The role of the secondary stress in teaching the English rhythm

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Abstract

In the phonological literature in English, which is a stress-timed language, the existence of at least three levels of stress is usually taken for granted. Words, phrases, utterances or sentences have a prominent element in one of their syllables, which usually correlates with a partner in the same unit, called the secondary stress. It so happens that in multi-syllable words or groups bearing more than two content words, there is also a tertiary stress. Function words neighbouring the content words are usually not stressed or they are reduced. In standard writing, the primary stress is indicated by an acute accent, the secondary stress by a grave accent while the lack of stress is not marked at all. This article proposes that the distinction between primary and secondary stress should have more prevalence in the pronunciation teaching curricula, as they expose the rhythm of English and convey the intended meaning clearly.

Keywords: Stress-timed language, primary stress, secondary stress, tertiary stress, rhythm.

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1. General Considerations of the 'Secondary Stress' and Its Function

The secondary stress (as we sometimes call the *secondary accent*) is the weaker of the two degrees of stress in the pronunciation of a single word, a compound word or a phrase forming a thought group (Zapata, 2009). The stronger degree of stress or prominence is called 'primary' and that of a weaker degree is referred to as 'secondary' (Fudge, 1984). The IPA symbol for secondary stress is a short vertical line preceding and at the foot of the stressed syllable (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2011). For instance, the syllable '*nun*' in the word 'pronunciation' [prə,nʌnˈsɪeɪʃn] has the secondary stress. Another tradition in English to show stress is to assign acute and grave accents for primary and secondary stress as in 'pronunciation' (Roach, 2009).

Most languages, if they have stress at all, have only one degree of it on the phonemic level. However in English, having such a suprasegmental structure as the secondary stress is a great asset in that the distinction in stress between the compound words and phrases points out the meaning intended to convey the meaning more clearly between the modified element versus the item that modifies it (Knowles, 1987). For instance in the compound word 'tax relief' [ˈtæḱs rə ˌliːf], the word 'tax' has higher prominence than 'relief', with the former word having the primary stress reducing the latter to secondary and making the meaning of the word clearer where the stress is placed (ibid).

Explaining it a little further with another example, again in the compound 'English teacher' [ˈɪŋglɪʃ,tiːʧɚ], the word 'English' [ˈɪŋglɪʃ] has prominence over 'teacher' [ˌtiːʧɚ], thus meaning that the teacher actually teaches English but he himself is not necessarily of English origin (Giegerich, 2004). However, if the first word 'English' falls into the secondary prominence over the second item as in the 'English teacher' [‰ɪŋglΣ ∀tiːʧə], then we can safely assume that the teacher who does the teaching, himself, is English (BBC, 2017).

So the meaning of phrases or compounds can be better understood by where their primary and secondary stresses fall. Here is yet another typically striking example: '*a 'black, board-e,raser*' [ə ˈblæk, bɔɚd⌣ɪ,reɪsɚ] (a board-eraser that is black) vs. '*a, black'board e,raser*' [ə, blæk'bɔɚd⌣ɪ,reɪsɚ] (an eraser for a blackboard) (Giegerich, 2014). Also, in the sentence '*My 'bike has been, stolen*' [maɪ ˈbaɪk, hæz bən, stoʊlən] vs. '*My, bike has been 'stolen*' [maɪ, baɪk, hæz bɪn ˈstoʊlən] the words 'bike' and 'stolen' have correlation in meaning between the two, and either one may have primary or secondary stress according to the prominence of their meaning (ibid). Thus the secondary stress plays a very important role in distinguishing the shades of meaning or the intensity of the utterance of the whole sentence.

