

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

---

**From the Selected Works of Peter Elbow**

---

2010

## 5. Intonation: A Virtue for Writing Found at the Root of Everyday Speech

Peter Elbow, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/peter\\_elbow/29/](https://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/29/)

Peter Elbow May 2010

DRAFT

## Chapter 5. Intonation: A Virtue for Writing at the Root of Everyday Speech

Intonation has come to fascinate me. And I think it may provide a bigger payoff for writing than any of the speech virtues in the last chapter. But I'm a little obsessed: I've found myself muttering, "Intonation is the secret of the universe."

Virtually everyone is an unconscious master of this complicated musical instrument. Very small children learning to talk seem preoccupied with intonation. They continually practice and often exaggerate the vocal music that goes with speech (body movement too). I remember a very small child saying, "Actually, I don't think I want to go to bed right now"--not angry or even recalcitrant, just firm. His whole sentence--especially his "actually" and "want"--created a richly musical performance that was far more dramatic and expressive than anything I'd ever heard come out of his parents' mouths. There is reason to suspect that intonation is a favored doorway for children into some of the subtleties of syntax.

It's virtually impossible to talk without intonation unless you work hard and consciously for pure monotone and even rhythm. Yet I notice now how often in faculty meetings where people are on guard and insecure (as this happens in various meetings in various realms), they unconsciously take much of the music out of their speech. And the "stiffness" of stiff adults consists of restricted intonation. Wooden politicians like Al Gore and John Kerry spend a good deal of time with coaches who try to teach them to be even half as intonationally expressive as they were at age five. When we can't understand someone who speaks a different language or dialect, we often understand their intonation just fine.

-----

Linguists sometimes restrict the word "intonation" to melody or pitch alone--and use "prosody" for the much larger package of audible features that speakers can add to spoken words themselves--such as silent pausing, lengthening of syllables, timbre, and accent. But I prefer the term "intonation" because it's more familiar and less technical, and I see people like Bolinger and Chafe also using the term to cover a wide range of audible effects. Bakhtin too prefers the term "intonation" and starts off his important "Discourse in Life" essay by exploring the rich complex messages conveyed in a single empty word, "well."

-----

### Intonation and Meaning

I like to illustrate the way intonation carries meaning in mini-workshops where we go around the room and each person says the same word or phrase but gives it a slightly different meaning. Try "no," "maybe," or "yes"), After each utterance, we see what listeners heard. "Hello" is another good one: besides the obvious seductive forms of "hello," there is the Sherlock Holmes' "hellll-o" that says "Here's an interesting fact." And the "helloo-ooo" that says, "Wake up, dummy." These and all the subtle variations cannot be conveyed silently on the page. (Bolinger--who has an extended and remarkably clear treatment of intonation--note that even speakers of tonal languages like Chinese use plenty of additional tonal expressiveness.)

Consider how this sentence has different meanings--depending on mere emphasis:

The prime minister wasn't elected [as opposed to expectations that he would be]

The prime minister wasn't elected [as opposed to someone else]

The prime minister wasn't elected [as opposed to some other process like being appointed]

That is, intonational stress causes a meaning to light up in the mind of the listener--meaning that may not be explicitly articulated, but it is meaning nevertheless. As the example shows, this kind of meaning shifts as intonation shifts. For another example of meaning carried by intonation the sound of irony or sarcasm adds a *no* that turns a positive utterance into a negative. We embed quiet subtle meanings into sound at every instant of natural speech.

Consider how many musical resources of intonation or prosody we can use when we talk. There is pitch (low to high); volume (soft to loud); speed (slow to fast); accent (yes or no); intensity (relaxed to tense); timbre (breathy, shrill, nasal, and many more); pausing (long and short). Note that these are not binary items, for in each case there is a full continuum between extremes (e.g., between low and height, slow and fast). There are glides and jumps. Also, there are patterned sequences. For example, tune is a pattern of pitches; rhythm is a pattern of slow and fast and accent. We change meanings by using subtle or not so subtle pauses or small intensifications or lengthenings of a syllable. Combinations of all of these make a rich palate we all use to paint meaning.

