



Organic *Language*

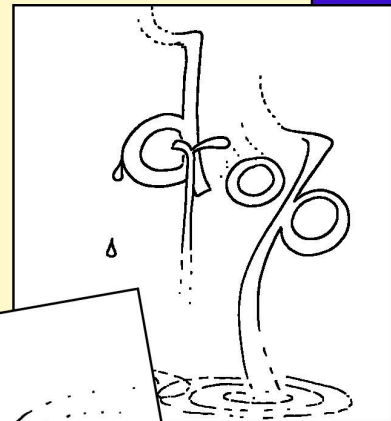
A guide to understanding speech
and how words convey meaning.

IAN BRUCE

What are words and how do collections of vocal sounds come to have meaning? It was always thought that the speakers of a language had to learn all the words in the language by rote. The first part of this book dispels this idea with a series of phonetic drawings of English words that have an uncanny connection with their meaning that can't be described in terms of hearing alone.

The second part puts forward a musician's view of how speech happens and proposes an expanded sensory model for hearing and speaking that clears away the mystery in the relationship between sound and meaning in English words.

When we learn to read and write our natural perception of spoken language becomes distorted. This book sets out a method for reawakening that innate perception.



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Organic *Language*

BY

IAN BRUCE

“We are tempted to think that the action of language consists of two parts: an inorganic part, the handling of signs, and an organic part, which we may call understanding these signs, meaning them, interpreting them, thinking.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*.



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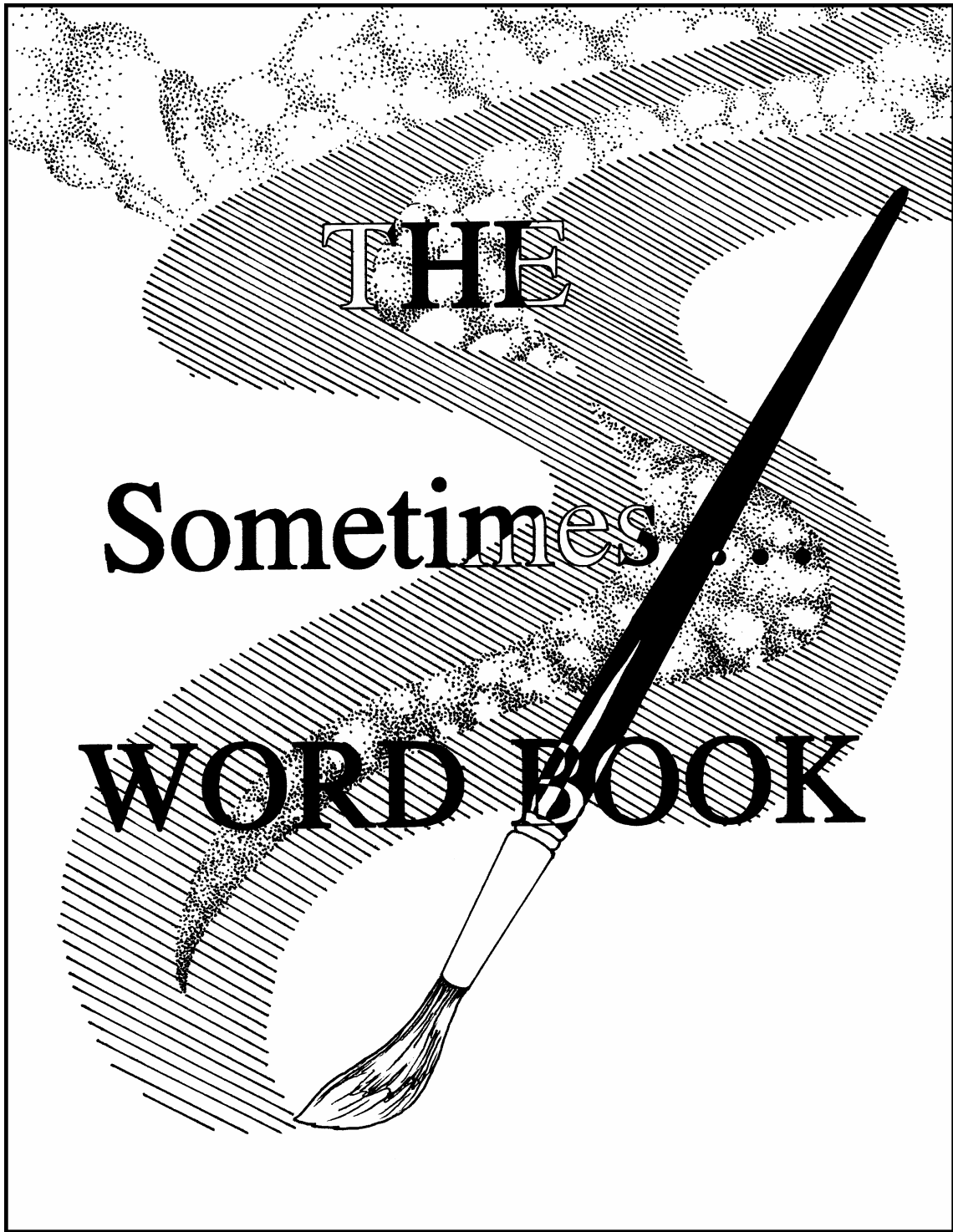
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Directions

