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## Stress Shift in English Disyllabic Prefixed Noun/Verb Pairs

Var skall egentligen betoningen ligga på substantivet *dispute*? Härom råder verkligen en viss dispyt. Slår man upp ordet i t.ex. *Concise Oxford Dictionary* ges endast *dispute*, men *dispute* hörs allt oftare. I denna artikel visar författaren att betoningsförskjutningen är en sedan länge pågående utveckling hos tvåstaviga prefixord av romanskt ursprung. Författaren är universitetslektor i engelska vid Göteborgs universitet.

English stress has often been the object of close study. Under the heading *Recessive Accent* in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, written in 1926, W.H. Fowler states that "the accentuation of English words is finally settled by the action of three forces", two of which work well together, "the habit of concentrating on one syllable" and "the drift of this usually single stress towards the beginning of the word" and that these two come into conflict with the third force, "a repugnance to strings of obscure syllables". Fowler goes on to say that "the drift... towards the beginning of the word" is "gradually assuming control of new words" and that when the move of the stress to the beginning of the word "has once opened an attack it will probably effect the capture" and uses French loan words like *plateau*, *menu* and *garage* to illustrate the movement of stress.<sup>1</sup>

The Middle English period (c1100-c1500) saw the introduction of a large number of Romance loan words whose stress pattern came in conflict with the Germanic and Old English stress pattern. Originally the loan words were stressed in the French way, i.e. with the stress on the last heavy syllable. The French word *city*, for instance, introduced into English in the 13th century and usually written in the forms *cite* and *cité*, was stressed on the second syllable which had a long vowel sound, /e:/, in Middle English, which can be seen when *cite* occurs in rhyming positions in end-rhymed poetry as in the following passage from MS. *Trinity of the Cursor Mundi*:

A Burgeis woned in þat cite  
þat Ioseph hett was riche of fe  
he had ben seke mony a day  
And deed þo in his bed he lay  
(*Cursor Mundi* (T) 12,491-4)

(A rich burgess called Joseph lived in that city. He had been ill for many days and then he lay dead in his bed.)

<sup>1</sup> However, Wells 1990 gives '--' as the American English stress for *plateau* and *garage*, and this stress is also given as British English options for both words.

In this MS., written in the South West Midlands in the period 1375-99, *cite* rhymes with *fe*, which was pronounced with the long vowel /e:/ in Middle English.

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* another French loan word, *village*, is stressed '--' as the final vowel -e was weakly pronounced (as /ə/). This can be seen from the rhymes in the following passage:

"By seinte Marie!" seyde this taverne,  
"The child seith sooth, for he hath slayn this yeer,  
Henne over a myle, withinne a greet village,  
Bothe man and womman, child and hyne, and page;  
(*Pardoner's Tale* 687)

However, the stress of *city* and *village* moved to the first syllable to conform to the English stress pattern. This movement of stress in French loan words is also commented on by Barber 1993:148-149:

When the words were first borrowed, they may have been given a French pronunciation, especially among bilingual speakers. But they were very soon adapted to the English phonological system... at first, a word like *nature* was stressed on the second syllable, as this seemed most like the French way of saying it, but after a time the stress was moved to the first syllable, as this was more in conformity with English speech habits.

The placing of the stress on the first syllable has its origin in the Proto-Germanic period. In Indo-European the stress had been free, and the movement of the stress to the first syllable was one of the factors that originally separated the Germanic language group from the other Indo-European languages. Jespersen 1948:22 finds that the stress shift "has left its indelible mark on the structure of the language and has influenced it more than any other phonetic change". Jespersen gives a possible explanation of the stress pattern in Proto-Germanic: "the syllable that is most important has also the strongest stress" (pp. 22-23), and this pattern corresponds to the general rule of sentence stress, i.e. the stressed words are the most important ones. In this way the weakening of the vowel sounds in unstressed words and syllables is less harmful for understanding. Jespersen goes on to say (p. 24) that "we have here a case of *value-stressing*; that part of the word which is of greatest value to the speaker and which therefore he especially wants the hearer to notice, is pronounced with the strongest stress."

