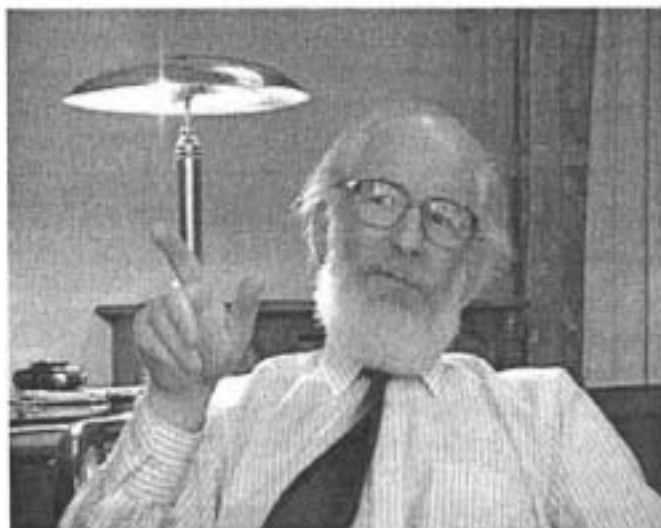


INTERVIEW: DAVID CRYSTAL

**“A NATION WITHOUT A LANGUAGE IS  
A NATION WITHOUT A HEART”**

by Katarina Rasulić

David Crystal, OBE, Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bangor, UK, internationally renowned scholar, writer, lecturer and broadcaster, author or editor of over 100 books (including *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*), gave a lecture at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade in November 2008 (courtesy of The English-Speaking Union, Serbia) and kindly took time to give this extensive interview for the inaugural issue of *Belgrade BELLS*.



*David Crystal*

*Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* – *CEL*, as we call it – with the second edition, you'll notice a big difference. The first edition has no colour. Or at least it just has one colour. This was because Cambridge were still very uncertain about the project. They said, "Well, we're not sure it will sell, you know. Therefore, we're not going to put too much money into it." I said, "Can I have full colour?" And they said, "No, no, no, we'll give you one colour – red, and any variant on red, but nothing else." And as a result, the first edition is really not very good as a graphic design. You can't do maps with just one colour; you need four colours for maps. And there are lots of illustrations in the first edition where the caption actually has to describe the colours in the picture, because I wasn't allowed to use the colours. But it was a most rewarding experience, because what we had here was a planning operation where Cambridge put in a picture researcher, a person called a visualiser, who'd help you design a page, the actual book designer – we were all sitting around a table discussing the balance of text to picture and how the page should work. You will know that at no point is there a sentence running on to the next page. You know, getting that right, so that the topic ends exactly at the bottom right-hand corner of the right-hand page, all of this was immensely exciting. And of course the fact of having a professional picture researcher was just a joy. You'd just say, "I need a picture of something", and they'd go away and come back with ten possible alternative pictures. And you'd just go, "Oh, that's a lovely one, that's a lovely one, I'll take that one!" That was the best bit – building together that picture and the text.

Having said that, the first edition of *CEL* was amateurish compared with *CEEL*, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. The difference is obvious. We learned so much from *CEL*, so that by the time we did *CEEL*, we got it right, and the first edition of *CEEL* was just stunning, it was better in all respects. And by that time, *CEL* had sold, Cambridge realized that it was a best-seller. And so for *CEEL*, I was given an open cheque. They said, "Have as many colours as you like, dear boy!" And the cover of *CEEL*, with the face and all the images going across the face, that cover cost 10,000 pounds to do. This was pre-computer, and it was all physical and photography. But they were prepared to put that sort of money into *CEEL* now that they realized that there was a market for encyclopedias of that kind. And then the second edition of *CEL*, ten years later, of course, was in full colour. So now everything was fine. But it was a long and difficult process persuading the publishers that this was a legitimate publishing experience.

**BELLS:** Could you share with us your favourite quotation about language?  
What can linguists learn from it?

DAVID CRYSTAL: That's an interesting one! There are so many. The *Words on Words*, that I co-authored with Hilary, was a wonderful year where we just read and read and read, and looked for quotations about language from anywhere – from Shakespeare, from Dickens, from the philosophers, from anywhere. Of course, we found thousands. And it's so difficult to choose. What your favourite quotation is depends really on what topic is on your mind most. And the topic that has to be on any linguist's mind most at the moment, and for the last ten years, and for the next ten years, is the topic of language death, because nothing is more serious. If half the languages of the world are dying, then this is half our data disappearing. And it could be worse than that, it could be 80% of the languages dying.

So the quotations that stay in my mind most at the moment are the quotations to do with language endangerment and language death. And the one that now immediately comes into my mind is a quotation which is actually a translation from Welsh. In Welsh it is *Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb galon*, which means *A nation without a language is a nation without a heart*. You'll find a similar quotation in many other languages, too. But that summarizes so much about what it means to have a language and



*Hilary and David Crystal*

why we should care about language death to the extent of being active about it. You've got the heart and you've got the head, and you need both in order to save a language. So, *a nation without a language is a nation without a heart.*

And Hilary's favourite quotation is: *A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say, it just begins to live that day.* That's Emily Dickinson, the American poet.

**BELLS: An important segment of your work is related to endangered languages and language death. Does the global spread of English pose a threat to other languages?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: Well, yes, of course it does. But anybody who focuses exclusively on English, as some people do, is missing the point entirely, because it isn't just English that's the threat. Any dominant language is the threat. The evidence is perfectly clear. If you go to South America, where the Brazilian Indian languages have been dying and dying and dying for the last hundred years, and the languages of the rest of the continent, in Peru, Argentina, Chile, and so on, have been dying – what language has taken over there? English? Not in the slightest. Portuguese, of course, and Spanish. Now go to the languages of the former Soviet Union, just to generalize about it, and all the languages that are spoken round the north of Russia, and round the south, and down the Volga, they are all dying out. Why? Because of English? No, because of Russian. So you can go around the world like this and find languages that are dying because of Chinese, languages that are dying because of Arabic – in West Africa, for example, some of the languages of Nigeria are being swamped by Arabic. And now, the interesting thing: go to the middle of Africa and find languages that are dying because of other African languages; Swahili, for instance, is swamping some of the smaller languages in the middle and the south there. And the general point is this: big fish eat smaller fish. If you've got a language that is bigger than yours, you've got to watch out. It doesn't matter whether that language is an African language, or an Asian language, or an Indo-European language, you are in trouble unless somebody manages it as a policy.

