

Spelling Bees

Spelling Progress Bulletin. [Spring 1972](#). Item 6:

"After World War II, the American occupation forces in Germany tried to introduce the spelling bee as a part of the democratization program but they failed because of the uniformly high level of spelling prowess." Lessons in the phonetic values of letters works very well in Europe, but probably that is because the languages involved have more consistently phonetic spellings than has English.

2003. SSS members picket the US National Spelling Bee.



2004 Spelling Bee pickets

**American Literacy Council and Simplified Spelling Society, May 29, 2004.
Press release.**

SPELLING BEE TO BE PICKETED.

Not all spellers heading for Washington, DC, for the National Spelling Bee on June 1-3 think English spelling is a good thing that should be celebrated.

While spectators and judges inside the Grand Hyatt Hotel will be pondering the spellings of obscure words, and admiring the efforts of contestants, outside on the street some members of the American Literacy Council (ALC) and the Simplified Spelling Society (SSS) will be trying to convince passers-by that English spelling is a problem that needs fixing.

Like those inside, they [may] admire the efforts of contestants, but they will have signs and sandwich boards with slogans such as "I'm thru with through" and "Enuf is enuf. Enough is too much". Their aim is to alert parents, educators, politicians, business people, and others concerned about the unacceptable level of illiteracy among English-speakers, to the fact that a prime cause for this is English spelling.

One of the picketers, ALC chair and SSS member, Alan Mole, from Boulder, Colorado, puts it this way: "Our odd spelling retains words like cough, bough, through and though. This increases illiteracy and crime. Fix it and you fix a host of problems. We want to fix it."

Organizer of the picket is Elizabeth Kuizenga (SSS), from San Francisco. She says there is evidence that English-speaking children around the world take much longer than speakers of other languages to learn to write, and they are distracted from writing creatively because of the constant attention they must give to spelling problems as they write.

"There is also empirical evidence that children's confidence in their sense of logic is seriously undermined by our illogical spellings, resulting in problems with mathematics skills as well," she says.

"Indeed, many children just give up on school altogether as a result. The prisons are full of people with literacy problems."

Theo Halladay (SSS) is an artist and teacher from Victoria, BC, Canada. She claims "our spelling puts an unfair burden on the many foreigners and aboriginals in Canada's population. We welcome them into our culture, then throw a written language at them that they can expect never to master. This is not only unnecessary, it's discriminatory, hypocritical and wasteful."

The group will be handing out pamphlets and answering questions on each day of the Bee.

USA TODAY web. 2 June 2004.

Spelling bee protesters: "Enuf is enuf!"

By Carl Weiser, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON - Protesters delivered a message Wednesday to the national spelling bee: Enuf is enuf!

Seven members of the American Literacy Society picketed the 77th annual spelling bee, which is sponsored every year by Cincinnati-based Scripps Howard.

The protesters' complaint: English spelling is illogical. And the national spelling bee only reinforces the crazy spellings that lead to dyslexia, high illiteracy, and harder lives for immigrants.

"We advocate the modernization of English spelling," said Pete Boardman, 58, of Groton, N.Y. The Cornell University bus driver admitted to being a terrible speller.

Protester Elizabeth Kuizenga, 56, is such a good speller she teaches English as a second language in San Francisco. She said she got involved in the protest after seeing how much time was wasted teaching spelling in her class.

Bee spokesman Mark Kroeger said good spelling comes from knowing the story behind a word - what language it comes from, what it means. "For these kids who understand the root words, who understand the etymology, it's totally logical," he said.

The protesters contend that the illogical spelling of English words makes dyslexia more difficult to overcome and helps explain why one in five Americans are functionally illiterate.

"If these people were able to read and write with a simplified spelling system, they would be able to fill out a job application, stay employed, and stay out of prison," said Sanford Silverman, 86. The retired accountant from Cleveland was handing out copies of his book, "Spelling for the 21st Century: The case for spelling reform."

Carrying signs reading "I'm thru with through," "Spelling shuud be lojical," and "Spell different difrent," the protesters - who first protested two years ago, but skipped last year - drew chuckles from bee contestants.

"I can't believe people are picketing against something this ridiculous," said Steven Maheshwary, 14, of Houston, who successfully spelled "Zoroastrian" in the bee.

Or as 13-year-old contestant (tautologous) Rachel Karas of Flint, Mich., put it: "It's just spelling. You gotta learn it."

