



# They've just got that rhythm



**I**N A recent column, I wrote about the stressing of prepositions and mentioned without further explanation that one possible reason for stressed prepositions is the rhythm of speech.

Languages differ markedly from one another in their patterns of rhythm and of stress. French, for instance, tends to have evenly weighted syllables. This results in a syllable-based rhythm, sometimes and perhaps unfortunately called "machine-gun" rhythm. English, on the other hand, tends to have a rhythm that is based on an even spacing of stressed syllables, so that each stressed syllable falls, roughly, on a beat.

English also has variable numbers of unstressed syllables between the stresses, and these unstressed syllables get squished or stretched to preserve the stress-based rhythm, sometimes called "morse-code" rhythm.

Take, for example, the following sentence, in which I have used capitals to mark the syllables that are most likely to be stressed. JOHN aRRIVES in WELLington toMORrow. There is only one unstressed syllable between the first two stresses, and one between the second and the third, but three between third and fourth. If you say the sentence aloud and clap its rhythm, you are likely to find that the beats are quite regular, and that they coincide with the stressed syllables.

This means that the three unstressed syllables between the last two stresses are each pronounced more rapidly than

the earlier unstressed syllables.

Getting the rhythm right is an important aspect of how we speak a language. Surprisingly, much traditional second-language instruction tends to neglect stress patterns and speech rhythm.

More recently, though, studies have shown that, if second-language learners are encouraged to work on these properties of speech, then there can be great benefits for other aspects of their pronunciation, such as the accuracy of the vowels and consonants they produce.

**N**OT only do languages differ from one another in their rhythmic structure, but so too do varieties of a language. This has been investigated quite widely for English, often in the context of considering the influence on English of the other languages with which English speakers come into contact every day. For example, Singapore English, whose speakers also speak languages such as Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, is characterised by a rhythm that is more like the syllable-based timing of French.

The other languages spoken by the speakers of Singapore English are unlike English in not having a stress-based rhythm, and under their influence Singapore English has developed a distinctive syllable-based rhythm.

New Zealand English lies somewhere between typically stress-based varieties like British English and syllable-based varieties like Singapore English. This has been demonstrated in a number of studies looking at the types of English spoken in New Zealand.

One study looked at the pronunciation in newsreader broadcasts of short words, including "of", "at", "from", ie prepositions that have two distinct



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pronunciations. One has a full vowel (so “from” pronounced with the vowel in “dog”), and the other has a reduced vowel (the sort of vowel you might get in the second syllable of “second”).

The simple premise was that in stress-timed varieties like British English, these words will generally not be stressed and will be squished into the intervals between the stressed syllables of “content” words like nouns and verbs, and will tend to have reduced vowels.

With a more syllable-based rhythm, like Singapore English, these words are less likely to be reduced, and more full-vowel forms will be found. The finding was that New Zealand English had significantly more full-vowel realisations of these words than British English.

In addition, there was a particularly strong tendency in this direction in the

English of Maori newsreaders. There is a probable influence here of te reo Maori, which has a rhythm that is similar to a syllable-based rhythm. But this influence is probably indirect, since other studies show that features such as this rhythm are found even among speakers who are not at all fluent in Maori.

So, given that at least some varieties of English – including New Zealand English – have prepositions with full vowels because of the type of rhythm these varieties have, then it is not surprising prepositions are sometimes heard as stressed – they’ve just got that rhythm.

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