So, yes, English caused trouble in Australia, in North America, and in the Celtic fringe of the British Isles, and perhaps it caused more trouble in some areas because of its colonial status, that has to be agreed. But the core problem today is not just the problem of English as a global language. It is a problem of dominant languages swamping smaller languages. And

language planning shows that it's perfectly possible to solve this problem. It isn't inevitable at all that a language is swamped by a bigger language. But on the other hand, it has got to be carefully managed at a political level, otherwise that will happen.

**BELLS: How about Welsh?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: Welsh is doing very well. Welsh is the only Celtic language of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be a success story. All the other Celtic languages are going down and down and down – Gaelic in Scotland, Gaelic in Ireland, Breton in north-west France. Welsh is going up. The statistics are clear. In the 1991 census 500,000 people spoke Welsh, in the 2001 census 580,000 people speak Welsh. Why? Because there was an activism. You need three things for a language to be saved: firstly, there has to be a bottom-up interest, activism on the part of the people, ordinary people must want the language saved; then there has to be a top-down interest, the government must want the language saved; and thirdly, there has to be cash, because it's expensive to save a language, so that's where government and private industry come in. Now in the case of Welsh, all three things happened. The activism of the 1970s was very, very strong. The British government, Mrs Thatcher's government, was eventually persuaded to launch a Welsh television channel, which was the turning point. Suddenly Welsh was institutionalized: you saw it on the screen, you heard it on the radio. Two Language Acts were put in place to protect the Welsh language, so that it is now obligatory to learn Welsh for certain types of public job. And money was put into the situation. As a result, Welsh grows. The other Celtic languages didn't have that kind of threefold opportunity, and so they haven't grown. They are trying now to do better, but it's late for them.

**BELLS: The English language has acquired an unprecedented global standing, while at the same time the emergence of New Englishes raises the question of the fragmentation of English. Can the English language accommodate both unity and diversity?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: If I could predict the future with language, I would be so happy. It's one thing you should never dare to do. I mean, I will try and do it, but nobody knows. Nobody could have predicted the situation for English. Nobody was predicting it, even 50 years ago they weren't predicting this. Nobody was predicting the language death crisis even

20 years ago. Nobody was predicting the Internet and the effect that it was having on language. So, it's really difficult to know. All one can do at the moment is identify the possible trends and then monitor them to see which of these trends is likely to dominate. Both scenarios could operate, and there is evidence of both scenarios operating at the moment.

On the one hand, there is clear evidence of language diversity, of English breaking up into an English family of languages. And that notion is a perfectly plausible one, we've seen it happen over the centuries, with the Romance family of languages from Latin, so why not now, there is no reason why not. And we've seen it happen: when you go to languages like Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea or Singlish in Singapore, you find languages that you cannot understand. I mean, I cannot understand them as a native speaker of British English, of course they are perfectly understandable by people there. So, on the one hand, there is evidence of language break-up in that way. And even though the new varieties of English, these New Englishes, may not move so far as to become totally unintelligible, nonetheless as you go around the English speaking world at the moment, what you find in most places is a degree of unintelligibility, so that people who are not part of that particular country find that they have a learning task to do. And that learning task applies equally to native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English. If I go to South Africa and encounter South-African English, I am as puzzled by it as you might be as a non-native speaker of English going to South Africa. So we're equal in that respect. And this is happening all over the English speaking world.

At the same time as that is happening, there is a strong movement towards homogeneity, because language is always driven by two forces. One, the force for intelligibility – we have to understand each other. And the other, the force for identity – we have to identify ourselves with our own country and so on. The diversity is a reflex of identity. Standard English is a reflex of the need for intelligibility. So at the same time as that diversity is taking place, there is an equal pressure on everybody to learn a standard which is going to guarantee opportunities like this one, where you and I speak the same Standard English. There might be a few differences here and there, but 99% of the time we're using the same standard, and therefore we can do an interview like this. Now the question is: How far is that Standard English going to be influenced at all by the localities from which it derives? In particular, for example, we have American Standard English, which is slightly different from British Standard English, and those are slightly different from Australian Standard English, and so on. Now the

question is: What do we mean by slightly? How much difference is there between British and American, Australian and American, Canadian and American, and so on and so forth? Empirical studies are very few, really. The dictionaries are beginning to build up stocks of information about this, and the grammars are beginning to look for differences between British and Australian English, for example. So there are some regional standard differences. And the question now becomes: What do we do with them when we encounter them?

