



MACHINERY AND ENGLISH STYLE

BY ROBERT LINCOLN O'BRIEN

IN every age since written language began, rhetorical forms have been to a considerable extent influenced by the writing materials and implements which were available for man's use. This is a familiar observation in studies of the past. Is it not, then, time that somebody inquired into the effects upon the form and substance of our present-day language of the veritable maze of devices which have come into widely extended use in recent years, such as the typewriter, with its invitation to the dictation practice; shorthand, and, most important of all, the telegraph? Certainly these agencies of expression cannot be without their marked and significant influences upon English style.

Were the effects of these appliances limited to the persons actually using them such an inquiry would not be worth making. Commemoration odes will never be composed by dictation, — *Paradise Lost* to the contrary, — nor will the great pulpit orator prepare his anniversary sermons, having in view their transmis-

sion by submarine cable. However generally modern novelists and playwrights may avail themselves of the assistance of a stenographer, it seems certain that the saner and nobler literature of the world will always be written in more deliberate, and perhaps old-fashioned ways, by mechanical methods in which there has been little change from Chaucer to Kipling.

But, unfortunately, no man writes to himself alone. The makers of the popular vocabulary decree to a great extent the words which the recluse of the cloister must select. If the typewriter and the telegraph, for mechanical reasons purely, are encouraging certain words, certain arrangements of phrases, and a different dependence on punctuation, such an influence is a stone whose ripples, once set in motion, wash every shore of the sea of literature. Every rhetorician hastens to acknowledge that the most he can hope to do by his art is to reflect the best usage of the day, of which he is little more than an observer.

Robert Lincoln O'Brien (1865-1955) was a journalist working in Washington, DC when he wrote the article reprinted here for the October 1904 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Granting, then, that the only effects of these mechanical agencies worth noticing come from their reflex relation to popular habits of expression, I purpose to trace some of the influences which the telegraph exercises in the choice of words and in rhetorical forms. A similar study of the various schemes of abbreviated writing derives an added importance from the fact that a universal shorthand has long been one of the dreams of orthographic reformers. While the immediate realization of this need not be feared, who can safely assert that some system may not suddenly be flashed before the public so simple and complete as to compel the attention of an utilitarian age? The effects upon literary style of all existing shorthands permit of accurate analysis. I shall also advert to some of the effects of the dictation habit which the typewriting machines have brought into vogue, to the inevitable failure of the graphophone as an agency of composition; and, incidently, chiefly as an illustration of how mechanical trifles are modifying modern English, I shall allude to some of the not inconsiderable effects of the newspaper headline.

Let us turn to shorthand first, because it is a possible agency of composition, rather than of transmission. For purposes of illustration, take the Phillips Code, which is the shorthand of the telegraphers:—

ak	acknowledge
akd	acknowledged
akg	acknowledging
akm	acknowledgment

iw	it was
ix	it is
iwr	it was reported
ixr	it is reported
iwx	it was expected
ixx	it is expected

At this second appearance to take the oath
At ts second aprc to tk t oath
of the presidential office
f prl ofs
there is less occasion for an extended address
tr is les oca fo an xtd-ed ads

than there was at the
tan tr ws at t
first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail,
fs. Tn a statement smw in detail,
of the course to be pursued
f course to b pursued
seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the
semd fitting & prp. Nw, at t
expiration of four years, during
expiration o fr ys, dur
which public declarations have been
wh pu declarations hbn
constantly called forth on every
constantly cld fh on ey
point and phase of the great contest which
pnt & phase f gt contest wh.
still absorbs the attention
still asbs t atn
and engrosses the energies of the nation,
& engrosses t energies f nation,
little that is new could be
lit tt is nu cd b
presented.
ptd.

Here is a system of natural shorthand, based on the English alphabet and, therefore, very easy to learn. Many hurried writers, in their own memoranda, or in rough-draft composition, and especially college students taking notes, make "wh" for "which" and "t" for "the." This system is merely a codification of such abbreviations. By it they are put into a strait-jacket. Its followers learn from the code book what short cuts are safe, and where complications would ensue. It thus standardizes natural abbreviations.

This, and every scheme of shorthand ever devised, offers to carry a long phrase, provided it is in frequent use, more cheaply, or with fewer strokes, than the short phrase which is unfamiliar.

To illustrate: S-c-o-t-u-s stands for the "Supreme Court of the United States," a sign obviously made from the initials of the words represented, just as "Potus," makes "President of the United States." While Scotus thus stands for six words, it is impossible to have "s. c.," its first two letters, stand alone for "Supreme Court," because those letters are wanted for South Carolina. "Supreme Court" by itself is not abbreviated. The

"Supreme Court of the United States" is. Hence it comes to pass that the reporter who writes in code can truthfully say, as one did to me recently, "When I am in a great hurry to rush off a dispatch I always write 'the Supreme Court of the United States,' but if I have plenty of time I say simply 'the Supreme Court.'"

