Errors & Excitations: William Steig's *The Bad Speller*

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ABSTRACT: Spelling errors are among the surface features of a written text that can lead readers to judge adversely the intelligence of the writer. Jokes about unconventional spelling frequently circulate, sometimes "punching up" (e.g., Donald Trump's "covfefe" meme) and sometimes "punching down" (e.g., teachers mocking student writing on social media). We should consider spelling errors, or unconventional spelling, to be matters of not just convention but also style. Sometimes, for instance, spelling errors are instances of language play, as in William Steig's children's book The Bad Speller (1970), in which Steig shares 44 whimsical drawings of animals, fairy tales, and idiosyncratic scenes, each captioned with a one-sentence description riddled with unconventional spellings. Steig's book is a meditation on the quirks of the English language and suggests that teachers, among others, might productively approach error and convention with a spirit of playfulness and a sense of humor.

KEYWORDS: error; humor; language play; satire; spelling; style; William Steig

> "Add a little bit to the end there. Spell it again" —Dan Quayle
>
> "It's potato, not potatoe" —Bart Simpson
>
> "The heart of our trouble is with our foolish alphabet. It doesn't know how to spell, and can't be taught" —Mark Twain
>
> "The ability to spell grows slowly out of a number of different kinds of encounters with words—with the sounds of words (phonological encounters), the looks of words on paper (visual encounters), the feel of words as the hand moves to form them in writing (kinesthetic encounters), and the meaning of words as they take their places in the contexts of sentences (semantic encounters)." —Mina Shaughnessy

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Written and illustrated by William Steig, *The Bad Speller* (1970) is a collection of simple, amusing drawings with captions full of unconventionally spelled words.[1] I spent hours as a six- and seven-year-old laughing at Steig's anthropomorphic animals, his offbeat visual take on Biblical and fairy tale characters, and what I later came to see as his aesthetically intentional use of spelling errors. I loved humor, and my big sister Anna taught me to read a year before kindergarten. Next to *The Bad Speller,* my second favorite book was a collection of Victorian limericks by Edward Lear who, like Steig, combined text, language play, and crude drawings. I loved Bugs Bunny cartoons which had a sensibility and a fascination with anthropomorphism that paired well with Steig. My parents' record collection included as much Allan Sherman and Bill Cosby as Rodgers & Hammerstein. I remember lying on the carpet and spinning *Don Adams Meets the Roving Reporter,* a series of offbeat, audio sketches in which the *Get Smart* star voices both a field reporter and the eccentric characters he interviews. A typical gag[2] has the roving reporter waiting at the top of Mt. Everest so he can interview the first person to climb Mt. Everest. I guess fairly obscure, goofy, erudite humor was attractive to an introverted little boy who liked books, records, and gags. But why were Steig's *spelling errors* funny?

Basic writing professionals have long worked to understand, contextualize, and theorize all kinds of errors. From Mina Shaughnessy's groundbreaking study of the logic and consistency of errors in student writing to Min-Zhan Lu's provocative juxtaposition of the unconventionality of student writing and the unconventionality of postmodern literary texts, most of this scholarship focuses on errors in college classrooms, while less work in the field has looked at the circulation of errors in non-academic contexts. Further, little research has been done on the humorous dimension of errors, despite, for instance, the preponderance of social media memes with funny ambiguities and misunderstandings stemming from a misplaced comma or misspelled word. I would like to posit *The Bad Speller* as a text that can show basic writing scholars, teachers, and students the productive potential of irreverence and humor. We already laugh at errors, for good or for bad, so why not take an additional step toward playfulness and toward acknowledgement and cultivation of an *aesthetics of error,* in which we frame errors as a matter of style more so than a matter of correctness?[3] In this essay, I offer a close reading of the stylish errors in Steig and work to reveal both the consistency and intentionality of the spelling errors and the ways the text's errors help Steig to reveal deeper emotional truths. Ultimately, my hope is that this close reading is suggestive of ways that teachers of basic writing can approach style

and sentence-level correctness with a sense of humor and an even greater openness to unconventionality.

Steig and the Bad Speller

William Steig (1907-2003) worked as a cartoonist and artist for four decades before he turned error into spectacle in *The Bad Speller.* Born in 1907 to Polish-Jewish immigrants, Steig grew up in the Bronx, in a house full of children and the arts. His parents were socialist-activists and loved to expose their kids to opera, Shakespeare, left politics, and the emerging field of psychoanalysis (Lorenz 13). When Steig arrived at *The New Yorker* in 1930, he brought these influences with him and used them in his work—a Gramscian "organic intellectual," if you will. Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci theorized that culture workers from the working class had an organic connection to class struggle and hence a great potential for illuminating how hegemony circulates. Indeed, Steig's early cartoons in particular were inclined to portray New York tenements and immigrant communities. Professionally, he was class conscious; alongside artists like Charles Addams[4], Steig argued that *The New Yorker*'s cartoonists were as vital as their writers *(Funny Business).* Steig helped to cement the magazine's reputation for witty, urbane cartoons that are silly, smart, and sometimes dark. For decades, readers were as likely to subscribe for the cartoons as for the prose. For all his populist urges, Steig was aware of his own talent and could be assertive in how he dealt with editors. He ran in artistic, elite circles, socializing with coworkers like E.B. White and other notable New Yorkers like Langston Hughes. His sister-in-law during his first marriage was famed anthropologist Margaret Mead (Lorenz 68-69). Having inherited his parents' affinity for psychology, Steig was influenced by Freud disciple Wilhelm Reich, later discredited for his controversial "orgone accumulators," meant to help persons with mental health problems shed bad energy and retain "life energy." Steig liked Reich's idea that we have in us "pollution" we should release (Lorenz 74-77).

