
Why can *recognize* be pronounced without /g/?

On silent letters and French origin in English – and what other explanations there can be

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Using morphological, phonological and etymological arguments to account for competing pronunciations of a word

The problem with *recognize* and its variant pronunciations

Investigating the phonological patterns, especially the stress patterns, of verbs ending in *-ize* such as *finalize*, *constitutionalize*, etc, the word *recognize* has attracted my attention. One would not generally attach too much attention to this word for its phonology: it seems to be a run-of-the-mill case of stressing the third-last (antepenultimate) syllable of a non-transparent derivation by *-ize*. For instance, Nádasdy (2006: 222) treats *-ize* as a basically neutral (strong) suffix, that is one that is not supposed to interfere with stress-patterns and otherwise of the stem to which it is attached. Following established analyses, he divides *-ize* words into two categories, though: those that are derived from a free stem ('*character*' > '*characterize*', '*final*' > '*finalize*'), where stress (indicated by the ' ' mark) does not shift in the derived verb, and those whose stem is non-transparent ('*recognize*', '*categorize*'), and where stress tends to be furthest away from the suffix itself. The fact that *recognize* has a non-transparent derivation means that there is no free English word **recogn*. Ginésy (2004: 126) analyzes *recognize* as morphologically having a double prefix, *re-* and *co-*, which reduces the stem to Latinate *-gn-*, which is always bound in English. Whether his etymological analysis is

warranted for the contemporary morphology of *recognize* is at least disputable today, but he correctly claims that '*recognize*', with stress on the initial syllable, behaves like a non-transparent derivation so it receives antepenultimate stressing. In other words, the most wide-spread pronunciation of *recognize*, with initial stress, is generally unproblematic in the literature: it is a case of non-transparent derivation by *-ize* with antepenultimate stressing.

Curiously, however, Wells (2008) lists two further possible pronunciations for *recognize*. One is a 'British English but non-Received Pronunciation' variant where stress is final:



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recognize /rekəg'naiz/. Even more interestingly, he points out a pronunciation 'generally considered incorrect': /'rekənaiz/, that is without /g/. This /g/-less pronunciation is listed as a regular variant in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE, 2009). It is mainly this latter variant that deserves special attention. From an orthographic point of view, one could be tempted to jump to the hasty conclusion that <g> is here a silent letter just like the <g> in *sign*, *malign*, *paradigm* or *phlegm* and a few others, all of them borrowed from French, where the <g> before a nasal <m> or <n> is mute in English. This /g/-less pronunciation of *recognize* is worth discussing at some length because in fact it does not conform to established patterns of silent <g> and also because there does seem to be a phonological explanation, rather than one based on etymology, for the relative currency of this /g/-less variant. The tentative explanation proposed in this paper has to do with the suffix *-ize* itself, and the form can be analyzed as a special case of non-transparent derivation.

Patterns of silent <g> – *recognize* does not fit them

The orthographic rule for silent <g> seems not to be convincing as accounting for the /g/-less variant of *recognize*, because a silent <g> is never found in the position where *recognize* /'rekənaiz/ has it. It is to be noted here that in initial <gn>, every <g> is silent (*gnaw*, *gnostic*, etc) – such examples are excluded as irrelevant from the present discussion altogether, because the silent <g> examined here occurs among the letters in coda (final) rather than onset (initial) syllabic positions. A pre-nasal silent <g> occurs among the letters in the coda of a stressed final syllable or, more rarely, of an unstressed final syllable (this syllable having either a full vowel or a reduced vowel). To collapse these environments: silent <g> occurs among the letters in the coda of final syllables. Otherwise the <g> is regularly pronounced before a nasal. Examples are shown in (1a–b) below for silent <g>, while (1c–d) show examples of pronounced <g> before a nasal.