The French loan words thus moved the stress to the beginning of the words so that they agreed with the Germanic stress pattern, but the original French stress of the loan words could, however, be used by poets for rhythm and rhyme (end-rhymes) for a long time. The *OED* comments on the stressing of the noun *record*: "The original stressing '--' is found in verse as late as the 19th c."

*Record* belongs to the fairly large category of two-syllable words that can occur as both nouns and verbs. It is a well-known fact, commented on

in phonetics handbooks, that in many of the English noun/verb doublets, a stress distinction is the only difference between the two parts of speech. In these pairs the noun is stressed on the first syllable and the verb on the second, e.g. the noun *'record* and the verb *re'cord*.

Samuel Johnson comments on this distinction in *A Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1755. He gives the noun *converse* as '— and the verb as '-, and under the noun he writes:

from the verb. It is sometimes accented on the first syllable, sometimes on the last. *Pope* has used both: the first is more analogical.

The stress distinction is also pointed out by John Walker in *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary, and Expositor of the English Language* from 1826:

There is a peculiarity of accentuation in certain words of two syllables, which are both nouns and verbs, that is not unworthy of notice; the nouns having the accent on the first syllable, and the verbs on the last. This seems an instinctive effort in the language (if the expression will be allowed me) to compensate in some measure for the want of different terminations for these different parts of speech.<sup>2</sup>

Walker also comments on the stress of the noun *record*:

The noun *record* was anciently, as well as at present, pronounced with the accent either on the first or second syllable; till lately, however, it generally conformed to the analogy of other words of this kind; and we seldom heard the accent on the second syllable, till a great luminary of the law, as remarkable for the justness of his elocution as his legal abilities, revived the claim this word anciently had to the ultimate accent; and since this time this pronunciation, especially in our courts of justice, seems to have been the most general. We ought, however, to recollect, that this is overturning one of the most settled analogies of our language in the pronunciation of dissyllabic nouns and verbs of the same form.

Prefixed words like *record* are historically interesting. When the Germanic stress shift took place, the stress of the prefixed nouns was placed on the prefix, i.e. on the first syllable according to the general Germanic pattern (as in Modern English *'answer*). Prefixed verbs, on the other hand, were stressed on the first syllable of the root of the verbs, i.e. on the first syllable after the prefix as in Modern English *be'come* or *for'give*, Modern German *be'deuten*, 'mean', or *ver'stehen*, 'understand', Modern Swedish *be'tyda*, 'mean', or *för'stå*, 'understand'. The difference in stress can probably be ascribed to the fact that the compounds of prefix and noun are much older than the compounds of prefix and verb. Prefixed nouns were fixed units when the Germanic stress shift took place while prefixed verbs were not, and therefore the stress was placed on the first syllable of the root of the verbs.

<sup>2</sup> "By different terminations" Walker means for instance the contrast s/z in the pronunciation of noun/verb pairs like *use, excuse*, etc.

Thus a distinction between parallel nouns and verbs was made, and as early as Old English there were noun/verb pairs with contrastive stress, e.g. *'angin*, 'beginning' and *an'ginnan*, 'begin', *'andgiet*, 'understanding' and *on'gietan*, 'understand'.

Verbs derived from nouns, however, generally kept the stress of the nouns as in the Old English verb *'andswarian* from the noun *'andswaru*, 'answer', which is also the stress of Modern English *answer*.

Nouns derived from verbs, on the other hand, often kept the stress of the verbs. This can be seen in the Old English verb *for'giefan*, 'forgive' and the derived noun *for'giefnes*, 'forgiveness', both stressed on the root of the words, a stress pattern still existing in Modern English in words with Germanic prefixes: *be'ginning* from the verb *be'gin*. Modern Swedish *för'klaring* from the verb *för'klara*, 'explain' and Modern German *Be'deutung* from *be'deuten*, 'mean', are stressed in the same way.

In Modern English there are few words with Germanic prefixes and even fewer noun/verb pairs. By the end of the Old English period the meanings of the original Germanic prefixes had weakened, and during the Middle English period, when the French influence on the English vocabulary was the strongest, the old prefixes were replaced by Romance prefixes so that new prefixed words were formed, and they were stressed in the French way with the stress on the last heavy syllable. This introduction of French prefixes and prefixed nouns/verbs meant that the English language suddenly had a large number of prefixed nouns with the stress on the "wrong" syllable.

