Why Email Looks Like Speech

Proofreading, Pedagogy, and Public Face

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"If you have good language skills, you will be respected and admired; whereas if you clearly have no clue about grammar or vocabulary, you could become president of the United States. The choice is yours!"

Dave Barry (2001)
"Wit's End," *The Washington Post Magazine*, March 4, p. 32

I. Defining the Beast

What kind of linguistic beast is email? The use of networked computers to exchange written messages has been with us for nearly three decades,[1] but prolific use of email by the general public only seriously began sometime in the 1990s. Given email's stagewise evolution, it's hardly surprising that commonplace depictions of the linguistic character of email (such as "everyone uses emoticons" or "the email medium leads to flaming") are not universally applicable to the messages written today by grandmothers, job applicants, customers ordering on-line, or teenage girls chatting through instant messaging.[2]

Surveying the burgeoning literature on how to characterize email linguistically, we discern a variety of views of the medium:

*letters by phone (email as a form of writing)

*speech by other means (email as a form of speech)

*mix and match (email as a combination of spoken and written elements)

*e-style (email as a distinct language style)

*contact system (email as a still-evolving language style)

Figure 1. Linguistic Views of Email

(NOTE: It goes without saying that when we use the terms "speech" and "writing," we are speaking paradigmatically, ignoring the abundant variation found in both spoken and written styles across users and usage contexts.[3])

The first two approaches attempt to pigeon-hole email into the mold of existing modalities of communication: either email is essentially a written message conveyed by a new electronic medium ("letters by phone")[4] or it's speech that happens to be written down for transmission purposes ("speech by other means").[5] These first two models (especially email-as-

speech) predominated in the early days of email and continue to thrive amongst the general public.

Language and media specialists have now moved to more complex models. The "mix and match" approach essentially lines up the speech-like qualities of email in one column and qualities that are more like writing in another.[6] A number of analyses speak of "e-style" (or some synonymous name) that is neither speech nor writing.[7] Recently, David Crystal has mapped out the distinct linguistic properties of what he calls "Netspeak," which he takes to be a new style of linguistic communitcation.[8] Finally, the "contact system" approach argues that the unfolding of email is very much like the development of a pidgin or creole. While the system has an identifiable grammar, there is also broad variation across users and usages. Since the system is still undergoing considerable transformation, there's no certainty how it will end up. Seen through this model, it's too soon to tell if email will eventually look more speech-like, more like writing, or become a distinct genre.[9]

Characterizing the linguistics of email has become not only a timely scholarly endeavor but downright fashionable. Student research projects are sprouting like mushrooms after a rain, if the email inquiries I've been receiving from would-be authors are any indication. While most have been reasonably formal and polite, one query stands out for the way it exemplifies the phenomenon the author purports to be studying.

The sender was a graduate student preparing a master's thesis, which was due very soon. Apparently his library didn't have many useful sources. After presenting me a long list of questions, he closed with

"OK NAOMI … I really need your information as soon as possible."

Figure 2. Graduate Student Email Query (1)

I responded (politely and briefly), though "OK NAOMI" seemed rather presumptuous from a person who was probably half my age and was, after all, seeking my help.

Apparently, my correspondent felt I was withholding information. He wrote back, this time reiterating that he wanted "the latest information" about email, requesting in his uninhibited way

"If you know something …. Tell me."

Figure 3. Graduate Student Email Query (2)

(Enough was enough. This time I didn't reply.)

To get a feel for why email is so difficult to classify, let's think about how some of the linguistic attributes of email measure up against speech or writing. First, we see that with regard to such parameters as language style, assumptions about recipient responses, identity of audience, and assumptions about durability of message, email seems to be Janus-faced – at once resembling and not resembling face-to-face speech:

Linguistic Parameters	Characteristics Generally Shared with F-to-F Speech		Characteristics Not Generally Shared with F-to-F Speech
Language Style	informal *often avoid salutations (or use "Hi") *use contractions, slang	HOWEVER	often *more* informal than F-to-F speech
Responses	fast response time assumed	HOWEVER	often don't get acknowledgement for assistance rendered
Audience Identity	intended for limited, specified audience	HOWEVER	can be forwarded to others without original sender's knowledge
Durability Assumptions	senders act as if ephemeral (and often don't edit)	HOWEVER	can print out can edit can reply with history

