

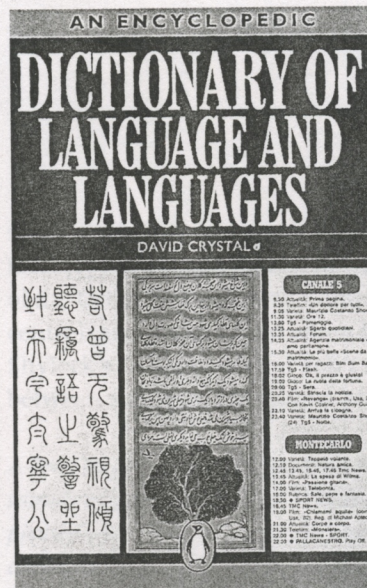
# David Crystal

## an interview

DAVID CRYSTAL

### Linguistics

Popular interest and the evident importance of language as the principal means of communication between people, interests, creeds and nations have promoted linguistics, largely in this century, from an amateur study to a widespread academic discipline.



Q You have a North Walian accent, but there are other bits mixed in. Where were you brought up? And educated?

A The first ten years were in Holyhead, then I moved to Liverpool with the family. Secondary education was at St Mary's College in Crosby, 1952-9, i.e. pre-Beatles. The relevance of this is that I played the clarinet in the school orchestra, then switched to the alto sax outside, and became part of the first Liverpool pop group to have a sax in it (The Zodiacs!). The moment of choice came at the end of the sixth form, when I could either go to university or go to Germany with the group. Did I make the right choice, you might well ask? Anyway, that's where the Liverpool part of the accent comes from. Then two years back in Wales, then 20 years in Berkshire, and now back in Wales again. Oh, and 22 years now being married to an RP-speaking speech therapist! No wonder my accent is what we linguists technically call a 'mess'.

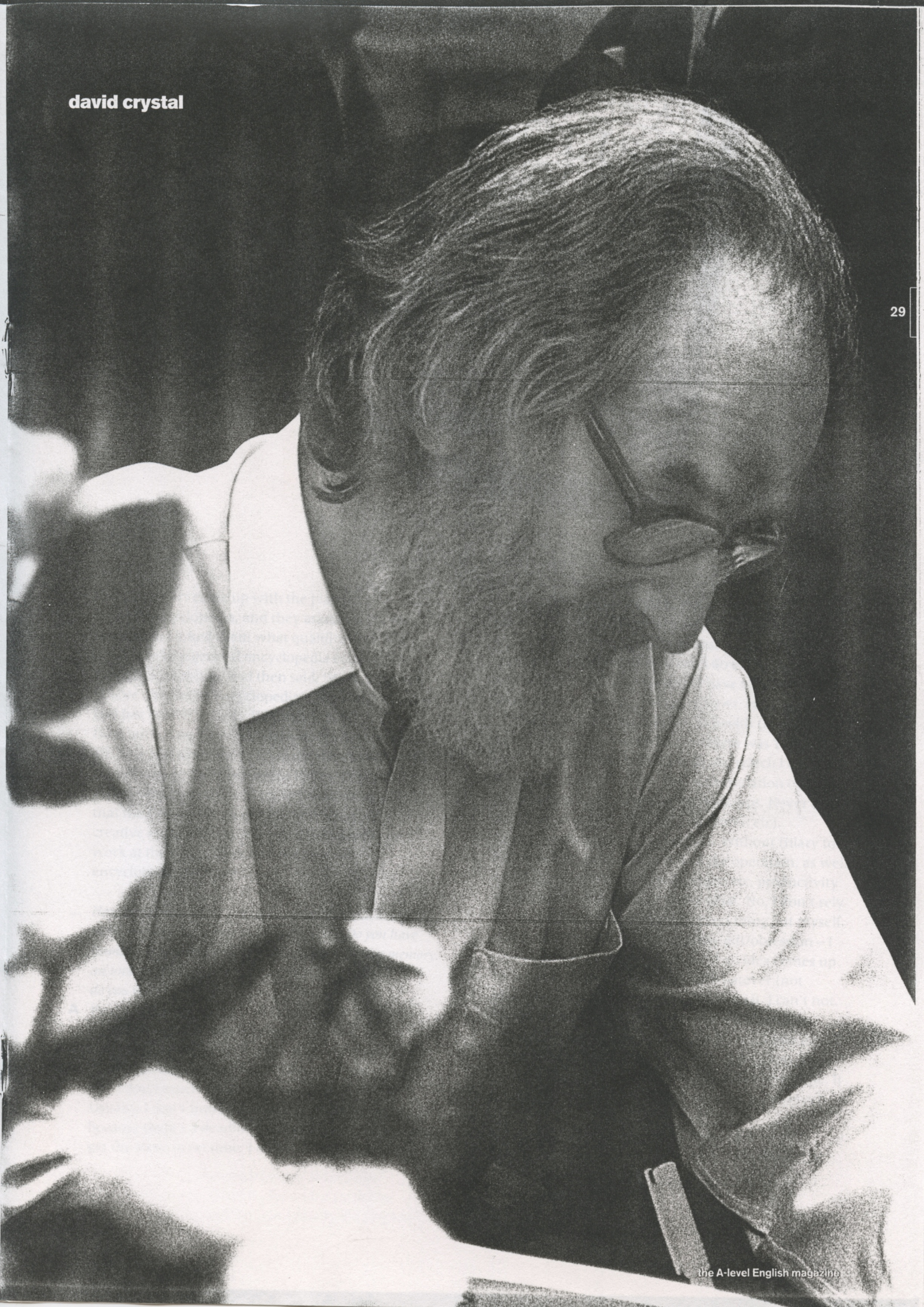
Q You have written about bi-lingualism. Do you speak Welsh, or indeed any other languages?

