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МУНДАРИЖА

TILSHUNOSLIK

Solixo‘jayeva Havasxon Zokirjanovna
Professor Nosirjon Uluqov – Namangan onomastika maktabi asoschisi 7

XAKIMOVA MUHAYYO KARIMOVNA
O‘zbek tili abstrakt leksikasida zidlik munosabatlari 11

SHUKUROV AXAT AXMATOVICH
Sinonimlarning lingvostilistik xususiyatlari 16

TURDIMURODOV SIROJIDDIN ESHQOBILOVICH
Yashirin, yumshatilgan va bilvosita ifodalangan ma’nolar tahlili
(evfemik ibora va maqollar misolida) 20

KURBANAZAROVA NARGIS SHODIYEVNA
Tortuvli etnonimining etimologik tahlili 23

TURDIQULOV SHERZOD DUMINOVICH
Ziyoratgohlar etimonining lingvomadaniy kodlarda aks etishi: sangardak teotoponimi 26

AHMEDOV HAKIM YARASHEVICH
Doston frazeologiyasida mifologik qatlamning lisoniy ifodasi
(Surxondaryo turkum dostonlari misolida) 29

ERGASHEVA DILRABO ALLANAZAROVNA
Badiiy so‘z san’atida dialogning ifodasi (Odil Yoqubov asarlari misolida) 32

ISOQOVA FERUZA SHAMSIDDIN QIZI
Kommunikatsiya, muloqot va diskurs: tushunchalarning farqlanishi va
diskursning kommunikativ maqomi 35

САЙДУЛЛАЕВА РАНО ИБАДОВНА
Проблема терминологической фиксации онимной периферии 38
(на материале русского и узбекского языков) 38

SULEYMANOVA NILUFAR KAMILOVNA,
TUKHTABAYEVA NILUFAR UKTAMJONOVNA
A token-level audit of acoustic measurements in british english vowel reduction 42

QULBULOV SHERQUZI TOSHTEMIROVICH
O‘zbek adabiy tilida nutq uslublari: funksional xususiyatlar va qo‘llanish mezonlari 45

TOJIYEVA DILDORA KOMILJON QIZI
Muammoli maqolada faktlardan foydalanish tartibi 50

ZAYNIDDINOVA ROZIYA SAIDAKBAROVNA
Nato harbiy terminologiyasining shakllanishi: institutsional va me’yoriy model 54

NURMATOVA DURDONA SHUXRAT QIZI
Ingliz va o‘zbek tillarida frazeologik birliklar baho ma’nosining nutqiy aktlarda voqelanishi 57

МУНДАРИЖА

ISLOMOVA BARNO XABIBULLA QIZI
O‘zbek tilida morfologik noaniqlik turlari: tasnif va avtomatik tahlildagi o‘rni 62

HAMROYEV SARDOR AKMALJON O‘G‘LI
Badiiy matnda makon deyksisini o‘rganishning
lingvopragmatik va diskursiv yondashuvlari 67

QURBONOVA MARJONA ERKINJON QIZI
Said Ahmadning «Ufq» trilogiyasida qo‘llangan antroponimlarning
lingvokulturologik talqini....71

ADABIYOTSHUNOSLIK

ALIMOV PARDA,
TOSHPO‘LATOV ZAYNIDDIN IBODULLO O‘G‘LI
Shafoat Rahmatulla Termiziyning ijodiy yo‘li....75

OCHILOVA OZODA BAXTIYOROVNA
Syujet yaxlitligida «davr, shaxs, muallif» uchligi sintezi....80

OBIDJONOVA MA’SUMA
O‘zbek va ingliz ilmiy fantastikasida kelajak motivining badiiy-poetik xususiyatlari....84

PARDAYEVA DILFUZA RAIMOVNA
Insider and outsider perspectives: the earliest literary models of amir timur
in uzbek and russian traditions (oral epic and medieval written sources) 87

ABDUNAZAROV O‘TKIR SAYDULLAYEVICH
A.Oripovning «Jannatga yo‘l» dostonida inson va jamiyat ziddiyatining badiiy talqini 92

ABDULLAYEVA NILUFAR IBRAGIM QIZI
Avhadiy Marog‘iy va Yusuf Amiriy «Dahnoma»larida
o‘n noma janrining poetik transformatsiyasi 95

XURRAMOVA TO‘LG‘ANOY MUZAFFAROVNA
Hakim Termiziy asarlarining adabiyotshunoslik talqini:
janr, timsol va axloqiy-didaktik an’ana masalalari....99

TA’LIM

ДЖУМАНАЗАРОВА ЗИЛОЛА ОБИДЖОНОВНА
Цифровые и интерактивные технологии в содержании
методической подготовки будущих учителей русского языка 104

МИРЗАЕВА ШАХЛО РИЗАЕВНА,
РУЗИЕВА МУШТАРИ ХУСНИДДИН КИЗИ
Эффективность развития русской диалогической речи студентов национальных групп....109

ТУРГУНОВА САЙЕРА АХМАДЖАНОВНА
Проблемное обучение в преподавании специальных филологических дисциплин 112

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A TOKEN-LEVEL AUDIT OF ACOUSTIC MEASUREMENTS IN BRITISH ENGLISH VOWEL REDUCTION

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Vowel reduction is an important phenomenon in English phonetics and phonology. It is commonly associated with changes in vowel duration, spectral structure, and articulation, particularly in unstressed syllables. In British English, the degree of reduction depends on stress, lexical properties, phonetic context, speaker characteristics, and speech-production conditions. Reliable investigation therefore requires both an appropriate linguistic framework and accurate acoustic measurements.