The patterns look somewhat involved but are not inextricably complex. Etymological pre-nasal <g> is silent in English when it comes in the final (or only) syllable of a content word, irrespective of whether or not it is stressed in a polysyllabic word. Data in Table 1 columns (a) and (b) cite a few examples. Most frequently, the vowel of this syllable is a stressed or unstressed diphthong, /e/

or /aɪ/, although *phlegm*,¹ *apophthegm* and *diaphragm*, with short stressed vowels, and *sovereign*, *foreign*, with a reduced vowel, behave in the same way: the <g> is silent. The words in column (b) are somewhat heterogeneous: *paradigm* and *diaphragm* have a full vowel, and for this reason they are given some prosodic prominence in some analyses, while *foreign* (modern French feminine *foraine*) and *sovereign* (modern French feminine *souveraine*) have an unetymological <g>. This extra <g> is possibly due to the digraph spelling of the final syllable of these words, which used to rhyme with *reign* and *feign*, where the <g> is etymological. These two words are cases of orthographic analogy, underlining the contemporary observation that <g> is silent when it comes in the final syllable. The important point to make here about *recognize* is that the /g/-less pronunciation /'rekənaiz/ does not fit either of the 'silent patterns' since its putative silent <g> is not final.²

On the other hand, the most widespread variant, /'rekəgnaiz/, is also problematic with respect to silent letters. As columns (c–d) of Table 1 show, orthographic pre-nasal <g> is regularly pronounced when it comes in a non-final syllable, where it is either in the coda of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable or where it is in the coda of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. In other words, orthographic pre-nasal <g> is pronounced when it is the coda at the boundary of a stressed and an unstressed syllable. It does not matter in what order the stressed and unstressed syllables follow each other in the word. Numerous examples in (c–d) have a weak suffix: *-tion*, *-ic*. Incidentally, this latter phonological context accounts neatly for the non-RP final-stressed pronunciation /'rekəg'naiz/ listed by Wells (2008): the stressed syllable *-nize* includes the suffix *-ize*. (The final stressing of this variant also implies that *-ize*, when it attracts stress on itself, is exceptionally a weak suffix rather than a strong suffix as generally assumed – but this issue will not be pursued any further here.) It should also be noted in this context that *recognition* has the primary stress on this syllable, which is perfectly regular, and that *recognizable* can be pronounced with primary stress on *-nizable*.

As to the two remaining variant pronunciations of *recognize*, it can be observed that no single pattern fits either variant of *recognize*. On the one hand, /'rekəgnaiz/, with initial stress and /g/, fits neither the 'silent patterns' nor the 'pronounced patterns', since its <g> is not final to be silent and not at the boundary of a stressed and an

Table 1: <g> before a nasal letter in English and stress-patterns (examples taken from Nádasy, 2006: 82, Sobkowiak, 2004: 120, and Wells, 2008)

silent <g>		pronounced <g>	
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
final stressed	final unstressed	stressed syllable	unstressed syllable
syllable	syllable	followed by another syllable	followed by a stressed syllable which is part of a weak ending
... 'V(V)N#	'...V(V)N#	... '(C)Vg.nV...	...Vg'NV...
'sign	'paradigm	'signal	resig'nation
ma 'lign	'diaphragm	'signature	paradig'matic
a 'lign	'apophthegm	'magnet	phleg'matic
be 'nign	'foreign ³	ma 'lignant	recog'nition
de 'sign	'sovereign ⁴	'lignite	ig'nite
re 'sign		'cognizance	ig'nore
		physi'ognomy	ig'noble
'reign		'ignorant	prog'nosis
'feign		'igneous	impreg'nation
'deign		'ignimbrite	pig'ment
cham 'pagne		'ignominy	seg'mental
cam 'paign		im 'pregnable	
		'pegmatite	
im 'pugn		'pigment	
op 'pugn		'segment	
'phlegm		<i>but</i> 'poignant ⁵	recog'nize (non-RP)

