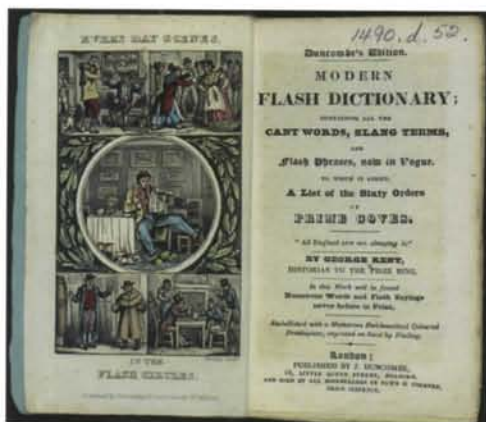


EXHIBITING THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH



David Crystal has been involved with the ESU since 1989, first as a member of the ESU board and more recently as Chair of the ESU's English Language Council. He has given several lectures, spoken at ESU conferences from Edinburgh to Sydney and written journal articles as well as attending the World Members Conference in Washington in 1992. In 1993, he spoke at the BBC/OUP/ELT lecture 'In Search of English – A Travellers Guide' held at Dartmouth House. He spoke at the ESU Language of Science conference in March 2005 and was special guest speaker in Belgrade in 2009 at the ESU 'Future of Englishes' conference. He has written a piece for us about the new exhibition at the British Library, exploring the development of the English language for which he was the lead consultant and the author of the accompanying book.

The British Library is doing something rather exciting this year. It's holding its first ever exhibition totally devoted to the English language. It's called 'Evolving English' and it's running from mid-November until early April. If you're anywhere near London during that time, make a visit. You'll never have seen anything like it.

Bits of it you might have seen before. Some of the really famous books and manuscripts are often on display at the Library - such as the Anglo-Saxon saga *Beowulf*, the first edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's First Folio, or the *King James Bible*. But they are there as wonderful works of literature in their own right. They're not there to tell a story - the story of the English language.

It's a story that has often been told in textbook form, but textbooks typically don't have many pictures - and when you do see them they're usually quite small and not in colour, and

it's often difficult to read the words in the manuscripts. TV documentaries are visual enough, but they never give us enough detail, nor do we get a good sense of the physicality of the objects. Once you see how big a First Folio or a *King James Bible* actually is, you don't forget it. (And how heavy these books are. You have to be quite strong to lift one of those bibles!) It's not just the famous books of the past that tell the story of English. The British Library has amazing collections of ephemera - texts that aren't intended to have a long life, such as tickets, programmes, posters and advertisements. These are also an important part of linguistic history, so they are in the exhibition too. And the Library has great collections of literature from all over the world. English is a global language now, and any exhibition has to show the way it has evolved in other places. This isn't just an exhibition of British English.

Nor is the exhibition only about books. People sometimes forget that the British Library has a large number of audio-recordings of spoken English, some dating back to the late 1800s. The Library has an excellent collection of modern regional accents and dialects too. And it's building up its collection of reconstructed accents. You can hear how English may have sounded in *Beowulf*'s time, or Chaucer's, or Shakespeare's.

There isn't just one story of English - there are hundreds. Each dialect of the language, whether national or global, has its own story. This was one of the big problems the organizers of the exhibition had to face. How to tell as many stories as possible, in a limited exhibition space? They solved the problem by dividing the space, and the accompanying book, into seven themes, each of which explores a different strand of the story.

English comes of age

This strand presents the first thousand years of English, beginning with the earliest appearance of the language in Britain, in the fifth century, in simple inscriptions. We follow its growth as a written medium, first using runes, and then the Roman alphabet introduced by missionaries, along with a few extra letters to cope with the Old English sound system. We see the language developing in poems, riddles, charters, wills, chronicles, songs, and stories. As we move into the Middle English period, from around the 12th century, the old letters are gradually replaced, so that the language becomes much more recognizable to modern eyes. The period ends with a letter, written in English in about 1419 by King Henry V, probably in his own handwriting. When kings start using English, rather than French or Latin, we can say that the language has really come of age.

Setting the standard

This strand takes up the story as the Middle Ages draw to a close. A nation state needs a standard language, if it is to function effectively, but this isn't something that happens overnight. It took 400 years to develop a 'standard English' - a variety in which educated people all came to use the same rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation. The exhibition identifies the main influences. We see the very first printed book in English, published by William Caxton, as well as works by Chaucer and Shakespeare, some early translations of the *Bible*, the first accounts of English spelling and grammar, and the first English dictionary, compiled by Robert Cawdrey in 1604. We then move into the 18th century, with its hugely influential grammars and dictionaries, such as Dr Johnson's, and into the present day, with the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the BBC.

Everyday English

Standard English has both formal and informal varieties, though it is the formal variety that we encounter most often in literature and the press, and in such areas as science, education, religion and the law. But this kind of literature is only one side of the coin. On the other side, we find thousands of examples of ordinary everyday English, in the form of letters, cookery recipes, diaries and all kinds of daily chat. In the exhibition we see some fine surviving specimens from the Middle Ages, such as the letters written by the Paston family, as well as informal writing from later periods by such people as Jonathan Swift, Jane Austen, Mark Twain and Harold Pinter.

English at work

The next strand introduces the notion of English in the workplace. Here we see the enormous stylistic range of the language as it was adapted to cope with new intellectual and social demands. It does not take long before we can talk about the 'language of' such areas as law, religion, economics, medicine, history, science and technology. More recently,

we find the language of the press, advertising and the media in general. In the exhibition we see the first ever English newspaper and some of the dramatic news reports and advertisements from the 19th century. Special forms of English appear, such as shorthand and the use of simplified systems for teaching purposes. All of this captures the notion of 'English at work'.

English at play

By contrast, this next strand illustrates the equally wide range of varieties involved in 'English at play'. The concept of 'play' is a very wide one. It includes any use of language where someone manipulates the rules to make an effect, as in jokes, riddles, word puzzles and creative literature. We see joke books and language parlour games from hundreds of years ago and how schoolbooks made use of language play to motivate children to learn. The history of English shows a continuous strand of playful language, from the earliest Anglo-Saxon riddles to the latest text-messaging poems. And the abbreviations of text-messaging turn out to be a lot older than most people realize.

Accents and dialects

This strand deals with the development of accents and dialects. They can be seen at the very beginning of the Old English period, and they become more in evidence as the language spread around Britain and came to be written down in widely separated places. We see the very first collections of dialect words and the way authors started to bring dialects into their writing, as with the poems of Robert Burns or the characters of Charles Dickens. The large surveys of the late 19th and 20th centuries stimulated fresh interest in the study of regional speech and there are examples in the exhibition showing how dialectologists operate.

Global English

This last strand looks at the emergence of English outside the British Isles, on a global scale. The evolution of international dialects follows the course of world history - largely a consequence of the spread of the British Empire. An American English emerged in the 17th century, and was soon followed by other Englishes in the Caribbean, India, the East Indies, Africa and Australasia. In some cases, contact with local languages resulted in the development of pidgin varieties of English, some of which evolved into separate languages. The diversification has continued in a postcolonial era, with many countries adopting English as a lingua franca and then immediately adapting it to express their cultural identity. Several of these 'new Englishes' are on display in the exhibition.

So: if you can get to London during the opening period, go. If not, there's an accompanying website and a book of the exhibition, *Evolving English*. Either way, you'll experience the language as never before.