Explaining schwa in French

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Hyman (1985:60-64) proposes a new analysis of schwa in French which “explains why no French word can begin with schwa” and “why ‘h-aspiré’ may not be followed by schwa” (p. 63). In this note, I would like to challenge the strength of such explanations.*

1 A Syllable-weight analysis of schwa

1.1 In Hyman’s analysis, French schwas are represented as underlying weightless vowels, which may not be resyllabified when they are preceded by a weightful consonant which is ‘in turn preceded by a vowel’, as appears in the following derivations of bas retrouvé ‘recovered stocking’ vs. bar trouvé ‘found bar’:

(1) a. underlying forms:

   bas retrouvé
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only unexplanatory, but does not appear to describe the simplest well documented properties of schwa deletion.

1.2 Probably the most characteristic property of schwa in Parisian French is the fact that it is normally retained after a group of two consonants in phonological phrases (but not always as we will see below), but may be deleted after a single consonant. The deletion is normal word-internally, as in (2), and more or less optional (i.e., it depends on style and elocution) when schwa is in the first syllable of a word, as in (3) (cf. Dell 1985:228-229):

(2) a. exactement /egzakt+əmɑ̃/ [egzaktəmɑ̃]
   b. massivement /masiv+əmɑ̃/ [masivmɑ̃]

(3) a. quel neveu /kɛl nɑvø/ [kɛlnɑvø]
   b. mon neveu /mɔ̃ nɑvø/ [mɔ̃nɑvø] or [mɔ̃nvø]

1.3 Hyman’s analysis implies the existence of an association rule (similar to his rule (85) for Chuvash) which assigns the weightless vowel /ə/ to the WU of the preceding consonant when the schwa is realized. There is, however, only but succinct discussion of this Schwa Association Rule (SAR). We may infer that it is blocked when the consonant preceding the schwa in turn is preceded by a vowel (see the discussion above), and applies in all other cases: cf. his analysis of je le feraï [ʒləfrɛ], with two weightless schw as in the underlying representation /ləfrɛ/ (his example 91) where it is stated that “the first associates onto the preceding [+cons] WU, since this WU is not preceded by a vowel” (p. 62, emphasis added).

According to this analysis, the underlying /ə/ of quel neveu /kɛl nɑvø/ would be associated to the WU of the preceding /n/ and would surface as [ə] in [kɛlnɑvø]. On the other hand, in mon neveu /mɔ̃ nɑvø/, /n/ is preceded by a vowel, which blocks SAR; as a consequence the weightless schwa undergoes a “late deletion”, and /n/ is “syllabic, i.e. the most sonorous segment dominated by its weight unit”: [mɔ̃nɑvø]

I have two specific reservations about SAR, and more specifically about the blocking constraint. First, it is not really explanatory. The constraint on SAR appears to be an independent language-specific parameter. There are no reasons why a different constraint could not have existed, e.g. one which blocks SAR when the consonant preceding the schwa in turn is preceded by a consonant. As a consequence, one would have to say that the result of this new constraint — quel neveu pronounced [kɛlnvø], with a ‘syllabic’ [n] and mon neveu [mɔ̃nɑvø] — is as likely as that of the old one.

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2. I refer here to the deletion of schwa between an obstruent and a following liquid, as in une pelouse [ynpluz] ~ [ynpluz], Pierre fera ça [pjɛrfərasa] ~ [pjɛfrərasa], or je le serai [ʒalsərɛ] ~ [ʒalsra]. In order to simplify the discussion, I will not comment on other varieties of French where schwa can also be deleted after groups of consonants in other environments, cf. Morin (1987).
Yves Charles Morin

The second is more important and concerns its descriptive adequacy. The blocking constraint wrongly claims that the pronunciation of the phonological phrase *mon neveu* [mõnəvwø] with a realized schwa does not exist — when in fact it is quite frequent. Conversely SAR should always apply when a schwa is preceded by two consonants, thus preventing the deletion of the last two underlying schwas in *je le ferai* /ʒə la fəræ/ — when in fact the pronunciation [ʒəlfre] is also quite frequent. Indeed, the spectrogram published by Rialland (1986:203, fig. 9) showing the ‘syllabic’ status of [r] in *ferai* and which Hyman discusses when he analyses his examples (90) and (91), shows very clearly that the utterance *Laisse, je le ferai* was pronounced by her subject as: [les ʒəlfre].

Furthermore, Hyman’s analysis wrongly claims that all consonants before a phonetically unrealized schwa must be ‘syllabic’, e.g. in (2b) *massivement* should be [masiymã]. But even Rialland (1986:190-191), the only authority on such ‘syllabic’ consonants, declares that these do not occur before a large class of suffixes, and in particular before the ending -ment.

1.4 Finally, Hyman claims that his analysis also explains (1) “why no French word can begin with schwa”, and (2) “why ‘h-aspiré’ may not be followed by shwa”. These explanations are derived from simple theoretical assumptions which make them easy to evaluate. But before I do, it will be useful to examine other dialects of French where one can indeed find words which begin with schwa, thus providing some of the necessary background for the discussion.

