

## AGE GRADING IN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION PREFERENCES

J.C. Wells

Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, University College London

### ABSTRACT

The results are presented of a survey into speakers' preferences regarding certain words of contentious pronunciation. In some cases sharp age grading was revealed. E.g. for *usage* older people preferred /'ju:zɪdʒ/, but the majority /'ju:sɪdʒ/. Other sharply age-graded words include *nephew*, *suit*, *issue*, *ate*, *deity*, *salt*, *poor*, *patriotic*, *inherent*, *delirious*, *applicable*, *controversy*, *formidable*, *harass*, *kilometre* and *primarily*.

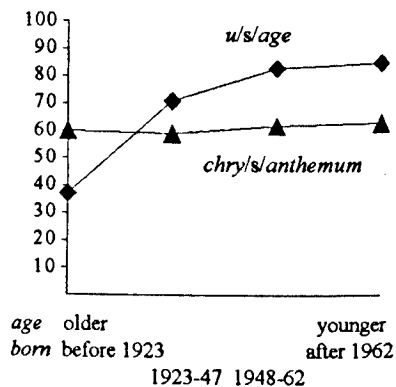
### INTRODUCTION

In compiling the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* [1] I sought to supplement my own intuitions regarding the prevalence of rival variants by carrying out an opinion poll of speakers' preferences for some ninety words known to be subject to fluctuating or contentious pronunciation. This survey revealed, for instance, that for the word *zebra* 83% of the respondents preferred the /e/ pronunciation, only 17% preferring /i:/. The poll was based on a postal questionnaire submitted to a panel of native speakers of British English (BrE). The respondents numbered 275, and were drawn in equal numbers from the north and the south of England, with small numbers of Welsh and Scots. Most were professionally concerned with speech, being academic phoneticians and linguists, teachers, university students, radio announcers or speech scientists and engineers; but over a quarter were volunteers from the general public recruited by personal contact or by an invitation in a Sunday newspaper. All might therefore be termed 'speech-conscious'.

The polling preferences presented in *LPD* were mostly given as overall percentages. In the present paper I examine their possible correlation with respondents' ages, which ranged from 15 to over 80 years.

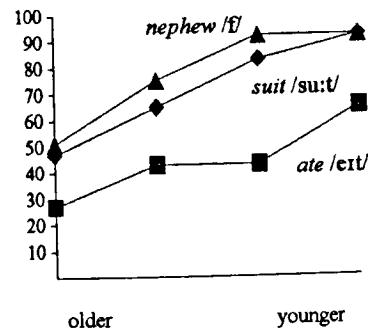
### STEADY STATE VS. CHANGE

There are various words which some speakers pronounce with /s/ and some with /z/. *LPD* records, for example, that in *chrysanthemum* 61% of respondents preferred /s/, and in *usage* 72%. This conceals the fact that in *chrysanthemum* the proportion preferring /s/ is virtually unchanged across all age groups, while in *usage* it ranges from 37% among the over-65's to 85% among the under-26's. Hence we infer that in *usage*, but not in *chrysanthemum*, the language is in a state of change, with /s/ increasingly preferred over /z/. It seems that /'ju:sɪdʒ/ displaced /'ju:zɪdʒ/ as the majority form during the forties, when those born between 1923 and 1947 were growing up.



### AMERICANIZATION?

Sharp age grading was also revealed in *nephew*, *suit*, and *ate*. In each of these words BrE preferences are shown as moving in the direction of the established American (AmE) pronunciation: from /'nevju:/ to /'nefju:/, /sju:t/ to /su:t/, and /et/ to /ert/.