A I learned Welsh as a second language in school, but missed out on teenage Welsh (cf. above), so it's not as comfortable a language as I'd like it to be. Much of the more advanced vocabulary of a language is encountered in the teenage years. I can understand it well enough now, and use it from time to time, for domestic purposes. I guess I'm technically semilingual in it. I have quite a bit of French, to the level of having lectured in it, once or twice. Otherwise, as a linguist you know what happens: you end up studying all kinds of languages for a short while, becoming quite competent in them for a short period, but never learning much vocabulary by heart, so they don't stay with you. I imagine I've studied some 20 or so languages like this.

Q What first stimulated your interest in language?

A I'm sure living in a bilingual (or bidialectal) community has a huge unconscious influence on your language awareness. But my first really conscious interest in language came in the second year of

david crystal



# David Crystal

## an interview

university. I actually went up to University College London not to specialise in language at all. I wanted a mixed character degree, with lit and modern lang and lang history, and the UCL English degree was perfect. Shakespeare one moment, Anglo-Saxon or phonetics the next. But to begin with, the linguistic side was a let down. During the first year there, I did my first course in linguistics, and got so fed up with the way it was being presented that I lost interest (and actually failed my first exam in the subject!). Then, in the second year, I was captivated by the enthusiastic presentation of English language studies by Randolph Quirk, and never looked back.

*You obviously have an interest and expertise in many areas of language. Is there any part of language study that you feel you can call your own or that you are particularly interested in?*

**A** I suppose this would have to be the side of the subject called clinical linguistics – the application of linguistics to the investigation of speech and language disorders. This was a side which I found myself developing in the 1970s. Eventually I set up the first degree course in linguistics and language pathology at Reading, and with colleagues there devised several clinical assessment procedures which became quite influential. I also had my own special assessment clinic there for a while. That's history now, though. My current preoccupation is trying to increase awareness of endangered languages.

*If you hadn't been a linguist, what would you have been? Having seen your bravura performances in lectures, an actor perhaps?*

**A** Maybe (see below). I have done a lot of acting, in fact,

starting with school shows, then at University, and local reps in various places. In Holyhead I'm a member of the Ucheldre Repertory Company (the local arts centre), and get involved when I can. I've done Shylock and Toby Belch. I don't see much difference between acting and lecturing, actually.

