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Contexts or Environments of Occurrence of the English Sounds

The context or environment of occurrence of a sound is the position which that sound occupies in a syllable or word. English sounds can occur in the following syllable positions:

- a) Syllable-initially (or in syllable-initial-position): the sound is at the beginning (i.e., is the first sound) of a syllable.¹ For example, the sound [p] is in syllable-initial position in the following words: *Pete* [p^hi:t], *party* (par-ty) [p^hɑ:ri], *polite* (po-lite) [pə'laɪt], *apology* (a-pol-o-gy) [əp^hɒlədʒi], *repeat* (re-peat) [ri'pi:t].
- b) Syllable-finally (or in syllable-final position): the sound is the end (i.e., is the last sound) of a syllable. For example, the sound [t] is in syllable-final position in the following words: *at* [æt], *eight* [eɪt], *attic* (at-tic) ['ætɪk], *political* (po-lit-i-cal) [pə'litəkəl].
- c) Syllable-nuclearly (or in syllable-nuclear position): when a vowel sound is between two consonants. For example, the sounds [i:], [æ], and [ʊ] in the words *meet* [mi:t], *cat* [k^hæt], and *cook* [k^hʊk], respectively, occur in syllable-medial position.

Similarly, English sounds can occur in the following word positions:

- a) Word-initially (or in word-initial position): the sound is at the beginning (i.e., is the first sound) of a word. For example, the sounds [θ], [z], [w], and [j] in the words *think* [θɪŋk], *zipper* ['zɪpər], *way* [weɪ], *yes* [jes], respectively, occur in word-initial position.
- b) Word-finally (or in word-final position): the sound is at the end (i.e., is the last sound) of a word. For example, the sounds [ð], [ə], [ʔ] and [ŋ] in the words *bathe* [beɪð], *sofa* ['sɒfə], *travel* ['trævlʔ], and *question* ['kwɛstʃŋ], respectively, occur in word-final position.
- c) Word-internally (or in word-internal position): the sound is somewhere between the first and the last sounds of a word. E.g., the sounds [ʌ], [m], [p], [ə], and [n] in the word *company* ['kʌmpəni] are in word-internal position.
- d) Intervocalically (or in intervocalic position): when a consonant sound is between two vowels. For example, the sound [t] in the words *attic* and *political* occurs in intervocalic position.
- e) In contact with voiceless consonants: when a voiceless consonant is before or after a voiced consonant sound in a word or utterance. E.g., the sound [d], in the words *tadpole* ['tæd.p^həʊl]]

¹ Please do not confuse sounds with letters. Also, notice that the phonetic transcription of a word does not always coincide with its spelling.

and *birth*day [ˈbɜːrθdeɪ] and in the sentence *Jack* did *three exercises* [ˈdʒæk ˈdɪd ˈθriː ˌeksəsaɪzɪz], is in contact with a voiceless consonant.

- f) Syllable-initially after “s”: when a sound (usually a [p], [t], [k], [f], [l], [m], [n]) is preceded by the sound [s] at the beginning of a syllable (usually forming a cluster). For example, the sounds [p], [t], [k], [f], [l], [m], [n] in the words *speak* [spi:k], *steak* [steɪk], *skull* [skʌl], *sphinx* [sfɪŋks], *slave* [sleɪv], *small* [smɔːl], *snake* [sneɪk], *construct* (con-struct) [kənˈstrʌkt].

EXERCISES

I. In what syllable-positions are the following sounds?

1. /s/ in the syllable *hos-* of the word *hospital*: _____
2. /v/ in the syllable *hos-* of the word *hospital*: _____
3. /t/ in the syllable *-tal* of the word *hospital*: _____
4. /p/ in the syllable *-pi-* of the word *hospital*: _____
5. /m/ in the syllable *main-* of the word *maintain*: _____
6. /n/ in the syllable *main-* of the word *maintain*: _____
7. /v/ in the syllable *-lieve* of the word *believe*: _____
8. /i:/ in the syllable *-lieve* of the word *believe*: _____
9. /e/ in the syllable *end-* of the word *ending*: _____
10. /r/ in the syllable *read-* of the word *readable*: _____

II. In what word-positions are the following sounds?

1. /f/ in the word *life*: _____
2. /θ/ in the word *method*: _____
3. /θ/ in the word *thinker*: _____
4. /ŋ/ in the word *thing*: _____
5. /f/ in the word *phone*: _____
6. /k/ in the word *skate*: _____
7. /v/ in the word *dogs*: _____
8. /r/ in the word *marry*: _____
9. /ʌ/ in the word *under*: _____
10. /ə/ in the word *coma*: _____