Do you put your eggs or your ex in your exit?

MICHAEL BULLEY

Some speculation on a consonantal contrast

THIS ARTICLE is about the pronunciation of intervocalic *x* in English. I started thinking about it when I realized that in French (a language I am having to improve in, as I now live in France) the *x* in *exercice* is pronounced 'gz', whereas in the English equivalent it is 'ks'. In fact, in all French words beginning '*ex* + vowel' the *x* is voiced ('gz'). There are other similar contrasts with English – *exécuter, exigence, exosphère*. While it might be instructive to compare the pronunciation of intervocalic *x* among several, or many, connected, or unconnected, languages, that sounds like a long work and I think it is possible to make some sense sticking only to English, with just an occasional glance elsewhere.

It quickly becomes clear that the interesting cases of intervocalic *x* in English are the words that begin with *ex-*. We can also count the *x* as intervocalic in words beginning *exh-*, where the *h* is not pronounced. In some of these words the *x* is voiceless ('ks'), in others voiced ('gz') and in a few it varies, depending on the speaker. As for intervocalic *x* in other words, there are a few I shall mention which seem exceptional. Apart from those, it is always (I think) the voiceless 'ks'.

The odd cases include words where the *x* is followed by *-ion* or *-ious*, such as *complexion* and *noxious*, where the *x* is 'ksh'. The same goes for *sexual*, though I have heard a 'ks' there as well, which, to my ears, sounds over-fastidious. An interesting case is the difference between *luxury* and *luxuriant/luxurious*, where the former is 'ksh' and the latter 'gzh' or even both 'ksh' and 'gzh'. Here are some examples of *ex-* and *exh-* words in the three categories voiceless, voiced, and both:

1 Voiceless ('ks')
execute, execrable, exegesis, exercise, exhibition, exodus, exorcise, exarch, exigent, exoteric, exosphere

2 Voiced ('gz')
exact, exaggerate, exalt, examine, exempt, exemplary, exist, exhort, exhaust, exhibit, exorbitant, exonerate, exult, exude, exotic

3 Both ('ks', 'gz')
exacerbate, exile, exit

The questions, then, are these: What, if anything, causes the difference between voiced and voiceless x in those words? Why are there some words with both pronunciations? And, with such words, what might it be that tempts people to one or the other?

I think we can discount as an influence the vowel that follows the *x*, since *a, e, i* and *o* occur in both the voiced and voiceless sets. The most obvious difference seems to be whether the *ex-* is stressed or not. In general, it seems that when the stress is on the first syllable the *x* is voiceless (as in *exit*) and when the stress is on the second it is voiced (as in *exact*). I have noticed, too, that for British English some dictionaries offer a contrast of pronunciation for the initial *e*, giving, in most cases, 'igz-' when the *ex-* is not stressed, and 'eks-' when it is. I

MICHAEL BULLEY studied Classics and linguistics at the universities of Edinburgh and London, then spent twenty-odd years teaching Classics in state education in various places in England. In 2002, he qualified as a teacher of English in French national education and taught for a time in Dijon before deciding to move to Chalon-sur-Saône to try to continue earning a living in language work but in a less organized way. He has appeared several times in ET and has contributed articles to journals on Classical, linguistic and philosophical topics.

DOI: 10.1017/S0266078404002111
English Today 78, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April 2004). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2004 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404002111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

think, though, I am right in saying that while, for example, the pronunciation 'igzist' for the word 'exist' is heard from some speakers, it is not now the standard one and that 'egzist' is more accurate. Certainly, in my own pronunciation, there is little or no difference between the initial vowel of *exact* and that of *exodus*.

The difference between *exhibit* and *exhibition* may be helpful here. In *exhibition*, the first syllable has only the secondary stress, but that seems enough to tip the scales towards a voiceless *x*. Yet there is a counter-example in *exaltation*, where most pronunciation guides favour 'egz-', and a halfway position with *existentialism*, where different authorities offer 'eks-' and/or 'egz-'.