Let us continue with other examples, for instance in a question statement such as '*Is 'this my, birth,day 'present?*' [ˌɪz ˈðɪs → maɪ, bɜ˞əθ,deɪ ˈprɛzənt], the primary stress on the word 'this' and secondary stress on 'birthday' expresses a surprise on the nature of the gift (Puzzler, 2017). On an alternate mode, in the newly formed intonation pattern '*Is, this my 'birth,day, present?*' [ˈɪz,ðɪs → maɪ ˈbɜ˞əθ,deɪ, prɛzənt], the rising prominence on 'birthday' [ˈbɜ˞θ,deɪ] reduces the stress to a secondary position on 'this' arousing curiosity on whether the parcel actually contains a 'birthday' [ˈbɜ˞θ ˌdeɪ] present or perhaps something else (ibid). As for the lexical formation of secondary stresses, much could be said about the recognition of their location. If we study such multisyllable words with their bases such as 'ex'PLAIN' [ɪksˈpleɪn] vs. ',expla'NAtion' [ˌɛkspləˈneɪʃən], 'con'SIDer' [kənˈsɪdɚ] vs. 'con ˌside'RAtion' [kən,sɪdəˈreɪʃən], 'as'SO ,ciate' [əˈsoʊ ˌʃieɪt] vs. 'as,soci'Ation' [ə ˌsoʊˈʃieɪʃən] and ''CHARacter' [ˈkærəktɚ] vs. ' ˌcharacteri'ZAtion' [ˌkærəktərɪˈzeɪʃən], we immediately recognise that the derivatives show a change in the position of primary stress leaving their earlier prominence to the reduced form as the secondary stress (ibid).

The role of secondary stress becomes more obvious in full sentences where meaningful thought groups are separated from one another by sustained junctures. In such thought-chunks those elements having greater prominence in meaning assume primary stress in pronunciation, whereas those with less prominence do fall into secondary positions (Yurtbasi, 2017). To exemplify this statement, here are some English proverbs being divided into such thought-groups separated by

juncture signs showing dearly individual instances of primary and secondary stresses: 'The 'BEST ˌthings in life → ˌare 'FREE ↓' [ðə 'bɛst, θɪŋz‿ɪn ˌlaɪf → ˌaːɚ 'friː ↓] 'A 'STITCH in ˌtime → ˌsaves ˈNINE ↓' [ə 'stɪtʃ‿ɪn ˌtaɪm → ˌseɪvz 'naɪn ↓] 'STILL ˌwaters → ˌrun ˈDEEP ↓' ['stɪl ˌwɔːtɚz → ˌrʌn 'diːp ↓] 'He 'TEACHes ˌill, → who 'TEACHes‿all ↓' [ˌhi 'tiːtʃ‿əz‿ɪl → ˌhʊ 'tiːtʃ‿əz‿ˌɔːl ↓] 'You 'CAN'T ˌtake it with ˌyou → when you 'DIE ↓ '[jə 'kaːnt ˌteɪk‿ɪt ˌwɪθ 'ju →, wɛn jə 'daːɪ ↓]' ˌBetter 'UN ˌtaught → than 'ILL ˌtaught ↓' [ˌbɛtɚ 'r‿ʌn ˌtɔːt → ˌðæ'n‿ɪl ˌtɔːt ↓] 'DON'T ˌcross your ˌbridges → be ˌfore you 'COME to ˌ them ↓' ['doʊnt ˌkrɑs jə 'brɪdʒəz → ˌtɪl jə 'kʌm tə ˌðɛm ↓] ''SOON ˌlearnt → ˌsoon for'GOTten ↓' ['suːn ˌlɜɚnt → ˌsuːn fə'gɑtən ↓] ''Even a ˌworm → will 'TURN ↓' ['iːvən‿ə ˌwɜɚm → ˌwɪl tɚn ↓] 'It was the 'LAST ˌstraw → that ˌbroke the ˈCAMel's ˌback ↓' [ˌɪt wəz ðə 'laːst ˌstrɔː → ˌðæt 'broʊk ðə 'kæməlz ˌbæk ↓] 'The 'WAY to a ˌman's ˌheart → is ˌthrough his 'STOMach ↓' [ðə 'weːɪˌtʊ‿ə 'mænz ˌhaɚt → ɪz ˌθruː hɪz 'stʌmək ↓] 'ˌWhere there's a 'WILL → ˌthere's‿a 'WAY ↓' [ˌwɛː ɚ 'ðɛɚ r‿ɪz‿ə ˌwɪl →, ðɛɚ r‿ɪz‿ə 'weːɪ ↓] ''MARry in ˌhaste → and re'PENT at,leisure ↓' ['mæri‿ɪn ˌheɪst → ˌæn rə'pɛnt‿ət, lɛʒɚ ↓] 'If you ∘wish 'GOOD ad ˌvice → con ˌsult an 'OLD ˌman ↓'[∘ɪf jə ˌwɪʃ 'gʊd‿əd ˌvaɪs → kən ˌsʌlt‿ə'n‿oʊld ˌmæn ↓] ''NO ˌnews → is 'GOOD ˌnews ↓' ['noːʊ ˌnjuz → 'gʊd ˌnjuz ↓] ''BIRDS of‿a ˌfeather → 'FLOCK to ˌgether ↓' ['bɜɚdz‿əv‿ə ˌfɛðɚz → 'flɒk tə ˌgɛðɚ ↓] ',Tell me 'WHO you ˌgo with → ˌand I'll 'TELL ˌyou 'WHO you ˌare ↓'[ˌtɛl mi 'hu jə 'goʊ ˌwɪθ →, æn‿aɪl 'tɛl jə 'hʊ ˌjʊ‿aːɚ ↓]

