

# Interview with a Linguist



Our most eminent writer and lecturer on the English language, **David Crystal OBE**, shares his expertise and opinions with the editor.

**JG:** Spelling appears to be a hot topic in many schools across the country at the moment. Why do you think children learning to spell correctly is currently such a big issue?

**DC:** There's nothing particularly new about this. Spelling has been the primary index of educatedness in language since the 18th century, and has always attracted strong opinions. This is what Lord Chesterfield had to say about it in 1750 in a letter to his son:

*'I must tell you, that orthography, in the true sense of the word, is so absolutely necessary for a man of letters, or a gentleman, that one false spelling may fix a ridicule upon him for the rest of his life'.*

It's such a big issue because, unlike the correctness issues surrounding punctuation and grammar, which are by their nature sporadic, spelling is always in front of our eyes. Every word has to be spelled. There is no bigger issue when learning to write standard English.

**JG:** The KS2 spelling tests show that many children in Year 6 are still spelling in a phonetically plausible way, e.g. stayshon. Why do you think this is?

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**DC:** It's an inevitable consequence of a government policy which has lost a sense of perspective. Teachers with long memories will recall the days when everything was 'look and say' – Janet, John, and their friends. I was one of those at the time who argued for the importance of introducing a phonic dimension to complement this. Because of its unique orthographical history, English is a language that needs both perspectives. And of the two, the phonic perspective is the more important, because the amount of irregularity in the spelling system is not as great as is sometimes assumed. (Estimates vary, but only about 20 per cent of the words in a college dictionary don't follow some sort of rule.)

What should have developed is a balanced approach, in which phonic and non-phonic dimensions would be brought into a mutually informing relationship. For this to happen, decision-makers needed to have some linguistic understanding of the nature of the English orthographic system. Unfortunately, this never happened, and the result was a swing to a virtually totally phonics-based method – which can never work well for English. The sensible approach, which I've often encountered in schools (teachers generally being far more sensible than policy-makers) is of course to introduce the irregularities judiciously, and whenever possible to explain them, which is why I wrote my *Spell It Out*, in an attempt to provide people with an overall sense of where the irregularities come from.

**JG:** You have mentioned before that the jingles taught to remember spelling don't work. Can you give some examples of where they don't?

**DC:** Jingles arose as a desperate attempt to find order in a system that many thought was chaotic. Who knows who cooked them up, but clearly they were based on very general impressions rather than on anything comprehensively systematic. The most famous one, 'i before e except after c', is a good example. I spend a whole section in *Spell it Out* showing why it doesn't work, but anyone who's tried it will have collected examples of their own – *weird, vein, eight, agencies, fancied, sufficient*, and many more. There are reasons for the way these words are spelled, and it's very satisfying when we know what they are. It's the stories behind the words that count, and that stay in the mind.

**JG:** Do you think the internet is adversely affecting spelling?

**DC:** This is an ambiguous question. If you mean the spelling system, then of course it will change, but 'adversely' means nothing in this context. Spelling has always changed and it always will. It is the result of social pressure, and as the internet is a new and huge social force, it will foster language change. So it will indeed be the case that, over time, new spellings will arise as a result of majority internet use, and eventually become part of standard English.

The good news is that several of these spellings will be simplifications. At present, it's virtually impossible for any of us to simplify English spelling. There have been organizations and groups trying to do this for over a century, without any success. Top-down approaches, in which somebody tries to reorganise the system as a whole, are doomed to failure because the system is simply too complex and (these days) too widespread globally for an individual reformer to have any chance of success. Apart from anything else, no two reformers ever agree about the best way of reforming the system.

But the internet could change all that, as it is by its nature global, and it reflects majority usage in unprecedented ways. If everyone unconsciously 'votes with their fingers' in support of new spelling, that spelling will dominate, begin to be used offline, and eventually be recognized as an acceptable alternative in dictionaries. This is what has already happened with many American-influenced spellings, for example, and it will happen with Internet-influenced ones too. But we are talking long-term here. This kind of change doesn't happen quickly.

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If you mean spelling *ability*, my comment would be that it is too soon to say. My general feeling is that the internet is making children read and write far more than I did at their age. The subject-matter may be





trivial – social chat and the like – but it is nonetheless reading and writing. And practice in literacy makes perfect. So, as long as children are taught to manage internet literacy, adverse effects are unlikely. That means introducing them to the linguistic variety of the internet, so that they see the difference between formal and informal styles, and realise when people online are being idiosyncratic, eccentric, standard, or conservative in their use of spellings (and punctuation). Exercises such as translating a nonstandard message into standard English, and vice versa, can be insightful and enjoyable. Important to note: and vice versa. At all costs, teachers should avoid condemning non-standard usage. Rather the aim is to develop a strong sense of appropriateness: that standard spelling is needed for formal writing; nonstandard spelling is appropriate only for informal writing. The sports writer in a newspaper needs to spell was as 'w-a-s'; but not when reporting someone saying 'We wuz robbed!' That kind of general linguistic awareness should already have been introduced into the curriculum much earlier, of course, as part of general work on language. A sense of linguistic appropriateness is needed for speech as well as for writing.

