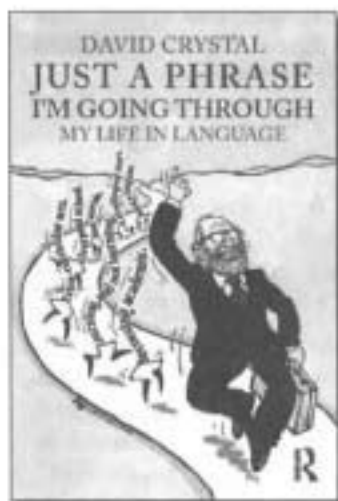

Life in Language: An Interview with David Crystal

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David Crystal has become known worldwide as, in effect, a spokesperson for the English language, and the long list of his publications in the field of linguistics and English language studies continues to grow. Most recently, however, in 2009, he published an autobiographical volume, *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through: My Life in Language* (Routledge, 2009), in which he traces some of the origins and the development of his fascination with language and with the English language in particular. The interview that follows has been shaped by Professor Crystal's responses to a set of written questions submitted to him by email in mid-year, a few months after the appearance of his autobiography. For fuller information about David Crystal's work and publications, see <<http://www.davidcrystal.com>>.

JOHN STOTESBURY: *At the start of June 2009, the mass media headlined the news that English was about to get its millionth word, trotting out the familiar arguments about the "success" of English. You yourself were interviewed on TV by Jeremy Paxman (see YouTube), and your response implied that the news report was somewhat spurious, since English, past and present, has probably accumulated at least a million and a half lexical items. Central, of course, to the news report was the notion of the "success of English". Can, in fact, this popular notion be linked to any extent at all to lexical or other English linguistic factors, or is it rather a matter of historical accident – and hence a cultural myth?*

DAVID CRYSTAL: "Implied it was somewhat spurious"? That's a somewhat genteel paraphrase! I actually said it was the biggest load of chicken-droppings I'd encountered in years. I wanted to say "bollocks", but the BBC wouldn't let me. I'm amazed that the claim attracted so much attention in the media. I suppose it shows the general ignorance of people about language. If someone had claimed that the six billionth child was going to arrive in the world on June 11th 1999, the stupidity of the remark would have been noted straight away. But people swallow whole the most extraordinary claims about language. Which, I guess, is why we need linguists and language periodicals: to put the record straight and to develop a climate of informed opinion.

I won't repeat my arguments here – they can be found on my blog (<<http://david-crystal.blogspot.com/2009/04/on-biggest-load-of-rubbish.html>>) – but I think it's worth recording that the proponent of the million-word claim has publicly acknowledged, both in that TV programme, and also in a comment to the blog, that there *are* more than a million words in English, so the ridiculousness of the whole exercise is evident. But you're right. Underlying all such claims, whether true or false, is some vague notion of "celebrating" English. Now, I don't have any problem with the notion of celebrating a language, as long as it's seen within a frame of reference which recognizes all

languages as equally worthy of celebration. There is no place for triumphalism, whether it's on behalf of a world language or a minority language, in a mindset which derives from linguistics.

There's nothing special about a million words. Any language which belongs to a scientifically literate community will have over a million at its disposal, simply because it is in the domains of science and technology that lexical growth is most apparent. Numbers become irrelevant after a while, when we start thinking of how many biological species there are in the world which have been given scientific names. English probably does have a larger vocabulary than any other language, but this is a consequence of its having been the dominant language of science for so long. It's also a consequence of its global spread. Once English came to be adopted by countries as an additional language, it began to adapt, to meet the communicative needs of the people, and huge amounts of local vocabulary were added to the lexicon. Regional dictionary projects (such as of South African or Caribbean English) testify to the tens of thousands of words which English has acquired over the decades. Languages which lack an international reach, or which try to protect themselves from other-language "interference", believing in some imagined notion of purity, reduce these sources of lexical enrichment.

Your question also refers to the other great myth – or rather, set of myths – about English, that there's something in its structure which has made it such a successful international language. Over the years I've heard many variations on this theme. English has a simple morphology, therefore it has become a global language. English grammar does not reflect social classes (in the way some oriental languages do), therefore it appeals to people with a democratic bent and therefore has become a global language. English has borrowed words from many other languages, and therefore learners will find a familiar point of contact in it, and therefore it has become a global language. While there are grains of truth in all these statements, opposite arguments also obtain. English has a complex syntax, therefore

it should not have become a global language. English has a really awkward spelling system, so it should not have become a global language. And so on. Structural arguments always cut both ways.