Steig's working-class populism co-existed with an occasionally highbrow sensibility. Throughout the 1930s–1950s, Steig published prolifically in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere, and showed work at curated exhibitions. The latter proved amenable to Steig's odd representations of the mental, emotional, and affective dimensions of the human condition, and he garnered acclaim. Compositionist Ken Macrorie wrote him a fan letter (Box 1, Folder 43). Updike praised the "psychological and philosophical resonance in Steig," arguing that although his work could be "unnerving" Steig is ultimately a

humanist (6). Auden found Steig's work dark and engaging. His *New Yorker* colleague Lee Lorenz wrote, "Steig uses his gifts not to parade his own feelings but to elucidate the feelings of others" (141). My favorite of his many *New Yorker* covers appeared on an issue that came out days before Thanksgiving and portrayed a turkey consulting a psychic who is crying as she gazes into her crystal ball. Silly, and yet Steig's empathy for both turkey and psychic are on display. He didn't begin writing children's stories until the 60s and this new pursuit provided another opportunity to explore the tragi-comic aspects of the human condition (e.g., being lost in "th woulds") and to engage the line between high and low culture. Steig once said, "I enjoy the physical act of writing. When I was a kid, before I could spell, I'd take a pencil and some paper and sit for hours 'writing' a story" (qtd. in Lorenz 121). It was perhaps inevitable that his career trajectory would lead to children's literature.

In his 60s, Steig started publishing stories and wordplay books, ostensibly for kids. His language play books include *CDC* and *CDB,* which contain whimsical illustrations captioned with rebuses comprised entirely of letters representing words ("CDC" = "See the sea"). Some of these pseudo-riddles are difficult to solve and represent Steig's interest in playful subversions of language conventions. *Speller* took a slightly different approach. Combining forty-four simple, black-and-white drawings of fairy tales, anthropomorphic animals, and mundane, melancholy human interactions with one-sentence captions (ironically rendered in red pen) full of unconventional spelling, *The Bad Speller* is a humorous look at the absurdities of English orthography. Figure 1's depiction of wide-eyed children "laust" not only in a forest but perhaps also in their own self-doubt and dread (an existential headspace known as "th woulds") shows Steig's irreverence toward English as well as his knack for putting errors in service to emotional insights.

Neither Steig's Wikipedia page nor his *New York Times* obituary mention *The Bad Speller.* Art historians and curators have written about the installations and anthologies showcasing Steig's paintings, illustrations, and scores of *New Yorker* covers, as well as Steig's decades-long membership in New York's literary and arts communities (*Funny Business;* Lorenz; Topliss). Scholars of children's literature and folklore (Archer; Cott; Spitz; Zipes) have studied Steig's allusion-rich stories like *Shrek!,* by far his best known work, and his Caldecott-winning *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, the latter occasionally banned for illustrations which depict police officers as literal pigs. But even biographical criticism and retrospectives of his career barely include *The Bad Speller* as a footnote. Steig himself called the book a "mistake" (qtd

Figure 1. Steig's Take on the Classic Fairy Tale. All Images from *The Bad Speller* Used with Permission of the Steig Family.

in Lorenz 167), lesser in significance in Steig's self-assessment than his more overtly psychological character studies.

As Bloom[5] shows, deviations from standard written English, from dialectical differences to rhetorical practices associated with the working class, have long signified less cultural capital and lower placement within class and race hierarchies. As such, those linguistic differences have been something to poke fun at. Given Steig's close ties to erudite circles, not the least of which was the staff of *The New Yorker,* bastion of high culture, where he did much of his most renowned work, one might hypothesize that *Speller* punches down or ridicules those who commit the mortal sin of a spelling error. Steig was close friends with his *New Yorker* colleague E.B. White, who co-wrote the most famous usage and style guide in the English language, and whose wife Katharine Sergeant Angell White, often credited for shaping the magazine's literary ethos, was Steig's editor for many years (Lorenz; Topliss). But I think *Speller* is more complicated and ambivalent, and shares only a passing connection with teachers poking fun at their student's errors on social media. Both involve a similar power dynamic: someone with greater access to higher-order, social-capital-yielding literacies ridiculing those with less access to those literate practices, but Steig's not singling out a real person. Instead he's doing something more subversive—creating a persona in the titular bad speller. Notice that the book isn't called *Bad Spelling*.

The persona alluded to in the title can be understood as a strawman for someone who is illiterate and, as the book's title overtly states, "bad," but also as an avant-garde documenter of life's foibles, and/or as a language poet, and/or as the precocious child with whom I could probably identify as a kid. The student whose writing is singled out and shared without permission online has a singular identity in that rhetorical situation. But who is Steig's bad speller? Hard to say. Children's literature scholar Karla Kushkin has said that Steig "relishes language, dropping in odd words and phrases the way an immigrant just learning English might" (qtd. in Lorenz 197). Kushkin's assessment reveals the ways that Steig found poetry and aesthetic beauty everywhere, including among the language of the vulnerable or the easily dismissed—children, immigrants, bad spellers, etc. Maybe he was *having* fun without *poking* fun.

The Bad Speller might bring to mind teachers ridiculing their students on social media, but the text might also remind us of Donald Trump's viral typo-cum-neologism *covfefe,* a recent example of a spelling error generating laughs. Trump appears to have intended to write "coverage," but the unconventional *covfefe* took on a life of its own, becoming in memes and late-night comedic monologues, an ambiguous word sometimes signifying the mythic liberal media's negative coverage of Trump, sometimes signifying coffee, and sometimes signifying Trump's stupidity or incompetence. The most obvious antecedent for this memed moment is then-VP Dan Quayle's 1992 misspelling of *potato,* at a spelling bee natch. Like Trump, Quayle became the object of jabs that inferred the spelling gaffe meant that Quayle was at best a lightweight and at worst a fool. These examples are perhaps unlikely to give us pause due not just to the regressive politics of Trump and Quayle, but also due to our viewing the humor as examples *of punching up* at powerful public figures. Further, we expect democratic engagement in the public sphere to at times include rigorous critique, satire, and even *ridicule* of both ideas and individuals.

