

## Writing about writing about language

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### David Crystal

What should a writers' festival be celebrating? Writing, Tom said, authoritatively. But 'writing' has always been one of those ambiguous terms, referring both to means and ends. Consider.

I am writing now in order to produce a piece of writing. My bad writing (in my handwritten notes) might nonetheless generate some good writing. Some writers might even have used their best writing to produce their worst writing. However, at the moment I am not using my best writing to produce some good writing, because I am typing. You can see the problem. Even the verb forms in English highlight the difference. 'What do you do? I write.' Ends. 'What are you doing this minute? I am writing.' Means.

Most literary festivals celebrate writing as an end, as an achievement. That is why you see the poets there, displaying their latest wares, along with the novelists, dramatists, essayists, et al. Step forward, Al. He always has a lot to answer for. And at a writers' festival he covers all kinds of people with his cape, such as popular scientists, journalists, broadcasters, political commentators, historians, biographers - and linguists.

We should expect linguists to be around, during a writers' festival, advertising their wares, just as we would expect to see firms dealing in car parts and maintenance alongside the glittering new models at a motor show. Linguists are always reminding people about the means to the ends. Their focus is on the tools of the writing trade. And on the way professionals use these tools, to produce prize-winning products. We are always asking these days, of innovative practices - such as the latest cinematic special effects - 'How on earth did they do that?' When it comes to using the special effects of language, linguists know.

It isn't just writing, of course. There are four linguistic modes of communication, not one. The other side of the coin to writing is reading, and both of these arise out of a semiotic money-box which contains another two-sided coin, speaking and listening. To be a writer, you need all four. I doubt if it's possible to write well without first being a respectable reader. Reading, in the normal course of events, is dependent on the prior establishment of speaking. And - again in the normal course of events - it certainly isn't possible to speak well without first being a reasonable listener.

All four functions operate synchronously in the writer. The metaphors writers live by mix terms from different channels. Good writers not only read what they write; they also listen to it. Poets talk about different 'voices' in their written work. Reading can mean either silence or speech ('reading aloud'), private activity or public (as in a 'play reading'). These days, the distinction between speech and writing in the creative domain is decreasing daily, as more and more 'talking books' hit the shelves. Soon, I expect authors will begin a new work by speaking it directly into a talking book, which will only later be written down. The book of the story. Like Beowulf.

But linguists are not just parasitical on literary authors. Linguists have their own stories to tell. I shall be doing more at the Festival than wandering around with the linguistic counterpart of a butterfly-net and notebook, murmuring 'nice one', 'lovely specimen', and drawing the attention of passers-by to the language equivalent in poetry, prose and plays of the beautiful patterns on a red admiral's wing. I have the millennium on my mind, as much as everyone else. I am using it as an excuse to take stock, to see where we are, where we've

been, where we might go next. I shall be ranking priorities. And I shall be sounding off about these priorities to anyone who cares to listen.

We believe in numbers ending with one nought, or two, or three. We are impressed with them. So I have come up with ten linguistic priorities for the new millennium. Ten. A much better word than nine or eleven. Linguistic realities are often more impressive than the truth. There is, we know, nothing truly significant about the year 2000. If we are relating it to Jesus's birth, we've missed it. If we are counting properly, from Year 1 AD (recalling that there was no Year Zero), we're not there yet. Who cares! The linguistic magic of moving from 1 to 2, with three zeroes, carries the day. Zero makes things special. I expect the same thing to happen when I have my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>1</sup>

Ten priorities, pleas, petitions, personal entreaties. Commandments, if you like. Preferences, if you do not wish me to be so bold. Some of them have been around a long time; some are very recent. Here's a brief account of them. DC's log. And like the Decalogue, they cannot really be ordered, except perhaps for the first.

I The top priority has to be a greater concern for endangered languages. That's why I've chosen this topic for my talk at the Festival, and made it the subject of my next book, *Language Death* (CUP, 2000). Without language there would be no writers. At the Festival, we are celebrating the achievements of language. But, with many languages, there will soon be no achievements to celebrate, because they will have disappeared. Of the 6,000 or so languages in the world, at least half are likely to be dead within the next century – that's, on average, one dying every two weeks or so. Australian linguists have done more than most to publicise the plight of these languages. In some cases, revitalization is possible, and some fine examples of this process have already been seen in this country. In others, all that can be done is urgent documentation, both of the language and of its oral literature, before they disappear for ever. For when a language dies, which has never been written down, it is as if it has never been. All writers, and especially those whose languages are not in any danger (at present), should be reflecting on this, and doing something about it.

II Close behind comes a greater concern for minority languages, even if they are not in any global sense endangered. All languages express the identity of the people who speak them, but for those who find themselves to be a small part of a large community, the role of language is especially important. They want to see their language treated with respect by the dominant culture; they want opportunities (which usually means funding) to use their language in public and see it valued. A writers' festival values language. It would be professionally dishonest for writers to take pride in the achievements of their own language while denying the same opportunity to others. Writers should be doing something about this, too.

