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Coming in First: Sound and Embodiment in Spelling Bees

The increasingly intense level of competition of the National Spelling Bee in recent years suggests that this “brain sport” has become a complex site for the politics of language standardization, media, and childhood competition. In this article I delve into this nexus to explore its heart: sound. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted at spelling bees and with spellers, families, officials, and media broadcasters, I examine how spellers experience the word as a mélange of sounds, the embodied processes that inform their orthographic choices, and how this sensory process made viewable for media audiences who may know little about orthography. Employing what Steve Feld (2015) has called “acoustemology,” I analyze competitive spelling through the lens of “firstness,” a concept the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1955) identified as a mode of being replete with unmediated feelings and qualities. Two-minute spelling bee turns serve as ethnographic examples of language materiality that reveal the complex routines that spellers undertake in each spelling bee round. This onstage sensorium also provides a basis upon which media broadcasters create metasemiotic frameworks through which to observe and understand the complexity this sensory activity. [semiotics, orthography, youth, soundscape, media]

Seventy seconds into his final turn at the 2014 National Spelling Bee, the camera focused on Jay’s tightly clasped hands.¹ They were turning white at the knuckles. Close-ups of previous spellers showcased active fingers and taut palms, tracing letters on skin or a nametag. Some had typed letters on imaginary keyboards. Jay’s clenched hands remained still. As one of the 11 cameras televising the National Spelling Bee panned out to capture the broader scene, Jay was pictured standing stiffly on a large stage, facing a table of judges and the pronouncer. With closed eyes, he asked for his word to be repeated multiple times. The harsh glare of stage lights elicited a light sheen across his forehead. Jay listened intently, his neck occasionally tilting and his body swaying. Repeating the word each time the pronouncer said it, the two went back and forth, uttering different sounds for what may have been the same word. As the clock counted down his two-minute turn, Jay’s eyelids remained closed. They were all that shielded him from the cameras’ gaze and the hundreds of spectators in the room. An alarming pop sounded and the onstage set turned red. He was nearly out of time.

Like the other 280 or so competitors at the National Spelling Bee, and many more who are excellent spellers but miss making it to the national level by just one letter, Jay is an “elite speller.” He spent much of his childhood years between the ages of 6 and 14 devoted to competitive spelling. The increasingly intense level of



Figure 1. The National Spelling Bee (photo by Mark Bowman for Scripps).

competition of the National Spelling Bee in recent years suggests that this “brain sport”² has become a complex site for the politics of language standardization, media, and childhood competition (Figure 1). In this article I delve into this nexus to explore its heart: sound. How do spellers experience the word as a *mélange* of sounds? What are the embodied processes that lead them to make orthographic choices in which they pair sounds with graphemes? And, how is this sensory process made viewable for media audiences who may know little about orthography?

Rather than regard competitive spelling as an arcane language standardization exercise in the age of spellcheck—a critique commonly forwarded by journalists and spectators—I instead view it as a dynamic phenomenon of sound and embodiment. In this arena, sound operates in dialogic, material, and temporally mediated ways, an example of what Steven Feld (2015) has called “acoustemology,” or a type of knowledge emergent in the intersection of acoustics and epistemology. I explore competitive spelling through the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s trichotomy of signs. “Firstness,” a concept he identified as a mode of being that refers to “feelings and qualities that have yet to take meaning as informed by facts, logic, or relationship” (1955:76) links sound to recognition and knowledge. I demonstrate how acoustemology operates across states of firstness, secondness, and thirdness as a way to understand how spellers like Jay report progressing through the two-minute on-stage turn, the qualities spellers link to words and roots, and how they pair sound and knowledge. The ways spellers experience the sensorium of spelling onstage also provides a basis upon which media makers objectify this process for televisual consumption, thus furthering the legitimacy of this language standardization exercise.

Drawing data from 20 months of noncontinuous ethnographic research conducted at the National Spelling Bee (NSB) in 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 during the South Asian Spelling Bee (SASB) regional and national competitions in 2012, 2014, and 2015, and with spellers and families, spelling bee officials, media broadcasters from ESPN and SONY TV, journalists and audience members, I argue that firstness is at the center of how this activity is undertaken, performed, and made ready for media broadcast. In what follows I outline key points about firstness and acoustemology, and analyze how they operate in with regard to orthography, embodiment, and

temporality. Linguistic anthropology has recently focused on qualities and sensory dimensions of communication, and explicit linkages between qualia and the structure of language can further this line of inquiry. My focus on acoustemology and firstness offer a means through which to understand how the qualia of sound takes shape in a speech event, in ways that underscore the language materiality of form as well as social meaning.

Firstness and Sound in Spelling Bees

Spelling bees have long played a role in promoting language unification and nation building. These contests emerged as part of efforts to unify a post-independence United States around English as a language, and nineteenth century literary accounts of spelling bees indicate various processes of linguistic negotiation and standardization (McArthur 2011). Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century spelling matches in schools began with students dividing words into syllables and repeating each after their teacher. This “choral exercise in syllable division,” (McArthur 2011:4) was done to ensure uniformity of pronunciation, and group study was followed by in-class contests. These grew into regional spelling matches and, over the twentieth century, newspapers began to sponsor local bees until regional contests eventually culminated in a national competition: The National Spelling Bee (NSB). The first such contest was sponsored by a Louisville newspaper in 1925, but the Scripps-Howard Corporation (now the “E. W. Scripps Company”) subsequently acquired and renamed it the “Scripps-Howard National Spelling Bee.” It is now simply called the National Spelling Bee. Over 11 million elementary school children participate in spelling bees annually, the winners representing their school, district, town, and sponsoring newspaper in the National Spelling Bee. Also of note here is the burgeoning “South Asian Spelling Bee” (SASB), open to spellers of South Asian parentage. This competition was created in 2007 by Touchdown Media, a New Jersey-based advertising and media company, on behalf of bank client MetLife and is held in 14 cities regionally with a national final in New Jersey.

Spelling bees may seem like archaic exercises in language standardization, but much has changed since the first National Spelling Bee was held in 1925. Now mass-mediated spectacles driven by concerns of advertising and marketing as much as by increasingly difficult levels of competition, these contests require a far more complex skill set than in decades past. My approach to understanding these skills considers long-term aspects of planning and preparation, time management, and discipline—encompassed by the concept of the “spelling career,” which I discuss in detail elsewhere (Shankar, in preparation). It also includes the complex routines that occur during a spelling bee turn vis-à-vis acoustemology and signs. I situate this discussion of sound and firstness in the broader frame of *language materiality* (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012, forthcoming), which attends to convergences of the linguistic and material across communicative events. Approaching language materially is to view it as a material presence with physical properties and as embedded within political economic structures. Firstness presents considerable possibilities for understanding the language materiality of spelling (see also Shankar, forthcoming).

Acoustemology, a way to study “the sociality of sound” (Feld 2015:12; see also Feld and Brenneis 2004), draws attention to forms of knowledge and recognition. Feld (2015:12) writes, “Acoustemology conjoins ‘acoustics’ and ‘epistemology’ to theorize sound as a way of knowing.” Privileging “interpreters” and “interpretations” over the physicality of sound waves, acoustemology “engages the relationality of knowledge production” to “investigate sounding and listening as knowing-in-action” (Feld 2015:13). Feld’s theory of acoustemology offers a way to focus on the firstness of sound and the ways words and grammatical rules are signs of secondness and thirdness. Numerous modalities of knowing are part of this process—perception, analysis, memorization, and indexical association.

