

Word accent in Serbian

Some facts:

1. Every word in Serbian has one accent or stress (only a small class of words has no accent at all – so called *clitics*).
2. The accented vowel is pronounced louder, higher and longer than unaccented vowels in the word.
3. Vowels can be short or long.
4. The accented vowels can be either falling or rising in pitch (or tone). The rising tone on the vowel is indicated by the underline on the vowel.
5. Here are some rules that can predict the accent of the word:
 - The last vowel of the word is always unaccented.
 - Accented vowels with falling tones occur only in initial syllables.
 - Words with one syllable (monosyllabic words) always have the falling tones.
 - So, the main task is to determine the tone of the accented vowel in words with two vowels (disyllabic words) since in that position, the initial vowel can have a rising or falling tone. This will come with practice.
6. Based on these two features, Serbian has four-accent systems:
 - **long rising accent** (example: *glava* ‘head’)
 - **long falling accent** (example; *sunce* ‘sun’)
 - **short rising accent** (example: *voda* ‘water’)
 - **short falling accent** (example: *pesma* ‘song/poem’)

Note: The following fact might also be helpful in determining the tone of the accented vowel. It has been observed that the tone of a falling accent is fully contained within the syllable marked for that accent. But the tone of a rising accent spreads to the following syllable. That’s the reason why we don’t have an accent on the final vowel of the word and why monosyllabic words have only falling accent.

Another useful note: The great majority of Serbian speakers cannot distinguish short falling from short rising accents. For them, only a short accent exists, with no reference to the tone quality. So, all you need to worry is about long rising and long falling accents.

Here are the tips on how to identify the word accent:

1. Determine the place of an accent, i.e., the vowel that is accented. To do that, try to pronounce each vowel (one at the time) with an accent and see how it sounds. Don’t worry about the tone, just the stress/loudness on the vowel. See the rules in 6 above.
2. Circle the accented vowel (so you know which one it is).
3. Determine the length or quantity of the accented vowel – whether it is long or short.
4. Determine the tone or quality of the vowel –whether it is rising or falling. Again, the rules in 6 above will help you make the decision quickly.
5. On the unaccented vowels, determine the length of the vowels – whether they are short or long. This is hard, but we will learn some rule for this too.