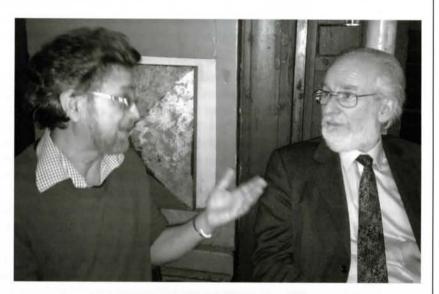# International English: an interview with David Crystal

Rakesh Bhanot

David Crystal needs no introduction. His website, www.davidcrystal.com, provides more than enough information about his publications, achievements, accolades et al. He is often described as the world's leading authority on the English language and is a regular keynote speaker at national and international conferences. A fact rarely mentioned in formal announcements is that he is a bit of thespian. In addition, he would do very well in the world of stand-up comedy. Following his presentation at TESOL Spain earlier this year, I persuaded him to sit down for half an hour and below is the text of our conversation on some aspects of English.

What, if anything, do you understand by the term *international English*?

Nothing very clear, I have to say. It's a sort of term that can mean anything you want it to mean; anything from a group of business men using English as a *lingua franca* in their meetings to casual encounters in hotels, or tourist spots around the world; with varying kinds of standards on both sides, various kinds of overlaps of usage and so on. I don't think there is a particularly coherent notion of *international English*; it's a term that covers a multitude of different meanings in a variety of settings.

Does the phrase 'English as a *lingua franca'* (ELF), have any more significance?

I don't think it does. What all these terms show is that people are groping towards a concept that is, at the moment very, inchoate. All these notions have come from one point of origin – a concern to relate the traditional notion of English, as it became a global language, which was, once, very uni-locationally centred; it was either English or American English or a combination, and of which other varieties of English were seen as secondary, or ill-formed, or unimportant or even *wrong* in some sense. People are now realising that because there are far more speakers of these Englishes, as other languages (or other varieties) than there are of British and American speakers combined, we can no longer do that. So, there is an attempt to take these other varieties seriously. The question now is how do you get from one mind-set to the other? How do you take these varieties seriously when you have stubborn opposition? It is difficult when you're brought up to believe that only American or British English is correct.

So, all these terms have come out: International English, International Standard English, World Standard English, English as Lingua Franca etc. Their heart is in the right place. However, what is wrong is when people prematurely try to define the linguistic character of these emergent international encounters, and some are more daring than others in saying: 'this is what it's like'. So, on one extreme, you have people asserting that there is a phenomenon, a global English or Globish, that is characterised by a certain set of grammatical instructions, a certain set of vocabulary items and so on, and where a simplification is motivating the reason for development. At the other extreme, you get people who are genuinely exploring the empirical character of these international encounters to see if it can work the other way round, to see what exactly this character is; and, in between, there are all kinds of other positions. To give an example or two: it is asserted that some of the features that have always caused difficulties for English learners, such as the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns, are being removed when you look at the way in which people interact with one another globally – when you use English as a *lingua franca*. So, because people say 'furnitures' instead of 'furniture' , or 'informations' instead of 'information', then these are features of a new ELF or a new 'international English' or whatever you like to call it. It is an empirical question, however, to what extent these features are genuinely present when you examine interactions between English speaking people using English in all varying circumstances in the world? This is a very difficult question to answer. People usually take an individual incident/experience and generalise from it; they say: 'everybody makes mistakes like that therefore the use of 'informations' is a feature of this new international English'. However, when you look around, you realise that the situation isn't as general as all that, and if you examine early corpora that have been collected, such as the VOICE Corpus (www.univie.ac.at/voice) in Vienna, and you type 'informations' into that Corpus, you find that it isn't as general as that. Thus, we are at a very early stage of empirical research.

Yet, some native (sic.) speakers use *media, data* or *phenomena* as singular nouns; even on the BBC. Would you say that native speakers also make mistakes?

