Unit 12: English Stress

1 INTRODUCTION
This unit presents a theoretical background to the discussion of the stress in English: the stress rules in English and the stress marking of English words and sentences.

2 OBJECTIVES
At the end of this unit, learners will be able to explain:
- what stress is
- diacritics to mark stress
- the importance of stress to English
- some common English Stress Rules (ESR)
- manners which awards stress marks on English words and sentences

3.1 WHAT STRESS IS
As a linguistic feature, stress concerns with the prominence given to a syllable of an utterance relative to the other syllables in the utterance. This prominence may be marked by higher intensity (loudness), increased fundamental frequency (pitch) length, etc. occasioned by some organs of speech. Christophersen (1956: 153) says that a certain syllable uttered with great energy. Fudge (1984: 1) says that stress means essentially that one phonological element is singled out within another, longer, phonological element. Sentence-stress involves the picking out of one word or phrase within the sentence; this word or phrase is usually given special emphasis of some kind in pronunciation.

The three levels of stress are (a) the main or primary stress, the highest and is marked by a short upper vertical line as diacritic represented as ‘ˈ; (b) the secondary stress, the less in prominence and is marked by a short low vertical line represented as ’; (c) the tertiary stress, the least in prominence and is not marked or at best be represented by a full stop.

A moderate English word of four syllables has its syllables named as, initial, antepenultimate, penultimate and final. The word “allowances” has four syllables: /əˈlaʊ.ənt sɪz/ where: /ə/ = initial syllable; /laʊ/ = antepenultimate syllable; /ən/ = penultimate syllable; and /t sɪz/ = final syllable to undergo a stress.

3.1.2 IMPORTANCE OF STRESS TO ENGLISH
Stress marking is an important element in the communicative competence expected of any user. Stress marking enables any user of English, for example, to immediately distinguish between “import” as a noun and “import” as verb.

3.3 THE ENGLISH STRESS RULES
In English, certain rules are applicable to assist in the determination of what syllable of a word is to be stressed, these rules help, to a large extent, the predictability of the occurrences of stress markings in English. Autosegmental phonologists like Goldsmith (1976, 1995) and metrical phonologists such as Liberman & Prince (1976), Hogg & McCully (1987), Jolayemi (2001) and Jolayemi (2006). It is from their perspectives that I will introduce to you a few ESR that can assist you in predicting the stressed syllable.
The working guidelines and formalised rules in stress marking are as follows:

a. Unless otherwise stated, only strong syllables can be stressed in an English word eg.: a.pply /əˈplɑːɪ/, /ə/ is not stressed as it is a weak syllable, but /plɑːɪ/ is stressed because it is a strong syllable. So that we have aˈpply and not ˈapply. This often referred to as the Main Stress Rule (MSR).

b. A weak syllable can only be stressed when the previous one or two syllables cannot be stressed.

c. All the theories of phonology agree that words that may attract a primary stress are in the categories of noun, adjective, verb and adverb.

d. The generative phonologists advise that when a syllable is stressed, all the other syllables in the word must be distressed or weakened (Chomsky & Halle, 1968).

e. The metrical phonologists state that the final syllable of a noun or adjective is “extrametrical”, so should be ignored when we want to apply ESR.

f. They also say that application of ESR should start at the extreme right.

g. The metrical phonologists also state that stress marking, or the application of ESR must start from the extreme right.

h. Generally speaking most nouns and adjectives tend to have stress towards the initial position because as the metrical phonologists have stated, the last syllable is “extrametrical” meaning it should be discountenanced before the application of ESR. So do not stress the final syllable of words in these categories (Hogg and McCully, 1987).

i. For words in the categories of verbs and adverbs, the rule states that the final syllable is often stressed, if and only if it is not a weak syllable or a syllable ending in the diphthong /əʊ/ (Roach, 2000: 98).

j. Certain affixes are stress “repellents” i.e. they push stress away from themselves by one or two syllables, eg.; some are “stress attractors” i.e. they attract stress towards themselves; Examples are some are -ion, -ity; while some are stress retainers i.e. they pull stress right on themselves. (Jolayemi, 2006).

k. Most prefixes do not influence stress marking. Eg. imˈportant and unimˈportant ; un- the negative marker has no influence on the stress position.

Most of the ESR given above are applicable to isolated words only or operated at the word level. So, most of them are called Lexical Stress Rules (LSR).

l. There is a rule that predicts stress occurrence in compound words only; this is called the Compound Stress Rule (CSR). It states that in the occurrence of a compound word, the first word of the compound word receives the primary stress.

m. The last of the ESR borders on longer utterances than the single words or compound words; it concerns a group of words that makes a phrase. The ESR often used to determine stress placement is called: Nuclear Stress Rule (NSR); and states that in group of words that form a phrase, place the primary stress on the final word of the phrase, if and only if it is in the categories of: noun, adjective, verb and adverb, if not, place it on the word that satisfies this condition before the final word.

