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"I LUV U"

Abraham F. Citron

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I

If a child writes to Grandma "I luv u," why can't we call that correct?¹ Had we a sistem that spelz lyk this, mor children wound lyk it, lurn it and uez it.

A shorter, simpler word is more easily written. Anything a child can more easily write is more likely to be written. The more children write, the more they read (for one thing, writing is, at the same time, reading); the more they read the more they are likely to write, and so on.

We ought to have a system that spells words straight out, the way they sound. Did you ever see anything as crooked as the way we spell *straight*? Straight should be *strayt*, to join the pattern of *day*, *way*, *stay*, *stray*, etc. If the stimulus is clear and reliable, learning is easier, faster. The less ambiguous the symbol, the quicker the learning. This is a basic rule we use everyday in education, indeed, in all life. Why don't we use this rule in spelling?

II

We do, partly, and this enables children to get some kind of hold on our spelling. We have a goodly core of words spelled as they sound in contemporary standard English speech, taking "standard English" as a broad dialect and not a narrow one. These are words such as *at*, *see*, *fish*, *claptrap* (*implement* comes very close) *bit*, *top*, *fool*, *but*, *God*. For various reasons, historical and developmental, a majority of our words are spelled more or less unphonemically. Why don't we bring these words more closely into regular phonemic patterns?

1. *Love* comes from the Old English *lufe*, hence *luv* is etymologically more correct than *love* (17, p. 681). There is nothing wrong with *u* standing for *you*; we just feel it is ungenteel.

2. If *laugh* were *laf* we would save 40% of the letters. If *give* were *giv* we would save 25% of the letters. If *there* were *ther* we would save 20% of the letters. At

Our spelling, essentially fashioned during the 5th thru the 18th centuries, has been for most of its existence an expression of the needs and life styles of churchmen, aristocracy, and gentry. During the feudal ages no one dreamed that common folk should read or write. One's letters were an unmistakable sign that one was gentlefolk. Thorstein Veblen rightly pointed to English spelling as a classic example of conspicuous consumption (16, p. 257). Because of this heritage we have the feeling today that a longer, more complex word is more cultured and genteel than a short, blunt word.

Our spelling is outmoded, inflated, inconsistent, clumsy, and much more difficult than need be. Loaded with fat and waste, it is by far the worst in the West.² An historian of our language has termed our spelling "the world's most awesome mess" (14, p. 337).

Many are offended at the suggestion of practical reductions such as *have*, to *hay* and *dead* to *ded* because our spelling comes down to us a matter of grace and style in which ladies and gentlemen had time and were happy to take time for the niceties of gracious forms. After all, isn't slashing letters from words of our hallowed tradition a mark of barbarism?

The inconsistencies of our spelling are notorious. Foreigners (another word carrying erroneous etymoloty; the *g* does not belong there), struggling with the absurdities of our spelling, do not know whether to laugh or cry. They know a system does not have to be that way. There are attempts, with the aid of computers, to show that our system is really more consistent than a superficial view reveals (10, p.

each saving the small hands of children are writing or typing with greater ease. This is what we want, a written language that children will use. This will aid all children, the fast as well as the slow, and no matter how they speak.

3. A non-profit organization promoting simplified spelling is BE t SS (Better Education thru Simplified Spelling), 2340 E. Hammond Lake Drive, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan 48013.

79-98). But children are not computers, and a child, seeing that *t-o* spells /too/, expects *g-o* to spell /gool.³

III

Do we have evidence of what happens when children learn to read using phonemic alphabets?

We have much evidence from experience with i.t.a. (Initial Teaching Alphabet) in Britain (2;6;7;15), and from systems like Unifon in this country (5, p.29), that children learn more easily and with lower failure rates to read when they use phonemic alphabets. There is also evidence that children learn more easily to spell in phonemic forms than in traditional forms (1).

