

# *Accent* & **tone** of **voice**

*by* Lee Hopkins



# Introduction

One of the main difficulties that faces us when we talk, and still more when we read aloud, is that words that look alike may have to be sounded quite differently owing to the fact that they are differently accentuated. One example will show you what I mean:

say the word *photo* and listen to the noise you make to represent the final *o*

now, say *photography* and listen to what happens when you come to the second *o* in the word

You will find that, owing to different accentuation, the two noises are quite different.

## What are *accentuation* and *inflection*?

Therefore it is obvious that learning, however accurately, the various individual vowel, diphthong and consonant noises (whilst such learning is an indispensable foundation) is insufficient to enable us to achieve good speech; nor is it sufficient to learn the pronunciation of isolated words or of one syllable.

There are also questions bound up with the problem of variations in tone and accentuation. These variations may be classified under two headings, *accentuation* and *inflection*, and for the purpose of clarification we may say that the former deals with single words and the latter with phrases and whole sentences.

Before I go any further, however, I must give two warnings.

First, accentuation and inflection are closely interlocked; the way in which a single word is accentuated may depend upon whether it stands alone or is incorporated in a sentence.

Secondly, however greatly you vary your accentuation or expression, you must never alter the way in which by means of your vocal apparatus (your mouth shape, tongue, lips, breath, vocal chords) you produce any given noise—the mechanics of production must remain the same. In the widest sense of the word speech is music, and just as when you play a given note on a piano, harp, violin or any other instrument, you can do so in many different ways—loudly, softly, tremulously, and so on—so you can make variations in the single sounds of speech; but the note on your violin, for example, cannot be fundamentally changed.

## *The two greatest difficulties in learning English*

To the foreigner attempting to learn English the first great difficulty is spelling, the second, hardly less puzzling, is accentuation.

The English language is the most heavily accentuated of all western languages—and it is also the most irregularly accentuated. The French do, of course, accen-

tuate. Clarity of utterance demands a measure of accentuation from everyone, no matter what language they speak; but they do so whenever possible on the last syllable of a word and they make as little fuss about it as possible.

English people, in contrast, accentuate very markedly, and it is extremely difficult to formulate any rules as to where the stress is put. There are some which are generally observed, but to all of them there are so many exceptions that they can hardly be called rules at all. Once, when defending our language to a French colleague, I remarked: "Rules are made to be broken," to which he replied: "But with your accentuation you do not even bother to make rules."

However, there are a few rules of general application we can formulate, and first among them is this:

with words of two or more syllables, it is usual to give at least one of the syllables a special stress.

Say aloud the words *magnet*, *rodent*, *horrid*, *deter*, *sorry*; in all of these, as in the majority of two-syllable words, one syllable is more stressed than the other.

This, however, does not take us very far; which of the two syllables should we automatically stress? With one exception these five words are stressed on the first syllable, why then do we not say 'deee-ter'?

There is no answer real to the question, save that it is customary to say *deter*.

Having disposed rather unsatisfactorily of this question, we come up against the fact that the rule, such as it is, does not always hold good. There are a considerable number of two-syllable words which have an equal stress on both syllables; *fifteen*, *undone*, and *wayside* are examples. Such words are, however, relatively few in number.

## How to stress three-syllable words

Our second rule will be this:

In words of more than three syllables there will usually be two stressed syllables.

The reason for this is not hard to find; it is easier to say long words if we make a pause of some sort in the course of them, and accentuation of a syllable gives us a pause without breaking the continuity of the word.

When words are of greater length than three syllables, we usually need two pauses. Think for a moment of the word *ecclesiastical*; if we say that without pausing anywhere, it is altogether "too much of a mouthful"; if we say it with only one stress (on the syllable *as*) we still have difficulty in getting so far without pausing; but if we accentuate the second syllable *cle* as well as the fourth syllable *as*, the word becomes an altogether easier to get our mouths around.

From this second general rule derives another:

that where there is double accentuation of any word, the stresses are not of equal value, one being nearly always more noticeable than the other.

