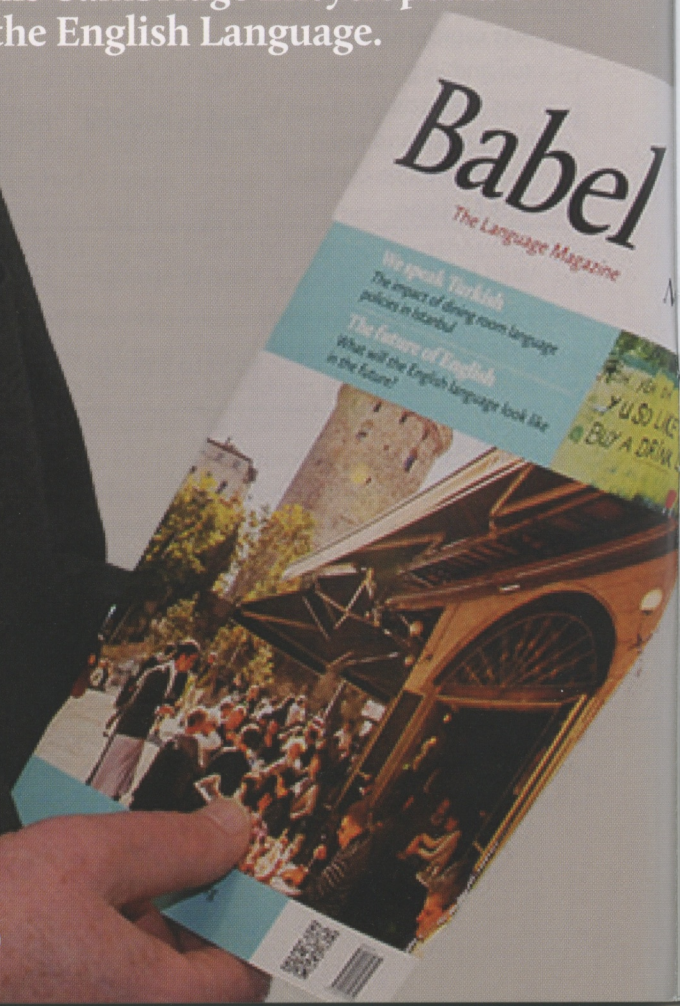


David

English Language teacher **Vanja Karanovic**, of Sixth Form College Farnborough, takes the opportunity to talk to Babel's Linguistic Consultant David Crystal about the new edition of his Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language.



Interview with Crystal

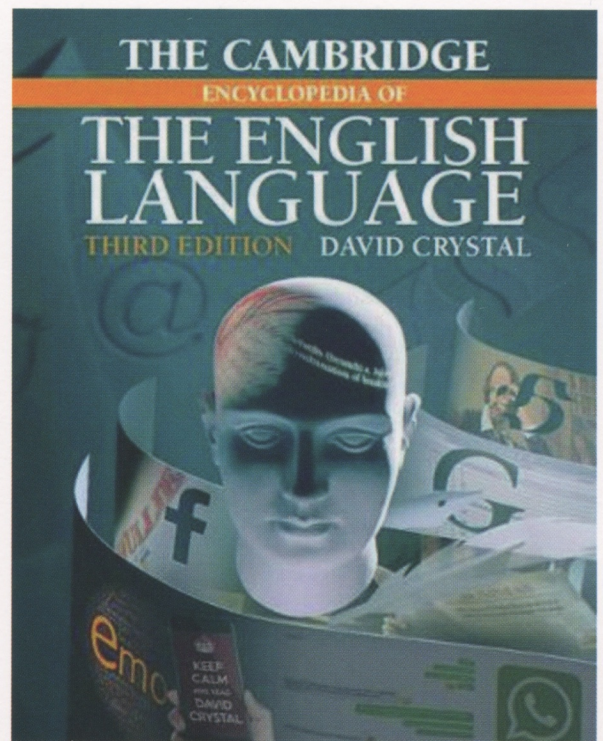
We're here to talk about the recent changes

to *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. What was your inspiration for an encyclopedia of the English language in the first place?

The original inspiration was when my 15-year-old nephew asked "Is there a book on language with pictures in it?" – language in general, that is, not just on English. It was as simple as that. I thought "There must be one" and I looked around, but couldn't find any.

