English spelling in the media 2000 to 2006.

BBC News. 24 November, 2000

Action over non-English spellings

The government has told school test officials to scrap their advice to pupils about using non-English spellings such as "fetus" and "sulfate" in national curriculum science tests.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) had said next year's tests for 11 and 14 year olds in England would use internationally agreed scientific terms.

The authority said very few words were involved and no-one would be penalised for using English spellings - it was simply trying to ensure that students were familiar with the standardised terminology.

BBC1. 28 January 2001.

Room 101. YouTube video

Actor Sanjeev Bhaskar's second choice for banishment was **"Silent letters in words.** No one can pronounce the words, or remember how to spell them, e.g. *autum(n), crum(b)*.

New Scientist Daily News. 4 September 2001.

English is toughest European language to read

By **James Randerson**

Despite being the world's lingua franca, English is the most difficult European language to learn to read. Children learning other languages master the basic elements of literacy within a year, but British kids take two-and-a-half years to reach the same point.

In the most extensive cross-national study ever, Philip Seymour of Dundee University and his team compared the reading abilities of children in 15 European countries. They found that those learning Romance languages such as Italian and French progressed faster than those learning a Germanic language such as German and English. "Children do seem to find English particularly complex and problematic though," says Seymour.

The team focused on the earliest phase of learning to read. They tested the children's ability to match letters to sounds, their capacity to recognise familiar

written words, and their ability to work out new words from combinations of familiar syllables.

Seymour's findings might explain why more people are diagnosed as being dyslexic in English-speaking counties than elsewhere.

In languages where sounds simply match letters, some symptoms just would not show up, says Maggie Snowling, a dyslexia expert at the University of York. The condition would be more difficult to diagnose in children who speak these languages, though subtle symptoms such as impaired verbal short-term memory would remain. "People might be struggling, but no one would notice," she says.

Consonant clusters

The Germanic languages are tricky because many words contain clusters of consonants. The word "sprint", for example, is difficult because the letter p is sandwiched between two other consonants, making the p sound difficult to learn.

Another feature of English that makes it difficult is the complex relationship between letters and their sounds.

In Finnish, which Seymour found to be the easiest European language to learn to read, the relationship between a letter and its sound is fixed. However, in English a letter's sound often depends on its context within the word. For example, the letter c can sound soft (as in receive) or hard (as in cat). Many words like "yacht" don't seem to follow any logic at all.

Historical accident

However, the things that make English difficult to read might have contributed to Britain's rich literary tradition. Words like "sign" and "bomb" are difficult because of their silent letters, but these hint at relationships with other words. The connection with words like "signature" and "bombard" is obvious.

Mark Pagel, an expert on language diversity at the University of Reading, acknowledges the irony that despite being the international lingua franca, English is the most difficult to learn. The dominance of English has more to do with historical accident than any innate superiority of the language, he says.

"People who speak English happen to have been the ones that were economically and politically dominant in recent history. Those forces greatly outweigh any small difficulties in language acquisition." 15:30 04 September 01

Daily Telegraph. 5 September 2001.

Why pupils are slow to learn English.

English is such a difficult language that British children take twice as long to master basic reading skills as pupils on the Continent.

While most primary schools in Spain, Italy and Finland learn basic reading within 12 months, children learning English typically take two and a half years.

Researchers who carried out the study say that the arcane rules of the English language, and not the quality of teaching, are to blame.

Prof Philip Seymour, of the University of Dundee, who presented the findings, fell short of calling for spelling to be simplified, but suggested that parents could help children overcome the extra difficulties of English.

They could encourage them to "decode" new and made-up words at home, he said.

The study investigated the literacy skills of about 600 primary school children in 15 countries, including Britain.

"Mastery of the basic foundation elements of literacy clearly occurs much more slowly in English than in many other European languages," said Prof Seymour.

"It seems likely that the main cause is linguistic and derives from difficulties created by theh complex syllable structure and inconsistent spelling of English."

Complicated syllables - such as the "shr" sound in shrink and the "umph" in triumph - add to the difficulty as do the different pronunciations of "ough" as in cough, plough, through.

Also reported in the **New Scientist**.

Australian Broadcasting Co. 22 September 2001.

Philip Seymour on Finnish...

Summary:

Why Finnish is easier to learn to read than English... Philip Seymour on his comparative study of the reading abilities of Grade I children in 15 European countries

Philip Seymour is Professor of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Dundee. He presented the results of his collaborative study of children's foundation literacy skills in 15 European countries at the recent British Association Festival of Science in Glasgow. They show some startling differences, the most glaring being that children who were learning to read English (Grade I children in Scotland), lagged well behind their peers in 14 other countries. Why should English be harder to learn than any other European language?

