

Weak forms¹

There is a tendency in English, as well as in Russian and some other languages, to reduce sounds of unaccented syllables.

Reduction is the process of the weakening of a sound which may result in its total omission.

e.g.: *from*, accented form [frɒm], weakened form [frəm], due to further reduction it becomes [frm].

The most frequent in speech are grammatical words – articles, conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, and also pronouns, modal verbs and some adverbs. They are regularly used nearly in every utterance. That's why they are usually unaccented. Consequently, the vowels and some consonants in them are reduced. The forms with reduced sounds are called weak forms and are put for contrast with strong, or full forms. Grammatical words exist in their weak forms when unaccented and in their strong forms when accented for some special reason or when used in isolation.

e.g. *does*



What does [dəz] he know about it? (*unaccented*)

Does [dʌz] he know? – Yes, he does [dʌz]. (*accented*)

¹ The transcription used here is conventional, based upon the International Phonetic Alphabet. We have preferred not to use the traditional transcription of Daniel Jones' English Pronunciation Dictionary, because we have found the use of the length symbol for the vowels in pairs like /i:/ – /ɪ/, /u:/ – /ʊ/ misleading, especially for first year students. We have used instead the version suggested for practical purposes by A. C. Gimson in *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*, London 1965. Thus, we have marked the maximum duration of a vowel in an open syllable or before a lenis consonant in a stressed position by two dots (e.g. *see* [si:], *been* [bi:n]); reduced duration of a vowel before a fortis consonant or in a half-stressed position – by one dot (e.g. *port* [pɔːt], *yourself* [jɔːself], *give it to me* ['gɪv ɪt ˌtuː mi:]); further shortening of a vowel – by total omission of this sign (e.g. *yourself* [jɔself], *there are many things there* [ðəə a meni θɪŋz ðeə]). So, we have used not phonemic, but phonetic transcription, which enables us to show also the process of the weakening of the quality of the vowels (e.g. *you* [ju:] – [juː] – [ju] – [jʊ] – [jə]).

In isolation – [dʌz]

In ordinary colloquial English, these words occur much more frequently in their weak forms than in their strong forms. The majority of them occurs in their weak forms in 90% of the cases.

It is important for students of English to weaken and obscure those grammatical words which may be totally unaccented. If such words are pronounced in their full form when unaccented, a serious loss of intelligibility for the English listener may result. The phrase “We have come for the books” pronounced as  [wi: hæv 'kʌm fə: ði: 'bʊks] is less easy to understand than when pronounced as  [wi v 'kʌm fə ðə 'bʊks]. The weak forms of grammatical words often come before the strong forms in modern dictionaries.

Reduction of lax vowels /ɪ, e, ʌ, ʊ, ɒ, æ/

The lax vowels /e, ʌ, ʊ, ɒ, æ/ occur in closed syllables only: *them, but, could, was*, etc. In stressed positions, they retain their quality: [ðem], [bʌt], [kʊd], [wɒz]. When the word loses its prominence, the vowel is weakened and turns to [ə]: [ðəm], [bət], [kəd], [wəz]. This may be called the first degree of reduction. Further weakening of the word may result in total omission of the vowel: [ðm], [wz]. This is often called the second degree of reduction.

Reduction of tense vowels /i, ɜ, u, ɔ, ɑ/

The tense vowels /i, ɜ, u, ɔ, ɑ/ occur both in open and closed syllables. Open syllables: *you, we, or*; closed syllables: *been, yours, whom*. In stressed positions, these vowels are long if they are not shortened before a fortis consonant (in the words like *worse* [wɜːs]): [ju:], [wi:], [ɔ:], [bi:n], [jɔ:z], [hu:m]. In the first degree of reduction,

when a word loses its prominence in a phrase, the vowel is gradually shortened: [juː], [wiː], [ɔː], [biːn], [jɔːz], [huːm]. Further weakening of the word in fluent speech may lead to the changes of the vowel quality. It loses its tenseness and more frequently than not turns to neutral [ə] (the second degree of reduction).

