English Department

Preparation for A-Level English Language & Literature

Reading Tasks

Read the Introduction, Beginning and Ending chapters (do feel free to read more if you wish) of *John Mullen's* - *How Novels Work*

Then

Read Fitzgerald's – *The Great Gatsby* or

Bronte's , Jane Eyre'

and one of the following texts;

Bill Bryson's - *Bill Bryson's Mother Tongue*

Introducing Linguistics

Set up a username on CommonLit.org and read one fiction and non-fiction extract and complete the quizzes that follow.

Finally – Read and attempt to learn the key terms in the glossary.

Writing Tasks

1. **Re-creative** – re-write the beginning or ending of *Jane Eyre* or *The Great Gatsby*. You might consider characterisation, setting, narrative voice, structure or a dominant theme. (Word count: 1000 -1500 approx.)

   OR:

2. **Critical Response** – write a magazine article explaining why two of your chosen texts should be read by all students preparing for A-level study of English. (Word count: 1000 – 1500 approx.)

Then

3. **Linguistic Foundations** – select 3 glossary terms that you did not know before reading them and explain why you think these 3 are the most important when analysing language. (Word count 500 max)

Fleming, Ian, *From Russia With Love* (1957; Penguin, 2004).
Franzen, Jonathan, *The Corrections* (2001; Fourth Estate, 2002).
Haddon, Mark, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003; Vintage, 2004).
Highsmith, Patricia, *Ripley Under Ground* (1974; Vintage, 1999).
Hollinghurst, Alan, *The Spell* (1998; Vintage, 1999).
Hornby, Nick, *How to Be Good* (2001; Penguin, 2002).
le Carré, John, *The Constant Gardener* (2001; Coronet, 2001).
Levy, Andrea, *Small Island* (2004; Review, 2004).
McEwan, Ian, *Atonement* (2001; Vintage, 2002).
Mitchell, David, *Cloud Atlas* (2004; Sceptre, 2004).
O'Hagan, Andrew, *Personality* (2003; Faber, 2004).
Pamuk, Orhan, *My Name Is Red* (2001; Faber, 2002).
Patchett, Ann, *Bel Canto* (2001; Fourth Estate, 2002).
Rendell, Ruth, *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* (2001; Arrow, 2002).
Roth, Philip, *The Human Stain* (2000; Vintage, 2001).
Safran Foer, Jonathan, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002; Penguin, 2003).
Shields, Carol, *Unless* (2002; Fourth Estate, 2003).
Smith, Zadie, *White Teeth* (2000; Penguin, 2002).
Spark, Muriel, *Aiding and Abetting* (2000; Penguin, 2001).
Swift, Graham, *Last Orders* (1996; Picador, 1996).
Tartt, Donna, *The Secret History* (1992; Penguin, 1993).
Trevor, William, *The Hill Bachelors* (2000; Penguin, 2001).
Yates, Richard, *Revolutionary Road* (1961; Methuen, 2001).

Introduction

SOME books we read once, but some we go back to. The literature we most value is what we revisit. For special kinds of writing, repetition can be the whole point. The intense pleasures of poetry are usually understood as coming from rereadings. Popular poetry anthologies and radio programmes enact these pleasures, reminding us of what we already knew as much as introducing us to what is yet unknown. In the ultimate example of being able to return to what we once read, we may even have poems or parts of poems by heart, in store. In rare cases, readers will have fragments of novels—resonant opening lines, perhaps—preserved in their memories. When the novelist William Thackeray first dined with Charlotte Brontë, he discomposed her by quoting from memory, as he smoked an after-dinner cigar, some cigar-smoke-inspired lines from *Jane Eyre* (1847)—lines that lead us to the heroine's meeting with Rochester in the garden of Thornfield, and to his first declaration of love for her. 'Sweet-briar and southernwood, jasmine, pink, and rose have long been yielding their evening sacrifice of incense: this new scent is neither of shrub nor flower; it is—I know it well—it is Mr Rochester's cigar' (vol. ii, ch. 8, 279).[1] Thackeray had been gripped by Brontë's novel, first reading it right through in a single day, and then returning to savour it.[2] Few readers will have extracts from their favourite novels seared on the memory like this, but all will know the gratification of coming again upon a passage that made some special impression on a previous reading.

Going back to a novel that you have read before marks it out.

The obvious definition of a 'classic' (a label still important to publishers of fiction) is a book that readers keep rereading. Given the sheer productivity of the fiction industry, it becomes more important than ever for any reader to possess a core of memorable novels. These are the books that have an afterlife, that can be gone back to. However, the process of returning to what has already been read, common enough in classrooms, is rarely imitated in most publicly accessible talk about novels. In newspapers, or on radio or television, analysing fiction most often takes the form of reviewing. This is necessarily a criticism of first impressions, largely aimed at potential rather than actual readers of any given novel. It is useful and often entertaining, but literary criticism should be something different. It should mean going back over a book you thought you knew, finding the patterns, or the inconsistencies, that you half-glimpsed before. Writing the newspaper articles on which this book is based, I was returning to novels that I had read. If the definition of a 'classic' is that it is a book that returns to life on every rereading, it seemed worth putting some contemporary fiction to this test, a test that a review cannot attempt.

Reviewers do at least write for the general reader. Many academic literary critics do not. There are kinds of literary scholarship that are valuable without having any wide appeal, yet there are also varieties of critical writing that are designedly inaccessible. Academic literary criticism, for the last two decades and more, has distinguished itself by its specialism and its obscurity. This has partly been thanks to the growth of literary theory, an avowedly more strenuous and certainly more hermetic way of talking about books. It made literary discourse forbidding not for its erudition or antiquarianism but for its style. Structuralism and then post-structuralism decreed that a special vocabulary was required to discuss texts (itself a term that was now de rigueur) in a properly analytical manner. Though a few of its phrases ('the death of the author', 'deconstruction') have escaped into the cultural bloodstream, its

arguments have been designed to appeal only to an academic readership. Yet it is not just literary theory. There has been a more general tendency for the writing of literary academics to retreat into narrower and narrower specialisms. Articles and books are written to advance careers, to claim their spaces in university libraries, but not to find readers. There has always been a gap between academic literary criticism and the common reader; the great academic critics of the earlier twentieth century, like William Empson or F. R. Leavis, were no easy read. Equally, there have been excellent academic literary critics writing over the last couple of decades—John Carey, Frank Kermode, David Lodge, John Sutherland—who can all be read with enjoyment by anyone with an interest in the books they discuss. Yet it is undeniable that the discussion of literature in universities, and in the books and articles written by those employed there, became peculiarly sealed off from the rest of the world around the beginning of the 1980s.

This despite the growth of what might be thought of as popular forms of literary discussion. Apart from the ever-expanding world of reviewing, there are also enough literary festivals, readings, and public discussions of new writing to satisfy the most avid follower of current trends within fiction. The business of literary prizes, but especially prizes for fiction, fills newspaper pages and provides items on national television news. The rival merits of contemporary novelists become the stuff of public debate, however facile that debate might sometimes be. The best known, though not the richest, of these prizes, the Booker Prize, has lent itself as an adjective to characterize a certain kind of novel: 'Booker Prize fiction' is a species of ambitious literary writing that can still lay claim to a large readership. Since Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* won the prize in 1981, and announced a new generation of novelists, this prize and others have regularly focused attention on serious recent fiction. And the talk is not just amongst readers. Never have authors, dispatched by their publishers on wearying tours

to advertise their latest works, explained so often what their novels are about.

The Novel—its condition, its future, its new authors—has become a potential news item. Some of this is created by publicists and is mere hype, but it is not all commercial manipulation. The growth of reading groups, for instance, was not created by marketing departments. The extraordinary burgeoning of these groups suggests not just a hunger for reading, but—rather stranger—an appetite for critical discussion. The keen private delight given by a good book is not necessarily enough for many readers. They also want to talk about them and to test their impressions. Behind the reading group is what might be thought of as a tenet of literary criticism: that you do not necessarily know what you think of a book until you have heard what others think. Reading groups are everywhere. Publishers target them, newspapers survey them, broadcasters mimic them. There have been several novels based on reading groups and one droll television comedy series. Though reading groups may choose to talk about, say, books of history or biography, mostly they discuss novels.

This seems natural. We all share a sense that fiction has a unique capacity to live on in, even form, our imaginations. Critics in the earliest days of the English novel, in the eighteenth century, worried about this new kind of book exactly because it seemed to take possession of its readers. In their heated imaginations, though not in fact, these readers were mostly susceptible young women, who would become dangerously absorbed in these narratives. Unable, in the intensity of their reading, to distinguish beguiling fiction from reality, they would be misled into any number of follies or vices. 'Perhaps were it possible to effect the total extirpation of novels,' wrote Fanny Burney in her preface to *Evelina* (1778), 'our young ladies in general, and boarding-school damsels in particular, might profit from their annihilation' (8). However, 'since the distemper they have spread seems incurable', bidding defiance

to 'the medicine of advice or reprehension', is it not just as well for the author to provide her own attempt at a novel 'which may be read, if not with advantage, at least without injury'? Burney's irony might just about have been read as proper modesty by contemporary moralists. We can laugh at their concerns more openly than Burney could. Yet the words we often use to praise a novel—*gripping*, *compelling*, *riveting*—confirm their belief that novels have a unique ability to seize their readers. 'I could not put it down' is a compliment almost invariably paid to a novel. With the power to absorb comes the possibility of critical judgement and critical argument. Each novel reader has an experience of the novel to describe, and even mere partisanship can generate a kind of critical analysis. Novels seem uniquely open to such analysis. They seem to invite it.

Reading groups provided the impetus for this book. It grew from a weekly column, 'Elements of Fiction', in the Review section of *The Guardian*. For four weeks in a row I would discuss aspects of a chosen novel. The aim was to see each week how some basic element of fiction—chapter titles, say, or characterization or dialogue—was used. I would try to illuminate the chosen novel by introducing comparable examples from other novels—usually from classic, sometimes from popular, fiction. The column was explicitly addressed to reading groups, and I made some effort to look at books they were likely to choose. All the novels were in paperback, and there was a leaning towards what is often called 'literary fiction'. The point was not to recommend the chosen novel (though I did not choose any books that I did not either like or admire); the point was to take a book that was in the public current of attention and to see what critical analysis could reveal about how it worked. The book came before the topics were chosen; the particular novel dictated the critical vocabulary that I explored. Though this meant that there were one or two critical terms that I would have liked to discuss and never did, I hope that it also meant that I did not come to the fiction with pre-formed analyses.

I have completely rewritten the original articles, but also rearranged them. They are not now grouped by the novels to which they are attached, but by the topics that they explore. I have written new introductions for the different chapters, making them, I hope, interesting whether or not the reader knows all the novels discussed. This book is addressed to anyone who is interested in the close analysis of fiction. I try to make a flexible critical vocabulary available to the general reader, to show that there is something between the rapid paraphrases and judgements of book reviews, on the one hand, and the recondite analyses of academic literary criticism on the other hand. It is striking how much of the talk about fiction that happens on radio or television, or at literary festivals, is talk about content. So often, a novel is discussable for what it is about. One emphasis that I have tried to carry over from academic literary criticism is the emphasis on form and technique. A novel absorbs us, I would say, not because of what it is about, but because of how it is written.

So this is a book about matters of form: how novels work rather than what they contain. It is here that a critic might have something to offer, apart from just another opinion. For criticism can make visible techniques and effects of which we are often only half-aware as we read.

Topics will sometimes appear familiar to most novel readers (plot, dialogue, location) and sometimes sound more technical (metanarrative, prolepsis, amplification). The vocabulary is less important than the patterns it can make visible. Equally, I think it is often revealing to put recent novels alongside novels from the past. So my hope has been to show not just how one particular novel is put together, but also how some knowledge of the history of fiction-making might make this clearer. When I discuss Nick Hornby's use of a female narrator I also explore Daniel Defoe's; I set Ian McEwan's use of weather against Austen's and Hardy's, and so on. Novelists themselves are often sharply aware of literary tradition and have been influenced by

the novels they have read—or, indeed, studied, for a number of the novelists whose work I discuss turn out to have degrees in English Literature. Any historical perspective shows that novels do have recurrent preoccupations, and that even innovations and experiments often have their precedents. The analogies I draw with 'classic' fiction had to be brutally abbreviated in the original *Guardian* articles; I have expanded them in this book.

In my choice of novels I was happy to be influenced by popular taste and to take books that were, for some reason, in the public gaze. This might mean that I chose a novel that had just won a literary prize or unexpectedly appeared on best-seller lists. It might also mean that I looked at an earlier novel by an author who had just produced an admired or castigated new work of fiction. (Arguments between reviewers about Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* (2003), for instance, prompted me to look at *Money*.) So there was often some sense of reappraising a writer's work in the light of later success (or failure). My practice of taking fiction that seemed of the moment led to some less predictable choices. The release of a new James Bond film made me think of examining one of Fleming's original novels (happily, just as it had been repackaged by Penguin as a 'Modern Classic'). I did consider removing such works from this book so that it would appear more clearly contemporary, but it would have been false to my own enthusiasms and also perhaps the miscellaneousness that characterizes the choices of reading groups.

I could not choose the latest novels because I took only works that were in print in paperback, aware that this is usually a criterion for reading groups. Though this began as a convenience, it had a useful critical consequence. It meant that, unlike a reviewer, I was often talking about a novel that had already been received, argued over, read, and reread. From the responses that I had from some of the readers of the newspaper, this meant that I was indeed sometimes looking at a book that they were talking about in a reading group. More generally, the

point was to take a book that some of the readers of the column might have read, a book that had been in circulation. This was bringing to journalism an academic habit, the engagement with what is already known.

Journalism, especially when it involves the weekly fitting of an idea to a predetermined space, compels succinctness. This seems to me a blessed discipline: expatiation is certainly an academic vice. Only in one respect did I find that the discipline sometimes distorted, rather than merely restrained, what I had to say. The word limit meant that quotation was severely restricted. Yet the space for quotation is one of the necessary privileges of criticism. Quotation, generous where necessary, is at the heart of any worthwhile attempt to explore a literary work. From Coleridge to Christopher Ricks, some of the best of all English critics work from quotation, holding what has been written up to the light. I have wanted to catch particulars in the novels I was examining, and to do so by looking closely at characteristic extracts. So where I have expanded articles for this book, it is often by fuller quotation from the novels that I have discussed.

When I set out, I wanted my 'Elements of Fiction' articles to show that literary criticism could be intelligible without being glib. Literary criticism should be a way of rediscovering what makes a book live, and rereading the individual novels in order to write this book has often changed what I thought of them. Some of them were more responsive to the test of revisiting than others, and the reader will sometimes discern where I have found this. I have not avoided words of praise and dispraise: there are critical judgements in the book, but these are usually between more and less successful uses of fiction's elements. I am not trying to recommend a canon of contemporary fiction, but to show how a critical vocabulary can make our opinions lucid.

1
Beginning

THE Novel, that most accessible, democratic of literary forms, must establish its contract with its reader. It may be helped or hindered by all sorts of extraneous influences: cover design, encrustations of quotation from admiring reviewers, and the like. But it must also make its own way in the world. For the first half-century and more of its self-conscious existence, the Novel acknowledged its novelty as a type of writing. Samuel Richardson did this in anxious earnest, prefacing the first edition of his first novel, *Pamela* (1740), with a letter from an admirer declaring that the work that followed would 'infallibly be looked upon as the hitherto much-wanted Standard or Pattern for this Kind of Writing'.[1] In the preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742), his contemporary and rival Henry Fielding announced with mock-solemnity the novelty of 'this Species of Writing, which I have affirmed to be hitherto unattempted in our Language' (8). This sense of unprecedentedness still lingers, even in a world where thousands of novels are published every year and where a novel seems the easiest kind of book for a literate person with a computer to write. One peculiarity of novels when they first arrived in the eighteenth century was that they told new stories rather than recomposing old ones. Their characters were, supposedly, singular; each novel had to introduce its readers to a new world. This has not changed.

The very permissiveness of those rules by which novels are written makes it necessary for a novelist to show a reader, in the beginning, what kind of thing he or she is reading, what he or she has signed up to. In his *Autobiography*, published

posthumously in 1883, Anthony Trollope was characteristically straightforward about what he had learnt about being a novelist. 'It is the first necessity of his position that he make himself pleasant.'[2] He meant that a novelist who wanted to sell books should give pleasure, but also that he or she should be welcoming or accommodating. And this was partly a matter of how to begin, how to introduce your characters, and perhaps yourself, to your readers. Trollope's own novels usually commence with a self-conscious business of introduction—with explanations of what we need to know (capsule histories of leading characters, for instance) and reassurances about what we will later find out. Often, in a manner invented by Fielding, Trollope will begin by talking about the reader or readers of 'these pages' (*The Way We Live Now*, 1874–5, ch. i, 1) and making himself present to us as an arranger of his material.

This manner is now extremely rare in novels. Those that do not use framing devices (see below) are likely to thrust us straight into a story rather than introduce us to it. Trollope seems to have believed that the novelist owed the reader the courtesy of introducing his material. He was notably hostile to the so-called 'sensation novels' of his day (exemplified by works like Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, 1859–60), and their habit of commencing with some startling incident. At the opening of his own novel *Is He Popenjoy?* (1878)—itself exploiting public interest in a sensational court case of the day—he explicitly deprecated this 'plan of jumping at once into the middle' (ch. i). For the conscientious novelist, 'the story must be made intelligible from the beginning, or the real novel readers will not like it'. 'Real novel readers' are presumably those who have long been dedicated to novel-reading, as opposed to those inexperienced consumers readily entertained by the tricks of sensation fiction.

While it is no longer common to meet a welcoming, gentlemanly author, ready with explanations, on the first page of a novel, we still need to be made acquainted with the tenets—the

ground rules, as it were—of the fictional world into which we are entering. Our expectations are being shaped before we even read the novel's first sentence. Those introductory elements that usher us in to the main narrative are already guiding our habits of interpretation. Every novel will have at least a title to instruct us. Once titles, as given on title pages, were commonly lengthy and packed with information. The title page of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1721), for instance, informed the book's first readers that it contained

> The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, &c. Who was Born in NEWGATE, and during a Life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a *Whore*, five times a *Wife* (whereof once to her own Brother), Twelve Year a *Thief*, Eight Year a Transported *Felon* in *Virginia*, at last grew *Rich*, liv'd *Honest*, and died a *Penitent*. *Written from her own* MEMORANDUMS.

This full title, with its pretence of documentary veracity as well as its sensationalism, is clearly part of the fiction (though there is no reason to think that it was composed by Defoe rather than his publisher). It encouraged eighteenth-century readers to associate Moll with notorious criminals and with the genre of criminal autobiographies that was already popular at the time. It also encouraged the reader to ask not 'What happens?' but 'How could all *this* happen?'

With its original title, Defoe's novel looks like something rather different from the literary classic that it has become. We might note that the original, purporting to be a version of the anti-heroine's own story, does not even have Defoe's name upon it. Its place on the library shelf was decided by publishers and readers long after its author's death. Few other novels have carried quite so much information on their title pages as this, but many originally had longer titles than those by which we now know them. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–66) was in fact titled *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,*

Gentleman. This is a mock-title, suitably inflated for a narrator whose fate will be shown to have been made by 'small accidents' and apparently inconsequential events. The knowing reader will already be keyed to the novel's method of comic deflation. Later novels honed down titles, but commonly employed explanatory, occasionally teasing subtitles. Until the early nineteenth century, these had often composed a double title, with the second part being given as an alternative to the first: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded*, Fanny Burney's *Evelina, or, a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). These seem to have avowed designs upon us. They prod us as to register the significance of the fictions on which we embark.

Without that commanding 'or' between the parts of a title, a subtitle becomes more reticent—a suggestion rather than a command. Such subtitles are fairly common in the nineteenth century: Thackeray's *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (1847–8); Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story* (1864–6); George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871–2). All these subtitles are calculated to nudge the readers and to communicate something of the novelist's deeper purposes. Most emphatic is perhaps Thomas Hardy's 'A Pure Woman' appended to the main title of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). This steer to our interpretation is all the stronger given the notorious uncertainty of what happens to Tess when Alec d'Urberville takes advantage of her on that night in the Chase. Is she seduced? Or is it rape? Whatever our suppositions, she remains 'pure' in her author's mind, though tragically not in her husband's. Hardy's subtitle is defiant in the face of imagined censoriousness. Such once conventional control of our preconceptions is now rare.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries almost any self-respecting novelist would next provide a preface, explaining and probably vindicating his or her purposes. For many decades these were commonly defensive, the novel being widely

regarded as a 'low' or irresponsible genre. In her famous defence of novels and novel-reading in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Austen refers wryly to 'that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding' (vol. i, ch. v, 21). She might have had in mind her successful contemporary Maria Edgeworth, whose novel *Belinda* (1801) she singles out for praise, for this began with a preface announcing, 'The following work is offered to the public as a Moral Tale—the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel.' You might suspect irony, but the subsequent explanation—'so much folly, errour, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination'—banishes that thought. Later prefaces were more confident. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837–8) comes to many modern readers with an Author's Preface written for the third edition of 1841. It is an angry and righteous response to those critics who had taken exception to the novel's 'Newgate' subject matter.

> It is, it seems, a very coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London's population; that Sikes is a thief, and Fagin a receiver of stolen goods; that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute.
>
> I confess I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil. (xxv)

We are given a lengthy polemic unimaginable from a novelist now. When Dickens discusses his depiction of Nancy, who aids Oliver and is murdered for it by Sikes, he arrives at an assertion from which even other Victorian novelists might have flinched.

> It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. (xxviii)

This was not to be the only time that Dickens composed a

preface to one of his novels as a rejoinder to his critics, and he was not the only novelist to do so. Frequently in the nineteenth century, as a novel was reprinted in subsequent editions, prefaces would be changed or supplemented, as an author mounted counter-attacks against critics or provided an antidote to misunderstanding. In some cases novelists' prefatory explanations after the event were elaborate. The prefaces to individual novels that Henry James composed for the New York edition of his fiction are substantial works of criticism. Conrad's, similarly composed for a collected edition of his fiction, are accounts of how the ideas for his books came to him. So in his Author's Note for *Nostromo* (1904), Conrad remembers how its germ was a 'vagrant anecdote' heard as a young sailor in the Gulf of Mexico, a story rediscovered 'twenty-six or twenty-seven years afterwards' in a 'shabby volume' in a second-hand bookshop (xl). It is as if, by showing how a novel originated, he can prove it to be, as he says in his 1920 Author's Note to *The Secret Agent* (1907), 'a perfectly genuine piece of work' (xxxvii).

A few novelists of the later twentieth century have acted in Conrad's manner. In the early 1970s Graham Greene composed introductions to the individual volumes of his collected works, published by Bodley Head. Reminiscing about the circumstances in which a novel was written, these made the personality of the author a dominant presence. Often they are droll: the 1974 Introduction to *Stamboul Train* (1932) tells us how its impecunious author could not at the time afford to travel beyond Cologne, explaining why, in the novel, there are 'more details on this first stretch of the line than I had the confidence to include later'.[3] Some of the Vintage paperback editions of Greene's novels currently available include the novelist's own introductions; others substitute introductions written by celebrity writers (Zadie Smith, Paul Theroux). Authorial prefaces have, however, largely died out, perhaps simply because the modern apparatus of publicity provides the author with many

means of explaining his or her purposes and, if necessary, rebutting the gainsayers.

The title apart, the most common form of authorial guidance that is still sometimes provided at the beginning of a novel is the epigraph—the resonant quotation placed at the head of a narrative, often on its own page. With the epigraph the author seems directly to tell us of the novel's significance, of its essence. Or rather, not directly, for an epigraph is invariably a quotation, connecting a new novel with the already written. (In Chapter 10 I examine the use of quotations and epigrams scattered elsewhere in a novel.) Novelists who are more 'literary', we might think, are more likely to provide an opening epigraph, and more populist novelists not to do so. There is some truth in this: George Eliot usually had an epigraph, Dickens did not. But it is not always so. Some contemporary writers of thrillers or detective fiction—Minette Walters, Ian Rankin, and Colin Dexter, for instance—like to begin with apposite quotations. In these cases the epigraphs are more like amusing clues to the mysteries that follow than claims of literary allegiance. They do also advertise the erudition of the authors, suggesting that the novel of detection is, like Inspector Morse's crosswords, the light amusement of the intellectually sophisticated.

Once we are past these introductory guidelines, we may think we are to begin the story. But not necessarily so. Sometimes there are false beginnings, things that we have to be told before the true beginning. These are discussed in the sections below on the prologue and the framing device, both of them parts of a work of fiction rather than some imposition from outside it. Unlike the prefaces of old, they do not communicate the author's intentions. Prologues charge the novel with the significance of earlier events or later knowledge. Framing devices provide a fictional explanation of how the main story has come to us. Both ask us to see how much is already taken for granted in simply starting to narrate. Yet, by using either, the novelist loses the opportunity for what is discussed in the final part of this

chapter: the arresting opening. This, especially if it is but a well-conceived sentence, can make the imagined world of a novel present in an instant. Most of the famous, quotable sentences from novels are such opening statements. The final part of this chapter therefore considers the special voltage of a novel's first sentence.

THE TITLE

Even the most common and unremarkable kind of title, the bare name of a novel's central character, will tell us something in advance about how to read. Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816) is about a singular and powerful individual, freed by wealth and lack of parental guidance, to exercise her sometimes imperious will. It is no accident that this is the only Austen novel to take its heroine's name as its title. To think of it another way, imagine that Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) were called *Isabel Archer*. This is not unimaginable, for Isabel is entirely the centre of the story, yet it would be to lose an important cue given us by James's title. However central are Isabel's experience, her consciousness, her choice of life, the title insists on a certain analytical distance. We watch her make her mistakes, we see the disastrous effects of her self-delusions. To give the novel its protagonist's name would be to encourage a sympathy that James seems to warn us off.

Unsurprisingly, both novelists and their publishers care very much about titles, knowing that they are the means by which a book first reaches out to its potential readers. Publishers have been known to put their novelists right in this matter. When Charles Monteith, editor at Faber and Faber, happened upon a novel by an unknown writer called William Golding that had been rejected by up to twenty other publishers, it was called *Strangers from Within*. Amongst other adjustments that Monteith suggested was the changing of the title to *Lord of the Flies*. One can hardly doubt that he was right. The phrase is used

by the boys in the novel for the pig's head stuck on a pole to propitiate the 'beast' that supposedly haunts the island. It is a totem of savage fear. It is also the English version of a Hebrew name for the Devil, Beelzebub (see Matt. 12: 24). The title tells us, both more clearly and more subtly than Golding's earlier suggestion, how all that is fearful on the island comes from within the boys themselves.

What about the title that seems a guide to the reader? While it is common for a title to tell us who a novel is about (*David Copperfield* (1849–50), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)) or where it is set (*Mansfield Park* (1814), *Washington Square* (1880)), it is more unusual, and more pointed, for the title to declare the book's theme. When he called his 1999 novel *Disgrace*, J. M. Coetzee joined other contemporary practising novelists who have announced their works with one-word abstractions. In recent years, there have been plenty. Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) and *Fury* (2001), Peter Carey's *Bliss* (1981), Anita Brookner's *Providence* (1982), A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. In each case the author appears to be pressing on the reader the significance, in the abstract, of the story that is to follow. These novels risk sounding as if they have theories in mind, each title being a nudge to the future undergraduate, a clue to the best focus of an essay. Perhaps such titles are particularly likely from novelists who themselves have had an academic training and have been taught to find the unifying ideas in narratives.

Novelists started using abstract-noun titles at the beginning of the nineteenth century for essentially didactic purposes. As well as those that came in pairs—Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796) or Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)—there were novels like Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* (1811), Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage* (1814), and Susan Ferrier's *Marriage* (1818). The lessons of these were unswerving. Brunton's heroine discovers the joys of 'chastened affection' and 'tempered desires' (ch. xxxiv, 437). Edgeworth's novel displays in lengthy detail the evils of patronage. Ferrier diagrammatically contrasts

the joys of a happy marriage with the pains of one undertaken foolishly. The one subtle early example is Austen's *Persuasion* (1818; a title decided by her brother Henry after her death, but probably in accordance with her wishes). This novel explores what persuades people not to follow their inclinations, but does not exactly recommend or condemn 'persuasion'. Later in the nineteenth century such titles became capacious rather than didactic: *War and Peace* (1863–9) is the obvious example. The title of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) sounds so straightforward—and does indeed sum up the inevitability of consequences in the novel—yet it deliberately fails to do justice to the psychological torments that fill its pages. With modernism, such abstract titles became open to sharply ironical use by writers like Joseph Conrad. His novel *Chance* (1914) shows how actions are determined by psychological necessity; *Victory* (1915) is about the salvation that may be found in defeat. When Conrad died, he left a novel tantalizingly incomplete called *Suspense*. He also wrote a wonderful novella called *Youth* (1902), about not being young any more (which became the title of Coetzee's next novel after *Disgrace*).

The title of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is not exactly ironical, but it is forbidding. It insists on an unconsoling theme. We are being told what the novel—for all its characters and locations and events—is *really* about. The title sensitizes a reader to a theme, even to a word. Phrases that could otherwise have been casual hook our attention. 'The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end,' David Lurie's ex-wife, Rosalind, says of his affair with his student. 'Disgraceful and vulgar too' (45). Because of the book's title, we notice her easy, indeed vulgar, use of 'disgraceful', an empty expression of exasperation. She means rather little by it. We know, after all, that she is a fellow 'sensualist' and no believer in any moral requirement to curb desire. She is simply saying that people should not be so foolish. Yet we notice too how 'disgrace' means so much more than she realizes. Her ex-husband is in the process of disgracing himself,

dragging himself down. In the end, this disgrace will even permit him a kind of humiliated self-recognition.

A complaint is made against him for his sexual pursuit of his young student Melanie Isaacs, and an official investigation begins. Lurie is given the opportunity by his university to save his job by displaying a token penitence. Angered by the self-righteousness of those who sit in judgement on him and the dishonesty required of him, he refuses. He will not 'express contrition' (54) in some insincere public gesture of humility and shamefacedness. Yet he comes to experience and accept a deeper feeling of disgrace. He is made to feel old, futile, truly ashamed. The would-be 'servant of Eros' (52) is, after all, a mere sexual predator. He is driven to a strange 'ceremony' of self-abasement when he visits the family of the girl he has forced himself on; 'he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor' (173). He tries 'to accept disgrace as my state of being' (172). He loses everything as a punishment for the affair; disgrace is his feeling that this is what he deserves.

In *Disgrace* those who feel disgraced are also those who have been punished or humiliated. Lurie's daughter Lucy is gang-raped, but it is she who tastes disgrace, taught the lesson of her weakness and made to suffer for the sins of her white tribe. As if she deserved it. Lurie imagines the rapists driving away in Lucy's car, contented. 'They must have had every reason to be pleased with their afternoon's work; they must have felt happy in their vocation' (159). He, the father, has been locked in the lavatory while it happens. He cannot save his daughter. 'Lucy's secret; his disgrace' (109). He is stripped of all that once gave him power and authority. When he first moves out into the arid countryside to live with Lucy, he works helping put down the unwanted dogs who plague the locality. He has become a 'dog-man'. (Not since *King Lear* have there been so many references in a literary work to the analogies between humans and dogs.) He observes that the condemned dogs 'flatten their ears' and 'droop their tails', 'as if they too feel the disgrace of dying' (143).

As if disgrace were the recognition of what is most terrible in life. Coetzee's title contests, in advance of the critics, any assumption that the novel is some kind of allegory of the state of South Africa. The singular abstraction suggests that the book wants to bring to life a universal condition. Surprisingly, rather like those didactic titles of the early nineteenth century, it suggests not just a theme but a lesson: disgrace is salutary, even necessary.

The other common type of title that presents itself as an authorial hint at a novel's implicit subject matter is the quotation title. This signals a relationship with another book, another author. The habit of using quotations for novel titles seems itself to have been Victorian in origin. One of the earliest examples is the best-seller *Not Wisely But Too Well* (1867) by Rhoda Broughton (the quotation, from *Othello*, applies to a heroine whose virtue triumphs over her amorous inclinations). The earliest famous example is probably Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), an untypically cheerful story of Wessex life. The title refers the reader to a pastoral song in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (ii. v), sung by an exiled courtier in the Forest of Arden.

> Under the greenwood tree
> Who loves to lie with me,
> And turn his merry note
> Unto the sweet bird's throat,
> Come hither, come hither, come hither!
> Here shall he see
> No enemy
> But winter and rough weather.

The immediate suggestion of the title is that the novel's bucolic delights are timeless; we have encountered them before. When he came to naming *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), however, Hardy used quotation ironically. The phrase is taken from Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'. Those who recall the original context—and in Hardy's day the 'Elegy' was still one of the best known and best loved poems in the language—would have their appreciation of the novel slightly changed. In his poem, Gray speaks of rural life 'Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'. If you know this, Hardy's subtly amended use of the quotation is striking: the countryside he depicts is full of strife. The novel depicts the economic precariousness of rural life, as well as the destructive passions of several of its main characters. Its title is an anti-pastoral irony.

There is a difference between titles made from quotations that we are likely to recognize and those that most readers would have to look up. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) is memorable partly because Miranda's wondering exclamation in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was already a famous quotation. Huxley's application is effectively ironical because the dystopia of his novel is indeed a 'wonderful' world, apparently without pain or discontent. Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) recalls probably the best-known words that John Donne ever wrote: 'and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee'.[4] Here, we readily gather, is a novel about our common mortality. Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940), like *Brave New World*, works by irony or 'antiphrasis'. Set in Mexico, its 'hero' is an alcoholic priest who practises his Catholicism at a time of religious persecution. Only because Greene's title is such a well-known phrase from the Lord's Prayer (in St Matthew's Gospel) can the author rely on his reader recognizing a religious thesis. On the one hand, the ignoble truth about ordinary, compromised human beings will not match the conventional swell of religious aspiration. On the other hand, in the most unlikely ways, Catholicism is indeed to be vindicated by Greene's story of suffering.

But what of the quotation that most readers will not recognize? The title of Michel Faber's novel of Victorian sexual mores *The Crimson Petal and the White* is strange and resonant enough to suggest that it must have some source, but is scarcely

an oft-quoted phrase. Indeed, in interviews Faber has often been asked to explain it. The frequency of the request is itself evidence that the novelist has been using the title to quiz his readers. It is hardly self-explanatory, and is not actually used within the novel. Contrast this with, say, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004): the reader who does not already recognize Hogarth's phrase for the serpentine line that characterizes beautiful forms will be told about it in the course of the book. Hollinghurst even includes an explanation of how the phrase applies to his protagonist's winding pursuit of beauty, while his acquaintances follow the straight paths of ambition. Faber's title asks the reader to try to decode it. A moment with any good dictionary of quotations will identify the quotation, though it might take a little more reading to interpret it. The phrase is taken from a lyric by Tennyson that is itself mysterious. The lyric is found within his long narrative poem *The Princess* (1847). In this poem's frame narrative (see 'The Framing Device', below) a group of undergraduates entertain some ladies in the gardens of a country house with 'A tale for summer' (*The Princess*, Prologue, line 205). There is agreement that the tale will be punctuated by the ladies singing 'From time to time, some ballad or a song | To give us breathing space' (Prologue, lines 234–5). In the story, one of these songs is supposedly read aloud to herself by the beautiful Princess Ida, who is overheard by the love-struck narrator. (He is a prince, in love with Ida, who has renounced male company to devote herself to women's education.)

> Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
> Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
> Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
> The fire-fly wakens, waken thou with me.
>
> (*The Princess*, VII. 161–4)

It is a yearning, strangely narcotic lyric, in the form of a *ghazal*, a Persian love poem. Its images, which are also the ornaments

from some Eastern verse, seem to stand for inexpressible desires.

We are invited to think of the long poetic association between flowers (in this context, especially roses) and women. Faber's novel has two women at its centre: Agnes Rackham, the pure and religious wife; Sugar, the prostitute with ideas above her station. Agnes may be 'white', but she is also a hysteric, pursued by religious visions and terrified by menstruation. (This seems to have become our cliché about 'innocent' Victorian femininity: think of the sexually fearful Victorian wife in A. S. Byatt's *Possession* who drives her husband to infidelity.) Sugar may be 'crimson'—a scarlet woman, no less—but she longs for a good life. Agnes mistakes her, clad in white in the street outside her house, for a guardian angel. She enters the Rackham household in this role, as governess to their neglected daughter Sophie. Sugar is the mistress of Agnes's husband, Arthur, a perfume manufacturer who turns petals into an industrial commodity, both cultivating and destroying beauty. The novel details these cosmetic products, many named after flowers and petals. Faber's title is an idealizing poeticism, ironical given his novel's insistence on the physical sufferings of his female characters. This quotation title requires us to compare his novel's images of female desirability and frailty with all those pure or fallen women of Victorian literature.

Its very title lets us know that Faber's novel is both a Victorian novel and a corrective to the myths of femininity peddled by Victorian novelists. Faber appears happy to let his reader chase the quotation, as if tracking down a Victorian secret. It is like those other bits of nineteenth-century bric-a-brac (clothes, magazines, furnishings, wrappings, and advertisements) that, recovered from his research, he scatters through his novel. It is itself a genuine relic of Victorian culture. In working out its significance we are asked to see how a twenty-first-century novel reinterprets the versions of womanhood that we might recognize from nineteenth-century literature.

THE EPIGRAPH

The resonant quotation at the head of a novel can seem portentous. In *Paratexts*, his survey of extra-textual devices such as titles, prefaces, and notes, the literary theorist Gerard Genette calls the epigraph 'a password of intellectuality'. The author attaches himself to some great name; 'he chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon'.[5] The filiation may be credible if you are Thomas Hardy using a shard of Shakespeare at the head of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or James Joyce prefacing *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914–15) with a quote from Ovid. But don't lesser mortals risk absurdity? The potential for absurdity was recognized by the first English novelist to use a sonorous epigraph at the head of a novel. Henry Fielding in *Tom Jones* (1749) humorously exploits the potential for self-importance of the prefatory literary motto. His zestfully ignoble tale of Hanoverian lowlife carried on its title page a quotation from Horace's *Ars Poetica*: 'mores hominum multorum vidit'—'He saw the customs of many men'. This was Horace's translation into Latin of the first line of Homer's *Odyssey*, referring to the knowledge that Odysseus wins through his travels. The quotation is appropriate, for Tom Jones, Fielding's foundling cast adrift in a dangerous world, must learn his lessons on the high road of Georgian England. It is also gloriously inappropriate, mock-heroic in fact, for Tom's bed-hopping and brawling hardly match the mythical ordeals of Homer's epic hero.

Fielding provided neither an attribution nor a translation for his epigraph. The educated reader might be expected to recognize it. Fielding's method throughout his novel is to combine ancient learning with modern comedy, to use gentlemanly prose to describe 'low' behaviour. The incongruity of the epigraph epitomizes this method. When Laurence Sterne chose an epigraph for the first volume of *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), he expected even more erudition of his reader. His novel had on its title page an epigram in Greek, without translation: 'Ταράσσει

τοὺς Ἀνθρώπους οὐ τὰ Πράγματα, ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τῶν Πραγμάτων, Δόγματα'. It is taken from Epictetus, not an author whose writing every educated gentleman would be expected to know. (Hardly any women readers, of whom Sterne had many, would have known Greek.) It means 'Men are disturbed not by things, but by their opinions about things', fitting for a novel where characters are comically tormented by their own fixed ideas. The inaccessibility of the epigraph seems calculated. Sterne's novel is full of buried allusions and plagiarized fragments, hidden jokes for some future scholar. For all its conversational brio it is a novel larded with eccentric learning.

It is rare for a contemporary novelist not to translate an opening epigraph in a foreign language. Donna Tartt gives English versions of the suitable lines from Nietzsche and Plato that decorate the entrance to her novel *The Secret History*. The fragment of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* at the head of Philip Roth's modern story of retribution *The Human Stain* is only given in English translation. Tim Lott's 2002 novel *Rumours of a Hurricane* chronicles the effects of Thatcherism on a working-class family, but it has a Latin epigraph from an Elizabethan epigrammatist, John Owen: 'Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis'. The epigraph is unattributed, but it is translated: 'Times change and we change with them'. It is a fitting motto for a tale about a time of change—about how the winners adapt and some cannot. But it also implies, especially by being given first in its original Latin, that this historical tale is a universal exemplum. Latin is the unchanging language. When, in contrast Alan Hollinghurst prefaces his novel *The Folding Star* (1994) with a verse epigraph in French, without any English gloss, he invites the reader to sense a private significance. The lines are attributed to Henri de Régnier, a poet of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose work has been little translated into English. Perhaps the majority of Hollinghurst's readers will let this epigraph go its way, though even the many who do not exactly understand it will surely keep some

lingering sense of its appropriateness (if only because it must stem from an author with a refined and literary cultural vocabulary). Only a scholarly reader, with access to an academic library, will be able to pursue it to its source. The melancholy verses may fit Hollinghurst's story of an Englishman's stay in a melancholy Flemish city, but only the author can know quite their resonance.

Yet even these verses have none of the absolute obscurity of Elizabeth Gaskell's untranslated German epigraph to her first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848). This story of poverty and class conflict in Manchester is prefaced by four lines of unattributed verse.

> Nimm nur, Fährmann, nimm die Miethe,
> Die ich gerne dreifach biete!
> Zweien, die mit nur überfuhren,
> Waren geistige Naturen.

Even the most erudite amongst her readers would be unlikely to know that the lines are by Ludwig Uhland, from his 'Auf der Überfahrt' ('In Passing Over') (1826). They might be translated as 'Take, ferryman, take the fare, which I gladly pay three times over! The two who crossed with me were ghostly beings.' The epigraph has no obvious connection to the events in the novel. Instead it appears to refer to Gaskell's two dead children: a stillborn daughter (her first child) and a son who had died three years before the novel was written.[6] The epigraph is pointed, for Gaskell had undertaken *Mary Barton* in order to distract herself after her son's death. (In the novel, which is full of death, John Barton's son has died of scarlet fever, the same disease that killed Gaskell's son.) Its essentially private meaning is represented by its untranslatedness, in a language that few Victorian novel readers would have known. Its inaccessibility is fitting.

As in Fielding's case, however, epigraphs perhaps work best when they are not entirely fitting, when incongruity is part of

their meaning. This seems the case with Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, a novel first published in 1961 but rediscovered, along with his short stories and some of his other novels, in the last few years. It opens with a quotation. Before his tale of suburban discontent begins, there, on a page of its own, is an unfamiliar fragment from a familiar writer. 'Alas! when passion is both meek and wild!' The author is identified as John Keats. It is a puzzle that presses on the reader to find its significance. The Keatsian 'Alas!', that poetic expression of regret, implies that the story that follows will end badly. The rest of the line suggests the disastrous potential of a combination of contradictory qualities (Keats has pointedly made a surprising contrast out of that lifeless cliché: 'meek and mild').

In *Revolutionary Road* the epigraph tells of the characters' resentful timidity. Frank and April Wheeler bridle at the conventions and restrictions of suburban life, yet they live this life because of their own compliance. As we read the novel, we can apply the epigraph. We are invited to notice how timidity and fierce inclination combine destructively in its leading characters. April Wheeler, with her thespian ambitions and her plans to move to Paris, is doomed to mortification. The opening scene, in which she stars in an embarrassingly bad amateur dramatic production, is painful because her hopes are so earnest. She nurses aspirations. Her fantasies about Parisian life are the more absurd for being supported by her belief that her husband is fluent in French (he knows the language hardly at all, but once drunkenly boasted about his proficiency). Frank Wheeler too feels meekly and wildly, his self-regarding sense of his lawless masculinity coexisting with his bland acceptance of his futile corporation job.

The point of Yates's epigraph is its apt unlikeliness: Keats speaking out in order to gloss a small-time drama of suburban life in 1950s America. Incongruity fits the story. The Wheelers like to speak as if they transcend the banal comfort of their existence: they read better books and think of higher things

than their neighbours. They are mentally unfettered, they think. They chafe at the lives that they have meekly chosen. They share with their friends Shep and Milly Campbell conversations of excruciating complacency on 'the elusive but endlessly absorbing subject of Conformity, or The Suburbs, or Madison Avenue, or American Society Today' (59). Yates mercilessly details these exchanges as endlessly repeatable performances—conversations contrived only to reassure the participants. 'They would all agree, and the happy implication was that they alone, the four of them, were painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture' (60).

The epigraph implies that we are witnessing a new version of some old calamity. It draws attention to the finding of an old story in an unlikely new setting. The line is taken from Keats's poem 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil' (though Yates does not tell us this). A strange verse tale adapted from Boccaccio, it narrates the tragedy of two lovers, Isabella and Lorenzo. Neither rich nor noble, Lorenzo is murdered by Isabella's greedy brothers, who wish a better match for their family. Isabella recovers her beloved's head, which she keeps beside her in a pot, under a basil plant. (The combination of tragedy and absurdity no doubt appealed to Yates.) Finally, she pines to death. She and Lorenzo, reticent lovers, have been crushed by a cruel world. Frank and April's story also ends in a catastrophe: attempting to induce a miscarriage, April haemorrhages and dies. 'The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy' (323). But tragedy there is.

THE PROLOGUE

A prologue is a unit of narrative that begins a novel but is detached from it. Usually it is baldly labelled 'Prologue', signalling that separation. A notable early example of the device is in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868). Collins's novel recounts the mysterious theft of a fabulous diamond from an English

country house. It begins, however, in a different place and time. A prologue, set almost half a century earlier, tells us of the diamond's sacred origins in India. This narrative, '*Extracted from a family paper*', is dated 1799 and purports to be written by the cousin of the English adventurer John Herncastle. It tells how Herncastle murders the diamond's guardians as the British army storms the stronghold of Tippoo, sultan of Seringapatam, and steals the wonderful gem. The prologue allows us to know of the supposed curse upon all those who seek to possess the Moonstone. 'The dying Indian sank to his knees, pointed to the dagger in Herncastle's hand, and said, in his native language:—"The Moonstone will have its vengeance yet on you and yours!" He spoke those words, and fell dead on the floor' (4). Without requiring any actual crediting of the supernatural, the prologue will overshadow the subsequent narrative. Violence will surely return upon those who yearn to possess the diamond. The novel's denouement sees the thief murdered by mysterious agents from India and the diamond returned to its origins. The logic of the novel's beginning has been realized.

Prologues are not uncommon in novels of murder and mystery. Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse novels, Ian Rankin's Rebus novels, and Patricia Cornwell's thrillers about the criminal pathologist Kay Scarpetta, for instance, all use them. Prologues are also favoured by James Ellroy and Henning Mankell, who both use the convention with an intentional jolt, confronting the reader immediately with a passage of inexplicable violence. Ellroy's *LA Confidential* (1990) and Mankell's *One Step Behind* (1997), for instance, both begin with men being killed ruthlessly in entirely mystifying circumstances. In such novels of detection, we have to work back to the events of the prologue, only seeing their true significance by the novel's end. Comparable is the prologue that begins Donna Tartt's second novel, *The Little Friend* (2002). Set twelve years earlier than Chapter 1, it inflects all that follows. A child has been murdered. The child's family, we are told, will not talk about the events of that day, so

the prologue is there to let us know what cannot find its way into dialogue. We are taken through the last minutes before his body is found, the unease growing to panic, a woman screaming, the terrible discovery. The reader must not escape the pain of it. We are made to imagine the apprehension and the agony that the characters knew.

The Little Friend too is some kind of novel of detection. When the main part of it gets under way, the protagonist, Harriet, sister of the murdered child, is determined to find the murderer. A baby at the time of the killing, she is now 12 years old. The prologue has set in motion an unease, a narrative imbalance, that must be resolved. Tartt also opens her first novel, *The Secret History*, with a prologue, and here too creates a gap of time, across which the novel then reaches. The prologue of *The Secret History* allows a time shift in the reverse direction, for it tells us of events that occur some time after the novel's official opening. Richard, the narrator, has done something that shapes every subsequent turn of his narration. Before we even know his name, we know his 'secret'. The prologue has told us that Bunny has been killed, that the narrator has been 'partially responsible' along with three others, that 'all those years' later he is still haunted by the recollection of the deed (1–2). 'This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.'

It is an odd business: the whole terrible point of the narrative seems to be given away in advance. But while this sacrifices uncertainty, it purchases a sense of fatality. We are made to know that the relationships between the six main characters, a self-selected group of classics students in a small New England college, will lead five of them to murder the other. 'It seems to me that psychology is only another word for what the ancients called fate,' declares their charismatic teacher, Julian (31). The prologue is a means by which Tartt turns psychology into fate. 'I'm afraid my students are never very interesting to me because I always know exactly what they are going to do,' observes Julian (32). He is wrong, both because they do in fact surprise

him, and because, for the reader, knowing 'exactly what they are going to do' is just what gives a voltage to their undergraduate mind games. The students' tricks and rivalries will, we know, turn nasty, so we are ready to detect their nastiness. Tartt's prologue influences every episode that follows. We know that Bunny will be murdered by his friends, and we must understand why—what Bunny is like. The novel's greatest success is to let you see how it has to be. Slowly and carefully, justifying the foreknowledge that she has given the reader, Tartt makes it all inevitable, and makes Bunny a person you might almost want to kill.

THE FRAMING DEVICE

Some stories account for their existence. The framing device is the means of doing so, the fictional explanation of how a narrative has been discovered or recorded. As the metaphor implies, the frame (or explanation) surrounds the rest of the narrative. A framing device must therefore be used at the beginning of a novel (this distinguishes it from other kinds of metanarrative: see Chapter 6). The first great novelist using elaborate framing devices was Sir Walter Scott, whose novels invariably begin with lengthy explanations of how the story that follows has come to us. *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), for instance, begins with a 'prolegomenon' by the pedantic Jedediah Cleishbotham, schoolmaster and parish clerk of the fictional Scottish village of Gandercleugh, who is publishing a story recorded by Peter Pattieson, his former assistant. In the opening chapter, 'Being Introductory', Pattieson tells how he assisted at a coach crash just outside the village. Two of the passengers were worldly Edinburgh lawyers, who stayed in the village inn that night and talked to him of Edinburgh's Tolbooth Prison, which is called the Heart of Midlothian. From them he learned the story that he now relates.

Scott's new work of fiction masquerades as an old tale, yet we

cannot take this literally. The huge novel can hardly be what Pattieson actually heard the two lawyers say, however garrulous they might have been. But then framing devices are often relinquished once the story is under way. This is the case throughout Scott's novels. Scott, who liked to draw both on history and on traditional stories, used his framing devices—his stories about his stories—to treat his own narrative as recorded rather than invented. There are other uses for such devices. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), for instance, unsettles us partly through being introduced by an unnamed narrator, one of whose friends, Douglas, will read the story to a group of acquaintances. They evidently tell each other ghost stories, but here is a tale of possession to disturb them all. One of the group expresses his desire to hear Douglas's story. 'I can see Douglas there before the fire, to which he had got up to present his back, looking down at this converser with his hands in his pockets. "Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It's quite too horrible"' (145). The framing device allows for the introduction of the governess's narrative, read aloud by Douglas 'with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to the ear of the beauty of his author's hand' (151). It also presents a story that will change the mood of amused complacency at the pleasures of a 'gruesome' tale. Comparably, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is told us by an unnamed narrator who, one evening, in a boat moored in the Thames Estuary, listens with four others to Marlow's perplexing tale of his journey up the great African river to find Kurtz. As this narrator puts it, 'we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences' (21). Our doubts about the significance of the events narrated are set in motion by the very form. The troubling and puzzling effects of the story are included within the work. Our narrator is but a listener, with no direct access to those 'inconclusive experiences'.

There are contemporary novelists too who like to begin by framing the story, pushing back its true beginning. In *The*

Human Stain, Philip Roth uses a framing narrative in order to approach with investigative curiosity a tale of passion. The novel does not just tell a story, it also scrutinizes that story. *The Human Stain* concerns a New England classics professor, Coleman Silk, who is hounded out of his job for alleged racism. (In fact he has made one innocent but misinterpreted remark.) His story is told by Nathan Zuckerman, who has, literally speaking, been employed as narrator. Silk has actually asked him to produce the true account of the witch-hunt that has ruined his career ('the day he burst in all but shouting, "Write my story, damn you!"'; 337). He has also told Nathan about the sequel: his secretive affair with Faunia Farley, a woman half his age who cleans at the college. Silk's story is contained within Nathan's account of how he came to find it out. Nathan recalls sitting on Coleman Silk's porch and listening to him pour out the strange facts of his new life. We have not just the picture of Silk's experiences, but also the frame that Nathan puts around them. The narrator, who tells us of 71-year-old Coleman's all-possessing, Viagra-enhanced sexual passion, is himself impotent after prostate cancer. The sexual delirium, heady and destructive, is seen from the outside. And it includes more than Coleman envisages. For Nathan says that it was when, after Coleman's death, he learned the secret of his racial origins that he 'began this book—the book he had asked me to write in the first place, but written not necessarily as he wanted it' (213).

Nathan is a character whom Roth often uses for such a purpose and who has aged with the author. He first featured in *My Life as a Man* (1974), and *The Human Stain* explicitly recollects his appearance in another Roth novel of the 1970s, *The Ghost Writer* (1979). Coleman Silk teaches at the same university that, we are told, once employed E. I. Lonoff, the great Jewish author whom Nathan Zuckerman visits in that earlier novel. Ever since, Nathan has been encountering characters on Roth's behalf. Roth's persistent use of the framing device suggests that he is but discovering stories that are out there. By

thus framing his narratives, Roth also unsettles our sympathies. In *The Human Stain*, Nathan recollects 'that April day two years back when Iris Silk died and the insanity took hold of Coleman' (10). He is drawn into the story when Coleman, furious and persecuted, bangs on his door one afternoon. 'All restraint had collapsed within him' (11). His exorbitant feelings seem mad. He is a person to be explained, a man whose fate is a fable of American prejudices.

As in *Heart of Darkness* (though not *The Turn of the Screw*), the framing device is insisted on at the narrative's conclusion. Conrad's novella ends with Marlow falling silent and the unnamed narrator who began the story taking over again, now made to feel by what he has heard that the Thames itself seems 'to lead into the heart of an immense darkness' (124). The story now told, the narrator notices that it is dusk and overcast, but the darkness is as much an effect of the narration he has just heard as of the dying daylight. In *The Human Stain*, the final chapter also returns us to the narrator, to Nathan Zuckerman, writing his book and measuring the reverberations of Coleman Silk's life and death. Yet, quite as much as *Heart of Midlothian*, it has earlier required us to forget what we have been told about how the story has come to us. For within the frame of Nathan's record, the reader has been allowed to know more than Nathan could ever know. We have been taken into Coleman's unspoken thoughts and into his secret past: his childhood, his sexual awakening, his making of a new identity for himself.

We might think these the narrator's imaginative prerogative; Nathan does say 'As I reconstruct it . . .' before one description of an episode that he never witnessed (63). But then the novel includes the solitary actions and private reflections of characters other than Coleman without any such apology or explanation. We listen to Coleman's lawyer talking to his wife about Coleman's case. We enter the mind of Delphine Roux, Coleman's feminist nemesis in his faculty, as she daydreams in the library about the handsome man reading post-structuralist

theory opposite her. In a slab of virtuoso interior monologue, we are even taken inside the maddened resentment of Les Farley, Faunia's psychopathic ex-husband. The novel extends itself to these other minds and other voices in order to chasten our sense of what we might know about others. Nathan tells of meeting Coleman and Faunia at an outdoor concert sometime after he left his job, seeing them talking intimately together, 'but about what, of course, I did not know' (208). The poisonous, anonymous letter that Coleman has received about his affair with Faunia (sent by Delphine Roux) had said

> Everyone knows you're
> sexually exploiting an
> abused, illiterate
> woman half your
> age.
>
> (38)

And Nathan's ignorance of what, perhaps trivial, talk passes at a certain moment between Coleman and Faunia recalls the wording of this letter in a salutary stumble of the narrative.

> Because we don't know, do we? *Everyone knows* . . . How what happens the way it does? What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the mishaps, the disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? *Nobody* knows, Professor Roux. (208–9)

Here the frame that Roth has made for himself is suddenly made prominent. Nathan Zuckerman is angrily *there*. Elsewhere it is sometimes a convenience to be forgotten. This is why it is important that Nathan is so clearly Roth's representative, a way in for the author's feelings about his material. The very flouting of the framing convention expresses the author's own passionate, lucid exercise of his imagination. The passion and lucidity are caught in the novel's most audacious use of its framing device. Near its end, Nathan encounters the homicidal

Les Farley, out fishing on the ice, no one around for miles. They have a charged, dangerous conversation and Nathan admits to being a writer, who writes 'about people like you' (356).

> 'Is that right?'
> 'Yes. People like you. Their problems.'
> 'What's the name of one of your books?'
> '*The Human Stain.*'
> 'Yeah? Can I get it?'
> 'It's not out yet. It's not finished yet.'
> 'I'll buy it.'
> 'I'll send you one . . .'

Often such self-referential tricks are merely self-regarding, but here the narrative risk of it exactly suits and imitates the risk that Nathan takes in the dialogue. If Les were to read the book he would want to kill its author. At the novel's conclusion the framing device is more than convenient: it is a dramatic necessity.

THE OPENING

When we talk about famous openings of novels we usually mean resonant first sentences rather than beautifully crafted first scenes or chapters. The memorable first sentence will epitomize in a small way the logic of the novel as a whole. Those famous openings of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or *Anna Karenina* (1873–7) are not merely clever statements in themselves, they are also perfect specimens of their different authors' narrative spirit and confidence. In some novels, the first sentence can enact the shock of entering a world governed by perverse rules. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is exemplary. 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.' The statement is made as if it were natural and already we are made to inhabit the logic of a dystopia. Something is very wrong but nobody inside the book notices.

Comparable is the opening sentence of Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), which can be translated into English as 'Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.' This gives us the novel's synthesis of banal normality and paranoia, but in the original German the effect is the more unsettling. 'Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet.' The past tense of 'mußte' and the subjunctive of 'hätte' (expressing uncertainty) imply that this sentence is free indirect discourse (see Chapter 2): it follows the thoughts of the character. His innocence is his self-image, not the narrator's assurance.

In a comparable vein, the thriller writer Ruth Rendell also likes to open with a simple yet disturbed statement. 'The world began to fall apart at nine in the evening': *The Crocodile Bird* (1993). 'Violent death fascinates people': *The Bridesmaid* (1989). 'The clothes of the dead won't wear long': *The Brimstone Wedding* (1995). At once, you are to be unsettled. The arresting opening statement epitomizes her method. Typically, her novels take you into the strange reasoning of twisted characters. In *The Killing Doll* (1984) a teenager thinks that he has made a pact with the Devil. In *Going Wrong* (1990) a criminal mistakenly believes that a glamorous, upper-class woman is in love with him. Each novel invites us to inhabit some parallel world of obsession or deranged conviction. The narrator will record deluded thought processes, yet without the distance that would permit judgement.

So it is with Rendell's *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me.* Immediately, you are into it. 'Minty knew it was a ghost sitting in the chair because she was frightened.' 'Minty knew . . .', not 'thought' or 'imagined'. We simply follow her perceptions. It sounds like a statement of fact, yet contains a strange circularity. That 'because' explains nothing, while suggesting that there is some logic at work. This suggestion is at the heart of the novel and of much of Rendell's fiction. The logic is in the mind of a

character whom we might call 'disturbed'—who, in an earlier age, would have been called 'mad'. As the opening chapter unfolds, we find out that she lives her life without anyone else, except the reader, noticing that she is ruled by such delusions. She keeps down a job, she socializes with her neighbours; and she sees ghosts and hears voices.

Even the name is off-balance. 'Minty'. It could be some term of endearment, an affectionate nickname maybe, but here it sounds simply peculiar. And it will be important in the plot. 'Minty' will be turned into a nickname, 'Polo', by the predatory conman who befriends her and then becomes her lover. This will later enable another of his victims to trace her. The conman calls himself 'Jock' and thinks he has the measure of Minty's vulnerability. 'You never were all that balanced, Polo,' she hears him say (11). Teasing is Jock's way with the women he tricks. The novel's title is the first line of one of his childish rhymes. 'Adam and Eve and Pinch Me | went down to the river to bathe. | Adam and Eve were drownded | Who was saved?' 'Pinch me,' says the gullible Minty—and so he does. 'Very gently on her upper arm' (25). But then she is weirder that he can guess and she will finally kill him. The nastiness of the rhyme becomes real. 'When you talk to God it's praying but when God talks to you it's schizophrenia' (21), jokes the owner of the dry cleaner's to Minty, not guessing why she does not laugh.

'More people are nuts, as you call it, than you'd think,' Minty's policeman neighbour tells his wife (245). Minty has what psychiatrists call an 'obsessive-compulsive disorder'. She is always cleaning herself and everything around her, and the narrative painstakingly follows all her purifying procedures. One leading character is a male anorexic, and we are taken in detail through all his special aversions. The narrative, as in that opening sentence, adopts the very patterns of fixation. Another central character, a rich, lordly, gay Tory MP, is, in comparison with these obsessives, a mere stereotype. You might think that from her experience in the House of Lords, Rendell would have had

every opportunity to make him credible. Yet it is not him but Minty—in all her exacting peculiarity—who comes to life. We see how she becomes a murderer, not because she is evil or psychopathic, but because she is living in a world of her own. The novel interests us precisely by implying that, in different circumstances—if 'Jock' had not picked on her as a victim—she would have gone on living her peculiar life. Indeed, she has no notion that she is a killer. '"It's wicked to murder people," Minty said. "Look at the trouble it causes"' (249).

about which she cannot tell us directly. If one was to extract them from the novel where they belong, they would be lifeless. It is difficult to imagine that these blank-toned episodes could actually be parts of the successful book that the plot requires. They work beautifully, yet they are not like extracts from any publishable novel.

11
Ending

WHEN William Godwin, now best known for being the father of Mary Shelley, set out to compose his novel *Caleb Williams*, he wrote the ending first. Recalling the process of composition in 1832, he described how he 'invented first the third volume of my tale, then the second, and last of all the first'.[1] He believed that 'carrying back my invention from the ultimate conclusion to the first commencement' would ensure 'an entire unity of plot'. The ending would not only provide a fitting climax, it would prove the novelist's point. Godwin had a political message about the ways in which 'the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society' (preface, 1). As an indication that the story was a parable of the state of the nation, he called it *Things As They Are* (its title was only changed by Godwin more than thirty years later). He knew that his demonstration of his political argument would be strongest at his novel's end—that there would be his *conclusion*: his final judgement.

It is no accident that our feelings about how a narrative satisfies, or fails to satisfy, us are often concentrated on its ending. Here, in the ending of it, promises are to be kept, questions answered, uncertainties resolved. Many readers will know how, as the sense of an impending ending becomes strong, the last pages of a novel take on a special intensity. It is impossible not to be influenced by what Jane Austen, nearing the very end of *Northanger Abbey*, admits to her readers is 'the tell-tale compression of the pages before them' (vol. ii, ch. xvi, 203). Readers and characters are 'all hastening together to perfect felicity'. If plot is all, we might now read with increasing speed,

avid to find how it will be worked out. Or we might slow ourselves to relish a conclusion for which we have long prepared. It is not surprising that novelists worry about their endings. Godwin himself did so. In manuscript, he had an ending in which his hero and narrator, wrongly imprisoned by his aristocratic foe Falkland, senses that he has been poisoned. As we reach the end of his account, he is growing weaker and weaker. This was the version that he wrote first of all. Yet, having written the rest of the novel, Godwin then had second thoughts. He wrote a new ending. In the published version, there is a trial at which Caleb vindicates himself, only to feel appalled at seeing Falkland, who was once his friend, finally crushed. Now at least truth triumphs, a fitting conclusion in that his great work of political theory, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, had argued that truth, if demonstrated rationally, was irresistible.

Ending the novel is not the same as completing it. Franz Kafka never finished *The Trial*, but he did end it. Early in the process of the novel's composition he completed both its opening and its final chapters. Perhaps 'chapter' is the wrong word, for the sections that he wrote, though given schematic titles, were unnumbered and were kept in separate files, as if self-contained units. Several sections exist only as incomplete drafts, usually excluded from published versions. Kafka gave no indication of the order in which these sections should be arranged, and experts still argue over this. He never finished the novel and he instructed his executor, Max Brod, to destroy it after his death, along with the rest of his unpublished writings. Unfinished it might be, but its sense of an ending is indubitable. The protagonist, Joseph K., is taken from his lodgings at night by two state functionaries, marched out into the countryside, and killed. The novel ends with the double twist of a knife in his heart and one of the most memorable concluding sentences in the history of fiction. '"Wie ein Hund!" sagte er, es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben.'[2] '"Like a dog!" he said. It was as if the shame would outlive him.' Kafka may not have known for

certain what he wanted to put in or take out, but he knew where the logic of his book must finally take him. This sense that an ending must fulfil what has come before is deep within all novel readers.

We can feel the importance of endings in recorded instances of novelists, like Godwin, changing their minds about how to finish their novels. The only manuscript fragment that we have of one of Austen's finished novels is the original ending that she wrote to *Persuasion*. Here she had Captain Wentworth deputed by Admiral Croft to ask Anne Elliot if she was indeed engaged to Mr Elliot, so that the Admiral would know to relinquish Kellynch Hall to the happy couple. Anne's denial immediately produces Wentworth's declaration of his feelings. Compared to the dramatically elaborate scene that Austen eventually substituted, with Wentworth overhearing the conversation between Anne and Captain Harville about the constancy of men's and women's feelings, it seems merely efficient. Her second thought, to have Anne and Wentworth crowded by other characters, unable to communicate directly, produced one of the great endings in English fiction. Yet she did not change her mind about what was to happen. For Austen the questions were about means; she was perfectly decided about what end (the marriage of lovers who have rediscovered their love) she would bring about. In other cases the change of mind is more radical. Dickens wrote two endings for *Great Expectations*, according to his friend and biographer John Forster, after being advised by his fellow novelist Bulwer Lytton: 'upon Bulwer Lytton objecting to a close that should leave Pip a solitary man, Dickens substituted what now stands'.[3] In the published version, Pip revisits the place where Satis House once stood and meets Estella there, still beautiful, but with a 'saddened softened light' in her eyes (vol. iii, ch. xx, 483). Estella says that they 'will continue friends apart', but in the next sentence, the last of the novel, Pip says that in the evening's 'broad expanse of tranquil light . . . I saw the shadow of no parting from her' (484). It is

something like a happy ending, though ambiguous still. Dickens was true enough to the sadness of his book not to engineer anything like a betrothal. Yet this resembles rather more closely the conventional ending of a Victorian novel than what he first wrote. The proof of the original ending survives. In this version Pip tells us that, after the death of her first husband, the brutal Bentley Drummle, Estella has married 'a Shropshire doctor'.[4] Pip, in the company of Joe and Biddy's young son, meets her again in Piccadilly: 'the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another'. The sadness is made sharper by her false assumption that the boy is Pip's son, and by his not disabusing her. Pip, we see, has lost his chance to be a father. He says that he was 'very glad afterwards to have had the interview', for it assures him that suffering has softened her and 'given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be'. And there we finish.

At the end of novels, debts must be paid, marriages arranged. In Dickens's first thoughts, Pip's paying off his debts excluded him from marriage, that usual end for a hero or heroine. He has travelled back to the 'marsh country' of his childhood in order to propose to Biddy, but arrives on the very day of her wedding to Joe. Once Biddy would have had him, but his vain 'expectations' led him away. Forster thought the first version 'more consistent with the drift, as well as natural working out, of the tale'. Bulwer Lytton, however, was surely right that Dickens had written an ending that would have disappointed many of his readers. When they end their novels, novelists are likely to think of their readers' expectations. Henry James, a pioneer of inconclusive endings, thinks of responses to the ending of *The Portrait of a Lady* when he lays out a close plan of its narrative in his notebooks. He proposes to end the novel with Isabel starting out for Italy to return to her cruel husband, whom she does not love.

> The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished—that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation—that I have left her *en l'air*.—This is both true and false. The *whole* of anything

> is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity.[5]

That 'obvious' marks James's awareness of the pressure upon the novelist to provide the required sense of an ending. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the ending of a novel, Carol Shields's *Unless*, whose novelist narrator has this pressure put on her by her publisher. We might no longer expect an ending to be as studiously tied up as that of a novel by Dickens or Trollope, but we need to feel we have reached a conclusion, that 'loose ends' have not been left. The reader's appetite for an ending is just what a novelist can exploit pleasingly in the provision of a 'twist' at the end, or a false ending (see below).

For endings have different phases. There are cases when a reader will feel that he or she has reached the 'real' ending long before the final few pages. An extreme and early example is Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. The frightening yet engrossing pursuit of the resourcefully virtuous heroine by her predatory master, Mr B., ends with him falling in love with her and marrying her. By page 275 of the modern World's Classics edition, Pamela is safely betrothed to him. Yet there are still well over 200 pages to go, filled with Pamela's moralistic reflections about the joys and duties of married life. To Richardson, this part of the novel was essential to his didactic purposes, but most readers will think that the story is over. Novels have ways of formalizing this sense of narrative taken up beyond the end of a story, and the last two sections of this chapter reflect on our need for proper conclusions by examining these. As even Jane Austen, the provider of emphatically 'closed' endings, recognized (see 'The Postscript', below), the most satisfying endings still leave us wanting to know more.

THE DENOUEMENT

Every novel ends, but not every novel has a denouement. The word is from the French for 'unknotting' and refers to the resolving or untying of a story's complications. Denouements occur in novels where the novelist has created problems that have to be solved, mysteries that have to be cleared up. A denouement is not just a conclusion, it is also an explanation, belatedly providing information that has previously been held back. So the word has also come to refer to the part of a narrative that comes after some climax or crisis. The main part of the story has ended, but there are still conclusions to be traced and consequences described. In George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede*, for example, the climax is the planned hanging of the servant girl Hetty Sorrel, who has been condemned to death for the supposed murder of her illegitimate baby. Eliot builds up to this climax, giving us a highly wrought dialogue on the eve of execution between Hetty and her cousin the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris. When Hetty is reprieved on the very scaffold, we might say that the narrative has reached and passed its final crisis. But there is still explaining to be done, still nine chapters to come. Hetty is sentenced to be transported. Arthur Donnithorne, the well-born father of Hetty's baby, is dispatched abroad. Adam Bede himself, who has always hopelessly loved Hetty, is to be made to love Dinah, and to marry her.

Denouements are necessary to our satisfaction, yet can seem imposed from outside. Thus novels with complicated plots will sometimes invent a character whose only role is providentially to arrive to reveal the schemes of the villainous and the true parentage of the virtuous. Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9) are notable examples. In *Tom Jones* the crucial unravelling involves not just the revealing of the villainous Blifil's scheming against the virtuous Tom, but also the revelation of Tom's true parents. First Mrs Waters, formerly Jenny Jones, arrives to tell Squire Allworthy, and the reader, that she is not Tom's mother, but that his father was a character whom we have never met: Mr Summer, the scholarly son of one of Allworthy's friends, who once stayed for a while in his house, and died young. Very belatedly, for otherwise there could have been no novel, the lawyer Dowling then arrives 'in the utmost haste' as the agent of the denouement. At last he delivers the message with which Bridget Allworthy entrusted him on her deathbed, many hundreds of pages earlier. 'Tell my brother Mr Jones is his nephew.—He is my son' (bk. XVIII, ch. viii, 840). (The message never arrived because Allworthy was ill and Blifil intercepted it.) Now, finally, all can be resolved. Comparably, in *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens brings in after some sixty chapters a character, Brooker, who has played no part in the story so far but is now revealed to be a former confederate of Ralph Nickleby. His role is to tell us of Ralph's past, and of the secret at the novel's heart: that Smike, the backward, brutalized boy whom Nicholas has befriended and saved from the sadistic schoolmaster Squeers, is in fact Ralph's son, his only child. That boy 'is now in his grave' (ch. 60, 737). Appalled, Ralph throws the table lamp to the ground and is gone. The end is in sight.

So often in a novel, someone must arrive with an explanation. We need—the narrator needs—an explanation in Carol Shields's *Unless*, which has bleakly imagined a problem without any evident solution. How will Shields untie her tight knot? The story is a contemporary nightmare common in news stories: the beloved child who, for reasons beyond understanding, chooses to become an implacable outcast. In *Unless*, Norah, the daughter of the narrator, Reta, squats on a Toronto street corner, a sign round her neck saying merely GOODNESS, impervious to friends and family. She is beyond blandishment or persuasion, silent and frightening. The life of her family goes on, but under the shadow of her withdrawal. Why has this happened? How can it all end? *Unless* frets a good deal about its need for a denouement. As often when Shields wants to comment on her own novel, she has her narrator, Reta, worry about the novel

that she is writing, *Thyme in Bloom*. She is contemplating the last couple of chapters. 'Then the dénouement, which will contain a twist that is certain to challenge any reader's good will, but I'm determined to go through with it' (237). Hers is a romantic and comic novel, and she must decide how to leave her two fictional lovers. She pictures a reader whom she would like to surprise, but must also gratify.

Arthur, Reta's ingratiating but bullying editor, worried about whether his author will give her novel a reader-pleasing denouement, declares piously, 'the form will complete itself in the only way it can' (241). He is himself an affected literary critic, dignifying his attempts to rewrite Reta's book with theoretical ruminations when she talks of her plans to write the final chapter.

> 'Ah yes, the final chapter. The all-important final chapter.'
>
> 'The most difficult chapter in a way.'
>
> 'I absolutely agree, It's critical. What is a novelist to do? Provide closure for the reader? Or open the narrative to the ether?'
>
> 'You mean—'
>
> 'I think of the final chapter as the kiln. You've made the pot, Reta, the clay is still malleable, but the ending will harden your words into something enduring and beautiful. Or else beautiful and ethereal.' (277)

Yet the satire here seems like a diversion from a challenge that Shields herself faces. Reta ruefully tells us that, in her novel, nothing is left unresolved. 'Everything is neatly wrapped up at the end, since tidy conclusions are a convention of comic fiction, as we all know' (317). She does what is expected.

Shields too is under pressure to explain. You might say that her novel could have left Norah to her psychosis. In life, she might have stayed on the street, or been taken into psychiatric care, or simply gone on being 'a problem' into an indefinite future. But novels must take a shape and achieve the sense of an ending. In the final chapter of *Unless* ('Not Yet') we find out—

because Reta has now found out—that there is a precise narrative explanation for Norah's withdrawal. There was an original trauma. She was a passer-by when a Muslim woman, a political protester, set herself on fire at that same Toronto street corner. It was an event in the television news that passed by us early in the novel. Norah saw the woman die and badly burned herself in a vain attempt to save her. This was what drove her into her own stunned, silent protest against the world. By chance, the evidence of what Norah saw and did was preserved on CCTV footage, given to the police, in the end seen by her family. If it had not been so, her affliction would have remained a mystery; 'unless, unless, all this would have been lost' (315). The narrator notices how fortunate is the explanation.

So the novel ends with a solution. On the last page, 'Norah is recovering at home, awakening atom by atom' (320). We are back (as if in Dickens) to the family hearth. Yet there is something awkward about the denouement. 'We know now, Norah,' says the narrator. 'You can put this behind you. You are allowed to forget' (315). Can we believe this confidence, the settlement of all the narrator's previous doubts? Here the knowledge of events, such as is traditionally allowed to a reader at the end of a novel, is conflated with a knowledge of what must have been going through Norah's mind. But these two kinds of knowledge are not the same. Does the author, we may wonder, quite believe in her own unknotting?

THE FALSE ENDING

Certain narratives please us by providing twists at their endings. On TV and in the cinema, we are used to thrillers that end by showing that we have been under some misapprehension for much of the preceding story. One way in which such surprise is engineered is by the use of what can be called the *false ending*: an apparent conclusion that is provided only in order to be unsettled by the true ending. A. S. Byatt's *Possession* is a neat

example of this. Its first, false ending solves the novel's central mystery and provides a romantic consummation. The final numbered chapter is headed by a fragment of Ash's poetry that is all about our appetite for endings.

> We are driven
> By endings as by hunger. We *must know*
> How it comes out, the shape o' the whole . . . (476)

We duly get this shape. The long-lost letters of the Victorian poet Christabel LaMotte have been unearthed from the grave of her fellow poet, and secret lover, Randolph Ash. A final letter makes clear that she gave birth to his daughter, May, who was brought up by Christabel's sister as her own child. When she grew up, May married happily and had her own child; she would never know her true parentage. Ash never read this letter, which was placed unopened in the grave by his widow. His child is revealed (in Byatt's most stretched coincidence) to be the great-great-great-grandmother of Maud, one of the novel's academic detectives. Roland and Maud, long kept tantalizingly apart, are finally allowed to sleep together, with the implication that this coupling is for ever: 'I'll take care of you, Maud' (507). There is some awkwardness here. Byatt's phrasing is stilted, mock-decorous—'Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him'—but the end has been reached.

Yet then there is the 'Postscript', the true ending, undoing some of the conclusions that the reader, and the novel's leading characters, thought had been reached. Dated '1868', it reveals information never to be known to modern-day researchers. 'There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace . . . This is how it was' (508). On a beautiful day in May, a gentleman 'with an ashplant in his hand' met a child playing in a meadow. They talked and played. She gave him a lock of her hair. He said he was a poet and gave her a message for her 'aunt', saying he was 'looking for the Belle Dame Sans Merci' but would now 'not disturb her' (510). The child got into a game with her brothers on her way home and the message was never delivered.

So Ash did know. He even met his daughter. It is her plait of hair that Roland and Maud discover in Ash's grave, not (as the sleuths suppose, and will go on supposing) Christabel's. The past is, we see, not discoverable after all. What is most important might be just what leaves 'no discernible trace'. The neat and poignant adjustment is made possible by the 'false ending' carefully arranged on the preceding pages. We see how every present-day character in the novel is doomed to misunderstand the past, especially those who know most about it. Ash's meeting with his daughter, his only child, is an encounter of which no one except him will ever know. The Postscript that shows this is composed in a dreamlike, florid language, loaded with literary allusions. 'There was a meadow full of young hay, and all the summer flowers in great abundance. Blue cornflowers, scarlet poppies, gold buttercups, a veil of speedwells, an intricate carpet of daisies where the grass was shorter . . .' (508). Its tone of pastoral make-believe has seemed unconvincing to some. What has passed without comment, however, is a psychological contradiction that is the consequence of Byatt's narrative ingenuity. We can well believe that, if Ash was earlier able to track Christabel down to her remote hiding place in Brittany, where she retired to conceal her pregnancy and then have her baby, he would certainly find her in Lincolnshire. She is, after all, living with her titled sister. But why, at the end of his happy encounter with his unknowing daughter, is he so casual with that message for her 'aunt'? All too clearly this leaves the possibility of the message failing to get through. May, after all, is 7 or 8 years old. (The 2002 film of *Possession*, as if worried about his carelessness, makes him give her a letter for Christabel, and then shows this being dropped and lost.) Christabel dies racked with guilt at concealing from Ash his daughter's very existence. The Postscript implies that her lover has, in effect, condemned

her to this bitter self-reproach. Yet clearly it is not part of the book's redemptive purpose that he should have done so. Why did he not find some reliable method of letting Christabel know that he knew? What about the excellent Victorian postal system? Of course, proper communication would not have allowed Byatt her deft reversal of expectations. The novelist's beautifully performed trick has its price.

EPILOGUE

Until the twentieth century it was common for plays, especially comedies, to have epilogues. (*Epilogue* means in Greek 'a speech added on'.) One of the actors would step forward out of the play's true ending to comment, often wittily, on its events and absurdities. The audience would be asked for its indulgence. Done well, it was, and still can be, a way of confirming a bond between performer and spectator. In a novel, an epilogue can look like the novelist distrusting the reader, as if unwilling to let him or her draw their own inferences from the novel's conclusion. It is hard to find the earliest novel with a declared 'epilogue', but this formal after-story became a feature of fiction in the mid-nineteenth century. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) has a brilliant little example. The whaling ship the *Pequod* has been sunk by the great white whale in an extraordinary final scene. The crew is lost. But then there is an epilogue. '*The drama's done. Why then does any one step forth?*' (625). Melville reminds us of stage convention, as Ishmael tells us how he was providentially saved. If he had not been, of course, the story could not have been told, for the novel has been narrated in the first person by Ishmael. In heightened language this epilogue implies that Ishmael has been spared in order to tell his tale. '*The unharming sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks.*' On the second day, after the destruction of Ishmael's ship and all his shipmates, '*the devious-cruising*

Rachel', a ship encountered earlier searching for one of its own missing whale boats, returns to find him, '*another orphan*'.

Some great English Victorian novels also have epilogues. The epilogue of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* takes us forward by more than seven years to show the appropriate fates of its chief characters. Adam, the artisan hero, has prospered and is now owner of the timber-yard where he was once but an employee. Dinah, the good woman whom he married, has been rewarded with beautiful children. We meet them again as they talk of Arthur Donnithorne, the rakish young squire who has just returned from abroad. Adam has just been to meet him. He has been punished with illness as well as the pains of exile. Adam reports that 'his colour's changed, and he looks sadly' (538). We gather from a passing remark by Adam's brother Seth that the young woman whom Arthur seduced, Hetty Sorrel, 'the poor wanderer', has died even as she was returning from Australia. Eliot's moral scheme is secure, rewards and punishments effected, but it is done with characteristic skill. The conversation through which we hear of characters' fates also dramatizes the mixed contentment and sadness of Adam and Dinah at the end of it all.

Slightly later than *Adam Bede*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* has an epilogue that satisfyingly brings his narrative full circle. The mystery of the Moonstone's theft has been solved. In the epilogue we hear how this fabulous diamond is restored to the Indian idol from which it was first taken in the novel's Prologue (see Chapter 1). In keeping with the curse, mentioned in that Prologue, on anyone who might take it from where it belongs, the Moonstone returns to 'the god of the Moon' (466). Later detective fiction also uses epilogues. Most of Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse novels, for instance, have them. In the calm after the denouement accounts are settled and Morse himself is pictured rueful and solitary, a melancholy figure until another murder can animate him again. Here is the very end of *The Dead of Jericho* (1981).

> And what of Morse? He still walks to his local most evenings, and would appear to take most of his calories in liquid form, for no one has seen him buying cans of food in the Summertown supermarkets. In mid-December he was invited to another party in North Oxford; and as he waited in the buffet queue his eyes caressed the slim and curving bottom of the woman just in front of him as she leant across the table. But he said nothing; and after eating his meal alone, he found an easy excuse to slip away, and walked home alone. (302)

Morse cannot be allowed to consummate his urges, for he must preserve his solitary restiveness (note the awkward repetition of the word 'alone') for the next whodunnit.

The epilogue has come to seem a rather old-fashioned device, perhaps partly because it was common in creaky American TV dramas of the 1960s. When Anne Patchett's *Bel Canto* settles its accounts with a final chapter labelled 'Epilogue', it risks appearing to manipulate its readers' sympathies. The novel has had its catastrophe—its disastrous resolution. Its leading characters, guests at a diplomatic party, are held hostage for most of its duration. The siege gives us a drama of romance, comedy, and daydreaming, but is abruptly concluded when troops storm in. 'At the sound of the shot, it seemed the man with the gun divided, first into two and then four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four' (311). There are soldiers everywhere. 'With every loud pop more came.' Several of the characters whom we have come to know are killed in this assault. The violence and finality is convincing, the narrative taking on the numbed surprise of the characters. In the chapter's final sentence, Mr Hosokawa the opera enthusiast and Carmen the revolutionary are killed, the former trying to save the latter. 'One shot fixed them together in a pairing no one had considered before: Carmen and Mr. Hosokawa, her head just to the left of his as if she was looking over his shoulder' (313). We are left in a state of shock.

But then we have an 'epilogue'. It is six months later and two former hostages are getting married. The tragic conclusion is

behind us, and now we have an ending that is conventional in comedy. The odd thing is that the bride and groom—Roxanne, the opera singer who was performing when guerrillas stormed the building, and Gen, the translator who was one of her fellow hostages—each had a brief, secret affair during the siege. Their lovers were those two characters who died in its final moments. Patchett's epilogue seems too clearly designed to rescue something from her tale. The bereaved partners must marry each other. The epilogue here, as elsewhere in fiction, risks persuading the reader that the author feels uneasy about the ending that has already been provided. After the conclusion of a fable, an epilogue is a proper summary, where the moral might be gracefully pointed. At the end of a novel, however, it should be different. A novel is too much like life, we might think, to be reducible to a moral. Its epilogue is more like an afterthought, something that could not be got into the story. Why then does Patchett need hers? She wants to believe that her characters have truly been transformed by their strange experience, that they have been redeemed by the events that she has plotted. Her epilogue is there because she wants the reader to believe this too.

THE POSTSCRIPT

Some narrative conventions first developed by novelists are now more familiar from film and television. One of these, used in the final chapter of John le Carré's *The Constant Gardener*, is the *postscript*. A story has been brought to its conclusion and the credits are ready to roll. Now, however, extra footage informs you what happened—after the story's end, perhaps years later—to some of the characters you have encountered. A postscript differs from an epilogue, which presents some representative episode from a future time. Postscripts, in contrast, feature brief summaries of future events—in films, often a few sentences on the screen. They are favoured by narratives that

purport to be based on 'real' people and events (which can be seen to spill over, therefore, beyond any artificially imposed ending). The postscript is schematic, succinct, often didactic. In fiction, it has sharp lessons and ironies to display.

In the final chapter of *The Constant Gardener*, we leave le Carré's hero, Justin Quayle, in the African bush, on the trail of his wife's killers, to be told 'a chapter of events' in the months that follow. We get given the peculiar fate of each secondary character. Sandy Woodrow is rewarded for dealing diplomatically with Tessa Quayle's murder by being made High Commissioner. The Foreign Office 'Africa Tsar' Sir Bernard Pellegrin, who has made sure that her findings about the murderous research practices of a large pharmaceutical company are 'buried', gets a senior post with the very company that she was investigating. Kenny Curtiss, the entrepreneur whose company was testing the new drug on Africans, is made a Lord. Rob and Lesley, the police officers doggedly investigating Tessa's death, leave the police service. Yet the villains of the piece do not quite escape. Le Carré cannot bring himself merely to invalidate his hero's sleuthing. Quayle has ensured that inconvenient documents become public, and the novel's postscript includes rumblings in press and Parliament about a conspiracy behind Tessa's murder. The Foreign Secretary is embarrassed by questions on the floor of the House. Only the string of legal petitions and cross-petitions disarms protest, ensuring that 'the case would run for years' (553). There is a twist of chronology in this. For the postscript also tells us of 'the unhappy passing of Justin Quayle' (550). 'Deranged by despair and grief, he had taken his own life at the very spot where his wife Tessa had been murdered only weeks before.' This is the final, official account—but not the truth. For now the narrative shifts back in time to show us what really happened, what has been hushed up in that summary. Quayle has, of course, been murdered.

In le Carré's postscript, poetic injustice seems to be the point. His is a sardonic use of a convention that is almost as old as

the Novel itself. Perhaps the earliest example is in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, completed in 1748. After reaching his tragic conclusion—agonizingly foreseen by attentive readers for the preceding seven volumes—Richardson signs off with the death of the villain Lovelace, destroyer of his heroine, Clarissa. He then appends a postscript (though it is labelled 'Conclusion'), detailing the fates of all the other characters. Clarissa's tyrannical brother makes an unhappy marriage and is gnawed by guilt at his treatment of Clarissa. Her spiteful sister marries 'a man of quality' who turns out to be a libertine. Everyone gets his or her deserts. The prostitute who helped Lovelace trick Clarissa duly dies of 'a fever and surfeit got by a debauch'. Clarissa's loyal governess finds that her financial investments multiply in value. The device is both elaborate and clumsy, forcing on us the author's concern that his novel be exemplary. Yet it caters to the reader's desire that characters not be forgotten: that, at the end, everyone be accounted for.

The Novel is a genre that would have us believe that its characters might have a life beyond its pages. Jane Austen used to enjoy discussing with her family the after-fates of Elizabeth and Darcy, Emma, Mr Woodhouse, and Mr Knightley. According to Austen's nephew James-Edward Austen-Leigh, his aunt told the family that 'Miss Steele never succeeded in catching the Doctor; that Kitty Bennet was satisfactorily married to a clergyman near Pemberley, while Mary obtained nothing higher than one of her uncle Philips's clerks, and was content to be a star in the society of Meryton.'[6] Mr Woodhouse would die two years after Emma's marriage, allowing her to move to Donwell (and perhaps retrospectively justifying his hypochondria), while the sensitive Jane Fairfax would apparently have only nine or ten years of married life with Frank Churchill before her death. Sometimes with a little more subtlety, the contents of a postscript could be contained within the ending of Victorian novels. A famous example is the final section of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, entitled 'Finale', which records the fitting

destinies of its main characters years beyond the novel's proper conclusion.

Some readers will feel that, as much as Richardson, le Carré has designs on us with his postscript. His is a political point: ordinary citizens and newspaper readers will never be told the kind of story found in his novel. His voice comes through with sarcastic directness. 'The permanent government of England, on which her transient politicians spin and posture like so many table dancers, had once more done its duty' (551). Yet the postscript is also offered as a form of verisimilitude. In the real world of multinational skulduggery and Foreign Office complicity, things continue. Foreign Office wheels keep turning; businessmen and diplomats leave one scheme only to turn up elsewhere. The bureaucrats who really run the country do not recognize the significance of any one person's story. Our protagonist reaches the end of his road, but the bigger narrative continues. The novelist makes a shapely tale, but in life there are no proper endings.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

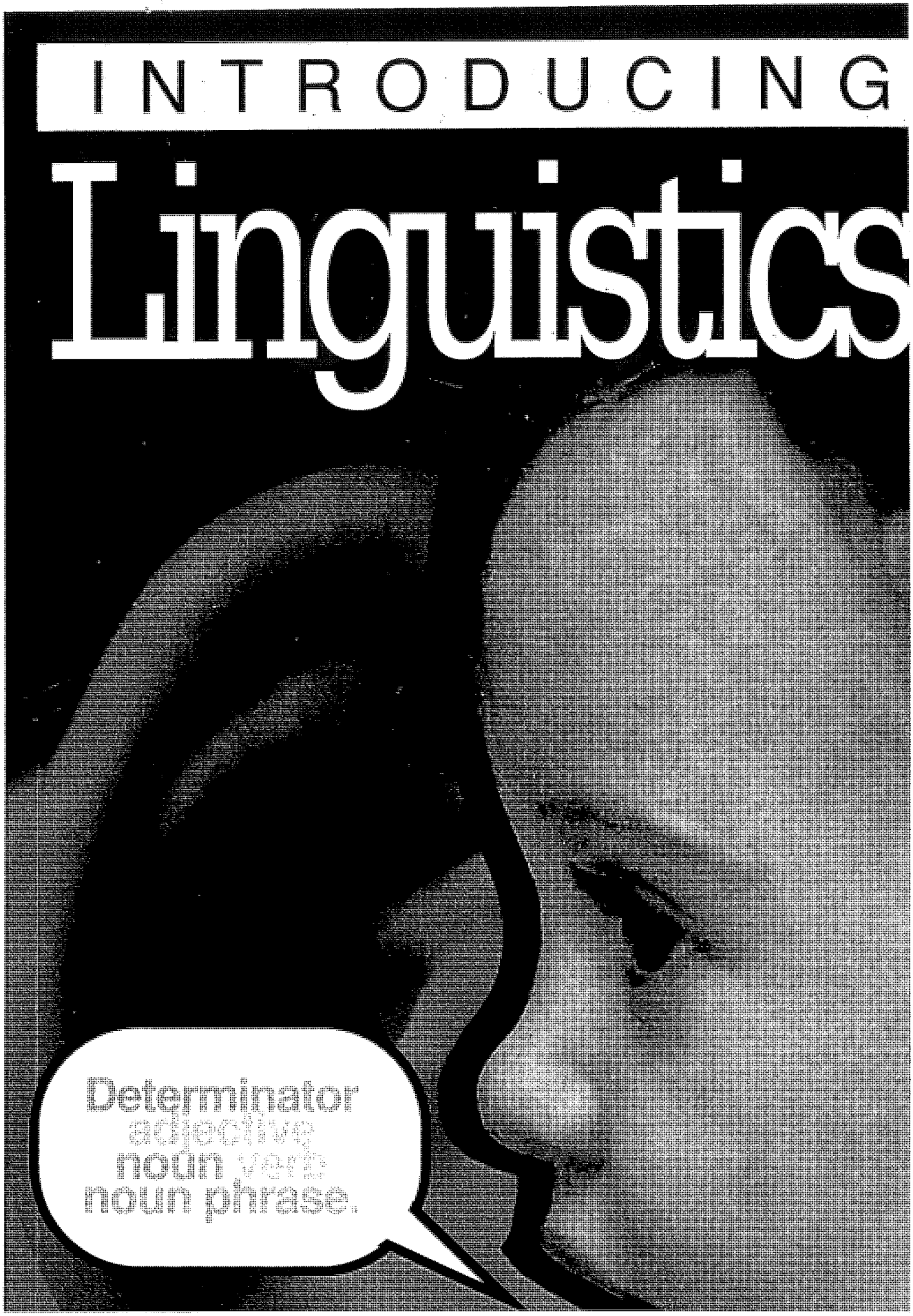
1. The anecdote is told by Brontë's publisher, George Murray Smith. I take it from Rebecca Fraser, *The Brontës: Charlotte Brontë and Her Family* (Crown Publishers, 1988), 349.
2. His own account is quoted in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (1994; Phoenix, 1999), 535.

CHAPTER 1

1. See Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, ed. T. Keymer and A. Wakely (Oxford World's Classics, 2001), 5. The World's Classics paperback is the only British edition of the first edition of the novel.
2. Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. Michael Sadleir and Frederick Page, introd. P. D. Edwards (Oxford World's Classics, 1999), ch. xii, p. 234.
3. Graham Greene, *Stamboul Train* (Bodley Head, 1974), p. x.
4. *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, XVII.
5. Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 160.
6. I owe this to Edgar Wright's annotations to his Oxford World's Classics edition of *Mary Barton* (1998). We now know that Gaskell had another son who died, in about 1839. It may be that he is the other one of the two ghostly beings mentioned in the epigraph. See Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Faber, 1993), 126, 154–5.

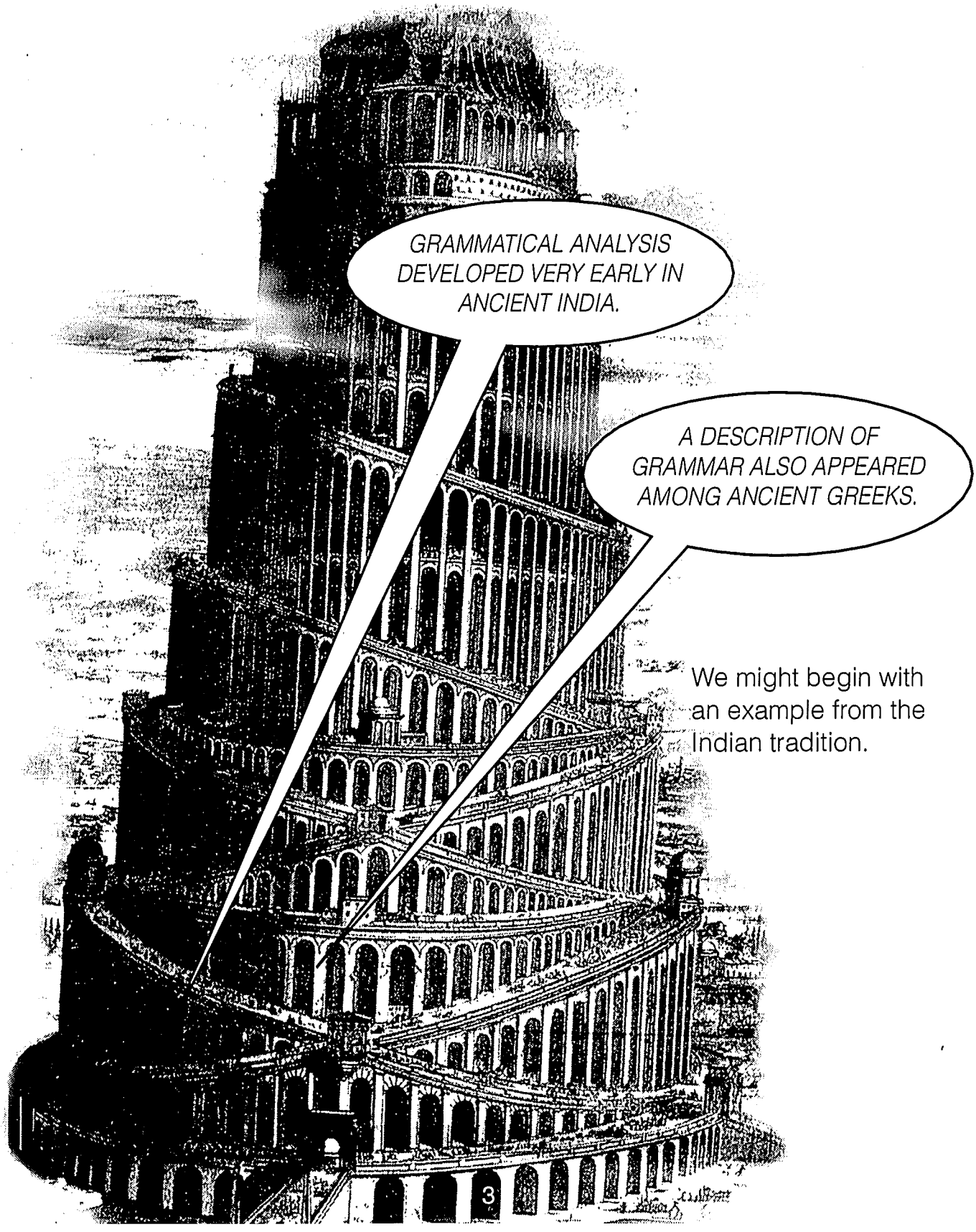
INTRODUCING

Linguistics



A Brief History of Linguistics

Human beings have probably been speaking for as long as we have existed, but it was only around 3,000 years ago that anybody began to be curious about language and to start examining it. This happened independently in two places.



