

# **Who Sets Email Style?**

## **Prescriptivism, Coping Strategies, and Democratizing Communication Access**

**Naomi S. Baron**

Department of Language and Foreign Studies, American University, Washington, DC, USA

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**Abstract**

Stylistic practices in email reflect an amalgam of social presuppositions about usage conventions and individual strategies for handling a new language medium. To understand how contemporary email patterns have been forged and where they might be heading, this study examines the ways in which newly enfranchised language users in the past have balanced externally-generated prescriptions for linguistic style with user-generated coping strategies in constructing spoken and written messages. Popular letter-writing, the early telegraph, and early telephone behavior offer useful precedents for thinking about both email messages themselves and the potential effects of language technology on broader language change.

**Keywords** democratization, email, etiquette, letter-writing, prescriptivism, style, telegraph, telephone

## **DIVORCE ON-LINE: USING LANGUAGE AT A DISTANCE**

Can you divorce your spouse by email?<sup>1</sup> That question was handed to a court in the United Arab Emirates, when an American of Arab descent emailed his Saudi wife to break their marriage bonds. Islamic law holds that a man can divorce his wife

simply by telling her “I divorce you”, if certain conditions are met. [*The Gulf News*, which reported the story,] said the court would have to rule if the notification of divorce through the internet was valid under the Gulf Arab emirate’s laws, or whether it should have been delivered verbally. (*BBC Online*, Friday, 5 May, 2000)

What else should – or shouldn’t – you do by email? Send an apology? Your condolences? News to your former spouse of your remarriage? Our concern in this paper is not with *answers* to these queries but with *how* we arrive at solutions. Are there objective principles upon which decisions are made or do usage patterns reflect social fiat? If the latter, who makes the rules, and on what basis? If there are rules (from whatever source), how do people learn about them? And are they followed? These issues assume special relevance when the number of people using a new technology suddenly expands, as in the case of email.

Questions surrounding contemporary email usage are hardly unique in recent communication history. Analogous problems arose with earlier technologies for transmitting language at a distance. To help inform our understanding of email style, we will be looking at three older media for conveying language at a distance. The first is letter-writing at points in British and American history when large numbers of new users found themselves sending personal letters. The second form is the telegram, and the third, the (land-line) telephone.

The primary focus of this paper is linguistic: to understand how users of a new language technology arrive at stylistic conventions for employing that technology. To facilitate this

inquiry, we draw upon historical resources that reveal interesting parallels in the emergence of usage conventions, then and now. However, as with any historical comparison, we must be mindful that differences in sociohistorical circumstances may complicate (and even vitiate) seemingly obvious analogies between responses to technical developments at two points in time.

With this caveat in mind, we turn to the linguistic issues that undergird our inquiry: style in language, communicating at a distance, and the process of becoming a language user.

### **Style in Language**

As a working definition, language “style” is the outcome of the choices we make about how to communicate what to whom. At the most basic level, these choices involve selection of words (e.g., “angry” versus “mad”), grammatical constructions (e.g., “It can be inferred that sashimi displeases you” versus “Everyone can tell you dislike sashimi”), or forms of address (“Mr. President” as opposed to “George”). In speech, stylistic variation also appears in our pronunciation (e.g., distinctly articulated or mumbled, Brooklyn accent versus British Received Pronunciation). In writing, we find variation in penmanship (e.g., calligraphic or hen scrawl), spelling (“theatre” or “theater”; Webster-perfect or in need of spell-check), and punctuation (e.g., knowing where commas belong or scattering them at will).

In general parlance, we most readily associate the notion of linguistic style with literature, contrasting, for example, the lengthy, grammatically varied sentences of an early nineteenth century author such as Thomas Babington Macaulay with the sparse, syntactically straightforward prose of an Ernest Hemingway. However, in everyday speech and writing, we also readily distinguish between *formal* and *informal* style – the former, appropriate for, say, a job application and the latter more likely in a note passed during a meeting. Closely linked with

the contrast between formal and informal style is the notion of *prescriptive* versus *descriptive* approaches to language. Prescriptive models (of the sort found in language usage handbooks and etiquette guides) announce what linguistic choices we are supposed to make: Don't begin sentences with conjunctions. Be sure your subjects and verbs agree in number. Typically, these directives reflect language used by members of the best educated stratum of society – at least when they are on their best, most formal linguistic behavior. Descriptive language models strive to record the actual language used by Everyman – which usually turns out to be not only rather informal but also in violation of many prescriptive edicts.

Attitudes towards linguistic style – and resulting usage patterns – matter not because one style is “right” and another “wrong” but because heightened attention to stylistic concerns generally signals that significant social and/or linguistic change is afoot. For example, stylistic practices are influenced by shifting social attitudes as to which parts of language should be normatively governed. In sixteenth and early seventeenth century England, spelling was rather chaotic (Shakespeare spelled his own name at least six different ways<sup>2</sup>) and provincial accents weren't stigmatized.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, the educated classes knew they would be judged harshly if their orthography and pronunciation didn't match “proper” norms.<sup>4</sup> As we'll see later on, the eighteenth century English drive for social mobility spawned a profusion of prescriptive guides for stylistic improvement of one's speech and writing.

While discussions of language style predominantly focus on pronunciation, selection of words, sentence constructions, and even spelling or handwriting, style also derivatively includes decisions about the medium through which the message is transmitted. The most basic choice is whether to employ speech or writing. Language technologies expand the options yet further: A face-to-face conversation or a telephone call? A handwritten note or a telegram (or, these days,

an email)? Choice of transmission medium can be seen as a matter of social etiquette, whose rules evolve as new technologies emerge and then become increasingly commonplace. (Of course, whether one is aware of – or follows – those rules is another matter.)

In sum, as language users, we necessarily make stylistic decisions (consciously or otherwise) whenever we speak or write. Our ultimate interest in this paper is in the factors influencing this decision-making process, especially during times of technological innovation. To better understand the linguistic ramifications of new language technologies, we turn now to the second of our linguistic themes: communicating at a distance.

### **Communicating at a Distance**

Before the invention of writing,<sup>5</sup> to communicate through human language was to speak face-to-face or at least within earshot of one's interlocutor.<sup>6</sup> Writing made possible communicating at a distance in time, space, or both. For most of its history, distance transmission entailed physically transporting messages from one place to another. Only in the mid and late nineteenth century did what we might call "teletechnologies" emerge – that is, technologies that enable remote transmission of linguistic messages. The first such development, the telegraph, appeared in 1844. The telephone debuted in 1876, the "wireless" (radio) at the end of the nineteenth century, and the television in the middle of the twentieth.

Linguistically, communicating at a distance (through traditional writing or using teletechnologies) differs from face-to-face speech in significant ways. Most obvious is the *loss of cues*. Face-to-face interlocutors rely on visual cues (such as facial expressions, bodily stance, physical distance between speakers) and auditory cues (e.g., tone of voice, volume) to help give meaning to words and sentences. Moreover, meaning in face-to-face conversation is often

determined by contextual cues. The utterance “Where’s Admissions?” means one thing when asked by a high school senior visiting a college campus and quite another when uttered by a very pregnant woman at a hospital information desk.

Secondly, communicating at a distance *changes the relationship between message senders and their audiences*. While face-to-face exchange enables interlocutors to limit access to their conversation, messages that are transmitted in time or space are potentially more public. From the earliest days of teletechnologies, users of the telegraph and the telephone were justifiably concerned that strangers (such as telegraph clerks, switchboard operators, or those with whom one shared a party phone line) were privy to their messages. Of course, unlike private message senders, writers of many ilk (e.g., novelists, authors of letters-to-the-editor) compose with precisely such public distribution in mind.

The *durable nature* of written messages also has ramifications for how such messages are composed.<sup>7</sup> On average, written messages are generally more formal stylistically as well as weightier in subject matter than their spoken counterparts. Similarly, *cost factors* tend to make for linguistic differences between face-to-face spoken communication and communicating at a distance. While face-to-face conversation has no price tag attached, we shall see that transmission of letters, telegrams, and phone calls was, in each case, initially relatively expensive. As a result, such communiques tended to be shorter and to deal with issues of more serious import than much of face-to-face conversation.

Finally, communicating at a distance requires message senders to develop *new transmission skills* beyond those needed for face-to-face spoken conversation. In addition to the obvious need to learn to encode and decode written text (i.e., writing and reading), letter-writers must, for example, understand how epistolary conventions differ from, say, those used in print

journalism or expository essays. Similarly, telephone users must develop conventions for opening and closing the discourse, or for keeping a conversation going, that adjust for the lack of a face-to-face interlocutor.

