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The Future of the English Sentence.

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This essay is about past and future changes in the predominant features of the written English sentence. Based on a survey of turn-of-the-century works from the last four hundred years, the author describes the general changes in sentence length, typical clause and modifier patterns, connectedness and structural explicitness. The printed sentence has become shorter, the flow of information more direct, the connections between nominalizations more implicit. The changes have their roots in patterns of spoken English, in the printing press and the widening of literacy and in the structure of scientific rhetoric. Over the coming two centuries, the printed sentence will probably continue to develop in a similar direction. The major variable is whether electronic technology will in the long run bring the printed sentence closer to the oral one or whether the sentence of electronic prose will develop its own distinguishing characteristics. In any case, the shorter sentence of the future will probably be rigorously and tightly constructed and more reliant on phrases than on subordinate clauses. Taking a long view that includes such speculation refreshes our perspective on the state of written English prose.

Changes in the syntax of the written English sentence are one of the foundations of our literate culture. Judgments about the character and quality of a piece of written English have been and are a result of not only the prose standards of the moment but also, and just as fundamentally, the direction of the movement of the written sentence in general. As a reliably stable element of standardized English (certainly more stable than the lexicon, almost as stable as modern spelling) written syntax changes slowly and slightly. But change it does. In every era, writers of sentences are gradually leaving some stylistic features behind and moving toward others. As they do, the great compass that is the dominant style or styles of the period shifts, with far-reaching effects.

This essay will try to describe that shift by considering not only the predecessors of the current written sentence but also by predicting what the written English sentence may look like two centuries from now. Two hundred years may seem like a large and arbitrary piece of the future to work with. But in selecting it I have followed Barbara Strang, who divided her *History of English* into two-hundred year intervals on the theory that each generation is aware of about one century's worth of gradual linguistic change and that twice that period is probably the smallest span in which change is reasonably clear-cut.[1] Strang was tracing the history of spoken English primarily, so from the point of view of the printed sentence and the guidelines of its standardization, both of which change more slowly in the long run, two hundred years is just around the corner.

I will look first at how the written English sentence has evolved over the last four centuries, during the period when the language has become stable enough to be considered standardized; then I will comment on the reasons for the changes and, finally, extrapolate the changes into the future.

This 50-word sentence from 1605 is typical in its length and full-bodied character, the result of its many subordinate clauses, pronouns and conjunctions.

For I am well assured that this which I shall say is no amplification at all, but a positive and measured truth, which is that there hath not been since Christ's time any king or temporal monarch which hath been so learned in all literature and erudition, divine and human. For let a man seriously and diligently revolve and pursue the succession of the emperors of Rome, of which Caesar the dictator, who lived some years before Christ, and Marcus Antoninus were the best learned, and so descend to the emperors of Graecia or of the West, and then to the lines of France, Spain, England, Scotland, and the rest; and he shall find this judgement is truly made.

Sentences are more explicitly connected to each other than today's sentences are — often opening with conjunctions.

17th century readers did not mind sentences that ambled along and postponed the main elements until the end.

Francis Bacon. 1605.
Advancement of Learning.

Samples of the past

The first step—a history of the prominent characteristics of the sentence—would seem to be almost as full of pitfalls as an attempt at prediction. There have been in each century a wide range of registers—from the basic narrative sentence that is as old as the language to the involutions of legal and philosophical discourse—and there are also regional considerations, such as the influences of Latin and French syntax and the contrasts between American and British English. Moreover, inclusion in the literary canon is no longer considered a reliable guide to a work's actual influence or representative character. All of these are reasons to squirm over any broad generalizations about the English sentence. And yet the printing press, the cultural unity of the English-speaking world, and the spread of literacy have all helped steady the language sufficiently so that the syntax of the written sentence has, since the 1700s especially, shown remarkable stability. Indeed, it is because the changes have been relatively small that it is inviting to try to chart them.

For such a chart, I have analyzed passages of five hundred words in about ten works written around each centennial year—within a decade on either side of 1600, 1700, 1800 and 1900—and also within the last few years. A complete list of the works that were surveyed will be found in the endnotes. The works are mostly but not entirely non-fiction, and for the last two dates, mostly by American instead of English writers. Within each twenty-year period, I have looked for a variety of discourse types, and for at least one unfamiliar name to include with the familiar authors. Some of the great writers of the language, such as John Milton and Samuel Johnson, are not here because they lived and wrote within the centuries instead of across them. The five-hundred-word passages from each work were chosen at random except that I avoided sections containing discourse structures with atypical syntax, such as long lists or dialogue. Samples are shown on these opening pages; they are just that—samples of the syntactic characteristics observed in many other excerpts—and they will be cited as examples in the discussion; they are not offered as definitive illustrations of the style of each period.

