RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by JOSH GEWOLB

Babble On, Babycakes

Just as we have to crawl before we walk, we have to babble before we talk. Researchers say babbling babies may just be learning to move the muscles involved with speech. But new findings indicate that there is more to babbling than meets the ear: It originates in the brain's language centers.

The brain's left hemisphere deals with language, and because the left half of the brain controls the right side of the body, most adults use the right side of their mouths more when speaking. But if babbling is just a result of babies exercising their mouth muscles, they should babble equally out of both sides of their mouths.

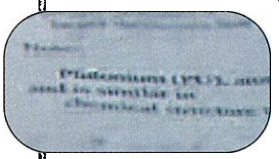
To see if that balance exists, neuropsychologist Siobhan Holowka of McGill University in Montreal videotaped six babies who were 6 to 12 months old; three were learning French, and three English. Independent coders then scored the babies' mouth movements on silenced video clips that included both babbles, such as "da," and extraneous sounds, such as "ssssss." The results—reported at the Society for Neuroscience meeting in San Diego on 13 November—showed that the babies used the center of their mouths to produce nonbabbles. But they almost always babbled with the right side, engaging the left side of their brains.

"It's a very important observation," says neuroscientist Joy Hirsch of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. "What it says is that babies' language systems are well intact," even before the babies begin uttering understandable words.

Terrorists Duped by A-Bomb Parody?

The abandoned plans found in an Afghan safe house suggested that Osama Bin Laden's terrorist network had filched a top-secret atomic bomb recipe: Fashion plutonium into giant orbs using rubber cement, surround them with a mix of dynamite and Play-Doh, and add a remote-control mechanism from a toy car.

But it turns out the blueprint—found by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reporters in a mound of documents left in Kabul when the Taliban fled the city on 12 November—is literally a joke. It is part of an article from a 1979 issue of the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*, a Chicago Heights, Illinois, mock journal that lampoons science. "It really is a small world," says former editor Marc Abrahams.



BBC image of the mock A-bomb recipe.

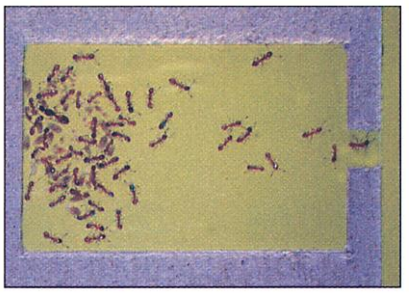
It isn't clear whether the terrorists knew the recipe was a parody—but the BBC didn't. Before the document was exposed as a joke by dailyrotten.com, an Internet gossip site, the network said that it showed "how dangerous Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network aspired to be."

Sizing Up the Nest

If you're an ant in the market for a new nest, you need to make sure you don't get a mansion when you just want a molehill. A new study has added fodder to the debate over how ants do the math that lets them size up potential nesting sites, arguing that they use a simple counting mechanism.

Since the 1970s, most entomologists have believed that ants pace the perimeter of a potential nesting site to estimate its area. But last year, entomologists Eamonn Mallon and Nigel Franks of the University of Bath, U.K., argued that ants size up sites by wandering about them and counting the number of times they cross their own chemical trails. The smaller the area, the more likely they are to visit the same place twice—a principle mathematicians call "Buffon's needle." Some researchers were skeptical of the idea, however, arguing that ants were actually checking for obstacles when Mallon and Franks thought they were estimating area.

Now the researchers say they have a new piece of evidence that bolsters their hypothesis. In the current issue of *Behavioral Ecology*, the team reports that when shopping for a new home, the rock-dwelling European ant *Leptothorax albipennis* always paces out the same-length path on the first visit to a site. The standard path serves as a measuring stick that the ants use on return visits to complete their survey, the researchers argue.



Ants may calculate the area of potential nest sites by counting how frequently they cross their own chemical trails.

Others are still not convinced. Mathematical biologist David Sumpter of Oxford University, U.K., notes that the researchers also observed that ants sometimes walk the edges of a site, suggesting that they were indeed measuring its perimeter.

The Poetry of Flatulence

Troubled by the apathy toward science he sees in the country's young people, the South Korean science minister has stooped to their level with a new book of scatological poetry entitled *Does a Fart Catch Fire?*

The minister, Kim Young-hwan, says that addressing the sometimes vulgar matters that interest children is the best way of convincing them that science is worth their attention. Each poem in his book is followed by an explanation of the relevant science. "What happens if astronauts in space cannot control their fart and shoot, 'ppung,' and the fart catches fire?" the title poem asks. Kim then explains that the gas we pass, like other chemicals, can in fact burn. Other titles range from "Peeing on an Earthworm" (about how children should treat small animals) to the more proper "Can Fish Catch Colds?"

The South Korean science minister is author of a new book of poetry with a title that translates as "Does a Fart Catch Fire?"

Kim, a dentist-turned-politician, is no stranger to flatulent prose: He wrote a previous children's book entitled *Daddy Eats Doo-doo*, as well as four volumes of serious poetry. He says his present effort has been so well received that he is now writing two similar titles. The books, which he envisions as "fusion[s] of science and art," are part of the Science Book Movement that the ministry began in June, aimed at getting children's science books written by scientists into elementary schools.

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