

# Distinctive Features of Stress in The French Language

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**Abstract:** This article provides a scientific analysis of the unique phonetic and prosodic characteristics of the French stress system. French differs from other languages in that stress tends to fall on syntagmatic and rhythmic units rather than on individual words. The study highlights that stress does not serve to distinguish lexical meaning in French; instead, it primarily manifests at the end of phrases and sentences and is intricately linked with intonation. The findings of this article have both theoretical and practical significance for teaching French, developing pronunciation skills, and in translation processes.

**Keywords:** French language, stress, phonetics, prosody, rhythmic group, syntagma, intonation, pronunciation.

**Introduction:** In linguistics, the study of phonetics and phonology plays a crucial role in understanding the sound system of speech, its structure, and functional mechanisms. Stress, an integral part of this system, shapes the rhythmic and melodic structure of speech and ensures logical clarity and expressiveness of thought. Through stress, important elements in speech are emphasized, and the meaning and communicative intention of sentences are determined. Therefore, the issue of stress is relevant not only from a phonetic perspective but also from the standpoints of general linguistics, psycholinguistics, and pragmatics.

Stress manifests differently in world languages, serving to differentiate lexical meaning in some languages while having grammatical or syntactic significance in others. For instance, in Russian, English, and German, the position of stress can change the meaning of a word, whereas in French, this phenomenon is rarely observed. This aspect necessitates studying the stress system in the French language as a unique and complex phenomenon. In the French stress system, the main unit is not an individual word, but a set of words - a syntagma or a rhythmic group.

Modern linguistics extensively studies the prosodic nature of stress in French, its relationship with intonation, pauses, and speech rhythm. Stress in this language is expressed not through strong dynamic pressure, but by raising the pitch of the sound and lengthening the syllable. This creates certain pronunciation difficulties for those learning French,

especially as a foreign language. Therefore, a thorough analysis of the theoretical foundations of stress in the French language also has practical importance.

The primary aim of this article is to scientifically elucidate the distinctive characteristics of stress in the French language, analyze its phonetic and prosodic nature, and determine the functional role of stress in the speech process. The research draws upon modern phonetic theories, perspectives of eminent linguists, and French language materials as its foundation. The findings of this study are expected to serve as a valuable theoretical and practical resource in French language teaching methodology, translation theory, and oral speech development.

## Main Part

The stress system in French is phonetically and prosodically complex, differing significantly from the concept of stress in many other languages. Foremost, it should be emphasized that stress in French does not manifest as an independent phonological unit at the individual word level. In this language, stress is more closely associated with the continuous flow of speech and is formed based on syntagmatic and rhythmic units. Therefore, to comprehend stress in the French language, it is crucial to analyze it not within the confines of a single word, but at the level of phrases and sentences.

One of the most important features of stress in the French language is that it primarily falls on the final position, that is, on the last syllable of a rhythmic group

or syntagma. This type of stress is often called "syntagmatic stress." In speech, words with independent meanings combine with auxiliary words to form a single rhythmic group, and the stress is placed at the end of this group. For example, articles, prepositions, and conjunctions are pronounced without stress and are uttered as a single unit with the following or preceding main word. This contributes to the smooth and continuous flow of the French language.

Additionally, the absence of lexical stress is one of the important characteristics of the French language. When the position of stress changes, the lexical meaning of the word remains unaltered, meaning that stress does not serve a meaning-differentiating function. This aspect fundamentally distinguishes French from English or Russian in terms of stress. Consequently, stress does not create phonological opposition but serves as a means of organizing the rhythmic and intonational structure of speech.

One of the significant features of French speech is its organization based on rhythmic groups. A rhythmic group typically has one stressed syllable, which serves as the intonational center of the entire group. These groups are separated by pauses in speech, and each group possesses its own independent intonational integrity. As a result, speech in French is formed on the basis of syllabic equality and rhythmic consistency, which enhances the melodic qualities of the language.

The relationship between stress and intonation is of particular importance in French. Depending on the purpose of the sentence, an increase or decrease in

intonation is observed along with stress. In declarative sentences, stress often concludes with a decrease in intonation, while in interrogative sentences, the rise in intonation is clearly noticeable on the stressed syllable. Thus, stress and intonation together determine the communicative type of the sentence and contribute to the correct perception of speech content.

