

The Accentual Structure of English Words

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In this section I shall focus our attention on the accentual patterns of English words.

- The sequence of syllables in the word is not pronounced identically. The syllable or syllables which are uttered with more prominence than the other syllables of the word are said to be stressed or accented. The correlation of varying prominences of syllables in a word is understood as the accentual structure of the word or its stress pattern.

It would be perfectly natural to begin this section with the nature of word stress.






According to A.C.Gimson, the effect of prominence is achieved by any or all of four factors:

- ⦿ · **loudness** (a louder syllable is perceived as more prominent)
- ⦿ · **pitch** (especially the change of pitch level)
- ⦿ · **the length of a syllable** (a longer syllable is perceived as stressed)
- ⦿ · **the vowel quality** (long vowels and diphthongs are generally more prominent than short vowels, while among short vowels themselves open ones are more prominent, and [ɪ-ʊ-ə] are the least prominent)

Languages differ according to the type of stress.

- ◉ European languages such as English, German, French, Russian, etc. are said to have the dynamic stress which implies greater force with which the syllable is pronounced.
- ◉ The musical (tonic) word stress is observed in Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, etc. The meaning of words in these languages depends on the variations of voice pitch in relation to neighbouring syllables

In Chinese sound «MA»

mā	má	mǎ	mà	ma
媽	麻	馬	罵	嗎
mother	numb	horse	scold	question word
				
First tone (flat)	second tone (going up)	third tone (down and up)	fourth tone (going down)	neutral tone (light)

English	Pinyin	Traditional	Simplified
mother	mā	媽	妈
hemp	má	麻	麻
horse	mǎ	馬	马
to scold	mà	罵	骂

- ◉ Now a brief word on the degree of stress. Phonetic prominence of a syllable in a word is relative, i.e. compared with the preceding one.
- ◉ Phonologically, there are only three degrees: primary - **the strongest, secondary and weak (or unstressed)**:
- ◉ *e₁xami[']nation, ₁organi[']sation.*

'*secre*,*tary*, ' *dictio*,*nary*.

- ◎ Some linguists also distinguish tertiary stress, which is as weak as secondary but has a different distribution:
- ◎ it follows the primary stress, while the secondary stress precedes it. Tertiary stress is usually found in American English:

Stress can be characterized as fixed and free. In languages with fixed type of stress the place of stress is always the same.

- In English and Russian word-stress is free, that is it may fall any syllable in a word;
- Stress in English and in Russian is not only free but also **shifting**. In both languages the place of stress may shift, which helps to differentiate different parts of speech, e.g. `insult--to in`sult, `import--to im`port.

Levels of stress

- Many levels of stress depending on the length of the word. (not just confined to two or three levels)
- - the word ‘around’ – on the second syllable the pitch of the voice does not remain level but falls from a higher to a lower pitch (trans 1)
- - the prominence from this pitch transition is called **primary stress (Roach) primary accentuation (Gimson)**
- - **secondary stress** – weaker than primary stress but stronger than than an unstressed syllable.
- ‘examination’ , ‘photographic’ ,

Word stress patterns

- 3 syllables
- **Verbs** – if the final syllable is strong then it will be stressed
- Examples : under'stand, enter'tain
- If the last syllable is weak, stress will be on the preceding syllable if it is strong.
- Examples: en'counter, de'termine
- If both the second and third syllable are weak, the stress will go to the first syllable.
- Examples: 'parody

