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IT DOESN'T LOOK RIGHT

Louis Foley

Sometimes a little acquaintance with a very different language can give us a new or deeper insight into the nature of our own.

For us of the western world, no kind of writing could seem more “foreign” than the complicated characters of Chinese. These are largely used also in Japanese and Korean with similar meaning though the *words* they suggest may be quite different. These ideograms represent a conception of written communication which those of us who have not grown up with it can probably never completely understand.

We recognize, of course, that Chinese writing is truly a form of art, and we may enjoy the “atmosphere” created by its use as decoration even though we are utterly unable to decipher it. What we do not appreciate is the relationship of this artistic quality to the *meaning* as it is intended and understood. “Any cultivated Oriental reader,” says a knowledgeable commentator, “appraises writing for its effect on the eye as well as as the ear.”¹

The reviewer from whom we have just quoted was reporting an interview with the distinguished Japanese author, Yukio Mishima. In the course of the conversation, Mr. Mishima explained the several ways of writing which are used in Japanese.

“When there is a double way of reading Kanji [the Chinese character]—that is, when the character has two different meanings—we explain the meaning intended by an entry in the margin, in a script called Furi-kana. We also use Hira-gana, which is a phonetic script, and Kata-kana, which is always used for foreign words.” As he talked, he wrote “New York Times” in Kata-kana.

Mr. Mishima was asked what naturally seems to us an obvious question. Why could not Hira-gana, which fairly accurately reflects the pronunciation, be used for foreign words, instead of complicating things with a third script? His answer disposed of the matter with finality: “It doesn’t look right.”

Even more categorically he ruled out Romaji, or the writing of Japanese in our Roman alphabet. This is taught in the schools, and is used in telegrams, but it is often confusing because the context may not show which of many possible meanings a mere phonetic

1. Robert Trumbull, “How to Write in Japanese,” N. Y. Times Book Review, September 19, 1965.

spelling of a sound is intended to represent. "Romaji is awful," said Mr. Mishima. "The visual effect of a Chinese character is very important."

So we begin to see something of the sophistication of Oriental writing as compared to ours. Losing nothing of what is communicated by actual speech, it leads on into realms from which we could "translate" only crudely and clumsily. It is the product of an ancient civilization which long ago learned to combine intelligence with aesthetic sensitivity and achieved a high degree of finesse in human relationship. The complete acceptance of visual values in writing, which transcend the "meaning" of the mere *sounds* of spoken words, surely represents an advanced stage of culture, whether one considers it justifiably profitable or not. In reality, however, we ourselves have unconsciously moved a certain distance in the same direction. To be sure, we give little thought to making our handwriting artistic; the beautiful calligraphy which was cultivated a few generations ago has become literally a dead letter if there ever was one.

It is understandable that handwriting should come to seem to us less important than it used to be. Nowadays a far greater proportion of all that most people read is printed or at least typewritten as a matter of course. And anyone who has had any connection with publishing knows that much careful attention is given to the appearance of a printed page. New styles of type, for instance, are being continually invented, and changes of format designed, not so much to make the reading easier to understand as to make its physical form more pleasing to the eye. What seems to be not sufficiently realized, however, is the importance of the pictures produced by the way words are spelled. Though we do not face the fact so frankly as do the Orientals, in our language also a word needs to "look right."

Perhaps too much reliance on the "look-and-say" method of teaching reading has sometimes formed habits of noticing only the rough general contour of words rather than seeing them in sharp focus. On the other hand, a purely "phonetic" approach has its limitations. While of course our system of spelling was originally designed to portray the sounds of actual speech, as we have become more visual-minded often the written word has come to have a life of its own.

The way our attitude toward language has evolved into visual-mindedness is demonstrated, in a small way but unmistakably, by our care for alliteration. Since as far back as there was anything that could be called English, the language has had a peculiar passion for joining or keeping close together words having the same initial sound.

