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LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE READING EASIER

Louis Foley

In recent years, specialists in linguistics have become increasingly aware of a fundamental reason for poor reading. That is the reading of words one by one, instead of promptly recognizing their grouping, the patterns in which they are joined, or in other words sentence-structure. The way a person reads orally seems to be a reliable indication of how he reads silently, for as a leading authority has remarked, "it is not likely that a word-caller in oral reading will read silently by language structures."* so it should be easy to determine in any case whether this basic fault is the explanation of a person's lack of skill in reading.

The fundamental necessity of reliable sentence-sense of course does not imply that the individual words can be neglected. In any kind of disciplined expression, every word counts for something or it would not be there. Consequently correct reading involves simultaneous recognition both of the values of the words in themselves and of the coherent patterns in which they are put together.

Often a single word, seemingly quite unimportant in itself, can make all the difference in the import of an entire sentence. Compare for example, "There are few men who could do it," with its negative suggestion that perhaps no one could, and "There are a few men who could do it," with its implication that after all there might turn out to be a considerable number. To recognize this difference one must grasp the sentence promptly *as a whole*.

Popular discussion of reading often sounds as if "literacy" were an open-and-shut affair, as if the ability to "read" meant being able to read anything that might appear in print. Actually, of course, any piece of writing takes a good deal for granted concerning the reader. As writing becomes sophisticated or "technical," it may assume his possession of a considerable body of special knowledge. Naturally he is supposed to be already quite familiar with the language as a whole,

* Carl A. Lefevre, *Linguistics and the Teaching of Reading*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company (1964), p. 5.

and to recognize at once the meaning of every word, not merely in general but in the context in which it appears.

Now, in all fairness, any material to be considered as a test or exercise in reading, a criterion of the reader's skill, should be well written. It should put no *unnecessary* obstacles in his path. This does not mean merely that the sentences should be soundly constructed, as of course they should be, and the words chosen to be as unequivocal as the writer can make them. It calls for enough gracefulness in the placing of word-groupings that the word-order helps to keep the construction plainly in view. It also involves smooth transition from one sentence to the next. Ease in reading depends not only upon the intelligence of the reader but upon the quality of the writing.

We spoke in the beginning of the fact that poor reading is principally caused by not seeing words in coherent groups. It does not seem to be sufficiently realized how much this prompt recognition is aided by proper punctuation, or hindered when the punctuation is either lacking or inaccurate. For the modern silent reader, the function of commas is not to mark "pauses" but to keep the structure of the sentence clear as one reads it for the first time, not knowing what is coming. In carelessly punctuated material, of which there is all too much, many a sentence is bound to have its structural pattern thrown out of focus at least temporarily. As far as the reader can be expected to see up to a certain point, a word looks as if it fell in one grouping while it really belongs in another. Patient backtracking and analysis will most often enable him to figure the thing out, but why should he be obliged to do it?

There are, however, even simpler and perhaps more fundamental aids to reading which are too often neglected. These have to do with a profound peculiarity of English, the extent to which meaning is affected by the stress put upon individual words or parts of them.

The matter of "intonation," about which the specialists in linguistics have so much to say, does not seem to be very important so far as modern American English is concerned. In contrast to other languages in which there is much movement up and down the scale, our speech mainly plows along on a monotone, and depends largely for its meaning upon the effect of stress or *accent de force* on certain words, or more exactly on certain syllables. Shift of accent from one syllable to another can give very different implications to an entire sentence. So the meaning may be not so much in the words as in how they are said.

Now, to a very large extent, this innate difficulty can be anticipated

and avoided by more careful choice of words or more graceful phrasing. Often indeed, mechanical devices of writing and printing can mark the manner of utterance which is required to convey the intended meaning. Particularly in transcription of colloquial speech, the under-scoring of certain words (italics in print) will be necessary to show the manner of speaking which makes all the difference. Frequently an apparently simple statement can be made to imply about as many different situations as there are words in the sentence. Consider for instance the latent possibilities in the innocent words: My father gave me a book.

My father gave me a book. (*Your* father didn't give *you* any.)

My *father* gave me a book. (My mother didn't.)

My father *gave* me a book. (He didn't just lend it.)

My father gave *me* a book. (He didn't give one to my brother.)

My father gave me *a book*. (Not several books.)

My father gave me *a book*. (Not a gun.)

Various colloquial or slangy expressions become such merely by distortion of normal accentuation. "I'll *say* so (whether I believe it or not)," takes on an entirely different tone when it is changed to "*I'll* say so!" "He would *do* that (in given circumstances)" implies a sarcastic description of character when it is twisted into "He *would* do that!"

