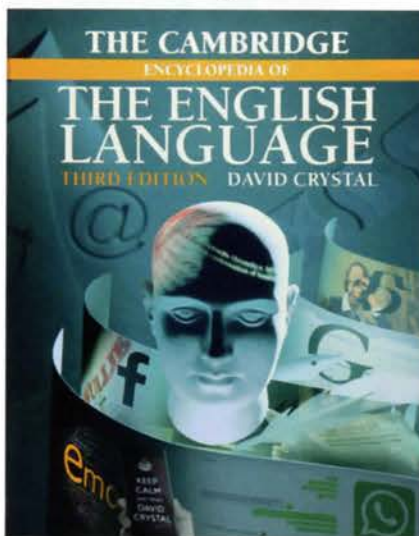# Keynote: CEELing my fate

David Crystal discusses the third edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*

Wandering around IATEFL 2019 in Liverpool, and wondering what to write about for this piece, I kept a note of the questions that people asked me. By far the commonest related to the third edition of The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language – CEEL (pronounced 'seal'), which came out at the beginning of this year. Why another edition? What's changed? What's new?

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The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language

In a word, everything. I don't envy teachers the task of keeping up to date with a language that's been changing as rapidly as English has. We only have to look at what is *not* in the earlier editions to see this. The first edition of *CEEL* came out in 1995: no mention of the internet! The second edition came out in 2003: so, the Web, emails, texting, blogging, and other digital developments of the time were all present. But 2003? No Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), or any of the new platforms we've seen in the past ten years (Instagram, WhatsApp...). And we mustn't forget the arrival of memes ('Keep calm...') and the proliferation of ludic linguistic sites that have developed cult

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followings, such as Lolcats and Doggolingo. All post-2003. They illustrate the emergence of new varieties of online discourse, often hugely radical in the way they play with traditional linguistic rules, and presenting issues that were totally unpredictable.

Language play

There must now be dozens of cult language games being played by unknown numbers of online aficionados. Take Doge (pronounced 'dohzh' or 'dohg'), which became popular in 2013, using a picture of a Shiba Inu, a breed of spitz that originated in Japan. Its visual style is bright colours and a quirky font. Its predominant linguistic style is to use two-word phrases, supplemented by some single-word items, such as 'wow', 'amaze' or 'scare'. The first word is usually one of the modifiers 'so', 'much', 'many', 'such' or 'very', followed by a word that these items don't usually go with, as in 'so wow', 'such happy', 'very eat' and 'many sunshine'. (This is harder to do than you might think.) One of my favourite examples is the way a group of enthusiasts got together to make a summary of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

What light. So breaks. Such east. Very sun. Wow, Juliet.
What Romeo. Such why. Very rose. Still rose.
Very balcony. Such climb.
Much love. So Propose. Wow, marriage.
Very Tybalt. Much stab. What do?
Such exile. Very Mantua. Much sad.
So, priest? Much sleeping. Wow, tomb.
Such poison. What dagger. Very dead.
Wow, end.

Then there's the unpredictability that comes from the nature of the online medium. In the old days, there was Speech and Writing, and we all knew where we were. Now there's a third medium, EMC (electronically mediated communication) or DMC (D for 'digitally') – which is making us rethink much of our traditional understanding of how language works. To take just one example: a Wikipedia page by its nature allows multiple inputs that can be written by people from different linguistic backgrounds, resulting in stylistic inconsistency. We might see 'gotten' in one paragraph and 'got' in another, for instance. And because a text can be added to at any time, we may see information from different time-frames juxtaposed – a page written in, say, 2008, is revised to include a comment from 2019 which refers to Brexit. Any social media platform would present us with similar issues.

This mention of Brexit is a further illustration of the unpredictable nature of language change. Who would ever have thought in 2003 that a new suffix would emerge, '-exit', which would generate dozens of coinages? My favourite was a moment when footballer David Beckham had to leave a game for some reason, and a newspaper the next day headed the story: 'Becksit'. Or who would ever have predicted that I'd need new spreads on English in a post-Brexit Europe, or on changes in the oratorical style of American presidents? (Believe me, folks. We're gonna make IATEFL great again.)

Fortunately, not everything was so unpredictable. I knew I had to update the statistics on global English use – now including all countries, not just those where English is a first or second language – and I expected a steady growth. But I was surprised by the totals that resulted. Between 1995 and 2003 we saw the use of English (in some shape or form) grow from 1.5 billion to 2 billion. I thought that trend would continue, and anticipated that, by 2018, 15 years on, we'd be looking at a total approaching 3 billion. In fact the stats came out at 2.3 billion. A continuing increase, certainly, but not at the same rate as before. A slowing down, possibly? Make what you will of that.

