



An analysis of Stress Shift in English Noun-Verb Pairs

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Abstract

This research highlights the outcomes of the investigation of the existence of a stress shift pattern in words that are both nouns and verbs in English language. It also explores learners' pattern of putting stress and how far this phenomenon of English phonology exists in English language learners' speech. The study was conducted on one hundred students at intermediate-level in which each subject was asked to read out forty sentences having distinct disyllabic and tri-syllabic words used as both nouns and verbs in each sentence and their demonstration was recorded on the smart phone. The results of study reveal that subjects' placement of syllable stress was mostly inaccurate and the majority subjects lacked knowledge of word stress. Hence, the study suggests that well-trained English language instructors at intermediate level should teach suprasegmental features of English language during their regular course of studies.

Keywords: English language, disyllabic and tri-syllabic words, word stress, stress-shift pattern

1. Introduction

Students' proficiency and fluency in spoken English has become critical for success in practical life, with the growing need and importance of the English language today. Speech is crucial in the process of learning a language. In English, good speech controls the system of sounds, intonation, and stress pattern. According to Jeffrey Kenworthy (1987), learners should develop a concern for pronunciation in the English language. They must understand that poor unintelligible speech creates an annoying and unpleasant situation for both themselves and the listeners. According to John Wells (1996), learners who want to interact with both native and non-native speakers must consider correct pronunciation as a goal of English learning. Learning proper English pronunciation is related to having the best communication skills and has many benefits. Keeping in view the importance of fair pronunciation this study intends to know that to what extent the students at intermediate level are capable of pronouncing disyllabic and tri-syllabic words used as both nouns and verbs in accordance with their grade level with an objective to put forward some recommendations for the improvement of the pronunciation of the students, if needed.

1.1. Research Questions

Following are the research question of the study:

- Can intermediate students distinguish between nouns and verbs while shifting their stress in disyllabic and tri-syllabic words?
- Do the students at intermediate level learn and practice English language stress system in their classroom?
- Can intermediate students speak English with accurate stress patterns?

1.2. Significance of the Study

The investigation is limited to shifts in English word stress, disyllabic and tri-syllabic words, made by the students of intermediate level, hence, it is related to English phonology, suprasegmental phoneme in particular, and stress shifts which are interesting phenomena in language learning made by interlanguage speakers. As a result, the study is not concerned with issues such as error analysis, or other aspects of suprasegmental Phonology, etc. Consequently, the main goal of this study is to see if there is a stress-shift pattern in the speech of second language learners at intermediate level with an aim to contribute to the learning of English stress pattern required at early stage for communication excellence pertaining to disyllabic and tri-syllabic words.

2. Review of Literature

English is a stressed-time language, and the stress pattern is one of the most important factors in English language learning because it allows students to improve their pronunciation. It is difficult to understand native speakers' utterances unless one is familiar with the stress pattern. Many language learning problems are caused by poor listening and speaking skills. According to Sethi and Dhamija (1989), word accent is an important part of word shape. Every word in English has a unique accentual pattern that is shared by both the speaker and the listener. Any arbitrary change in this pattern, such as we might find in a non-native speaker's pronunciation of that word, has the potential to deform the word beyond recognition.

Throughout the history of L2 teaching, various methods have been used. Some methods place emphasis on pronunciation, while others do not. Recent approaches to phonology in the English language emphasize the importance of word stress. Teachers should be encouraged to correctly teach word stress. According to Helen Fraser (2006), it is easy for students to place emphasis on individual syllables, but this is insufficient. Instructors must help L2 learners learn more skills to control their use of word stress in order to make their attempts at communication more understandable. They must gradually improve their hearing abilities to distinguish between stressed and unstressed syllables and acquire the ability to produce this distinction. They must internalize the controlling concepts in their minds.

2.1. Word Stress

In English, word stress can be used to differentiate meaning. The stressed syllables in English can distinguish between the meanings of two words, such as *convict* as a noun and *convict* as a verb. Stress is referred to as a suprasegmental phoneme because it can only occur with segmental phonemes. The degree of force used in syllable production is defined as stress (Crystal, 1985). This force of emphasis is applied to specific words (or certain syllables within words). Ladefoged (1982) defines stress as a suprasegmental feature of utterances; it applies to whole syllables rather than individual vowels and consonants. A stressed syllable is pronounced with more energy than an unstressed syllable. Stress is a term that we apply to words in isolation which have more than one syllable. It refers to the property that certain syllables carry which makes them stand out from the rest of the word. It seems certain that stressed syllables are made with more effort than unstressed ones; the muscles in the lungs seem to expel air more aggressively than for unstressed syllables.

2.2. Placement of Stress in English Words

There is no easy way to determine which syllable in a word should be stressed. Because English is not our first language, we must know how to emphasize new words. Roach (2009) provides the following information that can aid in the placement of stress in English words:

- Whether the word is morphologically simple, complex, or a compound.
- The word's grammatical category, such as noun, verb, adjective, and so on.

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- The number of syllables in the word
- The phonological structure of those syllables

2.3. Stress Shift

An intriguing feature of the English language is the existence of several pairs of words with the same spelling but belonging to different word classes. Roach (2009) describes how it is common in English for the stress pattern of a word to differ when it occurs in a specific context compared to when it occurs in isolation; for example, the word 'fifteen' in isolation is stressed on the second syllable, but in 'fifteenth place' the stress is on the first syllable. This is referred to as a Stress Shift. In the following sentences, for example, the word object has been used as both a noun and a verb:

These are familiar 'objects.

I ob'ject to his coming here.

As a noun, the object is pronounced with stress on the first syllable, whereas as a verb in the second sentence, the stress is on the second syllable.

