

Three Pronunciation Factors that Change Meaning in Discourse

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Introduction

Knowing what pronunciation factors change meaning in English discourse is of utmost importance for EFL/ESL teachers and students. At our very first encounter with English pronunciation we discover that the whole phonemic alphabet is based on meaning change. Three sentences can be the same except for vowel changes within them that make their meanings different: *I have a cat. I have a cot. I have a cut.* The same happens to the boy that went to Yale and the less fortunate one that went to jail. Here the consonant changes make the meaning different. Both a phonological change and a grammatical one occur in the sentences: *Dave sat there. They've sat there.* The same is true of intonation. What a meaning difference there is between: *Paul is a smart / boy, isn't he?* and *Paul is a smart / boy, isn't / he?* And also: *Are you / reading, James? Are you reading / James?*

The central focus of this article is how meaning changes, due to word stress, reduction and non-reduction and juncture.

Word Stress

A. Nouns and Verbs (of two syllables)

In this group we have the same words which are nouns when stressed on the first syllable and verbs when stressed on the second:

<u>conduct</u>	<u>insult</u>	<u>conflict</u>	<u>convert</u>	<u>permit</u>	<u>suspect</u>	<u>contract</u>	<u>record</u>
conduct	insult	conflict	convert	permit	suspect	contract	record

B. Compounds: Two Nouns / Adjective + Noun

1. <u>gold</u> fish	<u>bush</u> man	<u>metal</u> cutter	<u>dog</u> biscuits	<u>love</u> letter	<u>play</u> house
gold <u>fish</u>	Bush <u>man</u>	metal <u>cutter</u>	dog <u>biscuits</u>	love <u>letter</u>	play <u>house</u>

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As we read across the first line of noun compounds stressed on the first noun, the meanings are: *species, an Australian woodsman, an occupation, a type of food, a type of letter, a theater*. Those stressed on the second noun mean: *a material made of, a political supporter, a material made of, direct objects: biscuits, letter(s), house*. These meanings will be pointed out in the dialogues that follow.

2. bluebird the White house cold cream high jump red cap greenhouse
 blue bird the white house cold cream high jump red cap green house

Reading across the first line of adjective + noun compounds in which the adjectives are stressed, the meanings are: *species, special place, cosmetic, type of jump, porter, place for plants*. In the second line we have: *color, color, low temperature, elevated, color, color*.

3. coffee cup notebook English class baseball game credit card gas station
 nylon shirt brick wall steel bridge silk dress cotton shirt iron door

Another interesting group of compound nouns has unchangeable stress: when the first noun is stressed, classification or purpose is usually indicated and stress on the second noun usually indicates material made of (Prator-Wallace 1985: 54)

Discourse

Teacher-Student Conflicts

I don't see why the class should protest or rebel. There's just no way to content rebels. Why so many protests over the increase of homework which is for their own good? I suspect that they are inclined to look for conflicts that cause trouble and prevent progress.

The Estrogen Dilemma

-----Pressed for her secret, the youthful matron revealed she had been taking birth control pills, containing estrogen and a second female hormone, progesterone.----
 -That danger (increased risk of several forms of cancer) was underscored last week by a report in the *New England Journal of Medicine* reaffirming the long-suspected link between estrogen-replacement therapy and breast cancer. Weighing such risks against the truly marvelous benefits of estrogen may be the most difficult health decision a woman can make. And there's no avoiding it. (Wallis 1996: 38)

Bird Watchers

- A. I'm glad to hear that you see different birds in your yard, Bob.
 B. Yeah, I do. This morning I saw a bluebird and a blackbird. Last week I saw three blue birds, but I couldn't identify them.

Dog Biscuits

- A. What kind of food does Terry give his dog?
 B. He feeds his dog biscuits.
 A. Biscuits?
 B. Yes, he feeds it dog biscuits--the kind you can get at a supermarket.
 A. Oh, I'll have to get my dog biscuits too.

C. Phrasal Verbs and Phrasal Nouns / Verbs + Prepositions

A unique case of stress is the phrasal verb, the phrasal noun and the verb with a preposition. The phrasal verb is always characterized by its stress on the adverbial particle: shut down and a phrasal noun is stressed on the first word: a shutdown. The verb with a preposition is stressed on the verb itself: listen to.

come back	shut down	write up	hand out	crack down	break through	take off
<u>comeback</u>	<u>shutdown</u>	<u>write-up</u>	<u>handout</u>	<u>crackdown</u>	<u>break through</u>	<u>takeoff</u>
<u>listen to</u>	<u>look at</u>	<u>back up</u>		<u>pass out</u>	<u>wait for</u>	<u>crash into</u>
		(the street)		(the door)		

Discourse

Rescuing Captain O'Grady

----hours later, O'Grady's father was told that his son was in Bosnia and that he had been shot down. As his F-16 plane came apart, O'Grady reached for the ejection lanyard between his knees.----The ejection seat rocketed O'Grady into the air.----After punching out of his plane, he opened his parachute manually instead of waiting for it to be released. He recalls floating down----an seeing the Bosnian Serbs watching his progress. He landed in a grassy clearing and dashed toward some bushes where he quickly dug his face into the dirt and covered his ears. After six days of hiding from the Serbs and living without food, O'Grady is reached and rescued by the Marines (Fedarjo-Thompson 1995: 26-72).

Gorillas, Pottos and Turacos

----Nick spent 21 days on a platform, sitting and waiting before this gorilla sloshed along----one of the clearing of the Nouabalé-Ndoki forest (Congo). Researchers believe this may become the site of breakthroughs in the study of low-land gorillas.

