

The Opinion Pages

Schott's Vocab

A miscellany of modern words and phrases

David Crystal Guest Post: Who's John Wayne?

August 4, 2010 9:00 am

Schott's Vocab is delighted to present a guest post from David Crystal – writer, lecturer, and broadcaster on language and linguistics, and Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bangor in Wales.

*The author of a range of books, Professor Crystal has recently published *A Little Book of Language* – which, in the spirit of its predecessor, Ernst Gombrich's *A Little History of the World* – aims to introduce the subject of language and languages, in all their glorious diversity, to a teenage audience. In this post, Professor Crystal offers a look at the curious challenges of writing for modern teenagers, and modern audiences in general.*

Who He?

When you write a book for young readers – I mean chronologically young, not just “young at heart” (which means all of us) – you have to get the level right, and that can be tricky when it comes to information books. Getting the language right is not such a big deal, if you know about child language acquisition. Far more difficult is to get the knowledge level right.

Following in the footsteps of Ernst Gombrich's marvellous *A Little History of the World*, I aimed my *Little Book of Language* at young teenagers. And to be sure I'd written it at the right level, I had the draft manuscript read by a 12-year-old. “Underline anything you don't understand,” I told her. I was expecting to get the manuscript back with some difficult words underlined – words where I'd

perhaps overestimated the lexical knowledge of someone that age. What I wasn't expecting was the underlining that accompanied my chapter on personal names. I gave some examples of pseudonyms. "Do you know who Marion Morrison is?" I had written, and followed up my question with "You'll know him better as John Wayne."

My young reader underlines John Wayne. "Why have you underlined him?" I ask her. "Who's John Wayne?" she says. I am temporarily at a loss for words. "You don't know who John Wayne is??" "No." "What about *Stagecoach*?" "What?" "You've never seen *Stagecoach*?" I explain the fantastic chase at the end of the film. Her face is totally blank. I realize there is a yawning chasm between our cultural mindsets.

It took a while to find some pseudonyms she did recognize. I couldn't, it seemed, even rely on characters from television soaps, as she and her friends didn't watch them. Eventually I got a result – Eminem (Marshall Bruce Mathers) and David Tennant (David McDonald), and after checking them out with some other youngsters, they went in. But for how long? She knew David Tennant because of *Dr Who* – but since the end of 2009 he no longer plays Dr Who. Does that mean the name will disappear from young people's radar? And in any case, this was a book aimed at young people with an interest in language anywhere. How widely known is *Dr Who* in English-speaking parts of the world outside the UK? And is he known in translation in non-English-speaking territories?

It's always a problem, finding cultural references that travel. Very few politicians are known outside their own country – the top one, maybe, but hardly any from the cabinets. And few broadcasters are known outside their own country. Any reader of this post will immediately recognize the name of the breakfast television/radio "anchor" in their own part of the world. But name the corresponding anchors in other countries?

I experienced a cultural clash over that when I visited New Zealand a few years ago. Tui beer has a wonderful ad campaign there based on the catchphrase "Yeah right." Two books of the ads have been published, that's how successful it is. The trope is to present a statement that everyone knows but is suspicious about, and to add the comment "Yeah, right!" underneath. So, I saw such examples as:

One careful lady owner. Yeah right. †

Of course I remember your name. Yeah right.

The cheque is in the mail. Yeah right.

I'm really keen to see your mother again. Yeah right.

I understood those without difficulty. But then I encountered:

Let Paul fly us there.

“What does that mean?” I asked my local companion. He looked at me as if I was from another planet (which I was – Wales). “Who’s Paul?” I asked. “You don’t know who Paul is?” he replied. I felt like a 12-year-old. “No idea.” “Paul Holmes,” he said. “That doesn’t help.” He couldn’t believe I didn’t know who Paul Holmes was – a prime-time weekday breakfast show host in New Zealand for over 20 years. The equivalent in the UK of, say, John Humphrys or Terry Wogan. (But how many non-UK readers of this post know who *they* are?) It turned out that Paul Holmes had survived crashing his private aeroplane – not just once, but twice. The Tui ad appeared after the second event. Now I got it.

As English comes to be increasingly used globally, and people travel to visit English-speaking places, cultural clashes of this kind are going to be more frequent. Suddenly native-speakers of English find themselves in the same position as learners of English as a foreign language. It would be nice to hear some stories from others who have had similar experiences.

Co-vocabularists are invited to share stories of cultural and linguistic dissonance – whether across generations or geography.

† Editor’s note: American readers may like to know that “one careful lady owner” is a circumlocution beloved of used auto dealers and the like.