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Louis Foley
Babson Institute

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UP WITH THE SPELLDOWN!

Louis Foley

Not long ago there appeared in the newspapers an Associated Press photograph of a happily smiling boy holding in front of him a huge loving-cup. It was a pleasing picture because it looked genuine. The boy was straightforwardly posing to be photographed, not taking part in what Al Smith called "baloney," a picture ostensibly showing the actual bestowal of an award, but artificially posed afterward, with people looking a little foolish because this was not the real thing, and most people are not good actors.

It was Robert A. Wake of Houston, who had just become champion speller of the United States by winning the 39th annual National Spelling Bee in Washington. He had come out on top by spelling "sachem" and "ratoon." The latter he admitted that he had guessed, never having heard of the word—any more than most of us ever did.*

The idea of a "spelling-bee," or what used to be called a "spell-down," does not seem to be anywhere near as popular as it once was. Probably many modern educators would scorn it as hopelessly old-fashioned. It does, however, involve some principles which we might do well to take very seriously. Like athletic games, it shows how a contest can lead people to develop skills to a high point, by supplying *motivation*. Much more than apparent natural aptitude (which is hard to find out about anyhow), motivation or the lack of it is what determines success or failure of students on any level of their educational career. Once a sufficiently ardent desire is awakened, the mere difficulty of learning can make it even more "fun."

It shows that children *can* learn spelling if they just work at it. Childhood is the time to learn it. As someone well said long ago, correct spelling is not a virtue, only a necessity. There is something pathetic about a grown person having to give any conscious thought to spelling except once in a long while—as may happen to any of us about some item of common knowledge which for the moment eludes us.

All the basic aspects of language, spoken or written, have to be absorbed by continually meeting them, hearing or seeing them clearly, using them again and again until they are thoroughly built into our daily living. This means *drill*, which may be had to a large extent unconsciously, but not enough without formal training. Now "drill," it seems, is a bad word for some people. They might call it "parrot

* e.g., *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 1965, p. 1.

learning.” But the only thing wrong with a parrot’s learning words is that he doesn’t know what they mean. And parrots have nothing to do with spelling.

Of course mere spelling is not an end in itself. Unless a person has something important or interesting to write, how he might spell is of little consequence. It would hardly be possible, however, for anyone to become unhesitatingly dependable for the spelling of all sorts of words without becoming thoroughly aware of the natural relationships among them and among the ideas for which they stand. The physical forms have instant meaning for him; he recognizes easily *why* words are spelled as they are. There always is a reason, even though in some cases it may not seem so good as it once did. The simple but profound and far-reaching fact about people who “can’t spell” is that they do not really know the words. Along with whatever else it demonstrates, the achievements of children in spelling contests appear to indicate that our much-maligned English spelling is not such an obstacle in education as would-be reformers take it to be. It just isn’t “all that hard.”

Spelling “phonetically” has meant strange things to some people. An amusing example is the title of a watercolor view of Harvard College by Parson Jonathan Fisher, who was graduated from that institution in 1792. In what has been spoken of as his “phonetic spelling,” he labeled the picture “Harvurd Hal.”

Anyone with a true feeling for the ways of English spelling should know that *Hal*, a common nickname for Harold (or even for Henry as in “Bluff King Hal”), is no more pronounced like *hall* than “pal” sounds like *pall*. It is a subtle but real part of our system that doubling a *final* consonant is different from doubling a medial one! And as for “Harvurd,” if the artist had in mind the local pronunciation, and wished to be genuinely phonetic, he might better have simply omitted both *r*’s.

Our spelling is and must be governed, however, by other considerations as well as by mere phonetics. Often it is easily explained by “family” reasons. Thus the second “a” of Harvard comes out clearly in the adjective *Harvardian*, with the shift of accent. Similarly the word *grammar*, which not infrequently gets misspelled “grammer,” and which phonetically could as well be written *grammor*, *grammir*, *grammur*, or *gramr*, brings out its latent second *a* in *grammatical* or *grammarian*.

Recently I read a high-school graduate’s composition which referred repeatedly to the “Peace Core.” One may wonder if he

associates it with the “hard core” of certain organizations. Certainly he must not be a very attentive reader, for the established spelling has appeared often enough in public print. Of course our word *corps*, adopted long ago from French, owes its “p” to the 16th- and 17th-century scholarly fad of inserting “etymological letters” into words as reminders of their ancient ancestors, in this case the Latin *corpus* (body), a corruption of which gives us “corpse.” Such tinkering was not intended to affect the pronunciation, and seldom did.

When the “etymological” *p* was inserted into the French word *temps* (formerly *tems*) as a reminder of Latin *tempus*, it had no effect upon the sound, any more than the *b* put into our *debt* and *doubt* (from French *dette* and *doute*) to recall their remote Latin ancestors. Yet the *p* which is silent in *temps* comes into play in all words derived from it, which we have adopted and anglicized as *temporal*, *temporary*, *temperature*, and others. So the *p* in *corps* fits it into the “family” pattern of *corporal*, *corporate*, *corporation*, or *corporeal*.

Sometimes the bookish people who revamped various common words, several centuries ago, guessed wrong as to their derivation, as in putting the *d* in *admiral*, from French *amiral*. In some cases the alteration seems entirely pedantic, as in giving the *l* to *salmon* (from French *saumon*) in honor of Latin *salmo*—an “l” which has never been pronounced except by foreigners who had learned the word by reading without ever hearing it. It is easy to make fun of such examples, or even worse ones that may be found, but all such taken together form no very important part of our language, and few of them indeed will be found among the words most commonly misspelled. Now and then, after all, the pedantic alteration of words may have rendered some useful service by making it easier to associate words of related origins, to appreciate fundamental meanings, and thus to master vocabulary in ways hardly possible without such understanding.

