

A brief overview of syllable stress placement in English vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

How to correctly pronounce an English word seems to be a serious problem to most learners. This requires a perfect combination of sounds and stress in the word, and stress is supposed to be more important than sounds. The correct placement of word stress or syllable stress is essential for the learner's use and perception of English. For this reason, the paper may select and suggest some stress rules in the hope that the learners may feel useful for making the correct syllable stress in an English word. However, only main stress or primary stress in simple words is discussed, and the stressed syllables are presented in boldface letters throughout this paper.

Keywords: stress, syllable, words

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The fact that the learners may feel not confident about their knowledge of stress patterns is a great concern. There exists such an interesting situation in an English class at University of Physical Education and Sport, in which a learner is asked to read aloud a paragraph. The learner opens the paragraph by saying, (The “arena” ...), with stress placed on the first syllable instead of the second in the word “arena” [1]. The listener may not recognize the word “arena” and the phrase (The “arena”...) is misinterpreted as (There aren't ...) or (The Anna ...).

The placement of syllable stress in English words is considered to be very confused. According to Roach [2], anyone who tries to analyze the pattern of stressed syllable has to realize that it is a very complicated matter. Many learners may feel really difficult to predict the position of the stressed syllable in an English word, so there have been stress rules which are fairly complex and have many exceptions. Nevertheless, Roach and Kenworthy [2, 3]

assume that despite the exceptions, it should be better to try to produce some stress rules (even if they are more or less inaccurate) than to claim that there is no rule or regularity in English word stress. Also, Rogerson and Gilbert [4] claim that it is not easy to know which syllable or syllables to stress in words but there are some general “rules” which can help the learners.

2. A GLANCE AT SYLLABLES IN A WORD

Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics defines that a syllable is a unit of pronunciation typically larger than a single sound and smaller than a word [5]. A syllable is part of a word which contains one vowel sound; it may also contain one or more consonant sounds. Generally, the number of vowel sounds in the word decides the number of syllables [6]. Moreover, a word can be either a single syllable (e.g. good, in...) or a sequence of two or more syllables (e.g. student, successful, internationally...) [7]. A word containing one syllable is called a “monosyllable” or “monosyllabic word”, and a

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word containing more than one syllable is called a “polysyllable” or “polysyllabic word” [5].

3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SYLLABLE STRESS IN A WORD

The analysis of the characteristics of syllable stress in a word seems to be an extremely difficult task. It not only deals with phonological structure but also with morphological structure [2]. In addition, the placement of stress in a word is involved in factors such as the word form (noun, adjective, verb, etc.); the number of syllables in the word; the distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables; the number of affixes, especially, suffixes [8]. In general, the characteristics of syllable stress in a word may be summarized as follows. First, there is only one stressed syllable in words that have more than one syllable, the other syllables are said to be unstressed [7]. Second, the position of the stressed syllable in a word does not change, and the stressed syllable can be any syllable in the word [6]. Finally, the stressed syllable can be louder, longer, higher, and clearer than the other syllables [2 - 7].

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF SYLLABLE STRESS

Gilbert [9] insists that using the correct stress pattern is more important than using the correct sounds. The stress pattern of a word is an important part of its identity for the native speaker. When you hear a new word, syllable stress is the first thing you should notice. Placing the stress on the wrong syllable is a common cause of misunderstanding. An English listener may have trouble understanding a word if a non-native speaker produces it with the wrong stress pattern no matter how well most of the individual sounds have been pronounced [3, 4].

Dale and Poms [10] report that wrong stress placement when pronouncing **invalid** (a chronically ill or disabled person) may make it

sound like **invalid** (null; legally ineffective) and that making the correct syllable stress allows you to clearly understand the difference between such words as the noun **present** (gift) and the verb **present** (to introduce; to offer). Correct use of stress is essential for achieving proper pronunciation of words.

5. SOME RULES FOR SYLLABLE STRESS IN SIMPLE WORDS AND THE EXCEPTIONS

5.1. Stress on the ultimate

5.1.1. Rule: *Most two-syllable Verbs are stressed on the ultimate* [4]

Table 1. Verbs stressed on the ultimate [1]

Two-syllable Verbs	Exceptions
begin, obey, deny, attend, conflict, survive, attempt, predict, remain, instruct	open, empty, render, worship, notice

5.1.2. Rule: *In words ending in certain suffixes -EE, -EER, -ESE, -ESCE, -ETTE the ultimate is stressed* [8]

Table 2. Words stressed on the ultimate [1, 11]

Suffixes	Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives	Exceptions
-EE	absentee, referee, nominee	employee
-EER	pioneer, engineer, volunteer	
-ESE	Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese	Chinese (*)
-ESCE	convalesce, acquiesce, coalesce	
-ETTE	cassette, silhouette, launderette	etiquette

(*): Hewings [7] reports that a dictionary entry for the word **Chinese** will indicate primary stress on **-ese** and secondary stress on **Chi-**. However, in the phrase *a Chinese company*, main stress is likely to move back to the first syllable in the word **Chinese**.