Consonants may also be reduced, which means that they may be omitted: the auxiliary verb *have* is often pronounced like [əv], the pronouns *he*, *her* – like [i], [ɜ] (see → [Pronouns](#)).

Some words are reduced when they occur as the second element of certain compound nouns:

man [mæn], but *gentleman* ['dʒentlmən]

men [men], but *gentlemen* ['dʒentlmən]

pence [pens], but *twopence* ['tʌpəns] or ['tʌpns]

penny ['peni], but *halfpenny* ['heɪpəni] or ['heɪpni]

sense [sens], but *nonsense* ['nɒnsəns] or ['nɒnsns]

board [bɔːd], but *cupboard* ['kʌbəd]

The list given below includes only the grammatical words that are used both in strong and weak forms. The list of words not used in weak forms is given → [here](#).

Strong and weak forms of grammatical words

Spelling	Strong forms (transcription)	Weak forms (transcription)
Articles		
<i>a</i>	[eɪ]	[ə]
<i>an</i>	[æn]	[ən], [n̩]
<i>the</i>	[ðiː]	[ðɪ] before vowels, [ðə] before consonants

Particles ²		
<i>not</i>	[nɒt]	[nt]
<i>to</i>	[tu:]	[tu] before vowels and [w], [tə] before consonants
<i>there (is, are) (see → Adverbs C)</i>	[ðeə]	[ðə]
Pronouns		
<i>he</i>	[hi:]	[hi], [i]
<i>her</i>	[hɜ:]	[hɜ], [hə], [ə]
<i>me</i>	[mi:]	[mi]
<i>she</i>	[ʃi:]	[ʃi]
<i>them</i>	[ðem]	[ðəm], [ðm̩]
<i>us</i>	[ʌs]	[əs], [s]
<i>we</i>	[wi:]	[wi]
<i>you</i>	[ju:]	[ju], [jə]
<i>your</i>	[jɔ:]	[jɔ], [jə]
<i>their</i>	[ðeə]	[ðə] ³
<i>herself</i>	[hɜ:'self]	[hə'self], [ə'self]
<i>himself</i>	[hɪm'self]	[ɪm'self]
<i>yourself</i>	[jɔ:'self]	[jɔ'self], [jə'self]
<i>themselves</i>	[ðəm'selvz]	
<i>who</i>	[hu:]	[hu]
<i>whom</i>	[hu:m]	[hum]
<i>some (see → Pronouns B)</i>	[sʌm]	[səm], [sm̩]
Prepositions		
<i>at</i>	[æt]	[ət]
<i>before</i>	[bɪ'fɔ:]	[bə'fɔ]
<i>for</i>	[fɔ:]	[fɔ], [fə]
<i>from</i>	[frɒm]	[frəm], [frm̩]
<i>into</i>	[ɪntu:]	[ɪntu] before vowels and [w], [ɪntə] before

² Whether these words are particles or not is a problem which lies beyond the scope of this work.

³ LPD lists this weak form as “occasional”, occurring only before vowels as [ðər] (with r-liaison).

		consonants
<i>to</i>	[tu:]	[tu] before vowels and [w], [tə] before consonants
<i>through</i>	[θru:]	[θru]
<i>toward</i>	[tə'wɔ:d]	[twɔd]
<i>upon</i>	[ə'pɒn]	[əpən] ⁴
<i>of</i>	[ɒv]	[əv]
Modal verbs		
<i>can</i>	[kæn]	[kən], [kŋ]
<i>could</i>	[kʊd]	[kəd]
<i>must</i>	[mʌst]	[məst], [məs], [ms]
Auxiliary verbs		
<i>am</i>	[æm]	[əm], [m]
<i>are</i>	[ɑ:]	[ɑ], [ə]
<i>be</i>	[bi:]	[bi]
<i>been</i>	[bi:n]	[bin]
<i>is</i>	[ɪz]	[z]
<i>was</i>	[wɒz]	[wəz], [wz]
<i>were</i>	[wɜ:]	[wɜ], [wə]
<i>do</i>	[du:]	[du], [də]
<i>does</i>	[dʌz]	[dəz]
<i>have</i> (see →)	[hæv]	[həv], [əv], [v]
<i>has</i>	[hæz]	[həz], [əz], [z]
<i>had</i>	[hæd]	[həd], [əd], [d]
<i>shall</i>	[ʃæl]	[ʃəl], [l]
<i>will</i>	[wɪl]	[l]
<i>should</i>	[ʃʊd]	[ʃəd], [d]
<i>would</i>	[wʊd]	[wəd], [d]
Conjunctions		
<i>and</i>	[ænd]	[ənd], [ən], [ŋ]
<i>as</i>	[æz]	[əz]