2 Word-initial schwas in French

2.1 Origny-le-Sec (Aube)

In a field enquiry on the regional French of Origny-le-Sec (near Romilly, Aube) in 1976, I noticed that the initial vowel of *était/étais/étaient* ‘was/were’ was always syncopated after clitic pronouns, but that the historical liaison consonant was retained.³

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<th>Paris French</th>
<th>Origny-le-Sec</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>il était⁴</td>
<td>[il etɛ]</td>
<td>[iltɛ] ~ [itɛ]</td>
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³. Pace de Cornulier (1981:183), who hypothesized that such a situation could not develop: “l’idée [...] d’une voyelle *abstraite* capable de déclencher éision et liaison devant des mots commençant par une consonne paraît grotesque” (the concept of an abstract vowel that would trigger elision and liaison before consonants appears utterly ridiculous).

⁴. The /l/ consonant found after the clitic subject *il* must be analyzed as a liaison consonant both in the normal speech of Paris and in Origny. François’s (1974:645) Parisian corpus indicates that *il* is normally realized [i] before a consonant and [il] before a vowel, with only one exception. (This is only a dominant pattern, some Parisian speakers can use [il] before a consonant more or less frequently. The distribution of /l/ after the clitic subject *elle* is not as regular. Although in the (normal) speech of Paris, it is often omitted before a consonant, e.g. *elle travaillait* [ɛ travœʒ], it is occasionally found in such contexts in François’s corpus (1974:646–647). In other dialects, and in particular those I will present later (Origny, and Western dialects), /l/ is a liaison consonant found only before vowels.
Explaining schwa in French

A weightless analysis can easily account for this distribution: the verb était has an initial floating /e/, which is realized when SAR may apply, i.e. when the consonant preceding the weightless /e/ is not preceded by a vowel, as in c’était or t(u) étais.

(4) derivation of c’était:

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<th>after elision &amp; OCR</th>
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<td>s e t ε &gt; s e t ε</td>
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On the other hand, when the floating /e/ is preceded by a liaison consonant (i.e. a floating consonant in Hyman’s analysis, p. 55–58), SAR is blocked because this liaison consonant is preceded by a vowel:

(5) underlying form of on était:

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\text{on était}
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\[\times \times \times \]

\[\tilde{\text{n}} \text{e} \text{t} \varepsilon\]

The analysis of liaison in Origny, however, will have to be different from that proposed by Hyman for Standard French. For the sake of discussion, one could suggest that a liaison consonant in Origny is actually associated to the WU of a preceding vowel when a vowel follows (incidentally, this analysis is actually the one proposed for liaison without enchaînement in Standard French by Encrevé 1983). All other properties of liaison would automatically follow from an independently required enchaînement rule, which dissociates a word-final consonant from its WU and associates it to the WU of a (weighted) following vowel (cf. Hyman’s discussion of example 96), as appears below in the derivation of on était [5nte] vs. on avait [5nave] in Origny:

(6) a. underlying forms:

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| \[\tilde{\text{n}} \text{e} \text{t} \varepsilon \]
| \[\tilde{\text{n}} \text{a} \text{v} \varepsilon\]

b. OCR (onset creation rule):

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c. MCR (margin creation rule) and liaison:

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\text{on était} \quad \text{on avait}
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d. enchaînement:

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The syncope of the initial vowel of \text{étaient} in Origny is historically related to that of schwa elsewhere. Origny is located in an area where schwa used to be realized [e] (cf. Bourcelot 1969, map 373, where the dialectal pronunciation for \text{grenier} is [greɲe] around Origny). The initial vowel of \text{étaient} was phonologically indistinguishable from the other schwas. When Parisian French progressively replaced the local dialect, schwa began to be realized [œ], except in \text{était} where it kept its original quality — which also happens to be that of the initial vowel of \text{était} in Paris.

2.2 Word-initial schwas in Western dialects

The weakening of the initial vowel of \text{était} is not limited to Origny. It is well attested in many Western dialects, where it is noted in the local literature.

In some dialects, the initial vowel of \text{était} has simply been deleted from the underlying representation of \text{était} which now behaves like a regular consonant-initial word, e.g. [i ta] \text{‘he was’ like [i kreʃə] ‘he believed’ vs. [i apri] ‘he learned’. This appears to be the case in Bazouges-la-Pérouse, Ille-et-Vilaine (Chauveau 1984:26-29) and Muel, Ille-et-Villaine (Petiot 1977:41-57).

Elsewhere, the situation is similar to that of Origny. The verbal form \text{était} can be analyzed with an underlying schwa, which may surface after a (regular) consonant, but not after a liaison consonant. The initial vowel of \text{était}, when it is pronounced, is phonetically identical to the other schwas in the dialect. For instance, in La Poterie, Côtes-du-Nord (Petiot 1977:95-96), where schwa is pronounced [e] as in \text{le [le] ~ [l]} ‘the’, \text{premier [premjə] ‘first’, one finds [il te] ‘il était’, [5n te] ‘on était’ vs. [k ete]…

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5. There may be other schwas besides the initial vowel of \text{était} in Origny which have kept their original quality, but the only one that I could observe is found in \text{déjà ‘already’ [deʒà] ~ [dʒa]}, which, however, is also deletable in similar conditions in Parisian French.

