

# What you say and what we hear makes a big difference

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Is language really for communication?

I was on the market waiting to buy something at a stall with lots of other customers. The man who was doing his best to serve everybody was joined by a woman coming to help him. She looked – half at us customers and half at him – and said “Who’s next?”. He pointed to me and said “He was, and them next”, indicating the couple next to me. So I moved forward to get served. But then I saw the couple were moving forward as well, and the woman who was serving was looking a bit cross. “No, you’re not next”, she said to me. It emerged, after a brief and amiable discussion, that what the man had really said was “He wasn’t, them next”.

You can see how that could happen. My hearing isn’t as good as it used to be when I was younger – nobody’s is. But against the background noise of the busy market, I think quite a few people might have heard “he wasn’t them next” as “he was’n them next”. The only difference was the microsecond-long presence of the ‘t’ sound.

That made me think about an important question for linguistics. Is language really



■ Norwich market can be a Tower of Babel if you're not in the know.

for speaking? Is it really for communicating information? Obviously we do use it for that. But surely if language’s original function was for communication, we could have come up with something better than this flawed system which fails to work properly quite so often?

Miscommunication isn’t always due to mishearing either. It can also have to do with the ambiguity of many words. And with misinterpretation – how often do we find ourselves saying “that’s not what I meant”?

Some specialists think that maybe the original purpose of language wasn’t for speaking at all, but for cognition – for

thinking with. Perhaps speaking to each other was just a kind of secondary benefit? We certainly use the categories set up for us by our language to classify and think about the world. For Norwegians, the word “hus” doesn’t just mean ‘house’, it means ‘building’. So if they’re speaking English, they may tell you the library is “in that house there”. Obviously they’re not dividing the world up like we are.

And you can still – back on Norwich Market – buy milches and roes at the fish stalls. When people from elsewhere call milches “soft roes”, we think that’s very strange. They’re not roes at all. They’re milches.