⁴ LPD lists this weak form as “occasional”.

<i>but</i>	[bʌt]	[bət]
<i>or</i>	[ɔ:]	[ɔ], [ə] ⁵
<i>than</i>	[ðæn]	[ðən], [ðn]
<i>that</i> (see →)	[ðæt]	[ðət]

Words which have no weak forms at all

to have (notional verb) [hæv]: *I have a 'dog.*

then (adverb) [ðen]: *First 'you, then 'me.*

that (demonstrative pronoun) [ðæt]: *That 'pen is 'mine.*

there (adverb): [ðeə]: *We 'left there 'yesterday.*

on (preposition) [ɒn]

in (preposition) [ɪn]

what (interrogative pronoun) [wɒt]

when (interrogative pronoun) [wen]


where (interrogative pronoun) [weə]

Commentaries and exercises

Articles


We use the indefinite article *a* before vowels and *an* before consonants. The full form of the indefinite article is very rare. It is used only in the case of distinct pronunciation of isolated nouns: *a dog, a cat, an apple* [eɪ 'dɒg], [eɪ 'kæt], [æn 'æpl].

Being unaccented, the article *an* may lose its vowel altogether, because [n] is a sonant and it may make up a syllable by itself, e.g. *get an apple* ['get n 'æpl].

The definite article *the* occurs in its strong accented form [ði:] in cases when people want to emphasize the proper names, e.g.  *'This is 'the [ði:] 'Mr. 'Jones* (‘Вот тот самый мистер Джоунз’).

⁵ LPD lists this weak form as “occasional”, used chiefly in set phrases.

Ex. 1. Type A.⁶

1. 'Give me an 'envelope.
2. The 'Browns, the 'Smiths and the 'Atkins were 'present at the party.
3. A 'lady and a 'gentleman are 'waiting for you.
4. We re'peated the 'words after the 'teacher: “a 'pen, a 'desk, an 'end”.
5. 'Meet 'Mr. 'Smith. He is 'the 'Mr. 'Smith I 'told you about.
6.  'John 'ate an 'apple and a 'pear.

Particles. Adverbs

A. The particle *to* is never fully stressed. It occurs in its strong form only in the absolute final position: e.g. *Do you 'play 'football? – 'Presently, I 'don't, but I 'used to* [tu:].

B. The particle *not* is rather frequently stressed, especially when it is used without any verb: e.g. *'Will you 'help him? – 'Not 'me. 'Are you 'ready? – 'No, I'm 'not.*

Ex. 1. Type A.

1. To 'cut a 'long 'story 'short, we are to 'do 'all this 'work our'selves.
2. 'Harry 'used to 'get 'up 'early, to 'have his 'breakfast in 'bed, and to 'leave home at a 'quarter to 'nine.
3. 'This 'flat 'suits us to a 'T to my 'mind.
4. I 'had to 'go but I 'didn't want to.
5. To the 'right, there was a 'sofa, to the 'left, some 'old 'armchairs.
6. 'Are you 'tired? – 'No, I'm 'not.
7. 'Has he 'seen my 'brother? – 'No, he 'hasn't.
8. I've 'not 'seen your 'brother. I 'haven't 'seen your 'brother.
9. 'Will you 'go to the 'theatre? – I'd 'rather 'not.
10. I 'shan't be 'able to 'do it. – 'Why 'not?

