

Sound Disappearance: The Phonological Idiosyncrasy of Elision in Iraqi Arabic

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Abstract

The present treatise is a phonological study of elision in Iraqi Arabic. It aims at identifying and investigating the individual segments and the various types of syllables which are subjected to elision. It also attempts to examine the influence elision on the phonotactic rules, syllable structure and syllabification of Iraqi Arabic. It is assumed that elision has different effect on the concatenation of phonemes at and across word-boundary, syllable patterning and syllabification.

Key words: Iraqi Arabic; Elision; Assimilation; Syllable; Phonotactics

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INTRODUCTION

Fluent, unselfconscious speech shows a variety of characteristic differences in comparison with the citation form pronunciations. Such differences are attributed to general strategies called “connected speech process” which include, among other things, elision. Elision or sound deletion affects the distribution of phonemes at and across word-boundary. In addition, the original syllabic structures and the syllabification of words may be changed as a result of such a process, and to some extent miscomprehension, misunderstanding and confusion may occur as well. It is worth-noting that a simple enumeration

of elision and other phonological processes cannot provide speakers of language with predictive ability in the light of which pronunciations are expected to occur in a randomly spoken corpus. Regional and social accents, degrees of stress, positions of the word in the utterance, degree of formality and speech rate all interact to increase the possibility of appearing the process in a given phonological context.

Iraqi Arabic is that variety of Arabic which is spoken in Iraq by educated and non-educated people alike. It is the one which has its own lexical and phonological properties that make it remarkable among other varieties. Like other existing Arabic dialects, Iraqi Arabic is characterized by the deletion of different segments particularly the glottal plosive in different words. Moreover, in many contexts, whole syllables in different word-positions are elided, especially in words derived from Classical Arabic. Iraqi Arabic also exhibits deletion of complete words in certain cases where the syllabic templates of the Classical Arabic counterparts are changed under the influence of deletion.

This study is an attempt to investigate the phonological process of elision that occurs within the syllabic structure and across syllable and word-boundaries in Iraqi Arabic. The study contributes to giving more phonological facts and information about the types of phonotactics, the types of segments and types of syllables which are subsumed under deletion. To obtain authentic data for elision in this dialect, a tape recording of conversational speech is carried out, transcribed phonemically and then translated in Appendix (2).

ELISION: A GENERAL REVIEW

Elision (sound deletion) can be looked upon as the process of omitting sounds or segments in connected speech. Both consonants and vowels are possibly affected, and sometimes even the whole sound sequences may be elided. Elision can be of two categories: historical elisions

where a sound, which existed in an earlier form of a word, was omitted in a later form and contextual elisions in which a sound, existed in a word and said by itself, is dropped in a compound and in a connected phrase (Wells & Colson, 1971; Jones, 1972; Crystal, 2002).

From a technical angle, elision can be viewed as zero realization of phonemes in the sense that it occurs in certain circumstances as the gradation of phonemes which implies the loss of consonants or obscuration of vowel. This view is confirmed by Roach (2000) and Gruttenden (2007) who report that just like assimilation, elision is associated with rapid colloquial speech and this, in turn, leads to state that the process of change in phoneme realizations results from changing the speed and casualness of speech. Accordingly, it is important for foreigners to be aware that when native users of language to talk to each other, a great number of phonemes that the foreigners might expect to hear are not in fact pronounced.

The occurrence of elision is interpreted in terms of economy of effort where the speech energy is minimized. The nature and incidence of elision is assumed to be different from one language to another and thus it is institutionalized and considered a part of culture behavior (Ladefoged, 2006). That elision varies in extent and in frequency of occurrence in different languages paves the way to purport that it is regarded as being a variety-specific, i.e. it can serve the purpose of differentiating groups of speakers. A comparison of the citation forms and forms produced in connected speech elision may help in the understanding of dialect contact. Unlike ordinary variables, which are subservient to linguistic change, elision is phonetically motivated and its study therefore calls for a rather wider range of techniques (Kerswill, 1996, p.195).

