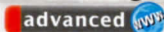# English — a status report

Welche Bedeutung hat die englische Sprache heute noch in der Welt? **JOANNA WESTCOMBE**, Sprachredakteurin bei *Spotlight*, befragte dazu den angesehenen britischen Linguisten David Crystal. **advanced**

Today, the English language and the ways we use language generally are changing fast and for many different reasons: social, economic and technological. We spoke to language expert David Crystal (pictured) on this topic 10 years ago (see *Spotlight* 2/01). For this anniversary issue, we asked Professor Crystal to give us a snapshot of English in the world today, to look back at the past to see how the language has developed, and to look ahead at the challenges to its global status. What emerges is that when talking about language, one cannot ignore culture, community, communication — and above all, the process of change.

How did English become a global language?

A language becomes an international or global language for one reason only: the power of the people who use it. In the case of English, we are talking about a combination of power factors that have influenced the language over a period of 400 years — political (the British Empire), technological (the Industrial Revolution), economic (especially the US), and cultural (developments such as the telephone, pop music and the internet). All of these aspects developed <u>initially</u> through the medium of English. The structure of the language — its pronunciation, spelling, grammar and vocabulary — is not a factor. Indeed, if you were the god of languages and had to make a decision about which one was to be global, you would probably <u>rule out</u> English on the grounds of its spelling alone. English has become global despite such complications.

Today, there are more non-native speakers using English than native speakers. Who are they, and why do they use English?

Of the two billion people in the world who use English, only some 400 million are native speakers. The remaining 1.6 billion are speakers of English in countries where the language has some sort of official status (in India and Nigeria, for example), or in countries where it is the first foreign language taught in schools (as in China and Germany). The <u>ratio</u> of native to non-native speakers is changing as the younger generation becomes more <u>bilingual</u>. The main driving force is economic: English provides access to a huge potential marketplace. But people learn a language for a variety of reasons — for travel, cultural understanding or to deepen their literary <u>appreciation</u>, for example. The commonest metaphor I hear learners use is that English is a "useful tool" to enable them to do what they want to do with their lives.

This must have an effect on the English language.

The chief effect has been <u>lexical</u>. New varieties of English are <u>primarily</u> identified by a vocabulary that reflects the local culture. Regional dictionaries — of Jamaican English or South African English, for example — now contain many thousands of <u>loanwords</u> that allow people to talk in English about local politics, landscape, locations, food and drink, fauna and flora, and much more. Relatively little research has been done on grammar, but we are beginning to see local usages emerge. These have differences that are comparable to those that exist between American and British English. In the US, you'd say "I just ate", whereas in the UK it would be "I've just eaten". Another example is the use of the present continuous form for verbs of <u>perception</u> in South-Asian English: "I am knowing", "I am remembering", "I am seeing". Some of these changes may become more widespread in the future. McDonalds already has a similar usage as its slogan: "I'm lovin' it".

Can you tell us specifically how and why language change is influencing British English pronunciation?

Pronunciation always changes, so there's nothing surprising about accents coming and going. The most noticeable trend in Britain has been the emergence of a new set of ethnic accents reflecting the origins of immigrant groups. There are around 300 languages spoken in London these days, so it's increasingly common to hear English spoken with
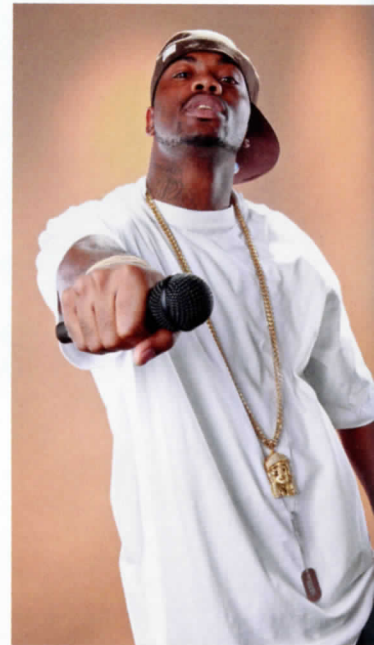
address [əˈdres]	in Angriff nehmen
affected: be ~ [əˈfektɪd]	betroffen sein
appreciation [ə‚priːʃiˈeɪʃən]	Würdigung, Verständnis
bilingual [baɪˈlɪŋgwəl]	zweisprachig
condemn [kənˈdem]	verurteilen
evolve [ɪˈvɒlv]	sich entwickeln
fraction [ˈfrækʃən]	Bruchteil
inarticulate [‚ɪnɑːˈtɪkjʊlət]	nicht fähig, sich auszudrücken
initially [ɪˈnɪʃəli]	anfangs (→ p. 57)
lexical [ˈleksɪkəl]	lexikalisch, in Bezug auf Wörter
lingua franca [‚lɪŋgwə ˈfræŋkə]	Verkehrssprache
literacy [ˈlɪtərəsi]	Lese- und Schreibfähigkeit
loanword [ˈləʊnwɜːd]	Lehnwort
novelty [ˈnɒvəlti]	Neuheit
overestimate [‚əʊvərˈestɪmeɪt]	überbewerten
perception [pəˈsepʃən]	Wahrnehmung
primarily [praɪˈmerəli]	vorwiegend
ratio [ˈreɪʃiəʊ]	Verhältnis
rule out [ruːl ˈaʊt]	ausschließen
syllable [ˈsɪləbəl]	Silbe
tiny [ˈtaɪni]	winzig

