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A Note on English Plural Formation

Rich Rhodes

The kind of allomorphy present in the singular versus plural forms of words like man men, foot feet, woman women, etc. is well documented if not well understood. However, there is one quirk related to the pair man men that I would like to document here. When man appears as a suffixal element it generally retains its irregular plural form men; however, careful attention to the phonetics of such plural forms reveals an interesting asymmetry. Consider the forms in (1).

(1) workman [warkmin] workmen [warkmin]

In careful speech the second vowel of the plural workmen receives some reduced stress. In my dialect this is approximately the same as in the famous Chomsky and Halle (1968) pair torrent versus torment (as a noum).

(2) No stress

torrent [torint] torment [torment]

workman [workmin] workmen [workmin]

Now the function of this stress is clear. Without the stress the vowel would be reduced obscuring or neutralizing the distinction between the singular and plural form. The mechanism for getting the stress onto that vowel, however, is not so clear. My best guess at the moment is that the suffix -mam has underlying stress and is marked as irregularly allowing stress reduction. This reduction is then blocked in careful speech, presumably, by a transderivational constraint which recognizes the potential ambiguity that would arise from stress reduction.

Footnote:

1. In casual speech the stress on the second vowel is absent and the form is pronounced as [workmin]. Now this form is in clear and obvious contrast with the singular [workmin], i.e. the difference is not neutralized, but for English speakers this contrast between unstressed is and unstressed is hard to hear. So with respect to the phenomenon under discussion this "near" neutralization counts as neutralization. Why it should be the case that there are contrasts which native speakers consistently make, but can hardly hear is a total mystery to me.