

On Casual Speech*

Arnold M. Zwicky
The Ohio State University

0. Introduction. The phonological processes that appear in, or are most prominent in, casual speech show a number of properties of interest to both synchronic and diachronic linguistics. Here I survey some of these properties and note important unsolved problems, with illustrations drawn mainly from colloquial American English and colloquial North Welsh.¹ After a brief discussion of the defining characteristics of casual speech, I turn to a series of common phenomena--the euphonic character of casual speech, the grammatization of casual speech processes, their extension with increasing casualness, the syntactification of such processes (by which they are hedged in by complex syntactic and lexical conditions), and the freezing of such processes in slow speech.

1. Fast and Casual. It is much easier to give clear examples of casual speech ([rʌnɪŋ] for [rʌniŋ] running in English, [ma:] for [ə mət] y mae '(there) is' in Welsh) than to say precisely what distinguishes casual speech from careful speech. In general, casual speech is fast, and it is stylistically marked as intimate, informal, and the like. But casual speech need not be fast; some speakers (my colleague David Stampe, for example) use a quite informal style even at fairly slow rates of speech, while others (Charles Fillmore among them) give the impression of great precision even in hurried speech. For this reason, and for others (such as the considerable individual differences in rates of speech), the delineation of registers or tempos continues to be impressionistic. Nevertheless, native speakers, even those who aren't linguists, seem to have sharp ears for distinctions in casualness, so that linguists working on their languages have been willing to assert the existence of several levels of speed and/or care, from three, as in Dressler (ms. 1972) on Breton, or four, as in Harris (1969:6-8) on Spanish, through five--Cheng (1968: sec. 3.3) for Chinese--to seven--Wescott (1965:183f.) for Bini. It is easy to construct sets with four levels for English and Welsh--e.g. I gave him a hat [aɪ ɡeɪv hɪm ə hæt], [aɪ ɡeɪv ɪm ə hæt], [aɪ ɡeɪv ɪ ə hæt], [aɪ ɡeɪ ɪ ə hæt]; and yr oeddwn i yn canu 'I was singing' [rɔjɔʊn i: ən kʌn], [rɔjɔʊn i:n kʌn], [rɔjɔnɪ:n kʌn], [rɔnɪ:n kʌn]--and some utterances seem to require more (I am able to grade six versions of It would have been funny if she had come, ending with [ɪro bɪ ɪʌni fəɪd kʌm]).

In the following sections I continue the tradition of lumping together speed and style, and I make no attempt to provide distinctive characteristics for the levels mentioned, but rely instead on my judgments for English and my informant's judgments for Welsh. It is worth noting, along the lines of Dressler (forthcoming) that there are important, though largely unexplored, relationships between casual speech phonology, casual speech

syntax, the register of lexical items, and such extralinguistic factors as body set and 'tone of voice'.

2. The Phonetic Basis of Casual Speech. We cannot rule out any pair of segments as impossible morphophonemic alternants; morphophonemics often includes remnants of linguistic history. The alternation [i]-[æ] in sing-sang is unexpected, but not devastating to linguistic theory. Casual speech processes, on the other hand, seem to be constrained to be phonetically natural. In the extreme case they can be explained as the inevitable result of increasing speed of speech: the articulators simply cannot achieve their targets in the time available. This is the sort of explanation suggested by Lindblom (1963) for certain vowel reductions in fast speech.

Even when such strong direct explanations are not available, casual speech processes are obviously 'euphonic', serving either ease--assimilation, neutralization, insertion of transitional sounds--or brevity--simplification of geminates, vowel contraction, deletion of weakly articulated segments, monophthongization. For each specific process we need an account of just how it serves these purposes. But beyond that we need an account of much more puzzling facts about casual speech processes--the conditions on them, which are typically quite complex, and the relationships between slow speech processes and those of fast speech.

3. Grammatization. By this I refer to the conditioning of processes in such a way that they are not direct reflections of phonetic tendencies, and fail to apply maximally. Grammatization is very widespread, and takes at least three forms, illustrated in the following sections.

