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Pronunciation has progressed but spelling is stuck in a time warp



THERE is a whole industry in pointing out the shortcomings of the English language, or the places where English is apparently illogical. Such lists raise a smile, and then get forgotten, but some raise general points about language that might be worth considering.

If it is one louse and two lice, why isn't it one house and two hicc? The answer is simply that the two have belonged to formally different groups of nouns as far as back as we can trace the Germanic languages.

Things that start as different may continue to be different. We might expect that an irregularity such as louse/lice would have been removed over history (just as the irregularity of help as the past tense of help has vanished). One common observation from the study of language change is that very common forms are less likely to change than rare ones.

Since lice (especially in numbers greater than one) are a constant threat to humans, the use of the word is common, and the irregularity remains. A form such as oxen presumably remains not because it is now uncommon, but because it has been common for so long.

Misled looks like the past tense of a verb to mislead. There are a couple of other forms we can raise here. Why isn't spoonfed the past of to spoonfeed, and why, like varroom, does barroom not indicate a sound? With

spoonfed, there are technical arguments, based on the fact that in English ordinary words do not end in "nf" (or even "nph").

But all these words are really suffering from is the demise of the hyphen: mis-led, spoon-fed and bar-room would not be ambiguous. It is just that the fashion these days is to print such things with no hyphen.

Why if you slow up do you do the same thing as when you slow down, even though up and down are opposites? The same question arises in relation to filling in or filling out a form. Verbs such as slow up, look out, look up, put up with, and so on are called phrasal verbs.

Although the second (or third) parts in these phrasal verbs look like prepositions, they often have a very different function and meaning from the corresponding preposition.

For example, in drink up, eat up, use up, the "up" does not indicate a direction, but completion. In bottle up, cork up, wall up, there is an implication of enclosure, perhaps under pressure. In measure up, shape up, smarten up, tone up, there is an implication of improvement.

But dig up and snatch up might really mean that there is movement in a direction away from the centre of the Earth.

If we say "More than one of them" why do we continue "is in danger" and not "are in danger" (after all, two is more than one, and

it would be "Two of them are in danger")? This question was answered by my colleague Paul Warren a few weeks ago: the "one" is closer to the verb than the "more", and seems to have captured the agreement with the verb.

Why do we have so many words that are spelt the same way, but pronounced differently? These words are called homographs: words such as tear for fluid from the eye or for to rip, invalid for a sick person or the opposite of valid, row meaning argument or series.

Where stress is involved (as with invalid or subject), nouns and verbs or nouns and adjectives have different stress patterns, which can show up particularly in two and three-syllable words. With most of the others, we have to realise that our spelling system was designed to deal with the English language as it was approximately 500 years ago.

A lot has changed since then, and the pronunciation of individual words has often changed. The spelling, though, tends to remain fairly fixed. Blood, food and wood once really had the same vowel sound in them (it would have sounded rather similar to the present-day "oh" sound).

So we are spelling for 500-year-old English, and pronouncing for today.

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GOT A QUESTION?

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