This surprised me, as language is surely a pictorial thing: language is people, and people make pictures and take part in pictorial events. So, I thought up the idea for *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, with pictures and text complementing each other. Then I tried to find a publisher.

I went to the publishers I was writing with in those days, but they turned it down. They couldn't believe that it was possible to pictorialise 'language', which they thought was too abstract a subject. I then approached a picture publisher: they could see the pictorial side, but thought the idea was too intellectual! In the end, Cambridge University Press took it on, and it was published in 1987, but even CUP was very cautious about the book's potential, and wanted to keep the costs down. For instance, they didn't give me full colour. I was allowed the use of a second colour only – red or variants of red – and if you look at the first edition, it's really quite tricky at times to see what's going on, because for a map you really need four colours and with only two you have to devise various kinds of shading, which isn't the clearest way of doing things. And captions become more complicated, as you sometimes



Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language third edition

have to explain in text the colours that are missing in a picture. They let me have full colour for the second edition, in 1997, and then for the third, which came out in 2010. Why?

Because the book sold better than they were expecting. In fact, one year, I was told, it sold more copies than the CUP translation of the Bible! And because it went so well they thought “Maybe an English language encyclopedia would do even better”, and that’s how CEEL was born – the child, as it were, of its more general parent.

We are now on the third edition of the Encyclopedia of the English Language. Why was it necessary to have a third edition now, 15 years after the last one?

Because of the time factor. The first edition was in 1995, and if you look at that now, one of the most noticeable things is that the internet is conspicuous by its absence. The main motivation for the second edition, in 2003, was to take into account the electronic revolution. But think now of what has happened over the past 15 years – no Facebook in 2003, no YouTube, no Twitter, no WhatsApp, none of the amazing developments that have made the digital world so different from what it was in those days. And then you look at the way linguistics has changed over the last 15 years – the ‘big data’ revolution, for instance. There are all kinds of huge corpora now, and better search tools, which has all got to be taken into account. And when you look at every area of language study you suddenly realise that there has been great change everywhere in the last 15 years – in the study of gender, for instance, or in the development of cognitive linguistics.

The new edition could have been any time in the past couple of years. Why this year? We just had a meeting one day and CUP felt that the time was right. I always leave it up to a publisher to decide the best date



for a new edition. And once that decision was made, new avenues opened up, especially because the technology has moved on. The biggest change has of course been in multimedia: the book is now online for the first time, and that has allowed weblinks, additional material for each page, an online quiz, and above all an audio accompaniment for the early English texts and phonetic descriptions. Cambridge can handle all this now in a way that just wasn’t possible a few years ago, so it all seemed to come together last year.

As an A Level English Language teacher, I felt my students needed a reference book about the English Language that reflected the most recent changes, so I was delighted when the 3rd edition came out.

Yes, language changes so fast, and things have to be brought up to date. Take the statistics of

English as a global language, for instance: how many speakers of English are there in the countries of the world? The 2003 figures are now very out of date, and the new edition shows a significant increase. This, of course, is what takes the time. It took me a year to prepare the third edition. People often think of a new edition as just tweaking an old one. This is far more than a tweak. There are more than 50 new pages in the new edition – at roughly a thousand words a page, that’s 50,000 words. Pictures replace some of those words, but, even so, it’s almost like writing a new book.

I would just like to go back to the technological advances and new technologies that have, I guess, featured the most in the new edition. Could you explain some of the main changes to the English language itself?

“I think the new technology opens up all sorts of dimensions that weren’t there before – sometimes in a very unpredictable way. The fact that we have instant messaging now, with applications like WhatsApp, presents a new dynamic among the people using it that has immediate linguistic consequences, such as sentences becoming shorter, sentence sequences separated by interventions, and new developments in punctuation.”

I think the new technology opens up all sorts of dimensions that weren’t there before – sometimes in a very unpredictable way. The fact that we have instant messaging now, with applications like WhatsApp, presents a new dynamic among the people using it that has immediate linguistic consequences, such as sentences becoming shorter, sentence sequences separated by interventions, and new developments in punctuation. The routine absence of full stops at the end of statements, for instance, has led to a usage where their presence now means something different: a full stop adds a sort of emotional charge to the interaction. And when you start exploring all the things that are happening, you realise there are quite a few, and that the technological section is going to become larger than you might have first thought. Semantic

developments like this are pretty unpredictable.

