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”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>ha1t</td>
<td>æ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>belt</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>filt</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>no1t</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>bult</td>
<td>ʌ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>love-ly1 i</td>
<td>ly2e</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(adopted from Hickey 2009)

\[ oi \text{ or } oy \]
\[ ou \text{ or } ow \]
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?

MaxCoda

FLAXEN || fla1k's-i1n

M.O.P. with exceptions

BISCUIT || bi1s'-ki1t

Ambisyllabicity

ABOMINABLY || a1-bo1m'-my1-na1b-ly1
Sheridan's Approach

MaxCoda?

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

Also in 691 word-medial long vowels and diphthongs:

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

Just one exception: BASIL || ba2z'-i1l

CVC structures unrelated to the phonotactics of short vowels:

priority to morphemic boundaries.

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'-spri1t
ABRUPT || a1b-ru1pt' FEEDER || fe3'd-u1r
Sheridan's Approach

M.O.P.?

Consistent about affricates

No split affricates /tʃ/ (tsh) and /dʒ/ (dzh or j)

FLYCATCHER;fly2'-ka1tsh-u1r AVOUCHER || a1-vou'tsh-e1r

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

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

When CVC required, ambisyllabic consonants rather than splitting -Cr- (contrary to the EPD)

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

DEPRIVATION || de1p-pry1-va2'-shu1n

(Possibly true for all obstruent+approximant clusters)
Sheridan's Approach

M.O.P.?

Another rule?

AUSPICE || a3's-pi1s AUSTRAL || a3's-tra1l

Conflicting rules

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

FEEBLY || fe3'b-ly1
## Sheridan's Approach

### Ambisyllabicity?

38% of ambisyllabic /1_0/ not graphic geminates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ambisyllabic</th>
<th>respelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/1_0/</td>
<td>FLATTERY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ambisyllabic</th>
<th>respelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/0_1/ or /0_0/</td>
<td>BAREHEADED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FORGETTER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ambisyllabic</th>
<th>respelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/1_0/</td>
<td>DECESSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>APPEASABLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>APPEASABLENESS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sheridan's Approach

Ambisyllabiciry?

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

AMULET || a1m'-u3l-le1t AUGURER || a3'-gu3r-ru1r

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

Ambisyllabiciry with underlying M.O.P.
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, əf-siˈnɛmənt.

To BOUND, bouˈnd.

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

FENCELESS, fɛnsˈ-lis.
Sheridan's Approach

However:

46 long vowels with stress after a consonant

27 numberless diphthongs: another case of confusion

APPPOINTMENT || 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
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.
Sheridan's Approach

More systematic treatment of syllabic consonants

FORBIDDENLY || fo1r-bi1d'n-ly1 To FRESHEN || fre1sh'n
BUCKLE || bu1k'l To BOGGLE || bo1g'l
DIMPLE || di1mp'l To DWINDLE || dwi1nd'l

But questions remain:

To DISSEMBLE;di1s-se1m'bl
- m'bl because */mb/# ?

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

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.
Syneresis vs. Dieresis

Comparing Sheridan with John Walker

$k\text{ür}'\text{t}h\text{ū}s$.  $k\text{ûr}'\text{t}\text{hē'-ûs}$

$\ddot{o}-\text{hē'-}d\text{zhēnt}$  $\ddot{ö}-\text{bē'}\text{je'-ênt}$

$\ddot{e}-\text{grē'-jûs}$  $\ddot{e}-\text{grē'jê'-ûs}$

$\ddot{u}-\text{than'-å'-fê'-å}$  $\ddot{y}u\text{-than'-å'zhe'-å}$
Lexicographic preference for syneresis, dieresis, or an “intermediate” realization:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sheridan 1780</th>
<th>Walker 1791</th>
<th>OED 1884-2012</th>
<th>LPD 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>syneresis</td>
<td>85.00%</td>
<td>27.50%</td>
<td>19.17%</td>
<td>15.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dieresis</td>
<td>15.00%</td>
<td>60.00%</td>
<td>74.17%</td>
<td>78.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intermediate</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>5.83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Syncope

Comparing Sheridan with John Walker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a1</th>
<th>æ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e1</td>
<td>ë</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i1</td>
<td>ï</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o1</td>
<td>ð</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u1</td>
<td>ɔ</td>
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<tr>
<td>u2</td>
<td>ʊ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y1</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| a2 | ɐ |
| e2 | ɛ |
| o2 | ɔ |
| a3 | ɔː |
| e3 | iː |
| i3 | uː |
| o3 | ɔː |
| u3 | ʊː |
| y2 | ɑɪ |
| oi | oː |
| oy | ɔɪ |
| ou | ʌ |
| ow | ɔʊ |

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.
Conclusions

Variation and inconsistencies within Sheridan's dictionary:

- Eventual disappearance of respelling features -ss-, -fully, /g-r/, “mute e”): limitations of 18\textsuperscript{th} 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.
Sources


Thank you!

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29 Consonants, eb ed ef eg ek el em en ep er es et ev ez eth eth esh ezh ing.
2 Superfluous, c, which has the power of ek or esf; q, that of ek before u.
2 Compound, j, which stands for edzh.
χ, for ks or gz.
1 No letter, b, 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 esf ev ez eth eth esh ezh ing.
9 Vocal, el em en er ev ez eth ezh ing.
4 Aspirated, ef esf eth esh.

Divided again into

4 Labial, eb ep ev ef.
8 Dental, ed et eth ethi ez esf ezh esh.
4 Palatine, eg ek el er.
3 Nasal, em en ing.