Out of Many, One: Spelling Bees and the United States National Spelling Bee

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The spelling bee is a paradigmatically American institution. Its origins are evident linguistically: ‘spelling bee’ is a sterling example of a diachronic Americanism, a term ‘coined in America, but [which has] been adopted wherever else in the English-speaking world [it is] applicable’ (Cassidy and Hall 2001, 213). The cultural practice of spelling bees emerged in the United States within a nexus of social, political, pedagogical and linguistic factors roughly linked to the emergence of American English as a unitary category tied to America’s political identity after the Revolutionary War. Representations of spelling bees in nineteenth century American literature reflect this linguistic identity in process of negotiation. In the twentieth century, spelling bees became media events and the unofficial, community-oriented practice of spelling bees was organized and officialised in the form of the Scripps National Spelling Bee. In popular culture, the National Bee1 has become inextricable from a specific version of American identity, in which hard work leads to material success. As such, its focus is less on reinforcing and consolidating orthographical norms than on the perceived pedagogical—and, more importantly, social—benefits of the difficulty of performing, and, more specifically, learning to perform, those norms.

For Our Mutual Benefit: ‘Bees’ as a Cultural Practice

The Americanism ‘spelling bee’ is, more fundamentally, a composite: a particular iteration of the American use of the term ‘bee’ to form compounds with verbal nouns. While most of the other terms thus created, such as husking-, paring-, quilting-, or raising-bee, have fallen by the wayside, ‘spelling bee’ has proven itself both highly persistent and highly portable. This adaptability may have to do with the evolution of the meaning of this particular compound away from the specific origins of the ‘bee’ as a cultural practice.

Most sources, both American and British, are consistent about the meaning of a ‘bee’: it is a ‘meeting of neighbours or friends for the purpose of accomplishing some task in common, esp[ecially] by assisting one of the number’, but also, more generally, a ‘social gathering for this or other purposes’ (Craigie and Hulbert 1938-44, 183). A bee, then, can be both pragmatically

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1 I capitalize ‘Bee’ throughout this paper when it refers to the Scripps Bee, in order to emphasize its official nature.
useful and social, although it need not necessarily be both at the same time: *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged* (W3) offers the single word ‘party’ as one of its sub-
definitions for the term ‘bee’. However, sources tend to divide on the etymology of this particular Americanism: the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that it arose from perceptions of the social character of the insect, a suggestion which Craigie and Hulbert, in *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*, reject out of hand, contending that there is ‘no evidence’ to support it. Instead, they posit that the term is of ‘obscure origin’ (Craigie and Hulbert 1938-44, 183).

There is, however, another possible etymology, generally favoured by American sources, and derived from a work about the social institutions of English farmers. George Caspar Homans, in his *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, argues that the American—and specifically New England—bee was, like all other institutions of New England town life, descended from ‘a custom of English villagers’. According to Homans, American bees ‘correspon[d]’ to the Yorkshire *bean-days*, when a farmer who had a particular job, unrealizable by the labour of his family alone, to accomplish would call in all the other villagers to assist him. The farmer would, in return, be expected to recompense his neighbours with ‘hospitality’. Homans’ argument for the linguistic kinship of the two words is based on a series of linked hypotheses. The *bean-day* was a practice of the nineteenth century, and there is ‘no record’ of such a particularly peasant-oriented practice in the thirteenth century, the titular object of his study. There is, however, a record of thirteenth century villagers giving *benes* to their lords. Homans argues that the nineteenth-century *bean* and the thirteenth-century *bene* are the same word, and that the American *bee* is also a derivative of the thirteenth-century English *bene*. Linguistic similarities aside, the far more important—and supposedly more persuasive—point for Homans is that the ‘institutions were alike’. Despite his own subordination of putative etymology to social similitude, Homans laments that ‘dictionaries’ do not acknowledge, or even discuss, the origin proposed in his text, originally published in 1941 (Homans 1971, 266-7). The specific dictionary entry referenced in a footnote to this passage is, in fact, Craigie and Hulbert’s laconic entry for ‘bee’ (Homans 1971, 448). Despite their neglect of his etymology, it was—at least partially—vindicated, as it found its way into subsequent American dictionaries and dictionaries of American English: Mitford Matthews, in the *Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles*—published in 1951—cites Homans by name, while the etymological entry for ‘bee’ from W3 gestures at his etymology—but with modifications—positing that the word’s origin may be ascribable to the Middle English *bene*, meaning ‘a prayer’ or ‘a boon’, and that an English dialect form of this word, *been* or *bean*, persisted. 2

Whatever the word’s precise etymology, both possibilities, as well as the definitions from various dictionaries, draw out the broadly social aspects of a ‘bee’ as a general practice: a bee is a gathering of a community to accomplish some action directly beneficial to one member, while indirectly benefiting all participants, either immediately in the form of food and drink, or more abstractly in the form of the development and consolidation of ‘neighbourliness’, under which category one could also include the implicit obligation that the host/beneficiary of the bee attend future bees put on by his or her neighbours. The spelling bee retains the more...

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2W3 is hesitant about this etymology, qualifying it with ‘perh’, short for ‘perhaps’.
generalized bee’s sense of diffuse social benefit, with one of the community emerging as more ‘benefitted’ than others. However, as a cultural practice, it has other antecedents, correlated to the first part of the compound: spelling.