Peirce's phenomenology offers ways of connecting time and space with what is knowable about how people experience them. He identifies "Phanerescopy [or Phenomenology]" as "all that is in any way or in any sense present to the mind, quite regardless of whether it corresponds to any real thing or not" (Peirce 1955:74). Peirce's (1995:75) phenomenology consists of three modes of being, such that it is possible to "directly observe them in elements of whatever is at any time before the mind in any way." The phenomenon of competitive spelling can be viewed across firstness, secondness, and thirdness to consider the "actuality of an event" through multiple ways of knowing and signifying across material, verbal, and sensorial dimensions. For Peirce, firstness refers to the qualities of phenomena and may exceed what our senses are equipped to identify or understand—a formulation that is quite apt for analyzing what happens in a spelling bee turn. Firstness encompasses qualisigns, or qualities that are signs. Qualia and qualisigns have proved to be generative in theorizing material culture and semiotic analyses (Munn 1986; see also Chumley and Harkness 2013; Keane 2003). For instance, my study of Asian American advertising development and production illustrated how qualisigns such as color, accent, and music can index ethnic and racial diversity (Shankar 2015).

Two other aspects of the representamen or sign—the sinsign and the legisign—are relevant here. A sinsign is an event that is a sign through its qualities, and involves several qualisigns. "Sin" refers to "singular" and sinsigns exist in secondness, exhibiting a material presence as they take form in the world. Sound can take shape as words in the mind of the speller, while it can also be mediated as spoken, through the acoustics of a room, through microphones and speakers. Legisigns, signs based in laws, can illustrate how spellers arrive at and choose between etymological rules, including grammar, roots, suffixes, prefixes, and the like. Legisigns are also presupposing, in that they allow spellers to begin with the assumption that the sound uttered by the pronouncer is an actual word found in the dictionary. For my purposes, secondness and thirdness offer a view into how qualia take form in the world (as sinsigns that involve qualisigns) and become codified (as legisigns involving qualisigns and sinsigns).

In this triad of signs, the sound and sensation of qualisigns become materialized in the secondness of a word, whose successful spelling requires a rule-bound thirdness. While secondness and thirdness are quite important here, I foreground firstness because it is most unstable, and most intensely governed by the temporality of a two-minute turn. There is movement across all three of these levels, between the discernment of sounds in firstness, the identification of the word in secondness, and the myriad exceptions to orthographic rules that make this contest worth watching. In this spirit, I do not attempt a perfect mapping of Peirce's logic onto the world of competitive spelling, as that would be neither possible nor desirable. Rather, I aim to expose its potential to elucidate the relevance of sound in ethnographic contexts apart from voice in song (Faudree 2013; Harkness 2013), that are directly linked to language's form as well as use, akin to discussions of how people experience accents (Cavanaugh 2007; Moore 2011).

Based upon these initial discussions of sound and firstness, I now turn to an ethnographic exploration of acoustemology and the nuances of diacritics, accent, and poetics that lend complexity and dynamism to orthography.

Acoustemological Awareness and Orthography

Like modern spelling bees elsewhere that have been identified as sites of symbolic and political control over orthography and pronunciation (Jaffe 1996; Johnson 2005; Schieffelin and Doucet 1994; Sebba 2007), U.S. spelling bees also reinforce a particular language ideology (Schieffelin et al. 1998). In this case, they forward the English monoglot standard (Silverstein 1996) and pronunciations called for by the diacritical markings found Merriam-Webster's third edition unabridged dictionary. That is, language "unity" is built around a *particular* variety of the English language. During

a presentation to spellers and families about the Merriam-Webster Dictionary at the 2014 NSB that I attended, representative Peter Sokolowski laid bare this process by asking, "Why did Webster change the spelling of some words [from British English]? Because he believed America should have its own words. He believed politically in this new country, and that it needed a dictionary of American English." This language ideology of privileging a distinctly American variety of English has underpinned the sense of national prestige linked to American spelling bees, in which British and other Commonwealth variants of English spellings are not accepted. Even as other countries around the world adopt and implement the National Spelling Bee model, they are encouraged to do so through a franchise strategy that standardizes all spelling according to Webster's third edition.

Most words are symbols, or signs that relate to an object by means of arbitrary convention. They are learned by speakers as lexical or grammatical items. The indexical meanings of words are informed by shifting relationships in which the word as sign can relate to its object in terms of causation, such as time, place, ideologies, and social meanings. In all of these instances, the word itself is a starting point, identifiable and disambiguated from countless others that may bear resemblance to it. To put it plainly, in speech events, what a word means, whether through a standardized meaning or one that it has acquired in a particular speech context begins with sound that is identifiable as that word. If I uttered the word "cat" in English, you might think of a furry domestic pet, a dated slang term for someone with cache, a "cool cat," and so on. This is only possible if you heard the word "cat" instead of "cot" or "kit," or whatever "cat" might sound like when it is spoken into a microphone and heard by a listener about 30 feet away, through a sound system. For this reason, it is significant to consider the nature of words as sounds, through firstness.

American English, like other varieties of this language, is not spelled phonetically. Therefore, the most vital element in spelling competitions is sound. Spellers are tasked with correctly understanding the word that is uttered and distinguishing it from near homonyms or homophones. Seasoned pronouncers will mention if there is a near homonym before ever uttering the word, to further aid spellers in recognizing the word. While the burden of acoustemological comprehension is on the speller, it is also highly dependent on the pronouncer. Rahul Walia, founder and organizer of the South Asian Spelling Bee, explained that he hires pronouncers and judges in each city in which competitions are held. He does not employ speakers of South Asian English, so as to "avoid empty eyes [of incomprehension]," he remarked. In his view, finding judges with the correct regional accent is essential for competition, even though all pronouncers are expected to have a working knowledge of diacritical markings that enable them to read words selected from Webster's third. Mr. Walia's concern is that despite these markings, regional and other types of accents might still be heard in how pronouncers utter consonants, elongate vowels, and intone. Accent is important so that words are recognizable to spellers, such that, in his view, a Texas accent typical of Dallas or Houston would not be suitable for a spelling bee in Seattle.

In well-orchestrated spelling bees, sound not only conforms to the contours and prosody of the regional accent of the chosen pronouncer, but also to the diacritical markings of the dictionary in use. One way to understand the firstness of sound in this context is through what Roman Jakobson has called the "sound shape" of language (Jakobson and Waugh 1979). Most pronouncers and spellers do not have everyday experiences with the uncommon words used spelling bees, so they can only formulate the "sound shape" on the basis of diacritics. In a 2014 regional spelling bee I attended in Houston, Texas, the pronouncer had so much difficulty pronouncing words according to diacritical markings in the final rounds that a knowledgeable parent volunteer was asked to step in. Words in the final rounds of that bee, for instance, included *keraulophon*, *cacacha*, and *lysigenous*. Such words, while not unusual in the final rounds of spelling bees, could certainly challenge those who do not routinely hear or read them.

