

Chapter 6: *Segmental change: an outline of some of the most common phonological processes*

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6.2. Feature Changes. Assimilation. Different types of assimilation

Assimilation can be of several kinds. As it always involves a transfer of feature(s) between two neighbouring segments we can conventionally mark the two successive sounds by X and Y. Taking into account the direction of the process, we can then talk about *progressive assimilation* if the latter works forwards (conventionally from left to right, that is from X to Y) or, in other words, if the feature passes from a sound to the following one. If we have the opposite case, as in our example before – backwards, from right to left, from Y to X – we have *regressive assimilation*. Very often there is a mutual influence between the two sounds and then we speak about *reciprocal assimilation*. In this latter case the two sounds can fuse completely and give birth to a different sound; this type of assimilation is called *coalescence*. The various possibilities are illustrated below. The direction of the arrow indicates the direction of the feature movement.

- X → Y progressive assimilation (X “lends” a feature to Y)
X ← Y regressive assimilation (X “borrows” a feature from Y)
- Y ↔ X reciprocal assimilation
- X ↔ Y coalescence (X and Y merge into a different sound Z)
↓
Z

If we consider the extent to which the features of a segment influence the features of an adjacent one we can talk about *partial assimilation* if just some of the features are transferred, or *total* or *complete assimilation* if one of the sounds becomes indistinguishable from the other.

In certain cases assimilation can be diachronically established and consequently *obligatory*, in others it can be *optional* – it appears, say, in rapid, careless speech, but when we talk at a lower rate and more carefully and distinctly pronounce the sounds, it

may not take place at all. Thus, in the example above, we can separate the pronunciation of the verb from that of the following noun and thus prevent assimilation from taking place. The adjective *sure*, on the other hand, can only be pronounced with a palatoalveolar fricative in present-day English, a sound that results from the coalescence of the alveolar [s] and the palatal [j].

Being a very common process in any language – so important that the very fact that the term coarticulation, that is pronouncing sounds together, has become a (not very adequate) synonym for it – assimilation can involve the transfer of different types of features. In a very influential approach in phonology, called *autosegmental* phonology precisely because features are granted an autonomous status, features are considered to spread from one segment to another. Depending on the type of feature that spreads from one segment to another we can talk about several major types of assimilation such as assimilative processes involving voicing, nasal or oral release, manner of articulation features and place of articulation features.