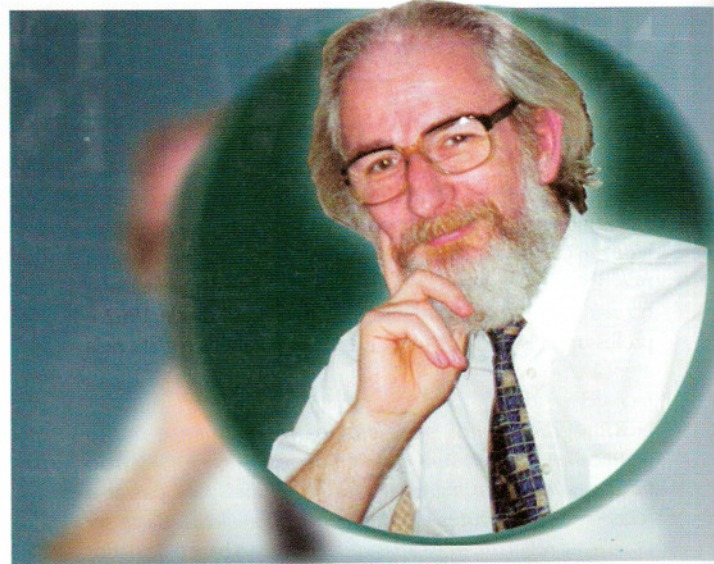


# David Crystal

by Jack Scholes

Professor David Crystal OBE, internationally renowned writer, lecturer, broadcaster and one of the world's foremost authorities on language, kindly took time out during his recent flying visit to Brazil to give this fascinating, thought-provoking interview, exclusively for **New Routes** readers.



**NR:** I see, David, that you live in Holyhead in Wales. Were you born and bred there and do you speak Welsh?

**DC:** Well, I was actually born in Northern Ireland, but from a very early age I was brought up in Holyhead in North Wales, and that is indeed a bilingual area. My family was English only, but when I went to primary school I learned Welsh along with all the other kids, so by the time I was ten or eleven I'd got quite a lot of Welsh inside me. But then the family moved to Liverpool - where Welsh wasn't that much use! So, although I've kept up my Welsh and now speak it reasonably well, and certainly understand it well enough, it's not a daily language for me.

**NR:** Does that have any bearing on your interest in minority languages?

**DC:** Oh, absolutely! I think it has a bearing on two things. First of all, you can't help but have your intuitions shaped by developing as a child in a multi-cultural environment. Perhaps one of the reasons why I'm a linguist is because of that early awareness of language difference and language interaction. And then secondly, as an adult, having now lived back in Wales for the last 15 years or so and become very much part of the concern to revitalise and maintain the Welsh language (Welsh being one of the success stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, really), it does indeed give you a perspective for the situation of endangered languages all over the world.

**NR:** Do we actually know how many languages there are in the world and what kind of percentage distribution there is in terms of numbers of speakers?

**DC:** Well, we do, more or less. The surveys that have been done are relatively recent, mostly in the 1970's, 1980's and into the 90's. As far as the numbers go, it all depends on what you mean by a language, as opposed to a dialect: estimates go from 5.000 to 10.000 languages in the world. The figure in my book is about 6.500 languages in the world. And the distribution is absolutely

clear. The summary statistic I like to quote is that 96% of the world's languages are spoken by 4% of the people, which is really quite a dramatic statistic.

**NR:** You mentioned your new book, which has just been published by Cambridge University Press, called "**Language Death**". What is language death?

**DC:** Well, a language dies when the last person who speaks it dies. Although some people argue that it dies when the second last person who speaks it dies, because then the last person has nobody to talk to. There are something like 60 or 70 languages which have just got one speaker left, and that is a very poignant and very dramatic moment in the history of a language, it seems to me.

**NR:** But, so what? I mean, languages have always died off. Does it really matter? Because, you know, many of these so-called advocates of the new monoglot millennium would argue that a reduction in the number of languages is actually a benefit to mankind.

