Chapter 3

Radio signs and codes

Radio is the art of communicating meaning at first hearing.
(Laurence Gilliam, former Head of Features, BBC Radio)

We must now look more closely at the raw material of radio, at the signs which its codes make use of in order to convey messages, and for this purpose I shall borrow some rudimentary distinctions from what is in fact a highly sophisticated classification of signs devised by the American philosopher, C.S. Peirce (1839–1914).

Peirce, who is commonly regarded as a founding father of semiotics or semiology, the study of signs, distinguishes between the *icon* – a sign which resembles the object which it represents, such as a photograph; the *index* – a sign which is directly linked to its object, usually in a causal or sequential way: smoke, for instance, is an index of fire; and the *symbol* – a sign which bears no resemblance or connection to its object: for example, the Union Jack as a symbol of Great Britain (Peirce 1960: I, 196; II, 143, 161, 165, 168–9; Hawkes 1977: 127–30; Fiske 1990: 47–8). In radio all the signs are auditory: they consist simply of noises and silence, and therefore use *time*, not space, as their major structuring agent (Hawkes 1977: 135). The noises of radio can be subdivided into words, sounds and music, and we will look at each of these in turn and also at the nature and functions of silence before attempting some general observations about the codes of radio.

WORDS

Since words are signs which do not resemble what they represent (we may represent a canine quadruped by the word 'dog' but we may equally refer to it as *'chien'*, *'hund'* or *'cur'* or even invent a

private word of our own), they are symbolic in character. Their symbolism is the basis of radio's imaginative appeal which I mentioned in Chapter 1, for if the word-sign does not resemble its object the listener must visualize, picture or *imagine* that object. But there is an important difference between words which are written or printed on a page and words on the radio, and that is that words on the radio are always and unavoidably *spoken*. They therefore constitute a binary code in which the words themselves are symbols of what they represent, while the voice in which they are heard is an index of the person or 'character' who is speaking – a fact which was perceived and researched fairly early in the medium's history (Pear 1931).

In other words, such factors as accent and stress have semiotic functions, or at least effects (O'Donnell and Todd 1980: 95). Almost irrespective of what is said in a French accent, for example, the listener may automatically ascribe a romantic personality to its speaker. In fact, voice can be so powerful an expression of personality that merely by virtue of some well-delivered links a presenter or disc-jockey can impose a unifying and congenial presence on the most miscellaneous of magazine or record programmes. Moreover the voice of a continuity announcer is an index not only of herself, whom she may identify by name from time to time, but of the whole station or network. As a matter of deliberate policy she will give a kind of composite unity to its various programmes, set the tone or style of the whole network (Kumar 1977: 240–1). Indeed an announcement such as 'You're listening to Radio 4' is ambivalent, for it means not only 'The programmes you're presently hearing are the output of Radio 4' but 'Since the network has no other self-conscious means of expression, *I* am Radio 4'. The ambivalence can be seen rather more clearly, and is taken even further, in the name of the USA's world service, where at intervals we can hear 'You're listening to the Voice of America' – the 'voice' being an index not only of the continuity announcer and the radio station, but of the entire nation.

By now it will be clear that signification is not static or rigid, but a highly fluid or elastic process which varies according to context and the preconceptions we bring to it – a fact which is not sufficiently acknowledged by some semioticians. A voice may be interpreted merely as the index of a human presence; or on another level as the index of a personality (a country bumpkin, seductive French woman, and so on); or on yet a third level as the

index of a programme, broadcasting institution or entire nation. It might be useful to see the latter two levels as examples of *extended* signification.

SOUNDS

Unlike words, which are a human invention, sound is 'natural' – a form of signification which exists 'out there' in the real world. It seems never to exist as an isolated phenomenon, always to manifest the presence of something else. Consequently we can say that sounds, whether in the world or on the radio, are generally indexical. We could of course say that recorded sound on the radio is iconic in the elementary sense that it is an icon or image of the original sound or that a sound in a radio play is an icon of a sound in the real world, but if we do we are still faced with the question of what the sound *signifies*, what it is that is *making* the sound. Thus sounds such as the ringing of a door-bell or the grating of a key in a lock are indexical in signifying someone's presence.

Shut your eyes for a moment and listen. The chances are that you will become aware of sounds which you have been hearing for some time but which you have not been aware of before. You have not been aware of them because you are reading such a fascinating book that you have ignored the messages coming from your ears. Suppose, however, that your desire for a cup of coffee is almost equal to your absorption in this book and that a friend has agreed to bring one to you about now. You will be quite capable of picking out from the welter of unimportant noises which surround you the keenly awaited sounds of rattling cup and turning door-handle. But the radio medium is such that the listener cannot select his own area of attention in this way: the broadcasters must prioritize sounds for him, foregrounding the most important ones and eliminating the irrelevant ones, or if this is not possible reducing them to the level of the less important ones. This has been illustrated in respect of radio drama by Erving Goffman (1980: 162–5).

