# 12 Broadcasting the nonstandard message

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In 1986 BBC television presented a nine-part series on the English language – *The Story of English* – which was the first major attempt by that medium to deal seriously with this topic.[1] The following year, I was approached, in a collaboration with Tom McArthur, to produce an eighteen-part radio version for the BBC World Service. I thought this would be an easy job. We were given access to the television scripts and footage, from which I assumed it would be a straightforward matter to select and rewrite. The assumption proved to be wildly wrong. I was underestimating the crucial difference between programmes made for radio and those made for television. The 'talking head' – the *sine qua non* of radio – proved to be so ancillary to the striking visual image that, when we came to listen to the recordings, there proved to be little that could be adapted directly. The TV dialogue and voiceovers routinely depended on the visual context in ways that made the audio tape ambiguous or unintelligible. Discourse was disrupted, from an auditory point of view, by visual sequences, some of which wandered away from the linguistic focus – for example, in the programme dealing with Shakespeare's influence on English, the viewer was taken on an interesting (but not wholly linguistically relevant) tour around Anne Hathaway's cottage! It made excellent television, but impossible radio. We had to begin from scratch, and found ourselves constructing our own 'story of English' anew.

This anecdote illustrates how easy it is to be taken in by the metaphor of the 'story' of a language. No language, as the opening chapter of this book stresses (Milroy, Chapter 1), has a single story. There are plainly many 'stories' of English, intricately and unpredictably interacting as they unfold through time. The character of each story will be affected by all kinds of constraints. One constraint is evidently the nature of the medium: the radio story cannot be the same as the television story. To illustrate further: the presentation of the written language (through manuscripts, inscriptions, handwriting styles, scribal idiosyncrasies, and so on) can be handled explicitly by television and only very indirectly by radio; conversely, radio greatly privileges the spoken word, allowing extended monologue of a kind that television eschews. But if we conflate radio and television, under the heading of *broadcasting*, a further contrast appears – between the story that this medium is able to tell and the

story as told by conventional publishing. Textbooks on the post-medieval history of English, as the Introduction to this volume makes clear, tend to ignore dialect richness, concentrating 'on Standard English in England, with an occasional nod in the direction of the USA' and lacking 'consideration of the rich diversity and variety of the language'. Broadcast accounts of the history of English, however, have done exactly the reverse.

*The Story of English* begins with a series of introductory shots covering (*inter alia*) air-traffic control, magazines in India, newspapers abroad, American movies, popular music, and the Scottish Hebrides. We see a castle on the isle of Barra, and hear the voiceover telling us that it is 'the ancestral home of an old Scottish family, the Clan MacNeil'. Then we see the presenter of the series, Robert MacNeil, who introduces himself to the viewers in this way:

> My name is also MacNeil, Robert MacNeil. My branch of the clan left Scotland four generations ago and settled in the United States and Canada. I was brought up in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and educated in Canadian schools. The way I speak English is a product of that background, modified by 30 years as a journalist in Britain and the United States.

The voiceover continues:

> Like the people of Barra, people throughout the British Isles, in North America and around the world, we all speak varieties of English determined by our backgrounds.

And MacNeil then says to camera:

> Our story is not about the correct way to speak English but about all the different varieties and how they came to be. Why a MacNeil in Nova Scotia sounds different from a MacNeil here in Scotland, or one in North Carolina, or in New Zealand. Varieties of English are as old as the language itself …

There could hardly be a stronger variationist perspective for a history of English. And a similar emphasis is found in the radio series, with its statement in the opening programme:

> We'll be illustrating the many varieties of English, especially those which are in the process of developing around the world … .

Every programme stresses variety, dialect, and change, as these opening lines from programmes 6–10 illustrate:

6   [Tape of a range of US accents] That's just a tiny sample of the

range of variations in the way English is pronounced within the USA …

7   [Tape of Gullah dialogue] That's the sound of Gullah, a variety of Black English spoken by about a quarter of a million people … .

