REVIEW ARTICLE

Voice in Global English: Unheard Chords in Crystal Loud and Clear

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The story of English throughout the period is one of rapid expansion and diversification, with innovation after innovation coming to use the language as a primary or sole means of expression. It is not possible to identify cause or effect. So many developments were taking place at the same time that we can only point to the emergence, by the end of the nineteenth century, of a climate of largely unspoken opinion which had made English the natural choice for progress (p. 75).

At the end of the twentieth century David Crystal sees English as symbiotically linked to ‘progress’. The questions that he explores in this slim volume are of momentous importance. The fates of the world’s citizens are increasingly decided on in English, so there is every reason to explore whether there are links of cause and effect between global English and the processes and structures that it is involved in. Crystal’s book ignores the fact that global (and local) inequalities are increasing, and that the ‘innovations’ of the global system are having catastrophic ecological and cultural effects. He sees no causal relationship between the globalization of English and the demise of other languages, which are apparently not ‘the natural choice for progress’. To write the story of ‘English as a global language’ in the form of a book for the general public, Crystal has had to address fundamental and challenging issues of approach and validity in relating value judgements and ideological preferences to types of data and permissible generalizations. English is now so ubiquitous, interlocking with social phenomena and with other languages in so many diverse ways, that there are serious methodological and ethical problems in selecting, packaging, explaining and interpreting the topic.

Crystal is an eminent scholar and popularizer, several of whose earlier books I admire. This book is intended, according to the cover blurb, for ‘anyone of any nationality concerned with English: teachers, students, language professionals, politicians, general readers and anyone with a love of the language’. A global audience indeed. This involves the author in needing to face at least two daunting challenges: how to remain scholarly in unravelling the interconnections between English and the multiple purposes it serves in what Crystal regards as a political minefield, and how a British view can present itself as universally relevant and appropriate. In my view the
book fails on both scores, and granted Crystal’s reputation, influence, and substantial rhetorical skills, needs very careful scrutiny.

The book is structured around three basic questions: what makes a world language, why is English the leading candidate, and will it continue to hold that position? There is an introductory general chapter, followed by a historical run-through of the establishment of English worldwide, a chapter on ‘the cultural foundation’, with sub-sections entitled political developments, access to knowledge, and ‘taken for granted’; a chapter on ‘the cultural legacy’ with sub-sections on international relations, the media, travel, safety, education, and communications, and a concluding section, ‘the right place at the right time’; and a final chapter called ‘the future of global English’, with sub-sections on the rejection of English, new Englishes, fragmentation of the language, and the uniqueness of global English. In fact nearly half of this chapter is devoted to the current debate in the US about English Only legislation, implying that Crystal’s understanding is that the internal affairs of the present-day US are central to the future of ‘global’ English. This seems to be endorsing what George Bernard Shaw presciently wrote in 1912, ‘what has been happening in my lifetime is the Americanization of the world’ (cited in Holroyd 1997: 660).

Crystal claims that the book is without ‘any political agenda’. He stakes out this defensive position since he does not wish to be identified with the protagonists of US English, who first commissioned a work from him on global English. But surely even the wish to be apolitical involves political choices, not least in relation to choice of scientific disciplines that can clarify his questions, their procedures and epistemological roots. While he draws on information from a wide variety of sources, his loyalty is to linguistics (e.g. p. 113), which is of little avail when studying colonialism, globalization, cultural hegemony, education, and the media, and even when defining multilingualism, official, national and minority languages. Lack of any grounding in the social sciences is a major weakness of the work.

‘HISTORY’

The area that Crystal does attempt to draw on is ‘history’, but I doubt whether many historians would be impressed. In the sections referred to as ‘America’ (oops, he does not mean the two continents, but the USA—this terminology is not merely a slip, his synecdoche reflects a hegemonic preference), ‘Canada’, and ‘The Caribbean’ (pp. 26–35), there is no reference to the First Nations, the indigenous peoples and their languages, except when he notes that the ‘explorers’ encountered ‘conflict with the native people’. The continent is presented as though there were no languages before Europeans took over. Amerindian languages do not warrant a mention.

When presenting the story of the dominance of English in the main ‘English-speaking’ countries, he writes:
No special mention is made of English in any of the documents which are significant for the history of Britain, and English has never been formally declared the official language of that country. Nor was English singled out for mention when the Constitution of the United States was being written. Rulings are needed to regulate conflict. If there is no conflict, there is no need for rulings. (p. 75)

How can anyone suggest that language issues have been free of conflict in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, or the USA? Or that documents confirming the dominance of English were never written (Crystal himself refers to Macaulay’s celebrated minute on language in India, which set the tone for the entire colonial education adventure), laws enacted, and policies implemented? There is a huge literature on these issues, British (e.g. Crowley 1991, 1996) and North American (e.g. Heath and Mandabach 1983, Crawford 1992, Hernández-Chávez 1994).

