"Geoff Nunberg may have the best ear in America for listening to how the English language is changing, the best mind for interpreting those changes, and the most amusing way of explaining it all."
— Terry Gross, "Fresh Air"

the way we talk now

GEOFFREY NUNBERG

COMMENTARIES ON LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
from NPR'S "FRESH AIR"

the way we talk now

COMMENTARIES ON
LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
from NPR's "Fresh Air"

GEOFFREY NUNBERG

Houghton Mifflin Company
Boston New York

Visit our website: www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Nunberg, Geoffrey, 1945-
The way we talk now: commentaries on language and culture from NPR's "Fresh air" / Geoffrey Nunberg.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-618-11602-8 — ISBN 0-618-11603-6
1. Language and languages. I. Fresh air (Radio program) II. Title.

P107 .N86 2001
400—dc21

2001024797

MV 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
Book design by Melodie Wertelet
Manufactured in the United States of America

Preface

Over the thirteen years that I've been doing language commentaries for the National Public Radio program *Fresh Air*, I've occasionally recorded several pieces at a time. So it happens now and then that I run into friends who say "I heard you on the radio yesterday" without my knowing which piece aired. When I ask which one they heard, it sometimes takes them a minute to remember; there will be an embarrassed pause, followed by something like "Gee, let me think — I was turning left off Folsom onto Ninth . . . ."

I can sympathize. That recession from consciousness is an inevitable effect of the way most of us listen to the radio nowadays, our minds darting nimbly between the program, the calls we have to make when we get to the office, and the jerk in the SUV who just cut us off. When we get out of the car, it can feel like waking up: we file away what we heard in the same part of the brain where dreams are stored.

But then, that's pretty much the way we hear most of the talk that comes at us. It lingers for a few seconds in short-term memory, and then it evanesces. Ten minutes later we can recall what we were told but not how. Even the strains and cracks of language escape our notice; like the incongruities of dreams, they're obvious only when we reflect on them in the light of day. And as with dreams, it can be hard to discern the work that talk is doing, over and above getting us from point A to point B.

The pieces collected here are efforts to snatch some insights from the torrent of our talk in the brief interval before it fades out of hearing. Taken together, the topics are a jumble, but that's probably a fair picture of our collective mind over the past decade: *PC . . . downsize . . . nigger . . . Luddite . . . community . . . yadda yadda . . . postmodern . . . Are you OK with that? . . .*

virtual . . . Ebonics . . . chad . . . hackers . . . whatever! Some of these are the keywords of our culture; others are as fleeting as the voices that come over the car radio. In either case, though, it's sometimes more interesting to sneak up on words rather than tackle them head-on. That's the way linguists like to work: we fasten on some inconspicuous detail of usage and worry it until a crack opens and we can glimpse the hurly-burly going on outside. And for these purposes it really isn't necessary to focus on the important words. You can do just as well prowling around the proletarian quarters of the vocabulary, where suffixes and interjections live out their ordinary lives. The more mundane the setting, the greater the pleasure you take in turning up some unexpected revelation; it's like happening on a Goya at a garage sale.

Those revealing minutiae can be compelling, precisely because we're normally unaware of them — they evoke the uncanny feeling we have when we realize that our unconscious has inadvertently given itself away. It doesn't take any special training or perspicacity to notice such things, once you get into the habit of cocking your ears for them. But it's useful to keep an open mind as well. I'm not one of those Panglossian linguists who think that everything happens for the best in our language. I hear a lot of talk that I am content to observe from the sidelines; for example, I personally prefer to call problems *problems* and to reserve the word *issue* for matters like universal health care. But I'm not comfortable with the style of criticism that calls attention to language only to deplore it. If you think you're smarter than the language, you're liable not to attend to what it's saying.

I've felt some qualms about publishing these radio pieces in their original form. The language of modern radio is more conversational than that of print, and the syntax is simpler — you

learn to make your sentences shorter and to avoid lists and relative clauses. And the medium leaves its mark on the structure too, for instance in the way it encourages those perky final paragraphs that let your listeners know you're about to close. But most of the pieces were simply too topical or too ephemeral to justify my rewriting them as essays, and I finally decided to publish them pretty much as they were read.

