

or WAYS TO NOT SAY AND YET SAY everything.



WAVE TO US AND WE'LL SAY hello

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WAVE TO ME AND SAY I AM HERE
IN WAVE TO ME AND SAY I AM HERE

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WAYS TO *talk* AND YET SAY *nothing*
or *WAYS TO not talk* AND YET SAY *everything*

The foreword.

The word that comes first.

The before-word.

That bit prior to the expulsion. That second before. Little breezy puffs of warm, damp you-ness. All verbs and nouns and adjectives thrown out into the cold, stark, eye-creasingly bright open. That brooding tempest in your mouth. The margins and parameters of that utterance. Your knowledge of its scale – of its termination – before you even crank open your mouth to let the words bolt out. Or your lack of this knowledge. The ability to keep yourself in check. And the ability to let yourself speak unedited.

The promise, the potential – all this before you even utter. What your pronouncement might be – versus what it is. No matter how majestic, or how paltry, like smoke rings in the air, it dissipates, then vanishes, to join all the others.

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Ways to talk and yet say nothing, or ways to not talk and yet say everything is part of a larger project entitled *The Architecture of Conversation*. *The Architecture of Conversation* began as a series of studies examining a collapse in communication between two people through the use of the universally recognised (and oft scorned) speech balloon. Later, however, the project

became more focused on linguistic theory and semantics. Philosophers such as Mikhail Bakhtin with his theories on spoken and thought words and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist principles have particularly informed this body of drawn, printed and sculptural works.


Mikhail Bakhtin wrote extensively about the utterance: its boundaries, its length, its intonation and the speaker's 'speech plan'. His work also concerned the connection between the speaker and the listener, and beyond this, the speaker and the community. Bakhtin proposed that whilst our words belong to us, they also belong to everyone else, including all who came before us. As a result, whilst we may feel that our words are our own, they have been heavily influenced by all with whom we have made contact and those who surround us, and therefore do not truly belong to us, or indeed to anyone.

Jacques Derrida's methods of critiquing established language theory by turning words, theories and frameworks inside out and over on their heads have also played a part in how this work and the resulting publication has unfolded. The work attempts to draw attention to linguistic conventions whilst simultaneously deconstructing those same conventions. The speech balloon is one of these. It is a visual code that we use readily with little thought to its usage, meaning, associated past and potential for further exploration.

Ways to talk and yet say nothing, or ways to not talk and yet say everything takes a selection of these drawings and concepts and exploits print media as further means to explore language systems, the way that we speak and language's idiosyncrasies.

So whispers are printed with white carbon paper, rather than the usual wet ink, suggesting a fleeting, chalky shadow of words on a page. A soliloquy meanders across a sheet, squeezing itself into every available space. The multiple nuances of individual words are explored through visual means and paper is treated accordingly: *excoriate* means both to censure or criticize severely and also to damage or remove part of the surface of something. Elsewhere a scroll flutters at the bottom of a page, a white flag on a battlefield, reference to one of the speech balloon's past guises.

The resulting portfolio presents various combinations of paper, ink and press, all of which seek to add tenor to the monologues, dialogues and colloquies from both emotional and theoretical perspectives.



Concerning speech balloons

The speech balloon, a universally recognised graphic device, is employed as a means to represent both spoken and thought words, most commonly in comics. This is achieved through the use of a form, frequently bubble-like, typically within which is placed typography. On occasion image may also be used. Traditionally a thought balloon is distinguishable from a speech balloon by a cord of bubbles attaching the principal bubble to the thinker's head.

Speech and thought balloons are simultaneously both a pictorial and a textual device. Initially we read the words (or images) cradled within the balloon and comprehend their meaning. But our understanding of this meaning is reinforced by both the choice of typography employed and the structure that the words are contained within. The visual properties of the type, image and balloon may all illuminate further what the character is speaking, thinking or doing.

Speech and thought bubbles come in many guises. Some are formal, orthodox in attitude, the suit-wearers of the species. Others are rotund, doltish even, bloated – but confidently so. Still others are susurrus – breathy, ethereal, poised to disintegrate and, in form, rather similar to an exhalation on a cold winter's day. The visual conventions are manifold. Most commonly a speech or thought balloon is devised from an outline to define the form, and the surface itself.

The boundary line differentiates between what is happening within the bubble form, and what is happening beyond it, in the comic frame. Those boundaries may be angular, beveled, indistinct or blousy as required and desired by their creator.

