## **Week 11: Stress in English II**

## **Word Stress**

Word stress means that in a word which has more than one syllable, one (or more) syllable is stressed or accented while the rest are unstressed or unaccented. Notice that the words ‘stress’ and ‘accent’ are being used interchangeably. In any polysyllabic word, one of its syllables is relatively more prominent than the others. This means the stressed or accented syllables are higher in pitch, longer in duration, and relatively a little louder than unstressed or unaccented syllables.  The stress can be on any of the syllables that make up a word depending on the word. Let us examine different English words with varying number of syllables and placement of stress.

1. **Stress placement on two-syllable words**

**first syllable second syllable**

FEmale AUNty UNcle FRIday unKNOWN unDO conTAIN canTEEN

WINdow PROgram MARble PIllow anTIQUE iDEA acCUSE beLOW

HOStile BIRTHday NEphew CENter anNOY poLICE beFORE rePORT

SISter BROther MOther FAther apPLY surPLY conDEMN braVO

1. **Stress placement on three-syllable words**

**first syllable second syllable third syllable**

QUANtity SAturday sepTEMber ocTOber modeRATE magaZINE

SEparate MOnarchy conTAIner proVIsion cigaRETTE enterTAIN

CARpenter CANnibal conDUCtor tenTAtive refeREE eruDITE

REsolute EStimate imPAtient enVElope maniFEST overWORK

1. **Stress placement on four-syllable words**

**first syllable second syllable third syllable fourth syllable**

AUCtionary inDIgenous photoGRAphic acquamaRINE

FEBruary neGOtiate circuLAtion superinTEND

JAnuary phoTOgraphy

VAluable rhiNOcerous

DICtionary imPOssible

When we stress the wrong syllable in a word, the word may be difficult to hear and understand; for example, in the following exchange, a change in the stress is the cause of the confusion of B.

A: I love DEserts best.

B: Why? It is the most uninteresting places to be.

In this extract, the pronunciation as DEsert identifies the word as meaning ‘a waterless, desolate area of land with little or no vegetation, typically covered with sand’. Whereas, with the placement on the second syllable to be ‘deSERT’, it would have conveyed the intended meaning.

If we stress a word differently too, it can change the meaning or type of the word:  
 \* They will DEsert the deSERT by tomorrow.

They will deSERT the DEsert by tomorrow

Even if the speaker can be understood, mistakes with word stress can make the listener feel irritated, or perhaps even amused, and could prevent good communication from taking place.

Word stress in English has patterns. However, it is dangerous to say there are fixed rules. Exceptions can usually be found.

* Here are some general tendencies for word stress in English:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Type of word** | **Tendency** | **Exceptions** |
| apple table happy | two-syllable nouns and adjectives | stress on the first syllable  **Ap**ple; **TA**ble; **HA**ppy | ho**TEL** la**GOON** |
| suspect import insult | words which can be used as both nouns and verbs | the noun has stress on the first syllable   "You are the **SUS**pect!" the verb has stress on the second syllable   "I susPECT you." | respect witness |
| hairbrush football | compound nouns | fairly equally balanced but with stronger stress on the first part   **HAIR**brush |  |

## **Tonic Stress**

Tonic stress refers to the syllable in a word which receives the most stress in an intonation unit. An intonation unit has one tonic stress. It is important to remember that a sentence can have more than one intonation unit, and therefore have more than one tonic stress.

Here are some examples of intonation units with the tonic stress in bold:

* He's **wait**ing
* He's **wait**ing / for his **friend**
* He's **wait**ing / for his **friend** / at the **sta**tion

The final tonic stress in a sentence generally receives the most stress. In the above examples, ‘friend’ and ‘station’ receive the strongest stress.

It is important to note, however, that there are a number of instances in which the stress changes from this standard.

## **Emphatic Stress**

If you decide to emphasize a word in a sentence, you can change the stress from the principal noun to another [content word](https://www.thoughtco.com/content-and-function-words-1211726) such as an adjective (big, difficult, etc.), intensifier (very, extremely, etc.). This emphasis calls attention to the extraordinary nature of what you want to emphasize.