Too much accentuation is as bad a fault in English as too little; we use it not only to make speaking easy but to give speech variety, and there is no variety in the regular repetition of equal stresses. We speak with disfavour of people being "heavy-footed" or "heavy-handed"; those who give equal value to the two stresses in demonstration, for example, may be said to be "heavy-voiced."

## Accentuation of prefixes

The exceptions to this rule are numerous, but they are based, for the most part, on a general principle.

When a frequently used word is given a prefix, its meaning being thus changed, and the prefix has a meaning of its own, the prefix is usually given as much stress as the word to which it is joined.

Among the more common of these prefixes are *anti*, *arch*, *un*, *half*, *over*, *pre*, *under*; these help to make such words as *antipathetic*, *archdeacon*, *undone*, *half-hearted*, *overbearing*, *prepay*, *underwriting*, and in each case the two stressed syllables in each word are equally accentuated.

We have seen that words of more than three syllables generally have two stressed syllables, unequally accentuated. The next problem is to discover which of the two carries the greater stress, and the solution of the problem is that almost invariably the second is the more heavily accentuated.

So far, so good, but our problem is still not properly solved. It is obvious that except in freak words of phenomenal length, the first stress will have to come either on the first or second syllable in order to avoid a vocal traffic jam. We still wish to know on which of the two it should fall. Since there is no principle of speech which we can apply as a touchstone to this problem, and since the problem is one which from time to time vexes nearly all of us, Here's two lists of words as examples of words over which, as regards the first accentuated syllable, foreigners are very apt to go wrong (and there are many English people almost equally prone to error).

The following words have the slighter stress on the first syllable:

<i>Centralization</i>	<i>Representation</i>	<i>Mathematician</i>
<i>Modification</i>	<i>Solemnization</i>	<i>Disciplinarian</i>
<i>Ornamentation</i>	<i>Circumvention</i>	<i>Caricature</i>
<i>Peregrination</i>	<i>Archaeological</i>	<i>Penetrability</i>
<i>Qualification</i>	<i>Temperamental</i>	<i>Instrumental</i>
<i>Aristocratic</i>	<i>Individuality</i>	<i>Artificiality</i>
<i>Paraphernalia</i>	<i>Heterogeneous</i>	<i>Peritonitis</i>

In contrast to the above list, the slighter stress is on the second syllable of the words in the following list:

<i>Administration</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Accessibility</i>
<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Ecclesiastical</i>	<i>Familiarity</i>
<i>Anticipation</i>	<i>Antagonistic</i>	<i>Peculiarity</i>
<i>Assimilation</i>	<i>Materialistic</i>	<i>Superiority</i>
<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Academician</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia</i>
<i>Examination</i>	<i>Bacteriology</i>	<i>Tuberculosis</i>
<i>Interrogation</i>	<i>Potentiality</i>	

We have seen that words of two and three syllables usually have one of them specially stressed, that in longer words there are usually two stresses, that in this case the earlier of the stressed syllables is, in most words, the less accentuated, and that this accentuation falls on the first or second syllable.

There remains the most important question of all: where, in all words of more than one syllable, does the main stress fall?

I have already referred to this problem in dealing with single-stressed words by telling you that no definite rule can be applied to solve it, and unfortunately this is equally the case where longer words are concerned.

If I were to tell you that you throw the stress back as far as you can, you could with perfect justice refer me to any long word ending in *ation*, as, for example, *re-orientation*, *predestination*, and thus negate my argument; if, on the other hand, I were to maintain that you throw the stress forward, you might well challenge me with *photographer*; and having used this word as a challenge to me you would yourself discover that whereas the stress is on the second syllable, you accentuate the first syllable in *photograph*, and also, that though it is a four-syllable word, *photographer* only has one stress.

Again it is no more true to say that as a general rule you stress the first syllable of a single-stressed word than it is to maintain that it is the second or the third syllable that is accentuated; compare *demise* and *demon*, *calvary* and *aquatic*, and you will see how hopeless it is to formulate any rules.



Compilers of dictionaries have achieved a very large measure of standardization, but if you look in the pages of the Oxford English Dictionary you will find no reasons given for the decisions they made and also, that in a number of cases, alternative pronunciations are given as being equally correct.

