Unit 6
The Phonology of English

Instructional Objectives
Upon completion of this unit, you should:
- have an understanding of syllables, word stress, and consonant clusters,
- be aware of the main processes involved in simplification in the stream of speech;
- be able to give examples of elision, assimilation and intrusion in English;

SYLLABLES
Syllables are made up of phoneme, and a syllable is the basic unit of English pronunciation. Normally, a syllable is produced in a single pulse of breath. A clear example is that the word ‘famous’ consists of two syllables.

Task 6-1
How many syllables are there in each of the following words? Write your answers in square brackets [ ]

Example: syllable \( \rightarrow \) sy/lla/ble [3]

- will
- sound
- interested

phoneme
letter
camera

willing
vegetable
chocolate

willingly
dictionary
library

The core element of a syllable is a vowel, which is sometimes called the peak of a syllable. The element that precedes the peak of a syllable is called ‘onset’, while the element, following the peak of a syllable is called ‘coda’. For example the word time /t ai m/ is a syllable in which the onset is /t/, the peak is /ai/ and the coda is /m/. It should be noted that:
- vowels can stand on their own in a syllable without consonants, but
- consonants must have a vowel to form a syllable.

Typical sequences in English syllables are shown below, where V stands for vowel and C for consonant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence of sounds</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV</td>
<td>be</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the English language, there can be a combination of three consonants before a vowel (onset) and four after (coda), and still this combination produces one syllable. An example is the one-syllable word *strength*.

\[
\text{/strεŋθ/}
\]

This is toward the phonological feature, something that contributes significantly to the development of your native-like English.

**CONSONANT CLUSTERS**

Consonant clusters—that is, a group of consonants without vowel sounds between them—do exist in some languages. English has a lot of consonant clusters as in the case of ‘strength’ above. However, other languages, such as Indonesian, and Javanese may have few or no consonant clusters. Learners of English as a foreign language may encounter learning problems with respect to the existence of consonant clusters when their language is without ones. They may also find that listening is a problem since they are not used to hearing consonants squashed together.

Back to Task 6-1 above where some words, such as *vegetable, camera, dictionary, interested and library* undergo lost syllables. Native speakers of English tend to drop the syllable. Compare the following ‘careful’ and ‘normal’ pronunciation.

**Table 6-1 The Lost Syllables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Careful</th>
<th>Normal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Camera</td>
<td>/kæmərə/</td>
<td>/kæmərə/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictionary</td>
<td>/dlkʃənərl/</td>
<td>/dlkʃənərl/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>/lntrəstId/</td>
<td>/lntrəstɪd/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>/laibrərl/</td>
<td>/laibrəl/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, learners of English as a foreign language such as in Indonesian context tend to add a syllable (mostly a schwa) due to the problem in consonant clusters. For example, they pronounce ‘study’ as /sʌtʌdl/ instead of /stʌdl/. Such a violation is, however, tolerable since it does not break communication—still intelligible.
WORD STRESS
In a word of more than one syllable, it must be pronounced with one syllable more greatly stressed than the rest. This is called word stress.
Learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) may find it difficult to decide which syllable in a word that must be stressed.

Task 6-2
Underline the syllable that has the main stress in each of the following words. Consult a good dictionary in case of doubt.
  e.g. student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>record</th>
<th>present</th>
<th>permit</th>
<th>invite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>export</td>
<td>increase</td>
<td>object</td>
<td>insult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protest</td>
<td>transport</td>
<td>suspect</td>
<td>reject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance of Word Stress
Word stress is significant in that it is important to meaning. In other words, a word which is wrongly stressed may cause unintelligibility. Unfortunately, no obvious logic can be used to rule out syllable. Even worst, word stress may shift from one position to another if the word changes its part of speech as shown in the following examples.

syllable syllabify syllabification

Thus, it can be said that word stress is conventional. In case of doubt, learners of EFL are supposed to consult a good dictionary.

Weak and Strong Form
At sentence level, ‘strong and weak form’ should be paid attention to. Observe the following examples with weak forms indicated as underlined and strong form as bold. Words that undergo weak and strong forms are those of structural words, such as auxiliary, modal verb, preposition, article, and other structural elements.

- Was he in school yesterday?
- Yes he was.
- Is that a letter to John?
- No it’s from him.
- Phonology is not as dull as most people think it is.
Task 6-3

Identify the weak and strong forms in the following sentences.

1. She isn’t my boy friend, but he was.
2. I don’t care where he is from.
3. What can I do for you?
4. Y’know, I can only speak one or two words.
5. She is really cute. What are you waiting for?