Fancy a system of universal shorthand in which a little effort made many words, and a greater effort fewer. This would be analogous to the long and the short haul clause of our Interstate Commerce Law. It is deemed contrary to public policy to let the railroads carry freight cheaper from Albany to Buffalo than from Albany to Syracuse; it would be equally adverse to literary policy to have any system of written expression in popular use which so discriminated in favor of the long haul. And yet every system of shorthand virtually does this. And shorthand is about as old as the art of writing. Words of most frequent use get the shortest signs. The others are not much abbreviated, but in regular systems of shorthand are "written out," as stenographers say when every sound is expressed in phonographic terms. A single stroke in Ben Pitman's stenography will make "in the first place." Similarly, t-nr-t, made without lifting the finger, is "at any rate;" t-nr-t contains all the consonant sounds of "at any rate." The vowels, of course, are of no consequence. Any less conventional phrase which might be needed to introduce a sentence could only be expressed by much greater effort. Such an arrangement puts a tremendous premium upon the inordinate use of the already overworked phrases.

There are cases in the code where the effort, or the charge, is the same for the long as for the short haul, a condition not quite so unfavorable to literary felicity. With the same number of letters, for example, written as a single word, we may say Secretary, or Secretary of State. One is "s-e-y" and the other "s-o-s," — Sey Hay or Sos Hay. Similarly, it makes no difference in effort whether we write

Sey Shaw or Sot Shaw, although Sot Shaw conveys the full official title of our nation's finance minister.

It may, perhaps, be of interest to know that while ours is a growing language, this is not a growing code. The telegraph companies forbid their operators to extemporize code words, or to use any which are not in the standard list. This rule has grown out of sad experience. Some years ago, when diplomatic complications with Italy were uppermost in the public mind, a press association sent out along its wires one night the notice of a newly coined code sign. The instructions said that the five words, "Baron Fava, the Italian Ambassador," would henceforth be written "d-a-g-o." This was rather easy to remember! But the one pupil who was absent from school the day the concert exercises were given out made himself felt in this instance. He allowed the untranslated code to slip into a prominent newspaper the next morning which announced that "a dago" had done certain things which other equally reputable newspapers were at the same time attributing to the personal representative of the august sovereign of Italy. No more emergency measures have been permitted.

In another way this premium which every scheme of shorthand puts upon the conventional forms of speech may be represented. Popular manuals of architecture tell us that in building houses there is great difference in cost between the use of stock sizes of door and window frames and of those which have to be cut out on special order. So it is with shorthand in cutting out literary forms. To be original is very wasteful of effort. An observant New England clergyman once told me that an extremely bright man in his Divinity School class, who always composed his sermons in shorthand, had in later years attracted attention because of his painful use of conventional terms and phrases. This took away much of the charm from what might otherwise have been an agreeable style. While this

experience may not be that of all who compose in this medium, that it would be the natural tendency of a universal shorthand can hardly be doubted.

While nobody would look for Addisonian passages in the stock market reports which are telegraphed over the country, the dreary monotony of their phrases furnishes something of a foretaste of the reign of abbreviated writing. In the market code the word "Hume" means "Holders unwilling to make concession." What mortal man would ever write "holders *disinclined* to make concessions," when so slight a change would involve such an amount of extra work? In short, the five pages of the market code contain about all the forms of expression and varieties of language ever seen in these market reports.

Shah, for example, means "shade higher," and *sog* means "the stock of grain on hand."

Among the many "apostrophes to labor," the all-conqueror, there should be reserved some little recognition of what we owe in our English style to the fact that the efforts involved in written and in spoken expression run along side by side at so even a ratio. Such exceptions as "through" with one syllable, and "deify" with three syllables, and fewer letters, are rare. In the main, product in writing corresponds with effort, and before we give favoring ear to any new system of abbreviated writing we should assure ourselves that this condition is retained.

The effects of the telegraph upon present-day literary forms are much more direct than those of shorthand, for, while only a few persons compose in the latter medium, a large share of the reading matter of the modern world is written by persons who necessarily have in view at the time its transmission over electric wires. The limitations of the telegraph thus vitally affect what the present age is reading. Nor are their relations to literary form less distinct than those of shorthand.

