

In search of English: a traveller's guide

David Crystal

This contribution derives from a lecture broadcast on the BBC World Service in October 1993 as the second Oxford University Press/BBC Lecture. David Crystal takes the reader on a journey to visit selected features of contemporary English in use, with the intent of pointing out to the traveller some implications for the presentation of language in textbooks and other curriculum documents. ELT Journal is pleased to complete the cycle of lecture, broadcast, and publication.

Introduction

My title is intended to bring to mind H.V. Morton (1892–1979), who in the first half of this century wrote one of the most popular series of travel books ever. Most were called ‘In Search of . . .’—Scotland, Ireland, Wales, etc. Morton went everywhere, boldly going where no man, except possibly George Borrow, had gone before, and visiting more locations in his tiny motor car than will ever be found in the recorded voyages of the Starship Enterprise. His efforts were much appreciated. *In Search of England*, for example, went through ten editions in two years. His books are still read, though more now for the nostalgia they generate than for their real-world relevance.

Those of us involved in English language studies and teaching can benefit from Morton's method. In the Preface to *In Search of England* (1927), he observes:

I have gone round England like a magpie picking up any bright thing that pleased me. A glance at the route followed will prove that this is not a guide-book, and a glance at the contents will expose me to scorn of local patriots who will see, with incredulous rage, that on many an occasion I passed silently through their favourite village. That is inevitable. It was a moody holiday, and I followed the roads; some of them led me aright and some astray. The first were the most useful; the others were the most interesting.

In this paper I am not in search of England, but in search of English, and I shall be similarly selective in my travels. My destinations have all been identified by linguists, in papers which have appeared in the last five years or so, as well worth a visit, and in each case I have found the excursion worthwhile. There are several places which I have no intention of visiting, and I am sorry if this will cause some to respond with incredulous rage—the infinitesimally tiny village of Great Splitting, for example, with its medieval Adverbial Inn (where each night they call ‘Hurry up please, it's timely’), or the hamlet of Little Caeyce, lying between Ewe and Eye. We shall not go there.

Talking about Hamlets, I need another quotation before I begin my travels, for when it comes to research into English I have found that it is rarely possible to predict the end-point of the journey when one starts out, or whether one's road leads anywhere at all. It is like Hamlet's ghost, which Horatio addresses.

HORATIO. Speak of it. Stay, and speak. Stop it, Marcellus.

MARCELLUS. Shall I strike at it with my partisan?

HORATIO. Do, if it will not stand.

BERNARDO. 'Tis here!

HORATIO. 'Tis here!

MARCELLUS. 'Tis gone!

We do it wrong, being so majestic
To offer it the show of violence;
For it is, as the air, invulnerable,
And our vain blows malicious mockery.

Any of us involved with English language teaching and research, if we are truthful, regularly have feelings not unlike those expressed by Marcellus. We observe the language at a distance, sensing its complexity and dynamism. It beckons us, as old Hamlet did, 'with courteous action', and tempts us to detailed study. We are seduced, and may spend years travelling the highways of English structure and the byways of English in use. After this, we might fairly expect our journey to have led us to some certainties about the language. Facts, in a word. Yes, of course there are facts. There are well-trodden roads. However, researchers and students alike should not be put off, as Morton was not, by roads which seem to lead nowhere, or which have signposts that are positively misleading. In such places can the greatest linguistic excitement, enjoyment, and source of learning all be found.

The fascination of first names

Let us begin with a road which seems to lead nowhere, and which may be dangerous to follow. I choose *first names*, which at first sight seem to be completely uninteresting, except insofar as one anxiously awaits the frequency counts published in *The Times* each year to see whether one's name is still 'in'. But it is by no means uninteresting, and the topic has a great deal to offer the English language student. Apart from anything else, it leads us into several fascinating areas, such as etymology, linguistic fashion, verbal humour, and the expression of gender—the last two being particularly difficult roads to travel along, and where the bones of many an unwary linguist can be found along the way. I approach the topic through humour.

In 1986, the satirical British TV programme *Spitting Image* recorded The Chicken Song, in which the lyrics invited the listener to perform a range of bizarre activities, such as (as I recall) bury all your clothes, paint your left knee green, climb inside a dog, and (the climax of the first verse) pretend your name is Keith. Why is it bizarre to be 'Keith'? A couple of years later, in another well-known programme, Rowan Atkinson, as Captain Blackadder, in a First World War trench, encounters a pretty

girl dressed as a male soldier. Wanting to keep her for himself, and not wishing to give away her identity to his colleagues, he gives her a male name: 'Bob'—to the delight of the audience, who then laugh each time he uses the name. Why is 'Bob' funny?