The direction of change

The general direction of change has been towards sentences that are shorter and more sharply separated from each other and whose internal sequence of subject-verb-object/complement is more prominent. Most sentences written around 1600 and 1700 range between forty and seventy words in length, though examples both shorter and longer are plentiful. The length is from one terminal punctuation mark to the next. Writers in this period often used a semicolon where we would use a period, but their terminal punctuation indicates what *they* considered to be the dimensions of completeness for their sentences, dimensions which allowed for greater mass and greater momentum than ours do. Some-

The main Body of the will (as the Reader cannot easily have forgot) consisted in certain admirable Rules about the wearing of their Coats; in the Perusal whereof, the two Brothers at every Period duly comparing the Doctrine with the Practice, there was never seen a wider Difference between two Things; horrible downright Transgressions of every Point. Upon which, they both resolved without further Delay, to fall immediately upon reducing the Whole, exactly after their Father's model.

In 1700 the sentence remains long and clauses are still explicitly connected, often by combinations of pronoun and preposition.

Adding to the fullness of early modern prose is the introductory absolute, a combination of a participle and its own subject.

Jonathan Swift. 1704.
A Tale of a Tub.

times the structure is periodic, the main subject and verb suspended until the end, as in Bacon's second sentence; but even when the order is more straightforward, such massive sentences weave phrases and clauses into a closely-knit web whose smoothness and connectedness is insistent. Modern readers are not accustomed to being held so tightly in a long train of thought, for such rhetoric was derived from an oratorical tradition that was designed to hold the attention of audiences more practiced than we at hearing sermons, epic recitations and oral arguments.

The style is characterized by hypotaxis, the use of explicit syntactic devices to show the hierarchical relationship between clauses. Conjunctions abound, not only within sentences but at the beginnings as well, as in the two sentences by Bacon ("For I am . . . . For let a man"). Conjunctive *for*, which has since become rare, is common. Also conspicuous is the combination of relative pronoun and preposition that functions as conjunction; Swift's sentence beginning with "Upon which" is a frequent construction. *Whereby*, *whereof* and *whereon* were ordinary enough to be written as one word.

Another device that gives these sentences their full-bodied character is the introductory absolute construction, in which an opening participle is accompanied by its own subject, as in Swift's "the two brothers . . . comparing . . . ." Today, absolute constructions usually follow the main verb instead of preceding it (*She left this morning, her husband having gone back yesterday*), and the introductory absolute has been replaced by the opening participle alone.

Since the 1700s, sentences have become steadily shorter. The average length in 1800 and 1900 was between thirty and forty words, and today it is in the twenties. My figures agree broadly with those of L. A. Sherman, who in 1893 based his statistical study of the sentence on much longer selections by fewer authors. He found the average sentence length in works by the sixteenth-century writers Edmund Spenser and Thomas Hooker to be 49.82 and 41.4 words per sentence respectively. In contrast, sentences by the ninteenth-century writers Thomas DeQuincey and William Channing measured 33.25 and 25.73 words respectively.[2] As for the length of the current American written sentence, Nelson Francis and Henry Kucera, in their analysis of the Brown University corpus, reported mean sentence lengths in the mid to low twenties for nonfiction, and in the teens for fiction.[3]

The shortened sentence was in the air in the eighteenth century. Responding to the reading public's taste for colloquial prose, rhetoricians

What would probably have been expressed as a clause ("...who reside...") a century before is now more likely to be a phrase.

This 38-word sentence from 1803 is characteristic of the somewhat more compact phrasing that was in the air in the late 18th century.

The Indian tribes residing within the limits of the United States have, for a considerable time, been growing more and more uneasy at the constant diminution of the territory they occupy, although effected by their own voluntary sales. And the policy has long been gaining strength with them of refusing absolutely all further sale, on any conditions; insomuch that, at this time, it hazards their friendship, and excites dangerous jealousies and perturbations in their minds to make any overture for the purchase of the smallest portions of their land.

The beginning of the shift from clause to phrase in sentences that are still long leads to heavy use of nouns.

