

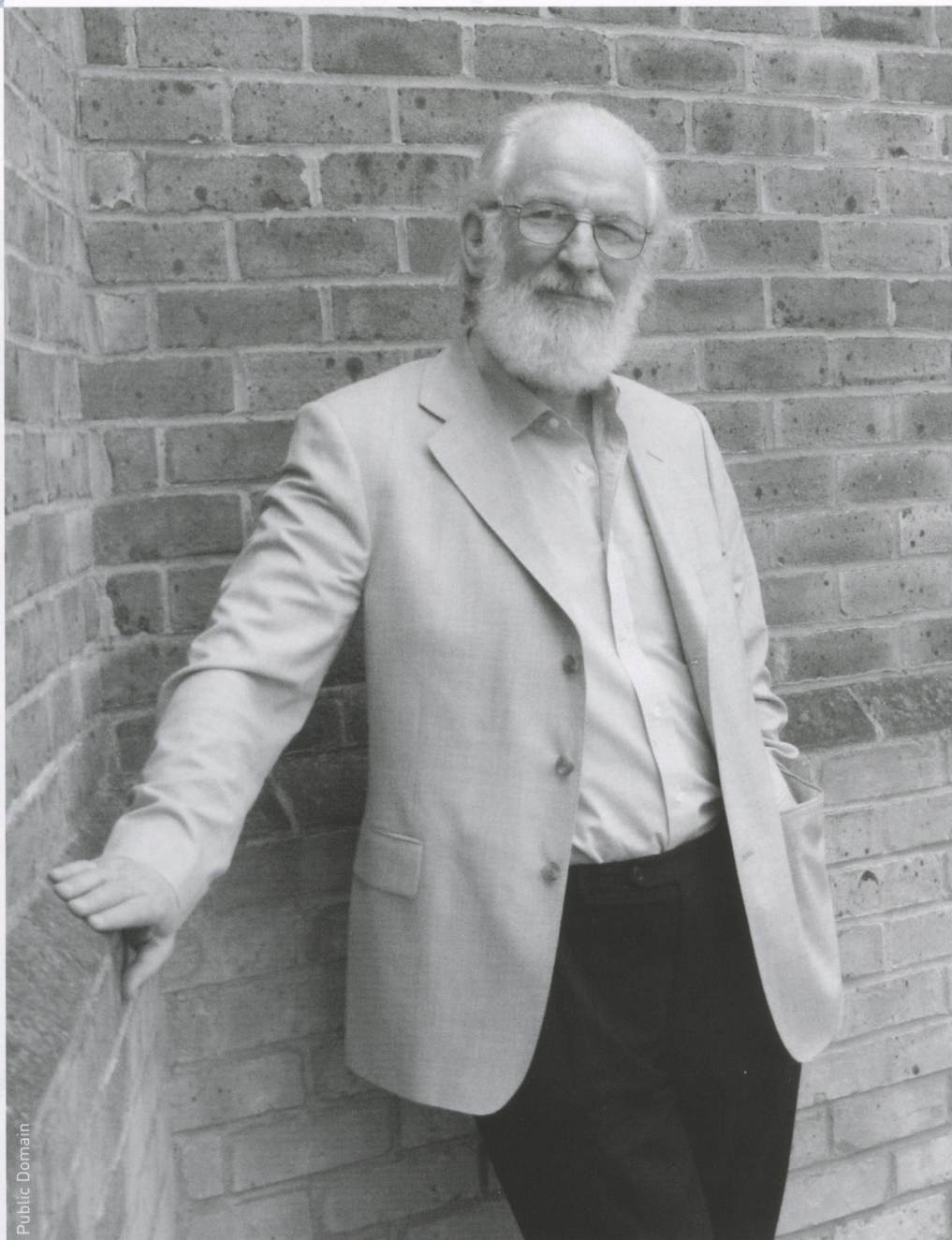
David Crystal

INTERVIEW

David Crystal is a world-renowned linguist and writer. He has done more than anyone else to explain and bring to life ideas about language for people who aren't themselves linguists. Here he answers questions put to him by *emagazine*, on behalf of A Level students.

