Towards a sociosemiotic interpretation of variation in the location of stress of some English word

Ignacio Guillén Galve
Universidad de Zaragoza

El objetivo de este artículo es estudiar, desde una perspectiva sociosemiótica, la variabilidad que presentan algunas palabras del inglés contemporáneo en cuanto a la ubicación de la sílaba tónica en ellas. A modo de ejemplo, nuestro análisis se centra en el caso del sustantivo **dispute**, en cuyo patrón acentual estándar o de diccionario la sílaba tónica es la segunda, aunque también existe una variante en la que se emplea la primera. Este último patrón acentual parece ser el usado sobre todo por hablantes nativos de inglés que participan con frecuencia en huelgas y otras acciones sindicales.

El empleo consciente o la asignación inconsciente por parte de ciertos hablantes de una sílaba tónica, apartándose así de lo que marca la norma o el uso más generalizado, apenas se ha estudiado en la literatura sobre la *variación* en la pronunciación del inglés (*"variation in English"*); sin embargo, este fenómeno, aun cuando parece funcionar como un índice o rasgo indicial más, está dotado de un significado social y de unas posibilidades *informativas* y *comunicativas* que lo convierten en algo más que un simple índice y permiten o aconsejan su análisis como un **signo** (un fenómeno capaz de poner en marcha el proceso de significación o **semiosis**), en torno a lo cual gira la mayor parte del artículo.

In this paper I set out to approach the phenomenon of the variability of the location of stress in certain English words in a **semiotic** vein, which is by no means the commonest way of dealing with the subject in the literature in the field of English phonetics. My objective is to put forward a proposal for a theoretical explanation of the phenomenon that should not only contribute to a better general understanding of its nature and function in the language, but also allow

of application to the teaching of the pronunciation of English, especially as regards non-native speakers of the language.

Before considering what requisite features my approach should have in order to be spoken of as **semiotic,** I should like to bring in an example of the phenomenon that will be examined on the following pages.

Every researcher in the pronunciation of **contemporary English** may be expected to posit the question of the predictability of **stress** at some point or other of their work. Stress is one of the various **prosodic features** that can be used to describe an utterance in phonetic terms. It may be measured physiologically or acoustically as a measure of intensity, muscular activity, or air-pressure, and more often than not amounts to the degree of force put on a part of a word when it is spoken making it seem stronger than other parts. Stress is thus **supra-segmental;** it may extend in time beyond the limits of the phoneme and embrace much higher units of the utterance. In English stress may be regarded as **variable** in the sense that the stress of a polysyllabic word may be on the first, the second, the third or some later syllable (CANNibal, aREna, afterNOON). However, as Charles Kreidler points out (1989: 197),

> To be sure, stress is **invariable** for any specific word. Although there are dialect differences in stress (*garage* is stressed on the second syllable in North America, on the first syllable everywhere else[1]) just as there are dialect differences in vowels (*either, half, roof*), **we are not free to put stress on whatever syllable we want.** If a person still learning English as a new language says '*beginner* instead of *be'ginner*, those who already know the language consider it a mispronunciation, even though the meaning is probably clear enough (emphasis my own).

The trouble is that the learner may sometimes get the impression that there are certain words in which the speaker is free to put stress on a number of syllables. For instance, when an Englishman feels that his usual /dɪ'spju:t/ for the noun dispute may be 'inappropriate in the company of those engaged in industrial strikes for whom /'dɪspju:t/ is the (recent) preferred form' (Gimson 1980: 300), he can throw the stress back to the first syllable of the word in such a public utterance, with the result that there comes about a motivated breach of the stress pattern of the word dispute as given in a pronouncing dictionary (cf *English Pronouncing Dictionary (EPD)* 1988 [1977]: 143). The learner may be

taken unawares if he hears the 'unorthodox' pronunciation, and may also be at a loss if the typical prescriptive-minded native speaker informs him that /dI'spju:t/ is the *correct* stress pattern for the word, and then again the same speaker *mispronounces* the word by uttering /'dIspju:t/ in the circumstances mentioned above.

Yet, if a learner is capable of viewing the phenomenon in a semiotic perspective (although he may not use semiotic terminology or even be conscious that he is behaving *semiotically*), he may be expected to intuit or realise that a certain **meaning** is bestowed on the **location of stress** in some words, that the note in the dictionary about the fact that 'the stress pattern '- - is increasingly used for the noun [dispute]' (*EPD* 1988 [1977]: 143) may allude to certain subtleties of meaning rather than to a capricious or simply changing pronouncing behaviour among native speakers of English. What that *meaning* amounts to will be discussed later on. Although in this paper I shall centre the discussion on the case of the noun dispute, the theoretical explanation and the conclusions related to it are meant to apply to other words with stress patterns similar to those of dispute.

1. STRESS PATTERNS AND SOCIAL MEANING

If it is accepted that /'dIspju:t/ is still a deviation from the norm as represented by /dI'spju:t/, this instance of stress shift may be considered to be a case of **variation in pronunciation,** the effects of which often manifest themselves in variously perceptible phonetic and phonological features such as those affecting the pronunciation of the noun dispute. The present case of variation might be described in conventional phonetic and semantic terms as a shift-back of stress prominence that in principle does not evoke a different *signifié* from that associated with the word in question, i.e. (official) argument or quarrel between a group or organization and another. Accordingly, the location or position of stress in the word would not be distinctive, at least not in the way in which the position of stress functions in pairs like the noun 'insult and the verb in'sult, noun 'abstract, verb and adjective ab'stract. These sets of words are semantically related but grammatically different. It might be argued that the stress pattern of the word dispute is variable at present because quite a few speakers tend to be faced with the necessity of doing away with linguistic irregularities, thus adjusting the stress pattern of the above