That venerable institution the B.B.C. (more formally, the British Broadcasting Corporation) ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)) are endeavouring to give a lead on correct accentuation as well as pronunciation, and you could not do better than follow their lead. But you will, I'm afraid, have to follow it blindly, without being given the reasons *why*. There is a list of recommended accentuations in the B.B.C.'s publication, *Broadcast English*.

## The stress in compound words

For a certain class of words, however, certain principles can be generally observed when deciding where to put the main stress. These are what are known as compound words, i.e., two words each capable of standing on its own, combined in one, such as *grasshopper*, *birthday*, *bookbinding*, *waterproof*. The great majority of such words have only a single-stressed syllable, and that syllable is the first one. Moreover, with these words the exceptions can, for the most part, be classified as follows:

1. Where a great deal of the meaning of a compound word lies in the second half, as in *arm-chair*, *gas-stove*, *backyard*, *eyewitness*, each part of the compound is accentuated, equal stress being given to each.
2. Where the first part of the compound is an adjective, as in *white-lipped*, *good-looking*, *madcap*, the same principle of accentuation is adopted.

Outside these two classifications are various other compounds also having a double stress, the most common of which are probably the compounds of *here*, *there* and *where* (except *hereafter* and *thereafter*, which are single-stressed), and *hence*.

Finally, before leaving the subject of the accentuation of words, I will just repeat my previous warning that accentuation may be modified by the position of a word in a sentence.

This modification particularly takes place in two-syllable words that normally are double-stressed.

If, in answer to the question: “How many rabbits do you keep?” you reply: “Fifteen,” each of the two syllables is equally accentuated, but if you say: “He went away fifteen years ago,” there is appreciably more stress on the second than on the first syllable. It is rare in common speech to find two consecutive syllables in a single word equally accentuated if that word occurs in the middle of a sentence, unless the word is a compound one.

We may know how the single sounds that make up a word ought to be pronounced; we may know how that word should be accentuated, and we may have—indeed, we all do have—grammatical knowledge sufficient to enable us to string words together into a meaningful sentence; but still we may not convey to our listeners what we intend to convey if we do not use the right tonal inflexions.

## Effect of *accentuation* on meaning

The exact shade of meaning in any sentence depends to a considerable extent on the rise and fall in our tone of voice and in the consequent emphasis given to particular words.

Wrong emphasis may destroy the intended meaning of a sentence almost as effectively as the use of a wrong word.

Equally, if you drop the pitch of your voice instead of raising it, or raise it when you should drop it, you may turn a question into a statement and vice versa.

In English speech it is possible to ask a question in the form of a statement and in such cases it is extremely important to use an inflexion which makes your listener certain that a question is intended. If we say: "It's been a fine day," and do not raise the pitch of our voice on the last word, we are understood to be making a statement; but if we do raise our pitch on the last word, the sentence becomes a question.

Try saying it in both ways and you will see what I mean. Similarly, the only way in which we can indicate in speech that a statement has been finished, that there are no qualifications or additions to come, is by a definite lowering of our voice's pitch.

## *Need to make our meaning clear*

Our first consideration in speaking sentences should be to make our meaning clear, and in ensuring, the way in which our voice rises and falls in tone plays an important part.

It plays a dominant part in making clear the emotion that lies behind or inspires our meaning; we have no really adequate method of conveying in speech what we feel other than that of varying the expression in our voices. It is quite possible to say: "I hate you," all on the same note and without emphasis, but if you do so you will entirely fail to convey any sense of hatred; but if you raise your voice on *hate* your feelings will be at once conveyed to your listeners.

Subtler shades of emotion can also be indicated by change of tonal emphasis. You can say: "I am so happy," raising the pitch of your voice on *so* and keeping it raised until the second syllable of *happy*, and thereby indicating an abundance of happiness, or you can keep your voice on one note until you reach the word *happy*, and raise the first syllable several tones, in which case you will indicate a feeling of wonder at your own happiness. There are obviously many other possibilities of accentuation of this phrase. Each variant conveys a subtle and individual emotional meaning.

