

Chapter 8: The Syllable

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WHAT IS IT?

- The syllable is the basic unit of speech studied in both the phonetic and phonological levels of analysis.
- **Phonetically** (i.e. in relation to the way we produce them and the way they sound), syllables are usually described as consisting of a centre which has little or no obstruction to airflow and which sounds comparatively loud; before and after this centre (i.e. at the beginning and end of the syllable), there will be greater obstruction to airflow and/or less loud sound.

Some examples :

- i) A **minimum syllable** is a single vowel in isolation. It is preceded and followed by silence.
'are' **ɑ:**, 'or' **ɔ:**, 'err' **ɛ:**)
- ii) Some syllables have an **onset** - that is, instead of silence, they have one or more consonants preceding the centre of the syllable:
'bar' **bɑ:** 'key' **ki:** 'more' **mɔ:**
- iii) Syllables may have no onset but have a **coda** - that is, they end with one or more consonants:
'am' **æm** 'ought' **ɔ:t** 'ease' **i:z**
- iv) Some syllables have both **onset** and **coda**:
'ran' **ræn** 'sat' **sæt** 'fill' **fil**

Looking at syllables from the **phonological** point of view is quite different. What this involves is looking at the possible combinations of English phonemes; the study of the possible phoneme combinations of a language is called ***phonotactics***.

The structure of the English syllable

- If the first syllable of the word in question begins with a vowel (any vowel may occur, though **ʊ** is rare) we say that this initial syllable has a **zero onset**.
- If the syllable begins with one consonant, that initial consonant may be any consonant phoneme except **ŋ ; ʒ** is rare.
- When we have two or more consonants together we call them a **consonant cluster**.

- Initial two-consonant clusters are of **two sorts** in English.

1- **s** followed by one of a small set of consonants.

e.g. 'sting' **stɪŋ** , 'sway' **swɛɪ** , 'smoke' **sməʊk**.

The **s** in these clusters is called the **pre-initial** consonant and the other consonant (**t**, **w**, **m** in the above examples) the **initial** consonant .

2- The other sort begins with one of a set of about fifteen consonants, followed by one of the set **l**, **r**, **w**, **j**

e.g. 'play' **pleɪ**, 'try' **traɪ**, 'quick' **kwɪk**, 'few' **fjuː**.

We call the first consonant of these clusters the **initial** consonant and the second the **post-initial**.

- Initial three-consonant clusters:
e.g. 'split' **spl**it, 'stream' **str**i:m, 'square' **skw**eə

The **s** is the **pre-initial** consonant, the **p**, **t**, **k** that follow **s** in the three example words are the **initial** consonant and the **l**, **r**, **w** are **post-initial**.



Final Consonant Clusters

- If there is no final consonant we say that there is a **zero coda**.

e.g. 'blue' **blu:**

- When there is one consonant only, this is called the **final** consonant. Any consonant may be a final consonant except **h, w, j**

e.g. 'black' **blæk**



two-consonant final clusters

- There are two sorts:
- First, **final** consonant preceded by a **pre-final** consonant.
The pre-final consonants form a small set: **m, n, ŋ, l, s**
e.g. 'bump' **bʌmp**, 'bent' **bent**, 'bank' **bæŋk**, 'belt' **belt**,
'ask' **ɑːsk**.
- Second, a **final** consonant followed by a **post-final** consonant.
The post-final consonants also form a small set: **s, z, t, d, θ**.
e.g. 'bets' **bets**, 'beds' **bedz**, 'backed' **bækt**, 'bagged' **bægd**,
'eighth' **eɪtθ**.

three-consonant final clusters

- There are two types :
- First, **pre-final** plus **final** plus **post-final**.

		Pre-final	Final	Post-final
'helped'	he	l	p	t
'banks'	bæ	ŋ	k	s
'bonds'	bʊ	n	d	z
'twelfth'	twe	l	f	θ

- Second, **final** plus **post-final 1** plus **post-final 2**. **Post-final 2** is one of **s, z, t, d, θ**.

