

BBN–ANG–141 Foundations of phonology

8. Unstressed syllables, unstressed vowels

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outline

free variation & neutralization

vowel reduction

spelling reduced vowels

other processes occurring in unstressed position

syllabic consonant formation

syncope

mergers in unstressed position

free variation

free variation exists in stressed syllables

either /ájðə/ ~ /ijðə/, *apricot* /éjprəkot/ ~ /ápəkot/

free variation

free variation exists in stressed syllables

either /ájðə/ ~ /íjðə/, *apricot* /éjprəkot/ ~ /áprəkot/

but it is much more common in unstressed syllables

family /fámilij/ ~ /fáməlij/ ~ /fámɫij/ ~ /fámliij/ (the first, stressed syllable is stable, the second unstressed syllable varies)

neutralization

vowel contrasts are neutralized before R

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- ▶ FORCE-NORTH-CURE merger: *shoat* ≠ *shot* ≠ *shoot*,
shore = *shor(t)* = *sure*

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- ▶ GA: *mat* ≠ *met* ≠ *mate*, *marry* = *merry* = *Mary*

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vowel contrasts are neutralized in unstressed syllables

man ≠ *men* (/a/ vs. /e/), but *postman* = *postmen* (/ə/ in both)

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man ≠ *men* (/a/ vs. /e/), but *postman* = *postmen* (/ə/ in both)

vowel reduction

/a/ > /ə/ and /e/ > /ə/ are instances of **vowel reduction**

vowel reduction

the vowels of English in stressed position (= full vowels)

6 short (checked) vowels	i	ə	u	e	a	o	
6 long (R) vowels	i:	ə:	u:	e:	a:	o:	
7 diphthongs (free vowels)	ij	əw	uw	ej	aj	aw	oj

vowel reduction

the vowels of English in unstressed position (= weak/reduced vowels)

3 short (checked) vowels	i	ə	ʊ	e	a	o
0 long (R) vowels	i:	ə:	u:	e:	a:	o:
3 diphthongs (free vowels)	ij	əw	uw	ej	aj	oj

vowel reduction

the vowels of English

short (checked) vowels	i	ə	u	e	a	o	
long (R) vowels	i:	ə:	u:	e:	a:	o:	
diphthongs (free vowels)	ij	əw	uw	ej	aj	aw	oj

stressed and reduced vowel may sound/look the same

village	vɪlɪdʒ
butter	bətə
easy	i:zɪj
photo	fəʊtəw

vowel reduction

the vowels of English

short (checked) vowels	i	ə	u	e	a	o	
long (R) vowels	i:	ə:	u:	e:	a:	o:	
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stressed and **reduced** vowel may sound/look the same

village	víli ɔ
butter	bát ə
easy	ízi j
photo	féwt əw

the distribution of reduced vowels: i ə u

short vowels only occur before a consonant

the distribution of reduced vowels: *ɪ ə u*

short vowels only occur before a consonant

▶ *illegal* *ilígəl*, *family* *fámilij*, *basic* *béjsik*

the distribution of reduced vowels: i ə u

short vowels only occur before a consonant

- ▶ *illegal* i lígəl, *family* fá*mi*lij, *basic* béjs*i*k
- ▶ *unite* junájt, *regular* régjulə, *volume* vóljum

the distribution of reduced vowels: i ə u

short vowels only occur before a consonant

- ▶ *illegal* $\text{i}l\text{ig}\text{ə}l$, *family* $\text{f}\text{a}m\text{i}l\text{i}j$, *basic* $\text{b}\text{e}j\text{s}\text{i}k$
- ▶ *unite* $\text{j}\text{u}n\text{a}j\text{t}$, *regular* $\text{r}\text{e}g\text{j}\text{u}l\text{ə}$, *volume* $\text{v}\text{olj}\text{u}m$
- ▶ *attack* $\text{ə}t\text{a}k$, *abacus* $\text{a}b\text{ə}k\text{əs}$

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short vowels only occur before a consonant

- ▶ *illegal* ilígəl , *family* fámilij , *basic* béjsik
- ▶ *unite* junájt , *regular* régjulə , *volume* vóljum
- ▶ *attack* əták , *abacus* ábəkəs

except reduced ə , which can also occur word finally

matter mátə , *colour* kélə , *martyr* má:tə , *coma* kéwmə

the distribution of reduced vowels: ij əw uw

free vowels occur anywhere

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- ▶ *create* krijéjt, *happy* háij

