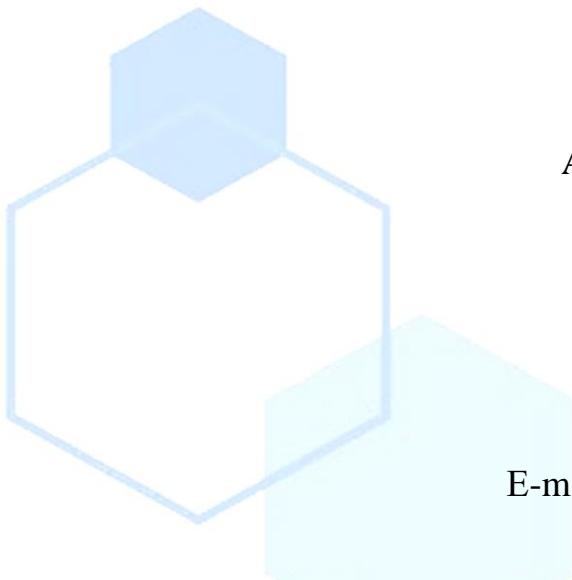


NATURE OF WORD STRESS



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Introduction

Word stress is one of the central concepts of English phonetics and a fundamental component of spoken communication. In every polysyllabic word of English, one syllable is pronounced more prominently than the others. This prominence affects not only the rhythm and melody of speech but also the meaning and grammatical function of the word. Inaccurate stress placement can lead to misunderstanding, miscommunication, or foreign-sounding pronunciation.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the linguistic nature, functions, classification, and placement patterns of word stress in English. The research is based on descriptive and comparative methods, drawing on fundamental phonetic works by A.C. Gimson, Daniel Jones, and Peter Roach.

1. The Phonetic Nature of Word Stress

Word stress refers to the degree of force or prominence given to a particular syllable within a word. This prominence is achieved through a combination of acoustic and articulatory factors:

1. Loudness (Intensity):

Stressed syllables are typically pronounced with greater loudness than unstressed ones.

2. Pitch (Fundamental Frequency):

English speakers often raise the pitch of their voice on the stressed syllable. Pitch is one of the strongest indicators of stress in English.

3. Duration:

Stressed syllables are generally longer than unstressed ones.

4. Vowel Quality:

Vowels in stressed syllables are pronounced clearly, while vowels in unstressed syllables often undergo reduction (e.g., become /ə/ or /ɪ/).

These combined features make the stressed syllable stand out perceptually. In English, stress is phonemic, meaning it can differentiate the meaning of words. This distinguishes English from languages where stress is fixed and does not influence meaning.

Functions of Word Stress

Word stress performs several important linguistic functions in English:

2.1. Distinctive Function

Stress is capable of changing the meaning of a word. This is especially common in pairs of nouns and verbs that share the same spelling:

'record (noun) – re'cord (verb)

'present (noun) – pre'sent (verb)

'increase (noun) – in'crease (verb)

Here, stress placement directly determines lexical meaning.

2.2. Word-Building (Grammatical) Function

Stress differentiates parts of speech. Most nouns and adjectives have initial stress, while the corresponding verbs have stress on the second syllable.

2.3. Rhythmic Function

English is a stress-timed language. This means that stressed syllables occur at roughly equal intervals of time, creating a characteristic rhythm. Correct stress placement ensures natural speech flow and contributes to intelligibility.

2.4. Emphatic (Communicative) Function

Stress can be used to emphasize or highlight a specific part of a word or utterance, contributing to the speaker's communicative intention.

Types of Word Stress in English

Phoneticians generally distinguish three levels of stress in English:

3.1. Primary Stress

This is the strongest type of stress in a word. It carries the main prominence and is marked by a high pitch and long duration.

Example: exami'nation

3.2. Secondary Stress

Secondary stress is weaker than primary stress but stronger than unstressed syllables. It often appears in long or compound words.

Example: ,orga'nization

3.3. Weak Stress

Weakly stressed syllables have reduced vowels and minimal prominence.

Example: pho-to-graph-ic → /fə/

Unlike Russian or Uzbek, where stress may be free but stable within a word, English uses a system of primary and secondary stress that interacts with morphology and word origin.

Stress Placement Rules and Tendencies

Although English stress placement may seem unpredictable, a number of regular patterns exist. These patterns are especially important for learners.

4.1. General Tendencies

Most two-syllable nouns and adjectives have stress on the first syllable:

'teacher, 'happy, 'river'

Two-syllable verbs and prepositions usually have stress on the second syllable:

Re'lax, ex'plode, be'tween

4.2. Stress in Multisyllabic Words

In longer words, stress often depends on morphology:

Suffixes that attract stress to the syllable before them

-tion, -sion, -cian

Exam'i'nation, commu'nication

-ic, -ical

Geo'graphic, his'torical

-ity

E'lectricity

-ian, -ial, -ious

So'cial, va'rious

Suffixes that carry primary stress themselves

-ee: employ'ee

-eer: engin'eer

-ese: Japan'ese

Suffixes that do NOT affect stress

-able, -less, -ness, -ment

(stress stays as in the base word)

4.3. Prefixes

English prefixes rarely carry stress. Stress usually falls on the root:

Un'happy, dis'like, mis'understand

However, some borrowed words may retain prefix stress:

'anti-aircraft, 'supernatural

4.4. Influence of Word Origin

Germanic words tend to be stressed on the first syllable: 'mother, 'winter

Latinate and Greek borrowings follow suffix-based rules: revo'lution, psy'chiatry

Difficulties for Learners

Students whose first language is Russian or Uzbek often face challenges with English stress because:

1. English stress is less predictable and strongly influenced by morphology.
2. English uses extensive vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, which is less typical in Russian/Uzbek.
3. Incorrect stress may completely change the meaning of a word.
4. Learners often transfer the stress patterns of their native language into English.

Common errors include:

Stressing the wrong syllable (com'fortable → correct: 'comfortable*)

Ignoring vowel reduction

Placing stress on prefixes instead of roots

Effective learning strategies:

Memorizing stress patterns and common suffix rules

Using dictionaries with phonetic transcription

Listening practice and repetition of native speech

Shadowing and drilling exercises

Conclusion

Word stress is a crucial component of English phonetics and overall communication competence. It determines the rhythm of speech, distinguishes meanings and grammatical categories, and contributes to intelligibility. Despite its complexity, English stress follows identifiable patterns related to syllable structure, morphology, and word origin. Mastery of stress placement significantly improves pronunciation, listening comprehension, and fluency.

For learners, systematic practice, awareness of stress rules, and comparison with their native language help overcome pronunciation barriers and achieve a more natural, native-like speech pattern.

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