They are in any case beside the point. As I've argued at length in such books as *English as a Global Language*, a language becomes an international or global language for one reason only – the power of the people who speak it. Power, of course, means different things at different times. In the case of English, a combination of political/military, scientific/technological, economic, and cultural power has led to English achieving its present position. Equally, because languages are dependent on power relations for their standing, it would only take a shift in world politics or economics or religion for other languages to come centre stage. Whether that is likely to happen is for wiser minds to explore.

JS: *Closely connected with the previous question, is there any glimmer of truth in the old saw that learning English (as L2 – or, indeed, as L22) is "intrinsically easier" than learning some other languages?*

DC: No truth at all. The best evidence, to my mind, comes from child language acquisition. Although only a small proportion of the world's languages have been studied from a developmental psycholinguistic point of view, the evidence is clear that children pass through broadly similar stages of language acquisition at more or less the same ages. Observe five-year-old children talking in England, China, Brazil, or wherever, and you find comparable competencies. If adult learners are unable to replicate this commensurability of learning, that must be due to other factors, many of which have of course now been given sophisticated appreciation in the second language learning literature.

You ask for a "glimmer"? Well, I am impressed with the way English has become the language of choice for most international popular vocal music. Note the way people sing in English in such competitions as the Eurovision Song Contest. I've sometimes had the opportunity to ask singers why they use English. The

answer is partly functional – because English is the "cool" language, associated with the Beatles, the Stones, and so on. But it's also partly structural: composers often say that the predominantly monosyllabic character of the common words in English makes it an easier medium to work with, for heavy beat music, than languages where word morphology gets in the way. Rapsters also make this point.

JS: *Although, in a very real sense, you left behind the formal constraints of institutionalized linguistics a quarter of a century ago, you very obviously have remained at the forefront of linguistic investigation, especially in relation to English. Are there areas in the present-day institutional practice that you wish that you had been able to share in more directly? Are there areas of present-day linguistic practice that you consider un(der)-productive? Where may the research emphases be in the immediate future?*

DC: The value of an institution is that it fosters collaboration in ways that are not easily available to individuals working as independents. When I left Reading in 1984, at a time when I was heavily involved in clinical linguistics, I was immediately cut off from my primary source of research data – the interactions with patients who routinely passed through the linguistics department's speech therapy clinic. Fortunately, I had amassed a huge amount of data already, thanks largely to an MRC project, so in a sense leaving the clinic behind was a benefit: it gave me time to write everything up! But once that was done, I realized that it wasn't going to be possible to retain an ongoing dynamic role in relation to clinical linguistic research.

I have indeed missed the stimulation provided by collaborative research situations – working with doctoral students, in particular. But don't forget that, though I ceased to be a full-time academic in 1984, I didn't cut my ties with academia. I began an honorary professorial relationship with Bangor, and for several years taught a couple of courses there. I've done a fair bit of external examining, especially at doctoral level. Editing journals and book series also fosters an intimate contact with other academic linguists, as do fairly frequent visits

as a visiting lecturer to universities and involvement in the British Academy. So I do feel "in touch".

I find your last two questions very difficult, because there are so many areas. I never cease to be amazed how neglected some language topics are. I'm not interested in rediscovering wheels, and every time a publisher (for example) asks me to write something, the first thing I do is check that the topic isn't already covered. Repeatedly I find that it isn't. I wouldn't have written *Language Death* if a general account had been available at the time (there are several such accounts out there now), and the same applies to *Language and the Internet*, *Language Play*, *Txtng*, *Pronouncing Shakespeare*, and a number of others.

I'd like to have done some "hands on" work in relation to endangered languages. Apart from in the case of Welsh, my experience of endangered languages has come from reading the work of others. Today, there are some excellent accounts of the reasons why we should all be deeply concerned with language preservation, notably Nicholas Evans' moving and masterly *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have To Tell Us* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). I would like to have been able to write a book like that. As it transpired, the closest I could get was to edit it.

But if I had to opt for one area, as an indication of future trends, I would go for electronically mediated communication (EMC). The internet is now the largest corpus of language data ever compiled, and it is offering an extraordinary array of research opportunities in such areas as graphology, lexicology and stylistics, as well as applied areas such as automatic translation and searchlinguistics. And "we ain't seen nothin' yet", given that voice-over-internet is going to be a huge growth area in the next few years. There are major opportunities for research in speech-to-text (eg a system that turns voicemail into text message), text-to-speech (eg a system which turns texts into voicemail), automatic speech recognition (eg in answerphones, washing machines, and hands-free carphones, where – despite huge advances in the past few years – regional accents and rapid speech still

pose problems), and speech interaction via such systems as Skype and iChat (where the technology introduces interesting – but little studied – communicative constraints, such as the effects of message arrival lag or limited video view). What happens to language when technological constraints are placed on the interaction – as illustrated by turn-taking in chatrooms and instant messaging, or character restrictions in texting and twittering?