The sounds of male and female names

In 1990, an interesting phonological analysis of the structure of English first names was published in the *Journal of Linguistics* (Cutler *et al.*). They analysed nearly 1,700 items from a dictionary of first names, looking at the differences between male and female names. This is what they found:

- Female first names tend to be longer than males, in terms of the number of syllables they contain. Males are much more likely to have a monosyllabic first name (*Jim, Fred, John*), and much less likely to have a name of three or more syllables (*Christopher, Nicholas*). By contrast, there are few monosyllabic female first names (*Ann, Joan, May*) and many of them are trisyllabic or more (*Katherine, Elizabeth, Amanda*).
- 95 per cent of male names have a first syllable which is strongly stressed, whereas only 75 per cent of female names show this pattern. It is not difficult to think of female names which begin with an unstressed syllable (*Patricia, Elizabeth, Rebecca*), but male names are very rare (*Jerome, Demetrius*). In fact, none of the popular British names in the frequency lists in the last seventy-five years has had an unstressed initial syllable.
- The stressed syllables of female names tend to make much more use of the high front vowel /i:/ as in *Lisa, Tina, Celia, Maxine*, and the archetypal *Fifi* and *Mimi*. Male names in /i:/ are far less common—*Peter, Steve, Keith*.
- Female pet names tend to be longer than male. A bisyllabic pet name could be either male or female, but a monosyllabic one is much more likely to be male. *Jackie* could be either sex, but *Jack* is male. (Other examples include *Bob/Bobbie* and *Bill/Billie*.)
- Female names are much more likely to end in a (spoken) vowel, as with *Linda, Tracey, Patricia, Mary*. If not a vowel, the last sound will very likely be a continuant, especially a nasal, as in *Jean, Kathleen, Sharon, Ann*. By contrast, plosives are much more likely to be found in male endings (*David, Dick, Jock*). Interesting questions arise. Is *Kate*, for instance, more male-sounding than *Kath* or *Katie* or *Katherine*? Henry V is one who thinks so, when he speaks to Princess Katherine: 'plain soldier' (*Henry V*, v. ii).

Sound symbolism

These are observations, not explanations. Is there some basis for the sound symbolism? Can such associations as smallness and brightness, often linked with the /i:/ vowel, explain the preference for /i:/ in the female names? Can we relate the trend towards the use of an initial stressed syllable to greater masculine aggressiveness? Certainly, if I were a scriptwriter, and I had to think up the most inappropriate name for a girl dressed as a man, the above tendencies would lead me to choose a

monosyllabic form, using a closed syllable, ending in a consonant as far away from a continuant as I could find—a plosive—and with a vowel as far away from /i:/ as I could find, such as /æ/ or /ɒ/. *Bob*, in short. I leave you to consider why, in a recent US survey, a sample of American men overwhelmingly judged the sexiest female name to be *Christine*.

I say nothing more about this example—except to report that (in my experience) it guarantees the wholehearted attention of a class of recalcitrant fifteen-year-olds even first thing on a Monday morning—and turn now to the misleading signposts which we will find as we travel in search of English. These are the widespread fictions or myths about the language, some of which are so universally accepted as to be pedagogical orthodoxy. They pose problems to foreign language learners and native speaker learners alike.

The nature of conversational English

Most of these problems are to do with the nature of conversational English, which still suffers badly from our attempts to describe it, using models which originate in earlier studies of the written language, and which have been influenced by what I can only call our innate desire for things to be neat and regular. The currently fashionable field of discourse analysis provides some excellent examples, especially if we examine the language teaching materials which attempt to provide a guide to the realities of English conversation. I choose three examples of the stereotype and the reality in this area.