Thomas Jefferson. 1803.
Message to Congress proposing the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

recommended quicker sentences and fewer conjunctions. George Campbell in 1776 reminded writers that "Brevity is the soul of wit" and urged a reduction in the use of such "drawling conjunctions" as *whereby* and *therewith*.[4] His contemporary Hugh Blair pointed out the "peculiarity" that "the omission of a connecting participle should sometimes serve to make objects appear more closely connected . . . [and] is used to denote rapidity."[5] Blair was describing one of the effects of parataxis, the placing of sentence elements next to each other without an expression of subordinate relationship. Parataxis has steadily replaced hypotaxis, with its explicit conjunctions at every turn, as the relational style of our written sentences.

Not only conjunctions but relative pronouns as well become less fequent over the centuries; *that* and *which* as relative pronouns appear, in my five-hundred-word samples, usually about seven or eight times in the 1600 and 1700 passages, from four to six times in 1800 and 1900, and three or four times in current writing. In place of such explicit connecting devices, modern writers prefer more succinct juxtapositions. Rather than extend a clause, they will start a new one sooner. They may compress an explicit dependent clause into a less explicit phrase—Adams' "the wants of man, beyond a mere roof cover," instead of, for instance, "those wants of man which extended beyond the need for a roof-cover." They freely insert an appositive, as Dillard does with "in certainties, in data which anyone anywhere could verify." Or they use the dash to shift the emphasis to an added comment without a wordy transition.

The flow of information in the sentence has become more direct, the arrangement of items more compact. Sherman, noting the decline in the number of clauses and conjunctions, described the modern sentence as lighter, more intuitive and organic.[6] Recent sentences are less likely to be inverted; even Richard Hooker, a terse stylist for 1600, characteristically wrote "That mere natural men do neither know nor acknowledge the things of God, we do not marvel." Such a sentence was periodic, but even in those early sentences which were not strictly periodic, there was a leisurely, ambling arrangement, a sense that phrases and clauses might be tucked in before, after and within the core of the sentence with equal comfort. Modern sentences, by contrast, are less likely to spread a net of modifiers in all directions. For the last couple of centuries, independent clauses have started more quickly. Three of Dillard's five sentences begin with the subject phrase. According to one study, fully three quarters of the sentences in current American prose open with the main subject itself and no sentence modifiers or other word groups in front of it.[7]

Antithesis — contrastive parallel phrasing — is trim compared to the elaborate constructions of prior centuries. The sentence combines the old formality with a new quickness.

As far as one can see into the spirit of the builders, Chartres was exclusively intended for the Virgin, as the Temple of Abydos was intended for Osiris. The wants of man, beyond a mere roof-cover, and perhaps space to some degree, enter to no very great extent into the problem of Chartres. Man came to render homage or to ask favors. The Queen received him in her palace, where she alone was at home, and alone gave commands.

Although the average sentence of 1900 is still over 30 words long, the explicit connections of the past have given way to juxtapositions that are swifter. There are fewer conjunctions and fewer relative pronouns.

Henry Adams. 1905.
Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.

The modifying elements in recent sentences have been steered into two locations in the clause. The primary one, which is not new, is after the sentence core, where it has always been a simple matter to link a chain of modifiers; from Adams, "The Queen received him in her palace, where she alone was at home, and alone gave commands." But the other slot for modification has come into frequent use more recently, and that is the position immediately after the subject. Post-modifiers bound to the subject noun—as in Jefferson's "The Indian tribes residing within the limits of the United States"—are infrequent in early sentences, and even non-restrictive modifiers (Bacon's "Caesar the dictator, who lived some years before Christ") and sentence modifiers in this position (Swift's "The main Body of the Will (as the Reader cannot easily have forgot)") do not appear often. Today, however, such constructions are ordinary, as in Dillard's "Science, that product of skepticism . . . ." The frequency of such modification (either by a phrase of at least three words or by a clause) has increased slowly and steadily since 1600, usually ranging from two to four examples within five hundred words in 1600, to around four to six in 1800, to between six and ten today.

Antithesis—contrastive parallel phrasing—has been toned down as the sentence has become streamlined. From Cotton Mather in 1702 (*Magnolia Christi Americana: Winthrop*): "This made him the terror of the wicked, and the delight of the sober." *So* and *as* were pivotal words in early modern syntax, where clauses often seemed ready to burst into effusive comparison. Bacon's clause is on the verge: "there hath not been since Christ's time any king or temporal monarch which hath been so learned in all literature and erudition, divine and human." Comparisons and parallelism have continued, of course, as in Adams' "Chartres was exclusively intended for the Virgin, as the Temple of Abydos was intended for Osiris," but this is, characteristically for the modern sentence, very trim. The earlier Ciceronian taste for elaborate contrast has been diluted to compound clauses pivoting on *but* and pairs of brief parallel phrases, as in Dillard's "I think science works the way a tightrope walker works."