Just after World War II, Max Beerbohm published a collection of his half-hour BBC radio broadcasts. The short preface began: "I fear that an apology should be made to any reader of the six broadcasts that form the greater part of this book. They were composed for the ears of listeners; and though of course a writer should always write not less for the ear than for the eye of the reader, he does not, in writing for the ear only, express himself in just the way that would be his if he were writing for the eye as well." When you read over Beerbohm's essays, though, it's hard to tell what he felt obliged to apologize for. The syntax and diction sound much the same as in his print essays, and there is no mistaking his dapper voice.

It may be that a contemporary writer has to make more concessions to the radio form than writers did back in Beerbohm's day, when people gathered after dinner to listen attentively to the evening broadcast over a console that had no preset buttons to turn to in the event of longueur. (When Beerbohm was getting ready to sign off, he could simply say, "Ladies and gentlemen, good night," without any summative throat-clearing — all well and good when you're broadcasting live at nine in the evening but not a feasible strategy when you're taping a piece that will run on different stations at all hours.) Even so, there's no question that Beerbohm was sincere in feeling he had to apologize for publishing his broadcasts as they were written. And I find some hope in realizing that the stylistic

adjustments he made in writing for radio are not as evident to a reader as they were to him.

Over the years I've lost count of all the people who have suggested topics for radio pieces, forwarded me interesting material, or provided a fact or reference that allowed a piece to gleam with the luster of borrowed erudition. To them I'll have to extend a generic acknowledgment. But there are a few friends and colleagues with whom I conferred so frequently that they deserve special mention: Howard Bloch, Leo Braudy, Rachel Brownstein, Michelle Carter, Paul Duguid, Elisabeth Feldman, Linda Georgianna, Kathleen Hickey, Lauri Karttunen, John Lamping, Larry Masinter, Bob Newsom, Scott Parker, Joe Pickett, Ellen Prince, John Rickford, Hinrich Schuetze, Brian Smith, Tom Wasow, and Deborah Wolfe. Michelle Carter's indulgent support included reading over the manuscript of this book; thanks to her, I was able to improve some pieces that needed help and eliminate others that were past it. Katya Rice helped to organize the book and copy-edited the pieces with unfailing intelligence and attention to detail, undaunted by the grammatical and orthographic insouciance with which I had prepared these texts when I thought they were destined only for reading aloud. Jacquelyn Pope and Wade Ostrowski at Houghton Mifflin made final adjustments to the text. I owe thanks, too, to Joe Pickett and Marge Berube of Houghton Mifflin, and to my agent, Joe Spieler, for seeing that the project got safely off the launching pad.

These pieces could not have appeared without the efforts of the staff of *Fresh Air* and its executive producer, Danny Miller, who manage week in and week out to turn out a show of consistently high quality. I am especially grateful to Phyllis Myers and Naomi Person, the producers I've worked with over the

years; I thank them for their friendship, for their frequent encouragement ("Whaddya got for us this week?"), and for patiently teaching me how to write for radio. And needless to say, I am immensely grateful to Terry Gross for creating a valued space in the culture and allowing me to be a part of it.

Finally, it will be obvious to anyone who reads through this collection that I owe a special debt to Sophie Nunberg, who began to inspire pieces shortly after she was born, and whose subsequent contributions to my linguistic understanding are frequently documented in these pages.

All of these pieces were originally broadcast on *Fresh Air*, except for "Slides Rule," which appeared in *Fortune*; "Come Together, Right Now," which appeared under the title "Convergence" in *Forbes ASAP*; "Chad Row," which appeared in the *San Jose Mercury-News*; and "Shall Game," which appeared in *California Lawyer*.

Contents

Politics of the English Language

The Two R'S

Technical Terms

Business Talk

Valediction

the passing scene

The Choice of Sophie {1989}

As soon as we knew it was going to be a girl, we started looking for a name in earnest. Men's names are like men's ties: there are only about six of them, and you run into the same ones over and over again. The five most popular boys' names in 1925 were Robert, John, William, James, and Charles; in 1950, Robert, Michael, James, John, and David; in 1970, Michael, Robert, David, James, and John. All solid, unimaginative stuff. It's only in the last few years that boys' names have begun to bend to the winds of fashion. In 1982 the most popular names were Michael, Christopher, Matthew, David, and in fifth position Jason, a name that didn't even make the top fifty ten years earlier. But girls' names are traditionally much more subject to caprice. In 1925 the top five were Mary, Barbara, Dorothy, Betty, and Ruth. In 1970 they were Michelle, Jennifer, Kimberly, Lisa, and Tracy, with Mary down at number fifteen. And by 1982 the top five were Jennifer, Sarah, Nicole, Jessica, and Katherine. Mary had fallen all the way to number thirty-one, behind Megan, Erin, and Crystal. Naming a girl child is like buying her a trousseau twenty years in advance.