Fotos: iStockphoto; Hemera; Friedrich Stark

accents that reflect these cultural backgrounds. It is the same story around the country. The traditional accent of Liverpool ("Scouse") is now heard in several varieties, spoken by Chinese, Jamaicans, Italians and others. One of the most interesting <u>novelties</u> — found in English accents elsewhere in the world — is a <u>syllable</u>-timed pronunciation: a regular "rat-a-tat-a-tat" sound. This may be compared with the traditional use of stress-timed speech, where the rhythm is made up of strong and weak sounds: "tum-te-tum-te-tum". Originally a feature of non-native English, syllable-timed pronunciation is now increasingly heard in native accents, especially among young people. Rapping, for example, is typically syllable-timed.

With all these changes and varieties, do you think there is a need for a "standard English"? What form might this take?

One shouldn't <u>overestimate</u> the changes. They relate to only a <u>tiny</u> <u>fraction</u> of standard English grammar and vocabulary. Spelling and punctuation have been <u>affected</u> very little. In parts of the world where a radically different variety of English has <u>evolved</u> (such as Singlish in Singapore), standard English remains as an alternative variety, taught in schools and needed for international communication. Standard English will gradually change over time, of course, as it always has, and we must expect to see the influence of non-native speakers upon it. Sounds found difficult by the majority of users (such as "th") might be lost, and plurals with "s" in nouns such as "information" and "furniture" might be accepted in future. But there is no reason at present to say that there is a new universal and uniform version of English "out there" among non-native speakers, with labels such as "Globish" and "English as a <u>lingua franca</u>". These are only trends. On the other hand, when these trends establish themselves among millions of educated language users, they need to be respected and not <u>condemned</u> as "substandard" English.

What do you say to those native speakers who think that English is being corrupted and standards are falling?

Every generation has people who think like this. It's been that way for centuries. There's little one can do to persuade people who believe that all change is for the worse that this is not the case. One generation's hates are the next generation's loves. There is no evidence at all that spoken standards are falling. Some people point to <u>inarticulate</u> teenagers, but when one looks behind the stereotypes, one finds that these young people are often able to talk about their world as fluently as the critics do about theirs.

Of course, teachers still need to broaden and deepen the range of linguistic abilities in children, and if standards of <u>literacy</u> are falling (as some evidence does suggest), then that needs to be <u>addressed</u> urgently. But this is an educational issue, not a purely linguistic one.
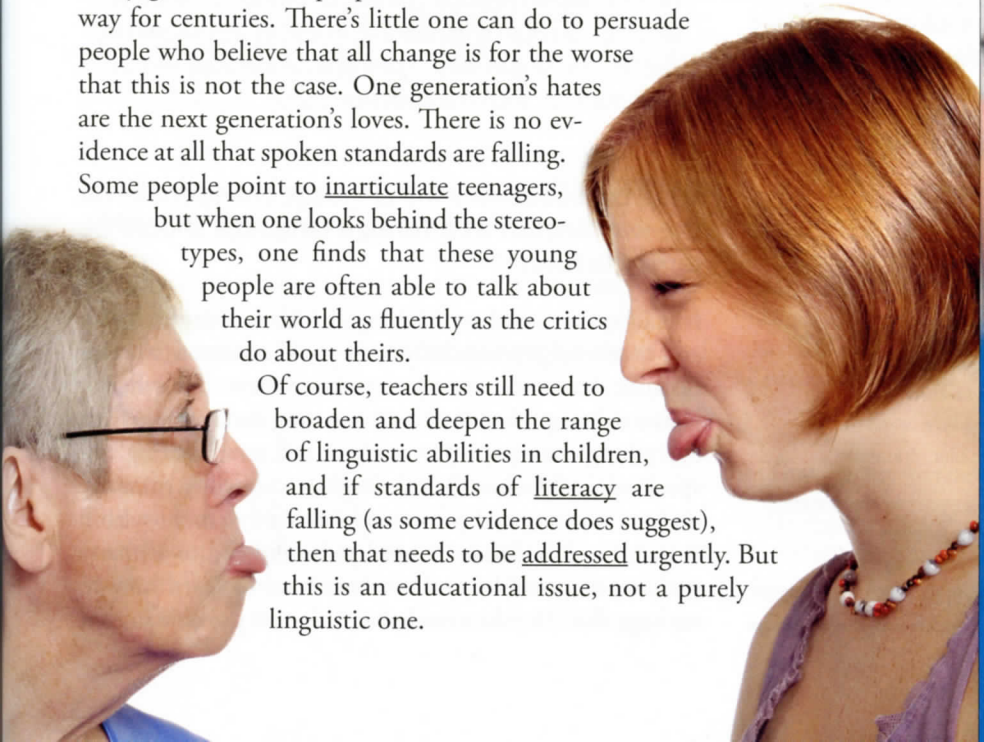
Ten years after the publication of your book *Language on the Internet*, what impact is the internet having on the development of English and the way we use it?

