

LESSON 4

Sentence-Stress and Rhythm

I. Stress in Groups of Words

In Lesson 3 we were concerned with word-stress, the stressing of syllables in words of more than one syllable. Our knowledge of stress must, however, go beyond words if we are to have the complete picture. We do not really talk in words, most of the time, but in sentences, or at least in phrases.

In the sentence *I am glad to see you*, there are normally two stresses: on *glad* and *see*. Because these are words of only one syllable, they have no word-stress, but the emphasis that is put on them is in many ways the same as that put on the first syllable of *history* /hɪ'stəri/. It is sometimes convenient, however, to distinguish between word-stress (hɪ'stəri) and sentence-stress (I am glád to sée you).

When sentence-stress falls on a word of more than one syllable, it usually falls on the syllable that normally receives word-stress: "I'll méet you to-mórrow."

In Lesson 3 it was pointed out that there is a great deal more difference between stressed and unstressed syllables in English than in most other languages; this is as true of sentence-stress as of word-stress. To an English-speaking person the rhythm of many other tongues (for example, Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Pilipino) seems to be mechanically regular—a series of little bursts of sound all of about the same size and force, like machine-gun fire.

I. Stress in Groups of Words

English pronounced with such a rhythm would probably not be understood. If asked to draw a picture representing the rhythm of the syllables in Spanish, the speaker of English might produce a line of soldiers of very much the same size and following one another at rather regular intervals, as in Figure 5.

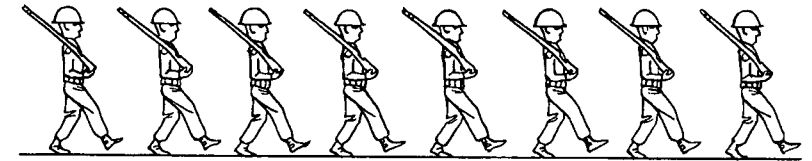


Figure 5. The seeming rhythm of some other languages

He might picture his own language as a series of family groups, each composed of an adult accompanied by several small children of varying sizes. A few of the adults might be childless, and some would be larger than others. (See Figure 6.)

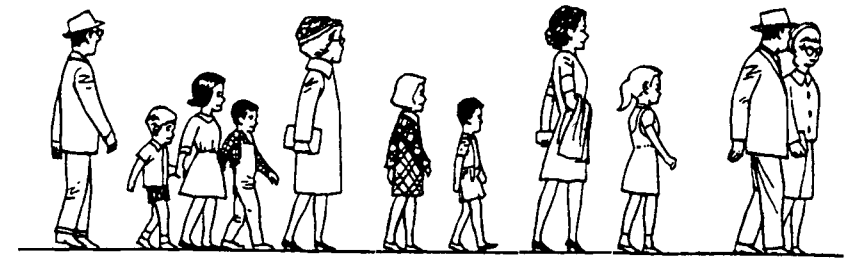


Figure 6. The rhythm of English

In a language like French or Spanish, a line of poetry is usually determined by counting the total number of syllables, stressed and unstressed alike. Lines containing the same number of syllables are felt to be of the same length. In a line of English poetry the number of sentence-stresses is more important than the number of syllables. Here are two lines from Tennyson that are considered to be perfectly matched in rhythm and of the same length when read.

"Bréak, bréak, bréak,
On thy còld gray stónes, O Séa!"

The unstressed syllables are so unimportant, rhythmically speaking, that it is not even necessary to count them. When a person recites those lines, it may

take as long to say the first as the second, even though the first contains only three syllables and the second is made up of seven.

This leads to a significant observation regarding English pronunciation:

ACCENTS TEND TO RECUR AT REGULAR INTERVALS.

The more unstressed syllables there are between accents, the more rapidly (and indistinctly) those syllables are pronounced. This is true to a large extent even of prose.

Have your teacher or a native speaker of English pronounce these two sentences for you at normal speed:

The boy is interested in enlarging his vocabulary.
Great progress is made daily.

