

# The syllabic structure in english



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The syllabic structure in English Outline 1. Theories on syllable formation and division. 2. The structure and functions of syllables in English 1. Theories on syllable formation and division

Speech can be broken into minimal pronounceable units into which sounds show a tendency to cluster or group. These smallest phonetic groups are generally given the name of syllables. Being the smallest pronounceable units, syllables form morphemes, words and phrases. Each of these units is characterized by a certain syllabic structure. Thus a meaningful language unit phonetically may be considered from the point of view of syllable formation and syllable division. The syllable is a complicated phenomenon and like a phoneme it can be studied on four levels - articulatory, acoustic, auditory and functional. The complexity of the phenomenon gave rise to many theories. We could start with the so-called expiratory (chest pulse or pressure) theory by R. H. Stetson. This theory is based on the assumption that expiration in speech is a pulsating process and each syllable should correspond to a single expiration. So the number of syllables in an utterance is determined by the number of expirations made in the production of the utterance. This theory was strongly criticized by Russian and foreign linguists. G. P. Torsuev, for example, wrote that in a phrase a number of words and consequently a number of syllables can be pronounced with a single expiration. This fact makes the validity of the theory doubtful. Another theory of syllable put forward by O. Jespersen is generally called the sonority theory. According to O. Jespersen, each sound is characterized by a certain degree of sonority which is understood as acoustic property of a sound that determines its perceptibility. According to this sound property a ranking of speech sounds could be established: voiceless plosives (voiced fricatives (voiced plosives (voiced fricatives (sonorants

(close vowels (open vowels). In the word plant for example we may use the following wave of sonority: [pla: nt]. According to V. A. Vassilyev the most serious drawback of this theory is that it fails to explain the actual mechanism of syllable formation and syllable division. Besides, the concept of sonority is not very clearly defined. Further experimental work aimed to description of the syllable resulted in lot of other theories. However the question of articulatory mechanism of syllable is still an open question in phonetics. We might suppose that this mechanism is similar in all languages and could be regarded as phonetic universal. In Russian linguistics there has been adopted the theory of syllable by LV Shcherba. It is called the theory of muscular tension. In most languages there is the syllabic phoneme in the centre of the syllable which is usually a vowel phoneme or, in some languages, a sonorant. The phonemes preceding or following the syllabic peak are called marginal. The tense of articulation increases within the range of prevocalic consonants and then decreases within the range of postvocalic consonants. Russian linguist and psychologist N. I. Zhinkin has suggested the so-called loudness theory which seems to combine both production and perception levels. The experiments carried out by N. I. Zhinkin showed that the arc of loudness of perception level is formed due to variations of the volume pharyngeal passage which is modified by contractions of its walls. The narrowing of the passage and the increase in muscular tension which results from it reinforce the actual loudness of a vowel thus forming the peak of the syllabic. So the syllable is the arc of loudness which correlates with the arc of articulatory effort on the speed production level since variations in loudness are due to the work of all speech mechanisms. It is perfectly obvious that no phonetician has succeeded so far in giving an adequate

explanation of what the syllable is. The difficulties seem to arise from the various possibilities of approach to the unit. There exist two points of view: 1. Some linguists consider the syllable to be a purely articulatory unit which lacks any functional value. This point of view is defended on the ground that the boundaries of syllables do not always coincide with those of morphemes. 2. However the majority of linguists treat the syllable as the smallest pronounceable unit which can reveal some linguistic function. Trying to define the syllable from articulatory point of view we may talk about universals. When we mean the functional aspect of the syllable it should be defined with the reference to the structure of one particular language. The definition of the syllable from the functional point of view tends to single out the following features of the syllable: a) a syllable is a chain of phonemes of varying length; b) a syllable is constructed on the basis of contrast of its constituents (which is usually of vowel - consonant type); c) the nucleus of a syllable is a vowel, the presence of consonants is optional; there are no languages in which vowels are not used as syllable nuclei, however, there are languages in which this function is performed by consonants; d) the distribution of phonemes in the syllabic structure follows by the rules which are specific enough for a particular language. 2. The structure and functions of syllables in English Syllable formation in English is based on the phonological opposition vowel - consonant. Vowels are usually syllabic while consonants are not with the exceptions of [l], [m], [n], which become syllabic in a final position preceded by a noise consonant: bottle [bɪftl], bottom [bɪftm], button [b/n] and [r] (in those accents which pronounce [r]) perhaps [prʌps]. The structure of English syllables can be summarized as follows: - Many syllables have one or more consonants preceding the nucleus. These

make up the syllable onset: me, so, plow. - Many syllables have one or more consonants, following the nucleus. They make up the syllable coda. They are traditionally known as closed syllables: cat, jump. - The combination of nucleus and coda has a special significance, making up the rhyming property of a syllable. [pic] The English language has developed the closed type of syllable as the fundamental one while in Russian it is the open type that forms the basis of syllable formation. The other aspect of this component is syllable division. The problem of syllable division in case of intervocalic consonants and their clusters, like in such words as city, extra, standing and others. Let us consider the first word ['sit. i]. There exist two possibilities: a) the point of syllable division is after the intervocalic consonant: b) the point of syllable division is inside the consonant. In both cases the first syllable remains closed because the short vowel should remain checked. The result of instrumental analyses show, that the point of syllable division in such words is inside the intervocalic consonant. EPD indicates the point of division after the consonant. The second case. There are two syllables in the word extra but where should the boundary between them fall? 1) [e - kstrÉ™]. It is unlikely that people would opt for a division between [e] and [kstrÉ™] because there are no syllables in English which begin with consonant sequence [kstr]. 2) Similarly, a division between [ekstr] and [É™] would be unnatural. 3) [ek - strÉ™], [eks - trÉ™], [ekst - rÉ™] are possible. People usually prefer either of the first two options here, but there is no obvious way of deciding between them. In some cases we may take into account the morphemic structure of words. For example, standing consists of two syllables; on phonetic grounds [stÄn - diÄ]. on grammatical grounds [stÄnd - iÄ]. Now we shall consider two functions of the syllable. The first is constitutive function. It lies in its

ability to be a part of a word itself. The syllables form language units of greater magnitude than words, morphemes, and utterances. In this respect two things should be emphasized. First, the syllable is the unit within which the relations between distinctive features of phonemes and their acoustic correlates are revealed. Second, within a syllable (or syllables) prosodic characteristics of speech are realized, which form the stress pattern of a word and the intonation structure of an utterance. In sum, the syllable is a specific minimal structure of both segmental and suprasegmental features. The other function is distinctive one. In this respect the syllable is characterized by its ability to differentiate words and word-forms. One minimal pair has been found in English to illustrate the word distinctive function in the syllabic: nitrate - night-rate. This analogical distinction between word combinations can be illustrated by many more examples: an aim - a name; an ice house - a nice house, etc. Sometimes the difference in syllable division may be the basic ground for differentiation in such pairs as I saw her rise. - I saw her eyes; I saw the meat - I saw them eat.