

## ***Language and Questions of Culture* David Crystal is Interviewed by Xiaoping Jiang**

### 1. Xiaoping Jiang:

Dear Professor David Crystal,

Perhaps we could start with my personal experience in studying and using English as a *lingua franca*, which is that learning a language is much more than simply mastering a linguistic tool: it involves learning the culture behind that language. Yet your response to Michael Agar's *Language Shock* (1994) was that "It is also important not to overstate the case". And you continue, "When all these factors of individuality are taken into account, I wonder just how much will be left for languaculture?" (Crystal, 1994).

Well, in my experience as a Chinese national living and working overseas, many communication breakdowns *are* due to non-language issues. In fact, languages and cultures tend to be inseparable. Then, interestingly, in your more recent autobiography, *Just A Phrase I'm Going Through* (2009) you expressed a more linguacultural view. As you state, "To get to know a language, you have to get to know the people. There is no other way. And what better way is there of getting to know someone than over a glass or two in a snug?" Unfortunately there are no pubs as such on the University campus in Guangzhou, China (a very interesting cultural difference), though Chinese beer is very good and 'Maotai', China's national heritage liquor, is sweetly intoxicating.

So based on your statements, how would you now advise a language learner "to get to know the people" well especially when he/she has never been to the country in which the language is spoken? Is there any viable approach to overcome cultural barriers in intercultural communication? A nice and easy first question!

### David Crystal:

Increasingly, over the past ten years, I've come to take the view that a cultural perspective is intrinsic to the future of language teaching and learning, especially in the case of English, as it becomes increasingly global. Once upon a time, I saw this perspective as a marginal or advanced feature of a curriculum - as I think most courses

did - something that learners would 'add on' after achieving a certain level of competence. Not any more. A cultural perspective needs to be there from day one. Here's an illustration.

I've just returned from several months in The Netherlands, and although it was not my first visit, it was the first time I had experienced Dutch as a daily routine. At one point I had my first complete Dutch conversation in a local baker's shop. I had fallen in love with appleflaps - a gorgeous concoction of apple in a slightly sugared, triangular casing made of puff pastry - and I wanted my daily fix. The conversation was very simple:

Me: Een appelflap. (One appleflap)

Shop lady (laughing): Zeer goed... Een euro vijftig. (One euro fifty)

Me: Dank je wel. (Thank you very much)

Shop lady: Alsjeblieft. (Please)

This conversation, basic as it is, is full of cultural content. It is firstly, an informal exchange, as shown by the choice of 'Dank je wel' (vs. more formal 'Dank u wel') and 'Alsjeblieft' (vs. more formal 'Alstublieft'). But it is not just informal: there is a pragmatic difference. In normal English I wouldn't say 'Thank you very much' for the first exchange in a trivial shop purchase. I would say simply 'Thank you' - and leave a 'very much' for a moment when I felt the server had done something special. But in Dutch, 'Dank u wel' is the routine expression of thanks.

Then there is the distribution of 'please'. You will have noticed that I didn't use it, following my observation that Dutch people usually don't when they're asking for something over the counter. On the other hand, when the lady gave me the appleflap, it was she who said 'please', where clearly the word was functioning more like a 'thank you' - 'thank you for your custom' or 'here you are'. Immigrant waiters in English restaurants who say 'please' as they give you something are clearly unconsciously transferring their first-language habits into their new setting.

I have a grandson in Amsterdam who is growing up bilingually. One of his biggest challenges is sorting out the politeness differences between the two languages/cultures. We keep haranguing him to say 'please' and 'thank you' as much as possible - this is, after all, the British way, instilled by parents into English children's brains from around age 3. 'Can I have a biscuit?' asks the child. 'I haven't heard that little word yet', says the parent. 'Can I have a biscuit, PLEASE' repeats the child.

But this isn't the Dutch way, so when my grandson forgets, he is constantly sounding abrupt to our ears. Nor, for that matter, is it the way in several other languages. One of the common traps for a British tourist is to keep saying 's'il vous plaît' in French or 'por favor' in Spanish, in contexts where a native-speaker would never use them. The British speaker often sounds too insistent, as a consequence: 'Una cerveza, por favor' - 'A beer, if you please!'

And we are not yet finished with the culture of my tiny Dutch exchange. For why did the lady laugh, when I asked for an appleflap? It was because she recognized me as a foreigner, but one who had learned to appreciate what is a quintessentially Dutch food. Her laugh basically said 'you're becoming one of us now'. Indeed, on another occasion, someone asked me how my Dutch was coming on, and I said I'd got all the vocabulary I needed, namely 'appelflap'. She nodded in agreement, but then pointed out that if I wanted to be really fluent in the language I needed the plural form, 'appleflappen'.

I have had dozens of experiences like this, as I expect most readers of this journal have. And when one starts to collect examples for a 'dictionary of language and culture', as I've done in workshops in several countries, it's amazing how many instances of cultural identity a class can generate in half-an-hour. This is the first step, it seems to me: to build up a sense of what makes one's own culture unique. One is then in a better position to predict the likely differences with other cultures. It's best done in a group where there is at least one person involved from a different cultural background. Left to themselves, native speakers usually have a poor intuition about what their cultural linguistic distinctiveness is.

The Internet can help enormously in this respect. No longer is it necessary for learners to be physically present in another culture before they can learn something about it. If I want to experience a language, or a different variety of English from my own, all I have to do is go online. Thanks to Skype and other such options, interaction is now practicable. Hitherto, most of this experience has been with written language, but with the increasing audio-ization of the Internet, the development of a more sophisticated cultural awareness is going to become a more practicable outcome. The other week I saw a group of primary school children in a classroom talking to a group of French children in their classroom via the Internet, and learning about favourite things to eat and what to call them. This was linguaculture in practice.

2. Xiaoping Jiang:

Yes, and another example is, if a Chinese student gets help on their English, they would often say “I’m sorry to waste you a lot of time” to show their appreciation of the help. These, as you said, are examples of “clearly unconsciously transferring their first-language habits into their new setting”. I would love to hear more from you on this “intrinsic cultural perspective in English teaching and learning”.