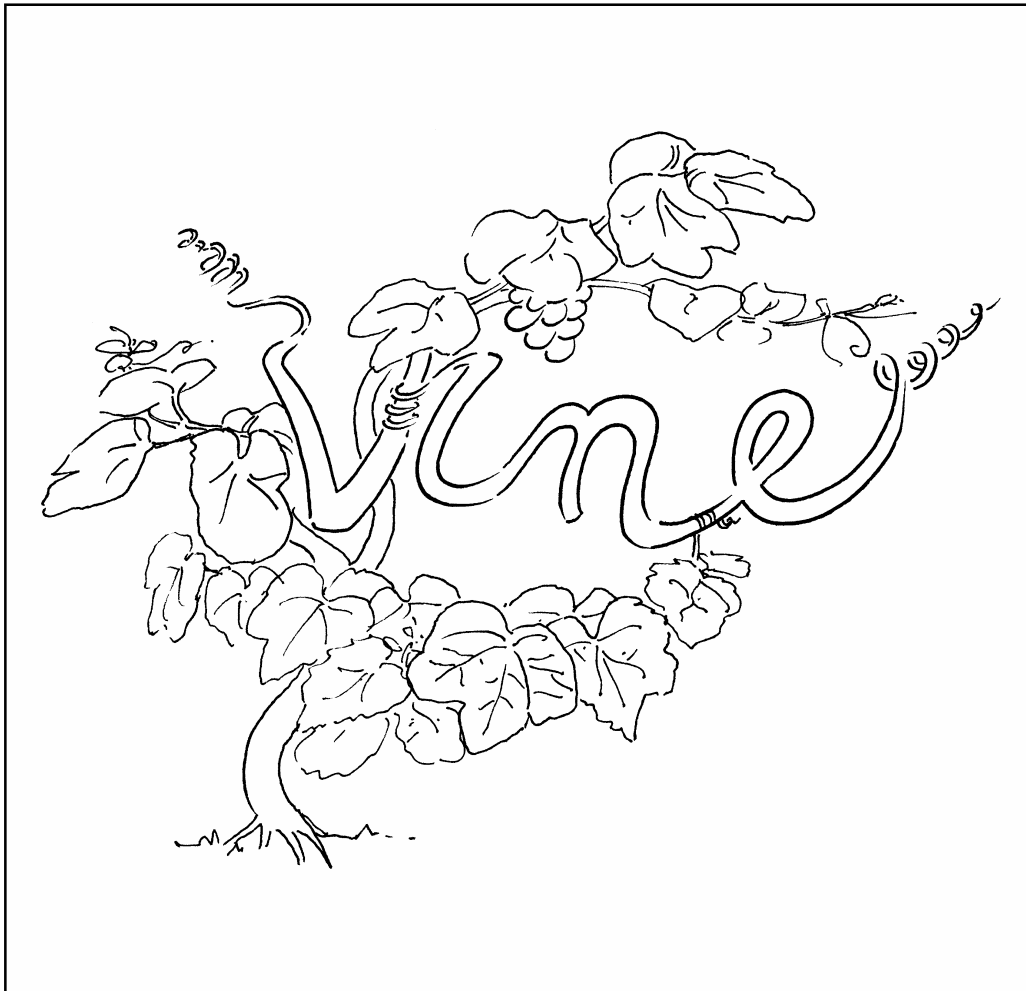
The modern person encounters thousands of words each day. We reach a point where words become merely marks on paper from which information can be extracted. We tend to forget that each word has a meaning in itself.