Each new technology has to be taken in its own right. You can’t generalise. When I wrote *Language and the Internet* years ago (it came out in 2001), I wondered whether, as the internet developed, it would become more homogeneous or more heterogeneous. At the time, I wasn’t quite sure whether it was better to say ‘the language of the Internet’ or ‘the languages [meaning varieties] of the Internet’. I left that open in the early book, talking cautiously about ‘varieties’ of internet language. These days it’s clear that the ‘varieties’ model is the better explanation. Each new technology brings a whole cluster of new varieties, and it’s the heterogeneity that I see increasingly now, rather than the different technologies of the Internet becoming more homogeneous in their use of

language. Twitter hashtags, and the way that the hashtag convention has broadened its semantic scope, is a current example.

And a lot of the users of those platforms are from a younger generation and they manipulate language in an extraordinary way because they will move from platform to platform adjusting their language accordingly. And you’re right. The styles are very different and they know the rules of each context.

Yes, and the rules that they are intuitively recognising or evolving themselves are very different from the rules that I know. I’m two generations or more before them, but even people who are just one generation earlier find it difficult to keep up, so this is where it’s very important to gather as much data as we can to tap into current intuitions about what’s going on. For instance, there was a study done a little while ago on the use of ellipsis dots (...) in messaging. For me, these dots simply mean that something has been left out or left unfinished. So, if I send a message to you saying “So how’s it going...?” I’m just being informal. But a youngster receiving this message would often read in a different implication: “What is it about me that he has in mind?” The ellipses dots imply a serious intent behind the question. That’s a development I have no personal intuition about. I can only get a sense of this kind of change by talking to young people.

They are the source of data and explanations of language use and they enjoy language change for that reason.

They love it. One of the things about A Level English

Language is that it brings to their conscious mind things that they know and had taken for granted and rarely had the chance or the motivation to explore.

And they didn't think it was relevant because they would have possibly been told off for abbreviations and met with a lack of understanding.

Exactly. We've gone through that stage now. Ten years ago, the main worry, the main discussion, the main talking points of classes that I would go into would be the mythology of texting – the fact that parents and others would be telling them off all the time. People like John Humphrys were saying that text-message abbreviations are absolutely awful, destroying the language. We're past that now. And anyway, the novelty of those abbreviations has worn off. One of the things I sometimes do when I go into schools is ask the teacher to get the students to collect some text messages for analysis. When I made such a visit a while back there wasn't a single abbreviation to be seen. I asked the students "Where have your abbreviations gone?" and they looked at me oddly. "We used to do that when we were younger", was the reply. There are several reasons. Predictive text makes it so much easier not to abbreviate. And one lad said to me "I stopped abbreviating when my dad started"!

You mention global English and the development of new Englishes. Does the development of new Englishes in terms of their vocabulary or even grammar affect British English? Do we see a change in British English due to more variation around the world?

It's a bit too soon to say, as far as the new Englishes are concerned;

but, of course, the traditional pattern is for one variety to influence another, depending upon which one gains more respect. The obvious example is American English influencing British English in areas like spelling and punctuation, and to some extent vocabulary and grammar as well; but as you look at the new Englishes of the world it's difficult to say what the long-term effect is going to be. There's quite a lot of interaction in vocabulary, but so far not much influence in terms of grammar.

I was mainly referring to the now frequent use of stative verbs in the continuous tense in British English. Does that form originate from American English?

No. The development of the continuous tense is something that's been going on over a long period of time in British English, regardless of the global situation. An extra dynamic does come from, for example, Indian English, where the present continuous has long been used in ways that British English is now moving towards. An Indian person who says "I am knowing the answer", "I am thinking of what you are saying", "I am remembering it", and so on is just doing what is now taking place in British English. I suspect that this trend is taking place in other Englishes too, but descriptive data is hard to come by – though the situation is improving thanks to easier travel, the Internet, and other available media. I sense a coming together of a feature that would previously have been used only to mark regional identity – in effect making it a part of standard English.

So, are the different varieties of English around the world seen as non-standard varieties?

You can't generalise. It depends on which part of the world you're in. In some places, it's quite clear that there are two varieties. The non-standard is in the street, the standard is what you learn in school – in Singapore, for example. The change has been that, whereas once upon a time the non-standard would have been considered completely unworthy, times have changed, and national identities have become more confident, especially as literatures have begun to develop that use the non-standard form in novels and poems and plays in a creative way. The non-standard then achieves some prestige, and people begin to see it as a respectable alternative to the standard form.

