

**David Crystal, *A Date with Language* [La întâlnire cu limba],  
Oxford, Bodleian Library Publishing, 2023,  
ISBN 978-185124-611-3, 392 p.**

Fuelled by his unwavering passion for linguistic communication and his steadfast devotion to the study of English language, David Crystal (b. 1941) continues to write and publish extraordinary books. Although *A date with Language* (Publisher: Samuel Fanous; Managing Editor: Susie Foster; Editor: Janet Phillips; Picture Editor: Leandra Shrimpton; Cover design by Dot Little at the Bodleian Library) may not be the first choice for university librarians preparing purchase orders, its captivating title makes it an attractive resource for EFL teachers seeking to spice up their daily curriculum, and for language and communication studies lecturers looking for engaging and inspiring content for talks and presentations. The Horatian notion of *prodesse et delectare* (to be useful and delight) perfectly applies to this ingenious and diverse collection of *daily doses of linguistic tidbits and philological pleasures*. Following a suggestion made by the Bodleian's Head of Publishing, Samuel Fanous, and recognizing a gap in the book market, David Crystal sets out to create a unique 'On This Day' book that celebrates *only* language.

Just as Jules Verne embarked on a thrilling 80-day adventure around the world, demonstrating that the transport and communication technologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century could help people circumnavigate the globe in a relatively short period of time, David Crystal takes us on a captivating 366-day expedition through the fascinating realm of language, collecting significant linguistic events and world-wide personalities who had insightful, illuminating or sagacious comments or opinions on language(s), language use and language users. The preface (vi-vii) sounds the trumpet for *language*: "This book is written for an English-reading audience, but several days focus on other languages. [...] within these pages you'll find represented the different elements in language structure – pronunciation, orthography, grammar, vocabulary, discourse – and how they are studied in dictionaries, thesauri, style manuals and etiquette books; uses of language in such domains such as science, religion, politics, broadcasting, publishing, the Internet and the arts; and the various applications of language study, such as in language teaching, speech therapy, deaf education and forensic science." While Crystal's book shares the day-by-day format with other time-based media such as calendars, journals, prayer books or travelogues, its unique focus on language matters and its 350-word mini essay for every day of a year, set it apart from these artefacts.

This language-centric book approaches linguistic diversity from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand there is the official perspective, which means that Crystal records first the days that have been formally recognized, nationally or internationally, and named, such as *World Radio Day* (February 13<sup>th</sup>), the *International Mother Language Day* (February 21<sup>st</sup>), *OK*

*Day* (March 23<sup>rd</sup>), *Morse Code Day* (April 27<sup>th</sup>), the *International Romani Day* (April 8<sup>th</sup>), *World Book Day* (April 23<sup>rd</sup>), the *European Day of Languages* (September 26<sup>th</sup>), the *International UNICEF Day* (December 11<sup>th</sup>), the *National Pencil Day* (March 30<sup>th</sup>, celebrated in USA), the *International Archives Day* (June 9<sup>th</sup>), the *International Typewriter Day* (June 23<sup>rd</sup>), *Esperanto Day* (July 26<sup>th</sup>) or the *International Day of Sign Languages* (September 23<sup>rd</sup>). Nevertheless, since there are not enough officially designated days to fill a whole year linguistically, David Crystal adopted a second perspective: a global search for personalities with insightful views on language or with direct or indirect contributions to language. Interestingly, Crystal's own commentaries enhance the representativeness and the significance of these personalities' attitudes, opinions or linguistic contributions. For example, the 1<sup>st</sup> of January is dedicated to Maria Edgeworth, 'the first to write a novel in a regional variety of English' (p. 2) and Crystal ends his mini-essay in the following terms: "She heralds the flowering of dialect writing that became a feature of the nineteenth-century novel in the works of Emily Brontë, Walter Scott, George Eliot and others. Stylistic diversity is the main driving force behind my selection of people and topics in this book, and I think of no better way of introducing that theme than through the writing of Maria Edgeworth."

