

# 1 Unusual Words

## 1.1 Ask Your Gardener

In my garden I have a *choisya* – an attractive low-maintenance flowering shrub of Mexican origin. Following my parents' example, I have always called it a 'tʃɔɪsiə. Apparently most people call it a Mexican orange.

Its botanic name *Choisya* is not in any of our pronunciation dictionaries. The OED, however, gives it as either 'tʃɔɪziə or (don't laugh) 'ʃwa:ziə, the latter recalling the name of the Swiss botanist after whom it is named, Jacques Denys Choisy **ʃwazi** (1799–1859).

Uncertainty and variability seem to be the norm for many botanical names in English. Their spelling is fixed (on the whole), but their pronunciation is either arbitrary or variable.

We all call a *fuchsia* plant a 'fju:ʃə, even though it is named after the German botanist Leonhard Fuchs **foks** and might well therefore have been 'foksɪə (but isn't). The *dahlia* is named after the Swedish botanist Anders Dahl **da:l**, but we Brits call it a 'deɪliə and the Americans a 'dæljə (or 'da:ljə, the swots).

I grew up calling *weigela* **wɪ'dʒi:liə**, and wrongly imagined it to be spelt correspondingly as *wigelia*. In fact it is named after Christian Ehrenfried Weigel **'vaɪgl**; in LPD I now recommend **wɪ'dʒi:lə**, while also mentioning several other possibilities.

Most florists seem to call *gypsophila* **'dʒɪpsə'fɪliə**, though it 'ought' to be **dʒɪp'sɒfɪlə**.

Let's not even think about *eschscholzia*.

## 1.2 Zooosh It Up

There's a word we can agree neither how to spell nor how to pronounce: but let's list it as **ʒʊʒ** *zhoozh*, as in *to zhoozh something up*, meaning to make more attractive, smarter, more exciting, to jazz it up.

The OED gives only the pronunciations **ʒʊʃ** and **ʒu:ʃ** and the spellings *zhoosh* and *zhush*. But I think that many, perhaps most, of the people who use this word pronounce it with a final voiced consonant, **ʒ**. And I am not sure that I have ever heard it pronounced with **u:** rather than **ʊ**. I think the usual pronunciation is indeed **ʒʊʒ**, which twice violates the usual phonotactic constraints on **ʒ**,

a consonant usually confined in English to intervocalic position, as in *pleasure* 'pleʒə – the phoneme ʒ doesn't normally appear at the beginning of a word, or indeed at the end of a word after a short vowel. The Wikipedia article on Polari confirms my opinion, saying that 'the word begins and ends with the same phoneme, the "zh" sound as in the word "measure"'.

Although I have heard other people use this word, it is not one I would actively use myself. Stylistically it strikes me as not just slang but camp slang (and I may be gay but I have never been camp). Indeed, the OED's first citation (1977) is from *Gay News*, from a sentence which is written entirely in Polari, and which reads like a quote from Julian and Sandy in *Round the Horne*.

As feely homies . . . we would zhoosh our riahs, powder our eeks, climb into our bona new drag, don our batts and troll off to some bona bijou bar.

In 2003, W. Stephen Gilbert commented that:

you might zhush up a tired salad by adding some garnish, or stick some zhush in an article for the Guardian by adding a couple of dubious jokes.

Sorry I didn't pick this word up in time to make it into the third edition of LPD.

1.3 Speleothems

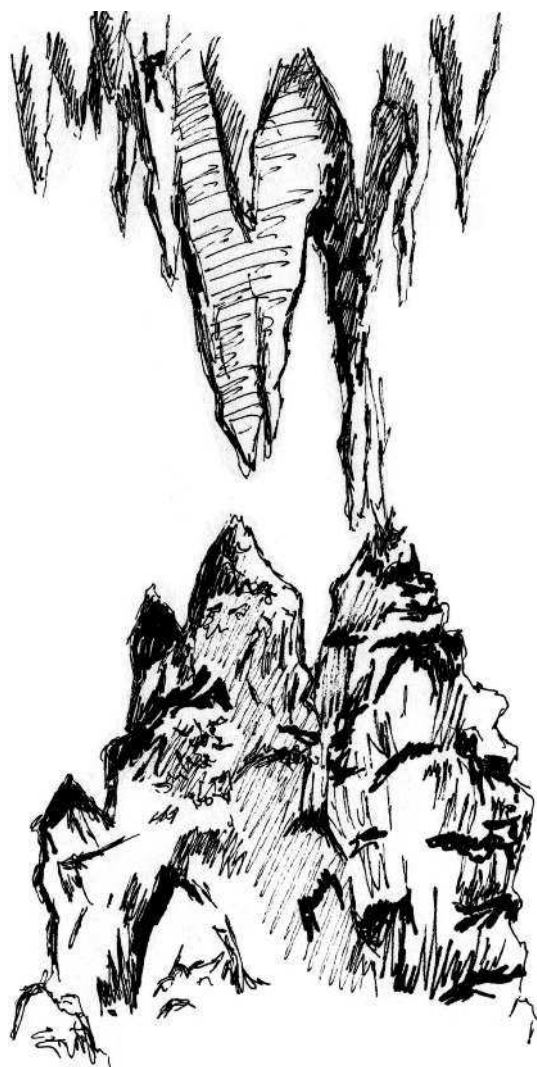
On a visit to Barbados I learnt a new word, *speleothem* 'spi:liəʊθem. It refers to any underground rock formation, more precisely to 'secondary mineral deposits formed from water in caves'. Examples include stalactites and stalagmites. According to the OED, this word was coined (from Greek) as recently as 1952.