This is not so much a grammatical mistake but more an evolution of grammar, which is perceived by some as a grammatical mistake while it is evolving, and as time goes by the so-called mistake becomes normal. This actually happened with *information*. When you trace the history of the word *information* back to The Middle Ages, you realise that it was, originally, a countable noun and it had plurals in Chaucer. Even in later writers, you often get 'informations'. The term has always been plural in some varieties of English; in legal English, for example, it has stayed a plural even until the present day. In the 18th century, it went out of use as a countable noun and became an uncountable noun. At the time this must have seemed very odd but then after it had settled down, everybody found that the countable use was odd and wrong. Maybe the countable use is coming back, is reasserting itself and in 50 years' time no one will be worried about it. But at the moment, the primary group of people who use it as a plural are learners of English for reasons to do with their learning. The point is, it's a very natural error to make. Why shouldn't one say 'an information'? One has to say 'a piece of information' at the moment but the other option is just as functional.

Given all these changes/developments in the varieties of English, what are the implications for teacher training? How can/should teacher training/education address this dynamic situation?
If we are talking about models, for instance, I've long since got rid of the distinction between native and non-native speaker; *it's just irrelevant it seems to me when you're talking about a language that has such a global reach* (my emphasis). I know hundreds, thousands, of people who have learned English as a second, or foreign, language whose ability is as good as any native speaker's in the range of functionality that they need to use. What I mean by that is that no foreign learner of English can possibly develop an instinct for all the cultural background of English that comes from learning to speak as a child. Nobody could possibly do that by definition. So, nursery rhymes and the little children's games that any native speaker plays with their family at the age or two, three or four... that is beyond reach of the kind of speakers I am talking about. However, this is irrelevant because it is not part of the relevant interaction that most people are using English for. However, I have lost count of the number of foreign learners whose English is as good as mine, if not better; you could not fault them in any way whatsoever. So, faced with the choice of a *native speaker of English* who does not know very much about language and has a poor analytical grasp of what the language is about, plus is just not a very good teacher perhaps, *and a non-native speaker of English* whose English might be a little below that of the other person's level but is a good teacher, a good analyst... I know who I would choose to learn English from.

Let's say you wanted to learn Japanese. Would you prefer a monolingual Japanese teacher or an English speaker who has learnt to speak Japanese?
I wouldn't judge them in terms of their native or non-native speaking ability. I'd judge them in terms of how good they are as teachers; how good their awareness was of the relationship between my language and theirs and how well they can anticipate the difficulties that I might encounter. Their 'nativeness' would be irrelevant. Bearing in mind, of course, what level of achievement in Japanese I am aiming at and what level I need. Is the question:

'should I become as good as them when I have learnt the foreign language'? Why should I be? The question of how much of a foreign language do you need to have as your goal is often not taken into account. I may only need my Japanese (or my English) for a very restricted set of circumstances. After all, here we are talking chiefly about vocabulary. One assumes that there's a sufficiently wide range of grammatical constructions being taught to say anything one wants to say. Pronunciation and, if you're writing the language, spelling and punctuation are important; but vocabulary is the killer because that's 50,000, 60,000, 70,000 words. How many of us need 50,000 words to do what we want to do in life? Maybe a vocabulary of 5,000, 10,000, 15.000 words is enough. So, the person I'm talking to will undoubtedly have a much larger vocabulary range than I've got but I will very comfortably fit into that frame of reference because I won't need as much as she's got.

YOU may be able to ignore this distinction between native and non-native speaker for your personal language learning requirements but for many people the label 'native speaker' still carries a powerful positive value. ELT conference organisers in many countries, e.g., prefer to invite keynote speakers who are native speakers rather than perfectly competent teachers/writers who are local.

Yes I know, but this is just a function of where we are at the moment. This has come up simply because English is finally perceived to be a global language and is evolving new varieties etc. Also, this phenomenon is hardly 10 years old. I know it seems to have been with us forever but when were the first books on English as a global language written? There's mine in 1997 or 98. There's David Graddol's book which came out at around the same time. There's Tom McArthur's book that came out in the second half of the 1990s, and it's only 2012. I never used to give lectures on English as a global language in the 1980s, EVER. It just wasn't an issue. One knew that English was becoming more and more global but not that it had achieved in some sense that status; and the statistics were missing. Nobody really knew how many people spoke it. Now, 10 years on, we can make some confident assertions about the numbers who speak English in the world; probably about 2 billion out of the 6 or 7 billion – maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less. Still, 10 years ago, one was very uncertain to say anything even as vague as that. So, given that it's all so new and given that the mind-set that this new situation makes us encounter goes back at least 50 years, maybe 100 years, we're not going to change it in 10 years!

We agree that English is spreading throughout the world at a pace that none could have predicted even 20 years ago. How much of this is down to the 'imperial legacy' of the British (and American) empire as argued so vehemently by scholars such as Robert Phillipson?

