Interview with David Crystal

Commentary: We caught up with David and Hilary Crystal at this year’s TESOL conference near Madrid. Professor Crystal, the most prolific author on the English language, kindly agreed to the following interview:

1 Part 1: Writing and Childbirth (3m44s)

Think (T): Well, thank you very much for talking to us. I have a couple of questions for you, Professor Crystal. To start out with, when I was preparing this interview I realized I’ve read more books written by you than by any other living person.

David Crystal (DC): Even Katherine Cookson?

T: Even Katherine Cookson, yes – similar! And how do you manage to be so prolific?

DC: First of all by not having a full-time university job. In fact, the reason why I left the full-time university world back in the Eighties was precisely because I knew I wanted to write. There were lots of things I wanted to write about and it was not possible to write about them because the university admin was becoming crippling and it’s got worse since then. So I left full-time and became an independent and I haven’t worked for a university for 25 years. And I set myself up basically as a writer and lecturer and so on. The only thing you’ve got to have if you do this sort of thing, of course, is at least an understanding partner, wife in my case. And actually, in my case, Hilary is my business partner as well and she looks after all the admin that an independent author accretes and without that my productivity would be half. But, so I started off and I aimed to write – well – two books a year basically
was my aim and sometimes I’ve managed it and sometimes it’s been more than that and sometimes less; (it) depends on the book really and how big it is and sometimes a book may take two or three years, but other times it takes two or three months.

T: And do have difficulty finding the subjects or are there a line of books waiting to be written in your mind?

DC: There has been. I don’t know if it will always be so. As we sit here now I have no idea what the next-but-one book is that I’m going to write. But usually an idea for a book comes up not because I think of it, but because somebody writes to me and says, “Dear Professor Crystal could you please recommend a book on X?” and I think to myself, “No, I can’t.” And then you think, “why not?” and then you think “I better write one!” I’ll give you an example, my next book that’s coming out in July is called Texting: The Great Debate, text messaging, and it was written because somebody wrote to me and said they’d like to read a book on text messaging and I thought, “So would I!” And that’s how it started and it wasn’t an easy book to write, let me tell you, because of course how do you get your text messages? Will you give me yours? You know most people are very reluctant to share their text messages. But in the end I got a corpus together and multilingual it was too. I got some Spanish examples and French and this sort of thing – and the book got written. It didn’t take long to write. It doesn’t take long to write a book so long as you know what you want to say, you’ve done the basic digging – you’ve got the research done. I have a facility in writing. I can write a book... I have written a book in a week, a short one I have to say. But once you... it’s not so much ‘Can you write the book?’ or ‘Will you write the book?’, it’s you can’t not write it. I shudder to make the analogy – women kill me for saying this – I say it’s a little like having a baby. I mean you can’t stop it coming. The pain is not so great I suspect – this is a man talking, remember – but it’s like that. Once I get an idea for a book I have to write it. Everything else stops until I get it written. I can’t sleep until it’s written.

T: If the comparison is valid, I have the same thing for articles...

DC: Well, there we are.

T: ...on a much lower level.

2 Part 2: The Cambridge Encyclopaedias

T: Which book are you proudest of?

DC: The next one.

T: Right.

DC: Always.

T: Always.

DC: Always the next one because the sense of achievement that comes from having got through a subject and shaped it and revised it and I mean it’s a work of art to me. I imagine it’s exactly the same feeling that you’d get from any painter or sculptor and so on. I just work with words whereas these people work with other things. Looking back over the years I suppose the book that I have to say I was most proud to have been a part of was the Cambridge Encyclopaedias, the language one first of all and then especially the Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language. And that was because it was such a wonderful creative experience working... it was a pictorial book remember. Now nobody had ever done a picture book on language before and so one was really exploring the creative boundaries of the printed page. You’d say to the picture researcher, “I want a picture of something – y’know – a language march, somewhere in the world” and they’d come in with twenty pictures and so you’d be looking at the best pictures and trying to decide which one, then you’d put it on the page and then you’d write your text and it wouldn’t quite fit, so you’d have to play about getting the balance right. And if... you probably know that book... and each double-page spread is a joy to look at and it’s because of all that creative energy that came from the team of people. I mean I wrote it, yes, and planned it and all, but a lot of other people helped to make that book the success it was. And it’s that kind of teamwork which makes...
me feel – y’know⁴⁰ – I was glad to have been a part of that.

Part 3: Promoting EFL in School (3m17s)