Contractions and Elision

Contractions are shortened forms. Native speakers of English tend to use contractions when speaking as such in the following examples:

1. She is going home. \(\rightarrow\) She’s going home.
2. They are my friends. \(\rightarrow\) They’re my friends.
3. I was not in her room. \(\rightarrow\) I wasn’t in her room.
4. That is my book. \(\rightarrow\) That’s my book.
5. That would not do any harm. \(\rightarrow\) That wouldn’t do any harm.

Meanwhile, elision involves shortening the length of a word as shown in the following extract.

“I know this land ain’t much good. Never was much good ‘cept for grazin’. Never should a broke her up. An’ now she’s cottoned damn near to death. Li on’y they didn’t tell me I got to get off, why, I’d prob’y be in California right now a-eatin’ grapes an’ a-pickin’ an orange when I wanted. But them sons a-bitches says I got to get off-an’ ... a man can’t, when his tol’ to.”

Learners of English should be extra careful when listening to contractions and elision since they may miss some of the important information.

Assimilation

There is another aspect of simplification in the stream of speech that might cause problems for the students when they are listening to spoken English: assimilation. This is where a sound is changed to adjust it to its surroundings, and to make pronunciation simple. Native speakers of English do assimilate sounds by nature, as shown in the following example:

- Good morning /gubmorniŋ/ \(\rightarrow\) d\(\rightarrow\) (b);
- One week /wʌmwi:k/ \(\rightarrow\) n\(\rightarrow\) (m)
- White coat /waikoUt/ \(\rightarrow\) t\(\rightarrow\) (x)
- Handbag /hæmbæg/ \(\rightarrow\) nd\(\rightarrow\) (m)
It takes quite a lot of ‘ear-training’ to notice these changes. The problem is that we are so influenced by the written language. We think that we hear what we see written down. As these examples show, what is written and what we hear can be quite different.

Assimilation does not usually constitute a problem for learners of English. The changes are so slight that they do not present many difficulties. It might be of interest to you or your students if you want to be able to produce ‘good’ English accent that people can recognize internationally. If this is your goal, it might be useful to practice adjusting your speech to include features of assimilation so that you sound natural. With fluency, however, these changes happen automatically.

Intrusion

Unlike the other features of simplification we have studied, intrusion is where native speakers actually add sounds to make pronunciation easier. As the term suggests, intrusion occurs when a sound intrudes between two others. The reason that intrusion occurs is because it is difficult to say certain sounds together.

The concept is very similar to the “consonant clusters” that we looked at earlier in this unit. We saw that in English there are a lot of consonant clusters—which can cause problems for some learners English, who might insert vowel sounds to make pronunciation easier. Native speakers of English tend to have problems pronouncing clusters of vowel, and so put in consonant sounds to make pronunciation easier.

You may be pleased to know that this is one area where it is easy to give rules, and there are only three rules to remember. They are all related to the fact that in English it is unusual to have one vowel sound directly after another, so we insert another sound.

Rule 1: For vowels pronounced with spread lips

Insert /j/ between final /i/, /i/, /ai/, or /ei/ and initial vowel:

- the answer /ðiˈɑːnər/
- she explained
- my aunt
- they arrived

Rules 2: For vowels pronounced with rounded lips

Insert /w/ between final /u:, /o:, /aU/, or /eU/ and an initial vowel:

- who else /huwels/
- too early
- and so on
saw it

Rule 3: For words ending in a written r or re
Insert /r/ if a written word ends in r or re (i.e. pronounce the r)
Insert /r/ if a word ending in a vowel is followed by another word beginning with a vowel
- for example /færegzæmpəl/
- more and more
- there are
- my sister and I
- the idea of
- data on paper
- panda in my room /pændərnəmərəm/
- agenda on the meeting
- character on the play
- better and better
- cry over impossibilities
- outer egoistic
- gender equality
- care of her
- armor of the year
- sticker on the table
- moreover everything
- inner and outer

Intrusion is not a usually a problem for learners of English. However, to encourage fluency and a ‘good accent’, it is worth doing exercises that focus on this feature.

Blurring of Word Boundaries
So-we’ve covered the main features of simplification in the stream of speech: weak forms, contractions and elision, assimilation and instruction. And all of these features contribute to one overriding feature in normal spoken English, which is the blurring of word boundaries. Think back to the joke at the start of this unit. The blurring of boundaries between the words parrots + eat + (th)em +all can lead us to the single word paracetamol.

This blurring of word boundaries is not usually a problem for learners when they are speaking English-after all, we can set our own pace for our utterances. But
it can be a problem when listening to English spoken at a normal or rapid speed; it can be very difficult to hear where one word ends and the next begins.