Pedagogical Projects and Practices: From ‘Spelling-for-Reading’ to ‘Spelling-for-Winning’

Whereas ‘bee’ is a term with a relatively stable meaning but a contentious etymology, the meaning of ‘spelling’ is historically contingent. Its contemporary meaning, of “[t]he action, practice, or art of naming the letters of words...or of expressing words by letters” (OED) has not always prevailed. Until the end of the eighteenth century, it was often defined ‘just as ‘dividing words into their syllables’” (Michael 1987, 90). This, now obsolete, meaning also referred to a practice with a different purpose than that of our modern sense, corresponding to what E. Jennifer Monaghan calls ‘spelling-for-reading’, as syllable division was seen as the preliminary step to both pronunciation and reading. Our modern meaning, however, corresponds to what Monaghan calls ‘spelling-for-spelling’, wherein spelling is seen almost as an end in itself (Monaghan 1983, 31). Spelling-for-reading lies behind the methods sketched out in The English schoole-maister by Edmund Coote, from 1596, which Allen Walker Read cites as a ‘forerunner’ for the American spelling bee (Read 1941, 495). In the brief introduction to his pedagogical dialogue, Coote lays out his method of setting ‘his schollers to oppose one another’ in spelling. The two ‘schollers’ so opposed—Robert and John—seem to be engaged, at least at the beginning, in spelling-for-spelling: John has Robert spell out words of progressing difficulty, moving from ‘lo’ to the far trickier ‘might’. The strangeness of the ‘gh’ in the latter word occasions a shift in the dialogue, as they begin discussing, and rehearsing, the principles of syllable composition, recognition and division (Coote 1596, 32-6). In Coote’s method, then, spelling-for-spelling is subordinate to the development and rehearsal of the skills necessary for spelling-for-reading.

The development of the American spelling bee from Elizabethan pedagogical projects depended not only upon the shift from spelling-for-reading to spelling-for-spelling, but also upon the introduction of a specifically social element: the drive to win. Both of these are explicit in Benjamin Franklin’s Idea of the English School. Franklin seems to echo Coote’s project, but the two differ fundamentally in terms of their pedagogical goals and methods. In his text, as a way of ‘fix[ing] the Attention of Children extreamly to the Orthography of Words’, Franklin suggests ‘Pairing’ students, so that each ‘strive[s] for Victory’ against the other in ‘spell[ing] truly’. The child who is pronounced ‘Victor’ most days in a month will receive a prize, preferably a book which will prove useful in future studies (Franklin 1751, 1). The focus of Franklin’s method is not spelling-for-reading, since the children admitted to his school would have already known how to do that, but orthography. This term adds a further dimension to the distinction between spelling-for-spelling and spelling-for-reading: orthography is ‘the set of conventions for writing words of the language’, while spelling is ‘the application of those conventions to write actual words’ (Sebba 2007, 10-11). These two can also be schematized as the ‘code’ and the ‘performance’ (Cummings 1988, 4-5). Orthography can be thought of as the code which lies behind Monaghan’s ‘spelling-for-spelling’, which is itself a particular
performance of that code. Franklin’s project is fundamentally different from Coote’s because its object is not the development of analytic skills but the rewarding of a correct performance of the orthographical code.

The other fundamental difference between Franklin’s and Coote’s methods has to do with the concept of reward. In Franklin’s project, the ability to perform correctly is made desirable because it leads to nearly immediate social and material success, an element completely absent from Coote’s dialogue. Although Coote starts out by claiming that the two students are ‘oppose[d]’, in the actual dialogue they have an almost collaborative role, as John alternately quizzes and instructs Robert, and they work together to draw out and understand the principles of spelling-for-reading. In contrast, outright competition is constitutive of Franklin’s method. In Franklin’s project, ‘spelling-for-spelling’, which seems to imply a completely closed circuit in which the performance of the code serves only to reinforce that code, becomes ‘spelling-for-winning’, as the correct performance of the code takes on specifically social and material benefits, particularly for the one child in the class who proves most adept most often. This association of orthographical acuity with social and material benefit, cast in a generalized pedagogical framework, largely informs the current, officialised practice of spelling bees.

Whether as a result of Franklin’s text or not, spelling matches became staples in American schools in the latter half of the eighteenth century (Read 1941, 497). In these schools, spelling-for-reading and spelling-for-spelling appear to have coexisted. The overlap between the two is evident from a letter by Joseph T. Buckingham, dated December 10th, 1860 and printed in the American Journal of Education in March 1863. Buckingham’s letter was written to the editor in response to his request for reminiscences on the subject of ‘schools as they were sixty years ago’, and, as such, is heavily tinged with nostalgia. In the letter, Buckingham recounts the daily proceedings at the ‘common district schools in Connecticut’ which he attended as a child. When it came to spelling, the class began by reading aloud together the tables for spelling from a spelling book, wherein the syllables for words are laid out systematically, building towards the full word. Buckingham remembers this practice fondly, characterizing it as both ‘exceedingly exciting’ and ‘exceedingly useful’, as it ‘required and taught deliberate and distinct articulation’. The practice almost inevitably created uniformity: ‘It is true that the voices would not all be in perfect unison; but after a little practice they began to assimilate’. After this choral exercise in syllable-division, the lesson moved on to competition: the schoolmaster gave out the words for ‘spelling’ and, ‘[i]f one was misspelt, it passed on to the next, and the next pupil in order, and so on till it was spelt correctly. Then the pupil who had spelt correctly went up in the class above the one who had misspelt’. In Buckingham’s letter,

3 In this way, it would resemble what Cummings calls ‘self-regulation’, according to which a performance which does not match the code is made to conform to the code, and for which his example is a spelling test (Cummings 1988, 6). A test differs from Franklin’s method of teaching orthography precisely because the interpersonal dimension of competition is only implicit—students may compare results in a competitive manner—and not necessarily constitutive.

