

Chapter 9 discussed the difference between strong and weak syllables in English. We have now moved on from looking at syllables to looking at words, and we will consider certain well-known English words that can be pronounced in two different ways; these are called **strong forms** and **weak forms**. As an example, the word ‘that’ can be pronounced ðæt (strong form) or ðət (weak form). The sentence ‘I like that’ is pronounced aɪ laɪk ðæt (strong form); the sentence ‘I hope that she will’ is pronounced aɪ həʊp ðət ʃi wɪl (weak form). There are roughly forty such words in English. It is possible to use only strong forms in speaking, and some foreigners do this. Usually they can still be understood by other speakers of English, so why is it important to learn how weak forms are used? There are two main reasons: first, most native speakers of English find an “all-strong form” pronunciation unnatural and foreign-sounding, something that most learners would wish to avoid. Second, and more importantly, speakers who are not familiar with the use of weak forms are likely to have difficulty understanding speakers who do use weak forms; since practically all native speakers of British English use them, learners of the language need to learn about these weak forms to help them to understand what they hear.

We must distinguish between weak forms and **contracted forms**. Certain English words are shortened so severely (usually to a single phoneme) and so consistently that they are represented differently in informal writing (e.g. ‘it is’ → ‘it’s’; ‘we have’ → ‘we’ve’; ‘do not’ → ‘don’t’). These contracted forms are discussed in Chapter 14, and are not included here.

Almost all the words which have both a strong and weak form belong to a category that may be called **function words** – words that do not have a dictionary meaning in the way that we normally expect nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs to have. These function words are words such as auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, etc., all of which are in certain circumstances pronounced in their strong forms but which are more frequently pronounced in their weak forms. It is important to remember that there are certain contexts where only the strong form is acceptable, and others where the weak form is the normal pronunciation. There are some fairly simple rules; we can say that the strong form is used in the following cases:

- i) For many weak-form words, when they occur at the end of a sentence; for example, the word ‘of’ has the weak form əv in the following sentence:

‘I’m fond of chips’ aɪm ˈfɒnd əv ˈtʃɪps

However, when it comes at the end of the sentence, as in the following example, it has the strong form *ðv*:

'Chips are what I'm fond of' 'tʃɪps ə 'wɒt aɪm 'fɒnd ðv

Many of the words given below (particularly 1–9) never occur at the end of a sentence (e.g. 'the', 'your'). Some words (particularly the pronouns numbered 10–14 below) do occur in their weak forms in final position.

- ii) When a weak-form word is being contrasted with another word; for example:

'The letter's *from* him, not *to* him' ðə 'letəz 'frɒm ɪm nɒt 'tu: ɪm

A similar case is what we might call a **co-ordinated** use of prepositions:

'I travel to and from London a lot' aɪ 'trævəl 'tu: ən 'frɒm 'lʌndən ə 'lɒt
'A work of and about literature' ə 'wɜ:k 'ɒv ən ə'baʊt 'lɪtrətʃə

- iii) When a weak-form word is given stress for the purpose of emphasis; for example:

'You *must* give me more money' ju 'mʌst 'gɪv mi 'mɔ: 'mʌni

- iv) When a weak-form word is being "cited" or "quoted"; for example:

'You shouldn't put "and" at the end of a sentence'
ju 'ʃʊdnt pʊt 'ænd ət ði 'end əv ə 'sentəns

Another point to remember is that when weak-form words whose spelling begins with 'h' (e.g. 'her', 'have') occur at the beginning of a sentence, the pronunciation is with initial h, even though this is usually omitted in other contexts.

⌚ AU12 (CD 2), Exs 1–4

In the rest of this chapter, the most common weak-form words will be introduced.

