

David Crystal. *Who Cares About English Usage?* 124 pp. R7,50.

David Crystal is well known both for his many publications on the subject of Linguistics and his popular BBC radio programme *Speak Out*, in which he deals with problems of usage raised by his students and radio audiences.

In this book he has selected a number of 'linguistic problem cases' and dealt with them in a light-hearted and witty manner. The book is illustrated by a number of amusing cartoons.

In the introduction David Crystal divides the users of the English language into three groups: those who do not care about the language they use, those who care sometimes and those who feel very strongly about the right use of English at all times. He hopes to arouse the interest of all three groups although for the highly literate reader the book is diverting rather than informative.

One of the problems dealt with is the lavish use of 'filler' phrases such as 'you know', 'as a matter of fact', 'what's more', 'sort of' expressions which the author regards as a bar to good communication when heard too often. He admits, however, that the use of some of these phrases may express a special nuance of meaning. As an example, he cites the sentence, 'I just saw Myrtle Jones in the street with - you know' (p.15).

The author deals at length with the subject of the split infinitive. On the whole, he regards its use as permissible. He points out that it occurs in the work of Wycliffe, a fourteenth century writer, and it has been used by prominent English writers in every century since, even in the work of Lord Macaulay. He attributes the strong aversion felt by some modern English speakers to its use, to the predominance of Latin in the schools in the nineteenth century.

Other problems discussed are the use of 'only' the complexity of plurals in English and the ever controversial 'different from' or 'to'. David Crystal accepts both and even 'than' in some sentences.

The problems of good pronunciation are not ignored. Attention is drawn to the intrusive -r. This does not occur in words which are spelt with an r but in phrases like 'law-r and order', 'armada-r of ships', 'withdraw-r-al of troops'. There are many sins of omission also; omitting the 'g' in strength or the 'g' at the end of a word ending in 'ing'.

One of the most amusing chapters describes the different ways in which people ask to go to the lavatory or where it is. The words used depend on who is speaking to whom, how well they know each other, whether either of them is foreign and the circumstances at the time.

For those who prefer to adhere to strict rules of grammar the views expressed by David Crystal in this book will seem too liberal. He teaches the lesson of tolerance and urges people 'to find out more about the history and variety of English'. To the question 'Is English declining today' he answers with a resounding 'No!', attributing the concern that many English speakers feel about their language to this century's violent explosion in means of communication so that we are exposed daily to many different varieties of English. In fact Dr Crystal is willing to accept almost any speech form or phraseology which is used frequently by the average English speaker. Thus he shows his allegiance to that school of thought which believes that a language really 'lives' and develops as it is spoken.

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