This illustration shows the importance of tonal inflexion. In this problem, the problem of when to raise your voice and when to let it fall, both to express meaning and feeling, it is possible to lay down certain generally accepted rules.

These refer to ordinary conversational speech. For politicians or actors special tricks are necessary, because the former often seeks to persuade his audience against their wills, and the latter deals with a world of illusion.

Advice to actors and politicians is, however, outside the scope of this book.

The first rule to remember is:

to indicate any emotion you must not only change the pitch of your voice, but you must also change it during the accented syllable of the emphasized word.

The change may be either a falling or a rising cadence. When the emotion is expressed in the course of a statement the falling cadence is normally used; when you say: "She was wearing a really lovely dress," you express admiration, and your voice begins to fall from a high pitch on the first syllable of *lovely*; but remember that in order to get the full effect of the falling cadence you must first have raised your voice; otherwise emphasis is lost.

If you begin the first syllable of *lovely* on the same note as you have used for "she was wearing a," the falling cadence you then use will be valueless for emotional purposes.

If you wish to express emotion in the course of a question you may need to use a rising cadence. Take the following simple sentence: "Did you do that dreadful thing?" If what you want to express is an emotion of pained surprise that the thing was done by "you," then you express it by a rising cadence on *you*, which can only be made effective if *you* is pitched lower than the previous word *did*.

The fact that in the above example the special emotion occurs early in the sentence and is expressed by a rising cadence, leads us, indirectly, to a second general rule, which deals with the problem of questions in speech.

Sentences embodying a question can be divided into two classes, those in which an interrogative word is used, and those in which the sentence begins with some part of an auxiliary verb (“to be” or “to have”).

In the former, the question, apart from any special emphasis required, is indicated by starting with your voice low pitched and raising the pitch gradually; in the latter, by reversing the process. If you say: “Were you at home last night?” you should start on a low note and rise through the sentence to the last syllable; if you say: “Where did you go last night?” you should reverse the process.

Now, a falling cadence will have little effect if your voice is pitched low before you attempt the fall; therefore, in order to achieve the startling effect which is your object when you alter the pitch of your voice, you must, in the sentence: “Did you do that dreadful thing?” break the rule I have just given you and start the sentence on a high pitch; furthermore you must use the rising cadence, for the rest of the sentence rises to the final syllable, and if you used a falling cadence you would get a startling effect not only on the word you wish to emphasize but on the succeeding word as well.

Our problem in this sentence is, in fact, a complicated one; but by contrast, if we want to emphasize the *you* in: “Where have you been?” it is simple. Since the sentence starts with an interrogative it will naturally be said on a falling cadence; we have only to make the fall more abrupt on the word *you*.

## *How to express a qualifying phrase*

Emphasis—which usually denotes emotion—is expressed by a sudden change in the pitch of our voice, that is to say, is expressed by a rising or a falling cadence. A query is expressed by a gradual rise or fall according to whether it is or is not introduced by an interrogative word. But when we are dealing with a qualifying phrase or an idea expressed in parenthesis, we employ neither of these methods.

A qualifying phrase is illustrated by the following sentence: “This remarkable man, who never failed to perform what he had promised, was honoured by his whole country,” and a parenthesis occurs in the italicized portion of the follow-

ing: “The whole problem, so the Prime Minister informed the House of Commons, was under earnest consideration.”

In these two cases the general rule is:

you should, throughout the qualifying phrase or parenthesis, keep your voice as much as possible at the same pitch, and that in any case you should not drop your voice on the last syllable.

## When you should drop your voice

This brings us to a final, and very important rule. I have left it to the last since it is actually observed automatically by almost every one and so needs less emphasis than the others.

This rule is:

in the course of the last syllable of any word completing a statement or a question, you should always drop your voice.

If you wish to inform someone of your political convictions by making the simple statement: “I am a Conservative,” you should drop your voice on the final syllable of *Conservative*. If you do not do so, your companion will expect you to qualify the statement. And conversely, if you do drop your voice on this syllable he will be unprepared for a subsequent qualification such as: “Although I do not approve of Mrs. Thatcher.”