These musical features are *semiotic* and carry meaning--syntactic, semantic, connotational, and "pragmatic" or interpersonal meaning. My printed illustration of different stresses in the sentence about the prime minister are crude compared to all the possible subtleties of meaning that intonation can create. So when we hear natural appropriate intonation, we get the gift of *hearing meaning* as opposed to having to construct meaning. The music of intonation enacts a rhythm and melody of *meaning*. That is, as listeners, we often feel as though the speaker and the language are doing the work of getting the meanings into our heads. As readers of text, however, we often feel that we have to do the work. That's why people tend to understand naturally spoken language more easily than they understand silent written language. Consider the sentences in this book that you've had to read twice. If I or someone else had spoken or read those sentences out loud, the meanings would have jumped right into your head on the first hearing (assuming we didn't mumble or go monotone on you). Shakespeare is often difficult on the page but clear when spoken well.

But poor sad writing. The cat has its tongue. How can silent text on the page carry any of this audible intonation that's so helpful for communicating meaning? Of course we *could* send a recording with every text we write--so readers could hear all these audible aids to comprehension--and pleasure. That's why people like books on tape. But my goal is to get the best of *both* speaking and writing. If we insist that readers listen to a recording, we lose two central virtues of writing--speed and flexibility: readers of silent text can go fast and skip and jump around and read the words in any order. I'll argue that we can get some of the benefits of intonation onto the silent page.

## Intonation and Voice

Intonation doesn't just give us the sound of *meaning*; it also gives us the sound of *people*. When we listen to talk, we tend to *hear* a kind of person: eager? sarcastic? hesitant? guarded? We tend to *hear* personal traits like honesty, untrustworthiness, arrogance, open mindedness. Some sophisticated scholars want us to stop hearing that way--stop reading that way.

*No, we don't hear attitude or personality, we infer it. And we should stop because we are so often wrong. Don't pay attention to anything but the meaning.*

True. Strictly speaking, we *don't* hear attitude or personality in words. But if we take that line of reasoning, we have to realize that we don't even hear *meaning* in words--we also infer it or read it in. We hear the sound *dear*, but the sound itself doesn't tell us if it means "dear" or "deer." We read it in. When a German hears the same sound, he hears "you" ("dir"). Meanings are not in words, they are in people.

So it's hopeless to tell people to stop "hearing" attitude and character. The only sensible goal is to help people "hear better"--which means helping them be more aware of the attitude or personality or tone of voice that those words tempted them to read in. When people pay attention only to the meaning, they tend not to notice how strongly influenced they are by these matters of voice. Teachers, for example, often find more mistakes and weaknesses in student essays where the voice unconsciously irritates them or turns them off. Their only hope of fairness comes from being aware.)

Voice is a complex and controversial topic. (I've tried recently to sum up conflicting issues and opinions in my "Voice Again"). But the bottom line for writers is pretty obvious. Readers tend to enjoy texts better and keep reading longer when they hear a voice or a person in a text--as long as it's not the wrong voice for the job. An effective voice can pull readers through difficult or unwelcome ideas. The voice is a matter of all those "silent sounds" that intonation can put into silent writing.

But even though I'm an enthusiast for voice, I must end with an important warning. Intonational phrasing and sound and voice are big pluses for writing, but they aren't enough in themselves to make writing *good*. Some of the emptiest, wrongest, and most dangerous writing is full of intonational phrasing, sound, and voice.

-----

By the way, in a review of linguistic research about intonation and gender, Sally McConnell-Genet found evidence that women used somewhat more intonation in their speaking than men. The differences were not extreme, but women used a wider range of ups and downs. She related that to her sense that women showed themselves more aware of status. She made some other interesting observations or claims about how people perceive intonation. "[T]he group heard as effeminate used a significantly wider range of speaking pitches and changed pitch more frequently." 549. One- and 2-way glides on single syllables tended to be perceived as non masculine. Interestingly, "[a]dult males whose speech was heard as effeminate by judges had, on the average, slightly lower-pitched voices than a matched group of males whom judges heard as nonremarkably masculine in their speech."

