

Chapter 3

Styles

Ann D. Zwicky

Ann Zwicky is a teacher at Ohio State University of beginning anything—so far linguistics, French, English composition, English as a second language, and remedial writing. She is interested in the overlap of linguistics and stylistics. She is currently collaborating with Arnold M. Zwicky on a study of the style and content of restaurant menus, a topic that combines two major interests, language and food.

1. Introduction

You probably don't speak to your grandmother exactly as you do to the neighbor's two-year-old, or the same to your minister as to your roommate. You wouldn't write your reason for requesting a loan in exactly the same terms on a bank form as in a letter to your brother. While you may be aware of making a special effort to produce your best language along with your best manners for some people—a prospective employer, for example, or a prospective in-law—you usually change styles automatically and effortlessly, without giving it a thought. In fact, most people change styles so unconsciously that they may be unaware that they ever do so. Some people deny that they *have* different styles on the grounds that it would be insincere—a form of playing-acting—to speak differently to different people. In reality, adapting your spoken or written style to your audience is like choosing the right tool for a job. You can't eat bouillon with a fork or sirloin steak with a spoon. And you may have eaten your peas with a spoon when you were three years old, but you wouldn't feel comfortable doing it at a dinner party now. If your four-year-old cousin asks you why your begonia needs light, you can't explain it with the one word "photosynthesis," but you would include that word in your answer to the same sort of question on a botany exam. You may tell your mechanic that one of the wires seems to have come loose from that funny-looking black thing, and he may respect the depths of your ignorance by replying to you in similar terms, but if he talks that way to his assistant, you may begin to doubt his competence. Common sense makes you choose simple words

to speak to a small child and use appropriate technical words, if you know them, to speak to an expert about his field. "Putting on airs" is not the only way to change your speech style, and it isn't even one of the most common.

Most of us are not aware of our own speech as part of a dialect, perhaps because we've heard "dialect" used to mean something like "substandard English" or "outlandish speech." People say things like, "I couldn't understand a thing he said; he speaks some kind of funny dialect." The statement that he speaks a dialect is sure to be true, because everybody speaks some kind of dialect. We grow up speaking the dialect of the region we live in and the social group we live among. If we decide for some reason to get rid of our native dialect—perhaps because it's too Southern or too New Yorkish or just too unlike the way our new friends speak—we can only replace it by another dialect. If we pattern our speech on that of network television announcers, we may have some right to say we speak "Standard American English," but that is really just another dialect. It can be called "standard" because it is widely acceptable but not because it represents *the* language in some special way. Because people who do not originally belong to its region have come to adopt it, a standard dialect eventually ceases to identify speakers regionally, but this doesn't mean that it is intrinsically better than any regional dialect.

We don't have to change our dialect to change styles. Most of us make our style shifts largely within the bounds of our native dialect, but some people become *bidialectal*. They speak a standard dialect at work or with strangers, but a regionally or socially marked dialect among friends and "homefolks." A bidialectal person can usually choose his style from a range of styles within each dialect, but he can also change his style by switching from one dialect to another.

Even those of us who don't have two entirely different dialects may have a set of pronunciations we avoid when we're on our guard, but slip back into when we're relaxed. The same person who says to a personnel interviewer for IBM that he's from "Columbus, Ohio," with clearly pronounced *o*'s everywhere they're spelled, may say "Clumbus, Uhayuh" [klʌmbəs əhayə] when he's among friends.

Various speech styles differ in at least three major ways: in vocabulary, syntax, and phonology. Probably the most obvious of these and the one we are most aware of is vocabulary. Almost everybody learns "bad words" at an early age. Four-year-olds come home proudly from preschool with brand new words like "son-of-a-bitch," and even if they can be persuaded not to use their store of adult shockers, seem endlessly fascinated by their own taboo words like "wee-wee" and "poo-poo." Although nearly everybody outgrows this stage, most of us do occasionally use some kind of "bad language"—some

words or expressions we wouldn't want to say in front of the primmest person we know. Because of the forbidden aura around words that have to do with sex and excretion on the one hand and God and religion on the other, we are particularly aware of this part of our vocabulary. We sometimes talk about it as if it were the whole of speech; in fact, "Watch your language!" usually just means "cut out the naughty words." In practice, however, many other sectors of our vocabulary change with our speech style as well.

In addition to "bad language," we often have a set of words or phrases that belong to "best language," a set we keep for our most formal and impressive occasions as we might keep our best china. Not everybody has best china, of course, but most of us do have best language. You may find that you save your best for formal writing. Look for it in term papers or English compositions or the kind of description of your aims and ambitions you often have to write on college or graduate school applications. Poetic words like *myriad* or scholarly-sounding ones like *multiplicity* might belong to this section of vocabulary.

In between these two levels, nearly everybody uses some technical language, or *jargon*. Many of us are more or less fluent in a number of different jargons. Every job and every field of study has some technical terms of its own. So does every hobby and every sport. Many technical terms escape from their own fields and come to be used generally. The space program has given us all "countdown," "A-OK," and "blast-off," for example, and even people with no interest in baseball know how it feels to "strike out." Within its own area, technical jargon is clear, expressive, and economical; for outsiders, much of it usually remains incomprehensible. If I tell you that a protopodite is the basal portion of a biramous crustacean appendage, you may still not have any idea how to recognize one. Both of these characteristics can be useful. Thieves' argot was a technical language invented to keep outsiders from overhearing anything useful. Other professional jargons are sometimes used to confuse or impress people outside the profession. "Rhinitis" sounds a great deal more impressive than "a runny nose." "Rhinoplasty" sounds a lot more complicated and serious than "nose job." When the dermatologist says you have "dermatitis," it sounds like a real diagnosis by an expert; if he called it a "rash," you wouldn't be so sure that he knew more about it than you did.