But despite these affective differences, the lines between punching up and punching down and between satire and ridicule can be blurry. Consider jokes about Trump playing tennis in unflattering shorts or eating fast food. These jokes punch up at an unsympathetic public figure, yet your fat[6] friends may perceive these jokes not as taking aim at Trump but as taking aim at our bodies. I doubt many were hurt by *covfefe*, but the ridicule of unconventional spelling and other surface features can similarly imply that those who transgress convention and correctness lack cultural capital or intelligence. Horobin writes, "There's a tendency to view correct spelling

as an index of intelligence, moral fibre, and general trustworthiness" (3). Horobin points out that although the culture collectively claims spelling is a practical utility, spelling bees tend to use esoteric or highly specialized words (6). Our concerns with spelling are rooted in utilitarian concerns like getting a good job but there's also a more abstract "prestige value" in being correct (Horobin 37). So then who and what are we laughing at when we laugh at spelling errors? Twain observed that the "foolish alphabet" more so than the user of said alphabet deserves both our ridicule and a systematic "simplification" (544). Those of us who teach basic writing and other classes with much linguistic diversity have a particular investment in considering what we talk about when we talk, and laugh, about error, and an aesthetically rich and thoughtful work like *Speller* deepens our sense (and that of our students) of the complexity of errors, their significations, and most of all their excitations. The word *excitation* suggests both excitement and whimsy as well as electrical stimulation and arousal[7] and I think captures something about the reason many of us love teaching writing and basic writing: the *buzz* and the *jolt* we get from language, including language play. Many of us want to share that excitation with students.

Whence Spelling Errors & What Should Teachers Do with Them?

Historians of language have explained and sometimes debated why spelling in English can be thorny. We use a Latin alphabet to write a contemporary version of an Anglo-Saxon tongue (Horobin 39; Upward and Davidson 14-17). Many readers of this journal probably learned in a Brit Lit survey that the Norman Conquest resulted in French becoming the language of the elite in Britain (Horobin 77; Upward and Davidson 71-72), introducing a host of new words and sounds. Complaints about the gulf between pronunciation and spelling date back at least to the sixteenth century, when lexicographers and dictionary writers worked to standardize a spelling system while debating whether to base those spellings on phonetic versus etymological accuracy (Horobin 110). The etymologist camp—and later Samuel Johnson—were reverential of classical influences on the language and advocated, for instance, adding silent letters to words like *debt* "to align them" with Latin cognates (Horobin 111), while major orthographers like John Hart considered silent letters to be confusing "superfluities" (Upward and Davidson 294). Just a few centuries later, on both sides of the ocean, spelling reform movements argued for streamlining. In the US, Carnegie and Twain were among the prominent

supporters of the "Simplified Spelling Board" (Upward and Davidson 307), while Tennyson and Darwin led a British counterpart (Horobin 167-68). Unsurprisingly, Twain approached his advocacy of spelling reform with wit; he put intentional spelling errors in service to his argument about the absurdity of English and did so many years before Steig.[8]

Compared to other types of errors, Shaughnessy says spelling errors embody "even greater strictness and arbitrariness" (160) and finds that more than one-third of the errors that basic writers commit are spelling mistakes (162). She sensibly suggests that spelling is probably not worth devoting much class time to, but she does develop a taxonomy of types of spelling errors observed in her data set, with the intent of understanding the logic that student-writers are following. Her categories are: spelling errors stemming from the "unpredictabilities" of English, non-phonetically spelled sound words, homophones, spelling errors stemming from "unfamiliarity with the structure of words," and mistakes "caused by failure to remember or see words" (164-75). This is in line with Shaughnessy's larger project of understanding students' perspectives including their rationales for errors. But spelling is only one surface feature to which we apply the construct of correctness and only one of the elements of the written word sometimes used to judge refinement, taste, and intelligence. Basic writing studies has long been concerned with building on Shaughnessy by contextualizing how errors circulate. Joseph Williams asked why we so often speak of error with "emotion" and "fury" (152), why some errors receive even greater vitriol than others, and why some people are more offended than others when it comes to errors of usage. He suggests we consider error a "social behavior," a transaction that causes a reaction in the audience, a "gaffe" more trivial than, say, a racist joke (153). So-called grammarians, he argues, often focus more on a mythic rule than on clarity and the holistic effectiveness of an utterance, pointing out that advice-givers and rule-makers like Steig's friend and colleague E.B. White often violate their own rules; ultimately Williams advocates reading student writing with the faith we place in published writers and texts (156-59), an idea that became a pillar of basic writing scholarship.

More recent analyses have explored the implications of the culture's handbook mentality (Rozakis; Strunk and White; Truss). Prendergast argues that *Elements of Style* and the handbooks that followed in its wake make use of violent imagery, bellicose metaphors, and uncritical nostalgia to justify waging "war" on bad writing. Worse, Prendergast says, Strunk and White issued absolutes regarding "clarity, brevity, and correctness," creating a moral imperative to disregard shifting contexts (e.g., inclusive language

movements) and "remake a world distinctly in one's own image: one style, one moral essence" (15). And Min-Zhan Lu points out that compositionists themselves adopt critical perspectives toward language and skill-drill pedagogy, but still perpetuate a divide between "form and meaning" (166). We "confirm these students' impression that only those who make 'errors' need to worry about issues of 'usage' and 'editing'" (167). Likewise, we treat writing by "outsiders" (like basic writers) differently than the ways we treat writing by "experts" (Lu 167), in ways that create and perpetuate colonial attitudes.

Writing about the ideological dimensions of style, Lu provocatively contrasts the latitude often given to difficult fiction writers versus basic writers: "Why is it that in spite of our developing ability to acknowledge the political need and right of 'real' writers to experiment with 'style,' we continue to cling to the belief that such a need and right does not belong to 'student writers'?" (170). Steig's persona in *The Bad Speller* might be a little bit of both groups—a little bit *brilliant artist* and a little bit *basic writer*. The "bad speller" referred to in the book's title might even trouble the binary between the low-status bad speller (or bad writer) in a pre-credit comp class and the language poet or avant-garde provacateur studied in a postmodern literature class. Steig's persona is also the writer described in *Errors & Expectations* whose so-called errors are less haphazard than they first appear. Shaughnessy argued that student writers use particular, largely consistent logics in making decisions about surface features of their writing. Steig affirms Shaughnessy's argument in that his persona also makes "errors" with intentionality and consistency, not due to carelessness or laziness. As we'll see below, the "bad speller" is a consistent speller. Like Twain, what interests Steig most seems to be the broader context of "bad" spelling. He's satirizing not poor spellers nor the non-*New Yorker* reading public, but rather the language itself, the illogic of English and its rules, conventions, and orthographic systems.

