

Thoughts on the English Language



The Writer (serigraph), Ruth Chaney, 1935-43

I grew up as a child in Cuba, a tropical island, where it never snows. Nevertheless, I knew about snow because of pictures and films, but my knowledge of snow was extremely limited. I knew that it was white, that it fell from the sky, that it occurred when it was cold and that it was beautiful to look at when it settled on the ground, cotton-like. I had absolutely no idea what it felt like (and to this very day I have trouble wrapping my head around “glacier”). What is interesting is that there were no words in Spanish, at least in Cuba and to a child—maybe in countries like Chile, Spain and Argentina that do experience snow—relative to snow that could provide information about it, or rather, to show the different dimensions of snow, words like snowdrift, snowflake,

blizzard, slush, and icicle. To us, snow was snow (which was “nieve”).

Note that if these other words were to magically disappear in English, it would take a paragraph to describe what each one connotes. But, if there is, indeed, a word (and if one knows the word and knows the object from firsthand experience), a lot of time is saved and communication flows easily; communication is not temporarily derailed in trying to explain the concept (as Ernst Mach said, “A well-chosen word can save an enormous amount of thought”). If one has never seen icicles, the word “icicle” is as meaningless as “bletow” (it is the linguistic equivalent of the saying that “one picture is worth a thousand words,” except that it would be “the right word saves a thousand other words”).

In the past few decades, I have seen two words emerge from total obscurity to become part of the commonly used lexicon in English: oxymoron and shadenfreude. Awareness of both situations had always been present, of course. It’s just that labeling them makes them more visible, more conscious. Shadenfreude, for example, is extremely common in Cuba. In fact, I am surprised that Cubans were not the first to coin a name for the idea of enjoying others’ misfortune—indeed, shadenfreude is a very Cuban concept. But there is no name for it in Spanish (and knowing Cubans, nothing will change by not adopting the word; Cubans will not start being nicer to each other). In the case of oxymoron, I distinctly remember playing a game with a dozen other university graduate students back in the late 1970s. The game consisted of one person searching in a large dictionary for some obscure, unknown, word, announcing it, and having others come up with both a meaning for it and using it as a reference; everyone would then vote on the definition that sounded most likely to be true; it was an amusing mental exercise and a lot of imaginative definitions were given. One of these words, I distinctly remember because of its unusual makeup, was “oxymoron.” None of the players

knew the meaning of the word. This was in 1979. In 2013, it had become so commonplace that my eight-year-old son used the word.

Incidentally, many other languages have words which name something that we may be vaguely conscious of but have not put into words. For example, the Japanese word “komorebi” encapsulates the experience of the interplay between trees, sunlight, and wind. As a result, we are not as eloquent as we could be.

Here is an example of the importance of the right word one which I mentioned in a previous [essay](#): In Swift’s satirical essay *A Modest Proposal*, written in 1729, the inhabitants of the colonies are mentioned as ... Americans. Not Englishmen. Not Virginians. Not New Yorkers. But Americans. As early as 1729 the colonists were seen (and saw themselves) as apart from England. That identifying label alone may have been a spark towards the consideration for independence. In 1777, when Fort Ticonderoga fell to British forces, King George III clapped his hands and exclaimed, “I have beat them! Beat all the Americans!”

There are others. After Princess Diana gave birth, she experienced a deep malaise, which she voiced to her royal in-laws. She received no comfort from that ice-cold corner. Years later, in an interview, she explained that, at the time, the term “post-partum depression” had not been formulated that encapsulated, and legitimized, her condition. Similarly, in my case, I had gone to the university carrying a full load, semester in and out, including during the summers (instead of taking the time off to recharge my batteries, sort to speak). Later, when I went to graduate school, I developed a physical and emotional aversion to my classes to the point that entering some classrooms took all my willpower, though I enthusiastically continued my independent research outside of classes. It was not until years later that the new term “burnout” described my symptoms exactly. If I had voiced the

word, and therefore, the condition, my adjustment would have been facilitated.