The asymmetry of conversation

There is an assumption that conversational discourse is symmetrical and logical. Certainly, if we use a ruler or some other simple measure to calculate the amount of speech devoted to each speaker in a typical coursebook, we find it balances out very nicely. I take at random an ELT book from my shelf (*Success with English 1*, Chapter 12) in which Martin and Jillian are sticking photographs in an album. He speaks eleven times, she ten, he says 207 words; she 209. Or again, in textbook families, where there is invariably a mother, father, boy, and girl (notwithstanding the fact that over 30 per cent of families in Britain are now single parent), the turns are taken regularly and predictably, with an order and courtesy that I fail to recognize from conversations in my own four-member household, on those rare occasions when everyone is present.

The logic of conversation

There is, moreover, the assumption in language teaching texts, that people actually listen to each other, when they talk to each other—that, for example, questions are answered, and commands are obeyed. Again, in my own household, the following, though also a stereotype, is nearer the truth. We are dealing with a Father, a Mother, a boy, Ben (aged 16), and a girl, Lucy (aged 18). I might begin with:

- F:** Are you going out this evening? (to which Lucy 'replies')
- L:** Where did I put my green skirt? (to which Ben 'replies')
- B:** Pass the salt, Luce. (to which M 'replies', talking to F)
- M:** She can never find that skirt. (to which Lucy 'replies', to herself)
- L:** I think I put it in the wash. (to which I 'reply', talking to Ben)
- F:** There you are. (and pass him the salt).

This, I should stress, was a successful conversation—and the example could, of course, be extended to include the times when we talked simultaneously, or interrupted each other, or gave multiple answers to the same question.

Sentences in progress

The next example displays a phenomenon whose extent I have only recently begun to fully appreciate. I went back to look again at some of my tapes of conversational material, prompted by a paper which appeared in *Language in Society* in 1991, written by Gene Lerner of the University of California at Santa Barbara, on what he calls 'sentences in progress'. Discourse analysts have for over a decade been probing the properties of what has come to be called the 'conversational turn'. It is essentially a simple notion—that we take turns to speak—but explicating it is difficult, as there is an intricate system of rules governing the sequences of sentences we use (e.g. which types of question constrain which kinds of answer), and the contexts in which they occur (e.g. the factors which permit unexpected sequences, such as when *Hello* is followed immediately by *Goodbye*, or *Goodbye* is allowed to precede *Hello*). An overriding impression is that, whatever the mutual influence sentences have on each other, at least turns consist of sentences, and that the end of a turn coincides with the end of a sentence. Lerner's paper points out that quite often (very often, in some contexts and with some people) the end of a turn does not coincide with the end of a sentence. Rather, the sentence begun by speaker A is continued by speaker B, and may even be taken up again by A. It is a 'sentence in progress'. Let us imagine, in the following conversation, that Speaker A, having heard me talk about this point is trying to explain it to Speaker B:

A: . . . so he was talking about sentences in progress.

B: Sentences in?

A: Progress. It's where one person starts, and another

B: Oh yes, I see, chips in and finishes it off. I know what you mean. I've got a friend who's always doing it. You're making a point and then he comes in and finishes it off for you. Uncanny, sometimes, how he's able to anticipate exactly

A: What you're going to say. I know. Some people are almost . . . almost . . .

B: Obsessive

A: Yes, obsessive about it. It's as if they can't stop. I must say I find it very irritating. But Lerner's paper isn't about the obsessive types. He's suggesting that joint sentence formulation is quite common in everyday informal conversation, and that there are certain syntactic strategies which promote this kind of collaboration between speakers,

B: Such as . . .

A: Well, starting a sentence with an *if* clause, for instance, especially if you're being a bit hesitant, thinking something out as you go along

B: The other speaker is likely to chip in and finish it off

A: And the first speaker is happy enough for this to happen, because

the point is made, and

B: Even better, the other person is making the point for him.

A: Which is what any conversationalist is happy to have happen. After all, what's a conversation about otherwise, if it isn't about getting your point of view across?

B: And rapport.

A: And?

B: Rapport. R-A-P

A: P-O-R-T. Oh yes, rapport, of course.

B: Because when you're in an informal situation like that, I imagine this kind of thing isn't by any means restricted to just one pair of utterances. I guess you could keep going more or less

A: More or less indefinitely.

B: Indefinitely, yes.

When I was looking for data to check out these observations, I found plenty of examples—and where? Actually, not so much in informal conversation at home, but in the teaching situation in school, where shared sentences seem to define the relationship between teacher and student. For example:

T: And the battle with Napoleon was called, Smith?

S: Aboukir.

T: Bay, Aboukir Bay, that's right.

