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## Linkage Words in Spoken English

Hsien-Hung Lin

Lecturer, Department of Applied English, I-Shou University, Taiwan

### Abstract:

*This paper aims to explore different aspects of linkage words in spoken English: definitions of linkage words, reduced forms of function words, common linkage words and phonological processes such as assimilation, deletion and linking that involve linkage words. In addition, it investigates the types of linkage words. Moreover, this study provides ESL/EFL teachers with the thorough and systematic knowledge for linkage words instruction that will improve teaching effectiveness.*

**Keywords:** Linkage words, function words, phonological processes

### 1. Introduction

I first encountered the linkage words such as *wanna* and *gonna* in a textbook written by Ackerman, et al. (2020). The linkage words of *wanna* and *gonna* are used to represent the full forms of *want to* and *going to*, respectively. I had great difficulty in understanding these reduced forms the first time I came across them. As I was preparing teaching materials, I had several questions in my mind regarding both form and function. Are these forms considered to be correct or accurate spellings? If they are accepted spellings, are they acceptable as such in written English? How are the linkage words formed by the speaker? And how are we going to teach these linkage words to students? The eagerness to find out the answers to all these questions motivates me to do research in the linkage words of spoken English.

In this paper, we first examine the given definitions of linkage words. Next, we will explore the notion of content words vs. function words. Then, common linkage words in spoken English will be examined. After that, this paper will deal with how the linkage words are formed. And finally, the pedagogical suggestions for linkage words will be drawn as a conclusion.

#### 1.1. Definitions of Linkage Words

According to Ackerman, et al. (2020), linkage is the combination of two words that create a new word. Many of the words are used on a daily basis by fluent English speakers, but it should be noted that these words are used in informal speech and are not to be used in formal writing.

The linkage words in spoken English are the same as reduced forms which has been used by many linguists and researchers (e.g., Grate, 1974; Weinstein, 2001; Chang, 2004; Lane, 2005). What are reduced forms? According to Weinstein (2001), reduced forms are the pronunciation changes that occur in natural speech because of the environment or context in which a word or a sound is found.

Lane (2005) uses reduced pronunciations to mean reduced forms. She claims that the reduced pronunciations are in fact standard English, not slang.

Grate (1974) points out that in normal, rhythmic speech, parts of a sentence are often sped up through reduction and compression. Certain words--particularly pronouns, auxiliary and modal verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions—are reduced in stress and then combined with adjacent words, so that two or three words are then spoken as one. The reduced word may lose a consonant or a whole syllable in the process, and usually has its vowel changed.

As defined by the above researchers, the linkage words in spoken English undergo the pronunciation changes and reduced pronunciations. The linkage words may lose a consonant or a whole syllable, and usually has its vowel changed. Besides losing a consonant or a whole syllable, the reduced word may also lose a vowel.

English rhythm is the patterning of strong and weak (stressed and unstressed) syllables in phrases and sentences (Lane, 2005). Stress and weak stress play a major role in the formation of reduced forms. In spoken English, content words are the sentence focus and are often stressed. Function words, on the other hand, are often de-emphasized and then reduced.

It is crucial to make a distinction between content words and function words because the distinction between stressed content words and unstressed function words, and the corresponding reduction of vowels in function words, underlies the concept of reduced speech (Celce-Murcia, et al., 1996:230). With this understanding, we can now turn our attention to the differences between content words and function words.

### 1.2. Content Words vs. Function Words

The notion of content words and function words has been explored by many linguists (e.g., Celce-Murcia, et al., 1996; Roach, 2000; Fromkin, et al., 2003; Sun, 2005; Lane, 2005). Celce-Murcia, et al. (1996:153-54) provide thorough and comprehensive analysis of content words and function words from phonetic points of view. They categorize content words (i.e., words that carry information) and function words (i.e., words that signify grammatical relationships), and illustrate which words in a sentence or utterance tend to receive stress and which do not. Based on their analysis, words (such as noun, main verbs, and adjectives) that carry the most information are usually the ones that are stressed. They also stress interrogatives (words that are used to begin information questions), such as *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*; and demonstrative pronouns, which are words that point to or emphasize (*this*, *that*, *these*, *those*). In light of these viewpoints, possessive pronouns (*mine*, *yours*, etc.), adverbs (*always*, *very*, *almost*, etc.), adverbial particles following phrasal verbs (*take off*, *do away with*) and negative contractions (*can't*, *isn't*), and even the negative particle *not*, when uncontracted, usually receive stress because of their semantic, as well as syntactic, salience.

