Randolph Quirk

WORDS AT WORK

LECTURES ON TEXTUAL STRUCTURE

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Preface

During a period of two months in late 1985 and early 1986, I was privileged to enjoy residence in Singapore with appointment as Lee Kuan Yew Distinguished Visitor. In addition to numerous addresses before groups as various as the Singapore Association for Applied Linguistics, the Singapore Society of Editors, the staff of the *Straits Times*, postgraduates of the Regional Language Centre (RELC), students and staff of the English Department of the National University of Singapore, I gave eight public lectures on 'The Nature and Constituents of Textual Structure'.

In selecting the topic of discourse and textual structure for these special lectures in Singapore, I had in mind the repeated emphasis by the Prime Minister himself on the importance of communicative skills (particularly in English and Mandarin) for Singapore's multilingual society, located at so crucially nodal a geographical point for international commerce. I had in mind also an address delivered in London at the Royal Society in July 1983 by Dr Goh Keng Swee (then Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore), and published the same year by the Trade Policy Research Centre as *Public Administration and Economic Development in LDCs*. In this, Dr Goh set out guidelines for developing countries which included 'investment in human beings' through excellence of education; and the 'careful study, diligent application and intelligent adjustment' of Western models. The study of communication models must doubtless be of prime relevance in this connection, but I venture to hope that such relevance extends far beyond Southeast Asia.

The present book therefore offers a somewhat generalised version of my Singapore lectures, and one that has been revised in the light of the extremely valuable contributions made by members of the audience during the discussion period after each lecture. Those who have thus influenced much-needed changes and improvements are too numerous for me to acknowledge my debt to them by name, but I must make an exception in the case of Mrs Lee Sow Ling whose searching comments, along with those of my

wife, have been particularly pervasive and welcome.

My debt goes far beyond my audiences, however, and I take this opportunity of thanking the authorities of the National University of Singapore — especially the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Lim Pin; the Dean of Arts and Social Sciences, Professor Edwin Thumboo; and the Director of the University Liaison Office, Mr Peter Lim — for enabling me to come to Singapore and for making my stay so enjoyable and so intellectually stimulating.

Randolph Quirk
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Lecture One
Basics of Communication

For all the scientific panoply involved in the description of communication and for all the modern electronic advances in creating more effective channels for communication, the greatest and most abiding difficulty about human communication is that it is human. And in this too lie its subtlety, its value, and its limitless potentiality: in considering it, we must ever bear in mind human frailty — whether of mind or morale — as well as human creativity. Every time we attempt to communicate, every time we attempt to interpret and understand someone else's communication, we are engaged in the uncertain and risky task of inference.

Inference. We can never *know*. Every time we speak, we are obliged to make guesses about what our hearer knows and about how he or she (and it often matters which) will relate that knowledge to what we want to say. Let me give a simple example — if only to show that examples are rarely simple:

Becker beat McEnroe in straight sets.

Clearly, this statement assumes a knowledge of tennis in the hearer: otherwise the expression 'in straight sets' would be meaningless. Yet the communication will not become less demanding if we paraphrase the technical expression and say

Becker beat McEnroe decisively

since this still assumes a knowledge of tennis; otherwise Becker and McEnroe could be boxers or sprinters or chess-players or candidates in a political election. More narrowly, the communication assumes an *up-to-date* knowledge of *international* tennis, since it is only after Wimbledon 1985 that the sentence achieves plausibility in the real world. Seen from this point of view, we note that as a piece of *communication* the sentence has a very real 'value-added' meaning, as compared with the mere grammatical and lexical

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meaning, the abstract *linguistic* meaning of what we might regard as a strictly comparable sentence:

> Jack beat Jill in straight sets.

Whether we meet this last example in an English textbook or whether we hear it said of a real-world, but unknown, 'Jack' and 'Jill', the meaning depends only on understanding that a tennis match comprises sets and if all sets are won by one side, that side can be said to have beaten the other 'in straight sets'. The original communication, plausible as I say only since August 1985, has a very different real meaning in the real world: an earlier virtually unbeatable champion, McEnroe, has been beaten by a young man who was hitherto virtually unknown. The meaning is a momentous change in the world of first-class tennis.

I have laboured this so-called 'simple' example to make one basic point: that in communication, we have an essential correlation between a semiotic system (in the present context, largely the English language) and an independently existent world (in the present context, a system of shared knowledge, myth, or belief — including a willingly suspended disbelief: as in fiction). Without that correlation, there can be no communication. The sentence

> Both my son's flointles have died recently

has a perfect grammatical structure but is not a communication since no hearer knows what a *flointle* is. Equally, however,

> Both my son's parents have died recently

is no communication since, although this time the faultless grammar is accompanied by no unknown words, there can be no correlation between the sentence and any situation in the real world or in any plausible fictive one.[1]

On the semiotic side of the correlation, I said that for our purposes we were largely concerned with the English language. Before I come to consider the qualification 'largely', let me expand a little on what the English language embraces. Lexicon obviously. The effectiveness of every communication depends on the selection

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[1]The fact we might 'read' a meaning into either sentence (for example, imagining the son to be adopted in the second) serves only to endorse the co-operative principle discussed below.

of specific lexical items from the hundreds of thousands that are available to us as speakers and writers. Our word stock can be seen as constituting a central core of general purpose items like *street, hand, top, arrange, fetch, heavy, bright, always* (which are virtually indispensable, regardless of the nature of the communication), surrounded by a vast array of words with more specialised reference like *chromosome, appendix, instigate, affirmative*. The latter enable us to articulate communications with great precision for such purposes as legal definition and scientific description, where our reliance on the assumed shared knowledge between the relatively few competent participants is all the greater. But less momentous topics than law and science have their technical vocabulary — we have seen an instance in the tennis report 'X beat Y in straight sets', and this example is useful in another respect. It draws our attention to the fact that words belong to the core or to the surrounding areas of specialisation not as formal items but in respect of their meanings. Thus *straight* and *set* belong to the common core when used in the senses understood in the sentences

> She drew a *straight* line on the page.
> The child has a fine *set* of teeth.