Culture and communication

I also knew I'd have to add extra pages on the growing cultural identities of what are still being called 'new Englishes' – though many are now no longer new. For CEEL I collected examples of conversational settings where a fluent English speaker (from country A) has failed to understand another fluent speaker (from country B) because one is unaware of the cultural meaning of what the other has said. People often underestimate the cultural knowledge of their listeners and readers. Because the words and phrases are so familiar and routine, they may not be aware that they are saying something that foreigners will not understand. They talk

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about the shops, streets, suburbs, bus routes, institutions, businesses, television programmes, newspapers, political parties and minority groups. They make jokes, quote proverbs, bring up childhood linguistic memories (such as nursery rhymes) and recall lyrics of popular songs. All this local knowledge is taken for granted and used in sentences without gloss. Visitors who hear such sentences, or read them in local newspapers, may need to have them explained. And it may take a while before people realise that there's a communication problem.

I described several such situations in the book – but not this one, which came to mind during the Liverpool Conference. One of the evening sessions took place in The Cavern, where the Beatles played. That entire quarter of Liverpool now is like a shrine, and there's a Beatles museum at the renovated Albert Dock, just next to the conference centre. The present-day Cavern was built next door to the site of the original venue and contains a replica of the former playing area. Both places have one thing in common: you have to go down many stairs into the bowels of the earth – hence the name.

But not everyone knows that, as illustrated by this conversation a couple of years ago between an Englishman and a foreign businessman (whose English was fluent) which went something like this:

A ... so Liverpool is famous for the Beatles.

B I've heard some of their songs. I like them a lot.

A They played in The Cavern.

B That must have been very difficult for them.

A Not really – though it was quite a small space.

B Why did they play there? Did it help them make a nice sound?

A Oh yes.
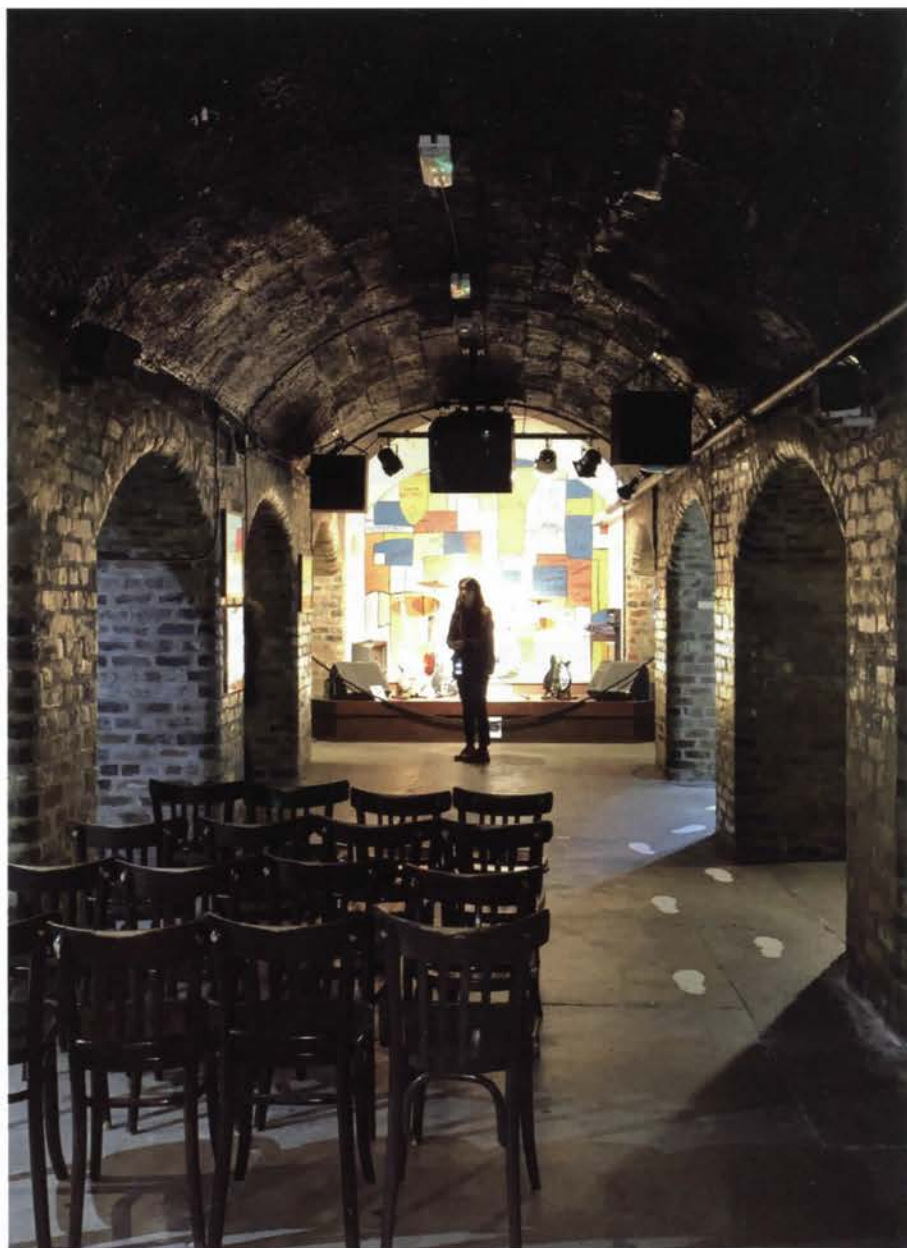
Replica of The Cavern Club at The Beatles Story: not wet or uncomfortable. Photo by Walton Burns.

