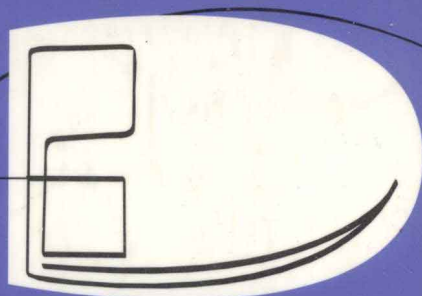


Alphabet to Email

How Written English Evolved
and Where It's Heading

Naomi S. Baron



HIGHLY COMMENDED IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
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NAOMIS. BARON



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ALPHABET TO EMAIL

How is technology changing the way we write?

In the fast-moving world of email, content is far more important than spelling and punctuation. Is it time to throw away the old rules – or should we hurry to the rescue?

From pen-and-parchment to the email revolution, Naomi S. Baron's provocative account shows how a surprising variety of factors—not just technology, but also religious beliefs, the law, nationalism, and economics—shape the way we read, write and communicate. Along the way, readers will discover that:

- Long before keyboards and carpal tunnel syndrome, monks grumbled about the ergonomics of the medieval scriptorium.
- In 1902 the Times of London proclaimed of the telephone: 'An overwhelming majority of the population do not use it and are not likely to use it at all.'
- Many children who seldom spoke to their parents at home now communicate with them through email.
- And much more.

This fascinating, anecdotal foray through the history of language and writing offers a fresh perspective on the impact of the digital age on literacy and education, and on the future of our language.

Naomi S. Baron is Professor of Linguistics at the Department of Language and Foreign Studies, American University. She is the author of five previous books about language, including *Growing Up with Language: How Children Learn to Talk* (Addison Wesley, 1992).

***Alphabet to Email* was highly commended in the English-Speaking Union Duke of Edinburgh's English Language Award 2000.**

For Ruth Baron

while it is true that nature is the cause of life, the cause of the good life is education based on the written word.

—Diodorus Siculus, *Politics*

If there are brothers so uneducated and unskilled that they do not know how to write at all, let me . . . suggest that they should learn . . . you have no right to say: “Please excuse me, I do not write well.” Write as well as you can, no one can ask more.

—Johannes Trithemius, *In Praise of Scribes*

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Preface

One snowy afternoon in January of 1998, I was having lunch at Geoff's, a sandwich hangout on Providence, Rhode Island's East Side. As I munched on a dill pickle and tried to focus on the book I was reading, I couldn't help overhearing the animated conversation at the next table between two Brown University undergraduates:

"You know what that scum-ball [aka former boyfriend] did to Heather? He sent her an *email* telling her he was seeing someone else."

"You mean he didn't even have the decency to break up face-to-face?"

"Nope. The coward."

As we round the millennium, the written word is undergoing major shifts in form and function. Messages that once were delivered orally in person or through carefully phrased formal letters are now dashed off in email with the same abandon with which we jot down grocery lists or leave casual voice mail of the "Hey, call me when you get home" variety.

Nearly three decades ago, I first became curious about the use of writing to represent language and, in particular, about how speech and writing divvied up communicative functions in literate societies. Long before email or voice mail arrived on the scene, it was clear that the "linguistics" of writing were every bit as fascinating as more traditional study of speech. Whether you looked at writing at a particular moment in time, at language change, or at the social forces shaping literacy, it was obvious that written language could be analyzed with many of the same conceptual tools linguists employ in looking at speech. My initial thinking about the linguistics of writing appeared in a book comparing spoken, written, and signed language.¹

The next step in my odyssey was shaped by technology. With the personal computer revolution in the early 1980s, academia began grasping for an appropriate analogy through which to capture the changes most people believed computers would engender in human communication. The universal comparison of choice was the invention of printing, perhaps inspired by Marshall McLuhan's pronouncements about how mass media—especially television—was leading us from a literacy-based society into a new form of orality (a theme Walter Ong developed extensively). The image played well at conferences and in the media, but I worried that its exponents seemed to know little about how printing came about in the West and what its real effects might be.

And so my next foray was into the impact of technology on the written (and spoken) word. My inquiries began with the printing press but then stretched both ways in time, looking backwards to the emergence of early means of writing production (stylus on clay, quill on parchment) and forwards to the development of teletechnologies (the telegraph, the telephone, computer-mediated communication in general and email in particular), along with the appearance of other language technologies, including the typewriter and the answering machine. My thinking has been honed by courses I've taught on language and technology at Emory University, Southwestern University, and American University, with interim reports appearing in professional publications.