IV

Without a doubt the main blockage to spelling reform is the vast resistance of traditional, well-set habits. The simplest and most common protective device against new forms is ridicule. However, in academic circles an elaborate protective mythology has developed, the main strands of which are the following:

1. esthetic objection
2. differing dialects objection
3. etymological objection
4. "lexical" objection
5. discipline objection
6. "lowering standard" objection
7. cost objection
8. displacement objection

None of these objections is substantial. They have served well, however, as "learned" and as "practical" blockages to change, surround-

ding our spelling system with an aura of sacrosanctity. It is difficult, in brief space, to make clear the superficiality of these objections, but perhaps a good start can be made.

1. **Esthetics** This is the complaint that phonemic spelling appears childish and crude, offends not only the sense of propriety and learning, but is unsightly and rubs raw the esthetic sensibilities.

But surely, to John Winthrop, and his companions on the *Arabella* in 1630 (9, p.26a) our contemporary spelling would be crude and objectionable, and to Chaucer's generation, hardly readable. A few years ago *cheque* was the norm, *check* was an upstart. The esthetic objection is uninformed by the history of English spelling, and naive, blissfully unaware that what is considered proper and right in spelling is what one is accustomed to. Further, preference is not all on one side; there are those who feel that *lyt* is a more beautiful word than *light*, that *helth* is handsomer than *health*, and so on.

2. **Differing Dialects** This is the argument that a phonemic spelling cannot be fashioned on the basis of standard English pronunciation because so many children and adults in this country do not speak a standard English dialect.

The first response to this is that a shortened word is easier to spell, write, read no matter how a person speaks. If a person says *haid*, it is easier to learn *had* than *head*; if a person says *mo*, it is easier to learn *mor* than *more*, etc.

Second, dialect is not evenly distributed over all syllables of words. In the spoken phrase, "Cain't go now, gotta stay with mah bruthuh," only three of the eight words are really away from the broad track of pronunciation we call standard English. These are *cain't*, *mah*, *bruthuh*. When Jack Kennedy said "New Yawk" and "Cuber," he seemed off standard English, but not when he said, "Ask not what your country..."

Third, Germany, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Spain, Mexico, Italy, and other lands, despite differing dialects, have adopted phonemic spelling systems, based on a standard dialect. No problems are evident based in the differing dialects spoken within these countries.

Fourth, there is evidence that black students in this country learn phonemic spelling as easily as white students (1; 5 p. 29).

3. **Etymology** This is the objection that phonemic spelling would alter many of the spellings so as to obscure or destroy roots and origins, robbing the reader of insights into the background and meaning of words.

The first response to this is that roots, plus prefixes and suffixes are *always* carried, never abandoned or destroyed, but merely re-spelled. *Psychology*, for example, composed of *psycho* and *logy*, becomes *syco-loji* in which the Greek roots are plainly identifiable. The same is true of *technology*, which becomes *tecnoloji*.

Second, letters dropped are often semantically quite meaningless. For example, if we spell *night* as *nite* or as *nyt*, we drop the *gh*, which, ages ago, had a sound function (pronunciation), but today is merely hauled along. The reader has not been robbed of meaningful background; the *gh* belongs in reference works, not in the word. If we dropped the *k*'s in *knee*, *knife*, *knob*, etc., meaningful background would not be lost.

Third, in many cases the present spelling carries a *false* etymology, which would be corrected by phonemic spelling. For example, the *s* in *island* never belonged there, for this word does not come from the Latin *insula*, but from Old Norse *eyland*, Anglo-Saxon *ealand*, German *eiland*, that is *water-land* (13p. 29). *Delight* has nothing to do with *light*, but comes from the Old French *deleiter*; thus the *gh* should be dropped (13, p. 29). All our words which use *ph* for *f* (*photo*, *phone*, *graph*, etc.) are in error, for the Greeks never used such a form

(8, p. 43). Our spelling today carries hundreds of these errors.

Fourth, it should be noted we are dealing with two sharply differing concepts of what a written code should do and be. Classicists, etymology lovers, lexicalists, and others, are entranced by what can be *pictured* (a retreat to picture-writing) in the spelling. They want an "enriched code," with everything in it. If a letter here, a digraph there, a borrowing yonder, make their way, by any happenstance, into the spelling this material becomes "valuable," part of "beloved tradition" and is dragged along forevermore. In the clasp, of such a view, words accumulate letters like a ship accumulates barnacles. Classicists view words as miniature antique shops containing exhibits of their history. Should written words be required to carry such displays?

