

# LECTURE 4

**Topic:** **Syllabic Structure  
of English Words**

# The Plan:

- The notion of a syllable
- Basic syllabic theories
- Syllable structure of English words. Types of syllables
- Functions of the syllable

## *The notion of a syllable*

In sound sequences the sounds are uttered with different degree of force - the energy with which we articulate is alternately increased and diminished.

The sound sequences are acoustically broken up into smaller units – **syllables.**

*the syllabic  
construction*

*['ri: - də - bl]*

*['sei - lə]*

*[pneɪ - nɪ]*

*the morphological  
construction*

*read - able*

*sail - or*

*open - ed*

**J. Kenyon:** the syllable is one or more speech sounds forming a single uninterrupted unit of utterance - a word or a commonly recognized subdivision of a word.

**J. Gygan:** the syllable is the smallest independent unit of speech, susceptible of being uttered in isolation.

# Syllables

- organize the sound sequences into words;
- mark the boundaries between words;
- distinguish meaning of words and phrases in speech:

E.g.: *Not a tall one* ['nɒt ə 'tɔ:l wʌn] VS  
*Not at all one* ['nɒt ət 'ɔ:l wʌn].

## *Basic syllabic theories*

- the most *ancient theory* :

there are as many syllables in a word as there are vowels.

- R.H. Stetson - the “*breath-puff*” (expiratory) *theory*:

there are as many syllables in a word as there are expiration pulses. The borderline is the moment of the weakest expiration.

■ Otto Jespersen - *the relative sonority theory* :

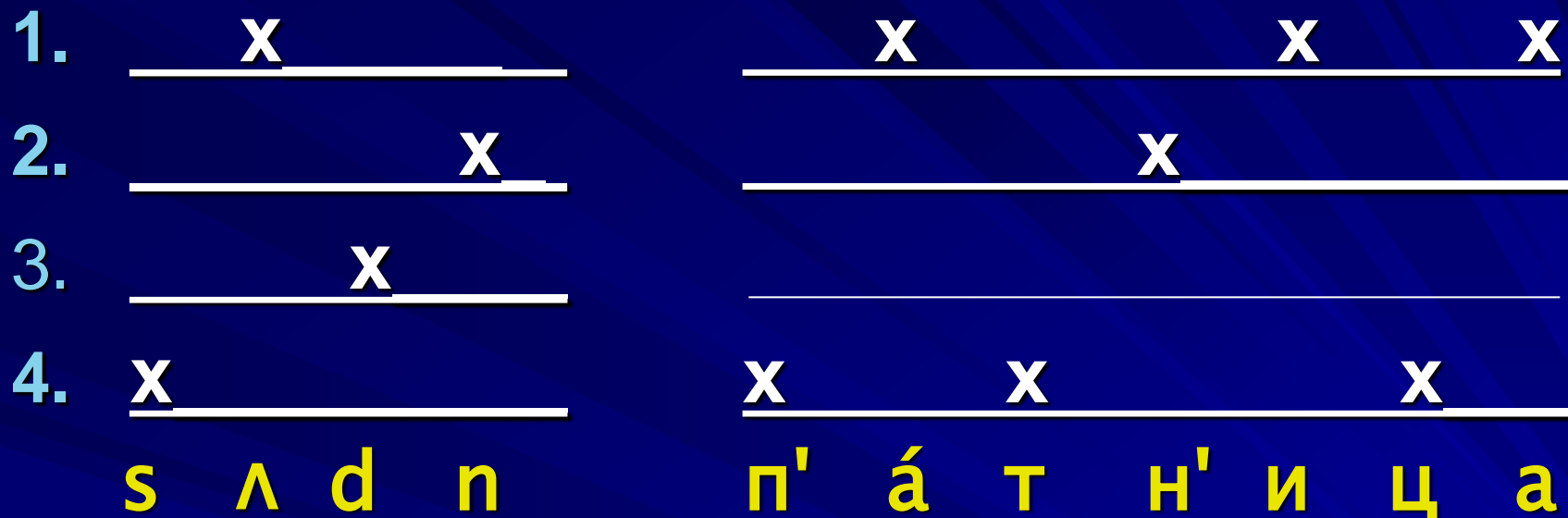
there are as many syllables in a word as there are peaks of prominence or sonority.

