Unit 6

Syllables

The Sonority Hierarchy

In any utterance some sounds stand as more prominent or sonorous than others...A sonority scale or hierarchy can be set up which represents the relative sonority of various classes of sound:

Open vowels
Close vowels
Laterals
Nasals
Approximants
Trills
Fricatives
Affricates
Plosives and flaps

Using the sonority hierarchy we can draw a contour representing the varying prominences of an utterance. The number of syllables in an utterance equates with the number of peaks of sonority [being aware that sound] classes from fricatives downwards cannot constitute peaks in English.

[There are three elements in a syllable.] The onset, peak and coda of a syllable form a hierarchy of constituents, in which the coda is more closely associated with the peak than with the onset [thus conforming the rhyme]. Onset generally involve increasing sonority up to the peak (...) whereas codas generally involve decreasing sonority.

[How to divide syllables in medial position?] Various principles can be applied to decide between alternatives: align syllable boundaries with morpheme boundaries where present (the morphemic principle): align syllable boundaries to parallel syllable codas and onsets at the ends and beginnings of words (the phonotactic principle); align syllable boundaries to best predict allophonic variation, e.g. the devoicing of /r/ following /t/ (the allophonic principle). Unfortunately, such principles often conflict with one another. A further principle is often invoked in such cases, the maximal onset principle, which assigns consonants to onsets wherever possible and is said to be a universal in languages; but this itself often conflicts with one or more of the principles above.

Words

The word, composed of one or more phonemes, has a separate linguistic identity, in that it is a commutable entity, higher than the phoneme, which may either constitute a complete utterance or may be substituted in a longer utterance for other words of its same class.

The syllable or syllables of a word which stand out from the remainder are said to be accented, to receive the accent.

The accentual pattern of English words is fixed but free.

Accent and prominence

Any of four factors, pitch, loudness, quality, and quantity may help to render a syllable more prominent than its neighbours. But it is principally pitch change which marks an accented syllable.

The final pitch accent in a word or in a group of words is usually the most prominent (and hence referred to as the primary accent) while a pitch accent on an earlier syllable is usually somewhat less prominent (and referred to as secondary accent).

Accented syllables are often assumed to be louder than unaccented syllables and in many cases this may be so. [However,] loudness is not by itself an efficient device for signalling the location of the accent of English.

While accent is primarily achieved by pitch change, sometimes assisted by extra loudness, among unaccented syllables some will be more prominent than others due to the quality and quantity of the vowels at their centre...Long vowels and diphthongs are generally more prominent than short vowels, while among the short vowels themselves /◀,   ,   / (when unaccented) are the least prominent and are often referred to as reduced vowels as opposed to other full vowels.

Conclusions:

There are four degrees of prominence in English:

a) primary accent, marked by the last major pitch change in a word (or longer utterance);

b) secondary accent, marked by a non-final pitch change in a word (or longer utterance);

c) a minor prominence produced by the occurrence of a full vowel but containing no pitch change;

d) a non-prominent syllable containing no pitch change and one of the vowels /◀,   ,   /.

Distinctive Word Accentual Patterns

The accentual pattern of a word establishes the relationship of its parts; it may also have a distinctive function in that it opposes words of comparable sound structure (and identical spelling). Such word oppositions (for the most part disyllables of French origin) may or may not involve phonemic changes of quality.

A relatively small number of pairs of noun and verb may differ only in the location of the primary accent, this falling on the first syllable in the nouns and on the second in the verbs (*accent, digest, torment, transfer, transport*)

In a somewhat larger number of pairs the occurrence of / / or /◀◀/ in the first syllable of the verb is more regular (*combine, compress, concert, conduct, contract, contrast, convict, desert, export, object, present, proceeds, produce, progress*).

Elision

Since OE, it has always been a feature of the structure of English words that the weakly accented syllables have undergone a process of reduction, including loss of phonemes or of vowels. The same process of reduction, with resultant contraction, may be observed in operation in PresE.

Vowel Elision

Established: initially in *state, scholar or sample;* medially in *Gloucester, marriage, evening, chimney*,..; finally in *time, name, loved, hands, eaten, written, cousin*.

Present colloquial:

- consonant + / / + / / + weak vowel = elision of / / as in *preferable, repertory, temporary, murderer*, etc.
  - / / + weak vowel + consonant = elision of weak vowel as in *Dorothy* (recent development)
- consonant + weak vowel + / / = elision of weak vowel (or reduction of dark /   / into clear / /) as in *fatalist, bachelor or insolent*.
- Elision of post-primary / / or /◀◀/ as in *university, probably, difficult, national, fashionable or government*.
- Loss of syllabicity in present participles of verbs such as *flavour, lighten* or *thicken* where the / / may be elided or the syllabic consonant [   ] replaced by a non-syllabic consonant.
- In pre-primary positions, / / or /◀◀/ of the weak syllable preceding the primary accent is apt to be lost in very rapid speech, especially when the syllable with primary accent has initial / / or / / as in *police, parade, correct, balloon* or *gorilla*, but also in *photography, suppose, perhaps, geometry* or *geography*.

Consonant elision

Established: the reduction of many consonant clusters has long been established as initial /wr, kn, gn, hl, hr, hn/, medial /tn, tl/ or final /mb, mn/: *write, know, gnaw, loaf, ring, nut, fasten, castle, lamb, hymn*,...

Present colloquial:

- loss of alveolars /t, d/ when medial in a cluster of three consonants as in *exactly, facts, handsome, lastly, Westminster, dustman*,...
- / / is normally elided from *asthma* and *isthmus*, sometimes from *months, twelfths, fifths, clothes*.
- Elision of /k/ and /l/ in *asked* and *only* may occur.
- /   / is elided when preceded by /   / as in *always*.
- /p/ may be lost in clusters where its position is homorganic with that of an epenthetic plosive as in *glimpse*.
- Whole syllables may be elided in rapid speech in the vicinity of /r/ or in a sequence of /r/ sounds: *library*.

Epenthesis

The elision of /t/ in words like *vents* sometimes leads to the opposite tendency to insert an epenthetic /t/ in words like *dance*.

While epenthetic /t/ occurs between an /n/ and / ,   ,   /, similarly, an epenthetic /p/ or /k/ may occur between an /   ,   / and a following fricative as in *triumphs, confuse*.