

## 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. We will now 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 ʃɪ 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 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**

However, 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; 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 'trævl̩ 'tu: ən 'frɒm 'lʌndən ə 'lɒt**

‘A work of and about literature’ **ə 'wɜ:k 'ɒv ən ə'baʊt 'lɪtrɪtʃə**

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

‘You *must* give me more money’ **ju 'mʌst 'grɪv 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 'ʃʊdn̩t 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. 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 'dɔː  
**ði** (before vowels)  
 'Wait for the end' 'weɪt fə ði 'end
- 2 'a', 'an'
 

Weak forms: **ə** (before consonants)  
 'Read a book' 'riːd ə 'bʊk  
**ən** (before vowels)  
 'Eat an apple' 'iːt ən 'æpl̩
- 3 'and'
 

Weak form: **ən** (sometimes **n** after t, d, s, z, ʃ)  
 'Come and see' 'kʌm ən 'siː  
 'Fish and chips' 'fɪʃ n̩ 'tʃɪps
- 4 'but'
 

Weak form: **bət**  
 'It's good but expensive' 'ɪts '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 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 **ɪ** and **ʊ** of their strong forms. I 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:

  - a) 'she' **ʃi**  
 'Why did she read it?' 'waɪ dɪd ʃi 'riːd ɪt  
 'Who is she?' 'huː '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 'tʃuːz  
 'He was late, wasn't he?' hi wəz 'leɪt 'wɒzn̩t i
  - c) 'we' **wi**  
 'How can we get there?' 'haʊ kən wi 'get ðeə  
 'We need that, don't we?' wi 'niːd ðæt 'dɒnt wi
  - d) 'you' **ju**  
 'What do you think?' 'wɒt də ju 'θɪŋk  
 'You like it, do you?' ju 'laɪk ɪt 'duː ju

- 11 'him'  
Weak form: **ɪm**  
'Leave him alone' 'li:v **ɪm** ə'ləʊn  
'I've seen him' aɪv 'si:ɪn **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** 'hiə  
'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. (Example 19 is a partial exception.)
- 15 'at'  
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'  
Weak form: **fə** (before consonants)  
'Tea for two' 'ti: **fə** 'tu:  
**fɔ:** (before vowels)  
'Thanks for asking' 'θæŋks **fɔ:** 'ɑ:skɪŋ  
In final position: **fɔ:**  
'What's that for?' 'wɒts 'ðæt **fɔ:**
- 17 'from'  
Weak form: **fɹəm**  
'I'm home from work' aɪm 'həʊm **fɹəm** 'wɜ:k  
In final position: **fɹɒm**  
'Here's where it came from' 'hiəz **wɛə** ɪt 'keɪm  
**fɹɒm**

- 18 'of'  
Weak form: **əv**  
'Most of all' 'məʊst əv 'ɔ:l  
In final position: **ɒv**  
'Someone I've heard of' 'sʌm wʌn aɪv 'hɜ:d **ɒv**
- 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 **tʊ**, and the pre-consonantal weak form **tə** is never used.)  
'I don't want to' aɪ 'dəʊnt 'wɒnt **tu**
- 20 'as'  
Weak form: **əz**  
'As much as possible' əz 'mʌtʃ əz 'pɒsəbəl  
In final position: **æz**  
'That's what it was sold as' 'ðæt s 'wɒt ɪt wəz  
'səʊld **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 'ænɪml̩ '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** 'ʃud bi ə 'ru:l  
**ðər** (before vowels)  
 'There is' **ðər** 'iz
- In final position: the pronunciation may be **ðə** or **ðeə**.  
 'There isn't any, is there?' **ðər** 'iznt eni 'iz **ðə**  
 or **ðər** 'iznt eni 'iz **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** 'wert  
 'He could do it' 'hi: **kəd** 'du: it
- In final position: **kæn, kud**  
 'I think we can' ai 'θɪŋk wi 'kæn  
 'Most of them could' 'məʊst əv ðəm **kud**
- 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' 'məʊst əd 'gɒn 'həʊm
- In final position: **hæv, hæz, hæd**  
 'Yes, we have' 'jes wi 'hæv  
 'I think she has' ai 'θɪŋk ʃi 'hæz  
 'I thought we had' ai 'θɔ:t wi 'hæd
- 25 'shall', 'should'  
 Weak forms: **ʃəl** or **ʃɪ; ʃəd**  
 'We shall need to hurry' wi ʃɪ 'ni:d tə 'hʌri  
 'I should forget it' 'ai ʃəd fə'get it
- In final position: **ʃæl, ʃəd**  
 'I think we shall' ai 'θɪŋk wi 'ʃæl  
 'So you should' 'səʊ ju 'ʃəd

- 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: **məs** (before consonants)  
 'You must try harder' ju **məs** 'traɪ 'hɑ:də  
**məst** (before vowels)  
 'He must eat more' hi **məst** 'i:t 'mɔ:ɪ
- In final position: **məst**  
 'She certainly must' ʃi 'sɜ:tnli 'məst
- 27 'do', 'does'  
 Weak forms:  
 'do' **də** (before consonants)  
 'Why do they like it?' 'wai **də** ðei 'laɪk it  
**du** (before vowels)  
 'Why do all the cars stop?' 'wai **du** ɔ:l ðə 'kɑ:z  
 'stɒp
- 'does' **dəz**  
 'When does it arrive?' 'wen **dəz** it ə'reɪv
- In final position: **du, dɪz**  
 'We don't smoke, but some people do' 'wi:  
**dəʊnt** 'sməʊk bət 'sʌm 'pi:pəl 'du:  
 'I think John does' ai 'θɪŋk 'dʒɒn **dɪz**
- 28 'am', 'are', 'was', 'were'  
 Weak forms: **əm**  
 'Why am I here?' 'wai **əm** ai 'hiə  
**ə** (before consonants)  
 'Here are the plates' 'hiə **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** hiə **ə** 'mɪnɪt  
**ə** 'gəʊ  
**wə** (before consonants)  
 'The papers were late' ðə 'peɪpəz **wə** 'leɪt  
**wər** (before vowels)

'The questions were easy' ðə 'kwɛstʃənz wə ɪzi

In final position: æm, aɪ, wɒz, wɜː

'She's not as old as I am' ʃɪz 'nɒt əz 'əʊld əz 'aɪ  
æm

'I know the Smiths are' aɪ 'nəʊ ðə 'smɪθs aɪ

'The last record was' ðə 'lɑːst 'rekɔːd wɒz

'They weren't as cold as we were' ðeɪ 'wɜːnt əz  
'kəʊld əz 'wiː wɜː

### 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 (weak or strong).

- 1 I want her to park that car over there.  
aɪ wɒnt      pɑːk      kɑː əʊvə
- 2 Of all the proposals, the one that you made is the silliest.  
ɔːl      prəpəʊzɪz      wʌn      meɪd ɪz      sɪliəst
- 3 Jane and Bill could have driven them to and from the party.  
dʒeɪn      bɪl      dɪrɪv      pɑːti
- 4 To come to the point, what shall we do for the rest of the week?  
kʌm      pɔɪnt wɒt      rest      wɪk
- 5 Has anyone got an idea where it came from?  
eniwʌn gɒt      aɪdɪə weər      ɪt keɪm
- 6 Pedestrians must always use the crossings provided.  
pədestriənz      ɔːlwaɪz juːz      krɒsɪŋz      prəvaɪdɪd
- 7 Each one was a perfect example of the art that had been developed there.  
iːtʃ wʌn      pɜːfɪkt ɪgzɑːmpəl      ɑːt      biːn  
dɪveləpt