Relatively little, interestingly enough. The internet has given us a few thousand new words, some new orthographic practices, and a range of new varieties. The <u>vast amount</u> of English (or any language) we see on the internet, though, is exactly the same as it was before this medium developed. But it is <u>early days</u> yet. For most people, the internet is less than 20 years old, which is a <u>blink of an eye</u> when it comes to language change. So there is probably plenty of change yet to come — especially, I <u>suspect</u>, in spelling. There is already a lot of short-term change, such as new slang, <u>abbreviations</u>, and fashionable language games, but these will probably not have much of a long-term <u>impact</u>. Already most of the linguistic novelty we <u>encountered</u> in the 1990s is history.

In 2001, you predicted an increasing presence of other languages on the internet. How secure is the position of English as the most-used language on the internet?

As measured by the number of internet users, English had <u>retained</u> its position as most-used language in 2010, but Chinese was <u>poised</u> to take over. Other languages were well behind those two. In order of decreasing frequency, these are: Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, German, Arabic, French, Russian and Korean. The internet is now a highly multilingual domain and will become increasingly so as more of the world comes online via mobile telephony. We must expect to see a huge <u>influx</u> of African languages, for example.

In terms of the quantity of information available in English online, it is still well ahead of all competitors. In terms of criteria such as the number of internet <u>hosts</u>, how-ever, English has long lost its pole position. So the situation is complex. I discuss this further in Chapter 5 of my book *Internet Linguistics* (Routledge, 2011). All that is happening is that the online world is beginning to reflect the realities of the offline linguistic world.

Germany is a global economic powerhouse. How far do you think that "German English" will influence English in the future?

It all depends on power, as I said before. If there is a <u>genuine</u> power base, then people who talk to the speakers of that power base will <u>accommodate to</u> their ways. No one gets very far by saying: "I want you to buy my goods, but, by the way, please get your grammar right first." German has already given many words to English, and the influence of German is cited in more than 10,000 entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This influence is <u>bound to</u> grow. A lot depends on the <u>locus</u> of creativity, especially in technology. ***Vorsprung durch Technik***, as we say in English.

🔍 A CLOSER LOOK

Vorsprung durch Technik is the slogan of the German car-maker Audi. It is used in many markets around the world, including Britain. Even though a lot of people don't know what it means, the slogan has become part of English popular culture, referring to the excellence of German engineering. In earlier ads shown in the UK, the slogan was — perhaps deliberately — mispronounced, with the stress on *durch*.

What consequences will language change have on the way English as a foreign language should be taught in future?

If teachers are used to teaching British standard English and **received pronunciation**, they will continue to do so, because that is the variety they know best. But when it comes to comprehension, both listening and reading, then everything changes — for students will enter an English-speaking world where British English is already a minority dialect, and received pronunciation a tiny accent within British English. Students need to be <u>exposed</u> to as many varieties as possible, and teachers have to learn how to manage this. Thanks to websites, it is now possible to read