Textbooks in rhetoric discuss learnedly the principles which should govern our

choice as between the rugged old Saxon words, made familiar in earliest childhood, and the longer ones of classic origin. Rhetoricians explain that, while in general the simplest words are the best, we should be chiefly governed by the effect which we aim to produce. But so far as I have been able to see, they pay no heed, as a practical agency affecting choice in the modern world, to the greater adaptability of the long word for telegraphic transmission, and hence of its liability to encroach upon the field of the simpler Saxon in popular usage, and so in the mental habits of the time.

There are two reasons for preferring the big word in telegraphing,—its greater accuracy and its economy from a pecuniary point of view. The latter consideration does not amount to much, since wires are often leased by the hour, and publications which are willing to pay for an extensive telegraphic service would not bother with petty differences of cost any more than any reader would think, in sending a message to New York, of the more specific information which could be conveyed for a quarter through the medium of ten long words.

But errors in transmission are the constant dread of the extensive user of the telegraph. Half-unconsciously he comes to prefer those words which experience teaches him go through safely. He may not be aware that this influence is operative, when he decides to write "superintendent" instead of "head," or "overseer" instead of "chief," because of the fewer chances that either of these long words will be confused at any point in the journey with something varying in perhaps a single letter. The long word throws out more life-lines. A slight mistake in its transmission does not vitiate its meaning.

The story is familiar of the New York commission merchant who telegraphed his factor: "Cranberries rising. Send at once 50 barrels, per Simmons," meaning by way of a certain Mr. Simmons who was the New Orleans agent. In a few

days a consignment arrived from the Southern factor, but with the plaintive suggestion that not another barrel of persimmons could be had for love or money in the entire state. The courts were not in this instance asked to decide whether the cost of an attempt to corner the market could be charged to the telegraph company for failing to take note of the "constructive recess" between per and Simmons.

Most jurymen would have said that the New York merchant was little less than idiotic to use a word so clearly open to error. So would the journalist be guilty of contributory negligence if he failed, after long experience, to make some selections in recognition of so obvious a danger. He will not, for example, send the word "prevision," because somebody who handles the word on its journey would be almost sure to change it to the more familiar "provision." Whenever two words are thus closely alike, one in common use and the other rare, only the former can with thorough safety be sent by telegraph. The wires are thus constantly shrinking the popular vocabulary, hastening the retirement of words of the less useful sort. Of all the pres and pros and ins and uns, the word of less familiar use is the one liable to be transformed to its already overworked rival. To the word that hath uses shall be given is a principle of the wires, applied with a vengeance. The writer who tried to be so fastidious as to describe a person by wire as "unmoral," would have as the reward of his pains at the other end of the line the ordinary term "immoral." Subjunctive moods, implying something contrary to reality, drop out in the same way. The writer who desires to convey this notion must do it in some less delicate way.

Only one operator among a considerable number needs to change from a less to a more familiar word, and it never gets back. Moreover, a word need fail but one time in ten to become objectionable to careful writers. So important is this

subject that the latest editions of Walker's *Rhyming Dictionary* contain a section on the most common telegraphic errors. The author cites the importance of unraveling this class of mistakes as one of the greatest uses of a classification of words by the groups of letters with which they end rather than by their initials.

The noun "cant," this book shows, may be made "tenant" without any change whatever except in the spaces between the dots and dashes of the first letter. How much safer the longer word "jargon," or, better still, "hypocritical speech," would in these circumstances be! It is not important to discuss these errors here, more than to allude to this recognition by the dictionary-makers of the important place in modern life of the telegrapher's eccentricities.

This agency, then, encourages big words and the overworked words. Its tendency is thus against the widening of the popular vocabulary, a misfortune too patent to need comment. It is an axiom of the rhetoricians that the power to express many and various shades of thought and feeling rests on the possession of a large and well-managed vocabulary. Many of our words already have so many meanings as to be subject to constant misinterpretation. It has been argued that half of the petty disputes of mankind may be traced in the last analysis to a different understanding of the language involved in the issue between the disputants. Examples of this are familiar.

But a greater effect of the telegraph on rhetorical forms arises from its relation to punctuation. Only the most obvious stops can be depended on; hence, one accustomed to this method of transmission learns to put sentences into such shape that they punctuate themselves, avoiding forms which could be completely overturned in sense by neglect of a period or by its conversion into a comma. The adverbial phrase at the beginning of a sentence is especially dangerous, because it so readily adapts itself to the end of the sentence before, with results that may be

amusing or amazing. It is always safer to have sentences begin directly, and even abruptly, with the noun which is their subject. Much of the graceful elision of one sentence into the next is lost by this requirement. Where each sentence stands out as distinct as a brick the literary passage will have the aspect of a brick wall.

