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# In search of English

by David Crystal

I often give talks at 'lit fests', and usually I find myself in the company of novelists, poets, dramatists, and the generalist authors that flood the literary tents these days. But at the Dartington 'Ways on Words' festival a couple of years ago I found myself in totally different company. I had just written a book which was a new genre for me – a linguistic travelogue: *By Hook or By Crook*. Its subtitle was *A Journey in Search of English*. The organizers, presumably sensing that travel was sexier than linguistics, placed me on their 'travel writers' day.

The idea for this book grew during 2005, when I was acting as a consultant for the BBC on their 'Voices' project. 'Voices' was a celebration of the accents and dialects of the UK and all regional radio stations were involved, collecting audio material and presenting it in a wide variety of programmes during August of that year. I was actively involved in several of the programmes – including one which was made for BBC television called 'The Way That We Say It', a report on the English accents used in Wales. You can see some clips at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/northwest/sites/voices/pages/tvclips.shtml>>, and you can see the ongoing project at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices>>.

Making a programme like this, there are long periods when you're waiting for something to happen. The light might not be right, the background might be wrong, there might be too much noise from passers-by... all sorts of things lead the producer to say, quite often, 'We don't need you for half an hour, David'. What is a chap to do, when such waiting-periods emerge? Some presenters read; some knit. I went walkabout, looking for language. I roamed around the neighbourhood where we were filming, looking out for interesting place-names, signs, inscriptions, posters... anything which had something unusual or surprising to do with language. And there were *always* surprises. Language never lets you down.

When the filming was over, and I was back home, I collected my notes and started to tell the story of my linguistic journey around Wales, but soon realized that I wasn't going to be able to restrict it in that way. The language issues I encountered demanded explanations, and searching for these took me far away from Wales. Take the title of the book: *By Hook or By Crook*. I wasn't intending

to call the book that at all. I was originally going to call it *In Search of English*. But after telling my opening story, in which I encountered a shepherd's crook, the publisher felt that a more lively title would better reflect what the book was about.

That story perfectly illustrates the serendipitous nature of linguistic enquiry. I was in Gaerwen, in Anglesey, waiting to talk to the auctioneer at the sheep market. Why? Because he was reputed to be unbelievably fast and fluent in both English and Welsh when auctioneering, and we wanted to interview him about the kind of language he used. He was working when we arrived, so while I waited for him to be available I wandered round the market. I thought I'd record some local Welsh accents and spotted an old, craggy, Welsh-faced shepherd near one of the pens. I put on my best Welsh accent to greet him and was flabbergasted to hear him reply in broad Scots – even though (he later told me) he'd lived in the area for forty years. That was surprise number one – to find someone who had retained an ethnic accent for so long. That's pretty unusual. Most people change their accents, a little or a lot, when they move.

**'That's the trouble with folk idioms.'**

Surprise number two was when he gave me a tutorial on shepherd's crooks. I hadn't realized there was such a science in their construction. And I went home that day with my head buzzing with stories of how crooks were used. Apparently they'd also been used for fighting in the old days. I was telling this to a friend who's into martial arts in a big way and he wasn't at all surprised. He'd used sticks in some fights and he could see

'I ... spotted an old, craggy, Welsh-faced shepherd...'



the value of having one with a hook, especially if they were good at trapping necks and legs. And then he asked me: 'Is that where *by hook or by crook* comes from?'

I didn't know. But I had my wordbooks nearby. I found references to the phrase in three books straight away – and found three different explanations. That's the trouble with folk idioms. The origins of many of them are lost, and people start guessing where they come from.

I had no idea, when I wrote my opening words of chapter 1, that a few pages later I would be exploring the origins of *by hook or by crook*, or that, in between, I would find myself talking about other associations which came to mind as I described my encounter with the Welsh/Scots shepherd. Like this one. Gaerwen is near Llanfairpwll, the short version of the 58-letter name which is the longest place-name in Britain. I explain how that amazing name came to be invented. And that leads me to think about other long place-names and about our obsession with linguistic length. People are always asking such questions as 'What's the longest word in the English language?' and 'What's the longest place-name in the world?'



