



A painful courtship of spelling and pronunciation



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

IF ENGLISH spelling cannot be trusted to tell us clearly how to pronounce words, then our only recourse is to pronounce words the way they are spelt.

The phenomenon is known as "spelling pronunciation" and goes back at least to the introduction of obligatory education in the 19th century.

Two examples will serve to make the general point. The first concerns the little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead; when she was good she was very, very good, but when she was bad she was horrid.

"Forehead" rhymes with "horrid", as it did for some speakers well into the 20th century. For the majority of speakers, though, it rhymes with "saw red". The other case is the case of the waistcoat, once pronounced as "weskit". In both cases, the modern pronunciation has been remodelled on the spelling.

The two examples given above have taken place in British English as well as in New Zealand English, but there are some cases considerably more common in New Zealand than in Britain. Instances affecting names are particularly common.

The names Davis and Davies, Johnson, Johnston and Johnstone are often distinguished in New Zealand, but much less frequently in Britain.

In Britain, Anthony is usually pronounced just the same way as Antony, with the "th" as in Thames; here it is usually pronounced with the "t" as in "anthropology". The British place Tren-

tham is pronounced with the "th" as in Thames, whereas here it is not.

In Wellington we have Marjoribanks St, usually pronounced as if it started with the name Margery, though there are still some Wellingtonians who pronounce it as though it started with March.

We also have Reading St, now pronounced like the Reading cinemas, following the town of Reading in England, but once, I believe, pronounced like reading a book. But Beauchamp St is still pronounced as Beecham.

We occasionally hear the "l" pronounced in Palmerston, and usually hear the "qu" in Jacqueline pronounced as in "quick", which follows an American but not a British pattern.

My colleague Janet Holmes is frequently addressed by New Zealanders with the "l" in Holmes pronounced, though she herself does not pronounce it.

With Scottish and Irish names, we have even greater difficulty. Catriona usually takes the stress on the "o", rather than on the "i" as it would in Scotland (with the "o" virtually unsounded), and we rarely pronounce Menzies as "Mingus", which is the Scottish pronunciation.

WE USUALLY hear the "o" in ceremony given its full weight, while in Britain it would be reduced; I have also heard the "o" in botanical pronounced as in "go", and I frequently hear the noun estimate pronounced with a full "a", as

though it were the verb.

In a previous column, one of my colleagues discussed the word worry, rhyming with sorry, and I have also heard wonder pronounced just like wander and slovenly pronounced with a short "o" rather than a short "u" sound.

Wednesday is sometimes heard with the "d" pronounced, schedule is more and more pronounced with the "sch" pronounced as in school or scheme and not as in schist. Everywhere in the world, nephew is now usually pronounced with the "ph" pronounced as in photograph, though it used to be pronounced as a "v".

In all of these cases, the New Zealand option is to follow the spelling where that option is open.

Occasionally, we find something that goes in the opposite direction. Students now regularly write "pronunciation" because that is what they say, even though the spelling given in dictionaries and the like is still "pronunciation" and the standard pronunciation of "pronunciation" makes it unlike "pronounce".

But if we re-spell to match our pronunciation, and re-pronounce to match our spelling, eventually we will end up with a system more straightforward than the present one.

It might be a painful process getting there, though.

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