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Extending the Treatment of Pronunciation Entries in General Dictionaries

Abstract

There is a clear need for a more extensive treatment of pronunciation entries in current general (and unabridged) dictionaries on the ground that such a lack results in providing the reading public with incomplete, if not inadequate, information of present-day (English) usage. The paper argues the need for such extension in four areas: (1) the inadequate treatment of new pronunciations in the language; (2) the inconsistent treatment of regionally dictated variants; (3) the omission of pronunciations associated with certain social groups and certain discourse styles; (4) the omission of pronunciation changes due to the contexts in which numerous words commonly appear.

1. Introduction

1.1 This paper deals with what dictionary editors should now consider: the entry of more extensive pronunciation data. It is my belief that by failing to do so inadequate pronunciation information is presented to the readers of our dictionaries and that, in fact, such a practice of the entry of more extensive pronunciation data is much overdue. This belief is based not only on the availability of such information in the scholarly literature, but in the recognition that a comparative examination of pronunciation entries in the current major dictionaries already shows that dictionary editors are beginning to address this need. The attempt, so far, has been inconsistent and incomplete. As such, this paper does not mean to fault editors - they are following the practices that have made the dictionaries we use the marvelous sources of information they are supposed to be. But it can be reasonably argued, I believe, that a failure to move, in the very near future, in the direction of the aim of this paper would be an unfortunate oversight if not a disservice to the dictionaries' reading public.

1.2 Although I am basing my remarks on the practices of American lexicography and using American English dictionaries in the development of my argument, similar practices in other countries *may* also obtain. This could be especially so in countries where more than one major spoken dialect of the language is in common use by different, educated speakers of the language and especially where other than formal style pronunciations are generally omitted from the lexical source. For example, American English dictionaries

differ from those in Great Britain, as we all know.

British English dictionaries typically record the usages associated with Southern English, the dialect known as 'Received Pronunciation'. Thus *COBUILD* (Collins, 1987) informs its readers that "the accent presented is Received Pronunciation ... which is a special type of Southern British English" (p. xii). And the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978) makes a similar remark on p. xvii: "The form of British speech (accent) that we represent is called *Received Pronunciation*, or 'RP'.... It is common among educated speakers in England, although not in most other parts of the British Isles." John Wells states, in the introduction to his *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*, that "RP is a social accent - not a local accent; RP is associated with the upper end of the social class continuum."

In America, the practice is, as you know, quite different - more typically represented by what the *Webster's New World Dictionary* (3rd College edition, 1988) informs its readers (p. xii): "The pronunciations given in this dictionary are those widely used by good speakers of American English" (i.e. not only by speakers of one regional or one social standard dialect). *The American Heritage College Dictionary* (1993) notes, similarly, (on p. xxxii) that "the symbols represent the pronunciation found in each variety of American English".

1.3 This paper need not review how American (or British) lexicographers treat pronunciation entries. Morton Benson, Evelyn Benson and Robert Ilson discussed such in the 3rd chapter of their *Lexicographic Description of English* (Vol. 14 of *Studies in Language Companion Series*, J. Benjamins, 1986), as have others. (See, e.g., Sidney Landau in his *Dictionaries: The Art of Lexicography* (Scribners, 1984, pp. 92-98.)) It is the second sentence of the BBI chapter 3 that I would wish to rewrite, if I could. It reads: "In a general purpose dictionary there is no need to include *all* [my italics] the details and variant forms that are given in specialized works on pronunciation". (My preference here is to suggest that a rewriting of this sentence might suggest that "there is a need to include more details of pronunciation than presently appear, although not surely all such details".)

1.4 For the purposes of this paper, I shall limit my remarks about the extension of such pronunciation entries to the following:

- (1) Should we consider attending, much more adequately, to the wide use of new pronunciations that continually enter the vocabulary?
- (2) Have we overlooked and/or inconsistently (if not inadequately) treated the known, common regional variants for many classes of words?
- (3) Is it not time to correct the oversight of overlooking variant pronunciations associated with certain groups of standard speakers; of words in certain styles of discourse; and of words in special contexts

that affect their pronunciations?