David Crystal:

My view has evolved mainly as a reaction to the way English has become a global language. There are two ways of looking at this phenomenon. One is to focus on the importance of international intelligibility, expressed through the variety we call standard English. The other is to focus on the regional features which differentiate one part of the English-speaking world from another. And it is this second perspective which is becoming more noticeable as English 'settles down' within a country. We now happily talk about British, American, Australian, South African, Indian, Singaporean, and other 'Englises'. Much of the distinctiveness is in the area of lexicology, and it is this domain which most closely reflects culture. Dictionaries have been compiled of distinctive local lexicons, and some of them contain many thousands of words.

I've written about this in several papers, over the past few years (e.g. 2010a, 2012a, 2012b) but the point deserves repetition. When a country adopts a language as a local alternative means of communication, it immediately starts adapting it, to meet the communicative needs of the region. Words for local plants and animals, food and drink, customs and practices, politics and religion, sports and games, and many other facets of everyday life soon accumulate a local wordstock which is unknown outside the country and its environs. And the reason I say this perspective is intrinsic to language learning is because it's virtually impossible for people to engage with speakers of other languages in everyday conversation without cultural issues needing to be taken into account.

When a group of people in a country (such as students, teachers, or businessmen) talk to me in English about everyday affairs, the subject-matter of their conversation inevitably incorporates aspects of their local environment. They talk about the local shops, streets, suburbs, bus-routes, institutions, businesses, television programmes, newspapers, political parties, minority groups, and a great deal more. They make jokes, quote proverbs, bring up childhood linguistic memories (such as nursery rhymes), and recall lyrics of popular songs. All this local knowledge is taken for granted, and, when used in newspapers, we need to have them explained. Conventional dictionaries don't help, because they won't include such localisms, especially if the expressions refer to local people, places, institutions, and suchlike. And casual cultural references that authors bring in to course-books only help to a limited extent.

Every English-speaking location in the world has usages which make the English used there distinctive, expressive of local identity, and a means of creating solidarity. From this point of view, notions such as 'Chinese English' take on a fresh relevance, going well beyond traditional conceptions of English spoken with Chinese accent, or English displaying interference of the kind you illustrate. Chinese English I define as the kind of English I need to know about when I go to China, otherwise I will be unable to converse efficiently with Chinese speakers in English. It would be amazingly useful to have a glossary of the English equivalents of Chinese cultural references, but this seems to be a neglected area for any language. And the same point applies the other way round: Chinese people need a glossary of English cultural references. Few such texts exist.

It takes a while for the speakers to realize that there is a problem, and often a problem of cultural misunderstanding is never recognized. People readily sense when someone's *linguistic* knowledge is imperfect, and may go out of their way to accommodate to a foreigner by speaking more slowly or by simplifying sentences. But they are not so good at *cultural* accommodation. There is too ready an assumption that foreigners will know what they are talking about. People always tend to underestimate the cultural knowledge of their non-native listeners and readers, whatever the language and whatever the setting. Because the words and phrases are so familiar and routine, people are usually not aware that they are using something which foreigners will not understand. They take things for granted. And that's why I think a cultural perspective needs to be treated more systematically in language teaching. It's not that it's been overlooked; it simply hasn't been treated as systematically, within a language-teaching programme, as it needs to be.

### 3. Xiaoping Jiang

Exactly, and that begs the question, how do we take this challenge? You have often quoted the estimate that globally "roughly a billion people will be learning English" (e.g. 1999), but locally the English taught will be culture-bound. So, harking back to your earlier point, should we teach the culture-specific "please" and have the billion learn it as a universal?

#### David Crystal:

'Should we teach...?' Ah, this is where I need to bow out gracefully. I am not an EFL teacher, and have never worked in a classroom (other than university ones). Nor have I ever done any primary research into teaching methods, curriculum, testing, materials, and all the associated issues that arise - though I do try to keep up with what's going on. I'm just a linguist. My role is to establish the linguistic facts as best I can, and to explain them, drawing attention to relevant theoretical notions in linguistics. Whether they should be taught, and when, and how, are questions for others to answer. And, having attended a

fair few EFL conferences in recent years, I can see that some teachers *are* beginning to answer them, and to share their experiences.

My impression is that teachers are keen to teach culture-specific items, once they are aware of the extent to which they exist. A workshop I sometimes do with teachers will illustrate this point. After explaining the issue, we take 30 minutes to begin collecting data for a culture dictionary, using no more sources than the intuitions of the participants. It only takes a few minutes before they have listed dozens of items - names and nicknames of political parties and politicians, what particular suburbs in the city are famous for, favourite television programmes and personalities, and so on. I (or other British people in the room) provide equivalences in the UK, and if there are participants from other parts of the English-speaking world, they make their contributions.

What emerges from this is that some of the cultural linguistic observations are easily generalizable. The 'please' phenomenon, for example, turns up in several other language settings; it isn't restricted to Dutch. And the discussion soon turns to the general question of how politeness is handled in language, which *is* a universal. I suspect that all the cultural points identified can be explored in a general way, though some are easier to investigate than others. Simply to say 'We do X' is to invite the response 'Do we do X too? And if not, what do we do instead?' Everywhere has politics, and traffic, and suburbs, and leisure activities, and so on.

I mentioned 'casual cultural references' above. What I meant by that is the sort of thing we encounter in a textbook. Chapter 15 teaches 'Questions and answers', shall we say, and the author uses as a dialogue a visit to Oxford Street in London. The focus is on the grammatical point being taught, and the vocabulary of shopping. But why Oxford Street? This would be an ideal opportunity to introduce a cultural perspective. This is a special street. Why? If someone were to say, in December, 'I'm keeping well away from Oxford Street' or 'Aren't the lights splendid this year', what does the speaker mean? The hidden topics are all to do with crowds of shoppers and the specially-erected overhead Christmas decorations. The point is fairly obvious, perhaps, but what cultural equivalents would I

encounter if I were to find myself talking in English to people in Paris, or Delhi, or Beijing? And where could I look these things up?

