Accent and Pronunciation - Content Words and Function Words

People are often concerned about speaking correctly, which could mean speaking without grammatical errors. Of course, one should try to speak correctly, and it's important to try to avoid very noticeable or serious grammatical errors when speaking. However, not making grammatical errors, or making very few of them, is not what people appreciate and notice the most about one's ability to speak English. People notice one's pronunciation. People don't ask for repetition because of grammatical errors as much as they ask for repetition because of pronunciation errors. That's right - pronunciation errors. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that one's accent is oftentimes the sum total of all of one's pronunciation errors, and sometimes minor grammatical errors.

Though one may think of grammar when thinking of speaking correctly, grammatical errors don't interfere with one's ability to be understood as much as one's pronunciation errors do. It is the combination of one's pronunciation errors that could present a challenge to native English speakers when listening to people. However, if being understood when speaking is not a problem, then some people might still wonder what gives them an accent. Once again, it's mostly, though not always, the sum total of their pronunciation errors.

The contrast between content words and function words is an important part of English pronunciation. Content words are the important words in our speaking. They give information. By contrast, function words are structure words or grammar words. Although function words contribute to meaning in some way, they don't carry information in the same way content words do. There are different types of function words, or grammar words, and they are part of limited lists. We use them to connect content words, or information words. Unlike function words, content words are unlimited. Generally speaking, content words sound louder, or have higher intonation, than function words. Because the content, or the information, has more prominence, minor grammatical errors don't stand in the way of communicating one's message as much as many mistakes in the pronunciation of one's content or information words. It is this contrast between content words and function words that allows one to speak “broken English” - English with many errors - and still be understood. People hear the content. That's what's important. By the way, this is not to downplay the importance of grammatical accuracy. However, the purpose here is to focus more attention on the importance of pronunciation. For professional purposes, pronunciation is the appearance of one's speaking while grammar, it could be said, is the appearance of one's writing.

So here it is. Content words sound louder than function words, and this contrast contributes greatly to intelligibility when speaking English, intelligibility referring to the ease with which one is understood when speaking. The contrast between content words and function words indicates a wider pitch range in English speech, more so than in some other languages. Here are the content words and the function words, which, by the way, should be part of one's knowledge base in learning and teaching English pronunciation.

Content Words - Information Words - Important Words - With the exception of 5 and 6, content words are part of unlimited lists.

1. nouns
2. verbs
3. adjectives
4. adverbs
5. interrogative pronouns
6. negative auxiliaries

Function Words - Grammar Words - Structure Words - These words are part of limited lists. For example, there are a limited number of pronouns, but an unlimited number of nouns. Nouns are content - information words.

1. pronouns
2. prepositions
3. conjunctions
4. articles
5. auxiliary words
6. determiners