
CHAPTER 7

Word Accent

7.1 Word Accent

Word accent is an important feature of English. In words of more than one syllable, not all the syllables are equally prominent. Those that are more prominent than others are said to receive the *accent*. Every good dictionary indicates the location of word accent, and because there are very few rules in the matter, it is necessary to refer to the dictionary to find out the accentual pattern.

The relative prominence of a syllable may be due to stress, that is, greater breath force, greater muscular effort, and greater amplitude of vibration of the vocal cords in the case of voiced sounds. Very often stress and pitch change work together to make a syllable prominent. The quality of the sounds and their length also contribute to prominence.

The syllable on which there is a pitch change is said to have the *primary* or *tonic* accent. Any other prominent syllable is said to have *secondary* accent. Primary accent is marked with a vertical bar above and in front of the syllable to which it refers, secondary accent with a bar below and in front of the syllable.

Examples

2 syllables:

(i) Accent on the first syllable:

¹able, ¹baggage, ¹captain, ¹damage, ¹eager, ¹kidney,
¹dentist, ¹master, ¹package, ¹tackle.

(ii) Accent on the second syllable:

a¹bout, be¹cause, ca¹nal, de¹ceive, ef¹fect, en¹rol,
pos¹sess, de¹light, be¹side, re¹course.

3 syllables:

(i) Primary accent on the first syllable:

¹accident, ¹bicycle, ¹calcu¹late, ¹delicate, ¹edu¹cate.

'recog₁nise, 'recti₁fy, 'permeate, 'foreigner, 'quarrelsome.

(ii) Primary accent on the second syllable:

ac₁ custom, com₁mittee, de₁ liver, e₁ lastic, ho₁ rizon, py₁ jama, re₁ actor, fa₁ miliar, sul₁phuric, des₁cribing.

(iii) Primary accent on the third syllable:

₁disap₁ point, ₁enter₁tain, ₁recom₁mend, ₁under₁stand
₁super₁sede, ₁millio₁naire, ₁inhu₁mane, ₁decom₁pose.

7.2 Strees Shift

It should not be assumed that words with the same stem will keep the primary stress on the same syllable.

Indeed, stress shift in derivatives is quite normal, e.g.,

a₁cademy, ₁aca₁demic, a₁cade₁mician

bac₁teria, bac₁teri₁ology, bac₁terio₁logical

₁indi₁vidual, ₁indi₁vidu₁ality, ₁indi₁vidua₁listic

Imp ✓ ₁politics, po₁litical, ₁poli₁tician.

7.3 Historical Reasons

The reasons for complexity in word accent in English lie in history. The language is drawn from two main sources, Germanic and Romance. In the first, words normally had accent at the beginning; in the second, on the contrary, the last syllable was usually the most prominent, and it is the interaction of these two principles that has produced the accentual patterns of modern English. *domina*

7.4 Compound Words

In compound words, that is, words consisting of combinations of two words, the primary accent is generally on one element — usually the first.

Examples:

2 elements:

(i) Primary accent on the first element:

₁anything

₁backbone

₁earthquake

₁goldsmith

(ii) Sometimes both elements are accented, but the tonic accent is on the second element. This is shown by an oblique bar pointing downwards to indicate the tonic accent and a vertical bar to indicate the pre-tonic accent.

¹after[\]noon

¹half-[\]hour

¹long-[\]lived

¹middle-[\]aged

¹north-[\]west

In connected speech one of the two accents is dropped to suit the rhythm of the sentence.

3 elements

Primary (tonic) accent on the second element:

¹hot-[\]water-₁ bottle

¹waste-[\]paper-₁ basket

7.5 Stress Change According to Function

There are a number of words of two syllables in which the accentual pattern depends on whether the word is used as a noun, an adjective, or a verb. The accent is on the first syllable when the word is a noun or an adjective and on the second syllable when it is a verb.

Examples:

¹ object (n.)	ob ¹ ject (v.)
¹ perfect (adj.)	per ¹ fect (v.)
¹ produce (n.)	pro ¹ duce (v.)
¹ progress (n.)	pro ¹ gress(v.)
¹ record (n.)	re ¹ cord(v.)
¹ import (n.)	im ¹ port (v.)
¹ subject (n.)	sub ¹ ject(v.)
¹ increase (n.)	in ¹ crease (v.)

7.6 Word Accent in Indian English

The patterns of word accent in English are not well organised. In some cases, a pattern different from that in British R.P. is used.