### **Becoming a Language User**

How do language users of any medium – spoken or written, face-to-face or at a distance – attain proficiency and comfort in handling a given form of linguistic exchange? One method is to follow *externally-generated prescriptions* for linguistic behavior. All societies have norms defining how people should interact with each other through language. Some of these norms are transmitted directly from one generation to the next, as when parents teach their offspring to say “Please” or insist upon their children writing thank-you letters for birthday presents. In many communities, published usage and etiquette guides help novitiates develop new language practices as part of their quest for social betterment.

The other variable is *user-generated coping strategies*. In our encounters with language as young children, we must all figure out, largely on our own, how to make sense of puzzling messages and media. Toddlers cope with sounds they can’t pronounce by reconfiguring adult words – “spaghetti” may become “pasketti” or “fish” come out as “fis.” Preschoolers coin words that logically might have existed – like “gripsion” on analogy with “traction”<sup>8</sup> – and commonly treat writing as a form of drawing.<sup>9</sup>

In the same vein, adults concoct individual or collective strategies for handling lexical issues or the challenges of written language. We invent names for new objects or situations we encounter – from “pineapple” (literally, a fruit – “apple” – that looks like a pine cone) to “pregnant chad” (for some of the questionable Florida ballot punches in the 2000 American

presidential race). In the realm of writing, from the early centuries of Christianity, authors and scribes made heavy use of abbreviations in producing handwritten manuscripts, thereby reducing the labor and expense involved in preparing documents on papyri and parchment.<sup>10</sup>

The relative importance of prescriptivism versus individual coping strategies may shift from one linguistic medium to another, as well as between sociohistorical periods. To see how the balance between these two variables has played out historically, we begin by looking at the evolution of linguistic prescriptivism in the modern English-speaking world.

### **PRESCRIBING MODERN ENGLISH LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR**

English linguistic prescriptivism came into its own in the eighteenth century, thanks to the social aspirations of would-be shopkeepers, merchants, and gentlemen. Since language usage was now a clear marker of social class, the newly rising were eager to learn how to write and speak “proper” English. Responding to the market, self-appointed language arbiters began lecturing and publishing handbooks, which were snapped up by the public.

Consider John Walker and Thomas Sheridan, both one-time actors who became leading teachers of elocution in eighteenth century England. Walker and Sheridan drew huge paying crowds to their lectures on how to speak properly. Walker’s *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language* went through more than a hundred editions. Sheridan’s *General Dictionary of the English Language* likewise met with resounding public success.<sup>11</sup> In fact, even Samuel Johnson’s biographer, James Boswell, took private speech lessons from Sheridan, despite Johnson’s assurances to Boswell that his accent was perfectly acceptable.<sup>12</sup>

How did the new language pundits determine the rules filling their treatises? Unlike France, neither Britain nor America had a language academy to decree how the language should

look and sound. Instead, prescriptivists largely followed the patterns of speech and writing used by the gentry (especially the better educated ones).<sup>13</sup> But authors also created rules out of whole cloth.

Bishop Robert Lowth led the charge for (written) grammatical prescriptivism that would last two centuries. Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) made clear that "good" English grammar must be fitted to the procrustean bed of Latin. He proclaimed, for example, that double negatives were unacceptable, as were sentence-final prepositions. While both constructions had been part of educated English for centuries, they were not found in classical Latin and therefore, Lowth maintained, were no longer to be tolerated in English.<sup>14</sup> By similar personal fiat, lexicographer and American patriot Noah Webster attacked eighteenth century British spelling, changing, for instance, "colour" to "color" and "traffick" to "traffic."<sup>15</sup> As recently as the early twentieth century, Henry Watson Fowler, author of the classic *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, literally made up distinctions between words (such as between "masterful" and "masterly") as suited his whim.<sup>16</sup>

Self-proclaimed language authorities persist to this day. Pronouncements on email usage, for example, sometimes reflect personal taste more than established linguistic conventions. To wit, the authors of *Wired Style*, Constance Hale and Jessie Scanlon, announce that the term *homepage* should be spelled as one word, with no hyphens between the two component parts. Their justification? They believe that "the two syllables combine to form one idea" and they "like the frontier echoes of 'homestead'."<sup>17</sup> In the same vein, Virginia Shea, author of *Netiquette*, acknowledges that she made up many parts of her book as she went along.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside prescriptive treatises on grammar, spelling, punctuation, or pronunciation, the English-speaking world has an extensive tradition of etiquette guides offering pointers on

linguistic appropriateness as part of broader treatises on personal comportment. Our discussion focuses on the role and content of such guides in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

As a land of opportunity, America has attracted waves of immigrants eager to make their way both economically and socially. Etiquette guides have provided relatively inexpensive and accessible tools for learning the rules of politeness that, at least historically, have been imperative if you hoped to mingle in “better” social circles. C. Dallett Hemphill writes that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “the main function of manners instructions was to guide the behavior of the newly rising groups.”<sup>20</sup> In 1906, Florence Howe Hall declared that “Natural prosperity has enabled a large portion of our people to pay more attention to the grace of life.”<sup>21</sup>

Judging from publication statistics, there was a strong market for etiquette guides among the rising classes. Arthur Schlesinger offers the following “incomplete enumeration” of distinct publications (i.e., ignoring revisions and successive editions of a work) appearing before the Civil War:

1830s: 28 different manuals

1840s: 36 different manuals

1850s: 38 different manuals

That is, an average of more than three new publications appeared each year.<sup>22</sup> John Kasson links the popularity of such guides to “the conviction that proper manners and social responsibility could be purchased and learned.”<sup>23</sup>

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the popular magazines aimed at middle-class women (such as *Women’s Home Companion* or *Ladies’ Home Journal*) were rife with articles on proper telephone etiquette or how to prepare dinner-party invitations. Emily

Post's *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* appeared in 1922, setting the standard for decades to come. While Post was arguably the best known arbiter of etiquette in the twentieth century, the genre boasted many other respected practitioners, including Millicent Fenwick<sup>24</sup> and Amy Vanderbilt.<sup>25</sup> Again, publication statistics evidence the popularity of such guides. From the period following the Civil War to 1946, a partial tabulation suggests that an average of five or six distinct etiquette books appeared each year:

1870-1917: average of 5-6 different manuals per year

1918-1929: 68 different manuals

1930-1946: 78 different manuals<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, by the early twentieth century, several of these works were becoming bestsellers. Lillian Eichler's *Book of Etiquette*, which first appeared in 1921, had sold more than a million copies by 1945. Post's *Etiquette* had topped two-thirds of a million in sales by the same year.<sup>27</sup>

Obviously, publication and sales figures alone are only clues, not proof that the audience purchasing such works actually read them and altered their behavior patterns (in dress, table manners, speech, or writing) accordingly. However, it is clear (e.g., from their prefatory remarks) that authors of these etiquette books had as their intended audiences "those seeking to overcome real or imagined 'disadvantages' of birth, class, and training, and to avoid social uncertainty, embarrassment, and ineptitude."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, at least some etiquette writers were aware that guides were being purchased "with an uneasy sense of shame," being "read *sub rosa*" and kept "out of sight" by social aspirants whose ownership of such books reflected the reality that their readers were in need of social instruction.<sup>29</sup>

As in the case of grammatical prescriptivism, "rules" in the etiquette guides have largely reflected upper-class practices. However, when new forms of communication have appeared

(such as telephones, answering machines, fax machines, cell phones, or email), authors haven't hesitated to invent usage rules. For example, in her contemporary etiquette guide *Can I Fax a Thank-You Note?*, Audrey Glassman confidently instructs readers on her notion of proper cell phone usage:

Turn your cell phone off – except in private or emergency situations. If you have a cellular phone, chances are you can afford a beeper. When in social situations, direct calls to your beeper and keep it on vibration mode.<sup>30</sup>

Just so, with regard to email, Judith Martin (aka Miss Manners) declares matter-of-factly that serious presents, such as wedding presents, and serious hospitality, such as an overnight stay, require serious letters where the seriousness of paper and ink may be experienced first-hand – in other words, by mail, rather than fax .... E-mail ... is excellent for spontaneous little bursts of gratitude and a supplement to big ones.<sup>31</sup>

On what authority do Glassman and Martin legislate such practices? As in Shea's case with *Netiquette*, we can only assume some combination of common sense and personal creativity.

Etiquette books have traditionally spelled out lists of social “do”s and “don’t”s. But in addition, the genre commonly provides sample texts illustrating what to say or write. Readers are encouraged to adapt these texts or even copy them verbatim. Nowhere is the case of etiquette-by-example more clearly demonstrated than in guides to letter-writing.

