

The syllabic structure in English

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

A ***syllable*** is a speech unit consisting of a sound or a sound sequence one of which is heard to be more prominent than the others.

The most prominent sound is called ***syllabic*** (a vowel or a sonorant).

Being the smallest pronounceable units, syllables form morphemes, words and phrases.

Theories on syllable formation and division

1. ***Expiratory (chest pulse or pressure)*** theory by R.H. Stetson 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. Torsuyev, e.g., 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.

2. the *sonority* theory (by O.Jespersen)

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.

The following ranking of speech sounds could be established: <the least sonorous> voiceless plosives □ voiced fricatives □ voiced plosives □ voiced fricatives □ sonorants □ close vowels □ open vowels <the most sonorous>

3. the “arc of loudness” or “arc of articulatory tension/muscular tension” theory (by L.V. Shcherba)

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.

It is perfectly obvious that no phonetician has succeeded 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. The majority of linguists treat the syllable as ***the smallest pronounceable unit which can reveal some linguistic function.***

The definition of the syllable from the functional point of view singles 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 the rules which are specific enough for a particular language.

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* [bOtɫ], *bottom* [bOtm], *button* [bAtn] and [r] (in those accents which pronounce [r]) perhaps [præps].

The structure of English syllables can be summarized as follows:

- 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.
- Many syllables have one or more consonants preceding the nucleus. These make up the syllable onset:
me, so, plow.
- The combination of nucleus and coda has a special significance, making up the rhyming property of a syllable.

Types of syllables

G.H. Torsuyev

1. V – fully open
2. CVC – fully closed
3. CV – initially covered
4. VC – finally covered

V.A. Vassilyev

1. V - uncovered open
2. VC – closed uncovered
3. CVC – closed covered
4. CV – covered open

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.

Syllable division

Orthography rules

1. In affixal words the syllabic boundary coincides with the morphological boundary
e.g.: dis-place, be-come, un-able, count-less
2. In words with CVCV structure the syllabic boundary is after the accented vowel:
e.g.: far-mer, ci-ty, ta-ble.\

Syllable division

Phonetics Rules

1. In words of CVC structure the syllabic boundary is after the intervocal consonant, which terminates accented syllable:

e.g.: [fa:m-e], [sit-i], [teib-l]

2. In words of CVS, VS structure the syllabic boundary is after the intervocal sonorant:

e.g.: inner [in-e], cinema [sin-em-e], enemy [en-em-i].

Syllable division

Rules

3. English diphthongs are unisyllabic, they consist of one vowel phoneme.

e.g.: cake – 1 syllable

4. English triphthongs are disyllabic, they consist of two vowel phonemes.

e.g.: science [sai-ens], flower [flau-e].

Functions of the syllable

- **Constitutive function**
- **Distinctive function**
- **Identificatory function**

1. *Constitutive* function

It lies in the ability of the syllable to be a part of a word itself.

The syllables form language units of greater magnitude, i.e. words, morphemes, and utterances.

2. *Distinctive* function

The syllable is characterized by its ability to differentiate words and word-forms (close and open juncture)

e.g.: ice cream – I scream.

an aim - a name;

an ice house - a nice house, etc.

I saw her rise.- I saw her eyes;

I saw the meat — I saw them eat.

3. Identificatory function

This function is conditioned by the pronunciation of the speaker. There must be correct syllabic boundary (the correct place of syllabodisjuncture)

e.g.: my train – might rain.