On the other hand, words that modify lexically important nouns and verbs (such as articles and auxiliary verbs) tend not to be stressed. Likewise, words that signal information previously mentioned (e.g., personal pronouns, relative pronouns, possessive and demonstrative adjectives) usually remain unstressed. In these unstressed sentence elements, vowels also tend to be reduced in some form.

For ease of differentiation, Celce-Murcia, et al. (1996) provide the following table:

### 2. Content Words versus Function Words

Content/Information Words (Often Stressed)	Function Words (Usually Unstressed, Unless In Final Position Or When Used Emphatically)
Nouns	Articles
Main Verbs	Auxiliary Verbs
Adjectives	Personal Pronouns
Possessive Pronouns	Possessive Adjectives
Demonstrative Pronouns	Demonstrative Adjectives
Interrogatives	Prepositions
Not/Negative Contractions	Conjunctions
Adverbs	
Adverbial Particles	

Table 1

It is worth mentioning that possessive adjectives (*her*, *his*, etc.) and demonstrative adjectives (*that*, *this*, etc.) are considered as function words even though they serve as adjectives. For example, it can be seen in the sentence "It is her book." and "I like that book." Possessive adjectives and demonstrative adjectives are not usually stressed in spoken English. When they are not stressed, they are often reduced.

#### 2.1. Common Linkage Words

Linkage words are two words spoken as one due to reduction and compression. Weinstein (1982) uses what she calls "special spellings" (e.g., *hafta* for "have to," *hasta* for "has to," *useta* for "used to," etc.) to represent linkage words instead of using standard forms of phonetic transcriptions. Weinstein (1982: ix) explains that these "special spellings" are intended to show learners, in a general and easily understood way, the particular pronunciation being worked with. Each "special spelling" is preceded by an asterisk to remind students that it is not to be considered as a correct spelling in formal English. Below are common linkage words:

have	+	to	→	*hafta
has	+	to	→	*hasta
used	+	to	→	*useta
supposed	+	to	→	*supposta
want	+	to	→	*wanna
going	+	to	→	*gonna
got	+	to	→	*gotta
should	+	have + past participle	→	*shoulda
could	+	have + past participle	→	*coulda
would	+	have + past participle	→	*woulda
must	+	have + past participle	→	*musta
may	+	have + past participle	→	*maya
might	+	have + past participle	→	*mighta
shouldn't	+	have + past participle	→	*shouldna
couldn't	+	have + past participle	→	*couldna
wouldn't	+	have + past participle	→	*wouldna

It is true that several levels of reduction are often possible in reduced phrases. Below are some examples taken from Weinstein (2001):

- I have to go. (Level 1: Slowest)
- I have \*ta go. (Level 2: Slow)
- I \*hafta go. (Level 3: Faster)
- I \*afta go. (Level 4: Fastest)

According to Weinstein's research, which consisted of recordings of unscripted speech by highly educated English speakers, *Level 3* speech is the most common. It is necessary for learners to become aware of the different levels of these reduced forms. Moreover, it is crucial for learners to recognize and comprehend the most common reduced form, such as *Level 3*. Interested readers may refer to the different levels of reduced phrases listed in a table presented by Weinstein (2001:119).

## 2.2. How are Linkage Words Formed?

The linkage words are two words that are spoken as one word. They are viewed as a native speakers' connected speech use. Rosa (2002) points out that reduced forms are produced when unstressed function words are contracted, linked, deleted, assimilated, or reduced to combine with other function words, as well as content words, of a sentence. Now, let us turn our attention to the phonological processes that linkage words involve.

## 2.3. Assimilation

There are three types of assimilation in the English language: (1) progressive, (2) regressive, and (3) coalescent (Roach, 2000; Kelly, 2000). Regressive assimilation and coalescent assimilation occur in many linkage words. Regressive assimilation means the phoneme that comes first is affected by the one that comes after it. Below are some examples of regressive assimilation that occur in linkage words:

have	+	to	→	"hafta"
has	+	to	→	"hasta"
used	+	to	→	"useta"
supposed	+	to	→	"supposta"

In the above examples, the voiceless [t] of *to* is the sound that causes the voiced [v], [z] and [zd] preceding it to assimilate and then become the voiceless [f], [s] and [st] sound.

Coalescent assimilation, also termed palatal assimilation (Bowen, 1987), is the process by which two sounds will combine to form a third different sound.

## 2.4. Deletion

According to Celce-Murcia, et al (1996), the term deletion (also known as omission) is the process whereby sounds disappear or are not clearly articulated with in certain contexts. Kelly (2000) claims that the reason for deletion (or elision in his own term) is an economy of effort on the part of the speaker; and, in some instances, it results in the difficulty of putting certain consonant sounds together while maintaining a regular speech rhythm and speed. The following are some of the examples for deletion:

- [he] → [e] Yes, he WILL.
- [his] → [is] Ask his NAME.
- [him] → [im] Show him HOW.

