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### **Suprasegmentals: An Overview**

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When we consider what it means to teach pronunciation, most of us think first of consonant and vowel sounds, known as segmentals. But individual sounds are only one part of pronunciation instruction. Less well-understood, but equally important, are suprasegmentals, also called prosodics or prosody. These musical aspects of pronunciation extend over larger units of speech like syllables, words, and phrases and include features such as word stress, rhythm, thought groups, connected speech, prominence, and intonation.

#### **Why are suprasegmentals important?**

Suprasegmentals are regarded as an integral part of L2 pronunciation instruction for several reasons:

- 1) Suprasegmentals play a vital role in overall intelligibility (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998; Field, 2005; Hahn, 2004, Zielinski, 2008). They are basic to the information structure of English and provide the listener with clues about what is important in the speaker's message. Many pronunciation experts urge teachers to give primary attention to prosody when instructional time is limited. Gilbert (2016, p. vi) states, "Any extra time can be used for other aspects of speech, but the central importance of prosody (rhythm and melody) must come first."
- 2) The segmental system works in concert with the suprasegmental system (Dickerson, 2010) in that the clarity of individual sounds is ultimately determined by stress patterns in words, the rhythmic structure of phrases, linking in thought groups, and the relative importance of a word in the speech stream. As Murphy reminds us, "prosody represents the phonological context in which all other facets of L2 pronunciation occur" (2017, p. 32).
- 3) Because melodic components of speech are broader than discrete sounds, suprasegmentals "permeate" everything speakers say and are especially compatible with contemporary L2 instruction with its focus on authentic classroom communication (Murphy, 2017, p.32).
- 4) While problems with segmentals tend to characterize speakers of particular languages (Swan & Smith, 2001), suprasegmentals are apt to be problematic for students from a variety of language backgrounds. Consequently, in classes with mixed language backgrounds, suprasegmental instruction usually meets the pronunciation needs of most students.

#### **What Are the Suprasegmental Features?**

Most pronunciation textbooks include the following core suprasegmental features, though terminology may vary.

1. **Word Stress.** In English words with two or more syllables, one syllable has primary stress. This syllable is longer in duration, higher in pitch, and has a full, clear vowel sound. Depending on their first language background, students may misplace stress (e.g., DE-cade for de-CADE), or they may stress syllables more or less equally (e.g., TWO TOURS for TU-tors).
2. **Rhythm.** While word stress is the alternation of strong and weak beats in words, English rhythm is the alternation of strong and weak beats in phrases and sentences. In English, words with relatively more meaning (i.e., nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, wh-words, and negatives) are stressed; words that serve a grammatical function but carry less meaning (i.e., articles, prepositions, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, etc.) tend to be weakened or reduced (e.g., CALL me at SIX).
3. **Thought Groups.** Speakers break the stream of speech into chunks or meaningful groups of words called thought groups. A thought group might be a collocation (e.g., *make progress*), a discourse marker (e.g., *however*), a hesitation device (e.g., *um; well*) or a grammatical constituent (e.g., *Thought groups / make spoken English / easier to process*). A brief pause often signals the end of a thought group or chunk.
4. **Connected Speech.** Within thought groups, the final sound of one word is linked to the initial sound of the next word. For example, in the utterance, “If you’d like to speak to a representative/ press zero,” the phrase *press zero* sounds like one word *presszero*. (Grant, 2014, p. 17). When words are linked or connected, sounds are subject to change based on the influence of adjacent sounds (e.g., *this year* sounds like *thi-shear*).
5. **Focus or Prominence.** In each thought group, one word or element is emphasized and stands out from the rest (Goodwin, 2014). This is the prominent word or the focus. In English, prominence highlights important key words, new information, or contrasting information (e.g., I have GOOD news / and BAD news.) One of the most important ways speakers signal prominence is an abrupt pitch change on the focus word or the stressed syllable of the focus word.
6. **Final Intonation.** Simply put, after the focus, the vocal pitch may rise, fall, or remain more or less flat to the end of the thought group depending on the speaker’s intent. For example:
  - He lost his WALlet. ↘ (completion / certainty)
  - He lost his WALlet. ↗ (surprise / uncertainty)
  - He lost his WALlet... → (incompleteness / more to come)

### A Few Guidelines for Teaching Suprasegmentals

- Be explicit in your suprasegmental instruction. If you simply provide a model for imitation, most students will miss the salient characteristics of the suprasegmental feature you are teaching. For example, when teaching word stress, direct students’ attention to the contrast between the extra length and clarity of vowels in syllables with primary stress versus the weakened, shortened vowels in unstressed syllables.

- Integrate the teaching of suprasegmentals with a multi-modality approach. Because suprasegmentals are not visible on the printed page, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic methods make suprasegmental features more accessible and tangible to students. For example, teachers can place dots over syllables with primary stress, underline focus words, and indicate final intonation with arrows. Similarly, synchronized body movement or physical gesture (e.g., stretching a rubber band while saying the stressed syllable of a word or stepping forward while uttering the prominent element in a thought group) can anchor or reinforce suprasegmental dimensions that might otherwise be difficult to internalize.
- Enhance student motivation by teaching not only the form of a suprasegmental feature but also its function or role in communicating meaning. For example, native and non-native listeners rely on word stress patterns not only to recognize individual words but also to identify word boundaries in stretches of running speech (Field, 2005). Rhythm and focus alert the listener to what is relatively more important in utterances. And recognizing the more common sound changes in connected speech will improve students' ability to understand authentic spoken English outside of the classroom.

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