At this point I have to stop generalizing and start giving an anecdote. I was at a seminar a few years ago where an American was talking to us all. It was a multilingual seminar in the sense that there were people from all over the world. At one point the American guy asked for questions and somebody asked him an unusual question, and he stopped and said, "Hey, that was from out of left field!" The person next to said to me, "What does *out of left field* mean?" And I didn't know either. The person next to me started to talk to the next person, and all around the room people started talking. The American guy stopped and said, "What is the problem?" So the person next to me asked the American guy, "Excuse me, what does *out of left field* mean?" And he was completely thrown, he had no realization that this would be a problem. He explained it. It's a metaphor from baseball: if the ball comes from the left field in baseball, it's from an unexpected direction. So *out of left field* means 'That was an unexpected question.' Well, I wasn't letting that pass; I said to the American guy, "We played that with a straight bat." And the American guy said, "Huh? What does that mean?" This, of course, is a metaphor from cricket, which the American did not know. *To play something with a straight bat* means 'to play in a very controlled defensive way'. Here was an example where we couldn't understand the American guy, the American guy couldn't understand the British idiom. Now, what do we do in the rest of the seminar? There are two things that could've happened. We could all have learned the idiom, as indeed we did, and carry on using our idioms as if nothing had happened. In actual fact what happened was this: for the rest of that seminar, the American didn't use another Americanism, nor did we use Britishisms. It was as if we'd all sensed that these idioms were getting in the way of our communication, so we wouldn't use them any more. And suddenly the conversation became culture-neutral. It became a kind of World Standard English without any cultural interference. Afterwards in the bar, we were joking about this, and we were trying to work out how we would all talk about something that had happened if we weren't allowed to use our local idioms. 'We were walking down the road on the...' - I can't say *pavement*,

the American guy can't say *sidewalk*, and the Australian guy can't say *footpath*, because these are three specific terms. So what do we do? 'We were walking down the road on the side of the road where it is safe for pedestrians to walk...' We were joking about it, but there's a serious point behind the joke. And this is that it is possible that the English language might develop in that way, without any cultural baggage from the different communities that use it. Now I don't know whether that will happen, but it's a possibility, and that seminar suggested it to me.

Personally, I think it's rather more likely that we will learn the idioms of the dominant community, which in this case is America. Traditionally, American English influences British English and it influences Australian and Canadian English and so on, and not the other way round. If that is the case, then increasingly British English vocabulary will grow and grow with Americanisms, and that other scenario will not take place. But it's too soon to say.

**BELLS: What are the implications of the globalization of English for ELT, especially in terms of university education?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: It makes the job more difficult, immediately. It used to be fairly straightforward. There was British English, there was American English; there was standard English, there was non-standard English; there was formal English, there was informal English; everybody knew where they were. Now it's much harder, because there are many kinds of English, gradations between standard and non-standard, and all sorts of complications have come along the way.

When I talk about this with a group of teachers, and I've done it many times, I wait for a consensus to emerge, and the consensus that I've seen most often is this: Everything that is happening to English doesn't alter at all your teaching procedures from the point of view of language production. If you are used to teaching British English and Received Pronunciation, you will carry on teaching British English and Received Pronunciation. Why? Because you are used to it, the materials are there, you know how to do it, and, most important, the exam boards expect you to do it. And you've got to train your students for the exams, otherwise what are you doing? So in terms of language production, nothing much changes.

But in terms of listening comprehension, everything changes. If one trains one's students to grow up to think that the only kind of English



in the world is the English they've been taught, or to grow up to think that other kinds of English are in some way inferior to the English they've been taught, then one is doing one's students no good service at all. One has got to prepare students for the real world of English. And that means, I think, introducing into one's classes, little by little, over the period of their learning, an exposure to the variety of Englishes around the world, so they're not put off when they first encounter them, so they are not scared of them, so they don't react and say, "What is that? That is not English! We were always taught this. How can you use that?"

You can't do that if you are faced with 400 million Indian speakers of English saying *I am thinking of what you are saying. I am remembering what you are doing. I am knowing the answer to your question.* You can't say, "I am sorry, that is not right, because I was taught to say *I know the answer, I think, I remember.* You can't use the Present Continuous in that way!" Well, 400 million people are saying you can. And under those circumstances you've got to respect the reality of varied English around the world. And this is, first of all, a listening comprehension problem, or task, or syllabus, and, secondly, a reading comprehension problem, or task, or syllabus. Because now you look at the literatures evolving around the world and you find that most of these literatures are reflecting these new English norms in their writing. The novels, the poems, the plays are full of these regional Englishes. You take things like the Booker Prize in England. Who wins it every year? Well, as often as not, somebody writing a novel in non-standard English. Take *Trainspotting*, for instance, entirely written in a Scottish variety of English. It's no good saying, "I'm sorry, that's wrong, it's not what I am used to." Well, hard luck! This is the way the English language is going.

The more one can prepare students to encounter these varieties of English in listening and reading comprehension, the better. And it does mean altering the balance of information in the syllabus. A balance between conservatism in language production and creativity in language comprehension is necessary. The reason why it wasn't done for a long time is because it was difficult to get hold of these other Englishes. The Internet, of course, has made it so easy. For all the Englishes in the world, there is now plenty of material on-line, just waiting to be used in the classroom. And because it's the new technology, the students find it cool and they are interested in it. So the teaching job in that respect has been made easier, I think.

**BELLS:** The electronic communication, especially the Internet, is one of the important factors in the global spread of English. In what ways does the Internet influence language – in particular, the English language?

DAVID CRYSTAL: So far not very much, because it takes time to influence the language. I'm not talking about an immediate influence – you look on the Internet and you find a word or a usage and you think "Oh, it's cool, I like that", you enjoy it, so you mention it to your friend, so for a day or two you use the influence that is there. No, I'm talking about something that is more permanent than that. And it's too soon to say, because the Internet in its realities is, for most of us, ten-fifteen years old, the World Wide Web starting in 1991 only, blogging starting in the early 2000s, instant messaging more recent than that, text messaging from round about 1999. We're talking about things which haven't yet had time to demonstrate their possible impact on languages.