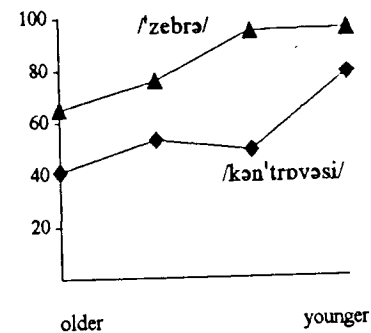


This might lead one to conclude that the most important influence on BrE pronunciation is AmE, and that all or most changes in BrE are to be attributed to American influence. Yet the evidence of other data makes clear that this is not so.

### DIVERGENCE FROM AMERICAN

Indeed there are other words in which the opposite trend appears: movement away from AmE. In *zebra* AmE consistently has /i:/, but it was known that in BrE both /i:/ and /e/ are used; *LPD* showed /e/ as preferred by 83% to 17%. When we compare age groups, we see that in BrE /zi:brə/ is almost exclusively an older people's pronunciation. They young have settled on /'zebrə/, thus striking away from the AmE norm.

In *controversy* the initial stress pattern universal in AmE is progressively being replaced in BrE by antepenultimate /-'trɒv-/ , a British innovation unparalleled in AmE.



### INFLUENCE OF PROFESSION

The dip in the graph — the unexpectedly low vote for the new pattern among the younger middle-aged — may be explained by the fact that this group of respondents contained many BBC radio announcers, for whom the stressing /'kɒn'trɒvəsi/ is something of a shibboleth. There was a clear correlation between being a BBC announcer and preferring initial stress in this word. It is one of the items on which the BBC Pronunciation Unit has in the past given firm guidance, and announcers have evidently made this preference their own.

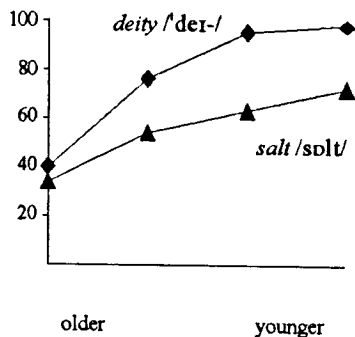
The only other word in the survey to reveal correlation with respondent's profession or occupation was *research*, where a preference for final stress (although common to all groups) is associated particularly with being an academic.

### OTHER VOWEL PREFERENCES

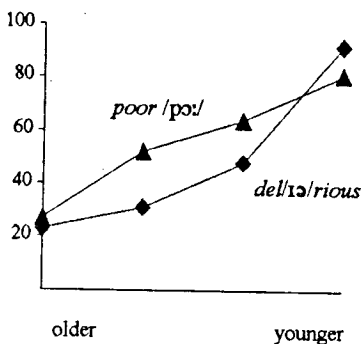
In *deity* the traditional form with /'di:/ is almost entirely confined to those born before the nineteen fifties, having been displaced, for reasons that are not clear, by /'dei-/. Among those born since 1962 preference for the latter form reached 98 percent.

In *salt* it has long been known that there is a form /sɒlt/ in competition with the /sɔ:l/ shown in most dictionaries. It

came as a surprise to me to find that in this word there is fairly sharp age grading, with the proportion preferring the short vowel rising from 34 percent among the oldest group to 72 percent among the youngest.



It is well known that in an increasing number of words the diphthong /ʊə/ is being replaced by /ɔ:/, probably through a process of lexical transfer. In *poor* we find that the proportion preferring a pronunciation identical to that of *pour*, i.e. /pɔ:/, rises from about a quarter among the oldest group to over four-fifths among the youngest.

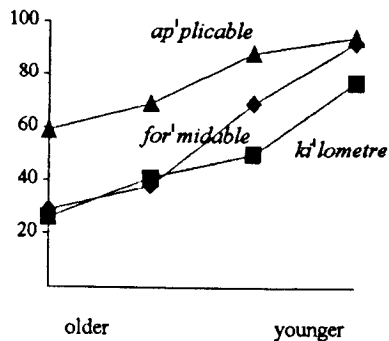


The sharpest age grading found in the survey related to the word *delirious*. The traditional pronunciation has the stressed vowel /ɪ/, as expected on the basis of etymology and orthography. However, for

reasons again unknown and apparently peculiar to this word, a new form with /-ɪɪr-/ has arisen, and is overwhelmingly preferred by younger respondents.