The description of South Africa (pp. 38–41) manages not to refer to apartheid or to name any African languages. The Indians that were brought over as indentured labour from 1860, and who had few rights, linguistic or other, prior to 1991, are described as having ‘arrived’. ‘White government’ is a careless reference to Afrikaners in power (white South Africans of non-Boer origins were not in political power after 1947). The reference to ‘South African politicians in recent years’ is to Afrikaners, hence excludes Nelson Mandela (whose Afrikaans was learned late in life). This invisibilization of blacks (in parallel with that of the indigenous groups in the Americas) is well, let us say, a trifle eurocentric and scarcely appropriate for someone wishing to address a ‘global’ audience. ‘National’ identity would also need more careful handling, so as to distinguish a Zulu or Xhosa ‘nation’ from a South African one.

Overall what is missing is any presentation of the way multilingualism has been managed in South Africa throughout this century. There is only passing reference to the exciting efforts currently under way to implement a multilingual policy as a key feature of the new dispensation, and on which there is a copious scientific literature (e.g. Heugh et al. 1995; Barkhuizen and Gough 1996; McLean and McCormick 1996; Webb 1996) as well as the key language policy document, the LANGTAG Report (1996). There is a fascinating unresolved tension in contemporary South Africa between the thrust of English and official multilingualism. South African policy-makers are also well aware of the way English serves the interests of elites rather than the entire population in most of its neighbouring countries, for instance in Namibia (Pütz 1995), which Crystal inexplicably omits to cover, along with Botswana and Lesotho, in the section on ‘former colonial Africa’.

This might be because Namibia was never technically a British colony, but probably has more to do with Crystal’s attempt to pack the ‘historical context’ of English of a large number of countries into very limited space. This leads to bald and selective coverage: Cameroon is described as highly multilingual, Nigeria with its 400+ languages not so. Ghana was ‘the first Commonwealth
country to achieve independence’. What about India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma, not to mention the dominions? (Some of the formulations, and inexactitudes, are lifted verbatim from Crystal’s *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, CUP 1995.) There is no reference to the many African scholars who have pleaded for the upgrading of African languages and denounced ‘aid’ that strengthens European languages.

Fundamentally Crystal’s story of globalizing English is eurocentric and triumphalist, despite his protestations to the contrary. Military conquest is identified in Crystal’s general introduction as an essential phase in global conquest (p. 7), but his narrative avoids any upsetting talk of bloodshed, let alone that what colonizers saw as triumph involved capitulation and domination for others. Thus he refers soothingly to a ‘successful British expedition against the Ashanti to protect trading interests’. The struggle for Kenya’s freedom from colonial rule involved a spot of ‘unrest (the Mau Mau rebellion)’. In describing the transfer of power in Zimbabwe, white Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence is mentioned, but not its illegality, nor anything as messy as a war of liberation. One can only hope that history writing for British schools has progressed beyond this eurocentric one-sidedness. Couldn’t decolonizing the mind (Ngũgi’s book is quoted 114–5) be a task as much for Europeans as Africans?

**LANGUAGE AND GLOBAL RELATIONS**

Crystal rightly notes in his introductory chapter that military success paves the way for a relationship in which economic matters are paramount. He even once refers to ‘economic imperialism’ (p. 74), but distances himself from such an unpalatable term by putting it in inverted commas. Nor does he reflect on whether economic and linguistic under-development might be inter-related, such that, for instance, the parlous state of publishing in most postcolonial states is connected to market forces that benefit British publishers, in an unequal relationship that is skewed in favour of the strong.

Crystal does not assess whether linguistic imperialism, however it is defined, has ever existed, or might still do so, which is puzzling, granted that theory-building, description and analysis of linguistic dominance are flourishing (e.g. Tollefson 1991; Phillipson 1992a; Dasgupta 1993; Dendrinos 1993; Pennycook 1994; Mühlhäusler 1996; Fishman et al. 1996; Kachru 1995), reflecting a variety of approaches and interpretations.

Crystal does not explore the unpleasant fact that most former colonies are now undemocratic, even if (or perhaps partly because?) they have maintained English as the official language, and the majority of the population in post-colonial states are governed in a language that they do not understand, and live in abject conditions. He does little to explain why the linguistic hierarchies imposed in the colonial age largely still remain in place. The uncomfortable and tragic fact is that the present world order clearly serves the interests of some—the West and the elites who collaborate with them—better
than others. Without appropriate language policies the global system would not function.

