

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE TYPEWRITER ERROR

EVERY one who uses a typewriter has experienced at times the sensation of awe which arises upon beholding a simple English word turned into a cryptic by means of what appeared to be a head-on collision between the brains of the operator and his, or her, fingers.

A weird and wonderful spelling of even the smallest words is a daily occurrence, and careful observation shows that nearly every operator twists the letters in the same way, when he twists them at all, thereby proving that the tendency of all human minds is to work along the same lines in the combined manipulation of thought transmission and manual achievement.

A prevalent fault is the omission of a syllable. One author who discarded the pen some time ago and writes his matter directly on the machine inevitably writes "coning," for instance, instead of "conspiring," and quite as inevitably he has written the two or three words following before he slowly realizes that the omission was made. He was interested to notice that a linotype operator on one of the New York dailies had made exactly the same error three times in a column report of a political speech, where "coning" appeared twice and "conacy" stood once in place of "conspiracy."

Two brains several hundred miles apart had worked in exactly the same manner in connection with the same combinations of letters. In both these cases the thought current showed greater speed than the muscle activity, but the linotype operator could not utilize the friendly india rubber eraser and correct his lapse, so he allowed the matter to go to print just as he had cast it.

A more prevalent form of this same fault, coming from the same cause, is the omission of the first letter or first two letters of a word, especially when the word is not accented on the first syllable. The mind thinking the word is intent upon the sound of the word as spoken, not upon its written aspect, and the fingers, following tardily, try to catch up with the thought current by either skipping entirely all the letters preceding the accented syllable or by dropping out one or two of them.

When the reverse of the above condition prevails and the fingers are more rapid than the thoughts, letters are doubled and trebled. "Occur" will be written "occuurr" when the fingers are waiting for the mind to tell them what

did occur that they may set it down. With the thought still bent on the doubling of the "c" the fingers double the following letters as well during the momentary delay, while the repetition of whole words shows also a lagging mentality and the peripheries autonomous through nervous activity.

This hardly ever happens with the linotype operator, for the reason that he is following "copy" and his fingers do not have to wait for his mind to formulate the next word or to decide possibly which of two words is the preferable one to use. It does occur very frequently with writers who compose directly on the machine.

The typist who composes as he operates has a threefold responsibility, for as the cells of ideation respond to the command of the will while thoughts are conceived, shaped, and transmitted, the fingers must be quick to transcribe and the vision sharp as well for punctuation and mechanical detail.

The three controls must be nicely balanced, for a laxness in muscle control results in the omission of letters, sometimes even of whole words, and spacing is obliterated, one word being run into another. A laxness of visual control results in a period being placed in the middle of a sentence in place of a comma or semicolon, or of the use of a small letter instead of a capital. The period being the emphatic stop is the one most often substituted for those of finer gradation.

Writing one line over another or substituting single for double space, or vice versa, proves the thought power too strongly concentrated upon the subject matter for proper adjustment of the triple forces mentioned. The thought control in this case has made both muscle and vision unduly subordinate. The muscles have run the carriage of the machine back to the starting point of a new line, but have not spaced properly between the lines, and the vision has failed to notice the error until the line has been written and the mischief done. Sometimes the vision fails in its duty entirely, and the mistake is not seen until the whole page is typed.

Should the mind lose its grip on the muscular tension completely the fingers run riot through sheer physical inertia and words are produced which are strongly suggestive of atavism, and could

only be described as a return to the language of pre-historic man or an attempt to reproduce the grunts and cries of animals.

The most difficult task for the author who turns from hand-written composition to composing on the machine is this nice balance between the three controls. He has been accustomed to writing words without much attention to the individual letters which composed them, leaving that duty to his typist. Now, he must again spell letter by letter, and at first he will find himself coming to a dead stop in the middle of an ordinary word without the least idea as to what letters follow, a word which he would write with his pen without an instant's hesitation or perceptible mind query as to its spelling.

His greatest stumbling block will be the rounding out of his sentences and paragraphing. The sentences in his infant typed copy will be short and jerky; the least waver of thought will mean a new one and his manuscript will be punctuated almost entirely by periods. For a time, the compound sentence escapes him entirely, but it eventually comes back into use, and colons and semicolons are again utilized and fall naturally into their proper places.

