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Shunshet over Aushtralia, as some English speakers might say.

A shtrange shift

Language Matters

A recent question from a reader of this column concerns their observation that "some people can't say 'straight' without inserting an h ('shtraight')". This is something that linguists have been noticing too, and not just in New Zealand.

The phenomenon involves the pronunciation of the /s/ sound using a tongue position that is further back in the mouth than expected. (Note that I am using / / here to indicate pronunciation.) Linguists call this /s/-retraction. To get a sense of what is involved, produce a /s/ sound and move your tongue to where it would be for the "sh" sound. You will probably find that, as well as a change in position, this also involves a different grooving of the tongue.

This /s/-retraction happens in certain contexts more than in others – it is particularly frequent in the sequences /str/ and /stj/, where /j/ is the sound sometimes called "yod". This is the sound at the beginning of the word *yellow* and which, in some English varieties, also occurs after /t/ in words like *Stewart*. In these varieties, /s/-retraction can result in "Shtewart". Former prime minister John Key is a standout exponent of /s/-retraction, with pronunciations such as "Aushtralia" and "shtudent".

As the correspondent's spelling "shtraight" implies, this retracted /s/ is similar to the sound often written with "sh", as in *shop*. There is of course no h inserted in the pronunciation, and the spelling "sh" represents a single speech sound. "Sh" is not the only spelling for this sound – think of words ending in "-tion", such as *vaccination*. Spelling reformers have suggested that English spelling is so daft that *fish* could be written "ghoti".

Although the origins of this example are unclear, it is often attributed to Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw. This spelling is based on the use of "ti" as in *nation* for the final "sh" sound, "gh" for /f/, as in *enough*, and "o" for the vowel, as in the first syllable of *women*. (I will comment in another column on the widespread NZ pronunciation of *women* as "woman", but the example still works for such speakers, as the vowel is still the one they would have in *fish*.)

It is not clear why /s/-retraction occurs, but the fact that it is found in some sound contexts (notably /str/ and /stj/) more than others suggests it may be related to changes in other parts of those sound sequences, such as how /tr/ and /tj/ sequences are pronounced in *train* and *tune*, for instance. The /s/-retraction is not unique to New Zealand – an international team of researchers has tracked it in accents of English in Scotland, the United States and Canada.

Nor is it new – recent VUW MA graduate Reuben Sanderson investigated a historical database of NZ English and found evidence of /s/-retraction in recordings of speakers born from the 1950s onwards.

He also noted that it shows up in some other contexts – in /st/ sequences with no following /r/ or /j/. In all of these contexts, the shift from /s/ to "sh" is possibly tolerated because it does not lead to ambiguity. English has no words with "shtr" that would be confused with words with "str"; "shtreet" is a variant pronunciation of *street*, not a different word.

There are historical parallels in a closely related language, German, where most dialects (apart from some northern varieties) shifted a long time ago from initial /sp/, /st/, /sl/, /sm/, /sn/, /sw/ to "shp", "sht", etc. For instance, *sprechen* (to speak) has a "shpr" onset. So perhaps English /s/-retraction is not so shtrange after all.

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South China Morning Post

Co-operation better than confrontation

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Viewpoint

The first 100 days of an American presidency is a time for evaluation. Joe Biden took office with the promise of an end to the chaos of the four years of his predecessor, Donald Trump, and a long list of pledges.

His administration has been able to quickly turn its attention to foreign policy, rejoining international organisations and agreements that were withdrawn from and rekindling neglected alliances, while continuing an approach towards China that has no clear end goal other than outdoing it as a competitor.

In his first speech to the joint houses of Congress on Wednesday, Biden focused on regaining global standing and influence, mentioning President Xi Jinping by name three times and frequently referring to the competition from China and other countries and the need to "develop and dominate the products and technologies of the future". A recent virtual climate summit hosted by Biden and attended by 40 leaders including Xi, at which new American carbon-cutting goals were announced, aimed to prove the US was committed to multilateralism.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said relations with Beijing will be based on confrontation, competition and co-operation. But so far, the focus has been mostly on confrontation. Given the risks, it would make more sense for Biden to set aside confrontation in favour of co-operation.