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**TALK**

**ABILITY**

DISCOVER THE SECRETS  
OF EFFECTIVE  
CONVERSATION

'Leaves you with the satisfaction of knowing, that by the end of the book,  
you have taken your communication skills to a whole new level.'

**ANGELA RIPPON**

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‘James is a smart and perceptive juggler of words, I’m just hoping he doesn’t start writing lyrics.’

**Don Black**, Oscar-winning lyricist for cinema and musical theatre, partnering notably with John Barry (titles including *Born Free*, *Thunderball*, *Diamonds are Forever*) and Andrew Lloyd Webber (including lyrics for *Sunset Boulevard*)

‘Talk is anything but cheap in James Borg’s persuasive new book. Instead he demonstrates how “talkability” is an essential life-skill and important counterbalance to today’s text-dominated communications.’

**Philip Jones**, Editor, *The Bookseller*

‘Leaves you with the satisfaction of knowing, that by the end of the book, you have taken your communication skills to a whole new level.’

**Angela Rippon**, TV and radio broadcaster

‘He dissects the language we use and our style of speech – offers a plethora of easy-to-understand pointers for how we can all improve. . . Fascinating reading for anyone who wants to be more effective in life — in any social group!’

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# Talkability

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*Discover the secrets of effective  
conversation*

JAMES BORG

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Pearson Education Limited  
Edinburgh Gate  
Harlow CM20 2JE  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)1279 623623  
Web: www.pearson.com/uk

First published 2016 (print and electronic)

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ISBN: 978-1-292-01364-0 (print)  
978-1-292-01366-4 (PDF)  
978-1-292-01367-1 (ePub)

#### **British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for the print edition is available from the British Library

#### **Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for the print edition is available from the Library of Congress

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
20 19 18 17 16

Text design by Design Deluxe  
Cover design by Two Associates

Print edition typeset in 10/13pt Sabon LT Pro by SPi Global  
Print edition printed by Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport

NOTE THAT ANY PAGE CROSS REFERENCES REFER TO THE PRINT EDITION

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# About the author

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James Borg spends part of his working time as a business consultant and coach and also conducts personal development and business skills workshops covering memory improvement, interpersonal communication, body language and ‘mind control’.

With a profound interest in the workings of the human mind, he developed memory techniques at an early age which eventually established him as a ‘memory expert’. After becoming interested in magic, he later specialised and performed in the branch of the art known as ‘mind magic’.

Influenced by an academic background in economics and psychology, James has spent a lifetime observing the ‘mind-body’ connection and went on to study the various mind ‘therapies’ which result in thinking and behavioural change in a person’s personal and working life.

His knowledge was honed in a career that spans the spectrum of advertising, sales, marketing, work psychology, training and journalism. He appears on BBC radio and contributes to national newspapers and magazines on the subject of consumer affairs, body language and business and communication skills. In 2009 he was chosen as a *Harvard Business Review* contributor. He still finds time to pursue occasional travel and sports journalism, which he became involved with early on in his career.

James is the author of the ‘trilogy’ comprising the Number 1 international bestseller *Persuasion*, the award-winning *Body Language* and *Mind Power*, which have been translated into more than 35 languages.

*Persuasion* spent a record-breaking 118 consecutive weeks at No 1 in the WHSmith Travel Business chart. In 2013 *Future* magazine published the ‘50 Best Business Books’ of all time, which included *Persuasion* (James being one of only three UK authors to make the list, along with Sir Richard Branson and Sir James Dyson).

## Author’s acknowledgements

I feel like one of those Oscar winners, standing on stage clutching the golden statuette with both hands and thanking a multitude of people . . .

