

## Deletion and Elision in the Spoken French of English-French Bilinguals in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria

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**Abstract.** Deletion, which involves loss of segment involving vowels and consonants, is a common phonological process in language. Existing studies have examined deletion in several languages and dialects with less attention paid to the spoken French of English-French Bilinguals in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. This article therefore examined deletion as a dominant feature in the spoken French of forty-four English-French Bilinguals in the University of Ibadan in Oyo State, South West of Nigeria with a view to establishing the dominance of deletion in the spoken French of the selected participants and how the English-French bilinguals approximate to the Standard French (SF). The data collection was through tape-recording of participants' production of 30 sentences containing both French vowel and consonant sounds. The results revealed inappropriate deletion of vowel and consonant in the medial and final positions in their spoken French.

**Keywords:** English-French bilinguals, Vowel deletion, Consonant deletion, Foreign Language, French Phonology

### 1. Introduction

Listening to the spoken French of a Nigerian, it is possible to predict the part of the country such a person comes from and this is because the accents of most speakers of French differ depending on the region they come from or their dialect (Iyiola, 2014; 2015). Existing studies have identified phonological variation features of French spoken by Nigerians with inadequate attention paid to the spoken French of English-French Bilinguals in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in spite of the shared phonological features between Standard English(SE) and Standard French (SF). This study, therefore, examines deletion as a main phonological process in the spoken French

of English-French Bilinguals in the University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria with a view to establishing the linguistic variables deleted and positions of deletion and causes of deletion in their spoken French.

### 2. Deletion

In language, we often come across situations where a morpheme shows up in two alternating phonological shapes, one of which contains a vowel or consonant segment that is missing from the other. For example, in Samoan language, the root meaning 'twist' has two alternants: *milos* and *milo* (van Oostendorp, Marc: 2004; Iyiola 2014; 2015; 2018). The form ending in *s* is found before a vowel-initial suffix (as in *milos-ia* 'be twisted'), while the form lacking the *s* is found when the root falls at the end of a word. In such situations, the two alternants usually stem from a single historical source, and we can attribute the alternation between segment and zero to the action of some sound change. The question then is whether or not the historical form contained the segment that alternates in the present-day forms. Either the segment was absent from the original form and has since been inserted in certain phonological contexts. Or it was present and has since been deleted in certain contexts. Which of these scenarios is correct depends on whether the segment's occurrence is phonologically predictable or not.

Deletion is a common process in language. It involves the loss of a segment under some language-specific imposed conditions (Oyebade 1998:63). Deletion could involve consonants and vowels. Deletion that involves vowel is called elision. Vowels are usually deleted when two or more vowels occur across morpheme boundary. When such an occurrence is introduced by morphological processes,

the language may choose to drop the first or the second of the contiguous vowels. Consider examples like “J’ai, l’eau, l’hôpital” among others. General terms used to describe whole-segment deletion include elision, loss, drop and truncation.

Although these terms continue to prove useful for descriptive purposes, they retain a strong flavour of the philological tradition within which they were conceived. Firstly, there is a procedural flavour to the terminology: deletion might suggest that a phonological form is derivationally altered by the irretrievable elimination of a sound. Secondly, there is an implication that what gets deleted is a phoneme-sized unit – an impression undoubtedly reinforced by the practice of using alphabetic transcription to present the relevant data. Neither of these connotations accurately reflects how deletion is treated in modern phonological theory. Vowel sequences lacking an intervening consonant are cross-linguistically unacceptable. Whenever morpheme concatenation threatens to create a hiatus configuration of this sort, languages can take various measures to resolve it. One of the most favoured of these is to delete one of the vowels in French (Bright 1957, Iyiola 2015).

