

Focusing on Focus

ACCENT ACQUISITION PRINCIPLE: Phrase & Sentence “Meaning Focus”

PART ONE

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 is 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 is *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 a talk or 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 textbook *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) and in workshops and handouts.

Speaker A: Which language do you like the BEST?

Speaker B: I'd prefer ENGLISH—if I could MASTER it.

Speaker A: Why is 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 ´ 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 a talk, any word can be the focus, depending on what the speakers want to emphasize. Often, the focus of meaning is new or contrasting information, or an item that shows a speaker's disagreement with previous information. The voice gives extra strong emphasis to this focus word, which is also the "jump up point." In this sample conversation, there is 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 conversation 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.



Rule 3 = Meaning Focus on Function Words. More often than not, it is a *content* word (a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb) that carries the main meaning focus—and therefore, the strongest stress or emphasis, of a phrase or sentence. Occasionally, however, it is a *function* word that the speaker wants to emphasize. Some kinds of function (structure) words are personal pronouns (*he, she, it, them,* etc.), auxiliary or modal verbs (*is, are, has, can, will,* etc.), prepositions (*to, in, at, with, about,* etc.), conjunctions (*and, or, because,* etc.), and the negative word *not*. In the following conversation, some of the meaning focus points are function words. The syllable with the strongest stress in each phrase or sentence appears in CAPITAL LETTERS. (Notes of explanation follow in parentheses.)

Speaker A: I KNOW you've never gone to a rock concert. (*The auxiliary verb have is part of the unstressed contraction you've.*)



Speaker B: I certainly HAVE been to rock concerts. (*The auxiliary verb have is the focus point of the sentence. That's because the speaker disagrees with what was said before.*)

Speaker A: Then we'll go to one toNIGHT. (*The auxiliary verb will is part of the unstressed contraction we'll.*)

Speaker B: We WILL? What do you mean, WE? Maybe YOU want to, but I don't. (*The modal verb will—and the personal pronouns we, you, and I—are all emphasized to show disagreement.*)

Speaker A: How can I go to a concert by mySELF? (*The modal verb can is unstressed. So is the preposition to.*)

Speaker B: You CAN go alone, you know. (*For extra emphasis, the modal verb can is the stressed focus word.*)

Speaker A: Well, maybe I can go TO the performance alone, but how do I get back FROM the concert hall? (*The modal verb can is again unstressed, but the prepositions to and from are stressed to show contrast. The conjunction but is unstressed.*)

Speaker B: In MY opinion, you can get there AND back on your own. (*As usual, the modal verb can, the personal pronoun you, and the possessive adjective your are unstressed. The pronoun my and the conjunction and are stressed for emphasis.*)

Speaker A: You're saying that because you'd prefer a MOVIE! (*As usual, the personal pronoun you is unstressed. The auxiliary verb are—and the modal verb would—are parts of the unstressed contractions you're, you'd, and aren't.*)

Speaker B: I AM not. I'm saying it because I WOULDn't like to go out—to a concert OR a movie! (*To show disagreement, these words have extra stress: the auxiliary verb am, and the conjunction or. The other function words are unstressed.*)



EXERCISE 3—MEANING FOCUS ON FUNCTION WORDS. Listen and repeat the following conversation. Highlight or mark the most strongly emphasized focus point in each phrase or sentence. Many of them will be function words. Then compare your answers to those suggested in the Answer Key at the end of this ACCENT ACTIVITIES Pronunciation Supplement. Finally, practice the conversation with a partner and/or “perform” it for the class or whole group. Your listeners will comment on your choices of meaning points—and your “speech music.” Perhaps they can make suggestions for improvement in clarity.



Speaker A: What's your favorite kind of movie?

Speaker B: I don't know. What's your favorite kind?

Speaker A: Hey! I asked you first.

Speaker B: Well, I guess I like horror films. But not when I'm alone. And not on stormy nights. And only classics. I can't watch those horrible new slasher movies.