It's the random nature of the cultural focus that I think we need to avoid. Chapter 15 introduces the reader to Oxford Street. But Chapter 16 might be about a visit to the zoo, or visiting the dentist, or anything. Would there be anywhere in the course that completes the cultural picture, with respect to shopping? Whatever kind of shopping one encounters in Oxford Street, that is not the whole story, as far as shopping in London is concerned. Where in the course is the reader introduced to street markets, to 'downmarket' streets, to streets more 'upmarket' than Oxford Street, to barrow-boys, and so on? The list is not infinite. With a bit of thought, it would be possible to assess the semantic field of shopping and come up with a series of topics suitable for presentation to learners that would constitute one element in what we might call a cultural syllabus. Such a syllabus would be the equivalent, in pedagogical terms, of the kind of universal taxonomy that we see in library classifications, content hierarchies on the Internet, and other places where the aim is to obtain a broad view of human knowledge. Several useful taxonomies already exist. The challenge is to adapt them to meet language learner needs.

#### 4. Xiaoping Jiang

So, by a cultural syllabus are you suggesting anchoring functions (requesting); or activities (“shopping”, “discussing politics”) to specific localities? Or is there something more than that?!

#### David Crystal:

Much, much more. Localities form only one small part of a knowledge taxonomy. And I'm not at all thinking of speech acts such as 'requesting', which were well handled when people began to talk about communicative language teaching years ago. No, any principled cultural syllabus needs to take on board the whole 'universe of discourse' – that is, anything that can be talked about in a culture.

Here's an example of a taxonomy, to show what I mean. It's the one I developed for the Global Data Model,<sup>1</sup> (Crystal 2010b) devised in the 1990s as a means of classifying the Internet, and which was eventually adopted and adapted by Adpepper Media as a system for dealing with online advertising. This had ten top-level categories: the universe; the earth; the environment; natural history; humanity; recreation; society; the mind; human history, and human geography (which is where localities would go). Of course, at this level, they don't mean very much; but as one breaks them down one sees the power of the classification. For example, 'mind' subclassifies into knowledge and beliefs, mythology and religion, science and technology, arts and culture, and communication. Each of these classifies further: arts, for example, into the various artistic domains. And it is at this level that we would begin to see specific points of cultural contrast. Another taxonomy, which will be familiar to many readers, is the Dewey classification system used in libraries. It has different top-level categories, but eventually breaks down into specific subcategories of a similar kind to those I use.

It's a large task, but not an infinite one. There are only so many subcategories that need to be considered. However, it is an ongoing task. Culture never stands still, and keeping pace with areas of rapid cultural change (such as politics) is a challenge.

##### 5. Xiaoping Jiang

Thank you for your clarification. That is much clearer now. Perhaps we can change focus. So far we've been talking about English and the teaching of English(es) from an intercultural perspective. *Cultus* is also interested in translation. Do you see a place for training translators, for teaching translation as a form of intercultural communication? Or will there be no need, with the next generation of google translator and a new generation of instant interpreting apps?

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.crystalsemantics.com/about-us>

David Crystal:

Like most linguists, back in the 1970s I used to be a huge sceptic about the possibilities of machine translation. But none of us could have anticipated the way computer power and the sophistication of software was about to increase. And the fact of the matter is that, for the small number of languages selected for inclusion, operations like *Google Translate* is pragmatically helpful. It provides the gist of a written communication well enough for it to be the basis of action. I know this from personal experience. As you may have gathered from the answer to your first question, I spent some months recently in Amsterdam. I had to deal with the affairs of a seriously ill member of the family. This meant reading her correspondence about medical, insurance, and housing matters, all in Dutch. I sent everything through *Google Translate*, and although it was a bit of a pain having to cut and paste, or in many cases input copy myself, the result was always satisfactory - in the sense that I learned what the text was about, sufficiently accurately for me to know whether I needed to act on it, or file it, or put it in front of a real human being for a precise translation. That is what I mean by 'pragmatically' helpful. I was under no illusion about the accuracy or acceptability of the versions I was reading. They were full of errors of grammar, collocation, and idiom. Occasionally, the mismatch was so bad that the translation was no help at all. But those occasions were few, compared with those where I got real help. This would not have happened five years ago. So what will happen in another five years?

How long does it take to become a good human translator or interpreter? A long time. And translators tell me the process of learning never stops. Of course it doesn't. Nobody knows everything about a language. I know about a tenth of the over-a-million words in English, and learn new words most days. In any case, the language is always changing, so there are always new horizons. And no dictionary or grammar has yet been written which deals with everything that a language has to offer, as a comparison of any two products quickly shows. When I was writing *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* ([1995]2003a), I made a comparison of the two largest dictionaries on earth, the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* and found there was a third difference in their coverage of lemmas, as well as huge

differences in treatment. And anyone using the great reference grammars, such as *The Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985), will notice omissions - not least, information about grammatical differences in the major regional dialects (the 'new Englishes') of the globe. All professional linguists know what they don't know, and this is still a lot. The myriad doctoral theses in descriptive linguistics around the world, and the articles in the major journals, are a testimony to that. Most articles end up by saying: this is what we have found out, and our research shows there are yet more questions to be answered. What we know about languages, to date, is the tip of a linguistic iceberg - though this is hardly surprising for a subject that has been around for less than a century.

The quality of automatic translation is ultimately dependent on the quality of the data that linguists are able to provide. A completely automated corpus-matching process can achieve a limited success, but the results need to be linguistically evaluated and tweaked. And a rule-based approach needs linguistic input from the outset. In all cases, what the human being provides is an intuitive dimension that at present is certainly beyond the abilities of even the most sophisticated computers. And that human contribution is nowhere greater, to my mind, than in relation to the cultural issues we discussed earlier. In previous papers I've listed many examples of cultural knowledge. Here is a set from a paper I gave last year (2012b):

It's just not cricket, treating her like that.

The job isn't all beer and skittles, you know.

That made Fawlty Towers seem like paradise.

Oh, come on, disgusted of Tunbridge Wells!

