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“A peculiarity of accentuation”. On the Stressing of Disyllabic Noun/Verb Pairs in Late Modern English

Questo articolo si concentra sui commenti espressi dai linguisti nel periodo 1700-1900 sull’accentuazione dei sostantivi e verbi disillabici con prefissi di origine romanza. La distinzione nell’accentuazione di queste coppie, sulla prima sillaba nel caso dei sostantivi e sulla seconda nel caso dei verbi, definita un’accentuazione ‘peculiare’ da John Walker (1826), si era originata in Proto-Germanico, ma era stata distorta in medio inglese, con l’introduzione di coppie di sostantivi e verbi di origine francese, e dunque con un’accentuazione romanza. Lentamente, i sostantivi si adeguarono all’accentuazione germanica, ma nel 18° e 19° secolo si osservano numerosi casi di fluttuazione fra i due modelli. Per questo studio sono state esaminate 200 coppie di verbi e sostantivi disillabici con prefissi romanzi; verranno inoltre discussi i commenti espressi sulla loro accentuazione nei dizionari, grammatiche e manuali di pronuncia pubblicati fra il 1700 e il 1900.

1. *Background*

There is a peculiarity of accentuation in certain words of two syllables, which are both nouns and verbs, that is not unworthy of notice; the nouns having the accent on the first syllable, and the verbs on the last. (Walker 1826: 57, rule 492)

The words to which John Walker’s rule 492 refers are prefixed noun/verb pairs like *REcord/reCORD*. The “peculiarity” was the original Germanic stress pattern with the stress on the first syllable of prefixed nouns and on the first syllable of the root of prefixed verbs, but this pattern had been disrupted in the Middle English period, when the old prefixes were weakened and replaced by French ones and noun/verb pairs with French prefixes and French stress were introduced. As a result the English language suddenly had a large number of prefixed nouns with the stress on the ‘wrong’ syllable. Eventually, the nouns began to copy the Germanic pattern and move the stress to the first syllable.

ble, and linguists were aware of a noun/verb distinction as early as the sixteenth century. Levins (1570) gives some nouns and verbs with different stress but does not comment. Coote (1596: 29-30) comments on the stressing of “*an incense*” and “*to incense*”, and Butler (1634: 57) is also aware of the noun/verb distinction and gives a list of pairs (stress is marked before the stressed syllable), e.g. 'accent - ac'cent, 'convoy - con'voy, 'contract - con'tract, 'record - re'cord.

However, this shift appears to have been a fairly slow process compared to the stress shift in other disyllabic French nouns borrowed in the same period. In Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) only 29 per cent of the nouns in 200 randomly chosen noun/verb pairs (57 nouns) with Romance prefixes have first-syllable stress in spite of his rule that in disyllables “which are at once nouns and verbs, the verb has commonly the accent on the latter, and the noun on the former syllable”. Johnson does admit, however, that the noun/verb rule “has many exceptions. Though verbs seldom have their accent on the former, yet nouns often have it on the latter syllable”. Nevertheless, 12 per cent of the verbs in the doublets (24 verbs) are given with first-syllable stress, which means that only 17 per cent of the 200 noun/verb pairs show stress distinction.

As for the stressing of other disyllabic French nouns in Johnson's dictionary, 89 per cent of the nouns introduced into English before 1700 have their stress on the first syllable. These disyllabic loanwords had thus been adapted to the Germanic first-syllable-stress pattern much more easily than the nouns in the noun/verb pairs.

Although Walker (1826: 57) emphasizes the noun/verb distinction and even if a number of prefixed nouns had moved the stress to the first syllable, the majority of them are still stressed on the last syllable in his pronunciation dictionary. By the end of the nineteenth century more nouns had first-syllable stress, as can be seen in the first edition (1917) of Daniel Jones' *English Pronouncing Dictionary*. What is more surprising here is that the stress of the verbs had started moving in the same direction as that of the nouns (see Diagram 1 below).

