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This is a contribution from *Historiographia Linguistica* 34:2/3

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Pronouncing the “P”

Prescription or Description in 19th- and 20th-Century English Dictionaries?*

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1. *Introduction*

In P. G. Wodehouse’s novel *Leave it to Psmith*, published in 1923, Psmith explains to the “small maid-of-all work” who opens the door to him at Number Eighteen, Wallingford Street, West Kensington, that

I started life without the initial letter, and my father always clung ruggedly to the plain Smith. But it seemed to me that there were so many Smiths in the world that a little variety might well be introduced. Smythe I look on as a cowardly evasion, nor do I approve of the too prevalent custom of tacking another name on in front by means of a hyphen. So I decided to adopt the Psmith. The p, I should add for your guidance, is silent, as in phthisis, psychic, and ptarmigan. You follow me? (Wodehouse 1924: 39–40)

But was the “p” silent in those words in 1923? The dictionary evidence for this is varied: while it approaches unanimity during the course of the 19th century, it begins to diversify again just over the period that P. G. Wodehouse (1881–1975) was writing his Psmith novels (of which *Leave it to Psmith* was the last).¹ This article

* I am grateful to the academic referees who read this article in an earlier version for a number of suggestions and corrections.

1. Psmith made his first appearance in *Mike* (Wodehouse 1909), in which he mentions that he has just that morning decided to change his name, while buying “a simple pennorth of butter-scotch out of the automatic machine at Paddington” en route to his new school, Sedleigh (having left Eton the previous term). Here too he explains that the *p* is not sounded in his name: “Cp. the name Zbysco, in which the Z is given a similar miss-in-baulk” (p. 179). The intermediate novels are *Psmith in the City* (1910) and *Psmith Journalist* (1915; originally *The Prince and Betty*, 1912). The “silent *p*”, evidently a minor phenomenon in the history of English pronunciation over the 19th and 20th centuries, is undiscussed in such standard works as Jones (2006), MacMahon (1998), Mugglestone (2003).

investigates how 19th- and 20th-century English dictionaries have represented the pronunciation of Greek-derived words beginning *p*-, especially the *ps*- words, of which there is a large number. Notwithstanding the general lexicographical move from prescription to description over this period, it concludes that we should be extremely cautious about taking on trust the witness of lexicographers where pronunciation of these words (and perhaps others) is concerned, especially after the publication of the relevant parts of the *OED* in 1908–1909.

2. *Before and after the OED*

In his *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* published in 1791, the famous orthoepist John Walker (1732–1807) had proleptically agreed with Psmith on the silent *p*, but in a way that suggests that usage (or at any rate precept) was not then uniform. Writing of “the propriety of suppressing the *p*” in words such as *pseudography* and *pneumaticks*, Walker told his readers,

I have differed from Mr. Sheridan in these words, as I apprehend it is contrary to analogy, and the best usage to pronounce the initial *p*. *G* and *k* before *n* are always silent, as in *gnomon*, *knave*, &c. *B* is not heard in *bdellium*, nor *p* in *psalm*, *ptisan*, &c. and till some good reasons are offered for pronouncing it in the words in question, I must join with Dr. Kenrick, Mr. Scott, and Mr. Perry, who have sunk it as I have done.²

Walker’s dictionary was a highly successful work, reprinted over a hundred times up to 1904 and widely held as a standard: in 1808 the *Athenaeum* had judged it the “statute book of English orthoepy”, and by the end of the 19th century it had become “a byword for linguistic correctness” — though its author was subsequently regarded as an “arch-prescriptivist”, especially after the publication in 1917 of Daniel Jones’s *English Pronouncing Dictionary*.³

2. Quoted from Walker (1968), s.v. *pneumatick*. For 18th-century works on pronunciation, including those specified here, see Beal (1999) and Jones (2006), and on Perry’s dictionary see further note 5 below. A modern phonetician would analyse the articulation of the initial <p> in such words as resting on four phonological/phonetic possibilities: (1) the absence of any articulation: e.g., PNEUMATIC pronounced with /n/ as the initial segment — i.e. as advocated by Walker here; (2) /p/ and a following consonant or consonants forming an unusual, but nevertheless pronounceable sequence: e.g., /psm/ in PSMITH; (3) /p/ as an additional syllable in the word and pronounced with a following voiced schwa: e.g., PTERODACTYL as /pʰetərəˈdækti l/; and (4) the same as (3), except for a voiceless schwa after the initial /p/. Parallels to (3) and (4) are the different pronunciations of, e.g., POTATO. In slow speech, the schwa will be voiced; in faster, and often more informal, speech, it will be voiceless. Possibilities (2), (3) and (4) are not differentiated by any of the writers discussed in this article.

3. See Beal (2004), who herself quotes the “statute-book” description from *Athenaeum* 3 (1808), 77–84. Beal also quotes Alexander Ellis’s accusation “of Walker of being one of ‘these word-

Walker’s views on silent *p*- seem certainly to have taken hold, not least because they concurred with those of Noah Webster. During the next few decades a large number of single-volume dictionaries of English were published which also supplied guides to pronunciation for general use. Many of these (given the propensity of lexicographers to copy from one another) can be traced back either directly or indirectly to versions of Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language* of 1828, and many were additionally influenced by Walker. (Johnson’s dictionary, especially as re-edited by Todd and then Latham, was also used as an important source for these dictionaries but did not influence pronunciation, on which neither Johnson nor his editors supplied information.⁴) In 1828, Webster (1758–1843) had printed the following direction in his dictionary, just before the alphabetical sequence of words spelt *ps*-: “It is to be noted that in words beginning with *Ps* and *Pt*, the letter *p* has no sound”, and he had marked *phthisis* as pronounced with initial *th*- (which is presumably what Psmith meant by silent *p* in this case, which is rather different from that of words beginning *ps*- and *pt*-). This judgement, evidently in accord with Walker’s of 1791, is repeated in the corresponding text of the 1864 unabridged edition of Webster; this edition also states, in one of its introductory sections entitled “Principles of Pronunciation”, that the letter *P* “is silent when initial before *n*, *s*, and *t*, as in *pneumatics*, *psalm*, *psaw*, *ptarmigan*”.⁵ Printed at the end of this section is a “Synopsis of Words Differently Pronounced by Different Orthoëpists” which lists contentious words and their pronunciation

peddlars, those letter-drivers, those stiff-necked pedantic philosophical, miserably informed, and therefore supremely certain, self-confident and self-conceited orthographers’ ” (Ellis 1869: 1.155). The reference to letter-driving and pedantry suggests Ellis thought Walker over-attentive to etymology in determining a word’s pronunciation; Walker’s judgement on silent *p*, however, is a clear example of an opposite tendency. These contrary aspects and judgements of Walker — prescriptivist on the one hand and innovative on the other — are aptly analysed in a further study, Beal (2003).