3.1. Lexical Exceptions. Some processes simply fail to apply to particular words or phrases of the appropriate phonological form. For instance, English has a rule deleting the reduced vowel in unstressed occurrences of is, am, are, etc. (he's, I'm, we're). This rule doesn't apply to several words which have the same phonological structure and also undergo vowel reduction when unstressed: the conjunction and, the article an, and the preposition in. In my speech these words maintain their syllabicity, even when surrounded by vowels: a radio and a television set [...ré]dijow ŋ ə...], go to an ogre [gôw tuw ŋ ôwgr], away in a manger [əwéj ŋ ə...], all in fairly fast speech; but not [...ré]jdijow ŋ ə...] etc.

Often exceptionality divides the lexicon into three classes--those forms to which the process invariably, or almost invariably, applies, those to which it may apply or not, and those to which it is prohibited from applying to. The Welsh word-final *ð*-deletion process is of this sort. Some forms, among them ffordd 'way', cwrdd 'meeting', and the relative marker sydd, are usually pronounced without final dd [ð]; while gardd 'garden', tywydd 'weather', rhwydd 'easy', and many other words have two pronunciations; and there are many others, for instance dydd 'day', bardd 'bard', and braidd 'hardly', which may not lose their dd.

3.2. Class Exceptions. Quite often the restriction is to a phonological class, rather than to arbitrary items. Thus, the very extensive English syncope rule that is obligatory² in opera [ɒpə] and optional in buttoning [bʌʔnɪŋ] ~ [bʌʔnɪŋ] is in general constrained to apply to syllabics followed by liquids and nasals (Zwicky to appear: sec. 1), even though the result of its application before obstruents would often be perfectly pronounceable in English. Compare opera with Attica: [æʔkə] is phonetically possible in English, but not as a casual speech variant of Attica.

Like lexical exceptionality, phonological constraints on casual speech processes are so common that they could be illustrated with examples from any language; indeed, most casual speech processes turn out to be constrained in both ways.

3.3. Surface Acceptability. If casual speech processes apply maximally, they sometimes create forms that are unpronounceable, either in an absolute sense or with respect to the language in question. Then, under maximal application, these unpronounceable forms will be eliminated by other processes. For example, if a syncope rule yields sequences of obstruents of unlike voicing, then a voicing assimilation rule will remedy the situation, at least in very fast speech.

A sequence of events of this sort is illustrated by a Welsh process that deletes the first vowel in a word, if both it and the next vowel are unstressed. The rule is optional for some forms, obligatory for others:

calon 'heart' [kalón...*klón]
calonau 'hearts' [kaloná...kloná]
afal 'apple' [ával...*váll]
afalau 'apples' [*avalá...valá]

The rule yields a considerable number of initial clusters that don't occur as morpheme-initial clusters in the Welsh lexicon, among them:

[km]: camelod 'camels' [kamelód...kmelód]
 [lg]: llygoden 'mouse, rat' [lɛgodén...Lgodén]
 [tm]: tynora 'seasons' [tɛmorá...tmorá]

These clusters are tolerated up to a point. But the more extraordinary clusters are simplified by deletion of the first consonant, so that the end effect is that the entire first syllable disappears:

[kf]: ceffyl 'horse' [kefíl]; ceffylau 'horses' [fílá]
 [hg]: hogen 'girl' [hogén]; hogenod 'girls' [genód]
 [Rs]: rhesymol 'reasonable' [sɔmól]
 [nd]: nadolig 'Christmas' [dolíg]

Here, then, is a case where processes apply maximally. But processes are sometimes constrained by the surface acceptability

of the output. The English syncope rule that otherwise corresponds to the Welsh process just discussed is so constrained. This is the rule³ that eliminates the first vowel in a word if it is unstressed and the next vowel is stressed. Like the Welsh rule, it creates initial clusters not found in the lexicon ([dv] in development and [fs] in vicinity, for example). Unlike the Welsh rule, however, this one is barred from applying when it would create intolerable clusters, and cluster simplification doesn't have a chance to apply; deflation and revised preserve both the initial consonant and the following vowel.

A similar case from English is the rule of Auxiliary Reduction mentioned in section 3.1 above (see Zwicky 1970). It is barred from applying to is/has and to would/had if certain impermissible final clusters would result.