The words in this book should be read aloud and slowly. The drawings are intended to help you feel the sculptural process of word formation. Feel the resonance of the sound as it moves through the tissues of your body and the sequence of actions that is pronunciation. These are often an enactment of the meaning of the word.

By developing this awareness you may gain an inkling of how language began.

Sometimes ...

Words look like things.



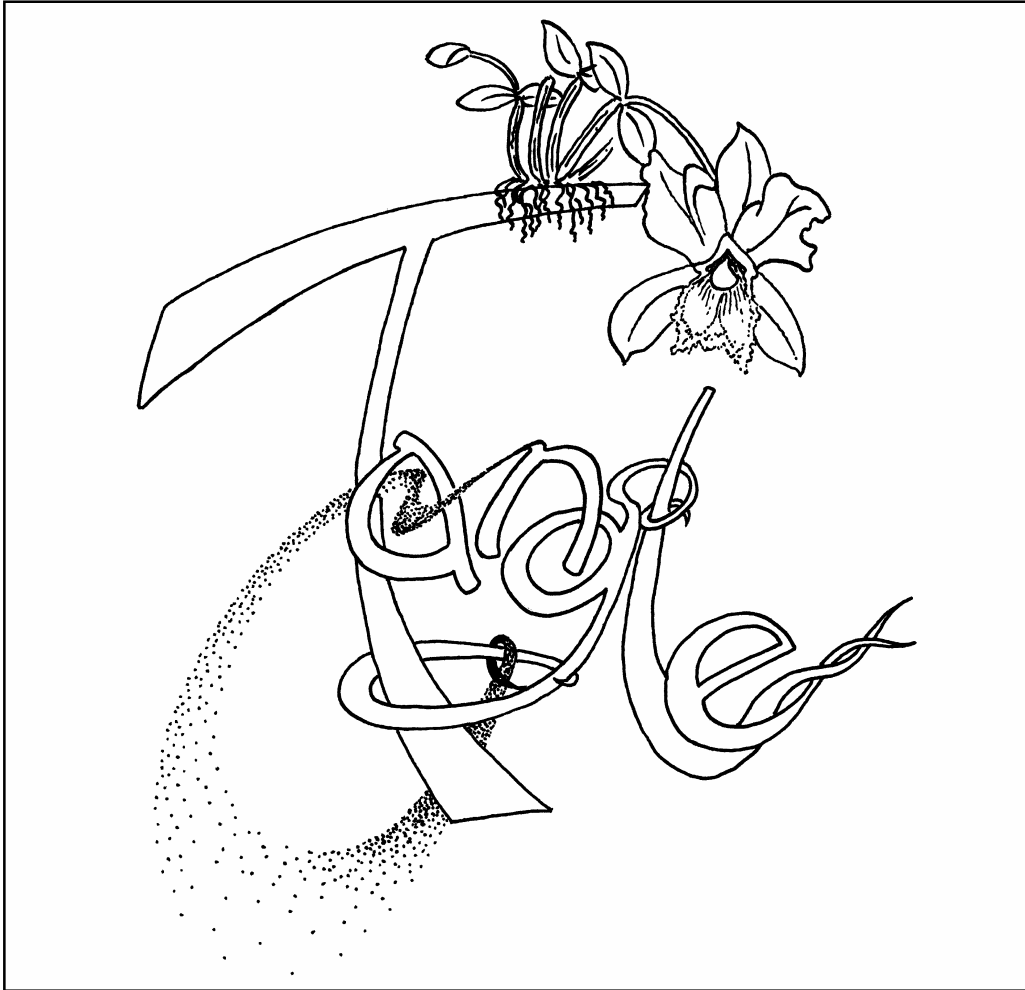
Sometimes ...