But both words are used in special senses outside the common core when applied to tennis in the expression *straight sets*. And this, we notice, while preserving the grammatical relations of the items: *straight* an adjective, *set* a noun. When a formal item is used in two different grammatical functions, it is still commoner to find these in different domains of the lexicon: 'I caught the bird with a *net*', 'The company has made a *net* profit'. 'Every time he plays Bartok, his wife *plugs* her ears', 'The car wouldn't start because the *plugs* were wet'.

No less than with lexicon, the choices of *grammar* crucially affect any communication we attempt. A noun phrase of high density that may seem admirable as we seek to express ourselves with careful precision may utterly confuse the reader or listener even if it appears in sentence-final position:

> As the advance contingent emerged from forest cover, a burst of hostile fire destroyed *the newly repaired armour-plated off-side front wing of the senior commander's light single-turreted patrol vehicle on which was mounted the experimental range-finder.*

A communicator more sympathetic to his audience and determined
to get his message across would avoid packing so much information
into a single noun phrase, even if this meant making the report
lengthier. Perhaps something like this:

> It had been decided to mount the experimental range-
> finder on the senior commander's patrol vehicle. This
> was of the single-turreted type with armour-plated front
> wings. The off-side one had been newly repaired and
> seemed a good place for the range-finder. But this was
> precisely the part that was destroyed by a burst of hostile
> fire as the advance contingent emerged from forest cover.

Here more than sixty words are used where less than forty appeared
in the earlier version; seven clauses where three had served before.
There can be no doubt that the second is clearer and that it com-
municates faster despite its greater prolixity. And the difference lies
solidly in grammar, not lexicon. Both versions have all the lexical
items presents in the first, and the second adds few though it repeats
some. Although in many cases the re-working of a message for
greater efficiency involves lexical choices, in many we are concerned
with grammatical choices: how many clauses, what structure of
clauses, whether to use the active or the passive, which parts to
pronominalise, which parts to front or postpone, which device to
use in order to move constituents to where we want them.

   The grammar of English provides a rich array of such choices
(cf Halliday, 1985) and the two versions of a single message that
I have given could be supplemented by an indefinitely large selection
of further alternatives. No one should underestimate the importance
of taking time to exploit to the full the lexical and grammatical
resources at our disposal as we sensitively feel out the best way of
getting our message across in the particular circumstances. These
will include whether, at one extreme, we are speaking face to face
with hearers we know and who can at once ask for clarification,
or whether, at the other extreme, we are writing for unknown
readers whose comprehension we have to guess. But irrespective
of such variables, there are general maxims of lexical selection and
grammatical organisation, as we shall see in the course of these
lectures (cf also Cole and Morgan, 1975; Hoey, 1983; Nash, 1980;
Schenkein, 1978). One is to ensure that we start from as secure
a position as possible in assessing the shared knowledge of speaker
and hearer: and then of proceeding from the relatively well-known,

established, 'given' to the relatively unknown, unfamiliar, new. Thus in both versions of the military example, I have assumed a prior knowledge of the experimental range-finder. If I had been in some doubt, my second version might have begun:

> There had been, as you may know, some experiments
> to devise a different type of range-finder.

If I was fairly sure I was on new ground, on the other hand, my opening might have been more starkly:

> There had been some experiments to devise a different
> type of range-finder.

And if I felt my hearer knew nothing about guns, I would take a further step back, perhaps with something like this:

> One of the difficulties in shooting is to establish the
> distance between the gun and the target; this is called
> 'finding the range'. There had been some experiments
> to devise a different type of range-finder ...

But I have been speaking as though a written version of a communication was identical with its spoken version. It is not, of course. Speech has audible features such as intonation, relative loudness, tempo and rhythm which have no one-for-one correlate in the English writing system. Because even the most literate of us do more than ninety-nine per cent of our communicating in speech, we find written communication far harder to cope with, whether we are doing the writing or whether we are at the receiving end as readers. As writers, we tend to forget that our readers (especially if they are strangers who do not know us personally) cannot easily reconstruct the intonation or stress or rhythm from what we have written: though for us, hearing our own speech mentally as we write, it may seem easy enough. As readers, on the other hand, we tend to vocalise (actually or in imagination) our own version of the inferred intonation and stress and rhythm in what we read, without mentally standing back to wonder how the writer would have sounded if he had spoken aloud what he has written for us.

So it is that I may write:

> The law insists that taxis only pick up passengers in
> this street

and because I am confident that anyone would have known exactly what I meant if I had said it aloud, I am foolish or inconsiderate enough to believe that it is equally clear to any reader in its written version. But in fact I would have said it in one of at least three ways (cf Taglicht, 1984). One would have meant:

> The law insists that it is *only taxis* that may pick up passengers in this street (private cars, for example, are forbidden to stop here).

Another would have meant:

> The law insists that taxis may *only pick up* passengers: they are not allowed to discharge passengers in this street.

A third version would have meant:

> The law insists that taxis use *this street alone* for picking up passengers: they are not allowed to do so in neighbouring streets.

But just as in writing I have failed to anticipate that the sentence has other than the meaning I had in mind, so readers may equally not recognise the sentence as ambiguous: they may just impose their own meaning upon it, convinced that they understand, though in fact they have only about one chance in three of having selected the correct one. And of course, as writers and readers, we are *doubly* disadvantaged: the writing system obliges us to compensate for absent phonological features and simultaneously debars us from the instantaneous check for understanding that is possible when we are in the normal face-to-face situation of spoken discourse. So it is that we have the paradox: though writing and reading constitute only a miniscule fraction of human communication, they require a totally disproportionate amount of learning, practice, skill and sympathetic attention.