Details or Transcript:

Jill Kitson: Welcome to Lingua Franca, I'm Jill Kitson.

This week: Why Finnish is easier to learn to read than English. Cognitive psychologist Philip Seymour on his comparative study of the reading abilities of Grade 1 children in 15 European countries.

Philip Seymour is Professor of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Dundee. His interest in how children learn to read and why some children have difficulty, and are labelled dyslexic, led him to wonder whether it's easier to learn to read in some languages than others. And first up, whether some European languages are easier than others to learn to read.

Professor Seymour set up a collaborative study of children's foundation literacy skills in 15 European countries and at the British Association Festival of Science in Glasgow earlier this month, he presented the results.

They show some startling differences, the most glaring being that the children who were learning to read English, Grade 1 children in Scotland, lagged well behind their peers in 14 other countries.

All 15 languages the children were learning to read were alphabetic languages. Why should English be harder to learn than any other?

When Philip Seymour talked with me a few days ago about his study, I began by asking him what common tests were given in the different languages?

Philip Seymour: Well, they're very simple tests. One was to be able to identify and give the sounds made by the letters of the alphabet, so the children just had a list of letters and they read down it, giving the sound for each letter. That was the first one. The second one was reading what we regarded as very familiar words, so these would be common words which occur in the early stages of children's reading schemes, and they're words like 'house', 'school', 'boy' and so forth, very common words. And so we had sets of those in each language, and these again were presented as lists and the children simply read them out loud. Then the third test was our test of what we call 'de-coding', which is working out a pronunciation for an unfamiliar form on the basis of its letters and sounds. So for this we used very simple nonsense words, which are not real words, but they can be worked out on the basis of knowing how each letter corresponds to a sound in the language. So those were the three tests which we used.

Jill Kitson: Now I suppose one of the things I was amazed at was that the assumption was that there was a common teaching approach used in the different countries, beginning with phonetic mastery of the alphabet, which I think is wonderful, but I have to say that when my own children started at school, there was something they were waiting for called 'reading readiness', and each child was expected really to learn at his or her own pace, and to pick up the alphabet somehow along the way. I take it that that wasn't a method used in any of the schools where you were testing the children?

Philip Seymour: No, I think that's right, that nowhere did we find a complete whole word method without any alphabetic teaching at all. I have seen that occasionally in Scotland, but it's not the usual method which is used, which is normally a combination of teaching a word vocabulary on the one side, and teaching about letters, sounds and decoding at the same time, so it's a kind of parallel approach.

Jill Kitson: Now were there any striking differences in knowledge of the alphabet at the end of Grade 1?

Philip Seymour: Not particularly. Almost all of the groups seem to have mastered the alphabet to a level of 90%-plus accuracy. The only difference we found was in terms of the speed of reading the letters, which was a little bit slower in the Scottish group who were of course younger than any of the other groups.

Jill Kitson: Yes, now it's worth pointing that up. I'm amazed at the variation in the ages at which children start school. I mean children in Australia start at five, as they do in Scotland. Six was the more common starting age in European countries, but in quite a number, Germany, Austria, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, it's seven years. So did you find that there was any sort of optimum age for starting school? Was that a discovery you might have made in this study?

Philip Seymour: It's certainly an issue. I mean some people say perhaps we're starting too early at five. On the other hand, people say if it's a difficult language, then you need to start earlier. So that's one argument there. We didn't really find a strong association between age and how well children did on these simple assessments. So the correlation, say between age and the ability to read the nonsense words, was non-significant. There wasn't any association across the European groups - that's excluding the Scottish group.

Jill Kitson: But the variation broke into two parts, didn't it, the ones who had the Romance languages, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, plus Greek and Finnish, did better than the children learning Germanic languages.

Philip Seymour: Yes, that was really just the decoding test, that's reading these nonsense words where it did seem to be easier to learn to decode in the more simple syllable- structure Romance languages than in the more complex syllable-structure of Germanic languages. It didn't actually make any difference to letter reading or word reading.

Jill Kitson: I mean there is that one-to-one correlation isn't there, if you're sounding words out, if you're learning by sounding words out, that you get in a language like Italian, that it seems to me, make it easier to learn than English, where one is running up against all sorts of variations and inconsistencies.

Philip Seymour: Yes, that's right. So there are really sort of two linguistic factors in the study. One is this difference between Romance and Germanic languages which has to do with the structure of syllables. Probably the more important one for our study is what's called orthographic depth, which is the consistency of the relationship between letters and sounds in the way the language is written. So in what's called

the shallow orthography, there's a very consistent one-to-one association between each sound of the language and each letter, and that's the case for Finnish, for example, where each sound of phoneme in the language is represented consistently by a single letter. Other languages obviously have a more complex system in which you may need more than one letter to represent a particular sound, and the relationships may be inconsistent and variable.