Words are actions.



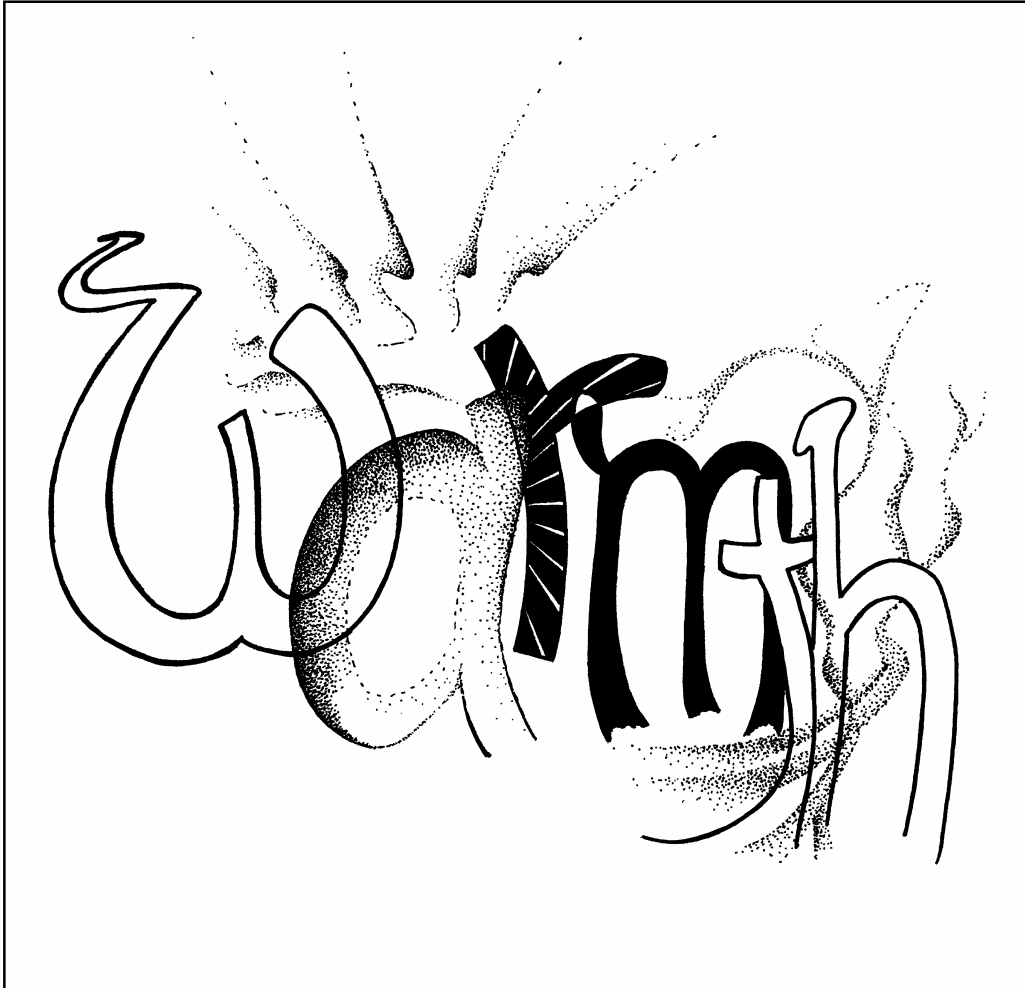
Sometimes ...

A word gets tied up in itself.



Sometimes ...

A word is a feeling.