noun to what is common among a number of English disyllables, namely 'pitch prominence on the first element for nouns [/adjectives], on the second element for verbs [e.g. accent, combine, conduct, perfect, protest, record, torment, etc]' (Gimson 1980: 232-3). For this reason, the location of stress fulfils a grammatical function in these sets of words, although it does not entail a change of lexical meaning. It might also be argued as another possible explanation of why dispute has two stress patterns in British English that native speakers may naturally shift the stress back in that word in the same way that they do in words carrying secondary and primary stress when a strong accent follows closely (e.g. afternoon in isolation vs afternoon in a spoken phrase like afternoon tea) (cf Gimson 1980: 285, *EPD* 1988 [1977]: xxii-xxiii, or Kreidler 1989: 219-41); however, there are few words without primary and secondary stress that allow of stress shift [2], and there are even fewer words that have two stress patterns of the type of dispute, one of which is endowed with some kind of social meaning. As I understand it, **social meaning** consists in regarding the occurrence of stress on the first syllable of the above noun as an instance of **text** that refers back to a community of speakers or society. Roughly speaking, Halliday views **text** as the instances of linguistic **interaction** in which people **actually** engage: 'whatever is said, or written, in an operational context, as distinct from a citational context like that of words listed in a dictionary (...) At the same time, text represents choice. A text is "what is meant", **selected** from the total set of options that constitute what can be meant. In other words (...), **actualized meaning potential**' (1978: 108/9; emphasis my own). In my view, the position of stress in a word can have social meaning only if its use amounts to an '**act of meaning**' in the sense put forward by Halliday (1978: 139):

> In its most general significance a text is a sociological event, a **semiotic** encounter through which the meanings that constitute the social system are *exchanged*. The individual member is, by virtue of his membership, one who means. By his acts of meaning (...) the social reality is created, maintained in good order, and continuously shaped and modified (italics as in original, emphasis my own).

In what follows I shall illustrate all of this by means of various examples which include individual words and communicative situations.

Apart from dispute, in English there are other words that have more than one stress pattern; these patterns also differ from each other in

the same or almost the same way as those of dispute do. Among those words, I shall mention piano, revenue, decorous, and the proper names Vanbrugh, Trafalgar, and Clanricarde. The standard stress pattern of the noun piano is /- ˈ- -/, i.e. three syllables, /pɪˈænəʊ/; however, the pronunciation /ˈpjɑːnəʊ/, two syllables with stress on the first one, is frequent among professional musicians. Revenue is commonly pronounced /ˈrevənjuː/, but in old-fashioned legal usage (e.g. among elderly solicitors) /rɪˈvenjuː/ is also frequent. Most English speakers say /ˈdekərəs/ when they utter the adjective decorous, but poets and elderly people are likely to pronounce it /dɪˈkɔːrəs/. As regards the proper names, people whose surname is Vanbrugh most often use the pattern /ˈ- -/, i.e. /ˈvænbrə/; however, scholars who study Sir John Vanbrugh's life and works (the seventeenth-century dramatist and architect) sometimes refer to his surname as /væn'bruː/. Poets tend to pronounce Trafalgar with the stress pattern /,- - ˈ-/, i.e. /,træfl'gɑː/, but the square in London is always pronounced /trəˈfælgə/, as is the surname of Viscount Trafalgar; the present Lord Nelson also pronounces the family name like that, unlike the previous holders of the title, who stick to the archaic form /,træfl'gɑː/. Finally, the standard pronunciation of the place-name Clanricarde is /klæn'rɪkəd/, but the stress pattern /ˈ- ,- -/, i.e. /ˈklæn,rɪkə/, may often be heard from residents in the neighbourhood of Clanricarde Gardens, London.

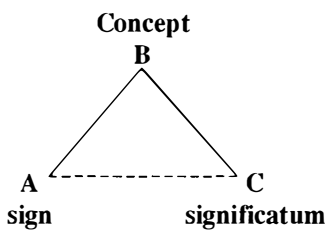
The existence of two different stress patterns for each word, sometimes with natural modifications to the quantity and quality of the vowels in unstressed syllables, implies that speakers can deduce significant information as to the social status and occupation, for example, of their interlocutors from the occurrence of stress on a particular syllable, among other features. The position of stress would therefore be a phonetic feature with a signalling function similar to that of the occurrence of certain phonemes in such words as ethyl, matrix, and thwart. The chemists' pronunciation of the first word is /ˈiːθaɪl/; doctors generally pronounce /ˈmeɪtrɪks/; and in nautical usage the last word is often /θɔːt/. However, the commercial or the general pronunciation of these words is quite different, namely /ˈeθɪl/, /ˈmætrɪks/, and /θwɔːt/. For these reasons, if the native speaker puts on his thinking cap, he is unlikely to conclude that the existence of the differing stress patterns /ˈdɪspjuːt/ and /dɪˈspjuːt/ can be accounted for on the same lines as those concerning the noun ˈprotest and the verb proˈtest. Is it again the case that for those engaged in industrial strikes /ˈprəʊˌtest/ is 'the (recent) preferred form' to mean 'a strong expression of disagreement', a noun, in contrast with a

hypothetical form /prə'test/ used by RP-influenced politicians and employers ? While it seems to be an established fact that *you pro'gress,* but *you make good/slow 'progress, you can dis'pute the minister's figures* and still waver between *a prolonged legal dis'pute* and *a prolonged legal 'dispute.*

2. THE POSITION OF STRESS VIEWED AS A SIGN

With regard to the case of the noun dispute, my initial proposal is to view the position of stress in the word as a **sign.** Although that prosodic feature is not representative of the linguistic expressions that are usually taken into account when the notion of **signification** is discussed in the literature of **semiotics,** I think that it is worth considering whether or not stressing the noun dispute on its first syllable can trigger the so-called process of signification or **semiosis,** and how this process would take place if it did. It is in terms of the notion of signification that the meaning of linguistic expressions is commonly described. As John Lyons puts it (1977: 95), 'words and other expressions are held to be signs which, in some sense, signify, or stand for, other things'. **Position of stress** would fall within the scope of 'other expressions', whatever this general group is meant to include.