8   [Tape of Canadian speaker] To most British ears that sounds just like another piece of American English, but it isn't from the United States at all. It's Canadian. One thing that gives the game away is …

9   [Tape of Liberian news] That was a broadcaster reading the news in Freetown, Sierra Leone. He was reading it in Krio, a creolised form of English spoken by …

10   [Tape of Scots] That's Stanley Robertson of Aberdeenshire, speaking the traditional dialect that is still strong in the north-east of Scotland. It's a variety of Lowland Scots …

The opening of programme 15 could have been a publicity manifesto for the present book:

15   [Tape of four regional accents] It's easy to give the impression, when you write an outline history of a language, that it's a single homogenous entity. The history of English, in many books, comes across as the history of its most prestigious variety, standard English. But it only takes a brief acquaintance with a living language to see that homogeneity is a myth.

Some readers might see in this scenario a Celtic plot. After all, we find television presenter Robert MacNeil accompanied by writer Robert McCrum, and radio presenter Tom McArthur accompanied by the patronymically more opaque (but nonetheless Welsh/Irish) David Crystal. But it is not so. The BBC's millennial approach, Radio 4's *The Routes of English*, produced by (Bristol-born) Simon Elmes, continues the emphasis, as can be seen in (Westmorland-born) presenter Melvyn Bragg's foreword to the printed version of the series (Elmes 1999: 3):

> Spoken English drives the language and this series, *The Routes of English*, goes down that road. Written English has nailed and enhanced spoken English time and again, but the tongue has always had its say. In shade of expression and idiosyncratic precision, the spoken word can often out-fox the scripted version – as I know from local experience with the Wigton dialect of Cumbria. It may be lost to the national stock of words but is full of depth and charge to those few in the know …

And the six programmes in the series express the production's regional emphasis, with the titles: Wigton, Winchester, Hastings, Canterbury, Edinburgh, and Liverpool.

It seems to be the nature of broadcasting to privilege linguistic variety, and the nature of conventional publishing to privilege the standard, with its roots in the written – and especially printed – language. Certainly, the contrast between the broadcasting treatments of the 'story' of English in recent decades and the published accounts – as summarised in the Introduction to this volume – are very different. This perhaps suggests that the 'sense of variety' which Trudgill and Watts wish to make available to their 2525 readership is much more likely to be achieved through mediums of communication other than the printed book. Indeed, I can see no way of convincing a prescriptively brainwashed and puristically sceptical world about the nature and importance of linguistic variety other than by employing the ever-increasing resources of multimedia. Without this, the gospel of this book is at risk of being read, but not heard. The quotations, illustrations, and phonetic transcriptions of earlier chapters, impressive as they are in their cumulative persuasiveness and academic accuracy, keep nonstandard varieties on the printed page – which is where they do not belong. There is more hope for a fairer-minded account of the history of English in an era characterised by the Internet, digital video discs, and interactive radio or television, than one in which the book reigns supreme.

## Linguistic stereotypes and realities

The use of books to convey information loads the dice against the appreciation of nonstandard domains. Everything we know intuitively about regional dialects suggests that they routinely illustrate a level of expressiveness which is a source of admiration to those who operate only in standard English. We recall the narrative power of rural story-tellers, the energy and humour of city repartee (such as in Liverpool or Glasgow), and the memorability of nonstandard figurative expressions and idiom in 'new Englishes' from around the world. But it is so difficult to convey these features in printed form, and phonetic transcription is at its weakest when it tries to capture the full range of expressiveness of the voice or the dynamic properties of discourse. These are problems which have constrained the study of the standard language for decades, of course; but our lack of knowledge of the features which define linguistic expressiveness poses a particular difficulty to those trying to understand and convey the character of nonstandard variation. Especially critical is the role of prosody and paralanguage – with particular reference to the communicative role of intonation, rhythm, and tone of voice. As Wales puts it (Chapter 3), the lack of information about this area is the 'most striking omission'. It is true that some features of intonation have been described and have received considerable discussion – such as the New Zealand-derived high-rising sentence terminal – but these are only a small part of the picture.

Millar (Chapter 9, pp. 188–189) also draws proper attention to the way intonation is sometimes referred to, as part of her general concern about the neglect of eloquence as a subject in mainline studies – to which I would add other notions of oracy, highly valued in classical tradition, but virtually ignored today, such as elocution, spoken rhetoric, and everything that goes under the heading of the 'speech arts' (performance poetry, drama, etc.).[2] But these references are sporadic, impressionistic, and usually low-level in their focus, identifying individual tones or tunes. Discourse prosody is much more germane, in all areas of nonstandard oracy, and this has received very little attention. We are in the ironic position of wishing to raise the nonstandard flag, but unable to provide persuasive descriptions of some of the linguistic features which play a central role in its design. The illustrative power of multimedia is bound to facilitate the linguist's task, in this respect.