[Distributed by Scripps Howard News Service, the National Spelling Bee sponsors and organizers, and quoted in part or whole by many on-line newspapers.]

Bee protesters: Alfabetic system makes spelling werds eezy

By BEVERLY GOODEN and ERINN JOHNSON June 3, 2004

Wy chanje English spelling?

Several men and women from across the country came to the 77th annual Scripps National Spelling Bee to demonstrate how much simpler they believe the English language should be.

Carrying signs such as "Enuf is Enuf" and "I'm thru with through," representatives from the American Literacy Council and the Simplified Spelling Society spent hours marching outside the Grand Hyatt Hotel as children inside correctly - or incorrectly - spelled such words as "triskaidekaphobia," "fougade" or "netiquette."

"There are over 40 million people who can't master spelling," said Pete Boardman, a protester from upstate New York. "We could simplify spelling by eliminating unnecessary letters."

Protester Timothy Travis, 61, of King George, Va., said, "Take words like 'red' and 'bed,' for example. They rhyme, so the word 'said' should be spelled 's-e-d.'"

The groups claim that 1 in 4 English-speaking children cannot read effectively by age 11, and even after years of school, barely half of all English speakers become confident spellers.

"Spelling, being obviously written and thus belonging to a different domain than spoken language, is slower to change than speech," wrote Patricia Moody, associate professor of English at Syracuse University, in response to an e-mail inquiry. "If you think that spelling doesn't change, look at a passage of Old English!"

She wrote that "historical reasons" account for many apparent inconsistencies in modern spelling.

But she added that making "wholesale" changes is "a different matter. Since spelling is conventional, asking a culture to make such wholesale changes voluntarily is a tall order!"

Margie Berns, a Purdue University professor of English, made the same points in a telephone interview. She said Germany has been trying to modernize some spellings. One prominent newspaper and one state have rejected the changes.

Both professors pointed out that words do change over time, a movement that may be enhanced by the Internet and e-mail. Berns said "nite" might replace "night" in all uses one day, for example.

"It's an interesting question whether you should plan the change, or whether the change will just happen," Berns said.

The nonprofit American Literacy Council offers literacy software and aids to assist those who have difficulty writing and reading, according to its Web site.

The Simplified Spelling Society's objective is to publicize the difficulties of the English language and to persuade people that changing how words are spelled would increase literacy, its Web site says.

"We think these kids are great, and we are very pleased with the goals they have accomplished," Boardman said about the bee participants. "But we just want to make people aware of another perspective on English spelling."

Quotes by members in other on-line reports.

Palm Beach News.

"The bee glorifies the English spelling for its difficulty and applauds one child in a million who can master it," said Alan Mole, president of the American Literacy Council. "We want to make it simple and logical so everyone can master it easily and millions can learn to read."

Both the American Literacy Council and the Simplified Spelling Society picketed the competition, distributing brochures and a book called Spelling for the 21st Century.

Author Sanford Silverman said 20 percent of U.S. residents can't read English and argued that the United States needs a phonetic language such as some European countries have.

Fort Worth Star Telegram

"We are protesting English spelling, not the spellers," said Joe Little, managing director of the American Literacy Council, which promotes changing English spelling to make it closer to the way it sounds.

Hollywood News May 04, 2004.

ROMIJN-STAMOS' MOTHER FIGHTS TO SIMPLIFY SPELLINGS

REBECCA ROMIJN-STAMOS' mother has embarked on a crusade to simplify the more complicated spellings in the English language.

The stunning X-MEN star's linguist mother ELIZABETH KUIZENGA has joined forces with a group of colleagues to push for a huge change in the way words are spelt.

Romijn-Stamos says, "They do this for fun, but it's also their quest. They're part of a group called the SIMPLIFIED SPELLING SOCIETY and they're trying to update the spelling of the English language to make it easier for other people who are trying to learn how to spell or learn English.

"And also so kids don't have to learn all the stupid rules they have for spelling and all the exceptions to all the rules.

"So anyway, we have a great time talking about it and totally support her and agree with it, but we also make fun of her a lot of the time."

2005 Worldwide picket for spelling bee.

With 273 finalists from the United States and its territories, nearby Canada and the Caribbean, Europe, and faraway New Zealand, the 78th Scripps National Spelling Bee will be the biggest and most widely supported ever.

