



# VERBAL REASONING

**What's in a name? Professor David Crystal explores the many varied branches of linguistics**

**L**inguistics is the science of language. Practitioners devote their energy to understanding why human language is the way it is, studying the history, acquisition, structure and use of as many languages as possible. Language obsessives would love to study them all, but even the most die-hard fan would agree that, with about 6,000 languages to choose from, life's just too short!

Where do modern languages come from? When did humans first learn to

speak? What's going on when somebody speaks with a stammer? Such questions are explored through studies in linguistics. Why do people have different accents? How do children learn their mother tongue so quickly? The ways in which we learn, adapt and communicate through language continue to stimulate debate and research.

If such questions intrigue you, you could be born to practise linguistics, specialising in any language or group of languages. I have friends working on Celtic languages, the Romance languages, American Indian and

Australian Aboriginal languages, or a single language, such as Russian, Arabic, Welsh, Japanese or English. Exactly which ones you encounter in a course will vary, but in principle, the linguistic world is your oyster!

From a study of individual languages, linguists go on to research how all languages differ and what they have in common. They have found, for example, that all researched languages have nouns and vowels but that some don't use future tenses, nasal consonants or even have a word for yellow.

Actually, these "facts" are only true for the

## Case Study

Thomas Stephens graduated from Southampton University with a 2.1 degree in German and linguistics.

"My degree was originally straight German, although everyone studying a language had to take a module of linguistics in the first year. Most people dropped this 'taster' course after a year but I was hooked and changed to Combined Honours.

"I'd always been interested in foreign languages, but fluency in half a dozen languages isn't what linguistics is about. It's the study of language in general: its formation, use and effect. Language is something that everyone uses every day, even though it's something that few people know anything about. Another difficulty when explaining linguistics is that most of the many branches it splits into are largely unrelated and are more like sciences than arts subjects.

"In my first year, I studied phonetics/phonology, syntax, sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Because linguistics is a relatively new and rapidly developing discipline – and because most of the lecturers were writing books – the lectures and tutorials often

turned into sounding-board sessions for the latest theories.

"I spent the next year abroad, but half of my dissertation had to relate to linguistics. My tutors rejected my first suggestion: a groundbreaking neurolinguistic investigation into the effects of alcohol on speech, so I ended up writing something about bilingualism.

"In my final year, I concentrated on the more theoretical modules, which aren't particularly vocational – although a knowledge of the more applied side (neurolinguistics, psycholinguistics and specialised phonetics) sets you up nicely for a postgraduate course to qualify as a speech and language therapist.

"Because linguistics is so diverse, I guarantee that everyone will find something of interest. I still read the latest pop science books on language – psycholinguistics is the most fascinating area: language acquisition, language loss (through brain damage) and loads of bizarre case studies. A final warning: life's too short to study Chomsky!"



two-thirds of the world's languages that have been studied. There is plenty to be done – but not all that much time to do it in! Languages are dying all over the world as small communities become endangered by the steamroller of modern global civilisation. On average, we lose a language every few weeks. Why this is happening, and whether

unprecedented range of new dialects as it spreads around the world. Courses on English language have different emphases: interrogating sounds, spellings, grammar, vocabulary, patterns of discourse or stylistic and social range. It is possible to study accents and dialects, the stages through which language emerges in children and the

demands. How can standards in these areas be improved? Some industries are using computers to recognise or produce speech. How can quality be improved? Progress in any of these requires a detailed analysis of languages, which is provided by the study of linguistics and the English language.

Meanwhile, more questions: What's the meaning of place-names? Where do irregularities in spelling come from? How many words are there in English? The list goes on...

## Languages are dying worldwide as small communities become endangered by modern global civilisation

anything can be done about it, is something else linguistics courses analyse.

There's a lot to discover, even if you concentrate just on English. English has more than 1,000 years of recorded history, a vast literature and a huge variety of spoken and written expressions, from airspeak (the language used by air traffic controllers) to zoological terms. Spoken as a first, second or foreign language by a quarter of the world's population, it is also developing an

way English has developed, from Anglo-Saxon times to the present day.

The study of English language and linguistics can help with real-life problem areas. Many children experience difficulties when learning to listen, speak, read or write. Many adults lose their command of language after a stroke. How can they be helped? Foreign language teaching and learning is a global industry, and translating and interpreting are major international

### For further information

For a full list of degree courses in linguistics, visit the UCAS website at: [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)

Professor Crystal has an honorary affiliation to the linguistics department at the University of Bangor. Visit their website at: [www.bangor.ac.uk](http://www.bangor.ac.uk)