Taking as his scenario a conversation at a party Goffman points out that whereas in real life we would be able to distinguish the important from the less important strand of sound, this has to be done for us on the radio by certain conventions. Among the possibilities he instances:

1 Fading in party chatter then fading it down and holding it under the conversation, or even fading it out altogether.
2 Allowing one or two low sounds to stand for what would actually be a stream of background noise.

What Goffman is concerned to stress about these conventions is their artificiality, which is aptly conveyed in the stock phrase 'sound *effects*':

> the audience is not upset by listening in on a world in which many sounds are not sounded and a few are made to stand out momentarily; yet if these conditions suddenly appeared in the off-stage world, consternation would abound.
>
> (ibid.: 163)

But it is important to realize that such conventions are indispensable even in radio which deals with real life. In a location interview, for instance, the interviewer will set the recording-level on her portable tape-machine so that the sound of her voice and that of the person she is interviewing will be foregrounded against all the other noises of the location.

Let us imagine an interview which takes place against a background of traffic noise. If the interview is with a superintendent of highways about noise pollution the traffic noise, while of less importance – and therefore less loud – than the interview, will still be of relevance to it. If, however, the interview is with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about his Budget proposals the noise of traffic will be quite irrelevant, an unavoidable evil, and the listener will be fully capable of distinguishing between these positive and negative functions of background noise.

This second type of location interview is, of course, a *faute de mieux*: it brings a broadcasting facility to an interviewee who cannot be brought into the studio, for an important function of the studio with its sound-proofing is that it eliminates irrelevant noise altogether. My point, then, is that radio does not seek to reproduce the chaotic, complex and continuous sounds of actual life: it may tolerate them to a degree, but seeks to convey only those sounds which are relevant to its messages and to arrange them in a hierarchy of relevance. Nevertheless the ultimate test of relevance is the verbal context: it is the subject under discussion in the interview which will tell us whether we should be paying any attention to the traffic noise.

Sounds on the radio may also carry what I have termed an extended signification. An owl-hoot, for instance, may open a documentary about feathered predators or it may evoke not merely an owl but an entire setting – an eerie, nocturnal atmosphere, as it would in a melodrama or a programme about the occult. A crowing sound frequently signifies not only 'a cock' but 'daybreak', while the sound of strumming may suggest not simply a guitar but a Spanish setting. Because radio broadcasters seldom walk while broadcasting, the sound of footsteps, often heard – and ignored – in real life, acquires a peculiar suggestiveness on the radio. Drama producers will use it sparingly, and to convey not only that a person is moving but that an atmosphere of tension or solitude is developing. Though in these cases partly indexical, extended signification seems to embody a tendency towards the symbolic. The guitar sound is certainly an index of an instrument which is commonly found in Spain, but when used to evoke a Spanish setting it will 'stand for' many other Hispanic things, abstract as well as concrete, which have nothing to do with guitars.

It is precisely this aspect of extended signification – a form of stereotyping – which can annoy those to whom it is applied because it sometimes causes in the rest of us a naive confusion of signifiers and signifieds. Spaniards grow understandably irritated if we expect them all to strum guitars and stamp their feet, Scotsmen with people who believe they always wear kilts and eat nothing but porridge.

It can be interesting to speculate on the origins of certain kinds of extended signification, but they seem to become firmly established by a process of custom and habit. On the radio it is likely that such sounds as the owl-hoot and the footsteps were originally chosen as an effective way of reinforcing particular pieces of dialogue or narration. But since they *are* effective and part of what is a rather limited range of resources open to the radio producer they were chosen again and again and came to acquire the status of a convention, an acoustic shorthand, in that they could replace or *absorb* much of the adjacent language. In hearing the hoot of the owl the listener might begin to brace himself for darkness and mystery before a word had been uttered. But while such conventions may be useful in replacing *much* of the adjacent language they cannot *wholly* replace it, for ultimately it is only the words which follow upon our owl-hoot that will tell us whether

what we are listening to is *The Natural History Programme* or *Thirty Minute Theatre*.

But it is not simply the case that radio broadcasters must indicate to the listener whether and in what way the sounds he hears are relevant: in some instances they must clarify the very *nature* of those sounds. Why?

Shut your eyes and listen again to the sounds around you. You may be surprised at how few of them you can identify with any precision. The frequency range of most sounds is narrow and what we often overlook about the way in which we normally recognize them are the clues our other senses afford, notably the visual sense. When we do not actually see what is causing them they often mean nothing at all. Moreover studio simulations of sounds can often sound more 'real' on the radio than the actual sounds themselves would. Among the better known and genuine examples of these studio simulations are the clapping together of coconut shells to convey horses' hooves and the rustle of a bunch of recording-tape to convey someone walking through undergrowth (McLeish 1978: 252). These are not straightforwardly indexical, since the sounds made by coconut shells and recording-tape have no *direct* connections with horses and people in undergrowth. They are 'images' of the sounds made by horses and people and are therefore best described as iconic indexes. They might also be described as 'non-literal signifiers' analogous to an actor in the theatre who represents a table by kneeling on all fours (Elam 1980: 8); but in radio such signifiers must approximate rather more closely to that which they signify than signifiers in the visual media.

