

Word stress in the English of Afrikaans-speaking undergraduates

by J.A. Venter

The heads of departments of English in South African universities have recently found it necessary to address an appeal to the education authorities about falling standards of English in the schools. In Afrikaans institutions the level of proficiency in English is certainly declining markedly. However much we would like to assume that the students know enough English to cope with our courses, we are unavoidably faced with the prospect of having to teach Practical English in addition to the usual literary and linguistic disciplines. It is when the decision to do this has been taken, that one discovers how time-consuming, tiring, uninspiring and generally daunting a task this is. In addition, the results of language teaching are objectively measurable with a fair degree of precision.

In approaching the problem an obvious starting point is the study of the errors which the students most commonly make. If these were to be collected, classified, analysed and the causes for their occurrence determined, we would be somewhat nearer to at least defining the teaching assignment involved. It is the specifics that matter. Merely saying, e.g., that the students do not use the tenses correctly, is of little practical value.

To start at one end, then, one might look at common errors in word accent. The placing of syllable stress in polysyllabic words is one of the major difficulties of the non-native speaker learning English. The list below is based on the mistakes of Afrikaans-speaking undergraduates in English courses. The items belong to the area between the major systems of errors in pronunciation (such as the devoicing of final consonants) on the one hand, and on the other the individual, more or less random items that tend to resist meaningful categorization.

The words are presented in a patterned sequence rather than merely alphabetically. It is suggested that the list might prove to be of some use as a source of teaching and testing materials.

1.1	aspect forfeit gymnast hygiene	octave prelate sarcasm
1.2	albatross apathy archetype atheist compromise deficit deities derogate impotent integral	longitude octagon politics precedent radiate reconcile requiem subaltern vehement
1.3	admirable illustrated infinitely	melancholy preferable spiritual
2.1	contempt decline diverse divert divest divorce divorcée	exist lament minute (adj.) profound quartet respect sestet
2.2	Achilles apparent archaic Byzantine coherence contribute debauched exhaustion	exhibit exhilarate intestines invalid primeval recorder sonorous
2.3	antitheses antithesis conspirator disreputable gesticulate incongruous longevity minutiae	octagonal political reiterate significance solemnity validity zoology
2.4	alliterative derogatory	imaginary incomparable

- 2.5 irreconcilable
- 3.1 adolescent politician
 continuity representative
 controversial superficial
 homogeneous technological
 incongruity unrequited
 melancholic vacillation
 obsolescent
- 3.2 alliteration interpretation
 homogeneity tuberculosis
- 3.3 autobiographical nationalization
 impenetrability personification
 industrialization unreliability
- 4.1 (Pairs of words used as verbs/nouns or adjectives)
 import
 increase
 insult
- 4.2 abstract torment
 accent transfer
 digest transport
- 4.3 absent proceeds
 conduct produce
 contract progress
 convict project
 desert protest
 export rebel
 frequent record
 object refuse
 perfect segment
 permit subject
 present survey
5. BUT NOTE: comment, contact, detail DO NOT CHANGE
6. technical
 technique
 technician
 technicality
 technology
 technological

7. penetrate
impenetrable
impenetrability
8. gesture
gesticulate
gesticulation
9. admire
admiration
admirable