

REVIEW

David Crystal in a conversation about conversations

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ABSTRACT

In this review, we present critically the points made by Professor David Crystal on the conference: *Let's talk: How English Conversation Works*, during the event Abralin Ao Vivo, organized by the Brazilian Association of Linguistics and partners. We raise the main concepts discussed by Crystal, relating the reality of English to the reality of Brazilian Portuguese. Nonetheless, we also present our reflections upon the topics discussed by Professor Crystal. During the conference, he spoke about how English conversation works, considering formal and informal interactions and how they happen, such as face-to-face and virtually. Much more than a lecture, the conference was a talk between Professor David Crystal and Professor Anne Wichmann, who talked about the act of talking.

RESUMO

Nesta resenha, abordamos criticamente os apontamentos feitos pelo professor David Crystal na live *Let's talk: How English Conversation Works*, proferida durante o evento Abralin ao Vivo, organizado pela Associação Brasileira de Linguística e parceiros. Levantamos os principais conceitos discutidos pelo professor, relacionando a realidade da língua inglesa com a realidade da língua portuguesa falada no Brasil. Entretanto, também colocamos nossas reflexões sobre os diversos assuntos abordados. Na live, o professor falou sobre como as conversas funcionam, desde interações mais formais até interações cotidianas, abordando também a maneira como elas são realizadas (pessoalmente, virtualmente, entre outros).

Muito mais do que uma palestra, a *live* foi uma conversa entre o professor David Crystal e a professora Anne Wichmann, que bateram um papo sobre o ato de bater papo.

KEYWORDS

Conversation. Interaction. Linguistics.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Conversa. Interação. Linguística.

One of the first guests at *Abralin ao Vivo*, an event organized by Abralin¹, CIPL², ALFAL³, SAEL⁴ e LSA⁵, was the professor emeritus David Crystal, a British linguist, author of many works on the English language. Among his publications, we highlight *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (2018) and a recent material called “Let’s Talk: How English Conversation Works” (2020a), which also entitles the conference held on May 5, 2020, available at Abralin’s YouTube channel (CRYSTAL, 2020b).

Much more than a live transmission of a lecture, Professor David Crystal had a conversation with Professor Anne Wichmann – a chat about the act of chatting itself, what it is, why we chat, how we learn it, its conventions and contexts –, that since the very beginning offered relevant contributions to the learning of the audience and fluency of the conference. In this review, we aim to present a commented summary of the main issues raised by the two professors, especially by Professor Crystal.

First, we would like to start with an intervention in the title of the conference: when Crystal refers to the word English, he is obviously mentioning the target language of his research endeavors. However, when listening to his talk, we can easily associate to examples from Brazilian Portuguese (BP) and relate the two languages, which we propose to do here briefly.

At the beginning of his conference of about an hour, Professor Crystal greeted us and established a connection with the target audience, Brazilians, he even joked about the unfortunate fact that the virtual system still does not allow sending *caipirinhas*. Doing so, he stressed the importance of establishing a connection with those who we are talking to, whether the conversation involves a

1 Associação Brasileira de Linguística.

2 Comité International Permanent des Linguistes.

3 Asociación de Lingüística y Filología de América Latina.

4 Sociedad Argentina de Estudios Lingüísticos.

5 Linguistic Society of America.

single person, a group, or a number of people that cannot be seen, as in the context of a virtual conference, to then start serious conversation. Another reason for establishing this connection concerns attention, a basic principle of eloquence, especially in an artificial context such as a lecture: never say anything very important in the first half a minute. People are, in that half a minute, getting used to your tone of voice, recognizing the situation, getting used to it. Based on years of research observations, Professor Crystal gradually introduced his topics, which address greetings, pauses, ways of starting and ending a conversation, the role of feedback, and the influence of different contexts in conversations, such as how the coronavirus pandemic has affected the way we talk.

Professor Crystal mentioned, for instance, the pragmatic difference between saying ‘good morning’ and ‘good night’, since the first causes strangeness when said repeatedly and the second accepts repetition more openly. Generally speaking, we can classify ‘good morning’ as belonging to the semantic field of greetings and ‘good night’ to the semantic field of farewells. Meaning that, greeting someone twice may sound uncomfortable and saying goodbye to the same person twice would be more acceptable, as various reasons within the context can cause repetition, such as forgetting something and saying goodbye again or when conversations lengthen causing the previous ‘good night’ to expire. The latter leads to another Crystal’s observation: ending a conversation is more difficult than starting one.