It is also drawing its biggest and widest protest picket ever.

On the street outside the May 31-June 2 2005 Washington, DC, event will be about a dozen picketers from these nations, plus others from Germany and England.

They will not be protesting the Bee, but the spelling that makes such a widespread competition possible among English-speaking peoples.

While admiring the ability of the finalists to deal with the language's spelling foibles, they aim to draw attention to the difficulties these defects place on children learning to read and write.

Not all learners are as gifted in memorizing the spelling of thousands of individual words which, by not always following the rules, make learning to read and write more difficult.

"We are not against spelling competence," said Dr Steve Bett, one of the picketers. "We are opposed to the spelling that fosters incompetence."

The picketers hope their message will be heeded by parents and other authorities having an interest in literacy learning, including educators, publishers, business people, and politicians in English-speaking countries, such as US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and the No Child Left Behind program she administers and promotes.

The picket is again being run by members of the American Literacy Council and the Simplified Spelling Society.

2005. See Report on the Spelling Bee Contest in Washington

by Adrian Alphohziel, [JSSS 33](#), Item 4.5

Report: Spelling Bee Picket of 2005.

Participants.

Ten people gathered at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington early in the evening on May 31, 2005 for the purpose of picketing outside the 78th annual Scripps National Spelling Bee for the following two days.

Slogans in picket signs.

Danger: Outdated spelling breeds illiteracy

Outdated spelling - a help or hindrance?

Update spelling; *improve literacy rate*

Q. What price literacy? A. Update spelling!

We're Thru With Through

Enuf Is Enuf. Enough Is Too Much.

Spelling Shuud "bee" Updaeted (with "bee" being a drawing of a bee)

Take The Sting Out Of Spelling (with a drawing of a bee with a stinger)

Ban the B in BOMB

Spell Different Difrent

English Spelling Leaves Many A Child Behind

Must You Be A Wizard To Spell?

What part of KNOW do you not understand?

One + Won = Too many ways to spell WUN

If you rebuild it they will read.

We had white baseball caps with the words "Simplify spelling and everybody wins!" stitched on the front; 3-fold brochures (400 copies) to hand to passers-by; buttons/badges to hand out to young with "I'm thru with through" and "Enuf is enuf. Enough is too much."

Picketing.

Most of us began picketing on the sidewalk outside the hotel at about 8:30am. Niall, who was wearing a kilt, immediately received the most attention from passers-by and reporters.

One interesting and productive encounter Niall had was with a young man who was the much older brother of one of the competitors. He had three of his friends with him and was very confrontational. He wondered what Ben Franklin would say about us trying to change the spelling of the Declaration of Independence that Franklin had helped write. Niall pointed out that Ben Franklin was the first spelling reformer, and if he had his way the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution would be spelled similar to some of our signs. His father plus the son who was in the Bee were listening in the background. Hours later they both confronted Niall and asked further questions. The father said, "We as a family sat down and talked about what you and your group had said, we decided that your group have given our family something to think about. We see the point of your protest and we will discuss it further."

Media attention.

Over the course of the 2 days of picketing, three different film crews from New Zealand interviewed and filmed Allan Campbell. Two were from national TV stations, and one was making a documentary film about the Bee. Allan and others appeared on the national news on one TV station in NZ. In response to a slightly derogatory remark from the anchorman, the NZ reporter commented: 'I think these guys could be on to something.' The film makers also interviewed several others in the group.

Elizabeth was interviewed by the local FOX News both over the telephone and in person on the street. A week and a half later her next door neighbor in California said she had seen her on the evening news on the local FOX station, so apparently the story was shared with stations around the country. The group were also seen on the local NBC TV news in on the morning of June 1.

SSS web stats.

Hits on SSS web, and search requests for Spelling Bee, were considerably higher for the Spelling Bee days and the following day.

2 June 2005. Charlotte Observer, Charlotte, NC, USA, by Chuck Kennedy. Extract.

CAN YOU SPELL 'UNBLEMISHED'?

The spellers weren't the only show at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in downtown Washington. Outside the spelling bee were protesters.

Six people were carrying picket signs -- including Joe Little, 40, a Winston-Salem native who attended UNC Charlotte in the early 1980s.

Their beef: the English language. They want spelling that's more logical, easier to learn.

