

Batna 2 University

Course: Phonetics

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Chapter Four: The Weak VS Strong Form

Content and Function Words

The lexical items are of two kinds: functional words and content words.

The functional words are prepositions, articles, conjunctions, forms indicating numbers, gender, or tense “auxiliaries” and pronouns. They are used chiefly to express grammatical functions. Functional words are words that help us construct the sentence but they don't mean anything; they do not have a dictionary meaning the way content words have. They are limited in number and their main function is to serve as “grammatical cement” holding content words together.

The meaningful words, i.e. those that have an independent meaning and refer to a thing, an event, a property, etc. are called **content words**. The contents are used to express cultural content and they consist of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. They have more or less independent meanings.

To sum up:

Function (synsemantic) words

- have little or no lexical meaning
- express grammatical relationships among other words within a sentence, or specify the attitude or mood of the speaker
- are conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, particles

Content (lexical, auto-semantic) words

- have lexical meaning
- nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs

Simply counting words is an admittedly crude way to understand what people are saying. Most computer programs do a poor job of appreciating context. They are generally unable to

appreciate irony, sarcasm, and the use of metaphors. In English, words often have different meanings in different settings. Generally, these words are nouns and regular verbs. Nouns and regular verbs are “content heavy” in that they define the primary categories and actions dictated by the speaker or writer. It makes sense. To have a conversation, it is important to know what people are talking about.

Function words are generally very short (usually 1–4 letters), are spoken quickly (at a speed of 100–300 milliseconds – the rate often used in laboratory studies testing priming or subliminal perception), and glossed over even more quickly when we read (Van Petten & Kutas, 1991).

We have a terrible memory of our own as well as other’s use of function words. In daily conversation, however, we have virtually no control or memory over how and when they are used either by the speaker or by ourselves. As evidence, estimate how frequently you have seen articles (a, an, the) on the last passage.

Has this piece of writing used more or fewer articles than you would in normal speech?

Despite rarely paying them any conscious attention, function words have a powerful impact on the listener/reader and, at the same time, reflect a great deal about the speaker/writer.

A closer analysis of function words points to their social functions more clearly. Pronouns, for example, are words that demand a shared understanding of their referent between the speaker and listener. Consider the following sentence:

I can’t believe that he bought it from her.

This is a completely normal sentence. We can imagine someone saying this to us and knowing exactly what is meant. This sentence makes absolutely no sense, however, unless you know who the “I”, “he”, and “her” are, as well as what the “it” is. So the mere ability to understand a simple conversation replete with function words demands social knowledge.

The same is true for articles, prepositions, and all other function words.

Consider the slightly altered sentences:

I can’t believe that he gave her the ring.

I can’t believe that he gave her a ring.

The difference between “the” ring and “a” ring is subtle but significant. These sentences hint to possible differences in the speaker’s and audiences’ shared knowledge, contexts, and interpersonal relationships. Words such as “before”, “over”, and “to” similarly require a basic awareness of the speaker’s location in time and space. The ability to use function words, then, is a marker of rather sophisticated social skills. Talking about nouns and verbs, however,

simply requires the ability to understand shared categories “whether it is a noun, a verb, or an adjective” and definitions “the meaning of each”.

The functional words follow a **closed system** (There are approximately 50 function words in English, including auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, particles, etc.), but the content words follow an **open system**. Thus, the bulk of the English vocabulary consists of the content words, especially nouns, since they keep on increasing in numbers.

Stress operates at the word level and at the sentence level. In natural connected speech, however, not all words are stressed. Traditionally, the main meaningful words (those that carry the main semantic content) are stressed, while the other words that convey minor information in sentences are not stressed. As opposed to content words are function words that have no or very little lexical meaning and are usually not stressed. They convey only grammatical information and express various grammatical relations. Depending on whether they are stressed or unstressed, the function words have several pronunciations. Typically, when they are unstressed, they are pronounced in their **weak form**. However, in some rare contexts, they can be stressed and appear in their **strong form**. The strong form only happens when we pronounce the words alone, or when we emphasize them. Weak forms are very often pronounced with a schwa, and so are very weak and sometimes a bit difficult to hear properly.

Weak Forms vis-à-vis EFL Students

Students who are learning English usually use only strong forms, and they sound very unnatural. English speakers use weak forms all the time, every single sentence is full of them, and students find it difficult to understand because they are not used to them, and very often they don't even know they exist. From the productive point of view, all native speakers use them regardless of the level of formality; and for foreign learners who want to speak as naturally as native speakers; the learning of weak forms becomes obligatory. From the perceptual point of view and this is more important, the knowledge which listeners have about weak forms facilitates perception and comprehension.

Why do grammatical words weaken the way they do?

It's all about rhythm. The way English is pronounced makes it necessary to weaken function words so you can keep the rhythm.

Weak and Strong Forms

Phonologically speaking, functional words undergo a set of modifications in natural speech. Nearly all functional words have two pronunciation forms; a strong form and a weak form. The strong form (also called citation form/ full form) is stressed and it is the pronunciation form that is usually found in the dictionary entry of the word (Brown & Kondo,

2006). It is the first form to which foreign learners are usually introduced. The weak form (modified pronunciation) is unstressed, less prominent, and phonemically different from the strong form in both quality and quantity. The common way of weakening functional words is reduction in the vowel quality. This is done by the replacement of the word's central vowel by a weaker one, mainly the “schwa”.