Among the same lines, Professor Crystal called attention to the issue of pauses, which are usually used in a dramatic way, in order to illustrate a moment of expectation, such as our example in (1), or the moment to end a conversation, as in (2), which occur in BP:

1. (A): E o João, né, cara? [pausa]
 ‘And John, right, man?’ [pause]
 (B): ...
 (A): ...terminou a faculdade!
 ‘... finished college!’

2. (A): ...mas é isso! [pausa]
 ‘... but that’s it!’ [pause]
 (B): Até!
 ‘See you!’
 (A): Tchau!
 ‘Bye!’

Both in person conversations and in phone calls or conferences, intonation is also a phenomenon to be taken into account, as there is absence of simultaneous expressions and reactions.

In the written form, it is even more difficult. The complexities related to our human conditions can lead us, in a specific moment, to interpret a text message in a completely wrong way. And we

dare not comment on the use of emojis, which carry the particularity of each individual in a much denser way than speech: a smile can mean anything from an agreement to a farewell.

Understanding that feedback is important in a conversation also requires assuming that at least two interlocutors must be actually inserted in the dialogue, so that they can respond not only with words, but with reactions, expressions and even interruptions, which sometimes assume a supporting character, agreement with the subject matter, but can also sound unpleasant, depending on the interlocutor's intentions, which border humiliation and offense. In face-to-face conversations, the simultaneous feedback provided not only by words, but by body language is much more obvious and faster than in virtual conversations, which have limitations, starting with internet connection quality. This lack of simultaneous feedback interferes with conversations that have become frequent due to current circumstances, both because of the need for social distancing related to the pandemic and because of advances in technology, which has been presented as a means of interaction almost as powerful as the traditional word-of-mouth. David Crystal draws our attention to the widespread mistaken use of the term social distancing. He recommends the use of 'physical distancing', since we are physically apart, not socially distant. We need social solidarity. The moment calls for flexibility, for learning new conventions.

All the observations made by Professor Crystal and complemented by Professor Wichmann have, kindly, taken the conversation to the current context we live in in the year 2020, in which a pandemic has forced us to replace personal interactions with virtual conversations. The immediate need for change has taken over the entire world. Concerning communication and linguistics, we can enlighten many possibilities, such as holding an international event accessible to people anywhere in the world, which is, for instance, the case of *Abralin ao Vivo*. Moreover, we place emphasis on the need for scientific research on face-to-face interactions with masks and on the specificities of interactions mediated by technologies. In the latter, Crystal highlights recent experiences: it is not certain how much can be said during conferences; the virtual space becomes uncomfortable, as it is not yet natural to speak to a camera and express yourself as in personal interactions; some expressions end up becoming robotic and repetitive.

It is appropriate to contextualize the world we lived in before the pandemic and the world we have been living in today. In the past, we talked about the internet and its possible characterization of "new normality", but, on the other hand, the necessary adaptations due to the pandemic made the process (which had already been fast) even faster. Adaptation was forced. In the meantime, Professor Crystal, in a hopeful manner, mentioned that young people are used to technology, and surely technology has been constantly evolving to meet people's needs.

Other discussions were concisely made, addressing language acquisition, cultural diversity, and other aspects that can be watched and rewatched any time as the recording is available to everyone. It is also interesting to return to the comment at the beginning of our text, about the possible relationship between English and BP, to say that several of the concepts discussed by Crystal and Wichmann were brought to discussion the next day, when Professor Ataliba Teixeira de Castilho (2020)

talked about conversations in BP at the live transmission of the talk “From the analysis of conversation to the formulation of linguistic principles”.

In short, we can state that David Crystal's conference has exceeded our expectations, which were already high. In our opinion, realizing how much scientific work there can be behind a simple conversation is, to say the least, impressive. Crystal's didactics in making part of the knowledge developed during his career accessible is also admirable. He showed us that, in addition to talking about conversations, he also knows how to converse. Therefore, we recommend that students of Languages, Communication and Teaching watch the conference, as well as those interested in language studies and curious about how we perform the art of conversation.

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