

FACTORS DETERMINING THE WORD STRESS IN ENGLISH

FACTORII CARE DETERMINĂ ACCENTUL CUVINTELOR ÎN LIMBA ENGLEZĂ

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Rezumat. Articolul acesta scoate în evidenţă un aspect al accentului care este considerat unul din cele mai delicate capitole ale foneticii limbii engleze. În limba engleză accentul este rezultatul unei combinaţii a forţei expiratorice, a lungimii şi a tonului silabei respective. De asemenea este subliniat faptul că caracterul inconsecvent al accentului cuvântului poate fi legat de influenţe simultane şi diferite ale unui cuvânt cauzate de diverşi factori aşa ca factorul recesiv, ritmic şi retentiv.

Cuvinte-cheie: zgomot, înălţime, accent recesiv, accent ritmic, accent retentiv, greutate semantică

The language, the choice and fluency of expression in oral or written speech is an essential element, we can say that it is even a criterion of culture. From a person's writing one can learn the cultural level of that person.

As far as we know, language is regarded to be a means of communication and thinking as well as an object of understanding. That is why the study of languages and the investigations and researches done in the field of language study, will never stop and there will always something new to be discovered.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned, it should be pointed out that pronunciation has not been a major concern in English language teaching.

According to Harmer J., most English language teachers get students to study grammar, vocabulary, practice functional dialogues, take part in productive activities, and, of course, become competent in listening and reading.

Harmer also mentions the fact that some of these teachers make little attempt to teach pronunciation in any overt way and only give attention to it in passing [5, p. 348].

Coming from this context, the learning of a foreign language (the English one in our case) is not an easy matter. One problem that causes the great deal of difficulty (besides others) in studying the English language is the correct placement of stress in in words and statements.

The study of word stress is considered to be one of the principal tasks of Phonetics as a branch of Linguistics. It should be pointed out that accentual structure presents one of the components of the phonetic system of the language.

One or more syllables of a polysyllable word have greater prominence than the others, and such syllables are said to be accented or stressed.

It should be mentioned that in English such factors as– *loudness* (force), *pitch*, *sound quantity* (length), *sound quality*, make a syllable more prominent than the others.

In such cases a vowel is perceived as a more prominent one if it is louder, longer and more distinct than the unstressed one.

Stress is defined by D. Jones as the degree of force with which a sound or syllable is uttered. It is essentially a subjective action. A strong energy of utterance means energetic action of all the articulating organs.

He also mentions that the stress is usually accompanied by a gesture with the hand or head or other parts of the body. It also involves a strong force of exhalation, and consequently gives the objective impression of loudness [6, p. 227].

Some phoneticians keep to the idea that stress is not independent of pitch. According to A. Gimson the effect of prominence is achieved by any or all of four factors: *force*, *tone*, *length* and *vowel colour* [2, p. 109]

The English linguists D. Crystal and A. Gimson agree that in English, word stress is a complex phenomenon marked by the variations in *force*, *pitch*, *quality* and *quantity* [1, p. 312]

According to Peter Roach the nature of word stress is simple enough, practically every one would agree that the first syllable of words like '*father*', '*open*', '*camera*' is stressed, that the middle syllable is stressed in '*po'tatoe*', '*a'partment*', '*re'lation*' and the final syllable is stressed in '*a'bout*', '*re'ceive*', '*per'haps*' and most people feel they have some sort of idea of what the difference is between stressed and unstressed syllables, though they might explain it in many different ways [8, p. 85]

A lot of phoneticians keep to the idea that a polysyllabic word has as many degrees of stress as there are syllables in it.

Taking into account what was said previously, we, the authors of this article also consider that the polysyllabic word has as many degrees of stress as there are syllables in the word.

We would like to demonstrate this through the word *examination*. For example, we can designate the strongest syllable of this word by giving figure 1, the second strongest syllable, by giving figure 2, etc. and in this way, we can highlight which is the strongest syllable in the word:

3 2 4 1 5

Examination – [i g-z-I-m-i-n-N-E-n]

We find the same distribution given by the English phonetician D. Jones in the word *opportunity*. He designates the strongest syllable (which is the third syllable) by the figure 1, the second strongest syllable (which is the first syllable), by figure 2 and etc. [6, p. 238]

2 4 1 5 3

Opportunity – [A-p-B-t-ju:-n-i-t-i]

From the above given example, D. Jones qualifies this distribution by stating that “much of word is commonly thought of as ‘stress’ is in reality stress plus prominence effected by means other than stress, and particularly by inherent sonority, by vowel and consonant length and by intonation”. [6, p.247]

But from a linguistic point of view, according to Vassiliev V., for purposes of differentiating words from each other the fourth, fifth and other still weaker degrees of stress are redundant in English, while the distinctive and recognitive relevance of the third degree of stress is a moot point. [9, p. 261]

We can say that the majority of British phoneticians distinguish three degrees of word stress:

- The strongest stress – **Primary stress**;
- The second strongest stress – **Secondary stress**;
- All the other degrees grouped together – **Weak stress**.

It follows from the above mentioned that the syllables which bear the primary or the secondary stress are termed to be **stressed** and syllables with weak stress are termed to be **unstressed**.

As far as we know, in pronouncing dictionaries, as well as in the phonetic transcription, the position of the stress is indicated by placing the stress mark before the symbol of the first sound of the given stressed syllable.

The primary stress is marked by a raised short vertical stroke (tick), the secondary stress by a lowered one, e.g. examination [ig,zImi'nNEn].

