Writing in the Age of Email: The Impact of Ideology versus Technology

Naomi S. Baron

Tracing social change and the evolution of writing the American writing curriculum provides the base for an argument that considers changing ideology as a strong factor in shaping contemporary views about composition and technique in writing. Technology alone, the author argues, is not responsible for what is an increasingly oral approach to written language. Emergent dimensions of email that alter communication access, social interaction and response are examined as contributory factors.

This paper was presented at the Tenth Annual Writing and Computers Conference in September, 1997 at the University of Brighton.

Naomi S. Baron is professor of linguistics and chair of the Department of Language and Foreign Studies at American University in Washington, DC. Her current research interests include the historical relationship between spoken and written language and the linguistic character of email.

Department of Language and Foreign Studies
American University
Washington, DC 20016
nbaron@american.edu

Visible Language 32.1
Baron, 35–53

© *Visible Language*, 1998

Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, RI 02903

Birds or Antelope: A Matter of Perspective

The drawing is simple enough: a few lines and curves with a dot inside (*figure 1*). Surely it must be some sort of animal. But what kind? The answer depends upon other knowledge or experience you bring to the interpretation. Add a swooping chest and you get a bird (*figure 2*). Add four legs and you get an antelope (*figure 3*).

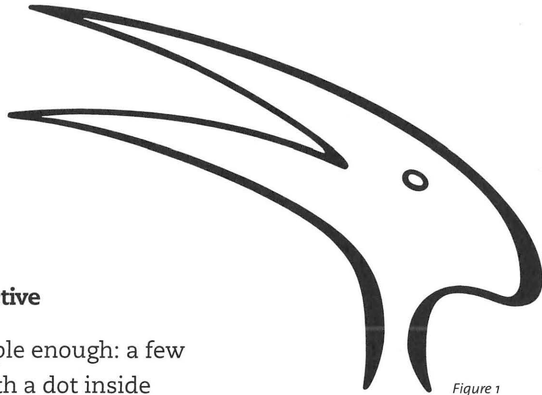

Figure 1

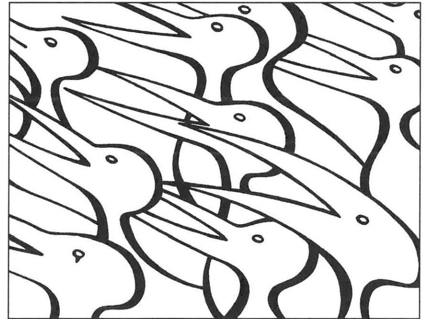

Figure 2

Figure 3

All observations, as Norwood Russell Hanson noted, are theory-laden (1958). This truism is as applicable in analyzing the effects of technology on human language as it is in rethinking the history of science. The way we look at seemingly "objective" data – from the movement of planets to the composition process – is inevitably colored by the cognitive and social models we bring to our studies.

The object of observation in this paper is written language and, ultimately, the writing we do when sending electronic mail across a network or the Internet. Our question is, what are the characteristics of this writing, and how did they get to be that way. The thesis, following Hanson, is that our observations of email are likely to be theory-laden. The perspective coloring the common view is that the linguistic characteristics of email, often described as a cross between speech and writing, emerge from the networking technology through which email is composed and distributed. This article will argue, instead, that the speech-like aspects of email are as much the product of ideological shifts regarding written American English over the past century as they are reflections of contemporary computer technology. These ideological transformations include changing assumptions about appropriate subjects for student compositions, differing positions about the importance of grammatical correctness, and contemporary thinking about the extent to which writing is monologue or dialogue. All of these ideological changes are integrally tied to shifts in higher and lower educational philosophy in America.

Composition in America

In just over one-hundred years, American notions about the place, form and purpose of composition in education have undergone profound alteration. Between the 1870s and today, the ideas of two educational reformers – one a chemist and the other a philosopher – led Americans not only to abandon classical models of education but also to elevate composition skills (in English) among the popu-

Adams, K.H. 1993. *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges.* Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press.