There was thus a shift of stress in a number of prefixed noun/verb pairs in Late Modern English, and there were also doublets with fluctuating stress. This was also a period when a large number of dictionaries, grammars and pronunciation handbooks were published, and the fol-

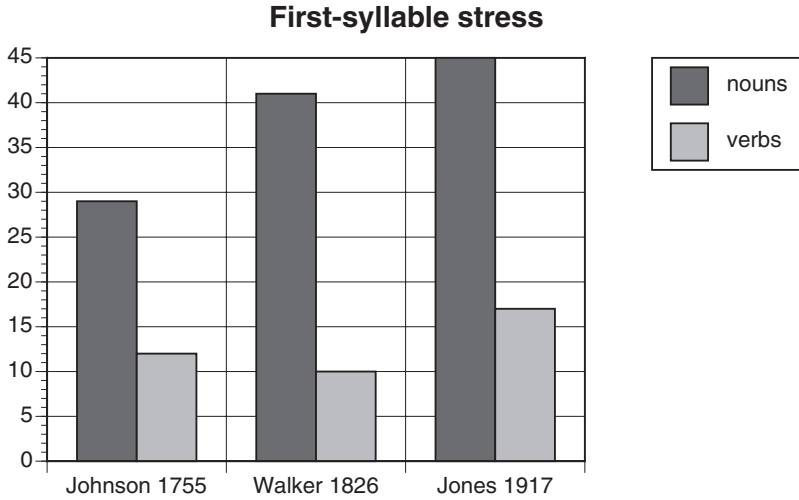


Diagram 1. First-syllable stress of nouns and verbs in 200 prefixed noun/verb pairs.

lowing discussion will focus on some of the comments on stress and stress fluctuation in these books.

2. *Orthoepists on the subject of stress and stress shift in prefixed noun/verb pairs*

Early linguists frequently comment on the noun/verb ‘peculiarity’. Ben Jonson points out in his grammar (1640: 54) that “the use of it [accent] will be seene much better by collation of words, that according unto the divers place of their *Accent*, are diversely pronounc’d, and have divers significations” and gives *differ*, *desert*, *present*, *refuse*, *object*, *incense*, *convert*, *torment* as examples of this. It is noticeable that he includes *differ* in his list of doublets and that he stresses the verb on the second syllable. However, the verb with second-syllable stress is probably *defer*.

Cooper (1687) gives a rule as regards prefixed nouns which appears to be copied by Aickin somewhat later (1693: part 2: 27): “When a preposition is put before a Monosyllable, the Primitive word has the Accent”. Both nouns and verbs are given in the list of examples, but later,

with reference to verbs, he comments that “some Nouns by altering the accents become Verbs” (Aickin 1693: part 2: 28). *Contest*, *object*, *subject* and *record* are some of the doublets given. These are all examples of “a preposition [...] put before a Monosyllable”, and the existence of prefixed nouns with first-syllable stress is not explained. Also, contrary to most other linguists, Cooper and Aickin appear to believe that the nouns were always earlier than the verbs. In Gildon and Brightland (1711: 154-155) the noun/verb distinction is not termed as a difference in accent but a difference in quantity:

In some Words, this is distinguish'd by the Sense; that is when it is a Name, the first syllable is *long*; and when it is a *Word of Affirmation*, the last is so; but this Rule reaches only *Words*, which are the same in Spelling, but differ in Sense and Pronunciation.

Robert Nares (1784: 147) calls stress “the most unstable part of the English language”, and stress takes up a large portion of his exhaustive pronunciation handbook, *Elements of Orthoepey*:

Accent appears to be the most unstable part of the English language. We can all remember words differently accented from the present practice; and many might be collected which still are fluctuating, with their accent unsettled.

In his chapter on ‘Ancient or peculiar Accentuation’ Nares (1784: 324) points to the on-going stress shift: “In perusal of our best poets, we often meet with words accented in a manner not familiar to us, in a way which was usual in their time, but since has grown into disuse”. As for the stressing of disyllabic nouns and verbs, Nares (1784: 148, 149) has two simple rules: “Rule I. Dissyllabic nouns, whether substantives or adjectives, have the accent on the first syllable” and “Rule II. Dissyllabic verbs have the accent on the last syllable.” With regret he goes on to comment on the many deviations from these rules (Nares 1784:150-151):

Therefore, nouns and verbs of the same orthography are regularly distinguished by the place of the accent [...] From this analogy, so clear and so simple, there are many more deviations than might be wished [...] It is to be supposed that our language would have been more regular, in this respect, than it is, had this analogy been generally observed sooner.