The evidence so far is that these new technologies have had very limited influence on the language as a whole. Of course, they have provided us with new styles of English, or Serbian, or French, or whatever it might be. Certainly, e-mail style is different from chatroom style, which is different from instant messaging style, which is different from text messaging style, and so on and so forth. But that's what you'd expect. Nothing is happening here that is new. When newspapers came along, they introduced us to new newspaper styles. When broadcasting started, it introduced us to new broadcasting styles. Let's ask the question in retrospect: Has broadcasting had an influence on the English language? Is it influencing the kind of English I'm using to you now? Am I sounding like a broadcaster? No, not in the slightest. I'm just talking to you in the way I would talk to anybody. You're not hearing in here sports commentary or weather forecasting language or news reading language or all the other styles of broadcasting language that evolved over the years. No, they exist, and they've made the English language a bigger, a richer language, but they have not influenced the way you and I speak to each other most of the time in everyday conversation. So I expect the same thing will happen when the Internet evolves, that all these new Internet styles will exist, they've made the language richer, there are now more options for people to use, more jokes that can be made when one uses these styles for humorous purposes, more literature is going to grow as a result of these new styles, there are already novels written in text messaging style, for example, and poems written in text messaging style. And this is a lovely flowering of

new varieties of English, and other languages too, which hasn't existed before. Are they influencing the language that you and I speak now? Am I at any point in this interview using any kind of Internet construction? I don't think so. I could do so, I might use a text messaging abbreviation, like LOL, meaning *laughing out loud*, or something like that. But I haven't done so, and it would be very unnatural for me to do it. Some young people do do it. And you do get the occasional use of Internet abbreviation heard in everyday speech, but it's more like local slang. Is that going to be a permanent influence on the English language? Well, even if it was, one new word or phrase, or two, or ten, or twenty – this is trivial compared with the size of the language as a whole.

So I don't actually think it will have that much influence on speech. On writing? Here we have to consider the possible impact of the Internet on spelling. Now, as you know, English spelling system is not all that helpful. Thanks to 600 years of influence from all the different languages, the English spelling system is in some respects highly irregular. Something like 15% of the words in English are very irregular indeed, and this is a problem for everybody. So since the 16th century people have been wanting to simplify the spelling of English, and they've always failed. No spelling reform method has ever succeeded, with just one exception, and that is Webster's revision of certain spellings for American English in round about the year 1800. And that was very limited, very limited indeed. But people still want to simplify English spelling. It would be lovely, they say, if we had a much simpler, phonetic spelling for English, oh, what joy, all the problems would be gone. And there is a Simplified Spelling Society in Britain, and there is one in America, and they meet and argue about how they could simplify English spelling. But none of their efforts have ever succeeded, because you can't impose a spelling change on a country easily. You can try it, as they've just done in Germany, and it's caused a heck of a problem. But you can do it with a language like German, because German is not a world language. But say British spellers decided to change British spelling. Would the Americans follow suit? Would the Indians follow suit? Would the Australians follow suit? A global language cannot be controlled in that way. So there is no way that English spelling will simplify unless the Internet does it. And you see the way in which simplified spellings are beginning to appear on the Internet, and it makes you wonder whether one day some of these spellings might become normal.

I'll give you an example: the word *rhubarb*, *r-h-u-b-a-r-b*. The spelling *r-u-b-a-r-b*, dropping the *h*, is non-standard English, it is an error. If a student used that, you would mark it wrong, wouldn't you? But that

**BELLS:** You grew up in a multilingual environment. What was that experience like and to what extent did it influence your interest in linguistics?

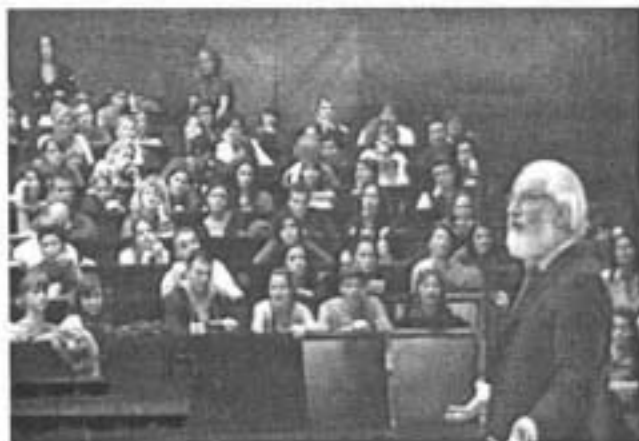
DAVID CRYSTAL: Yes, I grew up in the little town of Holyhead, which is in North West Wales. It was a bilingual town, with Welsh and English both spoken, and sometimes a trilingual town, because Irish was spoken, too. The Irish came into Wales in great numbers in the nineteenth century and built the railway along the north Wales coast and then stopped at Holyhead, which was as near as you could get to Ireland without going back there. So there was a strong Irish community and there was Gaelic in town as well. But it was Welsh and English that were the main two.

One of my earliest memories actually is of realizing that I was in a bilingual community without understanding both languages. You see, Welsh was not my home language, English was. I had a Welsh uncle, uncle Joe, who spoke Welsh to me sometimes, but I didn't really understand it. And then in school later I would learn Welsh. But I remember once when I was about three and I was at a Sunday school. The Welsh word for children is *plant*, *p-l-a-n-t*. And I remember the teacher in the Sunday school saying to us all "Nawr, plant", meaning "Now, children", and I remember thinking "Why is she calling me a plant? A plant is a vegetable that grows in the ground?" So I turned to the lad next to me and said, "Why is she calling us a *plant*?" And he knew more Welsh than I did and said, "Oh, stupid, that's *children*, isn't it?" And I suddenly realized, "So there are two languages, or two somethings – I can understand them, but I can't understand them. Why is that?" I remember being puzzled about it at this very early age. And I think that puzzlement was part of the source of my language interest, an early career move to being a linguist.

**BELLS:** Among the renowned linguists that you worked with, such as Randolph Quirk, Frank Palmer, or Michael Halliday, whose influence was the most significant?

DAVID CRYSTAL: Oh, Randolph Quirk, without a doubt. When I went to university, thanks to having had quite a solid language education in school – I'd learned French and Greek and Latin, and a little bit of German, too, and a little bit on the English language, of course – I knew I wanted to do some language work, and at the same time I was very interested in literature, so I knew I wanted that as well. So I looked for a course where there was a balance between the two. And I found one at University College London, where, in those days, you did ten courses, five of them language, five of them literature. This was perfect for me, this was heaven.

