English Words with Controversial Stress:
The Case of French Learners

Nadia Benrabah-Djennane, Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3

In order to gather the data he needed for the two versions of his 1990 and then 2000 *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*, John Wells decided to conduct a survey in which he elicited native British English speakers' pronunciation preferences (Wells, 1989, 1995, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c and later 2003). He felt he needed to supplement his own intuitions with a "self-selected sample of nearly 2,000 'speech-conscious' respondents". The survey relied on a written questionnaire soliciting the informants' preferences on a hundred or so words with "fluctuating or contentious pronunciation" (Wells, 2003: 215).

In his 2004 study, Mohamed Benrabah decided to conduct a similar survey in order to explore native speakers' preferences concerning 21 words with controversial stress. He decided to modify John Wells' methodology though in two different ways. First, he selected a sample of phonetically naïve native speakers. Second, instead of having the informants fill in a written questionnaire, his were asked to listen to a tape on which a native speaker (John Wells himself) was recorded while reading 21 sentences in which the test words were inserted in final position. For each test item, two versions of the sentences were spoken: one with a given syllable stressed, and one with another.

This is what triggered a series of questions in the present author's mind: What about our students? What about French learners of English in general? Does their sociolinguistic competence include an awareness of this phenomenon of variable stress? How do they handle the case of words with controversial stress? Which pronunciation do *they* prefer? Are there any similarities between their preferences and those of native speakers? Any differences? And if so, which are they? Which pronunciation do they actually use? etc.

So an experiment was designed and conducted with a view to eliciting the pronunciation preferences *and* actual productions of a number of advanced but phonetically naïve learners of English. The rationale behind the decision to consider advanced learners rather than beginners or intermediate students was because it was felt that beginners would be still very much involved with coping with the basics and other intricacies of the English language to have any awareness of the issue. Advanced learners, however, even if (or *perhaps* even if) phonetically naïve, could be expected to be sufficiently at ease with the language so as to be in a position where they might have developed an interesting level of sociolinguistic competence which could allow some self-awareness of this issue.

1 Experimental Framework
1.1 The informants
As this was a pilot, preliminary investigation, the current writer decided to start the study with a small group of informants (about 10). Besides, although the aim was to concentrate on advanced learners, in order to be able to assess their performance, it was felt that it would be interesting to compare their preferences and performance with that of less advanced learners (though not beginners). Similarly, for the same reason, a control group of native English speakers of the same age group was also considered. Thus, altogether, 36 students were solicited (32 French students and 4

native English speakers who were studying in the same field). All were registered in the Department of Foreign Languages at Stendhal-Grenoble III University in France and studying English and another language in addition to some Social Sciences. The control group also happened to be bilingual in French and English and had one of their parents being a native English speaker. The French learners were divided into three groups. 10 were registered in "Master 2" (henceforth "M2"). In other words, they were in their second and last year of "Master" (which is about the equivalent of an M.Phil in the UK). 11 were in "Master 1" (henceforth "M1"), and 11 in "Licence 3" (henceforth "L3"). L3 is the third and final year of the French "Licence" which corresponds to the BA in the UK). As this investigation is still in progress, only the results obtained so far concerning the pronunciation preferences and actual productions of the advanced group of M2 learners and the controls will be reported here.

1.2 The test
The test consisted of two major parts: one (Part A) eliciting the informants' actual performance, and the other (Part B) their pronunciation preferences. Part A was conducted first for obvious reasons (in order not to influence the informants' choices).

In Part A, the informants were provided with 60 written sentences. 21 of them were those used in Benrabah (2004), where the 21 test words with controversial stress (see Table 1 below) were each inserted in final position in a sentence. Furthermore, in order to avoid having the informants guess the real aim of the experiment, a number of distracters were added. The distracters were 39 extra sentences which did not contain any of the test items. The informants were asked to read aloud each of the 60 sentences while they were being recorded.

In Part B, the informants were provided with a written version of the 21 sentences bearing each of the 21 test words. They were asked to listen to the speaker on the tape (John Wells) who was going to say each of the sentences twice. They were then asked to say which pronunciation they preferred by ticking the appropriate box. The Answer Sheets looked like this:

*For each of the following bold words (21 in all), you will hear a speaker say two sentences. **Which pronunciation do you prefer**? Say whether you prefer (a), (b), (c) or (d). (Usually this will also be your own pronunciation.)*
For practice, just listen to the first two pairs of sentences.

(1a) He said it was **applicable**.   (2a) They're somewhere in the **Caribbean**.
(1b) He said it was **applicable**.   (2b) They're somewhere in the **Caribbean**.

