

The English syllable

Syllable a unit of speech consisting minimally of one vowel and maximally of a vowel preceded by a consonant or consonant cluster and followed by a consonant or consonant cluster. For example, the English word *introductions* consists of four syllables: in-tro-duc-tions (Richards and Schmidt, 2012: 576).

Syllabification is the process of dividing a word up into syllables. For example, locomotive can be divided up into four syllables: lo-co-mo-tive. The syllabification of the spelling of a word can differ from the syllabification of its pronunciation. For example, styl-is-tics /staɪclɪstɪks/ the first syllable of the spelling is styl, but the first syllable of the pronunciation is /stai-/ (Richards and Schmidt, 2012: 575).

According to Crystal, syllable is a unit of pronunciation typically larger than a single sound and smaller than a word. A word may be pronounced 'syllable at a time', as in *ne-ver-the-less*, and a good dictionary will indicate where these syllabic divisions occur in writing, thus providing information about how a word may be hyphenated. Therefore, Syllabification is defined as the term, which refers to the division of a word into syllables (Crystal, 2008: 467).

A syllable is a unit of phonological organization whose central component is a nucleus, which is normally a vowel, and which may be preceded or followed by consonants. The most basic kind of syllable is the CV (Consonant-Vowel) syllable (e.g. [ba]). This is the kind of syllable attested in the babbling stage of child development. Some languages contain only CV syllables, (Carr, 2008:171).

Syllables are claimed to be the most basic unit in speech. Every language has syllables, and babies learn to produce syllables before they can manage to say a word of their native language. When a person has a speech disorder, their speech will still display syllabic organisation, and slips of the tongue also show that syllabic regularity tends to be preserved even in "faulty" speech, (Roach, 2009:85).

1.Types of Syllables

1.1 Monosyllabic

A word consisting of one syllable. E.g. Or

1.2. Disyllabic

A word consisting of two syllables. E.g. garden

1.3. Polysyllabic

A word consisting of three or more syllables, alternately named 'multi-syllable'.

E.g. Globalization

2. Constituents of the syllable

Syllables have internal structure that can be divided into parts. These parts are onset and rhyme; within rhyme, you can find nucleus and coda. It is important to point out that not all syllables have all these parts; the smallest possible syllable contains a nucleus only. Simply, onset means the beginning sounds of the syllable; the ones preceding the nucleus. These are always consonants in English.

Syllables which contain no coda consonants are open syllables, as in the English word *bee* (/bi:/). Syllables which contain one or more coda consonants are closed syllables, as in the English word *but*. Syllables that lack an onset consonant are said to have an empty onset, as in the English word *eye* (/ai/). Empty onsets are said to be involved in the process of resyllabification, whereby a consonant which might otherwise occupy a coda position comes to occupy a following onset position, as in the sequence *green eye*, syllabified as /gri:.nai/ (where the full stop represents a syllable boundary), (Carr ,2008:171).

The syllable might be defined both phonetically and phonologically as follows:

***Phonetically:** syllables in relation to the way we produce them and the way they sound are usually described as consisting of a center which has little or no obstruction to airflow and which sounds comparatively loud; before and after the center, there will be greater obstruction to airflow and/or less loud (Roach, 2009: 56)

Examples:

- A minimum syllable: One vowel in isolation preceded and followed by silence. The word *are*, /a:/.
- A syllable with onset, a vowel preceded by one or more consonants. The word *Key*, /ki:/.
- A syllable with coda, a consonant or more after the vowel, but no onset. The word *Ease*, /i:z/.
- A syllable with onset and coda. The word, *Fill*, /fil/.

***Phonologically:** Looking at the syllable from this point of view means considering the possible combinations of English phonemes. In other words known as, **Phonotactics**.

Phonotactics is the arrangements of the distinctive sound units (PHONEMES) in a language. The consonant groups (CONSONANT CLUSTERS) /spr/ and /str/ can occur at the beginning of a word, as in sprout, strain, but they cannot occur at the end of a word. (Richards & Schmidt: 2010).

Phonotactics is a term used in phonology to refer to the sequential arrangements (or tactic behavior) of phonological units which occur in a language – what counts as a phonologically well-formed word. (Crystal: 2008).

It is rather problematic to identify the clear-cut line denoting the border of the syllables when we have diphthong in the word. It shows in the matter of deciding where the division can occur between syllables as in the word: **going** /gəʊɪŋ/. Deciding whether the vowel /u/ in the diphthong /əʊ/ belongs to the first or the second syllable is usually the problem.

The same problem with the word: **extra** /ekstrə/, the sound /s/ is in the middle between the /k/ and /t/. All English speakers would agree that the word has two syllables but the place of the possible division is what makes it problematic. It might be uttered as follows:

/e-kstrə/, /ek-strə/, /eks-trə/, /ekst-rə/, /ekstr-ə/.

3. The structure of English Syllable

Technically, the basic elements of the syllable are the onset (one or more consonants) followed by the rhyme. The rhyme (sometimes written as “rime”) consists of a vowel, which is treated as the nucleus, plus any following consonant(s), described as the coda.

Syllables.

Syllables like *me*, *to* or *no* have an onset and a nucleus, but no coda. They are known as open syllables. When a coda is present, as in the syllable *sup*, *cup*, *at* or *hat*, *they* are called closed syllables.

