

## Syllable formation in English

The speech continuum is characterized by the dialectal unity of syllable formation and syllable division. Syllable formation in English is generally based on the phonological opposition vowel vs. consonant. Vowels are usually syllabic while consonants are not with the exceptions of [l], [m], [n]. According to the number and arrangement of consonants with a vowel there are four types of syllables in English: 1. fully open syllables, which consist of a vowel sound only: *are* [ɑ:], *or* [o:], *I* [ai]; 2. fully closed syllables, which consist of a vowel between consonants: *cat* [kɔt], *jump* [dʒʌmp], *plan* [plæn]; 3. syllables covered at the beginning, which consist of a consonant or a sequence of consonants preceding a vowel: *so* [səʊ], *spy* [sraɪ], *screw* [skru:]; 4. syllables covered at the end, which consist of a consonant or a sequence of consonants following a vowel: *on* [ɒn], *old* [ɔld], *acts* [ækt]. Certain peculiarities of the system of English phonemes allow the existence of syllable types consisting of consonants only, with the nucleus [l], [n], [m] (*table* [teɪbəl], *taken* [teɪkən], *rhythm* [rɪðəm]). Due to the specific structure the basis of syllable formation in English forms the closed type of syllable while in Russian it is the open type. Thus a single generalized formula of English syllables can be summarized as follows: (Consonant) + Vowel + (Consonant). It means that the syllabic structure of the English language consists of the nucleus which may or may not be accompanied with consonants. The nucleus is the peak of the syllable, presented by a vowel or a certain sonorous consonant. Consonant(s) preceding the nucleus make up the syllable onset. Consonant(s) following the nucleus make up the syllable coda. The combination of nucleus and coda makes up the rhyming property of a syllable. The structure of the English syllable reveals variations in the number of pre-vocalic consonants from 1 to 3 (*splay* [spleɪ]) and post-vocalic consonants from 1 to 5 (*minstrels* [mɪnstɹlz]). The number of syllables in English words can vary from 1 to 8 (*day* [deɪ], *baby* [beɪbi], *family* [fæmɪli], *generation* [dʒenə'reɪʃn], *liberality* [lɪbərə'lɪti], *responsibility* [rɪs,pɒnsə'bɪlɪti], *irresponsibility* [ɪrɪs,pɒnsə'bɪlɪti], *incomprehensibility* [ɪn'kɒmpri,hensə'bɪlɪti]).

**Syllable division in English.** Syllable division is the other aspect of the dialectal unity characterizing the speech continuum. It helps to establish the structure of meaningful language units (morphemes and words) and thus determines the syllabic characteristics of the language. As it was mentioned above, the closed type of syllable has become characteristic property of the English language. Syllable division concerning the English long monophthongs, diphthongs and diphthongoids doesn't present any difficulties. The point of syllable division is right after them so they always occur in a phonetically open syllable (*'greeting* [gri:-tɪŋ], *carpet* [kɑ:-pɪt], *taming* [tɛɪ-mɪŋ], *popular* [pɒ-pjʊ-lə]). The problem of syllable division arises only in case of a stressed short vowel separated from the next vowel by a consonant(s) in words like *city* ['sɪtɪ], *many* ['meni], *scanner* ['skænə], *body* ['bɒdɪ], *money* ['mʌni], *ekstra* ['ekstrə], *admire* [əd'maɪə]. These English short stressed vowels occur in a closed syllable. The difficulty is to find the point of syllable division, which depends on the number of consonant sounds following the vowel. I. When a short stressed vowel is followed by one consonant, the syllable always remains closed because the short vowel should be checked (*pity*, *study*, *family*, *letter*). The point of syllable division in such words is inside the intervocalic consonant (*city* ['sɪtɪ]). II. When a short stressed vowel is followed by a consonant cluster, the syllable boundaries are determined with the help of different phonological criteria. 1) The syllable boundary of words *agree*, *Ukraine*, *abrupt* are determined like [ə-'grɪ], [jʊ-'kreɪn], [ə-'brʌpt] according to the distributional criterion, because consonant clusters [gr], [kr], [br] are possible in the initial position (*great*, *cry*, *break*). 2) The morphological criterion is taken into account when the boundaries of the syllable correspond to morpheme boundaries: *toastrack* ['təʊst-ræk], *friendship* ['frend-ʃɪp]. 3) Sometimes the division is made according to the native speaker's intuition of a new pronunciation effort in words like *extra* ['ek-strə].