Yet however carefully selected and 'realistic' the sounds may be, the listener may still be unclear as to what aspect of reality they are meant to signify. The rustle of recording-tape may sound like someone walking through undergrowth, but it also sounds like the swish of a lady's gown and remarkably like the rustle of recording-tape. In a radio play which of these things would it signify?

Accompanied by 'Damn! I don't often hit it off the fairway': a golfer searching for his ball in the rough.

Accompanied by 'Darling, you'll be the belle of the ball tonight': a lady in an evening gown.

Accompanied by 'This studio's a pig-sty. Throw this old tape out': a bunch of recording-tape.

In other words, sounds require textual pointing – support from the dialogue or narrative. The ear will believe what it is led to believe. This pointing might be termed 'anchorage', which is how Roland Barthes describes the function of words used as captions for photographs. Visual images, he argues, are polysemous. But so are sounds. Hence words help to 'fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs' (Barthes 1977: 39).

MUSIC

Music on the radio, as on television, seems to perform two main functions. It is an object of aesthetic pleasure in its own right, in record shows, concerts, recitals, and so on; and either by itself or in combination with words and/or sounds it performs an ancillary function in signifying something outside itself.

As an object of pleasure in its own right, music is quite simply the mainstay of radio's output. Some stations offer little or nothing else. Even on the five BBC networks, two of which – Radios 4 and 5 – devote over 90 per cent of their time to spoken word, music accounted for 51 per cent of total output in 1992 (BBC 1992: 28).

The difficulty is to define such music in semiotic terms since there is some doubt as to the sense in which music can be said to signify. Broadly speaking, words and images refer to something outside themselves but the assertion cannot be quite so confidently made about music. Music with lyrics seems to present less of a difficulty since we could say that the significance or meaning of the music is expressed in the words; but it might equally be argued that the music means one thing and the lyrics mean another and that they are quite capable of counterpointing as well as complementing each other.

Quite apart from this, the question of what meaning (if any) attaches to wordless music is a formidable one. It can of course be seen as an index of the instruments and musicians that are playing it. When we hear a record on the radio but miss the presenter's introduction to it, we may still be able to identify which band is playing by the characteristic sound it has evolved. But to leave the matter there is a bit like saying that spoken words are signs of nothing but the identity of their speaker.

Dictionary definitions of music generally ascribe an emotional significance to it, and some compositions (for example,

Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture) evoke historical events: but while acknowledging this we would have to point out that music does not convey these emotions or events with anything like the precision that words do. Indeed there is room for disagreement about the emotional significance of certain compositions with unrevealing titles like Opus No. 3 or Study in E Flat – and who could tell merely from hearing it that Chopin's Minute Waltz is about a dog chasing its tail?

This means that written commentaries which point to particular features of a piece of music as referring to particular emotional or historical conditions tend to rely consciously or unconsciously on circumstantial evidence – the title of the piece and/or the famous legend which it 'narrates', the situation in which it was composed, the biographical and psychological details of the composer, and so on. Hence our very difficulty in discerning what music refers to means that if it does signify, then apart from its local imitations of 'natural' sounds its mode of signification will be almost entirely symbolic.

The virtual absence, or at any rate imprecision, of meaning in music makes it at once highly suited to the radio medium and somewhat unilluminating as to its nature. It is highly suited because in being largely free of signification it allows us to listen without making strenuous efforts to imagine what is being referred to, but to assimilate it, if we wish, to our own thoughts and moods – a fact that helps to explain why music has become even more popular since radio's rebirth as a secondary medium. But it is unilluminating in the sense that in its fully realized form (that is, not as a written score) it consists almost purely of sound, refers scarcely at all to anything outside itself, and is therefore one code which is not distinctively shaped by radio since radio is itself a purely acoustic medium.

This was recognized fairly early in broadcasting history by a features producer who wished to dismiss the idea that there was anything especially 'radiogenic' about music:

There is no such thing as radio music. Composers go on composing music just as if wireless had never been invented, and the music of all periods is played before microphones in exactly the same way as it has always been played. It does not have to be 'adapted'.

(Sieveking 1934: 24)

Apart from the fact that radio allowed the listener to hear music without visual distractions (and even in this was anticipated by the gramophone), the point is that music is rather less revealing about the nature and possibilities of the medium than, say, news, drama or light entertainment: for whereas we can compare radio versions of the latter with their corresponding forms on the stage, screen or in newspapers and see the distinctive way in which the medium has adapted them, music in its essential form is always and everywhere the same. Not modified by radio, it does not particularly illuminate it.