4. Nor is pronunciation marked in Richardson’s *A New Dictionary of the English Language* (1836–1837), though all these dictionaries indicate stress in many of the words they record. For a useful survey of 19th-century dictionaries before the *OED*, see Simpson (1991: 1958–1960); and for a wide range of lexicographical information and comment on this period and later, see Green (1996: 234–365).

5. Quoted from Goodrich, Porter and Webster (1864: §84.xliv). It is possible that Webster’s 1828 views on silent *p* had also been influenced by Willam Perry’s *Royal Standard English Dictionary* of 1755, a revised edition of which (1788) was the first English language dictionary to be printed in America. As its title page explained, this edition was “intended to fix a standard for the pronunciation of the English Language conformably to the present practice of polite speakers in Greatbritain [sic] and the United States”. Unlike Walker, Perry does not provide any comment on the pronunciation of *p*- in these instances, but by printing it in italic font he indicates it should be silent. For influences on Webster, see Micklethwait (2000).

as recommended by the orthoepists in question, each with a date to indicate the publication of the work referred to (viz. Webster 1864, Perry 1805, Walker 1806, Knowles 1845, Smart 1857, Worcester 1860, Cooley 1864). The only *ps* or *pt* word included in this list is *ptisan*, uniformly pronounced *t-* (it is the word's subsequent vowels and consonants that are in question, not the initial, silent, *p-*).⁶

A survey of more than a dozen dictionaries spread over the period 1819–1890 (see first section of the References below) indicates that dropping the *p-* had become virtually uniform practice over the course of the 19th century; I have been able to discover only one source that takes a different view. This first emerges in the *Comprehensive English Dictionary* of John Ogilvie (1797–1867), published in 1864, whose title page explains that its pronunciation was “adapted to the best modern usage by R[ichard] Cull.” The *Comprehensive* was a reduced version of Ogilvie's previous multi-volume *Imperial Dictionary* published in 1850 (itself based on Webster), which also took account of more recent abridgements of Webster by his son-in-law Goodrich. But while the *Imperial* had reproduced Webster's note on *ps-* and *pt-* words in the body of its text, advocating silent *p-*, Ogilvie's new dictionary departed from what seems to be, elsewhere, universal custom, and assigned to the majority of *ps-* words the pronunciation with initial *p-*, not *s-*. The exceptions come immediately after *psalm* and its derivatives (which in all the dictionaries I have examined are uncontroversially said to be pronounced with initial *s-*): *psammite*, *psammitic*, *psarolite*, and *psathyrite*. By contrast, *pt-* words conform to dictionary evidence elsewhere, and are all marked as pronounced with initial *t*; the latter sound is also (as elsewhere) assigned to *phthisic* and its derivatives, but *fth-* is assigned to *phthisis*.

This singular record is reproduced the following year in Ogilvie's 1865 *Student's English Dictionary*, for whose pronunciation Cull was again responsible, but not in the version of Ogilvie adapted by Charles Annandale (*A Concise Dictionary of the English Language* of 1863, which I have seen only in its 1864 edition), in which Cull plays no part. The eccentricity of Cull's position on *ps-* words would appear thus to be confirmed, and it seems reasonably safe to assume that silent initial *p-* in these words was elsewhere pretty much the norm.

Some time over the first two decades of the 20th century, however, the story changes. Webster's *New International Dictionary* of 1911 notes in its “Guide to Pronunciation” that “the letter **p** is silent as initial before **n**, **s**, **sh**, and **t**, as in **psalm**, **pshaw**, **ptarmigan**; and usually in words of Greek derivation, as **pneuma**, **psilosis**, **pteranodon**, although in these words, especially the less common ones, some

6. *chivalry* (mentioned below, p. 272) does occur in the list: all authorities save Walker give the pronunciation as *sh*; Worcester gives both *sh* and *ch-*. All the 19th-century dictionaries I have seen which indicate pronunciation assign the word *sh-*.

scholars pronounce the p” (p. liv), and in the body of this dictionary many though not all of such words are given the *p*- pronunciation as an option.⁷ The practice appears to have become more widespread by 1917 or so, when Daniel Jones (1881–1967) published the highly regarded *English Pronouncing Dictionary* already mentioned. Jones set out to record the pronunciation of “cultivated Southern English people in ordinary conversation. [...] that most usually heard in the families of Southern English persons whose men-folk have been educated at the great public boarding-schools” — in other words, the pronunciation of Eton-educated Psmith and others like him (Jones 1917: viii). However, instead of marking the initial *p*- as silent, in accord with Psmith’s testimony, Jones records it as optional in many words beginning *ps*- and *pt*-, and gives *f*- as a possible pronunciation of *phthisis* (the only word he lists beginning *phth*-).

A string of other dictionaries concur in these judgements. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1911 and subsequent editions up to the sixth edition of 1976), the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (the first, second and third editions, published in 1933, 1936 and 1944, respectively), Wyld’s *Universal Dictionary of the English Language* published in instalments in 1931–1932, the *British Empire Modern English Illustrated Dictionary* of 1938, Jones’s own subsequent editions, and no doubt many others, all agree that pronunciation of the initial *p*- in such words is possible (and some, by listing it as the first of the two options, i.e., with *p*- or without, indicate that it is preferable). This reversal seems odd, not least since pronouncing the *p*- is so unfamiliar both today and for many years past (judging by personal memory and by anecdotally gathered witness to the last few decades).

3. *The views of J. A. H. Murray*

Why did this change of heart occur? The answer may lie, at least in part, in the comments made on these forms by the chief editor of the *OED*, James Augustus Henry Murray (1837–1915), in fascicles of the relevant sections of the letter *p* published between 1908 and 1909 — just in time to influence the 1911 *Webster’s*, which included the *OED* as one of the authorities in the “Synopsis of Words Differently Pronounced” at the end of its “Guide to Pronunciation”.⁸ Murray’s strongest

7. This dictionary also prints a much enlarged version of the Webster “Synopsis of Words Differently Pronounced by Different Orthoëpists”, whose updated authorities include the *OED*. As before, *ptisan* (universally attested as pronounced with initial *t*-) is included but no new *ps*- or *pt*- words added other than *psalmist* and *psalmody*.