More and more, however, this has seemed to be thought of as a matter of *spelling*; the very term “alliteration”—very modern by comparison with the phenomenon itself—puts the emphasis upon *letters*. Merely to bring together words that begin with the same letter, we see words strained in meaning, or changed in spelling, or used though the all-important initial letter happens to be silent. Slogans and trade-names are continually furnishing new examples.

For a reader who is really literate in English, misspelled words are distracting because they do not look right. Commonly they show a lack of feeling for our well-established system. “Necessary” and “sucess,” for instance, reveal unawareness that before *e* or *i* the letter *c* necessarily has its “soft” sound, and that with a double *c* (or *g*) in such position the first is “hard.” In another kind of situation, “ocured” or “omited” betrays ignorance of the way doubling or not doubling the consonant, in an accented syllable, marks the quality of the preceding vowel.

Spelling does not have to be “unphonetic” in order to look wrong. “Misspelled” or “roomate” or “bookeeper” represents the real pronunciation well enough, but distorts the components which we need to see clearly for the appearance to be satisfactory. The fact that complete pronunciation of both elements is impossible is irrelevant, as it is in so common an example as *bus stop* or the *man’s socks* or *foreignness*. Various trade-names, coined in order to have proprietary rights in them, may represent perfectly the sounds of the words as spoken. Such is the case with *servicenter*, *realemon*, *scenicruiser*, or *handiapt* (candles). Yet they would surely be puzzling at first if pictures or physical surroundings were not there to illustrate them.

The term *bus* shows how irresponsible slang clipping of a word can get us into permanent trouble. There is no way to spell its plural that can look right. Words ending in *s* are regularly pluralized by adding —es, but “buses,” with its single *s* between two vowels, naturally looks as if it would rime with *refuses*. To be sure, when employed as nouns as *bus* is, some words can keep the “s” sound with only one *s*, as do *uses* and *abuses*, but the *u* keeps its “you” sound, and “buses” suggests the same pattern. Finally, to represent the intended sound by writing “busses” would be to employ the very different word *buss*, an old-fashioned name for a kiss. So there is no really satisfactory solution. Whereas the original word *omnibus*, pluralized as *omnibuses*, caused no trouble at all; *bus* was not the accented syllable, and its “u” hardly existed as a real vowel.

The quaint form “monies” as a plural for *money* has had wide-

spread currency, but it is displeasing because it violates a principle that goes all the way through our spelling. When a final *y* is preceded by a *vowel*, we simply add *s* as in *donkeys*, *monkeys*, *honeys*, or any number of other examples. Only when it follows a consonant does the *y* change to *i* and add *—es*. So deeply is this a part of our orthography that it applies independently of grammar, whether we have to do with noun plurals or with verb forms; it appears in *tries*, *carries*, *worries*, or *empties* as naturally as in *flies*, *bodies*, *enemies*, *opportunities*, *canaries*, *companies*, or *subsidies*. Conversely, not only *e* but any preceding vowel keeps the *y*: *buoys*, *Sundays*, *destroys*, *delays*, and so on.

There is sad evidence that even people professionally connected with education may have only the vaguest notions of how words *ought* to look. This word-blindness was demonstrated when great numbers of Texas schoolteachers followed the urging of their association and bombarded the state capitol with letters concerning a proposed across-the-board increase in wages. Besides grammatical atrocities, many of the letters displayed such unbelievable misspellings as *apprecate*, *appreicate*, *captoil*, *eleminate*, *percticler*, *equatable*, *ensifficent*, *proposial*, *purposal*.² With such deep and many-sided ignorance of language on the part of *teachers*, there must be great numbers of schoolchildren who have small chance of attaining literacy.