Repetition I have one other example of a discourse myth before moving on to more conventional areas. It is a myth which is ground into us when we are very young. We are taught that repetition is a bad thing. 'Don't repeat yourself' is an injunction placed upon us when we assemble our first stories and essays, and make our first public utterances. Repetition is considered to be deadening, boring, thoughtless. You would not think so after reading the paper by Deborah Tannen (1987), of Georgetown University, who goes so far as to subtitle her study of repetition in conversation in *Language* 'towards a poetics of talk'. It turns out that a great deal of our conversational interaction involves the repetitious use of structure. Two examples of my own, the first from an argument between husband and wife:

A: I didn't leave it in the car. Me leave it in the car? How could I have left it in the car. I don't leave things like that in cars.

B: I didn't say you did leave it in the car. I said you might have left it in the car.

Basically the same sentence turns up six times in succession—a phenomenon which might otherwise be thought to exist only in the worst kind of foreign language teaching drills. Here's another example: the first speaker has just pulled a Christmas cracker, and two others intervene.

A: Oh this one's awful. You won't want to hear this one.

B: Go on, let's hear it.

C: Yeah, let's hear it.

- A:** No, you won't want to hear it. I tell you, it'll make you ill.
B: I don't mind being ill.
C: Come on, let's all be ill together.
B: Yeah, let's hear it.
A: You really mean it? You want to hear it?

This time there are two repetition sequences, one (about being ill) inside the other (about hearing it).

These are by no means unusual examples, and Tannen spends a great deal of her paper speculating on why we do it. She argues that it enables speakers to produce language in a more efficient way, so that they use up less mental energy, and speak more fluently—perhaps even more emphatically and persuasively. One of her examples is taken from a conversation about someone in her office: 'And he knows Spanish. And he knows French. And he knows English. And he knows German. And he is a gentleman.' The speaker could have said: 'And he knows Spanish, French, English, and German, and he is a gentleman'. The more compressed style is of course more likely in the carefully constructed world of literary expression, but it lacks the dynamic punch of the conversational sequence. The repetition intensifies the meaning. It helps the speech to hang together, and may help listeners to follow it more easily.

Repetition also helps conversationalists hang together. It establishes rapport between the speakers. It shows that they accept each other's utterances (even if they disagree with them) and it indicates their willingness to interact and to keep on interacting. It helps the conversation become familiar, so that everyone feels at home in it, and feels able to contribute to it, without fear of being thought inadequate. It is even possible to conceive of holding your own in a conversation in which all you do is repeat aspects of what the other person has just said. You may recall this strategy being the focus of irony in the novel *Being There* by Jerzy Kosinski. In the film version, Peter Sellers played the role of the simpleton gardener who repeats (in a slow, almost meditative style) what other people say to him, and is thereby thought to be highly perceptive. And I am sure I am not the only one who has found himself out of his depth in a conversation, yet has managed to keep his end up by repeating what other people are saying. Indeed, once I was congratulated by a local town councillor in Holyhead for having such sensible ideas, when all I had done was repeat, at irregular intervals, fragments of what had emerged from the councillor's own monologue.

It is a short step from here to the dramatic parallelism associated with a masterly speech maker. Churchill, for example: 'We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.' It is also a short step from here to the rhetorical balance of the fourfold repetition of the 'In such a night' speech in the *Merchant of Venice* (v. i.). This is presumably why Tannen subtitles her article 'towards a poetic of talk.'

So, it is a myth that conversational discourse is inevitably symmetrical. It is a myth that interaction is always logical. It is a myth that conversational turns and sentence endings invariably coincide. It is a myth that repetition is totally undesirable. These are all roads where the pedagogical tradition has pointed signposts in the wrong direction, making us search for English (the nature of English conversation, at least) where it is not—and where only a careful analysis of natural conversational data can get us on the right road again.

Analysing English conversation

Of course, this is easier said than done. To approach someone with a microphone and an innocent smile, asking for 'some natural conversational English, if you would be so kind', guarantees the acoustic quality but hardly the linguistic content. And to hide the microphone under a table or behind a curtain, while guaranteeing the naturalness of the content, does little for the acoustic quality, and of course raises an issue that President Nixon memorably pioneered in the Watergate saga. It took many years for linguists and sociolinguists to devise ways of getting the best of both worlds. When Derek Davy and I were trying to solve this problem for a book which eventually appeared as *Advanced Conversational English*, it proved to be an expensive and time-consuming, but eminently worthwhile task.

