DAVID CRYSTAL

JUST A PHRASE I'M GOING THROUGH

MY LIFE IN LANGUAGE

Just a Phrase I'm Going Through

'David Crystal loves and appreciates every word he speaks, and every word written in this book helps us to understand someone who is not just a great linguist, but a true champion and lover of language.'

Benjamin Zephaniah

'David Crystal's writings on linguistics never fail to be readable and full of fascination for the general reader. I enjoyed this very much: it is a clear and modest account of a good and useful life.'

Philip Pullman

Kidnapping, attempted assassination, espionage . . . not the answers you'd expect to the question 'what happens when you become a linguist?'

But now, reflecting on a long and hugely successful career at the forefront of the field of English language and linguistics, David Crystal answers this question and offers us a special look behind the scenes at the adventures, rewards, challenges and pitfalls of his life in language.

Both an autobiography and a highly accessible introduction to the field of linguistics, *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through* illuminates and entertains us with its many insights into the ever-fascinating subject of language.

David Crystal is synonymous with language, both as a great populariser and linguistic pioneer, and his contribution to the field is unparalleled. This is a book not just for students and teachers but for all lovers of language.

David Crystal received an OBE for services to the English language in 1995, and was made a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA) in 2000. He is Patron of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) and the Association for Language Learning (ALL). Having published over 100 books, covering a diversity of language topics, his most recent publications include *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8* (2008) and *Think on my Words: Exploring Shakespeare's Language* (2008). He has been a freelance writer, lecturer and broadcaster since 1984 and continues his work with language from his home in Holyhead, North Wales.

‘David Crystal, the UK’s Linguist-at-Large, starts his autobiography *Just a Phrase I’m Going Through* right off in Chapter 1 by summing up what it means to be a linguist. He does such a good job that every linguist in the world will go yessing through this chapter, and copy it on the sly to pass out to their students who ask what linguistics is really all about.’

John Lawler, *University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA*

‘Crystal’s story-telling and wit skills continuously reveal the magic of encountering and investigating the ever-new kaleidoscope of language.’

Paola Vettorel, *University of Verona, Italy*

‘Academic researcher, editor, broadcaster, lecturer, consultant, and now language autobiographer, David Crystal is simply a unique phenomenon who is constantly breaking new ground. The book is a delight to read. It’s beautifully written, witty, entertaining and profoundly reflective on matters of language and life. If anyone needs persuading how and why language is central to our lives and can be both serious and fun, it is here.’

Ronald Carter, *University of Nottingham, UK*

‘David Crystal has a magic narrative touch. In this captivating professional autobiography he intertwines linguistic insights with his own personal and professional story, demonstrating what he has always told us so eloquently: that neither life nor language can be understood without the other.’

Guy Cook, *The Open University, UK*

‘An engaging, can’t-put-it-down hybrid of autobiography, suspense, humour, scientific writing, narrative, and even a bit of trivia. As an introductory linguistics text or leisure reading selection, it addresses the kinds of language-based questions that emerge literally everywhere and that pique the curiosity of linguists and non-linguists alike – transmitted to us through the wonderful wit, style, and personal perspective of David Crystal.’

Susan Strauss, *Pennsylvania State University, USA*

Just a Phrase I'm Going Through

My Life in Language

David Crystal

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Prologue

The invitation seemed harmless enough, and not so different from dozens which had arrived before it. It was early 1981. I received a phone call from Sister Marie de Montfort, the head of the speech therapy course at Trinity College, Dublin. Would I be willing to come over and give a public lecture on the subject of language handicap? They were in the early stages of developing their new degree course, so they were, and they'd been thinking it might be good to put on some talks of general interest, indeed, and as I'd written a few books about the subject, well, sure, it might bring in some of the public, as well as the students, which wouldn't be bad . . . and apart from anything else, it was ages since we'd last met, and wouldn't it be a chance to see how the new course was getting on, well now, wouldn't it? Would I think about it, at least?

A visit to Dublin is always a treat. I am half Irish myself. And it was true that I hadn't seen Sister Marie for several years. She'd been part of a postgraduate group I'd helped to teach just after I joined the linguistics department at Reading University. The liveliest nun I'd ever had the good fortune to meet. Twinkling eyes, great presence, a lovely sense of humour. I'd got to know her quite well, through shared professional and religious interests, and she was the best of company. I'd once carried out some external examining for her department, and rediscovered Dublin in the process. Then, as is often the way, there'd been a lull, and several years had passed. It would be a real pleasure to see her – and Trinity – again. I thought about it, seeing as she'd asked, for two seconds, and fixed the date and place on the spot.

Time passed. Hilary (my wife) and I made travel plans. More time passed. We were sent the details of the venue. Then, on 25 March, just a week before, we opened the daily newspaper. 'Lecturer shot at Dublin university,' said the headline. At Trinity College. Giving a public lecture. In the arts building. In a lecture room. In the same lecture room that I was scheduled to talk in exactly one week later.

