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Placement of Stress in English and its Effect on Meaning

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Abstract

The present study deals with the placement of stress in English and its effect on meaning. Stress is the degree of force that the speaker makes on the specific syllable or words in order to carry important information to the listener. So, it is important to pronounce words accurately because part of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences depends on stress placement. Stress is a difficult area to be mastered successfully. However, the present study is an attempt to show the effect of stress placement on word, phrase and sentence. It is designed to determine the effect of stress on changing not only syntactic category of words, Phrases but their meaning as well. The data were hand picked from different sources. This paper hypothesizes that English stress has different positions and has an effect on meaning of word and sentence. The conclusions arrived at have validated the above hypothesis.

Table of Contents

1. **Introduction**

English language is one of the most popular languages in the world. Many countries have adopted it as a second language. Speech is one of the important language activities. The spoken form of language precedes the written one and this is clear because a child has the ability to speak before writing(Liles,1971).

The ability of understanding speech involves the ability of controlling the sound system. One of the important elements of the sound system is stress. Ladefoged and Johnson (2011:249) believe that stress is :

> A suprasegmental feature of utterance. It applies not to individual vowels and consonants but to whole syllable wherever they might be. A stress syllable is pronounced with a greater amount of energy than an unstressed syllable and is more prominent in the flow of speech.

The problem with stress is that if a non-native speaker produces a word with the wrong stress pattern, an English listener may have difficulty in understanding the word. This fact is emphasized by O'Conner (1980:91) when he states that stressing the wrong syllable damges the form of the word and may make it very difficult to hear and understand.

The aim of this paper is to show the importance of stress and discus how different positions of stress affect the meaning

This paper hypothesizes that English stress has different positions and has an effect on the meaning of word and sentence.

This research includes besides this introduction a section about English stress concerning its nature and levels. Section three deals with the placement of stress in separate words and sentences. The last section is written about stress and meaning. This paper ends with the conclusions arrived at.

2. English stress

2.1 The nature of English Stress

Roach (2009:73) defines stress as the degree of force used in the pronounciation of a certain syllable. Gimson (1989:228) refers to stress as a capcity of the pronunciation for the speaker and the higher sound for the listener. There is a strong relationship between stress and syllable. Lodge (2009:76) points out that a stressed syllable is produced with strong energy which makes it unique. Gussenhoven and Jacobs (2011:32) also argue that a stressed syllable appears in any words as more prominent than other syllables in the same word.

In addition, stress is also defined from two perspectives : production and perception (Roach, 2009 : 73). Al-Hmash (1984 : 93) also defines stress from the point of view of the speaker as an effort used in the production of the sound of the syllable and from the view point of listener, stress is the loudness of the specific sound by comparing it with another sound near it.

Stress is a special feature which is restricted by a number of phonetic factors that enable to select a stressed syllable from unstressed one near it (McMahon,2002:118). Concerning the previous point, Roach (2009:73) indicates that the essential characteristic of stressed syllable is prominence. Roach (ibid:74) points out that this prominence is affected by four important factors :

1. Loudness is a component of stressed syllable. Stresses syllables are all louder than unstressed ones. This is a direct result of speech production factors.

2. Length is one of the affective component in the prominence. A stressed syllable has a longer duration and strong vowels than unstressed syllable.

3. Pitch is a very important part of perceptual characteristic of speech sound. Each syllable of the word is produced either as low or high pitched. Stressed syllable is resulted as higher pitch which makes it prominent.

4. Vowel quality is one of the affective part in determining the prominence of stressed syllable. Stressed syllable contains a vowel that is different from other syllables around it. So that, the prominence of stressed syllable can be showed by comparing it with other syllables near it.

Roach (ibid) states that prominence is made by those four factors in combination and may be made by only one or two of them.

2.2 Levels of stress

In English language there are only three main levels of stress. Ashby (2011:161) asserts that there are only three possibilities in recognizing stress : primary stress, secondary stress and unstressed. Ashby (Ibid) claims that these stresses are enough to play two main roles—they show the features of the word itself (word stress) and they also show the points in the word which may carry the important information when the word is used in longer utterance (sentence stress). Roach (2009:75) refers to the fourth level of stress which is Tertiary. Tertiary level is rare in English language.

2.2.1 Primary Stress

When we pronounce certain words, we put stress on certain syllables. There are some syllables which are very prominent and strong due to the effect of stress. Primary stress represents the maximal prominence of the syllable in a word (Collins and Mess, 2013:306). Roach (2009:75) mentions that primary stress is on the strongest syllable in a word which appears to be more prominent than other syllables. Primary stress can be marked with a vertical mark ['] placed above and in front of the syllable (Collins and Mess, 2013:131).

Examples :

Father   / ˈfɑːðə /

About   / əˈbaʊt /

Receive   / rɪˈsiːv /

Camera   / ˈkæmərə /

2.2.2 Secondary Stress

In long words of more than one syllable, a type of stress can be observed, that is weaker than primary stress (strong). Gussenhoven and Jacobs (2011:32) state that IPA marking for secondary stress is [ˌ] to be placed before the syllable concerned.

