**English Pronunciation Podcast 56 – The Rhythm of English: Which words do we stress in a sentence?**

In this week's podcast, we're going to learn how to speak in the rhythm of American English.  
When you learn to speak in the rhythm of English, you sound more like a native speaker and more importantly, it's easier for people to understand you. In order to speak with the right rhythm you have to stress the right words and right syllables. Stressing the wrong words can be confusing to your listener

**The focus of this week's podcast is:**

* To learn which words of a phrase or sentence Americans usually stress.
* To practice speaking in the rhythm of an American with some key expressions.

**Review: What is Stress in English?**

Podcasts #14-21 taught you when and how to stress syllables *within words.* I recommend that you listen to those podcasts if you haven't already or if you're not sure about the rules concerning syllable stress within words.

As we previously learned in podcast 14, stress in English is primarily indicated through the lengthening of a vowel and a rise in pitch.

**Stress = longer vowel +rise in pitch (intonation).**

This rise in pitch is also called "pitch emphasis." Remember, more volume is not essential. *Longer vowels and higher pitches* are the real way to indicate a stressed syllable or word.

In any phrase or sentence, certain words receive more stress and we can hear that their vowels  
are longer and the pitch of their stressed syllable is somewhat higher.   
But how do we know which words to stress?

**Which words receive the most stress when speaking with an American accent?**

The answer is actually quite simple and logical: *the words which are the most important  
and newest pieces of information in the context of our conversation are the words that receive the most stress.* Stressing those words is an important part of speaking with the correct rhythm of English.

When it comes to understanding proper stress and rhythm, we must divide words into two categories: content words and structure words.

**Content Words vs. Structure Words**

**Content words:** Content words are usually stressed. Content words are the words which give a sentence its unique meaning. They are "the meat" of our message, the core of our message that we want to communicate. Verbs and nouns are just a couple of examples of content words.

**Structure words**, however, are *usually not stressed*. They are simple grammatical words which could be a part of any sentence. They are generic. Prepositions like "at" or 'to" or articles like" the" and "an" are examples of structure words which are usually not stressed.

Now let’s make a complete list of content words and structure words:

**Content Words**   
verbs  
nouns  
adjectives,  
adverbs  
"wh question words"( who, what, where, why, when and how) demonstratives (this, that, these and those)

**Structure words:**

pronouns, (subject pronouns object pronouns, reflexive, possessive pronouns),  
prepositions  
conjunctions (and, or, for, but, nor, yet, which, that)  
articles(the ,an, a)   
modal verbs (can, could, should, would, might, etc.)  
helping verbs ( "have" in the present perfect tense, do, does)   
the verb "be".

Let's listen to a sentence and notice how the content words are stressed and the structure words are not stressed. Listen for long vowels and higher pitches on the content words.

We talked for a long time.

Notice how I stressed "talked", "long" and "time". Listen again:

We talked for a long time.

All of the words which I stressed are content words, talk is a verb, long is an adjective and time is a noun. Most importantly, they contain the most important part of my message. By stressing these words, I highlight the most important part of my message and make it easier for my listener to understand me.

**Stress and Intonation are Signals**

In this sense, stress and intonation are signals to our listener. They tell our listener," this the important part of my message. It's important to listen right now."

Imagine if I lacked any knowledge of English grammar but only had some vocabulary. I might say:

"Talked long time."

And indeed these are the words which I stressed when I said, "We talked for a long time."

Let's look at the words which I did not stress. "We" a pronoun, "for" a preposition, and "a" an article. Notice that these are all structure words and are therefore are not stressed. Their vowels are shorter and their pitches are lower.

Now try saying the sentence, stressing the content words : talked, long and time.

**Exercise: Please listen and repeat.**

We talked for a long time.

**Can Structure Words be Stressed?**

You may have noticed that sometimes structure words *are* stressed. It is possible to stress a structure word. In the previous example, I might have said something like:

**We** talked for a long time. -stressing the structure word "we".

I would do this in this case where I wanted to show contrast. If I want to specifically show to my listener that *we* and not *they* or *you* talked, I would stress the pronoun "we". But if my point is more about the act of talking and for how long, then I do not stress "we."

As I mentioned before it’s all pretty logical.

It all comes down to this: stress the pieces of information which are the most important at that moment of the conversation. These just happen to usually be content words.

Now let's practice some key expressions of English paying attention to our rhythm.   
Remember to make the stressed syllable of content words longer and with a higher pitch.   
Really try to feel the rhythm of the sentence almost *like its music*. If you've ever studied music,   
you know that it's important to pay attention to note duration- how long the note lasts and also important to pay attention to the pitch of the note. The same is true for language. You want to pay attention to the music of English.

**Exercise: Listen and repeat paying careful attention to the rhythm of your sentences:**

**Nice** to **meet** you.

**When** are you **free** for **lunch**?

Do you **need** to **see** a **doc**tor?

It's **time** to **raise** the **bar**. (set a higher standard)

I'd **like** to **mak**e a reser**va**tion.

**John** and **Lisa** are **ty**ing the **knot**. (getting married)

Perhaps in these examples, you noticed that one of the stressed words received more stress   
than the other stressed words. Its vowel was longer and its pitch was higher. This is known as *the focus word*. There is usually one word in every phrase that receives the most stress and that is known as the focus word. Choosing the right focus will be discussed in a future podcast lesson.