2. The Location of the Secondary Stress

What makes the acquiring of the correct pronunciation of the English words extremely difficult for foreign speakers is that English has several degrees of word stress (Fudge, 1984). All words in English have a primary stress, whose placement is totally unpredictable. In addition, long words in particular have a secondary stress. Phonologists also distinguish a tertiary stress, but for the purpose of this short presentation, I will just restrict the contrast only in these two types of stresses (Davenport & Hannahs, 2013).

All the vowels of a six-syllable word except the one with primary stress may be considered as unstressed syllables whose vowels are reduced to schwa: im.par.ti.'a.li.ty [ɪm%paə∇Σɪæləti] (Taalportaal, 2017). However, we notice that the vowel in the first syllable, far from being reduced to schwa is a long, tense vowel. The fact that the vowel has managed to preserve its value though primary stress doesn't fall on that syllable is explained by the fact that the second syllable of the word bears a clear secondary stress (Davenport & Hannahs, 2013). And we duly mark this syllable by a lower case [ˌ] stress sign to show its secondary prominence.

In some cases, secondary stress falls in those syllables where the prominence previously falls but the main stress moves towards the end of the word (Wenszky, 2000): Here are some examples: library ['laɪbrəri] vs. [ˌlaɪ'breɪrɪan], secretary ['sɛkrətri] vs secretarial [ˌsɛkre'teɪrɪəl], and some with no previous roots: dormitory ['dɔrmɪˌtɒri], testimony ['tɛstɪmɒni], matrimony ['mætrɪˌmɒni], ceremony ['sɛrəˌmɒni] or photograph ['foʊtəˌgraːf], photography [fə'tɑgrəfi], photographic [ˌfoʊtə'græfɪk]

3. Compound Stress and Phrasal Stress

The compound stress pattern is a reliable indicator of compound status, since this stress pattern would never be possible in a syntactic phrase (Gao, 2017). The compound stress is the stress falling on the initial part of the thought group: cowboy, school bus, Christmas present, ballet lesson, elevator operator, peanut butter jar label, blockhead, blackberry, yellow jacket, watchdog, crybaby, cover letter; scarecrow, carsick, sunbathe, waterski, freeload, deep-fry, stir-fry, tie-dye, red-cheeked, pig-headed, levelheaded, home-grown, over-rated, home-cooking, late-blooming; sightseeing, mountain-climbing, book-marked, Labour Day, Veteran's Day, Main Street, Easy Street etc. In the phrasal stress, the latter words have stress and we refer to it as the rightmost stress (Gordon, 2004). So here the stress occurs towards the end of the statement as opposed to the initial stressing in compounds. 'the

