
A decline in spoken English?

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Some observations on changes in stress in radio and television

“THIS **IS** THE CBC,” says the announcer. Till quite recently, stressing the “is” would have implied that someone had been asserting that it WASN’T the Canadian Broadcasting Company, but not now. Similarly, we are told that the Olympic games **ARE** taking place, tomorrow **WILL** be sunny, and the host of the program **HAS** convened the usual panel.

The CBC is not consciously being defensive, but simply following an increasingly common pattern of stressing unimportant words. Thus prepositions almost always qualify. “We are **AT** the McEwan Centre”; “The music **OF** the choral”; “They are involved **IN** the scandal.” So do previously unemphasized conjunctions, notably “and.” “The President **AND** his advisors are discussing the issue.” In the case of pronouns, stress where the sense does not require it can be not only puzzling but rather misleading. “**SHE** said that the estimated loss was \$2 million”; “**HE** was informed after the event.” The stresses are probably not intended to express scepticism about the speaker, or imply that others were not informed. And the tendency to emphasize what is least important is not limited to particular parts of speech. We hear “A computer-**BASED** system has been set up,” where “based” is much less important to the meaning than “system” or “computer.”

Breaking up clauses and sentences is a different but related issue. Take the statement, “Despite the scandal, a national poll showed that most Canadians still support the Liberal party.” The logical pause is, as indicated here, after “scandal.” A current reading was: “Despite the scandal a national poll / showed that most Canadians still support the Liberal Party.” This is initially confusing because it conflates the scandal and the poll, which are only tangentially related. Similarly with: “The cost is 3.3 / million dollars and the government / will pay half.” Sometimes the meaning conveyed is not

what the composer of the words intended. “The high will be 20 degrees / in Nova Scotia. 25 degrees / in northern New Brunswick.” Juxtaposing Nova Scotia and 25 degrees conveys the wrong message. Similarly with: “The radiation unit is damaged / at Dartmouth Hospital. Service is still available / in Halifax.” “The contract is worth \$4 million. When the first tender was made / it was for \$2 million.”

This mode of speech is still commonest on radio and television, but fast spreading into most people’s speech. Even on the Canadian stage, where one might expect greater conservatism, and regard for the sense, Lear is likely to declaim: “Why should **AE** dog, **AE** horse, **AE** rat have life?” – as if the really important point were whether it was “a” dog or “the” dog. (Admittedly the definite article is still, usually, passed over lightly.) And, although I have drawn examples from Canadian media, the general pattern seems to have originated in the USA, and is now almost as common in the British media. Dickens actually described it in 1844 (though as an American peculiarity) in Martin Chuzzlewit, as the mode of a New York based gentleman, Colonel Diver: “he emphasized all the small words and syllables in his discourse, and left the others to take care of

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themselves – as if he thought the larger parts of speech could be trusted alone, but the little ones required to be constantly looked after” (chapter 16). Dickens may have based this on an individual’s peculiarity of speech, but more likely he was describing a fairly common New York dialect. In either case, Colonel Diver represents the wave of the future.

Why are we all coming to speak like him? The trend appears early and strongly among newsreaders, and here it may be a reaction to seeing only segments of what is to be announced appearing at one time, and being unable to understand the overall context. In this situation, the newsreader would not know which words should be emphasized, in the interests of clarity. Simply stressing all short words, especially prepositions and pronouns, goes a long way to solving that problem. Sports announcers often have the opposite difficulty, that they know all too well what they have to announce because it is short, simple, and has already been repeated many times; for example that a football team has some key players injured and will therefore be weaker for their next game. Yet the newsreader’s solution may also help here. Stressing the unimportant words and fracturing clauses will make the sporting announcement harder to understand, and it may acquire a spurious impression of profundity. Neither of these motives need be conscious.

A further point that may be relevant: in the USA at least, there has been a demand for fairly

inflexible rules of punctuation, perhaps the tradition of a nation that has always included many citizens whose first language is not English, or perhaps simply based on the desire to have as many areas of life as possible firmly defined, like the Constitution. These rules are sometimes arbitrary and irrelevant to the sense; for example, that commas and periods come inside inverted commas, and colons and semi-colons outside. There may be a similar preference for set rules of emphasis in speech, beginning with the newsreaders and spreading outwards.

One might argue that none of this matters much, that listeners will sort out for themselves what is actually meant. Yet speech can be harder to understand than writing, as there is no opportunity to pause and check back, and real misunderstanding is likely. With this kind of annunciation, listeners are likely to put much of their effort into merely decoding the false emphases and elisions. Less attention will be paid to subtleties and implications, or to formulating a critical reaction: the majority are likely to just swallow the message and leave it at that. This is sometimes to the speaker’s advantage, notably with politicians who contradict what they said last month, or state what should be perceived as untruths. With this mode of speech, the audience is less likely to realize what is happening. 1984 is behind us, and some of Orwell’s predictions have come true. ■

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