

1. Sentence stress: An introduction

1.1. Definition

Sentence stress is the pattern of stressed and unstressed words across a sentence. Normally this emphasis is on words that carry important information, although this can change significantly, depending on the specific meaning the speaker wants to communicate.

Example

In the sentence 'She **bought** a **car**', the emphasis is usually on the words 'car' and 'bought'. Most sentences have two basic types of words, namely: content words and function words.

1. Content words are the key words of a sentence. They are the important words that carry the meaning or sense. Therefore, they are predisposed by their function in the language to receive the accent. Content words often take the form of *main verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs*.

Content words have in connected speech the qualitative pattern of their isolated forms; therefore, they retain some qualitative prominence even when no pitch is associated to them and when they are relatively unstressed.

2. Function words (aka grammatical, structure words), on the other hand, are not as important as content words for the meaning. They are small, simple words that make the sentence correct grammatically. They give the sentence its correct form—its structure. Function words take the form of auxiliary verbs, modals, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, articles ... etc.

However, while function words often belong to the category of unstressed words, they may be exceptionally stressed if the meaning requires it. Many function words may have 2 or more qualitative and quantitative patterns according to whether they are accented or unaccented. The accented form is called the '**strong form**' and the unaccented form is called the '**weak form**'. The following table shows the strong and weak forms of pronunciation of some of those structural or functional words.

Grammatical category	Function word	Strong form	Weak form	Example of weak form
Auxiliary verbs	Am	/æm/	/əm/	That's what I'm trying to say.
	Are	/ɑ:(r)/	/ə(r)/	Where are you from?
	Is	/ɪz/	/əz/ - /z/	Where's he from?
	Was	/wɒz/	/wəz/	That's where he was born.
	Were	/wɜ:(r)/	/wə(r)/	That's where my children were born.
	Do	/du:/	/də/	Where do you live?
	Does	/dʌz/	/dəz/	Where does he live?
	Have	/hæv/	/həv/	He will have left by now.
	Has	/hæz/	/həz/ - /əz/	The baby has swallowed a stone.
	Had	/hæd/	/həd/ - /əd/	He had already gone.
	Can	/kæn/	/kən/	I'm not sure if I can lend it to you.
	Could	/kʊd/	/kəd/	Well, what could I say?
	Would	/wʊd/	/wəd/ - /əd/	Well, what would you have done?
	Should	/ʃʊd/	/ʃəd/	Well, what should I have said?

Personal pronouns	You	/ju:/	/ju/ - /jə/	How do you do?
	Your	/jɔ:(r)/	/jə(r)/	What does your boss think?
	He	/hi:/	/hi/	Where does he work?
	Him	/hɪm/	/ɪm/	I'll give it to him later.
	She	/ʃi:/	/ʃi/	She's leaving tomorrow.
	Her	/hɜ:(r)/	/hə(r)/ - /ə(r)/	I'll give it to her later.
	Us	/ʌs/	/əs/	They'll give it to us later.
	Them	/ðem/	/ðəm/	I'll give it to them later.
Prepositions	To	/tu:/	/tə/ - /tu/	He's already gone to work.
	At	/æt/	/ət/	He's at work, I think.
	Of	/ɒv/	/əv/	That's the last of the wine!
	For	/fɔ:(r)/	/fə(r)/	He's away for two weeks.
	From	/frɒm/	/frəm/	She comes from Scotland.
Conjunctions	And	/ænd/	/ənd/ - /ən/	She's tall and fair.
	But	/bʌt/	/bət/	She's here, but Juan isn't.
	Than	/ðæn/	/ðən/	She's older than you.
Articles	A	/eɪ/	/ə/	He's a doctor
	An	/æn/	/ən/	She's an architect.
	The	/ði:/	/ðə/ - /ði/	She's the person I told you about.
Indefinite adjectives	Any	/'eni/	/'eni/	Have we got any biscuits?
	Some	/sʌm/	/səm/	There's some tea in the pot
	Such	/sʌtʃ/	/sʌtʃ/	It's not such a big deal, really.

Factors affecting sentences stress

English sentence stress is affected by several factors, most noticeably:

1. The position of the words in the sentence: *main verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs* are often stressed.
2. Important information (prominence): Sentence stress is largely determined by the meaning to be conveyed and the word carrying that meaning.
3. The speed of speech: Words which don't carry speech are often pronounced with a higher speed.

Rules of sentence stress

If we want to show stress and intonation at sentence level, several principles should be kept in mind:

- In isolation every word has a primary stress (although stress of monosyllabic words is not indicated).
- Monosyllabic words are not stressed in isolation, but they sometimes receive stress in a sentence.
- In words stress we identified different degrees of stress, we may do so in sentence stress, too.
- In sentence stress, the last syllable is the strongest. It is called the nucleus (in neutral intonation)