1.5 To answer and illustrate the above queries I shall refer to one or more editions of the four most widely used American dictionaries, noting how attempts to correct these oversights or inadequacies are being made. Not all of these dictionaries reflect the identical oversights - some have paid more attention to some aspects than have others - and I believe it is to their credit when such has been done. But all of them do demonstrate inadequacies (and inconsistencies) in more than one of these regards. When any one of these major dictionaries does so, it should be a matter of concern: for it does imply that unlike the treatment of etymologies, neologisms, or definitions - where thoroughness and 'up-to-dateness' is a matter of justifiable pride - and all of these dictionaries are exemplary in these regards - the treatment of pronunciations, although carefully and accurately done, "is not yet in the same ballpark" (to use a special Americanism). For my purposes, I plan to refer to different editions of such desk-size dictionaries as *The American Heritage Dictionaries*, *The Random House College Dictionaries*, (*The Merriam-*)*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionaries*, and *Webster's New World Dictionaries*.

2. The treatment of new pronunciations

Too many new pronunciations, in common use, take too long to find their ways into our dictionaries. I decided to check the pronunciations of four words, each of which was entered with a single (please read "acceptable") pronunciation in the *Unabridged Webster's International Dictionary*, second edition, 1934 (and in abridgements based thereon): *eustachian* as [justeikiən], *gaseous* as [gæsiəs], *placard* as [p.lə'kɑrd], and *tercentenary* as [tə'sentə'neri]. Yet in each instance the alternative, or variant pronunciation of each word was already in my, and my colleagues', lexicon (i.e., the form we typically used), by this date. The alternative pronunciations for three of these words did find their way into the 1947 *American College Dictionary*; but *gaseous* still appeared with only the three-syllable form. (You should know that I was on the pronunciation consultant staff of that volume and can be partially blamed for that oversight!). All of the alternative forms do presently appear in our current dictionaries.

Editors and publishers make a special point in their advertising of stating that their dictionaries contain the "newest definitions" (*AHCD*, 1993) or: "more than 20,000 new words" (*WNWD*, 1980) or "the most up-to-date" (*RHCD*, 1984). No such claim for new pronunciations is made by any of them, in their advertising, for such does not seem to be a matter as important. To illustrate: a check of the entry for the word *herb-herbal* in the 1991 *RHWCD* reveals the following: It enters only the (urb) pronunciation, with the note that (hurb) is "especially British". The *RHCD* (1984) had entered both

pronunciations, with no comment. *Webster's 10th* (1993) enters "\`ərb\, US also and British usu \`hərb\". As an aside, Wells' *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (1990) enters *only* the spelled form for American speakers, yet back in 1944 (and in editions since) Kenyon and Knott entered both forms in their *Pronouncing Dictionary of American English*. The *AHD* (1969) does enter both forms. The inconsistency in these major dictionary sources can be enlightening to the dictionary collector if confusing to the uninitiated reader. But the differences do tell us something about approaches to pronunciation entries. Similar comments can be made about the treatment of such words as *harass* (with the two different stress patterns) or *often* (with and without the /t/) in the different sources - which I have previously commented on for the *Cambridge Language Survey* newspaper and which need not be repeated here.

To take two other examples: the treatment of the words *nuclear* and *athlete*, with pronunciations that have fairly recently (i.e., in reasonably widespread use for at least a decade) entered the vocabulary of many educated speakers. The first word has developed a metathesized form and the latter has inserted an epenthetic vowel. The pronunciations, as though spelled *'nukyooler' and *'athelete' appear, as follows, in some of the checked sources: *W10* enters the metathesized pronunciation of *nuclear* with a usage note that "though disapproved by many ... found in widespread use among educated speakers. ... While most common in the United States these pronunciations have also been heard from British and Canadian speakers." (page 796). (Wells in his *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* does enter this metathesized pronunciation, for RP, British, speakers, with a special symbol that indicates that the pronunciation... "is not considered standard. Although generally seen as incorrect, these variants are included because of the fact that they are in widespread use" (preface, p. xiii). The *RHWCD* enters the metathesized form also and adds a pronunciation note that such "is a controversial pronunciation" and also "disapproved of by many ..."

Neither the *WNWD* nor the *AHCD* enter this pronunciation so no usage note is forthcoming in either source. The same situations appear with the word *athlete*: Neither the *WNWD* nor the *AHCD* enter the epenthetic form, but both *Webster's 10th* and the *RHWCD* do. The former enters it as just another pronunciation variant, in addition to the two-syllable form, with no usage note; the latter adds a note about its usage, as follows: "The pronunciations (for *athlete*, *athletic*, and *athletics*) with an unstressed vowel between the first and second syllable, are *usually* considered nonstandard." (my italics)

The treatment of new pronunciations is, thus, not exactly consistent. It is understandable that hesitations will take place - and yet, it would seem, that once a pronunciation is considered in reasonably widespread use by educated speakers, the entry can stand on its own. At the very least, progress in this matter has begun!