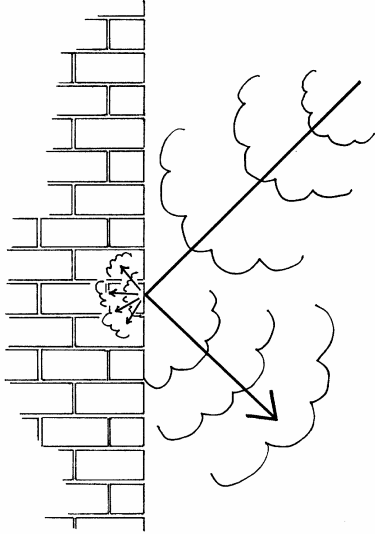
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Part 2

SPEAKING & WRITING

Hearing with Your Body

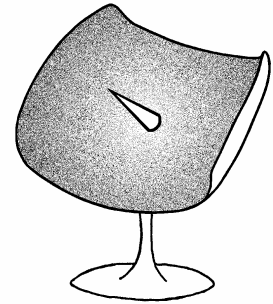
Sound is an energy of vibration passing through a physical medium. It spreads out from the point of its origin. If it reaches a discontinuity in the medium (say a hard surface), some of it is reflected and some passes into the new medium.



The air around us is just such a physical medium, like an ocean we are floating in. The solid structures around us (floors, walls, ceiling) also provide a medium for sound to travel. In fact, sound reaches us through any physical matter with which we are in contact. Some of the sound bounces off our skin and some passes into the structures of our body.

We usually associate the perception of sound solely with the ear. Certainly, the ear is the main organ of sound perception. With it, we tune into sounds and make them intelligible. But we have a secondary perception of sound that comes from the sound around us vibrating in the tissues of our body. The body is like a radar dish, registering the vibrations

coming to it from all around. The ear is the tuning cone in the centre of that dish, which is able to tune in to a particular sound and direct our brain to give it special attention.



Here are some simple exercises that will help you develop an awareness of ‘bodily hearing’:

Exercise 1. Raise and lower your arms very slowly. Imagine you are a large bird. Feel the small currents of air you are creating as they pass over your skin.

Exercise 2. Hum to yourself. Feel the sound vibrating all over and through your face and neck as you do so.

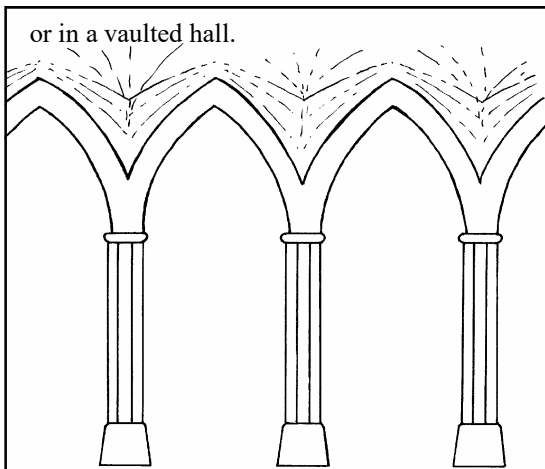
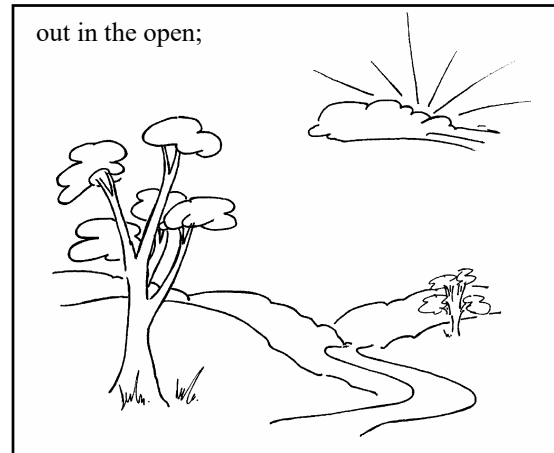
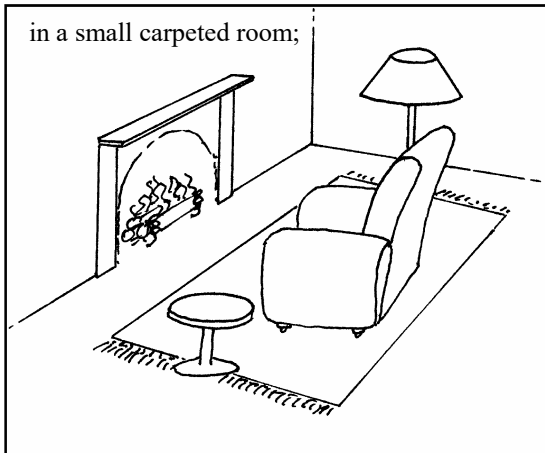
Exercise 3. Tap your knuckles lightly over your legs. Hear the different sounds and feel the internal vibrations as you tap muscle, bone and fatty tissue.

