CHAPTER ONE

Weaving and worrying

Journalism versus literature?

I was up all night worrying about myself and my connection to language. Irwin Shaw, *Beggarman, 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,

indicating a common origin. Any human can learn any other human language. This contrasts with, say, bird communication, where the quacking of a duck has little in common with the trilling of a nightingale.

A primitive form of human language was probably in use from around 75,000 BP (before the present), perhaps even earlier.[10] It was almost certainly spoken, not signed or written. This proto-language had relatively few words, and minimal grammar. Full spoken language was firmly established before 50,000 BP. Archaeological evidence guarantees this. Waves of humans, with a culture superior to that of previous groups, emigrated out of Africa, into the Middle East, then travelled westward across Europe. Others went eastward to India and the Far East.[11]

Open-endedness

Humans perpetually juggle words, stringing them together in new and inventive ways. This talent has various labels: 'open-endedness' is perhaps the clearest, though 'creativity' and 'productivity' are also found.

The free range of human language contrasts with the output of most, perhaps all other animals, who can communicate about a limited set of topics only. In his 'Ode to a nightingale', the poet John Keats envies the nightingale:

> . . . thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
> In some melodious plot
> Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
> Singest of summer in full-throated ease.[12]

Yet birds are restricted in what they can warble about. Keats's nightingale was more likely enticing a mate, or warning others off its territory, than rhapsodizing about the season: most avian trills are about mating or territorial rights.[13]

Dolphins, via their echo-locating 'clicks', can distinguish between objects so similar that humans would judge them equal. Yet even dolphins are limited in what they can communicate about: distances and sizes are the main topic of dolphin 'conversation'.[14]

The ability to respond freely is another key aspect of creativity: no human is obliged to make a fixed response to any situation. People can say whatever they want, or even stay silent. If you were offered a large slice of cake, you might reply, 'Yes please'. But you could also have said, 'No, thank you, I'm slimming', or 'That looks marvellous! You must give me the recipe' or even 'Is that really a cake? It looks like a cow-pat.' Or you might have been so busy grabbing and chewing the cake that no reply was needed. Having a limitless range of possible responses is known (technically) as 'freedom from stimulus control'.

Many animals, on the other hand, make a fixed response to a certain stimulus. Chimps find it difficult to hold back excited 'yummy food' noises if they see something which whets their appetite: Figan, a young chimp who was given some bananas, made such delighted 'food, food' grunts that other chimps arrived, and grabbed his bananas – though he later learned to largely suppress these natural sounds, and was able to scoff his bananas in private.[15]

Instinctive grammarians

The open-endedness of language has another, less obvious aspect. Humans are instinctive grammarians, in that they can think and talk and write about language itself, as when the comic poet Ogden Nash contemplates a new word he's discovered:

> Seated one day at the dictionary I was pretty weary and also pretty ill at ease,
> Because a word I had always liked turned out not to be a word at all, and suddenly I found myself among the v's.
> And suddenly among the v's I came across a new word which was a word called *velleity*.
> So the new word I found was better than the old word I lost.[16]

This ability to contemplate language, and talk about it, contrasts with spiders, which cannot stand back and admire their handiwork. All humans, even young children, 'know something about language that the spider does not know about web-weaving':[17] 'Normally developing children not only become efficient users of language, they also spontaneously become little grammarians. By contrast, spiders, ants, beavers, and probably even chimpanzees do not have the potential to analyze their own knowledge.'[18]

A useful spin-off of this ability to think about language is the further skill of weaving it into conscious creative patterns. The poet Elizabeth Jennings pictures the process of composing poetry in her poem 'The house of words':

> It is a house you visit but don't stay
> For long. Words leap from ledges. Verbs and nouns
> Ask for a sentence where they'll fit and say

What you were unaware you thought. A dance
Of meanings happens in your head.[19]

More famously, a poet's 'intolerable wrestle / With words and their meanings'[20] has been described by T. S. Eliot:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.[21]

