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 /dæt/ (strong form) or /dət/ (weak form). The sentence ‘I like that’ is pronounced /aɪ ləɪk /dæt/ (strong form); the sentence ‘I hope that she will’ is pronounced /aɪ həʊp /dət /jɪ 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’ /aɪ m ʃænd əv /tʃɪps
However, when it comes at the end of the sentence, as in the following example, it has the strong form *d v:

‘Chips are what I’m fond of’ *ʧɪps ə ˈwɒt əɪm ˈfɒnd əv

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 *fɒm him, not to him’ ðə ˈleɪəz ˈfɒm ɪm ɒt ˈtuː ɪm

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

‘I travel to and from London a lot’ əɪ ˈtrævl ˈtuː ən ˈfɒm ˈlʌndən əˈlɔt
‘A work of and about literature’ ə ˈwɜːk əv əˈbɔːt ˈlɪtrətʃər

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

‘You *mʌst give me more money’ ju ˈmʌst ˈgɪv mi ˈmɔː ˈmæni

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 ˈʃʊdənt put ˈænd ət ðə ˈend əv ə ˈsentənz

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.

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 ˈdɔːr
ði (before vowels)
‘Wait for the end’ ˈweɪt fə ði ˈend

2 ‘a, an’

Weak forms: ə (before consonants)
‘Read a book’ ˈriːd ə ˈbʊk
ən (before vowels)
‘Eat an apple’ ɪːt ən ˈæpl

3 ‘and’

Weak form: ən (sometimes ə after t, d, s, z, ʃ)
‘Come and see’ ˈkɒm ən ˈsiː
‘Fish and chips’ ˈfɪʃ ənˈtʃɪps
4 ‘but’
Weak form: բոտ
‘It’s good but expensive’ իթs գուդ բոտ իկ’sպենսիվ

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: դոտ
‘The price is the thing that annoys me’ դու պրաիզ իզ դու թուն
don դու ա’նկազ մի

6 ‘than’
Weak form: դեն
‘Better than ever’ բետե դեն եվե

7 ‘his’ (when it occurs before a noun)
Weak form: իզ (իզ at the beginning of a sentence)
‘Take his name’ տեյկ իզ նեյմ
(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: ա (before consonants)
‘Take her home’ տեյկ ա հուամ
եր (before vowels)
‘Take her out’ տեյկ եր աուտ

9 ‘your’
Weak forms: յա (before consonants)
‘Take your time’ տեյկ յա թայմ
յոր (before vowels)
‘On your own’ յուն յոր յուն

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 i, u) 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’ ջի
‘Why did she read it?’ վաու դիդ ջի ռիիդ իտ
‘Who is she?’ հու: իզ Ջի

b) ‘he’ ի (the weak form is usually pronounced without h except at the beginning of a sentence)
‘Which did he choose?’ աթջ դիդ ի թջւ:զ
‘He was late, wasn’t he?’ իի վազ ’լեյտ վանզթ ի
c) ‘we’
   wi
   ‘How can we get there?’ ‘hɑːʊ kən wi ˈget ˈdeə
   ‘We need that, don’t we?’ wi ˈniːd ˈdeət ˈdəʊnt wi

d) ‘you’
   ju
   ‘What do you think?’ ‘wɒt də ju ‘θɪŋk
   ‘You like it, do you?’ ju ‘ləɪk ōt ‘duː jʊ

11 ‘him’
   Weak form: im
   ‘Leave him alone’ ‘laiːm ‘ləʊn
   ‘I’ve seen him’ aɪv ‘siːn ‘ləm

12 ‘her’
   Weak form: ə (hə when sentence-initial)
   ‘Ask her to come’ ‘ɑːsk ə tə ‘kæm
   ‘I’ve met her’ aɪv ‘mɛt ə

13 ‘them’
   Weak form: ðəm
   ‘Leave them here’ ‘liːv ðəm ‘hɪə
   ‘Eat them’ ‘iːt ðəm

14 ‘us’
   Weak form: əs
   ‘Write us a letter’ ‘rɛɪt əs ə ‘letə
   ‘They invited all of us’ dɪ ɪnˈvɪt id ‘əl 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’
   Weak form: ət
   ‘I’ll see you at lunch’ əl ˈsiː ju ət ‘lʌŋʃ
   In final position: æt
   ‘What’s he shooting at?’ ‘wɒts ɪ ˈʃuːtɪŋ æt

16 ‘for’
   Weak form: fə (before consonants)
   ‘Tea for two’ ‘tiː fə ˈtuː
   fər (before vowels)
   ‘Thanks for asking’ ‘θæŋks fər ‘ɑːskɪŋ
   In final position: fə:
   ‘What’s that for?’ ‘wɒts ˈdæt fə:

17 ‘from’
   Weak form: frəm
   ‘I’m home from work’ aɪm ‘həʊm frəm ‘wɜːk
In final position: from
‘Here’s where it came from’ ‘hĩəz weər it ‘kəim from

18 ‘of’
Weak form: əv
‘Most of all’ ’məəst əv ‘ɔːl
In final position: əv
‘Someone I’ve heard of’ ’səmwaŋ aiv ‘hɜːd aʊv