Baron, D. 1990. *The English-Only Question.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Baron, N.S. (in press). Letters by Phone or Speech by Other Means: The Linguistics of Email. To appear in *Language and Communication.*

Batson, T. 1988. The ENFI Project: A networked Classroom Approach to Writing Instruction. *Academic Computing*, February/March, 32-33, 55-56.

lace and eventually to emphasize self-expression as the *raison d'être* for writing. Some background on the demographics of mid and late nineteenth-century America is critical to understanding the subsequent course of written language in American education.

The national pulse: America in the second half of the nineteenth century

It is, of course, a truism that the United States is a nation of immigrants. The decades after the Civil War, especially between 1890 and 1910, brought large numbers of foreigners to American shores. With the exception of the Irish, the vast majority of these were non-English-speaking.

Since today's "immigrant" is tomorrow's "native," it has often been difficult to differentiate "foreigner" from "American." However, a common variable linking much of the American population of the late nineteenth century was their minimal level of formal education. Schooling beyond rudimentary skills was deemed neither necessary nor affordable by the majority of the farm-based or laborer populace. While states began requiring free schooling to be available as early as 1852 (in the case of Massachusetts), attendance was hardly the norm. As late as 1870, only two percent of all seventeen-year-olds graduated from high school. By 1900, that number had risen to 6.3 percent (Gere, 1987: 37).

Not surprisingly, the percentage of students participating in higher education was small. In 1770, the country boasted only 3,000 living college alumni (out of a population of about three million – see *Missions of the College Curriculum, 1977:* 20). A hundred years later, only one percent of the nation's crop of seventeen-year-olds later graduated from college (Gere, 1987: 37).

Yet like many immigrant and/or underclass populations, growing numbers of Americans recognized the importance of learning to speak and write "correct" English. At the grass roots level, this movement (redolent of its counterparts among the rising lower classes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England) was evidenced

Bean, J. 1983. Computerized Word-Processing as an Aid to Revision. *College Composition and Communication, 34:* 146–148.

Besnier, N. 1995. *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bolter, J. 1991. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Borup-Nielsen, G. 1995. *A Study of the Two Experimental Schools of C.N. Starcke and John Dewey.* Lampeter, Wales: Mellen University Press.

in trends ranging from growing sales of dictionaries to the formation, in the early twentieth century, of "Better English Clubs" (Drake, 1977: 19, 36). (See Crowley, 1989; Crowley, 1991 and Mugglestone, 1995, for discussion of language standardization issues in British English.)

The mid and late nineteenth-century educational push was further bolstered by an attitudinal shift about the very nature of the American English tongue. A century earlier, Noah Webster had displayed his revolutionary spirit in arguing that American English was distinct from British English, with its own vocabulary, grammar and spelling. But a hundred years later, the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. American linguistic guardians (reacting, in large part, against the waves of immigrants) once more saw prescriptive standards (and British standards, at that) as needed bulwarks to maintain the purity of spoken and written English (Drake, 1977). This insistence upon prescriptive standards became an important theme in the subsequent rise of English composition in America; it only began to subside in the 1970s and 1980s.

A high immigrant population, low levels of formal education, grass roots movements to improve language skills and an emphasis on prescriptive standards all made late nineteenth-century America ripe for a national emphasis on English composition. The efficient cause, however, was a set of transformations in educational pedagogy that would profoundly alter notions about the relationship between spoken and written language.

Transformation from a spoken to a written pedagogical model

From the founding of Harvard in 1636 through most of the nineteenth century, American higher education bore two characteristics of relevance to our discussion. First, the mode of instruction was overwhelmingly oral. Students provided oral answers to questions posed verbally, recited memorized passages and regularly engaged in oral disputations and speech contests.

The emphasis on oral pedagogy was a direct continuation of the rhetorical model of the medieval and early modern English university. However, while recognizing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetoric as spoken language, it is critical we be clear that this rhetorical style profoundly differed from everyday speech. Based on the rhetoric of Cicero and Quintilian, medieval and early modern rhetoric filled a related role in formal disputations, whether legal, political or religious. Regrettably, some contemporary discussions (e.g., Clark, 1990) confuse this earlier formal rhetorical mode with the conversational style of a lot of modern composition.

