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This Change is Due*

by

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A Practical Approach

Our spelling carries many letters which serve no purpose. It also inconsistently assigns letters to sound. The difficulties resulting from these irregularities, both in the task of learning to spell, and that of learning to read, are well known.

Reforming our spelling at one sweep is an awesome and improbable venture. But going at it step-by-step, by specific changes easily understood, easily put into use, over a period of years, is practical. Such a step-by-step process will not jar our habits too much and will reduce costs to a minimum. This paper outlines a first step that might be taken.

A first step should appear to the writers and readers of English as natural and fitting. It should be compatible with a variety of phonemic systems, and should operate through a clear, concise rule. It should *shorten* the words it affects. Since the last letter of a word is usually the simplest to drop, it should affect that letter. To reduce the effort required to learn it, it should affect relatively few words. Finally, if at all possible, it should bring a group of words, presently forming exceptions to a well known spelling rule, into agreement with that rule.

The Case of the Final, Misdirectiv(e)

A well-used rule in our spelling is that a final, silent "e" can be used to signal that the preceding vowel is long. The following pattern is common:

bat—bate kit—kite cam—came
fat—fate not—note can—cane
hat—hate tot—tote van—vane

and so on.

In each case the final "e" signals that the preceding vowel is long. Well and good. But there is a group of words which do not follow this rule. The words of this group carry the final silent "e" but their preceding vowel is *not long*. Thus, the final "e's" that these words carry are not only useless, but are

* Drop Useless E's forms the acronym DUE

misdirected as well, and should be dropped.

Here are seventy-two of these words, found among the first four thousand most commonly used American-English written words (Kucera and Francis, 1967). They are listed in order of their frequency of use:

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. ar(e) | 37. els(e)wher(e) |
| 2. hav(e) | 38. promis(e) |
| 3. ther(e) | 39. extensiv(e) |
| 4. wher(e) | 40. favorit(e) |
| 5. mor(e) | 41. involv(e) |
| 6. befor(e) | 42. intensiv(e) |
| 7. giv(e) | 43. legislativ(e) |
| 8. the(e)for(e) | 44. anywher(e) |
| 9. liv(e) | 45. attractiv(e) |
| 10. els(e) | 46. primitiv(e) |
| 11. effectiv(e) | 47. definit(e) |
| 12. you'r(e) | 48. effectiv(e)ly |
| 13. l'v(e) | 49. reserv(e) |
| 14. determin(e) | 50. serv(e) |
| 15. objectiv(e) | 51. ar(e)n't |
| 16. activ(e) | 52. preserv(e) |
| 17. opposit(e) | 53. alternativ(e) |
| 18. positiv(e) | 54. genuin(e) |
| 19. they'r(e) | 55. we'v(e) |
| 20. we'r(e) | 56. examin(e) |
| 21. somewher(e) | 57. massiv(e) |
| 22. sensitiv(e) | 58. ther(e)by |
| 23. executiv(e) | 59. unfortunat(e)ly |
| 24. minut(e) | 60. effectiv(e)ness |
| 25. negativ(e) | 61. inadequat(e) |
| 26. detectiv(e) | 62. initiativ(e) |
| 27. expensiv(e) | 63. competitiv(e) |
| 28. creativ(e) | 64. conservativ(e) |
| 29. impressiv(e) | 65. fals(e) |
| 30. twelv(e) | 66. respectiv(e)ly |
| 31. everywher(e) | 67. excessiv(e) |
| 32. representativ(e) | 68. nowher(e) |
| 33. doctrin(e) | 69. exclusiv(e) |
| 34. nativ(e) | 70. vers(e) |
| 35. relativ(e) | 71. climat(e) |
| 36. curv(e) | 72. desperat(e) |

It is possible to quibble with this word or that in the above list. However, beyond minor shifts, the list stands as a clear exemplification of the principle of the final, silent, misdirectiv(e) "e" in our spelling system.

How many words would this affect? For our total lexicon, one would not hazard a guess. However, in identifying the seventy-two, it was noted that as the list continued, the rate of occurrence decreased. It is probable that in the first twenty thousand most commonly used written American-English words, we would find not more than three hundred misdirectiv(e) "e" words. The

list of seventy-two, above, gives a good overview of the types of words affected.

How did these words develop and how did the "e's" come to be attached to them?

The first five of these words (and some others) are of Teutonic, Anglo-Saxon, and Old English origin. They come to us as follows:

are: Old Eng. *ar, are*; Old Norse, *eir*; Old Frisian, *ere*; Old H. Ger. *era*. By 1320 the spelling had settled to the present *are*.

have: Old Eng. *habben*; Old Frisian, *habba*; Old Saxon, *hebben*; Old H. Ger. *haben*; Old Norse, *hafa*; Gothic, *haben*. We find in 1175 *habbe*; in 1300 both *hab* and *haf*; in 1340, *habbe*; 1375, *have*; by 1583 this word had stabilized in its present form.

there: Old Eng. *paer, par, per* (It is necessary to use typed "p" because, unfortunately, we have lost the old Runic character used here in Old English. It was called "thorn", was pronounced as our hard "th", and looked something like this: A); Old Frisian, *ther*; Old H. Ger. *dar*; Gothic, *par*; Old Norse, *par*. In 893 AElfred wrote "par". In 1400 we find both *thar* and *ther*; in 1420 we find *peer*; in 1563, *thaer*; not until 1673 did this word stabilize in its present form.

where: Old Eng. *hwar*; Old Frisian, *hwer*; Old Saxon, *hwar*; Old H. Ger. *war*; Middle Eng. *whar, where*; In 825 AElfred (copying Genesis) wrote: "God cwaed: *Adam hwar aert pu?*" In 1250 we find *ware*. In 1382 Wycliff wrote *where*, and from that date the spelling stabilized. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1961).

more: Old Eng. *mar*; Old H. Ger. *mer*; Old Irish, *mar* (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1975).