Sometimes technical language just gives a different label to something we have an ordinary name for. Your "cilia" are just your eyelashes, for example, just as your "rhinitis" is only a runny nose. Sometimes technical language names something for which everyday language lacks a name, like the little cleft that runs from your nose to the middle of your upper lip. Often technical language marks distinc-

tions that ordinary language ignores. A horse breeder raises Thoroughbreds, Standardbreds, Morgans, Appaloosas, or Arabians. In his fields he sees mares with foals. The foals are colts or fillies. When they grow up the fillies will be mares; some of the colts will become stallions or horses, but others will be castrated to make them geldings. For the unhorsy outsider, all these animals are merely horses. "Scarlet" and "crimson" are both "red" to many people who can tell them apart perfectly well—and so are "garnet, magenta, vermillion," and "claret." However, if you are a professional decorator, or even if you are just trying to buy a cushion that will match the exact shade of red in the upholstery of your sofa, "red" becomes too broad a term to be useful.

If you think you don't use any technical language, this is probably because your particular jargon is widely shared among people you know. If you can watch a baseball or football game on television and understand the commentary, you understand at least one form of jargon; if you can go on to discuss the plays yourself, you speak that jargon. To become completely convinced of this, try to describe a baseball or football game to a foreigner who knows nothing about the sport, or try to read a detailed account of a match in some sport unfamiliar to you—perhaps cricket or polo—remembering that its technicalities are no worse than those you've mastered for baseball. (There is a fine, rather untechnical, description of a cricket match in Chapter 18 of Dorothy Sayers' *Murder Must Advertise*.)

Here is another example of cricket talk, from an Australian player of the sport named George Lombard:

The way the fielding team positions itself depends on the kind of bowler the batsman is facing. For example, a right arm leg-spin bowler bowling over the wicket to a left-handed attacking batsman with a weakness outside the off stump would need a slip and a gully and a ring of fieldsmen in the deep on the leg side saving the boundary; however, if the same batsman were facing a fast-medium right arm inswinging bowler, there would be a need for two or three slips, a deep third man, a gully, point (optional), cover, and deepish mid-off, with a man at deep fine leg and another at a wide mid-on position.

Besides technical language, most people speak at least two levels of slang: the nearly neutral everyday language that's just a little too informal for letters of application and the like (*fridge* and *t.v.* belong to this vocabulary) and the more specialized, perhaps short-lived "trendier" slang of their own particular group at a particular time. You might call the two sets "common" slang and "in-group"

slang. "Get off my case" is an example of the latter where I am living now; it means approximately "stop nagging at me." Some slang is very short-lived, like "Twenty-three skiddoo!" but some lasts long enough to become accepted in the stiffest circles. "Fan" appeared as a slang shortening of "fanatic" in the late sixteenth century, and today we have fan letters, fan clubs, and even fan magazines for all kinds of things from baseball stars to rock groups. Slang, like technical language, can be used to keep insiders together and to exclude outsiders. Cockney rhyming slang is an extreme example of this. It originally consisted of replacing a word or expression with an expression that rhymed with it: "wife" became "trouble and strife," while "hat" was "tit-fer-tat." But then the resulting phrases, although unconnected in meaning with the words they stood for, still offered cues to their *sounds*, so the slang makers went one step further and deleted the rhyming word. Thus your wife becomes your "trouble," while your hat is your "titfer." On the other hand, slang terms often move readily from dialect to dialect. Some originally Black slang is now very popular with Americans of all races. Non-Cockneys often learn and use bits of rhyming slang for fun.

Many of us also have at least some bits and pieces of a private language peculiar either to our own families or our closest friends. This kind of intimate vocabulary may be based on long-outgrown baby talk, the malapropisms of eccentric aunts, quotes from favorite books, punch lines of family stories, or even a deliberate code. In my own family, just the phrase "To me . . ." with a rising tone on *me* is a warning that bragging is unbecoming. It is a quotation from a letter to my uncle, who was organizing an amateur show. "Why not let Miss X sing?" it said, "To me, she has a lovely voice." Unfortunately for her aspirations, Miss X was recognized as the writer of the letter. One of the most widespread family codes—"m.i.k." for "more in the kitchen" vs. "f.h.b." for "family hold back"—is so well known that it's probably useless now.

Many English speakers also draw on a stock of foreign words and phrases. People whose parents or grandparents speak another language at home may use expressions from that language only in casual or intimate conversation. They may have some favorite foods, for example, which they can refer to only in another language. Those who have traveled abroad may use foreign phrases to add elegance to their more careful conversation or to their writing. Some people with no Jewish background like to use Yiddish phrases because they sound "cited" or "show biz."

Every speaker is able to draw at will from all these varied vocabularies whatever seems appropriate. As long as the choices are

appropriate, neither the speaker nor the hearer is likely to notice that he dips into a number of different vocabularies within a single conversation.

To find your own personal vocabularies, try some of the following exercises.