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free vowels occur anywhere

- ▶ *create* krijéjt, *happy* hápij
- ▶ *obese* əwbíjs/əbíjs, *Genoa* dzénəwə, *window* wíndəw

the distribution of reduced vowels: ij əw uʊ

free vowels occur anywhere

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- ▶ *unite* juwnájt/junájt, *visual* vízɹuʊəl, *value* váljuʊ

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except reduced ij, which does not occur before a consonant

(note that ij is **word final** in *babies* béjbijz or *laziness* lézizjənəs)
 before a consonant reduced əw and uw can always lose their w, thus becoming reduced ə and u

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reduced u and uw

occur only after palatal consonants and stop+liquid clusters:
volume vóljuwm, *virtue* vé:tʃuw, *gradual* grádʒuwəl, *issue* íʃuw,
usual júwʒuwəl, *instrument* ínstrumənt, *influence* ínfluwəns

the distribution of reduced vowels: summary

	—C	—#	—V
ɪ	✓	✗	✗
ə	✓	⊙	✗
ʌ	✓	✗	✗
ɪj	⊙	✓	✓
əw	(✓)	✓	✓
ʌw	(✓)	✓	✓

⊙: different than full vowel

spelling reduced ə

single vowel letters

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	<i>about</i> əbáwt	<i>madam</i> mádəm	<i>comma</i> kómə
E	<i>erase</i> əréjs	<i>chicken</i> tʃíkən	—
I/Y	—	<i>April</i> éjprəl	—
O	<i>obey</i> əbéj	<i>abbot</i> ábət	—
U	—	<i>bonus</i> béwnəs	—

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no letter

app●le ápəl, *rhyth●m* ríðəm, *cent●re* séntə

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no letter

app●le ápəl, *rhyth●m* ríðəm, *cent●re* séntə

digraphs

villain vílən, *famous* féjməs

spelling reduced i

single vowel letters

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	<i>village</i> víliɔʒ	—
E	<i>erase</i> iréʒs	<i>chicken</i> tʃíkin	—
I/Y	<i>ignore</i> ignóː	<i>April</i> éjpril	—
O	—	—	—
U	—	(<i>minute</i> mínit)	—

spelling reduced i

single vowel letters

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	<i>village</i> víliɔʒ	—
E	<i>erase</i> iréʒs	<i>chicken</i> tʃíkin	—
I/Y	<i>ignore</i> ignóː	<i>April</i> éjpril	—
O	—	—	—
U	—	(<i>minute</i> mínit)	—

digraphs

forfeit fóːfit, *handkerchief* háŋkətʃif

spelling reduced i

single vowel letters

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	<i>vill<u>a</u>ge</i> <i>víliɔ̃</i>	—
E	<i>er<u>a</u>se</i> <i>iréjs</i>	<i>ch<u>i</u>cken</i> <i>tʃíkin</i>	—
I/Y	<i>ign<u>o</u>re</i> <i>ignó:</i>	<i>Apr<u>i</u>l</i> <i>éjpril</i>	—
O	—	—	—
U	—	(<i>min<u>u</u>te</i> <i>mínit</i>)	—

digraphs

foreit *fó:fit*, *handkerchief* *háŋkətʃif*

note

i does not occur before R in covered position:

aspiration *áspiréjʃən* or *áspəréjʃən* vs *affirmation* *áfəméjʃən*

spelling reduced ij

single vowel letters

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	—	—
E	—	<i>area</i> é:rijə	<i>simile</i> síməlɪj
I/Y	—	<i>aria</i> é:rijə	<i>happy</i> hápij
O	—	—	—
U	—	—	—

spelling reduced əw

single vowel letter

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	—	—
E	—	—	—
I/Y	—	—	—
O	<i>obey</i> ə(w)béj	<i>Oldsmobile</i> əwldzmə(w)bijl	<i>motto</i> mó(t)əw
U	—	—	—

spelling reduced əw

single vowel letter

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	—	—
E	—	—	—
I/Y	—	—	—
O	<i>obey</i> ə(w)béj	<i>Oldsmobile</i> əwldzɪmə(w)bijl	<i>motto</i> mó(t)əw
U	—	—	—

digraph

*fell*ow fé(l)əw

spelling reduced **uw** and **u**

single vowel letter

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	—	—
E	—	—	—
I/Y	—	—	—
O	—	—	—
U	<i>unite ju(w)nájt</i>	<i>volume vólju(w)m</i>	<i>menu ménjuw</i>

spelling reduced **uw** and **u**

single vowel letter

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	—	—
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notes

reduced **uw** does not occur before C + unstressed V (2) or R (3, 4)

spelling reduced **uw** and **u**

single vowel letter

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1. *stimulate stímjuwlejt* or *stímjulejt* or *stímjəlejt* vs

