

# Unit 8

## Syllables & Rhythm (3):

stress, and weak forms

Slides for the session of

*Phonetics with Listening Practice (British)*

held on

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## English Phonetics: Unit 8:

/ˈɪŋ glɪʃ/ /fə ˈnet ɪks/ /ˈjuːn ɪt/ /ˈeɪt/  
[ˈɪŋɡlɪʃfəˈnɛtɪks | ˈjuːnɪt eɪt ]

## Syllables &amp; Rhythm (3)

/ˈsɪl əb əlz/ /ən/ /rɪð əm/ /θriː/  
[ˈsɪləbɪzŋˈɪðm̩ | ˈθ]

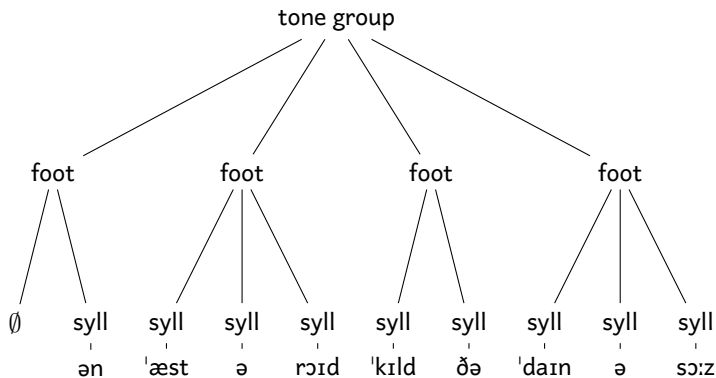
## stress, and weak forms

/stres/ /ənd/ /ˈwiːk fə:mz/  
[ˈstɹɛs | ən ˈwiːk fə:mz]

## 1 The phonological rank scale for English reprised

## 2 Rhythm

## 3 Weak Forms



tone group

|

foot

|

syllable

|

phoneme

(Context: 'What happened 65 million years ago?')

## English as a ‘stress-timing’ language

- French is **syllable**-timing:

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## English as a 'stress-timing' language

- French is **syllable**-timing:
  - each syllable takes as much time to say as any other syllable does

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## English as a ‘stress-timing’ language

- French is **syllable**-timing:
  - each syllable takes as much time to say as any other syllable does
  - how would a French speaker read aloud “an asteroid killed the dinosaurs”?

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- English is **stress**-timing:

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## English as a ‘stress-timing’ language

- French is **syllable**-timing:
  - each syllable takes as much time to say as any other syllable does
  - how would a French speaker read aloud “an asteroid killed the dinosaurs”?
- English is **stress**-timing:
  - some syllables are **stressed** – they ‘stand out’ (are ‘salient’) because they are louder and/or longer than the others:  
[ən 'æstəɪɹɔɪd 'kɪld ðə 'dæməsɔ:z]

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[ən 'æstəɪɔɪd 'kiɪd ðə 'dɪnəsɔ:z]
  - the time from one stressed syllable to the next is roughly constant.

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  - the time from one stressed syllable to the next is roughly constant.
- The phonological unit of rhythm is the **FOOT**:

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- The phonological unit of rhythm is the **FOOT**:
  - each foot starts with a stressed syllable or with a ‘silent beat’.

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  - each foot starts with a stressed syllable or with a ‘silent beat’.
  - we will use a forward slash ( / ) to indicate a foot boundary.

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[ən 'æst.əɹɔɪd 'kɪld ðə 'dæm.əsɔ:z]
  - the time from one stressed syllable to the next is roughly constant.
- The phonological unit of rhythm is the **FOOT**:
  - each foot starts with a stressed syllable or with a ‘silent beat’.
  - we will use a forward slash ( / ) to indicate a foot boundary.
- Practise making each foot the same length:
  - / John / bought / five / black / ties / <sup>^</sup> /
  - / Mary’s / buying / seven / yellow / dresses / <sup>^</sup> /
  - / Jennifer’s / purchasing / seventy / violet / cardigans / <sup>^</sup> /
  - / Nicholas is / contemplating / twenty-seven / multicoloured / carpet-slippers / <sup>^</sup> /

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Weak Forms

## Which syllables are stressed?

- Definitions:

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Weak Forms

## Which syllables are stressed?

- Definitions:
  - 'Content' words = common nouns, proper nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives, and (most) adverbs.

