

To the crux of the matter now, English deploys quite a big number of weak form words. In the forthcoming succinct account, I will try and outline the most commonly used ones. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that all the strong and weak form pronunciations were reproduced verbatim from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2010, 08th edition.

Articles

Both English definite article and indefinite articles are reduced in connected speech.

A (strong form /eɪ/; weak form /ə/), an (strong form /æn/; weak form /ən/) and the (strong form /ði:/; weak form /ði/ in pre-vocalic positions and /ðə/ in pre-consonantal positions): the vowels in all of these three articles shift to the schwa when weakened with the sole exception of 'the' which has another weak variant used in pre-vocalic positions:

Julie has accepted a friend request from a complete stranger on facebook;

The mayor's inability to convincingly answer the question put him in an awkward position;

The closure of that factory has sparked off large-scale unemployment in that little town.

Prepositions

Prepositions are amongst those little words that undergo weakening. This, however, does not entail that all the members belonging to this word class are susceptible to change. In fact, only a smallish set of them does get reduced. It so happens that the ones that are weakened are much more common than those which are not. The following are those prepositions that should get their fair share of weakening:

Of (strong form /ɒv/; weak form /əv/): this word features most of the time in its weak form unless it appears word finally:

I have bumped into a number of intriguing books while paging through the library catalogue.

From (strong form /frɒm/; weak form /frəm/): only in final positions and when being under emphasis, it typically retains its clipped form:

I am striving to read the book from cover to cover.

At (strong form /æt/; weak form /ət/): only in utterance-final positions is it pronounced in its full form:

The innocent girl has been staring at the picture of her deceased young brother for a long while.

For (strong form /fɔ:(r)/; weak form /fə(r)/): only in utterance final positions before a pause and when being contrasted does it keep its unreduced form intact:

I have not cracked a joke for donkey's years;

My tutor of Phonetics has at long last bumped into the devoted student he has been fishing for.

To (strong form /tu:/; weak form /tə/ in pre-consonantal positions; /tu/ in pre-vocalic positions): both when used in pre-verbal environments when indicating direction, only one featuring in pre-pausal positions and when under emphasis is it strengthened:

She does not profess to know the ins and outs of the theory but she knows a great deal more than anyone around;

Strawberry farmers will soon be heading to their field to carry on their afternoon duties.

Pronouns

Most of the English pronouns have two forms: weak and strong. It is, however, not invariably accurate to use the weak form. The following explains this more sufficiently.

He (strong form /hi:/; weak form /hi/; /i/), him (strong form /hɪm/; weak form /ɪm/), his (strong form /hɪz/; weak form /ɪz/), she (strong form /ʃi:/; weak form /ʃi/) and her (strong form /hɜ:(r)/; weak form /hə(r)/; /ə(r)/; /ɜ:(r)/): these two pronouns retain their reduced form almost in all phonological environments. The two exceptions to this are that when they are used in utterance-initial positions or when used contrastively, the strong form is evoked. Mind you, unlike a number of other words, even in final positions usage of the weak form of 'he, his, him, her' is not deemed illicit.

He is a decent bloke, is he not?

I fully understand what he is after;

The letter I gave him was sent by his furious boss;

Peter has fallen head over heels with her ever since their second encounter at the post office;

You (strong form /ju:/; weak form /ju/) and **your (strong form /jɔ:(r)/; weak form /jə(r)/**: in most cases the long, tense monophthong in the first word is the weak vowel in the general region of long and short discussed above; in the second word the schwa is used instead of the long monophthong:

You are the only one here who has been groundlessly huffing and puffing about the pros of the plan;

The factory manager will send you your parcel soon.

We (strong form /wi:/; weak form /wi/), us (strong form /ʌs/; weak form /əs/) and them (strong form /ðem/; weak form /ðəm/): these words, though grouped together, do not display the same type of weakening. 'We' is weakened by virtue of replacing the long monophthong by the short vowel in the general region of /ɪ/ and /ʊ/, while 'us' and 'them' are weakened through the substitution of their nuclei by the schwa vowel:

We were unable to abate their pain due to colossal magnitude of the injury;

The ambulance driver informed us that they are better now;

We were wrongly accused of not looking responsibly after them.

Conjunctions and Adverbs

This category of words also goes through changes when in connected speech. Here again, it is noteworthy that not all the adverbs and conjunctions in the English language are prone to be reduced. Only the ones mentioned below are the ones you got to strive to weaken when the grammatical environment and the meaning you want to get across grant you the green light, as it were.

There (strong form /ðeə(r)/; weak form /ðə/): when used at the beginnings of sentences. when used as a demonstrative pronoun, its full form is left intact:

There must be a verily sage counsel my granny can offer to help me come to some resolutions for the upcoming year;

The boss foresaw that there would be a great deal of row about the newly installed software.

But (strong form /bʌt/; weak form /bət/): when used contrastively or when the speaker wants to underscore the discourse that ensues does it retain its full form:

The party was awesome but Peter did not seem to enjoy it one bit.

And (strong form /ænd/; weak form /ənd/, /ən/, /n/): it is almost always used in its weak form:

Charles Dickens and Nancy Farmer are amongst the best authors the English language prides itself on.

As (strong form /æz/; weak form /əz/): this conjunction is used almost always in its weak form. Of course, you should not lose sight of the exceptions outlined above:

I am helping as much as I could.

