

To stress or not to stress? It used to be so easy in the past

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There is a controversy about the word controversy. Should it be CONtroversy or conTROversy? There is also controversy about the word contribute: at least one EDP reader finds the pronunciation CONtribute irritating and feels it should be conTRIBute. Some objectors even claim that CONtribute is an "Americanism" (it isn't) - which of course means that they don't like it.

It might help to reduce this irritation a little if we can look at this issue historically, because what is going on here is actually part of a very long-term historical trend. As far back as about 1000 BC, our ancestral language, Proto-Germanic, regularised stress on the first syllable of all words, something which distinguished it from all the other contemporary Indo-European languages like Proto-Celtic and Proto-Italic, which never did this.

By the time of Old English, say AD 500, this rule still applied - the norm for all words was stress on the first syllable unless that was a prefix, as in be-neath or be-fore. And this is still the system today in our basic English vocabulary.

But in 1066, the Normans invaded and starting messing things up. English began



■ We can blame the Normans for the inconsistencies in our pronunciation.

to borrow words from French - which descended from Proto-Italic and did not have the first-syllable stress rule.

The word contribute was borrowed into English in the late 1300s. This, and the many other words like it, complicated the originally straightforward English word-stress system, not least because stress could also shift as between related forms like contribute and contribution.

Ever since these French borrowings arrived, there has been a tension in the English language between the original Germanic system and the upstart French system. There has also been a tendency for the English language to try and resolve this tension by fitting inconvenient French-origin words into the natural

Germanic system: there's been a drive to shift to pronunciations like CONtribute, with stress on the first syllable. Balcony was pronounced balCONy until the 1920s, but is now BALcony. Other borrowed words which used to have stress on the second syllable include comPENSate, conCENtrate, conTEMplate, and reCONcile.

But, to be honest, things aren't quite so simple as this. The tension between the two systems actually leads to all sorts of contradictions and complications. It used to be more usual to say CONtroversy, as it still is in the USA. But nowadays a majority of people in this country say conTROversy. I wonder if this Britishism irritates Americans.