From a phonetic perspective, stress in French is expressed not through strong articulatory pressure, but through pitch and duration of sound. In stressed syllables, the sound is pronounced with a slight elongation, and the intonational peak corresponds to this syllable. This feature makes stress sound soft and natural in the French language. At the same time, such expression of stress creates significant phonetic difficulties for foreign language learners.

Furthermore, French also has emphatic stress, which is used in speech to provide special emphasis or emotional coloring. Emphatic stress usually appears at the beginning of a sentence or on a specifically highlighted word and is intonationally more pronounced. This phenomenon demonstrates that stress performs not only a rhythmic but also a pragmatic function.

In general, the stress system in the French language is an important tool that determines the rhythmic, intonational, and communicative structure of speech. The fact that stress has a syntagmatic character, does not differentiate lexical meaning, and is inextricably linked with intonation makes the phonetic system of the French language more distinctive and complex (Table 1).

**Table 1. Cross-linguistic comparison of stress systems**

Analysis criterion	French	English	Russian	Uzbek
Stress type	Syntagmatic stress	Lexical stress	Lexical stress	Primarily final syllable stress
Stress position	End of rhythmic group: <i>une belle journée</i>	Free within words: <i>PREsent</i> - <i>preSENT</i>	Mobile: <i>m-úka</i> - <i>muká</i>	Often on the last syllable: <i>kitoblar</i>
Meaning-distinguishing function	No	Yes	Yes	Limited
Rhythmic unit	Rhythmic group: <i>je vais à l'université</i>	Individual word	Individual word	System of words and affixes

Connection with intonation	Very strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Phonetic realization	Through pitch and length	Strong dynamic stress	Dynamic + pitch	Dynamic stress
Emphatic stress	Present: <i>Moi, je comprends</i>	Present	Present	Present
Pronunciation difficulty (for foreigners)	High	Moderate	High	Low to moderate

The comparative results indicate that the stress system in French is characterized by its syntagmatic nature, with stress being more dependent on intonation and speech rhythm. In English and Russian, stress plays a crucial role as a means of differentiating lexical meaning. In the Uzbek language, stress typically falls on the last syllable of a word and is closely tied to grammatical forms, with a limited function in distinguishing meaning.

### Conclusion

The conducted analyses reveal that the stress system in the French language is a unique and complex phenomenon in phonetic and prosodic terms. The research has established that stress in French does not form as an independent phonological unit at the individual word level, but primarily manifests within the framework of syntagmatic and rhythmic units. This situation demonstrates that stress functions not as a means of distinguishing word meaning, but rather as a mechanism regulating the rhythmic and intonational structure of speech.

In the French language, the placement of stress at the end of rhythmic groups, namely the predominance of final stress, contributes to the smooth and melodious quality of speech. This stress placement ensures that auxiliary and independent words are pronounced as a single intonational unit. As a result, French speech acquires a continuous, melodious, and natural character. Simultaneously, the intrinsic connection between stress and intonation plays a crucial role in determining the communicative type of a sentence. The harmony of stress and intonation in declarative, interrogative, and exclamatory sentences aids in the correct perception of speech content.

Comparative analyses have shown that the stress system in French differs fundamentally from those in

English, Russian, and Uzbek. In English and Russian, stress serves to differentiate lexical meaning and directly affects word semantics, while in French, this feature is almost non-existent. In the Uzbek language, stress primarily falls on the last syllable of a word and is associated with grammatical formation, with a limited function of distinguishing meaning. These differences confirm that the role of stress in the phonetic system and speech structure varies for each language.

It is also determined that in the French language, the phonetic expression of stress is realized through raising the pitch of the sound and lengthening the syllable, rather than by strong dynamic pressure. This feature makes the French stress soft and less noticeable, creating certain pronunciation difficulties for foreign language learners. At the same time, the presence of emphatic stress indicates that stress performs not only rhythmic but also pragmatic and expressive functions.

In general, an in-depth study of the stress system in the French language, along with enriching the fields of phonetics and prosody in linguistics, has important theoretical and practical significance for the methodology of teaching French, translation theory, and the processes of developing oral speech. The conclusions presented in this article can serve as a scientific basis for further, more profound research into the prosodic features of the French language in the future.

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