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Well-chosen words



By Michael Skapinker

The guardians of English may be unable to resist linguistic change but they do have the power to influence it



James Murray, the first editor of the Oxford English Dictionary

Spell it Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling, by David Crystal, *Profile*, RRP£12.99, 224 pages

The Story of Ain't: America, Its Language and the Most Controversial Dictionary Ever Published, by David Skinner, *HarperCollins*, RRP£16.99/\$26.99, 368 pages

Words of the World: A Global History of the Oxford English Dictionary, by Sarah Ogilvie, *Cambridge University Press* RRP£17.99/\$29.99, 257 pages

Employers have told David Crystal that if they receive a job application with a spelling mistake, it goes straight in the bin. I am not sure I believe that. Who throws anything, apart from food wrappers and empty coffee cups, in the bin these days? I imagine the misspelling applicants get an email saying “We are afraid your application has been unsuccessful” and never discover why.

Misspelling is not a modern malady. In *Spell it Out*, Crystal reproduces

a 1910 cartoon from Punch magazine in which a boss berates his secretary for typing “income” as “incum”. “Good Heavens!” exclaims the secretary. “How did I come to leave out the ‘b’?” And in 1750 Lord Chesterfield, the statesman, advising his son to brush up on his spelling, warned: “I know a man of quality, who never recovered the ridicule of having spelled ‘wholesome’ without the ‘w’.”

You would not get either “incum” or “holesome” today. As soon as I typed them, Microsoft Word inserted wavy red lines beneath telling me I had made a mistake. But, as Crystal points out, electronic spellcheckers are less helpful when you misspell a word in such a way as to spell another, as in a poem by Mark Eckman and Jerrold H. Zar:

I have a spelling checker,

It came with my PC.

It plane lee marks four my revue

Miss steaks aye can knot sea.

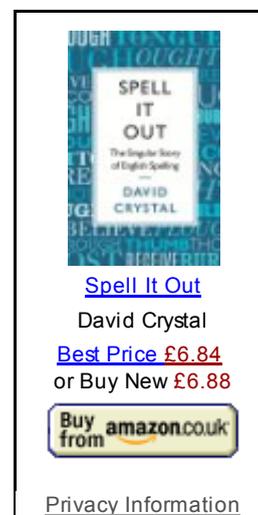
Why, for centuries, have people struggled to spell? Because English spelling is horribly hard. It is not just that we have “for” and “four”, “stake”, “steak” and “mistake”. We also have “peak”, “peek” and “pique”. “Horrid” has a double consonant in the middle, “timid” a single one. “Prefer” has one “f”, “proffer” two.

Why is English spelling such a tangle? It all started when Latin-speaking missionaries arrived in Britain in the 6th century without enough letters in their alphabet. They had 23. (They didn’t have “j”, “u” or “w”.) Yet the Germanic Anglo-Saxon languages had at least 37 phonemes, or distinctive sounds. The Romans didn’t have a letter, for example, for the Anglo-Saxon sound we spell “th”. The problem continues. Most English-speakers today have, depending on their accents, 40 phonemes, which we have to render using 26 letters. So, we use stratagems such as doubling vowels to elongate them, as in “feet” and “fool”.

With the Norman invasion in 1066, spelling became more complicated still; French and Latin words rushed into the language. As the centuries went by, scribes found ways of reflecting the sounds people used with the letters that they had. They lengthened vowels by adding a final “e”, so that we could tell “hope” from “hop”.

From the late 1300s, scribes used the letter combination “gh” in words such as “night”, to represent the back-of-the-mouth noise people then used. Why did it remain even after the sound died out? Because by the end of the 15th century, William Caxton had introduced printing to England, and the printers decided to keep it.

It is often thought that printing standardised English spelling but much variation remained.



While Caxton would usually write “fynysshed”, Crystal also found “finisshed”, “fynisshed”, “fyn-ysshid” and “fynysshid”. “Musik” sometimes appeared as “musycque” and “them” as “theym”.

Samuel Johnson’s dictionary largely fixed English spelling. By the 19th century, Crystal says, every educated family had a copy. But Johnson’s dictionary wasn’t the last word. For example, he said that no word could end with a “c”. So he insisted on “musick”.

Language and spelling change. Crystal, one of the most prolific writers on English, has helped popularise that truth. If, as internet use suggests, people are now starting to write “rhubarb” as “rubarb”, that, he says, may one day become an acceptable alternative. But Crystal cannot stop himself wanting to teach people to spell the old way. If only, Crystal writes, young people understood the derivations of words. If they learnt a little Latin, they would realise that “aberrant” had one “b” and “abbreviate” two because they came from the Latin source words *ab+errant* and *ab+breviate*. Crystal is as entertaining and erudite as ever in this book but he has probably spent too long at his desk if he thinks young people are eager for etymology lessons. Those who really want to know how to spell and what words mean can look them up in a dictionary.

