

The Confusing English

by Thatcher Rea

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Before I begin tonight I should warn you that this speech might be rated M for Mature Audiences, so any of you wishing to leave are free to do so now. PAUSE The rest of you may sit and suffer.

It's been often said that the English are a very confusing group of people. They insist on driving on the wrong side of the road and have saddled all of their current and previous empire with that unique procedure, except the Canadians who have watched their neighbors to the south and have learned the error of the British ways. The British continue to regard the royal family with the greatest homage and respect although over the past few years there are serious questions about whether they really deserve it. The expense of that decision weighs on the British economy and has on occasion caused the queen to sell a horse or two. They have two parts to their government- the Houses of Commons and the House of Lords- and there is some question whether the latter group serves any real purpose, particularly when you consider some of the blokes the queen has recently knighted. At least they are no longer automatically passing the title down from generation to generation. You now have to be voted into the club. Don't visit their courts or you may find yourself addressing some dude in a curly wig. Hope you get your dates right. In Britain you show the day's date first, followed by the month and then the year. In the USA we reverse the day and month. After many years of having the world's most confusing monetary system, they actually introduced the decimal

system about 25 years ago, but they can't seem to get rid of some of the odd coinage terms,

such as:

Ha'penny	=1/2 penny
Tupense	=2 pennies
Thrupense	=3 pennies
Shilling	=12 pence
Quid	=1 pound
Fiver	=5 pounds
Half crown	=2 shillings + 6 pence
Pound	=20 shillings
Guinea	=21 shillings

What they did do when they went to the decimal system was to equate everything to pennies and pounds, but tradition has been hard to change. Of course, you may have heard of a nickel, dime, quarter and buck in our country.

These are only a few of the English idiosyncrasies. If you really want to understand the spoken language, you have to learn a few slang expressions such as:

Stand up guy	= A politician who is good for the people
Dog and bone	=Telephone
Spend a penny	=Find a bathroom
Jam jar	=Car
Boot	=Car trunk
Sherbet dab	=Small cab
Gary glitter	=Pint of bitter beer
Tube	=Subway

Daffy duck	=O' f... it
Flicks	=Movies
Mum	=Mother
Stick in the mud	=Set in one's ways
Barking dogs	=Sore feet
Wee Porkie Pies	=Little lies (with apologies to Reed Taylor)

Dr. Richard Lederer in his writings points out some of ridiculous aspects of the English language with the facts that “the blackbird hen is brown, there is no butter in buttermilk, no egg in eggplant, neither worms nor wood in wormwood, neither pine nor apple in pineapple, no ham in hamburger, and sweetbread is really meat. To make matters worse English muffins weren't invented in England, French fries in France, or Danish pastries in Denmark”.

You may think from this narration that I am an English bigot. On the contrary I am primarily of English descent. The name Thatcher comes from the sons of Peter Thatcher, one of whom is Margaret's husband. The name Rea comes from my Scotch Irish ancestry and the name MacRae. Of course, my relatives like so many immigrants of other nationalities decided it might be wise to drop the MAC and change the RAE to REA. However, they never realized that anyone stuck with the name of Thatcher Rea would someday have it spelled Mr. RAY, RHEA, RAE, REY, WRAY or RAY THATCHER or even worse in Italy as Mr. DATCHER or REE-A. The spell check on my computer doesn't even consider REA as a suitable option. Most people are completely lost with the spelling of THATCHER as well. So in my quest to simplify life for the next generation I am addressing the subject of English grammar, spelling

and pronunciation tonight and leaving the English with all of their other confusing peculiarities.

Let's take a few moments to look at some of the baffling aspects of the English spellings of words and their pronunciation.

- THERE / THEIR / THEY'RE Same sound but different spellings and usage
- AFAR / FAR / FARTHER / FURTHER Which one to use when?
- YOUR / YOU'RE Most people use the former in place of the latter
- ITS / IT'S When to use the first one or the second?
- NUMB NUM / no need for the B
- NONE / LONE / LOAN / HONE Settle on one spelling for the TONES
- TWO / TOO / TO / STEW All pronounced the same way but with different spellings
- LOVE / ABOVE / SHOVE Wouldn't LUV / ABUV / SHUV be simpler?
- XAVIER / SAVIOR Same sound but different spelling
- FAWN / YAWN / GONE What to do about AWN and ONE sounds?
- LONG / SONG / WRONG Why shouldn't it be RONG also?
- DROUGHT / ROUTE / ROUT Why not DROWT and ROWT? Should it be ROOT?
- KNOCK / KNOT / NOT Why not settle on NOCK and NOT?
- VEIN / VANE / VAIN Won't one of them suffice?
- PHLEGM / FLEMISH / PHONE / PHYSICS / PHILOSOPHY They sound the same but the spelling is ridiculous, which brings up the question of why we need PH or PF in front of the L? F alone should suffice. Which leads me to question why have the P at all? Make it silent like the P in swimming.
- FLOWER / FLOWER / FLOOR Where does FLUORIDE fit?
- TEAR / DEAR / FEAR / DEER / BEER They all sound the same.
- ONE / WON / OWN Make up your mind!

