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## "CUVVENTRY"

### The English Language In Trouble Again

(Written for "The Listener" by PROF. ARNOLD WALL)

ANY one who takes an interest in problems of English pronunciation must have foreseen, when, sadly enough, the name of "Coventry" appeared the other day in the news, that we were in for one of those regrettable exhibitions of vacillation in our speech which so often mar the harmony of the home and lead to quarrels, bets, and frantic appeals to dictionaries. The expected happened, and different announcers from the BBC, not to mention the local practitioners, gave us both "Coventry" (o as in "convent"), and "Cuvventry." The same tendency to variation appears in "Covent Garden."

#### One of a "Cumpany"

There are, sad to relate, a large number of English words in which the sound of u is represented by the symbol o. The reasons for which will be explained shortly. These words fall into three groups, all large. In the first stand those words which are spelt with o but pronounced with the sound of u without any possible difference of opinion, the sound being firmly fixed. Such, for example, are: "comfort," "money," "monkey," "honey," "son," "ton," "wonder," "colour," "Monday," "front," "company," "London," "brother," and "mother." Only some poor benighted foreigner would pronounce any one of these with the sound of o. And all of them, I may say, have been spelt with u at one time or another in the English of the past. In the second group we have words spelt with o and pronounced with the sound of o as in "pot," without any variation; this is the largest of the three groups. Examples are: "yonder," "novel," "collar," "lobster," "monster," "Lonsdale," "modern," "bother," "Thomas" (for "Tummas" as an obsolete vulgarism), "compact," and "compound." Here again we are all agreed upon the correct pronunciation; nobody says "yunder," "muddern," or "nuvvel," though I remember that my own mother used that pronunciation; without any authority that I know of.

#### "The Variables"

Finally we have the group of variables, words spelt with o and pronounced by some speakers with the sound of u, by others with the sound of o. Here begin the difficulties of those who wish to speak "correctly," and find themselves bewildered because, in so many cases, the two differing sounds are to be heard from quite good speakers; this is so with "Coventry" as many of us must have noticed in recent broadcasts. Here are a "baker's dozen" of such disturbers of the peace: "Coventry,"

"Covent Garden," "Compton," "constable," "frontier," "monetary," "conduit," "Ponsonby," "comrade," "Romney," "Cromwell," and, rather apart from the rest, "donkey" and "lorry," in both of which the variation is, I think, confined to certain provincial dialects.

I had better get rid of those last words first. In parts of Northern England, and of Scotland, and in some of the South-Western counties of England the pronunciation is "dunky" or "dunk," but the standard sound is the o, though the Century Dictionary prefers "dunky"; the word is of very recent introduction and is not recorded by the authorities before the 19th Century as a standard word. The pronunciation "lurry" for "lorry" is confined, I think, to a few Northern counties, especially Lancashire, and at any rate until very recently the word was spelt "lurry" whenever it occurred in the daily press, in Liverpool and Manchester.

In some of the words in my list the "correct" sound, as prescribed by recognized authorities, is u, in others it is o. The following are "correctly" pronounced with the sound of o; "Coventry," "Covent Garden," "comrade" (though "cumrade" is traditional and preferred by some authorities) and "Cromwell," though no doubt the old pronunciation was "Crumwell" or "Crummle"). The sound of u is "correct" in "constable," "frontier" (but not in the U.S.A.) and "monetary." In these three the variation is very frequent in this country. The only "correct" pronunciation of "Ponsonby" is "Punsonby," but in Auckland the sound of o in "Pon—" is irrevocably fixed. The names "Romney" and "Compton" are allowed to be pronounced with either sound, u or o, according to the preference of those who bear those names. The breed of sheep is, I think universally "Rom—", not "Rum—" in New Zealand. "Conduit," a much-discussed and disagreed-upon case, is now generally recommended as "conduit" or "condute," though the BBC recommends the old traditional "cundit" without much hope, I should think, of seeing or hearing its instruction obeyed.

#### Blame the Norman Conquest

It is not at all difficult to discover the cause of this unfortunate variation in the value of o in English spelling. It is one of the results of the Norman Conquest, after which event the language was largely respelt according to the ideas of scribes whose native tongue was French. In French the u had the sound called the thin u, which it still has, so, to avoid confusion, they used the symbol o for the English sound of u, which was then that which we give it in "push," "pull," "bull," etc. This resulted in a worse confusion than ever because some scribes stuck to the old u while others used the o for the same sound, and for centuries very many words were spelt in the two ways by

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