

David Crystal

by Jack Scholes

Professor David Crystal OBE, internationally renowned writer, lecturer, broadcaster and one of the world's foremost authorities on language, kindly took time out during his recent visit to Brazil to give an exclusive interview for **New Routes** readers. The first part of this interview was published in the previous issue, **New Routes # 12**. As promised at the end of the first part we are now proudly offering the continuation of this fascinating, insightful interview.



photo by Jack Scholes

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NR: English is nowadays referred to as a 'Global Language'. Do we actually know how many people speak English in the world and how this breaks down in terms of the different kinds of speakers there are?

DC: Well, all statistics about language use are a bit vague. Most countries don't keep censuses, but the received wisdom is that first language English speakers around the world total something like 400 million - mainly in the United States, but also in Britain, Ireland, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean and a few other countries.

Then we must add second language speakers - in about 60 countries like Ghana, Nigeria, India, and Singapore, where the language has a special status. Again, nobody's very clear, but a conservative estimate would be perhaps another 400 million or so speakers there.

And then the amazing world of English as a foreign language, the other 120 countries in the world where English has no special status, and where really nobody knows how many people are learning English or have learned it sufficiently well to count as an English speaker.

An estimate that the British Council uses is that a billion people are in the process of learning English this year. If we assume that two thirds of these are sufficiently competent to be counted as speakers of English - say, 6-700 million - then we can add this total to the other two, which makes about 1.5 billion people speaking English world-wide, a quarter of the world's population.

NR: And yet there are no apparent intrinsic properties of the English Language which would actually entice anyone to choose it as a world language, are there? So why has English become so widespread?

DC: All languages develop for one reason only - the power of the people who speak them. This has always been the case - with classical Greek and Latin, for example - the Empires of the world have always carried their languages with them. It was the same with English. The first type of power was the political/military power of the British Empire. Then came the Industrial Revolution with its technological and scientific power - so many of the inventors of the world worked at the

time in the English language. And then in the 19th century there was economic power, especially in the United States, which meant that the centre of economic gravity of the world shifted into an English speaking country, one whose population was growing so much that it quickly became the dominant country as far as English language use was concerned.

And then in the 20th century, of course, we have the amazing range of cultural developments, everything from radio and television and cinema at one end of the century to things like air traffic control and computer developments and the Internet at the other. And all originating in or facilitated by English-speaking countries. So a combination of all these things produced the remarkable effect of a language that is spoken by more people than any other has been since recorded history began.

NR: *Do other power sources exist that are likely to overthrow English as a global language in the future, or do you think English is now in an unassailable position?*

DC: Well, my view is that English is in an unassailable position. I think the snowball has got so big as it rolls down the hill, picking up speakers all the time, that it is unstoppable. So many people speak English in so many countries now that I can't see English being seriously challenged in the near future. But not everybody believes that, and many people think that, power politics being the way they are, it would only take a relatively small shift in power relations to mean that certain other parts of the world might suddenly grow in prestige and economic power, thereby attracting people to their languages. The futurologists suggest that the Pacific Rim countries are going to be significantly greater in effect in the next century, as indeed are the countries of Latin America. In which case, suddenly languages like Chinese or Japanese or Spanish and Portuguese could suddenly become much more desirable as language learning entities, and English might become conceivably less so. As I say, I myself don't think that's likely, but certainly some people do.

NR: *We have talked so far about English, but you often refer to Englishes in the plural. What exactly do you mean by this?*

DC: By 'Englishes' I mean the new regionally located varieties of English that can be found around parts of the world where English has been adopted and then adapted

by the local communities to suit their needs. The origins of this process are when English began to move around the world in the 16th century. Within 20 years of English arriving in America we saw the first signs of American English growing, with the distinctive vocabulary of the American Indians being introduced into English - words like moccasin and wigwam. And then as English moved to other places, Australian English developed and South African English. These are 'old Englishes', if you like. Now in the 20th century what we've seen with the growth of newly independent nations all over the world is a remarkable upsurge in distinctive Englishes in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Singapore, India, and many other parts of the world where new dialects of English are growing very very rapidly - even to the extent of having tens of thousands of new words in English that are not known outside those individual countries.

NR: *Like 'Brazilian English', words which are used as English words in an English sentence without being translated?*

DC: Well, one interesting thing is that even the English as a foreign language countries are beginning to develop their own kinds of English. Any newcomer to Brazil immediately sees a whole range of vocabulary that they need to have translated. You only need to look a menu and you encounter words like 'feijoada'. Think of all the samba vocabulary. These situations produce loan words for English - how many I don't know, but there must be hundreds already.

