



| 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: perchè lo spelling inglese è così assurdo? Ecco la risposta. BY MARK WORDEN

C1 ADVANCED



SPEAKER
MARK WORDEN

▶ TRACK 14

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 nightmare¹ 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 indeed², the language of the Anglo-Saxons. But then, progressively, over subsequent centuries various people messed it up³. 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 printers⁴ 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 layers⁵ 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:

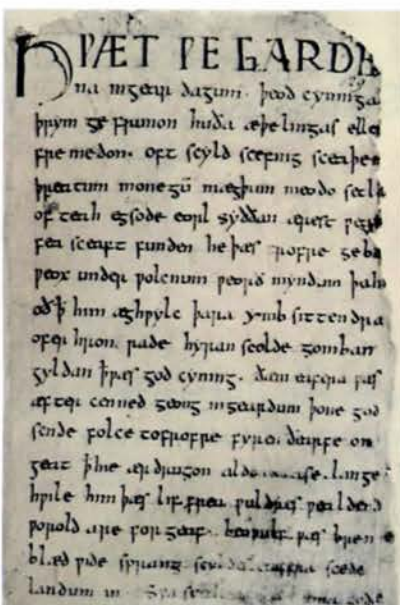
David Crystal

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

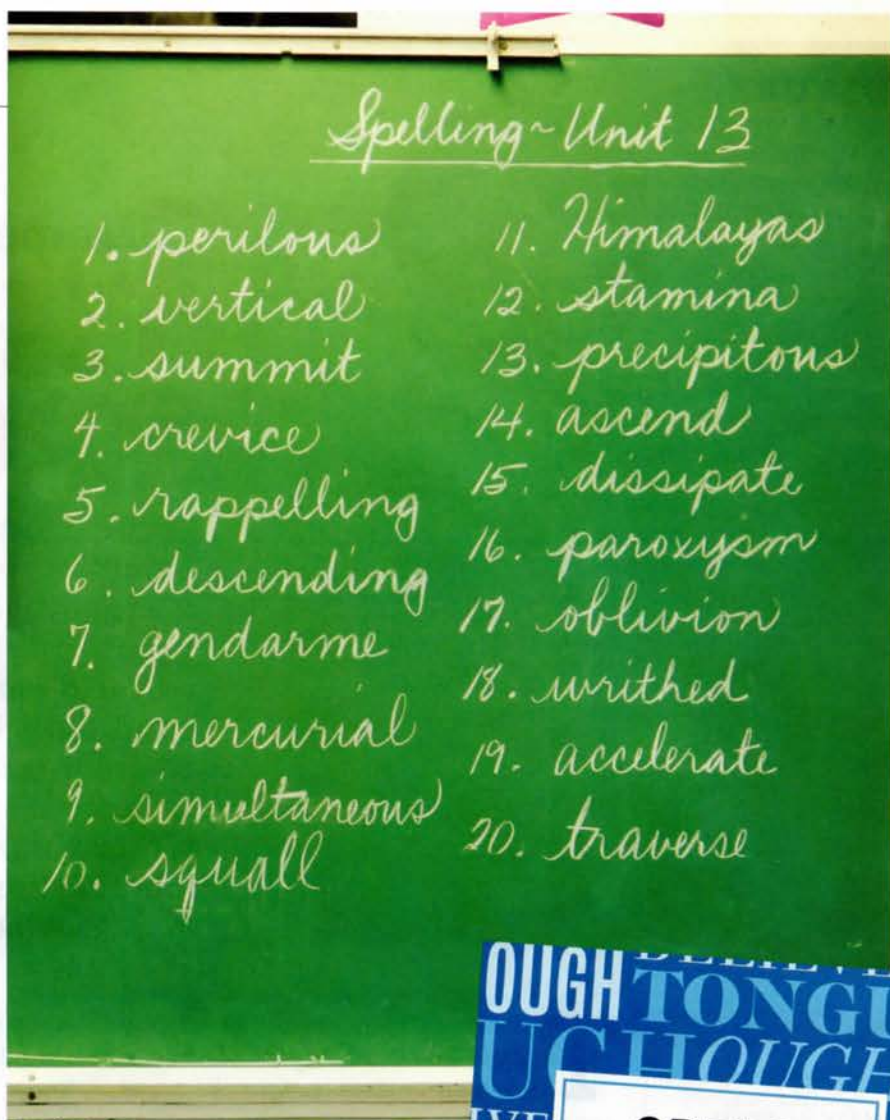
it ends in *-ise* and sometimes *-ize*, and both are acceptable. You look up *flower pot* and sometimes it has a hyphen⁶ in the middle, sometimes a space, and sometimes neither⁷, and all three are acceptable, and when you add them all up, you find that an extraordinary number of words still have variations. 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 challenge⁸ 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



Above: the opening page of *Beowulf*, one of the major works of Anglo-Saxon literature. Right: a spelling test. Below right: David Crystal's best-selling book on spelling.



- Spelling Unit 13
1. perilous
 2. vertical
 3. summit
 4. crevice
 5. rappelling
 6. descending
 7. gendarme
 8. mercurial
 9. simultaneous
 10. squall
 11. Himalayas
 12. stamina
 13. precipitous
 14. ascend
 15. dissipate
 16. paroxysm
 17. oblivion
 18. writhed
 19. accelerate
 20. traverse

GHOSTS

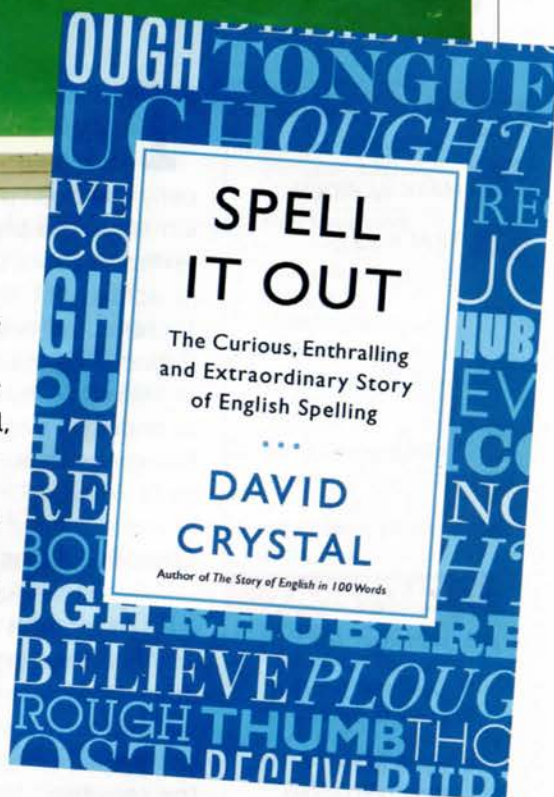
We then asked David Crystal whether he had any words of encouragement:

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 better⁹. I'll give you one example: a lot of people wonder¹⁰ 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! ☹

Guarda la videointervista con David Crystal
www.speakup.it > magazine extras



Various people messed it up.

Il sostantivo *mess* significa disordine, disastro. C'è anche la frase *another fine mess*, "un altro bel disastro" (purtroppo l'ononimo 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 "ecco 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!

Speak Up
EXPLAINS

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*.