

A Reason for Reagan

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Prin. Why, how could'st thou know these men in Kendall Greene, when it was so darke, thou could'st not see thy Hand? Come, tell us your reason: what say'st thou to this?

Poin. Come, your reason *Jack*, your reason.

Falst. What, upon compulsion? No: were I at the Strappado, or all the Racks in the World, I would not tell you on compulsion. Give you a reason on compulsion? If Reasons were as plentie as Black-berries, I would give no man a Reason upon compulsion, I. (*I Henry IV*, 1193-98)

Most people have strong feelings about their name. It is the one thing they call their own. Please emphasize the importance of respecting this most personal of possessions. . . . — Cathy in California (Landers)

Political figures lend their names, not only to political, but also to linguistic history. Sometimes their names become synonymous with their deeds, as in the famous case of Elbridge Gerry, once governor of Massachusetts and expert in legislative redistricting. In a different way, and through no fault of his own, the current President of the United States has also made his mark on linguistic history. By historical accident, two variant pronunciations of his last name have arisen; by political accident, and because of the strong feelings he aroused when first running for public office, the variant pronunciations took on different connotations — at least for some of the people some of the time. The reason for Reagan involves English orthography, the history of the language, Irish and American dialects, California politics, and attitudes toward political and linguistic authority. It is further evidence that language abhors a semantic vacuum, that variant meanings can result from the most innocuous variations in pronunciation.

The President spells his name *Reagan* and pronounces it accordingly. That is the problem. There are two likely pronunciations for the stressed vowel, [i:] and [e:]. Both are proper and familiar nowadays in words derived from Middle English open *ɛ*. We have *real*, *dream*, *sea*, and so on, with the first pronunciation; *break*, *great*, *steak*, *yea* with the second. (A third

pronunciation [ɛ] is also possible, as in *head, deaf, bread*; this is a shortening of [e:].) Nowadays nearly all such words have the [i:] pronunciation, but for a long time the prestige and literary dialects seem to have preferred [e:].¹ The passage from *I Henry IV* quoted at the start of this paper is but one of many sources of evidence for this once-common pronunciation; unless *reason* and *raisin* are homonyms, Falstaff makes no sense. A century later, rhymes like *peace:race* and *obey:tea* in Pope, and *dream:name* and *reigns:deans* in Swift, indicate that [e:] persisted in favor. At the same time, however, the present-day [i:] pronunciation for most of the *ea* words had been in existence as a dialect variant, as is also attested by rhymes. Shakespeare had *proceeding, weeding, and bleeding* in an elegant rhyme with *reading* in the first scene of *Love's Labour's Lost* (99-104); Pope couples *see:flea* and *ease:these*, while Swift has *cheap:meet* and even *great:meet*.

By the end of the eighteenth century, significant changes had occurred. The higher [i:] supplanted [e:] in nearly all of these words. At the same time the possibility of choosing between pronunciations ended. Aside from proper nouns, all words are now fixed with one or the other sound. With [i:] we have *sea, beat, meat, real, dream, leak, heal, neat, veal* and many more. (Before [r] other complications arise; they need not concern us here.) The words spelled *ea* and retaining [e:] can be counted on the fingers of one hand: they are the four mentioned earlier, *break, great, steak*, and the archaic *yea*. The first three, familiar in both written and spoken English, present the reader with an acceptable alternative pronunciation for the *ea* spelling.

Meanwhile, by the eighteenth century Irish dialects of English had also fixed the pronunciation of *ea* words derived from Middle English open ɛ. In contrast to British and American English, Irish English often settled on [e:] for most of these words. So it happened that the future President of the United States acquired the less common American pronunciation of his name as his birthright. He explains in his 1965 autobiography, *Where's the Rest of Me?*: "My father was John Edward Reagan (always pronounced Ra-gan), a first-generation black Irishman" (7).

Reagan's inheritance of [e:] is actually more complicated than appears by this account. Ronald's father did not, in fact, bring over an [e:] direct from Ireland. It was his Irish great-grandfather, christened Michael *O'Regan* in 1829, who made the change to the President's spelling and brought the name to America. Michael, "the first literate O'Regan" ("Reagan Genealogy" 45), demonstrated his literacy in 1852 in England, where he had emigrated, by signing himself *Reagan* on a London marriage certificate. His still illiterate brother Nicholas made his mark on the document as a witness. "The registrar," we are told, "gave Nicholas's surname 'Regan' while Michael signed

himself ‘Reagan,’ a form of spelling not used in Ireland” (Lauritsen 79). Michael, his wife Catherine, his children, and his two brothers emigrated to Illinois in 1858, bequeathing the *Reagan* spelling (which they all adopted) and the [e:] pronunciation to their posterity.