Jill Kitson: Now tell us just how far the children in Scotland were behind their peers in other countries, which is quite striking. I mean the Scottish education system has a very high reputation, but they were markedly behind and in fact didn't catch up to where their peers were at the end of Grade 1 for another year or so.

Philip Seymour: Yes, that's quite right. The children were good readers so far as the norms in the United Kingdom are concerned, with reading tests. So they were actually reading ahead of their age. But on the tests which we were giving, they were far, far behind the other groups. So the score for, say, the familiar words was over 90% for the majority of languages, but was no more than about 30% correct for the Scottish group at the end of their first year, and then it had risen to 60% to 70% at the end of the second year. So it's really a very massive and striking difference.

Jill Kitson: So you then were able to make some sort of projected idea of how long it actually takes to learn English, and you put it down at something like 2-1/2 years as against what is achieved in that first year in Grade 1 in other countries.

Philip Seymour: Yes, that's right. The other countries are reaching the sort of mastery level within their first year of learning. What we found was that the reading age needed to match the same levels in English was about 7 and a half to 8 years, and if the reading age scale starts at five years, as it does when children begin to learn to read, then that is implying that about 2 and a half years of reading experience are needed to establish this very basic foundation level of reading.

Jill Kitson: Was it common across all 15 countries for there to be some children who at the end of Grade 1 or Grade 2 you would label dyslexic, or is there some language there in amongst all those languages, that any child can learn to read?

Philip Seymour: Well that's an interesting question, obviously. If one looks at the distribution for the easier languages, then you find that the great majority of children are bunched together at the top end of the scale, but there is a tail of children who are doing less well. No real examples of children who couldn't read at all, but a few who are reading less well than the majority. So you could define dyslexia in that way for those languages. I suppose the point is that in English it would be a much more extreme failure which would count as dyslexia - in terms of being outside the distribution - than you would find in these other languages.

Jill Kitson: So what are the problems of English? Danish is the next hardest it seems, but English is strikingly harder to learn. It has this wonderful ability to take in words from many, many different languages, but is this actually creating the problem that we have with children learning to read?

Philip Seymour: It may be what's creating the problem at this early stage of reading,

in that as you say, you have words which have come in from many different sources, and they've all got slightly different bases for their spelling, and that's what produces this great amount of inconsistency in English spelling. So that's producing problems for the early stage of learning to read. Of course there may be other aspects which come in later on: it may almost be an advantage to have a language in which the spelling signals the meanings of words or their grammatical structure and so forth, which is what happens in English.

Jill Kitson: Now of the Romance languages, French and Portuguese are harder to learn, and so what are the characteristics there that make them less easy to learn than other Romance languages?

Philip Seymour: Well I think they have a certain degree of what are called orthographic depth in that in French you may have multiple letters to represent phonemes and there's inconsistency, the spelling is influenced by the meaning or morphology of words; there are silent letters which have to be there for grammatical reasons, but which may not be pronounced and so forth. So it is quite complex. Not as complex as English but not so different.

Jill Kitson: One of the things that I found myself considering was the fact that with English being the global lingua franca of commerce, popular entertainment, of the Internet, international relations and so on, this is rather paradoxical. But I wondered whether it means that global English has to be more like the English of, say, Grade 3 readers, a vocabulary that has simple syllables and simple phonetic correspondence; that from global English, the more difficult and complex words will simply be screened out.

Philip Seymour: I suppose that might happen; that would be a kind of world wide revolution in English spelling which could happen. I mean as you say, it is strange in a way that the language which is very widely used is the one in which it is perhaps most difficult to learn to read. Whether people learning English as a second language do find our spelling system a problem, I'm just not quite sure. Most of the people I know who have learned English and are using it in academic work and so forth, don't seem to me to keep complaining about the spelling system.

Jill Kitson: And just lastly: why did children learning Finnish, which is a sort of completely exotic one-off language, why is that easier to learn?

Philip Seymour: Well it has a simple syllable structure and it has a very, very consistent spelling system, so that's probably the main point. The language itself seems to me to be tremendously complex, if one was wanting to learn to speak it, because each word has numerous grammatical components attached to it in many, many different combinations, so it looks very, very complex to us to understand. But from the point of view of the reader it is straightforward and simple.

Jill Kitson: Philip Seymour, Professor of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Dundee.

And that's all for this week's Lingua Franca.

Daily Telegraph. Frank Johnson. 24 November 2001.

... **why is English spelling so illogical?** One example among thousands: when "skill" and "full" are put together, the word is spelt "skilful".

