INTONATION PITCH AND STRESS – A GUIDE

Say this sentence aloud and count how many seconds it takes.

*The beautiful Mountain appeared transfixed in the distance.*

Time required? Probably about 5 seconds. Now, try speaking this sentence aloud.

*He can come on Sundays as long as he doesn’t have to do any homework in the evening.*

Time required? Probably about 5 seconds!
Wait a minute the first sentence is much shorter than the second sentence!

You are only partially right!

This simple exercise makes a very important point about how we speak and use English. Namely, English is considered a stressed language while many other languages are considered syllabic. Some words are given more emphasis and longer some words are quickly spoken, sometimes ‘eaten’!

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The Basics:

In English speech there are a combination of stressed (strong) and unstressed (weak) syllables.

- It was the *best* car for them to *buy*.

The syllable which is stressed the most is called the **nuclear** syllable.

- It was the best car for them to *buy*. (Buy is the nuclear syllable.)

The nuclear syllable carries the main focus of information. It also carries any new information.

- We looked at the **hatchback**. (*Hatchback is new information*).
- The hatchback was **old**. (*Hatchback is given information. Old is new information*).

The nuclear syllable sounds louder than the other stressed syllables. It also has a change of pitch.
Pitch movements:

The two most common pitch movements are:

1. rising pitch  yés
2. falling pitch  yès

Compare these replies:

Q: When would it suit you to come?
A: Nòw?
(The intonation expresses a question: would it be OK if I came now?)

Q: When would it suit you to come?
A: Nòw.
(The intonation expresses a statement: I'll come now.)

A falling tone is used to show completeness. A falling tone is normally used when a person is about to stop talking. A falling tone is used at the end of a list to show that the list is complete.

- Would you like tea / coffee / fruit juice / or lemonade / (That's all I'm offering.)

A rising tone can indicate incompleteness. A rising tone at the end indicates that they wish to continue speaking and are seeking feedback, by word or gesture.

What is intonation?

Intonation shows the speaker’s attitude. It is by changing the pitch that we can indicate certainty, uncertainty, enthusiasm, boredom, and so on. We can say “yes” so that it almost means “no”.

As listeners, we become skilled at detecting fine shades of meaning in other people's speech. We can say they sounded unhappy, tired, sneering, self-satisfied, sarcastic, and so on. These attitudes are picked up from very fine variations in pitch and loudness.

Although intonation is an important feature of spoken English, it is represented in written English only rather crudely by the use of such punctuation devices as full stops, commas, question marks, and exclamation marks.

Skilful writers can convey shades of meaning in various ways. Some resort to a simple method of adverbials.

  e.g. “How are you today?” he asked cheerfully.
Improving sentence intonation is one of the key elements in your English pronunciation. Let's discuss the four basic types of word stress that lead to proper intonation in English.

Tonic stress
Emphatic stress
Contrastive stress
New information stress

TONIC STRESS

Tonic stress refers to the syllable in a word which receives the most stress in an intonation unit. An intonation unit has one tonic stress. It’s important to remember that a sentence can have more than one intonation unit, and therefore have more than one tonic stress. Here are some examples of intonation units with the tonic stress bolded.

He's waiting
He's waiting / for his friend
He's waiting / for his friend / at the station.

Generally, the final tonic stress in a sentence receives the most stress. In the above example, 'station' receives the strongest stress.

There are a number of instances in which the stress changes from this standard. Here are short explanations for each of the changes with example sentences to illustrate.

EMPHATIC STRESS

If you decide to emphasize something, you can change the stress from the principal noun to another content word such as an adjective (big, difficult, etc.), intensifier (very, extremely, etc.) This emphasis calls attention to the extraordinary nature of what you want to emphasize.

For example:
That was a difficult test.
- Standard statement
That was a difficult test.
- Emphasizes how difficult the test was

extremely
terrribly
completely
utterly
especially
etc....
CONTRASTIVE STRESS

Contrastive stress is used to point out the difference between one object and another. It tends to be used with determiners such as 'this, that, these and those'.

