

Stress

Stress is conveniently defined as “the degree of force with which a syllable is uttered”. A strong energy of utterance means energetic action of all the articulating organs; it involves a strong force of exhalation, of loudness. Weak energy of utterance involves weak force of exhalation, and therefore gives the objective impression of softness.

Syllables which are uttered with a greater degree of stress than the neighboring syllables in an utterance are said to be stressed or pronounced with strong stress; syllables uttered with relatively small degree of stress are said to be unstressed or pronounced with weak stress.

Relative Degrees of Stress

The analysis of spoken English has shown that it is possible to distinguish four relative degrees of stress.

These are traditionally called primary [ˈ], secondary [ˌ], tertiary [ˑ], and weak [ː], primary stress being the strongest and weak stress the least strong.

Word Stress

English word stress cannot be learnt by means of rules. In most cases there is no rule as to the placement of stress, and when rules can be formulated at all, they are generally subject to various exceptions. It is therefore necessary for the learner of English to learn the stress of words individually.

Stress of One-Syllable Words Spoken in Isolation:

All one-syllable words, when spoken in isolation, have primary stress. This means that the phonetic transcription of such a word as *pill* is not complete unless it shows the stress, thus [pɪl]¹,

¹The different degrees of stress will henceforth be marked above the pertinent vowels.

Stress of Two-Syllable Words Spoken in Isolation:

When two-syllable words are spoken in isolation, some have primary stress on the first syllable and weak stress on the second, such as the words *English* [ɪŋgliʃ] and *study* [stə'di]; others have weak stress on the first syllable and primary stress on the second such as the words *believe* [bɪliɪv] and *dictate* [dɪkɪ'eɪt]¹.

There is a number of two-syllable words the grammatical function of which is determined by the placement of primary stress on either the first or the second syllable. For example, *content*, when pronounced with primary stress on the first syllable, functions as a noun. But when pronounced with primary stress on the second syllable, it functions as a verb.

Thus *content* (noun) is pronounced [kɒ'ntənt], and *content* (verb) is pronounced [kəntə'nt].

Again, the word, *present*, when pronounced with primary stress on the first syllable, functions as an adjective or noun. But when pronounced with primary stress on the second syllable, it functions as a verb. Thus [pre'znt] (adjective or noun), and [prɪz'ent] (verb).

Stress of More Than Two-Syllable Words Spoken in Isolation

The pronunciation of more-than two syllable words is characterized by the incidence of a third degree of stress, namely tertiary [ˑ] on the syllable which does not have either primary [ˈ] or weak [ː] stress.

¹In this book we will follow a convention that weak stress [ː] will not be indicated in the phonetic transcription of words unless it is desired to call special attention to it. In examples where stresses will henceforth be indicated, any syllable with no stress marked will be understood to have weak stress.

Examples:

Animation [æniméyʃən]: Tertiary stress on the first syllable, primary on the third and weak on the second and fourth.

Satisfied [sætɪsfàyd]: Primary stress on the first syllable, weak on the second and tertiary on the third.

Necessary [nésəsəri]: Primary on the first syllable, weak on the second and third, and tertiary on the fourth.

Pronouns and articles are usually unstressed¹. Following is a list of the most common of these words in their stressed (strong) and unstressed (weak) forms:

Word	Pronunciation	
	Stressed (strong)	Unstressed (weak)
a	[éy]	[ə]
an	[æn]	[ən], [n]
the	[ðíy]	[ði] (before vowels)
		[ðə], [ð] (before consonants)
and	[ænd]	[ənd], [ən], [nd], [n]
but	[bə't]	[bət]
to	[túw]	[tu], (before vowels)
		[tə], [t] (before consonants)
by	[báy]	[bi], [bə]
for	[fɔ':]	[fə], [fo]
	[fə'r] (before vowels)	[fr] (before vowels)
from	[frɔ'm]	[frəm], [frm]
of	[ɔ'v]	[ov], [əv], [v]
		[f] (before voiceless consonant sounds)
on	[ɔ'n]	No weak forms

¹The stressed forms of these words are used when they occur in citation form, or when special emphasis of these words is required.

Word	Pronunciation	
	Stressed (strong)	Unstressed (weak)
so	[sów]	[so], [sə]
some	[sə'm]	[səm], [sm]
that (conjunction)	[ðæt] (not often used)	[ðət]
that (relative pronoun)	[ðæt]	[ðət], [ðt]
than	[ðæn]	[[ðən], [[ðn]
there	[ðéə]	[ðə]
is	[ðéər] (before vowels)	[ðr] (before vowels)
	[íz]	[z] is only used when the preceding word ends in a vowel sound or a voiced sound or a voiced con- sonant sound other than [z] or [ʒ] [s] is only used when the preceding word ends in a voiceless consonant sound other than [s] or [ʃ]
are	[á:] [á:r] (before vowels)	[a], [ə] [r] (before vowels)
was	[wɔ'z]	[wəz], [wz]
were	[wə':], [weə] [wéər] (before vowels)	[wə] [wər] (before vowels)

Word	Pronunciation	
	Stressed (strong)	Unstressed (weak)
been	[bíyn]	[bín]
me	[míy]	[mí]
you	[yúw]	[yu]
your	[yɔ':], [yɔ'ə], [yúə]	[yo], [yə]
he	[híy]	[i:], [hi], [i]
him	[hím]	[ím]
she	[šíy]	[ši]
her	[hə':] [hə'r] (before vowels)	[ə], [h], [ə] [ər] (before vowels).
it	[ít]	no weak forms
we	[wíy]	[wi]
us	[ə's]	[əs], [s]
they	[ðéy]	[ðə] especially before vowel sounds)
them	[ðém]	[ðəm], [ðm], [əm], [m]
has	[hæz]	[həz], [əz], [z], [s] ([z] is only used after words ending in a voiced sound other than. [z] or [ʒ]; [s] is only used after words ending in a voiceless consonant sound other than [s] or [ʃ])
have	[háev]	[həv], [əv], [v]
had	[háed]	[həd], [əd], [d]
will	[wíl]	[l], [wəl], [əl]
would	[wúed]	[wəd], [əd], [d]
shall	[ʃáel]	[ʃəl], [ʃl] [ʃə], [ʃ] (when we or be follows)
should	[ʃúed]	[ʃəd], [ʃd] [ʃt] (before voiceless consonant sounds).
can	[kæen]	[kən], [kn]
could	[kúed]	[kəd]
may	[méy]	[me] (before vowel sounds) [mi], [mə]
must	[mə'st]	[məst], [məs], [mst], [ms].

Exercises

Stress

1- Indicate the primary stress in these words:

Study - reform - increase - lately
Empire - industry - midnight.

2- What part of speech are these words:

Súbject - conténted - objéct - belieéve
Présent - pronóunce.

3- Transcribe these words, marking the primary stress.

Nature - primary - primarily.
Realize - realization- discourage.

4- What are the parts of speech that are generally unstressed? Give examples.

5- What types of sentences usually end with a rising intonation?