- If it's one GOOSE and two GEESE, why isn't it one MOOSE and two MEESE?
- TROUGH / THROUGH The first should be pronounced and spelled TROF and the second one THRU
- RECEIVE / RECIPIENT There used to be an old rule – I before E except after C
- VALUABLE / INVALUABLE They both mean valuable; one measurable and the other not
- NOWADAYS / THESE DAYS One method should suffice
- FOR / FOUR / FORTY / FORE Why not FOR to cover FOUR or FORE?
- KNOWLEDGE Why not spelled NOLEGE?
- TOOTH / TEETH If the plural is EETH, why wouldn't the plural of BOOTH be BEETH?

And so on and on. and on it goes.

With the advent of computers and e-mail communication between people both young and adult, use of time saving expressions, such as in the following list, has grown substantially. Students are learning to shortcut the English language in their computer typing with symbols and eliminating capitals to replace words such as “YOU, ARE, YOUR, BEFORE, WAS, BECAUSE, and TWO” with “u, r, ur, b4, wuz, cuz, and 2”. However, teachers in many cases still feel that it is important for students to know and understand the difference between formal and conversational writing. Teenagers are pushing the boundaries of the language by using terms such as “o I c”(oh, I see), “nm”(not much), “jk”(just kidding), “lol”(laughing out loud), “brb”(be right back), “abcd”(above and beyond the call of duty), and “ttyl”(talk to you later). “There is no official English language anymore”, says Jesse Sheidlower, North American Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary. “Language is spread not because not

anyone dictates any one thing to happen. The decisions are being made by the language and the people who use the language.” This makes teaching the formal language even more difficult as new generations learn how to “slaughter the King’s English”. The point of all these examples is that the spelling should probably reflect the verbal sounds of each word.

Next, let’s look at English grammar. Many grammatical uses by people in this country are “wrong”, according to the experts as well as “used wrongly”. In many cases the adverb and proper pronoun usage are a thing of the past. Think of all the people you’ve encountered who say “I wish I was” instead of “I wish I were”, “...if I was going” instead of “...if I were going”, or “I ain’t going nowhere” instead of “I am not going anywhere”, or “all the other people” instead of “all of the other people”, or “trip to town” instead of “trip into town”, or “me and her are going” instead of “she and I are going”, or “do it to Mary and I” instead of “do it to Mary and me”, or “doing good” instead of “doing well”, or “on the day before” instead of “the prior day, or “it would be them” not “it would be they”, or “...that would be me” instead of “I”, or “ she and his child was” instead of “ his and her child”, and finally “irregardless” instead of “regardless”. This reminds me of the time when I had a business associate who insisted on punctuating every sentence with “irregardless” and “f-----“. Soon this became very obnoxious and over time I tried to break him of using both terms. One day he got so mad at me that he yelled “irref-----ingardless what you say ...” With some people there’s no hope. These are only a few of the grammatical errors expounded everyday. Most of the people in this country who make the grammatical errors are not even aware that they

are making them. You may wonder why I am interested in this subject of English grammar, spelling and pronunciation?

First, I attended two schools where strong teachers drilled these items into my head. This was in the days before it became fashionable to concentrate on story telling and concept, such as what did the author mean by “this or that phrase”? I even learned to diagram sentences as a means of understanding the importance of sentence structure. In addition, I had to take two years of Latin as a foundation for English to be able to graduate.

Second, I am being exposed daily to the use of bad grammar, especially on the TV and in discussions with other people who don't know better. If our children continue to also be subjected to this condition, it is high time something was done about it. I am too old to tackle the task myself but I would hope that some person or organization would see the need for change and get started. If you have visited France lately, you may hear a new slang which has evolved called Verlan, in which standard French spellings or syllables are reversed or recombined, or both. Much of this comes from the reversing of traditional spelling plus phonetics. For example, “Good day, how are you?” becomes “Jourbon, ca av?” and “Une fete” (a party) is “une teuf”, the word for woman or wife (femme) has become “meuf” and a café has become “feca” and so on. This has immigrated from the African and Arabian French provinces to the continent where it is now appearing in film dialogue, advertising, rap and hip-hop music and the mainstream of conversation. A similar thing has happened in this country with the African American population which has adopted terms such as “mutha, ‘hood, cool, rap, dig, yo, ho, etc.” It reminds me of my summers at Castle Park when we

adolescents developed anagrams such as “ytrap, hcaeb, remmus, llufnoom, taenyad, doog yob, srats and knird” to describe a “party, beach, summer, full moon, neat day, good boy, stars and drink”. Most of you must have learned how to speak Pig Latin when you were quite young with words such as “amscray, ackbay, ibbonray and anksthay”. All of these happenings reflect changes in cultures and ways of communicating which address the need to update our language. With Hispanics now 12 ½% of the U.S. population and increasing rapidly, you can imagine the growing need to modify the English language. In the southern United States terms such as “y’all and ain’t” are now everyday words, while in the Southwest “goodbye” has given way to “adios. I know a young man in this town from Mexico who works as a groundskeeper at a local golf course. He speaks no English, but he can drive a golf ball over 300 yards, chip with accuracy and putt like an expert. Think of the potential that he might have if he could learn to speak English.