So far I have referred to writing in respect to the ways in which it is deficient as compared with spoken communication: reasonably enough, since they are certainly the greatest source of difficulty. But the deficiencies are not all on one side. Writing has features that are absent from speech. For example, in writing, there is a clear distinction between capital letters and small letters, between apostrophe *s* and plural *s*, between roman type and italics,

indeed between one word and another. A lecture title read over the telephone as:

> Some art in sound

was taken down by a stenographer as

> Sir Martin's hound

and we have to admit that, in isolation, neither was obviously less plausible than the other. But in written transmission no such confusion could have occured. Again, there is a great deal of difference between

> Give me the racing news, please

and

> Give me *The Racing News*, please

though in speech they sound identical. There is the story of the customer who said to an assistant in a bookstore:

> I've come for T.S. Eliot's *Family Reunion*

and received the puzzled reply:

> Well, I don't think it's being held here, madam.

With its access to such symbols as question marks and quotation marks, writing also makes sharp distinctions that can be blurred into ambiguity in speech. This is true even of such pairs as the following, where intonation need not always distinguish one from the other:

> 1(a) Was he tired!
> (b) Was he tired?
>
> 2(a) John is not coming, then.
> (b) John is not coming, then?
>
> 3(a) The doctor said I need a holiday.
> (b) The doctor said, 'I need a holiday'.

There are other visual codes within the graphic system, some of them well-established international conventions like the use of

'Gothic' black-letter typeface for the title of a newspaper:

Fig. 1

or more casual *ad hoc* devises where — in London, for example — a sign like this outside a restaurant:

Fig. 2

is to be interpreted as 'good *Greek* food'.

Clearly, we would find it difficult in speech to match such instances of *double entendre* — or perhaps I should say the *double voir*. Just as able speakers exploit the subtleties available through intonation and other oral features absent from writing, so the alert writer is quick to use features of the graphic system that are without oral correlates. In the fourth lecture we shall discuss Updike's *I/eye* and Jacobson's *annalist/analyst*, but one does not need to go to sophisticated fiction. The phenomenon is commonplace in the puns and witticisms of smart journalism, which require both phonic realisation and visual cues operating simultaneously to produce the desired effect. In *The Guardian* of 9 November 1985, an article on European holiday resorts was headed

Savoie Fare

Here the spelling has to be interpreted in terms of travel (*fare*) to the Haute-Savoie region of France, but the sound suggests simultaneously *savoir faire* as this is informally pronounced in English, an expression appropriately redolent both of France and of sophisticated taste. But if one had heard the article read aloud without seeing it, only the *savoir faire* sense would have been communicated — and rather mystifyingly at that.

With this example and its dependence on the European scene

(not to mention the tastes of *Guardian* readers), we clearly reach out beyond the limits of the language side of the correlation I specified earlier: beyond language, that is, to the pragmatic conditions that subsist in shared knowledge. In spoken language, such limits are often acknowledged by the need for non-linguistic accompaniment such as the smile of apology, of encouragement, of self-deprecation, of conspiracy to jest; the raised eyebrow, the hunch of shoulders, the spread of fingers, the shaping gesture of hands and arms.

Or of course we may point to an actual example or a diagrammatic representation of an example. In most real discourse in the real world, language is accompanied by visual aids of this kind; it is exceptional to be talking in the dark, literally or figuratively. Yet even so, what we select from these visual accompaniments, whether as emitters or receivers of communication, continues to depend upon shared knowledge. There is in London an employment agency, now with branches in many places but bearing the name of the street in which it started up: the Brook Street Bureau. The firm seeks to persuade those seeking work to register with them and it seeks equally to persuade employers that this is where they will get the best staff. On the London Underground there has been an advertising campaign exploiting with elegant economy the rhetorical polar contrast: 'Not that, but this', 'Avoid that, choose this'. The economy resides in two contrasting pictures, each with a brief contrasting caption. For example, two vases of tulips, the one well-tended, the other neglected (Fig. 3). If you hire an assistant
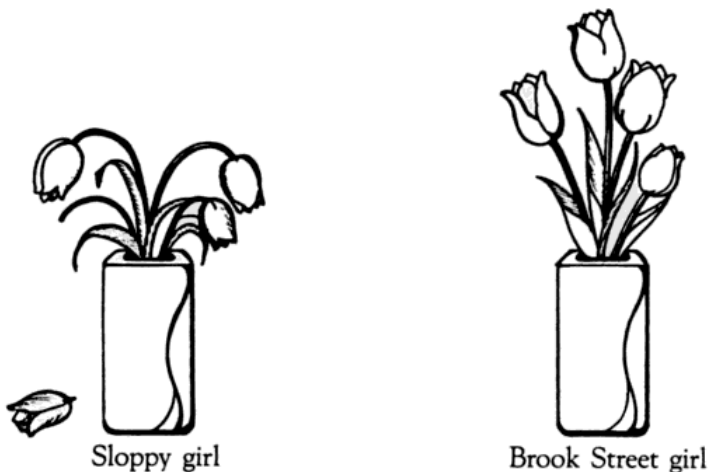

Sloppy girl   Brook Street girl

Fig. 3

from any other agency, she is liable to be sloppy: not so, if you hire from a branch of Brook Street. But this contrast is expressed only very indirectly by means of the words: the opposite of 'sloppy' is merely implied by 'Brook Street', partly by the rhetorical expectation of contrast rather than (say) paraphrase, partly by what have been selected as contrasting 'icons' of *sloppy* and *Brook Street*. Successful interpretation depends on the relatively minor cultural feature that office desks are often decorated by a vase of flowers, and a glance at how well those flowers are tended will suggest how alert and efficient the desk's occupant is. Here we have a notable example of that reliance on inference which I stressed at the outset.