Even if Nares comments on and gives lists of the many exceptions to his basic rules, he does not mention prefixes or prefixed nouns or verbs. Neither does Walker (1826: 57), who has another explanation: "This seems an instinctive effort in the language (if the expression will be allowed me) to compensate in some measure for the want of different terminations for these different parts of speech."¹ The examples of doublets with stress difference listed in Walker's dictionary are prefixed noun/verb pairs, but it is possible that, in the eighteenth century, the Romance prefixes were not felt as prefixes in the same way as the original Germanic prefixes had been. Below some of the prefixed nouns and verbs with fluctuating stress in Late Modern English will be discussed.

3. *Stress shift in prefixed nouns*

3.1. *Record*

Record, introduced into English in the 13th century, is one of the first prefixed nouns to move the stress to the first syllable. Levins (1570) gives the noun and the verb *record* with different stress but does not comment. In the Preface (p vi) of the EETS edition (1867) of Levins' *Manipulus Vocabulorum* the editor Henry B. Wheatley expresses doubts about the distinction between the noun and the verb:

The substantive *contráct* (6. 18) has the same accent as the verb *contráct* (6. 22). It is generally supposed that the distinction now made between the substantive and verb in these and other words is of late adoption, but we find in this Dictionary *a récorde* (171. 18) and *to recórde* (171. 21), but the accent on the substantive may be misplaced.

However, the accent of the noun *record* is probably not misplaced by Levins as contemporary poets could have the stress on either syllable. Thus Shakespeare could stress the noun *record* on the second syllable as in the following passage where it rhymes with *sword* and *word*:

¹ By "different terminations" Walker means for instance the contrast *s/z* in the pronunciation of noun/verb pairs like *use*, *excuse*, etc.

With this I did begin to start and cry,
And then against my heart he set his sword,
Swearing, unless I took all patiently,
I should not live to speak another word;
So should my fame still rest upon record,
And never be forgot in mighty Rome
Th' adulterate death of Lucrece and her groom.

(*The Rape of Lucrece* 1639-1645)

The noun *record* is also stressed on the first syllable (cf. Sonnet 55):

When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.

This fluctuation is in line with Watts' (1721: 77) statement that "[t]he *Metre* also is favour'd sometimes by placing the Accent on different Syllables". He adds, however, "in some few Words that will admit of it", and the examples given to illustrate stress variation are French loan-words.

The stressing of *record* is commented on by Nares (1784: 359-360): "*record* (subst.), is often accented on the last; but surely better as well as more regularly, on the first". Nares goes on:

This word was variously accented even by Spenser [...]. Shakespeare has used it in like manner variously [...]. Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, has uniformly given it the regular accent *récord*. But Dryden has *recórd*.

Johnson (1755), contrary to many other early linguists, gives the noun *record* with second-syllable stress but comments: "The accent of the noun is indifferently on either syllable; of the verb always on the last." Walker (1826) also comments on the fluctuating stress of the noun *record*, clearly referring to his rule 492:

The noun *record* was anciently, as well as at present, pronounced with the accent either on the first or second syllable; till lately, however, it generally conformed to the analogy of other words of this kind; and we seldom heard the accent on the second syllable, till a great luminary of

the law, as remarkable for the justness of his elocution as his legal abilities, revived the claim this word anciently had to the ultimate accent; and since this time this pronunciation, especially in our courts of justice, seems to have been the most general. We ought, however, to recollect, that this is overturning one of the most settled analogies of our language in the pronunciation of dissyllabic nouns and verbs of the same form.

3.2 *Survey*

Johnson (1755) stresses the noun *survey* on the second syllable in accordance with his rule that "[d]issyllabic nouns having a diphthong in the latter syllable, have commonly their accent on the latter syllable". Nares (1784: 367), who does not always agree with Johnson, comments:

Johnson has adopted this accentuation as the usual one; but I have no doubt that it is now invariably spoken *súrvey*, though I am not at present prepared with poetical authority to vouch for the assertion.

Walker (1826) does not approve of first-syllable stress of the noun *survey*:

This substantive was, till within these few years, universally pronounced with the accent on the last syllable, like the verb: but since Johnson and Lowth led the way, a very laudable desire of regulating and improving our language has given the substantive the accent on the first syllable according to a very general rule in the language, 492; but this has produced an anomaly in pronunciation, for which, in my opinion, the accentual distinction of the noun and verb does not make amends: if we place the accent on the first syllable of the noun, the *ey* in the last must be pronounced like *ey* in *barley*, *attorney*, *journey*, etc. Notwithstanding therefore this accentuation has numbers to support it: I think it but a shortsighted emendation, and not worth adopting.

