

ACCENT. In Eng., accent is the auditory prominence perceived in one syllable as compared with others in its vicinity. Accent and stress are often treated as synonymous, though some literary scholars and linguists distinguish the two terms according to a variety of criteria. Disagreements persist about the source and acoustical nature of syllabic prominence—loudness, volume, pitch, duration, or some combination of factors—but they are arguably of peripheral relevance to the understanding of accent within Eng. poetics.

The phenomena of accent vary among langs. and the poetics associated with them. The Eng. lexical contrast between *convict* as noun and as verb has no parallel in Fr. (Sp. resembles Eng. in this regard, while Finnish resembles Fr.) For Fr. speakers, stress contours are perceived on the level of the phrase or clause, and learning Eng. entails acquiring the ability to hear contrastive accent in words, just as a Japanese speaker learning Eng. must acquire the distinction between the liquids *l* and *r*. A consequence is that, while Fr. *meters count only syllables, Eng. meters conventionally also govern the number and distribution of accents.

In Eng. speech, accent operates in various ways on scales from the word (*convict*) through the sentence. As the units grow larger, accent becomes increasingly available to choice and conscious use for rhetorical emphasis. One step beyond the accents recorded in dict. is the difference between “Spanish teacher” as a compound (a person who teaches Sp.) and as a phrase (a teacher from Spain). Eng. phonology enjoins stronger accent on “Spanish” in the compound and “teacher” in the phrase.

These lexical accents and differences in accent between compounds and phrases are “hardwired” into the Eng. lang. Beyond those, speakers exercise more deliberate choice when they employ contrasting accent to create rhetorical or logical emphases that are intimately entwined with semantic context. In the opposition Chicago White Sox vs. Chicago Cubs, it is the variable rather than the fixed element that receives the accent. Consequently, the question “Are you a fan of the Chicago *Cubs*?” accords with what we know about the world of baseball, while “Are you a fan of the *Chicago* Cubs?”

implies a Cubs team from some other city. This kind of contrastive stress, so dynamic in Eng. speech, also plays a variety of important roles in the poetic manipulation of lang., perhaps esp. in how written poetry contrives to convey the rhetorical and intonational contours of speech. When a line break, for instance, encourages the reader to place an accent on some word where it would not normally be expected, the emphasis may suggest an unanticipated logical contrast. This foregrounding of accent may have rhetorical implications: “The art of losing isn’t hard to master; / so many things seem filled with the intent / to *be* lost that their loss is no disaster” (emphasis inferred; Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art”); “The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs. Porter [not Actaeon to Diana] in the spring” (T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*).

Within the specific realm of traditional Eng. metrical verse, words are treated as bearing an accent if they are short polysyllables (whose stress can be looked up in a dict.) or monosyllables that belong to an open class (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, interjection). Other syllables tend to be unstressed. Yet several factors can alter this perception. One is the kind of rhetorical force created by contrastive stress, esp. in the volatile case of pronouns. Another, more pervasive influence arises from the complex interaction between the abstract, narrowly constrained pattern of meter and the concrete, highly contingent *rhythm of the spoken words. This fundamental distinction—meter and rhythm are related similarly to “the human face” and “a human’s face”—crucially conditions how we perceive accent; it accounts for some difficulties that an unpracticed reader of metrical verse, though a native of Eng. speech, may have in locating the accents in a line.

Some of the confusion surrounding the term may be reduced if we recognize that *accent* names phenomena on two different levels of abstraction, the acoustical and the metrical. There is an analogy with phonemes. Speakers of Eng. unconsciously insert a puff of air after the *p* in *pan*, but not in *span*. The difference can be detected by using acoustic instruments or by holding a palm in front of the mouth, yet is not detected by speakers in the absence of exceptional

a primary reason for apparent ambiguities of accent in lines of Eng. verse.

See DEMOTION.

■ G. L. Trager and H. L. Smith Jr., *An Outline of English Structure* (1951); W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, "The Concept of Meter: An Exercise in Abstraction," *PMLA* 74 (1959); Brooks and Warren; Chatman, ch. 3, 4, appendix; N. Chomsky and M. Halle, *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968); M. Halle and S. J. Keyser, *English Stress* (1971); R. Vanderslice and P. Ladefoged, "Binary Suprasegmental Features and Transformational Word-Accentuation Rules," *Lang* 48 (1972); P. Kiparsky, "Stress, Syntax, and Meter," *Lang* 51 (1975); M. Liberman and A. S. Prince, "On Stress and Linguistic Rhythm," *Ling* 8 (1977); E. O. Selkirk, *Phonology and Syntax* (1984); B. Hayes, "The Prosodic Hierarchy in Meter," *Phonetics and Phonology*, ed. P. Kiparsky and G. Youmans (1989); R. Bradford, *Roman Jakobson* (1994).

C. O. HARTMAN