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INTONATION PITCH AND STRESS – A GUIDE

Say this sentence aloud and count how many seconds it takes.

> *The beautiful Mountain appeared transfixed in the distance.*

Time required? Probably about **5 seconds**. Now, try speaking this sentence aloud.

> *He can come on Sundays as long as he doesn't have to do any homework in the evening.*

Time required? Probably about **5 seconds**!

Wait a minute the first sentence is much *shorter* than the second sentence!

You are only partially right!

This simple exercise makes a very <u>important</u> point about how we speak and use English. Namely, English is considered a **stressed** language while many other languages are considered **syllabic**. Some words are given more emphasis and l o n g e r some words are quickly spoken, sometimes '**eaten**!'

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The Basics :

In English speech there are a combination of *stressed* (strong) and *unstressed* (weak) syllables.

- It was the **best** car for them to **buy**.

The syllable which is stressed the most is called the **<u>nuclear</u>** syllable.

- It was the best car for them to **buy**. (Buy is the nuclear syllable.)

The nuclear syllable carries the <u>main</u> focus of information. It also carries any <u>new</u> information.

- We looked at the **hatchback**. (*Hatchback is new information*).
- The hatchback was **old**. (*Hatchback is given information. Old is new information*).

The nuclear syllable sounds louder than the other stressed syllables. It also has a change of pitch.

Pitch movements :

The two most common pitch movements are:

1. rising pitch yés 
2. falling pitch yès 

Compare these replies:

Q: When would it suit you to come?
A: Nów? 

(The intonation expresses a *question* : would it be OK if I came now?)

Q: When would it suit you to come?
A: Nòw. 

(The intonation expresses a *statement* : I'll come now.)

A **falling** tone is used to show completeness. A falling tone is normally used when a person is about to stop talking. A falling tone is used at the *end* of a list to show that the list is complete.

- Would you like tea / coffee / fruit juice / or lemonade / (That's all I'm offering.)

A **rising** tone can indicate incompleteness. A rising tone at the end indicates that they wish to continue speaking and are seeking feedback, by word or gesture.

What is intonation ?

Intonation shows the speaker's *attitude*. It is by changing the pitch that we can indicate certainty, uncertainty, enthusiasm, boredom, and so on. We can say "yes" so that it almost means "no".

As listeners, we become skilled at *detecting* fine shades of *meaning* in other people's speech. We can say they sounded unhappy, tired, sneering, self-satisfied, sarcastic, and so on. These attitudes are picked up from very fine variations in **pitch** and **loudness**.

Although intonation is an important feature of spoken English, it is represented in written English only rather crudely by the use of such punctuation devices as *full stops, commas, question marks, and exclamation marks.*

Skilful writers can convey shades of meaning in *various* ways. Some resort to a simple method of adverbials.

e.g. "How are you today?" he asked cheerfully.

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Intonation - Stress Types

Improving sentence intonation is one of the key elements in your English *pronunciation*. Let's discuss the four basic types of word stress that lead to proper intonation in English.

Tonic stress
Emphatic stress

Contrastive stress
New information stress

TONIC STRESS

Tonic stress refers to the syllable in a word which **receives** the most stress in an intonation unit. An intonation unit has one tonic stress. It's important to remember that a sentence can have *more* than one intonation unit, and therefore have more than one **tonic** stress. Here are some examples of intonation units with the tonic stress bolded.

He's **wai**ting
He's **wai**ting / for his **friend**
He's **wai**ting / for his friend / at the **station**.

Generally, the final tonic stress in a sentence receives the most stress. In the above example, '**station**' receives the strongest stress.

There are a number of instances in which the stress changes from this standard.
Here are short explanations for each of the changes with example sentences to illustrate.

EMPHATIC STRESS

If you decide to emphasize something, you can **change** the stress from the principal noun to another content word such as an *adjective* (big, difficult, etc.), *intensifier* (very, extremely, etc.) This emphasis calls attention to the extraordinary nature of what you want to emphasize.

For example:
That was a difficult test.
- Standard statement

That was a **difficult** test.
- Emphasizes *how* difficult the test was

extremely
terribly
completely
utterly
especially
etc....

