

# a brave new linguistic world

In 1877 the English language was much more homogeneous than it is today. There was a great deal of written variation in the daily press and in such 'special' domains as science, law, religion and literature; but the public presence of spoken English was remarkably unvaried. Regional dialects—though considered quaint—were viewed as sub-standard, fit only for adding colour to the low-life or eccentric characters populating the pages of such novelists as Dickens. There was little mobility: many people would live their whole lives in one community, hearing no accent or dialect outside those used by their immediate social contacts. Global variation was hardly noticed: American English had begun to make its mark, as an alternative standard, but other parts of the English-speaking world were shrouded in linguistic mystery.



The proliferation of new spoken varieties has been the most noticeable trend in the past 125 years, and 1877 certainly seems to have been special in this respect. That was the year when the telephone first went into commercial use. It was the year when the phonograph was first demonstrated, launching the era of sound recording. Each of these technologies led to new dimensions of speech variation—and with the arrival of broadcasting in the 1920s, varieties of speech became sophisticated indeed, rivalling the written language for their range and versatility (in news reading, weather forecasting, interviewing, sports commentary and many more). Fifty years on, and the Internet brought yet another dimension to language variation, introducing new interactive varieties (for example, e-mail and chat) and new possibilities of written expression (for example, text messaging).

---

...there is still plenty of energy left  
in the global spread of English...

---

But we ain't seen nothin' yet. All the signs indicate that technological progress, and consequently yet more language variation, is going to continue. There is still plenty of energy left in the global spread of English, which has already generated a range of highly recognisable varieties (such as in Australia, South Africa, and India). English could easily become a two-level ('diglossic') language, with standard English maintaining the demands of international and national

Astronauts go for a drive on the moon... 1972... First emails are sent... Israeli Olympic compound is stormed by Arab guerrillas... John Betjeman is appointed Poet Laureate... 1973... End of Vietnam War... Open University awards its first degrees... Women are allowed on the London Stock Exchange floor for the first time... 1974... Nationwide postcoding completed in UK... UK hit by national strikes resulting in 3-day week... Nixon resigns over Watergate... Britain's first McDonald's restaurant opens in South London... 1975... Britons say 'yes' to joining the European Common Market... Cambodia falls to Khmer Rouge... 1976... America's Viking spacecraft lands on Mars and sends back the first close-up pictures of the planet's surface... 1977... Punk era starts in Britain... Space Shuttle makes its maiden flight... The film Star Wars is released...

intelligibility alongside non-standard varieties expressing local identities. There are already signs that these local varieties, especially when mixed with other languages (as with 'Singlish' in Singapore), are not intelligible to English speakers outside of that community.

The world of English language teaching is going to change out of all recognition as a consequence. We will need to replace the comfortable dual mindset of 'British' vs 'American' English by one which recognises an increasing number of regional standard models. The

range of varieties

we will

experience

around

us will

place

---

...the world of English language teaching is going to change out of all recognition...

---

much greater demands on our listening and reading comprehension, and the rise of regional and national varieties will require a greater focus on cultural studies within language coursework.

When a variety (for instance, South African English) develops a distinctive local vocabulary of 10,000 words or more, the only way to get to grips with it is to develop an awareness of the local factors (such as politics) which gave rise to this vocabulary

in the first place. We will need to supplement the familiar dichotomy of teaching 'speech' and 'writing'

with a third medium—electronic communication through the internet. We will need to cope with the consequences of a

high speed pace of language change: a new word entering the

language can be worldwide within a matter of minutes. Standards will therefore change much more rapidly than in the past.

We are approaching a truly revolutionary moment in English language teaching, and I do not believe it is possible to take account of these factors by the slow adaptation of present theories and procedures. A whole new paradigm shift is on the horizon in which the notions of language variation and change must become central. Applying this to such domains as syllabus design and testing will be difficult but unavoidable. There will be plenty to keep Trinity busy over the next 125 years, in this brave new linguistic world.

---

#### David Crystal

David Crystal is honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, and works from his home in Holyhead, Anglesey as a writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster. His recent authored works include 'Language and the Internet' and 'Shakespeare's Words'. He is editor of the New Penguin Encyclopedia.

1978... The compact disc is first demonstrated... First baby is born from a test-tube... 1979... Sony introduce the Personal Walkman... Abel Muzorewa becomes Rhodesia's first black Prime Minister... Margaret Thatcher becomes Britain's first woman Prime Minister... 1980... John Lennon shot dead... World Health Organisation claims that smallpox has been eliminated... 1981... Scientists identify the AIDS virus... Charles and Diana marry... 1982... Unemployment reaches 3 million in the UK... Escalation of the Falkland Islands conflict... Channel Four goes on the air... 1983... Iran at war with Iraq... Mother Teresa honoured with the Order of Merit... 1984... Band Aid is formed to help the famine in Ethiopia... Ted Hughes becomes Poet Laureate... Macintosh computer is launched... 1985... Boris Becker becomes youngest Wimbledon men's champion in history...