## **DEMOCRATIZING LETTER-WRITING**

The history of letter-writing guides is a vital piece of our story because of the role they played when increased education, coupled with postal reforms, made it possible for a widely expanded portion of society to send letters. While these new correspondents might already possess basic

literacy skills, they often didn't know how to compose business or personal letters. To understand how rising literacy rates, falling postal costs, and opportunities for social mobility helped generate a burgeoning market for normative letter-writing guides aimed at a popular audience, we look at each factor in turn.

### **The Literacy Factor**

Measuring historical literacy rates is as much an art as a science, in part because there is no commonly accepted definition of the term "literacy." One study counts a person as literate if he could sign his name (i.e., as opposed to simply making a mark) while another measures ability to read the Bible – even if the individual in question could not write his own name.<sup>32</sup> While no single measure is ideal, at least using the same uniform criterion provides a place to begin mapping literacy trends.

Using the signature literacy test, David Cressy suggests that literacy rates among men in England rose from roughly 10% in 1500 to nearly 30% in 1600, 40% in 1700, and about 60% in 1800.<sup>33</sup> It's important to keep in mind that literacy skills were not equally distributed across social classes or professions. Not surprisingly, the higher one's social standing (and generally, by implication, one's level of education), the greater the level of literacy one was likely to have. Similarly, within the same broad social class (e.g., skilled craftsmen or tradesmen), literacy levels differed widely, depending upon the needs of the profession. Goldsmiths in rural England, for example, were nearly twice as likely to be literate as were wheelrights.<sup>34</sup>

What about literacy trends in America? Kenneth Lockridge's studies of signature literacy in colonial New England (comparing signatures versus marks on wills) report relatively high levels of literacy among white males:

1650-1670:           60%

1705-1715:           70%

1787-1795:           90%

Rates for females lagged behind:

1650-1670:           30%

1705-1715:           40%

1787-1795:           almost 50%<sup>35</sup>

Literacy rates were higher in New England than in the south or the mid Atlantic region, reflecting immigration patterns as well as religion<sup>36</sup>

Over the next hundred years, literacy rates in America benefited from a growing commitment to public education.<sup>37</sup> However, immigration and settlement patterns made for wide discrepancies in literacy. While the largest gaps, according to Carl Kaestle, "were between native whites, foreign-born whites, and nonwhites," there was also strong variance across geographic regions, income levels, and rural versus urban locations.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, studies suggest that standard tests of signature literacy may be problematic since significant portions of the population may never have signed (or put marks to) documents such as deeds or wills,<sup>39</sup> thereby artificially inflating reported levels of signature literacy.

Yet despite our difficulties in accurately measuring the rise in literacy, we can say with confidence that both literacy levels and educational opportunities continued to increase in nineteenth century America. As for literacy, US Census data report a decline in white illiteracy

(males and females combined) from 10.7% in 1850 to 6.2% in 1900. When native-born versus foreign-born whites are tallied separately, the statistics for illiteracy in 1900 stood at 4.6% (native) and 12.9% (foreign), with an illiteracy rate for nonwhites reported at 44.5%.<sup>40</sup> As for education, Massachusetts introduced tax-supported “common schools” (elementary schools teaching basic skills) in 1827.<sup>41</sup> In 1852, New York became the first state to mandate statewide compulsory education. Massachusetts followed a year later, and gradually other states fell in line.<sup>42</sup> As we shall see, included in the common school curriculum were not just basic literacy skills but instruction in how to write letters.

### **The Cost Factor**

Literacy was not the only significant impediment to more democratized access to letter-writing. For many years, poor roads, highway robbers, and lack of post offices and delivery systems made letter-writing a problematic medium for conveying messages.<sup>43</sup> But the biggest hurdle was postage costs.

Consider the situation in England. In 1680, a penny post was established for mail delivered within the city and close-in suburbs of London.<sup>44</sup> However, up until 1840, the same item sent beyond the London metropolis could become costly indeed. Prices were set by both distance and the number of sheets of paper sent. Before the reforms instituted by Rowland Hill in 1840, a simple inland (i.e., within England) letter cost six pence – “a sum which was around one fifth to one tenth of many people’s weekly wage.”<sup>45</sup> Postal reforms introduced on January 10, 1840, reduced the price of a half-ounce letter carried anywhere in the United Kingdom to one penny. The effect on the number of letters mailed was immediate and dramatic. Martin Dauntton

reports the following statistics (in millions of letters mailed for which postage was paid) in the years surrounding the cost reduction:

1839:	75.9
1840:	168.8
1845:	271.4
1850:	347.1
1853:	410.8 <sup>46</sup>

The United States experienced a similar evolution in postage costs. In the eighteenth century, mailing was expensive. As in England, postage was charged by distance sent and number of pages, and was generally paid for not by the sender but by the recipient. Abigail Adams, writing to her husband in 1783, chided John Adams for failing to fill up all the white space on the pages of a letter he had sent her: “I paid 3 dollors the other day for what one sheet of paper would have contained.”<sup>47</sup>

Postage remained expensive in America up into the early 1840s. For example, in 1843, it cost more (18 ½ cents) to post a letter from New York City to Troy, New York than to send a barrel of flour between the same cities (12 ½ cents). For a laborer, mailing a letter cross-country might cost the equivalent of a day’s wages.<sup>48</sup>

A note of caution is in order in looking at historical communication costs. In comparing prices of posting letters (or sending telegrams or making long distance phone calls), it’s important to keep in mind how much inflation (or, during some periods, deflation) has changed the value of a dollar over time. For example, an item that cost roughly \$5 in 1850 would have

cost \$100 in 2000; a price of roughly \$14 in 1950 was equivalent to \$100 in 2000. That letter sent for 18 ½ cents in 1843 would have cost the equivalent of \$3.19 in 2000.<sup>49</sup>

Through a series of postal reforms, culminating in 1851, rates then plummeted. The cost of sending a half-ounce letter as far as 3000 miles fell to 3 cents if prepaid (5 cents if not).<sup>50</sup> As in England, reduced postal rates encouraged a marked rise in the number of letters being sent. Richard John reports that

by 1830, the total [number of letters transmitted through the postal system] ... [was] 14 million, which was roughly one letter per free person per year.... By 1856, the comparable total had increased to around 130 million, or 5.3 letters per free person per year.<sup>51</sup>

Possession of essential literacy skills plus affordable postage rates were important ingredients for facilitating the growth in written correspondence. Now we need to understand *who* was sending all these additional letters – and *why*.

### **Social Change and the Rise of Complete Letter-Writers**

The English-speaking world has a long history of genteel letter-writing, documented back at least to the Paston family letters in the fifteenth century and reaching something of an apotheosis in the eighteenth century, as seen in the correspondence of such figures as Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Samuel Johnson, and Horace Walpole. However, besides genteel correspondents, new groups of would-be letter-writers began learning the epistolary craft, driven by desire for social mobility and employment opportunities provided by an increasingly business-oriented economy.

How do people learn to write letters? In traditional upper-class families, children and young adults tended to be taught by tutors or through familial example. In the US, at least from the nineteenth century<sup>52</sup> until fairly recently, lower education regularly included the art of letter-writing in the formal curriculum. However, both in England and America, the new classes of writers were heavily dependent upon a genre of instructional books known as “complete letter-writers.”<sup>53</sup>

Letter-writing guides in the English-speaking world grew out of a subject in the medieval university curriculum known as *ars dictaminis*, which applied the principles of Roman rhetoric to composing legal letters. Rules for composition were augmented with models (in Latin, of course) from classical authors. These models were intended to be copied verbatim or lightly adapted “by those unable or unwilling to prepare letters of their own.”<sup>54</sup>

Such formulaic letters provided a working foundation for the explosion in legal documentation in the early Renaissance. By the latter half of the sixteenth century, books began appearing in English (for example, William Fulwood’s *The Enimie of Idlenesse*, 1568 or Angel Day’s *The English Secretorie*, 1586), based on French prototypes, that offered sample letters on such personal subjects as what to write to a son who had been behaving badly or how the son’s response should read. Often the sample letters were preceded by a brief section on English grammar. The genre, which came to be known as the complete letter-writer, flourished, and persists to this day.<sup>55</sup>

Up through the mid seventeenth century, letter-writing (and complete letter-writers) were largely reserved for the educated classes. The situation was to change in 1687 with publication in London of John Hill’s *The Young Secretary’s Guide*, which, along with its successors, catered not to the gentry but “to the practical interests of the masses.”<sup>56</sup>

*The Young Secretary's Guide* (and other works like it) offered a treasure trove of sample letters concerning the sorts of issues with which the newly-rising *bourgeoise* had to deal, including “Instructions how properly to *Entitle, Subscribe, or Direct a Letter* to any Person of what Quality soever” and “an Exact Collection of Acquittances, Bills, Bonds, Wills, Indentures, Deeds of Gift, Letters of Attorney.”<sup>57</sup> This new genre of practical letter-writing guides for the masses met with astounding success. By 1764, *The Young Secretary's Guide* was in its twenty-seventh edition in London, going on to multiple editions in Boston as well.<sup>58</sup>

Katherine Hornbeak argues that the development and success of letter-writers that were aimed at the humbler classes was due to three factors: the rise of a middle class, the spread of education, and English postal reforms that included a sharp rate drop, making it feasible for those with limited incomes to post correspondence.<sup>59</sup> Hornbeak concludes that “it is not unreasonable to perceive a causal connection between the improved postal facilities and the crop of bourgeois letter-writers appearing in 1687 and thereafter.”<sup>60</sup> (Recall that the London penny post was introduced in 1680.)