The term “elision” may be broadly extended to traditional rhetoric, where the phenomenon of elision is dealt with in relation to the implications needed for the construction of well-formed metrical lines. In rhetorical terminology, elision in word-entail position is known as “aphesis” or “prosiopesis”, in word-medial position as “syncope”, and in word-final position as “apocope”. A similar classification is made for an opposite phenomenon known as “intrusion” (Heffner, 1950, p.178).

ELISION: HISTORICAL AND CONTEXTUAL CATEGORIES

The loss of different segments in a variety of context is well-documented in Arabic dialectology. It has been reported that a number of Arabic dialects displays a tendency to delete certain segments in different environments. This deletion is not only conceived as a form of economy of effort but it is also thought of as “laziness in the production of speech sound” (Anis, 1973, p.134).

Iraqi Arabic shows two main types of elision:

historical and contextual. The former stands for the loss of segments of certain lexemes whether these lexemes are spoken in isolation or within phrasal contexts. Such elided forms occur at a specific period of time and they are still in common use. That is, lexemes pronounced with certain elided segments in Iraqi Arabic have become a part of the vocabulary of this variety and have retained their deleted forms whether in isolation or in word-combination. Within Iraqi historical elisions, two subtypes can be recognized: elisions which take place for purely phonological purposes, and elisions which have resulted from morphological and syntactic processes such as affixation, negation and phrase formation. In the light of these two sub-types, both the underlying vowels and consonants are dropped. This can be clarified by reducing nouns of the classical word-pattern /faʕala/ which are pronounced colloquially in Iraqi Arabic as /fuʕla/ or /fiʕla/. In such cases, a number of vowels of the classical words are deleted as in /rugba/ “neck” instead of /raqaba/, where the short vowel /a/ of the second unstressed syllable is dropped together with the phonemic substitution of /q/ by /g/ and the short vowel /a/ by /u/ of the first stressed syllable, /ʕibʕa/ “net” in variation with /ʕabaka/, in which the segmental replacement of /k/ by /ʕ/ and the short vowel /a/ of the first syllable by /i/.

Equally important, Iraqi Arabic does not distinguish between pausal and non-pausal forms. All words are pronounced with a distinct pausal form where the final short vowel of classical words whether they occur in isolation or in running speech is lost:

Iraqi Arabic	Classical Arabic	
tirak	tarak	“he left”
taar	taara	“he flew”
difaʕ	dafaʕ	“he pushed”

Elision of short vowels of the first unstressed syllables of bi-syllabic and monosyllabic words in Iraqi Arabic is another example of historical deletion which occur because of phonological purposes. This can be shown in words like

Iraqi Arabic	Classical Arabic	
tjuur	tujuur	“birds”
ʕhuud	ʕhuud	“witnesses”
jadirsuun	jadrusuun	“they study”
ʕʕirfuun	jaʕrifuun	“they know”

Consonantal segments have also been dropped in Iraqi Arabic in individual words at a certain period of time. This can mainly be represented by the loss of the glottal plosive in different word-positions, for example:

Iraqi Arabic	Classical Arabic	
sbuuʕ	ʔusbuuʕ	“a week”
xuwwa	ʔuxuwwa	“brotherhood”
braahiim	ʔibraahiim	“a proper name”
dbaara	ʔidbaara	“file”

Historical elision of other consonants in Iraqi Arabic in relation to purely phonological factors can be illustrated by the loss of the glottal fricative /h/ in word-final positions. Such a process takes place within word boundary and in word combination as in qibloo “they admitted him”, baaʕoo “they sold it”, saaʕdoo “they helped him”, minhooh “they awarded him”, min-naa “from here” and ʔallaa bil-xeer “a type of greeting” in contrast to qiblooh, baaʕooh, saaʕdooh, minhooh, min-naah and ʔallaah bil-xeer. More recently, particularly among young generation, a complete syllable of the pattern /cvc/, or the onset and the coda of a syllable of the same pattern have been elided, for instance:

Young generation speech	Old generation speech	
siiha	siihlah	“call him”
saaho	saahoolah	“they call him”
jdaawuu	jdaawuunah	“they treat him”
jtibxuu	jtibxuunah	“they cook it”