NR: *Is the English language then going to fragment into mutually unintelligible variations?*

DC: Well, this has always happened in the history of language. That's how families of languages have grown. That is why all the Romance languages exist now, because Latin fragmented in that way. And there is a very serious possibility that this could happen at grass roots level with English. Indeed, there are already clear signs, as you go around the English-speaking countries of the world, of comprehension difficulties as one listens to the English language speakers on the streets, in the more colloquial forms of the language they use. Especially noticeable are the new 'mixed' languages. English might mix with Chinese or Malay or Japanese to produce a new kind of language, often called Singlish in Singapore, or Japlish in Japan, or Spanglish in a Spanish-speaking context. These

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are not bastardised forms of language either. They are genuine new forms of a language, completely fluent and grammatically structured, a fascinating new development. If these continue to develop, as I think they must, then we shall be in a situation indeed where at a colloquial level the language is indeed fragmenting. But the good news, from the point of view of those who are worried about this, is that at another level, at the level of standard written, printed English, there is a great deal of uniformity and consistency throughout the whole of the English-speaking world.

NR: *I suppose technology will also play its part with things like the Internet, satellite TV, cable TV and so on.*

DC: That's exactly right, for Standard English, at least. Standard English is essentially a written form of English, but if you speak Standard English aloud you get a kind of educated and rather formal sort of English. Now that is the kind of English you will most often encounter on CNN and the BBC World Service, which can now be received in virtually every country in the world. So the future of English is really going to be the story of the tension between these unifying forces, which are keeping the language together, and the street forces which are pulling the language apart.

NR: *What are the implications of all this for classroom teachers of English?*

DC: Well, classroom teachers are in a very difficult position at the moment. There has never been a time in the history of the English language where there has been so much change going on. The main periods of language change in the history of English were in the early Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. But over the last 400 years the language has been really rather stable. Now in the 20th century and in the new millennium the forces acting on English are really remarkable. So teachers are having a difficult job keeping up with what's going on. And that is the first thing. Teachers have to be aware of what's going on, linguistically, in the world as a whole. Magazines like **New Routes** play a very important role, it seems to me, in presenting teachers with the facts, with what is happening. You can't solve a problem until you know that a problem is there.

As far as teaching practice is concerned, myself I wouldn't have thought there was much need for teachers to change their policies, their syllabuses, their curricula, for the immediate future. If teachers have always taught British English, Received Pronunciation, for example, there is no reason for them to stop doing so. If they teach General American, they will carry on doing so. The materials are there, they know how to teach those

varieties, the examination system is ready for them in those varieties, and most of the books and articles they read will be in and about those varieties.

But as far as listening comprehension is concerned, I think there is a real need for teachers to take on board as quickly as possible the message of English as a global language, which is that English is now going to be encountered by their students in an enormous range of varieties. If students go out into the world thinking that the only kind of English that exists is British English, Received Pronunciation, they have got an awful shock coming to them! And therefore teachers can do a grand job finding materials of all kinds, illustrating South African English, Australian English, Ghanaian English, and all the others. The more teachers can expose students to these varieties, the better. So for production, I don't think there is a need for much change, at present; whereas for listening comprehension, I hope for a great deal of change.

NR: *Should we, as teachers of English, be optimistic or pessimistic about the future?*

DC: Well, I don't think there's any point being either. I think you have to be realistic - and the realism of the present situation is that nobody owns English any more. Too many people speak it for it to belong to any one country. English is beyond control. It is being used by people who are using it, adapting it, doing things with it like never before. And therefore the teacher must keep feet firmly on the floor. 'Stay cool' is the main message. Remember that everybody's in the same boat, all over the world. We need to introduce our students gradually, by degrees, to this experience of world English, while nonetheless giving them the firm anchor of one variety of English - British, or American, or whatever you want it to be. Don't panic, is the main message for the new millennium! □

The author

David Crystal is currently chair of the UK National Literacy Association (NLA), patron of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) and of the National Association of Professionals concerned with Language Impaired Children (NAPLIC). He is also a member of the English Language Committee of the English-Speaking Union and Director of the Ucheldre Arts Centre in Holyhead, UK. His many published books include: *English as a Global Language** and the new *Language Death**, both published by Cambridge University Press.

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