Could it have been the IRA? The Northern Ireland troubles had been building up, since the early 1970s, and southern Ireland was feeling some of the effects. The lecturer who had been attacked was a businessman, and not known for his political views. He hadn't been killed, but was seriously wounded in the legs. Nobody knew if this was a one-off incident, or the start of a new campaign, or something completely unrelated. Hilary and I looked at each other. Of course it was a new campaign. And wouldn't they be just looking out for another easy target? A fresh, pink lecturer from a British university? My talk had been given plenty of advance publicity. They knew I was coming. The marksman was probably already chosen. We could see the headlines. We could hear the screams. We——

pulled ourselves together, and decided to get some advice. When I got to work the next day I rang up the Vice-Chancellor. The VC's secretary said he wasn't in yet, but she could give him a message. I explained the problem. She didn't seem at all concerned. A routine lecturing risk, she probably thought, remembering the student riots of '68. I waited a couple of hours, then tried again. There must have been something in my voice – the total lack of quiver, perhaps – which impressed her. She put me straight through.

I described the situation, and – to be fair – the VC was impressed. He had read the newspaper report, and, no, he hadn't realized I was going there next week. He didn't think there was any likelihood of the same thing happening again, but still, academic joke, he didn't want to lose a lecturer (this was a few years before the era of university cuts, you appreciate, when such remarks would no longer be funny), so he would phone his opposite number in Dublin. Half an hour later, he called me back. His tone was too jocular to be totally convincing. I could sense a 'but' in the offing. He had discussed the matter with the people at Trinity, and they felt there was no reason whatsoever for the visit not to take place. (Too many negatives in that sentence, I thought, but they did at least seem to be cancelling each other out.) They were very much looking forward to it. All should be well. No, all *would* be well. But – ah, there it was – to be on the safe side, they would make some special security arrangements. The Irish Special Branch would be informed.

'You're not going to Dublin, are you?' asked my mother. 'Not after that

shooting?' And that was the way the week went. The news travelled at speed around the university. Everyone seemed to be concerned. Departmental colleagues asked me whether I was sure about this. Lecturers I hardly knew stopped me in corridors and commiserated – almost as if I'd been shot already. A student asked if I'd marked his essay yet. We appreciated the concern, but it didn't do much for our frame of mind. Fortunately the children weren't old enough to be aware of current affairs, so we had no problems there.

We spent the week rationalizing. We were committed. We couldn't back out now. It wouldn't be professional. A large audience was expected. The IRA wouldn't be so stupid. They'd know there would be extra security. Besides, my mother's family came from County Wexford. *And* I was born in Lisburn, in the north. *And* I was Catholic. *And* we were going to be looked after by a nun.

That clinched it.

We flew out from Heathrow, and arrived at Trinity in time for lunch. Wonderful place, Trinity. An academic oasis in the very centre of Dublin. The glorious Book of Kells nearby, to keep you humble. Guinness, to restore your pride. Slightly fortified, we walked over to the lecture hall with Sister Marie. It was a fine, sunny afternoon. As we approached the foyer of the lecture block, our pace slowed. We looked around for the extra security. There was the normal bustle of students and staff milling around, searching for venues, waiting for things to happen. Nothing special was happening. It seemed to be a perfectly normal day.

There was a porter on duty at the entrance. Sister Marie went up to him, looked about her, stood sideways on to him, and through the corner of her mouth asked him surreptitiously whether he knew anything about the 'special arrangements' for the 'visiting lecturer'. Her head jerked briefly in my direction. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying her new role as undercover agent. The porter looked at me, then back at Sister. He obviously had no idea what was going on. Then there was one of those marvellous Irish conversations, as Sister seized the initiative.

'There's supposed to be a Special Branch man here. Have you seen anything of him?'

'I have not, Sister. But would he be in uniform, now?'

'Ah sure, not at all, he'd be in plain clothes.'

'Plain clothes, is it? So what would they be like, Sister, would ye say?'

'Sure, they'd be just plain. Like what anybody might be wearing. It's to show he's in the Special Branch, don't you see.'

'Well, I'll keep me eyes open, Sister, and if I sees anyone in plain clothes uniform, I'll tell ye straight.'

We moved on towards the lecture room. You couldn't miss which one it was, because just outside was a small book exhibition, arranged by a publisher who specialized in books on speech pathology, and who'd handled some of my work. The rep was standing at the side, handing out publicity material. We went up, introduced ourselves, and chatted for a moment. He was very sorry that he wouldn't be able to hear the lecture, he said, as he had to stay with the books, in case anyone pinched them. But if things were quiet, he'd try and pop in, every now and then, that's if I didn't mind. Not at all, I said, and followed Sister Marie in.

The room had one of those close-fitting, fire-proof double doors – the sort where one panel rests heavily over the edge of the other, so that if you push the wrong one, nothing happens for a moment, until you push harder. Then it springs open – and closes behind you with a crash. I trapped my thumb in it. A bad sign.

I looked around the room. It was almost full, about a hundred or so, all charming, young, female, smiling speech-therapy students, notebooks at the ready. Then, a double-take. Not all. At the back, opposite the door, a burly figure, balding, male, with no notebook, and very definitely not smiling, or charming. 'Ah,' said Sister Marie happily, when she saw him, 'That'll be the Special Branch.' Good to see him blending into the background, I thought, in his plain clothes. And I got the feeling that everyone *was* glad to see him there, actually, the events of the previous week being an unmentioned commentary throughout the day.

