

TEN QUESTIONS



or
avid
ystal


At some point in our ELT professional lives, it is inevitable that we will happen upon a book, an article, a YouTube video, a conference presentation, or an interview that is by, of, or with Professor David Crystal. For me, it was thanks to a very passionate and supportive manager who encouraged me to attend my first IATEFL Conference in the UK a few years back, where Professor Crystal, patron of IATEFL, opened the conference with his plenary talk, and reminded us that language change is not language deterioration. Needless to say, the opportunity to hear Professor Crystal speak at IATEFL and to interview him for the Journal has been nothing short of thrilling (and many thanks are owed to Steve McIver at Cambridge). I hope you will all relish this interview as much as I did. — Sandra Pitronaci

1. Of the many and varied projects you have worked on over the years, which have you enjoyed the most?

Would it be a cheat of an answer to say 'all of them'? But it's true. While working on a particular aspect of language, at that point in time I can't think of anything more enjoyable. And then on to the next one, which feels the same. If there are differences in enjoyability, I can't think of a way to quantify them. The reason is that I've always found myself in the situation of 'demand and supply'. Most of my projects have arisen as a result of someone asking me a question or wanting a solution to a problem, and each one is enthralling. I'd never have got into clinical linguistics had it not been for a phone call from the local hospital asking for help with the assessment of a child with a language disorder. I'd 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'd never have got into Shakespearean original pronunciation if I hadn't had a call from Shakespeare's Globe in London asking for help with their 'original practices' productions. In many cases, it's a casual enquiry, or a publisher, simply asking 'Is there a book on...?' — and you realise the answer is no. And then I find I can't sleep until I've written it. I began work on *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* because a teenage relative of mine asked me if there was a book about language 'with pictures in it'.

2. If you hadn't become a writer, editor, lecturer or broadcaster, what other professional path might you have followed?

I can't imagine being anything else, but there's an interesting issue lying behind the word 'writer'. Fiction or nonfiction? You're probably thinking of me as a writer of nonfiction books and articles on language and linguistics. But I originally thought I would be a writer of fiction. My very first published pieces were when I was about 17 — two short stories for a magazine — and I've never lost that impulse to complement factual with creative writing. My English degree course at University College London reinforced this synergy: it was a course where half was literary and half was linguistic. So I found myself — for example — studying phonetics in the morning and Shakespeare in the afternoon. And since then I've always tried to maintain this balance. Almost every book I've written on the language has contained some literary content. A recent example is *Let's Talk: How English Conversation Works*, as it contains a great deal of linguistic analysis alongside insights from literary writers into the nature of conversation. And in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* there's a literary dimension throughout. I maintain that anyone interested in the history of the language should engage with its literature. And conversely, anyone wanting to analyse or explain how literature works (as opposed to simply 'liking' it) needs a metalanguage which only a linguistic perspective can provide.


 Go to Accessible Version (/accessible)


even in the value of learning by doing. It's much easier to talk sensibly about the value of novelists, poets, and dramatists if you've tried to do what they have done. I wrote my first (wee) play for an end-of-year celebration in the UCL English department, and my first film screenplay for the university's film society. I've had a part in all genres. Only some of it has been published or performed, but that's not the point. I wanted the experience of getting to grips with the constraints and complexities of poetry, novels, and plays for theatre, radio, and television. And also the procedures and complexities of the operation of publishing, which led to my setting up a local press in the 1980s, and a small amount of home publishing since the advent of technology (such as Kindle) now available.

1. Which writers do you read or which books have you enjoyed the most? How do you read for pleasure, are you able to put aside all thoughts about the mechanics of language?

I read much for pleasure now, having read so much over the years. It is difficult to choose among all the great authors, though Shakespeare reigns supreme. Yes, I can read a novel or a poem, or go to a play, without noting the mechanics, though a really good usage will always make me stop and reflect on the creativity behind it. But when I'm writing myself, I like to leave language as far behind as possible, or at least to try to write it in a new way. So I listen to music a lot, watch films a lot, and engage a lot with the arts. I used to present many literary performance events, and I've done a lot of acting, not least with my son Ben's theatre company 'Passion in Practice', which came onto the stage at Shakespeare's Globe. I started a community arts centre in my hometown where I live, some thirty years ago, and am still involved. That's been a lot of fun at least as it's allowed me to meet so many wonderful artists in all forms.

