

Sentence Level Intonation

Intonation and Time Stress

Content words sound louder, or they are more prominent, than function words. The intonation of content words is higher. The primary stress syllable in a content word receives sentence stress. These categories of words are content words, information words, or important words in a sentence or phrase. They belong to unlimited lists. These words do not form limited lists, as is the case with function words.

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

Function words receive less volume than content words, or they are less prominent. The intonation of function words is lower. We can also call function words structure words or grammar words. They belong to limited lists of words. Some function words have a “weak form”, which speakers use very often.

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| 1. pronouns | 3. conjunctions | 5. auxiliary words |
| 2. prepositions | 4. articles | 6. determiners |
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English is a time-stressed language. By contrast, many other languages are considered to be syllabic. The stressed syllables in content words determine the pulse or rhythm of our speaking. In the example sentence, the syllable that receives stress in each content word is darkened and underlined.

Let's begin practicing. Say just the syllables that receive sentence stress at an even tempo. Count to four, and then say “where go mor noon”. After you've done this a few times, add in the rest of the syllables and say the whole sentence. You'll find that it takes just as long to say “where go mor noon” as it does to say “where are you going tomorrow afternoon”. Intonation typically falls at the end of a sentence or phrase. This symbol \ indicates falling intonation, which is heard as either a glide down or a step down: glide down on the same syllable; step down from one syllable to the following syllable.

**Where go mor noon ** - **Where are you going tomorrow afternoon? **

**go take walk park ** - **We're going to take a walk in the park. **

By contrast, in syllabic languages, syllables often sound more even, and, therefore, the intonation sounds flatter. If you speak English in this way, it could be difficult for people to easily understand you, especially if you speak fast. The absence of an obvious intonation pattern, shorter vowel sounds, and disconnected syllables make speech less intelligible, meaning not easy to understand.

Where are you go ing to mor row af ter noon? We are go ing to take a walk in the park.

The intonation at the end of yes-no questions typically rises. This symbol / indicates yes-no rising intonation.

Are you leaving early? / **Yes, we're going to be getting a very early start tomorrow.**

Note: Intonation and time stress are not determined by a fixed set of rules. Intonation and time stress have some flexibility. It is not always 100% clear whether or not a syllable receives sentence stress. In the last example sentence, the word “be” may or may not receive sentence stress. Other examples of this type occur from time to time.