That Ronald Reagan’s name was indeed pronounced with [e:] long before his political career began is confirmed by the first listing in *Current Biography*, in 1949, which indicates the [e:] pronunciation, as do the revised entries of 1967 and 1982. But it is also clear that, even in Hollywood, Reagan’s preference for [e:] was not universally known. As evidence consider the autobiography of screenwriter Lester Cole, admittedly no political friend of Reagan’s, referring to an incident during the 1947 investigation of Hollywood by the House Un-American Activities Committee: “. . . the Committee on the Arts, Sciences and Professions (A.S.P.) sent me to Ronnie Reagan’s (then pronounced *Reegan*) house, to ask him to a meeting of the First Amendment Group” (270). (Reagan didn’t attend.)

Elsewhere, too, the preferred family pronunciation of the name has had to compete with the more prevalent [i:]. A 1984 Associated Press report from Ronald Reagan’s birthplace of Tampico, Illinois said that *Reagan* is “pronounced ‘Ree’-gun’ in these parts” (Springer 32).

Until the 1966 campaign for governor of California, there is no evidence that the variation in pronunciation had any semantic implications. It was, instead, typical of the uncertainty that exists in America over the pronunciation of personal names imported from a wide variety of tongues and dialects. The uncertainty is compounded in that, for personal names, we let the individual, not the dictionary or some other outside authority, have the last word. Consider in that regard another man of Irish ancestry closely associated with President Reagan: his secretary of the treasury, Donald Regan. Speaking to the National Press Club on June 29, 1983, Regan jokingly argued the superiority of his own [i:] pronunciation. He began by saying that the President’s ancestors couldn’t spell; the family name is *Regan* — “even the President admits that now.” And Regan told a joke about an encounter that supposedly took place in Beverly Hills, California just before Reagan’s inauguration as governor of California in 1967. The singer Pat Boone, walking his dog, met a neighbor, someone like the comedian Henny Youngman, also walking a dog. Boone happened to inquire how *Reagan* should be pronounced.² It’s R[e:]gan, he was told. Boone then asked the neighbor, What kind of dog is that? to which the neighbor replied, It’s a bagel.

Another member of President Reagan’s administration provides an excellent example of the pejorative possibilities in the simple mispronunciation of a name. According to *The Wall Street Journal* of Dec. 2, 1983:

Is a tax increase not a tax increase if enacted after the 1984 elections? Is

it disloyal to take the president of the United States too literally? And how do you pronounce Feldstein?

These may not sound like hot questions, but they are.

They are being bandied about the nation's capital in the current controversy surrounding Martin Feldstein, a Harvard University economist who came to Washington in September 1982 to become the chairman of President Reagan's Council of Economic Advisers. . . .

. . . Larry Speakes, the chief Reagan spokesman, was heaping public scorn on the professor Wednesday. Mr. Speakes even was pronouncing Feldstein two ways — *Feld-steen* and *Feld-stine* — though Mr. Speakes has long been confused on that score (*Feld-stine* is correct). (Blustein 1)³

In his column "On Language," William Safire gave a more circumstantial account of the incident:

A reporter first mispronounced the Feldstein name in his question, saying "Feldsteen". . . Mr. Speakes then misspoke . . . and corrected himself with a muttered 'Could never get his name straight.' That was promptly interpreted as unseemly ridicule or, even worse, an ethnic slur, and another White House aide then was forced to put out word from anonymous ambush that the President was 'furious' at his spokesman. (6)

So it appears possible that someone who does not respect another's authority in political matters may also refuse to follow the other's authority in language. And this is where, in the case of Reagan, the opportunity for semantic differentiation enters. As the 1966 campaign for governor began, Reagan's name was heard across the state, far more frequently than before. At first, many who encountered the name in print — including radio and television broadcasters — used the well-established [i:] mispronunciation. They soon learned, from the candidate and his backers, that Ronald Reagan was different. The Luce publications considered it necessary to point this out when introducing Reagan to their national audiences. *Time*, under the heading "New Role for Reagan," referred to "Reagan (rhymes with pagan)." A week later, a *Life* article on the candidate explained, "The speaker is Ronald Reagan (pronounced *Ray-gan*), one time left-wing liberal Democrat" (Oulahan and Lambert 71).

An uncharitable linguist might suspect that, if Reagan had not had the good fortune to have inherited the [e:] pronunciation, he would have adopted it for this campaign. It had more linguistic and political advantages than simply distinguishing the new R[e:]gan. For one thing, in English as in other languages, the small mouth opening and the high pitch of the high front vowel can suggest littleness. We have such diminutives as *Davy*, *Johnny*, and *Ronnie*, using the [i:] suffix, and words such as *wee*, *kiddy*, *namby-pamby*, *tummy*, *hanky*, and *teeny-weeny*. A 1968 article in the *Los*

Angeles Times, for example, reported an anti-Reagan campaign in Berkeley using *Ronnie*: “The ‘Recall Ronnie Reagan’ registration table was doing a brisk business” (Hall). Actress Bette Davis in 1981 was quoted as remarking, “He was a silly young kid. Everyone called him Little Ronnie Reagan” (McClelland 148; see also 226).