On the island we visited an impressive series of limestone caverns, Harrison's Cave, which has only recently been developed as a tourist attraction. You are driven around underground in a 'tram' (a train of wagons pulled by a tractor) through tunnels and caverns full of stalactites, stalagmites, and other, um, speleothems. It was somewhat reminiscent of Postojna in Slovenia, and is well worth a visit.

I was struck by the fact that our guide, presumably a native Barbadian, pronounced stə'læktart and stə'lægmart (or with stæ-). The usual British pronunciations, I think, are 'stæləktart and 'stæləgmart. I don't think I have ever heard penultimate stress in these words in BrE (British English), though apparently that is the stressing that some Americans use.

My correspondents have come up with various mnemonics to help remember which is which, stalactite or stalagmite. Stalactites cling tightly to the ceiling, while stalagmites might one day reach it. Or stalagmites, with a G, grow from the ground. And a stalacrite has the shape of a capital T.

I do wonder, by the way, why the last syllable of name of the island, ba:'beɪdəs (or the like), is usually pronounced in BrE with a short vowel and voiceless fricative, like *doss*. In comparable words such as *tornado*, *desperado*, *avocado*, *torpedo* we pluralize in the usual way with z and retain long əʊ, like *doze*. But we Brits treat *Barbados* like *chaos* and *ethos*.



## 1.4 Netsuke

A correspondent asked why *netsuke* is conventionally pronounced as if spelt *netski*. Why is a vowel that is present in the Japanese-derived spelling completely elided (even in careful speech) in English?

If you're not sure what a netsuke (根付) is, there's a helpful explanation in Wikipedia.

The LPD entry for *netsuke* reads

'**net ski** -sker; 'nets ok i, -ei – *Jp* [ne ,tsɯ ke]

My decision to prioritize '**net ski** was based on what I have heard antiques experts say on television. I see that the Cambridge English Pronouncing

Dictionary (CEPD) prioritizes the **-sker** variant, but its authors and I agree that the most common pronunciation in English has only two syllables.

Why is this? It's because of the way the Japanese pronounce the word. The vowel is not 'present' in the phonetic sense in Japanese, even though it may be there phonologically. High vowels in Japanese are normally elided between voiceless consonants.

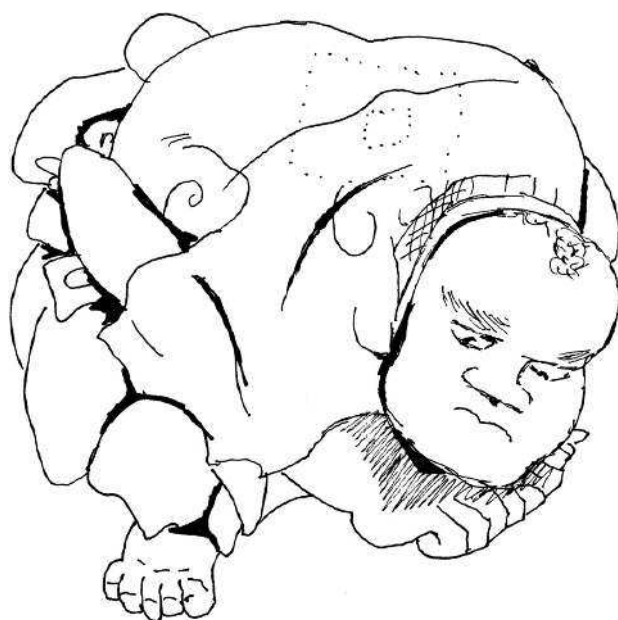
So this is an instance of the English spelling being a transcription of the Japanese orthography/phonology, while the pronunciation reflects a surprisingly sophisticated awareness of the Japanese pronunciation – a situation which is unusual. After all we don't write *a certain je ne sais quoi* while making a point of saying **ʒən sɛ kwa je n'sais quoi** as the French do. Possibly the snobbery surrounding antiques helps to reinforce this counter-intuitive pronunciation as a kind of shibboleth, as with stereotypically aristocratic names like *Cholmondeley* and *Althorp*.

