

recruit women to its ranks and encourage them to carry concealed handguns for protection. They have even produced deadly dinkies in designer colors—one to match every outfit! They seriously propose that the solution to this horror is to arm EVERYONE! If everyone in the whole country carries a gun, to school, work, play, worship, we shall all be safer!! The arms manufacturers are rubbing their hands in glee and dreaming about their profits.

Edmund Burke's words in 1795 are like a bell tolling for all of us now, 200 years later:

'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men TO DO NOTHING.'

Unfortunately in America many citizens who would call themselves good people are blind to this deadly weapons worship. They don't seem to care that when Good Samaritans die violently, a populace that fears instant death does not replace them. My relatives and friends in Britain shake their heads sadly and tell me about the increase in crime there. I know this is happening, but thank goodness the gun does not rule in Britain the way it does here. I hope British cool headedness and clear common sense will prevent daily life being invaded by this deadly plague of violence. I hope British physicians from their position of trust and respect will work against the American nightmare ever becoming a reality in Britain.

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Mission Woman

'A Mission woman was beaten ...

On a crowded bus, 3.30 in the afternoon
rumbling 19th near the Conservatory.

Chosen for the words 'Excuse me'
by five teens on a San Francisco MUNI bus ...
the assault came like tornado hail.

I want to know where the others' eyes were.

The last two City Good Sams, dead.

in the Sunset district, an apparent racial attack.

She fought her way off the bus

when it did its routine, followed.

'F*** you white bitch!!'

Questions remain as to why the driver ...

One shoved her down onto stained
gas-station cement, thrashed her head
on the pump island.

failed to push the police alert button.'

This pain lasts past fists and boots.

I want to know where the others' eyes were.

I know her name.

Graeme Fordyce

TALKING AND WRITING: HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE?*

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Last year having been the centenary of his death, and this being his city, it seems appropriate that I should take my text from Robert Louis Stevenson; from his *Virginibus Puerisque*, written in about 1879 and subtitled *The Truth of Intercourse*.

The difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean; not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish ... the business of life is mainly carried on by means of this difficult art of literature. Anybody, it is supposed, can say what he means; and in spite of their notorious experience to the contrary, people so continue to suppose.
R.L.S.

And then he rather contradicts himself:

Life, though largely, is not entirely carried on by literature. We are subject to physical passions and contortions; the voice breaks and changes, and speaks by unconscious and winning inflections ...

To explain in words takes time and a just and patient hearing ... but the look or the gesture explains things in a breath ...

Not long ago I wrote a letter to a friend which came near involving us in a quarrel; but we met, and in personal talk I repeated the worst of what I had written, and added worse to that; and with the commentary of the body it seemed not unfriendly either to hear or say.

When I began to write and then to administer and teach, I fell on a remarkable essay on *Utterance and Text* by a Canadian academic, David R. Olson.¹ It has influenced much that I have done, and thought about since. A number of unattributed references to Chomsky, Paiget and Popper in what follows are shamelessly lifted from Olson's paper. I am not an expert on linguistics, education or philosophy and I will not plunge into these deep waters beyond the point at which I think I can swim.

In beginning to adumbrate the difference between utterance and text, Olson starts with Martin Luther's passionate statement, at the beginning of the 16th century, that the Bible was *Sui ipsius interpres*. The written word was its own interpreter. It **meant** what it **said**. And let us throw a tiny spanner in the works by observing that the good bishop Usher was able to deduce from the **truth** of the written Bible that the world, as calculated from Old Testament genealogies, must have been created in 4,001 BC.

Why was Luther's an important statement? We had had for almost 2,000 years the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. These, however, because plays have to be 'taken off the page' by actors, were, in Olson's terms **utterances** transcribed into **text**. They were not written as Text.

Such writings, as there had been long before 400 BC and thereafter, were essentially guides to memory. Aristotle's *Poetics* were simple rough lecture notes. Writings began as ideograms, then became almost words—but lacking vowels—

*Based upon a talk given at a meeting of the Senior Fellow's Club in the College on 23rd March 1995.

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then, with the Greeks, phonemic alphabets. Signs that reproduced what one could say.

Before Luther's time, there were very few books in common usage. An early Elizabethan household, however grand, might hold half a dozen books. Libraries, in the sense of 'private libraries', 'gentlemen's libraries', arrived in the 17th century. Until then books had been in the custody of the Supervisor of the Dionysia, or the Magister Ludus, or the High Priest, or the Abbot. They remained there, in spite of Luther, up until Shakespeare's time. He did not bother to publish his plays, but Hemmings and Condell did in 1627. Luther, one of the world's great revolutionaries, was at his most revolutionary in inveighing against the need to seek a Priest to tell you what a book **meant**. He was right, but only half right; as Bishop Usher had demonstrated to us.

Shakespeare, who wrote plays designed for theatrical performance, is not *sui interpretes ipsius*. His works were written for actors, and for good actors. They are replete with encoded messages about how to speak them, how to move, where to stand. There are those who say they prefer reading Shakespeare to going to plays, but I know or, perhaps, believe, that you cannot understand a Shakespeare play without hours of study, preferably in the context of directing the play with actors. There is just so much there.

