

Vowel elision in spoken Italian

Luigia Garrapa
University of Konstanz (Germany)

This paper deals with vowel elision in spoken Italian. In Romance languages a vowel sequence (V1V2) across word boundaries can be realized as a hiatus or it can be resolved in a variety of ways. One of them is vowel elision: the final vowel (V1) of a Word (Word1) gets elided if the following word (Word2) begins with a vowel (V2) (see Vogel et al. 1983, Agostiniani 1989, Nespor 1987, 1990 for Italian; Cabré & Prieto 2005 for Catalan; Bisol 2003 for Brazilian Portuguese and Tranel 1996 for French among others). What probably drives speakers to apply vowel elision is, phonetically speaking, euphony (when V1=V2), the need for an easier articulation and for a more fluent pronunciation (when V1≠V2), especially when the speech rate increases (cfr. Vogel et al. 1983, Nespor 1987, 1990), or, phonologically speaking, the crosslinguistically valid constraint requiring that syllables have onsets (MaxOnset principle, see Tranel 1996, McCarthy 2003).

Vowel elision in Italian is said to be obligatory only when the masculine singular determiners *lo* (the) and *uno* (a) are followed by a Word2 beginning with a vowel (see 1); on the contrary it is said to be an optional process when other singular determiners, pronouns and prepositions are followed by a vowel (see 2) and it seems to be determined by morphological, syntactic, phonological and markedness factors (Vogel et al. 1983 and Serianni 1988).

Many scholars (see Nespor 1987, 1990, Vogel et al. 1983 and Agostiniani 1989 among others) have studied vowel elision mainly in Italian [Lex Lex] sequences. Our research, in contrast, focuses on [Fnc Lex] sequences (Fnc = determiner, pronoun, preposition and Lex = noun, verb, adjective). Our data (3 hours of recording) are representative of Florentine Italian (a variety of Standard Italian spoken in central Italy) and of Italian as spoken in Lecco (standard Italian as spoken in northern Italy).

Our aim is to understand the functioning of vowel elision in spoken Italian and to see if our data mirror what is stated in descriptive grammars (see Serianni 1988, Dardano & Trifone 1988): only *lo* (the) and *uno* (a) are obligatorily elided when followed by a Word2 beginning with a vowel (see 1) or if other Fnc too nearly regularly undergo elision.

Our assumption is that, as far as [Fnc Lex] sequences are concerned, not all vowels are equally likely to undergo elision, but dorsal vowels [a, o] seem to have a higher deletion rate (DR) than coronal vowels [i, e]. In fact, the DR of [a, o] is 96% in Florentine Italian (FI) and 76% in Italian as spoken in Lecco (LI), the DR of [i, e] is 66% in FI and 15% in LI.

We believe that the behaviour of coronal vowels, with regards to vowel elision, depends on morphological factors, given that in Italian the vowels/affixes *-a*, *-o* express the feature [singular] (*-a* : [fem. sing.], *-o* = [masc. sing.]) while *-i*, *-e* generally express the feature [plural] (*-e* : [fem. plur.], *-i* : [masc. plur.]) and, as stated in descriptive grammars, plural Fnc generally do not undergo vowel elision, according to a markedness hierarchy of the form fem.pl. > masc.pl. > fem.sg. > masc.sg. (where > = more marked).

We propose to account for these findings by an analysis cast in the framework of Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky 1993, McCarthy & Prince 1995) putting the different behaviour of vowel elision in Florentine Italian (where V1 nearly regularly gets elided, no matter of its quality, see 3a-c) and in Italian as spoken in Lecco (where dorsal vowels are nearly regularly dropped, see 4, but coronal vowels tend to be preserved, no matter if they express the feature [plural], see 5a, or not at all, see 5b) in relation to two different constraint rankings: **Max-WI >> Onset >> Max-IO-V_{coronal}**, **Max-IO-V_{dorsal}** for Florentine Italian and **Max-WI >> Max-IO-V_{coronal} >> Onset >> Max-IO-V_{dorsal}** for Italian as spoken in Lecco.

