



# Interview with David Crystal

**Commentary:** We caught up with<sup>8</sup> David and Hilary Crystal at this year's TESOL<sup>9</sup> conference<sup>10</sup> near Madrid. Professor Crystal, the most prolific author on the English language, kindly agreed to the following interview:

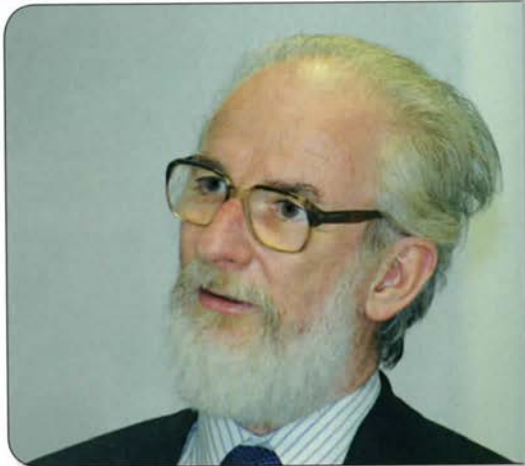
## 1 Part 1: Writing and Childbirth (3m44s)

**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<sup>11</sup> I've read more books written by you than by any other living person.

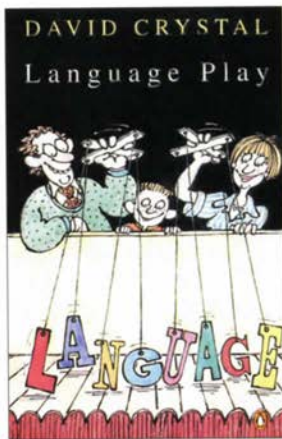
**David Crystal (DC):** Even Katherine Cookson?

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

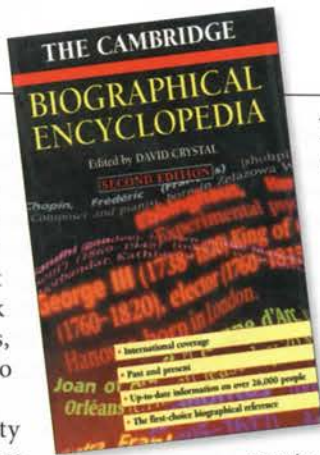
**DC:** First of all by not having a full-time university job. In fact, the reason why I left the full-time university world back in the Eighties was precisely because I knew I wanted to write. There were lots of things I wanted to write about and it was not possible to write about them because the university admin<sup>12</sup> was becoming crippling<sup>13</sup> 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<sup>14</sup> basically as a writer and lecturer<sup>15</sup> and so on<sup>16</sup>. The only thing you've got to have if you do this sort of thing, of course, is at least an understanding partner<sup>17</sup>, wife in my case. And actually<sup>18</sup>, in my case, Hilary is my business partner as well and she looks after all the admin<sup>12</sup> that an independent author accretes<sup>19</sup> and without that my productivity would be half. But, so I started off and I aimed to<sup>20</sup> write – well – two books a year basically







was my **aim**<sup>21</sup> 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**<sup>22</sup> 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**<sup>23</sup> 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**<sup>24</sup> to **share**<sup>25</sup> their text messages. But in the end I got a corpus together **and multilingual it was too**<sup>26</sup>. 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**<sup>27</sup> you know what you want to say, you've done the basic **digging**<sup>28</sup> – **y'know**<sup>29</sup> – 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**<sup>30</sup> 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**<sup>31</sup> level.

## 2 Part 2: The Cambridge Encyclopaedias (1m36s)

**T:** Which book are you proudest of?

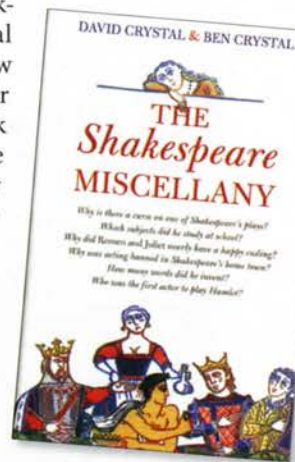
**DC:** The next one.

**T:** Right.

**DC:** Always.

**T:** Always.

**DC:** Always the next one because the sense of achievement that comes from having got through a **subject**<sup>22</sup> and **shaped**<sup>32</sup> 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**<sup>16</sup>. I **just**<sup>33</sup> work with words **whereas**<sup>34</sup> 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**<sup>35</sup> of the printed page. You'd say to the picture researcher, "I want a picture of something – **y'know**<sup>29</sup> – a language **march**<sup>36</sup>, 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**<sup>37</sup> **fit**<sup>38</sup>, so you'd have to play about getting the balance right. And if... you probably know that book... and each **double-page spread**<sup>39</sup> 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



