

## Behind the CEEns 1

The question I am asked most frequently concerning my two language encyclopedias, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (known as CEL /sel/ and CEEL /si:l/ for short), is: how long did it take to write them? Surprisingly - unlike most books, anyway - it is an almost impossible question to answer. In these two articles I'll explain why.

One thing most people don't know is that there almost wasn't a CEL. The original idea for such a book came about like this. In 1979, a young relative, still at school, was thinking what subjects to study at university. He was interested in languages, so he asked me for advice. Was there an interesting book on linguistics and languages which he could read - something which would be intelligible, encyclopedic - with pictures in it, maybe?

I looked at my shelves, and couldn't see anything. At the same time, while looking, I found splendid illustrated guides to all kinds of other subjects - on mythology, for example, with plenty of accessible text and a liberal use of illustrations. But on language, nothing.

Why not?, I thought. And I sat down at my typewriter (we are in the late 1970s, remember - no computer-processing yet) and put together a one-page proposal. I still have it. Its opening paragraphs read as follows:

I am struck by (a) a massive modern interest in the subject of language, communication, usage, etc., illustrated at popular level by such TV programmes as *Call My Bluff* and *Blankety Blank*, and radio series like *Speak Out*, and (b) the trend in publishing towards illustrated guides, of the Octopus Books, Mitchell Beazley type, the sort of thing that makes excellent Xmas presents. It ought to be possible to bring these two points together.

Language is ideally suited for visual and popular treatment. This might sound odd at first, as people often think of language as an essentially oral/aural medium - speech - which by its nature isn't visual. The fallacy is to think of language as divorced from the people who use it. Rather, language reflects the society, the people who use it. It has no existence apart from them. To photograph language, you photograph the people and places in which it is used, their products and conflicts, their ways of studying language. You also, of course, include the more obviously visual side of language - written language and its derivative codes.

My brother-in-law worked for one of the popular-guides publishers, so I sent this in to him, for an opinion. No question, he said. Far too academic. Sorry. I then sent it into an academic publisher, with whom I'd worked for several years on other projects. No question, they said. Far too popular. Sorry. I decided the time wasn't right, and put the proposal into a bottom drawer, joining several other mouldering proposals, and got on with something else. But I didn't forget about it.

Fast forward now to early 1983, when I found myself in a meeting with Penny Carter of Cambridge University Press about linguistics journals. Only at the end did the conversation turn to other possible projects. I mentioned one or two of the things I had lurking in the bottom drawer, and the idea of the language encyclopedia came up. It turned out that various people in CUP had been thinking along similar lines, and she asked me to send in the material I had. I cleaned off the dust.

I was asked to develop the one-page proposal, and it became a 12-page prospectus. We had a long meeting in which we discussed the best way to handle it. Should it be a single-authored work, or an edited book with several contributors? The arguments in favour of the former were individual creativity and stylistic consistency; the arguments against were the dangers of personal bias and the difficulties in covering such a vast field. We agreed on a

middle road: I would write the book, but would have available an international advisory board who would read all the material. *CEL* was finally commissioned in June 1983.

Penny Carter described it as 'one of the most interesting and exciting projects' she'd been involved with. That reaction was crucial, for me. I was well aware that such a proposal would only succeed if it had an enthusiastic press behind it, for the page design and picture research would make major demands on their personnel. It would, in a very real sense, be a collaboration between author and designer.

I decided to use the double-page spread as the chief means of organizing information. I felt it should be possible to treat a topic succinctly, and illustrate it well, within a single opening. Readers should be given the impression that, when they open the book, they can see a topic laid out accessibly before them. So there would be no sentence run-ons as you turn the page. Each verso would present a fresh topic, or a fresh sub-division of a topic.

But working with double-page spreads and illustrations is a pain. The temptation is to write too much text and leave too little space for the picture. I had a terrible habit of leaving only a postage-stamp size for the picture. The designer, Roger Walker, trained it out of me, but it took a while. I paid for it dearly, by having to delete chunks of text from my drafts. And there is nothing worse than having to lose text you have slaved over.

The way the collaboration worked was like this. Roger gave me a grid, which I set up on my word processor (available at last!) - so many characters per line, so many lines per column, two main columns and one sidebar per page, and so on. A main chapter heading would use up 5 lines of text from my column; a sub-heading would use 3 lines. A certain number of lines would be taken up by the picture(s). Eliminate all of this, and the remainder is the amount of text you are permitted to write - usually around 1000 words per page.

It was never possible to get a perfect match on first draft, because the letter-spacing on a word processor is not the same as that on a printed page - so there were always extra lines to be added or taken away, to ensure that the exposition came to an end as close to the bottom of the page as possible. Some of the design sessions were like horse-trading. Can I have two extra lines of text if you crop that picture a bit more? Please!!

