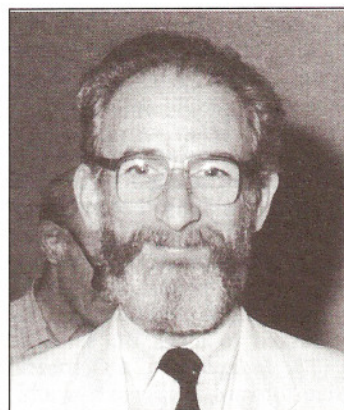*Guest Editorial*

Is there anybody there?

In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, which if everything has gone according to plan (both for *The Indexer* and for Cambridge University Press) will have been published a fortnight before the present journal issue, I have included a section on the different kinds of monologue and dialogue situation which exist in English. A straightforward monologue is easy to imagine—a sermon. Likewise, a straightforward dialogue is unexceptional—a conversation between two friends. The focus of the section is on the many types of case where kinds of language are used that are *intermediate* between monologue and dialogue. In the case of spoken language, they include such pseudo-dialogues as people who talk to themselves, or to plants, or to an answerphone. In the case of writing, they include diaries, examination answers, and note-taking. One of

Andrew Orr.

David Crystal

the most interesting cases is where we write *as if* an audience is present, because we know that at a later stage one will be. Activities here include preparing a handout for a talk, writing an essay for a tutor, and—indexing.

From the point of view of discourse analysis, indexing is truly a strange behaviour. It is a task where the compiler is trying to anticipate every possible query about content which future readers of a publication might have. Indexers are in effect trying to provide answers to a host of unasked questions—and this in itself is an interesting reversal of communicative priorities. Normally, we wait for a question before we try to answer it. Indexers therefore need to work as if their audience is present. But there are two snags: first, in most cases they do not know who this audience will be; second, in most cases they do not receive any feedback as to whether their judgements have been successful. From a communicative point of view, there is probably no more isolated intellectual task than indexing. The twilight howl of the indexer might well be 'Is there anybody there?'

This is why it is so important to develop the theoretical research dimension to indexing. Indexing seems to be in the situation now which medical science was in a couple of hundred years ago. That was a time of case studies, of anecdotal observation, of speculative generalization. Medicine has moved on from this primitive empirical stage, thanks chiefly to vast numbers of experimental studies, motivated by testable hypotheses, and prompted by fruitful theories. And indexing must move on, too.

Thumbing through the copies of *The Indexer* since I became President of SI in 1992, it is plain that most of the major papers fall into the category of extending the empirical range of the subject at a descriptive level, with several authors telling us about the particular problems of indexing a particular category, whether it be newspapers, law reports, personal names, hymns and psalms, or museum objects. Regional differences also attract their fair share of attention. There is a proper concern with methodology, which these days is heavily biased towards taking into account the consequences of the electronic revolution. Educational methods (e.g. training of indexers) and points of interdisciplinary connection (e.g. with library science) are in evidence. But theoretical articles are few—a point probed by Ken Bakewell in his piece on 'Research in indexing' (*The Indexer* **18** (3) April 1993, page 147).

There are exceptions, as shown by the paper by Ross Todd (*The Indexer* **18** (2), October 1992, pages 101–4), who reminds us of the importance of distinguishing between 'the mental processes that take place during subject analysis' and 'translating the outcomes of subject analysis into a specified indexing language', and asserts that 'the focus of our literature is very much on the translation stage'. 'There is little about how indexers decide what the subject of a document is, how they determine its aboutness.' What are the rules which guide us in our decision-making? Todd points out that there are huge variations in inter-indexer consistency, when indexers are asked to index the same document. He might have added that there are also major variations when the same indexer is asked to index the same document—a point commented upon in a different connection by Hans Wellisch (*The Indexer* **19** (2), October 1994, page 132). I very much agree with Todd's conclusion, that 'a productive step forward in research would be to begin investigating indexing practice that focuses on the first stage of indexing, subject analysis, and examine how indexers in practice actually undertake this process' (page 104). We now need to refine our methodologies so that this can be done, and to find the time to step back from the daily grind, as the first pathologists did, to put these methodologies into practice.

I conclude my encyclopedia section on unusual types of monologue by saying, 'the task of indexing is a difficult one, requiring exceptional communicative commitment'. If there is anything I have had confirmed in my presidential period of office for the Society of Indexers, it is the truth of this last observation.

DAVID CRYSTAL
President, Society of Indexers