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Weak Forms



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Weak Forms

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- Monosyllabic ‘content’ words are stressed: *killed*

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- Monosyllabic ‘function’ words are unstressed: *an, the*

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- Monosyllabic ‘content’ words are stressed: *killed*
- Monosyllabic ‘function’ words are unstressed: *an, the*
- Polysyllabic words (including compounds) have at least one stressed syllable: 'asteroid, 'Oxford Street, 'after, be'fore

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Weak Forms

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- Polysyllabic words (including compounds) can have more than one stressed syllable: ,polysyl'labic, ,Oxford 'Road

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Weak Forms

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- Polysyllabic words (including compounds) can have more than one stressed syllable: ,polysyl'labic, ,Oxford 'Road
- Difference between secondary or minor stress ( , ) and primary or major stress ( ' ) is not very important:

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Weak Forms



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- Difference between secondary or minor stress ( , ) and primary or major stress ( ' ) is not very important:
  - It's polysylLABic. (versus) They're polysyllabic WORDS.

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- Difference between secondary or minor stress ( , ) and primary or major stress ( ' ) is not very important:
  - It's polysylLABic. (versus) They're polysyllabic WORDS.
  - It's POLysyllabic not MONosyllabic.

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- Difference between secondary or minor stress ( , ) and primary or major stress ( ' ) is not very important:
  - It's polysyl**LAB**ic. (versus) They're polysyllabic **WORDS**.
  - It's **POL**ysyllabic not **MON**osyllabic.
- Sometimes a syllable will be stressed just to maintain the rhythm (here: the syllable **for**):
  - Surely **TOM** can **write** it **for** us

## Weak Forms versus Strong Forms: the difference is important!

- Sally can write the report in Hungarian for us.  
/ **Sally** can / **write** the re- / **port** in Hun- / **GAR**ian / **for** us  
can = POLARITY: positive: unmarked  
**[kŋ]** ('weak form') (eine einfache Bejahung)  
(nicht rhythmisch hervorgehoben)

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## Weak Forms versus Strong Forms: the difference is important!



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Weak Forms

- Sally can write the report in Hungarian for us.  
/ **Sally** can / **write** the re- / **port** in Hun- / **GAR**ian / **for** us  
can = POLARITY: positive: unmarked  
[kŋ] ('weak form') (eine einfache Bejahung)  
(nicht rhythmisch hervorgehoben)
- I can't write reports in Hungarian, but  
I can find a translator for you  
I / **can't** / **write** re- / **ports** in Hun- / **GAR**ian but  
I / **can** / **find** a trans- / **LAT**or / **for** you  
can = POLARITY: positive: marked  
[k<sup>h</sup>æŋ] ('strong form') (eine stärkere Bejahung)  
(rhythmisch hervorgehoben)

## Weak Forms versus Strong Forms: the difference is important!



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Weak Forms

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/ **Sally** can / **write** the re- / **port** in Hun- / **GAR**ian / **for** us  
can = POLARITY: positive: unmarked  
**[kʌ]** ('weak form') (eine einfache Bejahung)  
(nicht rhythmisch hervorgehoben)
- I can't write reports in Hungarian, but  
I can find a translator for you  
I / **can't** / **write** re- / **ports** in Hun- / **GAR**ian but  
I / **can** / **find** a trans- / **LAT**or / **for** you  
can = POLARITY: positive: marked  
**[kʰæ̃n]** ('strong form') (eine stärkere Bejahung)  
(rhythmisch hervorgehoben)
- You **can** write reports in Hungarian!  
You / **CAN** / **write** re- / **ports** in Hun- / **gar**ian!  
can = POLARITY: positive: marked: contrastive  
**[kʰæ̃n]** ('strong form') (eine trotzige Bejahung)  
(rhythmisch *und melodisch* hervorgehoben)

## How many 'degrees of stress' are there in English? Two or five?

- *Context:* 'What happened 65 million years ago?'

- *Utterance:* // .1 ^ ən / æst ə rɔɪd / kɪld ðə\* / dɑɪn ə sɔɪz //

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Weak Forms

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- *Context*: 'What happened 65 million years ago?'