Pronouncers are required to know diacritical markings, but learning them is also an essential step identified by every elite speller with whom I spoke. Even if competitors know the spelling of a word in print, they are not always able to recognize it as it is pronounced in a competition. Chetan, four-time National Spelling Bee competitor whose best finish was fifth place in 2013, emphasized the importance of this practice when I interviewed him and his father. Their family had settled in the Dallas area when they emigrated from India, and his father remarked, "In third grade, Chetan didn't make it to the finals because he missed 'righteous,' because they mispronounced the word. It turned out that I had learned it and quizzed it in a way that didn't help him, by pronouncing it 'ri-tee-us' rather than 'rite-chus.' So we learned the key." Their family, who for years had spoken a variety of South Asian English with a distinct accent, prosody, and cadence, realized that they all had to learn the diacritical markings so as to not "lose on a simple word we don't know how to pronounce." Other Indian-American families I spoke with echoed these experiences and realizations. Symantak, 2012 South Asian Spelling Bee champion and finalist in multiple National Spelling Bees, and his mother shared their experiences of preparing for Houston regionals and national competitions. Symantak's mother remarked, "I said words the 'Indian way.' I didn't pay attention to pronunciation, I didn't realize it was that important. We grew up and studied in India, so I don't have the American accent, certainly not the Merriam-Webster pronunciation! So we were just doing them the Indian way, learning the words, but after that learned to do things the right way." Dallas-based 2014 National Spelling Bee co-champion Ansun also emphasized the importance of diacritical markings to me: "It's important because if you pronounce the word wrong you may not be able to link the words together, and it will be harder to spell it, so diacritical markings are actually very important in spelling." Striking in these comments is the strict adherence to notions of "right" and "wrong" when it comes to pronunciation, not just spelling, confirming another way that spelling bees further the project of language standardization across multiple levels.

Such linkages between words as text and words as vocalizations can be understood as the firstness of sound as it is experienced by spellers in the moment of a turn. Important here is their ability to compare and contrast with other ways they may have heard the same word uttered. Elite spellers can be adept at recognizing the "mispronunciation" of regional officials like the Houston pronouncer. Mother of seasoned speller siblings Shobha and Shourav confirmed that taking this contingency into account is one of the skills successful competitors must have: "When we go to local bees it's with the expectation that pronouncer might not pronounce words 100% correct. That's part of the package." Handicapping for incorrect emphasis, regional variation, and accents is a competitive advantage that helps elite spellers recognize words, even if they are variably pronounced. One speller at the 2012 South Asian Spelling Bee finals graciously thanked his parents for consistently "mispronouncing" words because he believed it helped him to manage the variation of regional pronouncers who also "mispronounce," thereby making him more adept at recognizing words. Such glib remarks aside, most spellers admit that it is extremely difficult to adjust for this sonic dissonance. Sound and orthographic knowledge are already a complicated pairing. Adding the variability of not pronouncing according to diacritical markings can prove to be ruinous. Shobha and Shourav's mother recognized this and remarked that, "I keep reminding [my children] that the pronouncer may not be right, but it's your job to ask as many questions as possible." Their father added, "Map to the word you know. Find the closest word you studied." Mapping, as this parent puts it, can be also viewed as linking qualisigns of sound with sinsigns and legisigns that conjure words or parts of words during the limited time frame of competition.

While such problems of accuracy are fairly common at local and regional bees, the National Spelling Bee is thought to operate at a consistently high level. Dr. Jacques Bailey, former champion and pronouncer for the National Spelling Bee for the past

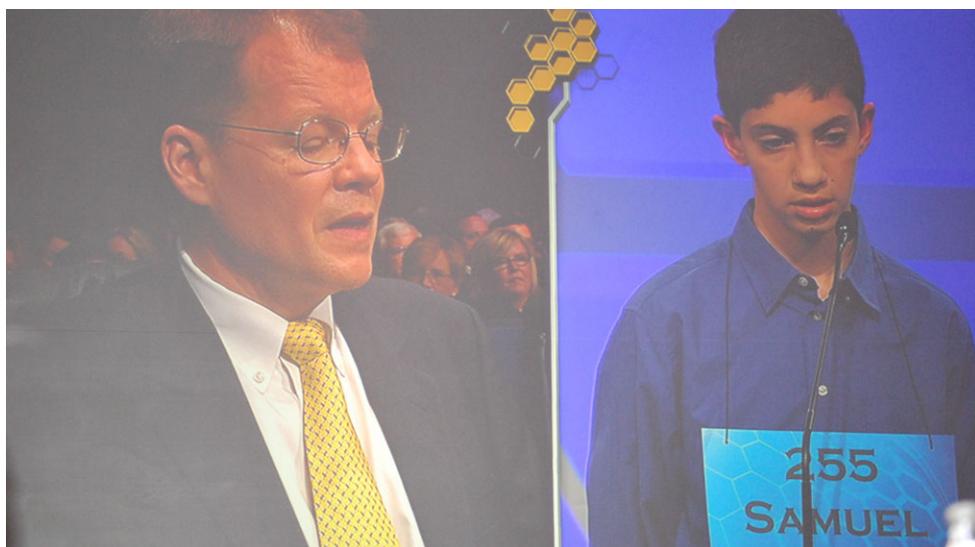


Figure 2. Dr. Bailey pronounces a word for a speller at the 2014 National Spelling Bee. (photo of auditorium screen by author).

decade or so, is regarded by spellers and families as among the most precise and skilled pronouncers. In a Skype video interview, I mentioned how spellers routinely talked about incorrectly pronounced words. He was quick to add that “It happens in Washington, too. Some of it depends on the acoustics and sound system in the room” (Figure 2). Dr. Bailey had fashioned several approaches to manage problems of misrecognition. He explained that he is from Denver and described his speech as a “typical Midwestern accent” (that is presumably heard as relatively “standard”). For instance, in a press conference for reporters covering the 2015 bee for their news outlets, Dr. Bailey emphasized the importance of recognition, stating, “I record words in a studio in Vermont, pronouncing words to help kids study.” In his role as pronouncer, he reported sometimes opting for pronunciations found in common usage rather than adhering strictly to the diacritically informed pronunciation prescribed by Webster’s third edition.

Similar to the logic of hiring local pronouncers for regional bees, Dr. Bailey’s efforts in this regard are to aid spellers in recognizing words. Yet, he also espoused a philosophy of being “extra crisp” in his pronunciations in the competition, noting the contrast with his predecessor’s approach, which was to primarily “say the words the way you’d say them in ordinary speech. So his pronunciations were not purposefully extra crisp.” Crispness, here a qualisign to be performed by Dr. Bailey and recognized by spellers as helpful enunciation, is an intentional practice: “When I pronounce for the bee I use a different voice, it’s a different enunciation, because I’m aware that people are interested in *all* the sounds. I try to make all the sounds accurately. I don’t over pronounce, but I pronounce more crisply than in ordinary speech.” Dr. Bailey also drew my attention to the physiology of his sound production: “There are some sounds spellers can misunderstand, some are disambiguated by how you move your mouth,” demonstrating the point by saying “fifth” three ways and noting how his tongue moved differently for each. Likewise, he performed the “crispness” in differentiating between “utter,” [ʌtə] “udder,” [ʌdə] and “butter,” [bʌtə] waiting for me to hear and experience them differently than I would in ordinary speech. This exercise in recognition is one that led Dr. Bailey to add, “Sometimes I worry afterward that the speller didn’t get it. Sometimes that happens but they spell it correctly, or I feel they got it but they spell it wrong.” Dr. Bailey’s strategy of pronouncing according to “ordinary speech” as well as the strategy of being

“purposefully crisp” seem to be at odds with each other, as evidenced by his worry. Choosing the sounds that would most helpfully convey the word to a speller is a speculative process, involving assumptions about what the speller may hear as helpful versus confusing.

