

## Journal des traducteurs Translators' Journal

# The Importance of Pronunciation in a Canadian Dictionary

Walter S. Avis

---

Volume 4, Number 1, 1er Trimestre 1959

La lexicographie au Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061518ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061518ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0316-3024 (print)

2562-2994 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this article

Avis, W. (1959). The Importance of Pronunciation in a Canadian Dictionary.  
*Journal des traducteurs / Translators' Journal*, 4(1), 21–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1061518ar>

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PRONUNCIATION IN A CANADIAN DICTIONARY

Walter S. AVIS, *Royal Military College*

In the English-speaking world the dictionary enjoys enormous prestige as the arbiter of good taste in language. In North America, moreover, the dictionary is more reverently esteemed than in the Old Country, for among the educated of the New World divided usage is widespread, especially with regard to pronunciation. This situation, which reflects the absence of a generally acknowledged standard dialect, is typical of countries which began as colonies. The mixing of various English dialects, on the one hand, and of non-English speech traits, on the other, makes for considerable diversity of usage. Furthermore, the English transferred to North America has undergone linguistic change along lines somewhat different from those followed by the mother tongue. As a consequence, a body of speech habits peculiar to North Americans has evolved, mutually intelligible but differing in many respects from the educated speech of England. Moreover, in the absence of a generally acknowledged standard dialect, usage among the educated varies somewhat from region to region within the United States and Canada, as well as from one country to the other.

The fact is that for several reasons, the most significant being the stress system and the spelling system, English lends itself to diversity in pronunciation, especially in borrowed words of more than one syllable. Since stress in English may fall on any syllable, depending on the word in question, and since the vowels in unstressed are normally neutralized, that is, centred to /ə/ or /i/, the problem of mastering the pronunciation of polysyllabic words is formidable. As for spelling, written forms often represent the spoken language of five centuries ago, since spelling reform has failed to keep up with subsequent changes in pronunciation. As a result, the symbols used in the written language do not have a uniform value with respect to the sounds of speech (*knight, write, tough, dough, etc.*), thus making the system of orthography difficult to master. Furthermore, the discrepancy between the spoken and the written word gives rise to numerous "spelling pronunciations," such as /'aftən/ beside /'afən/ for *often*, thus increasing the number of variants.

Variant pronunciations often come into being through the operation of analogy, the process of classifying the unfamiliar according to well-established speech patterns. Thus a person encountering *machination* for the first time would probably give *ch* the value it has in the familiar and related *machine* and use a stress pattern familiar in *generation*; the

result would be /,mæʃə'neʃən/, a pronunciation in widespread use alongside the dictionary-recommended /,mækə'neʃən/. Again, a reader meeting *pejorative* for the first time might associate the new form with the familiar *majority*, pronouncing it /pi'jɔrətiv/. When he hears someone else say /'pijə'retiv/, he may consult a dictionary, thus learning that both are deemed acceptable and that there are other variants in good use. For reasons such as these the mastery of literate English is far from easy; for the same reasons a reliable dictionary is indispensable to the literate English-speaker.

We of the New World have inherited diversity; but, like those of the Old, we are heirs to a deep-seated reverence for "correctness," a legacy from the Age of Reason and the Age of Convention which followed it. Correct use of the forms of speech and writing constitutes one of the most generally acknowledged marks of social acceptability. "Beware the shibboleth," the teacher says, "for it is by a man's speech that we know him." For this reason, then, the fashions of usage must be reckoned with, even in North America, where the social structure is more fluid than in older speech communities. Mastery of good English is a prerequisite to success in our world; acceptable pronunciation is the mark of an educated man. We acknowledge this principle, whether or not we are successful in applying it, by making instruction in the proper use of language an important function in our institutions of learning, from Grade One to Degree One and beyond. Consequently, the dictionary is among the most valued and valuable of books: it guides us to the forms of language that are acceptable in our community.

Fashions of language are set by the educated, cultured members of a speech community; and, for the most part, it is the usage of this segment of society that is recorded in general dictionaries. In Great Britain the *Oxford* dictionaries (among others) claim to reflect cultivated British pronunciation; in the United States *Webster's* dictionaries (among others) make the same claim for American usage. Because Britain and the United States are different speech communities, British dictionaries are more appropriate for Britishers than for Americans and vice versa. Neither British nor American dictionaries, however, are appropriate for Canadians, for neither reflects Canadian usage as such. Indeed, they do not claim to do so.

At the present time, unfortunately, Canadians are in the position of having to choose between British and American dictionaries, since the only ones available to them are compiled either in England or in the United States. The fact is that *no* dictionary reflects Canadian usage in a satisfactory manner, although one or two small editions based on British or American models imply that they do so. Such hybrids, alas, do little to relieve the confusion and uncertainty that face Canadian dictionary users.

To say that British and American dictionaries do not reflect Canadian pronunciation is to say that Canadian usage is neither British nor American, that there is something distinctive about the English spoken in this country. And so there is. People in both England and in the United States who are familiar with Canadians recognize this distinction; and they are usually able to cite traits of speech that distinguish us from

themselves. The Britisher may observe that we say *schedule, calf, tomato, secretary*, and *war* in a way different from his; and he might note that Canadians pronounce *caught* and *cot* with identical vowels, whereas he uses different vowels. The American, on the other hand, may observe that our manner of saying *house, khaki, progress, been*, and *lever* is not his; and he might point out that Canadians pronounce *shone* to rhyme with *gone*, whereas for him it rhymes with *bone*. As suggested by these few out of many possible examples, Canadian habits of pronunciation are neither British nor American, although they are in large measure a blend of both.

