

# ABC LANGUAGE REPORT – OCTOBER 2015



## Dozens of New Zealand citizens face deportation over crimes committed in Australia on RN Breakfast

with Fran Kelly on RN

Monday 19th October

MP3



Welcome to the ABC Language Report for the month of October.

As you read on, you will be *charged with* willful misuse of the word *allegedly*, learn when to use *number of* vs *amount of*, be amazed by the wonderful world of *initial-stress-derived nouns* and learn [an entirely new word](#).

But for now, a cautionary tale! Cast your eyes left, to the soothing visage of RN Breakfast presenter Fran Kelly.

And, if you can, I'd implore you to cast your eyes downward to the title text found in this section of [the ABC radio player for iOS](#).

*Dozens of New Zealand citizens face deportation over crimes committed in Australia on RN Breakfast*

The dangling prepositional phrase at the very end of that sentence—"on RN Breakfast"—makes it appear as though these dozens of New Zealand citizens committed their crimes while simultaneously being guests on Radio National's flagship current affairs program.

One wonders: how did they all fit in the studio?

The newsletter comes in three parts this month, and a refresher:

**Strongly Recommended** – is the sterner stuff. These are lexical items or pronunciation woes that have passed intense scrutiny and discussion, and carry

recommendations from ABC Language accordingly.

**For Your Consideration** – for ideas useful to keep in mind in reporting, but not urgent enough to warrant a recommendation.

**Input Appreciated** – issues that flummoxed the Language Committee that we'd like your help on.

There is no cliché this month — perhaps you would like to [suggest one](#)?

Anything else you've noticed or picked up, I am reachable at [webb.tiger@abc.net.au](mailto:webb.tiger@abc.net.au).

Tiger Webb

Researcher, ABC Language

## NUMBERS IN ACTION

At a recent Friends of the ABC meeting in Perth, a Friend expressed concern about how the ABC's command of English is slipping.

The example given was 'use of the word *amount* when the proper English is *number*.'

This distinction is count vs mass nouns. *Number* is used for count nouns, *amount* is used for mass nouns.

Consider this incorrect copy, from [News online](#):

*In north-west New South Wales the amount of all agribusiness lenders doubled, from 12 to 25.*

"Agribusiness lenders" is countable, so the correct word here would be *number*.

It is **strongly recommended** that *number* should be used when referring to countables, and *amount* be used when referring to mass nouns. Remember: a *number* of cows produce an *amount* of methane gas.

## REMEMBER TO USE THE SCOSE DATABASE

Eyebrows were raised at this iNews caption.

*Victorian Police say they executed warrants on a Wombarra property this morning in conjunction with the Australian Federal Police as part of taskforce Heracles huh-RACK-lees*

An increasing trend in news copy is for complex (or deceptively simple) proper nouns to be included without a pronunciation guideline.

This author's guidance is incorrect. According to the SCOSE database, Heracles (both the taskforce and the Homeric hero) would be pronounced HE-ruh-kleez.

It is **strongly recommended** that you check the SCOSE database before sallying forth on your lonesome.

## ALLEGEDLY

We turn now to the law, and allegations.

An allegation is, put simply, a fancy legal way of saying "someone else has said this, we are just reporting it".

One common mistake to watch out for, from [News Online](#):

*Broken Hill woman charged with murder over alleged stabbing outside hospital*

In this sentence, "charged with" and "alleged" are doing the same job: reporting on an unverified declaration made before the courts. Trim the fat, and we are left with:

*Broken Hill woman charged with murder over hospital stabbing*

One other job "alleged" does for us in sentences is make it clear to the reader which facts are in dispute and which are not. Take a look at [this headline](#):

*Michael McCabe killing: Fourth man in court over alleged north Queensland bashing murder*

What are the facts that are alleged, ie, those in dispute? Not that McCabe was murdered, and not the physical location of the "bashing murder" – North Queensland or otherwise.

