

News, Announcements

Conference Report

The Changes in Epochal Paradigms and the Opportunities They Offer for English Studies

3rd International Conference of the Slovene Association for the Study of English

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, 10–12 May 2012

The host institution of the conference was the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, in close cooperation with the Slovene Association for the Study of English (in Slovene SDAŠ), a member of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), a federation of 33 national associations of English studies. The event brought together 102 speakers and over 150 scholars in total, from fields including linguistics, literature, translation, methodology, gender and cultural studies. The event was highly international, with participants representing 26 countries covering Europe (especially countries from the former Yugoslavia), but also including India, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia and the USA.

The conference was opened by the President of SDAŠ, Professor Smiljana Komar, a member of the host department. She was followed by ESSE President Professor Fernando Galván, who welcomed the participants on behalf of ESSE, briefly outlined the Society's activities, informed the audience that SDAŠ is among the low-membership ESSE subsidiaries with around 70 members (though such a number is perhaps not that low taking into consideration that Slovenia has a population of just 2.5 million), and reminded participants of the 11th ESSE Conference to be held in Istanbul on 4-8 September 2012. The opening session proceeded with three plenary lectures by Professor David Crystal (University of Wales, Bangor) on 'Language and the Internet', Professor David Staines (University of Ottawa) on 'Contemporary Canada: Fiction at the Multicultural Crossroads', and Raymond Kerr (The British Council, Istanbul) on 'The British Council's Continuing Professional Development Framework'. After the opening, the participants split into four parallel sections chaired mostly by scholars representing the host department.

The title of the conference itself opens up space for a number of interpretations. As the organisers claimed in the conference call, and as Professor Komar reminded us in the introductory speech, the aim was to question the traditional role of English studies as well as those traditional critical theoretical tools which emerged from a context of static print media and which were developed before the rise of TV and the internet. Thus the unifying themes of the conference may be summed up as follows: whether books and texts are an obsolete concept in the era of hypertext, what role the traditional canon plays in a context where reading is losing its primacy, and what lies ahead for the English language and English studies in an online environment. Naturally, the title of the conference invited much speculation and a range of readings: while some decided to focus on phonetic, morphological, semantic and many other aspects of well-established genres, others zoomed in on the 'changes' associated with emerging genres with unstable and 'elastic' generic conventions, such as blogs, web pages, social networks or e-books, all of which have arisen due to modern communication technologies. Probably due to the wide thematic scope which attracted a host of varied contributions, some sections lacked organic coherence (a potential weak point of any conference on a large scale) and many conference attendees might have found themselves section-hopping.

Speaking personally, the high point of the conference was the opportunity to see the famous 'spokesperson' for the English language, David Crystal, in the flesh. Professor Crystal was, as many eminent personages tend to be, very approachable – and the conference participants enjoyed communicating with him both on a professional and a personal level during the breaks and informal dinners. Professor Crystal's plenary speech offered a wider perspective on internet linguistics, an area which he sees as an indication of future trends and which is covered in his recent books – *Language and the Internet*, *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide*, *Language Play*, and *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8*.



From the left: dr. Adam (PdF MU), prof. D. Crystal, dr. Zapletalová and dr. Tomášková (FF OU)

He views electronically/digitally mediated communication (E/DMC) as a new paradigm which is still emerging as a routine form of electronic interaction. As a result, 'electronic language' is a new phenomenon that is breaking and also complementing the traditional spoken/written paradigm: for people born before 1990 books are central and the screen marginal, while for those born after 1990 there has never been a world without the internet and it has become part of their lives – for them, the screen is central and books marginal. That is, according to Crystal, the nature of this

paradigm shift – this complete reversal of traditional expectations in relation in literacy – and our task (as teachers) is to understand the nature of the new medium so as to anticipate what it is doing to our students and all of us and to examine the impact of those new communication opportunities on individual languages.

Basically, the talk centred on two questions: what new communicative possibilities does the internet allow, and has it affected English in any particular way? With respect to the first question, Crystal discussed phenomena such as the lack of simultaneous feedback in electronic language in favour of multiple simultaneous conversations, the lack of permanence/stability versus the possibility of ‘refreshing the page’, hypertext links versus traditional footnotes, or ‘framing’ in emails as an expression of so-called ‘cutting linguistics’. Crystal sees internet language as a curious amalgam of the spoken and written medium, a property which can be sensed in the terminology – chatroom, email conversation, web page – in which the terminology of speech and the terminology of writing are mixed together.

The internet has radically altered our conception of some of the most widespread notions in linguistic and literary research, as the traditional notion of text – in a sense determinate, having a beginning, middle and end, carrying an assumed identity in terms of a stylistic homogeneity of spoken/written medium – is disappearing. The text is now being extended into a forum with no end, constantly ongoing, repeatedly edited, unfinishable. These texts are no longer synchronic/diachronic in Saussure’s sense, because the internet, as Crystal admits, blows this distinction out of the water. Some texts are now ‘panachronic’, for example those in Wikipedia. Another important quality of these ‘new’ texts is their stylistic heterogeneity; in a wiki-world anyone can enter the text, edit it, add comments or reflections, all of which is possible due to the internet’s anonymity: we have no idea about authorship.

Certainly, the internet has a fundamental impact on communication resembling a revolution; new communicative issues are being raised, while old familiar, comfortable concepts of language have to be revised. However, Professor Crystal maintains that with respect to the second question, the idea that languages are going to be rapidly reformulated by the internet is one of the big myths of the present day. To support this argument, analysis of electronic language does not offer evidence of profound changes; only in orthography is there a certain amount of innovation, such as trends towards punctuation maxi/minimalism. In summary, David Crystal concludes that the internet is a revolution in the sense that it is an epoch-changing paradigm as far as communicative function is concerned, yet not very much has changed as far as specific, individual linguistic means are concerned. Inevitably, the internet offers enormous scope for research because so little of this information has yet been given the kind of analysis it deserves.

Overall, the Ljubljana conference was a memorable experience; presenting and sharing one’s own research, meeting some colleagues and making new friends all took place in a highly inspiring setting, in a historic university city with an unexpected Salzburg-like charm. The next occasion where (not only) the Ljubljana conference participants can meet again will surely be, apart from Istanbul this year, the 12th ESSE Conference to be held in Košice in September 2014.

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**The Department of English and American Studies,
Faculty of Arts, University of Ostrava**

invites postgraduate students in doctoral study programmes,
and their tutors/supervisors/teachers, to take part in the conference

**The Interpersonal Function of Language in the Genres
of Academic, Institutional and Media Discourse,
to be held on November 8–9, 2012**

We welcome papers presenting research results related to any of the wide range of means realizing the interpersonal metafunction in a variety of genres representing academic, institutional and media discourse.

Keynote speakers:

Hon. Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. H. G. Widdowson, University of Vienna, University of London
Prof. PhDr. Jarmila Tárníková, CSc., Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci
Doc. PhDr. Milan Ferenčík, M.A., PhD., Prešovská univerzita v Prešově

Important dates

If you wish to present a paper, please submit the abstract by electronic mail by August 31;
e-mail notifications of acceptance will be sent by September 15;
registration forms should be sent by September 30, 2012.

Contact address for abstract submission and registration:
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A selection of papers will be published in a conference monograph and in the Ostrava Journal of English Philology (<http://ff.osu.cz/kaa>).