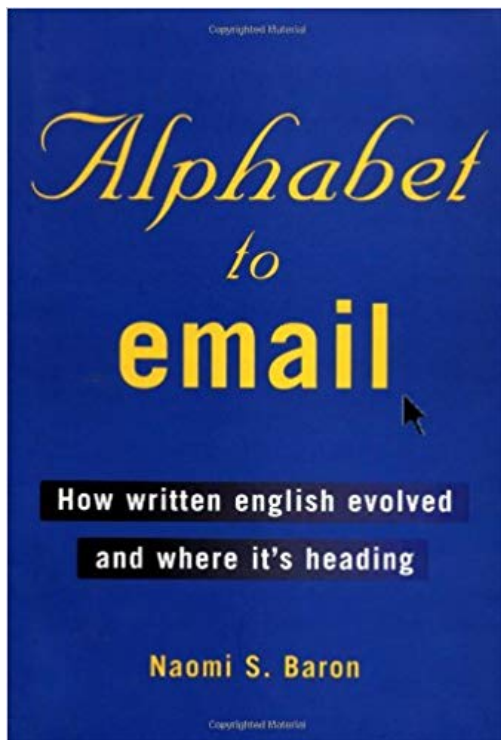


Alphabet to Email: How Written English Evolved and Where It's Heading *by* Naomi S. Baron



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In Alphabet to Email Naomi Baron takes us on a fascinating and often entertaining journey through the history of the English language, showing how technology - especially email - is gradually stripping language of its formality. Drawing together strands of thinking about writing, speech, pedagogy, technology, and globalization, Naomi Baron explores the ever-changing relationship between speech and writing and considers the implications of current language trends on the future of written English. Alphabet to Email will appeal to anyone who is curious about how the English language has changed over the centuries and where it might be going.



Reviews of the **Alphabet to Email: How Written English Evolved and Where It's Heading** *by* Naomi S. Baron

Rleillin

Every communications technology has significantly affected the nature of human language. With the

growing ubiquity of the Internet, this is an appropriate time to take a look at the effect of technological change on language and to see if historical patterns repeat themselves in the virtual world.

I am personally fascinated by languages. I'm amazed by the richness and variety of human communication, and by the constant change in vocabulary, grammar and style. In comparison to other languages, written English is pretty close to spoken English—even parts of this review uses language similar to what I might use in an intellectual conversation about a book on linguistics. Still, I thought that I'd give Baron a chance, and see what she had to say. I'm glad that I did.

This is not a book for academics. It is written for the educated and somewhat motivated layperson. With a glib style, and a keen awareness of the need to explain linguistic concepts to her readers, Baron's book is informative and enjoyable. According to the author, written English was once virtually identical to speech, serving as a record of spoken words. As needs changed, and technology permitted, language patterns in written English diverged significantly from spoken English. However, and perhaps motivated by the requirements and capabilities of new transportation and telecommunications technologies, written English has made a decisive retreat from the formal, and appears to be reconverging towards spoken language patterns.

She paints a dynamic picture of the historical ballet of written English. The give and take as the prescriptivists (think William Safire) and the descriptivists each have their day. Since the 1960s, American dictionaries have been largely descriptive, no longer trying to impose the ideals of their editors on the language, but instead trying to provide a written reference to actual usage (this is why contemporary dictionaries include profanities).

Not being a big fan of anything written before the late 19th century, I can easily accept that written language has become less formal. For me, Mark Twain was one of the earliest writers to use a style that doesn't feel horribly anachronistic. Interestingly enough, Twain was the first author to provide his publisher with a typewritten book manuscript. Baron makes a compelling case for the influence of technology, like the typewriter, on the English language. Again and again, the significance of new communications technologies is often completely misunderstood. Conservative social elements resist new technologies out of concern for their perceived negative effect on cultural values. Perhaps justifying this natural social backlash, once a communications technology becomes commonplace, it results in permanent changes on written and spoken language.

So what will be the effect of the Internet on our mother tongue? I wouldn't spoil a good story by leaking the ending, but I can tell you that her conclusions are well-reasoned and highly credible. If you are even mildly interested in language issues, communications, or the social effects of the Internet, then you will find this an enjoyable and informative text. If you are interested in further reading or research, you'll be pleased with the lengthy bibliography.

the monster

The author's English, her command of the subject and her humorous presentation maintained my interest. I learnt a lot which I will use.