More recently, I've focused specifically on written English (and, again, its relationship to speech). Why English? Part of the explanation is autobiographical. In my undergraduate years, I studied both English literature and linguistics, at a time when the overwhelming focus of linguistics was on English syntax. Graduate training in linguistics included excursions into the history of English, resulting in a dissertation comparing the historical emergence of a syntactic construction in English with the ontogenetic process by which children learning English master the same grammar.²

But there were pedagogical reasons as well for this emphasis on written English. As a writer, I've always had something of a traditionalist's bent, putting me at odds with the descriptivist ideology of American linguistics. In self-defense, I began tracing the notion of prescriptivism (and its linguistic cousin, standardization) in earlier centuries.

In my role as a teacher, I was also goaded into thinking about another aspect of writing: English composition. I've long agonized over my students' writing skills when they set pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard). What *did* these students learn in English Comp? I've tried to stop blaming

the messengers and, instead, examine contemporary approaches to pedagogy. What are our goals in composition classes? Where did these goals come from? What are appropriate composition goals for the future? How does computer technology (especially networked computing) enter into the discussion?

For the past five years, my professional horizons have expanded to shepherding a university program in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages). My students—both native speakers and those for whom English is a second or third language—have led me to examine the status of English as a written and spoken language in the international arena. Current notions of “World Englishes” or “International English” reintroduce issues of standardization (and prescriptivism), while international growth of the Internet leads us to rethink how technology shapes both spoken and written norms.

Alphabet to Email attempts to draw together these strands of thinking about writing, about speech, about pedagogy, about technology, and about globalization. My intended audience is anyone who has a stake in the English written word: teachers of composition (as well as grammar and literature), teachers (and students) of English as a second language, linguists, computer specialists, and, perhaps most important of all, the venerable educated lay person who’s curious about where the English language (especially in its written form) has been and where it might be going.

HELP ALONG THE WAY

Few books are crafted in isolation, and this one’s no exception. Without the help of so many people (and places), the work couldn’t have seen the light of day.

First some of the people who provided conversation, critiques, references, editorial assistance, or opportunities to try out a number of my ideas in public forums: Anne Beaufort, John Doolittle, Domenico Fioromonte, Mary Beth Hinton, Rebecca Hughes, Melissa Laitsch, Nigel Love, Elizabeth Mayfield, Bernd Naumann, David Olson, Sharon Poggenpohl, Robin Sherck, Simon Shurville, Ilana Snyder, Talbot Taylor, Charles Tesconi, and Edda Weigand. Particular gratitude goes to my students over the years, particularly the hardy adventurers in the honors class I taught at American University in Fall, 1995, called “Alphabet to Email.” As always, American University’s library was efficient in helping me find books and articles that were buried in far-off archives. The Wesley Theological Sem-

inary Library in Washington, DC, graciously allowed me to photograph a print of John Wesley from their collection. Louisa Semlyen, my editor at Routledge, wins the patience and perseverance award for providing just the right amount of carrot and stick. Brenda Danet's comments were invaluable in the final stages of manuscript-preparation. My special thanks to Katharine Jacobson, Stephanie Rogers, and Kate Chenevix Trench at Routledge for smoothing the editorial process. Advice I have ignored from all the above has been at my own peril, and mistakes are all mine.

Earlier versions of some of the arguments presented in this book have appeared in a number of journals and edited works: "From Print Shop to Desktop: Evolution of the Written Word" (1989) *Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Linguistic Variation and Change*, T.J. Walsh, ed. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 8–21; "From Text to Expert System: Evolution of the Knowledge Machine" (1989) *Semiotica* 74:337–351; "Thinking, Learning, and the Written Word" (1997) *Visible Language* 31:6–35; "Letters by Phone or Speech by Other Means: The Linguistics of Email" (1998) *Language and Communication* 18:133–170; "Writing in the Age of Email: The Impact of Ideology versus Technology" (1998) *Visible Language* 32:35–53; and "History Lessons: Telegraph, Telephone, and Email as Social Discourse" (1999) *Dialogue Analysis and Mass Media*, ed. B. Naumann, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1–34. I'm also grateful to the following organizations for permission to reproduce material that appears in the following figures: Figure 2.1 *New York* magazine, Figure 3.1 Cambridge University Press, Figure 3.2 Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Figure 4.1 Wesley Theological Seminary Library, Figure 4.2 The *New Yorker*.

