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A reader has inquired about the pronunciation that they describe as *knowun* for the word *known*. This pronunciation results in a disyllabic version of the word, with two syllables instead of one and a weak unstressed vowel in the second syllable. Sometimes, but not always, there is a /w/ sound between the two syllables.

There is a small set of verb forms like *known* that often have this pronunciation. Others are *blown*, *flown*, *grown*, *mown*, *shown*, *sown*, *thrown*, along with related words like *overgrown*, *unknown*, and so on. Add to this *sewn*, which rhymes with these *own* words. I have also heard disyllabic versions of *hewn*.

These forms are the past participles of verbs like *know*, used in certain tenses, as in *we have known*. These participle forms can also be used as adjectives, as in *a known problem* or *the garden is overgrown*.

The disyllabic pronunciation of *own* words has been present in New Zealand English for some time. It was commented on in a handwritten amendment to a pronunciation guide for radio



**Knownen unknowens**

**Language Matters**

announcers some time around the late 1930s or early 1940s, and it has been found in archival recordings from the 1940s.

It is not unique to New Zealand, having been reported in Australia, Scotland, and South Africa, but it is probably more widespread here, with one study in the 1990s reporting that half of a sample of over 1000 speakers used the disyllabic form.

My own corpus of recordings of New Zealand English includes a large number

of speakers reading sentences that include *thrown* (*That's the ninth dirty shirt you've thrown in the laundry*) and *overgrown* (*The footpaths have become decidedly overgrown*).

While nearly two-thirds of *overgrown* in this collection have disyllabic realisations, only about a quarter of cases of *thrown* do. This difference is probably due to the sentence context – *thrown* is followed by a vowel and is typically not emphasised by speakers in this sentence, while *overgrown* is at the end of the sentence and is emphasised by most of the speakers.

Note also that *overgrown* is being used as an adjective and *thrown* as a verb form, though I am not aware of any evidence that this difference might be important.

What remains unclear is why this form exists. It does not seem to be an example of a general change that affects all instances of a particular sequence of sounds, as we do not see similar comments for words that rhyme with *known*, such as *bone* or *loan*.

Nor does it seem to be a change that is intended to keep apart homophones such as *grown/groan*, *mown/moan*, or *thrown/throne*, though that may be an unintended consequence. If the aim of pronunciation was to disambiguate these forms, then it is not clear why it is also found for the other words in the set, such as *known*, *shown*, etc, where there are no homophones with which they might be confused.

It has been suggested that the disyllabic pronunciation might have arisen through analogy with other participle verb forms that end in *n* and already have a final weak syllable, like *taken* and *fallen*, although this analogical process is not found for other participles that end in *n*, such as *seen* or *slain*.

Or the disyllabic versions might be a re-emergence of earlier such forms – the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives examples of earlier spellings that might reflect a disyllabic pronunciation, such as Chaucer's *knownen* from the 14th century. These might have persisted in regional British accents that fed into New Zealand English. Much is *unknownen*.

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**THE IRISH TIMES**  
**One disaster too many for Haitians**

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

And then came Grace, a brutal coup de grace, it seemed. Struggling still to dig out victims from the recent 7.2 magnitude earthquake, whose death toll has risen to 2000, Haiti's people were lashed four days later by tropical storm Grace. Its torrential rains flooding makeshift camps and putting further pressure on already overstretched emergency services.

Hospitals are currently overwhelmed with thousands seriously injured by the earthquake.

The island, population of 11 million, is considered the poorest country in the Western hemisphere and has never really recovered from a devastating quake in 2010 that killed about 300,000

**Viewpoint**

people and caused an estimated US\$8 billion in damage.

A subsequent cholera outbreak in 2016 killed at least 10,000 Haitians and sickened 800,000 and that year the country was also pounded by Hurricane Matthew, the worst storm to hit it in half a century.

The quake came about five weeks after Haiti's President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated.

Relief efforts have been largely coordinated by from the international airport by international aid groups. There was little sign, reports say, of the Haitian authorities, underscoring the power vacuum left in a country without a president or a functioning government.