Our procedure was to invite friends and acquaintances around to our houses, specifically to record them. I would tell them that I wanted to record their accents for a research project. When they arrived, they would be led into a sitting-room where a microphone had been set up in front of each chair, with a tape recorder in the middle of the floor. They would sit nervously behind their microphones. I would turn the tape recorder on, and ask them to count from 1 to 20 in their best accents. When this was over, I would switch the tape recorder off and offer some drinks. They would relax, and the evening would become a social one. At one point I would have to answer a long-distance telephone call, which would keep me out of the room for half an hour. Of course, as you will have guessed, the leads running from the microphones to the tape recorder in the middle of the floor were false. Another set of leads ran to a different tape recorder in the kitchen, which recorded the whole evening's conversation. Because people had seen the tape recorder being switched off, they ignored the microphones, leaving them within a few inches of their mouths, thus enabling us to record conversation of superb acoustic quality. (I should perhaps add that at the end of the evening I always owned up, and offered the participants the chance to wipe the tape. No one ever asked me to do so.)

Was it all worthwhile? I cannot speak for others such as those at the Survey of English Usage (Quirk 1968) who are doubtless still exploring the motorways of data opened up through this technique. For my part it brought to light fascinating aspects of English language use about whose existence I had previously been quite unaware—or, perhaps better, about whose *extent* I had previously been quite unaware. There is space for just three examples—one from the phonology, one from grammar, and one from semantics.

The speed of speech

The speed at which people spoke was a surprise. I had been used to analysing speech—such as in a radio discussion—which ran at an average rate of 300 syllables a minute, depending of course on such variables as personality and regional accent (for some accents are spoken much more rapidly than others). This is much faster than reading written English aloud, as in the case of the BBC news, where the rate may descend to nearer 200, especially on the World Service. But in the conversational recordings, the speed at times was often averaging 400, and for fragments of utterance it approached 500. I stress the word ‘fragments’. I doubt whether anyone can speak 500 syllables in a minute without dying. But for parts of an utterance, eight of ten syllables can emerge in a second. A common example was an auxiliary verb sequence, such as ‘*I wouldn’t have been able to go*’, which was heard as a single syllabic beat, approximately shown here as ‘*I wudnbinabluh go*’. The phonetic changes involved in such a sequence are all well established, and can be identified in, say, Gimson’s account of assimilations and elisions in his *Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*—*have* [hæv] becoming [həv], and so on. It was the overall speed of the articulation which was so surprising, and which caused us so much difficulty at the stage of transcription. No amount of phonetic training can decode such rapid sequences. We had to guess what the speaker was intending to say, from the context—just like foreigners listening to English, in fact. The high acoustic quality of the recordings proved to be critical in such cases.

Defining sentence boundaries

The biggest surprise, I think, was the difficulty we had in defining sentence boundaries. This has always been the leading point of contrast between written and spoken language, but with maximally informal conversation, the contrast becomes dramatic indeed. In writing, given the existence of punctuation and capitalization, it is usually not too difficult to see where a sentence comes to an end. In speech, lacking these devices, we naturally expect the prosody to be called into play—but we must be sure that we do not exaggerate its role. People sometimes think that they will always be able to hear a sentence boundary because a combination of intonation, rhythm, and pause will tell them. It is not so, except perhaps in the most formal of speaking styles, where a sentence may fall to a low point in the voice and be followed by a substantial silence, and we know that it has come to an end. In everyday conversation, this rarely happens, and even if it does, there is certainly no guarantee that the sentence will have come to an end, because after the pause, there may be a conjunction, such as the word *because*—or one such as *or*—which, as in the case of relative pronouns, can keep a sentence moving on, along with any parentheses and subordinate clauses that the speaker thinks fit to introduce, and of course not forgetting co-ordinate clauses, which in fact make up the vast majority of the cases that we encounter when we start analysing real conversational speech, and which, as I said at the outset, provide a great deal of the interest when we go in search of English—if you recall.

