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A Little Book of Language

(CRYSTAL, David, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2010, 272 p.,
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A Little Book of Language is a study published by Yale University Press in 2010. As the writer of the book, David Crystal is not only a world-famous language specialist with over a hundred books but also an editor, lecturer, broadcaster and Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. As a prominent linguist, Crystal wants to take people's attention to dying languages in the first place by raising awareness of language as a means of communication. The book is especially written for young people and true beginners in the area of language study. Starting from the very first times of a baby's language development, in each chapter, readers discover the secrets of language in the meanwhile being acquainted with Crystal's own children: Steven and Sue. Though it has 40 chapters, each chapter develops one after another in a way that it does not let the reader get lost in the lines and difficult paths of language and linguistics. In fact, while shedding light on language, it also enlightens the readers.

First five chapters deal babies' stages of language development and parents' role in the process is stressed. Parents are depicted as the first teachers of newborns and the strength of 'baby talk' (unusual speech of parents with their babies) in the acquisition of language is said to be effective. No matter where they are born or how their mother and father talk, in their first months of life babies all over the world make same sounds for different situations such as in pain, content or hungry. This shows that there is no language of crying. Yet, there is one language of a society called mother tongue and though readers might be acquainted with stages of language development, they, once more, enter in babies' world and discover the language together with babies.

In the sixth and seventh chapters, Crystal deals with *discovering grammar* and *having a conversation* stating that after children find out 'magical things' happen when sounds are strung together, then they start to play language game with adults. For instance, if father comes after saying 'dada' or mother comes when saying 'mama', nobody can stop children

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from repeating the game again and again. The writer indicates that children's speed of learning is very impressive and he also makes the reader consider the difficulty of trying to explain oneself with just a single word which is done by children with limited vocabulary. In addition, communication's importance in language learning is mentioned once more and rules of conversation are stressed such as turn-taking and politeness. As turn-taking is not a natural process, children have to learn it as they have to learn politeness. All of these are mastered by observing people around. A child's development of speaking and listening skills and realization that both skills are active are also included.

Nowadays, children are exposed to writing a lot and thus they learn to read and sometimes to write at an early age. From chapter eighth to chapter twelfth, *learning to read and write, getting to grips with spelling, spelling rules and variations, grammar rules and variations, accents and dialects* are discussed. The difficulty of dyslexic children in reading and writing and the Braille alphabet for deaf children are also talked on. Spelling, grammar, accents and dialects are ways of showing class and people's home town or city. Crystal also goes back in time and shows that in the Middle Ages there was no Standard spelling of English. Nevertheless, in the 18th century things changed in society. Spelling became an important way of understanding whether a person is educated or not. Moreover, he mentions about the difficulty of English spelling and the reasons of that, while at the same time explaining the reasons of British and American English spelling differences and the dominance of American spelling all over the world. The twelfth chapter ends with a question asking why people are so obsessed with their accents and dialects and the answer is stressed with the expressiveness of language of people's identity.

Being bilingual is the focus of the thirteenth chapter and bilingual, trilingual, multilingual (polyglot) concepts and language families are dealt with in this chapter. There are also some interesting facts such as about three quarters of the world grow up speaking two or three languages and all countries are multilingual. The following chapter *the language of the world* develops on the previous one by giving a place to the world languages. Language families are portrayed as parent, daughter and sister languages and their dialects are also referred.

Fifteenth and sixteenth chapters are about *the origins of speech and writing*. In each, the writer gives discussions or legends about their appearance and follows the traces of speech and writing to the ancient times. The chapter, *modern writing*, deals with the modern times of writing and the development of alphabet from the earliest North Semitic, Hebrew- Arabic, to Greek and Roman alphabets. The eighteenth chapter, on the other hand, takes *sign language* as the third way of communication along with writing and speech. Here, the variety of sign languages and even British and American sign languages' being different from each other are stressed. In addition job-related signs are referred such as referees, umpires, orchestra conductor but their signs' limitedness and not being like language is expressed.

Both common and different parts of languages are compared and contrasted in nineteenth chapter: *comparing languages*. Here, the common things that all languages share such as sentences, nouns, verbs, vowels, consonants, rhythm and intonation are discussed. Yet, it is added and exemplified that what makes all languages differ from every other is the word order. In addition, speech acts are given with examples and it is stressed that while learning a foreign language people need to master speech acts to avoid misunderstandings. Politeness rules, on the other hand, might not be the same in every language so their importance in communication is stressed as well. As Lakoff pointed out "what is polite for me may be rude for you." (1973, cited in Locher, 2012, p.3).

In twentieth chapter, Crystal starts with *dying languages* and gives some reasons of their dying and goes with several usages of language. “A language dies with the last person speaking it dies” says the writer and stresses that in fact languages do not die and if one day somebody learns it again then the language revives. Besides, spoken and written languages and which is easy to keep alive is told in this chapter. *Language change* is the title of twenty-first chapter and includes the change in every part of language such as, word, punctuation, word meaning change and so on. Besides, the fastening effect of Internet in the process of change is pointed out. The twenty-second chapter *language variation* stands out the differences between young and old people’s word choice and upper-lower class word usage (even not as obvious as it was) and male-female voice differences, all are exemplified along with situation, setting and gender distinctness. Here, it is necessary to point out that it is not the language that is sexist; it is the society that makes sexist language (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003). In fact, sociolinguistic way of language is remarked in this chapter. The ensuing chapter is *language at work*, in which the reader comes into contact with more variations of the way language is used in like workplace usage. As every job has its special vocabulary or jargon, grammar, own style of talking and writing, then it is inescapable to have occupational dialects, too. The next chapter, *slang*, goes on with the special usages of language that is peculiar to a group. Slang as rendered by Adams (2009) is ‘the poetry of everyday speech’ and used by a group of people who have a lot in common.

