

English Stressed

The Americans tend, as is well known, to stress a number of words of two syllables on the first syllable where the English stress the second. Does it matter if we follow the Americans, as the people talking on Radio 4 increasingly do? The first-stress is particularly noticeable in place-names. The capital of Iraq is now regularly *Bághdad*. But there is no restriction to proper nouns. Heard within the last few months, for instance, *súrvey* [verb]^[1], and *défence*^[2]. In English a distinction is frequently made between a verb, stressed on the second syllable, and the otherwise phonetically identical noun, stressed on the first, so the first example, *súrvey*, is our usual form for nouns, as in *Ordnance Survey*. We also have first-syllable stress where the stress is contrastive: “I didn’t say *óffence*, I said *défence*” is ordinary English.

Should any resistance be made to Americanisms? The standard linguistic-science response would be to use one of the most annoying clichés (annoying because based on a misreported story) and to call the resister King Canute trying to hold back the tide. Linguistic change, they like to think, is a quasi-natural process, and linguists can only describe it. Anyone who tries to influence linguistic change is called a *prescriptivist*, which has in this context much the same suggestion of unspeakable vice as, in political discourse, *racist* or *fascist* or *homophobe*. But as Mark Halpern reminds us,^[3] all uses of language are by individuals, neologisms are often deliberate, and if not they do show at least the degree of personal choice involved in voluntary, even if subconscious, imitation. Changes in language, including the sound-shifts so brilliantly discovered by the scholars of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, happen because some individual hits on a new way of talking—new word, new phrase, new accent or whatever it may be—and enough of the rest of us imitate for the neologism to get established. The formerly regular form then becomes old-fashioned or precious before dying out. It is possible for changes to be for the better or for the worse, depending on whether they give better possibilities of expressiveness to the common language.

In the case of the new Americanised accents, there are at least two reasons for resistance. First, the imitation by one culture of another is the sincerest form of flattery, even if it is only an imitation of fashion. The French *couturiers* have their imitators because France traditionally has the prestige of leading the western world in women’s clothes. It may be that American culture is just inherently superior to British, but if not, is it good for us to follow American cultural fashion? The speakers of a language ought to have a certain robustness. If I tried to tell an American that it is better to reserve *défence* for contrastive stress, an old-fashioned stage American might reply, reasonably, “Well, that just ain’t how we do it here, Limey.” This would have some force, even by the descriptive standards of orthodox linguistics. Wholesale imitation of another culture at least implies some lack of self-confidence for which in the present case there is no obvious reason.

In fact there are reasons, in the area of linguistic resource discussed by Michael Wallerstein,^[4] for wanting to keep the English stress distinctions. The noun-verb contrast is a useful syntactic marker. Stress is also often an informative indicator of what is a prefix. *Produce*, as well as making a distinction from the noun (also with a different first phoneme) *próduce*, expresses in the verbal form from which the noun derives that the *duce* bit is the root and the *pro* a prefix. So the stress recognises the same root in *addúce*, *dedúce*, *indúce*, and so on. It is not that speakers of American English cannot be aware that they are using different descendants of *duco*,

but English English makes the recognition that bit clearer. English can take the reduction of stress on prefix in verbs to surprising lengths, as in *superimpóse*.

In the case of *défer* (English English *defér*) there is also some risk of confusion with *differ*. And will the Nóbél Prizes in future be taken to be Noble Prizes?^[5]

More important is the effect on verse. If *súrvey* is the normal stress of the verb, will Isaac Watts be supposed to have wrenched stress when he wrote “When I survey the wondrous cross”, or will the line be misread as trochaic? If the capital of Siam is *Báangkok* how to read the last line of “Growltiger’s Last Stand”?

And a day of celebration was commanded in Bangkok.

When Gaunt commends the Duchess of Gloucester

To God, the widow’s champion and defence

will he be uttering a line ending with the Shakespearean rarity, a trochaic fifth foot?

The depressing thing is that the people who run the BBC think that all this does not matter. They have no proper sense of responsibility for the language.

Notes

1 Radio 4, 07.10, 27 June 2008

2 Commentator on Wimbledon 24 June 2008 (admittedly this was an American lady)

3 Mark Halpern, *Language and Human Nature*, Regent Press, Oakland, CA

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4 Michael Wallerstein, *Dear Mr Howard*, Edgeways Books

5 Polysyllables also suffer. In future *primary* will be thought to be somehow connected with *merry* if the pronunciation *primérrily* catches on.

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