As a whole, Canadian English parallels British English in some respects, American in others, and in still others is distinctively Canadian. The explanation of this mixed character lies in the settlement history of the country and in its subsequent development. From the beginning Yankees have been prominent among the settlers of most provinces and American influence has been continuous and extensive ever since. Canadians grow up learning from American textbooks, listening to American radio, TV, and movies, and reading American periodicals and books. Moreover, hosts of Canadians are constantly crossing and recrossing the line, as immigrants, as students, as tourists, and as bargain hunters. On the other hand, Britain has also made an enormous and continuous contribution to the settlement of Canada; indeed, in recent years British immigrants have far outnumbered American, a fact which will surely have its effect on the future of Canadian English. Furthermore, the prestige of British English has always exerted strong influence on Canadian speech habits, especially among the educated. Finally, Canada has developed into an independent nation with its own political, social, and cultural institutions, all of which have made contributions distinctly Canadian to the language. In short, it should surprise no-one that there is much diversity in Canadian usage.

Although other functions of a general dictionary are inadequately performed by the available dictionaries — that is, providing trustworthy information about current words, meaning, and spellings — pronunciation is here receiving attention. To provide reliable information about Canadian pronunciation, the lexicographers will have to undertake an extensive country-wide survey. Such a survey would certainly reveal that variant pronunciations for many words are in general use; it would also reveal which of the variants enjoys preference. In many instances Canadian preference would coincide with American practice, in others British. In still others pronunciations not recorded in either American or British dictionaries might prove to be current among educated Canadians. For example, the great majority of Canadians at all social levels pronounce *khaki* as /'karki/, a variant recorded in none of the existing dictionaries, the American form being /'kæki/, the British /'kɑ:kɪ/. Again, the pronunciation /vez/ is widespread for *vase* in Canada, as opposed to British /vaz/ (also used by many Canadians) and American /ves/ (rarely heard in Canada).

If a Canadian consults a British dictionary, he will probably find that the preferred pronunciation offered for each of the following words is unfamiliar: *abdomen, acoustic, amateur, aunt, bomb, bought, capsule,*

*caught, clerk, conduit, dance, drama, evolution, fertile, forehead, half, mulatto, nausea, patriotism, placate, privacy, profile, questionnaire, secretary, solder, squirrel, suit, syrup, walsh, water.* On the other hand, the practice of most Canadians would differ from the pronunciations set forth in American dictionaries as preferable for the following: *again, avenue, been, figure, lever, presentation, process, produce, program, progress, reptile, shone, simulcast, suggest, were, Z.*

Finally, there will surely be a number of words having pronunciation variants widely heard among educated Canadians which are not recorded at all in most of our imported dictionaries. Such words may be represented by the following examples: *absolve* /əb'zɔlv/, *absurd* /əb'zɜrd/, *antarctic* /ænt'artik/, *arctic* /artik/, *culinary* /'kəlɪnəri/, *isthmus* /'ɪsməs/, *jackal* /'jækəl/, *evil* /'ivəl/, *finale* /fə'næli/, *longitude* /'lɒŋgə'tud/, *machination* /mæʃɪ'neʃən/, *mauve* /mav/, *official* /o'fɪʃəl/, *oppressive* /o'presɪv/, *plenary* /'plenəri/, *recuperate* /rɪ'kʊpə'ret/, *resource* /rɪ'zɔrs/, *senile* /'senail/, *species* /'spɪsɪz/. If investigation shows that educated Canadians in large numbers use such variants as these, it is reasonable to assume that these forms are acceptable and therefore "correct" in Canada and that they should be included in a Canadian dictionary. Wherever more than one variant is demonstrably current in educated usage, these should be shown; thus one might expect to see both /'niðər/ and /'naɪðər/ for *neither*, /'lɪzər/ and /'leɪzər/ for *leisure*, and no doubt /kloz/ and /kloðz/ for *clothes*, although the latter form seems hardly enough used to merit inclusion.

It must always be remembered that absolute uniformity among speakers of any language is not to be expected, for differences will always persist from speaker to speaker and from region to region. Consequently, no dictionary can be a mirror-image of the language in good use. It will be at best an abstraction, an attempt to indicate the current practice of cultivated people. This task, difficult at best, is perhaps easier in long-established countries where a national standard has come to be recognized, usually the dialect of the political, economic, and cultural heartland, which is usually the most populous region as well. In Canada, no regional type of speech has been overtly acknowledged as a standard. Fortunately, however, the speech of most English-speaking Canadians has much in common, especially from Ontario westward. Indeed, it seems safe to say that the type of speech in general educated use very closely resembles that of the Toronto region, and in view of the fact that Toronto is undeniably the centre of gravity of English-speaking Canada, it seems probable that this type of speech will prove one day to be the national standard. At any rate, the speech surveys now underway will provide us with more knowledge about Canadian English than we have had hitherto; and they will make possible a reliable general dictionary for Canadians.

