

## A Perceptual Analysis of Vowel Elision in Educated Ekiti English

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### **Abstract**

Nigerian English, with its own varieties which include Ekiti English, has its own peculiar features at the levels of lexis, syntax, semantics and phonology. Some scholarly attempts have been made at characterising these features. This study, another attempt in this direction, investigates Elision in Educated Ekiti English with a view to finding out how educated Ekiti users of English employ elision in their speeches. Data for the study were gathered through structured texts read into a tape recorder by fifty respondents (civil servants in the Ekiti State Ministry of Education) purposively selected. Data generated were later analysed using perceptual analysis and simple percentage. The study reveals that there are insignificant cases of elision in Educated Ekiti English. A low percentage of the subjects realised elision in words tested that contained vowels that were expected to be elided. Therefore, Educated Ekiti speakers of English do not usually make use of elision in their speeches as they tend to pronounce every word as it appears.

### **Introduction**

English language, apart from the fact that it is a second language and has acquired the status of an official language in Nigeria, is foreign to Nigerians. Nigerians are non-native speakers of English. In the light of this, every Nigerian might have acquired a mother tongue before learning English language. Hence, there is tendency for Nigerian speakers of English not to pronounce some words in English as the native speakers would. This study seeks to critically examine elision as a phonological process in English vis-à-vis its use by educated Ekiti speakers of English. Elision is a phonological process which deals with the omission of a speech sound. Producing elision is something which second or foreign learners do not (necessarily) need to learn to do, but it is very important for them to be aware of the fact that when native speakers of English talk to each other, quite a number of phonemes that the foreigner might expect to hear are not actually pronounced (Roach, 1983). Elision is the omission of one or more sounds (such as a vowel, a consonant, or a whole syllable) in a word or phrase, producing a result that is

easier for the speaker to pronounce (Wikipedia, 2008). Native Speakers of English easily produce elision in their speech but most Ekiti speakers of English tend to pronounce every sound as it appears.

Ekiti is one of the dialects of Yoruba language. According to Awobuluyi (1998), Ekiti is classified as a Central Yoruba (CY) dialect among other dialects. His classification was based on the kinds of sounds that are found in the dialect. Other scholars like Adetugbo (1967, 1982), Akinkugbe (1976) classify this dialect based on the location of the speakers as well as the kind of sound system it operates. Educated Ekiti English refers to the English language spoken by natives of Ekiti who were born and nurtured in Ekiti context and who have obtained not less than National Diploma (ND) or National Certificate of Education (NCE) qualification.

### The Concept of Elision

Attempts have been made to define elision by various scholars (Jones 1978; Brosnahan and Malmberg 1970, Schane 1973, Roach 1983, etc). Each of these scholars predicated his definition of elision on the omission or deletion of a sound. For example, Jones says elision is the disappearance of a sound. When two sound segments become juxtaposed, one of them gets deleted (Jones 1978:203). Brosnahan and Malmberg note that a careful investigation of stretch of speech to determine what has actually been articulated often reveals that a number of features or segments of the chain which the speaker believes he has pronounced are missing. Like other phonological processes such as insertion, coalescence and metathesis, elision is a syllable structure process, which often leads to changes in the syllable structure. One of such changes is what Schane (1973:53) refers to as a more preferred syllable structure. The elision process may break up consonant clusters or vowel sequences by deleting one of the consonants or vowels in such clusters.

Roach (1983:142) gives examples of elision as a loss of weak vowel after p, t, k. The vowel in first syllable may disappear and the aspiration of the initial plosives takes up the whole middle portion of the syllable. Words like 'potato', 'tomato', 'perhaps', 'canary', are pronounced p<sup>h</sup> teitəu, t<sup>h</sup> ma:təu, k<sup>h</sup> nəri' p<sup>h</sup> hæps Another example is the weak vowel before n, l, r, which becomes syllabic. This is seen in the words like 'tonight' /tnait/ 'police', /pli:s/ 'correct', /krekt/. Yul-Ifode, (1999) opines that elision is a phonological process involving the omission, deletion or total loss of a sound segment and the process may affect a vowel or consonant. Few examples of elision are given below:

Comfortable	[kʌmfətəbl]	-----	[kʌmfɪtəbl]
Laboratory	[ləbərətəri]	-----	[ləbərətɹi]
Temperature	[tɛmpərəʃə]	-----	[tɛmpɹəʃə]
Vegetable	[vedʒətəbl]	-----	[vedʒtəbl]

Elision is a kind of modification in relation to the environment of a phoneme. Roach (1983:127) says:

The nature of elision may be stated quite simply: under certain circumstances sounds disappear; one might express this in more technical language by saying that in certain circumstances a phoneme may be realized as zero, or have zero realization or be deleted.

