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FIVE BEST

Watch Your Language

Top books on the history and use of English.

BY DAVID CRYSTAL

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1. The Oxford English Dictionary (1884).

If I were ever asked which book to take to a desert island, I would opt immediately for the second edition of the unabridged Oxford English Dictionary (1989)--and hope that the island had an electricity supply so that I could download the online version or use the CD. The OED is without a doubt the most comprehensive account of the history of English vocabulary ever compiled. It has gaps and biases, of course--for example, the original editors went through Shakespeare with a tooth-comb, at the expense of some of the other Elizabethan dramatists--but it is still the source I turn to most often whenever I am working on the development of the language. Its process of continual editorial revision provides a voyage of linguistic discovery that, I am happy to say, never comes to an end.

2. "The Use of English" by Randolph Quirk (St. Martin's, 1963).

This is the book that opened my eyes--and the eyes of several generations of English students-- to the range, versatility and flexibility of the English language. "The Use of English" originated in a series of BBC talks, and the radio influence is apparent in the friendly tone of the writing and down-to-earth exercises. The book brought home the importance of always linking the study of language to the study of literature. Its range of examples, from both linguistic and literary sources, gave a perfect illustration of how the subject should be taught. When Randolph Quirk instructs the reader to "write opening paragraphs which you might expect to find beneath the following headlines," he doesn't rely on the sort of heavy news items that an older book might have employed; instead he gives us the cheeky "Rubber Bridge at Monte Carlo" and "Virgin Lands Job for Disgraced Red." First published by Longmans in London in 1962 (a second edition came out in 1968), the book was replaced in 1990 by "English in Use," which Quirk co-wrote with his wife, Gabriele Stein. But nothing could replace the freshness and impact of the original volume.

3. "A History of the English Language" by Albert C. Baugh (Appleton-Century, 1935).

This book just goes on and on. I used its second edition (1957) when I was an undergraduate and was fascinated by both the range of its coverage and the depth of its treatment. It begins by seeing English in the context of the Indo-European family, then works its way from Old English through Middle English into Early Modern English and Modern English, and in later editions continues the story as the language expands around the world. "A History of the English Language" packs an enormous amount of illustrative detail into its 450 or so pages. Other histories of the language have since been written, but this one holds a special place for its balanced views and accessible scholarship.

4. Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases by Peter Mark Roget (1852)

No name has come to be so synonymous with "thesaurus" as has Roget's. He has even become a

common noun: I have "a Roget" on my shelves. Indeed I have a dozen Rogets, as his thesaurus has now appeared in numerous editions and been revised, expanded or abridged more times than any other example of the genre. The original was a truly remarkable work for its period, and anyone who has tried to update it or rework its contents (as I have) cannot fail to recognize the prodigious labor that went into its compilation. Idiosyncratic as all such thematic thesauruses are, it is nonetheless the best first source of reference we have for those many occasions when we are dimly aware of the meaning we want to express and are searching for the best word with which to express it.

5. "Mother Tongue" by Bill Bryson (William Morrow, 1990).

I admire nonspecialists who take an interest in a subject and explore it with respect and accuracy, adding a level of accessibility and an individual slant that academics would do well to emulate. Few of these writers have succeeded; none has succeeded so well as Bill Bryson in this book. It's a delightful survey--though with its good humor, wealth of anecdote and boyish enthusiasm, "romp" would be a better word.

Mr. Crystal is the author of more than 30 books specifically on English. His latest title, "How Language Works" (Overlook), will be published in November.

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