V = vowel, C = consonant, () = optional, # = word boundary marker, ' = primary stress

unstressed syllable to be pronounced (<g> is at the boundary of two unstressed syllables). On the other hand, /'rekənaɪz/, with initial stress but no /g/, also does not fit the 'silent patterns' since <g> is not final, and it does not fit the 'pronounced patterns' since <g> is not at the boundary of a stressed and an unstressed syllable. The closest analogy for this stress pattern is 'stalagmite /'stæləgmɑɪt/, which has /g/ in exactly the same phonotactic position – but there are no recorded variants for this word. The verb *impregnate* /'ɪmpregnet/ is also similar for its stress-pattern and even has a verbal suffix, -ate, but it does not have a reduced vowel before /g/ – and again, no variants are recorded. The fact that these words also have a pronounced /g/ show that the rule aims at silent letters: if

there is no reason for the <g> to be silent, it will be pronounced. In this section it has been pointed out that the /g/-less variant of *recognize* does not fit established patterns of silent <g>, and it has also been noted that in fact neither the /g/-ful nor the /g/-less variant have anything to do with silent letters. If *recognize* can be pronounced without /g/ (unlike *stalagmite* and *impregnate*), it must have a very different reason from the orthographic rule of silent <g>.⁶

Before moving on to discussing why there is a /g/-less variant for *recognize*, it should perhaps be added for clarity's sake that, from a phonological point of view, there is no silent /g/ in any of the above words: the mismatch between the pronunciation and the spelling of these words is totally

irrelevant. There is no phonological sense in saying that *sign* /'sain/ has a silent /g/ while *sine* /'sain/ does not. The two are homophones today. It is only their morphological alternations that betray their different etymologies: *sign* happens to have relatives like *signal* or *signature*, both with /g/, while *sine* has *sinusoid*, which lacks /g/. But *sign* and *sine* do not have silent sounds when pronounced, of course.

A suggested (morpho)phonological explanation why /'rekənaɪz/ is possible

The reason why it is important to look for a contemporary phonological explanation for /'rekənaɪz/ is because *recognize* is not obviously perceived as a French word in contemporary English. Moreover, it is definitely not used in contemporary French with any comparable frequency, if it can be said to still exist in the first place. According to the OED, *recognize* is first attested in 1388/89 in English, so it is not a recent borrowing. It is also known that the /g/-less variant has been around at least since 1791, and probably much earlier, because Walker (1791: 45)⁷ makes a comment on its usage: 'Some affected speakers, either ignorant of the rules for pronouncing English, or over-complaisant to the French, pronounce *physiognomy*, *cognizance* and *recognizance*, without the *n*;⁸ but this is a gross violation of the first principles of spelling.' This would suggest that affected speakers of English, trying to imitate French /ɲ/ or /g/-less pronunciations, had taken up *recognize* without /g/: it is then a later variant, and the /g/-ful variant can legitimately be recognized as primary. Interestingly, it is these three words that still show variation between the presence or absence of /g/: Wells (2008) has a /g/-less variant for both *physiognomy* and *cognizance*. It is possible that Walker had tapped into some contemporary English phenomenon, which he interpreted to be affected speech. For instance, modern French has *physionomie*, without <g> in the spelling or /ɲ/ in the pronunciation, and the French agent noun *physionomiste* is attested since the sixteenth century and seems to have always been spelt without <g>. For *physiognomy* and its derivatives at least, it seems safe to say that English did not borrow /g/-ful versions from French in the first place, but has inserted one based on Latinate etymology just as in *doubt* and *debt*, where the does not come from French. This would make the /g/-ful forms spelling pronunciations. Furthermore, the

cognate forms of *recognize/cognize* seem to have been obsolete by this time in French. It is hard to see how they could serve for any model, then – the modern form (*re*)*connaître* could not influence *recognize*. The point to be made here is that although silent <g> heavily overlaps with real or imaginary French origin, the contemporary patterns of silent <g> do not cover the case of *recognize* (or *physiognomy* for that matter). Consequently, it must have some phonological importance that this group of words, but not *stalagmite* or *impregnate*, show variant pronunciations. While the etymological explanation has its merits in accounting for why a /g/-less variant emerged in the first place, it is somewhat simplistic, because there seem to be reasons to think that *recognize* has undergone some morphophonological reinterpretation in its history. In other words, modern English *recognize* must have better reasons for keeping a /g/-less variant than merely claiming French origin.

