

## REVIEWS

**Crystal, D. (2018) *Sounds Appealing: The Passionate Story of English Pronunciation*. London: Profile Books. 296 pp.**

*Sounds Appealing* is the latest of the 100+ books published to this date by the renowned linguist and lecturer, David Crystal. Just as the title claims, it is a story of English pronunciation in all its aspects, related with passion, humour and fascinating insights into its history as well as possible future. It is part of a series of ‘stories’ on the English language which Crystal has published since 2011, namely *Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar* (2017), *Making a Point: The Pernickety Story of English Punctuation* (2015), *Spell it Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling* (2012) and *The Story of English in 100 Words* (2011).

The book contains 31 chapters accompanied by 20 panels, nine auditory check tasks (with key) and Appendix with notes on the teaching of pronunciation for teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). What is perhaps most appealing about the volume is its versatility towards the readers; indeed, those who may enjoy the book range from linguists to members of the general public, students of phonetics as well as lecturers, native speakers along with users of English as a foreign language. Crystal is able to find a perfect balance between the amount of facts, linguistic terminology, references to the doyens in the field of English phonetics, evidence from literary texts, and even popular culture trivia, be it references to films, advertisements, TV shows, singers or politicians.

The opening line of the book reads “in the 1980s, I found myself as the ‘voice of language’ on BBC Radio 4” (p. 1), followed by the author’s account of the beginnings of his involvement with the way English is spoken as well as with the BBC. It was the time when numerous local radio stations across Britain started broadcasting and their announcers often spoke in accents that differed from the traditional BBC model; this in return caused a sustained flood of complaints from listeners “expressing concern at what they perceived to be a falling of standards” (ibid.). To help ease the situation and address some of the issues, the BBC approached Crystal, who then wrote a programme called “How dare you talk to me like that” (ibid.), originally planned as a one-off, but which was – eventually – the first of two successive series, running for almost ten years. The one thing the incoming letters from the general public had in common (apart from the actual comments and criticism concerning e.g. the pronunciation of individual sounds and their regional variants, omission of sounds, misplaced word stress

or intrusive ‘r’) was the language in which they were written: it was *passionate*. And so questions like “What is it about pronunciation that produces such a response? Why does pronunciation get to people in a way that other aspects of speech don’t?” (p. 3) are some of those the book is trying to answer.

The first chapter deals with the nature of pronunciation and the history of phonetics studies, while Chapter 2 presents the basic concepts and definitions, for instance, *phonetic notation*, *phonemes*, *minimal pairs* and others (pp. 12-16) and introduces some of the most prominent linguists in this field such as Henry Sweet, Paul Passy or Daniel Jones, to name just a few.

The segmental level of phonetics is covered in Chapters 3 and 4 (titled *The Basic System* and *How Sounds are Made*, respectively) where Crystal first explains the division of sounds into vowels and consonants, their numbers in English, the IPA symbol for each of them, etc., and goes on to describe the processes of articulation; to do so he sometimes uses a personal observation or an anecdote, and sometimes a metaphor (such as that about the tongue and lips: “They seem to be performing a beautifully choreographed dance.” (p. 28)), or he provides a tip for YouTube videos. Individual sounds are then dealt with separately, i.e. vowels in Chapters 11-15 and consonants in Chapters 16-20 (each chapter covering one family of consonants according to the manner of their articulation). The treatment of vowels is very thorough, as the author combines the description of their individual properties (i.e. quality, quantity, tongue position and lip movement) and their equivalents in various regional accents across the globe. The reader is thus presented with a much more colourful picture and quite possibly may find an explanation for some peculiar pronunciation they noticed in films, on the Internet or while travelling. The examples are plentiful, with some using puns or playing on humour, such as the case of diphthong substitution in “*Devon’s two crame tays*” (p. 90) standing for “two cream teas”. Last but not least, Crystal often demonstrates different sound qualities (whether on the articulation or perception level) by quoting from works of literature; we learn that the auditory contrast between close and open vowels is frequently used in nursery rhymes (*Jack and Jill*), brand names (*Kit Kat*), or even Shakespeare (*pibble-pabble, snip-snap*) (all p. 108), that the contrast between close front and close back vowels sounds good in names of characters, cf. /ɑ:/ and /i:/ (*Charlie Weasley*) or /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ (*Lilliput*) (p. 109), or that “writers often rely on plosives to give their characters names that are sometimes humorous and sometimes menacing” (p. 123), for instance Dickens’s *Jack Bamber*, *Peggotty* or *Pip* (ibid.). Such details will be most certainly appreciated by many a literature lover.

Stress, rhythm, intonation, pauses or speech rate, in other words features of suprasegmental phonology, are introduced in Chapters 5-10, followed

by Chapter 21 about the syllable and Chapter 23 about connecting words and linking. Most of these sections of the book are accompanied by panels (inserted text, photographs, copies of newspaper clippings and others), for example, on p. 49 we find a short entry called *Uptalk?* to complement Chapter 6 on intonation, or the section on word stress is followed up by *Laboratory or lavatory?* (pp. 60-62), which is a copy of a document from the year 1929, *Broadcast English: Recommendations to announcers regarding certain words of doubtful pronunciation*, containing 333 words and published by the BBC for its employees.

As mentioned previously, accents and regional varieties are referred to in individual chapters dealing with both vowels and consonants, but they are also treated separately in Chapter 24 *Accents Welcome* and Chapter 25 *Being Accommodating*; the former is supplemented with a delightful panel *Myths about Accents*, where we find corrections of various media stories, such as that “the Liverpool accent is the result of mists and fog in the River Mersey [...], causing colds and nasal catarrh, which led to its characteristic adenoidal twang” (p. 202) or that “the Australian accent arose because the first convict settlers were regularly drunk, resulting in many so-called ‘lazy’ diphthongs, such as the /aɪ/ sound in words like *day*” (pp. 202-203). As Crystal puts it, “such explanations spread because they are simple and easy to understand. But none of them stand up to examination” (p. 203).

To conclude, *Sounds Appealing* will definitely sound appealing to a great number of readers, whatever their academic or linguistic backgrounds, and has proved yet again that David Crystal – apart from being a linguist, writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster – is an indefatigable campaigner for the popularization of English language studies.

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### References

- Crystal, D. (2017) *Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar*. London: Profile Books.
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David Crystal Homepage. <http://www.davidcrystal.com/home>. Retrieved 2 March 2019.