



IIT Madras
ONLINE DEGREE

STRUCTURE OF SPOKEN WORD

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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 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; “**monkey**” has two spoken vowels and two syllables; “**elephant**” has three vowels and three syllables; “**university**” has five vowels and five syllables.

- 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.

ACTIVITY 1

- **Look at the following words**

act, actor, action, active, activity, actionable,
book, bookish, certain, certainly, distance,
divide, division, elimination, fertilizer, beauty,
furious

- 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 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

Activity 2

- Make a list of words that have syllables only with vowels, and no consonants.
- But syllables can have other sounds before and/or after vowels. In “act”, you have one vowel followed by two consonants; in “best”, you have one consonant before vowel, but two after vowel. There are syllables in English with up to three consonants before vowel. See the following, for example: spread, strike, screw
- These words have three consonants each before the vowel, and only one or none after the vowel.

- 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.

ACTIVITY 3

- Find words with one, two, three and four consonants after the vowel.

Thank you