

The treatment of syllables and syllable boundaries in Thomas Sheridan's English pronouncing dictionary of 1780

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The Syllable, State of the Art and Perspectives

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Are there clear-cut principles behind the syllabification choices in Sheridan's *General Dictionary of the English Language*?

English Syllabification: a quick overview

Main phonotactic issue: maintaining closed-syllable (*CVC*) contexts for short vowels

Possible solutions:

- Consonants systematically go left (Wells' MaxCoda, applied in the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*)
- Consonants systematically go right, but with exceptions (Maximal Onset Principle, applied in the *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary*)
- Consonants are ambisyllabic (with or without underlying M.O.P.)

English Syllabification: a quick overview

Privilege of occurrence is often assumed:

Obligatory *CVC* for all stressed short vowels, and for unstressed short vowels as well, except for /ɪ/, /e/ and /ə/, which can occur in open syllables.

Method

- Digitization:

A, *B*, *D*, and *F* sections

8706 entries

- Queries: perl regular expressions:

short or long vowels, stressed or unstressed, closed or open syllables, word-medial or word-final, etc.

Sheridan's Dictionary

A General Dictionary of the English Language, One main Object of which, is, to establish a plain and permanent Standard of Pronunciation. (1780)

- Explicitly prescriptive
- New “scheme for respelling”
- The *Rhetorical Grammar*: no mention of syllable division, but much on the role of “accent” (stress) in determining vowel length

Sheridan's Dictionary: “scheme of the vowels”

	First	Second	Third
<i>a</i>	<i>halt</i> æ	<i>hate</i> e:	<i>hall</i> ɔ:
<i>e</i>	<i>belt</i> ε	<i>beat</i> e:	<i>beer</i> i:
<i>i</i>	<i>fit</i> ɪ	<i>fight</i> aɪ	<i>field</i> i:
<i>o</i>	<i>not</i> ɒ	<i>note</i> o:	<i>nose</i> u:
<i>u</i>	<i>but</i> ʌ	<i>brush</i> ʊ	<i>blue</i> ju:
<i>y</i>	<i>love-ly</i> i	<i>lye</i> aɪ	

(adapted from Hickey 2009)

oi or *oy* ɔɪ

ou or *ow* aʊ

Sheridan's Approach

Does Sheridan keep short vowels, stressed and unstressed, in CVC-contexts?

10 % of SV in CV syllables, principally to indicate reduced vowels;

Sheridan's usage suggests graphocentric bias.

Sheridan's Approach

What strategy (or strategies) does Sheridan adopt to ensure short vowels are in closed syllables?

a1 æ

e1 ε

i1 ɪ

o1 ɒ

u1 ʌ

u2 ʊ

y1 ɪ

MaxCoda

FLAXEN || flak's-i1n

M.O.P. with exceptions

BISCUIT || bi1s'-ki1t

Ambisyllabicity

ABOMINABLY || a1-bo1m'-my1-na1b-ly1

a2 e:
e2

o2 o:

a3 ɔ:

e3 i:

i3

o3 u:

u3 ju:

i2 ai

y2

oi ɔɪ

oy

ou aʊ

ow

Sheridan's Approach

MaxCoda?

DARKLING || da1'rk-li1ng DUMPLING || du1mp'-li1ng
DIMPLY || di1mp'-ly1 FALSEHEARTED || fa3lse-ha1'rt-i1d

a2 e:
e2

o2 o:
a3 ɔ:

Also in 691 word-medial long vowels and diphthongs:

e3 i:
i3

FINDER || fi2'nd-u1r FRUITBEARING || fro3't-be2r-i1ng
FOWLER || fow'l-u1r AXILLAR || a2gz-i1l'-la1r

o3 u:
u3 ju:

Just one exception: BASIL || ba2z'-i1l

i2 ai
y2

CVC structures unrelated to the phonotactics of short vowels:
priority to morphemic boundaries.

oi ɔi
oy

ou aʊ
ow

No preference for leftward syllabification.

Sheridan's Approach

M.O.P.?