1. Why study Linguistics?

Because it's the most insightful way of studying language. Thanks to its objective, systematic, and comprehensive approach, it gives us ways of talking about language that are precise and internationally recognised, and research procedures that are reliable and replicable, allowing us to arrive at conclusions that can be stated with confidence. The findings can then be used by non-linguists for the investigation and solution of a wide range of problems where language plays a part in their daily lives – a process that is the motivation for the field of applied linguistics. It also provides answers to many of the questions about language that are asked out of simple curiosity by people from all walks of life – questions about child language acquisition, accents



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and dialects, the names of people and places, and indeed any of the topics that are covered by the school A Level syllabus in English language. We might sum this all up by saying, as people often do, that linguistics is the science of language, as long as we remember that language means languages – all 6000+ of them – and don't interpret this to mean that linguists have no interest in the aesthetic and artistic areas of language use (as seen for example in literary stylistics).

2. Prescriptivism/ descriptivism – most linguists are firmly in the latter camp. Is there ever any tiny bit of you that feels that some things are simply wrong, or too important to shared communication to go along with?

It's first important to remember what prescriptivism actually is. It's not 'the teaching of rules', for we all have to do

that when (for example) teaching a foreign language – and indeed we might say that the aim of linguistics is to establish what the rules are that govern (Chomsky's term was generate) acceptable language use. Prescriptivism is 'the teaching of unauthentic rules' – rules that go against the facts of language use – and in everyday life the condemnation by one person of another's usage on the grounds of personal taste. So I can't think of any circumstance where I would want to say that a usage evidenced by a section of society is 'wrong'. A usage would be wrong only if it went against the rules that everyone uses – saying that in English the definite article should follow the noun, for instance. Otherwise, the notion of correctness has been replaced in linguistic thinking by the notion of appropriateness. I would certainly have no problem saying that a usage was inappropriate in a given situation.

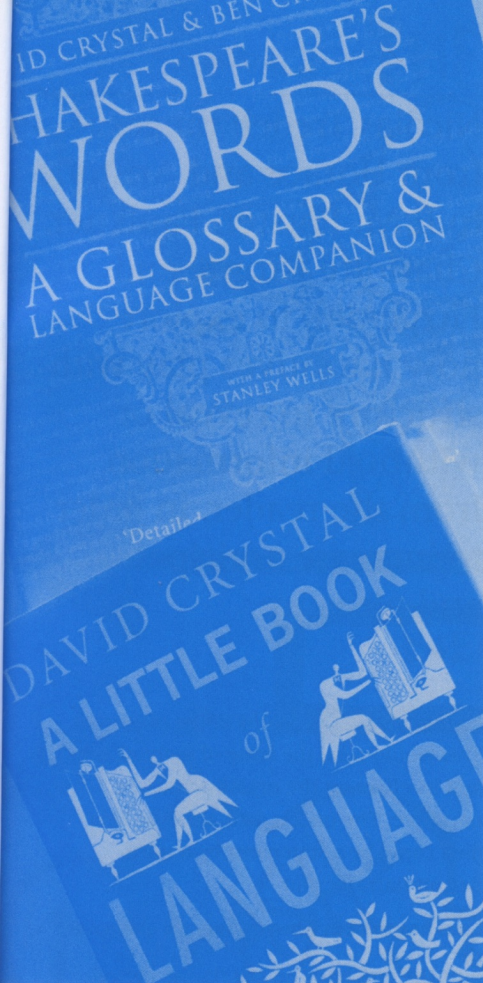
But you mention 'shared communication', and here it is possible to see circumstances where I would indeed join with others

in saying that a usage was not just inappropriate, but plain wrong. These are all cases where professional language users fail to respect the linguistic standards needed for their use to be successful. Examples: an announcer at a railway station or on a ferry boat who speaks too quickly for the information to be assimilated by customers; or radio presenters who drop their voice at a critical moment, so that listeners hear that this was Symphony no 3 in D major by – 'who'?

3. You talk and write about a huge range of topics within linguistics. Which aspect do you currently feel most interested in?