NFER report of PIRLS. April 2003.

2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.

Page v. Summary 2.4

"England is one of the countries with the widest span of attainment. Its most able pupils are the highest scoring in the survey, but its low achieving pupils are ranked much lower. This pattern is a consistent one in English-speaking countries, but continental European countries are more likely to have a similar standing for their high and low achieving children, leading to a narrower range of attainment."

Page 18. Chapter 2.

"However, several developed English-speaking countries (New Zealand, England, Scotland and the United States) also tend to have a wide range of achievement. This contrasts with such European countries as Italy, France, Germany, Sweden and The Netherlands, which all have fairly narrow ranges of achievement."

Page 21 & 22. Chapter 2.

The reasons for this difference between European countries with lower ranges of attainment and the maintenance of position for their low achieving children, and English-speaking countries with larger ranges of performance and worse performance at the lower percentiles, need further exploration. They may derive from educational factors, such as curriculum and pedagogic practice, or from social factors in the countries related to cohesion or inclusiveness. Finally, they may also derive from the nature of the languages tested. **English has many orthographic inconsistencies, and a richness deriving from its many linguistic roots. It is possible that these factors mean it is more difficult for low achieving pupils than more regular languages."**

BBC Radio 4. Saturday 1 March 2003.

'i before e except after c'.

[The program covered most aspects of spelling, except the irregularity of English spelling compared with other languages and the spelling reforms carried out by other countries. Here are excerpts, re-arranged in themes.]

Presenter *Martin Wainwright* finds out why some people can spell and others can't. **Producer *Anna Buckley*.**

1. Celebrities Beryl Bainbridge and Noddy Holder.

MW. It's five years now since the Government introduced its National Literacy Scheme, but our spelling's getting no better. We live in a world with 'Kwik-Fix' and 'Drive-thru' with a 'u', not to mention text messages and slap-dash e-mail.

MW. *Beryl Bainbridge* has been short-listed for the Booker Prize six times, yet she stumbles over this basic tool of her trade, spelling, that nightmare for so many of us, horror words like 'separate'; stumbling attempts to apply the childhood rules.

BB. I'm not proud of not being able to spell properly. I'm quite ashamed of it in a way. If I'm writing a letter by hand, I will put at the bottom, "Excuse spelling. In a rush."

MW. *Noddy Holder* and his rock band Slade, 30 years ago.

NH. The first title that we did mis-spelling on a record was 'Cuz I luv u'. I'd written it down fonetically in our dialect, our Black Country dialect. We used that and it got such a great reaction from people, of how unusual it was at the time. We had 'Cum on, feel the noize,' and 'Luk wot u dun'.

There was such an uproar about us, supposedly, influencing kids to spell wrongly. Quite frankly, I don't see anything wrong with spelling things exactly as they sound.

2. Tricky spellings discussed during the program.

'Chrysanthemum, definite, glorious, recognize, focuses, accommodate, bicycle, preciousness, demagogue, pronunciation, separate, accommodation, 'e's at the ends of words, the minefield of plurals e-y-s/i-e-s.

NH. 'sincerely' always catches me out. I don't know whether it is 'ely' or 'ley'. Or there is no 'e' at all there.

BB. 'physician', 'psychology' I fiddle about with it and say 'Oh to hell with it', and just put it down, the nearest thing I can get to it. 'Window'. You might think it is 'd-o-u-g-h' at the end, mightn't you? 'Win', you might think w-y-n. 'Necessary'. Oh, I've, long ago, given up knowing how many 'c's and 's'es, so I put as many as I can afford.

I look in a thesaurus to find another word. But if you can't spell the first word you are looking up, it's very difficult to use. It's the same with a dictionary, you see.

3. Bernard Shaw and 'ghoti'.

MW. *Bernard Shaw* is famous for his plays. But spelling reform was his real passion. He left all his money to fund the competition for a new system. And he loved poking fun at the apparently odd mismatch of spellings and sounds in English. Have you seen the Bernard Shaw thing? Can you guess what this word is? g-h-o-t-i. And obviously it is a trick. It means 'fish', gh is /f/ as in cough, o is /i/ as in women, ti is pronounced /sh/ as in function.

Conventional, proper spelling has its 'ghotis'. A heartfelt poem in the Sunday Times dealt with one:

I take it you already know
Of tough and bough and cough and dough.
Others may stumble, but not you,
On hiccough, thorough, laugh and through.

4. Teachers and children.

MW. Primary school teacher, *Charlotte Pendlebury*, St Peter's school in Rawdon, Leeds, takes a class of 7 year olds over the hurdles of fonemes, the word-sounds central to today's National Curriculum. And much older challenges like the 'curly' /k/ and the 'kicking' /k/. And terrible traps, which her retired colleag, *Sylvia Dennison* well remembers.

