

## Language, Linguistics and UoR Pioneers: An Interview with David Crystal

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*CR. A lot of people I know from being here – including myself – can basically say that you're responsible for getting them interested in language. I mean, I was reading your books and it was really that that got me into it and wanting to study it, because I was very indecisive! But I've always wanted to know what first got you interested all those years ago in wanting to study Language and take it so far.*

DC. Well I think the original interest or curiosity in languages comes from growing up in a bilingual area – in my case in North Wales, with a monolingual family background, and going out into the street and realizing that I can understand one person, but I can't understand another. "What's going on here? I thought language was all about understanding each other", thinks this three-year-old, and I'm told that there's another language out there called Welsh, which I don't speak. Well, why not? And there was also Irish on the streets – this was Holyhead in North Wales - so that's another puzzle. My Uncle Joe spoke Welsh, so as a result I moan about this to him, and he starts teaching me some Welsh, and it's on the streets anyway, and I go to school and learn some more Welsh there, so I begin to get a command of it. But that kind of initial uncertainty in a bilingual situation generates a curiosity about languages, I think. That's part one.

Then, at age ten, the family moves to Liverpool, where I'm told in no uncertain terms by the Scouse kids in my class that, if I don't lose my Welsh accent within the next two days, I'm going to be beaten up! So I do promptly lose that accent and become your archetypal Scouser. And this now generates another kind of curiosity, you see, about dialects and accents and what's going on here. So my early upbringing was one of mobility in which I encountered various language situations. I was brought up a Catholic and I served mass, and so I learnt Latin. Well, 'learnt' it? I knew how to make the responses in church, but I didn't know what they meant, and this was another curious language situation. And then in school, of course, I learnt French and Greek, and then Latin properly.

So by the time I was at A-Level, I had a pretty wide language background, enough to make me very very curious about language, to the extent that when I was in the fourth form in secondary school I invented a language. It was basically a derivative of Latin, I now recognize, as far as I can remember it, but I did it just because I wanted to see how languages were created, and I had that kind of curiosity. So that's where it started.

Then I looked out for a university course that would balance Lang and Lit, because as far as I knew at that time I wanted to be a literary person – I did my own creative writing (I had some short stories published as a teenager) – so I was going in for Lit. But I was interested in Lang, so I looked for a course which balanced Lang and Lit, and found it at University College London, which was fifty per cent Lang and fifty per cent Lit. And this was heaven for me, because in the morning I could do Shakespeare and in the afternoon I could do phonetics – this was absolutely ideal! That's how it all began. And then the teachers there fuelled the interest in Linguistics, which of course didn't exist as a degree subject in those days.

*CR. Mike Garman and Pauline Robinson have spoken about how everything began, but I wondered why Reading in particular was keen to open this Linguistics department, if there was anything, even geographically perhaps, about why they wanted to start this?*

DC. Well, I'm not sure what the political background was. Let's go back a step. In the early 1960s, this was the period when people were, for the first time, becoming aware that there was a subject called Linguistics. It had been around in American universities a lot longer, of course, but in Britain it had hardly any presence, even though there were some departments around, like at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where people had been doing Linguistics for some time. But not as an undergraduate subject, and it certainly didn't have a popular press. So people generally weren't aware, though some were beginning to realize that there was this thing called Linguistics and that maybe it had something to offer.

This is why the department started at Bangor in the first place, which Frank Palmer initially developed. There the interest was in the Welsh language, of course - Welsh dialectology, in particular - and the thought that there might be a degree course, and certainly a postgraduate course, where Linguistics could be shown to be of use was appreciated then. But Bangor never delivered on the promises that they made to Frank about developing Linguistics courses at an undergraduate level. Whereas at Reading here, the Professor of French, [George] Lehmann, had already twigged that Linguistics was really rather special, and he was one amongst several here that made the case that they needed a Linguistics department at Reading. So the motivation came from inside the university from departments who sensed that there would be value-added in having a linguistic dimension to their 'normal' French course, German course, English course, and so on. The prime movers were - I can't remember now entirely - but Lehmann, the Professor of French, he was very keen on it; Whitney Bolton was in the English department, Professor of English Language, he was very keen on it; and there were several others who thought a Linguistics development was a good idea. And at the time, in the mid-sixties, there was money around, hence the scale of the new phonetics laboratory, which far exceeded what was possible at Bangor.