It may be difficult deciding when sentences of this kind come to an end—in some cases, several dozen clauses might be linked by *and* or other devices, lasting several minutes—but it is unusual to find a problem in understanding what is being said. We evidently process such sequences one clause and phrase at a time. This is where the intonation and rhythm are so important, and also where such syntactic features as comment clauses play a critical role. Comment clauses—especially the more colloquial ones, such as *you know*, *you see*, and *I mean*—have had a bad press. They are condemned as signs of unclear or lazy thinking, and, indeed, when they are overused or inappropriately used (as in a wall of political hedging erected by a defensive politician), they are widely and justifiably attacked. But in the kind of conversation recorded here, I am not talking about over-use. I am talking about the occasional and varied insertion of a comment clause as a means of making a monologue flow smoothly, or identifying a change-point for the dialogue—you know?—or as a means of establishing rapport, you see, or a gentler conversational style. Mind you, it is easy for people to underestimate the amount of grammar which such features contain. It comes as a surprise, often, to realize that such a clause as *you know* is constrained by rules, varying in meaning as it moves from one part of the sentence to another, and being disallowed in certain contexts. For example, it may appear at the beginning of a statement (*You know, it's time we talked*), but it is distinctly unusual at the beginning of a question (**You know, is it 6 o'clock?*) or a command (**You know, shut the door*), or an exclamatory or minor sentence (one does not say, after banging one's thumb with a hammer, **You know, damn!*). There are several simple exercises that people can use to work out the constraints for themselves. A sentence such as '*John and his friend have just come back from New York*' can be used to illustrate an insertion task. We may add *you know* at the beginning or end: '*John and his friends have just come back from New York, you know.*' But not between the last two words: '*John and his friend have just come back from New, you know, York.*' And to insert it between the third and fourth word can change the meaning rather dramatically: '*John and his, you know, friend have just come back from New York.*'

Lexical myths

Lastly, there is vocabulary, where again there are many new roads to travel and myths to encounter. Indeed, perhaps the largest myth to destroy is the 'poor relation' status that vocabulary has, especially when seen in comparison with grammar. We should never forget that it is in vocabulary that the bulk of the language actually lies. People have been excessively preoccupied with drawing the attention of teachers and students to questions of grammatical correctness, and persistently tend to undervalue the importance of vocabulary in language development and function. It is an unfortunate legacy of 200 years of pedagogical grammatical preoccupation backed up by half a century of theoretical linguistic preoccupation. To take just one example: people still grossly underestimate the size of the language's vocabulary. The most widely quoted figure is half a million words or so—an estimate based on the

total headwords found in either the *Oxford English Dictionary* or Webster's *Third New International Dictionary*, which each contain around that number. What is forgotten is the limitations of coverage of both these works, as can be easily seen by an item-by-item comparison of sections of the two books. You will find that less than half the vocabulary in the *OED*, with its historical and British dialect emphases, will be found in the Webster, and vice versa. And, to take a further example, the range of derivative forms (using prefixes and suffixes) which each recognizes is dramatically different. The size of the English lexicon, accordingly, is much larger than we think.

Precision By way of example, I will discuss one lexical myth: the signpost which points us in the direction of precision. I think most of us would agree that it is highly desirable to use words precisely. However, it does not follow from this that there is no room for controlled or intentional imprecision in our use of the language. Indeed, any lexical analysis of spontaneous speech will bring to light a great deal of it—words and phrases which approximate, round off, exaggerate, generalize, qualify, and maintain vagueness or ambiguity—in a word, there will be many hedges. Here is an example, from one of our sitting-room tapes, in which someone is answering a question about why football is not so popular nowadays:

I think it *probably* is the money, for what you get, you know. I was reading in the paper this morning, a chap, he's a director of a big company in Birmingham, who was the world's number one football fan, he used to spend *about a thousand* a year watching football, you know. He's watched football in every league ground in England, all ninety-two, and he's been to America, to watch West Bromwich playing in America, he's been to the last *two or three* World Cup tournaments, and he goes to all the matches away, you know, European Cup matches *and everything* that English teams are playing in, he's *all over the world* watching it, you see. This year, he's watched twenty-two games, which is *about 50 per cent* of his normal, and even he's getting browned off?

There are sixteen clauses in this extract (excluding comment clauses), more or less, and five or six hedges—that's about one in three. Note how stylistically important they are: the background of informal approximation makes the speaker's point really stand out, when he wants to be precise, as in all *ninety-two* and *twenty-two* games. It is the balance between precision and imprecision which contributes to the success of his rhetoric, it seems—and perhaps to rhetoric everywhere.

