Linguistic notes on English orthography and current usage

On the letters 'ph' in English

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The following inter-related essays deal with matters of current English usage. The first is on an orthographic theme, while the second is on a lexical one.

L. M. BOYD authors a daily, nationally syndicated column entitled "Trivia," which appears in numerous newspapers throughout the USA. He often writes about matters of English language. We have already had occasion to alert readers of *ET* to some of his work (see *ET* 20:3 [2004], pp. 25–26). I do not mean to be picking on Mr. Boyd, but considering his track record, perhaps the time has come for his quitting pontificating on matters of English grammar, pronunciation, and the history of the language.

In his column for April 27, 2004 (*The Orange County Register*, Santa Ana, California), he writes: "Is there any word in English, besides 'shepherd', that contains a '*ph*' not pronounced like an '*f*'? Doubt it." Although it is a rare phenomenon for the digraph <ph> to be pronounced as a sequence of the two phonemes /p/ + /h/, we can mention the following: *upheave* (and derivatives), *upheld* (and derivatives), *upholstery* (and derivatives), *cupholder*, *haphazard*, *loophole*, not to mention hyphenated words, such as *top-heavy* (which we are not counting here). Then there are cases of the change of [f] > [p]: *diphthong* and *monophthong* (and derivatives thereof respectively), and *diphtheria* (where many speakers pronounce [dɪpθɔŋ], [manɪpθɔŋ], and [dɪpθɪriə] respectively). There are probably further cases of <ph> not being pronounced as [f].

I would like readers to notify me at akaye@fullerton.edu of additional examples of the phenomenon described above. I shall tabulate all of them and offer them for a subsequent issue of *ET*. ■

On Beedham on Pinker on 'computer mouse'

THE MAJOR conclusion of Steven Pinker's words-and-rules theory (1999) is that the workings of language are essentially two: (1) memorized words, or as Pinker puts it: "Words in the sense of memorized links between sound and meaning" (1999:269), and (2) regular rules, or to use Pinker's exact words: "... regular inflection is computed by a mental operation that does not *need* access to the contents of memory; rules in the sense of operations that assemble the words into combinations whose meaning can be computed from the meanings of the words and the way they are arranged" (*ibid.*). The fact that native speakers of English are divided in the plural forms of 'computer mouse' offers evidence that some of them use memory, while others use the regular pluralization rule.[1] Pinker devotes considerable space to this topic and writes that in 1992 he surveyed several dozen ads which used plural

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headings for various computer paraphernalia, except for the mouse:

"Desktops-Notebooks-Monitors-Printers-Keyboards-Mouse" (1999:174). More than half of them, however, used *mice*. He then goes on to affirm that "many people ... still wince at *mice*, though not to the point of using *mouses*, which remains rare among native speakers" (*ibid.*).

I have conducted numerous surveys over the past several years with over 1,000 students at California State University, Fullerton concerning their usage of the plural of 'computer mouse'. Granted, college students may be younger and better educated than the average American English speaker; however, I believe other linguists conducting a similar linguistic experiment on usage will come up with similar statistical results to mine. About 90% of those sampled offered the plural *mouses*, while the remainder voted for *mice*.[2] Insofar as my own California dialect is concerned, *mouses* is the correct form and *mice* refers exclusively to rodents. I thus have a semantic bifurcation similar to the two plurals of *brother*: the regular *brothers* means the siblings, whereas *brethren* refers to ecclesiastical or church associates.

To reiterate, Pinker's assertion that *mouses* is rare is inaccurate, according to my samplings. Commenting on the alleged rarity of *mouses*, Beedham states (2002:362): "[S]teven [P]inker asks, why is it that the noun *mouse* in the sense of 'computer mouse' appears not to have a plural? It certainly isn't *mouses*, there is no question of that, but is it *mice*? The answer is: No, it is not." The truth of the matter is that Pinker never states anywhere in his volume that 'computer mouse' "appears not to have a plural." Nothing of the sort! Beedham's claim that the plural of 'computer mouse' is nonexistent is certainly erroneous, and therefore, the word *mouse* with its two possible plurals, which we have substantiated in dictionaries and in samplings, supports Pinker's theory that language comprises a lexicon of memorized words as well as a grammar of nonmemorized rules, thus justifying the title of his book – *Words and Rules*.

I also claim that if my bifurcated semantics is typical of native speakers of English (and I believe it is), meaning plays a significant role in differentiating the 'rodent' from the 'computer device', paralleling *brothers* vs. *brethren* and, for some native speakers, *oxen* 'animals' versus *oxes*, as in *dumb oxes* or *clumsy oxes* (people), *geese* 'animals' versus *silly gooses* (people), and *lice* 'insects' versus *filthy louses* (people).

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Endnotes

1. This goes hand in hand with other facts; e.g., *dove*, the past tense of *dive* (memorized and irregular) and *dived*. Most Americans use the former, while the British use the latter.

2. Those affirming that they used *mice* and not *mouses* could be influenced by a prescriptive virus that just will not allow the regular rule of pluralization to apply. Several of those belonging to this group even confided that this prescriptivism might have influenced their respective choices.

The American Heritage Dictionary (2000:1149) offers *mice* and *mouses* as the plurals of 'computer mouse'. This same information is reported in this dictionary's third edition (1993:892). The implication that *mice* is more common (by listing it first, as is done) has not been confirmed by my surveys of usage. *The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* (1996:945) reports *mice*, but states that *mouses* is a possibility. *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1996:1257) lists only *mice* as the plural of

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'computer mouse', which is also so stipulated in *The Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995:923). Peters (2004:360) states that "among computer users [the plural of *mouse*] is often *mouses* [in addition to *mice*]. *Wired Style* (1995) [sic] (Hale 1996) prefers *mouses* and dictionaries including the *New Oxford* (1998) and the Australian *Macquarie* (1997) acknowledge it as an alternative [to *mice*] for that purpose." ■

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