It's not clear how we should best transcribe these elidable Japanese vowels. Which is best, **ne tsu ke**, **ne tsu ke**, or **ne ts ke**? There's a certain amount of regional and gender variation, but as I understand it, the first represents a theoretical pronunciation that you might get if you asked a Japanese speaker to say the word very slowly and carefully, indicating the identity of each mora in turn. The second is still slow and careful. The third is the ordinary pronunciation.

Where an **i** or an **u** is devoiced/elided in this way it may still leave a trace in the form of a secondary articulation on the preceding consonant, making /k/ [kʲ] in /ki/ and [kʷ] in /ku/. (See Section 12.2.)

In the simple Japanese question *これはなんですか kore wa nan desu ka* 'what's this?' the last two words are typically pronounced not **desuka**, not **desuka**, but (to my ear at least) just **deska**.

Anyhow, the antiques dealers have clearly based their English pronunciation on the Japanese spoken form, not on the written romaji.



## 1.5 Abseiling

My uncle Gilbert was not only a marathoner but also a keen climber, and I suppose it is from him that I must have learnt the verb *abseil* (OED: ‘to descend a rock face or other near-vertical surface using a rope fixed at a higher point and coiled round the body or passed through a descendeur, the speed of descent being controlled by the rope’s friction’.)

He pronounced this word ‘æbseil; so do I, and so do most of the people I have heard use the term. It stopped being a mountaineers’ technical term and entered general usage when people started abseiling not only down mountains but also down the outside of buildings, for charity, for fun, or in protest.

The etymology of the word is straightforwardly German: the neuter noun *Seil* means ‘rope’ or ‘cable’, and its derivative *abseilen* means ‘to lower (something, or oneself) on a rope’, hence ‘to abseil (down)’, and also, figuratively, ‘to skedaddle’. No doubt it was borrowed into English by the early pioneers of mountain climbing in the Swiss Alps.

The German pronunciation is **zail**, ‘apzailən. The German spelling *ei* regularly corresponds to the sound **ai** (or however you choose to write this German diphthong).

So why, despite this, does our prevailing pronunciation have **er**? It could easily be accounted for as a spelling pronunciation – compare *eight*, *rein*, *veil*, *vein*, etc. On the other hand, in native English words the spelling *ei* can correspond not only to **er** but also to **ai** (*eider*, *height*, *kaleidoscope*) and **i**: (*ceiling*, *deceive*, *Keith*, *seize*). As we all know, *either* and *neither* can go either way.

All other German loanwords with *ei*, as far as I can see, have English **ai**, as *Eiger*, *eigenvalue*, *Einstein*, *Freiburg*, *Geiger*, *gneiss*, *Holbein*, *Leipzig*, *Weimar*, *Zeiss*, *zeitgeist*. What is special about *abseil*?

I think the explanation must be contamination from *sail*, even though abseiling has nothing to do with sails. (It seems improbable that its long obsolete homophone *sale* ‘rope for tying up cattle’ could have had any influence.)

According to LDOCE, *abseil* is BrE only, the AmE (American English) equivalent being *rappel* **ræ’pel**, **ræ-**. The OED, on the other hand, defines the two terms slightly differently, rappelling involving a doubled rope but abseiling just ‘a rope’.



## 1.6 Mayoral Elections

A well-known British television presenter introduced an item on the topic of London's **mer'ɔ:rəl** election, only to segue immediately into calling it the **'meərəl** election.

There's a well-known disagreement about how we pronounce the stem from which the adjective *mayoral* is derived, namely the noun *mayor*. In the United Kingdom (or in England, at least), we generally pronounce it as a homophone of *mare*. This makes it monosyllabic, with the SQUARE vowel, thus **meə** (or some might prefer to write **mɛ**). In the United States, on the other hand, *mayor* is commonly disyllabic and rhymes with *player*, thus **'meɪə**; though you do also get a monosyllabic variant **mer** (i.e. a homophone of *mare*), particularly when immediately followed by a proper name.