This emphasises that pronunciations of words sometimes are not dictated by the orthography of such words as some sounds present in the orthography may not be sounded when pronounced.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English also defines elision as the act of leaving out the sound or part of a word when you are pronouncing it (A.S. Hornby, 2005: p.475). Christopherson (1981) explains that the primary reason for elision could be said to be an unconscious striving for economy of effort. Gimson (1980) identifies various ways by which elision takes place. Sounds may be elided in fast colloquial speech, especially at or in the vicinity of word boundaries. Elision occurs in a vowel and this is divided into:

- a. Allophonic variation
- b. Phonemic elision

Allophonic variation is realised when a syllable ends with a closing diphthong (i.e. one whose second element is closer than its first in RP /ei, ai, ɔi, əu, au/, and the next syllable begins with a vowel. When this happens, the second element of the diphthong may be elided. For example, 'hyaena' / hai'i:ə/ is realised as (hai:nə), 'layer' /'leɪə/ smoothed to /leə/, 'mower' / məʊə / with smoothing is the same as 'myrrh' / mɜ:/. In phonemic elision, the initial schwa sound /ə/ is often elided, particularly when followed by a continuant and preceded by a word final consonant:

Not alone {not 'ləʊn}

Get another {get 'nʌðə}.

Similarly, the sound schwa may be elided when final /ə/ occurs with the following linking /r/ and word initial vowel /ə/ may be elided. Examples are seen in the following:

after a while /a:ftə'wail/

as a matter of fact /əz mətrəv fækt/

Father and son /fa:ð ənsə

### **Nigerian English**

The term Nigerian English has generated a lot of arguments among scholars as to whether it exists or not. At present, the question of whether there is a form of English that could be termed Nigerian or not is fast becoming jettisoned or has been jettisoned. This is because works of several scholars have revealed the evolution of a form of English that is apparently different from Standard English and peculiarly Nigerian (Banjo 1995). Adetugbo (1979, 1980, Balogun (1980), Ogu (1992) have argued that a variety of English (though yet to be fully described) has been identified as Nigerian.

At every level of language, there are features that could be marked as Nigerian (see Ufomata 1990, Jowitt 1991, Egbe 1992). In an article published in the *National Concord* of eleventh July, 1986, Bamgbose proposed that instead of belabouring the question of whether or not Nigerian English exists, concentration should be on the interesting task of specifying, describing and analysing the forms of this variety. After this publication, a lot have been done on the task of describing the Nigerian English in relation to phonology, syntax, lexis and semantics. Notable scholars in these different fields have come out with different data to support their claims that there exists a variety of English that is Nigerian (see Kujore 1985, Ufomata 1990, Jowitt 1991, Banjo 1995). Jowitt claims that there is such an abundance of data that a sizeable team is needed to collect and catalogue them.

### Phonological Features of Nigerian English

Of great importance is the topic above to this current research study. As we shall be looking at Educated Ekiti English, recourse cannot but be made to phonological features of Nigerian English. Nigerian English at the phonological level can be realised at the sound, stress, syllable and intonation units (Akindele and Adegbite 1999). The sound unit can be explained under consonant and vowel sounds. The variety, Nigerian English emerges as a result of contact between Nigerian languages and English language. According to Stevens (1965:11):

In speaking a foreign language, we commonly use, not the sounds of that language, but those sounds of our mother tongue which we imagine to be equivalent to the sounds of the foreign language.

It is therefore, presumed that Nigerians commonly use the sounds of their native language, most especially the widely – spoken languages like Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, when speaking in English especially for sounds not available in the native or indigenous languages.

For vowels in Nigerian English, there is no distinction between long and short vowels. For example words like leap, /li:p/, part /pa:t/ sheep /ʃi:p/ become /lip/, /pɒt/, /ʃip/ respectively. We are paying attention to vowels here because the study evaluates vowel elision. There is monothongisation in Nigerian English. Here, some diphthongs are reduced to monothongs. For example, /ei/ is reduced to /e/ in words like ‘day’, ‘may’, ‘rain’ ‘take’ etc.

/əʊ/ is reduced to /o/ in words like home, ‘old’, ‘told’, ‘load’, ‘road’ etc.