%brother of ∀Mary' vs. '∀Mary's %brother' – He was %teaching ∀linguistics – 'He was %teaching in ∀Ghana'

Most expressions that linguists would classify as compounds take compound stress, i.e., a pattern. The secondary stress, compared to primary is weaker in prominence (Plag, Kunter & Lappe, 2007). Gimson (1967) defines a syllable that bears secondary stress as the syllable articulated with the second highest degree of energy. He defines secondary stress as an accentuation that has no pitch prominence (Gimson, 1967). Pitch prominence is carried by primary stress. While in writing, the primary stress is often indicated by the mark ' before the stressed syllable, for secondary stress the same mark is used but is placed at the foot of the syllable in question (ibid). Secondary stress usually appears in longer words such as pronunciation [prəˌnʌnˈsiˈeɪʃn] in English. It is also important to note that besides primary and secondary stress there is 'unstress'. The stressed syllables, whether being stressed primary or secondary, are only realised in contrast with syllables that are not stressed, are 'unstressed' (Mattys, 2012).

Compound words are words that consist of two units, these being created by independent English words. So far as stress placement in compounds is concerned, compounds usually contain a single primary stress on one element of the compound, the other element or elements carrying secondary stress (Gimson, 1967, p. 224). Compounds frequently consist of two nouns. These usually have the stress on the first element (e.g., 'sunrise' [ˈsʌn%raɪz]. Compounds comprising adjectival first element and the –ed morpheme at the end receive stress on the second element (e.g., %bad∀tempered' [ˌbædˈtempəd]. For compounds that have a number of some form as the first element the stress will fall on the second element (e.g., %second∀class [ˌsekəndˈklɑːs]. Compounds functioning as adverbs are usually final-stressed (e.g., %North-∀East [ˌnɔːθˈiːst]). Compounds that are final-stressed also include those that function as verbs and have an adverbial as the first element (e.g., %down∀grade' [ˌdaʊnˈgreɪd].

If we compare the stress pattern of compounds with that of phrasals, we see a clear distinction between their location (Giegerich, 1992). Let's take the example of 'blackbird'– a compound – and 'black bird' – a phrase. Following the rule of stressing a compound that is made up of two nouns, blackbird is stressed on the first syllable and semantically, it is a type of bird. If talking about a phrase, the second word is stressed and any kind of bird that is black is meant (ibid). Other examples include ∀black%board (a board used in classroom) – %black∀board (a board painted black), or ∀dark%room (a lightless room for developing photographs) - %dark∀room (a room with not much light in it).

It is good to note at this point that connected speech may influence moving the stress to the preceding syllable, as is the case of 'bad-tempered'/ˌbædˈtempəd/ that becomes 'bad-tempered teacher' /ˈbædtempəd ˈtiːtʃə/. Similarly to stressing certain syllables in polysyllabic words, during a speech production some words are made more prominent. 'The position of the stress is determined largely by the meaning which the utterance is intended to convey' (Plavka, 2003).

As for sentence stress, one single sentence such as 'John hasn't arrived' can be uttered in three different ways according to meaning intended: 1) John % hasn't ar ∀rived 2) John ∀hasn't ar % rived, and 3) *John %* hasn't arrived, with the word shown in italics being more prominent than the rest of the elements. The first utterance may be said in a situation where it is known that John has set out to get here, but is not here yet. The second one may be a correction of someone who claims that John has arrived. The last one will possibly try to convey that John was supposed to have come but was not among the people that had come (Fudge, 1984).

Whatever message we want to convey, however, there are certain rules that indicate which words are possibly going to be stressed in an utterance and which are not. As for the secondary stress placement, the prominence sometimes fall on those places which were dominant earlier, but there is always a balance between the two to establish the rhythm of the sentence (Wenszky, 2000).