**Functional characteristics of the syllable.** The syllable is a phonological unit that performs the following closely connected functions: constitutive, distinctive and identificatory. I. The constitutive function of the syllable lies in the ability to be a word or a part of it. In this respect the syllable exercises the connection of smaller and greater language units. On the one hand, it represents the correlation of the distinctive and their acoustic features of phonemes. On the other hand, it realizes prosodic characteristics of speech within the stress pattern of words, the rhythmic and intonation structures of utterances. Thus the syllable sums up specific minimal features of both segmental and suprasegmental levels.

II. The distinctive function lies in the ability to differentiate words and word-forms taken separately or in combinations. This can be proved with the help of distinctive oppositions.

Minimal pairs *nitrate* [naɪ-'treɪt] – *night-rate* [naɪt-'reɪt], *lightening* ['laɪt-'nɪŋ] – *lightning* ['laɪt-nɪŋ] illustrate syllabic distinctive function in words, because syllable division changes their allophonic contents

There analogical distinction can be found within language units of greater magnitude. Such oppositional pairs as *an aim* [ən 'eɪm] – *a name* [ə 'neɪm], *Mike lame* [maɪk 'leɪm] – *my claim* [maɪ 'kleɪm], *an ice house* [ən 'aɪs 'haus] – *a nice house* [ə 'naɪs 'haus], *we loan* [wɪ 'ləʊn] – *we'll own* [wɪl 'əʊn] present differentiation of syllables concerning word combinations. Sometimes syllable division may be the basic ground even for differentiation of sentences: *I saw her rise* [aɪ 'so: hə 'raɪz] – *I saw her eyes* [aɪ 'so: hə 'aɪz]; *I saw the meat* [aɪ 'so: ðə 'mi:t] – *I saw them eat* [aɪ 'so: ðəm 'i:t].

III. The identificatory function is conditioned by the pronunciation of the speaker. The listener's ability to perceive and identify the exact meaning of a word or a combination of words depends on the speaker's ability to establish the correct syllabic boundary: *pea stalks* ['pi: 'sto:ks] – *peace talks* ['pi:s 'to:ks], *my train* [maɪ 'treɪn] – *might rain* [maɪt 'reɪn].

The realization of the distinctive and identificatory functions of the syllable is closely connected with the notion of juncture, kept by the speaker and taken in by the listener. Close juncture (conjuncture) occurs between the sounds of the same syllable. Open juncture (disjuncture) occurs between the sounds of two different syllables. Some linguists state that it can be marked with [+] and needs obligatory representation in a phonetic transcription. In this case the differentiation between the oppositional pairs will look as follows: *ice cream* [aɪs + kri:m] vs. *I scream* [aɪ + skri:m].

Summarizing it's necessary to underline that the syllable reveals its functional value only occasionally, that is with the help of other phonological units.

#### **Nature and placement of word stress in English.**

The syllabic structure of words is closely connected with their stress pattern or accentual structure. The sequence of syllables in a word is not pronounced identically. The syllable(s) uttered with greater prominence are known as stressed or accented.

Word stress is defined as a complex phenomenon, marked by the changes of force, pitch, quantitative and qualitative components. The correlation of these components determines the nature of word stress in an individual language.

English word stress presupposes special changes in all four components.

Indeed, if we compare stressed and unstressed syllables in the words *abstract* ['æbstrækt] and *to abstract* [əb'strækt], we may note the following peculiarities of the stressed syllables:

- the force is greater, as the articulation is more energetic;
- the pitch of voice is higher, because the vocal cords and the walls of the resonance chamber are more tense;
- the quantity of the vowel [æ] in [əb'strækt] is greater, as it is

longer;

- the quality of the open vowel [æ] also changes, because in [əb'strækt] it retains the distinctive features representing a broad variant, whereas in ['æbstrækt] it becomes closer to the narrow one.