In all of these examples, orthography and firstness are deeply intertwined. Attention or inattention to diacritics shapes how spellers, parents, and pronouncers develop acoustemological relationships with words. In instances like the ones described by Shobha and Shourav’s parents, listening for potential departures from the diacritical markings requires a highly sophisticated approach to experiencing the word as both sound and law. The disjuncture that may occur between what a word should sound like and what it actually sounds like is subjective, as Dr. Bailey’s elaboration of the qualisign “crispness” demonstrates. To account for this acoustic ambiguity, elite spellers correlate the skill level of the pronouncer, the perceived difficulty of the word, and their own embodied experience of what they hear on stage. Especially in the midst of national competition, recognition of sound poses a far greater challenge than regional competitions in smaller venues.

Embodiment, Sound, and Firstness in the Turn

Years of preparation and engagement with etymology come to a head in the two-minute spelling bee turn. The time and space of a turn can vary greatly depending on the venue and how closely officials follow the rules. In the classroom, school, and district competitions that culminate in the regional bees that feed into the National Spelling Bee, students may simply spell the word without time constraint. Regional spelling bees tend to more closely replicate the format of the National Spelling Bee, but only approximate the professionalism and ambiance of the event hosted by the Scripps Foundation. Held in a large ballroom at the Gaylord Convention Center, the competition is filmed by ESPN on at least eleven cameras and is broadcast with live commentary and prerecorded speller profile segments.

In this cavernous space, spellers manage their bodies and navigate various types of firstness in the spelling turn to perform a transmodal transduction (sound to orthography) to spell a word within their allotted time. This event is marked by genre conventions of talk, routine, and embodiment that are different from the types of communication that exist around it. This formal speech event is governed by its own rules and predictable parts, including the pronouncer repeating the word multiple times, often after answering each of the questions spellers are permitted to ask. Likewise, contestants may repeat the word numerous times, and are asked to do so before and after they spell it. Mastering this specialized spelling bee genre is a vital part of becoming an elite speller. Embodiment is central to how spellers interact with sound, as well as with pronouncers and judges, through multimodal pragmatic and semantic acts (Goodwin 2006; Goodwin and Alim 2010). Embodiment underscores the language materiality of this process, in that it links “the materiality of sound to the sociality of vocal practice” (Feld et al. 2006:340). Advice to competitors on the National Spelling Bee website advocates for such a multimodal approach to the spelling bee turn: spellers should promptly approach the microphone when the previous speller completes a turn, face the judges so that their mouths can be viewed voicing letters, repeat the word clearly and confidently back to the pronouncer, and cycle through a battery of spelling questions, uttering the word each time (Figure 3). The spelling turn also involves embodied stances of proprioception, or an awareness of one’s own physicality vis-à-vis other objects. Through control of saccadic eye movement, spellers discipline themselves to minimize taking in nonessential stimuli in the room. This bodily stance is diligently developed over a child’s spelling career; part of socialization to the habitus of the spelling bee turn.

Pronouncers and spellers utter sounds that are intended to be perceptible as particular; spellers aim to pair them with the correct orthographical representation. Spellers are highly attuned to the sound of the word they are given and equally



Figure 3. Performing the spelling bee turn (photo by author).

invested in repeating it for the pronouncer as accurately as possible. This dyadic exchange can last several turns if spellers do not hear the target sounds or reproduce them accurately. This dialogic spelling turn incurs rights and responsibilities for both spellers and pronouncers with respect to their oral production and the aural component of this speech event. The onus of hearing is initially on the spellers, to detect the correct word. Subsequently, when the contestant begins spelling, the judges must discern the letters and note the sequence of their utterance in order to deem the spelling correct or incorrect. Some judges write each letter down as a speller says it and compare it to the printed word in order to ensure accuracy. Miguel, a judge at the South Asian Spelling Bee, explained his approach: “You have to listen closely, hear all the letters, and vote.” Judges in national competitions also often collaborate in the act of hearing, conferring to make sure the speller receives the fairest outcome. In these ways, the acoustemology of these events is always dialogic, but with one interlocutor bearing the responsibility of comprehension more than the other, depending on the stage of the turn. In the orientation to Bee Week at the 2014 National Spelling Bee, Dr. Bailey addressed the assembly of spellers with the following explanation of what they could expect as they approach the microphone:

I can pronounce your word correctly. I will say the first pronunciation in Webster’s Third. I will give you other pronunciations as long as they will be phonetically helpful. I am on your side. I won’t give you alternate pronunciations that will lead to a misspelling. If I’m holding back, I won’t throw in extra syllables. Can I tell you if you’re saying it correctly? No, but I’ll say “I can’t be sure, but it sounds like it.” I can’t simply say “yes” because the responsibility for understanding the word lies with you, **it is your responsibility**. You don’t need to be able to say the word correctly. The judges need only to hear the correct letters in the correct order.

Pronouncers and judges are unwilling to offer definite affirmations because hearing what the speller intended is itself an interpretive process open to different outcomes. If the judges believe they are hearing the correct word, they may say “I don’t hear any problems” or “It sounds like you’re on the right track.” In some turns, there are

numerous back and forth exchanges that may end with a slightly more conclusive, "There you go" or "That's it." Otherwise the pronouncer continues to repeat the word if it appears that a speller has not recognized it, either until they are satisfied or run short on time. A more effective tack is when the judges can pinpoint a section of the word in which they hear a problem and offer such direction as, "Listen right in the middle of the word," or "I'm not sure you're hearing the end properly." Sometimes, when a speller repeatedly struggles to say a word, as one speller in the 2013 NSB did with the word "langlauf," a judge will instruct, "Watch Dr. Bailey's mouth as he says it." After about 15 tries, the contestant eventually misspelled it.

Once situated at the microphone and given their word, elite spellers cycle through a set of questions that allow them to collect etymological and contextual information that may aid in the spelling of a word. In addition to asking if there are alternate pronunciations, they may ask for the definition, language of origin, part of speech, or its use in a sentence. This process, which many described as "breaking down words," is essentially one of transduction. Rahul Walia explained it to me like this: "Everyone has a different strategy. If they are really committed, they have to have an analytical strategy to break down words." Put differently, spellers engage in morphological and phonological analysis to match sound with graphemes. Bee organizers, judges, and participants concurred that champions rarely memorize word lists; as a consequence, being able to use this genre of questions used to elicit linguistic information emerges as critical. Shobha and Shourav's mother confirmed this point and exclaimed, "I have parents coming and telling me bees are about rote memorization and therefore nothing fancy... There's more to it. You can't memorize five hundred thousand words, there has to be a strategy! You can't win Scripps on rote memorization, you need to have an ability to analyze the data and process the data." For this reason, as Dr. Bailey told me, the judges believe in giving the speller "every bit of information to help them, short of telling them how to spell the word."