But Brook Street handles male staff as well as female staff, and an advertisement with similar contrastive momentum can also be seen on the Underground (Fig. 4). This is somewhat more ambitious, with the allusion to H.G. Wells' scientific fiction in the 'invisible man', which for the purposes of the implied contrast we must be prepared to interpret as the employee who has not appeared at work by the required time. By contrast, the man supplied by Brook Street is associated with being there 'on the dot'. But why is nine o'clock selected to represent this punctuality? Clearly, the advertisement would be counter-productive, if not meaningless, in a community where businesses began work at 7.00 a.m. or 8.00 a.m. or 8.30 a.m. Nor could Brook Street Bureau have been entirely happy with 9.00 a.m. as the focal point even in London — where some offices open earlier and many somewhat later, such as 9.30 a.m. or 10.00 a.m. But 9.00 a.m. was iconically the most satisfactory in forming an immediately recognisable geometric precision: the clock hands form an exact right-angle. And if nine o'clock is not the personal starting time for everyone reading the advertisement, at least it is familiar to all as a starting time for many.
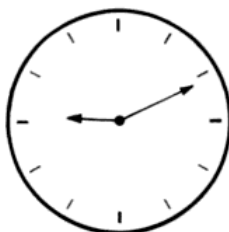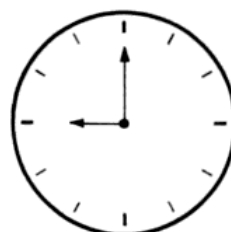
Invisible man   Brook Street man

Fig. 4

On one final point the designers must also have felt some hesitation: the female version uses the term 'girl', the male 'man'. Doubtless, this is again a reasonable pragmatic compromise, though in most contexts *girl* matches *boy*, and *man* matches *woman*: and feminists are increasingly vocal in their objection to the use of 'girl' for a female employee because of its implied emphasis on youth, and hence a person over whom authority is wielded (cf Lecture Eight below). Yet for many outside that movement, *woman* sounds uneasily impolite and *lady* inappropriately suburban and class-oriented. It is of some interest that public lavatories in the USA (and elsewhere too in the English-speaking world) often bear the imbalanced labels 'Men' and 'Ladies'.

I have dwelt at length with the issues raised by some very ordinary, day-to-day examples to make the point that even the simplest, shortest, least technical, least momentous texts have a structure involving profound interactions between language and the world, between individuals and the culture in which they operate: involving extensive assumptions about shared knowledge and shared attitudes, reasoned inferences about the degree to which participants in even such simple communications are willing to co-operate. The desirable opposite of 'sloppy' is 'neat' or 'efficient': why should I, the reader, be willing to accept an otherwise unattested paraphrase of this as 'Brook Street'? Why indeed should I accept a neat vase of flowers as a promise of efficient typing? The opposite of 'invisible' (which would never occur to me as a word to apply to someone who was late for work) is 'visible'. But visibility is very low indeed in my priorities in seeking a useful colleague. Why should I equate visibility with punctuality — and this in turn with staff supplied by the Brook Street Bureau?

The answers to all these questions lie at the roots of human communication. We start with a disposition to *seek meaning*: to co-operate (cf Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983) in interpreting phenomena as in some way semiotic. But just as important: we are disposed to belief in the truth of the communciation and in its relevance. And its relevance entails being of value and interest to us as telling us something new and worthwhile. If our examples had been as in Fig. 5, they would of course have been easier to understand, in some ways more logical. But they would have been so simplistic, so obvious, so trite as to fail in arousing our interest or in conveying any sense of relevance. And they would have required additional indicators to connect the second part of each with the advertiser.
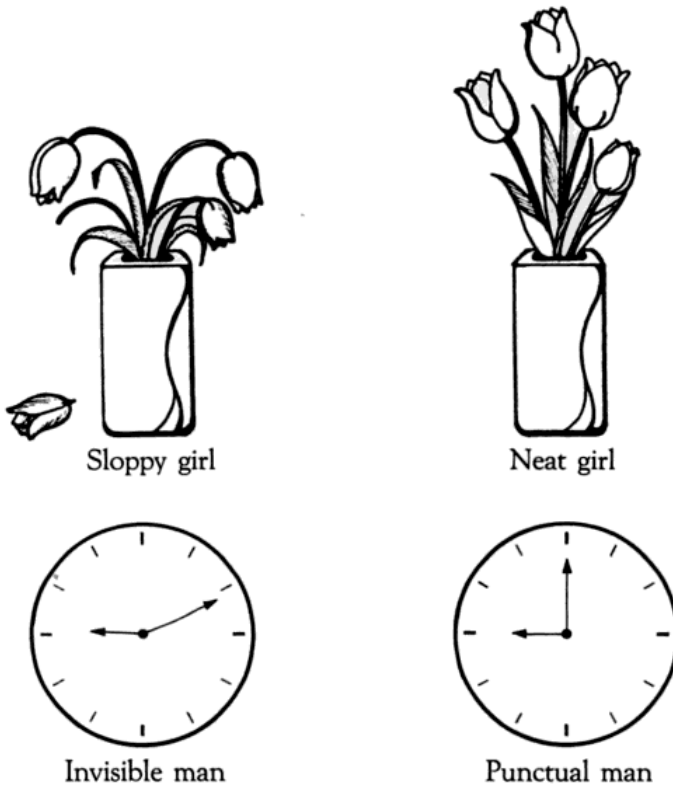
Sloppy girl   Neat girl

Invisible man   Punctual man

Fig. 5

Nonetheless, these simplified versions underlie the more interesting and more exacting ones that constituted the actual Brook Street advertisements. They are what we need to see as the covert *intratextual* constituents: 'sloppy' entails our awareness of an antonym. But it must now be clear that the effectiveness of a text depends not just on such intratextual constituents but on *extratextual* ones. Some of these are pictorial and cultural (as with the vases of flowers), some may be *intertextual*. The latter make covert or overt reference to another text of which shared knowledge can be assumed: the use of the phrase 'invisible man' is of this kind, connecting the text of the Brook Street advertisement to the title and text of the Wells novel about a man who could move around invisibly.

Let me illustrate these three distinctions — intratextual, extratextual, and intertextual — with examples that stay within language

without support from pictorial representation. Consider a text con-
sisting of just the following two sentences:

> The trade minister has presented a persuasive case for
> stopping the export of strategically sensitive materials. In-
> dustry must look at this question very seriously indeed.