Dictionaries have been setting people right for a long time. In a letter to the periodical *The World* in 1754, Lord Chesterfield said he accepted the authority of Johnson’s. “I hereby declare that I make a total surrender of all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a freeborn British subject, to the said Mr Johnson, during the term of his dictatorship.”

Across the Atlantic, people no longer wanted to be British subjects and Noah Webster wanted a dictionary that would give the new republic pride in its own way of speaking. His great work, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1828, contained the now-familiar “humor”, “labor” and “center”. It became the standard American reference book well into the 20th century, when US schools had Good Grammar Weeks, during which children were encouraged to go seven days without splitting an infinitive.

In everyday speech, people split infinitives all the time. Americans also used words such as “ain’t”, unrecognised by Webster’s, and sang along to “Ain’t We Got Fun”.

In *The Story of Ain’t*, David Skinner recalls the convulsion that, in 1961, accompanied the publication of Webster’s third edition, which contained not only then-current words such as “pin-up”, “astronaut” and “beatnik”, but the dreaded “ain’t”.

The New York Times said Webster’s had “surrendered to the permissive school”. The Atlantic called the new dictionary “a very great calamity”. In the Detroit News, the Rt Rev Richard S. Emrich declared it “bolshevik”. The uproar was good for sales. “But,” Skinner



[The Story of Ain't](#)
David Skinner
Best Price £8.07
or Buy New £10.87
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writes, “Noah Webster’s ideal of a country unified by his dictionary was in tatters.”

Why did the editors of *Webster’s Third* drop this lexicographic A-bomb (another addition to the dictionary)? Because views on dictionaries, indeed on language itself, had changed. Instead of laying down rules on how people should write and speak, dictionaries became records of how people did write and speak. And that meant all the people, not just those who spoke the educated language of New England. The new trends in lexicography went along with the growth of scientific method and Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution: lexicographers observed what was happening to the language, rather than handing down precepts.

Not all of the biographical sketches that run through *The Story of Ain’t* cohere. It can be difficult to remember who was responsible for which alleged lexical outrage or counter-strike. But Skinner is good on the development of 20th-century linguistics and on the interplay between America’s language and its sense of itself.

It wasn’t just in America that views on words were changing. The old country had witnessed a revolution, too, at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the reference work that had succeeded Johnson’s in authority and esteem. Like *Webster’s*, the *OED* represented the nation. British prime minister Stanley Baldwin described it as a “national treasure”. In 2006, the public voted the *OED* an “icon of England”, alongside Marmite, Buckingham Palace and the bowler hat.

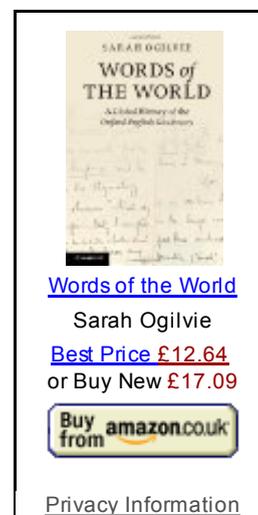
Launched when the British empire was at its zenith, the *OED* relied primarily on UK sources. James Murray, its towering figure, who became editor in 1879, saw the English spoken in the US, Australia, India and South Africa as peripheral. He and his successors resisted foreign words – “loan words” – until they were firmly established in British English. All that changed when Robert Burchfield became editor of the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* in 1957. A New Zealander, Burchfield swept aside the *OED*’s Anglocentric ways, opening the dictionary to world Englishes, as well as to foreign words entering the language. Burchfield’s *OED*, like *Webster’s Third*, gave us English as it was, not as the ruling class wished it to be.

That, at least, is the version told in many newspapers, books and broadcasts. When Sarah Ogilvie arrived in Oxford from Australia to work for the *OED* in 2001, she believed it too. *Words of the World* describes her discovery that the story – assiduously propagated by Burchfield himself – was false.

Not only were Burchfield’s predecessors welcoming to the English spoken elsewhere, they were also such enthusiastic includers of loan words that they attracted fierce criticism from traditionalists. In its assessment of the first volume in 1889, the *Edinburgh Review* accused the dictionary of failing to defend English’s “purity”. Ogilvie’s analysis shows that Burchfield included fewer words from elsewhere than his predecessors; he also, contrary to *OED* policy, deleted loan words that

were already there.

This is a beauty of a book. Ogilvie deftly summons up her characters: not only editors but contributors such as Dr Minor, a surgeon and murderer who sent thousands of supporting quotations to the *OED* from Broadmoor, the high-security asylum. It is a fiercely revisionist work but charitable too – Ogilvie acquits Burchfield, who died in 2004, of mendacity. She gives us a vivid insight into the lexicographer's art. And, as she makes clear, it is an art. Whatever the strivings for objectivity, Ogilvie teaches us that dictionary-compilers, just like picky employers, bring their own feelings about words to the office.



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