4 Franklin’s project was not purely speculative: in fact, it formed the basis for the curriculum of the Academy of Philadelphia’s English School into the Revolutionary period, as the website for the Archives and Record Center of the University of Pennsylvania points out.
both meanings of ‘spelling’ appear to be operative: the first practice clearly has to do with ‘spelling-for-reading’, whereas the second appears to be related to ‘spelling-for-spelling’. Notably, the former is associated not only with a sense of generalized cohesion, but with conformity, while the latter provides an opportunity for mobility within the class. The two extremes of ‘togetherness’ and individualism appear to meet in an interesting twist on the individual rivalry promoted in Franklin’s method: Buckingham recalls the practice of competitive spelling as also being, on occasion, a team sport, with the losing side having to do the next morning’s chores—namely, sweeping the room and building the fire—, while the winning side was allowed to go home early. Furthermore, the two practices, competition and repetition, have in common, for Buckingham, the stimulation of the desire to emulate, ‘and emulation produced improvement’ (Buckingham 1863, 129-31). Although Buckingham seems to make both practices both complementary and subordinate to the larger impulse of ‘improvement’, the drive to win retains a special place, as the placing of the competition after the repetition makes clear: victory in the competition makes latent ‘improvement’ both manifest and, by extension, rewardable.

Room for Improvement: Spelling and the Nation

In addition to his account of pedagogical practices, Buckingham’s letter records a significant milestone not only in the evolution of spelling bees, but also in the history of English in America: the advent of Noah Webster’s spelling-book, which, in Buckingham’s schoolboy world, occurred in the winter of 1784-5 (Buckingham 1863, 130), a year or so after it was initially published in 1783. Whether or not the young Buckingham was aware of it, the question of syllable division became especially charged in the post-Revolutionary period, when the issues of pedagogy, orthography and nationalism were, to a large extent, inextricable. Syllable division, insofar as it was one of the central concerns of Webster’s spelling book, became one of the major sites for specifically nationalistic linguistic posturing.

As is evident from Buckingham’s account, in general practice spelling books were used to teach syllable division, the preliminary step to orthography. The apparent need for the modification of existing, British, practices of syllable division was one of the factors leading to the publication of what would become the standard American text: Webster’s ‘blue-back speller’, so called because of its distinctive cover.5 This first stage of what would become Webster’s life-long project began as a revision of Thomas Dilworth’s A New Guide to the English Tongue (Micklethwait 2000, 54). Dilworth’s book, published in 1740 in England, enjoyed extraordinary success on both sides of the Atlantic—by 1795 it was in its ninety-seventh edition in London—and was the most widely used spelling book of the period (Micklethwait 2000, 23). Even Webster himself learned to read from it (Monaghan 1983, 14). In the preface to his speller, Webster positions it is an essential revision of Dilworth on two fronts: syllable division and patriotism. These two impulses are, of course, not distinct. On the national scale, however,

5In Buckingham’s experience, Webster’s book was not in ‘general use’ until 1790 or 1791 and so the spelling books used in the practices recalled above were of ‘a miscellaneous character, such as had been in families perhaps half a century or more’ (Buckingham 1863, 131).
Webster asserts that ‘the late revolution’ had made Dilworth’s book ‘improper’ for use in America (Webster 1783, 7-10).

Besides its implication in a larger ‘program of education’, whose ultimate purpose was providing ‘American children with American textbooks’ (Monaghan 1983, 13-14), the patriotic orientation of Webster’s first spelling book was, in large part, constituted by the claims made in its preface, which in turn reflect the wider political contexts in which the project emerged. John Hurt Fisher argues that, after 1776, the division between America and England was ‘schizophrenic’, as America was split between rejection of English ‘tyranny’ and nostalgia for English culture. Despite this divided response, the American Revolution ultimately produced an ‘impulse to define the language of the new nation as ‘American English’’ (Fisher 2001, 59-61), an endeavour which itself was necessarily divided between the desire to be distinct from British English and an inescapable attachment both to English as a language and to its British authorities: ‘it was to prove more difficult to declare independence from Samuel Johnson than it had been to reject George III’ (Simpson 1986, 33). Although projects for establishing American English after the Revolution must be placed in their contemporary context, alongside other attempts at ‘ascertaining’ and ‘fixing’ English (Fisher 2001, 61), their particularly nationalist cast cannot be entirely mitigated.

As a means of—at least partially—resolving the impasse between rejection and attachment, this nationalistic impulse often expressed itself as a drive for improvement, from which, of course, competition was not entirely absent: the specifically American projects grew out of a sense that ‘America could succeed where the mother country had failed’ (Fisher 2001, 62). In William Thornton’s Cadmus, often cited as an example of vehement linguistic nationalism, improvement is phrased as amendment: ‘You have corrected the dangerous doctrines of European powers, correct now the languages you have imported’ (Thornton 1793, v). Webster, similarly, argues in the preface to the first speller that America must ameliorate, ‘select[ing]’ what is useful from the existing heritage, so that it may be ‘as distinguished by the superiority of [its] literary improvements’ (italics mine) as by its political innovations (Webster 1783, 14-15).