By the middle of the eighteenth century, complete letter-writers underwent further evolution as the focus shifted from business concerns to the “familiar” letter. While such letters (in essence, personal letters to family and friends) had long been exchanged among members of the upper classes, Samuel Richardson’s *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends, on the Most Important Occasions* (1714) “now urged [letter-writing] upon anyone aspiring to social refinement.”<sup>61</sup> Manuals such as Richardson’s were highly successful on both sides of the Atlantic. In the first half of the eighteenth century, 32 such books were produced in America. During the second half of the century, the number had climbed to nearly 400.<sup>62</sup>

What drove the popularity of these guides? In the words of Konstantin Dierks, “Linguistic refinement had clearly become faddish as an instrument and symbol of upward mobility.”<sup>63</sup>

Letter-writing guides continued their popularity well into the nineteenth century. In the United States, 60 new editions of letter-writers appeared between 1837 and 1857.<sup>64</sup> While there is no evidence at hand specifically linking a rise in sales of letter-writing guides in America to declines in postal rates in the 1840s and 1850s, it is very clear that authors of such guides took as their intended audience those of humble origins – and means. For example, *Frost’s Original Letter-Writer* (1867) observed that

there are vast numbers of people who seldom write or read a letter, and who, when the want is felt, are deeply sensible of their own deficiency. Many who handle the saw or hammer daily, will shrink from attempting to wield a pen, and feel that their own want of practice will cause them to make blunders that will excite the ridicule of their correspondent.<sup>65</sup>

Now even the workman with minimal literacy skills had access to the niceties of proper letter-writing.

As we have already noted, in nineteenth century America letter-writing instruction became a regular component of the public-school curriculum. Its role turned out to be multifaceted. Not only were children taught to write familiar letters and, sometimes, to write business and social letters. At the same time, argues Lucille Schultz, letter-writing provided more general instruction in etiquette, “inculcating children with the manners and morals of polite society.”<sup>66</sup>

## LANGUAGE BY WIRE

If democratizing letter-writing was heavily bound up with prescriptive language etiquette, introduction of the telegraph in 1844 predominantly called forth individual coping strategies for handling the new medium. Eventually, the general etiquette literature expanded to include new conventions for telegraph usage. However, two other concerns regarding the telegraph proved especially pressing. The first was to construct a personal understanding of how the technology worked (which had not been an issue for new letter-writers). And the second was to figure out how to formulate messages succinctly in order to save money.

The physics of telegraphy was incomprehensible to much of the general public. To some early users, surely the piece of paper on which their message was written must be traveling through space – like traditional letters carried by post, only faster.<sup>67</sup> In the same vein, early in the telegraph's history, some people expressed concern “over the risks of physical connection by wire to those who were diseased.”<sup>68</sup>

Complementing these individual attempts to make sense of telegraph technology were larger questions of how communicating by telegraph might be legally defined. Can you get married by telegraph? People did.<sup>69</sup> Are notices transmitted by telegraph (rather than by letter) legally sufficient? Courts began ruling that yes, they were.<sup>70</sup> Is the telegraph company liable for damages caused by errors in the transmission of messages?<sup>71</sup> Are the contents of telegrams privileged information, as in the case of letters? And who “owns” the original message transmitted?<sup>72</sup> Soon treatises devoted to telegraph law began to appear.<sup>73</sup>

As use of the telegraph became more familiar, the primacy of coping strategies made room for considerations of etiquette, at least among the well-to-do. Was it, for example, acceptable to telegraph an invitation to a dinner party? (Initially the answer was “no.”)

Pronouncements on appropriate telegraph behavior can be found well into the twentieth century.<sup>74</sup>

Etiquette guides sometimes offered sample wording for composing commonly sent telegrams, such as for reserving a hotel room in another city. In 1919, a literary magazine of the time, *The Dial*, reported on a publication called *Forms Suggested for Telegraph Messages* containing message templates that could be adapted for any situation necessitating a telegram be sent. Congratulating a parent on the birth of a child? Try

I (we) am (are) delighted to hear of the birth of your first (second) (third) (fourth) son (daughter) .... Kiss it (him) (her) for me (us). My (our) love.

Need an all-purpose form lauding personal success?

I (we) congratulate you on your school (college) (political) (professional) success. I (we) am (are) justly proud of my (our) son (daughter) (friend) (congressman) (doctor).<sup>75</sup>

About the same time, Western Union began offering “prepared texts for those who needed help in finding the right words for the right occasion.”<sup>76</sup>

But unlike the complete letter-writers, guides for composing telegrams don’t seem to have achieved widespread popularity. The reason, most likely, was money. Since telegrams were charged by the number of distinct words transmitted, cost considerations dwarfed concerns about the niceties of etiquette.

In the United States, there were fixed prices for sending ten-word telegrams, with the specific charge reflecting the distance the message had to travel (that is, following the earlier postal rubric). An additional charge was made for each word over ten. Accordingly, there was strong motivation to cram as much information as possible within the confines of a single word.

How expensive was it to send a telegram? To illustrate the pricing issue: In 1868, Western Union charged 65 cents to send a ten word telegram from Binghamton, New York to New York City, but only 35 cents to send the same length message between Binghamton and Elmira (NY). Telegrams that were more than ten words cost an extra 4 cents per word between Binghamton and New York City, but only an extra 2 cents per word between Binghamton and Elmira.<sup>77</sup>

Telegrams sent even greater distances could be very expensive indeed. In 1866, the minimum charge for a telegram of ten words or fewer sent between New York and San Francisco was \$7.45. (In equivalent dollars in 2000, that would be \$80.91.)<sup>78</sup> The minimum charge had dropped to \$2.50 by 1873<sup>79</sup> – still a substantial sum at a time when a letter of several pages could be sent the same distance (albeit far more slowly) for 3 cents.

Who cared about cost? Almost everyone, including the press, businesses, and private citizens.

From the earliest days of the telegraph, American newspaper reporters became highly dependent upon telegraphy for transmitting stories to their home offices and later to multiple papers across the country.<sup>80</sup> Use of abbreviations was a common means the press employed for cutting down on the number of distinct words sent across the wire. For example, the single “word” SCOTUS might be used in lieu of the five-word Supreme Court of the United States.<sup>81</sup>

Individual businesses were also heavy users of the telegraph. Their two major concerns were privacy and economy. Privacy was generally facilitated by using code or cipher words. However, in the process of constructing their code books, businesses also managed to reduce costs substantially by using a single word to stand for an entire phrase or sentence. For example, in *The Motor Trade Telegram Code*, printed in 1921, the message “Shall we ship” is expressed

through the single code-word *loaza*, and “Quote price and earliest date of shipment” gets compressed into *ixuah*.<sup>82</sup>

Cost considerations also figured into composing private telegrams. One strategy was to string several English words together to look like a single word (“AREYOUSURE” for “are you sure” or “SMORNING” for “this morning”). In the same spirit, writers of telegraphic code books designed “to cheapen [the cost] of telegraphy” for everyone from bankers and merchants to travelers and “the public generally” proposed such codes as

afford = We do not understand 1<sup>st</sup> word in your telegram. Please repeat it.

or

albacore = Your telegram only received to-day; it crossed mine.<sup>83</sup>

One strictly socially-oriented code book offers the following sorts of code words for sending telegrams when traveling:

conquer = I am learning all the new dances; don't you wish you were here?

fierce = Accommodations poor. I advise you not to come.<sup>84</sup>

As users learned to compress their messages into fewer units that counted as words, the average cost of sending a telegram fell.<sup>85</sup> With an overall increase in telegraph volume, telegraph companies were able to reduce their unit charges and still keep profits up,<sup>86</sup> a principle that would later apply, in turn, to the telephone and then to Internet accounts.

