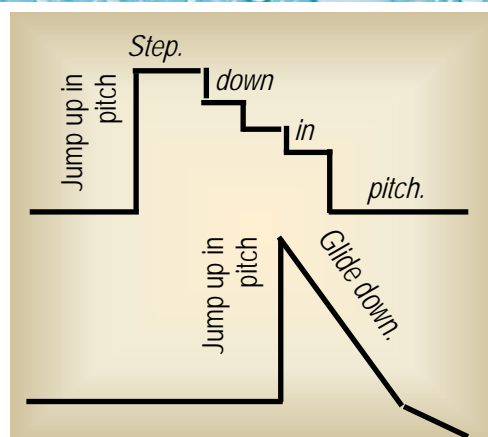


Accent Acquisition Principle: Phrase & Sentence “Meaning Focus”

The “Getting Acquainted” section of *Accent Activities: Pronunciation Supplement to the Speaking Text*, gives a general introduction to the “Step System of American Speech Music.” Here’s a review and summary of those principles for accent acquisition:

- For each phrase or short sentence, the speaker’s voice “jumps up on an early important word.”
- If this “jump-up point” is the *last* syllable, the voice then *glides* down in pitch. If it’s *before* the last syllable, however, the voice *steps* down in pitch on each syllable that follows.



Phrase & Sentence Meaning Focus

But how do speakers know *which* word is the “jump-up point?” Often, the place the voice makes the biggest upward jump in pitch is the “meaning focus” of a phrase or sentence. According to speech specialist Judy Gilbert¹, these are the general rules for phrase and sentence meaning focus:

Rule 1 = “Normal” End-of-Sentence Focus. At the beginning of talk or a conversation, the last *content word* is usually the focus of meaning. “Content words” are the words that “carry the meaning” of an utterance. Most often, they are nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. With “normal” end-of-sentence focus, the voice jumps up on the accented (stressed) syllable of the last content word. Then it glides down if this is the *last* syllable of the utterance or *steps* down on each unstressed syllable that follows. In the following sample conversation, all the phrases have “normal” end-of-sentence focus. The “jump up” syllable is printed in CAPITAL LETTERS.

¹ In her well-known classic *Clear Speech: Pronunciation and Listening Comprehension in North American English* (published by Cambridge University Press, 40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, 1993 Edition), in workshops and handouts, and in text revisions and updates.

Speaker A: Which language do you like the BEST?
Speaker B: I'd prefer ENGLISH—if I could MASTER it.
Speaker A: Why's the language DIFFICULT for you?
Speaker B: Because of its pronunciATION.
Speaker A: How's your American English ACcent?

Speaker B: I suppose it's all RIGHT.

Speaker A: I assume people understand you EASily.

Speaker B: Not ALways.

Speaker A: So what are you going to DO?

Speaker B: I'll WORK on it.

Speaker A: Who's going to HELP you?



EXERCISE 1—END-OF-SENTENCE MEANING FOCUS. Listen and repeat the sentences in the following conversation. Highlight² or otherwise mark the *focus point* of each phrase or short sentence (the last content word). You can compare your choices with the suggestions in the *Answer Key* at the end of this *ACCENT ACTIVITIES Pronunciation Supplement*. Then practice and/or “perform” the conversation with a partner. Be sure to *jump up* in pitch on the focus point and glide down—or step down on each syllable to the end *of the utterance*.

Speaker A: What do you think of your accent?

Speaker B: I think it needs work.

Speaker A: Why do you think so?

Speaker B: Because it's not always clear.

Speaker A: Why do you suppose that happens?

Speaker B: Well, I don't always use the right intonation.

Speaker A: You haven't quite mastered the system.

Speaker B: Right. And I'm not sure which word to focus on.

Speaker A: I thought the focus word was always at the end.

Speaker B: Not always. It depends on the meaning. The focus point can be anywhere in the phrase or sentence.



² To practice stress or focus by reading aloud written material, it may help to use a highlighter (transparent marker) to mark accented syllables. Or you can mark emphasis in other ways, such as by boxing focus words or by putting a dot or an accent mark *ˈ* to show syllable stress. In the above exercise, a few of the focus points are boxed as examples—like this:



Rule 2 = Special Emphasis for Meaning Focus. After the beginning of talk, *any* word can be the focus, depending on what the speakers want to emphasize. Often, the focus of meaning is new or contrasting info, or an item that shows a speaker's disagreement with previous input. The voice gives extra strong emphasis to this focus word, which is also the "jump up point." In this sample conversation, there's special emphasis on the meaning focus of each sentence.