Exercise 4. Listen to the sounds about you and tune in to a low vibration, then one that is high. Listen to sounds that are originating close to you and then to sounds that are distant.

Exercise 5. Listen to any distant sound. Feel the physical sensation the sound makes in your body as you hear it, then picture what is making the sound. Isolate the physical sensation from the interpretive function.

Acoustic Hearing

A sound is not only reflected by surfaces, it is also altered by them. We have the ability to discern between a direct sound and one that has been acoustically altered. You will recognise the voice of a friend if he is speaking:



The acoustic environment alters the sound of your friend's voice, but you can still recognise it. You can also recognise the type of space that has produced the alteration. I call this 'acoustic hearing' and like any of our abilities it can be refined and trained to become an active skill.

Once you have learned to recognise this acoustic element in sound, you can easily apply the technique to the world of ideas: whenever you are struggling to grasp a particular idea in a subject under study, it helps to think of the idea as a single sound within an acoustic space which is the whole subject. The

sense of the general context usually clarifies the idea.

Exercise 1. Test the sound of your own voice speaking close to a piece of paper, a piece of woollen cloth, in a cardboard box or close to the surface of a table. The acoustic effect is so great and ever-present that we tend not to notice it.

Exercise 2. Start to notice the sounds of people's voices in terms of the acoustic environment: talking in a small room, out in the open or in a large space like a church. Use this skill on scenes in movies. Often the visual backdrop does not match the acoustic one.

Exercise 3. As you listen to someone expressing ideas in real life or on television, try to imagine the environment of thought and life situation from which those ideas arise.

Using Breath to Make Sound

The energy of speech comes from our muscles via the air of our breath. The action of the breath is controlled by three muscle regions, producing three types of breath that create different types of vocal sound.

The abdomen breath

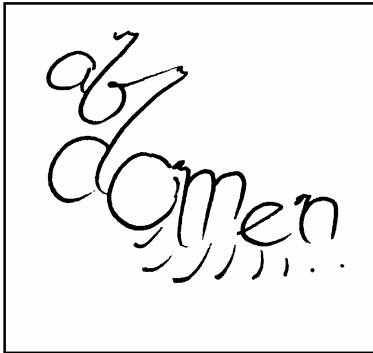
When you contract your abdomen, air is forced up and out of the lungs. When the abdominal muscles relax, the lungs stretch downwards. This breath produces a long vertical column of air that vibrates with the deep tones of speech.

The chest breath

Contraction and relaxation of the muscles of the rib cage cause the lungs to compress and expand widthways. This breath produces expansive fiery tones.

The Top Breath

The very top of the lungs, the neck and the head cavities, form the top breath. The way sound resonates in these spaces produces the articulation and fine shaping of sound.



Exercise 1. Say *abdomen*. Feel the sound vibrate deep in the trunk of your body.

Exercise 2. Say *chest* and feel the sound thrust forward with the action of the rib cage muscles.