Second, the language of study was predominantly Latin, with some Greek added for good measure. In fact, the closest most college students of the day came to composition in English was through written translations of classical texts. This focus on classical languages, also an English import, was bolstered by Lockean (and ultimately Aristotelian) notions about the composition of the human mind. If we assume the mind is composed of a collection of faculties (such as reasoning, observation and attention), then education consists in exercising those faculties much as one would muscles. The content of the exercise matters less than how vigorous it is.

In America, proponents of the "mental muscle" theory viewed classical languages as the best form of mental exercise. Even if one eventually needed to speak and write eloquent English (as did future ministers, who constituted a significant proportion of the seventeenth- through nineteenth-century American college population), Latin was assumed to be a better avenue for sharpening one's skills, since presumably it was harder.

When they did write English, what did students write about? Lofty, impersonal themes such as "Can the Immortality of the Soul Be Proven?" or "Whether the Soul Always Thinks" (Myers, 1996: 38). More modern, individually motivated themes did not emerge until Charles W. Eliot and John Dewey profoundly altered national presuppositions about the goals of higher and lower education.

Eliot's model: adapting the German research university to America

When Charles W. Eliot became president of Harvard in 1869, he set to work changing the face of higher education in America and, in the process, altered lower education as well. Himself a product of both Harvard College and a pivotal stint in Germany studying chemistry, Eliot conceptually redefined Harvard's educational goals which, in turn, became the model for the rest of the nation.

Underlying nearly all of Eliot's ideas was his drive to adapt the German research university model to the United States. Eliot's changes included introducing an undergraduate elective system, eliminating requirements in the classics, building an advanced undergraduate and graduate research program (complete with seminars, research papers and scholarly publication), and, along with Andrew White at Cornell, instituting written examinations (Graff, 1987: 32). As part of the curricular revolution, the study of English – philology, literature and composition – assumed a new identity.

Early in his presidency (1872), Eliot appointed Adams Sherman Hill, a lawyer-turned-newspaperman, to assist the then Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, Francis James Child. Hill recast what had been a four-year traditional rhetoric program, emphasizing spoken and written grammatical correctness and literary style, into what would become higher education's ubiquitous one-year freshman composition course. Equally importantly, Hill introduced the first college placement examination in English, supporting Eliot's agenda for pressing lower education into raising its standards in English composition. The German model of higher education that Eliot so admired presumed that university students had learned to write in lower school. Until American lower schools could ensure the same tough standards, Harvard (and its sister institutions) would need to provide remedial service. (See e.g., Krug, 1961, for a selection of Eliot's writings on popular education. See also Brereton, 1995.)

Brereton, J.C. 1995. *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875–1925*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Clark, G. 1990. *Dialogue, Dialectic, and Conversation: A Social Perspective on the Function of Writing*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Coleman, J. 1996. *Public Reading and the Reading-Public in Late Medieval England and France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cremin, L.A. 1961. *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957*. New York: Random House.

But what were students to write about? In earlier decades, the themes had been set by the instructor in rhetoric. Hill, building on his newspaper experience, instead asked his students to write objectively about their observations and perceptions of everyday life. Hill's successor, Barrett Wendell, introduced the daily theme, intended to "teach a young writer to recognize and grasp the individual nature of experience" (Myers, 1996: 49).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the composition revolution at Harvard had profoundly affected many aspects of teaching the English language. Colleges around the country developed versions of Harvard's writing program, and English composition as a discipline began its inexorable separation from philology (soon to become linguistics) and from English literature (which was to become the province of the new, "scientific" English Department). But for our purposes, the most important effect of Harvard's revolution in composition was that a new purpose was defined for teaching writing. Instead of learning a rhetorically-based imitation of classical style whose goal was to expound on abstract themes, college students were asked to formulate their observations of individual daily experiences. While the required medium of expression was writing, the redefined theme opened the door to what would become in the decades that followed the expression of a personal voice. And over time, the expression of that voice, although in writing, came to sound more and more like speech.

