

Is Autocorrect making us worse at spelling?

Introduction

The growing number of digital devices being used in and out of the classroom has increased the use of different Autocorrect programs and software. There has been an increase in the use of digital and mobile devices among individuals below the age of eight, ranging from playing video games to watching videos, this usage requiring some text entry (Arif, 2016).

Initially Autocorrect referred to Word's ability to change words when you type in a word incorrectly (Tyson, 2014, p.255). Autocorrect can now make suggestions for words that fit within your message or automatically make changes to your typed word (Balfour, 2016, p.512). Now, Autocorrect has gotten more widespread, being used in mobile phones, text messaging chats, emails, and search engines will make searches based on what the software thinks was the intended text or auto-completing the phrase.

With this increased usage, reliance on and availability of Autocorrect, will this have a negative impact on our future spelling abilities?

Top 10 Most Commonly Misspelled Words in the English Language

1. Publically
2. Pharoah
3. Definatly
4. Goverment
5. Seperate
6. Occured
7. Untill
8. Recieve
9. Wich
10. Accomodate

(Curtin, 2018)

How Autocorrect Works

Autocorrect corrects typos once the word is indicated to have been complete with punctuation or a space (Tyson, 2014), this differs from spell check as spell check will underline the word and notify that the word is incorrect. Some word misspellings are not corrected automatically if it is unclear what the correct word is supposed to be, for example the word "Itented" could be any of "indented", "intended" or "invented" (Tyson, 2014).

Some Interesting Terms

Malapropisms are words that are used incorrectly in place of a similar sounding word which will often result in some amusing "autocorrect fails". A **textism** is often used in text messaging and includes the use of unconventional abbreviations of words, " 'tonight' becomes '2nite' " (Powell, 2011, p. 58). The **Cupertino Effect** also replaces a word with an incorrect word because the actual correct word is not located, the term Cupertino Effect originated from being provided as the

correct spelling for the word “cooperation” (The History & Origin of Autocorrect, 2016).

History of Autocorrect

Dean Hachamovitch, working on Microsoft Word, was the founder of AutoCorrect (The History & Origin of Autocorrect, 2016). AutoCorrect was used by comparing your typed words with the existing glossary of words and matching the correct word with the incorrect words (The History & Origin of Autocorrect, 2016).

Initial Thoughts

“[T]he BBC informs us that Autocorrect and spellcheckers have turned us into a bunch of illiterate idiots” (Greenfield, 2013). The improvements of autocorrect allowed us to be less careful when typing and spelling as the artificial intelligence software will take care of these mistakes for us. Will Autocorrect cause us to be lazy and build poor spelling habits?

Autocorrect is a means of increasing efficiency (Buckwalter, 2016, p. 513) as “[r]elying on humans to discover and troubleshoot violations is slow and prone to error” (Zhou, 2017, p. 157). The main concern with Autocorrect as Buckwalter states is to improve efficiency as opposed to educating ourselves and teaching us to spell. If advances in technology can streamline communications and eliminate mistakes and become more efficient, surely these will help justify any negative effects?

What is Good about Autocorrect?

Without Autocorrect, whenever memos and documents were typed, messages would be read and reviewed before being submitted or delivered (Perry, 2018). With emails and text messages being sent almost instantly there is less of a desire to take time to review and proof-read messages with the focus being switched to communicating quickly and the instant corrections and changes made by Autocorrect is definitely an advantage in saving time.

“With over two-thirds of Britons now having to rely on spell-check, we are heading towards an auto-correct generation.” (Greenfield, 2012).

As generations are being raised in a more digital world, more communications are taking place in a digital text

format and the main benefits of Autocorrect are removing the stresses or concerns of typing correctly as any mistakes will be corrected by the software. As these stresses have been removed, we are encouraged to type and read more which leads to society being more literate (Greenfield, 2013). Texting in a format where there are fewer concerns about grammar and spelling allows children to practice and engage with language and communicate more freely which can help lead to an increase in writing in the children’s future.

There is an increase in productivity as a result of being able to spend less time on making corrections and more time communicating and typing (Buckwalter, 2016). As advances in technology have allowed Autocorrect to predict what the message sender intends to type (Queenan, 2016) and with the predictability of the search queries for search engines, time is saved and allows us to complete many more messages and search queries. Through machine learning more contextual autocorrect is being developed and more specific corrections can be made based on the different levels of formality that you use to converse with different people, helping you with suggestions in an attempt to appear more sophisticated.

What is Bad about Autocorrect?

Although Autocorrect has made many advances in technology and has improved its ability to predict the correct words from misspelled words, there are still opportunities for mistakes or “Autocorrect fails” within text messages which are often sent quickly without being reviewed.