We might begin with an example from the Indian tradition.

An Indian Linguist

Pāṇini's life (*circa* 5th century BC) is unknown, but his work, the *Astādhayāyī*, is a culmination of earlier studies in phonology and grammar.

Pāṇini's approach to grammar requires that the pieces of words should first be glued together in order. Rules should then be applied to convert these sequences into the correct surface forms. Pānini worked on Sanskrit, but we can illustrate his method very well with English. Consider the verb

penetrate

and its related adjective

impenetrable

meaning "not able to be penetrated". This consists of the negative prefix

in – (as in insane),

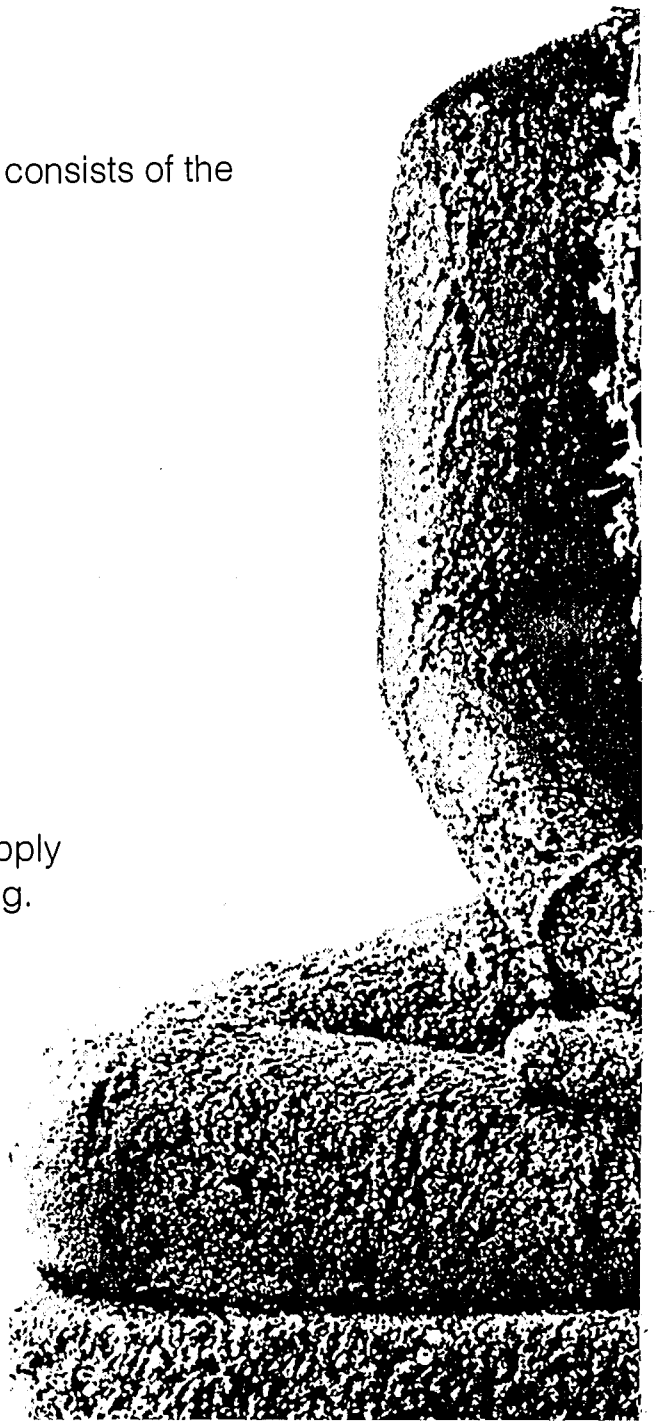
the stem ***penetrate***

and the suffix – ***ble***

So, to start with, we have

in-penetrate-ble

Now we need some rules, which we will apply to pronunciation, not necessarily to spelling.



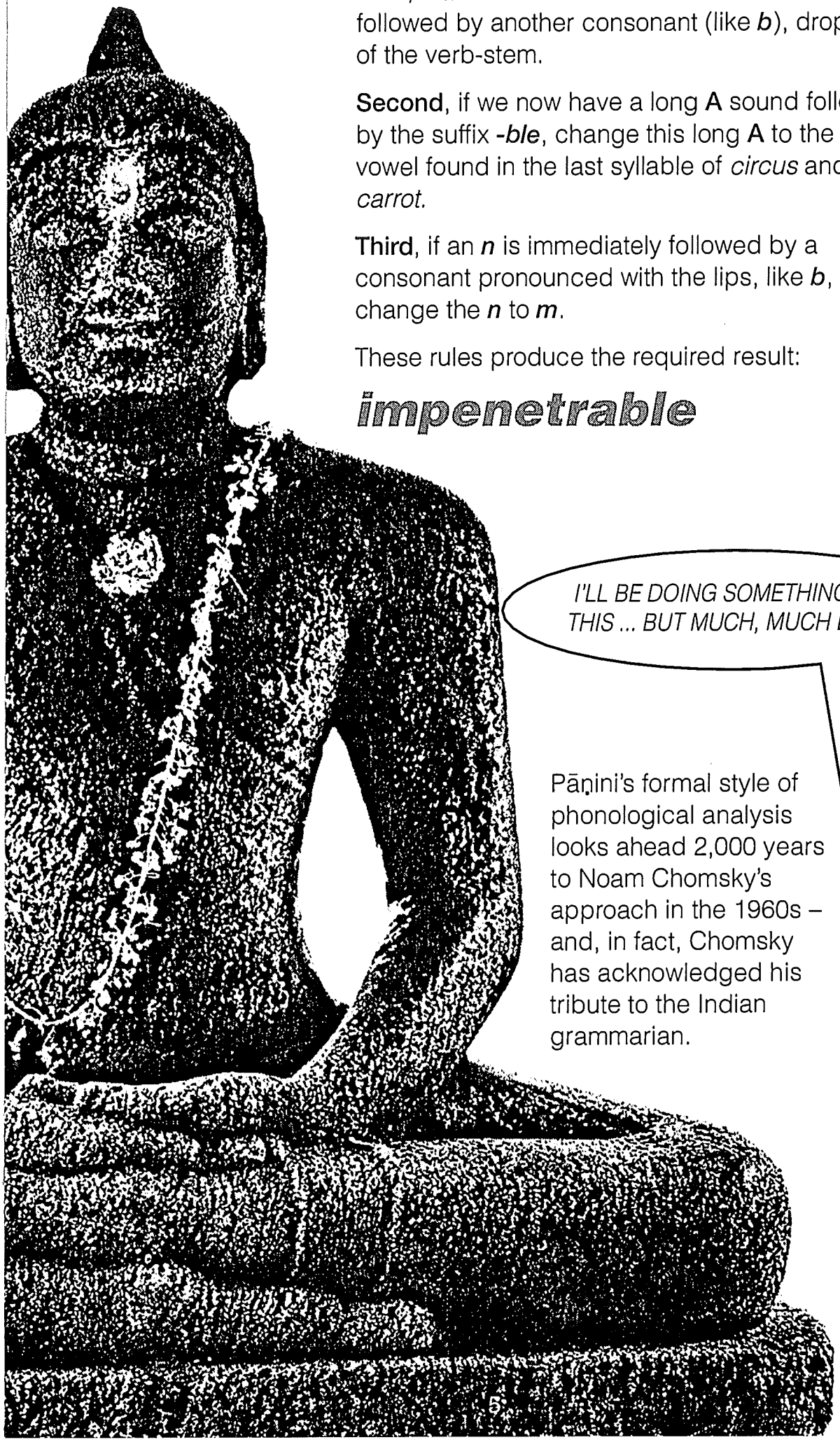
First, if a verb-stem ends in ***-ate*** immediately followed by another consonant (like ***b***), drop the ***t*** of the verb-stem.

Second, if we now have a long **A** sound followed by the suffix ***-ble***, change this long **A** to the weak vowel found in the last syllable of *circus* and *carrot.*

Third, if an ***n*** is immediately followed by a consonant pronounced with the lips, like ***b***, change the ***n*** to ***m***.

These rules produce the required result:

impenetrable



I'LL BE DOING SOMETHING LIKE THIS ... BUT MUCH, MUCH LATER!

Pāṇini's formal style of phonological analysis looks ahead 2,000 years to Noam Chomsky's approach in the 1960s – and, in fact, Chomsky has acknowledged his tribute to the Indian grammarian.

The Greek Origins of Linguistics

Even though the Indian tradition was much the more sophisticated of the two, it was the Greeks who founded the European tradition.

The great Greek scholar Aristotle (384–322 BC) took the first step.

SUBJECT:
The King of Persia

PREDICATE:
took a vast army into Greece.

Aristotle went no further, but this division is still recognized today, as a fundamental part of the analysis of sentences.

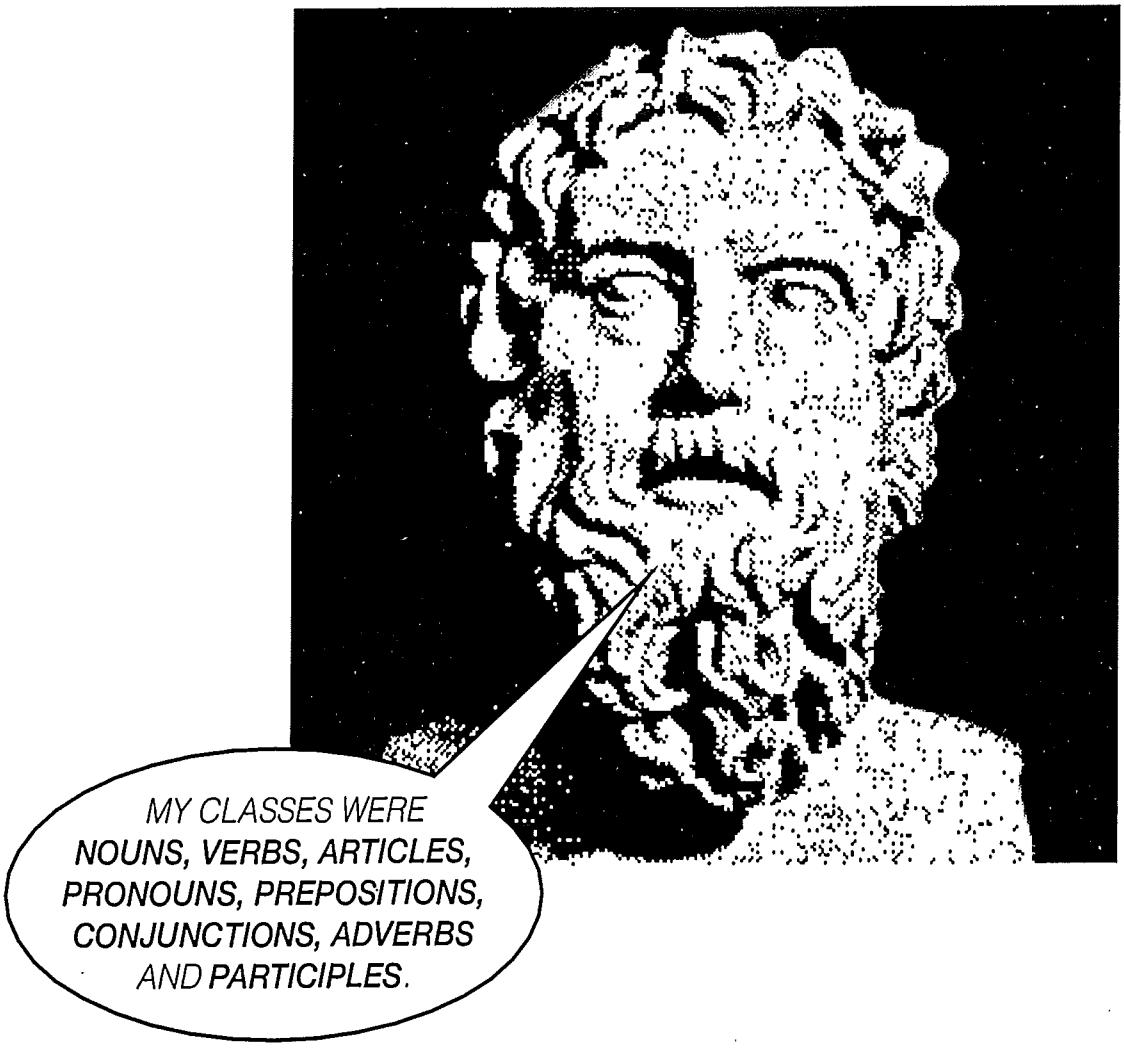
The Greek verb **leípō** "leave", like any Greek verb, has more than 300 distinct forms.

leípein to leave
leípōn leaving
leípsein to be going to leave
leípsōn going to leave
lipein having left
leípō I leave
leípeis you (singular) leave
leípei he/she leaves
leípomen we leave
leípete you (plural) leave
leípousi they leave
leípō (that) I may leave
leípoimi may I leave
leípsō I will leave
leípsoimi may I leave (future)
élipon I left
lípō (that) I might leave
lípoimi might I have left
léloipa I have left
eleloípē I had left
leípomai I remain
leípomai I will remain
elipómēn I remained
léleimmai I have remained
leiphthēsomai I will be left
elíphthen I was left

Grammar or Parts of Speech

The Greek work culminated in the writings of Apollonius Dyscolus (110–175 AD) and Dionysius Thrax (second to first centuries BC). It was Thrax who produced the first complete grammar of Greek, only parts of which survive today. Ancient Greek was a language in which most words could take lots and lots of different endings for grammatical purposes.

By looking at the behaviour of Greek words, and especially at these endings, Thrax concluded that Greek words fell into just eight classes, which we call the *parts of speech*.



Thrax's description of Greek would become the basis of all grammatical description in Europe until well into the 20th century, even though his eight classes were later modified.

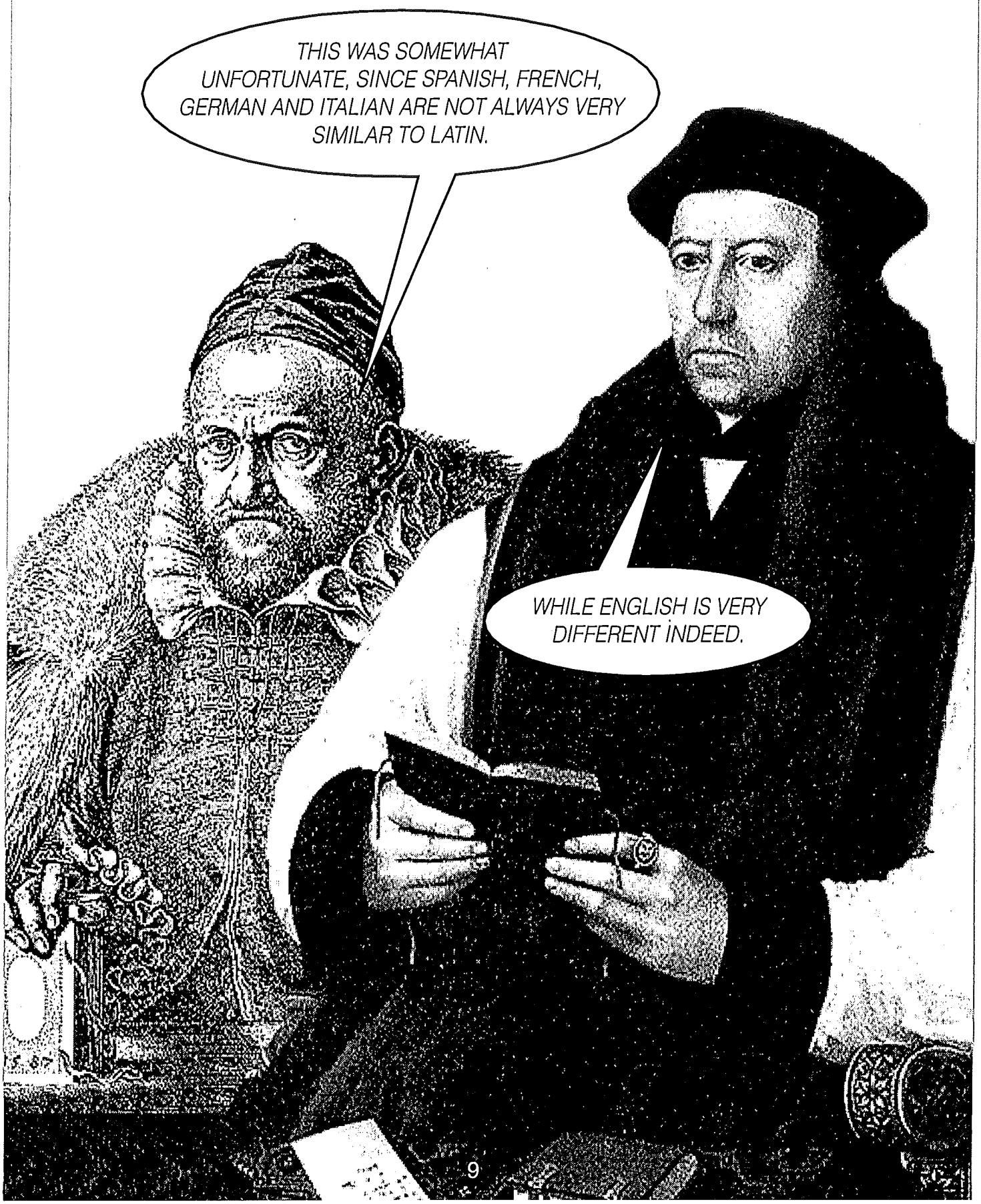
Latin Grammar

After the Roman conquest of Greece in the mid-2nd century BC, Roman scholars learned of the Greek work, and they began to apply the same analysis to their own language, Latin.

amicus bonus a good friend
amici boni of a good friend
amico bono to a good friend
amicum bonum a good friend (object)
amico bono (by/with/from) a good friend
amici boni good friends
amicorum bonorum of good friends
amicis bonis to good friends
amicos bonos good friends (object)
amicis bonis (by/with/from) good friends

The Graeco-Latin tradition was ultimately synthesized in the work of the most influential Roman grammarian, Priscian, who wrote in the 6th century AD. Priscian's description of Latin is still what we find in most school textbooks of Latin today.

When Europeans finally began to be interested in writing descriptions of their own languages in the 14th and 15th centuries, they mostly tried to impose Priscian's account of Latin onto their own languages.



Traditional Grammar

Nevertheless, this *traditional Graeco-Roman grammar* has continued to be taught in European schools down to the present day.

Except that, in the English-speaking countries, the teaching of English grammar was largely discontinued in the 1960s...

The Port-Royal Grammar

The 17th-century French scholars, known as the Port-Royal Circle, put together a remarkably original "universal" grammar of French, one which largely broke free from the Priscianic tradition. Here is a typical example of their analyses.

The invisible God created the visible world.

This sentence is analysed as...

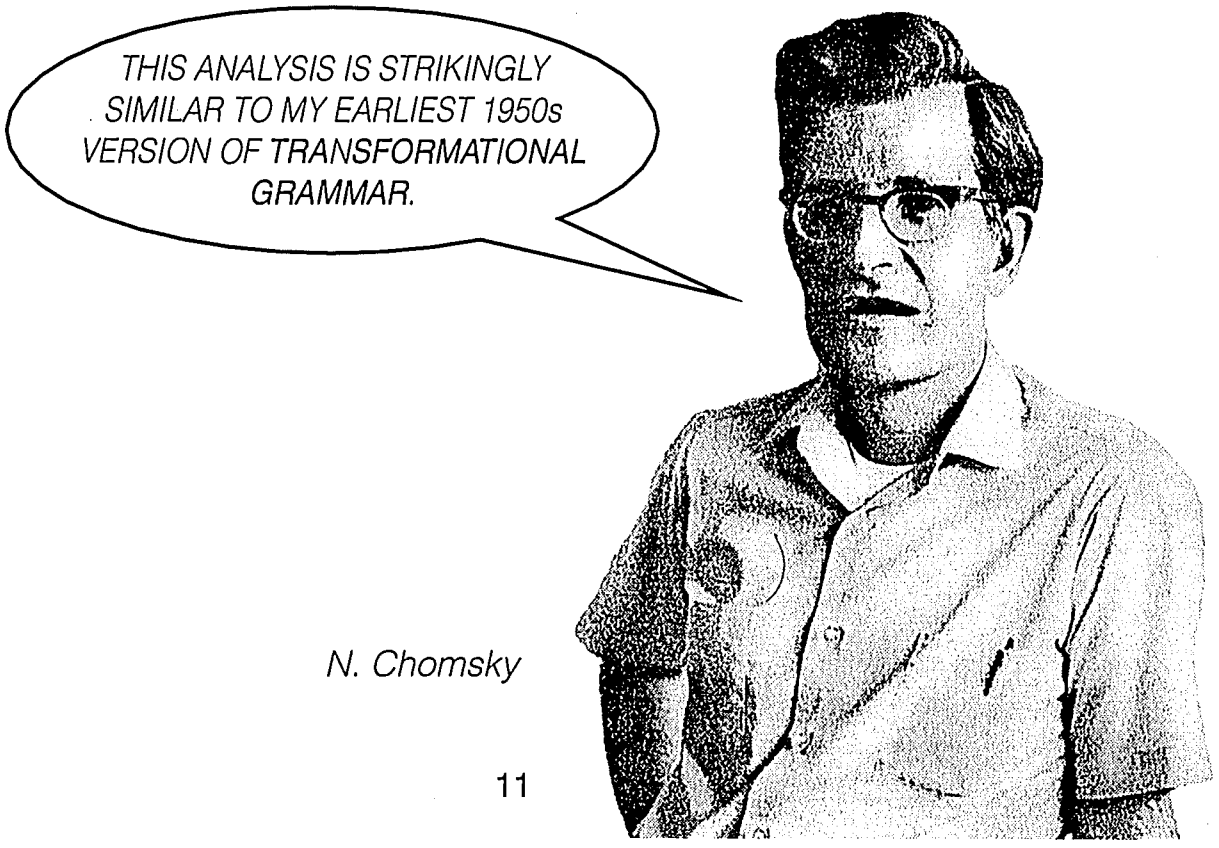
God, who is invisible, created the world, which is visible

... which in turn is decomposed into the three propositions...

God is invisible

God created the world

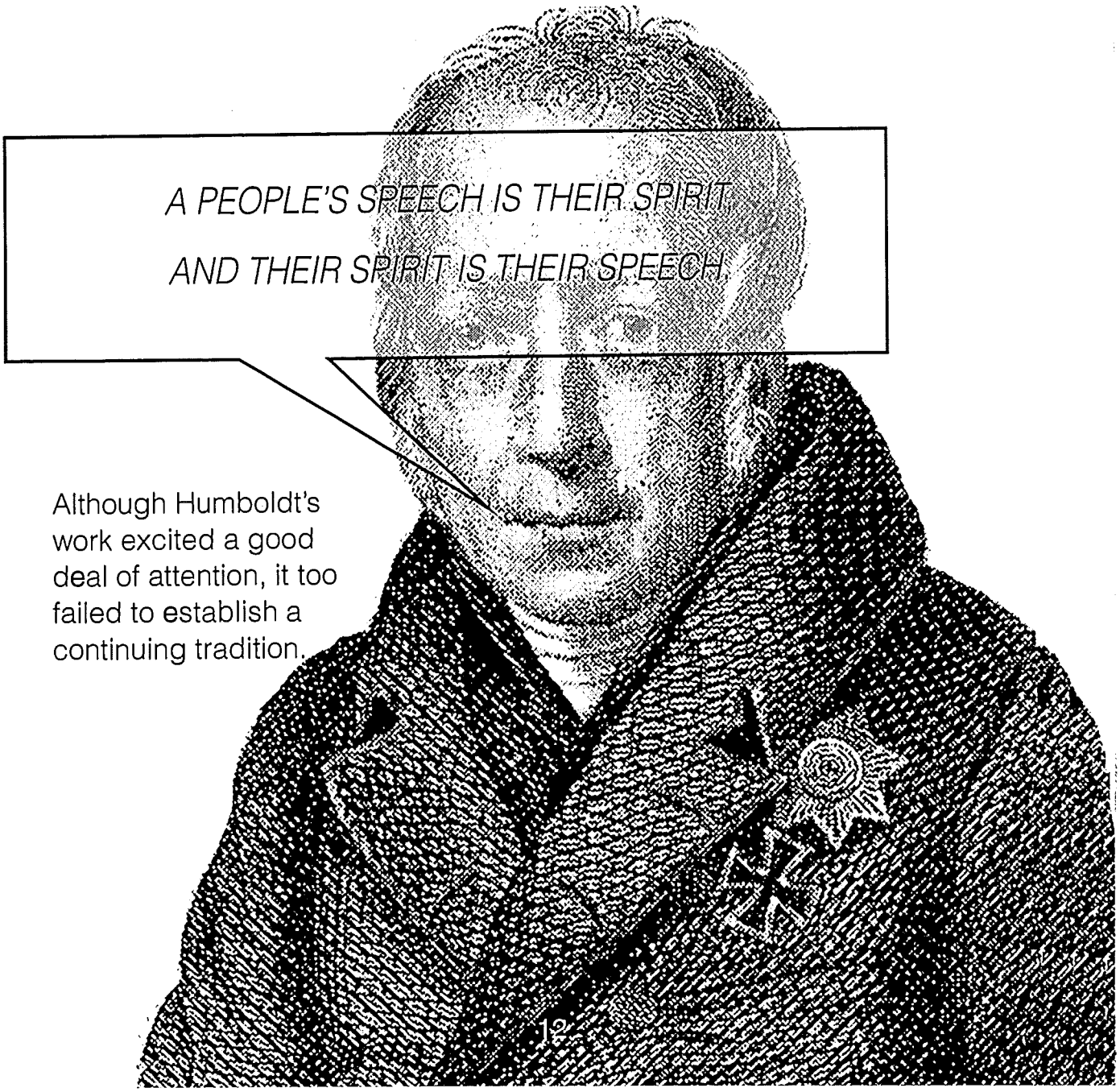
The world is visible



N. Chomsky

The German polymath Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), brother of the famous explorer Alexander von Humboldt, likewise tried to develop a universalist and philosophical approach to the study of languages.

> The central fact of language is that speakers can make infinite use of the finite resources provided by their language. Though the capacity for language is universal, the individuality of each language is a property of the people who speak it. Every language has its *innere Sprachform*, or internal structure, which determines its outer form and which is the reflection of its speakers' minds. The language and the thought of a people are thus inseparable.

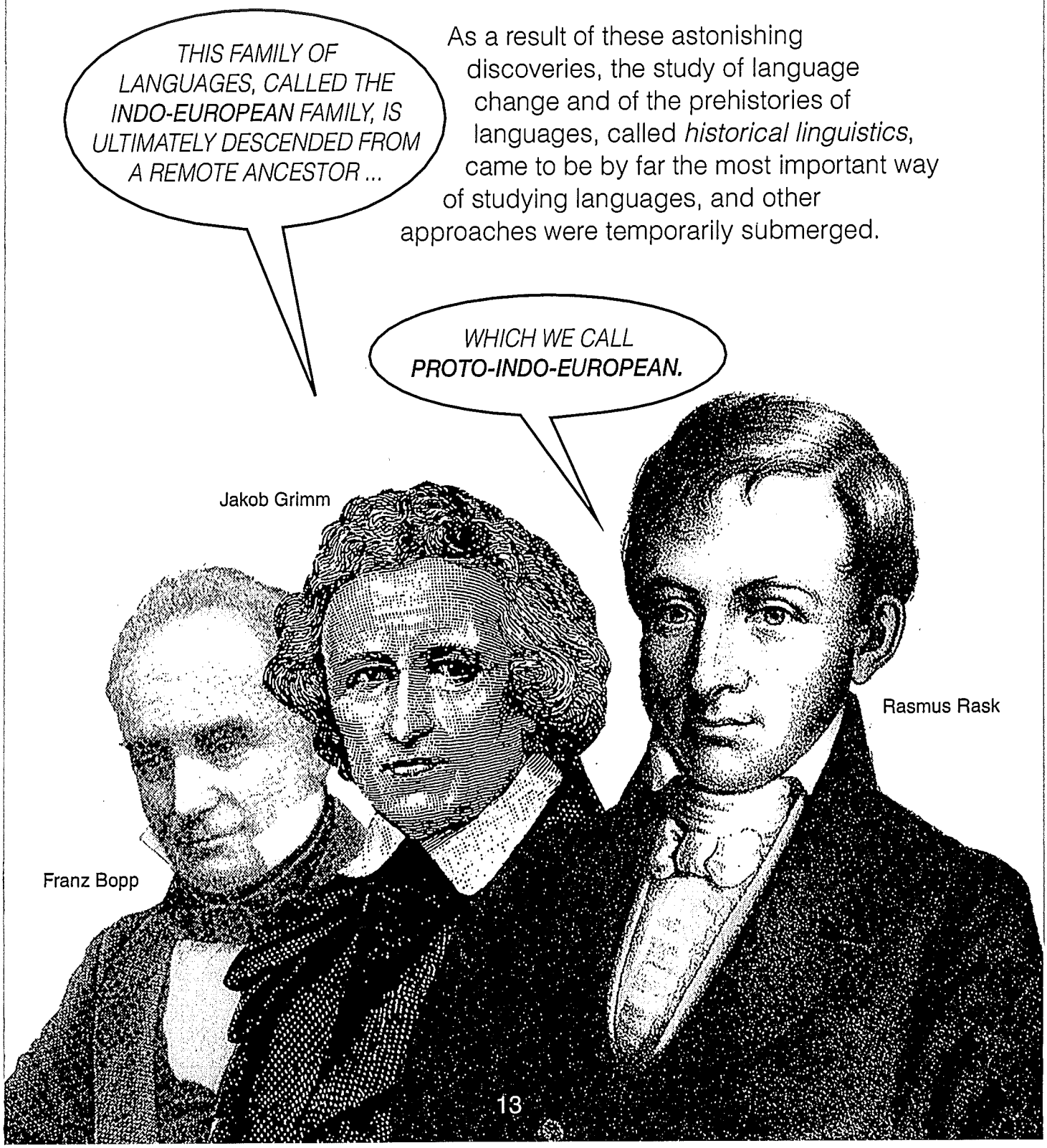


Although Humboldt's work excited a good deal of attention, it too failed to establish a continuing tradition.

Historical Linguistics

Toward the close of the 18th century, European linguists began to realize that certain languages exhibited such striking systematic resemblances that they must be derived from a single common ancestor, from which they had diverged by a long series of changes. Scholars like Franz Bopp (1791–1867), Rasmus Rask (1787–1832) and Jakob Grimm (1785–1863) were able to show that almost all of the languages of Europe and many languages of Asia were all related in this way.

As a result of these astonishing discoveries, the study of language change and of the prehistories of languages, called *historical linguistics*, came to be by far the most important way of studying languages, and other approaches were temporarily submerged.



Here's an example of the kind of systematic correspondence that attracted early attention. Note the initial consonants.

English	*Latin*	*Greek*
fish	piscis	(ikhthys)
father	pater	pater
foot	ped-	pod-
for	pro	para
six	sex	hexa
seven	septem	hepta
sweet	suavis	hedys
salt	sal	hal
new	novus	neos
night	noct-	nykt-
nine	novem	(en)nea

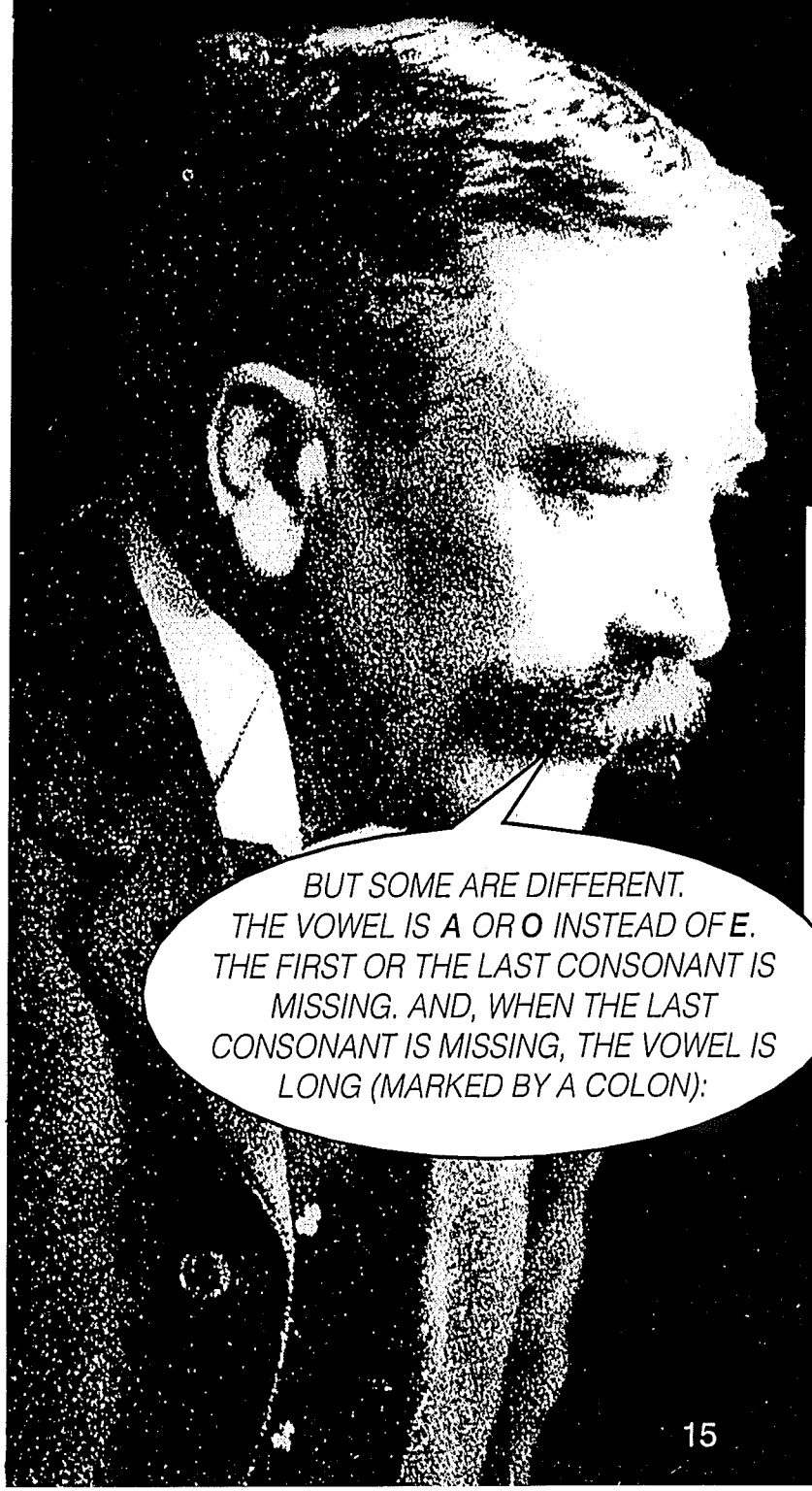
The Origins of General Linguistics

Only toward the end of the 19th century did the non-historical study of language structure begin to reassert itself. Pioneers like the German Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–93) and the Poles Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) and Mikołai Kruszewski (1851–87) published important observations about word structure and sound structure in languages.

This kind of work we now call *general linguistics*: the study of how languages are put together and how they work.

Ferdinand de Saussure

But the single most influential figure in the development of general linguistics was, at this time, working in some obscurity in the Swiss city of Geneva. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) had been trained as a historical linguist, and in fact he had made important contributions to the understanding of Proto-Indo-European. Saussure applied the technique of internal reconstruction to Proto-Indo-European (PIE) to explain certain irregularities in the forms of some roots. Most PIE roots have the form ***CeC-***, where ***C*** means "any consonant". For instance ...



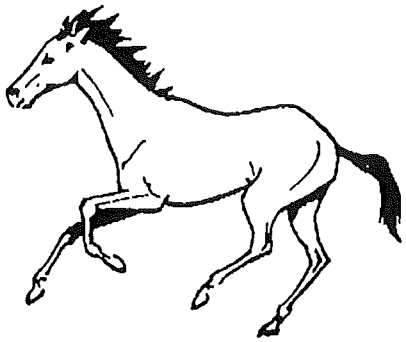
bʰel-	'shine'
bʰer-	'carry'
gel-	'form into a ball'
kwel-	'revolve'
meg-	'great'
mel-	'soft'
nebʰ-	'cloud'
ped-	'foot'
reg-	'go straight'
sed-	'sit'

ag-	'lead'
ak-	'sharp'
dʰe:-	'put, set'
do:-	'give'
ed-	'eat'
es-	'be'
ma:-	'good'
od-	'smell'
se:-	'sow'

Saussure proposed that these irregular roots had earlier been perfectly regular, but that they had happened to contain certain consonants which had disappeared. We now call these consonants ***laryngeals***.

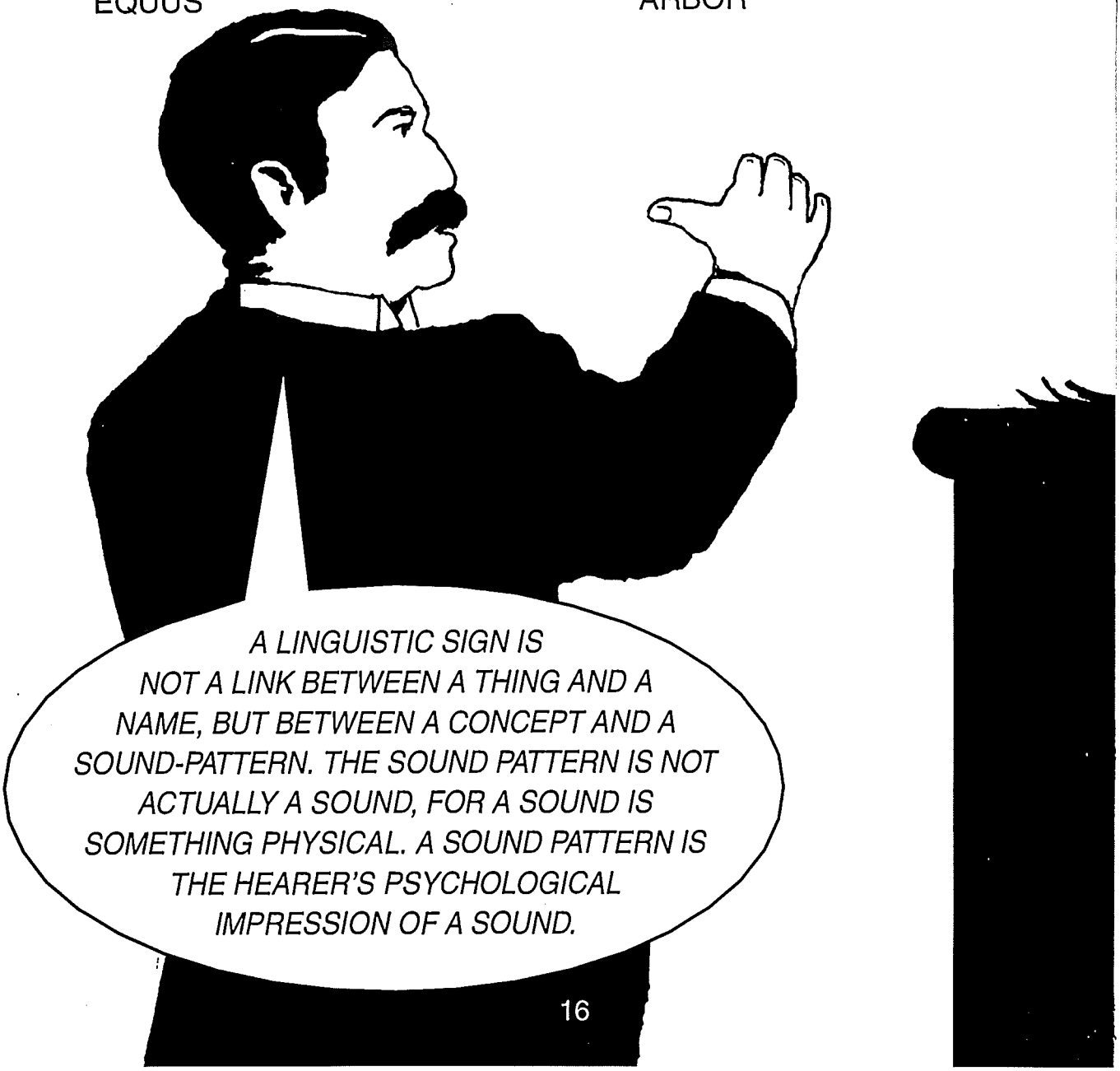
Saussure's Lectures on General Linguistics

Most people reduce language to a list of terms corresponding to a list of things. For instance, in Latin ...

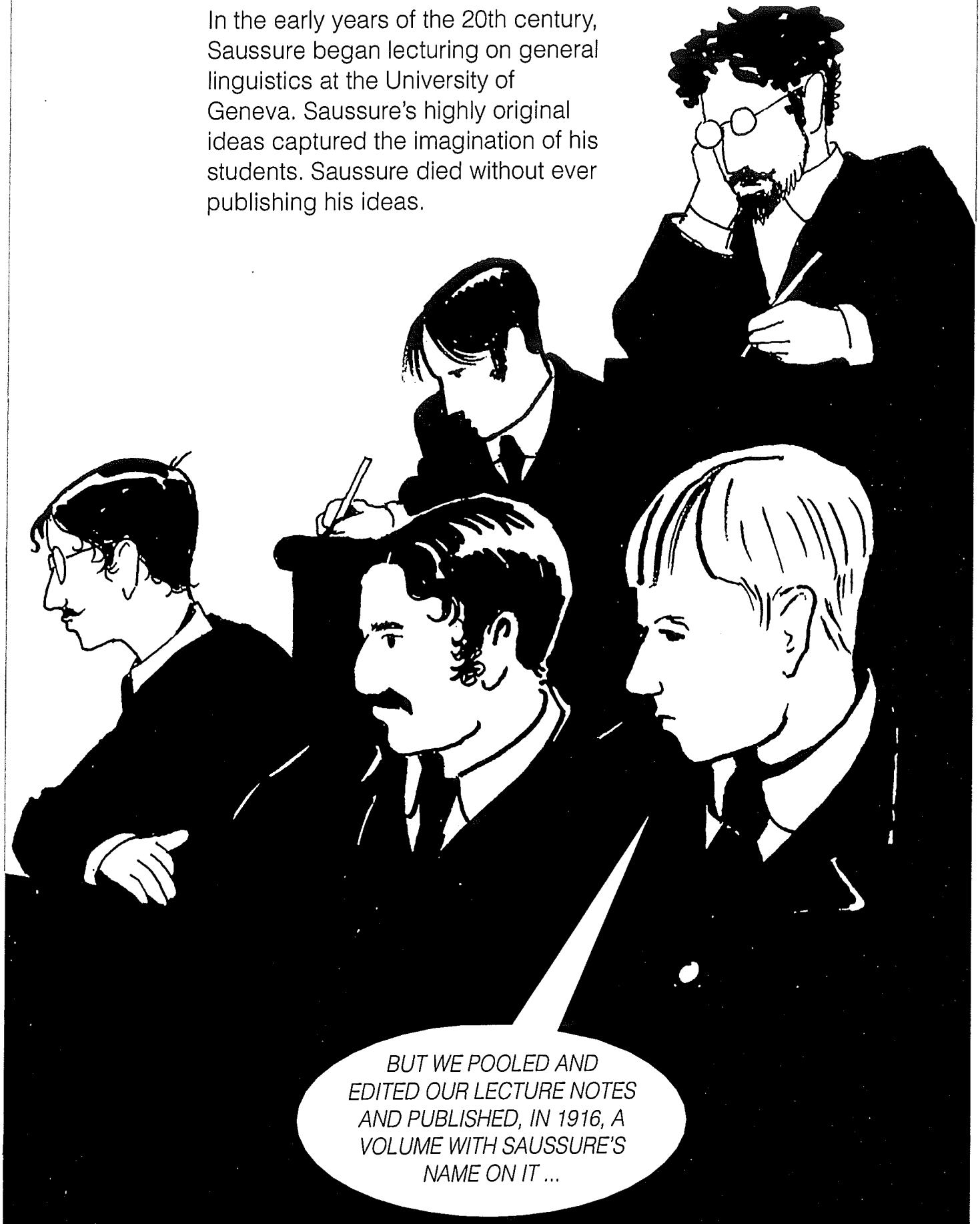


EQUUS

ARBOR



In the early years of the 20th century, Saussure began lecturing on general linguistics at the University of Geneva. Saussure's highly original ideas captured the imagination of his students. Saussure died without ever publishing his ideas.



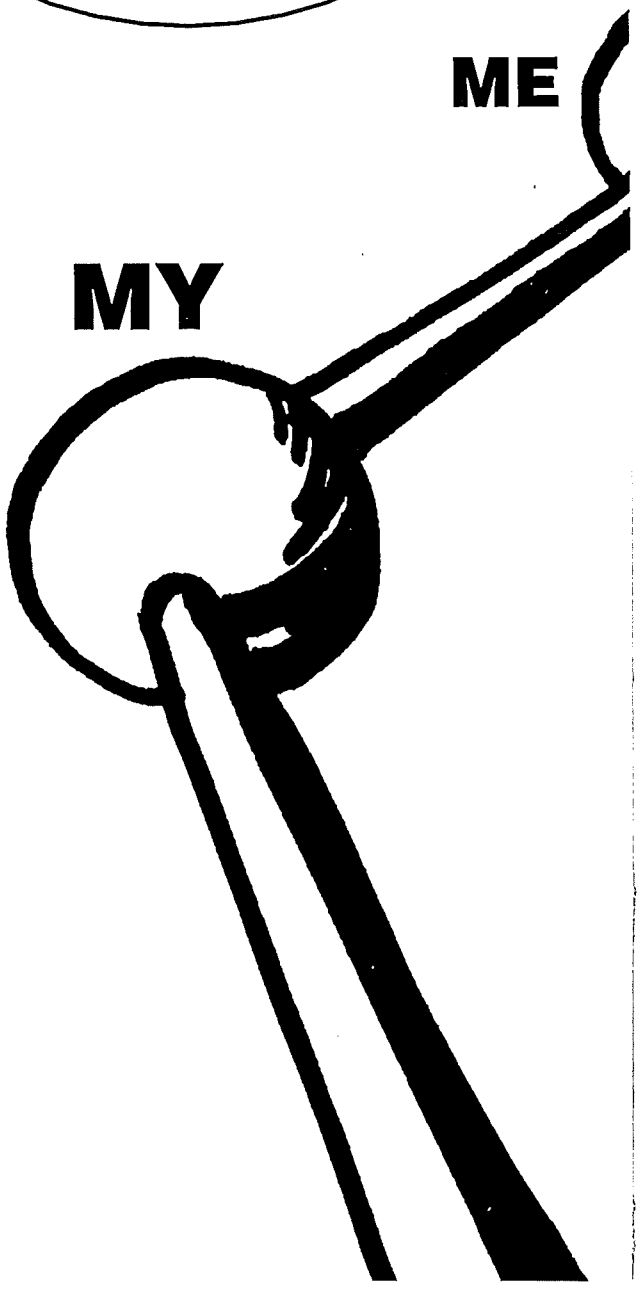
... the now-celebrated ***Cours.***

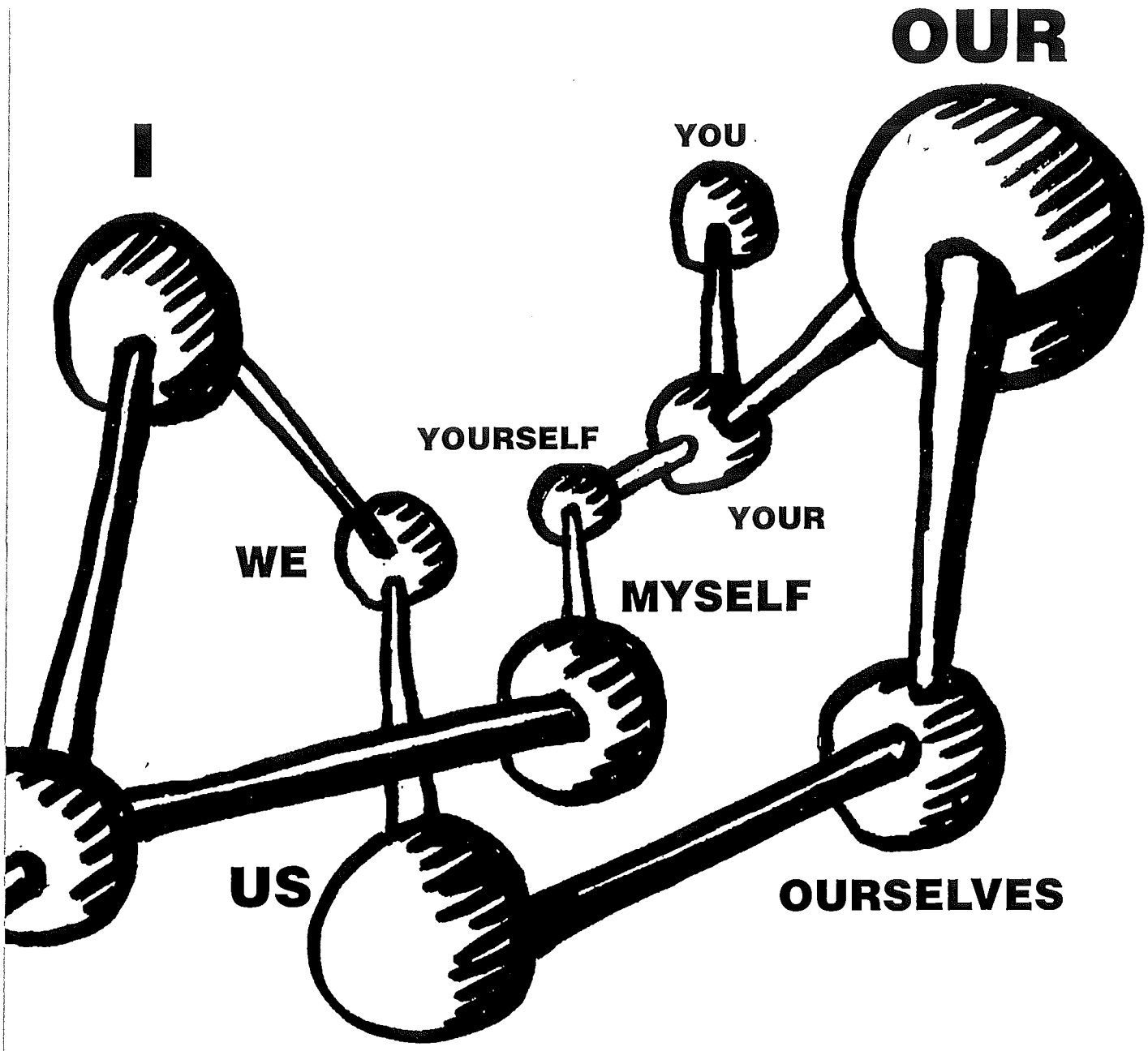
Saussure's Structuralism

Before Saussure, most linguists had taken an *atomistic* approach to language structure. That is, they perceived a language as primarily a collection of objects, such as speech sounds, words and grammatical endings.

I ARGUED INSTEAD THAT A LANGUAGE WAS BEST REGARDED AS A ***STRUCTURED SYSTEM*** *OF ELEMENTS, IN WHICH THE PLACE OF EACH ELEMENT IS DEFINED CHIEFLY BY HOW IT* ***RELATES*** *TO OTHER ELEMENTS.*

This novel approach quickly came to be called *structuralism,* and, since Saussure's work, virtually all important work on languages has been structuralist in this sense.





An Example from English

Here is an example of structuralist analysis. Among the speech sounds found in English are two which we represent as [d] and as [ð].

The sound [d] occurs at the beginning of the word ***den***,

while the sound [ð] occurs at the beginning of the word ***then***.

Since these words are otherwise identical in pronunciation, and since they have different meanings, we may therefore conclude that these two sounds "count" as different in English. That is, they behave as two different structural units for the purpose of building English words. We therefore say that [d] and [ð] belong, in English, to two different structural units, or *phonemes*, which we represent as /d/ and /ð/, so that *den* and *then* are represented phonemically as /den/ and /ðen/.

An Example from Spanish

In contrast, the sounds [**d**] and [ð] exist also in Spanish, but their behaviour is different there. In Spanish, [ð] can occur only in certain positions, notably between vowels, as in [deðo] "finger", while [**d**] can never occur in these positions.

Note, for example, [dama] "lady", with [**d**], but [la ðama] "the lady", with [ð] between vowels.

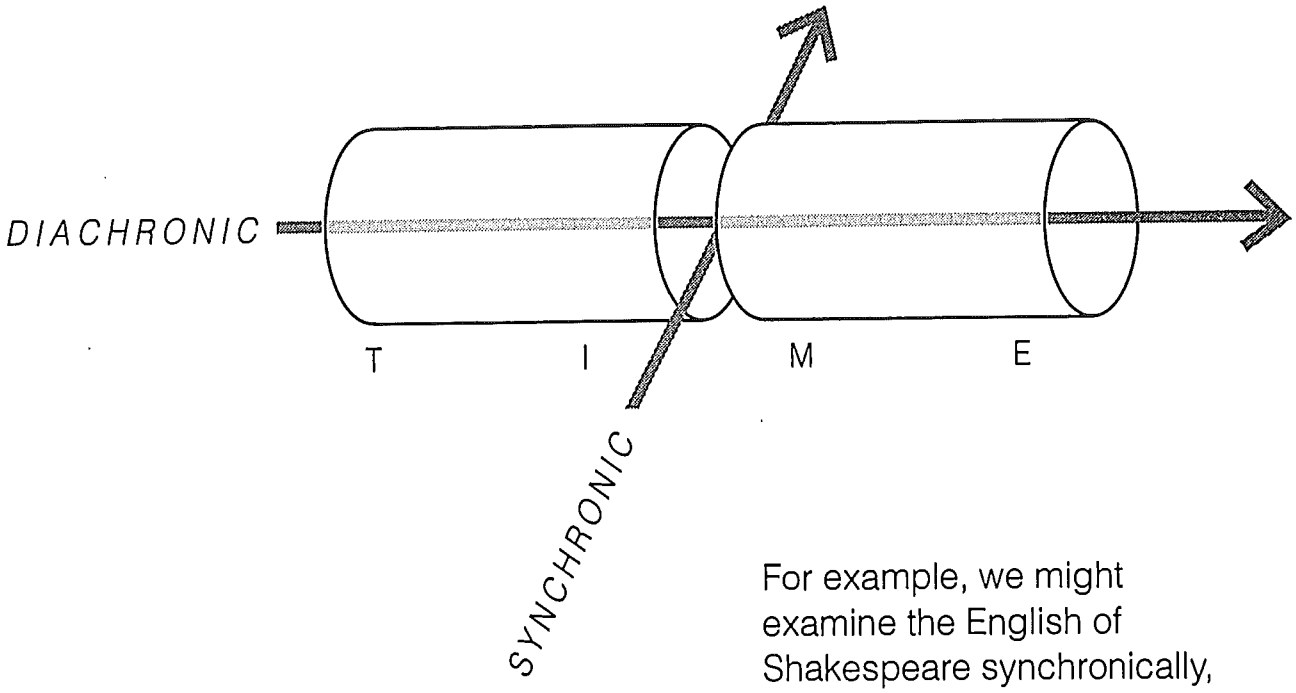
In Spanish, therefore, the two sounds do not "count" as different, and we assign them both to a single phoneme [d]. The correctness of this analysis is recognized by the Spanish spelling system, which writes *dedo,* "finger", *dama,* "lady" and *la dama,* "the lady".

Both English and Spanish possess the speech sounds [d] and [ð], then, but the structural relation between the two is different in the two languages – and, in a structuralist approach, it is the *structural relation* that matters, not the objective phonetic facts.

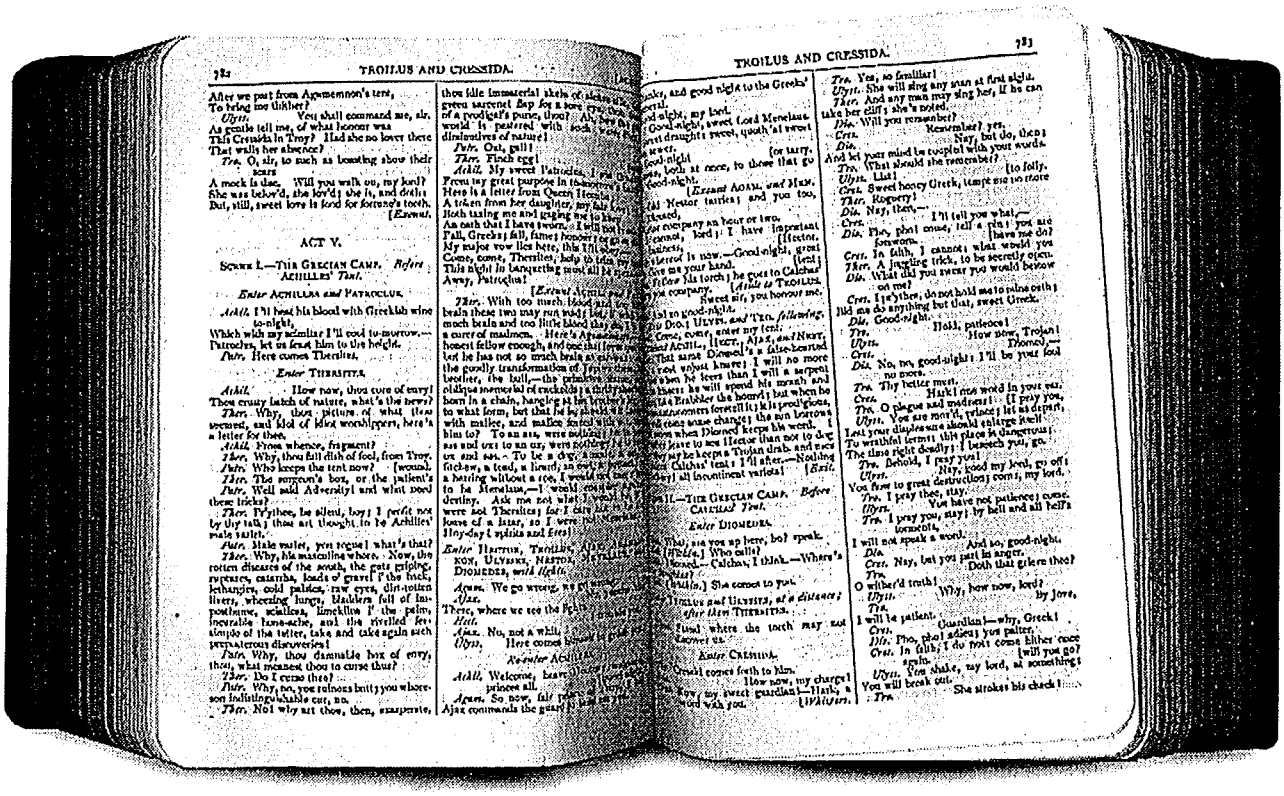
Today almost all work in linguistics is structuralist in Saussure's general linguistic sense. From the rules of pronunciation to the structure of conversations, linguists see a language as an orderly system, or better as a system of systems, with all linguistic phenomena forming part of these systems.

Synchronic and Diachronic Structures

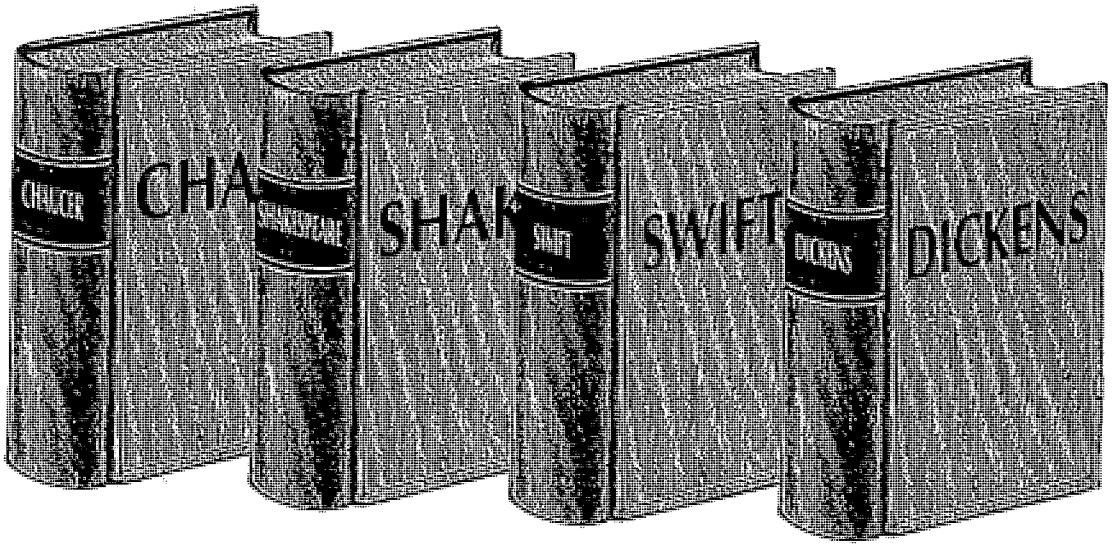
A further aspect of Saussure's work is an emphasis upon two very different approaches to the study of language: a *synchronic* approach, in which we focus on the structure of a language at a particular moment in time (not necessarily the present), and a *diachronic* approach, in which we look at the development of a language over time.



For example, we might examine the English of Shakespeare synchronically, for its own sake.

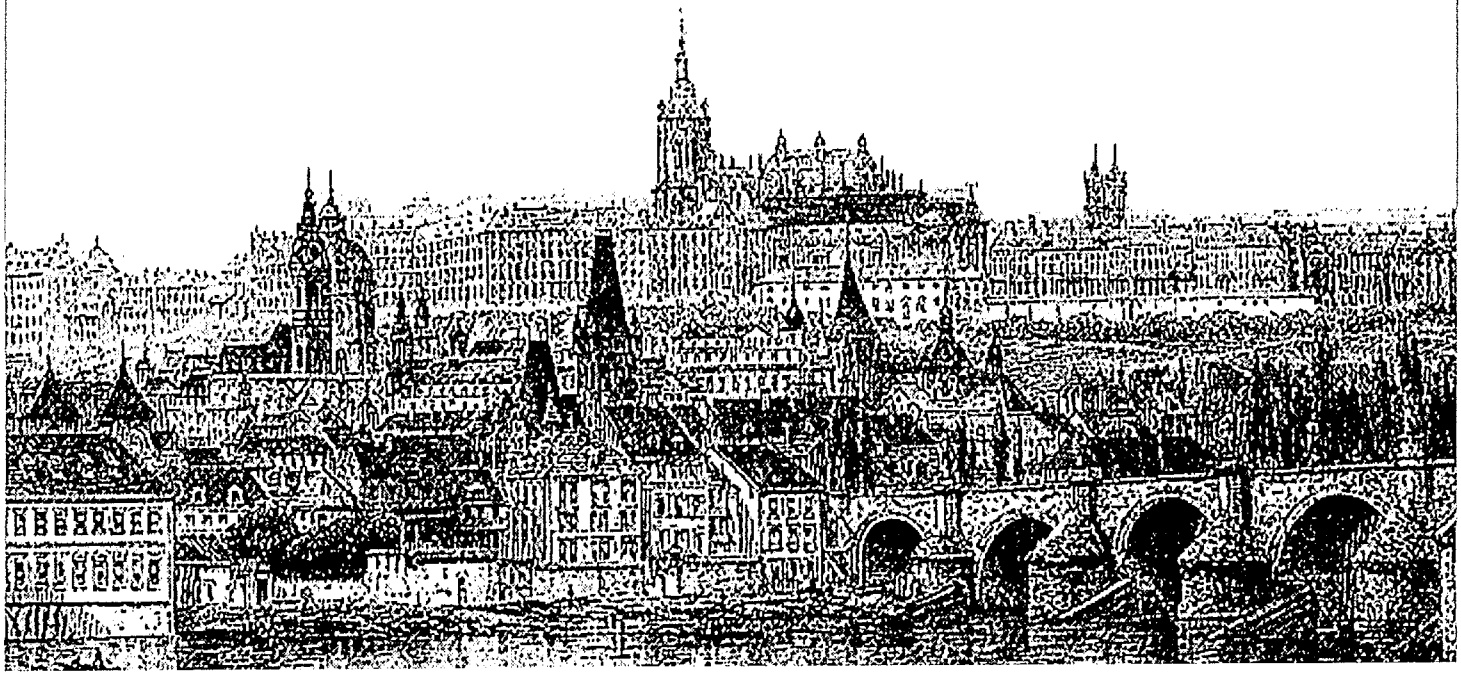


Or we might examine it diachronically, as a stage in the development of medieval English into modern English.



The Prague Circle

After the First World War, a number of East European linguists, many of them Russians fleeing the Communist revolution in Russia (1917), congregated in the Czech city of Prague. Eventually known as the Prague Circle, this group developed structuralist ideas in a number of directions during the next two decades. Particularly prominent were the Russians Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1890–1938) and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982). Trubetzkoy's *Principles of Phonology,* published in 1939, was perhaps the Circle's most influential publication (phonology is the study of sound systems in languages). But the Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia in 1938 caused the dispersal of the group: Trubetzkoy died, while Jakobson fled west, eventually arriving in the USA.



Trubetzkoy's Phonology

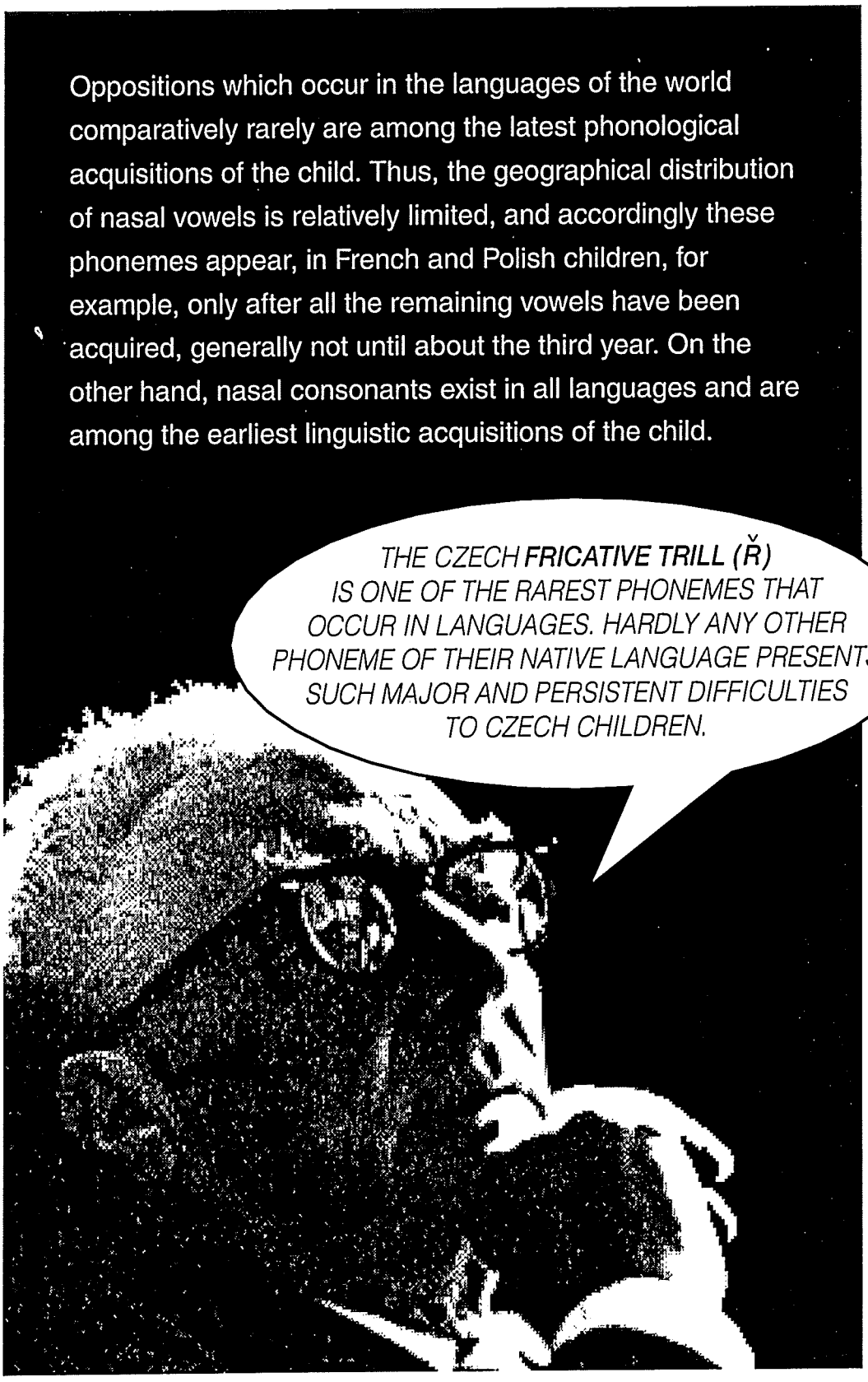
Here is an example of Trubetzkoy's analysis of phonology from his book.

> The specific character of a phonological opposition consists in the latter's being *a distinctive opposition of sound* ....The concept of distinctiveness presupposes the concept of opposition. One thing can be distinguished only from another thing: it can be distinguished only insofar as it is contrasted with or opposed to something else.

For example, the word ***caught*** is pronounced about the same in American and Canadian accents. However, in most American accents, ***caught*** is pronounced differently from ***cot***, while in Canadian accents ***caught*** and ***cot*** are pronounced identically.

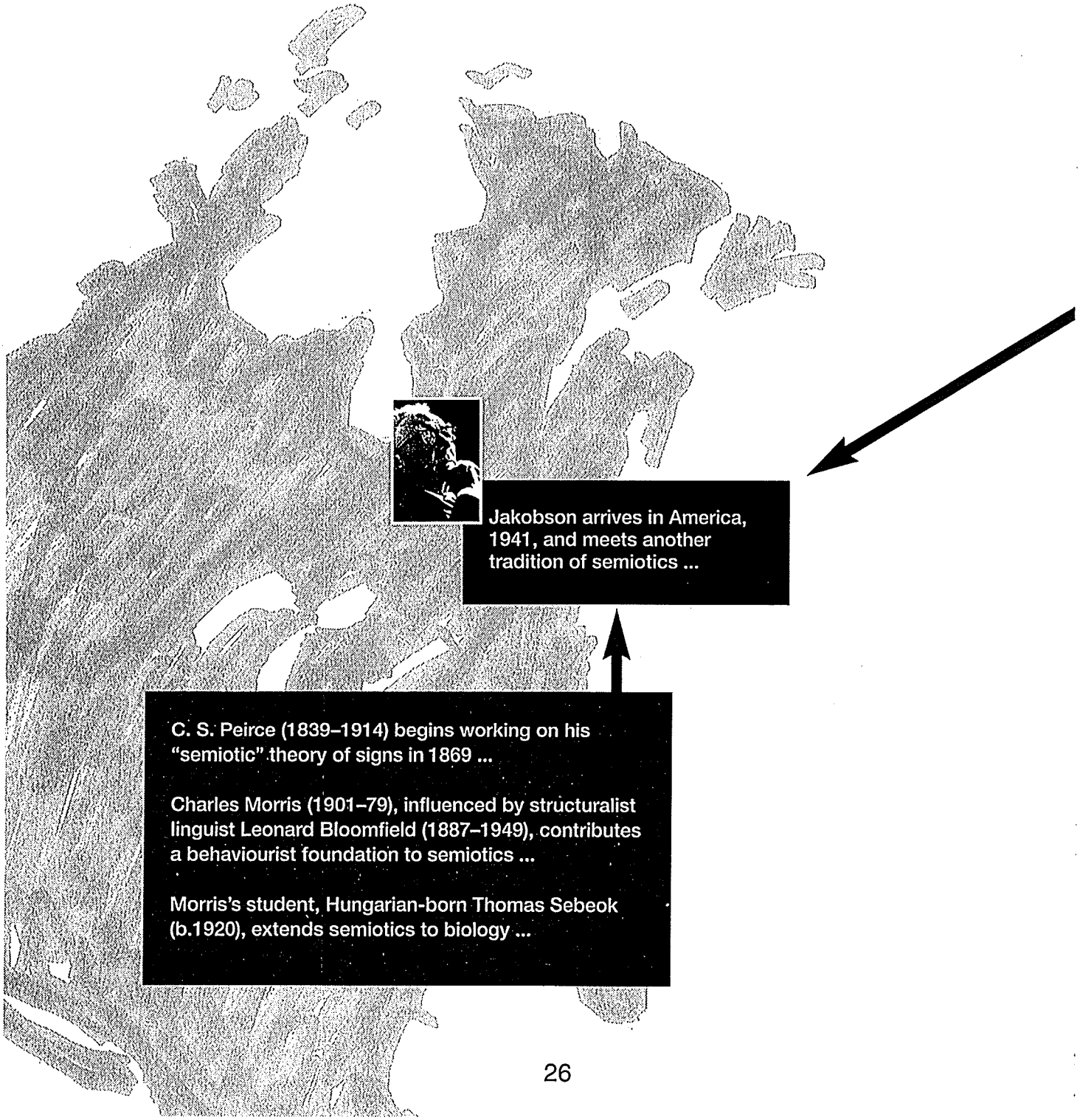
Jakobson's Work on Linguistics

Here is an example of Jakobson's linguistic analysis from his famous article on child language acquisition and the degree of universality of speech sounds.



Jakobson and Semiotics

Jakobson is a key figure bridging the development of *semiotics* from linguistics. His itinerary of exile from Russia to America links together these traditions. Linguistics provided the model of analysing language as a structured system that "produces meanings". Semiotics attempts to extend this approach to other *non-linguistic* systems, that is, to every aspect of social experience that can be analysed as structured systems of *signs.* These might include traffic systems, symphonies or architecture, and, at its most ambitious, in bio-semiotics, the evolutionary environment of organisms.



... *Moscow Linguistic Circle* had links with the semiotic 'formalists' of *OPOJAZ* (Petrograd Society for the Study of Poetic Languages, 1916–30) ...

... *semiology* influenced the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* (1915–21) headed by the young Jakobson ...

Jakobson helps found the *Prague Circle* (1920) ...

Saussure announces a "general study of signs" or *semiology* ...

Saussure/Jakobson influence on *structuralism* in France, 1950s and 60s.

Sign systems in

anthropology:
Claude Lévi-Strauss (b.1908)

psychology:
Jacques Lacan (1901–81)

history:
Michel Foucault (1926–84)

Post-structuralism

Roland Barthes (1915–80)

Jacques Derrida (b.1930)

Julia Kristeva (b.1941)

Linguistics can be, and is, performed without reference to semiotics. But semiotics is unimaginable without linguistics.

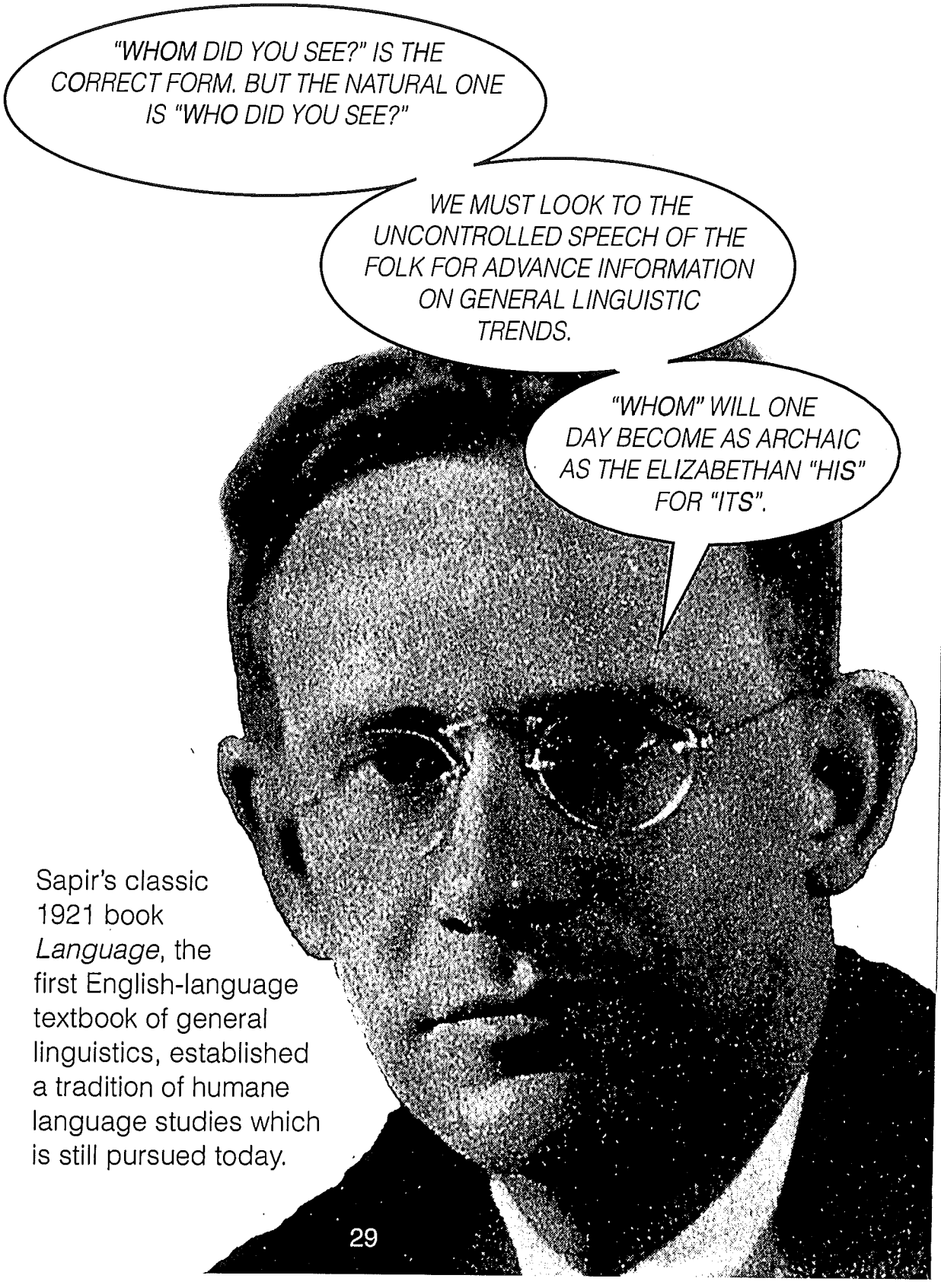
The Origins of American Linguistics

Around the time that Saussure was giving his lectures, the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) was pursuing the study of the dying cultures of native Americans. Boas realized early that good investigation of these cultures required knowedge of their languages. He attacked the common prejudice that race, culture and language are part and parcel. The example he gave was of the Athapaskan linguistic families.

Boas influenced a generation of American anthropologists to learn the native American languages and publish careful descriptions of them. For his efforts, Boas is now recognised as the father of American linguistics.

Sapir's General Linguistics

Boas's most famous student was another German-American, Edward Sapir (1884–1939). Sapir came to linguistics with a strong background in music, art and literature, and his approach to language was accordingly broad and humane in outlook. Sapir was deeply interested in uncovering possible relations between language and culture.

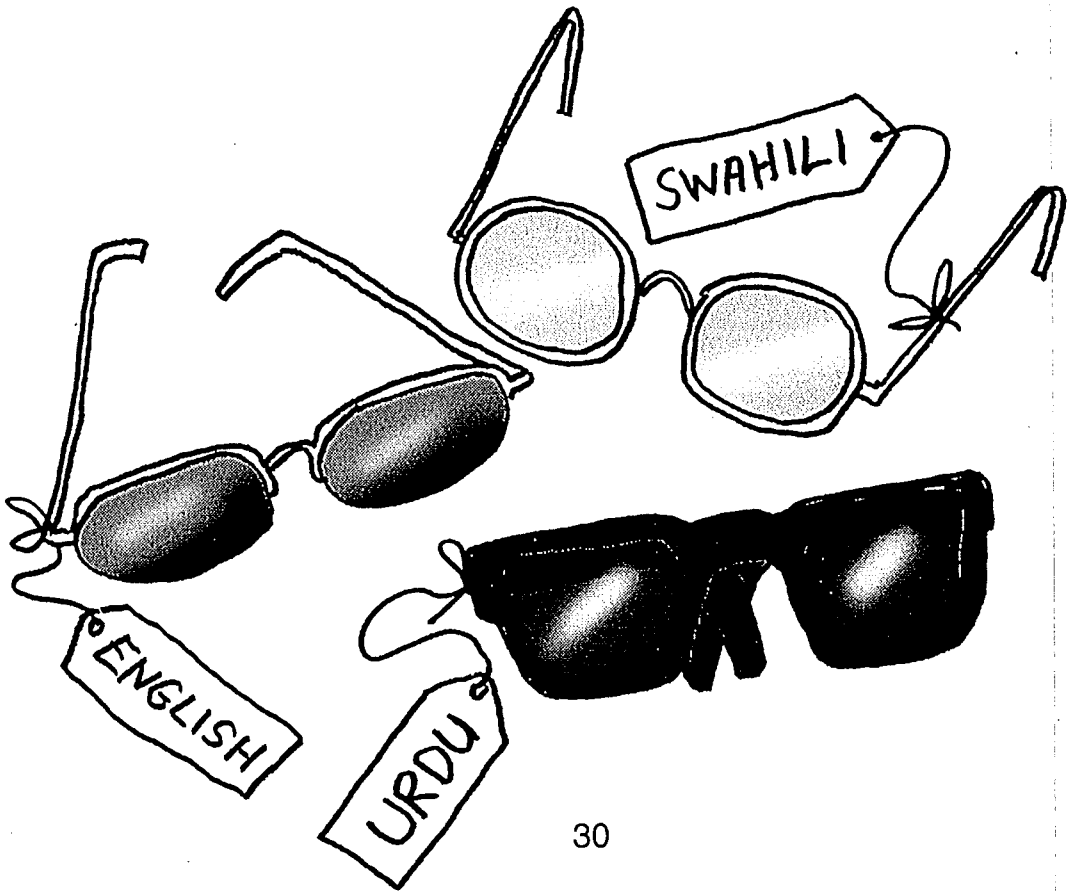


Sapir's classic 1921 book *Language*, the first English-language textbook of general linguistics, established a tradition of humane language studies which is still pursued today.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

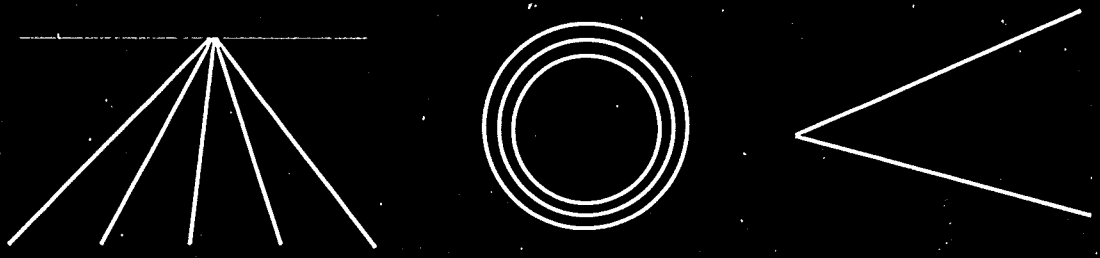
Sapir's best-known student, a former fire-insurance inspector named Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), pursued his teacher's interests and produced a number of studies of native American and Canadian languages. Pointing to striking differences in the way that different languages carve up the world, Whorf produced a cultural argument.

This idea, variously called the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* or the *linguistic relativity hypothesis*, has fascinated linguists, anthropologists and psychologists ever since, though its degree of validity, if any, has been much debated.

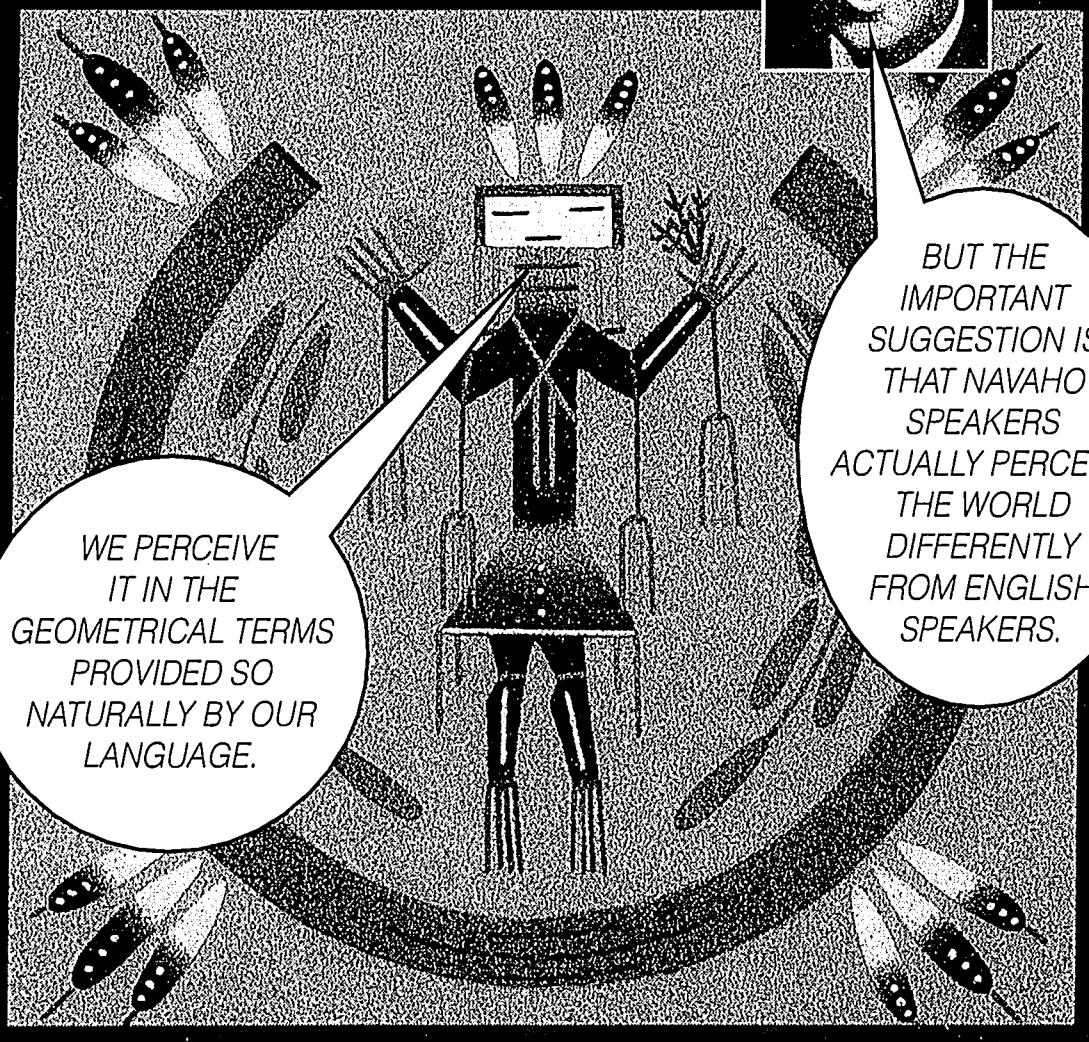


Example of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

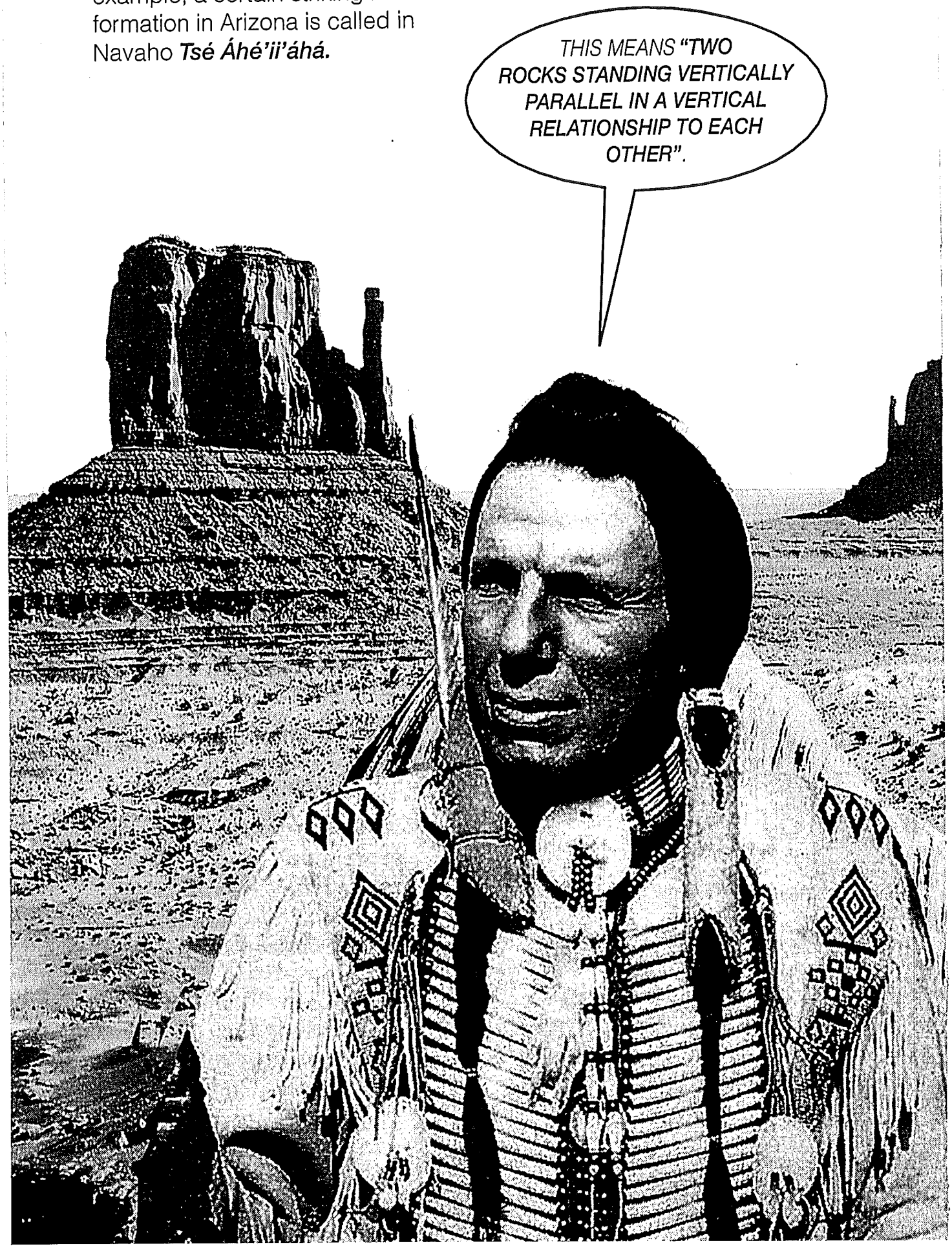
For example, the Navaho language of Arizona is rich in words for talking about lines of various shapes, colours and configurations. Among the hundred or so words available for this purpose are *adziisgai,* 'a group of parallel white lines running off into the distance', *ahééhesgai,* 'more than two white lines forming concentric circles' and *álhch'inidzigai,* 'two white lines coming together at a point'.

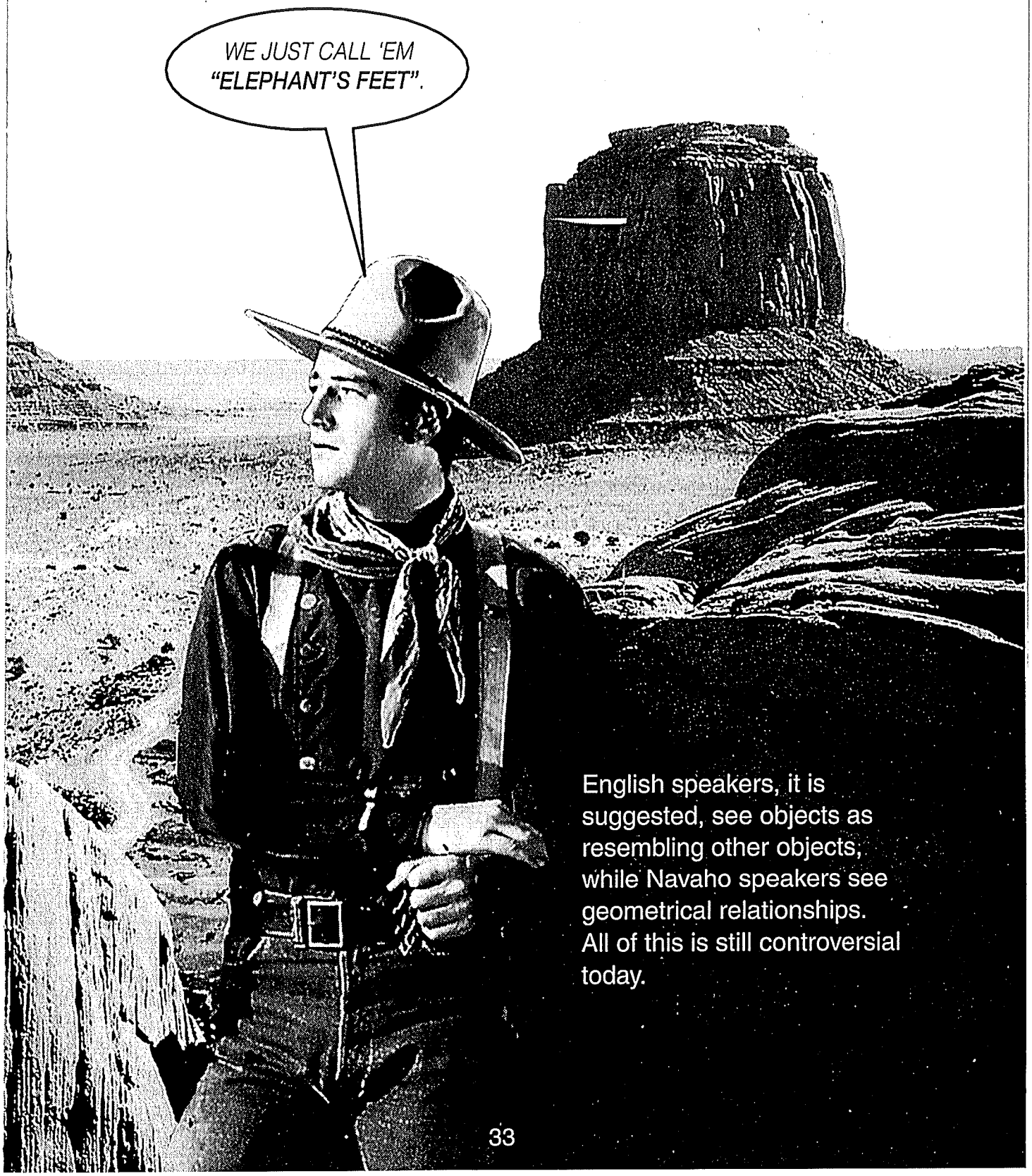


This large vocabulary allows Navaho speakers to speak easily about all kinds of geometrical arrangements which would require lengthy descriptions in English.



It is noteworthy that Navaho place names are overwhelmingly geometrical in nature. For example, a certain striking rock formation in Arizona is called in Navaho ***Tsé Áhé'ii'áhá.***

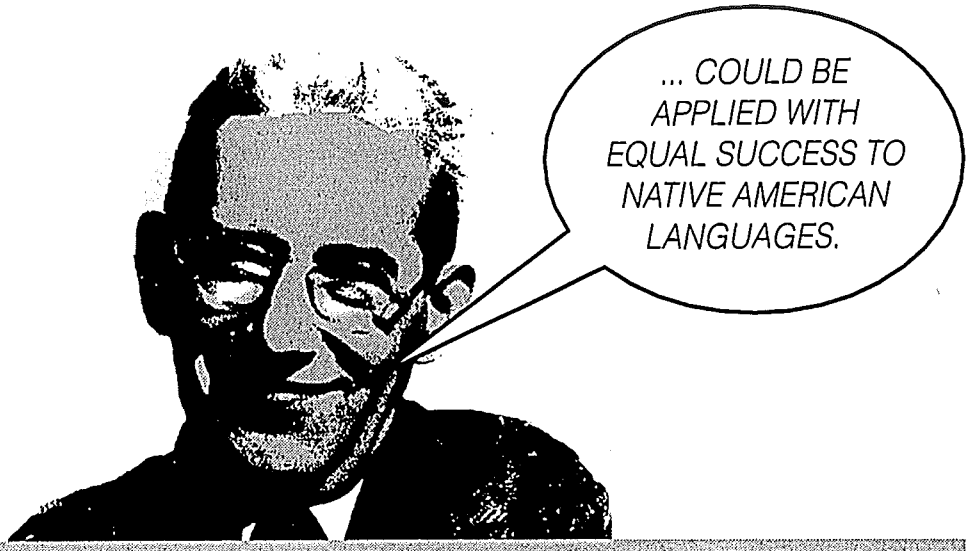




English speakers, it is suggested, see objects as resembling other objects, while Navaho speakers see geometrical relationships. All of this is still controversial today.