Given the consumer's drive to pack as much information as possible into a “word,” it was only natural that the telegraph industry fought back. The industry set limits on the number of letters that a “word” could have and, in the case of ciphers (like *ixuah*), on the kinds of consonant and vowel combinations that would be permitted.<sup>87</sup> Early issues of *The Telegrapher* (the trade

journal of the Western Union Telegraph Company) are full of queries from local telegraph offices as to how many chargeable words a particular telegram contains.<sup>88</sup>

In sum, the telegraph posed two major challenges to the public. The first was how to make sense of the technology. The second was how to craft messages that could be sent inexpensively. Beyond the need to devise coping strategies on both fronts, a small (generally financially well-to-do) groups of users also concerned themselves with the niceties of telegraph etiquette. However, since regular use of telegrams remained a luxury beyond the financial reach of most Americans (at least during the nineteenth century), the vast majority of potential users had little motivation to master the emerging social and linguistic intricacies of a medium they rarely encountered.

### **PHONING SPIRITS**

Alexander Graham Bell's "talking telephone" was patented in 1876. As with the telegraph before it, the mechanical workings of the new device proved mysterious to many, engendering now-humorous attempts to make cognitive sense of the apparatus.

In 1884, a California granger was reported (perhaps apocryphally) to have attempted stuffing rolled-up strips of written messages into a telephone transmitter.<sup>89</sup> Ten years later, "the editor of a prominent Philadelphia newspaper ... cautioned his readers not to converse by phone with ill persons for fear of contracting contagious diseases."<sup>90</sup> Perhaps strangest of all was the cognitive model for the telephone worked out by a mid western woman in the early 1900s:

A woman in Columbus, Indiana, wanted to have a telephone installed at the head of the grave of a long-dead relative. The woman, who claimed she could carry on conversations with the spirits of the dead when she visited the cemetery, believed she could eliminate

the trip by dialing up the grave-site on the phone and having the spirit of the dearly departed answer.<sup>91</sup>

The telephone, like the telegraph, introduced new legal considerations: When could a telephone conversation stand in lieu of a written agreement? Were telephone calls wholly privileged communication? Was marriage by telephone legally binding? How do you handle profanity? A century later, the same kinds of legal issues would arise with email, though the question now is often whether written language (letter, telegram, fax) or spoken language (the telephone) serves as legal precedent.<sup>92</sup>

Not surprisingly, cost considerations helped shape the nature of telephone communication, especially in the early decades. Phone calls were expensive, particularly long distance. In 1915, a three minute, station-to-station daytime call between New York City and San Francisco cost an astonishing \$20.70<sup>93</sup> – or \$343.30 in 2000 dollars.<sup>94</sup> (Compare this price with a ten word telegram, which by then cost about \$1,<sup>95</sup> and a half-ounce letter, which cost just pennies.). The cost of a three minute transcontinental call didn't go below \$5 until nearly 1940.<sup>96</sup>

Before the post-war prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s, many people in the United States did not have telephones in their residences. In 1920, only 35% of households had phone service. By 1946, the number had risen to 51.4%, but as late as 1960, the number was still only 78.3%.<sup>97</sup> For those who did have telephones at home, service was often a party line that allowed other subscribers to listen in on your phone calls. In many parts of the US, local calls were charged by timed message units (akin to modern long distance), discouraging lengthy phone conversations among people of modest means. The major effect of these price factors (at least before World

War II) was to define the telephone as an instrument to be used for conveying essential information rather than for extended, casual social banter.<sup>98</sup>

Complementing these technological and fiscal issues were the complex challenges the telephone posed in the world of communication etiquette. Anyone with access to the instrument – rich or poor, whether calling from a drawing room or from a public phone available at the local pharmacy – had to figure out to whom calls could legitimately be placed, what kinds of topics were appropriate to discuss, and even how to initiate and terminate a conversation.<sup>99</sup>

Take the issue of what information you could appropriately impart over the telephone. Guidance from the etiquette experts began appearing in profusion and persists until this day.<sup>100</sup> One continuing topic of discussion has been whether an invitation might be issued over the telephone (an issue encountered earlier with telegrams). For decades, the self-appointed social arbiters said “no,” for “the person invited [by phone], being suddenly held up at the point of a gun, as it were, is likely to forget some other engagement” or simply feel there is no choice but to accept.<sup>101</sup> Some etiquette mavens softened their position as telephone use became more commonplace, though others held firm, not fully relenting until the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>102</sup>

One of the most curious chapters in the evolution of telephone etiquette involved how to initiate conversations. When Alexander Graham Bell launched the telephone, he recommended saying “Ahoy” (normally used for hailing ships) to begin a phone conversation. Because telephone lines of the day were always “live,” individuals placing calls needed some means of signaling their presence and desire to talk with the person at the other end.

To appreciate what happened next, we need to be aware of the bitter rivalry between Bell and Thomas Alva Edison. Edison, who had vied with Bell over first patent rights on a talking

telephone, threw his inventive talents into creating an alternative technology – the phonograph, which was designed to capture spoken acoustic signals onto a waxed cylinder that could then physically be delivered to the intended recipient.<sup>103</sup> In the summer of 1877, while experimenting with his early phonograph, Edison shouted “Halloo” (a traditional hunting call to the hounds) into the mouthpiece of the device.

Two months later, Edison suggested a variant of “Halloo” in corresponding with a friend about how to solve the signaling problem on telephone calls. Edison wrote: “I don’t think we shall need a call bell[,] as Hello! can be heard 10 to 20 feet away.” Note that Edison had been hired by Western Union to design a telephone unit that would compete with Bell’s. As a result, Edison was in an excellent position to lobby for use of “Hello” (instead of his rival’s “Ahoy”) as an opening telephone greeting.<sup>104</sup>

But there was a problem. At the time, “Hello” (and its variants) were viewed as vulgar language. Etiquette books inveighed against the use of Edison’s greeting. Bell’s company, AT&T, fought to suppress use of “Hello,” and as recently as the 1940s, social arbiter Millicent Fenwick deemed the word acceptable only under limited circumstances.<sup>105</sup> But such prescriptivist efforts were of little avail. “Hello” had moved into common usage by the turn of the twentieth century. Over time, it became not only the standard way to begin a phone conversation but (at least in the United States) the normal greeting for initiating face-to-face spoken encounters.

Early users of the telephone and the telegraph faced many of the same challenges, including devising coping strategies for making cognitive sense of how messages are transmitted, along with handling both legal and fiscal issues. In the case of the telephone, etiquette guides offered a profusion of advice for using the medium. Judging from the continuing

sales of magazines and books discussing proper telephone protocol, we can surmise that the advice was widely accessible. However, we don't have clear evidence as to how much the advice was actually read – or followed.

## **INVENTING THE FUTURE**

As a new technology for communicating at a distance, email is once again challenging language users to work out stylistic conventions for approaching the medium. Our discussion here focuses on the effects of cost reduction and the concomitant surge in new usership on the question of who determines email style.

As in the case of personal letter-writing (and later, the telephone), falling prices and improvements in delivery systems have helped democratize email, especially over the past decade. Howard Rheingold reminisces how in 1985 he joined the early computer networking community known as the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), paying \$3 an hour to access the system – resulting in a first monthly phone bill of over \$100.<sup>106</sup> Today, for around \$20 a month, home computer users in the US can literally access the “whole earth” twenty-four hours a day (not only for sending email but for multiple other Internet uses) and at speeds that make modem transmission of the late 1980s and early 1990s pale. People with access to “free” university or business connections reduce the cost to zero and often benefit from even faster transmission speeds.<sup>107</sup>

As a medium for communicating at a distance, email has experienced a meteoric rise. Email as a personal messaging system was invented a mere 30 years ago,<sup>108</sup> and the publicly accessible Internet infrastructure through which the preponderance of messages are sent is less than half that age.<sup>109</sup> Yet by the end of 2001, more than 100 million American adults had Internet

access.<sup>110</sup> Statistics collected at the end of 2000 indicate that of those with Internet access, 49% sent email messages on an average day.<sup>111</sup>

How many email messages do Americans send? It's hard to get precise figures, given that the Internet is, by design, both decentralized and outside the purview of regulatory control. However, a few snapshot statistics give a sense of how ubiquitous electronic messaging has become. The International Data Corporation reports that 9.8 billion electronic messages are sent daily (presumably world-wide).<sup>112</sup> A website at Clemson University (in South Carolina) indicates that by the end of the Spring 2000 semester, students and employees were downloading 2 million email messages per school day. Given there were roughly 47,000 email accounts on campus (as of September, 2000), that averages out to almost 43 messages downloaded per person per day.<sup>113</sup>

Who is shaping the messaging style for this prolific medium? Email style guides began appearing in the business world in the mid 1980s.<sup>114</sup> The explosion in email use in the 1990s bringing forth a substantial number of books, articles, and web sites aimed at the wider public.<sup>115</sup> But do people read them? As we have seen, complete letter-writers appeared by the hundreds, and some general etiquette books became standout bestsellers. While I have no sales statistics on email usage guides,<sup>116</sup> such books don't appear to be topping the sales charts or going through many editions.