However, the nouns with French prefixes began to move the stress to the first syllable. It appears that the stress of Romance two-syllable words had not been fixed in Shakespeare's time and that variation was possible. Kökeritz 1953 believes that it is "a combination of verse stress and the inherent Germanic accentuation that will best explain the frequent cases of stress vacillation in disyllabic words of Romance origin."

The noun *compound*, whose first occurrence in the *OED* dates from 1530, is one instance of the stress vacillation:

Originally stressed on second syllable; so in H. More, and still dialectally, Shaks. has both, but *'compound* more frequent. (*OED*)

The earliest occurrence of another noun, *perfume*, given in the *OED* dates from 1533. The *OED* comments on the stress of the noun:

Orig. like the vb., stressed *per'fume*; so in 18th c. dicts., and in Webster 1828, usually in 17-18th c., and frequently in 19th c. poets; but Shaks. has *'perfume* 7 times against 3, and Walker 1791 considered the stress fixed on *per-*; on the other hand Todd, 1818, held it was 'sometimes though rarely so stressed', but during the 19th c. this became the predominating prose usage.

Under the noun *perfume*, Walker 1826 again emphasises the noun-verb stress pattern:

the analogy of dissyllable nouns and verbs seems now to have fixed the accent of the substantive on the first, and that of the verb on the last.

Although Walker calls the stress pattern with the '-- accent of the noun and the '- accent of the verb in noun/verb pairs "one of the most settled analogies of our language in the pronunciation of dissyllabic nouns and verbs of the same form", the majority of the doublets in his dictionary have the stress '- for both the noun and the verb.

It is, however, noticeable that the number of prefixed Romance nouns stressed on the first syllable is steadily increasing. Both the noun and the verb *research* have generally been stressed '- in British English, but now the stress '-- of the noun *research* appears to be gaining ground in British English. In his *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* from 1990, Wells comments on the change of stress:

the '-sɜ:tʃ [...] form appears still to predominate in universities, although 'ri:sɜ:tʃ [...] has increasingly displaced it in general usage both in Britain and America. Some people may distinguish between the verb '- and the noun '--. BrE poll panel preference: '- 80%, '-- 20% (university teachers '- 95%, '-- 5%).<sup>3</sup>

The 1977 edition of Daniel Jones' *English Pronouncing Dictionary* comments on the stress of *dispute*: "The stress pattern '-- is increasingly used for the noun" and in Wells 1990 38 per cent of the British English poll panel preferred the stress on the first syllable for the noun. The noun *default* also displays a movement of stress. Jones 1977 gives '- as the only stress for both the noun and the verb while Wells 1990 gives '-- as an option for the noun.

It thus appears that there is a tendency in English to move the stress to the first syllable in two-syllable nouns with Romance prefixes so that they are in agreement with the Germanic pattern. It is also noticeable that there is no movement of stress in words with Germanic prefixes. Here the original stress has been kept.

(Theories have been put forward (e.g. Honey 1994) that the general movement of the stress to the first syllable originates in modern American English, and that the shift of stress that can also be seen in British English can be ascribed to the influence of American media. This can hardly be the case as the movement of stress to the beginning of the word started long before radio and television existed. Furthermore, a fairly large number of French loan words stressed on the second syllable in American English have moved the stress to the beginning of the word in British English, e.g. *ballet*, *debut* and *café*.)

In order to study the stress shift in noun/verb doublets with Romance

<sup>3</sup> Wells' opinion poll panel of 275 native speakers of British English.

prefixes, 200 two-syllable words with Romance prefixes, given as both nouns and verbs in Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* from 1755 and in the latest edition of the *OED*, have been looked at. These word pairs were also examined in Walker's *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary*, and *Expositor of the English Language* from 1826, the 1917 and 1977 editions of Jones' *English Pronouncing Dictionary* and Wells' *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* from 1990. (For a condensed version of the main results, see tables at the end of the article.)

In Johnson's dictionary from 1755 57 (29 per cent) of the nouns in these doublets are stressed on the first syllable but in Wells 1990 104 nouns out of a total of 197 pairs have the stress on the first syllable, as first or second choice, which means 53 per cent of the nouns.

