

Lecture No. 3:

WORD STRESS; Stress Placement within the Word

1. Definition of syllable

A syllable is a single unit of speech which contains, most of the time, a vowel.

2. Syllable structural properties

If we have a look at the structural properties of the syllables, we can notice that each syllable consists of a **nucleus** (central peak of sonority), usually a vowel, and the consonants that cluster before and after the nucleus are called the **onset** and the **coda** respectively.

<i>Syllable parts</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Optionality</i>
– Onset	Initial segment of a syllable	Optional
– Nucleus	Central segment of a syllable (core)	Obligatory
– Coda	Closing segment of a syllable	Optional

- The preceding consonants or consonant cluster before the nucleus are called the “**onset**”.
- The consonants or consonant cluster following the nucleus are called the “**coda**”. An English syllable requires a nucleus which is a vowel in most cases, although the consonants [r], [l], [m], [ŋ] can be also syllabic.

Zero onset: if the syllable does not contain any consonant before the vowel. E.g.: *I'll, on, ask*

Zero coda: when the syllable has no consonant after the vowel. E.g.: *may, fee, strew, troy*

* A syllable that stands alone is called **monosyllabic**, e.g., *horse, train, wide, show...*

A word containing more than one syllable is called **polysyllabic**, e.g., *carry, deliver, organize, transformation, unwillingly, undoubtedly...*

3. Nature of stress

In English, when a word has more than one syllable, one of the syllables is produced with more force, energy, and prominence than the rest of syllables, this emphasis is called stress. For example: ' *Carry, a'go, 'sailor, 'organize, uni'versity.*

We mark a stressed syllable by placing a small vertical line (') high up before the syllable. the accented pattern of English word may be considered as **fixed** because the stress falls on the same syllable in a given word but it may considered as **free** because it may fall on the first, second, third or last syllable in a given word. Look at these words. What do you notice?

water /'wɔ:tə/ **together** /tə'geðə/ **information** /,ɪnfə'meɪʃn/ **Volunteer** /,v ɒ lən'triə

4. Levels of stress

There are two levels of stress: **primary** stress and **secondary** stress. A third level refers to **unstressed** syllables. Example, in the verb *organize* there are three levels /,ɔ:gənaɪ'zeɪʃn/. Can you identify them?

In some words, we can find a stress which is weaker than the primary stress (called secondary stress). Examples: *Organization* /,ɔ:gənaɪ'zeɪʃn/ , *photographic* /fəʊtə'græfɪk/ , *transportation* /,træns'pɔ:t'eɪʃn /

5. Characteristics of stressed Syllables

From the perceptual point of view, all stressed syllables have one characteristic in common that is prominence. Stressed syllables are recognised as stressed because they are more prominent than unstressed syllables. What makes a syllable prominent? At least four factors are important (Roach, 1991: 85-86):

- **Pitch:** it is the most efficient factor for recognizing the prominence of stressed syllable, in which the stressed syllable is pronounced with a higher pitch than unstressed ones.
- **Energy of articulation (loudness):** the stressed syllables seem to be louder to the listener's ear than unstressed ones.
- **Quantity/ Duration (length):** stressed syllables are longer than unstressed ones and take more time to be pronounced than the vowels of the unstressed syllables, which are reduced in length.
- **Quality:** the stressed syllable mostly has strong vowels /e, æ, ɒ, aɪ, iː, ɔː, ɜː, əʊ, aɪ, aʊ/ whereas the weak vowels such as /ə, ɪ, ʊ/ are frequently unstressed in polysyllable words.

In order to decide stress placement, it is necessary to make use of some or all of the following:

- Whether the word is morphologically **simple or complex** (containing one or more affixes, or being a compound word)
- The **grammatical category** to which the word belongs (noun, adjective, verb, adverb...)
- The **number of syllables** in the word
- The phonological structure of the syllable

6. Two-syllable simple words (either the first or second syllable is stressed)

6.1. Two-syllable simple verbs

Rule 1: if the second syllable of the verb contains a long vowel a diphthong or ends with more than one consonant it (second syllable) receives stress.