Out of Many, One Standard: Nationalism and Regionalism

Besides the reaction against England occasioned by the Revolution, the general project to establish American English also had an internal dimension: a drive to ‘select’ and ‘improve’ in relation to regional varieties of English in America. In Webster’s spelling book, these two areas of focus are not wholly distinct: they reach their confluence at the issue of pronunciation, which is, in turn, intimately tied to the question of syllable division. Webster’s primary objection to Dilworth’s method was that his divisions were made ‘without any regard to the proper sound of words, which is the only just rule in this matter’ (Webster 1783, 7-8). Webster frames the establishment of a ‘uniform standard of elegant pronunciation’ as a nationalist imperative, declaring that it would be better ‘for the reputations of Americans to unite in destroying
provincial and local distinctions, [and] in resisting the stream of corruptions that is ever flowing from ignorance and pride’ (Webster 1783, 7).  

The spelling book, insofar as it was designed to ‘influence the way children learned to speak’ (Monaghan 1983, 35), was meant to intervene directly in this conflict, bearing the standard of uniformity. In the preface, Webster identifies the ‘standard of pronunciation’, which the book will aim to provide to ‘illiterate’ instructors in order to ‘demolish those odious distinctions of provincial dialects’, with ‘the customary pronunciation of the most accurate scholars and literary Gentlemen’ (Webster 1783, 6). In this definition, ‘correct’ pronunciation is figured as somehow regionless, as opposed to the ‘provincial’ nature of dialect. Furthermore, it is given an explicit class dimension, associated with education—or, more precisely, with a hierarchy of education, with the ‘illiterate’ teachers placed on the lowest rung of the pedagogical ladder and the ‘scholars’ and ‘literary Gentlemen’ at the top. In the Preface to the series of lectures which were published as the Dissertations on the English Language in 1789, Webster is more explicit about the ‘transcendent’ nature of his enterprise, contending that ‘[t]he principal business of a compiler of a grammar is, to separate local or partial practice from the general custom of speaking; and reject what is local, whether it exists among the great or the small, the learned or ignorant, and recommend that which is universal, or general’ (Webster 1789, ix). Despite the more democratic turn his thinking appears to have taken in the Dissertations, in which he also extols the so-called ‘yeoman’, whom he claims ‘speak[s] the most pure English now known in the world’ (Webster 1789, 288), Simpson argues that Webster’s adoption of the ‘rhetoric of a common language’ was a blind, masking his ultimate goal of ‘producing a standard polite usage shared by the educated and influential classes in all parts of the republic’ (Simpson 1986, 102), a goal very much in evidence in the preface to the first speller. Despite Webster’s best efforts to occlude its regional affiliations, however, this standard had a necessarily regional aspect, as all standards do: standardization, in fact, ‘is the process by which a particular dialect of a language acquires or is assigned functional importance greater than the other dialects’ (Trudgill 2006, 119).

‘Spelling Bee’: An Ascendant Regionalism

In the Dissertations, Webster explicitly associates a relative lack of regional variation with mutual intelligibility. Drawing a distinction between the people of America and those in ‘distant counties’ of England, Webster argues that the former, despite the vast expanses of land which may intervene between them, have very little trouble understanding each other, since, in America, there are very few words, ‘except such as are used in employments wholly local’, which are not ‘universally intelligible’ (Webster 1789, 288-9). Speaking from the perspective of standardization, and of his own present, Webster obscures the ways in which ‘local’ terms can come to be ‘universally intelligible’. Indeed, the term ‘spelling bee’ is an excellent example of the semantic ascendency of a regionalized term. Unlike many other dictionaries, which include it under an entry for the term ‘bee’, W3 has a separate entry for ‘spelling bee’ itself, in which it is

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6 Thornton’s project, as laid out in Cadmus, was similarly designed to lead to the elimination of dialects, as he claimed that ‘by reading alone’, all could attain to the ‘pronunciation of the scholar’ (Thornton 1793, 38).
defined as a ‘spelling match’. By equating the two terms, W3 elides the—specifically geographical—subtleties of their relationship. In fact, ‘spelling match’ was itself a regionalized term which was ultimately superseded by ‘spelling bee’. Whereas the latter was associated with New England, the former was associated with Iowa (Read 1941, 506).  

The predominance of the term ‘spelling bee’ to refer to the practice of ‘spelling matches’ or ‘spelling competitions’ (as the entry from the New Oxford American Dictionary defines the former) highlights the regional affiliations which underlie the supposedly regionless, unitary category of American English. Although it refers to a practice of American origin, and is, by any definition of the term, an Americanism, the term ‘spelling bee’ encodes a particular regional linguistic identity.

