

Lesson 07: INTRODUCTION TO SENTENCE STRESS

Sentence stress is the music of spoken English. Like word stress, sentence stress can help you to understand spoken English. Sentence stress is what gives English its **rhythm** or "beat". WHILE word stress is accent on **one syllable** within a **word**, sentence stress is accent on **certain words** within a **sentence**. Sentence stress is considered as free because it is largely determined by the meaning to be conveyed. Some words are predisposed by their function in the language to receive the accent. They are called content (lexical words): main verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs. Content words have in connected speech the qualitative pattern of their isolated forms; therefore, they retain some qualitative prominence even when no pitch is associated to them and when they are relatively unstressed. Function words (grammatical, structural words) belong to the category of unstressed words, but they may be exceptionally stressed if the meaning requires it. They are words such as auxiliary verbs, modals, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, articles. In a sentence, we have two types of word:

content words function words

Content words are the key words of a sentence. They are the important words that carry the meaning or sense.

Function words are not very important words. They are small, simple words that make the sentence correct grammatically.

Rules for Sentence Stress in English

The basic rules of sentence stress are:

content words are **stressed** .1

function words are **unstressed** .2

the **time between stressed words** is always the **same** .3

The following tables can help you decide which words are **content words** and which words are **function words**:

Content words - stressed

Words carrying the meaning	Example
main verbs	SELL, GIVE, EMPLOY
nouns	CAR, MUSIC, MARY
adjectives	RED, BIG, INTERESTING
adverbs	QUICKLY, LOUDLY, NEVER
negative auxiliaries	DON'T, AREN'T, CAN'T

Function words - unstressed

Words for correct grammar	Example
pronouns	he, we, they
prepositions	on, at, into
articles	a, an, the
conjunctions	and, but, because
auxiliary verbs	do, be, have, can, must

Exceptions

The above rules are for what is called "neutral" or normal stress. But sometimes we can stress a word that would normally be only a structure word, for example to correct information. Look at the following dialogue:

"They've been to Mongolia, haven't they?"

"No, **THEY** haven't, but **WE** have.

Note also that when "be" is used as a main verb, it is usually unstressed (even though in this case it is a content word).

Function words may carry sentence stress if **emphasized**.

I don't think I can do it. But I think **you** can do it.

- **Polysyllabic** function words may carry sentence stress. **behind ago until**
- **Adverbs** of position carry sentence stress. I'm not coming **here again**. I left it **over there**.
- **Demonstratives** carry sentence stress. **This** book is really worth reading. **That's** the stupidest idea I've ever heard.
- **Negatives** are stressed. I'm **not** coming here again. We **can't** expect everything. I hope you **won't** be annoyed.
- **Interrogative pronouns** carry sentence stress. **Why** are they here?