

Strong & Weak Syllables

Lecture 14

Strong and Weak Syllables

One of the most noticeable features of English is that some of its syllables are **strong** while many others are **weak**.

1. *Strong Syllables*

The strong syllable occurs when:

1) It has its peak one of the **vowel** phonemes (or possibly a **triphthong**), but not **/ə, u, i/**.

2) If the vowel is short, the strong syllable will always have a coda.

2. Weak Syllables

Weak syllables:

1) The vowel in a weak syllable tends to be **shorter**, of **lower** intensity and **different** in quality.

2) Weak syllables can only have one of a *very small number of possible peaks.*

Examples

father /fa:ðə/:

(weak vowel in the 2nd syllable: weak syllable)

bottle /bɒtl̩/:

(No vowel in the 2nd syllable: weak syllable)

Phonological rules of Weak Syllables

- In Word- final position:

1) the vowels **/ə/, /i/, /u/** (with **no coda**)

/ə/: /betə/

/i/: /hæpi/

/u/: /θæŋk ju/

2) the vowel **/ə/** (with **a coda**)

/ə/ only: /əʊpən/

Phonological rules of Weak Syllables

- Inside a word:

1) the vowels **/ə/, /i/, /u/** (with **no coda**)

/ə/: /fəʊ.tə.ɡra:f/

/i/: /reɪ.di.əʊ/

/u/: /ɪn.flu.əns/

/ɪ/ can act as a peak, **without coda** if the **following** syllable **begins** with a **consonant**. Example:

architect /a:.**ɪ**.tekt/

The vowel /ə/ : “*schwa*”

The most frequently occurring vowel in English is /ə/, which is always associated with **weak** syllables.

Description of /ə/

Quality:

1. It is **mid** (*half-way between close and open*).
2. It is **central** (*half-way between front and back*).
3. It is described as **lax**, that is, not articulated with much energy.

Cont.

Not all weak syllables contain /ə/, though many do. Thus, we need to know where /ə/ is appropriate and where it is not.

Cont.

particular weak syllables are pronounced as strong instead, according to the following rules of English spelling:

It will be pronounced as a /ə /when:

1) Spelt with 'a':

/ə/ instead of /æ/ as in *character* /kærəktə/

2) Spelt with 'ar':

/ə/ instead of /ɑ:/ as in *particular* /pətɪkjələ/

3) Adjectival endings spelt with 'ate':

/ə/ instead of /eɪ/ as in *intimate* /ɪntɪmət/

It will be pronounced as a /ə /when:

4) Spelt with 'o' :

/ ə/ instead of /əʊ/ as in *tomorrow* /təmədrəʊ/

5) Spelt with 'or':

/ ə/ instead of /ɔ:/ as in *ambassador* /æmbæsədə/

It will be pronounced as a /ə / when

6) Spelt with 'e'; / ə/ instead of /e:/ as in *violet*

/vaɪəleɪt/

7) Spelt with 'er' / ə/ instead of /ɜ:/ as in *stronger*

/strɒŋgə/

It will be pronounced as a /ə /when

8) Spelt with 'u' / ə/ instead of /ʌ/ as in
autumn / :təʍn/

9) Spelt with 'ough' / ə/: different pronunciations
as in *thorough* /θʌrə/

10) Spelt with 'ou' / ə/ instead of /aʊ/ as in
gracious /greɪʃəs/

The close *Front* & Back Vowels

Two other vowels are commonly found in the **weak** syllables:

1. **/i/** in the general area of **/i:/** and **/ɪ/**
2. **/u/** in the general area of **/u:/** and **/ʊ/**

Cont.

In **strong** syllables, it is easy to distinguish **/i:/** from **/ɪ/** and **/u:/** from **/ʊ/**.

Example:

beat - bit

Cont.

But in **weak** syllables the difference is not so clear.

Example:

easy - busy

Cont.

the vowels are more like **/i:/** and **/u:/**
when they precede another **vowel**,
the vowels are more likely **/i/** and **/u/**
when they precede a **consonant** or a
pause.

Rules where /i/ is found

1) **In** word-final position :

a- in words spelt with final **'y'** or **'ey'**

after one or more consonant letters, e.g.

happy /hæpi/

valley /væli/

Cont.

B- in morpheme-final position when such words have suffixes beginning with vowels, e.g.

happier /hæpiə/

easiest /i:ziəst/

Cont.

2). In a prefix:

such as those spelt 're', 'pre' and 'de' if it precedes a vowel and is unstressed, e.g.

react /riækt/

preoccupied /priɒkjəpaɪd/

deactivate /diæktiveɪt/

Cont.

3). In the suffixes:

spelt **'iate'** and **'ious'** when they have two syllables, e.g.

appreciate /əpri:ʃiɛt/

hilarious /hɪleəriəs/

Cont.

4) In the following words when unstressed **'he'** , **'she'** , **'we'** , **'me'** , **'be'** and the word **'the'** when it precedes a vowel.

Examples where /u/ is found

Weak syllables with close back rounded vowels are not so commonly found.

1). We find /u/ most frequently in the words 'you', 'to', 'into', 'do', when they are unstressed and not immediately preceding a consonant.

Cont.

2). We find /u/ in the words **‘though’** and **‘who’**, when they are unstressed.

Cont.

3). /u/ is also found **before** another **vowel** within a word, e.g.

evacuation /ɪvækueɪʃn/

influenza /ɪnfluenzə/

Strong & Weak FORMS



Strong & Weak Forms

Certain well-known English **WORDS** can be **pronounced** in **two** different ways; these are called *strong form* and *weak form*.

Cont.

Almost all words which have both a strong and weak form are **functional words**. These functional words are words such as *auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns and articles*.

Examples

word	strong form	weak form	e.g. of a weak form
<i>a</i>	<i>ei</i>	<i>ə</i>	<i>a cup</i> [<i>ə kʌp</i>]
<i>and</i>	<i>ænd</i>	<i>ənd, nd, ən, n</i> 	<i>you and me</i> [<i>ju ən mi</i>]
<i>as</i>	<i>æz</i>	<i>əz</i>	<i>as good as</i> [<i>əz gʊd əz</i>]

Examples

word	strong form	weak form	e.g. of a weak form
<i>at</i>	æt	ət	<i>at home</i> [ət həʊm]
<i>can</i>	kæn	kən, kŋ	<i>I can go</i> [aɪ kŋ gəʊ]
<i>has</i>	hæz	həz, əz, z, s	<i>he's left</i> [hɪz lɛft]

Examples

word	strong form	weak form	e.g. of a weak form
<i>he</i>	hi	hɪ, ɪ, I	<i>Will he go?</i> [wɪl ɪ gəʊ]
<i>must</i>	mʌst	məst, məs, mʃ 	<i>I must sell</i> [aɪ mʃ sel]
<i>she</i>	ʃi	ʃɪ	<i>Did she go?</i> [dɪd ʃɪ gəʊ]

Examples

word	strong form	weak form	e.g. of a weak form
<i>that</i>	ðæt	ðət	<i>He said that it did</i> [hɪ I sɛd ðət ɪt dɪd]
<i>to</i>	tu	tʊ, tə	<i>to Mexico</i> [tə mɛksɪkəʊ]
<i>would</i>	wʊd	wəd, əd, d	<i>it would do?</i> [ɪt əd du]