Recently an educator spoke of “how a native-born illiterate forms the plurals of [*sic*] *cats*, *dogs*, and *horses*.” With apparent scorn he referred to the books “such as say, ‘Many plurals are formed by adding -s or -es,’ ” for which he has no use. “This is the sort of nonsense which has been foisted on people for generations. Our friend, the illiterate, gets on just fine, and he has no idea of what an *s* is.”**

Now the “plurals” which he cited have long been familiar to anyone who has looked into phonetics as applied to English. They are the classic examples to show what appear as three distinct methods

** John F. Gummere, headmaster of the William Penn Charter School, in *CBS Bulletin*, June 1966, p. 9.

of pluralization when one considers the words purely from the point of view of *phonetics*. The “books” which he despises, however, were not speaking from that point of view, and did not need to do so.

If the illiterate had “no idea of what an *s* is,” he would be even less likely to know the much less used letter *z*. The practical fact is that the *-s* or *-es* ending is simply a flexible visual indication of the plural. The pronunciation takes care of itself as it has to do. After the voiced consonant *g* of *dog*, for instance, the voiceless quality of *s* is impossible, just as the “*z*” sound would be after the voiceless *t* of *cat* or the *k* in *duck*. The “*z*” value of a final *s* is a common phenomenon, not only in plurals but in verb forms such as *is*, *has*, *does*, *goes*, et cetera, and so with a single *s* between vowels as in *rose*. Having seen a great deal of “illiterate” writing, I do not believe I ever saw *cats*, *dogs*, or *horses* misspelled. That is just not the sort of mistake made by a person sufficiently literate to be unself-consciously writing *at all*.

During the late nineteenth century there was a great vogue of the humorous device of misspelling to represent crude pronunciation of uncultivated people. What seems not to have been thought of was that those same people, if they had occasion to *write*, would not have been likely to misspell the common words in question, however they might distort them in actual speech.

In that kind of “fun” writing, it was standard practice to write *was* as “wuz.” This is not only something which the uneducated person would not think of doing; it is not even a criterion of pronunciation. Most of the time, in everyone’s speech, *was* is an unaccented syllable, a mere connective; it loses all vowel value and subsides into a mere “wz.” Only when it becomes emphatic does it have its full theoretical form: “That’s what it really *was*.”

Here we touch upon what seems the most profound peculiarity of the English language as compared to any other. That is the hectic galloping manner of our speech, with heavy stress on accented syllables and relative or even complete neglect of all others. As our words are actually spoken, the “vowels” of unaccented syllables constantly tend to subside into a mere “uh,” and may disappear entirely. Our loose syllabication permits the grabbing off with an initial syllable of a consonant which logically introduces the following one. The more careless speech is, the more completely this distortion operates, until words (and whole phrases) are telescoped into jumbled shapes. How far this process can go can be seen clearly in such simple examples as “par” for *power*, “wah-r” for *water*, or “pairnts” for *parents*.

With our habitual playing-down of unaccented syllables, with their “vowels” losing all vowel quality, it is easy to see why many words are often misspelled. *Phonetically*, it would make no difference what “vowel” appeared in the unaccented syllable. A good example is *separate*, which has long been a favorite pitfall in spelling contests. We have noticed how, in the case of *grammar*, the reason for the second “a” comes out clearly in related words where the accent shifts. For *separate* there is no such reference, for that fatal second syllable remains obscure throughout the “family”—*separable*, *separation*, *separatist*.

Our allegedly “cockeyed” spelling does, however, have a real and reasonably reliable *system*, in which the accent plays an important part. Doubling or not doubling the final consonant of an *accented* syllable marks the quality of the preceding vowel, one way or another. We see how it works by comparing *cured* and *occurred*, *hoping* and *hopping*, *scraping* and *scrapping*, *preferred* and *persevered*. When a syllable is *not* accented, there is no reason for doubling: *interred* but *entered*, *excelled* but *canceled*, *fitted* but *benefited*, *shipped* but *worshiped*, *propelled* but *traveler*.

Unawareness of this well-established system accounts for a very large part of the most common misspellings by people using words they *think* they “know.” When a person misspells such a word as *anthropomorphic* or *psychotherapeutics* or *polygonaceous*, the probable reason is that he has no familiarity with the realm of thought to which it belongs. But the myriads of technical terms, continually being augmented by the creation of new ones, are no problem for the specialists who need and use them, and have little to do with the characteristic errors of people who spell badly.

No doubt the importance of correct spelling can be exaggerated, but rightly or wrongly it is commonly taken as a criterion of a person’s education. And misspelled words can be very revealing as to a writer’s background. At any rate, a youngster who has acquired a built-in dependability in spelling will have formed habits of accuracy which may well carry over into more important things. Instead of drifting with the tide of happy-go-sloppy speech and writing which continually besets us, he will have had a basic part of the preparation for belonging to the select company of those who truly *own* their “own” language, as well as for learning other languages, as it is becoming increasingly necessary to do in our modern world.

Louis Foley is a frequent contributor to *Reading Horizons*. He is Professor Emeritus of English at Babson Institute, Massachusetts, and a former member of the faculty of Western Michigan University.