B And did people come to see them there?

A Of course.

B It can't have been very comfortable.

A No, but nobody minded that.

B But didn't their instruments get very wet?

A Excuse me?

B I mean, damp.

A Sorry, I...

B Aren't the walls always wet?

A ?

It eventually dawned on A that B had heard 'The Cavern' as 'the cavern', or perhaps even 'a cavern'. He thought it was just a cave, presumably somewhere down by the river. In this case, the confusion was soon resolved, and B learned a cultural lesson. But I wonder how many such conversations take place where it isn't and B doesn't.

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Big data

Another area of special relevance to ELT is the arrival of 'big data', which has introduced a fresh climate into corpus linguistics, a field that has vastly grown since 2003. Once upon a time, we were impressed by corpora of a million words. Now we're talking multiple billions. And accessibility has greatly improved. Any teacher with a good internet connection can now readily access some of the huge

databases that are out there, to check a point of usage, to compare word frequency in different varieties (such as British vs American English), or – in a corpus such as Global Web-based English (GloWbE, pronounced 'globe') – to see how a word is used in some of the new Englishes.

The size of a corpus is a critical factor, especially when it comes to investigating words that are relatively low in frequency, or exploring collocations. Here's an example from *CEEL* that shows how results can differ among corpora. There are just over 16,000 instances of 'scheme' in the 100-million-word British National Corpus, with the top ten content-word collocates (occurring within four words on either side of 'scheme') as follows:

▌ 'pension', 'training', 'introduced', 'pilot', 'scheme' (as in 'move from a company scheme to a personal scheme'), 'colour', 'insurance', 'proposed', 'classification' and 'aid'.

When 'scheme' is searched in the much larger GloWbE, a very different picture emerges for British English:

▌ 'approved', 'occupational', 'mentoring', 'flat', 'eligible', 'overseas', 'defined', 'generous', 'labour' and 'tax-avoidance'.

It takes a contrast with American English to point out the salient feature of this list:

▌ 'blocking', 'URI' [primarily uniform resource identifier], 'offensive', 'defensive', 'socialist', 'alleged', 'evil', 'fraudulent', 'nefarious' and 'Ponzi'.

The negative tone of the American list contrasts with the overall positive tone in the UK.

It isn't just the large-scale domains that provide fresh perspectives. The (relatively) small-scale domains, such as the study of Shakespeare's language, have also been dramatically affected. The ongoing revision of the *Oxford English Dictionary* has made it necessary to revise all the statistics relating to Shakespeare's vocabulary. The figure for 'first recorded usages' in Shakespeare is still high – 1,000+ – but it's much lower than it used to be. Why? Because hundreds of texts from his time can now be searched online, and words that were once thought to be invented by Shakespeare (such as 'lonely') have now been found in earlier works. Still, it's enormously impressive. Most of us would be happy to add one word to the English language, let alone a thousand or more.

I suppose the most dramatic development has been the progress in technology that allowed me, for the first time, to give *CEEL* an online audio presence – not reading the whole thing, but providing spoken versions of the features that demand phonetic attention. I recorded all the texts from Old Middle, and Early Modern English in 'original pronunciation', as well as many of the spoken illustrations from Modern English (such as the prosodic and paralinguistic features). Active web links offer further illustration, such as IDEA, the International Dialects of English Archive, which provides hundreds of examples of present-day variations in accent from around the world, in voices of different ages and genders. An excellent source for listening comprehension.

'How long did it take?' I was asked several times at IATEFL 2019. There was something that had to be revised on virtually every page, and the new material added an extra fifty pages. It took over a year. But I survived, thanks to the brilliant editorial and production team at Cambridge University Press, and some fine design work on individual pages by Hilary Crystal. A book like this is a team effort, and it shows.

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