*A-level English Language students find your books stimulating and fascinating. Which one of them are you most pleased with? Which would you recommend to a student coming to language study for the first time? And which book would you choose to take to the mythical desert island? You can do the luxury and the eight records, if you like.*

**A** The one I like best is always the one I'm working on – currently a book called *Language Death* for Cambridge University Press next year. Then, as soon as it's over I find myself emotionally rather removed from it, curiously. Looking back, I guess I'd have to say that the *English Language Encyclopedia* was the most enjoyable creative experience, partly because of the collaboration with the various specialists at the Press – the designer, picture researcher, and so on. I tend to refer people who ask to either of the two language encyclopedias, partly because that's why they were written in the first place. The pictorial element means a lot, I think.

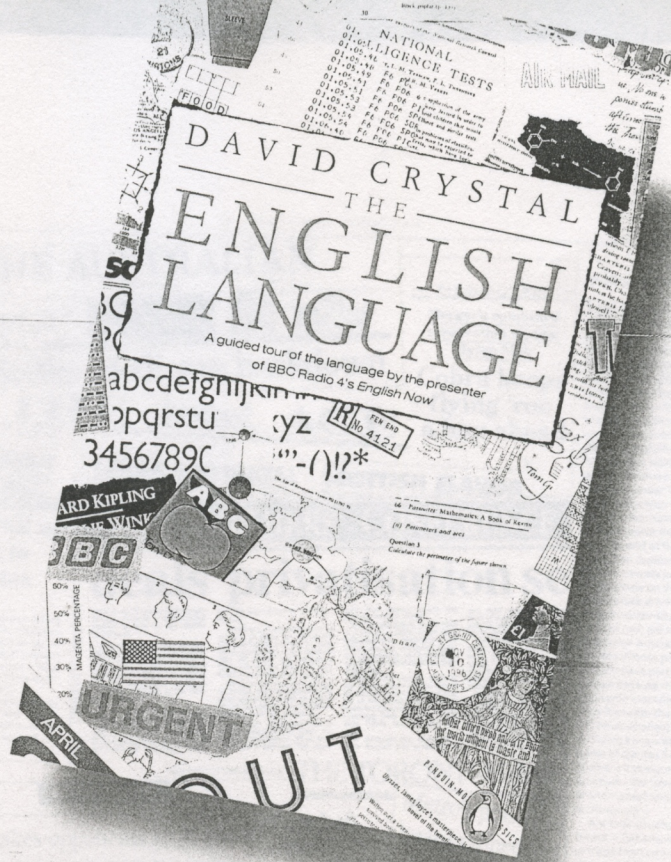
*Book for the desert island? Any enormous encyclopedia.*

*How did your interest in encyclopedias begin and develop? How do you manage to keep separate the language work and the encyclopedia work? Or don't you?*

**A** When I left the full-time university world in 1984, I had no thought of general encyclopedia work. I was proposing to be a full-time language author. Then CUP

*the current day... which we read... found the day festival... work... will get... taken up... thought... as to... things... into... it will go...*

'It's my most enjoyable creative experience.'



and Chambers came up with the plan for a new flagship encyclopedia, and they asked me if I was interested. I asked them what qualifications one needed to be a general encyclopedia editor. They thought for a while, and then said, 'Well, it helps if you've written an encyclopedia' (The Language one had just been finished). Editing is a totally different job from authoring, though. Anyway, it's been great: after all, here was somebody giving me the chance to study everything, and paying me for it! Yes, I keep the two things very separate, and try to balance the time so that the slog of editing doesn't take away all your creative energy. I have a team of four people who work at the updating side of the general encyclopedia database.