I hope Phillipson has changed his view, but I am not sure he has. It is such an odd view from the outset. The main forces that drive English around the world, the forces that make people want to learn English, are economic; not political. Yes, there is a historical tradition, obviously, but it's no longer relevant, and to keep asserting that it is, or to hint at British Council plots, is absolute nonsense.

When you look at the way English is going round the world that's what you see; you see the economic forces continuing to drive it. Ask most people why

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they're learning English – it's to get a better quality of life, and that's it. And if you say to them, 'well at the expense of this better quality of life, you will lose the sense of your personal identity and you're going to become all English, or all American', or something along those lines, they will look at you as though you're mad. And any of us who have learnt a language to a fluent level knows this. I've learnt an awful lot of French but I don't feel French in the slightest, and there's no reason why I should either. I think the point applies to English too, except the legacy (of empire) is still there and so some people choose to remember it and reflect upon it.

Let's leave the historical legacy to one side for a minute and turn to the Internet. What role has the Internet played in all these developments?

The internet changes everything; absolutely everything because of its anonymous character. You go to a chat room and, as soon as you're in there, the distinction between native and non-native speaker breaks down immediately because you have no idea who is there, what they're doing, what their background is, how much English they've got, where they've learnt it, or anything like that. All you've got is the evidence of the messages they have sent. Therefore, if somebody uses a particular feature of English that isn't particularly standard, you don't know whether that is a learner at an early level, an advanced learner who is speaking a local variety of English or a native speaker who's made a slip; you have no idea what this is. All you can do is accept what is before you and judge whether or not intelligibility is taking place and then judge, if you have the opportunity, whether there is some identity reason behind this selection of the feature you've noticed. This is difficult research to do, but it is possible to do it, especially on organisations like Facebook where there is a lot of background biographical information available. Anyway, what you see on the Internet is a completely different scenario from what we've ever seen before; mixed standards, stylistically varied standards. Wikipedia is a very good example of that. With any Wiki page you start at the top and you see one sort of English; you scroll down and you see a different kind of English. It's all on the same page and yet there's no stylistic coherence. So, the Internet is changing everything. Whereas before the main force driving the learning of English was economic, the internet is slowly providing a different reason for motivating people to use English – namely the need to join the global Internet community, which isn't necessarily about identity, or maybe it's a different kind of identity. Lots of people say: what is your identity? And people say, it's French or it's Welsh. Young people now say 'my main identity is online' and whatever my background, it's no longer important. Well, in that case, what is my linguistic correlate of that online identity? It's an amalgam; sometimes with linguistic features from all over the place; never seen anything like this before. This is one of the exciting developments.

Even before the advent of the Internet, I would say I had many identities. I was born in India, and have both Indian and Panjabi identities. I grew up in Preston and so have Lancastrian, British aspects. I have lived and worked in Spain and Germany, and using these languages makes me identify with the German and Spanish speaking parts of the world.

Well, you are extra-territorial, Rakesh, like so many of us are. This is George Steiner's term referring to people who, for whatever reason, because of their mobility around the world , or the way they were brought up, or because of their literary personae (cf. Nabakov), they are no longer able to answer the question clearly: 'Who are you?' in terms of their identity, cultural identity. I like the term extra-territorial for that reason. I also, like anyone who has moved around, relate to this. I was born in Wales, then lived in Liverpool, then in the South of England and I've travelled. In any given year, I am abroad as often as I am at home. If someone says 'what are you?', I prefer not to answer the question; I try to avoid it. I say, 'I'm not sure'. It depends where I am; I'm a citizen of the world. If forced, then I would go back to my roots and say I'm from Wales.

In the light of what we have been discussing, and what you said in your keynote address earlier about pragmatics, semantics etc., would you say that the job of teaching English is becoming more challenging?

The job of the English teacher has, indeed, become more difficult over the past 20/30 years as a result of English becoming a global language. Once upon a time it was very straight forward. There was British English or American English. The teachers would learn the main differences and make sure students encountered them so they knew when to switch between the two main variations. It was straight forward. And then, as the number of alternative Englishes grew, nothing altered for a while. So, say an Australian variety of English arose and, unless you were going to go to Australia, it was irrelevant. You didn't need to know about that. But now the world has become a small place and people are travelling much more than they did before; in both directions. So, whereas people in London once upon a time, need never have bothered to learn Indian English, because they were never going to go to India; well, now India has come to them. Now they are going to encounter it even if it's just at their local Indian restaurant and they've got to learn terms like popadom, aloo gobi, matar paneer; obvious terms as well as less obvious ones.