One thing that particularly interests me is the way the whole notion of what counts as a text is undergoing a revolution, as dynamic processing evolves. How are we to define the boundaries of a text which is ongoing? People can now routinely add to a text posted online, either short-term (as in the immediate response to a news story), or medium- or long-term, as in comments posted to a wiki, blog, bulletin board, or other forum. Ferdinand de Saussure's classical distinction between synchronic and diachronic does not adapt well to EMC, where everything is diachronic, time-stampable to a micro-level. Texts are classically treated as synchronic entities, by which we mean we disregard the changes that were made during the process of composition and treat the finished product as if time did not exist. But with many EMC texts there is no finished product. I can today post a message to a forum discussion on page X from 2004. From a linguistic point of view, we cannot say that we now have a new synchronic iteration of X, because the language has changed in the interim. I might comment that the discussion reads like something "out of Facebook" – which is a comment that could be made only after 2005, when that network began. I don't know how to handle this.

The problem exists even when the person introducing the various changes is the same. The author of the original text may change it – altering a Web page, or revising a blog posting. How are we to view the relationship between the various versions? The question is particularly relevant now that print-on-demand (POD) texts are becoming common. It is possible for me to publish a book very quickly and cheaply, printing only a handful of copies. Having produced my first print-run, I then decide to print another, but

make a few changes to the file before I send it to the POD company. In theory (and probably increasingly common in practice), I can print just one copy, make some changes, then print another copy, make some more changes, and so on. The situation is beginning to resemble medieval scribal practice, where no two manuscripts were identical, or the typesetting variations between copies of Shakespeare's First Folio. The traditional terminology of "first edition", "second edition", "first edition with corrections", ISBN numbering, and so on, seems totally inadequate to account for the variability we now encounter. But I don't know what to put in its place. The same problem is also present in archiving. The British Library, for example, has recently launched its Web Archiving Consortium. My website is included. But how do we define the relationship between the various time-stamped iterations of this site, as they accumulate in the archive? I don't know how to handle this, either.

JS: *Is there still some dispute over the "scientific" status of linguistics? Has the "science" of linguistics gained a share of public as well as institutional acceptance to the same extent as other sciences that can be followed by the "layman", such as astronomy, genetics, etc?*

DC: I don't think linguistics is viewed as a science by the general public, or – more important – by those who form the opinion of the general public. I'm thinking of people like the buyers from bookstore chains. Large bookstores usually have a section called "popular science". Did you ever see a linguistics book there? (I can speak only from an English language perspective. I don't know what happens in bookstores in Germany, France, etc.) In my experience, books on language tend to turn up in sections as varied as general reference and travel, but rarely in anything that might be called scientific. So it seems as if much of the linguistics PR over the past forty years, which has emphasised the message that linguistics is "the science of language", hasn't had the impact on popular consciousness that we hoped it would.

But that's no reason to stop trying to get the message across. The importance of studying

language objectively, systematically, empirically (and so on) needs to be emphasized as much today as ever before. The need is perhaps not so urgent in the UK, where several of the tenets of linguistics have been adopted in the English language parts of the National Curriculum. But there are still many countries where people foster misleading or harmful views about language. And the UK is certainly not immune. Here's an example from the pages of *Quest*, the journal of the Queen's English Society (Winter 2007): "The vast variety of earthly languages is indeed an almost unmitigated curse. The fewer languages the better, and the world will be a far better place when everyone speaks the same language – or perhaps I had better be frank and say when everyone speaks English (and it will come). I think Crystal once said languages are dying at the rate of one a fortnight. If so, that's the best news I've heard in a long time, and long may it continue!"

This is the first time, as far as I know, that a member of the QES has come out so publicly in an attack on linguistic diversity. I have often heard its members put down regional English dialects, but never before all other languages. The periodical's back cover maintains that the views expressed in its pages are not necessarily those of the editor or of the Society – but in this case, we can delete "not necessarily", as in the previous issue of *Quest* the editor himself had expressed the same opinions in a book review (which is what motivated the letter-writer). Talking about the views I represent on linguistic diversity, he asks "do we really need it [diversity]?" and answers his own question with "quite the contrary", and he goes on to say: "when a language dies, what really is lost? Surely something is in fact gained if the speaker decides to drop, say, Karas and adopts English instead?" The ignorance of the expressive richness of other languages is truly breathtaking, but it is only to be expected from someone who affirms "the superior quality of the content of the English language". And no letter expressing the opposite viewpoint has since appeared in its pages.