For example, the feature of change in accent according to the function of the word is not always found in Indian English. *Absent* is generally accented on the first syllable, both as an adjective and as a verb. *Object* is accented on the first syllable, both as a noun and a verb.

Here are some other examples of word accentual patterns in Indian English that diverge from R.P.

conduct (v.), *develop*, *activity*, *already*, *correct*, *expect*, *hotel*, *industrial*, *mistake*, *occur* and *prefer* are accented on the first syllable by some speakers instead of the second.

atmosphere, *industry*, *minister*, *record* (n.), *refuge*, *written* and *yesterday* are accented on the second syllable by some speakers instead of the first.

It is necessary to use the correct pattern of word accent when talking to native English speakers, because wrong word accent, that is, one different from that used in native English, is the most frequent cause of the unintelligibility of Indian English.¹

7.7 Rules for Accentual Patterns

Here are a few rules for accentual patterns in English words:

(1) All English words have some accent, primary or secondary, on the first or the second syllable.

(2) Words with weak prefixes are accented on the root, and not the prefix, e.g., a¹ broad, a¹ cross, ad¹ mit, ad¹ vice, a¹ head, a¹ lone, a¹ loud, a¹ mount, a¹ part, at¹ tend, be¹ low, be¹ tween, com¹ pose, cor¹ rect, de¹ velop, ex¹ pect, oc¹ cur, pre¹ fer, re¹ duce.

(3) The inflectional suffixes *-es*, *-ing*, *-ed*, and the following derivational suffixes do not affect the accent: *-age*, *-dom*, *-en*, *-er*, *-ess*, *-ful*, *-fy*, *-less*, *-let*, *-ly*, *-ment*, *-ness*, *-or*, *-some*, *-ward*.

<i>e.g.,</i>		
	match	'matches
	be'gin,	be'ginning
	want,	'wanted
	break,	'breakage
	free,	'freedom
	bright,	'brighten
	board,	'boarder
	god,	'goddess
	care,	'careful
	class,	'classify
	aim,	'aimless
	book,	'booklet
	bad,	'badly
	ap'point,	ap'pointment
	'bitter,	'bitterness
	'conquer,	'conqueror
	fear	'fearsome
	back	'backward

(4) Words ending in *-ion* have the primary accent on the last syllable but one, e.g., ,appli'cation, ,civilization, ,compo'sition, ,conver'sation, ,culti'vation, de'termination, exami'nation, i,magi'nation. ,intro'duction, ,qualifi'cation.

(5) Words ending in *-ic, -ical, -ically* have the primary accent on the syllable preceding the suffix, e.g., a ,polo'getic, e'lectric, e'lectrical, gram'matical, ,patri'otic, po'litical. po'litically, ,scien'tific, ,sympa'thetic, ,sympa'thetically.

(6) Words ending in *-ity*, are `accented on the syllable preceding the suffix, that is, on the third syllable from the end—the ante-penultimate syllable, e.g., ac'tivity, ,curi'osity, ,elec'tricity, e'quality, ,gene'rosity, mo'rality, ne'cessity, ori'ginality, ,possi'bility, ,proba'bility.

(7) Words ending in *-ial, -ially* have the primary accent on the syllable preceding the suffix, e.g., ,arti'ficial, ,cere'monial, ,confi'dential, ,confi'dentially, es'sential, es'sentially, in'dustrial, me'morial, of'ficial, ,presi'dential.

(8) In words of more than two syllables ending in *-ate*, the primary accent is placed two syllables before the suffix, that is, on the third syllable from the end, e.g., 'compli₁cate, 'culti₁vate, 'edu₁cate, 'fortuna₁te, 'separa₁te (adj.), 'sepa₁rate (v.)

(9) Words ending in *-ian* are accented on the syllable preceding the suffix, e.g., 'elec₁trician, li₁brarian, mu₁'sician, poli₁'tician.

(10) Words ending in *-ious* are accented on the syllable preceding the suffix, e.g., 'anxi₁ous, in₁'dustrious, in₁'jurious, labori₁ous. lu₁'xurious, re₁'bellious, vic₁'torious.

(11) The following suffixes take the primary accent on their first syllable:

-aire	millio ₁ 'naire
-eer	ca ₁ 'reer
-ental	funda ₁ 'mental
-ential	exis ₁ 'tential
-esce	acqui ₁ 'esce
-escence	effer ₁ 'vescence
-esque	gro ₁ 'tesque
-ique	phy ₁ 'sique
-itis	neu ₁ 'ritis