/ɛə/ is reduced to /e/ in words like ‘chair’, ‘hair’, ‘heir’, ‘wear’, ‘care’ etc

/ʊə/ is reduced to /ʊ/ in words like ‘tour’, ‘cure’, ‘pure’, ‘sure’, ‘endure’ etc.

In diphthong /aʊ/, some speakers lower the second element into [o] resulting in the articulation of [ao] in words like ‘cow’, ‘about’, ‘how’, ‘mouse’, ‘shout’ etc.

The English language is stress-timed while Nigeria languages are syllable-timed (Akinjobi 2004). The stress patterns in Nigerian English are such that almost every syllable is stressed. This is as a result of the fact that in many Nigerian languages, it is only the tonic syllable that obtains. This is imported into English to produce wrongly such words as ma‘dam, indi‘cate, communi‘cate, recog‘nise identi‘fy, co-ordi‘nate, etc.

### Research Procedure

This study is aimed at investigating Elision in Educated Ekiti English with a view to finding out instances or otherwise of elision as used by Educated Ekiti users of English. Therefore, the study has civil servants in the Ministry of Education as its subjects. A total number of fifty (50) subjects were selected for the study. Out of the total subjects selected, twenty (20) had National Certificate of Education (NCE) and the remaining thirty were university graduates. Since there was a predetermined specific type of the representatives of the total population of the subjects in mind selected for the study, a purposive sampling technique was adopted to pick the subjects for the study among the civil servants targeted.

The data for the study were gathered through the process of selected subjects reading into tapes prepared texts on the items to be tested. One of the research instruments used for data gathering in this study was a prepared text that showed items to be tested. Secondly, a tape recorder was used to record the reading. Also, direct observations were carried out on some subjects as they produced freely their speech in their inter-personal interactions. The study, since it has to do with speech production, adopted perceptual analysis for its analysis and simple percentage was used for frequency of speech or sound pronounced. The analysis of the contents of the tables, which reveal the results of the findings, was subsequently done for proper understanding and clarity.

### Analysis and Discussion

This deals with the analysis of data collected for this study. Findings of various instances of elision as discovered in the speech of Educated Ekiti English are brought to the fore here.

#### Instances of Elision in Educated Ekiti English.

**Table 1: Loss of weak sound after p, t, k.**

Expressions	Expected Response	Subjects' Responses	No	%	Total
What about the potatoes?	p <sup>h</sup> teitəʊz	potertos	35	70%	50
		potertəʊs	10	20	
		p <sup>h</sup> teitəʊz	05	10	
Can I have some tomatoes?	t <sup>h</sup> ma:təʊz	toma:tos	46	92	50
		t <sup>h</sup> ma:təʊz	04	08	
I will see you perhaps tomorrow	p <sup>h</sup> hæps	pa:ha:ps	47	94	50
		p <sup>h</sup> hæps	03	06	
	t <sup>h</sup> mɔrəʊ	tɔmɔrəʊ	25	50	50
		tɔmɔrəʊ	15	30	
		t <sup>h</sup> mɔrəʊ	10	20	

The table above shows the analysis of some words used to test elision in Educated Ekiti English. In this instance of elision which shows loss of weak vowel after p, t, k, various degrees of pronunciations or realisations were derived. Four words ‘potatoes’, ‘tomatoes’, ‘perhaps’ and ‘tomorrow’ were tested in the expressions written in the table. In the first expression, ‘potatoes’ is our focus. The expected pronunciation is ‘p<sup>h</sup>teitəʊz’. It is observed that 70% of the subjects had the word realised as ‘poteitos’, 20% of the subjects pronounced it as ‘poteitəʊs’ while an insignificant 10% of the subjects pronounced ‘p<sup>h</sup>teitəʊz’. In the second expression from the table, the focus is on ‘tomatoes’. The expected pronunciation of the word is ‘t<sup>h</sup>ma:təʊz’. The weak vowel ‘ə’ in the first syllable is supposed to be elided and the aspiration of the initial plosive ‘t’ takes up the whole middle position of the syllable.

