

An overview of the contemporary English language: changes and perspectives – interview with David Crystal
Um apanhado da língua inglesa contemporânea: mudanças e perspectivas – entrevista com David Crystal

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ABSTRACT: In this unprecedented interview, the English linguist David Crystal outlines the lexical and morphological changes within the English language, particularly in the last decade. In addition, he discusses neologisms incorporated to the English language (British), especially those originating from Brazilian Portuguese. Finally, Crystal talks about the growth of varieties of global English and, also, the phenomenon entitled: "New English(es)".

RESUMO: Nesta entrevista inédita, o linguista inglês David Crystal traça um panorama sobre as mudanças lexicais e morfológicas ocorridas no interior da língua inglesa, particularmente na última década. Ademais, discorre sobre neologismos incorporados à língua inglesa (britânica), especialmente aqueles oriundos do português brasileiro. Por fim, Crystal fala sobre o crescimento de variedades do inglês global e, também, do fenômeno intitulado: "New English(es)".

KEYWORDS: Language. English. Language changes. New English(es).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Língua. Inglês. Variação linguística. *New English(es)*.

Welisson Marques: David Crystal, first of all, many thanks for the opportunity of having this interview with you. It is a great pleasure to have this contact with you. I would like to start by asking you about your recent publications and the new ones which are on the way.

David Crystal: It's difficult to make generalizations, as I'm very much a jackdaw linguist - by which I mean that I dart about from subject to subject looking for glittering linguistic subjects to write about. Or rather, the subjects come looking for me - for it's an interesting fact that almost all my books have been written reactively - in response to a question, or a trend, or an event of some sort.

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For example, in 2010 the British Library held its first ever exhibition on the English language. They asked me to help curate it, and the result was the accompanying book *Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices*, which gave an account of some of the amazing early books and manuscripts that formed the exhibition. I would never have written such a book without that stimulus - *could* never have written it, because it required photographs of rare texts that only a collaboration with the British Library could provide.

Then in 2011 a birthday: the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. Hugely exaggerated claims were being made about the influence of that translation on the development of the English language. People would quote idioms such as 'a thorn in the flesh' and 'fly in the ointment' and say there were thousands of expressions like this that come from the Bible. I knew there weren't so many, but had no idea what the exact number was. It was time for a reality check. I read the whole KJB through (twice!), counted them up, and presented the results in the book *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language*. (For the record, I found 257.)

Then, later in 2011, another prompt - this time from the British Museum. The director, Neil Macgregor, had made a fascinating series of broadcasts, which later became a book, called 'The history of the world in 100 objects'. His idea was to select objects from the BM collection, each of which stood for a strand in world history. The entire 100, jigsaw-like, would provide an overview of this complex topic. So I thought: could the same thing be done for the English language? The result was *The Story of English in 100 Words*.

Now, turning to the future. The situation is no different! My next book, which may just have appeared by the time you read this, is called *Spell It Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling*. Everyone reading this will at some point have felt the misery of getting to grips with English spelling, and will have wondered why there are so many irregularities. It's been one of the commonest questions I get asked. And for a long time, I was able to answer only anecdotally. For, to provide a complete answer would require an exploration of every word in the language - or, at least, every word in a general dictionary (excluding the really specialized terms). That's over 100,000 words! Fortunately, some indefatigable scholars have done just that, and the results of their work are now available. It meant that, finally, I was in a position to stand on their shoulders and see the way English spelling evolved more clearly than was ever possible before.

And we are currently coming to the end of a major project which will be published towards the end of 2013. I say 'we' not in the 'royal we' sense (Queen Victoria: 'We are not amused'), but because this is a collaboration with Hilary, my wife and business partner. We've been travelling around Britain over the past year visiting places which were important in the history and study of the English language, from Pegwell Bay, in Kent, where the Anglo-Saxons first arrived, to University College London, where the latest apps for the study of grammar are being devised. In between, there are over 50 places which I think are really important for the history of the language, and we have visited them all, with me writing the text and Hilary taking the photographs. The book will be a mix of English linguistics and travelogue. It will be called (I *think* - titles can often change at the last minute) *Wordsmiths and Warriors: The English Language Tourist's Guide to Britain*.

And in the longer term? Well, who knows what things will happen in the next year that will motivate another glittering subject for study. That's the beauty of languages. Whatever they are like today, they will be different tomorrow. The Anglo-Welsh poet Dylan Thomas once said 'The memories of childhood have no order and no end'. I feel the same when writing about language.

Welisson Marques: How do you see the changes in the English Language, firstly in Great Britain, and secondly in the English-speaking countries (such as USA, South Africa, Australia and Canada) in the last ten years?