Corpus-based research provides access to naturally occurring speech, but its findings depend on the quality of segmentation and measurement. An interval may include neighbouring consonants, a boundary may be incorrectly positioned, or an automatic formant estimate may not represent the intended vowel. Such issues can influence descriptive statistics and subsequent interpretations.

Dabouis and Fournier (2025) investigated vowel reduction and preservation in British English in relation to linguistic and lexical factors[1]. Caverlé and Vogel (2020) examined the stability, reliability, and sensitivity of acoustic measures of vowel space[2]. These studies underline the importance of interpreting acoustic data in relation to linguistic context and measurement procedures.

The present study examines ten observations from a working dataset associated with the International Corpus of English–Great Britain (ICE-GB). The observations were flagged because of their recorded durations, proximity to a recorded 400 ms processing limit, or formant values requiring further inspection. The earlier review also assigned each observation a preliminary reduction classification.

The aim is to establish a structured procedure for auditing individual acoustic observations. The objectives are to describe the ten flagged observations, report their preliminary reduction classifications, identify potential measurement issues, and define a transparent procedure for documenting verification decisions. The observations are treated as cases requiring review rather than as confirmed errors.

2.1. Dataset and acoustic variables. The study uses ten purposively selected observations from a working dataset associated with ICE-GB. They were selected because their recorded intervals were unusually long, some durations were at or near 400 ms, or their formant measurements appeared to require additional inspection. As the sample was selected for quality-control purposes rather than randomly, it cannot be used to estimate the prevalence of measurement errors in the complete dataset.

Three acoustic variables are considered: vowel duration in milliseconds (ms), first formant frequency (F1) in hertz (Hz), and second formant frequency (F2) in hertz (Hz). F1 is associated with vowel height, while F2 provides information related to vowel frontness and backness. Both values must be interpreted in relation to vowel identity, speaker characteristics, phonetic context, and recording conditions.

Duration must also be interpreted according to the operational definition used in the dataset. The recorded interval may represent a target vowel, a whole word, or a larger speech segment. These units

[1] Dabouis Q., Fournier J.-M. An empirical study of vowel reduction and preservation in British English // Phonology. 2025. Vol. 42. Article e15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0952675725100122.

[2] Caverlé M. W. J., Vogel A. P. Stability, reliability, and sensitivity of acoustic measures of vowel space: A comparison of vowel space area, formant centralization ratio, and vowel articulation index // The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America. 2020. Vol. 148, No. 3. P. 1436–1444. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1121/10.0001931.

should not be treated as interchangeable.

2.2. Preliminary reduction classification. The earlier review classified seven observations as non-reduced and three as reduced. These labels are retained as preliminary classifications, not as final phonetic judgements. Reduction classification and measurement verification address different questions: a token may be linguistically classified while its boundaries or formant measurements remain uncertain.

2.3. Verification procedure. The proposed procedure uses Praat to inspect the waveform, spectrogram, and formant tracks[1]. It comprises six stages:

1. Source identification: match the observation to its original recording, transcript, and annotation.

2. Acoustic inspection: examine the waveform and spectrogram[2].

3. Boundary verification: confirm the beginning and end of the target vowel.

4. Formant inspection: assess F1 and F2 within the verified vowel interval[3].

5. Consistency checking: compare duration with timestamps when they describe the same interval.

6. Decision recording: document the verification status and evidence supporting the decision.

Five categories are used: VALID, when the measurement is supported by the acoustic evidence; RESEGMENT, when temporal boundaries require correction; REMEASURE, when acoustic measurements need to be repeated; EXCLUDE, when predefined inclusion criteria are not met; and PENDING, when evidence is insufficient for a reliable decision.

Original values should be retained, and any revised values should be recorded separately with an explanation. The present review does not report intra-rater or inter-rater reliability coefficients because repeated or independent measurements have not been completed.

3.1. Preliminary audit of the ten observations. Table 1 presents the initial acoustic values, preliminary reduction classification, and reason for selecting each observation for review.

