

Weak and Strong Syllables

Objective(s): To distinguish the syllables that can take the primary/secondary stress from those which are usually unstressed.

1. Definition

Weak syllables refer to those syllabic segments which tend to be shorter in duration, lower in intensity (pitch), and different in quality (reference articulation points). If we consider the word 'driver' /draɪvə/, we can perceive that the second syllable is shorter than the first, less loud, and includes a vowel /ə/ that cannot be found in strong syllables. In the same way, if we examine the word settle /setl/ we notice that it is made up of two syllable /set/ and the syllabic consonant /l/, which does not occur in strong syllables (Roach, 1991). At the end of a word, weak syllables can end in the following vowels:

- i) the vowel /ə/ ("schwa");
- ii) a close front unrounded vowel in the general area of i: and ɪ (symbolized i);
- iii) a close back rounded vowel in the general area of u: and ʊ (symbolized u).

It is worth noting that the close unrounded front /i/ is in a position in-between the close front long /i:/, and the half-close short /ɪ/; and the close rounded back /u/ is placed between the back close long /u:/ and the back half-close short /ʊ/. The vowel /i/ is found in word final position spelt with final 'y', or 'ey' preceded by one or more consonant letters, eg., funny /fʌni/, easy /i:zi/, and in words like easier /i:ziə/ happier /hæpiə/. We can also find them the prefixes (re- pre- de-) preceding a vowel; in suffixes spelt 'iate' 'ious'. In addition, this sound can be noticed in these function words: he /hi/ she /ʃi/, me /mi/, we /wi/ be /bi/.

Conversely, strong syllables are stressed, and have as a peak of one of the vowel phonemes (i: u: ɜ: ɔ: ɑ: ɔ:), diphthongs eɪ aɪ ɔɪ əʊ ɪə eə ʊə, or triphthongs (eɪə aɪə ɔɪə əʊə ɪəʊ). If the last syllable includes a short vowel, it will have a coda.

2. Dividing Words into Strong and Weak Syllables

salad S w 'sæləd	Balloon w S bə'lu:n	Bulletin S w w 'bʊlɪtɪn	Remember w S w rɪ'membə
Measure S w 'meɪʒə	Command w S kə'mɑ:nd	Canada S w w 'kænədə	contagious w S w kən'teɪdʒəs
Value S w 'vælju:	Result w S rɪ'zʌlt	Elephant S w w 'elɪfənt	Develop w S w dɪ'veləp
Yellow S w 'jeləʊ	Supply w S sə'plai	Harmony S w w 'hɑ:məni	Annoyance w S w ə'nɔɪəns
Enginner s w S ,endʒɪ'nɪər	Architect S w s 'ɑ:kɪtekt	Architecture S w s w 'ɑ:kɪtektʃə	California s w S w ,kæli'fɔ:njə
Lemonade s w S ,lemə'neɪd	Elevate S w s 'elɪveɪt	Elevator S w s w 'elɪveɪtər	Elevation s w S w ,elɪ'veɪʃən
Understand s w S ,ʌndə'stænd	Modify S w s 'mɒdɪfaɪ	Modifying S w s w 'mɒdɪfaɪɪŋ	Understanding s w S w ,ʌndə'stændɪŋ

References

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 Roach, P. (1991). *English Phonetics and phonology: A practical course*. (2nd ed). Cambridge:
 Cambridge University Press.