David Crystal: I think the most noticeable change in Great Britain has been in relation to accent - the increased acceptance of regional accents in public situations, such as on the BBC. Received Pronunciation (RP) is still heard, of course, but it's now routine to hear the news or a weather forecast read in a distinctively Scottish, Welsh, or other mildly regional tone - for example, Susan Rae for Scottish and Huw Edwards for Welsh. 'Mixed' accents are everywhere these days, reflecting the way people have become increasingly mobile - living in one place and working in another, or spending only a few years in one place before moving on. My own accent is a mix of the places I have lived in - Wales, Liverpool, and the south of England, and this affects my accent. Sometimes I say *example* with a short *a*, and sometimes with a long *ah*. And the long-standing influence of American English on British English is noticeable. My natural pronunciation of *schedule* is with a *sh*, but all my children pronounce it with *sk*- - and so, when

I'm talking to them, there is a tendency for me to accommodate, and I say *sk-* too. RP has also been affected by change, as anyone can tell by listening to a recording of the Queen in 1953 and the Queen today: her *a* in *man* is no longer so fronted, nor is her vowel in *cup* so open. And young speakers do such things as unrounding the /u:/ vowel in *you*, *cool*, and suchlike.

There have been grammatical changes too. You'll notice the increased use of the present progressive form in verbs that used not to have it, such as verbs of cognition (*know*, *remember*, *think*...). Sentences like *I'm remembering what you said* used to be an indication of South Asian English, but today they are much more widespread. The McDonald's slogan *I'm lovin' it* is an illustration: twenty or so years ago this would have been *I love it*. And you'll notice the way that modal auxiliaries have been changing: *must*, for example, is now far less common than it was a generation ago, being replaced mainly by *have to*.

Vocabulary continues to grow steadily, as it always has. The Internet has contributed quite a few new words - though not as many as people think, and most of these (such as many of the slang words and phrases seen in such online sites as Urban Dictionary) are likely to have a very short shelf life. The majority of new words are coming in from the 'New Englishes' that have been evolving around the world - not just in the countries where English has long been established, such as the countries you mention, but in the nations that achieved independence in the second half of the 20th century. A country such as Nigeria has developed a very large local English lexicon now, as loan words have come into the local English used there from the hundreds of languages found in that country. And we mustn't forget the local English that has emerged in countries such as Brazil, when people choose to talk in this language about their own cultural setting.

But some things don't change. I write this piece during the Olympic Games, on a day when the press and radio stations are reporting the way people have been hearing some new Olympic verbs - *to medal*, *to gold*, *to silver*, *to bronze*, *to podium*, as in *He's been medalled*, *She's podiumed*. I've just heard a radio commentator say that *medalled* is bad because it will be confused with *meddled* - as if there were going to be contexts in which it wouldn't be perfectly obvious which meaning is required. English has coped with the similar distinction between *pedalled* and *peddled* for over a century without trouble.

In any case, *medalled* isn't new: its first recorded usage in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 1822, when Lord Byron used it. And even in the more specific sense of 'winning a medal in a competition', there are usages recorded from over 40 years ago. There's nothing new about it

at all. Some people still moan about turning nouns into verbs, nonetheless - forgetting that this kind of *functional shift* in word classes (or class *conversion*, as it's also called) has been a normal feature of English for over 500 years. Shakespeare would be linguistically denuded without it: 'He words me, girls', says Cleopatra. 'Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle', says the Duke of York in *Richard II*. There are hundreds of examples like this: I give a long list in *Shakespeare's Words* (Penguin, 2002; also available online at www.shakespeareswords.com - see the panel at Language Companion > Topics > Functional Shift). It's one of the most important features that gives English its distinctive character.

Welisson Marques: Could you talk a bit more about the recent grammar changes in the English language, such as the considerable reduction of inflectional comparison?

David Crystal: This is an enormous subject, now that the large corpora have begun to be investigated systematically. Here are a few examples. Apart from the points I mentioned earlier, several trends are taking place in the verb phrase, such as the steady reduction in the use of *shall* with the first person (already largely gone from American English), as well as a decline in the use of *ought to*, *need*, and *must*. People seem to prefer *have to* to *must* these days. There's an increase in the auxiliary-like use of certain lexical verbs (eg *They wanna [ie want to] look out*, *I gotta [got to] go*), and also in the use of *do* with *have* (*do you have* instead of *have you* and *I don't* instead of *I haven't*). The use of *get* with the passive is also on the increase (*he's got fired* rather than *he's been fired*).