Spoken and thought words take up no literal physical space in our reality, and yet in a comic-reality they do. If we push this line of enquiry harder, can we question further this physicality? Are both speech and thought balloons essentially flat? May they not also be considered a container? This term suggests volume, mass, and solidity. So if speech/thought balloons are receptacles of information, do they have dimensions? Are they solid or filled with air? Are they transparent or are they white? And what of the contents? Are these also three-dimensional? Do the words float or are they hung?

* * *

A brief history of visualising utterances

There's an extensive, complex history of visualising spoken or thought word in a variety of ways. The form that we now recognise instantly has experienced various permutations over the centuries. Here I have extracted some key examples of early speech balloons that have perhaps best examined the nature of the physicality of speech and thought.

Within European history, text has been used in painting as a vehicle for adding meaning to the image, often where the gesture, stance and expression of the subject, and object-symbolism may not communicate all. In Renaissance art, scrolls billow and unfurl across the canvas. Some literally snake

out of the subjects' mouths, clearly representing the spoken word. Others are visual devices that act as an outside narrator to the story, adding important information that cannot be communicated through image alone. They are all as imagined as the speech bubbles in contemporary comics.

Words, either religious texts or meaningful maxims, were included in paintings via actual, palpable objects. These items might be engraved (grand carved columns festooned with flowers and ivy or ornate stone urns for example); printed (a book casually left open on a desk or idly poised in the lap of the sitter); or handwritten (a folded note clutched by the subject or a sheath of papers stacked casually in the foreground).

Completely independently and far preceding the Europeans, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the Meso-americans developed sophisticated written systems to visualise spoken words, songs and music. Images and objects discovered at many archeological ruins depict humans and animals with questionmark-like forms leaping from their mouths. Similar to the ribbon-esque scrolls that were previously mentioned, the *banderole* or *speech scroll* employed by the Mesoamericans is potentially more abstract in its nature than its European relative. The tongue-like shape darts from the direction of the speaker's mouth and may link the speaker to a series of other images. If our latter-day translations of these devices are correct, these images are glyphs, figures used as symbols to represent words, sounds and ideas. It's suggested that the manner in which these speech scrolls are decorated may give information about the tone of the words, or the identity of the person speaking them.

Thomas Rowlandson's *The Loves of the Fox and the Badger, or the Coalition Wedding* is an adroit example of a comic strip demonstrating the full gamut of techniques available to the artist in the late 1700s for exploring the interplay between text and image. The piece, a satirical illustration poking fun at the troubled coalition between Charles James Fox and Lord North in Britain after Fox's Commons victory in 1782, uses a frame format, captions, scrolls, text-inscribed objects and speech and thought bubbles containing both typography and image. In this instance, the contained image, surrounded by radiating lines, suggests a dream.

Continuing the practice of using objects as a means to display narrative, in the late 1800s Richard F. Outcault famously created *The Kid*, a yellow nightshirt-clad street urchin, who speaks to the newspaper-reading audience via his clothes. The speech balloon in this instance then is humanoid and in terms of the comic strip, a living and breathing speech/thought balloon at that.

Winsor McCay remains unprecedented as the most sophisticated boundary-pusher of the pliable side to speech and thought balloons. Not only this, several of his works test the concrete possibilities of the comic strip as a whole. *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, published between 1905 and 1914 in initially *The New York Herald* and then later *The New York American*, presents Little Nemo in a series of dream states, in which alternative universes are depicted. A particularly appropriate nightmarish scene shows a series of ever-expanding speech bubbles taking over the entire frame and almost drowning the characters within it.

Most recently, Peter Brookes, a British political cartoonist, brilliantly transformed words into a physical weapon. His cartoon, published in *The Times* on 29 April, during the 2010 UK election campaign, documented what must be one of the biggest political gaffes of recent times. The cartoon exposes our own vulnerability in the face of words and their capacity to turn on us when least expected. The first frame of the cartoon depicts the words *bigoted woman* in a traditional speech balloon, poised over the form of Gordon Brown. In frame two Brown is clasping the speech balloon and pulling it towards himself. In frame three he is forcibly stabbing its mouthpiece into his stomach.

Whilst most spoken words are uttered, then slip away unnoticed, there are some that return to plague us. It takes just three images for Brookes to mutate a passive, visual convention that we identify as particular to the cartoon and comic world, into a physical form that inflicts bodily harm – akin to the damage that those words *bigoted woman* caused Gordon Brown's political career.

David Carrier
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