4. Extension. With respect to the relationship between slow and fast speech, it is notable that casual speech processes never seem to begin to apply all at once, in their full generality. Instead, they extend themselves from zero or restricted applicability in careful speech, with a wider domain of application at each succeeding level. This wider domain of application is achieved in at least four ways: (a) a process absent at one level is manifested at the next; (b) a process optional at one level becomes obligatory at the next; (c) a process applies to a larger class of segments, or in a wider context; and (d) processes are reordered so as to maximalize applicability. Examples of all the types abound in the literature (in, for example, the Dressler and Zwicky items already cited, in various articles by William Labov, and in several unpublished works by C.-J. Bailey).

One consequence of extension is a characteristic hierarchical, or implicational, arrangement of elements, in which the appearance of an element at one level implies its appearance at all succeeding levels, a pattern of variation that recurs in social dialects, geographical dialects, and age dialects, as Bailey (to appear) has emphasized.

These hierarchies can often be observed through statistical tendencies. The Welsh syncope rule in the previous section is a case in point. It has been noticed at least since the time of Sweet (1882-84) that the vowel [ə] is much more likely to be syncopeated than any other Welsh vowel. [a] clearly is the next most likely, and [u] and [ɨ] are the least likely.⁴

5. Syntactification. Here I mean the tendency for casual speech processes to be conditioned by complex syntactic or lexical features. The extent to which syntactification occurs is remarkable, and cries out for explanation.

Again, many cases have been analyzed in the literature, though perhaps without an appreciation of the problem they present. Let us consider briefly the restrictions on the contraction of will, are, and am in English, in contrast to is, has, had, and would (Zwicky 1970, Lightner 1970). The first set I'll call dependent auxiliaries, the second set independent.

Now the dependent auxiliaries cannot contract unless they are 'in construction with' the preceding word in a special way.

Thus, among other things, they won't contract with words in a preceding relative clause, while the independent auxiliaries will: Anyone who wants to go'll [**gowll*] have to go, All of us who want to go're [**gowr*] going, Anyone who wants to go's [*gowz*] going to go, Anyone who wanted to go'd [*gowd*] have to go. In fact, the restrictions are quite severe, and for am, they seem to be that the preceding word be an occurrence of I which is the subject of am.

It is very hard to imagine that the difference between the dependent and independent auxiliaries in English illustrates some universal linguistic principle. Presumably, whatever is happening here is in some way a consequence of the structure of English, interacting perhaps with more general principles. But we have nothing like a detailed account of either partner in this union.

In the remainder of this section I consider some of the factors affecting syntactification.

5.1. Close Syntactic Connection. As in the example of the dependent and independent auxiliaries in English, the structural closeness of items is often a factor in how they will be affected by casual speech processes. It is, unfortunately, often difficult to assay the relative importance of stress levels and structural cohesion, since the two are not infrequently related. Thus, the recurrence of special casual speech processes affecting the combinations article and noun, verb and negative, verb and subject or object pronoun, noun and possessive pronoun, noun and preposition or postposition, etc., surely is not accidental; but does this follow from the intimate syntactic relations between the two elements, or from the low stress on one of them, or are both of these factors relevant, and are the positions in fact different?

References to syntactic intimacy are common in the standard reference grammars. Thumb (1964:24f.), for example, says of Modern Greek:

Final -v is usually only pronounced in such words as are closely connected with the following word, and only when the following word begins with a vowel or with κ, π, τ, ξ, ψ, τσ, and these sounds then... become g, b, d (*gz*, *bz*, *dz*); the -v itself becoming ŋ and m before g and b. The forms which retain the final -v under these conditions are especially the definite and the indefinite article, the conjunctive pronoun of the 3rd pers...., the particles δέν "not," ἄν "if," πρίν "before," ὡς "as, like," ὅταν "when"...

Liaison in French is obligatory in a similar set of contexts, as listed by Delattre (1966:39-62).

5.2. Syntactic Features. The forms which undergo a casual speech process not infrequently constitute a syntactic class, as in the case of the English auxiliary contraction

discussed earlier. That is, the exclusion of and, an, and in from contraction is not a matter of entirely arbitrary lexical markings; rather, the process applies to auxiliaries only.