It was like Clapham Junction in Oxford Street today.

Now, whatever these mean, the task for the translator is plain. What is the equivalent of Clapham Junction (thought of as a highly chaotic railway station) in French, Chinese, Swahili...? Automatic translation is very poor, at present, in handling the cultural stories behind proper names. A human translator well-versed in a culture knows straight away what is going on. Or should do - which I guess is why you mention 'training' in your question. I don't know just how much systematic training translators get in cultural

awareness. I think, to a large extent, it is assumed to grow naturally, with age and experience. If so, then there is plainly a case for a more comprehensive and principled solution, as in the answer to your previous question.

One other point: automatic translators focus on one thing: the need for intelligibility. What they don't do is focus on the need for identity. But a language performs both functions, and of the two it is identity that engages emotions more readily - as the news headlines about language policies and planning around the world illustrate. Hearts and heads are both involved, when it comes to language. But computers are not (currently) much interested in hearts. So any questions of identity - and these are largely bound up with the cultural theme of this dialogue - remain for the human translator to solve.

## 6. Xiaoping Jiang

Could we then have a look at an example and investigate further the question of the human translator solving problems and on "the identity that engages emotions"?

Below are two different examples. The first relates to your 'cultural bump' regarding (the lack of) politeness in Dutch. How should a human translator act? Should he/she add it some negative politeness when translating into (British) English? The example below is an extract from the Italian writer, Italo Calvino (Calvino 1970: 115; see also Katan 2002).

A demure Stefania orders a coffee without the 'please':

"Uno ristretto, doppio, caldissimo, - disse al cameriere. Le era venuto un tono di confidenza sicura di sé, come se ci fosse una consuetudine tra lei e l'uomo di quel bar, dove invece non entrava mai.

An almost Google translation (apart from the 'coffee' which is added) gives us: "a small, double, extremely hot coffee", she said to the waiter. A tone of confidence had come to her, sure of herself, as if this were a routine between her and the man in that bar, where actually she had never ever set foot.

The second is from a well-known Chinese poem (in Jiang & van Rij-Heyligers, 2011)

Original Chinese poem	Literal Translation	Free Translation
古藤，老树，昏鸦，	<i>Dry vines, old trees,</i>	<i>Crows hovering over</i>
	<i>evening crows,</i>	<i>rugged old trees wreathed</i>
		<i>with, rotten vine – the day</i>
		<i>is about done.</i>
小桥，流水，人家，	<i>Little bridge, murmuring</i>	<i>Yonder is a tiny bridge</i>
	<i>brook, rural cottage,</i>	<i>over a sparkling stream,</i>
		<i>and on the far bank, a</i>
		<i>pretty little village.</i>
古道，西风，瘦马。	<i>Ancient road, west wind,</i>	<i>But the traveller has to go</i>
	<i>thin horse,</i>	<i>on down this ancient road,</i>
		<i>the West wind moaning,</i>
		<i>his bony horse groaning,</i>
夕阳西下，断肠人在天	<i>Sunset, broken heart, at the</i>	<i>Trudging towards the</i>
涯。	<i>end of the world.</i>	<i>sinking sun, farther and</i>
		<i>farther away from home.</i>
		<i>(Hawks)</i>

David Crystal:

When people talk about the difficulties of translation, they usually give examples from literature, and especially poetry, as if this were representative of the task. It isn't. Poetry is the most elaborated form of language it is possible to achieve, where extra aesthetic, linguistic, and cultural value is potentially assigned to every element used by the poet, and rules are continually being 'bent and broken' (as novelist Robert Graves (1967: 33)

once put it)<sup>2</sup>. It is inconceivable to have a translation that ‘keeps the original flavour and beauty’ of any poem in another language. If one wants to access that, one needs to learn the foreign language. There is a phonaesthetic and graphaesthetic uniqueness about every language which defies translation. All a translation can do is act as a signpost, conveying the core meaning and (to the best of one’s ability) adding equivalents that capture aspects of the aesthetic of the source.

This should be done, incidentally, at sentence (or even discourse) level – not at word level. Words are not the best unit to use when comparing languages. Rather, one should think in terms of sentences. And also in terms of semantic and pragmatic functions, rather than forms. It is not relevant if a language does or does not have prepositions or adverbs at word level. The point is that all languages have ways of expressing place, manner, and time, and the translation task is to find the linguistic level at which these meanings are expressed.

But to return to my first point: the vast majority of translation that takes place in the world, on a day by day basis, isn’t like your poetry example. It deals with much more mundane matters where aesthetic issues are minimal. In this respect, your Italian example is far more typical. And it’s a good example, because it relates to the field I’ve referred to several times in this dialogue: pragmatics. By pragmatics I mean the study of the choices one makes when one uses language, of the intentions behind those choices, and the effects that those choices convey. It is a field that is still in its early stages of development, with plenty of theory around but relatively little empirical research, and this lack is especially noticeable in fields such as foreign language teaching and translation, where examples of pragmatic difficulty are typically anecdotal, such as identifying the contexts in which *tu* vs *vous* would be used in French, or the differences between saying *hello* and *goodbye* in English. We still lack a sophisticated ‘comparative pragmatics’ – an essential perspective in studying translation.

---

<sup>2</sup>See also, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,827077,00.html>

Your Italian example is entirely pragmatic in character. There is no semantic issue here: the meaning of the Italian has been well conveyed by the translator. The question is how to capture the tone of politeness involved – which in a complete explanation would make reference both to intention and effect. To fully explain a use of language one needs to know (or to guess at) the intention that lies behind the utterance and to identify the behavioural consequences. If one cannot do the former (as people sometimes say with reference to the ‘intentional fallacy’ in literature (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954)), then one has to fall back on the latter – the conveyed effects. In the ‘coffee’ example, we are actually aided in this task by the omniscient author, who has told us something of Stefania’s intentions. In this respect, literature is often easier to analyse pragmatically than other uses of language, because the know-all author tells us what is going on in the speaker’s mind.

