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English as a Global Language

Posted on December 1, 2004 by Editor

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Editor, Interface


David Crystal is easily both one of the most prolific writer/editors on the topic of the English language, and one of the most authoritative. He is the author of The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (1997), the recent work, The Stories Of English (2004), the earlier Language and the Internet (2001), and the work under review here, English as a Global Language, among many others. Crystal is primarily a linguist, and secondarily an expert on the history and development of the English language in particular. Among his other fields of interest, Crystal pays a great deal of attention to the impact of the Internet on language use.

A topic which has continually interested us at the Berglund Center is the issue of writing for the World Wide Web. Crystal brings a great deal of experience and learning to this issue, and we will be reviewing several of his books in this and following issues. At first glance it might appear that English as a Global Language would have little to say about the impact of the Internet, or the question as to what is good writing within that environment. However, Crystal’s close treatment of the topic, primarily via a historical approach, gives the reader an excellent, broad understanding, including an understanding of the impact of the Internet upon the spread of English.

Crystal is primarily interested in the development of English (in fact, Englishes, as one of his important points is that there are in fact, many varieties of English, all equally valid.) between 1950 and the publication of his second edition in 2003. In 1950 there was much speculation that English might become a global language. By 2003, as Crystal states, “World English exists as a political and cultural reality.”

The historical process whereby this happened is related with a great deal of fascinating detail, always culminating in useful generalizations. Briefly put, the British empire first gave English its introduction upon the world stage, then as the empire began to fail, American economic and
technological domination gave it an additional boost, in effect insuring its status as a global language.

Crystal’s fundamental perspective is that multilingualism is a “world resource”, but at the same time, a common language is equally important. He is not one of the triumphalists who looks forward to the day when English alone might be a sufficient linguistic resource with which to deal with a truly global environment. Language has, Crystal states, two important functions: one communicative across localities, and one to build cultural and community solidarity within localities. Accordingly, though minor languages are continually lost, there seems little reason to believe that any one language will prove truly dominant. Those wishing to communicate or trade outside their locality will always function at a higher level when operating in the language of that locality than in their native tongue.

Moreover, the question as to whether English will be the permanent choice for the global language is also, Crystal feels, an open one. It may be that English has achieved such a broad spread and become the second language of so many peoples that it could withstand even the economic and political collapse of both English and the United States. But perhaps not; there are other important languages that might well come to the fore under such circumstances. As Crystal continually states, the present world is, from the linguistic perspective, one in which predictions on the basis of past events are impossible: we have never been here before, in a world with truly global communications on the scale of contemporary cheap air travel and the Internet.

*English as a Global Language* is a fascinating work, and its numerous insights merit many more pages of review than we can afford to devote to it at present. There are times when the linguistic analysis gets a bit thick for the general reader, but Crystal, as appropriate to a scholar with his concerns, usually is clear and concise.

Anyone interested in either language or communications would find this book a wonderfully rewarding read. Moreover, the 2nd edition is a true rewriting of the first, and the author makes good use of the several years that passed between editions.

[1] Crystal’s corporate page can be found a:  http://www.davidcrystal.com/


[3] Xi.
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