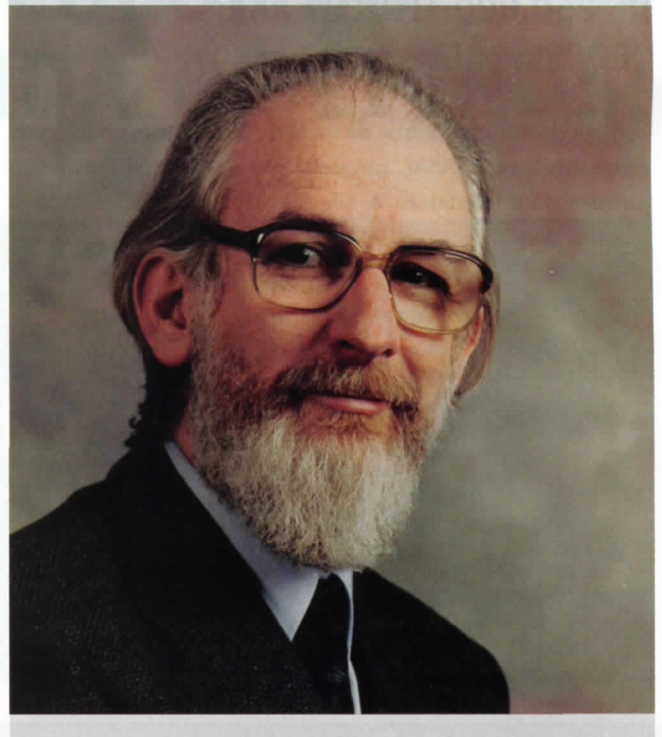




DAVID CRYSTAL



JS: Why has English become a global language?

DC: A language becomes international or global for one reason only - the power of the people who speak it. But of course 'power' means different things at different times. In the case of English, the language has spread as a result of a combination of political/military power (the British Empire), scientific/technological power (the Industrial Revolution), economic power (pounds, and later dollars), and cultural power (broadcasting, travel, films, pop songs, internet...).

JS: What are some of the most important consequences of the fact that English is now a global language with more non-native speakers than native speakers using it?

DC: Language has no existence apart from the people who speak it. It exists to express their world and their vision of it. Any language which comes to be used globally has to adapt to allow this to happen, in the form of new words, idioms, patterns of discourse, pronunciations, and so on. New varieties of English ('new Englishes') is the inevitable result. These features chiefly emerge through the influence of the indigenous languages spoken

by those who have begun to use English as a second language. When they appear in many such situations, around the world, we begin to sense the arrival of a new kind of international English, different from the standard Englishes (such as British and American) of earlier times. It is this that some people are now calling 'English as a lingua franca'. It is too soon to say with any certainty what its shared linguistic features are. Several have been suggested, such as the replacement of uncountable by countable nouns (*furnitures, informations, researches, etc.*). But there is no doubt in my mind that in due course the linguistic character of English will be affected by the sheer weight of numbers using it as a non-native language. The wonderful new expressiveness that will emerge we can already see in the creative writing coming out of Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia.

JS: How does this affect the English we teach?

DC: It means we have to be more aware of variation in the language. I don't think it much affects the way we teach spoken or written production: if a teacher is used to teaching British English and RP as a model, that will



continue; similarly, if it is an American model. But in terms of listening and reading comprehension, things are never going to be the same again. So courses somehow have to include the variety that is out there - not forgetting that, especially for young students, this variety is dramatically present on the internet.

JS: Considering the fact that English is an international language, what would be some essential features for a coursebook?

DC: I've never written coursebooks, so I'm not in a position to say. But just as coursebooks have increasingly become culturally localized, over the past half century, so I'd expect the kind of English they represent to include examples of regionally relevant English. I'm thinking of local vocabulary for food and drink, folk music, myths and legends, national politics, and so on. I hope we are past the stage where students are given the impression that the only function of the English language is to talk about Big Ben and the Tower of London. It's there to talk about samba schools and Corcovado too.

JS: Do you think any other language could take over from English as a global language in the future? Spanish is the fastest growing language in the world at the moment and China is emerging as the new superpower.

DC: Of course. The status of a language is a reflection of power, so this question is really about the future role of countries, religions, and political movements in the world. Futurologists differ over this, but clearly there are scenarios in which Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, or other languages could become dominant one day. The history of language clearly indicates that no language remains important for ever. On the other hand, history may not be a guide, in a world where electronic media dominate and where one language has made such progress that it is currently used by a third of the world's population. There are no precedents for what happens in such circumstances.

JS: In Brazil there have been attempts to legally restrict the use of English. Do you see the use of English expressions in business and environments such as shopping centres as positive or negative?

DC: I see them as being in exactly the same position as the use of French or Italian expressions in the names of shops and products in any English-speaking country.

They add a nuance which was not there before, and they help to sell goods and services. All languages borrow from each other. They always have and they always will. Languages change their character as a result, but that is inevitable. (The only languages that don't change are dead ones.) English is no longer a Germanic language, from the point of view of vocabulary: it is 80 per cent Romance! And without that Romance vocabulary, there would have been no Shakespeare. In an electronic world, protection is impossible. The effort devoted to protecting a language is better spent developing fresh teaching methods, in which people are taught how to appreciate the emerging variation in their language, how to manage it, and how to exploit it. The job of the teacher becomes more difficult, as a consequence - and of course ought to be reflected in higher salaries!

