Elision

'It 'im too 'ard then, dint ya?

Quite simply, elision is all about dropping sounds or not pronouncing them fully in fluent speech.

As you worked your way through some of the material in the exercise above, you may have noticed that sometimes, words seem to have letters missing within the phonetic transcription. For instance, we know that the word *round* is pronounced **/raʊnd/** and the word *to* is pronounced **/tə/**. However, when the words are used together as in *round to*, we often drop the final **/d/,** so that phonetically it reads **/raʊn tə/**. This is because **/t/** and **/d/** are both labio-dental sounds, and we tend to drop one – in this case the voiced **/d/.** This is called **elision.**

This is one of the aspects of **sentence stress** that we need to consider when guiding and teaching our students, as opposed to pointing them towards isolated phonetic dictionary entries.

In English, stress placement in sentences and rhythm are part and parcel of everyday speech. As a result, stress placement is variable depending upon the meaning and the effect sought. This is quite a large area of phonetics, so for now we will simply identify some regular features of stress placement in connected utterances. Some words regularly attract the stress, while others don't. Those that are regularly unstressed are:

- **auxiliary verbs – primary and modal**
- **determiners (articles, demonstrative pronouns, etc.)**
- **subject pronouns (he, she, it, they, etc.)**
- **prepositions (one/two syllable words e.g. on, in, at, upon, etc.)**
- **conjunctions (and, but, so, etc.)**

You will notice that these are primarily grammatical words, rather than content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. We might think of them as 'small' words but technically they are called **'function'** words.

However, you could say *'I want an apple and an orange'* – where the *'and'* is unstressed and pronounced with schwa, but imagine that the question were *'Would you like an apple or an orange in your lunchbox?'*. The answer might be *'I want and apple AND an orange'*, in which case the important part is the fact that speaker wants BOTH and therefore the *'and'* doesn't have schwa...

Elision is called **gradation** by some and involves the loss of a phoneme in connected speech. This tends to happen in unstressed syllables and, in a sense, elision is a simplification or an economy made in rapid colloquial speech. In short, in natural conversation, we tend to glide over weak forms and 'lose' some of them. As a result, learners of English need to be made aware of it more for their ability to understand native speakers' rapid speech than for their own speech production.

There are 3 main phonetic environments where this occurs:

a) Syllable-final clusters involving **/t, d/**

conscripts	is pronounced	**/ˈkɒnskrɪps/**
facts	is pronounced	**/fæks/**
the fact that	is pronounced	**/ðə fæk ðət/**

Helen's machine stopped printing

is pronounced   **/ˈhlənz məˈʃiːn ˈstɒp ˈprɪntɪŋ/**

/h/ and **/j/** tend not to create this elision but other consonants can in rapid speech. Cruttenden (2008: 303-4) provides a number of useful examples that show the vulnerability of **/t/** and **/d/** in combinations such as **-pt, -kt, -st, -ft, -ʃt, -ʧt, -bd, -gd, -nd, -ld, -zd, -ʤd, -vd, -ðd**:

next day	/neɪks deɪ/
mashed potatoes	/mæʃ pɒˈteɪtəʊz/
the last post	/ðə lɑːs pəʊst/
Liz smiled gently	/ˈlɪz ˈsmaɪl ˈʤentlɪ/

b) The elision of **/ə/**

This can occur in several environments. In connected speech /ə/ can easily disappear at word boundaries when the sound comes at the start of a word, positioned between two stressed syllables, as in:

go away   /ˈgəʊ‿ˈweɪ/

or when it is followed by a stressed syllable beginning with /r/ or /l/

police   /pliːs/

Elision can also occur when the sound comes in the middle or final combinations as in:

preferable /ˈprefrəbl̩/ *library* /ˈlaɪbrɪ/

c)   The loss of **/h/**

/h/ is lost in pronominal weak forms (i.e. the weak form of the pronoun) when they don't occur at the start of an utterance. As you can see from the example below, the **/h/ of the two** masculine pronouns is retained at the beginning of the sentence – 'He', but gets elided when it occurs for a second time, in the middle of the sentence.
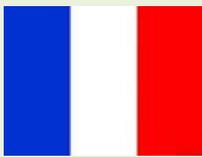
He passed his exam

is pronounced

/hɪ ˈpaːst ɪz ɪgˈzæm/

We see this even more when we are teaching French learners. Take a look at the box below for details.

"'Allo, 'Allo" - missing /h/ - why it's relevant - French speakers

In French, there is no /h/ so French speakers will often carry this over when speaking in English and leave out the /h/, as in *'e 'asn't seen 'im today*. Try getting your French speakers to open their mouths and produce aspirated **/h/**sound, and then say **hot, head** and **heart.** See here for an example of the **/h/** sound on the phonemic chart:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try/activities/phonemic-chart

Kerry McEwan, one of our English tutors at Global English, says that she gets her French speaking students to say:

"I hear with my ears"

to show them the aspirated 'h'.