A Pioneer of American Structuralism

Another linguist was turning American linguistics somewhat away from its anthropological and cultural connections, and toward a more tightly focused concentration on language structure in its own right. Though trained as a specialist in the Germanic languages of Europe, Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) first made his name by demonstrating that the techniques of historical linguistics, already applied so successfully to European and Asian languages ...



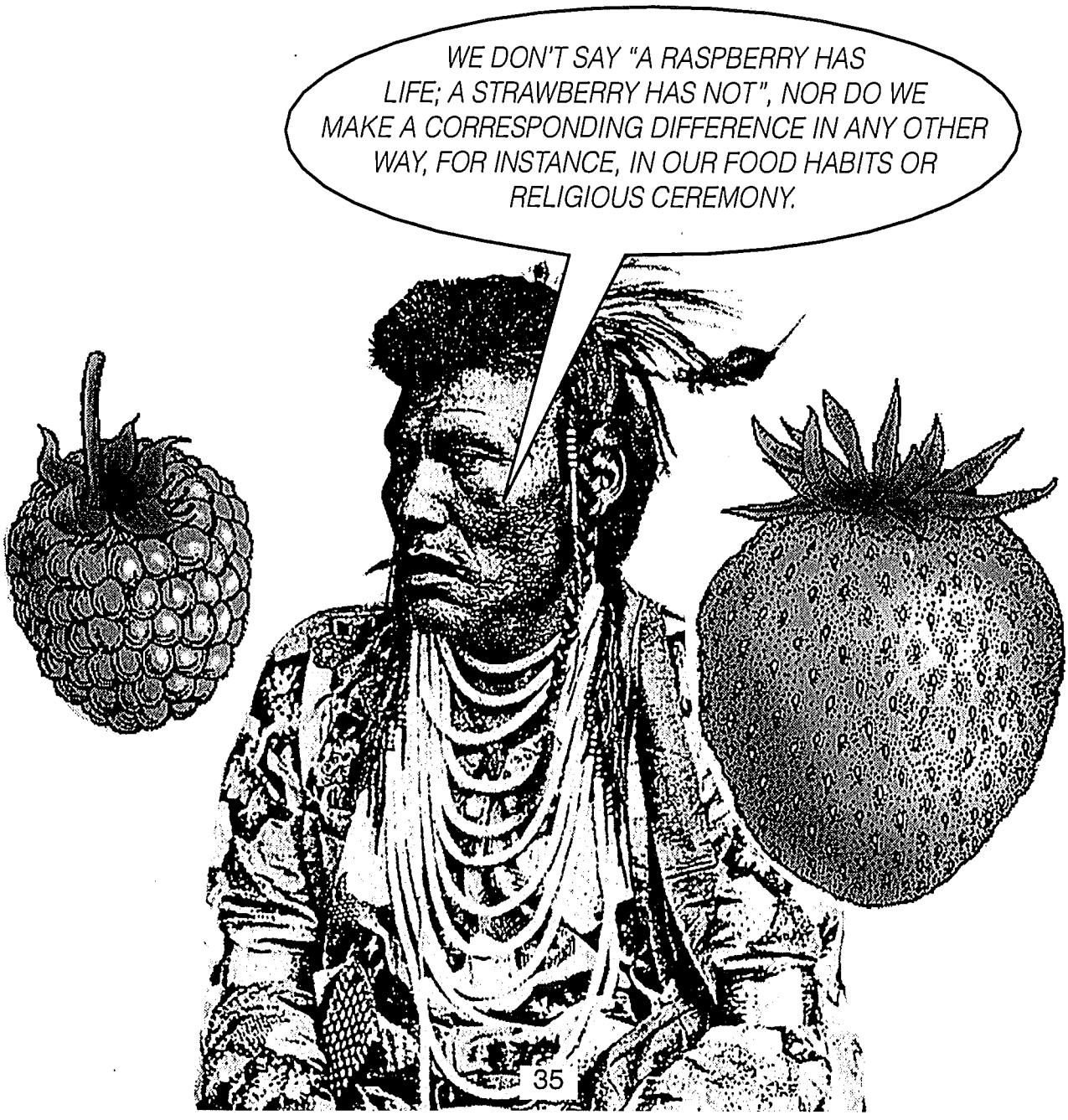
Cree	*Menomini*	*Ojibwa*	*Proto-Algonquian*	*English*
atim	anɛɛm	anim	*aθemwa	dog
niitim	nenem	niinim :	*niiθemwa	my sister-in-law
kaateew	kianɛɛw	kaanaat	*kyaaθeewa	he hides him
atameek	anaamɛɛk	(doesn't exist)	*aθameekwa	dead fish

Bloomfield produced a masterly study of the Algonquian family of languages of North America, for which he was able to reconstruct an unrecorded *Proto-Algonquian* ancestor.

But Bloomfield became best known for his 1933 textbook, also called *Language*, in which he presented a carefully articulated approach to the structuralist analysis of languages, far more explicit and detailed than Saussure's *Cours* had been. This is exemplified by his approach to the grammatical nature of gender systems.

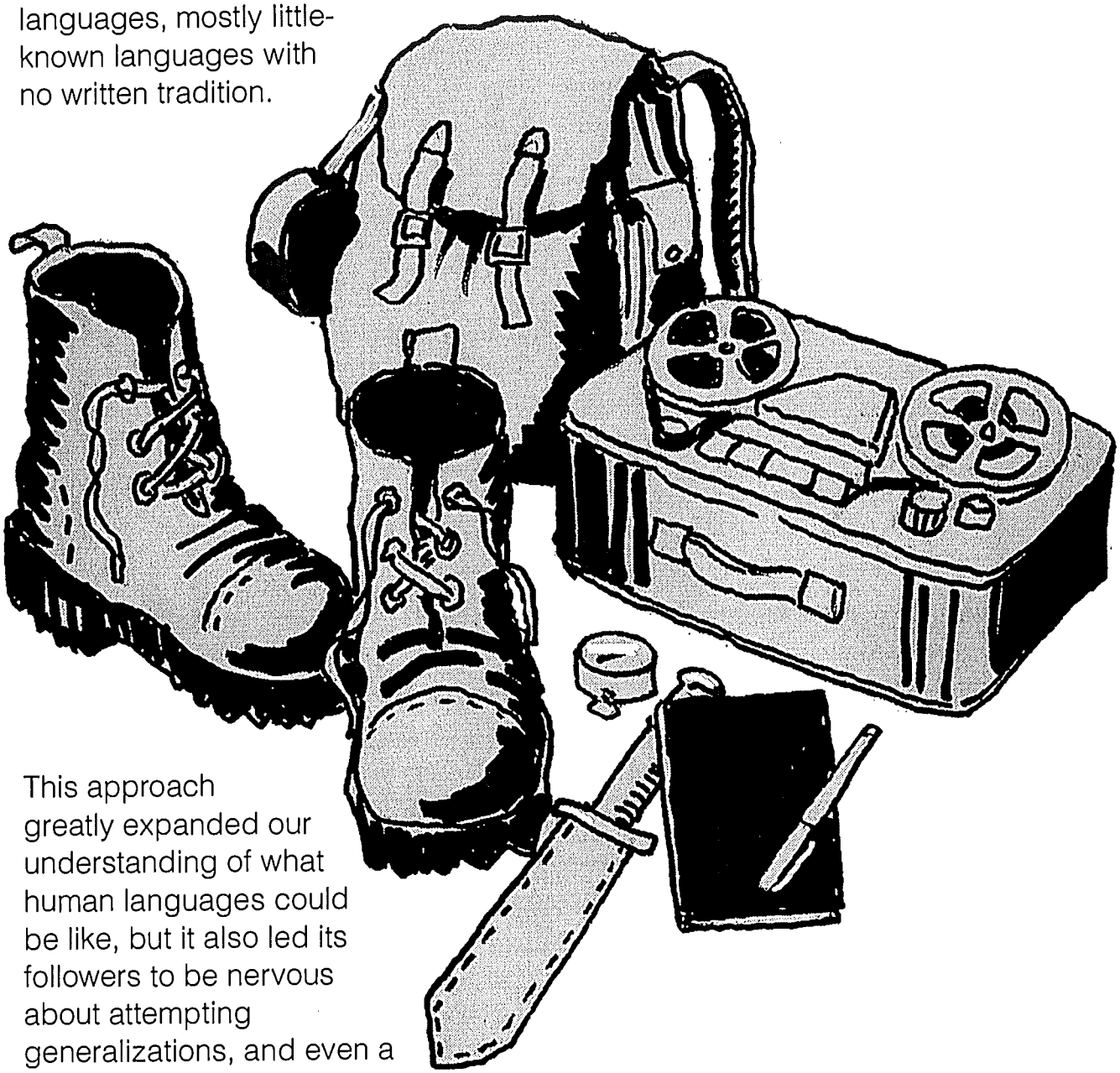
> The gender system of animate and inanimate in an Algonquian language, for instance, includes among the animates some things which we do not regard as living: *stone, pipe, raspberry* (but not *strawberry*), *knee* (but not *elbow)*.

Ethnologic observations show that the speakers do not (except in the grammatical forms of their language) make any differential distinctions.



Post-Bloomfieldian Structruralists

The next generation of American linguists took their inspiration mainly from Bloomfield. Impatient with what they saw as the armchair theorizing of European linguists, these *post-Bloomfieldians* were eager to place linguistics upon a firmly empirical and scientific footing. The brand of linguistics they developed, known as American structuralism, therefore focused strongly on empirical data collected from hands-on fieldwork on real languages, mostly little-known languages with no written tradition.



This approach greatly expanded our understanding of what human languages could be like, but it also led its followers to be nervous about attempting generalizations, and even a little hostile to linguistic theorizing.

The Formalism of Zellig Harris

In great contrast to their European colleagues, the American structuralists took no interest in the meanings or functions of words and utterances, preferring to concentrate on linguistic forms alone. This taste was taken to something of an extreme by one unusual American linguist, Zellig Harris (1909–92) who grew ever more interested in linguistic analysis of a highly formal kind, even of an algebraic kind.

Harris was largely interested in relating sentences to other sentences. One of his devices was the decomposing of sentences into smaller ones. Here is an example, illustrating (very broadly) how a complex sentence can be related to a simpler one by successive operations of stripping material:

---

1 The attitudes that people in power express are for public effect

T N WH N P N tVn tVb P A N

---

2 Attitudes that people express are for effect

N WH N tVn tVb P N

---

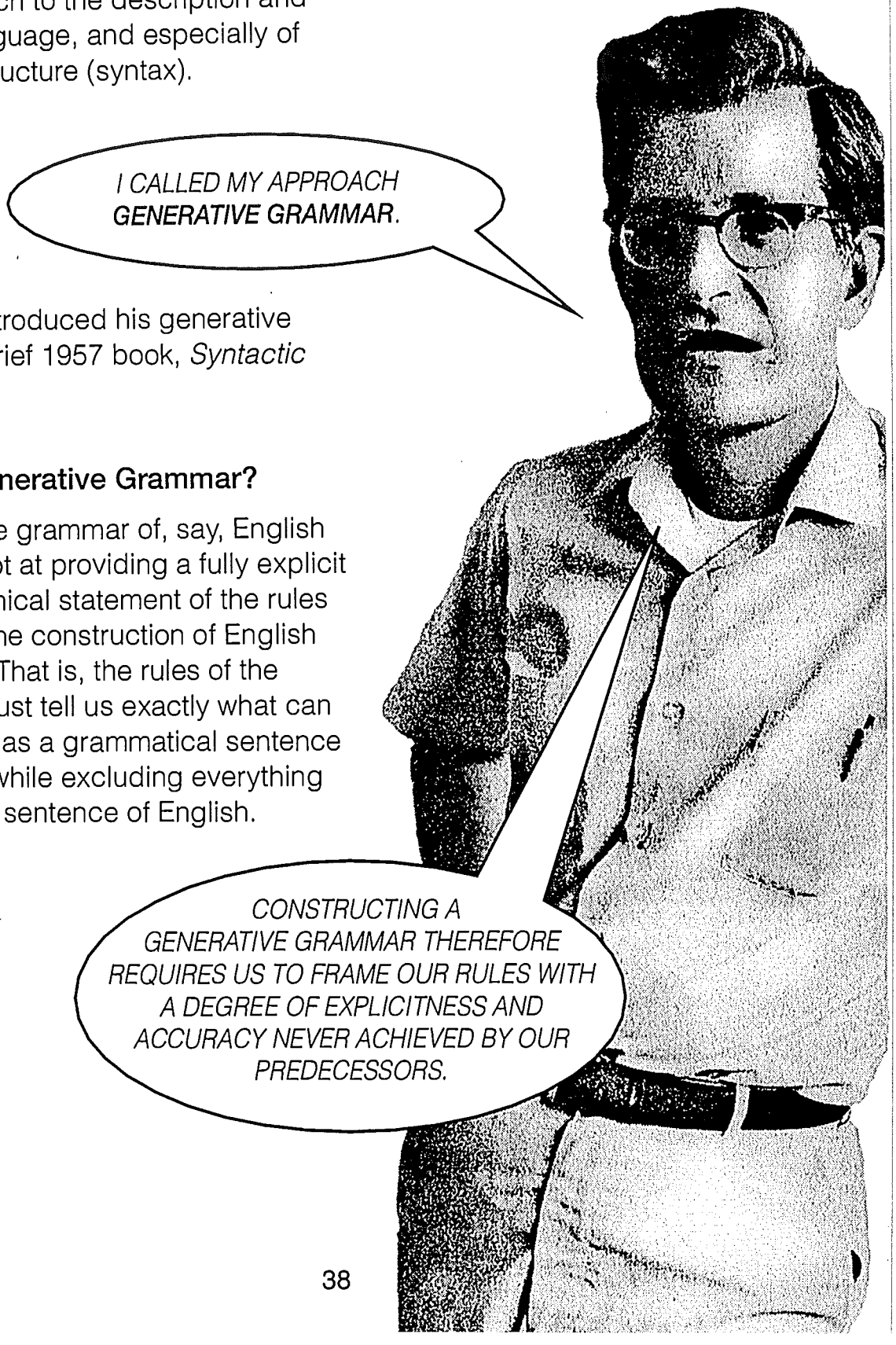
3 Attitudes are for effect

N tVb P N

Harris's work was viewed by most of his colleagues as eccentric and extreme, but it did have a deep effect upon one of Harris's students, a young man called Noam Chomsky (b.1928).

Chomsky's Generative Grammar

In the 1950s, Chomsky took Harris's formalist methods and combined them with certain ideas from mathematics, which he had been studying along with linguistics. The result was a strikingly new approach to the description and study of language, and especially of sentence structure (syntax).



Chomsky introduced his generative ideas in a brief 1957 book, *Syntactic Structures*.

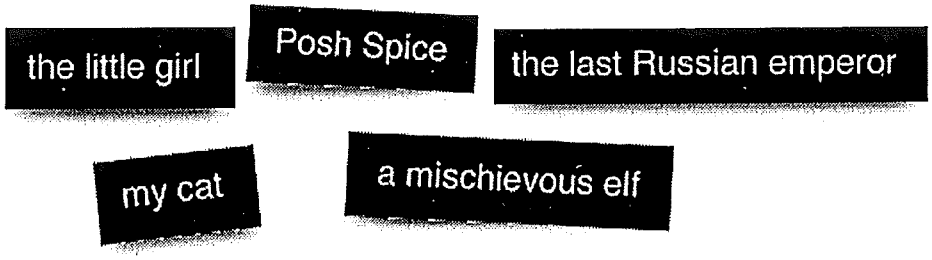
What is Generative Grammar?

A generative grammar of, say, English is an attempt at providing a fully explicit and mechanical statement of the rules governing the construction of English sentences. That is, the rules of the grammar must tell us exactly what can be counted as a grammatical sentence of English, while excluding everything that is not a sentence of English.

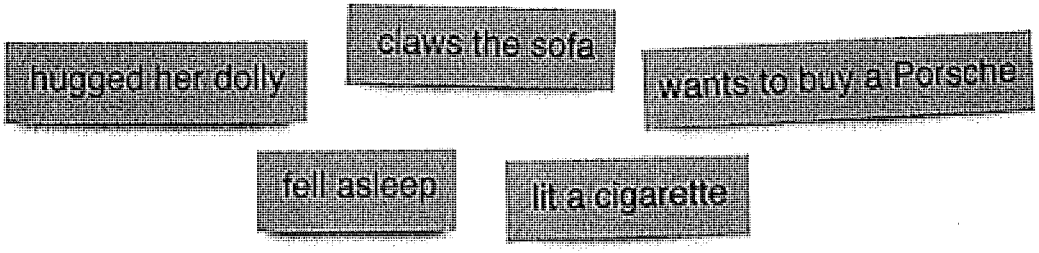
Here is a brief example of a fragment of a generative grammar of English.

1. S --> NP VP
2. NP --> Det N'
3. N' --> A N
4. N' --> N
5. VP --> V NP

For example, the first rule says "A sentence may consist of a noun phrase followed by a verb phrase". Other rules tell us what a noun phrase can look like, and what a verb phrase can look like. Here are some possible noun phrases:



And here are some possible verb phrases:



These rules are designed to stipulate exactly what can and cannot be a sentence of English. For example, they allow things like

(and also ***Posh Spice claws the sofa*** and ***My cat wants to buy a Porsche***, of course, as these are indeed grammatical sentences of English, if a bit silly).

But they do not allow things like ***Destroyed the city our enemies*** or ***Little the girl her dolly hugged***, which are ungrammatical in English.

Transformational Grammar

There are many different kinds of generative grammar that can be defined, differing in the kinds of rules allowed. The one illustrated on the previous page is a fragment of a context-free phrase-structure grammar, a type which is particularly convenient to work with. But Chomsky himself rejected this kind as too simple to capture important facts about languages.

I DEVELOPED INSTEAD A MUCH MORE POWERFUL KIND OF GENERATIVE GRAMMAR, CALLED TRANSFORMATIONAL GRAMMAR, OR TG.

TG uses enormously powerful rules. For example, to convert

The police arrested Susie

into

Susie was arrested by the police

a single transformational rule does all of the following:

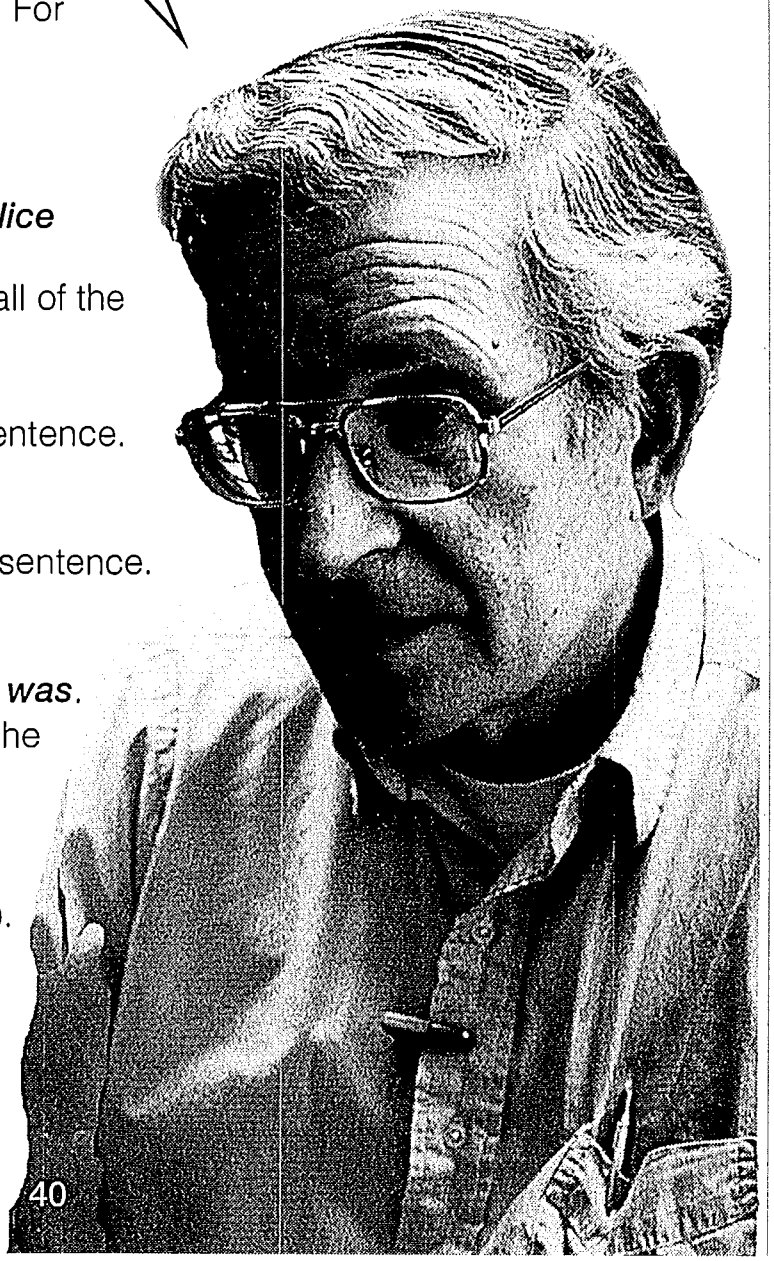
Move ***the police*** to the end of the sentence.

Insert ***by*** before ***the police***.

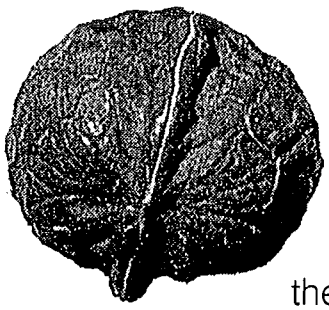
Move ***Susie*** to the beginning of the sentence.

Insert ***be*** before the verb ***arrrested***.

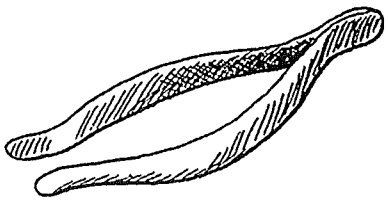
Add tense-marking to convert ***be*** to ***was***. Change the past tense ***arrested*** to the participle ***arrested*** (the two forms happen to be identical for *arrest*, but compare ***The police took Susie*** with ***Susie was taken by the police***).



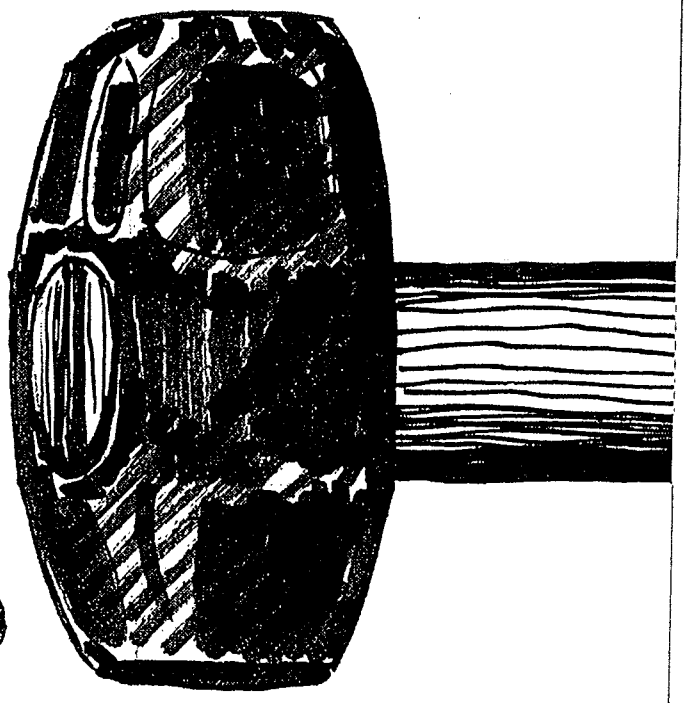
Chomsky's Programme



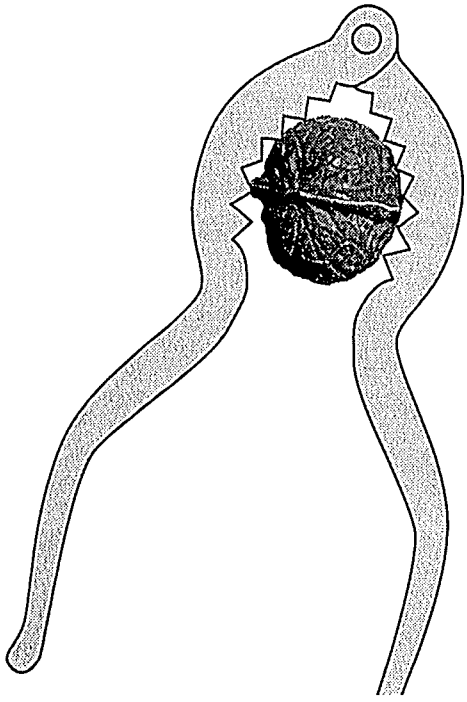
The point of a good theory of grammar is its *power* to tell us what is possible and impossible in the grammars of human languages. Chomsky himself in the 1950s defined several theories of grammar and ranked them in *order of power.* His point was this.



SOME THEORIES OF GRAMMAR ARE TOO FEEBLE AND CANNOT HANDLE CERTAIN PHENOMENA THAT DO OCCUR IN THE GRAMMAR OF HUMAN LANGUAGES.



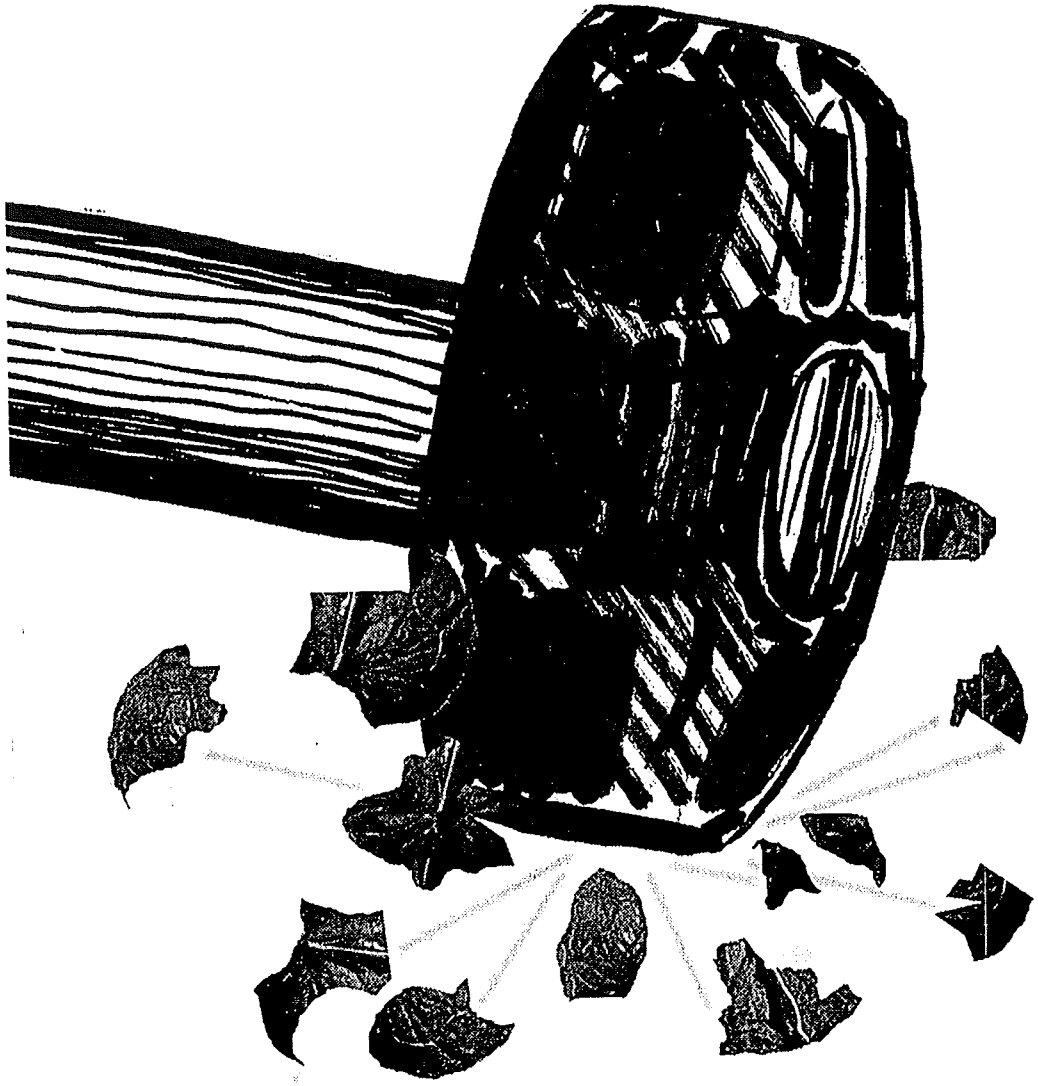
OTHERS ARE TOO POWERFUL AND ARE ABLE TO HANDLE PHENOMENA THAT NEVER OCCUR IN HUMAN LANGUAGES.



What we want is a good fit: a theory of grammar that can handle exactly the range of grammatical properties found in human languages. When we find such a theory, we will have the best possible theory (or model) of the grammars of human languages.

Paradox of the TG Programme

Chomsky argued that his own theory of *transformational grammar* (TG) provided the best fit. But then, in 1969, the mathematical linguists Stanley Peters and Robert Ritchie proved that TG was so powerful that it could, in principle, describe anything at all that could be described at all –



– hardly an appealing result. But why is this *bad*? Because – to put it simply – it defeats the purpose of a good theory of grammar, which is to tell us what is **possible** and **impossible** in human languages.

A theory that is too powerful is, in effect, claiming that nothing whatever is prohibited in human grammars, and absolutely everything is possible. This is virtually saying that human grammars have *no identifiable properties at all.* In short, TG makes no claim at all!

The Functional Approach

Chomsky and his colleagues have been forced to modify their ideas repeatedly in the face of refractory data. Some critics have been wondering whether the generative enterprise can ever be successfully carried through at all.

For these reasons, among others, many linguists prefer to steer clear of what they see as excessive formalism in favour of more human-centred approaches, approaches that focus far more directly upon what people are trying to do when they speak, and how they go about this task.

One such approach, preferred by many linguists, is the functional approach. These linguists try to determine what purposes are being served by a language, and what linguistic forms are available to serve those functions.

But what do we mean by the functions of language? Most people, on being asked what language is for, provide the same reply: it's for communication. But this answer is far too simple. Consider a rather typical example of genuine language use, recorded in a pub in Birmingham (England). Mick, who has just lost his licence for drinking and driving, and his wife Rita are both talking to a third person, Roy; material in square brackets is not part of the conversation, but has been inserted for clarity.

AS IT IS NOW, HE ONLY NEEDS A COUPLE OF PINTS [BEFORE HE'S DRUNK].
I GOT STOPPED ON ABOUT NINE, NO, NINE PINTS OF BEER AND SOME SHERRIES ON THE LUNCHTIME AND I WENT THROUGH, RIGHT, I WENT THROUGH AS NEGATIVE [ON THE BREATHALYSER TEST]. IT'S A FEW YEARS BACK, LIKE, BUT THIS TIME, MIND YOU [I GOT CAUGHT].
BECAUSE HE'S DRINKING EVERY SINGLE DAY AND IT'S NOT GETTING OUT OF HIS SYSTEM.
YOU'RE WELL ON YOUR WAY NOW. DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.
STOP IT.
IT EMBARRASSES ME IN FACT.
GOT TO START STOPPING IN, LEARNING WHEN TO STOP.

What Does "Function" Communicate?

Very little information is being communicated here, and that which is being communicated is hardly likely to be essential to the recipient.

What Mick is largely doing is trying to maintain good relations with his friend ...

... while what his wife Rita is doing is largely trying to change Mick's behaviour.

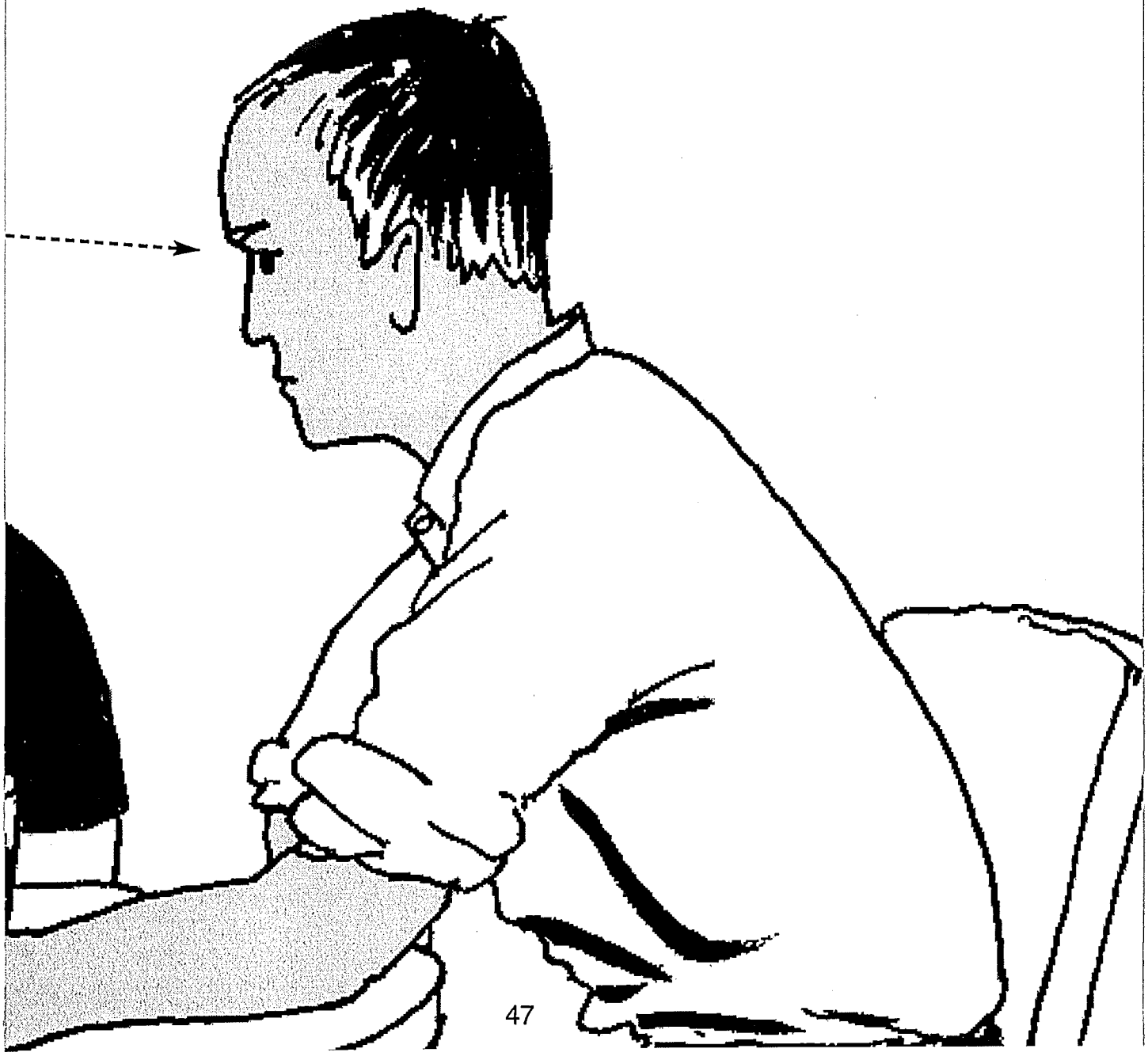
And these goals, maintaining good relations and trying to persuade people to do things, are far more typical of most language use than the bare "passing of facts".

A functionalist approach – and there are quite a few functionalist approaches in use – attaches little importance to determining precisely what is or is not grammatical. Instead, it focuses on the needs of speakers, and looks at linguistic ways of meeting those needs. A functionalist account of the passage quoted above would begin by asking some simple questions:

"What are Mick and Rita trying to do?"

"What devices does English make available for serving those purposes?"

"Why have the speakers chosen the particular devices that they have chosen?"



Systemic Functional Linguistics: Texts

One of the most prominent functional approaches is called Systemic Functional Linguistics. This has been developed by the British linguist Michael Halliday (b.1925), and it has become prominent in Britain and in the Commonwealth – though not so far in the USA, where functional linguists prefer somewhat different approaches.

This is the first stage of Halliday's analysis of a conversation between two shop assistants. One is teaching the other how best to sell silver goods to customers.

Fig. A-1 The 'silver' text

Step 1

// 4 ^ in / thĭs job / Anne we're // I working with // sìlver //

Step 2

// 1 ^ now / silver / needs to have / lòve // [// 1 yeà //]
// 3 you / knōw ^ the // 4 people that / bŭy silver // 1 lòve it //

// 1 yèa // 1 guess they / wòuld //

Step 3

// 1 yèa // 1 mm / ^ well / nàturally I / mean to / say that it's // 13 got a / lovely / gleàm a/bout it you / knōw // 3 ^ and / if they come / īn they're // 1 usually / people who / love / beautiful / thìngs //

Step 4

// 1 ^ so / you / have to be / beautiful / wìth it you / know //
1 ^ and you / sèll it with / beauty //

// 1 ùm //

Step 5

// 1 ^ you / ^ I'm / sùre you know / how to do // 4 thăt // ^
// 1 oh but you / mùst //

Step 6

// 1 let's hear / ^ / let's hear / ^ / lòok / ^ you say // 1 màdam //
5 isn't / that / bêàutiful //

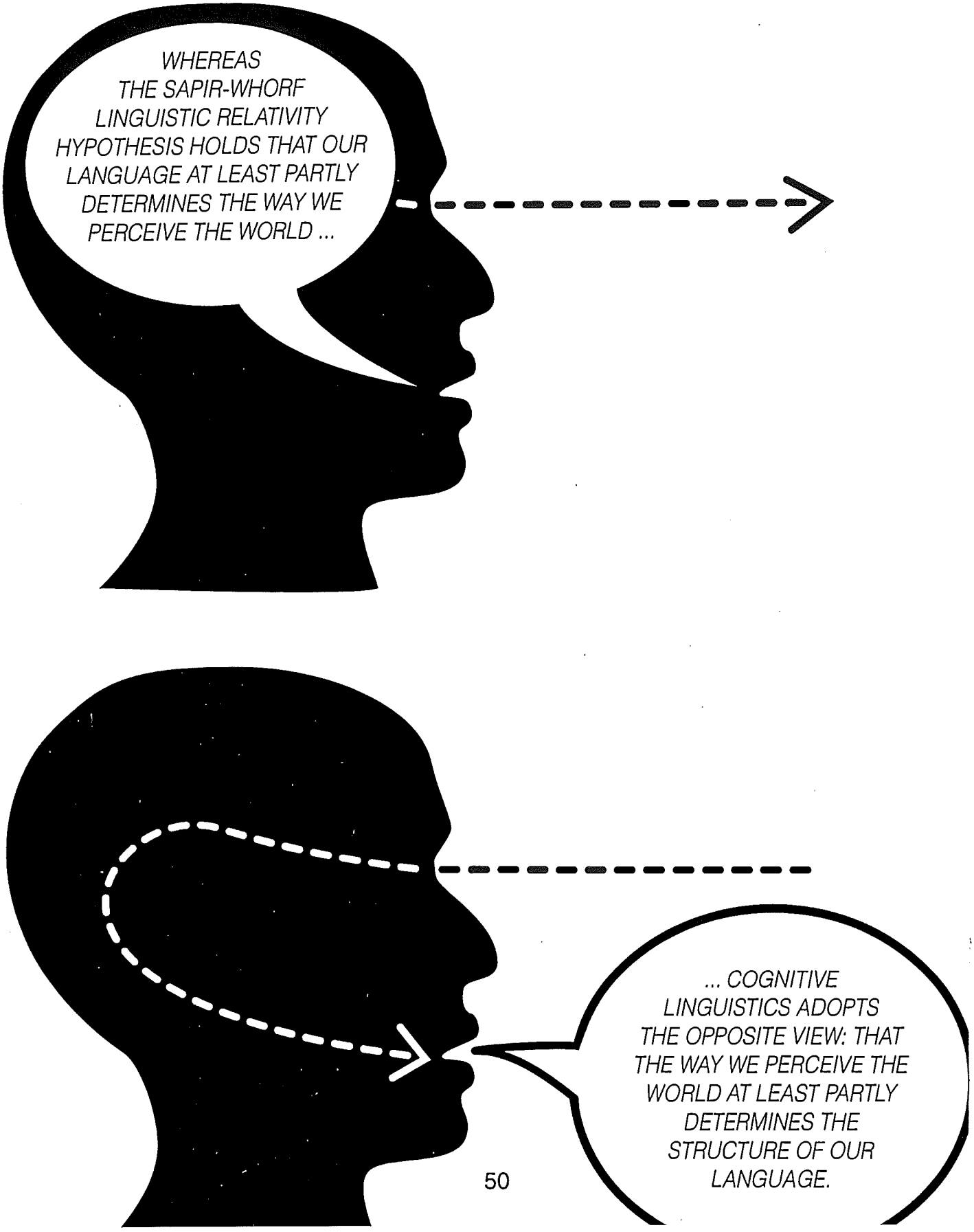
Step 7

// 4 ^ if / you sug/gĕst it's beautiful // 1 they / sèe it as / beautiful //

It has developed effective ways of analysing texts – a topic utterly beyond the scope of formalist approaches like Chomsky's, since the rules holding texts together cannot be rigorously formalized in the way that the rules holding sentences together can be.

Cognitive Linguistics

Another and quite different approach which has become prominent only in the last few years is *cognitive linguistics*. Cognitive linguists are interested in understanding the structure and functioning of language in terms of human perception and cognition.

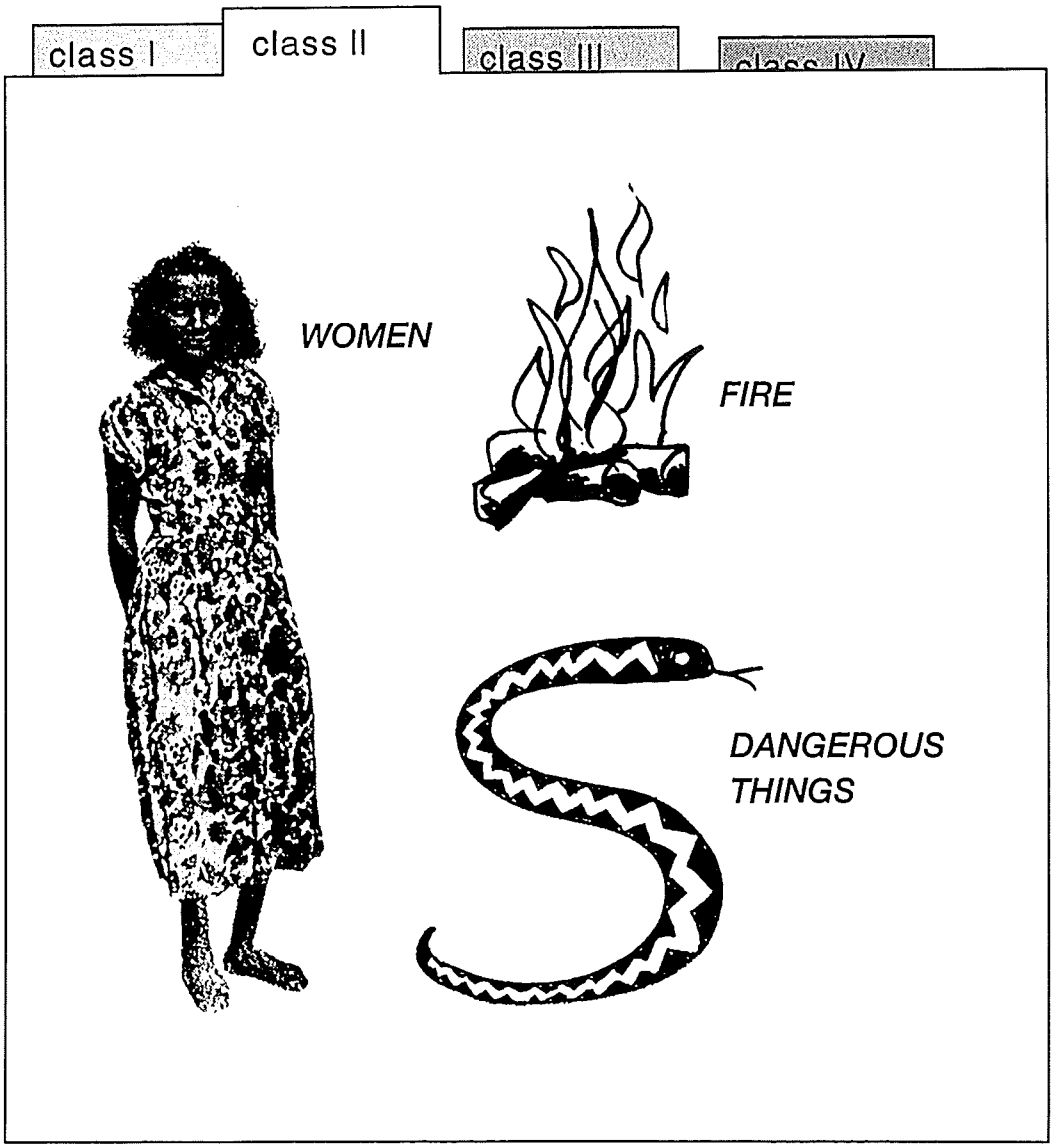


Gendering Nouns

A prime mover in the development of cognitive linguistics has been the American linguist George Lakoff (b.1941), a former Chomskyan whose interests have changed. In his famous book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, Lakoff draws attention to a curious property of the Australian language Dyirbal, described some years earlier by the British linguist Bob Dixon. Like many European languages, Dyirbal has grammatical gender: that is, each noun must be assigned to one of the available genders. In European languages, the gender of a noun is usually unpredictable from its meaning.

Dyirbal Noun Genders

Now Dyirbal has four genders, and the gender of a noun usually is predictable from its meaning – but the rules are surprising. For example, one of the four gender classes, called gender class II by Dixon, includes all nouns pertaining to *women*, all those pertaining to *fire*, and all those denoting things that are *dangerous* – poisonous snakes, stinging nettles, and the like.



Lakoff was wondering what it is about their perception of the world that induces Dyirbal speakers to assign these words a common gender. The answer here is far from obvious, but cognitive linguists believe that a good deal of language structure can be explained in terms of perception.

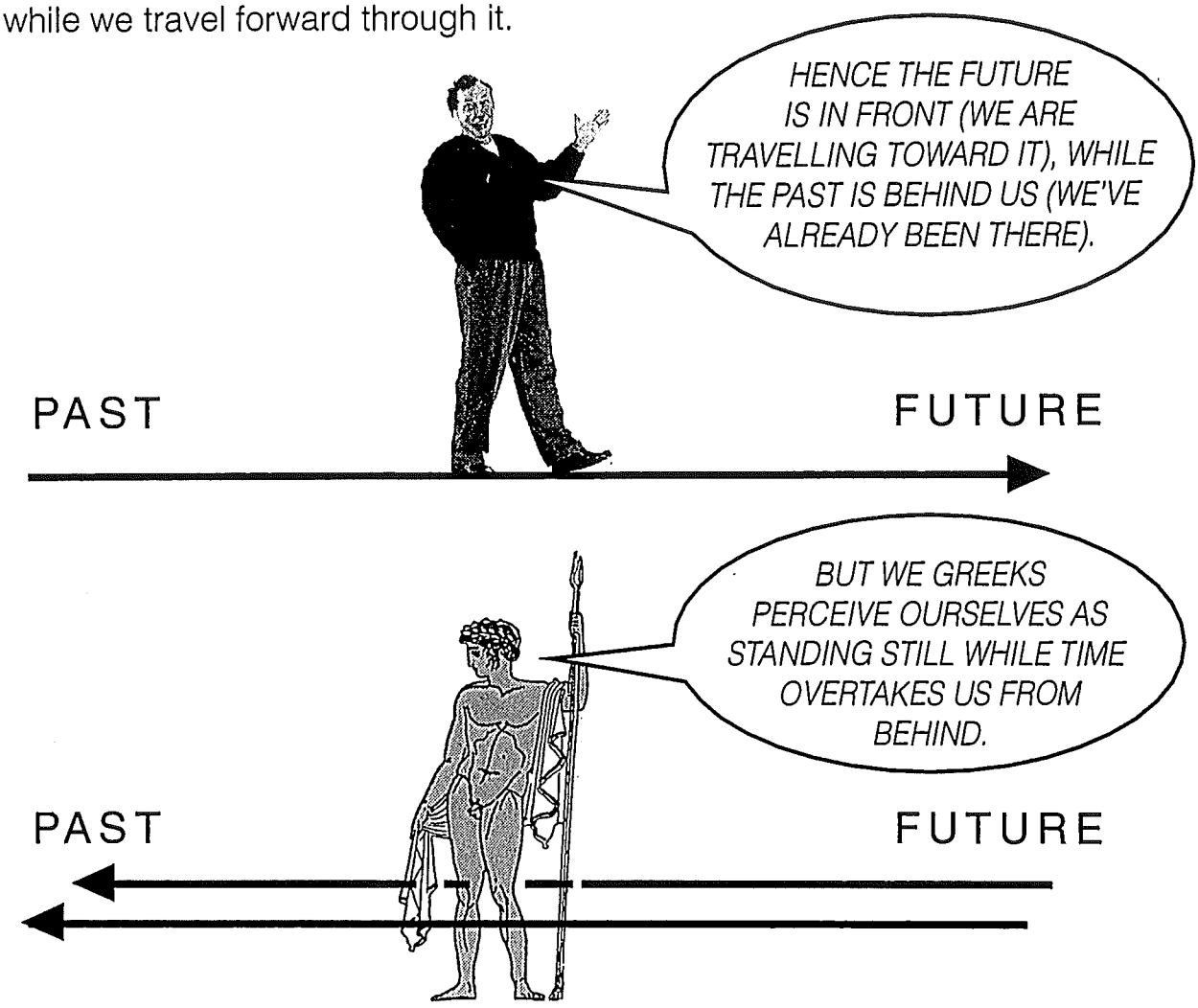
Language Perception Differences

Here's an example. In English, when we say that something is in front of us, we often mean that it's in the future, while something which is behind us is in the past. This seems so natural to us that we rarely think about it. But not all languages are the same.

The ancient Greeks did it the other way round.

Greek Perception of Time

The answer appears to lie in the way that people perceive time. We English speakers, apparently, perceive time as standing still while we travel forward through it.



So, the future was still behind the Greeks – and not yet visible – while the past was already in front of them – and hence visible, at least to some extent.

The striking linguistic differences therefore result from two different ways of perceiving the flow of time: ourselves travelling through time versus time travelling past us. And such perceptual differences, cognitive linguists believe, may show up as differences in language structure, as in this case.

Metaphor

The key notion here is *metaphor.* We and the ancient Greeks have used different metaphors for time, and metaphor – to be precise, cognitive metaphor – plays a central role in much cognitive work.

Here's another cognitive metaphor from English. In English, anger is commonly perceived, metaphorically, as a hot liquid within our bodies. Accordingly, we say things like ...

She's really steamed up

She's boiling

and

She blew her top

Such locutions are incomprehensible without a grasp of the cognitive metaphor on which they are based.

What is Language?

The formalist, functionalist and cognitive approaches are just three of the principal ways in which linguists are trying to get to grips with the rich and complex nature of human languages. Now, so far we have taken it for granted that we know what languages are. But this is not so obvious. We need now to clarify what we mean by the term "language".

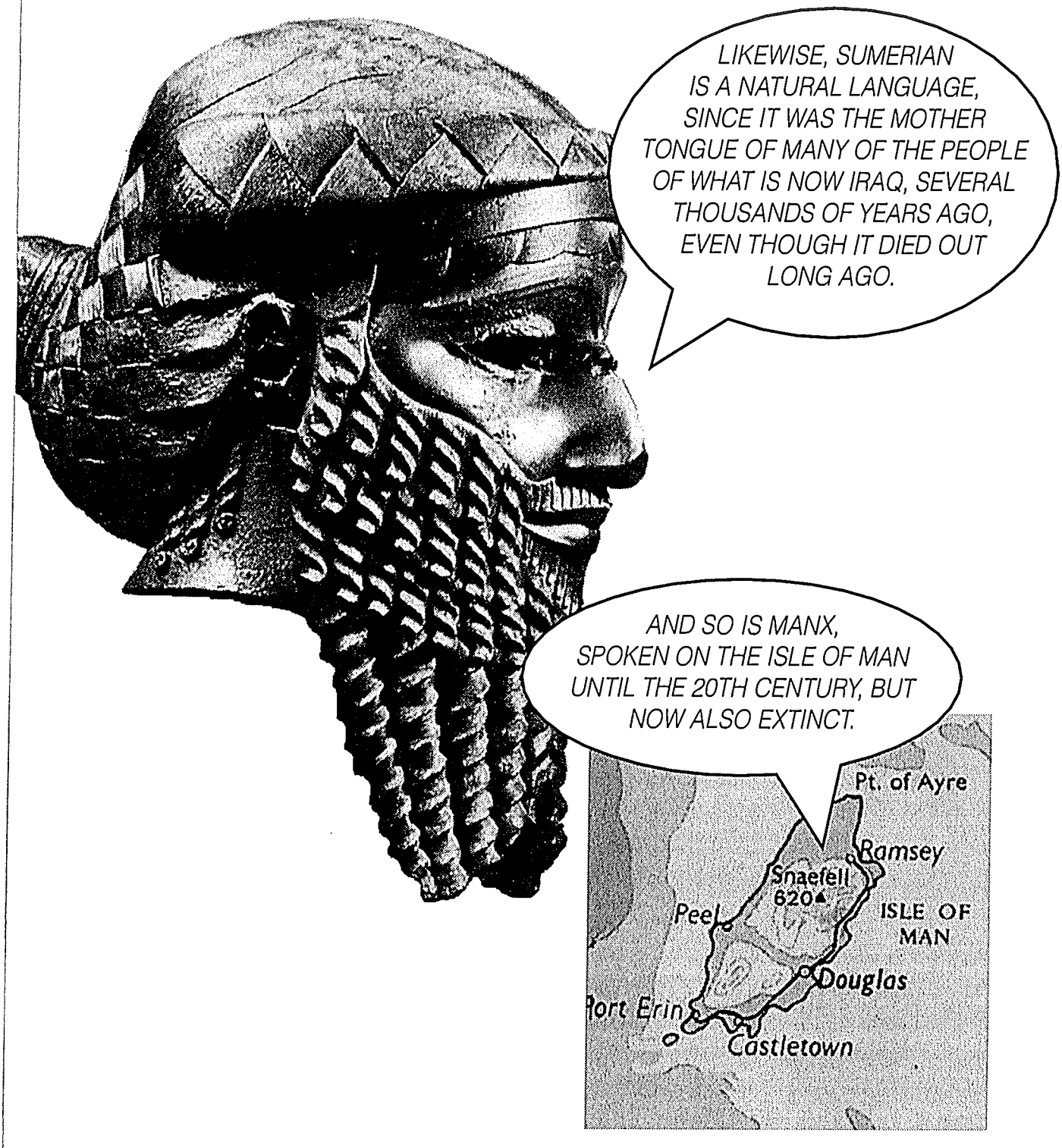
Linguistics is the scientific study of language – but what is language? Does the term *language* here include things like ...

Does it include made-up languages like Esperanto?

No, it does not.

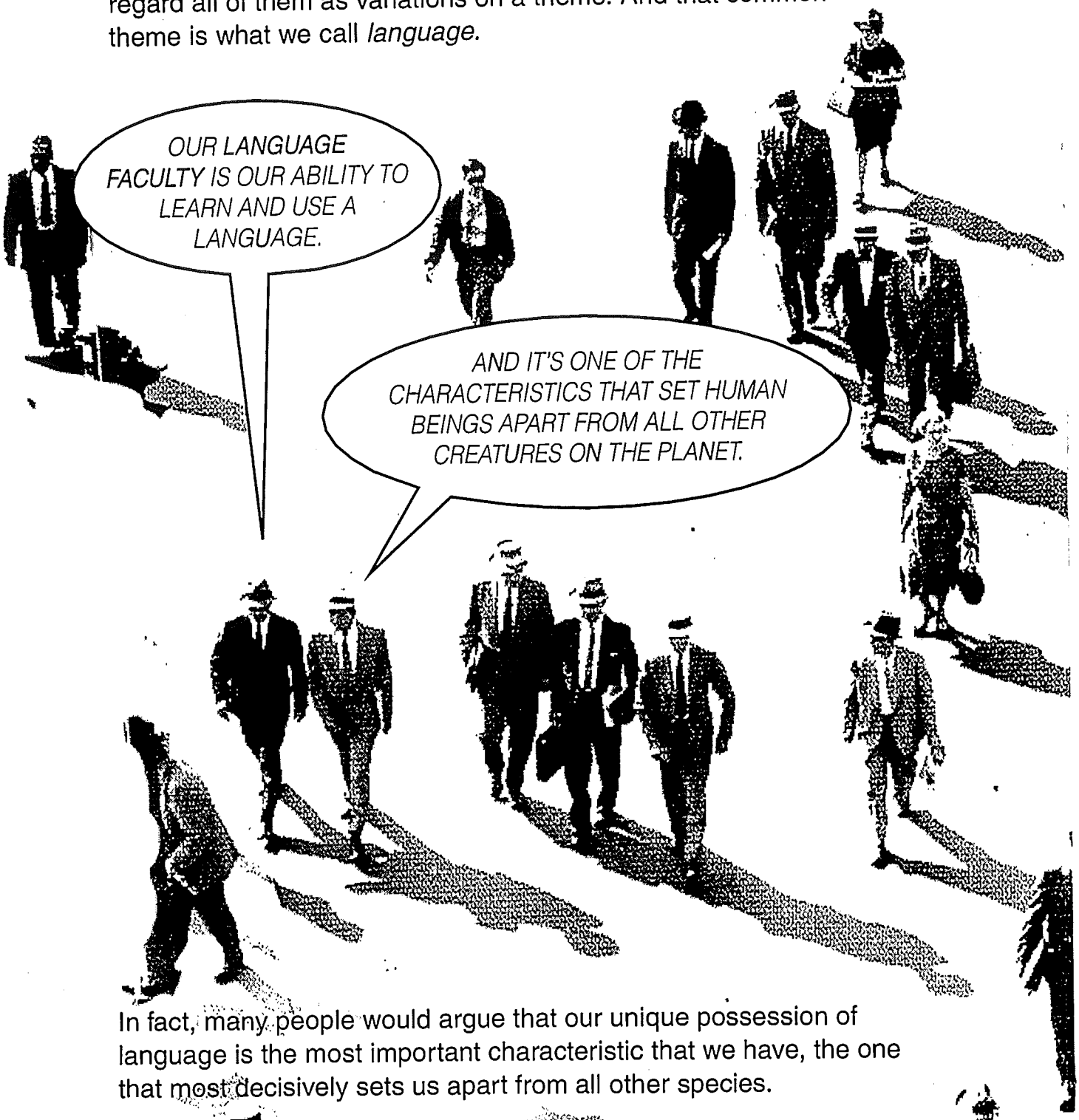
Natural Language

The term *language* is used by linguists (practitioners of linguistics) in a very specific sense. Let's start with individual languages. An individual language is anything that is, or once was, the mother tongue of a group of human beings. Often linguists use the more explicit term *natural language* for a language in this sense. So, English is a natural language, and so are French, Japanese, Swahili and Pitjantjatjara (spoken in western Australia).



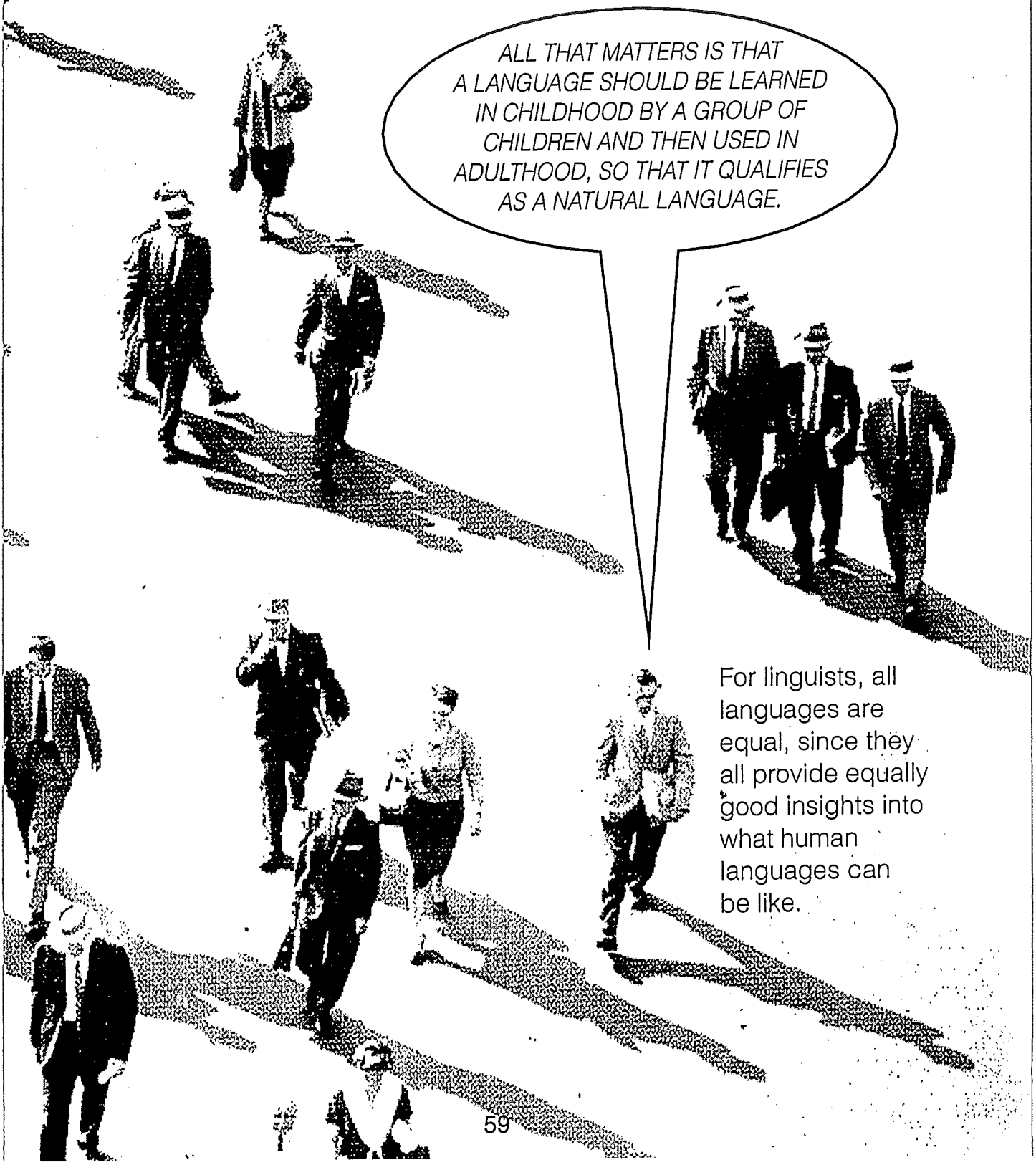
Our Language Faculty

Now, as we'll see in a bit, all these natural languages have important features in common, so many features that we can regard all of them as variations on a theme. And that common theme is what we call *language.*



In fact, many people would argue that our unique possession of language is the most important characteristic that we have, the one that most decisively sets us apart from all other species.

It doesn't matter whether a language has a billion speakers (like Mandarin Chinese) or only a tiny handful (like some languages of Australia and the Americas). It doesn't matter whether a language is the chief language of one or more nation-states (like Spanish and Arabic) or whether it is spoken only by an obscure group almost unknown to the outside world (like the Hixkaryana and Wari' languages of Brazil). It doesn't matter whether a language has a long and proud literary tradition (like English and French) or whether it has never been written at all (like most of the world's languages).



For linguists, all languages are equal, since they all provide equally good insights into what human languages can be like.

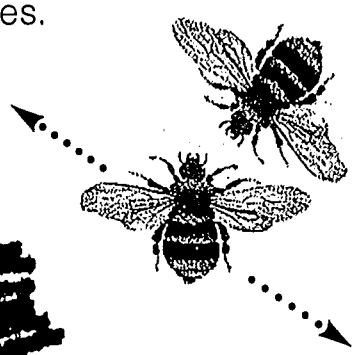
What's Special About Human Languages?

How many languages are there? At present, well over 6,500. We have probably now discovered practically all of the languages that are currently used.

Why are human languages so special? After all, most creatures can communicate in some way with their fellows. Birds sing; crickets chirp; dolphins click; and vervet monkeys have some remarkably specific calls with meanings like ...

LOOK OUT! EAGLE!

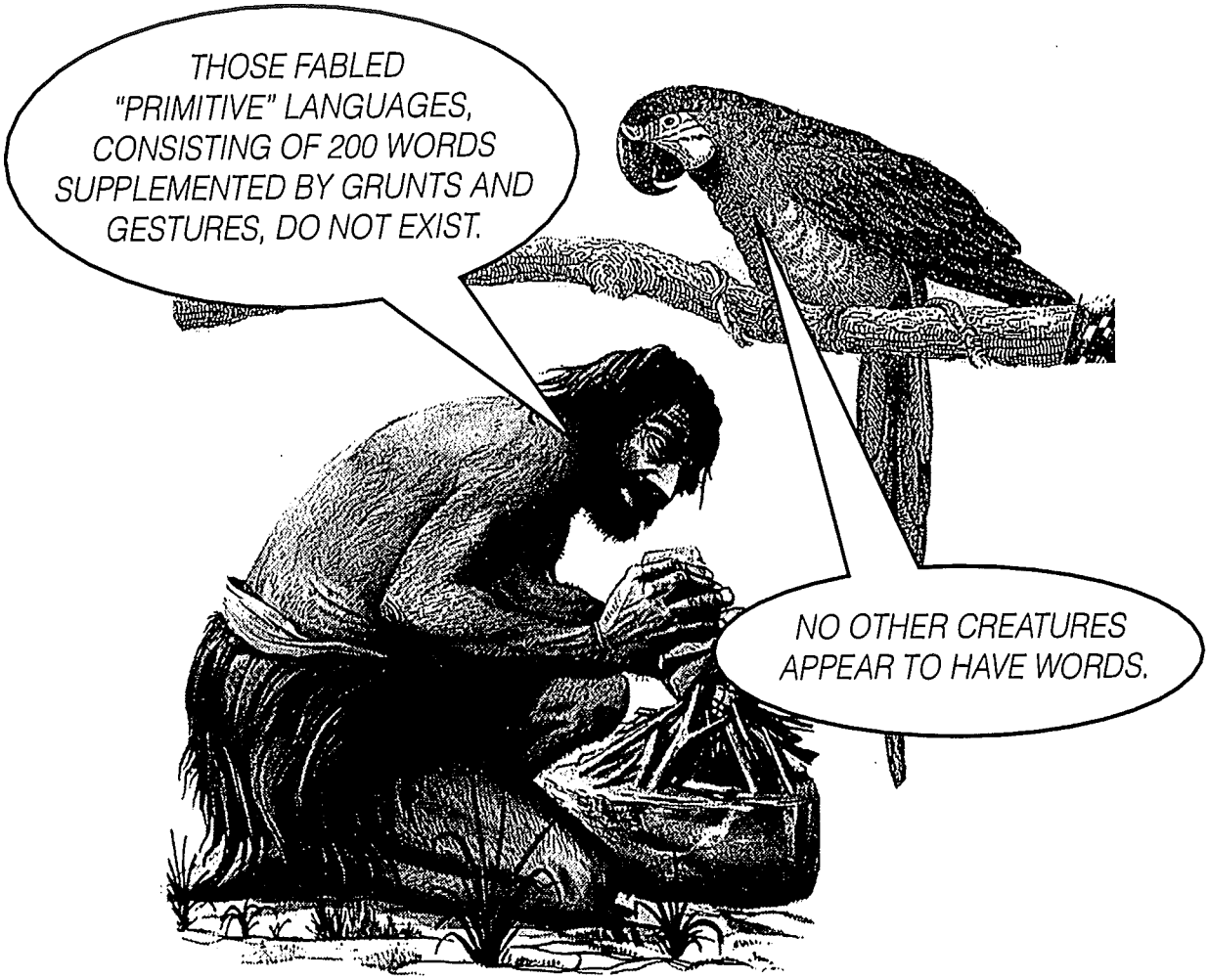
Even honeybees have an astoundingly effective system for informing their nestmates about the location and quality of nectar sources.



What do all Languages Have in Common?

Around 1960, the American linguist Charles Hockett (b.1916) began pointing out that *all* human languages possess a number of striking and important properties that are absent from the signalling systems of all other creatures on the planet. Hockett called these properties the *design features* of language; here are some of them.

All languages have words, and all languages have thousands of words.



All languages have devices for acquiring new words as required:

CD-ROM, Trekkie, trainspotter, AIDS, soundbite, hyperthermophile

No other creatures can do this.

All languages have ways of modifying the meanings of words:

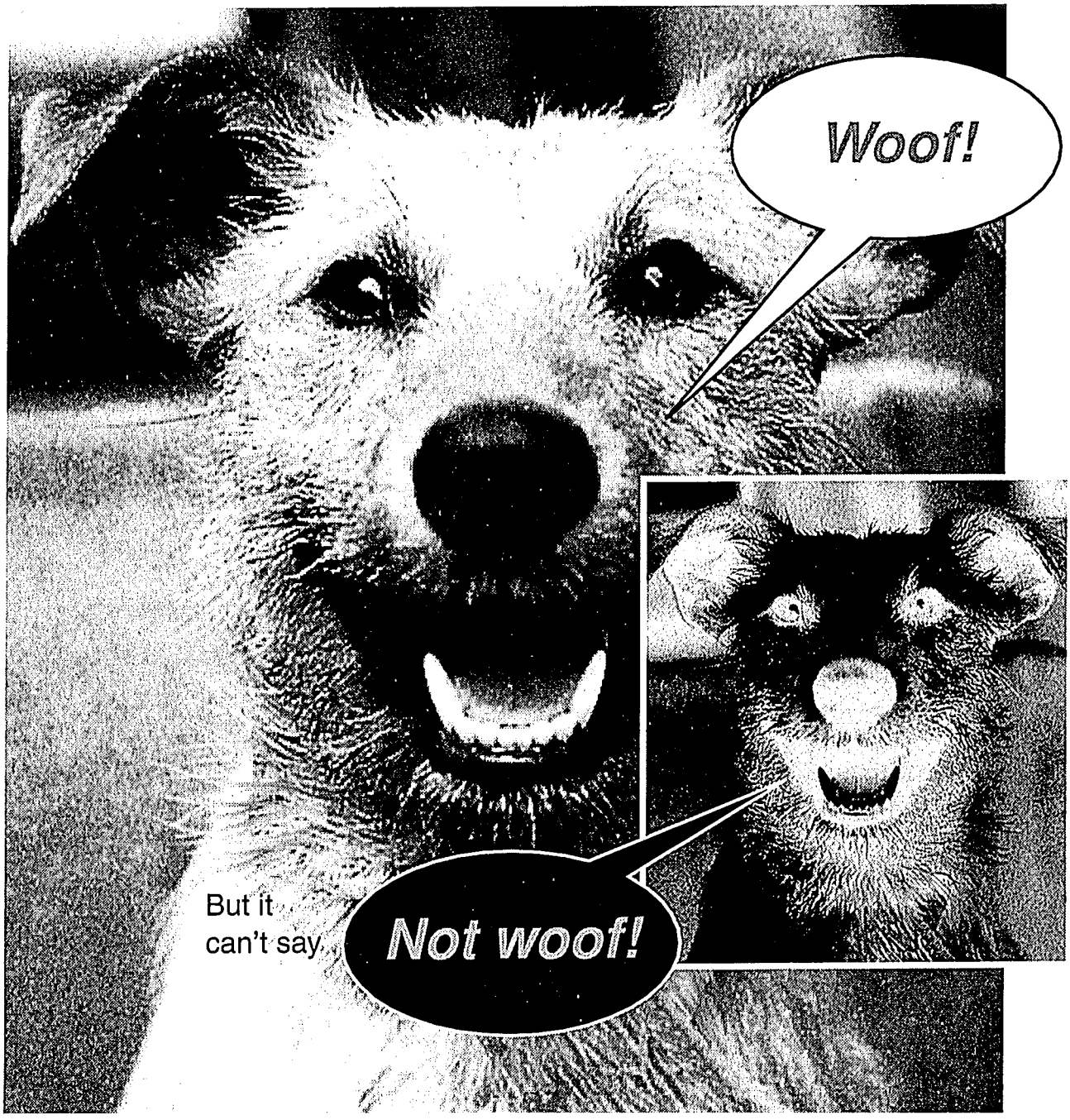
take, took, have taken, is taking, will be taken.

No other creatures can do this.

All languages have negation:

Susie smokes;
Susie doesn't smoke.

But negation is unique to us: a dog can say ...



All languages can form questions:

Does Susie smoke?

All languages permit abstractions like

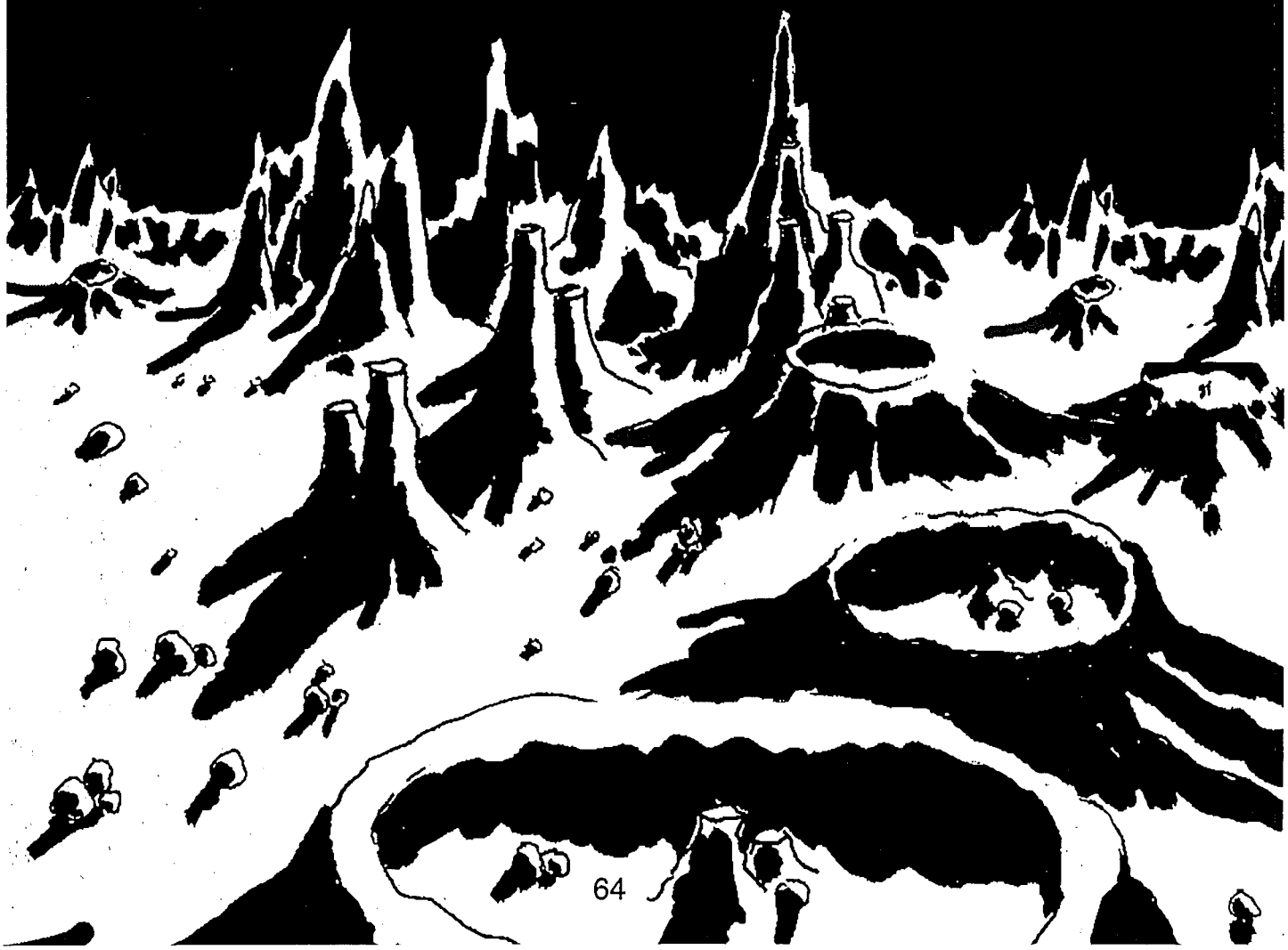
redness, curvature and ***absence.***

All languages permit displacement, the ability to talk about things other than the here and now:

I was in Paris last week.

I want to be an astronomer when I grow up.

What do you suppose the surface of Venus is like?



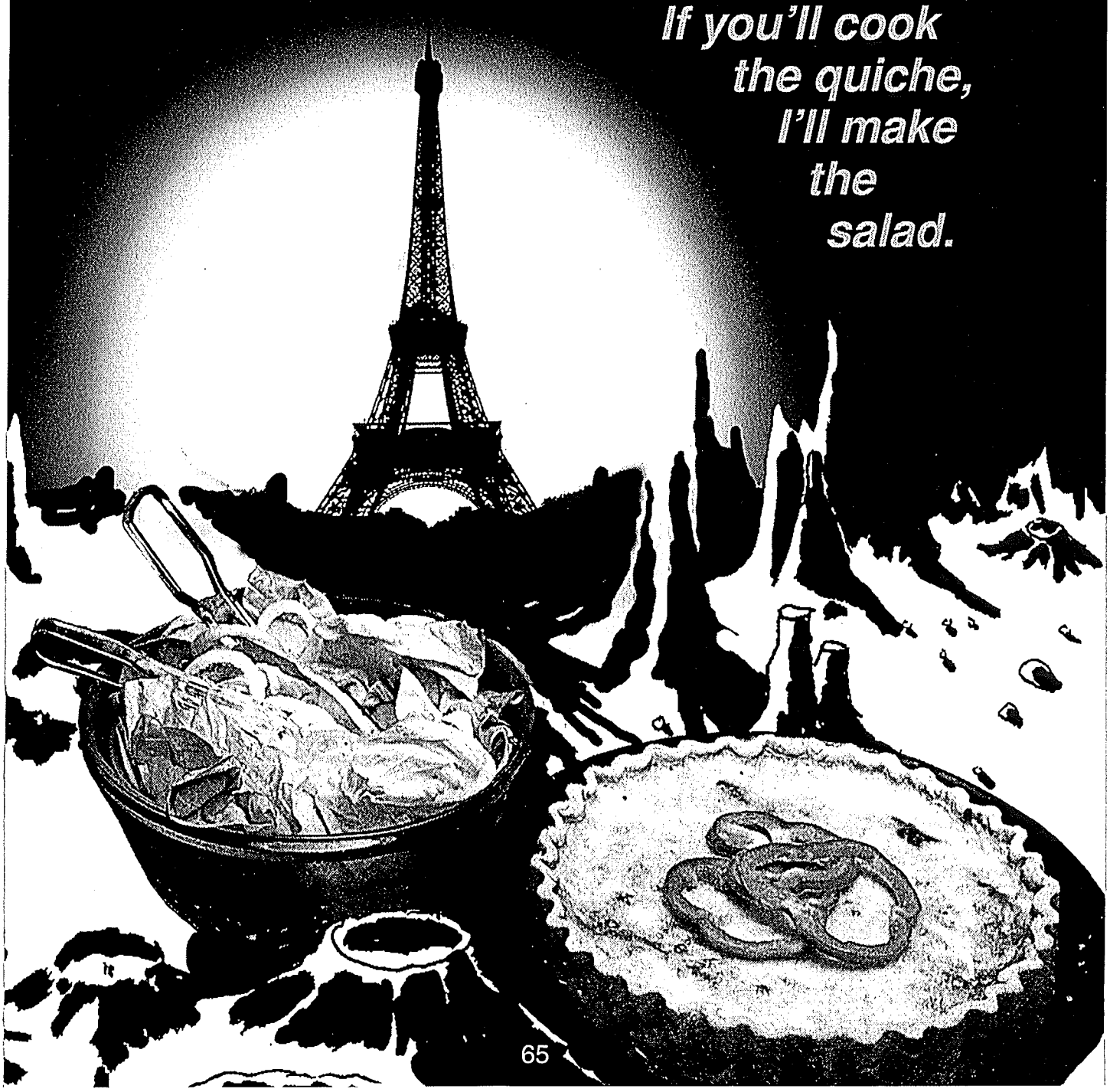
All languages permit hypothetical, counterfactual, conditional, unreal, and fictional utterances:

Legolas the elf quietly drew his sword.

Europeans could not survive in the Australian desert.

If I spoke better French, I could get a job in Paris.

If you'll cook the quiche, I'll make the salad.



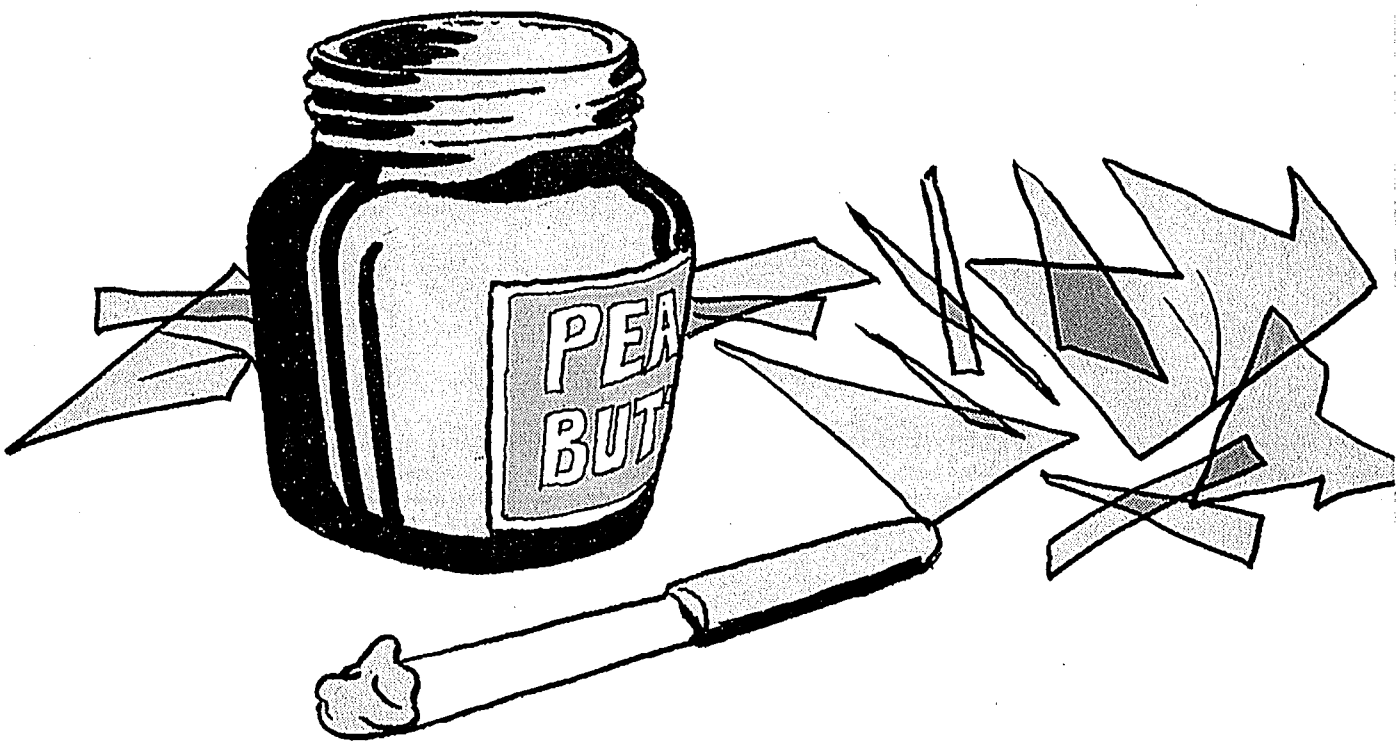
All languages exhibit *open-endedness*, the ability to produce and understand totally new utterances without difficulty:

Luxembourg has invaded New Zealand.

Shakespeare wrote his plays in Swahili, and they were translated into English by his African bodyguards.

Aunt Bea has sent us some photos of her granddaughter's christening.

I find that peanut butter is a poor substitute for putty.



Very likely most of the sentences in this book are ones that you have never used or encountered before, and yet you can still understand them easily.

All languages exhibit *stimulus-freedom*, the ability to say anything at all, including nothing, in any circumstance. If your friend Julia asks you ...

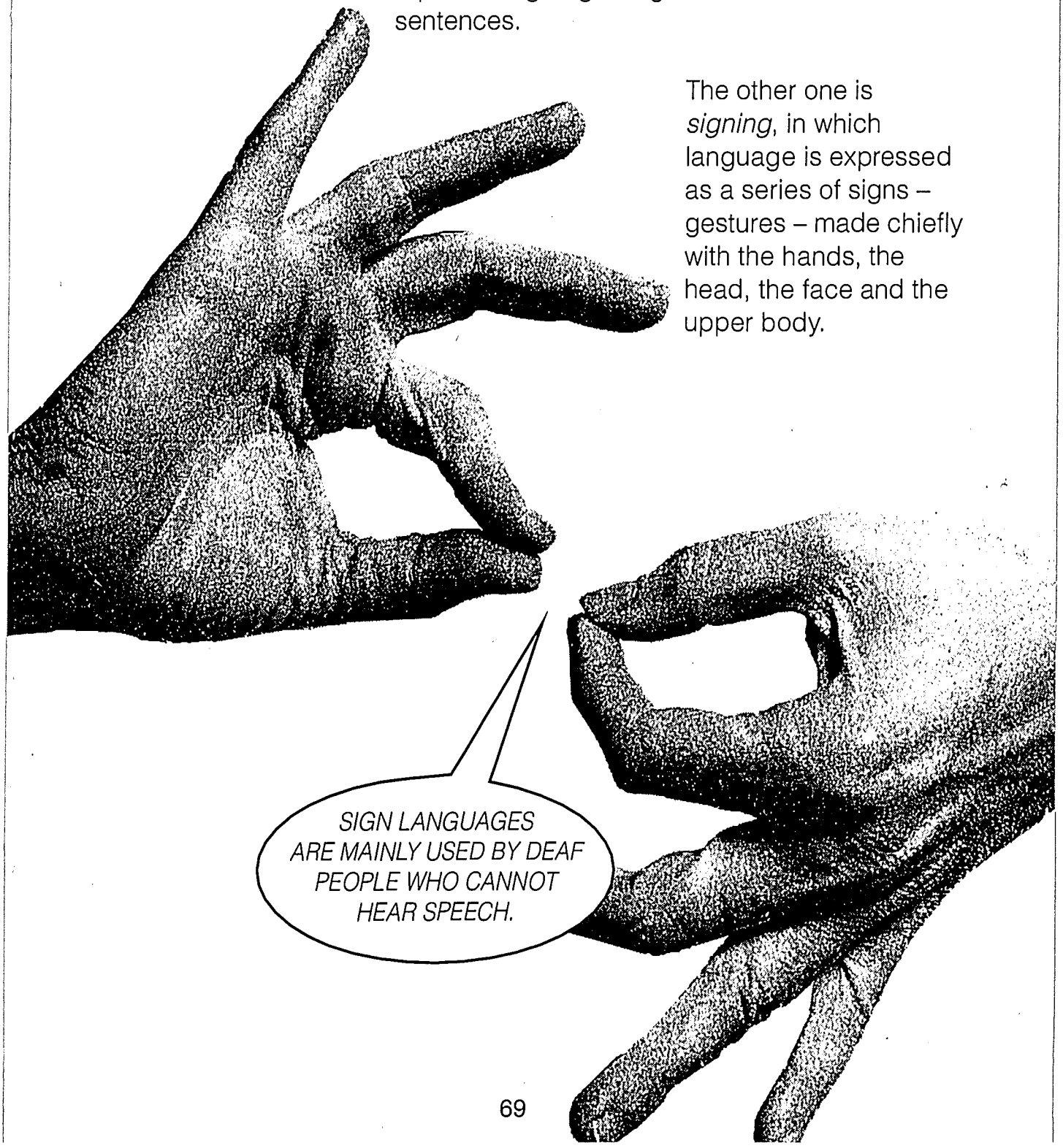
Linguistic Abilities

No other creatures can do these things. But all humans can: an Oxford professor or a Chicago stockbroker can do them effortlessly, but so can a Stone Age tribesman in New Guinea or the Amazon, and so can a seven-year-old child in Siberia. Language is peculiarly human ...

Language Media

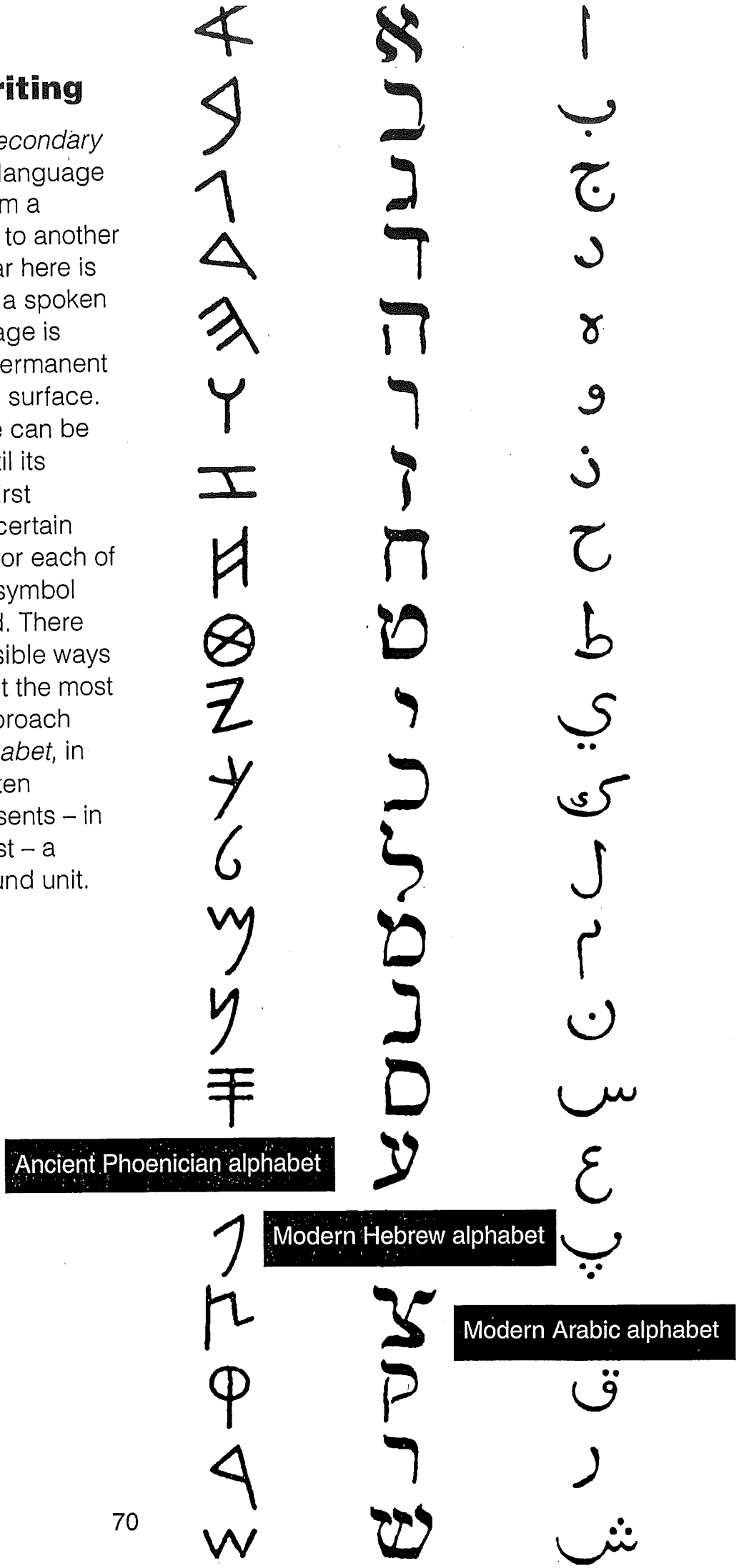
Language must be expressed through a *medium*. A *primary medium* is one in which a mother tongue can be acquired, and there are just two primary media. The more familiar one is *speech*. In speech, air from the lungs is squeezed up and out through the mouth and the nose, while the vocal folds, the tongue and other organs of speech modify the airstream in various ways to produce a sequence of speech sounds representing larger linguistic units like words and sentences.

The other one is *signing*, in which language is expressed as a series of signs – gestures – made chiefly with the hands, the head, the face and the upper body.

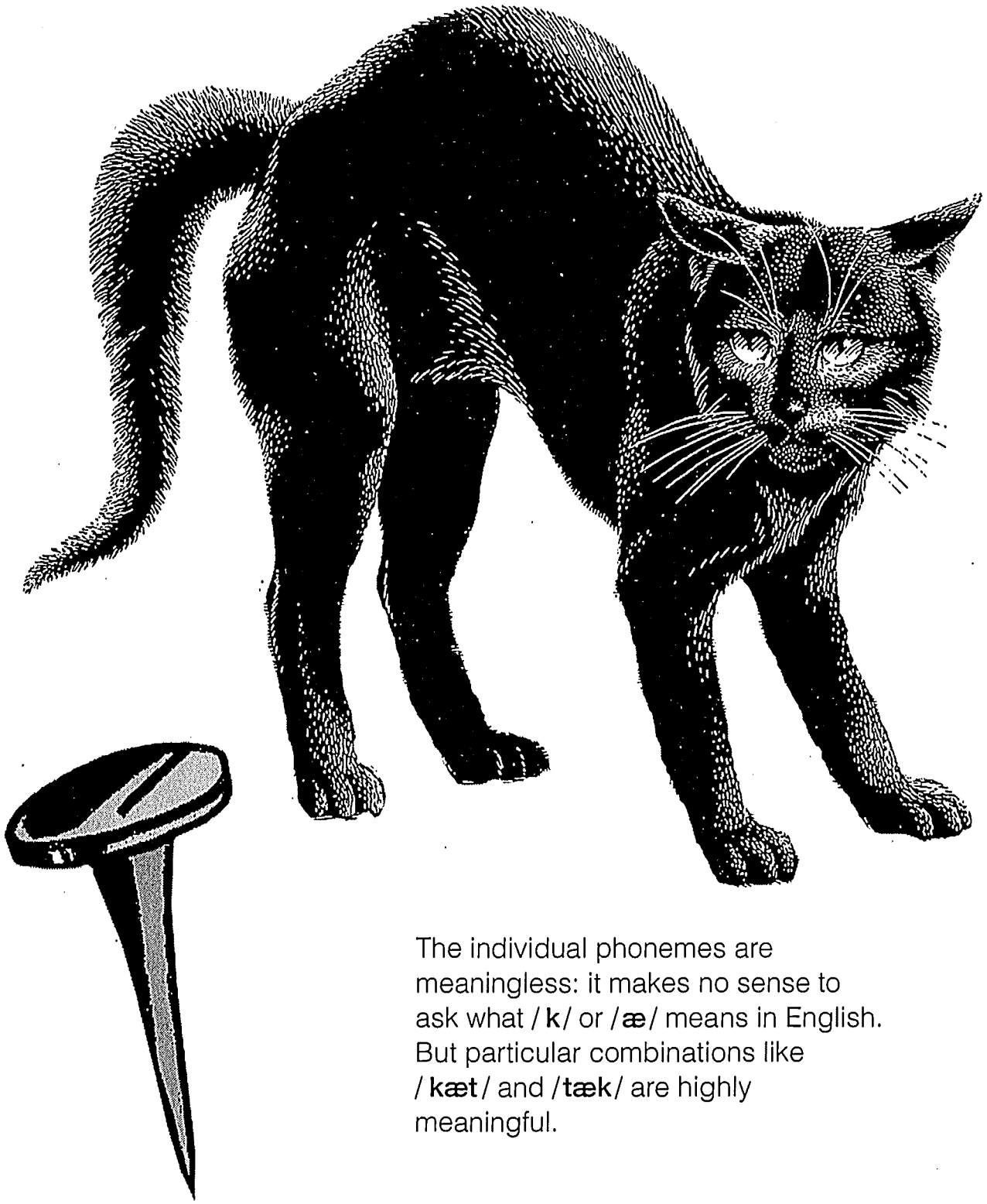


Units of Writing

There are also *secondary media*, in which language is transferred from a primary medium to another one. Most familiar here is *writing*, in which a spoken or signed language is converted into permanent marks on a solid surface. But no language can be written down until its speakers have first analysed it into certain recurrent units, for each of which a written symbol can be provided. There are several possible ways of doing this, but the most widely used approach today is an *alphabet*, in which each written character represents – in principle, at least – a single basic sound unit.



