



# IIT Madras

ONLINE DEGREE

**English – I (Basic English)**  
**Dr Shreesh Chaudhary**  
**Retd. Professor**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture 36**  
**Structure of Spoken Word**

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**STRUCTURE OF SPOKEN  
WORD**

Prof. Shreesh Chaudhary



Good afternoon. Today, we will begin talking about the Structure of Spoken Word, and today we are talking about syllables.

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## Structure of Spoken Word : Syllable

- Speech sounds are produced mostly by lung air going out through vocal chords, pharynx and mouth. Some speech sounds in some languages are also produced by air coming in the same way. We will talk about articulation of sounds in a later unit of this module of the course.
- Let us here talk about how spoken words are formed.
- Sounds come together in a certain manner to form a higher unit called “**SYLLABLE**”.



A syllable is the highest unit of structure of a spoken word. We know that all speech sounds are produced, or nearly all speech sounds are produced by lung air going out through the vocal cords, then pharynx and then mouth. That is why when you talk air comes out, that is why when you talk people will be bad, people with bad breath are not liked very much because bad breath comes out.

But good breath or bad breath, all speech is produced, or nearly all speech is produced through lung air coming out, through vocal chords, through the pharynx and through the mouth. At each of this stage, speech air is manipulated, but tongue manipulates speech air more than any other organ. In a later unit, we will talk more about the production of individual speech sounds.

Today, let us talk about how these sounds get together to make words or parts of words. These sounds together join to make a higher unit called syllable, please note the spelling and note the pronunciation it is “**SYLLABLE**” s y l l a b l e, syllable, not syllable, “**SYLLABLE**”.

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- A syllable has at least one vowel. Without a vowel there can be no syllable.
- One syllable has only one “spoken” vowel.
- So a word has as many syllables as the number of “spoken” vowels in it.

For instance, “**cat**” has one vowel and one syllable; “**mon**key” has two spoken vowels and two syllables; “**elephant**” has three vowels and three syllables; “**university**” has five vowels and five syllables.



Now a syllable. What is a syllable? You can define it in many ways, so as we speak lungs contract and expand so that air comes out, so one contraction and expansion of lungs is called a pulse. So a syllable is, a syllable is equal to the unit of sound or sounds produced in one breath pulse, one puff of air and then again another puff of air, so for two syllables, you need two puffs of air coming out.

There is another definition possible, in each syllable, you have only one spoken vowel which also means that every syllable must have one spoken vowel, it also means that one vowel can make only one syllable. I mean one spoken vowel, not a vowel in spelling particularly in a language like English I will give you examples later to show that sometimes two vowel letters make one one vowel sound.

So, we are not talking about writing; we are talking about spoken language. So, one syllable has only one spoken vowel. So a word has as many syllables as the number of spoken vowels. Look at some examples, look at this word ‘cat’, only one vowel, so only one syllable. But look at the other word ‘monkey’, how many vowels? Two vowels, what are they?

Therefore we have two syllables “mon” “key”; they take two breath pulses to come out. No matter who you are, you may be a great leader, a great author, a great speaker, a great actor or a humble, simple person like many among us, you can only produce one syllable in one breath pulse. To produce a word like “monkey” which has two syllables, you need two vowels at least, and you need two pulses of lung air, two breath pulses.

Similarly, elephant, how many syllables do they have? There have three. Why three? Because there are three vowels “a a aa” or “e e a” in print. In spoken language “a e ae” so we have “e le phant”, “a e ae”, “e le phant”, so three vowels and three syllables in a longer word and English had lots of long words, words of four syllables, three syllables, five or even six syllables. Look up the dictionary. A word like “university” has five syllables. Why? Because it has five vowels.

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- In writing, sometimes two vowel letters make one spoken vowel, such as in words like “beat”, “deep”, “eight”, “head”, etc. two vowel letters make one vowel sound. So all of these words are one syllable, or mono-syllabic, words.



**REMEMBER WE ARE TALKING ABOUT SPOKEN ENGLISH, AND NOT WRITTEN ENGLISH.**



But, remember we are talking about the spoken word, we are not talking about orthography, we are not talking about written English or English spelling. In spelling, you might sometimes find two vowels make one sound. Say for example, in words like “beat” you have two vowel letters ‘e and a’ but together they make one sound ‘e’ so that you have beat.

Similarly, in “deep” you have two vowel letters e plus e, but together they make only one sound ‘e’, and therefore you have “deep”. Or in another word like “eight” you have two vowel letters ‘e and i’ but together they make only one sound ‘ei’, so you have “eight”, like that “head” and “grate” and “heat” and whatnot, English is notorious for that, here sometimes two vowel letters make only one vowel sound.

So, what we are talking about is spoken language, all of those words of one syllable or if you talk about them in jargon, all monosyllabic words, all words of one syllable, have only one spoken vowel. Remember we are talking about spoken English, not about written English, so the number of letters in spelling, do not necessarily influence the number of sounds in a word.

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At this stage, just to check whether you got the concept of syllable right, you can give yourself a test. Look at the following words; I am going to go quiet, you can also be quiet for first, read them silently and then read them aloud and ask yourself how many syllables each of these words has. After you have decided which word has how many syllables, see “act” for instance has only one, but “active” has two and “activity” has four sorry ‘ack ti vi ty’ four.

