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Speaking with Emphasis

By Summer Stanley

When learning English, whether as a primary or a secondary language, knowing which word in a sentence to emphasize when speaking can be difficult. The meaning of the sentence can be completely changed when stressing one word over another.

Emphasis is used by:

- Stretching out the vowel sound.
- Pausing after the word that is being emphasized is spoken.
- Speaking slower when saying the word you want to emphasize.
- Pronouncing one syllable louder than the other syllables.

Here's an example:

- He said she gave him the money.
  - o **HE** said she gave him the money. (A different person didn't say it.)
  - o He **SAID** she gave him the money. (Implies that he might not be telling the truth)
  - o He said **SHE** gave him the money. (As opposed to someone else giving him the money.)
  - o He said she **GAVE** him the money. (Implying that he didn't take it without permission.)
  - o He said she gave **HIM** the money. (She didn't give it to someone else.)
  - o He said she gave him the **MONEY**. (She didn't give him something else.)

With the potential for such a wide range of meaning in that one simple sentence, it's easy to see how miscommunication can occur if we're not careful. It's especially important to be aware of emphasis during phone conversations, since we don't have the benefit of body language and facial expressions to clarify what we're trying to say.

Resources:

"Emphasis and focusing on specific words to change our message," accessed May 14, 2019, from https://www.ambyrne.com/2018/01/25/emphasis-and-focusing-to-change-our-message/

"Taking the Stress Test: how emphasis can change meaning," accessed May 16, 2019, from https://eurotalk.com/blog/2015/10/30/taking-the-stress-test-how-emphasis-can-change-meaning/

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