Clive James has said that to attempt to exhaust the semantic content of a line of Shakespeare is to try to drink Lake Windermere through a straw. The greatness of the play Hamlet lies in the inexhaustible possibilities of re-reading, and re-interpreting it in different generations, within different cultures.

So why Luther, and the importance of his remark? After Luther, **text**, what was written down, rather than **utterance**, what was spoken, won increasing dominance. In the late 16th, and 17th century printing took over from oral and spoken communication. Printing and reading then became our way of learning, as it had not been previously. We buy or borrow books. We may need a little help from time to time but, as Luther maintained, the meaning is there in the text.

In our own times Chomsky has gone further: 'The meaning of a sentence', he seems to say, 'is independent of its function and context'. Everything that a sentence holds of meaning is there in the words of the sentence. One can see the progression from Luther to Chomsky as a steady movement towards the greater autonomy of the written text. But what Chomsky says is nonsense. The sentence 'Would you be kind enough to pass me the salt?' within the sentence is clearly an inquiry about the generosity of spirit of the recipient of the question and his or her preparedness to pass the salt. But we all know that the sentence means: 'Pass the bloody salt'. In its function and context its meaning is simply not enshrined in the sentence.

So on one side we have a division between the professors of linguistics and their structuralist colleagues. They are progressively analysing, and deconstructing our sentences, allowing them only to mean what is specifically there **in the text**, whether or not it is what the author intended. On the other side are those who think that saying something is a means of communicating with a fellow human being, who fortunately happens to share our language.

But let us not demean the written text. Karl Popper argued that western science, even western civilisation (whether we admire it or not) is, in effect, a form of literature. It depends and always has depended on someone writing

down precisely what he has discovered. That such-and-such has been observed to happen in such-and-such circumstances. A little later and a thousand miles away, someone else will say 'Yes, but not under minus 100 degrees centigrade'. So science progresses. In Popper's phrase it is the very refutability of a proposition that qualifies it as science. If you cannot refute it, it is nothing but a wild unprovable speculation.

If you say 'All swans are white' someone else can report that he has seen some black swans. Your statement was scientific. It was also refutable. But if you say that swans, like men, have souls: you are saying something that can neither be proved nor refuted. It is not a scientific statement.

The kind of precision, necessary to scientific statements and unique to the text and to the printed word, has given us most of our current comforts; central heating, aeroplanes, computers and motor cars. But this dominance of the written text has not been confined to science. It probably reached its zenith with the great English essayists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. That elegant and precise movement from observation to proposition, to deduction to conclusion, became the ideal model for all our ways of thinking. It was the Enlightenment that thirled us to rational thought elegantly expressed. From the writers of the Enlightenment, and from the industrial revolution, sprang the whole of what we call modern civilisation, or sometimes manifest destiny (the idea that God had given us the power to understand and the right to impose our understanding on His world for our, and the world's, benefit. However, the few North American Indians left, to take one example, may view this unkindly). Are we so sure, any longer, of the rightness of our so-called civilisation?

Our educational system for years and years has been moving to a style of learning solely based on the language of the written text, almost to the exclusion of utterance. We teach our children always to move from A to B and thence to the conclusion of C. We teach them to think in a text-based fashion. We teach them to speak a written language.

Children learn fast. Olson, leaning I think on Piaget, tells us that very young children quickly understand 'Mary hit John' and 'John had more than Mary', but it is late in their childhood before they can deduce from these statements that 'Mary was hit by John' and that 'Mary had less than John', **unless they know the context**. They quickly understand real life; but they cannot analyse the subtlety of the text. And yet they are persuaded, too young I think, to abandon their inherent, natural talent for understanding real life and switch to a form of communication which is alien to them. Thomas Sutcliffe, the television reviewer of the Independent wrote 'The widespread belief that cookery is a matter of following the written instructions is one of the reasons it's so unnerving to be asked out for dinner in this country'.

Utterance, how we talk to each other, has been neglected of recent years. As opposed to text it has its own values. When Romeo suddenly realises the nexus into which he has fallen after the murder of Tybalt, he doesn't explain his anxieties and fears, his regrets, his despair. He doesn't lay plans for escaping from the police, informing Juliet, manufacturing an alibi. He says '**Oh, I am fortune's fool**', a line so brief, so grand in scope, so aptly alliterative and evocative, so immediate and memorable, that an audience of a thousand different individuals immediately, and by some process, not surely rational, shares his predicament.

In the old American play *No Time for Sergeants*, the rookie from away

beyond the sticks prepares for his first night in barracks. A distant bugle sounds 'Lights Out'. With the broadest of smiles our rookie remarks: 'Somebody brung his trumpet', and we love him from that moment. Not because of what he has said but because of what he has uttered.

