



Unit 8

Syllables & Rhythm (3):

stress, and weak forms

Print version of the
Phonetics with Listening Practice (British)
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8.1

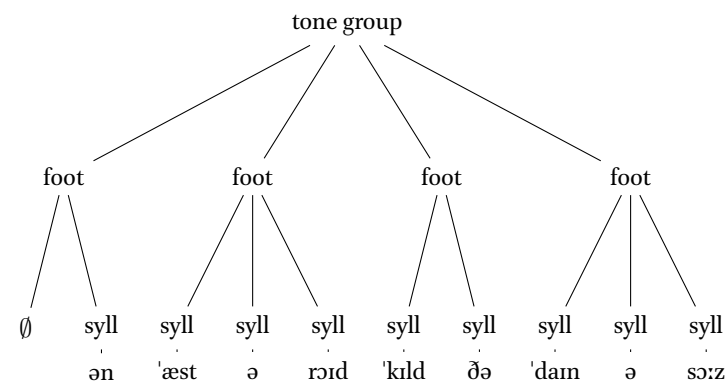
English Phonetics: Unit 8: /'ɪŋ glɪʃ/ /fə 'net ɪks/ /'ju:n ɪt/ /'eɪt/ ['ɪŋ glɪʃ fə 'neɪ tɪks | 'ju:n ɪt eɪt]

Syllables & Rhythm (3) /'sɪl əb əlz/ /ə n/ /rɪð ə m/ /θri:/ ['sɪləbɪz n̩ 'ɪð m̩ | 'θ]

stress, and weak forms /stres/ /ənd/ /'wi:k fɔ:mz/ ['stɹɛs | ə n̩ 'wi:k fɔ:mz]

8.2

1 The phonological rank scale for English reprised



tone group
|
foot
|
syllable
|
phoneme

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

8.3

2 Rhythm

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 'æst.ə.rɔɪd 'kɪlɪd ðə 'dʌn.əs.ɔːz]
 - 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 / [^] /
 - / Mary's / buying / seven / yellow / dresses / [^] /
 - / Jennifer's / purchasing / seventy / violet / cardigans / [^] /
 - / Nicholas is / contemplating / twenty-seven / multicoloured / carpet-slippers / [^] /

8.4

Which syllables are stressed?

- Definitions:
 - ‘Content’ words = common nouns, proper nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives, and (most) adverbs.
 - ‘Function’ words = pronouns, articles, prepositions, aux. verbs, etc.
 - Monosyllabic = has only one-syllable
 - Polysyllabic = has more than one syllable
- 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
- 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:
 - It's polysylLABic. (versus) They're polysyllabic WORDS.
 - It's POLysyllabic not MONosyllabic.
- Sometimes a syllable will be stressed just to maintain the rhythm (here: the syllable **for**):
 - Surely TOM can write it **for** us

8.5

3 Weak Forms

Weak Forms versus Strong Forms: the difference is important!

- Sally can write the report in Hungarian for us.
/ Sally can / **w**rite the re- / **p**ort in Hun- / **G**ARian / **f**or us
can = POLARITY: positive: unmarked
[kən] ('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- / GARian but
I / can / find a trans- / LATor / for you
can = POLARITY: positive: marked
[k^hæ̃n] ('strong form') (eine stärkere Bejahung)
(rhythmisch hervorgehoben)
- You can write reports in Hungarian!
You / CAN / write re- / ports in Hun- / garian!
can = POLARITY: positive: marked: contrastive
[k^hæ̃n] ('strong form') (eine trotzige Bejahung)
(rhythmisch und melodisch hervorgehoben)

8.6

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

- Context: 'What happened 65 million years ago?'
- Utterance: // . 1. ʌ ə̃n / æ̃st ə rɔɪd / kɪld ðə* / dɑ̃m ə sɔːz //
- (5) stressed syllable, melodically prominent: dam
- (4) stressed syllable, first stress in utterance: æst
- (3) stressed syllable: kɪld
- (2) unstressed syllable with normal vowel: rɔɪd sɔːz
- (1) unstressed syllable with reduced vowel: ə̃n ə ðə ə
- NERD ALERT!
- cf also John C. Wells on 'Syllabification and Allophony':
<https://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/wells/syllabif.htm>

8.7

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.
- 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>

8.8

More practice; homework

- We'll do the exercises in §§ 13 and 14 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
/ ʌ bətðəɪə / mɑːkt / dɪfərənsɪz

- 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/