

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Word Weavers

Modern journalism is often the subject of criticism and opposition. Written by a leading authority on language and the media, this engaging book suggests that view is unfair, and that journalists are in fact skilled 'word weavers' whose output is cleverly worked into planned patterns. Drawing on a range of authentic news articles, the book traces the development of journalism from its origins to the present day. Aitchison shows how contemporary news writers have inherited an age-old oral tradition, which over the centuries was incorporated into public notices, ballads and newsbooks – eventually providing the basis of the journalism we see today. She argues that, while journalists have very different aims from literary writers, their work can in no way be regarded as inferior. Entertainingly written, *The Word Weavers* provides a fascinating insight into journalistic writing, and will be enjoyed by anybody wanting to know more about media language.

JEAN AITCHISON is Emeritus Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication, Worcester College, University of Oxford. Her previous books include *The Language Web: The Power and Problem of Words* (1997), *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* (3rd edition 2003) and *The Seeds of Speech: Language Origin and Evolution* (Canto edition 2000), all published by Cambridge University Press.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Word Weavers

Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

*Emeritus Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and
Communication, University of Oxford*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths
 Jean Aitchison
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo
 Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
 Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press,
 New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521540070

© Jean Aitchison 2007

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without
 the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Aitchison, Jean, 1938–

The word weavers : newshounds and wordsmiths / Jean Aitchison.

p. cm. – (Cambridge approaches to linguistics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978-0-521-83245-8 (hardback : alk. paper)

ISBN-10 0-521-83245-4 (hardback : alk. paper)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-54007-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10 0-521-54007-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Journalism and literature. 2. Journalism–Technique. I. Title. II. Series.

PN4759.A48 2007

808'.06607–dc22 2006036799

ISBN 978-0-521-83245-8 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-54007-0 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in
 this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites
 is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

CONTENTS

List of figures ix

Preface xi

Acknowledgements xv

- 1 Weaving and worrying 1
Journalism versus literature?
- 2 Singers of tales 12
Oral narrative
- 3 The tongue of the hand 32
Speech and writing
- 4 Hangings, histories, marvels, mysteries 50
The birth of journalism
- 5 Calendars of roguery and woe 72
Daily newspapers
- 6 Story-telling 96
Narrating the news
- 7 Glimmering words 119
Boiling down and polishing

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

| Contents

- 8 Painting with words 145
Imaginative creativity
- 9 Two ideas for one 165
Exploring metaphor
- 10 The role of journalism 187
Evaluating the views
- Epilogue 213
- Notes* 215
- References* 234
- Index* 251

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

FIGURES

1.1	Condemnation of newspapers	page 9
2.1	Ancient lyre	20
3.1	Early clay tokens	36
3.2	'Tripod' tablet (section)	38
3.3	Txting (text messaging)	46
4.1	Ballad singer	52
4.2	Execution in London	54
4.3	A PERFECT DIURNALL OF THE PASSAGES In Parliament, 10 April 1643	65
5.1	Report of Nelson's death, <i>The Times</i> , 6 November 1805	77
5.2	Nelson's funeral car and funeral casket, <i>The Times</i> , 10 November 1805	80
6.1	Moscow swimming pool disaster, <i>The Times</i> , 5 February 2004	98
6.2	ANOTHER MURDER IN WHITECHAPEL, <i>The Times</i> , 1 September 1888	101
6.3	Newspaper story structure	107
7.1	The famous 'GOTCHA' Headline, <i>Sun</i> , 4 May 1982	126
7.2	Totty with top botty, <i>Sun</i> , 22 Oct. 1999	129

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x | List of figures

7.3	Murder headline formula	136
7.4	Violent death headline formula	138
7.5	SHOES DESIGNED TO MOVE YOU	143
8.1	Conjuring with language	146
8.2	Selection and combination	159
9.1	Birdiness rankings	172
9.2	My pear tree has gone bananas	178
10.1	The copycat of Casterbridge	188
10.2	Filtering raw news	200
10.3	Gatekeeping	202

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiii

Preface

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publishers gratefully acknowledge the help of the many organizations in collecting the illustrations and text extracts for this volume. Every effort has been made to obtain permission to use copyright materials; the publishers apologize for any omissions and would welcome these being brought to their attention.

Text extracts

p. v Poem 'Shooting the messenger' by Dennis O'Driscoll. Reproduced with the kind permission of Anvil Press Poetry and the *Oxford Magazine*

p. 122 Evans 2000:75. 'Edward the donkey' from *Essential English for journalists, editors and writers*. Reproduced with the kind permission of The Random House Group Ltd

p. 149 R. S. Thomas b. 1913. Four lines from 'Don't ask me', Thomas 2000:69. Reproduced with the kind permission of Bloodaxe Books Ltd

xvi | Acknowledgements

p. 158 R. S. Thomas. Ten lines from 'Vocabulary', Thomas 2000:63. Reproduced with the kind permission of Bloodaxe Books Ltd

p. 150 William Carlos Williams d. 1963. Poem 'From a play' (sixteen lines, 1942), from Williams 1988:44–5. Reproduced with the kind permission of Bloodaxe Books Ltd

p. 150 Richard Wilbur, poem 'Opposites', lines 1–4, in Wilbur 2005. Reproduced with the kind permission of Harcourt Brace

Images

Figure 1.1 Condemnation of newspapers, reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian library

Figure 3.1 Clay tokens, from David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, Second Edition*, p. 198, reproduced with the kind permission of Cambridge University Press

Figure 4.1 Robin O'Green of Burnley, in O'Connell 1999:2, 253, reproduced with the kind permission of the British Museum

Figure 4.2 'A Proper newe Ballad', *Society's Broadside*, in O'Connell 1989:90, reproduced with the kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries

Figure 4.3 A PERFECT DIURNAL OF THE PASSAGES In Parliament (Raymond 1993:474), reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian library

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83245-8 - The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvii Acknowledgements

Figure 5.1 Souvenir edition of *The Times*, 6 November 1805, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 5.2 Funeral of Nelson, *The Times*, 10 November 1805, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 6.2 ANOTHER MURDER IN WHITECHAPEL, *The Times*, 1 September 1888, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 7.1 GOTCHA. *Sun*, 4 May 1982, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 7.2 'Denise is Totty with Top Botty', *Sun*, 22 October 1999, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 9.1 Birdiness rankings, from Aitchison 2003b:56, reproduced with the kind permission of Blackwell Publishing Ltd