INPUT	OUTPUT
le ami-	l’ami ‘the friend (m.)’
la amie -	l’amie ‘the friend (f.)’
Je ai-	J’ai

Deletion can also target vowels at the absolute edges of words, usually when the affected syllable is unstressed or in some other way non-prominent. Some languages do not tolerate consonant clusters. When such a linguistic phenomenon occurs as a result of morphological or syntactic collocation, the offending cluster is rectified. Sometimes, the conditions for consonant deletion may be that the language prefers that final syllables should be open (Oyebade 1998:65; Iyiola 2014, 2015). If a closed syllable occurs in final position, the process of consonant deletion is introduced to obliterate the arresting consonant and hence to open the syllable e.g. /pətitami/ → /gRozami/, /tʁɛzɛtRwa/, /tʁɔpɛtRwa/ → /pətigarsɔ/, /gRogaRsɔ/ → /tʁɔplɑRʒ/ → /tʁɛlaRʒ/ (Oyebade 1998). Oyebade further discusses the process of degermination (a type of consonant deletion) whereby a cluster of identical consonant is reduced to one. Consider the examples below:

Latin	French
Terra	/tɛR/
Bella	/bɛl/
Pressa	/pʁɛs/

Certain syllabic positions are particularly favourable to deletion, and deletion changes the syllabification of the phonological forms it targets. These assumptions are themselves founded on a widely accepted model of syllabification that can be summarised as follows:

### 3. Standard Syllabic Model

(a) Sonority: syllable nuclei always correspond sonority peaks (typically vowels).

(b) Word edges: (i) a word-initial consonant forms a syllable onset; (ii) a word-final consonant forms a syllable coda. These assumptions represent what can be considered the ‘standard’ view of syllabification (Blevins 2004). However, it has increasingly been called into question, and this inevitably impacts on the validity of syllable-based analyses of deletion.

However, this study will not be complete without saying that English is the mother tongue of our participants in this study and that English has a way of interfering in the spoken aspect of a second foreign language learner. In English language, phonological process occurs when words are juxtaposed at a morpheme boundary, thus resulting in a change of the segment of these neighbouring words. In other words, the changes that take place in segment in environment such as initial, final, intervocalic and when morphemes combine to form a word are called phonological processes (cf. Schane 1973:49). Phonological processes that occur in English language can be said to be either assimilatory or non-assimilatory. Notably, Final Vowel epenthesis also takes place in spoken English. However, our focus in this study is to examine instances of deletion in the spoken French of the English-French Bilinguals in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria which has not gained enough attention by previous studies.

### 4. Methodology

Forty-four participants for this study were purposively selected from learners of French whose mother tongue is English in the Department of European Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The participants were selected from 400 level (Year 4 Students) because it is believed that they would have attained a considerable level of proficiency in French language. The data collection was through tape-recording of participants’ production of 30 prompt sentences (Iyiola, 2014; 2015) containing both French vowel and consonant sounds. Scoring of correct and incorrect productions was done and analysed statistically by converting it to percentages.

5. Analysis

Through the participants’ production of 30 sentences, we discovered dominant instances of schwa/ə/ deletion in the spoken French of the English-French bilinguals as analysed in simple percentages in the table below.

Word	Correct phonetic representation	Variables	Variants by respondents	% of Deletion	Possible Phonological Processes
Secrétaire	/səkRetɛR/	/ə/	skreter	78%	Deletion of “ə” sound in the initial position while the “ə” deletion at the end is free
Gifle	/ʒifl/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Zebre	/zɛbR/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Diable	/djabl/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Fenêtre	/fənɛtR/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Aveugle	/avoegl/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Août	/ut/	/a/	-		The “a” sound is not pronounced
Faisable	/fəzabl/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Frère	/frɛR/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Fièvre	/fjɛvR/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Mainte	/mɛt/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Père	/pɛR/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Sclérose	/skleRoz/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Joyeuse	/ʒwajøz/	/ə/	-		Free deletion
Oeuvre	/oevR/	/ə/	-		Free deletion

In the table above, 78% of the participants deleted /ə/ in the word “Secrétaire /səkRetɛR/” at the initial position. As opined by Francis (1989:35), phonological variations could result from stress and its frequent concomitant, vowel reduction or deletion. From the table above, this study has been able to highlight instances of vowel reduction or deletion in the spoken French of our participants. Also, it was discovered that whenever the sound /ə/ ends a word without any accent on it or not, it is always deleted. Hence, we refer to it as free deletion. However, the case is otherwise in words like “secrétaire” and “août”. The sounds /ə/ and /a/ are deleted respectively but the difference is that the latter is a free deletion.