The stress pattern can change under the influence of tempo as well

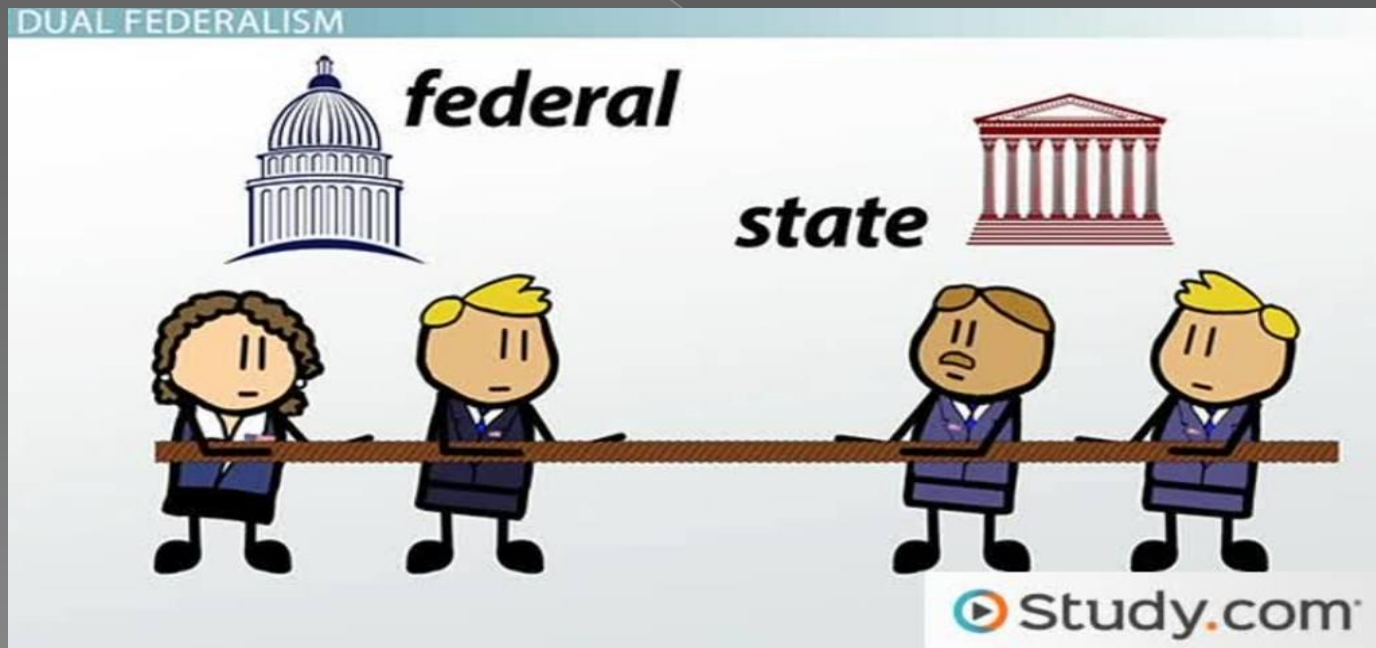
- In this case secondary stresses are dropped. It sometimes happens that a word's stress pattern is influenced not only by rhythm, but also by the stress structure of a derivative:
- *pre* 'fer - *pre* 'ferable (instead of the regular 'preferable; ,
- *distri* 'bution - 'distribute (instead of the regular di 'stribute.

- ◎ Word stress is closely interrelated with sentence stress, which usually falls on the syllable marked by word stress. So the arrangement of stresses in an utterance depends on the stress patterns of words
- ◎ *'Let's buy an 'ice-cream.*

The three functions of word stress are the following:

- ⦿ **constitutive**
- ⦿ **identificatory**
- ⦿ **distinctive**

- First of all word stress builds up a word by making one (or more) syllables more prominent than the others, it organizes the syllables of a word into a language unit.
- Thus the word stress performs *the constitutive function*.



Constitutive function

- Syllables constitute words, phrases and sentences through the combination of their prosodic features:

loudness – stress

pitch – tone

duration – length

tempo

Syllables may be:

- **stressed- unstressed**
- **high, mid, low, rising, falling**
- **long, short**

Identificatory Function

- This function is conditioned by the pronunciation of the speaker.
- The listener can understand the exact meaning of the utterance only if the syllabic boundary is perceived correctly – “syllabodisjuncture”.

e.g.

pea stalks - peace talks

my train – might rain

- ◎ Word stress is capable of differentiating the meaning of words or their forms, thus performing its *distinctive function*:
- ◎ 'content – con'tent; 'insult – in'sult;
'concrete – con'crete.