Technological developments in sound recording have already begun to free historians of nonstandard English from the most serious limitation of the past – the need to work through the written language. Several of the contributors to this book have drawn attention to the ways in which the inevitable reliance on writing limits our ability to perceive linguistic reality. Insofar as writers represented nonstandard English at all, the result has been a somewhat sanitised version. Indeed, as Millar illustrates (Chapter 9, pp. 174–175), conflicting 'reports' of a speech show how untrustworthy the written language can be as a guide to what was spoken. The point is even more strongly made when nonstandard language in literature is taken into account. Blake (1981) provides an extensive discussion and range of illustrations, with regional and social examples ranging from Chaucer through Shakespeare and Swift to the nineteenth-century novel (Bronte, Scott, Dickens, Hardy) and from there to Shaw, Lawrence, Wesker, and beyond; Phillips (1984) provides further instances. Sometimes the spellings are genuine attempts to reflect a phonetic reality, as in much of the writing of Twain or Dickens; but often the forms employed are no more than eye-dialects, in which a nonstandard spelling evokes a regional image, with no phonetic difference involved, as in *yu* for *you*. Even in the best examples of the attempts to render regional or social Englishes there is an uncertainty – and usually serious inconsistency – about what they were intended to convey, as we would expect from any amateur attempt at speech transcription. Vowel variation is particularly susceptible to difficulties of interpretation; prosodic features are given little expression, other than through the occasional piece of impressionistic verbal description. The distinction between idiosyncratic and group usage remains unclear: how far would all members of a character's speech community speak in the same way?

In cases where the influence of another language is involved (as in African, North American, Indian, or Celtic literature), often we simply cannot be sure whether a particular rendition is a genuine feature of the local dialect or an invention introduced by the author for literary effect. When Shakespeare makes Fluellen say 'look you', in *Henry V*, is this because he had heard local

Welsh speakers say this or because he shared the widespread but erroneous belief (still current today) that this is what Welsh-influenced speakers of English say? Regional stereotypes – that all Scots say 'Hoots mon' and all Irish say 'Begorrah' – characterise a great deal of the literary canon, and are no sure guide to regional reality. The need for even greater caution has to be advocated in such cases as the non-native domains illustrated by Mesthrie (Chapter 6), where the skill of an author from an unfamiliar language background may lead us to believe that an English expression is a genuine regional form, whereas in fact it is a purely literary creation. For example, imagine I am writing a novel which contained a character of an old Welshman, and at one point I put in his mouth, as he looks out of the window: 'What a storm! It's raining old women and sticks today!' What would be your reaction, as a reader? You would be likely to conclude that this rather curious expression is a vivid example of the regional English spoken in Wales. In fact it is a word-for-word translation of the Welsh equivalent of 'It's raining cats and dogs' (*Mae hi'n bwrw hen wragedd a ffyn*), and has nothing to do with the way English is spoken in Wales. When Welsh people speak English, and want to talk about heavy rain, they say 'It's raining cats and dogs'. No one says 'It's raining old women and sticks', except perhaps in jest. This does not ruin the literary brilliance of my novel, but it does make a nonsense of relying on my novel as a source for regional dialectology. We have to face up to this problem for all of the meagre set of written sources on the history of nonstandard English.

We cannot, it seems, very often trust the data, as represented in the writing of authors. Nor can we trust them when they become metalinguistic, and talk about the language themselves. A remarkable number of authors have in fact reflected on the nature of the language they use and hear around them,[3] but few of these observations are capable of being interpreted in terms which would satisfy a linguist. A good example is Dickens' fine descriptions of his characters' tones of voice, which have auditory plausibility while nonetheless defying phonetic interpretation. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (Ch. 10), Ralph is described thus:

> If an iron door could be supposed to quarrel with its hinges, and to make a firm resolution to open with slow obstinacy, and grind them to powder in the process, it would emit a pleasanter sound in so doing than did these words in the rough and bitter voice in which they were uttered by Ralph.