There is an interesting morphophonological observation concerning *recognize*. It is known that the addition of strong-boundary suffixes such as agentive *-er*, *-ing* or *-ment* does not interfere with the pattern of silent <g>: *designer*, *signing*, *alignment* – all without /g/. The suffix *-ize*, as pointed out above, is generally considered a strong or neutral suffix: therefore it should not interfere with silent <g>. As a matter of fact, one could propose that the pronunciation of *recognize* without /g/ is a good indicator that *-ize* is indeed a strong-boundary suffix: the verb clearly comes from /'rekən/ # /aɪz/ > /'rekənaɪz/. The form /'rekən/ is incidentally an attested free-standing phonological form in English, spelt <reckon>. This word is etymologically distinct from *recognize*. From a phonological point of view, however, the form /'rekənaɪz/ does look as if derived from **reckon* > *reckonize*. The morphological problem is that *reckon* is not used as a noun or adjective in contemporary English, not even in idioms. This is problematic, since *-ize* attaches to noun and adjective stems, not to verbs. It can be said that this is a non-transparent derivation, in the sense that only the phonological form of *reckon* is needed for the derivation. Nevertheless, even semantically the derivation from *reckon* 'to calculate an amount, to guess a number without calculating it exactly' seems to fit in with the general semantics of *-ize* suffixation: *recognize* 'to accept or admit that something is true'. At any rate, the two meanings are probably close enough to have a potential interference even through folk etymology and, crucially, to prolong the currency of the /g/-less variant. The hypothetical proposal is, then, that

today *recognize* can be pronounced without /g/ not because of some French interference but because of interference from *reckon*. *Recognize* then, when /'rekəgnəɪz/, is a case of non-transparent derivation from a bound stem *recogn-*, and when /'rekənəɪz/, it is a different case of derivation from the free stem *reckon*. This latter case should also be considered non-transparent, since *reckon* only lends its phonological form (and possibly some of its semantics too).

Conclusions

The paper draws attention to the existence and importance of phonological variants of the verb *recognize*: /'rekəgnəɪz/, /'rekənəɪz/ and even /'rekəgnəɪz/. While the first, most wide-spread variant seems to be a run-of-the-mill derivation by *-ize*, the other two variants are accounted for phonologically. The final stressed variant has been established to be a case where *-ize* exceptionally attracts stress to itself, so that it behaves like a weak suffix. The most important observation about the /g/-less variant is that its graphic and phonological context do not match otherwise established patterns of silent <g>. Therefore, the word is not a case of silent <g>. This observation has pushed the argumentation further: another reason had to be found why <g> can remain silent in this verb. It is tentatively proposed that /'rekənəɪz/ could phonologically come from **reckon* > /'rekənəɪz/. In this manner, words that deviate from patterns of silent <g> but that nevertheless have an optional silent <g> can be accounted for: *physiognomy* can lose its /g/ by analogy with other *-onomy* nouns; *recognize* by phonologically accommodating *reckon* to serve as its phonological (and semantic) base. ■

Notes

1 *Phlegm* used to have /i:/, as Walker (1791: 45) makes clear.

2 It is interesting to note that *physiognomy* does not conform to patterns of silent <g> either, since it is not final.

3 The <g> in this word is not etymological so it does not belong here strictly speaking.

4 The <g> in this word is not etymological so it does not belong here strictly speaking.

5 The phonotactic constraint that does not allow stressed /ɔɪ/ to be followed by a consonant (other than /s/) and another consonant-initial syllable explains why *poignant* cannot be pronounced with /ɔɪg/ – the /g/ must drop: /'pɔɪnənt/. See *moisture* /'mɔɪs tʃə/, with /s/ in the coda of the first syllable.

6 It should perhaps be pointed out that an alternative, more simple, description of the distribution of silent and pronounced pre-nasal <g> would be to say that there is /g/ when a weak suffix is added to the stem and there is no /g/ when it comes in final <gn gm> clusters.

7 My thanks go to Joan Beal, of the University of Sheffield, for pointing this passage out and making it available to me.

8 As Beal (2012: 154) notes, Walker means *g* here ‘since his examples of “French” pronunciation still contain /n/ but not /g/’.

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