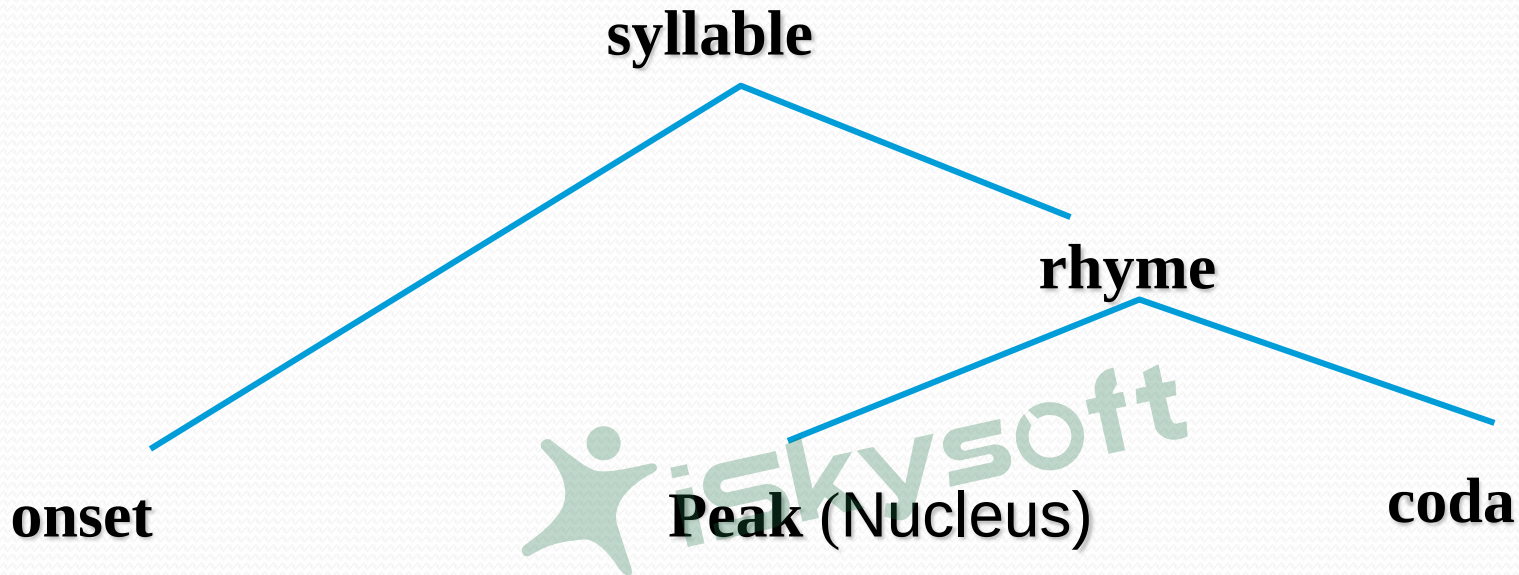
		Pre-final	Final	Post-final 1	Post-final 2
'fifths'	fɪ	-	f	θ	s
'next'	ne	-	k	s	t
'lapsed'	læ	-	p	s	t

four-consonant final clusters

- Most four-consonant clusters can be analysed as consisting of a final consonant preceded by a pre-final and followed by post-final 1 and post-final 2 as shown below:

		Pre-final	Final	Post-final 1	Post-final 2
'twelfths'	twe	l	f	θ	s
'prompts'	prɒ	m	p	t	s

The general structure of a syllable consists of the following segments:



- **Onset** {obligatory in some languages, optional or even restricted in others}
- **Rhyme**
 - **peak (Nucleus)** {obligatory in all languages}
 - **Coda** {optional in some languages, highly restricted or prohibited in others}

Syllable division

- An unanswered question is how we decide on the division between syllables when we find a connected sequence of them .
e.g. 'morning' is it **mɔː.nɪŋ** or **mɔːn.ɪŋ** ?
'extra' the possibilities are:
1- **e.kstrə** 2- **ek.strə** 3- **eks.trə** 4- **ekst.rə** 5- **ekstr.ə**
- maximal onsets principle states that where two syllables are to be divided, any consonants between them should be attached to the right-hand syllable, not the left, as far as possible. But still we have problems in some words like 'extra'.
'better' **be.tə** (impossible division **because** we never find isolated syllables ending with one of the vowels {**ɪ, e, æ, ʌ, ʊ, ʊ**} so, we can then analyse the word as **bet.ə** which seems more satisfactory.

**Thank you
for paying attention**