Dictionaries are the main topic of twenty-fifth chapter and it is stated that everybody needs to look up a word from a dictionary even it can be a word from their own language because there are lots of words in a language and it is not possible for one to know every word of that language. Next chapter concerns about *etymology* which is the study of the history of origins of words and some details are given. Following two chapters *place names* and *personal names* show the importance of naming in human life and give reasons of it and examples of place and personal names.

The Internet’s importance and effects in human lives are shown with the example of babies learning to type words before they learn to write in chapter *the electronic revolution*. The fourth chapter *texting* make people realize that the Internet also affected their life pace with texting, using emoticons to show feelings instead of writing or saying. On the other hand, the argument whether Internet corrupts language is discussed and concluded that if someone is not a good speller he/she cannot be a good ‘texter’ as well. As people love to play with language, the thirty-first chapter is allocated to *language at play* such as pun, palindrome, and anagram.

The thirty-second chapter asks once more *why use language* and the reasons such as to express emotions, to avoid embarrassment, for fun, to show support and to show our identities are listed. The following three chapters focus on these reasons and explain them in detail. *Language for feelings* is the thirty-third chapter and here connotations (positive – negative), persuading, playing with feelings, giving bias, using rhetoric sentences to persuade are mentioned as the ways of changing people’s feelings. *Political correctness* as another way of effecting or caring people’s emotions is given in the next chapter. Political correctness is the way of trying to avoid choosing or using words that will offend, however, as it is difficult to please everyone at the same time, it is seen that political correctness might still cause misunderstandings and recently its main usage has gone away from the purpose. Chapter thirty-five is *language in literature* and in this chapter another way of effecting people’s feelings are shown via author’s choice or using way of words.

‘Building a language wardrobe inside our heads as we grow’ is a metaphor that starts the chapter thirty-six: *developing style*. In this chapter, language styles of people are discussed. Style is someone’s personal way of using language and people develop their styles.

The complexity of language is another chapter that builds on the sophisticated nature of language and whether people speak or write they show great ability to do so is stressed. Moreover, the focus on the creative nature of language here reminds Chomsky's (1967) idea that with a limited set of signs people can produce unlimited sentences. Besides, people's being good at not only language use but also the way to convey messages are connected to their use of body language, gestures, tone of voice and even touching. This chapter concludes with the comparison of animal and human language.

The thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth chapters are both concern about linguistics. Former is on linguistics and defines what it is and what are the people studying it are called. In fact, this chapter reveals the writers intention of the writing of that book and informs that for a person to be a linguist he/she does not need to know lots of or all of the languages of the world which is nearly impossible. Here, the yields of knowing more languages in understanding how a language works are set aside as well. The aim of linguistics, its bringing to language studies are another areas that are emphasized. Every topic covered in the book opens up new questions into the field of linguistics and some of them are listed as: phonetics, grammar, semantics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, historical linguistics and so much more branches. The next chapter, *applied linguistics*, looks into the scientific benefits of studying language. Here, ways of solving problems like helping children who suffer from language delay are mentioned by giving a specific situation of a language delayed child. What's more, the applications of this area to language and especially foreign language learning are shown once more. Even applied linguistics can help people to solve crimes. The crime detection is another area that gets benefit from applied linguistics. The chapter ends with some predictions about the language in the future.

The last but not the least chapter *your language world* ends the book. In this chapter, Crystal lectures that everybody who has interest in language should care at least one of the six things that he orders and thinks as important for the future of language. These are: caring about the fact of dying languages and to vote for politicians who can provide money to help languages survive; secondly caring about minority languages and showing respect to people using them; third, he advises us to learn as many language as possible and travel to foreign country with a dictionary at hand; another advice is appreciating the varieties in our own language first; then he expects us to know and even master every possible style of language mention previous chapters; and lastly caring and helping people who have difficulties in learning their mother tongue and people with speech difficulties. At the end of this chapter and of course the end of the book, Crystal talks about the language's being different from other areas as it is in every area and he depicts this book as a little book of language in front of the hugeness of language itself.

All in all, *A Little Book of Language* not only searches out the story of language but also it subscribes to the future of it. In a way, the past, the present and the future of language is delineated ranging to a great extent from the first words of babies to the modern writing and speaking of people. Crystal sheds light on language in ancient times, by digging deeper and deeper to find out its intricacies, and ascents to the future of it by evaluating today's language usage trends. By the help of illuminating tables and diagrams as well as Crystal's own writing style, *A Little Book of Language* is a kind of tale to be talked about. On the other hand, in fact, the past, the present and the future of language might be appropriate headings to gather all chapters into these three headings to make the readers remember the book by heart.

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