

The Syllable

Objectives: The main aim of this lesson is to acquaint learners with the notion of syllable, and its importance in stress placement. It targets to help learners identify the different constituents of the syllable, and distinguish between syllabic and non-syllabic segments.

1. Definitions

The notion of the syllable is stemmed from [Latin *syllaba*, Greek *sullabe* which means 'taken, brought, or put together'; *Silbe*].

Syllables are usually described as consisting of a centre, also called peak or nucleus, which has little or no obstruction to the airflow, and is therefore usually formed by a vowel (either a monophthong or a diphthong), and which sounds comparatively loud; before and after this centre (that is, at the beginning and end of the syllable), there will be greater obstruction to the airflow and/or less loud sound (Roach, 2000, p. 70). The minimal syllable, then, is typically a single, isolated vowel, as in the words *are* /a:/, *err* /ɜ:/, and /ai/. The few consonants that can occur in isolation, such as the interjections *mm* /m/ (used to express agreement) and *sh* /ʃ/ (used to ask for silence), are not regarded as minimal syllables by all linguists.

The syllable is a "unit at a higher level than a phoneme, or segment, yet distinct from that of a word or morpheme" (Gimson, 1980, p. 55)

"In every word made up of more than a single sound, at least one of the sounds is heard to be more 'prominent' than the other(s). If there is only one such 'prominent' sound, the sequence is said to consist of a single syllable" (Jones, 1956, p. 134)

"A unit of pronunciation typically larger than a single sound and smaller than a word" (Crystal, 2008, p. 468).

The syllable can be defined as an uninterrupted unit of spoken language larger than a phoneme. It can be a word, or a part of a word, consisting of only one vowel sound (centre) which can be preceded, followed, or surrounded by one or more consonant.

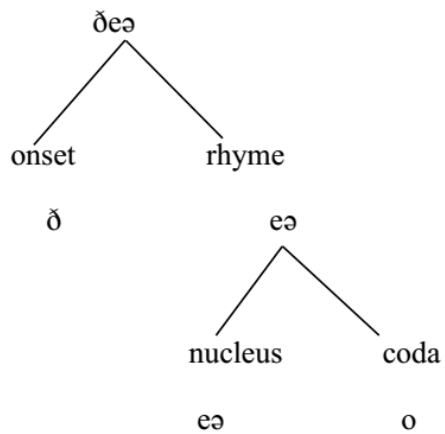
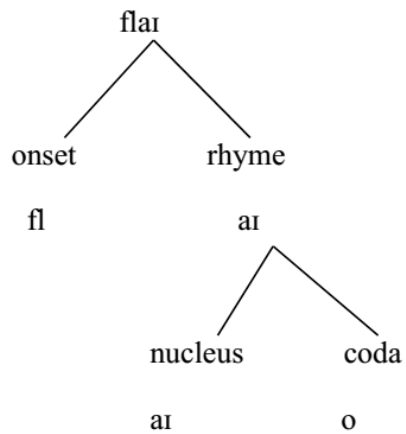
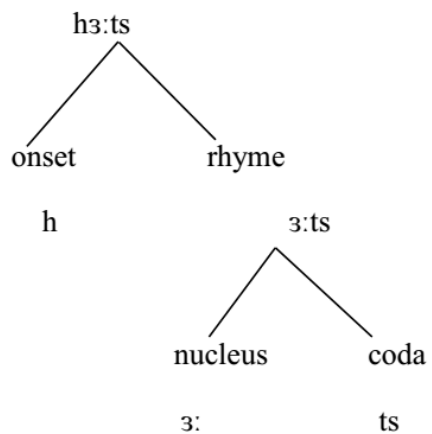
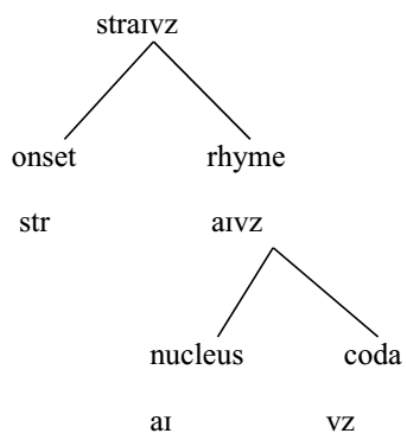
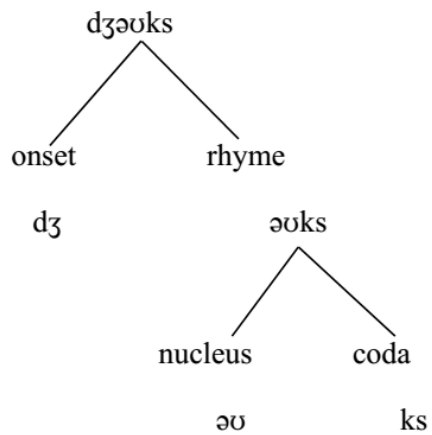
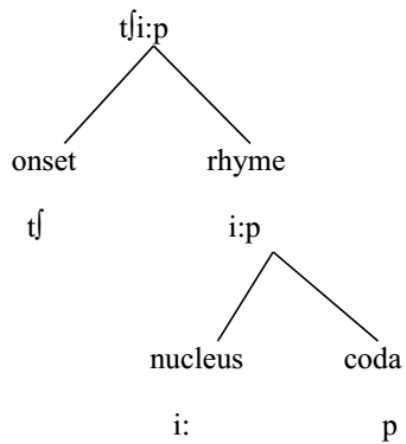
2. Structure of the syllable