A recent study of British foreign policy since 1945 begins by stating: ‘It appears to be a widely held assumption that Britain (and indeed the Western states as a whole) promotes certain grand principles—peace, democracy, human rights and economic development in the Third World—as natural corollaries to the basic political and economic priorities that guide its foreign policy’ (Curtis 1995: 1). Curtis’s book documents in great detail how false this view is, and how the media have uncritically promoted this deceptive vision. His concluding chapter states:

One basic fact—of perhaps unparalleled importance—has permeated a number of studies and is well understood: the mass poverty and destitution that exist in much of the Third World are direct products of the structure of the international system. Moreover, an elementary truth is that the world’s powerful states have pursued policies with regard to the Third World which knowingly promote poverty. (Curtis 1995: 236)

Crystal’s apparent assumption that English is exclusively for the good in North–South relations seems to prevent him from probing into just how the position of English has been achieved and from attempting to assess the significance of the various factors that figure in his narrative. He writes blithely that during the twentieth century the world presence of English ‘was maintained and promoted, almost single-handedly, through the economic supremacy of the new American superpower’ (p. 8). Single-handedly? What about World Bank policies? Development ‘aid’? Post-colonial education? The publishing business (not least the Cambridge and Oxford University Presses, Longman et al.) that makes English Language Teaching (selectively reported on, p. 103) a multi-billion pound global business? British academics have drawn considerable profit (in several senses) from the patronage of the British Council and publishers (trips globally to lecture, donations of books, etc.). There are ethical problems in all such activities (Kaplan 1995; Hamelink 1997; Swales 1997, Tomaševski 1997). Applied linguistics involves addressing serious ethical questions (see, for instance, the thematic number on this topic of Issues in Applied Linguistics 4/2: 1993).

Many ethical issues are directly related to ‘world’ English, its conceptualization, forms and functions. For instance, the post-communist world has been exposed to a great deal of scientific and linguistic contact with western interests in recent years, in a fundamentally asymmetrical relationship between scholars in east and west. The implications are becoming increasingly clear to those at the consuming end of global English. The distinguished Hungarian linguist Miklós Kontra reports (personal communication, 17 December 1997):

I am increasingly coming to the conviction that the international language English not only opens gates but closes them too. It closes the
gates of information flow in all cases where what does get translated into English is partial, inadequate, uninformed, etc. And there are an embarrassingly large number of such cases even within such a field as sociolinguistics.

Kontra has also drawn to my attention a lively debate in Hungary on ‘Colonisation or partnership? Eastern Europe and western social sciences’—see the special issue of *replica*, 1996, which is concerned with issues of scientific agenda-setting and funding, of national scholarship and global—meaning largely American) interventions and pressures.

What I am basically suggesting is that Crystal’s book contains a narrative with selective exemplification, much of the data being, as one would expect, factually correct (with surprising errors, see also below), but that his own agenda has a free run, granted that the apparatus of scholarly documentation has been avoided, ostensibly since this is a popularizing book. There are therefore very considerable types of information that are simply excluded, namely those that do not fit into the world-view underpinning his narrative.

**LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION**

Crystal’s admission that there are other views is reflected in quotations from Gandhi and Ngũgĩ ‘rejecting’ English (114–5), however the implications of this position are buried in comments on the expense of bilingualism. He does not name counter-examples, such as Scandinavian competence in English being compatible with all affairs being conducted in local languages. Nor reflect on the cultural distance between the world of English and education for cultural continuity or subsistence farming needs in Africa. Ngũgĩ has in fact nothing against the English language as such. What he objects to are the purposes to which it is put in Kenya and global capitalism (Ngũgĩ 1993). Critical intellectuals in countries like Kenya end up in prison (without charge or trial) and exile, their voices unheeded by decision-makers locally and globally.

Language in education policy is a clear instance of where Crystal writes as though he is unaware of the relevant literature. In his attempt to present both sides of the US official English story, he goes through the political and socio-economic arguments for and against, but when he gets to the educational issues, he abandons this structure, noting that ‘it is too complex an area to be given summary treatment in the present book’ (p. 127). The same could be said for Crystal’s entire enterprise: he has unjustifiably over-simplified the complexity and reality of global English. In relation to educational language policy, I can think of a dozen scholars who would be able to summarize the issues concisely, for instance the contributors from Belgium, California, Australia, Austria, Canada, Spain, Estonia, Russia, India and New York to Tove Skutnabb-Kangas’s book *Multilingualism for All* (1995). Closer to Crystal’s Welsh home, there are distinguished scholars (see Baker 1993), but none, significantly but not surprisingly, from England. Few if any scholars in bilingual education or foreign language pedagogy would endorse without
qualification the belief that ‘the earlier the better’ is the key solution to second or foreign language learning (p. 15), since there is massive scientific evidence to the contrary, and looking at a single factor such as age is educationally unsound.