An amusing example appeared in a hotel advertisement in connection with the New York World's Fair: "Your youngsters are on us." Now, as English is naturally spoken, when the object of a preposition is a *pronoun*, the accent goes on the preposition. So in the ordinary way this sentence would read: "Your youngsters are *on* us." That suggests a scene of an invading army of children running through the place, clambering over everything. What was meant, of course, was "on *us*," free of charge, as when someone says, "The drinks are on *me*."

An unusually long-lived advertising slogan is the one used for many years with the scouring-powder Bon Ami, accompanying the picture of a newly-hatched chick: "Hasn't scratched yet." It is a clever play upon words, but impossible to read aloud because it cannot be read in two ways at the same time. With reference to the chicken just out of the egg, one would say "hasn't *scratched* yet," with the expectation that it will start scratching very soon. The claim for the powder, however, is that it "hasn't scratched *yet*," with the confident assumption that it never will.

One of the most widespread misquotations from Shakespeare is

the phrase, “the milk of human kindness.” It did not have to do with “kindness” in the sense of being benevolent or gracious to others. As becomes clear when it is written “*humankindness*,” it meant the quality of being only human, subject to human frailty and undependability.

Many printed or painted signs which taken literally are quite incoherent nevertheless convey their message clearly enough because obvious physical surroundings furnish an unmistakable context. SLOW CHILDREN CROSSING, for instance, has to be recognized as two independent elliptical sentences, one imperative and the other declarative justifying the first.

In a certain city, the Post-Office had back of it a very large paved parking-lot, more than adequate for the needs of mail service. During World War II, the postmaster offered the use of part of the space for the convenience of a nearby headquarters of the Women’s Army Corps. On one side of the lot was a conspicuous sign: No Parking Reserved for WACS. Taken literally as a single statement, this would mean that parking was *not* intended for those people, even though it might be kept for others.

In such surroundings the lack of punctuation, to mark the end of one fragmentary sentence and the beginning of another, would probably cause no difficulty for anyone familiar with our language. Much more important in the interest of immediate clarity is the regular signaling of compound words. Neglect of such indication may be merely amusing in the case of street-signs where show-windows provide the context:

Ready to Wear Clothes (We’ve been naked long enough!)
Hearing Aids (Indeed it does.)

In *ready-to-wear* and *hearing-aids* the ideas are made unmistakably clear by the simple device of the hyphen, though not in the same way in both cases. In the first we see coming ahead of the noun an adjective phrase which would more naturally follow it, “clothes ready to wear,” when of course no special indication whatever is required. It is the kind of situation we have in “a well-dressed man,” “a hit-and-run driver,” “a once-and-for-all decision.” Without foreseeing the phrasing as a whole—which is more than should be asked of any reader—the relationship of the words would very likely be momentarily puzzling. At the same time such phrases do not form compound words in any real sense. The absolute difference appears

in the fact that the individual words composing the hyphenated phrase do not change from their ordinary meaning or pronunciation.

Hearing-aids is quite something else; it is a true compound formed on a characteristic pattern. The system by which we keep endlessly making up compound words in English involves a special manner of treatment. The meaning is no longer that of one word plus another as if they were separate. Their grammatical relationship is definitely changed. As they are naturally spoken, the accent goes strongly on the first element, while the second tends to lose its distinctive character, as if almost taken for granted, and subsides into something like a mere grammatical ending.

In such expressions as “a going concern,” “an entering wedge,” or “the reading public,” we have a present participle used like any adjective, with the emphasis on the noun. In “*stepping-stones*,” “*parking-lot*,” “*bathing-suit*,” “*swimming-pool*,” or “*dining-room*,” the first element is a verbal noun, like the object of an implied preposition: stones for stepping, a lot for parking, and so on. In speech this distinctive grammatical construction is naturally shown instantly by the stress on the initial element. No doubt various compounds already thoroughly familiar to everybody may be read correctly with no particular difficulty though their nature is not properly indicated. As was long ago pointed out, however, by Professor Otto Jespersen, world-authority on English during his lifetime, the lack of proper hyphenation can make phrasing dangerously misleading. In the neglect of necessary hyphens we have a most conspicuous exhibition of the sloppy inconsistency which makes us understand many statements, if we do, in spite of the apparent distortion of their written form.

If the prompt recognition of word-groupings is vital to skill in reading, the helpfulness of signaling this most firmly unified sort of combination should not be overlooked.

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