In the noun phrase we see the increased omission of the definite article in such examples as *famous author J K Rowling*, the increased use of *they* in singular concord (*everyone said they were leaving*), increased use of *less* rather than *fewer* with countable nouns, and an increase in the use of periphrastic rather than inflectional comparison (*a more happy occasion* for *a happier occasion*, *the most angry customer* for *the angriest customer*). Some of these changes are of course condemned by people who have been taught to believe that the rules of traditional grammar are sacrosanct, so you should think carefully about your audience before introducing one of these usages, especially in written English.

Welisson Marques: Do you believe these changes tend to reflect a kind of "simplification" of rules in the language usage?

David Crystal: No. There are of course always trends towards simplification in language change. The commonest type is called analogy, when one usage follows the pattern of another. We see it operating in all areas of language. It's very common in spelling, for example, as I describe in my latest book, *Spell It Out*. But the kinds of grammatical change I've been illustrating can't be seen as simplifications. In what way is a reduction in the use of *must*, for example, and an increase in the use of *have to*, a simplification? It is simply one construction being replaced by another - though 'replaced' is not the best way of putting it, as there is never a simply one-for-one replacement. There will be consequences for some of the other forms that make up the auxiliary verb system. I don't know of any way to evaluate the relative complexity of these two usages. Similarly, is *I don't* more or less complex than *I haven't*? Is *more happy* more or less complex than *happier*? There's no easy way to answer these questions.

Welisson Marques: We all know that languages change over time and vary from place to place lexically, grammatically and phonologically. In this respect, taking into consideration that lexical change appears to spread more quickly than grammatical change as well as the issue of 'New Englishes'. How do you see these questions in relation to the making of new dictionaries of the English language?

David Crystal: About 'New Englishes'... we are simply seeing regional dialects 'writ large' - on a global scale. It's a very natural process, and one which will be multiply repeated every time people want to linguistically institutionalize their local identities. It's one of the consequences of a language developing an international - and, in the case of English, a global - reach that it will develop local varieties. Vocabulary will be a primary index of this localization, simply because it is in the lexicon that we see the immediate reflection of regional culture. And so dictionaries, which institutionalize a language's lexicon, will need to keep track of this.

It was impossible to keep track of all lexical trends in English in the age of paper dictionaries. Several lexicographers, such as Lawrence Urdang, have speculated about the possibility of a 'super-dictionary', which would include all lexical items in the language, from whatever source. That we have no such entity is apparent from any comparison of two dictionaries. I did this once for my *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, comparing a small sample from major British and American dictionaries: there were striking differences in coverage of headwords and senses. And the general dictionaries omit huge

numbers of specialized terms. Most of the technical senses of terms in linguistics, for example, are only included in specialized dictionaries. And when it comes to slang, regional dialect, and - most of all - the emergent vocabulary of New Englishes, we find huge gaps in coverage.

The reasons are obvious. Even assuming that one could get reliable information about all these items, it would be impossible to include all of them within a paper dictionary. I was involved myself in an attempt to compile such a dictionary in the 1960s - a *Dictionary of English-Speaking Peoples*, for the publishing house of Cassells. I wrote to lexicographers and linguists in many of the newly independent countries and asked them to submit word-lists reflecting the way their local lexicons were developing. I expected just a few dozen items, but was sent lists that were sometimes in the hundreds. The likely size of the outcome made it an impossible exercise for Cassells, who eventually dropped the project. Today, as I look at the regional dictionaries that have been published around the world, such as the *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, or the *Dictionary of South African English*, the true scale of the enterprise is now apparent. Many of these dictionaries contain well over 10,000 items.

The only place where world English lexical progress can be accommodated is on the Internet, and I expect that such a website will one day be created. It would include lexical developments in English from any country, reflecting local cultural identity - words for local food and drink, fauna and flora, myths and legends, folklore and music, and not forgetting the names of people and places which have developed cultural associations in a country, such as the names of political parties, nicknames of politicians, popular programmes on radio and television, newspaper names, personalities, parts of a city that are especially attractive or dangerous, and so on. Every country in the world has equivalents to such British English items as *Tories*, *Soho*, *Whitehall*, *The Sun*, *Clapham Junction*, *Oxford Street*, and *ITV*, where cultural significance forms an important part of the definition. It makes an interesting exercise for English users in a country to compile a dictionary of items of local significance. Whenever I've explored such things with a local group, it doesn't take long to compile a list of several hundred items. Most of the items are thought up by the participants from their own intuitions, but an invaluable source of data is the vocabulary used by novelists, poets, dramatists, and journalists writing in English. These lists would form an important part of an online super-dictionary. And such a dictionary is so needed. I've lost count of the number of occasions I've read a short story written in English only to be floored by the use of cultural vocabulary that I simply don't know - and which isn't to be found in the usual dictionaries. Occasionally authors will add a glossary

or footnotes explaining words they feel may be opaque; but they never anticipate all the differences which make their use of language difficult to those who do not share their background.