"We believe English spelling is dysfunctional," said Little, a former employee of the American Literacy Council. "There are examples galore."

Why not laff instead of laugh? Or thru instead of through?

A fellow protester, Niall McLeod Waldman, who hails from Scotland, held up a sign that read "Ban the b in Bomb."

"There's never been a governing body to come up with rules for English," said Waldman, whose pet peeve is words such as "aisle" that start with a silent letter. "That's why we end up with a spelling system that's the dog's breakfast -- a mess!"



05 June 2005. New Zealand Herald, by Bronwyn Sell.

Spelling made easier.

If Allan Campbell is serious about simplifying English spelling he's going to have to do something about his name.

Far too many Ls for a start. And what's the point of the P? Or the E? And since C can be pronounced in two ways, how about a K instead?

Which leaves us with Alan KambL, a Christchurch man so passionate about reforming our messy spelling system that he flew to Washington DC this week to make his point outside the pinnacle of spelling - the US Scripps National Spelling Bee.

On stage, Hamilton's Charlotte Roose, 12, understandably mis-spelled erythrophobia as arithrophobia and Florida-based New Zealander Sam Lawson, 14, lucked out on pompadour, spelling it pompador.

On the footpath outside, Campbell, 75, and about a dozen international spelling enthusiasts held a restrained protest, not against the spelling bee, which was made famous by the documentary Spellbound, but against the inconsistencies in the English language.

Such as why we insist on using a silent B at the end of dumb.

"Any spelling system that has a B on the end of dumb has to be dumb itself," says Campbell, who has been interested in spelling since 1947 as a proof-reader on the Otago Daily Times.

"I'm a good speller and I found that I often had to go to the dictionary to find words that I should know - was it [spelt] EA or was it EE? - I couldn't remember." Fifty years later he joined the UK-based Simplified Spelling Society and later became convener of the New Zealand branch, Spell 4 Literacy.

"It was then that I found out that changing spelling, far from being just a fanciful wish that didn't really have any significance in the real world, did have significance in the real world, because [conventional spelling] held back children and foreigners learning to read and write in English.

"Our spelling needs to be updated to suit our rules. One of the beauties of the English language is the richness that it gets from all the words that it takes from all different languages. This is one of the glories of it.

"But the trouble is when they come into our language they tend to stay as they were in their original language, which has different rules to ours. We don't anglicise them.

"We need to make our words fit our own rules so that a child can learn the rules and then, if they come across a strange word, they just think of the rule and they know what it is."

Campbell has lobbied New Zealand governments for an inquiry into the place of spelling in the teaching of reading and writing.

He says New Zealand could approach other English-speaking countries and international English-speaking organisations and suggest a panel of language experts be appointed to simplify spelling.

"So far we've been fobbed off a bit."

Linguistics experts Professor Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy and Professor Laurie Bauer doubt the simplified spelling movement will succeed.

Bauer, from Victoria University, says there's a strong case to be made for spelling reform, but it would be expensive and complicated.

"It would be like the constitution of the EU - you'd have to go around and get approval from everywhere. Think of how much it would cost just to reprint the Bible in a new spelling."

Reform would also be politically difficult. Whose version of English would we take as our baseline? The Queen's English? American English? Southland English?

That choice is part of the reason that moves to reform English spelling haven't gained traction, says Carstairs-McCarthy, of Canterbury University.

"The problem lies not just in American versus British [pronunciation], versus New Zealand or Australian, but there are huge variations within America and Britain," he says.

"There are many Americans for whom pin and pen sound exactly the same. There are many Americans for whom horse and hoarse are pronounced differently, so would we want to have a spelling system which differentiated those?"

"There are people in England for whom wait and weight are pronounced differently.

"So it gets very hard to solve political questions about whose pronunciation is going to be the norm to be reflected in the spelling system."

Bauer says he would love to be on an international panel to reform English spelling, if only to do a bit of tinkering - get rid of the inconsistent OUGH, homophones such as knight and night, and silent consonants such as the K in knee.

"Anything that we could do which would make really good sense would probably be relatively minor but we're unlikely to have the political will or the money to sit down and really sort it out, which is probably a shame," says Bauer.

"It's a nice idea, and if it had been done gradually over the centuries we probably wouldn't feel terribly uptight about it. Because it hasn't been, it would cause major disruption and the question is: is it economically and politically feasible?"

