



WHY DO  
PEOPLE  
SING?

*On Voice*

**PADDY SCANNELL**



# Why Do People Sing?



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WHY DO  
PEOPLE SING?

On Voice

polity

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First published in 2019 by Polity Press

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
101 Station Landing  
Suite 300  
Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-2942-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-2943-8 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Scannell, Paddy, author.

Title: Why do people sing? : on voice / Paddy Scannell.

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA : Polity Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018049240 (print) | LCCN 2018056143 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509529452 (Epub) | ISBN 9781509529421 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509529438 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Voice--Psychological aspects. | Oral communication. | Singing. Classification: LCC BF592.V64 (ebook) | LCC BF592.V64 S33 2019 (print) | DDC 302.2/242--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018049240>

Typeset in 11 on 14 pt Sabon by  
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire  
Printed and bound the UK by Tj International Limited

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# Preface

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In this short book, I have set myself the difficult task of writing about the human voice, with the eventual goal of answering the question in my title. Why *do* people sing? It is a personal book, based on my academic life's work, but not written primarily for the academic community. It is also a book intended to appeal to a broader nonacademic readership. My starting point is my own historical work on British broadcast radio and the gradual recognition that it consisted wholly of people talking and singing at the microphone. Television is an extension of radio, not of cinema, and it too depends on talk for its effect.

From this I came, much later, to two things: first, that underpinning all talk is the largely invisible and very much neglected topic of voice. I have only recently come to the conclusion that talk is a thing in itself, and should not be thought of as spoken language or oral communication. Talk, as my first chapter attempts to show, depends on a native language. It would be odd to suppose that talk is nonlinguistic, but that is not all it is. I now think that talk (which I think of as "first lan-



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guage”) is primarily about communication and, as such, is the entry point into human society. This means that talk is primarily a sociable phenomenon, and as such is (humanly) universal. The sociability of talk was (for me) revealed through radio and then television. In today’s noisy world there is much talk that is aggressive, egoistic, and confrontational, and this forced me to wonder whether this is the context in which we learn to talk.

It struck me as important that talk is learned intergenerationally: from one generation to the next. And it strikes me as equally important that this is a *caring*, reciprocal process, one on one, between adult and child, child and adult, and also – if it is to work – a multilayered process involving desire, love, and more besides, that all come together not just or only in language, but in looks and gestures, facework and close proximity between two people who jointly, and with gladness of countenance, share in this process. I simply could not imagine that talk began otherwise, as a form of aggression or human egotism.

These tentative thoughts led me to an even more tentative conclusion: that communication (talk) and language are nonidentical. It seemed obvious to me (eventually) that writing is *the* medium of language and its primary function has nothing to do with communication and talk. Writing is, I think, a system of record with primary economic and financial functions that have developed over many centuries. It is also (but accidentally) a primary historical resource – in fact, our only one, until sound recordings were invented in the nineteenth century. The very new digital age that we live in depends entirely on language – not the analog language of broadcasting, but the digital language of social media

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and the internet. This fact is hidden from us, largely because the binary digital numeric code of computers and much more are all reconverted into alphabetic, analog code with which we have long been familiar.

These, I think, are the wider, tentative implications of this little book. I start with the communicative musicality of the voices of parent and child as a baby learns to talk. I consider the beautiful sound medium of radio – its impact on voice, talk, music, and singing, and its crucial role in making them public in quite new ways. Recording technologies developed for broadcasting put voice on record, making it a radically new historical resource for historians, hitherto almost wholly reliant on written archives. In written fiction, readers cannot hear the voices of the characters or of their author. Or can they? I explore the voices in the text, including the voice of the text in one of the Mapp and Lucia novels of E. F. Benson. Finally, I attempt the impossible task of putting into words on paper the inexpressible experience of listening to singing, wherein the glory of the human voice finds its purest expression.

In writing this book, I have drawn extensively on my own academic writings over the last forty or so years. Historical details on the early BBC may be found in the work I co-wrote with David Cardiff, *A Social History of Broadcasting* (1991). Further information on particular programs may be found in later work. Detailed accounts of *Harry Hopeful* and *The Brains Trust* may be found in my *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (1996) and *Television and the Meaning of "Live"* (2014), respectively.

For information on unreferenced talk and language,

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I have used the invaluable *Wiki* extensively, and likewise for the historical context of singing, along with the equally invaluable multivolume *Groves History of Music*.

I have tried to think of similar academic writing on talk, but none comes to mind.

As a background to everything about communication and language in this book, I would recommend Chapters 6 and 7 in my *Media and Communication* (2007).

Well-known works, for instance Roland Barthes on photography or Jacques Derrida's *On Grammatology*, are acknowledged, but not referenced. Some familiarity with the writings of Heidegger and Wittgenstein is assumed.

The Tronick experiment, analyzed in some detail in Chapter 1, can easily be found on YouTube.



