

## David Crystal's 'The Future of Englishes'

It was a packed theatre that greeted me when I arrived in Rotterdam on September 18 to hear David Crystal speak. I was just lucky enough to squeeze into one of the last available seats when the man himself took the stage and began by thanking the organiser for spelling 'Englishes' correctly.

It took a second or two for this to sink in, but yes, I had heard it correctly; Mr Crystal had pluralised 'English'.

Of course, logically speaking, it isn't very strange. Most of the English speaking world are now aware that there isn't only one kind of English in existence, no matter how much the purists wish it were so. We have British English, American English, South-African English, Australian English and New Zealand English, to name but a few. These languages have their own vocabularies, sometimes even their own syntax, and can even be difficult to understand to speakers of other flavours of English.

This was indeed one of the most important points that Mr Crystal wanted to make; that cultural awareness is always necessary for comprehension.

Then came the subject of English as a global language. This is something that most of us take for granted these days, but just how true is this statement? Well, Mr Crystal had a few statistics for us, "Although," he warned, "you should never believe anyone who says they want to tell you how many people speak a language... so let me tell you how many people speak English."

A rough estimate of mother tongue English speakers is 400 million; speakers of English as a second language account for anywhere between 200 to 800 million and the number of speakers of English as a foreign language is impossible to even guess at.

According to the British Council, however, there are roughly one billion people learning to speak English at any one time, so if you add that to the guesstimated number of mother tongue speakers we get a rough estimate of 1.5 billion.

That's only a quarter of the world's population! So why is English the global language?

"Power," says Mr Crystal. The political, scientific, economic and cultural power of the western world has determined the global language.

And what of the future? Quite simply, nobody knows. Mr Crystal believes that English will spread and develop and new varieties may be born but how that will happen and how the different Englishes will evolve is something only time will reveal. The English language is, even now, changing before our very eyes. Each year new words are added and others find themselves being nudged ever closer to the door marked 'obsolete'. Indeed, one only has to look at how the English language has evolved over the last millennium to see how rapidly and dramatically it can change.

Whatever the future holds, we can at least rest assured that the English language still has quite an interesting life ahead of it.

*By Jodie Mann*

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