

Profiling English Prosody

A Textbook for Students of English

Biljana Čubrović
and Patricia Ashby



Textbooks and Handbooks Series

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Biljana Čubrović & Patricia Ashby

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FOREWORD

This book serves as an introductory guide to English prosody, and is specifically designed for use in undergraduate courses in English Phonetics. It covers the notion of the syllable, word stress, sentence stress and intonation in an accessible manner. The book was created out of decades-long experience of teaching English Phonetics courses to university students. Our intention was to cover every given topic using simple and easy-to-follow explanations illustrated by authentic, real-life examples that a student may encounter in everyday conversation.

The initial chapter discusses the syllable as an important linguistic unit that organizes sound sequences in speech. We address the challenges of defining syllables, the disagreement among native-speakers on syllable boundaries, and the language-specific nature of syllabification rules that will help an L2 (second language) learner better understand how English syllables work.

The second part explores the main concepts of lexical stress in English. It examines stress patterns characteristic of English words, the absence of fixed stress rules, and provides guidelines for an L2 learner of English that will gear them towards the acquisition of accurate stress patterns and avoid misunderstandings.

The final section is dedicated to English rhythm and intonation, covering the terminology and concepts necessary for understanding and producing appropriate pitch patterns, nuclear tones, and the placement of the nucleus in utterances. The primary objective of this section is to demonstrate to a novice learner of English intonation how native speakers use tunes, as well as to provide guidance on how to master them.

We hope that this book will be adopted in English Phonetics classrooms as a stand-alone teaching material or serve as a supplement to existing textbooks. Special thanks go to Dr. Michael Ashby for his invaluable feedback and constructive criticism during the writing process. Additionally, we are grateful to the three reviewers who graciously provided feedback on the material. The authors are also particularly grateful to the publisher, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philology, for their enduring patience and continual support. We take full responsibility for any inaccuracies in the textbook.

1

THE SYLLABLE

1. GETTING STARTED

The syllable is a seemingly simple and natural linguistic unit that organizes sound sequences in speech. Attempts to define it clearly and comprehensively have encountered challenges. When asked to count syllables in a word, speakers of English and other languages typically carry out the task with ease in their L1, and have no difficulty attempting it even in another language. Marking syllable boundaries, on the other hand, seems problematic. Even L1 speakers disagree, especially in words with complex medial consonant sequences, as in *dolphin* or *extra*. L2 speakers of English may have an even greater issue because syllabification rules are language specific. In other words, what we know about a good syllable in Serbian or French will not necessarily apply to English. This chapter will outline the basics of the English syllable, introduce you to its constituents (the nucleus, onset, coda, and rhyme), discuss its form, as well as offer guidelines about syllable division.

2. THE SYLLABLE BASICS

When asked how many syllables there are in a word of one's own mother tongue, nearly every speaker will provide a correct answer, no matter how long and complex the word. Let's take a look at some of the long words of English like *syllabification* or *incomprehensibilities*. Some L1 speakers of English may use their fingers to count the syllables. Some will find it easier to say the word out loud to count the syllables, but the results seem accurate – six and eight syllables, respectively, for the two long words given above. And this is quite surprising, when you come to think of it. This task is even easier than counting segments (consonants and vowels) in a word. There is something about syllables that seems quite natural to us.

A good starting point to identify a syllable is: **one vowel equals one syllable**. When counting syllables in words, we typically rely on finding vowels in them. *Tennis* contains two vowels, therefore, it has two syllables, similar to *pity* (again 2 vowels = 2 syllables). We can count four vowels in the English word *philology*,

hence four syllables. What complicates the matter of counting syllables in English is that some consonants may perform a syllabic function, as /ŋ/ in *button*. Syllabic consonants in English are most commonly /l, m, n, ŋ/, but /n/ and /l/ are most often found in this role. You will also have noticed that in the phonemic transcription a small vertical line is used to mark a syllabic consonant:

Syllabic /l/ in *parcel* /'pɑ:səl/

Syllabic /m/ in *rhythm* /'rɪðm/

Syllabic /n/ in *button* /'bʌtn/

Syllabic /ŋ/ *bacon goes (fast in this house)* /'beɪkŋ gəʊz/ → /'beɪkŋ gəʊz/

Looking at the spelling we do not have a way of saying whether a consonant is syllabic or not, but in casual speech this can often be the case.

