

WORDS IN COMPANY

Undoubtedly, speech is not merely a random stringing of speech sounds; instead it is a systematically-regulated stream of sounds in which spoken utterances can be divided into identifiable groups. These groups may be long, as in how did you fix the broken window yesterday?; short, as in yes/no; or may be of intermediate length, as in I am home. Longer speech streams can be divided into interrelated groups, for example:

||Yesterday afternoon| about an hour before we had tea| I heard a noise of broken glass| in the kitchen|.

These speech groups are not uttered continuously. Instead they are separated by slight pauses in speech which are represented by a single vertical bar (|), while the beginning and the end of the whole speech stream is marked by double vertical bar (||). Moreover, within a speech group, words (or syllables in words) are not pronounced with the same amount of force. That is, some of them are spoken with greater force than that of the other ones in the same speech groups. For example:
I could hardly believe my eyes ⇔ ||aɪ kʊd 'hɑ:dli bɪ'li:v maɪ 'aɪz|.

The highlighted syllables are said with more force than the non-highlighted ones. Thus, the syllables which are pronounced with greater effort or force are called **STRESSED** syllable, whereas the syllables which are pronounced with less effort or force are called **UNSTRESSED** syllables. This leads to the question: what sort of words are stressed and what sort of words are unstressed?

1. All words of more than syllable are stressed, e.g. disbelieve /'dɪsbɪ'li:v/.
2. Content or informative words like verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs generally are stressed, e.g. allow /ə'laʊ/, head /'hed/, good /'gʊd/, well /'wel/.
3. One-syllable words known as function words like pronouns (e.g. I, you, etc.), prepositions (e.g. for, at, etc.) and articles (e.g. a, an, the) generally are not stressed. However, they may sometimes be stressed for special purposes, i.e. they are stressed to give more emphasis.
4. Syllables the centers of which are occupied by /ə/ are unstressed, e.g. contain /kən'eɪn/.

Weak Forms of Words

Weak forms of words refer to word (or syllable) forms with /ə/ and they are usually unstressed, but they can be stressed when they are pronounced in isolation. For example, the preposition 'for' is pronounced /'fɔ:/ in isolation and is stressed, but it is pronounced /fə/ when it occurs within word groups and is unstressed, i.e. it includes /ə/, as in I bought a new dress for Anne ⇔ /aɪ 'bɔ:t ə 'nju: 'dres fə 'æn/. Some words have more than one weak form, such as 'have,' which is either pronounced as /v/ after (I, we, you, they), as in You've broken it ⇔ /ju:v 'brəʊkən ɪt/; or /əv/, as in The men have gone ⇔ /ðə 'mən əv 'gɒn/. Look at the thirty-five common and wonderful examples of weak forms in your textbook on pages 92-94. Some of the words with weak forms also have strong forms which can be used in the following contexts:

1. When the word is stressed, it is pronounced with its strong form, as in have you finished? ⇔ /'hæv ju: 'fɪnɪʃt/.
2. When the word occurs in word-final position, as in what's that for? ⇔ /'wɒts 'ðæt fɔ:/

Rhythm Units

It is important to know that a word group may comprise a one-syllable word, multisyllabic word, or more than one word, that is a sequence of syllables which are of different lengths. The length of the syllable depends on the natural length of the vowel and the following consonant(s), for example:

1. /naʊ/ is considered as a long syllable because it contains a diphthong which is not followed by a consonant(s). This means it can be stretched out.
2. /su:n/ also is considered as a long syllable because it has a long vowel followed by a weak consonant.
3. /wen/ is slightly shorter than the previous ones because it has a short vowel which is lengthened because of the effect of the final weak /n/.
4. /jes/ is regarded as the shortest syllable because it has a short vowel which is much shortened because of the following voiceless long consonant /s/.

A given word group may include unstressed syllables pronounced weakly and quickly, especially when occurring before a stressed syllable, for example:

It is cold ⇔ ||ɪts 'kəʊld||.

Within the same word group, one or more unstressed syllables may occur after the stressed syllable, but the unstressed syllables are not uttered as quickly as the ones occurring before the stressed syllable. Instead, the stressed syllable and the following unstressed ones are pronounced within the same amount of time as that needed to pronounce a single stressed syllable, that is, they take the same time to be said, for example:

It was better ⇔ ɪt wəz 'betə.

In the example mentioned above, the two unstressed syllables before the stressed one are pronounced so quickly, but the last one after stress takes the same amount of time as /'be-/. Accordingly, /'betə/ represents **a stress group including the stressed syllable in addition to the unstressed syllable(s) occurring after it.** For example:

Both of them left early ⇔ bəʊθ əv ðəm 'left 'ɜ:lɪ. The highlighted part represents a stress group which consists of the stressed syllable /'bəʊθ/ in addition to all of the following unstressed syllables /'left/ up to the next stress. In an example like the following: I am going home for Christmas ⇔ ɪəm 'gəʊɪŋ 'həʊm fə 'krɪsməs, each highlighted part in this word group represents what is called a rhythm unit. **A rhythm unit includes the stressed syllable and the unstressed syllables before and after it.**

How do we decide what words or syllables go together in a rhythm unit? In order to be able to do so, follow these four basic rules (O'Connor, 1980, 99-100): ☺

1. Any unstressed syllables at the beginning of a word group must go together with the following stress group, for example: I was in London ⇔ ɪ wəz ɪn 'lʌndən.
2. If the unstressed syllable(s) is part of the same word as the stressed syllable, they belong to the same rhythm group, for example: cheaper fares ⇔ 'tʃi:pə 'feəz.
3. If the unstressed syllable(s) is closely connected grammatically to the stressed word, although not part of that word, they belong to the same rhythm unit, for example: give it to John ⇔ 'gɪv ɪt tə 'dʒɒn.
4. Whenever you are in doubt as to which rhythm unit unstressed syllables belong to, put them after a stress rather than before it. Thus, in 'He was older than me,' if you are doubtful about 'then,' put it with 'older' not with 'me.' ɪ hi: wəz 'əʊldə ðən 'mi: .