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4. Secondary Stress Exercises in Phrases and Sentences

While teaching the distinction between the primary stress and the secondary, minimal pairs could be used to show the stress mobility (word stress, 2017) as in the following examples. In the first part of the pairs, the initial primary examples are contrasted with those initial-secondary right after them:

'prosecutor' [ˈprɒsɪˌkjuːtə-] vs. 'prosecution' [ˌprɒsɪˈkjuːʃnˌ] – 'delegating' [ˈdɛləˌɡeɪtɪŋˌ] vs. 'delegation' [ˌdɛləˈɡeɪʃnˌ] – 'presidency' [ˈprɛzɪdənsiˌ] vs. 'presidential' [ˌprɛzɪˈdɛnʃɫ] – 'category' [ˈkætəɡəri] – 'categorical' [ˌkɛtəˈɡɒrɪkɫ] – 'consequently' [ˈkɒnsəkwəntli] vs. 'consequential' [ˌkɒnsəˈkwɛnʃɫ] – 'navigator' [ˈnævəˌɡeɪtə-] vs. 'navigation' [ˌnævɪˈɡeɪʃn] – 'vindicating' [ˈvɪndɪˌkeɪtɪŋ] vs. 'vindication' [ˌvɪndɪˈkeɪtɪŋ] – 'fabricating' [ˈfæbrɪˌkeɪtɪŋ] vs. 'fabrication' [ˌfæbrɪˈkeɪʃn] – 'segregating' [ˈsɛɡrɪˌɡeɪtɪŋ] vs. 'segregation' [ˌsɛɡrɪˈɡeɪʃn], 'replicating' [ˈrɛplɪˌkeɪtɪŋ] vs. 'replication' [ˌrɛplɪˈkeɪʃn] – 'hesitating' [ˈhɛzɪˌteɪtɪŋˌ] vs. 'hesitation' [ˌhɛzɪˈteɪʃn] vs. – 'agitating' [ˈædʒɪˌteɪtɪŋˌ] vs. 'agitation' [ˌædʒɪˈteɪʃn] – 'celebrating' [ˈsɛləˌbreɪtɪŋˌ] vs. 'celebration' [ˌsɛləˈbreɪʃn] – 'indicator' [ˈɪndɪˌkeɪtə-] vs. 'indication' [ˌɪndɪˈkeɪʃn], 'calculated' [ˈkæɫkjəˌleɪtɪdˌ] vs. 'calculation' [ˌkæɫkjəˈleɪʃn] – 'generator' [ˈdʒɛnəˌneɪtə-], 'generation' [ˌdʒɛnəˈneɪʃn] – 'fascinating' [ˈfæsəˌneɪtɪŋ], 'fascination' [ˌfæsɪˈneɪʃn] – 'dominating' [ˈdɒmɪˌneɪtɪŋ] vs. 'domination' [ˌdɒmɪˈneɪʃn] – 'terminating' [ˈtɜ-mɪˌneɪtɪŋˌ] vs. 'termination' [ˌtɜ-mɪˈneɪʃn], 'decorator' [ˈdɛkəˌreɪtə-], 'decoration' [ˌdɛkəˈreɪtə-], 'demonstrator' [ˈdɛmənsˌtreɪtə-] vs. 'demonstration' [ˌdɛmənsˈtreɪʃn] – 'cultivating' [ˈkʌɫtɪˌveɪtɪŋ] 'cultivation' [ˌkʌɫtɪˈveɪʃn] – 'aggravating' [ˈæɡrɪˌveɪtɪŋ] vs 'aggravation' [ˌæɡrɪˈveɪʃn] – 'ceremony' [ˈsɛrəməni] vs. 'ceremonial' [ˌsɛrəˈmɔːnɪɫ]

The teacher can also ask students to mark in several sentences their primary and secondary stress as intonation exercises while he reads them aloud (Zapata, 2017):