It was time to start. I began the lecture, talking about the relevance of linguistics to speech therapy, and all went well – until about twenty minutes in, when the publisher's rep, bored with nothing to do, and taking advantage of the fact that nobody was around outside except the porter, decided it was safe after all to come in and listen for a bit. He pushed at the door, but misjudged it, and went for the wrong side. When he let it go, there was an explosive bang. Nobody was expecting it. The suppressed anxiety in everyone's mind rushed to the surface. Heads whipped round expecting the worst. Some of the students ducked under their desks. One let out a scream. The Special Branch man went for his gun. I promptly disappeared down behind the lectern.

When I cautiously peered over the top, the poor publisher's rep stood framed in the doorway, highly embarrassed at all the commotion, and obviously trying to work out why somebody in the audience for a lecture on speech therapy should be pointing a gun at him. He spluttered an apology. Everyone eventually regained their composure, laughing a bit self-consciously, and I carried on. But of course, a few minutes later, the rep, wanting to check that all his books were still there outside, decided to

leave. He was going to be so quiet, he told me afterwards, nobody would even know he was moving. Only he forgot the door. There was another loud bang. Down went the audience. Twitch went the policeman. Scream went the students. I saw the back of the lectern again.

And I remember thinking, as I went down for the second time: There must be easier ways of earning a living! Then, asking whoever might have been listening in to my thoughts: 'What on earth is going on? How have I ended up here?'

Chapter 1

Being a linguist

How, indeed? How did I get to be a linguist, a linguistics person, a linguistician, a language geek? How does anybody? And what does 'being a linguist' mean, anyway? There's a problem here. The biographical bit will have to wait a chapter. Bear with me, while I go on about my subject for a bit.

It's not as if it's the most obvious label for a way of earning a living, after all. Indeed, it's a succulent irony that the very name of the profession which has come to be known as 'the science of language' is itself ambiguous.

> 'What do you do?'
> 'I'm a linguist.'
> 'Ah. And how many languages do you speak?'
> 'Do you mean really fluently?'
> 'Of course.'
> 'Just one.'
> 'But you said you were a linguist!'

So I am, I am, but not in that sense. I would love to be fluent in many languages. As it happens, I *can* 'get by' in a number, but there's a world of difference between 'getting by' and 'being fluent'. Ordering a gin and tonic, or asking the way, is one thing. Carrying on a proper conversation about the local political scene is very much another. It's the vocabulary that's the killer. Getting a grasp of the basic grammar of a language, and learning to pronounce the sounds accurately, need not take too long. But

vocabulary is the Everest of language. Memorizing the tens of thousands of words you need in order to hold your own in long conversations on variegated topics takes time, lots of it, and – unless you happen to have been brought up bilingual – a level of motivation and opportunity which is usually missing in Britain for all but a very lucky or very gifted few. How the multi-tongued record-holders of the past managed it is beyond me. Take the great Harold Williams, who died in 1928. He was a journalist – the foreign editor of *The Times* – said to have spoken fifty-eight languages fluently. He was apparently able to talk to all the delegates attending the League of Nations in their own language. Nobody else came anywhere near him. Fifty-eight languages! I wonder he ever managed to do anything else.

Being a linguist, in my sense of the word, evidently doesn't mean that you've managed to learn lots of foreign languages. But it does mean that you're interested in them. All 6,000 or so of them. All languages that have ever been or ever could be. No, 'interested' is too mild. When you dip your toe into linguistics, you end up being enthralled, captivated, obsessed by languages. Because they are all around you (increasingly so, in an escalatingly multicultural world), their sounds, words, and sentences keep thrusting themselves on to your attention. You are surrounded by an ever-playing linguistic orchestra. You cannot avoid listening, analysing, reflecting, comparing, contrasting, making notes. You delight in the diversity of the very sound of language. The pleasure must compare with that of a botanist in a garden full of the brightest flowers. Or of a bibliophile surrounded by antiquarian bookshops in a heaven like Hay-on-Wye. Except that you don't have to travel so far to enjoy the diversity of language. You just have to walk down the street, or go into a shop. You don't even have to leave home. On television every day there are more accents and dialects than Horatio would ever have dreamed of in his philosophy, and they are all calling out, 'I am interesting. Study me.'

And so you do. If you're a linguist. That's what linguists, in my sense, do. They revel in the variety of local accents and dialects. They are fascinated by the phenomenon of daily language change. They bathe happily in a warm sea of foreign tongues, and the more esoteric the better. They explore the upper orifices of the body to work out their phonetic capabilities. They marvel, along with everyone else, at the self-assuredness of the language-learning child, then try to understand how on earth such ability emerges so quickly, and what has gone wrong when it doesn't. They puzzle over how language must be represented in the brain. They try to work out what all languages have in common, to capture the essential identity within the very notion of 'language'. They speculate about the linguistic past, along with historians and archaeologists, and

ruminate – especially after a glass or two – over how languages must have originated. After a third glass, they can develop opinions about what might be going on in the way non-human animals communicate, or even extraterrestrials. They do not lack experience in such matters. Linguists were brought in to advise on the alien speech-forms in *Star Wars*. And arising out of *Star Trek*, there is a grammar and dictionary of Klingon.

