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I was surprised when, after last year's attack on the US Congress, the word *shaman* came up, and it was pronounced with the first syllable sounding like *shah*. Personally, I have always pronounced this word with the first syllable rhyming with *pay*.

So I checked my usual sources, and was very surprised to find that the preferred pronunciation given for British English was with the word beginning like *sham*. This might not be completely up to date, but my sources are from this century, and not particularly old. It seems that, while preferences may differ in Britain and the US, all three pronunciations are possible in both varieties.

I was surprised again when the Omicron variant of Covid was announced, to hear *Omicron* being pronounced with a short first vowel sound, and a short I. Again, I consulted my sources, and found that long and short first vowels and long and short I-sounds are all considered standard in all combinations. In this case, we can stress either the first or the second syllable, too.

While variation in pronunciations is not rare, it is still a bit surprising to find



Jacob Chansley, the so-called "shaman" from the US Capitol riot last year. The word can be pronounced several ways, as can "Omicron".

Omicron variants

Language Matters

such a wide range of pronunciations all being given equal status. One of the things that having a "standard" pronunciation does, typically, is reduce the amount of variation that is sanctioned (and, of course, who does the sanctioning is an interesting question with no easy answer).

The word *performance*, for instance, is

not listed as having a standard pronunciation with an initial [pr] (as in the word *prefer*), even though it is a pronunciation which is regularly heard (at least in New Zealand). And since we are talking about *pronunciation*, the version with the first bit sounding like *pronounce* is only listed as being "considered incorrect" – thus recognising its existence, but not encouraging it.

Sometimes, differences in pronunciation arise because people

analyse a word to different extents. The classic example here is *kilometre*. If you think this is made up of *kilo* and of *metre*, you probably stress the first syllable; if you just see it as the name of a unit with no internal meaning, you probably stress the second syllable, thus putting the stress three syllables from the end – an increasing pattern in English stress more generally.

The more frequently a word is used, the less you are likely to think about the bits that make it up; the less you think about the bits that make it up, the more likely you are to treat it as an overall pattern.

Most of us do not see the word *carriage* as being related to *carry*, as is historically the case. The word *biopic* is stressed on the first syllable if you think of it as made up of a bit of *biography* and a bit of *picture*, but stressed on the second syllable if you just see it as a new kind of film.

Rarity is a factor which leads to variable pronunciation (and foreignness is another). This cannot be the entire story, though, because Britons apparently use the word *centimetre* more often than *kilometre*, but still (according to Professor John C. Wells of University College London) prefer to stress the O rather than the I in *kilometre*, but stress the first syllable in *centimetre*.

The main conclusion you can draw is that appeals to logic rarely convince people, and rarely influence the way the language develops. The subconscious patterns that we follow are more abstract than we might realise.

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THE SCOTSMAN
Medical marvel not to be ignored

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

As of January 5, nearly 4.4 million people in Scotland had received their first dose of Covid vaccine, 4m their second, and more than 3m a third "booster" shot. However, while this is significantly higher than in many other parts of the world, there is still considerable room for improvement. Vaccines have been shown to be safe and highly effective at preventing serious Covid infections, but there are still those who resist being inoculated.

It is clear the pandemic continues to cause major problems for society at large. As should have been clear from the start, vaccinations are our best way out of this crisis. We can be thankful that the

Viewpoint

uptake of vaccines in Scotland and the UK has been high enough not to prompt politicians to seriously consider Draconian measures like compulsory jabs. But those who have still not volunteered should reconsider.

There are some people who have genuine reasons to be wary of getting the vaccine, such as adverse reactions to inoculations in the past. However, they should consult their doctor or seek advice from other official sources about the benefits and risks before making their final decision. The speed at which effective Covid vaccines were developed was a medical marvel and one we are fools to ignore.