Lu argues we should "contest the distinction between "real" and "student" writers, and move past simplifying idiosyncracy as "error" (171). With both groups, why not aim for a more contextual, critical disposition where we strive to place "errors" and other matters of "style" in a social and political context? Lu's important work on the rhetorical canon of style challenges Shaughnessy's assumption that the global message is necessarily of the utmost importance and that the "code" should be invisible to readers. For Shaughnessy, errors worm their way into "the consciousness of the reader. They introduce in accidental ways alternative forms in spots where usage has stabilized a particular form. . . they shift the reader's attention from where he [sic] is going to how he [sic] is getting there" (Shaughnessy

12). Using conventional sentence-level features, for Shaughnessy, is "obligatory" because standard spelling et al. "have become habitual to those who communicate within that code" (12). Lu and other critical theorists have worked to reclaim local concerns as interesting, aesthetic, political sites for consideration of the written word. The translingual and code-meshing movements, for instance, have asserted multilingual texts and the so-called unconventional styles and rhetorics used by Gen 1.5 students and other twenty-first century trans-nationalists as sites of resistance and creativity (Canagarajah; Lu and Horner; MacDonald and DeGenaro; Milson-Whyte; Young et al.). *The Bad Speller* is one such example of a text foregrounding style, aesthetics, and sentence-level choices, alongside ideological richness.

Connors and Lunsford's landmark study on error found that spelling was the most frequent error ("Frequency of Formal Error" 400). Lunsford and Lunsford replicated the study two decades later, and spelling had dropped to the fifth most common error (795). Because Connors and Lunsford were surprised at the preponderance of spelling errors in student writing, they omitted this category of error from the study and subsequently inquired further into spelling errors in a separate article using the same data set. In the follow-up analysis, they found that little pedagogy exists around spelling errors beyond the distribution to students of what they call "demon lists" (a term I think Steig would relish) of commonly misspelled words; further, they find that the majority of spelling errors in their data set consist of homophones and non-phonetically spelled words spelled how they sound ("Exorcising"). In their follow-up, Connors and Lunsford point out that although spelling is largely absent from then-emerging literature on the teaching of writing, in practice the "sp" marginalia was "the commonest of the crimson rashes to which first-year essays never seemed to develop antibodies," from the 1880s through 1980s ("Exorcising" 404). During that period, textbooks remained stagnant, Connors and Lunsford find, characterized by either ignoring spelling altogether, or suggesting that students "look it up, learn the rules, observe a demon list, and write out troublesome words over and over" (409). Aside from these studies, little research has been conducted on spelling errors in college writing. According to Anson, the "movement in the profession away from preoccupation with correctness was simultaneously reinforced by the broad intellectual trends of postmodernism" (5). Anson advocates for a broader pedagogy than error-marking and posits the value of fostering in students an ability to consider the "function" (impact on readers) rather than the "fact" of an error on the page (16-17).

Patterns & Consistencies of "Error" in *The Bad Speller*

We can observe, chart, and unpack the patterns and consistencies of spelling errors in *Speller* by looking at the most commonly misspelled words:

Table 1. Most Commonly Misspelled Words in *The Bad Speller*

Most commonly misspelled words	**Number of times this "Error" appears**	**Consistency of this "error"**	**Representative appearance of "error"**
the -> th	20	Text also contains one correct spelling of "the"	HANDSIL N GRETTLE LOST IN TH WOULDS.
is -> iz	7	Total consistency (i.e., "is" spelled "iz" all in all seven instances)	LITL MIS MUFAT IZ FRITIND BIGH A SPYDAR.
his -> hiz	7	Total consistency	JENERAL ABOWT TWO KUT A KAIK WITH HIZ SORD.
of -> ov	6	Total consistency	TO LUVERS KISSN ON TH LIPSE BIGH TH LITE OV A FOOL MUNE.
dog -> dawg	5	Total consistency	DAWG MUTHR N CHILED.

to -> two	5	Text also contains one instance of "to" spelled as "twho" and three instances of "to" spelled as "tew"	TO HIPNETIS TRINE TWO HIPNETIGHS EECH UTHR AT TH SAIM TYM.
with -> wyth	4	Text also contains two correct spellings of "with"	DUNKEE WYTH A PETT GEWS.
two -> to	4	Total consistency (although "two" appears as a misspelling of "to" five times)	TO GEACE DOOLN.
has -> haz	4	Total consistency	KAT WISHN HE KOOD FLI. BURD BEAN HAPY HE HAZ WYNGZ.
			**The text contains 44 illustrations and has no pagination, so I have not provided parenthetical citations.

The nine most-commonly misspelled words in *The Bad Speller* suggest that the text sees errors as mundane. All nine are monosyllabic. With the exception of "dawg," all are among the most commonly used words in the language: auxiliary or copula verbs, prepositions, and other short words of four letters or fewer. All nine are relatively easy to spell, suggesting that Steig's vision of spelling error is not limited to English's difficulties. Error is

commonplace in the text; long, complex, idiosyncratic, and/or multisyllabic words are not the only words prone to error. If the titular bad speller is a persona, we can see their mistakes as more than a function of confusion. The errors appear as ordinary facts, as self-evident, possibly as choices. What most stands out is consistency, echoing Shaughnessy. Errors in Steig's book are reasonably unambiguous and free of chaos. They rarely impede clarity. They are facts on the page and follow a pattern. Indeed, these top nine errors have an 90% consistency rate. I.E., they are spelled the same (incorrect) way a total of sixty-two times and appear as variant spellings only seven times. Steig brings order to a language arguably characterized by disorder, bringing to mind Shaughnessy's description of reading an essay composed by a basic writer: ". . . the inexperienced teacher is almost certain to see nothing but a chaos of error. . . [but] a closer look will reveal very little that is random or 'illogical' in what they have written" (5). The same can be said of *Speller;* the text appears chaotic but analysis reveals consistency and order. Put another way: Steig fully committed to the bit. He even wrote a two-page letter to his publisher about his progress on *The Bad Speller* and misspelled every word (Box 1, Folder 43).