The straightforward style has also made a very recent casualty of the passive voice. The use of the passive has always varied widely among different types of discourse and among individual writers. And until this century no stigma attached to it; neither grammarians nor rhetoricians prior to 1900, even as they expounded the importance of vigorous verbs, criticized passive inversions. So while the passive often appeared about half a dozen times within five hundred words in the past—as in Swift's "there was never seen a wider Difference"—its number has been reduced to about half of that in this century.

Today, the average sentence length is in the low 20s, and flow of information from subject to verb to object or complement is quite direct.

Science, that product of skepticism born of cultural diversity, is meant to deal in certainties, in data which anyone anywhere could verify. And for the most part it has. Our self-referential mathematics and wiggly yardsticks got us to the moon. I think science works the way a tightrope walker works: by not looking at its feet. As soon as it looks at its feet, it realizes it is operating in midair.

Elliptical phrasing and the use of appositives help keep the modern sentence compact.

Verbs and verbals have replaced the heavy nominalizations of the previous two centuries, allowing the sentence to become shorter.

Annie Dillard. 1982.
Living by Fiction.

Another type of sentence inversion, however, has not changed noticeably. Sentence openings such as *There are* or *It is*, sometimes seem conspicuous in modern writing, but they have always been around in about the same proportions as they are today; Bacon's "there hath not been" and Swift's "there was never seen" are examples. (Another nil change: I wondered whether simple doublets such as Jefferson's "jealousies and pertubations" have been on the increase. Such phrases, often annoyingly redundant, impose a strong rhythm on a sentence. Overall their frequency has not changed but has always varied among writers; see the profusion in the passage by Bacon.)

Recent English leans heavily on its nouns. *Nominalization* refers to the replacement of clauses by noun phrases in which the part of the verb has been taken by a noun. For example, Jefferson's phrase "the constant diminution of the territory" is a nominalization of the clause "the territory is constantly diminishing." Nominalizations were thick in the non-fiction of 1800 and 1900 especially. Their rise is reflected in a decline in the numbers of finite verbs. The early sentences often comprised several brief clauses, each with its finite verb accompanied by simple nominals. In my survey, finite verbs and verb phrases dropped steadily from a high range of forty to sixty per five-hundred words in 1600 to a low of thirty-five to forty-five in 1900, when nominalization was at its peak. In the samples of current writing, however, verbs are back up to their 1700 level, averaging about forty-five (but often ranging ten above or below that), the reversal probably the result of the combination of the colloquial style (with its reduced nominalization and preference for active verbs) and the reduced size of the twentieth-century sentence.

Another sign of nominalization has been the tendency since the eighteenth century to put more modifiers in front of nouns. In the samples from 1600 and 1700, common nouns preceded by two or more modifiers (other than articles, demonstratives or possessive pronouns), as in Bacon's "a positive and measured truth," rarely numbered more than half a dozen in five hundred words. Today the frequency has roughly doubled, so that premodification with two elements is common; its components have branched out from ordinary adjectives to include nouns-as-adjectives, as in Dillard's "tightrope walker."

These collective changes could be summed up in a number of ways, by calling attention to one pattern or another, but the most revealing pattern for the purpose here, I think, is the continuum between the implicit and the explicit. In one crucial respect the sentence has become more explicit; the expression of the information contained in the main

subject, verb and object/complement has become less obstructed and more prominent. But in many other respects, written sentences have moved in the opposite direction, toward abbreviated forms and implied instead of stated meanings. The connection between sentences is a conspicuous example. Today's readers don't require the links between sentences that earlier readers were accustomed to, and in much the same way that we have learned to see the continuity across the quick cuts in film and television, so we can also see the connection between the closing of one sentence and the opening of the next without the need for *where upon*'s. The decreasing use of subordinate clauses and the drift towards both prepositional phrases and premodification is likewise a movement towards more implicit writing. "Caesar the dictator, who lived some years before Christ" is more explicit than "The Indian tribes residing within the limits of the United States," which is more explicit than "a tightrope walker"; each succeeding form relies more and more on the reader's ability to interpret it correctly in order to avoid ambiguity (does "residing" refer to the past or the present? What is the relation of the "tightrope" to the "walker"?) and each is more compact.