The English Only movement has spawned a substantial literature, so that the idea that arguments for what is ‘a bad cure for an imaginary disease’ (Nunberg 1997: 44) can be loyally and neutrally presented as though they are equally valid seems to me to be a denial of scholarly responsibility. The intellectual community in the United States, including the most prestigious professional associations working with language, is massively against English Only. One would not suspect this from reading Crystal’s book.

The assumption that experts from countries such as the UK or the US, deeply monolingual and with a very patchy record of foreign language learning, can contribute to policy on education and language matters in multilingual societies is completely counter-intuitive. However this is one of the ‘triumphs’ of the English Language Teaching business. Though the ideologies and practices of this paradigm are increasingly being questioned by critical intellectuals in North and South, linguistic hierarchies reminiscent of the colonial period, and master-minded by the type of linguistics and applied linguistics department that Crystal used to work for, still underpin much World Bank and IMF education policy, which currently sets the tone for ‘aid’ alongside notoriously anti-social, poverty-inducing structural adjustment policies:

the World Bank’s real position . . . encourages the consolidation of the imperial languages in Africa . . . the World Bank does not seem to regard the linguistic Africanisation of the whole of primary education and beyond as an effort that is worth its consideration. Its publication on strategies for stabilising and revitalising universities, for example makes absolutely no mention of the place of language at this tertiary level of African education. (Mazrui 1997: 39)

A set of agenda-setting World Bank reports on basic education in eastern African countries barely refers to local languages (see Phillipson 1992b). The ensuing educational ‘aid’ reflects the belief that only European languages are suited to the task of developing African economies and minds, the falsity of which many African scholars have shown, Anre, Bangboçe, Kashoki, Mateene, Ngûgî (references in Phillipson 1992a). Even the World Bank is currently reassessing its policies, since educational results are poor when mother tongues are neglected (Dutcher 1997).

LANGUAGE RIGHTS

the nature of the rights is not explored. On the contrary, Crystal notes that as soon as minorities achieve rights, the majority needs to have their rights affirmed, whereas the guiding principle of human rights law is that it is the oppressed that need protection. On the other hand language policy analysis might need to assess the antagonism of dominant groups to minorities (as in the US and much of the western world) when devising schemes for the management of multilingual societies, including the ensuring of rights for speakers of minority languages in the face of dominant group intolerance (Grin 1994).

When it comes to voluntary associations of states such as the European Union, the issue of language rights in such fora as the European Parliament and the EU Commission in Brussels is central to all communicative activities (Labrie 1993). Crystal’s description (pp. 81–2) correctly reflects the fact that English is expanding in EU use, but not what the implications are for all the relevant languages, or for a supra-national entity that is supposed to build on principles of democracy, pluralism, and equality between the member states, including their languages.

A close reading of his text reveals a surprising clutch of basic errors.

- Crystal refers to nations each having the right to use their ‘own language’, where what he is referring to is the right of citizens of each member state to use the language that was accorded rights when the state joined the EU. For instance the Irish opted for English, the Irish language being a treaty language but not an official or working language. In several member states there are several major national groups; in Belgium, Finland and Spain there is more than one official language. Members of the Welsh or Basque nations would not get far in Brussels in their languages.
- The number of member states was not 11 but rose to 15, and the number of official languages to 11, when Austria, Finland and Sweden acceded to the EU in 1995.
- Crystal uses inappropriate terminology when he refers to ‘translation’ and ‘translators’ when what he is describing is interpreters providing interpretation services at meetings.
- The parenthetic suggestion is thrown in that some countries might be ‘asked’ to give up their languages, a risk that English-speakers presumably regard as not one that they might incur. Crystal’s loose formulation is that ‘countries’ could be asked to give up their ‘official status’, when what he is presumably referring to is languages. While the de facto hierarchy of working languages means that member states implicitly accept that some working languages are more equal than others, it is quite another matter to propose limitations on official languages, since these are the dominant language of member states, and EU law takes precedence over national law in member states: any limitation on the translation of EU written documents (for instance if all Italians could only read them in English or French) is juridically unthinkable and totally unacceptable in a democracy.
The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (an important-sounding body) is spuriously referred to as an authority on demographic data for linguistic competence whereas in fact the Bureau deals exclusively with non-official languages, i.e. Friesian, Welsh, Catalan, etc. Data on the use and learning of the official languages of the EU is in fact collected by other EU bodies with such predictable names as Eurostat and Eurobarometer.