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CONTRASTIVE STRESS

Contrastive stress is used to point out the difference between one object and another. It tends to be used with determiners such as 'this, that, these and those'.

For example : I think I prefer **this** colour. Do you want **these** or **those** curtains?

Contrastive stress is also used to bring out a given word in a sentence, which will also slightly change the meaning.

- **He** came to the party yesterday. (It was he, not someone else).
- He **walked** to the party yesterday. (He walked rather than drove).
- He came to the **party** yesterday. (It was a party not a meeting or something else).
- He came to the party **yesterday**. (It was yesterday not two weeks ago or some other time).

NEW INFORMATION STRESS

When asked a question, the requested information is naturally stressed more strongly.

For example :

Where are you from? - I come from **Seattle**, in the USA.
What do you want to do? - I want to go **bowling**.
When does class begin? - The class begins at **nine** o'clock.

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ENGLISH IS A STRESS BASED LANGUAGE

English is considered a stressed language while many other languages are considered syllabic .

What does that mean?

It means that, in English, we give stress to certain words while other words are quickly spoken (eaten!). In French each syllable receives equal importance and therefore equal time is needed. English however, spends more time on specific stressed words while quickly gliding over the other, less important, words.

Let's look at an example:

The modal verb "can".

When we use the positive form of "can" we quickly glide over the can and it is hardly pronounced.

1 We **can** meet here.

But when we use the negative form "can't" we tend stress the fact that it is negative.

2 We can't meet here.

Sentence 2 is longer.

So, what does this mean when you speak?

Well, first you need to understand which words we stress.

Stress words are :

CONTENT words:

- Nouns
- Principal verbs
- Adjectives
- Adverbs

Non-stressed words are :

FUNCTION words:

- Determiners
- Auxiliary verbs
- Prepositions
- Conjunctions
- Pronouns

You needn't worry about pronouncing every word clearly to be understood (we native speakers certainly don't). You should however, concentrate on pronouncing the stressed words clearly.

We concentrate on the stressed words rather than giving importance to each syllable. so listen for (and use in speaking) the stressed words. All those words that you thought you didn't understand are really not crucial for understanding the sense or making yourself understood. Stressed words are the key to excellent pronunciation and understanding of English.

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Word Stress

All words of more than one syllable have what is called word stress. This means that at least one of the syllables is l o n g e r and **louder** than the other syllables.

In the following examples, **stressed** syllables are in CAPITAL letters:

PHOtograph		phoTOgraphy		photoGRAphic
	comMITtee			
PENcil	MARyland	soCIety	volunTEEr	inforMAtion

In many cases, word stress must simply be learned as new vocabulary is acquired. However, there are several **rules** for word stress which can make it easier to deal with.

I. COMPOUND NOUNS

bluebird
blackboard
notebook

bookstore
toothbrush
keyboard

In each of these examples, the first part of the compound gets the stress.

II. NOUN + NOUN COMPOUNDS

(2-word compound nouns)

air conditioner
computer programmer
nail polish

french fry
Geiger counter
doctor's office

The *first* word gets the stress.
(Note: If the "unstressed" part of the noun+noun compound is more than one syllable, it will have some word stress. However, the first part of the compound will get even **more** stress.)

III. PHRASAL VERBS

versus Compound Nouns derived from phrasals

Phrasal verbs (a.k.a. two-word or two-part verbs) are generally made up of a **verb** and **preposition**. For many of these, correct word stress is especially important as they have compound noun counterparts.

In *phrasal* verbs, the **preposition** gets the word stress. In the *compoun nouns* however the stress is on the **first** part.

Phrasal Verbs	Compound Nouns
let down	letdown
shut out	shutout
turn off	turnoff
take over	takeover
print out	printout

IV. HOMOGRAPHS

Homographs are words which are written the same way but which have *different* **pronunciation**.
In English, there are many words which have the same spelling, but with different word stress the meaning can change. The *vowel* sounds change depending on whether they are stressed or unstressed.

VERB	NOUN
re**cord**	**re**cord
prog**ress**	**prog**ress
pres**ent**	**pres**ent
per**mit**	**per**mit

By Kenneth BEARE