The social, educational, and fiscal circumstances surrounding email at the turn of the new century are quite distinct from those facing earlier cohorts of new letter-writers, telegraph users, and people making telephone calls. Those sending email messages today are not using the medium for social mobility. They are educated, literate, and know how to write letters of the traditional sort. They don't seem particularly concerned with understanding how the technology works (as long as their Internet connections are functioning). Moreover, since the number of

words in a message or the physical distance between sender and recipient doesn't affect cost (which is generally prepaid or free to the user anyway), those constructing email messages are freed from a number of considerations that were of paramount importance to earlier generations crafting language used at a distance.

If prescriptive guide books, educational issues, cognitive modeling, and cost considerations aren't shaping contemporary email behavior, how are new users determining how to construct messages? Commonly, novitiates begin by using conventions familiar from traditional letter-writing (or, in office contexts, memoranda). Like travelers adopting local customs, many users pick up conventions (e.g., regarding greetings or use of acronyms) from the email they receive or, in the case of parents, from advice proffered by children.

Even the handbooks, articles, and web sites that do exist offer little consistent help, should email users seek guidance. While the advice extended in earlier letter-writing guides was fairly homogeneous from one volume to the next, today's email handbooks sometimes present starkly divergent views on how to formulate messages. For example, *Wired Style* breezily recommends writers to

Think blunt bursts and sentence fragments .... Spelling and punctuation are loose and playful. (No one reads email with red pen in hand.)

while *The Elements of Email Style* is more conservative:

By focusing on the 20 percent of English grammar, usage, and mechanics issues that cause 80 percent of the problems in writing e-mail, you can quickly and dramatically improve your e-mail messages.<sup>117</sup>

Contemporary email etiquette often takes its cues as much from convenience as from prior social convention. Follow-up thank-you letters from job candidates were largely replaced by email messages years ago. Condolence letters – which once had to be handwritten – now show up as email or even e-greeting cards.<sup>118</sup>

Underlying most decisions about how to formulate email messages – formal or informal, sloppy or edited – are conceptual models individual users construct (generally unconsciously) of whether email is more like speech or more like writing. That is, we must decide whether to employ conventions of informal speech (including assumptions that the message will be private and ephemeral, and that precision isn't overly important) or assumptions about more formal writing (that messages are durable and can end up in the hands of unknown others). Many computer users function with a mental model of email as a private, speech-like medium of communication that disappears without a trace when “deleted,” even when we rationally know better. However, there is also a good deal of variation across individual users (and usage contexts) in the extent to which we model email as a spoken or a written medium.<sup>119</sup>

Beyond usage conventions, beyond etiquette, even beyond individual modeling strategies, the aspect of email usage that may prove most linguistically interesting in the early twenty-first century is message length. In the initial days of email, messages were short. Murray Turoff had insisted that messages be confined to a single screen-worth of text, an edict endorsed by business.<sup>120</sup> Given the CRT displays of the 1970s and early 1980s, this constraint meant few lines indeed.

As email began pervading universities and then spreading to a larger general usership, email length expanded. You could write at your leisure, compose with ease (given modern word

processing features), and send off your message only when you were ready. Multi-page emails became common.

Recently, however, three technological developments have begun to encourage shorter messages. The first, instant messaging, converts the monologue of writing into the dialogue of spoken give-and-take. Since the turns are shorter, so must our written messages be. The second development, hand-held devices for sending and receiving email (such as palms and cell phones) are best suited for short messages, given the lack of a real keyboard and the small screen for viewing what has been written. A third factor is the “time out” program still included on many public-access computers and subscription dial-up services that disconnects users if there has been no Internet activity for a set number of minutes. While some systems give the user warning, others simply terminate the connection. If you’ve been carefully constructing or editing a lengthy email, you risk losing your handiwork before it can be sent. Shorter (and sloppier) emails that are shipped out within the allotted time are safer. Abbreviations and elimination of words deemed superfluous render email composition faster still.

The email style now emerging is reminiscent of telegraphic language that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. While the driving force in composing telegrams was cost, the technology itself discouraged lengthy messages. Transmission bottlenecks were created at telegraph offices when swarms of reporters wanted to file stories, via the telegraph, at the same time. These communication log jams were eventually cleared by creation of the Associated Press (which made it possible to simultaneously file one story with hundreds of newspapers) as well as by a change in journalistic writing style from flowery to succinct.<sup>121</sup>

Did the technology impact language beyond the world of telegrams and news stories? It has been argued that mechanical limitations of the telegraph contributed to – or at least were

supportive of – restructuring of American prose in the decades following the invention of the telegraph.

As early as 1848, the case was made that English prose style would become more concise as a result of cost constraints on sending telegrams. The argument, presented in an unsigned article in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, went like this. Because the cost of sending telegrams is determined by the number of words in the message, “the *desideratum* of the Telegraph ... is ... *How can the greatest amount of intelligence be communicated in the fewest words?*” The author proceeded to suggest that the “terse, condensed, expressive” style of telegrams, “sparing of expletives and utterly ignorant of synonyms,” would not be confined “within the narrow precincts of the Telegraph office, or limited to the pen of the operator.” Why not? Because of the number of people whose own writing style would be influenced by the language they read daily in the newspaper, much of which had been sent over the telegraph wire:

When a half column or more of every paper in the Union is filled with Telegraphic despatches [sic]; when these reports form a large part of the daily reading of thousands; when correspondence is hourly prepared and revised, throughout the whole extent of the United States, with a view to telegraphic transmission, is it too much to expect that this invention will have an influence upon American literature; and that that influence will be marked and permanent

and, the writer judges, “salutary.”<sup>122</sup> Such influence was viewed as positive in that it cut through the more ponderous style of prose that was common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

At the turn of the twentieth century, in an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Robert Lincoln O’Brien explored the broad effects of the telegraph (along with those of shorthand, the

telephone, the typewriter, and newspaper headlines) on language in America. This time, however, the author found the effects of the new technology to be deleterious.

All of O'Brien's examples derive from good-faith efforts by writers to compensate for errors in telegraphic transmission, which, unfortunately, were fairly common. Consider, says O'Brien, the understandable tendency of people sending telegraph messages to use longer rather than shorter words as a hedge against errors in transmission. For example, by writing the word "superintendent" instead of "head," or "overseer" instead of "chief" in a telegram, there are

fewer chances that either of these long words will be confused at any point in the journey with something varying in perhaps a single letter. The long word throws out more life-lines.

Unfortunately, longer words undermined the American rhetorical move favoring (shorter) Anglo-Saxon words over Latinate ones.<sup>123</sup>

Another example involves rearranging sentence structures to avoid confusion that might result from transmitting punctuation marks incorrectly. O'Brien points out the dangers of entrusting to telegraphers sentences that begin with adverbial clauses. If the period ending the previous sentence is mis-transmitted as a comma, the opening adverbial phrase of the next sentence may inadvertently become part of the earlier sentence. (Since telegrams were sent using only upper-case letters, there was no unique capital letter to mark the beginning of a sentence.)

A rational strategy would be to stick to sentences that begin with noun subjects. However, the effect on prose style is less than desirable:

Much of the graceful elision of one sentence into the next is lost by this requirement. Where each sentence stands out as distinct as a brick the literary passage will have the aspect of a brick wall.

