

## REVIEW

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## RESENSIE

Crystal, David. 2003. *English as a Global Language*. Second edition. Cambridge: CUP. 212pp

The position of English as a global language and its perceived effect on other languages has elicited strong debate for some time now.

In a debate fraught with minefields, David Crystal attempts to take a neutral stance in the interests of what he terms 'balance and consensus'. For him there is no necessary clash between English the global language and the interests of other languages. He confesses his belief in the fundamental value of multilingualism and in a common language. On the one hand, he sees multilingualism as a resource which offers the benefit of being part of more than one culture. On the other hand, he sees a common language as a resource which promotes mutual understanding and thus presents fresh opportunities for global cooperation. For him, the principles should be complementary rather than divisive.

In 1995, he set out to explain succinctly and factually why English has achieved its worldwide status. The three main questions the first edition of the book sought to answer were: what makes a world language? why is English the leading candidate? and will it continue to hold this position? In this new edition, the three questions remain, but the book has moved from being a more popular account to one which provides careful documentation of its arguments.

Chapter 1 explores why English is a global language. Crystal argues that there is a clear link between English the global language and economic, technological and political power. He refers to the example of Greek and Latin to show how the spread of language is tied to successful military and maritime expeditions, showing how military power is not sufficient to maintain and expand the power of a language – this requires economic power. In the case of English, the position of the language established by the might of the British Empire would not have been maintained were it not for the rise of American economic power bolstered by the development of technology. With a global language come certain dangers. Crystal lists three of these: linguistic power, linguistic complacency and linguistic death. With regard to the first, Crystal considers that effective teaching of English is an effective counter to a situation in which those who speak English have power as opposed to those who don't. Effective teaching ensures that competence in English is not the preserve of the few. In the South African situation, a similar argument has been mounted, but perhaps there is more recognition than Crystal reveals in his book of the complexities of achieving this. The second danger Crystal lists, linguistic complacency or a feeling that it is not necessary to learn another language, was highlighted by the 9/11 episode where the failure of the intelligence services seems to have related in part to language limitations. Crystal is optimistic that the desire to boost exports and attract foreign investment and tourists will mean that there will be

a greater readiness among English speakers to learn other languages. He justifies his position by pointing to language programmes in Australia and the US.

The third danger, language death, is the most complex. Crystal challenges the view that there is a causal link between the rate of the adoption of English and the demise of minority languages. His argument is that language death has occurred in parts where English has no presence. He sees as simplistic the argument that power asymmetry means pressurising the third world to adopt English. His position is based on the evidence that powerful first world countries with strong languages of their own, if anything, feel even greater pressure than third world countries to adopt English. For him this speaks of global interdependence, where English represents a valuable tool to achieve particular goals. Local languages continue as an inextricable part of identity. Clearly, language death cannot be explored satisfactorily within this book. Crystal gives the matter fuller attention in *Language Death* (2000).

In the second chapter, Crystal provides a fascinating account of the historical reasons for the choice of English as a global language. He describes the spread of English to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Southeast Asia and the former colonies in Africa. But he is realistic that what appears to be a worldwide spread of the use of English is true only of the centres.

In the third chapter, Crystal gives a well-informed account of *how* English came to be chosen as the access to knowledge and later access to knowledge as to how to get financial backing. Perhaps what is less clear is *why* it was that English was chosen. He makes the interesting point that shifts in identity and perceived value have led to the current status of Welsh, Gaelic, French (in Quebec) and Maori in what may be termed inner circle countries. Ironically, in outer circle countries (former colonies) English is sometimes viewed as a neutral language because it can offer a way round choosing between the competing interests of local languages.

Exploring another aspect, in the fourth chapter Crystal shows that English is used by a substantial number of international organisations, including the UN, the Association of South East Asian Nations, and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Nations (p. 87). The choice relates to a desire for mutual intelligibility. However, the reason that the language chosen should be English is more complex. Then there have been the fortuitous factors such English coming to be the language of air traffic control, shipping and the internet, the rise of the film industry in Hollywood, the popularity of pop music, and the place of English in the advertising industry and the media.

The book ends with speculation about the future. Wisely he is aware that prediction is not possible. In his view some of the factors that could affect the standing of English are rejection and a shift in the balance of political and economic power. With respect to the first, he briefly explores the likelihood of the rejection of English and considers the possibility of cases where regional interests far outweigh global interests, or another language, for instance Spanish, could seem more attractive. In his view, a diminishment of the economic and political power of America is also not likely. Here one would have to be aware that his book was written before the invasion of Iraq by America.

I found particularly interesting Crystal's discussion of the ways in which the domains of grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics and discourse in the New Englishes are affected by local features. English has always been a very tolerant language, so his speculative argument that a World Standard Spoken English (WSSE) could emerge is plausible. Should this happen it

remains to be seen whether the need for mutual intelligibility will make the current standard English (within the framework of a dynamic view of language) the touchstone or whether, as he suggests, the impact of the second and foreign language users will mean that the standard will incorporate linguistic features shared by several or (all) second language users. Certainly the notion of a national variety (or dialect) being used as an expression of national identity and a universally intelligible standard English being used in the interests of international communication has its merits.

I found that the book on the current role of English made compelling reading. Whether Crystal's desire to give a balanced account makes him a 'naïve liberal ideal[ist]' with a 'laissez-faire attitude' (Pennycook, 2001:56) or someone who aims at giving a fuller picture will no doubt continue to be debated. *English as a global language* provides a solid introduction to the issue of global English that should be read by students doing courses in linguistics and education.

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Crystal, D.2000. *Language death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Pennycook, A. 2001. *Critical applied linguistics*. New York: Erlbaum.