So the department started in response to demand, really. The demand came from inside the university, not from the general population outside (such as teachers and speech therapists) - that came later. But I think it was the fact that there was a general sense around that Linguistics was valuable which probably led to that climate developing here at Reading. We're talking early 1960s, so the Linguistics Association of Great Britain was being formed, the British Association for Applied Linguistics was being formed - these new organizations were institutionalizing the subject, and there was a clear demand for an undergraduate series of courses.

*CR. Moving forward in time quite a bit, probably everyone agrees that the largest change to Language in the last fifty years is the Internet - well, communication certainly in general - the fact that everyone's talking to each other all over the world now. I think it was 2001, your original book on Language and the Internet - I was wondering what your feelings are on how the definition of 'netspeak' and 'Internet Language' has changed even since that time, in the last fifteen years or so.*

DC. Well, I'm going to talk about that this evening at the general talk, because this is the 'Linguistics: where next?' theme that I'm addressing there. But I think it's important to put the Internet idea into a broader context. You mentioned earlier that a lot of people have got interested in Language through reading one of my books - now, why is that? Where did that come from? Well, one has to remember that when the department started here - I remember it very very clearly - there was a first-year course but there were no first-year textbooks! Imagine that situation: you're having to teach undergraduate courses, and there are no textbooks at all aimed at that first-year level. There are of course books on Language and

Linguistics written by specialists, the classic books of the period like Bloomfield's *Language*, but these are very demanding for first-year students, and there was nothing else around. So already the publishers were beginning to knock on doors. It was a regular experience to have a publisher wander around the department corridor, literally knocking on doors and saying "Hello, I'm from Longman or Macmillan or wherever, anybody interested in writing a book?" – it was that kind of situation.

The publishers had been noticing the general trend, the greater interest in Linguistics that had been coming up here, there and everywhere, and they were wanting books to meet that market. And that's how I started. I'd always wanted to be a writer, and I was good at it because of the literary side, and when the knocking on the doors came, some were not interested in the department, but I was. And so, as a result, I ended up writing, first of all, *What is Linguistics?*, and then developed the Linguistics series for Penguin Books, which wasn't just me – I did the *Linguistics* Penguin, but then Frank Palmer did *Grammar*, Geoffrey Leech did *Semantics*, Doc O'Connor did *Phonetics*, and so on and so forth. So, during that second half of the sixties, the remit basically was to write the textbooks, or at least the introductions to the subjects that you could plonk down in front of your new students and say "Read this, and this is a start". And one thing led to another and, as a result, over the next ten years, a huge number of books came out, some from me, either in series or as separate developments.

Now, because of the nature of the subject, Language getting into every conceivable corner of society in some shape or other, the demands came in from all over the place – the clinical demand arrives, and there are no textbooks there either; the Applied Linguistics side arrives, there are no textbooks there either (the one by David Wilkins is one of the first). And we're suddenly finding that because we were the first department to introduce Linguistics in this kind of cross-disciplinary way, as well as a subject in its own right, we were under huge demand all the time to either go and give lectures on it in other places, or to give courses on it, summer schools and things, or to write the books that nobody else seemed to be either interested in writing or perhaps even able to write because they didn't have that kind of undergraduate teaching experience. So that is what happened. And between 1965 and 1975, I would reckon something like thirty or forty texts came out of Reading or were organized by us here at Reading – hugely important, that side of things.

This response to demand continued into the 80s, and is still there today – so, to get back to your original question, when something new happens out there in the big wide world, and somebody says "What's Linguistics got to say about this?", they would often come to us, and this kept happening to me long after I left the department. And then, having left and become freelance, with no departmental responsibilities any more – lovely, lovely, lovely! – I found myself with the time and the motivation and the skill set to respond to people coming up to me and saying, "Look, there's this field that's developing, is there a book on Language and X?", where X could be something social, something psychological, something medical, something electronic, and if the answer was no – and it was usually no – the next question was "Well, will you write it then?". And having done a couple of general overviews – *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, in the first instance, and then *of the English Language* – I did have that kind of broad perspective. I'm a guy who's great on breadth, but I'm never motivated to go into depth until a project turns up that demands real research. And so I knew a little bit about a lot of topics, and then, every now and then, somebody would say "Well look, can you turn that little into a lot by focussing on a particular area?", and that's what happened with the Internet.