Signification is often described as a triadic relation. I shall be using here the model brought forward in the writings of Charles S. Peirce, which have strongly influenced the theory of signs or **semiotics.** The general Peircean definition of the sign is 'something that stands in a relation for something (the object) to something (the interpretant)' (Oehler 1987: 7), a complete triadic relation being one in which no two of the three correlata (*sign, object, interpretant*) are related to each other without the mediation of the third correlatum. This kind of analysis can be illustrated by means of the following diagrammatic representation in the form of a triangle after Lyons (1977: 96):



In Peircean terms, (B) stands for the interpretant, and (C), for the object. The discontinuous line AC means that the relationship between a lexeme, an instance of a **sign**, and its significatum is indirect in the sense that it is **mediated** by a concept (cf Lyons 1977: 97). Nevertheless, although in the eyes of Peirce's theory AB and BC also represent relations of signification and mediation as explained above, it seems that the interpretant is the key element in this analysis.

> In order for a sign to function as a sign it must produce **a reaction**, which in turn is only possible if the sign is mediated by **a third element** in such a way that for the receiver of the sign the sign really represents its object. **This third element is the interpretant**, that constituent of the sign which makes it into **a conventional, interpretative social entity** (Oehler 1987: 8; emphasis my own).

As regards a word like SQUARE in its spoken form, a typical Peircean **symbol**, the signifier would be the chain of phonic sounds that is used to evoke the concept of [a shape with four straight equal sides forming four right angles], the Morrisian *significatum,* whereas the object or thing, which is 'neutrally' spoken of as significatum by Lyons and a number of other authors, would be this: □ . Therefore, the three constituents that enter into the triadic relation of the sign SQUARE are (A) /skweə/, (B) [a shape...], and (C) □ . If, for example, a drawing teacher wants his students to draw four □ in a row, he may be expected to be aware that his order will probably be a message comprising, among other signs, the word SQUARE, and that his students will react to the order by thinking of □ and then drawing four □ when he articulates the noun SQUARE because at least in Western geometry [a shape with four straight angles ...] is a basic, well-known concept, and in addition they are students in front of a person who has the right to 'command', since it is 'drawing class', and so forth. All of this is furthered by the interpretant. To sum up, in the above communicative situation /skweə/ is a single instance or occurrence of the word SQUARE, and as such is a **Replica** or **Sinsign** of the word, which is a **Legisign** if it is considered outside the scope of individual utterances (e.g. as part of the lexicon of a natural language) (cf Peirce 1955: 101-2). This classification results from examining the sign in itself. As regards the object, □ is the **dynamic object** of SQUARE, since seeing such a shape may cause that sign to appear in the mind of a person (cf Oehler 1987: 6). Finally, according to Peirce's reflections

about what a sign is, the meaning of the sign is known as the **immediate interpretant**, here [a shape with four straight equal sides forming four right angles]; however, there is also a **dynamic interpretant**, which, in the example of the drawing class, is the actual reaction the sign provokes when it is uttered by the teacher (i.e. drawing four of those shapes in a row as he has asked to do).

The above example is a simple manifestation of **semiosis** at work, and a brief introduction to the concepts and classifications used by Peirce to deal with the different aspects and elements of the sign. Yet there are other significant aspects associated with the process of signification. Klaus Oehler draws our attention (1987: 7) to the fact that

> a sign never exists alone, that is, without connection to other signs. For every sign must, as a matter of definition, be **interpretable.** This, however, presupposes the existence of at least one other sign. This further sign is similarly a sign only on condition that it is interpretable, and hence presupposes another sign. And so on ad infinitum (emphasis my own).

This aspect of signification, the theoretical interminability of every process of interpretation, has also been underlined by other scholars. For instance, Roman Jakobson pointed out that every sign always entails a '**rélation de renvoi**' (cf Eco 1987: 114). This can be illustrated by means of the sign SQUARE, in which the signifier /skweə/ and the significatum □ are mediated by the concept [a shape with four straight equal sides forming four right angles], which in turn contains other signs (e.g. ANGLE) in which the three-place relation is engaged again, and so in principle ad infinitum.

The last few paragraphs were intended to describe the main characteristics of signs in general. I have not mentioned the different **classes of signs** Peirce recognized because I shall concentrate only on one of the dimensions of his classification, namely the three classes into which signs can be divided concerning their connection to their objects: **Icons, Indices** and **Symbols.** The reason why I have chosen to do so is that, as regards the case of the noun dispute, this dimension is the one that seems to throw light efficaciously on the question of whether or not the location of stress can function as a sign, and explanatory advantages can thus be gained from that approach. This stance —here on the functional possibilities of a prosodic feature— is not unusual in semiotics. Much of current semiotic analysis is concerned with determining into

which of the three Peircean categories a given sign falls. However, in handling those categories, a distinction that is undoubtedly useful, one should view icon, index, and symbol more like points on a continuum rather than as distinct categories.

In the first place, it is reasonable to think that on a certain occasion a slick politician may be faced with the necessity of being in favour with those engaged in industrial strikes. It may happen that he has to make use of the word dispute (e.g. in a *friendly* pub lunch conversation with angry trade unionists), and therefore, as a concession to their 'social accent', pronounces /'dIspju:t/. He may do it even unconsciously, since 'some speakers will tend (often unwittingly) to adapt their own speech to some extent to that of their interlocutor, e.g. by making concessions to the other's social or regional accent' (Gimson 1980: 300). What can be inferred from this phenomenon is that the sign dispute as /'dIspju:t/ can not only *stare pro* the sign [the usual disagreement with your narrow-minded boss], but also *pro* the sign [this is the stress pattern used for the noun by these pigheaded unionists I have to calm down].

Secondly, is the position of stress in dispute above a **sign** ? In other words, is it a phenomenon based upon a relation of 'referring back ("sending back") to something else' (Eco 1987: 114) ? In my opinion, it is important not to skip over these questions because, otherwise, the essentially phonetic and sociolinguistic subject of the present paper would not ever be able to profit by the insights into it that semiotics can give. For this reason, one should not lose sight, as it were, of the following comment by Alain Rey (1978: 101):

> When the sign (or semiosis) becomes the underlying concept of semiotics, social anthropology, economics, medical semiology, etc., are **semiotically relevant only if** comunication is described and analyzed according to precise (even if broad) definitions of the elements being communicated **as signs** (emphasis my own).