The cultural and historical context for the ascendancy of ‘spelling bee’ over alternate formulas is fraught with linguistic ironies. The term ‘spelling bee’ only began to prevail in the mid-1870s, a period which witnessed a renaissance of their practice spurred by the extraordinary success of Edward Eggleston’s 1871 novel, The Hoosier School-Master (Read 1941, 506), which includes, as one of its key scenes, a spelling competition in Hoopole County, Indiana. Ironically, Eggleston’s novel explicitly rejects the indiscriminate imposition of the New England dialect: in the preface to the 1899 edition, he claims that it was the first to actually represent people from regions other than New England speaking in dialects other than that of New England. The precise example Eggleston uses to illustrate his point is the term ‘bee’, used in the broadly social sense: ‘Before the appearance of this story, the New England folk-speech...had acquired a standing that made it the classic lingua rustica of the United States. Even Hoosiers and Southerners when put into print...usually talked about ‘huskin’ bees’ and ‘apple-parin’ bees’ and used many other expressions foreign to their vernacular’ (qtd. in Eggleston 1976, 4). Although he does not mention ‘spelling bees’ specifically, his ‘Hoosiers’ use the term ‘spelling-school’ (Eggleston 1976, 23).

Dramatizing Dialect: Eggleston’s Spelling-School

The novel’s spelling-school sequence stages the fraught relationship between dialect and orthography and presents an ingenious variation of the novel’s larger linguistic strategies. In Eggleston’s novel, the—specifically regional—multiplicity underlying standard American English is made manifest by the coexistence of standard orthography and a nonstandard.

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7 Read’s source is an MA thesis by Frank Mott which specifically identifies ‘bee’ as a New England term (Read 1941, 506). The entry for ‘bee’ in the Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE) associates it with the ‘North’ and ‘North Midland’ regions, corresponding, respectively, to northern Iowa, northern Idaho, northern Illinois, northern Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, New England, northern New Jersey, New York State, northern Ohio, Oregon, northern Pennsylvania, northern South Dakota, Washington State, Wisconsin, northern Wyoming, and northern Delaware, central and southern Iowa, central Illinois, northern Maryland, Nebraska, southern New Jersey, central Ohio, central and southern Pennsylvania, southern South Dakota and northern West Virginia (Cassidy 1985- , 198). There is currently no entry in DARE for ‘spelling bee’, since the volume in which it should appear, Volume 5, covering SI through Z, will be published in 2012.

8 In a further example of geographical flattening, in both Craigie and Hulbert and Matthews, ‘spelling school’ is quite literally equated with ‘spelling bee’, as in both texts an ‘equals sign’ is placed between the two terms (Craigie and Hulbert 1938-44, 2189; Matthews 1951, 1609).
version of it devised to register specifically verbal performance—i.e. the ‘Hoosier’ dialect, which is represented mainly in dialogue. The spelling-school sequence, on the other hand, depicts a verbal performance of the standard orthographic code, during which the standard of pronunciation is temporarily suspended: the spelling-school confers social success upon the correct performance of orthography without regard to pronunciation, ‘correct’ or not. This comes to seem like an egalitarian opportunity, since, at least in the spelling-school, pronunciation is no longer a barrier to success, as long as one can master standard orthography. In Eggleston’s novel, however, this element is only minimally evident, since nearly everyone at the match speaks with the same accent. Rather, the spelling-school, at least momentarily, asserts the authority of the orthographic code while suspending the relevancy of the code of pronunciation. This reconstitution of linguistic authority is figured in the character of Squire Hawkins, who is the administrator of the orthographical code, the ultimate source for which is Webster’s speller (Eggleston 1976, 45). Hawkins himself is a former schoolmaster, and former Yankee, who has been so naturalized to Hoosier ways that you ’would-n know he’d ever been a Yankee’ (Eggleston 1976, 38), as one character remarks. However, Ralph Hartshoot, the titular schoolmaster, whose thoughts are relayed in standard American English, sees persistent traces of the Squire’s origins: ’Hakwins had some New England idioms, but they were well overlaid by a Western pronunciation’ (Eggleston 1976, 44). For the spelling-school, then, the administrator of Webster’s orthographical authority is a man who uses the idioms of New England with a decidedly regional accent: the Squire enforces one of the codes of Webster’s speller, that of orthography, while flagrantly violating the other, with his ‘provincial’ pronunciation.

The negotiations between orthography and spoken language in Eggleston’s spelling-school scene reflect the fundamental difference between Webster’s project and that of dialect literature. Both Webster and dialect writers sought to synchronize orthography and spoken language: Webster, particularly in his early work, was very much concerned with narrowing the gap between written words and spoken language (Simpson 1986, 57), while this harmonization took on a different cast in American dialect literature, as writers adopted orthographical innovations in order to represent spoken language more accurately (Jones 1999, 4). Webster was unfailingly ‘prescriptive’ (Monaghan 1983, 123) in his attitudes toward pronunciation, guided by his belief that there was only one correct way to pronounce every word in English. Dialect literature, on the other hand, was far more illustrative in its orientation, as it sought to represent not just the multiplicity of actual spoken language, but the fact that ‘th[e] standard was itself regional in nature’ (Jones 1999, 50). In Eggleston’s novel, dialect and standard American English coexist, and this simultaneity figures the larger ways in which dialect literature asserts the multiplicity which the standard both attempts to mask and out of which it is itself constituted. In a stunningly ironic twist, however, Eggleston’s ingenious vignette of the agon between orthography and pronunciation, standard and regionalism, helped to consolidate the linguistic success of one particular regionalism because of the social popularity of the practice to which it refers.
The (Spelling-) School for Scandal

