

Either or

NELL HARRAP, of Wellington, wrote to ask about the right way to say some words. This kind of question is so widespread, and the answers are so difficult, that I thought I would discuss the general problem.

It seems easy: "cat" is always pronounced one way, and "dog" is always pronounced a completely different way, and so all other words must also have their own pronunciation. Unfortunately, things are not that simple.

The problem is that any pronunciation has two sides to it. Consider the word "either". Some people say it with the first syllable rhyming with "see", others with the first syllable sounding like "eye" (and some people vary).

You can find people all round the world pronouncing this word with these different building blocks: you can have the same vowel as in see, flea, key, receive, and so on, or you can have the same vowel as in eye, lie, flight, hi, and so on.

This is the first side of pronunciation, which building blocks you use. The second is that, even if you choose to use the "eye" option, you will pronounce that vowel differently if you are a New Zealander from the way you will pronounce it if you come from Toronto, or Dover, or Leeds, or Atlanta. These pronunciations may be only slightly different, or they may be radically different.

In the extreme cases, a few New Zealanders saying this vowel may sound to Londoners as though they are saying the vowel in "coin" and "boy". They are not: their sound in "coin" and "boy" is different from what they say in "kine" and "buy". Because we have no good ordinary language terminology for distinguishing this kind of pronunciation difference from the first kind, we tend to treat them as if they are all the same, and this is misleading.

Now consider what is "right". Is it right for speakers from Toronto to say "either" with a vowel that means that we can identify them as Canadians, or is it wrong? Clearly it is right for them as Canadians to sound like Canadians, even if we occasionally misinterpret what they are saying.

Is it right for anyone to say "ee-ther" or for anyone to say "eye-ther"? That may depend on a number of factors. For instance, in some areas one of these pronunciations may be so common as virtually to oust the other. If speakers from one such area use the pronunciation from their area, they are doing just the same thing as the Canadian using the



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Canadian vowel. But otherwise, how do we judge? Do we go with the older pronunciation (if we know it)? If we do, we should say "biTmen" with the stress on the middle syllable, rather than "Blumen", which is the current norm. Do we go with the more common pronunciation (and if so, more common in what region)? If so, we should accept "throw-en" in New Zealand. Do we go with the pronunciation of a specific region (and if so, which region, and why)? If so, we might end up objecting to the pronunciation of "harass" because they say "HArass" in England. In every case we are making assumptions about what is "right" that other people may object to.

This is not the same as saying that there are no errors of pronunciation. When I recently heard Chris Laidlaw use the word "chameleon" with an initial "sh" sound (as we find in "chauffeur"), I put this down as an error. "Chameleon" is not French, but Greek, and has an initial "k" sound. I sympathised with Chris Laidlaw, since I recalled once getting into similar problems with the word "chimera", a word that I had at that time only ever met in French and in writing. So there are words that have a single established pronunciation, and there we can give clear answers.

But if enough people started pronouncing "chameleon" as if it were French, we might have to end up allowing two pronunciations.

There are many words which have two (or more) pronunciations using different building blocks, and there it can be difficult to say which is right. And all words have phonetic variants which depend upon, among other things, where you come from: there it is impossible to say that one is right and another wrong.

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