— *How do you manage to produce so much? Books, articles, talks, encyclopedias, radio programmes etc.? Do you have teams of researchers, a vast data base, a prodigious memory, an understanding family? How many hours a day do you work?*

**A** People always ask this, and I can't give a sensible answer. I am, first and foremost, a writer. That is what I am happiest at doing. If a day passes without a few thousand words crunched, it's been a wasted day, for me. I don't much mind what the subject-matter is. Usually, I don't find myself in a position to choose, because there's a deadline looming, and I'm trying to get the piece in on time. I do believe in responding to

need, as it comes up. Often, I'm working on something, and something interestingly urgent crops up – such as your list of questions! – so you take some time off to deal with it. You can't do everything, of course. I'm sad that these days I have to turn down so many requests for articles, reviews, etc.

Chief attributes must be: good health (I've been very lucky here – last serious problem was TB in my early 20s. It hit just before my finals, which I did in hospital!). Ability to type fast. Accumulation of a large personal library, for convenient look-ups. Never throw anything away (news articles, snippets, etc). Understanding family, oh yes, yes. Without Hilary to look after all the business side of the operation, as well as being an invaluable proof-reader, etc, productivity would be down by I don't know what. No, I don't rely on researchers: I have to check everything out myself. But most of all, it's the compulsion/gift/obsession – I don't know what you call it – but if an idea comes up for a book, article, poem, play, or whatever (not always my own idea, note) I have to do it. I can't not. The idea won't leave you alone until it's down on paper. As a result, there are no set hours. Some days I work 12 hours or more. Other days, much less. I've worked all night sometimes, to get something done. It doesn't seem like work, when you enjoy it so much.

*Do you enjoy the travelling that you must do?*

**A** The being there, oh yes. We both do. Not the actual

# David Crystal

## an interview

travelling. That side has become much more, in the last year or so. We're abroad about every two months now. Mainly a consequence of the English-as-a-world-language interest.

Q *How do you relax when you are not being an encyclopedic linguist?*

A I was the prime mover in setting up the local arts centre in Holyhead a few years ago, and Hilary and I are still very much involved. It's a great contrast with sitting at a computer all day long. It's a multi-purpose arts centre, so we have theatre, dance, exhibitions, the lot. This morning, for instance, I was opening a new sculpture there. You meet so many fine people, and the arts lifts you up in a special way.

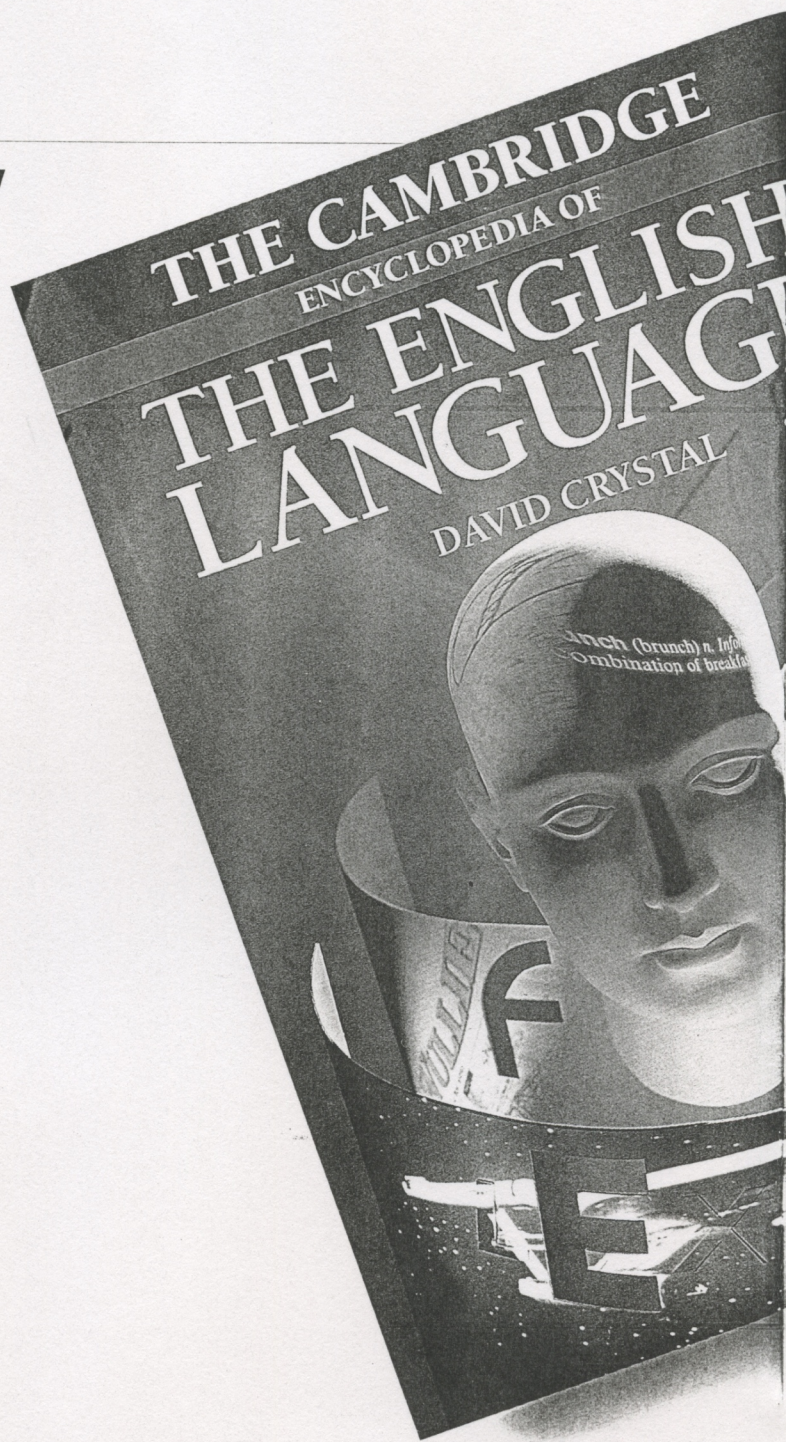
Q *What are you writing at the moment? What future projects do you have planned?*

