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ON LANGUAGE

The Keypad Solution

By AMMON SHEA

There is a long and noble history of trying to change the English language's notoriously illogical system of spelling. The fact that through, rough, dough, plough, hiccough and trough all end with -ough, yet none of them sound the same as any of the others, is the sort of thing that has been vexing poets and learners of English for quite some time. Proponents of "fixing" this wayward orthography have included some of the most prominent names in American history. [Benjamin Franklin](#) suggested changing the alphabet, and [Andrew Carnegie](#) provided money for people to study the problem. [President Theodore Roosevelt](#) issued an edict in 1906 that gave the Government Printing Office a list of 300 words with new spellings: problem cases like artisan, kissed and woe were to be changed to artizan, kist and wo. Roosevelt was largely ignored by the G.P.O., and the matter was soon dropped. Although this issue has been extensively studied and argued over by these and other eminent thinkers, there has been an almost complete lack of success in effecting any substantial progress.

And so it is rather bizarre that the first widespread change in how people spell English words appears to have come from a group of (largely) young people sending [text messages](#) to one another with cellular phones and other electronic devices. You may not like seeing the phrase "LOL — U R gr8" on the page, but it is common enough that you are likely to understand it. Why have such inadvertent "reforms" succeeded where generations of dedicated intellectual attempts have not? And will they last?

For most of the history of the language, English speakers took a lackadaisical approach to spelling; the notion that a word should always be spelled the same way is a much more recent invention than the language itself. The standardization of English spelling began in the 16th century, and although it is unclear at exactly what point our spelling became set, what is certain is that ever since it happened, people have complained that the rules of spelling, such as they are, just don't make sense.

Perhaps the most successful attempt at spelling reform (at least in America) was wrought by Noah Webster, who managed to forever make Americans view the British honour and theatre as off-kilter. Some portion of Webster's determination to change -our to -or and -re to -er was due to nationalist fervor; he wanted his countrymen to break free of the orthographic bonds of their oppressors. He was noticeably less successful in convincing Americans of the utility of many of his other ideas, like spelling oblique as obleek, machine as masheen and prove as proov.

I contacted several of the spelling-reform organizations in operation today to ask them about their feelings on adopting text-messaging shorthands as a kind of spelling reform. Alan Mole, the president of the American Literacy Council, when asked if his group had ever considered allying itself with the texters, said that it had not, although he added that text messaging "does serve the purpose of raising consciousness" about the fact "that there are different ways of making people spell." The council, which has picketed the Scripps National Spelling Bee, prefers its own phonetic method of spelling reform, called SoundSpel. The group offers a downloadable version of SoundSpel (ententetranslator.com/IDL.htm) that can instantly translate an entire novel's worth of standard English into a more spellable, if less recognizable, form.

The sister organization of the council, the British-based Spelling Society, does not advocate adopting texting conventions, either, but this is less surprising, because it does not advocate adopting any particular approach at all. Jack Bovill, the society's president, wrote in an e-mail message: "Our present aim is to raise awareness of the problems caused by the irregularity of English spelling. We DO NOT support solutions."

Whether texting conventions are supported by organized spelling reformists or not, can they possibly solve the difficulty of spelling our troublesome language? David Crystal, the author of "Txtng: The Gr8 Db8," told me in an e-mail message that "there's nothing in texting to suggest spelling reform," noting that texting relies heavily on abbreviations, which he sees as creative stylings, not systematic improvements. He added that there is very little that is new about most of the abbreviations and lexical shortenings that make texting so maddening to so many. In fact, he said, with the exception of a few recent coinages like LOL, "virtually all the commonly used ones can be found in English a century ago." For example, bn (been), btwn (between) and wd (would) can all be found in a 1942 dictionary of abbreviations.

Naomi Baron, a professor of linguistics at American University and author of "Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World," shares Crystal's view. She predicts that the number of "textisms" will stop growing as people continue to develop more proficiency in using handheld devices and as the devices continue to grow more sophisticated than simple telephone touch pads. She adds that part of the appeal of texting shorthands is their novelty, and that that will fade.

Crystal did say that a certain amount of spelling reform might eventually come from the Internet: "People who try to impose reform 'top down' rarely succeed. But a 'bottom up' movement might well have some permanent effects." Given that the general attitude toward text messaging is that it comes from the linguistic bottom, it may well be that this masheen-sent lingua franca may prove to one day be less obleek than it is now.

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