Are Coming, which plays games with a letter in the Cyrillic alphabet (which is not an r).

During the 1956 presidential elections the Hudson County Democratic Committee in New York erected a huge billboard sign high atop a gasolinestation near the Holland Tunnel, which people driving into and out of Manhattan could not help seeing. The sign intentionally misspelled the name of the Democratic candidate and read: “On November 6 vote for Adlai E. Stevenson.” The caption under the picture of the billboard in The New York Times read: “Think! Sign atop a gas station near entrance to Holland Tunnel in Jersey City bears an intentional misspelling.” A Committee member stated, “the planned mistake paid off wonderfully and got more attention than if the name were spelled correctly.” Stevenson’s reaction is not known. Being a master of the English language and certainly a careful speller, he most likely would have shaken his head at this kind of childish electioneering.

During the 1988 presidential campaign both candidates, reading from prepared notes, made interesting slips of the eye: Governor Dukakis spoke of equipping aircraft carriers with modern “musicians,” and Vice President Bush said: “I hope I stand for anti-bigotry, anti-Semitism, anti-racism.” These slips were essentially due to the similarity of the initial letters or part of the word, like the typographical errors of similarity or familiarity cited above, but probably also due to the immense fatigue and exhaustion brought on by a presidential campaign.

When one’s name is deliberately or even unconsciously misspelled, or when it is knowingly misspelled, a person perceives it as a slap at his pride. One does not have to be psychologically sophisticated to see in it a deliberate discourtesy, an intended injury to his dignity.

Missing or misplaced punctuation marks naturally fall within the net of the E.T. gremlins. Read the sentence “Let’s eat, children” without the comma and see the difference it makes. There are many examples of how sentences with improper punctuation marks sound ludicrous. For example, a doctor’s familiar words “say Aah,” while examining a patient’s throat, came out in print as “say Haa.”

On guard against such a potential E.T. virus is an army of professional proofreaders who, like electronic inspectors at airports searching for concealed weapons, are supposed to weed out errors before the final printing. Proofreaders use a special set of marks, signs and symbols to indicate on the galley proofs the required corrections—deletions, insertions, size or type of fonts (lower case letters, capitals, bold face), space notations (size of paragraph indents, missing spaces between words or extra spaces within words, type and length of dash), etc. To the uninitiated these marks look like hieroglyphics of an ancient people. (See the entire p. 1081, Proofreaders’ Marks, in the Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, 1991.)

I had better stop here. While I am pointing out and correcting various typographical errors, the gremlins of E.T. may play a trick on me, mischievously introduce new errors, and attribute them to me.

ETYMOLOGICA OBSCURA

Jeux d’Esprit

If the European Community has achieved nothing else it has produced one magnificent acronym: ESPRIT, the European Strategic Programme of Research in Information Technology. Indeed, there might well have been equal willingness in Brussels to launch a program in, say, Ichthyological Taxonomy for the sake of such a satisfying acronym.

Information technology was, however, the favored field, and the ESPRIT program was launched a few years back to promote European research of this type. Information technology, or IT, covers areas as diverse as automatic speech recognition and synthesis, telephone and other communications engineering, database management, human-computer interaction, and indeed computer science itself. Communication via computer is at the heart of IT. For instance, a much-used catchword of IT is “the
The article on Hindi words [XVIII, 1] prompts me to ask if anyone knows the etymology of bungee ‘springy cord.’ I have always assumed that it must be Hindi because of its look, but I have no evidence of that. At this moment, the word is most commonly used for the elastic tether by which daredevils attach themselves to a bridge or building before leaping off into space, a sport that was graphically depicted in the opening scene of the movie, To Live and Die in L.A. My daughter tells me, however, that the term was used at least ten years ago for the elastic cords used for tying schoolbooks to the luggage rack at the back of a bicycle.

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[The dozen or so American and British dictionaries I checked are silent on the origin of bungee; though The Australian National Dictionary suggests that it is related to bungie ‘India rubber; an eraser,’ neither is given an etymology. A bungee consists of a number of strands of rubber bound together in a tough woven cloth covering. The term familiar to me from my sailing days is shock cord, for it is often used to relieve the strain on a mooring or anchor line. However, as Mr. Levitt’s daughter pointed out, it is usually found as a stretchy tie used to bind things up, as a reeved mainsail on its boom, light articles to a luggage rack, etc.—Editor.]