Steig brings order, but perhaps not too much order. There are several notable exceptions to consistency in the list above, including but not limited to the inclusion of several instances of correct spelling of the words. "The" appears once in the next and "with" twice in their conventional forms. Also, one-off misspellings "twho" and "tew" keep readers on our toes (or our tews?). Homophones also lead to a handful of inconsistencies. Two (!) of the most commonly misspelled words are homophones of one another ("to" and "two"), which of course can be readily confused with one another. The word "to" (i.e., the preposition or infinitive marker) appears as "two" five times, but also as "twho" one time and as "tew" three times. And although the word "two" (i.e., the number) always appears as to, "two" does appear in the text as a misspelling of "to." These particular errors *can* be read as deeper engagement with the confusing properties of the language, interesting complications of the consistent patterns of error in the text. Attentive readers might notice, even if in passing, the normalizing repetition of "th" and "iz" while also picking up on the playful chaos of the to/two/twho/tew homophones. Some readers might feel seen. Some readers might appreciate the play. Both audiences will note the lack of punching down in Steig's humor.

Animals are a frequent visual motif, as well as an additional iteration of the text's repetition and consistency. A full twenty-nine out of forty-four illustrations contain animals, usually anthropomorphized. In all but two cases

(both are instances of the word "fish"), the names of animals are misspelled. In nearly every case of an animal appearing more than once, the animal names are misspelled in the same way, another notable pattern in the text:

Table 2. Misspelled Animal Names in *The Bad Speller*

Misspelled animal names that recur in the text	**Number of times this "error" appears in text**	**Consistency of this "error"**
dog -> dawg	5	Total consistency (i.e. "dog" is never spelled differently including in its conventional form)
bird -> burd	3	Total consistency
lion -> line	3	Total consistency
mouse -> mows	2	Total consistency
cat -> kat	2	Total consistency
donkey -> dunkee	2	Also appears once as "dunky"
Animal names that appear misspelled one time each: beagle -> beagl crocodile's -> krokodilez duck -> duk ducks -> dux elephant -> elephant elephants -> ellafence fox -> focks geece -> grace gooce -> gews horse -> hoarse owl -> oul peacock -> pekok pig -> pyg rabbit -> rabit rabbit -> rabet seals -> seelze spider -> spydar whale -> wail	None of these animal names ever appear with their correct spellings, although notice that plurals contain wholly different spellings from their singular form. Notice that "Rabbit" is the only animal name on this list that has two different variants.	**Animal names that are spelled correctly in the text:** fish (twice)

It is unremarkable that there is such a long list of animal names in the text, given how frequently animals appear across Steig's entire body of work. However, the preponderance of *misspelled animal names* further underlines Steig's consistency. And since animals are part of the *natural world,* the misspelling of their names suggests that we can look at the errors themselves as, well, *natural.* Similar to the misspelling of *easy* and monosyllabic words like "of" and "is," the misspelling of "pig" and "duck" in a sense normalizes error as part of a usual, nearly conventional, possibly even primal aspect of the bad speller persona's writing style. Animals in Steig's world are ubiquitous and, paradoxically, both funny- and normal-looking. The same can be said of spelling errors. And the spellings of animal names are also extremely consistent, even moreso than the nine most commonly mispelled words, with a 94% consistency rate (only rabet/rabit and dunkee/dunky stray from the consistent pattern.

If consistency of error is one way *Speller* echoes Shaughnessy, another echo is the recognizable reasons for the errors. For instance, Steig uses misspellings that appear to be overgeneralizing a pattern based on a rhymed word:

Table 3. Misspellings That Seem to be Informed by Rhymed Words

Misspelling	**Perhaps because the word rhymes with. . .**
my -> migh	high
musicians -> musitions	positions
various -> varius	Darius
geese -> geace	peace
masquerade -> mascaraid	laid
by -> bigh	high
same -> saim	aim
when -> wen	ten
wall -> wawl	tall
all -> awl	tall
bone -> boan	loan
her -> hur	fur
for -> fore	score
sphere -> sphear	ear

near -> nere	here
to do -> tew dew	few
owl -> oul	foul
caught -> cought	fought
hear -> hare	scare
lips -> lipse	eclipse
moon -> mune	dune
could -> kood	wood
bird -> burd	absurd
whale -> wail	tail

As Shaughnessy taught us, student writers often commit errors not due to laziness or randomness, but rather for specific, logical reasons. Errors often occur due to overgeneralization of some rule (e.g., the overuse of "whom" even, incorrectly, as a subject pronoun). Likewise, spelling errors are sometimes due to the inconsistent phonetic system of the English language. Steig is playing with this concept, showing us intentional but unconventional ways to spell everyday words like "bird" and "bone."

Two additional patterns illustrate the internal logic of *The Bad Speller.* First, words that begin with the *hard c* sound nearly always appear with an initial k instead of an initial c or initial qu:

Table 4. Misspellings Involving an Initial Hard-c Sound

Words that contain an initial hard c sound and that are incorrectly written with an initial "k"	**Number of times this error appears in the text**
cat -> kat	3
campus -> kampus	1
cooking -> kukn	1
campfire -> kampfyr	1
cupboard -> kubberd	1
catch -> katsch	1
casting -> kastng	1
queene -> kwene	1

could -> kook	1
quill -> kwil	1
cut -> kut	1
cake -> kaik	1
crocodile's -> krokodilez	1
	words in the text that contain an initial hard c sound and begin with the conventionally correct initial consonant sound: climber -> clymer climbing -> clymen caught -> cought kissing -> kissn kisses -> kissiz

The /hard c/ sound can be confusing since the sound can be signified with a *c, k, ck,* or *qu*. In the initial position, Steig consistently uses a k fifteen times in thirteen different words. He only uses the correct initial /hard c/ sound five times, in the words kissing, kisses, climber, climbing, and caught, although as the table shows, these three words are still misspelled despite the correct initial letter.