Considered in this way, the spelling bee turn consists of firstness punctuated by questions and information that form the basis for secondness and thirdness. Elite spellers ask these questions regardless of whether they think they know the word. Some are concerned that they may not have heard the correct word, while others are unsure of certain letters, especially if the word contains a schwa sound, and rely on the additional information to decode the sounds they hear. Shobha and Shourav's father clarified, "There's two processes. For a word they know it's confirmation, whereas when it's a word they don't know the questions help them extract as much info as possible. Language rules can help." Likening the questions to putting together clues, one speller told a Sony TV interviewer, "I just try to ask for clues until I have picture in my head of the spelling I think is correct." Asking questions becomes so habituated that elite spellers enter the routine regardless of the word. Elite speller Arjun amusingly recalled being given the word "spaghetti" at his regional bee and immediately, by habit, saying "Definition?" Admitting that he laughed out loud as soon as he realized that he had asked for the definition of such a common word, he continued, "I have no idea why I said it. But once you keep asking the questions they get imprinted in your mind, so that's the first thing that came out of my mouth."

Taking a closer look at which types of firstness are present may offer insight into what actually occurs between "the clues" and the pictures and imprints in spellers' minds. Spellers' relationships with word parts and roots can be informed by qualisigns, both from their everyday lives and how they may be conjured from sound they hear during the turn. Words can index meanings from other places and times and bring to the fore archived meanings linked to it—rules of grammar, historical detail, and so on. For example, Sania, a finalist in the 2013 South Asian Spelling Bee, recalled for a television interviewer that she had been eliminated in one bee with the word "zwieback." Months later, when she spent time with her toddler cousin who was teething, the association of the biscuits with teething surfaced: "something clicked. It's like I had something real to associate with that word, and I've never misspelled it since." Other spellers recounted similar associations developed through

experience, or their parents' or coaches' experiences. A gloss on firstness may offer further insight here: "A quality of feeling can be imagined to be without any occurrence. . . Its mere may-being gets along without any realization at all" (Peirce 1955:81). Many of the later round words in the spelling bee that are less used, including those involving concepts with which children may be less familiar, are solidified in memory through visceral associations and feelings that parents and coaches help explain.

Firstness affords a view of how materiality operates in the transduction between sound and orthography. In addition to the genre conventions of the questions, there is an unfolding of interpretants (Peirce 1955) that forwards the speller's recognition of the orthographic shape of the word. Such recognition is evident in an embodied firstness. Spellers noted how the infrastructure of national competition mediates their experiences of sound, suggesting that hearing words on a national stage was a significantly different experience than elsewhere due to the lights, cameras, crowds, and tension. When I spoke to 2009 National Spelling Bee champion Kavya, she recalled having to manage the intensity of this space by blocking out everything but the pronouncer: "I used to get so involved that I don't remember noticing the audience, cameras, or anything else. It was like being on stage with just the judges and pronouncer Dr. Bailey. If you can focus, it is easy to block out everything." Shobha described a similar experience: "You're just focusing on the word for that two minutes, only focusing on what the pronouncer says. For those two minutes you're the only two people around. That keeps you calm, focusing on the word. You just focus on the word, even if there's a camera in your face." Kavya's and Shobha's emphases on focus underscore the competing sensory inputs that can elicit a wide range of visceral responses having nothing to do with the word itself but which nonetheless require management—nervousness, fear, nausea, confidence, elation, and the like. Managing them effectively allows spellers to hone in on qualisigns, such as the crispness Dr. Bailey performs, and move through their turn.

Breaking down words and rebuilding them through contextual information is a complex process to undertake during a two-minute turn on stage. In that moment, the sound of the word and the contextual information gleaned from the questions can be considered legisigns governed by "general law or type," (Peirce 1955:116). These rule-bound signs offer a link between etymological knowledge and the firstness of sound. Champion speller Symantak offered his method of how to link the word he hears to his vast knowledge of etymology and morphology.

If it's a word you don't know the first thing you do is ask for the language of origin. If it's Latin or Greek you can probably piece it together from stems. If it's a word that's, say, Latin from French you may have a bit more confusion, or French from Latin, French from Latin will be easier than Latin from French because of the roots developing. But if you have a word from unknown origin it can either be simple or unnecessarily weird. There are two ways it can go. So you see with different languages of origin you can sort of tell a word, even if you don't know it you can try to piece it together and offer your best guess as to how it's spelled.

Like Symantak, elite spellers can fluidly access this inventory of information about roots, suffixes, prefixes, and schwa sounds as they vary according to language of origin. Symantak explained that studying words this intently has allowed him "to notice patterns. So if you've studied all of the words that have to do with the root C-E-R-E, Latin meaning wax, you're going to have that engrained in your memory. . . words ending in S-E-R-E, that's different, those are fabrics, not a root but those words are fabrics." Even though they are learned as symbols, some portions of words invite material associations that may be conjured during a spelling turn—linking sound to sinsigns and legisigns. In this case, roots and suffixes are linked to material objects in the world, like wax or fabric. From sound alone, there is no way of knowing whether the correct spelling calls for a "c" or an "s." Symantak recalled a word from a recent bee, "adipocere," which he defined as "waxy, fatty substance in the shell of a turtle":

Adipocere. Does this word come from the Latin “adipo-” meaning “fat” and “-cere” meaning wax? So if you fulfill the three parts, which means you **pronounce** the root fairly reasonably, you have the **correct language of origin** for that root, and you **define** the root somewhat right, then Dr. Sitsma [a National Spelling Bee judge] will say, “You’re on the right track.” Then you proceed to spell the word, after you’ve gone through all the questions and confirmed everything.

Roots in this instance are not simply abstract symbols, but take on a materiality in the mind as legisigns that spellers link to rule-bound ways of transducing sounds according to language of origin and roots.

A key aspect of transduction is employing a method to pair sound with letters before uttering them aloud. Most often this involves some kind of visualization. Competitors call this “prespelling,” which is a way to see the word and confirm the letters and their order before officially spelling their word. The linkage between sound and orthography connects firstness with secondness and thirdness. When I asked 2014 National Spelling Bee co-champion Sriram if he prespells words, he explained, “I read them off my mind, I visualize it. The sequence of letters pops into my head.” Other spellers employed a more embodied, tactile approach to spelling by tracing potential letters on the front or back of their laminated nametag (Figure 4), their palms, or their wrist (Figure 5). These signs are fleeting movements, barely perceptible and not intended to have a communicative function with the pronouncer or judges. As part of an embodied firstness, they allow spellers to find the material shape of graphemes before uttering letters aloud. Champion speller Ansun told me that he visualized the word by tracing each letter as he uttered it aloud for the judges, in order to keep track of the letter order. He declared, “Once I have the letters in my mind, then I transfer them to the nametag. That helps me visualize it.” He admitted that he didn’t know if the letters in his mind were typed or handwritten when I asked, but other spellers did. Kate Miller, a finalist at the 2013 and 2014 National Spelling Bee, typed on an imaginary keyboard during prespelling (Figure 6). She explained that she tried out different combinations of letters while mouthing them voicelessly, and slowly and deliberately typed each letter as she eventually said them aloud. When I asked Shobha about writing with her finger on her



Figure 4. Prespelling words on nametag (photo by author).