More fundamentally the weakness of Crystal’s description is that practicalities are referred to rather than the more important issues of linguistic equality or language rights. And, predictably, it just so happens that Crystal cites English as the solution to the practical problems. Crystal mentions the way ‘relay’ interpretation operates (described in Dollerup 1996), but he is evidently not familiar with the scholarly literature in which other policy options have been considered (see Ammon 1996; Schlossmacher 1996; Quell 1997). The existing studies relate to which languages are used most frequently at meetings, which are used as the initial drafting language of documents, what principles guide EU language policy, what Members of the European Parliament and civil servants working for the EU feel would be an appropriate solution to some of the practical problems of administering a cumbersome interpretation and translation system (a possible reduction of the number of oral working languages, polyglot competence), and more utopian solutions such as using Esperanto as a relay language.

How is it that English happens to be ‘in the right place at the right time’?

Crystal interprets his narrative as showing that English was ‘in the right place at the right time’, rather than as an expression of structural and material power and particular interests. This trivializes the issue and is in fact in conflict with the analytical underpinning he begins the book with, where he admits that what is decisive for the expansion of a language is power of various kinds. I can cite a couple more examples of how his data lead him to endorse the expansion of English rather than the cause of global multilingualism.

- There is a tendency to draw on anecdotes (the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth said . . . ) rather than the relevant scholarship.
- No geolinguistic data is provided on the maps that occupy a relatively large amount of space.
- Coca-colonization is exoticized through quoting an Italian form of the word (p. 86), as though it does not exist in English. The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1993 edition) glosses it as the spread of American culture as represented by Coca-Cola, and dates it as mid-twentieth century. The term Macdonaldization is now more common in scholarly circles (e.g. Hamelink 1994).
- While it is correct that the use of English in higher education is expanding
in western Europe, it is false to suggest that it is becoming the ‘normal medium of education’ in countries such as the Netherlands (p. 102), or for that matter any other EU country. It is also a fallacy to assume that it is preferable to teach advanced courses in the natural sciences in English if the textbooks in use happen to be American. This is a recipe for diglossia and accelerating the marginalization of languages that have hitherto been used in all domains (see Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas forthcoming).

- The loss of the world’s linguistic resources is trivialized as being a matter of ‘anxieties’ about a single world language, instead of issues of linguisicide being explored along with the links between bio-diversity and linguistic diversity (see, e.g., UNESCO’s World Commission on Culture and Development 1995; Maffi et al.: in press).

My fundamental fear is that this book could easily be misused by monolingual English-speakers, and is unlikely to promote the cause of global linguistic diversity. Nothing that I have written means that I am blind to the fact that English can open many doors (its alchemy, in Braj Kachru’s memorable phrase) but we do know how and why it does so, and what the implications are for other languages, to a far greater extent than Crystal demonstrates.

Crystal’s celebration of the growth of English fits squarely into what the Japanese scholar, Yukio Tsuda, terms the Diffusion of English Paradigm, an uncritical endorsement of capitalism, its science and technology, a modernization ideology, monolingualism as a norm, ideological globalization and internationalization, transnationalization, the Americanization and homogenization of world culture, linguistic, cultural and media imperialism (Tsuda 1994). Tsuda’s alternative is an Ecology of Language Paradigm, the key features of which are a human rights perspective, equality in communication, multilingualism, the maintenance of languages and cultures, the protection of national sovereignties, and the promotion of foreign language education (for elaboration see Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1996).

There are still significant limitations to work in this area (see, for instance, Manfred Görlach’s insightful review of Fishman, Conrad, and Rubal-Lopez’s book, 1997), but the flow of books is persistent and gathering force. One that I can warmly recommend, exploring many of the same themes as Crystal, is David Graddol’s *The Future of English?* (1997), commissioned by the British Council. It is a very astute, sober and scientifically informed book on global English and what factors will influence its fate. My analysis of Crystal’s book has tried to concentrate on its scholarly shortcomings rather than any assumed differences between his ideology and mine. He and I may well agree that what is needed in the field of global English is to clarify the nature of scholarship that can support those struggling for the maintenance of our fragile global language ecology.

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NOTE

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