Talking of which, my thanks to Don Black, Oscar-winning lyricist (famous, amongst other things, for his 007 collaborations with John Barry and musical partnerships with Andrew Lloyd Webber). With a busy schedule of composing words, that hasn’t stopped for fifty years and in the middle of new productions – including the return of *Sunset Boulevard* to the London stage – I’m grateful that he took the time to read the manuscript. Also to the delightful Angela Rippon who in the middle of filming a new BBC series and a round of media interviews, made time to read the manuscript and kindly contributed a Foreword for the book. My thanks also to Philip Jones, the esteemed Editor of the book industry’s weekly ‘bible’ *The Bookseller* magazine. Although frenetically busy while processing the shortlists for The British Book Industry Awards 2016, he made an exception and read the proof manuscript and provided a contribution. Also, my thanks to the preview titles editor, Caroline Sanderson who picked this book as a ‘personal favourite’ and featured it as her ‘Editor’s Choice’ in the magazine. I’m grateful to Gillian Tett, US Managing Editor of the *Financial Times* who in between her busy day-to-day New York activities, her writing and stateside travels, read the manuscript – with my deadline in mind – and contributed her thoughts.

Thanks as always to the Pearson publishing team. A special mention to Laura – Senior Project Editor – one of the last links in the chain after the manuscript is handed over for copyediting. I’ve worked with her on my books over a period of thirteen years and I commend her for a continual display of patience, politeness and perspicacity. She’s taking her talents elsewhere and I wish her good fortune.

Finally, I’m grateful to my wife for putting up with me –again – during the writing of this latest book. The ‘thinking’ time is as

time-consuming as the actual writing time, I always find. (As those of you who have written a book may know, it doesn't end even after the manuscript is handed in. There's a lot more to do after that for months ahead). The process always results in her having to endure the same things as far as she's concerned: periods of absences; my distraction; being preoccupied; poor listening; 'mindlessness'. Oh, and occasional absent-mindedness. (*Now, where did I leave that Oscar?*).

# Publisher's acknowledgements

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## Picture Credits

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Page 3: **Dan Piraro**; page 222 **Rex Shutterstock**: Everett Collection / REX Shutterstock; page 256 Shutterstock/Alena Kozlova

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## Cartoons

Matt cartoon on page 27 © Telegraph Media Group Limited 2013.

## Text

Poetry on page 29 from *Conkers: Poems*, Oxford University Press, USA (Wade, B. 1989) Oxford University Press, USA; Extract on pages 216-7 from 'Are women being held back by too much smiling?', *London Evening Standard*, 17/03/2015 (Sands, S.), London Evening Standard; Article on page 219 from Joanna Lumley's Life Lessons, *The Times*, 19/04/2014 (Deborah Ross).

# Author's note

## *An 'adventure' with words*

After completing the 'trilogy', there was another book that I knew I had to write at some stage – a book on 'talk'. Otherwise, as far as I was concerned, it was 'unfinished business'. It had been in my mind long before and I made it my aim to bring this to fruition at some time.

I've always been interested in – and studied – 'psycholinguistics'. Specifically the element of linguistics that deals with how words affect our *mind* and *emotions*; the mental processes of how we use language and the relationship between language and thought. Newer, non-invasive brain-imaging techniques such as fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) have now helped us to study further the cognitive processes related to spoken language.

People that I come across and delegates on courses and workshops have suggested to me – over the years – some topics that they would like to see covered, as well as revealing their personal frustrations about communication in everyday life. In addition, the comments I've received during research group sessions have been revealing.

What's interesting is that as far as topics that were suggested, very little has changed. I've covered areas that seem to cause the most problems in our everyday dealings in our personal and working lives.

We seem to have the same difficulties: poor or lazy speaking habits, disagreements, misunderstandings, apologising, giving praise/accepting it, relaying criticism . . . the list is endless. In addition, what was striking were the frustrations that many people mentioned when dealing with the medical profession and the continuing distrust of what politicians say and do. There's a 'silver lining' here. We can look at the

'deficiencies' that we recognise in them and therefore help ourselves in the way we communicate with others – to inspire more trust.

My own experiences in everyday life and the working world of clients, meetings and presentations over the decades has obviously been fertile ground. I confess to a certain amount of unintended 'eavesdropping' on people's conversations, which has also been extremely helpful.

Make a decision to change your habits and feel the excitement of going on an 'adventure' with words. As I state repeatedly, habits take time to change.

Eventually, this quest to explore a new way of talking will prove to be a worthwhile journey. It will make life more interesting, satisfying and less stressful. It will certainly change relationships. *It will certainly change your life.*

So look at your speaking habits and take an objective look at how your talking skills can be improved. Consider how *single* words or a different *turn of phrase* can change outcomes – good or bad.

