The Coventry, Play! Mystery — or, covfefe is really Cov, fefe! ‘Cov(entry), play!’


While covfefe in Donald Trump’s Wednesday morning (5/31/17) tweet was most probably a misspelling of coverage, that strange letter-string lends itself to alternative linguistic analysis. Linguists most often write about language structure and language change in non-tweeted texts, but trying to find humor in the chaos of the current administration can sometimes lead one to a different place.

Cov is used in British English as a clipped form of the city name Coventry. This is parallel to the clipping seen in U.S. place names like Delmarva, which includes the beginnings of Del-aware and Mar-ylvania (plus the first and last letters of V-irginia).

In Coventry, as in many other British cities, there are speakers of Ewe (usually rendered in English as AY-way or AY-way), a language mainly spoken in the southwest of Ghana — now a sovereign nation, but once a British colony in West Africa. In Ewe, fefe is a form of the verb ‘to play’. (Ewe is a tonal language, but the tone markings are omitted here.)

Hence — IF we can entertain the barely conceivable thought that Trump might tweet bilingually — we can speculate as follows: covfefe = Cov, fefe! = ‘Coventry, play!’.

But why Coventry, and why play?

Here, we can invoke Trump’s well-known trouble with geography (e.g., with Belgium and the Middle East). Also relevant is the fact that Coventry has a football/soccer team (Coventry City) — as does Manchester (which actually has more than one team).

Trump could have typed Coventry when he really meant to tweet about Manchester and the recent terrorist attack there. And he may well have misunderstood requests for people to pray that Manchester Stand United as references to the playing of Manchester United.

This enables us to solve the mystery of that now-famous twump — or tweet by Trump. Imagine him starting with Manchester (United), play!, substituting Cov(entry) for Manchester, replacing play with the Ewe form fefe, and then running it all together in lower-case letters. Thus, voilà: covfefe, with geographical confusion and language-mixing (or at least some yawning) tossed together in a single word-salad — priceless.

Plus, if anyone really believes this, then there’s a large tower in New York City that might actually be available for a special price....

Postscript: The facts about Cov and fefe are verifiable online via Wiktionary. There’s also an old (1968) Ewe language-course online; it’s out of date but does contain the verb-root fé ‘play’ (in the word-list on page F-1). Finally, Coventry in British English also means ‘banishment’, but that and the possible twump covtwumtwum are another story.