We human beings are odd compared with our nearest animal relatives. We’ve lost most of our hair. We wear clothes. And, according to the writer Mark Twain, we’re the only animal who blushes or who needs to. But our oddest characteristic is our language. Unlike animals, we humans can say what we want, when we want. “Alfred burned the cakes”, “Amanda plans to breed bandicoots”, and “Mermecolions intrigue me” are all possible utterances, even though Alfred burned the cakes over 1,000 years ago, Amanda’s bandicoot breeding plans are in the future, and mermecolions are mythical creatures, a cross between a lion and an ant with sex organs the wrong way round. This open-endedness, the ability to talk about anything at any time is uniquely human. In contrast, many animals are limited in the signals they can send. One species of grasshopper selects between six possible chirps, meaning roughly “Life is good … Get off my patch … I’m feeling sexy … That female’s mine … How about making love?” And finally, “I did enjoy that.” It’s as if humans had to choose between hello, goodbye and I love you. Animals then are linguistically limited, but all normal humans can produce and understand any number of new words and sentences. Humans use the multiple options of language often without thinking. But blindly, they sometimes fall into its traps. They are like spiders who exploit their webs, but themselves get caught in the sticky strands. In this final lecture, I want to discuss how the huge choice available to us also sets up possible snares.

The human mind subconsciously cuts down on the potential language pathways, and in so doing ensnares the thoughts of its speakers. It is a tangle which humans either make for themselves or is made for them by skilful persuaders. Persuasion is of course a major use of language, maybe one of its original uses. Everyone needs to be on their guard. Overt mind bending is usually easy to detect. Advertisements go in for obvious mind bashing and the speakers at Speakers Corner are clearly trying to influence us.

CLIP: SPEAKER AT SPEAKERS CORNER
The BBC is a godless, cursed organisation spreading the cancer of unbelief, of sin … in children … the nakedness, women naked. You are going to die!

But less direct persuasion may trap the unwary. Language worries worth worrying about do exist. They rarely appear to be major perils, but, like a banana skin or a loose paving stone, they can trip people up and cause more damage than might be foreseen. A single strand in a spider’s web might at first catch a fly by one leg, but then entrap it further. Speakers therefore need to be watch out. If they clear their minds of pseudo worries, such as anxiety about split infinitives, then they might have more energy left to notice these genuine pitfalls.
The gobbledegook syndrome is the most straightforward of these snares. Gobbledegook can be defined as pretentious or unintelligible jargon, as when a young man impresses others with idle chatter of a transcendental kind in Gilbert and Sullivan’s opera Patience.

MUSICAL CLIP: GILBERT AND SULLIVAN’S PATIENCE

Gobbledegook needs to be translated into comprehensible language, though it must not be confused with technical vocabulary. A doctor talking to another doctor might justifiably use words such as “electroencephalography” or “mesenteric adenitis”. However, medical terms can become gobbledegook if used inappropriately. “Is there any history of cardiac arrest in your family?”, a doctor asked. “We never had no trouble with the police” was the indignant reply.

Politically correct terms are sometimes labelled gobbledegook, but this is not entirely justified. The PC movement has some beneficial spin-offs - “firefighter” or “bar person” in an ad makes it clear that either sex can apply. The PC movement is still young and some PC phrases sound very bureaucratic, as with “visually challenged” for blind or “developmentally inconvenienced” for older mentally retarded. But PC hearts are in the right place even if their tongues or pens are twisted up in sesquipedalian words. PC phrases need to be looked at unemotionally one by one. Some terms simply reflect a normal distinction between written language, which is fairly formal, and spoken language, which is relatively informal. Other expressions overlap with euphemisms, though these rarely present a serious threat to understanding. It does not need a linguist to point out that the bus company which restructured its fares was just raising them, or that workforce imbalance correction simply means sacking people.

In sentence structure gobbledegook is usually due to lack of time and care, as perhaps with the personal pension plan which defined foreign emoluments as “earnings of a person resident but not domiciled in the UK from duties performed wholly or partly in the UK for a non-resident employer”. It’s as clear as dirty dish water and perhaps more time should have been spent drafting it. As the French writer Pascal once said, “I have made this letter longer than usual only because I have not had time to make it shorter”. So gobbledegook delays understanding and can also cause misunderstanding. Only recently a member of the European Parliament commented: “The treaties are so complicated that very few people can possibly understand what they mean. Fraudsters are having a field day simply because the regulations are so complex”. Overall gobbledegook is easy to spot, though less easy to cure because lucid speaking and writing take time and practice. But it is worth making the effort. Good communicators are like cooks squeezing a lemon: they extract the essence, then convey the full flavour to the consumers whether in speech or writing.