*h*, you see, came in just because people wanted to reflect the etymology of the word, it didn't have any phonetic value or anything like that. So an awful lot of people think that *rhubarb* is spelled as it is pronounced – not *r-h-u-b-a-r-b* but *r-u-b-a-r-b*. Now, traditionally, they would never get away with it in traditional education, but on the Internet – if they think that's how it should be spelled, they will spell it that way. If you type *r-u-b-a-r-b* into Google, you get 46,300 hits on this day. That has happened over the last ten years. In ten years' time, there will probably be 400,000 hits. And in 20 years' time there may be 4 million hits. And suddenly, *rubarb* without the *h* will be a perfectly legitimate spelling to use in English. Now you may think, "That's rather radical, that's rather dramatic." But no. There are already many alternative spellings in the English language. Do you spell *judgement* with an *e* or without an *e*? Both are possible, the dictionary recognizes both. Do you spell *advertise* or *advertize*? Do you spell *archaeology* or *archeology*? Both are possible. If you go through a dictionary, a college dictionary, and count all the words in the dictionary that have alternative spellings, like these, do you know what the percentage is? Somebody did that a few years ago as a research exercise – 25%, a quarter of the words in an English dictionary have alternative spellings. And you think, "No, that can't be right." Well, let me give you some more examples. Do you spell *moon* with a capital *M* or a small *m*? Do you spell *bible* with a capital *B* or a small *b*? Do you spell *flower-pot* with a hyphen or not? And you suddenly realize, oh, yes, there are thousands of these examples. So



*David Crystal at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade,  
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English already has many alternative spellings. So why not *rhubarb* and *rubarb*, and lots of other simplifications coming into the language? Saying that right now upsets an awful lot of people, because the conservative-minded purist temperament of many people says, "It is a terrible thing that spelling should be variable like this!" But spelling has only been fixed in English over the last 250 years. In Shakespeare's time there was no standard spelling, there was no correct spelling until the 18th century. So this is really just allowing the language to develop as it always used to be before those prescriptive dictionary writers and grammarians came along and said, "Oh, no, no, no, we must have fixed spelling, because that's the only way in which we'll ever be able to understand each other." Well, they're right to a certain extent. If we all spelled as we liked, it would be very confusing. But the language allows a certain flexibility in spelling. All languages do. And it's possible, therefore, that one day the Internet might be the source of English spelling simplification, in which case the answer to your question 'Does the Internet have an impact on English' would be 'yes'. But not yet.

**BELLS:** How do you see the relation between the study of the English language and the study of literature, especially in foreign language teaching? For example, the curriculum of the English Department at Belgrade University includes both. In your opinion, is that the right option for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

DAVID CRYSTAL: Excellent. That's absolutely the best way forward. In some parts of the world it's totally different, isn't it? The literature department is over there, the language department is over there, and they don't meet, they never talk to each other. Once, you know, I went to a university, I was invited by the British Council – they said to the university, "Would you like him to give a talk?" And the literature department said yes, and the language department said yes. So I said, "What do you want to talk about?" And the literature department said, "The relationship between language and literature". And the language department said, "The relationship between language and literature". And I said, "Well, why don't you both come together and we have the same talk?" "Oh, no, no, we can't possibly do that." I had to give the talk twice!

For me, language and literature are two sides of the same coin. Literature is the most wonderful manifestation of language, and therefore all language students need to know where language is going, so that they

can see language at its best. Literature students have to work through the medium of language. They need to know the nuts and bolts of language in order to understand how literature achieves its effects. The more they know about language, the better literary scholars they will be. Robert Graves, the novelist, once said, "A poet has to master the rules of English grammar before he attempts to bend or break them." Now I would generalize that quotation and say – it isn't just poets, but novelists and short story writers and essayists and dramatists have to master the rules of English, or Serbian, or French, or German grammar and vocabulary and phonology and orthography and pragmatics before they attempt to bend or break them. In other words, it's the bending and breaking of rules that makes literature so wonderful. And therefore you have to know what these rules are. Now it is the same for students and literary critics. If your job is to explain literature, then you also have to know about the rules that are being bent and broken. A literary critic needs to know as much as possible about the structure of the language in order to explain the effects that are going on. So it seems to me that we have two directions which ultimately focus on the same thing, that is, the language – how it is, how it works, how it's structured, how it's used. And I think the more one can show how this works in practice, the more convinced literary departments become about how to see the relevance of language and the more convinced language departments become about the relevance of literature.

Now, to give you one example. There is a comedy show on British television called *Whose line is it, anyway?* And in the improvisation that takes place in that stand-up comedy show, one of the games that they played was the game of questions. The game of questions was a game where you are allowed to talk to each other, but you must only ask questions, you must not use statements, you must not use commands, you must not use exclamations. Now Hilary and I will play this game briefly: – *Well, how are you?* – *Why do you want to know?* – *Isn't it of interest to know how you are?* – *Why are you asking me that?* – *Why wouldn't I ask you that?* – *Do you think other people would be interested?* – *My...* Oops, she wins because I'm stuck, I can't think how to do it next. It's a clever game, and it's difficult to play. Now that is not literature. But in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, which is literature, Stoppard asks the question, "What were those characters doing when they were off stage?" The whole story of the play is the story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern coming to Elsinore and then wondering why they are there and what they are supposed to be doing. And when they are not talking to Hamlet and the King and the Queen, what are they doing? Well, they do all sorts of things,

they talk about life, the universe and everything, in a very funny way, as Tom Stoppard does so brilliantly, and at one point Rosencrantz says to Guildenstern, "What are we going to do?" And the other one says, "We could play questions". And then they play the game of questions for two pages of script. It's very funny, and if you've seen the play, it's one of the best points in the play.