Dewey's model: progressive education

In the same decades that saw Eliot's reforms in higher education, a new model of lower education was percolating across Europe and America. Froebel in Germany, Starcke in Denmark, Binet in France, Montessori in Italy, Francis Parker in Massachusetts, John Dewey in Chicago and then New York, and Abraham Flexner in New York all sought to redefine how a nation's children should be educated. Such efforts came to be known collectively as "progressive education," (see, e.g., Borup-Nielsen, 1995).

Crowley, T. 1989. *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates*. London: Macmillan.

Crowley, T. 1991. *Proper English? Readings in Language, History, and Cultural Identity*. London: Routledge.

Danielewicz, J., and Chafe, W. 1985. How "Normal" Speaking Leads to "Erroneous" Punctuation. In S. Freedman, ed. *The Acquisition of Written Language*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 213–225.

Drake, G.F. 1977. *The Role of Prescriptivism in American Linguistics, 1820–1970*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

The term "progressive education" has been loosely applied to a spectrum of educational reform, dating back most recently to Rousseau. The common elements linking all of these movements include:

1. a child-centered (as opposed to teacher-centered) approach to education.
2. an emphasis on fostering creative self-expression in children.
3. the belief that children cannot be taught; rather, they learn by doing, aided by guidance from adults.
4. the view of schools as social (and socializing) institutions.

For the progressive education movement, school was not a place to drill students in skills or even to impart information but a venue for developing the child's individual potential as a member of society through guidance from teachers and association with age-mates. In Dewey's words, "the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself" (Lang, 1898: 6).

In the United States, progressive education had an episodic history. It received a measure of recognition in the 1910s through the 1930s. None other than Eliot became the honorary president of the Progressive Education Association (founded in 1919), followed, upon his death, by Dewey himself. The movement receded during the Depression and World War II, only to reappear under influence from the British Open Classroom movement in the 1950s and, perhaps more importantly, as we shall see a little later on, from the Vietnam generation of the 1960s and 1970s.

While the general effects of progressive education would not be strongly felt in the United States until the last quarter of this century, Dewey's commitment to personal, creative self-expression in children had an early and profound effect on one area of the lower school curriculum: teaching writing. In 1920, William Hughes Mearns (an English teacher and writer) became the head

of the Lincoln School, a laboratory school founded by Abraham Flexner and run under the aegis of Teachers College at Columbia University. Dewey had moved from the University of Chicago to Columbia in 1905, and through Mearns' leadership, the Lincoln School was to become a continuing laboratory for Dewey's ideas on progressive education.

Mearns created for his students an English curriculum that focused not on historical analysis or grammatical correctness but on self-expression (Myers, 1996: 104). Following Flexner's injunction that students' "intellectual and aesthetic capacities ought to develop on the basis of first-hand experience" (Flexner, 1923: 100), Mearns replaced the traditional lower-school English curriculum of grammar, spelling, penmanship and literature with what he labeled "creative writing." Again following Dewey, he viewed his task as teacher to be one of guide, not instructor. Writing, Mearns said, is "an outward expression of instinctive insight [that] must be summoned from the vasty deep of our mysterious selves. Therefore, it cannot be taught; indeed, it cannot even be summoned; it can only be permitted" (1925: 28). As a form of self-expression, writing reflects one's own voice. In fact, he once described poetry as "when you talk to yourself" (Mearns, 1943).

Mearns' curricular innovations (and those of kindred spirits in progressive education) were to have two important effects on pedagogy later in the century. The first was on perceived relationships between spoken and written language. By emphasizing student self-expression and diminishing the role of teacher as expert, progressive education supported a model of writing as the transcription of thoughts initially expressed through speech rather than thoughts mediated by writing as a distinct form of language. This model was further reinforced by the assumption that the mechanics of "correct" writing should take a back seat to the unfettered expression of ideas.