If the second sentence were to begin with the word *so*, the relation
between the two sentences would be interpreted purely as *intra-
textual*. Because we now know the minister's policy, industry must
obviously take the hint and consider what action is needed in
consequence. But if the second sentence were to begin with the
word *but*, the relation between the two sentences would have to
be interpreted in terms of *extratextual* factors. Although it is clear
which policy the minister is favouring, the writer would suggest
by *but* that industry should take other factors into consideration
and be very hesitant about accepting the policy. As linked by *so*,
the reader need not look beyond the text in front of him; as linked
by *but*, he is obliged to do so.

Now the other, but of course related, concept of *intertextual*
reference. In Anita Brookner's recent prize-winning novel *Hotel du
Lac*, the principal character is writing a letter about having been
persuaded to take a holiday abroad: it had been thought that she
was on the verge of a breakdown. Well, she says,

> I am myself now, and was then, although this fact was
> not recognised. Not drowning but waving.

The relation between these sentences is *intertextual*, our understand-
ing being dependent upon our knowing the anecdote (subject of
a well-known poem by Stevie Smith) of the seaside death which
was caused by witnesses misinterpreting the thrashing arms of a
man in the water: he died because people thought he was merely
waving to friends on the shore when in fact he was drowning. Miss
Brookner takes the key words from this totally different text and
reverses them: her friends had thought she was metaphorically
drowning when she was merely, so to say, waving.

That four-word sentence, 'Not drowning but waving', ends a
paragraph which Miss Brookner began with another intertextual
allusion:

> A cold coming I had of it. Penelope drove fast and kept
> her eyes grimly ahead ...

For anyone who does not recognise the modified quotation from
T.S. Eliot (the beginning of his *Journey of the Magi* just as it is
the beginning of the Brookner character's letter), the English will
seem curiously unidiomatic and its reference uncertain: is the writer
commenting on the weather or on the unfriendliness of her com-
panion? Someone less confident about inferring the knowledge of
the reader might have felt driven to insert 'as Eliot almost said' at
this point in the letter, and to add at the other point: 'if I may
invert the circumstances of the man whose friends let him die'.
Redundancy is valuable — often indeed essential — in communi-
cation, but there are severe penalties for over-indulgence.

Virtually every communication depends on supplementing
the lexical and grammatical coherence achieved intratextually by
pronominalisation, paraphrase, and other purely linguistic devices.
We have to refer outward to other texts and outward beyond
other texts to features of the world around us.[1] This is relatively
easy in spoken discourse within our own circle of acquaintances
but becomes more difficult as we write — and especially as we
write for audiences unknown and beyond the confines of our own
familiar culture. At this moment, there are hurtling towards the
stars several space-craft, the Pioneers and Voyagers, which have on
board information that we seek to convey to possible dwellers in
other worlds: a mixture of electronic, pictorial, and mathematical
devices is accompanied by recorded excerpts in many human lang-
uages. It is hoped that other civilisations will want to interpret
these communications and will co-operate in seeking to do so.
But this is an extreme example of where nothing beyond this
co-operative maxim can be taken for granted. We can assume no
shared knowledge at all, and it is impossible to be confident in
attempting discourse in these circumstances.

The point I wish to make as my last in this first lecture is that,
because English is so widely used in the world for communicating
between peoples of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds,
we should never forget the gaps it may be necessary to bridge
as we make our intertextual and extratextual allusions. In 1982,

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[1]There is an especially remarkable degree of intertextuality in slogans and
advertising. A series in sausage promotion included 'I'm meaty — fry me' (echo-
ing the air hostess in another advertising series, 'I'm Susan — fly me'), 'Porky and
best' (echoing 'Porgy and Bess'), among others. The musicians' charity *Bandaid*
carries an appropriate reference to a proprietory brand of emergency plaster,
which itself — with equal appropriacy — invites identification with 'first aid'.

there was an international educational conference in Dubrovnik, Jugoslavia. One of the participants was a friend of mine, Professor Ramesh Mohan, then head of the Indian Central Institute in Hyderabad, and he sent me a copy of the paper he had circulated, presenting very important numerical data about the expansion of higher education in India. It is of some interest in the present connection to consider one excerpt from Mohan's paper:

> Correspondence courses ... are already being conducted by 22 universities, with an enrolment of 1,15,000.

Let us leave aside for a moment how this would sound if the last figure were given orally. As written, it constitutes a puzzle for anyone outside the Indian subcontinent and other areas using Indian numerology. Elsewhere, if commas are used in long figures, they separate units of three digits counting from the right. In such cultures, Mohan's figure looks like a misprint: is the first comma to be deleted or is there a digit missing between the two commas? The fact is, of course, that there is no error: the method of punctuating the digits reflects precisely the Indian mode of referring to units larger than a thousand. The quantity that the rest of us refer to analytically as 'a hundred thousand' is for Indians lexicalised as a *lakh*, a hundred of which in turn is lexicalised as a *crore*. Mohan's secretary therefore correctly represented in figures the total of 1.15 *lakhs* of students doing university correspondence courses. In India, Mohan would probably have given the total orally as 'more than one *lakh*'; in the international setting of the Dubrovnik conference, he probably verbalised this same quantity as 'more than a hundred thousand'.

The point for our purposes is simply this: every communication in every language is impregnated with culture-bound references. As we move from using language in the environments with which we are most familiar, we are faced with the need to recognise what those culture-determined features and allusions are. Will our readers be familiar enough with tennis to understand the phrase 'in straight sets'? Will they associate angular letters with Greece? Will they know that there has been work on a new range-finder? Will they know, indeed, what a range-finder is? Have they ever heard of *The Invisible Man*? Will they associate nine o'clock with starting work? Have they read T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*? If we think that all these things are beyond our readers' comprehension, we are in danger

of reducing our communication to banality, sacrificing the fun of puzzling it out, losing our readers' interest: 'The employee you hire from others will always be late for work: you can depend on our man to be on time.' If on the other hand we wrongly assume that *lakhs* and *crores* and H.G. Wells and range-finders and T.S. Eliot and Brook Street Bureau are totally familiar to our readers, we are in the opposite danger of leaving them totally at sea. Not waving but drowning.