The perceptiv(e) reader will have noted that there is ample etymological precedent (here) to drop the e's from the present spelling of these words. The words ending in "ive" are from Latin forms. "Positive", for example, comes from "positivus", and thru Old French, *positif*. Where did the final "e" now in the word, come from? Perhaps from the habit of early printers, setting type by hand, to add an "e" to a

word at the end of a line that was a bit short, as filler, to justify (even out) the margin (Hanna, Hodges, & Hanna, 1971). English printers and English schoolmen have always liked "e's"; perhaps it was felt that these Latin derivatives appeared more dignified and more erudite dressed out with final e's.

Note that we are speaking here of one change, and one change only, in the words affected. That change is dropping the final "e". This change will remain in force as any of these words takes a suffix, i.e. "objectiv" — "objectivly"; "effectiv" — "effectivness"; "positiv" — "positivly", etc.

Some of these words achieve final phonemic form just by dropping the "e"; others require further changes. Such changes will be made in a systematic way at later dates if the reform process continues.

That Crucial First Step

English spelling reform has always been dogged by the difficulty of getting off the ground. It has never been able to get started. No group has been able to persuade the public to accept a first, all-important step.

Coming as close to this as any effort to date is that of THE SPELLING ACTION SOCIETY of Australia, headed by Harry Lindgren, which promotes S.R.1 (Spelling Reform One). This states that the short "e" sound as in "bet", should be spelled with an "e". Thus: head = hed, said = sed, any = eny, many = meny, etc. Altho a considerable number of people in Australia and elsewhere have adopted this change (four books have been printed using it), progress has been slow since it was introduced in 1965. (Lindgren 1969).

BETTER EDUCATION thru SIMPLIFIED SPELLING (BEtSS), a five year old Michigan-based organization, has a new, realistic approach to this problem, of which DUE is one aspect.

Not only the actuality of change, but the idea of spelling change, has proved to be a major blockage. It is possible that if the public can be moved to accept a first change, a first definite, real change, then it may be possible to go on to change number two, and thence to a change process. Clearly, however, nothing is possible unless that first step is achieved.

Therefore the first step must be one that will reduce doubts, hesitation, resistance, to a minimum. The first step should be as *simple* as possible, as easy to learn to use as possible, and as reasonable as possible. It should have a rationale that is easily understood and is immediately acceptable.

The DUE (Drop Useless E's) Step Meets These Qualifications

The number of words involved is small. In the affected words only one letter will be touched; in the vast majority of cases that letter is the final one of the word. The change consists of one operation—drop it. Other factors being equal, it is the last letter that is most easily dropped. Further, if the last letter is a silent, useless, tag-along, which does not stand out in the gestalt (configuration) of the word, then it is easily cut.

Little effort is required to learn to omit these e's. Inhibiting their appearance on paper will minimally disrupt writing habits. Under this change the appearance of the longer words will vary only slightly; the e's will scarcely be missed. Once the shorter words have been used for a time, they will begin to appear "normal" and "right".

Shifting "are" to "ar" delivers perhaps the greatest shock, since a third of this commonly used, short word is dropped. But if the two-letter "ar" is confronted squarely, with habits left behind, it will be found to be aesthetically balanced, well formed to do its job. In addition, when it is realized that "ar" is in good company with "art", "arc", "arbor", "arcade", "bar", "car", "far", etc., its legitimacy is more easily recognized. After all, one of the earliest forms of this word in Old English was "ar" (Oxford English Dictionary 1961).

This is a strategic step with which to start because it brings a group of maverick words into the corral, into compliance with a well known spelling rule. Thus, it can be seen as strengthening the structure of traditional spelling. For this reason those concerned with the teaching of spelling may look on this particular change with some favor. Both parents and teachers can welcome this change.

Finally, this is a strategic way in which to start because this operation shortens the words it affects.

Method

It is first necessary to build support among faculty, administrators, and parents. Second, before any formal steps are taken, substantial support for this specific spelling change should be obtained from business leaders.

Third, if the state branches of organizations such as the Parent Teachers Association, the International Reading Association, the National Council of English, will promote this change, the cooperation of state boards of education can be obtained.

Local boards of education all over the country, acting in concert, should authorize this curriculum innovation. It should be ordered on the grounds that it is good for spelling, good for the written language, good for the children who are learning to spell, to write, to read, and good for all those who write or read English.

Superintendents will send lists to principals, who will send them to department heads and to teachers, who have had them anyway for months. The change will be explained and new spelling will be substituted in the curriculum when appropriate. Students will be taught to spell, write and read the new forms.

No special training sessions for the teachers will be necessary. Districts might wish to distribute a page on the etymology of the most common of these words.

Committees of students and parents, under the direction of teachers, will mark out these "e's" in all materials used in the classrooms, including dictionaries. In general, library materials will be untouched. New books will be obtained only if, they would normally be purchased.

The costs of this curriculum change to local boards would be limited to two or three extra (public) meetings to hear opinions and comments on DUE. Any meetings of board members with business or community leaders would not be budget items of school boards.

No further changes should be made for a two-year assimilation period. During this time it is pro-

bable that a number of institutions, businesses, and individuals will adopt the new spellings. Slowly but surely the public will find them easy to learn, practical, and "proper".

If a consensus develops to go further, a number of simple changes are at hand. Some involve a very few words; all involve dropping letters. Twelve such changes are listed in the BEtSS Starter Brochure (BEtSS, 1981).

Regardless of further steps, for the sake of better spelling and better reading, teachers and administrators should remove these words from their "exception" status and bring them within the final "e" rule.

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