



WHO? WHAT? WHY? WHERE? WHEN?

BY DAVID LOWE

One of the things I most miss living in France is the letter “W” – “Wishy-washy washerwoman watches Willy Wonka.” For “W”, we say “double U” not double V, and it is the only letter whose name doesn’t contain any of the sounds that the letter typically makes.

“In Wales, whales wail.”

The “W” at the beginning of a word in English is pronounced much like the beginning of that most positive of French words *oui*, which sounds like our “we”. *Oui-oui* sounds like “wee-wee”, which means pipi in English. This confusion explains why my son wet himself on his first day at school. He repeated “wee-wee” to his teacher, only to be answered *oui-oui*, with a nod of the head and the idea that these English and their children are a bit strange.

“Wood would, wouldn’t it?”

Of course, with the rise of the Internet, the world has been obliged to reconsider the “W” – www, a sort of triple affirmation of this wonderful, wonderful world of “W”, is omnipresent. As if every virtual place has been compelled to start with not just one “W” but with a triple “W”. The short form of World Wide Web is “double U, double U, double U”, or, in French, double V, double V, double V, which as an abbreviation has, ironically, three times as many syllables as the name it is supposed to be short for – an anachronistic acronym.

I have a “W” in my name, Lowe. There’s a soft Anglo-Saxonish labial sound at the end of the name which you don’t get in the more Chinese sounding Lo. I often get called “Monsieur Love” in France, which rather flatters me. On the other hand, Arsène Wenger probably moved to England so that he could have his name pronounced properly, and Guillaume le Conquérant may have gone to all that trouble just so that he could be called William.

The only country that starts with a “W” in the United Kingdom is Wales. Globally, of course, there are places that begin with the word “West”, i.e. Western Sahara, Western Samoa, etc. Most compasses use

the abbreviation “W” for West rather than “O” for Ouest, which could be confused with “O” for Ost – all quiet on the Western front, so to speak. “World War One Won”.

Since in French most words beginning with “W” are of foreign origin, the French tend to pronounce them as in the original language: wallaby, watt, whisky, woofer, wi-fi, western, weekend, on the one hand, wagon, wagon-restaurant, wagon-lit, wagon-citerne, wagonnet, on the other. In fact, I could ask why call it a double V if you almost systematically pronounce it “double U”? The issue comes to a head in “WC”. Of course, one of the great mysteries is if the “W” is so rare in French, then why are French-speaking Belgians called Wallons (or Walloons for the Brits)?

The “W” started to appear in French in the 16th century, despite resistance from Latinists, who didn’t need it, and Germans who used it but didn’t distinguish it from a “V”, which they confusedly pronounced as an “F” anyway. It was one of those letters that was gradually adopted owing to Anglo-Saxon influence, cocking a snook at the establishment and paving the way for world domination 400 years later. So, all together now: “Whether the weather be fine, Whether the weather be not, We’ll weather the weather, whether we like it or not!”