Carstairs-McCarthy says English began to get complicated after the Norman conquest of England, which introduced French words into the vocabulary while preserving the French spelling.

There was no consistent system of English spelling until the late 18th and 19th centuries. Before that people pretty much did as they pleased. Printers would take letters out of words or put extra letters in so they'd fit across a page. And William Shakespeare famously spelt his name several different ways.

Campbell has pondered simplifying the spelling of his name, but says he's had it too long now.

"Possibly if I'd been as interested in my early years as I am now, I may have, and started a new dynasty."

He takes small steps, such as writing fone for phone in his press release this week.

"Our current spelling is not a sacred cow," he says. "Spelling is a tool for reading and writing and it should fit that category. It should be efficient for the job it's meant to do. Dysfunctional is the word I often use.

"All we can do here is work at arousing interest, arousing an appreciation of the problems our spelling causes."

Grat bks in short.

Simplified Spelling - how the classics would read.

(Spellings taken from the Dictionry Of Cut Spelngs, published by the Simplified Spelling Society)

In th beginng, God created th hevns and th erth. - The Bible.

Last nyt I dremt I went to Manderley again. - Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier.

It is a truth universly aknolej d that a yung man in posession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. - Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen.

In my yungr and mor vulnrbl years my fathr gave me som advice that I've been turnng over in my mind evr since. - Th Grat Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

A squat grey bildng of only thirty-four stories. Over th main entrnce th words, Centrl Londn Hachry and Conditionng Centr, and, in a shield, th World State's moto, Comunity, Identity, Stability. - Brave New World by Aldous Huxley.

No one wud hav beleved in th last years of th nineteenth century that this world was being wachd keenly and closely by inteljnecs grater than man's and yet as mortl as his own; that as men busid themselvs about their varius concerns they wer scrutinized and studid, perhaps almost as naroly as a man with a microscope myt scrutinize th transient creaturs that swarm and multiply in a drop of watr. - Th War of th Worlds by H.G. Wells.

Scarlett O'Hara was not butiful, but men seldm realized it wen caut by her charm as th Tarleton twins wer. - Gon with th Wind by Margaret Mitchell.

Wethr I shal turn out to be th hero of my own life, or wethr th station wil be held by anybody els, these pages wil sho. - David Copperfield by Charles Dickens.

It was a dark and stormy nyt; the rain fel in torents exopt at ocasionl intrvl s, wen it was chekd by a violent gust of wind wich swept up the streets (for it is in Londn that our sene lies), ratng along th housetops, and fiercely ajitatng th scanty flame of th lamps that strugld against th darkness. - Paul Clifford by Edward Bulwer-Lytton.

It was th best of times, it was th worst of times, it was th aje of wisdm, it was th age of foolishness, it was th epoc of belef, it was the epoc of incredulity, it was the season of Lyt, it was th seasn of Darkness, it was th spring of hope, it was th winter of despair. - A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens.

What's wrong with our spelling?

GH has different pronunciations: laugh, through, aghast, gingham, longhand, Edinburgh; and OUGH is pronounced several different ways: "The dough-faced ploughboy coughed and hiccoughed his rough way through Scarborough."

Some words have different pronunciations for different meanings: bow, close, does, lead, live, minute, read, use, wind, wound.

Words that sound identical are spelt differently, as in there/their, here/hear, two/too/to, allowed/aloud, see/sea, by/bye/buy, weather/whether/wether, colonel/kernel.

Silent letters clutter up the LANGUAGE: numB, musCle, hanDkerchief, Hour, busnness, Knee, coLonel, damN, Pneumonic, husTle.

The same R-sounding ending has different spellings in burglar, teacher, actor, glamour, acre, murmur, injure, martyr.

The use of double consonants is inconsistent, as in gallery and galaxy, dilemma and lemon, gimmick and criminal, common and comic, plodder and model, sorry and forest.

The EE sound can be spelt by several combination of vowels: seem, team, convene, sardine, protein, fiend; people, he, key, ski; debris, quay.

The Sh-sound is spelt differently, as in shop, station, vicious and session.

25 June 2005. New Zealand Listener. Extract.

Say the Word.

But not everyone loves the spread of spelling fever. For New Zealander Allan Campbell, a retired grandfather from Christchurch and one of six members of the New Zealand Branch of the Simplified Spelling Society, the Bee provided an opportunity to join a small band of fellow picketers to protest the "dysfunctional role of English spelling in English literacy acquisition".