Several years ago at one of the larger universities, two doctors, whose duty it was to review the medical histories which entering students had to write about themselves, kept account of the distortions of spelling which they came upon continually. From the long list which they compiled, a few samples will suffice to show the generally illiterate quality. While many students described their health as “excellent,” some merely claimed to be in good “phisicul” and “mentle” condition. The many misspelled maladies included “bronicle namonia,” “rumatic feavor,” “asma,” “accute apendisidus,” “heart mummurs,” “stummach truble,” “toncilitas,” “goider,” “hemrodes,” and other “atact.” Among the causes of deaths in their families were “harding of the artarees,” “cansur,” “appleplexy,” “serebrul hemrige,” “sorosis of the liver,” “hartatact,” “tuberculosis,” and in a few cases “susidide.” Medical terminology was no more roughly handled, however, than common everyday vocabulary. Thus a student reported his “accedent” on an insurance-claim blank: “Riding a ‘hoarse’ when the saddle ‘sliped’ and I hit my ‘anle’ on anothers riders ‘sturip.’ ”

2. *Newsweek*, March 8, 1965; quoted in *C. B. E. Bulletin*, May 1965.

On this the doctor could not forbear commenting: “How lucky! He might have been ‘throne’ from the ‘hoarse,’ and ‘exrayse’ might have shown that he sustained a broken ‘elbo’ or ‘nee’ injury.”

As remarkable as anything else was the inability of many students to write the name of their religious persuasion. Every known faith got misspelled to some extent, but the widest possibilities of variation appeared in 7 ways of writing Catholic, 8 for Baptist and Episcopal, 9 for Lutheran, 20 for Presbyterian, 23 for Methodist, and no less than 53 ways of spelling Protestant.³

Yet such displays of illiteracy may seem somewhat less discouraging if we view them in perspective. When we examine old books in their original texts, not modernized as they are reprinted now, we begin to see English spelling in a somewhat different light. A good example in point is Governor William Bradford’s *History of Plimoth Plantation* (down to 1647). The forms of countless words as Bradford wrote them seem ridiculously misshapen; without their context many could hardly be recognized at all. For a few of the more striking specimens we may notice *shuch* (such), *peeeces*, *muskeeto*, *bewtie*, *gunes* and *bulits*, *capten*, *katle* (cattle), *particulers*, *peirst* (pierced), *hott climats*, *devisision*, *spetiall*, *pretious*, *brethern*, *ploted*, *hops* (hopes). Moreover, words shift from one spelling to another as we find them in different places. Every rule or principle of spelling in our system as we know it is violated in every conceivable way. Yet the author was by no means an uneducated man. Whenever he quotes Latin in legal discussion, or uses Biblical names, his spelling is quite orthodox.

The simple fact is that at that time people did not feel that the spelling of English particularly mattered. Not until more than a century later was there a real dictionary of our language, and “correct” forms were not yet established as such. Words did not *need* to “look right” at all. With respect to concern for its appearance, English writing was many centuries behind languages which through long tradition gave importance to the way a word looks on paper. So in spite of the corruptions which still take place, it is only realistic to recognize that we have come a long way.

While newspapers are often guilty of poor sentence-structure or misuse of words, they are generally remarkably accurate in spelling as we ordinarily think of it. Frequently, however, they go astray in the compounding of words, and produce forms which cannot “look right” to anyone sensitive to the nature of our language. When *teen-ager*

3. Ohio State University *Monthly*, March, 1958, p. 3.

(not a very apt coinage from any point of view) is written solidly as “teenager,” that form logically suggests a mispronunciation and a false relationship with words like *manager*, *tanager*, or *dowager*; a basic part of the word is made to look like a mere grammatical ending.

When a phrase which would naturally come *after* a noun is placed in front of it, we make the relationship immediately clear by hyphenating the phrase. So “the view over all” becomes “the over-all view.” Writing the prepositional phrase “overall,” as if it were a compound, distorts it into the sound and suggestion of an *overgarment*, like an *overcoat*, a quite different construction. Similarly *under way* is a prepositional phrase, with the accent falling naturally on the object *way*. Spelled “underway” it seems to fall into the pattern of *underwear*, *undershirt*, and the like, where the “under” was an adjective from the beginning and never was a preposition.

