

De-emphasized Syllables
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What makes one singing group's delivery of the lyrics smooth and flowing yet another group sounds choppy and stilted? This question has plagued many quartets and choruses for years. The difference lies in whether the group sings "words" or "lyrics."

Words are individual and evenly emphasized incorporating only the fraction of the pronunciation guide in the dictionary definition that relates to emphasis. For example: the word "parted" is described in the dictionary as "\'pär-təd\" placing the emphasis on "par." This is as far as the inartistic singer gets and the delivery is often then pronounced (sung) as "par-ted" with almost equal emphasis on "par" (sounding like what a golfer shoots on a hole if he is one shot over a birdie), followed by "ted" (sounding like what Theodore Roosevelt's friends called him).

The artistic singer puts the word into context and pronounces it (sings it) more as the dictionary suggests. In this example the emphasis on "par" is fine, but now the "de-emphasis" of "təd" is included. Just how do you pronounce (sing) "təd" you might ask? It is very close to the "ih" of "lit." That little upside-down "e" ("ə") is called a "schwa" and is a deemphasized syllable. Real lyrical *emphasis* is only effective when just as much attention is paid to *de-emphasis*!

It appears again in the word "around." The dictionary says to pronounce it: "\ə-'raund\". Again, the second part or "round" is not in question. It's the darn "schwa" that makes the difference. The inartistic singer sings "uh-round" and the artistic singer sings "ə-round." How do you pronounce the "ə" here? It is pronounced like the "u" in "look" (the short double "o" sound)

The absolutely biggest occurrence of this is the definite article "the." If "the" precedes a vowel sound it's pronounced "thee" – no problem. But, when "the" precedes any kind of a consonant sound it must be pronounced as "thə" or "thu." Here's how you practice; say, "look!" Now take off the "l": "ook." Now take off the "k." "oo." Now add a soft "th" on the front: "thoo" (or "thu" using correct vowel terms).

Here's a typical line from a barbershop ballad:

"Now that we have par-*ted*, and you are not *a*-round, *the* night-time is so"

[Italics added to identify the problem syllables]

1) If we sing "words" WITHOUT de-emphasis it sounds like:

"Now that we have par-TED, and you are not UH-round, THUH night-time is so"

2) If we sing "lyrics" WITH de-emphasis it sounds like:

"Now that we have part-ihd, and you are not u-round, thu night-time is so"

Since this is the way we talk, it's very easy to get singers to "fall into line" with the de-emphasis concept. The role of repetition cannot be stressed enough! One great side benefit to this is that chords will tune better ON the de-emphasized syllable AND on the syllable directly FOLLOWING it.