19 ‘to’
Weak forms: tə (before consonants)
‘Try to stop’ ’trai tə ’stɒp
tu (before vowels)
‘Time to eat’ ’tæm tu ’tɜːt
In final position: tu (it is not usual to use the strong form tu;; the
pre-consonantal weak form tə is never used)
‘I don’t want to’ at ’dəʊnt ’wɒnt tu

20 ‘as’
Weak form: əz
‘As much as possible’ əz ’mætʃ əz ’pəʊsəbəl
In final position: əz
‘That’s what it was sold as’ ’dæts ’wɒt it wəz ’səuld 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’ at ’θɪŋk səm ’ænɪməl ’b्रəʊk it
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’ ’həv səm ’mɔː ’tɪː
In final position: səm
‘I’ve got some’ aiv ’ɡɒt səm

22 ‘there’
When this word has a demonstrative function, it always occurs in its strong form
ðə (ðər before vowels); for example:
‘There it is’ ’ðər it ɪz
‘Put it there’ ’pʊt it ’ðə
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 ðə.
‘There isn’t any, is there?’ ðər ’ɪzət eni ɪz ðə
or ðər ’ɪzət eni ɪz ðə
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: kæn, kəd
‘They can wait’ ˈðeɪ kæn ˈweɪt
‘He could do it’ ˈhiː kəd ˈduː ɪt
In final position: kæn, kəd
‘I think we can’ əɪ ˈθɪŋk wi ˈkæn
‘Most of them could’ ˈmɔːst əv ˈdəm ˈkəd

24 ‘have,’ 'has,’ 'had'
Weak forms: əv, əz, əd (with initial h in initial position)
‘Which have you seen?’ ˈwɪtʃ əv ju ˈsiːn
‘Which has best? ’wɪtʃ əz ˈbɪst
‘Most had gone home’ ˈmɔːst əd ˈɡɑn ˈhæm
In final position: hæv, hæz, hæd
‘Yes, we have’ ˈjɛs wi ˈhæv
‘I think she has’ əɪ ˈθɪŋk ʃi ˈhæz
‘I thought we had’ əɪ ˈθɔːt wi ˈhæd

25 ‘shall,’ 'should'
Weak forms: ʃɔl or ʃ]; ʃəd
‘We shall need to hurry’ wi ʃɪ ˈniːd tə ˈhʌri
‘I should forget it’ əɪ ʃəd ʃəˈget ɪt
In final position: ʃɔl, ʃəd
‘I think we shall’ əɪ ˈθɪŋk wi ˈʃɔl
‘So you should’ ˈsɔʊ ju ˈʃəd

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: mɔs (before consonants)
‘You must try harder’ ju mɔs ˈtraɪ ˈhɑːdə
məst (before vowels)
‘He must eat more’ hi məst ˈɪt ˈmɔː;
In final position: məst
‘She certainly must’ ʃi ˈsɜːtɪli ˈməst

27 ‘do,’ 'does'
Weak forms:
‘do’ ɗə (before consonants)
‘Why do they like it?’ ˈwʌɪ ɗə ˈðeɪ ˈlɑɪk ɪt
du (before vowels)

'Why do all the cars stop?' 'wai du 'ɔːl ə ðə 'kærz 'stop

'does'

dəz

'When does it arrive?' 'wɛn dəz it ə'raɪv

In final position: dəʊ, dəz

'We don’t smoke, but some people do' 'wi: əʊnt 'smɔʊk bət

'sæm pi:p| 'du:

'I think John does' ai 'θɪŋk 'dʒɔn dəz

28 'am', 'are', 'was', 'were'

Weak forms:

əm

'Why am I here?' 'wai əm ai 'hɪə

ə (before consonants)

'Here are the plates' 'hɪə ə ə ðə 'pleɪts

ər (before vowels)

'The coats are in there' ðə 'kəʊts ər ðən 'ðɪə

wəz

'He was here a minute ago' hi wəz 'hɪər ə 'mɪnɪt ə'gəʊ

wə (before consonants)

'The papers were late' ðə 'pɛəpəz wə 'lɛt

wər (before vowels)

'The questions were easy' ðə 'kwɛstʃənz wər 'iːzi

In final position: æm, əː, wəz, wəː

'She's not as old as I am' ʃɪz 'nɔt əz 'əʊld əz 'ai æm

'I know the Smiths are' əɪ 'nɔʊ ðə 'smɪθs ə:

'The last record was' ðə 'lɑːst 'rɛkɔrd wəz

'They weren't as cold as we were' ðet 'wənt əz 'kɔʊld əz

'wiː wəː\n
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.

   ai ɒwənt  pærk  kærəʊvə
2 Of all the proposals, the one that you made is the silliest.
   òl præpəuzlz wən məd ɪz sɪliəst
3 Jane and Bill could have driven them to and from the party.
   dʒiən bɪl draɪŋ pətɪ
4 To come to the point, what shall we do for the rest of the week?
   kæm pɔɪnt wət rɛst wɪ:k
5 Has anyone got an idea where it came from?
   ɛnɪwən gɔt əɪdiə wɛər ɪt kɛm
6 Pedestrians must always use the crossings provided.
   pədɛstrɪənz ðəlweɪz juːz krosɪŋ prəvərid
7 Each one was a perfect example of the art that had been
dɪvələpt