We, teachers, have to teach our students this way of learning the correct pronunciation of words because the stress mark, in this case, indicates simultaneously the point of syllable division.

As for the American phoneticians, we want to say that they distinguish a greater number of degrees of word stress. For example, they use other terms and other marks to indicate each degree:

1. Primary stress – ['];
2. Secondary stress – [^];
3. Tertiary stress – [`];
4. Weak stress – [ˇ].

From here we can conclude that the degrees of stress are three in number: the primary stress, the secondary stress and the weak stress which is characteristic for unstressed syllables.

So, as we proposed from the beginning, the purpose of this article is to emphasize the factors that influence the word stress in English.

We cannot admit the fact that the stress setting in English words are determined by historically developed factors.

It should also be emphasized that the inconsistent character of the accentual patterns of words can be linked to simultaneous and different influences of a word caused by various factors.

As we have already mentioned before, the position of word stress in English is the product of its historical development, consequently the position of word stress has been influenced by the combination of different factors.

As it has been pointed out by V. Vassiliev, the first word stress factor, which is considered to be the oldest, is the **recessive** one and is characteristic of all Germanic languages. Following this factor, we have to place the accent on the initial syllable of words derived from them and on the root syllable of words which belonged to other parts of speech and, of course, have a prefix. [9, p. 271]

It should be pointed out the fact that, in Modern English, all the disyllabic and trisyllabic words having been borrowed from French during the Middle English period have only recessive stress (e.g. marriage).

V. Vassiliev mentions that the recessive factor which influenced the word stress is responsible for the fact that throughout the whole historical development of the English language in the incidence of its word accent has always been very strong. [9, p. 272]

As we have already mentioned before, this factor determined the incidence of stress in a great number of disyllabic and trisyllabic French words. These words were borrowed into English during and after the Norman Conquest. The accent in such words originally fell as it was in Modern French, on the last syllable, but under the strong influence of the native English recessive stress it began to shift gradually to the initial syllable.

V. Vassiliev continues to mention that in most cases these prefixes have lost their referential meaning since then, with the result that recessive stress in Modern English is of two subtypes: *unrestricted recessive stress* which falls on the initial syllable e.g. 'mother, 'daughter, 'restaurant, and *restricted recessive stress* which falls on the root of native English words with a prefix which has no referential meaning now e.g. be'come, a'mong, for'get. [9, p.272]

The next factor which influences the word stress in English is considered to be the **rhythmical** factor, it results in alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. Due to this factor caused the appearance of the secondary stress in multisyllabic words, e.g. ,pronun'ciation, ,revo'lution, ,exami'nation.

Sometimes, in some multisyllabic words we may find the recessive and the rhythmic stress, e.g. ,indi'visible.

The **retentive** factor is characteristic by the retention of the primary stress in the derivative words on the same syllable on which it falls in the parent word, e. g. 'similar – 'similarly, 'popular – 'popularly, 'port – 'portal.

Word stress in compounds depends on the spelling. Compounds are written in different ways: as one word, e. g. *armchair*; *sunflower*; with the words separated by a hyphen, e. g. *gear-change*, *fruit-cake*; with two words separated by a space, e. g. *desk lamp*, *battery charger* [8, p.99]

Word stress in compounds depends also on the semantic weight of the elements. When the first element determines, restricts the second one or introduces some contrast, it is stressed while the second element of the compound remains unstressed though the stressed vowel of the second element retains its qualitative and quantitative prominence [8, p.99]

Taking into account the above mentioned, we can say that this is the case with the majority of compound nouns which are usually single stressed, e. g. *reading-room*, *writing-table*, *apple-tree*, *raincoat*. Perhaps the most familiar type of compound is the one which combines two nouns and normally has the stress on the first element as we see in the above examples.

It is probably safer for our students to assume that stress will normally fall in this way on other compounds, however a variety of compounds get stress instead on the second element. For example, compound words with an adjectival first element and the *-ed* morpheme at the end get the stress on the second element, e. g. *bad-'tempered*, *half-'timbered*, *heavy-'handed*.

Compound words in which the first element is a number also get the stress on the second element, e.g. *first-'class, five-'finger, three-'wheeler*. Compounds which function as adverbs are usually stressed on the second element, e. g. *North-'East, down-'stream*, and compounds which function as verbs and have an adverbial first element, of course, take final stress, e. g. *ill-'treat, back-'pedal*.

So, it follows the fact that here we deal with variable stress which is pointed out by P. Roach in his book '*English Phonetics and Phonology*' where he mentions that it would be wrong to imagine that the stress pattern is always fixed and unchanging in English words [8, p. 100]

Stress position may vary for one of two reasons: either as a result of the stress on other words occurring next to the word in question, or because not all speakers of RP agree on the placement of stress in some compound words.

The main effect is that the stress on a final-stressed compound tends to move to the preceding syllable if the following word begins with a strongly stressed syllable, for example:

Bad-'tempered but *a 'bad-tempered 'teacher;*

Half-'timbered but *a 'half-timbered 'house;*

Heavy-'handed but *a 'heavy-handed 'sentence.*

We have to mention that our students must be particularly careful about using accentual patterns in English. In each case a pronouncing dictionary should be consulted.

Thus, we may conclude that the word stress in English words is influenced by the *recessive, rhythmic* and *retentive factors*. The number of stresses in two element compounds depends primarily on its *spelling* and *morphemic structure*. In the distribution of primary and secondary stresses the *semantic factor* plays an important role.

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