I've always found myself in the situation of 'demand and supply'. Most of the topics have been the result of projects that have arisen as a result of someone asking me a question or wanting a solution to a problem. I would never have got into clinical linguistics had it not been for





a phone call from the Royal Berkshire Hospital asking for help with the assessment of a language-disordered child. I would never have got into internet linguistics had it not been for an email from an advertising company asking if it was possible to block inappropriate ads turning up on websites. And, I would never have got into Shakespearean linguistics if I hadn't received a call from the editor of *Around the Globe* – the former name of the magazine of Shakespeare's Globe in London – asking me if I would write a series of articles on aspects of Shakespeare's language. That's very much my main current interest now, because it led to the book *Shakespeare's Words*, co-authored with actor son Ben, and the associated website www.shakespeareswords.com – and, as everyone knows, once you get involved in a website you are there for life, managing it, improving it, getting rid of glitches, adding to it... We add a new feature every year, on 23 April, in response to demand, and each one is a timely but time-consuming mini-research project. In 2019, in addition to the basic Glossary, we added a Thesaurus. This year it's Word Families – words and their derived forms. (How does Shakespeare exploit the word love? love-broker, loveshaft, love-sick, unloved...) Next year we'll be adding an audio dimension, so that people can hear the glossary words spoken in modern English (bearing in mind

the needs of foreign language learners) and original pronunciation. And after that... who knows?

4. What's your single biggest bit of advice to A Level students starting out on their course?

Be original. And that means: start collecting. Keep a sharp eye and ear open for examples of usage in your own local world – your family, friends, school, shops, streets, social media... or if you go on holiday. Start noticing things and writing them down – or taking a photo of them. It's all so much easier these days, with modern technology, than when I started out doing exactly that. Most of the sidebars in my encyclopaedias began as casual observations. Indeed once I wrote a whole book in that way. It was called *By Hook or by Crook*, and its subtitle was *A Journey in Search of English*. I wandered around Wales and nearby parts of England, and recorded what I saw and heard. Tourist linguistics, one might call it! It was an interesting literary exercise too. Normally, when I write a book, I have a pretty clear vision of the beginning, the middle, and the end. I might even write a synopsis of the whole thing in advance, to show to a publisher. But with that book I had no idea, when I ended Chapter 1, what was going to happen in Chapter 2, because I hadn't been there yet! And so it was for the whole book. Well, you're not writing a book, but you are going to write essays, do projects, and answer exam questions which cry out for original ideas. And there's nothing impresses an examiner more (they tell me) than reading something in an answer that they've never seen before. (As long as it's relevant to the question, of course!)

5. What do you predict or anticipate to be the biggest new developments of the English language over the next few decades?

It's never possible to predict the future, when it comes to language. Who would have thought, a year ago, that 2020's 'words of the year' were going to be words like self-isolate and lockdown? Or, a decade ago, that there would be a new suffix in English, -exit? These are tiny details, but the same applies to bigger issues. Language reflects society, so any question about the future of language is actually a question about the way society (in the broadest sense,

including politics, economics, religion, culture...) is going to change. Lacking any ability to answer that question, all I can say is that the two major trends of the moment will continue. Global English varieties will continue to develop and institutionalise (i.e. produce dictionaries, style manuals, literary works, and so on), and new varieties will emerge, especially in countries which have no colonial history of first or second-language English speaking (such as China, Mexico, Sweden...). Internet technology will continue to grow, with largely unpredictable linguistic consequences – other, I suppose, than the expected growth in oral/aural transmission, and improved facilities in speech to text, text to speech, automatic translation, robot accents, and the like, which will undoubtedly lead to new areas of interest in teaching and research. At the moment the Internet is still a predominantly graphic medium: we type most of the time. But that will change.

David Crystal is honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Bangor, and works from his home in Holyhead as a writer, editor, lecturer, and broadcaster. The author of over 100 books on the English language and linguistics, he received an OBE for services to the English language in 1995.

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- Dan Clayton: At War with the Pedants: an Interview with Henry Hitchings, *emagazine* 53, September 2011
- David Crystal – An Interview, *emagazine* 4, Summer 1999
- David Marsh: Grammar and Style - Different Rules for Different Occasions, *emagazine* 63, February 2014
- John McWhorter Speaks, *emagazine* 79, February 2018

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- David Crystal at the *emagazine* Conference