When he finishes a paragraph his brain is necessarily dwelling on the next one, and the chances are that he will at first type an almost solid, unparagraphed manuscript. With this result obsessing his muscles, the few next succeeding manuscripts will be paragraphed every line or two, and unless a kindly editor straightened them out would look queer enough in print.

In the transposition of letters a uniformity is observed which substantiates the theory that all minds work alike under the same combinations of thought and muscular production, and also shows that the left hand is most apt to be disobedient.

The word most transposed is the, and in writing this most operators on the universal keyboard write th with the right hand and e with the left. The prevailing transposition is teh. You will find this in nine manuscripts out of ten, and you will find it at least once a day in some newspaper set by linotype operators, and sometimes several in the same paper.

The left hand of all these different operators with its brain transplanted direc-

tion to press that particular key, presses it before the right hand has completed its work. The sense of consecutiveness and initiation is strong in the right hand, for never is the transposed het or htc. The sense of consecutiveness is deficient in the left hand, but the sense of initiative is also deficient, for never is the word transposed eth.

The transposition next most frequently seen is the trifling word out and the prevailing transposition is otu. Here again the letters o and u which should properly come first are written by the right hand and the t by the left and, as in the case of the, the left hand presses its key out of its consecutive order and before the right hand has contributed its quota. This word so transposed will be seen frequently in newspaper columns and practically never is it written either by author or linotype operator tou or tuo, thus showing again the lack of initiative on the part of the left hand.

This lack of initial movement cannot be more plainly evidenced than by the difficulty experienced by operators in learning to use the left hand shift key in machines that are provided with a double shift—one at each end of the keyboard. While the right hand seeks the shift naturally when a capital is desired, it takes effort to train the left hand to perform the same act and many operators, even after years of typewriting, use the right hand shift exclusively finding that they have to "think" to persuade the left hand to push down and hold the key that the other manipulates "instinctively." This, in spite of the fact that the left hand shift is the better one to use in the majority of cases for the free right hand will perform faster work while the other attends to the shift than the left will perform if the right is holding the key rigid.

Of course, the right hand does not perform the act "instinctively" any more than its mate; it performs it through a brain direction, but the movement is an initial one (capitals always coming at the beginning of a word or sentence) and the sense of initiation is stronger in the right hand and requires less brain effort.

The sight typist who is merely copying, and this includes the linotype operator, sees letters, spaces, and punctuation marks rather than words. His mentality makes no effort to cognize more than the desired copy, and he completes

the cycle between the vision and the fingers with no serious strain on his thought centres. Consequently his errors have less of excuse than those of the man who is framing the sentence he is to write at the same time he is writing it, and the sight typist's errors are those of haste, weariness, and indifference alone.

It is conceded that the best sight typists are those who complete the cycle of sight and action without any draft upon the deeper centres of recognition or understanding. As the "parrot talker" utilizes what one might call the reflector powers only, so the parrot typist depicts, reflects, and develops on the machine letters in combination, words in assemblage, and the various marks which separate them. Of the actual sense of the sentence when completed he very probably knows nothing unless he gives the paragraph a hasty after-glance.

The speediest copyists and typists the writer has met were those who worked mechanically and did not know what a story was about after it was copied. The slowest he ever had any experience with was a young lady of much good literary taste, who sensed and enjoyed an interesting story or article as she copied it.

The very fact that this typist grasped the meaning of the sentences and the drift of the narrative made her a slow copyist compared with those who did not know whether they were copying Addison or Artemus Ward. This operator, by the way, when put on mercantile work where the sentences were composed of the customary mercantile phrases and she did not utilize her thought centres, became at once the fastest operator in an office where several of the twenty other operators had had ten years' more experience than she had enjoyed.

A correspondent who dictated an average of one hundred and forty different letters a day to three stenographers, and who had three typists working on four letters at the same time, and all using the same make of machine did not find it necessary that they should place their initials at the foot of the letter as customary.

The nature of the occasional errors, the quality of the spacing, the touch of the operator, in a word, the psychology of the letter, inevitably revealed to him the identity of the person who wrote it.