Rugg points out in *Blind Spot* of an instance where the invention of a new word saved many lives. WWI was characterized by terrific artillery bombardment, the likes of which had never before been witnessed. Some soldiers cracked up. Someone came up with the medical-sounding term "shell shock" which prevented the sufferers from being shot for cowardice or malingering.

Kurt Vonnegut suggested three words—wampeter, foma and cranfalloon—to encapsulate certain situations, but the never caught on.

Lastly is Wooton's superb *The Invention of Science*. With the discovery of a new, antipodal, continent by Columbus, along with totally new peoples, foods and animals, came the sudden realization that knowledge could be increased. Brand new words were created, particularly by the Portuguese, to succinctly describe these activities: "exploration" and "discovery." Other important words later came into being: "science," "scientists," "scientific."

Thereafter a scientific chain reaction occurred in Europe.

As is the case with all religions, many languages possess absurdities. German, for example, has the superfluous letter ß. It also capitalizes all nouns, as was sometimes the custom in the English language of the 1500s. Spanish pronounces the letter x in the alphabet as we do in English, but every time that it appears in a word, that sound is replaced by a j sound. It also has the ll as part of its alphabet, even though the same sound is taken care of by the letter y (e.g., *llorar* and *yema*). For my personal irritation, English has the same sound for f and ph (e.g., *filter* and *phosphorus*); thankfully, English no longer substitutes f for the sound of

s, as was commonly the case during the 1500s. In fact, redundancy in alphabets is characteristic of many languages, the main culprit being the letter c, which often duplicates the sounds of k and/or s. Then, there is the letter h. The letter h is a superfluous letter. Logically, if it has no sound, why does it exist, why place it inside words in the first place? In Spanish and German, the h is always silent. In English, sometimes it is silent, as in "annihilate," but sometimes it has the sound of expelling breath, as in "hospital."

English, however, has been blessed with an overabundance of absurdities. The curious thing that I have found from personal observation is that while these absurdities drive native English-speakers up a wall, foreigners like myself who learn English as a second language take them in stride and just shrug them off. In fact, children from other countries whose English is their second language famously outperform native speakers of English in spelling bees in the United States! Just look at the winners of the nationwide spelling bees! Logically, it should be the other way around: native English speakers should have no difficulties in spelling words while foreigners—used to phonetical alphabets—should be going mad with frustration (this is a fertile field of research for psycholinguists). Incidentally, other countries do not have such a thing as spelling bees; a word in Italian, in Polish, in Spanish or Portuguese is written and spelled exactly as it sounds.

The underlying fact of the matter—the real problem—is that there are really no rules to pronouncing and, therefore, to spelling words in English (an unknown word can be pronounced in any number of ways). The letter a in "hat" is pronounced differently in "hate," "cap" and "cape," "stag" and "stage" simply by putting a (silent) "e" at the end. "Minute" as in time is pronounced differently from "minute" as in small, "live" in television is pronounced differently from "live" as

a state of being. I is pronounced differently in "filed" and "filled." Oo is pronounced differently in "cool" and "blood." "Me" is pronounced differently if you add a letter at the end (e.g., "men, met"). Read/red/read; the same word ("read") is pronounced differently on *how* it is used and there is no indication with the spelling of the word to indicate which way to pronounce it. "Mouth" and "ply" sound distinctly different by themselves as opposed to when they are put together ("Plymouth"). And some people may think twice about naming their daughter Alice since when you split up the name, there is an unpleasant result: a lice. Clearly, the main culprits to the problem are the vowels—and yes, I know that some words irritate English speakers because they contain a silent consonant (e.g., the k in "know," the gh in "fight," and the vowel e in "fate" —as opposed to "fat"), but many languages have the same silent aberration. No, the overwhelming problem lies in the vowels.

