

Secondary Stress in Contemporary British English

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This thesis has two main goals: a theoretical one and an empirical one.

The framework adopted in this work is grounded in the approach to phonology introduced by Guierre (1979), which is mostly found in French works on English phonology and is essentially corpus-driven. This framework has only seldom been confronted to other theories, even though it differs from “standard” theories on a number of assumptions. This makes the intertheoretical dialogue a complicated task. Consequently, the present work wishes to put the “Guierrian” approach into a broader perspective, by adopting more “standard” formalism and theoretical tools to facilitate communication with other theories but still preserving the main assumptions of this approach which, we believe, are its strength. Indeed, the Guierrian approach advocates the consideration of spelling when dealing with generalisations regarding English stress or vowel qualities. It also assumes that elements such as *de-*, *se-*, *-ceive* or *-mit* (e.g. *deceive*, *seclude*, *permit*) are relevant morphological constituents and, in terms of methodology, authors working within this approach use large amounts of data from pronouncing dictionaries to test their claims. These assumptions will be defended and put into the perspective of the broader literature. Moreover, the very definition of our topic of research is in itself a theoretical challenge, as definitions of what a “stress” or “accent” is are often quite evasive or contradictory (see the definition of “stress” in Wells (2008) compared the assumption in standard theory that any full vowel carries a degree of stress; and see also Hulst 2005; Schane 2007 on that issue).

The second goal will be to test the different proposals which have been made for the regulation of English secondary stress on a corpus of pronunciation dictionary data of about 9,000 words. Even though research on English stress seldom makes use of such large corpora, a few previous works have done so on this issue directly (Wenszky 2004), indirectly (Collie 2007), or in the context of larger studies on English stress (Guierre 1979; Fournier 2010). Therefore, this makes this study the largest one on the issue, and it might prove to be enlightening, as standard assumptions on English stress generalisations may prove to be wrong when faced with large corpora (Dabouis et al. forthcoming). Finally, the study of secondary stress touches a number of theoretical aspects such as the nature of the cycle, the role of the lexicon or the modelisation of frequency effects and therefore constitutes a good area of investigation which could be valuable for any framework.

References

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