The second effect was on pedagogical assumptions about what type of teaching was appropriate for what age student. Progressive education was designed for

lower school training. (Recall that in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, relatively few students completed high school, much less continued on to college.) Moreover, Dewey himself had argued that by the time children are about age twelve, their educational agenda should shift from cooperative to individually designed projects (see Cremin, 1961: 140–141). Yet ironically, the model of teacher as guide-on-the-side, originally designed for elementary and junior high school students, would later become the dominant American model for teaching college students across the curriculum. As a result, in contemporary America, there is often no serious place in eighteen years of formal schooling for the classical model of writing as a discrete form of linguistic representation, complete with its own standards for grammar, punctuation, spelling and style.

Post World War II America

Higher education in post World War II America was significantly affected first by veterans' benefits and then by an unofficial war half-way around the world. Thanks to the so-called GI Bill, over two million veterans of World War II poured into American colleges and universities (Myers, 1996: 159). A college education was to become the American expectation, not the exception. While the college curriculum of the 1940s and 1950s had been relatively traditional (Myers, 1996: 200), the Vietnam War (and the national attitudinal changes it engendered) fostered a different model: student-centered, dialogic, "relevant"; in short, progressive education.

The implications of this shift for the teaching of writing and for attitudes towards the written word more generally were far-reaching. Prescriptivism began falling into decline, heralded by the appearance of the descriptively-based *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, but fueled by a growing insistence upon spontaneous self-expression at the expense of edited prose. Transformations in the college writing curriculum reflected these political and social trends and were, in turn, instrumental in recasting

Flexner, A. 1923. *A Modern College and a Modern School.* Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, Page.

Gere, A.R. 1987. *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Graff, G. 1987. *Professing Literature: An Institutional History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hanson, N.R. 1958. *Patterns of Discovery.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

American notions about the relationship between spoken and written language.

Computers and Writing

Since World War II, composition programs in America have successively embraced three distinct (though sometimes overlapping) models of how writing should be taught, reflecting, in turn, three different assumptions about the goal of student writing. The first, a traditional model that has roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century classical rhetoric, takes the goal of writing to be imparting knowledge. Accordingly, writers are trained to focus on the product they are generating, with the expected attention to details of written mechanics and style. This model has persisted throughout the second half of the twentieth century, although with decreasing popularity.

The second, so-called "process" model, emphasizes the act of writing more than the written result. Students are encouraged to do considerable pre-planning ("pre-writing") as well as multiple drafts, but the prescriptive mechanics of written style are de-emphasized. In both the traditional and the process models, writing is seen as an individual activity. However, while the traditional model encourages objective presentation ("It appears that...," "One might argue that..."), the process model allows for more individual expression ("I think..."). In essence, the process model embraces the self-expression component of progressive education.

The third model is more social-dialogic. The purpose of writing is no longer expression of objective information or self-expression but what has come to be called the social construction of knowledge (see, e.g., Clark, 1990: chapter 1). Rather than being a solitary activity, writing is envisioned as a group conversation, utilizing not only peer review but even group composition. Conceptually, the social-dialogic model incorporates progressive education's views of schools as social (and socializing) institutions which, in Dewey's words, lead children to use their "own powers for social ends" (Lang, 1898: 9).

Hawisher, G.E., LeBlanc, P., Moran, C., & Selfe, C.L. 1996. *Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education, 1979–1994: A History.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Heath, S.B. 1983. *Ways with Words.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Herring, S., ed. 1996. *Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social, and Cross-Cultural Perspectives.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Kolb, D. 1996. Discourse across Links. In Charles Ess, ed. *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 15–26.

As some (Hawisher, et al., 1996) have noted, developments in the use of computers to teach composition have capitalized upon the emergence of first the process and then the social/dialogic models of writing. The era of stand-alone word-processors made it possible to relegate writing mechanics to the computer, leaving the author free to concentrate on more "important" things, such as ideas. Word-processing also enabled writers to produce successive drafts without needing to rewrite or retype the entire text each time (see, e.g., Bean, 1983: 146).

