

# The Columbian

## PO-LIC-ING PRO-NUN-CI-A-TION< ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRESENTS MANY OBSTACLES FOR ITS SPEAKERS -- SOME WE CAN'T OVERCOME

TRICIA JONES, *Columbian staff writer* February 18, 2001; Page D1

February gets a raw deal. It has fewer days than any other month. In this hemisphere, it presides over a lot of disgruntled souls who are heartily sick of winter but still weeks away from spring. And hardly anybody even says it right. Go ahead. Say it out loud. Unless you're in the minority, you bypassed that first R and uttered "Feb-you-ary," rather than the proper "Feb-brew-ary."

The truth is, there's a lot of improper language spoken daily. Not in the sense of questionable taste, but in mangled pronunciation. And some of it comes from people you might expect would know better.

The issue is more complex than you saying "to-may-to" while I say "to-mah-to." Despite the famous song lyrics, we can't call the whole thing off.

It's not the least bit unusual to hear realtor pronounced as three syllables, when two is correct. Or for dessert lovers to order "sherbert" instead of sherbet. Fugitives are said to have "exscaped;" shoppers bring home loads of "groshrees." But runaways actually have "ess-caped" and supermarkets sell "gro-ser-ees."

Linguists admit English can be a tricky language. Many words behave perfectly on most tongues. But others seem to have been born to go bad.

Tina Hanlon, associate professor of English at Ferrum College in Ferrum, Va., said the confusion comes naturally, given that we live in a society that thinks in terms of writing first and speech second.

"But we speak more than we write, and speech patterns don't always follow what's in the spelling," Hanlon said. "Also, phonetic combinations that are more difficult to say are the ones that get switched around by a large number of people."

Still, Hanlon admits there are some words that get routinely twisted for no apparent reason.

Tony Shelton, who provides communication training as part of his job for a Texas-based public relations firm, said some wayward words can be traced to authority figures such as politicians and television news anchors.

"Others hear these mispronunciations, either in person or on TV, and follow suit," Shelton said. "It's a kind of trickle-down route to ineffective communication."

Shelton said we have Jimmy Carter to thank for "nu-cu-ler," a misstatement of the word nuclear. The former president should have been saying "nu-clee-er."

But how picky do we need to be, anyway?

Scholars often point out that language is a living entity. Otherwise there'd never be any need to update dictionaries.

"When it doesn't change, then it has completed its evolution and may be classified as a dead language," said Michael Steele, an English professor at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Ore.

Steele said he has always questioned who has ultimate authority in such matters, anyway, given the many root sources for English.

"Language in the first place starts off arbitrarily. There's no God-given commandment as to what's pronounced or spelled what way," he said.

Origins aside, there's another factor at work in policing pronunciation one Steele sees as touching on a deeper social issue.

"My guess is it's used for possible snobbish reasons, or trying to sort out who's educated and who's not. It can be a weapon," he said.

Bryan Garner of Dallas disagrees. Author of "The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style" and "Black's Law Dictionary," Garner said it's true people will draw certain conclusions about a speaker based on how that person uses language, and they don't always judge kindly. But he doesn't regard concern about language as a repressive force.

"If we spread education, it wipes down the barriers that exist by making (correct pronunciation) something that anyone can achieve," Garner said.

At the same time, Garner accepts that common usage sometimes directs how words will be spoken by future generations. A case in point is flaccid. Diehard traditionalists still say "flax-sid," following the rule that governs the word accident. But far and away most people believe it's "flas-sid." So while Garner longs to preserve the old pronunciation, he sees this instance as a lost cause.

Hanlon said she probably falls in the middle of any debate over how stringently speakers should hold to accepted forms of pronunciation.

"We're all more careful and cautious in some situations that others job interviews or professional presentations," she said. "We all have our pet (mispronunciation) peeves, but as a linguistics teacher, I should accept it's going to happen, and what does it matter in casual conversation."

One issue on which all language experts seem to agree is that of place names. The consensus is that those who live in a disputed area should have final say on how to say it. So it's "Or-egun," not "Orry-gone," "Ill-in-oy," not "Ill-in-oise," and "Ne-vaa-da," not "Ne-vah-da."

Missouri appears to be in a class of its own. Arguments abound over the right way to say the name of the state, both in and outside its borders.

Donald Lance, professor emeritus of English linguistics with the University of Missouri, collected data from 1970 to 1994 on the subject. He determined no area of the state has used any one pronunciation 100 percent of the time.

"It's not primarily a rural vs. urban matter, and it's not north vs. south in the state, but it is generational," Lance said.

According to Lance, most Americans born in the region prior to 1960 said "Missour-uh," but the final syllable took on a long "e" sound as the '60s generation grew up. Politicians still prefer the old style, as it appears to hark back to older times and seems more pure in some way.

Whether mispronunciations create amusement, indifference or annoyance, the listener faces a decision. Is it better to intervene or let the error pass? Public relations executive Shelton has no doubts.

"I never correct anybody who has not asked for my assistance," he said. "My mother, and probably Miss Manners, would call that very rude."