1. Suppose you were to drop a cup of coffee, leaving a pool of coffee and broken china at your feet. What would you say to express your annoyance? (a) if you were alone; (b) if you were with your parents; (c) if you were with your roommate; (d) if you were at a reception for a clergyman, or a bank president, or anybody you personally would consider very respectable. Write down what you think you'd say in each case and compare. (Since so much of style depends on who you are and what your social relationships are, we have been imagining a specific someone as our reader, and that is a particular kind of college or university student. Other readers can think of what they would do in that role, also imagine situations in their own lives comparable to ones we suggest here.)
2. (a) Watch a sports event on television and write down all the technical terms you notice. Separate them into those you use yourself, those you understand but might not use, and those you don't understand (if any). Or (b) Read one assignment for a subject you are studying and write down all the technical terms you find in it.
3. Look over any term papers you have written or any other formal writing you've done. Write down any words you find in your writing that you never use in ordinary conversation. Connectives like *ergo*, *therefore*, and *nevertheless* are good words to look for, and so are poetic or literary words like *valor* and *evanescent*. Scholarly work may make you come up with *dichotomy* or *seminal*. Your own "best" words may, of course, be nothing like any of these.

2. Pronunciation

We may be less aware of changing our way of pronouncing things than of changing our choice of words, yet our phonology does change with style. A number of studies have been made of "casual" or "fast speech" phonology. For people who are not linguists, the most obvious feature of casual speech is probably "dropping your g's" in words that end in *-ing*. We all know about this, because most of us have had teachers who told us not to do it. Even people who spend their lives telling other people not to at least occasionally "drop their g's" in expressions like *going fishing*. (Linguists use quotation marks around

the phrase "dropping g's" because what happens phonetically is a change from [ŋ] to [n], with no [g] involved in either pronunciation.) If you listen very carefully, you will find that even people you think *never* drop their g's (you may be one of them) do so sometimes, and even people you think always drop them put in a few. Men are generally said to drop more g's than women and boys to drop the very most.

You've probably heard that Cockney speakers "drop their aitches"—and sometimes put them in where they don't belong. You may not be aware of dropping your own aitches, but all English speakers, including both the most untraveled Americans and the most cultivated Oxford graduates, drop some. The initial *h* of pronouns like *he*, *her*, and *him* tends to disappear, especially when it is preceded by a consonant sound. Try saying "Don't let her hit him" at ordinary conversational speed, and see how many *h*'s you honestly hear. Get your friends to say it and see if you hear their *h*'s. Of course, through the years some have become completely mute, like the one in *honest*. Some speakers never say *h* before a y sound, and so don't have it at the beginning of *human*, *humor*, or *huge*, but this is part of a regional dialect and not a matter of style.

Speakers of many dialects replace the *th* pronunciations in words like *either* and *either* with *t* and *d*. You have probably heard them unfavorably characterized as "dese and dose" speakers. Whether or not you say "dese and dose," you may sometimes drop the first sound of *this* or *that* completely. Young men, in particular, do this often in casual speech. Everybody does it in the phrase "atta boy"; "that's the boy!" would sound ridiculously affected as a shout of encouragement.

You may have been taught that it's informal to use contractions, but this is really only true of written style. In speech, it is extremely formal, even stilted, not to use contractions. The ordinary contractions like *he'll*, *she'd*, *won't*, and *can't* are neutral in style. In tag questions, like "Herbert could do that, couldn't he?" the contraction of *not* is almost obligatory. "You are studying English, are you not?" could only be a non-native speaker's question—or one by a native speaker being extremely highbrow. In really casual speech, we make nonstandard contractions in addition to the ordinary ones. In ordinary fairly careful style, we say "he'd" for "he would" or "he had." In casual speech, we say "he'd've" for "he would have," and in the most informal style, that comes out as [id əv bin fəv], with "it would have been funny" can come out as [id əv bin fəv], with "it would" reduced to "it'd" and then "id," and "have" reduced to something that sounds just like "of." Children often write *of* for *have* because they sound the same in casual speech.

Unstressed syllables are lost in some words in any but super-careful pronunciation. Almost nobody regularly pronounces three full

syllables in *every*, *opera*, and *camera*. In really casual speech we lose many other syllables, so that we say things like "Jo," "bye," and "k'you" for "hello," "goodbye," and "thank you." "Going to" and "want to" will be reduced to "gonna" and "wanna," and we'll make various other reductions.

The process of contraction goes so far in really intimate conversation that we get down to vocal signs we can say with our mouths shut and really can't satisfactorily spell at all. "Hm?" with a rising intonation is "what?" "Mn-hmm" is "yes," and "uh-uh" with a glottal stop in the middle is "no." We can more or less hum the whole sentence "I don't know," particularly if we shrug our shoulders as we do it.

People often disapprove officially of casual speech patterns as "sloppy" or "careless" speech, but they're really economical and efficient when used where they belong. With close friends a very careful, formal style is wounding—as rude as the most casual speech style would be in addressing a prospective employer we'd just met. We usually enunciate very carefully with our families only when we're angry and want to show the distance we feel from them.

So far we've discussed mostly sounds that are reduced or lost in casual speech. Another phonological process that becomes more widespread in casual speech is assimilation—one sound becoming more like a neighboring sound—in English, usually the one after it. Some assimilations are reflected in our spelling; when we put somebody *in prison*, we *imprison* him. The *n* of *in* brought into such close contact with the *p* becomes an *m*. The *in* of *input* keeps its *n* in writing, but in any but the most painfully careful pronunciation, it sounds like *m*. A vowel followed by a nasal consonant is always at least somewhat nasalized, not only in English, but very probably in all languages of the world. The vowel of *can't* is always slightly different from that of *cat*. Sometimes the physical difference between the words *cat* and *can't* is entirely in the nasalization of the vowel of the second. This is so automatic a process that for the most part we don't recognize it, but the difference is there and always shows up on equipment that is designed to measure it. As we speak faster and more carelessly, we tend to make more and more assimilations without meaning to. You may find it hard to believe you make any extra assimilations even in fast speech. To be convinced at least that *other* people do, read aloud at moderate speed to a friend the words "Empire Stape Building, Hybe Park, carboard box" and ask him to repeat what you said.¹ For most people these pronunciations sound perfectly fine at normal speed because they are used to

hearing them that way and making the necessary mental corrections. Listen carefully and try to catch yourself or your friends in unsuspected assimilations.