Speaker A: Are you usually a good converSationalist?

Speaker B: What do you mean by GOOD in conversation?

Speaker A: Well, do you LISTen well before you answer?

Speaker B: I probably SPEAK better than I listen.

Speaker A: So you're NOT a good listener?

Speaker B: I didn't SAY that. I said that speaking is my STRONGer skill.



EXERCISE 2—SPECIAL EMPHASIS FOR MEANING FOCUS. Following is another sample social conversation. Listen and repeat the lines. In each phrase or sentence, highlight, circle, or otherwise mark the focus point you hear. Then compare your answers to those suggested in the *Answer Key* at the end of this *ACCENT ACTIVITIES Pronunciation Supplement*. Finally, practice the exchange with a partner and/or "perform" it for the class or whole group.

Speaker A: What's your favorite topic of conversation?

Speaker B: My favorite topic? I guess it's sports.

Speaker A: What kind of ports? I don't think you're talking about shipping ports. Maybe you mean ports of entry. Or perhaps your favorite topic of conversation is port wines.

Speaker B: Not ports, silly—sports! Sports is my favorite conversation topic.

Speaker A: What kinds of sports? You must mean team sports.

Speaker B: Not American team sports—like football. I prefer international team sports. Soccer is my favorite.

Speaker A: But that's the same as football. I've even heard it called "soccer-football"?

Speaker B: Not in American English, it isn't. And the British call it "rugby."

Speaker A: How about individual sports like skiing or gymnastics?

Speaker B: Well, I like to watch those sports, but I can't participate in them.



EXERCISE 4—MEANING FOCUS IN OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS AND “SHORT TALK.”

Here are some sample exchanges based on “Open-Ended Questions” designed to stimulate thought and provoke discussion). The responses are “Short Talk Answers,” entertaining “Mini-Speeches” on the topic.

For each exchange, work with a partner. With a natural accent, practice each *Question & Answer* by reading it aloud—or by paraphrasing in your own words. Be sure to add extra stress or emphasis to each syllable in **CAPITAL LETTERS**. Then jump up in pitch, *gliding* down on that syllable or *stepping* down on the following ones. In this way, you’ll make clear the focus point—and therefore the meaning—of each utterance.

On the other hand, if you disagree with the writer’s choice of “Meaning Focal Points,” change them to what **YOU** think should be most strongly emphasized. Mark these syllables. When you read or paraphrase each exchange, use your voice to clearly indicate what’s most important.

Finally, present one or more exchanges to the whole group. Get your listeners’ reactions to your accent, especially your choice of focal points and the system of “speech music” you use to emphasize them. Record each exchange. Analyze your evolving accent to improve the clarity and communicative effectiveness of its “meaning focus” feature.



OPEN-ENDED QUESTION 1:

Which language in the world do you like the **BEST**? **WHY**?

“SHORT TALK” ANSWER: To tell you the **TRUTH**, I like my **NATIVE** language the best. Of course I enjoy **LEARN**ing English, but I’ll probably **NEVER** like speaking it. At least for **ME**, **SPAN**ish is the most beautiful language there is. It’s **roMANTic**, not businesslike. Why do we use more words in **SPAN**ish than we do in English? Because we have **MUCH** more to say, that’s why. We don’t even **TRY** to get right to the point. We really **LOVE** our poetic language.



OPEN-ENDED QUESTION 2:

Is **ENGLISH** a difficult language for you? **WHY** or why **NOT**?

“SHORT TALK” ANSWER: For **ME**, the most difficult part of learning English is listening **compreHENS**ion. I can **READ** English all right because I can look up new words in the **DICTION**ary. **WRIT**ing’s not so bad because the grammar isn’t that **COMplicated**. Anyway, there’s plenty of **TIME** for writing. Not so with **LIST**ening, however. It seems I can’t listen **FAST** enough—especially to fluent native **SPEAK**ers. They talk so **QUICK**ly. They run words **toGETHER**. And they **MUMBLE**.