2.4. Stress Shift in Noun and Verbs

Similarly, the same type of stress placement can be seen in the following pairs of words:

Nouns	Verbs
'conduct	con'duct
'contract	con'tract
'contrast	con'trast
'convict	con'vict
'desert	de'sert

As a result, when a word is used as a noun, the stress falls on the first syllable, whereas when used as a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable. The placement of stress is usually determined by whether the word is simple, compound, or complex. The type of suffix or prefix used in that word determines stress placement in complex words, and the grammatical class and sequencing of words determines stress placement in compound words Yadugiri (2006).

The main reason for placing so much emphasis on word stress and stress shift is that incorrect stress changes the meaning of the word. It eventually leads to non-recognition of produced speech, resulting in communication failure. Benrabah (1997) argued that native speakers of the target language may have difficulty understanding non-native speakers' speech because of their tendency to use the target language's incorrect stress pattern (e.g., Martin Aitchison, 1994; Benrabah, 1997; Slowiaczek, 1990).

There are various word stress patterns in English, but memorization is the best way to learn word stress. There are numerous phonological rules in these suprasegmental features that have been described. These rules should be taught to students and followed by teachers in second language teaching classes. Teachers should plan interactive activities in the classroom to improve their speaking skills and stress pattern practice.

The literature review discussed above provides information about the nature of stress, its placement, variations in putting stress, and, most importantly, the stress shift pattern on which the current research is based. Word stress is a golden key to speaking and understanding English. It is the best way for students to understand fast spoken English (Essberger 1998). However, we made an effort to familiarize readers with the stress pattern and tried to raise awareness about its importance in speaking skills and proper usage.

3. Methodology and Procedure

This study used a quantitative strategy supported by descriptive statistics. The study's goal was to look at the stress shift pattern in SLL utterances. The study was conducted on students of public sector Postgraduate College for Women in Lahore district. The research sample consisted of one hundred students of intermediate level, studying English as compulsory subject. Subjects were given sheets of paper with forty sentences to read aloud and smart phone was used for recordings of their demonstration. Disyllabic and tri-syllabi words were used as both a noun and a verb in these sentences. Each participant was given five minutes to read out the set of sentences while keeping in mind to care to elicit a stress shift in the words uttered. The performance of the subjects was recorded followed by researchers’ listening of recordings carefully to investigate on which syllable correct stress was given. Finally, the collected data was arranged and analyzed for findings.

4. Findings of the Study

This section consists of data analysis and discussion.

Words	No of Respondents	Percentage of Correct stress on First syllable as Noun.	Percentage of Correct stress on Second Syllable as verb.
<i>Permit</i>	100	40%	60%
<i>Produce</i>	100	30%	60%
<i>Progress</i>	100	30%	70%
<i>Desert</i>	100	80%	90%
<i>Convert</i>	100	40%	80%
<i>Perfect</i>	100	70%	90%
<i>Discourse</i>	100	10%	90%
<i>Contract</i>	100	30%	90%
<i>Increase</i>	100	20%	10%
<i>Reject</i>	100	20%	90%
<i>Attribute</i>	100	80%	90%
<i>Decrease</i>	100	10%	80%
<i>Rebel</i>	100	30%	60%
<i>Interchange</i>	100	30%	30%
<i>Contract</i>	100	40%	90%
<i>protest</i>	100	40%	90%
<i>Present</i>	100	40%	70%
<i>Record</i>	100	50%.	50%
<i>Export</i>	100	50%	40%
<i>Conflict</i>	100	40%	90%

5. Discussion

It was found that during the recording process that the students were completely unaware of the intonation pattern in sentences and the stress shift on syllables in different words used as a noun and a verb. During sentences' reading, it was also noted that no syllable stress was observed in two or three syllabic words by the subjects. It reflects that they were able to utter stressed words but not in the required stress pattern required in English Phonology which ultimately enabled the researchers to understand that no formal training in the suprasegmental phonology was given to students directly or indirectly. Hence, we see that uttering special words (noun/verb), became a challenge for the majority of subjects because they mispronounced different words having more than one syllable.

The results also reveal that there was no occurrence of a stress shift pattern on words; subjects only emphasized the second syllable of words, whether they were nouns or verbs. Regardless of the rule that stress falls on the first syllable of a noun and the second syllable of a verb, they mostly put stress on the second syllable and were unable to pronounce correct stressed syllables due to a lack of phonological training during their course of studies.

6. Conclusion

The following conclusions are drawn from the analyzed data:

- Syllable stress placement was a problem among students regardless of whether a word was a noun or a verb, the subjects treated such word pairs similarly. They unconsciously applied incorrect stress to various syllables in accordance with their own preferences due to their lack of understanding about syllable stress.
- With the exception of a few subjects' stress shifts were inaccurate. It was obvious that they were unconsciously emphasizing certain syllables as they never had training in learning English pronunciation; the speech of subjects lacked a smooth transition of stress-shift placement.
- Subjects' inability to pronounce words correctly was noted during the study as the results highlight that subjects were unaware of the rhythmic process of stress shift, hence, could not pronounce words.

7. Recommendations

In light of the findings the following recommendations are made for future research on the related area under the umbrella of English linguistics.

- a. It is recommended that efforts may be made by the teachers teaching English language at intermediate level to teach students English stressing system to improve English pronunciation of the students.
- b. More research may be conducted on English Phonology.
- c. Stress as a prosodic (suprasegmental) feature should be taught at all public sector colleges in EFL classes by using latest pronunciation teaching techniques.
- d. Students, at intermediate level, should be taught governing rules of basic English Phonology as English words have more complex stress patterns.

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