CP: And what did magic 'e' do? Makes the vowel say its name. Well done. What are the vowels?

Children. a-e-i-o-u.

SD. Small children get 'said' wrong such a lot, and 'they'. They put an 'a' in instead of 'e'. And 'went' is quite a tricky word. They confuse it with 'when' and don't know whether to put an 'h' in or not.

CP. Yes, 'what'. They nearly always miss the 't'. 'when'. They forget the 'h'. Or forget the 'e'. Yes, poor little things. Yes. But you just keep rolling them over, just keep giving them again and again until in the end they get so used to them.

Children trying to sound out words. l-ike like. jer-arf jraffe.

MW. That is a hard one. Can you spell 'giraffe'?

Children. No.

Children. l-arf laugh!

SD. 'castle'. I would point out the 't' and say, 'well we don't sound the 't' but it's there'. I can't give any reason for it, but they just have to take my word for it . And a word like 'friend'. Children write that such a lot, and they invariably forget the 'i'. And I just have to say to them, "Say to your next-door neighbour, 'You are my fri-end'" and hope that that would stick.

CP. 'or'. We have been doing this week about six different ways of writing 'or'; you know, o-r, a-w, a-u, -o-u-g-h like in 'bought'. I have to apologise for the English language. It is difficult for them all the time.

SD dictating to class. 'Jim is thin' And he's not a fish with a fin. Look at me. Watch my mouth. Watch! Watch! 'thin' not 'fin'.

SP. 'er' How many 'er's are there? /i-r, u-r/ and ? Not /a-r/. That's /ar/.

MW. Is it worth it in the end?

SP. They get a lot of satisfaction, I think, when they can spell them. And it's rich, isn't it? And at least it's never boring.

MW. That Government strategy for teaching spelling, the initial teaching alfabet, clicked with Slade's fonetics. But it was anything but simple. To help children get started it created 14 new letters, for sounds like /oo/ and /th/.

CP. My God, was that a dire thing. It was learning some alfabet, which didn't seem to bear a great deal of resemblance to the alfabet that we all know and love and use. And I couldn't really see the point of it at all. It just seemed to me that it was a bit of a backward step.

5. Show-off spellers.

MW. It's a challenge that some children relish. My finest hour was spelling 'floccinaucinihilipilification' that's 29 letters, one letter longer than the famous 'antidisestablishmentarianism'.

Pratish Bedida is only 13, but he won the national spelling competition last year in the United States.

PB. I think I realised I was a good speller in second grade which is when I was seven. I'd take extra words like 'ventriloquist', when other kids were learning stuff like 'cat' and easier ones like that. This word will probably never be used in competition, but the word I would use to trick everyone out would be the longest word in the English language which is 'pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis'. It's 45 letters.

6. Richard Wade and free speling.

MW. *Richard Wade* had a distinguished career in broadcasting and public administration. But he has given it all up to run the campaign for free speling - that's speling with only one 'l' please note. The message is - liberation. Don't spend hours agonizing over odd words! Just spell them as you like.

RW. Quite a lot of people, who in every other way perform extremely well, but spell badly, would be very, very good at doing job A or job B, but they simply don't get the interview because they have spelt it wrong. I think that attitude should go.

What I'm proposing is that one should free-spel, that is, on any given page, if there are two or three words, half a dozen words, which you find difficult, and you can't remember whether the word 'personnel' has one 'n' or two, don't worry, just spell it the way you've got it.

It was my fortieth birthday. I got a birthday card from my boss on Radio 4 - that's 'f-o-u-r', and they'd printed it with the word 'forty' f-o-r-t-y. And I thought "You know, this is just ridiculous. You've got 'fourteen, forty, fortieth, fourteenth, four'. We need to do something about this."

People who are most opposed to changing spelling, are of course, the intelligent, articulate people, who are broadcasters or writers or whoever they may be, because they have invested a lot of intellectual capital in it, and it is also a very nice class distinction between those who can and those who can't.

7. Text messaging. Andrew Wilson.

MW. The beeping youthful world of texting now sends 50 million messages a day from mobile fones. Not to mention e-mails awash with short cuts like L-O-L, meaning 'laugh out loud'. *Andrew Wilson* is editing a book of text message poems.

AW. People need to write in a concise way and they need to save their thumbs from hurting. Those two things are driving people to invent their own spelling. In a text message, you can only write 160 characters, so you've got to keep it short, basically. 'wait. That's spelt w-8. That's one of my favourites, using the number 8 in that way, because I think it just looks cute. And 'later' spelt 'l8r'.