All this is important for learners of English who these days are likely to encounter this vocabulary more often than ever before - either because they travel more than they used to or because they see or hear this language on the Internet. But it's important for native speakers too. In fact, when it comes to the encounter with the vocabulary of 'New Englishes', there is no longer any difference between native and non-native speaker: we are all in the same boat. A super-dictionary, with a strong global cultural component, would benefit everyone.

Welisson Marques: Now, concerning lexicology, in Brazil, or better in the Portuguese language as a whole, the number of Anglicisms is very high. Is it possible to measure (and if possible even exemplify), the number of foreign words incorporated in the English language (especially British) from the Brazilian Portuguese in the last few years? Do you think Internet has helped to increase (apart from speeding) this process?

David Crystal: Borrowing from other languages is a perfectly normal process, affecting all languages at all periods of their history. It's an inevitable result of language contact. English, having travelled the world more than most, has been affected more than most. In fact, only about 20 percent of English vocabulary is Germanic. The rest comes from French, Latin, Greek, Spanish, Italian, and several hundred other languages - including Portuguese, of course. The online *Oxford English Dictionary* has around 4500 entries in which Portuguese figures as part of a word's history, but it doesn't distinguish between European and Brazilian varieties, and in many cases it's not clear whether a word has come into English directly from Portuguese or via some other language (usually Spanish). In some cases, it's possible to see from the definition that the country of origin is Brazil: *feijoada* is a nice example! But dictionaries inevitably underestimate all the Portuguese words reflecting Brazilian culture that people unconsciously use when speaking English in Brazil. Think of all the words to do with samba schools, types of music, carnival, and so on.

People shouldn't worry about the reverse process - the English loan words entering Portuguese. As we see in the case of English, a healthy language assimilates these without trouble, and uses them creatively. Shakespeare would not have been able to write so effectively

if English hadn't enabled him to choose between words from Germanic, French, and Latin. Loan words enhance the expressive potentialities of a language.

Is the Internet increasing the amount of borrowing? It's too soon to say, as the whole phenomenon of routine electronic communication is still only some 20 years old - and that's an eye-blink when studying language change. But it's obvious that increased ease of access to online sites in different languages (and different varieties of a language) will increase awareness of the lexical resources of these languages, and some of this will result in neologisms. It's impossible to predict how many new words will arrive in this way.

Welisson Marques: You pointed out earlier about the long-standing influence of American English on British English. Could you describe other linguistic tendencies which are noticeable?

David Crystal: The main tendency, to my mind, is the growth in varieties of global English, of which the distinction between American and British English was an early manifestation. Today, we find large numbers of people using Australian, South African, Indian, Caribbean, and many other local varieties around the world, and it only takes an encounter with one of these 'New Englishes' in (for example) a film, TV series, pop song, or Internet forum for some of the linguistic features to achieve a wider 'passive' recognition, and eventually perhaps some 'active' use.

Look, for instance, at the way syllable-timed rhythms and pronunciations from the Caribbean have been adopted by young people in many parts of the world in the form of rap, hip-hop, and other popular genres. Or the way films like *Crocodile Dundee* and TV series like *Neighbours* have brought Australian English to the attention of a wider public. I've certainly found myself using the Australian greeting *Good-day* more often these days!

Within Britain, the multi-cultural character of many cities has also brought a greater regional diversity. Some of the older rural regional dialects of Britain are dying out, indeed, but they are being replaced by an enormous ethnic diversity in which mixed accents and dialects are increasingly heard. Once upon a time, the dialect of Liverpool (usually referred to as 'Scouse') would have been heard only in Anglo-Saxon mouths, but today, if you go to Liverpool, you will hear Chinese Scouse, Jamaican Scouse, and a host of other 'mixes'.

Welisson Marques: Do you think it is possible to calculate how many people speak English as their mother tongue nowadays – I mean, we are in 2012 - (and also as a second language)?

David Crystal: Not with any great accuracy. I give the relevant statistics in my *English as a Global Language*, and also in my *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. These books came out (in their second editions) in 2003, though, so the figures there are inevitably a bit out of date now. The global estimate for all speakers has certainly changed from the 1500 million cited there to the 2000 million that is the most commonly suggested total now.