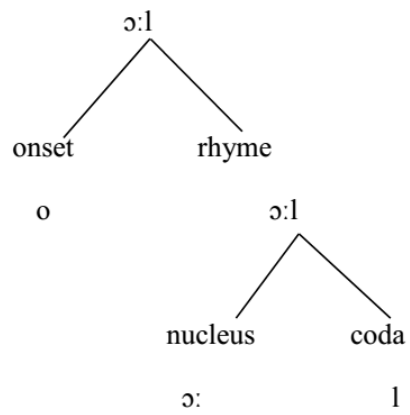
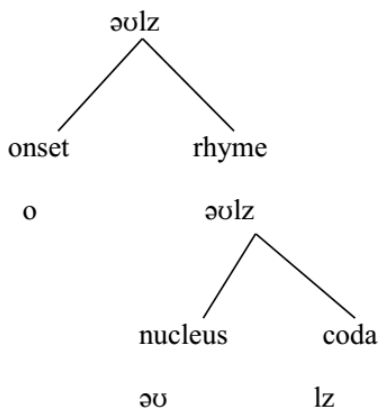
- **The Onset:** A term used in phonetics and phonology to refer to the consonant sound preceding the nucleus/peak in the syllable (it is formed by one or more consonants).
- **The Coda:** This refers to the consonant sound (s) following the peak in a syllable.
- **The Rhyme/ Rime:** A term referring to a single constituent of syllable structure comprising the nucleus (the non-consonantal segments) and coda (the final sequence of consonantal segments)
- **The Peak:** In phonetics and phonology, a term used to characterize a relatively high level of prominence. It is the syllabic element, or the centre of a syllable. Every syllable is made of a syllabic segment, mostly a vowel. This means that some consonants can be syllabics (we will explain the issue of syllabic consonants later). Additionally, most syllables, as we have mentioned in the definition above, have non-syllabic segments (consonants) before and after them.

In short, the syllabic segment is called center, peak, or nucleus. The consonant, or consonants, which precede the nucleus, are called the onset; and the ones that follow the peak are labeled as the coda. The nucleus and the coda are called the rhyme (rime).

A syllable that ends in a vowel, i.e. one that ends with the centre, is commonly referred to as an **open syllable** while a syllable that ends in a consonant, i.e. one that ends with a coda - irrespective of whether it has an onset or not - is commonly referred to as a **closed syllable**.

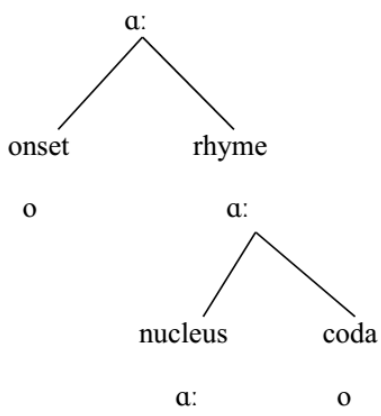
3. Examples of Syllable Division



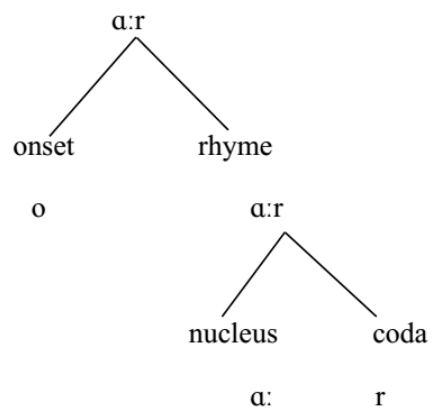


are (RP)

/ɑ:/

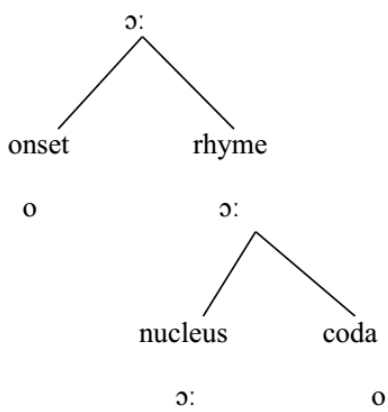


are (AE)

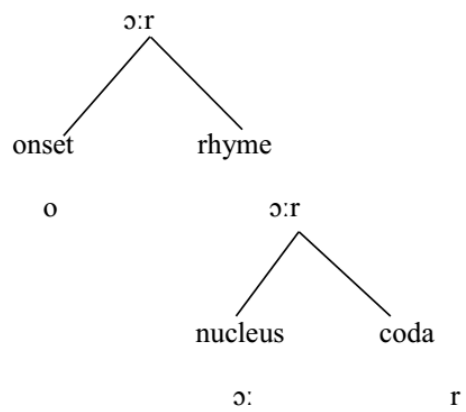


or (RP)

/ɔ:/



or (AE)



Practice: Divide these words into onsets and rhyme, and the rhyme into a nucleus and a coda:

Brushed/ waves / are / speaks / blow / moved / eats / wished / fourths / owls / or/ drives/ peaks/
strikes / occur / words / stopped / called / pairs / air / rhymes / ear / heirs / plea / cares

References

Crystal, D. (2008). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*. (6th ed). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Gimson, A. C. (1980). *An introduction to the pronunciation of English*. (3rd ed). London: Edward (Publishers) Arnold Limited.

Jones, D. (1956). *The pronunciation of English*. (4th ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roach, P. (2000). *English Phonetics and phonology: A practical course*. (3rd ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.