For Roach, this variance in pronunciation is a significant characteristic of the way English pronunciation is modified (Roach, 2002). Some functional words have more than one weak form. When the same functional word occurs in different contexts, the phonological environment exerts significant effects on the way it is weakened. For instance, the word “your” is pronounced /jə/ when it occurs before a consonant and /jɜr/ before a vowel:

Take your time /teɪk jə taɪm/

On your own /ɒn jɜr əʊn/

In speech, the decision to use one form or another is rule-governed. Generally, this is related to the position where the word occurs, intended emphasis, and meaning. However, in spoken English, the weak pronunciation form is more frequent than the strong one, and it is described as the normal pronunciation of the word.

As stated before, there are rules that are used to identify where a functional word is to be used on its weak form and where the strong one has to be used. Since in English the weak forms are the normal pronunciation form of functional words, and they are more frequently used, it is a good way to focus on the **exceptions** where the weak form **is not** used in order to get a clear image of these rules. Hence, we will mention the conditions under which the strong form is more suitable, which means that in almost all of the other conditions, functional words have to be weakened.

- ✓ The strong form is used when the functional word occurs in isolation, i.e. out of context. The strong form is used when the word occurs in the final position of the sentence. Pronouns such as “his, us....” may remain weak in final position.

Where are you **from**? /frɒm/

I'm home **from** work. /frəm/

Stay with him. /ɪm/

- ✓ When functional words are quoted, they are pronounced strongly.

The word “**and**” is a conjunction /ænd/

- ✓ When the word is emphasized in an utterance, it is stressed to show an intended meaning.

Is Mary present? Yes she **is** present /ɪz/

- ✓ In connected speech, if a functional word precedes a pause, it is pronounced in its strong form.

It is **a**...er em it is **a** good idea. /eɪ/ /ə/

- ✓ For auxiliary verbs, if they occur in their negative sense, they are always strong.

She **has** not found her keys yet. /hæz/

- ✓ When the word “must” is used in the sense of concluding something, it is usually stressed (Roach, 1998).

He does not reply to the phone calls. He **must** be in a meeting. /mʌst/

- ✓ In addition to this, there are some functional words which are regularly stressed. These are particularly demonstratives like “this”, “that”, “those”, and interrogatives like “where”, “who”, “which”, “how” (Collins & Mees, 2003). Interrogatives such as these do not have a weak form. If the word “that” is used in a relative clause, it is not stressed. But as a demonstrative adjective, it is stressed.

Who is that boy? /ðæt/

I told him that I was busy. /ðət/

List of common English words that have weak forms (used when the word is not stressed):

Word	Transcription	Example
A	/ə/	I've got a new dress.
Am	/əm/ /m/	I'm not going home, am I?
An	/ən/	That's an apple
And	/ənd/ /ən/	We need some salt and pepper.
Any	/əni/	Do you have any money?
Are	/ə/	They are at school just now.
As	/əz/	It was as big as an elephant.
At	/ət/	She works at night.
Be	/bi/ /bi/	He's going to be late.
Been	/biːn/	Have you been here long?
But	/bət/	The food is good but the service is terrible.
Can	/kən/ /kn/	Can you come early?
Could	/kəd/	I think he could pass the exam.
Do	/də/	Do you need any help?
Does	/dəz/	He doesn't live in London, does he?
For	/fə/	It's a present for my dad.
From	/frəm/	That book's from Julia.

Had	/həd/ /əd/ /d/	I had a car when I was at university.
Has	/həz/ /əz/ /z/	He has been here for years.
Have	/həv/ /əv/ /v/	I've had lunch already.
He	/hi/ /i/	She thinks he's handsome.
Her	/ə/ /hə/	Tom told her that the meeting had been cancelled.
Him	/ɪm/	I've bought him some chocolate.
His	/ɪz/	That's his last chance.
I	/ɪ/	I wish I had gone to bed earlier.
Me	/mi/	John called me last night.
Must	/məst/ /məs/	You really must take your umbrella.
Of	/əv/ /v/	That's part of the problem.
Our	/ɑ:/	She dropped her coffee on our rug.
Shall	/ʃəl/	Shall we go out for dinner?
She	/ʃi/	I think she's gone to the library.
Should	/ʃəd/	You really should get a haircut.
Some	/səm/ /sm/	They bought some bread this morning.
Than	/ðən/ /dn/	This part of LA is much busier than where I live.
The	/ðə/	Have you seen the front door keys?
Them	/ðəm/	We dropped them off at the airport.
There	/ðə/ /ðər/	The restaurant is over there.
To	/tə/	Are you going to the party tonight?
Us	/əs/ /s/	Lucy gave us one of her kittens.
As	/wəz/	It was a beautiful day.
We	/wi/	I wonder when we should leave.
Were	/wə/	They were late again!
Who	/hu/	Do you know who that girl is?
Will	/wəl/ /əl/ /l/	He'll arrive later.
Would	/wəd/ /d/	If I were you, I would study a bit more.
You	/ju/ /ju/	Do you like chocolate?
Yours	/jə/ /jər/	Is that your coat?