# 1

## The Voice of the Friend

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My topic, voice, is one that has puzzled me for a long time. Perhaps the best way to explain this is to outline how I (eventually) discovered it and how it came to interest me. I came upon it by chance or, more exactly, as a byproduct of the focal topic of my academic working life, which was, and remains, radio. Back in the 1970s, David Cardiff and I began working on a history of the beginnings of broadcasting in Great Britain. It turned into a study of the British Broadcasting Corporation from its beginning in late 1922 through to the outbreak of war in 1939. We were interested in how people working in the BBC figured out, starting from scratch, how to do what in fact they did – i.e., make “programs” (as they came to be called) that people might want to listen to. To *listen to*, because the brand-new medium of broadcasting they were working with was wireless radio.

It’s hugely consequential that, more or less accidentally, we started work on radio, not television. Most academic attention at the time and since was directed to the study of television, and television was something

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you watched rather than listened to. It was thought of from the start as a visual medium. David and I were out on our own, in our concern with the “sound” medium of radio. It quickly became apparent to us that there were two sounds that radio transmitted: the sounds of music and of people talking. In our book we attended to both. I will start with the question of talk, and come to music later when I discuss singing and what it means to us. In either case though, I came eventually to see that voice underpins them both: the human voice as it speaks and sings. I would *now* say that to understand voice we must understand talk, and, reciprocally, to understand talk we must understand voice. But talk was where I began back in the 1980s and voice as its underpinning only appeared to me as such many years later. Part of the puzzle for me (now) is why it took so long for me to see this. Why did I not recognize the intimate relationship between voice and talk from the start? The answer, at least in part, is that I did not understand what talk was, when I came across it as a basic problem for broadcasters. Talk was what concerned me first and voice did not appear, at first, to be crucial to its understanding.

It’s helpful to see that so-called tele-technologies of communication – electronic technologies that provide immediate connection over long distances for communicative purposes – are all, essentially, technologies of talk. From the wired telephone, then “wireless telephony” (as it was originally called) or radio, followed by television – all these technologies, one way or another, *reveal* talk. Radio and television (broadcast media as distinct from down-the-wire, one-to-one telephony) disclose talk, make it visible so to speak, in two basic ways. They make it *public* in a quite new way. And they make

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it *historical*. It has taken me many years to grasp these most basic facts about *broadcast* radio and television. What eluded me for a long time was the recognition that both are mediums of talk: obviously perhaps, in the case of radio, that so-called “blind” medium. Not so obviously in the case of television. It’s worth remembering that early definition of television as “talking heads.” If you treat the telly as a *visual* medium (by muting the sound), you miss most of what’s going on. Try simply watching a soccer game or the news without sound: and notice what’s missing. For me, television is an extension (a continuation) of radio (which of course is how it developed technically and historically), and I take talk to be the unifying characteristic of two closely related *broadcast* technologies.

In the next chapter, I will examine the development of talk first on radio in the UK and second on television in the USA. In this chapter, I am concerned to establish just what it is that is special about talk. And to do so I want to disentangle it from language. Our species became human when ancient people learned how to talk to each other with words. The body of words they used – their word-hoard (their treasury), as the Anglo-Saxon poets called it – was, as we would now say, their language: the communal-defining resource they used in talk. Thus, talk comes *before* language, and this is true to this day. Human beings learn to talk to each other. They don’t, *in the first place*, learn a language. They learn how to interact, expressively and communicatively, with other human beings – and this is the precondition of talk. Talk is as old as humanity. In learning to talk, we become human. It is *this* capacity that gives the conditions of a common *social* (sociable) humanity. Talk is universal

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(the shared and common species-wide resource always and everywhere), but no such claim can be made for language. There is not now, nor was there ever, a universal world-defining language that everyone spoke (*pace* the tower of Babel myth); and of course, as everyone knows, writing developed thousands of years after speech. We don't speak of learning language. We speak of learning to talk. Having learnt to talk the language of our mother (*die Muttersprache* as it's called in German), at a later stage we might learn a "second" language (French, German, etc).

Learning a second (or third) language is usually thought of as a formal process that takes place in school at a certain stage (though of course if you move to another country you may well pick up its language informally in interaction with native speakers, more or less as infants pick up their language from their mother). It's as much, if not more so, about learning to read and write in a foreign language – a doubled learning task, as distinct from the single learning task of talk. At least it was for me – a long time ago – when learning French and Latin were pretty much the same thing. What I learned was the written language. I was taught its vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. I didn't really learn how to speak French, to converse in this language – that was a minor part of the way it was taught at my school in the 1950s. Learning to speak Latin was obviously pointless, since no one spoke it. I've no doubt the emphasis has changed. But what remains in place is the (academic) notion that language is defined in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, and that the learning process is the double task of becoming competent in reading and writing.