Along comes the Internet, then - this is 1991, the year of the World Wide Web - and in the ten years after that, no introduction to Language and the Internet had been forthcoming. Why not? I don't know! I was as amazed as anybody else when Cambridge said "Look, we need a book on Language and the Internet, would you write one?", and I said "There must be one out there!". But there wasn't. And so then I spend a year really going into depth on that

particular subject to produce that particular book and that's the way it went, you see. Fortunately I was in the position to be able to respond. If I had still been full-time in a department and Cambridge had come up and said "Would you like to do a book?", I would've had to say "Well, maybe, but I haven't got time". You know, all the teaching, all the admin – the admin! - that was growing and growing in the 90s and early 2000s, and took up a horrendous amount of time. It still does, of course.

*CR. We've had fifty years of Linguistics here, which is great, and hopefully we'll have another fifty years and be here celebrating a hundred years of Linguistics, and I just wondered if you had any thoughts on what on earth might be new and interesting that we might be studying in 2065?*

DC. The one thing I've learnt over the years is never try to predict the future when it comes to Language, because Language is people, and people is society, so predicting the future of Language is predicting the future of society, and heaven knows, we could all be talking Martian in a hundred years' time - or anything! Think back twenty-five years – who would have predicted the Internet? And that's changed everything, so heaven knows what the next developments are going to be in our domain. All I know is that Linguistics has a job to do to keep pace with these developments, whatever they're going to be.

That's the thing, that was always the beauty of this department, that's the philosophy that Frank Palmer had when he started the department – there were no exclusions. When Mike used the word 'eclectic' in his talk earlier on, that is such an important word. It *was* an eclectic department, and that contrasts with the other departments at the time that were typically non-eclectic. I mean, they were Chomskyans and only taught Chomsky and that was it – anything else was out of the question. Or you were Hallidayans and taught only scale-and-category functional grammar, and nothing else – Chomsky would be anathema there! And in our department, there was Frank, who had this huge comparative linguistic background in all sorts of languages, as you've heard Mike say. What he didn't say was that there was Peter Matthews, who had trained in generative grammar and at the time was very much into that sort of approach to Linguistics. Then there was me, who was quite the opposite – I'd been trained by Randolph Quirk at London in a very descriptive, traditional European style of grammar. And as a result, the rows we had were tremendous, absolutely fantastic rows, in staff meetings! But from a student point of view, you got an introduction to Linguistics that was broader in scope than anywhere else in the world, I would say. Certainly no university in America would be able to give such a wide range of introductions to so many different points of view about language – to Firthian Linguistics, Hallidayan Linguistics, Chomskyan Linguistics, Quirkian Linguistics, and so on.

That is the kind of ethos that governed the department from the beginning, and it also happened when CALS developed, and we saw the same eclectic ethos there. And it's the ethos that's got to stay today: you've got to be ready to be all-inclusive and not to exclude any possibilities. I don't know what the current mind-set of the people in the department is, but that's what I would hope to see happen. Whatever happens in society out there which has a language dimension to it, this is the department - and I hope there are others out there now - that would be able to say "That's really worth studying, let's get a course on it or a lecture series on it" or something like that, and maybe "Let's get somebody in to do some research into it, get some postgrads on it", and just be prepared to be reactive in that way. Being proactive I think is impossible – I have no idea what will happen - but I know you've got to be ready to respond to circumstances, no matter how unexpected.

*CR. That must be part of its appeal: you never quite know what's going to happen next, and it's fascinating from that point of view.*

DC. That's right, and that's why I chose that topic for my talk this evening, because that is the history of this department. All the major developments we've heard about so far, and the ones we're about to hear about, came about unexpectedly. None of it was planned at the outset. Once the department was established, "Get on with it!", as Mike said – well, get on with what? Get on with whoever is going to knock on your door. And people did knock, and not just the publishers, but other departments in the university - not just the Language departments, but the Literature department, the Philosophy department, the Typography department, the Music department, the Psychology department, and so on. They all suddenly realized they'd got these guys here – what are we going to do with them? They started to salivate and say "We're all interested in Language, and now there's a department here that specializes in this? Gimme, gimme, gimme!". And that's how it was. The actual structure of the degree courses is the tip of the iceberg of the activity that went on in the department in those days, because that was just the teaching side of it. Underneath, the intellectual, mutual probing and interdepartmental exchange of ideas was unbelievably exciting, because all kinds of people would come to start seminars from departments that you'd never have dreamed would ever want to be interested in you.

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