I'm a somewhat old-fashioned writer, still liking to sit in semi-public places, applying pen directly to paper. My gratitude to Georgetown University and Wesley Theological Seminary for its spaces where no one I knew could find me, Armand's Pizza at American University for my early morning writing table, and La Madeleine café in Bethesda, for its tea and tranquility.

My long-suffering family deserves special thanks, along with a promise that I won't undertake another book for a long while.

November 1999
Bethesda, Maryland

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Robin Hood's Retort

The year is around 1150, and Robin (of Sherwood Forest fame) has returned to England after years in the Crusades. Much has changed in his absence—Maid Marian has even become a nun. Middle-aged, confused, and stung by his woman's seeming abandonment, Robin asks how she could have taken vows. Marian patiently explains she had no way of knowing Robin was even still alive:

“You didn't write,” she chides.

Robin's innocent retort:

“I never learned how.”

In this imagined sequel to the familiar saga, the film “Robin and Marian” starkly captures the great linguistic divide between medieval and modern times in European-based cultures. Marian presupposes a twentieth-century view of the written word (“Drop a line to let me know how you're getting on”). Robin, a product of his times, makes no apology for being unable to write. And apologize he shouldn't, for literacy in the Middle Ages was hardly widespread. Your average warrior or nobleman had no more use for reading or writing than for eating with silverware or regular bathing.

The written word is an integral part of contemporary communication. People who can't read and write are called illiterate, which presupposes literacy as the norm. Yet the relationship between writing and speaking isn't straightforward, even in societies that take literacy for granted. Asymmetry sets in from the start. With rare exception, we start to speak

before learning to read and write. When literacy instruction begins, we teach children to “write what you say,” but later insist that our charges learn to distinguish between spoken and written styles. We usually encourage children to speak freely (without correcting them), saving normative critiques for the moment they commit words to paper.

Among adults, there are more asymmetries. Most of us have been taught to maintain distinct styles for speaking and for writing. However, increasingly, people are blurring these distinctions in the direction of the informal patterns of spoken language.

Is there a reason to maintain two separate systems of language?

WHY WRITE?

Human memory can perform astounding feats. People have memorized works of Shakespeare or all of the *Ramayana*. In our dotage we still recall scenes from childhood, and as children we recount every one of our parents’ promises.

Yet memory only carries us so far. We forget to purchase items at the supermarket, have “false memories” about episodes we think we experienced, and squabble over ownership of belongings that don’t bear our names. What’s more, without some durable means of recording our thoughts and words, we have no sure-fire way of accurately transporting ideas through time or space.

Scripting Language

Over the past five millennia, human communities have devised ingenious schemes for making linguistic communication durable. Three basic types of scripts have appeared around the world, sometimes arising independently, sometimes borrowed or adapted from earlier scripts.

Writing can represent meaning directly (logographic scripts), with symbols standing for whole concepts or words. Chinese is the example most commonly cited of a logographic script. Logographic symbols generally derive from pictorial (iconic) representations of the objects or ideas they refer to. However, in many cases the iconic origins of symbols are lost in prehistory.

The other two types of writing systems represent sounds. Syllabic scripts such as Japanese *hiragana* and *katakana* pair a syllable (generally a consonant plus a vowel) with a single symbol. Spoken and written words are composed of one or more syllables (and symbols), where the

relationship between meaning and symbols is viewed as arbitrary. Alphabetic scripts (such as Attic Greek, Arabic, and English) pair individual sounds with individual symbols. Words are composed of one or more letters (written) corresponding to sounds (spoken), where again the relationship between word-meaning and visual symbols is essentially arbitrary.

Most of the world's developed writing systems aren't pure types. For example, Akkadian (which borrowed its script from the Sumerians in the middle of the third millennium BC) became primarily a syllabic system by converting earlier Sumerian logograms to new syllable signs.¹ Middle Egyptian relied on many signs to do double duty, sometimes representing the meaning of a word, and other times standing for one or more sounds.² Use of a single symbol to represent both sound and meaning is found in a number of writing systems of the world, from Mayan in Central America to Chinese and Japanese.

Japanese writing illustrates the contortions that a society can go through in representing the written word. Japanese has not one writing system but three: a logographically-based script, *kanji*, borrowed from the Chinese, and two related but distinct syllabaries, *katakana* and *hiragana*. Normal writing combines all three. *Kanji* are typically used for core meanings, *hiragana* to represent grammatical markers, and *katakana* to show emphasis or represent words borrowed from languages other than Chinese.