Our spoken language does not do this. How do we manage to understand each other in speech? Alphabetic writing was created to represent speech, nothing else. Classicists say: "Look how primitive is speech; look how enriched and sophisticated the written code can be!" Over the years they have dropped everything in it but the kitchen stove. During the last two hundred years American written forms have been slowly, very slowly, casting off some of the feudal encumbrances. This paper takes the position that a written word should be as lean and clean as possible.

4. **The "Lexical" Objection** This states that phonemic spelling will drop crucial non-phonemic letters of a word which serve to aid the reader in visually relating that word to other words of the same family (3, p. 287-309). For example, lexicalists say that the *g* in *sign* should be retained, although not sounded, to show that one is dealing with a word belonging to the family of *signal*, *signature*, *significance*, etc. A second example: we must maintain the *a* in *said* to show its relationship to *say*.

4. Noam Chomsky, with Morris Halle, wrote the famous sentence: "There is, incidentally, nothing particularly surprising about the fact that conventional orthography is, as these examples suggest, a near optimal system for the lexical representation of English words (4, p. 49). This is intended to convey the impression that lexicality is an inherent quality of our orthography, a natural development,

with survival value. The assumption of the natural evolution of lexicality within our written forms is false. It is there because certain classes of persons, operating under certain ideas, placed it there. So far, they have had the power and influence to make it stick. It is not at all a natural partner of our orthography because it is anti-alphabetical.

The first response to this is that neither i.t.a. nor Unifon have a single letter of lexical spelling, yet children use these systems without any difficulty in relating related words. When is gone, no one misses it.

Second, if such aids are helpful, why are they so often absent in speech? Why is the *g* in *sign* absent in speech, yet we relate spoken *sign/sin/to/signal*? How do we relate so easily */say/to/sed*?

Third, if we need visual similarity to relate related words, why does the orthography develop forms such as *mind-mental*, *reason-rational*, *whole-holistic*, *is-was-will be*, etc.? Were lexical theory sound, *was* would be *wis* to relate it to *is*.

The fact is that in usage, according to our particular language development, we relate thousands of words in countless ways, from gross and obvious to subtle and fleeting. This is, most of the time, independent of the sound or appearance of given words.

Fourth, good readers read so swiftly and take in so much at a glance, that they usually do *not even see* the spelling. A person trained to read *said* will snap it up, just as a person trained to read *sed* will snap that up. Good readers will whip through *wil* and *wou* as swiftly as through *will* and *would*. It is the *beginning* reader and the speller who pay a terrible price for this lexical spelling which is unnecessary.⁴

5. The Character and Discipline Objection A number of teachers and administrators have expressed to me the idea that they are not all sure that making a word easier to spell is a good thing. They go on to say that spelling is an excellent discipline, requiring close attention, dedication and perserverance. It builds character. Making it easier would detract from its educational challenge.

Alas, all is mistaken in this: its philosophy, its psychology, and its pedagogy. We can take time here only to say that spelling is a tool, like a key, necessary to open the door to writing and reading. The lighter and better fitting the key, the quicker the students can go on to the vast universe of subjects thus opened to them. There is plenty of genuine challenge and difficulty in educational growth without intentionally placing stumbling blocks in the paths of children.

6. The "Lowering Standards" Objection When those who mention this are asked which standards they mean, they refer to one or more of the objection before listed. Without specific content, it remains an effective slogan, an umbrella term for specific objections.

7. The Cost (to school districts) Objection First, this need not be great if a step-by-step pace is adopted, one type of change each two years or so. Special groups of parents or students could mark changed spellings in workbooks, dictionaries, texts and readers. Books wear out in any case and could be purchased at the normal rate in a given district. Little money need be invested in workshops to introduce teachers to the new spellings, and to the purposes of phonemics spelling.

Second, a national commission, set up by the fifty state boards of education, would set national goals and timing. The expense to each board would be minimal.

