

## The Meaning is in the Music Sound Patterns of Spoken English

Spoken English sounds very different than the way that printed English looks. As in most languages, the written text preserves speech patterns through punctuation and grammatical rules, but the oral language is shaped when a native English speaker groups words into natural units of meaning through various oral techniques. These oral meaning-units are indicated by phonetic symbols set with slashes / /. Among the phonetic techniques to convey meaning:

Stress: The distinctive sound of spoken English comes from two sources, the syllable stress within a word and the word stress within a sentence. The **syllable stress** is the syllables within the word that get a **primary stress** or, in the case of a word with many syllables, a **secondary stress**. Example: able = /AY-bəl'/; ability = /ə-BIL-ih-tee/

Intonation: The words that convey with particular meaning within a sentence are stressed, giving the entire sentence a distinct melody, called **intonation**. The syllables within these stressed words get an extra stress, both from their natural position within the word and their emphasized position within the sentence.

Long vs. short Vowels: **Long vowels** sound the names of the letters, and they also take more time to speak than **short vowels**. Long vowels are often within syllables closed by consonants and receive stress; short vowels are often in open syllables ending in vowels, are unstressed and softer. “/Ay/ is for /ah-pplə.”<sup>1</sup>

Reduced vowels: Long vowels are reduced to short vowels in closed syllables, and short vowels can become reduced into a mere “uh” sound when they fall into unstressed syllables sound. A **reduced vowel** will sound as if it has been swallowed and is called a **schwa**, marked by /ə/. In casual speech, it can disappear completely. Example: about = /ə-bout/ or /'bout/.

Voiced vs. Unvoiced Consonants: The **unvoiced consonants** are only a puff of air with no voiced sound like, s, f, t, p and the **voiced consonants** are made with a distinctive sound from the throat, like z, v, b. When a word has voiced consonants, its vowel will be spoken longer than the vowel in a word with only unvoiced consonants. Example: seat vs. seed.<sup>2</sup>

Phrasing pauses: Often a sentence is broken deliberately into groups of meaning with pauses after stresses, much the way music is broken into musical phrases separated by slight pauses. In English, this helps separate units of meaning, such as between the subject and verb or between prepositional phrases and is noted by a single apostrophe /' / for a short pause and a double apostrophe /'' / for a longer pause. (This **oral phrasing** is not the same as grammatical phrases that lack a subject-verb combination.) Example: Your child' slept in the bed,' but the other child'' had to sleep' outside' on the ground.

Liaisons: Words slur together depending on their beginning and ending consonants. These **liaisons** are word connections that change the sound of the letters in surprising ways. Example: What are you doing? Whacha' doin'?

Emotional tone: Emotions will always override the normal patterns of spoken English to give a sentence a unique sound. Always remember **the feeling and the spirit of the language** are the first and original ways of conveying meaning.

<sup>1</sup> For a complete list of phonetic symbols, see *Phonetic Symbol Chart*.

<sup>2</sup> See Ann Cook, *American Accent Training, Grammar*.

## Two Primary Intonation Patterns: New Meaning is Louder, and Old Meaning is Softer, Almost Silent

English has distinctive loud-soft hammering sound pattern to convey meaning. Within a single word, some syllables are loud and stressed; others are soft and unstressed. In a sentence, the words with new meaning are spoken loudly and sharply; words with less meaning are soft, almost silent. It is hard to understand English that lacks the correct sound pattern.

The most basic English sentence structure has three parts: Subject – Verb – Complement. Nouns often introduce new ideas, so they are stressed. Pronouns usually refer back to previous nouns, so they are unstressed, or quiet. This produces two primary sentence sound patterns.

Imagine peaks and valleys of waves in the sea. The peak is the louder, new information; the valley is the soft, almost silent, slurred combination of old or unimportant information.

### 1. NEW INFORMATION PATTERN

Noun as Subject – Verb – Noun as Complement

**NOUN** – Verb – **NOUN**

1. The cat sat on the table.

The **CAAT** ' satunth' **TAY**-bəl.



### 2. OLD INFORMATION PATTERN

Pronoun as Subject – Verb – Pronoun as Complement

Pronoun – **VERB**– Pronoun

2. She sat on it.

She' **SAAd**'nit.



### Question Pattern: Add Rising Intonation at the End.

The question pattern preserves the same spoken structure of its corresponding statement; the noun subject and complement are usually stressed and the verbs unstressed. As in many languages, the question pattern has a rising intonation at its end.

1. NEW INFORMATION QUESTION PATTERN:  
Helping Verb - **SUBJECT** – Base Verb – **COMPLEMENT**?

Verb(helping) – **NOUN** – Verb(base) – Obj(**NOUN**)?

1. Did the cat sit on the table?

Didthə **CAT** ' sidunth' **TAY**-bəl?



2. OLD INFORMATION QUESTION PATTERN:  
Helping Verb - **SUBJECT** – Base Verb – **COMPLEMENT**?

Verb(helping) – Pronoun – **VERB(base)** – Pronoun?

2. Did she sit on it?

Didshee **SIT**onit?



The first question pattern emphasizes the noun subject and the noun complement, just as in its corresponding answer in statement pattern #1, “Yes, the cat sat on the table.” The second

pattern emphasizes the verb, just as in its corresponding answer in statement pattern #2, “Yes, she sat on it.”

### Command pattern: Stress the Verb and Noun Complement.

A command pattern is based on the Subject-Verb-Complement foundation, but the subject is implied, not spoken and the most important part of a command, the verb, is loud. The complement is stressed when it contains important information.

#### 1. UNSTRESSED COMMAND PATTERN:

(Subject) - Verb – Complement(unstressed).

##### 1. (S) - **Verb** – Adverbial.

(You) **GO** outside!



#### 2. STRESSED NOUN COMMAND PATTERN

(Subject) - Verb – Complement with Noun closing.

##### 2. (S) - **Verb** – DirObj – PrepPhr(adverbial)

(You) **PUT** thatunth' **TAY**- bəl.



## Emotion Produces Variations in the Primary Intonation Patterns

Emotion and meaning always override these normal patterns and create variations:<sup>3</sup>

▶ New information: The word that adds extra new meaning will be stressed.

It's **sunny** outside, (as predicted.)

▶ *Can't* or negatives (*no, never, not*)

It **can't** be sunny outside. (The weather channel predicted rain!)

The **book** is on the **table**, but the **pencils** are **not** on the table.

"And I **can't stan** 'im!" (*Singin' in the Rain*)

▶ Contrast:

It's sunny **outside**, but **stormy** in **here**.

Where's the **book**? It's on the **table**.

Is the book **on** the table or **under** it? It's **on** the table.

▶ Opinion:

"I did **too** do my homework!"

▶ Surprise:

"The student **cheated** on his college exams?"

▶ Emotion:

(Hey John, what's up?) You **want** to go to the **movies** with me?

**You** want to go to the movies with **me**? (You must be crazy!)

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<sup>3</sup> See: Ann Cook, *American Accent Training, Grammar*.

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