That (strong form /ðæt/; weak form /ðət/): that can serve a range of grammatical purposes. It can be used as a determiner as in 'Give me that dress on the sofa.', as a pronoun as in 'That is a thorny issue, indeed.' It can, likewise, be used as a relative pronoun, as in 'The bartender said that he would be here in twenty five minutes.'

Only when used as a relative pronoun to introduce relative clauses is it weakened. When used for the fulfillment of other syntactical purposes, it retains its full form:

The bus conductor hoped that he would come across her at the next bus-stop.

Not (strong form /nɒt/; weak form /nt/): this conjunction is most of the time reduced in the parole of native speakers:

That is not the right color of shoe-lace your niece wanted you to buy.

Than (strong form /ðæn/; weak form /ðən/): it is virtually invariably used in its weakened form. The weak form is almost non-existent in the overwhelming bulk of the word's occurrences:

The anti-virus on my laptop is much more robust than the one on yours.

Auxiliaries and Modals

Prior to embarking on any discussion, it is wise to point out that some of the following verbs, viz, to be, to have and to do, can have dual grammatical functions: helping verbs preceding other verbs for the fulfillment of a number of semantic and/or grammatical roles and the only verbs in the sentence, called full verbs. Only when used for carrying out the former function are they weakened. When used as the full verbs of the sentence, they retain their citation form and any reduction is deemed a violation to pronunciation rules. I have noticed that some Algerian learners have stepped into what is labeled hypercorrection, that is, the production of non-native strings of language owing to their excessive obsession with accurateness, meanwhile not knowing the exceptions to the rules they have internalized.

Am (strong form /æm/; weak form /əm/), **are** (strong form /ɑ:r/; weak form /ə(r)/), **been** (strong form /bi:n/; weak form /bɪn/), **was** (strong form /wɒz /; weak form /wəz/), **were** (strong form /wɜ:(r)/; weak form /wə(r)/, **is**: (strong form /ɪz/; weak form /s/ /z/):

These various variants of the verb to be are weakened in the overwhelming bulk of their occurrences regardless of whether they are used as the only verbs of the sentence or fulfilling their auxiliary functions:

I am going to turn down their proposal;

I am not here to voice any queries on behalf of the other members of the committee;

You are wholeheartedly welcome to attend all my classes provided that you do not stir up any noise;

You are endeavoring to achieve the impossible;

The little boy was entranced to behold the fancy performance of the players;

Most of Facebook-aholics were commenting tirelessly on my recent post on the dramatically falling education standards.

The pediatrician's here to look into her baffling medical state;

Susan has been for a long time trying to grab hold of that book, Jim.

Has (strong form /hæz/ weak form /həz/; /əz/) **have** (strong form /hæv/weak form /əv/; /həv/), **had** (strong form /hæd/ weak form /həd/; /əd/): only when used as the only verb of the sentence are they not weakened:

The government should have devoted a much bigger portion of the budget to childcare;

Computer-technology has rendered quite a few people unable to keep pace with the swift and over-night changes the world witnesses;

It had been a fairly affluent area prior to the outbreak of a number of social ills.

Do (strong form /du:/, weak forms /du/ in prevocalic positions; /də/ in pre-consonantal positions), **does** (strong form /dʌz/ weak form /dəz/ or even /s/): here again the long monophthong in 'do' and the short one in 'does' are both converted, as it were, into the neutral vowel, the schwa. In highly rapid speech delivery the 'do' is realized as only 'd'. That is to say, it is rendered into a phoneme instead of a syllable. By the same token, 'does' can be realized as 's'. In pre-vocalic environments, the strong form is retained or the weak vowel that lies in the general region of the short /ʊ/ and long /u:/ is deployed. The strong form is also retained when 'do' or 'does' are used as a morphologic al emphasis-signaling device, as in 'She does know where to go next.'

What do you do on a typical Sunday?

Why does the price of meat peak in winter?

Shall (strong form /ʃæl/; weak form /ʃəl/), **will** (strong form /wɪl/; weak form /l/), **should** (strong form /ʃʊd/; weak form /ʃəd/), **would** (strong form /wʊd/; weak form /əd/), **can** (strong form /kæn/; weak form /kən/) and **could** (strong form /kʊd/; weak form /kəd/): these modal verbs are weakened almost always. There is an exception to this worth knowing: when they come under emphasis, the strong form is deployed:

You should visit the dentist's shortly, Mike;

It would be far cheaper, if we were to go by train;

The schedule could well be the wrong one to tailor.

Must (strong form /mʌst/; weak form /məst/): this grammatical word has two possible weak forms. One features in pre-consonantal positions, whilst the other features in pre-vocalic ones. The former does not have the /t/ when weakened, while the latter contains the /t/.

The advisory committee must hold a meeting on Thursday;

Algerian children must eat far more vegetables and fruits if they wanted a healthy diet.

Nouns

Even though we pointed out above that only grammatical words are prone to undergo weakening, there are two words in the English language which seem to violate this rule, and render our aforementioned statement not fully accurate. We should not, however, lose sight of the fact that exceptions are inevitabilities, particularly if the phenomenon under scrutiny is as elusive as multi-dimensional as is language.

Sir (strong form /sɜ:(r)/; weak form /sə(r)/) and saint (strong form /seɪnt/; weak form /saɪnt/): These are the only nouns that undergo weakening. The following are our examples:

Have you ever visited Saint Louis cathedral?

Sir Boris Johnson is the current mayor of London, is he not?