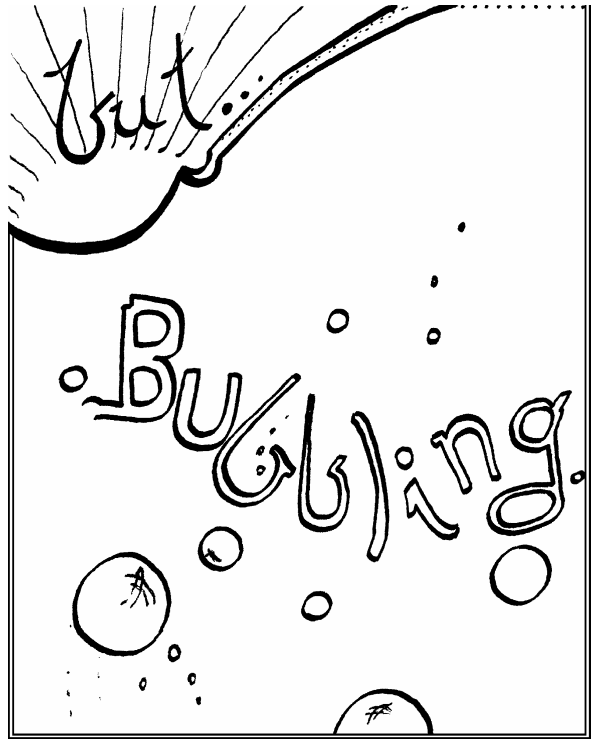
Exercise 3. Say *articulate* and feel the body of resonant air in the mouth, head cavities and neck being shaped and formed.

Exercise 4. Say *done*. The articulation of the *d-* leads to the chest expression of the *-o-*. This resonance continues but is forced lower by the articulation of the *-n* above.



The balanced use of breath and resonance is an essential quality of a good speaking voice. It gives pleasure to the listener, imparting a feeling of calm and relaxation. When someone becomes anxious and distressed they tend to talk quickly and overuse the chest breath. Simply remembering to slow down and use the deep breath has a wonderful, calming effect.

Pages 50 to 57 are not included in this sample.



Pages 59 to 93 are not included in this sample.



SHATTER
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CASINO

Pages 95 to 100 are not included in this sample.

NOTES

The ideas expressed in *Part 2* were derived mainly from self-observation, but I subsequently embarked on a study of academic linguistics in an effort to understand the uncanny alignment of meaning with sound shown by the drawings in *Part 1*.

I found that traditional linguistics does not acknowledge the existence (or significance) of bodily sensations associated with either speaking or hearing, and routinely confuses written renditions of speech with spoken language itself.

Following is a summary of modern research findings, with some ideas and arguments of my own, that support the understanding of spoken language as a multi-sensory phenomenon and inform the discussion of the effects that literacy and written texts have on our thought processes. The final pages sketch out some ideas as to the mechanisms by which the sounds of English words convey meaning — the ‘organic’ of *Organic Language*.

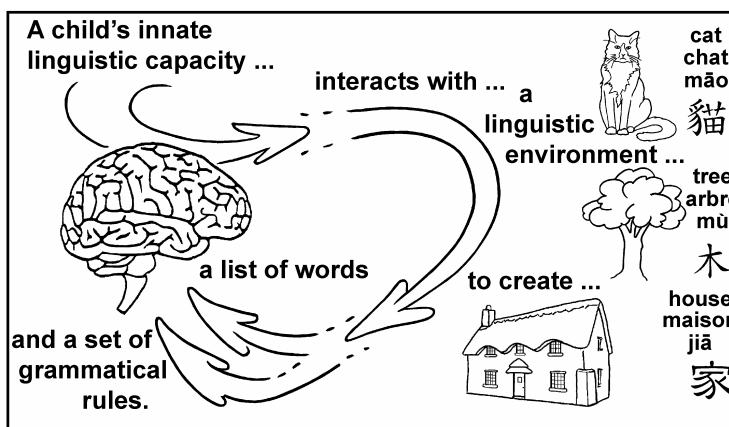
An innate ability to acquire a grammatical language

All of the 3,000 spoken languages in the world today (Ong 1982, p. 7-a) are equal in terms of grammatical completeness—they have a full range of tenses and cases and other essential elements necessary for communication. The prevalence of English as a world language is more the product of political and economic forces such as the old British empire, the world dominance of the USA, Hollywood and the Internet, than any superiority in the grammar or expressive power of the language itself.

Since the 1950s, when Noam Chomsky showed that almost all sentences we encounter are unique combinations of words that have never been uttered before (Pinker 1994, p. 22), linguists have been exploring the language acquisition mechanism in the human brain that enables children to achieve total fluency in several languages if they are exposed to them consistently during their childhood. This mechanism ceases to function at adolescence, so that an adult learning a new language will never achieve native fluency.

