One

Looking Towards Babel

Someone once said that a good title for a book about language would be "Teach Your Dog to Talk". It has all the ingredients necessary for instant mass appeal; dogs are popular, and teaching them to do just about anything at all is a challenge. So teaching a dog to talk would really be something. The title would convey instant mystery; how could *anyone* teach a dog to do that? The trouble is, another title that would be at least as appealing would be "Teach Your Dog to Juggle". Who really cares about *talking*? We all manage pretty well at it, without even being taught how to do it. So a whole book about talking, and how we do it, sounds about as interesting as an entire book on walking, and how we do that. Juggling, on the other hand, or on any hand come to that, is something else.

Language, unlike juggling, is a human faculty that we take for granted, like having two legs, two arms, one head. Nobody taught us to have two legs, just as no one taught us to listen, to understand, to make sense of a whole jumble of sounds. Imagine what it must be like for the 180 or so babies born each minute to suddenly hear such a cacophony of noise. Obstetricians say that the reason a newborn baby cries when naked is that it is *cold*. It has never felt that before. It has never seen bright lights. It has never heard the sound of a human voice, the sound of *its own* voice, a dog's bark, the cars outside, the aeroplane overhead. And yet somehow, it manages to make sense of the different sounds it hears; it learns to hear patterns in those sounds, and associate meanings with those patterns, and even produce new patterns itself. It learns to *communicate*. As adults, we carry around knowledge about tens of

thousands of different words; what they mean, how they should be spelled, how they sound, how to move the muscles in the lips and tongue to pronounce them, how to join them up to form sentences; in short, how to *use* them. As infants, we *acquire* that knowledge. How? No one questions that incredible feat. But learning to juggle, that really *is* something, apparently, to write home about.

We take our ability as a species to speak and hear (and understand) so much for granted that, more often than not, we fail to see the very real mystery surrounding how we manage to do this. How is all that information about all those words stored in the brain? How do we use that information? We can hardly open up a brain like a book and look up the words in the same way that we thumb through a dictionary. Even using a simple dictionary that you *can* thumb through involves knowledge about the way the dictionary is organized, the nature of the alphabet, the shapes of individual letters, and so on. So if we *could* thumb through a brain, and look up the information that it contains, where would all this other knowledge, about how to *use* the brain-dictionary, be? And wherever it is, where did *it* come from?

We rarely appreciate how overworked our babies are; they have to do much more than just use their brain-dictionaries, they have to *create* them in the first place, *and* figure out a way of using them. And who helps them? Making sense of the spoken langauge we provide them with is hardly an easy task. Speech is quite unlike writing. Its words are quite different:

therearenospacesbetweenthembutthatisprobablythe*least*oftheproblems.

The majority of the spoken language that we hear around us is just one long continuous, changing sound — just listen to someone speaking a language you have never heard before. Basically, language is a nightmare. Yes, da Vinci and Einstein were clever, but your average baby is not doing badly in the brilliance stakes.

So the mystery is there, and like any mystery, it has its fair share of intrigue, excitement, discovery, argument, and counter-

argument. Just as cosmologists and quantum physicists search for a unified theory of the universe, so *psycholinguists* search for a unified theory of how we produce and understand language. The scientific methods used in their search can be just as rigorous and scientific, and the theories just as plausible (or implausible). The excitement is just as great. When scientists discovered that the background radiation in the universe was not uniform, but had ripples in it (much like ripples in water), it made front page news in many of the world's major newspapers; the excitement this news generated arose because, quite simply, it told us something about how the universe was constructed; how it came into being. That knowledge alone was worth telling to the world. And yet, language, like ripples in the radiation bathing the universe, can tell us something about the *mind*, and how *it* is constructed. At the end of the day, it comes down to simple aesthetics; you may be excited by the mysteries of the cosmos, or the mysteries of the mind. Psycholinguists are excited by the mysteries of language.