It is worthy of note that even when /R/, /l/ and /f/ are pronounced at the medial and final positions, they are deleted by the English-French bilinguals as observed in the examples below:

voir /vwaR/	→	/vwa/: the consonant /R/ is deleted in the final position.
garçon /gaRsɔ̃/	→	/gasɔ̃/: the consonant /R/ is deleted in the medial position.
sœur /sœR/	→	/sœ/: the consonant /R/ is deleted in the final position.
offert /ɔfɛR/	→	/ɔfɛ/: the consonant /R/ is deleted in the final position.
total /total/	→	/tota/: the lateral /l/ is deleted in the final position.
rural /RɥRa/	→	/RɥRa/: the lateral /l/ is deleted in the final position.
hôpital /opital/	→	/opita/: the lateral /l/ is deleted in the final position.
veuf /vœf/	→	/vœ/: the fricative /f/ is deleted in the final position.
cheveux /ʃəvø/	→	/ʃvø/: the round vowel /ə/ is deleted at the initial position.
secrétaire /səkRetɛR/	→	/skRetɛ/ /ə/ and /R/ are deleted at the initial and final positions respectively.

Other examples of consonant deletion in the spoken French of the English-French bilinguals are shown in the table below:

Word	Correct phonetic representation	Variable	Variants by respondents	Possible Phonological Processes	% of Deletion
Bonjour	/bɔ̃ʒuR/	/R/	/bɔ̃ʒu/	Deletion of /R/ at the final position	80%
Père	/pɛR/	/R/	/pɛ/	Deletion of /R/ at the final position	80%
Trop	/tRo/	/p/	/tRo/	The sound /R/ is velarised at the medial position	76%
Garçon	/gaRsɔ̃/	/R/	/gasɔ̃/	Deletion of /R/ at medial position	78%
Surtout	/sɥRtu/	/R/	/sɥtu/	Deletion of /R/ at the medial position	78%
Vœf	/vœf/	/f/	/vœ/	Deletion of fricative /f/ at the final position	72%
Sœur	/sœR/	/R/	/sœ/	Deletion of /R/ at the final position	80%
Voir	/vwaR/	/R/	/vwa/	As above	82%
Les	/le/	/s/	-	Deletion of /s/ at the final position	100%
Erreur	/ɛRœR/	/R/	/ɛRœ/	Deletion of /R/ at the final position	84%
Lait	/lɛ/	/t/	-	Deletion of dental /t/ at the end	100%
Faisons	/fəzɔ̃/	/s/	-	Deletion of /s/ at the end	100%