⁶ Do all exercises of Type A given in this section of the book in the following way: 1 – read the commentaries; 2 – translate the sentences; 3 – copy the sentences together with the stress marks, transcribe the underlined grammatical words; 4 – analyse the use of the weak forms.

C. Don't mix up *there* as an adverb and the grammatical word *there* in the function of the introductory subject (*there is, there were, etc.*), the weak form of which is sometimes reflected in spelling: *There's...*

Ex. 2. Type A.

1. There's 'plenty of 'room there. 2. There's no 'light in the 'cellar. 3. There 'seems to be 'no 'doubt a'bout it. 4. Is there 'anything 'in it? 5. I 'thought there must be 'someone 'living there. 6. There are some 'books in there. 7. At 'least there was a 'wireless there. 8. I'll be 'home from 'two till 'five.

Pronouns

A. Pronouns seem to occur in their strong forms at the unaccented absolute end of a sense-group or a sentence: e.g. 'Why are you 'looking at me [mi:]?

Mind that pronouns *us* and *them* do not have strong forms when final and unaccented: e.g. *She 'called us* [əs]. *I 'like them* [ðəm], [ðm].

Ex. 1. Type A.

1. You 'look 'tired. 2. He 'speaks 'French. 3. 'Thank you very 'much in'deed. 4. 'Was her ob'jection ,unex'pected? 5. 'Have you 'heard from your 'sister? 6. He 'said she 'could. 7. 'What can we 'do? 8. 'Give me the 'book. 9. 'What do we 'owe you? 10. He 'noticed me. 11. 'All 'came to 'see her. 12. 'Who should in'form us? 13. I'll 'meet them. 14. Here's a 'sandwich for 'you. 15. 'Wash yourself.

B. The pronoun *some* has several meanings.

1) It may convey the idea of an indefinite quantity; in the case it is a determiner and is reduced when unaccented.

e.g. *I've 'got some [səm] 'money.* – ‘У меня есть немного денег.’ *I 'read some [səm] 'books in 'summer.* – ‘Летом я прочитал несколько книг.’

In the absolute final position, it is not reduced: *Do you 'have any 'milk?* – *I 'have some [sʌm].*

2) It may convey the idea of an indefinite quality, being the synonym of the adjective *certain*. In that meaning, it always occurs in its strong form, even when unaccented: *For some [sʌm] 'reason, she 'hasn't 'come.*

Ex. 2. Type A.

1. Some 'people 'came to the 'office. 2. I 'saw it in some 'paper. 3. 'Some people don't 'like him. 4. I'm 'going to 'do some 'shopping. 5. I've 'got some 'people here. 6. There's some 'tea in the 'pot. 7. 'Do you 'want some 'tea? 8. – No, 'thank you, I've 'had some al'ready. 9. You didn't 'make any 'toast this 'morning. – 'Do you 'want some? 10. I'll 'try some 'other time then.

C. Pronouns with initial [h] commonly lose it when they occur unaccented within a sense group: they retain the sound [h] when they are initial in a sense group or when they are accented.

e.g. *I 'gave her [ə] the 'pen.* *I 'gave 'her [hɜ:] the 'pen.* *Her [hə] 'pen is on the 'floor.*

Ex. 3. Type B⁷. 

⁷ Do all exercises of Type B in the following way: 1 – listen to the recording; 2 – write the sentences down, marking the stresses; 3 – transcribe the grammatical words; 4 – analyse the use of the weak forms.

Prepositions

A. Prepositions are usually unaccented. Sometimes, they are contrastively accented and, consequently, are used in their strong forms, e.g.: ▶ Not 'at [æt] 'London, 'in 'London.

Ex. 1. Type B. ▶

B. In certain positions, prepositions are used in their strong forms even when they are unaccented:

a) in the absolute final position (that is, at the absolute end of a sense group or of a sentence).

e.g.: 'Do you 'know where I 'come from [frəm]?

b) prepositions are optionally strong followed by an unaccented pronoun at the end of a sense group or a sentence:

e.g. She was 'not 'listening to him [tu: him], [tu ɪm].