The OED offers a lengthy historical discussion of the pronunciation of the word. The nub is that:

A disyllabic pronunciation existed in Middle English, where it was a variant of a more common monosyllabic one ... The disyllabic pronunciation survived in Britain at least into the 17th cent. ... as one possible



pronunciation, but other sources of similar date show that this was by then highly conservative in British usage. In North America, however, disyllabic pronunciations appear to have remained current in all periods.

I've sometimes wondered whether *Mare* Street in Hackney in northeast London ought really to be spelt *Mayor* Street. Disappointingly, though, it appears that the name has a quite different origin, and comes from an old word *mere* or *meer* meaning 'boundary'.

Back to *mayoral*.

- In LPD I give the main BrE pronunciation as 'meərəl, with an alternative meɪ'ɔːrəl. For AmE I give just 'meɪərəl. (With hindsight, I ought to have included AmE meɪ'ɔːrəl too, perhaps even as the main AmE form.)
- CPD/EPD, 18th edition, gives BrE 'meərəl, AmE 'meɪɔːrəl. The editor tells me that both 'meɪɔːrəl and meɪ'ɔːrəl ought to be included as AmE possibilities.
- OPD and the online OED give BrE 'mɛːrəl, AmE meɪ'ɔːrəl, 'meɪərəl.
- My main American reference dictionary, Webster's Collegiate, 11th edition, gives three pronunciations, the equivalent in IPA of 'meɪərəl, 'merəl, meɪ'ɔːrəl.
- The online resource Forvo has BrE 'meərəl, AmE meɪ'ɔːrəl.

Time for a survey, perhaps; but even a preference poll isn't going to reveal inconsistent usage like that of the newscaster who sparked my curiosity.

## 1.7 Keirin

A new word I learnt from the London Olympics was *keirin*, one of the forms of cycle racing. Everyone on British TV seems to call it 'keɪrɪn (though one correspondent told me 'the *keiren* event was usually pronounced 'kɪərən in my experience'). This is phonetically interesting, because in BrE we normally get the sequence **er** only across a morpheme boundary, as in *play#room*, *hay#ride*, *day-release*, *way round*. Within a morpheme, historical FACE plus **r** plus a vowel normally develops into **ɛər**, as in *Mary*, *various*, *sharing*. The only similar case I can think of is *Beirut*, which sometimes has **ea**. sometimes **er**. Anyway, we pronounce *keirin* as if it were spelt *kay-rin* or *K-rin*.

I find that the word is actually borrowed from Japanese 競輪, or in kana ケイリン, *keirin*, *keerin*. (In Japanese the diphthong *ei* and the long monophthong *ee* are not distinct.) The OED, which dates the word to as long ago as 1957, gives an alternative pronunciation with final stress, **keɪ'rɪn**. In Japanese the word is accentless.

My correspondent's version looks as if it could have been influenced by the Irish-derived man's name *Ciarán* or *Kieran*, which is regularly 'kɪərən.

## 1.8 Biopic

I noticed an interesting misinterpretation of spelling from a television quizmaster. He referred to a certain film (movie) as a **baɪ'ɒpɪk**, that is a *biopic*, a film about someone's life, a filmed biography. It is, of course, normally called a **'baɪə(ʊ)pɪk**, being composed of *bio-* plus *-pic(ture)*.

Given *bionic* **baɪ'ɒnɪk** and *myopic* **maɪ'ɒpɪk** 'short-sighted', you can understand how he came to pronounce the word this way. After all, *biopic* looks as if it contains the suffix *-ic*, which regularly throws the word stress onto the preceding syllable.

This word thus joins a list that includes being *mised* (**'mɪzɪd** instead of **,mɪs'led**) and items such as the *seabed* **si:bd** at the bottom of the ocean, *infrared* **ɪn'freəd** rays, *inclement* **'ɪŋklɪmənt** weather, and (my favourite) *sundried* **'sʌndrɪd** tomatoes (see Section 11.3).



## 2 Food and Drink Words

### 2.1 Flummery

The cartoonist Steve Bell had a strip in the *Guardian* in which he shows the Queen saying, ‘One does so enjoy a spot of flummery, does one not?’.

*Flummery* **ˈflʌm(ə)ri** is one of the very few words which English has borrowed from Welsh. It comes from *llymru* **ˈlɨmri** and originally, both in Welsh and English, denoted a kind of porridge. Its earlier etymology is unknown. In English it acquired in time its present meaning ‘flattery, humbug, meaningless trappings’. It’s interesting that *flummery* diversified in this way, while *porridge* has widened its meaning quite differently, coming to mean ‘jail time, period of imprisonment’.