Every spoken language contains a small number of basic sound units, or phonemes. Among the phonemes of English are /**k**/, /**æ**/ and /**t**/. If we produce these phonemes in the order /**kæt** /, we get the word *cat.* But the order /**tæk**/ gives us *tack,* while /**ækt**/ yields *act,* /**æt**/ gives *at,* and /**tækt**/ gives *tact* or *tacked* (which are pronounced identically, in spite of their different structures).

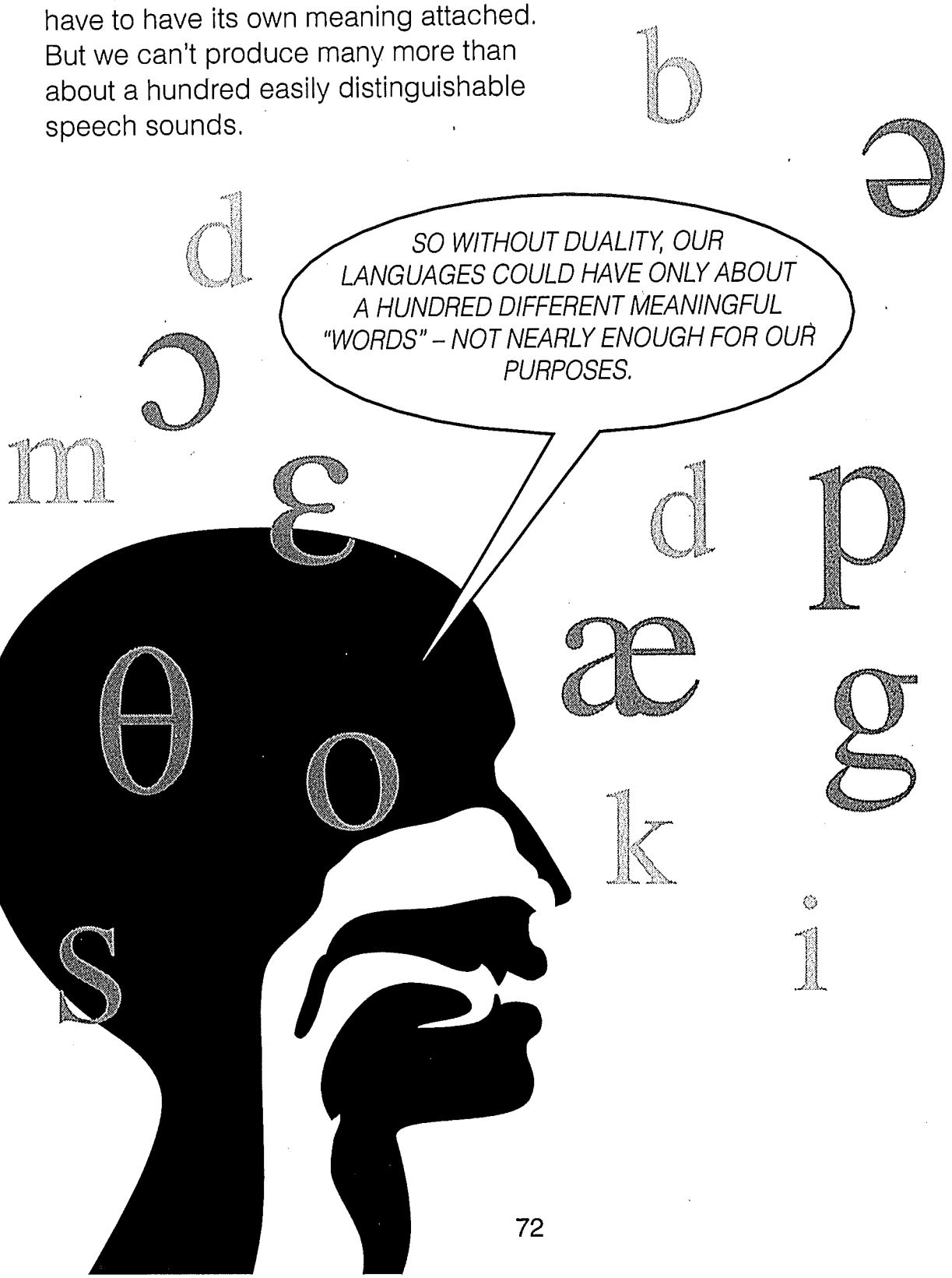


The individual phonemes are meaningless: it makes no sense to ask what /**k**/ or /**æ**/ means in English. But particular combinations like /**kæt**/ and /**tæk**/ are highly meaningful.

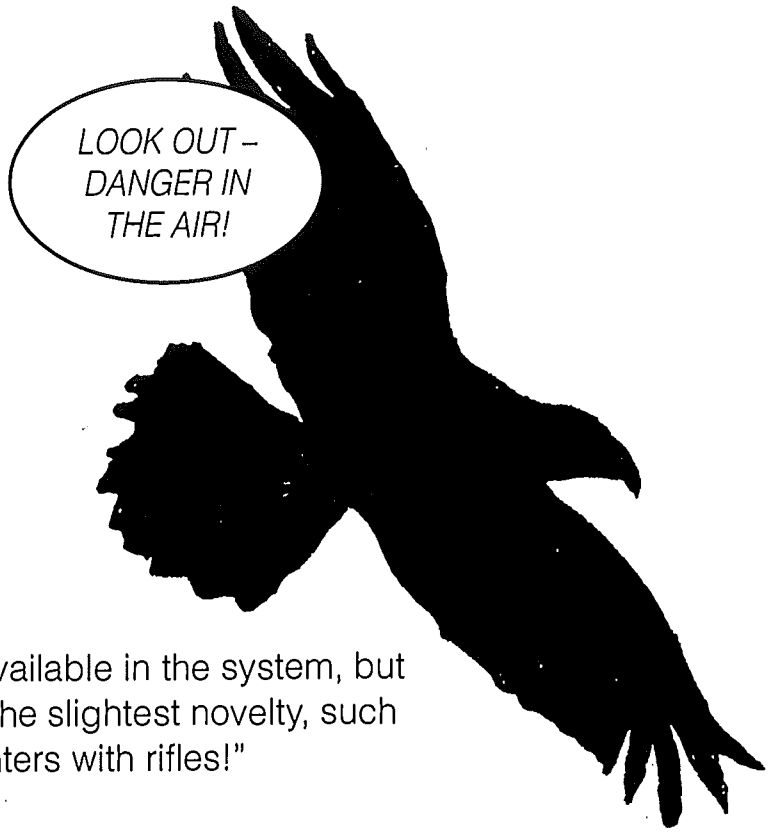
Duality of Patterning

This is the way every spoken language is built up. A small number of meaningless phonemes can be combined into meaningful sequences, such as words. We call this arrangement *duality of patterning*, and duality is unique to human languages.

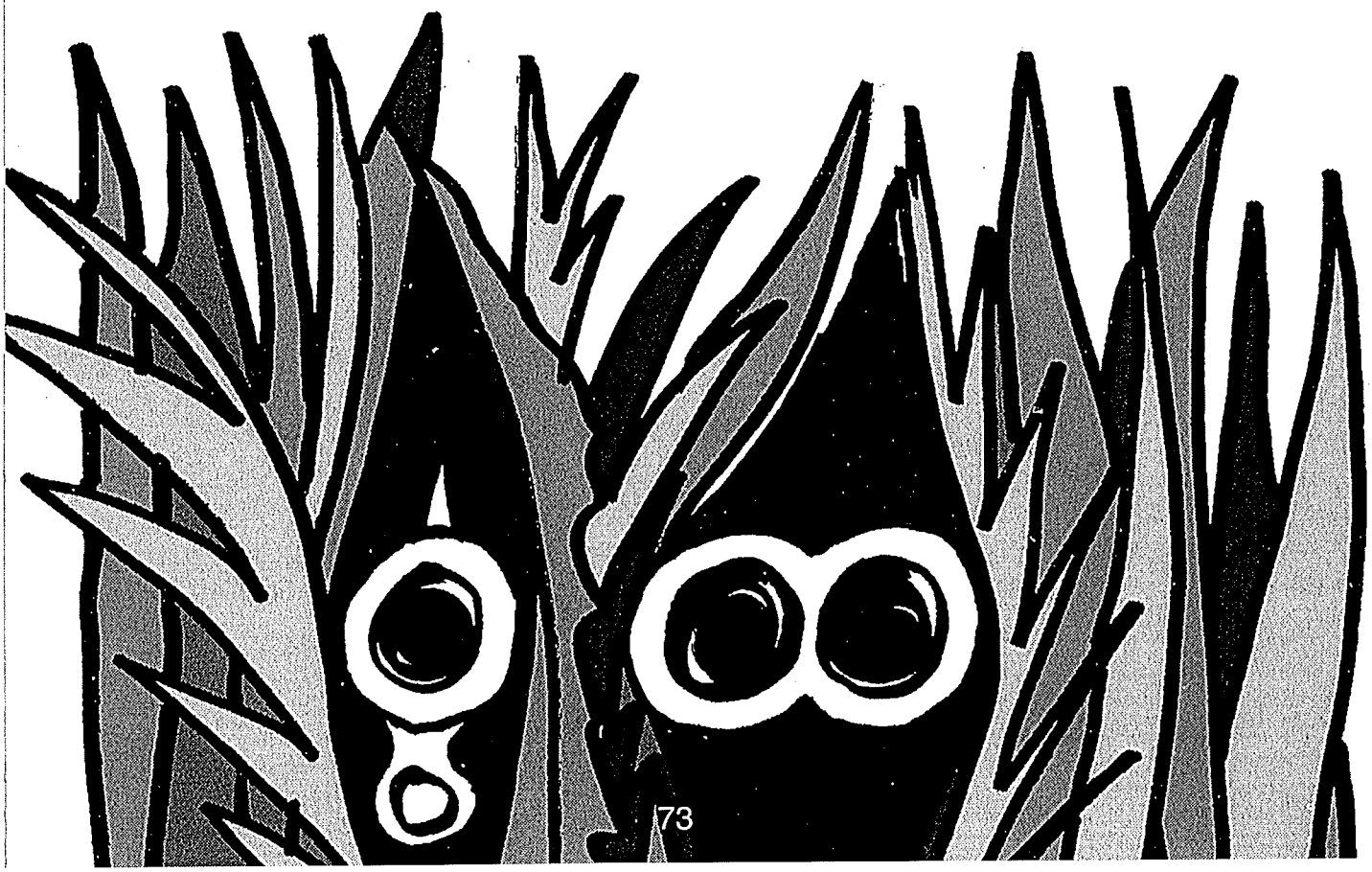
What could we do if we didn't have duality? Well, every different sound would have to have its own meaning attached. But we can't produce many more than about a hundred easily distinguishable speech sounds.



But this is exactly what non-human species do. They operate with "one-sound-one-meaning" – and so they can produce only a few different meanings: usually three to six, maybe twenty or so at most. This is one major reason why we can say a limitless number of different things, while other creatures can't. An animal can only ever choose one from a very short list of possible things to "say". A monkey can say ...



... if that message is available in the system, but it can't come out with the slightest novelty, such as "Look out – two hunters with rifles!"



Sign Languages

Sign languages are a little different here. The number of possible signs is very much larger than the number of possible speech sounds. Even so, every sign can be decomposed into a small number of meaningless elements such as hand position, direction and speed of movement, and other body-parts touched.

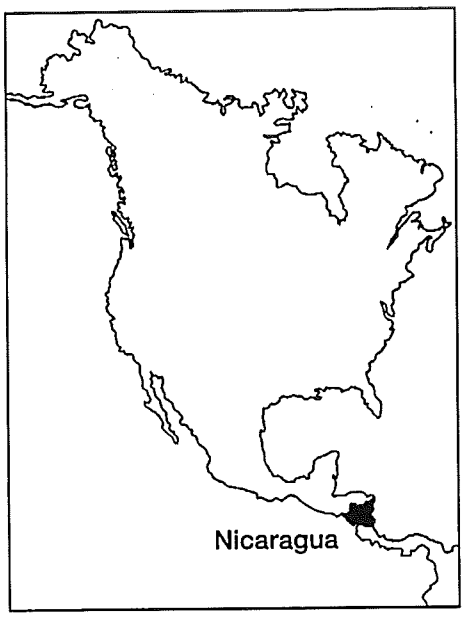
British Sign Language (BSL)

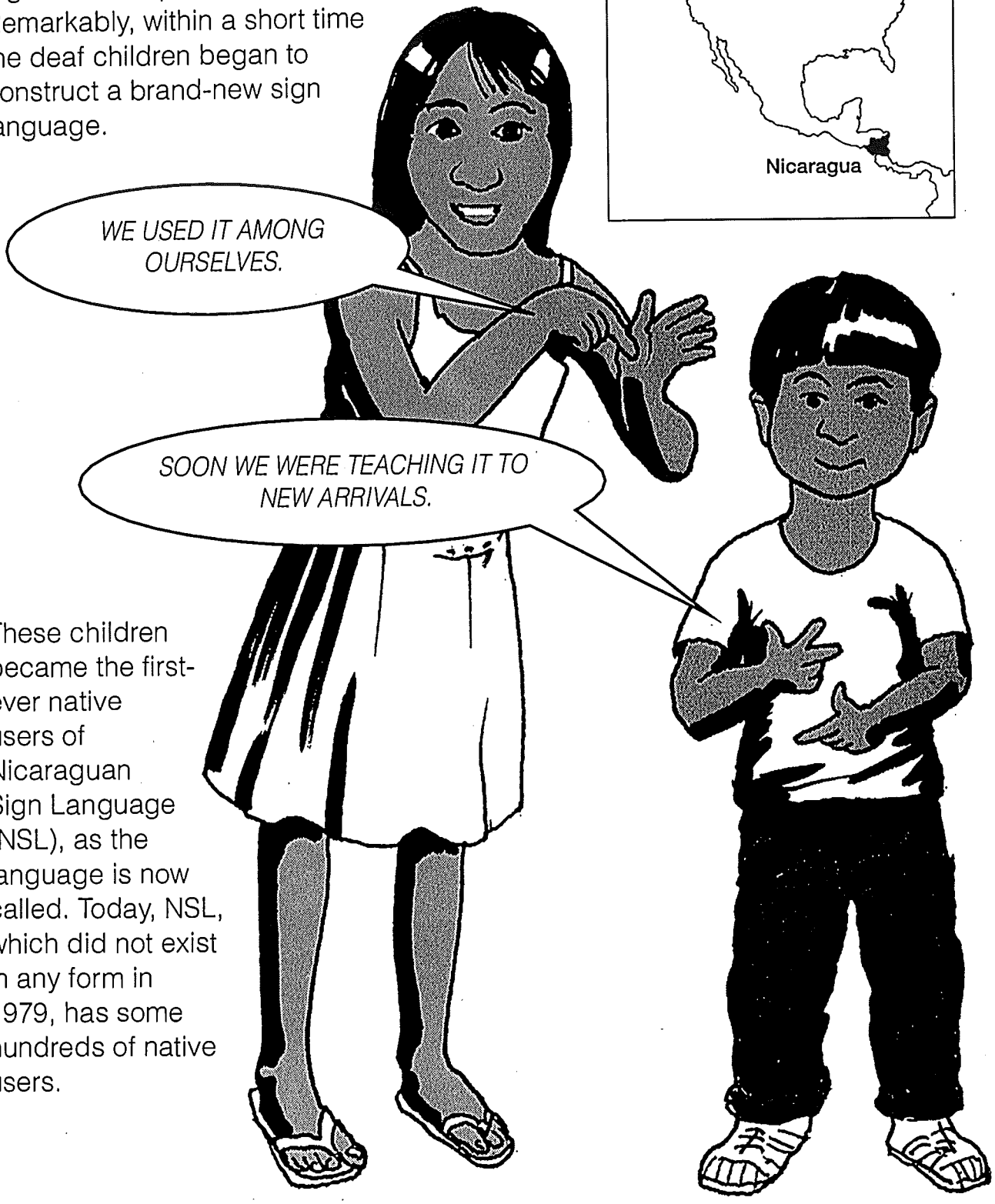
Sign languages, by the way, are not crude or derivative systems. A sign language is a real language, just like English or Spanish. A sign language can be acquired by a child as its first language. A sign language has a large vocabulary and a rich and elaborate system of grammar: breaking a rule of grammar is just as bad in a sign language as it is in a spoken language.

Of course, sign language is not very convenient in the dark, but then spoken language is not very convenient in ear-splitting noise – no problem for signers.

Nicaraguan Sign Language

As it happens, the world's newest known natural language is a sign language. After the 1979 revolution in Nicaragua, the new government collected the hundreds of deaf children who had been brutally shut away under the old regime and brought them together in a special school. Remarkably, within a short time the deaf children began to construct a brand-new sign language.





These children became the first-ever native users of Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL), as the language is now called. Today, NSL, which did not exist in any form in 1979, has some hundreds of native users.

Grammar and Word Order

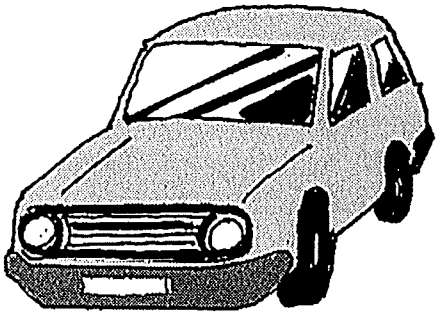
One of the most important properties of language is *grammar.* Grammar is a set of rules for combining words into sentences, for modifying the forms of the words for particular purposes, and for interpreting the result. Every language has a grammar – indeed, every language has quite a lot of grammar. There is no such thing as a language with little or no grammar. But the rules of grammar differ from language to language.

Take word order. In English, the only normal order in sentences is *subject-verb-object*, or SVO, as in ...

Mike washed the car

Mike
is the subject

washed
is the verb



the car
is the object

But other languages may be different.

Different Examples of Word Order and Location

Irish is VSO, and an Irish-speaker says, literally,

Washed / Mike / the car.

Japanese is SOV, and a Japanese-speaker says

Mike / the car / washed.

Malagasy (in Madagascar) is VOS, and the result is

Washed / the car / Mike.

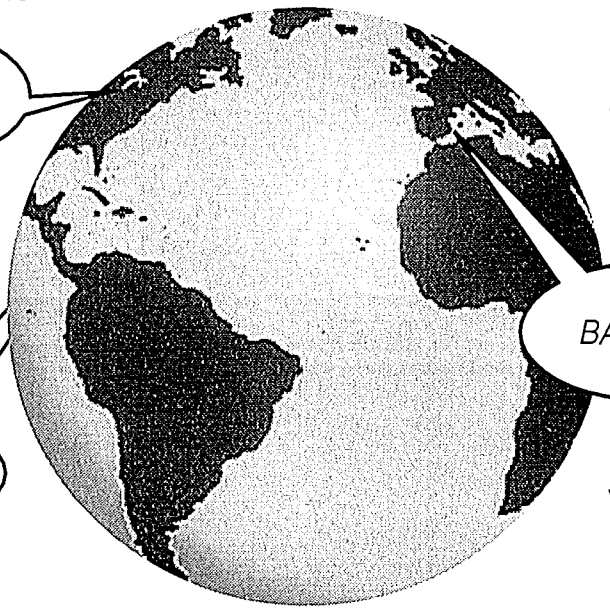
Hixkaryana, in Brazil, is OVS, and so we get

The car / washed / Mike.

In these languages, the English order would be just as wrong as the other orders are in English.

Or consider location in space. In English, we express this by putting a little grammatical word before the name of the place, as in

IN CHICAGO



Japanese, though, puts the little word after the name of the place, as in

TOOKYOO DE

'in Tokyo'.

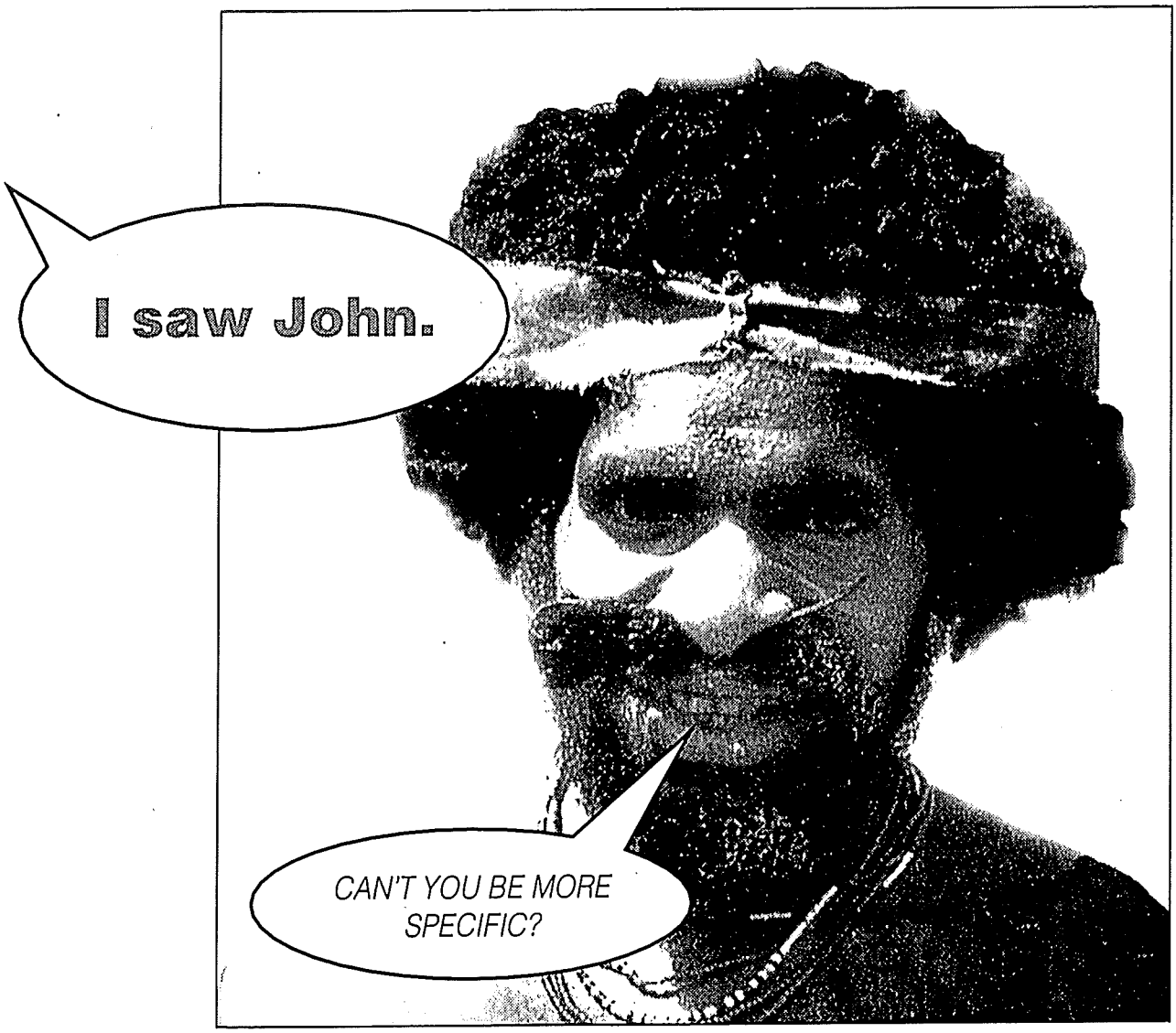
Basque (in western Europe) uses a suffix instead:

BAIONAN

'in Bayonne', where the *-n* means 'in'.

Tense and Time

Or consider tense, the grammatical marking of time. In English, we have only a single past-tense form: I say *I saw John*, regardless of whether I saw him ten minutes ago or ten years ago. But some other languages make finer distinctions. In European Spanish, you must say *Le he visto a Juan* if you saw John earlier today, but *Le vi a Juan* if you saw him before today. In the New Guinea language Yimas, there are four different past-tense forms, all distinguishing different degrees of remoteness in the past.



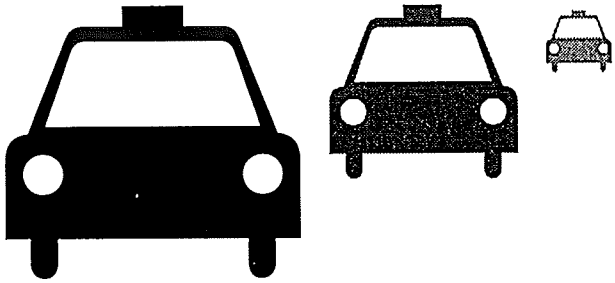
And in the African language Bamileke-Dschang, there are five. On the other hand, Chinese has no tense-marking at all: there is nothing corresponding to the difference between *see* and *saw*.

Grammatical Differences

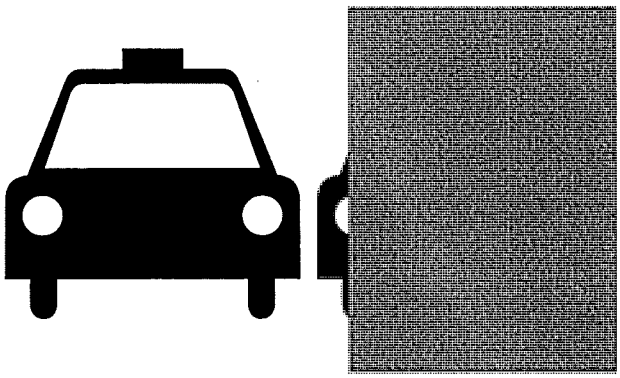
In English, if we want to refer to somebody or something we've already mentioned, we must choose among *he* for a male, *she* for a female and *it* for a sexless thing. In this case, English grammaticalizes sex.

In Finnish, however, the word is *hän* in every case: Finnish does not mark sex.

Basque, in northern Spain, does not mark sex either, but in Basque you must make a different choice: *hau* if the person or thing is close to you, *hori* if an intermediate distance from you, and *hura* if far away from you. Basque grammaticalizes distance, but not sex.



In the North American language Kwakiutl, you must make yet another choice: you choose one form if you can see the person or thing you're talking about, but another form if you can't. Kwakiutl grammaticalizes visibility.



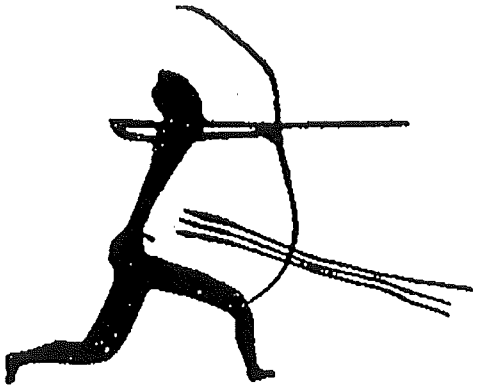
In standard English, the sentence *He's sick* can mean either "He's sick at the moment" or "He's chronically ill". If we need to make the difference, we have to stick extra words into the sentence. However, in one variety of English, African-American English (AAE), spoken by many black people in the USA, the difference is grammaticalized.

The rules of English grammar are not the same for all speakers.

Sign Language Grammar

In American Sign Language, the sign for sick can be grammatically modified in a number of ways, producing variations that mean "slightly sick", "very sick", "always sick", "sick for a long time", and several other possibilities, all of which require extra words in English. Sign languages, like spoken languages, have rich and elaborate grammatical systems.

Our remarkable language faculty is unique to our species. But when did language arise? No one knows.



50,000 years ago

100,000 years ago

200,000 years ago

1,000,000 years ago

THE FAVOURITE GUESS IS THAT LANGUAGE AROSE WITH OUR OWN SPECIES, HOMO SAPIENS, BETWEEN 100,000 AND 200,000 YEARS AGO.

WHILE STILL OTHERS BELIEVE THAT OUR OWN SPECIES FIRST ACQUIRED LANGUAGE ONLY AROUND 50,000 YEARS AGO.

BUT A FEW SPECIALISTS ARE ARGUING THAT OUR HOMINID ANCESTOR, HOMO ERECTUS, PROBABLY HAD LANGUAGE AROUND A MILLION YEARS AGO.

No resolution to this debate is in sight. Sadly, languages do not fossilize.

The Written Record of Language

Investigation of our remote linguistic past is very difficult. For one thing, writing was invented only a little more than 5,000 years ago, and we have no written records earlier than this. In fact, until recently, only a tiny proportion of the world's people could read and write, and even today only a few dozen languages are regularly written. Most languages have never been written down at all, and so we have no record of the overwhelming bulk of the world's linguistic history.

But writing changes too

Languages are always changing, not just century by century but day by day. Take a look at this passage written by Jonathan Swift in the 18th century:.

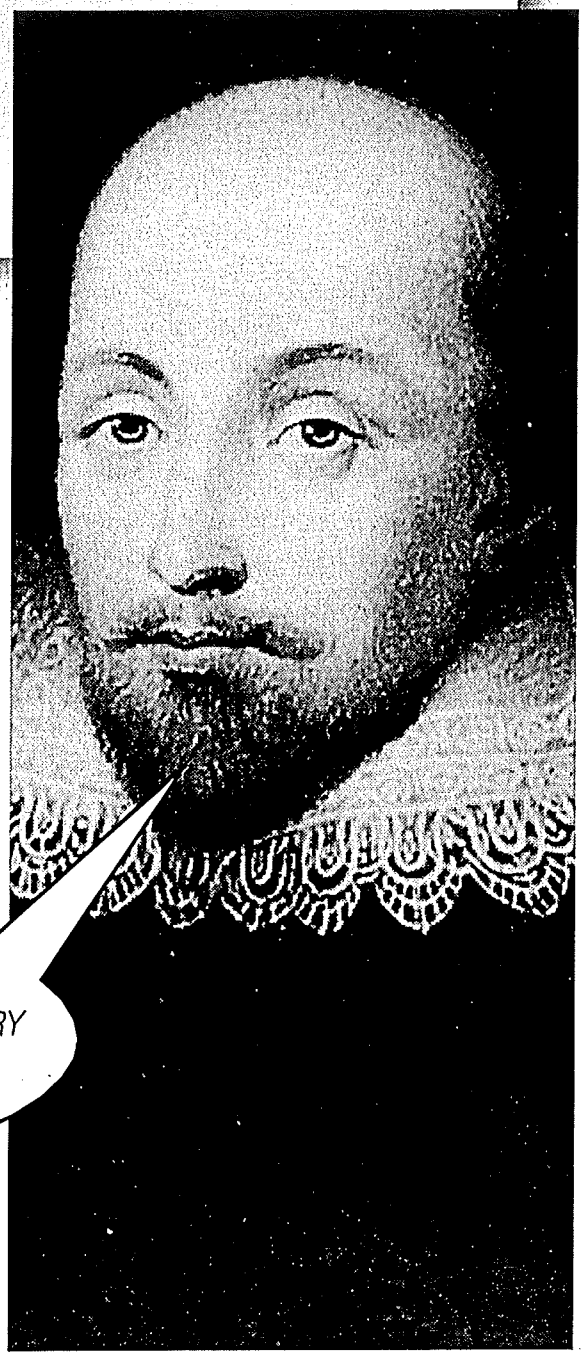
> But where I say, that I would have our Language, after it is duly correct, always to last; I do not mean that it should never be enlarged: Provided, that no Word which a Society shall give a Sanction to, be afterwards antiquated and exploded, they may have liberty to receive whatever new ones they shall find occasion for.

We can understand most of this, but it already looks strange to us.

Now take a look at a passage from Shakespeare, in the late 16th century:

My brother Jacques he keeps at school, and report speaks goldenly of his profit; for my part, he keeps me rustically at home, or, to speak more properly, stays me here at home unkept; for call you that keeping for a gentleman of my birth, that differs not from the stalling of an ox?

This is a little more difficult, and even stranger, but still mostly comprehensible in writing.

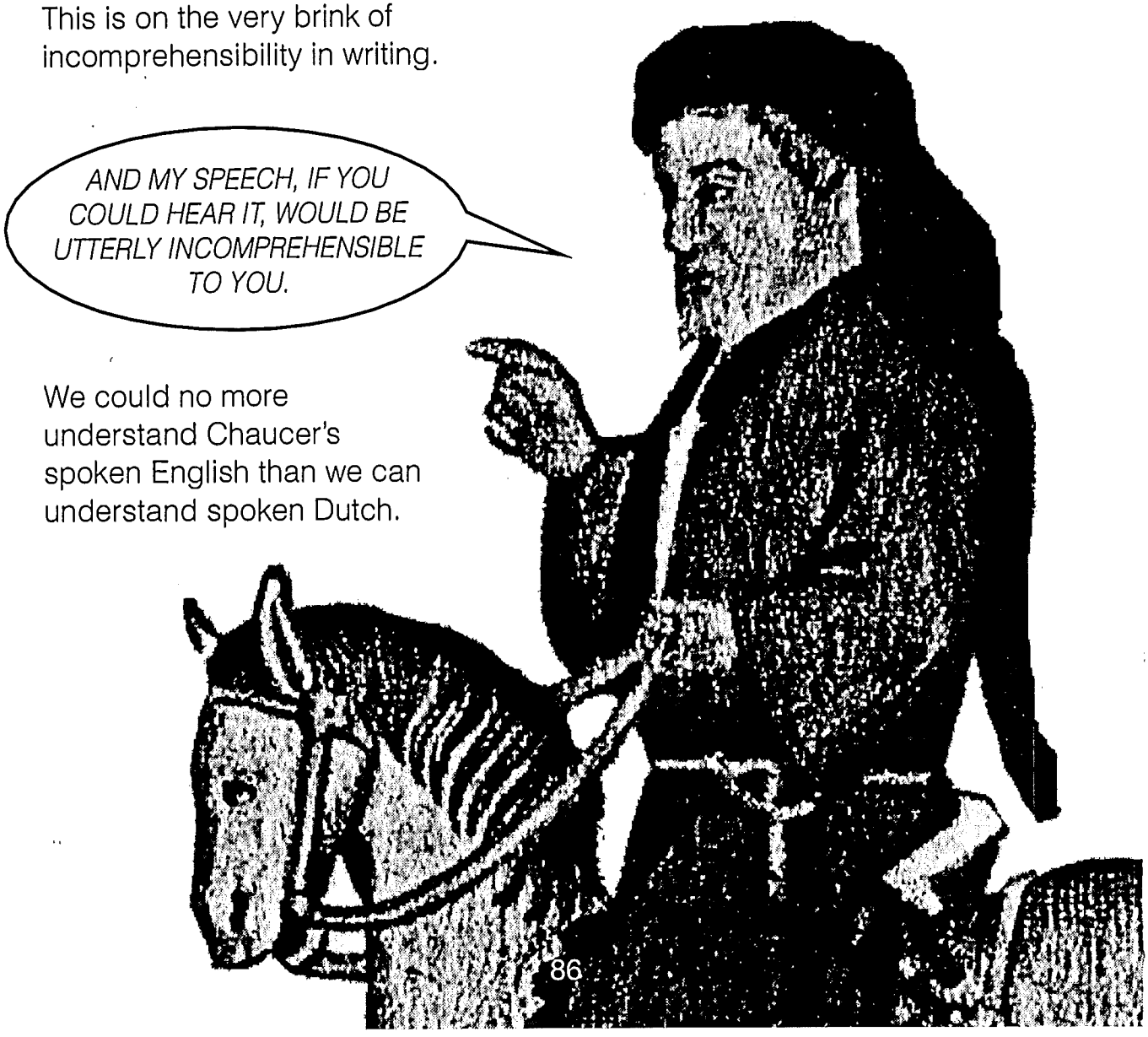


And Further Back ...

Now look at a passage from Chaucer, in the 14th century:

> A yong man whilom called Melibeus myghty and riche bigat vp on his wif, that called was Prudence a doghter, which that called was Sophie. Vpon a day bifel that he for his desport is went into the feeldes hym to pleye.

This is on the very brink of incomprehensibility in writing.



We could no more understand Chaucer's spoken English than we can understand spoken Dutch.

... to Old English

Finally, look at a sample of English from the 10th century, during the period we call Old English:

Her...Ælfred cyning...gefeaht with ealne here, and hine geflymde, and him aefter rad oth thet geweorc, and thaer saet XIII niht.

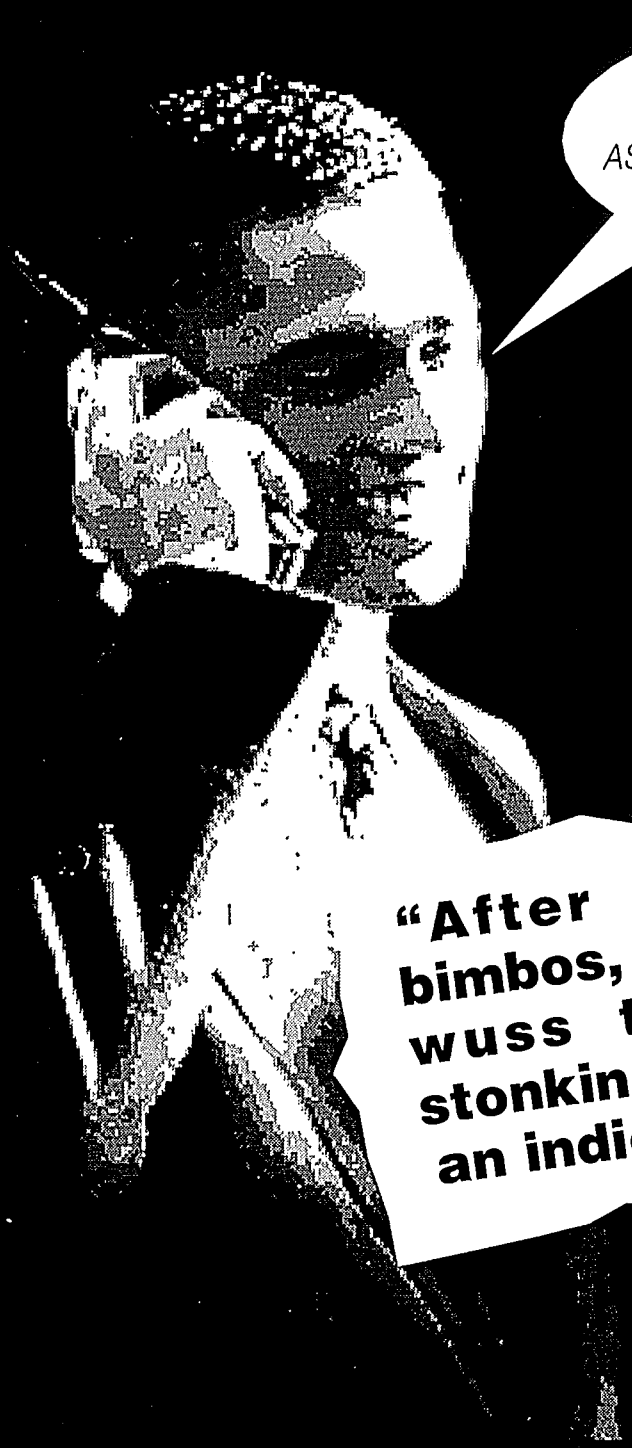
['Here King Alfred fought against the whole army, and put it to flight, and rode after it to the fortress, and there he camped for thirteen nights.']

This time even the written version is completely beyond us. Indeed, you might find it hard to believe that this passage is in English at all. But it is, though hardly our sort of English. During the last thousand years, English has changed out of all recognition.

The Never-ending Story

Now, a thousand years is only about forty generations, but, all during those *forty generations*, the language has been changing: a new pronunciation here, a new word there, a new grammatical form somewhere else, and – well, you see the result. Language change is ceaseless and remorseless, and it causes languages to diverge from their earlier forms almost without limit.

This change never stops. Utterances like ...



... would have been incomprehensible gibberish only a few years ago. But languages don't change merely because the world changes. A popular magazine can write this ...

"After all those ditzy bimbos, I thought I'd be a wuss to pass up this stonking part, even if it is an indie flick", she said.

... also incomprehensible a few years ago.

My nieces and my nephew grew up in the same area as I did, but about 30 years later. Already their English is a little different from mine: some different words, a few different usages, and a noticeably different pronunciation, especially in the vowels. Occasionally I have a little trouble understanding them. This is one more generation of change, piled onto all those generations of change that came before.

These constant changes often attract the ire of linguistic conservatives. Furious letters get written to newspapers complaining about usages that the writers did not grow up with:

Hopefully, we'll be there in time for lunch.

We have less students than we did last year.

Who do you trust?

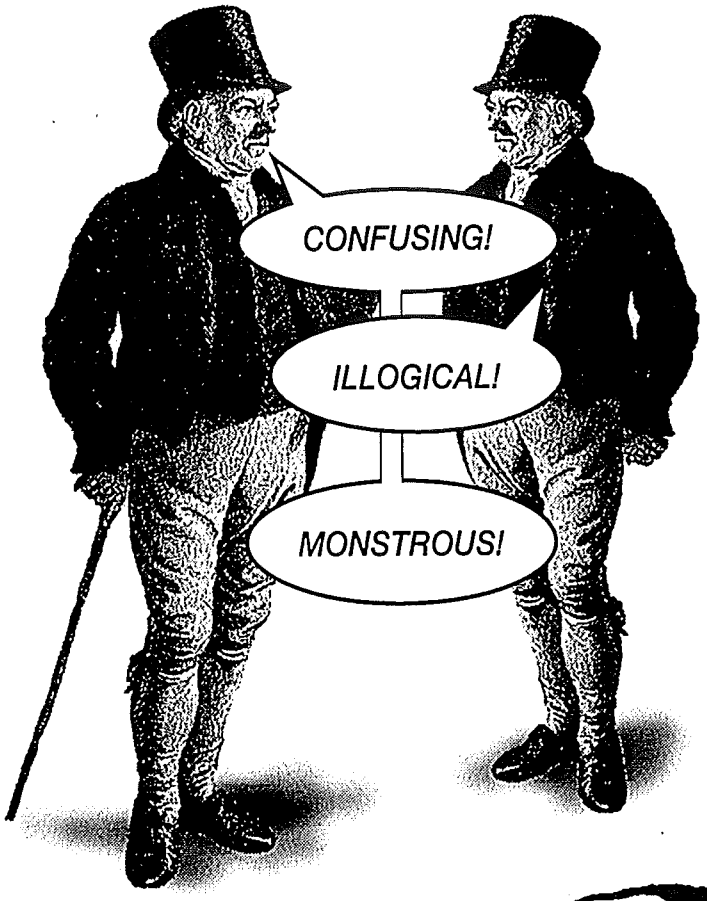
This one is different to the others.

I'm bored of boy bands.

– and countless others.

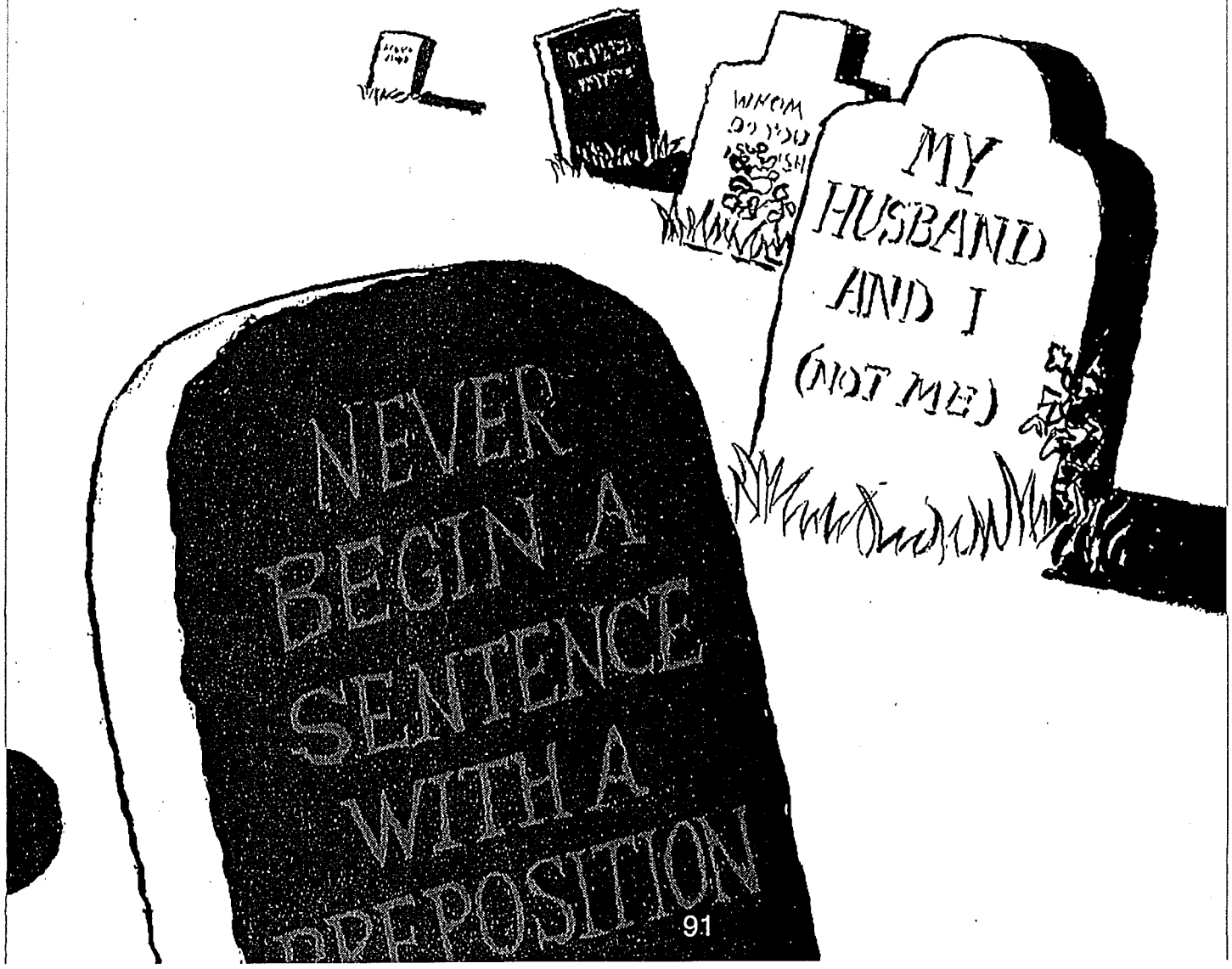
Conservative Prescriptivism

But this is nothing new. Two hundred years ago, the construction illustrated by *My house is being painted* did not exist in standard English, and the only possible form was *My house is painting*. When a few innovating speakers began to say things like *My house is being painted*, the linguistic conservatives of the day could not contain their fury, and they attacked the new form as ...



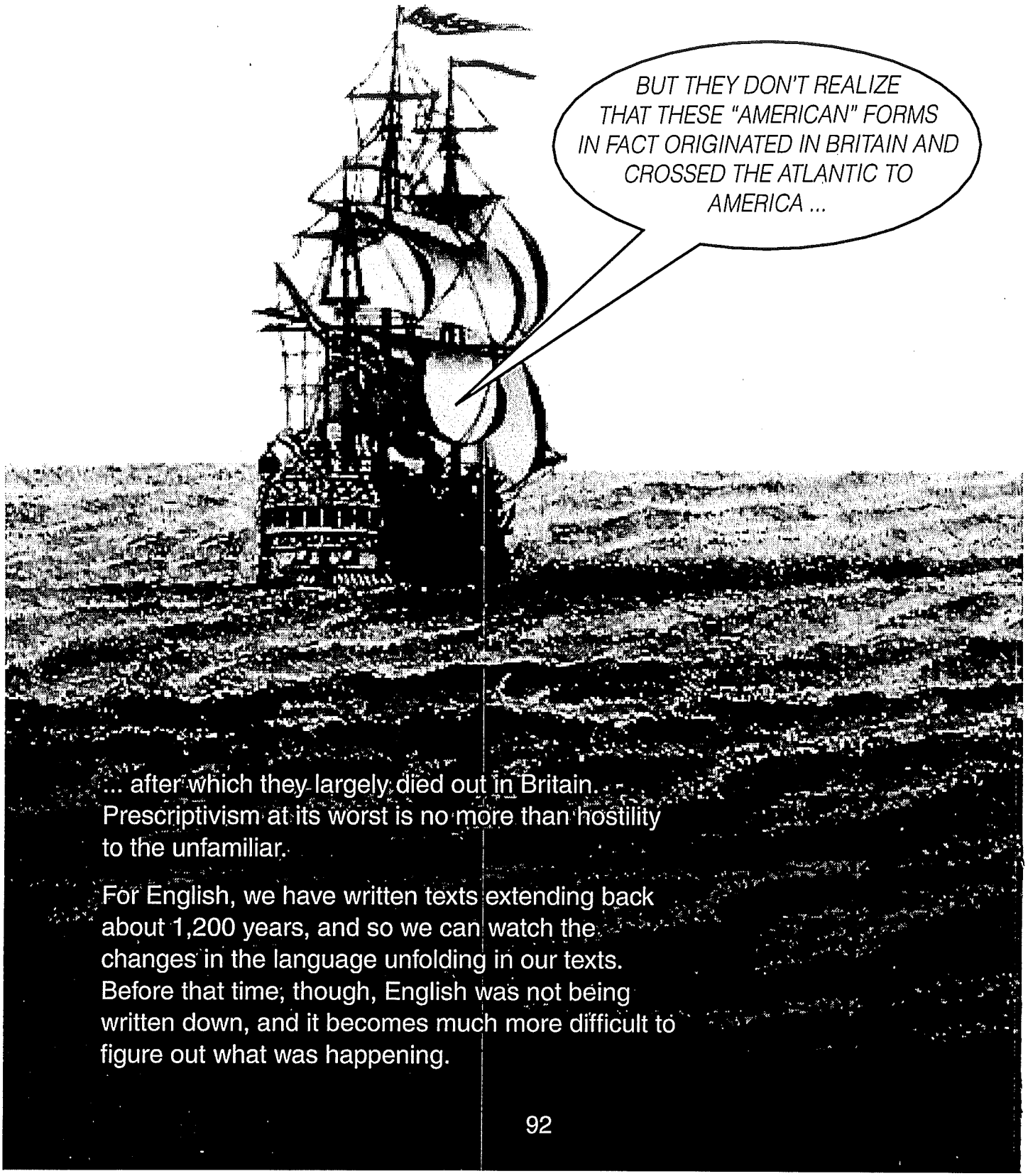
Well, you can see just how effective their protests were: today everybody says "My house is being painted", and nobody would now dream of trying to get away with the defunct older form.

This conservative attitude is called *prescriptivism,* and it is a powerful force in almost any society, but especially in one with a written tradition, such as ours. Educated people, by definition, have acquired a command of the standard language of their day, especially the written standard, and they are often deeply reluctant to accept any changes into the language they have grown up with and learned in school. But, as the examples cited above show, many or most of these changes pass into the language anyway, and eventually become accepted as part of the modified standard language. Those who reject the changes, and rail against them, eventually die, and the only speakers left are those who have grown up with the newer forms and regard them as normal. These younger speakers may rail in turn against the next set of changes, but again to no avail. They too will die and leave the field to the next generation of speakers, who accept yet further innovations. Thus it goes on for ever.



Historical Perspectives

In fact, though, prescriptivists do not always complain only about changes. For example, many speakers of British English complain about what they see as "Americanisms" invading their speech, such as *I guess* for *I suppose* and *I've just gotten a letter* for *I've just got a letter*.



... after which they largely died out in Britain. Prescriptivism at its worst is no more than hostility to the unfamiliar.

For English, we have written texts extending back about 1,200 years, and so we can watch the changes in the language unfolding in our texts. Before that time, though, English was not being written down, and it becomes much more difficult to figure out what was happening.

Difficult, but not impossible, because we have another way of getting at linguistic prehistory – at least when we are lucky, and we are lucky here. Look at the table below, showing a few words of similar meaning in English, Swedish and German.

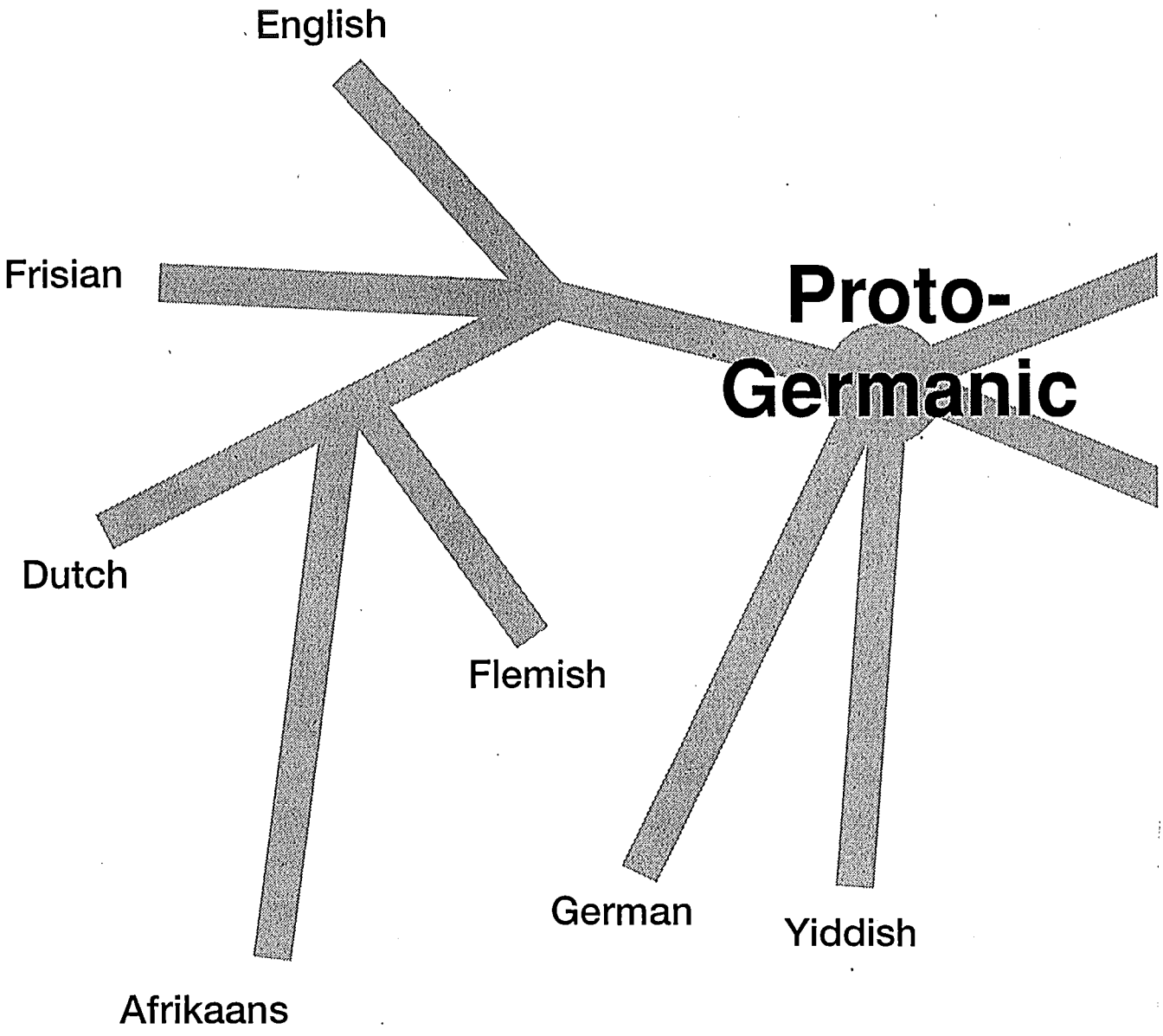
	English	*Swedish*	*German*
(a)	tooth	tand	Zahn
	two	tva	zwei
	ten	tio	zehn
(b)	three	tre	drei
	thing	ting	Ding
	thick	tjock	dick
(c)	nine	nio	neun
	new	ny	neu
	night	natt	Nacht

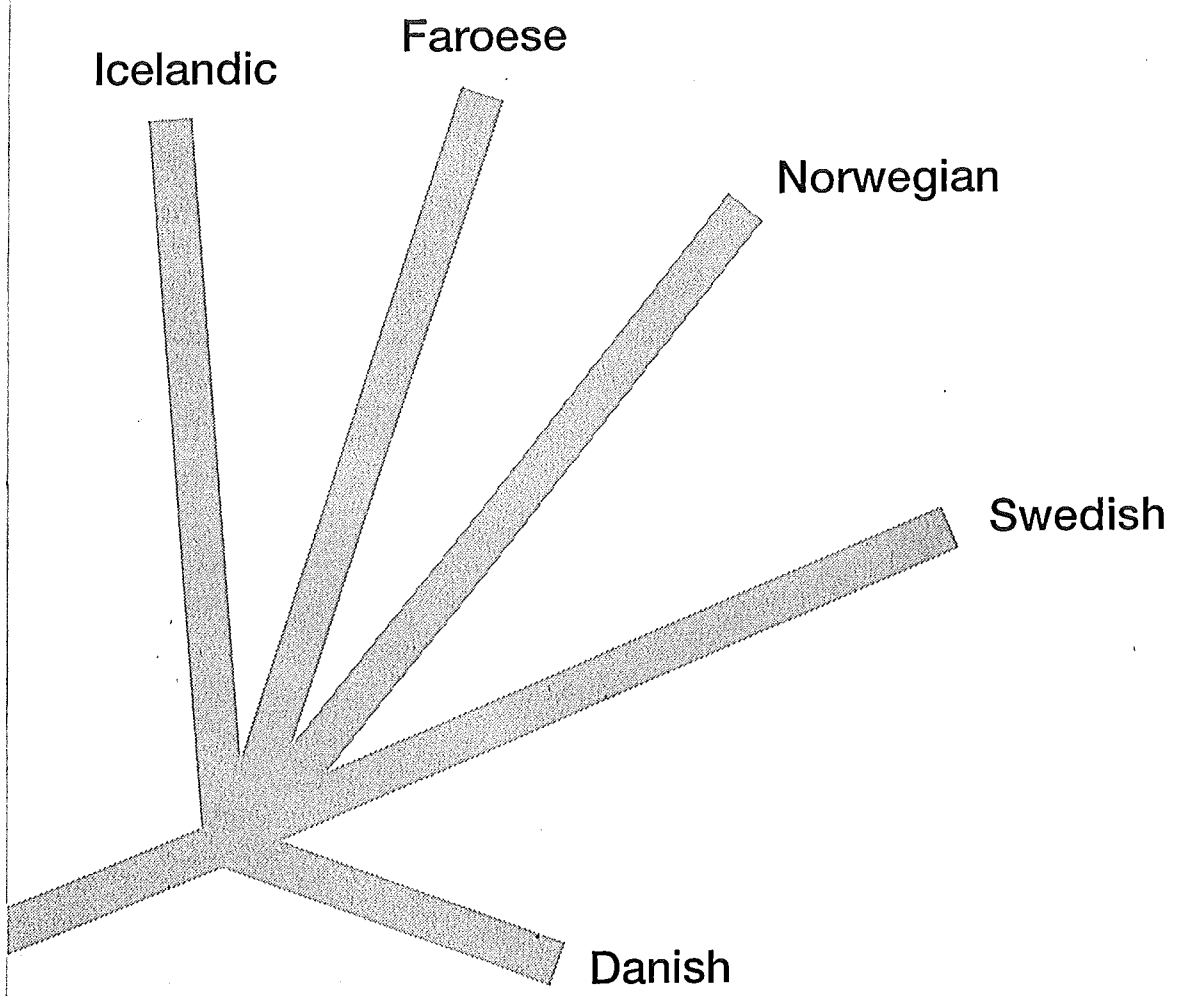
Now, you may notice a few striking similarities among some of these words, but the similarities are not the point at all. What is important is the *patterns* on view. In word after word, when an English word starts with /t/, the corresponding Swedish word starts with / **t** /, while the corresponding German word starts with / **ts** / (spelled *z*). Likewise, when an English word starts with / θ / (spelled *th*), the corresponding Swedish word starts with / **t** /, and the German one with / **d** /. And, when the English word starts with / **n** /, the Swedish one has / **n** / and the German one / **n** /.

Such patterns are called *systemic correspondences*, and there are many such correspondences linking these three languages, as well as some other languages.

Explaining Systemic Correspondence

How can we explain these systemic correspondences? There is really only one way. Once, long ago, these three languages were the same language! We call this ancestral language *Proto-Germanic*. The speakers of Proto-Germanic could not write, and so we have no records of it, but we can still figure out quite a bit about it, and about what happened to it. Proto-Germanic was probably spoken in southern Scandinavia around 500 BC. From there its speakers began spreading out over much of northern Europe. As they spread, of course, their language continued to change, but it didn't change everywhere in the same way. Instead, different changes happened in different places, and so the original language gradually split up into regional varieties which became ever more different from one another.



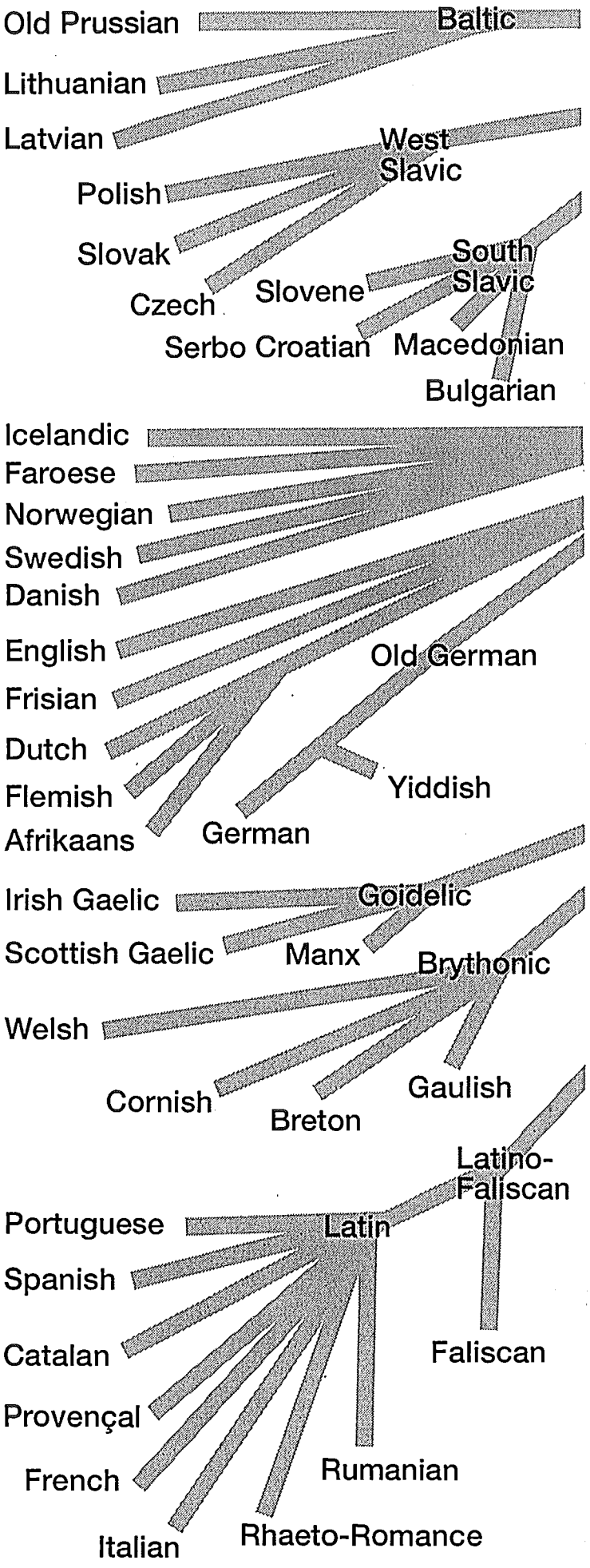


But the changes in pronunciation were rather regular. All the words in group (a) shown on page 93 started in Proto-Germanic with the same sound, which turned into /t/ in English and Swedish but into /ts/ in German. Likewise, all the words in group (b) started with the same sound, which became /θ/ in English, /t/ in Swedish and /d/ in German, and similarly for group (c). The combination of language change with time and geographical separation has not only changed the original language beyond recognition, it has broken that language up into a number of quite distinct *daughter* languages. Apart from English, Swedish and German, the daughters of Proto-Germanic include Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, Afrikaans, Yiddish, and a number of extinct languages like Gothic. We call these the *Germanic* languages, and the Germanic languages constitute a *family* of languages – that is, a group of related languages all descended from a single common ancestor.

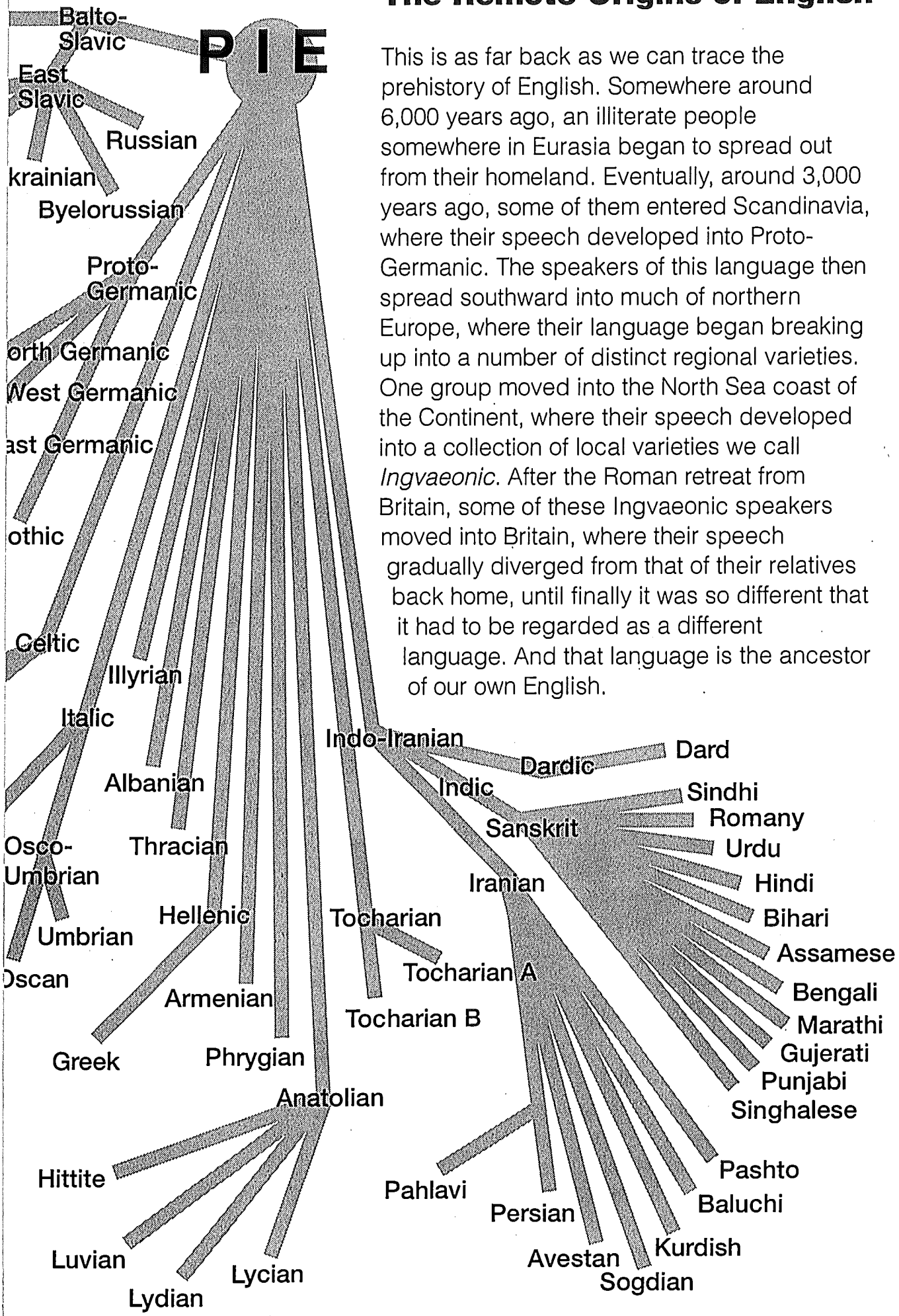
The Indo-European Family and PIE

And. Proto-Germanic is not the end of the story, or rather it is not the beginning. Two hundred years ago, to their own astonishment, European linguists began to realize that Germanic itself forms just one modest branch of a much vaster family of languages. That family has been named the *Indo-European* family, and it includes, besides Germanic, the Celtic languages like Irish and Welsh, Latin and its Romance descendants like Spanish, French and Italian, the Slavic languages like Polish and Russian, Albanian, Greek, Armenian, the Iranian languages like Persian and Kurdish, the Indic languages like Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, and a number of long-extinct languages once spoken in places like Turkey and Chinese Turkestan.

Naturally, the Indo-European languages are all descended from a remote common ancestor called *Proto-Indo-European* (PIE), which we think was spoken around 6,000 years ago, somewhere in eastern Europe or western Asia, by people who of course left no written records. The establishment of the Indo-European family was the great achievement of the linguists of the 19th century.



The Remote Origins of English

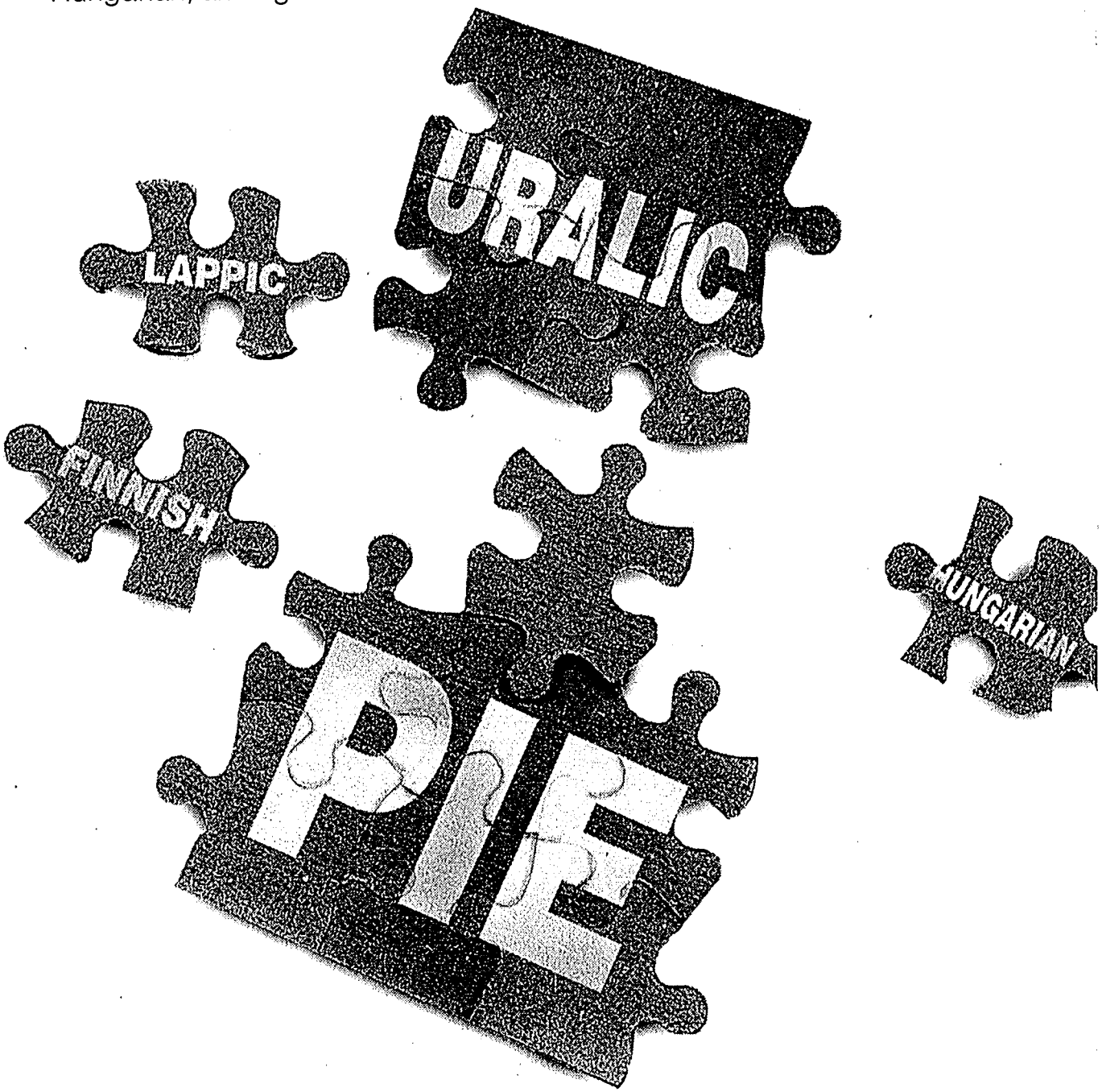


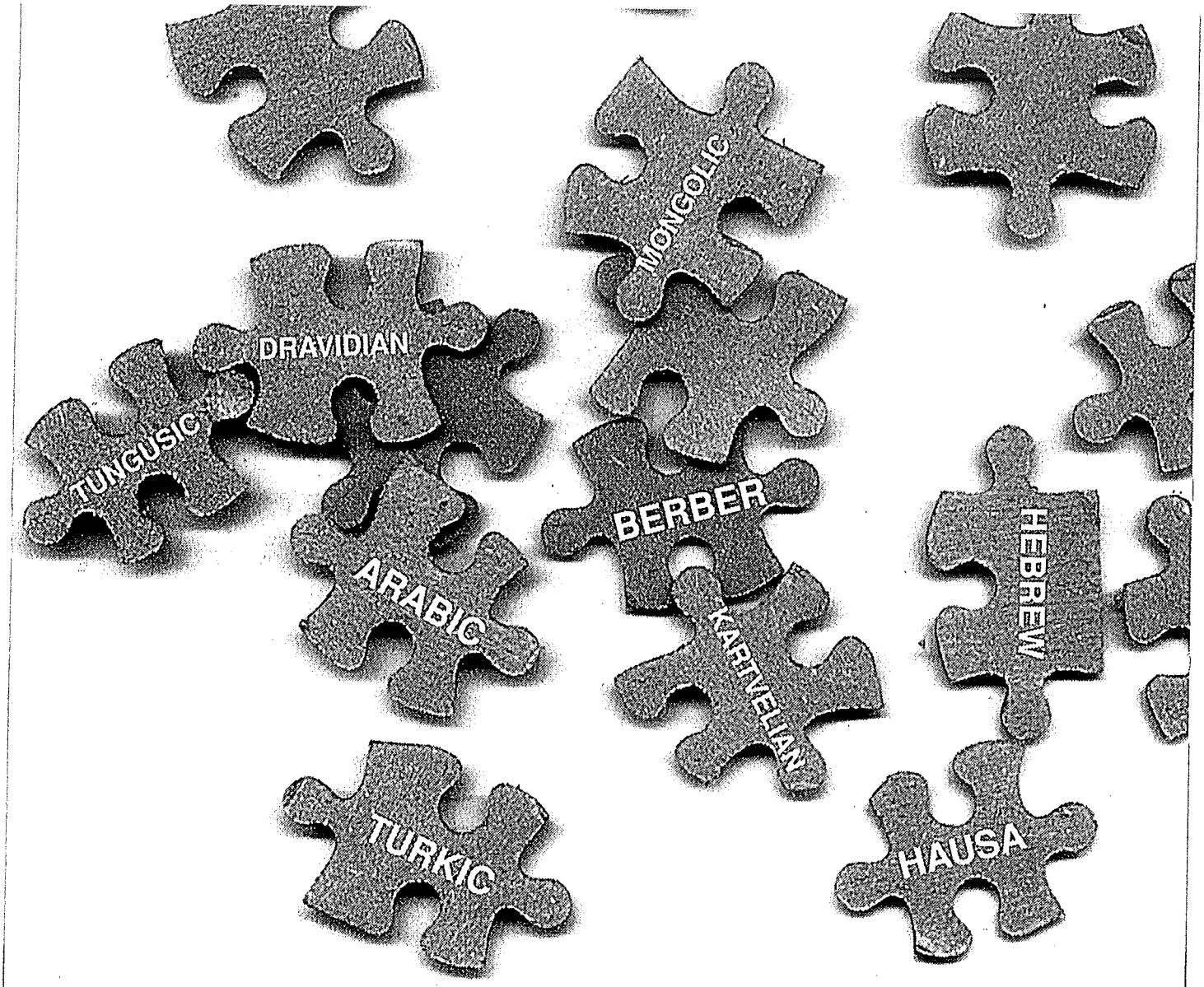
This is as far back as we can trace the prehistory of English. Somewhere around 6,000 years ago, an illiterate people somewhere in Eurasia began to spread out from their homeland. Eventually, around 3,000 years ago, some of them entered Scandinavia, where their speech developed into Proto-Germanic. The speakers of this language then spread southward into much of northern Europe, where their language began breaking up into a number of distinct regional varieties. One group moved into the North Sea coast of the Continent, where their speech developed into a collection of local varieties we call *Ingvaeonic*. After the Roman retreat from Britain, some of these Ingvaeonic speakers moved into Britain, where their speech gradually diverged from that of their relatives back home, until finally it was so different that it had to be regarded as a different language. And that language is the ancestor of our own English.

Eastern Ancestors of PIE

And what came before PIE? Clearly, PIE must itself have been descended from a still earlier ancestor, and so we might hope to go on finding ever more distant relatives for English somewhere on the globe. But this is hard. The further back in time we go, the greater the weight of accumulated changes we have to decipher, the fuzzier and blurrier becomes our picture of the linguistic facts, and the more distant and difficult to identify become any relatives that might be out there.

At present, no relatives for Indo-European have been identified. Several linguists have been intrigued by a possible link with the neighbouring *Uralic* family, which includes Finnish and Hungarian, among others.

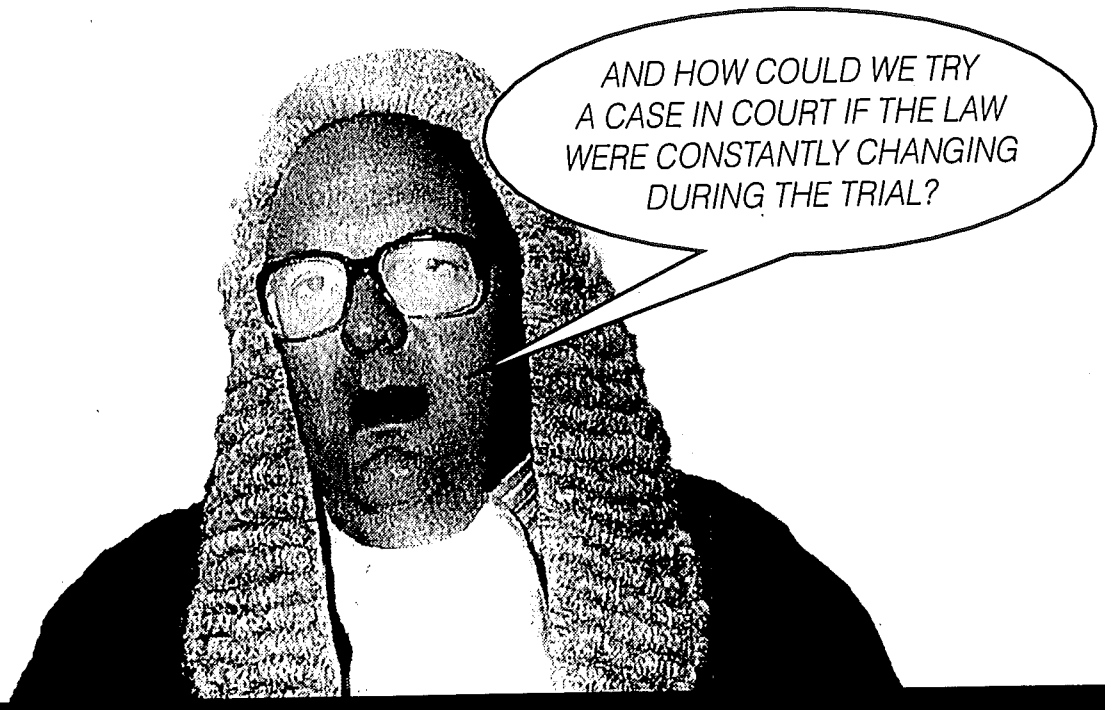




Others, far more ambitious, are trying hard to find evidence that Indo-European and Uralic are both distantly related to a startling collection of Eurasian language families, including Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic (in Siberia), Dravidian (in southern India), Kartvelian (in the Caucasus), the huge Afro-Asiatic family of the Near East (which includes Arabic and Hebrew, among others), and perhaps still more; this proposal is called the Nostratic hypothesis. But the evidence available to support these ideas is too tiny to persuade most linguists that we are looking at anything more than chance resemblances. We may never find a relative for Indo-European, even if some other living families really are very remotely related to it. Thousands of years of language change is just too effective at obliterating the remaining traces of a language's ancestry. Given enough time, everything changes.

The Saussurean Paradox

And this brings us to a famous issue in linguistics, known as the *Saussurean paradox*. How can we continue to speak a language effectively while it is *constantly changing*? After all, how could we play chess or football if the rules were constantly changing during a match?



Well, there is a clue in that sentence:

... if the law were constantly changing ...

Long ago, English had a complete set of distinctive verb-forms for talking about hypothetical states of affairs, the *subjunctive*. Most of these forms disappeared long ago, but a few cling to the edges of the language, including the one shown in *if it* ***were***. You may or may not use this form, but you probably at least recognize it. It continues to exist in the language, even though most people now say *if the law* ***was*** *constantly changing*. Some people say *were* all the time in this construction; some say *was* all the time but understand *were*; and some people vary, using *were* in some circumstances but *was* in others.

Variation

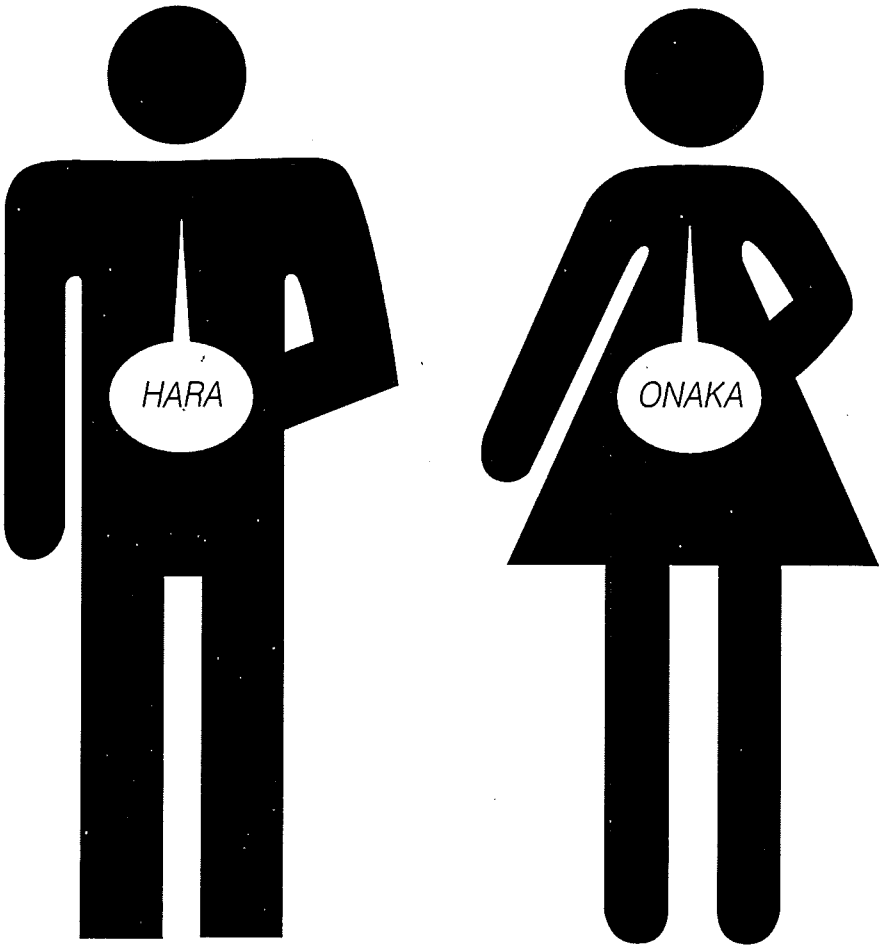
The key here is *variation*. Both forms, *were* and *was,* exist side by side in English, and both are used and understood. Once upon a time, everybody said *were.* And one day in the future, everybody will say *was.* Meanwhile, we have variation. And variation, we now understand, is the vehicle of change. When a change is in progress, the older form and the newer form coexist, and almost everybody is familiar with both forms, even if some people use only one or the other. Over time, the older form becomes less and less frequent, and the newer one becomes ever more frequent, until, one day, there is no one left alive still using the older form, and the change is complete.

So, for example, before the Norman Conquest of England, all English-speakers said *here* for "army". Some time after the Conquest, a few people began to use the Norman French word *army* when speaking English. For a long time, the two words coexisted in English. But more and more people began to use *army* in preference to *here,* and finally a day came when there was no one left saying *here* at all, and the word became extinct. Today this old word survives only in a few place-names, such as *Hereford* in England ("army-ford"), and no one except a specialist any longer knows what this name means.

Sociolinguistic Studies of Variation

We can choose between *telephone* and *phone*, between *gymnasium* and *gym*, between *omnibus* and *bus*, between *brassière* and *bra*, and after a while one form is no longer used at all – as has now happened with *omnibus*, and perhaps also with *brassière*.

The study of variation in language is *sociolinguistics*, and the sociolinguists are interested in more than language change. For example, they are interested in the speech of *men* and *women*. In some languages, men and women speak very differently: they use different pronunciations, different words, and even different grammatical endings.



Among speakers of Japanese, "stomach" is *hara* among men but *onaka* among women. Among speakers of Koasati in Louisiana, "lift it!" is *lakawhol* when women speak but *lakawhos* when men speak.

English has nothing quite like this, but we too have our sex differences in speech. For a woman, a particular jumper is *burgundy*, while for a man it is only *red*. For a woman, it is normal to say *That's a wonderful tunic you're wearing, Susie*, while, for a man, saying ...

... is in most circumstances quite unacceptable.

An important difference between men's and women's speech has been uncovered only recently by the British linguist Jennifer Coates. Coates has studied all-male and all-female conversations, and found some striking differences.

Male-versus-Female Speech

In all-male conversations, men engage in floor-holding.

But women don't do this at all. Instead, while one woman is speaking, the others constantly chip in with supporting contributions, ranging from "That's right!" to completing the speaker's sentence for her.

This difference, naturally, leads to confusion in mixed-sex conversations. While her male partner is speaking, a woman constantly chips in with supporting remarks, in the usual female style. But the man, who is not used to this, will very likely interpret these remarks as interruptions – which they are not – and become very annoyed. This is probably why so many men sincerely believe that women interrupt all the time – whereas, in fact, observation shows that, in mixed-sex conversations, it is men who do most of the interrupting.

Variation and Social Context

Variation is pervasive in language. Men don't speak like women. Plumbers don't speak like stockbrokers. Londoners don't speak like Glaswegians. Students don't speak like retired colonels. Disc jockeys don't speak like newsreaders. Everywhere we look, we find endless variation.

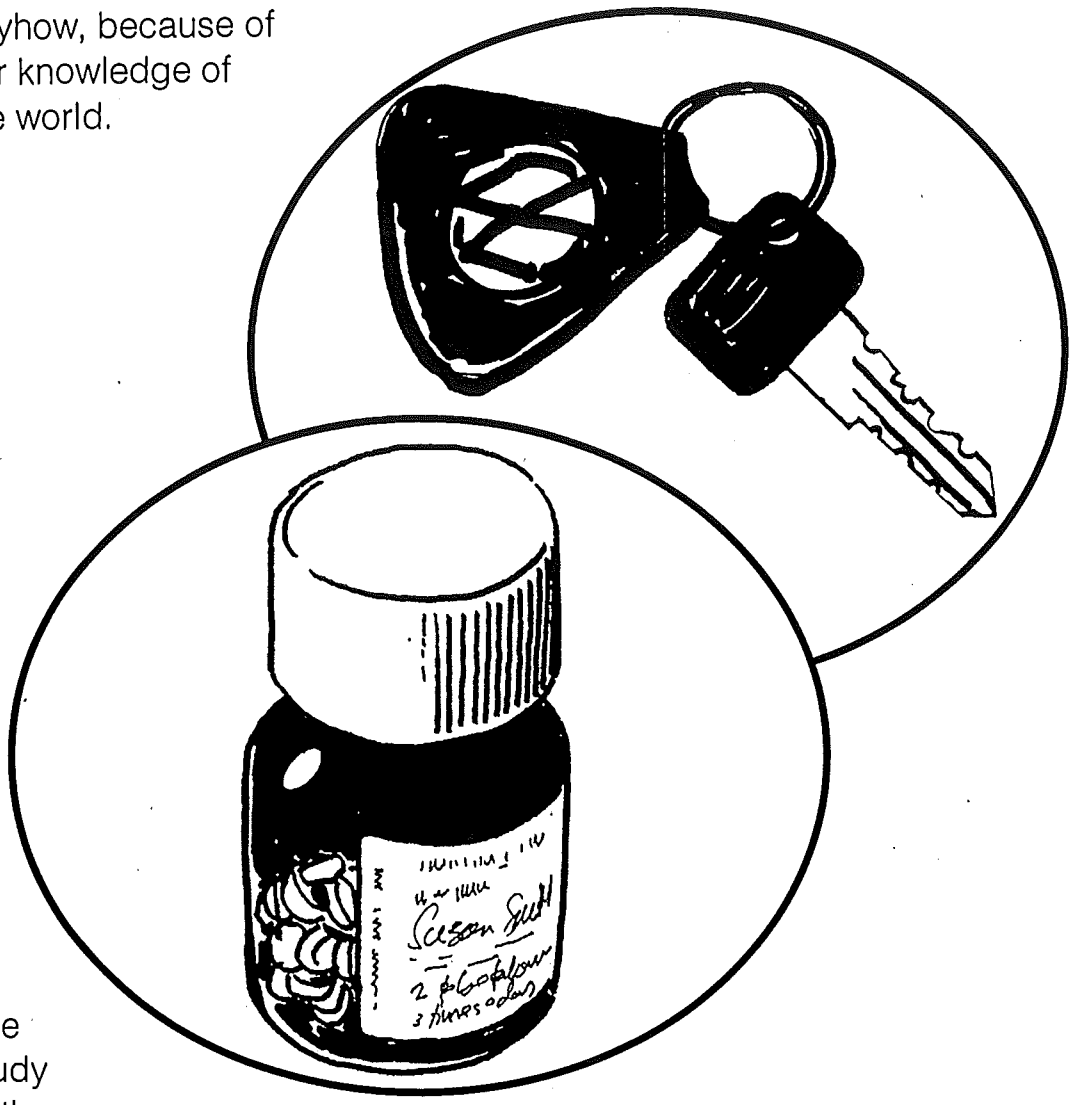
Even a single person speaks differently in different circumstances. With your friends in a pub, you might excuse yourself by saying "Gotta pee" – but you wouldn't do the same while chatting politely to your mother's elderly friends, or when being interviewed for a job with a bank. You wouldn't write an essay or a report in the same way that you'd write a personal letter to your lover. And the people who make announcements over supermarket PA systems seem to fall back on a variety of English unknown to the rest of the population.

This variation extends not only over social groups and contexts, but also over both time and place. At various times, in various places, and in various contexts, something exceptionally good has been described within our lifetimes as *ace, top-hole, spiffing, triff, tremendous, excellent, super, jolly good, awesome, smashing, wicked, fab, bodacious, unreal*, and in countless other ways.

One of the most striking things about our use of language is our ability to express meanings that are not really there. Suppose several of us are planning to go to a Christmas party, and we are discussing who should drive. One person remarks ...

What is the point of this seemingly irrelevant comment? Well, of course it is not irrelevant at all. In the context, it means "Susie can drive". Why? Because, with our experience of the world, we know that Christmas parties involve a lot of drinking, that people who drink cannot safely drive, and that people on antibiotics are usually not allowed to drink. So, in our example, Susie is a good choice of driver.

That is, in our context, the utterance *Susie's on antibiotics* is interpreted to mean *Susie is the obvious person to drive*. Now, this is strange. Clearly, *Susie's on antibiotics* doesn't really have this meaning. But we interpret the utterance in this way anyhow, because of our knowledge of the world.



The study of the way in which we extract communicative meanings from the context of utterances is now called *pragmatics*. We distinguish pragmatics from *semantics*, the study of meanings derived entirely from linguistic forms. Let us consider briefly the different approaches of semantics and pragmatics in the next pages.

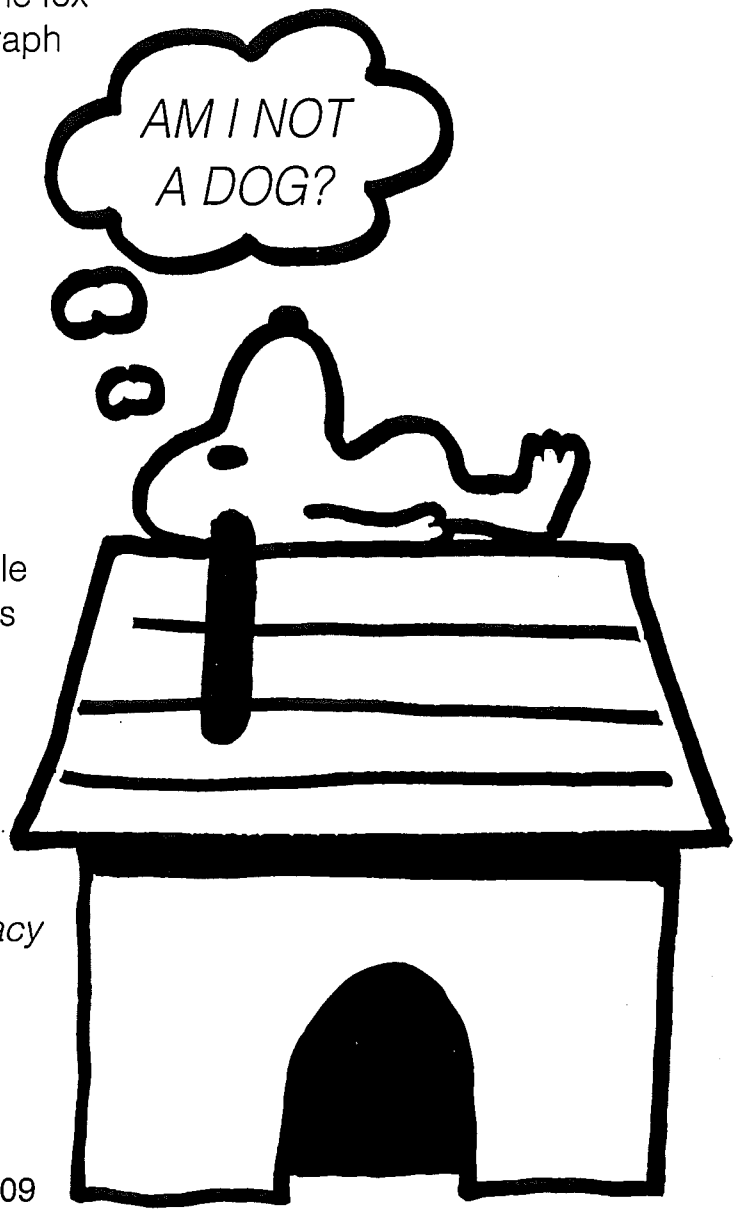
Semantics

There are aspects of meaning that are intrinsic to linguistic *forms* and not merely dependent on *context*. The study of these intrinsic aspects of meaning is called *semantics*. Semantics is a surprisingly difficult topic to investigate.

Take our familiar word ***dog***. Can you write a definition of *dog* which will be adequate to distinguish every dog from every non-dog? This is not so easy. Suppose we try this.

A dog is a four-legged animal with fur, long ears and a tail; it barks, eats meat, and lives with people.

Fine. But the Mexican hairless has no fur: is it therefore not a dog? The basenji cannot bark, yet we still call it a dog. A wild dog doesn't live with people: is it therefore a different species? No? Then why are foxes and wolves not dogs? These creatures are pretty doglike, and the fox even barks. Is a photograph of a dog still a dog? A dead dog? A stuffed dog? A cartoon dog?



It appears that we can't define even such a simple word as *dog* in a rigorous way. Somehow we still seem to know what the word means and use it without difficulty. And, if *dog* is hard, what about defining *small, green, evasive, democracy* and *pornography*? It almost seems a wonder that we can talk to one another at all.

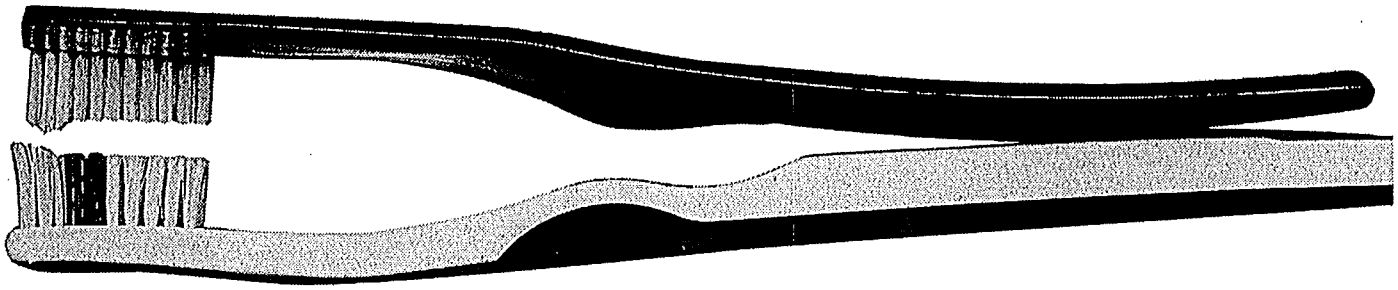
Meanings Occur in Connections

But words don't have meaning only in isolation. Much of their meaning comes from the way they are connected to other words. Consider the meanings of the words *took off, ran out of* and *lost* in the following examples:

Susie took her coat off.
Susie took her coat off the peg.