So the notion that has to be translated is the ‘tone of routine confidence’. How is routine confidence expressed in English? The issue is not one of ‘how do you ask for a coffee in English?’ but ‘how do you ask for a coffee if you are someone like Stefania in her present situation?’ It is not solely a matter of ‘politeness’, but of ‘politeness *in situ*’ – that is, in the situation in which Stefania finds herself. Personally, I wouldn’t expect to see ‘please’ in that situation. Or, if I did, it would be in a tone of voice (difficult to convey in writing) which would express the confident tone.

So, the pragmatic principle in translation is, I hope, clear: one aims to convey the effect of what would happen if the same situation arose in the other language. When the effect is a single parameter, such as politeness, this is achievable. When the effect involves multiple parameters, as in poetry, the task is much more complex, but – as your Chinese example shows – it is possible to point the reader towards aspects of the pragmatics which convey something of the intentions of the author (such as adding ‘the day is about done’ in the first line or the reference to ‘home’ in the last).

Xiaoping Jiang:

This is extremely interesting. Would your sophisticated ‘comparative pragmatics’ be what some call ‘Intercultural Pragmatics’? There is a Journal of that name, and an article

from it (Moeschler, 2004: 50) suggests defining the domain as "those facts implied by the use of language that do not require access to mutually manifest knowledge, but to specific contextual knowledge necessary for understanding the speaker's intention. In other words, intercultural pragmatics aims at understanding the extent to which non-shared knowledge affects and modifies the retrieval of intended meaning". This does seem very close to your point that the listener's problem lies in successfully interpreting the intentions that lie behind the utterance.

Coming back to Stefania, perhaps we could, as you suggest, "point the reader towards aspects of the pragmatics" by actually rendering the verbal politeness explicit. So, instead of "...she said to the waiter", "...she politely [or even 'demurely'] asked the waiter". Or possibly we could change the direct order into an indirect request "She asked the waiter for a ...".

David Crystal:

I should think so, as the Journal says in its aims that it has a focus on intercultural competence, and that is indeed one of the places one would go to in order to get a sense of how the field is developing. I used 'comparative' simply to align the field with other domains within *comparative linguistics - comparative grammar, comparative phonology*, and so on. But ultimately it depends on one's definition of culture. If one's notion of culture is all-embracing, and culture is part of your definition of pragmatics, then a comparative pragmatics would inevitably be intercultural. This would mean intercultural identity as well as difference, of course (no Whorfianism<sup>3</sup> here). I think it's a bit soon to say whether such an approach is the most fruitful one to adopt, or whether a narrower definition would be more insightful, in the sense that it would generate testable hypotheses. To what extent are the basic elements of any definition of pragmatics

---

<sup>3</sup> for a discussion see Editor's Introduction.

(intention, effect, choice, and so on, or one of the more specific notions, such as indirectness) able to be characterised without reference to culture?

The Stefania example does indeed suggest a research direction. Choice, for me, is the central issue. What choices does a language offer a speaker? The first task is to specify these, along the lines you illustrate. But you illustrate only two. How many other alternatives are there? How much of the lexicon can be used in this way? How much of the grammar? How much of the phonology? It is a large task, but not - from an ELT point of view - an infinite one.

I can envisage a 'cultural dictionary' or a 'cultural grammar' in which the main features are identified. Such works would not be comprehensive enough to handle every nuance that turns up in literature, of course, but they would deal with the kinds of situation that learners would be most likely to encounter. A corpus-based approach would provide the kind of initial guidance required - of the kind we see routinely used these days in ELT-orientated dictionaries and grammars. Coincidentally, today arrives on my desk the latest in the Longman family of dictionaries - the *Collocations Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Dubicka, et. al 2013). Collocations. Another huge area, which for a long time people did not know how to handle. Now, thanks to a sophisticated use of corpora, it is possible to present collocations in a systematic and illuminating way. The same thing ought to be possible with pragmatics, whether viewed as intercultural or intracultural.

#### 8. Xiaoping Jiang:

I'm wondering again about the 'cultural grammar' you refer to, and which we touched on at the beginning. How would this grammar be different to a course book organized around functional-situational discourses, but this time the 'situation' is more culturally anchored? Certainly, if we are to teach translation, we would have a very useful set of 'parallel' ('equivalent'?) texts. As you say, the differences are not "Whorfian".

But, what if the differences themselves weren't Whorfian, but the reasons, the underlying motivations that foster a particular set of collocations, politeness descriptors etc. were? At

which point the cultural dictionary would still be extremely useful for initial contact (Berlitz guide style?) and for technical/informative translations. But for longer stays, to appreciate and value the differences and be able to predict them, or to account for 'reader affect' in translation, something else is necessary – or is this where we agree to disagree?

But regardless of how we frame culture, in *English as a Global Language* (2003b), published some time ago now, you were suggesting that an international variety of English no longer attached to any specific culture may offer a neutral medium via which members of diverse cultures can communicate on equal terms. How far would you still go along with the idea that ELF, Globish<sup>4</sup> and so on, are the keys to overcoming communication barriers?

David Crystal:

I can't answer your first point very well, as it's not my world. I have only a few ELT courses on my shelves, and these are just a tiny fraction of what is 'out there'. But the examples I have read suggest that course books of this kind are more impressionistic in their coverage than taxonomically systematic - in other words, based on the author's intuition about the situations most likely to be often encountered by learners. I don't recall seeing a structural approach. Let me explain what I mean by that with an analogy.

In relation to vocabulary, for a long time people taught individual words and idioms. But after structural semantics arrived, it was clear that this was not enough. Far better was to teach vocabulary in terms of the words that cluster in semantic fields and the sense relations that they display, such as antonymy and hyponymy. So, one would not teach 'happy' in lesson X and 'sad' in lesson Y, but the two together. This kind of teaching is of course often done instinctively, but the message of the structural semantic approach was: 'do this systematically', and not just for 'opposites' but for lexical sets of all kinds.

---

<sup>4</sup> for a discussion see Editor's Introduction.

