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The Crystal Treasure Trove Receives Two New Gems: A Review for Conlangers of David Crystal's Two Most Recent Titles

By
Don Boozer

The Story of Be: A Verb's-Eye View of the English Language. David Crystal. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017. 978-0-19-879109-6. \$19.95. Index. 191 p.

Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar. David Crystal. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017. 978-0-19-066057-4. \$24.95. Index. 281 p.

The prolific David Crystal counts among his many pursuits being an author, editor, lecturer, and television personality. He is known for writing both accessible and entertaining books on language such as *The Gift of the Gab: How Eloquence Works*¹ and *Txtng: the gr8 db8*² as well as in-depth scholarly works on the topic such as *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*³ and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*.⁴ Prof. Crystal is also known for his exploration of Shakespearean language (in collaboration with his son, Ben Crystal) including reconstructing "Original Pronunciation" in books⁵, on-stage⁶, and online⁷. In fact, Prof. Crystal has a significant presence on YouTube⁸ including lectures, interviews, and more. Any conlanger would be well-served by delving into Crystal's voluminous treasure trove of work.

And, as of 2017, Crystal's book-hoard has received two new valuable additions: *The Story of Be: A Verb's-Eye View of the English Language* and *Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar*.

The Story of Be: A Verb's-Eye View of the English Language takes an in-depth look over 172 pages (plus appendices and an index) at the English verb *be* in all its multifarious aspects. Conlangers especially should devour this book for inspiration in their own languages.

Drawing illustrative examples from diverse sources like the lyrics of American rapper Common, the text of the Lindisfarne Gospel, the cartoons and captions of *Punch*, and the Grand Jury testimony of Pres. Bill Clinton, Crystal vividly explains the fascinating history and deceptively complex uses of this humble verb.

An interesting device that Crystal uses to engage the reader is his idiosyncratic labels for each chapter which set the stage for the various uses of *be*. For example, we learn about:

¹ Yale University Press, 2016

² Oxford University Press, 2008

³ 3rd edition published in 2010 by Cambridge University Press

⁴ 2nd edition published in 2003 by Cambridge University Press

⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of Original Shakespearean Pronunciation*, Oxford University Press, 2016

⁶ With an introduction available on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPlpphT7n9s>

⁷ <http://www.shakespeareswords.com/>

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=dauid+crystal&uni=3&search_type=videos

- To be or not to be: existential *be*
- I am to resign: obligational *be*
- My kids are all grown up: perfective *be*
- Have you been? lavatorial *be*
- So be it: factual *be*

And twenty-one other *be*'s!

For the diachronic conlanger, Crystal includes special in-depth sections on various persons and moods of *be* like:

- The infinitive form: *be*
- 1st person singular, present tense, indicative mood: *I am*
- 1st and 3rd person singular, past tense, indicative mood: *I/he/she it was*
- The present and past subjunctive: *be it noted, if I were you...*

These provide a deeper insight to how these various aspects of *be* came to be (no pun intended). One small example from the portion looking at “1st person singular, present tense, indicative mood: *I am*” will do to illustrate the detail provided:

“Representations of regional speech, from Middle English on, also show forms in which the old form of the 1st person pronoun, *ic* (pronounced ‘itch’), is attached to the verb: *icham, ycham*, with the vowel often dropped (*cham, ‘cham*). In the opening scene of Ben Jonson’s *The Tale of a Tub* (published in 1640), Squire Tub’s man, Basket-Hilts, is given a marked rural accent, and uses two such forms in his first speech: ‘Ich’am no zive [sieve], Cham no mans wife.’”

Crystal’s breezy, conversational writing style - with generous doses of humor - sometimes make the reader forget the deep well of erudition and expertise from which Crystal draws. And, although *The Story of Be* can be a quick read, any conlanger will do well to have their own copy to mark-up, annotate, and come back to for inspiration.

This is even more true for *Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar*. Right from the beginning, Crystal sets the stage for the wonderful discoveries to come when he lays out the parallel development of the words *glamour* and *grammar* on page xi. And, yes, he does make a nod to the spelling with and without the “u” when he ends the short section with:

spelled
glamour (British English)
glamor (American English)

There will be no spoilers in this review. For those unaware of the relation between these two words, we’ll let Crystal reveal the secret for readers!

Making Sense is divided into over thirty sections, counting the introductions, epilogue, appendix, and further readings; but everything comes back to grammar, which Crystal defines as “the study of the way we bring words together in order to make sense.”

And this study is far-reaching in Crystal's capable hands! The expected topics are here, of course: parts of speech, phrases, subjects and predicates, order, prescriptive grammar, pragmatics, semantics, and so on. However, readers are also treated to chapters considering "grammar online" ("Before the Internet arrived, it was difficult to see how a local English grammatical usage in, say Singapore, could ever have made an impression on the world English stage."); "grammar on the job" (including sports commentary); "going transatlantic" ("Henry Alford, author of *The Queen's English* (1860), bemoans 'the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans'"), and "going global" (including stops in Shenzhen, China; Uganda; Ireland; and Cameroon).

One frustration, for this reviewer, in reading *Making Sense* was Crystal's use of his daughter Suzie's experiences to illustrate the prototypical child language learning experience. Crystal sets the stage in his Introduction when he introduces her:

"Suzie, aged eighteen months, came rushing excitedly into the room, clutching her favourite teddy bear, and stood there in front me. 'Push!' she said, with a big smile on her face."

Suzie pops up unexpectedly from time to time then in lines such as: "When Suzie says *red cars gone*, she's doing three things at once - a multitasking ability that is at the heart of grammar." The insertion of episodes of Suzie's story into the text could be abrupt and tend to interrupt the flow of the text. Her appearance didn't always provide a useful illustrative example, merely a diversion. That being said, this is only a minor quibble in an otherwise fascinating work.

Additionally, *Making Sense* is part of a series which also includes books on spelling⁹ and punctuation¹⁰ and this trilogy (currently) would be a good resource for conlangers looking to explore these other facets of language expression as well.

Both *The Story of Be* and *Making Sense* come across as very British. That's not a criticism, simply an observation. Some of the phrases and situations Crystal uses as examples can come across as strange, exotic, or simply unfamiliar to an American reader. But we could all do with a little horizon-broadening from time to time.

Crystal does a superb job in both books of presenting a complex topic in everyday language without "dumbing down" the material. *The Story of Be* and *Making Sense* are highly recommended reads for anyone interested in the multifariousness of the English language.

⁹ *Spell It Out: The Curious, Enthralling, and Extraordinary Story of English Spelling*. London: Profile Books, 2012

¹⁰ *Making a Point: The Persnickety Story of English Punctuation*. London: Profile Books, 2015