Networked computing lent technological impetus to the third, social-dialogic model of writing. Trent Batson, one of the early pioneers of computer mediated communication for teaching writing, even argued that "some of the current theories about how to teach writing [seemed to be] developed specifically with networks in mind" (Batson, 1988: 32). More probably, we might argue that education in the 1970s and 1980s was ripe for progressive thinking, which drove models for teaching composition and much of the personal computer revolution more generally (see, for example, Reingold's 1993 discussion of the American counterculture roots of modern computing). The development of hypertext programs (e.g., Michael Joyce and Jay Bolter's *Storyspace* and the work of George Landow – see Bolter, 1991; Landow, 1992) helped move the notion of writing groups (for the purpose of peer review – see Gere, 1987) to the idea of group writing, where multiple authors create a single text *seriatim*. (See Murray, 1997, for current visions of the future of collective composition in cyberspace.)

The introduction of computers into the composition process facilitated – though it had not initiated – the shift of emphasis in composition from objective exposition to an interpersonal dialogue that is, as likely as not, more informal than formal. The fact that word-processors relegated the mechanics of writing to second-class status reinforced existing trends in manually-produced writing (e.g., to use pronunciation in written prose as if it were marking pauses in spoken discourse – see Danielewicz

and Chafe, 1985). The fact that networking incorporated interlocutors into the composition process (either as commentators or as co-authors) further confirmed students' beliefs that writing is a stream of thought or a conversation written down, not an entity in its own right.

Since we don't edit oral monologues or conversations, the role of editing in computer generated writing was also called into question. Nowhere has this fact become more evident than in the use of email.

Email and Written American English

The enormous success of email as a technology reflects the ongoing trend, at least in American English, for *writing* to approximate the structure and conventions of *speech* rather than functioning as a discrete form of linguistic representation. Yet when we probe the linguistic character of email, the story becomes yet more complex. For email has some characteristics of writing, some of speech, and some emergent qualities that belong to neither. Moreover, the formal properties of email as a system of linguistic representation are sometimes at odds with the ways real-world email users actually send and receive messages.

To understand the nature of email as a linguistic system, we need to answer three sets of questions:

1. What are the commonly assumed characteristics of spoken and written language? Are these characteristics reflected in actual spoken and written usage?
2. What are the commonly assumed characteristics of email? To what extent are they like spoken or written language?
3. What presuppositions do users bring to sending and receiving email? To what extent do these presuppositions derive from envisioning email as a form of speech, as a form of writing or as a new genre of communication?

There isn't the opportunity here properly to address these questions (see Baron, in press; Herring, 1996). How-

ever, by highlighting a few examples of "mismatches" between assumptions about traditional speech and writing on the one hand and real-world email usership on the other, we can get a sense of why email is frequently perceived as being more like speech than like writing.

Paradigmatic characteristics versus real-world user presuppositions

The literature on the relationship between speech and writing is, like Caesar's Gaul, divisible into three parts. One group of writers (see Coleman, 1996, for a good summary of this approach) lays out paradigmatic sets of characteristics that distinguish spoken from written language (for example, writing is more formal than speech; people say more than they write; speech is ephemeral while writing is durable). A second group of authors (e.g., Tannen, 1982) argues that the form and content of spoken and written language are nowhere as discrete – for example, under the right social circumstances speech may be much more formal than writing). A third group (e.g., Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Besnier, 1995) eschews the whole structural discussion and focuses instead on the ethnographic conditions that lead speakers and writers in different societies to formulate linguistic messages the way they do.

Whatever one's theoretical position, it is nonetheless true that most language users in literate societies share certain assumptions about how they think writing differs from speech. These assumptions, which were traditionally inculcated through formal schooling, roughly parallel the analysis laid out by the first group of scholars, even though these same users may, in day-to-day writing, produce language much more like that characterized by the second and third perspectives.