T: It was a very good book. In the recent electoral campaign in this country, in Spain, both of the major political parties were promising to bolster⁴¹ the teaching of English in schools. How would you recommend they spend the extra money? DC: It depends how much money they’ve got to spend really! You can do a lot with a little bit of money it seems to me. I’ve always since the 1960s argued for the importance of – y’know⁴² – the authentic language learning experience. This is authentic English we’re using now. I’m not simplifying for my listeners and nor should I. But – y’know⁴³ – take that argument out into the big wide world⁴⁴ and the need to present kids⁴５ and adults too with as wide a range⁴⁶ of authentic Internet that I think my answer would want to be primarily located⁴⁷ because what drives⁴⁸ teenagers, tweenagers⁴⁹ as well⁵⁰, to learn anything, to be interested in anything, apart from sex? – Well the teenagers, I mean. I mean how do you get them interested in language? The answer is well it’s difficult unless the technology is there. You know they love the Internet. They love YouTube, they love Facebook, they love MySpace and they love chatrooms and blogging and e-mails and text-messaging and all of this. Well, y’know⁵¹, one has got to build⁵² that much more fundamentally into the educational system it seems to me, especially in the context of teaching a foreign language, to preserve that motivation and develop it. And that’s quite expensive getting the technology in. And not just⁵³ the technology, getting the people in to maintain it because you can buy 20 computers for a classroom without any trouble⁵⁴ at all, but 19 of them are going to go wrong in the course of the next year. Somebody’s got to fix⁵⁵ them and help the kids⁵⁶ really master the technology; and of course you know they do it so instinctively themselves, but nonetheless⁵⁷ you do need⁵⁸ that kind of maintenance backup⁵⁹. So I think the IT⁶⁰ side of language-learning business is quite expensive, it’s gotta⁶¹ develop, it’s the future of the world. There is now more language on the Internet than in the entire libraries of the world combined. You know it is enormous now; it’s unbelievably large⁶². And so it’s their future and I think – y’know⁶³ – if I was in charge and had money I would want to make sure the kids⁶⁴ had the best possible exposure to mastering⁶⁵ what is happening on the Internet linguistically, coming to terms with⁶⁶ the various varieties of language that are there, the many... I mean the Internet is a multilingual experience... the many languages that are there and because most kids around the world and a significant number in Spain have identity issues⁶⁷ to do with local regional minority languages, then to realize⁶⁸ that the Internet is a strong force for preserving them as well⁶⁹. And so you get that kind of multiple experience as long as you’ve got the equipment and everything available. So, I guess⁷⁰ it would be somewhere in that direction.

Part 4: English in Asia (3m55s)

T: On the Downing Street website, which obviously I consult weekly, Gordon Brown was talking, in January I think it was, about the fact that English was about to explode, become very important in Asia, above all, in China and in India. Do you see this happening? He was talking about there being more, I think, more Chinese speakers of English than native speakers in the rest of the world. DC: I wonder if he said that. In India that is an argument that I’ve heard used, indeed⁷¹ I’ve used it myself. China probably not yet. And it does raise⁷² the question of the level of English in question.

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46 to bolster – strengthen, promote
47 the big wide world – the world in general
48 kid – (informal) child
49 range – variety
50 to be located – (in this context) be focussed, be centred
51 to drive (drive-drove-driven) – (in this context) motivate
52 tweenager – child that is 11 or 12 years old
53 as well – too
54 to build (build-built-built) – (in this context) incorporate
55 just – (in this context) only
56 trouble – difficulty, problems
57 to fix – repair, mend
58 nonetheless – nevertheless, even so
59 do need – (emphatic) need
60 back-up – support, help
61 IT – information technology
62 gotta – (slang) got to
63 large – (false friend) big
64 to master sth. – become proficient in sth.
65 to come to terms with (come-came-come) – accept
66 identity issues – (in this context) questions of national identity
67 as well – too
68 I guess – I suppose
69 indeed – (emphatic) in fact
70 does raise – (emphatic) presents, provokes
71 estimate (m.) – estimation
72 to be scattered with – be peppered with, have
And certainly having been to India and listened to the English there, yes it is the case that probably there are more speakers of English in India than in the rest of the native-speaking English world combined, something like 350 million probably were the estimates⁶⁶ that were being given to me. I asked everybody, "How many people do you think have a basic level of conversational competence?" Now that's very important because as you go around India you can have a chat to somebody and you get an Indian English back that is probably scattered with⁷⁰ a few errors and - y'know⁷⁹ - the vocabulary is limited but nonetheless it's a perfectly satisfying conversation in English. Now, if you mean that level of English, then sure India is doing better than anywhere else and China is going to catch up⁶⁷ soon because the news out of China is that they're intending to double the number of English speakers in China by the end of the Olympics. And they'll probably do it, the way they're going about it. But if you mean a high level of educated international English, the sort of thing you and I are using now, then it would be quite wrong. I think, to say that a third of the population of India is capable of carrying on a conversation of the kind we're having now. That figure⁷¹ is much more likely to be something like 10% or maybe a bit more. But that's significant because 10 years ago people like Badge Kachru was saying that the educated speakers in India were about 4%. So in 10 years I think that figure has doubled and maybe more. It's difficult to get statistics. But when I was going around I was talking to a lot of teachers and to indeed kids, both at primary and secondary level. I remember... is it time for a story? We were in Chennai outside the cathedral there and the church school was opposite. It was half-past-three in the afternoon and out came all these kids⁷² in beautiful little blue uniforms and they were going for their bus and they saw us, Hillary and I, on the other side of the square. We were different from everybody else. They came rushing over and - y'know⁷¹ - What was going to happen? They said, "Hello. How are you? How are you? You alright?" and so on⁶⁶, said these six-year-olds, seven-year-olds. And I thought, "That's all the English they know." So I said, "We're fine thanks. How are you?" "Oh, we're OK. We've been at school. We're going to school every day here" and chatter, chatter⁷⁷, chatter, chatter. And this was all in English. Now these are seven-, eight-year-olds. What are they going to be like in ten years' time? You know the population - y'know⁷⁷ - they're all going to be running call centres⁷⁶ in India all over the place, aren't they or whatever? So - y'know⁰⁰ - Gordon Brown's point is about the future of English in India I think, rather than⁷⁹ the future of English particularly. So, whether⁸⁰ Indian English becomes an influential factor as part of an English world lingua franca will depend upon how sexy⁸⁰ India becomes as an economic powerhouse⁸⁰ and an IT powerhouse and so on⁶⁶. I firmly believe from what I've seen in India that - y'know⁰⁰ - where is the next Google gonna⁴⁵ come from? It will probably be India the way it's going at the moment, in which case Indian English will suddenly⁰² shoot up⁴³ in prestige and at that point Brown's observation probably will be true.

T: That's fascinating. Thank you very much for speaking to us.

DC: My pleasure.