**DC:** Oh, yes, that's right. That is probably the most popular view out in the wide world, that a world with one language would be a peaceful world, back to before the curse of Babel. I would say two things to people who make these arguments. First of all, the 'curse' of Babel, implying that beforehand there was only one language, is a myth. Before Babel there were already many languages (as is clear from Genesis Chapter 10), so the world was never in a one-language community. Secondly, concerning the notion that a world with one language would be a peaceful world? It takes only five minutes of thought to realise that this is absurd. We can cite some of the famous monolingual countries of the world - like Vietnam, Cambodia, or Rwanda and Burundi, or indeed why go abroad, as it were? Let's stay in traditionally monolingual Britain and say there was never a civil war there, or never a civil war in America? There are civil wars everywhere. If people want to kill each other they'll do so regardless of the number of languages they speak.

\* See PromoMag page 05



**NR:** *So why do languages die, then?*

**DC:** Languages die for a mixture of reasons. Three reasons, basically. One is physical damage to people. Disease, very largely. In the history of colonisation, smallpox, these days AIDS, of course, devastating the world, reducing communities and therefore languages. In some parts of the world, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other tragedies.

The second reason is that there is active antipathy to individual languages and therefore cultures, in some parts of the world. Perhaps the other way round - antipathy to individual cultures and therefore languages. Ethnic rivalry in Africa is the classic case.

And then thirdly, the biggest reason of all, is globalisation and the assimilation of one culture within a more dominant culture. This is where one cites the rise of the global languages like English, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic, and the way in which minority languages and cultures have been crushed when they find themselves in the path of the 'steamroller' of those languages.

**NR:** *Which would be true of Brazil if we go back to 1500 and look at the number of indigenous languages spoken then as compared to today.*

**DC:** It most certainly would! A dramatic decline in the Indian languages of Brazil over the last 400 years or so, from around 1.175 to less than 200. And the scale of reduction is very similar in North America, of course, and in Australia. An important point to note, however, is that English is not the only steamroller. There is a tendency to think that, as English has become a global language, English is the only force that is crushing the languages of the world. But as the South American example shows, where English has never been the steamroller, Spanish and Portuguese have been the steamrollers. That is the story of language endangerment. The dominant language can be any language. Russian has extinguished many languages, Chinese has, Arabic has, and so on.

**NR:** *When talking about endangered languages would you also include such aspects as dialects and regional accents?*

**DC:** Oh, yes, I would indeed! There are endangered dialects as well as endangered languages. In Britain, for example, where local dialects are every few dozen miles, many people are proud of the dialect of their own region. The Yorkshire Dialect Society, for example, has existed for over 100 years. The fact that a dialect might be endangered by the standard language of the community is in its own way just as important an issue in terms of identity and emotion as the fact that a language might be dying out somewhere.

**NR:** *Okay. So what can be done, then? Where do we begin? What are some of the key issues we should be concerned about to "save", as it were, endangered languages?*

**DC:** Well, for many languages it is too late, nothing could be done to save them. On the other hand, every language is a unique vision of the world. The world is a mosaic of visions, and each language captures something of the way a certain human community has come to perceive the world. Therefore the fact that 40% of the languages of the world have never been written down means that there is a great potential loss of insight looming over us all. That is why it is so important, in the case of those languages that are about to die out, to have as much of them recorded as possible for posterity, for us to get a sense of what it meant for them to be human. So there is an academic job to be done, by linguists, even in the cases where the languages are going to die anyway.

In the cases where the languages are "saveable", and many of them are, salvation is possible only if three factors are present. First of all, there has to be a willingness on the part of the people themselves to save their language. Now, interestingly, many cultures in the world whose languages are under threat are not interested. They don't care. Their interest is in the new language, which is the 'cool' language, the language that's giving them jobs, a better quality of life. We have to respect that attitude, but we don't have to leave it unchallenged. It is possible to remove the linguistic apathy in a community. You can go in and point out the issues that are involved in language maintenance, discuss with the people the way future generations will regret the language's passing, and so on. But none of this will succeed, of course, if the circumstances aren't right. If you've got a community where the priority is to survive as a human being, to get rid of hunger, to get rid of disease, there's no point going in and saying, "We must save your language". You've got to save the people first. I call this the 'bottom up' factor.

The second thing that has to be present is a 'top down' factor. No language will survive unless there is sympathy from on high - I mean national government in terms of the constitution, offering safeguards to the community, local government interest, school structures, and so on and so forth.