I'm quite sure we could find similar views being expressed in France (about French) or Spain (about Spanish) – or indeed in many

countries. In one of my wildest dreams, I enjoy the prospect of locking a member of the Queen's English Society and a member of the French Académie in the same room to debate the language superiority question. But the example illustrates the fact that purism, prescriptivism, and other naive views about language are still present in society, notwithstanding the efforts of linguists to eliminate them. Accordingly, there will always be a place for the corrective that a scientific account of language provides.

JS: *How do you react to the concept of ELF? Do you consider that it has both pros and cons? Is there any possibility of ELF eventually being codified as a variety – or, perhaps more conceivably, varieties – of English to be learned by certain learners?*

DC: As a designation of a research field, I think it's timely and fruitful. At the same time, it has attracted a lot of theoretical speculation which, in the absence of empirical research, has resulted in some pretty silly claims being made about its linguistic character. This is why the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) project of Barbara Seidlhofer and her colleagues is so important (see the website at <https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/corpus_availability>). For the first time we have a serious corpus of data illustrating what people actually do when they use English as a lingua franca. Having dipped into this a little, I can't see any basis (yet) for suggesting that it is a single variety, though some statistical trends may emerge in due course. Apart from anything else, the contexts of use in the corpus are very diverse. But certainly, some of the usages that have been proposed as characteristic of ELF aren't supported by the data. Are uncountable nouns being replaced by countable? Here are the VOICE stats for a few such words:

informations	7	information	400
researches	5	research	234
advices	3	advice	30
furnitures	0	furniture	5
evidences	0	evidence	26
staffs	0	staff	87

I'll take that as a No, then. Any attempt at codification right now would be hugely premature.

A single variety? It's possible that ELF has some common-core features, but a much more likely outcome is that it will evolve into an indefinite number of varieties reflecting the speech situations in which it is used – situations which are defined by the linguistic backgrounds of the participants, the cultural influences of their communities, and so on. I'd also expect to observe a great deal of code-mixing. This is what we have seen in sociolinguistic and stylistic studies hitherto, and I don't see why ELF should be any different.

JS: *Do you speak Klingon? Might an "artificial" English (or some other variant of another world language) eventually form some kind of a lingua franca?*

DC: Hljol. (i.e. Beam me aboard.) I have the reference materials to hand, of course, pending the day I need to learn it. I take Marc Okrand's advice (in *The Klingon Dictionary*) very seriously. Explaining that *H* is the "ch" sound in *loch* or *Bach*, he apologises for the phonetic approximation, and wisely observes: "The best way to learn to pronounce Klingon with no trace of a Terran or other accent is to become friends with a group of Klingons and spend a great deal of time socializing with them."

It's never sensible to predict the long-term future, when it comes to languages. After all, who would have thought, a thousand years ago, that Latin would one day no longer be a dominant force in world linguistic affairs? But I don't see any sign at present of any of the artificial languages which have been devised over the past century or so achieving sufficient reach, because they lack the power base which is prerequisite for international appeal (as I mentioned earlier). It is, of course, precisely that power base which a Klingon Empire would provide.

JS: *Your contributions over the years have been in many varied sub-disciplines of linguistics. To what extent do you believe that the numerous strands of your work cohere, and, if you believe that they do, what is it that holds them together?*

DC: I think I see three motivations which provide a certain coherence. The first is a fascination with descriptive detail, deriving, I suppose, from my time on Quirk's *Survey of English Usage*. That's what unites all my early work in linguistics in intonation, prosody, syntax, and lexicology. The second is a concern for linguistics to be useful – an applied motivation – and there seems to be no end to the fields where it proves possible to apply one's linguistic knowledge to help solve language-related problems. This is certainly what drove my work in religious language, stylistics, clinical linguistics, educational linguistics, Shakespearean studies, indexing, and the various internet explorations.

The most rewarding times for me have been those when the two motivations coincide – where it is only through the descriptive detail that the problems get solved. This is what working with language-disordered children, with an acting company on Elizabethan pronunciation, and with online advertising companies have in common. The solutions are not possible without a meticulous, time-consuming, and informed attention to detail.

And the third uniting factor? Exposition, in the broadest sense, to include popularization. This is what brings together a third strand of writing, from *What is Linguistics?* to the Cambridge *Language* and *English Language* encyclopedias, and including the more focused expositions such as *Language Death* and *Language and the Internet*, as well as the lexicographical and indexing projects, such as the *Dictionary of Linguistics* and the journal *Linguistics Abstracts*.