Hanging out with style, a potto (a lower primate roughly the size of a rabbit) climbs upside down as readily as right side up, slinking along silently to avoid predators.

At first light the jungle comes alive with the plaintive cry of the great blue turaco (bird). Nimble climbers and acrobatic feeders, these birds are far less graceful in the air. In preparation for take off they sprint down a branch with their wings raised and tail feathers fanned. ----At touchdown great blue turacos sometimes crash into the forest floor, then scamper back to the canopy. (Chadwick 1995: 17, 20)

Passing Out but not Passing out Exams

- A. What ever happened to your poor teacher this morning?
 B. Well, she passed out the classroom door to get our final exams and then she passed out! The school doctor helped her come to, but I'm glad she couldn't pass out our exams to us.

Reduction and Nonreduction

Having considered the intricate details of how stress can change meaning, we now come to reduction and nonreduction. In reduction auxiliary verbs that combine with the preposition to are commonly reduced or contracted in informal speech. And this is a universal occurrence wherever English is spoken. It's really unfortunate that teachers who are not updated think that the use of such reductions is vulgar and careless. This is nothing but folk mythology about the language. However, if we are scientific in our approach, we accept the realities of language of which reduced forms is one. EFL teachers should know that "the second language student who cannot handle these contractions on an oral receptive level will be seriously crippled in the skill of listening comprehension. Furthermore, he will be able to communicate in his own speaking only on a level that will be considered very formal by his native, English speaking communicants, who will forgive his 'accent' because he is a 'foreigner', but who will to some extent be distracted by the way he talks" (Bowen 1975: 165)

The reduced forms we referred to above are: *hafta* (*have to*), *gonna* (*going to*), *yusta* (*used to*), *wanna* (*want to*), *gotta* (*got to*), and *hasta* (*has to*). These reductions are only written in comic strips, plays, quoted dialogues or personal letters. Otherwise, the full forms are written out. Also what should be taught is that the reduced form is not emphasized, but the following principal verb is : *hafta GO*, *wanna COME*.

The contrast in meaning comes when the auxiliary verb becomes the principal verb: *I'm starving. What do you HAVE to eat?* (What's available?), *I GOT to see that wonderful movie yesterday.* (had the opportunity). The reductions *hafta*, *hasta*, *wanna*, *gotta*, *gonna* all refer to present and/or future time except *yusta* which refers to past habitual action or if used with *be*, it means "accustomed to": *I used to (yusta) smoke, but not anymore. She's used to (yusta) working eight hours a day.* *Be* always precedes *gonna*: *He's, she's, I'm, we're gonna drink beer.* *Have* precedes *gotta* except after *I* where it is disappearing: *She's, he's I('ve), they've gotta do a lot of homework.* *Have* after *you* and *we* is also losing ground.

Other meaning contrasts of reduction and nonreduction are: *She's gonna stop and shop. She's going to "Stop and Shop".* (a store); *The dog is yusta fish. The dog is used to fish* (for the purpose of); *What do you wanna sing? What do you want to sing?* (how much?)

Discourse

A. I heard you saw your doctor about a diet.

B. Yes, I did. I *have to (hafta)* eat only nonfattening food. I just hate the idea!

A. Oh, sorry about that.

A. Oh, I'm so hungry. What do you *have to* eat in your fridge, Lil?

B. Be my guest! I have ham, turkey, chicken salad, ice cream and chocolate cake.

A. What kind of knife is that in your hand, Betty?

B. It's a curved knife *used to* cut the inside of a grapefruit. I *used to (yusta)* cut grapefruit with an ordinary knife and just made a mess of everything!

A. Did you see the Bolshoi Ballet when it was here last year?

B. Oh, sure. We *got to* see "Swan Lake" and it was excellent!

A. Well, you've *got to (gotta)* see the Ballet Folclórico de México, too. What brilliant dancers and colors!

B. Yes, you're right. We('ve) *got to (gotta)* get tickets right away. I'm *going to (gonna)* go to Bellas Artes this afternoon and I'm *going to* Sanborn's too.

Juncture

Besides changes of meaning due to stress, reduction and nonreduction, there is juncture--the slight pause between elements: syllables, words, sentences. It is the significant boundary that divides these elements: *ni/trate-night/rate; an/ice drink-a/nice drink; a great/abbey--a gray/tabby; a Greek/spy-a Greek's/pie; Joyce/leaps-Joy/sleeps; I/scream-ice/cream.* A

native speaker senses or intuits the difference between the above examples and, of course, his intuition is aided by the context of such utterances (West 1975: 104). However, EFL/ESL students need practice in hearing the differences, which can sharpen their hearing ability greatly. A teacher can read a list of these words written on the board and the students can indicate which they hear. Also the students can say the different pairs of words as they read them from the board.

Discourse

A. Did Joan say *that all me* could come to her party?

B. No, She said *the tall men* could come.

A. Did that lady in the white coat say *night rate* or *nitrate*?

B. She's a chemist. She must have said *nitrate*.

A. Did you ask me to bring you an *ice drink* or *a nice drink*?

B. Well, I really asked you for *a nice drink*, but I would appreciate the combination--*a nice drink* that is *an ice drink* would suit me fine in this hot weather we're having.

The housemother of a woman's dormitory at an American university tells her friend Grace about her surprise.

Housemother: Oh my, didn't you know that men are not allowed to stay in this dormitory?

Grace: Well, why do you ask? The name of my friend is *Joan Elson*.

Housemother: Oh, excuse me. I though you said *Joe Nelson*.

Grace: Oh! Come on! You know I wouldn't make such a silly mistake.

Conclusion

The intention of this article has been to make EFL teachers more deeply knowledgeable of English pronunciation so that they may help their students become better communicators of English.

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