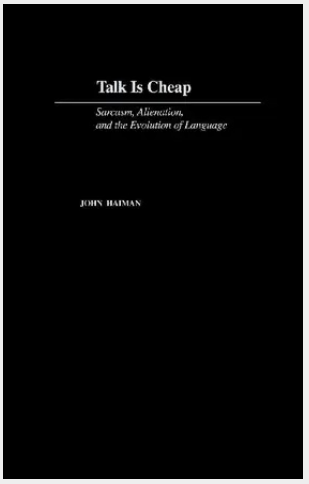
Haiman

Talk is Cheap

Sarcasm, Alienation, and Evolution of Language



Putting aside questions of truth and falsehood, the old 'talk is cheap' maxim carries as much weight as ever. Indeed, perhaps more. For one need not be an expert in irony or sarcasm to realize that people don't necessarily mean what they say. Phrases such as 'Yeah, right' and 'I could care less' are so much a part of the way we speak - and the way we live - that we are more likely to notice when they are absent (for example, Forrest Gump). From our everyday dialogues and conversations ('Thanks a lot!') to the screenplays of our popular films (Pulp Fiction), what is said is frequently very different from what is meant. Talk is Cheap begins with this telling observation and proceeds to argue that such 'unplain speaking' is fundamentally embedded in the way we now talk. Author John Haiman traces this sea-change in our use of language to the emergence of a postmodern 'divided self' who is hyper-conscious that what he or she is saying has been said before; 'cheap talk' thus allows us to distance ourselves from a social role with which we are uncomfortable. Haiman goes on to examine the full range of these pervasive distancing mechanisms, from clichés and quotation marks to camp and parody. Also, and importantly, Haiman highlights several ways in which language is evolving (and has evolved) from non-linguistic behaviour. In other words, this study shows us how what we are saying is continually separating itself from how we say it. As provocative as it is timely, the book will be fascinating reading for students of linguistics, literature, communication, anthropology, philosophy, and popular culture.

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