

Review for *Anglia*, March 2000

Rudolf Obendorfer. *Weak forms in present-day English*. Studia Anglistica Norvegica 8. Oslo: Novus Press, 1998, iv + 228 pp.

One of the most pervasive features of spoken English is the variable quality of vowels under different prosodic, morphological and syntactic conditions. Thus, there is a whole set of words that exhibit systematic reduction or deletion of vowels (and sometimes even of consonants) in certain unemphatic contexts. Traditionally, the pertinent words are said to have weak and strong forms, as exemplified in (1):

(1)	<b>strong</b>	<b>weak</b>
<i>he</i>	hi:	i:, hɪ, ɪ
<i>am</i>	æm	əm, m
<i>will</i>	wɪl	əl, l

These items raise a number of interesting theoretical and empirical problems: What exactly is a weak form? Which items belong to this class and which items do not? What is the nature of the alternation between strong and weak form? When does it occur? Is it a phonological process applying to underlying representations or are we dealing simply with different allomorphs listed in the mental lexicon?

As mentioned by Obendorfer (O) in his introduction, there is a vast amount of pedagogical and phonetic literature on the topic, but much of it is unsystematic or theoretically inadequate. O's major (and welcome) aim is therefore to bring together results from two different schools, British phoneticians and (mainly) American phonologists (p. 3). *Weak forms in present-day English* (read Received Pronunciation, RP) is certainly an important contribution to the debate. It is unfortunate, however, that the author is not aware of the important theoretical work on prosodic structure, lexical and post-lexical phonology and morphology published in the late 1980s and 1990s. It might have enhanced the explanatory potential of his study if he had been.

The book is organized in six chapters, complemented by a list of references, a very useful appendix containing an inventory of weak forms in RP, and equally useful subject and weak form

indices. Following a short introduction (pp.1-3), chapter 2 ('The conceptual framework', pp.4-28) clarifies problems of terminology and definitions in order to avoid any misunderstandings in the use of terms such as 'citation form', 'fused form', 'reduced form', 'cliticized form', to mention only a few. In general the discussion and decisions are sound, and it is only the treatment of 'clitic' and 'clitic variant' I would take issue with. O restricts his use of the latter term to weak forms that consist of a single consonant (e.g. 'm for am), which is a rather arbitrary choice. Furthermore, later in the book 'clitic' is used for 'clitic variant', although 'clitic' was said to be reserved for forms where "there is no related phonological representation that may qualify as an independent/discrete word form" (p. 22, see also table 2:2, p. 24), leaving English with only one true clitic, genitive 's. Towards the end of the chapter the definition of weak form is boiled down to the following four necessary ingredients (p. 28):

- weak forms are paradigmatically non-basic phonological word forms
- they represent morphosyntactic words in certain non-prominent contexts
- their phonological shape is semi-reduced, reduced or cliticized
- they are products of an ultimately idiosyncratic process

The last of the four points is probably the most significant finding of the whole book. It is ultimately not predictable whether a morphosyntactic word has a weak-form representation, hence it is an idiosyncratically marked property of that word. Chapter 3 ('Variables') deals with the influence of geographical, tempo, stylistic, and other variables (sex, age, linguistic awareness) on the occurrence of weak forms. In chapter 4 ('General issues', pp.53-84) O discusses general characteristics of weak forms, such as their lexical representation and derivation, neutralization, frequency, and their prosodic make-up. In my view the most prominent result of this discussion is that the weakeners have a syllabic structure that - according to independent general rules of English phonology - does not block reduction: "Weakening takes place idiosyncratically, but under conditions favorable to weakening" (p. 78). Furthermore, O claims that weak forms are "basically the products of a lenition process and therefore derived"(p. 64). This view is spelled out in the final chapter 6 ('The Process', pp.184-204), which formalizes the different kinds of reduction processes (*h*-deletion, semi- and full reduction of vowels, *w*-deletion, schwa deletion, syllable loss, complete elision) in terms of Government Phonology.

The heart of the book is certainly chapter 5 ('Conditioning', pp. 85-183), which discusses in great detail the factors that condition the use or non-use of weak forms. These factors include

phonological (pauses, stress, rhythm, segmental environments), morphological and syntactic context. The chapter is full of interesting observations and arguments, but I was searching in vain for something that could pull all the loose threads together. Generalizations pop up here and there but the overall impression is one of utter unpredictability and idiosyncrasy. In the end, I was left confused. Is this a reliable picture of what is actually going on in the language? I don't think so. Rather, it appears to be an artefact of O's approach, which tries to treat all kinds of weak form as instances of a single phenomenon (i.e. 'weakening'). O's own results show (somewhat ironically) that such an approach is probably ill-conceived. By lumping together all kinds of strong-weak alternation we necessarily lose sight of the robust generalizations concerning morpho-phonological alternations in different grammatical subsystems, such as the systematicity of weak and contracted forms in the auxiliary system (e.g. Pullum 1997, Ogden 1999). 'Weakening' may thus not be a unified phenomenon at all, but only the similar-looking outcome of distinct underlying mechanisms in distinct subsystems of the grammar.

In sum, my overall feelings after reading the book are mixed. The book is rich in descriptive detail but poor in theoretically relevant insights and generalizations. The latter point is reflected in the overall presentation. Nowhere in the book do we find a clear summary of O's research questions, nor is there a concluding chapter that tells the reader what the major results are. Perhaps the author was as puzzled by his account as this reviewer.

## References

- Ogden, Richard. 1999. A declarative account of strong and weak auxiliaries in English. *Phonology* 16.1, 55-92.
- Pullum, Geoffrey K. 1997. The morpholexical nature of *to*-contraction. *Language* 73.1, 79-102.