Lest these should seem plausible but unsupported theories I will compare some actual narration which has gone over the telegraph lines or the cables, with prose composed when no such requirement was in view. *Collier's Weekly*, for February 6, 1904, presented the first cable message from Mr. Frederick Palmer, its correspondent in Japan, and a writer of more than ordinary grace and polish. His dispatch consisted of fifteen sentences.

These begin as follows:—

The Nation is
It seems
There is
If troops are being moved
It is not
Their movements do
The government is
All these preparations are
There was never
If transports or troops are being
All partisanship has been
No word is obtainable
War preparations proceed
Such unity of preparation and control is un-
exampled
It is as if.

Not a single sentence here begins with an adverbial or adjective phrase. The only two sentences that begin with anything but the subject plain and direct are those having an adverbial clause, "if troops are being moved" in one, and "if transports or troops are being concentrated" in the other. In neither of these could the adverbial phrase be attached to the preceding sentence. If it could have been Mr. Palmer would not have sent it.

In George Bancroft's account of the battle of Lexington nearly half of the sentences, by actual count, begin with a

qualifying phrase of some sort. Here are a few of them:—

On the afternoon of the day
In the following night
A little beyond Charlestown Neck Revere was
At two in the morning, under the eye of
the minister and of Hancock and Adams,
Lexington common was.

I have before me an Associated Press dispatch from Seoul consisting of three hundred words compressed into eleven sentences. Every one, except the last, begins squarely with its subject. Let us contrast this abrupt, uniform, monotonous method of narration with some exceedingly familiar sentences of another sort, and think what the telegrapher's objection to them would be.

"With all his faults — and they were neither few nor small — only one cemetery was worthy to contain his remains. In that temple of silence and reconciliation" —

An adverbial phrase which you will notice could grammatically be attached to the preceding sentence just as well.

"Where the enmities of twenty generations lie buried, in the Great Abbey, which has during many ages afforded a quiet resting-place, etc. — This was not to be.

"Yet the place of interment was not ill chosen.

"Behind the chancel of the parish church of Daylesford, in earth which already held the bones" —

Please notice how the conversion of the comma after Daylesford into a full stop would make two entirely grammatical sentences, as follows:—

"Yet the place of interment was not ill chosen behind the chancel of the parish church of Daylesford.

"In earth which already held the bones of many chiefs of the house of Hastings was laid the coffin of the greatest man who has ever borne that ancient and widely extended name."

It is clear that Macaulay's prose would be badly twisted on the wires. He sometimes, to be sure, writes a considerable

passage in crisp, short, periodic sentences. This is a part of his art, to show the rapid movement of events. But he would have dreaded to be tied down to such a style always.

So marked a difference in the manner of stringing sentences together between that employed by Macaulay and Bancroft, on the one hand, and by two present-day correspondents on the other, I maintain, is not altogether due to the varying literary standards of these writers, but is in part accounted for by the conditions under which they severally write. In the lines which I have quoted Bancroft and Macaulay could trust their punctuation absolutely; their obscurest comma had the strength of Gibraltar. Mr. Palmer and the Seoul correspondent, in their painful loneliness on the other side of the globe, were deprived of all those consolations which faith in punctuation marks can give.

It seems clear that, as our language has progressed, more and more dependence has been placed on the punctuation. It has done more work; delicate shades of meaning have been conveyed by the visual image which the punctuation itself makes. This tendency, then, is in process of checking, so far as the telegraph operates to affect present-day usage.

When the wires slight punctuation they do rhetorical form an injury for which nothing can atone. From earliest childhood catch phrases have been familiar in which the meaning depended wholly on the location of a comma. Important cases have gone to the courts hanging on the punctuation of a tariff bill. The most discussed regulation of liquor traffic in Massachusetts to-day is known as the "Semi-colon" Law.

The English language is peculiarly rich in its connective parts of speech. These give the skillful writer an opportunity for the widest play of his art, in expressing the most delicate shades of conjunctive and disjunctive relation. Much of this is endangered by the wires. For example, the use of "and" and "but" as

the first words of sentences, while ordinarily not desirable, on occasions suggests a relation for which there is no ready substitute.

It is rather hard to give specific illustrations where the meaning of an "And" which begins with a capital does not approximate to that of an "and" in the middle of a sentence, and separated from what precedes it by a comma. The most that we can say in these cases is that one form is better than the other.

"Your fathers, where are they? And do they live forever?"

