

# Looking at Language

## Under a Spell

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

*Forskor and sevn yeerz agoe our faadherz braut forth on  
dhis kontinent a nue naeshun, konseevd in liberti, and  
dedikated to the propozishun dhat aul men are kreeaeted eek-  
wal.*

You've just read the first sentence of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address recast in the simplified spelling system proposed by Godfrey Dewey. Dr. Dewey is not the only man of good will who has proposed a significant overhaul of our "system" of English spelling. Way back in 1200, the Augustinian monk Orm developed a phonetic spelling system, and in succeeding centuries Orm's lead was followed by such luminaries as Benjamin Franklin, Theodore Roosevelt, George Bernard Shaw, and Upton Sinclair.

In *The Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce defines orthography as "the science of spelling by the eye instead of the ear. Advocated with more heat than light by the outmates of every asylum for the insane." "English spelling," declares linguist Mario Pei, "is the world's most awesome mess," while Edward Rondthaler, the inventor of the Soundspel System, labels spelling "a sort of graphic stutter we've tolerated for generations."

Nowhere is the chasm that stretches between phonology (the way we say words) and orthography (the way we spell them) better illustrated than in this eye-popping ditty about the demonic letter combination *-ough*:

### Tough Stough

The wind was rough.  
The cold was grouggh.  
She kept her hands  
Inside her mough.

And even though  
She loved the snough,  
The weather was  
A heartless fough.

It chilled her through.  
Her lips turned blough.  
The frigid flakes  
They blough and flough.  
They shook each bough,  
And she saw hough  
The animals froze—  
Each cough and sough.

While at their trough,  
Just drinking brough,  
Were frozen fast  
Each slough and mough.

It made her hiccough—  
Worse than a sticcough.  
She drank hot cocoa  
For an instant piccough.

If the road to language heaven is paved with good intentions, why haven't we Americans responded to the succession of well-intentioned spelling reforms proposed by linguists, clerics, writers, statesmen, and presidents? Because, as in most matters linguistic, simplified spelling is no simple matter.

For one thing, spelling reform would plunder the richness of homophones in the English language. *Rain*, *rein*, and *reign* were once pronounced differently, but time has made them sound alike. *Knight* was a logical spelling in Chaucer's day, when the *k*, *n*, and *gh* were distinctly sounded. Today its pronunciation matches that of *night*. In Milton's time, *colonel* was spoken with all three syllables. Now it sounds the same as *kernel*. Thus, the seemingly bizarre spellings that the reformers would excise are actually an aid to differentiation in writing. Think, for example, of the chaos that would be wrought by spelling the antonyms *raise* and *raze* identically.

So-called simplified spelling turns out to be a snare and a delusion of false simplicity. Instituting such reforms would generate a "big bang" effect, blowing apart words that are currently related. Like the builders of the Tower of Babel, lexical neighbors such as *nature* and *natural* would, as *naechur* and *nachurul*, be divorced and dispersed to separate parts of the dictionary. The same fate would be visited upon conversion pairs such as *record* (noun) and *record* (verb) and *progress* (noun) and *progress* (verb), and our streamlined pattern of noun and verb endings would grow needlessly complex. *Cats* and *dogs* would be transmuted into *kats* and *daugz*, *walks* and *runs* into *waulks* and *runz*, and *Pat's* and *Ted's* into *Pat's* and *Ted'z*.

Such transformations raise the specter of losing the rich etymological history that current spelling generally preserves. We cannot deny that *seyekaaloguee*, *Wenzdae*, and *troosoe* are accurate visualizations of the sounds they represent. But do we really want to banish the Greekness from *psychology* (from the Greek goddess Psyche), the *Scandinavianness* from *Wednesday* (from the Norse god Woden), and the romantic Frenchness from *trousseau*?

English is the most hospitable and democratic language that has ever existed. It has welcomed into its vocabulary words from tens of other languages and dialects, far and near, ancient and modern. As Carl Sandburg once observed, "The English language hasn't got where it is by being pure." As James D. Nicoll has quipped, "The problem with defending the purity of English is that English is as pure as a cribhouse whore. We don't just borrow words. On occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary." Purifying our spelling system would obscure our long history of exuberant borrowing.