5.3. Integrity of Morphemes. The lexical restrictions on casual speech processes sometimes correlate with the position of morpheme boundaries, for reasons that are not easy to see. Thus, the Welsh syncope rule eliminates many instances of word-initial n- (optionally in auroddiad 'report, recitation', afonydd 'rivers', achlysur 'occasion, cause', for example), but never when it is part of the negative prefix an-, as in anallu 'inability' (gallu 'power, ability'), anorffén 'endless' (gorffen 'finish'), anwastad 'uneven, unsteady' (gwastad 'even'), anamseról 'untimely' (anserol 'timely'). Compare anelú 'aim', which does not contain an- and may drop the initial vowel.

Here we are tempted to say that the process must leave enough of the prefix to insure its identification. But some other prefixes of the form VC allow syncope to apply⁵--e.g., ym-, as in ymweléd 'to visit' (gweled 'see') and ymddangós 'to appear' (dangos 'to show').

English is similarly sensitive to the location of morpheme boundaries in the syncope of words ending in [əri]l. In most of the words that syncopate the [ə] very freely, the [ij] is not a separate morpheme (machinery, shrubbery, hickory, slippery, Bowery). In one class of examples, adjectives in -y 'like', the syncope is barred in almost all cases in moderately fast speech: gindery, powdery, summery (cf. summary), peppery and so on (Zwicky to appear; sec. 1). These are not absolute facts, only tendencies; and, so far as I can see, the syncope process in question is not generally constrained by boundaries, only in the special case of [əri]l.

In these instances and in others in which casual speech processes are restricted lexically and syntactically, it looks as if we have caught the processes in the midst of extension (or contraction) through the lexicon or the set of contexts. What requires explanation is why this extension or contraction should move along the axes it does.

5.4. Avoidance of Homonymity. Although casual speech processes often yield homophones (Who do/did you have to see?, both pronounced with [húw]ə], occasionally they seem to be constrained not to. Perhaps this is the reason why the English article the never loses its [ə], even though the other pronominal items of similar shape (they, them, than, this, that, these, those, there) can be reduced in fast speech when they are unstressed (Zwicky 1970:326f.). Note, however, that the same process yields homonymity between them and him (I saw them/him, both with [əm]).

5.5. Total Syntactification. Just as some morphophonemic alternations may come in time to require statement (in whole or in part) as syntactic rather than phonological rules--the Welsh mutations and German umlaut are cases in point--so some casual speech processes have gone the same route. Not-contraction in

English is interesting in this regard. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Zwicky 1970:fn. 7), there is a series of evidence indicating that contracted not enters the phonological component as a verbal affix, like -ness or -able or the inflectional endings. One indication is that, unlike all other vowel deletions in fast speech, not-contraction doesn't manifest an intermediate stage with reduced vowels--will not has a full pronunciation [wɪl nɒt] and a contracted one [wɒwɪt], but no intermediate [wɪl nɒt] or [wɒw nɒt]. Therefore it appears that not-contraction, like the Welsh mutations, should be described by a syntactic rule (here a affix-formation rule) with certain phonological consequences (here the realization of a morpheme as [ɪt] rather than [nɒt]).

Both Welsh and English have syntactified certain deletions. English shortenings like Got a match? for Have you got a match? and He like dirty movies? for Does he like dirty movies? seem to be syntactic rather than phonological, inasmuch as the intermediate states required are not always available: For Do you like grass? the stages [ɔw yuw lájk græs] and uw lájk græs] both sound impossible to me. The elimination of the Welsh interrogative marker a, the relative marker a, and the negative nid is similar. Thus Nid wyf i yn hapus 'I'm not happy' is pronounced [nid uivf: ən hapɪs] only in extremely formal speech; the ordinary version is 'D wy' ddim yn hapus [ɔui óim ən hapɪs], and there is no intermediate version 'Id wy' (ddim) yn hapus.

To return to a previous example: the syncope in English opera is obligatory; [áprá] indicates a foreign accent or a spelling pronunciation. In fact, if it were not for the existence of a syllabic alternant in operatic, we would have no evidence that the underlying form of opera has three vowels rather than two. For every [évri:]], there is no longer any such evidence.