*Now listen to each pair of sentences and **tick** the appropriate box to show your preference.*

1) ***applicable***	I prefer :	(1a) He said it was ***applicable***.	□
		(1b) He said it was ***applicable***.	□
		(1c) both	□
		(1d) none of the above	□

In his 2004 study, Benrabah had only offered two different choices (illustrating two different stressing) to the native listeners. This was justified as his informants were native English speakers. However, in the present study, the informants were not native speakers. The current writer feared that in case, for some reason, the French learners did not feel "happy" with either of the two pronunciations suggested, providing them with a binary choice (and thus forcing them into one or the other) could probably be misleading. Moreover, it should be reminded that the informants considered here were phonetically naïve. Besides, at no time, was their attention explicitly and deliberately drawn on the question of stressing. All they were told was to say which pronunciation they preferred. Unlike native speakers who might instinctively (though not always consciously) be sensitive to a difference of stress, the French learners' choice might well be also dictated by stress though not necessarily. They could also choose this or that form because of the particular realisation of some

consonants and/or vowels, etc. felt to be similar to or different from the one(s) they think they do use. Another thing was that no one could objectively disregard from the start the possibility that the learners could feel they liked both pronunciations. This would surely have gone unnoticed by limiting them to a binary choice. For all those reasons, and to avoid any frustration that could go unnoticed and could also affect the results, it was felt wiser to allow, in addition to the two pronunciations, two other choices : *"both"* and *"none of the above".* For words having more than two different stress patterns, only two forms were illustrated for practical reasons.

2 Results and Discussion The results are shown on Table 1 below. Columns 3-4 and 9-10 indicate the preferences and productions obtained from the M2 group of advanced learners, while Columns 5-6 and 11-12 those obtained from the controls. The words are presented in decreasing order of preferences for the M2 group. Thus, *"SHORTcut"*, for instance (with the first syllable stressed) was preferred by 90% of the learners, *"apPLIcable* by 80% of them, etc. A first glance at the preference / production columns on the left (No 1 to 11) for the M2 group seems to indicate a tendency towards some correspondence between the learners' preferences and their actual realisations of the test items (even if never at a 100%). Only *"SHORTcut"* scored 90%. Four words,

		M2 Pref	M2 Prod	C Pref	C Prod			M2 Pref	M2 Prod	C Pref	C Prod
1.	a) **SHORT**cut	9	10	3	4	**12**	a) i**RRE**futable	2	1		2
	b) short**CUT**	1					b) irre**FU**table	6	8	3	2
90%	c) both			1		60%	c) both	2		1	
	d) None of them						d) None of them		1		
2	a) ap**PLI**cable	8	9	3	4	**13**	a) nece**SSA**rily	4	6	3	2
	b) **A**pplicable	2		1			b) **NE**cessarily		4		1
80%	c) **B**oth					60%	c) both	6		1	
	d) None of them		1				d) None of them				1 ce
3	a) **MIS**chievous	2	1			**14**	a) prin**CESS**	1			
	b) mis**CHIE**vous	8	9	2	4		b) **PRIN**cess	4	10	2	4
80%	c) both			1		50%	c) both	5		2	
	d) None of them			1			d) None of them				
4	a) **JUS**tifiable	2	2		1	**15**	a) in**COM**parable	3	2		1
	b) justi**FI**able	8	7	2	3		b) incom**PA**rable	5	8		3
80%	c) both			2		50%	c) both	1			
	d) None of them		1				d) None of them	1			
5.	a) **RES**piratory	8	3	1	2(3)	**16**	a) **HOS**pitable	3	4	4	3
	b) res**PI**ratory	2			1		b) hos**PI**table	5	5		1
80%	c) both					50%	c) both	2			
	d) None of them		7 ra	3	(1 to:)		d) None of them		1		
6	a) **FI**nance	7	10	3	4	**17**	a) **TRANS**ferable	4	2	2	2
	b) fi**NANCE**	1					b) trans**FE**rable	5	8	2	2
70%	c) both	1		1		50%	c) both	1			
	d) None of them	1a					d) None of them				
7	a) **RE**search		1	1	4	**18**	a) ha**RASS**	5	7	3	2
	b) re**SEARCH**	7	9	1			b) **HA**rass	2	3	1	2
70%	c) both	3		2		50%	c) both	3			
	d) None of them						d) None of them				
8	a) **CON**troversy	1	4	1	2	**19**	a) ki**LO**metre	5	4	2	2
	b) con**TRO**versy	7	5	1	1		b) **KI**lometre	2	6		2
70%	c) both	2				50%	c) both	2		2	
	d) None of them		1	2	1 ver		d) None of them	1a			
9	a) Cari**BBE**an	6	7	3	4	**20**	a) **RE**gulatory	4	4	2	3
	b) Ca**RI**bbean	4	2				b) regu**LA**tory	4	6		1
60%	c) both			1			c) both	2		1	
	d) None of them		1				d) None of them			1	(2: to)
10	a) for**MI**dable	6	6			**21**	a) prema**TURE**	2		2	2
	b) **FOR**midable	2	3	3	4		b) **PRE**mature	4	4	1	2
60%	c) both	1					c) both	1		1	
	d) None of them	1b	1	1			d) None of them	3	6 ma		
11	a) **Ex**quisite	6	6	1	1						
	b) ex**QUI**site	4	4	3	3						
60%	c) both										
	d) None of them										

