Stress in simple words

By simple words we mean those words which contain no prefixes or suffixes. Generally there are some rules that may be of some significance to foreign learners of English to determine which syllable or syllables in an English word must be stressed. Among these rules are the following:

a. Words of one syllable are generally unstressed, if they are purely grammatical words like pronouns, prepositions, etc. Other words, such as full verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs and the like are stressed.

b. All words of more than one syllable are stressed.

c. Two-syllable words have stress on the second syllable if that syllable is long. If it is short, the first syllable is stressed. As a matter of fact, this rule, despite its numerous exceptions, apply to many nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions, for example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Machine} & \quad \text{'college} \\
\text{arrive} & \quad \text{'open} \\
\text{today} & \quad \text{'hardly} \\
\end{align*}
\]

d. In three-syllable words, the syllable with a long vowel or diphthong ending with more than one consonant will attract stress. For example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{decided} & \quad \text{important} \quad \text{recommend} \\
\end{align*}
\]

This rule applies to both ultimate and the penultimate syllables. Besides, if the second syllable and third syllable contain short vowels, the first syllable takes stress, for example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{('family} & \quad \text{('cinema)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

e. Syllables which are not stressed often contain the schwa instead of any clearer vowel. It never occurs in stressed ones.

Although, stress placement in polysyllabic words is not predictable, these rules are applied mainly to lexical words.

Thus, distinction has to be made between two major types of stress namely free and fixed stress. The first type is movable stress, e.g., stress falls on different syllables depending on the word. The disyllabic English words (subject, import, increase etc.) are stressed either on their first syllable or second syllable according to their grammatical categories as nouns or verbs respectively.