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A matter of stress makes all the difference to what you mean



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ENGLISH has a set of noun-verb pairs that are differentiated by stress instead of by the suffix which distinguishes “assertion” from “assert”.

An example is provided by “import”, though not everyone makes the distinction with this word. If you decide to imPORT something, the stress goes on the second syllable, but the thing that you imPORT is an IMport, with stress on the first syllable.

What seems in this example to be a strange way of relating nouns to their corresponding verbs is really because the rules for stressing nouns are not quite the same as the rules for stressing verbs.

Even where pairs are not related, we find the same pattern arising, so that the verb inCITE has stress on the second syllable, while the noun INsight has the stress on the first syllable. A FOREarm has nothing to do with whether you wish to be foreARMed.

Since we are used to suffixes showing the difference between nouns and verbs, it may be surprising to learn that there are more than 100 pairs in English in which stress is used instead – pairs of two-syllable words with the same spelling where the stress indicates the part of speech.

With “import”, the stress is the only difference between the noun and the verb. There are many others that are similar – digest, discharge, discount, exploit, impact, increase, mandate, transfer, and so on. In rather more cases, though, at least one of the vowel sounds also changes.

In compress, conduct, consort and object the first vowel is reduced to the indefinite vowel sound that linguists call “schwa” in the verb versions, but has a full value in the noun versions when it is stressed.

We find not only noun-verb pairs related like this, but also pairs involving adjectives – consider “absent” (stressed ABsent when it is an adjective, but you abSENT yourself when it is a verb) and “minute” where the noun meaning 60th part of an hour seems to have nothing to do with the adjectival meaning extremely small, although they have the same source.

There are a few longer words that show

similar relationships, such as alternate, attribute and envelope, but these are rarer.

More common are those words that end in -ment or -ate which have full vowels in the last syllable when they are verbs, but not when they are adjectives or noun.

These include associate, elaborate, estimate, graduate, sophisticate, or compliment, implement, supplement, and so on.

I use more than 30 of this type but there are many more still listed in dictionaries.

And this raises an interesting point about these pairs: they seem to join or be lost from the list without obvious explanation. Comment, costume and suffix are just three that used to work like “conduct” but no longer do – for me, at least. “Research” is an example that has only recently vanished from the list.

With the -ate words, “estimate” is now on the cusp. Even professional broadcasters are not always sure how to pronounce it.

Conjugate and infuriate seem to have vanished in one of the relevant uses, but once worked the same way.

All this makes the point that you should never assume that English is easy. This point is made in another way by reports of things said, but not intended.

Perhaps the wartime headline of “Churchill flies back to front” was intended as a joke, but I presume that the item in a Scottish paper complaining that “The Duchess wore nothing to show she was the recipient of four Scottish honours”, if genuine, was unintended.

A colleague drew my attention to an advertisement for a “preloved women’s fashion show”, and I hope the preloved women who attended had a good time.

But sometimes these things seem to go beyond a joke, as in the badly named British institution, the National Centre for Domestic Violence.

Sometimes near enough is really not good enough, and we have to think carefully about the effect we make, at the risk of being unintentionally offensive.

Laurie Bauer is a linguist from Victoria University.