Furthermore, 18 of the 57 nouns stressed '-- in Johnson 1755 appear to have moved the stress not long before the middle of the 18th century according to comments in Johnson or the *OED*. Johnson points to the stress shift in the noun *aspect*:

It appears anciently to have been pronounced with the accent on the last syllable, which is now placed on the first.

The *OED* also comments on the accent of *aspect* as a noun:

Accented *a'spect* by Shakespeare, Milton, Swift and occas. by modern poets, but *'aspect* already in Tourneur 1609.

Johnson also gives the nouns *commerce*, *consort*, *converse*, *convoy*, *exile*, *produce* and *traverse* with the stress on the first syllable and comments that they "anciently had the accent on the last syllable".

As for the noun *consult*, Johnson gives a first-syllable stress but adds: "It is variously accented". Walker 1826 gives '-- as first choice for the noun with '- as an option and comments:

I am much mistaken if this word does not incline to the general analogy of accent in dissyllabic nouns and verbs, like *insult*. Poets have used it both ways; but the accent on the first syllable seems the most usual, as well as the most legitimate pronunciation.

In Walker 1826 185 of the 200 noun/verb pairs in Johnson 1755 occur as both nouns and verbs. 20 of the nouns stressed on the second syllable in Johnson 1755 had moved the stress to the first syllable, but although Walker frequently emphasises the importance of distinguishing the noun from the verb, he gives '- for both in the majority of the doublets, 110 out of 185, which means 59 per cent of the examples. For instance, the noun and the verb *proceed* are stressed '- in spite of the fact that the noun was stressed '-- by Johnson 1755. Moreover, when commenting on the stress of *ally* as a noun, he disapproves of a first-syllable stress that he calls "an affectation":

A few years ago there was an affectation of pronouncing this word, when a noun, with the accent on the first syllable; and this had an appearance of precision from the general custom of accenting nouns in this manner, when the same word, as a verb, had the accent on the last... but a closer inspection into the analogies of the language showed this pronunciation to be improper, as it interfered with an universal rule, which was, to pronounce the *y* like *e* in a final unaccented syllable. But whatever was the reason of this novelty, it now seems to have subsided; and this word is generally pronounced with the accent on the second syllable, as it is uniformly marked by all the orthoepists in our language.

However, less than 100 years later the original edition of the classic *English Pronouncing Dictionary* published in 1917 gives the stress of the noun *ally* as ə'lai with 'ælai as an option, but here Jones adds a note: "The pronunciation 'ælai appears to be spreading rapidly." In the edition of 1977, the stress '-- is given as first choice for the noun with '- as second choice. In this edition the verb is given as '- with '-- as an option, which means that the stress of the verb is also shifting.

As for the noun *survey*, Walker is obviously in two minds but decides in favour of the stress on the second syllable:

This substantive was, till within these few years, universally pronounced with the accent on the last syllable, like the verb: but since Johnson and Lowth led the way, a very laudable desire of regulating and improving our language has given the substantive the accent on the first syllable according to a very general rule in the language, 492<sup>4</sup>; but this has produced an anomaly in pronunciation, for which, in my opinion, the accentual distinction of the noun and verb does not make amends: if we place the accent on the first syllable of the noun, the *ey* in the last must be pronounced like *ey* in *barley*, *attorney*, *journey*, etc. Notwithstanding therefore this accentuation has numbers to support it: I think it but a shortsighted emendation, and not worth adopting.

Nevertheless, Jones 1917 has the stress of the noun on the first syllable, and Wells 1990 gives the first-syllable stress as an option also for the verb *survey*. Furthermore, both Jones and Wells have /eɪ/ as the pronunciation of *-ey* even if this syllable is unstressed.

Jones 1977 points to the shifting stress in another noun, *dispute*, previously only given as '-: "The stress pattern '-- is increasingly used for the noun." In Wells 1990 62 per cent of the British English poll panel prefer the stress '- and 38 per cent the stress '--.

42 nouns have moved the stress to the first syllable from 1755 to 1990. Perhaps it is not surprising that the doublets with Romance prefixes started to copy the Germanic stress pattern with the noun/verb distinction. What seems more unexpected is that the stress of the verbs is moving in the same direction as that of the nouns.