Journalists also skilfully twist words into novel patterns, though they are usually rushing to meet deadlines: 'Journalism is literature in a hurry', is a saying attributed to Matthew Arnold.[22]

Poetry praise, media moans

Yet these two types of word weavers, literary writers (wordsmiths) and journalists (newshounds), meet with different public reactions. The former are typically highly rated: 'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree', said Ezra Pound in 1931.[23] Poetry, in particular, tends to be extravagantly praised: 'It [poetry] is a species of painting with words, in which the figures are happily conceived, ingeniously arranged, affectingly expressed, and recommended with all the warmth and harmony of colouring', asserted Oliver Goldsmith in the eighteenth century.[24]

Meanwhile, the media often face fierce criticism. Moans have bubbled up for centuries. Newsbooks, the

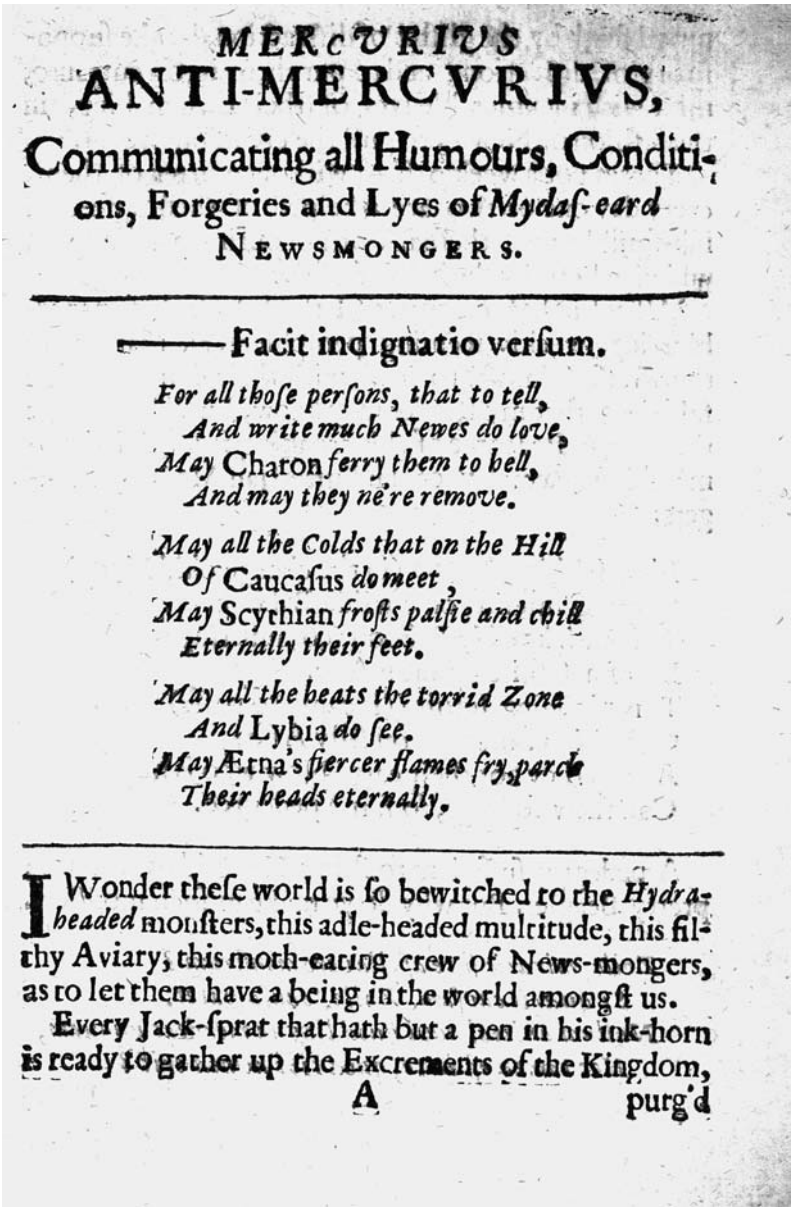
seventeenth-century forerunners of today's newspapers, were frequently condemned:

> For all those persons, that to tell,
> And write much Newes do love,
> May Charon ferry them to hell,
> And may they ne're remove,

ran a verse printed in the newsbook *Mercurius Anti-Mercurius*, in April 1648 (Fig. 1.1).[25]

The following spluttering condemnation by the fictional character, Sir Fretful Plagiary, in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play *The Critic* (1779) reveals a long-standing, though often unexamined, dislike of the press: 'The newspapers! Sir, they are the most villainous – licentious – abominable – infernal – Not that I ever read them – No –, I make it a rule never to look into a newspaper.'[26] In the early nineteenth century, Samuel Coleridge asserted: 'The habit of perusing periodical works may be properly added to Averroes' catalogue of Anti-mnemonics, or weakeners of memory (which included eating of unripe fruit, gazing on clouds, riding among a multitude of camels, frequent laughter, and reading of tombstones in churchyards).'[27]

Such moans continued. Journalism is 'the vilest and most degrading of all trades' claimed the respected philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill, writing in the nineteenth century.[28] Similar caustic comments were made by numerous others: 'Among writers, those who do the most mischief are the original fabricators of error, to wit: the men generally who write for the newspapers',[29] wrote Edward Gould, in 1867. 'The



MERCVRIVS
ANTI-MERCVRIVS,
Communicating all Humours, Conditi-
ons, Forgeries and Lyes of *Mydaſ-eard*
NEWSMONGERS.

——Facit indignatio verſum.

For all thoſe perſons, that to tell,
And write much Newes do love,
May Charon *ferry them to hell,*
And may they ne're remove.

May all the Colds that on the Hill
Of Caucaſus *do meet,*
May Scythian *froſts palſie and chill*
Eternally their feet.

May all the heats the torrid Zone
And Lybia *do ſee.*
May Ætna's *fiercer flames fry, parch*
Their heads eternally.

I Wonder theſe world is ſo bewitched to the *Hydra-headed* monſters, this adle-headed multitude, this filthy Aviary, this moth-eating crew of News-mongers, as to let them have a being in the world amongſt us.

Every Jack-ſprat that hath but a pen in his ink-horn is ready to gather up the Excrements of the Kingdom,

A purg'd

Fig. 1.1. Condemnation of newspapers.

newspaper press . . . is to a large extent in the hands of writers who have no respect for propriety or reticence of language',[30] claimed Henry Reeve, in 1889.

'In the old days men had the rack. Now they have the press',[31] the writer and wit Oscar Wilde said in 1891, and another of his vicious witticisms ran: 'There is much to be said in favour of modern journalism. By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, it keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community.'[32]

The moans and groans continued: 'Literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism that will be grasped at once',[33] said Cyril Connolly in 1938. 'Once a newspaper touches a story, the facts are lost for ever even to the protagonists', said Norman Mailer. 'I read the newspaper avidly. It is my one form of continuous fiction', is attributed to the British politician Aneurin Bevan. 'An editor is one who separates the wheat from the chaff and prints the chaff', asserted the American politician Adlai Stevenson.[34] All of these can be summed up by Saul Bellow's description of a newspaper in his novel *Herzog*, as 'A hostile broth of black print'.[35]

Complaints about the press have persisted into the twenty-first century: 'Awkward, cantankerous, cynical, bloody minded, at times intrusive, at times inaccurate, and, at times, deeply unfair and harmful to individuals and to institutions', moaned Prince Charles, the future king of England, according to a British Sunday newspaper.[36] 'We [journalists] are often seen as strawberry-nosed voyeurs, liars, drunks and cynics',[37] admitted the British journalist Andrew Marr in 2004.