Ronnie can be affectionate too, but it remains diminutive, as illustrated by the Reagans’ married life in the gubernatorial years: “Nancy was a good protector, as good as there ever has been. She called Reagan ‘Ronnie,’ and he called her ‘Mommy,’ and she made sure that he took his galoshes with him on bad-weather days” (Cannon 143). In contrast, [e:] may suggest greater size, more appropriately associated with masculinity and leadership. Perhaps it is no accident that one of the few *ea* words which escaped the shift to [i:] is *great*. It is no surprise, either, that we hear stories that Ronald, “at Nancy’s urging, changed the pronunciation of Reagan to give it a little more class” (Kaplan 11). (This cannot actually be the case, of course, since *Current Biography* lists the current pronunciation as early as 1949, and Ronald did not even meet Nancy until 1951.)

A second advantage of [e:] over [i:] is that it is distinctive, but not eccentric. It is rare but permissible. It will stand out as an unusual pronunciation for the spelling *ea*, a pronunciation one is forced to take note of, but it is nothing to arouse the indignation of even the most conservative language purist. Indeed, a purist might welcome it as an authentic traditional pronunciation. Reagan the politician stands out as a conservative, and so does R[e:]gan the name.

A third, less significant, advantage might be the Irish vote. California’s Irish-Americans are not a particularly prominent political bloc, if they form a bloc at all, but anyone proud of his Irish heritage might be favorably impressed by Reagan’s use of an Irish pronunciation.

For reasons of this sort, the newly publicized pronunciation sounded better, and it is understandable that Reagan’s supporters made a point of adopting [e:] quickly, while some of his detractors resisted changing their habits. The campaign against him, in both the Republican primary and the general election, involved, among other features, referring to the candidate as a simple movie actor, one not to be taken seriously for an important political position. Those who wished to link Reagan with his movie past tended to use the earlier [i:] pronunciation. Between Ronald Reagan the movie star and Ronald Reagan the politician there was thus a pronounced difference.

This does not mean that everyone in California took sides on the pronunciation of *Reagan*. In fact, it was never an issue in the campaign, but simply a means by which one could indicate one’s attitude of respect or disrespect.

Robert Kennedy, for example, speaking at Berkeley before the election, made exclusive and frequent use of the R[i:]gan pronunciation. But during and after the 1966 campaign, broadcasters and the public became accustomed to the candidate's own pronunciation. After he was elected, respect for his office, or willingness to allow the individual authority in regard to his own name, soon brought the generally accepted pronunciation to [e:].

By 1969, his third year in office, those who used [i:] were in the minority. It was those political figures contemptuous of the governor rather than merely opposed to him who in 1969 retained the [i:]. Those in the respectful opposition signified that theirs was not a quarrel of personalities by carefully choosing [e:].

One member of the disrespectful opposition was the controversial Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver. Lecturing in an experimental course at the University of California, Berkeley in fall 1968, Cleaver referred to "Mickey Mouse R[i:]gan," emphasizing the [i:] by lengthening it. In the summer of 1969, interviewed in Algeria, Cleaver talked of returning to California and saying hello "to Governor R[i:]gan and [San Francisco] Mayor Alioto." Or one might quote Arthur Goldberg, a student leader of the Berkeley People's Park movement, who in a June 1969 television interview spoke disapprovingly of "Governor R[i:]gan." Angela Davis, a black instructor in philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles, fired by the Regents of the university (including Ronald Reagan) for her radicalism and membership in the Communist Party, said in an October 1969 talk, "They realize that Ronald R[i:]gan is using anti-communism." And Mrs. Artie Seale, another Black Panther, said in a 1969 broadcast interview: "Ronald R[i:]gan is a pig."

In certain academic circles, where opposition to Governor Reagan was especially vigorous, the [i:] pronunciation still was widespread in 1969. One young college administrator remarked then, "I learned to call him R[i:]gan when he was in the movies, and it would be too much effort for me to change now. If I liked him, it might be different." Other members of the faculty, including some of those at public colleges and universities who lobbied legislators in opposition to the governor's programs, diplomatically used [e:].