Walker thus agrees with Johnson's rule, but he does give first-syllable stress as an option, and in his Preface he gives *survey* among the examples of nouns and verbs with stress distinction. Jones (1917) has the stress of the noun on the first syllable. Furthermore, Jones has the diphthong /eɪ/ as the pronunciation of *-ey* even if this syllable is unstressed.

3.3. *Ally*

Walker (1826), like Johnson (1755) and Nares (1784), has last-syllable stress of both the noun and the verb *ally*, another disyllable doublet ending in a diphthong, and calls first-syllable stressing of the noun “an affectation”:

A few years ago there was an affectation of pronouncing this word, when a noun, with the accent on the first syllable; and this had an appearance of precision from the general custom of accenting nouns in this manner, when the same word, as a verb, had the accent on the last, 492: but a closer inspection into the analogies of the language showed this pronunciation to be improper, as it interfered with an universal rule, which was, to pronounce the *y* like *e* in a final unaccented syllable. But whatever was the reason of this novelty, it now seems to have subsided; and this word is generally pronounced with the accent on the second syllable, as it is uniformly marked by all the orthoepists in our language.

However, less than 100 years later Jones (1917) gives the stress of the noun *ally* as /ə'lai/ with /'ælai/ as an option, and here Jones adds a note: “The pronunciation ‘ælai appears to be spreading rapidly”.

3.4. *Perfume*

The noun *perfume* has the accent on the last syllable in Johnson’s dictionary, and Murray (1795: 148) gives *perfúme* as one of the exceptions to the noun/verb rule. Walker (1826) comments on the fluctuating stressing of *perfume* but points to his rule 492:

Penning, Perry, Entick, Dr. Johnson, Buchanan, W. Johnson, and Kenrick, place the accent on the last syllable of this word, either when a substantive or a verb. As a substantive, Scott places the accent either on the first or last, and Sheridan on the first. Mr. Nares has shown at large, that the poets accent the substantive both ways; but the analogy of disyllable nouns and verbs seems now to have fixed the accent of the substantive on the first, and that of the verb on the last.

Nares (1784) is in two minds about the stressing of the noun. He

places *perfume* among the "Nouns accented like Verbs" (p. 156) but also among the nouns that "receive the accent indifferently on either syllable" (p. 159) and further on (pp. 200-201) in the list of noun/verb pairs with stress distinction, but he adds the hedge "often" after the first-syllable stress of the noun. Jones (1917) stresses the noun *perfume* on the first syllable, and he also gives first-syllable stressing of the verb as an option. Thus *perfume* is one of the verbs that moved the stress between 1826 and 1917.

4. Stress shift in prefixed verbs

32 nouns in the examined 200 doublets moved the stress to the first syllable between 1755 and 1917. Logically, the nouns should move the stress to the first syllable but the verbs should not. Nevertheless, no fewer than 15 verbs moved the stress to the first syllable between 1826 and 1917. What is interesting here is that while there is an increase in the number of doublets with both noun and verb stressed on the first syllable, the category of doublets with noun/verb distinction decreases (see Diagram 2 below).

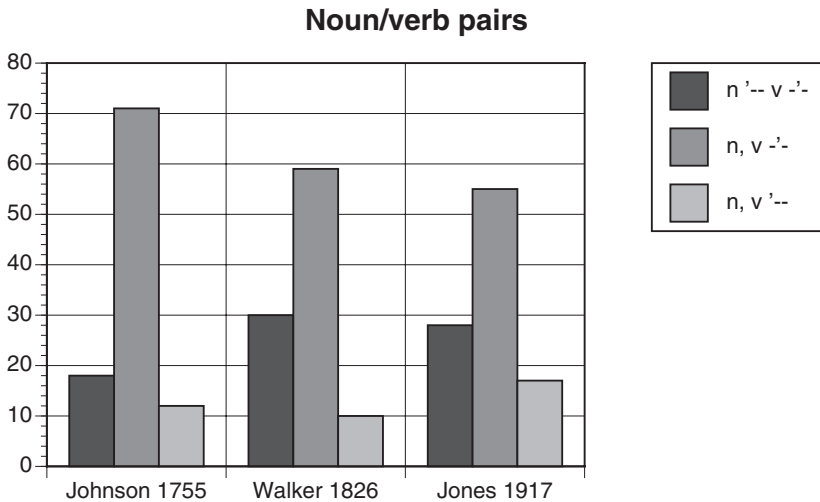


Diagram 2. Stress patterns in 200 prefixed noun/verb pairs.