I planned a writing schedule with the press, and started on the job in the autumn of 1983. Six months later, and I'd written - a half-dozen pages. The vastly increased levels of university administration in the mid-1980s were taking their toll. There wasn't time to write any more. Stay in the full-time university world, and there would be no encyclopedia, and not much else either, it seemed to me. It was time to choose.

2

By Easter 1984 it had become apparent that, if I was to continue with the proposal to write *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (CEL)*, I had to find more time from somewhere. And I *had* to continue. The encyclopedia had become one of those projects which fill your mind. Supported by the enthusiasm of the people at Cambridge University Press, I was more convinced than ever that such a book would meet a real need. I wanted to immerse myself in it - but there was no time. I had written just a handful of pages in six months, and there seemed no chance of the university situation ever improving. Indeed, it was getting worse.

British universities in the early 1980s had found themselves in a series of Thatcher-government-inspired staffing cuts. Like everyone else, I had received several letters from the Reading University authorities asking me whether I would like to take voluntary early retirement. There were generous cash incentives. I had never conceived of myself wanting to take advantage of this scheme - but that was while it was possible to preserve a balance between teaching, research, writing, and administration. That balance had gone, by 1984. I decided to apply.

And was turned down. The vice-chancellor of the time decided, in his wisdom, that the scheme was not right for people in a department (linguistics) which was actually making some money for the university. That scheme is not for you, he said. But by then I had already, in my mind, made the decision to leave. So I resigned anyway.

It was a risk, undoubtedly. Once you decide to earn a living as a writer, there is a delay before you get a return - and of course there may never be a return! I didn't stop lecturing completely. There was still part-time work around. But I did escape from the burden of administration. And that meant I could get on with the encyclopedia - once we'd moved house. By the autumn of 1984 I was working seriously on the project, spending about half my time on it. I carried on in this way through 1985, and by mid-1986 the writing was very largely done - though there were a very large number of changes to be made as proofs came through, and design drafts had to be rethought. The book eventually came out in November of 1987.

It did very well, and after a few years the press were beginning to think that perhaps a follow-up book would do just as well. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (*CEEL*) wasn't my idea: it was the inspiration of Adrian du Plessis, the director of Cambridge Reference. He suggested it early in 1990, and as soon as he had done so it seemed an obvious project. Moreover, there had been a change of mood at the press about encyclopedia-type projects which made the project even more attractive. Full colour was on the table.

Rewind a decade. When CUP took on *CEL* (sentences came to be stuffed with acronyms, as the years passed) they had done so with enthusiasm - but also with caution. As nobody had published such a book before, there was a concern to keep the costs well under control. The price of pictures was phenomenal, for example. To use just one *Snoopy* cartoon or a single frame from a *Star Wars* film would cost about £100 each. I wanted the book to be in full colour - maps, for example, can really only be done in four colours - but this was felt to be excessive, and we settled for the limited use of a second colour, red. It did present problems - not least by having to explain in a caption, from time to time, what the colours were in a picture which depended on them for its effect.

But *CEL* had done so well that the market for an English-language equivalent seemed assured, and the press was confident that a full-colour book would be viable. And once you have colour at your disposal, throughout a book, you would be a fool not to make as much use of it as possible. That is why *CEEL* has so many more illustrations than *CEL*, and why there are so many full-page illustrations. Black-and-white reproductions often fail to convey the relevant information, especially in historical texts. I remember going through my whole undergraduate career wondering what a page of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* really looked like.

So I was keen to get going on *CEEL*, and worked up a prospectus and some sample spreads in early 1990. Then other things got in the way (in the form of the *Cambridge Concise Encyclopedia*, which was at an advanced stage of preparation at the time, and the *Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia*, which was in its earliest stages of planning), and it didn't prove possible to get on with *CEEL* until the middle of 1992. These editorial projects meant that *CEEL* could be only a half-time commitment, more or less, and it took me a good two years before the book was complete.

The book was written 'left-to-right'. I started on page 1 and worked through until the end. At the same time, the spreads, as they were completed, were sent to the press for typesetting, so that the pictures could be sized and the text trimmed as we went along. We had learned from the *CEL* experience that this was likely to be a more efficient production process - and so it proved to be. But from an authorial point of view, it was trickier. It meant that the content of each page, and the sequence of pages, had to be worked out very precisely in advance. There would be no opportunity to revise the earlier pages at a later stage. It was an unusual experience - to be writing page 150, for instance, while page 1 was in proof and

being indexed - and it was a challenge for the in-house production controller to keep up with where everything was. But it worked.

And now the wheel has turned full circle. In 1997 appeared the second edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. And what is the main difference between the two editions? The use of colour. The appearance of colourful *CEEL* had immediately made the second-colour *CEL* seem dull, by comparison. It had been almost a decade since the first edition, and the subject had moved on. So when the decision was made to have a new edition, I was at last offered the full colour I had originally hoped for. All the pictures had to be researched again, of course, but the result was most rewarding - and at last the maps look right. Those early green ideas - to adapt a linguistic catch-phrase of the 1960s - are now most colourful, and are no longer sleeping furiously.