

Crystal Clear

David Crystal OBE is a leading authority on the English language. He's being interviewed for *Communicator* by Andrew Peck MISTC.

Andrew Peck: *What first spurred your interest in English and Linguistics?*

David Crystal: A curiosity about languages came first, prompted by my growing up in a monolingual household in a bilingual area (North Wales), and wondering why I could understand some people and not others. That led to early second-language learning (Welsh), and this was supplemented by other languages in secondary school and then at university. Moving from Wales to Liverpool at age 10 led to second-dialect learning. I didn't find out about linguistics until I got to university, but I devoured books on the history of English while I was still at school.

AP: *You've been writing about the changes technology is having on our use of language, whether 'Netspeak' or 'Txtng'. Is this really a new phenomenon, or have similar changes happened with earlier innovations? Are the changes ever a cause for concern?*

DC: Every new technology adds a fresh stylistic dimension to language structure and use, whether this be printing, the telephone, the telegraph, broadcasting... or now, electronically mediated communication (EMC). Think of the new varieties of English that emerged as a result of broadcasting, for example, such as sports commentary, chat shows, news reports, and weather forecasts. EMC is doing the same, with its many varieties. But it's too soon to say whether the linguistic novelties that have emerged (such as texting abbreviations) will make any significant long-term impression on individual languages. There's not much sign of this so far. The amount of new vocabulary, grammar, and orthography that has emerged as a result of EMC is minimal. And there are signs of the novelty wearing off (much less textese in young people's messages these days). That doesn't stop the prophets of doom continuing to predict linguistic disaster, of course.

AP: *We've looked back, let's look forward. How do you feel English will change within the next 25 years?*

DC: English will continue to increase its expressive richness, as it always has done. As EMC becomes increasingly audio-visual, I anticipate a range of new, online spoken varieties of English will develop. And there are bound to be stylistic changes as a result of increased reliance on mobile devices for internet access, with their smaller screens demanding more compact expression. But the main changes will be the continuing growth of international varieties of English (the so-called 'new Englishes'), as a consequence of English being a global language, and we will see a proliferation of new dialects (and accents) within English-speaking countries, as a result of immigration. Technology will also increase the speed of language change, due to its ability to circulate linguistic innovation at an unprecedented rate.

AP: *Technical communication is often about precise use of language that's ideally only open to one clear interpretation. This is a constant struggle. It sometimes seems that the more words we use the vaguer we become! Why is language inclined to be vague and open to interpretation?*

DC: It's the nature of spoken language to be imprecise. Face-to-face informal conversation is the norm, and this allows all kinds of contextual cues to aid intelligibility. 'Look at him over there!' Informality doesn't require precision: 'What did you buy?' 'Oh, tomatoes, onions, and stuff...' Written language lacks these cues and by its nature is more formal. But it still has to cope with polysemy - the fact that words typically have more than one meaning. Very few words in everyday language are monosemic (*handkerchief* is one), and as a fair number of these enter into technical communication the possibility of ambiguity is always in the background. Then there are cultural differences, so that a word which you thought was safely unambiguous turns out to have a different meaning in another culture. Technical language isn't exempt, as the case of billion famously illustrated. But I wouldn't

exaggerate these problems. Most technical language in my experience works pretty well.

AP: *Some technical communicators end up in the profession because they're "good at English", but many of the things we were taught in school like "don't use the same word twice" to demonstrate a rich and varied vocabulary and "use lots of adjectives" can be really bad technical communications practice. Recently you've been critical of the government's Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar tests. Your statement "It's meaning and clarity. Clarity unites us." is something that most in the ISTC would get behind. What changes would you make to the teaching of English to achieve this aim?*

DC: I'd want to get grammar seen as part of a wider context, in which meaning and effect are central. Grammar should never be seen as an end in itself: it's there to make sense of words, which by themselves (see above) are ambiguous. In linguistics, the two subjects involved are semantics (the study of meaning) and pragmatics (the study of the choices we make when we use language, the intentions behind those choices, and the effects that the choices convey). The relevant question is always: 'Why?' Why use one adjective as opposed to more than one? Why use passive sentences rather than active ones? What's the difference in meaning or effect on the listener/reader of the choice you've made? I've heard some fascinating discussions in schools when students are invited to explore the choices they make.

AP: *One of the biggest challenges we face is communicating about communication (when preparing style guides or controlled vocabularies for example). Do you ever find yourself meeting yourself coming back when writing about particularly fine points of language?*

DC: Well, this is my life, isn't it. Virtually all my writing is an attempt to explain how language works in ways that non-specialist readerships will understand. I try to avoid problems by getting someone from the intended

readership to read through what I've written before it gets published. For instance, when I wrote *A Little Book of Language* - aimed at young teenagers - I had it read by a 12-year-old to make sure I'd got the level right. She was one of my fiercest critics ever!