There are certain quotations which all linguists use to show that they are literate human beings – most of them from Lewis Carroll. An instance comes to mind now. In *Through the Looking Glass* (Chapter 6), Alice meets one of the most hard-boiled linguists ever, who points out that there are 364 days of the year when people might get un-birthday presents.

> 'Certainly,' said Alice.
>
> 'And only *one* for birthday presents you know. There's glory for you!'
>
> 'I don't know what you mean by "glory",' Alice said.
>
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't – till I tell you. It means "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!" '
>
> 'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument",' Alice objected.
>
> 'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make a word mean so many different things.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'

Master of Words. It sounds like a degree. And Humpty certainly claims to have his MW. As he goes on to say:

> 'They've a temper, some of them – particularly verbs: they're the proudest – adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs – however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them!'

Managing the whole lot of them. That's linguistics for you. And of course, not forgetting to tell the rest of the world what you discover when you become a word-manager. Because the things you find out are not just fascinating. They are also immensely useful to others.

But more of that later. What became plain to me, very early on in my close encounter with linguistics, is that being a wordmaster alters your behaviour, in the way you deal with words, sounds, and languages. To begin with, you discover you're not scared of them. And you find yourself

going out of your way to try things out – enquiring about the time, when you don't really want to know, just to see if your pronunciation is intelligible, or if a sentence construction works. It's an indescribable thrill when you try out something in a new language for the first time, with foreigners who don't know you from Adam (or Eve), and realize that your freshly cooked mix of novel sounds does actually work as a tool of communication! There's also a different kind of thrill, when your interest takes you over and you end up the focus of attention. I went to a phonetics talk once, in which the speaker was discussing whether or not it's possible to make a sound by trilling the epiglottis (that's the flap which covers the windpipe when you're swallowing). Reflecting on the point, I tried it out repeatedly on a London underground station platform. I stopped when it dawned on me that everybody was avoiding eye contact, and nobody was standing near me any more.

You also find yourself asking people questions about the way *they* use language – such as what their name means, or why their house is so called, or where their accent comes from. You don't plan it. The questions just sort of pop out. A woman telephoned me once about a new deal for car insurance, and asked to speak to my wife, who wasn't in. I took the message, and asked who it was from. She said her name was Aniela such-and-such. It came across as 'ann – ye – la'. 'You'll have to spell that,' I said, which she readily did. I'd never heard the name before. I know I should have just said thankyou, and put the phone down. But linguists aren't made that way. 'That's an interesting name,' I remarked, adding – in case she thought it was a new kind of come-on – 'I study names.' Twenty minutes later, we ended the conversation, the car still uninsured, but both of us more knowledgeable.

Why twenty minutes? Five minutes to establish that she didn't know what Aniela meant, though she thought it was from her grandmother's side of the family, and *she* came from Poland, and she hoped one day to visit there, and so on and so on. Another five thumbing through various books on the origin of first names, with her holding on, until, yes, there it is, eventually finding it in Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges' excellent *Dictionary of First Names*. Of Polish origin, indeed – the Polish form of Angela, 'occasionally used in the English-speaking world'. I felt honoured: I had now met one of the occasions. But Aniela wanted to know more. What did *Angela* mean? Did it have anything to do with angels? That one I knew. *Angel* goes back to Greek *angelos*, which meant a messenger, I told her. She was delighted. She'd been a messenger in her first job, you see, and she thought this was highly significant. Then she wanted to know what her best friend's name meant, and her boss had an interesting name

too . . . As I say, twenty minutes before she remembered there were other things in life than etymology, and that she'd better get on with them. She went back to insurance sales. I went back to – well, etymology, as it happens.

It's often like that. Conversations tend to grow unchecked, when the topic turns to language. I think it's because everyone has an interest in it. Everyone has a name, an accent, a favourite word, a pet linguistic hate. Everyone has a linguistic history, and thus a story to tell. When it comes to language, everyone's equal. Everyone's an expert. And, to be sure, everyone *is*, having spent much of the first five years of life learning how to talk, and (for those lucky enough to get to school) much of the next five learning how to read. You don't have to have special qualifications or go in for special training in order to sound off about your language or to play a word-game show, like those where you have to fill the blank in a sentence. You don't even have to phone a friend. You just have to use your own linguistic intuition. You want to hate a word? Invent a new one? Fill a blank? Just do it. Go on. 'Spick and ——'? 'They were green with ——'? You already know the answers (if you speak English). The associations are there, deep within your brain. You just need to bring them to the surface, and (if you happen to be on TV at the time) without panicking.

Most people enjoy my interest, when they're on the receiving end of language questions. And I enjoy theirs. A few tell me to mind my own business (which of course, if I take the observation literally, is what I *am* doing anyway). But most end up asking questions in return, and are pleased to learn that there are books or websites which can answer many of them. I sometimes think I should be asking for commission for acting as an unofficial publisher's rep. Mind you, conversations can be dangerous things, if you're a linguist. It's a danger which can affect anyone, but linguists are especially prone. Accommodation is lying in wait to get them.