-----

## Intonation Units

Perhaps the most fruitful way to look at intonation is to look at the little packages it comes in. For it turns out that when humans speak, whether casually or carefully or even reading

aloud, they tend to divide their speech into little musical spurts of sound that are commonly called intonation units. Here is a passage of spontaneous speech. (It's part of the longer excerpt that I printed in Chapter I from an interview in a retirement community.) As with much transcription by linguists, each intonation unit or phrase is given its own line.

NEAL

the last time we talked

you said you were a world traveler.

you've been all over the [place] [overlapping speech in brackets]

ALBERTINE

[oh yes] yes yes

that was after I married.

and we decided-

I wanted to know

the great question that was on my mind-

I'll never forget-

that's folk curiosity.

I wanted to know

what makes people tick.

and so ah ..

my husband loved to travel.

so ah ...

the same I

so we went out to find-

what makes people tick. {chuckles}

and of all our travels

we all came back home after many many years.

that there was just one answer

everybody ticks alike. {chuckling}

There's no difference.

In describing them, Chafe writes:

These intonation units occur as spurts of vocalization that typically contain one or more intonation peaks, that end in any one of a variety of terminal pitch contours, and that usually but not always are separated from each other by pauses" (397 "Punctuation").

Chafe is particularly interested in how widespread this feature of language seems to be:

In spite of problematic cases, intonation units emerge from the stream of speech with a high degree of satisfying consistency, not just in English, but in all languages I have been

able to observe and in fact in all styles of speaking, whether conversation, storytelling, oration, the performance of rituals, or even (or especially) reading aloud. That fact suggests that they play an important functional role in the production and comprehension of language. (*Discourse* 62)

(Crystal calls them “tone units” (1975); Halliday calls them “tone units or information units” (*An Introduction* 274-75)).

Here’s another illustrative passage from Chafe. It records an academic speaking at a conference. First she stands off to the side of a podium because she’s shorter than the podium--and she speaks in a casual extemporaneous way. Then as she starts reading her paper, she moves back behind the podium. Yet the intonational pausing persist across these two forms of speech. (He uses initial periods to represent tenths of a second of pause.)

... I’m standing over here to talk to you,  
because,  
(laugh) I’m too short to be seen,  
(laugh) you know over the podium.  
... (laugh)  
... You-  
most people have,  
.. uh,  
... an image of me,  
.. mainly cowlick and eyebrows,  
.. and,  
... so this,  
...this is a .. good compromise.  
[then moving behind the podium, she starts to read]  
..... Now most students,  
.. of human development,  
.. seek to discover.  
.. what is universal,  
... in the developmental process.  
... no matter what aspect of human development,  
.. they happen to be investigating.  
... They assume that the course of development,  
... to one extent or another,  
... is largely shaped.  
... by biological dis- predispositions.

In this passage, “the intonation units in both the spoken and read-aloud portions were almost identical in length, in each case averaging 1.9 seconds, a figure that is typical of spoken English in general, regardless of how it is produced.” (Chafe, “Reading Aloud” 9) Even when speech is coherent and flowing, we still see intonation units of more or less the same duration.

Chafe argues that this intonational habit is crucial for both speakers and listeners. Speakers need to pause as they find words. Intonational units reflect “in a gross way a strong constraint on the capacity of active consciousness” (*Discourse* 65). Thus speakers focus their full attention or active consciousness on one thought-segment as they articulate it, but then as they shift their focus of attention to another thought-segment, they create another unit--usually but not always with a tiny pause or gap between them. Sometimes the whole intonational “phrase” is no more than “uhhh” or “well,” but this kind of “place-holder” intonation unit comes out when speakers are expending their limited attention to the problem of figuring out what comes next.

