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An interview with Professor David Crystal

Interview by Karim Sadeghi



Background

Beginning with the current issue of the IJLTR, we are planning to introduce some of the key scholars in the field of (applied) linguistics (in the form of interview-based questions and answers) in an attempt to offer insights to our readers on how they can benefit from academic experiences and shining achievements of these big names. One of our previous issues (Vol.1, Issue 3, 2013) featured a joint interview with Prof. Jack C Richards and Prof. Rod Ellis. The new series of interviews (starting Jan. 2016) begins with Prof. David Crystal, who is undoubtedly one of the most influential international figures on language and linguistics. According to The Guardian, David Crystal is the foremost writer and lecturer on the English language. What follows is an email-based interview with Prof. David Crystal conducted by the editor-in-chief of the IJLTR in December 2015. Below, KS stands for Karim Sadeghi and DC stands for David Crystal.

KS: Thank you very much dear Prof. Crystal for agreeing to take part in this interview. Although you need no introduction and I doubt that any person with a general interest in language and linguistics wouldn't know you, I would request you to briefly introduce yourself highlighting your academic background, professional service and achievements in your 50-year-long career.

DC: 'Briefly' and '50-years' don't easily sit well together, but I'll try! Actually, it's now over 53, as I joined Randolph Quirk's Survey of English Usage as a research assistant in the autumn of 1962, then became a lecturer in linguistics at the newly formed department in the University of Bangor in North Wales. A couple of years later I moved to the University of Reading, where another new department was being established - called 'linguistic science' this time - and stayed there twenty years, eventually becoming one of the professors. I left in 1984, after a period of severe cuts in the British university system, to become an 'independent scholar', and have since worked in a freelance way from my home in Holyhead, North Wales. The wheel turned full circle when I became honorary professor of linguistics in the Bangor department.

KS: Could you talk about your books and scholarly articles? Please tell us how many publications you have and what the major focuses of these publications have been. How do you compare your first and last publications in terms of focus and topics covered?

DC: Ever since I was a teenager I wanted to be a writer. Indeed, my very first publications then were short stories for magazines. So when I joined academic life, and found myself involved in a newly developing subject where there was very little for students to read, it seemed the most natural step in the world to begin writing introductory material to meet the need. There was every opportunity, as publishers had sensed that linguistics was a subject with a bright future, and they were keen to find authors. My very first solo book was introductory in character (*Linguistics, Language and Religion*, 1965). At the same time, I had the benefit of colleagues who introduced me to the world of research writing, and my first book there was a monograph co-authored with Randolph Quirk: *Systems of Prosodic and Paralinguistic Features in English*. It was a parallel-track early writing career, as a result, with research publications running alongside general introductions of one kind or another, and that is the way it has been ever since. Fast forward to the present day: in 2016 the results of a 10-year research project will appear (*The Oxford Dictionary of Original Shakespearean Pronunciation*), at the same time as an account of a new (to me) topic, aimed at the general reader (*The Gift of the Gab: How Eloquence Works*).

I'm not sure how to quantify the publications in between. I'm often asked the question 'How many books have you written?' and it's not an easy question to answer, as it depends on what you count as a book. Is a second edition a new book? Is a 32-page book for schools to be counted in the same way as a 400-page monograph? Is an edited work the same as an authored book? If you include every ISBN with my name on it, the total is around 120 - you can judge for yourselves if you go to my website (www.davidcrystal.com), which contains details of all, along with the various articles, reviews, chapter contributions, and the like that form the basis of any academic's career. I've never counted these, but I suppose there must be over 500 now. For focus, see the next answer.

KS: You have worked as a writer, an editor, a lecturer and a broadcaster on various language and literature related issues and there have been many shifts on your interest areas since you started your academic career – from child language acquisition, clinical linguistics, language death, language education, religious language, to internet language. Do these shifts in topics and roles indicate new interests or do you see them as connected to a major concern you have on language/ linguistics?

