
With well over 100 books to his name, Professor David Crystal OBE has gained a world-wide reputation in the study of linguistics and the English language.

Q&A

Professor David Crystal

Far from being a 'keeper' of the language in its traditional form, he is one of the foremost advocates of its development, celebrating texting, tweeting, blogging, chatroom speak, virtual worlds, and rapping. He dismisses all the claims and worries that these new forms of the language are destroying language and literacy, and argues that we need a more inclusive approach to language, in which nonstandard varieties are respected alongside the standard.

We asked him about his life, work and views on the use of language.

When did you become interested in linguistics?

At university, which is where I first learned about the subject - first via phonetics, and then via the history of English. But the bigger question is 'When did I become interested in languages', and for that I would have to go back much earlier. Growing up in a bilingual community in Wales sparked a curiosity about languages, and exposure to a broad language curriculum in secondary school (French, Latin, Greek) consolidated the interest.

You have travelled across the country studying different regional accents - are they changing?

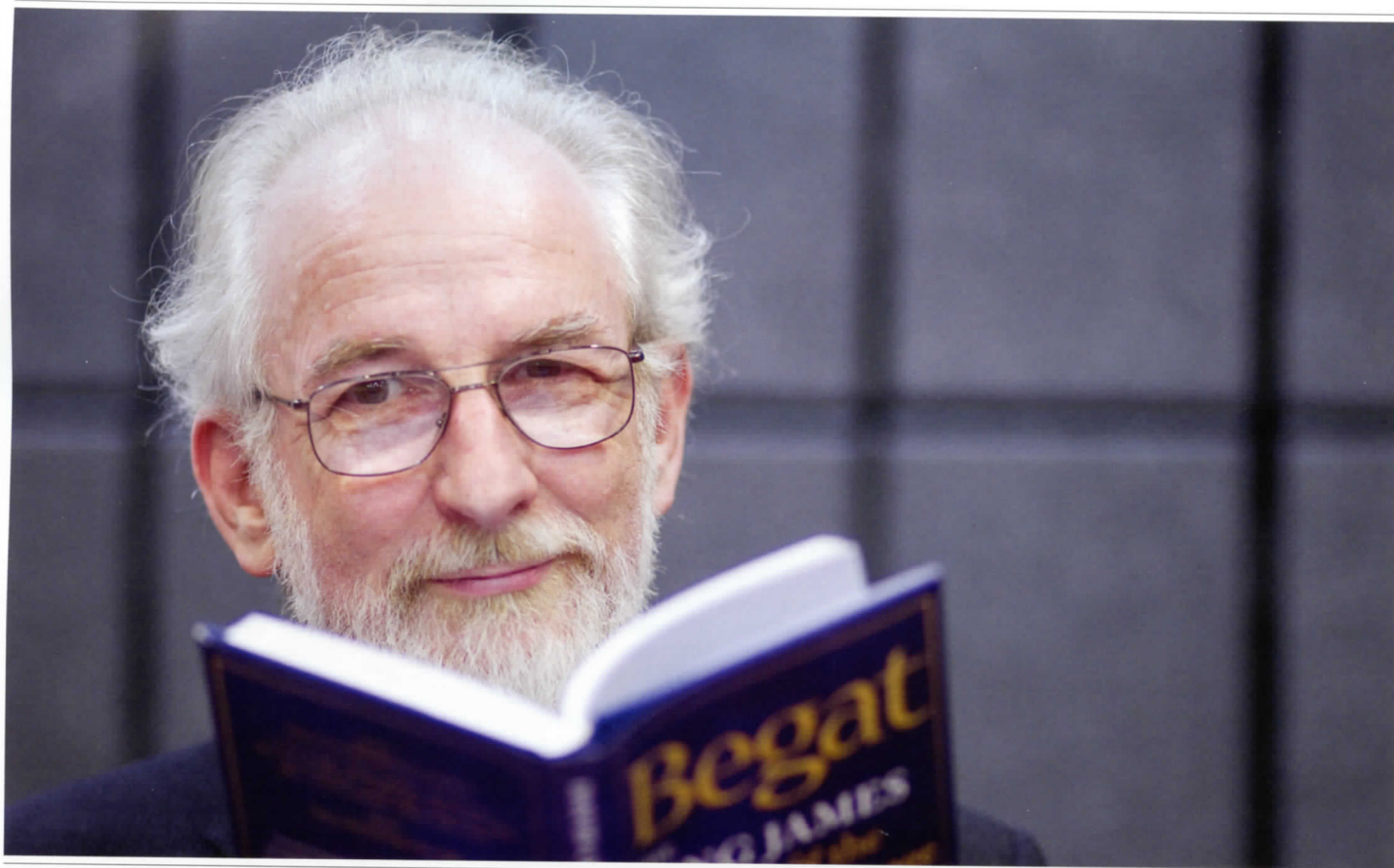
Accents always change, and there are always several things happening at once. Some old 'rural' accents are disappearing, as their associated ways of life die out. New accents are arriving, especially as the result of immigration. And some accents are having a greater geographical influence as a result of increased media exposure and population mobility.

How do you see the new forms of social media influencing the language?

The main development has been the emergence of new varieties (or styles) of language, largely driven by the constraints and opportunities provided by the technology. This is no different from what has happened before, of course, such as when broadcasting arrived and a new raft of varieties developed (newsreading, sports commentary etc). But the speed of change is unprecedented.

What impact is the internet having generally on the English language?

There has been very little impact on vocabulary (just a few thousand new words) and grammar (hardly any new constructions); rather more on orthography, especially punctuation. But it's early days. We are dealing with phenomena that are in some cases less than a decade old, which is too soon to say what long-term influence they might have. Spelling is likely to simplify, eventually.



What are your favourite words and which would you ban?

I don't have favourite words. All words are fascinating. Each has a unique history. I find the notion of 'banning' words repulsive - the worst kind of political correctness. More fruitful is a language management policy based on the notion of stylistic appropriateness.

Who do you admire and who has influenced you the most in your career?

I admire most those people who are prepared to spend time, money, and energy (and often their health and lives) trying to document and maintain endangered and minority languages.

The greatest influence on my career was the man who first conveyed to me the fascination and challenge of systematic language study - Randolph Quirk.

What do you enjoy most and least about your work?

Most: the daily process of discovery. With language, because it is ever-changing,

tomorrow is always another day. Least: the re-reading of my own work that I have to do when faced with the need to produce a second (or later) edition of a book.

If you weren't writing and editing books, broadcasting or lecturing, what would you be doing?

Being bored. But actually, I do spend quite a lot of time not doing these things. I started up an arts centre in my home town 20 years ago, and I try to keep up with the range of arts events that the centre puts on. Cinema is my main enthusiasm.

What have been your most embarrassing moments?

I think I must have suppressed them, as I can't remember anything truly awful. I think maybe linguists by nature develop a bit of a thick skin, as they're always trying out new languages, and gaily going into new language-using situations, with all the mistakes and risks that these encounters bring. I think I may have forgotten how to be embarrassed.

Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions?

I would like to see a West End production of my play about endangered languages, 'Living On'. I dream on.

Looking back on your life, what are your proudest achievements?

You mean in linguistics? - for I'm delighted to see the way my children have got on in life. I think probably developing the field of clinical linguistics, because of the real help it provided to those with language disabilities. But each time I finish a book, that (temporarily) feels like a proudest achievement.

Is there anything you would change?

Again, linguistically? I would have liked to become really fluent in a couple of languages, rather than being dimly non-fluent in several. So it goes.