8. Though the 1911 *Webster’s* may be reporting an independent practice among “scholars” pronouncing highly specialized terms, as indicated in the strange record of the first edition of Funk & Wagnalls’s *New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (1893). This lists a large number of *ps*- words, of which the vast majority are said to be pronounced with an initial *s*-; however a

expressed views were on pronouncing the initial *p*- in *ps*- words, which as we have seen was scarcely at all attested in dictionaries of previous decades. Taking a quite different line, Murray explains that the pronunciation of *psalm* and its derivatives with initial *s*- has probably led speakers to drop the *p*- in other *ps*- words of Greek origin, and makes it clear he disapproves:

The only words in *ps*- which go back to Old English times are the ecclesiastical terms *psalm* n. and vb., and *psalter*. *Psalterion* and *psaltery* appear in the 13th c.; *pseudo*, and some five of its compounds, occur in Wyclif. All the other *ps*- words are of Modern English formation, few before 1600, the great majority of the 19th c. In *psalm* the initial *p* was dropped already in OE., as in OF. and the cognate languages, and in English has never been restored in pronunciation (as it has been in French and German). This appears to have served as a precedent for dropping the *p*- in the pronunciation of other words, an unscholarly practice often leading to ambiguity or to a disguising of the composition of the word. As the *p* is now pronounced in French, German, and other languages, as well as by Englishmen in reading Greek, and by many scholars in English also (there being no organic defect in the English mouth to prevent it), it is here marked, except in the *psalm*, *psalter* group, as an optional pronunciation which is recommended especially in all words that retain their Greek form (e.g. *psora*, *psyche*), and in scientific terms generally, which have not been irretrievably mutilated by popular use. (Murray 1933: 1539)

The implication of these remarks is that the dominant current pronunciation, in the first decade of the 1900s, is with initial *s*-. By characterizing this as “irretrievably mutilated by popular use”, however, Murray gives a strong steer to the reader who turns to the dictionary for prescriptive guidance rather than dispassionate description. His recommendation that such a reader change his or her habits and pronounce the *p*- is clearly directive, sitting oddly in a dictionary that set out to describe and record usage rather than judge and form it. Evidently he hopes to introduce (or re-introduce) a pronunciation which has lain dormant for decades (see further Stanley 2001: 239).

Murray takes a similar view of the pronunciation of *pt*- words (other than the unfortunately spelt *ptarmigan*, whose *p* is not etymological):

Words beginning with this combination of consonants are all (with the exception of the fancifully mis-spelt *ptarmigan*) from Greek, in which the combination is frequent.

scattering are given optional *p*- pronunciation as well (e.g. *psocidae*, *psocina*, *psolidae*, *psophidae*, all as it happens in alphabetical sequence). By the 1928 edition of Funk & Wagnalls, all *ps*- words except three are given *s*- pronunciation only, the three exceptions being *psi*, *Psilorati* (referring to a mountain in Crete), *psaos*.

[Additional note in smaller font:] In English, the *p* of initial *pt-* is commonly omitted in pronunciation, so as to confound words in *pt-* with those in *t-*. As the *p* is pronounced in French, German, and other languages, as well as by Englishmen in reading Greek, and by some scholars in English, the full form is here given as an optional pronunciation often to be preferred. Few of the words are in familiar use. (Murray 1933: 1554)

Again, it appears that at the time Murray writes, the *p-* is usually silent in *pt-* words. As in the case of *ps-* words, Murray regrets this current usage as an unscholarly practice which obscures a word’s etymology and can lead to confusion with other words. Thus he recommends speakers to change.

Murray’s view of words beginning *phth-* follows the same pattern. With one exception, he assigns them the pronunciation *fb-* only or (more usually) *fb-* or *p-*, again departing from the practice of earlier dictionaries and of Psmith (i.e., silent initial *ph-* as the only option).⁹ The explanation for this is to be found in a note under the entry *ph*, where Murray concedes that the *phth-* pronunciation he records in *OED* does not describe common usage, but instead that of scholars: “in Eng. the *ph* is generally mute and the *th* pronounced; but in scientific words many scholars pronounce *fb-*, a combination which is quite as easy as *sf-* in *sphere*.” Historical considerations are behind this decision on registering pronunciation as behind the others we have looked at, as indicated by the exception. This is the word *phthisic*, whose pronunciation is given only as *ti-*, with no recommendation for *phth-*, Murray explaining “The current pronunciation has come down from the ME. *tisik*”. So etymology is decisive. It is the same again with *pn-* words, where Murray expresses his views vigorously (if with slightly less condemnation than that meted out to silent *p-* in *ps-* words):

[*pn-* is] an initial combination occurring only in words from Greek; the *p* is usually mute in English.

[Additional note in smaller font:] (The *p* is pronounced in French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, and other European langs.; also by Englishmen in reading Greek. It is to be desired that it were sounded in English also, at least in scientific and learned words; since the reduction of *pneo-* to *neo-*, *pneu-* to *new-*, and *pnix* to *nix*, is a loss to etymology and intelligibility, and a weakening of the resources of the language [my italics].) (Murray 1933: 1030)

pn- words are accordingly marked with the two pronunciations, *pn-* and *n-*, an exception to this rule being the word *pneumatic*, marked with *n-* only (perhaps because of its predominantly mechanical, as opposed to “scientific and learned”, applications).

9. The *OED* records many more examples of such words than earlier dictionaries, most of which list only *phthisis* (pronounced with initial *t-*).

On the face of it, it is surprising that Murray should have taken so prescriptivist a line on these words. As is well known (and was widely recognized at the time) *OED* broke new lexicographical ground by basing itself on the study of empirical data, and recording the facts of usage rather than linguistic or polite precept, a revolutionary approach aptly summed up many years later by Murray's co-editor, William Alexander Craigie (1867–1957):

[...] some of our predecessors in the science of lexicography thought it was part of their duty to improve the English language. We have got beyond that stage, and consider that if it is to be improved it is not our business to do so, but record it as it was and as it is.¹⁰

On at least one occasion Murray expressly disavowed the role of prescriptive texts in influencing pronunciation, telling the London Philological Society in 1879 (when he took over editorship of the *OED*) that “Englishmen do not take their pronunciation from dictionaries or spelling-books” (Murray 1879: 575). Elsewhere he expressed liberal views in marked contrast with the *OED* entries quoted above, although it is clear that he was exercised by the problem of how to record pronunciation adequately and appropriately. Indeed, he felt that his largely autodidact education (he had left school at the age of fourteen) had particularly sensitized him to the matter: he told the phonetician Henry Sweet (1845–1912), whose advice on recording pronunciation in the *OED* he sought in 1882, that “he had the advantage of having been a school master in the Borders and of having had to learn a standard pronunciation in order to teach English.” (As it happens, education at a Scottish day-school was specified as a disqualifying factor for the pronunciation Daniel Jones set out to record in his own dictionary some years later in 1917.¹¹) In an article on Murray's phonetic notation in *OED*, Michael MacMahon quotes letters to personal correspondents in 1882 and 1883 in which Murray recognized

10. Quoted in *The Periodical* [the in-house journal of Oxford University Press], 15 March 1934, p. 26 (available at <<http://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk/main/content/view/329/287/>> [accessed 13 June 2007]). For the revolution wrought by *OED*, cf. the statement by Craigie and C. T. Onions that the “basis” of this dictionary “is a collection of some five million excerpts from English literature of every period”, forming “the only possible foundation for the historical treatment of every word and idiom which is the *raison d'être* of the work. It is a fact everywhere recognized that the consistent pursuit of this evidence has worked a revolution in the art of lexicography” (Murray 1933, Preface).