Nevertheless the broad emotive power of music enables it to be combined with words and/or sounds as a way of signifying something outside itself, and some of these forms of signification are worth considering in detail.

Music as a 'framing' or 'boundary' mechanism

Musical jingles (sometimes known as 'IDs') identify or 'frame' radio stations just as signature or theme-music frames an individual programme by announcing its beginning and/or end. Station IDs are similar in function to the voice of the continuity announcer; they set the style or tone of the station and could be seen as both index and symbol.

It is interesting to speculate why musical IDs are more closely associated with 'popular', and verbal IDs with 'quality', stations; but it is certainly the case that the work done by continuity announcers on BBC Radios 3 and 4 is performed largely by jingles on Radios 1 and 2 and on Virgin 1215. As a way of framing individual items theme-music is also common in film and television, but it is of particular significance in radio because of the blindness of the medium.

Silence, a pause, can also be used as a framing mechanism, but unlike that of film and television it is *total*, devoid of images. To give the programmes connotations, an overall style or mood, music is therefore an especially useful resource on radio – less bald, more indefinitely suggestive, than mere announcements.

Let us take a formal but lively piece of eighteenth-century music played on a harpsichord – a gavotte or bourrée composed by Bach, perhaps – and consider its possibilities for the radio producer. It is highly structured and symmetrical in form and therefore commonly regarded as more cerebral or 'intellectual' than the Romantic compositions of the following century. She might therefore regard it as ideal theme-music for a brains trust or quiz programme.

But its characteristics have other possibilities. The 'period' quality of both the harpsichord and the music is unmistakable and might lend itself to a programme about history or antiques. Alternatively the 'tinny' tone of the instrument combined with the rhythmic nature of the piece might introduce a children's programme about toys or music boxes or with a faery or fantasy theme. You can doubtless imagine other possibilities for yourself, and I would simply make two further points.

The first is that depending on the specific contents of the programmes I have suggested, it would be possible to discern all three modes of signification in such theme-music – the symbolic, the indexical and the iconic.

Second, I would stress that these are *extrinsic* meanings of the music: we could not say that it is 'about' cerebration or history or toys. Another way we might describe them is as 'associative' meanings: in a serial, for instance, the theme-music will bring to the listener's mind what he already knows about the story-line: even more than this, it is a 'paradigm' of that *genre* of programme (Fiske and Hartley 1978: 169).

This function of music as a framing mechanism and the two following functions are noticed by Goffman (1980: 164–5).

Music as a link

Snatches of music are often heard between the scenes of a radio play or the items of a programme. They are analogous to curtain drops in the theatre, since they keep certain aspects of the programme apart and may additionally signal advertising breaks. But as well as keeping apart they bridge the changes of scene or subject, thus providing a kind of continuity.

'Mood' music

Such music is sometimes heard during a play. It acts as a background enhancement which is understood not to be heard by the characters, but is heard by the listeners as a clue to the characters' feelings or thoughts. The provision of both 'mood' and 'links' could be seen as symbolic, but there is another which Goffman appears to overlook.

Music as a stylized sound effect

This music is part of the stock-in-trade of radio drama, where it is used to simulate sounds that occur in the real world – storms or battles, for instance. It is understood that the characters also 'hear' this music, but not in its own form, only as the naturalistic sound – the storm, battle or whatever – that it is meant to evoke. Such music has an imitative function and is a sort of iconic index.

Music in an indexical function

This is music as part of the ordinary sounds of the world which radio portrays. These sounds are usually known collectively as 'actuality'. Here is a typical example from a news programme:

FADE IN SOUND OF BAGPIPES AND DRUMS
Presenter: The Band of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who were today granted the freedom of Aldershot.

The semiotic function of the music would be much the same whether it were live actuality from the freedom ceremony, or a recording of the actuality, or simply taken from a gramophone record (radio producers often 'cheat'). In the first instance the music would be indexical and in the other two instances the recordings would simply be acting as icons of the sounds the band was making at the ceremony – sounds which are an index of its presence. They would therefore be iconic indexes.

SILENCE

Though it is natural for us to speak of radio as a sound medium we should remember that the *absence* of sound can also be heard. It is therefore important to consider silence as a form of signification. It has both negative and positive functions which seem to be indexical.

Its negative function is to signify that for the moment at least, nothing is happening on the medium: there is a void, what broadcasters sometimes refer to as 'dead air'. In this function silence can resemble noise (that is, sounds, words and music) in acting as a framing mechanism, for it can signify the integrity of a programme or item by making a space around it. But if the silence persists for more than a few seconds it signifies the dysfunction or

non-functioning of the medium: either transmitter or receiver has broken down or been switched off.

The positive function of silence is to signify that something is happening which for one reason or another cannot be expressed in noise. Because radio silence is total (unlike film and theatrical silences, which are visually filled) it can be a potent stimulus to the listener, providing a gap in the noise for his imagination to work: 'Pass me the bottle. Cheers . . . Ah, that's better!'