abbreviation [ə‚briːviˈeɪʃən]	Abkürzung, Kurzform
accommodate to [əˈkɒmədeɪt]	sich anpassen
blink of an eye [blɪŋk]	Augenblick
bound to: be ~ [ˈbaʊnd tə]	wird sicher
early days: be ~ [‚ɜːli ˈdeɪz]	wir sind noch im Anfangsstadium
encounter [ɪnˈkaʊntə]	begegnen
exposed: be ~ [ɪkˈspəʊzd]	in Kontakt gebracht werden
genuine [ˈdʒenjuɪn]	echt (→ p. 57)
host [həʊst]	Anbieter
impact [ˈɪmpækt]	Auswirkungen
influx [ˈɪnflʌks]	Zustrom; hier: Zunahme
locus [ˈləʊkəs]	Ort
poised: be ~ [pɔɪzd]	im Begriff sein
retain [rɪˈteɪn]	beibehalten
suspect [səˈspekt]	vermuten
vast amount [vɑːst əˈmaʊnt]	Großteil

and hear most varieties of English at the press of a button or two. Explore the International Dialects of English Archive, for example, at *http://web.ku.edu/idea/*

What particular areas of the language phenomenon fascinate you most at present and will occupy your attention in the future?

Electronically <u>mediated</u> communication, because it is changing so rapidly. One never knows what is going to happen next. If you had said to me <u>a mere</u> five years ago that the next big development was going to be text messages for the internet, I would have said you were crazy. Then in 2006, along came Twitter. At the same time, the internet is allowing us to see the past in new ways. Thanks to the amount of material online and powerful search facilities, it is possible to study Shakespeare and other authors, as well as the history of a language, in <u>unprecedented</u> ways. Did we think everything was already known about Shakespeare? Not a bit: Shakespearean linguistic studies are still in their <u>infancy</u>.

As a British resident with strong links to Welsh language and culture, what do you think Britain should be doing about language?

Developing a strong language policy, and not leaving linguistic matters to <u>chance</u>. This means respecting all varieties of English. We will still need to <u>preserve</u> standard English to maintain national and international <u>intelligibility</u>. But we also have to respect non-standard varieties, which are the primary manifestation of a community's identity. We also have to recognize the realities of a multilingual world and the internet. Three quarters of the world's population are naturally bilingual. Two thirds of the world's population have little or no <u>command</u> of English. The need to give children as much multilingual experience as possible in schools is as urgent today as it ever was. I would make Britain and the US follow the norms found in Europe and insist that all children should learn at least one foreign language, preferably two.

What is your prognosis for global language use in the next 30 years?

It is never possible to predict the future when it comes to language; for language reflects society, and the question becomes more a view about how society will develop. What I see right now is a world that is more aware of the importance of linguistic <u>diversity</u> than ever before, concerned with the crisis affecting the world's languages (with one dying out every two weeks on average), and active in the preservation of local identities. These are good signs. At the same time, I note the arrival of new technology that is going to change everything. Standards of online automatic translation will improve in the next generation or two; and we can anticipate real-time <u>interpretation</u> very soon — perhaps like the <u>fictitious</u> "Babel fish" that fits in the ear and feeds on brainwave energy in Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Google is already <u>hinting at</u> such a <u>device</u>. It will take longer than 30 years to develop truly efficient systems, capable of handling the idiomatic semantics and pragmatics of language as well as the sounds, spellings, grammar and vocabulary. But once it happens, things will never be the same again.

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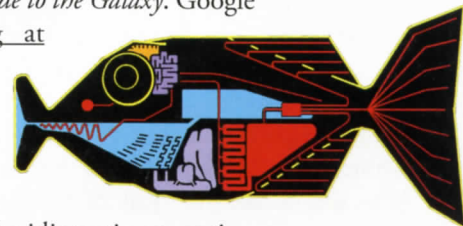
Professor David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. His many works on English include *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, *English as a Global Language*, and *Evolving English*. His most recent book in this field is *The Story of English in 100 Words*.

a mere [ə ˈmɪə]	noch, nur
chance: leave to ~ [tʃɑːns]	dem Zufall überlassen
command: have a ~ of English [kəˈmɑːnd]	Englisch beherrschen
device [diˈvaɪs]	Instrument, Einrichtung
diversity [daiˈvɜːsəti]	Vielfalt
fictitious [fɪkˈtɪʃəs]	fiktiv, erfunden
hint at [ˈhɪnt ət]	andeuten
infancy: still be in its ~ [ˈɪnfənsi]	noch in den Kinderschuhen stecken
intelligibility [ɪnˌtelɪdʒəˈbɪləti]	Verständlichkeit
interpretation [ɪnˌtɜːprɪˈteɪʃᵊn]	Dolmetschen
mediate [ˈmiːdieɪt]	vermitteln
preserve [priˈzɜːv]	aufrechterhalten
unprecedented [ʌnˈpresɪdentɪd]	nie dagewesen