Figure 5. Prespelling words on palm (photo by author).

palm after I observed her doing so in numerous competitions, she confirmed, “I’m very visual. If I see it, I can keep it in my mind. Writing on my palm is another way to match it with the picture in my mind.” Shobha had the unusual habit of writing multiple lines of text on her palm, about which she elaborated, “Sometimes the text wraps around, but sometimes I write the word twice to confirm it twice.”



Figure 6. Prespelling words on imaginary keyboard (photo by author).

Prespelling as an embodied practice can aid in managing the most important physiology of the turn—the tongue. Both figuratively and literally, tongue slips are a speller’s worst nightmare, undoing years of practice through a simple physical error that occurs due to haste. Prespelling is intended to minimize such slips and enable greater bodily control over the spelling turn. Kavya recalled: “In fourth grade I missed out at regionals, I didn’t go to Scripps because I missed a word, ‘mosaic,’ due to a slip of the tongue. I knew the word, but I said the wrong letters, and I realized I couldn’t change what I said. Then I realized I needed a way to slow down, pause, and look at what I’m going to say **before** I say the letters. Writing on my palm helped me, and I never had a situation like that afterward.” Referencing the rule that spellers cannot change letters or their order once uttered, imagining letters on the surface of her palm, rather than in her mind, allowed her to manage the intensity of firstness before entering into a dialogic process of secondness that could lead to an irreversible thirdness. These embodied practices are on full display in the time and space of the made-for-television National Spelling Bee broadcast.

The Temporally Mediated Soundscape

Until the early 1990s, when television network ABC began a live broadcast, the National Spelling Bee had no consistent broadcast platform aside from newspaper. Cable sports giant ESPN took over the franchise in 1994, when their parent company Disney acquired ABC. High production value has remade this once-classroom activity into a multilayered media spectacle. Details about a speller’s career may be shared during the turns of elite spellers, both through sportscaster commentary and through player profiles that are painstakingly filmed and edited during the weeks and days leading up to nationals. Such features add human interest to what might otherwise seem like a battery of words and questions and impart a sport-like quality for viewers.

Acoustemology and firstness shape the dynamics of the spelling bee broadcast soundscape. Recent discussions of soundscapes emphasize the “immersive” quality of sound that is transduced by particular ears, through various media (Helmreich 2010; see also Feld 2012; Hirschkind 2006; Ingold 2007; Samuels et al. 2010). As noted, the soundscape of the spelling bee turn is primarily dialogic but also inclusive of myriad ambient sounds. For those seated in the auditorium, live action and physical proximity create a shared sense of time and space. The auditorium audience may experience this soundscape in a number of ways, but all bear the imprint of time: two-minute turns punctuated by applause, in-house announcements for upcoming commercial breaks, the screening of short human interest segments for the television audience and warnings preceding the return to the live broadcast. Laughter, gasps, collective sighs, and “aww” noises signaling disappointment, are common and audible, in addition to coughs, sneezes, and the clicking shutters of cameras.

The experience of time in this soundscape also has an impact on how spellers transduce sound into orthography. In a precontest briefing, National Spelling Bee director Paige Kimball reviewed for spellers the “traffic light” system that only spellers can see when they stand at the microphone: with the first minute and 15 seconds in green, the next 15 in yellow, and then final 30 in red. “When the light turns red, you should start spelling,” she reiterated, looking at the stage of anxious as well as seasoned faces. Questions are not allowed after 90 seconds. Stage lights, visible to everyone, are also used to heighten this dynamic at the National Spelling Bee, changing from a soothing blue or purple during the first 90 seconds to an urgent shade of red, and do so with a different popping sound effect each time.

When I asked spellers about how they experienced the two-minute time frame, their responses varied. Kavya asserted, “Two minutes is actually plenty of time to think and process. It’s longer than you’d think.” Others perceived the passing of time differently. One speller remarked, “Sometimes you feel like you waited forever and it’s actually been, just, you know, thirty seconds. But you feel like, ‘My God, it’s been so long, I need to spell!’” The tension is palpable in the auditorium for those spellers who

enter the final 30 seconds, and the audience holds its collective breath to see if the spellers can finish spelling during their turn. Spellers are eliminated by timing out—an indication that they were unable to manage the temporality of their turn. Elite speller Dev shared the challenges of managing this span of time: “You shouldn’t spend too much time mulling over the questions and the word. Sure, you don’t want to rush, but you also don’t want to take too long, otherwise you might overthink it. Even if you know the word you might conflict [sic] yourself.”

The following examples illustrate how spellers manage temporality and how they may experience firstness, both offering evidence of and deviations from embodied routines. The first turn features elite speller Neha that I audio-recorded and observed during the 2014 National Spelling Bee semifinal round. In the following excerpt, the pronouncer is Dr. Jacques Bailey, and Neha is the speller. The timestamp is indicated in minutes and seconds beginning at the start of the turn (minutes: seconds).

Neha’s Spelling Bee Turn

- 00.00
- 1 Pronouncer: Gehenna. [gəˈhɛnə]
 - 2 Speller: Guh-henna? [gəˈhɛnə] Can I have the definition?
 - 3 Pronouncer: Gehenna is a place or state of misery.
- 00.08
- 4 Speller: Gehenna. [gəˈhɛnə] Can I have the language of origin?
 - 5 Pronouncer: It’s from Latin, which formed it from a Hebrew-derived Greek word. Gehenna.
 - 6 Speller: Gehenna. [gəˈhɛnə] So, is the part of speech a noun?
 - 7 Pronouncer: Yes, it is. Gehenna. [gəˈhɛnə]
 - 8 Speller: Okay.
- 00.28
- 9 Speller: (2 sec) Um, is there anything else I can ask?
 - 10 Pronouncer: (softly) Sentence (^).
- 00.34
- 11 Speller: Sentence, then.
 - 12 Pronouncer: Mikey and Patty think their great aunt’s house is a gehenna because she prohibits the presence of refined sugar on the premises. (audience laughter)
 - 14 Speller: Okay. Thanks.
- 00.44
- 15 Speller: (1.5 sec) Um, can I have the language of origin one more time?
 - 16 Pronouncer: Gehenna is from Latin, which formed it from a Hebrew-derived Greek word.
 - 17 Gehenna. (speller lifts palm and gazes at it for 3 seconds. She traces letters with her fingers for 6 seconds)
 - 18 Speller: (looking up with palm still raised flat in front of her torso) Okay, gehenna.
 - 20 [gəˈhɛnə] G-E-H-E-N-N-A. GEHENNA?
 - 21 Judge: Correct. (applause).

In this turn, Neha begins tentatively and asks whether the word is a noun (line 6), but then appears momentarily confused as she forgets the rest of the questions allowed in the genre. Dr. Bailey gently offers that she could ask for a sentence (line 10), and she accepts his suggestion (line 11). For Neha, the language of origin is the most critical clue she receives, and she asks for this complicated derivation a second time (line 15) before spelling the word correctly (line 18). Noteworthy here is that both pronouncer and speller say the word itself in each question and response, with a total of 12 times in less than 60 seconds. This high repetition contributes to the dialogic soundscape that pronouncer and speller create together. The pronunciation of “gehenna” remains quite consistent except in line 6, in which Neha seems to pronounce it with a mid-lower vowel at the end rather than a schwa. This minor deviation does not result in her misspelling, indicating a high degree of consistency between what she heard and what Dr. Bailey said. Neha manages the temporality of the turn skillfully, completing

the spelling of “gehenna” in just under a minute. In the nine-second silence of Neha’s prespelling (lines 17–18), she appears to take her time to assimilate the sounds, link them to sinsigns and produce legisigns to visualize the word. In the auditorium this nonspeaking period is transposed with the incessant clicking of camera shutters; this sound is filtered out for the television audience. Her successful turn is completed with applause audible to both.

