

# Unit 12

## 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 12:

/ˈɪŋ glɪʃ/ /fə ˈnet ɪks/ /ˈjuːn ɪt/ /ˈtwelv/

[ˈɪŋglɪʃfəˈnetɪks | ˈjuːnɪt ˈtwelv]

## Syllables &amp; Rhythm (3)

/ˈsɪl əb əlz/ /ən/ /rɪð əm/ /θriː/

[ˈsɪləbəlzn̩ˈɪðm̩ | ˈθriː]

## stress, and weak forms

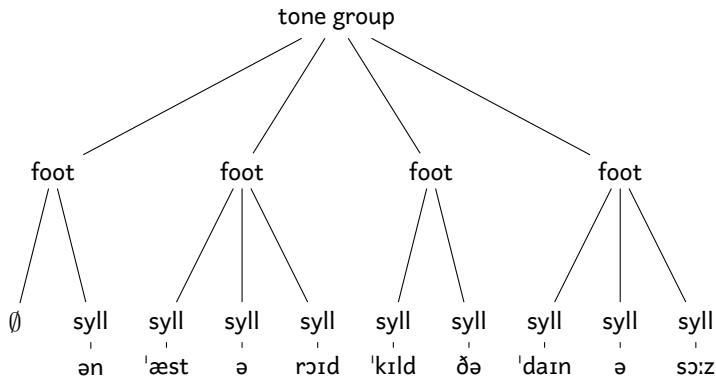
/stres/ /ənd/ /ˈwiːk fɔːmz/

[ˈstɪɹəs | ən ˈwɪk fɔːmz]

## 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 'æstəɹɔɪd 'kɪld ðə 'dæməsɔːz]

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  - 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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  - each foot starts with a stressed syllable or with a ‘silent beat’.

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  - we will use a forward slash ( / ) to indicate a foot boundary.

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[ən 'æstəɔɪd 'kɪld ðə 'dæməʊɪz]
  - 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 / ^ /

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

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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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- 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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- Difference between secondary or minor stress ( , ) and primary or major stress ( ' ) is not very important:
  - It's polysyl**LAB**ic. (versus) They're polysyll**lab**ic **WORDS**.

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  - It's polysyl**LAB**ic. (versus) They're polysyll**lab**ic **WORDS**.
  - It's **POL**ysyllabic not **MON**osyllabic.

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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.
- Sometimes a syllable will be stressed just to maintain the rhythm (here: the syllable **for**):
  - Surely TOM can write it for us

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Weak Forms

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

- Sally can write the report in Hungarian for us.  
/ **S**ally 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)

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



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[k<sup>h</sup>ɪ] ('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** / **w**rite re- / **p**orts in Hun- / **G**ARian but  
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[k<sup>h</sup>æɪn] ('strong form') (eine stärkere Bejahung)  
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## Weak Forms versus Strong Forms: the difference is important!

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can = POLARITY: positive: marked  
**[kʰæn]** ('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  
**[kʰæn]** ('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 \* / daɪn ə sɔɪz //

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

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

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- *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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- *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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• *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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- 
- (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
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- 
- 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.*

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- 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](https://www.audible.com/blog/science-technology/hear-what-scholars-think-english-will-sound-like-in-100-years)



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The phonological rank  
scale for English reprised

Rhythm

Weak Forms

## 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  
/ ʌ bətðəə / mɑ: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/phonetics/unit12\\_20241/](http://www.spence.saar.de/phonetics/unit12_20241/)  
(03, 04, 05)



Syllables & Rhythm  
(3):

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