Now, I appreciate that what I've just said looks like one of those weird sentences linguists sometimes dream up to make a Linguistic Point. (I'll be talking about another one later – Chomsky's 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'.) But it does make sense. By 'accommodation' I do not mean the place where you live. This is accommodation in the sense of 'adaptation' – a notion that was discovered by sociolinguists, a species of colourful linguist that formerly flourished well only in the shade, but is now regularly encountered in new cultivars in sunnier and more prominent positions. I think it was one of the great linguistic discoveries of the twentieth century.

Sociolinguists study what happens to language when it is put to use in society. And one of the things they noticed was that, when people talk to

each other, something happens to the language they use. Imagine: I meet you, and we start talking. If we hit it off, and we start to enjoy one another's company, then one of the ways in which we unconsciously display this rapport is that our accents start to move towards each other. I begin to sound a bit like you, and you a bit like me. We 'accommodate' to each other. (If we don't hit it off, of course, then the opposite applies. I try to make myself sound as *different* from you as I can, and you from me.) It's not just accents. We start to share words, too, maybe bits of grammar. We even start looking a little like each other, adopting the same sort of facial expression or body posture. But accent is always the most noticeable thing, because it's there in everything we say. Everybody accommodates, to some extent, even if they don't realize they're doing it. It must be part of our evolutionary make-up, a way of showing a group who belongs to it. Some people, though – perhaps those with a good ear for accents, perhaps those with a specially sensitive personality – do it more noticeably than others. That's when it can get dangerous, and linguists are at risk more than most.

Linguists are professional accommodators, phonetic chameleons. My wife tells me that she can always tell who I'm talking to at the other end of the phone – or, at least, which part of the world they're from – by the accent I slip into. I accommodate within a few seconds, and (unless I remember to stop myself) totally. I have long learned to lie with the consequences. That is not a typo. I mean 'lie', not 'live'. I remember meeting a Scot at an arts conference a few years ago. He had a strong Glasgow accent. We were both involved in community arts centres, and in the meeting we both seemed to be in agreement about what needed to be done, if such centres were to survive in a world where successive British governments were rating the arts as a funding priority several levels below what was being allocated for waste disposal. We start to talk. Within seconds, I can sense my vowels turning into Billy Connolly. And I know it's only a matter of time until he asks the jugular question. Sure enough, he begins to stare at me:

'Are you from Glasgow?'

I now face a dilemma. Either I lie and say 'yes', in which case he asks 'Which part?' and I have to say 'I don't know', because I don't know Glasgow well – and then he hits me. Or I say 'no', in which case he asks 'What are you taking the piss out of my accent for, then?' – and *then* he hits me. Actually, I've been lucky, and never been hit. But I often get some funny looks. I did once try to explain the concept of accommodation to a taxi-driver in Sheffield who insisted that I was from Leeds, because he was from there and he 'recognized the accent' – but it took so long and he got so interested that he missed the turning and I missed the train. So I now just

say something vague, like 'Oh it's a great place, Edinburgh / Manchester / Birmingham / Melbourne . . .', and hope that this is enough to prompt a conversation about something else, such as the traffic problems.

At other times, you find yourself becoming a catalyst for all kinds of strange linguistic behaviour. You find yourself playing with the words of a language, to see what kind of effects you can create. Some people are amused by the word-play. Others cannot bear its awfulness. But most end up intrigued, and find themselves joining in. For everybody, deep down, is interested in what makes languages tick, and what happens when people tock. 'Catalyst' reminds me of one such occasion which was so punful that it ended up as the opening example in my book *Language Play*. I didn't start it, mind. It wasn't me, Miss. But there we were, Hilary and I, and Kim and Wendy from across the road. They'd not long moved into the house, and their cat, Crumble, and ours, Splash (both now, sadly, ex-cats, RIP), had been seen approaching each other warily outside the house. One of the group (it doesn't matter who, but it wasn't me) described the event as a 'catfrontation'. The level of groan suggested that this was an excellent pun. Too good to be left to die in peace. It was time to stir the pot, to see what came out. 'Near catastrophe, if you ask me,' I said. More groans. And then the gold-dust. Within a minute, there was a 'catalogue' of disasters, I was accused (correctly) of being a 'catalyst', Splash was diagnosed with 'catarrh', remarks were made about 'catechisms', and so it went on, until everyone ran out of 'cat-' words. Later, Ed McLachlan added 'catatonic' when he did a brilliant cartoon for the book to illustrate the occasion. Some people with their heads screwed on write books based on this kind of word-play. Ever seen Peter Gammond and Peter Clayton's *101 Things*? A 'thing' in this context is a created being that looks a bit like an animated potato. 'Things ain't what they used to be' is illustrated on one page, and you see two of these mannikins, elderly and with sticks, having trouble getting around. 'These things are sent to try us' is shown on another, and you see an ugly-looker in the dock, commenting on the arrival of two bewigged beings into the court. There are ninety-nine more like that.