Natalie ran out of the room.
Natalie ran out of flour.

Alice lost her toothbrush.
Alice lost her virginity.



Clearly, the meanings we assign to words depend in important ways on the meanings of the other words they occur with. It is facts like these that make semantics such a difficult study to pursue. Indeed, in the 1940s, the American structuralists became so exasperated with the whole messy business of meaning that they effectively excommunicated semantics from the field of linguistics for a while – though it was accepted back into the fold in the 1960s.

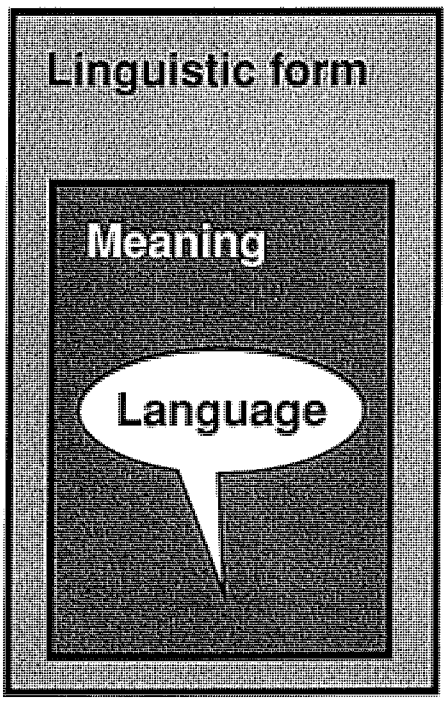
Pragmatics

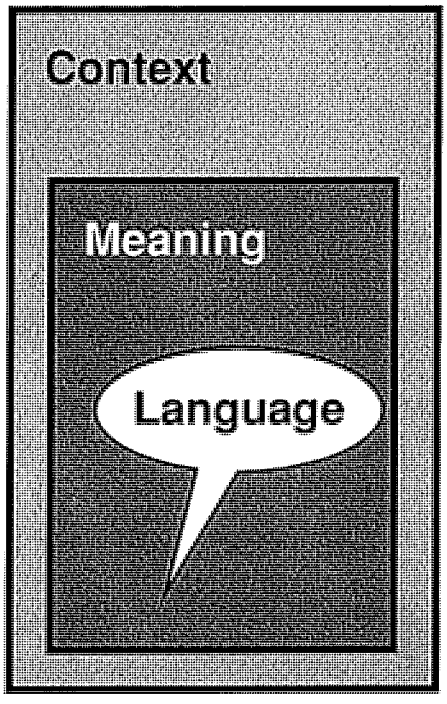
The term *pragmatics* was coined by the American philosopher C.S. Peirce (1839–1914). But it was only in the 1930s that another American philosopher, Charles Morris (1901–79), began to apply the term to aspects of language *behaviour.*

Morris's understanding of the term was very broad and encompassed many aspects of social and psychological behaviour. This broad sense is still usual in Europe today, where pragmatics has at times been understood to include even the study of *beliefs* underlying linguistic behaviour.

In the English-speaking world, though, the application of the term has been steadily narrowed down to the study of meanings derived from the *contexts* of utterances, as opposed to meanings contained within linguistic forms. As a result, linguists and philosophers have come to understand that there are two kinds of linguistic meaning, and two different approaches required to understand them.

Semantics treats the meaning of language as contained within linguistic form.





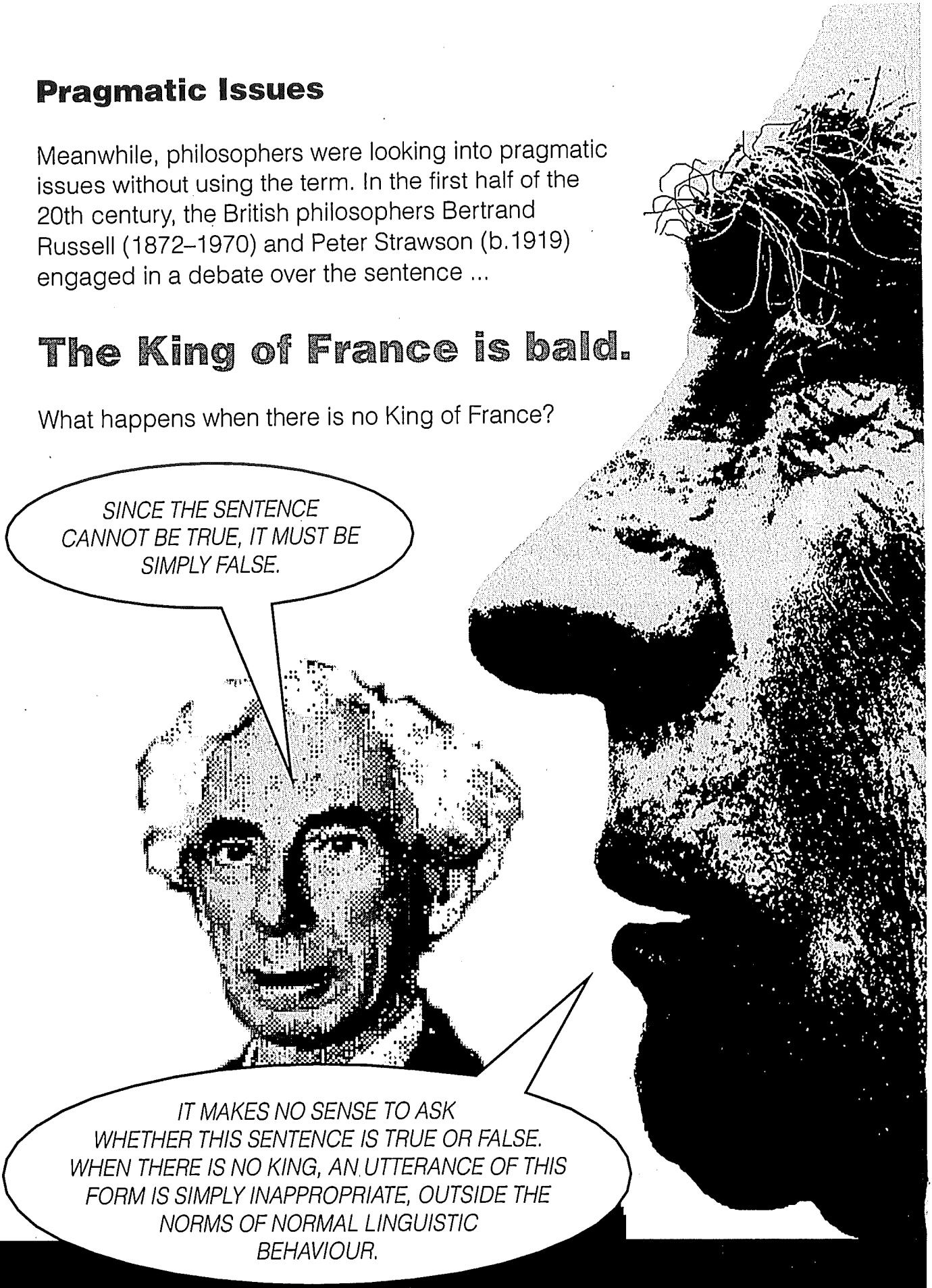
Pragmatics treats the meaning of language as contained within its context.

Pragmatic Issues

Meanwhile, philosophers were looking into pragmatic issues without using the term. In the first half of the 20th century, the British philosophers Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and Peter Strawson (b.1919) engaged in a debate over the sentence ...

The King of France is bald.

What happens when there is no King of France?

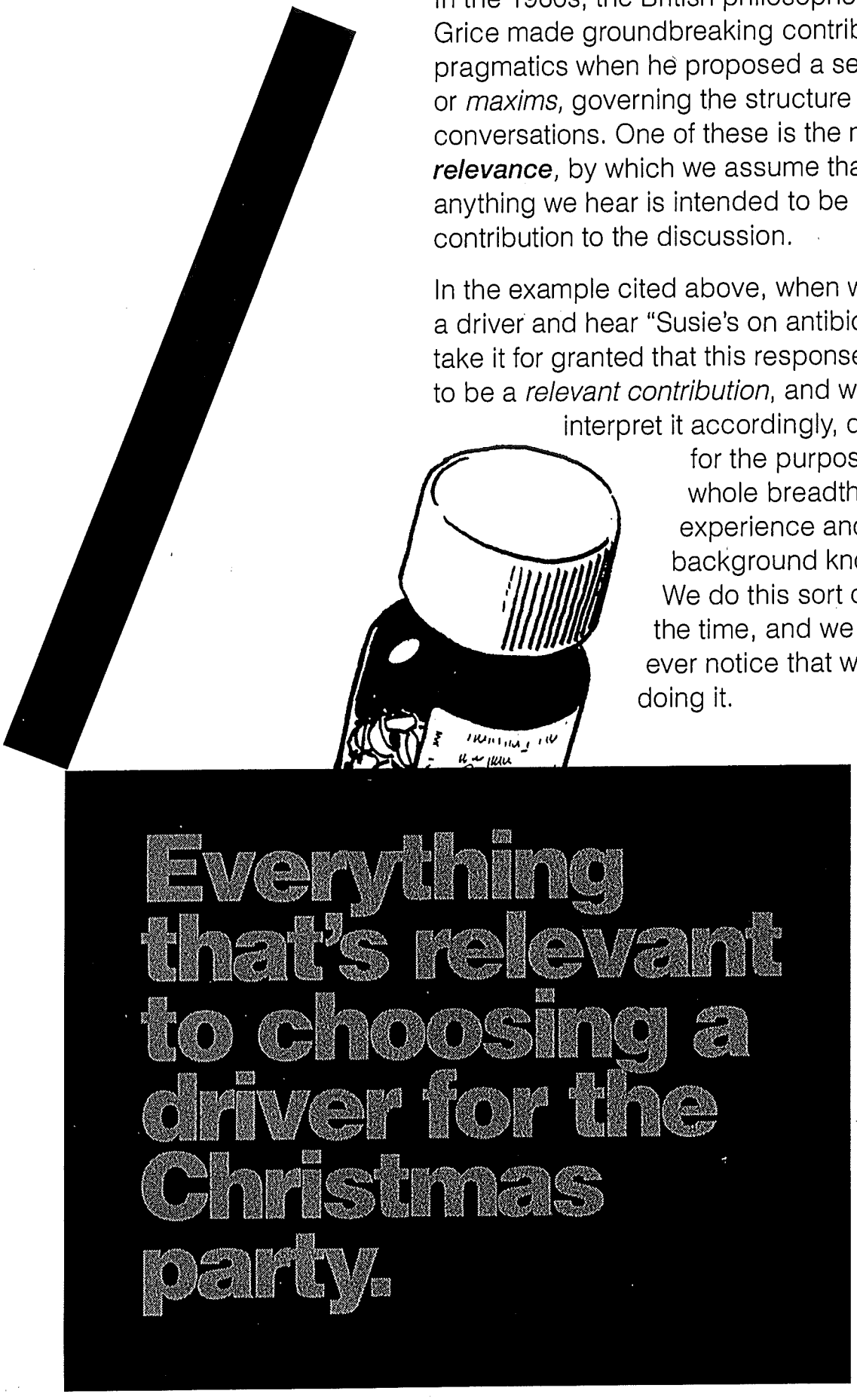


Strawson's view has been very influential in allowing linguists to develop the view that meaning cannot be wholly understood without reference to context.

Extending Pragmatics

In the 1960s, the British philosopher Paul Grice made groundbreaking contributions to pragmatics when he proposed a set of rules, or *maxims*, governing the structure of conversations. One of these is the maxim of ***relevance***, by which we assume that anything we hear is intended to be a relevant contribution to the discussion.

In the example cited above, when we ask for a driver and hear "Susie's on antibiotics", we take it for granted that this response is meant to be a *relevant contribution*, and we interpret it accordingly, drawing for the purpose on our whole breadth of experience and background knowledge. We do this sort of thing all the time, and we scarcely ever notice that we are doing it.



Two more of Grice's maxims are those of ***quality*** and ***quantity***. Suppose I say to you ...

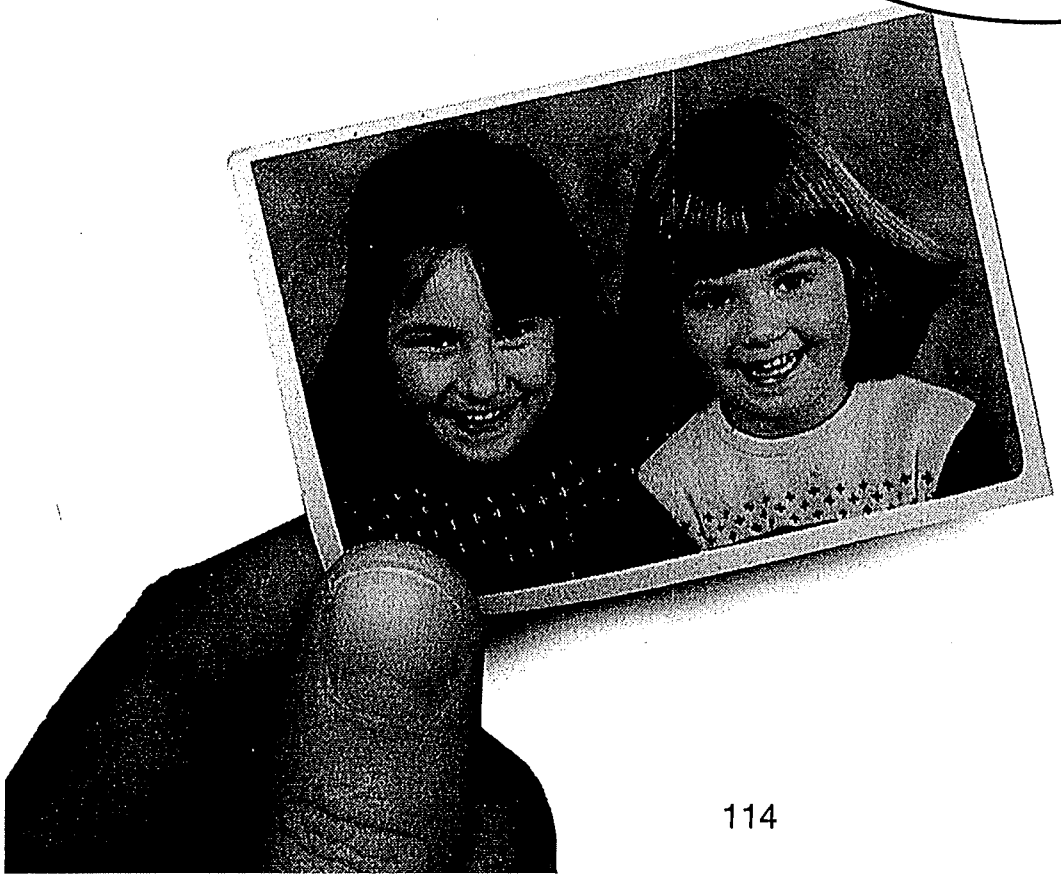
I have two children.

By ***quality***, you will conclude that I do not have *no* children or *one* child, since in that case I would be violating the maxim of quality. Or, in plain English, I would be lying.

By ***quantity***, you will conclude that I have exactly *two* children, and not three or four. If I say this when I have three children, then I am not strictly lying, but I am certainly being uncooperative.

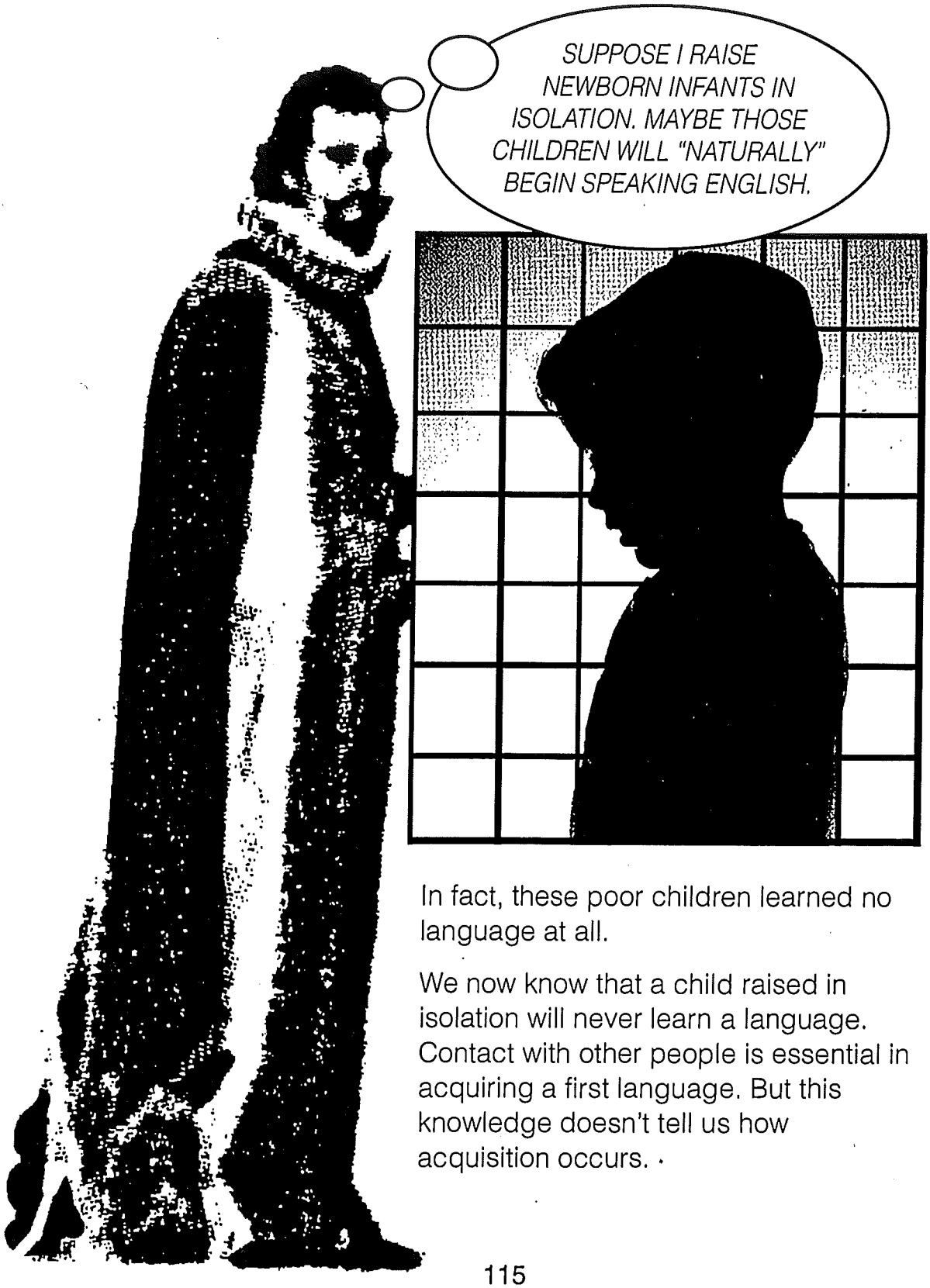
In Grice's analysis, you will assume that I am cooperating, that I am obeying the maxim of quantity, and hence that I have exactly two children.

I accept that you are telling the truth, and the whole truth.



Where Does Language Come From?

But how does language get into our brains in the first place? In the remote past, people were often inclined to believe that there must be a "natural" human language, which infants left to their own devices would automatically start speaking, without coaching. The Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus and the English King James I, among others, conducted barbarous experiments.



In fact, these poor children learned no language at all.

We now know that a child raised in isolation will never learn a language. Contact with other people is essential in acquiring a first language. But this knowledge doesn't tell us how acquisition occurs.

Skinner's Thesis Attacked by Chomsky

In 1957, the American behavioural psychologist B. F. Skinner published *Verbal Behavior*, a book arguing that children acquire their first language by trying to imitate the adult speech they hear around them. In Skinner's view, acquisition proceeds by a process of imitation and reinforcement.

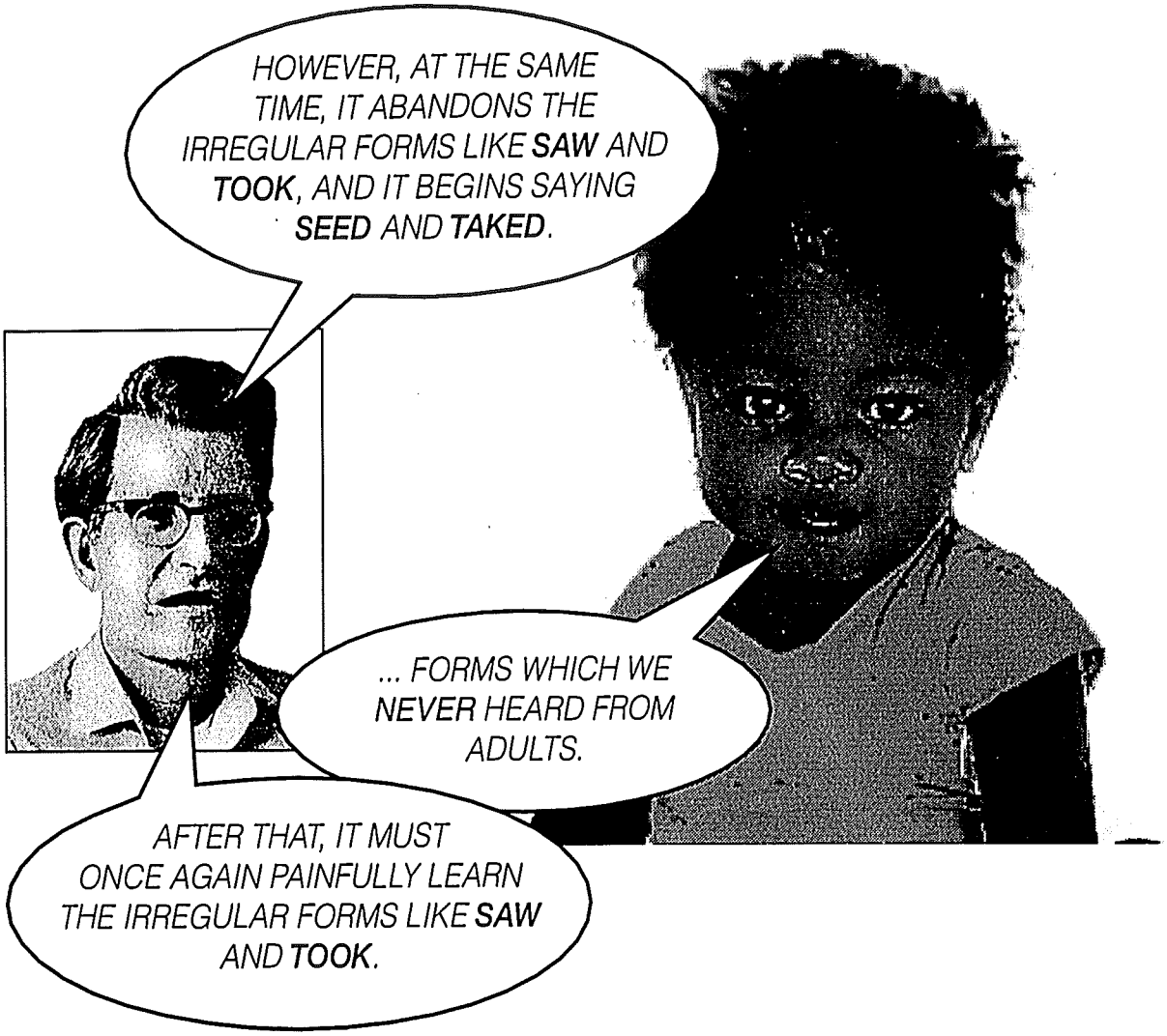
Skinner's book was scathingly, even savagely, reviewed by the then young and unknown Noam Chomsky. And with good reason. Several decades of careful study have now revealed a good deal about the way children acquire their first language, and it turns out that acquisition is utterly different from what Skinner conjectured.

Children Construct Rules

If Skinner were right, then children should produce more or less random approximations to adult speech, and they should make more or less random errors. But this is not what happens. Dozens of studies have shown us that children go about the business of language acquisition in a very orderly way. They do not produce random approximations to adult speech, and they do not make random errors.

Consider English past tenses. Most English verbs form regular past tenses: *love / loved, wash / washed, smile / smiled*, and so on. But some verbs, mostly verbs of very high frequency, have irregular past tenses: *see / saw, take / took, give / gave*, and so on. Children learning English acquire these frequent irregular forms early, and soon start saying *saw, took* and *gave.*

After a while, though, they begin learning the regular forms like *loved* and *washed.* Suddenly something clicks. The child realizes that there is a rule for making past tenses, and it delightedly starts saying *discovered, travelled* and *scraped.*



Another observation is the acquisition of *negation.* At first, the child produces no negatives at all. Then it begins producing negative utterances by means of an invariable negative word – usually *no* in English – stuck at the beginning:

No I want milk.

Later, this *no* is moved next to the verb:

I no want milk.

Finally, the rather complicated English negative auxiliaries appear:

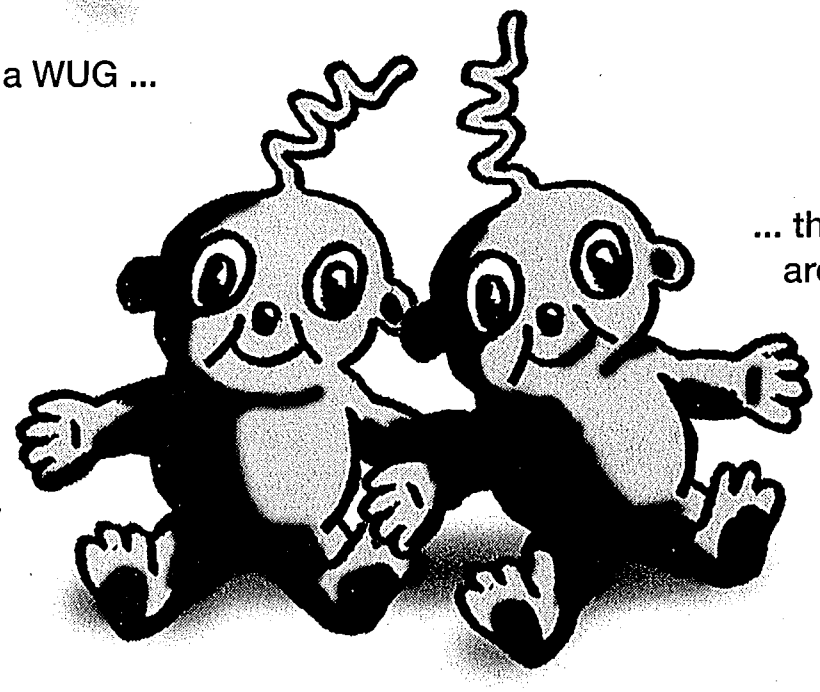
I don't want milk.

Example of Active Construction

A simple but striking example is the acquisition of English plurals. At first the child produces no plurals. Then, slowly, it learns enough regular plurals, such as *cats, biscuits* and *toys,* that it finally spots the rule, and begins happily producing new plurals with great freedom: *catalogues, lawnmowers, nurses.*

Small children can be tested to see if they have acquired this rule. A child is shown a cute little figure and told, *Look, here's a wug* – where *wug* is a made-up word it has never heard before. The tester continues, *Look, here's another wug. Now there are two...?* A child who correctly produces *wugs* has learned the rule.

If this is a WUG ...



... then what are these?

You yourself, of course, learned this rule long ago, and you apply it effortlessly every day to produce new plurals you have never encountered before: *CD-ROMs, laptops, e-mails, wusses.*

Such observations show clearly that the child cannot be proceeding by memorization or imitation. Instead, it must be constructing rules. And this is one of the most profound findings of modern linguistics: a child learning a first language *actively constructs* the language as it goes.

Indeed, most linguists are now satisfied that children are born with a biological language faculty, an innate disposition to acquire language. This innate faculty requires nothing more than a certain amount of stimulation from other people to be set in motion.

Creating a Language

We human beings can learn to do countless things. We can learn to do algebra, to make wine, to play the guitar, to dig oil wells, to prepare soufflés, to ice skate.

But these are only accomplishments. Billions of people go through their lives without ever learning these things. However, all healthy children, regardless of intelligence or circumstances, learn a first language, providing they have even the slightest opportunity to do so. As the Nicaraguan example shows, children are so determined to learn language that they will learn one even if they are not exposed to a language.

There are other cases that reinforce the same point.

Pidgin

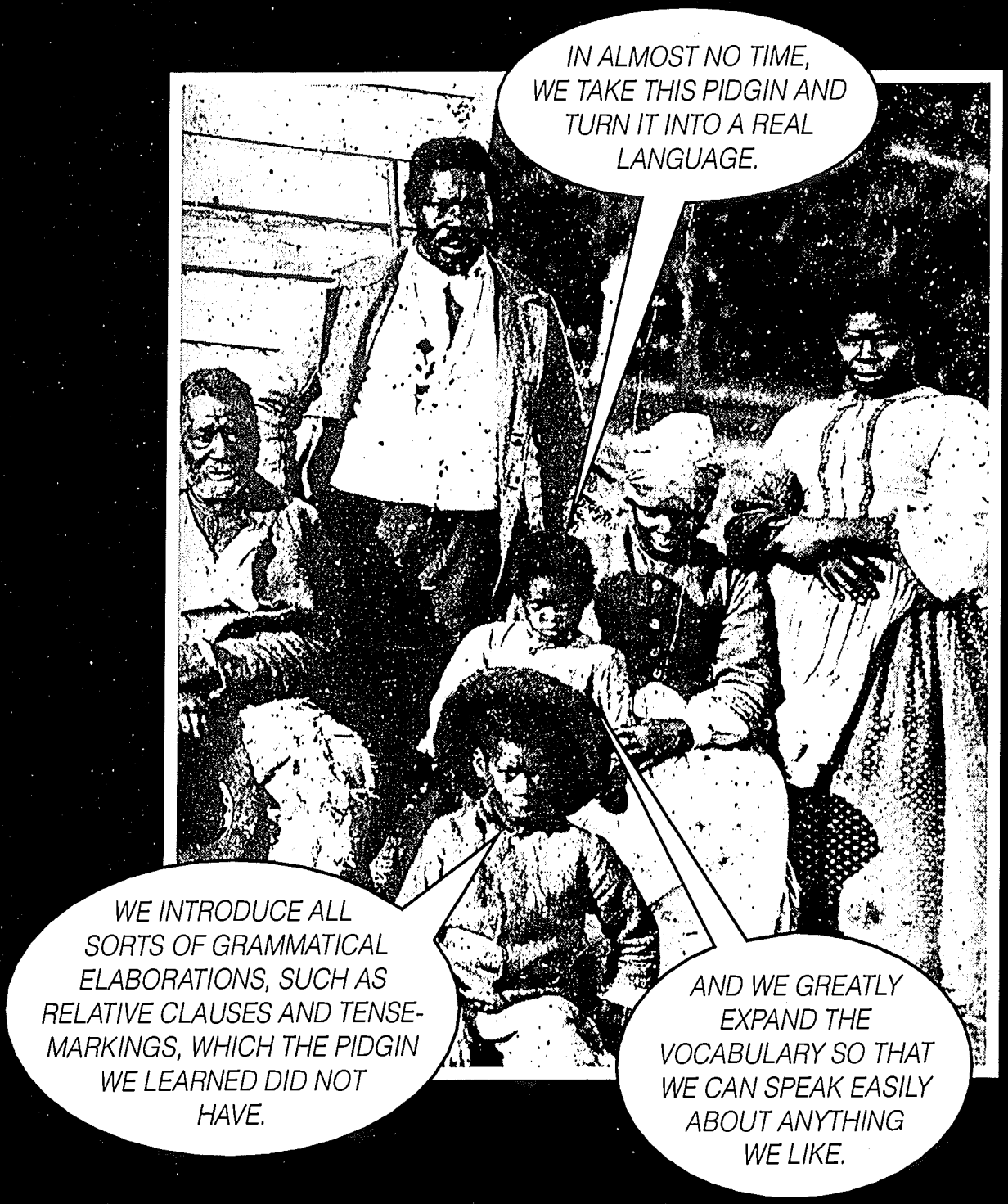
Countless times in human history, people have been brought together in circumstances in which they had no language in common. This happened to Africans brought as slaves to the Americas. It happened to the workers brought from a dozen countries to work in the sugar plantations of Hawaii. And it has happened to the people of Papua New Guinea, recently united in a new nation with hundreds of indigenous languages.

In such circumstances, people invariably react in the same way...

A pidgin is a crude and rudimentary language, with a small vocabulary and nothing much in the way of grammar. It is a poor and limited system of communication, but for simple purposes it does work, and everybody in the community learns to handle it.

Creoles

But then some people in the community get married and have children. And, whatever they may speak at home, the children have only the pidgin to speak with other children. The results are predictable.



In short, they create a new natural language, and the children who create it are the language's first native speakers. This new language is called a *creole*.

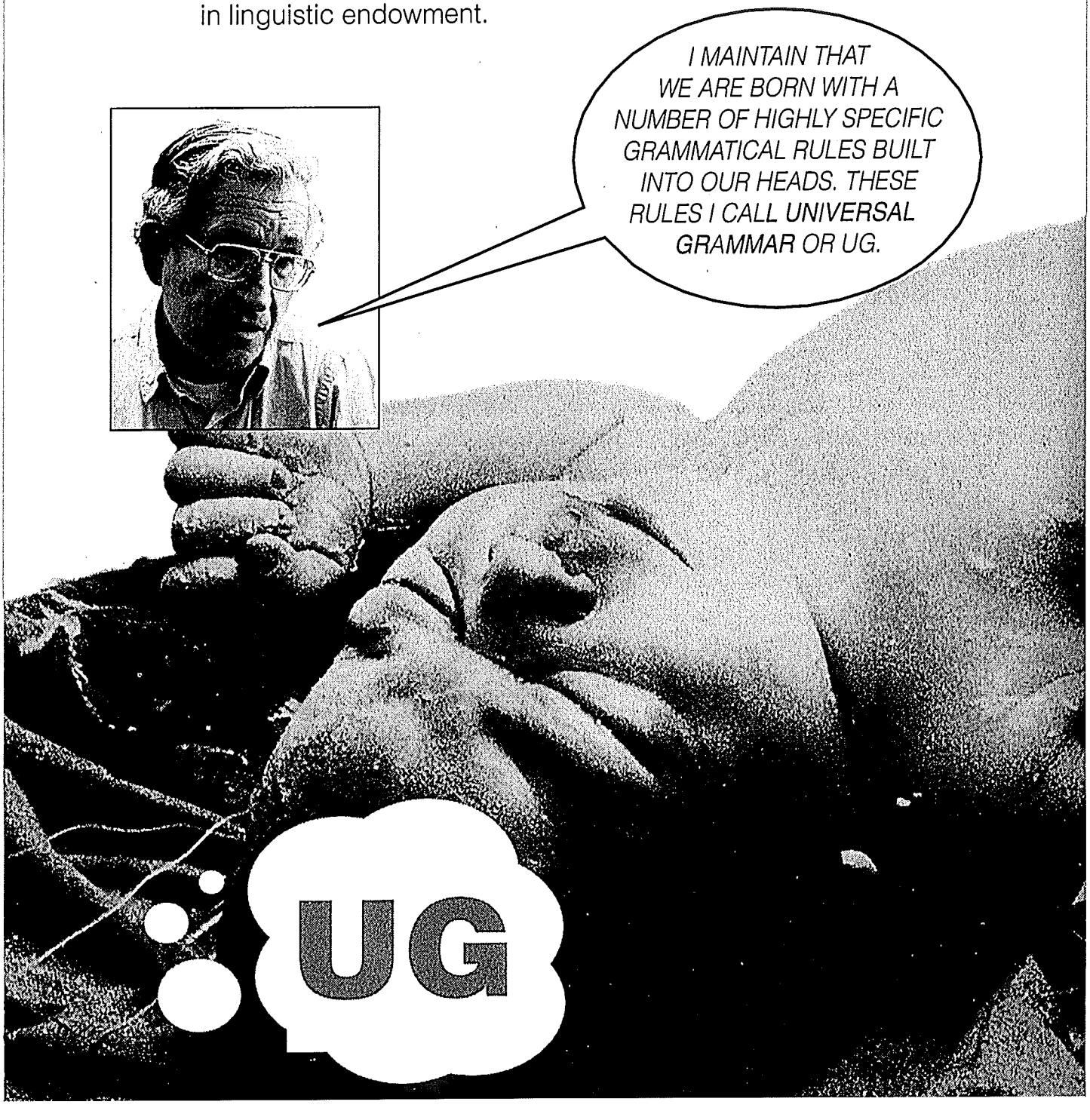
Just in the last few centuries, many dozens of creoles have appeared, in the Caribbean, in Africa, in Asia, in Hawaii, and elsewhere. All are testimony to that powerful human instinct to construct a language. When children construct a creole, not only do they learn a language their parents do not know, they learn a language that didn't even exist before – just like those deaf children in Nicaragua. Creoles, like Nicaraguan Sign Language, provide overpowering evidence that learning a first language is not merely an accomplishment, like learning to ice skate. Our language faculty is part of our **biology**, something that is built into our genes.

Our unique language faculty exists, most linguists now believe, because some of our remote ancestors evolved it. And, ever since that time, human children have been born with a biological urge to construct and use a language.

Chomsky's Universal Grammar

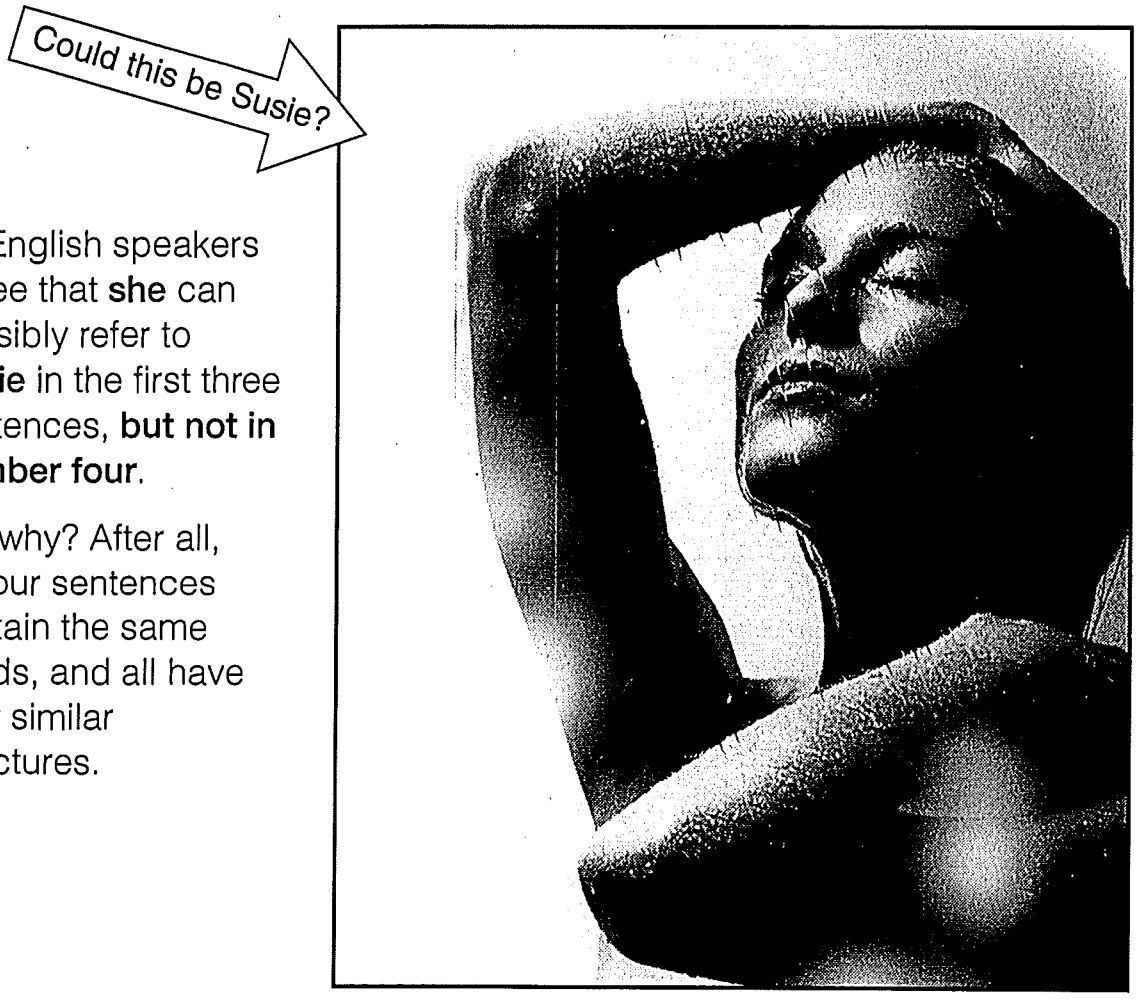
This "language urge" is unique to our species. As we saw earlier, no other creatures on the planet can even vaguely approach our ability to learn and use language. We can speak the way birds can sing, and for the same reasons. It is the recognition of our biological language faculty that has allowed linguists to join forces with psychologists, philosophers, computer scientists and students of artificial intelligence in laying the foundations of the new discipline called cognitive science. But just how much of our language is built into our genes?

The American linguist Noam Chomsky has for decades been arguing for a very strong view of our built-in linguistic endowment.



Here is a possible example of UG. Consider the following English sentences, and ask yourself this question: in which sentences can the pronoun **she** possibly refer to Susie?

1. **Susie had a shower after she got up.**
2. **After she got up, Susie had a shower.**
3. **After Susie got up, she had a shower.**
4. **She had a shower after Susie got up.**



All English speakers agree that **she** can possibly refer to **Susie** in the first three sentences, **but not in number four.**

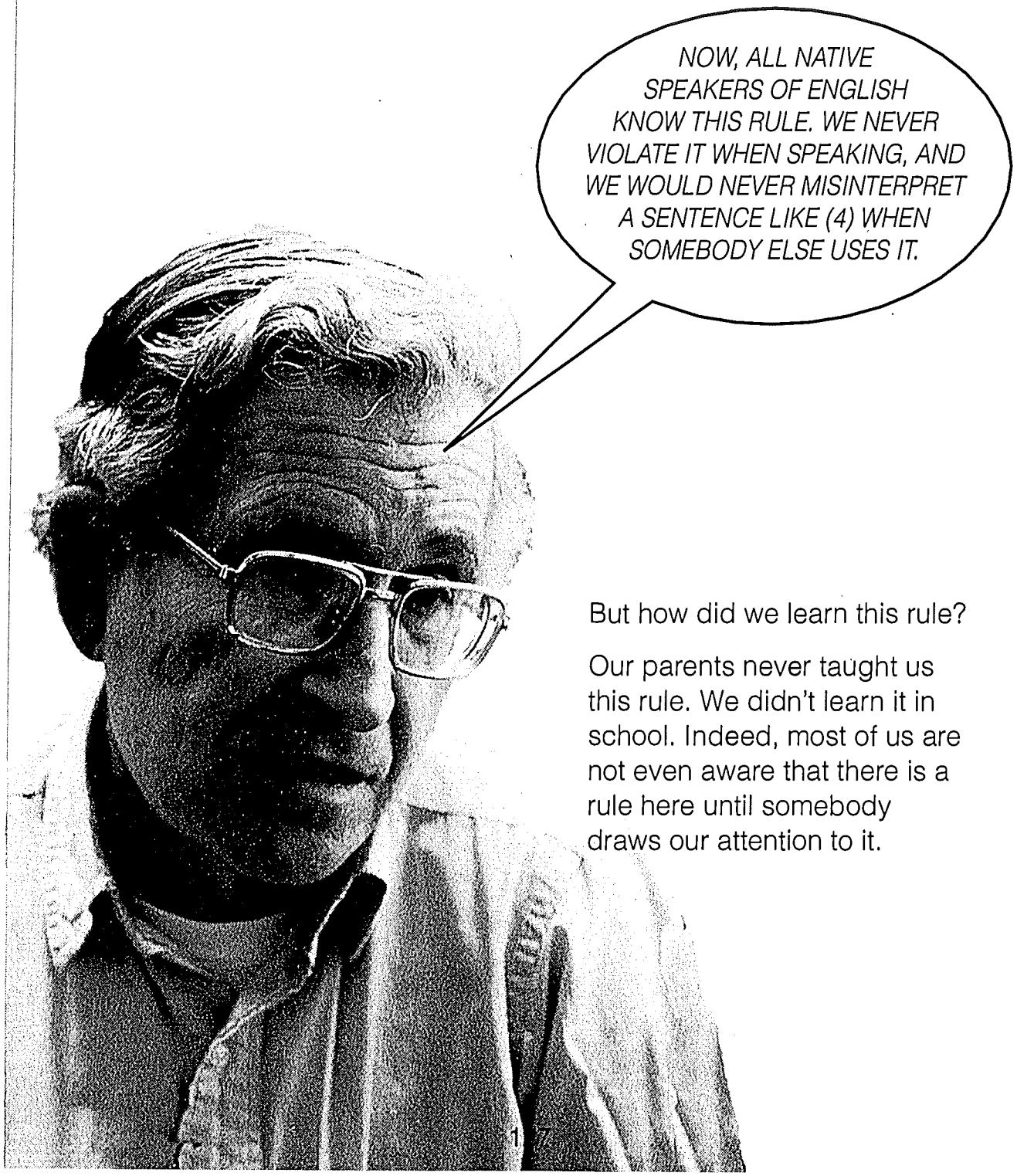
But why? After all, all four sentences contain the same words, and all have very similar structures.

What is the Rule?

Well, there is a rule here. It has proved possible to formulate that rule with considerable precision, though only within the context of a carefully articulated theory of syntax. The first version, put forward by the American linguist Ronald Langacker in 1969, has a forbidding form:

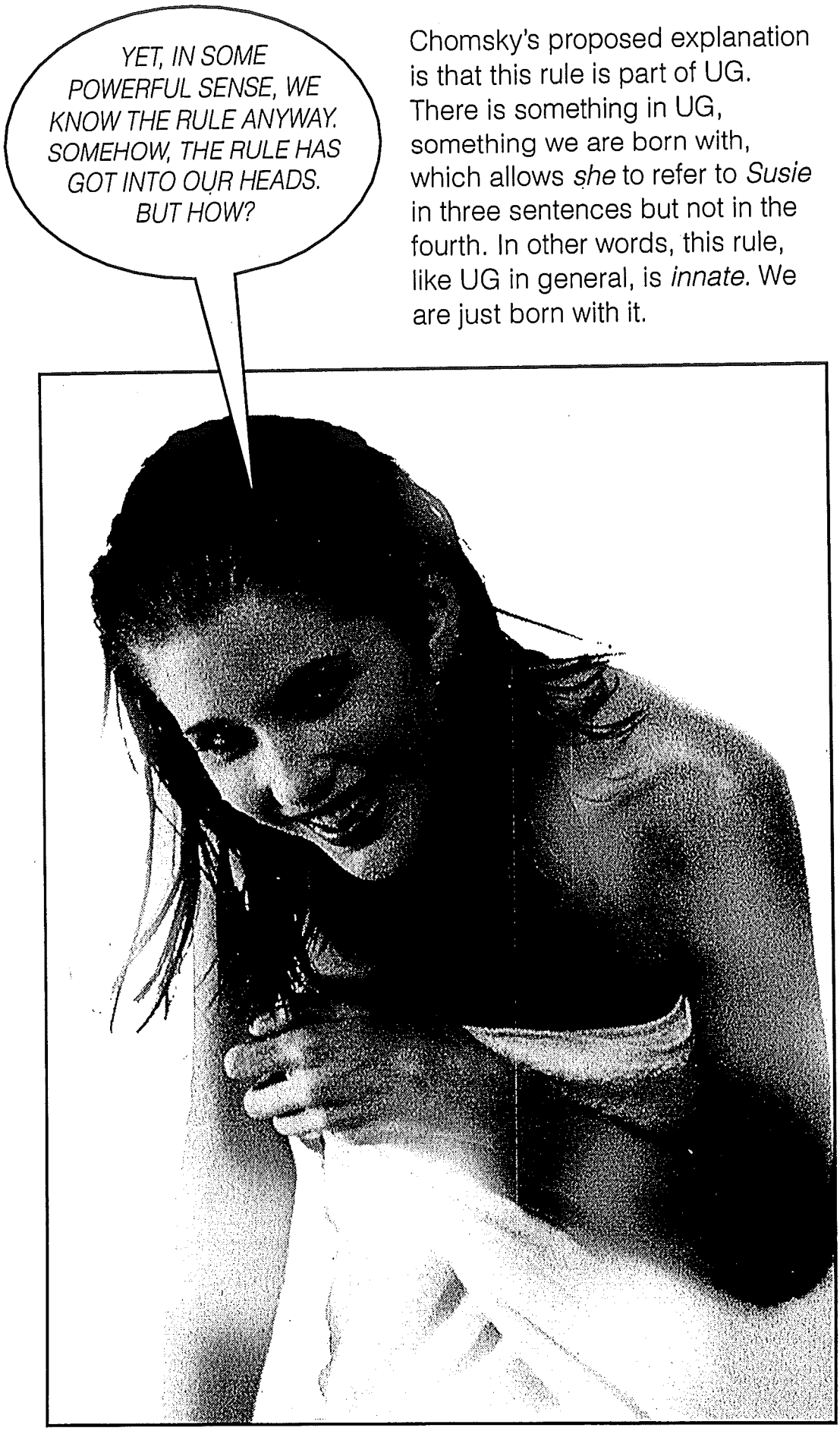
An anaphor may not both precede and command its antecedent.

Current formulations of the rule differ somewhat, but are just as impenetrable to a reader who knows nothing of linguistic theory.

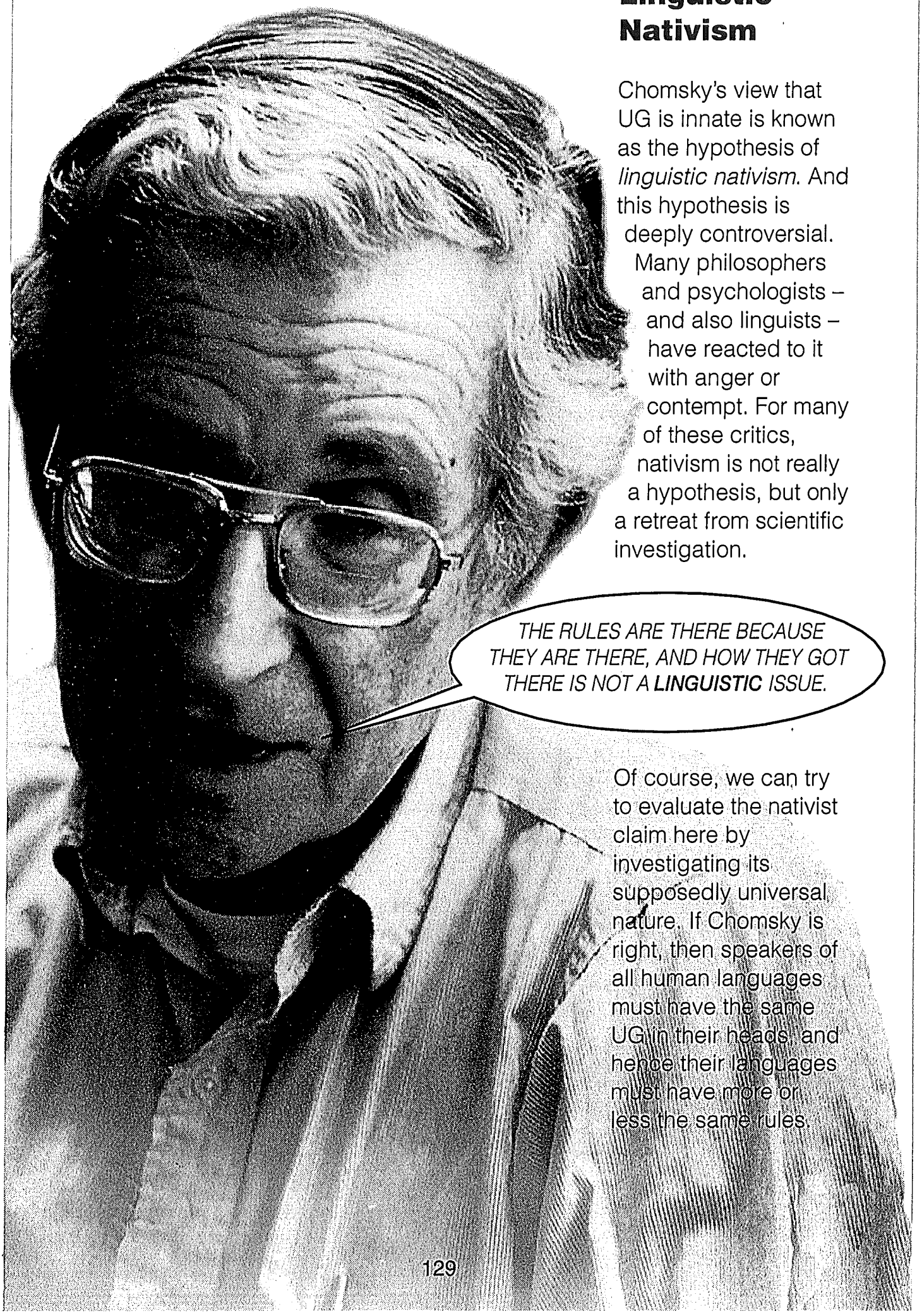


But how did we learn this rule?

Our parents never taught us this rule. We didn't learn it in school. Indeed, most of us are not even aware that there is a rule here until somebody draws our attention to it.



Chomsky's proposed explanation is that this rule is part of UG. There is something in UG, something we are born with, which allows *she* to refer to *Susie* in three sentences but not in the fourth. In other words, this rule, like UG in general, is *innate.* We are just born with it.



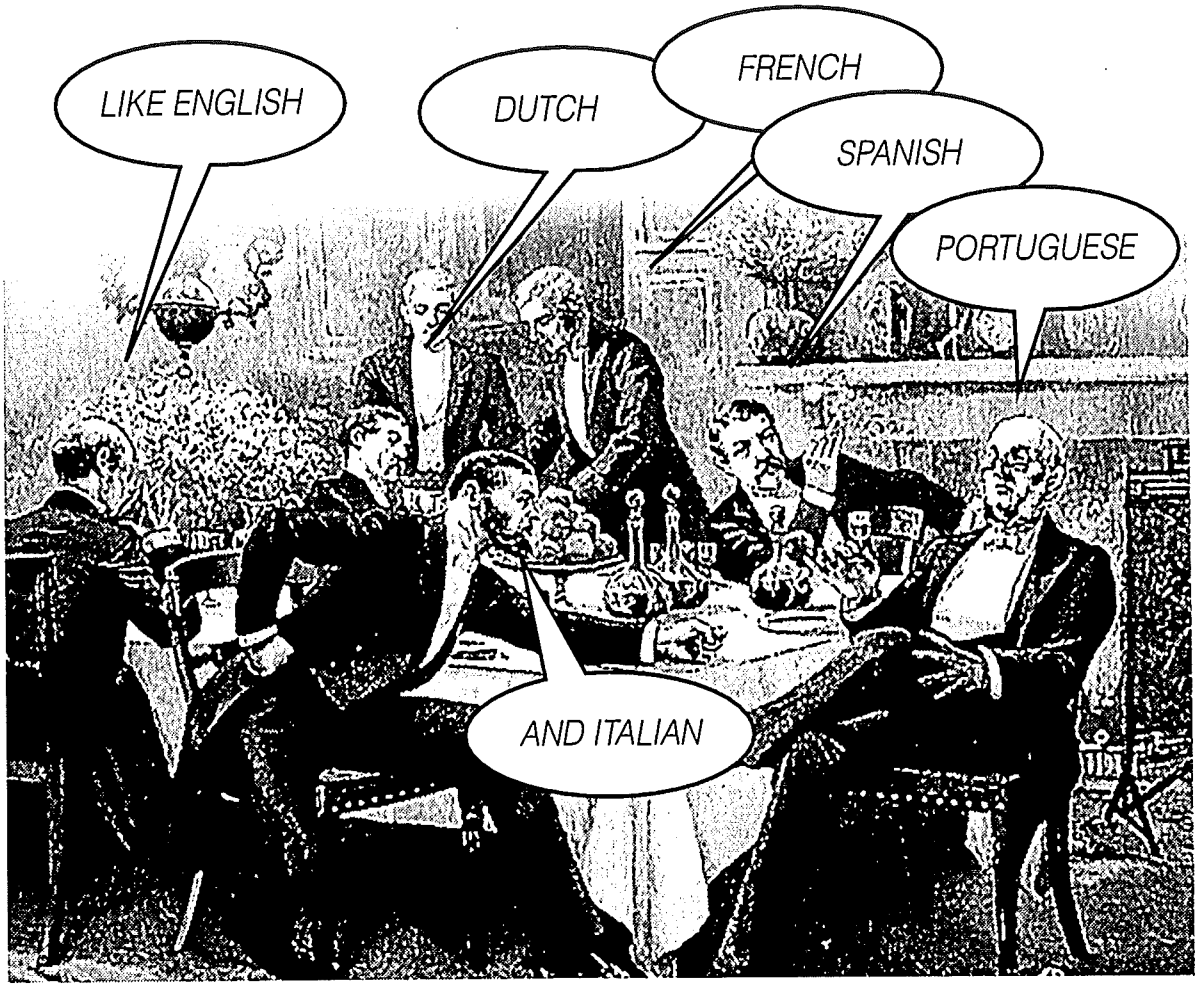
Linguistic Nativism

Chomsky's view that UG is innate is known as the hypothesis of *linguistic nativism*. And this hypothesis is deeply controversial. Many philosophers and psychologists – and also linguists – have reacted to it with anger or contempt. For many of these critics, nativism is not really a hypothesis, but only a retreat from scientific investigation.

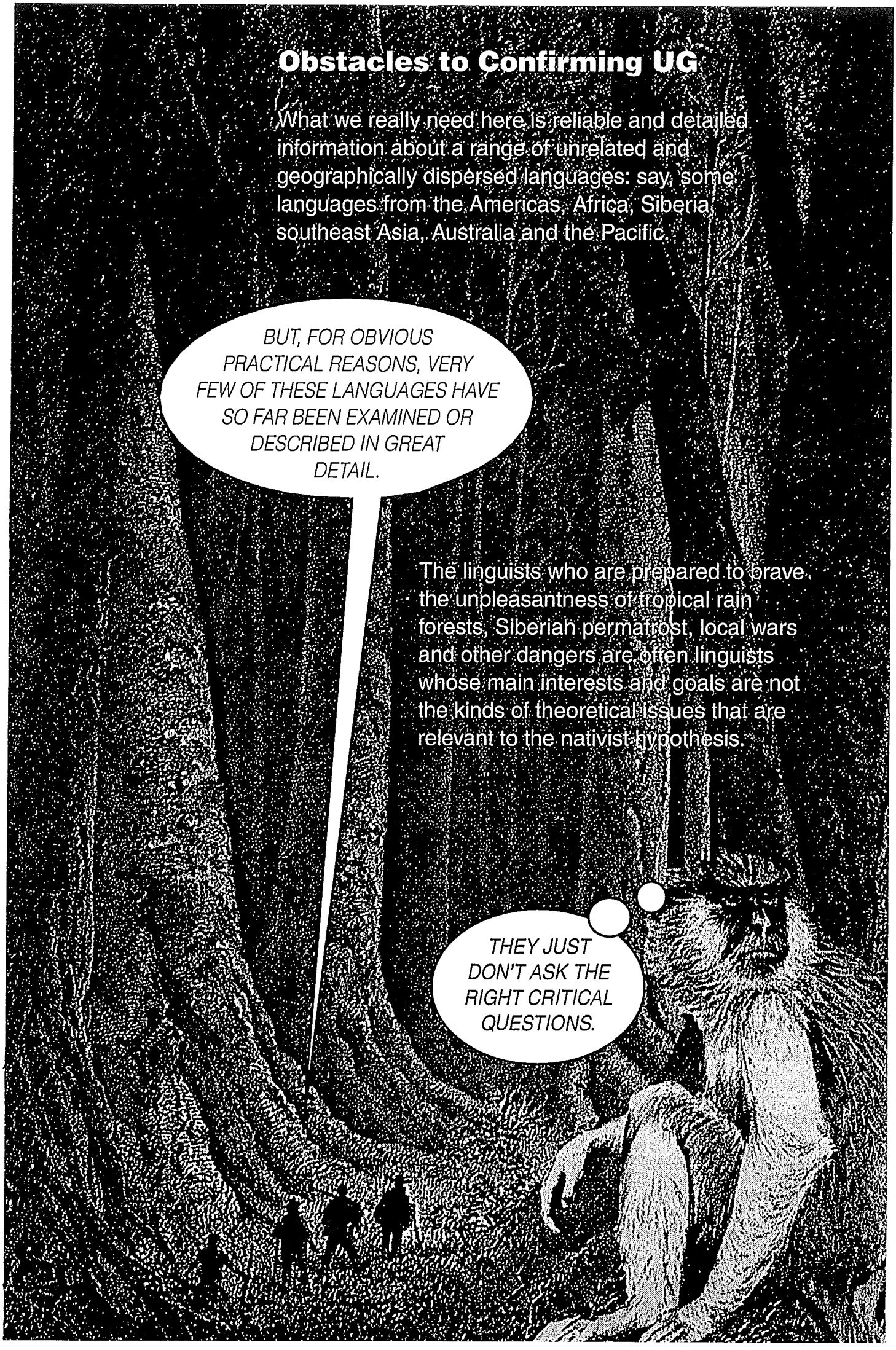
Of course, we can try to evaluate the nativist claim here by investigating its supposedly universal nature. If Chomsky is right, then speakers of all human languages must have the same UG in their heads, and hence their languages must have more or less the same rules.

So, careful examination of the grammatical rules of a wide variety of languages should provide some evidence one way or the other. And, of course, some linguists have undertaken investigations of just this kind. But the task is not easy.

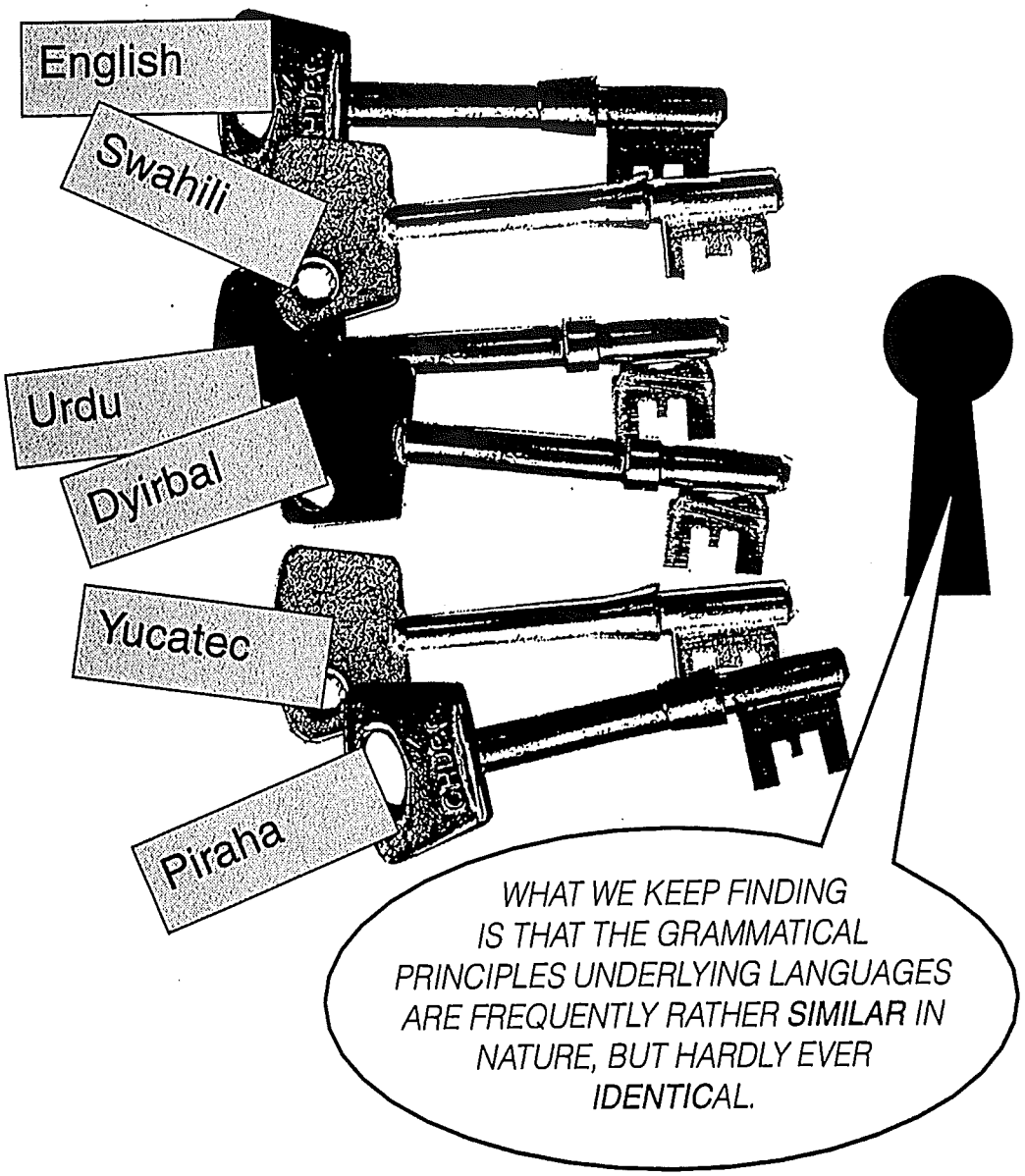
Most of the languages that are well known and that have been carefully investigated are European languages ...



But all these languages are related (they all descend from a single common ancestor). And, moreover, their speakers have been in intense contact for many centuries. Hence, all kinds of similarities among these languages are to be expected, for *non-biological* reasons.


Obstacles to Confirming UG
What we really need here is reliable and detailed information about a range of unrelated and geographically dispersed languages: say, some languages from the Americas, Africa, Siberia, southeast Asia, Australia and the Pacific.
BUT, FOR OBVIOUS PRACTICAL REASONS, VERY FEW OF THESE LANGUAGES HAVE SO FAR BEEN EXAMINED OR DESCRIBED IN GREAT DETAIL.
The linguists who are prepared to brave the unpleasantness of tropical rain forests, Siberian permafrost, local wars and other dangers are often linguists whose main interests and goals are not the kinds of theoretical issues that are relevant to the nativist hypothesis.
THEY JUST DON'T ASK THE RIGHT CRITICAL QUESTIONS.

These are formidable obstacles indeed. But we have, nevertheless, obtained a body of relevant data from a number of languages, data that we can scrutinize for possible confirmation or disconfirmation of nativist ideas. But the results, so far, have been largely of the most infuriating kind possible.



As a result, some followers of Chomsky's nativism have reacted by concluding that the principles of Universal Grammar must be more abstract than we had previously suspected. The principles can be stated only at a very high level of abstraction, remote from the surface forms of utterances, which result only from the interaction of the abstract principles with other devices and requirements.

Respectively, with Respect

But many critics have argued that this retreat into ever greater abstractness is futile and self-defeating: if we make our principles sufficiently abstract and sufficiently well insulated from the observable data, then these principles become unfalsifiable and untestable. That is, any given abstract principle can be made consistent with any set of data at all, and we no longer have a testable scientific hypothesis, but only an article of faith.

There are other problems. For example, certain important theoretical issues rest on the existence and interpretation of English *respectively* sentences, such as:

Jan and Larry drank whisky and sherry, respectively.

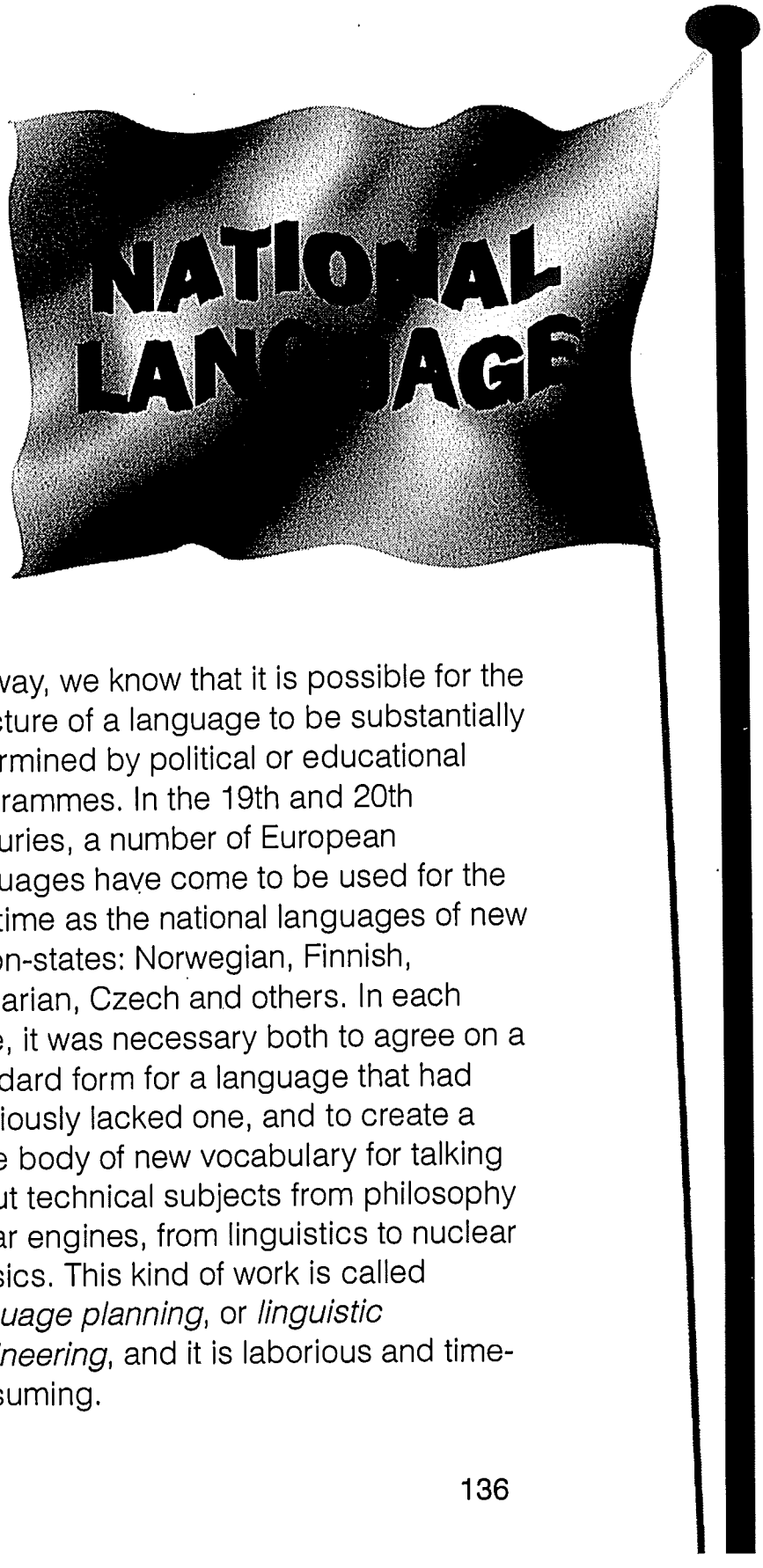
Some linguists have argued that the use of such sentences illustrates certain important things about UG. Unfortunately, other linguists have examined such sentences, and they have discovered something important and fascinating. Such sentences are used only by well-educated and highly literate speakers of English. In contrast, uneducated speakers of English not only do not use such sentences, they cannot even understand them when they are presented with them.

Innate or Acquired?

So, it appears that *respectively* sentences cannot really tell us anything about our innate language faculty. Rather, the use and interpretation of such sentences appears to be something *acquired* only through formal education. But, if some of our linguistic behaviour is acquired only through education, and is not born with us, how can we be sure that any particular aspect of language use is innate rather than learned? And how, the critics ask, can we be sure that *any* aspect of language use is innate, as Chomsky claims ...

Language Planning

Accordingly, while few linguists doubt that our language faculty is part of our biology, there are plenty of linguists who doubt that our language faculty is so detailed in its specifics as Chomsky suggests.

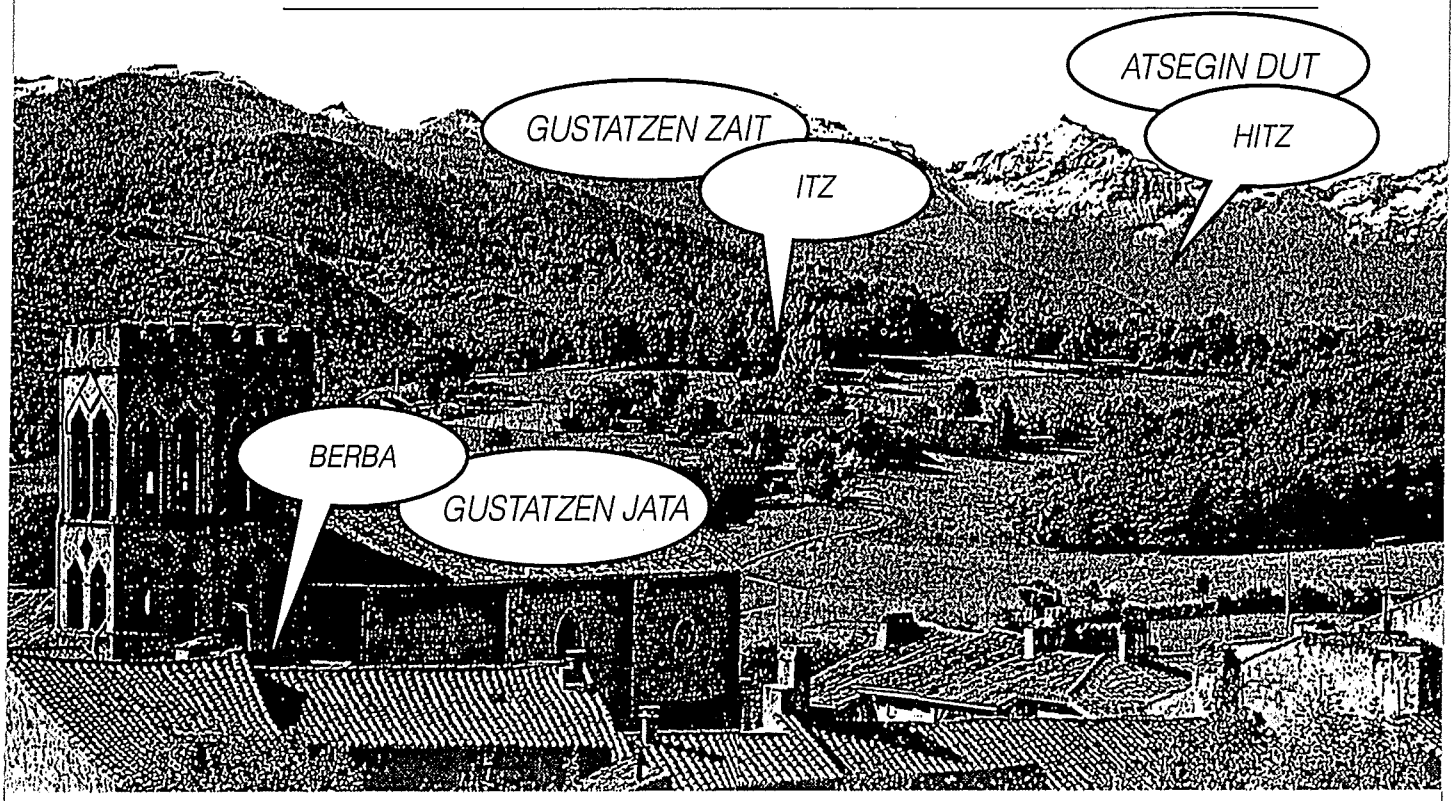


Anyway, we know that it is possible for the structure of a language to be substantially determined by political or educational programmes. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a number of European languages have come to be used for the first time as the national languages of new nation-states: Norwegian, Finnish, Bulgarian, Czech and others. In each case, it was necessary both to agree on a standard form for a language that had previously lacked one, and to create a huge body of new vocabulary for talking about technical subjects from philosophy to car engines, from linguistics to nuclear physics. This kind of work is called *language planning*, or *linguistic engineering*, and it is laborious and time-consuming.

Engineering Basque

Take the case of Basque, which has begun to be standardized only since the 1960s. Basque is spoken in the mountains of northern Spain and southwestern France. It had never before had a standard form, and it was spoken in numerous local varieties in the mountain valleys. Below is a small sample of the kind of local variation that faced the language planners when they began working on a new standard form.

"stone"	arri	harri		
"come"	etorri	ethorri	jin	jaugin
"word"	berba	itz	hitz	
"otter"	urtxakur	ugabere		
"I like it"	gustatzen jata	gustatzen zait	atsegin dut	laket zaut
"I'll do it"	eingo dot	egingo det	eginen dut	
"so long"	ikusi arte	ikhus arte		



Just imagine confronting thousands and thousands of regional differences like these, and trying to come up with a single set of agreed forms that will please everybody. But the Basques, after several decades, are now well advanced with their project, which should be completed in the foreseeable future – just as the Finns and others have already completed their own projects in language planning.

English has never undergone any language planning on this scale. This is not because English lacks regional or social variation – we have plenty – but only because our ancestors largely allowed a standard form of the language to emerge by a series of historical accidents, with no centralization and hardly any organized planning. This hit-or-miss approach has in fact been surprisingly successful at producing a single, rather unified standard form of English, with only minor regional differences.

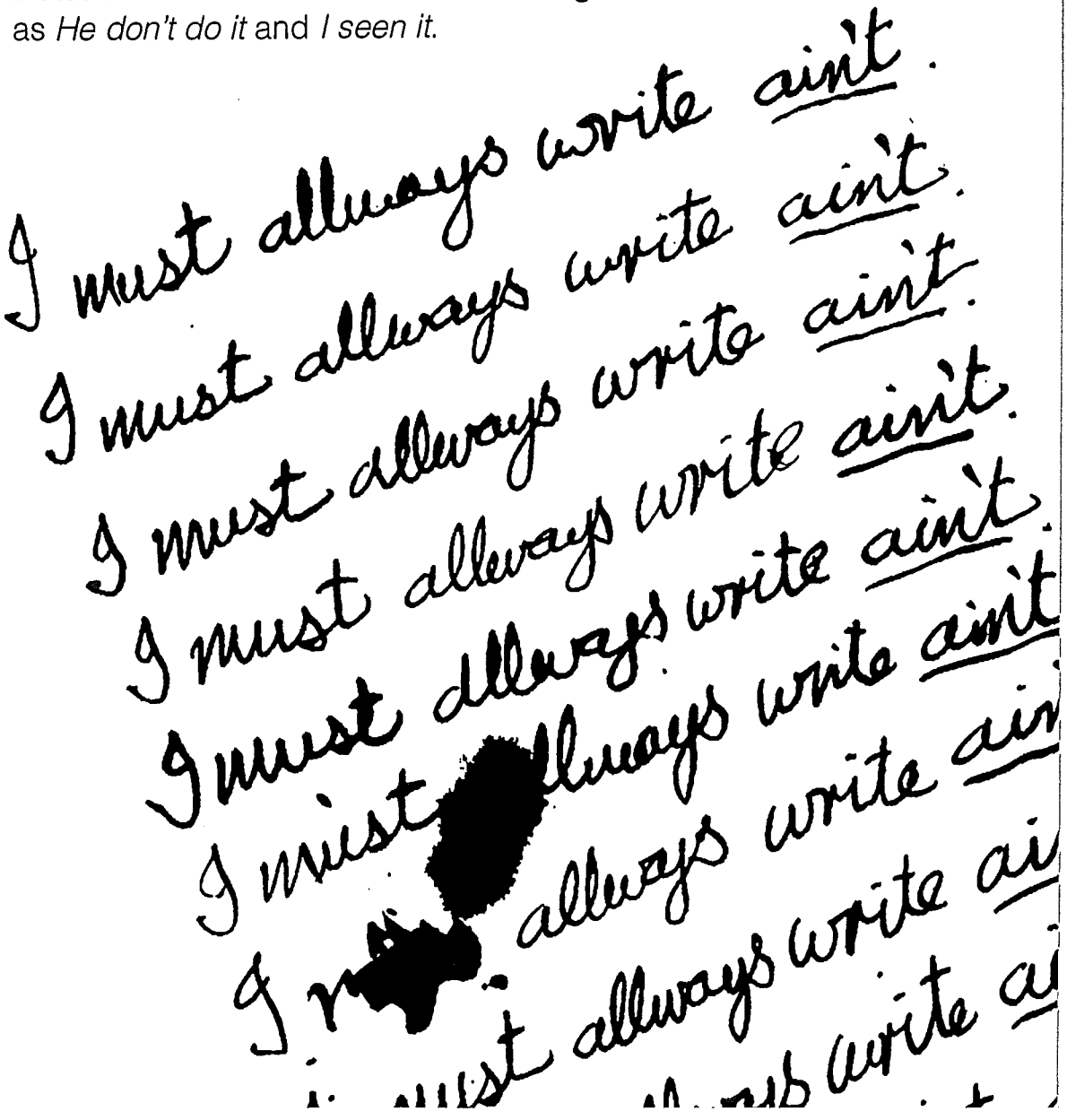
Standard English

Because of historical accidents, standard English requires:

I did it	and not	*I done it*
He doesn't know	and not	*He don't know*
I saw him	and not	*I seen him*
I haven't finished	and not	*I ain't finished*

and countless other forms that sound very odd indeed to uneducated speakers of vernacular English – not to mention that *respectively,* of course.

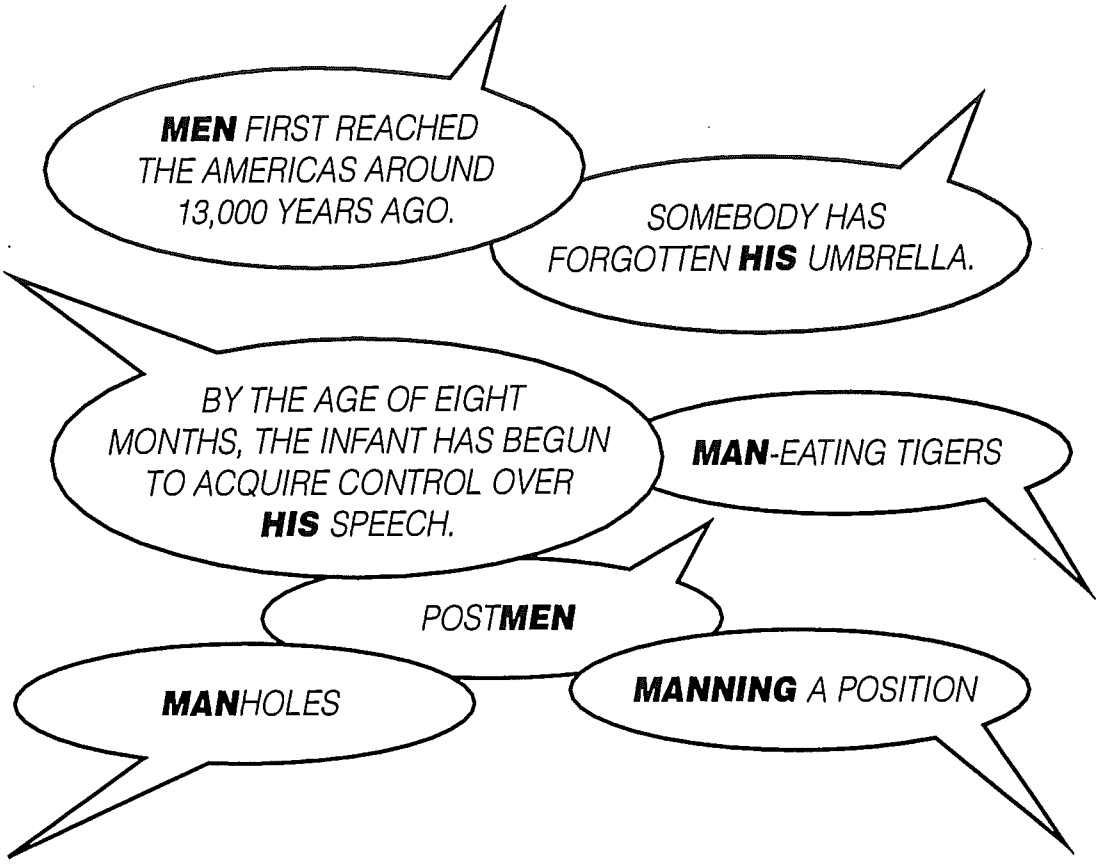
If somewhat different accidents had occurred, then ferocious English teachers would be doing their best to stamp out such "ignorant" and "illiterate" usages as *He doesn't do it* and *I saw it*, and teaching their pupils to use instead such refined and educated usages as *He don't do it* and *I seen it.*



Sexism in Language

Language planning has not been prominent in English. But today some people are beginning to argue for some vigorous linguistic engineering of our language, and for a particular reason: sexism.

Like many languages, English has a good deal of sexism built into it.



We are now trying to find less sexist ways of speaking and writing. Sometimes simple solutions are available: *letter carrier* for *postman, chair* for *chairman, firefighter* for *fireman.* Other cases are more awkward.

Somebody has forgotten his or her umbrella?

Somebcdy has forgotten their umbrella?

There appears to be no way out that will please everybody.

Sexist Attitudes

Even if we could somehow legislate these undesirable usages into oblivion, doing so wouldn't get rid of sexist attitudes. We constantly read things like these: *He attacked his next-door neighbour's wife* (the woman wasn't his neighbour?); *The pioneers trekked across the prairies with their cattle, their seed corn, and their wives* (the wives were just there as what?).

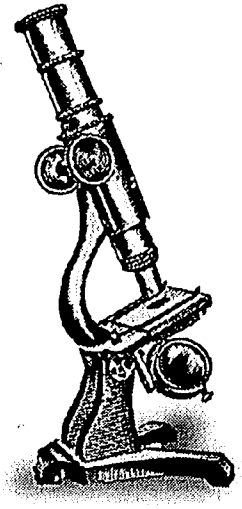
The new editor of The New Yorker is a striking and willowy blonde.

(Would a male editor be described like this?)

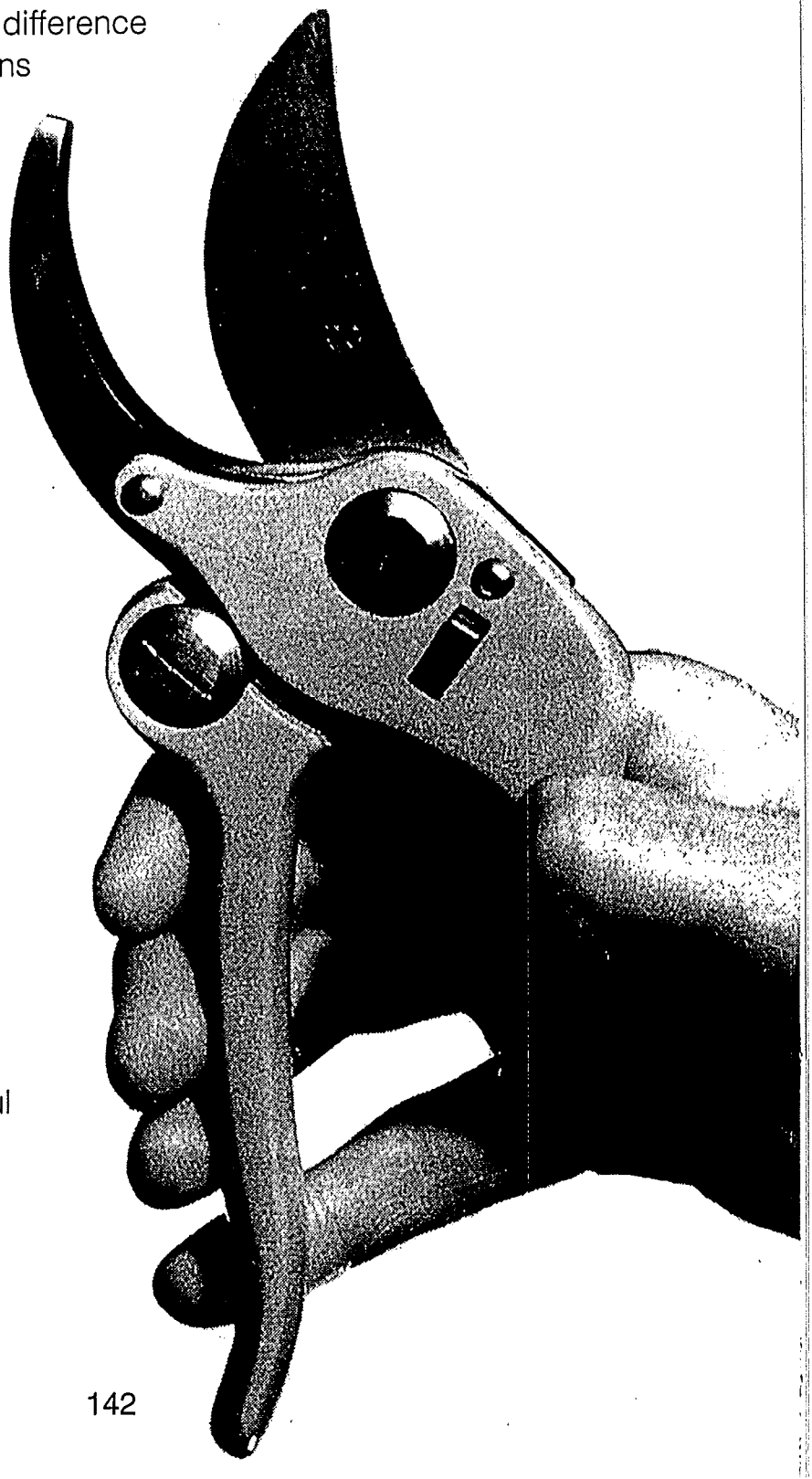
Unappealing as such usages are, most linguists consider their primary job to be recording and describing the language as it is, and not to be trying to change it. That is, the attitude of linguists is *descriptivism*, as opposed to the prescriptivism discussed earlier in the book. This fact has often led to misunderstanding among the wider public of what linguists are trying to do.

Descriptivism

Non-linguists often accuse linguists of maintaining that "any sort of language is equally good", particularly when we decline to join them in their passionate campaigns against whatever it is that has irked them. But this is misguided. Individual linguists have their own ideas about what constitutes good or appropriate usage in English, just like anybody else – except that the linguists' views are usually far better informed than other people's. But there is a big difference between expressing opinions and finding out what the facts are, and it is finding the facts that is the primary task of a linguist. Nobody would attack a botanist merely because that botanist was interested in finding out what plants are like,



instead of creating beautiful gardens.

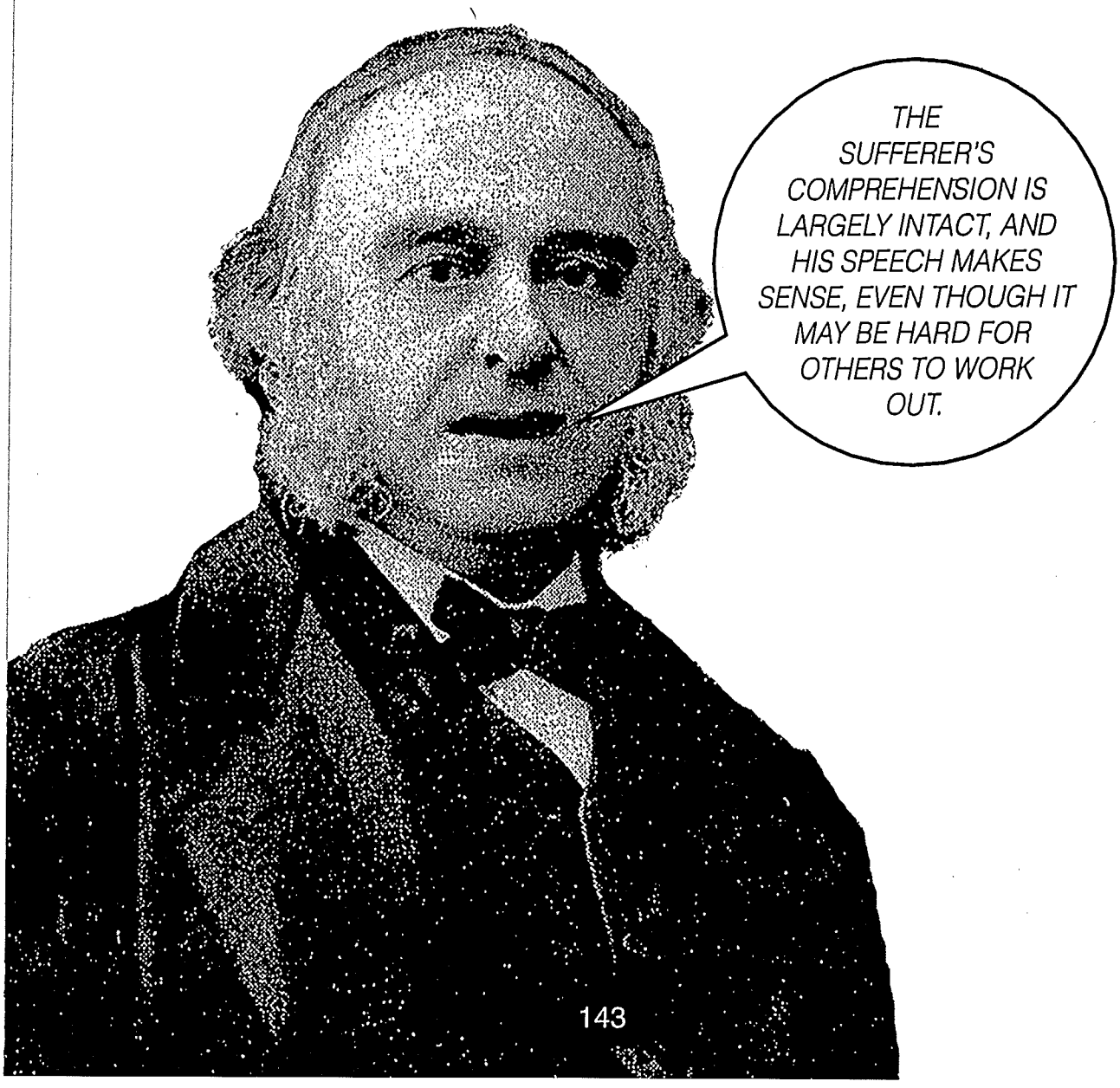


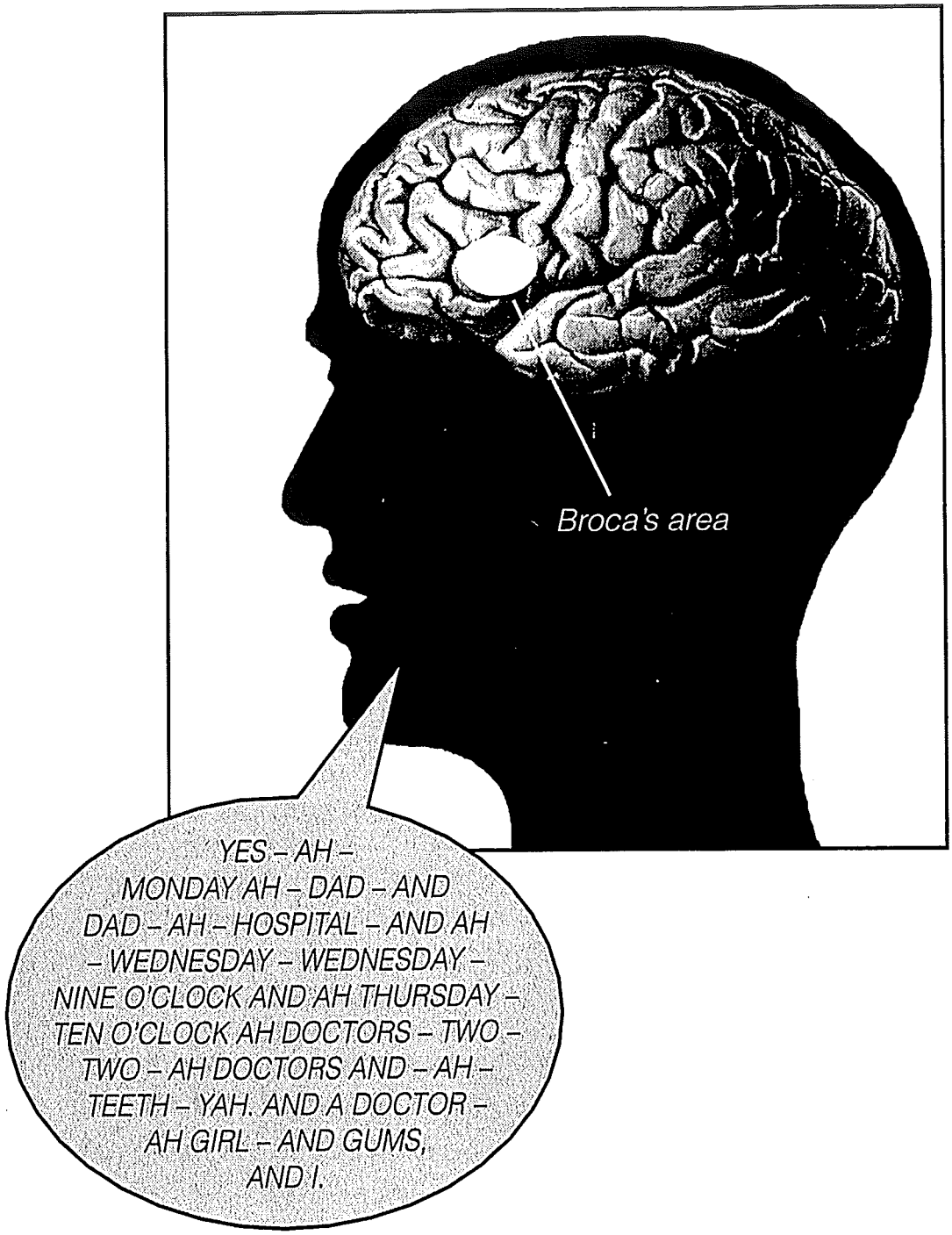
Disordered Language

All the examples we have considered so far represent normal language use. But not all language use is normal. Most particularly, our language can become abnormal, or *disordered,* when we are suffering from an injury to the brain. This happens because certain areas of the brain are largely dedicated to the use of language, and damage to these areas therefore disrupts our language.