Note how he or she unconsciously crushes together the unstressed syllables of the first sentence in order to get them said in time, and how the stressed syllables of the second sentence are somewhat lengthened so as to compensate for the lack of intervening unstressed syllables. If we were to illustrate these two sentences as suggested above, they might look something like this (Figure 7):

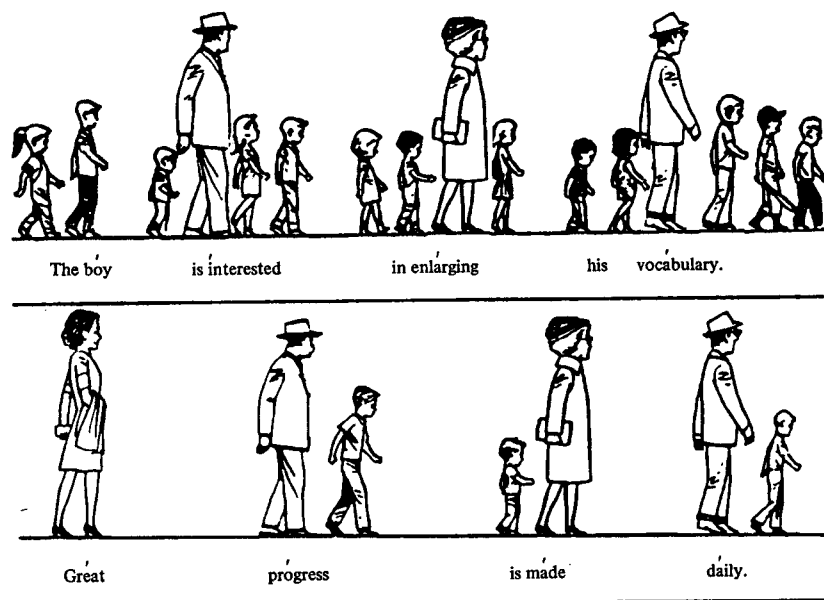


Figure 7. Examples of English sentence rhythm

The problem of acquiring a good English speech rhythm may be divided into five parts:

1. Giving proper emphasis to stressed syllables, and making them recur rather regularly within a thought group.
2. Weakening unstressed words and syllables, and obscuring the vowels in most of them.
3. Organizing words properly into thought groups by means of pauses.
4. Blending the final sound of each word and syllable with the initial sound of the one following within the same thought group.
5. Fitting the entire sentence into a normal intonation pattern.

Intonation patterns will be studied in Lessons 5, 6, and 7, and the rest of this lesson will treat the other four phases of the problem.

II. Which Words Should Be Stressed?

Grammarians sometimes divide all words into two classes: (1) *content words*, which have meaning in themselves, like *mother*, *forget*, and *tomorrow*; and (2) *function words*, which have little or no meaning other than the grammatical idea they express, such as *the*, *of*, and *will*. In general *content words* are *stressed*, but *function words* are left *unstressed*, unless the speaker wishes to call special attention to them.

Content words, usually *stressed*, include

1. Nouns.
2. Verbs (with the few exceptions listed under function words).
3. Adjectives.
4. Adverbs (including *not* and verbs contracted with *not*, such as *don't*).
5. Demonstratives: *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*.
6. Interrogatives: *who*, *when*, *why*, and so on.

Function words, usually *unstressed*, include

1. Articles: *a*, *an*, *the*.
2. Simple prepositions: *to*, *of*, *in*, and so on.¹
3. Personal pronouns: *I*, *me*, *he*, *him*, *it*, and so on.

¹Compound prepositions, those that include a noun, are stressed on the noun: *in spite of*, *instead of*, and so on.

4. Possessive adjectives: *my, his, your*, and so on.
5. Relative pronouns: *who, that, which*, and so on.
6. Common conjunctions: *and, but, that, as, if*, and so on.
7. *One* used as a noun-substitute, as in *the red dress and the blue one*.
8. The verbs *be, have, do, will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, and must*. These are easy to remember, as they are the verbs that may be used as auxiliaries: *He is resigning. Do you see it? We must wait.* Even when they are the principal verb in the sentence, they are usually unstressed: *Harry is my best friend. Barbara has a lovely smile.* On the other hand, they are stressed when they come at the end of a sentence (*I thought he was smarter than he is*), and when they are used in tag questions such as *didn't we* and *are they* (*All movies aren't made in Hollywood, are they?*).

