

Schwa assimilation and syllable boundaries

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Schwa assimilation is a very common phenomenon in modern Danish. It is a process where a schwa disappears but the syllabicity is taken over by adjacent sonorant sounds, e.g. [falə sə:ðə] → [fal] sə:ð] *falde, søde* 'fall, sweet' that retain their disyllabic status even though a vowel is lost. Schwa assimilation is in some cases obligatory, even in the distinct pronunciation of the word. In other cases it is optional, and in yet other cases it is very unlikely except in very reduced pronunciation.

Previous descriptions of the phenomenon (e.g. Brink & Lund, 1975) suggest that the likelihood of schwa assimilation occurring is related only to the degree of sonority in the neighbouring sounds, and that abstract boundaries, such as syllable or word boundaries, are irrelevant.

In this article the occurrence of assimilated and elided schwa in a Danish spontaneous speech corpus is analysed. It is shown that contrary to the previous descriptions, the realisation of schwa can be directly linked to the syllable boundary. Specifically a schwa is almost always assimilated if it is followed by a sonorant sound, no matter the degree of sonority. Also it is almost always assimilated to a preceding sound if, and only if, there is a syllable boundary between that sound and schwa.

These descriptions of schwa assimilation are not just two ways of saying the same thing. Assimilations that allegedly were very likely in certain phonological contexts half a century ago are now very unlikely and vice versa. This implies that the phenomenon has undergone a significant change from being an on the fly assimilation of schwa to the articulatory events surrounding it, to becoming an integrated part of the phonological syllable in which it occurs.