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Weak Forms

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 $\mathbf{L}evel: \mathbf{S}ophomores$

Weak Forms

Introduction

Weak forms are an essential feature of English pronunciation in everyday speech. The words which often receive weak pronunciations are function or structural words (i.e. words that express grammatical relationships). They are generally unstressed, There is a group of about 40 monosyllabic English function words that have recognizably at least two realizations: one with a full vowel and no consonantal adjustments, for example the conjunction 'and' as [ænd], and one with a shortened and neutralized vowel, commonly a schwa, and potentially also consonant deletions such as [ən]. The former has been termed the strong form and the latter the weak form of such words.

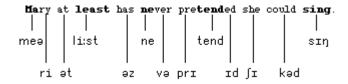
Weak and strong forms are among the phonological features that are linked to English pronunciation problems faced by ESL/EFL learners in so many parts of the world. From observation, it could be noticed that the EFL/ESL learners tend to use only strong forms, thus having an impact on their spoken English. The above situations predispose ESL learners to the use of all-strong-forms. The inappropriate use of strong forms impacts the speech in two dimensions: phonologically and semantically. When a speaker uses only strong forms in his/her speech, the utterances become full of tense vowels which disrupts the rhythm of the language. The speech loses its musicality and the speaker his/her listener. Semantically speaking, the all-strong-form use in speech mares its intelligibility.

This phenomenon is due to some reasons; first, the learners do not have any contact with native speakers. Second, the EFL/ESL teachers ignore some phonological aspects and do not 'like' handling them in their teachings. Not only do the teachers ignore such vital aspects of English language, but also do not use them in their daily conversions in classrooms.

In a stress-timed language such as English, stresses occur at regular intervals. The words which are most important (content /lexical words) for communication of the message, that is, nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs, are normally stressed in connected speech. Function words such as auxiliary verbs, modals, conjunctions, pronouns, articles, linkers and prepositions are not usually stressed, and are reduced to keep the stress pattern regular. Weak forms are syllable sounds that become unstressed in connected speech and are often then pronounced as a schwa. Structural words are often pronounced in their weak forms, since they do not carry the main content or meaning, and are therefore not normally stressed.

It has been noticed that the vowels in UNSTRESSED SYLLABLES can suffer reduction, usually to \bigcirc , often to \bot , and sometimes to \bigcup . But what happens if the WHOLE WORD is unstressed?

In this case, short structural words are often completely unstressed. One of the examples is:



In this sentence, the words "at", "has", "she" and "could" are all unstressed, and have weak vowels:

These are called **weak forms**. Yet, these are usually pronounced in their citation form, i.e., their strong form

you've learnt to say /fr pm/ and /hæz/ instead of /fr pm/ and / pz/.

What happens when a strong form becomes weak?

This is a detailed review of the different types of changes which structural words undergo when they become weak. For a complete look-up table of these changes, try this

ullet Words which change their strong vowel to ullet

• **Prepositions**at for from of to 5, 14-16

Aux verbs

am, are, can, do, does, had, has, have, must, shall, should, was, were, will, would, 37-39

• Adverbs conjunctions articles a, an, and, as, but, some, than, that, the, 36

Pronouns

her them us you your 29

• Words which change their strong vowel to $\bot(\dot{\bot})$

be, been, he, him, is, she, we, 33, 35

Words which change their vowel before vowels:

		Веботе	Before vowels	
		consonants		12
• 1/1 to 1	be	bī,bi	bi	aıl bı 'ðeə
				aɪl bi ˈəʊvə ˈðeə
	he	(h)I,i	(h)i	If I 'wonts
				If i 'a:sks
	she	ʃɪ,ʃi	∫i	ʃɪ 'wonts tu
				∫i 'o≀t tu
• ə,u to u	do	də, du	du	'wɒt də wɪ
				du 'o:l əv əs 'wənt
	to	tə	tu	tə 'denma:k
				tu 'aɪslənd
	you	jə, ju	ju	ˈwɪl jə ˈkʌm
				wīl ju 'a:sk
• add -r	for	fə	fər	fə 'təvni
				fər ˈælɪs
	her	(h)ə	(h)ər	hə 'mʌðə
				hər 'xŋk!
	there	ðə	ðər	ðə 'ka:nt bi
				ðər 'ɪzṇt eni
	are	ə	ər	ə ðer 'sıl
				ər 'ɔ:l əv ðəm
	were	wə	wər	wə öer 'sıl
				wər 'ɔː∟ əv ðəm
	your	jə	jər	jə 'm∧ðə
				jər 'a:nt
articles:	a	ə	ən	ə 'do:
				ən 'əʊpən dɔ:
	the	ðə	ði	ða 'do:
				ði 'əʊpən 'dɔ:

H-dropping

• Weak forms which drop their initial h except at the beginning of utterances had has had have he her him his 29-35

When strong, when weak ?

Quite often, strong forms are used instead of weak forms. The following is a summary of when strong forms are likely to occur.

