Chapter 8: *Suprasegmental Phonology: Stress, Rhythm, Intonation*

8.1. Stress and prominence. The phonemic (contrastive) function of stress
8.2. Free stress and fixed stress. The predictability of accentual patterns
8.3. Metric patterns
8.4 Morphological processes and stress shift
8.5. Primary and secondary stress
8.6. Weak and strong forms. Vowel reduction and delition
8.7. Rhythm
8.8. Intonational contours. Their pragmatic value

**8.5. Primary and secondary stress**

What makes the acquiring of the correct pronunciation of the English words extremely difficult for foreign speakers is that English has several degrees of word stress. All words have a primary stress, whose placement is totally unpredictable, as we have seen. In addition, long words in particular have a secondary stress (phonologists also distinguish a tertiary stress, but for the purpose of our discussion, we will just restrict our presentation to the first two types of stress). Though we are not always aware of the existence of this secondary stress its presence is clearly felt by the blocking of vowel reduction. Thus, according to the principles enounced above, we would expect all the vowels of the six-syllable word that occur in unstressed syllables (syllables 1,2,3,5,6) to be reduced to schwa. However, we notice that the vowel in the second syllable, far from being reduced to schwa is a long, tense vowel. The fact that the vowel has managed to preserve its value though primary stress doesn’t fall on that syllable is explained by the fact that the second syllable of the word bears a secondary stress that we conventionally mark by.]

We have seen how stress can play a phonemic role, contrasting lexical pairs *verb/noun*, for instance. At a more complex level stress may establish oppositions between *compounds* and *phrases*. Thus in the sequence *English teacher*, if we assign primary stress to the first word and the second word bears a weaker stress (a tertiary one, in fact) we interpret this as a compound meaning “a teacher of English”. If, however, in the same sequence, we assign primary stress to the word teacher and a secondary stress to English, we interpret this as a phrase meaning “a teacher who is English”. Without analyzing such cases in detail (they are very common) we will say that they can be accounted for in terms of stress placement rules that assign primary stress on the *left* in *compounds* and on the *right* in *noun phrases*. 