

○ **D. CRYSTAL, *JUST A PHRASE I'M GOING THROUGH: MY LIFE IN LANGUAGE***

(LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2009, PP. 285)

Part-autobiography and part-introduction to the field of linguistics, this book offers a pleasurable, entertaining, informative and inspiring reading experience. It is pleasurable because Crystal is a good writer, weaving the stages of his life with the many stages of the growth of linguistics as a discipline in its own right. It is entertaining because he has the skill of a storyteller, capturing and invoking the humorous side of the ridiculous. It is informative in its illustrations of many basic concepts of linguistics. And it inspires with its love of language.

The book is divided into nineteen chapters which provide a chronology of Crystal's life in language. Within each chapter are what have been labelled 'Panels'. These are short, often humorous anecdotes, set off in greyed boxes, with titles such as 'Linguist as dancer', 'Linguist as foul-mouth', 'Linguist as couturier'. In the panel on 'Linguist as grammarian', for example, Crystal relates a student's answer to the question 'what is a preposition?'. The student suggested that it was 'something to do with getting on a horse' because 'there was a pre-position one should adopt before mounting' (p.171). Although the roles sometimes appear unlikely at first glance – 'quantity surveyor' and 'spymaster' among them – these panels encapsulate the wide range of roles taken up by an applied linguist.

The nineteen chapters take a roughly chronological trajectory, from Crystal's childhood in Wales and Liverpool, to his university studies at University College London under Randolph Quirk, among others, to his entry into and exit from academia – this includes coverage of the growth of linguistics and applied linguistics as academic subjects – and on to further professional language involvements. Crystal makes reference, on the way, to his personal life, and to some of its most joyful and most difficult experiences. Throughout, the role played in his life by language is foregrounded.

Crystal's early contact with the bilingual Welsh community, for example, was for him an opportunity to 'shift perspectives, re-calibrate [...] auditory registers' (p.19). In the same vein, a childhood experience with a man who made false teeth for a dentist may have contributed to his interest in phonetics. This interest increased during his high school days with his first exposure to phonetic symbols. His high school studies in French, Latin and Greek, along with elocution lessons, all contributed to his developing understanding of language and of the voice as a tool of language.

During his university studies, however, aside from some positive experiences in his first year, linguistics did not come alive for him for some time. He was put off by the ‘confusing, ponderous, and unmotivating’ (p.75) approach used at the time, and by the difficulty of the available texts, such as Ogden and Richard's *The meaning of meaning*. As he says, there were no easy introductions to linguistics in those days, and the subject was not available in an undergraduate degree. However, just as he was about to settle for a literary career, he met Randolph Quirk. He describes Quirk as ‘incarnating’ himself into the room, and says that ‘in one hour [he] changed my life’ (p.83). Quirk directed him to learn phonetics and this he found wonderful due to brilliant teaching by AC Gimson and JD O'Connor.

Subsequently, while completing his PhD, Crystal worked for the Survey of English Usage as a research assistant. The Survey, headed by Quirk, was a study seeking to provide a descriptive – rather than prescriptive – account of the grammatical features of all varieties of spoken and written English. One day Crystal took a telephone call from a shoe shop sales assistant who first confirmed that the Survey dealt in English grammar and then asked for a selection of adjectives. Crystal, going along with what he thought was a brilliant joke, offered nouns and verbs as well: ‘We do have a special deal going this month, and, if you order all three, we throw in the adverbs for nothing. That’s quite a saving, as adverbs are normally a shilling. They’re longer you see [...] because of their endings’ (p.99). The caller ultimately ordered three dozen adjectives, and two dozen each of nouns, verbs and adverbs. When Crystal later shared the event with colleagues, no practical joker could be located and then, when the order arrived in the mail, it was realised that the call had been genuine, and the Survey group was obliged to respond in kind, deputising Crystal to trawl Roget's *Thesaurus* for words with ‘shoe-relatedness potential’ (p.99). As Crystal points out, this was an early form of contextual advertising, an area with which he became involved later in his long career.

Other areas to which he has also contributed and which are covered in the book include what he himself called theolinguistics (p.126), the relationship between linguistics and religion; lexicography; child language acquisition and language disability; speech therapy; English language teaching; internet search engines; education and typography; Shakespeare's impact on the English language; and many more. As he relates his involvement in these areas, Crystal flags many significant issues within applied linguistics including ethics, funding and cutbacks, the growth of the internet, social action, and politics. He also continually reflects on various aspects of language. Many of these reflections are familiar to those of us who have been involved in language teaching or who muse on language because of a fascination with it. To give just a few examples, he refers to

the different perspectives on bilingualism held by and on children and adults, discussing the way young children are not aware that they speak two or more languages; he suggests that the teenage years are the crucial age for vocabulary development; he comments on different kinds of abilities developed by speakers of multiple languages, using the term 'semi-lingual' to describe the limitations of his fluency in Welsh to nursery rhymes and linguistics. Crystal also reflects on what it means to become an academic and a public speaker. Implicit in these latter stories is the important role played by Crystal in bringing linguistics to the public arena.

Woven into this history of linguistics/applied linguistics as academic subjects and the many and various ways in which language is important, Crystal also documents some aspects of his personal life, including his own 'weediness' as a child, his time in a rock band, the discovery of his absent father, the medical issues – and death – of one of his children, and the depression and subsequent suicide of his first wife. The book is in this way the autobiography of a life, with its numerous difficulties and triumphs. From any point of view, not just for those with an interest in language, the book offers an extremely pleasurable reading experience.

Review by Constance Ellwood

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