CULTURE

David Crystal on Language

HOW DO YOU SPELL THAT?

Se c'è un guru della lingua inglese, questo è David Crystal. Vera e propria enciclopedia vivente in materia di linguistica, Crystal ci ha messo volentieri a disposizione la sua conoscenza in una serie di interviste. Iniziamo con la domanda che si pongono tutti: perché lo spelling inglese è così assurdo? Ecco la risposta.

BY MARK WORDEN

When it comes to the study of the English language, David Crystal enjoys cult status. He has written a number of entertaining books on the subject and he is a frequent guest on radio. Over the next few issues we will be talking to him about various aspects of the world's favourite language. This month we begin with his latest and most successful book, Spell It Out: The Singular History of English Spelling. Here he discusses a question that is a nightmare for mother tongue speakers and foreign learners alike: why is English spelling so absurdly difficult?

David Crystal

The story of English spelling is essentially the story of a system which originally was very regular and very phonetic, just like Italian, you know, you could read Old English very, very easily indeed, the language of the Anglo-Saxons. But then, progressively, over subsequent centuries various people messed it up. Along come the French in 1066 and they mess it up, introducing all kinds of French spellings into the Germanic system. A couple of centuries later along come the printers and they mess it up a bit, adding new conventions there. A couple of centuries later along come the classical language enthusiasts who introduce lots of Latin spellings and they mess it up, and so it goes on and on and on, with new layers of complexity being added to an originally very simple system, and so these days we're left with a system which is quite complex.

CONFUSED?

And that's not all:

David Crystal

And, moreover, which is still evolving because one of the biggest problems foreign learners of English have — and the same for native speakers, too — is, "Which is the correct spelling?" And a surprising 20 per cent of the words in an English dictionary have alternative spellings. This is the thing, you know, you look up the word judgement and sometimes it's with an e and sometimes without an e: both are acceptable. You look up the word realise and sometimes it ends in -ise and sometimes -ize, and both are acceptable. You look up flower pot and sometimes it has a hyphen in the middle, sometimes a space, and sometimes neither, and all three are acceptable, and when you add them all up, you find that an extraordinary number of words still have variations. British and American English, of course, is a perfect example of the way these variations are in front of everybody's eyes, all over the English-speaking world, and so, for all these reasons, English spelling does present quite a bit of a challenge to any learner.

GLOSSARY

1 nightmare: incubo
2 Indeed: veramente
3 messed it up: fecero confusione
4 printers: stampatori
5 layers: strati
6 hyphen: trattino
7 neither: nessuno dei due
8 challenge: sfida
9 crutch to help you get to grips with it better: 'stampella' per aiutarti a capire meglio
10 wonder: si domandano
11 along come the printers: ecco che arrivano gli stampatori
12 typesetters: compositori tipografici

GHOSTS
We then asked David Crystal whether he had any words of encouragement:

David Crystal
My best recommendation is: try to understand where the irregular spellings come from and then you’ll find that this acts as a kind of foundation or crutch to help you get to grips with it better. I’ll give you one example: a lot of people wonder why is there an h in the word ghost? In Middle English there was no h. It was G-O-S-T, “gost,” or G-O-O-S-T, but along come the printers11, William Caxton with typesetters12 from Northern Europe, from Belgium, the area of modern Belgium and the Netherlands, and they spoke Flemish, and so they introduced a Flemish spelling into the word. In their language ghost was “gheest,” G-H-E-E-S-T, the typesetters didn’t know any English, they thought, “Well, we’ll just spell the word like we know how to spell it,” they put an h in and it stayed. Well, once you know that, actually you never forget that there’s an h in ghost, you know, so stories like that actually help! 😊

Various people messed it up.
Il sostantivo mess significa disordine, disastro. C’è anche la frase another fine mess, “un altro bel disastro” (pur troppo l’omonimo film di Laurel e Hardy del 1930 è stato tradotto in italiano erroneamente come “un nuovo imbroglio”). C’è anche il phrasal verb to mess around che significa “perdere tempo, prendere in giro”.

A couple of centuries later along come...
Along come è un modo simpatico per dire “eccoci che arrivano”. Da notare l’uso dell’avverbio prima del verbo, che non succede spesso in inglese.

And so it goes on and on and on.
E così via. David Crystal ripete le parole and on per rendere l’idea della storia che si ripete. È un modo di dire divertente e quasi poetico!

z. Lo spelling in inglese è talmente complicato che spesso si chiede How do you spell that? Quindi bisogna sapere come si “dicono” le lettere. In inglese britannico “z” si dice zed, in americano zee.