Examples:

Photography   / fəˈtɒɡrəfi /

Anthropology   / ˌænθrəˈpɒlədʒi /

Organization   / ˌɔːɡənaɪˈzeɪʃən /

Activation   / ˌæktɪˈveɪʃən /

2.2.3 Unstressed

This involves a non-prominent syllable. This level of stress is often the weaker syllable in a word in that it contains the short vowel /ə/. Unlike primary and secondary stress, unstressed level is left unmarked.

Examples:

Open   / ˈəʊpən /
Announcer   / əˈnaʊnsər /
Programmer   / ˈprəʊɡræmər /

3. Placement of stress

Roach divides the languages of the world into two groups on the basis of placement of the stress. The first group contains languages which have fixed place for the stress in words like, French language in which the last syllable is usually stressed. The second group contains languages in which there is no fixed place for stress in words. For example, in English language there is a difficulty to predict the placement of word stress (2009:76).

3.1 Simple words

The Learners of English language must use the correct placement of stress. For example, the shift of stress in words such as (desert) / ˈdezət / and (desert) / dɪˈzɜːt / may make confusion if they are not pronounced with proper stress. Kenworthy (1987:28) points out this problem and states:

> If a non-native speaker produces a word with wrong pattern ,
> an English listener may have great difficulty in understanding
> the word, even if most of the individual sounds have been well
> pronounced. In listening, if learners of English expect a word
> to have a particular stress pattern, they may not recognize it
> when a native speaker says it. In other words, what they hear
> doesn't match what they have in their mental dictionary.

According to the above quotation, it is concluded that there is a strong relationship between stress and the class of the word. Gimson (1989:235), McMahon (2002:120), Roach (2009:87), Ladefoged & Johnson (2011:112) and Collins & Mess (2013:132) indicate that English language has pairs of

two-syllable words in which the placement of stress play main role in determining their syntactic category (noun, adjective or verb)

Examples:

words	nouns	verbs
conflict	'kɒnflɪkt	kən'flɪkt
import	'ɪmpɔ:t	ɪm'pɔ:t
insult	'ɪnsəlt	ɪn'sʌlt
abstract	'æbstrækt	æb'strækt
digest	'daɪdʒest	dɪ'dʒest
transfer	'trænsfə	træns'fɜ:
torment	'tɔ:ment	tɔ:'ment
reject	'ri:dʒekt	rɪ'dʒekt
subject	'sʌbdʒɪkt	səb'dʒekt
insert	'ɪnsɜ:t	ɪn'sɜ:t

3.2 Compound words

Roach (2009:85) suggests that compound words consist of two independent words. As far as stress placement in compounds is concerned, Gimson (1989:231) mentions that one word of the compound has primary stress, while the other word(s) normally carries (carry) the secondary stress.

With reference to the placement of stress in compound words , Susan (2010) gives some stress patterns for compound words : compound nouns have a primary stress on the first element as in (bedroom) / ˈbedru:m / ; compound verbs have a primary stress on the second word of the compound

as in (outsmart) / aʊtˈsmɑːt / ; finally in the compound adjectives the stress is on the second word as in(bed-termpered) / bed-ˈtempəd /.

Roach (2009:86) also suggests another rules for compound stress. These rules are : compound words have primary stress on the second word if the first word is number as in (second class) / sekənd ˈklɑːs / ; compound words have a primary stress on the second word if the compounds function as adverbs as in (north-East) / nɔːθ ˈiːst / ; finally, when compounds function as verb and has an adverb, then stress is on the second word as in the example (downgrade) / daʊnˈgreɪd /.

It is good to note that Collins and Mess (2013:132-133) mentions other rules concerning this point. They are : the stress is on the second element when the compound words refer to name of towns as seen in (New York) / njuː jɔːk / ; the stress is on the second word when the compounds refer to the part of building as in (back door) / bæk dɔː / ; finally, the names of magazines and newspapers have a primary stress on the second word as in (Daily post) / deɪli ˈpəʊst /.

3.3 Sentence stress

Unlike word stress, sentence stress has flexibility in the placement of stress. Kenworthy (1987:32) concludes that there are several ways in which the speaker is capable of sending ideas or important information by focusing the main stress of the sentence on specific words.

However, the placement of sentence stress is affected by the classes of the word. In this regard, Collins and Mess (2013:135) list two type of words: function words and content words. Function words include (articles, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs). They are normally unstressed. Content words are those which carry the meaning of the sentence such as (nouns, main verbs, adjective and adverbs). Those content words are normally stressed.

Example:

I've 'heard that 'Jack and 'Jane 'spent their 'holidays in 'Jamaica (Collins and Mess, ibid)

In the sentence above, the content words (heard, Jack, Jane, spent, holidays, and Jamaica) are stressed (strong) whereas the function words (I, have, that, and, their and in) are normally unstressed (weak).

However, there are exceptions to the rules mentioned above specially what is concerned with the stress of function words. Roach (2009:90-91) indicates that those function words are normally stressed in certain circumstances. They are :

1. Many function words are stressed when they occur at the end of the sentence :

Chips are what I'm fond of.

