

## **'The Future Of English: Coping With Culture'**

### **With Professor David Crystal**

**12<sup>th</sup> February 2013**

**Report by Scott Sherriff**

Exploring themes investigated in his latest book, 'Spell It Out', Professor Crystal's lecture addressed the emergence of English as a global language and how it must contend with cultural differences that act as barriers to communication and understanding. There has never been a global language like English. For every one native speaker there are five non-native speakers. This is uncharted territory and attempts to define strategies capable of overcoming obstacles presented through cultural differences are problematic. Yet impediments can be mitigated if English speakers underpin their interactions with a cultural awareness when engaging with others across the world.

Professor Crystal described how the two main forces that drive language, intelligibility and identity, have conspired to create an adapted form of English, diluting any notion of it existing in a single, homogenised form. The evidence of this can be seen in contrasting usage of grammar and punctuation. These developing distinctions have engendered linguistic and dialectic diversity.

As English has been adopted in different settings, different identities have in turn asserted themselves on the language. This is not an entirely new phenomenon. Professor Crystal remarked how we have long been aware of the variations between British and American English and have adjusted our communication accordingly.

Most culture-specific idioms do not travel, remaining opaque to people lacking a full grasp of all aspects of English culture. A non-native speaker is unlikely to have the cultural awareness to process an idiom such as 'It was like Clapham Junction in there today!' We are inclined, Professor Crystal declared, to underestimate the impact of the cultural assumptions that lace our communication. Sometimes our

intuition concerning the elements of language that will successfully transpose is amiss.

Professor Crystal considers it vital to work with someone from outside the culture to garner a true appreciation of inherent differences. The implication is that cultural studies need to play a more significant role in language instruction than previously thought. Data must be collected to illuminate the exact nature of cultural differences. A dictionary that illustrates culturally distinct forms of English and couples them with global equivalents is not currently available, yet the benefits such a resource would generate are clear.

Professor Crystal called for a cultural linguistic dictionary for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century... not a project that any single individual could undertake but perhaps, he suggested, the English Speaking Union and the British Council could take this forward.....

#### Questions from the floor/online audience-

*“What has been the single most important tipping point in achieving global English as a lingua franca?”*

Professor Crystal does not identify a specific tipping point. He is amazed, however, at the speed with which the current situation has transpired. If people want to talk, he added, they need to find a lingua franca and this has accelerated the global rise of English. Speculating as to what the situation will be like in one hundred years time, Professor Crystal mused whether we might all possess a ‘babel fish’, a reference to the animal featured in ‘A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’ that provides translations of any language. Google are promising that something along these lines is possible! The concept of a lingua franca, therefore, may become redundant in the future.

*“Do you think there will be a growing trend to squeeze the cultural content out of language so people can communicate internationally?”*

Professor Crystal sees examples of this cultural squeeze. Attending a conferencing recently, he noted how his colleagues were tripping over themselves in their discussion at the bar to avoid any culturally distinctive pieces of language! There was a conscious decision to avoid attempts at cultural borrowing.

*“Do generational differences have as much impact on communication as cultural differences?”*

There are changes to the way we communicate that surface as a result of the novelty of a particular phenomenon and are unlikely to be sustained over the long term. Professor Crystal cited the nature of texting as an example. When writing an SMS message ten years ago, there was a greater tendency to use abbreviations in a humorous vein. Many of these abbreviations have now died out completely. Discussing this subject with a group of sixth form students, Professor Crystal learnt that these abbreviations are indeed now regarded as ‘naff’, something seen as being used more by parents! They are outdated and unfashionable. Professor Crystal acknowledged that things are moving so fast it is difficult to generalise regarding these issues. On the Internet, though, there is a propensity to differentiate and create exclusive clubs and it is through these linguistic idiosyncrasies that online groups begin to identify themselves. Language in this instance influences and defines a group’s culture.

A closing comment by one member of the virtual audience questioned why something can cost you an ‘arm and a leg’ in English but only ‘a leg’ in French! Professor Crystal was unsure but what is certain is that his highly entertaining address had clearly refreshed the parts other lectures cannot reach.