And in *Bleak House* (Ch. 8), we find Mrs Pardiggle:

> Always speaking in the same demonstrative, loud, hard tone, so that her voice impressed my fancy as if it had a sort of spectacles on too.

Often, an author's views present a stereotype which bears little relationship

to contemporary reality. A good example is Wales' comment (Chapter 3, pp. 55–57) on the Lake Poets, some of whom wrote at length on the kind of language they were using. A very famous quotation from Wordsworth, in the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), emphasises his effort to use 'a selection of language really used by men'. Insofar as this is a naturalistic reaction against the studied style of eighteenth-century poetry, the point is uncontentious. But when people make the assumption that Wordsworth was reflecting in his poetry the kind of speech which would have been current in the Cumbria of his day, they are far from the truth.

A further dimension of difficulty arises when we find we have to explore a writer's mindset or world view, or even the climate of the time, in order to make sense of a usage, or an observation about language. It is a point which applies just as much to grammarians, lexicographers, and stylists, as to novelists, dramatists, and poets. The telling of a (piece of the) story of English will be greatly influenced by the point of view of the teller, who will (consciously or unconsciously) select events and examples, and interpret what is and is not noteworthy or significant, from a particular agenda. Several cases have been illustrated in this book where social, political, historical, and other agendas must be taken into account when trying to evaluate the emphasis and orientation of linguistic texts. A political perspective is evident in the attitudes to language expressed by eighteenth-century writers (Watts, Chapter 8); a particular historicism inevitably conditions our views on the nature of the continuity between Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) and Middle English (Milroy, Chapter 1); a religious perspective is needed in Early Modern English, where we need to recognise the impact of Puritanism in order to understand the way in which oaths (and their euphemisms) are used variably in plays throughout the period (Jucker, Chapter 11).

The study of language always needs to take place within the perspective of its commentators' sociopolitical background. The point is a truism in non-linguistic domains. It is routine to allow our awareness of the political background of contemporary literary authors and social commentators to influence our interpretation of what they are saying; and any investigator who failed to take this background into account would (rightly) be considered naive. But this is precisely what histories of English generally fail to do, when giving an account of the older writers on language, many of whom have been influenced by political or social ideologies (Milroy, Chapter 1). Only in occasional cases are linguistic observations related to (and thus explained by) a writer's personal background. An example would be Dr Johnson, where the occasionally idiosyncratic definitions in the *Dictionary* have often been discussed with reference to his own background and beliefs. Which political party did Johnson support? *Tory* is defined as 'One who adheres to the antient constitution of the state, and the apostolical hierarchy of the church of England, opposed to a *whig*.' And *Whig*? 'The name of a faction'. But how many of us, interested in English linguistic history, would be able to say what the political, religious, moral, or other views were of the grammarians,

lexicographers, and others whose linguistic observations we are attempting to evaluate?

Sometimes these views pervade a whole work, and make it extremely difficult to assess the representativeness of the linguistic observations it contains. This is especially true of the mindset permeating the study of English from the mid-eighteenth century, which was so profoundly influenced by Latin models and prescriptivism that it was routine to hear people reason that even 'our best Authors for want of some rudiments of this kind have sometimes fallen into mistakes, and been guilty of palpable errors in point of Grammar' (Watts, Chapter 8, p. 159). The arrival of major works of great influence on prescriptive attitudes – Johnson's dictionary, Lowth's grammar, Walker's pronunciation dictionary, all written within a few years of each other – mark a turning point, neatly demonstrated in the changing attitudes to variation shown in the grammars of the period (Poplack *et al.*, Chapter 5). By the middle of the following century, this orientation had developed, in some writers, into a whole social, moral, or political philosophy. William Cobbett, for example, makes his position clear in the dedication to Queen Caroline of his *Grammar of the English Language* (1829):

> A work, having for its objects, to lay the solid foundation of literary knowledge amongst the Labouring Classes of the community; to give practical effect to the natural genius found in the Soldier, the Sailor, the Apprentice, and the Plough-boy; and to make that genius a perennial source of wealth, strength, and safety to the kingdom.