2. How do you think the internet would affect language. That was almost 20 years ago now. How has language progressed as you expected?

More or less. My point then was that the actual character of the language has changed very little, and it's the same now. No new grammatical constructions have appeared in English. We have seen a few thousand new words and expressions, but these have taken their place alongside the hundreds of thousands of other words in the language. Spelling is largely the same. Punctuation is the one area where we've seen a significant change, with some genres using reduced punctuation (as in the omission of periods after statements in short messages) some increasing marks (amazing!!!!!!), and some changing their function (as in the use of a period in instant messaging which is an emotional charge). There have been a few interesting novelties, as language has developed, such as hashtags. Emojis, of course. But will they have the same impact in the future that some claim? The history of textisms suggests perhaps not.

The novelties that generated so much media angst in the early 2000s have largely disappeared. Do you remember all the fuss about text messaging abbreviations being a disaster for the language? All history now. Textisms had a brief flowering period, and then they just stopped being fashionable. The ones that have been in the language for centuries (such as 'C' for 'see' and 'U' for 'you') continue to be used, of course, but hardly any of the novel creations of the 1990s and early 2000s are still seen today. LOL is one that has stood the test of time. Why the change in fashion? Technology changed, with predictive texting. But when I last went into a school and asked the (16-17-year-old) students why they weren't using textisms, I was told in no uncertain terms that they weren't cool any more. And one lad summed it up for me: 'I stopped using text abbreviations', he said, 'when my dad started'! When older people steal younglings' slang, it definitely ain't cool.

3. What have been your biggest professional challenges throughout the pandemic, and what has helped you get through?

I've been very lucky, as the situation hasn't presented me with the kind of challenge that so many others have had to face. Writing is a self-isolating state, at the best of times. So nothing much changed there. The main difference for me was that all my travelling stopped. That used to be a major part of life. Hilary (my wife) and I were on the road for the best part of two hundred days a year BC (Before COVID) — lots of visits to schools, literary festivals, bookshops, and the like. That all stopped. Then, in its place, online talks took over. That's had its good points, despite missing the dynamic and atmosphere of being in a real room with a real audience. I've had the chance to talk to groups in parts of the world I've never been to. And the chat function in these online platforms allows more people to be involved in the Q&A. One participant actually wrote that he'd never have dared ask a question in a big hall, but here it was like having me in his living room, one to one. And indeed, that was where I was: in his living room.

4. What impacts have you seen on our daily vocabulary as a result of the current pandemic, or on our language use as a result of lockdowns and isolation?

Like many linguists, I started collecting the new vocabulary as it emerged. There wasn't much novelty in official pandemic jargon, such as lockdown and quarantine. But I was greatly impressed by the way people, despite the awfulness of the situation, began to coin playful or imaginatively surreal expressions that captured the character and the effect on our behaviour of the virus — in the traditional spirit of laughing in the face of adversity. Anyone reading this will have their own examples, but — to take just one word, quarantine — my collection includes:



ined how one looks, following an overuse of tanning equipment during

aching what all teachers had to do while schools were closed

am any group — sporting, musical, theatrical... — performing together online

atime meeting online to share a cup of tea during lockdown

chnology any device, physical or digital, that helped pass the time while
t home during a lockdown

dium for many, the daily state

etotal giving up alcohol during lockdown

me the sense of timelessness while in lockdown

ni a looked-forward-to Martini-type drink while having to stay at home

p any idea that helped you survive a period of lockdown

pple an increased reliance on alcohol during lockdown

ugh a description of the times we lived in during lockdown

ines songs composed to raise spirits

television programmes or online videos that were watched assiduously

media of course allow novel communicative opportunities and options, as
en in the way Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and all the other platforms have
i interaction in the face of a pandemic. New strategies are evolving, as people
ope. The most important is the lack of simultaneous feedback. In face-to-face
a listener provides a speaker with a continuous flow of reactions, in the form
tact, gestures, and vocalisations (mhm, really?, yes, you're kidding...). These
ng in an online conversation, and as a result speakers have to communicate
knowing how their words are being received. It's the main reason why, at
f an online session, people report they're feeling exhausted! Zoomed out.

ive an excellent session in the Cambridge Better Learning Leadership
nce in July 2021, and I noticed that plenty of people had questions
What is the most common question on language you tend to receive
glish language teachers and students?

d your interest in linguistics and language develop?' And I answer it by
g how I've been curious about languages since I was a small child, as a
nce of growing up in a bilingual area (Wales), where I began life knowing
of the languages, English, and found myself puzzled when encountering

Welsh outside my home. But it wasn't long (thanks to input from Welsh-speaking
relatives and in primary school) before it became a second language; and exposure
to a third language, Latin (as an altar server in the local Catholic church) fuelled that
curiosity. Why are these languages similar in so many ways? Why are they different?

