



\*This is only a test of the Emergency Graphics System.

## The sound and the fury

by Robert Currie

Few human activities are as common as speech. Yet for something so vital, language is only dimly understood. How we use and acquire language is the subject of *Talk Talk Talk*, a book which attempts (and generally succeeds) in outlining this mysterious but most profoundly human of behaviors.

Author Jay Ingram possesses just the credentials for the task. As host of CBC Radio's science program *Quirks and Quarks* for 12 years, Ingram has that rare combination of scientific understanding, an energetic writing style and a gift for making concepts understood by the lay reader.

This is a task which puts those credentials to the test. Despite the universality of its subject matter, speech, the field of linguistics is a minefield of abstraction, jargon, theory, and bitter discord. The scholarly detachment so honored (although not always observed) in the social sciences gives way to polemics, invective and personal attacks. Leading linguists say of each other's theories "misguided and dangerous," and "it should be shouted down." Fortunately, Ingram stays much more level-headed.

Ingram sets out to cover a lot of territory. In just over 300 pages, he probes how we make and understand sounds, the normal acquisition of

language in children, and the many, often baffling, abnormalities of speech and comprehension.

In addition, he explores communication in animals, the role of genetics and environment in language, and travels back to the dimly perceivable syllables of protolanguages, the ancient ancestors of modern languages. Despite the breadth of scope, Ingram manages to acquaint the reader with the fundamental issues in all these fields, and more.

Through his use of examples and case histories, Ingram explains how scientists have pieced together their limited understanding of the mechanisms of speech. We meet a man whose speech was normal in almost every respect, except for his inability to name fruits and vegetables. We look at the cases of bilingual people who, as a result of a stroke, lose only one of their languages. And we also see the how children not exposed to language, the so-called "wild children," fare when attempts have been made to teach them to talk.

In the process, we learn how political and social conditions have shaped how language is studied and regarded, up to the present day. We also watch as a succession of curious

rulers conduct cruel experiments to discover what language a child would learn if left alone, banishing infants into the wild, usually to die. Ingram shows us the political use of linguistics at its most sinister, as Adolf Hitler twists the work of archaeologist Gordon Childe into a justification of Nazi theories of a "master race".

Turning to the present day, Ingram turns up some interesting findings. He finds research showing that men don't necessarily interrupt conversations more than women, and Margaret Thatcher, famous for wanting to take control of conversations, actually interrupted interviewers less often than they interrupted her.

*Talk Talk Talk* is an excellent primer to anyone interested in speech,

but even more, Ingram writes with enough style and wit to make anyone interested. We can only wish that every discipline had an introduction as lucid as *Talk, Talk, Talk*.

### Old Seaman

From the jam of traffic  
I saw him standing  
on a cliff of curbside  
hugging his chest  
folding forwards towards his knees  
as if he were some ancient actor  
racked into a final bow  
hack, spit, hack, spit, cough  
hawking great raptorial phlegmmings  
as inevitable as gravity, gifts  
that drop, in slow suicide  
tracking into the graceless drain  
to spin and drift, seaward  
so that, at least  
a part of him  
would someday reach  
a watery grave.

steve vernon

An investigation into the mystery of speech  
by the bestselling author of THE SCIENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Jay Ingram

TALK  
TALK  
TALK

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