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Feet and metrical stress

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9.1 Metrical stress: introduction

9.1.1 What are stress languages?

In stress languages, one or more syllables in each word or phrase is said to be 'more prominent' than others. 'Prominence' is not an intrinsic property of stressed syllables, but a matter of relative strength between 'stronger' and 'weaker' syllables. Most stress languages distinguish only two degrees of stress: stressed and unstressed. Yet a further distinction among stressed syllables into primary and secondary stress is common, while some languages even display a three-way distinction into primary, secondary, and tertiary stress. Here we will use the IPA conventions for stress notation. Primary stress is indicated by a superscript vertical bar before the syllable carrying it, secondary stress by a subscript vertical bar. Consider, for example, the transcription for 'designate': [ˈdɛ.zɪg.ˌneɪt].

There is no unique phonetic property corresponding to stress, although it is cross-linguistically highly common for stressed syllables to have higher pitch levels, longer duration, and greater loudness than unstressed syllables. Tones tend to be attracted to stressed syllables (see Gussenhoven Ch.11, Yip Ch.10, and de Lacy Ch.12). Yet, stress is clearly different from tone in the sense that stress does not assimilate, neither locally between adjacent syllables, nor across longer distances. Cross-linguistically, relations between segmental properties and stress are common. The vowels of stressed syllables are prone to lengthen, while those of unstressed syllables may undergo reduction. Stressed syllables tend to license a larger set of vowels than unstressed syllables.

In 'free stress' languages, word stress is lexically contrastive, resulting in minimal pairs that differ in terms of stress alone (e.g. Russian [ˈbaɡrʲit] 'to spear fish' and [baˈɡrʲit] 'to paint crimson'). In 'fixed stress' languages, stress is phonologically predictable, but a word's morphological structure may affect the location of stress. For example, suffixes may attract stress,