Linguistics, indeed, is what linguists do. But linguists can be as different from each other in their interests and personalities as the proverbial chalk is from cheese. So the subject needs a more judicious definition. 'The study of languages'? That's where it starts. But it doesn't stop there. Before too long we need to drop the *-s*. For the study of languages leads, inevitably, to the study of language. Language. Roll it round the tongue, and meditate on its meaning. A phenomenon, a behaviour, an ability, a faculty, a social fact. Something (no, 'thing' is wrong) which takes you above and beyond individual languages. Or maybe it should be below and within. It

is such an abstract notion that writers try to pin it down with metaphors. And the metaphors are endless. My wife, Hilary, and I collected dozens when compiling *Words on Words*, a book of language quotations. Language has been called an instrument, a tool, an art, a symphony, a game, a city, a social force, a force for humanization. Roland Barthes called it a skin. Anthony Burgess 'a mouthful of air'. For Ralph Waldo Emerson it was both 'fossil poetry' and the 'archives of history'. For Max Müller 'the autobiography of the human mind'. For Martin Heidegger, it was 'the house of being'.

The simplest definition of linguistics that I know is to say that it is 'the science of language'. It sounds dull, put like that, a long way from games and symphonies. But it is dull-sounding only to those who have not experienced the thrill of scientific enquiry – the drama of not knowing. Ignorance is a tension that has to be resolved. If you are scientific in temperament, it isn't a rational matter. You just *have* to know, to find out. Or, at least, you have to push knowledge to its limits, to find out what is findoutable. And that means being disciplined and thorough and systematic and humble and objective and experimental and all the other things that make a good scientist. It is a frame of mind which manifests itself in the smallest enterprises. Science is not just for the million-dollar projects. It colours every enquiry, no matter how tiny. And every enquiry requires the same devotional energy, the same readiness to expend time.

LINGUIST AS DETECTIVE

I was planning the section on personal names for *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, and needed some interesting names. I skimmed through a history book to see what I could find. 'Franklin D. Roosevelt', there was one. The 'D.' stood for 'Delano'. Unusual. 'Harry S. Truman', there was another. And the 'S.' stood for——? The book didn't say. Careless editor, I muttered. I found another reference book. 'S.' again. And after three or four more books, still just 'S.' My linguistic nose started to twitch. Something Was Up. They couldn't all be careless.

The 'S.' saga began. It was time to look for primary sources. Somebody's biography, perhaps? A few clicks of a mouse now, and the question is answered; but in 1992 it meant a trek to the local library and a trawl through a catalogue. Yes, there were several biographies of Harry S. Truman. Now it was reading time.

Nothing in the first book, nor in the second. Then, in Margaret Truman's biography of her father, bingo. I discovered that the 'S.' stood for – well, everything and nothing. She explained how

Truman's grandfathers were called Solomon Young and Shippe Truman, commenting: 'Dad owed the middle initial in his name to both grandparents. To placate their touchy elders, his parents added an S, but studiously refrained from deciding whether it stood for Solomon or Shippe.'

In my book the report of this saga takes up just fifteen lines of a sidebar – a mere fifty words. Was it worth the effort? In all, it took about two full days of searching and reading. But I am as pleased with that result as with any lengthy article that might have taken a couple of days to write, for it has altered my understanding of language, in a small way. If you had asked me before, 'Must an initial in a person's name always stand for a name, and only one name?' I would have said 'Of course', as you would have. But not now. It proved to be an interesting exception. People are always doing unexpected things with language. It's just a question of their being master, that's all.

If you're a professional linguist, you're always on the lookout for unexpected developments, and you have to be prepared to spend time following up leads. Sometimes the leads don't take you anywhere. The 'S.' hunt might have been an awful waste of time, ending up with 'Simon' or 'Stanley' or some other unsurprising appellation. I know dead ends very well. I have a drawerful of them, chronicles of wasted time, which have never appeared in any of my books. But I don't throw them away. Never throw anything away. Today's dead end can be tomorrow's fresh pointer.

I love the sciences, and I love the arts too. It is the best of lives when you can deal in both, and linguistics lets you do just that. I can find myself working in the morning on a topic to do, say, with the anatomy and physiology of the vocal cords, and in the afternoon exploring the stylistic impact of an interesting word order in James Joyce. That's what makes linguistics really interesting for me, the way it cuts across the conventional boundaries. There are so many parallels between the sciences and the arts. Being a scientist is a way of looking at the world, just as being an artist is. Artists have often made use of scientific ways of thinking, in their creating process. And one of the most interesting developments in the twentieth century was the growing awareness that so many scientific discoveries come from the use of insights which are strikingly artistic in character. Peter Medawar even went so far as to call his famous book on the philosophy of science *The Art of the Soluble*. Certainly, being a linguist has brought me into contact with worlds I never dreamed I would enter when I started my degree course in English – acoustics, anatomy, medicine, education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, geography, mathematics,

computer science, IT. All part of the professional world that linguists inhabit, as they explore the nature of language.