There are certainly some exceptions to this 'rule': *exogamy* and *exogenous* have a voiceless *x*, even though the stress is on the second syllable. Yet they are hardly words of common usage and one suspects a scholarly influence to bring them in line with other words having the Classical Greek prefix *exo-*, such as *exoteric* and *exoskeleton*. You can contrast them with *exotic*, which also has the *exo-* element, but is a word of everyday currency; there the stress rule applies again, producing a voiced *x*. Perhaps the same argument is justified for other eso- (rather than exo-)teric words, such as *exanthema*, *exergue*, *exordium* and *exurbia*.

If, then, the deciding factor in most cases is stress, the question to ask is whether there is a 'default' pronunciation for the first syllable of these words, which is changed by the presence or absence of stress and, if so, which it is. My own feeling is that, if we should think of a default pronunciation, then, if for no other reason than that intervocalic *x* is nearly always voiceless in other positions and with other vowels – as in *tuxedo, annexation, epoxy, galaxy, axis, oxygen, uxorious, alexia* – the voiceless *x* is the default for these 'ex-' words, made voiced when the following syllable has the stress.

This is a shaky thesis, though. These *ex-* words are nearly all of Latin origin and there is nothing to suggest that the *x* of Classical Latin was anything other than voiceless. Yet the Romance languages show a preference for a voiced sound for the derivatives of Latin words that begin *ex-* and *exh-*. Could it be, then, that the equivalent English words that have the stress on the first syllable are bucking a trend? There is no reason to think that *x* in itself has a diachronc tendency to become voiced and so, if there is a natural phonetic influence at work here, it must be the preceding *e*.

If that is correct, the conditions for the voicing of intervocalic *x* in English are that the word begins *ex-* or *exh-* (with the *h* not pronounced) and that the second syllable has the stress. The question remains, though, why those conditions should cause it. I am afraid I have no answer to offer that convinces me. As a Classicist, I am used to pronouncing the Latin word *exemplum*, which has the stress on the second syllable, with a voiceless *x* ('ks'). Just for fun, I have experimented with a voiceless pronunciation of the English, French and Italian equivalents – *example*, *exemple*, and *esempio* – and, while of course it sounds strange, it is not at all difficult to do.

The two Romance languages in question do not throw much light on the question of stress. French words do not really have stress patterns: for a word such as *exécuter* all you can sensibly say about the stress pattern is that the third syllable is not stressed. In Italian, there are indeed differences of stress patterns, but they do not seem to affect the pronunciation of the *s* in these *es-* words. The few contrasts between voiced and voiceless *s* here seem to exist simply to distinguish meanings in the spoken language. Examples are *esoterico* and *esamina*; in English, with a voiced *s* ('z'), they are *esoteric* and *examination* and with a voiceless *s* ('s'), *exoteric* and the verb-form *examines*. There is also the contrast between (voiceless) *esodo* and (voiced) *Esodo*, whose English equivalents are *exodus* and *Exodus*.

Finally, there are the in-between words, such as *exile*, *exist*, and *exacerbate*. Here my own pronunciation looks as if it almost follows the stress 'rule': I think I always have 'ks' for *exit*, probably have both 'ks' and 'gz' for *exile* and always 'gz' for *exacerbate*. I have an idea that some of those people who have a voiced *x* for *exit* might produce a voiceless one for the phrase *exit poll*, where you seem to need to put more effort on the first syllable than with the simple *exit*. It may be, too, that some of those who always favour 'gz' for *exile* and *exit* also go for a voiced option in other contexts. You can hear a voiced dental in the word *what* in some people's speech, when they say, for example, 'What is it?' Those who do that are more likely than not, I think, to have a voiced *x* in *exit*. The only advantage, or maybe disadvantage, I can think of in having the voiced version is that it works better for telling the convoluted joke that has the punch-line about not putting 'all your Basques in one exit'. ■

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404002111 Published online by Cambridge University Press