There are two paths along which it is possible to find an answer to the above questions. One is based on what Ferdinand de Saussure called 'syntagmatic and associative (i.e. paradigmatic) oppositions' (cf Krampen 1987: 73). The other consists in identifying the class of signs in Peirce's classification under which the location of stress can be considered to fall.

On the basis of the notion of 'associative opposition' discussed in de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics,* **paradigmatic relation** can be defined as the connection that exists between all the elements which in theory could take the same place in a syntagm (e.g. the sequential arrangement of words in a sentence). Returning to the case of the position of stress in the noun dispute, I think that the sequence of syllables that constitute the word may be regarded as a phonetic syntagm /dI/ + /spju:t/, in which the stress can in principle be on both the first and the second syllable. First-syllable stress and second-syllable stress would thus be a pair of elements that stand to each other in a relation of associative (i.e. paradigmatic) opposition. The often-quoted passage (cf e.g. Krampen et al, 1987: 239) from de Saussure's *Course* in which he compares the paradigmatic opposition to columns of different styles which could take the same place in a building may be adapted to the present analysis by saying that if the stress pattern used for dispute is not the canonical form, so to speak, it will evoke mental comparison with the other pattern possible for the word, its unmarked pronunciation, /dI'spju:t/. Briefly, it can be concluded that the position of stress in the above noun is quite capable of 'referring back' to something else paradigmatically (a different possible stress pattern, with all its connotations), and my proposal for viewing it as a sign is well under way.

As regards the syntagmatic opposition, the connection that exists between all the elements co-present in a syntagm, the position of stress is also amenable to it. Now the syntagm might be a **tone unit,** 'an utterance or part of an utterance which contains a single tone [a change in the direction in the pitch movement of a speaker's voice, which takes place as a (...) glide] and, therefore, one tonic syllable' (Bradford 1988: 61). In the utterance emitted by our slick politician there would be a string of syllables, and, depending on how many tones he chose to use, the string or piece of speech could be divided into a different number of tone units. Dispute would certainly appear in one of those tone units, the elements of which (i.e. the accented or tonic syllable, the stressed syllables, and the various unstressed syllables) can be considered to stand in a mutual relationship of dependence or syntagmatic opposition. Accordingly, it is possible for /dI/ in /'dIspju:t/ to enjoy a syntagmatic relation to, for instance, the accompanying stressed syllables in the tone unit, and be, as them, a potential accented or tonic syllable. This depends on the speaker, who 'can create certain effects —transmit certain subtle meanings— by accenting a different word' (Kreidler

1989: 75). The trouble is that the syntagmatic opposition concerning the two syllables of dispute, each of which can be either stressed or unstressed, with regard to the other syllables in the unit does not seem to be as relevant as the paradigmatic opposition in order to comprehend the meaning of the position of stress in that word and the like, as I shall explain later on. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, as far as the two types of sign opposition described above are concerned, the position of stress can undoubtedly be viewed as a **sign,** and function as such.

3. SIGN, OBJECT, INTERPRETANT... AND STRESS

Now, to what class of signs would the position of stress belong ? The first problem that arises in this respect is whether it is possible to determine what the signifier, the object, and the interpretant of the sign '**position of stress**' are. To begin with, its interpretant is of a somewhat elusive nature, compared with that of a sign like the word SQUARE, a symbol. Yet it does not seem preposterous at all to suggest that there is a degree of similarity between the two following communicative situations, which are already familiar to us. If an English teacher of drawing asks in class about the name of a shape with four straight equal sides forming four right angles, the students will most probably answer /skweə/, perhaps with this image, □ , in mind (as the significatum or object). Now, if an MP in an election campaign happens to be accosted by an infuriated constituent blabbering on about a certain /'dIspju:t/, she might deduce from the position of stress in the recurrent word, among other things or signs, that 'This man must be one of those workers that are continually involved in industrial action' (as the significatum or object). This deduction may help her to work out the most appropriate way of handling the infuriated constituent, perhaps causing her to say /'dIspju:t/, too, when trying to soothe the man. If she did so, her use of the non-standard stress pattern of the noun might be **communicative,** since the position of stress would be meaningful for her as the sender of the sign in order to influence her annoyed interlocutor. Lyons considers any signal to be **communicative** in so far as 'it is **intended by the sender** to make the receiver aware of something of which he was not previously aware. Whether a signal is communicative or not rests, then, upon the possibility of choice, or selection, on the part of the sender' (1977: 33). The possibility of selection implies that the stress pattern of the word dispute is not 'automatized' (i.e. is not always /dI'spju:t/) and

therefore admits of a certain degree of **foregrounding** (i.e. /'dIspju:t/), which in principle enables the user of the sign to behave ostensively (cf Sperber and Wilson 1986: 49). The MP's stressing dispute on its first syllable after listening to the infurated constituent is ostensive in the sense that it makes manifest an intention to make something manifest (e.g. 'although I am now an MP, I also worked in a factory when I was younger, so I understand your annoyance, etc'). This behaviour is similar to what Lyons considers 'communicative', and is also related to the function of foregrounding in general as Garvin views it (1981: 8):

> By automatization is meant the expected occurrence of an object, event or action; by foregrounding is meant its unexpected occurrence by virtue of which it attracts [attention to itself].

In brief, the position of stress in the noun dispute enjoys much of the character of a sign because a speaker may utilize it in a communicative or ostensive, non-automatized manner, which underlines the relational character of the sign.