JS: How is the Internet changing the English language and how do you see the future of standard English taking into consideration the whole spectrum of the so-called new language created by the digital generation?

DC: It isn't a new language. That's one of the myths created by the media, who have noticed the occasional new linguistic feature and exaggerated its presence. What has happened is that languages have evolved new genres, or styles, as a result of the internet. English (and Portuguese) has such styles as blogging, texting, tweeting, instant messaging, social networking, and so on, which were not there before. These styles have emerged in response to particular technologies. They have no impact on the rest of the language. Nothing I am writing now shows any influence of the way I write when I blog, text, or tweet. Nor does it influence my speech. It was ever thus: when broadcasting came along, it introduced us to many new styles, such as sports commentary and newsreading. The arrival of these styles hasn't made our daily speech sound like a sports commentary or a news broadcast. And it is the same with the internet. Electronic communication has added new patterns of discourse, a few hundred new words and phrases, and some new orthographic conventions (such as emoticons), but the vast majority of the language's grammar, vocabulary, and orthography hasn't changed.

JS: On the BBC Channel Four programme - *It's only a theory* - you debunked several myths about text messages and successfully proved that - "Texting is good for the English language". Could you please summarize your convincing arguments?



DC: There are five main myths:

Myth 1: texting is full of abbreviations. **Reality:** It isn't. Only around 10 per cent of the words used in texts are actually abbreviated.

Myth 2: the abbreviations are new, thought up by a young generation. **Reality:** they aren't. Most of them can be traced back over a century.

Myth 3: the fact that people leave letters out shows they don't know how to spell. **Reality:** people leave letters out because it's economical and 'cool' to do so; but if it's cool to leave a letter out, you have to know that it's there in order to leave it out. The research shows that the best texters are actually the best spellers.

Myth 4: young people are putting these abbreviations into their homework and exams. **Reality:** they aren't. Such things are hardly ever seen. And if a youngster did try to get away with such a thing, there is a fine cadre of people whose job it is to deal with the inappropriateness. They are called teachers.

Myth 5: texting shows the decline of the English language. **Reality:** on the contrary, it shows the way English is alive and well, capable of adapting to the new demands placed upon it.


JS: You are a Welsh speaker despite the fact that you were born in Northern Ireland. Welsh seems to be going through a real revival at the moment. Why is this?

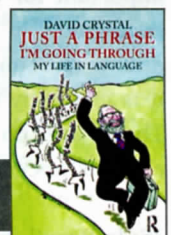
DC: Being born in Northern Ireland was a side-effect of wartime, as I explain in my *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through*. My family connections were based in Wales. Yes, Welsh is doing very well right now: one of the 20th century's success stories. There are always three factors that promote an endangered language: 'bottom-up' involvement from the people themselves; 'top down' involvement from local and national government; and financial support, to foster the language's growth. All three factors have been present in Wales, starting with the activism of the 1970s and the appearance of a Welsh TV channel, two Language Acts which protect the language and guarantee it an educational and public presence, and enough funding to turn aspirations into reality. But there are never grounds for complacency. A language is only as safe as its next generation of users,

and interest (especially among young people, who are the parents of the next generation) has to be carefully fostered. The internet plays an especially important role in this connection, and it's good to see a strong Welsh presence there.

JS: You are one of the most prolific authors in the world with more than a hundred books to your name. You are also an editor, lecturer, and broadcaster and you have even been described as "a national treasure".

My final question is – Where do you find the time to do all this?

DC: Well, I had to leave the full-time academic world (in 1984) in order to do this. I always felt myself to be first and foremost a writer, and the academic cuts of the time were preventing this from happening. Since then the administrative burden on academics has grown and grown, and my colleagues are once again in the middle of another round of savage and inexplicable cuts. In such circumstances, it is hard to find the time to concentrate on research and writing. I've been fortunate to have avoided all that. But becoming free-lance doesn't mean one can avoid administration completely, and here I have to pay tribute to the amazing work done by my wife and business partner, Hilary, who looks after all the accounting, event liaison, and the thousand other tasks that accompany a writing and lecturing life. Finally, I should also pay tribute to the subject, language, which cries out for prolific treatment. It has so many aspects, so many angles, all calling 'study me', and, of course, changing every day. Language never stands still. Whatever it was like yesterday, it will be different tomorrow. Whatever was written about language before 1990, it all has to be thought through again in the light of the internet. That, for me, is the basis of its appeal. 



See PromoMag Page 07

The interviewee

David Crystal studied English at University College London, and then held academic posts at the universities of London, Bangor and Reading before becoming honorary professor of linguistics at Bangor in 1984. His major works on English include *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* and *The Stories of English*. An autobiography, *Just A Phrase I'm Going Through: My Life in Language*, appeared in 2009. His most recent books are *A Little Book of Language* and *Begat: the King James Bible and the English Language*, both 2010.