

# Stress does strange things when I scream for icecream and apple pie



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WATCH YOUR  
LANGUAGE

**Y**OU WILL probably agree that if you say "apple cake" you stress the apple more than the cake, but if you say "apple pie" you stress the pie more than the apple. Apple cake is left stressed (stressed on the leftmost of the two words), apple pie is right stressed.

This is true for most speakers of English who have stress as a feature of their English. Why should it be? What is it about cakes that makes them behave differently from pies in this regard?

Consider another example. When you say "Willis Street" you will probably stress the Willis more than the street; if you say "Broderick Road" you will stress the road more than the Broderick.

This is not the type of thing you can easily teach. There are no hard-and-fast reliable rules. We have to talk in terms of tendencies rather than in terms of definite answers. Yet speakers agree a surprising amount of the time.

The first tendency is that constructions with the same second word all tend to be stressed in the same way.

Not only apple cake, but also carrot cake, chocolate cake, coconut cake, fruit cake, and even rice cake take the same

stress pattern. Not only Broderick Road but Karori Road, Karangahape Road, Up-land Road and so on.

More than that, there is a slightly less powerful force for constructions with the same first word to be stressed the same way: brick building, brick facing, brick wall are all right stressed. You can see the problem, of course.

If we have chocolate EGG, chocolate RABBIT, chocolate SANTA, why would we get CHOCOLATE cake? The answer is twofold. First, the second word has more influence in deciding where the stress falls than the first one does.

Next, the meaning can also play a role. Where the second thing in the two-word construction is made of the first thing, the stress usually goes right. Tomato plant, where the tomato is from the plant is stressed differently from tomato paste, where the paste is made of tomatoes.

Since a chocolate cake is not a cake made of chocolate, right stress is less expected. The examples with brick, above, show the same tendency.

**T**HERE are other tendencies at play, too, but these are sufficient to show how difficult it is to decide what the right answer is, even though speakers of English mostly end up with the same answers.

There are, though, instances where different varieties of English put the stress in different places: Americans tend to say ICEcream, while Britons tra-

ditionally said iceCREAM. There are even cases that vary in the same speaker, either because they cannot make up their minds about icecream, or they say different things in different contexts. Consider the difference between He is blue-EYED, and he's her BLUE-eyed boy.

This is all very well, you might think, but does it matter? Well, consider the difference between a TOY factory and a toy FACTORY. The first one makes toys; the second is itself a toy. Similarly, if there were a concrete TRUCK it would be made of concrete, while a CONcrete truck delivers concrete.

So getting the stress wrong can be misleading from time to time, and will certainly sound weird enough to confuse people.

Which makes it all the more surprising that news readers in our media seem particularly unsure about where to put the stress. Most of the time, this does not make a huge difference, even though it sounds odd, but occasionally it is very misleading.

A climbing ROSE is one which climbs; a CLIMbing frame is one for climbing (and so on, across the board). So when we hear about a living ROOM we get very confused: it is not alive. There are places where the listener can be quite baffled by an unexpected use of stress.

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