While such effects on English prose may not be welcomed, they may nonetheless be inevitable:

If the typewriter and the telegraph, for mechanical reasons purely, are encouraging certain words, certain arrangements of phrases, and a different dependence on punctuation, such an influence is a stone whose ripples, once set in motion, wash every shore of the sea of literature.<sup>124</sup>

Over the past century and a half, English prose style has undergone a profound transformation.<sup>125</sup> Returning to the examples we offered at the outset of this essay, compare the syntactically intricate and stylistically varied writings of Macaulay with the far simpler, direct sentences of Hemingway (whose prose reflects his experience as a war correspondent, bound by the transmission strictures of the telegraph). Even so simple a measure as average sentence length reveals the shift. During the span of the nineteenth century, the average written English sentence was between 30 and 40 words long. By the 1980s, that number had shrunk to 20 words.<sup>126</sup>

It's impossible to determine the extent to which the telegraph may have been responsible for this change. We know that many other forces were at work in America to bring about what has been called a "democratic eloquence," a "plain, unadorned, declarative prose ..., a prose leaner than anything traditional rhetoricians had favored except for the simplest of purposes."<sup>127</sup> What we can say with certainty is that the telegraph – as a technology both prone to transmission error and costly to employ – reinforced reforming trends at work on American English both before and after 1844.

And what of email? Is the use of email – and its typical inattention to spelling, punctuation, and editing – affecting contemporary written American English?

In recent years, a number of literary critics have expressed concern over whether written English is becoming sloppier and losing some of its clarity and expressive power, at least in part due to the rise of electronic communication.<sup>128</sup> However, another way to think about the problem is to ask whether English was already in the process of becoming less edited and less tightly argued than in decades past, with email style reinforcing on-going change rather than initiating it.

If we look carefully at the evolution of English composition instruction in America over the past 125 years, we find an increasing trend for pedagogy to encourage students to write informally, to focus on content rather than mechanics; to be, in short, more speech-like.<sup>129</sup> Seen against this historical backdrop, we can conclude that email style is, at a minimum, reinforcing on-going trends in the evolution of English prose for writing to mimic informal speech.

While some composition and rhetoric professionals seem unconcerned about these trends,<sup>130</sup> many teachers of writing are less sanguine. Moreover, besides stylistic considerations, there remains the issue of composition length. In the decade ahead, as we continue to increase the percentage of writing done on-line,<sup>131</sup> contemporary email patterns of ever-shorter messages may well influence our understanding of what constitutes “good” writing when it does appear on the printed (or printed out) page.

Years ago, Alan Kay mused that “the best way to predict the future is to invent it.” Whenever language users gain access to a new medium or a new language technology, they are faced with the challenge of how to apply it. While external guidance can be helpful, it’s clear in the case of email that individuals have a significant hand in blazing their own usage trails and, in the process, in helping to create the future of the medium.

In the early days of a new language technology, the excitement of linguistic freedom may outweigh concerns over whether the paths being defined create unintended consequences

regarding precision and richness of linguistic expression. In the coming years, it will be interesting to see how the tension between individual coping strategies versus academically constructed standards for writing on-line plays out.

## NOTES

1. My thanks to Talbot Taylor for pointing out this *BBC Online* news item.
2. Crystal, 1995, p. 149.
3. Mugglestone, 1995, pp. 17-18, 23.
4. Scragg, 1974, p. 90; Mugglestone, 1995.
5. Writing seems to have emerged independently at several points in history, the first of which was in Mesopotamia around 3000 BC – see Coulmas, 1989, p. 72.
6. Drums, smoke signals, message sticks, and such are semiotically interesting but lack the linguistic power and nuance of human speech.
7. For more detailed discussion of differences between spoken and written language, see, for example, Chafe & Tannen, 1987.
8. See N.S. Baron, 1992, pp. 94ff for an analysis of how children engage in what I have called “language orienteering” to make their way through the unfamiliar linguistic landscape they encounter in the process of learning to talk.
9. N.S. Baron, 1992, pp. 202-205.
10. See, for example, Reynolds & Wilson, 1991, especially. p. 291, on abbreviations in the Greek and Latin manuscript literature.
11. N.S. Baron, 2000, pp. 128-130.
12. Mugglestone, 1995, p. 42.

13. Explicit association of “proper” spoken style with the language of those who are “graciously behauoured and bred” is evidenced in the sixteenth century (e.g., George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie*, 1589) and the seventeenth century (e.g., Owen Price’s *The Vocal Organ*, 1665) – see Mugglestone, 1995, pp. 16-17, 14.

14. See Leonard, 1929 for the classic discussion of prescriptivism in eighteenth century England.

15. For discussion of Webster’s attempts (successful and otherwise) at prescriptive language reform, see D.E. Baron, pp. 60-67.

16. Sheidlower, 1996, pp. 112-113.

17. Hale & Scanlon, 1999, p. 95.

18. Shea, 1994, p. 24.

19. Works on etiquette issues in the United States include Schlesinger, 1946; Hodges, 1989; Kasson, 1990; Newton, 1994; and Hemphill, 1999.

20. Hemphill, 1999, p. 9.

21. F.H. Hall, 1906, p. 19.

22. Schlesinger, 1946, p. 18.

23. Kasson, 1990, p. 43.

24. Fenwick, 1948.

25. Vanderbilt, 1952.

26. Schlesinger, 1946, pp. 18, 34, 51.

27. Schlesinger, 1946, p. 51.

28. Kasson, 1990, p. 54. Hemphill points out (1999, p. 131) that over 90% of the etiquette guides appearing between 1820 and 1860 “were directed to the middle classes.”

29. Schlesinger, 1946, p. 34.
30. Glassman, 1998, p. 55.
31. Martin, 1997, p. 4.
32. Cressy, 1980, p. 178. For discussion of the difficulties in accurately measuring historical literacy rates, see Cressy, 1980; Kaestle *et al.*, 1991, pp. 10-32.
33. Cressy, 1980, p. 177.
34. Cressy, 1980, p. 132. For extensive data and discussion regarding social class and occupational literacy levels in early modern England, see Cressy, 1980, Chapters 6 and 7.
35. Lockridge, 1974, p. 39, though Lockridge notes that due to artifacts of data sampling, the statistic reported for women for the end of the eighteenth century may be too high.
36. In Kaestle's words, Lockridge argues that "Protestantism, and particularly the Puritan version of Calvinism, was the driving force behind New England literacy." (Kaestle *et al.*, 1991, p. 20)
37. See Soltow & Stevens, 1981 for discussion of nineteenth century education and literacy in America.
38. Kaestle *et al.*, 1991, p. 23.
39. Gilmore, 1982, p. 157; cited in Kaestle *et al.*, 1991, p. 23.
40. Folger & Nam, 1967, pp. 113-114.
41. Gutek, 1970, p. 53.
42. Church & Sedlak, 1976, p. 59.
43. For discussion of mail delivery issues in seventeenth and eighteenth century England, see Dawson & Dawson, 1908, vol. 1, pp. 27-30 and Hornbeak, 1934, pp. 82-84. On the

American postal system from colonial days onwards, see Fuller, 1972 and John, 1995. Harrison, 1997 reviews letter-writing and the mail in the Canadas from 1640-1830.

44. Hornbeak, 1934, p. 83.

45. N. Hall, 2000, p. 88.

46. Daunton, 1985, p. 23.

47. *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 5, p. 260; cited in Decker, 1998, p. 59.

48. Fuller, 1972, p. 61; John, 1995, p. 159. John states that in the 1840s, “few common laborers made more than \$1.00 a day” (p.159).

49. Calculations of equivalent dollar values here and later in the paper were made using the "Inflation Calculator" at [www.westegg.com](http://www.westegg.com). According to the site's designer, this calculator is based on the pre-1975 data from *Historical Abstracts of the United States* [presumably *Historical Statistics of the United States*] and data for 1975 onwards from the annual *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. I am grateful to Larry Sawers for his assistance on historical issues relating to wages and inflation.

50. Fuller, 1972, p. 65.

51. John, 1995, p. 157. John's data for 1830 are drawn from retrospective statistics compiled in the 1850s by Pliny Miles, a postal reformer (see Miles, 1855, Table I.2). The figure for 1856 is taken from Miles, 1857, p. 363.

52. L.M. Schultz, 2000, esp. p. 113.

53. For discussion of the historical development of complete letter-writers in the English-speaking world, see Hornbeak, 1934 and Robertson, 1942. Chartier *et al.*, 1997 analyze the historical role of complete letter-writers in France.

