

Basic European Portuguese Pronunciation



In today's post I am going to write a little bit about basic Portuguese pronunciation. In fact, to be more specific I will clarify how to pronounce European Portuguese, since many people want to know it and do not find many materials out there about it.

If you are interested to find out some of the reasons why the Portuguese have such a "weird" way of speaking, you have come to the right place!

To begin with, I would like to tell you that as hard as it seems, you can really learn some basic rules that will always apply in European Portuguese, making it much easier to understand the pronunciation.

I will name them in a second, and I want you to know that the order I am writing them has a reason, and you will soon find it out. But before I get into the stress of a word itself, I would like to tell you a little bit about syllables.

Syllables are parts of a word. If you have the word "Menina" (girl), you have three different parts in this word - Me-ni-na. These are what we call syllables and the stress of a word always falls on a syllable.

If you understand this, you will more easily understand what I will now explain about word pronunciation. So, let's then look at the pronunciation rules:

1) Check the word to see if there is an accent (a stress/diacritical mark) - If you find a tilde (~), an acute stress (´), a grave stress (`) or a circumflex mark (^), the stress will be on that syllable. So, if you have the word "Ananás" (pineapple), and you divide the word into syllables /A-na-nás/, the stress will fall on the last syllable, because there is where the diacritical mark is. Therefore, we have the following pronunciation: /a-na-NÁS/ (Throughout this article, I will use capital letters to exemplify which syllable should be stressed, like I did in this example).

More word examples:

- Coração (heart) - /co-ra-ÇÃO/

- Fácil (easy) - /FÁ-cil/
- Grátis (for free) - /GRÁ-tis/
- Confusão - /con-fu-SÃO/
- Amália (a common woman's name) - /a-MÁ-li-a/

So, I think you get the picture, right?

The reason I put this rule first is that you should always check first for a stress mark like the ones I described and if the word has one, then it will be easy to know where the stress of the word should go and which syllable you should pronounce more.

2) When the word does not have a diacritical mark, then the stress of the word generally goes into the penultimate (one before the last) syllable - This is the second most important rule, because in general words that are not accentuated by a stress mark, have their penultimate syllable accentuated instead. This is the case of "Caminho" (Path/Way), which is divided into three syllables - /Ca-mi-nho/ - which means its accentuation is as follows - /ca-MI-nho/. As you can see, the penultimate syllable is the one stressed, since there is no diacritical mark to tell us otherwise.

More word examples:

- Comida (food) - /co-MI-da/
- Aventureiro (adventurous) - /a-ven-tu-REI-ro/
- Casa (house) - /CA-sa/
- Companhia (company) - /com-pa-NHI-a/

As you can see, it doesn't matter the length of the word - whether it has two, three, four or even more syllables - if it does not have a diacritical mark, it will generally have its stress in the penultimate syllable.

Although this rule is what applies in most of the cases, there are of course some cases where it doesn't apply. Those are the following:

3) If the word ends in i, l, r, z, im, um, ins, uns, the stress shifts to the ending syllable - In this case, instead of being in the penultimate syllable, the stress changes to the end. It is the case of the word "rapaz" - /ra-paz/ - which one pronounces /ra-PAZ/.

More word examples:

- Papel (paper) - /pa-PEL/
- Comer (to eat) - /co-MER/
- Senti (I felt) - /sen-TI/
- Atum (Tuna) - /a-TUM/
- Pinguim (Penguin) - /pin-gu-IM/
- Pinguins (Penguins) - /pin-gu-INS/
- Alguns (some) - /al-GUNS/

4) If the word ends in a diphthong (two vowels that are read together to form a single sound) like ão, au, ao, õe, oi, ãe, ai, ou, ei, ui, the stress also shifts to the end - If you have a word like "Macau" (Macau), for example, the stress will be in the last syllable, because this word ends with a diphthong. Therefore, we will read it /ma-CAU/.