DC: To begin with, I was very much a descriptive linguist, with a particular focus on English - the result of a first degree in English language and literature at University College London, and that first job on the Survey of English Usage. My PhD was a description of intonation and related features in English, and my first academic articles were all on aspects of English phonology and grammar, as well as stylistics, for the study of variety in language was at the heart of the Survey, and the relationship between language and literature - introduced to me by the 50/50 lang/lit balance of courses in the UCL degree - fascinated me, both as a creative writer and as a linguist. but it wasn't long before the world of applied linguistics beckoned. Each year, on the Bangor and Reading postgraduate courses, there were teachers taking a Diploma or an MA in Linguistics, or in Teaching English as a Foreign Language - including, as I recall, some from Iran - and I, along with my colleagues, was faced with the task of presenting our linguistics courses in a way that these students would find relevant to their work. At the same time, other language-based professions, such as speech therapy, the teaching of the deaf, and mother-tongue teaching, were becoming aware that linguistics could help them develop. As my main areas of teaching were the structure of English and child language acquisition, I found myself repeatedly approached, and when it dawned on me that linguistics really could 'make a difference', I was very happy to become involved. These early 'shifts', as you call them, were no more than reactions to demands. It was a very unpredictable time. The phone would ring, and it would be someone from the local remedial reading centre, or the audiology unit at the local hospital, or the national schools inspectorate, all interested in learning more about linguistics and what it had to offer. I was as much out of the department as in it, in those days - and the department was totally supportive of these initiatives, as it helped to demonstrate (in the gloomy financial climate of the late 1970s) that linguistics made (as present-day jargon puts it) a significant impact. From a personal point of view, my writing began to diversify at that point.

A couple of decades later, this reactive process was still operating, always unpredictably. The phone continued to ring, not least following the arrival of the Internet in the 1990s, which led to several collaborative research projects in the online world. In the 2000s, an unexpected call from Shakespeare's Globe in London led to the project to reconstruct the pronunciation that would have been used on stage in Shakespeare's day - an exercise in applied historical phonology. So, to answer your question, yes, these are all new interests, but there is an underlying common factor - a desire to meet a real need, which I imagine is what motivates any applied linguist.

Your mention of language death raises a slightly different set of issues. This was one of two major trends in language that linguists became aware of in the 1990s. One was the emergence of English as a global language - something that had been on the cards for some time but now supported by speaker numbers all over the globe. The other was the realization that so many of the world's languages were endangered to the point of extinction. It transpired that there was a great deal of ignorance, at a popular level, of why these developments had taken place. I remember sitting in a

cafeteria in the mid-90s hearing people on the next table discussing why English had become so widely used. The reasons being passed around were total nonsense - such as that English was the world's most beautiful language, or that it didn't have any grammar. I resolved to write *English as a Global Language* at that point, to try to explain how the present-day situation has arisen. And the same motivation led to my book *Language Death*, for other mythologies were pervasive there, and the wonderful field-workers around the world who are doing their utmost to document and revitalise endangered languages I felt needed as much support and publicity as I could give them.

KS: Which one of your works/ roles you have enjoyed the most? Which one of your books/ articles you think is more seminal compared to others? Which one has been welcomed the most by the readers? Which area of your work would you like to spend more time on and why?

DC: Is it possible to answer the first question by saying 'all of them'? Certainly each has been hugely rewarding, both intellectually and emotionally. Probably the greatest emotional satisfaction came from my clinical linguistic work: there's nothing quite like the delight that comes from knowing you have helped a language-disordered person to make progress. If a child, you only have to see the look on the parents' faces when their little boy or girl manages to say things that were previously impossible. Every speech therapist knows that feeling, and insofar as my linguistic analyses helped that to happen, I shared it.

It's difficult for me to say which books have achieved the status you mention in your next two questions. Certainly the two CUP encyclopedias - *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and *the English Language* - have been my steadiest and best-selling books over the years. But what I've found is that different books have become a staple part of different kinds of courses, so I imagine they are welcomed in different ways by different groups. As for your last question: when I engage with a new topic, I immerse myself in it until it is coming out of my ears, write my book or whatever, and then leave it behind, because a new topic is calling to me. It's always been that way. So I don't actually want to spend more time on any topic of the past. I don't think I would have anything to add. For this reason I hate having to do new editions of old books. Mind you, this kind of writing existence has its down side. I might finish writing a book in, say, January, and it will come out in, say, September. But by that time I will have moved on to another topic, and I actually have to remind myself (eg for a radio interview) what the book is all about! I know, from talking to other authors who write a lot, that I'm by no means alone in this, but it's still a nuisance.