<sup>4</sup> Walker's rule 492 is the stress distinction in noun/verb pairs.

In Johnson 1755 only 24 verbs (12 per cent) out of the total of 200 in the corpus are stressed on the first syllable, but in Wells 1990 the number had risen to 58 (29 per cent of 197 pairs), which means that 34 verbs had moved the stress from 1755 to 1990.

*Exile* is one of the 24 verbs stressed '-- in Johnson 1755, but here Johnson adds a note: "This had formerly the accent on the last syllable, now generally on the first though *Dryden* has used both." (Johnson also points to the shift of stress of the noun *exile*: "It seems anciently to have had the accent indifferently on either syllable; now it is uniformly on the first." The *OED* also gives both the noun and the verb as "formerly accented *e'xile*".)

In Chaucer's works *exile* occurs both as a noun and a verb, and when the verb is a rhyme word, the stress is on the second syllable:

Spek thou, for I ne dar him ysee,  
So have I doon in erthe, allas the while!  
That certes, but if thou my socour bee,  
To stink eterne he wole my gost exile.  
(*An ABC* 56)

In Walker 1826 the stress of *exile* is moved from the first syllable to the second, but in Jones 1917 it is moved back to the first syllable. Walker has fewer verbs (19 verbs, 10 per cent) than Johnson (24 verbs, 12 per cent) with the first-syllable stress, which may be an attempt to prove his point that the noun/verb stress distinction is "the most legitimate pronunciation". In Jones 1917 the percentage of verbs stressed '-- is higher, 17 per cent (34 verbs), and the figure keeps going up, 21 per cent (42 verbs) in Jones 1977 and, as we have already noted, 29 per cent (58 verbs) in Wells 1990.

A recent shift of stress can be heard in the verb *increase*, which can be stressed on the first syllable, a fact commented on by Wells 1990 in the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*: "The stress distinction between verb '- and noun '-- is often not made consistently; nevertheless 85% of the BrE poll panel preferred it". Wells gives the stress '- as the first choice for the verb with '-- as an option in British English and American English, the same as in Jones 1977 (BrE). For the noun both Jones 1977 and Wells 1990 give '-- as first choice with '- as an option.

(The *OED*: gives the noun as "-- formerly '- and comments:

The shifting of the stress is recent. Todd remarks 'the accent .. has, in modern times, been often placed on the first syllable, by way of so distinguishing the substantive from the verb'. *Increase* appears in Walker 1791, Perry 1805. Some later dicts. have both *in'crease* and *'increase*: so in Tennyson. Here the verb is, however, only given as '-.)

In Johnson 1755 both the noun and the verb *progress* are stressed '--, but Johnson says "not used" of the verb. It appears that the verb, which does not occur in Walker 1826, had become obsolete. This is also pointed out in the *OED*:

Common in England c 1590-1670, usually stressed like the sb. '-'. In 18th c. obs. in England but app. retained (or formed anew in America, where it became common c 1790, with the stress '-'. Thence readopted in England after 1800.

In Jones 1917 the verb appears again and is given the stress '-'. In Wells 1990, however, '-- is given as an option for the verb in British English (but not in American English). It is thus noticeable that the verb was stressed '-' when it reappeared in English, and that the stress has later been moved to the first syllable.

Contrastive prefixes, for instance in *increase* as opposed to *decrease*, and in *import* as opposed to *export*, would seem to be a possible explanation for the shift of accent in the verbs. A stressed prefix in words like these would be in agreement with the general Germanic tendency to stress the most important part of the word, the syllable the speaker wants the listener to hear. However, contrastive stress hardly seems to be the case in verbs like *convoy*, *exile*, *perfume*, *protest*, etc. where the stress has moved or is moving to the prefix.

It is possible that the Romance prefixes are not felt to be prefixes in the same way as the original Germanic prefixes. The on-going shift of stress in these disyllabic verbs may be a general adaptation to the rhythm of the stress-timed language where the stressed syllables occur at more or less regular intervals and may be the same kind of stress change as in other French loan words such as *ballet*, *café*, *menu*, etc. The *OED* comments on the stress of words with the French prefix MIS-<sup>2</sup> in compounds adopted from French, a prefix which "became ultimately identical in form (as it was in meaning) with MIS-<sup>1</sup>" (MIS-<sup>1</sup> is the Germanic prefix.)