One of the few things that we are taught at school about the spoken word is that you should not drop your voice at the end of a sentence. To some extent this is untrue. When you have finished what, for the moment, you want to say, or when you have come to what, in print, would be represented by a full stop, you should always drop your voice.

The only truth in this statement lies in the fact that you should never do so to such an extent that you become inaudible. There is real danger that, through laziness, you may develop the disease of inaudibility, and if one word is inaudible, a whole sentence may become meaningless; but, provided you are of this danger, you will find that there is no more useful signpost in the whole of our spoken language than the dropping of our voice at the right moments.

## Balance

It could be argued that these rules of vocal inflexion may, if applied too rigidly, defeat the object. I need to warn you that, however correctly you employ the rising or falling cadence and the other prescribed variations in tone of voice, you are likely to rob your speech of meaning if you consciously strive to follow these rules every time you open your mouth.

It cannot be stressed often enough that the main purpose of speech is to convey meaning. It may be that yours can be meaningful even though you break all the rules I have just given you; all I would say is, that for most of us, these rules—if followed without conscious effort—make the expression of the ideas we want to convey easier than it would otherwise be.

And practice makes perfect.

There are also general warnings and pieces of advice which, I believe, every one would do well to incorporate into their speech lives.

- (1) Do not over-emphasize single words. This is a necessary warning because I have so far stressed the need for emphasis in speech. In speech, as in everything else, you can have too much of a good thing. Keep your reserves of vocal emphasis for occasions on which you really feel emotion; if you are continually over-emphasizing words your listeners will soon cease to believe that any emphasis you use has any special significance.
- (2) Beware of double emphasis. If you put a lot of stress on one word in a sentence that word will stand out, as a high peak stands out in the middle of a plain; but if two words in close juxtaposition are each given special emphasis the prominence of each will be adversely affected by the other.
- (3) Do not under any circumstances let your voice stay for a long time at the same pitch. One of the worst faults in speech is monotony. I know that I have told you not to vary the voice's pitch when speaking a qualifying phrase, but such phrases, and ideas in parenthesis, should never be long ones. Let your voice rise and fall.
- (4) Do not adopt a sing-song intonation. Your voice should not keep on rising and falling to and from the same note. If it does, you will only

achieve an effect of monotony similar to that which occurs when you do not vary the pitch at all.

- (5) Do not be afraid of taking a new breath. It is better to break a sentence, or even a word if necessary, than to arrive breathless at the end of either.



# Be natural in your speech

One final piece of advice:

**be natural in your speech.**

My object throughout this mini ebook has been to give you first, some idea of the main sounds of our language and of how they should be made, so that you can study them and consider whether they are, in fact, the sounds you are accustomed to make; and secondly, to indicate the main principles of accentuation and vocal inflexion, so that you can express your meaning and emotions clearly.

If, however, every time you speak, you are wondering: “Am I making the noises which I have been told to make, and varying my voice in the correct manner,” then your speech will become stilted and affected; and if there is one thing about ‘Pronunciation’ it is that affected speech is bad speech.

As with all things in life, practice makes perfect. Prepare your speech, record yourself if you can and play it back (in private would be a good idea at first). Once you are more confident you can practice in front of others, if you like.

Speaking confidently, either in a one-on-one setting or to a auditorium full of people, entails knowing your material, preparing any props (such as PowerPoint or multimedia presentations), rehearsing, and being aware of your timing. And you need to know how to speak so as to not either send your audience to sleep or have them laughing behind your back.

I trust that the rules I have outlined are of help.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Lee' with a stylized flourish.

**Lee**

## About the author

Communication effectively in business is about more than hiding behind a shoddy and boring PowerPoint™ slideshow.

It's about the communication of ideas, of processes, of visions with passion and integrity.

With published academic papers and degrees in psychology and business management, as well as extensive consultancy and industry experience, Lee Hopkins is well placed to help companies communicate better for better business results.

For more information at plenty of free articles you can use to meet your own business's communication needs, please visit the consultancy's website at [www.hopkins-business-communication-training.com](http://www.hopkins-business-communication-training.com)

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