

# Speling errors a challenge to professionalism

*The journey from letters to digital media and back again*

**T**he advertisements for firewood make for amusing reading: *Microcarpa*, *beach logs*, *cyprus*. I get some belly laughs from *Radiator pine*. Being firewood, it is always delivered “bone dry” of course (not that bones are necessarily, or even usually, very dry).

Perhaps I shouldn't be amused. The advertisements are written by guys without the advantage of a good education, making a pitiful income from hard and dangerous work. We all know what they mean, so why is spelling important?

I lectured at the School of Forestry for a few years, and I would always deduct marks for bad spelling. In these computerised days, poor spelling is quite unnecessary, but some students couldn't be bothered to check their work before handing it in. For their project, the class were supposed to be acting as consultants, advising on a specific forestry project. What confidence would a client have in consultants who are too lazy to check their spelling? In making multi-million dollar decisions, how can a client be sure that the numbers are typed correctly, if the words are so obviously wrong?

Having said this, I have some sympathy with bad spellers. I suspect there is a loose correlation between good mathematical skills and bad spelling, just as good mathematicians are often attracted to classical music. Their brains are configured a certain way. Furthermore, I agree with George Bernard Shaw when he said that it was a great privilege to be born with English as your mother-tongue, and in payment for our good fortune and for the hardship others must go through to learn our illogical language, the least we can do is to standardise and simplify our written script.

Despite my sympathy with bad spellers, I have other reasons for favouring the orthodox versions. Consider the case of the recent forestry graduate who, on his first day at work, had to complete a tax deduction form. He wrote down his occupation as “*Forrester*”! In the eyes of his new employers, his mana automatically slipped a couple of notches. Similarly, I was slightly disturbed to discover many third-year students that would consistently misspell common forestry words (“*Prunning* and *thining*”). If an accountant or a lawyer asked a forester to assess a block of trees, and the report's starting sentence was “*The Douglas fur would not benefit by silverculture*”, the forester's credibility would take an unrecoverable hit. His subsequent words of wisdom would be irreparably devalued.

The next point is more subtle. If a speaker is trying to get across a heartfelt message, the effectiveness of his presentation will be reduced if he or she has a strange accent, or if he wears peculiar clothes, or if he constantly plays with the coins in his pocket. We humans need all the brain cells we can muster to absorb difficult concepts, and we can't spare any for such distractions. If a writer wishes

to inform, then poor spelling acts as a similar stumbling block. People quickly recognise the pattern of a correctly spelled word and absorb its meaning, but hesitate slightly if it's unexpected.

And what of texting? The upcoming generation seem to do most of their writing on their cell-phone, and it saves time (and money) to write “*Thnx for the prez u sent*”. But does this message have the right degree of solemnity, gratitude and respect that the message demands? Would the text “*Ur pa has died. Sorry*” be at all appropriate? If you said “*Value of radiata block is 500 grand + or -*”, how would this be received in an arbitration court, many years later? The medium is the message, or at least an essential part of it.

An interesting trend is developing in e-mail language. At first, e-mails tended to mimic letters in their formality: “*Dear Mr Jones, I note that blah-blah-blah, yours sincerely, William Black*” but the easy-going American influence quickly prevailed “*Hi Jonesy, blah-blah-blah, cheers, Bill*”. Now that cell-phones can handle e-mails, they are starting to contain a lot more text-language abbreviations, which is less formal still. Such shorthand is quick to write and is often unambiguous, so what is the problem?

There is no problem if the correspondence is between close friends, unambiguous, of trivial nature, and of ephemeral importance. But I wonder about the durability of any electronic medium, be it text messages, e-mail, web logs or Internet newsletters. I remember words stored in out-dated software on punch-cards, magnetic tape and floppy disks. Totally inaccessible now.

The invention of writing is a miracle of civilisation. It is like a time-machine or sorcerer's crystal ball, where you can communicate with the long dead. You can read the thoughts of a great forester from a century ago, or even the musings of a Greek philosopher from 500 B.C. - provided you have a good translation. But it is only the formality and standardisation of a language that allows a translation to work. Informal text messages will soon be totally indecipherable, even if they are stored in a readable form.

So, while there is definitely a place for the casualness and immediacy of electronic messages, carefully scripted words written on paper may endure for longer. In other words, there is still a place for the *Journal of Forestry* in hard-copy, for formal articles, and for correct spelling.

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