6. I have consulted Brossier et al. (1980) [including tapes of the short stories], Chauveau (1984), Dottin & Langouët (1901) and Petiot (1977).

7. In many Western dialects all historical short [e] and [ɛ] vowels have been reduced to a central unrounded [ə] which is phonetically identical to the historical schwa (when it is pronounced). However, [ə] < [e] and [ɛ] is not subject to the rules of schwa deletion and it retains its stress in word-final position.
‘qu(i) était’. Similarly in Pléboullé, Côte-du-Nord (Petiot 1977:21-28): [ʒɛtjô] ‘nous étions’, [œl tɛ] ‘elle était’, [il tɛ] ‘il était’, [si ʒ tə] ‘si j’étais’ (note here that the initial schwa of étéais is absent when the previous consonant is preceded by a vowel), [ʒ m etə pâdy] ‘je m’étais pendue’, [t a di k ʒ etə bude] ‘t(u) as dit que j’étais boudet (i.e. ‘nice’)’. Another example from a dialect where shwa is pronounced [ə] is Mayennais (Brossier et al. 1980): [k sətɛ dyr] ‘qu(e) c’était dur’ vs. [stə] ‘c’était’, [sə tə] ‘ça était’, [ʒ n tə] ‘on était’ (note here that the initial schwa is realized only after ‘heavy’ consonant clusters).

3 Explaining gaps

Now we can return to the gaps in Paris French that Hyman’s analysis claimed to account.

3.1 No French word can begin with a schwa

“The weightless representation of schwa explains why no French word can begin with a schwa: if such a word had an initial schwa, this schwa would never be realized, because it would not have a [+cons] WU to attach to” (Hyman, p. 63). There appears to me to be two flaws in this argumentation. First, even if we assume that a word-initial schwa is never realized, this certainly does not mean that it does not exist. Evidence for its existence could come from other sources, e.g. the presence of a liaison consonant as we have just seen in other dialects of French. That Hyman should argue against the existence of a weightless segment because it is never phonetically realized is certainly surprising: a few pages before the same author argues for the existence of a weightless consonant to account for ‘h-aspiré’ — which is never realized. The second flaw concern the absence of a [+cons] WU to attach to. This argument apparently presupposes that associations cannot extend outside the word, and thus that a schwa could not be attached to a consonant belonging to a preceding word (recall how one can argue that the initial weightless /e/ of était in Origny is attached to the preceding /s/ in c’était /sete/). This also is surprising, when liaison is precisely analyzed by this author as the association of a weightless consonant to the vowel of a different word.

3.2 ‘h-aspiré’ may not be followed by schwa

“If we represent h-aspiré as floating [+cons] ..., then a haCV sequence would have the representation in [(7)].

(7) 

\[ \begin{array}{c|c|c|c} \otimes & \otimes & \otimes \\ \hline \end{array} \]

\[ [+\text{cons}] \quad \varepsilon \quad C \quad V \]
In this representation only the OCR applies. The schwa may not link with the preceding floating [+cons] because the latter does not have a WU, and the floating [+cons] may not link with the following schwa by the OCR, because the latter also does not have a WU. Thus, the sequence h-aspiré + schwa would have no realization, and is therefore never present as an initial sequence in underlying forms.” (Hyman, pp. 63-64)

I see the same two flaws: one argues against the existence of a phonological entity because it has no phonetic realization, and one presupposes that no interaction is possible between words.

Note how in the argumentation above nothing depends on the fact that the floating consonant is not completely specified, and how it applies as well to an underlying floating /v/ for instance. I can easily imagine one case where one may want to posit an initial sequence of floating segments /va/, if one admits a rule linking a floating consonant to the WU of a preceding vowel when it is followed by a vowel (as is argued in similar terms by Encrevé 1983:57 for liaison without enchaînement, or as I proposed — for the sake of the argument — in Origny). The initial /v/ could then be linked to a preceding vowel because it is followed by a floating /a/, which nonetheless is never realized. (To give some concrete support to our hypothetical situation, imagine what would happen to the verb venir, if a historical rule deleted [v] in [vn] clusters after a consonant or in utterance-initial position, as in Pierre venait [pjɛr ne], venez! [ne], but not after a vowel, as in tu venais [ty vne], vous venez [vu vne], etc.)

If there are some principled reasons why h-aspiré may not be followed by schwa in French, they certainly cannot be (only) those suggested above.

3.3 Actually, these are probably not the only cases of hasty explanations in Hyman (1985). For instance, the reason why Glide Formation (GF) in French is blocked in brouette [bruɛt], *[brwɛt] cannot be “BECAUSE it may not be the case that GF creates more than a ternary branching WU” (p. 80, emphasis mine), cf. skier /ski+e/ ‘to ski’ which may be pronounced [skje] by many speakers of Parisian French and where GF creates a quaternary branching (unless one is willing to say that the OAR for /b/ before /t/ in brouette occurs before GL, while the OAR for /s/ before /k/ occurs later). But enough of this, less I be told Sutor, ne supra crepidam!

References


Explaining schwa in French