I wanted something vaguely old-fashioned and Middle European, sort of a feminine version of Max or Emil, which would sidle up nicely to Nunberg. But my wife is French, and wanted something that worked in that language as well. She vetoed Louise and Paula, which was probably just as well. I told her that Géraldine might be all very well in French but that it was out of the question in America for as long as there are people alive who remember Flip Wilson. We toyed with Isabelle and

Adèle, then hit on Sophie, which seemed an ideal solution. *So*-phie for New World, So-*phie* for the Old.

I had the first inkling that there might be a problem when my friend Greg was out visiting from New York. Greg is my pipeline to the cutting edge: he was listening to Zydeco and eating arugula when Jimmy Carter was president. He asked me if we had a name for the baby yet; then before I could answer he said, "Wait, don't tell me. You're going to call her Sophie." I was taken aback, to put it mildly. "How'd you guess *that*?" "Look," he said, "these things are in the air. You could be in a cave in Alaska for ten years, and then your wife gets pregnant and you say, 'I've got it—we'll call the kid Blair!' " I tried to put this out of my mind, but it made me nervous. And then just two weeks before the baby was due, we were watching an episode of *Thirtysomething* where one of the characters had gotten herself a cat and named *it* Sophie.

I began to fear that we had hit upon the Jennifer of the 90s. Strange, the way the collective mind works. Here are all these prospective parents poring over name books while they practice their breathing. They've been ruled by language all their lives, constrained to call things by the names that other people gave them. Now they have the opportunity to label one little bundle of reality with whatever name strikes their fancy, and as if by magic they all stop on the same page.

I thought about what it would be like in nursery school, with two or three other Sophies, a Lindsay and a Chelsea, and a clutch of Chloës and Zoës with diereses dancing over their curls. And what would happen forty years later? Was Sophie going to be one of those names that are so tied to a particular decade that they wind up as markers of dowdy middle age, like Mildred, Ethel, and Flo?

We went with the name anyway. Even if it turns out to be

trendy, she'll make it her own. You only have to look at her to know that. After all, Doris Day is no ordinary Doris, and Audrey Hepburn makes you rethink Audrey. And whatever you associate with Marilyn, you make at least one exception. Sophie Nunberg. You heard it here first.

Vietnamese for Travelers {1989}

Over the years, I must have collected about twenty of those little books that offer to teach "useful phrases for the traveler" in one language or another. It's a captivating genre, which encapsulates all of the fond faith of travel planning. The guides try to offer pat phrases for any eventuality, including some that are pretty implausible. The classic example is a nineteenth-century guide for French tourists in England that offered the sentence "Our coachman has been struck by lightning." Or take this one, from a book called *French Without Toil*: "That's true, the lyrics are cretinous, but the melody is agreeable." I've kept this sentence on the tip of my tongue over the years I have been visiting France, but I haven't been able to work it into a conversation.

But even phrases that sound at first as if they might come in handy turn out to have not much use in daily life. For example, the Dover guide called *Say It in Spanish* provides the sentence "Here is the check for my trunk." I like the sound of that one; I once spent a day walking around Seville repeating it like a mantra: "Ah-*kee tyay*-nay oos-*ted* el ta-*lohn* day mee ba-*ool*." But it's not something I have ever wanted to say in earnest in Spanish or any other language, and I don't think many other travelers have needed that one, either. You'd not only have to have a trunk and leave it at the railroad station checkroom, but you'd have to be reckless enough to hand the claim ticket to a complete stranger who knew no English. On the other hand, you can scour these books in vain for the phrases that you actually do find yourself needing when you are abroad, even simple things like "It's not leaking on that side" or "You might have told us about the band practice when we checked in."

A friend of mine recently sent me what has to be the most