

Syllable Structure

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The syllable is a well-recognized unit in linguistic analysis.

Canonical syllable patterns are most often represented as a string of C and V symbols, where C stands for a Consonant and V for a Vowel sound (including any complex vowel elements such as diphthongs which might occur in the language). The one kind of syllable which seems to occur in every language is CV, that is, a syllable consisting of just one consonant preceding a vowel. In a relatively small number of languages (e.g. Hawaiian) this is the only type of syllable permitted. It is more frequent to find languages in which it is permitted not to have an initial consonant, e.g. in Fijian. For these languages the canonical syllable can be represented as (C)V, the parentheses indicating that an initial consonant is an optional element. If a language only allows syllables which fit this template, the language will be said to have **simple syllable structure**.

A slightly more elaborate syllable structure would add another consonant, either in the final position of the syllable or at its beginning, giving the structures CVC and CCV; these are both

modest expansions of the simple CV syllable type. But it is worthwhile to make a distinction between two types of two-consonant strings. In a very large number of languages, although two consonants are allowed in the onset position of a syllable, there are strict limits on what kinds of combinations are permitted. The second of two consonants is commonly limited to being one of a small set belonging to either the class of “liquids” or the class of “glides”. The liquids are the sounds commonly represented by the letters r and l, while glides are vowel-like consonants such as those at the beginning of the English words *wet* and *yet*. Liquids and glides have in common that they are produced with a configuration of the speech organs which permits a relatively unobstructed flow of air out of the mouth. Languages which permit a single consonant after the vowel and/or allow two consonants to occur before the vowel, but obey a limitation to only the common two-consonant patterns described above, are counted as having **moderately complex syllable structure**. An example is Darai (Indo-Aryan; Nepal). Here the most elaborate syllable permitted is CCVC, as in /bwak/ ‘(his) father’, but the only possible second consonant in a sequence of two is /w/.

Languages which permit freer combinations of two consonants in the position before a vowel, or which allow three or more consonants in this onset position, and/or two or more consonants in the position after the vowel, are classified as having **complex syllable structure**. An obvious example of complex structure is English, whose canonical syllable pattern is often cited as (C)(C)(C)V(C)(C)(C)(C). The full expansion of the pattern only occurs in a few words such as *strengths*, when pronounced /stɹɛŋkθs/, but it is relatively easy to find syllables beginning with three consonants or ending with four, as in *split* and *texts*.

The classification of languages into three categories of syllabic complexity, simple, moderate and complex, naturally overlooks many other questions of segment distribution (for example, whether the syllables at the beginnings and ends of words have the same or different restrictions from those which are internal to words), and has to gloss over some important differences with respect to how rarely or frequently the more complex syllable types occur in a given language. Despite its summary nature the three-way classification provides a useful grouping with interesting geographical characteristics.