Finally, the decline of inversions, including the passive inversion, and the muting of antithesis and comparisons have the same effect: within the sentence, continuity and compactness are greater, but the reader may have to make prominent in his or her mind what is not necessarily up front and most prominent in the sentence. Adams' last sentence—"The Queen received him in her palace, where she alone was at home, and alone gave commands"—is focused on the Virgin, but it is the contrast to the "wants of man" that the reader must keep in mind for the sentence to be meaningful. Two or three hundred years earlier, the comparison would most likely have been restated in the sentence: "Chartres was not intended for the comfort of man, who was there only to be received by the Queen in her palace, where she alone was at home, and alone gave commands." Adams' actual sentence of 1905 is shorter, more direct and less complete.

Sources of change

The written sentence has been shaped by a number of forces that must be considered before trying to project it into the future.

One of the forces has been the evolution of the spoken language itself. Certain evolving constructions characteristic of spoken Modern English have influenced the shape of the written sentence. Verbs in conversational English have more and more often come in tightly wrapped packages of verb-and-preposition, as in Dillard's "*look at* its feet," and verb-and-

object, as in "*got us* to the moon." The effect of such phrasal packages, in print as in speech, is to discourage interruptions between verb and complement. Also, of the verb forms and auxiliary verbs that have found their way from spoken to printed English, *do* has been multiplying its functions to become an integral part of questions, negations and emphatic constructions. The standardization of the negative construction with *do*—"Do not enter"—has discouraged the old inverted style of negative that is echoed in Adams' "enter to no very great extent" and that has, like the phrasal verb, helped create the expectation that auxiliaries and adverbs will fall into a certain order around the verb and will not too lightly be inverted or interrupted.

As with verbs, some written configurations of nouns have roots in changes in spoken English. In conversation as well as on paper, more modifiers of different kinds have been placed in front of nouns more often, and with more varied connections implicit between them. In the past some adjectives could follow a noun—*soldiers three*—but now almost all adjectives precede. Past participles more frequently refer to a characteristic as well as a past action or state of being; a *learned lesson* (past action) became, as in the passage by Bacon, rulers who were "learned in all literature" and "best learned," which became shortly after, a *learned person* (an attribute).

So the written sentence has been feeling the effects of word patterns taking shape in spoken English. But, especially in its dimensions, it has been feeling the effects of the printing press even more. Print encourages literature—and the sentences of which it is composed—to become compact. The rambling constructions in Bacon and Swift were descendants of the tradition of recitation. Whether modeled on ornate Latin oratory or on strung-together narratives of the medieval epic, the massive sentence was a hold-over from the days of performance before an audience of rapt listeners.[8] But as Walter Ong argued in *Orality and Literacy*, the physical qualities of the line of type—regular, justified, fixed and locked—promoted a sentence with similar features.[9] The spread of literacy in the eighteenth century encouraged regularity of another kind as well: In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan credited Addison and Steele with creating prose that held a single "tone and attitude to the reader throughout the composition"—in place of the variation in tone that had characterized the spoken and even handwritten sentence.[10] The novel and the newspaper, commodities themselves, packaged the sentence as a commodity; critics accused Samuel Richardson and Daniel Defoe of writing easy, flowing sentences in order to churn out works quickly and make more money—a charge with some degree of truth, according to Ian

Watt.[11] The printed sentence could become casual, implicit and compact partly because the tastes of the reader/consumer were uniform and well understood. This reader was often a lady, with the enforced leisure to read novels and to further mold the written sentence through what Watt called the "cult" of personal letter writing. Thus the men and women of eighteenth-century London, in their different roles, helped create the more familiar and straightforward written sentence.

Some of these eighteenth-century developments deepened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The expansion of literacy turned into the movement for mass education. The style of *The Spectator* gave way to that of *The New Yorker*, and more remotely to the zippy sentences of the daily newspaper and *Time*. In the second half of the last century, magazine advertisements became less likely to be written only in complete sentences and more likely instead to display the phrases and catchwords that have characterized ads ever since. The conventional punctuation of the sentence was put on the defensive and fragments and comma splices became schoolbook errors for the first time.

But other twentieth-century developments would have been unimaginable in the eighteenth. At that time, language intended for public consumption was printed. In our century, in the "secondary orality" (Ong's term) of radio, film and television, public language has become oral as well. The written sentence, besieged by the advertising slogan, the headline, the sound bite and the jump cut, has become ever quicker.