<sup>1</sup> **moreover** – what's more, furthermore  
<sup>2</sup> **footnotes** – notes at the bottom of the page (in the yellow box)  
<sup>3</sup> **subject** (n.) – (in this context) theme  
<sup>4</sup> **painful** – (in this context) arduous, unpleasant  
<sup>5</sup> **to improve** – get better  
<sup>6</sup> **eventually** – (false friend) in the end  
<sup>7</sup> **to relate** – associate, connect, link  
<sup>8</sup> **to catch up with s.o.** (catch-caught-caught) – meet  
<sup>9</sup> **TESOL** – Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages  
<sup>10</sup> **conference** – (false friend) congress, convention  
<sup>11</sup> **to realize** – (false friend) become conscious  
<sup>12</sup> **admin** – administration, paperwork  
<sup>13</sup> **crippling** – (in this context), a handicap, so onerous/arduous that you cannot do anything else

<sup>14</sup> **to set oneself up** (set-set-set) – establish oneself  
<sup>15</sup> **lecturer** – (false friend) s.o. who gives academic speeches  
<sup>16</sup> **and so on** – et cetera, etc.  
<sup>17</sup> **partner** – boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife  
<sup>18</sup> **actually** – (false friend) in fact  
<sup>19</sup> **to accrete** – attract, accumulate  
<sup>20</sup> **to aim to** – intend to, plan to  
<sup>21</sup> **aim** (n.) – objective  
<sup>22</sup> **subject** – (in this context) theme, topic  
<sup>23</sup> **the next-but-one book** – the book after the next one  
<sup>24</sup> **reluctant** – unwilling, reticent  
<sup>25</sup> **to share sth.** – (in this context) show sth. to other people  
<sup>26</sup> **and multilingual it was too** – and what's more it was multilingual

<sup>27</sup> **so long as** – as long as, provided that, if (and only if)  
<sup>28</sup> **digging** – (literally) excavation, (in this context) research  
<sup>29</sup> **y'know** – (pause filler) like, sort of  
<sup>30</sup> **to shudder** – (literally) tremble, quiver, (in this context) hesitate  
<sup>31</sup> **lower** – (in this context) less prestigious  
<sup>32</sup> **to shape** – form, define, create  
<sup>33</sup> **just** – (in this context) simply  
<sup>34</sup> **whereas** – while, by contrast  
<sup>35</sup> **boundary** – (in this context) limit  
<sup>36</sup> **march** – (in this context) demonstration, protest  
<sup>37</sup> **quite** – (in this context) exactly, completely  
<sup>38</sup> **to fit** – be the right size  
<sup>39</sup> **double-page spread** – the design of two pages that go together

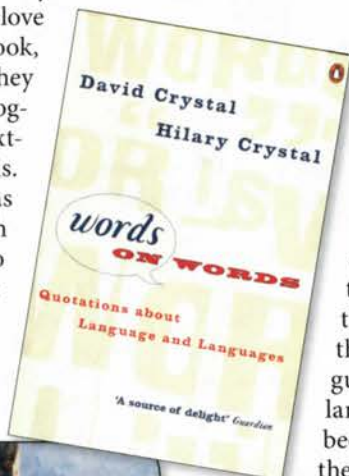


me feel – **y'know**<sup>29</sup> – I was glad to have been a part of that.

### 3 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 **bolster**<sup>40</sup> 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'know**<sup>29</sup> – 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'know**<sup>29</sup> – take that argument out into **the big wide world**<sup>41</sup> and the need to present **kids**<sup>42</sup> and adults too with as wide a **range**<sup>43</sup> of authentic

Internet that I think my answer would want to be primarily **located**<sup>44</sup> because what **drives**<sup>45</sup> teenagers, **tweenagers**<sup>46</sup> as well<sup>47</sup>, 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'know**<sup>29</sup>, one has got to **build**<sup>48</sup> 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



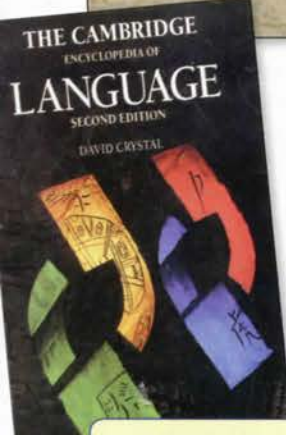
**do need**<sup>53</sup> that kind of maintenance **back-up**<sup>54</sup>. So I think the **IT**<sup>55</sup> side of language-learning business is quite expensive, it's **gotta**<sup>56</sup> develop, it's the future of the world. There is now more language on the Internet than in the entire libraries of the world combined. You know it is enormous now; it's unbelievably **large**<sup>57</sup>. And so it's their future and I think – **y'know**<sup>29</sup> – if

I was in charge and had money I would want to make sure the **kids**<sup>42</sup> had the best possible exposure to **mastering**<sup>58</sup> what is happening on the Internet linguistically, **coming to terms with**<sup>59</sup> 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 issues**<sup>60</sup> to do with local regional minority languages, then to **realize**<sup>61</sup> that the Internet is a strong force for preserving them **as well**<sup>61</sup>. And so you get that kind of multiple experience as long as you've got the equipment and everything available. So, **I guess**<sup>62</sup> it would be somewhere in that direction.