Language. The very word is like a bell . . . I put it on a mental pedestal and view it from different angles, to try to grasp its totality. All I see is a multiplicity of angles, models, options, possibilities . . . stories. I see it interacting with lives, and with my own life, in a profusion of ways, some predictable, some unnervingly unpredictable. I can feel how central it is to everything people do. 'House of being' is exactly right. But it is mind-numbingly difficult to hold on to this vision, or to communicate it to others in such a way that all its facets are visible. It is at once stable and changing, unified and diverse, personal and social. Once I was asked to give a lecture on linguistics to a group of Fine Arts students at Reading University. It was part of a series where specialists on different subjects would lecture, and afterwards the students would draw or paint what they heard. I have a print of one of the offerings (see plate 2.3). It is a large square of blues and yellows, divided up into sixty-four smaller squares, eight by eight, like a chessboard. When I first saw it, I thought, yes, my point about language having a regular structure has got across. But then I looked more carefully, and began to feel dizzy. The picture seemed to be full of geometrical symmetries, but when I tried to plot them, they faded into randomness. A diagonal series of distinctive squares fails to meet in the middle. Cubes approach each other and intersect, some shaped like an L, some like an X, some like no imaginable letter shape. Double perspectives are everywhere. Look at the picture in one way and you see steps; look at it another way and you see boxes. The picture has no obvious orientation: any side can be the top. Different observers see different things in it, and in showing it to others anyone can make you see what they want you to see. Look at that pattern. A camel, perhaps, or a weasel? Or like a whale. Very like a whale. I had talked a lot about variations and changes and exceptions and deviations and idiosyncrasies in my lecture. The students had caught the key point perfectly. The tension between regularity and irregularity, between convention and deviation. That is what exists at the heart of language.

The story of language, like the story of Dylan Thomas's childhood, has no beginning and no end. A television series was made once called *The Story of English*. But there is no 'story' of English, or of any language. Rather, there are many stories, many perspectives, many points of view. And it is the same with language as a whole. No 'introduction' to linguistics says all there is to say about language, or says it in the way in which it might best be said. Individual linguists can only report their own perspectives, and they are all different. Each one has a personal tale to tell. This is mine.

Chapter 2

A semilingual start

Linguists in my sense, I suspect, are made, not born. I doubt if I'd ever have become one if my curiosity about languages hadn't been roused very early on, by living in a bilingual community. That shouldn't be surprising. If we are all born, as Noam Chomsky first suggested, with parts of our brains ready for learning language, then surely we are going to end up as more sensitive language users if those parts are nurtured through being exposed to more than one of them. When I first encountered the way Chomsky talked about this innate ability, his 'language acquisition device', or LAD, I thought what a boring old metaphor that was. I still think so. If our brains are indeed wired for language, suggesting that, as humans, we're evolutionarily eager to start this business of talking as soon as possible, then we need a more dynamic image. Something like chicks in a nest, mouths perpetually open, waiting for worms. Gimme, gimme! Only with us, it's languages, not worms. And the more languages we manage to acquire, the more human they make us. As the French proverb goes: 'A man who knows two languages is worth two men.' Or the Slovakian: 'With each newly learned language you acquire a new soul.' At the very least, we have a MAD, not a LAD – a 'multilingual acquisition device'.

In my case, the bilingual community was Wales. I was brought up in Holyhead, a small town in the top left-hand corner of the country, on the isle of Anglesey. It grew up as a port town, with Dublin some sixty-five miles away to the west, and the mail-boats and railway line the backbone of the economy. All kinds of people would pass through, usually as

quickly as possible. When the weather was bad, they were stuck. Jonathan Swift was one who wrote about his enforced stay, on 25 September 1727:

Lo here I sit at holy head
With muddy ale and mouldy bread
All Christian victuals stink of fish
I'm where my enemies would wish
Convict of lies is every sign,
The Inn has not one drop of wine
I'm fastened both by wind and tide
I see the ship at anchor ride
The Captain swears the sea's too rough
He has not passengers enough.
And thus the Dean is forced to stay
Till others come to help the pay.

People still get stuck, though there's plenty of wine in town now, and the bread's no longer mouldy. There's a Tesco, after all. Nor does it take the best part of a day to get across to Ireland. The fastest ferries can do the journey in an hour-and-a-half. You can leave Holyhead at seven o'clock and be in Dublin city centre soon after nine. Go by train in the other direction and in the same time you've only got as far as Crewe, with London still two hours away.

There's a close bond between Holyhead and Ireland, and it shows in the people. There are some 12,000 in the town, and a third of them are of Irish descent. Most would be descended from those who fled from Ireland in the days after the potato famine, in the 1840s, and who came across to Holyhead to find work. Some of them travelled to Liverpool, and then helped to build the railway line along the North Wales coast, a few years later; and when they got as far as Holyhead – as near to God's own country as you could be without getting your feet wet – they stayed. George Borrow met a crowd of Irish workers on the pier when he visited the town in 1854 (as recounted in *Wild Wales*, Chapter 41); they mistook him for an Irish priest, and wouldn't let him go until he'd given them a Latin blessing. You can actually see the oul' country from South Stack head on a clear day, with the tops of the Wicklow Mountains stretching like a black pencil line along the horizon. A Gaelic welcome (*Fáilte*) greets you on a café wall as you approach the main street. And the local Catholic church has one of the largest memberships to the west of Wrexham.