For example:

* That was a difficult TEST - Standard statement
* That was a DIFFICULT test. - Emphasizes how difficult the test was

Some [adverbs](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-are-adverbs-1209005) and modifiers tend to be used to emphasize in sentences that receive emphatic stress:

* Extremely
* Terribly
* Completely
* Utterly
* Especially

## **Contrastive Stress**

Contrastive stress is used to point out the difference between one object and another. Contrastive stress tends to be used with determiners such as 'this’, ‘that’, ‘these’ and ‘those'.

For example:

* I think I prefer THIS color.
* Do you want these or THOSE curtains?

Contrastive stress is also used to bring out a given word in a sentence which will also slightly change the meaning.

* **HE** came to my house yesterday. (It was he, not someone else.)
* He WALKed to my house yesterday. (He walked, rather than drove.)
* He came to my HOUSE yesterday. (It was a house, not an office or something else.)
* He came to my house YES**terday**. (It was yesterday, not two weeks ago or some other time.)

## **New Information Stress**

When asked a question, the requested information is naturally stressed more strongly.

For example:

* Where are you coming from? - I am coming from HOME.
* What do you want from me? - I want my BAG.
* When does the lecture end? - The lecture ends at SIX O’CLOCK.

### 9.5.1 Lexical and grammatical words

## Words in English are categorized as **lexical** and **grammatical**words based on their functions. The lexical words (also known as content words) are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs while grammatical words (also known as function words) are pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and interjection. This categorization is important in the workings of stress in English.

Words

Lexical Grammatical

Nouns Pronouns

Verbs Preposition

Adjectives Conjunction

Adverbs Interjection

Lexical and grammatical words have distinct characteristics. Lexical words are considered the major parts of speech because they are content words that have dictionary meanings with each having specific referent to an object, person, process, idea or state of affairs to which it refers. For example: *bank, pencil, development, cry, dance, quickly*, etc. Also, lexical words belong to the “open-system” class of words. It means these groups of words can be extended by creating additional members. Thus, the list of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs can never be exhaustive; new words are constantly being created.

In English pronunciation, lexical words attract stress while grammatical words do not carry stress. Therefore, English is said to be a stress-timed language (see 10.1.2). That is, stress is placed on lexical words and the time spent on stressed syllables occurs at approximately equal intervals. The time spent on a stressed syllable is the same despite 'the unstressed syllable (s) before the next stressed syllable. For example:

* They 'bought a 'car.
* 'Sleep on the 'bed.

## **Sentence Stress**

Sentence stress is best understood within the context of English intonation. This is because intonation in English is centred around sentence stress which itself is dependent on word stress. It is the emphasis placed on certain words in a sentence. This results in a songlike effect that English has. Sentence stress is what gives English its **rhythm** or "beat". You remember that word stress is accent on **one syllable** within a **word**. Sentence stress is accent on **certain words** within a **sentence**. The vocal space created between stressed words within a sentence leads to the rhythm of the sentence.

Most sentences have two basic types of word:

* **content words**  
  Content words are the key words of a sentence. They are important words because they carry the meaning or sense—the real content.
* **function words**  
  Structure words are not very important words. They are small, simple words that make the sentence correct grammatically. They give the sentence its correct form—its structure.

If you remove the structure words from a sentence, you will probably still understand the sentence. But if you remove the content words from a sentence, you will **not** understand the sentence. The sentence has no sense or meaning.

In connected speech, when words are put together into phrases or sentences, some words retain their lexical stress and others lose it. This means that one-syllable words can bear stress. Look at the example below:

The ˈfight is between the ˈcat and the ˈdog

In this utterance, there are three stressed syllables: *fight, cat* and *dog.*

These all happen to one-syllable words. The word *between* does not bear a stress at all, although if we were to say this word in isolation, the second syllable would bear the main lexical stress: /biˈtwi:n/.

The stresses marked in the phrase above *the cat and the dog* are not lexical stresses but sentence or rhythmic stresses. It is clear from this that the two types of stress do not always coincide.

## **Summary**

In this study session, you have learnt that:

9.1 there are two major types of stress in terms of pitch, three degrees of stress; primary stress, secondary stress and unstressed;

9.2 to apply the appropriate stress on words you have to consider the category of the word and the type of vowel in the syllable; and

9.3 sentence stress works with word stress which itself depends on the syllable.