3. Treatment of regional differences

3.1 Pronunciation entries are too often limited to a single entry, despite sufficient evidence in the literature that refers to other commonly used variants for a large number of words, some dictated by regional use. And these are often inconsistently entered, when compared with other phonetically-related forms. Thus *WNWD* (1988) shows only (hōrs) for *hoarse*, (stōrē) for *story* and (ô) in the first syllable of *forthcoming*, but both (ō) and (ô) forms for *oral* and *fourth*. The *RHCD* (1984) lists (ô) and (ō), in that order for each of the five words mentioned, while the *AHD* (1969) lists the same words, with the same pronunciations, but in exactly the reverse order - i.e. (ô) and (ō). The *AHCD* (1993) lists the word *clasp* with the single entry (kläsp), as it does with *ask* and *grass*; but *half* and *aunt* are listed with both (ǎ) and (ã) forms. One cannot apply the preface remark on p. xxxii of this dictionary that “a single set of symbols can represent the pronunciation in each regional variety of American English. You (the reader) will supply those features of your own regional speech.” That comment will apply for the vowels of *third* or *go*, with or without the postvocalic /r/, or the diphthongs in *price* and *mouth* but not for the words noted above. *Webster's 10th* does enter both the (æ) and (a) pronunciations for those words, as does the *RHWCD* and the *WNWD*.

3.2 There is no consistent, even cursory, treatment of regional differences, when such might serve the reader well. Communication in the US, like elsewhere, is instantaneous today - through radio and television. Persons in Iowa listen to newscasters born and raised thousands of miles away - in Miami, New York, Washington, D.C., Boston and Chicago, and elsewhere, and they hear pronunciations not always mirrors of their own. If *words* were used differently in these dialects, their meanings would, quite rapidly, find their ways into our dictionaries. Why not similar treatment for pronunciation? For example, *greasy* with both the /s/ and /z/ pronunciations appear in all the desk-size dictionaries mentioned, without mention of regional preferences. Yet all the linguistic evidence notes that these differing pronunciations are, typically, regionally dictated -, i.e. the /z/ form is southern, the /s/ form everywhere else, with occasional /z/ only in overlapping, adjacent areas. These data have been available since at least the Linguistic Atlas reports in the early 1950's. The use of /ɔ/ in “historical long o” plus /r/ words, as in *story*, *boarder*, and *mourning*, is an Eastern variant in America for what appears as /o/ or /or/ in the South and elsewhere. Both pronunciations appear in the dictionaries but they are not regionally labelled, showing their generally restricted use. Yet, the entry for *Oregon* in *WNWD* (1988) lists (ôrəgən, ār-), and “also, but not locally (-gän).” A similar regional comment appears in *W10*, with the note that (-gän) is “chiefly by outsiders”. Thus the reader

finds, for this place name, a clearly identified regional label. *WNWD* (1988) makes a similar comment by noting “also, but not locally -gän.” No such restrictive comment appears in the *AHD* (1969) nor in the *RHCD* although the same pronunciations are entered. And none of the dictionaries checked show if the pronunciation (kolerädo), with /æ/, rather than with /a/ for the penultimate syllable, is regionally restricted - although all show both pronunciations. Kenyon and Knott entered both forms in their 1944 edition with the special note that “observers disagree as to whether - /-rædo/ or /-rædo/ prevails in the state. There is little doubt that in the US as a whole /kælərædo/ prevails.” One must add to this complex statement that the entire northeast and much of the Midatlantic areas of the country do use antepenultimate /a/ as the prevailing vowel. Little wonder, perhaps, that pronunciation notes for this word are missing from all the dictionary entries ... or is it?

3.3 Now let's look at such words as the well-known *merry*, *marry*, *Mary* trio. These words are pronounced differently in different parts of America, with /e/ for all three words in the North Central part of the country, but with three different vowels for each of these words /e, æ, eə/ in the Mid-Atlantic states, including the New York metropolitan area, but with /e, æ, e/ in the South. Thus Southern speakers report that [hæri mærid meri nɪ ðə stæɪz], while their New England cousins would [mæri mæri nɪ ðə stæɪz]. None of our dictionaries identify any regions for any of these pronunciations, perhaps because (they would argue) that such matters more properly belong in pronouncing, not general, dictionaries. But we haven't had a current pronouncing dictionary in the US for 50 years and none seems forthcoming soon! When these variants do appear, the South Carolina reader will no longer wonder when (s)he checks the pronunciations of *declare* and *stair* in *WNWD*, for (s)he will no longer note that the presently listed pronunciation, with the /e/ of *ten* for these words, leaves her (his) pronunciation (and most of their Southern compatriots from Virginia to Texas) with the vowel of /æ/ unmentioned, if not excluded. To complete the comment on this matter, *RHWCD* shows only the vowel of *dare* for these and similar words, while *Webster's 10th* shows both the /æ/ and /e/ vowels, as in the key words, *ash* and *bet*.