**The beauty of language is
that it changes. Whatever
English was like yesterday,
it's different today, and will
be different tomorrow. It's the
essential unpredictability that
keeps the learning juices flowing.**

I was, without realising it, recapitulating the
history of comparative philology, when Sir
William Jones in 1786 speculated about
the similarities between Latin, Greek,
and Sanskrit, and concluded that a prior
language, Indo-European, must have
existed. My linguistic interests were
broadened in secondary school,
where I was taught French, Greek,
and more Latin. I remember
inventing a language, based

on Latin, during woodwork lessons, which now, unfortunately, no longer exists. At
university I was introduced to Gothic and Old Norse as well as Old and Middle English.
So it was unsurprising that, when I discovered there was such a subject as linguistics,
I fell in love with it.

8. What is it about linguistics that's so appealing?

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. I sum all this up by saying that linguistics is
the science of language, as long as you 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).

9. What are you learning about at the moment?

The same as before. That might seem like a perverse response, but it's true. The
beauty of language is that it changes. Whatever English was like yesterday, it's different
today, and will be different tomorrow. It's the essential unpredictability that keeps
the learning juices flowing. Who would have thought, in 2019, that 2020's 'words of
the year' were going to be words like self-isolate and lockdown? Or, a decade ago,

Go to Accessible Version (/accessible)

There would be a new suffix in English, — exit, as in Grexit, Sexit, Mexit...? These details, but the same applies to bigger issues. I look at the way global English are continuing to develop and institutionalise (i.e. produce dictionaries, manuals, literary works, and so on). Or at the way new varieties are emerging, especially in countries which have no colonial history of first or second-language speaking (such as China, Mexico, Sweden...). Or at the way internet technology is going to grow — more oral/aural transmission, improved facilities in speech access to speech, automatic translation, robot accents, and the like, which are leading to new areas of interest in teaching and research. Lots to learn. And of this interview is on English, but we mustn't forget that, of the 6,000 or so languages in the world, only a third of them have been given a really full description, and many of them are so seriously endangered that they're going to die out in the century. So when a new description appears, it's a moment of joyful learning.

Do you have any advice or tips for English language teachers in Australia?

I'm not an EL teacher, and I take my hat off to those who are! I've observed classrooms quite a lot, and of course had many conversations with teachers, not to mention organisations such as IATEFL (International Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language), ALL (Association for Language Learning), and the National Literacy Association). But I don't like to give tips to people who know more about the business than I do. However, the challenges facing me when I write are things that people do have many points of overlap with what goes on in the classroom. One of the biggest, I think, is finding a way of talking to them at the level they want to be talking about, respecting the kind of language they value and use, and taking the time to connect to the world of linguistics and literature so that it becomes accessible. It isn't that long ago I wrote an introduction to language for tweenagers, *A Little Language*, and to check I'd got the level right I asked a 12-year-old to read the script and point to places where I'd lost her. It was an invaluable critique. We don't realise what the generation gap really is. For example, in my chapter on film, I illustrated from such people as John Wayne, which is the star's film 'Who's John Wayne?' she asked. She'd never heard of him. We spent some time accordingly, finding people who used pseudonyms that her age-group would understand (such as Madonna, Eminem...). But will these be the John Waynes of the next generation? Keeping pace with changes in fashion is the biggest challenge, whenever I give talks in schools - sorry, wrong tense - when I used to give talks in schools, BC, I would often ask for what medics call a 'case history' (though in that case what do you watch, what games do you play, what social media are you using, what are you doing). No point in illustrating usage from Twitter if none of the kids use it. Or how about John Wayne!



David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bangor, and works from his home in nearby Holyhead, North Wales. A complete list of publications and current activities, along with fuller biodata, can be found on his websites below.

www.davidcrystal.com
(<http://www.davidcrystal.com>)

shakespeareswords.com
(<http://shakespeareswords.com>)

originalpronunciation.com
(<http://originalpronunciation.com>)