With regard to the situations of oral communication given as examples above, in the first one the signifier elicited by the teacher is made up of a string of sounds that constitute a word. In the second situation, the signifier is also made up of phonic matter since it amounts to the occurrence, on the first syllable, of at least a slightly higher pitch than that of the unstressed syllable, with greater associated intensity. So much for the nature of the signifier; let me now move on to the tricky question of object and interpretant. It is clear that, in the case of the MP, the position of stress in a particular word is capable of bringing about 'a **reaction**', which is what a real sign must be capable of producing, as Klaus Oehler points out when outlining Peirce's semiotics. But the reaction would not take place unless an interpretant mediated the sign, here a peculiar location of stress. Therefore, it seems that the MP's knowledge (if it exists at all) that the noun dispute allows of two stress patterns, one the unmarked dictionary form and the other the preferred form by those engaged in industrial strikes (a pattern on the increase, though, as it is acknowledged in the 1988 revision of the *Everyman's Pronouncing Dictionary*), is the interpretant, and as such it ensures that for the receiver of the sign, the MP, the position of stress can represent its object, 'this man must be one of those workers that are continually involved in industrial action'. To be precise, stressing /dI/ in dispute

also has an **immediate interpretant** and a **dynamic interpretant.** The latter would be **the action** of the MP's **identifying** her interlocutor with a certain social group, i.e. the reaction /'dI/ provokes. The former would be **recalling** that the stress pattern /'dIspju:t/ is not the commonest (or the most correct if the receiver of the sign is prescriptive-minded), but is rather associated with a certain social group. As regards the object, a precise interpretation in Peircean terms would entail viewing the MP's interlocutor in that particular communicative situation as a **dynamic object**, since he determines the sign by using, uttering it (in principle it does not matter whether he does informatively or communicatively on that occasion). The **immediate object** would thus be a person engaged in industrial strikes as the sign itself represents it (perhaps a simplistic representation, but it may be operative for the users of the language). Of course the position of stress is not the only sign that can evoke that object. At a point in his *Semantics,* Lyons reminds the reader (1977: 107-8) that

> Not only may a person's pronunciation or handwriting indicate his membership of a particular regional or **sociocultural** group, his sex and age, who he is, what his emotional state or attitude is, and so on; so too may his employment of a particular form or lexeme, or a particular grammatical construction (emphasis my own; cf also Gimson 1980: 300).

However, phonetic aspects deserve as much attention as lexicogrammatical and other aspects because 'accepting (...) the view that all communication is by means of signs, we can say that messages are signs, which may or may not be composed of simpler signs' (Lyons 1977: 96). The position of stress in words like dispute would be one of the apparently simplest signs comprised in bigger signs such as utterances.

4. THE POSITION OF STRESS: INDEX ? SYMBOL ? BOTH ?

It can be inferred from my description of the signifier, the object, and the interpretant of /'dIspju:t/ on a par with those of the spoken form of SQUARE that it admits of regarding the position of stress as a **symbol**. I am conscious that it may be difficult to think that both [a shape with four straight equal sides forming four right angles (and not the length round the outside of a circle, and not ..., etc)] and [the stress pattern of the noun dispute is either - '-, the canonical form, or '- -, a

sociolectal variant] are interpretants. But this difficulty may be put down to the frequency with which words have been given as examples of a **symbol,** almost excluding 'smaller' signs from the category. What is clear is that viewing the position of stress as a symbol would be in principle in contradiction to conventional or traditional approaches to such phenomena, in which **Index** is the category of signs associated with them. For example, when A C Gimson discusses the problems of teaching the pronunciation of English to foreign learners, he starts by assessing the somewhat thorny question of the choice of models of pronunciation. Among other things, he points out that

> in normal circumstances, the Englishman (...) will by early adulthood be making habitual use of one speech form determined by his family background and by his social environment. Such variations in his pronunciation as occur are likely to be the result of differences in **situation.** It will no doubt be possible to identify the phonetic and phonological features which characterize his pronunciation when he is making a formal speech or when he is talking to children (...) Such **phonetic indices** are of course accompanied by (...) (1980: 300; emphasis my own).

Consequently, Gimson may be expected to analyse the variations introduced in his pronunciation by our slick politician (/'dIspju:t/ X /dI'spju:t/) as '**phonetic indices**' due to '**situation**', although in his *Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* he does not make it explicit what a phonetic index is. Lyons also speaks of '**indices** and **indexical features**' (1977: 106-8) when he deals with the signals that correlate with an individual's membership of particular social groups within the community, under which there come '**occupation-identifying** (or **occupational**) indices'. My thesis is that the position of stress concerning words like the noun dispute is a complicated kind of sign, since it is neither a pure symbol nor a pure index, as I try to demonstrate below.

The conclusions reached by authors who apparently prefer to think that the position of stress in the noun dispute is an **Index** or an **indexical feature** cannot be ruled out altogether. Note how the phenomenon fits in with Peirce's definition of an **index,** which reads as follows: '[An index is] a sign, or representation, which refers to its object (...) because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object (...) and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign' (Peirce 1955: 107). When the quick-witted MP of my example momentarily notices that her

interlocutor has stressed the above noun on its first syllable, contrary to British common usage expectations, she will find it '**informative**' (in the sense given in Lyons 1977: 33) and useful as a sign provided her perception of the phonic stimulus of stress on the first syllable through the sense of hearing succeeds in calling up the knowledge (stored in her memory) that at present the word has two related stress patterns, one of which is commonly associated with speakers of certain social standing and occupation. On the basis that this latter idea may function as the **object**, the position of stress is also 'in dynamical connection with the individual object' in the sense that it is uttered by an individual speaker whose pronunciation of the word can be thought to correspond to some of the characteristics of the object the position of stress stands for. Furthermore, our peculiar sign also seems to resemble the examples of indices given by Peirce (1955: 108-9):

> I see a man with a rolling gait. This is a probable indication that he is a sailor. I see a bowlegged man in corduroys, gaiters, and a jacket (...) A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focusses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience.

'I hear a man say /'dIspju:t/. This is a probable indication that he is one of those workers who are continually involved in industrial action', our MP might think.

