

Syllable Stress in Communication by Jeff Gregory



A crucial factor in oral communication in English and Spanish is to stress the correct syllable in a word when it is being pronounced. For example, take the English word “culinary.” The stress falls on the first syllable: **cu’-li-nar-y**. But if we say it with the stress on the second syllable, we have: **cu-li’-nary** - which sounds very different and would probably not be understood by a native speaker.

You can actually say an English word with imperfect pronunciation, but if you have the syllable stress correct, you will most likely be understood. Likewise in Spanish, syllable stress is crucial. For example, the word “**hablo**” without the accent mark receives the stress on the first syllable and means “I speak” (present tense). But “**hablo**” [with the accent mark] receives the stress on the last syllable and means “he, she, or you spoke” (past tense). So if an inexperienced Spanish speaker uses this word and puts the stress on the wrong syllable, it can be confusing to the listener.

Interestingly, in some languages such as Thai, all the syllables in a word receive just about equal stress, so syllable stress is not a crucial factor in oral communication as it is in English and Spanish.