But not everything coheres. A man must live. And especially since 1984, when I became an "independent scholar", I have had to balance work in linguistics with general editorial work which helped, as it were, to pay the mortgage. The editing of the Cambridge and Penguin families of general encyclopedias illustrate that balance in action. For some time there was no particular relationship between the two worlds. But in due course a strong and fruitful link emerged. The classification system which I devised to find and group entries in the

encyclopedia database evolved into a taxonomy which has since formed an important element of what I would now call "applied internet linguistics".

The problems of internet search and navigation are well known, and linguistics has a role in helping to solve them. In online advertising, for example, irrelevant or inappropriate ads are found on many pages. A Web page about bridge construction is accompanied by ads about card games. A CNN report about a street stabbing in Chicago is accompanied by ads which say "Buy your knives here". It's obvious that the keyword algorithm being used is linguistically naive, ignoring issues of ambiguity and context. A more sophisticated semantic analysis of page content avoids such problems.

And underneath all of this, there is I suppose a further factor, more to do with personality than anything else. I saw a travel book in a catalogue once: its title was *Because I Haven't Been There Before*. I feel like that with language too. As soon as I encounter a field I haven't had the opportunity to explore, I want to go there. Conversely, I am reluctant to go back over a field I have already visited. I hate having to do second editions!

JS: *Finally, I've always been impressed by your enormous productivity in terms of publications, and your recent memoir. Just a Phrase I'm Going Through (2009), underlines the success (there is surely no better term!) that your research and writing have enjoyed and continue to enjoy. Can you suggest, especially to young, aspiring academics in the broad field of English Studies, ways in which they might even to a modest extent emulate your example?*

DC: Well, as one of the stories in *Just a Phrase* explains, I had to give up full-time academia in order to write. So I'm under no illusion about the difficulty facing young academics today, whose administrative load is probably greater than mine was in the 1980s. But, if the time can be found to research and write, there is certainly no shortage of subject-matter. The beauty, as well as the frustration, about working with language is that, always,

"tomorrow is a new day". Whatever the results of one's research on language today, one is always aware of the steady, ongoing process of language change, which makes tomorrow a new linguistic world. Indeed, in some domains of language use, the likelihood of tomorrow being linguistically novel is very real.

Take internet linguistics. In 2001, impressed by the way a new world of language use seemed to be emerging, I published *Language and the Internet*. This had chapters dealing with what I thought were the main domains of internet activity: emails, chatrooms, virtual worlds, and the World Wide Web. There was no mention of blogging or instant messaging because, although those domains existed (the term *blog* arrived as early as 1997) they had achieved no public presence in 2000, when I was writing my book. A new edition was needed, and that duly appeared in 2006. This contained a new chapter on the missing domains. But it made no mention of the social networking sites, such as Facebook or YouTube, for these had hardly been born in 2005. Four years on, and there seems to be no end to the new technologies. If I had put out a third edition in 2007 it would have been out-of-date by now because it would not have mentioned Twitter. And when we consider all the domains as yet unborn, especially those which will use voice-over-internet protocols, it's easy to see that there is enormous potential for research, both in the pure and the applied domains.

Two forces pull linguists in different directions: the desire to know a lot about a little; and the desire to know a little about a lot. The ideal is to

keep a balance. All linguists need a domain which they feel they "own", in the sense that they know as much about it as anyone else in the world, and in some respects know that little bit more. In my case, once upon a time, that domain was English intonation; later, it was clinical linguistics; today it is internet linguistics. But everyone needs to be willing and able to react to new linguistic questions and situations as they arise, and that is very much how I've ended up writing so much. Most of my books have been written in response to a single question, sometimes overheard, sometimes addressed directly to me. While having lunch in the British Council canteen in London, a remark heard from the next table – that "English has become a world language because it is more logical than other languages" – led to my deciding to issue *English as a Global Language* as a general text (it had previously had only a private circulation). A view expressed by someone at a conference lunch, that "text-messaging is harming children's language", led to *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8*. And the most recent example: *Just a Phrase* was written as a response to some of the commonest questions I get asked during language "days" for schools. "Why did you become a linguist?" "How do you become a linguist?" "What's it like being a linguist?"

People are hugely interested in language, and hold strong opinions about it, so linguists are always in demand to help debunk myths and to explore questions of genuine popular interest. The millionth-word question illustrates that. Which is where we came in.

NOTE

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JAS