Lecture Two
Strategies of Beginning

We communicate in *texts* (cf Quirk *et al.*, 1985): that is, in stretches of language — spoken or written, short or long — which effect the semiotic and pragmatic correlation which we discussed in my first lecture. And in that lecture, I stressed the importance, as well as the inherent difficulty, of trying to establish and then keep firmly in mind the shared knowledge of communicator and addressee. We are able to make a communication effective only by saying something new. But that 'something new' has to be linked to 'something old': we have to start from where the addressee is now (cf Chafe, 1976). I used an allusion to T.S. Eliot in connection with the shared-knowledge precept. Let me use Eliot again in connection with the theme I want to address now. In his *Four Quartets* he reminds us that in communication 'every attempt Is a wholly new start', 'each venture Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate'. I shall get away from the military metaphor on which he embarks and direct your attention to the anatomical one implied by 'inarticulate'.

In its formative stages, the communication we wish to make is like a number of bones, laying around in the newly dug archaeological site of our minds, each bone unjoined to any other: unordered, inarticulate. The completed communication will have each bone placed in purposive relation to another, sets of such bones constituting one unit, such as an arm or a leg, which then as a whole is purposively articulated to a shoulder or a pelvis. Once we have started, it will not be so bad: but where do we begin?

To carry this macabre analogy a little further, we are more in the position of having a collection of bones that must be articulated with another — and, we trust, a complementary — collection in the possession of our addressee. How do we select a bone in our collection that will obviously link up with one in his? Well, of course, one way is to ask him what bones he has in his collection and then promptly set to work fitting an appropriate one from ours.

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So it is that, in opening up a conversation with someone, we often begin with a question, and this can have more than one function: exploring our hearer's existing knowledge, invoking participation and interest, and thirdly indicating the topic on which we hope to convey some new information:

> Have you been anywhere near Soho this afternoon? Well, there's a huge fire and several buildings are gutted. It seems to have started with a gas explosion in a kitchen but by now several streets have been sealed off and West End traffic is in absolute chaos.

I have tried to illustrate this interrogative gambit with something that might be heard between two acquaintances meeting in the street or equally between total strangers in a shop or a train. But in fact, apart from when we are embarking on discussions of severe emergencies, discourse beginnings tend to be very different as between family and friends on the one hand and strangers on the other. It is with the former that we go straight to the point — and often, as I say, with a question. And if 'existing knowledge' is less important because we know more about our addressee in this respect, it remains just as important to invoke the other's participation and give some indication of what is to follow:

> Do you know who came in to the office this afternoon?
>
> Do you hear that confounded dog again?

Whether, as in the first of these, the answer could hardly be other than 'No' or, as in the second, it could hardly be other than 'Yes', such questions are not meant to elicit answers, but interested attention. As such, they can be reduced to the merest 'phatic communion' with a question that is interrogative in form only:

> Do you know what? I think it's time I wrote a will. I'll ask Jack if he can recommend a good lawyer.

And since no one who asks 'Have you heard the one about the teacher's daughter?' expects the addressee to say 'Yes', this opening can be taken as a phatic gesture that the speaker wants to tell a joke. But of course question openings are by no means confined to indicating the will to convey information or tell jokes. They can also be used — obviously — to seek it. The strategy is none the less identical. The opening speaker defines by his question the

direction that the conversation should take. In the case of the 'fire' example, the questioner might well have paused after

> Have you been anywhere near Soho this afternoon?

And if there is an affirmative response, the questioner might at once come back with

> Well, please tell me more. I gather there's a huge fire ...

Moreover, information-*seeking* questions may be as phatic as the information-*offering* question 'Do you know what?' For example, one may informally invite news, information, grumbles, comment, with such openers as

> How goes it?
> How's things?
> What's new?

For the purposes of the present lecture, of course, I am not concerned with how we break the conversational ice among family and friends. We all manage these things pretty well without academic lectures on the subject. I mention this type of situation precisely because it *is* familiar and therefore constitutes our only experience of 'how to start' when we are faced with the prospect of starting something less familiar: like beginning a talk on the radio, or composing an article for a newspaper, or even writing an academic lecture.

The familiar openings we have been considering have two vital features that we must carry over into these less familiar settings. We need to evoke the participatory attention of our listeners or readers. And we need to give them some idea of why we want it. Not surprisingly, we find ourselves adapting such strategies as the question, partly because they come naturally to us, and partly because we can infer that our hearers or readers will be used to such gambits as well. A letter to the press might thus begin as follows:

> How many of your readers are aware of the connection
> between car radios and traffic accidents? Studying po-
> lice reports of some fifteen accidents this year, I have
> found that in twelve of them, the drivers were listen-
> ing to radios at the time of impact, and it seems very
> likely that in consequence their attention was to some

extent deflected from the necessary concentration on
their driving.

Even in a situation where help and information are going to be
provided by a particular participant, it is quite likely that this very
participant will open the discourse, and that with a question (often
preceded by *well*: cf Lecture Five). A doctor in his surgery may greet
the next patient with:

> Well now, Mrs Jones, what seems to be the problem?

A teacher may begin a lesson with:

> Well, shall we begin where we left off last week? Do
> you remember the distinction I drew between speed
> and acceleration?

Meeting a new class, a teacher may instinctively seek to interest
and involve pupils with a question such as:

> Well, now, how about getting to know each other?

And of course directives and requests are often dressed up as ques-
tions — if only for courtesy's sake:

> Will you tell me your name, please?
> Would you care to come in now, Mrs Jones?
> Could you set quietly and let me explain?

And questions must be taken to include *indirect* questions:

> I wonder whether you would care to give me your name.
> My concern is how to apply for a renewal of this licence.

