

Truths about Spelling

Your correspondents in the last issue overlook Patrick Parrinder's valuable insight that good English, 'whether or not it is strictly based on today's Standard', should be the aim (LRB, 28 January). The most useful English, assessing it as a medium of communication (and what else is it for?), has the richest and widest vocabulary and the clearest and most logical rules of grammar. Richness is enhanced by allusions that require knowledge to catch. (This may be knowledge of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* or an early instalment of *Neighbours*, but the former is likely to be more interesting.) On regional dialects, we need to distinguish bad from neutral features. The Cockney's 'he ain't done nothing to nobody' is bad because the literal contradicts the intended meaning. The Lancastrian's short 'a' is neutral in relation to the RP speaker's long 'a,' or perhaps superior (my Liverpudlian father used to jeer: 'there's no "r" in bath').

Spelling became fixed in the 18th century to aid communication. The OED records 31 different spellings of 'merry' from the ninth century onwards; only two are permitted now (one of these only in certain combinations). Misspelling is objectionable because it checks the flow of communication. A friction-causing consequence of standardisation has been what *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* calls 'spelling pronunciation'. Old pronunciations are lost because they differ from a recently-adopted standard spelling. Oxford's River Cherwell is pronounced 'Charwell' by knowledgeable dons and very old Oxfordshire countryfolk, but most people follow the current spelling. My 18th-century map by Isaac Taylor spells it 'Charwell'.

One can deploy the Tower of Babel argument to defend use of Standard English. It is not many years since most people encountered throughout life only people speaking in the dialect they spoke themselves. Now, via radio and television, we are expected daily to comprehend dozens of different dialects. Standard English gives relief from this. De Quincey complained in 1823: 'On this Babel of an earth ... there are said to be about three thousand languages and jargons.' If within each language there are dozens of dialects then human sanity cries out for standardisation.

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