1 'the'

Weak forms: ðə (before consonants)
'Shut the door' 'ʃʌt ðə 'dɔ:
 ði (before vowels)
'Wait for the end' 'weɪt fə ði 'end

2 'a', 'an'

Weak forms: ə (before consonants)
'Read a book' 'ri:d ə 'bʊk
 ən (before vowels)
'Eat an apple' 'i:t ən 'æpl

3 'and'

Weak form: ən (sometimes ŋ after t, d, s, z, ʃ)
'Come and see' 'kʌm ən 'si:
'Fish and chips' 'fɪʃ ŋ 'tʃɪps

- 4 'but'
Weak form: bət
'It's good but expensive' its 'gʊd bət ɪk'spensɪv
- 5 'that'
This word only has a weak form when used in a relative clause; when used with a demonstrative sense it is always pronounced in its strong form.
Weak form: ðət
'The price is the thing that annoys me' ðə 'praɪs ɪz ðə 'θɪŋ ðət ə'nɔɪz mi
- 6 'than'
Weak form: ðən
'Better than ever' 'betə ðən 'evə
- 7 'his' (when it occurs before a noun)
Weak form: ɪz (hɪz at the beginning of a sentence)
'Take his name' 'teɪk ɪz 'neɪm
(Another sense of 'his', as in 'it was his', or 'his was late', always has the strong form)
- 8 'her'
When used with a possessive sense, preceding a noun; as an object pronoun, this can also occur at the end of a sentence.
Weak forms: ə (before consonants)
'Take her home' 'teɪk ə 'həʊm
ər (before vowels)
'Take her out' 'teɪk ər 'aʊt
- 9 'your'
Weak forms: jə (before consonants)
'Take your time' 'teɪk jə 'taɪm
jər (before vowels)
'On your own' 'ɒn jər 'əʊn
- 10 'she', 'he', 'we', 'you'
This group of pronouns has weak forms pronounced with weaker vowels than the i:, u: of their strong forms. I use the symbols i, u (in preference to ɪ, ʊ) to represent them. There is little difference in the pronunciation in different places in the sentence, except in the case of 'he'.
Weak forms:
a) 'she' ʃi
'Why did she read it?' 'waɪ dɪd ʃi 'ri:ɪd ɪt
'Who is she?' 'hu: 'ɪz ʃi
b) 'he' i (the weak form is usually pronounced without h except at the beginning of a sentence)
'Which did he choose?' 'wɪtʃ dɪd i 'tʃu:z
'He was late, wasn't he?' hi wəz 'leɪt 'wɒznt i

- c) 'we' wi
 'How can we get there?' 'haʊ kən wi 'get ðeə
 'We need that, don't we?' wi 'ni:d ðæt 'dəʊnt wi
- d) 'you' ju
 'What do you think?' 'wɒt də ju 'θɪŋk
 'You like it, do you?' ju 'laɪk ɪt 'du: ju
- 11 'him' ɪm
 Weak form: ɪm
 'Leave him alone' 'li:v ɪm ə'ləʊn
 'I've seen him' aɪv 'si:n ɪm
- 12 'her' ə (hə when sentence-initial)
 Weak form: ə (hə when sentence-initial)
 'Ask her to come' 'ɑ:sk ə tə 'kʌm
 'I've met her' aɪv 'met ə
- 13 'them' ðəm
 Weak form: ðəm
 'Leave them here' 'li:v ðəm 'hɪə
 'Eat them' 'i:t ðəm
- 14 'us' əs
 Weak form: əs
 'Write us a letter' 'raɪt əs ə 'letə
 'They invited all of us' ðeɪ ɪn'vaɪtɪd 'ɔ:l əv əs

The next group of words (some prepositions and other function words) occur in their strong forms when they are in final position in a sentence; examples of this are given. Number 19, 'to', is a partial exception.