Here are some things you might do to find out more about casual phonology:

1. Ask five or more people to count from sixty-five to eighty-five. Then ask each one to read the number seventy-seven from a card. Tell them it's a class project or a psychological experiment, but don't explain until after they've finished just what you're looking for. Concentrate on the way they pronounce "seventy." You should hear pronunciations from carefully enunciated "seventy" to something very much more like "sebmtý." Some people may also drop the *v* entirely and say something that sounds like "senty." For each person you ask to count, have a piece of paper with two columns headed "assimilated" and "unassimilated"; write the numbers from seventy to seventy-nine down the margin, and then seventy-seven again. Make a mark for every pronunciation and then seventy-seven again. Add to the page the sex and approximate age of the person you asked and how well you know him. When you've finished, write a short summary of your results.
2. For several short periods during the next few days, try to count occurrences of *-ing* and *-in* endings—*doing* vs. *doin* and so on, and note the approximate circumstances of your counting. You can jot down on a piece of scrap paper something like "Linguistics class, 9/17/80" with a column for the teacher and another for students, or "conversation, 9/18/80" plus a set of names like "me, Jane, Tarzan" and then tally *-in*'s to the left and *-ing*'s to the right under each name, for example. At the end of your observation period, figure the percentage of forms counted with *-in* and the percentage with *-ing*. Check to see if the percentage is noticeably smaller for more formal situations, like classes, or for female speakers. Then make a general statement about *-in* and *-ing* in current English usage. Include any special observations of your own that seem relevant. (See Chapter 6 for how to do a more extensive study of these pronunciations.)

3. Syntax

The process of contraction in casual speech leads to syntactic changes as well as phonological ones. Some words seem to be phonologically

1. These examples are from G. W. Turner, *Stylistics* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 11, 239.

eroded to almost nothing, and others are deliberately dropped. We use more sentence fragments and leave out more unnecessary words. *I* and *you* as subjects tend to disappear, especially when they would be the first word of a sentence. The verbs *to have* and *to be* drop out, especially when they are auxiliaries rather than main verbs. "What are you doing?" becomes "Whatcha doin?" and "goin a town," is a perfectly good answer. A noun phrase often stands alone. "Nice day" is a standard conversational opening. "New car" can be a shortened version of "I have a new car," "You have a new car," or "That's a new car" (at the neighbors') or even of several more complicated sentences, depending on the situation. The circumstances of our speech fill in their own details and tell the person we are talking to exactly what we mean. Very intimate speech may be characterized by extremely abbreviated sentences in which normally vital bits of information are left out. "Did you put in my . . . ?" "Yes."

In casual speech we may use constructions we would avoid in writing or in speaking to an audience. "Bill and me are going" is normal in casual speech for many people who would write "Bill and I." "Where's it at?" is good casual style for many who would say "Where is it?" if they were speaking carefully. I usually say only "who" in conversation, but I often write *whom*, even in letters to friends.

Some types of sentences are usually reserved for casual styles. One process that is characteristically informal is topicalization, which pulls the object to the front of the sentence: "That I'd like to see!" Another is called the *alpha-tag*. An ordinary tag question, called a *flip tag*, is a statement with a question "tagged" on: "You know Rosie, don't you?" or "You don't want any more, do you?" These questions have negative tags ("don't you?") with positive sentences, positive ones ("do you?") with negative sentences. The alpha-tag is a positive tag added to a positive sentence: "You're buying a borzoi, are you?" as opposed to "You're buying a borzoi, aren't you?" Ordinary tag questions are conversational, but neutral in style. Alpha tags are markedly informal. They may be pointedly sarcastic, or they may just be conversational openers.

There may be a number of constructions that we save for writing or for very formal speech that don't fit our everyday usage. One of these is the subjunctive. The subjunctive is technically a verbal *mood* contrasted with the indicative. The indicative is prescribed for statements of fact, and the subjunctive for wishes, suppositions, and other nonfactive uses. Many people now don't use the English subjunctive at all, or if they do, reserve it for their most formal style. Only the "contrary-to-fact" subjunctive in clauses like "If I were rich" occurs at all regularly in speech or informal writing, and even that seems to be getting rarer. Forms of the subjunctive other than *were* in *if* clauses

usually occur only in fixed phrases of extreme formality, such as a lawyer's "if it please the Court" or a written petition's "we hereby request that this *be* done." Sentences that begin with a subjunctive element—"Be he live or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread!"—are almost never heard in modern speech and rarely even seen in writing.

In writing or in prepared talks we are usually careful to vary our sentence structures; in casual speech we'll use simpler structures and reuse them more often. Sentences that contain a number of clauses strung together by *and* are usually informal. On the other hand, sentences with subordinating structures are usually formal. For a sentence to begin with a clausal or sentential subject, as this one does, is a mark of formality. It is perfectly neutral for a written or spoken sentence to begin with *it* and have its sentential subject placed after the verb, as this one does.