Eggleston’s novel also offers a glimpse of the social facets of community-oriented spelling competitions. Spelling bees became social events around 1800, when they were moved out of a strictly pedagogical context and ‘transferred to the evening’. Spellers from neighbouring school districts, as well as members of the larger community, were also invited to participate. The name ‘spelling-school’, which stuck to these social occasions, ‘salved the Puritan conscience’ by giving them the appearance of pedagogical rigour (Read 1941, 500). In Eggleston’s novel, the elements which must have so troubled the Puritan mind are made manifest: the narrator remarks that ‘[s]pelling is only a blind in Hoopole County’, covering for particularly romantic socializing as dancing does ‘on Fifth Avenue’ (Eggleston 1976, 41). At the end of the spelling-school, Ralph, defeated by the bound girl Hannah, finds himself utterly smitten with her, as he has finally seen her ‘awake’ (Eggleston 1976, 57). This episode, although it makes manifest the romantic possibilities latent in the gathering, also reveals another of the key social aspects of the institution of spelling bees: the triumph of Hannah (or ‘Hanner’ in Hoosier dialect) (Eggleston 1976, 51) is an early iteration of the egalitarian mythology which the current Bee celebrates.

While Eggleston’s spelling-school ends on an apparent note of optimism, with the possibility of love at least temporarily making up for Ralph’s loss to Hannah, other literary representations of spelling matches in nineteenth century dialect literature highlight the dimension of competition. Mark Twain’s coinage ‘spelling fight’ (Twain 1881, 170), from The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, has been dismissed as a ‘nonce-combination’ (Ramsay qtd. in Read 1941, 506), an understandable position given Samuel Clemens’ thoroughly curmudgeonly attitude towards spelling, and spelling bees. Although undoubtedly ironic, the term draws attention to the potential violence underlying competition: students are essentially fighting against each other to win. This latent violence is made startlingly manifest in Bret Harte’s poem ‘The Spelling Bee at Angels’. In the poem, an informal spelling bee breaks out in a camp bar-room and turns into a massacre. At the end, Truthful James, Harte’s narrator, announces himself the only ‘gent that lived to tell about the Spellin’ Bee!’ (Harte 1896, 187).

From Bees to the Bee: Consolidation through Media

Despite the sinister turn the match takes, Harte’s poem illustrates the correlation between the adaptability of spelling bees, contingent on their essentially informal nature, and their popularity in all possible social situations: a spelling bee, requiring nothing other than a spelling-book and a handful of spellers, could happen anywhere, even in a camp tavern. From the 1870s on, however, the popularity of spelling bees as unofficial, informal entertainment dwindled, although they remained popular in schools (Read 1941, 509). Over the course of the twentieth century, spelling bees became more structured and, ultimately, officialised in the form of the current Scripps National Spelling Bee. This process of organization was due in large

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9 Although Clemens had been a ‘masterful speller as a schoolboy’, (Maguire 2006, 63), in a speech to introduce a spelling match in Hartford, Connecticut in 1875, he remarked that he does not ‘see any use in spelling a word right—and never did’. Clemens later became an avid supporter of Andrew Carnegie’s ‘simplified spelling’ program, which also had the endorsement of President Theodore Roosevelt (Smith and Frank 2002, 5-7).
part to their continuing association with newspapers. The trend began in 1925, when the *Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Kentucky organized the first national spelling bee. The newspaper initially conducted a state-wide match to find the best spellers in Kentucky and then invited other newspapers around the United States to choose champions to participate in a national competition in Washington, D.C., as the website for the Scripps Bee notes. The ‘national’ character of this first iteration of the Bee seems to have been largely attributable to the fact that it was held in the nation’s capital, whether the regional coverage offered by local competitions was geographically comprehensive or not.

The first steps towards the establishment of the current Bee were taken in 1941, when the Scripps Howard News Service acquired sponsorship of the National Spelling Bee. This takeover of sponsorship by a national news service from an aggregation of local newspapers refigured the—previously only nominal—national character of the Bee alongside the reach of its sponsor’s media enterprise. The current National Bee has not entirely lost its affiliation with local newspapers: contestants begin the qualification process for the Scripps Bee by competing in local bees, which are generally sponsored by a newspaper and/or ‘other high-profile community businesses and organizations’, as the Scripps Bee website notes, in concert with local school boards and officials. Though these sponsors are not necessarily linked to the Scripps Company either financially or commercially, the entire process takes place under the aegis of their sponsorship of the final step, the National Bee.

Besides the longstanding association with print, broadcast media have also played an essential role in the development of the official Bee from more informal, local bees. The two have essentially played complementary roles: whereas newspapers have provided the structural and organizational background for its establishment, radio and television have served, through diffusion, to increase its popularity. The Bee has experienced a huge amount of growth in the past few years because of its association with television: in the early 2000s, it experienced a swell in popularity, thanks in part to live coverage of the finals on various American networks. This popularity has not just increased amongst passive viewers, since the lure of appearing on television has indubitably added to the appeal of the current Scripps Bee for potential participants. Neil, one of the competitors featured in the film *Spellbound*, a documentary which follows eight children competing in the 1999 Bee, asserts that one of his goals at the Bee was to appear on ESPN. Furthermore, the enormous popularity of *Spellbound* itself, which was nominated for a 2003 Academy Award for best documentary, has also served to increase the Bee’s profile.

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10 Scripps (the E.W. Scripps Company) retains sponsorship of the Bee today, but the ‘Howard’ has been dropped from the name.