Funny Autocorrect Mistakes

Result	Intention
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“Your mom and I are going to divorce next month”

“Your mom and I are going to Disney next month”

“Sorry about your feces”

“Sorry about your fever”

(Zimmer, 2011)

before submission or ignorance and not knowing how to spell the correct word.

Most common Formal Errors in 2006

1. Wrong word
2. Missing comma
3. Incomplete or missing documentation
4. Vague pronoun reference
5. Spelling error (including homonyms)
6. Mechanical error with a quotation
7. Unnecessary comma
8. Unnecessary or missing capitalization
9. Missing word
10. Faulty sentence structure

(Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008, p. 795)

These mistakes may or may not be noticed by the user and can often cause the user some embarrassment. But this can be more troubling if the word is changed to an incorrect word but the user does not recognize the error and this new mistake is the result of a poor spelling ability in the first place.

Autocorrect Gone Wrong

Me	Mom
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“Can we eat filled main on tonight?”

“What is that?”

“That steak dish I like. We had it for my birthday last year”

“You mean Filet Mignon???”

Although there are many advantages to having and using Autocorrect, there are some downsides that need to be considered (Buckwalter, 2016). Autocorrect automatically corrects your mistakes but this may provide a barrier to learning to spell and correct misspelled words as you do not have the opportunity to review your word and identify any mistakes (Arif, et al. 2016, p. 410). An important part of learning is working through experiences and making adjustments in order to reinforce learning, but when mistakes are automatically corrected, this learning does not take place.

With the case of other programs or software like spell check that will identify the mistakes and make suggestions, the user will have the opportunity to review the mistakes before making the appropriate changes and hopefully learn from this experience.

Who is to blame for our bad spelling?

The New Yorker looked at a study reviewing the most common errors in undergraduate papers, finding that the misspelling of words has increased from 1988 to 2008 (Greenfield, 2012). This seems to indicate that spelling has gotten worse but it could also be the result improvement in all of the other areas.

A study conducted by Lunsford & Lunsford to count the different types of errors in undergraduate papers found that many of the spelling mistakes were the result of incorrect spell-checker suggestions (Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008), this seems to suggest that this dependence on spell-check and expectation of computers to be correct has had an overall negative impact on typing. This issue is amplified by either individuals no longer proof-reading the texts and papers

In our fast moving lifestyle people rush through tasks and these spelling mistakes are the result of typing or texting quickly (Perry, 2018), which assumes that mistakes are the result of carelessness as opposed to individuals having poor spelling skills.

“Bad spelling has plagued typists since at least as long as computer spell-check has existed” (Greenfield, 2013), mistakes in spelling has increased over the past 30 years but this has coincided with the increase of the use of computers and different platforms for typing and texting and poor spelling has not just arrived with the more recent developments of Autocorrect.

Study conducted to determine the main causes of mistakes in text



(Arif, 2016, p.412)

A spelling test was conducted by Powell, et al. 2011, which evaluated the spelling of undergraduate students when previously exposed to textisms or incorrectly spelled words (Powell, et al. 2011). Surprisingly, the study suggested that exposure to textisms had a positive affect on spelling ability. This seems to suggest that abbreviations are used to save time and not the result of people not knowing how to spell the intended word and that text messaging between individuals may have an overall positive affect on spelling ability.

Conclusion

It has been reported that spelling mistakes have been increasing but this could also be the result of the

increasing number of people that are typing which would naturally result in more mistakes. As we type more, we also have the possibility of creating more new words at a faster pace (Greenfield, 2013) which can be seen as a positive even though more mistakes are being made in the process.

It is also unclear how much of an affect autocorrect will continue to have on our depreciating ability to spell as the implementation of autocorrect has made it more possible for younger people to engage in typing who would previously have not participated in texting or typing.

Although, poor spelling among students' is becoming more apparent, it appears that this deterioration in spelling has been happening for some time and is not a recent phenomenon.

The main advantage of using autocorrect is being able to type quickly without have to spend much time or effort on spelling. If the mistakes in typing or largely because of our rushing through typing and texting these mistakes are not necessarily because of ignorance and poor spelling ability but of impatience and of poor proof-reading ability.

New spell check programs have emerged such as “Grammarly” that is able to make suggestions and improvements to your text but allows you to review the suggestions before the adjustments are made. For those individuals who are opposed to the lack of opportunities for review and learning with autocorrect, perhaps a more comprehensive version that provides opportunities for review will be a sufficient in meeting our needs.

It does not appear that autocorrect will be going away but if this is a main factor in allowing and encouraging individuals to engage in communications in a text format the benefits may outweigh the negatives brought on by this software.

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