Viewed as a sign, the position of stress in dispute in my example of the MP and the infuriated constituent complies, too, with the essential feature that Lyons asks of all indices, namely that 'they should convey information (...) about their source [by their **indicating** something or someone as the source of the index]' (1977: 107). Note that for Lyons 'a signal is **informative** if (regardless of the intentions of the sender) it makes the receiver aware of something of which he was not previously aware' (1977: 33). Accordingly, the position of stress would make the MP aware that her interlocutor may be 'one of those workers ...', something of which she may well not have been aware previously unless the man was wearing a badge, for example.

In the last two paragraphs I have tried to stick to the spirit of Peirce's general definition of **Index,** i.e. there shall be some known or assumed connection between a sign (A), and its significatum (C) such

that the occurrence of (A) can be held to imply the presence or existence of (C). As Lyons points out (1977: 106), Peirce appears to have refrained from introducing the condition that the connection between (A) and (C) **should be independent of the existence of an interpretant.** In my view, it is the absence of this condition that enables some authors to regard the position of stress solely as an indexical feature or phonetic index (cf Gimson 1980, or Lyons 1977 after Abercrombie 1967). As regards the position of stress on the first syllable of dispute, I do not think that the connection between (A), its occurrence as a sign, and (C), the object I assign to it ('those engaged in industrial strikes, for whom /'dIspju:t/ is the (recent) preferred form'), can be established independently of the existence of the kind of interpretant I have described above. If a Spanish student of English does not acquire the knowledge that there are two stress patterns associated with the noun dispute, and he is only exposed to the 'correct' form, /dI'spju:t/, he may be expected to react to the other form by considering it a **mispronunciation,** if he happens to hear it, since it simply will not be **informative** to him, and will also fail to stand to him for something in some respect or capacity. It just will not be a sign. British native speakers are, however, rather more likely to be in contact with both forms and their users, and therefore the problem will not arise. An added problem would come up if the student adopted the stress pattern /'dIspju:t/ because he has heard it uttered by a native speaker, and then used it on every occasion. This would undoubtedly create a strange impression in the presence of native speakers.

As a result, the position of stress does not seem to constitute a good instance of the original Peircean **index** [3] on account of the role played by the interpreting mind in connecting the occurrence of stress on a certain syllable with some of the social characteristics of a group of speakers. It is true that the phenomenon exists because one day that group of speakers began to depart from the norm for reasons best known to themselves, thus causing two different stress patterns to co-exist, with all the implications this situation has. In this sense, the interpreting mind did not generate the connection at all, and thus the position of stress in dispute would be amenable to the category of **Index** as Peirce viewed it (1955: 114):

> The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except **remarking it, after it is established.** The symbol is connected

> with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist (emphasis my own).

Therefore, the interpretant in the triadic relation of the sign '**position of stress**' would only fulfil the function of mediating between signifier and object in order to 'remark' the connection existing between them. I have already explained how the location of stress in dispute when pronounced /'dIspju:t/ fits in with Peirce's idea that 'An *Index* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object' (Peirce 1955: 102). This is the only notion that in my opinion can dissuade anyone from considering the position of stress to be a **pure symbol.** The word dispute as a lexical item does not refer to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by it, since it cannot be in dynamical connection with it, unlike stressing dispute on its first syllable. However, quite a few ordinary words may function both as symbols and as indices. For example, in English the word bairn /beən/ means [child]; if we analyse it in Peircean terms (cf 1955: 112), it can be a symbol because it is a general mode of succession of three phonemes, which becomes a sign only in the fact that **a habit**, or acquired law, will cause replicas of it to be interpreted as meaning a young girl or boy. Nonetheless, it can also be an index because, if it appears in an utterance, its user will most probably be a speaker from Scotland, or from Cumbria or Northumberland in England. What is significant is that, while the sign bairn is generally contiguous with <speakers from Scotland, etc>, since it is dynamically used by them, the sign bairn is by no means affected by the object [child] refers to, and therefore is a symbol in that respect. Peirce made it clear (1955: 114) that

> Any ordinary word, as "give", "bird", "marriage", is an example of a symbol. It is *applicable to whatever may be found to realize the idea connected with the word*; it **does not, in itself, identify those things** (emphasis my own; italics as in original).

Accordingly, if a young Scots male utters the word bairn, it will not identify him as [child], although a Londoner might guess that the speaker comes from the North. But, if a unionist produces the sign /'dIs/ in syntagmatic combination with /pju:t/ and in associative opposition to /dIs/ (+ /'pju:t/), it will not, either, '**in itself**', identify him as [speaker usually involved in industrial action], although it might lead an interlocutor to associate him with such a group of citizens. This highlights the fact that

the only way of differentiating clearly between the signs 'position of stress'/**Index** and 'word'/**Symbol** is accepting that in the former the object can actively embody and mould the signifier, whereas in the latter the object does not affect the signifier. For the rest, things are very much alike.

Peirce himself did not advocate a sharp distinction between symbols, indices, and icons, perhaps because that attitude would imply going against the very nature of the sign and its capacity for referring back to other signs. When Peirce dealt with indices, he acknowledged (1955: 108) that

> it would be difficult, if not impossible, to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality,

an idea which he developed by stating (1955: 112) that

> A Symbol is a law, or regularity of the indefinite future. Its Interpretant must be of the same description; and so must be also the complete immediate Object, or meaning. But a law necessarily governs, or "is embodied in" individuals, and prescribes some of their qualities. Consequently, a constituent of a Symbol may be an Index, and a constituent may be an Icon.

In the absence of any (Peircean) **semiotic** foundation, quite a few traditional or conventional phonetic and sociolinguistic approaches to the natural phenomenon of variation in pronunciation have confined themselves to regarding aspects like the position of stress as simple or pure phonetic indices or indexical features, if they speak of '**indices**' at all, thus overlooking Peirce's pointed remarks about the complex nature of signs, and also the explanatory benefit of viewing apparently unimportant phenomena such as the above as **signs**.

In order to finish this lengthy section on the category of signs the occurrence of stress on the first syllable of dispute belongs to, I should like to apply the foregoing conclusions to the explanation of how and why that sign can also function as a **symbol**, but not as a pure one, just as it cannot be a pure index, either.

