

DON'T STRESS OUT! BUT DO STRESS PROMINENT SYLLABLES!

Here's a word that's almost guaranteed to be in the final round of a spelling bee: suprasegmentals.

Now, before you head to Google to look up the meaning of this mouthful of a word, all you need to know is that above the level of the sound are properties called "suprasegmentals"—these include features like syllable stress and intonation.

For now, let's focus on stress. In English, we create the feeling of prominence by making a syllable relatively louder, higher in pitch, slower, and more carefully articulated. If you think of a dictionary audio clip saying a word like "specific" you can imagine the loudness and pitch rising on the "SIH" syllable... transcribed something like: spuh-SIH-fihk.

SUPRASEGMENTALS	
'	Primary stress
ˊ	Secondary stress
	ˌfounəˈtɪʃən
ː	Long eː
ˑ	Half-long eˑ
◌̥	Extra-short e̥
	Minor (foot) group
	Major (intonation) group
.	Syllable break ˌi.ækt
◌̣	Linking (absence of a break)



A WORLD OF DIFFERENCES

There is a lot of variation across world languages when it comes to stress. Some have a similar feeling of stress (loud/higher pitch) but apply that stress differently. German tends to favor the first syllable, while Spanish favors the second-to-last (penultimate) or last syllable. Native French speakers often report not having the feeling of stress. And speakers of Japanese have “pitch accents” that have different traits.

A great example of syllable-stress contrast within a language comes with comparing Indian English with American English. Since the Indian English accent tends to favor the first syllable more often than its American counterpart, the word specific in Indian English is often pronounced SPEH-sih-fihk. So you can see the shift when moving to or from the American accent (spuh-SIH-fihk). You can also see the unstressed syllables sometimes change their vowel sound to a schwa [ə].

BONUS TIP:

If you want to get really dorky, check out a [Wikipedia article](#) on “isochrony,” which discusses various rhythm-style of languages. They can be grouped as stress-timed (ex. English), syllable-timed (ex. French), or mora-timed (ex. Japanese). This deep dive into language will give you a more comprehensive understanding of a language’s *prosody*—a geeky word for speech patterns, including stress, rhythm, and melody.

