

David Crystal – English language in constant development – what to teach!?

By Pernilla Ernmalm

After his plenary session at the IATEFL's conference in Liverpool, David Crystal held a question & answering session where several interesting topics were brought up.

One example of this is Crystal's response to a question regarding the emergence of varieties of global English. Those of us who have followed David Crystal know that he continuously emphasizes the fact that the English language is constantly moving, growing, changing, developing and there is nothing anyone can do to change that. It is nothing new. Today, according to Crystal, we have gone beyond the differences between British English and American English. Today we have several different varieties of the English language. Crystal makes a distinction between varieties of the English language which, most of them have developed in former British colonies, and other variations of the English language which are developing in countries where English is not a first language.

When a new variety of English arises, usually from a former British colony, what then determines whether or not it develops into a new standard of English? According to Crystal, literature is the institutionalization of the different varieties of English in the world. When a new variety of English comes along it is always criticized. It is always condemned for breaking the rules, usually the rules of the educated people who spoke English a long time ago.

Crystal refers to the time when American English started to develop and a vast majority of the educated British people claimed it to be "disgusting". Still today, according to Crystal, British people claim that Americans do not speak proper English. Crystal says that we need to look at the development of a particular variety. If it is only one or two people who speak this variety, it doesn't really matter. However, if there are millions of people who speak this way, it matters. And when literature is as big as, in this case, American English you can no longer say that these are errors, that this is wrong. A new variety, a new standard of the English language has developed. And by standard is meant that the written language is starting to follow the spoken language. This is now happening in other places all over the world, somewhat slower, but still.

With every new variation of the English language that comes along, according to Crystal, it is the literature that determines whether or not this particular variety of English can be regarded as a new English standard. Are there published novels, short stories, plays, poetry in, for example, Singaporean English or Caribbean English with distinctive grammar and distinctive spelling? According to Crystal, it is through literature that a new variety of English will gain respect and prestige and consequently become accepted.

Furthermore, Crystal points out that there is also a development of the English language among English speaking people in countries where English is not spoken

as a first language. Such varieties of the English language are for example: Dutch English, Norwegian English, **Swedish English** and Russian English etc. According to Crystal, Russians will speak English with a Russian accent and with stylistic variations. Swedes will speak English with a Swedish accent and other stylistic variations and, as long as we can understand each other, this is ok.

The most distinctive difference will be that these variations will be characterized by a strong cultural emphasis. Crystal explains that Swedes will talk English about Swedish things and Russians will talk English about Russian things. He suggests that if he was to come into the conference room and say “Oh, it was like Clapham junction down there!” People from other countries would understand the grammar and the vocabulary of what he is saying, but they will not understand the sentence if they do not have the cultural background to this particular allusion. The allusion in this case is that Clapham junction, a railway station south of London, is known to be the most complicated railway station in England, it’s more or less chaotic. In other words Crystal is saying that downstairs is chaos! He gives another example by showing his watch and saying that the watch is “more Portobello street than Bond Street”. To understand this, as well, you need to know that Bond Street is a posh street where you buy expensive watches and Portobello road is a street market where you buy inexpensive watches. It is all a matter of knowing the cultural background. Cultural allusions, everything from the nicknames we give our prime minister, the safe and the dangerous neighborhoods in a city to the local food and drinks that each country has etc. This is all part of our cultural knowledge and when we go to different countries in the world, this is what we encounter.

So, how does this affect our teaching? Well, according to Crystal, the first thing is to take this kind of cultural perspective seriously. In Crystal’s view, these kinds of different varieties around the world need to be treated more systematically, because this is the future of English. With time and with people moving from country to country different varieties of the English language will meet and mix. The language never stays foot.

As a teacher you need to make a big distinction between production and comprehension. When it comes to production none of this matters, teachers can, according to Crystal, continue the way they have always done. However, in terms of comprehension, reading and listening comprehension, everything changes. Crystal emphasizes that teachers do a disservice to their students by letting them go out into the world and letting them think that everybody speaks British English and RP, because they don’t. British English is nowadays a minority dialect of Global English. RP is a minority accent in Britain. Teachers should therefore try to give their students as much exposure to these different varieties as possible, as early as possible. If they do, the students will get accustomed to hearing several different versions of the English language.

An invaluable source when exposing students to different varieties of the English language is the internet. Literature and film are also very good sources. Through films and other types of listening comprehension the students will also receive a greater understanding for such important things as, the above mentioned, **cultural**

allusions. The demand for awareness of cultural references also emphasizes **the importance of teacher training courses in English speaking countries for non-native English speaking teachers.**

David Crystal recommends the internet site below, when searching for proper listening comprehension. **The International Dialects of English Archive** is an online archive of primary-source recordings of English dialects and accents as heard around the world.

<http://www.dialectsarchive.com>