

## On having one's fate ceeled.

David Crystal

*Observations accompanying the launch of The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language, at the Royal Society of Arts, Industry and Commerce, 4 May 1995.*

The trouble with language—and especially the English language—is that it won't leave you alone.

- You are watching television, like any ordinary human being, and encounter Rowan Atkinson, as Captain Blackadder, attempting to hide the identity of a pretty girl dressed in a male soldier's uniform by calling her 'Bob', to the rollicking delight of the viewing audience. You laugh, then miss the next few minutes of the plot while you wonder what it is about the phonetics of 'Bob', or of Rowan Atkinson's articulation, that has made everyone laugh so much.
- You are dropping off to sleep, and you hear, from your teenage son's room, the strains of the Chicken Song, which was a hit record when recorded by the TV programme Spitting Image in 1986. The lyrics drift into your consciousness: you are being invited to perform such activities as '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'. You then find yourself unable to sleep, as you wonder what it is about the phonetics of the name that made Spitting Image so attracted to 'Keith'.
- You make a casual remark in a book (as hundreds have done before you) about the fact that the English language, unlike the French, has never been placed under the care of an Academy. One day, you receive a letter from South Africa where the writer says, please, if there isn't an Academy in English, 'what is it exactly I belong to'? You begin making enquiries, and find that what he has joined is precisely what the textbooks say has never existed—an English Academy, albeit a small one, based in Johannesburg and established in 1961.
- You read a reference to Harry S Truman, and wonder what the S stands for. No encyclopedia tells you. Even Britannica is silent. You order an armful of biographies from the local library, and eventually track down an explanation from his daughter: the S stands for— nothing. Truman's grandfathers were Solomon Young and Shippe Truman. His parents added an S, to placate them, but refrained from deciding which one it stood for.

That is the way of it, with language—and especially with the English language, which has an unprecedented range of genres and varieties to generate stories like these. You are travelling contentedly along one of its main highways, when you encounter a tantalizing byway, and you cannot resist its call. Sometimes it leads nowhere, and you have wasted your time. But more often than not you find a gold-mine, or at least, as in the Truman case, a

nugget. And, just like the gold-miners of old, you then want to tell everyone else about what you have found. The beauty of a thematic encyclopedia is that, being such a flexible genre, it lets you do so. Mind you, you have to be prepared to spend time in order to discover what are often quite small nuggets. It took two days' digging to find the answer to my Truman problem, for example, and it resulted in a caption paragraph of only half-a-dozen lines. It was worth it—but that is probably the main reason why the book has taken five years to produce.

### Balancing acts

The problem with any book on English, and certainly any which tries to treat the subject encyclopedically, is that of the proverbial balancing act: how to maintain a balance between the competing perspectives which are part of the world of English language study and use.

- The first question of this kind was to decide on the space to devote to the three main dimensions of English language study: history, structure, and use. I settled on the following: the first 25% of main text is historical; the next 40% is structural; and the remaining third of the book is devoted to uses and applications. This emphasis is quite deliberate. An encyclopedia of the language must not shirk the 'hard' bits—by which I mean the details of its linguistic structure. Previous works aimed at a general audience have tended to do just that—telling the historical story of English in broad terms and alluding anecdotally to its fascinating range of regional and social uses. But, as any English teacher knows, these are the easy bits of the story to tell. The tricky bit is how you get across, in a comparably interesting and systematic way, the core features of English phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Finding a dramatic illustration of a press advertisement is easy. Finding a dramatic illustration of the structure of an embedded noun phrase is not. But actually, the bulk of the space in the sections on structure is not devoted to grammar at all, but to the lexicon, the vocabulary of English. Most of the mountain which comprises the language is made up of words. I have therefore dealt with that topic more fully than is usual in introductory accounts, and in all its extraordinary diversity, from etymology to loan words to place names to catch phrases, jargon, neologisms, and slang.
- Another desirable balance is between illustration and commentary. I believe in letting the language speak for itself, as it were, especially at a regional level, and have devoted a good deal of space to examples of different varieties and genres, spread throughout the book. On the other hand, you can stare for ever at a piece of language without being able to describe what is distinctive about it, or explain why it has the effect it has. The presence of systematic commentary is crucial. We are trying, after all, to explain as well as describe. So there is a complete outline of the sound system in the book, for example, and of English grammar, and of the English alphabet, and I go into considerable detail in reviewing the distinguishing features of the world varieties of the language. At the same time, I have

devoted a fair bit of space to what (for want of a better word) are linguistic curiosities. I am a sucker for them, collect them insatiably, and like any enthusiast assume that everyone else will like them too. So I do not apologise for devoting a whole page to the works of the late-Victorian Americans Josh Billings and Artemus Ward, who turned mis-spelling into an art form. Nor do I regret making such copious use of the late and much lamented *Punch*, to which I give my own tribute in CEEL, both for its cartoons and for its social commentaries on language change, as in the marvellous piece called *The Latest Thing in Crime*—on the splitting of infinitives in Victorian times. There are pictorial curiosities, too, such as rare shots of the usage gurus Henry Fowler and Ernest Gowers; or of the remarkable Canadianism, *Kiss'n Ride* (a commuting point where people deposit their partners en route for work); or of *Shakespeare*, which is a small town in Ontario (a rare example of an English author achieving place-name status—we do not normally call towns by such names as *Tennyson* and *Thackeray*).