We have already seen (in Lesson 3, Section III, 2-a) that compound nouns ordinarily have a primary accent on their first component. This is true whether such nouns are written with a hyphen (like *bird's-nest*) or without a hyphen (like *drugstore*). These nominal compounds may, of course, also be written as two separate words, in which case the first of the two words ordinarily receives sentence-stress while the second does not: *an apartment house, business affairs, a social worker*. In fact, native speakers of English use this sentence-stress pattern as a signal to listeners that they are to interpret the two words as a nominal compound, with a special meaning, rather than as a sequence of independent words. Thus *She's a social worker* means that she makes her living by helping people solve social problems, whereas *She's a social worker* presumably means that she is a worker who enjoys social relationships with other people. In the first of the above two examples, then, though *worker* is certainly a noun, therefore a *content* word, it is not given sentence-stress, so that it will be recognized as part of a nominal compound.²

Though most verbs are also *content* words, in two-word verbs made up of a verb and adverb it is normally the *adverb* that receives sentence-stress, not

²Not all two-word sequences that look as though they might be nominal compounds are stressed on the first component. An important group of apparent exceptions is made up of sequences in which the first component announces the material of which the second component is made. In these sequences both components receive sentence-stress: *It's a gold watch* (the watch is made of gold), *It's an apple pie* (the pie is made of apple). Compare the last example with *It's an apple tree* (the tree is not made of apple). There are in English minimal pairs of two-word sequences that differ in sentence-stress and therefore differ in meaning: *It's a metal cutter* (it cuts metal), *It's a metal cutter* (the cutter is made of metal). The best explanation of the difference seems to be that the *metal cutter* is felt as a nominal compound, with a special meaning of its own, while the *metal cutter* is felt as a sequence of two independent words, modifier plus noun.

the verb: *to split up, to put on*. (Compare Lesson 3, Section III, 2-b.) Do not confuse these genuine two-word verbs with other verbs, such as *look* and *listen*, that may be followed by a prepositional phrase: *to look at him, to listen to him*. A good way to tell the difference between, for example, *to put on* and *to look at* is to put both expressions into a question beginning with *what*: *What are you putting on? What are you looking at?* Note that *at* may be placed before *what* and thus separated from the verb: *At what are you looking?* But the two-word verb cannot be divided in this way: *On what are you putting?* does not make sense.

In the great majority of cases, then, it is a simple matter to determine where the stresses are placed in a sentence. One has only to apply the principles outlined above.

1. I don't imagine you can succeed in a business venture.
2. In an hour it will be ready to turn over to you.
3. This red rose is to be planted here.
4. He eats three full meals each day.
5. I shall deliver it to you.
6. She says that she likes the apartment, doesn't she?

Which are the content words? Which are the function words? Why is there no sentence-stress on *venture* in Sentence 1? Why no stress on *turn* in Sentence 2? Why no stress on *be* in the same sentence? Why is *doesn't* stressed in Sentence 6? Why stress *don't* in Sentence 1? Why stress *this* in Sentence 3?

If a native speaker of English violates these principles and distributes the sentence-stresses in some other way, he or she usually does so for one of two reasons:

1. He may wish to call special attention to a word by placing *contrastive stress* on it. If the speaker of Sentence 1 above wishes to suggest that *you* cannot succeed in a business venture though perhaps someone else could, he will stress the function word *you* as well as the content words *imagine, succeed, and business*. Such contrastive stress on a word adds a meaning that the sentence would not otherwise have.
2. He may wish, unconsciously, to give the sentence *a more regular rhythm*. In English speech one stressed syllable is usually separated from the next by one, two, or three unstressed syllables. But Sentence 4, if stressed according to the "rules," contains six successive stressed syllables without any intervening unstressed ones. A native speaker of English might feel this to be an unnatural rhythm and instinctively suppress some of the stresses: *He eats three full meals each day*. Sentence 5, if stressed

according to the "rules," ends in a series of four unstressed syllables. The native speaker might therefore find it natural to stress the function word *to* as well as the content word *deliver*: *I shall deliver it to you.*

Students of English should not, however, allow these unusual stresses they may occasionally notice to confuse them and lead them to distribute stresses randomly. The basic principles—content words stressed, function words unstressed—are easy to follow. Particular care should be taken to resist the tendency, widespread among those learning English as a foreign language, to stress auxiliary verbs (*can, may, and so on*), personal pronouns (*I, you, he, and so on*), and possessive adjectives (*my, your, his, and so on*). All of these are *function words*. The main verb is ordinarily more significant than the auxiliary, and *I* and *my* are not as important as we sometimes think.