Of the many prose styles that have threaded their way through these changes, one strand calls for further comment. In his essay "On the Language of Physical Science," the English linguist M.A.K. Halliday has traced the features of nominalization, implicitness and simplified clause structure to the rhetorical requirements of scientists writing over the last four centuries.[12] According to Halliday, scientists, in recording and publishing their experiments, drew on those aspects of English discourse that best suited their purposes, and, as science has become prestigious, those stylistic elements have become widely imitated. A principal requirement of scientific exposition is its suitability for carrying over complex information from one sentence to the next; what is new data in one sentence—a stage in a experiment, or a result—becomes background information in the next one. The easiest way to package a statement in reduced form so that it can then become a piece of a later statement is to make it a noun phrase. A description of how two bodies repel each other is later referred to as *the repulsion*; an explanation of how quickly solids crack becomes *the rate of crack growth*, or even *the crack growth rate*. The

explicit clause that first presents a piece of information is reduced to an implicit phrase when the information is recapitulated. But within the sentence, Halliday pointed out, a different tendency is at work. As events and processes are turned into nouns, verbs often become expressions not of action but of relationships between processes. One process *causes* or *is caused* by another; an event *supports* a theory. Such statements of relationship are by nature explicit and precise; they tend therefore to take the form of simple independent clauses. These characteristics of simple clause structure and nominalized, compact phrase are not invariable characteristics of scientific writing and were not conspicuous until the eighteenth century, but they have been taking shape and exercising their influence on other prose styles (such as bureaucratic writing) gradually. Halliday, in other words, has seen in the rhetoric of empirical explanation precisely those tendencies that have marked the changing generic sentence.

To recapitulate: The evolution of the written sentence over the last four centuries has been the work in part of changes in spoken English, in larger part of the growth of printing, and in particular of the form of discourse amenable to empiricism. Shifts in the explicitness and implicitness of the sentence have been linked to the rise of the printing press, to widening literacy and to the age of science. Of these three influences, two especially—the expansion of readership and the pervasiveness of scientific thinking—will continue to be felt for the next two centuries. This alone is perhaps reason enough to predict that the sentence will change in the next two hundred years about as much as it has since Jefferson's time, and in the same direction. But before I explore more specifically where that change may lead, let me discuss two cultural variables that might bend this line of development in unpredictable directions.

Some uncertainties

The first is the uncertain fortune of the English-speaking world. For the past four centuries, the steady development of the sentence has been made possible in part by the uninterrupted growth of first the British and then the American cultural empires. That expansion will probably cease soon—if it has not done so already—and might be drastically reversed during the next two centuries. Robert Burchfield, chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement*, predicted in a 1978 article in *Encounter* that English would, in the future, follow the course of Latin in the Middle Ages: After spreading over most of the known world and serving as both an official language and an alternate second language at the local level, English would gradually break up into a variety of new languages.[13] The scenario seems very probable in the long run—all

languages evolve or die—but how far along in the process English may be in the twenty-second century is hard to know. The future will be more centralized and media-dominated than the Latin-unified Middle Ages were, and consequently standard English will probably persist as the language of privilege that transcends national borders. But economic, military or ecological events that curtail the influence of the English-speaking world could quickly change the direction in which the English sentence has been moving. The perception that the English language is in retreat on the world stage, that it has become inadequate or decadent, would intensify the forces of innovation and reaction that are always pulling at writing style.

Another question is the long-range effect of electronic technology on the relation between spoken and written discourse. So far, our printed language remains the creature of the mechanical printing press; that is, our rules of written discourse are still founded on the separation between writing and speech that was widened by the mechanical press. Electronic communication has begun to close that gap, and yet the electronic media, overwhelmed by them as we may sometimes feel, are only in their adolescence. If the full effects of such technology on the language still lie ahead of us, then by 2200 the sentence may have headed down one of two roads.

The first possibility is that the sentence that is read and the sentence that is spoken will remain two distinct types. Even though it has become briefer and more colloquial in some respects, the written sentence has never actually been a reproduction of actual speech as much as it has been a visual artifact derived from it. (One illustration of this difference is the frequency of use of the prepositional phrase; seemingly colloquial in its simplicity and brevity, the prepositional phrase is nonetheless forty percent more frequent in writing than in speech.[14]) In the future, while the written sentence will probably approach the spoken one in length, it may also remain remote from it in the character of its internal phrasing. Word processors make experimentation and refinement so easy technically that written style may acquire an expanding array of traits that distinguish it from oral style. In a study of the impact of computer conferencing on language, linguist Naomi Baron has predicted that writing would be changed in the directions of both greater logical coherence and reduced stylistic richness.[15] A similar result has been forecast by those who have considered the influence on language of structuralist thinking, including the stucturalism of computer programming itself.[16] The divergence between the written and the spoken might be unwitting, as computer-influenced language finds its own syntax, or it might be delib-

erate as well, as writers in various fields begin to shun the simple sentence and pursue a new ornateness in their prose. As George A. Kennedy commented in his history of rhetoric, "The history of prose style is largely the history of a series of reactions."[17]

