THE FIRST EDITION of David Crystal’s *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* appeared in 1995, and was widely acclaimed. It covered an extraordinary amount of material under the broad topics of ‘The History of English’, ‘English Vocabulary’, ‘English Grammar’, ‘Spoken and Written English’, ‘Using English’ and ‘Learning about English’. It used modern design techniques and was richly illustrated with all kinds of visual material. It was a book that allowed extended reading of essays on particular topics, or dipping and pursuing cross-references. This second edition appears eight years later. Has English changed sufficiently in those eight years to justify a new edition? Is there enough new material in this new edition to persuade someone who bought the first edition in 1995 to buy the 2003 one?

The first edition was 489 pages; the second is 499 pages. Thus there are ten pages of new text, and these are in the part called ‘Using English’, where a new section twenty-three deals with ‘Electronic Variation’. Crystal points out that when he started work on the first edition of the book the Internet had not been created. Clearly, any account of contemporary English must deal with its latest electronic manifestations. Crystal argues that Netspeak is not just a new variety of English but a new medium, especially since when people sit at their computers they engage in an activity that is close to the traditional task of writing, but that is also in many ways more reminiscent of speaking — indeed, the activity in which they engage will often be called a discussion or ‘chat’. As chat it cannot provide feedback on how the messages are being received (‘smileys’ or ‘emoticons’ are not an adequate substitute for facial expressions and body gestures), but, unlike normal chat, the new medium enables a participant to engage in a number of separate chats simultaneously. As ‘writing’, it is not traditional in many ways: ‘It is unlike writing in that it makes use of graphic effects (as in animated text), has the ability to manipulate a writer’s output (as in e-mail framing), and is dependent on non-linear reading practices.’

Crystal outlines what he sees as some of the major features of the new medium, including various kinds of ‘distinctiveness’: lexical, graphetic, graphological, grammatical and what Crystal calls ‘discourse distinctiveness’. He shrewdly observes that one of the great discourse advantages of e-mail is that e-mails do ‘not insist on the participants engaging in rituals of a phatic kind (asking about health, family, weather)’, the omission of which in other forms of conversation might be regarded as rude. Graphological distinctiveness is seen at its
most extreme in text messaging, where the small screen and limited space (160 characters) have led to a highly abbreviated communicative style. A form of this abbreviation (‘u r gr8’), with the addition of many non-standard forms (‘yep’, ‘yup’), is also seen in chat rooms and news groups, and to a lesser extent in e-mails. Crystal points out how tolerant we have become, even in e-mails, of the presence of non-standard or ‘incorrect’ spellings: ‘Spelling errors in an e-mail would not automatically be assumed to indicate a lack of education (though they may be) but simply a typing inaccuracy or lack of editorial revision.’ I am not entirely convinced by the argument for lexical distinctiveness, but I see what Crystal means. He demonstrates various methods of word formation, including compounding (‘mousepad’, ‘webmaster’), affixation (‘hypertext’), blends (‘netiquette’), and conversions (‘to mouse’). Crystal admits that ‘most Netspeak jargon is the result of everyday words which have been given fresh sense in an internet context’, but still describes such words as ‘ludic innovations’. I am not sure that ‘ludic’ is quite the right word. What strikes me again and again when looking at Netspeak is a paradox: the extraordinary inventiveness, richness and creativity of the technology, alongside the sheer blandness and unimaginativeness of the language used to describe and employ it. It is a world of simplistic transfers (‘browser’ and ‘mouse’, etc.), an arid landscape of acronyms and abbreviations (BTW, IMHO, LOL, POP, PPP, etc.).

This new edition gives me the opportunity to re-examine Crystal’s treatment of Australian English. Clearly, one of the greatest difficulties in producing an encyclopedic book of this kind, which attempts to cover all the varieties of English spoken in the world, is that if you are from outside a culture it is very difficult to be sure of the nuances of its language. In general, Crystal does a sound job with Australian English. There is, for example, an excellent summary of the phonetic features. Yet comments on regional variation are somewhat superficial when the only example given of regionalisms is the use of stroller in New South Wales as against pusher in South Australia for ‘a child’s push-chair’. In the list of ‘well-known slang terms’, larrakin appears with the meaning ‘hooligan’, a sense that has surely been obsolete for some time. In the list of idioms, we find look like a consumptive kangaroo, which, if it exists at all, is as rare as hen’s teeth or rocking-horse manure. In a section on variation, we are told that the spelling variant centre/center shows ‘considerable variation across states and between age groups’, when I would have thought that center remains strongly non-standard everywhere in Australia. In a discussion of Norman Lindsay’s The Magic Pudding, there are comments on the use of names from local flora and fauna, and the fact that ‘swag’ means quite different things in Australian and British English. But I think that someone writing from within the culture would have mentioned the transferred (especially in political contexts) sense of magic pudding — ‘a never-ending or endlessly renewable resource’. In the discussion of creoles, Australian examples are lumped together in a map reference as ‘Australian creoles’, when any Australian reader would want to distinguish carefully, for example, between Kriol and Torres Strait Creole. There is no mention of Aboriginal Englishes. It seems to me that there should have been time between the first and second editions to get some Australian experts to look at the section on Australian English. No doubt this applies to other Englishes as well.

There has been some updating of tables and the like in the body of the main text, but it remains largely untouched from the first edition. The new section twenty-three, with its account of electronic language and the Internet, is certainly excellent in itself, but the issues raised by the new language or medium are not allowed to feed back into other sections of the book, especially the section on World English. This book is certainly a must in the library of anyone who has an interest in language, but I am not convinced that the extra ten pages would justify the purchase of the second edition by someone who already owned the first.