The other thing is that the Internet has brought everyone together. Once upon a time, it would have been very difficult for me to encounter the realities of, say, South African English. Today, if I want to read the South African Times, I just call it up and it's on the screen in my home in Wales. And remember we're at the beginnings of the Internet revolution; it's less than 20 years old. Currently, it's predominantly a written medium and 80% of the internet is writing. However, within the next 15 years or so, it's going to be 50% writing, and then, predominantly speech, and speech to text are all going to evolve. The Internet is going to become an oral/aural equivalent of what happens offline now, and at that point all these issues we've been talking about in relation to English in non-internet experiences will come up again in Internet encounters. The difference being that offline it would be unlikely for me to talk directly face to face with somebody from Australia, South Africa, from the Caribbean or anywhere, in a kind of motivating circle, informally online. That's going to be routine because we'll all be in the same chat room talking about the latest James Bond film together and I'm going to be talking to all of these guys and they talking to me. I mean, at the moment we're writing

to each other but that immediately denudes the identity because Standard English writing is pretty unidentifiable; that's the whole point of it I guess; apart from the occasional spelling change from American English. That is all going to change.

All this has implications for testing and assessment, as well as the challenges we mentioned for teachers earlier. For example, IELTS teaching/listening materials often include a variety of accents which can make life difficult (or interesting) for teachers and students.

Yes, when you say things have got more difficult in terms of listening comprehension and reading comprehension, they certainly have. In terms of production, I'm not sure that much has changed actually because after all, a teacher will teach a variety to their students. Now, if you're brought up on British English, and received pronunciation (RP), and that's the world you know, then you'll teach that because RP is a perfectly respectable accent and British English is a perfectly acceptable dialect. However, if the learners are brought up thinking that it is the only accent and dialect in the world, then you're not doing them any service at all. You have to expose them to other varieties of English, as many as possible, because that is the English they are going to encounter when they walk down Oxford Street or wherever it is. Now, the same point applies to testing and evaluation. The first step is to acknowledge the distinction between production and comprehension. The important thing is to have a reasonably coherent and consistent production ability. One needs to know what one is doing and not randomly guess that this or that usage might be appropriate, and, at a listening comprehension level, the stakes have gone up quite dramatically. It's important for the exam boards to recognise that at the level of marking or grading … to recognise that because there is a relationship between comprehension and production, it is possible for someone to take on board a usage which is not part of the dialect that they were taught, incorporate that into their dialect without being penalised for it. On that basis, if someone was marking me, I would be marked down all over the place. Sometimes I say /ɪɡˈzɑːmp(ə)l/ and sometimes I say //ɛɡˈzɑːmp(ə)l/. Sometimes I say /ʃɛdjuːl/; sometimes I say /skɛduːl/. This is my accent; this is my dialect and it is there for all sorts of reasons. This is an example of something that is unimportant; whether I say /ʃɛdjuːl/ or /skɛduːl/. Traditionally, one of those would have been marked correct and one marked wrong. These days I hope the exam system is recognising that language is more fluid as a result of all the pressures we have been discussing, and are more tolerant in their decisions as to what constitutes an error and what constitutes natural evolution. At the level of listening comprehension, the system has to change and is already changing. It isn't that long since exam boards were against accepting even US English – only British English counted. These days, I think they are more flexible.

The English language is often mentioned in the context of 'world peace'. Do you think it has a role in promoting or fostering such a lofty aim?

Yes, I do, but only in so far as it is part of a broader language policy which recognises the importance of all languages. There are always two forces driving language: one is the need for intelligibility and the other is the need for identity. Of the two, it is the identity force that is the stronger within us. If you

have a strong sense of identity, and are not extra-territorial (see above), then that is the most important thing. That is what people fight for, go on marches for, go on hunger strikes for, or are willing to die for. It is not intelligibility; no one has died for the plain English campaign or anything like that.