5.1.3. Rule: Reflexive Pronouns are usually stressed on the ultimate [10]

Table 3. Reflexive Pronouns stressed on the ultimate [1, 10]

Reflexive Pronouns	Exceptions
myself, himself, herself, yourself, yourselves, itself, ourselves, themselves	themselves (occasionally used with stress on the first syllable)

5.2. Stress on the penultimate

5.2.1. Rule: Rogerson and Gilbert point out that 90% of two-syllable Nouns and Adjectives receive stress on the penultimate [4]

Table 4. Nouns and Adjectives stressed on the penultimate

Two-syllable Nouns and Adjectives	Exceptions
woman, table, problem, drama, extra, teacher, angry, hopeful, active	hotel, cashier, machine, canoe, balloon, canal, receipt, alone, complete, elite

5.2.2. Rule: In words ending in the suffixes -IC/-ICS, -ION, -ICIAN, -CENTRIC, -ISH the penultimate is usually stressed [3, 11, 12]

Table 5. Words stressed on the penultimate [1, 3, 11 - 13]

Suffixes	Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives	Exceptions
-IC/-ICS	realistic, scientific, strategic, apologetic, automatic, phonetics, economics, athletics, physics , mathematics	
-ION	introduction, tradition, position, function , position collision, expansion, discussion, confession, impression	champion , criterion

-ICIAN	politician, technician, magician, electrician, mathematician	
-CENTRIC	Eurocentric, heliocentric, eccentric	
-ISH	diminish, demolish, establish, childish, distinguish	feverish , impoverish

5.3. Stress on the antepenultimate

5.3.1. Rule: The antepenultimate is stressed in Nouns of three or more syllables ending in the suffixes -ITY/-TY, -GRAPHY, -OLOGY [2, 8, 11]

Table 6. Nouns stressed on the antepenultimate [1, 2, 8, 11, 13]

Suffixes	Nouns	Exceptions
-ITY/-TY	possibility, activity, opportunity, electricity, specialty, community, antiquity, faculty, curiosity, publicity	difficulty
-GRAPHY	photography, bibliography, radiography, geography, autobiography	
-OLOGY	psychology, anthology, biology, geology, phonology	

5.3.2. Rule: The antepenultimate is frequently stressed in words of three or more syllables ending in the suffixes -ICAL, -ATE, -IFY/-FY, -CY [3, 11]

Table 7. Words stressed on the antepenultimate [1, 3, 11]

Suffixes	Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives	Exceptions
-ICAL	critical , economical, surgical, grammatical, logical	
-ATE	separate , indicate, certificate, facilitate, syndicate	

-IFY/-FY	satisfy, simplify, diversify, identify, electrify, qualify, clarify, personify, modify, intensify	
-CY	tendency, dependency, efficiency, legacy, proficiency	adequacy, hesitancy

5.4. Stress on the pre-antepenultimate

Rule: The pre-antepenultimate is usually stressed in words of four or more syllables ending in the suffixes -ACY, -ATOR, -MONY, -ARY [3]

Table 8. Words stressed on the pre-antepenultimate [1, 3, 11]

Suffixes	Nouns, Adjectives	Exceptions
-ACY	literacy, intimacy, inaccuracy, numeracy, delicacy	conspiracy, diplomacy
-ATOR	educator, administrator, refrigerator, commentator, operator	conservator, totalizer
-MONY	ceremony, testimony, alimony, matrimony, palimony	disharmony, hegemony
-ARY	culinary, ordinary, voluntary, imaginary, intermediary	disciplinary, complementary

5.5. Stress in Noun-Verb pairs [7]

5.5.1. Rule: A number of two-syllable words take different stress patterns when they are used as a Verb or a Noun. Stress on the ultimate when they are used as Verbs. Stress on the penultimate when they are used as Nouns [7]

Table 9. Stress in Noun-Verb pairs [1, 7]

Verbs	Nouns
contract, transfer, permit, reflex, increase	contract, transfer, permit, reflex, increase

5.5.2. Rule: Several two-syllable words which are used as a Verb or a Noun only remain one stress pattern - on the ultimate or the penultimate

Table 10. Stress on the ultimate or the penultimate [1]