The script you're reading in this book has its roots in a North Semitic alphabetic system that developed in the second millennium BC. North Semitic split into three branches, the most important of which were Aramaic (the source of the Hebrew and Arabic scripts) and Phoenician (from which the Greek, Russian, and Roman alphabets derive). As best we can figure out, the Phoenician script was carried by traders to the Archaic Greek world in the tenth century BC.

It was through the Etruscans that the Greek alphabet reached the West in the eighth century BC. (The Greeks had colonies in Sicily.) By the seventh century BC, the Latin alphabet emerged from the Old Italic and Etruscan scripts, eventually spreading over the known world. Today, the Latin (or Roman) alphabet is used, with minor adaptations, to represent languages as diverse as Norwegian, Turkish, and Vietnamese.

The script in which a language is written often bears political baggage. For example, when Ataturk assumed power over what became modern Turkey, he replaced the use of Arabic script for writing Turkish with the Roman script. The history of scripts in Azerbaijan is even more involuted. Originally, the Arabic script was used for writing Azerbaijani. In the

1920s, a shift was made to Roman script. By the 1930s, Roman was rejected in favor of Cyrillic. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, it was again back to Roman.³

The English language has essentially been written using the Roman alphabet, but with a few additions (and subsequent subtractions) along the way. The first phase of adaptation came on the Continent, north of the Alps, when sometime between the first centuries BC and AD, the Etruscan script became the basis for a runic alphabet.⁴ Several runes emerged to represent Germanic sounds not found in Italic languages (and therefore, not surprisingly, absent from the Latin alphabet). For example, the *thorn* (<þ>) was used to represent the initial <th> in *think* (Note: < > indicates alphabetic letters.)

Archaeological evidence suggests that when the invading West-Germanic tribes came to England in the mid-fifth century, they wrote in runes—to the extent they wrote at all. In all probability, when Augustine arrived in 597 as Pope Gregory the Great’s emissary to christianize the heathen, the writing he found was runic. Under the influence of Christianity, the Latin alphabet fairly quickly became the script in which English was written.

Yet the emerging Old English language contained a number of sounds not encoded in the Latin alphabet. Among the non-Latin symbols added to the Old English alphabet (besides the runic *thorn*) were the *ash* (<æ>) as in *vat* (created by juxtaposing the Latin graphemes <a> and <e>) and the *eth* (<ð>) as in *than*. The *eth* was derived from the Irish script, itself an adaptation of Latin.

In the ensuing centuries, the character-set for writing English continued to evolve. Letters such as <v> and <q> (which were part of the Latin alphabet but used only infrequently in Old English) began to get a better workout, thanks to both borrowings from Norman French and internal language change within Middle English. The runic characters were gradually phased out, along with other peculiar Old English symbols such as the *ash* and the *eth*. “Re-romanization” of the English script was hastened by the development of printing in the fifteenth century.

When William Caxton began using type in England, his set of type punches didn’t include the letters peculiar to the English alphabet of the time. How was he to handle the *thorn* (<þ>) and *eth* (<ð>)? One obvious solution was to substitute the grapheme combination <t> plus <h>, following the occasional practice of earlier English scribes. However, sometimes Caxton turned creative, substituting the <y> punch for the original *thorn*

found in the manuscripts he was setting. Why? Because by the fifteenth century, the top hook on the *thorn* had been so shortened in height that the letter now looked somewhat like a reversed <y>.⁵ In later centuries, this substitution of <y> for the first sound in *think* was confused with the use of <y> for the sound [j] (as in *yes*), yielding the quaint but incorrectly spelled first word in “Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe.” (Note: [] indicates pronunciation of sounds.)

Writing is made possible by the existence of a script. But what do societies *do* with scripts once they have them?

What Bloomfield Knew

“Put writing in your heart,” advised a scribe in fifteenth-century BC Egypt, “that you may protect yourself from hard labour of any kind.”⁶ Given the alternatives (pyramid building, anyone?), we can hardly fault the scribe’s logic. Yet besides sometimes providing a meal ticket, what’s so beneficial about the written word?

Any symbol—a word, a hunk of gold, a piece of the true cross—gains its meaning through social convention. Just so, writing can serve a myriad of functions, but only because a group of people have decided writing is an appropriate medium for doing the job.

The list of possible uses for writing is expansive. We use writing to

- make peace treaties
- record wills
- make laundry lists
- break off engagements
- send condolences
- say hello to Aunt Martha
- record the news
- present scientific findings
- seal death warrants
- enable actors to learn their lines
- disseminate the word of God
- declare independence
- render legal judgment
- create literature
- say goodbye.

In most cases, the same roles can also be filled by speech. In pre-literate