The initial consonant in Welsh *llymru* is of course **l̪**, the voiceless alveolar lateral fricative, a sound we don’t have in English (*Sounds Interesting*, Section 7.4). As with the name of Shakespeare’s stereotypical Welshman *Fluellen* (Llewelyn) and in the *Floyd* variant of *Lloyd* (Welsh *llwyd* ‘grey’), the English **fl** captures the distinctive phonetic components of **l̪**, while spreading them out over two separate successive segments, the first voiceless and fricative, the second alveolar and lateral. Our modern lame English attempts at **l̪**, namely **xl** and **θl**, and the **ʃl** that South Africans sometimes use in *Hluluwe* (Zulu **lu** **ˈlu:we**) all exemplify the same tactic.

### 2.2 Conchology

As I’m sure you know, a conch is a mollusc, namely a kind of large saltwater snail or its shell. Not only is it edible, its shell can be used as a sort of trumpet (as blown by Triton).

In William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, a conch shell is used to call the boys together, and at meetings is held by whoever is speaking, as a symbol of democracy and order.

Anyhow, when I was at school we called it a **kɒŋk**. Pronouncing it with final **k** marks the word as being of Greek origin: its immediate Latin source *concha* is taken from Greek κόγχη *kongkhē*. (In Greek and Latin it seems to have referred primarily to a mussel rather than to anything larger, but no matter.)

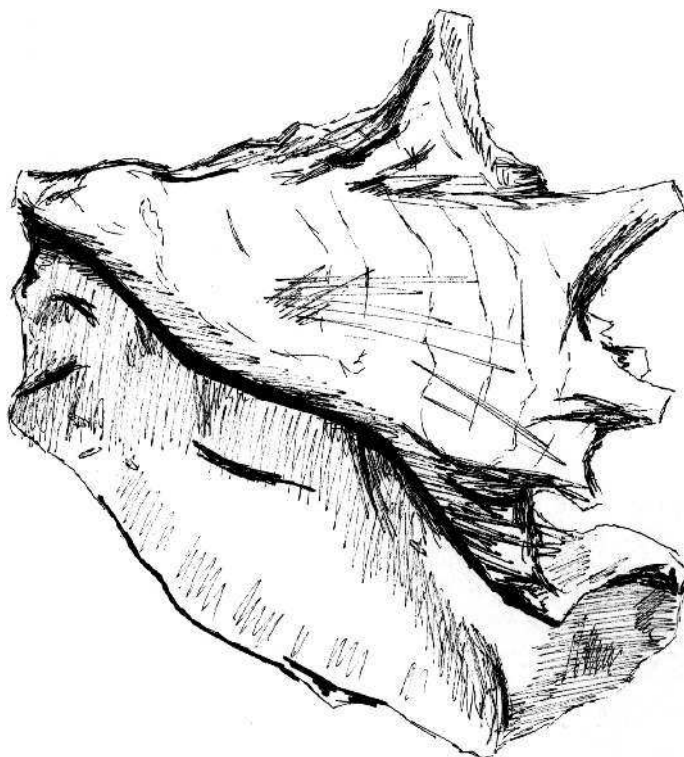
However, some people pronounce the word **kɒn(t)ʃ**, which presumably originated as a spelling pronunciation (though the OED thinks it may be the earlier form, having come in via French).

In words spelt with final *ch* there is an interesting interaction between pronunciation and spelling. If the sound is **tʃ**, we form the plural by adding *-es*, as in *churches*, *touches*, *inches*. But if it is **k** we add just *-s*, as in *monarchs*, *epochs*, *matriarchs*, *triptychs*.

So those of us who say **kɒŋk**, **kɒŋks** logically spell the plural *conchs*. Those who say **kɒn(t)ʃ**, **'kɒn(t)ʃɪz** spell it *conches*.

West Indians, for many of whom *conch* is an everyday word, pronounce it with final **k** (though in some islands the conch is known instead by the alternative name *lambie*).

On a Caribbean recipe webpage I found a recipe for CURRIED LAMBIE/ CONCHS. The spelling tells you how the author of the recipe pronounces the name of the main ingredient.



### 2.3 Kumquat

My local supermarket now sells kumquats. I like to slice these tiny citrus fruits whole and add them to salads.

But how do we pronounce the name? Personally, I say **'kʌmkwɒt**. Probably most speakers of English do the same. The word comes to us from Cantonese, where it is pronounced **k<sup>1</sup>ɐm k<sup>1</sup>wɛt** (with tone 1, high level, on each syllable).