The Committee wishes to reiterate that inserting the word allegedly into copy is not, in legal terms, a get out of jail free card.

It is **strongly recommended** that due care be taken with the term to stop its overuse and misuse.

## APPROXIMATIONS

From a complainant:

*What is it with the news industry's fascination with approximation? The 7pm news says "the new Defence Minister Marise Payne has been in Parliament for nearly 20 years." What is about 18 years that your news department thinks its listeners/viewers can't handle?*

The ABC is trusted in large part because it is accurate. With this in mind, it is **recommended** that accuracy should always be a priority and approximation is to be avoided.

Use your noggin: exact figures will not be of paramount importance for every story.

Take the example of [this coverage](#) of a Richmond football victory. You would never say Richmond won by "about 30 points" (the score is an important figure) but you might say the crowd numbers (a less important figure for stories where attendance is not the focus) were "over 80,000-strong".

## NEOLOGISM

From an online complainant:

*During the sports section of the news bulletin, North Melbourne's effort against West Coast was referred to as "galliant".*

Many, many complaints about this issue.

Presumably the newsreader meant gallant or valiant – this sort of thing is understandable in unscripted speech, but unacceptable in scripted bulletins.

It is **recommended** that only actual words be used in reportage, where possible.

## FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

### THE REFORMATION

A recent economic summit has the word *reform* on everyone's mind.

From [News online](#):

*Prime Minister's reform summit constructive but participants unable to give details of potential policies*

As the News style guide states, *reform* is a term that has connotations of positivity.

As a noun, *reform* means "the improvement or amendment of what is wrong." As a verb, it takes the meaning to "improve by alteration, substitution, abolition."

*Reform* is a useful word, although it is best if used critically: given its positive connotations, special care should be taken when reporting on policy.



## STRESSORS

It's a stressful time of the year, though not in the way you might think. October has seen many complaints about stress in words. Here is one:

*Why is it some of the national news readers do not understand the word 'pro' and pronounce words different to the rest of normal Australians..*

*For example words such as; progress are read 'prog ress' instead of 'pro gress', project are read 'prod ject' instead of 'pro ject'.*

There are nouns in English sometimes referred to as *initial-stress-derived nouns*, whose meaning and function change with stress (and also vowel length).

One hint that you may be in murky waters is that commonly, initial-stress-derived-nouns are two-syllable words with a Latin prefix such as *re-* or *con-*, or as our listener has picked up, *pro-*.

An incomplete and up-for-revision list is included here.

Noun	Pronunciation	Verb	Pronunciation
an object	OB-jekt	to object	uhb-JEKT
the protest	PROH-test	to protest	pruh-TEST
a decrease	DEE-krees	to decrease	duh-KREES
an insult	IN-sult	to insult	in-SULT
no progress	PROH-gres	to progress	pruh-GRES
a project	PROH-jekt	to project	pruh-JEKT
a compress	KOM-pres	to compress	kuhm-PRES
a permit	PUR-mit	to permit	puh-MIT
the transfer	TRANS-fur	to transfer	trans-FUR

Incorrect pronunciation of words of this type can affect the clarity of reportage.

If in doubt, a reminder that [the Macquarie Dictionary](#) will usually contain both pronunciations and is available to all ABC staff members through the intranet.

## INPUT APPRECIATED

### HONE IN ON VS HOME IN ON

From [the Science Show, on RN](#):

*Honing in on genetic causes of psychiatric disorders*

This sparked the question from our audience: is it *hone in on*, or *home in on*?

To "home in" is certainly older – its origins are in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with pigeons and hunting. The first recorded usage of *hone in on* (or similar) is from 1965.

Razors are honed, missiles (like pigeons) are homing. Are both valid, expressing different metaphors applicable to different situations? Or is one incredibly inaccurate, and should be kicked Right Out?

The ABC Language Committee would love to discuss this further. All thoughts to [webb.tiger@abc.net.au](mailto:webb.tiger@abc.net.au).