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SIMPLIFIED SPELLING OR SIMPLE-MINDED BUSINESSMEN?

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

-- "Through the Looking-Glass", Chapter 5.

Those who like to develop their skill of believing impossible things before breakfast had a good chance in a recent front-page news article in the Wall Street Journal. The headline was "Organizashun Urjez Chanjez in Speling To Simplify English."

Did the Wall Street Journal have a lapse of common sense? Or did some wag on the news staff decide to calm depression jitters by giving businessmen a laugh? The answer isn't clear because the article was played like a serious, page-one news story, with carryover to page 12.

In case you didn't recognize it, the crazy headline you just read above is a sample of the spelling "reform" developed by a crusading group of businessmen. They call their cause "Better Education thru Simplified Spelling, Inc. The acronym is BEtSS.

BEtSS' executive director, Abraham Citron (who calls himself Ayb), says his "biggest problem is being taken seriously." He seems to be surmounting that problem rather well by getting dignified free advertising on the front page of the Wall St. Journal.

BEtSS says it is promoting "natural" spelling. Probably some public relations man thought up that word to try to sell the product -- something like "natural" wholegrain cereals. The idea is to eliminate superfluous letters and (in its own words) "spel sum wordz uezing chanjez that the organizashun urjez."

The lead sentence of the Wall Street Journal extends an invitation to the businessmen of America to "help stamp out illiteracy, bolster national productivity, and create a better life for millions." Are those altrustic goals the real appeal to businessmen?

Its more likely that BEtSS hopes Simplitied Spelling will appeal to businessmen as a cover for the fact that their secretaries cannot spell. The great advantage of Simplified Spelling is that there need not be any agreement on which simplified spelling is simpler. Even BEtSS spells simplified words differently in its own brochure.

The reason why secretaries and new job recruits cannot spell is that in the last 20 years, the elementary schools have not taught most children to read, write and spell by the phonics method. Phonics means teaching a child the phonetic sounds, syllables and letters of the English language. When you train a child in phonics, you give him the building blocks of words so he can "unlock" (read or spell) them himself.

Instead of learning how to read, write and spell the syllables of the English language, most children in the last three decades have been taught by what is called the "whole-word" or "look-say" method. This is a process of teaching the child to memorize a handful of words by associating them with pictures on the same page. A child taught by the "whole-word" system instead of by phonics may do such ridiculous things as read "pony" for "horse," or read "vacation" for "holiday."

Some modern educators don't think it is important whether or not the child makes that kind of substitution. For example, Yetta and Ken Goodman of the University of Arizona stated in a press interview, "Whether he says pony or horse is not the point. The kid who substitutes pony would only do it because he is so preoccupied with the sense (of what he is reading) that he puts in something that seems to fit the context. He's predicting."

With the inane stories that fill most of the elementary school readers, one could argue that it doesn't matter whether the child is really reading or is merely "predicting" or guessing the words. But when it comes to handling business orders, or filling prescriptions, or using instructions to operate machinery, the difference can be millions of dollars, or even life or death.

The shocking rate of illiteracy among young people today is extremely costly to business. Instead of grasping at the faddism of BEtSS, businessmen should start a campaign to insist that the schools produce a better product for the billions that taxpayers spend on education. And the most successful system is the least costly: teach first-graders the English language by the phonics method and they will be able to spell.