spelling reduced **uw** and **u**

single vowel letter

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A	—	—	—
E	—	—	—
I/Y	—	—	—
O	—	—	—
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1. *stimulate* stímjuwlejt or stímjulejt or stímjəlejt vs
2. *stimulus* stímjuləs or stímjələs, but *stímjuwləs

spelling reduced **uw** and **u**

single vowel letter

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	—	—
E	—	—	—
I/Y	—	—	—
O	—	—	—
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1. *stimulate* stímjuwlejt or stímjulejt or stímjəlejt vs
2. *stimulus* stímjuləs or stímjələs, but *stímjuwləs
3. *saturate* sátjurejt or sátfərejt, but *sátjuwrejt

spelling reduced **uw** and **u**

single vowel letter

	BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
A	—	—	—
E	—	—	—
I/Y	—	—	—
O	—	—	—
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3. *saturate* sátju**r**ejt or sátj**ə**rejt, but *sátju**w**rejt
4. *tenure* ténj**ə**, *treasure* tréz**ə**

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a schwa+consonant sequence may become a syllabic consonant

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- ▶ if it is a sonorant (obstruents cannot be syllabic):

opal əwpə| → əwp|, but *opus* əwpəs ↯ *əwp̩s

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- ▶ nasals can be syllabic only if the preceding consonant is an obstruent or r:

mutton mətən → mətŋ, *quorum* kwɔ:rəm → kwɔ:rŋ,

but *melon* melən ↯ *melŋ, *common* komən ↯ *komŋ

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 but *melon* melən ↯ *melŋ, *common* komən ↯ *komŋ
- ▶ l can be syllabic except when the preceding consonant is also l:
mortal mo:təl → mo:t|, *morsel* mo:səl → mo:s|,
moral morəl → mor|, *mammal* maməl → mam|,
narwhal na:wəl → na:w|, *mile* majl → majəl → maj|

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moral morəl → morɫ, *mammal* maməl → mamɫ,
narwhal na:wəl → na:wɫ, *mile* majl → majəl → majɫ
- ▶ r can be syllabic only before vowels: *terrorist* terərist → terrɪst, but
terror *terrɪ; *hammer* *hamrɪ, *camera* kamrə, *literal* litrɪ

syncope

syllabic consonants may lose their syllabicity

the result, called **syncope**, is the total loss of the unstressed vowel:

family fámilij → fáməlij → fámlij → fámlij

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- ▶ the syllabic sonorant is followed by an unstressed vowel:
memory mémərij → mémrij, but *memorize* mémərajz ↯ *mémrajz,
Lebanon lébənən → lébɳən → lébnən, but *lébənən* → lébɳən ↯ *lébnən

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- ▶ the syllabic sonorant is not preceded by *r* (recall, *r* in CUBE must be followed by something syllabic—usually a vowel):
celery sélərij → sélrj → sélrj, but *perilous* pérələs → pér|əs ↯ *pérləs

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celery sélərij → sélrjij → sélrjij, but *perilous* pérələs → pér|əs ↯ *pérləs
- ▶ there is no stop+liquid cluster before the ə:
company kəmpənij → kəmpnij, *factory* fáktərij → fáktrij, *raspberry* rázbərij → rázbrij, but *burglary* bé:glərij → bé:glrjij ↯ *bé:glrij

a special case of syncope: “high vowel gliding”

syncope usually affects ə

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- ▶ ij: *opinion* əpínijən → əpínjən, *helium* híljijəm → híljəm
- ▶ uw: *usual* júwɜuwəl → júwɜwəl

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- ▶ uw: *usual* júwɜuwəl → júwɜwəl
- ▶ this phenomenon is sometimes called **high vowel gliding**

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- ▶ uw: *usual* júwɜuwəl → júwɜwəl
- ▶ this phenomenon is sometimes called high vowel gliding

like syncope, high vowel gliding does not occur

a special case of syncope: “high vowel gliding”

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- ▶ after stop+liquid clusters: *atrium* éjtrijəm ↯ *éjtrjəm

mergers

reduction

accept əksépt = *except*

complement kómpl̩mənt = *compliment*

currant kərənt = *current*

mergers

reduction

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currant kərənt = *current*

syncope

finally fájnəlij → fájnlij = *finely*

Hungary həŋgərij → həŋgrij = *hungry*

lightening lájtəniŋ → lájtniŋ = *lightning*

sample exam questions

which short vowel may occur word finally?

1. unstressed i
2. stressed i
3. unstressed ə
4. stressed ə

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