The second type of historical elision in Iraqi Arabic represents the disappearance of both vowels and consonants in terms of morphological and syntactic processes. Vocalic elision of this category can be demonstrated by the deletion of the short vowel of the final syllable of perfect verbs when a suffix beginning with a vowel is attached to these verbs as in kitbat “she wrote”, kitbaw “they wrote (masc.)”, kitban “they wrote (fem.)”, kitbu “write (pl.)”, which are derived from the perfect verb kitab “he wrote”. Pre-final and final short vowels may also be dropped when a suffix beginning with a consonant is added to certain lexemes, for example: gabli “before me” is derived from gabul, ʔahli “my family” from ʔahal, ʔibni “my son” from ʔibin, marti “my wife” from mara, sitirti “my jacket” from sitra, and rahilti “my desk” from rahla.

Consonantal deletion resulting from morphological and syntactic factors can be verified by means of a speech change from one generation into another in this variety:

Young generation utterances	Old generation utterances	
biidi	bʔiidi	“with my hands”
bamrak	bʔamrak	“at your orders”
lahmar	ʔil ʔahmar	“the red”
linsaan	ʔil ʔinsaan	“the human being”
fluus ahli	fluus ʔahli	“my family’s mony”

Contextual elision in Iraqi Arabic also involves both vowels and consonants. This can be pointed out by examples like hamdilla wiʕʕikil “Praise thanks are to God” for ʔal hamdu lillaa wiʕʕikil, where the short vowel /u/ of the word ʔal hamdu is elided together with other segments, xan dil jamkum “let’s stay with you” in variation with xalli ndil jamkum, in which a complete

syllable of the word xalli consisting of /l/ + /i/ is deleted together with the transference of the initial consonant of the subsequent word, namely ndil to the preceding word xalli, gaaʕ jiqra “he is reading” as compared with gaaʕid jiqra, hmalla waaldeek “May God have mercy on your parents” instead of rahmalla waaldeek, where the /r/ and the short vowel /a/ of the lexeme rahmalla are dropped.

ELISION AND GRADATION: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Vowels in Arabic as a whole can either be long or short. However, one can identify other degrees of length of the basic Arabic vowels in which such phonemes become in certain contexts very short or probably very weakly articulated where they lose their phonetic value. In fact, Arab scholars (Ibn Jinni, 1955; Hijazi, 1978) recognize two degrees of vowel gradation in Arabic. The first degree entails a slight articulation of the short vowel, i.e. the short vowel is not given a full value: it is weakened or obscured. This degree can be illustrated by the slight pronunciation of the short vowels /a/ and /i/ in words like ʔanta “you (sing. /masc.)”, and ʔanti (sing. /fem.)”. The second degree implies the closure of the lips after eliding the short vowel /u/ that follows the final consonant of a word in the pausal form, for example: wahu llaah “and he is Allah” instead of wahwa llaahu.

Qualitative vowel gradation in Iraqi Arabic can be shown by gradual modification of the quality of some vowels of classical lexemes where such vowels appear in unstressed positions:

Iraqi lexemes	Classical lexemes	
ʕiʕiir	ʕaʕiir	“barley”
ʕirab	ʕarib	“he drank”
ʕiraf	ʕaraf	“he knew”
ʕidwaan	ʕudwaan	“aggression”

In Iraqi Arabic, quantitative gradation can be elicited in a number of grammatical words, particularly prepositions, where their vowels are dropped rapid connected speech. Such a phenomenon usually takes place when these lexemes appear in unaccented positions. Nevertheless, when these words are stressed they retain their full forms. It is worth noting here that unlike English, grammatical words in Iraqi Arabic show not more than two pronunciations, except in few cases: a full form and a reduced form where the nucleus of these words may be elided, for instances:

Gradational phrases	Non-gradational phrases	
mnil ahsan	min il ʔahsan	“it is better”
ʕla baxtak	ʕala baxtak	“for God’s sake”
baʕdiʕ ʕwajj	baʕad ifwajj	“after a while”
wja heeʕ naas	wijja heeʕ naas	“with such people”
min taʕab	min it taʕab	“as a result of tiredness”

ELISION AND ASSIMILATION: INTERRELATED PROCESSES

What is worth underlying here is to examine those contexts in which both elision and assimilation may take place simultaneously in Iraqi Arabic. That is, there are certain phonological environments where two processes may co-occur, and above all, elision, in particular, tends to provide the contexts for assimilation to appear in a number of situations.

