
Lacking consonance?

KEITH DAVIDSON

Puzzled by Michael Bulley's 'Consonantal beginnings', in *ET80*
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MICHAEL BULLEY does admit to some difficulty in discussing initial consonant clusters in English, when he says: 'The conventions of writing can mislead us about speech.' While the restoration of the phonetic symbols in the 'full and proper form' of the article (*ET80*) now elucidates some of the puzzles in the previous version (*ET79*), difficulties remain in maintaining a clear distinction between the sound systems of English and the writing system:

I have used IPA symbols where they make for clarity, but the phonetic representation here is more in the style of a dictionary pronunciation guide than of a phonetic transcription.

This appears to be a distinction between citation forms and the representation of actual speech sounds, but it would have helped the discussion to have made the conventional distinction between 'phonemic' representation in slant brackets / / on the one hand and 'phonetic' realisation in square brackets [] on the other – the convention followed in these notes. Bulley's 'phonetic representation' is, however, retained in the quotations from his discussion.

His focus is on 'sound', presumably phonemic distinctions – excluding the sound features of pitch and rhythm. (While these prosodic features may be largely irrelevant to lexical recognition in English, it is arguable that stress shift at least is lexically distinctive in such contrastive pairs as /dɪspjuːt/ (noun) and /dɪs'pjʊt/ (verb) as forms of *dispute* in some accents.) But his phonetic representation is puzzling:

In some people's speech – sometimes, often or always – the [t] of *true* and *tune* is [tʃ] (as in *chew*), and the [d] of *drink* and *duty* is [dʒ] (as in *jaw*), and with *tune* and *duty* in that pronunciation the [j] might also be absent.

It's difficult to know what to make of this: is he really suggesting that in some people's speech

these might not be contrastive pairs, with loss of initial retroflexion in [tɹ], [dɹ] and even of the dental onset [t], [d] – all assimilated to [ʃ], [ʒ]? And the orthography does intervene in the discussion:

... I have already accepted [sf] as an 'uncontroversial' English pairing. The main word here is *sphere* ... [b]ecause *sphere* is a word of such common currency, it and the others, all derived from Classical Greek, sound naturally English, as opposed to the musical terms of Italian origin, like *sforzando*, which remain 'foreign' to the phonetic nature of English.

While the syllabic-initial consonant cluster /ts/ (<z>) may remain relatively 'foreign' in English, the cluster /sf/ evidently is not; the orthographic form <sf-> may well be (in British orthography at least: *Encarta* (1999) records *sferics* as the usual US spelling for British *spherics*) – but that is another discussion.

Reference to the sound systems seems to be lost altogether when Bulley looks at the 'many combinations that are not found in initial position', such as:

*aptitude, amnesia, advice, topknot, capsiz*e

in which he seems quite unaware that we are now dealing with syllable division, and not phonemic consonant clusters at all, i.e.:

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*/ˈapˌtɪtʃud/ (/tj/ → [tʃ]?), /amˈnɪzɪə/, /ədˈvaɪs/
/tɒpˌnɒt/, /kɑpˈsaɪz/ or /ˈkɑpˈsaɪz/*

There are interesting things to be said about predictability in both orthographic and phonemic sequences in English, but mixing the two hardly seems to help things in English as ‘a learnt language’.

References

- Davidson, K. 1999. ‘Breaking the spell’. In *English Today*, 59, pp.3–11.
Encarta. 1999. *World English Dictionary*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing plc.

SNIPPETS 2

Swiss MP heads campaign against growing official use of English

A leading politician in Berne is leading a backlash against the growing use of English in government circle. And 80 of his colleagues, mostly from French speaking cantons, are backing his campaign for more emphasis to be given to Switzerland’s national languages.

The argument was brought to a head when Didier Berberat, a Neuchâtel member of the Social Democratic Party, sent a letter of protest to the Swiss cabinet, complaining: “I don’t understand the increasing need to use English. Our culture is too rich to ignore.”

But he told Swissinfo [Swiss Radio International] he was not asking for the government to legislate that only German, French and Italian should be used in official documents, as is the case in France and Quebec.

He instanced the Swiss Federal Police Office, which went under the name of Swisspol, which he said was only one step away from “Federal Bureau of Investigations.[”] And the body turning out Swiss coins, Swissmint, could be confused with a sweet factory.

But Didier Berberat admitted that not everyone would back his argument.

“As a minority in Switzerland, people who speak French are not very well represented with the administration,” he said, “and I understand that our German speaking counterparts may feel less concerned about this issue.”

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