“Actionable” four or “beauty” only two. Do not be guided by letters of spelling but be guided by sounds in spoken language, and you will find that one vowel makes one syllable. If a spoken word has four vowels, it has four syllables such as activity or actionable. But, if the spoken word has only one vowel, such as act or book, then these words have only one syllable each. You can check your answers, and you can take a new set of words and see if you got them all right.

And usually, any dictionary gives you syllable division, word divided into syllables, compare your division of words into syllables with a division of the same words into syllables given in the dictionary. If you are right, then move on.

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- Other sounds merge around vowels. For instance, we cannot produce any number of consonants, one or more, without a vowel.
- Try saying “ct” without “a” between them; or, “mnk” without “o” between “m” and “n”; or, “lphnt” without “e” and “a” among them. You cannot articulate these words. So vowels carry voice, and carry other sounds that we call consonants.



So, it is agreed that one syllable has only one vowel sound and one vowel sound makes only one syllable which also means that the number of vowel sounds and the number of syllables are the same. This is true of all languages; this is true of all languages of the world, not just English, this is what we like to call language universal. In no matter, whether you speak Hindi or English, Tamil or English, Tamil or Kannada or Malayalam, one vowel makes only one syllable, and one-syllable must have one vowel. There can be no syllable if there is no vowel. You cannot produce consonants by themselves without a vowel.

Try and produce “c and t” without “a” you can say “c and t” because in the letter ‘c’ you are adding ‘e’, in the letter ‘t’ you are adding ‘e’, but pronouncing these two letters by themselves would not be possible, it cannot be humanely done. So, consonants go along with the vowel; you can try and do, you can try and say these two letters “ct” just the sound, not the letters. Similarly, the sounds of “monkey” without ‘o and e’ and sounds of other words. If you take away vowel sounds, you cannot produce those words.

So, in other words, it is the vowel sounds, in other words, it is the vowel sounds that carry voice, that takes the spoken word to the listener, without the vowel sounds, the words would not be heard, the articulation of words would not be possible in any language no matter what language you speak, vowels are the carriers of spoken word and vowels are also the glue stuck to which other sounds come to the listeners.

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- So there can be syllables without consonants, such as in “a” as in “a book”, “about”, “ago”, “again”, “away”, etc.
- These things differ from language to language



It is possible, but these things differ from language to language, just as I said every language has syllables, and in every language, there is no syllable without a vowel. In every language, the number of syllables and the number of spoken words in it are the same; one spoken vowel means one syllable.

Similarly, languages differ just as they are one in this part of the structure of syllable; they differ in the matter of consonants. There are languages such as English where you can have a syllable without a consonant. In a phrase like a book, there are two syllables “a and book” but “a” does not have a consonant before or after it, whereas book, the next syllable in the same phrase has a consonant at the beginning, the consonant “ba” and has a consonant at the end “k” in between you have “o” which is the vowel sound.

So, in English, it is possible for us to have a syllable which has no consonant, but the number of syllables of this kind is very few, such syllables, I mean you will notice that exceptions always are in limited numbers. But generally speaking, you have words which begin with a consonant, and you have words that end in a consonant.

But these things differ from language to language. There are languages where you have no word, no syllable without a consonant; you have languages where each syllable has one consonant and one vowel. But you also have languages such as English where you can have three consonants at the beginning.



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So, for example, before we go to three consonant syllables, let us look at this phenomenon of syllables with or without consonants. Can you make a list of words that have syllables only with vowels and no consonants, once you make that list compare your list with the dictionary and you will know whether the syllable division that you have done is all right?

This will also give you an idea, an insight into the structure of words consisting of syllables, so it is therefore important that you do this exercise and wherever you have doubts, you can please mail us and check with us, and we will tell you why your answer is correct, or it is not correct if it is not correct.

A syllable can have other sounds other than consonants. For example, look at this word “a c t”, it has no consonant before a vowel, but it has two consonant sounds after vowels. In the next word here in the example in the slide “best”, you have one consonant one sound only before vowel but two sounds, two consonants after vowel.

There are words also which have three consonants at the beginning look at for example words like spread, strike, screw, you have three consonants before the vowel “s p r” “s p r”, or “s t r” or “s c r”, now all of these words have three consonants before the vowel, but they have only one vowel because they all make only one syllable.

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- Similarly, there are syllables in English that have up to four consonants after the vowel. See the following, for example: act, acts, tests, sixth, sixths.
- In “act”, there are two sounds after the vowel; in “acts”, there are three; so is it in “sixth”; but in “sixths”, there are four consonants after the vowel.



Similarly, there are syllables in English that have up to four consonants after the vowel at the end. Say, for example, look at words like sixth, a word like “act” has only two syllables, two consonants after the vowel within the syllable. “Acts” has three consonants after the vowel within the syllable.

But “tests” again has three consonants after the vowel within the syllable, “sixth” again three consonants “k s t” “sixth”, but in “sixths” sorry all the “sixth” and then plural marker “sa”, so they give you up to four syllables, four consonants at the end of the syllable after the consonant.

So, the number of consonants varies from language to language in English a maximum of three is possible before the vowel and a maximum of four is possible after the vowel, but it is not so in every language there are restrictions. If you do a higher course in the pronunciation of English and in phonetics and phonology, you will know these things.

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Now, to ask yourself whether you got the lesson right find words with one, two, three and four consonants after the vowel within the syllable and make this list and compare them with the ones given in the dictionary. But it is important for us to understand the concept of syllable so that we can overcome any problems we may experience in learning the pronunciation of individual words. Thank you very much. Have a good evening.