Figure 4. Comparison of Email Characteristics with Characteristics of Face-to-Face Speech

Second, there are aspects of email that remind us more of written language, but that don't neatly fit into conventional writing molds. Consider two such dimensions: level of candor and the physical components of an email message:

Candor	high level of author candor (encouraged by perceived or actual anonymity)
	higher level than usually found in face-to-face speech or even in much traditional writing
Mixed Writing Modes:	though overall email frame is that of a memorandum, body of message is sometimes constructed like a formal letter
	signature files often contain more information than normally found in letters, including not only phone and fax numbers but quotations or visual displays

Figure 5. Examples of Hard-to-Classify Attributes of Email

In this paper, we'll focus on three attributes of email that characterize a significant proportion of the messages sent today (especially by more experienced users), spanning the spectra of age, gender, and education:

*informality of language style

*psychological assumption that medium is ephemeral

*high level of candor (stemming, at least in part, from treating email as an

ephemeral medium)

Figure 6. Key Email Attributes

Taken together, these attributes commonly make for messages that are more off-the-cuff than reflective, more personally opinionated than objective, more blunt than subtle. (NOTE: Use of humor in email can be an exception.)

Our question in this paper is not so much whether these attributes are speech-like (largely they are) but with *why* email has these traits and, derivatively, what the presence of these traits

tells us about broader issues of community behavior. While the analysis here centers on the United States, the same issues resonate elsewhere, in varying degrees.

The argument goes like this. Technology often enhances and reflects rather than precipitating linguistic and social change. The growing American tendency for all writing (not just writing produced on computers) to become more informal, less edited, and more personal and candid largely derives from transformations in American education over the past 125 years, along with a decline, especially over the past 50 years, in concern for "public face" – that is, the ways we reveal to others who we are (or wish to be) through such avenues as dress, decorum, and language. The heavily speech-like character of much contemporary American writing bears witness to these transformations.

II. Education in America

Three movements in American educational reform have strongly influenced contemporary writing style:

> *Harvard University's reformation of English composition instruction in the 1870s
>
> *John Dewey's work on progressive education in the early 20th century
>
> *emergence of a student-centered curriculum from the 1970s onwards

Figure 7. American Pedagogical Reforms Contributing to Contemporary Writing Style

Harvard reformed its English composition instruction because of President Charles W. Eliot's concerns that incoming students couldn't write acceptable English prose.[10] Eliot's remedy was to replace the earlier rhetoric requirement, which had students tackling such lofty themes as "Can the Immortality of the Soul Be Proven," with a practical regimen designed to "teach a

young writer to recognize and grasp the individual nature of experience."[11] This new approach to writing, which valued what individual authors had to say for themselves, soon permeated American higher education.

Focusing on lower education, the American pragmatist John Dewey drew upon earlier European ideas about empowering children as learners to argue for a student-centered approach to education that fostered children's creative self-expression. Some of Dewey's followers developed lower-school curricula that replaced traditional work in grammar, spelling, penmanship, and literature with what we now call "creative writing."[12]

Progressive education garnered attention in early 20th century America and then largely faded from view. However, in the years following the student tumult of the Vietnam era, there was new impetus for a student-centered curriculum that favored relevance and learner viewpoint over content-driven, teacher-centered classrooms. This new pedagogical mandate began at the college level, but made its way through the lower grades. In the world of composition programs, a "process" (rather than "product") orientation set in, along with emphasis on self-expression ("I think") rather than objective argumentation ("It can be argued that").

One consequence of these reforms has been a shift away from teaching formal rhetoric to encouraging informal writing, typically placing more value on what the student wants to express than on the actual language (including sentence mechanics) used to express it. As a result, writing is often taught as a form of conversational social interaction.[13] It's therefore not surprising to find teachers of English composition counseling their students to reject the prescriptive punctuation rules laid out in grammar books in favor of punctuation indicating the rhetorical pauses of speech or to find linguists justifying such practices.[14]

III. The Decline of Public Face

The pedagogical shifts we've been looking at have not occurred in a vacuum. Especially in the last half-century, they've dovetailed with other American social trends that have generally emphasized informality over formality. These same trends have led more recently to some paradoxical views about individual privacy.