In a similar vein to elision categories mentioned so far, Iraqi Arabic also exhibits historical and contextual assimilation. However, in both types of assimilation segments are assimilated to each other regressively whether within word-boundary or in word-combination. The former can be represented as follows:

Assimilated segments	Non-assimilated segments	
ʃʃuun	dʒʃuun	“eyelids”
ʃambar	ʃanbar	“a type of Iraqi rice”
mizzawwidʒ	mitzawwidʒ	“married”
maanna	maalna	“ours”
miʃitti	miʃidti	“my stomach”

Most of these assimilated forms have been established in this dialect where they are spoken in the way whether they appear in slow careful speech or in rapid speech.

The latter type involves that the final segment of a preceding word may be assimilated to the initial segment of a subsequent word. This can be shown by the following examples:

Assimilated forms	Non-assimilated forms	
ʔahlaw wasahlan	ʔahlan wasahlan	“welcome”
baʃaf ʃway	baʃad ʃwajj	“a little later”
sit tillaab	sit tillaab	“six students”

Base form	Syllable deletion	Assimilation	Double assimilation & elision	
xalli nbaawiʃ	xal nbaawiʃ	xan nbaawiʃ	xam baawiʃ	“let’s see”
xalli nbaat	xal nbaat	xan nbaat	xam baat	“let’s sleep”

In all the examples cited so far, both the final reduced form and the pre-final assimilated form occur in rapid speech, while in slow careful speech the base form as well as the first elided form may be heard frequently. Other examples of such a case in which various processes operate on the same original form are very common in this dialect as in ʃissawwi “what are you doing?” in comparison with ʃinu tsawwi, ʃissaalfa “what is the matter?” instead of ʃinhi saalfa, bbeef “how” for biʔajji fajʔ.

The co-occurrence of both elision and assimilation can be illustrated by examples like maassawwar “I do not think so” for maa ʔatsawwar or maa ʔassawwar, maazzawwadʒ “I do not get married” in comparison with maa ʔatzawwadʒ or maa ʔazzawwadʒ, hassa “now” in variation with hassaʃaʃa, faj ʃii “something” in comparison with farid ʃii or fariʃ ʃii and mis suug “from the market” for mnil suug.

In a variety of contexts, elision in Iraqi Arabic may cause some sort of juxtaposed segments to be assimilated to each other. This is attributed to the fact that many adjacent sounds of different place or manner of articulation are difficult to be uttered successively since they need much more effort on the part of the speaker. Hence, Iraqi speakers appeal to accommodate such pronunciations via adopting various strategies including assimilation. The following examples may illustrate this assumption: ritt agilla “I wanted to tell him” as compared with ridit ʔagilla where the loss of the short vowel /i/ of the first word leads to the assimilation of /d/ under the influence of /t/ producing a final geminate cluster, ssawweet “what have you done?” in variation with ʃinu sawweet in which the reduction of the word ʃinu into /ʃ/ yields to the assimilation of /ʃ/ under the influence of /s/ resulting in an initial geminate cluster, xaj jruuh “let him go” instead of xalli jruuh whereby the loss of the syllable /li/ of the first word provides the assimilation of /l/ into /j/ creating a medial geminate cluster, ʃassuug “towards the market” for ʃalal suug where the elision of the onset and the nucleus of the syllable /lal/ constitutes the assimilation of /l/ into /s/ under the influence of the following /s/.