Sot	/so/	/t/	-	Deletion of dental /t/ at the end	95%
Hôpital	/opital/	/l/	/opita/	Deletion of lateral /l/ at the final position	74%
Chaud	/ʃo/	/d/	-	Deletion of dental sound /d/ at the final position	100%
Impôt	/ɛ̃po/	/t/	-	Deletion of dental sound /t/ at the final position	88%
Saint	/sɛ̃/	/t/	-	As above	96%
Lourd	/luR/	/R/, /d/	/lu/	Deletion of dental sound /d/ at the final position while the /ʁ/ is deleted at the tail final position	81%
Fils	/fis/	/l/	-	Deletion of lateral /l/ at the medial position	83%
Bœufs	/bœf/	/f/, /s/	/bœ/	Deletion of /s/ at the final position and deletion of /f/ at the final position	75%
Mangeons	/mãʒõ/	/s/	-	Deletion of /s/ at the final position	100%
Papier	/pajɛ/	/R/	-	Deletion of /R/ at the final position	100%
Rural	/ʁuRal/	/l/	/RuRa/	Deletion of lateral /l/ at the final position	73%
Tort	/tɔR/	/R/, /t/	/tɔR/	Deletion of /t/ and the rolling of /R/	92%
Bruit	/bruɛ̃/	/R/, /t/	/bruɛ̃/	Deletion dental sound /t/ at the final position while the /R/ at the initial position is rolled	90%
Chat	/ʃa/	/t/	-	Deletion of dental sound /t/ at the final position	100%
Secrétaire	/sækRetɛR/	/R/	/sækRetɛ/	Deletion of /R/ at the final position	83%
Prend	/pRã/	/R/, /d/	/pRã/	Deletion of consonant /d/ at the final position and the rolling of consonant /R/ at the mid position	100%
Nœud	/nø/	/d/	-	Deletion of consonant /d/ at the final position	100%
Manger	/mãʒɛ/	/R/	-	Deletion of consonant /R/ at the final position	100%
Bout	/bu/	/t/	-	Deletion of consonant /t/ at the final position	93%
Offert	/ɔfɛR/	/R/, /t/	/ɔfɛ/, /ɔfɛR/	Deletion of /R/ at the tail end of the word and free Deletion of /t/ at the end position	80%
Chuchoter	/ʃuʃote/	/R/	-	Deletion of /R/ at the end of the word	100%
Saisonnier	/sezɔ̃nje/	/R/	-	Deletion of /R/ at the final position	100%
Lorgner	/lɔRnɛ/	/R/	/lɔnɛ/	Deletion of sound /R/ at the mid position	77%
Rêver	/Reve/	/R/	/Reve/	Deletion of /R/ at the end of the word while the /R/ is rolled at the initial position	100%
Psychologie	/psikoloʒi/	/p/	/sikoloʒi/	Deletion of /p/ at the initial position of the word	99%
Sept	/set/	/p/	-	Deletion of /p/ at the end of the word	100%
Sirop	/siRo/	/p/	-	Deletion of /p/ at the end of the word	90%
Janvier	/ʒãvje/	/R/	-	Deletion of /R/ at the end of the word	100%

In the table above, deletion of /R/ is dominant in the pronunciation of the English-French bilinguals. 80% of the participants deleted the uvular /R/ at the final position in words like “bonjour/ bɔ̃ʒuR/” changing to /bɔ̃ʒu/, “Erreur/ɛRœR/” changing to /ɛRœ/, “Sœur/sœR/” and lourd/luR/ changing to /lu/. Also, 78% of the IUFLs deleted /R/ in the medial position in such words like “Surtout/syRtu/” changing to /sytu/ and “garçon/gaRsɔ̃/” changing to /gasɔ̃/. It should be noted that /R/ is deleted in the verbs of the first group in French; for instance, payer/pɛje/, manger /mãʒɛ/, sauter /sote/parler/paRle/, donner /dɔne/. In addition, 72% of the participants deleted the labio-dental fricative /f/ at the final position in “Vœuf/vœf/” changing to /vœ/, 74% deleted the lateral /l/ at the final position in “Hôpital /opital/” changing to /opita/ while 88% of them deleted the consonant /p/ at the initial position in “Psychologie/psikoloʒi/” changing to /sikoloʒi/. Generally, it is important to stress that where we have 100% deletion, such sounds are deleted in the transcription of French words.

## 6. Conclusion

Instances of deletion were confirmed in the production of French words by English-French bilinguals. However, they were found to be inappropriately used. These instances of deletion may be attributed to the nonexistent of some French sounds in English and the Parisian /R/, which is not stressed at the end of words in English. Also, most of the participants in this study deleted consonants at the end of words by overgeneralising the rule that consonants sounds are not pronounced or stressed in French not taking cognizance of the fact that to every rule, there are exceptions. However, we would like to suggest that, the teaching of phonetics and phonology of French language be emphasized especially in the Anglophone setting for better mastery of speech production of French sounds and words. Though it may not be totally possible to eradicate errors in speech production, it could be minimized and Nigerian speakers of French could approximate better to Parisian French. This work is a contribution to language variation in spoken French.

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