Table 1 : Informants' pronunciation preferences and productions

i.e.: *"ap**PLI**cable"*, *"mis**CHIE**vous"*, *"justi**FI**able",* and *"**RES**piratory"* (No.2-5)*,* had the same pronunciation preferred by 80% of the learners. It was interesting to note that in terms of production, *"respiratory"* was quite problematic for the M2 as 7 out of 10 stressed the word differently (*"-**RA**-"*) while 8 had said they preferred *"**RES**piratory".* Also interesting were the cases where the 60 or 70% of the M2 preferences for a given form were different from those chosen by the control group. This was the case, for instance, for *"research"* (No.7)*,* *"controversy"* (No.8)*,* *"formidable"* (No.10)*, and* *"exquisite"* (No.11)*,* among others.

On the other hand, the informants being French, attention was paid to whether their L1 usual (word/sentence) final stress had any influence on their choices or productions. A closer look at the results revealed that between a "left-stressing" and a "right-stressing" (as illustrated in "***A**pplicable"* and *"ap**PLI**cable" respectively),* 47.62% of the learners' preferred the form with the "right-stressing" against 33.81% for the "left-stressing" (15.24% preferred both forms and 3.33% none of them). This was even more striking in their productions where 51.43% of them produced the form with the "right-stressing" against 39.05% who adopted the one with "left-stressing". 9.52% even produced a form with a stress which was positioned further right.

The fact that a good number of the words considered here were cognates could have had some similar influence. Yet this was not always the case here as illustrated in the words *"**FI**nance"* or *"**PRIN**cess "* which scored 10 and 9 out of 10 respectively. Besides, as the original aim of this study was to concentrate on those words identified as having controversial stress, cognates could hardly be avoided. However, as some pedagogical implications can clearly be drawn from the results obtained here, it should certainly be worthwhile to try and control such lexical factors in any future work concentrating on word stress with a similar public.

So even though phonetically naïve, those advanced learners seem to have had a significant exposure to a good amount of English. However, what comes out of the present study is that influence from their L1 stress pattern is still quite visible. Also, one might predict that the results that will be obtained from the less advanced group of learners will probably reveal a similar if not even more striking tendency. This should be borne in mind when tackling the problem of English stress-pattern in general as well as when planning any teaching of this important aspect of English pronunciation to a French public. The next step now will be to conduct a similar experiment with students who do have, in their curriculum, a course on English phonetics. Administering the test before they start the course and then later, say, at the end of the course, could show whether the actual teaching of phonetics has any impact on the learners' preferences, performance and handling of this issue.

References

Benrabah, Mohamed (2004) Variation en anglais : étude de cas. Talk given at the *12ème Colloque d'Anglais Oral* organised by the ALOES, Université Paris 13, Villetaneuse, France, 2-3 April 2004.
Wells, John C. (1982) *Accents of English 1. An Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wells, John C. (1989) The LEPD pronunciation survey: a preliminary report *Speech, Hearing and Language: Work in Progress U.C.L.* No. 3, pp. 237-246.
Wells, John C. (1995) Age grading in English pronunciation preferences. In K. Elenius and Braderus, P. (eds.) *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences. S*tockholm: KTH and Stockholm University, vol. 3, pp. 696-699.

Wells, J.C. (1999a) British English pronunciation preferences: a changing scene. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, vol. 29 (1), pp. 33-50.

Wells, John C. (1999c) Which pronunciation do you prefer? *IATEFL Issues 149 The Changing Language*. June-July, pp. 10-11.

Wells, J.C. (1999b) Pronunciation preferences in British English: a new survey. *Proceedings of the XIVth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences,* San Francisco, Vol. 2, pp. 1245-1248.

Wells, J.C. (2003) Pronunciation research by written questionnaire. *Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences.* Barcelona, pp. 215-218.