Cryptography Group Exercise

Below is a cryptogram from the Saturday Review. Your job is to decode it back into the original English message. We recommend that you do this in groups of up to three students. (But if you’re already familiar with solving this kind of puzzle, work on it alone; otherwise you’ll just blow the rest of your group away.)

A cryptogram is a message or quotation written in a substitution cipher—for each letter in the original message, a different letter has been uniformly substituted in the cryptogram. All As become Ws, for example, and all Ws become Gs, and so on. For more information, Google “cryptogram.”

Here’s a hint for working in your groups: Everyone should work on the same copy of this handout. Then, if you want to start over, you can use a new, clean, worksheet.

The relevance of this to linguistics is that it illustrates a property of natural language: redundancy, meaning it contains more information than is absolutely necessary. We saw how leaving out all the vowels or scrambling the middle letters in each word doesn’t hinder comprehension very much. In this case, all we need to understand the message (admittedly, with some effort) is the length of the words and the pattern of how the letters are distributed; we don’t need the actual letters that make up the actual English words.

BSL PLXB NFIB CR BSL

RDEBDCV DV JFVA VCYLUX

DX BSL VCBDEL BSFB BSL

ESFIFEBLIX FIL NHILUA

DJFKDVFIA.

— RIFVOUDV N. FTFJX