A Just finished (with Hilary): *Words on Words: Quotations on Language and Languages* – for Penguin. Currently: *Language Death*, for CUP. Next, probably a book on Shakespeare's language, based on the kind of thing I write for each issue of the Shakespeare's Globe magazine. A lot will depend on what happens on the creative side. And who knows what else will crop up?

Q *Is your interest in the theatre a recent thing? How does writing for the theatre compare with your academic and language writing?*

A I've written half a dozen plays over the years, all mouldering in various drawers. I actually started out on the fiction side, as a writer. My very first pieces were short stories for a magazine in the 1950s. Then I did a playlet at university. But I don't see myself as a

creative writer, really, so when I write plays, or stories, or whatever, I do it mainly for fun (because I have to – see above), and not because I want to make a career out of it. I send them off to places, and sometimes the pieces get published and sometimes they don't. I suppose if I had a literary agent I might make more of that side, but I've never had time to get it organised! The current play, *Living On*, which we read extracts from at the Hay Festival last week, I hope will get taken up, though, as all royalties from it will go to



**THE AUSTRALIAN**  
 THURSDAY JULY 6 1995  
 NUMBER 100

**MICROSOFT JOINS PRICE WAR**  
**JAPAN The growing partnership**  
**WHY IT PAYS TO BE A POM**

**Merger's combined reservation system flying high**  
**Cobra keeps flying 'roo a hop ahead**

**PM's \$109m Medicare backdown**

**THE AGE**  
 THURSDAY 6 JULY 1995  
 MELBOURNE 50¢ ADVERTISING 65¢ PER PAGE

**MONTHLY ideas for home & garden**  
**LABOR'S BETRAYAL Philip Clubb on lessons of his TV series**  
**SCOTTISH FLAVOR More than just a haggis**