11. In his Introduction (p. viii), Jones explains that the pronunciation registered in his dictionary “is not as a rule used by those who have been educated at day schools in Scotland, Ireland, or the North of England”. Interestingly, given Murray's views quoted below, he adds, “Least of all is it a product of the delusion under which many lexicographers appear to have laboured, viz. that all educated people pronounce alike”. For Murray's sensitivity regarding his own position see Murray (1977: 190).

eight different possibilities for the unaccented vowel in *brimstone*, seven in *propose*, six for the initial vowel of *authority* and three for the second vowel in *aconite* and *acolyte*.¹² In the Preface to volume I of the *OED* (1884), he recorded that he had once been “present at a meeting of a learned society, where, in the course of discussion, he heard the word *gaseous* systematically pronounced in six different ways by as many eminent physicists” (Raymond 1987 [unpaginated], p. x of original document). To a correspondent of 15 April 1886, by which time fascicles for the letters *A-Batten* had been published, he wrote,

Outside England (i.e. in the United States, Scotland, Ireland, the colonies) [...] people are apt to think that there is only one “correct” or “proper”, or “right” pronunciation of a word. We in England on the other hand recognize that language is mobile and liable to change and that a very large number of words have two or more pronunciations current at the same time, and [*sic*] giving life-variety to language [...] You may therefore quite freely choose for yourself between pronunsiation and pronunshiation, or use them alternately; either (*eether* or *ither*) is intelligible [...] I say *eether*, my children all say *ither*. (MacMahon 1985, note 14)

He explained his view more broadly in a letter of 5 January 1895 to an unnamed correspondent:

[...] it is a free country, and a man may call a *vase* a *vawse*, a *vahse*, a *vaze*, or a *vase*, as he pleases. And why should he not? We do not all think alike, walk alike, dress alike, write alike, or dine alike; why should we not use our liberty in speech also, so long as the purpose of speech, to be intelligible, and its grace, are not interfered with? (Quoted in K.M.E. Murray 1977: 189)

The problems of dealing with such variation in the *OED* must have seemed overwhelming at the time. On the one hand there was no established system of phonetic notation (Murray invented his own); on the other hand — despite all the orthoepist works that had appeared over the last century and before — there was no established standard of pronunciation. As Henry Sweet pointed out in 1890,

the unity of spoken English is still imperfect: it is still liable to be influenced by local dialects [...] it changes from generation to generation, and is not absolutely uniform even among speakers of the same generation, living in the same place and having the same social standing. (Sweet 1890b: vi–vii)

Moreover no one had done the field research and gathered together the empirical data; as Sweet wrote elsewhere in the same year, “Reflect that it is absurd to set up a standard of how English people *ought* to speak, before we know how they actually

12. MacMahon (1985: 147), quoting or referring to letters in the Murray Papers archive in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, dated 12/10/1883, 5/10/1882 and 19/11/1882.

do speak” (Sweet 1890a: 3).¹³ This observation implies a view that language should be recorded descriptively: but there is ample evidence in the writings of a range of linguists over the late 19th to early 20th centuries (including, at times, Sweet himself) that many thought a univocal standard of pronunciation desirable, not least as a part of a progressive programme to enable social mobility and militate against the snobbery with which variant pronunciations, whether regional or social, were often received by the upper classes.¹⁴

As MacMahon convincingly shows, what Murray hoped to record in the *OED* — notwithstanding his open-minded remarks to individuals on the language’s mobility, its propensity to change, and the enhancing “life-variety” that is the result — was a stable standard of pronunciation: “what cultivated Englishmen *aimd* at [...and what] they actualy produced in deliberate speech” [sic; Murray is adopting phonetic spelling].¹⁵ And when one turns to *OED* itself, one sees that variant pronunciations of the sort Murray happily condoned in his letters were given short shrift: for example only one pronunciation was recorded for *acolyte*, *aconite*, *pronunciation*, and *vase*, only two for *gaseous*.

But Murray’s comments on initial *p*- fall into a separate category from the problems of identifying and notating a standard discussed by MacMahon (and also, with a different ideological slant, by Crowley 1989). They are not the result of a wish to record and promote a single standard of educated speech, already more or less established among a socially and culturally defined elite. Instead, they are a deliberate attempt to persuade members of this very elite to change their habits and discard their current pronunciation in favour of another (far less common) one, thus giving precedent to etymological correctness over existing usage.

In other ways, too, Murray adopts a prescriptive attitude in the *OED* which seems at odds with his dictionary’s (and his own) avowed descriptivism. Both he and his fellow editors used a variety of methods to stigmatise well-established usage, indicating disapproval under the cover of supposedly objective definitions or

13. Both remarks by Sweet are also quoted by Crowley (1989: 137, 173). The same views are found in letters from Sweet to Murray written in 1882 and quoted by MacMahon (1985: 79–80) and note 23.

14. Cf. Sweet (1877: 196): “When a firm control of pronunciation has [...] been acquired, provincialisms and vulgarisms will at last be eliminated and some of the most important barriers between the different classes will thus be abolished”; for comparable evidence see the many quotations from original sources in Crowley (1989), e.g., pp. 125–163 (Crowley’s view is that such a programme was culturally suspect, because it perpetuated existing social hegemonies); for a discussion of attitudes to pronunciation earlier in the 19th century, see Jones (2006: 282–293).

