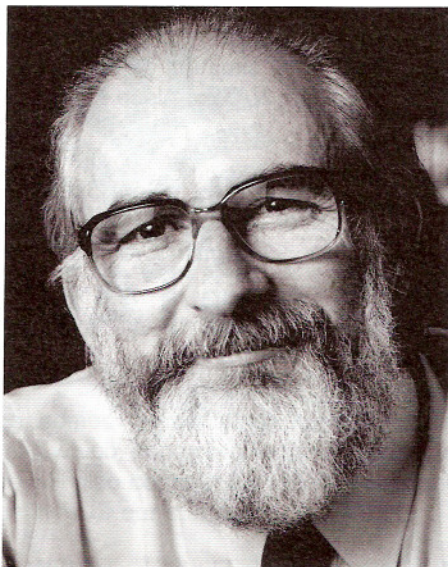


The calm before the storm before the calm

David Crystal



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In the old days, in English Language Teaching, things seemed very calm and simple. Binary concepts organised our thinking. Here are three: British vs. American English, speech vs. writing, prescriptive vs. descriptive. Then things changed – swiftly, dramatically, radically. No English teacher's life could be the same thereafter, whether the context was mother-tongue, second language, or foreign language.

The old days? I'm thinking way, way back – to the 1980s, just before a decade of linguistic revolution. Why revolution? Because three events took place which fundamentally altered our view of the linguistic world and has made it a much complicated place to work in.

Firstly, the status of English as a global language was finally confirmed, both statistically and expositoryly. People had been anticipating this outcome for some time, but it was only in the mid-1990s that surveys charted its presence in all countries, and textbooks began to appear which attempted to explain what had happened and what would happen next. The phenomenon of 'New Englishes' became the

buzz phrase of the time – no longer just British and American, but Australian, South African, Nigerian, Indian, Malaysian, Singaporean, and several more, often given cheeky labels such as 'Singlish' and 'Malenglish' to reflect the mixing of language backgrounds which gives such new varieties their character. And with some of these regional Englishes achieving considerable local status within their communities, it became necessary to rethink the comfortable notion of a universal 'Standard English'.

It suddenly became difficult to condemn many nonstandard usages as 'incorrect' when millions of educated people were observed to be using them, all over the world, and they were turning up repeatedly in best-selling novels, plays, and books of poetry. A new linguistic realism was beginning to pervade literature, so much so that, today, it is hard to find a novel written entirely in standard English, and several (such as those by Irvine Welsh and Roddy Doyle) celebrate nonstandard varieties with unprecedented enthusiasm.

Secondly, the Internet arrived, in the form of the World Wide Web (from 1991), chatrooms, and email, which began to be widely used in the mid-1990s. Electronic communication provides us with a new linguistic medium – identical to neither speech nor writing, and offering communicative possibilities that the two older mediums do not provide. The Web taught us to hyperlink – something that is impossible in speech, and not really implementable in writing (the nearest we get is the footnote or the bibliographical cross-reference). It also introduced a routine dynamism into writing – pages could change

their content, and text could move about. Email taught us to cut and paste – again, something that neither of the traditional mediums permit. Chatrooms showed us how, for the first time in the history of human communication, it was possible to carry on several conversations simultaneously.

Speech arrived some 50,000 years ago, and writing some 10,000 years ago. So a third medium is a revolutionary moment, indeed. And no English teacher can ignore it, because the opportunities and constraints provided by the technology are motivating new dimensions of expressiveness, such as reduced punctuation, nonstandard spellings, and text-messaging abbreviation. There is a sense of *deja vu*. It had been a long slog, since the 1970s, teaching kids to appreciate the stylistic differences between speech and writing. Now the whole appropriateness enterprise, it seems, has to be begun again, with three mediums to choose between.

Thirdly, the last generation of the prescriptively trained population began to – how can I put this tactfully? – pass away. The 1950s was the final decade when it was routine to suffer the rigours of learning the artificial rules introduced by the 18th-century grammarians. The last classes of people who learned all about split infinitives and sentences not ending with prepositions are in their sixties now.

That generation was followed, as we all know, by one in which school-children learned nothing about grammar at all – an imbalance which, twenty years on, the National Curriculum in English took pains to correct. Now, grammar is back – but with a difference. It is no longer prescriptive, nor even descriptive – the two positions which governed our mindsets in the era of the Bullock Report (1975). Today, grammar teaching – as language teaching in general – aims to be explanatory.

The watchword is 'Why?' Why do we use language in the way we do? Why are accent differences important? Why do we need grammar? What is an adverb for? To answer such questions, we have to think in terms of meaning and social function – the communicative purposes of language. Two terms have come to the fore, as a consequence, semantics and pragmatics, and new dimensions of teaching have had to be introduced.

But it is an awkward time. It is a transitional period. Although the last generation of home-grown prescriptivists is disappearing, they are by no means all dead yet, and some are in very senior positions in society, so their influence lives on. The bulk of the adult population is 'in between' eras – never having been taught prescriptively, and, having nothing to replace it. They are therefore in ignorance of language, and rather scared by it, having had their usage repeatedly corrected by people who claim to know better. They lack the confidence, which comes from a real knowledge of language, to stand up for themselves.

The Truss phenomenon is clear evidence. No book on punctuation could ever have sold so well if there had not been a generation feeling a desperate need for linguistic reassurance. If anything demonstrates the failure of the traditional prescriptive system, it is *Eats Shoots and Leaves*. Ironically, the book does little to help solve their problems: people need more in an account of punctuation than a set of personal preferences, no matter how elegantly and humorously they are expressed. We need to know the rules of punctuation, of course, but there is an inherent messiness about the English punctuation system which also needs to be explained, and its variation appreciated.

This requires far more than a 'zero tolerance' approach, which is itself intolerable for its arrogant and patronising view of people who, for whatever reason, have been unable to master the inconsistencies introduced by 19th-century printers. If people are 'sloppy and

ignorant' (as Truss calls them) because they misplace apostrophes, then we need to ask why the education system failed them, and try to ensure that the new system does not fall into the old traps. It is no solution to go haranguing greengrocers or calling them names, when everyone – everyone, Truss included – is unavoidably inconsistent in their usage some of the time.

For the present generation of English language teachers, it is the biggest challenge. Teaching the subject a generation ago was easy, compared with today, because matters were black and white. In a generation's time, it will be easy again, for the new explanatory principles will have begun to take hold. But now, right now, it is a stormy time to be an English language teacher.

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