The other possibility is that as electronics finds its place in the relation between the oral and the written, it may bring them closer together. As electronics tends to replace every mechanical process with invisible, nerve-like circuitry, the differences between spoken and visible discourse may shrink. A pivotal change will occur soon—it has begun already—when word processors record and respond to speech. When today's young children reach their middle age, they will probably be talking into their word processor instead of typing into it. As the electronic transformation of speech directly into print becomes a common procedure for creating text, the hand will lose its ancient place as the indispensable writing implement. Meanwhile, the book will be replaced by the portable screen with replaceable chip. Futurists debate the advantages and disadvantages of the book versus the screen,[18] but such changes will be driven unstoppably by the general rise of electronic over mechanical technology. And after the screen has long replaced paper and page, after a few generations of students have been raised on voicewriters, then even scholarship may be communicated through combinations of writing (will it be called that?), electronic speech and graphics in an interactive format. By then, sentences printed on paper may have become nostalgia, intriguing in their immobility and fineness, like daguerreotypes. But what shape the electronically-recorded sentence will have taken at that point is impossible to know.

The sentence of the future

For now, let us return to the more manageable job of predicting where past changes might take the sentence if we project them into a future that, while different, is at least familiar.

The most certain change is the continuing simplification and unification of the sentence. The average sentence will get shorter. This change will be driven by the continuing preference for the proposition that is both colloquially and precisely expressed. Sentences will not become shorter as rapidly as they have in the past in terms of absolute numbers, but when the average length is down in the teens, gradual decreases of just one or two words will be consistent with the long-term trend.

An accompanying change will be that punctuation will become lighter, and some of our correct punctuation rules will look as excessive in the

year 2200 as some eighteenth-century punctuation rules do to us now. The shrinking sentence has already had an impact on sentence boundary punctuation; the preference for the short, catchy word cluster—in advertising, among other genres—has encouraged the fragment, the run-on and the comma splice. As formal errors, these mistakes are new to the twentieth century, and the strain they indicate between theory and practice in marking off sentences will certainly be growing worse. There will be increasing pressure to accept the joining of two related independent clauses with a comma instead of a semicolon, and to accept increasing numbers of elliptical structures as sentences. My guess is that the result of the tension will be a compromise. More exceptions will be allowed—commas splicing clauses of slightly greater length than the very short ones that they are permitted to splice now, certain kinds of fragments finding acceptance as colloquial sentences. Otherwise though, the very fastidiousness with which the concise sentence is arranged will insure that the boundaries of the independent clause are vigilantly watched.

The reduction of subordinate clauses and the expansion of noun phrases will produce sentences that are easy to take in at a glance but that are also thick with modifiers and prepositional phrases. A glimpse of the future from *The New Yorker*'s "Notes and Comment" (Jan. 14, 1991): "Whether these weapons would be used in the event of war is impossible to know without access to highly classified information." Of the two halves of this sentence, the future probably lies in the types of phrases and modifiers found in the second half, while clause structures like that of the first half will become rarer. I think that much of Francis Christensen's analysis in *Notes Toward A New Rhetoric* of the contemporary cumulative sentence will hold even truer in the future than it does today. Phrases and adverbial clauses conspicuously inserted at the opening of sentences will become less common, and today's grammar-book advice to use such openings for the sake of variety will appear in retrospect to have been fairly useless. To counterbalance the simplification of the clause, writers will rely increasingly on chains of phrases—modifiers, verbals, prepositional phrases—after the verb to channel the flow of information and move it quickly down to its fine points.

As most sentences become more direct and concise, unusual kinds of sentence structure will not disappear; instead, they will carry new stylistic significance. An exception here is the type of sentence that opens with *There is*, *It is*, and similar introducers; these have a long and stable history in the language that will probably continue unchanged. But other types of inversions or rearrangements in statements that we now accept as

stylistic whims may carry more specific connotations in the future. Placing the main subject and verb in an unusual position (*The deficit is growing, we believe*) or reversing their order (*Says the attorney,...*) may well signify a more formal or a more slangy style than such arrangements do today. Inversions of the type *Not until they finished dinner did they talk about it* will still be around but will probably feel more highly flavored—perhaps more bombastic, perhaps more archaic.