But let’s turn to another language trap, the “wimp effect”. Humans subconsciously notice which words occur together. Newspapers kept reminding us that George Bush had shaken off his wimp image. President Bush has decisively buried his lingering image as a White House wimp, we were told; but in so doing they were reinforcing his negative image. The Bush wimp pairing insured that he remains perhaps permanently associated with wimp-hood, however undeservedly. And in a newspaper report about the New York police force, the word “corruption” occurred 65 times. An
inquiry was only just starting, yet the consistent nearness of the words “police” and “corruption” as in “police corruption power and analysis unit” guaranteed that New Yorkers would feel anxious about their police even before any investigation had taken place.

So humans may be subconsciously trapped by their language. Linguistic freedom was seriously questioned over 60 years ago, first by Edward Sapir, then by Benjamin Lee Whorf, two American linguists. Their ideas became known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Sapir stated: “Human beings do not live in the objective world alone . . . but are very much at the mercy of their particular language . . . The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached”. Their detailed claims are far more clear, though they undoubtedly cover much more than the common observation that some cultures have more subdivisions than others for particular vocabulary areas. By the way, the most quoted example - that Eskimos have numerous words for snow - has been grossly exaggerated, as explained in an article aptly titled The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax. British skiers possibly outdo Eskimos, or, more accurately, speakers of the Inuit language in the varieties of snow they can name.

Whorf’s best known claim was that “standard average European” cultures are in a mental straitjacket in which events are packaged into boxes, such as days, hours, minutes: a length of time, he argued, “is envisioned as a row of similar units, like a row of bottles”. In the American-Indian language Hopi, a different linguistic situation prevails, he suggested. An English utterance such as “They stayed 10 days” becomes in Hopi, “They stayed until the 11th day” or “They left after the 10th day”. According to Whorf, “Our ‘length of time’ is not regarded as a length but in Hopi as a relation between two events in lateness”.

But all Whorf has pointed out here is that the Hopi language expresses “time” in a different way from English. Hopi and English speakers need not envisage time differently: it is a hypothesis which needs to be tested, and which he himself failed to test. So Sapir and Whorf tried to identify possible language traps. They may have been struggling to express an even wider entrapment in language, which I have called the frog-in-a-well problem. This comes from a Chinese folk tale about a frog which had lived all its life in a well. One day it hopped out, and was astonished to find what a limited view of the world it had always had.

In English, a clear example of this is the use of generic “he”; that is “he” supposedly referring to either sex. A widespread assumption exists that use of “he” for he and she presents no problem, especially if a disclaimer is attached: when I say “he”, I mean “he” or “she”.

But “he” is far from neutral. Both men and women assume generic “he” refers primarily to men. In a typical study, 20 university students - 10 men and 10 women - were asked to listen to a number of sentences such as: “When a botanist is in the field, he is usually working,” and say in each case, as quickly as possible, yes if the sentence could refer to a female or no if the sentence could not refer to a female. Ninety-five per cent of the subjects, both males and females, made errors, and said that “he” sentences could not refer to females. But when the sentence was changed to a genuinely sex-neutral wording, such as “a botanist who is in the field is usually
working,” the number who assumed that the sentence did not include females dropped to 43 per cent. In another study, 10 university students - 5 men and 5 women - were asked to read paragraphs involving a neutral between sexes person, such as “beginning writer” but which contained the pronoun “he”. Afterwards they were asked if the “beginning writer” was male, female, or unspecified. Only 20 per cent consistently said unspecified. And there are numerous similar studies.

Humans behave like spiderlings who never venture outside their web. They create their own limited mental pictures of the world. The word “week” is often quoted. A week has no concrete reality in the external world. Yet most native speakers of English have a mental model of a sequence of seven days, which is divided into two chunks - five working days followed by two rest-days, the “weekend” - or sometimes it is six working days followed by one rest-day.