Among the general population, at least in southern California, a definite differentiation in attitudes persisted during Reagan's governorship. Students in an introductory linguistics class at the University of California, Riverside, in fall 1969 interviewed acquaintances on a number of linguistic matters, including pronunciation of the then-governor's name. (There were 118 students; each did three interviews.) What is the full name of the Governor of California? they asked, and then, Do you approve of his policies? Roughly two-thirds of the 285 Southern Californians interviewed had adopted the

[e:] pronunciation by then. The difference in meaning, though, showed up only among the older population. The 155 interviewees aged 15 through 25 showed no appreciable difference in pronunciation according to their approval or disapproval of Reagan's policies, but the 130 aged 26 through 80 showed a striking difference: 71 percent [e:] for those who approved of his policies, only 52 percent [e:] for those who did not. (See Table.) It might be hypothesized that those 25 or younger, whatever their policies, had not been attentive to Reagan until he and his preferred pronunciation appeared in the 1966 campaign, while the older Californians had been acquainted with Reagan and the [i:] pronunciation,⁴ and were more or less inclined to change to [e:] according to their sympathy with him.

In May 1972, during Reagan's second term as Governor, two students (Alan Corbin and Claudia Shea) at the University of California, Riverside conducted another survey on the pronunciation of *Reagan*, this time limiting it to 26 older white women, aged 55 to 90, half of them residents of a "retirement community." All had lived in California since Reagan's first election victory. The pronunciations of the Governor's name, elicited indirectly in conversation, correlated strongly with the interviewees' attitudes towards Reagan's policies. Of the 18 women who agreed with Reagan, 13 (72 percent) used [e:]; of the 8 who disagreed, only 2 (25 percent) used [e:]. Comments were recorded for two of the women who opposed Reagan's policies and his use of [e:]: "Reagan pronounced it differently in office"; "He asked to have it changed."

But with the fading of the particularly acrimonious politics that marked Reagan's early years as Governor of California, by the time of his campaigns for the Presidency in 1976 and 1980, the political difference between the two pronunciations seems to have disappeared. On the eve of the 1976 campaign, a vehemently anti-Reagan book used the [i:] pronunciation, not to defy Reagan, but to ridicule the ignorance of one of Reagan's supporters. (The book was by Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, the man Reagan defeated in his first campaign for Governor.) According to the book, a friend of the author had met

. . . a cab driver in Washington, D.C., who had said: "That Ree-gun cut the hell out of taxes out there in California. I'm for him if he can do that here."

My friend, who knows better, was astonished, and asked the cabbie if he hadn't heard that taxes had gone up every year that 'Ree-gun' was in office. (Brown and Brown 53-54).

In Reagan's 1980 campaign for the Presidency, the media and his opponents, as well as his supporters, took the [e:] pronunciation for granted; this time around, *Time* did not have to instruct its readers on the proper pronunciation.

Indeed, because of the prominence of the Presidency and Reagan's own

popularity, he single-handedly seems to have established a new norm for the pronunciation of *Reagan*. Nowadays it is the [i:] pronunciation, as in Treasury Secretary Regan's name, which is on the defensive. For that we have such evidence as *The New York Times* and *Current Biography*, which found it necessary to indicate the [i:] pronunciation for the *Regan* spelling ("REE-gun," Arenson; [rē'gən], *Current Biography Yearbook 1981*). In matters linguistic, as in politics, Ronald Reagan has made a name for himself.

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Table

Pronunciation of *Reagan* Among Southern California Residents
Fall 1969

(Interviews by students in an introductory linguistics class at the University of California, Riverside. Results tabulated by Thomas E. Armbruster and E.C. Howell, Jr.)

	Total	[e:]	[i:]
Ages 15-25: 155 interviewees			
Approving of Reagan's policies	39	25 (64%)	14 (36%)
Disapproving	116	77 (66%)	39 (34%)
Total Ages 15-25	155	102 (66%)	53 (34%)
Ages 26-80: 130 interviewees			
Approving of Reagan's policies	72	51 (71%)	21 (29%)
Disapproving	58	30 (52%)	28 (48%)
Total Ages 26-80	130	81 (62%)	49 (38%)
All Ages Combined	285	183 (64%)	102 (36%)

Notes

¹For detailed discussion of the development of Middle English *e*, see Kökeritz 194-209 and Wyld 209-212.

²Boone was an early supporter of Reagan (McClelland 210).

³This incident made such an impression at the *Wall Street Journal* that it was included in a year-end "Business-News Trivia Quiz": "The pronunciation of Martin Feldstein's last name became a matter of some dispute when the White House seemed to ridicule the economic adviser for his outspoken advocacy of contingency taxes. How does Mr. Feldstein pronounce his name?" (Abrams 11). The author of the earlier article, it might be noted, was Paul Blustein, who through personal experience might be especially sensitive to possible slights regarding the pronunciation of *-stein*. Three months later, a *New York Times* feature article on Feldstein mentioned the incident twice on the first page (Smith 34).

⁴Indicating the extent to which Reagan was already known among voters, one biographer reports that "according to polls, he began the [1966] campaign with a 97 percent identity factor" (Edwards 85).

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