Sociologists have looked at the ways people "present" themselves to other members of their community.[15] Like actors on stages (hardly a new or uniquely American notion), we construct our outward appearance based upon how we want others to perceive us – as wealthy or in need, intelligent or clueless, ambitious or cautious, leaders or followers. This "public face" we display to others is shaped by individual bent as well as by community norms that are in vogue at the time. High fashion of the 1920s is today relegated to period drama, and the Boston accent that sounded so prestigious in the Kennedy era now sounds, well, simply like a Boston accent.

How have mainstream attitudes towards public face been changing since World War II? Three significant shifts have been

*reduced emphasis on social stratification and on overt attention to upward mobility

*notable disconnects between educational accomplishment and financial success

*strong emphasis on youth culture

Figure 8. Forces Behind Declining Attention to Public Face in America

Each of these shifts has contributed to more casual behavior with respect to dress, affect, and language, often resulting in diminished attention to monitoring how we present ourselves to others.[16]

How do these shifts play out in social practice? As increasing portions of the American population view themselves either as middle class or as legally protected to be accepted "as they

are," there is less impetus to learn the fine points of etiquette or dress up for a job interview. When high school or college drop-outs become multimillionaire (or billionaire) rock stars, basketball players, or computer CEOs, the public's belief in a necessary linkage between education and financial success weakens. So, too, does public commitment to developing the sophisticated thought and language that higher education traditionally nurtures. As youth-driven entertainment (from Disney to Eminem) and youth lingo (think of "cool" or the pandemic use of "like") permeate the tastes of adults who once prided themselves on being more sophisticated, the cultural and linguistic norms to which the nation's youth aspire are being dumbed down to match popular teenage practice.[17]

One recent manifestation of this move away from putting on a well-scrubbed public face is an emerging ambivalence about individual privacy. Yes, we are troubled when companies can track our buying habits, and we fight to limit access to personal medical records. Yet many respectable Americans don't think twice about undressing before curtainless windows, revealing intimate details of their lives on personal web logs,[18] or appearing on "*Surviver*" programs.

Such lack of social inhibition is also manifest in a lot of the email being sent ("OK NAOMI … if you know something … tell me"). Much as telephone callers have historically divulged more personal information and have often been more blunt with people they can't see than with the same audience face-to-face, email is legendary for encouraging self-disclosure,[19] often with a more incendiary tone than typically used in other forms of communication.

IV. Sentence Mechanics as Social Barometer

What does this increased candor, coupled with growing disregard for the social and intellectual behaviors traditionally associated with upward mobility and education, have to do with contemporary writing style? We said earlier (Figure 6) that email and contemporary writing more generally tend to be characterized by

*informality of style

*a psychological assumption that the medium is ephemeral

*a high level of candor

Let's have a look at how these characteristics, particularly the first two, manifest themselves in types of writing we have earlier assumed needed to be carefully proofread before being launched for public consumption.

Some examples illustrate the point:

FOR EMERGENCY'S CALL

(Sign on locksmith shop in Colorado ski village)

"Go find a friend and tell them all about this fine book."

(Puff, written by respected science writer, for book published by Simon and Schuster)

And there are more:

Homer => home run

Albany => AlbaN.Y.

nothing => othing

M.D., Ph.D., F.A.C.S. => MD, PhD., F.A.C.S.

Figure 9. Miscellaneous Printing/Publishing "Errors"

In recent years, not one but three venerable publishing houses have inexplicably mangled texts I submitted on computer disk. My "Homer" (as in the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) became "home run." "Albany" morphed into "AlbaN.Y." In a recent issue of *History Today*, "nothing" showed up as "othing." A costly magazine ad for a cosmetic surgeon informed readers that the good doctor was an "MD, PhD., F.A.C.S." [Fellow of the Academy of Cosmetic Surgeons], though obviously not a stickler for consistency in punctuation. Memory tells me that earlier in my adult career, the bar for what constituted acceptable written English was set much higher. I'm increasingly in accord with the thesis offered by a reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* that about ten years ago, all competent proofreaders must have been taken out and shot.

The real issue with "EMERGENCY'S" or "othing" isn't just proofreading. Rather, what we tend to call "sloppiness" in writing – even writing that purportedly has been edited – results from changing attitudes towards both privacy and public face. Are we intentionally flouting language conventions in our writing? Probably not. Rather, we don't feel as driven now as we once did to monitor what others see of us. It's not that we've forgotten how to proofread. Instead, we often don't see the need to do so.