*Mischief*, *mischievous*, and *miscreant* are the only compounds of MIS-<sup>2</sup> having the stress on the prefix. This is due to the fact that they early ceased to be felt as compounds, and while they followed of stress change in French-derived words, *mischance* and the rest fell under the influence of the native compounds of MIS-<sup>1</sup>, and so have their stress on the root.

A movement of stress only takes place in nouns and verbs with Romance prefixes, not in words with Germanic origin like *mistake*, stressed '-' both as a noun and a verb. Here the original Germanic stress pattern has been kept.

#### Prefixed Nouns and Verbs Stressed on the First Syllable

	1755	1826	1917	1977	1990
nouns '-'	57 29%	75 41%	89 45%	100 50%	104 53%
verbs '-'	24 12%	19 10%	34 17%	42 21%	58 29%

#### Stress Patterns of Prefixed Noun/Verb Pairs

	1755	1826	1917	1977	1990
n '-', v '-'	35 18%	56 30%	55 28%	58 29%	46 23%
n, v '--	23 12%	19 10%	34 17%	42 21%	58 29%
n, v '-'	141 71%	110 59%	110 55%	100 50%	93 47%
n '-', v '--	1*)	—	—	—	—
<b>Total</b>	200	185	199	200	197

\*) The word is *permit*. The prefix stress of the verb given by Johnson is confusing; an error perhaps.

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# M

## Gender Differences in Reading Comprehension

This study, written by Dr Jennifer Herriman of the University of Göteborg, is a critical analysis of the vocabulary in the English reading comprehension tests in the Swedish University Entrance Examinations ("Högskoleprovet") from 1992 to 1996. It examines the vocabulary in the texts, questions and answer alternatives and compares the vocabulary in the questions where there are big differences in the success rates of male and female test participants.

The comparison reveals among many other things the fact that "female-friendly" vocabulary is chiefly concerned with the humanities, especially the personal sphere of the individual, feelings and relationships; while the "male-friendly" vocabulary has to do with the factual, impersonal sphere of public life, science, economics and politics.

This new survey of gender and language, which is entitled *Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension*, is published by Institutionen för Pedagogik, Avdelning för Språkpedagogik, at the University of Göteborg.

ÅKE PERSSON

## Themes in Contemporary Irish Literature

The title of this essay is not totally unproblematic and poses questions which could be dwelt on. What, for example, does the description "contemporary" include? Can James Joyce be considered contemporary? He died in 1941, so he is of course not contemporary in the strict sense that he is still alive. Yet, his writing continues to influence not only Irish literature but literature world-wide. The same question could most certainly be posed in relation to William Butler Yeats, who died in 1939. In the extension, it could even be asked about Jonathan Swift, who died more than two hundred years ago but whose hard-hitting satires speak to readers and inspire writers of today.

The label "Irish" could also be lingered on. What is *Irish* literature? Is it literature written in the language of Irish (Gaelic)? Or does it refer to literature written *in Ireland*, in Gaelic as well as in English? If it refers to literature written *in Ireland*, are James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett Irish? As is known, they were all born in Ireland, but for various reasons they decided to continue their literary careers abroad, James Joyce in Switzerland and Italy, Shaw and Wilde in Britain, and Beckett in France. Today, we have similar problems with the acclaimed novelists William Trevor, born in Ireland, now living in southern England, and Iris Murdoch, just to take two examples. Trevor would probably still be thought of as Irish, whereas Murdoch, I suspect, would be considered British.

That the thorny problem of nationality is not merely an issue for academics who have nothing else to do than to quarrel about these matters was clearly shown in 1982, when *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* appeared.<sup>1</sup> One of the poets included here was Seamus Heaney, born on a farm in Northern Ireland – therefore geographically and legally speaking British – but since the early 1970s living in Dublin in the Republic. It did not take long for Heaney to respond to and express his annoyance with the inclusion of his work in this anthology. In a long poem entitled "An Open Letter," he emphatically distances himself from being thought of as "British," stating half-way through the poem:

My passport's green.  
No glass of ours was ever raised  
To toast *The Queen*.