Out of the fifty subjects selected, 92% of them pronounced the word as ‘toma:tos’ while a small fraction of 8% realised the expected ‘t<sup>h</sup>ma:təʊz’. The word ‘perhaps’ in the third expression in the passage is realised as ‘pa:ha:ps’ by 94% of the subjects while 6% had it pronounced as ‘p<sup>h</sup>hæps’. Also in the same expression, the word ‘tomorrow’ is our focus for elision. The expected realisation is ‘t<sup>h</sup>mɔ:rəʊ’. From the result in the table, 20% of the subjects realised the expected ‘t<sup>h</sup>mɔ:rəʊ’, 50% of the subjects realised it as ‘tɔ:mɔ:rəʊ’ while 15% of the subjects pronounced it as ‘tɔ:mɔ:rəʊ’. It is obvious from this result that where the ‘ə’ in the first syllable in ‘tomorrow’ is supposed to be elided, two different vowels – ‘v’ and ‘o’ are used instead.

**Table 2: Other instances of elision which deal with general loss of weak vowels in words.**

Expressions	Expected Response	Subjects' Responses	No	%	Total
I am comfortable	kʌmfɪtəbl	kɔmfɪtebu kɔmfɪtebl kʌmfɪtəbl	43 04 03	86 08 06	50
Bring the vegetable	vɛdʒtəbl	vɛdʒɪtebu vɛdʒtəbl vɛdʒɪtəbl	39 06 05	78 12 10	50
Can you handle the camera?	kæmrə	Ka:mera: kæmrə	48 02	96 04	50
The vice chancellor's speech was scholarly.	ʃa:nslə	ʃa:nsɛɪv ʃa:nsɪv ʃa:nslə	38 05 07	76 10 14	50
He is very natural	næʃrəl	na:ʃvɔra: næʃrəl	45 5	90 10	50
I am here temporarily	tɛmprərɪli	tɛmpɔrərɪli tɛmprərɪli	37 13	74 26	50

My father is a novelist	nɒvlist	novelist	35	70	50
		novʊlist	10	20	
		nɒvlist	05	10	
It is a national issue	næʃnl	na:ʃnə	34	68	50
		næʃnl	16	32	
This is fashionable	fæʃnəbl	fa:ʃnəbu	39	78	50
		fæʃnəbl	11	22	
Arrest the murderer	mɜ:drə	mɒdɑ:rɑ:	27	54	50
		mɒdra:	18	36	
		mɜ:drə	05	10	

The second table above shows the result of elision in Educated Ekiti English. Instances of loss of weak vowels are also tested in the table. Different kinds of realisations were found in the analysis of the words under focus. In the first expression, 'comfortable' is our focus. The expected realisation is 'kʌmfətəbl'. Clearly from the table, 86% of the subjects realised it as 'kɒmfətəbl', 08% pronounced it as 'kɒmftebl' while another 06% pronounced the expected 'kʌmfətəbl'. 'Vegetable' in the second expression is expected to be realised as 'vedʒtəbl'. Out of the fifty subjects selected, 78% pronounced it as 'vedʒitebu', inserting vowel 'i' where elision is supposed to take place, 12% of the subjects realised it as 'vedʒtebl', eliding the 'i' but mispronounced the 'ə' after 't' as 'e', only an insignificant 10% had it pronounced as 'vedʒtəbl'. In the third expression from the table, 'camera' is our focus. It is expected to be realised as 'kæmrə'. The vowel 'ə' between 'm' and 'r' is supposed to be elided. 96% of the subjects had it realised as 'ka:mɜ:rɑ:', while only 04% of the subjects pronounced the expected 'kæmrə'.

The next in the table is 'chancellor' which is found in the fourth expression. 'Chancellor' is expected to be realised as 'ʃɑ:nslə' as a result of elision. 76% of the subjects realised it as 'ʃɑ:nsləv', 10% produced it as 'ʃɑ:nslə' while 14% of the subjects had it pronounced as 'ʃɑ:nslə'. Although the 10% that produced the word as 'ʃɑ:nslə' actually elided the weak vowel 'ə' but pronounced the weak vowel 'ə' at the final position as strong 'v'. 'Natural' is what our focus is in the fifth expression in the table. The expected pronunciation is 'nætʃrəl'. Observable from the table, 90% of the subjects realised it as 'na:ʃvɜ:rɑ:', inserting strong vowel 'v' in the word where a weak vowel 'ə' is expected to be elided. 10% of the subjects produced the expected 'nætʃrəl'. In 'temporarily' from the table, the expected realisation is 'tɛmprərɪli'. Out of the fifty subjects sampled, 74% produced 'tɛmprərɪli', inserting 'o' where elision is expected to take place. Only 26% of the subjects had it realised as 'tɛmprərɪli'. From the next expression, 'novelist' is where elision is expected. The expected pronunciation is 'nɒvlist'. 70% of the subjects pronounced 'novelist', 20% realised 'novʊlist' while only 10% produced the expected 'nɒvlist'.