• *Utterance*: // .1 ^ ən / æst ə rɔɪd / kɪld ðə\* / dɑm ə sɔɪz //

- (1) unstressed syllable with reduced vowel: ən ə ðə ə

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Weak Forms



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- *Context*: 'What happened 65 million years ago?'

• *Utterance*: // .1 ^ ən / æst ə rɔɪd / kɪld ðə\* / daɪn ə sɔɪz //

- (2) unstressed syllable with normal vowel: rɔɪd sɔɪz
- (1) unstressed syllable with reduced vowel: ən ə ðə ə

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Weak Forms

## How many 'degrees of stress' are there in English? Two or five?

- *Context*: 'What happened 65 million years ago?'

• *Utterance*: // .1. ^ ən / æst ə rɔɪd / kɪld ðə\* / daɪn ə sɔɪz //

- (3) stressed syllable: kɪld
- (2) unstressed syllable with normal vowel: rɔɪd sɔɪz
- (1) unstressed syllable with reduced vowel: ən ə ðə ə

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Weak Forms

## How many 'degrees of stress' are there in English? Two or five?

- *Context:* 'What happened 65 million years ago?'

• *Utterance:* // .1. ^ ən / æst ə rɔɪd / kɪld ðə\* / daɪn ə sɔɪz //

- (4) stressed syllable, first stress in utterance: æst
- (3) stressed syllable: kɪld
- (2) unstressed syllable with normal vowel: rɔɪd sɔɪz
- (1) unstressed syllable with reduced vowel: ən ə ðə ə

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## How many 'degrees of stress' are there in English? Two or five?

- *Context:* 'What happened 65 million years ago?'

• *Utterance:* // .1. ^ ən / æst ə rɔɪd / kɪld ðə\* / daɪn ə sɔɪz //

- 
- (5) stressed syllable, melodically prominent: daɪn
- (4) stressed syllable, first stress in utterance: æst
- (3) stressed syllable: kɪld
- (2) unstressed syllable with normal vowel: rɔɪd sɔɪz
- (1) unstressed syllable with reduced vowel: ən ə ðə ə

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Weak Forms

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- (2) unstressed syllable with normal vowel: rɔɪd sɔɪz
- (1) unstressed syllable with reduced vowel: ən ə ðə ə
- 
- NERD ALERT!
- cf also John C. Wells on ‘Syllabification and Allophony’:  
<https://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/wells/syllabif.htm>

## English in the future?

- Standard English = stress-timing; Indian English = syllable-timing

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## English in the future?

- Standard English = stress-timing; Indian English = syllable-timing
- Which form of English will be most important by 2124?

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## English in the future?

- Standard English = stress-timing; Indian English = syllable-timing
- Which form of English will be most important by 2124?
- Will English lose its weak forms in the future?:

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## English in the future?

- Standard English = stress-timing; Indian English = syllable-timing
- Which form of English will be most important by 2124?
- Will English lose its weak forms in the future?:
- First paragraph of 'A Tale of Two Cities' by Charles Dickens (1859):

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.*



Syllables & Rhythm  
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Weak Forms

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- Which form of English will be most important by 2124?
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- First paragraph of 'A Tale of Two Cities' by Charles Dickens (1859):

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.*

- English 1,000 years ago | English today | English in 100 years:  
<https://www.audible.com/blog/science-technology/hear-what-scholars-think-english-will-sound-like-in-100-years>



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## More practice; homework

- We'll do the exercises in §§ 1.3 and 1.4 of Walter Sauer's *A Drillbook of English Phonetics*
- If not done at the beginning of the class, students will read aloud portions of the *Dialectal Differences* text, clapping the rhythm as they go.
- For homework: Listen to examples of Indian English to get a feel for the rhythm (syllable-timing): <http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/> and scroll down to:  
14-INDIAN ENGLISH
- For homework: Mark the stresses (including the “silent beats”) in *Dialectal Differences* and identify the weak forms. Hint: “, but there are marked differences” is  
 $\wedge$  bətðəʊə / mə:kt / dɪfjənsɪz
- For homework: Read the 3 short PDF files from Arnold and Hansen on Rhythm. You can find them here:  
[http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08\\_20232/](http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08_20232/)