

Of Paradigm and Breakfasts

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The mispronunciation of ‘paraDIGM’ as ‘paraDIGIM’ by Adesh Nanan and of ‘breakfasts’ as ‘brea**f**as**E**S’ by Hazel Manning is a laughing matter for many in this society, for mispronunciation of English is one of our tokens of illiteracy. Adesh and Hazel have reached tertiary school, are public officials, and are models of some sort to members of the public. One of the behaviours they are expected to model is use of correct Standard English in their official public utterances. In particular, they are expected to pronounce Standard English words ‘correctly’ and get that language’s grammar of pluralisation right. When these expectations fail, two consequences are public ridicule and public embarrassment. But their gaffes are much more than tokens of illiteracy.

Very importantly, they are indices of linguistic processes and strategies at work in speakers who are less than perfect in Standard English pronunciation and grammar, as all of us are, including yours truly.

Let’s focus a little more closely on the mistakes, starting with Adesh’s. ‘Paradigm’ is an academic word, adopted and restructured by English from ‘paradigma’ in Late Latin and from ‘paradeigma’ in Greek. It has come to mean something like ‘pattern,’ ‘model,’ and ‘framework’ - words which look more English-like and manageable, and which are just as good. But ‘paradigm’ looks more educated and scholarly and, therefore, more impressive, and was probably selected for Adesh to use on that account.

By just looking at ‘paradigm’ versus its source words, you can tell that it lost at least the final vowel ‘a’ at some point in its adoption by English. In the source languages, the ‘a’ would have been pronounced as part of the syllable ‘ma,’ itself preceded by the syllable ‘dig’ or ‘deig.’ So when Adesh said ‘para-DIG-IM,’ he was at least using the earlier pronunciation of the syllable ‘dig.’ But with the ‘a’ gone from ‘ma,’ the syllable also disappeared, with the ‘m’ now a part of a new syllable ‘digm’.

In the spelling, ‘digm’ is a formidable syllable. ‘How the blazes do you pronounce this?’ Adesh must have asked himself, probably both called upon to pronounce it for the first time in public and not having read and practised his speech before delivering it. The syllable ends with the funny letter combination ‘gm’ that linguists and teachers call a ‘digraph.’ Should Adesh pronounce the syllable ‘dim,’ ‘dime,’ or ‘di-gim’? He settled for ‘di-gim.’ In so doing, he broke ‘digm’ into two syllables – ‘di’ and ‘gim’ – by putting the vowel ‘i’ between ‘g’ and ‘m’ to make the digraph manageable for pronunciation. He was laughably wrong, but more importantly, he used a pronunciation strategy that is common to many languages and that linguists call ‘vowel epenthesis’ – the placement of a vowel between two consonants in a digraph to facilitate pronunciation.

You can hear the process at work in the words spelt ‘peoPLe,’ ‘Crab,’ and ‘SCRew Driver,’ but pronounced ‘peoPUL,’ ‘CARab,’ and ‘SUCURU DARAIva’ by people around the world whose routine language is not Standard English. It is a process that creates (new pronunciations of) words, which in time become stable in a language.

The correct pronunciation of ‘digm’ is of course ‘dime,’ and Adesh could have used analogy to get to it. He could have quickly calculated that ‘igm’ is akin to ‘ign’ in words like ‘sign’ and ‘malign,’ but alas, the strategy of vowel epenthesis came more readily to him.

While Adesh’s mistake is a matter of mispronunciation through vowel epenthesis, Hazel’s is one of English grammar imposed on a Creole pronunciation. Fatima Principal Anthony Garcia argues that Hazel’s ‘breakfasES’ is a compromise between Creole grammar and Standard English grammar, while Hazel’s PNM colleague, Camille Robinson-Regis, recently declared on the hustings that Hazel’s innovation is an apt reflection of impressive volume. These are interesting explanations, Garcia’s because it speaks to an effect of the interaction of Creole and English in Trinidad and Tobago, and Robinson-Regis’ because it asks us to consider that Hazel was not merely pluralizing by adding the wrong plural form ‘es’ to a ‘breakfast’ restructured to ‘breakfas,’ but also extending the notion of ‘plural’ with the notion of ‘volume.’ (Great anthropological stuff, that, Camille!)

I prefer to explain things as follows.

In Creole speech in general, and in Trinbagonian speech in particular, words which in Standard English end in two voiceless consonants drop the final consonant once this consonant is not ‘s.’ Examples of such words are ‘laST,’ ‘firST,’ ‘moST,’ ‘beST,’ ‘coST,’ ‘teST,’ ‘intereST,’ and ‘breakfaST.’ They end in the cluster ‘st’ where both ‘s’ and ‘t’ are voiceless, that is, do not make the vocal chords vibrate when they are pronounced. In routine Trinbagonian pronunciation, the ‘t’ is not pronounced. Other examples of words where two voiceless consonants are reduced to one are ‘soFT,’ ‘raFT,’ and ‘maSK,’ where the ‘t’ and ‘k’ are dropped. But if the last of the two consonants is ‘s,’ none of the consonants is dropped, as is obvious from words like ‘hops’ (a kind of bread), ‘Fats’ (nickname for a very thin person), and ‘beats’ (dribble in football).

Because of our Creole pronunciation rule, the noun ‘breakfaST’ will therefore lose its ‘t,’ leaving ‘breakfaS,’ which now ends in ‘s.’ In Creole, if you want to quantify a noun, you merely put a plural quantifying word (like a numeral) before it, as in ‘twenty-five thousand breakfas,’ where there is nothing on ‘breakfas’ to show that it is plural; ‘twenty-five thousand’ already does the job. But in Standard English, nouns ending in ‘s’ are typically pluralized with ‘es,’ as can be seen in ‘gasES’ and ‘kissES’.

Since the noun ‘breakfas’ was restructured in the pronunciation to end in ‘s,’ Hazel seems to have elected to pluralise it in the Standard way in the fashion of ‘gas’ and ‘kiss,’ thereby producing ‘breakfasES.’

This is what Garcia calls a compromise between Creole and English grammar – Creolised pronunciation fused with English pluralisation. I prefer to call it ‘interlanguage’ – the creation of a new form between the Creole and the Standard, drawing on material from both languages. If the new form is a temporary development in the acquisition of the Standard system of pluralisation, it will eventually give way to the target plural ‘breakfastS.’ But if it gains a sufficient body of speakers who make it into a regular, conventional form, it will be part of an alternative way of speaking.

What this analysis means is that Hazel has not yet fully acquired the Standard English system of pluralisation. But this should not be surprising, for other highly schooled people, not in the same kind of limelight as she, have similar difficulties. As part of the proof, Derek Ramsamooj was heard on a recent edition of TTT's 'Issues Live' to use the phrase 'business interesES.'

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