Exercise: transcribe the verbs in the table below

Word	Transcription	Word	Transcription
apply		arrive	
assist		attract	
demand		avoid	
receive		relax	
produce		record	
complete		resist	
succeed		applaud	
adopt		announce	
decode		include	
subsume		appear	

Exception: the second syllable is unstressed if it contains the diphthong / əʊ /

Example words: borrow/ /, follow/ /, swallow/ /.

Rule 2: if the final syllable contains a short vowel and one final or no consonant, the first syllable is stressed.

Exercise: transcribe the following verbs in the table below.

Word	Transcription	Word	Transcription
enter		open	
edit		profit	
begin		carry	
offer		study	
prosper		travel	

What do you think of the following verbs? Express/ /, equip/ /, forget/ /, forbid/ /.

6.2. Two-syllable simple adjectives

Two-syllable simple adjectives are stressed according to the same rule (as verbs)

Exercise: transcribe the words in the table below.

Adjective	Transcription	Word	Transcription
divine		hollow	
Correct		aloud	
alive		narrow	
splendid		alone	

*Exceptions: honest / /, perfect / /

6.3. Two-syllable simple nouns

Nouns require different rules:

*If the second syllable contains a short vowel, the stress falls on the first syllable.

Otherwise, the stress usually falls on the second syllable. Transcribe the verbs below.

Word	Transcription	Word	Transcription
money		design	
estate		dozen	
balloon		taboo	
product		contract	

*Other two-syllable words such as adverbs and prepositions seem to behave like verbs & adjectives.

Examples: almost / /, apart/ /, inside/ /, above/ /, along/ /, around/ /

Transcribe the words above and justify stress placement.

7. Three-syllable simple words (either the first, second or third syllable is stressed)

7.1. Three-syllable simple nouns

Rule 1: if the final syllable contains a short vowel or the diphthong / əʊ /, it will be unstressed. If the syllable preceding the final syllable contains a long vowel, a diphthong or more than one consonant, the central syllable will receive the stress (that is, the 2nd one).

Examples: Disaster /dɪ'zɑ:stə /, potato /pə'tetəʊ /, tomorrow /tə'mɒrəʊ /

Rule 2: If the final syllable contains a short vowel and the second one contains a short vowel and ends with no more than one consonant, the first syllable will receive the stress.

Examples: cinema /'sɪnəmə /, character /'kærəktə /, synonym /'sɪnənɪm/

Exception: Most of the rules mentioned before show stress on the syllable containing a long vowel, a diphthong, or ending with more than one consonant. However, sometimes even if the final syllable fulfills the previous conditions, the stress can fall on the 1st syllable.

Examples: interview /'ɪntəvju:/, continent /'kɒntɪnənt/, substitute /'sʌbstɪtju:t/

7.2. Three-syllable simple adjectives

Adjectives follow the same rules as nouns to assign stress placement in three-syllable words.

Examples: difficult /'dɪfɪkəlt/

Activity: Transcribe the following nouns or adjective then mark stress.

Words	Transcription	Words	Transcription
accident		synopsis	
cathedral		innocent	
camera		intellect	
tobacco		insolent	
valentine		opportune	

7.3. Three-syllable simple verbs

Rule 1: If the final syllable (3rd one) contains a long vowel, a diphthong or ends with more than one consonant the stress will fall on that syllable (the 3rd syllable).

Examples: intervene/ɪn'tervɛn/, introduce/ɪn'trɔːdʊs/, resurrect/ɪn'terɪkt/

Rule 2: The 2nd syllable is stressed if the 3rd syllable contains a short vowel and ends with no more than one consonant (that is, only 1 consonant or none).

Examples: Establish/ɪ'stæblɪʃ/

Activity: Transcribe the following verbs and determine stress placement.

verbs	Transcription	verbs	Transcription
Abandon		Develop	
Deliver		Imagine	
Determine		Interrupt	
Encourage		Understand	