MUSICAL CLIP: NEVER ON SUNDAY

They have this idealised notion of a week, even though they may organise their own working life quite differently, and may know that technically the week begins on a Sunday. In contrast, an Inca week had 10 days, nine working days followed by market day, on which the king changed wives.

These mental models can be handed down from generation to generation, and they can reinforce cultural norms. The word “mother” represents a cluster of at least three different ideas, as the linguist George Lakoff has pointed out. First a birth idea - the mother gives birth to the child; second, a nurturing idea - the mother looks after the child; third, a marital idea - the mother is the wife of the father. This cluster of ideas has helped to give rise to a stereotype of a “proper mother” as one who gives birth, stays at home and nurtures, and is married to the father. The stereotype persists even though it is increasingly out of touch with modern society.

To take another example, many British people assume that they live in a society organised in tiers. They have a mental model of a layer cake with rich upper class at the top, comfortably off middle class in the centre, and struggling working class at the bottom. Yet numerous socioeconomic studies have shown that the middle class versus working class divide is one of differing lifestyles, not position on an economic hierarchy. As an actor noted, “We were poor, but we had a piano, so I suppose we were middle class”.

Powerful mental images may be preserved or even created by metaphors, it has been suggested. Expressions such as “Pauline was rich in ideas”, or “Alan had a wealth of experience” presuppose that accumulating money might be a praiseworthy aim. Consider the emotion of anger. This is often envisaged as heated liquid in a container, as George Lakoff has pointed out. It’s like a whistling kettle which builds up a head of steam: “Mark’s anger simmered”, “Helen seethed with rage”, “Neil’s blood boiled”. Overheated liquid is liable to burst out, as in “Mary blew her top”, “Matthew exploded”.

Such metaphors reflect genuine mental images, according to psycholinguistic experiments. When asked about an idiom such as “hit the ceiling”, speakers imagine
containers bursting open and their contents spouting upwards. They do not imagine a person with springs on their heels hitting their head on the ceiling.

Arguably, the “liquid in a container” image could lead people to assume that explosion is a natural consequence of overheating, and justify outbursts of rage. This is unlike the situation in some parts of India, where anger is still thought of as heat, but dry heat which requires lubrication. So universal tendencies may have different cultural manifestations.

Fear provides the reverse scenario. Physiologically humans either freeze or flee, yet almost all English metaphors stress freezing or empty containers, not fleeing: “Peter froze with terror”, “Marigold was rooted to the spot”, Peggy’s limbs turned icy cold”, “Paul’s courage drained away”. A petrified English speaker might stand still rather than attempt to escape. It is a worrying possibility, though one which has not yet been checked out. But entrapment in existing traditional metaphors is not the only danger. Metaphor is a powerful device for changing people’s attitudes. Nukespeak is the most publicised example: phrases such as “nuclear shields”, “nuclear umbrella” might lead people to assume that nuclear devices are essential safety equipment, it’s been argued, and distract attention from their potential danger. The surgical language of the Gulf War described air strikes as having “pin-point accuracy” in the hope of persuading people that the war damaged only buildings rather than humans, it has been claimed.

Metaphors are “hi-tech” devices for changing people’s minds. The linguist Susan Elgin used to get annoyed when friends she was visiting left their television on. She found it insulting. Then she read that for the younger generation, “the television is the flickering fire on the hearth”. The metaphor changed everything for her - instantly. She now understood why the television set was left on, and was no longer annoyed by it. She comments: “I wouldn’t expect them to put out the fire in their fireplace out during my visit: why should they turn off their television?”

Metaphors used by politicians and journalists can affect attitudes. Humans can be dehumanised by aligning them with illness, as when Ronald Reagan vowed to fight the “communist cancer”, or with animals as when couriers who carry drugs are referred to as “ants” or “mules”. An electronics firm, which was faring badly, was said to have “binged on the 1980s consumer boom” and was now attempting to recover from “the hangover”. The metaphor of binging implies some degree of foolishness rather than sheer economic bad luck. But metaphors do not automatically catch on and influence people. They have to fit in with a feeling in the air, or zeitgeist, which differs from language to language. In psychobabble metaphors have to achieve cultural resonance and avoid cognitive dissonance since we humans are like spiders who get accustomed to moving along some strands of our web and not others. A few images are widely accepted: a notion that up is good and down is bad may be universal. “Paul is going up in the world”, “Jack’s down on his luck”, “Henrietta’s moving up the ladder”. These may have equivalents everywhere, but other images are local. It’s not chance that when dealing with large quantities of say drugs Europeans across the channel tend to talk about “avalanches”, but we in Britain refer to “floods”.

