

# Phonetics and Phonology

FF1B

## Lecture 5

### THE SYLLABLE

- In the flow of speech, it is the **utterance** which is the largest unit constituted by the speaker. An utterance can be divided into **sentences** or **clauses** which are relatively independent as to their meaning and form.
- The **word** is an independent unit only in the sense that its meaning can be identified within a given context.
- The **syllable** is the basic **rhythmical phonic unit**. Phonologically it is the basic unit at *the prosodic level*, ie it is the bearer of prosodic, suprasegmental features such as **stress, quantity, tone** and **rhythm**. There are many theories covering the nature and the structure of the syllable, we will be concerned with the way Roach presents it in his book.

#### The nature of the syllable:

- from a phonetic point of view, syllables are usually described as consisting of a centre which has little or no obstruction to airflow and which sounds comparatively loud; before and after the centre, there will be greater obstruction to airflow and/or less loud sound.

- syllables are basically carried by obligatory vowels which can be preceded and followed by optional consonants.

example 1: err /ɜ:/

example 2: fur /fɜ:/

example 3: furs /fɜ:z/

#### Basic structure of the syllable:

- the obligatory vowel within the syllable structure = **peak** (centre)
- the optional consonant(s) that can precede the peak = **onset**
- the optional consonant(s) that can follow the peak = **coda**

SYLLABLE : (onset) - peak - (coda)

#### The structure of the ONSET

- the maximum number of consonants within the onset is **three**:
  - the first consonant in the onset is called **pre-initial**; if present it is always represented by /s/;
  - the second consonant in the onset is called **initial**; this can basically be any English consonant, especially if the onset only consists of this initial consonant;
  - the third consonant in the onset is called **post-initial**; this is exclusively represented by /l/, /r/, /w/ and /j/;

ONSET: (pre-initial) - (initial) - (post-initial)

- the onset without consonant is called **zero onset**;
- obviously, some combinations are preferable, some combinations of consonants are impossible in English:

\*sʒw          \*mr          \*hl

(NB: /ʃw/ is only present in the vowel name ‘schwa’ and the brandname of the soft drinks, Schweppes: /ʃwʌ/ , /ʃweps/.)

### The structure of the CODA:

- the maximum number of the consonants within the coda part is **four**;
- the individual ‘slots’ bear the following names:
  - pre-final** consonants (only a small set: /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /s/);
  - final** consonants (basically any English consonant – but combinations within consonant clusters are limited);
  - post-final** consonants – again a small set /s/, /z/, /t/, /d/, /θ/.

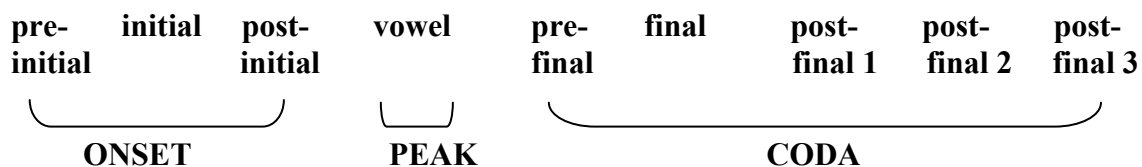
### More examples:

6. fifths /fɪfθ/ - 2 post-final consonants
7. next /nekst/ - 2 post-final consonants
8. twelfths /twelfθs/ - 2 post-final consonants
9. sixths /sɪksθs/ - 3 post-final consonants
10. texts /teksts/ - 3 post-final consonants

**!!! NOTE:** if the peak (centre) of the syllable is not carried by a vowel we need to consider a **syllabic consonant** /l/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /r/, eg. middle /mɪd̩/

### SUMMARY

This is the maximum phonological structure of the syllable:



# Syllabicity

- Syllabic consonants /l̩/, /m̩/, /ŋ̩/, /r̩/
- Examples:

cattle /kætl̩/

happen /hæpŋ̩/

happen /hæpm̩/ - e.g. 'these things happen partly because...' /... hæpm̩ pɑ:tli.../ -> because of assimilation

broken key /brəʊkɪ ki:/ - optional, again because of assimilation

Hungary /hʌŋgɪri/ - as opposed to hungry /hʌŋgri/ - **important difference**

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## REDUCTION = strong and weak syllables

- Reduction is basically a sort of vowel weakening in unstressed syllables, eg. bigger /bɪgə/, perhaps /pə'hæps/.
- This change is in **quality**, or sometimes – but not necessarily - connected with the change in **quantity**.
- Quality = a distinction between **strong** and **weak** vowels
- Quantity = a change in length (ie **short** and **long** vowels)

Czech does not know this process of reduction of strong vowels in unstressed syllables, however it is one of the key features of the sounds of English!

