

VILLAGE VIEW

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This morning's local radio newscast included a report that the Coast Guard was bringing an injured seaman to the Cape Cod Hospital from a fishing vessel at sea off the Cape. The man had been hurt aboard the boat when, according to the item, "he got tangled up in a wench."

Did my ears deceive me? I listened to the report three more times during the morning; twice more it was said the poor man got tangled up with a wench. On the final broadcast I heard, the disembodied voice from the radio did say winch instead of wench.

For those of you like the newscaster, who apparently didn't know the difference between a winch and a wench, let me tell you there's a whale of difference.

It may not be too surprising a radioman doesn't know what a winch is; we don't see many of them around anymore unless we're knowledgeable about the mechanics of commercial fishing. But surely, most men know a wench when they see one.

For the record, a wench is a girl or maiden, sometimes a female servant or a peasant girl; in days of yore, a lewd woman or strumpet was called a wench. Granted, getting tangled up with such a one could mean a trip to a hospital, but it's unlikely to occur on a ship at sea.

A winch, on the other hand, is a crank with a handle, used to put a machine such as a grindstone in motion. In the case of the unfortunate seaman, the winch was most probably

equipped with a barrel or drum around which was coiled rope or wire. When the crank handle is turned, the rope winds on the drum; machines of this sort are used on fishing vessels to hoist and pull in the nets, heavily laden with fish.

Getting tangled up in a winch rather than a wench could be considerably more likely to land a person in the hospital. What intrigues me, of course, is the dissimilarity between the two images conveyed.

Let me hasten to extend my sympathies to the injured man. I don't mean to make light of his pain. That's not the point.

The point is what a difference a single letter of the alphabet, in this case an "e", can make if substituted for another, in this case an "i". That, after all, is what speech is all about.

We take twenty-six letters and construct from them a language to express everything we want to communicate. We describe concrete things we can see, touch, smell, hear and taste, using nouns and names. A book is one thing; a boot, still another; yet we change only one letter to project those totally different images.

With the same number of letters we describe other things, things we can't see. When we speak of an air current, we describe it as a gale, a breeze, a zephyr, a draft, a wind, or a gust. We give it character with synonyms such as taste. We define it further with words such as north, south, east, west, and combinations thereof.

Change the pronunciation of just one letter of those words; meaning changes completely. Gate, freeze, zipper, craft, mind, or rust might result. The English language is rich and varied enough to offer opportunities for new sounds not yet incorporated into our speech. We find no definitions for words such as cale, treeze, bipper, praft, gind, or nust. There's opportunity for a tremendous quantity of new English words. All we need is meanings with which to endow them.

In addition to using sounds to identify things we can see, touch, smell, hear and taste, as well as things we can't, but do feel physically, we use a whole vocabulary to communicate the idea of emotion. Because individuals are unique, each one differing from every other, we sometimes need to explain our inner feelings and reasons for them.

Something that angers you could, conceivably, amuse your brother. An occurrence that entertains one person, another may find utterly boring. You may find slapstick movies hilarious; to some people they are embarrassing. People who think a pie-in-the-face of another person is sidesplitting will wonder at him who reacts to such a scene with dismay.

The key to the difference lies in ways people empathize with others. Laughing at the guy who slips on a banana peel may be a nervous response, a flood of relief that no serious injury is sustained. To bring understanding to both the viewer who doubles up, and the one who's made uncomfortable when watching such antics, it's necessary to use terms that accurately describe emotions each experiences.

Precision in speech or in writing isn't always possible. None of us is perfect; we all make mistakes. If the person who sets the type from the copy I prepare for this article doesn't catch a spelling error I make, or inadvertently hits a wrong key, the error appears in every copy of this issue of the paper, for all the world to see.

The reader must then make a mental correction as his eye travels along the lines of type. In some instances, the meaning of a sentence can be completely changed. One man I know wrote a carefully researched and documented article concerning collecting American pewter. In summing up, he stated that collectors will not readily find authentic pieces. When the paper appeared in print, it read "collectors will now readily find..." No one caught the typographical error and he was chagrined to have, seemingly, made such an irresponsible statement.

So it is with all of us who produce for public consumption words, thoughts and ideas. We make errors in typing, spelling and pronunciation.

The radio announcer made one this morning; that's forgivable and understandable. No one who writes or speaks would castigate another for such a slip. Those of us who heard and caught the error even enjoyed it.

My imagination conjured up the wench in whom the seaman got tangled up. The picture was ludicrous and left me giggling. At the same time, of course, I knew the wench was a winch, and my own physical self flinched, knowing how damaging to tender flesh a screaming winch and flailing wire could be.

And so it is we use and mis-use our language. It's something that can happen to anyone; most of us don't get caught so publicly, aren't embarrassed before so large an audience, when our tongues or fingers slip.

Those of us who write or speak for public consumption, however, live with the knowledge we could fall victim to the same trap, today, tomorrow, or the next day.

There's one fine thing about this particular mistake: it was a pleasant way to start the day, laughing at the instant picture that came to mind as I lay, half asleep, listening to the early morning news. How often is there something funny, something that really brings a chuckle, as you get out of bed in the morning?