

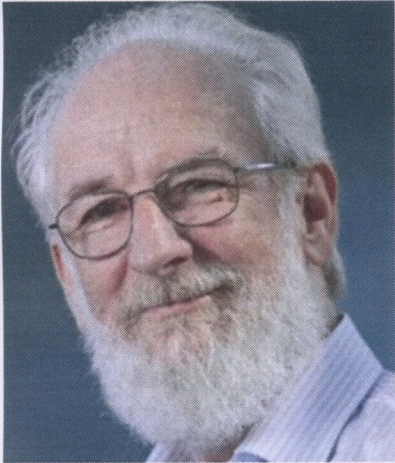
Le mot juste en anglais

Un blog destiné à tous les locuteurs français qui s'intéressent à la langue anglaise **DE DIVONNE-LES-BAINS À LOS ANGELES : UN PONT ENTRE LE MONDE FRANCOPHONE ET LA CULTURE ANGLO-AMÉRICAINE**

David Crystal - linguist of the month of April 2018

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

*In March, **Grant Hamilton**, translator, author of Les trucs d'anglais qu'on a oublié de vous enseigner and regular collaborator with *Le Mot juste en anglais*, spoke with **David Crystal**, one of the world's most eminent English-language linguists [*]. Below is a shortened transcript of their conversation.*



David Crystal
The Interviewee



Grant Hamilton
The Interviewer



As the author, coauthor, or editor of over 120 books, could you tell us how you go about choosing your subjects?



The vast majority come up in a conversation like this, actually. A publisher or someone at a conference will say, is there a book on such or such a topic? And you end up writing one. The big encyclopedias were written precisely because somebody said, have you come across a book in which language is presented with pictures? And once you start thinking about it, it's a sexy idea, and that's how the encyclopedia came about. The reason why they are so many things like this waiting to be written is because language is always changing. Whatever English and French were like yesterday, they are different today and they will be different tomorrow. There is always a demand to keep pace.



Very daunting, though, to take a subject like English grammar, as you did in "Making Sense : The Glamorous Story of English Grammar", which I reviewed on this blog, and write about it. You must be very focused, or very organized, or have a huge team of researchers helping you.



Oh no, I never use researchers or assistants. I'm not a good collaborator. I used to, years and years and years ago, but it proved increasingly difficult simply because people's timetables don't match easily. Sometimes it's much quicker just to sit down and write rather than do it jointly.

Like many linguists, I collect things—a usage, a spelling, a punctuation, anything. You keep notes all the times. I always have a drawer full of stuff ... Internet headlines, newspaper headlines, articles, blog posts... You try and write something that hasn't been done before. In the grammar book case, as you noticed, the distinctiveness is bringing together the language acquisition dimension to grammar, as well the descriptive side (what is grammar like?) and the explanatory side (how did the study of grammar develop?). That was the concept: bring together those three domains, which are normally kept separate.



And it made the book all the harder to write because you're addressing several audiences, really.



Yes, and then it becomes an interesting literary exercise: how to present the material in such a way that you can keep these different interests separate and yet make the whole topic accessible. Every book, I think, has got to have a literary dimension to it. That's the

difference between being just a scholar and being a writer and a scholar.



What in your opinion is the border between acceptable use of language and unacceptable use of language?



That's what linguistics is: it tries to define that borderline between acceptability and unacceptability.

There are cases where something is completely unacceptable. Nobody in the English-speaking world puts the definite article after the noun and says "cat the," whereas in a language like Romanian that is perfectly acceptable. Then there are cases—never very many, only about two or three percent of usage—where you have a debate over whether something is acceptable. Linguists spend a fair amount of time presenting and discussing these fuzzy cases.

Where the prescriptivists [1] go horribly wrong is that they think the only issues worth talking about are these fuzzy issues. There are far more important issues in relation to grammar, or for that matter pronunciation.



What would you say to a translator about controversial grammatical usage? Should somebody translating French into English use the singular "their" or "they"? Do they start using this at a different point from writers?



The reason why this is an issue is because usage has begun to change. It's tricky to decide at which point that usage is not going to raise hackles anymore. When I'm writing scripts for the radio, for instance, I make sure not to put in anything that can raise the hackles of slightly older listeners. For instance, I avoid split infinitives. Not because I think they are wrong, but simply because I don't want to get piles of letters from people saying, "Oh, you used a split infinitive!" and forgetting what I was talking about. The thing about "they" is that we're in the middle of a process of acceptance, but only about thirty percent into it.



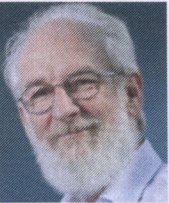
I have said on Twitter that translators should be late adopters of grammatical change.



That's very wise. One should be conservative in these matters. Those who are avant-garde will find you slightly old-fashioned, but they're not going to complain, whereas older people may be upset. I think the point about "they" and "their" is that the same thing happened to English in the Middle Ages with the second person pronoun. Like French, where there was "tu" and "vous," and "vous" was plural but gradually came to be used as a singular pronoun of respect, English had "thou" and "you," and "you" began to be used for the singular. In Shakespeare for instance, whenever anybody switches from thou to you, it's exactly the same as when somebody switches between vous and tu in French. At the time of the change, probably, people worried about it, but nobody would anymore. One day "they" for singular and "they" for plural will be just as normal as "you" for singular and "you" for plural.



Do you have the impression that English is changing faster than before?



Speed of change is difficult to monitor because the records of the past are not as clear as they might be, and change doesn't happen in a steady, continuous movement. It has peaks and troughs. But we are now beginning to get a handle on change thanks to the arrival of very big corpora of usage, some of which are now historical in origin.