Email, rather than being a linguistic anomaly, is an example *par excellence* of this growing attitude towards writing as a medium that doesn't require attention to public face. In fact, some of the self-appointed gurus of email style blatantly scoff at the idea that email should be subject to editing – either by sender or receiver:

"Think blunt bursts and sentence fragments …. Spelling and punctuation are loose

and playful. (No one reads email with red pen in hand.)" (p. 3)

"Celebrate subjectivity." (p. 9)

"Write the way people talk. Don't insist on `standard' English." (p.12)

"Play with grammar and syntax. Appreciate unruliness." (p. 15)

Figure 10. Hale and Scanlon (1999). *Wired Style*

V. The Shape of Things to Come

Email looks a lot like speech because writing in general has become more speech-like,

thanks in part to conscious pedagogical decisions and in part to changing social attitudes about

what is acceptable to present to others as representations of ourselves. But so what? Does it

matter whether writing is formal or informal, edited or unedited, reflective or blurted out,

reserved or candid?

Historians of English usage know that language communities go through normative and

laissez-faire cycles, sometimes caring inordinately about such issues as dialect and prescriptive

grammatical rules, other times reveling in the sheer inventiveness of a linguistically

unconstrained citizenry.[20] Of late, some literary critics have cautioned that contemporary patterns

of education and technology may be altering our earlier relationship with the written word.[21] Is

email hastening the demise of traditional writing norms, especially in light of the galloping trend

to shift from hard-copy writing (and reading) to electronically mediated communication?

Perhaps like teenagers, we are going through an experimental phase that we will outgrow.

Perhaps more normative (and contemplative) writing will return to fashion, in turn reshaping our

notions of what email messages should look like. My best educated guess is that even if such a linguistic about-face does take place, it won't happen any time soon. For now, too many people are enjoying their linguistic recess.

Notes

1. Abbate, 1999, pp. 106-111.

2. In the words of David Crystal,

   The hacker community is but a tiny part of the online population, and the linguistic intuitions and preferences of such vast numbers are immensely variable and impossible to control. Quirky, individualistic writers there will be among them; but there will also be the huge numbers of non-quirky, conservative writers, who don't read science fiction, study Zen, or go in for wordplay. For every one hacker, there are probably a thousand [non-hackers] – and [non-hackers] of many different linguistic fabrics. The future of [language used in computer mediated communication] … is very much bound up with the extent to which hacker-originated language and style has developed a sufficiently stable and powerful identity to motivate new Internet users to use it, or whether these users will introduce fresh linguistic directions, evolving norms of stylistic usage which owe nothing to hacker origins, and which avoid the playful and esoteric features so much in evidence now. (Crystal, In Press, Chapter 3)

3. See, for example, Tannen, 1982; Chafe and Danielewicz, 1987; Chafe and Tannen, 1987; Biber, 1988, 1995.

4. See Spitzer, 1986, p. 19.

5. E.g., Hale and Scanlon, 1999.

6. E.g., Yates, 1996; Baron, 1998.

7. E.g., Ferrara *et al*., 1991; Maynor, 1994; Collot and Belmore, 1996.

8. Crystal, In Press.

9. Baron, 2000, Chapter 9.

10. Crowley, 1998.

11. Myers, 1996, pp. 38, 49.

12. See, for example, Mearns, 1925.

13. See, for example, Bruffee, 1984, pp. 641-642.

14. Dawkins, 1995, p. 534; Danielewicz and Chafe, 1985, p. 225.

15. Goffman, 1959.

16. Obviously, Americans still pay attention to shaping their own identities and find ways to convey these self-constructed images to others. In real life, people wear funky hats, put on accents, or purport to have degrees they never earned. On-line communities are notorious for individuals presenting themselves as they wish to be seen, rather than as they really are (see, for example, Donath, 1999). However, in the process of constructing identities – at least "in real life," contemporary Americans seem to be generally less formal and less interested in self-construction for the purpose of social mobility than in times past.

17. See Meyrowitz, 1985, for an earlier discussion of some of these issues.

18. Branscum, 2001; "My Life as a Website," 2001.

19. E.g., Sproull and Kiesler, 1991.

20. E.g., Mugglestone, 1995; Leonard, 1929; Mencken, 1919.

21. E.g., Steiner, 1972; Birkerts, 1994.

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