Single intervocalic consonants tend to be syllabified rightward (74%) – but within morphemes

BRIGADE || bri1-ga2'de

To ANTIQUATE || a1n'-ty1-kwa2te

FACETIOUS || fa1-se3'-shu1s

Morphemic boundaries play an important role

ABBREVIATION || a1b-bre1v-ya2'-shu1n

To DECLINE || de2-kli2'ne BOWSPRIT || bo2'-sprit

ABRUPT || a1b-ru1pt' FEEDER || fe3'd-u1r

a2 e:
e2
o2 o:
a3 ɔ:
e3 i:
i3
o3 u:
u3 ju:
i2 ai
y2
oi ɔɪ
oy
ou aʊ
ow

a1 æ
e1 ε
i1 ɪ
o1 ɒ
u1 ʌ
u2 ʊ
y1 ɪ

Sheridan's Approach

M.O.P.?

Consistent about affricates

a1 æ No split affricates /tʃ/ (tsh) and /dʒ/ (dzh or j)
e1 ε FLYCATCHER; fly2'-ka1tsh-u1r AVOUCHER || a1-vou'tsh-e1r

il i No split *tr*, *dr*, or *fr* ; marked preference for maintaining -*Cr*-
with all obstruents except *b*.

ol ɒ FLAGRANT || fla2'-gra1nt FAUTRESS || fa3'-tre1s

u1 ʌ
u2 ʊ **When CVC required, ambisyllabic consonants rather
y1 i than splitting -Cr- (contrary to the EPD)**

ACRIMONY || a1k'-kry1-mu1n-ny1 ATROPHY || a1t'-tro2-fy1

DEPRIVATION || de1p-pry1-va2'-shu1n

(Possibly true for all obstruent+approximant clusters)

a2 e:
e2

o2 o:

a3 ɔ:

e3 i:

i3

o3 u:

u3 ju:

i2 ai

y2

oi ɔi

oy

ou aʊ

ow

Sheridan's Approach

M.O.P.?

Another rule?

AUSPICE || a3's-pi1s AUSTRAL || a3's-tra11

Conflicting rules

BRAZIER || bra2'-zyu1r FEASTER || fe3's-tu1r

FEEBLY || fe3'b-ly1

a2 e:
e2

o2 o:

a3 ɔ:

e3 i:

i3

o3 u:

u3 ju:

i2 ai

y2

oi ɔɪ

oy

ou aʊ

ow

Sheridan's Approach

Ambisyllabicity?

38% of ambisyllabic /1_0/ not graphic geminates

a2 e:
e2

a1 æ

FLATTERY || fla1t'-te1r-y1 ACTIVITY || a1k-ti1v'-vi1-ty1

o2 o:
a3 ɔ:

e1 ε

19% of ambisyllabic /0_1/ or /0_0/ not graphic geminates

e3 i:
i3

i1 ɪ

BAREHEADED || ba2're-he1d-di1d

o3 u:

o1 ɒ

FORGETTER || fo1r-ge1t'-tu1r

u3 ju:

u1 ʌ

Less than 5% of orthographic geminates are NOT given as ambisyllabic in the respelling (many typos)

i2 ai
y2

u2 ʊ

oi ɔɪ
oy

y1 i

DECESSION || de2-se1s'-shu1n FATWITTED || fa1t'-wi1t-i1d

ou aʊ
ow

APPEASABLE || a1p-e3'-za1bl

APPEASABLENESS || a1p-pe3'-za1bl-ne1s

Sheridan's Approach

Ambisyllabicity?

Only 2 out of 1224 cases of ambisyllabic consonants occur after long vowels:

AMULET || a1m'-u31-le1t AUGURER || a3'-gu3r-ru1r

Sheridan makes use of ambisyllabicity to maintain CVC structures for short vowels, especially when stressed

Ambisyllabicity with underlying M.O.P.

a2 e:
e2
o2 o:
a3 ɔ:
e3 i:
i3
o3 u:
u3 ju:
i2 ai
y2
oi ɔi
oy
ou aʊ
ow

a1 æ
e1 ε
i1 ɪ
o1 ɒ
u1 ʌ
u2 ʊ
y1 i

Sheridan's Approach

The issue of the floating stress mark

According to Sheridan's theory, syllables with **long vowels or diphthongs (LVD)** should bear stress marks **immediately after the vowel**

ASSIGNMENT, áf-sí'ne-mént.