For certain types of grammatical constructions, there is a suggestion of a speeding-up. For example, the use of the present continuous, rather than the present simple, "I'm going" versus "I go." These days you can say quite happily, "I'm having a meeting next week," whereas thirty years ago it would have been "I have a meeting next week." Of course the classic case is the McDonald's slogan "I'm loving it," which thirty years ago would have been "I love it."



Are you familiar with Quebec's language laws?



Yes I am indeed.



What do you think about trying to redress the power balance between two languages the way this law seeks to do?



We're talking identity now, not intelligibility. When you go around the language world, you'll find lots of parallel examples. There are two forces driving language: the need for intelligibility and the need for identity. And they can be in conflict. The more a country becomes culturally heterogeneous, the more the language and its dialects become absolutely center stage. It's very naïve of a country not to grasp this nettle, recognize it, have a minister for languages, or something of that kind. We don't have one in Britain, and the problems are becoming increasingly noticeable as we become more multicultural.



So language laws are not good or bad, they just exist?



That's exactly right. It's very difficult to extrapolate from one country to another, because situations are so different.



I have noticed what seems to me an adolescent accent in Quebec French. Do you know of any such cases?



Adolescent speech is a somewhat neglected area of language acquisition studies. Adolescence is an age when kids are struggling to establish their identity in relation to their peer group and where their accent is therefore going to modulate, quite noticeably and quite fast sometimes, in relation to what they perceive to be the norms of the peer group and what's desirable and undesirable. This has been clearly noticed in East London, for instance, where adolescents are meeting up and mixing with large numbers of immigrants, and adopting the rhythm of their accents. And at an older level, it might die away a bit, but at adolescent age it's there.



I have heard you mention how English speakers tend to be monolingual, but that the default around the world is to be multilingual. Do you think this has impoverished the culture of English-speaking people?



In a way, although impoverishment is only relevant if lack of ability impinges on your well-being or quality of life. When English speakers travel, they don't feel impoverished—everybody speaks English, don't they? So why should they learn another language? And conversely, we don't have many immigrants in Britain who haven't learned English. So what's the point?

But things are changing. The demand for foreign languages is increasing. And after Brexit, it's probably going to be even greater. So increasingly I hear people saying things like, "I wish I knew more languages."



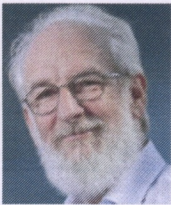
I was not thinking about material impoverishment, but more the failure to benefit from the cognitive aspects of speaking several languages.



When people start saying they should learn a foreign language, they will be motivated initially about earning extra money or having a better quality of life. Eventually issues of identity will arise, and issues of cognitive growth will arise, but they tend to be later rather than earlier in my experience.



We've noticed in worldwide surveys with the arrival of Trump that that the reputation and aura of the United States have taken a hit. Do you think this could have an impact on the prestige of the English language?

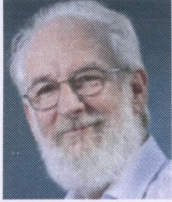


Not anymore. Once upon a time maybe, when the total number of speakers in the world was relatively low and the proportion in America was relatively high. But things have changed. There are now 2.3 billion speakers of English in the world, some 230 million of them in the United States. There are more in India, and will probably soon be more in China. Numbers count in the study of language. Yes, America may have lost some of its shine, but look what's happening in other parts of the world.

The other point I would make here is that Trump, from a language point of view—nothing to do with politics—has been rather unfairly pilloried for the nature of his oratory. People compare him with Obama and others and say, Trump isn't an orator. But Trump has a political speaking style that is closer to everyday conversation than any previous politician has ever dared to do. And the result has been to win him votes. So although America might lose out in terms of what he's saying, I don't think English is going to lose out in terms of the way he is saying it.



Do you have an opinion about "Globish," or simplified English for non-native speakers?



There have always been attempts to simplify English, and Globish is one. But simplification really has gone too far. Imagine a business meeting which tried to restrict itself to a Globish vocabulary. You wouldn't get very far.



English speakers wouldn't know which words to use and which words to avoid.



There is an interesting point here: people tend to underestimate the size of their vocabulary. Try having a French speaker who says he has a poor command of English go through a selection of pages from a dictionary and tick the words he knows, then add them up and multiply by the number of pages in the dictionary.

You'll be amazed at the total. He could actually know 10,000 words. People know more English than they think.



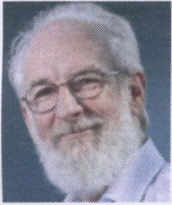
I am interested to hear what you think is the future of Welsh.



Welsh is the success story of the twentieth century as far as minority and endangered languages are concerned. There was a hugely effective activist movement in the 1960s and 70s. It generated a Welsh television channel, and two Welsh language acts, which helped to protect the language and give it a public presence in a way that it didn't have before. So there has been a steady increase in the knowledge and use of Welsh. Certainly around here where I live, sixty percent of the population can speak Welsh.



Is that success in your view?



Yes, absolutely, compared with a few decades ago.



What is the role of Welsh in daily life? Is it the language that people speak at work?



In some domains. You cannot get a job with the local government authority, for example, unless you either speak Welsh or are prepared to learn it. In private business, of course, it's still optional. And so you will hear it quite routinely spoken, though not enough to satisfy the real keen supporters.



Do you have any advice for someone seeking to learn English?



The more one can encounter the language in its various forms—online, in mobile form, and so on—the better. The future of a language and the future of a society which finds that language important are in the hands of the younger generation. So I think the more one can use the Internet and all its facilities, the better

really.