### 4 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, **indeed**<sup>63</sup> I've used it myself. China probably not yet. And it **does raise**<sup>64</sup> the question of the level of English in question.



material as possible the better. Now some of those materials are a little expensive, especially when you think of all the audio and especially these days the Internet type of equipment. And it's in fact in the context of the

and develop it. And that's quite expensive getting the technology in. And not **just**<sup>49</sup> the technology, getting the people in to maintain it because you can buy 20 computers for a classroom without any **trouble**<sup>50</sup> at all, but 19 of them are going to go wrong in the course of the next year. Somebody's got to **fix**<sup>51</sup> them and help the **kids**<sup>42</sup> really master the technology; and of course you know they do it so instinctively themselves, but **nonetheless**<sup>52</sup> you

- <sup>40</sup> to **bolster** – strengthen, promote
- <sup>41</sup> **the big wide world** – the world in general (outside academia)
- <sup>42</sup> **kid** – (informal) child
- <sup>43</sup> **range** – variety
- <sup>44</sup> to **be located** – (in this context) be focused, be centred
- <sup>45</sup> to **drive** (drive-drove-driven) – (in this context) motivate
- <sup>46</sup> **tweenager** – child that is 11 or 12 years old
- <sup>47</sup> **as well** – too
- <sup>48</sup> to **build** (build-built-built) – (in this context) incorporate
- <sup>49</sup> **just** – (in this context) only
- <sup>50</sup> **trouble** – difficulty, problems
- <sup>51</sup> to **fix** – repair, mend
- <sup>52</sup> **nonetheless** – nevertheless, even so
- <sup>53</sup> **do need** – (emphatic) need
- <sup>54</sup> **back-up** – support, help
- <sup>55</sup> **IT** – information technology
- <sup>56</sup> **gotta** – (slang) got to
- <sup>57</sup> **large** – (false friend) big
- <sup>58</sup> to **master** sth. – become proficient in sth.
- <sup>59</sup> to **come to terms with** (come-came-come) – accept
- <sup>60</sup> **identity issues** – (in this context) questions of national identity
- <sup>61</sup> **as well** – too
- <sup>62</sup> **I guess** – I suppose
- <sup>63</sup> **indeed** – (emphatic) in fact
- <sup>64</sup> **does raise** – (emphatic) presents, provokes
- <sup>65</sup> **estimate** (n.) – estimation
- <sup>66</sup> 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 **estimates**<sup>65</sup> 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 with**<sup>66</sup> a few errors and – **y'know**<sup>29</sup> – the vocabulary is limited but **nonetheless**<sup>32</sup> 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 up**<sup>67</sup> soon because the news **out of**<sup>68</sup> China is that they're **intending to**<sup>69</sup> 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**<sup>70</sup> a conversation of the kind we're having now. That **figure**<sup>71</sup> is **much more likely to be**<sup>72</sup> 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**<sup>71</sup> has doubled and maybe more. It's difficult to get statistics. But when I was going around I was talking a lot to teachers and to **indeed**<sup>63</sup> 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 kids**<sup>73</sup> 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**<sup>74</sup> and – **y'know**<sup>29</sup> – What was

going to happen? They said, "Hello. How are you? How are you? You alright?" **and so on**<sup>16</sup>, 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, chatter, chatter**<sup>75</sup>, 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'know**<sup>29</sup> – they're all going to be running **call centres**<sup>76</sup> in India all over the place, aren't they or whatever? So – **y'know**<sup>29</sup> – Gordon Brown's point is about the future of English in India I think, **rather than**<sup>77</sup> the future

of English particularly. So, **whether**<sup>78</sup> Indian English becomes an influential factor as part of an English world lingua franca will depend upon how **sexy**<sup>79</sup> India becomes as an **economic powerhouse**<sup>80</sup> and an **IT**<sup>55</sup> powerhouse **and so on**<sup>16</sup>. I firmly believe from what I've seen in India that – **y'know**<sup>29</sup> – where is the next Google **gonna**<sup>81</sup> come from? It will probably be India the way it's going at the moment, in which case Indian English will **suddenly**<sup>82</sup> **shoot up**<sup>83</sup> 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.



occasionally  
<sup>67</sup> **to catch up** (catch-caught-caught) – reach the same level  
<sup>68</sup> **out of** – from  
<sup>69</sup> **to intend to** – plan to  
<sup>70</sup> **to carry on** – (in this context) have, participate in  
<sup>71</sup> **figure** – statistic, total  
<sup>72</sup> **is much more likely to be** – has a much greater probability of being  
<sup>73</sup> **out came all these kids** – all these children came out

<sup>74</sup> **to come rushing over** – run up, approach quickly  
<sup>75</sup> **chatter, chatter, chatter...** – (in this context) they talked and talked  
<sup>76</sup> **call centre** – company in which a large number of people telephone people's homes and offices to market another company's products or to offer customer services  
<sup>77</sup> **rather than** – instead of, as opposed to  
<sup>78</sup> **whether** – (in this context) if  
<sup>79</sup> **sexy** – (in this context) attractive  
<sup>80</sup> **economic powerhouse** – country whose

economic growth is so strong that it causes other countries to advance  
<sup>81</sup> **gonna** – (slang) going to  
<sup>82</sup> **suddenly** – quickly and unexpectedly  
<sup>83</sup> **to shoot up** (shoot-shot-shot) – increase/grow very quickly

