Interview with David Crystal

What was your first experience of BAAL?

As the most junior member of the newly established Department of Linguistic Science at Reading, I was volunteered to be the local organizer of the founding 1967 conference. It was back-to-back with the meeting of the LAGB, held just before, which was also donated to me. I recall thanking Frank Palmer for the character-forming exhaustion! But it was an exciting time, especially seeing most of the leading names in British EFL in the same room - and it was a purely language teaching occasion, which is the most dramatic contrast with the wide range of topics covered by the association today.

What have been the main highlights of your BAAL membership?

I suppose giving the invited lectures in 2002 and 2009. These are really valuable occasions which force you to pause and take stock of where you're up to in thinking about the subject. And as the membership grew and became more diverse, it meant I got reactions from points of view I'd not encountered before. I imagine most people who've given a BAAL plenary - as opposed to a SIG talk - have had a similar experience. I might be talking about applying linguistics in a clinical setting, for instance, and in the discussion up comes an interesting parallel with foreign language teaching. It's rare to find oneself in such mixed academic company, and it was a huge source of insight. These discussions aren't usually written up, but I have a parallel instance downloadable on my website (davidcrystal.com) - a conversation with Chris Brumfit in 2006 called *'Coping with change in applied linguistics'*.

How do you envisage the future of applied linguistics?

I think it would be useful to see more exchanges of that kind, as part of a move towards developing a real theory of applied linguistics. It's a point that kept coming up in that conversation I just mentioned. I'd been going on about my 'problem-solving' view of applied linguistics and Chris put forward the view that we need something 'rather more synoptic'. That would require the development of an applied linguistics theory that generates models and hypotheses about the principles and methods that have emerged in different applied domains. For instance...

What kind of correspondences emerge when we compare teaching and learning in foreign language, mother tongue, and clinical contexts? Might these be stated in a more general way - issues to do with selection, ordering, and simplification, for example, or the role of audience or readership? My applied linguistics world has been largely confined to English language settings. Are there differences in the way these issues are handled among different language communities? Applied linguistics universals, one might say.

Might all domains of applied linguistics be incorporated into a single theory? Could we find common ground between, say, forensic linguistics, clinical linguistics, translating and interpreting, and lexicography? I'd like to think so. I have space for just one example. I was called as an expert witness in an international legal dispute a couple of years ago. As I prepared to answer questions from the panel of (evidently linguistically uninformed) judges, the senior lawyer whispered to me: 'Don't make it too technical'. I don't know how many times I've heard that, in talking about grammar to EFL teachers, speech therapists, and above all in writing books and articles aimed at a general public. But how to explicate the notion of 'not too technical' in a principled way? Are there, in short, axioms that could be formulated so that they would apply to all possible applied linguistics domains?

All possible?

I'm now thinking of those areas of language use which have received little or no exploration from this point of view. In my 2002 Pit Corder lecture I mentioned a few of them, in such areas as musicology and theatre. What could an 'applied theatrical linguistics' possibly mean? I now have part of an answer to that question, having had the opportunity to explore the application of historical phonology to stage productions of Shakespeare in the form of 'original pronunciation'. But that is just one direction of application in that area among I don't know how many. Then there's museological applied linguistics - ranging from the principles involved in the creation of 'houses of language' to the captioning of exhibits. It's all done on a 'suck it and see' basis at the moment. It should be more principled.

Any area of life could be given an applied linguistics treatment. My lecture (also downloadable on my website) was called 'Final frontiers in applied linguistics?' The question-mark was important. I concluded 'there seems to be no limit to the frontiers involved in this subject of ours'. I still think that - reinforced by the way social change has brought us face-to-face with fresh issues. I mean 'face-to-face' literally, using Zoom and other such platforms, where the pandemic has given rise to a constituency of users who have to learn how to use these platforms well. What are the constraints and limitations? What are the strategies that people use to cope? What are the effects on communication of universal mask-wearing? All questions that were hardly conceivable just two years ago.

So, what about BAAL?

I concluded my conversation with Chris by saying: 'I wonder sometimes if it will ever be possible to establish a unifying set of considerations to give coherence to our field. But I'm in no doubt that this is what we have to try to do'. I still think that. And the most likely place where such a prospect could be developed is BAAL.