Elision and assimilation may function subsequently and in combination on the same base form in Iraqi Arabic. In such a case, an assimilated segment may be further assimilated after dropping a subsequent segment. Putting on the concrete footing, the loss of the following sound may provide the context for the preceding assimilated sound to be further coalesced:

ELISION: APHAERESIS, SYNCOPE AND APOCOPE

In phonetics and phonology, the term “aphaeresis” has been used to denote elision of the initial vowel of a lexeme when that vowel is preceded by the final vowel of another lexeme. The terms “syncope” and “apocope” refer to the loss of segments (consonants and vowels) in word-medial and word-final positions respectively. The word

in Arabic never begins with a vowel as compared with English where lexemes may begin either with a vowel, a diphthong, a single consonant or a consonant cluster. In Arabic, the word usually begins with a single consonant and in Iraqi Arabic the word starts either with a single consonant or with a two-element cluster. Accordingly, “aphaeresis” is not applicable Arabic and its dialects, but it is confined to English and other languages like French.

Syncope and apocope are not recently detected phenomena in Arabic dialects including Iraqi Arabic. They have been investigated thoroughly in Arabic in relation to different topics, particularly the investigation of the various linguistic characteristics of the old Arab dialects, elision elicited in the recitations of the holy Quran, metrics and the like Shahin (1980), Al-Jundi (1978) and Al-Muttalibiy (1984).

In the light of syncope, Iraqi Arabic shows many examples where both vowels and consonants are dropped in word-medial position. Iraqi speakers often delete short vowels occurring in the first unstressed syllables of bi-syllabic words having the structure /cv+cvvc/. So, words like kbaar “big (pl.)”, dmuuʕ “tears”, dʒnuud “soliders”, ʕgaal “headband”, nriid “we want” and hnaak “there” are commonly used instead of the classical versions kibaar, dumuuʕ, dʒunuud, ʕiqaal, nuriid and hunaak.

In rapid connected speech, medial vowels are lost in Iraqi Arabic. This can be illustrated by the examples like ʕeeb ʕleek “shame on you” as compared with ʕeeb ʕaleek, joom ʕla joom “day after day” in comparison with joom ʕala joom, mini bʕiid “from a distance” instead of min biʕiid. Consonants are also elided in word-medial position, most notably the glottal plosive, for instance: taariix “history” for taʔriix, biir “a well” instead of biʔr, muumin “believer” in comparison with muʔmin.

In phrasal contexts, consonants and vowels are also lost word-medially in Iraqi Arabic. This can be indicated by the following examples: ʕaan jbaaʕ ʕal walad “he was looking at the boy” instead of ʕaan jbaawiʕ ʕalal walad, xan juuf “let’s see” for xalli njuuf, fad sbuuʕ “a week later” as compared with fard sbuuʕ, bit ʕammi “my cousin” for bint ʕammi, ʕid ʕali “with Ali” in comparison with ʕind ʕali.

With regard to apocope, Iraqi Arabic shows deletion of different segments in word-final position particularly consonants. In this dialect, vowels are rarely dropped word-finally except in certain words of classical origin where these words are always used in their pausal forms. Thus, verbs like tirak “he left”, ʕirab “he drank”, naDDaf “he cleaned” are the variants of the classical verbs taraka, ʕaraba, naDDafa. Elision of final short vowels may be elicited in some words which are in common use as alternatives to their colloquial words terminating with vowels. In consequence, words like ʕwajja “a little” and ʕalajja “against me” may be pronounced as ʕwajj and ʕalajj. The loss of final short vowel can also be observed in words such as twaffa “he died” in comparison with tawaffaa, moota “dead (pl.)” for mawtaa, hibla “pregnant”

instead of hublaa. rima “he threw” for ramaa.

Final consonants are frequently lost in Iraqi Arabic as in ʕbii “what is wrong with him” in comparison with ʕbiih, wajjaa “with him” instead of wajjaah, taʕa gillak “come to tell you something” for taʕaal ʕagillak, xoo ma zaʕal “I hope he has not been offended” in variation with xoob ma zaʕal.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study unveils a number of outstanding findings that contribute, in a way or another, to trace the landmarks of how Iraqi sounds are subsumed under the process of elision. Vowels, consonants and syllables are elided in various degrees in different word positions and across word-boundary. Elision affects the distribution of phonemes among word positions, and this effect is therefore reflected mainly through the alternation of the patterns of the syllabic structure of words which is accompanied in most cases by the decrease in the number of the original syllables. In certain contexts, elision violates the phonotactic parameters in a way that it leads to the formation of impermissible consonant combinations.