15. As quoted by MacMahon (1985: 83), from the *Proceedings of the Philological Society* 1881–1882, minute of meeting held on Friday 17 March 1882.

labels or etymologies. Saying *pants* instead of *drawers*, for example, was said to be “shoppy”; a new sense of *avocation* (= “usual occupation, vocation”) had, in Murray’s view, been “improperly foisted upon the word” (even though this sense was instanced from the work of historian and essayist Thomas Babington Macaulay, commonly regarded as an exemplary stylist, whose writings were extensively quoted elsewhere in the *OED*); the word *caucus* had been “generally misused” in English newspapers since 1878. (Any persistent and imaginative user of the electronic *OED* may easily turn up further examples of such proscription by typing suitable terms into the search engine boxes — “misused”, or “wrongly”, or “improperly” — and sifting the results.¹⁶)

In some of these instances, it may be that Murray’s innate scholarliness was affronted by linguistic change, and that he found it hard to relinquish the etymological meaning of a word, or the clue to etymology afforded by ‘correct’ pronunciation of the letters occurring in a word as spelt. What was at stake was not social class or regional variation (as in disputes over how to pronounce the *a* in *vase*), but the history of the language. For a medievalist, dialectician, and pioneer in historical lexicography, such a bias must have been particularly hard to resist. It was also sanctioned by earlier views on pronunciation, the very ones that Walker (in 1791) had been reacting against. Johnson had urged in 1755 “for pronunciation the best general rule is, to consider those as the most elegant speakers who deviate least from the written words”, a dictum echoed by several other pundits over the next few years (though not in relation to the initial *p*).¹⁷ Concern over the relationship between spelling and pronunciation had thus been topical for centuries. Towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th it had become intense, and together with many of his friends and associates Murray had long been involved in debates on spelling reform which proposed that, one way or another, spelling should be adjusted to mirror pronunciation.¹⁸

16. For other examples see Brewer (2005: 290–291). The subject has been intensively dealt with by Lynda Mugglestone, who shows that the *OED* lexicographers attached derogatory labels to words found in normally acceptable print sources, and that frequency of attestation did not guarantee lexicographical approval despite their dictionary’s claims to describe rather than prescribe; see Mugglestone (2000) and Mugglestone (2005), Chapter 5.

17. Quoted from Johnson’s “A Grammar of the English Tongue”, included in 1755 edition of his *Dictionary* (unpaginated); see discussion in Mugglestone (2003: 85), who provides examples of the dictum’s repetition by other writers.

18. See Murray (1977: 101–102). A representative example of such discussion, summarising positions over the previous decade, occurs in Ellis (1881); see also Sweet (1877), who names Murray as a younger member of England’s “flourishing phonetic school” (p. viii) and includes an appendix entitled “A Popular Exposition of the Principles of Spelling Reform”.

In 1892, Murray's co-editor Henry Bradley (1845–1923) had set himself clearly against changing spelling in this way. Describing the difficulties of determining the pronunciation of words which were “classical derivatives”, Bradley explained:

In dealing with such words I have been guided by the consideration that with reference to them the normal relation of written to spoken language is reversed: *the combination of written letters being the real word, and the corresponding sounds merely its symbol*. In words of this class, therefore, *the best pronunciation is that which most effectively and promptly suggests to mind the written form of the word* [my italics throughout].¹⁹

Similarly, in his dictionary entries for *ps-*, *pt-*, and other such Greek-derived words, Murray advocates the reverse course to that of the spelling reformers. Prescriptively recommending that it is users' pronunciation which should be adjusted, not spelling, he does the best he can to make obvious the link between a word and its etymology.

4. *Murray's influence? The English Pronouncing Dictionary and other dictionaries*

Given the reputation and influence of the *OED*, which was widely acknowledged as the ultimate authority on the English language within a few years of the publication of the first fascicle in 1884, Murray's views may well have affected the way in which subsequent dictionaries recorded the pronunciation of these initial sounds (in all cases barring *pn-* words, that is, for no dictionary takes up Murray's suggestion to pronounce the *p* in these cases. It may be that the silent *p* was too well established in words like *pneumatic*, with a wide practical application — for example as used of motor-car tyres — to be dislodged by any appeal to scholarliness).²⁰ But was Murray also successful where actual speakers were concerned — so that, notwithstanding his belief that “Englishmen” disregarded dictionaries as a source of authority on pronunciation, he was able to persuade them to change their unscholarly ways and start to pronounce the hitherto silent *p-* in more abstruse words of Greek origin? The example of *Psmith* may suggest he was unsuccessful, since it clearly implies that dropping the *p-* was still unproblematically current in 1923. But can this example gainsay the contradictory evidence of Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary (EPD)* five years earlier? Might it also be relevant that *Psmith* was a character first introduced by P. G. Wodehouse in a

19. Bradley (1892: 263). Bradley was working on words beginning with the letter *e* but unfortunately gives no examples of the difficulties he refers to.

20. The exception to this rule is the word *pnux*, uniformly (so far as I can see) recorded with pronounced initial optional *p-* after the *OED*, though not before.

novel of 1909 (see note 1 above), and unlikely therefore to have been able to take advantage of Murray’s views on initial *p*-, which had been published in the same year? Given the paucity of other evidence, it is worth looking at the dictionary record more closely.²¹

Jones’s dictionary (published as an Everyman volume) was a pioneering book when it first appeared in 1917, since it explicitly disavowed any prescriptivist intentions. The Introduction (vii–ix) states firmly that the work

is a record of *facts*, not of theories or of personal preferences. No attempt is made to decide how people *ought* to pronounce; all that the dictionary aims at doing is to give a faithful record of the manner in which certain specified classes of people *do* pronounce. [...] the proper function of the phonetician is to observe and record accurately, to be, in fact, a kind of living phonograph.²²

Evidently this is a very different approach from that of Murray on the silent *p*. The point was repeated in the Editor’s Preface, by Walter Rippmann (Staff Inspector for schools at London University and an influential editor of many linguistic studies).²³ Pronunciation “is a fatally attractive subject for dogmatizing”; Rippmann wrote (p. vi),

but the assumption of infallibility in matters of pronunciation, common as it is, should always arouse suspicion. This book does not claim to afford a model of pronunciation, and criticism that attributes to it any such claim is futile. It is to be judged as a record of facts.

It is hard, therefore, not to believe Jones’s witness that pronouncing *ps*- and *pt*-words with non-silent initial *p*- (and *f*- at the beginning of *phthisis*) was a current practice among public-school educated speakers in 1917.

21. That no words beginning *ps*, *pn*-, *pt*, *pth*- (or *chivalry*, mentioned below) occur in the lists published in Bridges (1929), suggests they were not thought to be particularly problematic (or alternatively were too uncommon to merit inclusion).