- 15 'at' ət
 Weak form: ət
 'I'll see you at lunch' aɪl 'si: ju ət 'lʌnʃ
- In final position: æt
 'What's he shooting at?' 'wɒts ɪ 'ʃu:tɪŋ æt
- 16 'for' fə (before consonants)
 Weak form: fə (before consonants)
 'Tea for two' 'ti: fə 'tu:
 fər (before vowels)
 'Thanks for asking' 'θæŋks fər 'ɑ:skɪŋ
- In final position: fɔ:
 'What's that for?' 'wɒts 'ðæt fɔ:
- 17 'from' frəm
 Weak form: frəm
 'I'm home from work' aɪm 'həʊm frəm 'wɜ:k

In final position: frɒm
 'Here's where it came from' 'hɪəz weər ɪt 'keɪm frɒm

18 'of'

Weak form: əv
 'Most of all' 'mɔːst əv 'ɔːl

In final position: ɒv
 'Someone I've heard of' 'sʌmwʌn aɪv 'hɜːd ɒv

19 'to'

Weak forms: tə (before consonants)
 'Try to stop' 'traɪ tə 'stɒp
 tu (before vowels)
 'Time to eat' 'taɪm tu 'iːt

In final position: tu (it is not usual to use the strong form tuː; the pre-consonantal weak form tə is never used)
 'I don't want to' aɪ 'dɔːnt 'wɒnt tu

20 'as'

Weak form: əz
 'As much as possible' əz 'mʌtʃ əz 'pɒsəbəl

In final position: əz
 'That's what it was sold as' 'ðætɪz 'wɒt ɪt wəz 'səʊld əz

21 'some'

This word is used in two different ways. In one sense (typically, when it occurs before a countable noun, meaning "an unknown individual") it has the strong form:

'I think some animal broke it' aɪ 'θɪŋk sʌm 'ænɪməl 'brəʊk ɪt

It is also used before uncountable nouns (meaning "an unspecified amount of") and before other nouns in the plural (meaning "an unspecified number of"); in such uses it has the weak form səm

'Have some more tea' 'hæv səm 'mɔː 'tiː

In final position: sʌm
 'I've got some' aɪv 'gɒt sʌm

22 'there'

When this word has a demonstrative function, it always occurs in its strong form ðeə (ðeər before vowels); for example:

'There it is' 'ðeər ɪt ɪz

'Put it there' 'pʊt ɪt 'ðeə

Weak forms: ðə (before consonants)
 'There should be a rule' ðə 'ʃʊd bi ə 'ruːl
 ðər (before vowels)

'There is' ðər 'ɪz

In final position: the pronunciation may be ðə or ðeə.

'There isn't any, is there?' ðər 'ɪznt eni ɪz ðə

or ðər 'ɪznt eni ɪz ðeə

The remaining weak-form words are all auxiliary verbs, which are always used in conjunction with (or at least implying) another (“full”) verb. It is important to remember that in their negative form (i.e. combined with ‘not’) they never have the weak pronunciation, and some (e.g. ‘don’t’, ‘can’t’) have different vowels from their non-negative strong forms.

23 ‘can’, ‘could’

Weak forms: kən, kəd
 ‘They can wait’ ‘ðei kən 'weɪt
 ‘He could do it’ ‘hi: kəd 'du: ɪt
 In final position: kæn, kʊd
 ‘I think we can’ aɪ 'θɪŋk wi 'kæn
 ‘Most of them could’ 'mɔ:st əv ðəm 'kʊd

24 ‘have’, ‘has’, ‘had’

Weak forms: əv, əz, əd (with initial h in initial position)
 ‘Which have you seen?’ 'wɪtʃ əv ju 'si:n
 ‘Which has been best?’ 'wɪtʃ əz bi:n 'best
 ‘Most had gone home’ 'mɔ:st əd ɡɒn 'həʊm
 In final position: hæv, hæz, hæd
 ‘Yes, we have’ 'jes wi 'hæv
 ‘I think she has’ aɪ 'θɪŋk ʃi 'hæz
 ‘I thought we had’ aɪ 'θɔ:t wi 'hæd

25 ‘shall’, ‘should’

Weak forms: ʃəl or ʃl; ʃəd
 ‘We shall need to hurry’ wi ʃl 'ni:d tə 'hʌrɪ
 ‘I should forget it’ 'aɪ ʃəd fə'get ɪt
 In final position: ʃæl, ʃʊd
 ‘I think we shall’ aɪ 'θɪŋk wi 'ʃæl
 ‘So you should’ 'səʊ ju 'ʃʊd

26 ‘must’

This word is sometimes used with the sense of forming a conclusion or deduction (e.g. ‘she left at eight o’clock, so she must have arrived by now’); when ‘must’ is used in this way, it is less likely to occur in its weak form than when it is being used in its more familiar sense of obligation.