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APPENDIX 1: IRAQI SEGMENTAL SYMBOLS

The Vowels:

- i as in ʔibin “son”
- ii as in bziim “buckle”
- ee as in ween “where”
- a as in matbax “kitchen”
- aa as in waasta “medium”
- oo as in xoof “fear”
- u as in duʕbul “marbles”
- uu as in hduum “clothes”

The Consonants:

- b as in bhaam “thumb”
- s as in salʕa “blad”
- w as in wlaaja “city”
- t as in taʕbaan “tired”
- z as in zibid “butter”
- j as in jnaam “he sleeps”
- t as in tiin “mud”
- ʃ as in ʃaʕar “hair”
- d as in dmuuʕ “tears”
- x as in xaadim “servant”
- d as in daabut “officer”
- y as in yaali “expensive”
- k as in kital “he killed”
- ħ as in ħilim “dream”
- g as in gwaani “sacks”
- ʕ as in ʕgaal “headband”
- q as in qamiis “shirt”
- h as in hnaak “there”
- ʔ as in ʔamal “hope”
- ʃ as in ʃaaʒ “tea”
- f as in fazʕa “effort”
- ɕ as in ɕibin “cheese”
- T as in Taani “second”
- m as in moot “death”
- D as in Deel “tail”
- n as in nahar “river”
- D as in Daruf “envelop”
- l as in liga “he found”
- s as in sirdaab “cellar”
- r as in rubuʕ “quarter”

APPENDIX (2)

The text is an Iraqi farmer’s recorded speech in which he describes how palm trees are cultivated, and what types they are.

Text

ʔinnaxla jzirʕuunha jsammuunha faraxl naxal. taali hannaoba taaxaD muʕaddil ʔam sana lamman maa dguum tiħmal. hassa huwwa nnaxal anwaaʕ. ʔindak naxal birhi, xudraawi, saʕamran, firsi w guntar w baʕid anwaaʕ w qasaam maa adri biihin aana. amman akDar lijzirʕuunha hnaak huwa saʕ amraan min ɕjihāt haj ʔissaʕamraan, awwalan jsaddiruun min ʔinda ʔihwwaj lilxaaridɕ. hannaoba hatta jiftayluun biihin bʕjiradaay wijsaffuuna wijsaffuuna. Taali nooba jisaffuuna wilbaaʕi jbiisuuuna, hatta jaʕni kill joom awaadim jiftiruuna jaakuuna, bass Daak ʕalilakTar maal jsaddiruuna lilxaaridɕ. hannaoba naxal aku illi jihal w taali Daak ʔilfaħal. ʔilfaħal kill gaaʕ ʔitʕuuf mija miiteen naxla, biiha faħal waahid, Dikar. haaDa jguum, baʕad ma ʔinnaxal jguum jtalliʕ, jxalluuna jtalliʕ, taali waahid jɕzi jlaggiħ, jsammuuna laggaħʕi. raɕɕzaal iih! haaDa jħutt ʔilfarwand maala jisʕad ʔalilfaħal jgussla ʔam talʕa.

Translation

They plant the palm tree and it is called a palm sapling. So, they plant it and it takes about on average a number of years before it begins to bear fruit, they say it bears fruit. Now the palm is of many kinds: you have the Birhi, Khudhrawi, Sa’amran, Firsi and Guntar, and also many other types which I do not know. But, the type which the people there plant mostly is the Sa’amran because they export much of it abroad. Firstly, they work on them in a hut, cleaning them and opening them. Then, they export them and the rest they sell in the area, every day people come and buy them and eat them. However, most of it they export abroad. Now there is the type of palm which bears fruit and then there is also the male palm. In every plot of land in which you see a hundred or two hundred palms, there is one male palm. When the palm begins to bring out buds, they let it bring out buds, then someone comes to pollinate them. He is called a laggaħchi. A man, yes! He puts on his climbing belt and climbs up the palm. He cuts off a number of buds.