Disordered language resulting from brain damage is called *aphasia* (or *dysphasia*), and several different types are known.

In the 1860s, the French surgeon Paul Broca identified a particular disorder now called *Broca's aphasia.* A sufferer from this aphasia speaks painfully slowly and laboriously, with very little in the way of grammar, and his speech is somewhat slurred.

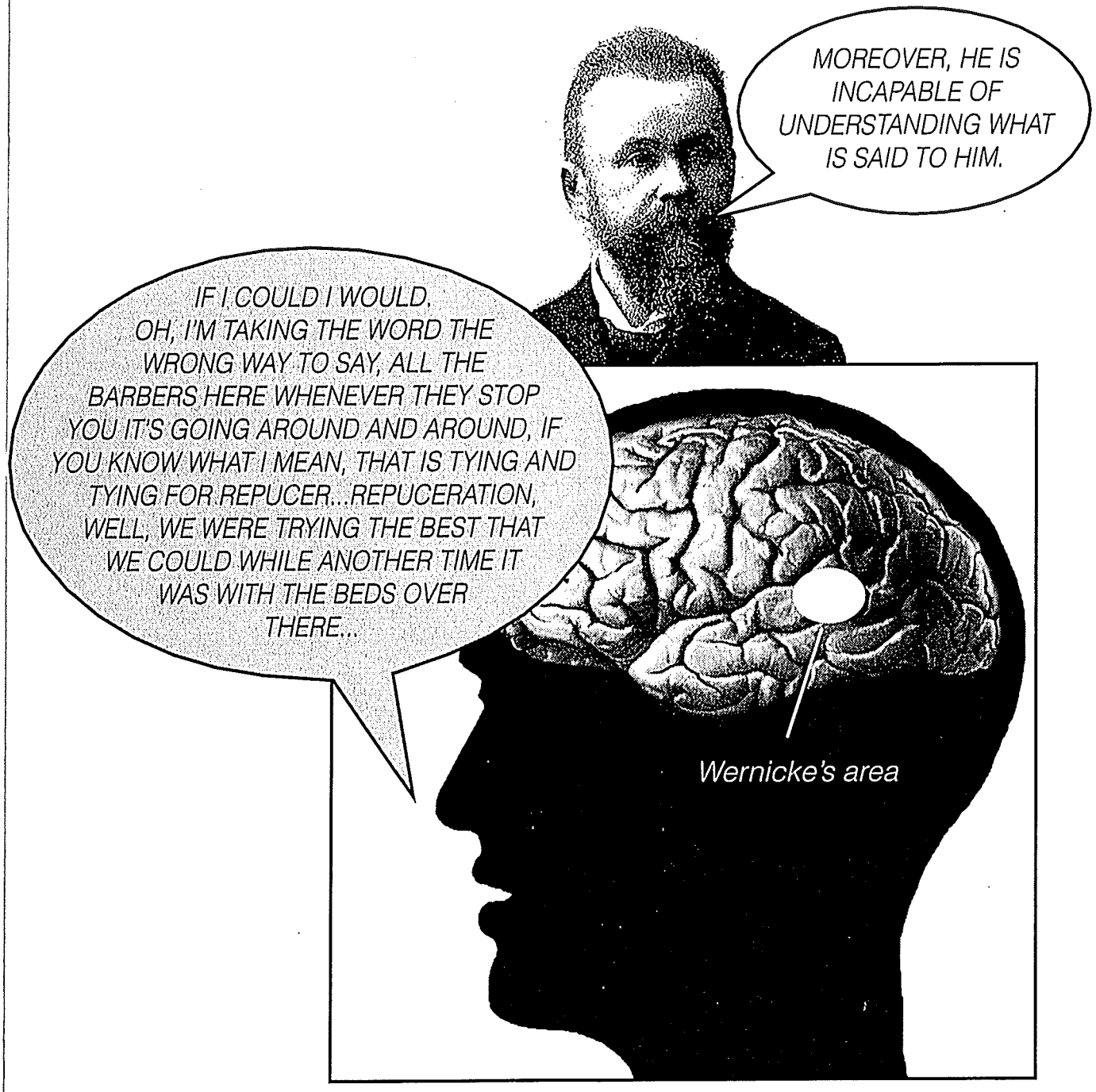




Post-mortem investigation of eight such patients showed that all had suffered injury to a particular area on the left side of the brain, now called *Broca's area.* Broca conjectured that this area must therefore be responsible for providing the grammatical structure of sentences, and also for the fine muscular control of the speech organs. These conclusions are now known to be correct.

Wernicke's Aphasia

In the 1870s, the Austrian neurologist Carl Wernicke identified a group of patients with a very different form of aphasia, now called *Wernicke's aphasia*. A sufferer speaks rapidly and fluently, with normal rhythm and intonation, but what he says makes no sense.



Post-mortem investigations again revealed that all the patients had suffered injury to another part of the left side of the brain, now called *Wernicke's area*. Wernicke's area appears to be responsible both for comprehension and for access to ordinary vocabulary.

Neurolinguistics

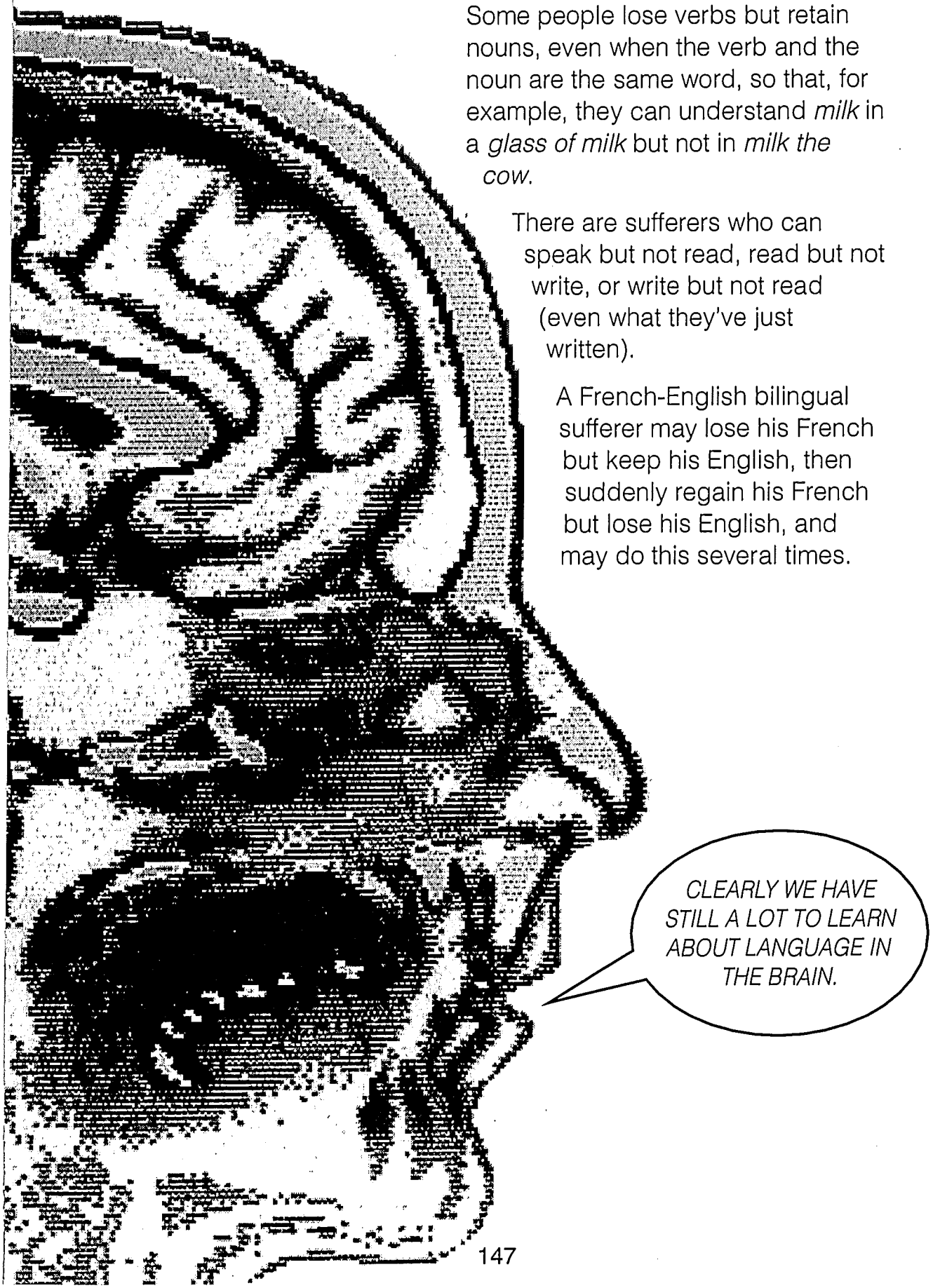
Since Broca's and Wernicke's days, *neurolinguistics,* as we now call the study of language functioning within the brain, has made considerable advances. Today we no longer have to wait for post-mortems on the brains of deceased sufferers: we can study the linguistic behaviour of the brains of living, healthy, conscious people by using brain scanners to detect activity. These studies have broadly confirmed the earlier results, but, at the same time, complex new problems have arisen.

We have found sufferers with a wide range of highly specific systems. For example, one man lost all words for fruits and vegetables, but had no other problems of any kind.

Some people lose verbs but retain nouns, even when the verb and the noun are the same word, so that, for example, they can understand *milk* in a *glass of milk* but not in *milk the cow.*

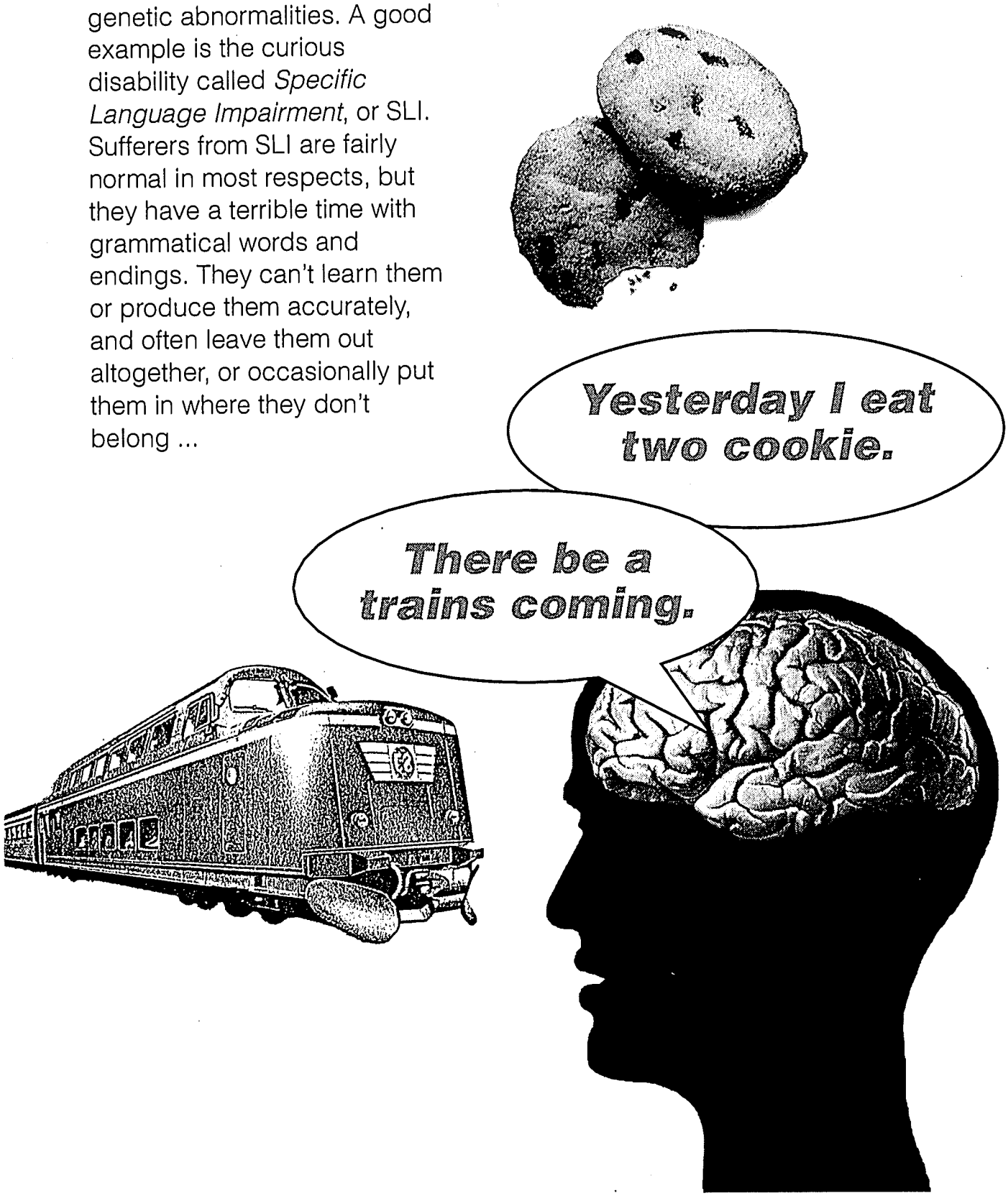
There are sufferers who can speak but not read, read but not write, or write but not read (even what they've just written).

A French-English bilingual sufferer may lose his French but keep his English, then suddenly regain his French but lose his English, and may do this several times.

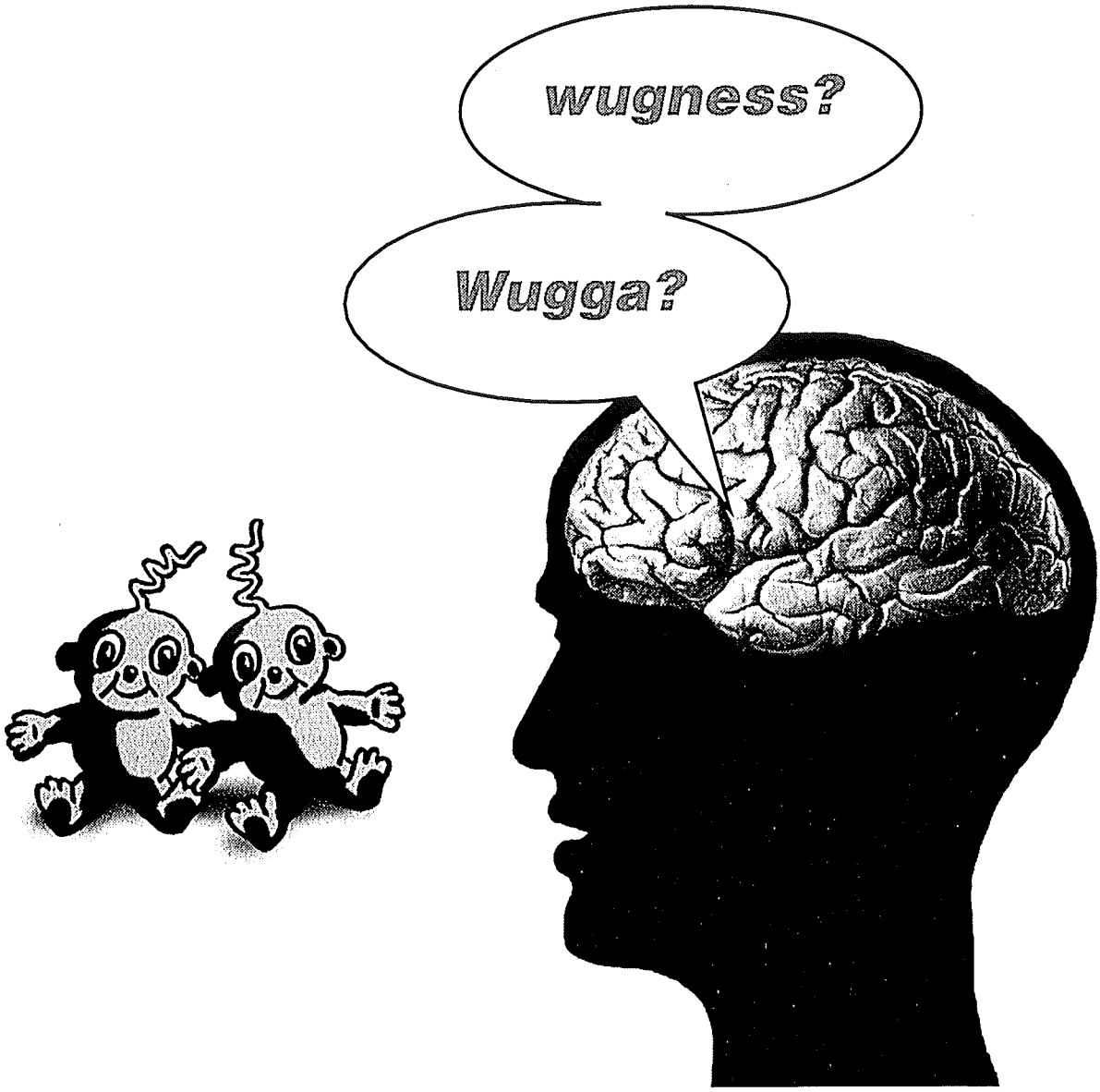


Specific Language Impairment

Not all linguistic deficits result from brain damage. Some of them appear to be caused by genetic abnormalities. A good example is the curious disability called *Specific Language Impairment*, or SLI. Sufferers from SLI are fairly normal in most respects, but they have a terrible time with grammatical words and endings. They can't learn them or produce them accurately, and often leave them out altogether, or occasionally put them in where they don't belong ...



Most spectacularly, they fail the *wug* test described above: asked to form the plural of a nonsense word, they have no idea what it might be. For *wug*, they produce ...

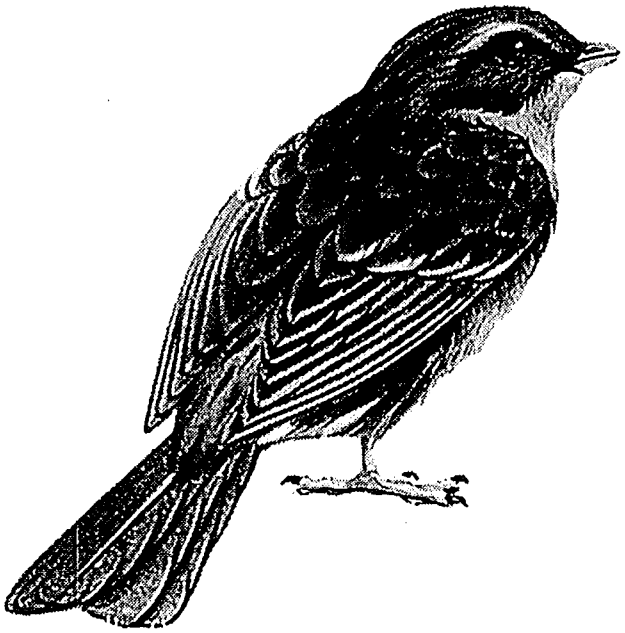


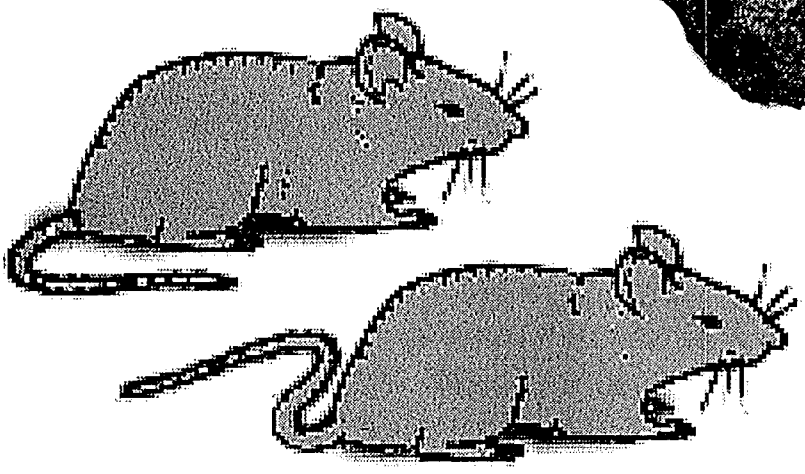
– or something equally surprising; for *zat* they produce *zacko;* for *zash* they produce *zatches;* and so on.

It appears that sufferers from SLI have never learned that there are rules for making things like plurals. Consequently, they must painfully learn all the regular plurals like *dogs* and *boxes* one by one, just as we all do with the irregular ones like *men* and *mice.* As a result, they have no idea what the plural of a new noun might be, since they have no rule to fall back on.

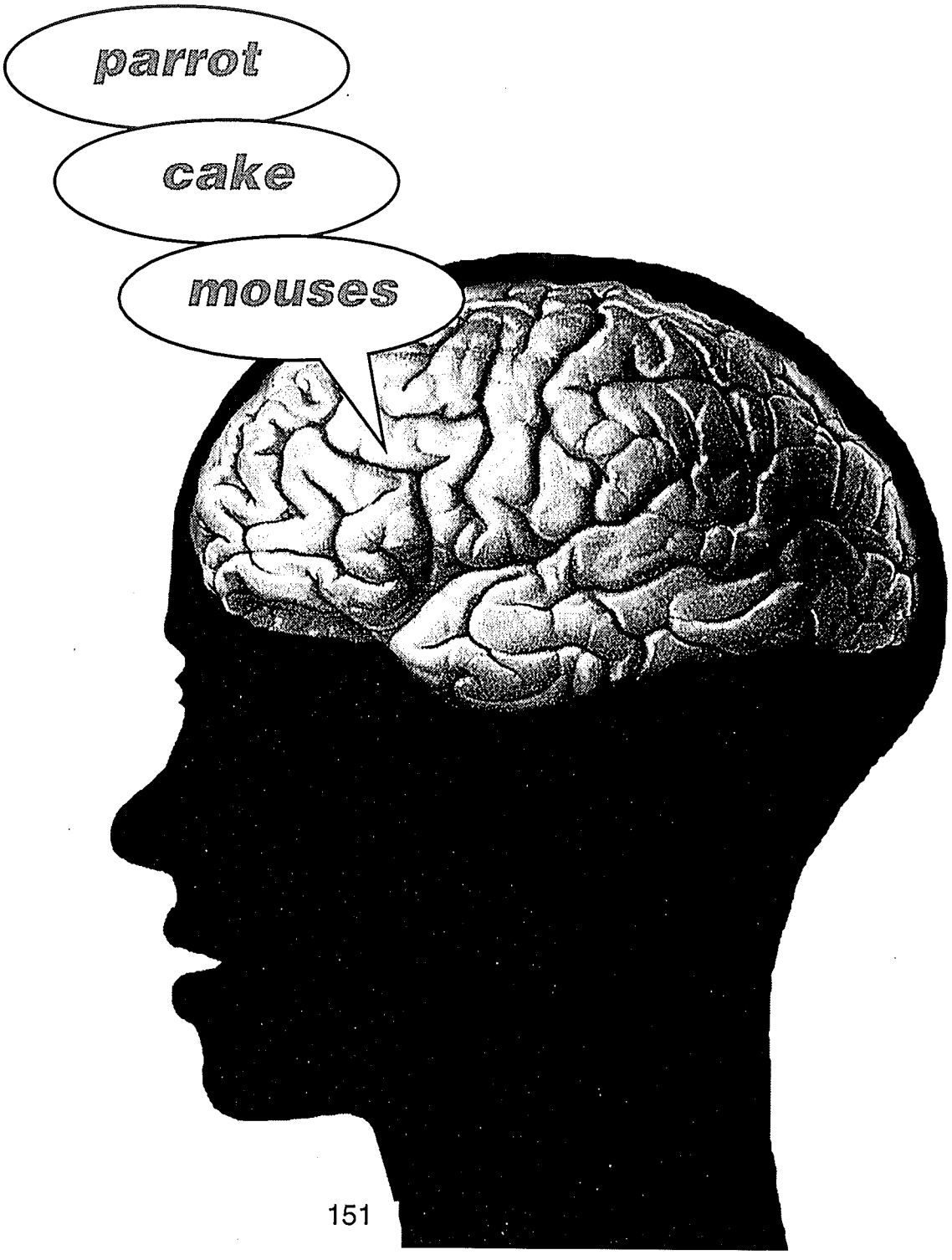
Williams Syndrome

Another linguistic disability which results from a faulty gene is the *Williams syndrome*. Sufferers from this syndrome exhibit a number of physical abnormalities, including unusual pixie-like faces, as well as a severe degree of mental retardation, so severe that they cannot look after themselves and must live in institutions. Williams sufferers have absolutely no trouble in learning linguistic rules: for example, they learn to construct regular plurals like *books* and regular past tenses like *enjoyed* as readily as anyone else. But they do have a linguistic problem of another kind.





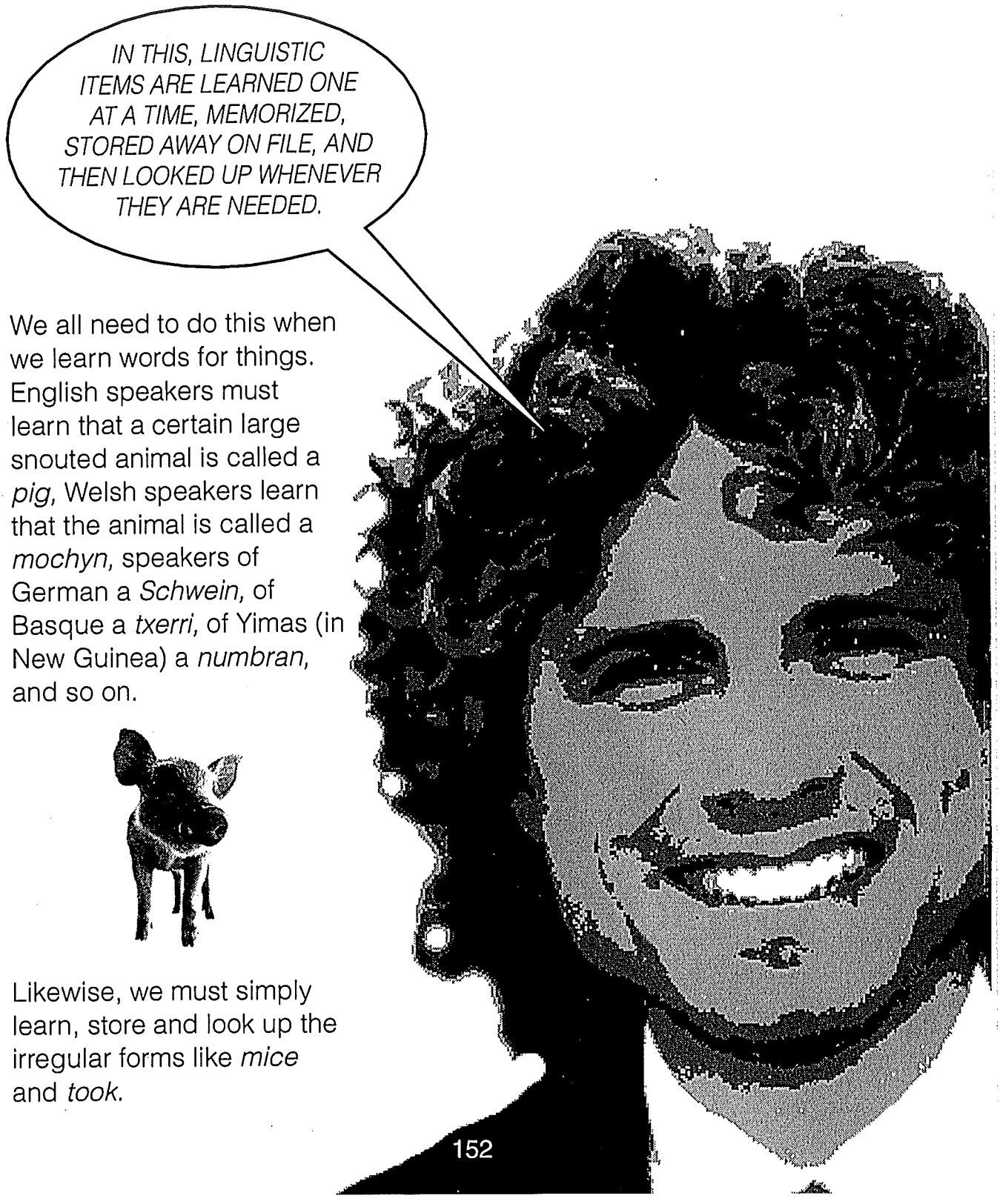
They have some difficulty in finding words. It is not that they hesitate or stumble – in fact, they typically speak in a breathless rush – but that they often select the wrong words. So, for example, a Williams sufferer may say *parrot* when *sparrow* is intended, or *cake* when *cookie* is meant. Moreover, they not infrequently overgeneralize the rules they know so well, and, like very young children, say *taked* instead of *took* or *mouses* instead of *mice.*



A Psycholinguistic View of Language

In his recent book *Words and Rules*, the Canadian psycholinguist Steven Pinker assembles evidence from first-language acquisition, from normal adult behaviour, and from SLI and Williams sufferers, to develop a general view of how language operates in the mind. Pinker argues that our language faculty consists of two large, important and distinct components.

One component is the ***storage***, or ***look-up***, element.

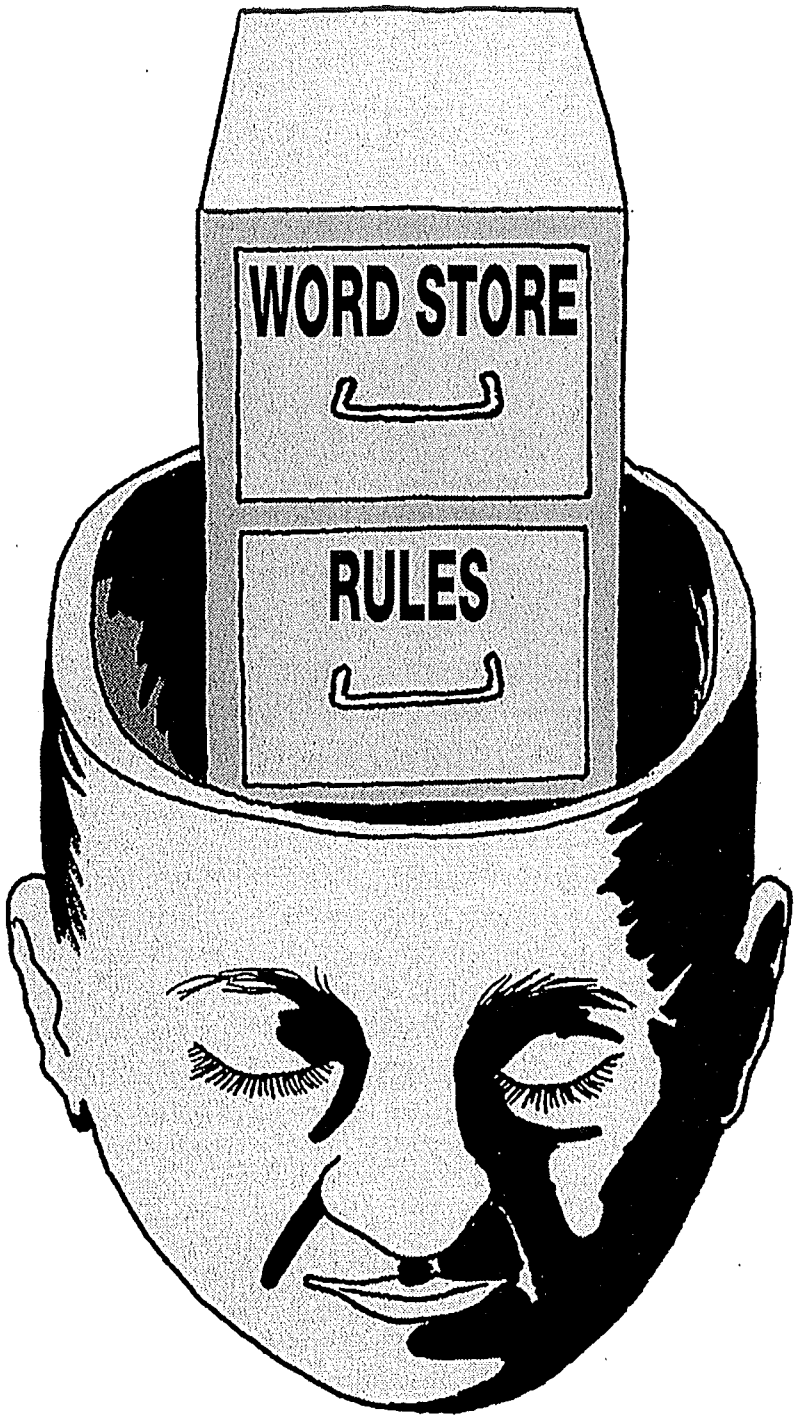


We all need to do this when we learn words for things. English speakers must learn that a certain large snouted animal is called a *pig*, Welsh speakers learn that the animal is called a *mochyn*, speakers of German a *Schwein*, of Basque a *txerri*, of Yimas (in New Guinea) a *numbran*, and so on.

Likewise, we must simply learn, store and look up the irregular forms like *mice* and *took*.

The other component is the ***rules*** which we gradually construct during acquisition, rules (in English) like "Make a plural by adding *-s*" and "Make a past tense by adding *-ed*".

Both components are essential: the rules are useless if we haven't memorized some things to apply them to, while doing without rules would mean we would have to memorize and look up absolutely everything – a formidable task.



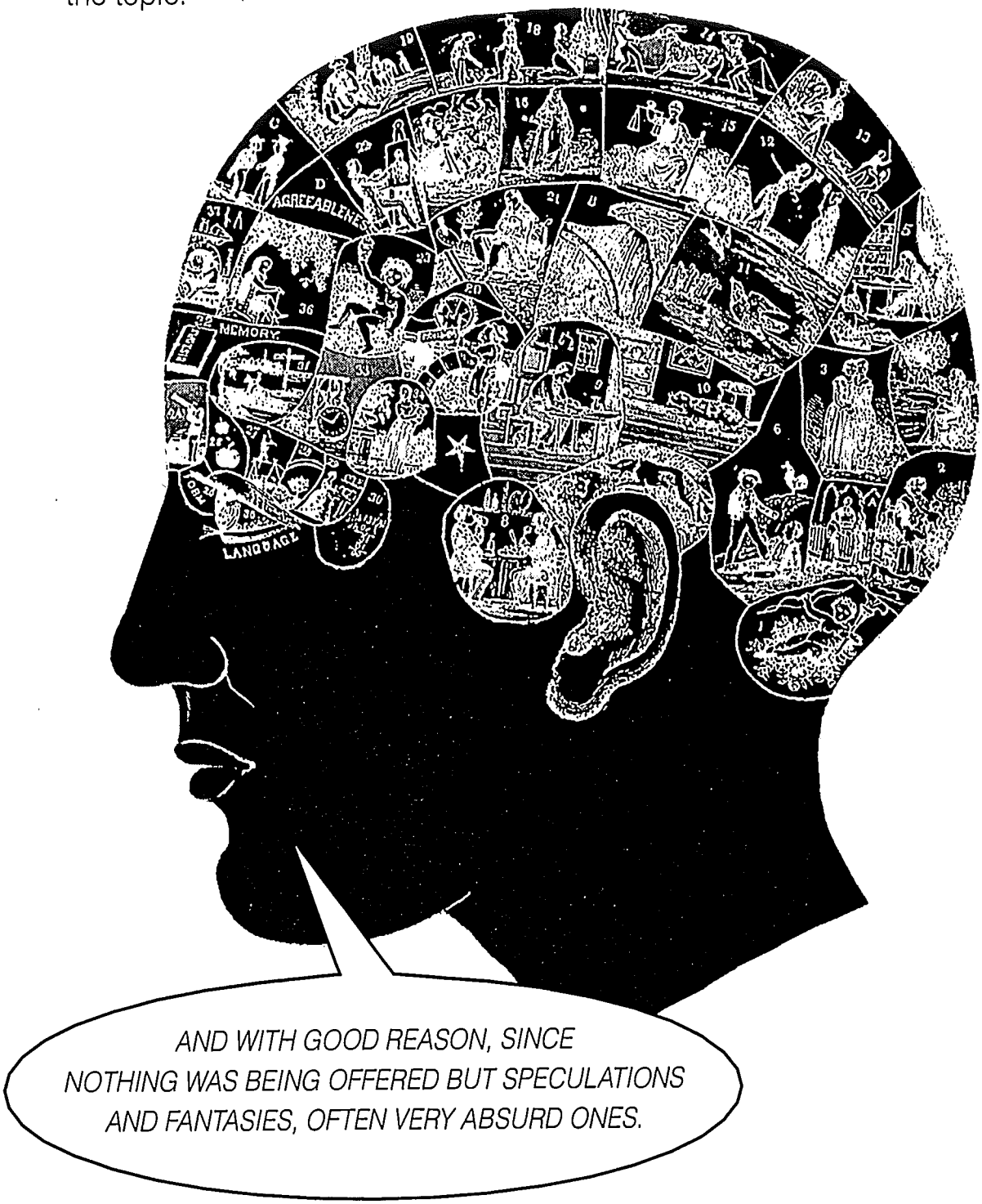
A Problem of Faulty Genes

Pinker (and others) argue that SLI disability is largely a deficit in the rule component.

Geneticists have recently pinpointed the locations of both of the faulty genes implicated in producing SLI and the Williams syndrome. Perhaps, one day, we will be able to identify precisely what is going wrong in the brain when these genes are defective, and thus to understand something about the way the brain processes language.

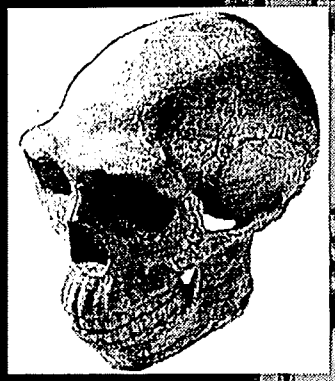
How Did Language Originate?

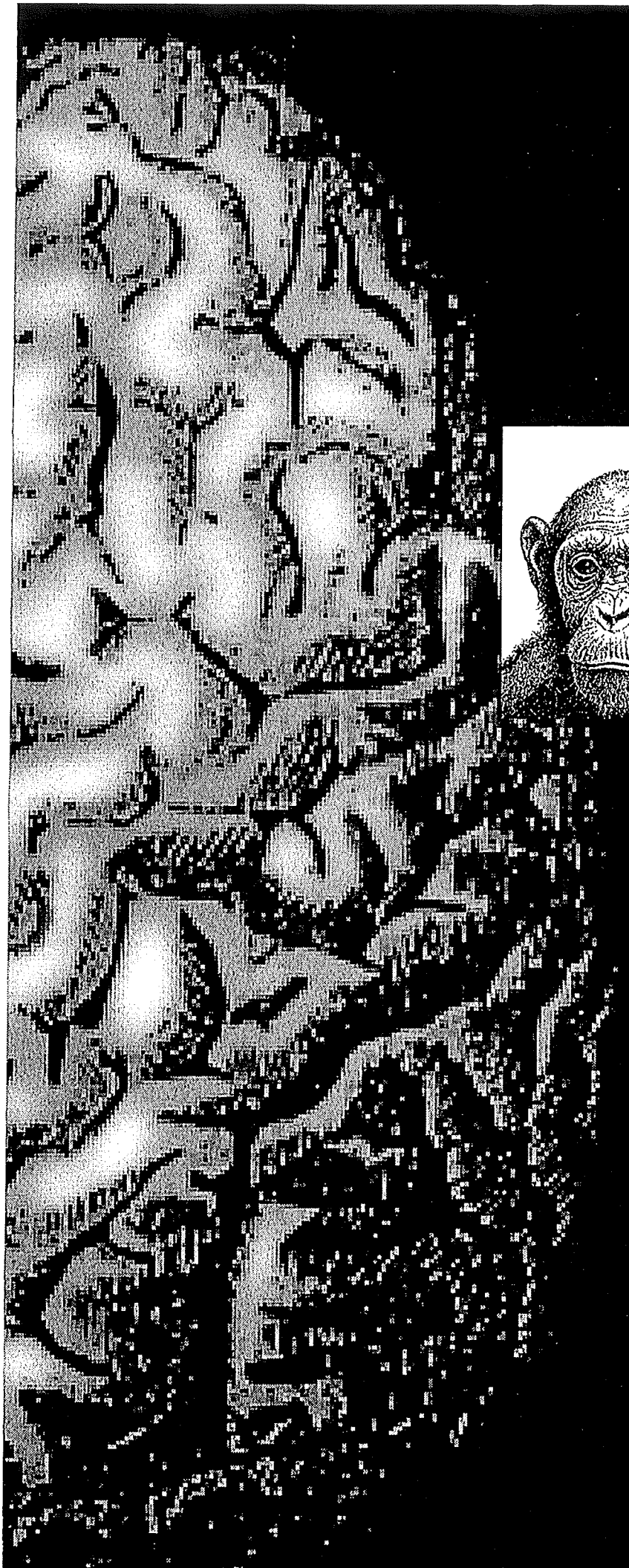
Related to our hope of understanding language in the brain is another hope: the hope of learning something about how language came into existence in the first place. For many years, this very topic was taboo among linguists. That's because nothing of significance was known about the structure of language, about the functioning of the brain or about language processing in the brain, or even about human ancestry. Indeed, in 1867 the French Academy of Sciences banned discussion of the topic.



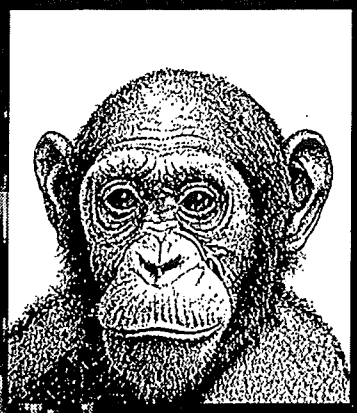
What Do We Know Today?

Today we are much better off. Linguists can tell us important things about the way languages are put together. Psycholinguists have made great progress in understanding how language is processed in the mind. Neurolinguists and neurologists now know a great deal about the way the brain is structured, how it behaves, and how language is located and organized in the brain. And, of course, palaeoanthropologists have made huge progress in unravelling the origins of our species. So we now have a body of facts to work with.





But that doesn't mean we are much closer to answering the question of *how, when* or *why* language began. Linguists are now beginning to hold regular discussions with specialists in many other fields – *psychologists, anthropologists, primatologists* (specialists in primates, the group that includes apes and monkeys as well as human beings), *archaeologists*, and other interested scientists, in the hope of finding some common ground. However, little has yet been found.



When Did Language Begin?

How early did language arise? Some archaeologists and anthropologists believe they can see evidence for a long period of virtual stasis in the culture of our ancestors...

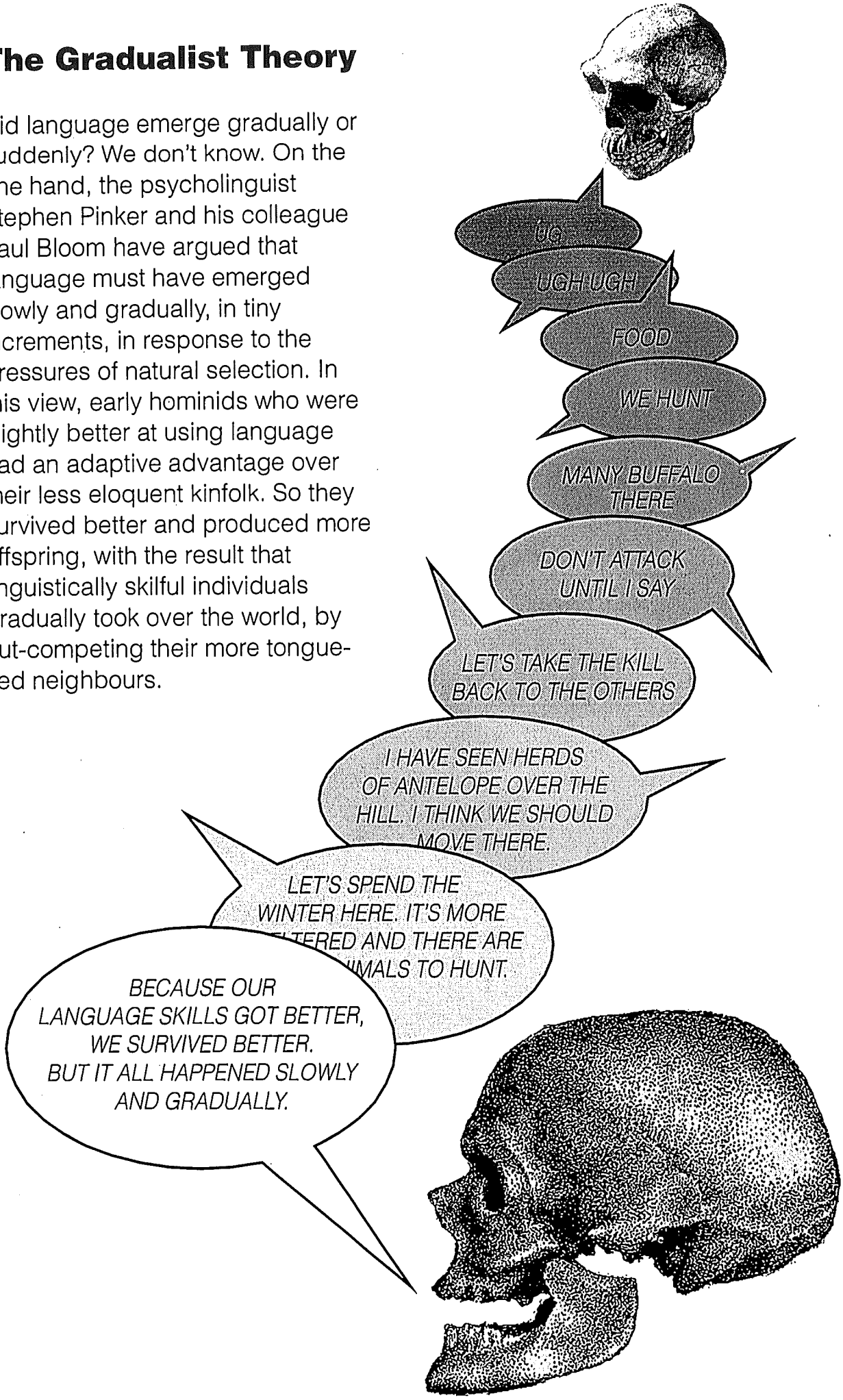
This date must represent the first appearance of language, since nothing else could explain this explosive development. Others, including most linguists, conclude that our language faculty is so much a part of our biology that language must have appeared together with our own species, *Homo sapiens*, between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago.

Then again, some anthropologists are convinced that the fossil skulls of our hominid ancestors who lived over a million years ago, before our own species had evolved, show clear evidence of the brain structures associated with language, such as Broca's area.

There is no consensus, since the new data available to us point in different directions.

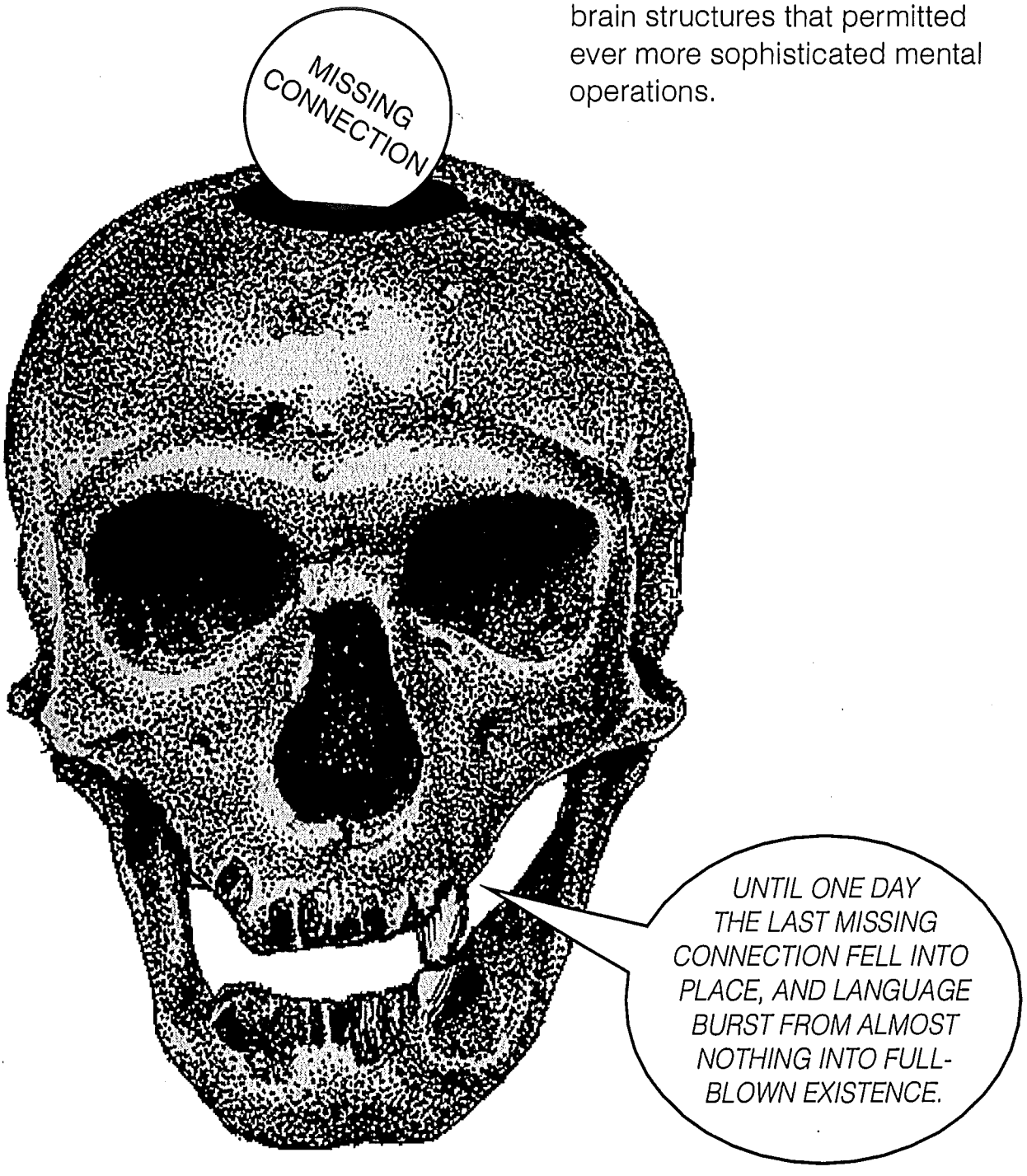
The Gradualist Theory

Did language emerge gradually or suddenly? We don't know. On the one hand, the psychologuist Stephen Pinker and his colleague Paul Bloom have argued that language must have emerged slowly and gradually, in tiny increments, in response to the pressures of natural selection. In this view, early hominids who were slightly better at using language had an adaptive advantage over their less eloquent kinfolk. So they survived better and produced more offspring, with the result that linguistically skilful individuals gradually took over the world, by out-competing their more tongue-tied neighbours.



The Catastrophic Theory

On the other hand, the British-born American linguist Derek Bickerton has argued for a sudden, indeed catastrophic, emergence of language. In Bickerton's view, our ancestors had no language for a long time, but they gradually acquired brain structures that permitted ever more sophisticated mental operations.

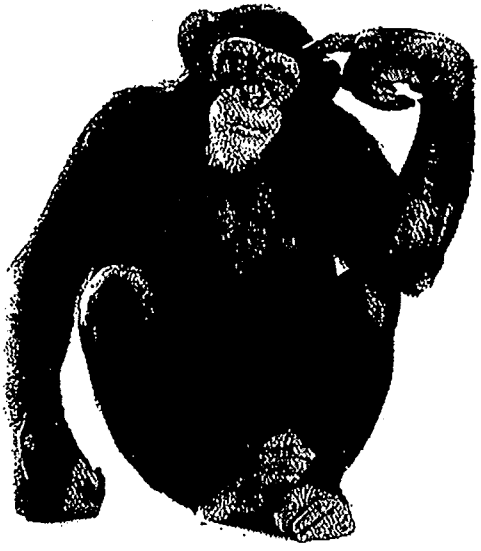


Criticism of the Gradualist View

The Pinker–Bloom view suffers from a difficulty in imagining what a partial language might look like. Can we envision a "language" with nouns but no verbs, or with affirmative statements but no negative statements, or with sentences of two words but not of ten words, or with names for things but practically no grammar? Linguists find this hard to accept. No such "language" has ever been found anywhere – except for the last.

This last describes the pidgin languages, which have tiny vocabularies and practically no grammar. As we have seen, pidgins are created by people who need to communicate but who have no language in common.

Bickerton's point is that nothing ever seems to be observed that lies somewhere between pidgins and real languages. He notes several other related features to pidgin. Systems strikingly similar to pidgins can be observed among very young children just starting to acquire their mother tongues.

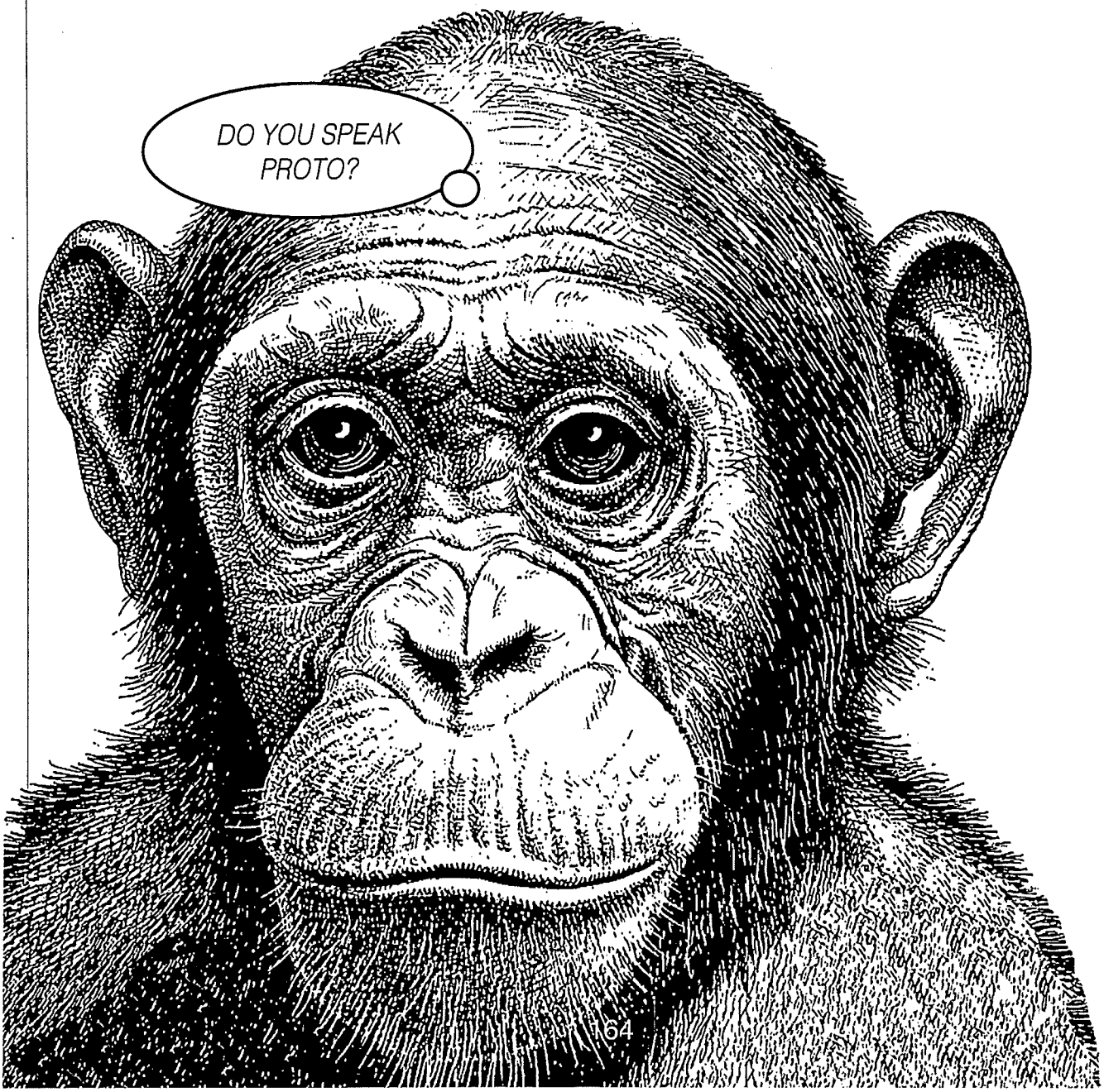


Also among certain individuals suffering from brain damage. And even among chimpanzees to which scientists have tried hard to teach some form of human language.

Bickerton's Conclusion

Bickerton concludes, therefore, that there exist only two linguistic possibilities, a crude pidgin-like system which he calls protolanguage, and full-blown human language. Our remote ancestors must therefore have jumped pretty much overnight from the one to the other, thanks to the sudden acquisition of some crucial connection in the brain.

For Bickerton, children acquire protolanguage before they move on to language, certain damaged individuals never acquire anything beyond protolanguage, and our relatives the great apes, having never acquired that last fateful connection in their brains, can be taught to manage protolanguage but not language.



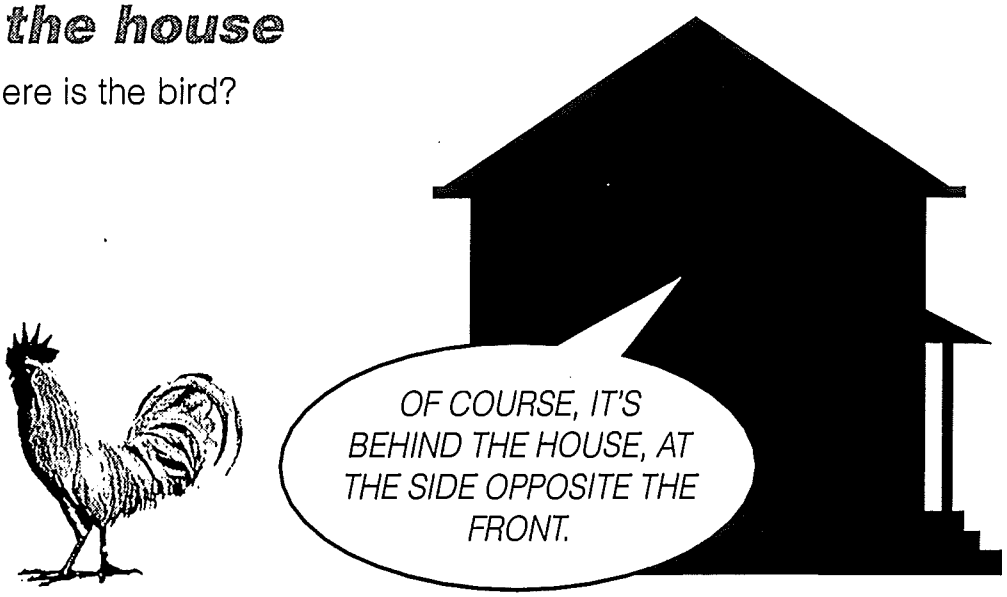
Another Cognitive Example

Nothing is settled. Nor do we as yet even have any great agreement as to whether language should be regarded as an entirely distinct phenomenon, or whether it should be viewed as an integral part of our perception and cognition. Recall the ideas of the cognitive linguists, discussed above, in which linguistic categories are seen as *perceptual* and *metaphorical* categories. And now consider one further example of the cognitive approach.

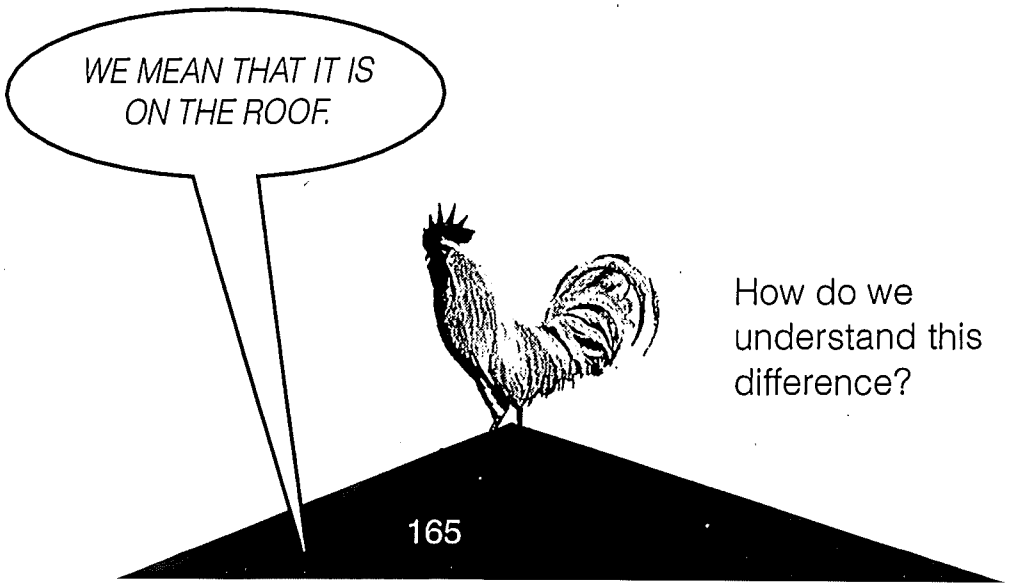
In English, if we say that

a cockerel is *at the back of the house*

– where is the bird?



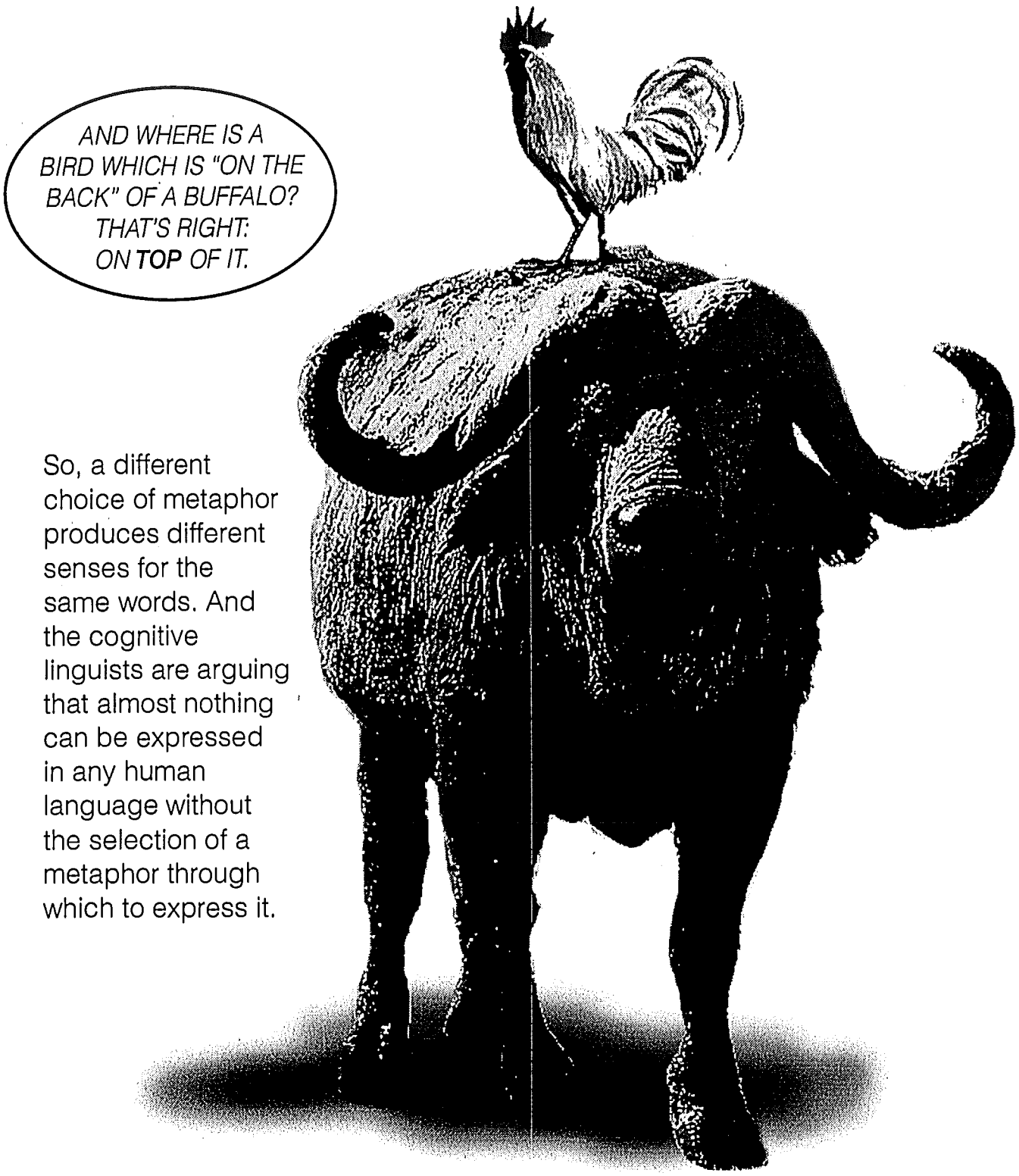
Fine. But, in quite a number of languages, above all in parts of Africa, when speakers describe a bird as (literally) "at the back of the house"...



How do we understand this difference?

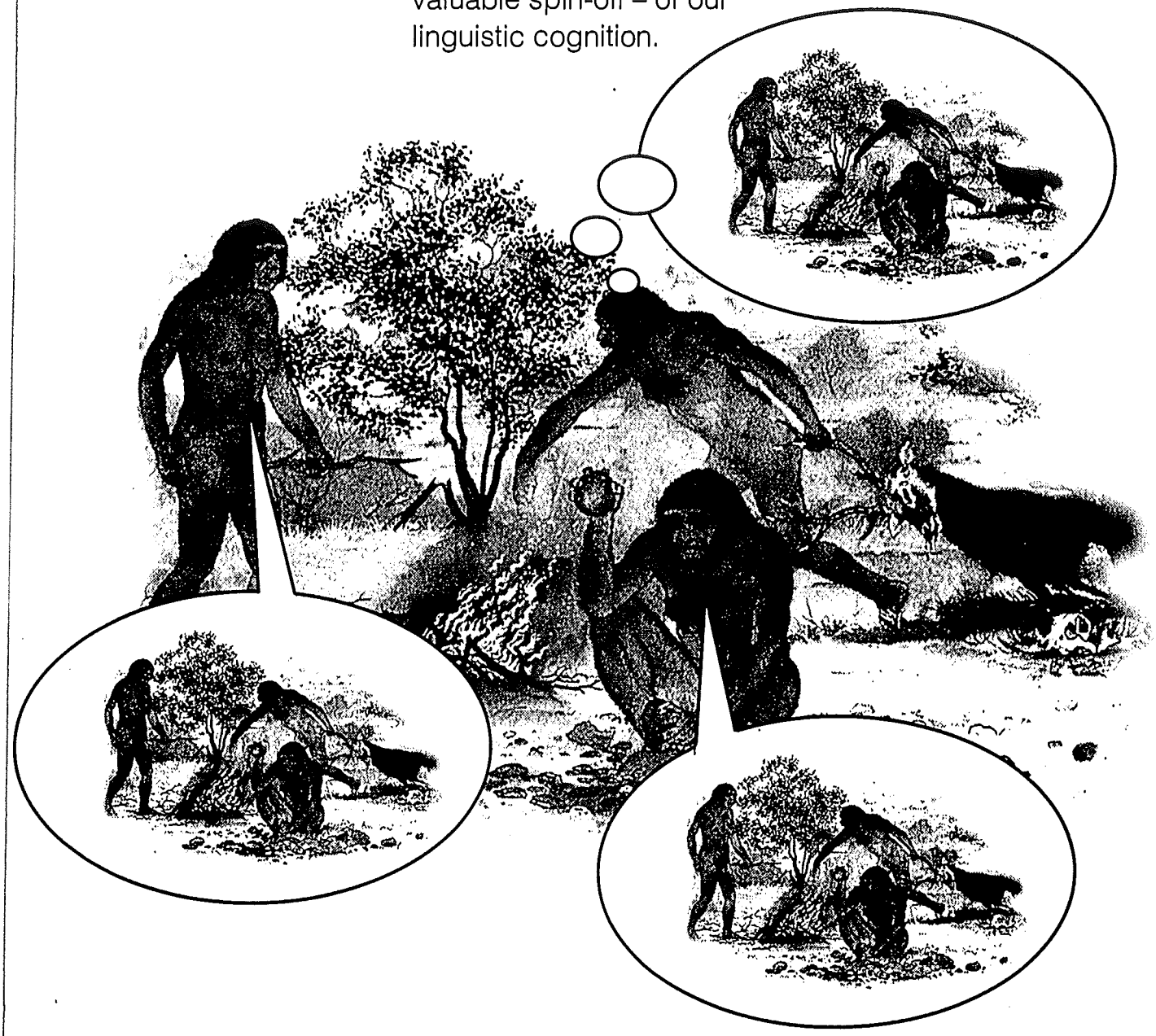
Differences of Metaphor

Well, in English, it appears, we orient ourselves in terms of *human beings*. And our backs are behind us. So, something which is "at our back" is behind us. But not all languages work in the same way – that is, they don't all use the *same metaphors*. The speakers of some languages think metaphorically, not in terms of people, but in terms of four-footed animals, such as buffalo.



So, a different choice of metaphor produces different senses for the same words. And the cognitive linguists are arguing that almost nothing can be expressed in any human language without the selection of a metaphor through which to express it.

Indeed, there are linguists, such as Robins Burling, who argue that seeing language as primarily a means of communication is an error. Language, proposes Burling, is best seen as a means of organizing the world, as a way of constructing and organizing mental representations. In this view, our familiar ability to communicate with language is merely a spin-off – though admittedly a very valuable spin-off – of our linguistic cognition.



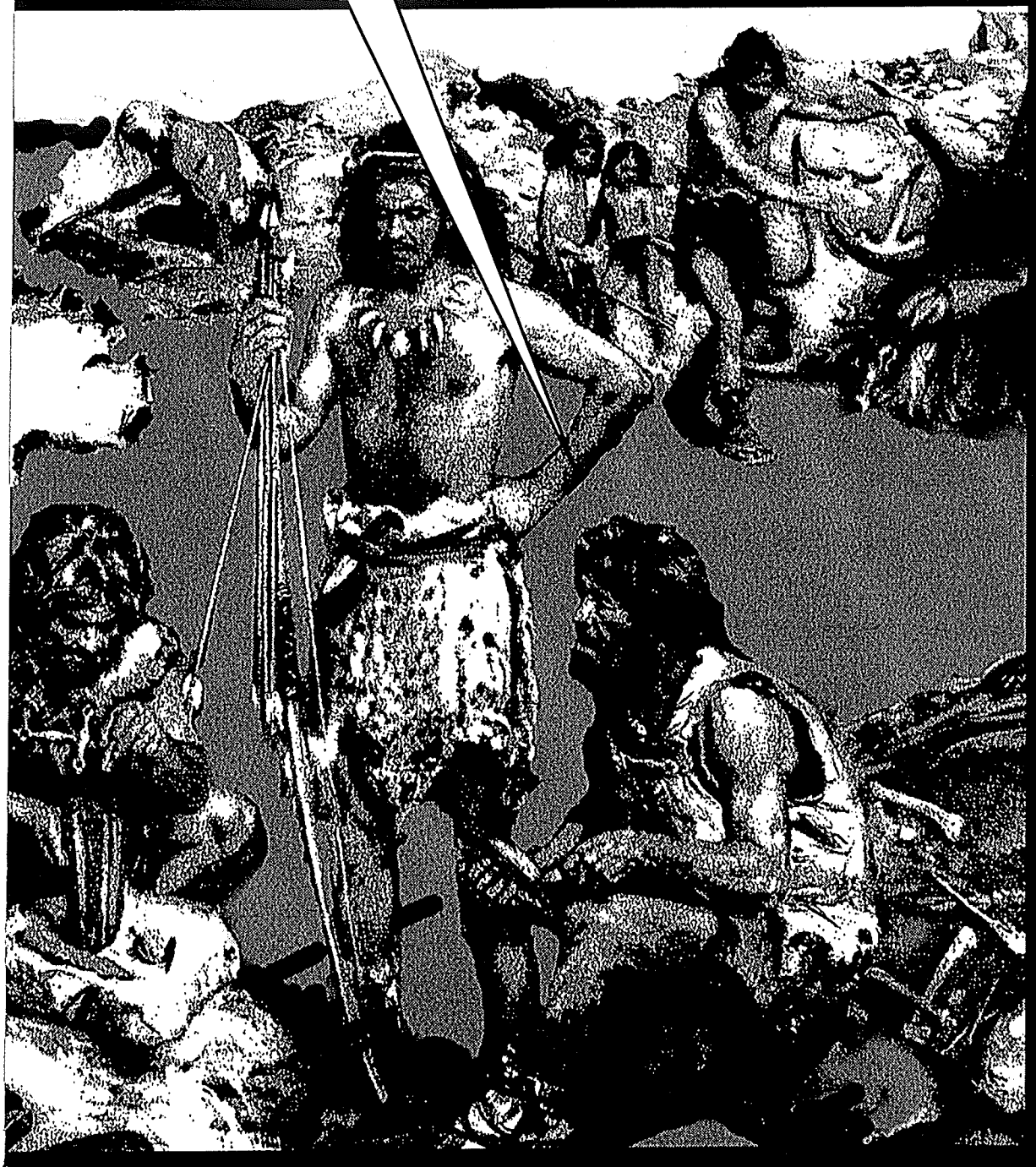
But it remains true that we know next to nothing about the way in which language came into existence. Naturally, into this void have come countless speculations, not a few of them confident in tone and even strident.

Conflicting Speculations

Some people argue that our remote ancestors must have gestured before they could speak, and that speech must have grown out of gestures.

... OR BECAUSE SPEAKING FREED OUR HANDS WHILE ALLOWING US TO CONTINUE PAYING CLOSE ATTENTION TO ONE ANOTHER.

This last view sees speech as a kind of vocal grooming, replacing the constant grooming behaviour seen in apes today.

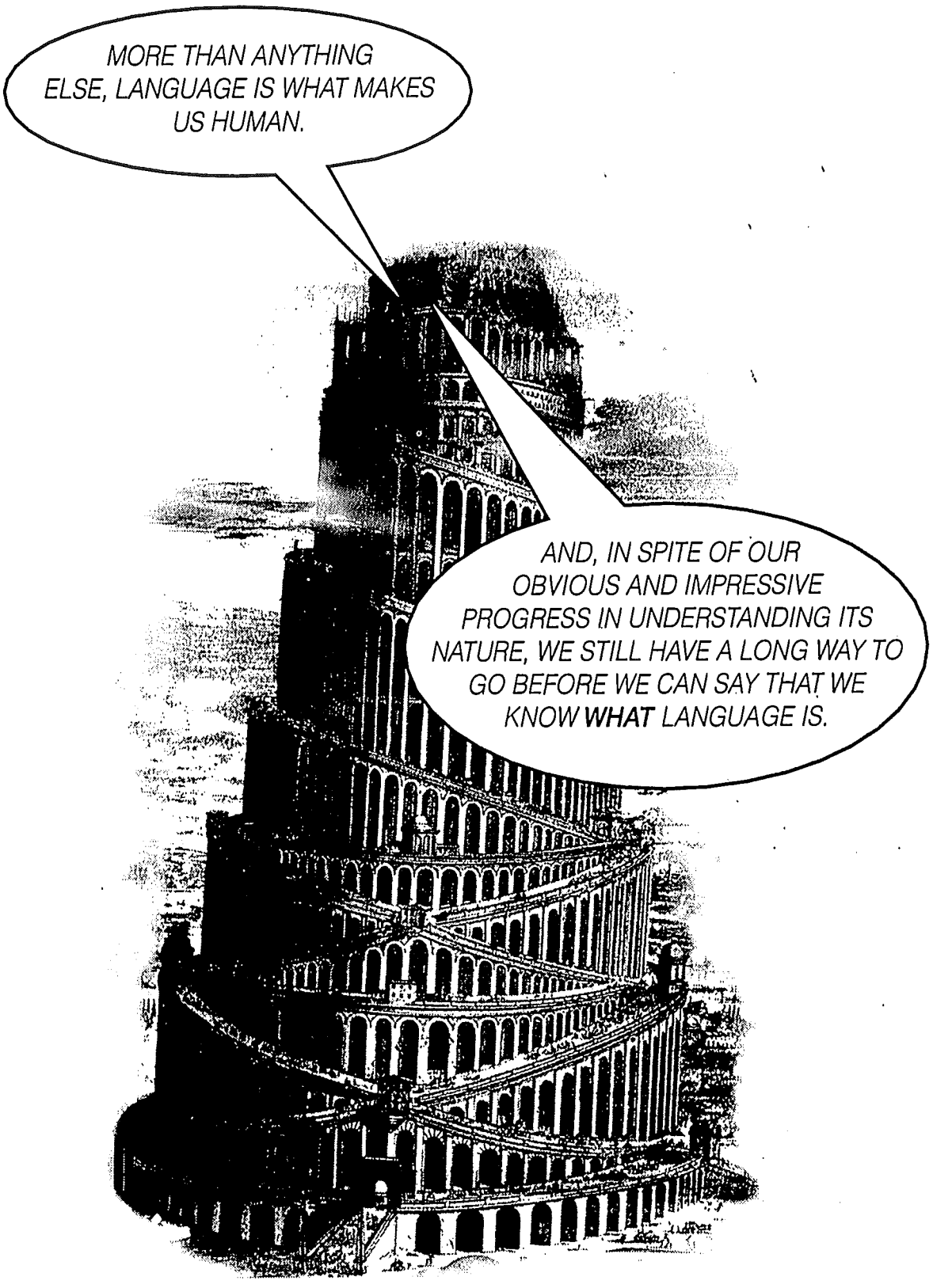


The Purposes of Language

The best that can be said about these competing interpretations is that all of them are highly implausible. It is most unlikely that language arose in order to serve any *one* particular purpose, and that only later did our ancestors discover that it could also be pressed into service for *other* purposes. In fact, we use language for a wide range of purposes. Here are just a few:

- **passing on information**
- **persuading people to do things**
- **convincing people to believe things**
- **entertaining others**
- **amusing ourselves**
- **maintaining and displaying our place in society**
- **expressing our individuality**
- **expressing our emotion**
- **maintaining good (or bad) relations with others**

Few linguists are eager to believe that our ancestors evolved language purely in order to serve just one of these numerous functions, and then accidentally discovered that they could use it for one or two other things as well. Language is richer than that, and it is more deeply embedded in our existence. Language, remember, is what most obviously distinguishes us from all the other creatures that live on this planet.



Further Reading

If you'd like to learn more about linguistics, this chatty and very readable book is a good place to start:

R.L. Trask. 1999. *Language: The Basics*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Beyond this, you can move on to a textbook. Here is an elementary text:

Jean Aitchison. 1992. *Teach Yourself Linguistics*, 4th edition. London: Hodder.

Larger, but still elementary, is this:

George Yule. 1996. *The Study of Language*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Larger still, but brightly written, is this one:

Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman. 1998. *An Introduction to Language*, 6th edition. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.

The first reference book to consult is this gloriously illustrated encyclopedia:

David Crystal. 1997. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

If you're interested in the history of linguistics, there are lots of books, but not all of them are easy to read. For the period before the 20th century, try this:

R.H. Robins. 1967. *A Short History of Linguistics*. London: Longman.

The 20th century is more difficult, but try this one, which is a little selective:

Geoffrey Sampson. 1980. *Schools of Linguistics*. London: Hutchinson.

For a collection of enjoyable popular essays on recent hot topics, look for this:

Jay Ingram. 1992. *Talk Talk Talk*. London: Penguin.

For psycholinguistics and child language acquisition, this is the most readable textbook:

Jean Aitchison. 1998. *The Articulate Mammal*, 4th edition. London: Routledge.

The next book introduces language and brain:

Loraine K. Obler and Kris Gjerlow. 1999. *Language and the Brain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

There are two lively introductions to anthropological linguistics:

Nancy Bonvillain. 1993. *Language, Culture, and Communication*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Gary B. Palmer. 1996. *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

An elementary book on language change is this:

R.L. Trask. 1994. *Language and Change*. London: Routledge.

Finally, a splendid coffee table book on the languages of the world:

Bernard Comrie et al. 1997. *The Atlas of Languages*. London: Bloomsbury.

Index

Algonquian languages 34-5
alphabet 70
American linguistics
  native 28, 30-5
  structuralism in 36-7
Americanisms 92
Ancient Greece 7, 53-5
animals, language 61, 73
apes 163, 164, 169
aphasia 143
Aristotle 6
Astadhayayi, the 4-5
Athapaskan people 28
atomistic approach 18

Barthes, Roland 27
Basque 137
Bickerton, Derek 161-4
Bloom, Paul 160
Bloomfield, Leonard 26, 34-5
bio-semiotics 26
Boas, Franz 28-9
Bopp, Franz 13
brain injury 143-51
Broca's aphasia 143-4
Burling, Robins 167

catastrophic theory 161
Chaucer, Geoffrey 86
chimpanzees *see* apes
Chomsky, Noam
  functional approach 43-9
  generative grammar 38-42
  and Panini 5
  reviews Skinner 116
  transformational grammar 11, 40
  universal grammar 125-35
Coates, Jennifer 103
cognitive linguistics 50, 165
consonants, acquisition 25
Courtenay, Jan Baudouin 14
creoles 123-4
Czech language 25

definitions *see* semantics
Derrida, Jacques 27
descriptivism 141-2
diachronic approach 22-3
Dixon, Bob 51
duality of patterning 72
Dyirbal language 51-2
Dyscolus, Apollonius 7
dysphasia 143

English
  grammar 10
  Old 87
  origins 97
  standard 138-9
European languages 9

female speech 105
Foucault, Michel 27
French grammar 11
functional approach 43-9

Gabelentz, Georg de 14
gender 80
  systems 35, 51-2
  see also sex differences in language; sexism
generative grammar 38-42
genetic abnormalities 148, 154
German 93-5
Germanic languages 95
gradualist theory 160, 162
grammar 77-83
  and the brain 144
  English 10
  French 11
  Greek 7, 8-10
  Latin 8
  see also universal grammar
Greece 6-7
  see also Ancient Greece
Greek and Latin 7, 8-10
Grice, Paul 113-14
Grimm, Jakob 13

Halliday, Michael 48
Harris, Zellig 37
historical linguistics 13
history 3-14
Hockett, Charles 62
Humboldt, Wilhelm 12

India 4-5
Indo-European family 96

Jakobson, Roman 23, 25-7

Kristeva, Julia 27
Kruszewski, Mikolai 14

Lacan, Jacques 27
Lakoff, Georg 51-2
Langsacker, Ronald 127
Language (Bloomfield) 34-6
Language (Sapir) 29-31
language
  acquisition 115-20
  built-in faculty 124
  creating 121-4
  defined 56
  disordered 143-51
  Humboldt 12
  media 69-71
  natural 57-9
  origins 83-99, 92-3, 155-69
  planning 136-8
  political influence 136
  purpose 170
  variation in 101-8
  see also linguistics
languages
  animals 61, 73
  changes in 84-92
  common features 62-7
  Germanic 95
  native American 28, 30-5
  new 59
  number of 59
laryngeals 15
Latin
  grammar 8
  and Greek 7, 8-10
Lévi-Strauss, Claude 27
linguistic
  engineering 136-8
  nativism 129

relativity 30
linguistics
general 14
historical 13
history of 3-14
location, expressing 78

male speech 104
mathematics 38
maxims 113
media for language 69-71
metaphor 55, 166
Morris, Charles 26, 111
Moscow Linguistic Circle 27

native American languages 28, 30-5
natural language 57-9, 123
Navaho language 31-3
negation 118
neurolinguistics 146-7
Nicaraguan Sign Language 76

Old English 87

Panini 4
parts of speech 7
patterning in language 72
Peirce, C.S. 26, 111
Peters, Stanley 42
Petrograd Society 27
phonemes 71-3
phonology 23-5
Piaget, Jean 135
pidgin 122, 162-4
PIE *see* Proto-Indo-European
Pinker, Steven 152-3, 160
plurals 119, 149
political influences 136
Port-Royal Circle 11
pragmatics 108, 111-14
Prague Circle, the 23, 27
predicate of sentence 6
prescriptivism 91
primary media 69
Principles of Phonology 23
Priscian 8-9
Proto-Germanic 94-7
Proto-Indo-European (PIE) 15, 96-9
protolanguage 164

Rask, Rasmus 13
relevance in language 113
"respectively" sentences 133-5
Richie, Robert 42
Romans, the 8
rules 4-5, 153
in language acquisition 117-18
universal grammar 127-35
see also maxims
Russell, Bertrand 112

Sapir, Edward 29
Sapir-Whorf hypothesis 30-1, 50
Saussure, Ferdinand de 15-22
general linguistics 16-17
Saussurean paradox 100
Sebeok, Thomas 26
secondary media 70-1
semantics 108, 109-10, 111
semiotics 26-7
sex differences in language 80, 102-5
sexism 140-1
Shakespeare, William 85
sign language 69, 74-6
American 82
English 74-6
Nicaraguan 76
signs *see* semiotics
Skinner, B.F. 116
socio-linguistics 102
sound and language 14, 16, 18-21, 23-5
pattern 16
units 71-3
Spanish and structuralism 20-1
Specific Language Impairment 148-9, 154
speech 69
male vs. female 104-5
parts of 7
standard English 138-9
stimulus-freedom 67
Strawson, Peter 112
structuralism 18-21
and language 26, 35-7
subject of sentence 6
subjunctive 100
Swedish 93-5
Swift, Jonathan 84
synchronic approach 22
Syntactic Structures 38
systemic correspondence 93-4
Systemic Functional Linguistics 48

tense 79
acquisition 117-18
Thrax, Dionysius 7
time
concept of 55
see also tense
transformational grammar 11, 40-2
Trubetzkoy, Nikolai 23

universal grammar 125-35
Uralic languages 98

variation in language 101-8
Verbal Behavior 116
vowel acquisition 25

Wernicke's aphasia 145
Whorf, Benjamin Lee 30-1
Williams syndrome 150-1
word order 77-8
Words and Rules 152
words, new 62
writing
invention 84
as a medium 70

Biographies

R.L. Trask is professor of Linguistics at the University of Sussex. A specialist in historical linguistics and in the Basque language, he is the author of numerous books, including *Language: The Basics, Language Change, Historical Linguistics, The History of Basque* and *A Student's Dictionary of Language and Linguistics.*

Bill Mayblin trained as a graphic designer at the Royal College of Art in London. He is a senior partner in the London-based design practice, Information Design Workshop.

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

"Why?" asks the confused waiter, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder.

"I'm a panda," he says at the door. "Look it up."

The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

"**Panda.** Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

So, punctuation really does matter, even if it is only occasionally a matter of life and death.

Sticklers, unite!

"If Lynne Truss were Roman Catholic I'd nominate her for sainthood."
–FRANK MCCOURT, author of *Angela's Ashes*

"*[Eats, Shoots & Leaves]* makes correct usage so cool that you have to admire Ms. Truss."
–JANET MASLIN, *The New York Times*

"'Correct usage' has been made sexy by Lynne Truss in her delightful *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, the most entertaining work of paralinguistics since Shaw's *Pygmalion*."
–JOHN SUTHERLAND, *Financial Times*

"Truss is William Safire crossed with John Cleese's Basil Fawlty."
–*Entertainment Weekly*

"[Truss is] a reformer with the soul of a stand-up comedian."–*The Boston Globe*

"Lynne Truss makes [punctuation] a joy to contemplate."–*Elle*

GOTHAM BOOKS
A division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.penguin.com

Reference/Humor Printed in U.S.A.

U.S.A. $11.00
Can. $15.50

ISBN 1-592-40203-8

Eats, Shoots & Leaves

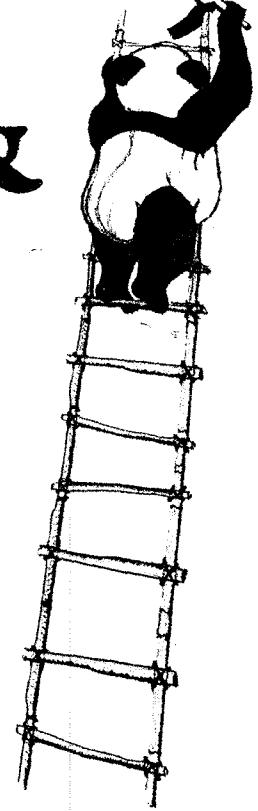
LYNNE TRUSS

GOTHAM BOOKS

"You don't need to be a grammar nerd to enjoy this one....Who knew grammar could be so much fun?"—*Newsweek*

The #1 *New York Times* Bestseller

Eats, Shoots & Leaves



Includes a limited-edition Punctuation Repair Kit

The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation

LYNNE TRUSS

With a Foreword by Frank McCourt, author of *Angela's Ashes*

PUNCTUATION REPAIR KIT

GET STUCK IN

Praise for *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*:

"Witty, smart, passionate, it gives long-overdue attention to 'the traffic signals of language.'"

—John Rechy, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Best Books of 2004: Nonfiction

"Witty and instructive . . . Truss is an entertaining, well-read scold in a culture that could use more scolding."

—*USA Today*

"A witty look at the amusing foibles of punctuation."

—*Reader's Digest*

"Lynne Truss has done the English-speaking world a huge service."

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

"This book changed my life in small, perfect ways like learning how to make better coffee or fold an omelet. It's the perfect gift for anyone who cares about grammar and a gentle introduction for those who don't care enough."

—*The Boston Sunday Globe*

"Truss's scholarship is impressive and never dry."

—Edmund Morris, *The New York Times*

"Witty and playful."

—*Time Out New York*

"At long last—a worthy tribute to punctuation's stepchildren: the neglected semicolon, the enigmatic ellipses and the mad dash. Punc-rock on!"

—James Lipton, author of *An Exaltation of Larks* and host of *Inside the Actor's Studio*

BARRY LEWIS

Lynne Truss is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today, or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door* and *The Lynne Truss Treasury*. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, for which she won Britain's Book of the Year Award, has sold more than three million copies worldwide. Truss is a regular host on BBC Radio 4, a *Times* (London) columnist, and the author of numerous radio comedy dramas. She lives in Brighton, England.

Eats, Shoots & Leaves

The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation

LYNNE TRUSS

GOTHAM BOOKS

GOTHAM BOOKS
Published by Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.); Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England; Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd); Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd); Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India; Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd); Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Gotham Books, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Originally published in Great Britain in 2003 by Profile Books, Ltd.
Previously published as a Gotham Books hardcover edition.

First trade paperback printing, April 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright © 2003 by Miraculous Panda Ltd.
All rights reserved

Gotham Books and the skyscraper logo are trademarks of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

ISBN: 1-592-40203-8

Printed in the United States of America

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

To the memory of the striking Bolshevik printers of St Petersburg who, in 1905, demanded to be paid the same rate for punctuation marks as for letters, and thereby directly precipitated the first Russian Revolution

Contents

Foreword by Frank McCourt	xi
Publisher's Note	xv
Preface	xvii
Introduction – The Seventh Sense	1
The Tractable Apostrophe	35
That'll Do, Comma	68
Airs and Graces	103
Cutting a Dash	132
A Little Used Punctuation Mark	168
Merely Conventional Signs	177
Bibliography	205

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the many writers on punctuation who did all the hard work of formulating the clear rules I have doubtless muddied in this book. G. V. Carey's *Mind the Stop* (1939) and Eric Partridge's *You Have a Point There* (1953) are acknowledged classics; modern writers such as David Crystal, Loreto Todd, Graham King, Keith Waterhouse, Tim Austin, Kingsley Amis, Philip Howard, Nicholson Baker, William Hartston and R. L. Trask were all inspirational. Special thanks go to Cathy Stewart, Anne Baker and Gillian Forrester; also to Penny Vine, who set me off on this journey in the first place. Nigel Hall told me the panda joke; Michael Handelzalts told me about the question mark in Hebrew; and Adam Beeson told me where to find the dash on my keyboard. Learned copy-editors have attempted to

sort out my commas and save me from embarrassment. I thank them very much. Where faults obstinately remain, they are mine alone. Finally, I would like to thank Andrew Franklin for his encouraging involvement along the way, and the hundreds of readers who generously responded to articles in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Author* and *Writers' News*. It was very good to know that I was not alone.

Foreword

If Lynne Truss were Catholic I'd nominate her for sainthood. As it is, thousands of English teachers from Maine to Maui will be calling down blessings on her merry, learned head for the gift of her book, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.

It's a book about punctuation. Punctuation, if you don't mind! (I hesitated over that exclamation mark, and it's all her doing.) The book is so spirited, so scholarly, those English teachers will sweep all other topics aside to get to, you guessed it, punctuation. Parents and children will gather by the fire many an evening to read passages on the history of the semicolon and the terrible things being done to the apostrophe. Once the poor stepchild of grammar (is that comma OK here?), punctuation will emerge as the Cinderella of the English language.

There are heroes and villains in this book. Oh, you never thought such could be possible? You never thought a book on punctuation could contain raw sex? Well, here is Lynne Truss bemoaning the sad fact she never volunteered to have the babies of Aldus Manutius the Elder (1450–1515). (Help! In that last sentence does the period go inside the parenthesis/bracket or outside?) If you actually know who Aldus was you get the door prize and, perhaps, Ms. Truss will have your babies.

Aldus Manutius the Elder invented the italic typeface and printed the first semicolon. His son, yes, Aldus the Younger, declared in 1566, "that the main object of punctuation was the clarification of syntax."

"Ho hum," you say or, if you're American, "Big deal." Very well. You're entitled to your ignorance, but pause a moment, dear reader, and imagine this page of deathless prose, the one you're reading, without punctuation.

In the villain department I think greengrocers get a bad rap. No, this doesn't come from Ms. Truss. She merely notes their tendency to stick in apostrophes where apostrophes had never gone before. I

feel no such sympathy for the manager of my local supermarket who must have a cellarful of apostrophes he doesn't know what to do with: "Egg's, $1.29 a doz.," for heaven's sake! (In the U.S. it's "heaven's sakes.")

Egg's, and it's not even a possessive.

Lynne Truss has a great soul and I wouldn't mind drinking tea out of a saucer with her—when you read the book you'll see what I mean—except that, on occasion, she lets her Inner Stickler get out of hand. She tells us of "a shopkeeper in Bristol who deliberately stuck ungrammatical signs in his window as a ruse to draw people into the shop; they would come to complain, and he would then talk them into buying something." Then she flings down the gauntlet: ". . . he would be ill-advised to repeat this ploy once my punctuation vigilantes are on the loose." (Notice my masterly use of the ellipsis. Hold your admiration. I owe it all to Lynne.)

I would have that Bristol shopkeeper knighted. Imagine the conversations in his shop. Irate customers skewering him on points of grammar. You could write a play, a movie on this shopkeeper. Track

him down, Lynne. Bring him to London. Present him at court.

On second thought, present Lynne Truss at court. The Queen needs cheering up, and what better way than to wax sexy with Ms. Truss over Aldus Manutius, the Elder and the Younger, their italics, their proto-semicolon.

O, to be an English teacher in the Age of Truss.

—Frank McCourt
January 2004

Publisher's Note

Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* has been reprinted exactly as it was in its original British edition, complete with British examples, spellings and, yes, punctuation. There are a few subtle differences between British and American punctuation which the author has addressed in her preface to the North American edition. Any attempt at a complete Americanization of this book would have been akin to an effort to Americanize the Queen of England: futile and, this publisher feels, misguided. Please enjoy this narrative history of punctuation as it was meant to be enjoyed, bone-dry humour and cultural references intact, courtesy of Lynne Truss and all of us here at Gotham Books.

Preface

To be clear from the beginning: no one involved in the production of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* expected the words "runaway" and "bestseller" would ever be associated with it, let alone upon the cover of an American edition. Had the Spirit of Christmas Best-sellers Yet to Come knocked at the rather modest front door of my small London publisher in the summer of 2003 and said, "I see hundreds of thousands of copies of your little book about punctuation sold before Christmas. It will be debated in every national newspaper and mentioned, yea, even in the House of Lords, where a woman named Lady Strange—I kid thee not—will actually tell the panda joke," I'm afraid the Spirit would have been sent whiffling off down Clerkenwell Road with the sound of merry, disbelieving laughter ringing in its

ears. "Lady Strange," we would have repeated, chuckling, for hours afterwards. "Honestly, what are these prophetic spirits of old London town *coming to* these days?"

