



INTERVIEW



Is there such a thing as global English?

David Crystal beschäftigt sich seit Jahrzehnten mit den englischen Sprachen – Pluralform beabsichtigt. LORRAINE MALLINDER unterhielt sich mit dem britischen Linguisten über die Entwicklung von Englisch als Weltsprache und die unzähligen Ausprägungen rund um den Globus.

ADVANCED

David Crystal has been thinking about the English language for a long time – and has written more than 100 books on the subject. You might say it's his life's work, but don't look to him for rules on grammar and pronunciation. This world-famous linguist has a decidedly informal take on English as a constantly changing, egalitarian language owned by all those around the world who choose to speak it.

But before asking for his views on global English, the theme of this interview, there's something we need to get out of the way: 100 books? How is that even possible? Modest by nature, Crystal downplays his six-decade body of work, which ranges from the scholarly doorstopper *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* to his book about text messaging, *Txting: The gr8 db8*. Although he is regarded as Britain's foremost linguist, Crystal wears his expertise lightly.

His interest in language began in childhood, particularly during his early years in Holyhead, North Wales. "I was brought up in a monolingual English-only household, but on the streets, there was Welsh and also Irish at the time. I was very curious about why I could

Name: David Crystal
Born: 6 July 1941, in Northern Ireland
Famous as: British linguist

WORD TO GO

"Doorstopper" describes a book that is so large and heavy that it can be used to prop open a door.

decidedly
• ausgesprochen

take
• hier: Ansicht

modest ['mɒdɪst]
• bescheiden

scholarly ['skɒləli]
• wissenschaftlich

foremost
• führend, herausragend

expertise [ˌɛkspɜːˈtiːz]
• Kompetenz, Fachwissen

monolingual
• einsprachig

prop sth. open
• etw. offen halten

understand people in my house, but couldn't always understand people on the streets," he says. In 1951, his family moved to Liverpool, where he learned French, Latin and Greek at school.

"By the time I ended school, I was definitely interested in languages," he says, speaking online from his home in Holyhead. It was a passion that took him from his early linguistics and literature studies at University College London, to giving lectures at Bangor and Reading universities. This was at a time when the field of linguistics was exploding. He then became a consultant in the 1980s. Crystal advised London's Shakespeare's Globe on "original pronunciation" and served on the board of the British Council.

So, who better to ask about the rise of global English? Does it actually exist? And, if so, what does the term mean?

What is "global English"?

The emergence of global English was perhaps inevitable, given the influence of Britain and, latterly, America, on science, technology, finance and culture over the past few centuries.

"There's never been so many people speaking one language before," says Crystal. Working on various editions of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, he asked every nation in the world a simple question: "How many people speak English in your country?"

With about 200 countries to survey, it was a big job, drawing on conversations with examining bodies, embassies and British Council offices. In 1987, he found 1.5 billion English speakers. In 2003, that figure had increased by around a third, to just over two billion. By 2018, there was another, slightly smaller increase, to 2.3 billion – a lot of people.

So, English is still on the rise, largely due to second-language learning, even if the pace of growth has slowed. That slowdown could be caused by a number of factors, including the use of AI translation tools, but also geopolitical shifts,

which can cause a country to prioritize other languages, such as Mandarin. As Crystal points out, we're now moving into sociology and politics – not his domain.

But make no mistake: English is still the world's most widely spoken language, used in some form by more than a quarter of the globe's population. And here's where it gets tricky, because, according to Crystal, there's more than one English in the world.

A world of "Englishes"

"Look at this big baby," says Crystal, wielding a great red tome plucked from his crowded shelves. It's the *Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad & Tobago*. It turns out that "those two little islands in the Caribbean" have around 12,000 English words all of their own.

"I've got 20 or 30 dictionaries like that, all with 10,000, 20,000 words," says Crystal, pointing round the room.

Here's the thing: it turns out there are two parallel forces driving the growth of English. The need for intelligibility, for everyone to understand each other, has increased the numbers speaking the language. However, as the language spreads around the world, the desire for nations to foster distinct identities has pushed it in different directions.

"The future of a language means the future of society and the future of politics and economics," says Crystal. In the postcolonial world, newly independent nations may have retained English as a "devil-you-know language", he explains. Take Nigeria, which preferred to stick with imperialist English rather than be faced with the impossible task of choosing one of the hundreds of local languages battling for supremacy.

"Everyone hates English equally, as it were," says Crystal. "But the interesting thing was they then said: 'We will make it our English. We will give it our identity.'" And so it happens that countries wind up collecting words that better express their national character, describing their flora and fauna, myths and legends and cultures.



"The future of a language means the future of society and the future of politics and economics"

lecture ['lektʃə]

• Vorlesung, Vortrag

Reading ['ri:diŋ]

• (wg. Aussprache)

consultant

• Berater(in)

board

• Vorstand

emergence ['i:mə:dʒəns]

• Aufkommen

inevitable [i'nevɪtəbəl]

• unvermeidlich

given ['gɪvən]

• hier: angesichts

latterly

• neuerdings

examining body

• Prüfungskommission

pace [peɪs]

• Tempo

prioritize sth.