Steig similarly avoids the conventional spelling of the "-ing" suffix:

Table 5. Misspellings Involving -ing Endings

Words with a misspelled "-ing" suffix	**Number of times this error appears in the text**
sleepwalking -> sleepwaukn	1
playing -> plane	1
dueling -> dooln	1
cooking -> kookn	1
trying -> trine	2
climbing -> clymen	1
spying -> spine	1

resting -> wrestn	1
looking -> lookn	1
studying -> studeyng	1
rocking -> rokn	1
observing -> observan	1
passing -> passn	1
riding -> rydng	1
fishing -> fishn	1
biting -> bytng	1
performing -> perfourmng	1
casting -> kastng	1
typewriting -> tiperitn	1
shooting -> shewtng	1
bowing -> bown	1
being -> bean	2
producing -> prodoosn	1
breathing -> breethn	1
kissing -> kissn	1
Wishing -> wishn	1
Writing -> ritn	1
Using -> yewzng	1
Taking -> taken	1
Floating -> floteng	1
Tiptoeing -> tiptone	1
Sleeping -> sleepen	1
	Words in the text that spell the "-ing" suffix in the conventional way: leaping -> leping descending -> descending wondering -> wundring

Only three words contain the "ing" suffix spelled conventionally, whereas the "-ing" suffix is misspelled thirty-four times in thirty-two unique words, usually with an omitted i or g; this pattern has a consistency rate of 91%. But beyond the consistency of this error, the misspelled suffix allows Steig to engage dialectical difference. Some dialects do not fully enunciate the *ing* sound—and as the chart demonstrates, Steig mirrors this aspect of orality. For example, his caption for his Old Mother Hubbard cartoon reads, "OLE MUTHR HUBERD LOOKN FORE A BOAN IN HUR KUBBERD." This is one of the particularly ambivalent moments of error. The Old Mother Hubbard protagonist is defined by her low-class status, as signified by empty cupboards. So one way to read the omission of the fully enunciated "-ing" sound is as a punching down at the woman. She's low class, not someone likely to read *The New Yorker,* and likely speaks a dialect that uses this pattern. She's likely saying something closer to "lookn" than "looking." Other misspelled "ing" words also signify working-class and/or rural life uncommon to *New Yorker* offices—"fishn" and using a "rockn" chair, for example. But we can also read these errors as commentary on the language's frequent deviations from phonetic pronunciation. Steig allows for multiple readings; he could be mocking individuals (both people and animals, natch) but is more than likely laughing at the absurdity of the larger system in which those individuals practice literacy.

The Aesthetics and Poetics of Error

I would like to transition from charting the repetition of error in Steig to the broader aesthetic effect of these misspellings. If the previous section demonstrates how *Speller* embodies Shaughnessy's core argument about the internal logic and consistency of error, the present section attempts to theorize the text's implementation of an *aesthetics of error,* that is, Steig's employment of so-called mistakes for poetic, playful effect. The errors are frequently, well, fun, and clearly Steig loves to wink at his readers by employing "errors" that involve wordplay, underlining my reading of the text as a call for approaching unconventionality with a spirit of humor. Often, the misspellings themselves serve as poetic devices, as I'll unpack below. But also, it is this aesthetic approach—the inventive, intentional, and reflective use of mistakes-as-poetic-devices—that allows Steig to delve more deeply into human emotions, further demonstrating the text's utility in basic writing classes. In this playfulness and poetry and in this deeper exploration of hu-

man affect, we again see echoes of Lu's connection between basic writers and avant-garde postmodernists.

Steig uses error to create or reinforce the visual appearance of rhymes. Frequently, Steig uses unconventional spelling in service to the artful repetition of the same final letters of words. This gives the visual appearance of rhyme. For example, he describes a mountain-climbing dog who "wil yodil" upon reaching the peak. Spelled and pronounced conventionally, "will" and "yodel" are at best half-rhymes but the repetition of the final "il" gives the words visual symmetry. There is artistic and aesthetic intention in this flourish. Elsewhere Steig shows readers a "line spine" (lion spying) on a hunter; the visual and the caption work in tandem to anthropomorphize the lion and turn the tables on the hunter, but beyond the irony, we observe Steig attending to language choices and creating a faux-rhyme or visual rhyme using two words that, again, are at best half-rhymes. At times these "visual rhymes" draw attention to words that even when spelled conventionally rhyme with each other. He captions his take on the evil queen from Snow White with: "Mira, Mira, on the wawl. Hu iz faress of them awl?" The rhymed couplet still works with the conventional spellings of "wall" and "all" but Steig further draws our attention to the visual-textual dimension of the repetition—as

Figure 2. Another Image Based on a Familiar Fairy Tale

opposed to just the sound of the words. He uses a similar technique in his imagining of Old Mother "Huberd" looking for a bone in her "kubberd." The rhyme already works sonically but now works as a visual too. Logically and perhaps poetically too, why shouldn't the rhymed words "Hubbard" and "cupboard" look alike on the page? Steig is essentially telling his readers that words can look as silly and surreal and interesting as his drawings.

Steig uses error to create a visual representation of alliteration. It's not enough for Steig to employ alliteration as a sonic device. He frequently repeats the same initial consonant, particularly the aforementioned, initial "k." Thus we meet one "kat" who wishes he "kood" fly, and one "kat" who prefers "kukn" on a "kampfyr." With the correct spellings, Steig still could have employed both alliteration and a repeated initial consonant ("c" instead of "k"), but as is the case with many of his rhymes, he further underlines the sonic repetition with the unconventional spelling. The letters have aesthetic appeal. With both his visual rhymes and visual alliteration, Steig makes conscientious and creative choices—the kinds of choices we encourage our basic writers to make. We can't be sure of Steig's intentions, but we can ask our students about their intentions and their choices, encourage intentionality and reflectiveness, and perhaps even respect and foster unconventionality and play.

Steig engages in puns, neologisms, and other forms of play. Steig uses a strikingly large number of poetic tropes. His wordplay further reinforces Lu's notion that basic writers are akin to postmodernists in their deconstruction of convention and clarity. Spelling errors are perhaps the most "basic" of basic writing markers. The breakdown of convention occurs at the level of the individual word, after all. Of course, Steig is a highly literate practitioner of dominant-dialect English—a writer and member of the media elite, literally a close friend and colleague of the person who wrote the book on sentence-level correctness, and yet the analogy between the Bad Speller and the Basic Writer holds true. Steig has created a persona in the titular bad speller to convey his critiques of the very idea of convention. The fact that Steig uses aesthetic tools as part of his satire illustrates what I think Lu meant in her provocation about basic writers as postmodernists. Some of the puns hinge on misspelling. For instance, Steig crafts an image of a romantic scene unfolding underneath a "fool mune," and the moon is anthropomorphised with a goofy face, the moon literally a "fool." And we see a menagerie of animals "perfourmng a difiklt feet." In the image, there are four animals—thus the "perfourmance." Their trick is balancing one another on their paws and hooves—thus they are performing a "feet." Another example, one that ap-

pealed to me as a little boy, is a dog disguised as a donkey to fool his friends, "butt" the other dogs know his real identity due to his scent, literally due to his "butt." Elsewhere, another dog is fascinated by the "mistery" of a levitating man. A "mister" who can levitate. . . a "mistery."

