



Stress Patterns in the English Language

Word accents (stresses) are especially important connections between song and language because they give shape, expression, and meaning to both.

In the English language, words have regularly accented patterns, and one syllable of each word is typically louder than the others, shaping the sound. An accent shift can change the meaning of a word and, therefore, the intended expression "**PRE**-ent" is a noun, referring to a gift, where as "pre-**SENT**" is a verb, meaning to give or offer.

Another feature of the sound of language is the grouping of syllables and words to form larger units. Examples of some common groups are "happy Birthday," "open the cabinet," "in a minute," and "whenever possible." In "**HAP**py" and "**BIRTH**day," the accent is on the first syllable, but when combined into the word grouping "happy birthday," "happy" loses its accent, and the grouping then has a single accent on "birth" - happy **BIRTH**day.

In larger groupings, one syllable tends to predominate. We call this **predominant syllable a stress**, to distinguish it from the accent that each word has. A stress pattern, then, is a naturally occurring group of syllables that has a predominant or stressed, syllable. Stress results largely from a change of loudness, but it is also affected strongly by rhythm, melody, language, and other structural elements.¹ (p.123)

Why and how stress patterns are used:

Attention to stress patterns is basic to the study of rhythm and structure, whether of language or of music.

In the English language, meaning of our speech can depend on stress patterns.

As in listening to speech, listening for stressed syllables in song phrases involves listening for changes in dynamics. Becoming aware of and sensitive to subtle differences in dynamics prepares us for an understanding of music shaping and phrasing. It is common for the stress to occur on the beat of a song, but it almost never occurs on every beat. Consider the power of stress for distinguishing

between a musical and a mechanical performance.1 (p.123)

While learning a song, students are encouraged to find the chunks of language that can stand alone such as "Old MacDonald," "had a farm," or "and on this farm he had a duck," They are then asked to find the syllable in each language chunk that should receive an emphasis. They are encouraged to emphasize that syllable as they sing the song.

Sample statements and activities by which to introduce stress patterns to your students:

"Speak *"the mulberry bush"* four times in a row. Tapping one finger on the opposite palm, tap only once during each repetition of the phrase: *"the mulberry bush"*, *"the mulberry bush"*, *"the mulberry bush"*, *"the mulberry bush."*

Notice which syllable received the taps. Listening, movement, and repetition combine to reveal the syllable most natural and comfortable to tap, the stressed syllable. Did you hear the **MUL**berry bush, the **MUL**berry bush....?1 (p.124)

Explanation of the term

In each little phrase or chunk of music, one syllable is emphasized. What does it mean to emphasize something? How might we emphasize a syllable while we are using?

Bibliography

1. Bennett P. D. & Bartholomew, D.R. (1997). *SongWorks I: Singing in the education of children*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth