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Marshall R. Craig

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THE LOGIC OF IMPROPER WORD COMBINATIONS

Marshall R. Craig

Brigham Young University

Over the years my students and I have disagreed about certain word combinations. While I have insisted that they write these combinations as two words, some students have consistently spelled them as combined words. My students have, as nearly as I can tell, ignored the slashes I have conscientiously supplied between the elements of unorthodox combinations, and my question, "One word or two?" You could say that I have had a lot of trouble with one combination. You could also say that I have not had a lot of impact on the tendency to spell it as one word.

Recently, however, I have begun to look at the problem differently. My wife is a member of a national committee working on a beginning braille reading series, and when she returned from her most recent committee meeting, she reported that the spelling of a lot as one word had been discussed. Eric P. Hamp, the University of Chicago linguist, a member of the committee, had said, "Well, of course, it really is one word." After I recovered from his pronouncement--I had, after all, been slashing away at that combination for over thirty years--I began thinking how a lot differed from the usual combination of the article and the noun. First, it does not take the expected adjectives that the noun would take. Although the OED lists two adjectives, great and good, as possible modifiers, I do not encounter those adjectives in student writing. Both "a great lot" and "a good lot" have an old-fashioned sound to me, and my students shake their heads over their use. Second, the one modifier I do encounter in student writing is the emphatic adverb awfully, in the combination "an awfully lot"; sometimes they write "an awful lot," which I feel is incorrect.

My attention to the combined alot made me more aware of the other combinations students were writing, and I began to make a simple tally, with surprising results. (I am sorry now that I did not take more pains and put down the exact sentences in which the combinations occurred.) I knew before I began that students confused the a while in a phrase such as "for a while" with the single word, the adverb, awhile, and that the combined alright, spelled with a single l (apparently an imitation of the adverb already, I had always carefully explained to my students) had made its way into semi-respectability in the dictionaries. The Oxford American Dictionary classifies it as an "incorrect" form; the most recent edition of The Random House College Dictionary as "nonstandard"; and Webster's New Collegiate as a variant spelling, quoting Gertrude Stein in its citation.

However, as I made my tally, I was surprised at the number of combinations I encountered in a couple of weeks of checking student papers, ranging from freshmen compositions to those of English majors in their senior year. Some papers were from students applying to law schools and to graduate schools in English. I was even more surprised by the imbalance I discovered between the tendency to combine words into a single form and that to separate words we have come conventionally to spell as single words.

Students combined twenty words. In addition to alot and awhile, three other words were combined with the article--aday, alittle, and, most surprisingly to me, anannual. I found, as one would expect, alright several times as a single word, but also afterall, anymore, atleast, dueto, eventhough, inbetween, infront, infavor, infact, inspite, and nolonger. Three words were made up of nouns in combination: rootcellar, schoolchair, and studentbody. Only six words which we usually spell as combinations were separated: all together (for altogether), before hand, house wife, now a days, over take, and when ever. I tried not to select a combination or a separation which looked as if it were merely a careless slip of the student's handwriting. Some handwriting made it difficult to determine if the combinations were intentional; I did not use examples from those students. The combination infact appeared twice in a single composition, once carefully hyphenated as it was broken at the end of the line.

When I had collected about a dozen combinations, I began to see interesting implications and to talk with my colleagues about what I was seeing, and the more combinations I have collected and the more I have studied them, the more I have come to see a pervasive pattern in the combinations and a kind of undeniable logic to most of the formations.

Four of the six words conventionally combined which were written as separate words are extremely common, appearing often in student writing: altogether, housewife, overtake, and whenever; one, nowadays appears less often in student writing, and the final one, beforehand, is rare in my experience. These are not recent combinations. Housewife has been spelled as a combination since 1225, and the two most recent combinations, beforehand and nowadays have been written as single words since before the turn of the century. Only one of these appears in a two word combination, when ever, as in the question "When ever did I do that?" But each of the word units appears as a single word individually often, probably much more often than in combination. Unless the student who separated them were proofreading carefully for word combinations, he could easily overlook these errors.

If we take the sentence that I just wrote as an example, we can see the problem the student faces. I wrote proofreading and overlook as single-word combinations, of course, but I wonder how many students proofreading a paper would notice if they were not combined. More of them would certainly notice the failure to combine over and look, because of the many possible combinations of over with verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Proofreading could pose more of a question for the student, because proof has few combinations. Webster's Third lists eleven two-word combinations with proof, six single-word combinations (including both proofread and proofreader), and one hyphenated combination. The student who wrote overtake as two words, as well as the several who wrote whenever as two words, must have been either careless or extremely poor proofreaders. They must have seen these words repeatedly in combination.

If we consider the three noun combinations students wrote, however, we realize that the problem is even more complex than it first seems. One might assume that the longer the word had been in the language, the more likely it is to have combined with other nouns, appearing as two words or as hyphenated words, and finally as single-word combinations. The word

school seems to follow that pattern. A borrowing from Latin into Old English and appearing in combinations as early as Middle English, it combines readily with a number of other nouns to produce single-word combinations, such as schoolmaster, from the 13th century; schoolhouse, from the 15th, schoolboy, from Shakespeare's time; and schoolgirl, from the early 19th century. The OED gives school-book as a hyphenated word rather than the modern single word, and school board, from the late 19th century, as two words. School board, of course, is still written as two words today; however, 20th century combinations, not listed in the OED, include schoolbag, schoolchild, schoolteacher, schoolwork, and schoolyard. Yet modern dictionaries give as two-word combinations school age, school bus, and school year. Whatever rule the combinations are following, it is a highly complex one.

The student who wrote schoolchair as one word seems to have been making up a word, but unless he looked in a dictionary he would have had difficulty knowing whether he should combine the nouns into a single word or write them as two.

Both of the other base words the students improperly joined to other nouns are also old words in English. Root, an Old English borrowing from the Scandinavian, combines with few words. It would understandably have fewer possible combinations than a word such as school, but the OED lists only four hyphenated combinations with other nouns, some of which have disappeared from every-day English, such as root-end, root-leaf, and root-weed. The hyphenated root-stock of the OED is given as a single word in Webster's Third, where it is joined by rootstalk and rootworm. However, root borer and root weevil are given as two words as are root beer, root canal, root crop, and root disease. Two combinations which do not appear in the OED are given as hyphenated words in Webster's Third, root-bound and root-hardy. A writer would be relatively safe not to combine root with other nouns, but he could not know this as a result of a general rule of word combinations.

A writer would be even safer not to combine the third noun, student, a Middle English borrowing from the Latin or the French, with another noun. The OED lists only studentship, student plus the suffix ship, as a single word combination, a word rarely found in American English, but it does list other possible hyphenated combinations: student-days, student-life, student-monk, student-pastor, and student-song. With the present tendency to use either the single-word combination or two words, it is not surprising that these forms have disappeared, although we might expect those which have remained in use to have moved to single-word combinations, such as student days and student life. However, not only are these written now as two words but also the modern additions to the language such as student body, student council, student lamp, and student teacher.

We can draw only one major conclusion from this, perhaps overelaborate, discussion of the problem of combining nouns: no simple rule to aid the student can be formulated; either the student must have a good visual memory or recourse to a dictionary as he composes.

In the past I have sometimes said that students making combination errors lack a word sense, but I have reached a conclusion that they, for the most

part, possess a good "word sense" but have a weak visual memory. I see no basic difference between rootworm, one word, and root weevil, two; and little difference in the stress of the second element in studentship, one word, and student body, two.

Nor do students lack a word sense when they join words other than two nouns. Many of the words joined by students in their writing--in fact, almost all of them--have a basic one-word meaning, or if they lack that one-word meaning, they clearly represent a single concept. Professor Hamp might say that each of them also is a single word. With these combinations, just as with the noun combinations, the student must have that good visual memory or recourse to his dictionary.

We can first dispose of a couple of exceptions. One of these is the surprising anannual. It does not fit the pattern which most of the other words follow. The two words do not express a one-word meaning, and another word may easily be inserted between the article and noun: "a true annual," "a hardy annual," or even "a purple annual." Also the often improperly joined awhile does not fit the pattern of the other joined words. We say "a little while" or "a long while." But although it does not follow the pattern of the other words, it has an interesting history. While is an Old English word, and the adverb awhile appeared as early as the 13th century, but its earlier version, the two-word combination one while, appears as early as Beowulf. Even more interesting than its longevity in the language, is the early appearance of the form which the OED terms "improperly written together when there is no unification of sense," our old friend "for awhile" written as two words. That form first appeared in 1489 in Caxton's writing. Other examples are given through the 19th century in the OED, and any teacher of composition can add to the list from the latest batch of themes.

The common problem with alot is of much more recent origin. Although lot in the sense of a marker or object for settling disputes, a meaning which survives in our modern "casting lots," is an Old English word, the meaning for lot of "a great many" or "a great deal" is a relatively new one, being first noted by the OED in 1812. In the OED it is listed as colloquial and is so classed as recently as Webster's Second and by The American College Dictionary of 1966. (In later editions of The Random House Dictionary, it is classed as "Informal.")

Notice how most of those words that the students joined have a single-word meaning: alot is equivalent to much or many, although we could argue that it needs the of to complete its meaning in an expression such as "a lot of people," but in its final position in a sentence such as "He laughed a lot," it carries the complete meaning of the single word much, or perhaps often; aday is equivalent to daily; alittle, to some; dueto, to because; eventhough, to although; inbetween seems no different from between; infront clearly means ahead; infavor, favoring; infact, actually; inspite, despite; anymore has a sense of now in many sentences; and afterall can carry the meaning of finally. This leaves only atleast and nolonger. Both of these combinations seem to me to carry a single impression. Atleast, which several students wrote as a single word, is one word in German, Swedish, and Finnish, although I was told recently that it is three words in Russian.

Indeed (note the single form, written as two words from 1330 until 1600), I have seen only one of these forms in print, with the exception of alot, which seems to be the preferred spelling used in our university paper; that word is anymore. On a recent weekend it appeared in a nationally syndicated comic strip, in an editorial in the Provo Herald, and in a television advertisement announcing that "Smith's isn't just a food store anymore." Seeing anymore written as a single word led me back to the dictionary. Neither the Random House Dictionary nor its college edition lists the form. Webster's Third, Webster's Collegiate, and Webster's New World approve the single-word combination for use with a negative expression. "We can't find those anymore." These three dictionaries would approve the word in the television commercial, "not just a food store anymore," but not in the other examples I saw in the newspaper nor its use in student writing. In the cartoon it appeared at the beginning of an expression, as it does in "Anymore we call him Bill." In the editorial it appeared in a positive assertion also, "We have to be careful of people who make such statements, anymore."

All of these words are units of expression; other words do not usually intervene between them. I think of two exceptions in addition to alot. In opposition to the awfully which we use with a lot, we use very with a little, "a very little," and we use largely or mainly with due to, "due mainly to." The student, however, clearly thinks of these words as single units and does not remember how they are printed. The combinations are not just random joinings.

My investigation has led me to be more sympathetic to the students' problems and to be aware of the strong tendency to join words rather than separate those we have joined for some time. I am not arguing that all these word combinations are on the verge of acceptance, that we have more words such as alright and anymore ready to appear in the next editions of our college dictionaries. I am saying that eventhough we do not approve of these spellings, which we may encounter once or twice aday, we could atleast understand the logic of our students, who may be alittle, or alot, out infront of the rest of us in spelling practices. Perhaps we must all use the dictionary, or preferably more than one--all of this year's editions--before we slash such words anymore.