The next word in the table is 'national'. The expected realisation is 'næʃnl'. 68% of the respondents produced 'na:ʃna:', inserting strong vowel 'ɒ' where elision is supposed to take place while 32% of the respondents produced the expected 'næʃnl'. Also from the table is 'fashionable' which our next focus is. The expected realisation of the word is 'fæʃnəbl'. Observable from the table, 78% of the subjects produced 'fa:ʃnebu', inserting strong 'ɒ' where the weak 'ə' is supposed to be elided while only 22% realised the expected 'fæʃnəbl'. The last expression in the table contains the word 'murderer' which is our focus here. 'Murderer' in the expression is expected to be pronounced as 'mɜ:drə'. 54% of the subjects realised it as 'mɒda:ra:', inserting strong 'ɒ' where 'ə' is expected to be deleted, 36% of the respondents produced 'mɒdra:' while only a negligible 10% produced the expected 'mɜ:drə'. It is obvious here that the 36% of the subjects that produced 'mɒdrə' elided 'ə' where necessary but used a different vowel – 'ɒ' where 'ɜ:' is supposed to feature. As a whole, it can be said that only 10% of the total respondents produced the elision here.

**Table 3: Instances of elision where weak vowel + n, l, or r, becomes syllabic consonant.**

Expressions	Expected Response	Subjects' Responses	No	%	Total
Please see me tonight	tnaɪt	tonaɪt	05	10	50
		tɒnaɪt	45	90	
		tnaɪt	00	00	
That is correct	kɹɛkt	kɹɛkt	50	100	50
		kɹɛkt	00	00	
The police are doing well	pɪi:s	poli:s	39	78	50
		pli:s	11	22	

Table 3 reveals instances of elision where weak vowel + 'n', 'l' or 'r' becomes syllabic. From the first expression, 'tonight' is our focus. In the connected speech, the word is expected to be pronounced as 'tnaɪt'. The weak vowel 'Y' after the initial 't' is expected to be elided while the 'n' that follows becomes syllabic. It is noticeable from the table that 10% of the subjects under study produced 'tonaɪt', inserting 'o' where the weak 'Y' is to be elided, 90% of the subjects had it realised as 'tɒnaɪt', inserting another strong 'ɒ' where the weak 'Y' is to be omitted while 0% of the subjects produced the expected 'tnaɪt'. In the second expression from the table, 'correct' is our focus. The word is expected to be produced as 'kɹɛkt,' the weak vowel 'Y' after initial consonant 'k' is expected to be omitted and the 'r' that follows becomes syllabic. Noticeable from the table is that 100% of the subjects pronounced 'kɹɛkt', inserting strong 'R' after the initial 'k' where it is expected that weak 'Y' omitted while 0% of the subjects realised the expected 'kɹɛkt'. The last word on the table is 'police'. It is expected that the word is realised as 'pɪi:s' with the weak vowel 'Y' after the initial 'p' omitted and 'l' that follows becomes syllabic. Apparently from the table, 78% of the respondents had the word produced as 'poli:s' while 22% of the respondents produced it as 'pɪi:s'.



## Conclusion

Elision as a phonological process makes for easy pronunciation of one's speech, most especially in connected speech. Having investigated elision in Educated Ekiti English, it can be deduced that there are insignificant instances of elision in Educated Ekiti English. Findings revealed that the majority of educated Ekiti Speakers of English are not aware of the appropriate use of elision; they tend to pronounce every word as its orthography dictates, just as they tend to give prominence to every syllable in a word. Some words that are supposed to have the /Y/ sound elided are pronounced with strong vowels. 'Tomatoes', 'potatoes', 'perhaps' and 'tomorrow' are expected to have the /Y/ in the first syllable elided and aspiration 'o' occupies the whole space. Instead of that, various strong vowels as 'o', 'a:', 'u' are used.

In the instance of general loss of weak vowels in words, Educated Ekiti English falls short of this. A number of words that are expected to have the weak vowel elided are articulated with other strong vowels. For instance, 'comfortable', 'vegetable', 'camera', 'chancellor', 'natural', 'temporarily', 'novelist', to mention a few are supposed to have /Y/ elided in their second syllables. However, they have them realised with strong vowels as 'R', 'j', 'â', 'o', 'Š', etc. And where weak vowel + 'n', 'l', or 'r' becomes syllabic consonant, 'tonight', 'correct' and 'police' are realised with vowels 'o', 'Š' and 'R'.

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