More word examples:

- Carapau (a kind of fish) - /ca-ra-PAU/
- Amou (he/she/it loved) - /a-MOU/
- Pensei (I thought) - /pen-SEI/

Note that some of these diphthongs have accents on them, so the first rule I wrote about earlier in this post applies too.

Now that you have learnt about the stress rules, let's go a bit deeper into the pronunciation of the actual sounds of letters in different contexts.



VOWELS

To start, I will tell you about **vowels**. In Portuguese, like in English we have five vowels - a, e, i, o and u - and when you spell the actual letter you will have the sound "a", like the "a" in "car"; the "e", like the "e" in "tell"; the "i", like the "ee" in "breed"; the "o", like the "a" in "all"; and finally the "u", like the two "u" in "kung-fu".

This would be very simple if the story ended here. However, not everything can be that simple, right? So, the way you read these vowels, will depend on the words and the combination of letters.

In fact, the vowels "a", "e" and "o" vary a lot, since they have three "kinds" of pronunciation - Open pronunciation, closed pronunciation, reduced pronunciation and nasal pronunciation. The open pronunciation is just the way that you would actually spell the letter, like in the examples I gave above. The closed pronunciation, reduced and nasal ones are very different, though. Let us take a look!

a

Open Pronunciation - Like the "a" in "cat" in the British English variation.

Closed Pronunciation - We use this to pronounce the "a's" that are not in the end of the word, nor in the stressed syllable. It is the case of the first two "a" on the woman's name "Mariana". They sound something similar to the "u" in "butter".

Reduced Pronunciation - This happens when we have the "a" at the end. The sound is very reduced or almost non-existent. In fact, European Portuguese speakers are known for "eating" the vowels at the end of words, and this is the reason why. We actually DO tend to not pronounce the vowels that are at the end of words, unless the last syllable is the one accentuated. Otherwise, that would be just too much effort for us aha! So, using the female noun "Mariana" that we looked at above, we would have a pronunciation that would look something like /ma-ri-A-n/, where the last "a" would be almost inexistant.

Nasal Pronunciation - Happening every time the word is followed by a "nasal sound" (a sound you produce forcing the air out of your nose, like what happens with the letters "m" and "n" in Portuguese). In the word "ananás", the first two vowels are followed by a nasal sound, which makes them sound like the "a" in "antropologist". With the diacritical mark "˜", this vowel will also sound nasal.

#e

Open Pronunciation - Like the "e" in "pet". We pronounce this letter this way when it is in the accented syllable or if it contains the diacritical mark "´".

Closed Pronunciation - We use this to pronounce the "e´s" that are not in the end of the word, but can be in the stressed syllable. Therefore, we can have the stressed syllable which contains an "e", sounding like the open pronunciation or like a bit more closed one. It is the case of the sound "e" in the Portuguese word "preço" (price). The sound is something similar to the "ai" in "airplane".

Reduced Pronunciation - When we have the "e" at the end of the word or after a "p" sound, we often use the reduced pronunciation. The sound is very reduced or almost non-existent. This happens in the word "competente" (competent), for example, where the first and the last "e´s" are almost not sonorant at all!

Nasal Pronunciation - In words like "entusiasmo" (enthusiasm), the vowel will have a nasal component to it. It will sound exactly like the "e" in "enthusiasm". Like what happens with "a", if the vowel "e" contains the diacritical mark "ˆ", this will also make it sound nasal.

#o

Open Pronunciation - Like the "o" in "lot". We pronounce this letter this way when it is in the accented syllable or if it contains the diacritical mark "´".

Closed Pronunciation - We use this to pronounce the "o´s" that are not in the end of the word, but can be in the stressed syllable. Therefore, we can have the stressed syllable which contains an "o", sounding lvey open or a bit more round and closed. It is the case of the sound "o" in the Portuguese word "podre" (rotten). The sound is something similar to the "ou" sound in "mould".