It is not surprising to find that imprecision is an important factor in promoting an informal speech style. When we are engaged in an informal social chat we are not usually trying to express ourselves succinctly or precisely. Where hedges become very interesting, and suggest a huge meadow of fresh research, is when they appear in contexts where *a priori* we would expect total precision, such as in scientific lectures. I choose this example because it has been well worked

through in a paper by Betty Lou Dubois in *Language and Society* (1987). Her paper is called 'Imprecise numerical expressions in biochemical slide talks', and is glossed 'Something on the order of around forty to forty-four'. She analysed a series of slide talks given at a professional biomedical conference (it might just as easily have been a meeting of linguists, judging by the examples), and classified the hedges. *About* was by far the commonest (e.g. *about ten per cent of the animals developed the virus*), and there were a large number of hedges which were used before and after statistics, such as *almost ten per cent*, *close to ten per cent*, *of the order of ten per cent*, *something like ten per cent*, and *ten per cent plus, or minus*, along with several multiple hedges, such as *something of the order of ten per cent*. My own data brought to light many more, such as *roughly*, *in the region of*, *hard on*, *well nigh*, *within an ace of*, and *say* (as in *£10, say*).

In scientific reports, the amount of imprecision being introduced, and the reasons for introducing it, are important elements in our evaluation of what is being said or written. There could be *all* the difference in the world between *500* and *about 500*, and it's important to know the margins of tolerance a person is using in order to interpret them. When someone says Smith has written over thirty novels, in principle the actual number of novels written ranges from thirty-one to infinity. In practice, we interpret this figure to be from thirty-one to about thirty-five or so. Anything much higher would be nearly *forty*. Our numerical system makes us round figures up or down in tens and fives. We don't normally say, 'Smith has written over thirty-four novels.' For most purposes, a phrase such as *about thirty* suffices. And indeed, to go for a more precise figure would suggest that I was making a particular point. For example, after a meeting attended recently, someone asked how many people had been present. '*About 50*', said the manager. '*Fifty-three*', said the assistant manager, who had earlier been asked to put out 50 chairs and then had to find another three when some extra people arrived.

Lexical inventiveness

Hedges are an example of the readiness of ordinary people to bend the language to suit their purposes. Rule-bending is not something which only poets do. Everyday conversation is actually highly innovative—as can be seen from the neologisms which proved to be such a major part of the lexicon of my tape recordings. Two things particularly struck me. The first was the considerable degree of lexical inventiveness which was present. If speakers were stuck for a word—perhaps because they had forgotten it, or because there was no such word in the language—they would often invent one, on the spur of the moment. Examples of such nonce-words include *unsad*, *coffinish*, and *Eurodrivel*. The existence of this phenomenon is nothing new. The frequency with which it appeared was.

Nonsense words

I was also struck by the unexpectedly high use of nonsense words, used in order to signal a breakdown in the speaker's ongoing mental processing—when a word has become completely unretrievable. Collecting nonsense words is an interesting pastime. I have found

thirty to date, as follows:

a *thing* group: thingamabob, thingamabobbit, thingamajig, thingummy, thingummybob, thingy, thingybob;

a *wh* group: whatchacallit, whatchacallem, whatchamacallit, whatever, whatsisname, whatsit, whatsits, whatnot, whosis, whosit, whosits;

a *d* group: deeleebob, deeleebobber, diddleebob, diddleydo, diddley-thing, diddlethingy, dingus, dingdong, dingy, dooda, doodad, doohickey;

a *g* group: gadget, geega, gewgaw, gimmick, gizmo, goodie;

a small miscellaneous group: hootenanny (US only), lookit, widget, oojamafliip.

An interesting additional observation was to find, in my sitting-room data, nonce-nonsense formations such as *thingummycallit*, and several idiosyncratic items, such as *gobsocket* and *jiminycricket*.