Across languages, the most common syllable shape (we call this the least marked) is the CV syllable (Zec 2007: 163). C stands for a consonant, and V for a vowel. All languages make use of the CV syllable type in which a consonant is followed by a vowel (Maddieson 1984), as in *see* or *paw*. Syllables that end in a vowel are called open syllables. Those syllables that end in a consonant, like *seat* and *pawn*, are called closed.

In a limited number of languages, open syllables are the only syllable type permitted, e.g. Hawaiian *a.lo.ha* (Eng. 'hello') or *ma.ha.lo* (Eng. 'thank you'). Yoruba, a language spoken in Nigeria, Benin and Togo, favours the CV syllable type but allows some consonants like /m, n/ to close syllables. Of interest here may be examples of loanwords borrowed from English into Yoruba that have to undergo some adaptation of English consonant clusters (groups of consonants at syllable margins), e.g. *gu.lu.ko.o.si* (Eng. 'glucose') or *kem.i.si.ri* (Eng. 'chemistry'). Serbian speakers are similarly tuned in to favour the CV syllable type.

3. THE SYLLABLE STRUCTURE AND PHONOTACTIC RULES

As a linguistic unit, the syllable is typically represented by a syllable tree, as shown in Figure 1. The Greek letter σ, called *sigma*, is used to denote a syllable. Every syllable has a nucleus (N). This slot is typically occupied by a vowel, and in some cases by a syllabic consonant, as in Serbian *krv* /kɾv/ (Eng. *blood*) or the second syllable of the English word *battle* /'bætl/. Any consonants that occur before the nucleus form an onset (O). The nucleus and anything that follows it constitute a unit called the rhyme (or rime; R). You may be familiar with it from poetry. In rhyming there is repetition of the vowel and the sound(s) after it, e.g. *tag, bag, nag*,

‘This textbook offers a clear and engaging introduction to prosodic phenomena in phonology, primarily focusing on the English language while making meaningful connections with Serbian, the students’ native language. The authors present the material in an original way, defining key concepts and explaining prosodic features with detailed examples, including exceptions. Each chapter concludes with practical exercises, accompanied with a detailed key, designed to help students master specific segments of the content. This comprehensive textbook is tailored to meet the needs of undergraduate students studying English phonology, providing thorough coverage of relevant topics and preparing students for further exploration of prosodic aspects of English.’

Maja Marković, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

‘This is an original text written by two authors with long experience in teaching and researching English intonation. It is an introduction to English prosody, with special attention paid to syllable structure, word and sentence stress, as well as the main concepts underlying the intonation of English. [...] The teaching material provides easy-to-follow explanations guiding the students towards better understanding of English intonation and enabling them to master English intonation and use it in their speech.’

Smiljana Komar, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Patricia Ashby is an Emeritus Fellow to the University of Westminster (having taught there for over 30 years) and a National Teaching Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. The author of two successful textbooks — *Speech Sounds* (1995 and 2005), and *Understanding Phonetics* (2011) — she has taught and lectured on phonetics all over the world, including Belgium, Germany, India, Poland, Spain, Serbia, Finland, Hong Kong, The Netherlands and Japan, and in the UK at the universities of Westminster, Reading, Oxford and UCL. She holds a PhD from UCL, and her main research interests now lie in the areas of English intonation, and the history of phonetics. She has served on the Council of the International Phonetic Association since 2011.

Biljana Čubrović is Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Belgrade and founder of the Belgrade Phonetics Lab. She conducted research in acoustic phonetics at Cornell University as a Visiting Scholar during 2008–2009 and 2013–2015. Her publications include *A Workbook of English Phonology* (2003 and 2005), *Profiling English Phonetics* (five editions since 2009), and *Acoustic Investigations of Serbian and American English Vowel Inventories* (2016). She is Editor-in-Chief of the journals *Annals of the Faculty of Philology* and *Philologia*, and has chaired the Publishing Council at the Faculty of Philology since 2022. She currently teaches English Phonetics, Dialects of English, and Research Methods in Linguistics.