Third, in my travels in the USA and in Europe I have become aware of a desire on the part of other nationalities to learn how to speak English in order to be able to communicate on an international basis. With the growth of the USA as the strongest and most economically sound nation in the world, speaking English is becoming a necessity. As standard operating procedure foreign schools are now teaching English as a second language. Recently, while in Barcelona, Spain, we found a Pakistani waiter who could speak English quite well. We inquired as to how he had learned the language and he stated that all the children in his school were required to become fluent in English, but he commented that it was a very difficult task for a foreigner. Most others that we encountered in Europe could make

themselves understood with a few English words or we could say a few foreign words but there were many who neither spoke nor understood any English. It was apparent that those people with the better jobs could speak the most English. One thing is for sure – OK is universal.

In 1887 Dr. Ludwig Zamerhof made an attempt to develop and promote a universal language, Esperanto, which could be adopted by English and non-English speaking people alike. Like many ideas that seem to have merit and should fly but they don't, this concept never got off the ground. However, there is hope yet. Recently, many European nations have banded together to adopt a common currency system, which is really working out well. In fact, the EURO is currently worth more than the DOLLAR. Of course, the confused English refused to get in the boat.

So what may be a solution to the problem of a universal language? First, pick English as that language. The world is moving in that direction as it becomes smaller and more economically interdependent. Recently, on a trip to Europe I purchased watches for my daughter and myself. The watches were designed in Italy for a Japanese company, which had them produced in China to be sold in France by an English-speaking French salesgirl to an English-speaking American tourist. As the USA is the world's biggest market, other countries with other languages will be compelled to use our language in order to compete in this market.

Second, simplify English so that it can become easy to teach, learn and speak properly. Dr.

Lederer reports that about eighty percent on our words are not spelled phonetically. In effect we have two languages, one spoken and one written. This results primarily from the inadequacy of our Roman alphabet to represent all the sounds of English; our willingness to borrow words and, with them, unconventional words from other languages; and finally, the gradual changes in the way we pronounce words, most of which have not been matched by repairs to our spelling. Simplifying English would require considerable changes in the English grammar, spelling, pronunciation and punctuation, but it would build upon a language already in existence and not require the development of a whole new language.

Third, present a proposal for a universal language based on modified English to the United Nations for review and consideration. This doesn't suppose that current national dialects and tongues would be abolished, but only that schools would begin to teach this new modified English as a second language as a matter of course. This does not prohibit the injection of some foreign words and expressions into modified English. There may be some strong negative sentiment on the part of some of those nations hostile to the USA and Great Britain, but hopefully they can be shown that the benefits outweigh the emotions involved. This would seem to be a positive step toward worldwide understanding.

Lastly, base the words selected for the language on phonics, not on historical spelling and pronunciation. Speaking is far more important than writing in communication and more children are being taught the language today based on phonics than ever occurred in the past.

For example, select certain letters and combinations of letters to represent specific sounds under all usages. "OME" would always be pronounced as in "HOME, ROME, or TOME". This would through necessity change "COMB" to "COME and "COME" to "CUM", while "SOME" would already sound right if it became "SUM". "OR" would take care of "OR" and "ORE", while "BORE, MORE, POUR and ROAR" would become "BOR, MOR, POR and ROR". "FUSE, NEWS, SNOOZE and USE would all become "FUZ, NUZ, SNUZ and UZ". To take a "CRUISE" would be simplified to "CRUZ". "KNOWLEDGE" ends up as "NOLEGE". "ASTUTE" would become "AZTOOT". "EXCEPTION" goes to "XEPSHUN". And even the word phonics would drop the P and H and replace them with an F. I'm sure you get the picture.

So as I stand here tonight I might say to you, "Adios, yu muthas, see yu rond da hood". Or better still "Fairwel, uz guyz, c u rownd tha nayborhud". Let's hope that the new English will be a little more sophisticated than that.

I have a final wish to dedicate this speech to my late wife, Mary, a teacher who never let any actors on TV get away with bad English grammar without verbally correcting them and who never gave up pushing for a better English education. And to extend thanks to my daughter, Lollie, for all of the ideas, support, and computer assistance which she has provided to "the old man" in preparing this speech.