To BOUND, bou'nd.

those with **short vowels** should have the stress mark **after one of the following consonants**

FENCELESS, fens'-lis.

a2 e:
e2
o2 o:
a3 ɔ:
e3 i:
i3
o3 u:
u3 ju:
i2 ai
y2
oi ɔi
oy
ou aʊ
ow

al æ
el ε
il ɪ
ol ɒ
ul ʌ
u2 ʊ
yl i

Sheridan's Approach

However:

46 long vowels with stress after a consonant

27 numberless diphthongs: another case of confusion

APPOINTMENT || a1p-point'-me1nt

19 cases from *A* and *B* sections, none from *D* or *F*

ATTAINABLE || a1t-ta2n'-a1bl

211 *a1'C*, with /n/ or /r/, or graphic *l*

/a:/ vs. /æ/

ARBITRARY || a1'r-bi1-tra1-ry1 To BECALM || be2-ka1'm

To DEMAND || de2-ma1'nd

a2 e:
e2

o2 o:

a3 ɔ:

e3 i:

i3

o3 u:

u3 ju:

i2 ai

y2

oi ɔi

oy

ou aʊ

ow

a1 æ

e1 ε

i1 ɪ

o1 ɒ

u1 ʌ

u2 ʊ

y1 i

Sheridan's Approach

- Sonority hierarchy?

No problem within sonority sequencing principle

To ABSOLVE || a1b-zo1lv' DELINQUENT || de2-li1nk'-kwe1nt

DRAUGHT || dra1ft' To DISTURB || di1s-tu1rb'

Possible violations of sonority hierarchy indicated

a rise in the coda or consonants of equal grade

To DEDUCT || de2-du1k't DUCT || du1kt'

DOGSMEAT || do1g'z-me3t BIRDSNEST || bu1rdz'-ne1st

- Morphemic view ?

Phonemes isolated by stress mark in fact morphemes in many cases.

a2 e:
e2

o2 o:

a3 ɔ:

e3 i:

i3

o3 u:

u3 ju:

i2 ai

y2

oi ɔɪ

oy

ou aʊ

ow

Sheridan's Approach

More systematic treatment of syllabic consonants

FORBIDDENLY || fo1r-bi1d'n-ly1 To FRESHEN || fre1sh'n

a2 e:
e2

BUCKLE || bu1k'1 To BOGGLE || bo1g'1

o2 o:
a3 ɔ:

DIMPLE || di1mp'1 To DWINDLE || dwi1nd'1

e3 i:
i3

But questions remain:

To DISSEMBLE; di1s-se1m'bl

o3 u:
u3 ju:

- m'bl because */mb/# ?

i2 ai
y2

oi ɔi
oy

ou aʊ
ow

Ultimately, too small a sample.

Sheridan's Approach

The use of “mute *e*”

Short vowels: Only 125 with “mute *e*”, over 93% word-final, and all with corresponding graphic *e*

a1 æ

e1 ε

i1 ɪ

o1 ɒ

u1 ʌ

u2 ʊ

y1 ɪ

To ADDULCE || a1d-du2l'se

DUNCE || du1n'se FENCE || fe1n'se

Long vowels/Diphthongs: Over half of syllables with LVDs contain a “mute *e*”

To FROUNCE || froun'se To DISBURSE || di1s-bu1r'se

Only cases of stress mark within sequences that respect the sonority hierarchy.

a2 e:
e2

o2 o:

a3 ɔ:

e3 i:

i3

o3 u:

u3 ju:

i2 ai

y2

oi ɔɪ

oy

ou aʊ

ow

Syneresis vs. Dieresis

Comparing Sheridan with John Walker

<i>al</i>	æ
<i>el</i>	ε
<i>il</i>	ι
<i>ol</i>	ο
<i>ul</i>	υ
<i>u2</i>	υ
<i>yl</i>	ι

kúr'-tshùs.