Ex. 2. Analyse the difference in the use of weak and strong forms of prepositions in the left and right columns.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. I have 'just 'come from [frəm] the 'conference. | 1. 'Let me 'know when you 'hear from [frəm] him. |
| 2. Of [əv] 'what 'colour? | 2. 'What are you 'thinking of [ɒv]? |
| 3. For [fə] 'what 'purpose? | 3. 'What have you 'done it for [fɔ:]? |
| 4. We shall be 'present at [æt] the meeting. | 4. 'What are you 'looking at [æt]? |
| 5. I shall 'go to [tə] 'London.
I shall 'go to [tu] A'merica. | 5. 'Don't let it 'be a 'trouble to [tu:] you. |

Ex. 3. Type B. ▶

Ex. 4. Type A. Transcribe the prepositions and the articles.

1. You must 'stay in 'bed at 'least for a 'day or 'two. 2. As a 'matter of 'fact, it is 'not 'serious. 3. 'Mother ran 'down to the 'doctor. 4. An 'omnibus a'cross the 'bridge 'crawls like a 'yellow 'butterfly. (*Oscar Wilde*) 5. 'Is he 'greedy? – He 'pays through the 'nose. 6. We 'started to'wards the 'town. 7. 'Come before 'lunch time. I'll be 'free then. 8. You 'always 'get into 'trouble. 9. She was 'sitting at the 'table, her 'head on her 'hands. 10. I 'don't 'know how to a'pologise for 'leaving you by your'self like 'this.

1. 'What are you 'speaking of? 2. 'What 'place have you 'been to? 3. The e'dition we have 'just 'spoken of is 'very 'cheap. 4. The 'doctor had been 'sent for. 5. 'Whom are you 'typing it for? 6. 'What 'country will they 'go to? 7. 'Do you 'see what I am 'getting at? 8. 'What are you 'asking for? 9. 'What was she 'frightened of?

1. I shall 'drop 'round to you. 2. It was 'meant for her. 3. He was 'smiling at us. 4. 'Sit 'here where I can 'look at you. 5. He 'wasn't 'looking at me, he 'wasn't 'talking to me, he 'doesn't 'care about me. 6. 'Don't 'wait for me. 7. There isn't 'anything I wouldn't 'do for him. 8. I'll 'do the 'room 'up for you. 9. They can re'cover from it, 'can't they? 10. 'How shall I 'put it to you?

Ex. 5. Type A.

1. 'What are you 'laughing at? – I'm 'laughing at his 'silly 'face. 2. 'What were you 'looking at? – I was 'looking at these 'photos. 3. That's 'not the 'man we are 'looking for. – 'Well, you must be 'looking for 'someone 'else. 4. 'What do you 'want these 'books for? – I 'want them for my 'thesis. 5. 'What did she 'die of? – She 'died of 'cancer. 6. 'Where do you 'come from? – My 'family 'come from Ber'lin. 7. I

'don't 'want to 'go, but I've 'got to. 8. We 'waited for the 'postman. We 'waited for him. 9. 'Who's re'sponsible for this de'cision? 'Who's re'sponsible for us? 10. 'Have you 'heard of 'Dick and 'Bessie 'Buxton? – I've 'never 'heard of them.

Verbs (auxiliary and modal)

A. These verbs occur in their strong forms either when they are accented according to the rhythm:

e.g. 'Do [du:] you under'stand this 'rule?

or when they are accented contrastively (that is, when the speaker is emphasising an idea):

e.g. He 'will [wɪl] come. 'Он обязательно придёт.'

Ex. 1. Type B.  

B. If unaccented, the auxiliary and modal verbs have their strong forms in the absolute final position.

e.g. 'Who is on 'duty to'day? – 'I am [æm].

I 'don't 'know where 'Tom was [wɒz].

Ex. 2. Type B. 