Weak forms: məs (before consonants)
 ‘You must try harder’ ju məs 'traɪ 'hɑ:də
 məst (before vowels)
 ‘He must eat more’ hi məst 'i:t 'mɔ:
 In final position: məst
 ‘She certainly must’ ʃi 'sɜ:tɪnli 'məst

27 ‘do’, ‘does’

Weak forms:
 ‘do’ də (before consonants)
 ‘Why do they like it?’ 'wai də ðei 'laɪk ɪt

- du (before vowels)
 'Why do all the cars stop?' 'waɪ du 'ɔ:l ðə 'kɑ:z 'stɒp
 'does' dəz
 'When does it arrive?' 'wen dəz ɪt ə'raɪv
 In final position: du:, dʌz
 'We don't smoke, but some people do' 'wi: dəʊnt 'sməʊk bət
 'sʌm pi:pəl 'du:
 'I think John does' aɪ 'θɪŋk 'dʒɒn dʌz
- 28 'am', 'are', 'was', 'were'
 Weak forms: əm
 'Why am I here?' 'waɪ əm aɪ 'hɪə
 ə (before consonants)
 'Here are the plates' 'hɪər ə ðə 'pleɪts
 ər (before vowels)
 'The coats are in there' ðə 'kəʊts ər ɪn 'ðeə
 wəz
 'He was here a minute ago' hi wəz 'hɪər ə 'mɪnɪt ə'gəʊ
 wə (before consonants)
 'The papers were late' ðə 'peɪpəz wə 'leɪt
 wər (before vowels)
 'The questions were easy' ðə 'kwɛstʃənz wər 'i:zi
 In final position: æm, ɑ:, wɒz, wɜ:
 'She's not as old as I am' ʃɪz 'nɒt əz 'əʊld əz 'aɪ æm
 'I know the Smiths are' aɪ 'nəʊ ðə 'smɪθs ɑ:
 'The last record was' ðə 'lɑ:st 'rekɔ:d wɒz
 'They weren't as cold as we were' ðeɪ 'wɜ:nt əz 'kəʊld əz
 'wi: wɜ:

Notes on problems and further reading

This chapter is almost entirely practical. All books about English pronunciation devote a lot of attention to weak forms. Some of them give a great deal of importance to using these forms, but do not stress the importance of also knowing when to use the strong forms, something which I feel is very important; see Hewings (2007: 48–9). There is a very detailed study of English weak forms in Obendorfer (1998).

Written exercise

In the following sentences, the transcription for the weak-form words is left blank. Fill in the blanks, taking care to use the appropriate form (weak or strong).

- 1 I want her to park that car over there.
 aɪ wɒnt pɑ:k kɑ:r əʊvə

- 2 Of all the proposals, the one that you made is the silliest.
 ɔ:l prəpəʊzɪz wʌn meɪd ɪz sɪliəst
- 3 Jane and Bill could have driven them to and from the party.
 dʒeɪn bɪl ɪd ɪv ɒn drɪvŋ ðəm tə ʌnd frəm ðə pɑ:ti
- 4 To come to the point, what shall we do for the rest of the week?
 kʌm tə ðə pɔɪnt wɒt ʃəl weɪ dʊ fɔ: ðə rest ɒv ðə wɪ:k
- 5 Has anyone got an idea where it came from?
 ɛniwʌn gɒt ən aɪdɪə weə ɪt keɪm
- 6 Pedestrians must always use the crossings provided.
 pədestriənz mʌst əlweɪz ju:z kɹɒsɪŋz prəvaɪdɪd
- 7 Each one was a perfect example of the art that had been developed there.
 i:tʃ wʌn pɜ:fɪkt ɪgzɑ:mpəl ɑ:t bi:n dɪveləpt