

A Line of the Times: *front line*, *front line* or *frontline*?

by Henry Daniels

Increasingly frequently, be it in speech or writing, one comes across what, in my experience, used to be universally known as the front line – where the bold type indicates that the primary (= main) stress falls on the second element – referred to as the front line, with the primary stress shifting onto the first element. The recent tendency to write frontline as a single word confirms and exacerbates what appears to be a confusion in form and meaning. The purpose of this short article is to search for possible explanations for this change-in-progress, and to remind WFA members that in following the trend, without due regard to meaning, they may well be saying something they don't actually intend to say.

Formations

When, as is traditional, the expression is pronounced with the primary stress on the second element, the speaker is using a lexicalised (ie established and recognised) compound of the pattern Adjective + Noun (Adj + N). Other compounds formed according to the same pattern include *front door*; *front garden*; *front teeth*; *back door*; *back garden*; *back teeth*. Similarly, we say *Black Watch*; *first rate*; *high tech*; *last post*; *late night* and *Western Front*.

Notice that compounds of this type focus on the second element, which is in some way specified, by the first, but, importantly, without its fundamental meaning being modified.

In contrast to the Adj + N compounds, there are many different sub-varieties of the basic Noun + Noun (N + N) pattern. The particular N + N sub-variety which concerns us here is that illustrated by *airline*; *bread line*; *horse line*; *neckline*; *timeline*; *tramline*, in which the focus of attention is on the first element, which receives the primary stress, hence the familiar *support trench*; *reserve trench*; *communication trench*; *duckboard*, all modelled on the same pattern. Note that in these formations the meaning of *line* is modified as a function of the meaning of whatever first element it is coupled with. If we stress *front line* on the first element: *front line*, then we are assimilating the compound to the N+N pattern, by making *front* a noun, and focusing on it rather than on *line*. Here it should be pointed out that the expression *the front*, as figuring in wartime usage, did not refer to a single line, but to the whole eight or ten mile wide swathe of lines, communication trenches, switches, breastworks, tracks, wire entanglements and open terrain on either side of, and including, no man's land. Thus to make a N + N compound *front line* or *frontline* is to produce a compound which is at best unclear and at worst meaningless. Are we to understand by it 'the line of the front' (cf. *timeline* 'the line of, or representing, time')? In this case, to say *front* would be perfectly adequate: we don't need to add *line*. Or are we to understand it as meaning 'the line set up for the accommodation of the front'? (cf. *horse line*, *tramline*). This would be nonsense.

Stress shifters

To come back to traditional usage, the form *front line* means 'the fire-trench, support and reserve trenches facing the enemy's front fire-trench', and is opposed, on either side of no

man's land, to *second line* (or *position*) and *third line* (or *position*), which are also Adj + N compounds.

The story doesn't end there, because we should like to know where, what is rapidly emerging as a misappropriation of language, has come from. In order to look into this question, we need first to make a general observation about English prosody. It is that English tends to avoid the juxtaposition of two strongly-stressed syllables, and prefers to separate them with weak syllables whenever possible. One way of doing this is to shift the stress in a potential line-up such as **first rate team* (where the asterisk indicates non-occurrence or dubious acceptability), to *first rate team*, whereby the first element of the original compound steals the stress from the second, which is called upon to act as a weakly-stressed buffer between the adjective and the final noun. By virtue of this general tendency of English prosody, the mechanically generated **front line troops* undergoes stress-shift to produce *front line troops*, cf. **late night train* and **Black Watch tartan* shifted to *late night train* and *Black Watch tartan* respectively. So here we have a context, and a frequently occurring one at that, where the Adj + N compound *front line*, when functioning as a prefabricated pre-modifier of a third element, assumes the stress-pattern *front line X*, thus sounding for all the world like a N+N such as *airline* or *neckline*. Frequently heard collocations such as *front line soldier*; *front line casualty*; *front line officer*, all of which undergo a necessary stress-shift, reinforce the permanent misanalysis of *front line* as a regularly stressed N+N compound of the same pattern as *hemline* or *poverty line*. However, collocations such as *front line fatigue*; *front line experience*; *front line reminiscences*, in which there are in any case one or two weak syllables separating *line* from the next strongly-stressed syllable, do not trigger the stress-shift mechanism. Indeed, it is the fact that hypothetical **front line fatigue* or **front line experience* sound peculiar, plus the well-established prosody of familiar expressions such as *the German front line*; *The Old Front Line* and '[...] within three days we found ourselves in the front line' that provide convincing evidence that we are dealing with a normal, regularly stressed underlying Adj. + N compound, which, albeit on occasion, undergoes stress shift. Speakers who, regardless of context, stress it *front line* or writers who have it in a single word *frontline* appear to be over-generalising the stress-shift tendency, and in doing so, are assigning it to the wrong class of compound, resulting in confusion.