Choices about where to put negative markers often affect the tone of a sentence. Sentences with double negation—"I didn't do nothing"—sound colloquial or, for some dialects, ungrammatical, although most children go through a stage of marking a sentence as negative at every possible point; and in many languages (French and Russian, for example) that is the correct way to express negativity. Sentences with a negative adverb at the beginning and the auxiliary verb placed in front of the subject, as if in a question—"Never had he seen a more hideous sight"—are very formal, probably because they show such a wrenching of normal word order. As long as you can preserve normal word order, it seems stylistically neutral to mark negation as early in the sentence as you can. Sentences with negative subjects—"Nobody came" and "Nothing happened"—are perfectly ordinary, but when those same negative pronouns come after the verb—"I saw nobody" or "He touched nothing"—they sound rather formal. "I didn't see anybody" and "He didn't touch anything," in which the negative element is attached to the verb rather than expressed in the object, seem to represent the most neutral style for these sentences.

"Who did you see?" and "Who did you go with?" are of ordinary conversational style. "Whom did you see?" and "With whom did you go?" are notably formal. "George and Eric, whom you met last week" seems normal to me, but many people avoid *whom* altogether. Putting in relative pronouns where it would be equally correct to leave them out marks a sentence as formal. "I enjoyed the book you lent me when we were here last week" is less markedly formal than the same sentence with "which" or even "that" added.

The use of passive rather than active constructions is generally formal, and so is a very *nouny* style. For example, that last sentence

would sound less formal written this way: "When you use passive constructions rather than active ones and write in a very *noury* style, you usually sound formal." Both passives and nominalizations (nouns made from verbs, as *nominalization* is made from *nominalize*) can be used to avoid putting in pronoun agents, which cause trouble of various kinds. The first sentence of this paragraph contains no pronouns or *agents* or *actors*. Some handbooks and some teachers advise writers to avoid the pronoun *I* in any but the most informal writing. But the "editorial *we*" can be confusing, especially in articles or books with more than one author, where it might be a real *we*. Writers also sometimes include their readers in a *we* ("As we will see again in a later chapter . . .") and sometimes do not ("We find this solution unsatisfactory, for reasons which we will discuss below"). Writers may eliminate *we* as well as *I* by the extremely formal device of writing third-person phrases like "in the opinion of the present author" to avoid saying "I think." (*I think* the formal expression sounds awful, so this is probably a good time to repeat that "most formal" and "best" aren't necessarily the same.)

Authors may address their readers as *you*, which creates a somewhat informal, person-to-person tone. Early novelists often spoke directly to "dear reader," but this and "gentle reader" are long out of style. In some languages the most formal or more respectful way of addressing somebody requires the substitution of a third-person form like *he* or *she* for any second-person *you* form. This kind of deferential speech occurs very rarely, if at all, in modern spoken English (you may possibly have heard a movie butler say something like "If Madam will step this way . . ."). But third-person address is sometimes used in textbook writing: "The interested reader should consult the supplemental references at the end of this chapter." This creates a whole new problem, because if the interested reader is pronominalized, he or she (unlike *you*) must have a marked sex in English.

There are a number of answers to that problem. The traditional one is to say that *he* is unmarked in English, because it can be used either for a male person or for an unspecified person, whereas *she* can apply only to a female. Most people are less convinced of this than the authors of the Ohio statute that states that "No person shall be forced to undergo an abortion against his will." An increasingly popular solution in spoken language is to use a *plural* pronoun—"Somebody left their galoshes"; "Nobody seems to know where they are going"—but most grammarians still frown on this in writing. Nobody seems to be happy with E. Nesbit's solution of writing sentences like "Everybody put on its hat"; perhaps it threatens our pride in our humanity too much. "He/she" is a fair solution for official forms, but it sounds awkward. Some people write "s/he," but it has no pronunciation.

Perhaps the most effective is the most explicit, "he or she," which sounds all right in any but casual styles, and as long as it is not repeated several times in close succession. Some modern feminists have proposed the introduction of new neutral pronouns; *co* is one form that has been suggested. This solution seems unlikely to be accepted, because the pronouns have been a closed class of words too long to accept new members readily.

For most American speakers, *you* is a normal indefinite pronoun, as in "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." *One* in this sense is still the prescribed form, but it is generally reserved for extremely formal usage. In British English, *one* used to be a polite substitute for *I*, but it is now considered funny—old-fashioned at best, and probably affected.

We in place of *you* occurs only in very special conversational styles—usually nurse to patient or teacher to children—and is probably meant to indicate friendliness and empathy, although it is generally accompanied by some element of coercion.

Another syntactic element that reflects styles is the choice of certain sentence types, which are sets of sentences whose form is related to their major uses. The major sentence types in English are *declarative*, *interrogative*, and *imperative*. Declarative sentences are most straightforwardly used to make statements, interrogative sentences to ask questions, and imperatives to give orders, but it is obvious that these are not the only functions for which we use sentences. We use sentences not only to exchange information and to command action, but also to establish contact, to make jokes or play games, to pray, to make requests, to promise, threaten, cajole, insult, and so on. We don't have anywhere near enough sentence types to serve all our communicative needs, so the ones we have must be versatile. "How do you do?" has the form of a (rather peculiar) question, but it functions as a greeting formula to which the most common response is an identical "How do you do?" Both "Have a good day!" and the Southern "Y'all come back, now!" have the shape of imperatives, but they act as leave-taking expressions: neither expresses any real hope of influencing the future behavior of the person addressed.