(a) Normally weak, but strong when stressed

- foregrounding
 - 1 'meariez'si:nīmbī'fo: Mary has seen him before ◀
 - 2 'meari'hæz'si:nɪmbɪ'fɔ: Mary has seen him before
 - 3 'meariaz'si:n'hɪmbɪ'fɔ: Mary has seen him before
- comparative stress
 - 4 'ðīs 'treīn 'īzηt 'kʌmīŋ 'frɒm 'lʌndən | īts 'gəʊɪŋ 'tu: 'lʌndən |
 This train isn't coming from London, it's going to London
- evasion of repetition (deacccenting)
 - 5 hi 'did it fa åa 'pi:p! av åa 'siti he did it for the people of the city 6 'gavanmant 'pv åa 'pi:p! | 'bar åa 'pi:p! | 'fo: åa pi:p! government of the people, for the people, by the people 7 åa 'mi:| waz 'gud || bat 'weiting 'fo: åa 'mi:| waz 'to:||a

 The meal was good, but waiting for the meal was torture
- citation forms
 - 8 'brgə ðən'mi: bigger than me
 9 'hau dəjə 'spel ðə 'ws:d 'ðæn How do you spell the word "than"?

 10 ar kəd 'du: rt rf ju wəd 'əunli 'stop 'hæs[rŋ mi

 I could do it if you would only stop hassling me

 11 ar sed 'kud | 'not 'wud I said "could", not "would"

 12 ar sed 'ði: 'targə 'not 'er 'targə I said "the tiger", not "a tiger"
- in front of pauses
 - 13 ard 'lark tə 'spi:k tə ði: || 'wptsrznerm || 'blevk u 'selz rn'∫vərəns ◀
 I'd like to speak to the whatisname bloke who sells insurance
 (Note on the soundclip I say "the er bloke" perhaps the /i/
 in "the" is a result of the following vowel in "er".)

(b) weak forms which become strong when final

• Prepositions and auxiliary verbs are strong at the end of utterances; pronouns remain weak:

```
14 'aɪ 'kʌm frəm 'braɪtn || 'braɪtnz weər aɪ 'kʌm frɒm ◀
15 'kʌm ət 'sɪks ə'klɒk | 'wɒt ə jə 'getɪŋ æt ◀
16 djə 'wɒnt tə 'kʌm | 'jes aɪ 'wɒnt tu: | bət aɪ 'kɑ:nt ◀
```

sometimes strong preceeding final unstressed pronoun:

```
17 aī 'w∧ndər if jəd 'du: 's∧mþiŋ fɔ: mī
18 aī 'w∧ndər if jəd 'du: 's∧mþiŋ fə 'mi: ◀
19 'sɒk it tu im 'ʤɒni ◀ (see also 40)
```

(c) different part of speech

Some words occur as different parts of speech with different stress and vowel quality:

• that: weak when relative, strong when demonstrative:

```
20 'enībodi ðat 'd∧z 'ðæt ◀
21 'ðæts ða 'mæn ðat aī 'sɔ: _ ða 'haus ðat aī 'bɔ:t īz 'ðæt wʌn ◀
that's the man that I saw - the house that I bought is that one
22 'ðæt 'bʊk 'sez ðat 'ðæts ða 'best 'weī ta 'kʊk 'mʌʃrumz ◀
```

• some: weak when indefinite, strong when adjectival:

```
23 ðar a sam 'pi:p| 'werting aut'said ta 'si: ju there are some people waiting outside to see you 24 'sam 'pi:p| 's:|wiz 'get on mai 'ns:vz some people always get on my nerves
```

- there: strong when adverbial, optionally weak when a dummy subject. Can also be weak finally.
 - 25 'ðeəz ðə 'haus ar wəz 'bo:n rn ◀
 26 ðə wəz ə 'sʌdn 'sarləns | 'wɒznt ðə (ðeə ... ðeə) ◀
 (The sound clip gives both weak and strong forms you may hear either.)
- Some verbs can be both auxiliary (weak forms) and main (strong forms):

```
27 ar 'dīdņt 'si: īf i ad 'fīnīst | 'wot daz īt 'mæta 🐗
28 ar 'hæd 'flu: 'lɑ:st 'wi:k | si 's:lweīz 'dʌz wot sī 'laīks 🐗
```

• (d) h-dropping

ullet Words beginning with h- drop the h when weak, but often retain them at the beginning of a sentence

```
29 I gave her the letter - Tony went to see his mother ar 'gerv a ða 'leta | 'tauni 'went ta 'si: rz 'mʌða

30 His mother came to see him hrz 'mʌða 'kerm ta 'si: rm

31 Her mother came to see them ha 'mʌða 'kerm ta 'si: ðam d
```

• If dropped h leads to V-V, it may reappear:

```
32 I tried to give her his letter
ar 'traid to 'giv o hiz 'leto d

33 She did it for her brother
fr 'did it fo he 'brað d

but more often this leads to linking r after o, a, ao s:

34 ar 'traid to 'giver iz 'leto d
```

(e) conjunctions

• and, but, than - nearly always weak

35 | Si 'did it fər ə 'brʌðə 🍕

NOTE: don't drop h's in lexical words!

