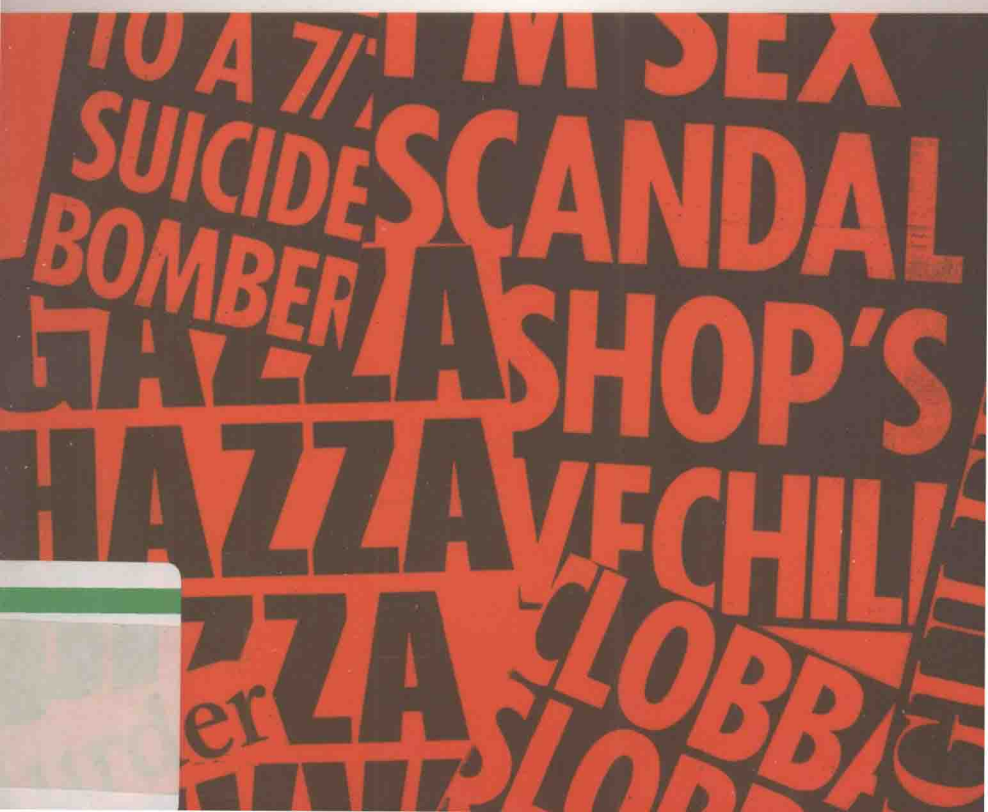




The Word Weavers

Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison



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Communication, University of Oxford*



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Shooting the messenger

The street seller of newspapers
is growing old.

One glance and you can tell
that a lifetime of violence
has taken its toll.

War and murder have been
meat and drink to him.
Think of all the catastrophic news
of which he has been the bearer,
all the sensational headlines

he has put through his hands,
all the scandal he has spread,
all the famous dead of whom
his tabloids have spoken badly.
At day's end, when he checks

how many papers are left,
he counts them pensively,
as if preparing a defence,
as if each were a year for which
he simply cannot account.

DENNIS O'DRISCOLL

PREFACE

The word weavers is a book about newshounds (journalists) and wordsmiths (literary writers). Both of them are skilled word weavers, whose output is consciously woven into patterns, unlike most of the words spontaneously uttered in everyday speech.

Humans, alone among apes, have a bizarre extra ability. They open and shut their mouths and utter strange, complex noises which their fellow humans understand. In short, they are born to use language. For tens of thousands of years this linguistic talent was purely oral. Humans gossiped, persuaded, informed and entertained one another by word of mouth. These centuries of oral tradition have largely been forgotten. Yet they had an indelible effect on current-day media and literature. Luckily, we can peel away some of the relatively recent layers and reveal a hidden oral core, which had a huge influence on later written output.

Our own early oral tradition is revealed in sage saws and old ballads. These in turn were incorporated into broadsides, chapbooks and newsbooks and, eventually, into modern journalism. A later literary

tradition undervalued these old roots, and (wrongly) proclaimed itself to be superior. This book explores this old rivalry. It shows that the media need to be properly evaluated, and reinstated in their rightful place as parallel to, and in no way inferior to, conventional English literature.