MW. They are very disconcerting when you first see them. One starts, 'omg, jst mt yr bf! 'Oh my god, just met your boyfriend.' That is a pretty good condensation. They have got those words down to 12 letters.

8. Dyslexia experts, John Stein and Maggie Snowling.

Professor *John Stein*, physiologist at Oxford University [and the National Dyslexia Trust]:

Many children who have problems with reading and spelling, have problems with controlling their eye-movements so that their eyes don't fixate steadily on the letters they are trying to read, but they sort of slip from one to the other, and therefore the order of the letters that they are looking at slip and therefore they can't build up a good representation of the correct spelling of words. I think there is a spectrum of abilities on the visual side of reading and writing that goes from the extremely good, thru to the extremely poor, who you would call dyslexic, and just plain bad spellers are somewhere in the middle. Just plain bad spellers don't have as good a representation of the visual form of words, or their orthografy as we call it, as do others who have a better visual memory. And exactly the same is true, by the way, on the fonological side, on the auditory side. Some people have very good representation. They remember and pronounce a word like 'antidisestablishmentarianism'. Others would have huge problems with it, even tho it is perfectly regular, because they don't have such good representation of the sounds that letters are meant to stand for and the order in which they should come out.

My idea is that we can produce tests that you can administer to children before they learn to read to find out where their weakness is going to lie, and these will be basic visual tests where we test people's ability to spot fine visual motion. There are similar kinds of tests that you can use on the auditory side. When you tell the difference between different letters, like when I say /b/ or /d/, you are actually picking up on changes in frequency that occur during the utterance of those sounds. And that change in frequency happens over a short period of time. So people who can detect change in frequency of this sort well, are going to be good at phonological kinds of things for their reading. Ones who are less good at that and find it difficult to order

them properly are going to be bad. So, it won't be long at all before we have tests and we will be able to say, 'Ah, you've got a weakness in the visual side; you've got a weakness in the fonological side. These are the kinds of teaching methods that we feel will help you. And I think, to a large extent, armed with this knowledge, we will be able to compensate for any differences in the brain. I wouldn't like to call them damage to the brain in a child. They are just differences in the brain.

Maggie Snowling**,** professor of psychology at York University, [a vice-president of the British Dyslexia Association]:

What we know is that some language skills, particularly the ability to process speech-sounds, seem critical to learning to spell. What children seem to me to have to do, in order to learn to spell, is to be able to reflect on words at the level of the individual sounds in words.

What we think is that, the reason that some good readers are poor spellers is actually because they are really too good at reading, so typically these people would have very good linguistic skills. They'll have a very good vocabulary. They'll probably read very, very quickly and they may even skim-read to some extent. They are the sort of people, who, maybe if they are reading a Russian novel, would just miss out all the names because they would just sort of pick up the gist of the name and be able to continue and still follow the story. All this is excellent in terms of the efficiency of the reader. What they are not doing is abstracting the kind of detailed information from words on the page that they need to learn about the irregularities of English. So when they come to spell, they can't remember if it is a double-letter or they can't remember if it is t-i-o-n, or c-i-a-n, so what they have to do is to resort to a fonetic version or else just the most frequent way those sounds are represented in the language.

Commonly people think poor spellers are either uneducated or else just lazy. I think neither of these things are true. These are intelligent people, often very intelligent. It's a pattern of individual difference.

9. Dictionary editor, John Simpson.

MW. So who made the rules? Even Shakespeare famously spelt his own name in a variety of ways? Dr Samuel Johnson is the man who usually gets the blame. Critics reckon that our crisis set in with his famous standardizing dictionary, published in 1755. Today, the doctor's role is played by the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, *John Simpson*.

JS. We want to see what is the most frequent form of a word in a given variety of English. We are not working on rules.

10. Tony Fox defends current spelling.

MW. *Dr Tony Fox,* from Leeds University, is an eloquent defender of English as she is spelled.

TF. One could, of course, say in English, that the letter 'c' is totally unnecessary and in fact, it is a nuisance, because it could easily be replaced by 'k' on the one hand, the kicking 'k'. But in fact, not in all words, but in a number of words, this is actually quite useful, this ambiguity of the letter. For example, let's take a lot of words ending in 'ic' like 'electric'. Now you could say, "Let's spell it '-ik'." That makes more sense.

But what about 'electricity'? In this case, the 'c' suddenly is changed into an 's'. That is very regular. Take any word ending in '-ic' like that, add 'ity' and it is automatically pronounced 's'. If you like, 'c' is a kind of symbol to indicate this is pronounced 'k' in some contexts and 's' in others. That is very useful. What it does it to preserve the picture of the word 'electric' no matter what you do to it. And other things happen in other contexts. For example, 'electrician'. There you've got the 'ci' is now 'sh'.