36 'meəri ən 'bru:s ə kwīkə ðən 'mi: bət 'sləvə ðən 'ju: 🌗

(f) auxiliary verbs

```
37 can: aī 'þīŋk aī kən (kṇ) 'du: īt d
38 will does: 'dʒɒn əl əv 'fɪnɪʃt baɪ 'naʊ | 'wen dəz i 'li:v ðə 'fæktəri d
39 must was were: wi məs 'get səm 'mɔ: | 'wɒt wəz aɪ 'seɪɪŋ | 'weə wə ðə 'ʧɪ
Idrən d
```

• strong forms finally, like prepositions

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40 can, have: aɪ kən 'du: ɪt ɪf 'ju: kæn | hil əv 'fɪnɪ∫t bɪfɔ: 'ðeɪ hæv ◀
```

• strong when main verbs

41 see 28 above

(g) Negatives are always strong

```
42 'ðæts 'npt wpt ar 'sed
43 'ðæt 'rzņt wpt ar 'sed ◀
44 jv 'ka:nt 'du: 'ðæt ('kænt) ◀
```

(h) structural words which do not have weak forms:

```
how if in on off then they up what when where
```

hav if in on of den dei ∧p wot wen weed

their does not have a weak form in RP, although you may sometimes hear a weak form $^{\delta er}$ before words beginning with a vowel (e.g. "their own"). In GA this weak form occurs before consonants too.

They is never weak. But **them** has a weak form and may even lose the initial consonant - $^{\delta am}$ or am .

Activities

Activity one

In the following sentences, the transcription for the weak-form words is left blank. Fill in the blanks, taking care to use the appropriate form.

1. I want her to park that car over there.

ar wont pa:k ka:r əʊvə

2. Of all the proposals, the one that you made is the silliest.

o:l prəpəuziz wnn meid siliəst

- 3. Jane and Bill could have driven them to and from the party.

 dgein bil driven
- 4. To come to the point, what shall we do for the rest of the week?

 kam point wot rest with
- 5. Has anyone got an idea where it came from? eniwan got aidiə weər it keim
- Pedestrians must always use the crossings provided for them.
 pedestrienz o:lwiz ju:z krosinz prevaidid
- 7. Each one was a perfect example of the art that had been developed there i:t] wan pa:fikt igza:mpl a:t bi:n divelopt

Activity two

Mark the underlined words w if you think they will be weak and s if you think they will be strong.

- 1 I could speak English when I was twelve.
- 2 I wasn't very well yesterday, but I am today.
- 3 A: Are these your gloves? B: Yes, they are. Thanks!
- 4 A: I don't think you were at the lesson last week, were you? B: I was!
- 5 A: I didn't think the singers in the band were very good. B: Oh, I thought they were!
- 6 A: Have you got a pen? B: Just a minute, I think I have, somewhere.
- 7 A: Has the lesson started? B: Yes, it has, but you can go in.
- 8 A: Where does he live? B: Near the old town hall. Do you know where that is? A: Yes, I do.
- 1 A: Are you going to talk to him? B: No, I think he should talk to me first.
- 2 A: Shall I phone her? B: Yes, I think you should.
- 3 A: You see those people over there? Do you know them? B: I know her, but I don't know him.
- 4 A: What are you going to give him? B: I think I'll give him a shirt. What about you?
- 5 Let him come in and ask him what he wants.
- 6 She says she'll bring her money tomorrow.
- 7 I'm tired ... shall we go now?
- 8 Everybody's leaving. What about us? Shall we go, too?
- 9 Tell us when you're ready.
- 10 A: Who broke that window? B: He did! C: No, I didn't, she did!

Activity four: Fill in the weak forms in the phonetic transcriptions. Use only \mathfrak{I} , \mathfrak{i} & \mathfrak{u} .

a) 'Have you seen the time?'

| h___v j___ si:n ð___ taim |

b) 'What have you done today?'

wɒtv j dʌn tdei	
c) 'That was really annoying.'	
ðæt wz rɪəlnɔɪjŋ	
d) Your bike has got a puncture.	
j baɪkz gɒt pʌŋt∫	
e) 'Shall we go to the pub for a beer?	
l w gəʊ t ð рлb fr bɪə	
f) Most of them have finished.	•
məʊstv ðmv fɪnʃt	
Actvity five: Mark the stress patterns of the word gr special attention to the pronunciation of the weak for Example: in fact all of you	- ·
 at the end of the morning you will all be able to from the college office at nine o'clock in the morning at four o'clock in the afternoon most of you from nine in the morning till eight in the evening open at the same times sports clubs and examinations. 	
Activity six: Transcribe phonemically the whole sente	ences.
1.I want her to park that car over there.	

- 2.To come to the point, what shall we do for the rest of the week?
- 3. Has anyone got an idea where it came from ?
- 4. She can do a lot but her parents didn't want her so.
- 5. Is it Ann or you who sent that email to my friend?