The book is written as a series of letters to his son, 14-year-old James Paul Cobbett, who can have been left in no doubt about the role of grammar in indicating the general incompetence of those in power, some of whom had at one time forced Cobbett to flee the country to avoid imprisonment. This is one of the stronger parts of Letter XXII:

> How destitute of judgment and of practical talent these persons have been, in the capacity of Statesmen and of legislators, the present miserable and perilous state of England amply demonstrates; and I am not about to show you, that they are equally destitute in the capacity of writers.

And from Lesson 4 in Letter XXIV, Cobbett concludes an analysis of the errors in Castlereagh's grammar with:

> What do you say, what can you say, of such a man, but that nature might have made him for a valet, for a strolling player, and possibly for an auctioneer; but never for a Secretary of State. Yet this man was *educated* at the *University of Cambridge*!

When a grammar becomes such an index of (lack of) character and expertise, it needs careful evaluation, before its observations can be taken as a guide to the language it purports to describe.

## Towards the telling of new stories

If there is one thing we can learn from the traditional way in which the 'story of English' has been presented, it is this: that the next period in English linguistic history should not be treated in such an unbalanced way. There are several factors which lead me to think that a more inclusive and representative historical linguistics will be the outcome. Awareness that there is a problem (as illustrated by the present volume) is already a step towards the solution of the problem, and reference to nonstandard domains, and to their linguistic characteristics, are today being increasingly included in 'standard' historical accounts [e.g. Hogg and Denison 2002; Mugglestone (forthcoming)]. The availability of recorded sound means that the dependence on written material, with all its disadvantages, can in future be avoided. But, most important of all, there is bound to be a change in the marginal status of nonstandard domains, simply because there are going to be more of them to take into account.

The growth in diversity is noticeable at both national and international levels. Nationally, urban dialects are adapting to meet the identity needs of immigrant groups, such as the currently evolving Caribbean Scouse in Liverpool. With over 300 languages now spoken within London, for example, it would be surprising indeed if several did not produce fresh varieties as they interact with English, even if some will doubtless be short-lived and transitional in character. The linguistic consequences of immigrant diversity have long been noted in cities in the USA, but are now a major feature of contemporary life in the urban centres of most other countries where English is a mother-tongue, notably Australia. At an international level, the evidence is overwhelming of the emergence of a new generation of nonstandard Englishes, as the global reach of English extends. While standard English continues to perform its traditional role in fostering a shared medium of global intelligibility, the adoption of English by international communities has led to immediate adaptation in the interests of expressing identity. Several authors in this book have drawn attention to the 'new Englishes' which have developed among mother-tongue speakers in recent centuries (Trudgill, Gordon and Sudbury, Mesthrie); but these are going to be a small group by comparison with the varieties which have yet to emerge as a consequence of the adoption of English by non-native-speaking communities. The proportion of native speakers of English to the total of world speakers of English has been steadily falling for some time (Graddol 1999): for every one native speaker there are now three non-native speakers.

Because no language has ever been spoken by so many people in so many places, it is difficult to predict what will happen to English, as a consequence

of its global expansion; but increasing variation, extending to the point of mutual unintelligibility, is already apparent in the colloquial speech of local communities. The range of domains identified by Mesthrie (Chapter 6) illustrates one set of possibilities, but there are still other nonstandard varieties to be taken into account, such as the code-mixed varieties now found all over the world, and identified by such names as Singlish, Taglish, and Chinglish (McArthur 1998). Nor do current models yet allow for what is going to happen to English in communities where new types of social relationship have linguistic consequences – such as the thousands of children being born to parents who have only English as a foreign language in common, and who find themselves growing up with this kind of English as the norm at home. In such cases, non-native English (presumably including features which would be traditionally considered as learner errors) is being learned as a mother-tongue, and new kinds of nonstandard English must surely be the outcome.