Some of the Murphys from County Wexford travelled over in those post-famine days, and one settled in Holyhead: Mary Murphy, a farmer's daughter. In 1906 she married Lewis Morris, a railway guard – and, judging by a solitary surviving photograph, not one you would mess with. Their daughter, Mary Agnes, was my mother.

The Irish were everywhere. Most of them got jobs on the boats, or on the railways. In those days, because of the Irish link, Holyhead was the

most important station on the line from London Euston apart from Euston itself. The chief daily train was called the 'Irish Mail'. The incomers found a small population on Holy Island, almost entirely Welsh speaking. Over a century before, in his *Holyhead Journal*, Dean Swift had commented, during his enforced stay, 'I should be glad to talk with Farmers and Shopkeepers but none of them speak English. A Dog is better company than the Vicar.' Today, the Welsh element in the population is much reduced, and English is the language you will hear in most parts of the town. A third or more of the population is of English descent – many of them people from Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham who visit the area on holiday, because of the beaches, the scenery, the mountain-climbing, or the sailing, and who then buy a holiday home, or settle there after they retire. Holyhead is a cosmopolitan town, therefore, by no means as Welsh as a few miles east on the 'mainland' of Anglesey, where 60 per cent or more of the population of a village can be Welsh speakers. In Holyhead, the figure is less than 20 per cent. Imbalances of this kind can lead to complications when bilingual policies are introduced, as we shall see.

LINGUIST AS HISTORIAN

Holyhead is actually on Holy Island. An island off an island. Off yet another island, if you go as far as the English Channel. Why 'Holy'? It is named after Saint Cybi (pronounced '<u>cub</u>by'), a sixth-century abbot who founded a monastery at Holyhead. The island is called *Ynys Gybi* in Welsh. It means 'Cybi's island', though the point is not immediately clear without a gloss. What you need to know is that adjectives and other qualifying words follow the noun in Welsh, so that it's literally 'island Cybi'; then you have to appreciate that the first consonant of a word can change ('mutate') if it combines with another word that has feminine grammatical gender. The *C* of *Cybi* has changed to *G* because *ynys* (pronounced '<u>un</u>iss') is one of those feminine words. It's an unholy job looking words up in a dictionary, when they change their first letters like this, but that's language for you. Cybi's church is thought to have been located within the walls of a fort, erected as a coastguard defence during the late Roman period to protect the inhabitants from marauding Irishmen. There's no sign of the original church now, but some of the Roman walls are still there, with their characteristic herringbone stonework.

The isle is full of historical noises. There is an inescapable sense of time and place. Prehistoric standing stones are all around. To the south is a famous burial chamber, at Trefignaeth, dating from about 3000 BC. As a child, I lived in a flat on Stanley Street, whose back

windows overlooked the Roman walls, and I was repeatedly told off for climbing on the corner towers, but it was just not possible to be a Roman soldier otherwise. Grown-ups never understand. They said it was dangerous, but Roman soldiers aren't supposed to be bothered about things like that.

A short walk up the hill, out of the town, and there was Holyhead Mountain, in all its natural glory, except for the huge gouge taken out of its north end – the quarry from which seven million tons of stone had been blasted in the mid-nineteenth century to construct the harbour breakwater – the longest in Europe at 1.86 miles (as every local lad knew). A regular weekend walk would be up this mountain – hardly a mountain, at only 710 feet, but the highest point in all Anglesey, and richly endowed with history. At the top, the site of a Roman lookout post. To get there you had to clamber over the remains of the walls of an Iron Age hill-fort. On the lower western slopes you could walk through an array of hut circles, the well-preserved remains of a village settlement from the third century AD, wisely placed beneath a ridge protecting it from the hostile south-westerlies. Just beyond was South Stack lighthouse, the stuff of picture postcards, a monument to nineteenth-century shipping.

It is the sort of place someone taking early retirement might easily retire to – but more of that later. For a young child, it was so easy to reach out and touch the history. In one of the hut circles there is a huge hearthstone, opposite the entrance, and, to the right, a stone mortar in the ground, in which grain would have been ground. You can sit there, rub the stone with your fingers, and just imagine. Years later, I used it as a backdrop for a television magazine programme; it provided the perfect setting for a discussion on the history of language. A keen sense of history is prerequisite for being a linguist. Mine came out of those hut circles.

When you live in a cosmopolitan place, language variation is in the very air. There are different accents and dialects all around you, if not different languages. Holyhead had the lot. You could hear snatches of Gaelic alongside Welsh and English. And Welsh English, Irish English, and English English. In such places, your ear is being perpetually tuned. You keep having to shift perspectives, recalibrate your auditory registers. You learn to accommodate very early on. You install a language checking device in your head, and make routine use of it. 'What did that mean?' 'Did I hear that right?' 'What did she say?' I remember sitting with a group of children, I think it must have been at a Sunday school. The lingua franca was English, but this particular teacher was (I later realized) using some Welsh