OPEN-ENDED QUESTION 3: What's your favorite means of communication? WHY?

"SHORT TALK" ANSWER: I guess MOST people prefer face-to-face conversation, and I do TOO! Not only can I HEAR better, I can WATCH people's body language and their lips. On the TELEphone, I can't always HEAR so well, and of course, I can't SEE anything. I don't like to communicate in WRITing because it TAKES too long. It's too much TROUBLE, even to get and send E-Mail messages on the COMputer. So for ME, in-PERson communication is the best.



OPEN-ENDED QUESTION 4: Are you usually a good conversationalist? In what WAYS?

"SHORT TALK" ANSWER: I have one main strength in conversation. It's that I REALLY want to learn from other people. So when they talk, I listen VERY carefully. I ask questions to encourage them to keep TALKing. I make SURE I get the message before I respond. But all this leads to a PROBLEM. I'm so busy LISTening I can't think of what to SAY. Then there's SILENce—and I know silence can feel VERY uncomfortable in social conversation in this culture.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTION 5: What are the "rules" for social conversation in YOUR native culture?

"SHORT TALK" ANSWER: In MY native culture, social conversation is a major acTIVity. EVeryone likes to talk, and many people love to ARGue. Often at a social gathering, everybody talks at the same TIME. It's not so important to LISTen, just to talk—LOUDer than everyone else.

It's VERY important to appear right (or smart or knowledgeable). Polite or shy usually means "BORing."

We don't LEARN so much when we converse, but we SURE have a good time!



OPEN-ENDED QUESTION 8: Describe your conversational style in one—and ONLY one—word.

"SHORT TALK" ANSWER: If I had to describe my conversational style in only ONE word—I couldn't DO it! Well, maybe I COULD—IF I chose the right adjective. I guess...my style is SHY. Well, maybe that's not QUITE the right word. Perhaps it's poLITE. OR...it may be conSIDerate. No, not exACTly. I'm really more interested in OTHERs—except not ALL the time, so I suppose I mean TOLerant. No...WAIT! I've GOT it! In ONE word, my conversational style is— indeCISive!

OPEN-ENDED QUESTION 9: Would you rather talk with someone MORE or LESS knowledgeable (or intelligent) than you? WHY?

"SHORT TALK" ANSWER:
LESS knowledgeable—or less inTELLigent. Definitely! Why do I say THAT? Because I HAVE to win all the time—even in a MEANingless conversation. I'm VErY competitive. So if someone seems to know more than ME, I feel inADEquate. I feel PREssured to think of something smart to say. Or to tell a really funny JOKE. I MUST show that I'M the best—the SMARTest. Hmmm. That's NOT really very bright of me.



OPEN-ENDED QUESTION 10: Describe your ACcent in English. What do you do WELL? What needs imPROVEment?

"SHORT TALK" ANSWER: MY accent? It's terRIFic. It's PERFect. It couldn't be BETter. Well, on second thought, maybe it COULD. Perhaps I could improve the clarity of some of the SOUNDS. Perhaps I could LINK words together more naturally. Perhaps I can stop leaving OUT syllables or adding EXtra ones.

Probably, I have to put STRONGer stress on accented syllables and say UNstressed ones more quickly. And exAGgerate focus words more! Other than THAT, my accent is the best!

EXERCISE 5—MEANING FOCUS IN YOUR OWN “SHORT TALK” ANSWERS. Now try answering all or some of the above ten “Open-Ended Questions” with your own ideas. You might want to jot down some notes for each answer so you can highlight or otherwise mark the syllable in each phrase or sentence to receive the strongest stress (the meaning focus point).

Alone or with a partner, with a natural, easily-comprehensible accent, present your question and answer to the class or whole group in a short “Mini-Speech.” Be sure to emphasize “Meaning Focus Points” clearly so that your listeners will get the message you want to communicate.

Finally, to find out if your ideas came across, ask your listeners what they think your *main point* was—and what important details they remember from your talk. Get their reactions to your accent too, especially your choice of focal points within your “speech music.”

If possible, record each “short talk” on audio/video. Then analyze its clarity, expressiveness, and communicative effectiveness, especially in regard to its “meaning focus.”

Repeat the same steps with “short talk” answers to other “Open-Ended Questions” for social conversation.