In these examples, [h] is deleted from *he*, *his* and *him*. In addition to the loss of single sound, as shown above, deletion of unstressed initial syllable could occur in reduced forms. Below are some examples provided by Weinstein (2001):

- about → \*bout
- because → \*cause

The above examples show that the syllables [a] and [be] are deleted from the words "about" and "because," respectively in their reduced forms.

## 2.5. Contraction

According to Crystal (1997), contraction is a term used to refer to the process or result of the phonological reduction of a linguistic form so that it becomes attached to an adjacent linguistic form. As speech becomes more rapid in rate or informal in tone, some sounds may contract. Here are some examples:

Contractions of am, is, are

I'm (= I am) 25.

It's (= It is) raining.

We're (= We are) early.

Contractions of not

I don't (= do not) like scary movies.

He isn't (= is not) here.

I can't (cannot) come today.

Other Contractions

I'll (= I will) bring your book tomorrow.

I've (= I have) seen that movie.

I'd (= I would) like a hamburger.

According to Celce-Murcia, et al. (1996), the contractions above are conventionalized written sequences that obscure a word's boundary.

## 2.6. Blending

To distinguish conventionalized written contractions from spoken contractions, Celce-Murcia, et al. (1996) used the term "blending" to refer to spoken two-word contractions provided by Weinstein (2001:102) such as the following:

Who'll (= Who will) set up the TV?

Who're (= Who are) we going to ask?

When're (= When are) kids shown how to set up the cable?

How'll (= How will) we get this box inside the house?

## 2.7. Linking

In rapid speech, words are not always articulated separately; sometimes, they are linked together. According to Rogerson and Gilbert (1990:38), there are two sorts of linking to be encountered in spoken English:

1. Words ending in a consonant sound are linked to words beginning in a vowel sound.

2. Words ending in a vowel sound are linked to words beginning in a vowel sound.

Let us begin with the first rule. Consider the following examples:

sit up = si tup

read it = rea dit

turn off = tur noff

pick it up = pi ki tup

first of all = firs to fall

In these examples, when a word ends in a consonant, that final sound is often moved to the beginning of the next word that begins in a vowel.

Now let us turn to the second rule: vowel-to-vowel linking. Examples:

*mayI sheis weought*

In these examples, the words are linked by inserting a sort of "y" sound because the vowel at the end of the first word necessitates a spread and stretched lip position.

In the examples below, the words are linked by inserting a sort of "w" sound because the vowel at the end of the first word is rounded. Examples:

*doI noother toooften*

In addition to these two rules, Grant (2001) suggests another type of linking. She claims that when consecutive words in the same thought group end and begin with the same consonant sound, the sound is held or lengthened, not pronounced twice. Below are the examples she gives:

at twelve (hold *t*)

big game (hold *g*)

good deal (hold *d*)

class schedule (lengthen *s*)

with three (lengthen *th*)

## 3. Conclusion

In this paper, we posed several questions. Are the forms *wanna* and *gonna* considered to be correct or accurate spellings? If they are accepted spellings, are they acceptable as such in written English? How are the linkage words formed by the speaker? And, how are we going to teach these linkage words to students? Now it is time to answer these questions.

The linkage words such as *wanna* and *gonna* are specialized spellings which represent the reduced pronunciations involved. These spellings are considered to be unacceptable and therefore nonstandard when used in formal written English. In response to the research question "How are the linkage words formed by the speaker?" The linkage words in spoken English involve the phonological processes such as assimilation, deletion, contraction, blending and linking.

So, how are we going to teach these linkage words to students? The most crucial part of how we are going to teach these linkage words to students is to find the best way to teach reduced forms by supplying students with both the full forms and the reduced-form phrases. Then students may read both forms and be asked to repeat them. It is both impossible and impractical to teach all the linkage words within one class period. Therefore, we would suggest an introduction of 8-10 linkage words within one class and then integrate the material being taught. In addition, we should equip students with the notion of content words and function words in order to make them aware of what the reduced forms of function words will be. Students should also be taught what phonological processes (e.g., assimilation, deletion, linking) the linkage words may involve.

With a systematic knowledge of linkage words, English teachers will benefit more in terms of their teaching effectiveness and decoding of the reduced forms of spoken English. Students with a systematic knowledge of linkage words will better learn and understand these linkage words with more efficiency.

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