THE SYLLABIC STRUCTURE OF ENGLISH AS THE OBJECT OF THE PHONOTACTIC INVESTIGATION

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Abstract.
The article will be concerned with the syllable as a phonetic and phonological unit. It will attempt to show what is included into the notion of the syllable and what are the approaches to the problem of the syllable. On the other hand, the author will try to describe the essential characteristics of the English syllabic system with the aim of providing a useful piece of information on the subject for the would-be teachers of English.

Keywords: syllable division, Syllable formation, phonological opposition, comprehensible, phonotactics, sufficiently polysyllabic, denationalization, Syllabification.

The syllabic structure of all languages can be characterized from the point of view of two aspects: syllable formation and syllable division which are inseparable from each other. Let us begin with the study of the first aspect. Syllable formation in English is generally based on the phonological opposition 'vowel vs. consonant'. Vowels are usually syllabic while consonants are not, with the exceptions of [l, m, n]. The English language possesses a great variety of syllables types. Syllabification is to do with how we chop up words. If we can't analyse the syllable, it becomes very difficult to deal with things like word and sentence stress and almost impossible to transcribe accurately what people say.

In addition to understanding phonemic analysis at the level of vowels and consonants, we need to know how these elements combine to make comprehensible speech rather than just a series of noises. The second concern of this guide is to outline the nature of English phonotactics. This refers to what is and is not allowable in English in terms of how syllables may be constructed. For the purposes of the first part of this guide, we shall define a syllable as a unit of pronunciation having one vowel sound, with or without surrounding consonants. As we shall see, there are exceptions. Most people are able to count how many syllables there are in an individual word, even if they would be hard put to define exactly what is meant by the term 'syllable'. They do this, when asked, often by tapping out the numbers on a table or by humming the sound of the word. Inadvertently, they are betraying just how crucial syllable structure is to phrasing and rhythm in the language. Roach however, notes:

> As a matter of fact, if one tries the experiment of asking English
> speakers to count the syllables in, say, a recorded sentence, there is
> often a considerable amount of disagreement.

This is because, in more extended speech than a single word or short phrase, what is perceived is often at odds with what one knows about the sentence and lexical structures. Even single words, providing they are sufficiently polysyllabic, may cause problems and counting the

number of syllables in a word such as denationalisation requires a little concentration. There are seven when the word is pronounced carefully and in isolation [/ˌdiːˌnæ�.ʃə.nə.laɪˈzeɪʃ.ən/] but likely to be fewer if the word appears in a string because the fifth, which is unstressed, is often elided. Note, by the way, the convention of placing a between syllables in transcriptions. Here, we will be using the term syllable structure but other analyses prefer the term syllable shape to describe the same phenomena. They are functionally synonymous. When an Onset or Coda contains more than one consonant, it is described as complex.

The system looks like this, taking the syllable shrubs [/ʃrʌbz/] as our example because it has both a complex consonant cluster onset (/ʃr/) and a similarly complex coda (/bz/): The Rhyme is so called because it is this part of the syllable which allows a poetic rhyme as in hatch, match and dispatch, for example. You may see it spelled as Rime in US texts. In our example, it allows a rhyme with nubs or clubs (/nʌbz/ and /klʌbz/) because the same three sounds are present: /ʌ/, /b/ and /z/. In some analyses, e.g. Roach (op cit.), the Nucleus is referred to as the Peak. Here we are following Zec. In some analyses, too, especially of languages other than English, the system is seen branching to the left rather than, as here, to the right so the Onset and Nucleus are considered together as the Body and the Coda stands to the right. Other analysts, incidentally, doubt the whole existence of the syllable as a unit of analysis. The term comes from the Greek and refers to the arrangement of sounds in a language. In other words, it looks at what is possible in terms of the combinations of V and C.

The possible number of ways to arrange 24 consonants in two-sound combinations or clusters is 576 but no language on earth will allow anything like that number of combinations. If we consider three-sound clusters, the number of possibilities rises to 13,824 but the most flexible and liberal of languages, such as Russian in this respect, will not exhibit more than a tiny fraction of all the possible combinations.

For example, there are no English words in the Chambers 20th Century Dictionary which begin with shm. There are, however, some which begin with schm such as schmelz, schmooze and schmuck (all of which are loan words from German or Yiddish and none of which causes English speakers any pronunciation trouble).

English football commentators had little difficulty pronouncing the name of the Danish goalkeeper Schmeichel. Nevertheless, the combination of /ʃ/ and /m/ as the onset of a syllable is not allowed by the phonotactic rules of English and most native speakers would reject a word like shmig without a second thought. ou may well be wondering why a site mostly concerned with teaching and learning English takes the trouble to explain all this. There are implications for teaching because phonotactic rules are extremely language specific and also not something of which learners of English (or their teachers) may even be aware. What results is that learners will attempt, often, to apply the rules of their first language(s) to English and that may have unpredictable results (most of them errors). Simply knowing what syllable structures and natures are allowed in English and what are rare or forbidden altogether will direct you to some useful areas of pronunciation practice but there's more to it than that. The following are just a few examples with a summary at the end. Some knowledge, however incomplete, of what syllable structures are permitted and where they may fall in your learners' first language(s) will be helpful in planning what to teach, where to lay the focus and, just as importantly, what you can safely assume is familiar already.

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