Some wordplay is more conceptual, like the suggestion that "Handsil" and "Grettle" are lost in the "woulds." This is my favorite moment of abstract, existential humor. Steig turns the helping verb "would" into a noun and creates a neologism. The "woulds" calls to mind the more recent usage of "the feels" as a noun: *This sad movie has me in my feels*. Similarly, the woulds becomes an emotive, poignant noun for moments of second-guessing. I've been lost in the woulds, too. But the line is also funny. Being lost in the "woulds" sounds almost like a line from an Ogden Nash poem (about a "panther" who we ought not "anther" maybe?) or a Maureen Dowd op-ed critiquing Hillary Clinton for past missteps. Though less existential than the "woulds," other conceptual moments abound. In another panel, the king of the jungle is spending the day fishing, and Steig's narrator observes that "th line haz lett owt his fishng lion." And the most literal pun is surely the sentimental scene of a "dawg muthr n chiled," which could as easily be read "dog mothering [her] child" as "dog mother and child." The more deeply Steig wanders into a world of emotional depth, the less his work seems like punching down; the moon (or "mune") might be a fool, but the text is in solidarity with lost children, mama dogs, and all the rest.

Steig also plays with language by using the incorrect homophone, mirroring one of the most common ways basic writers misspell words. There are numerous examples of this form of "bad spelling" in the text, but one particularly homophonic caption—accompanying a drawing of a little girl fascinated by a monstrously large flower—reads, "Migh o migh, iz she serpryzd two sea a flour ov sutch grate sighs." Every word except for "she" and "a" is misspelled and no fewer than five are incorrectly deployed homophones: two, sea, flour, grate, sighs. These misspellings don't necessarily create puns or ambiguities, but they highlight the preponderance of confusing, English-language. Steig also substitutes:

- "Butt" for "but"
- "To" for "two"
- "There" for "their" (the seminal example of confusing homophones)
- "Hare" for "hear"
- "Fore" for "for"

- "Knot" for "not"

Steig breaks down the barrier between a dumb versus intellectual joke. Substituting "butt" for "but" is perhaps the dumbest.[9] And maybe the most intellectual is "wyth" for "with," clearly a call-back to a common spelling of the word during the early-Modern era. It's yet another instance of Steig embedding a knowing linguistic reference via an "error."

Implications and Conclusions

If Steig's language play and focus on error reflect a desire to break down barriers between high and low culture by making dumb jokes that are also intellectual, then a similar claim can be made about the broader worldview of *The Bad Speller.* Like Bugs Bunny cartoons, which shared a similar smart-dumb dynamic, *The Bad Speller* draws heavily on biblical, literary, and cultural allusions. Just as the Warner Bros. shorts often retold operas (the iconic "Rabbit of Seville"), fairy tales, and other familiar stories, with its own cast of loony characters, so does Steig (in a preview of the storytelling mode he used in *Shrek* years later). One *The Bad Speller* panel retells the Biblical story of Jonah, and riffs on fairy tales like Little Miss Muffet abound. Steig situated his irreverent work in a broader tradition, bringing erudite wordplay to a mass audience, like the humorous, populist expression of Ogden Nash, Edward Lear, Don Addams, and Bugs Bunny architects Chuck Jones and Tex Avery.

Through his sense of play (including his intentional errors), Steig takes his work to dark places, places that acknowledge the good, bad, ugly, and complexity of human emotion. Steig's representation of "Handsil n Grettle laust in th woulds" underlines the children's fear. His "Litl Mis Mufat" is terrified, and his version of the dog belonging to "Ole Muthr Huberd" appears genuinely hungry. Though whimsical, he seems attracted to stories of struggling and suffering. Poet and critic W. H. Auden wrote the following about Steig (albeit years before *The Bad Speller)*:

> [H]e is unequivocally pessimistic: the only virtue he grants the human species is a capacity to perceive and laugh at its folly. Though this is, I believe, too negative to be an adequate response to life—a sense of humor is rarely without an element of fear—it is an indispensable preliminary. We shall never earn the right to lift our heads till we have learned to hang them. (48)

It is telling that a modernist poet best known for a poem about World War II, finds Steig's worldview a bit too dark. Indeed, it may take a second read to realize Auden is praising Steig—for awareness of the bleak side of humanity, for possessing a more authentic and holistic understanding of the potential of humor, and for a fully formed perspective on the "follies" of life. In *The Bad Speller,* Steig posits a frightening, difficult, surreal world. We are all adrift, lost in "th woulds," or fleeing from mundane terrors like the arachnophobic Little Miss Muffat. Summing up his process, Steig once wrote, "The so-called struggle of the artist is nothing but the struggle against the restraints, internal/external, of our irrational way of life" (qtd. In Lorenz 123). For Steig, the world writ large is as chaotic as our orthographic system. I rediscovered *The Bad Speller* cleaning out my childhood bedroom in 2017, as my parents prepared to sell the house where they'd lived for half a century. As a forty-something, it was the text's sometimes-brutal affective dimensions that spoke to me. Truth be told, I still found the but/butt gags compelling too.

Two additional cartoons illustrate Steig's sense that the world is mundane but frightening and disordered. In one, the devil is sitting at a typewriter, brainstorming a list of "wikid thingz tew dew." The devil wears a real scowl on his face and looks particularly malevolent, at least as cartoon demons go. But Steig undercuts the malevolence by giving the devil a goofy

Figure 3. Steig at the Intersection of Malevolence and Whimsy

pet owl and a wife doing household chores. The world is a scary place, but life goes on, and there is whimsy to balance life's dreadful realities. In the other, two hypnotists attempt to control one another. They both look evil but ineffectual. The caption reinforces that they are merely "trine two hipnetighs" each other. Like the scene with the devil, the malevolence is undercut. Hope is alive, despite the scary environs in which we find ourselves.