So here is a piece of structured language, the kind of thing any teacher would use in a language teaching class: "Let us exchange questions together, let us train each other, let us have a teaching game, where you ask questions of each other." Nothing to do with literature. And now suddenly exactly the same game is being used in one of the best plays in the English language. Language and literature are the two sides of the same coin. And there are plenty of examples of that kind that one could adduce to demonstrate without the shadow of a doubt that language and literature come together like that.

**BELLS: How do you see the future of foreign language and literature university studies? Is that something that young people should opt for?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: Oh, yes, I think so, because you can't ignore a world literature. The world literature informs you. Anybody who studied comparative literature, I think, realizes that there are huge benefits to be gained from studying the literature of other countries. George Steiner, the comparative literature professor from Cambridge and Geneva, used to say that you have to learn a foreign language in order to learn how to define the contours and the boundaries of your own language. That's what a foreign language does - it helps you see how your language is unique. The same point, he says, applies to literature. The more you study a foreign literature, the more you see the uniqueness of your own literature. And this applies equally, of course, to endangered languages. Because each language is a vision of the world, and the world is a mosaic of visions. And there are only 6,000 visions in the world, because there are only 6,000 languages. And many of them are dying out. So we are losing visions, week after week after week. So students who are studying their own mother tongue language should as soon as possible learn another language and learn another literature, for two reasons. One, because that is fascinating, it's showing you a different world than the world you inhabit in your own head. And secondly, it's showing you about your own world and making you think about what it means to be who you are. That kind of balance



between looking within yourself and looking outside of yourself is part of what I consider education to be all about. It's called broadening your horizons, to use an old cliché. But that broadening of horizons is best done through foreign language activity and the literature associated with it, it seems to me.

So if I were in charge of the world, I would be wanting everybody to learn another language, from scratch, as soon as possible, as early as possible. In fact, I wouldn't have to do it for three quarters of the world, because three quarters of the world is already bilingual anyway. It is the monolingual quarter of the world, the ex-colonial powers who think that only their language is important and that they don't have to learn anybody else's. And the English in particular, they have to be persuaded that learning another language is a good thing. It is one of the guarantees of peace that multilingualism is recognized and built upon. Most wars turn up when people refuse to accept that diversity is a basic human good. And the more one understands other people's languages and literatures, the more one comes to respect them. This is now a somewhat idealistic romantic vision I'm giving you, but I think everybody recognizes there is some truth in it.

**BELLS: What is your most striking linguistic impression from Belgrade?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: Well, there are so many. One of the most striking ones: I look out over the rivers from the fortress where I see all the names of Belgrade, from *Singidunum* right down to *Beograd*. And you suddenly see in that vertical alignment of names, different languages, different varieties of languages – it's a panoply of linguistic history, which reflects, of course, the reality of the history of Belgrade, where I come to the hotel and I am given a brochure and in the brochure is listed all the peoples who fought here, all the times Belgrade was beaten up and rose again, and was beaten up again, and rose again. And you suddenly realize that you're seeing here a chronological diversity which is, well, I've never seen anything like it. And to see this now suddenly summarized in however many names it is, six or seven or eight, and on the other side you see the confluence of the Sava and the Danube coming together, and you suddenly realize how central Belgrade always has been to European history. It was one of the most moving moments to look through that eye at those two rivers, through a linguistic perspective. And it dawned on me. I knew theoretically about this, but to see it and to feel it was a most moving moment.

Except that in the first year the language work was really rather boring, I have to say. A lot of it was being taught in the old, traditional, philological way, where you analyzed old states of languages into their sound changes and things like this, and it was all rather abstruse and rather abstract, and I began feeling more and more bored by this. Where was the reality of language behind it? I remember once, when I was learning Anglo-Saxon for the first time, and I encountered the Old English word for king – *cyning* – and I did not know how it was pronounced, I went up to the lecturer and said, "How do you pronounce this word?" And he said, "Well, we're not entirely sure..." I said, "But can you give me a rough idea?" And he said, "Well, no, not really, because, you see, we know very little about the pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon." I said, "But all I want to know is a rough idea. How is this y pronounced?" He said, "Well, it was a front rounded vowel." So I began to think, "This is a very funny subject. If *Beowulf* is the work that was sung, that was said, how was it pronounced?" They wouldn't say. So I got rather bored with old language study in the first year and began to think that linguistics was a subject that was distant from reality. It was reinforced by my first linguistics class that I did in the first year. The lecturer decided that the best way to teach linguistics over ten hours – this was an introduction to linguistics – was to give us a long reading list, and the first book on it was Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*. Now anybody who has read that book knows how difficult and abstruse it is. I would never dream of giving an undergraduate *The Meaning of Meaning* to read. Postgraduates, maybe. But we had to read this. And there were other books of a similar kind. At the end of the course we were given an essay to write on linguistics, and I wrote my essay, and I failed – I got a D for it. I just couldn't understand it, I wasn't interested, it was badly taught.

So at the beginning of my second year I was not going to follow a life in language, I was going to study literature, I was going to choose all the literature options. And then one day, we had a course which everybody had to do, called *The History of the English Language*, and it was taught by this person called Randolph Quirk. So we're all sitting there, pretty fed up with language, really, and in he walks, and one hour later, I am a born-again linguist! It was as simple as that. His energy, enthusiasm, knowledge, persuasiveness, his way of putting the subject across, it just knocked me over. At that point I knew that that was what I wanted to do. Then I started doing phonetics and suddenly everything started to fall into place. So the fact that I am talking to you now is largely due to Randolph Quirk.

**BELLS:** In your account in *Linguistics in Britain: Personal Histories* (edited by K. Brown and V. Law, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) you wrote: "I learned my generative grammar from Jim Sledd, whose orientation to linguistics – best described as sceptical enthusiasm – has stayed with me." How would you describe and account for your own orientation to linguistics?

