

# MISCELLANY

## BROAD AND FLAT A IN MARKED WORDS

VACILLATION BETWEEN [ɑ] (“broad” A)<sup>1</sup> and [æ] (“flat” A) is a persistent feature of American speech, particularly in loan words or *nomina propria*, as in the twofold pronunciation of the stressed vowel of *Colorado*, *Nevada*, *Iran*, *Iraq*, *Milan*, and so on. Whereas no Westerner would be caught dead saying *Color[ɑ]do* or *Nev[ɑ]da*, many of them, along with other Americans, do habitually say *Ir[ɑ]n*, *Ir[ɑ]q*, and *Mil[ɑ]n*, instead of the long-standing and traditional *Ir[æ]n*, *Ir[æ]q*, and *Mil[æ]n*. In the case of loan words, including designations of foreign places or things, even where initially there is vacillation between [ɑ] and [æ], as in *Viet Nam* (cf. the preference for [næm] over [nam] to render the slangy abbreviation ‘*Nam*’), American speech in modern times seems to favor pronunciations that speakers likely construe as approximating the donor/original language’s sounds, especially in the case of a smattering of knowledge of foreign, mostly European, languages. In this respect, American speech has tended to diverge from traditional British English—and the older American tradition (cf. Pyles 1952, 256–57)—where anglicization has long been the norm (cf., for instance, the different rendering of names like *Kant* or *Dante*; or of words like *mafia*). Viewed from this perspective, pronunciations like *Ir[ɑ]n* simply conform to a current tendency.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, however, there has been a marked augmentation of the domain affected by the tendency—specifically, to include unfamiliar words, whether or not a particular word is ascertainably foreign and “known” to a speaker as such. In this new situation, the emphasis falls on unfamiliarity: the word in question is either not part of a speaker’s active vocabulary or is used sporadically. It may have been acquired from other speakers who are equally unfamiliar with it. In such cases, the pronunciation is likely to be at variance with the common or traditional pronunciation. Take the recently manifested vacillation in the stressed vowel of the journalistic buzz word (a Sanskrit borrowing), *mantra*: on two consecutive days (9–10 Oct. 1996) I heard *m[ɑ]ntra* instead of *m[æ]ntra* from Charlayne Hunter-Gault (PBS, “The News Hour”) and Mara Liasson (NPR, “Morning Edition”). The foreign provenience of this word is clearly irrelevant as far as these speakers are concerned. Its new transferred meaning—that is, anything repeated as a set piece, especially a political slogan, the dictionary meaning being a type of prayer—is the sense these journalists have evidently assimilated and foregrounded. But the traditional pronunciation *m[æ]ntra* is either un-

known or eschewed. I propose to explain this appearance of [ɑ] for [æ] as deriving from INSECURE KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORD AS SUCH, not its meaning.

This analysis is confirmed indirectly by cases where unfamiliarity cannot be invoked as the reason for [ɑ], but MARKEDNESS could be.<sup>3</sup> In a recent broadcast of his commentary, "The Nature of Things" (Vermont Public Radio), the naturalist Will Curtis several times pronounced the word *habitat* with [ɑ] for both of the relevant (stressed and unstressed) vowels. This untraditional pronunciation of a word in common use can be chalked up to its valorization as marked in the sense of "special" or "restricted." When a speaker accords salience or special status to a word that contains a vowel that can be rendered [ɑ] or [æ], [ɑ] may be utilized as a means of mirroring the marked value of the word IN CONTEXT. Curtis (whose topic was the disappearance of *habitat* for certain flora and fauna) evidently—and unconsciously—did this with *habitat*.<sup>4</sup>