Some sentences have the special property of doing what they say. "I promise to pay for the penguins," is both a declarative sentence and a promise. Saying "I promise" performs the act of promising. "He promised to pay for the penguins," a very similar sentence, is a declarative sentence, but is not in itself a promise. "I'll pay for the penguins" can be an offer or a promise; "You'll pay for the penguins" is a prediction or a threat.

The meaning of a sentence is limited by the understandings of the words that make it up, but it is not absolutely determined by them.

That is, in ordinary English, "I'm very fond of apples" can never mean "Throw me a grapefruit," or "My grandmother wears a wig"; but it can be either a statement about the speaker's preferences in fruit or an indirect request for an apple, and one can imagine situations in which it would have still other meanings. The speaker could be talking about what kind of tree to plant or what wallpaper pattern to choose for the kitchen (red apples or ivy on a lattice). He could even be explaining his good health by an indirect reference to the well-known proverb "An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

Just as the same sentence type may fulfill different functions, different sentence types may fulfill the same function when we have a choice of different ways to convey the same message. English offers a number of different ways of making requests, for example. The most straightforward requests take the form of imperatives, or orders, with *please* added: "Please close the door" or "Close the door, please." Neither of these is noticeably formal or informal; you could say either to a close friend or a perfect stranger. If you wanted to be especially polite, you could phrase the same request as a question: "Would you mind closing the door?" Sometimes the force of a request can be conveyed indirectly by a statement like "There's rather a draft in here with the door open." People often prefer the indirect approach when they're afraid of being turned down. Then if they don't get what they wanted, they still haven't been directly refused. Straight commands with no *please* attached are generally considered rude unless they are given by somebody formally in charge, like a military officer, or somebody informally in charge in an emergency. "Call the fire department!" isn't rude. In some situations, particularly rather intimate ones, even harsh words may have a softening effect on commands, and "Shut the damn door" may be no worse than a friendly request.

It is generally informal, outside of the Socratic dialogue, to answer a question with a question. Sometimes it is just a way of putting off an answer until you have further information: "Are you coming?" "What time is it?" Sometimes the second question is the answer: "Are you coming?" "Why not?" In some really casual styles a question/answer like "Is the Pope Catholic?" means "yes," while one like "Does a chicken have lips?" means "no." This sort of response can be risky if you aren't sure the people you're talking to are used to it; not everybody understands that kind of answer.

The strong influence of the circumstances of speech makes it very difficult to generalize about sentence types and formality. The standard way to answer a question is certainly to use a declarative sentence. On the whole, it seems reasonable to predict that the most neutral way to formulate a request in English is to use a question, rather than an imperative with or without *please*, or a statement of

conditions which might prompt a request. In English conversation it is most acceptable to be neither too direct nor too indirect. Notice, however, that even the most formal written style uses direct imperatives. I wrote "notice" in the last sentence, not "perhaps the reader would be interested in noticing" or "would you please notice"; writers do not hesitate to order their supposed readers about.

Here are some projects to try to become more aware of the interactions of style and syntax:

1. Compare some sample of informal writing with a sample of formal writing by the same person. You might use a term paper of your own and an unmailed letter to a close friend. Perhaps you have a letter *from* a friend and a sample of some more formal writing by that person, such as an article from a school paper. Or you could look at published correspondence of some twentieth-century writer or scholar (F. Scott Fitzgerald and Virginia Woolf are two among many writers who have had at least some of their correspondence published) and compare the private letters with the professional prose of the same writer. Choose short samples of writing—not more than one printed page long—but try to choose representative ones. If you are looking at a piece of fiction, try to choose a page that is mostly narrative, without too much dialogue. Look at the number of passive sentences versus the number of active ones in the two samples. Count the number of whole sentences and the number of sentence fragments or sentences with some element left out in each. What punctuation marks are used in each sample? What is the average length of a sentence in each? Are there any constructions that show up often in one sample but aren't present at all in the other? How many sentences in each begin with something other than the subject? How many contain subordinate clauses? Finally, try to make some general statements characterizing the differences and similarities you find in the two writing samples.
2. Try to get through some "service encounter" like buying your lunch in a cafeteria or asking for something in a store without making any direct requests. Without being impolite, try to avoid adding *please*, since it marks questions as requests. "Could I have a slice of tomato on my hamburger, please?" must be a request, although without the *please* it might have been a real question. Write down what you said, and what the results were. Did your indirect requests succeed, and if not, why not?
3. In a conversation with your roommate or a relative or someone else you know well and often talk to, ask at least two questions using *whom* instead of *who* ("With whom are you going out to-

night?" "Whom did he ask to the party?" "To whom are you writing?") and use at least one sentence with *one* instead of indefinite *you* or *I* ("One doesn't often see those anymore"). If you don't get any reaction the first time you do this, repeat the experiment. Describe your experiences.

4. Scales of Formality

So far we have been talking about style as if there were four relatively easily defined stylistic levels of language: formal, neutral, casual, and intimate. No matter how you name your levels, they are not really separate categories, and they overlap in unexpected ways. A very large segment of our vocabulary is neutral in feeling and can be used appropriately in any style. "Car" is more formal than "heap" or "wheels," less formal than "automobile" or "limousine," but it is acceptable at any stylistic level. Abbreviations like "t.v." and "fridge" are now usual in neutral as well as casual and intimate styles. Technical terms like "carburetor" may reach all levels of style because they have no nontechnical equivalent. We may know only technical words or only informal words for some things—my husband always says "lythrum" for the spikes of pink flowers at the bottom of our garden, but the only name I can usually remember for them is the common name, "loose-strife."

