

111 Weak forms

1 Weak vowels

Weak vowels are vowels that we do not stress (say strongly). The two weak vowels are /ə/ and /ɪ/:

	WEAK	STRONG
a/an	/ə/ /ən/	/eɪ/ /æn/
the	/ðə/	/ði:/
of at	/əv/ /ət/	/ɒv/ /æt/
can	/kən/	/kæn/
was	/wəz/	/wɒz/
been	/bɪn/	/bi:n/

We usually use weak vowels in 'grammar' words, e.g. *the, a, an*, prepositions and auxiliary verbs.

2 Weak forms in prepositions

Most short prepositions are weak when we are speaking:

I'm going to /tə/ the cinema. Dimitri is from /frəm/ Greece. He's at /ət/ the doctor's.

We usually use the weak form of *to /tə/* in *going to* and *used to*:

Are you going to /tə/ phone the cinema?

We used to /tə/ get the school bus at 8.00 in the morning.

3 Weak forms in other words

- *a/the*: We usually pronounce *a/an* and *the* with /ə/:
a book, an apple, the garden

But when a vowel sound comes after *the*, we pronounce *the* with /i:/:
the apple

- *was/were /wəz/ /wə/*:
Was it hot in Corfu? There were a lot of insects.

- *that /ðət/*:
Do you think that everyone's ready?

But when we use *that* to ask about something or choose something, it is always strong:
What's that? I'd like that one, please.

- *than /ðən/*: We also use weak forms in comparative and superlative adjectives:
cheaper /-ə/ cheapest /ɪst/
The restaurants are cheaper here than in London.
But the cheapest restaurants are in the country.

- *been /bɪn/*: We usually pronounce *been* with the weak form /i/:
We've been to the theatre. Have you ever been to India?

- *can /kən/*: We usually pronounce *can* as /kən/ in statements and questions.
Karen can play the piano. Can Karen play the piano?
We use the strong form /kæn/ in short answers:
Yes, she can.

The negative *can't* is usually strong /ka:nt/ in most varieties of British English:
Karen can't play the guitar.

Practice

1 Write the words in the correct place below.

an ball been cat from hand leave stay that the to train wait was

vowel usually weak	<i>an</i>						
vowel usually strong	<i>ball</i>						

2 Some words with weak vowels are underlined. Put a circle around the other words with weak vowels. The number in brackets () tells you how many other words there are.

- 0 Would you like acup of tea? (1)
- 1 Louise comes from the United States. (1)
- 2 We were always very busy in the mornings. (1)
- 3 I told you that I'd been to France. (1)
- 4 They are going to repair the car. (2)
- 5 Let's go to the park – we can do our English homework tonight. (2)
- 6 June 21st is the longest day of the year. (2)
- 7 The black jeans are cheaper than the blue ones. (3)
- 8 I can play the piano at the show. I can't play the guitar. (3)

3 GRAMMAR IN USE Read the conversation. Then put a circle around the weak forms of *can*. Underline the strong forms, including *can't*.

FRAN It's nearly the end of our last year at university.
We should organise a party.

ZOE Yes, you're right. Where (0) can we have it,
do you think?

ALEX We (1) can probably use the student
union building.

ZOE (2) Can you check?

ALEX Yes, I (3) can. No problem.
I'll do that tomorrow.

FRAN What about food?
(4) Can we do the food ourselves?

ALEX No, we (5) can't. The university cooks
will have to do it. But I'm sure they
(6) can do it for a good price.

FRAN OK. What about music? I suppose we
(7) can't organise that, either.

ALEX Yes, we (8) can. We just bring the CDs we
want and play them on the system there.

ZOE Great. Look, I'll do an invitation tomorrow and
show it to you. Then we (9) can decide who to
invite. OK?

ALEX Yes, but I've got a class in the morning, so I (10) can't meet you
until after lunch.

ZOE Let's meet at about 2.00, then.

FRAN Good idea.