AP: Does the grammar of English vary depending on the genre of communication? Is there such a thing as a science fiction grammar, a medical grammar or a legal grammar? (Is there really a singular 'English Grammar'?)

DC: To a limited extent. Stylistic variations among genres are chiefly due to other levels of language, such as vocabulary, layout, and discourse organisation. But obviously there are differences of frequency in the use of particular constructions, and in some genres certain types of sentence are conspicuous by their presence or absence (for example, the use of questions, commands, exclamations). Work your way through a major reference grammar, such as *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, and you'll find that only about five percent of the content is stylistically various. Grammar is the area of language that is most resistant to change.

AP: (When) Can we expect to see a David Crystal book on the linguistic features of Technical Communication?

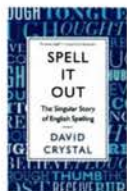
DC: I've only ever explored this as a part of a more general study. Scientific and technical English figured in a chapter of *Investigating English Style*, for example, and of course in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. And I've written the occasional article on the subject. But a whole book... Hmm.

AP: You've written a lot. What do you read?

DC: Usually, material relating to the book I'm currently writing! And I try to keep up with what's coming out in the language field. When I'm off-duty, as it were, I tend not to read, preferring to do something more auditory, such as listening to music or going to the theatre. But I can't go into a bookshop without buying something. My last two purchases were biographies (David Lodge, John Carey). I rely on my wife Hilary, who is a voracious novel reader (as well as a children's novelist herself) to tell me what I mustn't miss in the fiction world.

The book reviews

David Crystal has written so many books, it's hard to select a few to review. So I've browsed my bookshelf to share a few of my favourites - some written a while ago, others more recently.

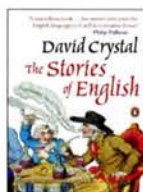


Spell it out.

Profile Books (2013).

ISBN 9781846685682. If you've ever wondered why some words are spelt in what seems a very illogical way, you should read this book. It explains that - at the time - there was some logic behind the decisions. At least, there was when there were decisions... sometimes changes in pronunciation have been part of the story, and sometimes necessity. Using just 26 letters to represent a word based on its sound has led to some interesting combinations! This book does give some guides - top tips, if you like - but the real fascination for me was in understanding why we spell 'debt' with a 'b'.

Rating: ★★★★★



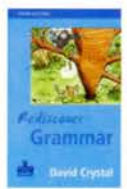
The Stories of English.

Penguin (2005)

ISBN 9780141015934.

This book has been on the book-shelf for a few years now, being the set book for an English Language course with the Open University. For those of us who struggle with the vagaries of US vs British English, not to mention Australian, South African and Singapore variants, this book provides an insight into development of English both within our own country and around the world. The rich dialects that were commonplace only a few years ago are given page-space alongside more recent additions to the language - the technical and scientific vocabulary we deal with every day. This book won't make you a better technical author - but it will help you understand why being a good one is so difficult.

Rating: ★★★★★



Rediscover.

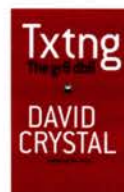
Grammar Longman

3rd Edition (2004).

ISBN 9780582848627. This one is a bit more work-related. It's my favourite

grammar book because it explains both the 'rules' (acceptable formal and informal usage) and the terminology in language I can understand, with plenty of examples. If ever I'm asked to recommend a book on grammar, this is the one I suggest... and its complementary cousin, *Making Sense of Grammar*.

Rating: ★★★★★



Txtng. The gr8 db8.

OUP Oxford (2009).

ISBN 9780199571338.

A balanced account of the influence of texting on the language is presented, using statistics to reassure that the English language as we know it is safe in the hands of texters. Another well-written book that takes an academic approach to a contemporary topic in English language usage while making it accessible to a broad readership. Given that this book deals with a technological influence on communication, it is a must-read for those of us who find ourselves documenting the next generation of devices and interfaces.

Rating: ★★★★★



Listen to Your Child.

Penguin (1989)

ISBN 9780140110159.

It's fascinating watching my son learn to talk - the way he puts words together to make meanings that he understands even if they sound a little odd to his parents. This book has shed some light on the process, explaining that when he mispronounces a word, he thinks he's saying it right - and gets frustrated if you repeat the incorrect one back to him. Some of the equipment mentioned - such as tape recorders - shows the book's age, but in general the content is still relevant - and enjoyable - today.

Rating: ★★★★★ C



About the author:

David Crystal OBE is a leading authority on the English language. His writing is engaging and prolific; he

has written over 120 books, and numerous articles and studies into the evolving language we all share and use.

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