'John ˈloves ˌMary' [dʒɒn 'lʌvz %mɛəri↓] — 'Phoˈnetics is ˌeasy' [fə∀nɛtɪks_ɪz_ˌiːzi↓] – 'Want to ˈsee ˌit?' [∀wʌnt tə %siːˑɪt↑] – 'ˌI'm eighˌteen' [%aɪm_eɪ∀tiːn] – 'ˌWere they ˈhome?' [%wɜːɚ ðeɪ ∀hoʊm↑] 'A ∀week a%go' – '∀Where do you %live?' – '∀Come %here, ∀please' – 'You%study ∀English?' – '∀How are % you?' – '∀ ˈFine, ∀thanks' – '∀Who did%that ?' – '%Mrs. ∀Jones' – '% Mrs. ∀Jones?' – '%Yes, ∀she %did' – 'The si%tuation_is in∀tolerable' – '∀What %time % did you ∀call?' – 'Would you like some coffee?' – 'The teacher is sick?' – 'The President likes swimming, doesn't he?' – 'We speak Spanish in Venezuela, don't we?' – 'How much money have you got?' – Pay attention to your teacher. – Let's rent a car. – Don't be silly. – Why are you angry? – Did you understand my explanations? – Will you come to class tomorrow? – Who broke the chair? – You didn't feel the earthquake? – - Is that John over there? – You know it as well as I do. – This room is more expensive than that one. – Do you know John, dear? – Good morning, Mr. Smith! –Young man, we'll see you later. – My friend, I want to tell you something. – You want a chair, don't you? – Shall we meet here, or in your room? – I looked down, and there were my keys. – It's unbelievable! – What a beautiful day! – I ordered an apple not a pear. – Pass me the onion near the sugar bowl. – Are you coming to our party? – Is he the man you talked to me about? – I already know him, but I haven't met her yet. – Ask them all the questions you want. – Where were your glasses? – John'll do the work for you? – I was cleaning the house when he arrived. – There are eighteen students in my class. – What's it mean? – The teacher gave each one of us a piece of cake. – There's a cat under the table. – Who are you waiting for? – Have you seen Arthur? – How long has he lived in Middleford? – Let's have a party on Friday. – Is Bruce going to ring Mary up? – No, he's telephoning another girl. – What's Mr. Steele putting on? – Can you tell me the time? –. You mustn't smoke in class. – Arthur, come into my office. – Do you speak English? – What can I do for you? – May I help you? – Whose house does Arthur live in? – I've just come back from England. – We're going to visit Jenny, Mary and Sheila. – Would you like to go to the cinema or to the theater? – Did you feed the chickens? – How often does Mary go to a restaurant? – What's the matter with you? – Don't miss class. – You study English, don't you? – You can't smoke in class, can you? – Will he come tomorrow? – You have nothing cheaper? – May I ring the bell? – You're married, aren't you? – My English students don't watch TV, do they? – What time did you call? – We speak Spanish in Venezuela, don't we? –. John, are you listening to me?

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5. Conclusion

In many phonological approaches, and in many dictionaries, English is represented as having two levels of stress: primary and secondary. In every lexical word, and in some grammatical words, one syllable is identified as having primary stress, though in monosyllables the stress is not generally marked. In addition, longer words may have one or more syllables identified as having secondary stress. Syllables that have neither are called unstressed. Secondary stress is frequently indicated in the following cases: In words where the primary stress falls on the third syllable or later. In many compounds or phrasals, where one part of them is pronounced more prominently. Teaching students the distinction between primary and secondary stress is of utmost importance for their acquision of the rhythm of English. English being a stress-timed language where stressed syllables occur approximately at regular intervals and the correlation of primary and secondary stress carries a special function for conveying the intended meaning, even unstressed syllables bear their own mission to support them with their absence of stress. So the neglect of such an important function in sentence rhythm cause many problems in oral communication that need to be overcome or prevented at an earliest stage before students of English move any further in their pronunciation studies.

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