**Truckers fill up erstwhile to fuel tax**  
**THE PREMIERS' CONFERENCE deals privatisation se**

**MIXED MESSAGES**

These extracts from Australian newspapers provide an illustration of the way the English of a country can be influenced by both British and American models. The locally makes itself felt in such cultural references as *premiers' conference*, *Medicare*, *dollars*, *interstate*, and *federal*. US spellings are seen in *favorable*, *honor*, and *program*, with two prominent examples under *The Age* masthead: *labor* and *flavor*. On the other hand, there is a use of *towards* (not *toward*) near the end of the political piece. The combination of sources is nicely juxtaposed in the article on the fuel tax, where *truck drivers* (not *trucker drivers*) visit *gas stations* (not *gas stations*). Distinctive Australianisms are rare in both papers. The extracts have partly been chosen because they do contain some examples: *trucker*, *gas stations*, *the premiers' conference*, *the Australian*, and *roo* (= "flying kangaroo", a nickname of Qantas Airways). (Cobra is a computational acronym - for 'common branding reservation architectures'.)

A similar situation can be found in Canada, where extracts from two papers show *program* and *favor* alongside *theatre*, *fiber optics*, and *manoeuvring*. *Metro* (in the metropolitan area of the city) is also used in the USA. The introduction of a French term in a headline (short for *Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec*) hints at the bilingual issue which has dominated Canadian politics. (*Univis* is a cultural reference - the trade name of a grocery business in Canada.)

**OPINIONS**

**study makes opponents look good**  
 The Conservatives scoffed when Liberal Jean Charest proposed a \$1.5-billion work program...  
 importance of public investment. Last December, Mulroney announced that the government was committed to developing a high-speed electronic highway, allowing scientists and engineers across the country to exchange vast amounts of information through the use of fibre optics. At the same time, former finance minister Don Mazankowski unveiled a \$500 million program of roadbuilding and airport improvements.

**True Left should favor GST**  
 By Trevor Bartram  
 THE POLITICAL left, the NDP and Liberals, is in search for support among Canadian voters, but...

**Metro's police board rapped over Whitehead, Junger Cases**  
 By Rosie DiManno  
 TORONTO STAR

**Blyth theatre festival off to strong start**  
 Goldblum character's skepticism refreshing

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**  
 Thursday, Toronto, July 6, 1995

**Foreign investment approvals touch \$320.89 crore**  
 DELHI - Foreign investment approvals are \$320.89 crore during the first five months compared to Rs. 530 crore in the whole of Rs. 3890 crore in 1992, reports UNCTAD...  
 than 90 per cent of these investments have high priority and technology industries. The use of foreign investment is in sectors like oil, food processing, chemicals, electronics, genetic engineering, telecommunications, industrial machinery and hotel and tourism.

**Caisse formalizes hold on Univis**  
 REPORT ON BUSINESS

**Indian Express**  
 NEW DELHI: Samajwadi Janata Party leader G. Prakash Lal on Monday accused the Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda of misusing the official machinery for campaigning in the state assembly and urged the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) to ensure a free and fair election. In a communication addressed to the CEC, Chaudhala alleged that the Chief Minister and his Congress supporters were threatening the electorate, especially the sarpanches, panches and members of the area in meetings of public representatives and compelling them to toe the official line, fating which they threatened to suspend the development grants to their respective villages, the communication said.

**Chaudhala-Bhajan tiff on Kalka polls**  
 Chaudhala on Monday accused the Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda of misusing the official machinery for campaigning in the state assembly and urged the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) to ensure a free and fair election. In a communication addressed to the CEC, Chaudhala alleged that the Chief Minister and his Congress supporters were threatening the electorate, especially the sarpanches, panches and members of the area in meetings of public representatives and compelling them to toe the official line, fating which they threatened to suspend the development grants to their respective villages, the communication said.

A page from the latest full-colour edition.

the Foundation for Endangered Languages, which desperately needs help. That again is a good illustration of how things happen: it wasn't my idea. The idea for such a play, on a dying language, was suggested by theatre director Greg Doran. Once in the mind, it just had to be written.

and English language at Lancaster, where he had a somewhat embarrassing time, given that one of my books was a course text in his first year! He left last year, and has now just completed a postgraduate course in acting in London. So there's the link between linguistics and acting again!

Do your children share your interest in language?  
 A The youngest two have. Lucy ended up doing communication studies. Ben actually did linguistics

Questions by John Shuttleworth and Simon Powell.