- A further balance is needed too between entertainment and research (that is, if you do not find research entertaining). There is, I hope, humour and general interest on most pages, most notable, I suppose, where there is a deliberate attempt to interface, as they say, with popular culture, as shown by examples taken from *The Prisoner*, *Star Trek*, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, *Punch*, *Oor Wullie*, *The Sun*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Desperate Dan*. At the same time, certain topics have demanded a straightforward, detailed account, with the needs of the serious student in mind. For example, the table of statistics of world English usage demands careful reading: it has been freshly calculated on mid-90s population estimates, and shows a much more complex scenario than is usually suggested. I have also compiled new tables on letter frequency and digram frequency, using the Cambridge Encyclopedia database, and there is an interesting collection of sound symbolic words, using such no less reputable sources as the *Dandy* and *Beano*. A particularly interesting exercise was obtaining the data for the sequence of spreads entitled *A Day in the Life of the Language*. I chose 6 July 1992, and obtained a copy of as many English-language newspapers as I could from all over the world, to throw some light on the question of just how regionally distinctive these papers are. The reality of World Standard English emerges supreme.

- Several other balancing acts are implicit in CEEL. One is the need to take into account the public interest currently being shown in certain language topics; another is the focus on English language which is now part of the school curriculum. I have accordingly devoted whole pages to such notions as the nature of Standard English, political correctness, plain English, spelling variation, and estuary English. Regional sensitivity has also to be respected. I have been dismayed at the way Scots English, for example, with a literary tradition almost as old as that of English English, can be ignored in historical accounts of the language, and I also don't like the way New Zealand English is disregarded because of the influence of its larger neighbour. Both areas get their individual spreads in CEEL.

## The importance of colour

As this is an illustrated book, and 4-colour treatment is available on every page, it would be a sin (sorry, I would be morally challenged) not to make maximum use of it. The availability of full colour is a major step forward in reference books on language. Gone are the constraints which surround monochrome publishing, where there are real problems in representing the complexity of, say, world language maps. And it avoids the absurdity, which I have had to live with before, of having to use words to replace colour, such as in describing the structure of the dialogue in TV subtitling for the deaf, where one has to point out that the speech of each speaker is in a different colour. Mind you, colour can be a dangerous friend: it can tempt you towards the 'pretty picture' approach to reference, where you put a picture in because it looks nice, and not because it has much to do with the text. Ann Hathaway's cottage, for example, looks very fine, but when it is used as an illustration for a chapter on Shakespearian English, as happened a few years ago in a full-colour book on the subject, one begins to wonder whether criteria haven't slipped a tad.

I do not apologise for the fact that I have devoted several full pages or half pages to extracts from major texts. I hate it when I see illustrations of texts where the words cannot be read because they are too small: in one introduction to the language, for example, a page of Shakespeare's first folio is reproduced 3 cm square. What this means is that you cannot read any of it, so I wonder what is the point. Black-and-white reproductions, moreover, often fail to convey relevant information, especially in historical texts. I have often seen a black-and-white reproduction of the opening page of poor, burnt Beowulf, but never seen it in colour, and I remember going through my whole undergraduate career wondering what a page of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle really looked like. I have therefore been very happy to have the opportunity to show a page of Beowulf in its natural colour, as well as a page from the early Chronicle and another from the Peterborough Chronicle. There are also large illustrations from classic historical texts, such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Johnson's Dictionary, as well as of some less known texts (e.g. the front page of The Lyttelton Times, the first newspaper to be published in New Zealand, with some distinctive language already apparent) and pages from modern texts, such as British and American dialect atlases, and the whole of the marvellous Daily Sketch page where Mrs Patrick Campbell is reported to be prepared to say *bloody* in the first performance of Shaw's Pygmalion.