Nor should we forget the question-related structure called the
'pseudo-cleft' (Quirk *et al.*, 1985):

> What I would like to do this afternoon is explore with
> you the strategies of discoursal openings.

I do not mean to give the impression, of course, that all
discourse begins in an interrogative mode. Within the circle of
intimates, we can open up with an imperative:

> Just listen to this, folks!

(so, too, within living memory, but well beyond the circle of intimates, the town-crier's 'Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!') or

> Switch the radio off a minute and let me tell you about a problem that's cropped up.

We may also begin with an exclamation:

> What a ghastly day! I've been drenched coming here.

> How marvellous about Betty! You must be very proud of her success.

More formally, an alternative opening can make use of a polite conditional:

> If I may, I'd be grateful for your attention so that I can explain ...

> If you could spare a moment, perhaps you could tell me ...

> If everyone is ready, perhaps we can begin the meeting.

Of course, there are situations in which conventions of a different kind are accepted:

> Your attention please. Singapore Airlines announce the departure of Flight SQ 58 for Hong Kong.

> BBC Radio 4. The time is now two o'clock and here is a summary of the news.

> This is an answering machine. When you hear the bleep, please give your name and phone number, together with a short message, and we shall call you back as soon as possible.

It is worth noticing that, with the last, a still rather unfamiliar mode of communication, it is usual — as in this example — to suggest to callers how they should structure their message: in other words, we *tell* them how to begin.

It may seem strange that by this time I still have not mentioned other familiar formulae for beginnings — formulae sanctified by tradition to a far greater extent than obtains with radio or public address systems. For example, in many — perhaps all — cultures, there is a well-established and immediately recognisable way of

beginning a story. Chinese tales often begin by naming a person:

> There was a certain young man named Yu who was
> fond of boxing ...

> There was a native of Shun Tian named Xing Yunfei,
> who was a lover of stones ...

> There lived in Ling Yang a man named Zhu Erdan ...

> Ma Ji, whose alternative name was Longmei, was the
> son of a merchant ...

> A certain Xu, a native of Jiaozhou, was engaged in trade
> beyond the sea ...

> In Taiyuan there was a certain gentleman named Geng
> who came of an old and well-known family ...[1]

On the other side of the world, the sagas of medieval Iceland began likewise and indeed with far less variance:

> Thorstein was the name of a man; he was the son of
> Egil Skallagrimsson ...

> Mord was the name of a man; he also had the name
> of Fiddle and he was the son of Sigvat the Red ...[2]

Well, of course, the English language provides similar formulae. The very first of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales begins:

> Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
> Ther was a duc that highte Theseus.

The formula survives in stories for children whose young hearts are stirred as a fond parent begins: 'Once upon a time, there was a poor woodman who lived in the Forest of Dean ...'

   I had not mentioned these conventions, because they are very much associated with fiction and — so far as the Anglo-Saxon tradition is concerned at any rate — with fiction of bygone days. And they are fictional not least in purporting to represent something that has a real beginning: we affect to start with a *tabula rasa* in which everything is postulated as new. In the non-fictional world, as I have tried to show elsewhere (Quirk, 1982, Chapter 11),

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[1] All these examples are taken from the translations in *Strange Tales of Liaozhai.* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1982).

[2] The openings of *Gunnlaugssaga* and *Njalssaga* respectively (my own translation).

'beginnings do not exist: we have only continuations'. To the extent that the examples given earlier in this lecture have seemed plausible, this statement may strike you as blatantly flying in the face of the facts.

Not so. I invite your attention to discourse as 'continuation' — and this in two fairly distinct respects: what we may think of as the escalator model and the elevator model. Spoken discourse in which we participate is usually already in progress when we join it. Rather than pressing a button to start an elevator moving, we are more usually involved in getting on to an escalator which already has passengers and which is already in motion. We join a group of acquaintances, trying not to be so intrusive as to stop their conversation, and we listen for a few moments, tune in to the topic as best we can, and in due course make a contribution of our own, not to introduce a new subject but to add our own continuation to the one already in progress.

It is with this fact that the modern realistic novel comes to terms, no longer opening with a traditional and formulaic beginning such as the ones we have just been exemplifying. Patrick White's novel *The Twyborn Affair* (1979) begins as follows:

> 'Which road this afternoon, Madam?'
> 'The same, Teakle — the one we took yesterday.'
> 'Bit rough, isn't it?' her chauffeur ventured.
> 'We Australians', Mrs Golson declared, 'are used to far rougher at home.'

It is just as though we had chanced to hear two strangers talking, and we eavesdrop our way into their lives. We speedily learn that it is a driver and his female employer: we speedily learn that the latter is an Australian called Mrs Golson, and that wherever she is, she is not at the moment of speaking in Australia itself.

I referred to this technique as that of 'the modern realistic novel', but of course it is not all that modern — nor has it been confined to the novel. For hundreds of years, we have been used to such openings in drama. For example, Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* begins with a man and a woman on stage, as much strangers to us as were Patrick White's chauffeur and employer. The man speaks first:

> I'll pheeze you,[1] in faith.

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[1] A vague threat.

And the woman replies:

> A pair of stocks, you rogue!

to which the man responds with:

> Y'are a baggage: the Slys are no rogues; look in the
> chronicles: we came in with Richard Conqueror.

As with the Patrick White example, our eavesdropping quickly yields results: we learn the man's name (it is Sly) and we know that he has social pretensions far above the level of the woman with whom he is in conflict.

This literary convention implicitly asserts that whatever may constitute the sense of ending, conclusion, finality to which the novel or play is directed, there is no beginning: only a plunging into activities and relationships that are already there. We join in a process which is *continuing*.