54. Murphy, 1989, p. 77.

55. For example, Meyer, 1998.

56. Hornbeak, 1934, p. 82. As Hornbeak writes, “Until 1687 ... the letters [in complete letter-writers] concerning the business and family life of the masses were in the minority.... It was with the publication of *The Young Secretary’s Guide* that the English letter-writer becomes thoroughly democratic, for its letters are overwhelmingly adapted to the everyday needs of the middle and lower classes.” (p. 80)

57. Hornbeak, 1934, pp. 77-78.

58. Hornbeak, 1934, pp. 84-86.

59. Hornbeak, 1934, p. 82.

60. Hornbeak, 1934, p. 84.

61. Dierks, 2000, p. 32.

62. Dierks, 2000, p. 32.

63. Dierks, 2000, p. 32.

64. Zboray, 1993, p. 114.

65. Frost, 1867, Preface.

66. L.M. Schultz, 2000, p. 110.

67. Even “fairly educated people” made this assumption in the initial decades of telegraph use (“Railway Travelling Fifty Years Ago,” *Answers* (London), July 19, 1890, p. 122; cited in Marvin, 1988, p. 22).

68. Alonzo Jackman, letter to the editor, *Woodstock* [Vermont] *Mercury*, August 14, 1845; cited in Marvin, 1988, p. 201.

69. See “A Marriage by Telegraph,” *The Telegrapher*, vol. 7, no. 9, May 1, 1874, p. 135.

70. *American Law Review*, 1904, vol. 38, p. 770. Also see Lubrano, 1997, pp. 148-149.

71. *The Telegrapher*, vol. 1, no. 18, August 1, 1868, p. 2.
72. *The Telegrapher*, vol. 7, no. 4, February 16, 1874, p. 57; *The Telegrapher*, vol. 7, no. 8, April 15, 1874, p. 120; *The Telegrapher*, vol. 10, no. 1, January 1, 1877, p. 4.
73. For example, Scott & Jarvogen, 1868; Gray, 1885.
74. *Vogue's Book of Etiquette*, appearing in 1948, explains that "Invitations by telegraph are sent for any kind of entertainment in emergencies. Normally, they are sent for: tea, cocktails, receptions, and informal dances" (Fenwick, 1948, p. 518).
75. *The Dial*, November 15, 1919, p. 446.
76. Lubrano, 1997, p. 124. In addition, a number of handbooks that were designed for business correspondence (e.g., Davis & Lingham, 1914; Lewis, 1915) included templates for composing telegrams. I'm grateful to David Hochfelder for these and other references relating to the telegraph.
77. "Tariff Bureau," *The Telegrapher*, vol. 1, no. 22, October 1, 1868, pp. 6-7.
78. See footnote 49 above.
79. *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 1975, p. 790, Series R 74.
80. Blondheim, 1994.
81. O'Brien, 1904, pp. 465-466.
82. Saunders, 1921, pp. x-xi. For an historical review of the use of codes and ciphers in business telegrams, see U.S. Delegation, 1928.
83. U.S. Delegation, 1928, p. 48; *The Telegrapher*, vol. 6, no. 8, March 15, 1873, p. 120. Examples of telegraphic code books written to accommodate the needs of private users include Selleck, 1886 and Moll, 1886.
84. Johnson & Johnson, 1914, pp. 14, 26.

85. Perry (1992, p. 141) observed “an immediate drop in the charge for the average telegram from 1s 1d in 1885 to 8d in 1886, as senders learned to condense the length of their messages.” Though his comment was made in reference to England, presumably the same principle applied in the US.

86. “Cheap Telegraphy,” *The Telegrapher*, vol. 8, no. 1, January 1, 1875; p. 3. On profitability issues, see “Annual Report of the President,” *The Telegrapher*, vol. 9, no. 20, October 16, 1876, pp. 306-307.

87. See U.S. Delegation, 1928.

88. For example, *The Telegrapher*, vol. 6, no. 9, April 1, 1873, p. 132.

89. “A Granger’s Experience with the Telephone,” *Electrical World*, October 11, 1884, p. 137; cited in Marvin, 1988, p. 20.

90. “Diseased Germs Transmitted Through Telegraph Circuits,” *Electrical World*, June 23, 1894, p. 833; cited in Marvin, 1988, p. 81.

91. “Wishes Telephone Placed at Grave,” *Telephony*, vol. 10, 1905, p. 65.

92. See, for example, Sipior & Ward, 1995.

93. *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 1975, p. 784, Series R 16.

94. See footnote 49 above.

95. *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 1975, p. 790, Series R 74.

96. *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 1975, p. 784, Series R 16.

97. *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 1975, p. 783, Series R 3.

98. There were, of course, exceptions, including the financially well-off and businesses. See Fischer, 1992 for a sociohistorical analysis of the evolution of telephone usage in the United States. As early as 1877, A.G. Bell had envisioned the day “When people can ... chat

comfortably with each other by telephone over some bit of gossip,” but it would take many years before this hope became fiscally practical for the broader public (see Bruce, 1973, p. 210).

99. Young children learning to use the telephone encounter similar challenges – see N.S. Baron, 1992, pp. 148-152.

100. Examples of advice on telephone etiquette early in the twentieth century include Richardson, 1913 and Bailey, 1923, along with standard etiquette books (e.g., Post, 1922). Among the contemporary guidebooks are Martin, 1997 and Mantus & Moore, 1996.

101. F.H. Hall, 1914, pp. 53-54.

102. As Emily Post wrote in the 1956 edition of *Etiquette*, “Custom, which has altered many ways and manners, has taken away all opprobrium from the formal invitation by telephone” (p. 127). See Fischer, 1992, pp. 183-187 for more extensive discussion of telephone etiquette.

103. See Gitelman, 1999 for discussion of Edison’s initial goals for the phonograph.

104. See Koenigsberg, 1987 and Grimes, 1992 for a fuller account of the origins of “Hello.”

105. Fenwick, 1948, pp. 360, 14. Also see Fischer, 1992, pp. 70-71, 186.

106. Rheingold, 2000, p. 25.

107. Early computer modems transmitted data across telephone lines at the rate of 300 bits per second. By 2001, computers generally came equipped with 56 *kilobits* per second modems, though growing use of DSL lines, cable connections, and T3 lines increased Internet transmission speed up to 45 *megabits* per second. I’m grateful to Greg Welsh for discussing this issue with me.

108. See Hafner, 2001.

109. See Abbate, 1999.
110. Pew Internet and American Life Project Internet Tracking Report, Sunday, February 18, 2001. More Online, Doing More. [www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org).
111. Pew Internet and American Life Project Survey, November-December, 2000. [www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org).
112. Reported in Hafner, 2001, p. F1.
113. See [dcit.clemson.edu/sig/email/statistic.htm](http://dcit.clemson.edu/sig/email/statistic.htm).
114. For example, Shapiro & Anderson, 1985.
115. Recent printed resources on email style and etiquette include Angell & Heslop, 1994; “Can I Apologize by E-Mail?” 1999; Flynn & Flynn, 1998; Hafner, 1998; Hale & Scanlon, 1999; Lamb & Peek, 1995; and Schultz, 2000. Relevant web sites (as of December, 2001) include Kaitlin Duck Sherwood’s site at [www.webfoot.com/wwwp.html](http://www.webfoot.com/wwwp.html), Heinz Tschabitscher’s site at [www.email.about.com/internet/email](http://www.email.about.com/internet/email), and Mary Houten-Kemp’s site at [www.everythingemail.net](http://www.everythingemail.net).
116. Attempts to obtain sales figures from publishers were unsuccessful.
117. Hale & Scanlon, 1999, p. 3; Angell & Heslop, 1999, p. 4.
118. On the use of email greeting cards (including to express condolences), see Cohen, 2000.
119. For discussion of these issues, see N.S. Baron, 1998; 2000 and Crystal, 2001.
120. See, for example, Shapiro & Anderson, 1985, p. 23.
121. See Blondheim, 1994; Hochfelder, 1999.
122. “Influence of the Telegraph upon Literature,” 1848, pp. 411, 412.
123. See, for example, D.E. Baron, 1982, pp. 46-47.

124. O'Brien, 1904, pp. 467-468, 469, 464. For additional discussion of the possible impact of the telegraph on American prose style, see Carey, 1983 and Hochfelder, 1996; 1999, especially Chapter 4.

125. For discussion of the evolution of English prose style in nineteenth century America, see Wilson, 1962, pp. 635-669.

126. Haussamen, 1994.

127. Cmiel, 1990, p. 13.

128. See, for example, Birkerts, 1994.

129. See N.S. Baron, 2000, Chapter 5 for fuller development of this argument.

130. See, for example, Dawkins, 1995 on the issue of prescriptive punctuation.

131. According to Michael Heim, "80 percent of written English [now] passes through bits and bytes" (Heim, 1999, Preface to second edition).

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