kúr'tshé-ús

ò-hé'-dzhént

ò-bé'jé-ént

ě-gré'-jús

é-gré'jé-ús

ǔ-thán-à'-fě'-à

yù-thán-à'zhé-à

<i>a2</i>	e:
<i>e2</i>	
<i>o2</i>	o:
<i>a3</i>	ɔ:
<i>e3</i>	i:
<i>i3</i>	
<i>o3</i>	u:
<i>u3</i>	ju:
<i>i2</i>	aɪ
<i>y2</i>	
<i>oi</i>	ɔɪ
<i>oy</i>	
<i>ou</i>	aʊ
<i>ow</i>	

Lexicographic preference for syneresis, dieresis, or an “intermediate” realization:

	Sheridan 1780	Walker 1791	<i>OED</i> 1884- 2012	<i>LPD</i> 2008
syneresis	85.00%	27.50%	19.17%	15.83%
dieresis	15.00%	60.00%	74.17%	78.33%
intermediate	0.00%	12.50%	6.67%	5.83%

Syncope

Comparing Sheridan with John Walker

<i>a1</i>	æ	his' -túr-ý	his'túr-è	<i>a2</i>	e:
<i>e1</i>	ε			<i>e2</i>	
<i>il</i>	ɪ	láb' -bò-rá-túr-ý	láb' bó-rá-túr-è	<i>o2</i>	o:
<i>ol</i>	ɒ			<i>a3</i>	ɔ:
<i>ul</i>	ʌ	drív' -lúr	drív' vl-úr	<i>e3</i>	i:
<i>u2</i>	ʊ			<i>i3</i>	
<i>yl</i>	i	á' rí-nál	á' sé-nál	<i>o3</i>	u:
				<i>u3</i>	ju:
				<i>i2</i>	ai
				<i>y2</i>	
				<i>oi</i>	ɔɪ
				<i>oy</i>	
				<i>ou</i>	aʊ
				<i>ow</i>	

Prescriptive, but less graphocentric?

Conclusions

Sheridan's concerns in placing syllable boundaries are **primarily morphemic**;

M.O.P. is followed for **single intervocalic consonants within morphemes**;

CVC structures are achieved through the use of **ambisyllabicity** (for single consonants and obstruent+approximant clusters) or by **splitting -sC-clusters**: no MaxCoda;

Other issues, relating to the **sonority hierarchy** and/or morphemes, are addressed with the floating stress mark.

Prescriptivism, but less guided by graphic forms. ²²

Conclusions

Variation and inconsistencies within Sheridan's dictionary:

- Eventual disappearance of respelling features *-ss-*, *-fully*, */g-r/*, “mute *e*”): limitations of 18th century technology;
- Empirical, word by word rather than systemic approach;
- Explicit desire to hew to spelling, imperfect though it may be.

Further Research & Larger Aims

Completing the digitization : more evidence;

Contrasting and comparing Sheridan with his contemporaries.

Bringing new arguments to the contemporary debate over various aspects of English syllabification;

Ideas for improving algorithms;

Computing dialectal and diachronic variation of syllabification in English.

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Thank you!

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19 *Consonants*, eb ed ef eg ek el em en ep er es et ev ez et̃i eth eſh ezh ing.

2 *Superfluous*, c, which has the power of ek or efs ;
q, that of ek before u.

2 *Compound*, j, which ſtands for edzh.
x, for ks or gz.

1 *No letter*, h, merely a mark of aspiration.

Consonants divided into Mutes and Semivowels.

6 *Mutes*, eb ed eg ek ep et.

3 *Pure Mutes*, ek ep et.

3 *Impure*, eb ed eg.

13 *Semivowels*, ef el em en er efs ev ez et̃i eth eſh ezh ing.

9 *Vocal*, el em en er ev ez eth ezh ing.

4 *Aspirated*, ef efs et̃i eſh.

Divided again into

4 *Labial*, eb ep ev ef.

8 *Dental*, ed et eth et̃i ez efs ezh eſh.

4 *Palatine*, eg ek el er.

3 *Nasal*, em en ing.