

VILLAGE VIEW

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Perhaps you've read one of the articles which have appeared in a couple of publications recently concerning an effort by what the WALL STREET JOURNAL terms a "crusading group of businessmen and educators." Based in Detroit, they call their organization, Better Education thru Simplified Spelling, Inc.

Businessmen should, they believe, support their crusade to change how we spell more closely to reflect how those words sound when spoken. Their argument goes that "simplified" spelling would shorten the language and result in enormous productivity gains.

For instance, the first sentence in the paragraph above might read: "Bisnesmen shud, thay baleev, saport dhee crusad tw chanj ho wee spel dhee wurdz wee wz mor clozly tw reflek ho thoz wurdz ar prononzd."

The group's president, one Charles F. Kleber, thinks it will "grow like a snowball if we could just get it started."

I think he's slipped a cog.

In the first place, the rate of functional illiteracy in our country is already a national disgrace. Even though every school attempts to teach its students to spell words we use in exactly the same way, educators seem incapable of imparting their own knowledge in this area. (If, indeed, they possess such knowledge; after reading some letters I've received from some teachers, I wonder.) To further confuse those who already have great difficulty reading and writing and spelling English words would mean disaster to those who have managed to master even a meager proficiency.

In the second place, regional differences in how words are pronounced would turn such a phonetic system of spelling into an impenetrable jungle, even for the educated; no one from one area of our country could read easily what someone in another section had written.

It's bad enough, when you travel from north to south and from east to west in the United States, to understand what

people say! If we can't understand what they write, we shall certainly be in big trouble. For instance, Mid-Westerners pronounce the part of a building that forms the cap just as they say "rough". That would change to "ruf", perhaps, while back east we might have to re-learn to spell roof, "ruf," utilizing the W as a double U to reflect the "oo" sound.

South of the Mason-Dixon Line, people not only pronounce words differently, their colloquialisms sometimes make them almost unintelligible to Yankees unfamiliar with regional terms. Some years ago, after driving several hundred miles through rains and sunny spells, on muddy roads and dusty ones, I stopped to have my car washed at a Virginia service station prior to visiting friends in the area. The young man did a fine job. As he was finishing, he turned and said, "Do you want me to put on some tar dressin'?"

My hearing was still excellent at that time, yet I didn't have the foggiest notion what he was talking about. "I'm sorry," I said, "but what did you say?" He repeated his question. Seeing the bewildered expression on my face, he restated his query.

"Would you like dressin' put on the tars?" he asked, indicating with a nudging foot that he might do something to the tires. Mine were the old-fashioned kind with broad white bands running around the rims.

Then I understood he wanted to do something to clean up the Whitewalls. I nodded, feeling relieved and not quite so stupid. "That would be very kind of you," I told him. And he proceeded to scrub them clean, then brush on a liquid that looked like whitewash. The service delayed my departure 15 minutes while the stuff dried. The tires looked splendid for months afterwards. The bill probably reflected his extra work, but it was worth the cost.

Now: how would the crusaders of Better Education thru Simplified Spelling, Inc., spell TIRE? For me, perhaps: tyr. For a Virginian, tah? And how does either of us read the others?

Before going further, please know I'm not making sport of the Virginian nor the Mid-Westerner. Cape Codders, too, have some speech peculiarities. We neglect, as do many Southerners, to pronounce the terminal R on words. We say mothuh, fathuh, brothuh, sistuh and, at the same time unless we're pretty careful, we say Cuber instead of Cuba. Bananer, rather than banana, has been heard, too. Or take "sure." While most Americans make it one syllable, here we give it two and say, "shoo-ah."

Folks from around Philadelphia go us one better. They make two syllables from only the three letters in each of the words "Cow" and "now." If you hear someone talking about "cay-ows," you can bet they're Pennsylvanians. Jerseyites speak a language all their own with joint becoming "jernt," poison transforming to "persin," and other similar anomalies. Nor should New Yorkers sneer. They, too, can be picked from a group and identified as to geographical origin from the way they talk.

How, then, can any rational simplified spelling system be accepted wherever English is used? What of our Scotch-Irish Nova Scotian neighbors who spell "about" just as we do, but pronounce it differently? It's always a dead give-away when my friend from Cape Breton Island phones to see "What you're about these days."

And finally, not to over-do this farce, but this point does have bearing: consider the various ways English is used in

England, not to mention Scotland, Wales and the gorgeous green Isle of Erin. If we think people from different parts of our own country "Talk funny," imagine how we sound to the British who, we must admit, have given us our Mother Tongue, yet sound to us like foreigners.

We can, though, read their letters, books, and newspapers with no difficulty; they, in turn, read and understand ours. Can you picture, however, with what dismay (not to say disdain) the English might view a page of this suggested simplified spelling?

In the last analysis, when it come to spelling English words, we can confess there's sometimes good reason to wonder whether there might not be better ways. A successful crusade to adopt a phonetic system, though, will lead only to chaos. As things stand, there are real and discoverable reasons for the spellings employed to form English words which convey our thoughts to others. These reasons may be obscure, may be hidden in the mists of time, may seem esoteric. They may confuse those trying to learn to sort out similar sounds with entirely different meanings. Such duplications in pronunciation are more frequent in English than in most other languages. Yet bases for our language do exist and can be traced back, historically, through Old English and Anglo-Saxon, through Latin and Greek, and even to Sanskrit.

Complicated as it may be, let's not compound the problem with a system based on pronunciations!