Examples

- (1) ***uno** amico > un amico *a friend* ; ***lo** orso > l'orso *the bear*
- (2) **una** isola > una isola/ un'isola *an isle* ; **la** agenzia > la agenzia/ l'agenzia *the agency*
lo ho letto > lo ho letto/ l' ho letto *it (I) have read*
la avevo già vista > la avevo già vista/ l' avevo già vista *(I) her had already seen*
 pieno di **errori** > pieno di errori/ pieno d'errori *full of errors*
uno anello di oro > un anello di oro / un anello d' oro *a ring of gold*
- (3a) V1 = [o] (masc.sg.), V1 = [a] (fem.sg.)
 ***questo** anno > quest' anno *this year*
 una **opinione** > un' opinione *an opinion*
- (3b) V1 = [i] (masc.pl.), V1 = [e] (fem.pl.),
li avevo presi > l' avevo presi *(I) them had taken*
le avevi viste > l' avevi viste *(you) them had seen*
- (3c) V1 = [i], V1 = [e]
di originale > d'originale *of original*
 ce **ne** è > ce n' è *there of it is*
- (4) V1 = [o] (mas.sg.), V1 = [a] (fem.sg.)
 ***allo** ultimo momento > all' ultimo momento *at the last moment*
 quella **idea** > quell' idea *that idea*
- (5a) V1 = [i] (masc.sg.), V1 = [e] (fem.sg.)
li odio > * l'odio *(I) them hate*
le inviterò > * l' inviterò *(I) them will invite*
- (5b) V1 = [i] (masc./fem. sg.)
mi è successa una cosa strana > *m'è successa una cosa strana
To me has happened a thing strange
 rarely **mi** hanno detto > m' hanno detto *(they) to me have told*
 Ho comprato qualcosa **di** originale > * ho comprato qualcosa d' originale
I have bought something of original
 but ***al** giorno **di** oggi > al giorno d' oggi *nowadays*

References

- Agostiniani, L. 1989, "Fenomenologia dell'elisione nel parlato in Toscana" in *Rivista di Dialettologia Italiana*, 13: 7-46.
- Bisol, L. 2003, "Sandhi in Brazilian Portuguese" in *Probus* 15: 177-200.
- Cabré, T. & Prieto, P. 2005, " Positional and metrical prominence effects on vowel sandhi in Catalan" in Frola, S. et al. (eds) *Prosodies with special reference to Iberian Languages*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin-New York .
- Dardano, M. & P. Trifone, 1988, *Grammatica italiana*, Zanichelli, Firenze.
- McCarthy, J. & A. Prince, 1995, "Faithfulness and Reduplicative Identity" in *Papers in O.T.*, Beckmann et al. (eds) 18: 249-284.
- McCarthy J. 2003, *Optimality Theory in Phonology*, Blackwell.
- Nespor, M. 1987, "Vowel degemination and fast speech rules" in *Phonology Yearbook* 4: 61-85.
- Nespor, M. 1990, "Vowel deletion in Italian: the organization of the phonological component" in *The Linguistic Review* 7: 375-398.
- Prince A. & P. Smolensky 1993, *Optimality Theory: constraint interaction in Generative Grammar*, Rutgers University and University of Colorado.
- Serianni, L. 1988 *Grammatica italiana*, Utet, Torino.
- Tranel, B. 1996, "French Liason and Elision revisited: a unified account within Optimality Theory" in Parodi et al. (eds) *Aspects of Romance Linguistics, selected Papers from the Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages XXIV*, March 10-13, 1994: 433-488.
- Vogel et al. 1983, "La cancellazione di vocale in italiano" in *Studi di Grammatica Italiana*, Accademia della Crusca (a c.d.), Firenze: 189-230.