STRESS PATTERNS

Not only in *controversy* but also in a number of other words of four syllables there is a tendency for initial stress to be supplanted by antepenultimate. This is true, for example, of *applicable*, *formidable* and *kilometre*. In all of these there is a steady increase in preference for antepenultimate stress across the age groups; and there is no blip caused by the radio announcers, whose views here coincide with those of the other respondents.



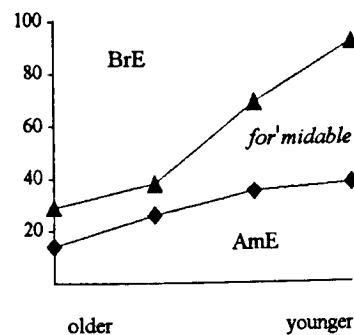
The case of *kilometre* brings us back to the question of possible American influence, since /kɪ'lɑ:məʒə/ is the usual AmE form. As this survey shows, the traditional and logical BrE /'kɪlə'mi:tə/ (cf. *centimetre*, *millimetre*) is being rapidly displaced by /kɪ'lɒmɪtə/.

AN AMERICAN SURVEY

A comparable survey of AmE pronunciation preferences has recently been carried by my doctoral student Yuko Shitara [2]. Her work reveals, for instance, that in *congratulate* and *February* the forms /kən'grædʒəleɪt/ and /'febjuəri/

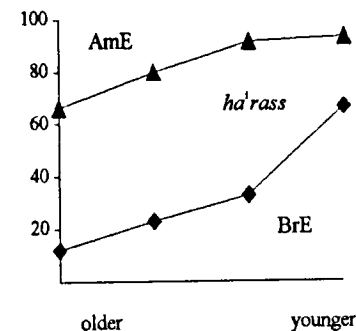
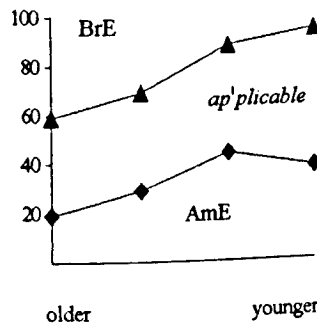
are significantly more favoured by younger than by older Americans; and the younger respondents are significantly more likely to report that *cot* and *caught* are homophonous than their elders.

Several stress patterns are changing both in BrE and in AmE. The graph for *formidable* shows BrE to be in the lead in the movement away from initial stress, and to be changing its preference more rapidly.

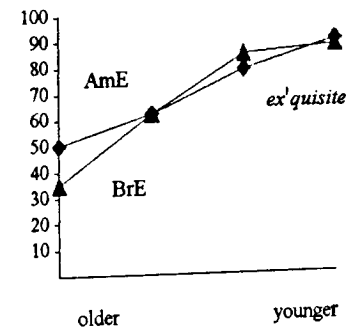


The pattern for *applicable* is similar, though here the change is somewhat further advanced. Here AmE appears to show a recent swing back towards /'æplɪkəbəl/.

In *harass* it is the Americans who are in the lead. Their adoption of final stress (at least in some meanings of the word) is increasingly imitated in Britain.



In one word at least, a change in preferred stress placement is taking place at the same time and at about the same rate in AmE as in BrE. This is *exquisite*, where the stress pattern /'ekskwɪzɪt/ is in the later stages of being displaced by the pattern /ɪk'skwɪzɪt/.



REFERENCES

[1] Wells, J.C. (1990). *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*. Harlow: Longman.  
 [2] Shitara, Y. (1993), "Survey of American pronunciation preferences - a preliminary report." *Speech Hearing and Language, Work in Progress*, Phonetics and Linguistics, University College London, 7: 201-232.