As you know, syllables are carried by vowels or syllabic consonants. The vowels in those syllables can be **strong** or **weak**, depending on stress.

## Which are the weak vowels?

1. ə ('schwa')
2. ɪ (ie a close front unrounded vowel in the general area of /i:/ and /ɪ/)
3. u (ie a close back rounded vowel in the general area of /u:/ and /ʊ/)

**Strong vowels** are any other vowels except /ə/, /ɪ/ and /ʊ/.

## STRONG AND WEAK SYLLABLES

- Rule 1: stressed syllables **MUST** always be strong UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES (containing strong vowels), eg. attend /ə'tend/ , particular /pə'tɪkjələ/
- Rule 2: unstressed syllables are **MOSTLY** weak but occasionally also strong, eg. furniture /'fɜ:nɪtʃə/ , access /'ækses/- not \*/'æksəs/, superstar - /'su:pəstɑ:/ not \*/'su:pəstə/
- The most widespread weak vowel in English is schwa /ə/.
- However in longer words, there is often a kind of oscillation between /ə / and /i/, or /ə / and /u/.
- *Example 1:* modality /məʊ'dæləti/ or /məʊ'dæliiti/
- *Example 2:* particular /pə'tɪkjələ/ or /pə'tɪkjulə/

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## WEAK FORMS x STRONG FORMS

- weak form is a **word** in English which can be pronounced in two ways, strongly and weakly but the weak pronunciation is preferred.

!!! weak syllable ≠ weak form !!!

- **weak syllables** occur in lexical words but **weak forms** are words themselves, often grammatical words like prepositions, auxiliary verbs, articles, etc.

- the complete set of weak forms is a closed group of about 40 items (of which Roach gives 28) – please see one of the handouts for your seminar or the copy I gave some of the groups last semester.

## Weak forms – cont.

- Model examples:

**Example 1:** are                    /ɑ:/ = strong pronunciation (sp)  
   /ə/ = weak pronunciation (wp)  
   -most frequent, preferred

**Example 2:** for                    /fɔ:/ = sp  
   /fə/ = wp -> preferred

**Example 3:** there                /ðeə/ = sp  
   /ðə/ = wp -> /ðəz ə haʊs ɪn ðə wʊdʒ/

**Example 4:** some                /sʌm/ = sp, contrast  
   /səm/ = wp, indefinite quantity

**Example 5:** that                /ðæt/ = sp, demonstrative pronoun  
   /ðət/ = wp, relative pronoun,  
   conjunction

**Please note: an active consistent use of weak forms is a must for any competent user of English and absolutely crucial for a good teacher of English**

### The use of strong forms

The words from the above mentioned 'list', which have weak forms also have strong forms, which MUST be used in the following cases:

1. Whenever the word is stressed, as it may be: 'kæn aɪ ?, 'du: ðeɪ ?, 'hæv ju ?, 'hi: 'laɪks 'hɜ: bət dəz 'ʃi: 'laɪk 'hɪm ?
2. Whenever the word is final in the group: 'pi:t hæz, aɪ 'dəʊnt 'ni:d tu: , 'ju: a:, 'hu:z It frɒm?
3. Exceptions: *he, him, his, her, them, us* have their weak forms even in final positions (unless they are stressed)

*not* has its weak form finally when attached to *can, have, is*, etc.: 'dʒɒn 'ka:nt, ʃi: 'ɪznt ; but never otherwise: aɪ 'həʊp nɒt.

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### EXERCISES

see Roach (1995: p.84)