Reduced Pronunciation - When we have the "o" at the end of the word, in a non-stressed syllable or alone meaning "the" (masculine form of "the") , we often use the reduced pronunciation. This makes the "o" sound like an "u" or "oo" like in "kung-fu" or in "cool". This happens in the word "momento" (moment), for example, which we would read like /mu-MEN-tu/. As we can see, when the syllable is not stressed the "o" also sounds like "u". The one at the end, when the word is pronounced really fast, seems almost inexistent as well, making the word sound like /mo-MEN-t/.

Nasal Pronunciation - Like in the case of "a" and "e", this type of pronunciation happens every time the vowel is followed by an "n" or "m" or contains the diacritical mark "ˆ". In words like "ponte" (bridge), the vowel will come out pretty nasalised and it will sound something like "on" in the english word "among".

#i and u

These two vowels are pronounced only with an open pronunciation, like in the words "guitarra" (guitar) or "luva" (glove) or a bit more nasal, like in "pintar" (to paint) or "juntar" (to gather), respectively.

CONSONANTS

Today I am not going to write about all the consonants, as that would take us a long time, and most of the others I won't mention do sound a lot like in English.

The following consonants, however, show some differences in the way they are pronounced. So, let us take a look at them!

#c

Before "i" and "e", this consonant will have a soft sound, i.e., it will sound like the "s" in "sound".

Examples:

- cimento (concrete) - /si-MEN-t/
- cinzeiro (ashtray) - /sin-ZEI-r/
- cebola (onion) - /se-BO-la/

Before an "a", an "o" and an, "u", it will show a hard sound or a "k", like the "c" in "cup".

Examples:

- casa (house) - /KA-sa/
- computador (computer) - /Kom-pu-ta-DOR/
- curto (short) - /KUR-t/

#ç

This letter is also a consonant and every time we use it it is because we want a "c" that precedes an "a", "o" or "u" to have the soft sound "s", rather than the hard sound "k".

Examples:

- Cabeça (head) - /ca-BE-ssa/
- Carapuço (hoody) - /ca-ra-PU-ssu/

#g

Like with the letter "c", the "g" will sound soft or like a "j" before "i" and "e", i.e., it will sound like the "g" in "giant".

Examples:

- gigante (giant) - /ji-GAN-t/
- girassol (sunflower) - /ji-ra-SSOL/
- gente (people) - /JEN-t/



Before an "a", an "o" and an, "u", it will show a hard sound or a "g", like the "g" in "game".

Examples:

- gato (cat) - /**G**a-tu/
- garfo (fork) - /**G**AR-fu/
- gota (drop) - /**G**o-ta/

When we want a "g" that precedes an "e" or an "i" to have a hard sound like "g" in "game", we insert an "u" between the "g" and the following "e" or "i". The "u" is then not read and the "g" becomes a hard "g".

Examples:

- Guitarra - /**g**i-TA-rra/
- Guerra - /**GE**-rra/

#h

Normally this sound is not pronounced, unless it is together with an "l" or an "n", in which case it will seem to sound a bit like a "y".

Examples:

- Homem (man) - /**Ó**-mem/ (silent)
- Hora (hour) - /**Ó**-ra/ (silent)
- Coelho (rabbit) - /co-E-**lhu**/ (in fact sounding like /co-E-lyu/).
- Manhã (morning) - /ma-**NH**Ã/ (in fact sounding like /ma-NYÃ/)



#j

This consonant always sounds soft in Portuguese, like the “g” in “giant”.

Examples:

- Jamaica - /**ja**-MAI-ca/
- Manjeriçã (basil) - /man-**je**-ri-CÃO/

#m and n

These consonants sound pretty much the same as in English, except when at the end of the word. In fact, the consonant "m" will sound very nasal and like if you actually do not finish it. What I mean is that when reading this letter at the end of a word, try to stop the movement of your lips in the middle, not allowing them to touch each other like they normally would and pushing the sound through your nose instead.

The "n" never appears at the end of a word, but when a word ending in "m" becomes plural, it will change into "ns", and the sound of the "n" will be nasal as well and very similar to "m" at the end of a word.

