

Mispronunciation: Why you should stop correcting people's mistakes

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A [recent survey](#) of 2,000 adults in the UK identified the top ten "mispronunciations" people find annoying. Thankfully the majority (65 percent) of annoyed people do not feel comfortable correcting a speaker in public.

But leaving aside the fact that 2,000 is hardly a representative sample of the UK, with its population of [over 66 million](#), this survey raises longstanding linguistic questions: why do people pronounce words differently, why does [pronunciation](#) change, and why does so-called mispronunciation upset some people to the point of making it possible (and interesting) to compile a top ten list?

I'm a phonetician—an expert in the way people make [speech sounds](#) and pronounce [language](#). I've also written about what we can learn about a person [from the way they speak](#).

A universal truth about language is that it is subject to constant change—and pronunciation is just as likely to change over time as aspects like grammar or vocabulary.

How language changes

One criticism of speakers who pronounce nuclear ("NU-cle-ar") as "nucular" is that it does not match the spelling. In fact, English is known for having some very irregular spelling-to-sound correspondences, so that argument does not always hold up. The most extreme cases are probably family and place names: the surname Featherstonehaugh can be pronounced to sound like "Fanshaw," for example, while Torpenhow in Cumbria is pronounced "Trepenna."

How did we get to those pronunciations? Through a process of gradual, historical language change. These changes could be the result of social interaction ("other people say it like this"), mishearings, spelling pronunciations, phonetic processes or the influence of other languages, among other things. Certainly, language change is inevitable, which is handy because it keeps us linguists in business and generates a lot of copy for newspapers and the like.

Let's have a look at some of the pronunciations people objected to in that survey.

"Espresso" is pronounced "expresso" by many people, even though there is no "x" in the spelling. This pronunciation probably arose by analogy with the word "express." The two are actually cognate words with similar origins, both meaning "press out" or "obtain by squeezing."

If you hear someone ask for an espresso, it's easy to see how you might mishear this to be nearer to a word you already know, and therefore adopt that pronunciation. Importantly, you are unlikely to misunderstand what the speaker has asked for.

We don't have a similar issue with the pronunciation of "cappuccino" or "macchiato" because we simply don't have anything similar to those words in English. Incidentally, I'm reliably informed that the French word for "espresso" is "expresso." *Vive la différence.*

The pronunciation of "probably" as "proably" likely arises from a process called weak syllable elision or deletion. The weak second syllable in "probably" is often deleted in speech. A similar phenomenon happens in "especially," pronounced "specially"—the first syllable is weak and is deleted. In English, the [most important syllables](#) for listener comprehension are stressed. That's why young [children](#) acquiring language say "tatoes" for "potatoes," or "jamas" for "pajamas."

In rapid adult speech, it is very likely that these weaker syllables will be deleted. As George Bailey, a sociolinguist at the University of York, [notes](#), it is interesting that "probably" and "especially" are singled out when we do this with many words. He gives the examples "memory" (pronounced "MEM-ry") and "library" (pronounced "LI-bry"), which did not make the list.

I have, however, noticed a recent change in the way some words which have historically had weak syllable elision are pronounced. For example, "irreparable" seems to be changing from four syllables with a main stress on the second ("ir-REP-ra-ble") to five syllables with the main stress on the third ("ir-re-PAR-a-ble"), with the stressed syllable sounding like "pear." I'm not entirely sure what is going on here, but it could be by analogy with the word "repair," or with "comparable," which seems to be shifting from "COM-pra-ble" to "com-PAR-a-ble."

The last word I'll draw out for examination is "Arctic," pronounced "Artick." It is possible that the first "c" might not be heard in rapid speech, even if a speaker is articulating it. This is because it is produced further back in the oral cavity than the following "t," and so its release can be masked.

Historically, as Graham Pointon, formerly the BBC's pronunciation adviser, [has noted](#), the Chambers Etymological Dictionary lists the earliest English version as "Artic." The "c" could have been reinserted during the Renaissance period, when scholars sought to reform English spelling to reflect classical languages such as Latin and Greek.

Unfortunately they also reformed the spelling of words which had entered the language via other routes. This gave us such fun spellings as "debt" for what had been written "dette" in Middle English and came from Old French "dete" (and of course we don't pronounce the "b" in "debt").

Another route for language change is the influence of other speakers. I'm half-expecting people to start pronouncing "microwave" quite differently following this [viral clip of Nigella Lawson](#). I've already had discussions with people who say they have adopted it "just for fun." How long before it goes mainstream?

Pronunciation and prejudice

So what does all this say about the 35 percent of people who feel compelled to correct so-called mispronunciations in public? Nothing good, in my opinion. It seems to be a pedantic display of perceived superiority which can only result in the person with the "unacceptable" pronunciation looking stupid.

The way people speak and pronounce words is very much dependent on their language background and experience. By correcting a pronunciation that you have actually understood but somehow object to, you could be inadvertently—or even purposefully—pointing out perceived deficiencies arising from differences in social class, culture, race, gender, and so on.

Correcting pronunciation can actually be an act of linguistic prejudice. This is different from correcting a language learner in a pronunciation classroom or asking someone to repeat something you have not understood, for example. Taking someone politely aside is less threatening, but you should still consider your motivations for doing so.

It might not always be the case that the corrector's motivations are self-centered. My father always corrected me (in private) because he believed that having a "non-standard" accent—particularly one which is perceived as ugly by some—would negatively affect my career prospects. Sadly, at the time (this was the 1980s), I think my father was right.

Issues of linguistic prejudice linked to race and class are still alive and well, as was recently brought into sharp focus in [an article](#) on the American television news journalist Deion Broxton. The good news is that linguists in the UK are actively working on [research](#) and [resources](#) to help combat accent prejudice.

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