DAVID CRYSTAL: Well, I've always found myself first of all to be a descriptive linguist. I don't see myself as a theoretical linguist. I'm no Chomsky, I don't do that kind of great model building in linguistics. No. I learned my linguistics from the descriptive aims of *The Survey of English Usage*, which Randolph Quirk eventually developed and where I worked in the early years, and also from the emphases that were in the Phonetics Department at University College London. These were all students of Daniel Jones, people like Gimson and O'Connor. So it was always: Listen carefully, get it accurate, write down exactly what people do, never mind about the theory behind it, get the facts right, and then you've got something to talk about. That was the main direction, always.

Very early on I learned there was no one perfect way that would explain all the facts. One model would help explain *this* set of facts, another model explains *that* set of facts. At the time, in London there was Randolph Quirk, there was Michael Halliday, Firth was over the way in the School of Oriental Studies. There were all these theoretical positions attracting interest. And Chomsky, of course, coming in at the time, with Sledd doing the teaching for us. There were all these different insights. It was a bit like going into a garden with all these different flowers competing for your attention. And if somebody says, "Which flower is the best flower?", well, you can't answer that question. Each flower has a different colour and a different attractiveness.

So I became very eclectic very early on in my linguistic theory – I would select bits from whichever theory I felt would help illuminate the data. And the second trend, which is just as important really, is that very early on I became an applied linguist, and not a general linguist, so that reinforced that kind of concept.

**BELLS:** How do you see the distinction between theoretical and applied linguistics? Where do these two meet?

DAVID CRYSTAL: I have a very clear distinction in my mind about the two. Both sides are controversial, of course, there are many opinions, but for

me, applied linguistics is the application of the theories, methodologies or empirical findings of linguistics to the solution of some problem defined by people who are not linguists. The world is a big world and language is everywhere, so language problems are everywhere. One of the first areas of applied linguistics, of course, was foreign language teaching and learning. And I did a little bit of that once upon a time. But looking back over the years, what I found is that the areas that have always pulled me in their directions have been areas where people who are not linguists have come to me and said, "Can you help? We've got a problem. How would you analyze this? We've got this difficulty."

So for me one of the first areas of applied linguistics, as I would now call it, even though it wasn't called that at the time, was in the application of language in the study of religion. This was the 1960s, when the Roman Catholic Church was changing from Latin to the vernacular, and everybody was discussing, "How should we do this? What sort of English should be in the liturgy? Is there anybody around who can advise us on this?" An area of applied linguistics was opening up here, and there were many other aspects of religion that were in the same sort of category. And then a few years later I found myself being approached by people in schools worried about the question of how you teach about the English language as a mother tongue to children of various ages. Another area people would approach us for – I say *us*, because other colleagues were also asked, not just me – was the teaching of reading in schools. There were many different controversies here about which is the best method. Is a phonic approach the best method? There were many different ways and so we would talk about that. A little later I found myself in the clinical world, where clinicians, speech therapists and others were asking questions like "What is the best way of analyzing the language of a language disordered child or a language disordered adult? Can you help?" Once again, you are pulled in that direction. And that's how it has been. It hasn't changed a bit in the last 40 years.

In the last ten years the people who have come to me have been Internet people. I'll give you an example. The advertising world is upset because advertisements on the Internet are sometimes misplaced. So, for example, a few years ago, there was a story about a street stabbing in Chicago. It was a CNN report. The ads down the side said, "Buy your knives here. Get your knives on eBay. We have excellent knives." 'We can stab you better than anybody else' was the implication. Now you can see what happened. The stupid software had analyzed the structure of the page, found the word *knife* being very frequent, looked in the advertising inventory, found *knife* in the context of cutlery and assumed that that was what the page was about.

The advertising industry is embarrassed by this sort of mistake. It happens all the time. So they turn to linguists, they turn to me and they say, "Can you solve this problem?" Yes, of course, I can solve this problem. It's a dead easy problem to solve. All you've got to do is do a proper semantic analysis of the whole page, and you'd immediately find out that *knife* in this sense was collocating with *murder* and *stab* and so on, whereas *knife* in the cutlery sense was collocating with *fork* and *spoon* and so on, and there is no problem so long as you do the analysis. "Oh, thank you very much", they say, "Will you do it for us?" And for the last few years that's exactly what I've been doing - analysis of web pages and so on. That's another area of applied linguistics. So over the years I must have worked in about ten or twelve different areas of applied linguistics, unified by the proposition "We have a problem. The problem involves language and we don't have the expertise to solve it. Can you help?" Usually the answer is yes, and occasionally no.

**BELLS: How do you see the role of pragmatics in the study of language?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: Well, I think pragmatics is probably *the* most important area of all in language study. But it's so recent that it's difficult to perceive its full potential. Of course, it depends on what you mean by pragmatics. Once again, we are in a controversial area where different people have different views.

For me, pragmatics is the study of the choices that you make when you use language. So inside my head at the moment is all the language I know, and now I have to choose certain words, certain grammatical patterns, certain sounds, certain everything, in order to make what I think is an appropriate conversation with you. And now whether that's right or wrong is a matter of pragmatic judgement. Therefore in studying pragmatics you are studying the person's background, the presuppositions behind what he is saying, his sense of the effect it's going to have on the audience, and all of this. So it's the most wonderful subject, because for the first time one can really arrive at an explanation of why people use language in the way they do. I think pragmatics is the most explanatory subject of all. And then it turns out that there are lots of people interested in pragmatic issues: people interested in the effect of language on a population, like the advertisers once again; or in literature, why does that literary effect work and another one does not; or the choice of shop names, and all those things.

The pragmatics is so important. And yet it's really very little studied at the empirical level. There are plenty of books on pragmatics, very thick

books. But the detailed empirical studies of the pragmatics of English, say, and then the pragmatics of French, say, and then – do English and French pragmatics meet or what are the differences between the two, a sort of contrastive pragmatics... There are hardly any studies of this kind done.