As always, I am enormously grateful to the numerous people who have helped in the emergence of this book. First of all, my thanks go to News International who funded my Chair at Oxford University, the Rupert Murdoch Professorship of Language and Communication, of which I was the first holder. This was a challenging and enjoyable post. All my life I have eagerly gobbled up media output, so it was a privilege to be paid to read and analyse newspapers, and other media, a pastime that I had previously regarded as a spare-time activity. Secondly, my thanks go to the Faculty of English at Oxford, to both students and staff. The English Faculty students who chose to do the final-year option on language and the media undoubtedly sharpened my thoughts on the topic with their challenging questions and thought-provoking essays. I am also grateful for the support I received from numerous members of staff, especially my research assistant Diana Lewis, and colleagues Ros Ballaster, Lynda Mugglestone and John Carey. Thanks also to Worcester College, Oxford, (the old college of Rupert Murdoch) which provided me with colleagues to whom I enjoyed chatting, and an office which was a pleasure to work in: it looked out onto trees and a lake. Numerous others (too many to mention) have helped me in the ten years I was at Oxford. Their

valuable aid is tucked into several sections of this book: they have provided references, suggested interesting angles, and discussed controversial topics. Staff at News International were also generous with their time, especially Jane Reed. Chris Whalley and Richard Bonfield helped me with illustrations involving newspapers. Andrew Winnard, Helen Barton, Elizabeth Davey and Leigh Mueller at Cambridge University Press deserve my thanks for the efficiency with which the book has been produced. Finally, I thank my husband, the lexicographer John Ayto, who sustains me endlessly with encouraging words, non-stop loving kindness, and mouth-watering meals.

JEAN AITCHISON

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Weaving and worrying

Journalism versus literature?

I was up all night worrying about myself and my connection to language. Irwin Shaw, *Beggarmen, thief* (1977)¹

‘What’s a Nupiter Piffkin?’, ‘Don’t be frightened of banshees’, ‘Henry VIII had six wives’, ‘Helen wants to film a salamander’, ‘Look at that dragonish cloud’, are all possible English sentences.

Yet a Nupiter Piffkin is a figment of a comic poet’s imagination:

Mr and Mrs Discobolos
Climbed to the top of a wall,
And they sat to watch the sunset sky
And to hear the Nupiter Piffkin cry
And the Biscuit Buffalo call.²

A banshee is a fabled mythical creature, ‘less a shape than a mournful screaming that haunts the Irish night’, according to Jorge Luis Borges.³ Henry VIII’s marriages took place several centuries ago,

Helen's film-making is in the future, and dragonish clouds exist only in the eyes and mind of a beholder, as in Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A towered citadel, a pendant rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't.⁴

Humans use language in multiple ways and for many different reasons, as the examples above show. We can, of course, communicate by various other means: we can wave, wink, point, tap someone on the shoulder, and so on. But these other routes have not been fully exploited. A cheery wave or kiss on the cheek might help to cement a friendship, but could not convey detailed information. For that, language is required.

Our own act

Language develops 'naturally' in humans: 'The *natural disposition* to language is universal in man, and everyone must possess the key to the understanding of all languages', said the philosopher-linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1836.⁵ 'Man does not live on bread alone: his other necessity is communication', said the linguist Charles Hockett.⁶ 'In nature's talent show we are simply a species with our own act, a knack for communicating who did what to whom by modulating the sounds we make when we exhale', wrote the psychologist Steven Pinker.⁷

Any human can learn any human language, and every human child has an overpowering urge to pick up any language he or she is exposed to at a young age.

The strong urge for humans to use language has a useful spin-off. It can be transferred from one medium to another: speech, sign or writing can all express the same message. If the spoken pathway is blocked, the need to develop language is so strong that an alternative is seized on by a child. As Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the 'fathers' of modern linguistics, said in 1915: 'What is natural to mankind is not spoken language but the faculty of constructing a language.'⁸

Language began in Africa, though exactly where is a matter of controversy. East Africa was the birthplace, according to a scenario sometimes known as the 'East Side story'.⁹ Around 3 million years ago, a major earthquake created the Great Rift Valley, splitting Africa's inhabitants into two major groups. Our cousins, the chimps, were left living and playing in the lush and tree-rich terrain of the humid west. But our ancestors, the proto-humans, were stranded in the increasingly arid east, where they were forced to adapt or die. They came down from the few trees that were left in East Africa's dry savannah, and began to walk upright. They were forced to broaden their diet, and began scavenging for meat. Better nourishment led to a bigger brain, a greater degree of social organization and, eventually, to language.

But more important than the exact location of language within Africa is the fact that all human languages are remarkably similar to one another,