'...sensing that travel was sexier than linguistics...'





The place-name is in New Zealand. When I wrote my book I'd never been there, but the linguistic gods were kind and not long after *By Hook...* went to press I actually found myself in New Zealand driving near to the location of the 85-letter Maori name. Well naturally we had to visit it and I was able to tell the story of what happened in the PS section at the back of the paperback edition.

## 'It might be called "stream-of-consciousness linguistics" ...'

I must admit I hadn't realized I was such a travel fanatic until I wrote this book. It wasn't enough just to talk about an interesting place-name: I had to go and visit it. Take Bricklehampton. This is the longest isogrammatic place-name in Britain. An isogram is a word in which every letter appears the same number of times. Bricklehampton has 14 letters, and none of them appear twice. When I discovered that, I just had to go and see the place – it's a tiny hamlet near Evesham – and take a photograph of its signpost.

You might think that's rather sad, spending a fair chunk of one's life travelling to places just because they have interesting names. I don't think it's so unusual, in fact. I suspect that there are some NATE readers of this article who are already thinking: 'No isogrammatic place-name in Britain longer than 14 letters? Hmm. Is that true? I bet I can find one with 15....' I don't think you will. But if you do, please write and tell me.

In fact, I don't think you will find a longer isogrammatic place-name anywhere in the English-speaking world. Now there's a real challenge! (Hyphenated names don't count, by the way.)

I was somewhat disconcerted, I have to say, to find myself writing a book in which I had no idea where I was going! Normally, when I write a book, I have a very clear sense of what is going

to happen. I make an outline of the book as a whole, work out how many chapters there will be in it, decide what their themes are going to be, and have notes about what sort of information will be in each chapter. When I start Chapter 1, I already have an idea of how I will close it. Sometimes, as with the last paragraph of my *Pronouncing Shakespeare*, I write the last lines first. But with *By Hook...* it wasn't like that at all. I had no idea how many chapters there would be, nor where I would end up even at the end of Chapter 1. It was initially an unnerving authorial experience.

But I needn't have worried. The travel-writers at Dartington told me that my experience was perfectly normal. 'That's part of the fun,' said one to me, 'not knowing where you're going to end up.' And the best travel books, it seems, retain that flavour of the unpredictable.

I should have anticipated it, because my subtitle is a deliberate echo of the series of explorations carried out by the travel writer H. V. Morton in the 1920s and 30s – *In Search of England*, *In Search of Scotland...* Morton used to point his car in no particular direction and see what happened. He writes, in the preface to one of his books, that he would turn randomly down interesting-looking side-roads and always found them more interesting than the main roads. That has been my experience too.

*By Hook...*, then, is a linguistic travelogue. It is an attempt to capture the exploratory, seductive, teasing, quirky, tantalising nature of language study. It might be called 'stream-of-consciousness linguistics'. But Morton wasn't the only influence. W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* is an atmospheric, semi-fictional account of a walking tour throughout East Anglia in which personal reflections, historical allusions, and traveller observations randomly combine into a mesmerising novel about change, memory, oblivion, and survival. The metaphor of the title – Saturn's rings created from fragments of shattered moons – captures the fragmentary and stream-of-consciousness flow of the narrative.

I was frequently reminded of the serendipitous nature of language study, when reading that book. Around the next corner is always a new linguistic experience, waiting to be observed. Language is in a state of constant change, with each day bringing new developments. Any linguistic study is a search for the impossible – to say something sensible about the 'whole' of a language. I have spent my entire professional life trying to make valid statements about language and languages – and about the English language in particular. Every now and then I feel I have come close to it, and then it leaves me behind, like the soldiers chasing the Ghost in *Hamlet* – 'Tis here! 'Tis here! 'Tis gone.' ■

David Crystal

'...I had no idea where I was going!'