This analysis joins hands with the earlier one, in that "unfamiliarity" is one of the concrete meanings of the abstract designation "marked." The foreignness of words lends itself typically to subsumption under the category of marked value, hence the special or restricted phonetic features commonly found in the pronunciation of foreign words unless and until they are nativized (if ever). This is especially true of names. Thus *Yasser Arafat* is constantly pronounced with some combination of [ɑ]'s and [æ]'s, although the thoroughly anglicized version—all [æ]'s—is also extant. I recently heard a speaker wishing to dignify his ownership of the very expensive car called a *Lamborghini* pronouncing the first vowel [ɑ] instead of [æ]. The vowel [ɑ], through its occurrence in what is perceived as American "educated" speech in words like *rather*, as well as in British English (*tomato*, *banana*), has become associated with marked (= foreign, formal, "high" style) pronunciation, whence its natural utilization as a phonetic mark of special status. Imitation of prestige dialects is likely to account for examples like the garden-variety word *pistachio* or the name *Andrea* being pronounced with [ɑ] rather than the plebeian [æ].<sup>5</sup>

All of this speaks in favor of the idea that the historically older urge of Americans to render foreign (European) words "correctly" at the expense of native phonetic norms has been subsumed, as but one specific manifestation, under the newer and more general drive for "authenticity." Truth is identified with the authentic. Thus, *K[ɑ]nt* and *D[ɑ]nte* persist as the only pronunciations in American speech, where the British norm has *K[æ]nt* and *D[æ]nte*,<sup>6</sup> not because of a desire to acknowledge the foreignness of the names but because nativizing their pronunciation might run the risk of making one's acquaintance with them seem less than authentic. Hence it is the avoidance of anything that, through speech, might be taken as a sign of

inauthentic knowledge that seems to explain the proliferation of pronunciations like *m[a]ntra*, *pist[a]chio*, and even *h[a]bit[a]t*.

## NOTES

1. In order to avoid needless confusion over phonological differences between varieties of American English, I have chosen to use [a] as a sign to cover all of the varieties that occur as the stressed vowel or vowel nucleus in words like *llama*. For a discussion of the contemporary distribution of the lowest and frontest vowel sounds of American English, see the forematter in Cassidy (1985). A concise historical characterization of broad and flat A in American English occurs in Robertson (1954, 392–94); cf. Mencken (1957, 334–37).

2. There are clearly plenty of exceptions, including words from Amerindian languages and Spanish, particularly in the Southwest and California.

3. Markedness is a formal semiotic universal affecting the valorization of terms of oppositions throughout grammar, from phonology to stylistics and discourse. Markedness is always context-sensitive and applies wherever there is a choice. The so-called marked term is more narrowly defined—is of more restricted scope—vis-à-vis its unmarked, less narrowly defined counterpart. In the case under discussion, the association of [a] with foreign lexemes and [æ] with native ones has resulted in the former being valorized as marked and the latter as unmarked. For more on the larger topic, see now Battistella (1996).

4. It might seem a plausible alternative to attribute this pronunciation of *habitat* to something like a subliminal awareness of the Latin source. But familiarity with Curtis's marked Eastern New England speech provides a convincing riposte to any such suggestion.

5. The recent appearance of the spelling *Ondrea* to render the name bears this out.

6. Jones (1984, s.v.) gives the alternate *D[ɑ:]nte* but only *K[æ]nt*. I suspect that the truer picture of present-day British English, with its wholesale importation of Americanisms of all kinds, would include *K[ɑ:]nt*.

## REFERENCES

- Battistella, Edwin L. 1996. *The Logic of Markedness*. New York: Oxford UP.  
 Cassidy, Frederic G., ed. 1985. *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Vol. I: *Introduction and A–C*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.  
 Jones, Daniel, comp. 1984. *Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary*. 14th ed. Rev. and ed. by A. C. Gimson. London: Dent.  
 Mencken, H. L. 1957. *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*. 4th ed. New York: Knopf.  
 Pyles, Thomas. 1952. *Words and Ways of American English*. New York: Random.  
 Robertson, Stuart. 1954. *The Development of Modern English*. 2nd ed. Rev. by Frederic G. Cassidy. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

MICHAEL SHAPIRO  
*Brown University*