I think the same approach is needed for the kind of thing we're talking about. To be 'culturally anchored', as you put it, one needs to look at the structure of the cultural relationships that lie behind a particular example of functional-situational discourse. This is what a cultural syllabus would reflect. To return to my earlier example, the semantic field of shopping involves an array of vocabulary which is organized into lexical sets, such as how much things cost, types of shops, city locations, and so on. Course books typically choose just one set of options from this field - such as 'A visit to Oxford Street' - and present the vocabulary needed. A more systematic approach would relate an Oxford Street experience to other kinds of shopping experiences, where a different kind of vocabulary would be required. Only in this way can one begin to make sense of real-world sentences such as: 'You're more likely to find what you're looking for in Bond Street... Portobello Road...'

I don't know how this would best be done (I am no materials writer), but I do see signs of writers moving in the direction of a more structured approach. The chapter headings in the *Global Intermediate Coursebook* (Clandfield *et al* 2011) provide an illustration of antonymy: 'Hot and Cold', 'Love and Hate', 'Friends and Strangers', 'Lost and Found', and so on. And several of the topics that are dealt with in these scenarios involve cultural as well as semantic considerations.

I still see many signs, as I travel around, of people 'dropping', as it were, their cultural background and accommodating (in the sociolinguistic sense) to the interpersonal (and thus, intercultural) needs of an international speech situation. In contexts where the participants are experienced professionals, this 'neutral' discourse is fluent and sophisticated, even though the cultural neutrality sometimes slips, so that someone unaware of a speaker's cultural background will temporarily be at a loss. The more informal and everyday the speech situation, the more people allow cultural knowledge to creep in (usually without realizing it).

This is one of the problems with approaches that try to capture the notion of English as a *lingua franca*. There is often an assumption that this is a single, homogeneous variety, whereas it is actually a highly heterogeneous phenomenon. Any corpus of ELF data

needs to be supported by a sophisticated sociolinguistic and stylistic frame of reference if it is to be sensibly interpreted. We need to know the type of person talking (age, gender, occupation...), the type of listener, the type of subject-matter, the nature of their relationship, and so on before we can evaluate the choices (back to pragmatics again) they make as they interact.

Every choice, no matter how tiny, needs to be viewed in this way. And the difficulty facing those trying to formulate the properties of English as a *lingua franca* is that little of the needed research has been done. To take just one example: some claim that a feature of ELF is the generalisation of countable plurals to uncountable nouns, so that we hear *furnitures*, *informations*, *researches*, and so on. Leaving aside the question of how far this actually happens, when examples do occur the first thing we need to do is determine the sociolinguistic variables involved, which will of course involve the identification of any factors that influence a speaker's linguistic competence. I imagine, for example, that a businessman or politician is more likely to say *researches* than a professional academic. Until we have such data, notions of ELF remain somewhat mysterious.

This is nothing to do with the absurd proposal that people can get by with a few hundred words of one kind or another, as in Globish-type proposals. The vocabulary size required in most international speech situations is necessarily large, and is always underestimated by people who haven't taken the trouble to do some real-world lexical frequency counts.

#### 9. Xiaoping Jiang:

I'm certainly happy to hear that Globish is not the way forward! You say that you "see many signs, as I travel around, of people 'dropping' ... their cultural background" to accommodate their counterparts, and that culture only really creeps in with informality. The informality (I am presuming here) comes with building a relationship and 'longer stays' or more prolonged contact, which was part of my point earlier. And this is where ELF begins to founder, especially if we agree with your point in "The Future of Englishes:

Going Local” (2010a): “people readily sense when someone’s *linguistic* knowledge is imperfect, and may go out of their way to accommodate the foreigner by speaking more slowly or by simplifying sentences. But they are not so good at *cultural* accommodation.” So, can ELF ever really be the key to overcoming communication barriers?

David Crystal:

The short answer is: it's too soon to say. It takes a while for a new approach to 'bed in', to get over the exaggerated claims for it made by its first enthusiasts, and to establish the domains in which it can make a real contribution. It's now clear that the focus on English as a lingua franca has led to a desirable broadening of the notion of legitimacy in relation to English. People no longer treat non-native speaker (NNS) English as negatively as they used to do. They can see that there is value in analysing it as a set of varieties comparable to the varieties that have long been studied in the English of native speakers. One of the premature impressions conveyed by this approach was that ELF is a single variety - that second language users all over the world were using English in the same kind of non-native-like way. This was never likely to be the case, and certainly never corresponded to my own experience of NNS usage as I travelled about. When the first corpora of NNS data became available, it was the differences between the speakers that struck me as much as the similarities. The important question, to my mind, is to account for those differences, for which (as I was saying before) we need a sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspective.

I wasn't thinking especially of the 'longer stay' kind of situation. The sort of thing I encounter more often is the international conference or business meeting. During the formal meetings, when people are sitting around a table and discussing an agenda, often with supportive written documentation, formal standard English is the norm, and mutual intelligibility is generally achieved (one has to say 'generally', because there is always the possibility that a local regional accent will make a spoken intervention difficult to understand). But when the meeting has a break for coffee or a meal, then a totally different linguistic encounter emerges. That is where speakers, more relaxed, begin to introduce a colloquial mode of expression that they would never have used in the formal meeting, and this is characterized by the use of idioms and the kind of cultural assumption that we've been talking about. This is usually harmless, in relation to the goals of the meeting. The problem comes when, on returning to the formal meeting, people inadvertently introduce these features into the dialogue. I remember one such

occasion when the one member of the British contingent, imagining that a degree of informality would help matters along, made a culture-specific pun (to do with cricket) which the other British participants immediately recognised, laughed, and reacted to (in the way one often does with language play, taking up the pun and trying to outpun the other person). But the non-British people around the table did not recognise the allusion, did not laugh, and felt excluded. This is a really frequent situation. I've often found myself in the same position, as I visit other countries, and find myself in a conversation where all the locals are 'enjoying the joke', or becoming enthusiastic or annoyed about a topic, and I have no idea what is going on. I've given extended examples of this kind of thing in other places, such as the 'Going Local' paper you mention.