A † is an object or thing of the everyday world; however, it may also be one of the dynamical objects related to the sign CROSS, whereas

[upright post with a bar crossing it near the top, on which people were tied or nailed ...] is one of its immediate interpretants. A cross is, too, a symbol of Christianity, since it refers to the object it denotes by virtue of an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object. Yet the present symbolic interpretation of †, with the related association of ideas, is based on an **index,** due to the fact that the cross alludes to the historical episode of Christ's death on the cross which he himself had dragged along previously. Nowadays the original dynamical connection between sign and object has become rather vague, and thus the cross has lost most of its character as an index. For these reasons, it is not unreasonable to think that in time the stress pattern **/'dIspju:t/** might become a symbol, not of Christianity, but of the working class or of trade unionism or simply of strikes, alongside other potential symbols such as pickets at factory gates or a specific working-class vocabulary or grammar. For example, syntactic constructions of the type I didn't have no dinner are employed by a majority of English speakers; Hughes and Trudgill point out (1987: 14) that

> It is often, however, considered to be 'wrong' by many people in the English-speaking world. This is largely because it is, like most non-standard grammatical forms, most typical of **working-class** speech, and for that reason tends to have low prestige. People who believe it to be 'wrong' (...) are probably making what is ultimately a social rather than linguistic judgment (emphasis my own).

It may happen that the connection between the sign and its object, between stressing the first syllable of the noun dispute (thus giving rise to a non-standard pronunciation form) and those engaged in industrial strikes, becomes so tenuous that the position of stress ends up being a symbol, with a noticeable degree of indexicality, of the working class in contrast to forms such as /dI'spju:t/ proper, say, to RP-speaking middle and upper classes. The trouble is that people in general are not sensitized to regarding phonetic phenomena like prosodic features as signs on a par with common symbols such as flags and crosses. My final conclusion about the position of stress in dispute is that it is at present a **social phonetic index** capable of functioning as a symbol in so far as the connection between the sign and its object may change with the times. This conclusion also takes account of the fruitful idea that the Peircean categories are best viewed as points on a continuum, which Peirce himself emphasized, as I have explained above. Owing to

its social character, the sign '**position of stress**' seems to be in the middle of the evolutionary process Raimo Anttila mentions (1980: 278) in the following passage:

> Recent sociolinguistics has made it completely clear that sound change results when variation is socially **encoded**, that is, when a particular pronunciation feature is assigned **social meaning.** The sound then becomes a social **index** (a pragmatic index, pertaining to the speakers) of a class or a region, and its fate is tied to the vicissitudes of that class or region (emphasis my own).

From a somewhat radical standpoint the position of stress can also be regarded as a symbol with an important indexical component, but what really matters is that it is a sign with a manifest social meaning, whichever way it is analysed.

5. THE NON-SEMIOTIC LOCATION OF STRESS

It must be noted that the position of stress in most English words is **not a sign** at all, not even in the same way as it is in the case of dispute. These are all instances in which the position of stress is devoid of meaning, and above all of social meaning, although they have not got one single stress pattern. In the introduction to the fourteenth edition of *Everyman's Pronouncing Dictionary,* Professor Gimson explains (*EPD* 1988 [1977]: xxii-xxiii) that

> It frequently happens that words carrying secondary and primary stress (especially compound adjectives) have a stress pattern in the citation or predicative forms which changes when used attributively or within the general stress pattern of the context. Thus, 'afternoon' has the citation pattern /ˌ- - ˈ- / which changes to /ˈ- - - / when followed by stressed 'tea'; similarly, 'good-looking' /ˌ- ˈ- - / may change to /ˈ- ˌ- - / when followed by stressed 'man'.

In both afternoon tea and good-looking man it is possible to observe how the primary stress is thrown back to the syllable carrying secondary stress in isolation (i.e. the citation form) because, in connected speech (i.e. in an utterance), a strong accent follows closely. Such stress-shifting is meant to bring about articulatory ease, and takes

place naturally. This is also the case of e.g. Friday afternoon, where the potential pitch-prominent secondary stress may be reduced to one of quality, quantity, or rhythm (/'- - ,- - `-/), without pitch-prominence, since a strongly accented syllable closely precedes (cf Gimson 1980: 285).

In all of the above examples the position of stress that differs from that of the citation form of the word in question cannot be utilized by a speaker to identify another speaker as the member of a particular social group within the community, or his probable geographical provenance, or his status, occupation, and so forth. In other words, in those utterances the position of stress does not function as an index, let alone as a symbol.

Similarly, when an English person hears either /ˌdaɪ'dʒest/ or /dɪ'dʒest/, in contrast with /'daɪˌdʒest/, he might utilize the position of the (primary) stress in the word as an indication that it functions as a verb in its utterance, although it is more likely that co-textual lexicogrammatical factors help him to determine the function of the word (cf Kreidler 1989: 197). At any rate, in the case of words like digest (e.g. transfer, proceeds, refuse, etc), which have two stress patterns (noun/adjective vs verb), the position of stress may be considered to be a **weak sign,** or a **weak index,** of the class of word or grammatical function. But what is clear is that in those words the position of stress is a particular pronunciation feature which does not encode any social meaning, the only meaning they can sometimes convey being one of a weak indexical nature related to the grammatical function of the word.