The protesters' aim was to attract the attention of parents, politicians, and educators to the foibles of the English language and address them by adopting regular spelling. Waving his "Enuff is enuff" placard, the literacy activist said that making many of the difficult spellings simpler would improve literacy.

"We are not protesting against the Spelling Bee," says Campbell, "rather our problem is with the irregular spelling that precludes kids from reaching this standard and inhibits their reading."

2006 Spelling Bee.

31 May 2006. SSS & ALC Press release.

Bee Man demonstrates at Grand Hyatt.

4th Annual Picket of English Spelling at National Spelling Bee in Washington DC Washington, DC (5/31/06) - With hundreds of finalists from around the world, and on the heels of *Bee Season* and *Akeelah and the Bee*, the 79th Scripps National Spelling Bee, the first to be televised on prime time network TV, will be the biggest and most widely watched ever.

It is also the time and place - May 31 at the Grand Hyatt in Washington, DC - for a fun picket by BeeMan for the purpose of highlighting the dysfunctional effect of English spelling on literacy rates in English speaking countries.

Bee Man loves the competition and tension of the Spelling Bee, but he's no friend of English spelling itself.

While admiring the ability of the finalists to deal with the foibles of English spelling, BeeMan aims to draw attention to the difficulties these defects place on children learning to read and write.

Not all learners are as gifted in memorizing the spelling of thousands of individual words which, by not always following the rules, make learning to read and write more difficult.

"We are not against spelling competence," says Elizabeth Kuizenga, spokesperson for BeeMan's campaign, which is co-sponsored by American Literacy Council and Simplified Spelling Society. "We are opposed to the spelling that fosters incompetence."

BeeMan hopes this message will be heeded by parents and other authorities having an interest in literacy progress, including educators, publishers, business people, and politicians in English-speaking countries, such as US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and the 'No Child Left Behind' program she administers and promotes.

Kuizenga adds that many spellings listed in Teddy Roosevelt's spelling-related Executive Order of 1906 - including anaemic, catalogue, colour, deposite, phantasy, manoeuvre & programme - are simpler now as a result of that order (anemic, catalog, color, deposit, fantasy, maneuver, program) and that others - including dialog, thru, donut and laff - have been simplified in more recent years. "The internet is speeding things up," says Kuizenga, "but an ocean of irregularity remains while millions of learners flail about and many finally fail. It is our hope that English will finally catch up with the many modern languages such as German, Dutch, Spanish, Russian and Czech, which have overhauled their spelling systems in the last century, and which have much higher literacy rates as a result."

Established in 1876 & 1908, respectively, the American Literacy Council and Simplified Spelling Society have been transatlantic partners in literacy activism at the National Spelling Bee since 2001.

Elizabeth Kuizenga, spokesperson, is a teacher of Literacy and of English as a Second Language in San Francisco.

14 May 2006. New York Post. MAX GROSS.

SPELLING FEVER

American Bee: The National Spelling Bee and the Culture of Word Nerds,
By James Maguire. Rodale Books. 288 pages, \$24.95.

In 2004, a protest was held outside the Grand Hyatt hotel in Washington, D.C. Demonstrators had flown across the Atlantic not to protest war or pollution, but to register their objections to the Scripps National Spelling Bee.

They were from the British-based Simplified Spelling Society, and - carrying signs that read, "I'm thru with through" - their ambitious goal was nothing less than to rewrite the English language.

There were six of them.

"People say how nice it is in the word *receipt* that you've got the *p* there, which reminds you of *reception*," Professor John Wells, the president of the society, told James Maguire, author of the new book "American Bee." "But what about *deceit*? Where there is exactly the same relationship with *deception*, but we don't write a *p* in *deceit*. It's the inconsistency that's really so unnecessary." Wells has a point, but he also sounds a little kooky. Then again, almost everybody in "American Bee" is a little kooky. After all, Maguire is telling the story of spelling bees, which tend to attract the strange and the geeky.

The American spelling bee's roots stretch back into the 19th century (apparently there was a major fad in the 1870s) and every year 9 million school kids participate in local bees, getting winnowed down to the top 250, who go to Washington to compete on a national level.

