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***Angst over the apostrophe and
hysteria over hyphens:
the English language has become a combat zone***

**The Fight for English
How language pundits ate, shot, and left**

David Crystal

Why are people so passionate about language? How has the fighting over English usage come about?

A world authority on language, David Crystal brings together his own distinctive style and unique expertise to provide the first thoroughgoing assessment of the debate over rights and wrongs in English usage.

With a lively and accessible approach, Crystal charts the clashes from Anglo-Saxon times via the language of Shakespeare and Samuel Johnson to our own time of texting and the greengrocer's apostrophe. He combines a chronological survey of key influences in the area of usage with discussion of particular themes such as punctuation, spelling, and pronunciation. And he looks ahead to the future in the context of recent education policy shifts.

While others have fought to impose their views on spelling and grammar, David Crystal – as ever scholarly yet entertaining – explains why we should say no to zero tolerance.

About the author

David Crystal is the foremost writer and lecturer on the English language, with over 100 books to his name. He is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, and in 1995 was awarded the OBE for services to the English language.

His many books include *Words, Words, Words* (OUP 2006), *The Stories of English* (2004), and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (second edition 2003)

'David Crystal is a national treasure' – John Humphrys

'David Crystal speaks for the everyman in all of us' -Roger McGough

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David Crystal on...

...the history of English usage

Who was the first person ever to worry about English usage? Maybe it was a topic which preoccupied Beowulf and his friends in the Germanic beer-halls, but all the evidence suggests that the talk there was less about how to deal with grammar than how to deal with Grendel. The only clauses Beowulf had to deal with were at the end of that half-human monster's fingers.

In the monasteries, though, things were rather different. The Beowulf story is preserved in a manuscript which dates from around the year 1000. And not long after, we find the first recorded example of a conversation in English, in the *Colloquium* – or 'Colloquy' – of Abbot Ælfric (pronounced al-fritch) of Eynsham. Buried within this document is the first brief mention in the English language of a concern to 'get things right'. (page 1)

...language change

You cannot stop language change. You may not like it; you may regret the arrival of new forms and the passing of old ones; but there is not the slightest thing you can do about it. Language change is as natural as breathing. It is one of the linguistic facts of life.

There is not the slightest thing we can do about it? Actually, there is one thing. We can learn to understand it, come to terms with it, and thus manage it. If all the energy that has been fruitlessly spent over the past 300 years complaining about language change had been devoted to improving our grasp of the nature of language, and developing fresh methods of language teaching and learning, we would all be a lot better off. (page 89)

...punctuation

Let me begin by making a very important point it is perfectly possible to write a whole paragraph without any punctuation at all and everything still makes sense it may be a bit difficult to read in places because we are not used to seeing english written in this way also the technique makes us read in a rush but there is no real problem only every now and again would the lack of a punctuation mark make us stop and wonder what the writer meant.

Zero tolerance does not allow for flexibility. It is prescriptivism taken to extremes. It suggests that the language is in a state where all the rules are established with 100 per cent certainty. The suggestion is false. We do not know what all the rules of punctuation are. And no rule of punctuation is followed by all the people all of the time.

Punctuation has always been a matter of trends. Commas, hyphens, semicolons, apostrophes - all have been subject to changes in fashion. In the seventeenth century the trend was to capitalize all nouns; in the eighteenth century, the trend was to leave all the capitals out...

Many children have been confused by *it's* and *its*... ...look at it from the child's point of view. Teacher has told me that there is a definite correlation between the meaning of possession and the apostrophe. *Its food* has the meaning of possession. Therefore I will insert an apostrophe and I will get praise. *It's food*. And what does the poor child get instead? Blistering hellfire. (pages 138, 133, 135)

...education

And [the National Curriculum of English] has managed to pull together many of the trends towards a comprehensive and realistic language awareness that I have been discussing throughout this book. It has totally rejected the prescriptive mentality. Standard English continues to be seen as a major educational goal, but it is viewed in an inclusive way, with all varieties – spoken, written, formal and informal, professional and everyday – taken into account. Literacy remains the centre of attention, especially at primary school level. And grammar is put in its place, alongside vocabulary, pronunciation, orthography, and the structure of discourse...

None of this, though, is at the expense of non-standard English. Regional and ethnic accents and dialects, national and international, in general use and in literature, are studied with equal respect, and students explore their function as expressions of regional and social identity. The relationship between standard and non-standard usage is carefully investigated. It is not – and never has been – a matter of ‘anything goes’. This is the kind of silly remark that prescriptively minded people make when they can think of nothing better to say. On the contrary: the whole point is to get across to students the notion that ‘anything’ *doesn't* ‘go’. The principle of appropriateness rules.

As an educational policy, the new Curriculum is in my view second to none, and the direction of thinking has been influential in other English-speaking countries. But is it working? (page 206)