But such silences or pauses can suggest not only physical actions but abstract, dramatic qualities; they can generate pathos or irony by confirming or countering the words which surround them. They can also generate humour, as in a famous radio skit which featured Jack Benny, a comedian with a reputation for extreme miserliness:

The skit consists of a confrontation between Benny and a mugger on the street. Says the mugger: 'Your money or your life'. Prolonged pause: growing laughter; then applause as the audience gradually realises what Benny *must* be thinking, and eventually responds to the information communicated by the silence and to its comic implications.

(Fink 1981: 202)

How, then, does the listener discriminate among these various negative and positive functions of silence? His guide is clearly the context – in the first instance whether any noise frames the silence and in the second, what that noise signifies.

THE PRIMARY CODE OF RADIO

In fact context (as will by now be clear) is the key to the meaning of the sounds, music and silences of radio – and the means by which the context is established is at bottom *verbal*. Sound conventions can indicate the relative importance of the different strands of radio content by means of levels and fades, but they cannot explain the *nature* of that importance. On the other hand we have seen that silence and sounds draw not only their meaning but in some cases their very identity from the words around them.

It is clear too that in its ancillary function music also requires the clarification of words, for music alone will not be able to tell us whether we are about to hear a brains trust or a history programme or a children's fantasy; and even when music is broadcast

as a background enhancer it is not clear without the words in the foreground precisely what is being enhanced.

But with respect to music which is broadcast for its own sake our case is harder to argue because the peculiar semantic status of music has somewhat contrasting implications. If it is at least agreed that music does not enshrine the kind of meaning that words do, there is an evident need to set it in a verbal context: it is not 'self-sufficient'. But on the other hand it could be argued from the same premise that music is literally inexplicable and therefore entirely self-sufficient: and it is surely true that music is much less parasitic upon context than sounds are. A series of shuffling or clicking noises divorced from their visual or verbal surroundings will leave us totally baffled as to their nature and significance; but a piece of music is instantly recognizable as music and can be fully appreciated as such, even if we have never heard it before and have no inkling as to what it is or who composed it. Public sound-systems in restaurants, airports and supermarkets pump out continuous 'muzak' with no attempt at verbal contextualization.

Nevertheless there seems to be a deep and abiding impulse to explain or identify music – an impulse that no radio station ignores entirely. If we are interested in any kind of music our first desire is to know what it is, even if the answer is an unrevealing *Symphony in G*. Moreover it is clear that because the inherent meaning of music is elusive the linguistic context can *invest* it with meaning. A particular rock record will seem progressive and 'heavy' when presented by John Peel, yet bland and 'middle-of-the-road' when announced by Simon Mayo. Nor is this peculiar to pop, but common in music traditionally regarded as 'significant' in both senses of the word. We all know about the bright idea of the marketing man confronted with an album containing such solemn pieces as the *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*: he boosted its sales by calling it *Bach's Greatest Hits*, and we shall see in Chapter 4 how Classic FM apes the behaviour of the pop and rock stations by running its own 'serious music' chart show as the snappily named 'Classic Countdown'.

It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that the primary code of radio is linguistic, since words are required to contextualize all the other codes. Indeed, our consideration of semiotic codes whether on radio or in any other medium may tempt us to the conclusion that the primary signification of things is *always* verbal – not

acoustic or even pictorial. At any rate, we need to look a little more closely at this primary code in terms of radio.

Since the medium is blind the words cannot be *seen* by the receiver but only *heard* by him: hence the linguistic code of radio approximates much more closely to that of *speech* than writing. But there is an important measure of difference. Much radio talk is first written down – scripted. Indeed at one time *all* of it was (Rodger 1982: 44–5), and to that extent it has a *literary* nature. This means that much radio talk is premeditated rather than spontaneous. It is also more explicit than spontaneous speech in that it creates its own context or situation to a much greater extent (Gregory and Carroll 1978: 42–3). It is more fluent, precise and orderly, less diffuse and tautological, than ordinary speech, and the adoption of these literary characteristics can, in a subtle way, make it seem more authoritative (Kress 1986: 407). As well as these advantages scripted talk runs to time and ensures that no important information is omitted or presented out of sequence.

Hence words on the radio could be regarded as the application of oral language to a situation which normally calls for writing, that is, where what is referred to is not simultaneously apparent to sender and receiver since they are separated – remote from and invisible to each other. These words do not constitute conventional orality but what has been termed 'secondary orality' (Ong 1982: 3, 136).

But there is a general convention on the radio that scripted speech does not 'admit' to being scripted. Aspiring broadcasters are taught to regard scripts as the 'storage of talk' (McLeish 1978: 65) and encouraged to work into them expressions which occur less frequently in writing than in speech, 'Well now . . .', 'Come to think of it . . .', the latter an implicit denial that anything has been premeditated. The purpose of such colloquialisms is to discourage the flat, expressionless tone of the unskilled broadcaster who concentrates on the *words* of her script rather than on what they refer to – a problem which does not arise in unscripted talk.