III We need to promote a greater concern for all accents and dialects. Here we are talking about a readiness to accept the variety of forms a language takes as it varies from one part of a country to another. We don't have to personally like all these forms, any more than we have to like all kinds of music or literature. But we should not go round, as many have done, condemning all urban dialects as ugly, rough, or slovenly. Beryl Bainbridge achieved some notoriety in the UK this year when she hammered 'the mangled language' spoken in Birmingham and Liverpool. How a person who makes her living out of perceptive characterization could subscribe to this is beyond me. There is a universal popular myth that urban speech is mangled. I would have expected novelists to do better than this, to see the truth, to capture the expressive power of these accents and dialects. Dickens did it all the time. The fact of the matter is that you can speak or write well or badly in any accent or dialect, rural or urban. Writers should be demonstrating this, and not publicising their

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<sup>1</sup> OK, OK. 60<sup>th</sup>.

prejudices or acting as linguistic vigilantes. Eternal vigilance is for the professional pedant only. Professional writers should be beacons of eternal tolerance.

IV At the same time, we need to promote a greater concern for the expressive range of a language. This means valuing all varieties and styles in a language, whether spoken or written, formal or informal, regional or social, domestic or professional. It means being concerned over standards of excellence, while recognizing that language reflects many needs and activities. One of the purposes of language is to express identity, as we have seen; another is to foster mutual intelligibility. This means that language has to be clear, care has to be taken to avoid ambiguity, and subtleties of expression have to be carefully managed. There has long been a concern in schools for children to master a 'standard' language, in which the focus is on the sounds, grammar, and vocabulary that facilitate national (and, these days, international) intelligibility. In the past, this was all too often seen as a replacement for a local dialect. Writers can do a valuable job in helping everyone see the value of both.

V We need to become more multilingual in our thinking, and in our abilities. There are still too many cultures which are monolingual in temperament. These, ironically, are the disadvantaged ones. Although culturally dominant, reflecting their colonial pasts, they are missing out intellectually by failing to make a second language a routine part of growing up. As Emerson said, 'As many languages as he has, as many friends, as many arts and trades, so many times is he a man'. Or woman. And the benefits, as people are beginning to learn, can be economic as well as personal. Writers, through their characters, are in the best position to make this point. But how many bilingual characters in fiction do you know?

(I wonder if the original Decalogue had so many short commandments because the first few took up too much space on the tablets of stone? With the end of a 2000-word piece looming, my remaining five must be reduced – though in style only, not import.)

VI We need to accept change in language as a normal process. This means we should stop seeing it as decay and deterioration, and complaining about it to the press, the prime minister, or whoever we hope will listen. There is probably more time wasted on this issue than on any other in the world of language. Language change is inevitable, continuous, universal, and multidirectional. Languages do not get better or worse, when they change. They just – change.

VII We need to show greater concern for those who are having difficulties learning their mother-tongue - whether for medical, psychological, or other reasons. As many as 10 per cent of a population can be affected by handicaps in listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Deafness, cleft palate, dyslexia, and language delay are just some of the conditions which form the world of another cadre of language professionals, the speech and language pathologists.

VIII We need to show greater concern for those who have lost their ability to use a mother-tongue in which they were once proficient. This is the language pathology world too, but now we are talking about the linguistic consequences of strokes, and other forms of brain damage, among the adult population. Aphasia is one of the best-known syndromes.

IX We need to bring the study of language and literature closer together. All too often, schools, universities, and language-teaching institutions introduce a sharp boundary between the two domains. 'The language' is taught in one class; 'the literature' in another. It's time to allow more language awareness into the literature class, and more literary examples into the language class. Both sides, after all, have a focus on creativity. The creation of new words and sentences is how a language develops and changes; the creation of new discourses is how literature does.

X Finally, we need to appreciate, truly appreciate, the value of language in human development and society. Languages should be thought of as national treasures, and treated accordingly. There should be galleries devoted to it, archives and museums - festivals. The first such major proposal of this kind, the 'World of Language' scheme for a language exhibition centre on London's South Bank, next to Shakespeare's Globe, is currently beached for lack of funding.

Festivals. I am back where I began. Wandering round the Melbourne Writers' Festival hoping that something will happen. And what I would really like to see happen is for writers, all kinds of writers, to take on board some of my priorities, and to express them in their own worlds. For where are the plays, novels, and poems about these language themes? I spent much of 1997 writing a play, 'Living On', to publicise the plight of dying languages. Why did it have to be me? Why not a real playwright? Why is there no novel (as far as I know) on language death? And if there is one, why are there not ten? Where are the bilingual characters? Where are the language-disordered characters? Where is the theme of language in books for children? Where have such topics as linguistic tolerance, dialect diversity, and standard language, been given a literary treatment?

Literature is supposed to be mimetic of all human experience. Well, it seems to me that there is one side of human experience which has had precious little literary treatment, and that is language – where it is the subject-matter, not just the medium, of the message. Language is too important to be left to any one group, even if they are linguists. It is certainly the responsibility of writers. And I cannot help but wonder: if more writers took these messages on board, would the ideas not start getting across to the general public more effectively than when they were being promulgated by linguists alone?

Writers' Festivals are just the places where such things could start to happen. Now that would be a real cause for celebration. I feel another priority coming on.

XI We need writers to be writing more *about* language – writing about writing, therefore, and also about reading, speaking, listening, and the whole enterprise of language study.

XII Damn.