





# THE LANGUAGE OF HUMOUR

Per capire le barzellette in una lingua straniera bisogna conoscere molto bene sia la lingua, sia la società. Perché l'umorismo è soprattutto un fatto culturale, e non tutti ridono delle stesse cose...  
Ne parliamo con il celebre linguista David Crystal. By Mark Worden

ADVANCED **C1**

SPEAKER   
MARK WORDEN

TRACK 16 

**D**avid Crystal has studied just about every aspect of the English language. And in his 1998 book, *Language Play*, he looked at exactly that: the language of play and humour. When we went to see him at his home and office in North Wales, we asked him to tell us more:

## DAVID CRYSTAL

(STANDARD BRITISH ACCENT)

Language play is something that people use to guarantee rapport with each other, so if you and I are mates<sup>1</sup>, we will use the same kind of language play, we'll make the same kind of silly voices and so on. This is not humour, this is rapport-building. A husband and a wife will use the same kind of language play; a relationship will start to break down when one person says to the other, "I **do hate** those silly puns<sup>2</sup> you keep making!" That is a good indication that the relationship is on its way out<sup>3</sup>.

So language play has a serious side, and then it has a humorous side, indeed it does. Well, they say humour doesn't travel and that's absolutely right, it does not. Just because people share the same language doesn't mean to say they share the same sense of humour. And this is evidenced by the frequency with which you see the different features of language play turning up in these different cultures. So, for instance, you're much more likely to see a pun in British English than in American English, you're much more likely to see a pun in a French magazine than in a German magazine, for instance. So French and German have different patterns<sup>4</sup> here.

## A PLAY UPON WORDS

And there are other ways you can play with language:

## DAVID CRYSTAL

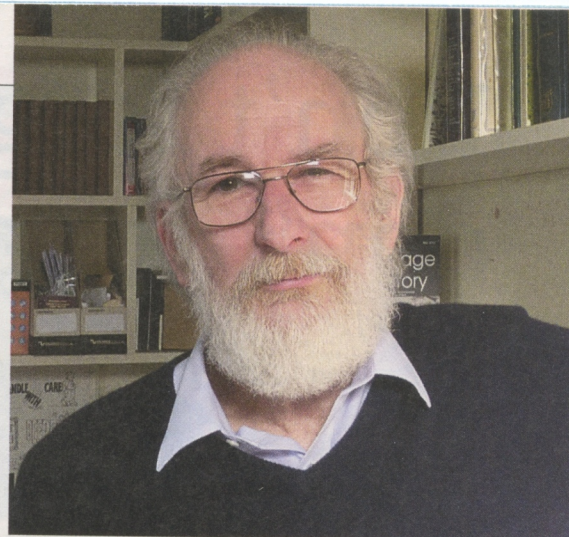
It's not just puns, of course: language

## GLOSSARY

- 1 mates:** amici
- 2 silly puns:** stupidi giochi di parole
- 3 is on its way out:** sta per finire
- 4 patterns:** modelli



Above: The cover of David Crystal's 1998 book. Right: David Crystal at home in Holyhead.



competitions of various kinds where, you know, the **task**<sup>5</sup> is to write a paragraph where every word begins with the same letter, you see, or write a paragraph where every word is a monosyllable, or something like this. You know, these are competitions that **turn up an awful lot**<sup>6</sup>: write a **limerick**, you see, about a politician and you'll win a prize. All of these are things that could be universal, but aren't and so when you look around the different countries of the world you see that some countries **go for one kind of challenge**<sup>7</sup>, **humorous or otherwise**<sup>8</sup>, and other countries don't. So. And then every day you get situations where you are travelling the world, as I often do, and **I crack a joke**<sup>9</sup> and **it doesn't go down at all well**<sup>10</sup>! People just don't see the point, they go "**Huh?**" And you think, "Oh, Lord! That **hasn't worked**<sup>11</sup>!"

## DISCOVERING JAPAN

David Crystal says that Japan is particularly challenging:

### DAVID CRYSTAL

There are situations where humour is embarrassing. When I lecture in Japan, for instance, I have to be aware that in Japanese culture there is a strong sense of face and of conformity to group norms and, if I crack a joke in a lecture in Japan, I must be prepared for the audience not to laugh because, for them, laughing **might be construed as derision**<sup>12</sup>, might be construed as an insult, might be construed as embarrassment. They might be worried that if a student might not laugh without checking to see whether their professor is laughing first and so on. Now, these are cultural variations that affect the way in which your humour might be **perceived**<sup>13</sup> and therefore the way in which you're prepared to use it. They in turn will have their conventions which wouldn't work so well in our culture. So you just have to be aware of this kind of thing. Yes, humour doesn't travel easily, and I suppose the everyday evidence of this is the way in which sitcoms from Britain to America are sometimes completely changed, aren't they? With different types of **script**<sup>14</sup>, different types

## GLOSSARY

- 5 **task**: compito
- 6 **that turn up an awful lot**: che si vedono spessissimo
- 7 **go for one kind of challenge**: scelgono un certo tipo di sfida
- 8 **humorous or otherwise**: umoristica o meno
- 9 **I crack a joke**: faccio una battuta
- 10 **it doesn't go down at all well**: non viene assolutamente capita
- 11 **hasn't worked**: non ha funzionato
- 12 **might be construed as derision**: potrebbe essere interpretato come derisione
- 13 **perceived**: percepito
- 14 **script**: sceneggiatura
- 15 **conversely**: viceversa
- 16 **raucous**: pesante, volgare

## A LANGUAGE WEEKEND

David Crystal is based in Holyhead on the Isle of Anglesey in North Wales. And in August (Saturday 19th and Sunday 20th) he will be hosting a special "**David Crystal Summer Weekend**" at the Ucheldre Community Arts Centre. It will cover many aspects of the English language, including structure, use and history.

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of jokes, different types of character, simply because the producers in America don't think British humour would go down well in America and, **conversely**<sup>15</sup>, a number of British people will not like what they perceive to be a somewhat **raucous**<sup>16</sup> American humour at times, and so **you do get** these variations. ⊗

## SPEAK UP EXPLAINS

**I do hate; you do get.** Normalmente si direbbe *I hate*, ma l'aggiunta dell'ausiliare *do* dà maggiore enfasi. Lo stesso discorso vale per *you do get*.

**Limerick.** Si dice limerick anche in italiano: è una poesia umoristica di cinque versi in rima che ha la forma AABBA. Limerick è anche una città irlandese, ma il perché abbia dato il nome a questo tipo di poesia è un mistero.

**Huh?** Anche nelle interiezioni ci sono delle differenze. Un italiano che non capito qualcosa dice *eh?*, mentre un inglese dice *huh?*  
Altri esempi classici, l'espressione di dolore *ah!* diventa in inglese *ouch!* e la risata *ahaha!* diventa *hahaha!*