One of the pictures on the cover of this Course book demonstrates this blurring of word boundaries (plus a bit of elision and assimilation). It is from a weekend edition of an Australian newspaper, and it shows the way that many Australians actually pronounce the utterance “Have a good weekend”.

As a final check on features of simplification in the stream of speech and the blurring of word boundaries, try the next task which draws samples from a humorous examination of spoken English, given in a little book called *Krek waiters peek Bristle*.

**Task 6-4**

Try to match the ‘Bristle’ word or phrase in the first column with the paraphrase in the second. Remember to focus on the sound of these utterances, rather than on how they appear in writing. The first one has been done for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bristle</th>
<th>Paraphrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>scold</td>
<td>Constructed from (i.e. made of)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sod</td>
<td>That’s all right with me (i.e. fair enough)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tour free</td>
<td>Discover (i.e. find)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may doubtter</td>
<td>In those circumstances (i.e. in that case)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take sages</td>
<td>I’m unfamiliar (i.e. it’s new to me)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fairy nuff</td>
<td>It’s not hot. (it’s cold)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fine</td>
<td>How strange (i.e. that’s odd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neuter me</td>
<td>It’s not quick (i.e. it takes ages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gnat case</td>
<td>Less than four hours (i.e. two or three)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SUPRASEGMENTALS**

It is argued that if a speaker makes a segmental pronunciation error, he or she is excused of a foreigner and his speech is interpreted more or less correctly depending on the context. But if he or she makes a suprasegmental error, a judgment is made of his personality, not his language.

It has been previously mentioned that **suprasegmental phonology** is what happens when sounds combine beyond the level of phonemes or segments. As the quote above suggests, this is a very important area of phonology for learners of English. Suprasegmental phonology is concerned with the overall meaning of an utterance, rather than the individual components.

Basically, there are three main aspects in the study of suprasegmentals, namely **stress**, **rhythm** and **intonation**. To accurately describe them is not at all easy, but in short they cannot be separated from each other. Let us, however, start to discuss one by one.
Sentence Stress

We have already looked at word stress (i.e. which syllable in a word carries the stress), and weak and strong forms, which are also related to stress. Now we deal with something that can be called sentence stress—that is, which words in a sentence or utterance carry the main stress.

Remember that any word said on its own is stressed, but when words are combined in utterances, some lose their stress. For our present purposes, we can be divided into two main types.

1. **Grammatical, or function words** do not have much meaning in themselves but hold in sentence together (articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions etc.). These words are usually unstressed—look back at the type of words that in the list of word that commonly have “weak forms”.

2. **Lexical, or content words** carry the main meaning of a sentence or utterance; they are usually nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. These words are usually stressed.

So in one sentence, some words are stressed, others are not. These differences in sentence stress result in ‘the headline effect’. In a newspaper headline, as exemplified below, which words would be selected to be put in the headline?

It has been reported that French have conducted another underground nuclear test at Muroroa atoll. The test is believed to have been carried out...

Different people may choose different words, but just about everyone will include *French, test, and Muroroa*. Those are the main content words of the story, and thereby carry the main stress. Function words will not be used in the headline. Thus, the above extract can be analyzed in terms of sentence stress as follows:

It has been reported that **French** have conducted another underground nuclear test at **Muroroa** atoll. The **test** is believed to have been **carried out**...

Here, **bold and underlined** shows the heavily stressed syllables and normal underlined shows others. These variations in stress are called primary and secondary stress.

**Rhythm**

Rhythm is very closely related to stress. In English, and possibly in some other languages, there is generally a very regular rhythm in speech because English is a stress-time language, namely the spaces of time between the main stresses are roughly equal, regardless of how many syllables there are in between.
The strong rhythm of English is often exploited in poems, and is a fixed feature in limericks. Small circles indicate unstressed syllables, while big circles indicate strongly stressed syllables. Here is an example.

A flea and a fly in a flue
\[ \text{o O o O o O o O} \]

What about your first language? Is it a syllable-time language or stress-time language? If it is a syllable-time language, then the syllables are equally spaced.

**Intonation**

Intonation is concerned with the rising and falling of our voices to convey different **attitudes** or **meanings**. Observe the sentence below. By applying different intonation, it will carry different attitudes and meanings.

1. The girl gave the money to her father.
2. The girl gave the money to her father.
3. The girl gave the money to her father.
4. The girl gave the money to her father.

In Sentence (1), it means that it was to her **father** that the money was given. Sentence (2) means that the girl gave, not lent. In Sentence (3), it was the **money** that the girl gave to her father, not anything else. Sentence (4) indicates the speaker’s doubt, questioning why the girl gave the money to her father—not saved for herself.