11 In fact, according to the Scripps Bee website, Scripps owns only 13 of the local sponsors.

12 Bees were a ‘recurrent feature’ on radio in the 1930s (Read 1941, 511).

13 Between 1994 and 2009, they were broadcast live on ESPN during the daytime. Between 2006 and 2010 they were also broadcast on ABC, and in 2011, the finals were broadcast live in prime time on ESPN, according to the Scripps Bee website.
Moving Up: Success and Class Mobility at the Bee

Televised fame is only one of the forms of material and social success offered by the Scripps Bee in return for a correct performance of the orthographical code. The Bee presents the possibility of immediate rewards for the winner: besides notoriety, he or she also receives a very substantial prize package. The facilitating of future success for competitors, whether they win or not, is also part of the Bee’s stated mandate: to ‘help students improve their spelling, increase their vocabularies, learn concepts, and develop correct English usage that will help them all their lives’. In Spellbound, this creation of opportunities for future achievement is given an emphatically nationalist cast: in the film’s version of it, the Bee is inextricable from a mythology of America as the site of egalitarian opportunities for success. The Bee offers an opportunity for each of the eight competitors the film follows —meant to represent a diversity of races and classes, as well as economic and cultural backgrounds—to achieve not only in the immediate context of the competition, but also to set themselves up for the future.

The film signals the ostentatiously American nature of the competition visually, and obviously, through a proliferation of American flags, the most striking of which is the enormous flag hanging in the center of the stairwell of the Grand Hyatt Hotel where the competition is taking place. In fact, the film often seems to make the actual competition subordinate to nationalism. The spelling of the climactic, winning word is interrupted by a montage, initiated by yet another American flag being raised, suggesting that the spelling or misspelling of the word matters far less than what the montage sets out to portray—namely, the particularly American opportunity manifested in the competition as a whole. During the montage, the film offers its own version of the history of spelling bees, through the Bee’s official Pronouncer, Alex Cameron. Cameron, unlike Eggleston’s Squire Hawkins, represents the authority of both the codes of pronunciation and orthography. He expounds a version of the history of the institution meant to further its own mythology of egalitarian opportunities for success: he contends that eighteenth century America—implicitly figured as the birthplace of spelling bees—was rife with opportunities for class mobility, and that this mobility was, in turn, predicated upon education. Cameron’s disquisition is crosscut with short vignettes of the families representing the two extremes of the class spectrum amongst the competitors followed by the documentary—Neil’s father, whose own father has paid a thousand people in India to pray for his success, and Angela’s, an immigrant from Mexico who works on a ranch in Texas and cannot speak English. In this montage, as in the film, class mobility remains latent, as the promise, or, more to the point, promise of opportunities, afforded by ‘education’.  

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14 The winner of the 2011 competition stood to win $30,000 in cash, a trophy, a $2,500 U.S. savings bond, a complete reference library, a $5,000 scholarship, and $2,600 in reference works and other prizes, according to Reuters.

15 In other words, the film associates the Bee with the proverbial ‘American dream’, a term coined by James Truslow Adams in The Epic of America: ‘that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement’ (Adams 1931, 404).

16 Class mobility aside, the Bee has seemingly provided equal opportunities for success regardless of gender or race. Girls have been allowed to compete since the Bee’s inception in 1925, and, statistically, have won more often than boys: according to the Bee’s website, of the 86 champions named, 45 have been
Hard Words and Hard Work: ‘Education’ and the Bee

The concept of ‘education’ is centrally important to the Bee’s mythology. In its mission statement, it assigns itself a pedagogical function. Despite this claim, the Bee is, at best, a para-pedagogical institution. Although it works with schools at the regional, qualifying level, it is not itself affiliated with any educational institution nor does it espouse any specific pedagogical program. The Bee’s website offers study guides for teachers and local bee organizers, and suggestions for students on how to prepare for participation—one of which is watching Spellbound—but these suggestions are mostly preliminary, rather than systematic. In essence, individual competitors must evolve their own strategies. In Spellbound, the two families in the montage about ‘class mobility’ also represent completely opposite approaches to this issue: Neil’s father, a great believer in hiring coaches to fix whatever problems may present themselves, hires not only a spelling coach but a French and Spanish coach for his son, whereas Angela, in the best Franklinian tradition, is an autodidact who evolves her own methods.17

Although they differ greatly in method, both have in common a belief in the intrinsic pedagogical and social value of hard work, which in both the film and in James Maguire’s popular history, American Bee, is held up as a fundamental element of the Bee’s ethos. The point is encapsulated by Neil’s father, who, in the montage, asserts that learning to strive for something ‘difficult’, and not necessarily a mastery of orthography, is the most valuable thing his son will take away from his experiences at, and preparing for, the Bee. The larger point of the Bee, then, at least insofar as it is represented in popular culture, is not orthography for its own sake, but orthography as a place for mastering difficulty. Ultimately, the popular cultural mythology of the Bee rests on an equation of hard words with hard work.