Personally, I clung on to one thing when *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* began its rush up the charts. Since the rallying cry for the book had been chosen pretty early on, I referred to it continually to steady my nerves and remind myself of my original aspirations—which were certainly plucky but at the same time not the least bit confident of universal appeal. "Sticklers unite!" I had written as this rallying cry. "You have nothing to lose but your sense of proportion (and arguably you didn't have a lot of that to begin with)." There you are, then. My hopes for *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* were bold but bathetic; chirpy but feet-on-the-ground; presumptuous yet significantly parenthetical. My book was aimed at the tiny minority of British people "who love punctuation and don't like to see it mucked about with". When my own mother suggested we print on the front of the book "For the select few," I was hurt, I admit it; I bit my lip and blinked a tear. Yet I knew what she meant. I am the writer, after all, who once wrote a

whole comic novel about Lewis Carroll and Alfred, Lord Tennyson and expected other people to be interested. Oh yes, I have learned that lesson the hard way.

I still have no idea whether sticklers are uniting in the UK, but I somehow doubt it, despite the staggering sales. Grammatical sticklers are the worst people for finding common cause because it is in their nature (obviously) to pick holes in everyone, even their best friends. Honestly, what an annoying bunch of people. One supporter of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* wrote a 1,400-word column in *The Times* of London explaining (with glorious self-importance) that while his admiration for my purpose was "total", he disagreed with virtually everything I said. So I am not sure my stickler-chums are, as I write this, sitting down to get things sorted out. What did become depressingly clear, however, was that my personal hunches about the state of the language were horribly correct: standards of punctuation in general in the UK are indeed approaching the point of illiteracy; self-justified philistines ("Get a life!") are truly in the driving seat of our culture; and a lot of well-educated sensitive people really have been

weeping friendlessly in caves for the past few years, praying for someone—anyone—to write a book about punctuation with a panda on the cover.

I don't know how bad things are in America, but in the UK I cannot emphasise it enough: standards of punctuation are abysmal. Encouraged to conduct easy tests on television, I discovered to my horror that most British people truly do not know their apostrophe from their elbow. "I'm an Oxbridge intellectual," slurred a chap in Brighton, where we were asking passers-by to "pin the apostrophe on the sentence" for a harmless afternoon chat-show. He immediately placed an apostrophe (oh no!) in a possessive "its". The high-profile editor of a national newspaper made the same mistake on a morning show, scoring two correct points out of a possible seven. On a TV news bulletin, the results of a vox pop item were shown on screen under the heading "Grammer Test"—the spelling of which I assumed was a joke until I realised nobody in the studio was laughing. Meanwhile well-wishers sent hundreds of delightful/horrific examples of idiotic sign-writing, my current favourite being the roadside warning CHILDREN DRIVE SLOWLY—courtesy of the wonderful

Shakespearean actor Timothy West. Evidently, this sign—inadvertently descriptive of the disappointing road speeds attainable by infants at the wheel—was eventually altered (but sadly not improved) by the addition of a comma, becoming CHILDREN, DRIVE SLOWLY—a kindly exhortation, perhaps, which might even save lives among those self-same reckless juvenile road-users; but still not quite what the writer really had in mind.

By far the oddest and most demoralising response to my book, however, took place at a bookshop event in Piccadilly. It is a story that, if nothing else, proves the truth of that depressing old adage about taking a horse to water. I was signing copies of my book when a rather bedraggled woman came up and said, despairingly, "Oh, I'd *love* to learn about punctuation." Spotting a sure thing (you know how it is), I said with a little laugh, "Then this is the book for you, madam!" I believe my pen actually hovered above the dedication page, as I waited for her to tell me her name.

"No, I mean it," she insisted—as if I had disagreed with her. "I really would *love* to know how to do it. I mean, I did learn it at school, but I've forgotten

it now, and it's awful. I put all my commas in the wrong place, and as for the apostrophe . . . !" I nodded, still smiling. This all seemed familiar enough. "So shall I sign it to anyone in particular?" I said. "And I'm a *teacher*," she went on. "And I'm quite ashamed really, not knowing about grammar and all that; so I'd love to know about punctuation, but the trouble is, *there's just nowhere you can turn, is there?*"

This was quite unsettling. She shrugged, defeated, and I hoped she would go away. I said again that the book really did explain many basic things about punctuation; she said again that the basic things of punctuation were *exactly* what nobody was ever prepared to explain to an adult person. I must admit, I started to wonder feverishly whether I was being secretly filmed by publishers of rival punctuation books who had set up the whole thing. I even wondered briefly: had any author in Hatchards (a bookseller established in 1797) ever hit a customer, or was I destined to be the first? Throughout the encounter, I kept smiling at her and nodding at the book, but she never took the hint. In the end, thank goodness, she slid away, leaving me to put my coat over my head and scream.

It was the same kind of strenuous apathy, I suppose, that I refer to on page 33, drawing on the deathless line in Woody Allen's *Small Time Crooks*: "I've always wanted to know how to spell Connecticut." I tend to feel that if a person genuinely wants to know how to spell Connecticut, you see, they will make efforts to look it up. Or, failing that, if a book announcing itself as *The Only Way to Spell Connecticut is This* is to be found in heaps on a table in front of them, they will think, "Hang on, I might get this!" But it turns out there are people whom you simply cannot help, because it suits them to say, with a shrug, "Do you know, I've always wanted to know how to use an apostrophe—and oh dear, I don't know how to wash my hair either." The fact that these people are sometimes editors of national newspapers and Oxbridge intellectuals is just an indication of how low our society's intellectual aspirations have sunk.

It is customary in the UK, incidentally, to blame all examples of language erosion on the pernicious influence of the US. Certainly American spellings

are creeping in to our shop signs (GLAMOR GIRL! I noticed in a huge chain pharmacy over Christmas—where it ought to have been "Glamour" with a "u"). But in the case of our deteriorating understanding of commas and apostrophes, we have no one to blame but ourselves. While significant variations exist between British and American usage, these are matters for quite rarefied concern. You say "parentheses" while we say "brackets" (see page 160)—but to people who call an apostrophe "one of them floating comma things" it doesn't matter very much. They are unlikely to spot that American usage interestingly places all terminal punctuation inside closing quotation marks, while British usage sometimes "picks and chooses". (Like that.) People who identify "that dot-thing" as the mark at the end of a sentence probably don't care that the American "period" is the equivalent of the British "full stop", or that "exclamation point" is the US way of saying "exclamation mark". We probably don't use the term "inverted commas" as much as we used to in Britain, but nobody in America has forced us to give them up.

My American correspondents, however, have

made it pretty clear that the US is not immune to similar levels of public illiteracy. Carved in stone (in *stone*, mind you) in a Florida shopping mall one may see the splendidly apt quotation from Euripides, "Judge a tree from it's fruit: not the leaves"—and it is all too easy to imagine the stone-mason dithering momentarily over that monumental apostrophe, mallet in hand, chisel poised. Can an apostrophe ever be wrong, he asks himself, as he answers "Nah!" and decisively strikes home and the chips fly out. Meanwhile a casual drive in America is quite as horrifying to a stickler as it is in the UK. CHILDRENS HOME; READERS OUTLET; PLEASE DO NOT LOCK THIS DOOR BETWEEN THE HOUR'S OF 9AM AND 6:30PM.

Might the tide turn, however? Are there any reasons to be cheerful on behalf of punctuation? Well, there is one—and although modesty ought to forbid me from mentioning it, it is the astonishing response *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* has had in the UK. Some may say that the British are obsessed with class difference and that knowing your apostrophes is a way of belittling the uneducated. To which accusation, I say (mainly), "Pah!" How can it be a matter of class difference when ignorance is universal?

Why should it only be middle-class people who care about the language? I come personally from a working-class background. I went to a state school, and there are many street traders in my immediate family. Punctuation is no more a class issue than the air we breathe. It is a system of printers' marks that has aided the clarity of the written word for the past half-millennium, and if its time has come to be replaced, let's just use this moment to celebrate what an elegant and imaginative job it did while it had the chance. Caring about matters of language is unfortunately generally associated with small-minded people, but that doesn't make it a small issue. The disappearance of punctuation (including word spacing, capital letters, and so on) indicates an enormous shift in our attitude to the written word, and nobody knows where it will end.

In the meantime, however, I suggest that we ponder the case of Defeatist Bookshop Woman, and consider what she must be like to live with. I may even have to write a fictional character based on her. I can see her now, holding up the queue at an ice-cream vendor, explaining her predicament: "If only

one could get an ice cream from somewhere, but it's hopeless!" Or standing outside Lincoln Center with a ticket labelled "Bolshoi" in her hand, saying, "If only I could see a ballet once in my life! But I suppose it's not to be."

Introduction – The Seventh Sense

Either this will ring bells for you, or it won't. A printed banner has appeared on the concourse of a petrol station near to where I live. "Come inside," it says, "for CD's, VIDEO's, DVD's, and BOOK's."

If this satanic sprinkling of redundant apostrophes causes no little gasp of horror or quickening of the pulse, you should probably put down this book at once. By all means congratulate yourself that you are not a pedant or even a stickler; that you are happily equipped to live in a world of plummeting punctuation standards; but just don't bother to go any further. For any true stickler, you see, the sight of the plural word "Book's" with an apostrophe in it will trigger a ghastly private emotional process similar to the stages of bereavement, though greatly accelerated. First there is shock.

Within seconds, shock gives way to disbelief, disbelief to pain, and pain to anger. Finally (and this is where the analogy breaks down), anger gives way to a righteous urge to perpetrate an act of criminal damage with the aid of a permanent marker.

It's tough being a stickler for punctuation these days. One almost dare not get up in the mornings. True, one occasionally hears a marvellous punctuation-fan joke about a panda who "eats, shoots and leaves", but in general the stickler's exquisite sensibilities are assaulted from all sides, causing feelings of panic and isolation. A sign at a health club will announce, "I'ts party time, on Saturday 24th May we are have a disco/party night for free, it will be a ticket only evening." Advertisements offer decorative services to "wall's – ceiling's – door's ect". Meanwhile a newspaper placard announces "FAN'S FURY AT STADIUM INQUIRY", which sounds quite interesting until you look inside the paper and discover that the story concerns a quite large mob of fans, actually – not just the lone hopping-mad fan so promisingly indicated by the punctuation.

Everywhere one looks, there are signs of ignorance and indifference. What about that film *Two*

Weeks Notice? Guaranteed to give sticklers a very nasty turn, that was – its posters slung along the sides of buses in letters four feet tall, with no apostrophe in sight. I remember, at the start of the *Two Weeks Notice* publicity campaign in the spring of 2003, emerging cheerfully from Victoria Station (was I whistling?) and stopping dead in my tracks with my fingers in my mouth. Where was the apostrophe? Surely there should be an apostrophe on that bus? If it were "one month's notice" there would be an apostrophe (I reasoned); yes, and if it were "one week's notice" there would be an apostrophe. Therefore "two weeks' notice" requires an apostrophe! Buses that I should have caught (the 73; two 38s) sailed off up Buckingham Palace Road while I communed thus at length with my inner stickler, unable to move or, indeed, regain any sense of perspective.

Part of one's despair, of course, is that the world cares nothing for the little shocks endured by the sensitive stickler. While we look in horror at a badly punctuated sign, the world carries on around us, blind to our plight. We are like the little boy in *The Sixth Sense* who can see dead people, except that we can see dead punctuation. Whisper it in petrified

little-boy tones: dead punctuation is invisible to everyone else – yet we see it *all the time*. No one understands us seventh-sense people. They regard us as freaks. When we point out illiterate mistakes we are often aggressively instructed to "get a life" by people who, interestingly, display no evidence of having lives themselves. Naturally we become timid about making our insights known, in such inhospitable conditions. Being burned as a witch is not safely enough off the agenda. A sign has gone up in a local charity-shop window which says, baldly, "Can you spare any old records" (no question mark) and I dither daily outside on the pavement. Should I go in and mention it? It does *matter* that there's no question mark on a direct question. It is appalling ignorance. But what will I do if the elderly charity-shop lady gives me the usual disbelieving stare and then tells me to bugger off, get a life and mind my own business?

On the other hand, I'm well aware there is little profit in asking for sympathy for sticklers. We are not the easiest people to feel sorry for. We refuse to patronise any shop with checkouts for "eight items or less" (because it should be "fewer"), and we got

very worked up after 9/11 not because of Osama bin-Laden but because people on the radio kept saying "enormity" when they meant "magnitude", and we really hate that. When we hear the construction "Mr Blair was stood" (instead of "standing") we suck our teeth with annoyance, and when words such as "phenomena", "media" or "cherubim" are treated as singular ("The media says it was quite a phenomena looking at those cherubims"), some of us cannot suppress actual screams. Sticklers never read a book without a pencil at hand, to correct the typographical errors. In short, we are unattractive know-all obsessives who get things out of proportion and are in continual peril of being disowned by our exasperated families.

I know precisely when my own damned stickler personality started to get the better of me. In the autumn of 2002, I was making a series of programmes about punctuation for Radio 4 called *Cutting a Dash*. My producer invited John Richards of the Apostrophe Protection Society to come and talk to us. At that time, I was quite tickled by the idea of an Apostrophe Protection Society, on whose website could be found photographic examples of ungrammatical

signs such as "The judges decision is final" and "No dog's". We took Mr Richards on a trip down Berwick Street Market to record his reaction to some greengrocers' punctuation ("Potatoe's" and so on), and then sat down for a chat about how exactly one goes about protecting a conventional printer's mark that, through no fault of its own, seems to be terminally flailing in a welter of confusion.

What the APS does is write courteous letters, he said. A typical letter would explain the correct use of the apostrophe, and express the gentle wish that, should the offending "BOB,S PETS" sign (with a comma) be replaced one day, this well-meant guidance might be borne in mind. It was at this point that I felt a profound and unignorable stirring. It was the awakening of my Inner Stickler. "But that's not enough!" I said. Suddenly I was a-buzz with ideas. What about issuing stickers printed with the words "This apostrophe is not necessary"? What about telling people to shin up ladders at dead of night with an apostrophe-shaped stencil and a tin of paint? Why did the Apostrophe Protection Society not have a militant wing? Could I start one? Where do you get balaclavas?

9

Punctuation has been defined many ways. Some grammarians use the analogy of stitching: punctuation as the basting that holds the fabric of language in shape. Another writer tells us that punctuation marks are the traffic signals of language: they tell us to slow down, notice this, take a detour, and stop. I have even seen a rather fanciful reference to the full stop and comma as "the invisible servants in fairy tales – the ones who bring glasses of water and pillows, not storms of weather or love". But best of all, I think, is the simple advice given by the style book of a national newspaper: that punctuation is "a courtesy designed to help readers to understand a story without stumbling".

Isn't the analogy with good manners perfect? Truly good manners are invisible: they ease the way for others, without drawing attention to themselves. It is no accident that the word "punctilious" ("attentive to formality or etiquette") comes from the same original root word as punctuation. As we shall see, the practice of "pointing" our writing has always been offered in a spirit of helpfulness, to underline

meaning and prevent awkward misunderstandings between writer and reader. In 1644 a schoolmaster from Southwark, Richard Hodges, wrote in his *The English Primrose* that "great care ought to be had in writing, for the due observing of points: for, the neglect thereof will pervert the sense", and he quoted as an example, "My Son, if sinners intise [entice] thee consent thou, not refraining thy foot from their way." Imagine the difference to the sense, he says, if you place the comma after the word "not": "My Son, if sinners intise thee consent thou not, refraining thy foot from their way." This was the 1644 equivalent of Ronnie Barker in *Porridge*, reading the sign-off from a fellow lag's letter from home, "Now I must go and get on my lover", and then pretending to notice a comma, so hastily changing it to, "Now I must go and get on, my lover."

To be fair, many people who couldn't punctuate their way out of a paper bag are still interested in the way punctuation can alter the sense of a string of words. It is the basis of all "I'm sorry, I'll read that again" jokes. Instead of "What would you with the king?" you can have someone say in Marlowe's *Edward II*, "What? Would you? *With the*

king?" The consequences of mispunctuation (and re-punctuation) have appealed to both great and little minds, and in the age of the fancy-that email a popular example is the comparison of two sentences:

A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Which, I don't know, really makes you *think*, doesn't it? Here is a popular "Dear Jack" letter that works in much the same fundamentally pointless way:

Dear Jack,
I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy – will you let me be yours?

Jill

Dear Jack,
I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men I yearn! For you I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?
Yours,

Jill

But just to show there is nothing very original about all this, five hundred years before email a similarly tiresome puzzle was going round:

> Every Lady in this Land
> Hath 20 Nails on *each* Hand;
> *Five & twenty* on Hands *and Feet*;
> And this is true, without deceit.

(Every lady in this land has twenty nails. On each hand, five; and twenty on hands and feet.)

So all this is quite amusing, but it is noticeable that no one emails the far more interesting example of the fateful mispunctuated telegram that precipit-

ated the Jameson Raid on the Transvaal in 1896 – I suppose that's a reflection of modern education for you. Do you know of the Jameson Raid, described as a "fiasco"? Marvellous punctuation story. Throw another log on that fire. The Transvaal was a Boer republic at the time, and it was believed that the British and other settlers around Johannesburg (who were denied civil rights) would rise up if Jameson invaded. But unfortunately, when the settlers sent their telegraphic invitation to Jameson, it included a tragic ambiguity:

> It is under these circumstances that we feel constrained to call upon you to come to our aid should a disturbance arise here the circumstances are so extreme that we cannot but believe that you and the men under you will not fail to come to the rescue of people who are so situated.

As Eric Partridge points out in his *Usage and Abusage*, if you place a full stop after the word "aid" in this passage, the message is unequivocal. It says, "Come at once!" If you put it after "here", however, it says something more like, "We might need you at some later date depending on what happens here, but in the meantime – don't call us, Jameson, old

boy; we'll call you." Of course, the message turned up at *The Times* with a full stop after "aid" (no one knows who put it there) and poor old Jameson just sprang to the saddle, without anybody wanting or expecting him to.

All of which substantiates Partridge's own metaphor for punctuation, which is that it's "the line along which the train (composition, style, writing) must travel if it isn't to run away with its driver". In other words, punctuation keeps sense on the rails. Of course people will always argue over levels of punctuation, accusing texts of having too much or too little. There is an enjoyable episode in Peter Hall's *Diaries* when, in advance of directing Albert Finney in *Hamlet*, he "fillets" the text of "practically all its punctuation except what is essential to sense" and then finds he has to live with the consequences. On August 21, 1975, he notes, "Shakespeare's text is always absurdly over-punctuated; generations of scholars have tried to turn him into a good grammarian." All of which sounds sensible enough, until we find the entry for the first rehearsal on September 22, which he describes as "good" but also admits was "a rough and ready, stumbling

reading, with people falling over words or misplaced emphases".

What happened to punctuation? Why is it so disregarded when it is self-evidently so useful in preventing enormous mix-ups? A headline in today's paper says, "DEAD SONS PHOTOS MAY BE RELEASED" – the story relating to dead sons in the plural, but you would never know. The obvious culprit is the recent history of education practice. We can blame the pedagogues. Until 1960, punctuation was routinely taught in British schools. A child sitting a County Schools exam in 1937 would be asked to punctuate the following puzzler: "Charles the First walked and talked half an hour after his head was cut off" (answer: "Charles the First walked and talked. Half an hour after, his head was cut off"). Today, thank goodness, the National Curriculum ensures that when children are eight, they are drilled in the use of the comma, even if their understanding of grammar is at such an early age a bit hazy. For *Cutting a Dash* we visited a school in Cheshire where quite

small children were being taught that you use commas in the following situations:

1 in a list
2 before dialogue
3 to mark out additional information

Which was very impressive. Identifying "additional information" at the age of eight is quite an achievement, and I know for a fact that I couldn't have done it. But if things are looking faintly more optimistic under the National Curriculum, there remains the awful truth that, for over a quarter of a century, punctuation and English grammar were simply not taught in the majority of schools, with the effect that A-level examiners annually bewailed the condition of examinees' written English, while nothing was done. Candidates couldn't even *spell* the words "grammar" and "sentence", let alone use them in any well-informed way.

Attending a grammar school myself between 1966 and 1973, I don't remember being taught punctuation, either. There was a comical moment in the fifth year when our English teacher demanded,

"But you *have* had lessons in grammar?" and we all looked shifty, as if the fault was ours. We had been taught Latin, French and German grammar; but English grammar was something we felt we were expected to infer from our reading – which is doubtless why I came a cropper over "its" and "it's". Like many uninstructed people, I surmised that, if there was a version of "its" with an apostrophe *before* the "s", there was somehow logically bound to be a version of "its" with an apostrophe *after* the "s" as well. A shame no one set me right on this common misapprehension, really. But there you are. I just remember a period when, convinced that an apostrophe was definitely required *somewhere*, I would cunningly suspend a very small one immediately above the "s", to cover all eventualities. Imagine my teenage wrath when, time after time, my homework was returned with this well-meant floating apostrophe struck out. "Why?" I would rail, using all my powers of schoolgirl inference and getting nowhere. Hadn't I balanced it perfectly? How could the teacher possibly tell I had put it in the wrong place?

Luckily for me, I was exceptionally interested in English and got there in the end. While other girls

were out with boyfriends on Sunday afternoons, getting their necks disfigured by love bites, I was at home with the wireless listening to an Ian Messiter quiz called *Many a Slip*, in which erudite and amusing contestants spotted grammatical errors in pieces of prose. It was a fantastic programme. I dream sometimes they have brought it back. Panellists such as Isobel Barnett and David Nixon would interrupt Roy Plomley with a buzz and say "Tautology!" Around this same time, when other girls of my age were attending the Isle of Wight Festival and having abortions, I bought a copy of Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* and covered it in sticky-backed plastic so that it would last a lifetime (it has). Funny how I didn't think any of this was peculiar at the time, when it was behaviour with "Proto Stickler" written all over it. But I do see now why it was no accident that I later wound up as a sub-editor with a literal blue pencil.

But to get back to those dark-side-of-the-moon years in British education when teachers upheld the view that grammar and spelling got in the way of self-expression, it is arguable that the timing of their grammatical apathy could not have been worse. In

the 1970s, no educationist would have predicted the explosion in universal written communication caused by the personal computer, the internet and the key-pad of the mobile phone. But now, look what's happened: everyone's a writer! Everyone is posting film reviews on Amazon that go like this:

> I watched this film [*About a Boy*] a few days ago expecting the usual hugh Grant bumbling ... character Ive come to loathe/expect over the years. I was thoroughly suprised. This film was great, one of the best films i have seen in a long time. The film focuses around one man who starts going to a single parents meeting, to meet women, one problem He doesnt have a child.

Isn't this sad? People who have been taught nothing about their own language are (contrary to educational expectations) spending all their leisure hours attempting to string sentences together for the edification of others. And there is no editing on the internet! Meanwhile, in the world of text messages, ignorance of grammar and punctuation obviously doesn't affect a person's ability to communicate messages such as "C U later". But if you try anything longer, it always seems to turn out much

like the writing of the infant Pip in *Great Expectations*:

> MI DEER JO I OPE U R KRWITE WELL I OPE I SHAL SON B HABELL 4 2 TEEDGE U JO AN THEN WE SHORL B SO GLODD AN WEN I M PRENGTD 2 U JO WOT LARX AN BLEVE ME INF XN PIP.

Now, there are many people who claim that they do fully punctuate text messages. For *Cutting a Dash*, we asked people in the street (outside the Palladium Theatre, as it happens, at about 5pm) if they used proper punctuation when sending text messages, and were surprised – not to say incredulous – when nine out of ten people said yes. Some of them said they used semicolons and parentheses and everything. "I'm a grammar geek," explained one young New Zealand woman. "I'm trying to teach my teenage son to punctuate properly," said a nice scholarly-looking man. I kept offering these respondents an easy way out: "It's a real fag, going through that punctuation menu, though? I mean, it would be quite understandable if you couldn't be bothered." But we had evidently stumbled into Grammar Geek Alley, and there was nothing we could do. "Of course I punctuate my text messages,

I did A-level English," one young man explained, with a look of scorn. Evidently an A level in English is a sacred trust, like something out of *The Lord of the Rings*. You must go forth with your A level and protect the English language with your bow of elfin gold.

But do you know what? I didn't believe those people. Either they were weirdly self-selecting or they were simply lying for the microphone. Point out to the newsagent that "DEAD SONS PHOTOS MAY BE RELEASED" is not grammatically complete and he will hastily change the subject to the price of milk. Stand outside a Leicester Square cinema indicating – with a cut-out apostrophe on a stick – how the title *Two Weeks Notice* might be easily grammatically corrected (I did this), and not a soul will take your side or indeed have a clue what your problem is. And that's sad. Taking our previous analogies for punctuation, what happens when it isn't used? Well, if punctuation is the stitching of language, language comes apart, obviously, and all the buttons fall off. If punctuation provides the traffic signals, words bang into each other and everyone ends up in Minehead. If one can bear for a moment to think of punctuation

marks as those invisibly beneficent fairies (I'm sorry), our poor deprived language goes parched and pillowless to bed. And if you take the courtesy analogy, a sentence no longer holds the door open for you to walk in, but drops it in your face as you approach.

The reason it's worth standing up for punctuation is not that it's an arbitrary system of notation known only to an over-sensitive elite who have attacks of the vapours when they see it misapplied. The reason to stand up for punctuation is that without it there is no reliable way of communicating meaning. Punctuation herds words together, keeps others apart. Punctuation directs you how to read, in the way musical notation directs a musician how to play. As we shall see in the chapter on commas, it was first used by Greek dramatists two thousand years ago to guide actors between breathing points – thus leading to the modern explanation of why a cat is not a comma:

> A cat has claws at the ends of its paws.
> A comma's a pause at the end of a clause.

Words strung together without punctuation

recall those murky murals Rolf Harris used to paint, where you kept tilting your head and wondering what it was. Then Rolf would dip a small brush into a pot of white and – to the deathless, teasing line, "Can you guess what it is yet?" – add a line here, a dot there, a curly bit, and suddenly all was clear. Good heavens, it looked like just a splodge of colours and all along it was a kangaroo in football boots having a sandwich! Similarly, take a bit of unpunctuated prose, add the dots and flourishes in the right place, stand back, and what have you got?

> My dear Joe,
> I hope you are quite well. I hope I shall soon be able to teach you, Joe – and then we shall be so glad. And when I am apprenticed to you, Joe: *what larks!* Believe me, in affection,
> Pip

Every language expert from Dr Johnson onwards has accepted that it's a mistake to attempt to "embalm the language". Of course it must change and adapt.

When the time comes that Pip's original text is equally readable with the one above, then our punctuation system can be declared dead and no one will mind. In the chapters that follow, we will see how it is in the nature of printers' conventions (which is all punctuation marks are) to develop over time, usually in the cause of making language less fussy on the page. It is useful to remember, however – as we struggle to preserve a system under attack – that a reader from a couple of hundred years ago would be shocked by present-day punctuation that we now regard as flawless and elegant. Why don't we use capital letters for all nouns any more? Why don't we use full stops after everyday abbreviations? Why not combine colons with dashes sometimes? Where did all the commas go? Why isn't there a hyphen in "today"? Lawks-a-mussy, what sort of punctuation chickens are we at the beginning of the 21st century?

Well, taking just the initial capital letters and the terminating full stop (the rest will come later), they have not always been there. The initial letter of a sentence was first capitalised in the 13th century, but the rule was not consistently applied until the 16th.

In manuscripts of the 4th to 7th centuries, the first letter of the page was decorated, regardless of whether it was the start of a sentence – and indeed, while we are on the subject of decorated letters, who can forget the scene in *Not the Nine O'Clock News* in which an elderly, exhausted monk unbent himself after years of illuminating the first page of the Bible, only to see that he had written, gloriously, "Benesis"? Nowadays, the convention for starting a new sentence with a capital letter is so ingrained that word-processing software will not allow you to type a full stop and then a lower case letter; it will capitalise automatically. This is bad news, obviously, for chaps like e.e. cummings, but good news for those who have spotted the inexorable advance of lower case into book titles, television captions, company names and (of course) everything on the non-case-sensitive internet, and lie awake at night worrying about the confusion this is spreading in young minds.

Meanwhile, the full stop is surely the simplest mark to understand – so long as everyone continues to have some idea what a sentence is, which is a condition that can't be guaranteed. As the original

"point" (so called by Chaucer), it appears to occupy a place in our grammar that is unassailable. Every time the sentence ends, there is a full stop (or a full-stop substitute such as the exclamation mark or the question mark). As easy as that. If you resort to full stops all the time, by the way, and don't use anything else, and keep to very short sentences, people who have read H. W. Fowler's *The King's English* (1906) will accuse you of "spot plague" and perhaps also assume you are modelling yourself on Ernest Hemingway, but the good news is you can't go wrong grammatically. The American name "period", incidentally, was one of its original English names too. Just as the word "comma" originally referred to the piece of writing itself (rather than the mark that contained it), so "period" referred to a longer piece of writing. Shakespeare called the full stop a period in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he described nervous players "making periods in the midst of sentences". This was on the occasion of one of the first (and unfunniest) scenes of someone wrecking the sense of a speech by putting the full stops in the wrong place:

> We do not come as minding to content you,
> Our true intent is. All for your delight
> We are not here.
>
> William Shakespeare,
> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, scene i

Ho hum. But we should not be complacent even on behalf of the robust and unambiguous full stop. Young people call them dots, you know. They are now accustomed to following a full stop with a lower-case letter and *no space*. Ask them to write "seven-thirty" in figures (7.30) and they will probably either put a colon in it (because their American software uses a colon for 7:30) or write 7-30 or 7'30. Meanwhile, the illiterate default punctuation mark is nowadays the comma, which gives even more cause for alarm:

> The tap water is safe to drink in tea and
> coffee, however, we recommend using
> bottled water for drinking, it can be
> purchased very cheaply in the nearby shops.

Sixty years ago, when he wrote *Mind the Stop*,

G. V. Carey gave just one paragraph to the apostrophe, because there was so little to say about it. "If only all marks were so easy," he sighed. But this was in an age when people had been taught the difference between "Am I looking at my dinner or the dog's?" and "Am I looking at my dinner or the dogs?" What I hope will become clear from this book is that one can usefully combine a descriptive and prescriptive approach to what is happening to this single aspect of the language. The descriptive sort of linguist tends to observe change in the language, note it, analyse it and manage not to wake up screaming every night. He will opine that if (say) the apostrophe is turning up in words such as "Books", then that's a sure sign nobody knows how to use it any more; that it has outlasted its usefulness; it is like Tinkerbell with her little light fading, sustained only by elicited applause; it will ultimately fade, extinguish and die. This is a highly sane and healthy point of view, of course – if a little emotionally cool. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, severely prescriptive grammarians would argue that, since they were taught at school in 1943 that you must never start a sentence with "And" or

"But", the modern world is benighted by ignorance and folly, and most of modern literature should be burned.

Somewhere between these positions is where I want us to end up: staunch because we understand the advantages of being staunch; flexible because we understand the rational and historical necessity to be flexible. In *Mind the Stop* Carey defines punctuation as being governed "two-thirds by rule and one-third by personal taste". My own position is simple: in some matters of punctuation there are simple rights and wrongs; in others, one must apply a good ear to good sense. I want the greatest clarity from punctuation, which means, supremely, that I want apostrophes where they should be, and I will not cease from mental fight nor shall my sword sleep in my hand (hang on, didn't "Jerusalem" begin with an "And"?) until everyone knows the difference between "its" and "it's" and bloody well nobody writes about "dead sons photos" without indicating whether the photos in question show one son or several. There is a rumour that in parts of the Civil Service workers have been pragmatically instructed to omit apostrophes because no one knows how to

use them any more – and this is the kind of pragmatism, I say along with Winston Churchill, "up with which we shall not put". How dare anyone make this decision on behalf of the apostrophe? What gives the Civil Service – or, indeed, Warner Brothers – the right to decide our Tinkerbell should die? How long will it be before a mainstream publisher allows an illiterate title into print? How long before the last few punctuation sticklers are obliged to take refuge together in caves?

So what I propose is action. Sticklers unite, you have nothing to lose but your sense of proportion, and arguably you didn't have a lot of that to begin with. Maybe we won't change the world, but at least we'll feel better. The important thing is to unleash your Inner Stickler, while at the same time not getting punched on the nose, or arrested for damage to private property. You know the campaign called "Pipe Down", against the use of piped music? Well, ours will be "Pipe Up". Be a nuisance. Do something. And if possible use a bright red pen. Send back emails that are badly punctuated; return letters; picket Harrods. Who cares if members of your family abhor your Inner Stickler and devoutly

wish you had an Inner Scooby-Doo instead? At least if you adopt a zero tolerance approach, when you next see a banner advertising "CD's, DVD's, Video's, and Book's", you won't just stay indoors getting depressed about it. Instead you will engage in some direct-action argy-bargy! Because – here's the important thing – you won't be alone.

That's always been the problem for sticklers, you see. The feeling of isolation. The feeling of nerdishness. One solitary obsessive, feebly armed with an apostrophe on a stick, will never have the nerve to demonstrate outside Warner Brothers on the issue of *Two Weeks Notice*. But if enough people could pull together in a common cause, who knows what we might accomplish? There are many obstacles to overcome here, not least our national characteristics of reserve (it's impolite to tell someone they're wrong), apathy (someone else will do it) and outright cowardice (is it worth being duffed up for the sake of a terminally ailing printer's convention?). But I have faith. I do have faith. And I also have an Inner Stickler that, having been unleashed, is now roaring, salivating and clawing the air in a quite alarming manner.

There is just one final thing holding us back, then. It is that every man is his own stickler. And while I am very much in favour of forming an army of well-informed punctuation vigilantes, I can foresee problems getting everyone to pull in the same direction. There will be those, for example, who insist that the Oxford comma is an abomination (the second comma in "ham, eggs, and chips"), whereas others are unmoved by the Oxford comma but incensed by the trend towards under-hyphenation – which the Oxford comma people have quite possibly never even noticed. Yes, as Evelyn Waugh wrote: "Everyone has always regarded any usage but his own as either barbarous or pedantic." Or, as Kingsley Amis put it less delicately in his book *The King's English* (1997), the world of grammar is divided into "berks and wankers" – berks being those who are outrageously slipshod about language, and wankers those who are (in our view) abhorrently over-precise. Left to the berks, the English language would "die of impurity, like late Latin". Left to the wankers, it would die instead of

purity, "like medieval Latin". Of course, the drawback is implicit. When you by nature subscribe to the view that everyone except yourself is a berk or a wanker, it is hard to bond with anybody in any rational common cause.

You think those thuggish chaps in movie heist gangs fall out a bit too quickly and mindlessly? Well, sticklers are worse. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera once fired a publisher who insisted on replacing a semicolon with a full stop; meanwhile, full-time editors working together on the same publication, using the same style book, will put hyphens in, take them out, and put them in again – all day, if necessary. The marginal direction to printers "STET" (meaning "let it stand" and cancelling an alteration) gets used rather a lot in these conditions. At *The Listener*, where I was literary editor from 1986 to 1990, I discovered that any efforts I made to streamline the prose on my pages would always be challenged by one particular sub-editor, who would proof-read my book reviews and archly insert literally dozens of little commas – each one of which I felt as a dart in my flesh. Of course, I never revealed the annoyance she caused. I would thank her, glance

at the blizzard of marks on the galley proof, wait for her to leave the room, and then (standing up to get a better run at it) attack the proof, feverishly crossing out everything she had added, and writing "STET", "STET", "STET", "STET", "STET" all down the page, until my arm got tired and I was spent. And don't forget: this comma contention was not a matter of right or wrong. It was just a matter of taste.

Eats, Shoots & Leaves is not a book about grammar. I am not a grammarian. To me a subordinate clause will for ever be (since I heard the actor Martin Jarvis describe it thus) one of Santa's little helpers. A degree in English language is not a prerequisite for caring about where a bracket is preferred to a dash, or a comma needs to be replaced by a semicolon. If I did not believe that everyone is capable of understanding where an apostrophe goes, I would not be writing this book. Even as a book about punctuation, it will not give all the answers. There are already umpteen excellent punctuation guides on the market; there is even a rather delightful publication for children called *The Punctuation Repair Kit*, which takes the line "Hey! It's uncool to be stupid!"

– which is a lie, of course, but you have to admire them for trying.

The trouble with all of these grammar books is that they are read principally by keen foreigners; meanwhile, native English-speakers who require their help are the last people who will make the effort to buy and read them. I am reminded of a scene in Woody Allen's *Small Time Crooks* when an oily Hugh Grant offers to help ignoramuses Allen and Tracey Ullman (newly wealthy) with any sort of cultural education. "Is there anything you want to know?" he asks Allen, who has been sullen throughout the interview. And Allen says reluctantly, "Well, I would like to learn how to spell Connecticut." What a great line that is. *I would like to learn how to spell Connecticut.* If you've similarly always wanted to know where to use an apostrophe, it means you never will, doesn't it? If only because it's so extremely easy to find out.

So if this book doesn't instruct about punctuation, what does it do? Well, you know those self-help books that give you permission to love yourself? This one gives you permission to love punctuation. It's about how we got the punctuation

we have today; how such a tiny but adaptable system of marks allows us to notate most (but not all) types of verbal expression; and how (according to Beachcomber) a greengrocer in days of yore inspired Good Queen Bess to create the post of Apostropher Royal. But mainly it's about making sticklers feel good about their seventh-sense ability to see dead punctuation (whisper it in verge-of-tears tones: "*It doesn't know it's dead*") and to defend their sense of humour. I have two cartoons I treasure. The first shows a row of ten Roman soldiers, one of them prone on the ground, with the cheerful caption (from a survivor of the cull), "Hey, this decimation isn't as bad as they say it is!" The second shows a bunch of vague, stupid-looking people standing outside a building, and behind them a big sign that says "Illiterates' Entrance". And do you want to know the awful truth? In the original drawing, it said, "Illiterate's Entrance", so I changed it. Painted correction fluid over the wrong apostrophe; inserted the right one. Yes, some of us were born to be punctuation vigilantes.

The Tractable Apostrophe

In the spring of 2001 the ITV1 show *Popstars* manufactured a pop phenomenon for our times: a singing group called Hear'Say. The announcement of the Hear'Say name was quite a national occasion, as I recall; people actually went out in very large numbers to buy their records; meanwhile, newspapers, who insist on precision in matters of address, at once learned to place Hear'Say's apostrophe correctly and attend to the proper spacing. To refer in print to this group as Hearsay (one word) would be wrong, you see. To call it Hear-Say (hyphenated) would show embarrassing ignorance of popular culture. And so it came to pass that Hear'Say's poor, oddly placed little apostrophe was replicated everywhere and no one gave a moment's thought to its sufferings. No one saw the pity of its

position, hanging there in eternal meaninglessness, silently signalling to those with eyes to see, "I'm a legitimate punctuation mark, get me out of here." Checking the Hear'Say website a couple of years later, I discover that the only good news in this whole sorry saga was that, well, basically, once Kym had left to marry Jack in January 2002 – after rumours, counter-rumours and official denials – the group thankfully folded within eighteen months of its inception.

Now, there are no laws against imprisoning apostrophes and making them look daft. Cruelty to punctuation is quite unlegislated: you can get away with pulling the legs off semicolons; shrivelling question marks on the garden path under a powerful magnifying glass; you name it. But the naming of Hear'Say in 2001 was nevertheless a significant milestone on the road to punctuation anarchy. As we shall see, the tractable apostrophe has always done its proper jobs in our language with enthusiasm and elegance, but it has never been taken seriously enough; its talent for adaptability has been cruelly taken for granted; and now, in an age of supreme graphic frivolity, we pay the price. Too

many jobs have been heaped on this tiny mark, and – far from complaining – the apostrophe has seemingly requested "More weight", just like that martyrish old codger in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, when religious bigots in black hats with buckles on are subjecting him to death by crushing. "More weight," the apostrophe has bravely said – if ever more faintly. "More weight," it manages to whisper still. But I ask you: how much more abuse must the apostrophe endure? Now that it's on its last legs (and idiotic showbiz promoters stick apostrophes in names for purely decorative purposes), isn't it time to recognise that the apostrophe needs our help?

The English language first picked up the apostrophe in the 16th century. The word in Greek means "turning away", and hence "omission" or "elision". In classical texts, it was used to mark dropped letters, as in *t'cius* for "tertius"; and when English printers adopted it, this was still its only function. Remember that comical pedant Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost* saying, "You find not the apostraphas, and so miss the accent"? Well, no, of course you don't, nobody remembers

anything said by that frightful bore, and we certainly shan't detain ourselves bothering to work out what he was driving at. All we need to know is that, in Shakespeare's time, an apostrophe indicated omitted letters, which meant Hamlet could say with supreme apostrophic confidence: "Fie on't! O fie!"; "'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd"; and even, "I am too much i' the sun" – the latter, incidentally, a clear case of a writer employing a new-fangled punctuation mark entirely for the sake of it, and condemning countless generations of serious long-haired actors to adopt a knowing expression and say *i'* – as if this actually added anything to the meaning.

If only the apostrophe's life had stayed that simple. At some point in the 17th century, however, printers started to intrude an apostrophe before the "s" in singular possessive cases ("the girl's dress"), and from then on quite frankly the whole thing has spiralled into madness. In the 18th century, printers started to put it after plural possessives as well ("the girls' dresses"). Some historians of grammar claim, incidentally, that the original possessive use of the apostrophe signified a contraction of the historic

"his"; and personally, I believed this attractive theory for many years, simply on the basis of knowing Ben Jonson's play *Sejanus, his Fall*, and reasoning that this was self-evidently halfway to "Sejanus's Fall". But blow me, if there aren't differences of opinion. There are other historians of grammar who say this Love-His-Labour-Is-Lost explanation is ignorant conjecture and should be forgotten as soon as heard. Certainly the Henry-His-Wives (Henry's Wives) rationalisation falls down noticeably when applied to female possessives, because "Elizabeth Her Reign" would have ended up logically as "Elizabeth'r Reign", which would have had the regrettable result of making people sound a) a bit stupid, b) a bit drunk, or c) a bit from the West Country.

So what are the jobs an apostrophe currently has on its CV? Before we start tearing out our hair at sloppy, ignorant current usage, first let us acknowledge the sobering wisdom of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*: "There never was a golden age in which the rules for the possessive apostrophe were clear-cut and known, understood and followed by most educated people." And then

let us check that we know the rules of what modern grammarians call "possessive determiners" and "possessive pronouns" – *none of which requires an apostrophe.*

Possessive determiners

my	our
your	your
his	their
her	their
its	their

Possessive pronouns

mine	ours
yours	yours
his	theirs
hers	theirs
its	theirs

And now, let us just count the various important tasks the apostrophe is obliged to execute every day.

1 *It indicates a possessive in a singular noun:*

The boy's hat

The First Lord of the Admiralty's rather smart front door

This seems simple. But not so fast, Batman. When the possessor is plural, but does not end in an "s", the apostrophe similarly precedes the "s":

The children's playground
The women's movement

But when the possessor is a regular plural, the apostrophe follows the "s":

The boys' hats (more than one boy)
The babies' bibs

I apologise if you know all this, but the point is many, many people do not. Why else would they open a large play area for children, hang up a sign saying "Giant Kid's Playground", and then wonder why everyone stays away from it? (Answer: everyone is scared of the Giant Kid.)

2 *It indicates time or quantity:*

In one week's time

Four yards' worth
Two weeks' notice (Warner Brothers, take note)

3 *It indicates the omission of figures in dates:*
The summer of '68

4 *It indicates the omission of letters:*
We can't go to Jo'burg (We cannot go to Johannesburg – perhaps because we can't spell the middle bit)
She'd've had the cat-o'-nine-tails, I s'pose, if we hadn't stopped 'im (She would have had a right old lashing, I reckon, if we had not intervened)

However, it is generally accepted that familiar contractions such as bus (omnibus), flu (influenza), phone (telephone), photo (photograph) and cello (violoncello) no longer require apologetic apostrophes. In fact to write "Any of that wine left in the 'fridge, dear?" looks today self-conscious, not to say poncey. Other contractions have made the full leap into new words, anyway. There is

simply nowhere to hang an apostrophe on "nuke" (explode a nuclear device), "telly" (television) or "pram" (perambulator) – although, believe me, people have tried.

Most famously of all, the apostrophe of omission creates the word "it's":

It's your turn (it is your turn)
It's got very cold (it has got very cold)
It's a braw bricht moonlicht nicht the nicht (no idea)

To those who care about punctuation, a sentence such as "Thank God its Friday" (without the apostrophe) rouses feelings not only of despair but of violence. The confusion of the possessive "its" (no apostrophe) with the contractive "it's" (with apostrophe) is an unequivocal signal of illiteracy and sets off a simple Pavlovian "kill" response in the average stickler. The rule is: the word "it's" (with apostrophe) stands for "it is" or "it has". If the word does not stand for "it is" or "it has" then what you require is "its". *This is extremely easy to grasp.* Getting your itses mixed up is the greatest

solecism in the world of punctuation. No matter that you have a PhD and have read all of Henry James twice. If you still persist in writing, "Good food at it's best", you deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave.

5 *It indicates strange, non-standard English:*
A forest of apostrophes in dialogue (often accompanied by unusual capitalisation) conventionally signals the presence in a text of a peasant, a cockney or an earnest northerner from whom the heart-chilling word "nobbut" may soon be heard. Here is what the manly gamekeeper Mellors says to his employer's wife in chapter eight of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

> "'Appen yer'd better 'ave this key, an' Ah min fend for t' bods some other road ... 'Appen Ah can find anuther pleece as'll du for rearin' th' pheasants. If yer want ter be 'ere, yo'll non want me messin' abaht a' th' time."

"Why don't you speak ordinary English?" Lady Chatterley inquires, saucily.

6 *It features in Irish names such as O'Neill and O'Casey:*
Again the theory that this is a simple contraction – this time of "of" (as in John o' Gaunt) – is pure woolly misconception. Not a lot of people know this, but the "O" in Irish names is an anglicisation of "ua", meaning grandson.

7 *It indicates the plurals of letters:*
How many f's are there in Fulham? (Larky answer, beloved of football fans: there's only one f in Fulham)
In the winter months, his R's blew off (old Peter Cook and Dudley Moore joke, explaining the mysterious zoo sign "T OPICAL FISH, THIS WAY")

8 *It also indicates plurals of words:*
What are the do's and don't's?
Are there too many but's and and's at the beginnings of sentences these days?

I hope that by now you are already feeling sorry for the apostrophe. Such a list of legitimate apostrophe jobs certainly brings home to us the imbalance of responsibility that exists in the world of punctuation. I mean, full stops are quite important, aren't they? Yet by contrast to the versatile apostrophe, they are stolid little chaps, to say the least. In fact one might dare to say that while the full stop is the lumpen male of the punctuation world (do one job at a time; do it well; forget about it instantly), the apostrophe is the frantically multi-tasking female, dotting hither and yon, and succumbing to burn-out from all the thankless effort. Only one significant task has been lifted from the apostrophe's workload in recent years: it no longer has to appear in the plurals of abbreviations ("MPs") or plural dates ("1980s"). Until quite recently, it was customary to write "MP's" and "1980's" – and in fact this convention still applies in America. British readers of *The New Yorker* who assume that this august publication is in constant ignorant error when it allows "1980's" evidently have no experience of how that famously punctilious periodical operates editorially.

But it is in the nature of punctuation lovers to care about such things, and I applaud all those who seek to protect the apostrophe from misuse. For many years Keith Waterhouse operated an Association for the Abolition of the Aberrant Apostrophe in the *Daily Mirror* and then the *Daily Mail*, cheered on by literally millions of readers. He has printed hundreds of examples of apostrophe horrors, my all-time favourite being the rather subtle, "Prudential – were here to help you", which looks just a bit unsettling until you realise that what it's supposed to say is, "Prudential – *we're* here to help you". And Keith Waterhouse has many successors in the print. Kevin Myers, columnist of *The Irish Times*, recently published a fictional story about a man who joins the League of Signwriter's and Grocer's and Butcher's Assistant's, only to discover that his girlfriend is a stickler for grammatical precision.

Meanwhile, William Hartston, who writes the "Beachcomber" column in *The Express*, has come up with the truly inspired story of the Apostropher Royal, an ancient and honourable post inaugurated in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. His story goes that

a humble greengrocer (in days of yore) was delivering potatoes to Good Queen Bess and happened to notice a misplaced apostrophe in a royal decree. When he pointed it out, the Queen immediately created the office of Apostropher Royal, to control the quality and distribution of apostrophes and deliver them in wheelbarrows to all the greengrocers of England on the second Thursday of every month (Apostrophe Thursday). The present Apostropher Royal, Sir D'Anville O'M'Darlin', concerns himself these days with such urgent issues as the tendency of "trendy publishers" to replace quotation marks with colons and dashes, the effect of which is that pairs of unwanted inverted commas can be illegally shipped abroad, split down the middle to form low-grade apostrophes and sold back to an unwary British public.

Do people other than professional writers care, though? Well, yes, and I have proof in heaps. As I was preparing for this book, I wrote an article for *The Daily Telegraph*, hoping to elicit a few punctuation horror stories, and it was like detonating a dam. Hundreds of emails and letters arrived, all of them testifying to the astonishing power of recall

we sticklers have when things have annoyed us ("It was in 1987, I'll never forget, and it said "CREAM TEA'S"); and also to the justifiable despair of the well educated in a dismally illiterate world. Reading the letters, I was alternately thrilled that so many people had bothered to write and sunk low by such overwhelming evidence of Britain's stupidity and indifference. The vast majority of letters concerned misplaced apostrophes, of course, in *potato's* and *lemon's*. But it was interesting, once I started to analyse and sort the examples, to discover that the greengrocer's apostrophe formed just one depressing category of the overall, total, mind-bogglingly depressing misuse of the apostrophe. Virtually every proper application of this humble mark utterly stumps the people who write to us officially, who paint signs, or who sell us fruit and veg. The following is just a tiny selection of the examples I received:

Singular possessive instead of simple plural (the "greengrocer's apostrophe"):

Trouser's reduced

Coastguard Cottage's

Next week: nouns and apostrophe's! (BBC website advertising a grammar course for children)

Singular possessive instead of plural possessive:

Pupil's entrance (on a very selective school, presumably)
Adult Learner's Week (lucky him)
Frog's Piss (French wine putting unfair strain on single frog)
Member's May Ball (but with whom will the member dance?)
Nude Reader's Wives (intending "Readers' Nude Wives", of course, but conjuring up an interesting picture of polygamous nude reader attended by middle-aged women in housecoats and fluffy slippers)

Plural possessive instead of singular possessive:

Lands' End (mail-order company which roundly denies anything wrong with name)
Bobs' Motors

No possessive where possessive is required:

Citizens Advice Bureau
Mens Toilets
Britains Biggest Junction (Clapham)

Dangling expectations caused by incorrect pluralisation:

Pansy's ready (is she?)
Cyclist's only (his only what?)
Please replace the trolley's (replace the trolley's what?)

and best of all:

Nigger's out (a sign seen in New York, under which was written, wickedly: "But he'll be back shortly")

Unintentional sense from unmarked possessive:

Dicks in tray (try not to think about it)
New members welcome drink (doubtless true)

Someone knows an apostrophe is required ... but where, oh where?

It need'nt be a pane (on a van advertising discount glass)
Ladie's hairdresser
Mens coat's
Childrens' education ... (in a letter from the head of education at the National Union of Teachers)
The Peoples Princess' (on memorial mug)
Freds' restaurant

Apostrophes put in place names/proper names:

Dear Mr Steven's
XMA'S TREES
Glady's (badge on salesgirl)
Did'sbury

It's or Its' instead of Its:

Hundreds of examples, many from respectable National Trust properties and big corporations, but notably:

Hot Dogs a Meal in Its' Self (sign in Great Yarmouth)

Recruitment at it's best (slogan of employment agency)
" ... to welcome you to the British Library, it's services and catalogues" (reader induction pamphlet at British Library)

Plain illiteracy:

"... giving the full name and title of the person who's details are given in Section 02" (on UK passport application form)
Make our customer's live's easier (Abbey National advertisement)
Gateaux's (evidently never spelled any other way)
Your 21 today! (on birthday card)

Commas instead of apostrophes:

Antique,s (on A120 near Colchester)
apples,s
orange,s
grape,s (all thankfully on the same stall)

Signs that have given up trying:

Reader offer

Author photograph
Customer toilet

This is a mere sample of the total I received. I heard from people whose work colleagues used commas instead of apostrophes; from someone rather thoughtfully recommending a restaurant called l'Apostrophe in Reims (address on request); and from a Somerset man who had cringed regularly at a sign on a market garden until he discovered that its proprietor's name was – you couldn't make it up – R. Carrott. This explained why the sign said "Carrott's" at the top, you see, but then listed other vegetables and fruits spelled and punctuated perfectly correctly.

Up to now, we have looked at the right and wrong uses of the apostrophe, and I have felt on pretty safe ground. All this is about to change, however, because there are areas of apostrophe use that are not so simple, and we must now follow the apostrophe as it flits innocently into murky tunnels of

style, usage and (oh no!) acceptable exception. Take the possessive of proper names ending in "s" – such as my own. Is this properly "Lynne Truss' book" or "Lynne Truss's book"? One correspondent (whose name I have changed) wrote with a tone of impatience: "From an early age I knew that if I wanted to write Philippa Jones' book I did NOT WRITE Philippa Jones's book with a second 's'. I see this error often even on a school minibus: St James's School. Perhaps the rules have changed or the teachers just do not know nowadays."

Sadly, this correspondent has been caught in the embarrassing position of barking up two wrong trees at the same time; but only because tastes have changed in the matter. Current guides to punctuation (including that ultimate authority, *Fowler's Modern English Usage*) state that with modern names ending in "s" (including biblical names, and any foreign name with an unpronounced final "s"), the "s" is required after the apostrophe:

Keats's poems
Philippa Jones's book

St James's Square
Alexander Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*

With names from the ancient world, it is not:

Archimedes' screw
Achilles' heel

If the name ends in an "iz" sound, an exception is made:

Bridges' score
Moses' tablets

And an exception is always made for Jesus:

Jesus' disciples

However, these are matters of style and preference that are definitely not set in stone, and it's a good idea not to get fixated about them. Bill Walsh's charmingly titled book *Lapsing into a Comma* (Walsh is a copy desk chief at *The Washington Post*) explains that while many American newspapers prefer

"Connors' forehand", his own preference is for "Connors's forehand" – "and I'm happy to be working for a newspaper that feels the same way I do". Consulting a dozen or so recently published punctuation guides, I can report that they contain minor disagreements on virtually all aspects of the above and that their only genuine consistency is in using Keats's poems as the prime example. Strange, but true. They just can't leave Keats alone. "It is *Keats' poems* (NOT *Keats's*)," they thunder. Or alternatively: "It is *Keats's poems* (NOT *Keats'*)." Well, poor old Keats, you can't help thinking. No wonder he developed that cough.

Having said that there are no absolute rights and wrongs in this matter, however, when many people wrote to ask why St Thomas' Hospital in London has no "s" after the apostrophe, I did feel that the answer must echo Dr Johnson's when asked to explain his erroneous definition of a pastern: "Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance." Of course it should be St Thomas's Hospital. *Of course it should.* The trouble is that institutions, towns, colleges, families, companies and brands have authority over their own spelling and punctuation (which

is often historic), and there is absolutely nothing we can do except raise an eyebrow and make a mental note. Virtually the first things a British newspaper sub-editor learns are that Lloyds TSB (the bank) has no apostrophe, unlike Lloyd's of London (insurance); Earls Court, Gerrards Cross and St Andrews have no apostrophe (although Earl's Court tube station seems to have acquired one); HarperCollins has no space; Bowes Lyon has no hyphen; and you have to give initial capitals to the words Biro and Hoover otherwise you automatically get tedious letters from solicitors, reminding you that these are brand names. The satirical magazine *Private Eye* once printed one of the letters from Biro's representatives, incidentally, under the memorable heading, "What a pathetic way to make a living".

St Thomas' Hospital is thus the self-styled name of the hospital and that's that. The stadium of Newcastle United FC is, similarly, St James' Park. In the end, neither example is worth getting worked up about – in fact, on the contrary, once you have taken a few deep breaths, you may find it within you not only to tolerate these exceptions but positively to treasure them and even love them. Personally, I now lose all power of speech if I see University College London ignorantly awarded a comma where none belongs, or E. M. Forster's title *Howards End* made to look ordinary by some itchy-fingered proofreader. Meanwhile, *The Times Guide to English Style and Usage* (1999) sensibly advises its readers not to pin their mental well-being on such matters, putting it beautifully: "Beware of organisations that have apostrophe variations as their house style, eg, St Thomas' Hospital, where we must respect their whim."

It is time to confess that I have for many years struggled with one of the lesser rules of the apostrophe. I refer to the "double possessive", which is evidently a perfectly respectable grammatical construction, but simply jars with me, and perhaps always will. We see it all the time in newspapers:

> "Elton John, a friend of the footballer's, said last night ... "
> "Elton John, a friend of the couple's, said last night ... "

"Elton John, a friend of the Beckhams', said last night ... "

Well, pass me the oxygen, Elton, and for heaven's sake, stop banging on about your glitzy mates for a minute while I think. *A friend of the footballer's*? Why isn't it, "a friend of the footballer"? Doesn't the construction "of the" do away with the need for another possessive? I mean to say, why do those sweet little Beckhams need to possess Elton John twice? Or is that a silly question?

But fight the mounting panic and turn to Robert Burchfield's third edition of *Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1998), and what do I find? The double possessive is calmly explained, and I start to peel away the problem. Do I have any objection to the construction "a friend of mine" or "a friend of yours"? Well, no. I would never say "a friend of me" or "a friend of you". And yes, you *would* say "a cousin of my mother's", "a child of hers". Well, "a friend of the footballer's" is the same thing! The only time you drop the double possessive is when, instead of being involved with an animate being, you are "a lover of the British Museum", because obviously

the British Museum does not – and never can – love you back.

We may all be getting a little sick and tired of the apostrophe by now, so I'll just get a couple more things off my chest.

1 Someone wrote to say that my use of "one's" was wrong ("a common error"), and that it should be *ones*. This is such rubbish that I refuse to argue about it. Go and tell Virginia Woolf it should be *A Room of Ones Own* and see how far you get.

2 To reiterate, if you can replace the word with "it is" or "it has", then the word is *it's*:

It's a long way to Tipperary.

If you can replace the word with "who is" or "who has", then the word is *who's*:

Who's that knocking at my door?

If you can replace the word with "they are", then the word is *they're*:

They're not going to get away with this.

And if you can replace the word with "there is", the word is *there's*:

There's a surprising amount about the apostrophe in this book.

If you can replace the word with "you are", then the word is *you're*:

You're never going to forget the difference between "its" and "it's".

We may curse our bad luck that *it's* sounds like *its*; *who's* sounds like *whose*; *they're* sounds like *their* (and *there*); *there's* sounds like *theirs*; and *you're* sounds like *your*. But if we are grown-ups who have been through full-time education, we have no excuse for muddling them up.

This chapter is nearing *its* end.
Whose book is this, again?
Some of *their* suggestions were outrageous!

This is no concern of *theirs*!
Your friend Elton John has been talking about you again.

In Beachcomber's hilarious columns about the Apostropher Royal in *The Express*, a certain perversely comforting law is often reiterated: the Law of Conservation of Apostrophes. A heresy since the 13th century, this law states that a balance exists in nature: "For every apostrophe omitted from an *it's*, there is an extra one put into an *its*." Thus the number of apostrophes in circulation remains constant, even if this means we have double the reason to go and bang our heads against a wall.

The only illiteracy with apostrophes that stirs any sympathy in me is the greengrocer's variety. First, because greengrocers are self-evidently horny-thumbed people who do not live by words. And second, because I agree with them that something rather troubling and unsatisfactory happens to words ending in vowels when you just plonk an "s"

on the end. Take the word "bananas": at first glance, you might suppose that the last syllable is pronounced "ass". How can the word "banana" keep its pronunciation when pluralised? Well, you could stick an apostrophe before the "s"! Obviously there is no excuse for not knowing "potatoes" is the plural of "potato", but if you were just to put an "s" after it, the impulse to separate it from the "o" with some mark or other would be pretty compelling, because "potatos" would be pronounced, surely, "pot-at-oss".

Moreover, what many people don't know, as they fulminate against ignorant greengrocers, is that until the 19th century this was one of the legitimate uses of the apostrophe: to separate a plural "s" from a foreign word ending in a vowel, and thus prevent confusion about pronunciation. Thus, you would see in an 18th-century text *folio's* or *quarto's* – and it looks rather elegant. I just wish a different mark had been employed (or even invented) for the purpose, to take the strain off our long-suffering little friend; and I hear, in fact, that there are moves afoot among certain punctuation visionaries to revive the practice using the tilde (the

Spanish accent we all have on our keyboards which looks like this: ~). Thus: *quarto~s* and *folio~s*, not to mention *logo~s*, *pasta~s*, *ouzo~s* and *banana~s*. For the time being, however, the guardians of usage frown very deeply on anyone writing "quarto's". As Professor Loreto Todd tartly remarks in her excellent *Cassell's Guide to Punctuation* (1995), "This usage was correct once, just as it was once considered correct to drink tea from a saucer."

It would be nice if one day the number of apostrophes properly placed in *it's* equalled exactly the number of apostrophes properly omitted from *its*, instead of the other way round. In the meantime, what can be done by those of us sickened by the state of apostrophe abuse? First, we must refute the label "dinosaurs" (I really hate that). And second, we must take up arms. Here are the weapons required in the apostrophe war (stop when you start to feel uncomfortable):

correction fluid
big pens
stickers cut in a variety of sizes, both plain
(for sticking over unwanted apostrophes)

and coloured (for inserting where
apostrophes are needed)
tin of paint with big brush
guerrilla-style clothing
strong medication for personality disorder
loudhailer
gun

Evidently there used to be a shopkeeper in Bristol who deliberately stuck ungrammatical signs in his window as a ruse to draw people into the shop; they would come in to complain, and he would then talk them into buying something. Well, he would be ill-advised to repeat this ploy once my punctuation vigilantes are on the loose. We lovers of the apostrophe will not stand by and let it be abolished – not because we are dinosaurs who drink tea out of saucers (interesting image) but because we appreciate the way the apostrophe has for centuries graced our words and illuminated our meaning. It is no fault of the apostrophe that some of our words need so much help identifying themselves. Indeed, it is to the credit of the apostrophe that it can manage the task. Those

spineless types who talk about abolishing the apostrophe are missing the point, and the pun is very much intended. The next day after the abolition of the apostrophe, imagine the scene. Triumphant abolitionist sits down to write, "Goodbye to the Apostrophe: we're not missing you a bit!" and finds that he can't. Abolish the apostrophe and it will be necessary, before the hour is up, to reinvent it.

That'll Do, Comma

When the humorist James Thurber was writing for *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross in the 1930s and 1940s, the two men often had very strong words about commas. It is pleasant to picture the scene: two hard-drinking alpha males in serious trilbies smacking a big desk and barking at each other over the niceties of punctuation. According to Thurber's account of the matter (in *The Years with Ross* [1959]), Ross's "clarification complex" tended to run somewhat to the extreme: he seemed to believe there was no limit to the amount of clarification you could achieve if you just kept adding commas. Thurber, by self-appointed virtuous contrast, saw commas as so many upturned office chairs unhelpfully hurled down the wide-open corridor of readability. And so they endlessly disagreed. If Ross were to write "red,

white, and blue" with the maximum number of commas, Thurber would defiantly state a preference for "red white and blue" with none at all, on the provocative grounds that "all those commas make the flag seem rained on. They give it a furled look."

If you want to know about editorial "commaphilia" as a source of chronic antagonism, read *The Years with Ross*. Thurber once went so far as to send Ross a few typed lines of one of Wordsworth's *Lucy* poems, repunctuated in *New Yorker* style:

> She lived, alone, and few could know
> When Lucy ceased to be,
> But, she is in her grave, and, oh,
> The difference, to me.

But Ross, it seems, was unmoved by sarcasm, and in the end Thurber simply had to resign himself to Ross's way of thinking. After all, he was the boss; he signed the cheques; and of course he was a brilliant editor, who endearingly admitted once in a letter to H. L. Mencken, "We have carried editing to a very high degree of fussiness here, probably to a point

approaching the ultimate. I don't know how to get it under control." And so the comma proliferated. Thurber was once asked by a correspondent: "Why did you have a comma in the sentence, 'After dinner, the men went into the living-room'?" And his answer was probably one of the loveliest things ever said about punctuation. "This particular comma," Thurber explained, "was Ross's way of giving the men time to push back their chairs and stand up."

Why the problem? Why the scope for such differences of opinion? Aren't there rules for the comma, just as there are rules for the apostrophe? Well, yes; but you will be entertained to discover that there is a significant complication in the case of the comma. More than any other mark, the comma draws our attention to the mixed origins of modern punctuation, and its consequent mingling of two quite distinct functions:

1 To illuminate the grammar of a sentence
2 To point up – rather in the manner of musical notation – such literary qualities as rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow

This is why grown men have knock-down fights over the comma in editorial offices: because these two roles of punctuation sometimes collide head-on – indeed, where the comma is concerned, they do it all the time. In 1582, Richard Mulcaster's *The First Part of the Elementarie* (an early English grammar) described the comma as "a small crooked point, which in writing followeth some small branch of the sentence, & in reading warneth vs to rest there, & to help our breth a little". Many subsequent grammars of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries make the same distinction. When Ross and Thurber were threatening each other with ashtrays over the correct way to render the star-spangled banner, they were reflecting a deep dichotomy in punctuation that had been around and niggling people for over four hundred years. On the page, punctuation performs its grammatical function, but in the mind of the reader it does more than that. It tells the reader how to hum the tune.

If only we hadn't started reading quietly to ourselves. Things were so simple at the start, before

grammar came along and ruined things. The earliest known punctuation – credited to Aristophanes of Byzantium (librarian at Alexandria) around 200 BC – was a three-part system of dramatic notation (involving single points at different heights on the line) advising actors when to breathe in preparation for a long bit, or a not-so-long bit, or a relatively short bit. And that's all there was to it. A *comma*, at that time, was the name of the relatively short bit (the word means in Greek "a piece cut off"); and in fact when the word "comma" was adopted into English in the 16th century, it still referred to a discrete, separable group of words rather than the friendly little tadpoley number-nine dot-with-a-tail that today we know and love. For a millennium and a half, punctuation's purpose was to guide actors, chanters and readers-aloud through stretches of manuscript, indicating the pauses, accentuating matters of sense and sound, and leaving syntax mostly to look after itself. St Jerome, who translated the Bible in the 4th century, introduced a system of punctuation of religious texts *per cola et commata* ("by phrases"), to aid accurate pausing when reading aloud. Cassiodorus, writing in the 6th century in

southern Italy for the guidance of trainee scribes, included punctuation in his *Institutiones Divinarum et Saecularium Litterarum*, recommending "clear pausing in well-regulated delivery". I do hope Harold Pinter knows about all this, by the way; who would have thought the pause had such a long and significant history?

Most of the marks used by those earnest scribes look bizarre to us now, of course: the *positura*, a mark like a number 7, which indicated the end of a piece of text; the sinister mark like the little gallows in a game of hangman that indicated the start of a paragraph (paragraphs weren't indented until much later); and, significantly here, the *virgula suspensiva*, which looked like our present-day *solidus* or forward slash (/), and was used to mark the briefest pause or hesitation. Perhaps the key thing one needs to realise about the early history of punctuation is that, in a literary culture based entirely on the slavish copying of venerated texts, it would be highly presumptuous of a mere scribe to insert helpful marks where he thought they ought to go. Punctuation developed slowly and cautiously not because it wasn't considered important, but, on the contrary,

because it was such intensely powerful ju-ju. Pause in the wrong place and the sense of a religious text can alter in significant ways. For example, as Cecil Hartley pointed out in his 1818 *Principles of Punctuation: or, The Art of Pointing*, consider the difference between the following:

> "Verily, I say unto thee, This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

and:

> "Verily I say unto thee this day, Thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

Now, huge doctrinal differences hang on the placing of this comma. The first version, which is how Protestants interpret the passage (Luke, xxiii, 43), lightly skips over the whole unpleasant business of Purgatory and takes the crucified thief straight to heaven with Our Lord. The second promises Paradise at some later date (to be confirmed, as it were) and leaves Purgatory nicely in the picture for the Catholics, who believe in it. Similarly, it is argued that the Authorised Version of the Bible (and by extension Handel's *Messiah*) misleads on the

true interpretation of Isaiah xl, 3. Again, consider the difference:

> "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

and:

> "The voice of him that crieth: In the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord."

Also:

> "Comfort ye my people"
> (please go out and comfort my people)

and

> "Comfort ye, my people"
> (just cheer up, you lot; it might never happen)

Of course, if Hebrew or any of the other ancient languages had included punctuation (in the case of Hebrew, a few vowels might have been nice as well), two thousand years of scriptural exegesis need never have occurred, and a lot of clever, dandruffy people could definitely have spent more time in the fresh air. But there was no punctuation in those ancient

texts and that's all there is to it. For a considerable period in Latin transcriptions there were no gaps between words either, if you can credit such madness. Texts from that benighted classical period – just capital letters in big square blocks – look to modern eyes like those word-search puzzles that you stare at for twenty minutes or so, and then (with a delighted cry) suddenly spot the word "PAPERNAPKIN" spelled diagonally and backwards. However, the *scriptio continua* system (as it was called) had its defenders at the time. One fifth-century recluse called Cassian argued that if a text was slow to offer up its meaning, this encouraged not only healthy meditation but the glorification of God – the heart lifting in praise, obviously, at the moment when the word "PAPERNAPKIN" suddenly floated to the surface, like a synaptic miracle.

Isn't this history interesting? Well, I think so – even though, for a considerable time, admittedly, not much happened. That imaginative chap Charlemagne (forward-looking Holy Roman Emperor) stirred things up in the 9th century when Alcuin of York came up with a system of *positurae* at the ends of sentences (including one of the earliest question

marks), but to be honest western systems of punctuation were damned unsatisfactory for the next five hundred years until one man – one fabulous Venetian printer – finally wrestled with the issue and pinned it to the mat. That man was Aldus Manutius the Elder (1450–1515) and I will happily admit I hadn't heard of him until about a year ago, but am now absolutely kicking myself that I never volunteered to have his babies.

The heroic status of Aldus Manutius the Elder among historians of the printed word cannot be overstated. Who invented the italic typeface? Aldus Manutius! Who printed the first semicolon? Aldus Manutius! The rise of printing in the 14th and 15th centuries meant that a standard system of punctuation was urgently required, and Aldus Manutius was the man to do it. In *Pause and Effect* (1992), Malcolm Parkes's magisterial account of the history of punctuation in the West, facsimile examples of Aldus's groundbreaking work include a page from Pietro Bembo's *De Aetna* (1494) which features not only a very elegant roman typeface but the actual first semicolon (and believe me, this is exciting). Of course we did not get our modern system overnight,

but Aldus Manutius and his grandson (conveniently of the same name) are generally credited with developing several of our modern conventional signs. They lowered the *virgule* and curved it, for a start, so that it began to look like the modern comma. They put colons and full stops at the ends of sentences. Like this. And also – less comfortably to the modern eye – like this:

Most significantly of all, however, they ignored the old marks that had aided the reader-aloud. Books were now for reading and understanding, not intoning. Moving your lips was becoming a no-no. Within the seventy years it took for Aldus Manutius the Elder to be replaced by Aldus Manutius the Younger, things changed so drastically that in 1566 Aldus Manutius the Younger was able to state that the main object of punctuation was the clarification of syntax. Forget all that stuff about the spiritual value to the reader of working out the meaning for himself; forget as well the humility of those copyists of old. I'm sure people did question whether Italian printers were quite the right people to legislate on the meaning of everything; but on the other hand, *resistance was obviously useless against a family that could invent italics.*

So what happened to the comma in this process? Well, between the 16th century and the present day, it became a kind of scary grammatical sheepdog. As we shall shortly see, the comma has so many jobs as a "separator" (punctuation marks are traditionally either "separators" or "terminators") that it tears about on the hillside of language, endlessly organising words into sensible groups and making them stay put: sorting and dividing; circling and herding; and of course darting off with a peremptory "woof" to round up any wayward subordinate clause that makes a futile bolt for semantic freedom. Commas, if you don't whistle at them to calm down, are unstoppably enthusiastic at this job. Luckily the trend in the 20th century (starting with H. W. Fowler's *The King's English* in 1906) has been towards ever-simpler punctuation, with fewer and fewer commas; but take any passage from a non-contemporary writer and you can't help seeing the constituent words as so many defeated sheep that have been successfully corralled with the gate slammed shut by good old Comma the Sheepdog.

> Jones flung himself at his benefactor's feet, and taking eagerly hold of his hand, assured him, his

> goodness to him, both now, and at all other times, had so infinitely exceeded not only his merit, but his hopes, that no words could express his sense of it.
>
> Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, 1749

> It needed a quick eye to detect, from among the huddled mass of sleepers, the form of any given individual. As they lay closely packed together, covered, for warmth's sake, with their patched and ragged clothes, little could be distinguished but the sharp outlines of pale faces, over which sombre light shed the same dull, heavy colour, with here and there a gaunt arm thrust forth, its thinness hidden by no covering, but fully exposed to view, in all its shrunken ugliness.
>
> Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839

No wonder feelings run high about the comma. When it comes to improving the clarity of a sentence, you can nearly always argue that one should go in; you can nearly always argue that one should come out. Stylists have meanwhile always dickered with the rules: Oscar Wilde famously spent all day on a completed poem, dangling a questionable comma over it; Gertrude Stein called the comma

"servile" and refused to have anything to do with it; Peter Carey cleverly won the Booker Prize in 2001 for a book that contained no commas at all (*True History of the Kelly Gang*); and I have seen an essay on the internet seriously accusing John Updike, that wicked man, of bending the rules of the comma to his own ends "with fragments, comma splices, coordinate clauses without commas, ellipted coordinate clauses with commas, *and more*" – charges to which, of course, those of us with no idea what an ellipted-coordinate-clause-with-a-comma might look like can only comment, "Tsk".

Meanwhile, lawyers eschew the comma as far as possible, regarding it as a troublemaker; and readers grow so accustomed to the dwindling incidence of commas in public places that when signs go up saying "No dogs please", only one person in a thousand bothers to point out that actually, as a statement, "no dogs please" is an indefensible generalisation, since many dogs *do* please, as a matter of fact; they rather make a point of it.

"The use of commas cannot be learned by rule." Such was the opinion of the great Sir Ernest Gowers; and I have to say I find that a comfort, coming from the grand old boy himself. However, rules certainly exist for the comma and we may as well examine some of them. The fun of commas is of course the semantic havoc they can create when either wrongly inserted ("What is this thing called, love?") or carelessly omitted ("He shot himself as a child").* A friend of mine who runs a Shakespeare reading group in New England tells a delightful story of a chap playing Duncan in *Macbeth* who listened with appropriate pity and concern while the wounded soldier in Act I gave his account of the battle, and then cheerfully called out, "Go get him, surgeons!" (It's supposed to be "Go, get him surgeons.")

But we'll come to such lovely enjoyable things by and by. In the meantime, however, this is serious. Sharpen a pencil, line up your favourite stimulants, furrow the brow, and attempt to concentrate on the following.

* He shot, himself, as a child.

1. *Commas for lists*

This is probably the first thing you ever learn about commas, that they divide items in lists, but are not required before the *and* on the end:

> The four refreshing fruit flavours of Opal Fruits are orange, lemon, strawberry and lime.
> I had a marvellous time eating in tavernas, swimming in the turquoise water, getting sloshed on retsina and not sending postcards.
> The colours of the Union Jack are red, white and blue.

The rule here is that the comma is correct if it can be replaced by the word *and* or *or*. For example: "I had a marvellous time eating in tavernas *and* swimming in the turquoise water *and* getting sloshed on retsina and not sending postcards." This would be the grammatical consequence of omitting the comma: a sentence that is clumsy (and sounds a lot more sloshed), but still counts as grammatical. What a loss to the language it was, incidentally, when they changed the name of Opal Fruits to Starburst.

However, if you feel you are safe paddling in these sparklingly clear shallows of comma usage, think again. See that comma-shaped shark fin ominously slicing through the waves in this direction? Hear that staccato cello? Well, start waving and yelling, because it is the so-called Oxford comma (also known as the serial comma) and it is a lot more dangerous than its exclusive, ivory-tower moniker might suggest. There are people who embrace the Oxford comma and people who don't, and I'll just say this: *never* get between these people when drink has been taken. Oh, the Oxford comma. Here, in case you don't know what it is yet, is the perennial example, as espoused by Harold Ross: "The flag is red, white, and blue."

So what do you think of it? (It's the comma after "white".) Are you for it or against it? Do you hover in between? In Britain, where standard usage is to leave it out, there are those who put it in – including, interestingly, *Fowler's Modern English Usage*. In America, conversely, where standard usage is to leave it in, there are those who make a point of removing it (especially journalists). British grammarians will concede that sometimes the extra

comma prevents confusion, as when there are other *and*s in the vicinity:

> I went to the chemist, Marks & Spencer, and NatWest.
> I went to NatWest, the chemist, and Marks & Spencer.

But this isn't much of a concession, when you think about it. My own feeling is that one shouldn't be too rigid about the Oxford comma. Sometimes the sentence is improved by including it; sometimes it isn't. For example, in the introduction to this book (page 7) I allude to punctuation marks as the traffic signals of language: "they tell us to slow down, notice this, take a detour, and stop". And, well, I argued for that Oxford comma. It seemed to me that without the comma after "detour", this was a list of three instructions (the last a double one), not four. And here was a case where the stylistic reasons for its inclusion clearly outweighed the grammatical ones for taking it out. This was a decelerating sentence. The commas were incrementally applying the brakes. To omit the comma after "detour" would

have the sentence suddenly coasting at speed again instead of slowing to the final halt.

Anyway, there are some more points about commas in lists before we move on. In a list of adjectives, again the rule is that you use a comma where an *and* would be appropriate – where the modifying words are all modifying the same thing to the same degree:

It was a dark, stormy night.
(The night was dark and stormy)
He was a tall, bearded man.
(The man was tall and bearded)

But you do NOT use a comma for:

It was an endangered white rhino.
Australian red wines are better than
Australian white ones.
The grand old Duke of York had ten
thousand men.

This is because, in each of these cases, the adjectives do their jobs in joyful combination; they are not

intended as a list. The rhino isn't endangered *and* white. The wines aren't Australian *and* red. The Duke of York wasn't grand *and* old. The wedding wasn't big *and* fat *and* Greek.

2. *Commas for joining*

Commas are used when two complete sentences are joined together, using such conjunctions as *and*, *or*, *but*, *while* and *yet*:

The boys wanted to stay up until midnight,
but they grew tired and fell asleep.
I thought I had the biggest bag of Opal
Fruits, yet Cathy proved me wrong.

If this seems a bit obvious to you, I apologise. But trouble arises with this joining-comma rule from two directions: when stylists deliberately omit the conjunction and just keep the comma where a semi-colon is called for (this is the "splice comma" John Updike is accused of), and when the wrong joining words are used. The splice comma first.

It was the Queen's birthday on Saturday, she got a lot of presents.
Jim woke up in an unfamiliar bed, he felt lousy.

Now, so many highly respected writers adopt the splice comma that a rather unfair rule emerges on this one: only do it if you're famous. Samuel Beckett spliced his way merrily through such novels as *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, thumbing his nose at the semicolon all the way: "There I am then, he leaves me, he's in a hurry." But then Beckett was not only a genius, he was a man who wrote in French when he didn't have to; we can surely agree he earned the right to be ungrammatical if he felt like it. Besides, he is not alone. E. M. Forster did it; Somerset Maugham did it; the list is endless. Done knowingly by an established writer, the comma splice is effective, poetic, dashing. Done equally knowingly by people who are not published writers, it can look weak or presumptuous. Done ignorantly by ignorant people, it is awful.

Meanwhile, words that must not be used to join two sentences together with a comma are *however* and *nevertheless*, as in, "It was the Queen's birthday

on Saturday, nevertheless, she had no post whatever"; "Jim woke up in his own bed, however, he felt great." Again, the requirement is for either a new sentence or one of those unpopular semicolons.

It was the Queen's birthday on Saturday; nevertheless, she had no post whatever.
Jim woke up in his own bed; however, he felt great.

3. Commas filling gaps

Are we halfway yet? I hope so, but I doubt it. Anyway, this one is quite simple, involving missing words cunningly implied by a comma:

Annie had dark hair; Sally, fair.

This doesn't arise very much these days, though, does it? I wonder why?

4. Commas before direct speech

This usage is likely to lapse. Many writers prefer to

use colons; others just open the inverted commas – a pretty unambiguous sign that direct speech is coming. Personally, I seem to ring the changes. Since this is a genuine old pause-for-breath use of the comma, however, it would be a shame to see it go.

The Queen said, "Doesn't anyone know it's my birthday?"

5. *Commas setting off interjections*

Blimey, what would we do without it?
Stop, or I'll scream.

6. *Commas that come in pairs*

This is where comma usage all starts getting tricky. The first rule of bracketing commas is that you use them to mark both ends of a "weak interruption" to a sentence – or a piece of "additional information". The commas mark the places where the reader can – as it were – place an elegant two-pronged fork and cleanly lift out a section of the sentence, leaving no obvious damage to the whole. Thus:

John Keats, who never did any harm to anyone, is often invoked by grammarians.
I am, of course, going steadily nuts.
Nicholas Nickleby, published in 1839, uses a great many commas.
The Queen, who has double the number of birthdays of most people, celebrated yet another birthday.

In all these cases, the bits between the commas can be removed, leaving the sentence arguably less interesting, but grammatically entire.

As with other paired bracketing devices (such as parentheses, dashes and quotation marks), there is actual mental cruelty involved, incidentally, in opening up a pair of commas and then neglecting to deliver the closing one. The reader hears the first shoe drop and then strains in agony to hear the second. In dramatic terms, it's like putting a gun on the mantelpiece in Act I and then having the heroine drown herself quietly offstage in the bath during the interval. It's just not cricket. Take the example, "The Highland Terrier is the cutest, and perhaps the best of all dog species." Sensitive people trained to listen

for the second comma (after "best") find themselves quite stranded by that kind of thing. They feel cheated and giddy. In very bad cases, they fall over.

However, why is it that sometimes these pairs of commas are incorrect? One *Telegraph* correspondent wrote to complain about a frequent newspaper solecism, and the example he gave was, "The leading stage director, Nicholas Hytner, has been appointed to the Royal National Theatre." Shouldn't the commas be removed in cases such as this, he asked? Well, yes. Absolutely. For a start, if you removed the name "Nicholas Hytner" from this particular sentence, it would make no sense at all. But there is a larger grammatical point here, too. Consider the difference between:

> The people in the queue who managed to get tickets were very satisfied.

and:

> The people in the queue, who managed to get tickets, were very satisfied.

In the first case, the reader infers from the absence of commas that not everyone in the queue was fortunate. Some people did not get tickets. (The ones who did were, naturally, cock-a-hoop.) In the second version everyone in the queue gets tickets, hurrah, and I just hope it turned out to be for something nice. The issue here is whether the bit between the commas is "defining" or not. If the clause is "defining", you don't need to present it with a pair of commas. Thus:

> The Highland Terriers that live in our street aren't cute at all.

If the information in the clause is "non-defining", however, then you do:

> The Highland Terriers, when they are barking, are a nightmare.

Now, here's a funny thing. When the interruption to the sentence comes at the beginning or at the end, the grammatical rule of commas-in-pairs still applies, *even if you can only see one of them*. Thus:

> Of course, there weren't enough tickets to go round.

is, from the grammatical point of view, the same as:

> There weren't, of course, enough tickets to go round.

as well as:

> There weren't enough tickets to go round, of course.

In many cases nowadays, the commas bracketing so-called weak interruptions are becoming optional. And I say three cheers for that, quite frankly. Where I get into a tangle with copy-editors is with sentences such as:

> Belinda opened the trap door, and after listening for a minute she closed it again.

This is, actually, all right. True, it isn't elegant, but it uses the comma grammatically as a "joining"

comma, before the "and". Most editors, however, turn purple at the sight of such a sentence. It becomes, suddenly:

> Belinda opened the trap door and, after listening for a minute, closed it again.

It seems to me that there are two proper uses of the comma in conflict here, and that the problem arises simply from the laudable instinct in both the writer and the editor to choose *just one use at a time*. In previous centuries – as we can see in those examples from Fielding and Dickens – every single use of the comma would be observed:

> Belinda opened the trap door, and, after listening for a minute, she closed it again.

Nowadays the fashion is against grammatical fussiness. A passage peppered with commas – which in the past would have indicated painstaking and authoritative editorial attention – smacks simply of no backbone. People who put in all the commas betray themselves as moral weaklings with empty

lives and out-of-date reference books. Back at *The New Yorker*, Thurber tells the story of "the grison anecdote" – a story about a soap salesman who belatedly spots a grison (a South American weasel-like carnivore) on a porch in New Jersey. Now, Thurber says he commanded Ross not to change a word of this piece, but he was obviously asking for trouble. "It preserves the fine texture of the most delicate skin and lends a lasting and radiant rosiness to the complexion my God what is that thing?" says the salesman. Ross, of course, inserted a comma after "my God". He just couldn't help himself.

The big final rule for the comma is one that you won't find in any books by grammarians. It is quite easy to remember, however. The rule is: don't use commas like a stupid person. I mean it. More than any other mark, the comma requires the writer to use intelligent discretion and to be simply alert to potential ambiguity. For example:

1 Leonora walked on her head, a little higher than usual.

2 The driver managed to escape from the vehicle before it sank and swam to the river-bank.

3 Don't guess, use a timer or watch.

4 The convict said the judge is mad.

In the first example, of course, the comma has been misplaced and belongs after "on". The second example suggests that the vehicle swam to the river-bank, rather than the passenger. It requires a comma after "sank". The third is pretty interesting, since it actually conveys the opposite of its intended meaning. What it appears to say is, "Don't guess, *or* use a timer or a watch", when in fact it only wants to tell you not to guess. It therefore requires a semi-colon or even a full stop after "guess", rather than a comma. The fourth makes perfect sense, of course – unless what's intended is: "The convict, said the judge, is mad."

Two particular stupid uses of the comma are proliferating and need to be noted. One is the comma memorably described in the "This English" column of the *New Statesman* in the late 1970s as "the yob's

comma": "The yob's comma, of course, has no syntactical value: it is the equivalent of a fuddled gasp for breath, as the poor writer marshals his battered thoughts." Examples cited in the *New Statesman* included this, from *The Guardian*:

> The society decided not to prosecute the owners of the Windsor Safari Park, where animals, have allegedly been fed live to snakes and lions, on legal advice.

The comma after "animals" is not only ungrammatical and intrusive, but throws the end of the sentence ("on legal advice") into complete semantic chaos. Meanwhile, moronic sentences such as "Parents, are being urged to take advantage of a scheme designed to prevent children getting lost in supermarkets" and "What was different back then, was if you disagreed with the wrong group, you could end up with no head!" are observably on the increase.

Less stoppable is the drift towards American telegraphese in news headlines, where the comma is increasingly given the job of replacing the word "and". Thus:

> UK study spurns al-Qaeda, Iraq link
> Mother, three sons die in farm fire

So that's nearly it for the comma. Although it is not true that the legal profession has historically eschewed commas altogether, one begins to realise there is a sensible reason for its traditional wariness. It is sometimes said, for instance, that Sir Roger Casement (1864–1916), the Irish would-be insurrectionist, was actually "hanged on a comma", which you have to admit sounds like a bit of very rough justice, though jolly intriguing. How do you get hanged on a comma, exactly? Doesn't the rope keep slipping off? Well, having landed in Ireland in 1916 from a German submarine, Casement was arrested and charged under the Treason Act of 1351, whereupon his defence counsel opted to argue a point of punctuation – which is the last refuge of the scoundrel, of course; but never mind, you can't blame the chap, it must have seemed worth a go. His point was that the Treason Act was not only written in Norman French but was unpunctuated, and was

thus open to interpretation. The contested words in question, translated literally, were:

> If a man be adherent to the king's enemies in his realm giving to them aid and comfort in the realm or elsewhere ...

Casement's defence argued that, since Casement had not been adherent to the king's enemies "in the realm" (indeed, on the contrary, had scrupulously conducted all his treasonous plotting abroad), he was not guilty. Now, I guarantee you can look at this set of words for hours at a stretch without seeing any virtue in this pathetic contention. Casement was clearly condemned by the phrase "or elsewhere", regardless of how you punctuate it. However, two judges duly traipsed off to the Public Record Office to examine the original statute and discovered under a microscope a faint but helpful *virgule* after the second "realm" which apparently (don't ask) cleared up the whole thing. Mr Justice Darling ruled that "giving aid and comfort to the king's enemies" were words of apposition:

> They are words to explain what is meant by being adherent to, and we think that if a man be adherent to the king's enemies elsewhere, he is equally adherent to the king's enemies, and if he is adherent to the king's enemies, then he commits the treason which the statute of Edward III defines.

How this story ever got the sensational name "hanged on a comma", however, is an interesting matter. "Tried to get off on a comma" is a more accurate representation of the truth.

A similar comma dispute still rages today, in a case with less explosive overtones. On his deathbed in April 1991, Graham Greene corrected and signed a typed document which restricts access to his papers at Georgetown University. *Or does it?* The document, before correction, stated:

> I, Graham Greene, grant permission to Norman Sherry, my authorised biographer, excluding any other to quote from my copyright material published or unpublished.

Being a chap who had corrected proofs all his life, Greene automatically added a comma after "excluding any other" and died the next day without explaining what he intended by it. And a

great ambiguity was thereby created. Are all other researchers excluded from quoting the material? Or only other biographers? The librarian at Georgetown interprets the document to mean that nobody besides Norman Sherry can consult the material at all. Meanwhile others, including Greene's son, argue that the comma was carefully inserted by Greene only to indicate that Sherry was the sole authorised biographer. It is worth pointing out here, by the way, that legal English, with its hifalutin efforts to cover everything, nearly always ends up leaving itself semantically wide open like this, and that if Greene had been allowed to write either "Let Norman Sherry see the stuff and no one else" or, "Don't let other biographers quote from it, but otherwise all are welcome", none of this ridiculous palaver would have transpired.

Airs and Graces

When I was about fourteen years old, a friend at school who spent the summer holidays in Michigan set me up with an American pen-pal. This is not an episode I am proud to remember. In fact, one day I hope to be able to forget it: the ensuing correspondence, after all, ran to only three pages, and no one from the Oxford University Press has, as yet, suggested collecting it in book form with scholarly apparatus and footnotes. But for the time being I need to get it off my chest, so here it is. The trouble was, Kerry-Anne was an everyday teenager with no literary pretensions – and for some reason this made the precocious blue-stocking in me feverishly uncomfortable. When her first letter arrived (she had pluckily set the ball rolling) I was absolutely appalled. It was in huge handwriting, like an

infant's. It was on pink paper, with carefree spelling errors – and where the dots over the I's ought to be, there were *bubbles*. "I am strawberry blonde," she wrote, "with a light dusting of freckles." In hindsight I see it was unrealistic to expect a pen-pal from the 8th grade in Detroit to write like Samuel Johnson. But on the other hand, what earthly use to me was this vapid mousey moron parading a pigmentational handicap?

To this day I am ashamed of what I did to Kerry-Anne (who unsurprisingly never wrote back). I replied to her childish letter on grown-up deckled green paper with a fountain pen. Whether I actually donned a velvet smoking jacket for the occasion I can't remember, but I know I deliberately dropped the word "desultory", and I think I may even have used some French. Pretentious? Well, to adapt Gustave Flaubert's famous identification with Emma Bovary, "*Adrian Mole, âgé de treize ans et trois quarts ... c'est moi.*" The main reason I recall this shameful teenage epiphany, however, is that in my mission to blast little Kerry-Anne out of the water, I pulled out (literally) all the stops: I used a semicolon. "I watch television in a desultory kind of way; I find there is not much on," I

wrote. And it felt so good, you know. It felt fantastic. It was like that bit in *Crocodile Dundee* when our rugged hero scoffs at the switchblade of his would-be mugger, and produces a foot-long weapon of his own, "Call that a knife? THAT's a KNIFE."

In this chapter I want to examine punctuation as an art. Naturally, therefore, this is where the colon and semicolon waltz in together, to a big cheer from all the writers in the audience. Just look at those glamorous punctuation marks twirling in the lights from the glitter-ball: are they not beautiful? Are they not graceful? Ask professional writers about punctuation and they will not start striking the board about the misuse of the apostrophe; instead they will jabber in a rather breathless manner about the fate of the semicolon. Is it endangered? What will we do if it disappears? Have you noticed that newspapers use it less and less? Save the semicolon! It is essential to our craft! But their strength of attachment is justified. Taking the marks we have examined so far, is there any art involved in using the apostrophe? No. Using the apostrophe correctly is a mere negative proof: it tells the world you are not a thicko. The comma, while less subject to universal

rules, is still a utilitarian mark, racing about with its ears back, trying to serve both the sense and the sound of the sentence – and of course wearing itself to a frazzle for a modest bowl of Chum. Using the comma well announces that you have an ear for sense and rhythm, confidence in your style and a proper respect for your reader, but it does not mark you out as a master of your craft.

But colons and semicolons – well, they are in a different league, my dear! They give such lift! Assuming a sentence rises into the air with the initial capital letter and lands with a soft-ish bump at the full stop, the humble comma can keep the sentence aloft all right, like this, UP, for hours if necessary, UP, like this, UP, sort-of bouncing, and then falling down, and then UP it goes again, assuming you have enough additional things to say, although in the end you may run out of ideas and then you have to roll along the ground with no commas at all until some sort of surface resistance takes over and you run out of steam anyway and then eventually with the help of three dots ... you stop. But the thermals that benignly waft our sentences to new altitudes – that allow us to coast on air, and

loop-the-loop, suspending the laws of gravity – well, they are the colons and semicolons. If you don't believe me, ask Virginia Woolf:

> As for the other experiences, the solitary ones, which people go through alone, in their bedrooms, in their offices, walking the fields and the streets of London, he had them; had left home, a mere boy, because of his mother; she lied; because he came down to tea for the fiftieth time with his hands unwashed; because he could see no future for a poet in Stroud; and so, making a confidant of his little sister, had gone to London leaving an absurd note behind him, such as great men have written, and the world has read later when the story of their struggles has become famous.
>
> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 1925

Look at that sentence fly. Amazing. The way it stays up like that. Would anyone mind if I ate the last sandwich?

Of course, nothing is straightforward in the world of literary taste. Just as there are writers who worship the semicolon, there are other high stylists who dismiss it – who label it, if you please, middle-class. James Joyce preferred the colon, as more

authentically classical; P. G. Wodehouse did an effortlessly marvellous job without it; George Orwell tried to avoid the semicolon completely in *Coming Up for Air* (1939), telling his editor in 1947, "I had decided about this time that the semicolon is an unnecessary stop and that I would write my next book without one." Martin Amis included just one semicolon in *Money* (1984), and was afterwards (more than usually) pleased with himself. The American writer Donald Barthelme wrote that the semicolon is "ugly, ugly as a tick on a dog's belly". Fay Weldon says she positively dislikes semicolons, "which is odd, because I don't dislike anybody really". Meanwhile, that energetic enemy to all punctuation Gertrude Stein (remember she said the comma was "servile"?) said that semicolons suppose themselves superior to the comma, but are mistaken:

> They are more powerful more imposing more pretentious than a comma but they are a comma all the same. They really have within them deeply within them fundamentally within them the comma nature.
>
> Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar", 1935

But how much notice should we take of those pompous sillies who denounce the semicolon? I say, none at all. I say they are just show-offs. And I say it's wonderful that when Umberto Eco was congratulated by an academic reader for using no semicolons in *The Name of the Rose* (1983) he cheerfully explained (so the apocryphal story goes) that the machine he typed *The Name of the Rose* on simply didn't have a semicolon, so it was slightly unwise of this earnest chap to make too much of it.

Non-writers are wary of both the colon and the semicolon, though, partly because all this rarefied debate rages above their heads. Eric Partridge, in his 1953 book *You Have a Point There*, says that using colons in your writing is the equivalent of playing the piano with crossed hands. But sadly, anyone lazily looking for an excuse not to master the colon and semicolon can always locate a respectable reason, because so many are advanced. Here are some of the most common:

1 They are old-fashioned
2 They are middle-class
3 They are optional

4 They are mysteriously connected to pausing
5 They are dangerously addictive (*vide* Virginia Woolf)
6 The difference between them is too negligible to be grasped by the brain of man

I hope we shall happily demolish all these objections in the following pages. But it is worth remarking that Fleet Street style gurus fly the flag for most of the prejudices listed above – especially as applied to the semicolon, a mark they increasingly strike out with puritanical gusto. The semicolon has currently fallen out of fashion with newspapers, the official reason being that readers of newsprint prefer their sentences short, their paragraphs bite-sized and their columns of type uncluttered by wormy squiggles. It's more likely that the real reasons are a pathetic editorial confusion about usage and a policy of distrusting contributors even when they demonstrably know their onions. But heigh-ho. There is no point trying to turn the clock back. The great theatre critic James Agate, in his diary for 1935, recorded how a notoriously fastidious fellow journalist "once telephoned a semicolon from

Moscow". Well. You could imagine the reception he would get today.