III. The Pronunciation of Unstressed Words of One Syllable

The group of unstressed words of one syllable includes most of the commonest words in the language: the ten words most frequently used all belong in that class: *the, of, and, to, a, in, that, it, is, and I*. These ten make up 25 percent of all that is written and spoken in English. Or, putting it another way, one out of every four words we use will be *the, of, or and, and so on*. Unfortunately, several of the ten are precisely the words that learners of English most often mispronounce. *It is probable that in no other way can you improve your English so much and so easily as by learning to pronounce them naturally.*

The rhythm pattern made up of the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables is powerfully reinforced in English by the phenomenon known as the weakening or obscuring of vowels. By pronouncing the vowel of an unstressed syllable as /ə/, /ɪ/, or /ʊ/, a speaker weakens that syllable and increases the contrast between it and stressed syllables. We have already seen, in Lesson 3, how the weakening of vowels works in polysyllables. As might be expected, it occurs also in quite a few words of only one syllable when these latter words do not receive sentence-stress. This leads us to another observation regarding English pronunciation:

THERE IS A STRONG TENDENCY TO WEAKEN THE VOWELS OF THE MOST COMMON UNSTRESSED WORDS OF ONE SYLLABLE JUST AS THE UNACCENTED VOWELS OF POLYSYLLABLES ARE WEAKENED; THAT IS, TO PRONOUNCE THEM /ə/, /ɪ/, OR /ʊ/.

Thus, contrary to what is taught in many beginning English classes, the indefinite article *a* is ordinarily /ə/, not /ey/: *in a minute* /ɪn ə mɪnɪt/. Only in

a few rare cases is *a* stressed, and given the sound /ey/: *the article "a"* /ðɪ ɑrtɪkəl éy/.

There are, then, two separate pronunciations of this and other similar words: the weak form and the stressed form. A partial list of such words is given below.

Words Most Frequently Weakened

Word	Stressed Form	Weak Form	Example
*a	/ey/	/ə/	in a car /ɪn ə kɑr/
*an	/æn/	/ən/	get an egg /get ən eg/
*and	/ænd/	/ən/	high and low /hay ən low/
are	/ɑr/	/ər/	two are ready /tuw ər rédi/
can	/kæn/	/kən/	you can come /yuw kən kəm/
had	/hæd/	/əd/	I had been /ay əd bin/
has	/hæz/	/əz/	it has gone /ɪt əz gɔn/
have	/hæv/	/əv/	we have seen /wiy əv siyn/
*of	/av/	/əv/	three of us /θriy əv əs/
*or	/ɔr/	/ər/	one or two /wən ər tuw/
that	/ðæt/	/ðət/	those that went /ðowz ðət went/
*the	/ðiy/	/ðə/ or /ði/	on the right /ən ðə rayt/
*to	/tuw/	/tə/ or /tu/	five to two /fayv tə tuw/
was	/waz/	/wəz/	it was late /ɪt wəz leyt/

The words in the list that are marked with an asterisk (*) are almost always weakened: *a, an, and, of, or, the, and to.*

That is weakened when used as a relative pronoun or a conjunction: *the word that you want* /ðə wɔrd ðət yuw wánt/, *I know that he will* /ay nów ðət hiy wíl/. It is stressed and pronounced /ðæt/ as a demonstrative: *the reason for that* /ðə rɪzən fɔr ðæt/.

The verbs *are, can, had, has, have, and was* are usually obscured or weakened, but are given their clear pronunciation whenever they receive sentence-stress: that is, at the end of a sentence or in a tag question. (See item 8 under "Function Words," Section II of this lesson.)

Who can /kən/ gó? Jóhn cán /kæn/.

The flágs are /ər/ an éxcellent idéa, áren't /ɑrnt/ they?

Can has the added feature of being pronounced with /æ/, rather than /ə/, in the contraction *can't*: *I can't tell you* /ay kənt téəl yuw/. Since the final /t/, as

normally pronounced in a combination like *can't tell*, is nearly impossible to hear, a person listening to the sentence would understand it as negative or affirmative depending on whether he heard /æ/ (*can't*) or /ə/ (*can*). The weakening of vowels can indeed affect meaning! If you fail to obscure the a of *can* in *I can tell you*, you may be understood to say precisely the opposite of what you intended.