Now, let me digress for a second. Cardinal Richelieu established the *Académie française* in 1635 for the primary purpose of creating a French dictionary. Samuel Johnson wrote his dictionary in 1755, which codified the spelling of words in English and, in doing so, codified the absurdities. Benjamin Franklin attempted to resolve the absurdities inherent in the English language by introducing new letters in his *Scheme for a New Alphabet and a Reformed Mode of Spelling* published in 1768, thereby making all letters phonetic, but his accomplishment fell on deaf ears. Later, Noah Webster, in a fit of American chauvinism, decided to compile a dictionary from an American standpoint (*An American Dictionary of the English Language*) rather than the British perspective. Here, he had the chance to finally make matters right. He did not. He just made a few minor changes to a word here and there (spelling "color" instead of "colour"). Thus, was lost a golden opportunity. Recently, a Canadian, on an impulse of Canadian chauvinism, announced he is writing a Canadian-flavored dictionary. It awaits Australians and kiwis

to follow suit.

Anyway, to return to the topic at hand, the problem could be greatly disentangled simply with marks to denote how vowels are pronounced in a word. Although some languages, e.g., Baha Indonesia, do not use any marks at all, languages such as Swedish, Italian, German, Czech, French, Serbian, Danish, Afrikaans, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish and (especially) Vietnamese do and they do so in order to indicate whenever the letter in a word violates the usual mandatory pronunciation or, because there are more sounds than the letters that the Roman alphabet can accommodate and no one has seen fit to simply create new letters (the alphabet itself seems to lack imagination; many of the letters are slight physical variations of V (A,W,M,N,U) I (J,L,H,T) and F (E,P,B,R); the similarities are more obvious when written instead of typed). Actually, that is not entirely correct, Spanish having inserted ñ, ch and ll while Swedish added Å, Ö, and Ä. In English, this remedy could easily be implemented, and in a matter of a few generations it could become commonplace, especially if it is perceived as being trendy. Thus, hät; but "hate" would stay the same since in the latter case the a is pronounced exactly as in the alphabet, like änd and hibernate. And so on.

The trick would be to resist the temptation to have different marks for each of the different sounds for each vowel; it would become unmanageable and clumsy since this problem is rampant in the language; for the same reason, this solution should not be used when multiple vowels occur together, as in "condition," "guard," and "serious."

However, English has two distinct advantages. First, is the brevity of the words. The majority of commonly used words in English are of one or two syllables. This characteristic allows for communication to flow smoothly and quickly. For example, "Duck!" has tangible results, whereas "Agacha la cabeza!" will result in being hit on the noggin with a rock

before the last word is uttered. The other characteristic is one that it shares with German and it is that it can put two words together which, again, condenses time and effort (e.g., lackluster).

Finally, I would like to close by pointing out the role of English as cement.

Conquest of other territories has always been the historical norm throughout the world. In such instances, the territories were annexed outright, along with any surviving peoples (although the Mongols preferred to slaughter the inhabitants for fun). In the 19th century, conquest of Africa and Asia by European powers was qualitatively different in that the conquered territories became colonies. Hitherto, a colony was an offshoot of the motherland, as when the Greeks established colonies in the Italian peninsula by transferring numbers of its land hungry citizens to the new territories. The 19th century colonies included huge areas of territories which included a myriad of different ethnic groups, each with its own laws, customs and language, always hostile towards each other (e.g., consult [Murdock's](#) ethnic map of Africa). When these colonies became independent, as countries, in the 20th century, they still retained the different ethnic groups and languages. Kenya, Nigeria and India are examples (in the case of India, religious fanaticism broke it up into two large areas, India and Pakistan, each in turn still having different ethnic groups within their artificial borders). The point here is that, although countries like Nigeria, Pakistan, and India have different local languages, English serves as a unifying force. This is enhanced by the fact, as mentioned above, that English has become an important international language of commerce, science, etc. Furthermore, knowing English is an important status symbol by the citizens of those countries and implies that a person able to speak English is well-educated (in Holland, Sweden and Nepal, English is a second language).

The end result is that the number of what could be considered English-speaking countries is double what would be considered as such if one were to just include the countries where English is the native language. It is no exaggeration to state that if it was not for the English language being the glue that holds certain countries together, some of those countries would break up. Indeed, English holds Singapore together.

And that is another one of the many benefits that the English language has conferred on humanity.