The same dichotomy exists with regard to email. Paradigmatically, email is, for example, a durable form of linguistic representation. Unlike speech, email is typed, can be stored and can be printed out. Yet in actual usage, senders of email typically behave as if the medium is

Krug, E.A., ed. 1961. *Charles W. Eliot and Popular Education.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Landow, G.P. 1992. *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lang, O.H., ed. 1898. *Educational Creeds of the Nineteenth Century.* New York: E.L. Kellogg & Company. Reprinted by Arno Press, 1971.

Mearns, H. 1925. *Creative Youth: How a School Environment Set Free the Creative Spirit.* Garden City, NJ: Doubleday.

ephemeral (i.e., like speech). The clearest evidence of this user presupposition is the writing style that characterizes much of email.

Two examples illustrate this trend, at least in the United States, for email to follow the style of speech, not writing. First, unlike off-line composition, emails typically undergo little or no editing. In fact, many otherwise meticulous writers send "written" emails without rereading them, while they would never transmit the same information in a traditionally composed letter or memorandum without review.

Second, most Americans readily adopt an extremely casual style in their email, more akin to the informality of their speech than to the relative formality of writing. The relaxed tone of emails is evidenced both in terms of address (users shift more quickly to first names – or no salutations at all – than in off-line writing) and in the ease with which humor is incorporated into communication with people you have never met or with whom, even in face-to-face speech, you would likely be more reserved.

This last point highlights one of the emergent dimensions of email that transcends the dichotomous speech-versus-writing discussion. Email provides a point of entree for communicating with individuals with whom you would ordinarily have no contact or whom you would hesitate to interrupt, for example, with a telephone call. We send emails to heads of organizations with whom we have little or no opportunity to air our concerns face-to-face and to whom a letter would seem inappropriate or futile. Similarly, we email people with whom we have working relationships but whom it would be an imposition to call and too cumbersome to write.

Why are emails not viewed as social intrusions, while either a knock on the door, the ring of a phone, or a letter in the box might be so perceived? Because email is more like the chime of a clock reminding us of the hour than like a summons commanding our departure. We have some latitude about when (or whether) to reply. As with written communication, we can choose the conditions of

Mearns, H. 1943. Poetry Is When You Talk to Yourself. In *Challenges to Education, War, and Post-War: 30th Annual Schoolmen's Week Proceedings*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 154–157.

Missions of the College Curriculum. 1977. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mugglestone, L. 1995. *"Talking Proper": The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Murray, J.H. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: Free Press

our response. At the same time, though, the socially acceptable time limit on responding is more akin to spoken language, since our interlocutor can be fairly certain that the message arrived and knows the technology enables a swift reply. As David Kolb observed, "Email offers focus and fast turnaround. A written letter unanswered for a month is not a serious matter; an email message unanswered for a month may signal the end of a friendship" (Kolb, 1996: 16).

Implications for the effects of email on written American English

What impact is email having (and can we expect it to have) on the way we produce the written word, at least in American English? As the number of email users continues to grow (currently, exponentially), we should anticipate that the nature of writing used in email will itself undergo evolution, much as word processing has (e.g., while an early generation of users typed or hand wrote drafts and only then input the text, today most computer users compose on-line). While the eventual future of email is unknown, some trends seem clear.

First, the amount of composition done at a computer – either as stand-alone "word processed" documents or as messages designed for computer mediated communication (be it email or chat room) – is increasing markedly. Since the same technology is used for composing all of this written text, the possibility for stylistic influence from text composed as email upon text composed as stand-alone word-processed documents is obvious.

Second, the move we discussed earlier towards group-oriented writing (either for peer review or to create collective products) is greatly facilitated by computer technology. The common use of email (or local networking) to transmit texts for comment or contribution also invites cross-over influences of email writing conventions onto traditional off-line composition.

Third, it seems unlikely that the influence will work the other way. One might, for example, be tempted to

hypothesize that as formal editing tools designed for word processing (such as spelling and grammar checkers) become increasingly available for email, at least the "mechanics" of email will begin to look more like writing than speech. The real issue, however, is one of motivation, not availability. Quite simply, why bother? Since the inception of these tools for word processing, an astounding number of people doing word processing have simply ignored the opportunity to do editorial cleanup on the computer, with the result (as many composition teachers know) that papers prepared on computers are often editorially inferior to those written longhand or typed, where students understood they were expected to check their work.

