

A Simple Sentence with Seven Meanings

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In some languages, speakers say each word in a sentence with equal stress. That is true for Japanese, for example. But, as you know, that is not true for English. If you are listening to this program, you just heard me add stress to the word “not” to help make that message clear.

When we talk about stress in spoken language, we are talking about saying something louder and holding the sound a little longer. English speakers use two kinds of stress together when they speak: word stress and sentence stress.

Word stress is saying one syllable of a word louder and longer than the other syllables. The word “painting,” for instance, has two syllables. The stress is on the first syllable.

Sentence stress is saying a word or words in a sentence louder and longer than the other words.

On this Everyday Grammar program, I will use a simple sentence to show you what that sounds like and how meaning can change completely when the sentence stress changes.

Rachel Smith is an American English pronunciation expert based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her YouTube channel, Rachel’s English, has become a respected tool for learning about pronunciation. Smith notes that, in English, even when you use the same words, you can get very different meanings.

Today, we will do a listening exercise to explore the connection between sentence stress and meaning. I chose a sentence that English language teachers have been using for years. By the end of the program, you will understand its simple genius. It goes like this:

I didn’t say he stole the money.

Naturally, some words carry a little more stress than others. That is just how English works. But notice that one single word doesn’t grab your attention. Yet, by putting stress on one word each time, we can give the seven-word sentence seven different meanings.

So, let’s get started with the exercise. Listen to the sentence again:

I didn’t say he stole the money.

I think you can identify which word is being stressed. But do you know what the stress means?

The speaker stressed the word “I” more than all the other words. But what does she mean? She is trying to say that she is not the person who said the man stole the money. Somebody else said it.

Now, listen to what happens when we move the stress to the second word:

I **didn’t** say he stole the money.

Here, the speaker’s meaning is, “It is not true that I said he stole the money. You think I said it but I did not.”

Now, let's move the stress to the third word and see how the meaning changes:

I didn't **say** he stole the money.

What does the speaker mean now? It sounds like she wanted to suggest that the man stole the money. But she did not want to directly say it.

Alright. Now for the next one. By now you might be able to guess the meaning. Listen here:

I didn't say **he** stole the money.

Here, the speaker is suggesting that someone else stole the money, not the man identified in the sentence.

Now, we move to the fifth word in our example. Let's hear how it sounds:

I didn't say he **stole** the money.

What the speaker is trying to say here is, "Maybe he just borrowed the money. Maybe he didn't steal it."

Onto the next one, word number six. This one might be a little tricky, so pay attention:

I didn't say he stole **the** money.

In this case, the speaker is suggesting that she is talking about some other money, not the specific money being discussed.

And, finally, we have this last example.

I didn't say he stole the **money**.

Here, the speaker is suggesting that the man stole something else. For example, maybe he stole jewelry or some other valuables.

Well, I hope you enjoyed this exercise.

At home, you can practice saying the sentence seven times, moving the stress to a different word each time. Some of you may feel strange about putting stress on one specific word. But it is a communication tool that sounds perfectly natural in English when used correctly.

As you pay attention to native English speakers, you will notice that we use the tool often. You can find examples on television and in films, for example. Try repeating what the speakers say.

Native English speakers often depend on sentence stress to understand what someone else is saying. It can be just as meaningful as word choice.

So, improving your sentence stress will help you to express your intended meaning more clearly as you speak. It will also help you to understand English speakers better.

I'm Alice Bryant.