Misanalysis

Let's be fair. There are at least three other possible reasons for this misanalysis, one general, and two particular. The general reason is that of contrastivity. Although the rule-generated and indeed traditional pattern is, for the reasons explained above *front line*, an inverted stress-pattern automatically appears when the expression is explicitly or implicitly contrasted with another having related meaning. Thus, we would get '[...] the enemy withdrew from his *front line* to his *second line* some 1,000 yards to the rear.' Just as *Western*

Front and *Eastern Front* (cf. the English title of E. M. Remarque's novel *All Quiet on The Western Front*) would undergo the same inversion in '[...] which enabled the Germans to transfer the necessary divisions from the *Eastern Front* to the *Western Front*'. Such instances of contrastive stress provide frequent opportunities for the unwary to slip off the duckboards into the mud(dle) of misanalysis. The second, more particular, factor is that of stress-inversion due to the specialised (ie non-literal) meaning of a small group of Adj + N compounds, of which *blackbird*; *bluestocking*; *shortfall*; *tightrope* are well-known members. Could it be that some people pronounce and write *frontline*, by analogy with these atypical formations? The tendency could simply be a fashion promoted by the media, or it could be the sign of a pseudo-scientific dressing-up of an expression which in fact has a perfectly literal, non-specialised meaning. The tendency to write it as a single word would point to this. The third factor comes perhaps from the upsurge in battlefield tourism and the increase in Great War archaeology over the last twenty years. Both activities feature, *inter alia*, the (I suspect) recent N + N compound *trench-line*, from which it is only a short – if erroneous – hop to a supposedly analogous **frontline*.

Quibbling

The democratisation of study in all fields, brought about by the online availability of documents which had hitherto been accessible only to a tiny minority of professionals, has tended to blur the distinction between precise specialist terminology and much looser and shifting everyday vocabulary. The exponential increase in popular awareness and interest in the Great War, as the centenary approaches, can only be seen as a good thing. Yet, for the purposes of precise communication and for reasons of deontology, it remains as important as ever to preserve the memory of the conflict in terms as faithful in form and meaning as possible to those used by the generation who endured it, and not to obscure it with passing fashions or inaccuracy.

This may all appear to be a linguist's quibbling. Languages are perpetually evolving, and no-one, however determined, has ever managed stop this from happening. Perhaps we are all destined to say and write *frontline* instead of *front line* simply because this is the way things are going, so that the most a linguist can do is observe the changes and attempt to account for them. However, it has been my (heartening and exciting) experience that ways forward in knowledge and debate present themselves when specialists of apparently unrelated disciplines get together. Linguists, historians, anthropologists and archaeologists all have things to learn from one another in terms of knowledge and procedure. Accordingly, I hope these linguist's musings will be of some use to readers of *Stand To!*, whatever their speciality.

A final word: if you have read this piece from the *topline* to the *bottomline* without getting stressed out or falling asleep, but still remain unconvinced, let it soak in and give it a *thinkabout* when you come out of the line.