

Rhythm and Its Influence on Word Stress

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Rezumat

Articolul dezvăluie unele proprietăți ale accentului în limba engleză și anume rolul ritmului în accentuarea cuvântului. Înlănțuirea cuvintelor în propoziție le supune pe acestea la variații ritmice, ce determină uneori deplasarea accentului de pe o silabă pe alta. În cazul, când un cuvânt are două silabe accentuate, atunci unul din acestea poate să dispară.

Stress is defined as the perceived prominence of one or more syllabic elements over others in a word. It should be pointed out that this is an aspect of the suprasegmental phonology of English, and it can be a property of syllables (word stress) or of larger utterances (sentence or syntactic stress).

Stress is described by D. Jones as the degree of force with which a sound or a syllable is uttered. It implies a relatively great breath effort and muscular energy [4, p.227].

R. Kindon defines stress as the relative degree of force used by a speaker [3, p.218].

J. Laver mentions the phonetic stress which makes a syllable more prominent than the other.

As a matter of fact, stress can be considered from the point of view of the speaker and of the hearer.

Following P. Roach we can maintain that stress is a combination of loudness, pitch, quality and quantity [5, p.86].

The English language has quite a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, in other words the rhythm is regular, that is why English compound words with two equally strong stresses when used in isolation (e.g. 'good-'looking) tend to lose one of the stresses in connected speech when either preceded or followed by a stressed word (e.g. the 'girl is good 'looking) [2, p. 246].

English has a stressed-time rhythm. In English, the stressed syllables in connected speech tend to occur at roughly regular intervals. The more unstressed syllables there are after a stress, the quicker they must be pronounced. It should be pointed out that the time taken by the pronunciation of an utterance depends, first of all, on the number of stressed syllables, in such cases we deal with a stressed-timed rhythm.

Each of the following phrases has an extra syllable, but each phrase has only one stressed syllable, all of them are said in the same amount of time:

write
writing
writing it
he was writing
he was writing it

Romanian has a syllable-timed rhythm. In Romanian, the length of an utterance depends on the total number of syllables; the syllables of an utterance are spoken with the same amount of time allotted to each of them, irrespective of whether they are stressed or not [3, p.219].

Therefore, the Romanian learner of English has to be careful not to pronounce the unstressed syllables with the same force and in the same time which is allotted to the stressed ones.

Another issue foreign learners of English should be aware of is that stress position may vary because not all speakers of RP agree on the placement of stress in some words. A well-

known example is *ice-cream* which is pronounced by some speakers and by others, [ais'kri:m] or ['aiskri:m].

Speech, as with all bodily movements such as breathing, walking, heart-beat, etc., is highly rhythmical, it tends to have a regular beat. But what marks the beat differs in various languages. Pike distinguished two kinds of rhythm in languages:

a) *syllable-timed rhythm*, where *syllables* tend to occur at regular intervals of time, and consequently all syllables tend to have the same length;

b) *stressed-timed rhythm*, where *stressed* syllables tend to occur at regular intervals.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned, the syllables might vary in length since there might be a varying number of syllables between stresses. English is a stress-timed language. In the following English sentence, syllables vary in length but stressed syllables occur regularly:

e.g. I 'want you to 'come with me to the 'doctor's to'morrow

In English, rhythm is organized into feet. The foot begins with the stressed syllable and includes all the unstressed syllables up to the next stress where a new foot begins. The above English sentence has four stresses and consequently four feet. Using slashes to indicate foot boundary we could represent feet as follows:

I / 'want you to / 'come with me to the / 'doctor's to / 'morrow. The beat at the beginning of the foot might be silent, we mark this silent beat with a caret (^).

Rhythm is also tempo dependent. The faster the speech, the more stressed-timed the rhythm [2, p.249]. The basic differences between syllable-timed languages and stressed-timed languages (such as English) are:

- | <i>syllable-timed</i> | <i>stressed-timed</i> |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. weak vowel reduction | 1. strong vowel reduction |
| 2. simple syllable structure | 2. complex syllable structure |
| 3. proportional effect of tempo | 3. non-proportional effect of tempo |
| 4. absence of secondary stress | 4. presence of secondary stress |
| 5. metrical system of a syllabic type | 5. metrical system of an accentual type |

1. In English unstressed syllables have little time to be produced in order to keep the rhythmic beat on the stressed syllables. Thus, there is a strong reduction in vowel quality due to the *undershoot* phenomenon: in the short time allotted for the pronunciation of unstressed vowels the articulators do not achieve the vowel target,

resulting in the centralized vowels [a, i, u].

2. The reduction and subsequent elision of unstressed vowels have resulted in a large amount of consonant clusters and a complex syllable structure in English.

3. In English, speaking rate (fast vs slow speech) does not affect the duration of stressed and unstressed syllables proportionally.

4. Stress-timed languages tend to have secondary stress in words (or to introduce rhythmical stresses in longer sequences) to avoid long sequences of unstressed syllables and to keep the rhythmic beat. In English no stressed syllable in a word can be preceded by more than two unstressed syllables in succession, a secondary stress is introduced (e.g., *clarifi'cation*, *re,conside'ration*, *varia'bility*).

After the stressed syllable, there may be up to three unstressed syllables, but only in words with certain suffixes (e.g. *ad'ministrative*, *'candidacy*).

5. In syllable-timed languages the syllable occurs at roughly regular intervals of time and the syllable is the rhythmical unit in verse. In stressed-timed languages it is the stress which

occurs regularly and the metric system is based on the foot, thus, English verse is referred to as iambic, trochee, anapest, etc., which refer to different stress patterns of the foot.

Bibliography

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