A perhaps more telling fret in the armor of simplified spelling is that even its most ardent adherents acknowledge that many words, such as *shejl* and *skejl*, are pronounced differently in the United Kingdom and the United States, necessitating divergent spellings of the same words. Moreover, when we acknowledge the existence of Irish English, Scottish English, Welsh English, Australian English, West Indian English, and all the other world Englishes, we must wonder how many variant spellings we must live with.

Compounding the problem is that pronunciation varies widely in different parts of the same country, a reality that leads us to ask this crucial question: if we are going to embrace an exact phonetic representation of pronunciation, *whose* pronunciation is to be represented? For many Londoners, the *raen* in *Spaen* falls *maenlee* on the *plaen*, but for Eliza Doolittle and many of her cockney and Australian cousins the *rine* in *Spine* falls *minelee* on the *pline*. How will reformers decide which spellings shall prevail?

In the Middle Atlantic states, whence I hail, *cot* and *caught* are sounded distinctly as *kaat* and *kaut*. In New Hampshire, to which I moved, I often heard *kaat* for both words. Not far to my south, many Bostonians say *kaut* for both words. I say *gurl*, in Brooklyn they say *goil* (as in the charmingly reversed "The *oil* bought some *earl*"), and farther south and west they say *gal* and *gurrel*. Because our present system of spelling is as much hieroglyphic as it is phonetic, speakers of English can gaze upon *rain*, *Spain*, *mainly*, *plain*, *cot*, *caught*, and *girl* and pronounce the words in their own richly diverse ways.

Even if our spelling were altered by edict, a feat that has never been accomplished in a predominantly literate country, pronunciation would continue to change. As Samuel Johnson proclaimed so long ago, "Sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally undertakings of pride." No surprise, then, that the good doctor went on to point out that spelling reformers would be taking "that for a model which is changing while they apply it." The phoneticizing process of spelling reform would itself have to be reformed every fifty or hundred years.

Errors in spelling are the most conspicuous of all defects in written English. Even with the ubiquitousness of spell checkers, business executives complain about the unchecked and unbridled orthography their employees generate. As a business guru once advised: "A burro is an ass. A burrow is

a hole in the ground. As a writer, you are expected to know the difference."

Now gaze upon one hundred words that people in business most frequently misspell. In the line-up are very probably the words that you fear and loathe.

- |                   |                   |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. absence        | 51. imitate       |
| 2. accessible     | 52. immediately   |
| 3. accommodate    | 53. independent   |
| 4. accumulate     | 54. interest      |
| 5. achieve        | 55. judgment      |
| 6. administration | 56. liaison       |
| 7. advantageous   | 57. license       |
| 8. aggressive     | 58. mediocre      |
| 9. analyze        | 59. millennium    |
| 10. appearance    | 60. minuscule     |
| 11. apparent      | 61. necessary     |
| 12. appropriate   | 62. negligence    |
| 13. argument      | 63. negotiable    |
| 14. background    | 64. noticeable    |
| 15. bankruptcy    | 65. occasion      |
| 16. basically     | 66. occurrence    |
| 17. before        | 67. omission      |
| 18. beginning     | 68. parallel      |
| 19. believe       | 69. perseverance  |
| 20. benefit       | 70. piece         |
| 21. business      | 71. precede       |
| 22. calendar      | 72. privilege     |
| 23. category      | 73. proceed       |
| 24. character     | 74. publicly      |
| 25. committee     | 75. questionnaire |
| 26. controversial | 76. receive       |
| 27. corroborate   | 77. recommend     |
| 28. definitely    | 78. rescind       |
| 29. dependent     | 79. relieve       |
| 30. description   | 80. renown        |
| 31. develop       | 81. repetition    |
| 32. dilemma       | 82. rhythm        |
| 33. disappear     | 83. ridiculous    |
| 34. disappoint    | 84. salable       |
| 35. dissipate     | 85. secretary     |
| 36. effect        | 86. seize         |
| 37. eligible      | 87. sentence      |
| 38. embarrassing  | 88. separate      |
| 39. environment   | 89. sincerely     |
| 40. exaggerate    | 90. skillful      |
| 41. exercise      | 91. successful    |
| 42. existence     | 92. supersede     |
| 43. experience    | 93. surprise      |
| 44. finally       | 94. their         |
| 45. flexible      | 95. threshold     |
| 46. friend        | 96. through       |
| 47. forgo         | 97. tomorrow      |
| 48. forty         | 98. truly         |
| 49. gauge         | 99. whether       |
| 50. harass        | 100. writing      |

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