The vowels of many other unstressed words of one syllable *may* be weakened; the weak forms listed here are those most important to use in order to avoid a "foreign accent."

IV. Thought Groups and Blending

By means of pauses we normally divide all but the shortest sentences into two or more parts, or thought groups. A thought group, then, is a portion of a sentence set off from the rest by a pause or pauses. In this manual we shall indicate pauses by a single diagonal line: *There may be time for a swim / if you come at once.*

When we make a pause in a sentence, it is usually for one of three reasons:

1. To make the meaning clear: *When the wind blows / the waves run high.*
2. For emphasis: *Frankly, / I'm disappointed in you.*
3. Or, in a long sentence, simply to enable the speaker to catch a breath.

It is obviously impossible to draw up a neat set of "rules" for the division of sentences into thought groups. Different persons will wish to emphasize different ideas, and individuals vary a great deal in their ability to keep on talking without stopping for breath. A speaker is ordinarily free to group words in several different ways, according to personal preference.

This does not mean, however, that a pause may be made anywhere in a sentence. It would certainly be unnatural to pause between *the* and *meaning* in *Phrasing depends upon the meaning of what you say*. In general, no pause is made within closely related word groups such as adjectives or articles and the nouns they modify, auxiliary verbs and the accompanying main verbs, prepositions and the nouns dependent on them, adverbs modifying adjectives, subject pronouns and verbs, verbs and their object pronouns, and so on. But between any of the large grammatical divisions of a sentence pauses may occur.

Analyze carefully the following passage, in which have been marked all the places where a native speaker of English would be at all likely to pause.

IV. Thought Groups and Blending

It is not strange / that chlorophyll / has been called / green blood. This substance / is carried about / in little green disks / which, / like the corpuscles of our blood, / can move about / just as if they had / a life of their own. If the sun / is too strong, / they can turn / their edges / toward it, / or sink / to the bottom / of the cells. When there is little sun, / they may rise / to the top of the cells / to make the most / of the light.

Of course, no one speaker would pause so often. If pauses are made too frequently, the effect is unpleasant; if they are made too infrequently, the speaker may run out of breath. If the material is written out, the author's punctuation will be a good guide, though more pauses will often be necessary than there are commas, semicolons, and other such marks.

To distribute pauses intelligently, it is first of all necessary that speakers understand the full meaning of what they are saying. And meaning can never be made clear to the hearer unless one groups words in a clear-cut fashion. The foreign student's most frequent error with regard to pauses is a failure to organize sentences into thought groups that can be recognized as such. The pauses are too timid, or bear no relation to the intended meaning.

Within thought groups, words and syllables are not pronounced as separate units; they flow along smoothly, without jerkiness, and one seems to blend into the next. A person who did not know any English would find it hard to tell where one word ended and another began. The blending between the two words of *read it* is as close as that between the two syllables of *reading*. Within a thought group a speaker does not audibly interrupt, even briefly, the outward flow of breath. The blending is accomplished by this constant flow of breath, and by the fact that even while one sound is being formed the speech organs are already moving on to the position in which the next is to be formed.

Those who are learning English as a second language often spoil the blending within thought groups by inserting little puffs of air or /ə/ sounds in order to divide combinations of consonants that seem difficult to them: *I don't think so* /ay down tə θɪŋkə sow/. (This phenomenon is treated in some detail in Lesson 9, Section III.) Blending may also be spoiled by making glottal stops, that is, by cutting off completely the outflow of breath for an instant by holding the vocal cords tightly together, thus closing the glottis. Glottal stops, indicated by the symbol /ʔ/, are comparatively rare in standard English, occurring necessarily in only a few special combinations like *oh, oh!* /oʔo/ (to express dismay). In some other languages (Hindi, Arabic, German, Hawaiian) they are more common, and may even serve to distinguish between one word and another (Danish, Pilipino). The student of English should not use glottal stops to separate vowel from vowel or consonant from vowel; for example, the /iy/ and /ow/ of *be over* /biy owvər/ should be blended.

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Clifford H. Prator, Jr.
University of California, Los Angeles

Betty Wallace Robinett
University of Minnesota

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