The secret of much apparently impromptu delivery was revealed many years ago in Professor John Hilton's broadcast on how to give a radio talk:

For, of course, I read every word. If only I could pull it off every time – but you have to be at the top of your form. Yes, of course,

every word's on paper even now – this – what I'm saying to you now – it's all here.

(cit. Cardiff 1980: 31)

Even lectures on Radio 3 are usually described as 'talks' to deflect attention from the fact that they are read.

Why should reading disguise itself as spontaneous talk? The act of reading implies *absence* – the separation of addresser and addressee. The addresser has been replaced by a text, so that if a radio listener is aware that a broadcaster is reading he will assume that she is either relaying the words of somebody else or erecting a barrier between herself and her audience. Hence to avoid creating this impression of absence and impersonality much radio talk which is actually scripted – programme presentation, weather forecasts, continuity, cues, trailers and so forth – is delivered as if it were unscripted and impromptu.

But there are certain kinds of radio talk which are not passed off as impromptu but announced as being *read*, notably the news ('This is the 6 o'clock news *read* by Brian Perkins') and readings from novels and stories ('A *Book* at Bedtime'): and while even within the BBC presentation-styles vary greatly from the rapid and urgent to the solemn and sedate, I would contend that our awareness that they are being read derives much more from these announcements than from any distinctive 'reading tone'. Indeed in the sense of being a mode of expression analogous to a 'speaking tone' it seems doubtful whether such a thing exists.

I base this contention on the fact that the differences between orality and literacy seem a good deal less absolute than is commonly supposed. It has recently been shown that writing carries a considerable 'oral residue' (Ong 1982: 40–1, 115, 149), that writers instinctively and inevitably conceive of the word as primarily a unit of *speech* and their readers as quite literally an *audience*. An obvious but not unique example would be a Churchill or Macaulay, whose oratory was committed to the page but which always addressed the ear rather than the eye. We revere Shakespeare as a giant of literature, but the major part of his work consists of plays – plays whose dialogue, however 'literary', was written to be delivered as if it were spontaneous speech. Such dialogue is also plentifully enshrined in that genre which is pre-eminently the child of print, the novel; and even in works which contain little actual conversation, like *Catcher in the Rye*, there is

often a first-person narrator who addresses the reader throughout in what is highly colloquial language – a fact which is bound to be reflected in any broadcast reading of it.

It could be objected that such an example is atypical, that much literary language is a good deal more formal than Salinger's and that this would be reflected in the tone in which it was read. But formality is not a preserve of literary language: much unscripted *talk* is formal – the off-the-cuff explanations of a teacher, for instance, or the reprimand she might deliver to a pupil. Conversely, the language of radio news, which is self-evidently written down, is formal too: at least it is not colloquial in the sense that Salinger's is. Yet when the newscaster reaches a tragic or humorous item, her voice tone becomes suitably grave or light-hearted, even on Radios 3 and 4. (We might notice in passing that just as words when voiced can evoke a sense of the broadcaster's personality, so the personality of the broadcaster can enhance the words; and of course different personalities may produce subtle differences of expression, which is not to say that their various readings may not be *equally* expressive.)

Formality, then, is not a *lack* of expression, it is not the same thing as a reading tone – and I would argue that what determines the tone of voice is not so much whether a communication has been written down or is spoken extempore as the *purpose* of that communication and the circumstances in which it is delivered. It seems likely that if a reader gives literary language its full expressive value her tone will not be very different from an ordinary speech tone, and that what we are accustomed to describe as a reading tone is really a flat and expressionless preoccupation with the words on the page rather than with what they mean. Since this tone is common among inexperienced broadcasters the measures prescribed by their instructors are understandable: but I would suggest that the tone of the accomplished news or storyreader, whose skill lies in bringing out the full meaning of the words, is virtually indistinguishable from the tone of the ordinary articulate speaker, and is an implicit recognition that writing is merely 'programmed talk' – not separate from speaking but a technological development of it.

But if it is true that a reading tone is not readily detectable among skilled broadcasters, why should news and stories on the radio *declare* themselves to be read? In each case the text must be accorded a primacy (or 'foregrounded', to re-employ this term,

this time in its linguistic sense) – though for rather different reasons. In the news the words must carry an air of definitiveness and accuracy; it must seem to be 'authorless' – originated by the events themselves. The impression that the newscaster is extemporizing it would negate its very purpose. She is therefore cued as a news *reader* and is likely to speak with a 'received pronunciation' (RP) so that her reading will maximize the symbolic function – the meaningfulness – of the words while minimizing her voice's function as an index of her personality. By this means it is suggested that she is the mere mouthpiece of the words and not their originator.