• etw. Priorität geben

domain

• Bereich

mistake: make no ~

• man darf sich nicht täuschen

tricky

• schwierig

wield sth. [wi:ɪld]

• etw. schwingen;
auch: ausüben

tome [təʊm]

• Schinken, dickes,
schweres Buch

pluck sth.

• etw. herausziehen

intelligibility

[ɪn,telɪdʒə'bɪləti]

• Verständlichkeit

foster sth.

• etw. unterstützen,
fördern

retain sth.

• etw. beibehalten

devil-you-know

• unbeliebt, aber vertraut

supremacy

[su'preməsi]

• Vormachtstellung

wind up [waɪnd] (ifml.)

• damit enden



Before long, *A Dictionary of South African English* also comes off the shelves, with its 10,000 or so unique terms, some of them borrowed from Afrikaans, Zulu and other languages, but others very recognizably English – even if they have completely different meanings.

Such as “robot”. On one trip to South Africa, Crystal was chatting to his British Council driver when he saw a “Robot Ahead” road sign.

“Robot, but what’s a robot?” he asked.

“You don’t know what the robot is?” said the driver, nearly swerving off the road.

“No, really, I don’t know. Tell me.”

“A robot is a traffic light.”

“The word ‘English’ most definitely has a plural these days,” says Crystal.

The world’s language

Of all the Englishes, the best known is perhaps American English – a variant itself spawned by a desire to assert a separate identity. When the first settlers set up camp in Virginia in the early 17th century, it took only weeks for them to start developing a new vernacular that would soon feature words like “wigwam” and “moccasin”.

Today, American English wields the biggest influence globally. “You can see it in how Britons speak, young people using terms like ‘quarter of’ rather than ‘quarter to’ when telling the time,” says Crystal. It has also affected verb usage, many ditching the old-fashioned present perfect – “I have just eaten”, for instance – in favour of the past simple – “I just ate”. Increasingly, it affects spelling, with “encyclopaedia” now replaced by the Americanized “encyclopedia”.

But the Americans have competition, especially from India, home to an astounding 400 million English speakers with a massive global diaspora. Crystal highlights the impact on cognitive verbs: “doing words” relating to the mind. In the past, using the present continuous in “I am thinking” or “I am remembering” would have been considered wrong. Nowadays, it’s perfectly acceptable. The trend found

its ultimate expression in a McDonald’s slogan that eschewed the 20th-century “I love it”, going instead for the zeitgeisty “I’m loving it”.

Other Englishes are also leaving their mark on global English, with guides like the *Oxford English Dictionary* gradually including new words that turn up in written language, particularly on the internet. “On the whole, they’re attempting to ... incorporate the variations rather than keep them separate, which doesn’t stop local countries having their own local dictionary,” says Crystal.

So, where is this all headed? Does global English have much of a future as the world’s most widely spoken language? The British Empire has long been replaced by American imperialism, but the geopolitical balance of the world is shifting and it’s by no means certain that English will continue to dominate. A thousand years ago, few would have predicted that Latin – once the language of instruction and spoken by the educated elite – would become almost obsolete.

For now, it seems global English’s greatest asset is its adaptability, its capacity for morphing into new shapes and forms, with pidgins or creoles. Formal English often coexists, maintaining the flow of the language through diverse societies. As Crystal puts it: “The historical situation, one where Britain or America owned the language, that’s history. It’s universal ownership now.”

“Anybody who takes the trouble to learn a language almost by definition has rights in it,” he says.

So, *Spotlight* reader, take it away. It’s all yours!



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swerve

- schlingern, ausscheren

traffic light

- Ampel

spawn [spɔ:n]

- hervorbringen, entstehen

assert sth.

- etw. durchsetzen, zur Geltung bringen

vernacular [və'nækjʊlə]

- Umgangssprache

affect sth.

- etw. beeinflussen

ditch sth. (fml.)

- etw. loswerden

astounding

- erstaunlich

diaspora [daɪ'æspərə]

- Verbreitung

impact ['ɪmpækt]

- Auswirkung(en), Einfluss

eschew sth. [ɪs'tʃu:]

- etw. vermeiden

incorporate

- integrieren

headed: be ~

- hinführen

means: by no ~

- keinesfalls

language of instruction

- Lehr-, Unterrichtssprache

obsolete ['ɒbsəli:t]

- veraltet, hinfällig

asset

- Vorteil, Wert

morph

- (sich) verwandeln

pidgin ['pɪdʒɪn]

- Pidginsprache (aus mehreren Sprachen gemischte Sprache)

creole ['kri:əʊl]

- Kreolsprache

INFO TO GO

For more information on “robot” and South African English, see pages 54–57.