Often we may deliberately change styles, not because of a change in our situation, but because of a change in our feelings. We may speak formally to our family or our most intimate friends when we are angry or embarrassed. It's a commonplace of family relationships that a mother's calls escalate from "Jimmy!" to "James!" to "James Altman Kimball!" When your mother gets to the most formal form of your name, you know she's serious. The same implications hold for adult life. "Good morning" said by a wife to her husband may be less cordial than an inarticulate grunt, given the right circumstances. We may choose to speak casually or even intimately to a stranger on an airplane to be reassuring or to a stranger in the next car to be insulting.

For a number of body parts or functions we seem to lack neutral words, so that we have only medical terms or euphemisms on one side and slang terms (often vulgar) or nursery words on the other. "Micturate" is a very technical term for the only slightly less technical "urinate," "void" is so elliptical only nurses understand it, "wee wee" is childish, "piss" is rude, and phrases like "go to the little girls' room" and "wash up" are coy and run the risk of not being clearly understood. In a case like this it's hard to find a term that really fits a neutral

style, so we have to mix in a term from whatever other style seems most natural for us.

Sometimes we mix styles deliberately. Somebody explaining a highly technical process may use very informal terms like "this little doodad" to lighten the terminological load a little. Politicians often inject a few "down-home" phrases into even their most formal addresses to remind their constituents that they are still "just folks." Preachers and teachers may try to show young people that they understand their problems and can still "speak their language" by using popular slang expressions. This kind of style mixing succeeds in its aims only if it is well done and doesn't sound too self-conscious. Done badly, it becomes embarrassing.

Speakers or writers who are attempting to use an unfamiliar style may slip uncontrollably in and out of it. A late nineteenth-century American poet, Julia Moore, wrote about Lord Byron, "Such obloquy he could not endure, / So he done what was the best." We are appalled and delighted by the discord between her highflown choice of words (*obloquy* and *endure*) and her very casual use of syntax (*he done*).

Eliza Doolittle, in *My Fair Lady*, said to her aristocratic companions at the races at Ascot, "Gin was mother's milk to her; in my opinion, they done the old lady in." Eliza spoke with the perfect enunciation and flawlessly aristocratic pronunciation Professor Higgins taught her, but both the expression "do her in" and the past tense "they done" belong to a different linguistic level.

These last two examples illustrate stylistic clashes. Such discords are usually funny, but they also serve to make stylistic elements stand out in a way they wouldn't in a more homogeneous discourse. Nobody who has read Julia Moore can continue to assume that vocabulary alone can make a style; the clashing syntax stands out too clearly.

Clare Silva and Arnold Zwicky³ have suggested that degrees of discord could be measured by assigning formal elements values between 0 and plus 10, and casual elements values between 0 and minus 10 (neutral elements would be valued at zero). The degree of stylistic deviance of a sentence would then be judged as the difference between

2. D. B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee, eds., *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), p. 237.

3. Clare Silva and Arnold Zwicky, "Discord" in *Analyzing Variation in Language*, edited by Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1975), pp. 203-19.

See also: Arnold Zwicky, "Note on a Phonological Hierarchy in English" in *Linguistic Change and Generative Theory*, edited by Robert P. Stockwell and Ronald Macaulay (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp. 275-301. Arnold Zwicky, "On Casual Speech" in *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society*, edited by Paul M. Peranteau, Judith N. Levi and Gloria C. Phares (Chicago: Chicago Linguistics Society).

its most extreme elements—a sentence which contained both a minus 10 item and a plus 10 item would have the highest possible discordancy value of 20. Such a sentence would probably sound ludicrous, while a sentence with a discordancy value of 2 to 5 might sound relatively normal.

The problem, of course, is how to assign values. The subjunctive at the beginning of a sentence (“Were you to ask . . .”) is obviously very highly marked—maybe plus 10. “Does a chicken have lips?” may be at the other extreme, a minus 10. In between these extremes lie a number of puzzling questions. “Wanna” in “Do you wanna go to California?” seems slightly less casual than the very same reduction at the end of the sentence “Do you wanna?” Obscene expressions may be minus 10 in some company, only about minus 7 in others. Deletion of *be* and the subject *you* in “Coming?” results in less informality than the deletion of *be* alone in “He coming?”

In spite of all these perplexities, it is possible to assign discord values to sentences that present stylistic clashes, precisely because the sense of clash illuminates the difference between the elements that characterize various styles.

In both of the examples of stylistic discord we have seen, a relatively formal tone was clearly intended. Julia Moore’s vocabulary matched the gravity of her subject matter—the life and death of a great poet—but her syntax (and her art) failed to live up to it. Eliza Doolittle’s pronunciation and intonation suited the occasion and her company, but her subject matter and her syntax didn’t. If Eliza had stayed at home with her Cockney dustman father, her subject matter and her syntax would have been appropriate, and her new high-class accent would have been the discordant element. We have to remember that there is no one style that is always and everywhere the best choice. A learned word can be as discordant at a pep rally as slang in a sermon.

The appropriate style for anything a speaker says—any *speech act*—always depends on the interaction of the setting, the participants involved, and the speaker’s intention. Of these, the speaker’s intention is always the most important element. We can tell with some certainty that Julia Moore wanted to write a serious poem, even a tragic one, and that Eliza Doolittle meant to contribute an apt anecdote to a conversation among stylish people. Both failed in their intentions.