CONCLUSIONS

All things considered, I think that it is possible to establish a scale of **degrees of signification** concerning the position of stress as a sign in various sets of words. The higher the degree, the more significant the meaning conveyed by the sign will be. The lowest tier would be occupied by non-signs, occurrences of stress due to stress-shift that do not engage the process of **semiosis,** and consequently make it impossible for the position of stress to be meaningful and function as a sign. For instance, THICK-set hair[4] compared with thick-SET (citation form) or his hair is thick-SET (predicative use). The next tier

would be occupied by pairs of words such as SEGment and (to) segMENT, in which the position of stress is a weak index in the sense that it only points to the class of words (a grammatical function) to which the bigger sign (e.g. SEGMENT) that contains the smaller one (e.g. /'seg/) belongs. A third tier would be occupied by cases of location of stress like those of Trafalgar as the present Lord Nelson pronounces it; piano as pronounced by British, professional musicians; dispute with the stress pattern preferred by those engaged in industrial strikes in Britain; decorous with the stress pattern often used by British, elderly people; and garage in its American pronunciation (/gə'ra:ʒ/). According to the subclassification of indexical signs adopted by Lyons (1977: 108), the position of stress in Trafalgar above would be an **individual-identifying index** or **indexical feature**; the rest of occurrences of stress mentioned above would be instances, respectively, of **occupational, status, group** (here 'being of a certain age'), and **regional** indices. The higher the number of potential 'dynamic objects' the different signs (locations of stress) can have, the more capable of functioning as a symbol each indexical feature will be, since the connection between sign and object is increasingly diffuse, and thus tends to become a regularity rather than an idiosyncratic aspect. Finally, the last tier would be occupied by words like directly, d(D)omett (- '-, a material; '- -, a surname), and v(V)andyke ('- -, a hue typical of ,- '-, name of artist or picture by him), which differ from dispute in that the position of stress produces **two or more different symbols.** For example, /'drekll/ (as a pronunciation of directly) is 'frequent in the sense of "at once", and still more frequent in the sense of "as soon as"' (*EPD* 1988 [1977]: 139), whereas the stress pattern /- '- -/ (e.g. /dI'rektll/) is the one generally used to express the sense 'in a straight manner'. In this case, the location of stress (a sign) in combination with other phonetic features (other signs) may differentiate homonymous symbols from one another, but it is devoid of social meaning, which thus seems to be associated with locations of stress which are primarily indices rather than with stress positions that give rise to symbols. Note that any position of stress may stop being meaningful and hence a sign if it is due to a case of stress shift resulting from the proximity of a strongly stressed syllable (*see above*). Yet, as this usually entails the existence of a syllable carrying secondary stress, the sign '**location of stress**' is not likely to be neutralized in those words that show different stress patterns of the type of dispute.

I should like to use my last words to point out that a semiotic approach to such phenomena as those discussed above will be useful

and fruitful only if it helps those who are faced with the necessity of learning English or studying the language in depth to comprehend the meaning and operation of apparently innocent aspects of the pronunciation of English like the position of stress in a significant number of words. In my own view, a semiotic analysis of such phenomena may supplement and perhaps surpass their conventional or traditional, phonetic and sociolinguistic explanation. John Lyons does not conceal the fact that 'features of [the above] kind have long been studied by linguists; and they are frequently recognized within a language-community as falling within the scope of such terms as "accent", "dialect", "jargon", in their everyday, pre-theoretical sense' (1977: 108). Nonetheless, it is Semiotics or linguistic approaches with a semiotic ambience, as it were, that may succeed in bridging the gap between the everyday, pre-theoretical knowledge most speakers have of certain phonetic mechanisms, and the far-reaching effects a thorough scientific analysis of them may produce, as well as bringing closer linguistic disciplines (Phonetics, Sociolinguistics, Semantics) which are concerned with signs, but are not always willing to acknowledge the fact that *their* signs are closer to one another than they admit.

NOTES

1. A similar example is the different stress patterns used to pronounce the well-known surname **Methuen** (/'meθjuIn/) and the name of the American town **Methuen** (/mI'θjuIn/).
2. The EPD indicates (1988 [1977]: 251) that the pronunciation /'aIdIə/ for the noun IDEA is also sometimes heard, especially when a stress immediately follows, although the commoner pronunciation is /aI'dIə/. When attributive, the adjectives IDEAL and, occasionally, DIRECT may undergo a similar stress shift.
3. This difficulty in viewing the position of stress as an **Index** may be attributed to the way in which Peirce used the term himself. Lyons points out that 'None of Peirce's followers appears to have used the terms index*, indexical* and indicate* in as general a sense as he did' (1977: 106).
4. Capital letters stand for 'stressed syllable' or for 'syllable carrying primary stress'. If required, secondary stress will be represented by underlining the appropriate syllable.

REFERENCES

Abercrombie, David. 1967. *Elements of General Phonetics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Anttila, Raimo. 1980. "Language and the Semiotics of Perception" in I. Rauch and G.F. Carr, eds. *The Signifying Animal: The Grammar of Language and Experience*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bradford, Barbara. 1988. *Intonation in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eco, Umberto. 1987. "The Influence of Roman Jakobson on the Development of Semiotics" in Martin Krampen et al, eds. *Classics of Semiotics*. New York: Plenum Press.

Everyman's ENGLISH PRONOUNCING DICTIONARY. 1977 (14th edition), reprinted with revisions and Supplement by Susan Ramsaran, 1988. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd.

Garvin, Paul L. 1981. "Structuralism, Esthetics and Semiotics" in W. Steiner, ed. *Image and Code*. Michigan: Ann Arbor.

Gimson, A.C. 1980. *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*. London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.

Halliday, M. A. K. 1978. *Language as social semiotic: the social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.

Hughes, Arthur and Peter Trudgill. 1987. *English Accents and Dialects: An Introduction to Social and Regional Varieties of British English*. London: Edward Arnold (a division of Hodder & Stoughton).

Krampen, Martin. 1987. "Ferdinand de Saussure and the Development of Semiology" in Martin Krampen et al, eds. 1987. *Classics of Semiotics*. New York: Plenum Press.

Kreidler, Charles W. 1989. *The Pronunciation of English. A Course Book in Phonology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Lyons, John. 1977. *Semantics*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oehler, Klaus. 1987. "An Outline of Peirce's Semiotics" in Martin Krampen et al, eds. 1987. *Classics of Semiotics*. New York: Plenum Press.

Peirce, Charles S. (Buchler, J., ed.). 1955. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.

Rey, Alain. 1978. "Communication vs. Semiosis: Two Conceptions of Semiotics" in Thomas Sebeok, ed. *Sight, Sound, and Sense*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson. 1986. *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.