Over the course of the Bee’s official history, the words—and particularly the winning words—have become progressively more difficult (Maguire 2006, 69).18 The difficulty of the words used at the Bee is constituted not only by the mined terrain of English orthography and its relative non-correspondence of pronunciation and spelling, but, more specifically, by the relative novelty or obscurity of words, factors which seem to pull in opposite directions.19 Whereas new words are difficult because their currency makes them appear less subject to established rules, obscure words are difficult because their lack of currency makes them appear less accessible. The particular challenges posed by both of these categories highlight the fact that the ‘hard work’ demanded by the Bee is not just a matter of memorization—it is, in fact, impossible to memorize a word one does not know, either because it is new or because it has

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17 Schools are not entirely irrelevant in this equation: other competitors, like Ashley, are shown working with teachers at their local schools to prepare for the Bee.

18 Frank Neuhauser won the inaugural 1925 bee by spelling ‘gladiolus’, whereas the winning word for 2011 was ‘cymotrichous’.

19 Homophones also provide a further level of difficulty: in Spellbound, George Thampy, the favourite to win, is eliminated because he misspells ‘kirtle’ for ‘curtle’.
fallen out of use—but, at the highest level of competition, involves an analytic dimension. As the Bee progresses, it explicitly moves away from what might be called ‘memorizability’: in the second round of the Bee, the words used are taken from the ‘Paideia’, the Bee’s official study guide, as well as the roughly 250 words which appear in the Sponsor Bee Guides; from round three on, however, the words are selected from W3, which contains some 470,000 words, as CBC News notes. The Scripps Bee website even contains an almost taunting sidebar about W3 which advises potential competitors that ‘[y]ou can’t memorize it’. Instead, the ability to mobilize the analytic tools at one’s disposal—etymology, origin, and definition—to ultimately perform the code correctly is figured as the key to success at the highest levels of the Bee. Although it may appear that, at this point in the competition, Franklin’s ‘spelling-for-winning’ has reverted to a pedagogically-oriented analytic exercise, at the Bee analysis always remains fundamentally subordinate to the performance of the code: no matter how brilliant and insightful an analysis the speller may perform on a word, if it is not spelled correctly, he or she will be eliminated. The development of the ability to analyze forms a substantial part of the ‘hard work’ which the Bee both simultaneously demands and encourages, but only the correct spelling of the ‘hard words’ ultimately matters.

Official and Unofficial: The Bee Abroad

Although spelling bees are by origin and by virtue of the mythology of the current National Bee maximally American, they have proven to be exportable. In England, a brief ‘mania’ for spelling bees broke out in the 1870s, alongside the American renaissance spurred by Eggleston’s text. Since then, the practice of officialised, media-oriented spelling bees has only recently been adopted. The Times organized a spelling championship in 2009, which it claimed as the United Kingdom’s ‘first’, although this should be understood as applying to a spelling championship modelled on the Scripps Bee. The BBC, attempting to capitalize on Spellbound’s success, produced a spelling reality show called Hard Spell, which aired in 2004 and 2005, and which was then spun off into a one-off pilot and series called Star Spell, featuring British celebrities.

Although it has not reached the United Kingdom, the Scripps Bee has expanded to other countries beyond the United States: the Bee proclaims that it works with local spelling bee sponsors in the 50 states, as well as the United States’ unincorporated territories, but also with other nations. In fact, since 2005, the winner of Canada’s official spelling bee, Canwest Canspell, has gone on to compete ‘internationally’ in the Scripps Bee in Washington, as the Canspell website proudly proclaims. Canadian participants have done quite well in the competition: in 2011, Laura Newcombe from Toronto placed second. The ‘exportability’ of the Scripps Bee has been dependent on the fact that the other national competitions from which it accepts spellers have remained, essentially, subordinate to it. In purely organizational terms, the other national competitions occupy essentially the same place as the local spelling bees from which American spellers are drawn to participate in the National Bee. In more broadly social terms, Canadian—and other international—spellers not only must use American spellings

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20 The Bee works with sponsors in American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
21 Besides Canada, the Bee also accepts participants from the Bahamas, China, Ghana, Jamaica, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea.
when competing at the Scripps Bee, as the CBC News notes, but they have also seemed to adopt
the same attitude as their American counterparts.\(^{22}\)

Another, less predictable, effect of the officialization of the practice of spelling bees has been
the apparent resurgence of the informal, community-oriented manifestation of the spelling bee
as entertainment. In one particular instance, the spelling bee has been given an ingenious twist:
organizers in Toronto have put together a strip spelling bee, based on a model already popular
in Montreal. Incorrect spellings merit removal of clothing, not elimination, as in official versions
of the spelling bee. The organizers are frank about the fact that the objective is titillation, not
edification, in a complete reversal of the practice of dissimulating romantic socializing under
the cover of pedagogy which characterized nineteenth-century American spelling-schools. This
version of the spelling bee both rejects the officialization inherent in the Scripps Bee (or the
Canspell Bee, for that matter) but also depends on it, both to define itself against and to give it
structure.\(^{23}\) Borrowing the framework, but rejecting the para-pedagogical intentions of the
official Bees, this version of a bee redeployed it in the service of pure entertainment.

\(^{22}\)In an article from the *Vancouver Sun* about the 2010 Canspell competition, the equation of success at
spelling with ‘hard work’, and, particularly etymological analysis, was emphasized.

\(^{23}\) In an article about the strip bee, Brian Towie suggests potential participants purchase a copy of *The
Oxford Canadian Spelling Bee Dictionary* which, although not the official dictionary of the Canspell
competition, was nonetheless designed with that market in mind.
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**Spelling and Orthography**

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