3.4 ENGLISH STRESS MARKING

Word and sentence level stress placement is the concern of this section, which is done under the sub-heading: Word-Level Stress Marking, Compound Stress Marking, and Phrase/Sentence Stress Marking.
3.4.1 WORD-LEVEL STRESS MARKING
Stress Marking the general rules that can assist in predicting the syllables that we can award the primary stress in English words and utterances. The objective, therefore, is the application of these rules in the placement of the primary stress on the acceptable syllables of words and utterances in English language using the generative and metrical theories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aˈmerica</td>
<td>ˈmanifest</td>
<td>mainˈtain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>´cinema</td>
<td>´Shallow</td>
<td>eˈlect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hoˈrizon</td>
<td>´frantic</td>
<td>deˈtermine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Under the noun category, we cannot place the stress on the final syllables of America and cinema because our rule says they are extrametrical, meaning we will ignore them before we apply the appropriate rule. We neither stress the penultimate, because they are weak syllables. This is what accounts for the initial stress pattern that we have observed for the two words under noun and the three adjectives. However, horizon defers this pattern by taken a penultimate stress marking instead of the final like the others. The reason is simple, and that is: we cannot skip the penultimate syllable /raɪ/ like we did for the rest because it is a strong syllable. This why we have the pattern hoˈrizon and not ˈhorizon.

On the verb category, we will notice that we accurately stressed the last syllable of maintain, because it is made of a strong syllable of a diphthong, ˈtain /teɪn/. This is also applicable to elect, stressed as eˈlect, because the last syllable, /lɛkt/, is strong. You still remember that a short vowel sound makes a strong syllable if two consonants serve as its coda. Determine, the third word in the verb category, does not obey this pattern because its final syllable, /mɪn/, is weak, hence we have to transfer the stress to the next available strong syllable. Thus, we have the final output of deˈtermine with /tɜː/, a strong syllable being the recipient syllable.

If we follow and work through these practical examples given above, we will be able to use stress in English correctly, especially at word level.

3.4.2 COMPOUND STRESS MARKING
A compound word is often made up of two independent words (pen knife, pen-knife or penknife). The first word of a compound often attracts the main stress. The word blackboard is in the noun category, so it has the stress on black as in ˈblackboard. Other examples are ˈheadmaster, ˈword-stress, ˈfootball, ˈstress-shift. Stress marking may not be as straight forward as it seems here, as complication may arise when use as a phrase or within a phrase.

3.4.3 SENTENCE STRESS MARKING
In the sentences:
  a. The teacher needs the blackboard to write the summary of his lecture.
  b. The teacher needs the black board to construct the stage for that scene.
In a we mean a classroom material for teaching; in b we mean a board that happens to be black in colour for stage construction; it may necessarily be a board that is brown, green or white. Therefore, “black” in a is an essential component of the classroom material, so the compound word is given the Compound Stress treatment (CSR) as ’blackboard. But “black” in b is a mere adjective to describe the particular colour of the board that the teacher needs for the stage. It is therefore a phrase, an adjectival phrase, which essentially, must attract the Nuclear Stress Rule (NSR) stress marking giving blackˈboard.

In a phrase: the blackboard eraser. Here, we must apply a complex of ESR to be able to correctly mark the stress.

- First, decide if the above is a word, compound or phrase to know what rule or rules to apply. In this case, we know it is a phrase.
- Second, what does the phrase rule state? Stress the word at the extreme right hand of the phrase. In this case: eraser.
- Third, But you will notice that “eraser” has three syllables! So, we actually have multiple difficult tasks on our hands; namely (a) how do we decide where to break erase into three syllables: e.ra.ser, er.a.ser or er.as.er? (b) which of the three takes the stress diacritic [ˈe.], [ˈra], [ˈas] or [ˈer]? Based on the maximum onsets principle, then, eˈraser, will be correct.
- Fourth, the next word from the right is blackboard, which we know is a compound word and so takes stress mark at the initial position such as ’blackboard.
- Fifth, the last word at the extreme left is the; which, although may receive a main stress if it stands alone, but which does not fall into the category of words to be stressed in a phrase.

The phrase in question can be analysed based on (a) the Classical Theory.
the 'blackboard eˈraser
6 4 5 3 1 2

(b) the Generative Theory.
the blackboard eraser (1 is most stressed; 6 least stressed).

(c) the Metrical Theory.
the blackboard ‘eraser

(d) the Autosegmental Theory
the blackboard eraser
- + - - + -
(- = no stress; + = stress)

The metrical phonologists may arrive at the stress pattern with the arboreal diagram, Straight Tree System (STS).
Notes:

i. indicates the syllabic weight at the syllable level
ii. indicates the syllabic weight at the word level
iii. indicates the syllabic weight at the class level: the 'blackboard (nominal adjective) and e'ras(e (noun, head)
iv. indicates the syllabic weight at the phrase level (between “the 'blackboard” and “e’ras(e”)

v. gives the ultimate prominence in the phrase to “e’ras(e”.

4 EXERCISES

a. What class of words normally receive the stress marking?
b. By what diacritic can mark stress?
c. From what direction do you start to apply ESR?
d. What do you understand by extrametricality?
e. Why does `import (Nn) has a different stress pattern from im'port?
f. Put the stress diacritic on the right syllable of the following words:
   • housemaster
   • among
   • stable
   • concentrate
   • congratulations.

g. Put the stress diacritic on the right syllable of the following sentences:
   • This is my driver.
   • That answer is wrong.
   • Shut the windows and lock the door.