22. Jones’s Introduction may be an echo, conscious or unconscious, of the Preface to Henry Sweet’s *A Primer of Spoken English* (Sweet 1890b: v): “The object of this book is to give a faithful picture — a phonetic photograph — of educated spoken English as distinguished from vulgar and provincial English on the one hand, and literary English on the other. At the same time I must disclaim any intention of setting up a standard of spoken English. All I can do is to record those facts which are accessible to me — to describe that variety of spoken English of which I have a personal knowledge, that is, the educated speech of London and the district round it — the original form of Standard English both in its spoken and literary form”.

23. See Collins & Mees (1999: 164–166), and on Jones’s dictionary more generally *ibid.*, pp. 166–173.

Or is it? Jones's pupil and successor, Alfred Charles Gimson (1917–1985), acknowledged in 1977 that “There can be little doubt that Daniel Jones will be remembered as the most influential British phonetician of the twentieth century”, but also commented, “Inevitably, he was never able to behave simply as a ‘living phonograph’. He made little use of sampling or statistical evaluation, but when in doubt paid great heed to his own usage.”²⁴ So how far should we trust his view that pronouncing the *p*- was an option in 1917 that was exercised by anybody other than a tiny number of philologists who had eccentric views on etymological correctness (and may well have been influenced by one man alone, viz. J.A.H. Murray)?

The doubt as to Jones's record which is raised by Psmith's contrary testimony of 1909–1923 is further stirred by the variations in recording the *p*- in subsequent editions of Jones's own dictionary. Over the following decades many impressions and several new editions were published of this work, which “rapidly established itself as the only really reliable guide to the pronunciation of British English”,²⁵ and a number of new words beginning *ps*- and *pt*- were added. To begin with, the original material seems not to have been changed, or the entries rethought as a whole. Thus the fourth edition (“revised and enlarged”), published in 1937, has a mixture of pronunciations indicated for these various words. Some of the new items, *psychiatrist*, *psychometric*, *psychometry*, *psychopathic*, are said to be pronounced with initial *s*- (no other option given), but other new items, with which the former are alphabetically interspersed, are given optional initial *p*- pronunciation (*psychoanalyse* and *psychotherapy*) — i.e., the same as for the original items, for which pronunciation is unchanged (e.g., *psychic* and *psychologic*, etc.). Is it credible that speakers would have dropped the *p*- in one case, and pronounced it in the other, especially since all these words belong, broadly speaking, to the same subject matter and many people would have occasion to use them all in similar contexts? No such inconsistency appears with the single new *pt*- word which appears in this edition, *pterosaur*, which is given optional *p*- along with the original *pterodactyl* (the other *pt*-words are unchanged).

Jones completely revised the dictionary for its 11th edition in 1956, with further additions and this time some partial changes to existing *ps*- entries. The word

24. Gimson (1977: 151, 155). Crowley (1989: 165–174), whose primary concern is to trace the history of standard English and “received pronunciation”, reviews Jones's earlier publications as well as the *EPD* to conclude that — notwithstanding Jones's stated intentions — “the effect of [his] work was both prescriptive and proscriptive”.

25. Collins & Mees (1999: 173); they comment that this was “a position which it effectively retained unchallenged for over seventy years until the appearance of Wells's (1990) comprehensive and authoritative *Longman pronunciation dictionary*”.

psyche has changed from being pronounceable with a *p*- to being pronounceable only with an *s*-, joining *psychiatric* and *psychiatrist*. All the other *ps*- words, however, are now said to be optionally pronounced with either initial *p*- or initial *s*- — meaning that the fourth-edition newcomers, *psychometric*, *psychometry*, *psychopathic*, have all moved from being *s*- only in 1937 to either *s*- or *p*- in 1956. The one exception to this is the new word *psittacosis*, pronounceable only with initial *p*-.

The 14th edition of 1977 (again completely revised, this time by A. C. Gimson) reproduces the treatment in the 11th of 1956. In the light of my own memory of the time, this strikes me as very odd. Gimson adds five new words, falling into two separate groups: first *psychedelic*, marked as pronounceable only with initial *s*-, and secondly *psephology*, *psychopath*, *psychosomatic*, *psychotic*, all four with two pronunciations indicated, with either *s*- or *p*-. Here, too, suspicion may be aroused. Could it be that *psychedelic* in 1977 is said to be pronounced only with initial *s*- because that is also true of its alphabetical neighbours *psyche* and *psychiatrist*? While the four other newcomers to the 14th edition are by contrast given the optional pronunciation *p*- because that had already been allotted to their own alphabetical neighbours? However, more generally, can it really have been the case that the 14th edition was an accurate representation of speech in 1977 (or indeed the 11th in 1956)? That while no one said *p-sychiatrist* in 1956 or 1977, some people said *p-sychoanalyse*?²⁶ If the dictionary was inaccurate in these editions, might it also have been inaccurate in previous ones?

At this point, it is helpful to consider the evidence provided by language users themselves (albeit gathered on an anecdotal basis, and subject to the normal reservations on the quality of such evidence — that speakers are often inaccurate witnesses to their own speech). The various octogenarians I have consulted remember silent *p*- as universal practice during the various stages of their lives, with a few exceptions. Two former acquaintances of Charles Talbot Onions (1873–1965) distinctly recall that he always pronounced the initial *p*- in *ps*- words. Onions was the youngest of the four original editors of *OED* and worked with Murray for many years: that his usage is so clearly remembered, from the 1940s, may indicate that it was as unusual then as now, despite the testimony of contemporaneous and

26. Astonishingly, the revised version of the fourteenth edition, published in 1988, which contained “several thousand alterations to pronunciation [as marked in the fourteenth edition] throughout” (p. ix), continued to give optional *p*- pronunciation for many *ps*- words (and for *pterodactyl* and *pterosaur*); *psyche*, *psychedelic*, *psychiatric* and *psychiatrist* remain pronounceable with initial *s*- only. It is significant that the four new *ps*- words included in the Supplement to this edition (*pseud*, *psych(e)* [the verb], *psycholinguistic* and *psychosexual*) are all given initial *s*- pronunciation only, indicating that this may indeed be the only current pronunciation for all these words (as stated in *OED2* in 1989; see below), despite the contrary evidence in the body of the dictionary.

subsequent dictionaries who record initial *p*- as a current pronunciation.²⁷ (Apparently Onions — and J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973) — also pronounced *chivalry* with a hard *ch*-, another pronunciation whose record in dictionaries if not actual speech Murray may have influenced. While almost all 19th-century dictionaries give *sh*- for the initial consonant (see note 6 above), many 20th-century ones give optional *ch*- as well. Murray had explained in his note on the etymology (in the fascicle for *Cast-Clivy*, published in 1889; Murray 1933: 363) that “As a ME. word the proper historical pronunciation is with *tʃ*-; but the more frequent pronunciation at present is with *f*-, as if the word had been received from modern French”. Once again, etymology was the crucial factor in determining how Murray thought a word should be pronounced — but not necessarily how it actually was pronounced, except in the case of some speakers who were also medievalists and philologists).²⁸