In the case of storyreadings the text is also foregrounded but for its beauty, not its truth. It is writing which is in one way or another good enough to act as an object of interest in its own right instead of as a barrier between broadcaster and listener – of more interest than the broadcaster's own words. Its literariness is declared as the main justification for the programme and it is the reader's function to express that literariness, or linguistic beauty, in whatever manner seems appropriate.

Yet even when the listener is aware that the words on the radio are being read to him he must still be able to grasp their meaning through the *ear*, an organ which is a good deal less comprehending than the eye, particularly when deprived of the help which it receives from the other organs in most acts of interpersonal communication. The cause of this lack of comprehension has been eloquently defined:

> Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word 'permanence', by the time I get to the '-nence', the 'perma-' is gone, and has to be gone.
> (Ong 1982: 32)

This is another reason why the scripted nature of radio talk is rarely acknowledged, for it is a general truth that much language is written down precisely because its meaning is too complex to be assimilated by ear, and the listener's awareness that it is read is therefore likely to make him feel that he will be unable to follow it. And it is certainly the case that radio language will not be easily followed unless it is syntactically fairly simple or else fairly concrete in subject-matter. The descriptions of physical phenomena which are characteristic of novels, stories and even news

items, their preoccupation with personalities, utterances and events – all this lends itself to radio. So too do ideas, opinions and arguments when expressed in the syntax of spontaneous speech. But when these ideas and arguments become more abstract and their expression is premeditated, or when they require sustained explanation or specialist knowledge, the radio medium is less effective (McWhinnie 1959: 49–50).

The BBC's Audience Research Department once tested a group of people on how much they could understand of a talk intended for the 'average' Light Programme listener: the average listener in the group could correctly answer only 28 per cent of the questions which were asked about the talk after it was broadcast (Silvey 1974: 141). Indeed it has been observed that the importance of the radio interviewer is not only as the poser of questions but as the interpreter of answers, the 'plain man' who in brief paraphrases renders the complex or specialist responses of the expert into language intelligible to the lay public (Cardiff 1980: 38).

It will be helpful to summarize our findings so far. Much radio talk is 'literary' in the sense that it has first been written down, but with certain notable exceptions it suppresses these literary origins and even when it does not its expression must be simple or concrete enough to be comprehended through the ear alone. Its messages will therefore tend to have a high level of *redundancy* (Ong 1982: 39–40; Fiske 1990: 11–13) – that is, material which is predictable or conventional; for speech is notoriously evanescent, as are all signs that exist in time. The listener has no chance of retrieval; he cannot introduce his own redundancy as a reader can by reading something twice.

Radio language is, then, very similar to that of television, which Fiske and Hartley have characterized as an intersection of oral and literary language (1978: 160): but the main differences are that the linguistic code of television has rather less to do in establishing context or situation, since much of this can be done visually, and it is potentially more 'literary' in the sense that it can and frequently does appear on the screen in the form of writing – as captions, tables, and so on.

Yet within the overall conditions created by the medium's blindness – conditions which make themselves felt to varying degrees in different kinds of programmes – the linguistic code of radio is capable of the same variety of function as ordinary speech:

Even by comparison with its sister medium of television, it is chaotically eclectic in the hospitality it affords to different kinds of language. The formal rhetoric of Churchill's wartime speeches would surely have sounded phoney if one had been able to watch him making them on television; radio allowed them their necessary distance and resonance. At the other end of the scale, the introduction of the phone-in programme a few years ago soon made one accustomed to hearing voices on the radio speaking as informally, often as inarticulately, as if one had heard them drifting through one's window from the street. In the course of an hour spent as an idle radio listener, twiddling between stations, one drifts from the most elaborate and carefully scripted language through every shade and tone to the most unofficial and unrehearsed grunts and squawks. On radio there is no median register, no particular way of speaking that could be said to represent the medium in neutral gear, ticking over. . . . Radio is by turns gossipy, authoritative, preachy, natural, artificial, confidential, loudly public, and not infrequently, wordless. Its languages bleed into one another.

(Raban 1981: 86–7)

We can take a more systematic look at this functional variety by using a familiar communication-model – that of Roman Jakobson (1960: 350–7). Many other models exist which could also be used (McQuail and Windahl 1981) but Jakobson's has the merit of simplicity and flexibility. It arranges the six elements which he regards as making up the communication act (and which we have already identified in Chapter 1) in the following fashion:

	context	
sender	message	receiver
	contact	
	code	
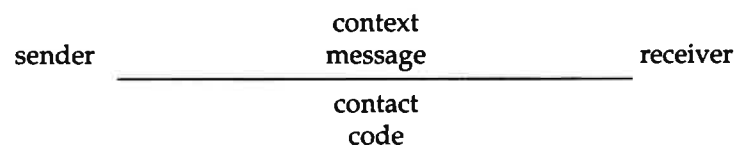
If, as Jakobson asserts, one or other of these six elements is always dominant in a single act of communication, not only can we classify the act according to which of the elements is dominant –

	referential	
emotive	aesthetic	conative
	phatic	
	metalingual	
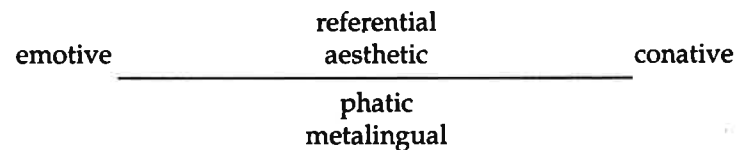
– but where that dominance is sustained over a series of acts of communication we can develop in radio terms an analogous theory of programme types or genres.