The exact number of personalities referenced in the book can be determined by consulting the index. Nevertheless, perhaps more significant than the count is the consistent titling strategy employed for *one hundred and sixty-two* entries. In essence, the mini-essays crafted for this number of days are introduced by titles adhering to the following structures: *personality name and surname + was born + year* and *personality name and surname + died + year* (e.g. *Anthony Trollope was born in 1815*, *Noam Chomsky was born in 1928*, *Emily Brontë died in 1848*, *Susan Sontag died in 2004*). Notably, *fifty-four* titles announce *births* and *one hundred and eight* commemorate *deaths*. Whether this disproportion should have meaning is a matter of personal interpretation or editorial decision. In his preface David Crystal acknowledges that unexpected encounters with several authors and texts he had not previously read extended the process of writing the book. This aspect is suggestive of the fact that shaping any language requires not only time, but also contributions of many voices from the past. In other words, the past, both distant and recent, is a treasure trove of fascinating ideas expressed by individuals who are rarely or never mentioned in traditional textbooks or who often fall outside the mainstream of English language and literature.

The remaining two hundred and four days are pinned down by an "armory of factoids for trivial pursuit."<sup>1</sup> Here are several examples: *The BBC broadcasts its first live football commentary in 1927* (January 22<sup>nd</sup>), *The first Internet domain name was registered in 1985* (March 15<sup>th</sup>), *The trademark 'ESCALATOR' was registered in 1900* (May 29<sup>th</sup>), *HAL 9000 became operational in 1992* (January 12<sup>th</sup>), *The first known recording of an audible human voice in 1860* (April 9<sup>th</sup>), *Launch of Twitter in 2006* (July 15<sup>th</sup>), and *Voyager 2 was launched by the USA in 1977* (August 20<sup>th</sup>). Such vignettes are a

<sup>1</sup> This phrase was coined by Hans J. Rindisbacher in his review for the same book. The review was published in 2024 in *The European Legacy*, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2024.2335046>.

pleasure to read because Crystal expands each factoid into a meaningful piece of knowledge with profound linguistic significance. For example, elaborating on the story of the trademark 'ESCALATOR', Crystal ends the entry with the following explanatory paragraph: "Words vary in their ability to act as a trademark, depending on how unique they are. The strongest ones are called *fanciful* – made-up words that have no other existence in a language. *Arbitrary* marks are those where a word from one semantic field is used uniquely in another, such as *Apple* for computers and not fruit. It isn't possible to take a normal generic word, such as *computer* or *fruit*, and trademark it, because it's in general usage. Trademark disputes thus usually revolve around the question of the extent to which a word has in fact become general – a linguistic issue. When a trademark word begins to be used in different grammatical ways – a noun becoming an adjective or a verb, for instance, as in someone *googling* or *zooming* – it's a sign that a process of genericization is under way" (p. 151).

A special category of days is represented by those whose origins are unclear or unknown. Nonetheless, logical reasons for their existence can be discerned because David Crystal has an extraordinary ability to interpret peoples' interests or obsessions through a linguistic lens. Examples include *National Gibberish Day* (September 20<sup>th</sup>), *National Name Your Car Day* (2<sup>nd</sup> October), *Babbling Day* (21<sup>st</sup> October) and *Be a Lover of Silence Day* (December 22<sup>nd</sup>).

*A Date with Language* is a cornucopia of fascinating linguistic nuggets, suitable for both casual reading and in-depth study. Crystal's book entertains and enlightens. It is the ideal gift for those with a deep passion for language.

According to his website<sup>2</sup>, David Crystal is no longer giving public talks. Nevertheless, he is still willing to sign books for those who send e-mail requests. In addition to the solution presented on the website, a solution typical of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Crystal was born, the tele-remote device discussed in the entry for November 18<sup>th</sup> is appealing and characteristic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see *Margaret Atwood introduces LongPen™ technology* in 2006, p. 324).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.davidcrystal.com/GBR/David-Crystal>.

