

## 12.2 Stress Assignment

Native speakers of English know where to place the primary stress in individual words because for most English words such stress assignment is fairly easily predictable. Native speakers follow certain rules of stress assignment to the extent that they rarely have difficulty in correctly stressing English words. Occasionally they may apply one of the rules inappropriately but even in such cases follow stress assignment rules, however the wrong rules for the particular case. If a grammar of a language is a statement of the rules that speakers of that language follow, then we should try to state some of these stress rules in English. That is the task to which we will now turn.

English speakers usually assign primary stress as follows to words pronounced in isolation. The vowel in a monosyllabic word is always pronounced with primary stress:

*héart, fáce, gó, pléase, friénd*

A basic stress pattern for two syllable words of native stock or for words that have been thoroughly nativized is stressed syllable followed by unstressed syllable. (From this point on we will mark only the vowel carrying primary stress.)

*bróther, búilding, córner, dínnér, gárden, héaven, hónor, íron, ócean, pérsón, ríver, wéather, táble, spírit, yéllow*

This pattern is mandatory when the second syllable is an inflection or *-ly*:

*físhes, hóuses, láughing, stárted, smóother, bíggest, trúly*

Extensions of this pattern in which there are two or more unstressed syllables following the first stressed syllable can be found in words like the following:

*árticle, énemy, béautiful, dángerous, líberal, índustry*

Another basic English pattern has an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (and possibly an unstressed syllable). This pattern usually begins with what appears to be a prefix. However, this prefix is not a "live" morpheme, but is a "dead" etymological prefix:

*abóut, alíve, believe, begín, contról, contáin, deféat, detáin, excépt, expláin, forgét, forgíve, inclúde, indéed, prepáre, preténd, recéive, recórd, withstánd, withdráw*

*Understanding English Grammar  
Ronald Wardhaugh. Blackwell, 1995.*