Any approach to ELT, sooner or later, has to cope with this kind of thing, and ELF is no different. At some point these approaches have to develop ways of overcoming these cultural barriers. There will always be a modicum of personal and idiosyncratic cultural difference, of course. Even within a language, people do not always understand each other! Those who have written books on the gender divide, *men from Mars; women from Venus* (Gray, 2002), illustrate this perfectly. So a cultural awareness approach will never eliminate all problems of interpersonal communication. But I think it will reduce the kinds of problem that arise out of cultural difference to manageable proportions.

#### 10. Xiaoping Jiang:

Mmm, the gender question is an interesting point. You mention in another interview (Crystal 2012b) you gave that maybe the Babel fish<sup>5</sup> automatic translator could in the future deal with these differences. I realise the question put to you was not entirely serious, but let's say, the Babel fish is translating 'everything'. That would mean that the cultural awareness, grammar and accommodation we have been talking about would all need to be in the translation, which I assume would make the translation exceedingly long. And even then, the main thesis of the *Men are from Mars* book is that men and

---

<sup>5</sup> for a discussion see Editor's Introduction.

women don't just use language differently, but think differently, so presumably the thinking, the reasoning behind the language would also need to be added to?

David Crystal:

Well yes, that really was a tongue-in-cheek answer to a tongue-in-cheek question. I don't think it's helpful to think of a Babel fish in this way. All a sophisticated Babel fish will do is simulate what a human translator does. It may improve on human performance in certain respects (e.g. finding a relevant term more quickly from its memory bank), and it may come out worse in others (e.g. in capturing sarcasm). If, as a human being, I don't understand what you're getting at, then I need to ask you - or get my translator (human or mechanical) to do so. I don't expect my translator to be a mind-reader - which, in relation to pragmatics, means knowing about the presuppositions and intentions underlying the utterances made by the participants. So the question of additional length simply does not arise.

I do think certain aspects of underlying knowledge can be incorporated into an automated system. This is the aim of the Semantic Web (Crystal, 2006) after all: to capture the kind of knowledge we have about the world and our place in it. It already has begun to formalise some of our intuitions, and the signs are promising. For example, in a dialogue about travelling from A to B, a system can ask us whether we have any preferences or constraints, any difficult days to travel, any dietary problems, and so on. It can anticipate difficulties that an individual user may not have thought about. Because there are so many variables, it can outperform a human adviser. But everything depends on someone first having worked out what the relevant options are. And, as we all know, if we have used them, these systems still don't anticipate all the individual differences, so that we often find ourselves - after answering all the questions in an online dialogue - having to approach a human being to sort out our problem. But it is early days.

The options in a travelling scenario are relatively easy to identify. They are far more difficult to identify in the case of male/female relationships. But analysis of the kinds of discourse which illustrate different ways of thinking suggests that even here we are not talking about a very large number of variables. Just as discourse analysts have shown that

all the stories that can be told reduce to a small number of basic 'plots', so I suspect some of the kinds of interpersonal difficulty illustrated in the gender books, or in cases of intercultural misunderstanding, will be capable of sufficient formalization to be able to be incorporated into software. One day.

11. Xiaoping Jiang:

Let's hope so, One Day! Thank you so much for sharing your brilliant ideas on language, culture and translation with us. Before we finish our interview, could I ask you about your present/future projects?

David Crystal:

It's been a pleasure, and thank you for such stimulating observations and questions.

My writing projects are always a mix of short-term and long-term. My most recent book (Crystal and Crystal 2013) is in fact a collaborative one, with Hilary (my wife), called *Wordsmiths and Warriors: the English-language Tourist's Guide to Britain*, published by Oxford University Press. We travelled all over the country visiting those places where something important happened to shape the character of the English language, and recorded what we found there. I wrote the text; Hilary took the photographs. It's a linguistic travelogue, in other words - an unusual genre, but one which we found provides a fresh and illuminating perspective for familiar subject-matter.

The main long-term project, due out at the end of 2015, is a dictionary of Shakespearean original pronunciation (OP). The desire to hear the plays and poems in OP has grown immensely over the last five years, and there have been productions of *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and several other plays in OP in various parts of the world. Further information about what has been happening can be found on a dedicated website ([www.originalpronunciation.com](http://www.originalpronunciation.com)). Anyway, the point is that everyone wants a transcription and recording to help them get the accent right. I've been helping as

much as I can with individual projects, but the ideal is for people to do this for themselves, for which they need teaching materials, and a dictionary is an essential element. It will be published by OUP towards the end of 2015, in time for the Great Anniversary (2016: 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death). I am currently up to letter C!

Working on any dictionary full time can do strange things to your state-of-mind, especially by the time you get to letter M! So it's important to be doing other creative enterprises to stay sane. In the meantime, I'm working on a book which introduces the wonderful Oxford Historical Thesaurus (Christian *et al*, 2009) to the general public, which will be out in September 2014. Its working title is *Words in Time and Place*.

#### 12. Xiaoping Jiang:

'M' for monumental, manic, mad? Shakespeare in the original pronunciation is certainly about as far away from ELF as you could ever get!

But what about the Oxford Historical Thesaurus? Could you tell us something more about how it works (for example, are there any applications for global English...?)

#### David Crystal:

The *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (HTOED), to give it its full title, is the result of some 40 years of work by a team based at the University of Glasgow. What they've done is go through the huge OED and group all the entries into semantic themes, organized in a taxonomic way. A thesaurus is the opposite of a dictionary. In a dictionary you know a word and want to look up its meaning. In a thesaurus you know a meaning and want to look up the words that relate to it - all the synonyms, and near-synonyms. English thesauri until now have been compiled for the present-day language. The HTOED extends this approach to the entire history of the language. So, if you want to know what words were around in 1600 to talk about ships, or love, or pigs - or

anything - you would look up the concept in the index, and this would send you to the relevant part of the thesaurus where you would see all the words that were in the language at that time to do with that particular subject. If you go to my blog (post of 29 June 2011<sup>6</sup>) you'll see an example, in which the various words for one's 'bottom' are listed historically. Here they are, in summary:

1000s: arse

1200s: cule, latter end, fundament, buttock

1300s: tut, tail, toute, nage, tail-end, brawn, bum

1400s: newscher, croupon, rumple, lend, butt, luddock, rearward, croup

1500s: backside, dock, rump, hurdies, bun, sitting-place, prat, nates, crupper, posteriorums

1600s: cheek, catastrophe, podex, posterior, seat, poop, stern, breek, flitch, bumfiddle, quarter, foundation, toby

1700s: rear, moon, derriere, fud, rass, bottom

1800s: stern-post, hinderland, hinderling, ultimatum, behind, rear end, hinder, botty, stern-works, jacksy

1900s: sit, truck-end, tochus, BTM, sit-upon, bot, sit-me-down, fanny, beam, ass, can, keister, batty, bim, quoit, rusty-dusty, twat, zatch, booty, bun, tush

There are some wonderful words, aren't there? Now imagine this done for every word in the language, and you will begin to sense the power of the HTOED. The book I'm writing takes a few areas like this one and relates them to the explanations (definitions) given in the OED, adding some cultural context to make the entries more interesting.

### 13. Xiaoping Jiang:

Wonderful! And how did 'catastrophe' (from the 1600s) get in there? But perhaps, to

---

<sup>6</sup> < <http://david-crystal.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/on-bottom.html> >

finish, we could ask you to give us an idea of the cultural context you are adding to an entry?

David Crystal:

It's a Shakespearean usage. In *Henry IV Part 2* (2.1.62) Falstaff's page harangues some officers who have been sent to arrest him: 'Away you scullion! ... I'll tickle your catastrophe!' You can see the semantic link in one of its senses: 'a final event; a disastrous end'. As far as we know, he's the only person to have used *catastrophe* in this way.

That's what I mean by 'cultural context' - in this case, simply pointing out who used the term and in what context is enough. None of that information is in the HTOED; but it can be found by looking at other sources, including the OED itself, of course. The commentary is inevitably brief. With a couple of thousand items to be dealt with, in the book as a whole, most entries will be less than 100 words.

14. Xiaoping Jiang:

We look forward to your new book, Professor Crystal. And thank you immensely for your wonderful contribution.

References

Adams, Douglas. 1979. *The Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy*". London: Pan Books.

Agar, Michael. 1994. *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*. New York: Quill William Morrow.

Bhattacharya Soumya. 2010. "Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language by Robert McCrum". *New Statesman*, 28 June.

<http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/06/english-language-world-globish>

Calvino I. 1970. "L'avventura di una moglie". In *Gli amori difficili*. Turin: Einaudi editore.

Clandfield, Lindsay; Rebecca Robb Benne and Amanda Jeffries. 2011. *Global Intermediate Coursebook*. London: Macmillan.

Crystal David. 2012a. "Plurilingualism, pluridialectism, pluriformity". In M. Pilar Díez, Rebecca Place & Olga Fernández (Eds), *Plurilingualism: promoting co-operation between communities, people and nations*. Bilbao: University of Deusto, pp. 13-24.

Crystal David (2012b) "Making sense of sense". Paper given to Zurich University Englisches Seminar series 'Sprache verstehen'. Online [www.davidcrystal.com/?fileid=-4938](http://www.davidcrystal.com/?fileid=-4938) [accessed 06/12/13]

Crystal David. 2012c. "International English: an interview with David Crystal by Rakesh Bhanot". *Language Issues*, 23(1), pp. 29-37

Crystal, David. 2010b. "Semantic targeting: past, present, and future"  
*Aslib Proceedings*, 62(4/5), pp.355-65.

Crystal, David. 2010a. "The Future of Englishes: Going Local". In Facchinetti, Roberta; Crystal, David; Seidlhofer, Barbara (Eds), *From International to Local English - And Back Again*. Frankfurt/New York: Peter Lang, pp.17-25.

Crystal David. 2009, *Just a phrase I'm going through: my life in language*. London: Routledge.

Crystal, David. 2006. *Language and the Internet*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, pp. 218-22.

Crystal, David. 2003b. *English as a Global Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, David. [1995] 2003a, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal David. 1994. "Words Worth". *Times Higher Education*, Nov 11, p. 34.

Crystal David & Hilary Crystal. 2013. *Wordsmiths and Warriors: the English-language Tourist's Guide to Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crystal David. 1999. "World English: Past, Present and future. [www.davidcrystal.com/?fileid=-403](http://www.davidcrystal.com/?fileid=-403) [Accessed 03/12/2013].

Dubicka Iwona, Margaret O'Keeffe and Joanne Taylore-Knowles (2013), *Collocations Dictionary and Thesaurus*, London, Longman.

Graves Robert, 1967, *Poetic Craft and Principle*. London: Cassell, p. 33

Gray, John. 2002. *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: The Classic Guide to Understanding the Opposite Sex*. London/New York: HarpersCollins.

Jiang, Xiaoping & Josta van Rij-Heyligers. 2011. "Intercultural space in translation education: Parallel corpus as a tool for exploration. *Cultus*, 4: 99-119.

Katan, David. 2002. "Mediating the Point of Refraction and Playing with the Perlocutionary Effect: A Translator's Choice?". In Stephen Herbrechter (ed.), *Critical Studies: Vol. 20, Cultural Studies, Interdisciplinarity and Translation*, Amsterdam/New York: Ridolphi. pp. 177-195.

Kay, Christian; Roberts Jane; Samuels Michael & Irené Wotherspoon (Eds). 2009.

*Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary: With additional material from A Thesaurus of Old English.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moeschler, Jacques. 2004. "Intercultural pragmatics: a cognitive approach". *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 1(1): 49-70.

Quirk, Randolph; Greenbaum, Sidney & Geoffrey N. Leech. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language.* London: Longman.

Whorf, Benjamin, L. & John B. Carroll (Eds). 1956. *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf.* Cambridge (MA): Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Wimsatt William K. & Monroe C. Beardsley. 1954. "Intentional Fallacy". In Wimsatt William, K., *The Verbal Icon. Studies in the meaning of Poetry.* Lexington (KY): University of Kentucky Press, pp. 3-18.