4. Treatment of entries associated with social groups

4.1 There are other inadequacies (omissions) that can be noted - for those words associated with certain social groups or certain styles of discourse or in certain contexts. One could raise the point that a failure to enter such pronunciations may well give the unsophisticated readers of dictionaries the

mistaken impression that such (presently unentered) pronunciations are not part of standard usage. Such would be far from reality for many speakers of standard American English.

4.2 Let's look first at some gender-related linguistic differences and note that such matters (not necessarily associated with pronunciation forms) *have* appeared in the sociolinguistic literature for over 20 years. (See, e.g. M.R. Key's earlier essay on "Linguistic Behavior of Male and Female", *Linguistics*, 88, 1972, 15-31 or the more recent D. Tannen *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (Morrow, 1990) and much more.) Research on pronunciation differences (as distinct from word usage, question techniques, syntactic or intonation differences) is, admittedly, not as widespread. Some such data have entered the linguistic literature and, hopefully, more will be forthcoming. Drawing on reports of sex-linked variations that have appeared, one can point to the following sample about American English: there is reported evidence that *February*, with a deleted first /r/ is more likely in the speech of men than in women with a High School education, as is the pronunciation of certain clusters in words like *fifth*, with /t/ for /θ/, while *aunt* with a lowered /a/ is the reported preference by women. All of the above data are reported for the Upper Midwest section of the United States (comprising 5 large states with about 6 million people in H. Allen, "Sex Linked Variation in the Responses of Dialect Information", *JEL*, 19.1, April, 1986). There is, admittedly, too little reported research on these matters. As they are reported, however, they should become matters for consideration - as possible dictionary entries, appropriately identified.

4.3 A similar comment can be made about the forms associated with age-differences, i.e. young vs. old pronunciations. The data, again, are sparse, at present, but they are beginning to appear and editors might well alert their staffs to watch for studies on these matters. A sample comment appeared in A.C. Gimson's, *Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*, rev. by S. Ramsaran, 4th ed., 1989 (E. Arnold, London), p. 239. The comment noted that (in British English) the elided /ə/ is common among schoolchildren in RP speech for such words as *geometry* and *geography*. Such entries do not appear in British dictionaries I have checked (e.g., *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*, 1983; *COBUILD*, 1987; *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 1989). Nor do such pronunciations, so labelled, appear in American dictionaries. Yet all of us, in both countries, are aware of these pronunciations among high school and college students. It may well be too early to enter these forms - for the data are too sparse. Or perhaps entries to this effect can be made, with an appropriate comment. Being aware that such differences do exist is worthy of mention in our dictionaries (in the body of the book, in addition to the preface remarks, if any). As the evidence gathers, such pronunciations *should* be entered. The speech of young people contains

variant forms - part of the standard language in use. As such, it needs to be examined and, if with sufficient frequency of use, recorded in the dictionary.

4.4 Or look at the treatment of deleted unstressed vowels in words like *celery*, *general*, *mystery*, *family*. These pronunciations - as two-syllable words in casual, informal speech styles - are common, expected forms. They appear inconsistently entered in our dictionaries. Thus the word *celery* appears in the *RHCD* (1975) and the *AHCD* (1993) with a three-syllable pronunciation only; both forms, with and without the medial syllable, appear in the *RHWCD* (1992). *Mystery*, *family*, and *general* appear in *WNWD* (1988) with the three-syllable pronunciations first, followed by the two syllable forms, preceded in each instance with the qualifying word "often". The *RHWCD* shows only the three-syllable form for *general*, but both forms for the words *family* and *mystery*, while the 1993 *Webster's 10th* lists the two-syllable pronunciation first for both *family*, and *general*. It seems odd to this reader to find this inconsistent approach in some of the sources noted, especially since the two-syllable form for each of these three words was the first of the two pronunciations listed by Kenyon and Knott 50 years ago.

