In the first lecture we noted that consonants have allophones or different versions of the phonemes (basic speech sounds of a given language). For example, the phoneme /p/ in English is actually pronounced in three different ways: as an aspirated /p/ or [pʰ] as in “pot”, as an unaspirated /p/ or [p] as in “spot”, or as an unreleased /p/ or [p] as in “stop” (sometimes). In fact, all speech is made up of allophones, and these are recognised as the more limited number of phonemes of a given language by the linguistic mechanisms of the mind. A native speaker of English hears [pʰ], [p] and [p] as same sound—the phoneme /p/, even though he unconsciously knows how to pronounce the different allophones in the right places when speaking. A Chinese, however, will hear [pʰ] and [p] as different sounds, because in Mandarin they are two different phoemes (/p/ and / pʰ/) and used to differentiate between different words.

Now, this phenomenon of allophones occurs among vowels too. For example, take the word “gradation”. A dictionary (which uses a phonemic, not phonetic, transcription system) would write this /grei ˈdeɪʃan/. But in fact there is a different allophone of the phoneme /ei/ (“long a”) in the first syllable, which is weaker and shorter than the full form in the second syllable, where the primary accent is. If we write it phonetically, i.e. writing the allophones, it will be: [gre ˈdeɪʃan]. This [e] is a closed e, as in the French “ê” in “café”.

But if we pronounce this word a bit quickly, it may have another pronunciation again: [ɡrə ˈdeɪʃan], with a shwa in the first syllable. Thus the phoneme /ei/ has three allophones in English: [ei], [e] and [ɛ]. The shwa, however, may be an allophone in this sense of all the vowels, and it is also an independent English phoneme.

In English vowels in syllables which have primary or secondary stress tend to be stronger, clearer and longer, and those in unaccented syllables tend to be “reduced”, that is, they are closer to the neutral sound of a shwa or they even vanish completely together with their syllable. We can see the theoretically reconstructed strong sounds of vowels through styding language families, where the accents may be on different syllables. For example:

- photograph /ˈfɔutə ɡræf/  
- photographic /ˈfɔutə ˈɡræfi k/  
- photography /ˈfɔti ˈɡræfi/  
- photographer /ˈfɔti ˈɡræfiə/  

We could think of an imaginary unreduced form /ˈfɔutə ɡræf/ and say that all of the weaker allophones of the words of have been historically reduced, or we might say that they are structurally reduced because they are in unaccented syllables. Reciprocally, it might be said that the syllables are unaccented partly because they have reduced vowels! The two go together naturally in English, although there are exceptions.

This is important because of the phenomenon called lento and allegro English. This simply means slow and fast English, respectively, and it is not news to anybody that one can pronounce any language slow or fast. However, in English the difference is especially significant, because rather than simply try to cram the same sequence of sounds into a shorter time when wanting to speed up, as perhaps Polish or Italian might do, English achieves much of its speed by weakening more syllables in its allegro form than in its lento form, and this involves reducing their vowels, and if the vowel is already very obscure, perhaps even omitting the syllable where convenient. Weak syllables and reduced vowels are naturally said more quickly.

For example, English has inherited the word ‘ɪstɔriə/ histɔriːə/ from Greek through Latin historia /his ˈtoriə/. Between those two languages there was a movement of the accent from the next to the last syllable to the third syllable from the end. Both have a strong o-sound in the second syllable. However, in English we moved the accent forward again to the first syllable: history /ˈhistəri, so the o-sound has been structurally reduced to shwa, and can never be pronounced as any more characteristic allophone of /ou/ (although in the related word “story” it is the dominant vowel, being accented).

However, that all relates to the lento pronunciation, which we almost never use. In normal, everyday allegro English, this word is pronounced /ˈhistri/ – which has now become a two-syllable word. This is very common phenomenon. Family”, “evening” and “company”, for example, are all pronounced as two-syllable words in normal allegro English. But even if a syllable is not dropped, its vowel may be reduced, and you should know what the reduced forms are and not be afraid to pronounce them that way. In fact, that is one of the most important things in acquiring a natural pronunciation and rhythm in
English – learn how to weaken your syllables and simultaneously reduce your vowels properly for your speaking speed. Being too clear is not a virtue in English.

So, to sum up, remember that English spelling reflects fully-realised forms of vowels, their strong and clear forms, or even their pronunciation in other languages. In the lento forms you find in a dictionary, there have already been many reductions of the vowels in less-accented syllables through a historical process of transformation which established the stress structures of these words. When a speaker decides to speak at normal, allegro, speed, he may again destress certain vowels and as a part of that process reduce their vowels.

These considerations can also influence the relative sounds of British and American words. Consider, for example, the word “laboratory”. In British English the primary stress is on the second syllable, so the allegro pronunciation is /ləˈboʊrətri/, while in American English the primary accent is on the first syllable, with a secondary accent on the third syllable: /ˈæbrəˌtouri/.

© 2007 Bradius V. Maurus III