Recently there has come into wide use the term *drop-out* for a student who leaves school before finishing. When this is written as one word “dropout,” it goes counter to one of the clearest principles in our system of spelling. Here the *o* would sound as in *hope*; to retain the intended value the *p* would need to be doubled as in *hopping*. In all these examples it is easy to see definite reasons why the distorted form does not “look right.”

In the representation of compound words, both run-of-the-mine “usage” and the “authorities” of dictionaries and handbooks are utterly inconsistent. There are involved, however, some clear-cut principles which are not difficult to demonstrate. The question whether a given compound should be hyphenated or may be written solidly can be decided by how the result *looks*.

Many common compounds are written solidly with no objectionable effect whatever, as *baseball*, *football*, *churchman*, *salesman*, or *businessman*. No such happy visual impression can be produced by writing “cutthroat” for *cut-throat*, “flattop” for *flat-top*, or “filmmakers” for *film-makers*, as some newspapers have tried to do. A striking example of such indiscriminating unification was a reference to a woman journalist as “the top *newshen* in Washington.”⁴ In a modern novel, described on the cover as “an American masterpiece,” this abuse of form is carried to such lengths that it becomes continually noticeable as a quaint mannerism.⁵ While *waterline*, *guncrew*, *goodlooking*, or *palmtree*, for instance, may pass without offense, when we come to such items as *paperlittered*, *rawmaterials*, *sunsetpink*, *bananabunches*,

4. *Time*, April 21, 1952. p. 57.

5. *Nineteen-Nineteen*, by John Dos Passos, 1937.

machinegunfire, or *tobaccocolored*, this style pointlessly attracts attention. Some queer sort of other word is suggested by *gasstove*, *brasshats*, *messtable*, or *tomatocan*, and one might well be momentarily puzzled as to the meaning of such specimens as *hangerson*, *teathings*, *riversmell*, or *redrimmed* (eyes). There can be no doubt that hyphenation would have made all of these easier for anyone to read.

The various would-be reformers of our spelling who attain publicity from time to time appear to hold a conception of language which is too narrow and pedantic. In their zeal to have everything spelled “phonetically,” according to their notions of what that means, they seem not to have a very realistic idea of what the process of reading actually involves. For one thing, it is quite arbitrary to assume that being “phonetic” should always limit us to only *one* way of representing a given phoneme. Like other languages, English can very well represent the same sound in different ways. Instead of being a fault, *this is a great advantage*.

Basically, of course, writing represents speech, and should always carry with it as much as possible of the living quality of spoken words. It has, however, a different job to do. It has to make up for the absence of all manner of physical aids which we may not think of as “context” or even consciously recognize at all, but which are continually operating to make oral expression intelligible. Thus for instance the differentiation in spelling of our so-called homonyms puts the literate reader instantly in the proper ambiance, which may be worlds away from what would be suggested by another way of representing the same sound. It would be making a senseless fetish of “phonetics” to spell as if they were “the same word” such coincidences of pronunciation as *seen* and *scene*, *fare* and *fair*, *sail* and *sale*, *cymbal* and *symbol*, *right*, *write*, *wright*, and *rite*, or *sight*, *site*, and *cite*. The simplified spelling enthusiasts seem to have completely ignored the great help to the silent reader which is afforded by this flexibility in our spelling.

So within much narrower limits, and almost apologetically instead of wholeheartedly and understandingly, we have been relying upon devices somewhat like those that Oriental languages have depended upon traditionally. Chinese and Japanese are full of examples of words of similar sound—but different meaning—which are represented by entirely different written characters. Thus their writing is characteristically more unmistakably clear than the spoken tongue. With English rather the reverse is too often the case.

By carelessness, inconsistency, simple ignorance, or stubborn re-

fusal to recognize the orderly *system* which our written language has effectively worked out, the reader is often obliged to understand what he reads in spite of its graphic form rather than by any aid it gives him. We could gain much immediate clarity in our writing if we realized more fully that “the way a word *looks*” is important.

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