**“I stopped using text abbreviations when I saw my parents had started to use them’. Definitely not cool now.”**

**JG:** What about texting?

**DC:** This is a good example of a myth that has become widespread: that texting is bad for spelling. It's a myth because it was based on misinformation about texting. People thought that text-messages were full of abbreviations, invented by children, who left letters out randomly. Research has shown conclusively that text-messages aren't full of abbreviations (on average, only about 10 per cent if the words in texts are abbreviated), that most of the abbreviations aren't novel but can be traced back to Victorian times and before – remember *YYUR ... ?* (Too wise you are ...) – and that the omission

of letters in a text is certainly not random, but systematic (for example, vowels are omitted rather than consonants). It is now clear that, rather than texting influencing spelling, it is the other way round. The best texters are the best spellers. And if you are a poor speller, you will be a poor texter. The argument goes: if it is cool to leave letters out, you have to know that the letters are there in the first place in order to leave them out.

But all this is maybe of historical interest only. There is now evidence that the novelty of textese is wearing off, and innovative abbreviations aren't as popular as they used to be, especially among older teenagers. Very young children can still be excited by them, but the older you get, the less 'cool' they are felt to be. In one secondary school recently, I looked at a collection of texts from a group of sixth-formers and saw no abbreviated forms at all. The students told me they simply weren't cool any more. As one lad explained: 'I stopped using text abbreviations when I saw my parents had started to use them'. Definitely not cool now.

So my advice here is not to overstate the supposed influence of texting, tweeting, and other such genres on spelling. There will always be the child who doesn't see the issue, and introduces the odd textism into a piece of written work. In which case, that child needs another dose of appropriateness awareness and internet linguistic management.

**JG:** What is the best way to teach children to spell correctly?

**DC:** I wish I knew! But, as a linguist, I don't see how anyone can learn a new intellectual skill without understanding what it is they are learning. So it's essential to spend some preliminary time on the nature of the system and how it works. And the best way of doing that, I think, is to adopt a historical perspective. Imagine: if you were a missionary and had to write English down for the first time, with the following letters (the Latin alphabet, with its five vowels), how would you do it? You hear long vowels and short vowels in speech and you have to distinguish them, and you've only got five letters to do it with. What are you going to do? This is how I start *Spell it Out*, and I've seen that kind of approach used in class. One way is to double the letter (*step > steep*), another is to show the length by adding a silent letter at the end (*fat > fate*), another is to double the consonant for the short sound (*latter > later*), and so on. This is where nonsense words can be really helpful, as they provide a check on whether a child has grasped the principle (how would you say *I'm mipping* versus *I'm miping?*).

The historical perspective also promotes a sense of explanation: this is *why* English spelling is the way it is. I find children love to hear the story of individual words – why is there an *h* in *ghost*? Why is there a *b* in *debt*? Why is there a *k* in *know*? Where do the different *-ough*'s come from? And so on. Again, this is why I wrote *Spell it Out*: to provide explanations. Explanations take time, of course, and I've no idea how best to fit such things into the curriculum, and over what period of time. The good news is that we're not dealing here with an infinite problem or one where everything has to be taught all at once. Vocabulary learning is a slow and steady process; so should spelling be.

Not everything is historical. The traditional focus on spelling individual words (*'learn these 10 words by heart tonight'*) makes it harder to learn to spell. Rather words should be grouped into families, so that they reinforce each other: *necessary* should be grouped with *unnecessary* and *necessity*, and so on. Then, more attention should be paid to mnemonics, in order to keep similar words apart. Confused about *stationary* and *stationery*? (Most adults are.) CARs are stationARy. LETters are stationERy. Nobody ever forgets it then. Teachers are very good at thinking up such things. What we need is a website where they can share examples of successful practice.

**JG:** There seems to be an increased general public interest in spelling at the moment. Why do you think this is?

**DC:** I think it's the sheer scale of the spelling exercise that has both fascinated and appalled people, and the fact that nobody – *nobody* – knows how to spell every word in the language. The reason is partly because there are some very weird spellings indeed, as a result of loans from other languages (the name for the Irish prime minister is pronounced *'tee-shuck'* – but I doubt many reading this now could confidently spell it without looking it up first). And it is partly because somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of the words in a dictionary have alternative spellings, such as the various ways of spelling *yogurt* or *poppadoms*. At the same time, everyone recognizes that it is important to spell correctly to avoid social criticism. They have also noticed the changes around them (especially due to American influence and

the internet), so they are less sure that their own early learning is still valid. As a result, they want a book that will help.

That's the only explanation I can give for my own short-lived moment of fame. Soon after *Spell it Out* came out, I was invited to appear on the Jeremy Vine show to talk about it. They wanted me on for only five minutes or so, but they got so many phone calls and emails that I ended up talking to Jeremy for the best part of half an hour. As I left the studio, the editor told me to watch Amazon that evening, as there was always a sales spike after a book was aired. I was dubious, but I did watch Amazon sales that evening, and was amazed. At the peak, I reached number 4 – ahead of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and only just behind Gordon Ramsay. So there we have it: cooking, spelling, and sex, in that order – at least, just for a day.

**David Crystal OBE**  
works from his home in  
Holyhead, North Wales,  
as a writer, editor,  
lecturer, and  
broadcaster.



**“So there we have it: cooking, spelling, and sex, in that order – at least, just for a day.”**