Morlurne

Alphabet to Email is the history of the development of written English from the adoption of the current alphabet to the present day. The book is written in a simple, clear style that makes the points easy to understand, and the argument is well structured. Written at a level the layperson can easily comprehend, the book provides many helpful insights into the current trends in written expression towards a more emotional, briefer colloquial style. The book raises important questions about the potential future for traditional, formally written English that will be of interest to most readers.

Those who like to understand more about language will definitely enjoy this book. Those who are interested in developing a more literate society will also find this book a must read. People who are unsure about when to be more formal and when to be less so will probably get a number of valuable ideas from this book. Those who do not like to read formal English will wonder why anyone would write or read such a book.

The book's basic thesis is that English started as an oral language with only primitive written capabilities until the current alphabet was applied. During the Middle Ages, written English developed to record oral English both as an "aide memoire" but also to create permanency where that was important. Beginning in the 17th century, written English began to take on its own, separate form and developed the rules as we know them today. That evolution continued until around 1950 in the United States, when written English began to increasingly mimic spoken English. E-mail is the latest expression of this trend, often replacing telephone calls, voice mail, and letters but in a form closer to voice mail than to the others.

Ms. Baron characterizes the current state of this convergence as being quite far along. She wonders if students and teachers will at some point simply stop reading formal English, despite knowing that it exists. Certainly, that process is far along. Reading lists for classes are very brief now, and yet many students listen to tapes, watch videos, or read summaries.

Ms. Baron notes that the purpose of writing is degenerating into simply being an information carrier, in the simplest form possible. She also observes that individual writing is merging into collective writing where "individual authorship, responsibility for telling the truth, and intellectual property rights are coming under fire." The mass forms of electronic writing mean that writing is becoming malleable over time, rather than a fixed product. Spencer Johnson rewrote each printing of "Who Moved My Cheese?" in response to reader reactions, for example. That would never have occurred in an earlier period.

Book reviews on Amazon came to mind as I read the book. The people who write these reviews are a tiny minority of all people who buy and read books. The reviews mostly fall into a few categories. Most reviews are from people saying that agree with the book, and that it made them feel good to read it. This is a classic oral communication form. The next most common category is a review that focuses on the usefulness of the material in the book for some purpose. That is clearly close to oral communication, like a tip you give people you know. Another category is one where people focus on the writing style in the book. Content usually gets little attention. Although ostensibly about the written word, the form of the review is usually to state a few simple conclusions without examples and is rather like the tips mentioned above. Many other reviews are brief summaries of the book and simple comparisons to well known books that seem to be based solely on reading the jacket copy. These are also informational of the verbal sort. Another subset involves disagreeing with the author and explaining why. These reflect formal thought, but are usually informally conveyed in terms of language and sentence structure. Rarely does one see a review of the sort that would appear in a newspaper or magazine, even though every writer of these reviews is familiar with that form.

Clearly, the future belongs to Hemingway. If you want an audience, you'd better make it simple and brief. I learned that I should shorten up my reviews on Amazon from reading this book. This echoed a recent conversation with a well-regarded publisher in which he told me that business books should be half the length of my latest one. That was quite an epiphany for me!

After you finish reading this valuable book, I suggest you make a conscious decision about which writing styles (and lengths) you will use when and where. That will lead you further back into what you are trying to accomplish by writing. In some cases, an e-mail is faster than a visit or a call. In some cases, it is more likely to get to the person. In other cases, formal writing can have an impact for which nothing else can substitute. Being conscious of what you are trying to accomplish can make all the difference!

Xor

Alphabet to Email describes the start of the written English language, how far it has come, and where it may go. Baron discussed the use of writing to represent language, the role that technology has played on written and spoken language, and the English written language. Baron describes everything from caveman writing on cave walls to the type of language people use when emailing one another. The purpose of Alphabet to Email seems to be to inform readers of the advancements and changes that have been made of written and spoken language over the years. Baron describes early technologies related to language, like telegraphs and the first telephone to current

technological uses like computers and voicemail. Baron also looks at how formality of the written language has changed through email. I feel that this book did not keep my attention, I often found my mind wandering as I was reading. It does give good information on the history and progression of the English language, if you're interested in that sort of thing.

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