Or consider wine. Wine drinkers are prepared to believe that wine can be breezy, flabby, chocolaty, meaty or even chewy, but puzzlement and fury erupted when a
wine critic suggested a wine smelt of hamster cages and worse. As a wine editor acidly commented: “Things like cobwebs, sumo wrestlers’ jockstraps and unswept floorboards simply don’t belong in a tasting note”.

Successful metaphors have to be both sufficiently ear-catching to make people take notice, but sufficiently ordinary to be acceptable. An organisation might be called an octopus: most people know an octopus has eight legs which reach out and cling and pull. But to call it a starfish or a squid would be unlikely to have the same effect, because people are less aware of how these animals behave. So the moral is twofold. Watch out for clever metaphors which might bend your mind. And conversely, if you yourself want to influence anyone, use metaphor, though use it carefully.

But what about language itself? Metaphor has shaped, perhaps misshaped, our views about how it works. The most widely-used metaphor is that of a game. The image is an oldish one. At the beginning of this century, the Swiss linguist de Saussure suggested that language was like a game of chess, in which all the pieces are interdependent: just as a single chess piece, such as a knight, acquires a value only in relation to the other chess pieces on the board, the same is true of pieces of language; and the philosopher Wittgenstein also talked about language as a game.

The game image is useful. But all metaphors can potentially mislead, in that any metaphor fits only partially. The game metaphor fits the rule-governed nature of language, but it perhaps over-emphasises its neatness and tidiness.

A more revealing image, now that we know more about language, may be the language web, the image and title of these lectures. The language web is potentially vast, though each language exploits only a small part of the available possibilities. We may laugh at daleks and other fictional robots with their narrow range of vocabulary and speech sounds, but we humans are similarly limited in our thoughts. (FX: dalek repeating word ‘exterminate’)

As speakers we behave in our use of language like surfers on the World-Wide Web. Those who browse in this extensive computer network soon find time runs out, just as it would if a spider were to try and cover the whole network of its own web. In the circumstances, we narrow down the number of tracks we go along, and select a few recurring routes. Ultimately, we must take care not to behave like the Chinese frog, which jumped back into its well because it couldn’t stand the freedom outside.

This World-Wide Web notion ties in with current ideas about how the mind works. Up till a few years ago standard digital computers provided the major metaphor for human language processes. Yet this analogy has not proved particularly fruitful. Old style computers worked in too rigid a way. Now the brain itself is being taken as a source of inspiration for understanding the mind; and also, incidentally, for devising new computers. Increasingly the brain is turning out to be like a massive spider’s web with its numerous circuits and multiple interconnections. We ourselves narrow these down in a way that is inevitable yet merits serious thought.

But let’s recap. These lectures began with a cobweb of worries which I attempted to clear away. We need to understand language, I argued, not try to control it. Then I tried to extend understanding of language: how it began, how children acquire it, and
how humans remember the huge web of words. Out of this wider framework, some genuine concerns emerged.

Yet there is one extra worry to add in: language loss. Ninety per cent of the world’s languages may be in danger. Around 6,000 languages are currently spoken in the world. Of these, half are moribund in that they are no longer learned by the new generation of speakers. A further 2,500 are in a danger zone in that they have fewer than 100,000 speakers. This leaves around 10 per cent of the current total as likely survivors a century from now. Of course languages inevitably split, just as Latin split into the Romance languages - so some new languages may emerge, but the diversity will be much reduced. The splendiferous bouquet of current languages will be whittled down to a small posy with only a few different flowers. To take a random example, it is unlikely that Menya will survive. It is a language fairly unlike English, spoken in Papua New Guinea by only a small number of people. (Example of Menya language) In 100 years time such recordings may be our only record of it.

“Worry about words,” the writer AP Herbert once said. “For whatever else you may do, you will be using words always. All day, and every day, words matter. Before you die the aeroplane may be as out of date as the rickshaw . . . But words will still matter.” He was quite right to tell us to worry about words. But, I’d like to add, it’s important to worry about them in the right way.