Does more detailed consideration of the evidence of dictionaries other than the *EPD* provide any further illumination? One might have expected the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (SOED)*, the abridgement of *OED* made by C. T. Onions and published in 1933, to follow *OED*’s record of pronunciation and thus indicate “*ps*-, *s*-” for *ps*- words. In fact, *SOED*’s account of whether or not to pronounce the initial *p*- is even more varied than (though different from) that of the *EPD*. In the 1933 edition, some words are said to be pronounced with initial “*ps*-, *s*-” (e.g. *psephism*, *psilo*-), some “*s*-, *ps*-” (e.g. all but one of the combinations in *pseudo*-), some *ps*- only (*pseudoperiteros* [i.e. the “*pseudo*” exception], *psittaceous*), and one *s*- only (*psychagogue*). Can we allow ourselves to believe that this represented actual usage? Or was it instead the unintended consequence of prescription mixed with (dare we suggest) muddle? By the time of the 1973 printing, an updated version of the third (1944) edition, several words have exited the dictionary and several have entered it, but the same confusing mixture remains: so that *psittaceous* is to be pronounced *ps*- only (as in the first edition), but *psittacosis* is to be pronounced *s*- only — as also is *psychoanalysis*, incidentally, contrary to the indication of the *EPD*. The Addenda to this printing of *SOED* lists six words beginning *ps*- (*psephology*, *pseud*, *psi*, *psilocybin*, *psychedelic*, *psychotic*) and assigns them all initial *s*- pronunciation only. From this last piece of evidence it seems plausible to infer that, despite the diverse testimony in the body of the dictionary, initial *s*- pronunciation was uniform by 1973.

27. My two witnesses to Onions’s speech are E. G. Stanley and Derek Brewer, the latter an undergraduate at Onions’s college in Oxford (Magdalen) and both men familiar throughout their lives with philological and linguistic issues.

28. See Stanley (2001: 241–242), on Tolkien’s affectation.

Another important Oxford lexicon, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (COD; originally derived, like the *Shorter*, from *OED*), has been more consistent. Its first edition (published in 1911, after Murray’s *p* fascicles had appeared), marked *ps*- and *pt*- words (other than *psalm* and *ptarmigan*, as ever) as pronounceable with an initial *p*-, and listed this option before the second, without the *p*-. This practice was repeated from one edition to another up to the fifth edition (1964; quoted from an impression of 1975) which reversed the order of the options and gave “s- or ps-”, implying that initial *s*- was by then preferred (or more usual). No distinctions are made in any editions between different *ps*- words (*psychiatrist*, *psychoanalyse*, *psittaceous*, etc.) such as those in Jones’s dictionary and *SOED*, lending weight to the theory that those distinctions are accidental vestiges of earlier editions, or incompletely assimilated additions, rather than reflections of real usage among speakers of the language. In the sixth edition of *COD*, published in 1976 (quoted from an impression of 1980), there was a complete change: all *ps*- and *pt*- words were indicated as pronounced with silent *p*-, notwithstanding the testimony to the contrary of Gimson’s 1977 edition of *EPD*.²⁹ That silent *p*- may already have been universal for some decades is indicated by the *Odhams Dictionary of the English Language* of 1946, edited by Albert Hugh Smith and John Leslie Noble O’Loughlin (the latter had trained under Onions in the early 1930s, in work on the *OED Supplement* of 1933; see Brewer 2007: 52). This professional and well-executed dictionary gives all *ps*- and *pt*- words as pronounced without initial *p*-; there is some reason to think, therefore, that in accord with the editors’ stated aim (p. vi of their Preface) this was “the accepted pronunciation” of the day. The same unvarying record, i.e. all such words with silent *p*-, is found in the *Chambers Shorter English Dictionary* of 1949, edited by A. M. Macdonald, and in two slighter volumes: the 1960 *Chambers’s Foundation English Dictionary* (no editor named) and the 1967 *Fontana English Dictionary* (edited by Alexander Hyndman Irvine). All these works are modest and straightforward lexicons aimed at the general non-specialist user; they bear no weight of accumulated scholarship or past editions. Across the Atlantic, the 1961 edition of *Webster’s International Dictionary* is solidly in agreement: this authority records that all *ps*- and *pt*- words are pronounced with unproblematic initial *s*-.

To my mind this assorted evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the initial *p*- was predominantly silent over much of the 20th century — although in the absence of a wide body of recorded oral evidence it is impossible to say for certain.³⁰

29. There were two exceptions: *psephology*, curiously given as pronounced *ps*- or *s*-, and the Greek letter *psi*, which is given *ps*- pronunciation only.

30. No *ph*-, *ps*- or *pt*- words are treated in Burchfield (1981); as with Bridges’s 1929 guide (note 21 above) this may indicate either that pronunciation was in practice (as opposed to dictionary record) uncontroversial, or that such words were too rarely used to have attracted notice.

I am prepared to accept that Jones's first edition of 1917 recorded real usage among a small number of what he called public school speakers, which I suggest was influenced by Murray's recommendations published in 1909. But the inconsistency of record of pronounced *p*- in dictionaries thereafter, especially between different editions of *EPD*, and latterly as between the *SOED*, *COD* and *EPD*, together with its absence altogether from a number of post-1945 non-Oxford dictionaries, points in my view to its existence mainly as a dictionary chimara rather than as a true reflection of the way English speakers have pronounced these words.