It is important to study syllables according to the relationship between them and their distributions.

4. Onset may consist of:

1. One consonant e.g. **book** /buk/

2. Two consonants or consonant cluster begin with /s/ or /p/ as in **slip** /slip/ and **play** /plei/.

It might be classified as:

- Two consonants: s+ other consonant e.g. **stop** /stɒp/, the sound /s/ is called pre-initial and the sound /t/ is considered as initial.

- Consonant other than /s/ e.g. **play** /plei/, the /p/ is initial and the /l/ is post initial.

3. Onset with three consonants (CCC): Onset of three consonants usually begins with /s/ sound, which is called a pre-initial as in **spring** /sprɪŋ/.

Onset + Center + Coda:

- **Coda with one C** e.g. *seat* /si:t/, the C is called final consonant.
- **Coda with two consonants CC:**
 - a. Pre-final consonant: usually with /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/ and /s/, e.g. **gold** /gold/, **seats** /si:ts/.
 - b. Final consonants: Other than the above sounds, they will be final + post final e.g. **month** /mʌnθ/, **aks** /æks/. It is always with suffix /s/, /z/, /t/, /d/, and /θ/.
- **Coda with three consonants CCC:**
 - a. Pre-final + final + post-final, *months* /m ʌ n θ s/.
 - b. Final + post-final1 + post-final 2, *texts* /tekst/, *fifths* /fifθs/, *fixed* /fikst/.
- **Coda with four consonants CCCC**
 - a. Pre-final + final + post-final1 + post-final2, *twelfths* /twelfθs/, *prompts* /prompts/.
 - b. Final + post-final1 + post-final2 + post-final3, *sixths* /siksθs/.

If the sounds /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/ and /s/ occur as first consonant in the coda they are always pre-final.

5. Syllable weight

The major distinction drawn between syllable types found in languages has been between open syllables and closed syllables. An open syllable ends in a vowel while a closed syllable ends in a consonant. In some languages syllables typically end in a vowel, i.e., they are open. That is the situation in languages like Japanese. In other languages, like French and English, syllables can end in a consonant. However, even in those languages, which allow closed syllables, there is often a clear preference for open ones.

There is a second distinction denoting the light and heavy syllables. A light syllable contains only a short vowel in the rhyme, with no coda, as in the first syllable of *potato*, *report*, *about*. Although the first two cases have onsets, and the third does not, all these initial syllables are still light, because onsets are entirely irrelevant to the calculation of syllable weight. If a syllable has a complex rhyme, then it is heavy; and complexity can be achieved in two different ways. First, a heavy syllable may have a short vowel, but one or more coda consonants, as in *bet*, *best*. Second, it may have a branching nucleus, consisting of a long vowel or diphthong; such a syllable will be heavy whether it also has a filled coda, as in *beast*, *bite*, or not, as in *bee*, *by*.

Syllable weight is a major factor in determining the position of stress in a word: essentially, no stressed syllable in English may be light. This means that no lexical word, or full word of English can consist only of a short vowel alone, with or without an onset, since such words, including nouns, verbs and adjectives, must be able to bear stress: thus, there are words such as *be*, *say*, *loss*, but not *[bɪ],

*[sɛ], *[lɒ]. On the other hand, function words like the indefinite article *a*, or the pronunciation [tə] for the preposition *to*, which are part of the grammatical structure of sentences and are characteristically unstressed, can be light. In cases where these do attract stress, they have special pronunciations [eɪ] and [tu:], where the vowel is long, the nucleus branches, and the syllable is therefore heavy. (McMahon 2002)

6. Strong and Weak Syllables

Syllables may sound stronger or weaker according to the tone they bear. It is almost certainly true that in all languages, some syllables are in some sense stronger than other syllables; these are syllables that have the potential to be described as stressed. It is also probably true that the difference between strong and weak syllable is of some linguistic importance in every language, however, strong and weak syllables do not occur at random.

7. Weak Syllable

The syllable becomes weak when we find the following four cases:

1. The vowel /ə/ (schwa), as being half way between front and back. e.g. **better** /betə/, **open** /əʊpən/.
2. A close front unrounded vowel in the general area of /i:/ and /ɪ/, it is neither long /i:/ nor short /ɪ/. The symbol used is /ɪ/, e.g. **happy** /hæpi/.
3. A close rounded vowel in the general area of /u:/ and /ʊ/. The symbol used is /ʊ/, e.g. **thank you** /θænk ju/
4. A syllabic consonant after another consonant. These consonants are: /l/, /m/, /n/, /r/ and /ŋ/, e.g. **bottle** /botl/, **threaten** /θretn/, **history** /histri/, and **thicken** /θɪkŋ/.

8. Syllabic Consonants

The great majority of syllables in all languages has a vowel at their centre, and may have one or more consonants preceding and following the vowel (though languages differ greatly in the possible occurrences of consonants in syllables). In English, some syllabic consonants appear to have become practically obligatory in present day speech: words such as “bottle” and “button” would not sound acceptable in BBC pronunciation if pronounced /botəl/ and /bʌtəl/ (though these are normal in in some other English accents), and are instead pronounced /botl/ and /bʌtn/. The English consonants / m, n, ŋ, r, l/ can be the nuclei of syllables if they are preceded by a consonant in RP (there is no vowel in the pronunciation of these syllables even though there is one in the spelling).