What one has to remember is that the two forms have different functions. Standard English is there to guarantee intelligibility around the English-speaking world, whereas the non-standard forms are there to express the identity of the particular part of the world that uses them. But there's a fuzzy boundary between the two. Non-standard forms can seep into standard English just as non-standard forms can be affected by standard English. The literary world is critical here. Remember that standard English means essentially the written language, not the spoken language. Some people do speak standard English naturally, but most don't. So, if people start using non-standard English in their written language then this immediately begins to standardise it and gives it a sense of validation. You see it now in the West African novel or Caribbean poetry or short stories from Singaporean writers. And what is especially interesting is that the writers no longer feel it necessary to explain what's going

on. In the early days, writers who wrote a story about West Africa using non-standard English would feel they had to explain to the reader what they were doing: 'said the man in creole', and the like. These days many don't think it necessary to do that.

Earlier, you alluded to the fact that people are becoming less prescriptive or are recognising the need for change. However, there are still people out there who would not welcome the influence of American English on British English, or change in general. What would you say to those people?

I'm afraid I don't say anything, these days. It's not really possible to talk to fundamentalists and hope to persuade them. You can try, but you're not going to get anywhere, so if somebody is a dyed-in-the-wool prescriptivist, there really isn't a point. It's so much a part of their being. It's not that their prescriptivism has no value. If somebody reacts violently to a particular usage, that's pretty good evidence that the usage is becoming general in society. But it's important to give prescriptivism the right definition. A lot of people think that prescriptivism means 'insisting on rules'. No. Prescriptivism means 'insisting on unauthentic rules'. If it's an authentic rule, there's no problem. If I teach you that the definite article must go before the noun in English, that's a prescription, but it's a valid one. Prescriptivism in the negative sense is when people insist on rules that have no authentic basis in the usage of the community.

Why is someone a prescriptivist? In the days when I used to enter into dialogue with prescriptively-minded people, I used to ask them that question. I remember asking one chap

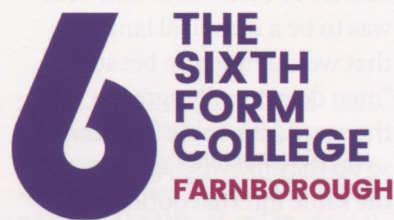
"Why are you so upset about split infinitives?", and he replied "I'll tell you why, young man. Because when I was in school, one split infinitive – one whack, two split infinitives – two whacks. I suffered for my language". He was a product of his time, and one has to accept that. And that is how prescriptivism has survived, from one generation to the next, through the way attitudes to language were taught in schools. But now there are so many English teachers who are not prescriptive in their temperament, and who have developed a greater linguistic awareness and a greater sense of the importance of variation, it's quite possible that prescriptivism will become a historical phenomenon within a couple of generations – just as it took a couple of generations for it to emerge in the first place, at the end of the 18th century.

My final question might be a bit difficult to answer. Do you have any thoughts on how English might change in the next 10 years?

Predicting the future of languages is virtually impossible. All I can say is that what's happening at the moment is going to continue. The rapid rate of change is going to carry on as the Internet continues to evolve. I don't see any radical change of direction in anything that's been noticed hitherto – but there are still unpredictabilities. Who would have predicted ten years ago the change in oratory that we associate with Donald Trump, for instance? Who would have predicted ten years ago the arrival of a new suffix in English that arose from Brexit, the way '-exit' is being used to generate new words? Who would have predicted ten years ago that the gender movement would have

developed to the extent that it now has, with so many more suggestions being made about gender-neutral pronouns and gender-neutral usage to avoid a clear male/female distinction? Who would have predicted the fashion for emojis ten years ago? So, there are unexpected things happening, and as I said earlier, it's these things that have motivated the considerable increase in the size of CEEL. And at the same time as new things are happening, some of the old things are dying away. Emoticons and – as I mentioned earlier – text-messaging abbreviations aren't as common as they used to be, for instance.

So, what's going to happen in the next ten years? I have no idea. But that's the fascination of the subject, for me. People often ask "Why are you a linguist?", "What's the most interesting thing?" and I always answer "Language change and language variation". Whatever English was like yesterday, it's different today, and it'll be different tomorrow. That's the best bit. ¶



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