

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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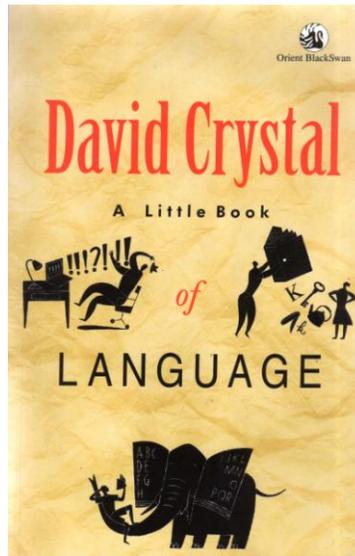
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A Little Book of Language by David Crystal (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2010) - A
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David Crystal is a colossus of a linguist. He has authored, co authored or edited more than 120 books on varied subjects, including his monumental work *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. His recent book *A Little Book of Language*, however, is a manual sort of a thing. It can be of as much relevance for a layman who does not know what linguistics is all about as for a specialist studying languages.

One of the most striking features of the book is the chapter-wise dealing of aspects - from a very ordinary, mundane, simple topic to the more specific, complex, specialized areas. It is, in fact this kind of a dealing that makes the reading of the book absorbing and engrossing.

The Structure of the Book

The book containing 260 pages is divided in to 40 chapters, each dealing with one specific issue, e.g., words, pronunciation, grammar, languages, language in literature, linguistics, applied linguistics, etc. Such an organization not only makes the reading enjoyable and comprehension easy, it also frees the reader of being taxed and burdened.

One can pick up a lot of things about language in general and also a number of other aspects without being aware of a learning process. Only writers of such great eminence as Crystal can achieve this with his little book of language, which is not really little from any considerations!

In the Beginning ...

David Crystal starts with baby-talk and has cited three occasions when we use it: i) when we talk to babies, ii) when we talk to animals, and iii) when we tease our friends. Similarly, Crystal gives us information on how we graduate from crying to pronouncing words. We start listening even before we are born- we listen inside the womb!

He also talks about Adam's first job which was to name all the animals. So the first human was a wordsmith, and his descendants have been at it ever since. He discloses how many words we know- it is around a million!

Crystal doesn't stop with Adam as his only example, of course. He in fact talks about how Adam's apple got the name. He goes on to point out that while we don't know exactly when humans first began to speak, we know they began writing things down tens of thousands of years ago. Language is our species' most distinctive characteristic. But since it's something we learn practically in the cradle, we take word-making more or less for granted. It is heartening to note how Crystal asks us not to do that. He also mentions how each one of us is capable of speaking many languages. It is only the language that we grow up with becomes the primary language.

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Young and Old Will Benefit from a Reading of This Book!

This book, *A Little Book of Language* is apparently meant for young readers. But, in reality it can be read and enjoyed by all age group. In effect, the concise, lucid and humorous way Crystal explains his subject makes the reading of this particular book a pleasure for readers of any age who want a good introduction or just a refresher course in the basics of linguistics—speech, grammar, etymology, dialects, slang and the myriad other *-ologies* and *-isms* that fall under the broad rubric of language.

Deals Also With More Complex Aspects

Prof. Crystal then moves on to more complex aspects such as spelling rules, grammar rules, origin of speech, pronunciation, the vocal folds, accents, sign language, language change etc. He discusses these phenomena in such simple and crisp manner that even a lay man - who does not have any idea on how a language works - can follow it and enjoy it.

One of the most striking features of this book is that it contains a lot of illustrations which not only substantiate Crystal's arguments but also supplements our knowledge of a certain thing.

Facts and Interesting Stories

It appears that a lot of what Crystal has to say in the book may sound familiar. For example, adult learners don't feel the real need of the etymology of words or what vocal chords are or how they function etc. But it is a fact that we can't shy away from.

Did you know that that at nine months, babies begin sounding like their parents—that is, French babies begin making French language sounds, Chinese babies start sounding Chinese, and so on? Or that in the Middle Ages, the word *meat*—or *mete* in the original spelling—meant not merely the flesh of animals but all food, a meaning that survives like a ghost hovering over a word such as sweetmeat, which has nothing to do with meat? Or, that there are more than 6,000 languages in the world, and that one goes extinct every couple of weeks?

Prof. Crystal goes on to tell us that languages also go on dying - in fact one language dies almost every two weeks. How much of research and studies have gone in to concluding this!

Language – An Ever Changing Institution

Crystal demonstrates, in innumerable ways, that language is an ever-changing thing. Words and usages come and go. Buy a new dictionary every five years or so, he recommends, since 'to have only an old one in the house is bit like having an ancient mobile phone.' But while he decries the

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death of some languages and wishes that more of us were multilingual, he is staunchly optimistic where you might expect him to be a scold. He's all for texting, for example, since he believes that to know how to corrupt the alphabet, you first have to know how to spell.

An Invaluable Book

Good-humored and erudite, Crystal has produced an invaluable book. This is a must read book for all, irrespective of whether one is a linguist or a layman. It enlightens everybody about the complicated and specialized concepts from a commonplace perspective. It is really not an easy job to achieve so much in a book of this size and shape. It is possible only with great human beings like David Crystal.

Covering the Spectrum

How does David Crystal do it? Given that this comes so soon after his last book, readers might legitimately have feared a potboiler. But it is nothing of the sort. He grabs our attention by starting close to home with some intriguing chapters on the development of language in babies and young children. After that he widens his lens to range deftly across the entire spectrum of language studies: linguistic variation, bilingualism, dialects, grammar, meaning, spelling, recent developments encouraged by the Internet, nonverbal language, dying languages, and much more.

Encouraging Conversational Tone

With clarity and wit, he draws on his own experience as a human being and a linguist to illustrate his points. And, in the short space of 260 pages, elegantly punctuated with anecdotes at the end of each chapter. Also, the sketches at the beginning of each chapter add specialty to the book. Internal evidence indicates that his main aim is to get teenagers enthusiastic about language. But no one, of any age, should be put off by the conversational tone. Prof. Crystal shows that it is possible to present a huge body of knowledge in a readable and entertaining way. It's a tour de force, and anyone interested in language will enjoy eavesdropping on the conversation.

A Better Place for Our Language to Live in!

What a manner to close the book? It shows how passionate Crystal is about language. He suggests 'six big things I care about, and I hope you'll care about them too, and may be, one day, do something to help make your language world a better place to live in'. These six big things are:

- i) Half the languages are going to die out during this century. But we can do so by making our politicians and leaders realize the importance of language diversity.

- ii) We need to show respect for the dozens of minority languages existing around us. We should show our interest in their languages so that they also grow.
- iii) We should cultivate as many languages as we can or need thereby attempting to develop as a multilingual personality. It will also make the other language users happy.
- iv) We should try to identify the accents and dialects existing in our languages and also appreciate the uniqueness of each one.
- v) We should also care about the range of styles existing in our own languages. We need to learn to handle all kinds of styles.
- vi) We should always be prepared to help out people having speech difficulty, e.g. stammering, etc.

A wonderful little book - not really *little* - to drive us through a maze of several issues relating to language with all its aspects.

I would strongly recommend the book for everybody. You need not be a linguist or a polyglot to read this book. This is not a rocket science either. It is written in so simple and crisp manner and gives you an encyclopedia of information about language that you will regret if you don't read.

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