Examples:

- Homem - /Ó-m**em**/
- Margem (margin) - /MAR-g**em**/
- Homens (men) - /Ó-m**ens**/
- Margens (margins) - /MAR-g**ens**/

Some people say the sound of an "m" final, seems to have an "g" or "y" in the mix, sounding like a "ny" or a "ng". Like this:

- Margem (margin) ---> /MAR-g**eng**/
- Homens (men) ---> /Ó-m**engs**/

#q

In European Portuguese, this letter is always followed by a "u". If this constellation of letters is followed by an "i" or an "e" that are not accentuated, then the letter should be read as a "k" or like the "c" in "cosmetics". If, on the other end, it is followed by an "a" or an "o", then the "u" should also be read, like "ku".



Examples:

- Que (what) - /**KE**/
- Quando (when) - /**KUAN**-du/
- Quisto (cist) - /**KIS**-tu/
- Quo (quo, like in status quo) - /**KUO**/

#r

This consonant has two types of pronunciation. As a hard "r", at the beginning of a word or when it has another "r" attached to it, as in "carro". This sound is very guttural, you make it with your throat and it does not really have an equivalent in English (at least that I know of). For some people, it might be easier to know that it has a similar sound to the "j" guttural in Spanish, like in "Juego", for example.

At the end of the word or alone in the middle of a word, it has a soft pronunciation, like in "Rome" or "Maryann", although in Portuguese you can hear it more than in English. It is something in between the English "r" and the Portuguese guttural "rr".

Examples:

- Rato (mouse) - /**RRA**-to/ (hard pronunciation)
- Carro (car) - /CA-**rr**o/ (hard pronunciation)
- Caro (expensive) - /CA-**r**o/ (soft pronunciation)
- Amor (love) - /A-**m**or/ (soft pronunciation)

#s

This consonant is one of the "richest" consonants in terms of pronunciation. It can be pronounced as a normal "s", at the beginning of the word and in the middle of the word if it is together with another "s", as in "passar" (to pass).

It can also sound like a "z" as in "zebra", if it is in the middle of the word on its own or if it is at the end of a word which precedes another word that starts with a vowel (like in "mais ou menos" (more a less), which is pronounced "Maizohmenush").

Finally, it can sound like a "sh" sound, as in "cash". This happens when this consonant is at the end of a word and the following word does not start with a vowel sound or when the "s" is between a vowel and a consonant, as in "gostar" (to like).

Examples:

- Sapo (frog) - /**SA**-pu/ (normal "s")
- Passo (step) - /PA-**ss**u/ (normal "s")
- Casaco (jacket) - /ca-**ZA**-cu/ ("z" sound)
- Os olhos (the eyes) - /Uz/ ("z" sound)
- Olhos (eyes) - /O-**lhush**/ ("sh" sound)
- Castanho (brown) - /**cash**-TA-nhu/ ("sh" sound)

#z

Normally pronounced as a normal "z", this letter can also sound like a "sh" sound if placed at the end of the word and the word does not precede another one starting with a vowel, in which case the "z" is read like a normal "z" in "zebra".

Examples:

- Rapaz (boy) - /ra-**PASH**/ (sounds like a "sh")
- Zebra - /**ZE**-bra/ (normal "z")

#x

The reason I put this letter at the end, is because I have some bad news about it. It does not seem to obey any rules, although it shows many different utterance ways. In fact, "x" can sound like the "z" in "zebra, like the "x" in "expectation" (a sound like "ks"), like the "sh" in "cushion" and like the "ss" in "pass". Unfortunately, as there seem to be no rules, I cannot teach you how to know it. It seems that you will have just to use your memory and lots of practise with this one.

Examples:

- Exemplo (example) - /e-**ZEM**-plu/ ("z" sound)
- Táxi (taxi) - /TA-ksi/ (like the English word "taxi")
- Extensivo (extensive) - /e**sh**-ten-SI-vu/ ("sh" sound)
- Máximo (maximum) - /MA-ssi-mu/ (normal "s" sound)



If you want to find an audio guide for all the words used in the examples above, please refer to the following link in www.learn-portuguese.org.

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