So much for the 'escalator', the first respect in which I suggested we might regard discourse as continuation. For the second, the 'elevator' model, let us return to my insistence in the first lecture upon shared knowledge. We noted the extreme and limiting case of the unmanned space-craft equipped with an attempt to begin discourse with the inhabitants of possible worlds, light-years away in the galaxy, creatures of whose existence we know nothing, and in breaking silence with whom we can make no assumptions of shared knowledge whatsoever. In communicating with our fellow human beings on earth, we are in a totally different position: we know that there is and must be shared knowledge, and we know that in any new communication we must build a bridge from that common basis, providing an extension, a continuation that is as smooth as our tact and ingenuity can make it.

Even a newspaper article (or news broadcast) about a totally unforeseen happening is likely to be linked back to a known analogy. Thus, announcing the volcanic devastation in Colombia in the autumn of 1985, news items appeared like the following:

> Only weeks after the disaster in Mexico, a possibly even
> greater one has befallen her neighbour Colombia, a few
> hundred miles to the south-east. Many thousands of
> people are feared to have lost their lives when Nevado
> del Ruiz gave vent to a massive volcanic eruption.

We notice that the actual news is given only in the second of these two sentences, and if economy and speed were our only criteria, the first sentence might have been omitted altogether. Yet in discourse strategy the first sentence is essential, forming as it does the bridge that continues past experience on to new experience. A continuation in more relevant senses than one. Disasters are unhappily the continuing lot of mankind. There is more immediately the continuation of recent experience: the Mexico tragedy, still fresh in all our minds. There is the consequent continuity to recently endorsed geographical knowledge: Mexico, still unhappily associated with such news, is used topographically as the link to Colombia, whose exact location could not otherwise be taken as common knowledge for Europeans. Even fewer would know where Nevado del Ruiz was, nor that it was a mountain, still less a volcanic one. There will even be, for some readers, an implication of geological continuity: the two Latin-American events may not be seismological coincidences.

So much for what we might call the *pragmatics* of continuation in this example. Now let us look at the language that conveys this connectivity.

Linguistic means of indicating to addressees that we are continuing on from what they already know include that very lightly stressed item, the definite article. To begin an observation as follows:

The range-finder has been destroyed ...

not merely indicates that the addressees are assumed to know what *a* range-finder is, but that they know well *which* range-finder the sentence refers to. So in our example, the opening words include the noun phrase *the disaster in Mexico*: 'the disaster' that you and I know about is our shared point of departure; we can now continue with something to which your previous knowledge and experience are relevant. It is both grammatically and communicatively appropriate, therefore, that the noun phrase we have been considering is immediately followed by another that is clearly related: so immediate and so clearly related that the connection can be pointed by suppressing the common element *disaster* and replacing it by the pronoun *one*: 'a possibly even greater *one*'. But there is a further grammatical difference between the two neighbouring noun phrases; the definite article has been replaced by the indefinite: '*a* possibly even greater one'. Start from our shared knowledge of *the* disaster you know about and I will tell you about *a* disaster that you don't.

If we now recall the examples of textual beginnings that we have been considering in this lecture, the prominent role of this most unprominent indefinite article will be appreciated: 'a huge fire' in Soho; time to write 'a will' and see 'a good lawyer'; and in translation from both Chinese and Icelandic, 'a certain young man', 'a native of Jiaozhou', 'Thorstein was the name of a man'.

All these indefinite noun phrases have a further grammatical feature in common which is highly relevant to the strategies of beginning a discourse. This feature can be seen with special clarity if the first sentence of the eruption report is re-written, preserving exactly the information content of the original but changing the sequence of presentation:

> A possibly even greater disaster has befallen Colombia
> only weeks after the one in Mexico, her neighbour a
> few hundred miles to the north-west.

We observe that there is nothing ungrammatical about this version, yet considered as the initiating sentence of a news item, it is decidedly odd. True, the new disaster is correctly prefixed by the indefinite signal and the familiar one by the definite. But the order in this alternative version not merely entails defining the location of the familiar disaster in relation to the previously unknown one, but of requiring the reader to *begin* by registering a new event and of only *subsequently* being enabled to relate this to previous knowledge. In other words, the alternative presentation frustrates the 'continuation' principle of proceeding from the shared 'known' to the communicated 'new'. This directionality, so obvious in pedagogy and logic alike, has a linguistic icon in *linearity*: we order the lexical and grammatical constituents of a communication, bearing in mind the desirability of a real-time presentation in which the familiar precedes the unfamiliar.

In linguistic studies, especially as conducted by the Prague School, this is known as achieving 'functional sentence perspective' (FSP), and we shall be considering its implications in more detail later (especially in the fifth lecture). But there is one feature of FSP that we should discuss at this point: it is the notion of *topic*. We apply this term to the grammatical unit which is initially placed in the sentence and, given the correspondence of linguistic linearity with logical progression — as we have seen — from most familiar to least familiar, it follows that the 'topic' has special reference to the 'most familiar' end of this scale. In many and perhaps the most
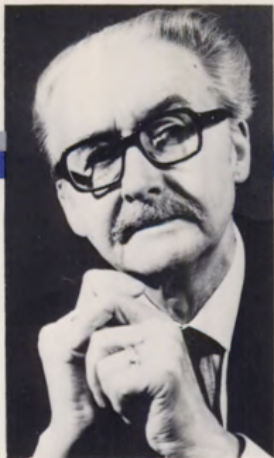
T hroughout his career, Sir Randolph Quirk has combined assiduous research, academic administration, and profound concern with everyday problems in communication. After holding the senior Chair of English in Britain, he became the head of Britain's largest University, and now he is the President of the British Academy — the body charged with responsibility for promoting British research in the humanities.

Many of his books spring from the research conducted in the survey of English Usage, which he established in 1959, and among them is *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, which he and his colleagues published in 1985: the most definitive grammar of English ever written.

The present volume, *Words at Work*, brings together the eight public lectures given in Singapore by the author from December 1985 to January 1986, at the National University of Singapore, under the auspices of the Lee Kuan Yew Distinguished Visitors Programme.

Among the topics covered are The Basics of Communication, Time and Tense and A Sense of the Appropriate. This book should prove valuable reading for teachers and students of language and anyone who is concerned with the proper use of language.

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