Third, as changes take hold, and groups of students pass through the elementary schools, less time and texts need be spent on spelling; time and money saved can be put to use in other areas of curriculum.

Fourth, more academic success for more children, less failure, more career development, healthier self-images, cannot be measured in dollar savings, but they will be felt by the schools and be the entire society.

8. The Displacement Objection This points to all the books in the libraries and in the collections, in the homes, all the habits set, to the vast institutional flow based on the present system, to massive resistance that will develop to block change, to costs of replacement, etc.

The history of civilizations has an inexorable answer to this. The people who do not adjust to the demands of changing conditions perish. We need a spelling for a technical, computerized, highly complex, modern society. We must have more citizens reading and writing at higher levels. Civilizations that do not displace and throw off what is no longer functional develop, like venerable dragons, huge scales, and gradually immobilized under the weight of these petrified excrescences, die.

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Dealing With Death Through Literature

Becky R. Fisher

Two subjects have been taboo in our society, sex and death. We could not acknowledge our entry into the world, and have been afraid of our exit from it. Today we are recognizing the importance of sexual information and guidance for children. Numerous books and articles are available to help discuss and explain the process of birth, and include it in life's processes. We are still afraid, however, to acknowledge death as a factor in our lives.

Earlier in our culture, birth and death were integrated into the everyday lives of people. Babies were born in the home and people died at home from disease and old age. Now, babies are born in a hospital and sick and elderly people are sent away to die in a hospital or a home for the aged. Children have had little opportunity to learn about death as a component of life.

There are ways to help a young child to face death, accept it, and live with its reality. We should talk openly with a bereaved child, helping him to acknowledge his feelings and to deal with them. He may be puzzled as to where Grandpa or Grandma has gone. Is he or she ever coming back? We should let him know that we, too, feel grief and suffering. We need to share our feelings.

Children of all ages need someone with whom they can talk openly and freely about their feelings. They need to feel that their feelings are understandable and ac-

ceptable. They need to know that other people have felt the very same way. One way to help a child see that his feelings are acceptable is by reading about others who have experienced the death of a loved one. Sometimes it is appropriate and helpful to begin the discussion about death by talking about the death of a flower, wild animals, or a pet. Reading a story or a good book to the child may help him to face the problem, or he may wish to read the book himself and then discuss it with an adult.

DEATH IN LITERATURE

In the early days of our country, the Puritans were quite forthright in their literary approach to death. In fact, they were morbid about it much of the time. They portrayed burnings at the stake, tortuous deaths, violent deaths, especially by those who had been condemned for crime.

Death is also quite often mentioned in Mother Goose rhymes. Sometimes it is very casual. Sometimes it is inappropriate. For instance, the rhyme of Mother Hubbard, who came back to find her dog dead and then came back a second time to find him alive and laughing. The story of *Who Killed Cock Robin* and the short life of Solomon Grundy, who lived only a week, are examples of casual approaches to death.

Many fairy tales also treat death quite unrealistically. In *The Three Little Pigs*, the wolf is killed without much thought. Hansel and Gretel

push the wicked witch into a burning oven. Snow White dies, but is awakened by a handsome prince. In Hans Christian Anderson's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, the toy soldier and the paper dancing lady die a rather violent death in a furnace. Fairy tales are perhaps not the best literature for approaching death realistically, although they do embody a certain kind of poetic justice.

One of the earliest novels for young people that deals with death in a therapeutic manner is *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The death of Beth, the youngest in the family, is treated with realism, feeling and truth.

In the early 1900s, death became a forbidden subject in literature for children. It was strictly avoided. This was unfortunate because early childhood is the stage when concepts and ideas are being formed. Children need preparation for death and one effective way to prepare them is through the reading of well chosen literature.

USING LITERATURE

Many times it is easier to begin facing death by talking about the death of animals. In *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst, a young boy is heartbroken when his cat Barney dies. At his funeral, he tries to name ten good things about Barney. He can list nine, but can't think of a tenth. Finally, he realizes that the tenth good thing is that Barney is a part of the ground and that he will live