Children who grow up in an environment where a pidgin is spoken (a simplified ‘contact language’ with a rudimentary grammar and vocabulary), will automatically begin to add grammatical complexity to it, ultimately developing the pidgin into a creole, which is a fully grammatical language. (Pinker 1994, p. 33)

The current theory proposes that babies are born with a complex structure of grammatical principles already in their brains, capable of generating the grammar of any human language. This structure includes linguistic ‘universals’ (principles common to all languages), such as the existence of separate words and the importance of word order. As a child develops from infancy to adolescence this innate linguistic capacity interacts with the linguistic environment, accumulating a lexicon of words and deriving a set of rules that can generate the appropriate versions of words (tense, case etc.) and arrange them into meaningful utterances in the linguistic context. (Pinker 1994, p. 85)



Writing relies on revocalisation to convey meaning

When we see a graphic symbol, for example a walking figure, the stimulus in the visual centre of our brains evokes a direct meaning response in our minds.



But when we see a written word, the stimulus in the visual centre of our brains is passed to the hearing centre of the brain, where the word representation is rendered into sound (often just silently imagined). It is only by this revocalisation that meaning can be extracted from a written word. (Ong 1982, p. 8-a)



It is important to realise that the ability to acquire a fully grammatical

Pages 103 to 109 are not included in this sample.

Modes of relationship

The study of semiotics (the study of signs and sign processes) posits that there are three modes of action by which a sign, words in this current discussion, evoke meaning by relating to their referents:

Iconic—words that imitate or attempt to resemble their referents e.g. *bang, crash*.

Indexical—words that are directly connected (physically or causally) to the signified by pointing to them in the context of the utterance e.g. *that, here, today*.

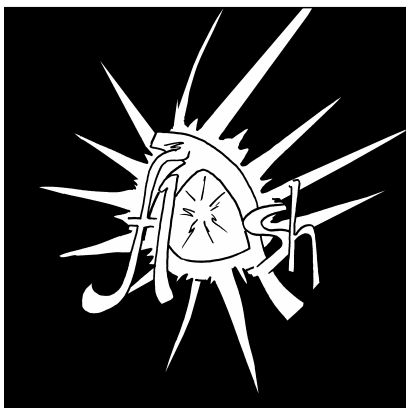
Symbolic—where words do not resemble their referents but have an arbitrary relationship that must be learnt e.g. *italic, mackerel, P.E., sandwich*. (Chandler, 1994 2. Signs)

Onomatopoeia—iconic representation of sounds

The most fundamental form of sound directly communicating meaning occurs when we imitate in speech the sounds we encounter in our environment. Think of the sound of breath passing through your nostrils, clapping your hands, the crash of waves or the chirp of a bird. By copying such sounds in speech, English has gained a wealth of onomatopoeic words such as: *whoosh, click, crunch, bang, splash, scratch, burp*. Because onomatopoeia attempts to depict referents by resembling them, it is termed iconic. Think of the religious icons of the Eastern Orthodox Church—paintings or sculptures of Christ or the saints that depict them in their human form.

Synaesthetic iconism—iconic representation of non-sounds

Think of the word *splash*. This is onomatopoeic in that it seeks to reproduce in vocal sound a sound from our external environment. Notice how it acts out the meaning, beginning with a dramatic plosive and fricative event from which sound shoots up and spreads out over the top and sides of the mouth—this imitates the sound of a splash as well as enacting the movement of a liquid when it splashes. Imitating the sound of a splash in vocal sound is onomatopoeic (an iconic representation) but the movement involved with a splash is not a sound, yet the word is imitating that shape and that movement with the mouth.



Now, think of the word *flash*. It has a similar action, and there is an undeniable similarity with *splash*, however *flash* describes a visual phenomenon. The flash bulb of a camera may make a sound but the sudden flash of headlights in a rear-vision mirror doesn't. The process whereby a stimulus coming to the brain through one sense results in a perception in another sense is called synaesthesia, and words that operate in this way are examples of synaesthetic iconism: a depiction in vocal sound of a phenomenon that does not involve sound.

Pages 111 to 126 are not included in this sample.