For example: I think I prefer this colour. Do you want these or those curtains?

Contrastive stress is also used to bring out a given word in a sentence, which will also slightly change the meaning.

• He came to the party yesterday. (It was he, not someone else).
• He walked to the party yesterday. (He walked rather than drove).
• He came to the party yesterday. (It was a party not a meeting or something else).
• He came to the party yesterday. (It was yesterday not two weeks ago or some other time).

NEW INFORMATION STRESS

When asked a question, the requested information is naturally stressed more strongly.

For example:  
Where are you from? - I come from Seattle, in the USA.  
What do you want to do? - I want to go bowling.  
When does class begin? - The class begins at nine o'clock.
English is considered a stressed language while many other languages are considered syllabic.

What does that mean?

It means that, in English, we give stress to certain words while other words are quickly spoken (eaten!). In French each syllable receives equal importance and therefore equal time is needed. English however, spends more time on specific stressed words while quickly gliding over the other, less important, words.

Let’s look at an example:

The modal verb "can".

When we use the positive form of "can" we quickly glide over the can and it is hardly pronounced.

1 We can meet here.

But when we use the negative form "can’t" we tend stress the fact that it is negative.

2 We can’t meet here.

Sentence 2 is longer.

So, what does this mean when you speak?

Well, first you need to understand which words we stress.

Stress words are:

- CONTENT words:
  - Nouns
  - Principal verbs
  - Adjectives
  - Adverbs

Non-stressed words are:

- FUNCTION words:
  - Determiners
  - Auxiliary verbs
  - Prepositions
  - Conjunctions
  - Pronouns

You needn’t worry about pronouncing every word clearly to be understood (we native speakers certainly don’t). You should however, concentrate on pronouncing the stressed words clearly.

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Word Stress

All words of more than one syllable have what is called word stress. This means that at least one of the syllables is longer and louder than the other syllables.

In the following examples, stressed syllables are in CAPITAL letters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHOtograph</th>
<th>comMITtee</th>
<th>phoTOgraphy</th>
<th>photoGRAphic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PENcil</td>
<td>MARyland</td>
<td>soCIety</td>
<td>volunTEEr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>inforMAtion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In many cases, word stress must simply be learned as new vocabulary is acquired. However, there are several rules for word stress which can make it easier to deal with.

I. COMPOUND NOUNS

| bluebird | bookstore |
| blackboard | toothbrush |
| notebook | keyboard |

In each of these examples, the first part of the compound gets the stress.

II. NOUN + NOUN COMPOUNDS

(2-word compound nouns)

| air conditioner | french fry |
| computer programmer | Geiger counter |
| nail polish | doctor's office |

The first word gets the stress.
(Note: If the "unstressed" part of the noun+noun compound is more than one syllable, it will have some word stress. However, the first part of the compound will get even more stress.)
III. PHRASAL VERBS

versus Compound Nouns derived from phrasals

Phrasal verbs (a.k.a. two-word or two-part verbs) are generally made up of a verb and preposition. For many of these, correct word stress is especially important as they have compound noun counterparts.

In phrasal verbs, the preposition gets the word stress. In the compound nouns however the stress is on the first part.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrasal Verbs</th>
<th>Compound Nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>let down</td>
<td>letdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shut out</td>
<td>shutdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turn off</td>
<td>turnoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take over</td>
<td>takeover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>print out</td>
<td>printout</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IV. HOMOGRAPHS

Homographs are words which are written the same way but which have different pronunciation. In English, there are many words which have the same spelling, but with different word stress the meaning can change. The vowel sounds change depending on whether they are stressed or unstressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VERB</th>
<th>NOUN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>record</td>
<td>record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>progress</td>
<td>progress</td>
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<tr>
<td>present</td>
<td>present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>permit</td>
<td>permit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By Kenneth BEARE