While many turns finish in about 45 seconds, some take on a far tenser, dramatic character as they enter the second minute and final 30 seconds. The process by which the speller interacts with the pronouncer and the word involve lengthier periods of silence and instances of repetition, suggesting the complexities of firstness as they are experienced. In the next example that I audio-recorded and observed, the stakes could not be higher as Ansun, 2014 co-champion, was to spell his winning word but nearly ran short on time.

Ansun’s Spelling Bee Turn

00.00

- 1 Pronouncer: Feuilleton [‘fɜːjə,tɔ̃n]
- 2 Speller: Okay, um, can I please have the definition?
- 3 Pronouncer: A feuilleton is a part of a European newspaper or magazine devoted to
- 4 material designed to entertain the general reader; a feature section, as in, “It was in
- 5 the feuilleton of the Paris newspaper that Cherie learned she was not the only one
- 6 who dressed her dog in her other dog’s hand-me-downs.” (faint audience laughter; 2 seconds). Feuilleton.

00.33

- 7 Speller: Okay. Um, language of origin please?
- 8 Pronouncer: French. (2.5 seconds)
- 9 Speller: Um, um, part of speech please?
- 10 Pronouncer: Noun. (4.5 seconds)

00:51

- 11 Speller: Um, um, any alternate pronunciations?
- 12 Pronouncer: Uh, there’s fur-yeh-tohn [‘fɜːjə,tɔ̃], fuh-yeh-tohn [‘fəjə,tɔ̃n], foy-tohn [fɔ̃jɛtɔ̃] (2
- 13 sec). Foy-tohn [fɔ̃jɛtɔ̃], fuh-yeh-tohn [‘fɜːjə,tɔ̃], fur-yeh-tohn [‘fəjə,tɔ̃n]. Pretty close.

01.15

- 14 [Stage noise: pop! to indicate 75 seconds are up and stage background]
- 15 Speller: Okay (5 seconds). Um, uh, can you please, can you please repeat the word?
- 16 Pronouncer: Sure. Feuilleton [‘fɜːjə,tɔ̃]

01.30

- 17 [Stage noise: pop! to indicate 90 seconds are up and stage background turns from
- 18 blue to red]
- 19 Speller: Okay. Feu- [fi-] oh whatever! (lifting nametag with left hand to write on back with
- 20 right index finger). F-E-U-I-L-L-E-T-O-N?
- 21 Judge: Correct!

Like Neha, Ansun does not uniformly follow the genre conventions of the turn. Yet unlike her, Ansun relies exclusively on Dr. Bailey’s pronunciation and never fully reproduces the word. Instead he says “okay” and begins with questions (lines 2 and 7). He relies on proprioception by watching the eyes and mouthing of Dr. Bailey when he asks for alternative pronunciations (line 11). Dr. Bailey, perhaps sensing Ansun’s need to have the word repeated several times, offers three alternate pronunciations, pauses, and repeats them back in a different order (lines 12–13). Hearing Dr. Bailey say the word multiple times and ways, along with the legisigns of French grammar, also aid in transduction. That Ansun does not say the word even once is highly unusual and a break from form, but because saying the word correctly

is not required, the judges accept his “oh, whatever” (line 19) prior to spelling. He uses the back of his nametag to trace letters with his right index finger as he spells the word (line 20), offering some insight into how the firstness he may be experiencing is translated into sinsigns. Ansun finishes spelling this word correctly with only 14 seconds remaining—about as close as a successful speller comes to getting timed out of their two-minute turn.

Just as I have grappled with conveying the intricacies of this process here, so too is it challenging to translate this process for television audiences. To bring home viewers into the sensorium experienced by spellers, firstness, not just secondness and thirdness, is objectified through narrative commentary. Sportscasters deliver different kinds of commentary, the most common being play-by-play, highlighting athlete movements and points scored. In a stationary, low-injury competition like spelling, play-by-play commentary would require superhuman creativity (Figure 7). Color commentary, however, which includes biographical information, statistics about past performance, and indications of how the competitor is presently performing, makes the repetitive character of the spelling bee much more television-ready. I had listened to sportscaster Paul Loeffler call the Bee for several years, and watched him at live when I attended (Figure 8). As a former speller, he finished 13th in 1990 when he competed, and has offered color commentary for this broadcast for several years. We spoke between the semifinals and the finals of the 2015 National Spelling Bee and he elaborated on his approach: “If I can take them inside that kid’s head, that is the best thing I can do. Now, how am I going to do that accurately? On one end there’s **the word**, so what are the potential clues the kid can pick up on? You know, if Dr. Bailey gives an alternate pronunciation that stresses a certain vowel sound and it’s not that ‘uuh’ schwa sound, that’s a big clue. If there’s part of the definition, that might trigger recognition of a certain root. That’s a big clue.” During Ansun’s turn analyzed above, Loeffler did a masterful job describing firstness for the home viewer (Figure 9). Revisiting it, we see that Loeffler inserted his metasemiotic commentary in three key places: the start of the turn, at the 75-second mark, and at the 90-second mark.

00.00

Pronouncer: Feuilleton

Commentator: *He didn’t like French last year when he was here but he says he’s a lot better at it.
[He still doesn’t want ‘em.*

Speller: [Okay, um, can I please have the definition?



Figure 7. Capturing the action for an ESPN broadcast (photo of auditorium screen by author).

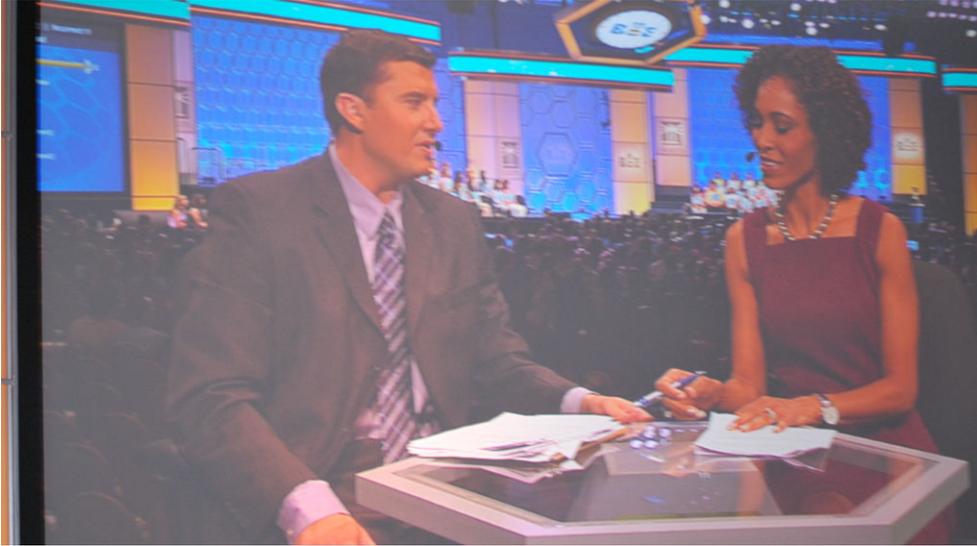


Figure 8. ESPN sportscasters Paul Loeffler and Sage Steele (photo of auditorium screen by author).



