

CAN STRESS INDUCE HOMOGRAPHY?

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NEIGHbor, NEIGHborhood, NEIGHborliness: no matter what suffix we add, the emphasis stays on the first syllable. This is bound stress. PHOtograph, phoTOGrapHy, photoGRAPHic: the emphasis changes from syllable to syllable without any good reason. This is free stress.

Why?

Well, 'neighbor' is an Anglo-Saxon word of Germanic derivation, and 'photograph' is a Greek word. Both ultimately derive from the ancient Indo-European language. But Greek is more closely akin to the old language than is Anglo-Saxon.

Indo-European was a complex language with at least eight cases, three numbers and genders, but few modes. It also employed a shifting accent whose rules, if any, we are unable to deduce.

Sometime after the Great Consonant Shift but before the Great Vowel Shift, Germanic changed the stress rules. From then on, the stress was on the most important part of the word. Because most Anglo-Saxon inflections are suffixes, most are stressed on the initial syllable. But don't forget unNEIGHborly.

Other languages show other stress patterns. Most Czech words have the stress on the first syllable; most French words have the stress on the last syllable (oxytonic); most Polish words have the stress on the penultimate syllable.

Simeon Potter describes an interesting experiment: taps were made at even intervals with every third tap louder. Most listeners interpreted them as groups of three separated by a pause. A Czech would say the pause came immediately before the loud knock; a Frenchman would say it came immediately after it; a Pole would say the pause came one knock after the loudest.

When the taps were made of equal loudness but with a longer pause after every third, the Czech ascribed greater noise to the first tap, the Pole to the second, and the Frenchman to the third.

Because so many English words have been borrowed from other languages, it is inevitable that words with the same spelling but different stress patterns would enter the vocabulary.

I shall call these stress homographs to distinguish them from tone homographs such as 'tarry' (delay) and 'tarry' (pitchlike), and identical or homophonic homographs, such as 'tattoo' (to adorn the skin with patterns) and 'tattoo' (a military call).

Stress homographs can have the same or different meanings, origins, or morphologies -- for more details, see my article "A Classification of Words" in the August 1975 Word Ways. Let us look deeper into the subject of stress homographs:

1. Value Stressing to emphasize the most important part of a word or phrase: LIGHT housekeeper (a housekeeper who does not weigh much), light HOUSEkeeper (one who does light housekeeping), lighthouse KEEPer (one who keeps a lighthouse)
2. Morphological Stressing to distinguish parts of speech: FOREcast (noun), foreCAST (verb)
3. Definition Stressing to distinguish between words of different meanings: reTIRE (to rest), RE-tire (to supply with new tires)
4. Rhythm Stressing to avoid two consecutive strong syllables: SHE is fifTEEN; SHE is FIFteen years OLD
5. Contrast Stressing to emphasize a point: Not OPpose, but SUPpose..
6. Humor Stressing: the Cisco Kid would make the statement "I put the emPHAsis on the wrong sylLABLE"
7. Nationality Stressing: LABoratory (American), laBORatory (British)
8. No-Good-Reason Stressing: CaribBEan, CarIBbean.

And that's stress for you!

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