You can dip into various chapters in Part Two or read the book from start to finish. I've cross-referred chapters where appropriate, to elaborate on a point.

I remember a singer improvising on the words of a song in which she sang about how – in our lifetime – we go through different stages: 'You grow/you learn/you try to turn the pages . . .'

After turning these pages I hope I will have inspired you to go on and take the risk of exploring your 'adventure' with words. Explore the use of alternative words and phrases and notice the different outcomes.

As Paulo Coelho said:

*'If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine; it is lethal.'*

# Foreword

*by Angela Rippon CBE*

---

James Borg is clearly a man who understands the wisdom of the saying ‘words are free, it’s how you use them that might cost you.’

In this his latest ‘adventure with words’ he explores the power of the spoken word; guides you through the minefield of getting the tone and content just right in domestic, professional and social conversations. And leaves you with the satisfaction of knowing, that by the end of the book, you have taken your communication skills to a whole new level.

*Angela Rippon has been a familiar face and voice in British broadcasting for over 40 years. Her career, after training as a journalist in her home town of Plymouth, embraces an impressive variety of programmes for both radio and television in Britain, America and Australia.*

*She was appointed the first woman journalist newsreader of BBC One’s Nine O’Clock News in 1975. Since then she has presented a wide variety of programmes from hard news and current affairs, to quiz shows and magazine programmes for both BBC and commercial radio and television. In 1981 she co-presented the BBC’s coverage of the wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer.*

*Currently, she presents BBC’s Rip Off Britain and reports for The One Show on BBC One as well as presenting the BBC series, How to Stay Young. Other credits include hosting the series Come Dancing and she was the first ever presenter of Top Gear.*



*“So difficult is it to show the various meanings and imperfections of words when we have nothing else but words to do it with.”*

*JOHN LOCKE*

PART ONE

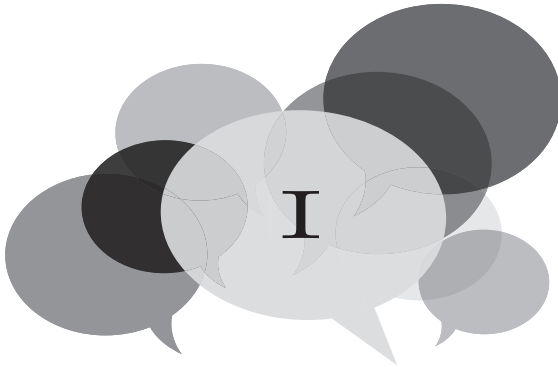
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# Talk essentials

Do you mind if I strap your phone to my forehead so I can pretend you're looking at me when I talk?



# Introduction



‘Feel the magic in the  
making . . .’

*‘Of course there must be lots of magic in the world’, he said wisely one day, ‘but people don’t know what it is like or how to make it. Perhaps the beginning is to say nice things are going to happen until you make them happen. I am going to try and experiment.’*

Francis Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*

**T**he words you use determine your success in your life, relationships, job and business. Those who understand the power of the spoken word and how it affects the hearts and minds of people will have made a conscious decision to develop their speaking skills.

Most of our educational systems don’t teach how important words are in our daily conversations and how they shape our reality. You’ll often hear metaphorical statements about ‘the magic of words’. Yet there is true magic in the way that words create situations and responses.

We cast spells with our language.

*Is there something in the fact that the word ‘spell’ has a twin meaning?* We cast a ‘spell’ with words – and we have to arrange letters in a specific order to ‘spell’ words.

I hope that as you read further on you’ll discover new and more effective ways to create magical moments by changing the way you normally express yourself in various situations. Your thoughts take shape in your mind with words and you express them externally in the same way. So be aware of keeping a rein on your self-talk and choose your words with laser-like precision to give you the best chance of communicating effectively.

Magic was a big influence on my life. I became interested in it at an early age and it taught me about the ‘power of suggestion’ – how important words were in creating the illusion of bending reality. I was admitted as one of the youngest-ever members to the world’s leading magical society.

