

*The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language.* By David Crystal.  
Cambridge: Cambridge United Press, 1995. xii + 489.

Reviewed by Sonja L. Lanehart  
*University of Georgia*

Crystal's *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (*CEEL*, pronounced like "seal" according to Crystal) is a visually striking book. It has many colorful pictures, broad coverage of the English language, and a recent publication date. In Crystal's explanation of why we study the English language, he uses words such as importance, beauty, fascination, and fun. Crystal's "metaphor of traveling" (vi) approach as opposed to a "metaphor of story-telling" (vi) approach can be seen throughout the text: numerous pictures of medieval manuscripts (11-17); colorful snapshots of periodicals (300-5); pictures of recent or current political leaders (111); intellectuals past and present (195 and 373); and other famous or popular people (150 and 275).

The appearance of the book is so captivating that it could easily persuade one to use it as a textbook for a lower-division undergraduate course on the English language. For such a class, the goal is usually to introduce key areas of study in the English language—structure, history, and modern variation. *CEEL* addresses each of those areas and more. It contains twenty-four chapters in all divided into six sections: (1) The history of English, (2) English vocabulary, (3) English grammar, (4) spoken and written English, (5) using English, and (6) learning about English. *CEEL* does not contain detailed information about each of the six areas but rather a broad survey of them coupled with more in-depth information about very particular items of interest (e.g., "What Is Standard English?" "Why English [as a World Language]," "Hyponymic Hierarchies," "Typographic Terms," and "Literariness in Conversation").

According to Crystal, "Most spreads [in *CEEL*] distinguish between an expository overview and detailed examples (largely through the topographic convention of main text vs panels). Then within each spread, I have tried to provide examples of the wonder which can be found when we begin to look carefully at the language" (vi). A wonder indeed! There are few books that could rival the pictorial illustrations and photography of this text. However, with such an arrangement, one can

easily get bogged down in the details that may or may not be a central issue for the area being addressed.

Although Crystal succeeds in making *CEEL* appear to be entertaining and informative, the many panels on a single page make for disjunction, especially when only a brief expository text surrounds the panels that contain detailed information about a minor topic of interest. It is often difficult to get engrossed in the writing of the expository text (as opposed to the panels) because frequently pages are composed of panels with little or no expository text. Attempts to process the textual and pictorial illustrations may fall short of being informative. As a result, students may find *CEEL* difficult to read because of the very format that makes it look so appealing. The layout that may entice them to pick up the book and begin skimming through it is not the kind of layout that maintains such captivation over the duration of a quarter or semester in which they need clear and coherent information that they can synthesize, analyze, and critically think about. Consequently, *CEEL* does a good job of drawing one in, but not as good a job of keeping one consistently focused on a topic over a period of time.

In addition to the sensory overload one might experience in viewing the text versus panel organization, there is another organizational concern. Crystal says, "The basic unit of organization in the book is the double-page spread. Sentences never cross turn-over pages, and the vast majority of topics are treated within the constraints of a single spread" (vi). I thought this practice would be an interesting accomplishment that would contribute to the readability of the text. Imagine not having to turn the page to find out the rest of the story, everything laid out right before one's eyes. However, such a design may contribute further to the textual disjunction. Discussions about a subject do not always fit into nice textual tidbits. There is even one occasion where the expository text on a page (8) ends in mid sentence—never to be completed.

I do not believe *CEEL* is a practical primary classroom text for an undergraduate English language course. Crystal does not claim that *CEEL* should or could be used as a classroom textbook; however, its very nature and appearance could make it quite appealing for that use. *CEEL* does have the accoutrements of a textbook: a table of contents, glossary, and references as well as indices of linguistic terms, authors, and personalities, and topics which help to navigate such a large, quarto text. Those aspects alone help to engender the notion that *CEEL* is a textbook or could be used as a textbook despite the drawbacks of doing so.

That *CEEL* functions better as a coffee-table book than as a textbook for an introductory-level class in the English language is quite acceptable, since Crystal never intends to impose the type of structure on *CEEL* that might make it more suitable as a classroom textbook. In fact, Crystal quite plainly states that "there is too much in any language for the information to be assimilated in a continuous reading" (vi) and that "more leisurely excursions over a period of time" (vi) would be the ap-

proach he would expect for such a text as *CEEL*. He certainly succeeds in implementing his philosophy by giving the reader the opportunity to taste various juicy topics and a few specific ingredients of interest in the English language. I do not doubt that *CEEL* functions nicely as a reference text for English language teachers to supplement other course texts or class materials. It certainly does much to illustrate the English language even if it does not always inform us about it in a more fluid and rigorous way. The pictures may draw one in initially, but without substantive discourse for conceptualization of the pictures and without the discourse as the focus instead of the pictures (or panels), *CEEL* will struggle for an identity as a classroom text instead of a coffee-table book.