;

Are the colon and semicolon old-fashioned? No, but they are *old*. The first printed semicolon was the work of good old Aldus Manutius just two years after Columbus sailed to the New World, and at the same date and place as the invention of double-entry book-keeping. But although I still swoon every time I look at this particular semicolon from 1494, it was not, as it turns out, the first time a human being ever balanced a dot on top of a comma. The medieval scribes had used a symbol very similar to our modern semicolon in their Latin transcripts to indicate abbreviations (thus "atque" might appear as "atq;"). The Greeks used the semicolon mark to indicate a question (and still do, those crazy guys). Meanwhile, a suspiciously similar mark (the *punctus versus*) was used by medieval scribes to indicate a termination in a psalm. But let's face it, we are not really interested in those dusty old medieval monks. What really concerns us is that, while both the colon

and the semicolon had been adopted into English well before 1700, confusion has surrounded their use ever since, and it is really only in the past few decades that grammarians have worked out a clear and satisfactory system for their application – tragically, at precisely the time when modern technological communication threatens to wipe out the subtleties of punctuation altogether.

For many years grammarians were a bit cagey about the difference between the colon and semicolon. Perhaps the colon was more "literary" than the semicolon? One grammarian, writing in 1829, lamented the two marks as "primeval sources of improfitable contention". By and large, however, it was decided that the way to satisfy the punters was to classify the marks hierarchically, in terms of weight. Thus the comma is the lightest mark, then the semicolon, then the colon, then the full stop. Cecil Hartley, in his *Principles of Punctuation: or, The Art of Pointing* (1818), includes this little poem, which tells us the simple one-two-three of punctuation values.

The stops point out, with truth, the time of
pause

A sentence doth require at ev'ry clause.
At ev'ry comma, stop while *one* you count;
At semicolon, *two* is the amount;
A colon doth require the time of *three*;
The period *four*, as learned men agree.

This system of sorting punctuation marks as if they were musical rests of ascending value has gone unquestioned for a long time, but do you know what I think? I think it's rubbish. Complete nonsense. Who counts to two? Who counts to three? Imagine all those poor devils who have, abiding by this ridiculous rule, sat at desks for the past three centuries, tapping pencils and trying to work out whether "To err is human, *tap*, *tap*, to forgive divine" is superior to "To err is human, *tap*, *tap*, TAP, to forgive divine" – before bursting into tears because each version sounds as bad as the other. The idea of the semicolon as an imperceptible bit weightier than a comma, and the colon as a teensy bit lighter than a full stop, is a wrong-headed way of both characterising the colon and semicolon, and (especially) sorting them out. They are not like so many bags of sugar attached to the belt of a sentence to slow it

down. Quite the opposite. Here is the American essayist Lewis Thomas on the semicolon:

> The semicolon tells you that there is still some question about the preceding full sentence; something needs to be added [...] The period [or full stop] tells you that that is that; if you didn't get all the meaning you wanted or expected, anyway you got all the writer intended to parcel out and now you have to move along. But with the semicolon there you get a pleasant feeling of expectancy; there is more to come; read on; it will get clearer.
>
> *The Medusa and the Snail*, 1979

Expectation is what these stops are about; expectation and elastic energy. Like internal springs, they propel you forward in a sentence towards more information, and the essential difference between them is that while the semicolon lightly propels you in any direction related to the foregoing ("Whee! Surprise me!"), the colon nudges you along lines already subtly laid down. How can such useful marks be optional, for heaven's sake? As for the other thing, if they are middle-class, I'm a serviette. Of the objections to the colon and semicolon listed above, there is only one I am prepared to concede:

that semicolons are dangerously habit-forming. Many writers hooked on semicolons become an embarrassment to their families and friends. Their agents gently remind them, "George Orwell managed without, you know. And look what happened to Marcel Proust: carry on like this and you're only one step away from a cork-lined room!" But the writers rock back and forth on their office chairs, softly tapping the semicolon key and emitting low whimpers. I hear there are now Knightsbridge clinics offering semicolonic irrigation – but for many it may be too late. In her autobiographical *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003), Hilary Mantel reveals: "I have always been addicted to something or other, usually something there's no support group for. Semicolons, for instance, I can never give up for more than two hundred words at a time."

So how should you use the colon, to begin with? H. W. Fowler said that the colon "delivers the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words", which is not a bad image to start with. But the holy text of the colon and semicolon is the letter written by George Bernard Shaw to T. E. Lawrence in 1924, ticking him off for his over-use of colons in the

manuscript of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. This superb missive starts with the peremptory, "My dear Luruns [*sic*], Confound you and your book: you are no more to be trusted with a pen than a child with a torpedo" – and then gets even more offensive and hilarious as it goes on. Shaw explains that, having worked out his own system for colons and semicolons, he has checked it against the Bible, and seen that the Bible almost got it right. With such authority behind him, he is offended by Lawrence's cavalier attitude. "I save up the colon jealously for certain effects that no other stop produces," he explains. "As you have no rules, and sometimes throw colons about with an unhinged mind, here are some rules for you."

Shaw is quite famous for his idiosyncratic punctuation. His semicolons, in particular, were his way of making his texts firmly actor-proof – in fact, when Ralph Richardson tried to insert a few dramatic puffs and pants in his opening lines as Bluntschli in a 1931 production of *Arms and the Man* (1894), Shaw stopped him at once and told him to forget the naturalism and observe the punctuation instead. "This is all very well, Richardson," Shaw said (according to Richardson's account), "and it might do for Chekhov, but it

doesn't do for me. Your gasps are upsetting my stops and my semicolons, and you've got to stick to them." Richardson said Shaw spoke the truth about this: miss any of Shaw's stops and "the tune won't come off". Look at any Shaw text and you will find both colons and semicolons in over-abundance, with deliberate spacing to draw attention to them, too, as if they are genuine musical notation.

> Captain Bluntschli. I am very glad to see you ; but you must leave this house at once. My husband has just returned with my future son-in-law ; and they know nothing. If they did, the consequences would be terrible. You are a foreigner : you do not feel our national animosities as we do.
>
> *Arms and the Man*, Act II

To adopt George Bernard Shaw's use of the semicolon today would obviously be an act of insanity. But in the letter to T. E. Lawrence he is sound on the colon. When two statements are "placed baldly in dramatic apposition", he said, use a colon. Thus, "Luruns could not speak: he was drunk." Shaw explains to Lawrence that when the second statement reaffirms, explains or illustrates the first, you use a colon; also when you desire an abrupt "pull-

up": "Luruns was congenitally literary: that is, a liar."

> You will see [writes Shaw] that your colons before buts and the like are contra-indicated in my scheme, and leave you without anything in reserve for the dramatic occasions mentioned above. You practically do not use semicolons at all. This is a symptom of mental defectiveness, probably induced by camp life.

So the particular strengths of the colon are beginning to become clear. A colon is nearly always preceded by a complete sentence, and in its simplest usage it rather theatrically announces what is to come. Like a well-trained magician's assistant, it pauses slightly to give you time to get a bit worried, and then efficiently whisks away the cloth and reveals the trick complete.

In each of the following examples, incidentally, can't you hear a delighted, satisfied "Yes!" where the colon comes?

> This much is clear, Watson: it was the baying of an enormous hound.
> *(This much is clear, Watson – yes! it was the baying of an enormous hound.)*

> Tom has only one rule in life: never eat anything bigger than your head.
> *(Tom had only one rule in life – yes! never eat anything bigger than your head.)*
> I pulled out all the stops with Kerry-Anne: I used a semicolon.
> *(I pulled out all the stops with Kerry-Anne – yes! I used a semicolon.)*

But the "annunciatory" colon is only one variety. As well as the "Yes!" type colon, there is the "Ah" type, when the colon reminds us there is probably more to the initial statement than has met the eye:

> I loved Opal Fruits as a child: no one else did.
> *(I loved Opal Fruits – ah, but nobody else did.)*
> You can do it: and you will do it.
> *(You can do it – ah, and you will do it.)*

A classic use of the colon is as a kind fulcrum between two antithetical or oppositional statements:

> Man proposes: God disposes.

And as Shaw put it so well, the colon can simply pull up the reader for a nice surprise:

> I find fault with only three things in this story of yours, Jenkins: the beginning, the middle and the end.

So colons introduce the part of a sentence that exemplifies, restates, elaborates, undermines, explains or balances the preceding part. They also have several formal introductory roles. They start lists (especially lists using semicolons):

> In later life, Kerry-Anne found there were three qualities she disliked in other people: Britishness; superior airs; and a feigned lack of interest in her dusting of freckles.

They set off book and film sub-titles from the main titles:

> Berks and Wankers: a pessimist's view of language preservation
> Gandhi II: The Mahatma Strikes Back

Conventionally, they separate dramatic characters from dialogue:

> PHILIP: Kerry-Anne! Hold still! You've got some gunk on your face!
> KERRY-ANNE: They're *freckles*, Philip. How many more times?

They also start off long quotations and (of course) introduce examples in books on punctuation. What a useful chap the colon is, after all. Forget about counting to three, that's all I ask.

;

So when do you use a semicolon? As we learned in the comma chapter, the main place for putting a semicolon if you are not John Updike is between two related sentences where there is no conjunction such as "and" or "but", and where a comma would be ungrammatical:

> I loved Opal Fruits; they are now called Starburst, of course.

It was the baying of an enormous hound; it came from over there!
I remember him when he couldn't write his own name on a gate; now he's Prime Minister.

What the semicolon's anxious supporters fret about is the tendency of contemporary writers to use a dash instead of a semicolon and thus precipitate the end of the world. Are they being alarmist? In each of the examples above, a dash could certainly be substituted for the semicolon without much damage to the sentence. The dash is less formal than the semicolon, which makes it more attractive; it enhances conversational tone; and, as we shall see in the next chapter, it is capable of quite subtle effects. The main reason people use it, however, is that they know *you can't use it wrongly* – which, for a punctuation mark, is an uncommon virtue. But it is worth learning the different effects created by the semicolon and the dash. Whereas the semicolon suggests a connection between the two halves of each of these sentences, the dash ought to be preserved for occasions when the con-

nection is a lot less direct, when it can act as a bridge between bits of fractured sense:

I loved Opal Fruits – why did they call them Starburst? – reminds me of that joke "What did Zimbabwe used to be called? – Rhodesia. What did Iceland used to be called? – Bejam!"

So it is true that we must keep an eye on the dash – and also the ellipsis (...), which is turning up increasingly in emails as shorthand for "more to come, actually ... it might be related to what I've just written ... but the main thing is I haven't finished ... let's just wait and see ... I could go on like this for hours ..." However, so long as there remain sentences on this earth that begin with capital letters and end with full stops, there will be a place for the semicolon. True, its use is never obligatory, because a full stop ought always to be an alternative. But that only makes it the more wonderful.

Popotakis had tried a cinema, a dance hall, baccarat, and miniature golf; now he had four ping-pong tables. He had made good money, for the

> smart set of Jacksonburg were always hard put to get through the rainy season; the polyglot professional class had made it their rendezvous; even attachés from the legislations and younger members of the Jackson family had come there.
>
> Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop*, 1938

The semicolon has been rightly called "a compliment from the writer to the reader". And a mighty compliment it is, too. The sub-text of a semicolon is, "Now this is a hint. The elements of this sentence, although grammatically distinct, are actually elements of a single notion. I can make it plainer for you – but hey! You're a reader! I don't need to draw you a map!" By the same token, however, an over-reliance on semicolons – to give an air of authorial intention to half-formed ideas thrown together on the page – is rather more of a compliment than some of us care to receive. The American writer Paul Robinson, in his essay "The Philosophy of Punctuation" (2002), says that "pretentious and over-active" semicolons have reached epidemic proportions in the world of academe, where they are used to gloss over imprecise thought. "They place two clauses in some kind of relation to one another

but *relieve the writer of saying exactly what that relation is.*" Those are my italics, by the way – but it does sound as if Robinson is a bit worked up. "The semicolon has become so hateful to me," he says in all seriousness, "that I feel almost morally compromised when I use it."

There are times, however, when the semicolon is indispensable in another capacity: when it performs the duties of a kind of Special Policeman in the event of comma fights. If there is one lesson to be learned from this book, it is that there is never a dull moment in the world of punctuation. One minute the semicolon is gracefully joining sentences together in a flattering manner (and sullying Mr Robinson), and the next it is calling a bunch of brawling commas to attention.

> Fares were offered to Corfu, the Greek island, Morocco, Elba, in the Mediterranean, and Paris. Margaret thought about it. She had been to Elba once and had found it dull, to Morocco, and found it too colourful.

There is no option for an upstanding semicolon in

such circumstances other than to step in, blow a whistle and restore order.

> Fares were offered to Corfu, the Greek
> island; Morocco; Elba, in the Mediterranean;
> and Paris. Margaret thought about it. She
> had been to Elba once and had found it dull;
> to Morocco, and found it too colourful.

That's much clearer. And we have *you* to thank, Special Policeman Semicolon. There are two dangers, however, associated with this quell-the-rampant-comma use. One is that, having embarked on a series of clarifying semicolons, the writer loses interest, or forgets, and lapses into a comma (ho ho). The other danger is that weak-charactered writers will be encouraged to ignore the rule that only full sentences should be joined by the semicolon. Sometimes – and I've never admitted this to anyone before – I adopt a kind of stream-of-consciousness sentence structure; somewhat like Virginia Woolf; without full sentences; but it feels OK to do this; rather worrying.

Let us come swiftly to the last proper use of the

semicolon. As we discovered in the comma chapter, it is wrong to write, "He woke up in his own bed, however, he felt fine." Linking words such as "however", "nevertheless", "also", "consequently" and "hence" require a semicolon – and, I have to say, this seems pretty self-evident to me. Much as I decry the old count-to-two system, there is an obvious take-a-breath thing going on here. When you read the sentence, "He woke up in his own bed, and he felt fine", you don't draw breath before the "and". You rattle on. Whereas when you read, "He woke up in his own bed; nevertheless, he was OK", an inhalation is surely automatic.

It should come as no surprise that writers take an interest in punctuation. I have been told that the dying words of one famous 20th-century writer were, "I should have used fewer semicolons" – and although I have spent months fruitlessly trying to track down the chap responsible, I believe it none the less. If it turns out that no one actually did say this on their deathbed, I shall certainly save it up for my own.

What you have to remember about our punctuation system is that it is very limited. Writers jealous of their individual style are obliged to wring the utmost effect from a tiny range of marks – which explains why they get so desperate when their choices are challenged (or corrected) by copy-editors legislating according to a "house style". You write the words "apple tree" and discover that house style is "apple-tree". This hurts. The alteration seems simply perverse. And no one is immune. When Salman Rushdie's story "Free Radio" (in his book *East, West* [1994]) was first published by *Atlantic Monthly*, I have heard that the magazine repunctuated its deliberately "logorrhoeic" narration without consulting him, presumably on the assumption that punctuation was something Rushdie was happy to leave to others, like the hoovering. Nicholson Baker, in an essay on the history of punctuation in his book *The Size of Thoughts* (1996), relates an emotional battle with his copy-editor over whether "pantyhose" (as written) should be altered to "panty hose". Baker, incidentally, advocates the return of compound punctuation, such as commas with dashes (, –), semicolons with dashes (; –) and colons with dashes

(: –); and in his book *Room Temperature* (1990), muses so poetically on the shape of the comma ("it recalled the pedals of grand pianos, mosquito larvae, paisleys, adult nostril openings, the spiralling decays of fundamental particles, the prows of gondolas ... ") that – well, you've never heard anything like it.

9

See how the sense changes with the punctuation in this example:

> Tom locked himself in the shed. England
> lost to Argentina.

These two statements, as they stand, could be quite unrelated. They merely tell you two things have happened, in the past tense.

> Tom locked himself in the shed; England
> lost to Argentina.

We can infer from the semicolon that these events occurred at the same time, although it is possible

that Tom locked himself in the shed because he couldn't bear to watch the match and therefore still doesn't know the outcome. With the semicolon in place, Tom locking himself in the shed and England losing to Argentina sound like two things that really got on the nerves of someone else. "It was a terrible day, Mum: Tom locked himself in the shed; England lost to Argentina; the rabbit electrocuted itself by biting into the power cable of the washing machine."

> Tom locked himself in the shed: England
> lost to Argentina.

All is now clear. Tom locked himself in the shed *because* England lost to Argentina. And who can blame him, that's what I say.

It is sad to think people are no longer learning how to use the colon and semicolon, not least because, in this supreme QWERTY keyboard era, the little finger of the human right hand, deprived of its traditional function, may eventually dwindle and drop off from disuse. But the main reason is that, as Joseph Robertson wrote in an essay on punctuation in 1785, "The art of punctuation is of infinite con-

sequence in writing; as it contributes to the perspicuity, and consequently to the beauty, of every composition." Perspicuity and beauty of composition are not to be sneezed at in this rotten world. If colons and semicolons give themselves airs and graces, at least they also confer airs and graces that the language would be lost without.

Cutting a Dash

In 1885, Anton Chekhov wrote a Christmas short story called "The Exclamation Mark". In this light parody of *A Christmas Carol*, a collegiate secretary named Perekladin has a sleepless night on Christmas Eve after someone at a party offends him – by casting aspersions on his ability to punctuate in an educated way. I know this doesn't sound too promising, but stick with it, it's Chekhov, and the general rule is that you can't go wrong with Chekhov. At this party, the rattled Perekladin insists that, despite his lack of a university education, forty years' practice has taught him how to use punctuation, thank you very much. But that night, after he goes to bed, he is troubled; and then he is haunted. Scrooge-like, he is visited on this momentous Christmas Eve by a succession of

spectres, which teach him a lesson he will never forget.

And what are these spectres? They are all punctuation marks. Yes, this really is a story about punctuation – and first to disturb Perekladin's sleep is a crowd of fiery, flying commas, which Perekladin banishes by repeating the rules he knows for using them. Then come full stops; colons and semicolons; question marks. Again, he keeps his head and sends them away. But then a question mark unbends itself, straightens up – and Perekladin realises he is stumped. In forty years he has had no reason to use an exclamation mark! He has no idea what it is for. The inference for the reader is clear: nothing of any emotional significance has ever happened to Perekladin. Nothing relating, in any case, to the "delight, indignation, joy, rage and other feelings" an exclamation mark is in the business of denoting.

As epiphanies go, this isn't quite the same as seeing Tiny Tim's ownerless crutch propped in the inglenook, but Perekladin is affected none the less.

> The poor pen-pusher felt cold and ill at ease, as if he had caught typhus. The exclamation mark was no longer standing behind his closed eyes but in

front of him, in the room, by his wife's dressing-table, and it was winking at him mockingly.

Translation: Harvey Pitcher in Chekhov, *The Comic Stories*, 1998

What can poor Perekladin do? When he hails a cab on Christmas Day, he spots immediately that the driver is an exclamation mark. Things are getting out of hand. At the home of his "chief", the doorman is another exclamation mark. It is time to take a stand – and, signing himself into the visitors' book at his chief's house, Perekladin suddenly sees the way. Defiantly he writes his name, "Collegiate Secretary Yefim Perekladin" and adds three exclamation marks, "!!!"

And as he wrote those three marks, he felt delight and indignation, he was joyful and he seethed with rage.

"Take that, take that!" he muttered, pressing down hard on the pen.

And the phantom exclamation mark disappears.

Most of us can't remember a time before we learned to punctuate. We perhaps remember learning to read and to spell, but not the moment when we found out that adding the symbol "!" to a sentence somehow changed the tone of voice it was read in. Luckily we are taught such stuff when we are young enough not to ask awkward questions, because the way this symbol "!" turns "I can't believe it" into "I can't believe it!" is the sort of dizzying convention that requires to be taken absolutely on trust. Of my own exclamation-mark history (which is not one to be proud of) all I can clearly recollect of its early days is that the standard keyboard of a manual typewriter in the 1970s – on which I did my first typing – did not offer an exclamation mark. You had to type a full stop, then back-space and type an apostrophe on top of it. Quite a deterrent to expressive punctuation, Mister Remington. But in fact, of course, all one's resourceful back-space/shift-key efforts only added to the satisfaction of seeing the emphatic little black blighter sitting cheerfully on the page.

This chapter is about expressive, attention-seeking punctuation – punctuation that cuts a dash; punctuation that can't help saying it with knobs on, such as the exclamation mark, the dash, the italic.

Of course the effect of such marks can be over-relied on; of course they are condemned by Gertrude Stein (strange woman). Yet I can't help thinking, in its defence, that our system of punctuation is limited enough already without us dismissing half of it as rubbish. I say we should remember the fine example of Perekladin, who found catharsis in an exclamation mark, and also of the French 19th-century novelist Victor Hugo, who – when he wanted to know how *Les Misérables* was selling – reportedly telegraphed his publisher with the simple inquiry "?" and received the expressive reply "!"

Everyone knows the exclamation mark – or exclamation point, as it is known in America. It comes at the end of a sentence, is unignorable and hopelessly heavy-handed, and is known in the newspaper world as a screamer, a gasper, a startler or (sorry) a dog's cock. Here's one! And here's another! In humorous writing, the exclamation mark is the equivalent of canned laughter (F. Scott Fitzgerald – that well-known knockabout gag-man – said it was

like laughing at your own jokes), and I can attest there is only one thing more mortifying than having an exclamation mark removed by an editor: an exclamation mark added in.

Despite all the efforts of typewriter manufacturers, you see, the exclamation mark has refused to die out. Introduced by humanist printers in the 15th century, it was known as "the note of admiration" until the mid 17th century, and was defined – in a lavishly titled 1680 book *Treatise of Stops, Points, or Pauses, and of Notes which are used in Writing and Print; Both very necessary to be well known And the Use of each to be carefully taught* – in the following rhyming way:

> This stop denotes our Suddain Admiration,
> Of what we Read, or Write, or giv Relation,
> And is always cal'd an Exclamation.

Ever since it came along, grammarians have warned us to be wary of the exclamation mark, mainly because, even when we try to muffle it with brackets (!), it still shouts, flashes like neon, and jumps up and down. In the family of punctuation, where the full stop is daddy and the comma is

mummy, and the semicolon quietly practises the piano with crossed hands, the exclamation mark is the big attention-deficit brother who gets over-excited and breaks things and laughs too loudly. Traditionally it is used:

1 in involuntary ejaculations: "Phew! Lord love a duck!"
2 to salute or invoke: "O mistress mine! Where are you roaming?"
3 to exclaim (or admire): "How many goodly creatures are there here!"
4 for drama: "That's not the Northern Lights, that's Manderley!"
5 to make a commonplace sentence more emphatic: "I could really do with some Opal Fruits!"
6 to deflect potential misunderstanding of irony: "I don't mean it!"

Personally, I use exclamation marks for email salutations, where I feel a "Dear Jane" is over-formal. "Jane!" I write, although I am beginning to discover this practice is not universally acceptable. I suppose the rule is: only use an exclamation mark when you

are absolutely sure you require such a big effect. H. W. Fowler said, "An excessive use of exclamation marks is a certain indication of an unpractised writer or of one who wants to add a spurious dash of sensation to something unsensational." On the other hand, it sometimes seems hurtful to suppress the exclamation mark when – after all – it doesn't mean any harm to anyone, and is so desperately keen.

?

The question mark, with its elegant seahorse profile, takes up at least double the space on the page of an exclamation mark, yet gets on people's nerves considerably less. What would we do without it? Like the exclamation mark, it is a development of the full stop, a "terminator", used only at the ends of sentences, starting out as the *punctus interrogativus* in the second half of the 8th century, when it resembled a lightning flash, striking from right to left. The name "question mark" (which is rather a dull one, quite frankly) was acquired in the second half of the 19th century, and has never caught on universally. Journalists dictating copy will call it a "query", and –

while we are on the subject of dictation – in this passage from P. G. Wodehouse's *Over Seventy* (1957) it is delightfully called something else:

> How anybody can compose a story by word of mouth face to face with a bored-looking secretary with a notebook is more than I can imagine. Yet many authors think nothing of saying, "Ready, Miss Spelvin? Take dictation. Quote No comma Sir Jasper Murgatroyd comma close quotes comma said no better make it hissed Evangeline comma quote I would not marry you if you were the last man on earth period close quotes Quote Well comma I'm not comma so the point does not arise comma close quotes replied Sir Jasper twirling his moustache cynically period And so the long day wore on period. End of chapter."
>
> If I had to do that sort of thing I should be feeling all the time that the girl was saying to herself as she took it down, "Well comma this beats me period How comma with homes for the feebleminded touting for custom on every side comma has a man like this succeeded in remaining at large mark of interrogation."

Question marks are used when the question is direct:

> What is the capital of Belgium?
> Have you been there?
> Did you find the people very strange?

When the question is inside quotation marks, again it is required:

> "Did you try the moules and chips?" he asked.

But when the question is indirect, the sentence manages without it:

> What was the point of all this sudden interest in Brussels, he wondered.
> I asked if she had something in particular against the Belgian national character.

Increasingly people are (ignorantly) adding question marks to sentences containing indirect questions, which is a bit depressing, but the reason is not hard to find: blame the famous upward inflection caught by all teenage viewers of *Neighbours* in the past twenty years. Previously, people said "you know?" and

"know what I'm saying?" at the end of every sentence. Now they don't bother with the words and just use the question marks, to save time. Everything ends up becoming a question? I'm talking about statements? It's getting quite annoying? But at least it keeps the question mark alive so it can't be all bad?

Deciding which way round to print the question mark wasn't as straightforward as you might think, incidentally. In its traditional orientation, with the curve to the right, it appears to cup an ear towards the preceding prose, which seems natural enough, though perhaps only because that's how we are used to seeing it. But people have always played around with it. In the 16th century the printer Henry Denham had the sophisticated idea of reversing the mark when indicating a rhetorical question (to differentiate it from a direct question), but it didn't catch on. You can imagine other printers muttering uncertainly, "Rhetorical question? What's a rhetorical question? Is *this* a rhetorical question?" – and not being able to answer. The Spanish Academy, however, in 1754 ratified the rather marvellous and flamboyant idea of complementing terminal question marks and exclamation

marks with upside-down versions at the beginnings, thus:

> ¡Lord, love a duck!
> ¿Doesn't Spanish look different from
> everything else now we've done this?

And it's not a bad system at all. Evidently Bill Gates has personally assured the Spanish Academy that he will never allow the upside-down question mark to disappear from Microsoft word-processing programs, which must be reassuring for millions of Spanish-speaking people, though just a piddling afterthought as far as he's concerned. Meanwhile, in Hebrew the question mark is exactly the same as our own, despite the fact that it ought logically to be flipped into reverse, since the words run from right to left. Remember Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*: "The Arabs learn Arabian with the speed of summer lightning / The Hebrews learn it backwards, which is absolutely frightening"? So we have an interesting and perverse perceptual problem in Hebrew: with the question mark the same way round as our own, it looks back to front.

Unsurprisingly, Gertrude Stein was not a fan of the question mark. Are you beginning to suspect – as I am – that there was something wrong at home? Anyway, Stein said that of all punctuation marks the question mark was "the most completely uninteresting":

> It is evident that if you ask a question you ask a question but anybody who can read at all knows when a question is a question [...] I never could bring myself to use a question mark, I always found it positively revolting, and now very few do use it.

Since Stein wrote these remarks in 1935, it's interesting that she thought the question mark was on the way out, even then. Those of us brought up with the question-mark ethic are actually horrified when a direct question is written without a question mark – as in, for example, the film title *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Unmarked questions left dangling in this way make me feel like an old-fashioned headmaster waiting for a child to remember his manners. "And?" I keep wanting to say. "*And?*" "Can you spare any old records," it still says in that

charity-shop window – only now it's a printed sign, not a handwritten one. Every time I pass it, it drives me nuts. Meanwhile, as Kingsley Amis points out in his *The King's English*, many people start sentences with words such as, "May I crave the hospitality of your columns" and then get so involved in a long sentence that they forget it started as a question, so finish it with a full stop.

> To do so not only sends the interested reader, if there is one, back to the start to check that the fellow did at any rate start to ask a direct question, it also carries the disagreeable and perhaps truthful suggestion that the writer thinks a request from the likes of him is probably a needless politeness to the likes of the editor.

What a marvellous little aside, by the way: "if there is one".

,

Of all the conventions of print that make no objective sense, the use of italics is the one that puzzles most. How *does* it work? Yet ever since italic type was invented in the 15th century, it has been customary

to mix italic with roman to lift certain words out of the surrounding context and mark them as special. None of the marks in this chapter so far has anything to do with grammar, really. They are all to do with symbolically notating the music of the spoken language: of asking the question "?" and receiving the answer "!" Italics have developed to serve certain purposes for us that we never stop to question. When was the last time you panicked in the face of italics, "Hang on, this writing's gone all wobbly"? Instead we all know that italics are the print equivalent of underlining, and that they are used for:

1 titles of books, newspapers, albums, films such as (unfortunately) *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*
2 emphasis of certain words
3 foreign words and phrases
4 examples when writing about language

We even accept the mad white-on-black convention that *when a whole sentence is in italics, you use* roman type *to emphasise a key word inside it.* Some British newspapers, notably *The Guardian*, have dropped the use of italics for titles, which as far as I

can see makes life a lot more difficult for the reader without any compensating benefits. Like the exclamation mark, however, italics should be used sparingly for the purposes of emphasis – partly because they are a confession of stylistic failure, and partly because readers glancing at a page of type might unconsciously clock the italicised bit before starting their proper work of beginning in the top left-hand corner. Martin Amis, reviewing Iris Murdoch's novel *The Philosopher's Pupil* in *The Observer* in 1983, complained of a narrator, "N", who was irritating on a variety of scores, and explains what can happen to a writer who uses italics too much:

> Apart from a weakness for quotation marks, "N" also has a weakness for ellipses, dashes, exclamations and italics, especially italics. Each page is corrugated by half a dozen underlinings, normally a sure sign of stylistic irresolution. A jangled, surreal (and much shorter) version of the book could be obtained by reading the italic type and omitting the roman. It would go something like this:
>
> *deep, significant, awful, horrid, sickening, absolutely disgusting, guilt, accuse, secret, conspiracy, go to the cinema, go for a long walk, an entirely different*

matter, an entirely new way, become a historian, become a philosopher, never sing again, Stella, jealous, happy, cad, bloody fool, God, Christ, mad, crazy ...

Martin Amis, collected in
The War Against Cliché, 2001

What a rotten thing to do. But on the other hand, I feel he has saved us all the bother of reading the book now.

❦

When Amis *fils* mentioned quotation marks as an annoyance in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, he was not objecting to those that indicate actual quotations. Inverted commas (or speech marks, or quotes) are sometimes used by fastidious writers as a kind of linguistic rubber glove, distancing them from vulgar words or clichés they are too refined to use in the normal way. This "N" character in Iris Murdoch's novel evidently can't bring himself to say "keep in touch" without sealing it hygienically within inverted commas, and doubtless additionally indicating his irony with two pairs of curled fingers held up at either side of his face. In newspapers, similar

inverted commas are sometimes known as "scare quotes", as when a headline says "BRITAIN BUYS 'WRONG' VACCINE", "ROBERT MAXWELL 'DEAD'", or "DEAD MAN 'EATEN' IN GRUESOME CAT HORROR". Such inverted commas (usually single, rather than double) are understood by readers to mean that there is some authority for this story, perhaps even a quotable source, but that the newspaper itself won't yet state it as fact. Evidently there is no legal protection provided by such weaselly inverted commas: if you assert someone is 'LYING', it's pretty much the same in law as saying he is lying. And we all know the dead man was definitely eaten by those gruesome cats – otherwise no one would have raised the possibility. The interesting thing is how this practice relates to the advertising of 'PIZZAS' in quite large supermarket chains. To those of us accustomed to newspaper headlines, 'PIZZAS' in inverted commas suggests these *might* be pizzas, but nobody's promising anything, and if they turn out to be cardboard with a bit of cheese on top, you can't say you weren't warned.

There is a huge amount of ignorance concerning the use of quotation marks. A catalogue will

advertise that its pineapple ring slicer works just like 'a compass'. Why? Why doesn't it work just like a compass? There is a serious cognitive problem highlighted here, I think; a real misunderstanding of what writing is. Nigel Hall, a reader in literacy education at Manchester Metropolitan University who studies the way children learn to punctuate, told me about one small boy who peppered his work with quotation marks, regardless of whether it was reporting any speech. Why did he do that? "Because it's all me talking," the child explained, and I imagine it was hard to argue against such immaculate logic. It seems to me that the 'PIZZAS' people, who put signs in their windows – 'NOW OPEN SUNDAYS', 'THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING' – have the same problem as this little boy. If they are saying this thing, announcing it, then they feel that logically they have to present it in speech marks, because *it's all them talking*.

Comfortable though we are with our modern usage, it has taken a long time to evolve, and will of course evolve further, so we mustn't get complacent. Until the beginning of the 18th century, quotation marks were used in England only to call attention to

sententious remarks. Then in 1714 someone had the idea of using them to denote direct speech, and by the time of the first edition of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* in 1749, inverted commas were used by printers both to contain the speech and to indicate in a general, left-hand marginal way that there was speech going on.

> Here the Book dropt from her Hand, and a Shower of Tears ran down into her Bosom. In this Situation she had continued a Minute, when the Door opened, and in came Lord *Fellamar*. *Sophia* started from her Chair at his Entrance ; and his Lordship advancing forwards, and making a low Bow said, ' I am afraid, Miss *Wes-* ' *tern*, I break in upon you abruptly.' ' In- ' deed, my Lord,' says she, ' I must own ' myself a little surprized at this unexpect- ' ed Visit.' ' If this Visit be unexpected, ' Madam,' answered Lord *Fellamar*, ' my ' Eyes must have been very faithless Inter- ' preters of my Heart ... '

Since the 18th century we have standardised the use of quotation marks – but only up to a point. Readers are obliged to get used to the idea from an

early age that "Double or single?" is a question not applicable only to beds, tennis and cream. We see both double and single quotation marks every day, assimilate both, and try not to think about it. Having been trained to use double quotation marks for speech, however, with single quotations for quotations-within-quotations, I grieve to see the rule applied the other way round. There is a difference between saying someone is "out of sorts" (a direct quote) and 'out of sorts' (i.e., not feeling very well): when single quotes serve both functions, you lose this distinction. Also, with the poor apostrophe already confusing people so much, a sentence that begins with a single quote and contains an apostrophe after three or four words is quite confusing typographically, because you automatically assume the apostrophe is the closing quotation mark:

'I was at St Thomas' Hospital,' she said.

There is, too, a gulf between American usage and our own, with Americans always using double quotation marks and American grammarians insisting that, if a sentence ends with a phrase in inverted

commas, all the terminal punctuation for the sentence must come tidily inside the speech marks, even when this doesn't seem to make sense.

> Sophia asked Lord Fellamar if he was "out of his senses". (British)
> Sophia asked Lord Fellamar if he was "out of his senses." (American)

Since where and when to put other punctuation in direct speech is a real bother to some people, here are some basic rules:

When a piece of dialogue is attributed at its end, conclude it with a comma inside the inverted commas:

> "You are out of your senses, Lord Fellamar," gasped Sophia.

When the dialogue is attributed at the start, conclude with a full stop inside the inverted commas:

> Lord Fellamar replied, "Love has so totally

> deprived me of reason that I am scarce accountable for my actions."

When the dialogue stands on its own, the full stop comes inside the inverted commas:

> "Upon my word, my Lord, I neither understand your words nor your behaviour."

When only a fragment of speech is being quoted, put punctuation outside the inverted commas:

> Sophia recognised in Lord Fellamar the "effects of frenzy", and tried to break away.

When the quotation is a question or exclamation, the terminal marks come inside the inverted commas:

> "Am I really to conceive your Lordship to be out of his senses?" cried Sophia.
> "Unhand me, sir!" she demanded.

But when the question is posed by the sentence rather than by the speaker, logic demands that the

question mark goes outside the inverted commas:

> Why didn't Sophia see at once that his lordship doted on her "to the highest degree of distraction"?

Where the quoted speech is a full sentence requiring a full stop (or other terminal mark) of its own, and coincidentally comes at the end of the containing sentence, the mark inside the inverted commas serves for both:

> Then fetching a deep sigh [...] he ran on for some minutes in a strain which would be little more pleasing to the reader than it was to the lady; and at last concluded with a declaration, "That if he was master of the world, he would lay it at her feet."

The basic rule is straightforward and logical: when the punctuation relates to the quoted words it goes inside the inverted commas; when it relates to the sentence, it goes outside. Unless, of course, you are in America.

So far in this chapter we have looked at punctuation that encourages the reader to inflect words mentally in a straightforwardly emphatic way:

Hello!
Hello?
Hello
"Hello"

But, as many classically trained actors will tell you, it can be just as effective to lower your voice for emphasis as to raise it. Poets and writers know this too, which is where dashes and brackets come in. Both of these marks ostensibly muffle your volume and flatten your tone; but, used carefully, they can do more to make a point than any page and a half of italics. Here are some literary dashes:

He learned the arts of riding, fencing, gunnery,
And how to scale a fortress – or a nunnery.

Byron, *Don Juan*, 1818–20

Let love therefore be what it will, – my uncle Toby fell into it.

Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1760–67

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

Emily Dickinson,
"Because I could not stop for Death", 1863

The dash is nowadays seen as the enemy of grammar, partly because overtly disorganised thought is the mode of most email and (mobile phone) text communication, and the dash does an annoyingly good job in these contexts standing in for all other punctuation marks. "I saw Jim – he looked gr8 – have you seen him – what time is the thing 2morrow – C U there." Why is the dash the mark *à la mode*? Because it is so easy to use, perhaps; and because it is hard to use wrongly; but also because it is, simply, easy to *see*. Full stops and commas are often quite tiny in modern typefaces, whereas the handsome horizontal dash is a lot harder to miss. However, just as the exclamation

mark used to be *persona non grata* on old typewriter keyboards, so you may often hunt in vain for the dash nowadays: on my own Apple keyboard I have been for years discouraged from any stream-of-consciousness writing by the belief that I had to make my own quasi-dashes from illicit double-taps on the hyphen. When I discovered a week ago that I could make a true dash by employing the alt key with the hyphen, it was truly one of the red-letter days of my life. Meanwhile, the distinction between the big bold dash and its little brother the hyphen is evidently blurring these days, and requires explanation. Whereas a dash is generally concerned to connect (or separate) phrases and sentences, the tiny tricksy hyphen (used above in such phrases as "quasi-dashes", "double-taps" and "stream-of-consciousness") is used quite distinctly to connect (or separate) individual words.

Are dashes intrinsically unserious? Certainly in abundance they suggest baroque and hyperactive silliness, as exemplified by the breathless Miss Bates in Jane Austen's *Emma*:

> "How do you do? How do you all do? – Quite well, I am much obliged to you. Never better. – Don't I

> hear another carriage? – Who can this be? – very likely the worthy Coles. – Upon my word, this is charming to be standing about among such friends! And such a noble fire! – I am quite roasted."

Yet the dash need not be silly. The word has identical roots with the verb "to dash" (deriving from the Middle English verb *dasshen*, meaning "to knock, to hurl, to break") and the point is that a single dash creates a dramatic disjunction which can be exploited for humour, for bathos, for shock. "Wait for it," the single dash seems to whisper, with a twinkle if you're lucky. Byron is a great master of the dramatic dash:

> A little still she strove, and much repented,
> And whispering "I will ne'er consent" –
> consented.

A comma just wouldn't cut the mustard there, especially with the metre hurrying you along. Meanwhile, Emily Dickinson's extraordinary penchant for dashes has been said to be a mirror into her own synapses, symbolising "the analogical leaps and flashes of advanced cognition" – either that, of

course, or she used a typewriter from which all the other punctuation keys had been sadistically removed.

Double dashes are another matter. These are a bracketing device, and the only issue is when to use brackets, when dashes. The differences can be quite subtle, but compare these two:

> He was (I still can't believe this!) trying to climb in the window.
> He was – I still can't believe this! – trying to climb in the window.

Is one version preferable to the other? Reading both aloud, it would be hard to tell them apart. But as they sit on the page, it seems to me that the brackets half-remove the intruding aside, half-suppress it; while the dashes warmly welcome it in, with open arms.

Brackets come in various shapes, types and names:

1 round brackets (which we call brackets, and the Americans call parentheses)

2 square brackets [which we call square brackets, and the Americans call brackets]
3 brace brackets {which are shaped thus and derive from maths}
4 angle brackets < used in palaeography, linguistics and other technical specialisms >

The angle shape was the earliest to appear, but in the 16th century Erasmus gave the attractive name "lunulae" to round brackets, in reference to their moon-like profile. The word "bracket" – one of the few English punctuation words not to derive from Greek or Latin – comes from the same German root as "brace" and "breeches", and originally referred (deep down you knew this) to the kind of bracket that holds up a bookshelf! The idea that, in writing, brackets lift up a section of a sentence, holding it a foot or two above the rest, is rather satisfying. For the reader, however, the important thing is that this lift-and-hold business doesn't last too long, because there is a certain amount of anxiety created once a bracket has been opened that is not dissipated until it's bloody well closed again. As Oliver Wendell Holmes remarked

so beautifully, "One has to dismount from an idea, and get into the saddle again, at every parenthesis." Writers who place whole substantive passages in brackets can't possibly appreciate the existential suffering they inflict. When a bracket opens halfway down a left-hand page and the closing bracket is, giddyingly, nowhere in sight, it's like being in a play by Jean-Paul Sartre.

However, there are plenty of legitimate uses of brackets. First, to add information, to clarify, to explain, to illustrate:

> *Tom Jones* (1749) was considered such a lewd book that, when two earthquakes occurred in London in 1750, Fielding's book was blamed for them.
> Starburst (formerly known as Opal Fruits) are available in all corner shops.
> Robert Maxwell wasn't dead yet (he was still suing people).

Second, brackets are perfect for authorial asides of various kinds:

> The exclamation mark is sometimes called (really!) a dog's cock.
> *Tom Jones* was blamed for some earthquakes (isn't that interesting?).

Square brackets are quite another thing. They are an editor's way of clarifying the meaning of a direct quote without actually changing any of the words:

> She had used it [*Tom Jones*] for quite a number of examples now.

Obviously, the text only says "it" at this point, but the editor needs to be more specific, so inserts the information inside square brackets. It is quite all right to replace the "it", actually:

> She had used [*Tom Jones*] for far too many examples by this stage.

Square brackets are most commonly used around the word *sic* (from the Latin *sicut*, meaning "just as"), to explain the status of an apparent mistake. Generally, *sic* means the foregoing mistake (or apparent

mistake) was made by the writer/speaker I am quoting; I am but the faithful messenger: in fact I never get anything wrong myself:

She asked for "a packet of Starbust [sic]".

Book reviewers in particular adore to use *sic*. It makes them feel terrific, because what it means is that they've spotted this apparent mistake, thank you, so there is no point writing in. However, there are distinctions within *sic*: it can signify two different things:

1 This isn't a mistake, actually; it just looks like one to the casual eye.

I am grateful to Mrs Bollock [sic] for the following examples.

2 Tee hee, what a dreadful error! But it would be dishonest of me to correct it.

"Please send a copy of *The Time's* [sic]," he wrote.

Square brackets also (sometimes) enclose the ellipsis, when words are left out. Thus:

> But a more lucky circumstance happened to poor Sophia: another noise broke forth, which almost drowned her cries [...] the door flew open, and in came Squire Western, with his parson, and a set of myrmidons at his heels.

9

I recently heard of someone studying the ellipsis (or three dots) for a PhD. And, I have to say, I was horrified. The ellipsis is the black hole of the punctuation universe, surely, into which no right-minded person would willingly be sucked, for three years, with no guarantee of a job at the end. But at least when this thesis is complete, it may tell us whether rumours are true, and that Mrs Henry Wood's "Dead ... and never called me mother!" (in the stage version of *East Lynne*) was really the first time it was used. Newspapers sometimes use the ellipsis interchangeably with a dash ... which can be quite irritating ... as its proper uses are quite specific, and very few:

1 To indicate words missing ... from a quoted passage
2 To trail off in an intriguing manner ...

Which is always a good way to end anything, of course – in an intriguing manner. When you consider the power of erotic suggestion contained in the traditional three-dot chapter ending ("He swept her into his arms. She was powerless to resist. All she knew was, she loved him ..."), it's a bit of a comedown for the ellipsis to be used as a sub-species of the dash. Perhaps the final word on the ellipsis should go to Peter Cook in this Pete and Dud sketch from BBC2's *Not Only But Also* in 1966. (My memory was that the title of this show contained an ellipsis itself, being *Not Only ... But Also*, but in modern references the ellipsis has been removed, which only goes to show you can't rely on anything any more.) Anyway, Peter Cook's musing on the significance of the three dots is quite as good a philosophical moment as Tom Stoppard's critics Moon and Birdboot in *The Real Inspector Hound* arguing about whether you can start a play with a pause. Pete is explaining to Dud how a bronzed pilot approaches a

woman on a dusty runway in Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice* – a woman whose perfectly defined "busty substances" have been outlined underneath her frail poplin dress by a shower of rain and then the "tremendous rushing wind" from his propellers:

DUD: What happened after that, Pete?
PETE: Well, the bronzed pilot goes up to her and they walk away, and the chapter ends in three dots.
DUD: What do those three dots mean, Pete?
PETE: Well, in Shute's hands, three dots can mean anything.
DUD: How's your father, perhaps?
PETE: When Shute uses three dots it means, "Use your own imagination. Conjure the scene up for yourself." *(Pause)* Whenever I see three dots I feel all funny.

A Little Used Punctuation Mark

One of the most profound things ever said about punctuation came in an old style guide of the Oxford University Press in New York. "If you take hyphens seriously," it said, "you will surely go mad." And it's true. Just look how the little blighter escaped all previous categorisation until I had to hunt it down on its own for this teeny-weeny, hooked-on, afterthought-y chapter. It's a funny old mark, the hyphen. Always has been. People have argued for its abolition for years: Woodrow Wilson said the hyphen was "the most un-American thing in the world" (note the hyphen required in "un-American"); Churchill said hyphens were "a blemish, to be avoided wherever possible". Yet there will always be a problem about getting rid of the hyphen: if it's not extra-marital sex (with a hyphen), it is perhaps extra

marital sex, which is quite a different bunch of coconuts. Phrases abound that cry out for hyphens. Those much-invoked examples of the little used car, the superfluous hair remover, the pickled herring merchant, the slow moving traffic and the two hundred odd members of the Conservative Party would all be lost without it.

The name comes from the Greek, as usual. What a lot of words the Greeks had for explaining spatial relationships – for placing round, placing underneath, joining together, cutting off! Lucky for us, otherwise we would have had to call our punctuation marks names like "joiner" and "half a dash" and so on. In this case, the phrase from which we derive the name hyphen means "under one" or "into one" or "together", so is possibly rather more sexy in its origins than we might otherwise have imagined from its utilitarian image today. Traditionally it joins together words, or words-with-prefixes, to aid understanding; it keeps certain other words neatly apart, with an identical intention. Thus the pickled-herring merchant can hold his head high, and the coat-tail doesn't look like an unpronounceable single word. And all thanks to the humble hyphen.

The fate of the hyphen is of course implicated in a general change occurring in the language at the moment, which will be discussed in the next chapter: the astonishing and quite dangerous drift back to the *scriptio continua* of the ancient world, by which words are just hoicked together as "all one word" with no initial capitals or helpful punctuation – the only good result of which being that if books manage to survive more than the next twenty years or so, younger readers will have no trouble reading James Joyce, since unhyphenated poetic compounds like "snotgreen" and "scrotumtightening" will look perfectly everyday. Email addresses are inuring us to this trend, as are advertisements on the internet ("GENTSROLEXWATCH!"), and when I received an invitation to a BBC launch for an initiative called "soundstart", I hardly blinked an eye. In the old days, we used to ask the following question a lot: "One word? Two words? Hyphenated?" With astonishing speed, the third alternative is just disappearing, and I have heard that people with double-barrelled names are simply unable to get the concept across these days, because so few people on the other end of a telephone know what a hyphen is.

As a consequence they receive credit cards printed with the name "Anthony Armstrong, Jones", "Anthony Armstrong'Jones", or even "Anthony Armstrong Hyphen".

Where should hyphens still go, before we sink into a depressing world that writes, "Hellohowareyouwhatisthisspacebarthingforanyidea"? Well, there are many legitimate uses for the hyphen:

1 To prevent people casting aspersions at herring merchants who have never touched a drop in their lives. Many words require hyphens to avoid ambiguity: words such as "co-respondent", "re-formed", "re-mark". A re-formed rock band is quite different from a reformed one. Likewise, a long-standing friend is different from a long standing one. A cross-section of the public is quite different from a cross section of the public. And one could go on. Carefully placed hyphens do not always save the day, however, as I recently had good reason to learn. Writing in *The Daily Telegraph* about the state of modern punctuation, I alluded to a "newspaper style-book" – carefully adding the hyphen to ensure the meaning was clear (I wasn't sure people had heard of style books).

And can you believe it? Two people wrote to complain! I had hyphenated wrongly, they said (with glee). Since there was no such thing as a newspaper style-book, I must really have intended "newspaper-style book". I'll just say here and now that I've rarely been more affronted. "What is a newspaper-style book, then?" I yelled. "Tell me what a newspaper-style book would look like when it's at home!" I still have not got over this.

2 It is still necessary to use hyphens when spelling out numbers, such as thirty-two, forty-nine.

3 When linking nouns with nouns, such as the London-Brighton train; also adjectives with adjectives: American-French relations. Typesetters and publishers use a short dash, known as an en-rule, for this function.

4 Though it is less rigorously applied than it used to be, there is a rule that when a noun phrase such as "stainless steel" is used to qualify another noun, it is hyphenated, as "stainless-steel kitchen". Thus you have corrugated iron, but a corrugated-iron

roof. The match has a second half, but lots of second-half excitement. *Tom Jones* was written in the 18th century, but is an 18th-century novel. The train leaves at seven o'clock; it is the seven-o'clock train.

5 Certain prefixes traditionally require hyphens: un-American, anti-Apartheid, pro-hyphens, quasi-grammatical.

6 When certain words are to be spelled out, it is customary to use hyphens to indicate that you want the letters enunciated (or pictured) separately: "K-E-Y-N-S-H-A-M".

7 Purely for expediency, the hyphen is used to avoid an unpleasant linguistic condition called "letter collision". However much you might want to create compound words, there will always be some ghastly results, such as "deice" (de-ice) or "shelllike" (shell-like).

8 One of the main uses of the hyphen, of course, is to indicate that a word is unfinished and continues

on the next line. Ignorance about where to split words has reached quite scary proportions, but thankfully this isn't the place to go into it. I'll just say that it's "pains-]taking" and not "pain-]staking".

9 Hesitation and stammering are indicated by hyphens: "I reached for the w-w-w-watering can."

10 When a hyphenated phrase is coming up, and you are qualifying it beforehand, it is necessary to write, "He was a two- or three-year-old."

Even bearing all these rules in mind, however, one can't help feeling that the hyphen is for the chop. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* as far back as 1930 was advising that, "wherever reasonable", the hyphen should be dropped, and the 2003 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of English* suggests that it is heading for extinction. American usage is gung-ho for compound words (or should that be gungho?), but a state of confusion reigns these days, with quite psychotic hyphenations arising in British usage, especially the rise of hyphens in phrasal verbs. "Time to top-up that pension," the advertise-

ments tell us. Uneducated football writers will aver that the game "kicked-off" at 3pm, and are not, apparently, ticked off afterwards. On the *Times* books website I see that Joan Smith "rounds-up" the latest crime fiction. But what if a writer wants his hyphens and can make a case for them? Nicholson Baker in his book *The Size of Thoughts* writes about his own deliberations when a well-intentioned copy-editor deleted about two hundred "innocent tinkertoy hyphens" in the manuscript of one of his books. American copy-editing, he says, has fallen into a state of "demoralised confusion" over hyphenated and unhyphenated compounds. On this occasion he wrote "stet hyphen" (let the hyphen stand) so many times in the margin that, in the end, he abbreviated it to "SH".

> I stetted myself sick over the new manuscript. I stetted *re-enter* (rather than *reenter*), *post-doc* (rather than *postdoc*), *foot-pedal* (rather than *foot pedal*), *second-hand* (rather than *secondhand*), *twist-tie* (rather than *twist tie*), and *pleasure-nubbins* (rather than *pleasure nubbins*).

It is probably better not to inquire what

"pleasure-nubbins" refers to here, incidentally, while still defending Baker's right to hyphenate his pleasure-nubbins – yes, even all day, if he wants to.

In the end, hyphen usage is just a big bloody mess and is likely to get messier. When you consider that fifty years ago it was correct to hyphenate Oxford Street as "Oxford-street", or "tomorrow" as "to-morrow", you can't help feeling that prayer for eventual light-in-our-darkness may be the only sane course of action. Interestingly, Kingsley Amis says that those who smugly object to the hyphenation of the phrase "fine tooth-comb" are quite wrong to assert the phrase ought really to be punctuated "fine-tooth comb". Evidently there really used to be a kind of comb called a tooth-comb, and you could buy it in varieties of fineness. Isn't it a relief to know that? You learn something new every day.

Merely Conventional Signs

On page 33 of the first-edition copy of Eric Partridge's *You Have a Point There* that I have before me as I write (I borrowed it from the University of London Library), there is a marginal note made by a reader long ago. A marginal note? Yes, and I have been back to check and muse on it several times. Partridge, who is just about to elucidate the 17th application of the comma ("Commas in Fully Developed Complex Sentences"), is explaining that in this particular case it is difficult to formulate a set of rigid rules. "My aim is to be helpful, not dogmatic," he explains. "The following examples will, if examined and pondered, supply the data from which any person of average intelligence can, without strain, assimilate an unformulated set of working rules." At which the unknown, long-ago

reader has written in old-fashioned handwriting up the side, "Rot! You lazy swine Partridge."

There are two reasons why I have borne this ball-point outburst in mind while writing this book. One is that if *Eric Partridge* wasn't comprehensive enough for some people, there is obviously naff-all chance for me. But there is also the fact that this startling effusion has lain within the pages of *You Have a Point There* possibly for fifty years, which is as long as the book itself has been a book. And this makes me wistful. The future of books is a large subject and perhaps this is not a suitable place to pursue it. We hear every day that the book is dead and that even the dimmest child can find "anything" on the internet. Yet I'm afraid I have to stick my small oar in because – as I hope has become clear from the foregoing chapters – our system of punctuation was produced in the age of printing, by printers, and is reliant on the ascendancy of printing to survive. Our punctuation exists as a printed set of conventions; it has evolved slowly because of printing's innate conservatism; and is effective only if readers have been trained to appreciate the nuances of the printed page. The good news for punctuation is that the age

of printing has been glorious and has held sway for more than half a millennium. The bad news for punctuation, however, is that the age of printing is due to hold its official retirement party next Friday afternoon at half-past five.

"I blame all the emails and text messages," people say, when you talk about the decline in punctuation standards. Well, *yes*. The effect on language of the electronic age is obvious to all, even though the process has only just begun, and its ultimate impact is as yet unimaginable.

"I write quite differently in emails," people say, with a look of inspired and happy puzzlement – a look formerly associated only with starry-eyed returnees from alien abduction. "Yes, I write quite differently in emails, especially in the punctuation. I feel it's OK to use dashes all the time, and exclamation marks. And those dot, dot, dot things!"

"Ellipsis," I interject.

"I can't seem to help it!" they continue. "It's as if I've never heard of semicolons! Dot, dot, dot! And everyone's doing the same!"

This is an exciting time for the written word: it is adapting to the ascendant medium, which happens

to be the most immediate, universal and democratic written medium that has ever existed. But it is all happening too quickly for some people, and we have to face some uncomfortable facts: for example, it is already too late to campaign for Heinz to add punctuation marks to the Alphabetti Spaghetti, in the hope that all will be well.

Having grown up as readers of the printed word (and possibly even scribblers in margins), we may take for granted the processes involved in the traditional activity of reading – so let us remind ourselves. The printed word is presented to us in a linear way, with syntax supreme in conveying the sense of the words in their order. We read privately, mentally listening to the writer's voice and translating the writer's thoughts. The book remains static and fixed; the reader journeys through it. Picking up the book in the first place entails an active pursuit of understanding. Holding the book, we are aware of posterity and continuity. Knowing that the printed word is always edited, typeset and proof-read before it reaches us, we appreciate its literary authority. Having paid money for it (often), we have a sense

of investment and a pride of ownership, not to mention a feeling of general virtue.

All these conditions for reading are overturned by the new technologies. Information is presented to us in a non-linear way, through an exponential series of lateral associations. The internet is a public "space" which you visit, and even inhabit; its product is inherently impersonal and disembodied. Scrolling documents is the opposite of reading: your eyes remain static, while the material flows past. Despite all the opportunities to "interact", we read material from the internet (or CD-roms, or whatever) entirely passively because all the interesting associative thinking has already been done on our behalf. Electronic media are intrinsically ephemeral, are open to perpetual revision, and work quite strenuously against any sort of historical perception. The opposite of edited, the material on the internet is unmediated, except by the technology itself. And having no price, it has questionable value. Finally, you can't write comments in the margin of your screen to be discovered by another reader fifty years down the line.

Having said all this, there is no immediate cause

for panic. If the book is dying, then at least it is treating its loyal fans (and the bookshops) to an extravagant and extended swan song. But when we look around us at the state of literacy – and in particular at all those signs for "BOBS' MOTORS" and "ANTIQUE,S" – it just has to be borne in mind that books are no longer the main vehicles for language in modern society, and that if our fate is in the hands of the barbarians, there is an observable cultural drift that can only make matters worse. As I mentioned in this book's introduction, by tragic historical coincidence a period of abysmal under-educating in literacy has coincided with this unexpected explosion of global self-publishing. Thus people who don't know their apostrophe from their elbow are positively invited to disseminate their writings to anyone on the planet stupid enough to double-click and scroll. Mark Twain said it many years ago, but it has never been more true:

> There is no such thing as "the Queen's English". The property has gone into the hands of a joint stock company and we own the bulk of the shares!
>
> *Following the Equator*, 1897

9

It hurts, though. It hurts like hell. Even in the knowledge that our punctuation has arrived at its present state by a series of accidents; even in the knowledge that there are at least seventeen rules for the comma, some of which are beyond explanation by top grammarians – it is a matter for despair to see punctuation chucked out as worthless by people who don't know the difference between *who's* and *whose*, and whose bloody automatic "grammar checker" can't tell the difference either. And despair was the initial impetus for this book. I saw a sign for "Book's" with an apostrophe in it, and something deep inside me snapped; snapped with that melancholy sound you hear in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, like a far-off cable breaking in a mine-shaft. I know that language moves on. It has to. Not once have I ever stopped to feel sorry for those Egyptian hieroglyph artists tossed on the scrapheap during a former linguistic transition ("Birds' heads in profile, mate? You having a laugh?"). But I can't help feeling that our punctuation system, which has served the written word

with grace and ingenuity for centuries, must not be allowed to disappear without a fight.

Nothing as scary as this has confronted punctuation before. True, Gertrude Stein banged on a bit. But attacks on punctuation have always been feeble. The Futurists of the early 20th century had a go, but without much lasting effect. In 1913, F. T. Marinetti wrote a manifesto he called *Destruction of Syntax/Imagination without Strings/Words-in-Freedom* which demanded the moral right of words to live unfettered – and only slightly undermined its case by requiring such a lot of punctuation in the title.

> By the imagination without strings [wrote Marinetti] I mean the absolute freedom of images or analogies, or expressed with unhampered words and with no connecting strings of syntax and with no punctuation.

Marinetti wanted to explode the "so-called typographical harmony of the page" and he was influential both on poetry and on graphic design. Reading him now, however, one's main impression is of a rather weedy visionary who fell asleep one night, saw in a dream how to use QuarkXPress, and was

then cruelly deposited back again in the days before the First World War.

> On the same page, therefore, we will use three or four colours of ink, or even twenty different typefaces if necessary. For example: italics for a series of swift sensations, boldface for violent onomatopoeias, and so on. With this typographical revolution and this multicoloured variety in the letters I mean to redouble the expressive force of words.

So much for Marinetti, then. Meanwhile, George Bernard Shaw, along with his famous doomed campaign to reform the spelling of the English language, had already started making efforts to undermine the contractive apostrophe. And while he certainly had more global influence than Marinetti did, he remained a one-man campaign. It is a measure of Shaw's considerable monomania, by the way, that in 1945 he wrote to *The Times* on the issue of the recently deployed atomic bomb to point out that since the second "b" in the word bomb was needless (I'm not joking), enormous numbers of working hours were being lost to the world through the practice of conforming to traditional spelling.

> I can scribble the word "bomb" barely legibly 18 times in one minute and "bom" 24 times, saving 25 per cent per minute by dropping the superfluous b. In the British Commonwealth, on which the sun never sets, and in the United States of North America, there are always millions of people continually writing, writing, writing ... Those who are writing are losing time at the rate of 131,400 × *x* per annum ...
>
> Abraham Tauber (ed.),
> *George Bernard Shaw on Language*, 1965

Yes, GBS can be a pretty stark reminder of how far one may lose one's sense of proportion when obsessed by matters of language.

But on the other hand he still writes better about language than most people, and in *The Author* in April 1902 he set out his "Notes on the Clarendon Press Rules for Compositors and Readers", which included not only a brilliant attack on those "uncouth bacilli" (apostrophes) which appear so unnecessarily in words such as "dont" and "shant", but was rather wonderful on italics too, and is perhaps where *The Guardian* got its ideas from:

> Not only should titles not be printed in italic; but the customary ugly and unnecessary inverted commas should be abolished. Let me give a specimen. 1. I was reading The Merchant of Venice. 2. I was reading "The Merchant of Venice." 3. I was reading *The Merchant of Venice*. The man who cannot see that No. 1 is the best looking as well as the sufficient and sensible form, should print or write nothing but advertisements for lost dogs or ironmongers' catalogues: literature is not for him to meddle with.

Note the way Shaw (or his editor) puts the full stop inside the inverted commas in example two, by the way. While individual obsessives seem to have made little impact on the development of punctuation in the 20th century (Shaw had few followers, and nobody remembers the Futurists), it is quite clear that punctuation did develop quite robustly under other kinds of cultural pressure. Hyphenation practice has changed hugely in the past hundred years; also capitalisation, and the presentation of all forms of address. Nowadays we write:

Andrew Franklin
Profile Books
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street Exmouth Market
London EC1 RoJH

Or, let's face it, I write that because he's my publisher. But my point is: there is no punctuation in this at all, whereas just twenty years ago I would have written:

Mr. A. Franklin, Esq.,
Profile Books, Ltd.,
3A, Exmouth House,
Pine Street, Exmouth Market,
London, E.C.1

Those of us who were taught to place full stops after abbreviations have simply adapted to a world in which they are not required. I don't write *pub.* or *'bus*, but I'm quite sure I used to. When I trained as a journalist twenty-five years ago, the intermediate rule on matters of address was that if the contraction of a title still ended with the original final letter – thus "Mr" for "Mister", or "Fr" for "Father" – no full stop was required, whereas if the title was cut short

– "Prof" for "Professor" or "M" for "Monsieur" – a full stop was essential. I doubt anyone bothers with that distinction any more. It is worth pointing out, though, that American usage has retained a lot of the formal niceties that we have dropped. They also often use a colon after "Dear Andrew", while on this side of the Atlantic we dither about whether even a comma looks a bit fussy.

There are other large changes to punctuation practice in our own lifetimes that have not troubled us much. Nobody says, "You can find it at BBC full stop Co full stop UK," do they? Even the most hide-bound of us don't mind this word "dot" getting into the language. Above all, though, a revolution in typographical spacing occurred so quietly that very few people noticed. Spaces were closed up; other spaces were opened; nobody campaigned. Dashes which were once of differing lengths for different occasions are now generally shorter, of uniform length, and sit between spaces. Until very recently, typists were taught to leave a two- or even three-space gap after a full stop, but now word-processing programs will automatically reduce the gap to a single word space. Semicolons and colons used to

have a word space preceding them, and two spaces after, and to be honest, it looked very elegant : but nobody does that any more.

My point is that while massive change from the printed word to the bloody electronic signal is inevitably upon us, we diehard punctuation-lovers are perhaps not as rigid as we think we are. And we must guard against over-reacting. Those who identify "Netspeak" with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s "Newspeak" (on the basis that non-case-sensitive compound words such as "thoughtcrime" and "doubleplusgood" bear a superficial resemblance to "chatroom" and "newsgroup") should urgently reconsider this association, not least because the key virtues of the internet are that it is not controlled by anyone, cannot be used as an instrument of oppression and is endlessly inclusive: its embracing of multitudes even extends to chatrooms in which, believe it or not, are discussed matters of punctuation. A site called "halfbakery", for example, encourages correspondents with attractive names such as "gizmo" and "cheeselikesubstance" to swap ideas about punctuation reform. This is where the intriguing idea of using a tilde to sort out

tricky plurals such as "bananas" came from. In one rather thrilling exchange in 2001, moreover, a member of the halfbakery crowd proposed the use of the upside-down question mark (¿) as a marker for a rhetorical question. This suggestion hung there like a bat in a cave for eighteen months until, astonishingly, someone called "Drifting Snowflake" wrote in to explain that a rhetorical question mark (the reversed one) existed already, "invented in the 16th century, though only in use for about 30 years". Gosh. I wonder if Drifting Snowflake is male and unmarried? As the internet is dedicated to proving, you really have no idea who anybody is out there.

What to call the language generated by this new form of communication? Netspeak? Weblish? Whatever you call it, linguists are generally excited by it. Naomi Baron has called Netspeak an "emerging language centaur – part speech, part writing" and David Crystal says computer-mediated language is a genuine "third medium". But I don't know. Remember that thing Truman Capote said years ago about Jack Kerouac: "That's not writing, it's typing"? I keep thinking that what we do now, with this medium of instant delivery, isn't writing, and

doesn't even qualify as typing either: it's just sending. What did you do today? Sent a lot of stuff. "Don't forget to send, dear." Receiving, sending and arithmetic – we can say goodbye to the three R's, clearly. Where valuable office hours used to be lost to people schmoozing at the water cooler, they are now sacrificed to people publishing second-hand jokes to every person in their email address book. We send pictures, videos, web addresses, homilies, petitions and (of course) hoax virus alerts, which we later have to apologise for. The medium and the message have never been so strongly identified. As for our writing personally to each other, how often do you hear people complain that emails subtract the tone of voice; that it's hard to tell if someone is joking or not? Clicking on "send" has its limitations as a system of subtle communication. Which is why, of course, people use so many dashes and italics and capitals ("I AM joking!") to compensate. That's why they came up with the emoticon, too – the emoticon being the greatest (or most desperate, depending how you look at it) advance in punctuation since the question mark in the reign of Charlemagne.

You will know all about emoticons. Emoticons

are the proper name for smileys. And a smiley is, famously, this:

:–)

Forget the idea of selecting the right words in the right order and channelling the reader's attention by means of artful pointing. Just add the right emoticon to your email and everyone will know what self-expressive effect you thought you kind-of had in mind. Anyone interested in punctuation has a dual reason to feel aggrieved about smileys, because not only are they a paltry substitute for expressing oneself properly; they are also designed by people who evidently thought the punctuation marks on the standard keyboard cried out for an ornamental function. What's this dot-on-top-of-a-dot thing for? What earthly good is it? Well, if you look at it sideways, it could be a pair of eyes. What's this curvy thing for? It's a mouth, look! Hey, I think we're on to something.

:–(

Now it's sad!

;–)

It looks like it's winking!

:–r

It looks like it's sticking its tongue out! The permutations may be endless:

:~/ mixed up!
<:–) dunce!
:–[pouting!
:–O surprise!

Well, that's enough. I've just spotted a third reason to loathe emoticons, which is that when they pass from fashion (and I do hope they already have), future generations will associate punctuation marks with an outmoded and rather primitive graphic pastime and despise them all the more. "Why do they still have all these keys with things like dots and spots and eyes and mouths and

things?" they will grumble. "*Nobody* does smileys any more."

Where does this leave people who love the comma and apostrophe? Where can we turn for consolation? Well, it is useful to remember how depressing the forecasts for language used to be, before the internet came along. Thirty years ago we assumed that television was the ultimate enemy of literacy and that, under the onslaught from image and sound, the written word would rapidly die out. Such fears, at least, have been dissipated. With text messaging and emailing becoming such compulsive universal activities, reading and writing are now more a fact of everyday life than they have ever been. The text message may be a vehicle for some worrying verbal shorthand ("CU B4 8?"), yet every time a mobile goes "Beep-beep; beep-beep" annoyingly within earshot on the bus, we should be grateful for a technological miracle that stepped in unexpectedly to save us from a predicted future that couldn't read at all. As David Crystal writes in his book *Language*

and the Internet (2001), the internet encourages a playful and creative (and continuing) relationship with the written word. "The human linguistic faculty seems to be in good shape," he concludes. "The arrival of Netspeak is showing us *homo loquens* at its best."

Punctuation as we know it, however, is surely in for a rocky time. Before the advent of the internet, our punctuation system was very conservative about admitting new marks; indeed, it held out for decades while a newfangled and rather daft symbol called the "interrobang" (invented in 1962) tried to infiltrate the system, disguised as a question mark on top of an exclamation. The idea was that, when you said, "Where did you get that hat?!" you needed an interrobang to underline the full expression, and it is delightful to note that absolutely nobody was interested in giving it house-room. But I'm sure they will now, once they find out. Anything new is welcome today. People experiment with asterisks to show emphasis ("What a *day* I've had!") and also angle brackets ("So have < I > !"). Yes, the interrobang will find its place at last – especially given that its name has overtones of a police interview termi-

nating in an explosion. Violent path-lab terminology is very much in vogue in the modern world of punctuation. Remember when we used to call the solidus (/) a "stroke"?

> "Yes, you can see the bullet points here, here and here, sir; there are multiple back-slashes, of course. And that's a forward slash. I would have to call this a frenzied attack. Did anyone hear the interrobang?"
>
> "Oh yes. Woman next door was temporarily deafened by it. What's this?"
>
> "Ah. You don't see many of these any more. It's an emoticon. Hold your head this way and it appears to be winking."
>
> "Good God! You mean – ?"
>
> "That's the mouth."
>
> "You mean – ?"
>
> "That's the nose."
>
> "Good grief. Then it's – ?"
>
> "Oh yes, sir. There's no doubt about it, sir. The Punctuation Murderer has struck again."

Is it an option to cling on to the punctuation and grammar we know and love? Hope occasionally flares up and dies down again. In May 1999, Bob Hirschfield wrote a news story in *The Washington Post* about a computer virus "far more insidious than the recent Chernobyl menace" that was spreading throughout the internet. What did this virus do? Named the Strunkenwhite Virus (after *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E. B. White, a classic American style guide), it refused to deliver emails containing grammatical mistakes. Could it be true? Was the world to be saved at a stroke (or even, if we must, at a forward slash)? Sadly, no. The story was a wind-up. Hirschfield's intention in inventing the Strunkenwhite Virus for the delight of his readers was simply to satirise the public's appetite for wildly improbable virus scare stories. In the process, however, he painted such a heavenly vision of future grammatical happiness that he inadvertently broke the hearts of sticklers everywhere:

> The virus is causing something akin to panic throughout corporate America, which has become used to the typos, misspellings, missing words and mangled syntax so acceptable in cyber-

> space. The CEO of LoseItAll.com, an Internet startup, said the virus had rendered him helpless. "Each time I tried to send one particular e-mail this morning, I got back this error message: 'Your dependent clause preceding your independent clause must be set off by commas, but one must not precede the conjunction.' I threw my laptop across the room."
>
> ... If Strunkenwhite makes e-mailing impossible, it could mean the end to a communication revolution once hailed as a significant timesaver. A study of 1,254 office workers in Leonia, N.J., found that e-mail increased employees' productivity by 1.8 hours a day because they took less time to formulate their thoughts. (The same study also found that they lost 2.2 hours of productivity because they were e-mailing so many jokes to their spouses, parents and stockbrokers.)
>
> ... "This is one of the most complex and invasive examples of computer code we have ever encountered. We just can't imagine what kind of devious mind would want to tamper with e-mails to create this burden on communications," said an FBI agent who insisted on speaking via the telephone out of concern that trying to e-mail his comments could leave him tied up for hours.

Hirschfield's story ended with the saddest invention of all:

> Meanwhile bookstores and online booksellers reported a surge in orders for Strunk & White's "The Elements of Style."

Given all that we know about the huge changes operating on our language at the moment – and given all that we know about the shortcomings of the punctuation system produced by the age of printing – should we be bothering to fight for the 17 uses of the comma, or the appositive colon? Isn't it the case, in the end, that punctuation is just a set of conventions, and that conventions have no intrinsic worth? One can't help remembering the moment in Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* when the Bellman exhibits his blank map and asks the crew how they feel about it:

> "What use are Mercator's North Poles and
> Equators,
> Tropics, Zones and Meridian Lines?"

> So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would
> reply,
> "They are merely conventional signs!"
> Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*, 1876

But after journeying through the world of punctuation, and seeing what it can do, I am all the more convinced we should fight like tigers to preserve our punctuation, and we should start now. Who wants a blank map, for heaven's sake? There is more at stake than the way people read and write. Note the way the *Washington Post* news story explained the benefits of emailing: it "increased employees' productivity by 1.8 hours a day *because they took less time to formulate their thoughts*". If we value the way we have been trained to think by centuries of absorbing the culture of the printed word, we must not allow the language to return to the chaotic *scriptio continua* swamp from which it so bravely crawled less than two thousand years ago. We have a language that is full of ambiguities; we have a way of expressing ourselves that is often complex and allusive, poetic and modulated; all our thoughts can be rendered with absolute clarity if we

bother to put the right dots and squiggles between the words in the right places. Proper punctuation is both the sign and the cause of clear thinking. If it goes, the degree of intellectual impoverishment we face is unimaginable.

One of the best descriptions of punctuation comes in a book entitled *The Fiction Editor, the Novel, and the Novelist* (1989) by Thomas McCormack. He says the purpose of punctuation is "to tango the reader into the pauses, inflections, continuities and connections that the spoken line would convey":

> Punctuation to the writer is like anatomy to the artist: He learns the rules so he can knowledgeably and controllédly depart from them as art requires. Punctuation is a means, and its end is: helping the reader to hear, to follow.

And here's a funny thing. If all these high moral arguments have had no effect, just remember that ignorance of punctuation can have rather large practical repercussions in the real world. In February 2003 a Cambridge politics lecturer named Glen Rangwala received a copy of the British government's most recent dossier on Iraq. He quickly

recognised in it the wholesale copying of a twelve-year-old thesis by American doctoral student Ibrahim al-Marashi, "reproduced word for word, misplaced comma for misplaced comma". Oh yes. Rangwala noticed there were some changes to the original, such as the word "terrorists" substituted for "opposition groups", but otherwise much of it was identical. In publishing his findings, he wrote:

> Even the typographical errors and anomalous uses of grammar are incorporated into the Downing Street document. For example, Marashi had written:
>
> "Saddam appointed, Sabir 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Duri as head" ...
>
> Note the misplaced comma. The UK officials who used Marashi's text hadn't. Thus, on page 13, the British dossier incorporates the same misplaced comma:
>
> "Saddam appointed, Sabir 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Duri as head" ...

So we ignore the rules of punctuation at our political peril as well as to our moral detriment. When Sir Roger Casement was "hanged on a comma" all those years ago, who would have

thought a British government would be rumbled on a comma (and a "yob's comma", at that) ninety years further down the line? Doesn't it feel good to know this, though? It does. It really does.

Bibliography

Robert Allen, *Punctuation*, Oxford University Press, 2002

Kingsley Amis, *The King's English: a guide to modern usage*, HarperCollins, 1997

Anon, *A Treatise of Stops, Points, or Pauses, and of notes which are used in Writing and Print*, 1680

Tim Austin, *The Times Guide to English Style and Usage*, Times Books, 1999

Nicholson Baker, "The History of Punctuation", in *The Size of Thoughts*, Chatto & Windus, 1996

— *Room Temperature*, Granta Books, 1990

Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: the fate of reading in an electronic age*, Ballantine, 1994

Bill Bryson, *Mother Tongue: the English language*, Hamish Hamilton, 1990

— *Troublesome Words*, third edition, Viking, 2001

R. W. Burchfield, *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*, revised third edition, Oxford University Press, 1998

Rene J. Cappon, *The Associated Press Guide to Punctuation*, Perseus Publishing, 2003

G. V. Carey, *Mind the Stop: a brief guide to punctuation with a note on proof-correction*, Cambridge University Press, 1939

— *Punctuation*, Cambridge University Press, 1957

David Crystal, *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, 1995

— *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge University Press, 2001

Kay Cullen (ed.), *Chambers Guide to Punctuation*, Chambers, 1999

H. W. Fowler, *The King's English*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1906

Karen Elizabeth Gordon, *The New Well-Tempered Sentence: a punctuation handbook for the innocent, the eager, and the doomed*, Houghton Mifflin, 1993

Ernest Gowers, *Plain Words: a guide to the use of English*, HMSO, 1948

Cecil Hartley, *Principles of Punctuation: or, The Art of Pointing*, 1818

Philip Howard, *The State of the Language: English observed*, Hamish Hamilton, 1984

F. T. Husband and M. F. A. Husband, *Punctuation, its Principles and Practice*, Routledge, 1905

Ben Jonson, *English Grammar*, 1640

Graham King, *Punctuation*, HarperCollins, 2000

Thomas McCormack, *The Fiction Editor, the Novel, and the Novelist*, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989

John McDermott, *Punctuation for Now*, Macmillan, 1990

Malcolm Parkes, *Pause and Effect: an introduction to the history of punctuation in the West*, Scolar Press, 1992

Eric Partridge, *Usage and Abusage: a guide to good English*, Hamish Hamilton, 1947

— *You Have a Point There*, Hamish Hamilton, 1953

Joseph Robertson, *An Essay on Punctuation*, 1785

Paul A. Robinson, "The Philosophy of Punctuation", in *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters*, Chicago University Press, 2002

Paul Saenger, *Space between Words: the origins of silent reading*, Stanford University Press, 1997

Reginald Skelton, *Modern English Punctuation*, Pitman, 1933

Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar", in *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: writings and lectures 1911–45*, Peter Owen, 1967 (reissue imminent)

William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, fourth edition, Longman, 2000

Abraham Tauber (ed.), *George Bernard Shaw on Language*, Peter Owen, 1965

James Thurber, *The Years with Ross*, Hamish Hamilton, 1959

James Thurber (eds. Helen Thurber and Edward Weeks), *Selected Letters of James Thurber*, Hamish Hamilton, 1982

Loreto Todd, *Cassell's Guide to Punctuation*, Cassell & Co., 1995

R. L. Trask, *The Penguin Guide to Punctuation*, Penguin, 1997

William Vandyck, *Punctuation Repair Kit*, Hodder Headline, 1996

Bill Walsh, *Lapsing into a Comma: a curmudgeon's guide to the many things that can go wrong in print – and how to avoid them*, Contemporary Books, 2000

Keith Waterhouse, *English Our English (and How to Sing It)*, Viking, 1991

— *Sharon & Tracy & the Rest: the best of Keith Waterhouse in the Daily Mail*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1992

— *Waterhouse on Newspaper Style*, Viking, 1989

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

"Why?" asks the confused waiter, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder.

"I'm a panda," he says at the door. "Look it up."

The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

"**Panda.** Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

So, punctuation really does matter, even if it is only occasionally a matter of life and death.

Sticklers, unite!

"If Lynne Truss were Roman Catholic I'd nominate her for sainthood."
–FRANK MCCOURT, author of *Angela's Ashes*

"*[Eats, Shoots & Leaves]* makes correct usage so cool that you have to admire Ms. Truss."
–JANET MASLIN, *The New York Times*

"'Correct usage' has been made sexy by Lynne Truss in her delightful *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, the most entertaining work of paralinguistics since Shaw's *Pygmalion*."
–JOHN SUTHERLAND, *Financial Times*

"Truss is William Safire crossed with John Cleese's Basil Fawlty."
–*Entertainment Weekly*

"[Truss is] a reformer with the soul of a stand-up comedian."–*The Boston Globe*

"Lynne Truss makes [punctuation] a joy to contemplate."–*Elle*

GOTHAM BOOKS
A division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.penguin.com

Reference/Humor

Printed in U.S.A.

U.S.A. $11.00
Can. $15.50

ISBN 1-592-40203-8

9 781592 402038 51100 EAN

Eats, Shoots & Leaves

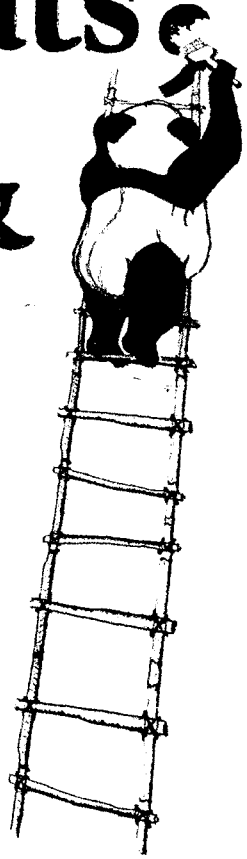
LYNNE TRUSS

GOTHAM BOOKS

"You don't need to be a grammar nerd to enjoy this one....Who knew grammar could be so much fun?"—*Newsweek*

The #1 *New York Times* Bestseller

Eats, Shoots & Leaves



Includes a limited-edition Punctuation Repair Kit

The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation

!

LYNNE TRUSS

With a Foreword by Frank McCourt, author of *Angela's Ashes*

BAUGH, A. & T. CABLE, 1978. *A history of the English Language* (3rd edition). London: Routledge

CAMERON, D., 1995. *Verbal hygiene*. London and New York: Routledge.

COLEMAN, J., 2012. *The life of slang*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CRYSTAL, D., 1997. *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

GREENE, R.L., 2011. *You are what you speak*. New York: Delacorte Press.

HITCHINGS, H., 2011. *The language wars*. London: John Murray.

LEECH, G. 2006. http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/doc_library/linguistics/leechg/mai_and_leech_2006.pdf (accessed 12.08.12).

LEITH, D., D. Graddol & L. Jackson. 2007. *Changing English*. London and New York: Routledge.

MILROY, L. & J. Milroy, 1991. *Authority in language*. London and New York: Routledge.

NEVALAINEN, T. & I. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2006. In HOGG, R. & D. Denison, David eds. *A history of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

http://www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/14 (accessed 12.08.12).

GLOSSARY

A

Abstract noun: A noun referring to a concept, idea or feeling

Accent: A way of pronouncing sounds differently, usually linked to the region a speaker is from

Accommodation: A term applied to the ways in which different speakers' language styles move closer (converge) towards or move apart (diverge) from each other

Acrolect: The variety of a language that is closest to the standard form (especially when discussing different varieties linked to regional and world Englishes)

Adjective: A word class used to modify nouns

Adverb: A word class used for a number of functions, including modifying adjectives and verbs. Adverbs often tell us about time, manner and place. These are called adverbs of manner. They can also modify adjectives and verbs by telling us to what degree (how much or how little) a verb is operating or an adjective is modifying. These are called adverbs of degree

Analogy: A mechanism of language change in which a speaker 'regularises' a language feature that appears to break a regular pattern

Aspect: A grammatical term that refers to whether an action or process is ongoing (progressive aspect) or completed (perfective aspect)

Auxiliary verb: A verb that operates alongside another verb in a verb phrase, often to specify tense or modality

B

Borrowing: A linguistic process in which a word from one language is taken and used in another

C

Child-directed speech (CDS): A way of speaking to a child that uses simplified lexis and grammar and more exaggerated pronunciation patterns

Clause: A grammatical unit generally used to express a single idea, usually consisting of a verb phrase and a noun phrase

Code-switching: The way in which a speaker moves between one register, style or variety of a language into another

Codification: Part of the standardisation process of a language in which the standard is written down in dictionaries or grammars

Collocation: A word or phrase that is often linked to another word

Community of practice: An approach to language variation which takes account of the groups of people speakers associate with and the forms of language they use in these groups

Complex sentence: A sentence consisting of at least two clauses, one of which is subordinate to (or dependent on) a main clause

Compound sentence: A sentence consisting of two or more main clauses linked with one of the conjunctions *or, but* or *and*

Computer-mediated communication (CMC): A mode of communication that combines elements of written and spoken forms and is produced using a computer (e.g., text messaging, email)

Conjunctions: Words that are used to connect words, phrases and clauses, e.g., *and, because, so*

Connotation: The wider, associated meanings of a word

Conversational floor: The term used to refer to the leading role in discussion taken by a participant

Conversational historic present: A term used to describe a speaker's use of the present tense when recounting a narrative that has already taken place

Conversational turn: The basic unit of structure in a conversation, generally seen as being a single contribution made by one speaker before another speaker takes their turn

Corpus (corpora): A body of language data, often in the form of a digital database

Corpus stylistics: An approach to stylistics which uses corpus data

Covert prestige: A linguistic term used to describe a type of status or value placed upon the language style of a speaker or group of speakers. In this case, the status is seen as outside, or opposing, mainstream values (c.f. overt prestige)

Creole: A form of language that develops from a contact language (pidgin) through subsequent generations

Critical discourse analysis (CDA): A linguistic approach that uses textual analysis to unpick underlying attitudes and ideologies

D

Declarative clause: A clause expressing a statement (usually with a subject verb word order)

Declinism: A belief that language standards are in decline

Deictic expression: A term that 'points' towards a person, an object, a time or a place, often used in speech where participants share the same physical context

Descriptivism: An approach to language that attempts to describe rather than judge usage

Determiner: A word class consisting of words which help specify and determine which noun or noun phrase is being identified (e.g., *an extremely long time* and *the one on the right*)

Dialect: A variety of a language, usually linked to a geographical area, that is different from the standard in its lexis, semantics, grammar and/or phonology

Dialect levelling: A reduction in the spread, range and features of local dialects, often associated with greater contact and movement of peoples in the 20th and 21st centuries

Dialectology: The study of dialects

Direct address: Talking or writing to a text receiver directly, using their name or a second person pronoun

Direct speech: Using the exact words spoken by someone in an account of what they said (c.f. indirect speech)

Discourse: When used in the field of ideology and interpretation, a discourse is a way in which an ideology or argument is expressed through language

Discourse markers: Words or phrases that indicate a change in topic, or a return to a previous topic

Discourse pragmatic features: Features of spoken language which help to manage interaction rather than convey specific lexical or semantic meanings

Dynamic verb: A verb used to describe a physical process

E

Elaboration: Part of the standardisation process of a language in which having been selected and codified, the standard is used for a wide variety of purposes in various genres

Elliptical constructions: Constructions that omit certain words, often for economical reasons in speech

Emoticon: A symbol used to express emotion or attitude, like a smiley ☺ or winking face ;-)

Erasure: The process by which language use makes particular groups of people (often women) invisible (e.g., through the use of *he* as a universal pronoun)

Exclamative clause: A clause used to exclaim or express shock or surprise (usually with a specific word order), usually starting with a *wh-* word (e.g., *What a tragedy!*)

Expressive punctuation: Using punctuation in a non-standard fashion to express or exaggerate a feeling (e.g., *!!!* rather than just *!*)

F

Face theory: A theory that suggests that we have 'face needs' that we are aware of when we engage in conversation

Filler: A short, often non-lexical utterance that acts like a pause in conversation

Fixed expression: A word or phrase that has become established and is used by a large number of participants

G

Genre: The particular category a text is placed into on the basis of an agreed set of conventions, for example advertising, poetry, text messaging

Grammar: The structure of a language in terms of its word order and morphology

H

Hedging device: A word or phrase used to avoid being direct when a participant expresses an opinion

I

Ideology: A set of beliefs or values which form a way of thinking about the world

Idiom/idiomatic expression: A word or expression that might be non-literal or metaphorical, but be generally understood through context or culture

Imperative clause: A clause used to command or direct (usually starting with a verb)

Implementation: A stage in the standardisation of a language in which the standard is applied as widely as possible and alternative, non-standard usages are treated as incorrect

Inclusive address: Addressing a text receiver as part of a group that also includes the text producer, often using the first person plural pronoun

Indirect speech: A way of reporting what someone has said but without using their exact words (c.f. direct speech)

Intensifier: An adverb of degree, adding strength to an adjective that it premodifies

Intonation: The way in which vocal pitch is used in speech

Interactional features: Language features that are primarily interactional (most commonly used in speech)

Interactional language: Language where the primary concern is to maintain personal and social relationships

Interrogative clause: A clause used to ask a question

Intertextuality: The process whereby one text refers to or borrows from another text or genre for effect

Intransitive verb: A verb that doesn't take an object

Invariant tag: A question tag that doesn't change to match in agreement with the person of the subject (e.g., *I've got bare skills at football innit*)

L

Latched talk: A term used in spoken language analysis which relates to when one speaker 'latches on' and immediately speaks after another speaker's turn, with no obvious gap between the turns

Letter homophone: A letter name that is used because it sounds the same as a part of a word (e.g., *U* = you, *B* = be)

Levelling (see dialect levelling)

Lexis: Vocabulary, individual words in a language

Lingua franca: A form of language used to communicate between speakers who have no shared language

Linguistic variable: A linguistic feature that is likely to change or vary and that can be used to measure differences between speakers (e.g. two different ways of pronouncing the word *path*)

M

Marked term: A word or phrase that is (sometimes unnecessarily) marked for gender (e.g., *male nurse*, *lady doctor*)

Metaphor: A way of describing or structuring one thing in terms of another

Minimal responses: Short, often non-lexical responses

Minor sentence: A grammatically incomplete sentence punctuated as a complete sentence, often making use of ellipsis

Mode: The way in which a text is produced and received, depending on the channel used (eyes or ears), whether it is spoken, written, or created through the medium of a keyboard or touchscreen. The three modes are generally referred to as spoken, written and blended

Modifier: A word (usually an adjective or adverb) that attributes a quality to another word

Morphology: The structure of words, usually with specific focus on their prefixes (beginnings) or suffixes (endings)

Multicultural London English (MLE): A form of language used by young multi-ethnic speakers, primarily in London

N

Nominalisation: A term used to describe how a process normally described using a verb becomes a noun (e.g., an *attack* is a nominalisation of a verb process *to attack*)

Non-lexicalised speech: Sounds made in speech which are not recognised words

Non-standard usage: A way of describing language usage that deviates in some way – in grammar, punctuation, spelling, lexis – from the normal conventions of Standard English. Linguists tend to prefer non-standard rather than incorrect because the former makes no judgement about the acceptability or otherwise of the usage

Noun: A word class used to label objects, people, places and concepts. Can normally have an *-s* added to make the plural, and often has a determiner like *a* or *the* somewhere in front

Number homophone: A number symbol that is used because it sounds the same as a part of a word (e.g., 8 = *ate*, 2 = *to*)

O

Open and closed questions: Closed questions are interrogatives which can only be answered with a yes or no (e.g., *Did you eat your breakfast this morning?*), while open questions offer a larger range of possible responses and often start with a *wh-* structure (e.g., *Why are you looking at me?* or *What is the matter with you?*)

Orthography: A broad term to refer to the ways in which language is represented by writing and including aspects of letter formation, spelling and type

Overgeneralisation: A pattern in children's language where regular grammatical rules are applied to irregular words (e.g., *runned* instead of 'ran', *mouses* instead of 'mice')

Overt prestige: A linguistic term used to describe a type of status or value placed upon the language style of a speaker or group of speakers. In this case, the status is seen as conforming to mainstream values (c.f. covert prestige)

P

Paralinguistic features: Non-verbal behaviour such as the use of stress, intonation and volume to add effect and meaning to verbal utterances

Patois: A variety of a language often derived from creole forms and using non-standard features

Philology: The study of language histories and origins

Phoneme: The smallest meaningful unit of sound in a language

Phonetic: Relating to sounds of speech

Phonology: The study of speech sounds

Phrase: A unit of language made up of anything from one word on its own to several words acting together, but usually smaller than a clause. Phrases take their identity from their head word i.e. the most important word in the phrase

Pidgin: A contact language that is formed when speakers who do not share a common language create a means of communication, often using simplified forms

Preposition: A word that helps tell you where things are and how they are positioned relative to other things (e.g., *under*, *on*)

Prescriptivism: An approach to language use that argues that there are correct and incorrect ways of speaking and writing and that certain preferred forms should be encouraged

Pronoun: A word class that is sometimes treated as a subclass of nouns. Pronouns are words which usually take the place of nouns or noun phrases. First person: I (singular), we or us (first person plural). Second person: you (singular) or you (plural)

Prosody: Patterns of rhythm and/or sound in speech

Q

Question tags (tag questions): Questions added to the end of statements, often used in speech

Quotative (expression): An expression used to introduce reported or direct speech

R

Reanalysis: A mechanism of language change in which a word, phrase or sound is looked at again in a way that changes how it is perceived (e.g., a compound word's origins as two separate words is forgotten and it is simply viewed as a single word)

Received Pronunciation (RP): An accent that came to be viewed as a prestige form in English during the early part of the 20th century

Regional dialect levelling (see dialect levelling/levelling)

Register: A term applied to language choices based on the level of formality and sophistication of the word choices, often linked to the field being discussed (e.g., a person may choose to speak in an academic register because that's what expected in a seminar at university)

Reported thought: A means of conveying what a person was thinking

S

Selection: An early stage in the standardisation process where a variety is chosen to act as the standard

Semantic derogation: Negative associations and meanings for particular words and phrases

Semantic fields: Groups of word meanings that are related by theme (e.g., words that have meanings linked to warmth, family or warfare)

Semantics: Word meanings

Sentence fragments: Another way of describing minor sentences

Simple sentence: A sentence consisting of one main clause

Sociolinguistics: The branch of language study that explores the relationships between language and society

Standard English: The variety of English that is generally accepted to be the norm and generally held up to be what users of the language should be taught and become competent in

Standardisation: The process through which a standard form of a language emerges

Stative verbs: Verbs that describe a state of being

Stylistics: A branch of language study that applies linguistic techniques to mainly literary texts

Subject ellipsis: A form of grammatical compression that features clauses without subjects (e.g., *Hope you are doing OK*, rather than *I hope you are doing OK.*)

Synchronic variation: Differences or variations within a language at a given time

Syntax: Part of grammar: the structures used when words are put together to create meaning

Synthetic personalisation: A technique that addresses a text receiver directly as if there is an actual relationship between them and text producer

T

Tag question: A group of words containing an auxiliary verb and a pronoun, sometimes with 'not' added. Tags are used to prompt an answer from a participant e.g., *isn't it?*

Tense: A grammatical term applied to how verbs are altered to indicate whether an event or process is in the present or took place in the past. It's very closely linked to the concept of time

Terms of address: How names and titles are used to identify speakers or characters

Transitional probability: The chance that one thing will be followed by another

Transitive verb: A verb that takes an object

U

Universal Grammar: A set of innate linguistic principles behind all languages

Unmarked term: Not indicating gender through the use of a prefix, suffix or modifier (c.f. marked term)

V

Verb: Verbs are used to describe actions and processes, and are a vital part of clauses

Verb stem: Part of a verb which suffixes are usually added to

Vernacular: The generally used forms of a language, often colloquial or non-standard

Voice: A grammatical concept that relates to whether the subject of the sentence is doing the verb (active voice) or having the verb done to it (passive voice)

THE CONTRIBUTORS

Professor Deborah Cameron
Deborah Cameron is Professor of Language and Communication in the English Faculty at Oxford University. She has written extensively about language, gender and sexuality: her most recent book-length publication on the subject is *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?* (OUP 2007). She is also the author of *The Teacher's Guide to Grammar* (OUP 2007), and a regular speaker, broadcaster and blogger on a range of linguistic topics.

Dan Clayton
Dan Clayton is an experienced A Level English Language teacher who has worked in London and Essex. He is currently teaching at The Sixth Form College, Colchester and was until recently a Research Fellow at UCL. He is a senior examiner and moderator for A Level English Language at a major awarding body and has written regularly for emagazine, EMC, Nelson Thornes and Philip Allan. His A level Language blog can be found at http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.co.uk/

Dr Sue Fox
Sue Fox is a Research Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London. She is a sociolinguist whose primary research interest is in contemporary language variation and change in English. Her research has focused on the social and historical contexts that have led to the variety of English that is spoken today in London, particularly among young people. She works on documenting, analysing and accounting for variation in pronunciation as well as variation in discourse and grammatical features, among speakers of various social and ethnic backgrounds. She is interested in tracking changes in progress and the processes that bring about language change, particularly in a multicultural urban environment such as London.

Professor Angela Goddard
Angela Goddard is a Professor of English Language and a UK Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellow. She has taught English in schools and universities both in the UK and abroad. She is currently a Guest Professor at University West, in Sweden, from where she is running a research project on international English. Angela is Chair of Examiners for English Language A Level at a major exam board, and edits the Routledge Intertext Series, consisting of a core text and 23 titles on different aspects of language research: details are available at http://www.routledge.com/books/series/SE0313/

Dr Paul Ibbotson
Paul Ibbotson studied physical geography for three years and then linguistics for a further year. After several more unwise and eccentric decisions he gained his PhD in developmental psychology from the University of Manchester, UK. He currently works at the same university – continuing to research the learning processes that drive language acquisition and continuing to make unwise and eccentric decisions.

Professor Paul Kerswill
Paul Kerswill is Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of York. His first research was on dialects in Norway, where he studied changes in the speech of rural dialect speakers who had moved to the city of Bergen. This started his fascination with how dialects change as