5. *The second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*

As an appendix, it is interesting to observe how Murray's record survived unevenly into the second edition of the *OED* (*OED2*), published in 1989, since this is a further example of the way dictionaries can unwittingly combine vestigial material with fresh evidence and judgement. As is well known, *OED2* set out merely to merge the first edition, originally published between 1884 and 1928, with the four-volume Supplement by Robert William Burchfield (1923–2004) of 1972–1986, and not in any way to revise or update the original work of 1884–1928 (except by adding a further 5,000 new words recorded since the relevant part of Burchfield's Supplement had been completed).³¹ Nevertheless, in some few places, the compilers removed or changed details that were clearly inappropriate (e.g. women as well as men were included in the definition for *jury*), or added new information. Where *ps*- is concerned, *OED2* retained Murray's original comments (odd as they sound in a late-20th-century work, with the phrase "irretrievably mutilated by popular use" as a description of diachronic linguistic change), and added to them a note deriving from Burchfield's Supplement which they print above Murray's comments: "In words beginning thus the only pronunc. current is that with initial (s); the indication of an alternative (ps) in the following main entries would be misleading and is accordingly not shown". This is a useful indication that the initial *ps*- pronunciation had completely disappeared by 1982, when Burchfield's volume covering words beginning *o-scz* was published. But the splicing of the new lexicographical material with the old did not work smoothly, since Murray's comment *advocating* pronunciation of the *p*- follows immediately afterwards, to baffling effect; while contrary to what the new note says, pronounced initial *p*- remains indicated in many of the *ps*- words treated — either as the only pronunciation (e.g. for *psammoma*, *psarolite*), or as the first of two optional pronunciations (e.g. for *psalterial*, *pseudo-archaic*, *psoriasis*, *psyche*). In other cases, where the word was added by Burchfield in his Supplement volume of 1982, only initial *s*- pronunciation is indicated, as with *psephology*, *psychedelic*, etc.

31. See Simpson & Weiner (1989), e.g., first sentence of Preface (vol. 1, p. vii).

OED2's treatment of Murray's views on *pt-* words is slightly different, in that his reference to the preferability of pronouncing the *p-* is this time successfully cut. This means that *OED2*'s reproduction of Burchfield's comment on *pt-* pronunciation (“in English words beginning with *pt-* the initial *p* is no longer pronounced”) does not, as in the previous case, contend with Murray's remark to the contrary effect. However, some of the *pt-* words that follow are given initial *t-* pronunciation only, since they entered *OED* on Burchfield's watch, while the ones that derive from the first edition are still marked as optionally pronounceable with initial *p* — although this clearly contradicts the statement just quoted.³² While there were particularly severe problems involved in the compilation of *OED2* — a prodigious feat of technology on the one hand and of proofreading on the other — the syndrome is similar to that visible in several other of the dictionaries discussed here.³³

6. *Conclusions*

All the above allows us to draw two main conclusions. First, that it is vital to examine dictionary evidence in the light of other contemporary records, making due allowance for editorial accidents of commission — that is, editors including out-of-date material in the absence of unambiguous evidence that it truly is out of date (it is hard to be sure that a word or pronunciation has died). We need also to allow for simple errors or inconsistencies appearing in the record when editors stitch new material into an existing work: with the best will in the world, it is difficult, when revising a dictionary, to be sure that the new version is new in all respects, and does not accidentally bear witness to forms no longer current. Second, if it is the case that Murray virtually single-handedly dragged non-silent *p-* back into existence for these Greek-derived, scholarly words (whether in dictionaries or among speakers), then that is a striking testament to the didactic and opinion-forming power of a dictionary, especially the *OED* — whatever may be said or intended of its avowed aim, namely to register usage not form it. The descriptive credentials of post-*OED* dictionaries — as for those published before the *OED* — should never, therefore, be taken for granted.

32. See Stanley (1990) and, for further discussion of *OED2*, Brewer (2007), Chapter 8.

33. The revision of *OED* currently underway, in *OED Online*, is about to tackle this section of the alphabet at the time of writing (spring 2007). The editor, John Simpson, writes, “With the revised material, the *p-* pronunciations have largely gone, but we still take each item case-by-case rather than applying a blanket policy. As a rule of thumb, the more current and non-specialized a word is, the less likely it is to have a *ps-* pronunciation nowadays. But an optional *p-* has been retained in one or two cases, as with the *PSAMMO-* words, where it's arguably more likely [...] that someone using the form would be conscious of its Greek origins and therefore more likely to acknowledge the *ps-* pronunciation” (personal communication to the author).

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SUMMARY

During the course of the 19th century, many English dictionaries carrying information on pronunciation directed that Greek-derived words beginning *ps*- should be pronounced with a silent initial *p*. In the relevant section of the *OED*, however (published 1909), the editor J. A. H. Murray (1837–1915) advised that, contrary to general practice, pronouncing the *p* was preferable, since it made clear the etymology of such words thus enhancing their intelligibility. Dictionaries after the *OED* have reported *p* as an optional pronunciation for many years subsequently — even as late as the 1970s — though their conflicting evidence supports the hypothesis that pronouncing the *p* was a dictionary chimaera never adopted by more than a handful of pedantic philologists. The article concludes that claims to descriptivism rather than prescriptivism, even by the most reputable dictionaries, should be taken with a pinch of salt.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours du XIXe siècle, les renseignements sur la prononciation dans beaucoup de dictionnaires anglais indiquaient que les mots d'origine grecque qui commençaient par *ps-* devaient se prononcer avec le *p* initial muet. Cependant, dans l'article qui traitait ce sujet dans le *Oxford English Dictionary* (publié en 1909), le rédacteur J. A. H. Murray (1837–1915) conseillait qu'il était préférable de prononcer le *p*, contrairement à l'usage habituel, afin de mettre en évidence l'étymologie de ces mots et ainsi de les rendre plus intelligibles. Les dictionnaires qui suivaient le *OED* ont pendant longtemps — même aussi récemment que dans les années soixante-dix — indiqué une prononciation facultative du *p*, mais les contradictions entre leurs preuves soutiennent l'hypothèse que le *p* prononcé n'était qu'une chimère de dictionnaire acceptée uniquement par certains philologues pédants. On concluera qu'il faut toujours se méfier quand les dictionnaires, même les plus réputés, prétendent à décrire au lieu simplement de prescrire.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Verlauf des 19. Jahrhunderts empfahlen viele englische Wörterbücher, die Informationen zur Aussprache enthielten, bei griechischstämmigen Wörtern, die mit *ps-* beginnen, das führende *p* nicht auszusprechen. Im entsprechenden Abschnitt des 1909 erschienenen *Oxford English Dictionary* riet Herausgeber J. A. H. Murray (1837–1915) jedoch — entgegen der allgemeinen Praxis — an, das *p* auszusprechen, da so die Etymologie solcher Wörter klarer werde und die Verständlichkeit erhöht würde. Nach dem *OED* erschienene Wörterbücher haben viele Jahre lang — bis in die 1970er Jahre — das *p* als optionale Aussprachemöglichkeit angegeben, obwohl es Beweise für die Hypothese gibt, dass die Aussprache des *p* eine Wörterbuch-Schimäre war, die nur von einer Handvoll pedantischer Philologen befolgt wurde. Der Artikel schließt mit der Empfehlung, dass die Behauptung, man gehe deskriptiv statt präskriptiv vor, selbst bei den reputierlichsten Wörterbüchern mit Vorsicht zu genießen ist.

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