

FEATURES**Dissecting pronunciation reveals roots of stress**

IN HER Saturday morning radio show early this year, Kim Hill ran a fascinating interview with Massey researcher Anna Gsell about kaka-po.

Gsell was planning to dissect the brain of a recently deceased 100-year-old bird. What first caught my attention, though, was not the topic but Hill's rather exaggerated pronunciation of the word "dissect", with a short "i" sound (as in "miss" - let's call this the "diss" form).

It wasn't until the end of the interview, when Hill took an opportunity to ask Gsell how she, as a non-native English speaker, was taught to pronounce the word, that I gained an inkling as to why Hill had produced the exaggerated form earlier.

It turned out that Hill, like Gsell, prefers to pronounce the first syllable with the same diphthongal vowel as found



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in the word "die" (so we will call this the "die" form), but still with stress on the second syllable (so "dieSECT"). I suspect this is true for many other speakers of English, native and non-native alike, and it is certainly true for most of the colleagues I have consulted.

So perhaps Hill had been told by her producer before the interview that the

"diss" form is the "correct" form, and this led to her exaggerated pronunciation.

In concluding the interview, Hill commented on how she would have the "language-Nazis" after her for confessing that she prefers the "die" form.

So if there is a correct form, what is it? If we turn to the authorities, in the form of dictionaries, we find three possible pronunciations.

These include the two forms already mentioned, which both have the word stress on the second "sect" syllable, and a further "die" form with the stress on the first syllable (so "DIEsect").

Of the dictionaries that I have looked at and which include information about where words have come from and how they have changed, most tell us that the "diss-SECT" form is the historically correct one.

But many also say that there is in-

creasing use (although not necessarily acceptance) of the two "die" forms.

Interestingly, the 1993 Merriam-Webster dictionary warns that the "die" forms are unacceptable to many, but the current on-line version of that same dictionary now gives priority to "dieSECT" and only then gives the others (including "diss-SECT") as alternatives.

Why the change? There is a book that has the wonderful title *The Big Book of Beasily Mispronunciations*, by Charles Harrington Elster. This book includes notes on "dissect", and says "properly, there is no 'die' in 'dissect'".

Elster refers to the possibility that "die" pronunciations arose by false analogy with "bisect".

This might be made more likely by the fact that the "dis" prefix meaning "apart, into pieces" also has a variant form in "di". So "dissect" might be thought of as

"di-sect" rather than 'dissect', even though this ignores (or is ignorant of) the double-s in the spelling.

Such a re-analysis might well reinforce a "die" pronunciation because of similarity to words like "disyllabic" ("having two syllables"), even though the "di-" in "disyllabic" is a different prefix.

Where does the "DIE-sect" form come from? There is a sense in which the diphthongal "die" pronunciation attracts stress - long vowels in English, including diphthongs, are, on the whole, more likely to be stressed than short vowels.

Researchers have also noted a general tendency in English (clearly with many exceptions) for words to have stressed first syllables - they claim that this helps listeners recognise words in running speech, since it makes the beginnings of words clearer.

It might additionally be the case that

the first syllable in "die-sect" has to be stressed to make it clear that the speaker is not saying "bisect".

There is also the phenomenon of stress-shift, known as the "thirteen men" rule because "thirTEEN" when followed by another stressed syllable such as "MEN" becomes "THIRteen MEN".

So many people who say "die-SECT" may also say "I'm going to DIE-sect WORMS".

Stress-shift could also explain why the airport at the place formerly called HeathROW is usually referred to as HEATHrow (probably from its pronunciation in "HEATHrow AIRport"), but that is another story.

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