How much better it is to have this second question stand off from the first as it does when made a new sentence and not a coördinate part of the preceding one. Of the thirty-one verses of the first chapter of Genesis, King James Version, twenty-nine begin with "And," following a period. Such illustrations show that "and" and "but," usually interior words, may be needed at the beginning of a sentence, a practice which the wires discourage. A writer dependent on them would feel safer to convey this conjunctive relation in some other form, necessarily by more blunt methods. Because the usual place of "and" and "but" is in the middle of a sentence the telegraph inclines to keep them there. It would thus send language into ruts which are already too deep.

The telegraph, it should be remembered, performs some good services for English style. The periodic sentence, the clean-cut sentence, the readily understood sentence are at a premium on the telegraph. It thus serves clearness and force rather than elegance.

The invention of the typewriter has given a tremendous impetus to the dictating habit, especially among business men. The more ephemeral literary productions of the day are dictated, sometimes to a stenographer for transcription, and often directly to the machine. In either case the literary effects of the dictating habit are too manifest to need elaboration. The standards of spoken

language, which in the days of the past stood out in marked contrast with the terseness and precision of written composition, giving rise to the saying that no good speech ever read well, have crossed over to the printed page. This means not only greater diffuseness, inevitable with any lessening of the tax on words which the labor of writing imposes, but it also brings forward the point of view of the one who speaks. There is the disposition on the part of the talker to explain, as if watching the facial expression of his hearers to see how far they are following. This attitude is not lost when his audience becomes merely a clicking typewriter. It is no uncommon thing in the typewriting booths at the Capitol in Washington to see Congressmen in dictating letters use the most vigorous gestures as if the oratorical methods of persuasion could be transmitted to the printed page.

The graphophone has been long enough before the public to make very clear its limitations. It is useful in transcription, but worthless in composition, and unless radically amended will always be useless. In its present form it is used at the National House of Representatives and among the court reporters, who read their stenographic notes into it; girls, with sounders over their ears, and playing the keys of the typewriter, turn the records into printed form. They regulate the speed exactly as they wish to write. In this respect it is ideal.

But the failure of the graphophone for composition arises from the unwillingness of a human being to be left behind in a race. The waxen wheel begins to spin; the person dictating must either keep pace with its rapid rotations, or bring it to a standstill. Such a race is not an invitation to careful thought or accurate utterance. Of all the devices to encourage verbosity and carelessness, this is without doubt the worst that has ever been invented. The graphophone is, therefore, not one of the present-day agencies modifying English style; but the rea-

son for this is that it does not have the chance.

One other agency shows how trifles in mechanism may still have an influence on English usage. My attention was called to this not long ago by a serious editorial in the literary supplement of a substantial newspaper, discussing whether the word "tie-up" had obtained a sufficient footing in the language to be permissible. It was at the time of the coal strike, and some purist had objected to the prevalent use of the word. This editorial took the other view, giving as a weighty reason that the word was indispensable in making headlines, and so had earned a place for itself in English usage.

The headline writer enjoys in effect a form of poetic license. His constant study is to present the most salient and attracting feature of a dispatch in a series of words which may be spelled in perhaps twenty-two letters. It is letters, rather than words, that count with him, and he also has to give a special rating to M's and W's. When a leading newspaper recently changed its type, cutting its number of headline letters down to twenty, its veteran employees in this department narrowly escaped becoming maniacs; their whole mental machinery was completely disarranged; they were compelled to look at everything in the world at an angle of twenty twenty-seconds.

The chase for a great deal of meaning with a few letters has led to the revival of some words which would otherwise have gone into complete disuse. Dr. Hornaday tried vainly to get the New York newspapers to say Zoölogical Park instead of "Zoo" when he began to give them material about it. They said that "Zoo" was essential in headlines, and by implication what was useful there could not be wholly tabooed elsewhere. It was the old story of the camel's head under the tent, to use a figure suggested by zoological parks. "Sans" as a preposition is doubtless gaining some headway because of this need. "Wed" is a great headline word.

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“Jap,” just now, for a Japanese seems destined in this way to be pushed toward general use. And the public reads the headlines; their influence is contagious. So is that of most of the mechanical agencies of the present day.

If I seem to exaggerate the effect of these agencies, or to overrate the part which they play in the development of present-day usage, I can only plead in extenuation the priceless heritage of English speech which it is ours to conserve. It is not the vanguards of the on-coming forces, but the richness of the treasures behind the citadels that give importance

to such a survey. Wider than Britain's Empire and our great stretches of territory is the dominion of the English tongue, rich with the spoils of its honorable conquest. Its words and forms have been gathered, alike from the patois of savages and the languages of every civilization, old and new. Certainly there can be no such thing as trifles and no considerations deserving to be called unimportant among the influences which affect in any degree the growth and permanency of our English, with its comprehensive and elastic vocabulary, and the splendid richness of its rhetorical forms.

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