The total for mother-tongue speakers hasn't changed greatly, because the populations of the relevant countries (UK, USA, Australia, etc) have been relatively stable over this time, so I think my figure of 400 million (plus or minus several million) is probably not far from the truth. The chief reason for the uncertainty here is that people have different views about whether creole and pidgin languages derived from English should be included in the mother-tongue total or not.

The second-language statistics are very much more uncertain. One reason is that they introduce the question of fluency. Just how fluent do you have to be before you can be included in the totals as a 'speaker of English'? If you choose the highest levels of fluency, the numbers will be relatively low; whereas if you allow a basic 'domestic' level of conversational ability the numbers will be relatively high. The problem is especially noticeable in India, where the huge population means that levels of fluency dramatically affect results. Estimates suggest that anything from a tenth to a third of the population speak (some sort of) English now – in other words, anything between 100 and 400 million. Add to that the corresponding uncertainty about number of speakers in China, and you can see that an estimate for second/foreign language learning of English is inevitably going to be very vague. Around 2000, estimates suggested that around 200 million people in China spoke (some sort of) English; but the Chinese said they would double that number by the Olympics – and who knows if they did? But my feeling is that they did, at least at a basic level of conversational competence.

After allowing for all the uncertainties, there's little doubt that, for every one native speaker in the world today, there are now four or five non-native speakers. The centre of gravity of the language has definitely shifted.

Welisson Marques: Which language do you believe will become the next lingua franca?

David Crystal: Nicholas Ostler has written a book called *The Last Lingua Franca*. His argument is that no lingua francas last forever, and there may not need to be another one, in any case. Certainly his first point is valid. Lingua francas come and go. They reflect the power politics of the world, and especially the economic situation, so it is perfectly possible for – one day – English to be replaced by some other language that reflects a new world political/economic situation. It might be Chinese, or Spanish, or Arabic... or anything. It might, of course, be Martian. Asking questions about the future of language is really asking questions about the future of the planet. Personally, I don't see there being any change in the position of English for the foreseeable future.

But the more interesting question is whether the world will continue to need a lingua franca, given that automatic translation is increasingly becoming a daily reality. At present, facilities such as Google Translate are pretty primitive, linguistically speaking. They have improved enormously over the past couple of years, of course, and are now capable of providing an online 'gist' in several languages (in written form) which is hugely valuable. Accuracy and idiomaticness will increase greatly over the next couple of decades. And an oral/aural version (a 'Babel fish') is already being planned which will, I imagine, provide a basic 'phrase-book' level option for spoken communication.

Think ahead 100 years. People walking around with Babel fishes in their ears, and immediate speech-to-text translation taking place on their mobile phones. Will we need lingua francas then? My view is yes. There will still be a large number of languages in the world with relatively small numbers of speakers, and where automatic translation tools are not available, and they will need lingua francas as they always have. A total reliance on technology to solve all communication problems is in any case not a wise strategy, especially in an age when power supplies could be erratic or prohibitively expensive. And I can imagine many social circumstances where it would be impracticable or undesirable to use technology for communicative purposes. Languages express identity as well as facilitating communication, and the role of lingua francas as a means of identifying multi-national speech communities will still be important.

Welisson Marques: Last but not least, do you think the interest in language learning has increased in England? If so, what have been the causes for that?

David Crystal: I think we *are* seeing a greater interest at the moment - a reaction against the appalling neglect of foreign language teaching shown by government over the past couple of decades. Several major organizations, such as the British Academy and the Association for Language Learning, have brought the problem into the public domain, and my impression is that there is now some embarrassment at the highest level at the way language teaching has been allowed to slip down the list of educational priorities. The craziest situation emerged when there was an increase in provision at primary school level at the same time as the importance of foreign languages was being reduced in the secondary level examination system.

Comparisons continue to be made with the much higher attention paid to language teaching in mainland Europe; and the generally poor level of linguistic ability achieved by the British is a recurrent theme. The biggest problem we have to face now, to my mind, is the shortage of specialist teachers. Several university language departments have been closed, or are under threat, and the range of languages available is now much less than it was, at a time when the need for new directions (e.g. courses in Chinese and Arabic) is obvious. Despite this, some institutions are doing extremely well. The Chartered Institute of Linguists gives awards each year to groups and individuals in the field of language teaching and learning. I'm an honorary vice-president of the CIL and have attended several of these ceremonies, and I've been hugely impressed by the dedication and ingenuity that can be found around the country, even in a climate where resources and public recognition have been meagre, to say the least. So I'm cautiously optimistic that Britain will end this decade with a better language-learning image than it has had in recent years.

Welisson Marques: Thank you very much, Dr. David.

Entrevista recebida em: 15.01.2017

Entrevista aprovada em: 12.06.2017