The inversions created by the passive voice will probably continue to be regarded as inconsistent with the direct and compact style and thus will remain out of favor. But the future of the passive voice is difficult to judge because its recent past may come to appear stilted. Our stricture against the passive voice is only about a century old, and criticisms of it have overlooked its usefulness for placing first in a sentence the primary item under discussion. Some current college handbooks are already more judicious about condemning the passive than those of a couple of decades ago, and two centuries from now severe criticisms of it will probably be regarded as a gripe peculiar to our century.

As sentences become shorter and their different parts are separated by fewer intervening words than in the past, skilled writers will find new refinements in the coordination and agreement among sentence elements, while inexperienced writers will feel that such precision is unnecessary. The dangling modifier rule is probably a good example of the type of proscription we will see more of. Currently, dangling modifiers that are clear in the context of not only the clause that follows but the sentence that precedes (*We walked along the path. Coming to a field, the moon was rising through the trees*) are not particularly troubling to many people; although classified as errors, they can be found in reputable writing. For this reason, it is conceivable that in time the dangling modifier will go the way of other syntactic patterns such as the final preposition and be reduced from a grammatical error to a stylistic preference. But what is more likely, I think, is that because the sentence of the future, although short, will be rigorously constructed, dangling elements will become a more rather than a less serious matter in the judgment of future grammarians.

For the same reasons, pronoun agreement will continue to be held to standards at least as rigorous as today's. As sentences become shorter and pronouns and antecedents become separated by fewer words, the potential for vagueness in certain pronouns will become greater. The proscriptive rule (less than a century old) about avoiding different uses of *it* within the same sentence (*When the fruit loses its crispness, it's time to*

throw it out) is probably typical of coming rules designed to prevent the pieces of the compact sentence from getting mixed up. The pronoun *this* is likely to be viewed as a demon pronoun in the future, not only because of its frequently hazy reference (... *but this was not enough*) but also because of its colloquial anticipatory use as well (*I saw this man who* ...). And finally, the dilemma of whether to use *he, he/she,* or *they* with singular indefinite antecedents will probably fail to move much closer to a satisfying grammatical resolution, since each alternative conflicts with an established notion of sentence structure or readability; instead, by 2200, the best we may be able to do with the pronoun gender issue is to establish different options as stylistic norms in different types of discourse.

Speculating on the future of the written sentence, as long as we keep the hazards in mind, can be a useful exercise. It requires that we consider how closely the history of our visible language presses on us, and that we remind ourselves that much of the structure of our current sentences is only a moment in the evolution of style. For grammarians and for teachers of writing, it never hurts to have one's perspective refreshed. As I see it, written English is moving in the direction of sentences composed of fewer clauses and more phrases, cleverly and thickly packed. If this is so, then pedagogical rules about dependent clauses may become less important than they are now, and rules concerning internal structure–explicit agreement, implicitly related but carefully organized modifiers and phrases—may become more so.

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Chronology of works surveyed

Early works are all available in reprints.

1600: Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementary*, 1582; Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1593; Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, 1594; Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages*, 1598; John Stow, *Survey of London*, 1603; Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, 1605; King James Bible, "Exodus" and "Luke," 1611; Thomas Dekker, *Preface to Troia-Nova Triumphans*, 1612.

1700: Christopher Cooper, *The English Teacher*, 1687; John Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690; John Dryden, *A Discourse Concerning Satire*, 1693; Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Concerning Virtue or Merit*, 1699; Daniel Defoe, *The Shortest-Way With The Dissenters*, 1702; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Winthrop*, 1702; Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 1704; Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 1711; Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, 1711; Jane Barker, *Exilius*, 1715.

1800: Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1789; William Bartram, *Travels*, 1791; James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 1791; Lindley Murray, *English Grammar*, 1795; Joanna Baillie, *Introductory Discourse to A Series of Plays*, 1798; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1800; Samuel Coleridge, *On the Principles of Political Knowledge*, 1800; William Blake, *Letters*, 1803; Thomas Jefferson, *Message to Congress*, 1803; Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 1811.

1900: Robert Louis Stevenson, *Open Letter to the Reverend Dr. Hyde of Honolulu*, 1890; Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Ubervilles*, 1891; William James, *The Knowing of Things Together*, 1895; William McKinley, *Annual Message to Congress*, 1897; John Dewy, *The School and Social Progress*, 1899; John Genung, *The Working Principles of Rhetoric*, 1900; Mary Ward, *Eleanor*, 1900; Edith Wharton, *The Other Two*, 1904; Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, 1905.

1982—: Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction*, 1982; Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses*, 1986; Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal*, 1988; Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, 1989; John McPhee, *The Control of Nature*, 1989; articles from 1990 issues of *The New York Times Magazine, The New Yorker*, and *Journal of the History of Ideas*; Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 1991.

Endnotes

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