*KS: Most of your works have dealt with theoretical aspects of language and linguistics. Given that you are currently the Patron of LATEFL, what connections do you see between some of your recent works such as *The Disappearing Dictionary: a treasury of lost English dialect words (May 2015)* and TEFL or applied linguistics?*

DC: Well actually - in relation to your first sentence - not so. I'm no theoretical linguist, in the sense of someone who is trying to construct a universal theory of language. I'm interested in theory of course, as one has to be, and anything I write I hope has a sound theoretical basis. But I see myself, these days, as very much a linguist in the empirical, descriptive tradition, focusing on one language (English) while not ignoring others, trying to describe its history and present state accurately and comprehensively, and trying to dispel the many myths and distortions about language in general, and English in particular, that are unfortunately still to be found in the media.

The best way I know of doing this is to write popular accounts of language that respect academic values, which is where a book like *The Disappearing Dictionary* comes in. I see popularization as a branch of applied linguistics, in fact - and that includes explanatory writing with a specialized audience (such as language teachers) in mind. I suppose one could sum up the link by saying that my focus is on 'what to teach' and 'why'. I've never taught ELT classes, so I can't make any direct contribution to the other big questions: 'how to teach' and 'when'.

KS: What are your future research and publication plans?

DC: Unpredictable, as always. Who knows what the next email will prompt? But as things stand right now, next year is Shakespeare's, with the big anniversary coming up. I've already mentioned the Dictionary, and associated with that will be a raft of events, some academic, some in theatre. My son Ben's company, Passion in Practice, is presenting a series of events for the British Council, the British Library, and Shakespeare's Globe, and I'll be heavily involved with all of them in the middle of the year. After that, I'm not sure. A lot will depend, I think, on how the Dictionary is taken up, and how many new productions in original pronunciation go ahead - not just for Shakespeare, of course, but for any writer from his time.

KS: Given that most of our readers are applied linguists and junior researchers in the field, what do you think issues of current interest in the field are and what should prospective researchers be attending to more in their studies?

DC: I never like to generalise about current issues, as they vary greatly around the linguistic world. Indeed, two departments in the same city might have very different views about what is a 'hot topic'. Personally, I think the Internet has opened up a whole new domain of study for linguists, and still very little descriptive work has been carried out, especially on languages other than English. As I've said in my two books on this subject - *Language and the Internet* and *Internet Linguistics* - everything we once knew about the two traditional mediums of communication - speech and writing - has to be checked against what is happening on the Internet. I never cease to be surprised at how what I thought was a solid generalization about usage needs to be modified when applied to what is happening online.

*KS: What is your suggestion to bridge the current gap between theory and practice in the field of applied linguistics - as most classroom teachers believe that research output (especially those published in top tier journals such as *SSLA*) is good for researchers only and that these publications have very limited classroom applications?*

DC: It's a difficult gap to bridge, because it's difficult to bring the two sides together. I've worked only in British schools on mother-tongue teaching, and the biggest problem I've found is simply time. Researchers and teachers are both hugely busy people, and even finding a time to get together to share ideas isn't easy. That is why organizations like IATEFL are so important: they provide the opportunity and motivation for a meeting of minds. I don't think anyone who has gone to an IATEFL or TESOL conference would leave without feeling that the gap has been bridged a little. So, join a professional organization, I would say, and try your hardest to get to the big meetings. And if you can't get there physically, these days a lot of valuable bridging is being done online, such as the IATEFL webinars.

KS: If you were given a second chance to live the life you have so far lived, would you choose to be linguist again or would you prefer to take a different path? Why? Is there anything you wish you could have accomplished in your life/career that you haven't so far?

DC: I've been very happy with a linguistic life - a theme I take up in my personal memoir, *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through*. Language is a subject that brings you into contact with every conceivable walk of life, as everyone uses it. It brings arts and sciences together. I love the way one can be studying phonetics in the morning and Shakespeare in the afternoon. Descriptive work is a very time-consuming occupation, though - inevitable, if you choose to explore a big pile of linguistic data. I would like to have had more time to take my creative writing further, and maybe one day that will happen.

KS: Many thanks again dear Prof. Crystal for so humbly taking part in this interview.