/ 'ʧɪps ə 'wɒt aɪm 'fɒnd 'ɒv /

2. When function words show a contrast :

The letters from him not to him.

/ ðə ˈlɛtəz frəm ɪm nɒt ˈtə ɪm /

3. When function words are emphasized :

You must give me more money.

/ jʊ ˈmʌst gɪv mi mɔː ˈmʌni /

4. When the function word is being "cited" or " quoted":

You shouldn't put "and" at the end of a sentence.

/ jʊ ˈʃʊdnt ˈpʊt ˈænd ət ði ˈend əv ə ˈsentəns /

4. Stress and Meaning

There is a strong relationship between the placement of stress and the meaning. However, Gill (n. d) mentions that there are words of two-syllable in which the placement of stress does not only affect their syntactic category, but their meaning as well, for example, there is a huge difference in meaning between (ˈaddress vs. addˈress) and (ˈcontent vs. conˈtent). The difference of meaning can appear when these words are put in the sentences as below :

Address	/ ˈædres /(n.)	Do you know Ali's address? (The name of the place)
	/ əˈdres / (v.)	You are not allowed to address the president. (to direct speech to someone)
Content	/ ˈkɒntent /(n.)	The content of your essay is fine. (what it contains)
	/ kənˈtent /(adj.)	She was sitting reading a book , looking very content. (relaxed , peaceful)

One of the important functions of stress is to distinguish between compounds and phrases (McMahon, 2002 :123) and (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2011 :112). Compounds generally have a primary stress on the first word while phrases have a primary stress on the second word. The difference in stress placement gives a clear indication of the meaning changes. Kushinka (2016) presents more than one example to emphsize this fact. For the first example, there is a semantic difference between ˈgreenhouse / ˈgriːnhaʊs /, a compound (a building used to growing plants) vs. greenˈhouse / griːnˈhaʊs / a phrase (a house that its color is green). The second example includes ˈWhitehouse / ˈwaɪthaʊs/, a compound noun which means (the house where the U.S president lives) which has a different meaning from whiteˈhouse / waɪtˈhaʊs /, a phrase which means (the house that its color is green). The last one is ˈblackbird / ˈblækbɜːrd /, a compound (a type of bird) which has a different meaning from blackˈbird / blækˈbɜːrd / a phrase (a bird that its color is black).

Concerning sentence stress , some words seem to be more prominent than others depending on the information the speaker wants to convey. One

of the difficult things to control when learning English language is stress. Stressing different word in the same sentence each time can completely change the meaning of it. Commenting on the fact above, Reed & and Levis (2015:178) argue that sentence stress is " manipulated by the speaker, and is strongly related to the structuring of information in discourse '' .

The information that is indented to be conveyed by the speaker must match with what the listener has in his mind. This view is supported by Reed & Levis (2015:178) who state that " the placement of sentence stress reflects what a speaker assumes is in the consciousness of the hearer at the same time... ''. For instance , Roach (2009:261) presents a sentence (you didn't say anything about rates.). Mustafa & faris explain this sentence in four ways:

1. <u>You</u> didn't say anything about rates.
2. You <u>didn't</u> say anything about rates.
3. You didn't <u>say</u> anything about rates.
4. You didn't say anything about <u>rates</u>.

The first utterance where the main sentence stress is placed on (you) is not you but maybe somebody else. The second utterance means that you didn't want to say. The third one refers that you didn't say (say) not (see or hear). The last one means that you didn't say anything about (rates) not about models or colors (2011:805).

Beare (2018) also presents a sentence (I don't think he should get that job) and he explains it in seven ways:

1. <u>I</u> don't think he should get that job. Meaning not (I) but maybe Ali or Nada thinks about this idea.

2. I <u>don't</u> think he should get that job. Meaning there is no proof that I think he should get that job.

3. I don't <u>think</u> he should get that job. Meaning I don't think but maybe I hear that he should get that job.

4. I don't think <u>he</u> should get that job. Meaning I think about another person not he.

5. I don't think he should <u>get</u> that job. Meaning he must work hard to get that job.

6. I don't think he should get <u>that</u> job. Meaning I think about another job to get it not that one.

7. I don't think he should get that <u>job</u>. Meaning maybe he should get high salary or something else.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this paper can be summarized in the following points:

1. Stress placement in English language has separate positions at both simple words, compound words and sentences.

2. The placement of stress in two-syllable words plays main role in changing not only the grammatical categories of the words but their meaning as well.

3. The placement of stress also has a great function to differentiate between compounds and phrases. Compound words have a primary

stress on the first word while phrases have a primary stress on the second word.

4. The place of the main sentence stress is manipulated by the speaker and depends on the information the speaker wants to convey.

5. Sentence stress is affected by the classes of the words in a sentence (content words and function words). Content words always receive the main stress, on the other hand function words are unstressed.

6. There are circumstances in which those function words are usually stressed such as when they show negation, emphasis and contrast.

7. Finally, the points were given above verify the hypothesis of this article.

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