

By Lori Pankonin

While at a family wedding recently, I learned that one of my cousins has studied nine languages. Whoa! How can one mind handle that? That doesn't mean he's fluent in nine languages but still.

It was also interesting that his son did not take such interest in foreign language and was allowed to utilize sign language as his alternative language in college. I wonder if the signs for run and jump are different in each language or if there are some universal actions with signing. Obviously I don't know much about it although I do find it fascinating.

I have studied some Spanish and find that even though the genders of the various verbs are somewhat confusing, the pronunciation and spelling of words is very true to form. I cannot imagine trying to learn English as a second language.

Each vowel has a different sound depending what other letters its with, however the big kicker is there are exceptions to every rule. Yes, the rule of whether a vowel uses the long or the short sound or whether it's silent can be different in any situation "just because."

Use 'i' before "e" except after "c". How long do you suppose it took to dream up that rule? And where's the logic? And whoever decided we needed to combine vowels? Can't they just each do their own job? And why do we have silent letters? Was it like a scrabble game and more points were allotted for each letter?

If Webster wrote the first dictionary, where did he get the words? Everyone makes mistakes, but have you ever wondered what happens if a word is misspelled in the dictionary? Forget that. Where would we be if we started questioning if words in the dictionary are misprints?

Okay. So I'm putting way too much thought into this. I guess preschoolers and young students are learning to read and spell in English with much success every day. I did it and don't recall it being that tough. If you're reading this, you did it.

What do I mean English as a second language? People are learning it as a primary language all the time. But face it, the language offers some pretty peculiar sidebars. Take these sentences, for instance, which put the same words in totally different contexts.

The bandage was wound around the wound. The farm was used to produce produce. The dump was so full it had to refuse more refuse. A bass was painted on the head of the bass drum. I didn't object to the object. The insurance was invalid for the invalid. They were too close to the door to close it. The wind was too strong to wind the sail. Upon seeing the tear in the painting, I shed a tear.

Two words in each sentence are spelled exactly the same, yet they are pronounced differently and have totally different meanings.

Likewise, even though my Australian relatives speak English, it's always interesting to compare our different terminologies for different things. Again, how confusing to understand the language with tricks like the following.

Why do we say something is out of whack? Is it ever in whack?

Why do "slow down" and "slow up" mean the same thing? On the same note, "fat chance" and "slim chance" mean the same thing. Yet, a "wise man" and a "wise guy" are opposites as are "overlook" and "oversee."

Why do “tug” boats push their barges?

Why are they called “stands” when they are made for sitting?

Why is it called “after dark” when it really is “after light”?

Doesn't “expecting the unexpected” make the unexpected expected?

Of all words, why isn't “phonics” spelled the way it sounds? Did the “f” need a break one day so “ph” was voted to fill in? Maybe Webster was using those magnetic letters on his refrigerator and had already run out of f's, so it was just a matter of improvising. Wait. Webster probably came before the refrigerator.

The mind is a pretty amazing thing. We often times just learn and don't give the why or the how a second thought. Good thing because there's not much we could do about it.

Ta ta.

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