

Jean Aitchison. *The word weavers: Newshounds and wordsmiths*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2007. 257, xvii.

The author was the first holder of the Rupert Murdoch Professorship of Language and Communication at Oxford, where she was “paid to read and analyse newspapers, and other media” (xii). The text, whose fairly broad left hand page margins help to produce an effect on readers quite like that of scanning news columns, and which reads with similar quickness and facility, is divided in ten chapters with catchy, periphrastic titles (*e.g.*, “Weaving and Worrying” and “The Tongue of the Hand”), a stylistic touch which readers of A’s previous work may recognize.

In Lawrence Sterne’s, *The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy*, the narrator endeavors to tell his story from the beginning; the author here likewise begins her story of the modern press with the origin of human life in Africa, embracing the notion of the “common origin” of all human languages (the term ‘proto-world’ is not used, but ‘proto-human’ and ‘proto-language’ are) (2, 3). Ch 2 touches on discourse developments in the Indo-European tradition, the epic, and the oral and published forms in the English tradition that anticipated the newspaper and the tabloid, and Ch 3 on the development of the roman alphabet for English orthography and on commuter mediated communications. Ch 4, 5, and 6 constitute the heart of the book, sources for and development of the press as we know it and the emergence of the daily newspaper, while Ch 7 offers a brief stylistic analysis of news writing. Ch 8 briefly discusses poetry, Ch 9 lists a number of metaphorical devices in language and literature, and Ch 10 discusses some modern developments in the press. Touching on so many topic areas in so few pages raises the question of scope in the work, while some of the information provided leads us to question the intended audience as well.

Included in Ch 1 among the sampling of criticisms and condemnations leveled at the institution of the press over the previous several centuries is Adlai Stevenson's remark that 'an editor is one who separates the wheat from the chaff and prints the chaff' (10). The chapter concludes with the claim that "many of those who grumble about the media are gluttonous gobblers of newspapers and magazines, the radio and television" (11), while questioning 'how many of these moaners actually read the "high" literature some of them claim to admire so much' (*ibid.*). This tone becomes thematic.

Ch 2 traces some commonplaces of Indo-European narrative traditions such as 'ancient phrases' like the bipartite phrase 'goods and chattel', themes in recorded poetry like the slaying of a dragon, (15, 16) and familiar figures like the 'flower of youth' (16 – 26), while making the important connection that street balladeers and their commonplaces were the forerunners of the modern tabloid press. Along the way are discussed computer mediated communications with their telegraphic and rebus orthographic conventions, but it is not at all clear that "alterations will creep permanently into the language via text messaging" (44). After all, it is still the same English that is being transcribed, i.e., this demonstrates not changes in the language but merely the use of alternate orthography, which is in principle no different than such usages as <thru> for *through* and <w/> for *with* in hand written notes, and <s.t.> for *something* in dictionaries.

Much of the information about the development of the writing system adapted for English seems too sketchy to be informative to those without a background in the literature, but too superficial to be useful to those familiar with it. More relevant is the discussion of stylistic differences between written communication and speech, the former being "explicit ... more complex" (46, 7). These are not, however, further developed in relation to the topic, but clearly are central to literature and journalism.

In Ch 4 we read about the development of modern journalism from the ballad mongers, with their commonplace topics, including tales of assassinations and Robin Hood figures. Broadsheets, pamphlets, chapsheets and newsbooks are shown to lead from this ballad tradition. Numerous longer selections are quoted, and copies of older documents are reproduced, such as the report in *The Times* of Lord Nelson's death in 1805 (77, 8). In Ch 5 we learn that the first daily, the *Daily Courant* began publishing in 1702 (72). It was certainly true, in these early sheets as today, that 'if it leads, it bleeds', as the old chestnut goes. We learn also that according to the founder of a gossip paper in the nineteenth century, Henry Labouchere, 'it is the business of newspapers to create a sensation' (85). The author does not point it out explicitly, but it is clear that this was characteristic of the ballads and broadsheets which resulted in today's journalism.

The author comments on the 'continued downmarket trend' of newspapers evident by the end of the nineteenth century, whereby 'more serious news' was pushed aside by entertainment news and gossip (84). Certainly it is hard to distinguish so-called legitimate news product from tabloid gossip today (observers will recall that during the infamous 'OJ trial' the *National Inquirer*, an unapologetic supermarket tabloid, was recognized for getting the story right more often and with greater accuracy than mainstream news sources). This trend (or reversion) in modern journalism is rationalized, 'Yet gossip about celebrities is not necessarily bad', (95) on the basis that the media is concerned with making us feel that we 'belong in our culture' (*ibid.*). It is not clear how that comports with the observation of Labouchere (above), though.

In Ch 7, along with a discussion about the well-known five 'wh's' and the requisite focus on clarity and conciseness, headlines are discussed. One cited, ALLISON MURDER CHARGED, is said to be comprehensible only to speakers of British English (134). This qualification is hard

to understand; it is a feature of English that unmarked nouns precede head nouns in noun phrases, and the fact that the crime is referenced in the press with the name (or some other property) of the victim is characteristic of all English language journalism to which this reviewer has been exposed, e.g., ‘The Preppie Murder Case’ (*New York Times*) and the ‘JonBenet Ramsey Case’ (*CNN*; *MSNBC*; *CBS News*),. Furthermore, several pages and a table are given to the position of *murder* in two-, three- and four-word headlines, e.g., BARMAID MURDER; ALLISON MURDER CHARGE; CAR HUBBY MURDER CAGED (134 – 8); but given the combined demands for conciseness in the telegraphic style of headlines and the limited alternatives offered by the grammar, one wonders at the point of this compilation.

We are also informed that ‘headlines are printed in large bold capital letters, which spread across the page’ and that ‘short words save space’ (130). The author rejects the ‘popular view that headlines are just eye-catching words crammed together to create the maximum shock-horror effect’ (127), claiming that in fact, ‘headlines are structured with a level of skill with which readers are usually unaware’ (128) — more of the aforementioned theme. Yet the samples of headlines provided, e.g., A REVOLTING MURDER / ANOTHER WOMAN FOUND HORRIBLY MUTILATED IN WHITECHAPEL / GHASTLY CRIMES BY A MANIAC from *News of the World*, 1888, (132) and TRAIN SEX MONSTER MURDERED ISABEL from the *Sun*, 1999, (133), seem rather to support ‘maximum shock-horror effect’ hypothesis.

The aforementioned questions of scope and audience again arise in Ch 8, which attempts to account for figurative language in poetry. Reference to Hugh Blair (*The Belles Lettres*, 1783) who finds ‘a whole tribe’ of *tropes* which encompass the various functions known under the heads metaphor, analogy, allegory, *et al.*, would certainly would have been helpful in

investigating the relationship between human cognition and language which the topic evokes, especially in view of the recourse taken to 1970s prototype theories of semantics.

The most informative sections of this text are found in Ch 4, 5, and 6, which explicate sources and developments in the English language press, and the compilation and reproduction of very early examples is invaluable. A great breadth of reference is provided throughout, as expected in a work by an author in this position. But touching on so many outcomes in the written word in something fewer than 210 short pages renders the treatment, in numerous spots, too thin to be informative, while in so many places information is included that appears directed to far too basic an audience than the meat of the text would suggest.

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