

Lessons of Phonetics - Third Semester

Course Objectives

On successful completion of this module, students should be able to:

- Independently transcribe individual words into phonemic transcription using the symbols of the I.P.A and showing stress marks.
- Describe syllable structure in English and principles of syllabification.
- Identify stressed and unstressed syllables and explain the differences between them.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the English stress rules and patterns at the level of individual words.
- Identify and explain the stress patterns of simple and complex words using the notation convention 0, 1, 2.

Lesson One: Syllables and Stress

1. Definition

A syllable is a phonetic unit of pronunciation having one vowel sound, with or without surrounding consonants, forming the whole or a part of a word. For example, there is one syllable in the word “sit”, two syllables in the word “father”, and three in “espresso”.

2. The Nature of the Syllable

From a phonetic point of view, syllables are usually described as consisting of a center which has little or no obstruction to airflow and which sounds comparatively louder than the other part(s). Before and after the center, there will be greater obstruction to airflow and/or less loud sound(s).

3. Syllable Structure in English

The structure of English syllable is, thus, the following: syllable = onset + center (peak) + coda. Peak and coda are sometimes referred to as the rhyme. Which means that syllable = onset + rhyme (nucleus + coda).

4. Strong and Weak Syllables

Syllables have two types: strong and weak. It is important to understand the difference between strong and weak syllables especially when we consider stress, elision, and intonation.

❖ The differences between strong and weak syllables:

- **Length:** Strong syllables are longer than weak syllables.
- **Loudness:** Strong syllables are louder than weak syllables.
- **Quality:** Strong syllables have vowels that differ in quality from the vowels of weak syllables.

NOTES:

- It is always the vowel sound that makes the syllable longer, louder, or different in quality.
- The syllable is weak when it has the short vowel /ə/ (Schwa).
Example: better /betə/ - The second syllable is weak.
- The syllable is weak when it has the close front unrounded vowel /i/.
Example: city /sɪti/ - The second syllable is weak.
- The syllable is weak when it has the close back rounded vowel /u/.
Example: thank you /θæŋk ju/ - The second syllable is weak.
- The syllable is weak when it has a syllabic consonant /m̩, n̩, ŋ̩, l̩, r̩/.
Example: couple /kʌp̩l̩/ - The second syllable is weak.
- The syllable is weak when it ends with the short vowel /ɪ/ and the next syllable starts with a consonant.
Example: design /dɪzain/ - The first syllable is weak.
- /ə/ is the weakest vowel in English and the most frequently occurring one.
- Only five consonants can be syllabic in English: /m̩, n̩, ŋ̩, l̩, r̩/.

List of important words with syllabic consonants:

cattle	wrestle	bottle	muddle
trouble	knuckle	panel	kernel
pedal	threaten	eaten	happen
often	uppermost	preference	Hungary
veteran	garden	rhythm	bottom
literal	visionary	couple	struggle
blossom	Handle	parcel	Petal
national	history	seven	Heaven

5. Syllabification (Syllabic Division)

We can figure out the number of syllables in a word by counting the number of its vowel letters (**a, e, i, o** and **u**). However, there are some (03) rules to follow.

- **First**, the final “e” in a word is **not** counted (site, white, wife, knife, etc.), except when it comes after two consonants (gentle, subtle, horrible, middle, etc.).
- **Second**, when two vowels occur together, they will be counted as one (soap, boat, moon, food, beautiful, etc.), except for some scientific words like “geology”, “biology”, etc.
- **Third**, the semi-vowel “y” is often treated as a vowel (Sydney, funny, beauty, cozy, etc.), except when it occurs at the beginning of words and/or is pronounced /j/ like in yummy, yesterday, etc.

Syllable division rules show us how to break up a multi-syllable word into its syllable parts. There are few main syllable division “rules” to guide us.

How is Syllable Division done?

- It all starts with the vowels. Find the vowels in the word. It helps to underline or highlight them.
- Find the pattern of the consonants and vowels (VCV, VCCV, VCCCV, VCCCCV, C+le, VV).
- Use the syllable division rule (shown below) to divide the word into its syllable parts.

The first thing to know is that every syllable must have a written vowel. The very definition of a **syllable** is an uninterrupted unit of speech with one vowel *sound*.

- ✓ **One consonant between the Vowels (VCV Pattern)**: if there is a consonant between two vowels, we move it either to the right or to the left. Here, you

would **split** VCV syllables the **before that consonant**. This leaves your first syllable open, so the vowel would be long.