Table 1. Initial acoustic measurements and preliminary classification

ID	Text code	Speaker	Word	Duration (ms)	F1 (Hz)	F2 (Hz)	Classification	Reason for review
OUT01	S1A-0012	A	so	400.000	472.097	1522.492	Non-reduced	At 400 ms limit
OUT02	S1A-0012	A	part	360.000	746.535	1621.773	Non-reduced	Long interval
OUT03	S1A-0012	D	like	384.579	496.160	1621.766	Non-reduced	Long interval
OUT04	S1A-0012	D	i	397.108	591.854	1574.716	Non-reduced	Near 400 ms limit
OUT05	S1A-0012	D	a	384.579	462.625	1898.272	Reduced	Long interval
OUT06	S1A-0012	E	half	370.642	575.304	1387.443	Non-reduced	Long interval
OUT07	S1B-0076	A	a	375.238	523.312	1639.756	Reduced	Long interval
OUT08	S1B-0076	B	is	400.000	706.395	1455.473	Non-reduced	At 400 ms limit
OUT09	S1B-0076	B	word	400.000	677.402	1697.253	Non-reduced	At 400 ms limit
OUT10	S1A-0062	A	for	190.000	361.887	2563.802	Reduced	F2 flagged for review

[1] Boersma P., Weenink D. Praat: Doing phonetics by computer [Computer software]. https://www.praat.org/

[2] Praat. Viewing a spectrogram. Praat Manual. https://praat.org/manual/Intro_3_1__Viewing_a_spectrogram.html.

[3] Praat. Formant. Praat Manual. https://praat.org/manual/Formant.html.

Seven observations were classified as non-reduced (OUT01, OUT02, OUT03, OUT04, OUT06, OUT08, and OUT09), while three were classified as reduced (OUT05, OUT07, and OUT10). This distribution describes only the selected observations and cannot be generalized to the full dataset because the sample was purposively selected for review.

3.2. Duration and processing-limit concerns. OUT01, OUT08, and OUT09 have recorded durations of exactly 400 ms, while OUT04 has a duration of 397.108 ms. These values raise the question of whether the duration field represents the target vowel, a larger annotation interval, or a processing constraint. The table alone does not establish the cause. The original audio, annotation boundaries, and extraction settings must be inspected before any value is revised.

Several other observations have recorded durations exceeding 350 ms. These intervals require checking to determine whether they represent the intended vowel, the whole word, or a wider speech segment. Long duration alone does not justify exclusion. The analyst must first establish the intended unit of measurement and confirm that the recorded interval corresponds to it.

3.3. Formant measurements and record consistency. OUT10 has an initial F1 value of 361.887 Hz and an F2 value of 2563.802 Hz. The F2 value requires closer inspection, but it does not automatically indicate an error. Formant frequencies vary with vowel identity, speaker characteristics, phonetic context, and recording conditions. The value should therefore be checked against the original recording, verified vowel boundaries, spectrogram, and formant tracks.

OUT03 and OUT05 share the same text code, speaker identifier, and recorded duration, although their target words and formant values differ. This correspondence does not prove that either observation is incorrect or duplicated. It does indicate that the original annotations should be checked to confirm that the records refer to distinct target intervals.

Duration values should also be compared with start and end timestamps when the fields describe the same interval. Any discrepancy should initially be treated as a consistency issue rather than automatically as evidence of a measurement error.

3.4. Verification status and methodological implications. All ten observations remain pending manual verification, and remeasurement has been recommended for each. The current review does not establish corrected measurements, final exclusions, or a confirmed measurement-error rate.

The audit highlights the importance of distinguishing a flagged value from a confirmed error. A value at a processing limit, a long interval, or an atypical formant estimate provides a reason for further investigation, but the final decision must be supported by the original acoustic evidence. The preliminary reduction classification must likewise remain separate from the verification status.

Preserving initial values and recording revisions in an audit trail supports transparency and reproducibility. The proposed workflow can help distinguish genuine phonetic variation from uncertainty introduced by segmentation or measurement. However, the ten selected observations cannot establish the prevalence of measurement errors in ICE-GB or general patterns of vowel reduction in British English.

This study presents a structured procedure for auditing acoustic measurements in research on British English vowel reduction. Ten observations were selected for further examination because of long recorded intervals, durations at or near a recorded 400 ms limit, or a formant value requiring additional inspection. The earlier review classified seven observations as non-reduced and three as reduced.

These classifications remain preliminary. All ten observations are pending manual verification, with remeasurement recommended. Consequently, the study does not claim that the measurements have been corrected or that any observation has been conclusively excluded.

The proposed procedure combines source identification, waveform and spectrogram inspection, vowel-boundary verification, formant review, consistency checking, and documentation of decisions. Retaining original values and recording any revisions separately provides a transparent basis for preparing a reliable dataset. Further work should complete manual verification against the original recordings and annotations and document the final decisions.

Reliable acoustic research requires not only numerical measurements but also a reproducible method for determining whether each measurement represents the intended phonetic event. The proposed audit framework provides a practical basis for improving data quality before statistical interpretation.

Rezyume. Maqolada Britaniya ingliz tilidagi unli tovushlar reduksiyasini o‘rganishda akustik o‘lchovlarni tekshirish usullari yoritilgan. O‘nta kuzatuvning dastlabki tasnifi va qo‘shimcha tekshirish zarurati ko‘rib chiqilgan.

Resume. The article examines methods for checking acoustic measurements in British English vowel reduction. Ten observations are preliminarily classified, and the need for further verification is highlighted.

Резюме. В статье рассматриваются методы проверки акустических измерений редукции гласных в британском английском языке. Представлена предварительная классификация десяти наблюдений и обоснована необходимость их дополнительной проверки.