Exile is one of the few doublets with stress distinction in Levins (1570) but is one of the 24 verbs with first-syllable stress in Johnson (1755). Johnson adds a note: "This had formerly the accent on the last syllable, now generally on the first though *Dryden* has used both." Johnson also points to the shift of stress of the noun *exile*: "It seems anciently to have had the accent indifferently on either syllable; now it is uniformly on the first."

In Walker (1826) the stress of the verb *exile* is moved from the first syllable to the second, but in Jones (1917) it is moved back to the first syllable. Walker has fewer verbs (19 verbs, 10 per cent) than Johnson (24 verbs, 12 per cent) with the first-syllable stress, which may be an attempt to prove his point that the noun/verb stress distinction is "the most legitimate pronunciation".

Nares (1784: 345-346) comments on the noun *exile*: "I take *exile* to have been the more ancient accentuation. It seems to have been upon the change in the days of Elizabeth." Here Nares goes on to comment on the stress shift of the verb: "I believe that the force of analogy changed the substantive first, and that ignorance compelled the verb to follow it. To *exile* was not quite obsolete when Dryden wrote: he has used that verb both ways." Thus Nares finds that "ignorance" was the reason for the shift in a verb like *exile*. He also gives another explanation to the "mispronunciation" of verbs (pp. 150-151):

verbs [...] made from substantives previously established, have frequently retained that accent [...] a circumstance which may often serve, though not invariably, to assist the etymologist in determining whether the substantive be made from the verb, or the verb from the substantive. If their common accent be that of the substantive, it is natural to suppose that the substantive was first admitted into the language; if it be that of the verb, the contrary conclusion follows.

This rule can hardly be applied to prefixed French loans as the nouns were originally stressed on the last syllable and moved the stress. *Exile*, commented on by both Johnson and Nares, is an example of this.

However, the examples of nouns introduced first given by Nares are not prefixed nouns, and Nares does not appear to regard prefixes as a factor that decided the placing of the stress. It is possible that Romance prefixes were not felt to be prefixes in the same way as the Germanic

ones. Indeed, in the very few verbs with Germanic prefixes that exist today, e.g. *forget*, *become*, there is no stress shift.

Johnson (1755) points out in his Preface that disyllables "formed by prefixing a syllable to the radical word, have commonly the accent on the latter", but the examples given to illustrate this have the Germanic prefix *be-*: "*to begét, to beseém, to bestów*". In these verbs the original Germanic stress pattern with the stress on the root has been kept. A movement of stress only takes place in nouns and verbs with Romance prefixes.

5. Conclusion

In Late Modern English stress was perhaps "the most unstable part of the English language" (Nares 1784: 147), and many of the orthoepists from this period comment on shifts and fluctuations in the many French loanwords in English. There are also frequent references to the noun/verb stress distinction as a typical characteristic of English or, as Walker (1826) puts it, "one of the most settled analogies of our language", but in spite of these rules the great majority of both nouns and verbs in these doublets have the stress on the last syllable in the dictionaries.

However, stress has been, and still is, an "unstable part of the English language". A fairly large number of not only nouns but also of verbs have displayed fluctuation and also a shift of stress to the first syllable over the years, which is in fact an on-going process in Present-Day English. Verbs like *increase* and *protest* are more and more often heard with the stress on the first syllable and are given with fluctuating stress in Wells (2000) but with only last-syllable stress in Jones (1917).

Contrastive prefixes, for instance in *increase* as opposed to *decrease*, and in *import* as opposed to *export*, would seem to be a possible explanation for the shift of accent in the verbs. A stressed prefix in words like these would be in agreement with the general Germanic tendency to stress the most important part of the word, the syllable the speaker wants the listener to hear. However, contrastive stress can hardly be the case in verbs like *convoy* and *protest*, where the stress is also moving to the prefix. It seems more likely that the Romance prefixes in verbs like these are not felt to be prefixes, and the on-going shift of stress in disyllabic verbs may be a general adaptation to the rhythm of the stress-timed English language.

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