- ✓ **Two consonants between the vowels (VCCV):** in words with the VCCV pattern, there are two consonants between the two vowels. Usually, we split between those consonants.
- ✓ **Three consonants between the vowels (VCCCV):** in the case of three consonants between the vowels, we *usually* split after the first consonant. For example, in the word *conflict*, the letters “nfl” are between the vowels. The first consonant “n” goes with the first syllable and the other two “fl” go to the 2nd syllable: con-flict.
- ✓ **Four consonants between the vowels (VCCCCV):** this is very similar to the last one. Split after the first consonant, unless it is a compound word. There are not so many of these words, and when you are getting into words this big, you should tend to shift focus to morphology.
- ✓ **Consonant -le:** if a word ends with a consonant –ly, split before that consonant.
- ✓ **The VV rule:** when there are two vowels next to each other, but they are NOT vowel teams or diphthongs (more than one letter making one sound together), then you split between the vowels. These two vowels do *not* share a single sound.

6. Syllabic Consonants

A syllabic consonant or vocalic consonant is **a consonant that forms a syllable on its own**, like the m, n and l in the English words rhythm, button and bottle, or is the nucleus of a syllable, like the r sound in the American pronunciation of work.

Lesson Two: The Nature and Levels of Stress

1. What is Stress?

Stress is the degree of breath force that is expending on each syllable of a word. It is the process of emphasizing on a particular syllable by pronouncing it with greater force. E.g.: perfect /'pɜ:fekt/.

2. Factors Responsible for the Prominence of Stressed Syllables

Prominence, then, is produced by four main factors: loudness, length, pitch and quality. Generally these four factors work together in combination, although syllables may sometimes be made prominent by means of only one or two of them.

3. Patterns of Word Stress

There are several patterns of stress:

➤ **Pattern One: two-syllable words**

- ❖ **Stress on the first syllable:** cheesy, sandwich, terror, pony, melon, biceps, triceps, chimney, napkin, necklace, pumpkin, grossly, popcorn, cupcake, earring, rainbow, peanut, sunshine, headache, salad, coffee (vs. café), London, pleasant, awkward, sorrow, etc.
- ❖ **Stress on the second syllable:** alone, machine, arrive, behind, discuss, about, above, upon, indeed, award, success, because, between, himself, direct, beyond, exchange, balloon, compete, accord, etc.

➤ **Pattern Two: three-syllable words**

- ❖ **Stress on the first syllable:** yesterday, bachelor, quantity, quality, cucumber, hamburger, dinosaur, broccoli, microwave, positive, modesty, poverty, adjective, comfortable, fashionable, handicap, prejudice, parody, journalist, etc.
- ❖ **Stress on the second syllable:** important, relation, eleven, spaghetti, consistent, banana, applicant, election, November, abandon, develop, substantial, historic, formidable, accomplish, gymnastic, etc.
- ❖ **Stress on the third syllable:** cigarettes, magazine, entertain, referee, kangaroo, volunteer, guarantee, understand, etc.

➤ **Pattern Three: four-syllable words**

- ❖ **Stress on the first syllable:** education, helicopter, criticism, category, eligible, testimony, cemetery, miserable, etc.

- ❖ Stress on the second syllable: remarkable, impossible, photography, obesity, ironically, harmonica, emergency, accelerate, immunity, renewable, advantage, polygamy, etc.
- ❖ Stress on the third syllable: diplomatic, information, indentation, photographic, macaroni, superficial, independent, energetic, unpredictable, adolescence, expectation, overwhelming, etc.
- ❖ Stress on the fourth syllable: misunderstand, misrepresent, etc.

➤ **Pattern Four: five-syllable words**

- ❖ Stress on the first syllable: capitalism, cannibalism, puritanism, etc.
- ❖ Stress on the second syllable: Catholicism, administrative, inevitable, communicative, sophisticated, vocabulary, identically, illuminati, extraordinary, etc.
- ❖ Stress on the third syllable: satisfactory, Aristocracy, incapacity, supernatural, underestimate, creativity, anniversary, etc.
- ❖ Stress on the fourth syllable: consideration, examination, cannibalistic, characteristic, Mediterranean, enthusiastic, monosyllabic, imagination, etc.

4. Levels of Stress in English Words

There are three different degrees of stress: primary or strong stress (') like in father /'fɑ:ðə/, secondary stress (,) ex-husband /,eks'hʌzbənd/, and weak stress (unmarked). E.g.: perfection /pə'fekʃən/.

It is important to bear in mind that English has “free” or “movable” stress, i.e. the position of stress may change from one word to another.

Suggested Resources for Further Reading

A.C. Gimson, Edward Arnolds. An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English.

J.D. Bowen, Newsbury House Publishers. Patterns of English Pronunciation.

L. Guierre. Drills in English Stress Patterns. Longman.

Roach, Peter. English Phonetics and Phonology (1998). Cambridge University Press