

12 Weak forms

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, which 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 wil (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; firstly, most native speakers of English find an "all-strong-form" pronunciation unnatural and foreign-sounding, something that most learners would wish to avoid. Secondly, 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 a later chapter, 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 'fɒnd əv 'tʃɪps

but when it comes at the end of the sentence, as in the following example, it has the strong form ɒv:

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

Many of the words given below (particularly the first nine) 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, e.g.:

'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 'træv| '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, e.g.:

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

- iv) When a weak-form word is being 'cited' or 'quoted', e.g.:

'You shouldn't put "and" at the end of a sentence'

ju 'ʃʊdn̩t pʊt 'ænd ət ði 'end əv ə 'sentəns

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 'æpl̩

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
iks'pensɪv
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'noɪz 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 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 ə '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: and u: of their strong forms. I will use the symbols i and u (in preference to ɪ and 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:
'SHE' ʃi
'Why did she read it?' 'waɪ dɪd ʃi 'ri:d ɪt
'Who is she?' 'hu: 'ɪz ʃi
'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

- 'WE' wi
'How can we get there?' 'haʊ kən wi 'get ðeə
'We need that, don't we?' wi 'ni:d ðæt 'dəʊnt wi
- 'YOU' ju
'What do you think?' 'wɒt də ju 'θɪŋk
'You like it, do you?' ju 'laɪk ɪt 'du: ju
11. 'HIM'
Weak form: ɪm
'Leave him alone' 'li:v ɪm ə'ləʊn
'I've seen him' aɪv 'si:n ɪm
12. 'HER'
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'
Weak form: ðəm
'Leave them here' 'li:v ðəm 'hɪə
'Eat them' 'i:t ðəm
14. 'US'
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 final in a sentence; examples of this are given. (19 is a partial exception.)
15. 'AT'
Weak form: ət
'I'll see you at lunch' aɪl 'si: ju ət
'lʌŋʃ
In final position: æt
'What's he shooting at?' 'wɒts ɪ
'ʃu:tɪŋ æt
16. 'FOR'
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'
Weak form: frəm
'I'm home from work' aɪm 'həʊm frəm
'wɜ:k

In final position: **frɒm**

'Here's where it came from' 'hɪəz
wɛər ɪt 'keɪm frɒm

18. 'OF'

Weak form: **əv**

'Most of all' 'mɒst əv 'ɔ:l

In final position: **ɒv**

'Someone I've heard of' 'sʌmwʌn əv
'hɜ:d əv

19. 'TO'

Weak forms: **tə** (before consonants)

'Try to stop' 'traɪ tə 'stɒp

tu (before vowels)

'Time to eat' 'taɪm tu 'i:t

In final position: **tu** (It is not usual to use the strong form **tu:**, and the pre-consonantal weak form **tə** is never used.)

'I don't want to' aɪ 'dʌʊnt 'wɒnt tu

20. 'AS'

Weak form: **əz**

'As much as possible' əz 'mʌtʃ əz
'pɒsɪbəl

In final position: **æz**

'That's what it was sold as' 'ðætɪz
'wɒt ɪt wəz 'sɔ:ld æz

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 'ænɪml
'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 'mɔ: 'ti:

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), e.g.

'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 'ru:l

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 enɪ 'ɪz ðə
or ðər 'ɪznt enɪ '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' 'ðeɪ 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' 'mɒst 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' 'mɒst əd 'gɒn
'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
'hʌri

'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 8 o'clock, so she must have arrived by now'; when 'must' is used in this way, it is rather less

likely to occur in its weak form than when it is being used in its more familiar sense of "obligation".

Weak forms: mæs (before consonants)

'You must try harder' ju mæs 'traɪ 'hɑ:də

mæst (before vowels)

'He must eat more' hi mæst 'i:t 'mɔ:

In final position: mʌst

'She certainly must' ʃi 'sɜ:tɪnli 'mʌst

27. 'DO', 'DOES'

Weak forms:

'DO' də (before consonants)

'Why do they like it?' 'waɪ də ðeɪ

'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' 'hɪə ə ðə 'plets

ər (before vowels)

'The coats are in there' ðə 'kəʊts ər

ɪn 'ðeə

wəz 'He was here a minute ago' hi wəz

'hɪə 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: əm, ɑ:, wɒz, wɜ:

'She's not as old as I am' ʃiz 'nɒt

əz 'əʊld əz 'aɪ əm

'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 these words. Some of them give a great deal of importance to using weak forms, but do not stress the importance of also knowing when to use the strong forms, something which I feel is very important. See Mortimer (1984).

Written exercises

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.

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 sɪliəst
3. Jane and Bill could have driven them to and from the party.
dʒeɪn bɪl draɪvən pɑ:ti
4. To come to the point, what shall we do for the rest of the week?
kʌm pɔɪnt wɒt rest wi:k
5. Has anyone got an idea where it came from?
eniwʌn gɒt aɪdɪə weər ɪt keɪm
6. Pedestrians must always use the crossings provided for them.
pədestriənz ɔ:lweɪz ju:z krosɪŋz prəvɪədɪd
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