It has been estimated that between 90 and 95% of words in English are spelt regularly. Of course the rules are a bit complicated. It is not that all the words are spelt in such a way that there is one letter for every sound and one sound for every letter. It doesn't work that way. But nevertheless, there are rules to be observed.

MW. That is a very good defense, but can you defend the terrible 'o-u-g-h'? I think there are seven sounds for 'ough'. Is there a rule?

TF. In a word, no. I think that to defend that would be indefensible, except on grounds that most of us manage to cope perfectly well with the 'o-u-g-h'es. You could argue that because there is a lot of history in our spelling, its historical spelling system, you might even say that to abolish the present spelling system would be something like demolishing a listed building. You might adapt it, you might want to tinker with it here and there to make it a bit better, but you wouldn't knock it down. And the same thing could be said about English spelling. It is such a fascinating monument to the language.

Law and technology resources for legal professionals. 21 June 2004.

Wisdom from the Grammar Goddess: Breaking the Spell by Diane Sandford.

The English language has the worst system of spelling of any major language. Since English spelling is so hard, it is used as a test, a rather unfair test, of a person's carefulness and literacy. Check every word that looks phunny.

BBC News. 7 July 2004.

SPELLING? IT NEVER REIGNS BUT IT PORES!

The latest edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary was published by the Oxford University Press on July 8 2004 at £20.

The dictionary's 100 researchers across the world ... studied a database of more than 300 million words taken from newspapers, magazines and websites to provide statistics on words with which people have trouble, ... discovered that ... **more and more writers are mixing up like-sounding words and phrases.**

Up to half of us are getting confused over simple words and phrases, according to the team at the Oxford University Press.

BBC Breakfast talked to Catherine Soanes from the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, and [SSS President] Professor John Wells from University College London.

John Wells asked why we could not spell *rain, reign, rein* in the same way. We have no problem with *post* = job, *post* = pole, *post* = mail.

The Western Mail. 28 August 2004.

What are words worth?

Author, journalist and university professor John Sutherland:

"And the simple fact is that English is a tough language to spell."
"There's no other European language which has what you might call such illogical spelling."

"He [Sutherland] says research estimates that getting this right adds six months to a year to a child's education, a time of life when our ability to learn is at its keenest. Might we be better occupied doing something else?"

The Times. 4 October 2004.

Bloomsbury English Dictionary, Ed. Dr Kathy Rooney.

'At larst sumwun of ad the sence to publish a dikshunery ware you can find eloosive wurds witch are dificult to spel...Bloomsbury realy shud be complmented on thare inishytive.'

Blackwell web.

The most authoritative advice on using language correctly - including 1,000 common misspellings, help with over 1,000 frequently confused soundalikes and over 900 Usage Notes answering everyday language queries - plus exclusive online language advice to solve tricky linguistic problems.

Wales online. 14 October 2004.

First realy usefull dictionery (sic)

A MAJOR new dictionary has been deliberately filled with the wrong spellings of words.

This is not an act of literary vandalism, but an innovative approach to help readers find the correct spellings for the words they most frequently get wrong.

The Bloomsbury English Dictionary will list 1,000 words where people often incorrectly expect to find them. The misspelt word will have a line through it and the reader will be directed to where they can find the right spelling.

Its arrival will come as a relief to anyone who has spent infuriating time flicking through a dictionary in search of a word they have no idea how to spell.

The list of mistaken spellings was drawn up by an academic advisory board of English teachers and professors from around the world.

Dr Kathy Rooney, the editor of the dictionary, explained why the dictionary was necessary.

She said, "One of the conundrums of lexicography is, 'If you don't know how to spell a word, how do you look it up?' This is a big dictionary aimed at someone who wants to know about a wide range of words."

She insisted there is still a role for such publications in a world where text-messaging and email have made abbreviations and improvised spelling common.

She said, "I think if you are wanting to communicate articulately and concisely, yes, it does matter. Sometimes [misspelling] stops people communicating clearly and leads to misunderstanding."

But she rejects the idea that dictionaries stop languages developing.

Dr Rooney said, "Spelling is always evolving. It's not written in stone.

"I think in 20 years' time our spelling may look very different."

She contrasted the difference in attitudes to spelling between the French and the British. In France, the Académie Française strictly governs the usage, vocabulary, and grammar of the language; in recent years it has tried to prevent the Anglicisation of French.

"English has been a bit like a sponge," she said. "We have soaked up words from the time of Sir Francis Drake.

"Now we have lots of words coming through business and food.

"I think [the French] have a concept of national pride which is different from ours. Our open approach has made English the worldwide leading medium of communication."