The value of these items to conversational survival perhaps needs no underlining. They make good the severe limitations on the hesitation system, which can take us only so far when we are faced with a problem of word retrieval. If we are in full flow, and a word escapes us, resorting to silence is undesirable. A complete and utter silence is unacceptable, and if used would surely worry the listener: 'I've been trying to find that . . . (Is he having a heart attack?). Voiced hesitation is a partial solution: 'I've been trying to find that . . . erm.' (At least a good-quality *er(m)* lets the listener know you are still alive.) But there are restrictions here. It is unusual to have two *erm*'s in immediate succession: 'I've been trying to find that . . . erm . . . erm'; and to have three is very strange. 'I've been trying to find that . . . erm . . . erm . . . erm'. One is beginning to sound like Big Ben. There is very little else we can do to mark time, apart from invent an idiosyncratic hesitation noise—which is not uncommon, incidentally. One speaker on my tapes used an inter-labial lingual trill as an extra hesitation noise. Another added a series of syllables which sounded like *yummyyum* to help him over the block. So nonsense words of the *whatchamacallit* type provide an extra resource to keep listeners informed of our word retrieval problems. They tell the listener that the speaker is wishing to hold on to his conversational turn, but at the same time is asking for assistance. They act like linguistic distress signals.

Conclusion I hope, by giving this set of examples, that I have not replaced one stereotype with another. You might be forgiven for thinking that I see an ideal speaker-hearer as someone who relies on everyone else to complete his conversational turns, never finishes a sentence, speaks very quickly, often with his mouth full, never answers questions, always repeats himself, says nothing without hedging, and invariably forgets what he wants to say—but who survives, if only by ending his utterance with a triumphant *whatchamacallit*. There is not much truth in this portrait. But we cannot get away from the realities that each of these

individual areas of enquiry has brought to light. They are part of the language, part of our intuitions. And they provide part of the norm against which we can evaluate our attempts at organized, careful, refined, precise expression.

My rambles through some of the recent linguistics literature, and into the undergrowth of conversational databases, searching for English, have been somewhat random, but I have tried to give them a unifying theme. First and foremost, I hope they have been interesting—more than that, fascinating—for if language analysis fails to fascinate us, something is seriously rotten in the state of Denmark—and I learnt that lesson from a Dane, Otto Jespersen, whose papers on language never failed to fascinate. Secondly, although the anecdotal nature of my illustrations do not add up to a seriously informative treatment, with full classifications and statistical support, I do hope they identify areas of particular neglect in our English language studies, and suggest the fruitfulness of these topics for further work. And lastly, there is a serious applied intent to my discussion for if a student is brought closer to the realities of language, there follows almost inevitably a greater sense of relevance, purposefulness, and motivation. My paper, if you so wish to interpret it, is a reaction to the somewhat sterile presentation of the language which I so often see in textbooks and curriculum documents. From another point of view, it is an attempt to indicate to those who have to put language curricula into practice, at whatever level in ELT classrooms, that there is a great deal to be gained by being prepared to leave the beaten track, as H.V. Morton did. I hope the examples I have used illustrate my conviction that, notwithstanding its theoretical manoeuvrings and terminological idiosyncrasies, an awareness of the questions and findings of linguistic research can help turn our language study into what it should be—a voyage of discovery. There is a risk. Our exploration might, as Horatio warns Hamlet in a panic, 'tempt [us] toward the flood . . . deprive [our] sovereignty of reason, And draw [us] into madness'. But, as we all know, there are more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in his philosophy.

Received December 1993

References

- Broughton, G.** 1970. *Success with English*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Crystal, D.** and **Davy, D.** 1975. *Advanced Conversational English*. London: Longman.
- Cutler, A., J. McQueen,** and **K. Robinson,** 1990. 'Elizabeth and John: sound patterns of men's and women's names'. *Journal of Linguistics* 26: 471-82.
- Dubois, B. L.** 1987. 'Something on the order of around forty to forty-four': imprecise numerical expressions in biomedical slide talks'. *Language and Society* 16: 527-41.
- Gimson, A. C.** 1994. *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (5th edn.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Lerner, G. H.** 1991. 'On the syntax of sentences-in-progress'. *Language in Society* 20: 441-58.

- Morton, H. V.** 1927. *In Search of England*. London: Methuen.
- Quirk, R.** 1968. 'The Survey of English Usage' in R. Quirk, *Essays on the English Language: Medieval and Modern*. London: Longman.
- Tannen, D.** 1987. 'Repetition in conversation: towards a poetics of talk'. *Language* 63: 574-695.

The author

David Crystal works from his home in Holyhead, North Wales, as an author, lecturer, and broadcaster, writing on language and linguistics, and editing general reference books. Formerly professor of linguistics at the University of Reading, he now has an honorary affiliation to the University of Wales, Bangor.