5. Pronunciation changes due to differences in the phonetic environment

5.1 Let us also look at occurrences that result when certain words appear in the context of normal discourse. For as the meanings of words are derived from their use in differing contexts so are pronunciations of words. One can say, in English, "I did *not* give it to the *girl*. I *gave* it to the *boy*," with the word *to* pronounced, in each instance, as /tə/, not as /tu/. It is the context and resulting stress pattern that dictates the pronunciation as different from the expected /tu/ in the sentences "The word *to* is pronounced /tu/" and "Where are you going to?" And both the stressed and the unstressed pronunciation forms of this word appear in all our dictionaries. Thus speakers do not stress the word *upstairs* similarly in the two sentences: "I'm going to my room upstairs" and "I'm going to an upstairs room". The two different grammatical forms (adv. and adj.) are pronounced with different stresses. When out of context - i.e. as an isolated word - the pronunciation is normally the one associated with the adverbial form, not the adjectival form, with primary stress on the second syllable. *Webster's 10* enters both forms with different stress patterns for the different grammatical categories. *RHWCD* enters one pronunciation, with two strong stresses, for both categories; *WNWD* shows the word with secondary-primary stresses for the adverb, and notes its use as an adjective, but with no separately indicated pronunciation for such. And *AHCD* enters the adverb with two primary stresses and with primary, secondary stresses, in that order, for the adjective. It would not be surprising if a reader checked more than one source and was confused.

5.2 Look at what happens to other, similar words in contexts, where stress shifts take place. The linguistic literature reports numerous examples of such. The word *millionaire* in the sentence “She’s a millionaire” has its primary stress on the final syllable. We shift its stress when it appears in the sentence “She’s a millionaire’s widow”, indicating the primary stress on the first syllable of both words, *millionaire* and *widow*. We do similar stress shifting for the words *nineteen*, *volunteer*, and *ideal* (all with strong stresses on the final syllables) to the strong stresses on the first syllables, when in such sentences as “He’s nineteen years old” or “It’s an ideal place”, etc.. None of these words appear with the different stress patterns for the different contexts in our dictionaries, although the subject of stress rules has been a matter of considerable analysis ever since the Chomsky-Halle *Sound Pattern of English* in 1968, if not before. Without the matter of context affecting pronunciations the dictionary editor appropriately avoids the different entries. Thus although *COBUILD* notes in its preface that the pronunciation for “disappointing” appears with a different stress pattern in the phrase “The result was disappointing” vs. “A disappointing result” (on p. xii), the entry in the body of the dictionary shows only one form, the pronunciation as it would be spoken in isolation.

5.3 Consider what happens to certain other words in the context of speaking for such words as *let*, *give*, and *want*, when in such contexts as “Let me see if I can”, “Give me my books back!” and “I want to go home, now!” In casual, rapid speech each of these words completely assimilates the /v/ or /t/ to the following, adjacent nasal sound. Such assimilations do not occur in “Let Mary see” or “Give Marjorie her books back “ or “I want Michael’s bat”. The different stress patterns in these sentences do have an effect on the pronunciation of the words in question. The changes in the sounds noted in the first three sentences are not allophonic changes, as do occur with the addition of nasality to the vowels of words like “can’t” or the lack of aspiration of the /t/ in “steam”. The changes are distinctive features or phonemic changes. Yet our dictionaries do not show the completely assimilated forms for these words, common as they are in casual, rapid discourse. For context is, at present, not a real consideration for these words. Thus educated speakers (ourselves among them) who use “lemme” (for “let me”) or “gimme” (for “give me”) or “gonna” (for “going to”) or “wannabe” in (“want to be”) do not have these pronunciations reflected in their (our) dictionaries. They will have to wait for a somewhat extended approach to the treatment of pronunciation - one that, hopefully, is on the way in the not too distant future.

6. Conclusion

The extended treatment of pronunciations *is* a matter of concern. The different entries we presently find in our dictionaries (for words such as those described above) is such an indication. I find the present situation, as regards the entry of pronunciations inadequately representative of the phonetic differences used in the United States. Large numbers of speakers (in the millions) do not find their pronunciations in all of the dictionary sources, for words like those mentioned above. As one who has acted as a pronunciation consultant for more than one dictionary publisher, I accept a good part of the blame, along with others of my colleagues in similar positions. We have been, perhaps, inadequately aggressive in suggesting that extended pronunciations entries *are* needed. It is my conviction that, in time, pronunciation entries, more completely treated than they are now, will become the norm. And I hope that that time is not in the too-far-distant-future. It will mean the hiring of additional pronunciation people and consultants and it will require needed space. But, I believe, it is now time to begin on that path, applying comments that may appear in the prefaces but not mirrored in the bodies of the books. The text of the dictionary *is* the record of current usage. It will add to the usefulness of the dictionaries we purchase, for they will then contain a more complete coverage of the language we use. It will meet a need.