Oral statements, utterances, to be memorable—or memorisable—have, for three thousand years needed some kind of poetic shape or form. Written texts have no such requirement. They are instantly transferable by book or fax. Old poems, old plays, old sagas survived by sticking in the mind. I could go on happily quoting Shakespeare, Yeats or Larkin to remind you of the richness of oral utterances. I shall not do so. But, I would like to demonstrate the breadth of human, humane, face to face utterance, and its virtues, without deprecating the precise virtues of what we have agreed to call text. Let me take Hamlet's '**Thou would'st not think how ill all's here about my heart**'. That amazing string of monosyllables, apart from 'about', the one duosyllable, which seems to wrap itself round the word heart is, surely, a profounder human communication than, say 'Yeah, I guess I've got a kind of psychosomatic cardiac arrhythmia' which is, maybe, more accurate and specific.

A few weeks ago I watched a sheepdog trial on television. For the less bucolic perhaps I should explain what happens at sheepdog trials. My family and I have lived for some years in Peeblesshire and used to go to these events. The shepherd, with his amazingly intelligent dog, goes and stands at a post at the end of an enormous field. Shortly, seven silly sheep are released from a wooden pen a quarter of a mile away. The first, and most moving, moment is when the shepherd whistles and the dog races round the edge of the field and gets behind the little group of astonished sheep. He drives them through a gate, takes them up to his master, turns them, takes them to a cabin, where they are persuaded to go in. The master then lets them out of a back door. They are taken to a drawn circle, where the problem is to remove one of two red-collared sheep, bring them together again and, finally, pen them in a small wooden enclosure. This is done by whistles and occasional shouts. But sheep being neurotic and not wildly intelligent, the master must keep his voice down; and the dog must be alert to any minuscule sign of rebellion from any one of the flock. I could not begin to understand the levels of communication present between the master and the dog, let alone between the dog and the sheep, but I suspect that they challenge Chomsky's view that the communication is totally enshrined in the spoken sounds, in the words of sentence, independent of function.

I suspect that there are depths in our possibilities of communication which the written text cannot convey. What I have called utterance is less competent than a written text to detail minutely specific arguments; but it can bring an audience like the seven sheep together and through the right fences; perhaps, just for the moment, this is the essence of what we have called utterance. It can bring a group together in a different kind of understanding. When we talk to each other, we are doing something different from writing a thesis. We are communicating in an older and quite different way.

I want to finish with a little story from Neil Gunn. It is a story I often told to my drama classes in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, notably after I had been away for a couple of weeks and a brilliant lady professor had taken my class and enchanted them with amazingly erudite footnotes to, as I remember, *Henry IV Part One*. They had filled their notebooks which had been left aside in confusion

during my lectures; (there is an old conspiracy between young students and old teachers: 'Tell us, please, what we need to know for the exams'. Footnotes to *Henry IV* seemed just the thing). Neil Gunn's story is told by Old Hector to Young Art:²

There was a time before now, began Old Hector in the storyteller's voice, when there lived an old man who had the Druid's knowledge. In truth he was a Druid himself, but though he had the knowledge, he hadn't the great wisdom, which is the wisdom of all the ages. The only thing in the wide world at that time which had the wisdom was a salmon that lived in a pool, in a river. There were some hazel trees that grew over this pool, and on the hazel trees grew nuts, and these nuts were the Nuts of Knowledge. As the seasons came and the seasons went, time out of mind, the nuts would be falling quietly into the pool where the salmon lay. Well did the Druid know this, and he knew, moreover, that if only he could catch the salmon and eat him, then he would have himself the great wisdom of the salmon. Well, on a day of days, who should come along to the Druid to get lessons but young Finn McCoul . . .

Finn McCoul catches the salmon and cooks it, but by burning his thumb on the hot fish and putting it in his mouth to cool it, he gets the wisdom before the Druid can eat the fish.

I told the story to my students, suggesting that the splendid lady professor was scattering, as from Maxim gun, hazel nuts of knowledge. Whereas I, to the best of my modest abilities, was trying to show them the shadow, under the peaty bank, where, perhaps, lay the salmon of wisdom.

Another profound, thought from Gunn takes us back, to the Enlightenment and the awful dominance of rational thought.

Too much critical analysis of a specific experience can drain its virtues away . . . Reason's noise. One who makes too much noise will never see a fawn in a glen. But there are fawns in glens.³

When I was doing my national service in the RAMC up at Fort George, there was a young soldier who had a little tuberculous lesion of the top of his left lung. We decided to send him down to Mearns Kirk. Now, I knew that a previous patient had been deeply shocked to arrive at Inverness station to find his carriage labelled in large red letters; 'Infectious Disease: Keep Out' or some such. So I went round in the evening and explained to him in great detail that, although he had tuberculosis it was a small lesion, that chemotherapy would sort it out in a few months and that 'The White Plague' was a thing of the past. He seemed happy enough but, just to be sure I went round again in the morning and asked him if he had accepted what I said and wasn't worried about having TB. 'TB!!!' he cried. 'Is that what I've got?'

I had been reading too many textbooks.

Perhaps we should talk to each other more.

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- ² Neil M. Gunn, *Young Art and Old Hector*. Faber 1942.
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