In some cases a speaker may use language that seems inappropriate to the setting of the conversation and to his role in it, yet which fulfills his intentions perfectly. When my daughter’s junior-high-school music teacher stands in front of a classroom full of riotously noisy eighth graders and says slowly and clearly the one word “sex,” she usually accomplishes the aim of getting everybody’s attention. If she said, “Now I want you all to sit still and listen,” her words would

sound more appropriate, but they wouldn’t be as effective. If I want to insult a bishop it may or may not suit my intentions to address him as “Your Grace.”

The observation that a given expression may have different values in different social or syntactic contexts gives us a clue about value assignments. The values must be relative, rather than absolute, and we will want to take into account as much relevant context as we have. In a sentence like “That is a foxy lady, is it not?” the uncontracted *is* in the main part of the sentence and the wording *is it not* for *isn’t it* are noticeably formal elements. We might assign the first uncontracted *is* a value of plus 4, or four degrees more formal than a neutral style, and the very stilted *is it not* a value of plus 8. *Foxy* and *lady* might seem to represent a clash as word choices, but we know that this is a fairly common expression, so we can consider the phrase as a whole. Suppose we assign it a value of minus 7, or seven degrees less formal than a neutral style. The choice of *that*, rather than *she* or *Marybelle*, may be considered as neutral, since anybody might use it to talk about a stranger in a public place, so we can assign it a zero. Similarly, since the subject of the sentence determines the pronoun in the tag question, we can pass that *it* as neutral. Then the widest difference of values in the sentence is between the minus 7 of *foxy lady* and the plus 8 of *is it not*. To get the absolute difference between these two we add their values, disregarding their signs, and get a total clash of 15.

This kind of discordancy value doesn’t tell us anything about whether the clash is caused by the formal or the informal elements. We have to consider everything we can find out about the setting, the people taking part in the conversation, and the speaker’s intention. Suppose we know that the speaker of our clashing sentence was a college student sitting in a student hang-out with a close friend. He is commenting on the looks of another student who has just walked in. We can assume that his intention goes with *foxy lady*, and that it’s the formal elements in the sentence that cause the clash.

What if we know that the speaker is a guest at a glittering ball where he knows very few people and is speaking to a stuffy, bemedaled old gentleman about an imposing lady in an emerald tiara? Then a very formal tone would suit the occasion, and it’s *foxy lady*, the informal element, that is out of place and clashes with its surroundings. He should have said something more like “extremely attractive woman.”

Suppose our speaker is a freshman at a reception for new students at a large university and he is talking to a dean to whom he has just been introduced about a woman faculty member. Then *is it not* sounds unnaturally formal, while *foxy lady* sounds impudent and rude. The clash is just as evident and the sentence is just as out of place as ever, but we can’t identify either the formal elements or the informal

ones as the cause of the incongruity; we have to say that both contribute almost equally to the discord.

In each of the following sentences, identify each stylistically marked element and assign a number to it. Then find a discordancy value for each sentence. Finally, imagine a situation in which somebody might have used the sentence and imagine the intention of the speaker; then say which elements in the sentence are inappropriate. You will probably want to "juggle" your numbers a bit as you progress in the exercise, since the values are comparative.

1. What is going down?
2. Never did he go for hard rock, you know.
3. That is a hot one, is it not?
4. Have not seen George around for a long time.
5. That Gregory was a pot-head was unsurprising to his mentors.
6. Could you possibly shut your big fat yap?
7. With whom was you figuring on sallying forth?
8. Whaddaya mean, you won't lemme request that I be allowed to graduate early?
9. Speaking as a psychiatrist, I would diagnose him as nuttier than a fruitcake.

As a further exercise, set up *different* imaginary situations for five of the preceding sentences, so that the clashing elements are not the same ones you identified the first time.

As a final exercise, try the following:

1. Suppose that you are a student in physical education. You are engaged to a student in economics named Elizabeth Manley or Albert Manley (choose one, according to your sex). How would you introduce your sweetheart to: (a) an old friend (of your own sex) at a barbeque or a beer party; (b) a class of ten-year-olds you are teaching to swim; (c) your grandmother at a family dinner party for Thanksgiving; (d) your advisor in the lobby of a movie theater; and (e) the president of your university at a formal reception for a visiting dignitary. What elements change in your various introductions? Which ones, if any, stay the same? Look for differences in address terms (kids, Granny, Dean Williams, etc.); in titles (my advisor, my grandmother, my fiancée, my old man, etc.); in sentence types ("May I introduce . . .?", "I'd like you to meet . . ."; etc.); and in order (who is introduced to whom). You may find other differences as well.

2. Get three friends to do the same exercise, or compare papers with three other students in your class. How do the answers differ from each other? Is there any one category of possible usages in which you find an especially large number of differences? Who shows the widest range of changes? The narrowest? Are the answers noticeably more alike for people of the same sex, or not?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The most readable introduction is G. W. Turner's *Stylistics*. A good textbook with useful exercises on rhetoric and style is *The New English* by Joe Williams. A short book which has become a classic as a discussion of conscious decisions in style is Martin Joos's "The Five Clocks."

In the area of less conscious choices that contribute to style, the notion of *sociolinguistic variables* is of central importance, and here the section of this volume by that title is recommended, as well as William Labov's *Sociolinguistic Patterns*.

Joos, Martin. "The Five Clocks." *International Journal of American Linguistics* 28, no. 2 (1962). Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics.

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