

David Crystal, language geek

Linguistic memoirs – with a whiff of anorak

Henry Hitchings

“Linguists are made, not born”, says David Crystal, and *Just A Phrase I’m Going Through* narrates his forging as both “language geek” and “linguistics person”. We begin in Anglesey, where Crystal was brought up, and follow him through his teens on Merseyside to his life in academia and embrace of such non-professorial roles as broadcaster, entrepreneur and, more unexpectedly, recoverer of the reputation of the poet John Bradburne. The subtitle “My life in language” makes the emphasis clear; deaths and marriages are dealt with briskly – births less so – and cede ground to the practicalities of departmental policy and British Council visits.

Fortunately, this dutifully autobiographical material is leavened by a mixture of humanity and genial self-enquiry. Crystal considers the influence on his career of his mixed Welsh, Irish, Jewish and Liverpoolian aspects, and to sum these up he borrows George Steiner’s term “extraterritorial”. The word seems better suited to Nabokov or Conrad; it would be more apt to think of Crystal as chameleon-like. Indeed, a recurrent theme is the different guises a linguist must adopt: proficient at slipping into them, Crystal recalls being a lexicographer and interviewer, as well as – more improbably – a dancer and, after a fashion at least, spymaster.

Sociability is an important part of his story. For instance, his early experiences of fieldwork led him to believe that “the research methodology was to pour pints of ale down the throats of anybody over seventy, and get them to talk about the names for the four-acre field [and] the local wood”. The author’s generous, slightly puckish manner is audible in the anecdotes that appear throughout this volume. While working on the Survey of English Usage under Randolph Quirk, he took a telephone call from someone who claimed to work at a smart London shoe shop. The caller wished to order some adjectives for a new batch of marketing material. Assuming he was on the receiving end of an academic wind-up, Crystal proposed selling him three dozen adjectives at threepence a go, along with two dozen each of nouns, verbs and adverbs – the verbs at a stiff ninepence apiece. Two days later, the order was confirmed by post. After a selection had with some sheepishness been put together and dispatched, a cheque for £2 followed.

The story captures the flavour of the book: it is lightly humorous, unapologetically fixated with the curiosities of language and people’s attitudes to them, and punctilious about particulars. Details are Crystal’s security. So we learn that he typed his first book on an Olivetti 22, while the initial draft of another comprised eighty-four pages of lined foolscap paper, and he tells us not only the name of the hotel he stayed in while visiting Rio de Janeiro, but also the name of the club where he drank his first caipirinha. He finds everything interesting, with the consequence that he sometimes overdoes the circumstantial snippets.

There is also, as befits a scholar whose expertise embraces database management and document classification, an enthusiasm for the finer points of such matters as data modelling and “morphology practicals”. Some of this is humdrum in the telling. A not unrepresentative sentence reads: “In 1970, following the fruitful collaboration with the Audiology Unit, the Reading Hospital/University Liaison Committee had set up a working party to investigate the possibility of a Child Communication Study Centre”. Crystal is the sort of person who can say of his grandchildren that “they allow language observation without parental responsibility”, and who, when an academic acquaintance has a baby, sends a note offering “Congratulations on the birth of fresh data”. Aware that this isn’t exactly normal, he expects such idiosyncrasies to raise a smile. Often they do. But occasionally there is a whiff of anorak.

When it comes to staking out his legacy, the author is predictably modest. He mentions “Crystal’s Law”, which sounds as though it should be a distillation of his many discernments, yet is actually this: “when you randomly open a new book or journal, you will immediately see an uncorrected typo”. Not exactly a maxim to grace a portico. But it is borne out here: casually opening Crystal’s own book, I come across the question “Was Beethoven handicapped by deadness?”.

Crystal’s most arresting theme is one that emerges only slowly: nostalgia for an age when linguistics appeared new and – his word – “sexy”. Today the subject’s importance and interest are no guarantee of a significant audience for its findings. Sexiness isn’t just garnish; it’s where the money is, and Crystal poignantly remarks, “I have a filing cabinet full of the corpses of dead television proposals”. He still hopes to see “a television blockbuster on language, in all its glory”. But he isn’t holding his breath. And, while his enthusiasm for his subject frequently proves delicious, the appreciation he offers of it here is tinged with sadness.

David Crystal

JUST A PHRASE I'M GOING THROUGH

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Henry Hitchings's books include Dr. Johnson's Dictionary: The extraordinary story of the book that defined the world, 2006, How To Really Talk About Books You Haven't Read, 2008, and The Secret Life of Words: How English became English, which appeared in paperback earlier this year.