What have we learned about the evolving relationship between speech, writing and composition in America? In the nineteenth century, "composition" was typically oral, though modeled on written standards. In the twentieth century, writing is the pedagogical norm, though increasingly modeled on speech. Computer technology has influenced the teaching of writing, but generally in the directions that composition theory and broader educational philosophy were already leading. To the extent that composition is increasingly done on-line, it seems likely that the spoken-language properties of email will reinforce the increasingly speech-like character of writing that school and college pedagogy in the United States has been fostering since the late nineteenth century.

Beyond American Shores

This article has addressed the relative roles of pedagogy and technology in the changing relationship between spoken and written American English over the past one hundred and twenty years. What relevance does this discussion have for other times, other varieties of English, other languages? Why should anyone other than Americans care?

The answer comes in two parts. First, the characteristics of written language are always shaped by social, eco-

nomic, educational, legal, religious or technological variables at work in a given society, on a given language, at a given time. The history and future, for example, of Japan's tripartite writing system (*kanji,* two kinds of *kana* and *romaji*) is inseparable from the political, religious, and social history of the country since Buddhist monks first introduced Chinese characters nearly two millennia ago. Similarly, while neither spoken nor written registers have ever been standardized in the United States, England has a commonly acknowledged written language standard, though a far more restricted student body continues on to higher education to learn the language's intricacies. As a result, computer technology might have quite different effects on writing in England than in America.

The second part of the answer requires us to reflect on the international reach of American English and of American computer technology. Long before computers seriously arrived on the scene, English in general and (some would argue) American English in particular had become the closest modern contender for the title "international language," thanks, in part, to American GIs, movies and television programming. And while Americans may no longer make their own televisions or baseballs, they have a dominant world presence in networked computing. Arguments of national pride aside, the language of the Internet is overwhelmingly English, and heavily American English at that. Patterns of written American English on web pages, in chat rooms and in emails bombard an international readership. It seems likely that American writing styles, as represented by computer mediated communication, are destined to influence written norms both in other English-speaking and in non-English-speaking countries as well.

The remaining question, of course, is whether the directions in which written American English are moving are to be commended, condoned or condemned – but thereby hangs another tale for another time.

Myers, D.G. 1996. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Rheingold, H. 1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* New York: Harper Collins.

Street, B. 1984. *Literacy in Theory and Practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tannen, D. 1982. Oral and Literate Strategies in Spoken and Written Narratives. *Language, 58:* 1–21.

Entering a new phase,
for rest, perhaps.
All the road graders
are silent, but not the music.
(Piano music drifts out of Victory Baptist Church.)
Philosophy, adapted into a religion for spirituality.
Each student must labor for six days,
clinging to the crumbling cliffs
of Earth.
There are no roofs over our heads.
There is no future in herding sheep,
Elemental greatness? Ask the Mayans.
Ask the hired hands from the Thirties.
Ask
the Confederates in the muddy fields
of imaginative battles won or lost.
Ethereal dreams,
they make me laugh, comparatively speaking
I am a young man
writing out
the complicated tracery
of my ancient history.

(I must mention Atlantis here.)

Give my love to Sasha.
Always there is joy in simple things.
The way the poem flows,
the rough rude hurts
of yesterday
that remain, somewhere,
leaning into sunset,
the flat land beyond the Delta
and the remnants of "home."
So my lines
surge out
caught between life and death again
in the midst of a stone-white glory, all
the comings, all the goings, all
the cosmic urges, the green
of the grass of Now
and the view
from an open window
in Milan,
an awesome distant charting.
Souls of glass, heavy machinery, men
and women on the road at night,
tramping through here, campfires
of last night and ghastly
images
of transcendental messengers
who also come and go
in the firelight
of man's
bumble-bee demise.