And the third thing there has to be, to preserve a language, is expertise. There have to be people who can analyse the language, get the grammars written, the dictionaries written, the stories recorded, the life of the language put down on paper and on tape, so that it can be taught. This means there have to be teachers, good teachers, teacher training, and materials provided by publishers. That's quite a costly business. I estimate that it probably costs about US\$ 200,000 per language to get



the foundation of a language established so that it can be the basis of a maintenance programme of some kind. Which sounds like a lot of money, but if you multiply it by 3,000 languages which are in danger, it is still less than a billion dollars - and a billion dollars is less than one day's profit from OPEC oil revenues or probably half an hour of Bill Gates' earnings! But it's because language survival needs money that organisations like **The Foundation for Endangered Languages\*\*** have been set up.

**NR:** *Am I right in saying that all royalties from the sale of **Language Death\*** will be donated to this Foundation?*

**DC:** Oh, yes! I think the royalties should go there because, you know, some of the local communities are quite right when they say, "We've been exploited. People have made money out of us". And I am not in the business of making money out of endangered languages.

**NR:** *In what ways might electronic technology and the media and things like the Internet benefit endangered languages?*

**DC:** Immensely! If you are the speaker of an endangered language and you want to get your plight before the world, until ten years ago you were in hopeless situation. You'd get a newspaper article, if you were lucky, but a radio show would be absolutely out of the question, and as for television - no chance! Now, with the Internet, for the cost of a phone call you can have your language in front of the world in no time.

**NR:** *But then many parts of the world where these languages are most seriously endangered don't even have electricity!*

**DC:** That's right, and so there is no chance there yet. But there are somewhere between 500 and 1,000 languages already on the Net now, and many of these are minority language groups. They are seeing the potential of the Internet to make their case and make their presence known around the world.

**NR:** *DISAL's **New Routes** comes out every three months. Just to kind of illustrate the unprecedented rate at which languages are dying, how many languages do you estimate will have died out between one issue of **New Routes** and the next?*

**DC:** Well, we can work it out. People estimate that something like half the languages of the world are going to die out in the next 100 years. That's 3,000 languages in 100 years and that means on average one language is dying out every two weeks. In the three months between one issue of your magazine and the next, six will have gone. Two each month, on average! Not many people

**NR:** *That's quite a startling figure! Just to finish off, David, perhaps **New Routes** can help in a very small way. I was just wondering if you could please teach our tens of thousands of readers a bit of Welsh.*

**DC:** A bit of Welsh? What are the most important things you need to know?

BORE DA - good morning ("morning good" - adjectives go after the nouns in Welsh)

IECHYD DA - good health. Very important when you're having a drink! Iechyd - health, da - good.

DIOLCH YN FAWR - "thanks greatly", as it were, thank you very much.

A very lively language, Welsh! Spoken by 580,000 people, more or less, a quarter of the Welsh population.

**NR:** *Okay, David, DIOLCH YN FAWR! Thank you very much!*

**DC:** CROESO! You're welcome! □

### Editor's special note

David and I stopped here for a short break and then continued the interview to discuss crucial issues such as English as a global language, the future of Englishes, and the implications for classroom teachers.

The text of the second part of this exclusive interview will be published in the next edition of **New Routes**.

Jack Scholes

### The author

David Crystal is currently chair of the UK National Literacy Association (NLA), patron of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) and of the National Association of Professionals concerned with Language Impaired Children (NAPLIC). He is also a member of the English Language Committee of the English-Speaking Union and Director of the Ucheldre Arts Centre in Holyhead, UK. His many published books include: *English as a Global Language\** and the new *Language Death\**, both published by Cambridge University Press.

\* See PromoMag page 05

### \*\* Some relevant organizations

#### The Foundation for Endangered Languages

c/o Nicholas Ostler, Batheaston Villa, 172 Bailbrook Lane,  
Bath BA1 7AA - UK  
nostler@chibcha.demon.co.uk

#### Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation (CLEP)

c/o Linguistic Society of America - 1325 18th Street, NW, Washington  
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lsa@lsadc.org

#### The Endangered Language Fund, Inc.

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