Figure 9. Spelling turn for ESPN Broadcast (screen shot from YouTube).

As soon as the word is announced, Loeffler references Ansun's relationship with French in previous bees. Introducing details from an interview he and his cohost conducted in the hours before the finals, Loeffler offers home viewers insider information about Ansun's spelling career that they would not otherwise have, potentially increasing their investment in his turn. Loeffler elicits empathy for Ansun's possible feelings of frustration or revulsion about receiving a word from a language he "doesn't want" but encouragingly adds, "he says he's a lot better at it."

01.15

[Stage noise: pop! to indicate 75 seconds are up and stage background]

Commentator: *It's all in the front end of this word for him. Give it your best shot, Ansun. Been clutch so far.*

Pronouncer: Feuilletton

Loeffler smoothly dissects the process for the home viewer. Materializing the word as having a “front end,” Loeffler treats it with physical properties that can be assembled through sinsigns and legisigns. He implies that Ansun has the back end figured out but is struggling with the portion that precedes it, though not specifying where the front ends and the middle begins. This seems irrelevant, however, as Loeffler’s broader aim is to lead the viewer through Ansun’s sensorium and how he may be experiencing the sound shape of “feuilletton.” Having sketched out this emotional tableau, he speaks directly to Ansun even though only the home audience can hear him, saying “Give it your best shot,” and praising him by saying he has “been clutch so far.”

01.30

[Stage noise: pop! to indicate 90 seconds are up and stage background turns from blue to red]

Commentator: *Now no more questions. Get the letters out there!*

Speller: Okay (lifting nametag with left hand to write on back with right index finger).
Feu- oh whatever!

Commentator: *However you say it, just spell it!*

Speller: F-E-U-I-L-L-E-T-O-N?

Capturing the collective anxiety of the audience, Loeffler’s remarks here reflect the scale and gravity of the championship round and the fact that Ansun is on the verge of getting timed out of his turn, and thus his trophy. He emphatically indicates what the viewer should glean from the changing stage lights: that Ansun should begin spelling immediately. Implying that the letters are in fact inside Ansun’s mind in some form, he urges him to move beyond firstness and give the letters shape and sound, to “get the letters out there!” Loeffler’s commentary also furthers the empathy he attempted to elicit in his earlier comments about this lengthy French word, that this lengthy French word would of course be difficult to say, and spelling it would be an impressive enough feat. He exclaims “However you say it, just spell it” when Ansun is unsuccessful in his only attempt to say the word and abandons this agenda in favor of simply spelling it. This casual remark epitomizes the role of the color commentator in making an otherwise esoteric or technical event accessible.

Distinctive here is Loeffler’s willingness to delve into the mind of the speller. While it would be relatively simple to remark on the physical actions of an athlete—a goal scored, a serve ached, or even a word prespelled on a palm—much of his commentary centers on *inaction*, or that which is contained in long pauses, minor gestures, and requests for information that are often repeated multiple times. Loeffler’s remarks here, as in countless other turns, draws in the audience, regardless of the viewer’s knowledge of this activity. In our conversation he remarked, “The balance I always try to find is, I want to be able to speak to the average Joe who would never even try to be in the spelling bee, make it make sense to them; but also, to the spelling bee audience, who speak the language and are really into it. Simultaneously speaking to those two audiences can be tough!” Such color commentary objectifies firstness for media audiences in ways that showcase the complexities of this temporally and sensorially intense activity.

Conclusion

Spelling bees offer opportunities to reconsider the dynamism of language standardization practices. Language standardization has an embodied, experiential firstness in the spelling turn and in spelling bees more generally. The competition itself requires an uncritical embrace of standard language ideology, but even so, does acknowledge for variation in terms of sound and accent of the pronouncer. The many procedural steps and turns Dr. Bailey undertakes can be seen as helping spellers, but are as well part of a larger project of standardization. Privileging a dominant pronunciation, eliminating others as they may be phonetically confusing, modulating his voice to make the sound shape of the word as accommodating as possible to the speller, all contribute to this process. Mediating firstness through broadcast strategies and color commentary add additional layers of authority to these standards. Breaking down and rebuilding words during the turn further the legitimacy of seemingly arbitrary rules of grammar and morphology.

The soundscape of the spelling bee turn offers possibilities about how to understand the centrality of firstness with regard to speech events and communicative acts. Firstness is foremost, as it guides the process of matching sound with a single word. In secondness, this sound is paired with a single word—a *sinsign*—that may or may not be the correct match to the sounds uttered. In the moment of the spelling turn, that word is singular and unique, the only one that will allow the speller to proceed accurately. In the turn, there is often much movement between firstness and secondness until the speller and judge decide to progress toward thirdness. At this stage, the actual spelling is rule-bound, through orthographic convention and exception, both learned. Young people engage in embodied transduction to move between sound and orthography, and the firstness of this process can be objectified for media consumption. While the spelling bee turn is not a typical, everyday communicative event, it does underscore the centrality of firstness in linking spoken and written language. Considering firstness more systematically in analysis of everyday speech acts, alongside established ways of examining secondness via indexicality and indexical orders (Silverstein 2003) or thirdness via rhematization (Irvine and Gal 2000) could reveal additional dimensions of meaning and experience in interactional analysis.

The acoustemological prowess elite spellers display, their discipline and focus, and their ability to manage the intense firstness that I document here are a key part of their “spelling careers,” as the spelling bee world calls them. What is gleaned via the acoustemology in spelling competitions is necessarily dialogic; emphasizing not just the acquisition of knowledge through years of preparation but also through “an ongoing cumulative and interactive process of participation and reflection” (Feld 2015:13). My attention to firstness is also relevant to an argument I develop more fully elsewhere, as a counterpoint to more sensational or reductive analyses of this competitive language standardization activity. For instance, a focus on sound and genre is routinely overshadowed by more media-ready headlines, such as that South Asian Americans, who comprise approximately 1% of the U.S. population and have won every spelling bee since 2007, with co-champions in 2014, 2015, and 2016 because they are rote memorizers with overbearing parents (for counterpoints, see Shankar 2008, Shankar in preparation). Considering spelling phenomenologically and through language materiality complicates these racial and ethnic representations by offering empirical evidence that these kids do not simply memorize, but rather, engage in a complex process of gathering data, deploying analytical skills, and undertaking this routine under time-sensitive conditions on live television.

Notes

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1. Names of spellers have been changed or only first names have been included.
2. The term “brain sport” was used by spelling bee families to include this activity as well as numerous other academically oriented competitions, such as science fairs, math competitions, and reality shows such as *Child Genius*. See Shankar, in preparation; and <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/05/17/brain-sports-are-gaining-momentum/4C4KN7hCA7LZxvP5fzDP1H/story.html>.

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