

Title: Sir Frederic Bartlett, the Bartlett lecture and an unwanted k

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Sir Frederic Bartlett, the Bartlett lecture and an unwanted k

Sir Frederic Charles Bartlett was born on 20th of October 1886 in Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire, England. He became one of the most well known psychologists of the twentieth century. And it is absolutely clear from his birth certificate, which I have in front of me as I write, that his first name was spelt without a final k. His major publications also repeatedly attest to the lack of a terminal 'k'. Yet, as a quick search through Google Scholar will readily confirm, he is often mistakenly cited as Frederick Bartlett.

Perhaps the occasional error in research articles can be allowed but it is more embarrassing when an honorary lecture named after Bartlett has been repeatedly referred to as the Sir Frederick Bartlett lecture. On February 24, 2015 the Editor of QJEP received an email from the production manager, informing him that the author of that year's Experimental Psychology Society Bartlett Lecture, Gordon Logan, had submitted corrections to his proofs in which he asked to amend 'The 42nd Sir Frederick Bartlett Lecture' to 'The 42nd Sir Frederic Bartlett Lecture' (Logan, 2015).¹ The production team then noted a discrepancy between Logan's (correct) spelling and spellings of Bartlett's first name in many earlier publications of the lecture in QJEP. Rather than ignore this discovery, or brush this under the publication carpet, it was felt appropriate that the Journal record a reflection on this event as well as resolve not to repeat the error in future.

¹ Rather gallingly, another lecture named in honour of Bartlett, for the Chartered Institute of Ergonomics, spells his name correctly and as far as I can ascertain, always has.

The Bartlett lecture was established by the EPS in 1966 with the inaugural lecture being given by Bartlett's close and longstanding friend Carolus Oldfield. As one might expect, Oldfield got Bartlett's name correct. His student and successor to the Cambridge chair, Oliver Zangwill, also got it right in the third lecture. There are other, later, correct renditions and, happily, the EPS's website now gives the correct spelling (though I am assured that for quite some time it did not). However, in many other Bartlett lectures, including ones by speakers who had known Bartlett personally such as T.C.D. Whiteside and Horace Barlow, the unwanted k creeps in starting, it seems, with the 5th lecture by Gordon Bower (Bower, 1976). The EPS are not the only error-prone institution. At the time of writing (20th July 2015) the University of Cambridge's webpage for St John's College – Bartlett's college – under 'Politics, Psychology, Sociology and International Politics at St John's', comments that "Sir Frederick Bartlett, the influential Psychologist, was also a Fellow of the College" (perhaps by the time this article is published, that mistake will have been corrected).²

Bartlett was important for his institutional role in shaping British psychology but in terms of ideas and findings, he is most often celebrated in relation to his theory of remembering (Broadbent, 1970; Danziger, 2008). In particular, it is Bartlett's insistence on remembering as a reconstructive activity and as a striving for meaning that have had the greatest influence on how psychologists think about memory. But I want to emphasise two different aspects of his work in relation to the added k: his insistence that psychology grapple with cognition as something that is embedded in a social

² Web page: <http://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/politics-psychology-sociology-and-international-politics-st-johns>, accessed 20th July 2015.

context and the notion of conventionalisation (see Bartlett, 1916, 1920, 1932).³ It is tempting to see the added 'k' as simply a cognitive error arising from a tendency in errors of addition or substitution for more common forms to replace less common forms rather than vice versa. Furthermore, the two spellings of Bartlett's name sound the same and it is also known that proofreaders more easily miss homophonic errors (Daneman & Stainton, 1991).⁴ These observations often derive from rapid, online processing tasks be it spontaneous speech or proofreading and the persistence of an unwanted k at the end of Frederic suggests additional things may be at play.

Stemming in large part from his interest in diffusionist ideas in anthropology, Bartlett argued that as items move between individuals, groups and cultures there is a tendency to change things to fit in with the dominant receiving culture. Perhaps the insertion of the k was the fault of a copy editor, who presumably pondered his or her decision and opted for the more anglicised form as an instance of conventionalisation. After all, there is little doubt that in the UK Frederick is the more common spelling and so the conventional and the most frequent coincide (both then and now: on the double page of the register on which Bartlett's birth is recorded, there are 25 Fredericks, 3 Freds, 1 Frederica and, of course, 1 Frederic). The perpetuation of the error would be aided by it coinciding with the dominant form. In addition, there is research suggesting that how effective we are at detecting errors is dependent on task demands and how the task is approached, that is, it is in part a product of what we are being asked to do (Schotter, Bicknell, Howard, Levy and Rayner, 2014). Whatever the explanation, none of this is isolated cognition; it is, as Bartlett would have had it, cognition in a context, with a

³ To be accurate, Bartlett used the term 'cognition' comparatively rarely but in this instance I hope I am allowed this anachronism.

⁴ I am grateful to Marc Brysbaert for highlighting this point.

purpose, shaped by factors as plain as frequency but also shaped by things as complex as one reader trying to infer the intentions of the writer. There is no doubt that psychology informs our understanding of the historical and much-repeated error, as it should, but equally, as Bartlett once concluded to a young Horace Barlow, “So you see it is all very difficult” (Barlow, 1985, p. 121).

982 words

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