The contraction of the definite article yr in Welsh has also become obligatory in many contexts, among them as a verb prefix in sentence-initial position: Yr oedd yna gi 'There was a dog' has at least seven natural pronunciations, down to 'R o' 'na gi [roná gí:], all of them with [r] for initial yr.

Fixed phrases and proper names seem particularly inclined to freeze. Thus, French liaison is obligatory in such expressions as comment allez-vous, accent aigu, un fait accompli and the proper names les Champs-Élysées and les États-Unis (Delattre 1966:47f.).

An extreme form of freezing can be seen in the English hortatory let's and the Welsh emphatic negative mo'r. The first is historically, and perhaps synchronically, let us; the second is ddim o'r 'nothing of the': but in colloquial speech, let's has been frozen into a hortatory marker and can occur with the subject us: Let's us go to Baton Rouge. In colloquial Welsh speech mo'r can now be constructed with the ordinary negative ddim: 'Welais i mo'r llyfr or 'Welais i ddim mo'r llyfr 'I did not see the book'.

FOOTNOTES

*This work was supported in part by a 1971 summer grant-in-aid from the College of Humanities, Ohio State University. My thinking on casual speech has been much influenced by discussions with a number of linguists, particularly Gaberell Drachman, Wolfgang Dressler, and David Stampe.

The Welsh elicitation was done partly in conjunction with Mary Louise Edwards and James Hutcheson, who have contributed a number of ideas about Welsh. Some of my observations about Welsh seem to have been made also by Oftedal (to appear), to judge from comments in Dressler (ms. 1972) and the abstract of the paper; I have not seen the paper. Invaluable examples and observations about colloquial North Welsh are found in Henry Sweet's description of nearly a hundred years ago (Sweet 1882-84), which has served me as a research guide.

1. The English examples are from my own speech, except where indicated. The Welsh data come from a considerable corpus elicited from the Rev. John Owen of Mt. Gilead, Ohio, a native of Caernarvonshire. Throughout the article 'Welsh' means 'colloquial North Welsh', in particular the speech of Mr. Owen. I am immeasurably indebted to Mr. Owen for his patience with my demands on his intuitions and his willingness to become a linguist-informant.

2. By 'obligatory' here I refer to natural careful speech; see section 6.

3. In some dialects. The rule scarcely applies in my speech.

4. The position of the remaining vowels cannot be determined without detailed study.

5. Even obligatorily and in defiance of the stress conditions, as in ymhéll 'far away' (pell 'far').

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bailey, Charles-James. (To appear). "The Patterning of Language Variation," in Varieties of Present-Day American English, ed. by R. W. Bailey and J. L. Robinson.
- Cheng, Chin-chuan. (1968). Mandarin Phonology. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois.
- Delattre, Pierre. (1966). Studies in French and Comparative Linguistics. The Hague: Mouton.
- Dressler, Wolfgang. (ms. 1972). "Allegroregeln rechtfertigen Lentoregeln: Sekundäre Phoneme des Bretonischen".
- _____. (Forthcoming) "Methodisches zu Allegro-Regeln," paper to be presented at Wiener Phonologie-Tagung, September 1972.
- Harris, James W. (1969). Spanish Phonology. Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press.

- Lightner, Theodore M. (1970). "On Regular Inflectional Endings in English," Papers in Linguistics 3.3.503-19.
- Lindblom, Björn. (1963). On Vowel Reduction. Report 29 of The Speech Transmission Laboratory. The Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm.
- Oftedal, Magne. (To appear). "La chute de voyelles et de syllabes inaccentuées en gallois parlé," in Etudes Celtiques.
- Sweet, Henry. (1882-84). "Colloquial North Welsh," Transactions of the Philological Society, 409-84.
- Thumb, Albert. (1964). A Handbook of the Modern Greek Language. Trans. of 2nd ed. Argonaut, Chicago.
- Wescott, Roger W. (1965). "Speech-Tempo and the Phonemics of Bini," Journal of African Linguistics 4.3.182-90.
- Zwicky, Arnold M. (1970). "Auxiliary Reduction in English," Linguistic Inquiry 1.3.323-36.
- _____. (To appear). "Note on a Phonological Hierarchy in English," in Linguistic Change and Generative Theory, ed. R. Stockwell and R. Macaulay, Indiana University Press.