“Speech sounds pronounced with the same degree of force, length and pitch, differ in sonority”.



## Scale of sonority:

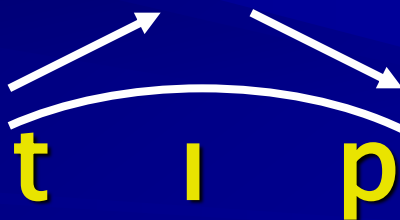
1. low vowels [a:, ɔ:, ɒ, æ]
  2. mid vowels [e, ə:, ə, ʌ]
  3. high vowels [i:, ɪ, u:, u]
  4. semi-vowels [w, j]
  5. sonorants [l, r, m, n, ŋ]
  6. voiced constrictive consonants [v, z, ʒ, ʒ]
  7. voiced plosive consonants [b, d, g]
  8. voiceless constrictive consonants and affricates [θ, tʃ, ʃ, f, s, h, dʒ]
  9. voiceless plosive consonants [p, t, k]
- 
- The diagram shows a list of 9 phonetic categories. Brackets on the right group them into four levels of sonority:
- Level 1: Items 1, 2, and 3 (low, mid, and high vowels).
  - Level 2: Items 4 and 5 (semi-vowels and sonorants).
  - Level 3: Items 6 and 7 (voiced constrictive and voiced plosive consonants).
  - Level 4: Items 8 and 9 (voiceless constrictive consonants/affricates and voiceless plosive consonants).



Two points of lower sonority constitute the beginning and the end of one syllable.

■ L.V. Shcherba - *the theory of muscular tension* :

the centre of the syllable is *the syllable forming phoneme*. Sounds preceding or following it constitute a chain - an arc of articulatory tension :



# Distribution of muscular tension in consonants according to Shcherba:

- finally strong, or initially weak:

*tea, new, may;*

- finally weak, or initially strong:

*it, us, add;*

- double peaked (combination of two similar sounds):

*pen knife, good day.*

- N.I. Zhinkin - *the loudness theory*:
  - syllables are due to a rise and fall in loudness inherent to every phoneme;
  - there are as many syllables as there are “arcs of loudness”;
  - the point of syllable division is the moment, when the arc of loudness begins or ends.

# *Syllable structure of English words.*

## *Types of syllables*

characteristic features of syllables in English:

- dependence of the type of consonant, determining the type of syllable, on the duration of the preceding vowel;
- the frequent use of syllabic sonorants [l], [n] and less common [m];
- the frequent use of unisyllabic words with groups of consonants.

**CV** transition is free => [p, t, k] are aspirated when precede stressed vowels – [pɪʌm p<sup>h</sup>aɪ].

BUT: [pɪʌmp<sup>h</sup>aɪ]

In a stressed position **VC** transition is not free => VC combinations form one syllable.

In an unstressed position **VC** transition is free => a short vowel is not checked:  
['pɒz - ɪ - tɪv].

## 4 types of syllables:

- open CV
- closed (C)VC
- covered CV(C)
- uncovered V(C)

Short vowels under stress occur only in closed syllables always preceding consonants:

**[ 'lʌv - lɪ; 'twen - tɪ; 'gʊd - nɪs ],**

or **[ 'letə; 'bɪgə ]** and **[ lɪtɪ; rɪðm̩ ].**



when two vowels are separated by two consonants:

[ə - 'gri:; ri - 'gret]

**BUT** [əd - 'mit; əd - 'vais]

when vowels are separated by more than two consonants:

['ek - strə] or ['eks - trə]

vowel sequences:

['flau - ə; 'vau - əl; 'sai - əns]

# *Functions of the syllable*

## *The constitutive function*

syllables constitute words, phrases and sentences by means of combinations of their prosodic features: loudness – stress, pitch – tone, duration – length and tempo;

***The distinctive function*** - a name –  
an aim, ice-cream – I scream

*Close juncture* (conjuncture) - within  
one syllable: between [n], [eɪ] and [s],  
[k];

*open juncture* (disjuncture) - between  
two syllables /+/: a + name, I +  
scream;

***The identificatory function***