So, world peace, yes! You require both of the above. We have to understand each other in so far as we can and an international lingua franca of some sort is a step in that direction. But this is a situation that reflects our current technological stage of development. Think 50 years down the road when machine translation will become so good that it will no longer be necessary to have a lingua franca when people are communicating online. They will type in their English phrase, press 'go' and it will come out on the other side in French, or whatever, and it will be good French; but at the moment such technology is relatively poor. At a spoken level we may think we need an international *lingua franca*, but no. The concept of Babel Fish in The Hitch Hiker's Guide is very near. Google is promising to have a primitive Babel Fish within two years (we are speaking in 2012) and they will indeed have some device which you put in your ear. You will say 'como estas?' and I will hear 'how are you'? It will be at a basic phrase book level but think ahead 50 years ahead, will we need a *lingua franca* then? Well, of course you will because technology requires electricity and if your battery dies you are sunk! Also, you won't always have your mobile phone or your computer with you all the time. Again, say you are having a liaison with a man or woman from another culture or language, you won't be using the latest technology to communicate. So, there will always be a role for a *lingua franca* but its role will diminish as these technological forces evolve.

Will people stop learning foreign languages?
No, because of the identity reasons that will still be there. The role of a *lingua franca* will become less important as technology allows us to use our individual languages to do the job that the current *lingua franca* is currently doing. However, let's recall why English became a world language in the first place and the answer, as we know, is the power of the people who speak it and any question about the future of an international *lingua franca* is bound up with the power politics of the communities who speak it. It is not rocket science to reflect on a situation where one day the power may shift and, say, Chinese, or Spanish, or Arabic may become a *lingua franca*.

But English is here to stay?
It may or may not be here to stay. Nicholas Ostler wrote a book a couple of years ago called 'The Last Lingua Franca'. He takes the view that English will only stay a *lingua franca* as long as people want to learn it; which means we are back to economics. However, if the world situation changes, we might all be speaking Martian!

With tongue-firmly-in-cheek, and in the presence of your wife, may I ask a silly but serious question? Can you imagine a situation where a kind of Babel Fish machine might help in male and female communication? So, a man speaks into a machine and the woman hears what he has really said and means; not just the sounds and literal words he has uttered.
Wow! That would be a fantastic development, but to try and give a serious answer. Well, what are the limitations of current automatic translation

machines? The limitations are lexical, semantic, pragmatic, cultural, and idiomatic; the basic grammar and vocabulary are translated very well. Most of the differences between male and female communication are pragmatic and psycho-linguistic but if our analysis of language becomes so sophisticated that all the pragmatics are capable of being incorporated into a piece of software, then you might have got the male and female situation sorted. There may, indeed, be a serious answer to this one day.

Given all the rapid changes we have discussed so far, are you in a position to make any predictions about the development of the English language(s) or English Language Teaching?

No change. All the evidence for the foreseeable future indicates that the trends we see now will continue. All the places in the world where you might think there is 'threat' to English, they are all wanting to learn English. The Chinese are not bothered about promoting Chinese. Everybody wants to learn English. The reason is because of the *status quo* of the language and the economic forces at play. We know China is growing as a global economic and productive force and maybe in 50 or 100 years the situation will be reversed. However, in the immediate future there will be no change. I don't want to make any long term predictions; a lot depends on what will happen on the technological front. There, 'we ain't seen nothin' yet'. Think of the machine translating developments, the fact that the Internet will become more audio-based, and the already increased presence of other languages on the Internet. Only a few years ago the only language on the Internet was English but now there are 2,000 languages there, and Chinese is about to take over as the number 1 language in terms of the percentage users

Will the Internet be a death knell to minority or endangered languages?

On the contrary, the threat to minority language goes. In fact, the Internet welcomes minority languages and for some of them it has been and will be their salvation. For some minority and endangered languages, the Internet provides online speaking communities. The future of such languages is in the hands of the teenagers who will be the parents of the next generation of children. If you can motivate the teenagers to retain their ethnic languages, then these language are home and dry. And how do you do this? Through the Internet! How do teenagers want to learn? Through the Internet, of course. So, the Internet offers a real hope of salvation for lots of languages. Apart from those where it is too late.

Thank you, David, for sharing your views on some of the current/future trends in English as a global language and the impact of the Internet on both English and other languages. I am very pleased that we ended on such a positive note about what we call the 'C' in NATECLA (community languages) since they seemed to have fallen off the agenda in recent years.

RB NB If in transcribing the interview, I have misrepresented or under/over-emphasised David's views, my apologies.

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