Similarly, *The Bad Speller* assumes the world is difficult. The fishing lion can't catch any fish. Animals who seem to have leisure time are burdened in their attempt at a "difiklt feat." Even "real" children (as opposed to children who are fairy tale characters) face burdens like getting caught in the rain. We glimpse foibles. Auden's assessment is deadly accurate: Steig seems to recognize that there is a great deal of "folly." As Auden points out, Steig is a "pessimist," but a pessimist with a sense of humor and a recognition that we can leverage and learn from a critical awareness of life's. . . difiklties.

No matter how hard they try, Steig's characters can't escape who they are—not the dog wearing a donkey mask, not the peacock riding an old-time bicycle, not the donkey reading the newspaper while its pet goose looks on. They are still, respectively, a dog, peacock, and donkey. We can't hide our true nature. Visually, Steig anthropomorphizes numerous animals in *The Bad Speller.* We see dueling geese; a jazz band with a pig, dog, and chicken; cats sitting around a campfire; a lion spending the day fishing; a duck riding around on a beagle's back; and much more. Some animals seem to live the lives of animals and others seem to have primarily human lives. In this way, *The Bad Speller* anticipated the television series *Bojack Horseman,* which similarly imagined a world with inconsistent rules regarding whether animals could think and communicate. And like the morose, existential, tragi-comic world of *Bojack*, which focuses on a horse struggling with depression, addiction, and a waning career in show biz, *The Bad Speller* implies that humans are no more or less likely than animals to find ourselves in states of profound, banal angst. Like the captions accompanying the scenes, human and animal alike are in states of error.

At its core, though, *The Bad Speller* is humor. Perhaps it's also a satire and critique of the oddities of English, an instance of punching up, akin to Twain's jeremiad on simplifying our spelling system. Perhaps it's also a poetic rendering of perceived rubes, punching down, its aim squarely on the poor spellers who probably wouldn't read *The New Yorker*. Regardless, it's humor. In a similar vein, the field of rhetoric and composition has on occasion treated error with whimsy: Williams purposefully including errors in his landmark essay, "The Phenonmeology of Error," to see if readers would notice, Connors

and Lunsford subtitling their work on student error, "Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research." Why? As I suggested earlier, I suspect many of us entered this field not only out of a love of language but more specifically a love of language *play*. Errors are funny in the way that most subversions of convention are funny. A "bad spelling" is an opportunity to play with language *and* to transgress a convention that the culture sometimes frames as a high-stakes matter of morals (see especially Prendergast). *The Bad Speller* is a companion to *The Elements of Style,* and not just because the two books were written by friends. Steig's book is a response and a rebuke, if unintentional, to *Elements,* shifting the focus away from moral imperatives and mandates toward aesthetics, and knowing winks, from matters of correctness to matters of style.

If Steig has a psychic connection to handbooks, he also has other serendipitous connections to the field. Before transferring to art school, he studied at City University of New York, decades before Shaughnessy would teach and conduct her groundbreaking research there. Indeed, *The Bad Speller* is also a companion piece to *Errors & Expectations,* a taxonomy of what we do when we stray from (or mock) convention. And just one year after *The Bad Speller* was published, CCCC convened its language policy committee to consider more inclusive teaching practices that acknowledge all forms of "language varieties" (Perryman-Clark et al. 1), a committee responsible for writing "Students' Right to their Own Language" in the years following that initial meeting. That document has little to say about spelling specifically, beyond the observation it's one of the "least serious aspects of writing" (29). But the statement speaks across all kinds of language diversity: "Should we, on the one hand, urge creativity and individuality in the arts and sciences, take pride in the diversity of our historical development, and on the other hand, try to obliterate all the differences in the ways Americans speak and write?" (22). According to the document, notions of "correctness…encourage an elitist attitude. The main values they transmit are stasis, restriction, manners, status, and imitation" (31). *The Bad Speller* agrees, implicitly urging us to look at our students like artists and tricksters who are capable of employing a variety of codes, capable of humor, capable of provocation. Perhaps *The Bad Speller* provides a way to teach our students not to punch down, a way to teach students not to punch at all, a way to build a world where laughing and making mistakes is preferable to punching, period.

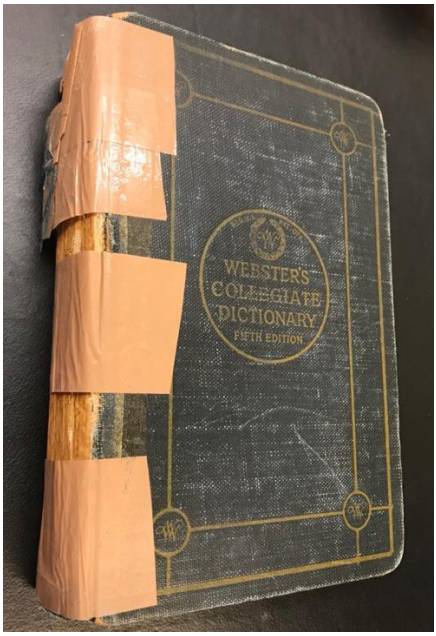

Figure 4. William Steig's Dictionary (Box 26, Folder 1)

Notes

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2. Another track on the Don Adams record, "Bank Robber," is sampled on "Nobody Move" from Eazy E's first solo album, a record I liked much later, so I'd like to think Eazy's producer Dr. Dre was as big a fan of *Roving Reporter* as I was. You know that scene in *Straight Outta Compton* in which Dre listens to old soul and funk records in his bedroom and the audience is meant to think about how he'll eventually become a millionaire sampling those records? The Mandela effect gets me every time; I always think he's going to be playing the funny records I loved as a kid

3. With, of course, critical exploration of how, when, and where these particular stylistic choices are and are not effective.
4. Of *The Addams Family* fame.
5. Lynn Z. Bloom makes this point in her influential article, "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise." Elsewhere in her work, Bloom recalls her family using a Steig cartoon as a Christmas card one holiday season. The cartoon shows a stern father holding a report card and telling his dejected little girl that a B+ won't do ("Give Grades").
6. As a fat person, I use "fat" as a descriptive, not derogatory, term.
7. Not to mention a fairly iconic Beach Boys lyric.
8. Twain's spelling satire and other documents from the spelling reform movements could also, alongside Steig, serve as teachable texts in courses foregrounding language, error, and satire.
9. And by "dumbest," I mean one of the funniest.

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