And while this might seem like a supremely esoteric (and boring) exercise, anyone who has seen the documentary "Spellbound" or read Myla Goldberg's charming novel "Bee Season" knows just how serious and exciting these bees can be. (There is a feature film out last week called "Akeelah and the Bee," and there's even a Broadway musical called "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.")

Awkward and soft-spoken kids (some of whom have to stand on their tiptoes to reach the microphone) lean forward and spell polysyllabic words - the majority completely unknown to most adults - with dazzling accuracy. They are sometimes quaking with nervousness (one boy fainted in 2004), but their courage in the face of all the cameras and competition seems downright heroic.

Maguire treads a lot of familiar material here, while not quite achieving the drama of "Spellbound." All the kids in the movie had distinct personalities, and the situation was fresh and interesting.

"American Bee" is at its best when it delves into the purists of orthography, like Wells and Jacques Bailly (the 1980 champ is the bee's official announcer), who have made spelling their whole life.

But Maguire never quite answers the larger questions raised by spelling bees. Is Wells right? Is the English language an inconsistent mess? Should it be changed? Is it changing too much? These are valid questions, worthy of consideration but Maguire isn't interested in making any judgments.

If nothing else, you'll come away from "American Bee" knowing how to spell "Boeotian" and "sphygmomanometer."

31 May 2006. Syndicated account. Bill Theobald.

Only in Washington.

Have an event in this town and you're sure to have some sort of protest. Even at a spelling bee.

In what has become an annual ritual, members of the American Literacy Council are picketing outside the hotel. The group believes that English spelling should be simplified so more words are spelled phonetically. Donut, for example.

This year's contingent is small so far - one man, in fact. But he's hard to miss. A New York man identifying himself only as Bee Man or Bee Daddy stood outside in the humidity with a yellow and white vest on top of black slacks. A plastic black nose and glasses. Black cap with antenna and a little fabric wings.

Around his neck was a sign that read: "I luv spelling bees."

"We are just doing our part to agitate in a nice way," Bee Man said.

He said more people were planning to protest, but many were sick. Or should that be sic?



1 Jun 2006. New York Sun. MOLLIE ZIEGLER.

Verbiphages Vie For Glory Tonite.

Spelling bees, which have always been popular among logolepts and verbiphages, are a particularly hot cultural touchstone now. [...]

Elizabeth Kuizenga, who is perhaps best known as the mother of supermodel and X-Men actress Rebecca Romijn, is also known in more esoteric circles as a prominent member of the Simplified Spelling Society, a group that advocates phonemic spelling. There is empirical evidence that children's confidence in their sense of logic is seriously undermined by English's illogical spellings, she says.

"Indeed, many children just give up on school altogether as a result. The prisons are full of people with literacy problems," says Ms. Kuizenga. (Did I mention that she is from Berkeley?)

Even if the idea sounded appealing, which regional pronunciation would be used? How would the word for the sister of your mother be spelled? And pronunciations change over time. Hangul, the Korean phonemic alphabet organized into syllabic blocks, is supposedly the best orthography in the world. Even it has become a slightly less good fit over the years. If the advocates of spelling reform had their way, spelling would have to change each time pronunciation changed.

What Ms. Kuizenga and her cohorts fail to understand, though, is that spelling bees are impressive precisely because English is so full of irregularities. And despite its various letter combinations and anomalies, spelling bees proudly stand for objective truth. Postmodernism may rule the day but when Dan Quayle encouraged a non-traditional spelling of the word potato, no one defended him by saying his version was valid because it was meaningful to him.

[...] The anti-spellers claim that their simplified spelling would help immigrants. In fact, many spelling finalists are multilingual and second-generation Americans, born to parents from Asia or the Middle East.

4 May 2006. Christian Science Monitor.

The buzz about spelling bees by Ruth Walker.

A New Zealand group called "Spell 4 Literacy" has been picketing spelling bees and otherwise campaigning for orthographical reform on the grounds that English spelling is a hindrance to literacy. (I can't help noticing, though, that their top guy is named Allan Campbell, and suspecting that he probably does not pronounce that "p.")

An outfit called the Simplified Spelling Society has likewise demonstrated at the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee with signs reading "Enuf is enuf" and "I'm thru with through." The society also maintains on its website extensive listings of languages where orthographical reform was been successfully carried out, including a report on the recent changes in German spelling, which include, as it happens, "Spagetti," without that troublesome "h."
