

Chapter Three: Weak (Reduced) and Strong (Full) Forms

Two words you have certainly bumped into or read about are weak forms. Under this heading, we will elucidate the notion portrayed by the label means and why I deem it immensely important that you pay sufficient heed to every insight the heading has to offer.

The English language exploits two major classes of words: grammatical and content words. The former refers to the category of words used mainly for grammatical purposes and do not contribute considerably to the lexical significance of utterances. These are: pronouns, article, prepositions, conjunctions, copula and auxiliary verbs.

Content words, on the other hand, are called as such because they are the words out of which the utterance derives its meaning, or lexical significance. This category incorporates: nouns, adjectives, adverbs.

The difference in meaning-contribution weight is also accompanied by a no less weight difference: pronunciation weight. Grammatical words do not invariably cost speakers much articulatory tension, muscular energy and breath effort because they do not always retain their strong vowels. Put differently and more plainly, grammatical words have more than one possible peak. The peak can either incorporate a strong vowel or a weak vowel. While content words invariably call for greater amounts of muscular energy and breath effort. That is, content words do not typically have one pronunciation that is weak and another one that is strong. The overwhelming bulk of content words possess only one possible phonological shape or identity.

We now can draw the following conclusion: the notion of weak and strong forms pertains exclusively to grammatical words. They are alternatively called function words, or (a label that I strongly disapprove of) empty words.

Function words, hence, can have two or more possible pronunciations: one strong and the other(s) weak.

A word of caution is in place here, the existence of these two possible ways of pronouncing these words does not entail that it is entirely up to us to choose any pronunciation as we please. There are some conventions which stipulate where to use the strong and where usage of the weak is frowned upon by native speakers or even completely rejected. The rule of thumb that should be borne in mind is that usage of the weak form is,

oddly enough, the norm. The strong form is used only under few specified conditions to be looked at below.

Roach (2009) maintains that knowledge of the very hallmarks of weak forms is vitally important for foreigners. The underlying reason of his claim is manifold:

Using only the strong forms and being in the dark about how, where and why weak forms are used would heap great strain on learners when attempting to comprehend the natives because, the argument runs, the natives use weak forms far more often than their strong counterparts.

It adds more to the foreign accentedness of learners and native speakers deem utter non-usage of weak forms stilted.

Under What Conditions are Strong Forms Used

The conditions that necessitate using strong forms are the following:

When function words appear at the end of the sentence before a pause as in:

He is the spouse she has been for years waiting for.

What on earth are you looking at?

When the grammatical word is being cited:

'For and at' are amongst the many words in the English language that undergo weakening.

When the grammatical word is emphasized, as in:

I purchased the finger sandwich for him not for her.

For auxiliary or copula verbs when used as the only verb of the sentence:

Most auxiliary and copula verbs retain their strong, unreduced forms when they are not used to fulfill their routine grammatical role: enabling other full verbs to express a variety of meanings. The exception to this is the verb 'to be'. Oddly enough, even when used as the full verb of the sentence, the verb to be can still be weakened.

I have a note of five thousand dinars.

He is the oldest member of our class.

Dr Djalal Mansour: Reduced and Full Forms of Function Words