Speaker A: So you absolutely won't go to a film with senseless violence and no plot.

Speaker B: Well, I guess I might have seen one or two like that. But I did not enjoy them.

Speaker A: They're showing one at that new theater near the shopping mall on Broadway.

Speaker B: The new theater isn't near the shopping mall. It's in it. And the mall isn't on Broadway. It's around the corner.

Speaker A: O.K., O.K. Let me make sure I got it. If there is a scary film at the theater, you're not going.

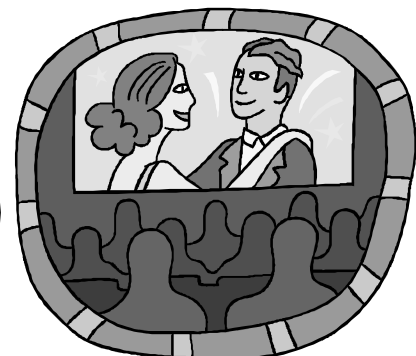
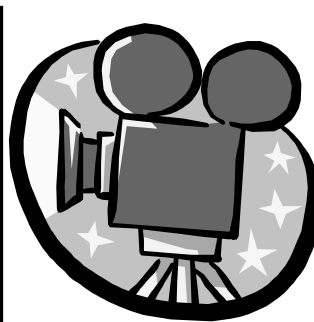
Speaker B: Correct. So what kinds of movies do you prefer?

Speaker A: Oh, I could see a horror film or a crime drama or a comedy or a love story or a documentary or...

Speaker B: All right already. I get it. You aren't so picky. At least not as choosy as I am.

Speaker A: I suppose my favorite kind of movie is an adventure story.

Speaker B: I guess I don't mind those. If there's some dialog in the movie. If it wasn't made for children. If it's not too violent. If it has a point. If....



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

Here are some sample exchanges based on “Open-Ended Questions” (question that stimulate thought and provoke discussion) and answers. The responses are “Short Talk Answers,” interesting or amusing mini-speeches on the topic.

For each exchange, work with a partner. With a natural-sounding, easily-comprehensible accent, practice each question-and-answer pair by reading it aloud—or by paraphrasing the ideas in your own words. Be sure to add extra stress or emphasis to the syllable in CAPITAL LETTERS in each phrase or sentence. Then jump up in pitch at that point, gliding down on that syllable or stepping down on the following ones. In this way, you will 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 focus points, change them to show what YOU think should be most strongly emphasized. You can highlight or otherwise mark the one syllable in each phrase or sentence that YOU think is the most important one to stress. When you read aloud or paraphrase each exchange, use your voice to clearly indicate the meaning focus points.

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



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 LEARNing English, but I’ll probably NEVER like speaking it. At least for ME, SPANish is the most beautiful language there is. It’s roMANTic, not businesslike. Why do we use more words in SPANish 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 compreHENSion. I can READ English all right because I can look up new words in the DICTIONary. WRITing’s not so bad because the grammar isn’t that COMplicated. Anyway, there’s plenty of TIME for writing. Not so with LISTening, however. It seems I can’t listen FAST enough—especially to fluent native SPEAKers. They talk so QUICKly. 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. Hmm. 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 ideas of your own. 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-sounding, easily-comprehensible accent, present your question and answer to the class or whole group in a short “mini-talk.” Be sure to emphasize the meaning focus words clearly so that your listeners will get the message you want to communicate.

Finally, to find out if you were successful in getting your ideas across, you can ask your listeners what they think your main idea was—and what important details they remember from your “short talk.” Get their reactions to your accent too, especially your choice of meaning focus points and the system of “speech music” you use to emphasize them.

Of course, you can record each “short talk” on audiotape or videotape. You can analyze the accent or pronunciation with the goal of improving its clarity and communicative effectiveness, especially the “meaning focus” feature of each developing accent.

And of course, you can repeat the same steps with “short talk” answers to other “Open-Ended Questions” for social conversation.