Both Verb and Noun forms remain stress on the ultimate	Both Verb and Noun forms remain stress on the penultimate
reply, demand, supply, command, report	visit, master, water, wonder, worry

5.6. Stress placement in numbers ending in -teen and -ty [7]

Rule: The -teen numbers are stressed on the ultimate, and the -ty numbers are stressed on the penultimate [7]

Table 11. Numbers stressed on the ultimate or the penultimate [1, 7]

Stress the ultimate in the -teen numbers	Stress the penultimate in the -ty numbers
thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen	twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety

5.7. Stress placement in words ending in the suffixes -IAN, -IAL, -ERY [11]

Rule: In words ending in the suffixes -IAN, -IAL, -ERY the syllable immediate before the suffix is usually stressed [11]

Table 12. Stress on the syllable immediate before the suffix [1, 11]

Suffixes	Nouns, Adjectives	Exceptions
-IAN	Canadian, librarian, vegetarian, comedian, historian	
-IAL	artificial, imperial, influential, material, commercial	
-ERY	surgery, machinery, discovery, delivery, refinery	stationery, jewellery

5.8. Stress in words of more than four syllables

Rule: The stressed syllable is put somewhere in the middle of words of more than four syllables rather than on the first or the last syllable [3]

Table 13. Stress in words of more than four syllables [1]

Words of more than four syllables	Exceptions
communicative , constitutionalism , fundamentalist , electromagnet , indestructible	imprecatory , monosyllable , polysyllable

6. SUMMARY OF THE STRESS RULES

The stress rules listed in (5) are summarized as follows:

- The ultimate is stressed in most two-syllable Verbs, reflexive Pronouns, and in words ending in certain suffixes -EE, -EER, -ESE, -ESCE, -ETTE (Rules 5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.1.3).
- The penultimate is usually stressed in most two-syllable Nouns and Adjectives, and in words ending in the suffixes -IC/-ICS, -ION, -ICIAN, -CENTRIC, -ISH (Rules 5.2.1, 5.2.2).
- The antepenultimate is stressed in words of three or more syllables ending in the suffixes -ITY/-TY, -GRAPHY, -OLOGY, -ICAL, -ATE, -IFY/-FY, -CY (Rules 5.3.1, 5.3.2).
- The pre-antepenultimate is usually stressed in

words of four or more syllables ending in the suffixes -ACY, -ATOR, -MONY, -ARY (Rule 5.4).

- A number of two-syllable words take different stress patterns when they are used as a Verb or a Noun. Stress on the ultimate when they are used as Verbs. Stress on the penultimate when they are used as Nouns. Furthermore, several two-syllable words which are used as a Verb or a Noun only remain one stress pattern - on the ultimate or the penultimate (Rules 5.5.1, 5.5.2).
- The -TEEN numbers are stressed on the ultimate, and the -TY numbers are stressed on the penultimate (Rule 5.6).
- In words ending in the suffixes -IAN, -IAL, -ERY the syllable immediate before the suffix is usually stressed (Rule 5.7).
- The stressed syllable is put somewhere in the middle of words of more than four syllables rather than on the first or the last syllable (Rule 5.8).

7. CONCLUSION

The goal of the paper is supposed to generalize some stress rules for making the correct syllable stress in English vocabulary. Nevertheless, the paper does not refer to the difference in the place of stress in some words with the same suffixes. This might be discussed in further research proposals.

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Tổng quan về cách đặt dấu trọng âm trong từ vựng tiếng Anh

Đặng Anh Tuấn

TÓM TẮT

Đối với đa số người học, cách thức để phát âm đúng một từ tiếng Anh dường như là một vấn đề nghiêm túc. Việc này đòi hỏi một sự kết hợp hoàn hảo giữa phần âm và phần nhấn trọng âm trong từ, và phần nhấn trọng âm được nhận xét là quan trọng hơn phần âm. Việc đặt trọng âm đúng trong từ đặc biệt quan trọng cho việc sử dụng và hiểu biết tiếng Anh của người học. Vì lý do này, bài viết xin được phép chọn lọc và gợi ý thêm một số quy luật tìm dấu trọng âm với hy vọng người học sẽ cảm thấy hữu dụng trong việc nhấn trọng âm đúng trong từ tiếng Anh. Tuy nhiên, bài viết chỉ thảo luận về trọng âm chính trong những từ đơn giản và trình bày âm tiết được nhấn bằng các ký tự tô đậm.

Từ khóa: nhấn, âm tiết, từ

Received: 30/09/2021

Revised: 29/10/2021

Accepted for publication: 15/12/2021