



*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 gasoline station 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. Stevieson." 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" [munitions], 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 mispronounced, 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 program chairman prepared in longhand a few laudatory introductory remarks about a lecturer: ". . . I bring you a man among men. He is out of place when among cheaters and scoundrels. He feels quite at home when surrounded by persons of integrity . . ." As if by a devilish design a number of errors in punctuation were made in the process of transcribing the prepared introductory notes, resulting in "Ladies and Gentlemen, I bring you a man. Among men, he is out of place. When among cheaters and scoundrels, he feels quite at home, . . ." and so on [(*"A Punctuation Parable," VIII, 4,16*)].

Computer errors may not technically fall within the category of typographical print errors, but they are nonetheless mistakes, and can be quite costly. In July of 1962 the spacecraft Mariner I veered off

course about four minutes after its launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida, and had to be blown up in the air. The reason: an inadvertent omission of a *hyphen* from the computer's mass of coded mathematical ascent guidance instructions. The spacecraft was to transmit scientific observations about Venus from a distance of 36,000,000 miles. Its cost: ten million dollars.

Every word or combination of words carries within itself a potential E.T. bug. Even monosyllabic words are not immune, as when 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. viruses 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



paperless office"; IT is supposed to replace all those filing cabinets and folders with a chip or two here and a CD-ROM there.

IT is not much in evidence, however, in the actions of ESPRIT itself. For instance, *paperless* is emphatically not the first adjective that springs to mind to describe the office of an ESPRIT participant. The more typical ESPRIT decor is, in fact, wall-to-wall paper—much of it in curious Euro-colours like mauve and puce. The European Community has, in the few decades of its existence, established quite a reputation for generating paper output on a scale that no mere national government has ever aspired to: like every other Euro-initiative ever launched, ESPRIT generates Euro-text by the ream. This is rather depressing, because it suggests that there is no escaping the remorseless Euro-bumf generator even for a program with an avowed aim of paper reduction. However, in its own way ESPRIT has indeed made a small step towards reduction of the European paper mountain. Perhaps inspired by its own acronym, ESPRIT insists that each ESPRIT project, however complex its title, choose a single-word acronym by which it may be identified; and ESPRIT itself never refers to projects by their full names, but only by the acronyms.

Whole forests may be saved by this, as "Speech Processing and Recognition using Integrated Neurocomputing Techniques" turns to SPRINT, and "Correct Hardware Design Methodology: Towards Formal Design and Verification for Provably Correct VLSI Hardware" becomes CHARME. (These are real ESPRIT projects, by the way. They are participants in ESPRIT's Basic Research Actions, or BRA—a less conspicuous support system.)

A study of successful ESPRIT acronyms (i.e., the acronyms of grant applications which proved successful) suggests certain guidelines. The ideal acronym should resemble ESPRIT itself by expressing a concept with international acceptance. It should preferably be French in origin, since that may lessen potential irritation in Brussels at the fact that the acronym invariably represents an English word sequence. So a group which plans to build a Partially Automated Restricted-Access Voice Input/Output Network would do well to call it PAR-AVION. Likewise, a consortium studying Algebraic Methods In Expert Neural Systems might call their project AMIENS (though AMEX would also do quite nicely).

Just as the right acronym can be the key to a project's success, so can an ill-chosen acronym lead to disaster. Perhaps that is what happened with my unsuccessful proposal for a Multiple Entry Reconfigurable Dialogue Editor ("This project stinks"—Referee A), or my Comprehensive Universal Labelled Database Enumerating System Architecture Concepts ("Will this work lead anywhere?").

In fact the area of acronym selection is so important that it seems to me there is a technology gap here. Moreover, a project to fill it is just what ESPRIT ought to support. So I plan to call on colleagues

throughout Europe to join a consortium which will design and build a Computational Human-Assisted Multi-Purpose Acronym Generator/Neologism Evaluator. All we have to do is think up an acronym for it.

Anne Cutler  
Cambridge, England



## EPISTOLAE

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.

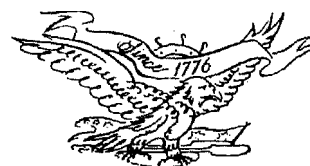
Lee Levitt  
New York City

[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 reefed mainsail on its boom, light articles to a luggage rack, etc.—Editor.]

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