She added that the dictionary recognised there are many varieties of English spoken in different cultures and that as many unique words and expressions as possible had been included.

They believe it will be welcomed by the 10% of the population who suffer from dyslexia.

BBC News. 2 November 2004.

OCR A-level examiners outraged by 'Fatal floors' in exam scripts.

Frequently misspelt words: Parliament, Puritain, phamplets, vergin, delt, contempory, arguement, concluesion, credable, relivance, biast, counterdition, scepticle for sceptical, Starlin for Stalin, lassie fair for laissez faire, miss be haived, perlight, traphic lights, loveable rouge, arguement, concluesion, credable, relivance, biast, and counterdiction.

Real word confusion: sight/site, theirs/there's, moral/morale; collaboration/corroboration, loose/lose, intermediate/intermittent, navel/naval, steak/stake.

Incorrectly spoken words, leading to misspellings: fief for thief, fought for thought, vexed interest for vested interest, economical policy for economic policy.

… there was a surprising amount of evidence candidates had been over-reliant upon spellcheckers rather than common-sense.

This produces such oddities as "the character's fatal floor".

New Zealand Herald. 25 November 2004.

Let me spell it out for you: written English is chaotic. Guy Keleny

When my Hungarian cousin Zsuzsi was learning English at school in Budapest she used to complain that you had to learn each word three times: first its meaning, then how to pronounce it, then how to spell it.

It is difficult to imagine a spelling bee in Hungary, or any other country where orthography was reformed in the 19th century and nearly all spellings are phonetically consistent. There wouldn't be any problems for the contestants to grapple with.

Sunday Times. 28 November 2004.

Education: Why spell it out? Karen Robinson.

English spelling is fiendishly complicated.

Nicholas Shearing, one of the [Hard Spell] programme's spelling checkers who is a senior editor on the Oxford English Dictionary:

"English is not a phonetic language. So if they didn't know a word they couldn't work out its vowels from the pronunciation. We don't say 'par-lee-ay-ment'."

"English is harder than other languages," says Rhona Snelling, who is one of the programme's "dictionary checkers" and an editor with Oxford University Press who used to teach English to foreign students.

South China Morning Post. 26 February 2005.

Tips on how to Finnish first.

Reading is a special time in Annika Liski's class at Ilolan Koulu, a primary school near Helsinki. ... Within a term of starting school at age seven, all Ms Liski's pupils are reading.

This was also reported in the Times Educational Supplement in July 2005.

UK Parliament. 7 April 2005.

Report on the teaching of reading.

"... it seems that at present around 20% of eleven-year-olds are not reading at an age-appropriate level".

Telegraph Weekend. Education. Letters. 18 June 2005.

Q. My mildly dyslexic son has difficulty using a dictionary because he often doesn't know where to begin looking for a word. Any suggestions?

A. Christine Maxwell's 'Dictionary of Perfect Spelling'. It lists (but does not define) more then 20,000 common words, the least phonetic being printed phonetically in red next to the correct spelling in black. So: ither/either; loyer/lawyer; shud/should; xma/eczema. Published by Barrington Stoke, which specialises in books for reluctant readers, £12.99:

See **Amazon.**

OECD-CERI. 28-29 September 2005.

Learning sciences and brain research report.

Shallow vs Non-shallow Orthographies and Learning to Read Workshop

Conclusion includes: "Countries with deep orthographies might possibly begin to consider the political and societal feasibility of implementing orthographic reforms."

Times Educational Supplement. 7 October 2005.

The issue. Our weekly guide to a whole school issue. **Spelling.**

Did you know?

- The English language has 44 separate sounds, but more than 1,000 ways of spelling them.
- It takes 2.5 years on average for children working in English to master basic literacy, while children in most other countries achieve this within a year of starting school.

Times Educational Supplement. 20 January 2006.

The language logic forgot. **John Bald**

Before readers have formed a notion of the patterns of English they encounter baffling spelling anomalies. So why isn't this problem tackled, asks John Bald

The irregular, hybrid nature of English spelling is probably the longest-standing cause of strife in education. Its effect appears to be international - studies of reading around the world show a consistently higher proportion of weak readers in English than in other languages.

Department for Education and Skills. March 2006.

Independent review of the teaching of early reading final report. Sir Jim Rose.

46. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that is harder to learn to read and write in English because the relationship between sounds and letters is more complex than in many other alphabetic languages.

Financial Times. 5 May 2006.

Mispell or Misspell? **By James Essinger.**

When you consider that the English spelling system is the most inconsistent, illogical and often plain barmy alphabetic spelling system in the world, and that there are hardly any reliable rules for spelling words properly (even the "i" before "e" except after "c" rule only covers the spelling of 11 words in the English language), it's amazing how well we do spell.
