LETTERS

Crystal clear?

Professor David Crystal

Some thoughts on one of your letters in the recent issue ...

John Forder's intuition about *l*-doubling in British and American English is quite correct. The norm in American English is to use a single *l* when the final syllable of the stem is not accented. So, we have *travel, traveled, traveling, traveler*, alongside *rebel, rebelling, rebelled, rebellious*. According to Pam Paters' *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (2004 – see page 309) – an essential tool for guidance about contemporary variation – 94 per cent of Americans follow this rule. (By contrast, 80 per cent of Australians follow the British pattern, and Canadian usage is very divided.)

It is British English that is anomalous. The regular spelling before an affix is with a single *l*, as we see in thousands of words such as *finalize* and *finalist*. Nobody has ever suggested that these should be *finallize* and *finallist*. It is unfortunate that writers and lexicographers in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain went down the double-*l* road – usually because they remembered the double *l* being used in the source languages, such as French and Latin, and thought English ought to do the same. But etymology is never a good guide to spelling, and inevitably they ended up operating inconsistently, so that today we find both *medalist* and *medallist*, *woolen* and *woollen*, *marvelous* and *marvellous*, and several more. Different publishing houses and dictionaries make different recommendations, in such cases.

There is a further complication. The longer the stem of a word, the more awkward the double *l* seems, especially if there is an *l* in the stem already. So, with new verbs, British writers go for *trialled*, but prefer *paralleled*.

But there are exceptions in American English too. A famous one is *crystallized*, which is the norm in US chemical writing, presumably on analogy with *crystallography*, and because of that is widely used elsewhere. And other words usually spelled with *l* will also sometimes be encountered with *ll*, depending on such factors as the conservativism of the writer or the writer's affinity with Britain.

Pam Peters' conclusion is that we should all be doing our bit to increase the regularity in English spelling, to make good some of the damage done to the British spelling system by the orthoepists, lexicographers and grammarians of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. So in cases where we have the choice between single *l* and double *ll*, as in *medal(l)ist, panel(l)ing, towel(l)ed, bejewel(l)ed, carol(l)ing*, and dozens more, she recommends that we go for the single *l* solution, which is the simpler and regular alternative, and the usage that is steadily increasing worldwide. The idea has its merits. One less thing for children – and copy-editors – to remember.