Stress

Stress, as a sound phenomenon, can be studied from two points of view: **production** and **perception**. The production of stressed syllables is said to imply a greater **muscular energy** than the production of unstressed syllables. From the perceptive point of view, stressed syllables are **prominent**. Prominence is the sum of different factors such as loudness, length, pitch and quality.

There are three possibilities of stress in a word: a primary stress, characterised by prominence and, basically, by a rise-fall tone; a secondary stress, weaker than the primary stress but stronger than that of the unstressed syllables (,photo'graphic); and unstressed syllables, defined by the absence of any prominence, becoming then the background against the prominent stressed syllables appear. Unstressed syllables normally have the short closed vowels /i/ or /u/ and the schwa.

From the teaching perspective, there are two ideas to be marked: first, "incorrect stress placement is the major cause of intelligibility problems for foreign learners, and is therefore a subject that needs to be treated very seriously." (Roach, 1991:91). Second, the rules for word stress from the phonological point of view are too complex to use in the language classroom, so implicit ways of teaching are required. Dictionaries with phonemic transcriptions can be helpful.

Another important aspect related to stress is that of the **"weak forms"**. There is a number of words in English (almost all of which belong to the category called **function or grammatical words**) which can be pronounced in two different ways, a strong and a weak form. There are about forty such words and it is important to be aware of their existence as they can provoke misunderstandings. English-speaking people find the strong forms unnatural and learners of English can misunderstand English speakers, who will surely use weak forms.

There are some rules to learn. The strong form will be used when:
a) they occur at the end of a sentence, as in "Chips are what I'm fond of".
b) A weak-form word is being contrasted with another word, as in "The letter is from him, not to him."
c) A weak-form word is given stress for the purpose of emphasis, as in "You *must* give me more money."
d) A weak-form is being "cited" or "quoted", as in "You shouldn't put "and" at the end of a sentence."

The most common weak-form words are:

THE (ðə or ði)

A (ə)

AND (ən)

BUT (bət)

THAT (ðət as a conjunction of relative pronoun)

THAN (ðən)

AT (ət or æt)

FOR (fə or fɔ:)

FROM (frəm or frɒm)

OF (əv or ɒv)

TO (tə or tu)

AS (əz or æz)

SOME (səm or sʌm)

CAN, COULD (kən, kəd or kæn, kʊd)

HAVE, HAS, HAD (əv, əz, əd or hæv, hæz, hæd)

SHALL, SHOULD (ʃəl, ʃəd or ʃæl, ʃʊd)

MUST (məs, məst or mʌst)

DO, DOES (də, du, dez or du:, dʌz)

AM, IS, ARE, WAS, WERE (əm, ə, ər, wəz, wə, wər or æm, a:, wɒz, wɜ:)

Roach, Peter. 1991. *English Phonetics and Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.