**BELLS: How important is pragmatics for language teaching?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: I think this is a very important area, and one that governs a lot of the change of direction that I see in language teaching, both foreign language teaching and mother tongue teaching. One of the biggest movements in English mother tongue teaching in schools in Britain at the moment is a switch from straight descriptive grammatical studies to pragmatic studies. Not just *what* grammar is in this text, but *why* is that grammar used in that text. And it's a big change, I think.

The communicative movement in foreign language teaching preceded the movement in mother tongue teaching. For a long time foreign language teachers have been worrying about how you incorporate that sort of pragmatic dimension into classroom work. Now this has never been a main area of interest for me, I've done a bit on the ELT side of things, but I'm not a specialist there. But on the mother tongue side I've done an awful lot. And there I see it over and over again. The exams provide a clear example.

Once upon a time, the typical exam in an English school was like this. You would have a paragraph and the student would be told: "Underline all the passive sentences in this paragraph". So if you knew what a passive sentence was, then you could underline them and you get a 100%, you've done it. That is never examined in that way these days. No examiner would ever do that. The exams these days say: "Find all the passive sentences in the paragraph and then explain why they are there. And explain why the other sentences are not passive. Why did the writer sometimes use the passive and sometimes not?" And that is a pragmatic question which deserves a pragmatic answer. Now that is a much more illuminating approach to the whole thing.

**BELLS: In 1984 you decided to leave the academic world and to become, as you said, "a freelance linguist", devoting immense time and energy to popularizing linguistics. Why?**

DAVID CRYSTAL: Yes, I became a freelance linguist, though not everybody liked that term. I went to Japan the year after I left the full time academic

world, and they came up to me and said, "So what shall we call you now?" I said, "Freelance linguist." And they were horrified. "We cannot call you that. We cannot. 'Freelance' is for journalists." And they went into a huddle in a corner, and they came back and said, "We shall call you 'independent scholar!'" So that's what I am, I'm an independent scholar now (laughing).

Why did I leave? Because I am primarily a writer, a researcher, a lecturer, a broadcaster – that sort of person. In the university world you have to do, as everybody does, your share of administration. Those duties have to be done. And for the best part of nearly 20 years I did that. I was head of department at one point, and everything was fine, you could have a balance between the two. My time would be perhaps 30% admin and the rest of the time doing the other things. But in 1981 everything changed. Mrs Thatcher formed a government a little earlier. And Mrs Thatcher is remembered as much for the cuts that she started to introduce into the educational system, and everything else, it wasn't just education, but in 1981 all the universities were told that they had to cut, cut, cut. And that meant 'lose staff'. And we were all sent a letter saying "Please, leave." You know, 'Nice of you to have been with us, but bye-bye, and here is a package to persuade you to leave'. I got this letter, and I said, "I'm not leaving. I don't want to leave. I'm happy. I'm developing this new clinical course for speech therapists, and another remedial course for teachers, and I don't want to leave." So I didn't. Some did. But not enough. The next year, 1982, another letter came round from the Vice-chancellor: "Not enough of you have left. Please, leave now." I didn't want to leave. Others did. Not enough. 1983, another letter: "Look, we still haven't got enough people leaving. Please, some more of you, leave now." More people did. I didn't. I didn't want to leave. But then, the year after, you realized what had happened. Hundreds of staff had left and gone to more rewarding jobs in restaurants and hotels, and heaven knows where. As a result, the administrative load that they would have done now fell upon the people who were left behind. And slowly that admin work grew and grew and grew.

By the beginning of 1984, my admin load was 80%. I had been commissioned to write *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* in 1980. By 1984, I had written about 30 pages of it. In four years. I had to leave, really. My wife Hilary and I had discussed it. We went up to Holyhead, and uncle John said, "Leave!" I said, "I can't leave!" He said, "Leave!" I said, "What would I do?" He said, "Be a consultant." And I said, "There aren't any consultants in linguistics." He said, "Be the first!" So, that's what happened. I quit, just left. We didn't get any package or anything, we just decided I

had enough, and we left. We moved, we went back to Holyhead, and I set up there as a freelance linguist. Within a year, I'd finished *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, you see. It was a risky move, becoming independent. But it all worked out fine.

**BELLS:** Among your numerous works, the two Cambridge encyclopedias – *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* – stand out in terms of size, complexity and world fame. What would you single out as the most striking experience related to these volumes?

DAVID CRYSTAL: You're quite right, these are the two best-sellers, without a doubt. Interestingly, they nearly never happened. What happened was this. I was asked by a young man, a cousin who was interested in studying language, whether I knew of any books about language with pictures in. There are books about history with pictures in, books about geography, books about archaeology. And I thought, "That's strange. Language is people, you can take pictures of people, language is alphabet, you can take pictures of alphabets. Why are there no books about language with pictures in?" So I thought, "I'll suggest this." And I wrote out a proposal, and sent it in to one of my publishers at the time, Edward Arnold, who said, "No, no, no. This is not a possible book. Books about language with pictures in, it can't be done. Language is theoretical, and abstract, and so on. No, no, no." Turned down. So then I got in touch with Hilary's brother, who was working in the coffee table book area, Octopus Books, and I said to him, "Look, I've got an idea about a book about language with pictures in, what do you think?" They considered it and said, "Oh, no, no, no. It's too abstract. You see, the pictures would be nice, but all the explanation would be far too abstract, no, we can't do it." So I thought, "Oh, blow it", and just put the proposal on the shelf.

And then one day I was at Cambridge University Press, talking about something completely different, and at the end of the conversation the editor there said, "So, what are you doing at the moment?" And I said, "Well, nothing much, I've been thinking of this idea about a pictorial encyclopedia of language". And they said, "Oh, really. Would you like to send in a proposal?" I said, "Well, all right, but I don't think you'll like it." And I sent it in, and they said, "Oh, yes, we rather like this idea. Would you like to work it up?" So I did, and the rest is history, in a sense. Except that even Cambridge was suspicious. If you compare the first edition of *The*