According to the placement of word stress languages differ into those with a fixed stress and those with a free stress. The English tends to mix the free and fixed tendencies of the placement of word stress. It holds true that word stress can occur in different syllables ('mother, 'cinema, ba'lloon, de'mocracy) and there are cases of shifting word stress ('import – to im'port, 'library – li'brarian). Still the placement of word stress in English is highly predictable, as its position is in most cases the product of the historical development of the language. In order to avoid accentual mistakes learners should know the basic rules of accentuation.

### **The degrees of word stress in English.**

According to the degree of prominence the stressed syllables get, the word stress is divided into primary (nuclear) and secondary stress. Both of these types serve to single out stressed syllables in a word, but the degree of prominence achieved by the primary stress is greater than that indicated by the secondary stress.

Notional words in all languages have primary stress. But the existence secondary stress in polysyllabic words is not characteristic of all languages.

For example, in English words with the number of syllables counted one to four usually have one primary stress ('toy, 'owner, 'character, psy'chology), but most words of more than four syllables have two stresses: primary and secondary (*pronunciation*). In the Russian language polysyllabic words have only one primary stress (*произноше́ние*). The most common mistake made by Russian students consists in omitting secondary stress in words like *demonstration* [deməns'treɪʃn] under the influence of the Russian primary stress pattern *демонстра́ция*. Therefore special attention should be paid to this peculiarity of English word stress in language teaching.

The foresaid distribution of the degrees of word stress is backed up by all linguists. However, the opinions of phoneticians differ as to how many degrees of stress are linguistically relevant in a word. The British and American linguists state that there are actually as many degrees of stress in a word as there are syllables.

The British linguists usually distinguish three degrees of stress in the word:

- 1) the primary stress, which is the strongest;
- 2) the secondary stress, which is less prominent;
- 3) the weak stress, which is realized in unstressed syllables.

The American scholars distinguish four degrees of word stress and term them: primary stress, secondary stress, tertiary stress and weak stress. The difference between the secondary and tertiary stresses is rather vague and seems to be predetermined by the differences between British and American English. For example, some suffixes of nouns and verbs, which are unstressed in Received Pronunciation, are said to have tertiary stress in General American ('territory, 'ceremony, 'dictionary, 'demonstrate, 'advertize, 'justify). Yet British linguists do not always deny the existence of tertiary stress as a tendency to use a tertiary stress on a post-tonic syllable in RP is also traced.

### **6. Functions of the English stress. Word stress and sentence stress.**

Word stress in a language performs three functions.

1. Word stress constitutes a word, it organizes the syllables of a word into a language unit having a definite accentual structure, that is a pattern of relationship among the syllables; a word does not exist without the word stress Thus the word stress performs

the constitutive function. Sound continuum becomes a phrase when it is divided into units organized by word stress into words.

2. Word stress enables a person to identify a succession of syllables as a definite accentual pattern of a word. This function of word stress is known as identificatory (or recognitive). Correct accentuation helps the listener to make the process of communication easier, whereas the distorted accentual pattern of words, misplaced word stresses prevent normal understanding.

3. Word stress alone is capable of differentiating the meaning of words or their forms, thus performing its distinctive function. The accentual patterns of words or the degrees of word stress and their positions form oppositions, e.g. *'import — im'port*, *'billow — below*.

Word stress is closely connected with sentence stress. On the one hand, they are different in their sphere of application: word stress is applied to a word, while sentence stress is applied to a phrase. On the other hand, in a speech chain word stress may change because of the rhythm, melody, and tempo of a phrase. Thus a speaker may omit the stress of a notional word within a phrase if it is necessary:

*I 'don't think he is 'right.*

*'Fifteen. 'Room Fifteen. 'Fifteen 'pages.*

So word stress is realized not only within a stressed syllable of an isolated word but in a word within speech continuum as well.