

A Note on Syllables

From *Spelling for Learning*

So far we have spoken of syllables without defining them, other than saying that they are parts of spoken words that contain one and only one vowel sound – or, as we will see below, a vowel-like sound produced by a syllabic consonant like that spelled <m> in *rhythm*. Though we will not speak much more about syllables, it may be well to pause to say a bit more about them – if only to explain why we use them so little in *Spelling for Learning*.

Though it is usually treated rather casually, as if it were simple and obvious, the concept of syllables actually poses some serious difficulties, primarily with explaining where to draw the boundaries between them. For instance, should a word like *generate* be [jɛn-ər-āt] or [je-nər-āt] or [je-nə-rāt] or [jɛn-ə-rāt]? Or, assuming that the person doing the syllabication doesn't know a phonetic alphabet and uses the regular alphabet: *gen|er|ate*, *ge|ner|ate*, *ge|ne|rate*, *gen|e|rate*? There is no problem hearing how many syllables there are in the word, but there are complex problems deciding where the dividing lines are to be drawn. Notice that all four syllabifications of *generate* above consist of three syllables. Syllables are usually easy to count because each always contains one and only one vowel or vowel-like sound. Syllables can be hard to demarcate because each may or may not contain consonants before and after the vowel, and it is not always entirely clear with which vowel a given consonant belongs. Thus the floating [n] and [r] (or <n> and <r>) in the different possible syllabifications of *generate*.

Boundaries are often defined in terms of open and closed syllables: Open syllables end in a vowel sound; closed syllables end in a consonant sound. The general principles are that stressed short vowel sounds will occur in closed syllables while stressed long vowels and diphthongs will occur in open syllables and that unstressed short vowels and reduced vowels like schwa will occur in open syllables if there is only one consonant sound between the unstressed short vowel and the next vowel sound. These principles are applied only to initial and medial syllables; long vowels can occur in closed final syllables: *decide* [di-sɪd], *control* [kən-trɒl], etc.

These principles work quite well, assuming that the students are clear on the distinctions among stressed and unstressed short and long vowels. These distinctions can get especially confusing if the student is using the regular spelling alphabet to represent syllables: *co|mmu|ni|ty*. The <o> is unstressed with only a single consonant sound, [m], between it and the next vowel sound, so it is in an open syllable. Notice, though, that although there is a single consonant sound following it, [m], there are two consonant letters, <mm>. That kind of thing can be confusing. The <i> is also

unstressed with a single consonant sound between it and the next vowel, so it is also open. The <u> is long and therefore its syllable is open, but that <i> feels stressed enough to tempt *co|mmu|nit|y* rather than the preferred *co|mmu|ni|ty*, or [kə-myū-ni-tē]. There is the stuff of real confusion here.

Further, the sound [r] after unstressed vowels is not covered by the two principles: *International*, for instance, is [in-tər-nash-ə-n^əl], not the implausible *[in-tə-rnash-ə-n^əl], and the noun-adjective *separate* is [sep-ər-it], not *[sep-ə-rit].

There also can be uncertainties if there are three consonant sounds between two vowel sounds: *transparent* is [trans-par-ənt] in dictionaries, but from a purely phonological point of view it is hard to see why [tran-spar-ənt] would not be just as plausible. The preferred syllabication appears to be motivated at least in part by the desire to keep the syllables and elements coterminous: The prefix is (*trans-* not <tran>, and the base is *pare*, not <spare>. (But, going back to the first pages of this chapter, notice that the preferred syllabication of *sixteenth*, [sik-stēnth], does not agree with the analysis into elements, *six+teen+th*): In the syllabication the [s] moves from the first to the second element, and the boundary between the second and third elements is obliterated.)

This uncertainty can also arise in certain cases of close consonant clusters, like <st>: *instant* is [in-stənt], not [ins-tənt], again at least in part due to the analysis into elements: (*in+stant*. Compare that with the preferred syllabication of *pestilence*: [pes-tə-ləns] rather than [pest-ə-ləns], which comes closer to matching the analysis into elements.

A further difficulty grows out of the distinction between spoken syllables (with which we have so far been dealing) and written syllables. Dictionaries usually divide main entry words into written syllables – that is, they divide the word at places where it can be hyphenated and run on at the end of a line. Written syllables are based essentially on sound, but sound as it is modified by the desire to avoid ending lines with odd-looking or potentially misleading word parts. Thus, a dictionary's analysis of a word into written syllables may not agree with its analysis into spoken syllables in its phonetic respelling for showing its pronunciation. For instance, the written syllables in *loutish* are <lout>+<ish>, maintaining the integrity of the elements, the base *lout* and the suffix *-ish*). But its spoken syllables are [lou-tish], following the principles discussed above, even though doing so violates the integrity of the base and suffix. Similarly, the analysis of *sixteenth* into spoken syllables, [sik-stēnth], does not agree with its analysis into written syllables: <six>+<teenth>.

Further complications are raised by a word like *rhythm*, which has two syllables, [rith-m], although it has only one vowel letter, the <y>. The reason for this is that when it follows a consonant and comes at the end of a word, the letter <m> sometimes functions as if it were a vowel. Other instances are in *chasm*, *algorithm*, *organism* – and all the other words with the suffix *-ism*. A consonant like the <m> in *rhythm* that constitutes a syllable on its own is called a *syllabic consonant*. Other letters that can spell syllabic consonant sounds are <n>, <l>, and <r>. Notice that in *button*, *brittle*, and *butter*, you do not hear any vowel sounds in the final syllables, just the consonant

sounds [n], [l], and [r]. A syllable always contains one and only one peak of sound. In the huge majority of cases those peaks are vowel sounds spelled by vowel letters, but occasionally the nasals and liquids [m], [n], [l], and [r] can provide the peak without a vowel letter, nearly always at the end of free stems.

So before students can be expected to analyze words reliably into syllables, they need to know a great deal: the distinction between written and spoken syllables, the distinction between vowel and consonant letters, the contrast between long and short vowel sounds, the difference between consonant sounds and consonant letters, the contrast between stressed and unstressed vowels. They also must be able to handle the complexities posed by having one set of principles for syllables that come at the beginning and in the middle of words as opposed to those at the end. And they must be able to handle the added complexities posed by [r], by tight consonant clusters like [st], and by syllabic consonants. This is no small set of demands.

Because of these complexities our discussion will use the concept of syllables only sparingly, as, for instance, in the discussion of the v.v string in words like *lion* and *create* in which two vowel letters are separated by a syllable boundary. In general, my advice would be to use the concept of syllables as little as possible and as quickly as possible to wean students away from it and into the more useful analysis of words into elements.

Exercise 2.15, p. 103