

Stress Placement in Compound Words

To jog your memory up, a compound word is a word is made up of two other words each of which can exist fully independently of the other while retaining its individual identity.

It is prudent to point out at the outset that in compound words, stress is assigned to only one of the components, not both. Of course, when we say only one component receives stress, we do not mean that the other one is robbed of prominence altogether. Rather, the other element is made noticeably less salient than the other. Do not forget, that each of the members of the compounds is a word in its right before being blended with another one to form one whole. This entails that when used separately, each of which has its distinct stress pattern, which would not be left out completely when forming a compound with another lexical entity. Plus, when we talk about stress-placement in compound words, this does not denote that stress falls on utterly new syllables. That is, we allocate stress to a syllable that is unstressed in one of the words of the compound when they are used in isolation of each other. The story is thankfully just not the right one. The same syllable that receives stress in one of the words in the compound is the selfsame syllable that is stressed in the compound.

Which word in the compound receives stress is largely dependent on the grammatical category of the compound and/or its grammatical make-up. The general tendency for stress in compound words is that it falls on the first word in the compound if the compound functions as a noun. Here are examples:

Internet-café, Facebook, schoolbag, bookworm, bulldog, waiting-room, chat-room, flat-mate, song-bird and the list goes on.

Compounds that are structured as follows: an adjective followed by a hyphen then a noun attached to 'ed' which are used extensively in English for the articulatory effort they spare us. In such compounds, stress falls on the second element. The following are examples:

Red-haired, white-skinned, heavy-handed, green-eyed, flat-footed, slow-witted, large-hipped, etc.

Some other compounds that seem to abide by the same accentual pattern are those the first element of which is a number. Such as:

Three-legged chair, four-tailed insect, three-volumed book.

Another category of compound that has the same stress pattern is that functioning as adverbial. Such as, head-first, down-stream.

Yet another set of compound which abides by the same pattern exists. Namely, compounds whose first element is an adverb and second element a verb and function as verbs. Such as, backfire, ill-use, up-grade.

Word-Class Pairs

This last heading will mark our discussion on stress assignment in English. There are a number of English words which have the same graphological patterns, but belong to different word classes. To set them apart in speech, native speakers deploy different stress patterns depending on the grammatical category of the word in question in the sentence. It is noteworthy that, surprising enough, quite a few of these words have predictable and rule-governed stress assignment. The hard and fast rule that is observed in many of them is that it is the first syllable that is stressed when the word functions as a noun or an adjective. On the other hand, if the word functions as a verb, stress shifts forward into the second syllable.

'abstract' 'æbstrækt (A), æb'strækt (V)
'conduct' 'kɒndʌkt (N), kən'dʌkt (V)
'contract' 'kɒntrækt (N), kən'trækt (V)
'contrast' 'kɒntrɑ:st (N), kən'trɑ:st (V)
'desert' 'dezət (N), dr'zɜ:t (V)
'escort' 'eskɔ:t (N), i'skɔ:t (V)
'export' 'ekspɔ:t (N), ɪk'spɔ:t (V)
'import' 'ɪmpɔ:t (N), ɪm'pɔ:t (V)
'insult' 'ɪnsʌlt (N), ɪn'sʌlt (V)
'object' 'ɒbdʒɪkt (N), əb'dʒekt (V)
'perfect' 'pɜ:fɪkt (A), pə'fekt (V)
'permit' 'pɜ:mɪt (N), pə'mɪt (V)
'present' 'preznt (N, A), prɪ'zent (V)
'produce' 'prɒdju:s (N), prə'dju:s (V)
'protest' 'prəʊtest (N), prə'test (V)
'rebel' 'rebəl (N), rɪ'bel (V)
'record' 'rekɔ:d (N), rɪ'kɔ:d (V)
'subject' 'sʌbdʒɪkt (N), səb'dʒekt (V)

A very glaring fact inextricably linked with stress placement in the above words must have stared you in the eye: because stress is assigned to different syllables depending on the grammatical category of the word, the phonological make-up of the word has not been immune against this change. Hence, it is worthwhile to point out that these so-called word-class pairs are not solely different in their accentual pattern; they are, likewise, different in the make-up of the nucleus of the first and the second syllable.

The English language sound system has undergone variable changes. One of the changes concerns the pronunciation of a few words in this list. The word 'process' is a good case in point. A number of speakers now use identical pronunciation for both the verb and the noun, with the diphthong being the nucleus of the first syllable.

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