For instance, radio language whose dominant function is primarily *referential*, whose orientation is towards the context of the real world, is language which is characteristic of news and documentary programmes or of commentaries on public events. On the other hand, chat-shows or interview programmes such as *Start the Week* and *Desert Island Discs* are dominated by an *emotive* use of language in the sense that the guests are encouraged to talk about themselves, their feelings and their attitudes to life. Radio is also capable of *conative*, persuasive or rhetorical, functions – most conspicuously in commercials or 'public service' notices advising road safety, for example, but also in party political broadcasts. On the other hand, the broadcasting of plays, storytellings and poetry-readings foregrounds the message for its own sake, for its inherent literary merits, and is therefore characterized by language in its *aesthetic* function.

Two further points should be made. First it is important not to push these classifications and the distinctions between them too far. Educational programmes might be generally recognizable by their predominantly referential language, but in making occasional use of drama or poetry-readings can also be characterized by language whose dominant function is aesthetic. And in a comic play it may be hard at times to decide whether the dominant function is conative – to make the audience laugh – or aesthetic – to foreground the 'message' for its own sake. The second point is that there is, of course, nothing exclusively radiogenic about such classifications: the Jakobson model could be used to classify forms of writing or television in much the same way.

I would, however, wish to suggest that there is one kind of programme classifiable in terms of this model which, if not peculiar to radio, was at least originated by it and is of unique significance therein: the phone-in. I shall be arguing in Chapter 9 that the purpose of the phone-in is to attempt the ultimately impossible feat of providing feedback for the listener and that the dominant function of the programme is therefore phatic and metalingual. In other words the phone-in enables radio broadcasters to create the illusion of a two-way medium and to verify both that they have an audience and that the audience is capable of responding to the codes they transmit. But in order to demonstrate

this I have to stretch the Jakobson model somewhat, since it does not accommodate the notion of feedback: for once the receiver responds to the sender their roles – and the model – have been reversed, the receiver is now the sender. But if we were to regard the original situation as persisting and the radio phone-caller's remarks as a *response* to the broadcaster's communication rather than a part of it, the function of that response is both *phatic* – a demonstration that the audience is 'present' and can hear the radio message – and *metalingual* – that it is capable of understanding and even contributing to it.

Such a concept of the phone-in does of course imply some divergence between what is actually and what is only apparently the dominant function of its language. The apparent function of a phone-in on the subject of nuclear energy may be to allow the listeners to become broadcasters and air their views in an emotive or conative way, like the speakers on *Any Questions?*; but its actual function will simply be to demonstrate that the radio station has many listeners and that they are responsive to the publicity which it chooses to afford to such an issue.

Yet even if it is the case that phone-ins exist primarily to demonstrate the presence and understanding of an audience rather than to ascertain what any individual member of that audience may think, it might still be doubted whether they are of unique significance to radio. The other mass media are equally bereft of feedback in the real sense, and television has also made use of the phone-in to create a semblance thereof. But I would argue that in none of the other media, with their images or visible texts, are the phatic and metalingual considerations – the need for feedback to the communicator – so pressing or persistent.

In Chapters 4 to 9 I shall be looking at various kinds of radio programmes which seem to use the medium in illuminating ways, and in Chapter 10 at radio audiences and the functions the medium has for them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER WORK

Form a small group with your fellow-students – say, five or six of you – and each write a two-minute 'voicepiece' or radio talk (360 words maximum) on any subject which will suit the length and the medium.

Remember that your listeners will not be able to see you or your

text and will be 'absent'. Its register should therefore be conversational, rather like that of a letter you might write to a friend, and it should be 'chatted' to the microphone – *performed* rather than merely read out. McLeish (1978) provides invaluable hints on writing for radio.

When you have written your piece rehearse it *aloud* to ensure that it reads easily and effectively. The group members should record their pieces in isolation, then re-group for playback and evaluation. The less experienced and more nervous you are at the microphone, the more likely it is that your remarks will sound 'literary', like those of an essay, your voice tone impersonal and 'read', and your delivery hurried. But you might notice how quickly you can improve with practice. Your eventual aim might be to see if you can make your talk sound so 'warm' and natural that you can convince an uninitiated listener that it was extemporized!

SECOND EDITION

UNDERSTANDING
Radio

Andrew CRISELL