As well as an early obsession with movies (aside from the ‘magic’, how many great ‘lines’ they have provided us with), music is another great passion for me. Again, it was also words that drew me in. I was always aware of the great power in certain song lyrics. Just a turn of phrase in a song can impact a person’s life like no ‘self-talk’ or advice from another person can. I remember the Oscar-winning lyricist Don Black saying in an interview: ‘There’s something a song can do, that words can’t do.’

Compelling lyrics can give us important life lessons. They can inspire you to fulfil your dreams, lift your mood up, get you through sad and difficult times and understand your own deficiencies.

They are words that – thanks to the songwriting skills of the lyricists – help us to understand life better, to make more meaning of life. Songs can evoke feelings and emotions like no other medium. We also associate some songs with certain times in our life, whether it was a time of sadness or joy.

It sometimes takes the pen of the songwriter to put in words what we feel but seem unable to say. Some song lyrics are sheer poetry. I'm often left thinking: why can't we express these sentiments in our communication with others in daily life? Ever heard anybody say 'pride can hurt you too . . .?' Instead of hearing the words 'you don't love me anymore' songwriter Don Black says: 'I'd love to have heard someone tell his girlfriend, "You've lost that loving feeling," on a bus.'

I haven't set out to do a 'painting-by-numbers' book on improving your talk. As always, you can tweak suggested examples to suit your own personality and the situation, while adhering to the *principles*. I remember a surgeon talking about operating on his patients and the necessity of improvisation: 'Of course, you need to know what's in the books in order to do the right thing', he said. 'But if you're limited by thinking in straight lines, you'll never find the solutions. I never think in straight lines.'

We all get entrenched in bad communication habits – with a husband, wife, partner, friend, boss, work colleague or client. It seems as though you can conduct relationships now without ever hearing a person's voice. Face-to-face talk is becoming less of an activity due to electronic devices and email. Even the telephone seems to be shunned, in many cases, in favour of text and email. There's a time and a place for the use of both of those. Communication is instant but it has become *impersonal*.

When you start becoming more mindful of your talk and craft your words with sensitivity, you'll create more of those magical moments and you'll marvel at how a change of words can so affect an outcome. And you won't forget the feeling.

So try out some of the suggestions in these pages and, as the line from the song in *Sunset Boulevard* goes, you'll 'feel the magic in the making'.





‘iContact’ or eye contact?

*'Electric communication will never be a substitute for the face of someone who with their soul encourages another person to be brave and true.'*

Charles Dickens, *The Wreck of the Golden Mary*

**N**O need to rub your eyes. Yes, these are the prophetic words of Charles Dickens, the great man himself, who had an instinct over 150 years ago – and the telephone hadn't even been invented at the time of his musings.

He was referring, through one of his literary characters, to communication via electric telegraph on a ship during a time of danger. It reflects his scepticism, and how he felt we should converse for important things. (What would he have made of email and social media?)

How often do we come across the term 'eye contact' and its importance? Yet far from becoming more adept, most people seem to have replaced 'eye contact' with 'iContact'.

In most of our interactions there is no question that it is eye contact that facilitates a connection with others and strengthens relationships. (Remember the phrase: 'we see eye to eye on this?') Think of babies from around the age of six months or so and how they will look to a parent's eyes to pick up meaning.

Communicating with others by computer, iPhone or iPad or other mobile devices is the favoured method for many of us now – let the device do the talking!

Even when present with other people, talking and listening while gazing down at these smartphones and devices is becoming normal. We seem to have crossed the etiquette line as to when it's appropriate to use them – out to dinner, on a date, in a meeting, paying at the supermarket checkout – you name it. What about connecting with people?

Have you noticed that when people are alone, or even with others, as soon as there is a gap in conversation, many of them will reach for their phone?

When speaking face-to-face we gauge the listener's sincerity and interest partly by looking to see where their eyes are focused. Recall how irritating and insulting it is when you see someone looking over your shoulder, or around the room, or at their mobile phone while you are talking.

Continued research shows that it is the positive perceptions that are created by people with good eye contact that makes it so worthwhile to