

Syllabification Rules for Spanish

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This document shows the syllabification rules for the Spanish language. These rules are syllable oriented. The " " denote regular words and the dots indicate the syllabification.

Open syllable and closed syllable

The syllable is **open** or **free** when it ends in vowel. For example, all the syllables of the following words are open:

"caballo" – "ca.ba.llo"

"maleta" – "ma.le.ta"

"sótano" – "só.ta.no"

"abuelo" – "a.bue.lo"

The syllable is **closed** or **checked** when it ends in consonant. For example, all the syllables of the following words are closed:

"charlar" – "char.lar"

"mártir" – "már.tir"

"costar" – "cos.tar"

"mandar" - "man.dar"

The Spanish syllable

The Spanish phonemes can be divided into two categories: syllabic and non-syllabic, according to their capacity to create syllables. In Spanish, only vowels can conform a syllable nucleus and create syllables.

It is also noticeable that the Spanish language tends, in general, to prefer open syllables.

The phoneme / tl /

Mexican Spanish is rich in words in the náhuatl language, especially for proper names. In náhuatl exists the phoneme / tl / that only goes at word ending. What is especial with the phoneme / tl / is that it is a syllable nucleus by itself and it is not combined with other phonemes. See the examples below:

"popocatépetl" – "po.po.ca.té.pe.tl"

"iztaccíhuatl" - "iz.tac.cí.hua.tl"

"xicohténcatl" - "xi.coh.tén.ca.tl"

"quetzalcóatl" - "quet.zal.có.a.tl"

Strong vowels and weak vowels

Spanish language has only five vowels: "a", "e", "i", "o" and "u". As a didactic technique one can consider that the vowels "a", "e", and "o" are **strong** and the vowels "i" and "u" are **weak**. This consideration will be helpful in the syllabification rules.

Syllabification Rules

1. Consonant between two vowels.

The Spanish language tends to prefer open syllables, so in this case, the consonant will be grouped with the second vowel:

"**ca**sa" - "ca.sa"

"**mi**ra**ron**" - "mi.ra.ron"

"**de**mo**ra**" - "de.mo.ra"

2. Two consonants between two vowels.

Groups of bilabial or labiodental consonants with a liquid consonant are unbreakable: "pr", "br", "pl", "bl", "fr", "fl":

"**op**rimo" – "o.**pr**i.mo"

"**ob**rero" – "o.**br**e.ro"

"**ap**lomo" – "a.**pl**o.mo"

"**hab**lando" – "ha.**bl**an.do"

"**ca**fre" – "ca.**fr**e"

"**af**lojar" – "a.**fl**o.jar"

Groups of velar consonants with a liquid consonant are unbreakable: "gr", "gl", "cr", "cl":

"**ag**randar" - "a.**gr**an.dar"

"**ag**lutinar" – "a.**gl**u.ti.nar"

"**acr**óbata" - "a.**cr**ó.ba.ta"

"**acl**amar" – "a.**cl**a.mar"

Groups of dental consonants with an alveolar flap consonant are unbreakable: "dr", "tr":

"**cu**adro" – "cua.**dr**o"

"**cu**atro" – "cua.**tr**o"

In the Mexican Spanish, a group of the consonant / t / with the consonant / l / is unbreakable: "tl":

"**at**las" – "a.**tl**as"

"**at**lalilco" – "a.**tl**a.lil.co"

Any other group of consonants are grouped like this: the first consonant goes with the first vowel and the second consonant goes with the second vowel:

"**in**separable" – "in.**se**.pa.ra.ble"

"**ar**tista" – "ar.**ti**s.ta"

"**ob**tener" - "ob.**te**.ner"

"**cu**enta" - "cuen.**ta**"

"**co**medlo" - "co.med.**lo**"

"**po**nedla" - "po.ned.**la**"

3. Three or more consonants between two vowels.

If the last two consonants form an unbreakable group, they go with the second vowel and the remain consonant goes with the first vowel:

"**em**pleados" - "em.**ple**.a.dos"

"**en**globar" - "en.**glo**.bar"

"**in**flamar" - "in.**fla**.mar"

"**con**traer" - "con.**tra**.er"

If the first two consonants are in a sequence like "ns" or "bs". Those sequences are unbreakable in this circumstances. So the first vowel goes with the sequence and the remain consonant goes with the second vowel:

"**cons**titución" - "cons.**ti**.tu.ción"

"**ins**taurar" - "ins.**tau**.rar"

"**obs**tinado" - "obs.**ti**.na.do"

"**obs**táculo" - "obs.**tá**.cu.lo"

4. Two strong vowels together.

Two strong vowels together make two different syllables:

"**aé**reo" - "a.**é**.re.o"

"**pe**lear" - "pe.**le**.ar"

"**le**o" - "le.o"

5. An strong vowel next to a weak vowel

A strong vowel next to a weak vowel, in any order, makes a diphthong:

"**ai**re" - "ai.re"

"**eu**ropa" - "eu.ro.pa"

"**á**sia" - "á.sia"

"**bu**eno" - "bue.no"

6. Two weak vowels together.

Two weak vowels together make a diphthong:

"cuidado" - "cui.da.do"

"ruidoso" - "rui.do.so"

"triunfante" - "triun.fan.te"

"ciudad" - "ciu.dad"

7. Triphthongs

A triphthong makes a whole syllable or part of it. A triphthong is made by one strong vowels between two weak vowels:

"bioinformática" - "bioin.for.má.ti.ca"

"radioisótopo" - "ra.dioi.só.to.po"

"asociáis" - "a.so.ciáis"

"buey" - "buey"

8. A weak vowel with an accent mark

An accent mark on a weak vowel transforms that vowel into strong. So the rule 4 applies in this case:

"había" - "ha.bí.a"

"país" - "pa.ís"

"reúno" - "re.ú.no"

"baúl" - "ba.úl"

Reference

Quilis, Antonio. (1999). Tratado de fonología y fonética españolas. Segunda Edición. Madrid: Gredos.