At the very least, the gap between standard and nonstandard Englishes is likely to widen, with both domains expressing distinct and complementary functions of intelligibility and identity respectively. There are undoubtedly similarities with diglossic situations. It is, as Wales points out (Chapter 3), too soon to provide detail about what is happening in parts of the world where the language is changing very rapidly. On the other hand, published studies indicate that regional distinctiveness is a significant and steadily increasing presence. In vocabulary, coverage in regional dictionaries [such as Cassidy and Le Page (1967) or Branford and Branford (1991)] routinely reaches between 10,000 and 20,000 entries. In pronunciation, contact effects of both a segmental and non-segmental character can be heard: the former illustrated by the retroflexion of consonants in the Indian subcontinent; the latter by the use of syllable-timed speech (as noted for South Africa by Mesthrie) in most of these new varieties (Crystal 1996b). Even in grammar, regional distinctiveness is growing. Although a work such as *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* can say 'dialect differences [in grammar] are not as pervasive as we might imagine' and 'the core grammatical structures are relatively uniform across dialects' (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 20–1), this judgement is likely to be premature once further work on spoken grammar is undertaken (Wales, Chapter 3). And even in the Longman grammar, a detailed examination of the points of regional (lexico-)grammatical variation instantiated in that work shows that virtually all areas of English grammar are affected (Crystal 2002).

## A comparative perspective

Any approach to nonstandard English needs to adopt two universalist axioms from general linguistics: one synchronic, the other diachronic. The view that all languages are 'equal', in the sense that they display a comparable range of structural properties and social functions, must be extended synchronically to all regional and social domains. The need to state this principle explicitly

today is aimed at the popular mentality which views regional dialects as structurally or expressively inferior to the standard language; but it is a view which, as this book repeatedly illustrates, has had a dominant influence in the past. There also needs to be a diachronic extension: all language states (*états de langue*) of the past need to be conceived within the same structural and functional frame of reference as those available to present-day investigation. This is no more than a linguistic application of the geological principle of *uniformitarianism* – the notion that geological processes controlling the evolution of the Earth's crust were of the same kind throughout geological time as they are today. Although this frame of reference is uncontentious within linguistics, it is a long way from being routinely operationalised in relation to nonstandard domains. Thus, for example, the range of language functions which have been widely explored in standard English, such as the use of language to express identity, solidarity, and power (Mesthrie, p. 112), has rarely been explored in nonstandard English. There has been a tendency in traditional accounts to view nonstandard domains as stylistically or sociolinguistically uniform, by comparison with the standard language, which is manifested in many varieties. Certainly, one of the features of a standard language is its ability to accrete new varieties in a way that nonstandard domains do not: for example, the range of written varieties, or the range of varieties which identify broadcasting, are never going to be matched in a nonstandard domain. But this is not to say that nonstandard domains have no variation at all. On the contrary, the kind of variation illustrated by Mesthrie's lectal approach to South African Indian English is illustrative, and doubtless typical.

To demonstrate the case that there is genuine equivalence between standard and nonstandard domains, comprehensive structural and functional perspectives need to be adopted. We are, however, a long way from this goal. This book is a start, in the way it illustrates points of structural parity within nonstandard domains, especially in segmental phonology, morphology, and the lexicon, and to a lesser extent in syntax. Yet it is the product of its time. To a considerable extent, it is a reaction to a point of view (within prescriptivism) which itself focused on low-level points of language, such as *ain't*, double negation, regional vocabulary, and the use of glottal stops. This reaction is needed, in that such features of nonstandard English still attract more than their fair share of public attention (in the UK National Curriculum, for example, one would be forgiven for thinking that such matters are all that English grammar should be concerned with), and the need to explain their linguistic role in nonstandard varieties remains important. The book's emphasis is also understandable, in that these levels of language are those about which linguistics traditionally has had most to say. It remains easiest to demonstrate nonstandard structural complexity with reference to phonology and morphology, and this is what most people do. When it comes to other 'levels' of linguistic structure, such as nonsegmental phonology, semantics, discourse structure, and pragmatics – even syntax – all we can do

is concur with Trudgill and Watts (Introduction, pp. 1–3) and Wales (Chapter 3) that we know very little about the way in which sensible comparisons between standard and nonstandard domains might be made. Even in standard English, the amount of descriptive work in some of these areas is limited and highly selective; for nonstandard English it is often no more than impressionistic and anecdotal. I believe that the harnessing of multimedia technology will soon begin to correct this imbalance. We shall not have to wait until 2525.

## Notes

1  The book of the series was McCrum *et al.* (1986).
2  It is a welcome sign to see organisations (such as the English Speaking Union) in recent years engaging in debating competitions, public-speaking competitions, and the like; but the focus of these events is national or international, and is thus exclusively on standard English.
3  For a selection, see Crystal and Crystal (2000).