## Left to right

Finally, some remarks on how a book of this kind gets written, for the approach is somewhat unconventional in publishing terms, and involved a modicum of suffering. It is, you will see, organized into double page spreads. This means that a topic is dealt with in a single

opening, with no run-on sentences to the next spread (but of course, including copious cross-references). The topics have to be thought out carefully in advance, and space allocated to them accordingly. The designer provides a grid, so that I know exactly how many lines per column, of main and caption text, I have available, and how wide each line should be, for the typefaces which have been chosen for the book. I set these parameters on my word processor, and the copy translates into print with remarkable accuracy. Without pictures, I have available roughly 1000 words of main text per page. The suffering is not in the writing, but in deciding what to leave out. When I am preparing a topic, I use the well-worn procedure of collecting everything I can find on it and putting it in a file. Over a 2-year preparatory period, some of these files can get very large, and it's painful having to omit so much marvellous material. Only a Britannica-size project could do real justice, these days, to the English language.

One thing I have learned, after the experience of my earlier Language encyclopedia, is to decide on the pictures first, and allocate enough space for them. In my first close encounter with this genre, I would decide on a desirable picture, but allocate a postage-stamp-sized space for it. The picture researcher would do her work, and produce a beautiful illustration, which might take up maybe a quarter of a page. I would then have to cut out n lines of text, which I believed I had already honed to perfection, to make the picture fit. (But that is easier than the opposite, when a picture is found which is smaller than the space you have allocated for it: then you have to unhone in a different direction, by finding relevant and unwaffly material to add seamlessly to said perfection.) Thanks to the earlier experience, the spacing in CEEL, fortunately, came out right, most of the time.

In fact you have to get it right, because if you don't, you're in trouble. The book was basically written from left to right, as is usual enough, but with all publishing activities— in-house editing, indexing, picture research, page designing, and typesetting—being carried out simultaneously, which is by no means usual. The reasons are all to do with schedules and economics. Take picture research, for instance. With a large illustrated book, you cannot leave this task until after the text is complete: the picture research has to be being done as you go along. This is especially important with the present topic, where there is unfortunately no national archive of the language to which one could refer. What is available is, unfortunately, a bit of a lottery (a gap in our culture which can only be filled by, with, or from a lottery—and there we have three good cases for lottery funding). There may not be a picture of what you want, or something costs too much. The sooner you know what is available, the sooner you can write the relevant piece of text with confidence. Conversely, once you have bought your picture, you gotta use it. There is no going back. The same point applies to the obtaining of copyright permissions. In a reference book which relies heavily on other people's work, there is a great deal of verbal and visual quotation, and it is

essential that these clearances are obtained as early as possible. And, as a third example, the designer too has to begin at the beginning, and stay actively involved in the project all the way through. Each page is a special design job; no two are alike. If the designer gets it wrong on a particular page, say by locating a picture next to the wrong piece of text, this has to be spotted and corrected in good time, especially if there are consequences for the amount of text on that page.

For all these reasons, it was decided to typeset and proof-read the book while it was being written. Now this is an intriguing situation for an author. It means that, while you are working on Part 2, the proofs for Part 1 are starting to arrive. Putting this the other way round, when you are writing Part 1, you know that you will not have the usual kind of authorial power to scrap part of it and start again, if later in the book you see a brilliant alternative way of proceeding. Basically, you have to get it right first time, otherwise pages will have to be redone from scratch, which is damaging both to the publishing schedule and to the Press's pocket. Far more time than is usual has to be devoted to planning, therefore, before you write a word of text. There is very little room for error—or, to be more precise, there is decreasing room for error as one moves through the book. At the beginning, with 500 pages ahead of you, you have all the manoeuvring room in the world. If you find you have severely underestimated the space to be devoted to a topic, or if you unexpectedly find a brilliant picture which takes up half a page or more, and you just *have* to use it, then you can find a way to cope, in the first half of the book. But as you pass half way, shades of the prison house began to gather around, and you are forced to adhere rigidly to the discipline into which you were erstwhile willingly Press-ganged. The alternative doesn't bear thinking about: to beg the Press for more pages. To beg the Press? One has one's pride. Still, just once, I did bear thinking about it, decided pride wasn't worth dying for, and begged. That is why the book is 496 pages and not 480, the size of my previous encyclopedia. But there is a limit to how far you can push the oldest press in the world, and of course, eventually, I reached it.

Which is just as well, really, otherwise it still wouldn't be finished. Encyclopedias are like poems: as Valéry said, they are never finished, only abandoned. The result, as it stands, anyway, is a book which has been at times a trial, but more often a delight to work on. In the preface I express my warmest thanks to the many people who have been involved and helped bring it to publication. This is no Oscar thank-you schmuss (a word I heard for the first time the other day). It is simply to acknowledge that it has been the most complex project I have ever had the good fortune to be part of, and insofar as it has produced a successful book, a great deal of the credit must go to the publishing team at Cambridge with which, as ever, it has been a real privilege to work.