Intonation units represent the amount of information to which a person can devote his central attention at any one time. (“Flow” 180)

-----

Chafe has studied intonation units extensively. See Chapter Five in his *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time* for a clear and extended treatment. He uses a very fine magnifying glass. It’s possible that if he listened to the recording of the conversation from the retirement community that I started with, he might have notated a few more units. (I suspect that the transcriber was more casual and didn’t want to make it too hard to read.) Chafe notes that there can sometimes be some ambiguity in identifying the beginning and end of a unit; some are fragments. But usually they are clear when you consider at the variety of factors that usually characterize a unit. Usually a brief pause at the end; almost always a terminal pitch contour of some sort--a kind of closure “tune”; usually an accent or pitch prominence--occasionally more than one; often they start with a bit of speed up and gradually slow down; they often move from a higher pitch towards a lowering; often they end with a change in voice *quality* like a tiny creak. About sixty percent of the units that Chafe has looked at among large samples represent a clause. He hypothesizes that we tend to start out with the intention of building a clause into an intonation unit--but very often we get derailed. He notes that intonation units can be substantive (“but isn’t she healthy?”), or regulatory (“well”), or fragmentary (“I mean she”).

Here is part of a dinner table conversation that Chafe notates where we can see how the pauses reflect the speaker’s not very smooth shifts of attention. He notes the length of the pauses in fractions of a second--and also strong and weak stresses:

... (0.3) Some élephants and these  
 ... (0.1) they  
 ... (0.7) there  
 these gáls were in a Vólkswagen,  
 ... (0.4) and uh,  
 ... (0.3) they uh kept hónkin’ the hórn,  
 ... (0.2) hóotin’ the hóoter,  
 ... (0.6) and uh,  
 ... (0.4) and the .. élephant was in frónt of em,  
 so he júst procéeded to sit dówn on the V\*W\*.

-----

But it’s not just speakers who have limited attention. Listeners also have limits on how much information *they* can focus full attention on during any one instant. So even if, as a speaker, we’ve gotten our minds around a big chunk of meaning and language so we *could* rattle it off nonstop for much longer than two seconds--or if we are reading a text outloud and have all the

words right there in front of us--we mostly don't rattle on nonstop. Experience has taught us, for the most part unconsciously, that listeners tune out or don't understand if we speed too long without any pauses or changes of pitch or accents.

After all, a stream of language with none of that intonational architecture is hard to understand and deadening in its effect. Consider our sample astronomy sentence from the previous chapter:

The conversion of hydrogen to helium in the interiors of stars is the source of energy for their immense output of light and heat.

For a written text, it's far from awful, but people don't *say* sentences like this in everyday conversation--and it doesn't carry much implicit intonational chunking to help readers. If an academic wanted to read it outloud in a conference paper, she *could* make it work fine if she "read with expression"--that is, if she made brief pauses where I've inserted slashes:

The conversion of hydrogen to helium / in the interiors of stars / is the source of energy for their immense output of light and heat.

She'd be creating some intonational music that's not actually built into the silent written sentence. (Academics in many areas of the humanities and social sciences often jettison the intonational wisdom they have in our bones and read papers out loud nonstop at academic conferences. Scientists, interestingly, often use a more "human" language modality at their conferences and *talk* from slides and notes--rather than read papers. They are often amazed to hear about the unhuman linguistic practices at conferences in other fields.)

Whether or not Chafe is right in his ambitious hypothesis that intonational chunking has been evolutionarily favored, he has the psychological and philosophical wisdom to stand back and notice that it's actually a *miracle* that one speaker can get a piece of meaning almost instantaneously from his mind into someone else's mind where it didn't exist. Intonational chunking increases the likelihood of this miracle.

The title of Chafe's book on this topic shows his interest in time: *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time: The Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing*. He points out the obvious fact that speech happens *in time*--"on line," as the jargon has it. Time won't pause while we speak and listen, so we must pause and chunk our language into intonational music with pauses--because of the limits on how much information we and our listeners can process at any instant.

## **Intonation Units and Writing**

But things are different, notes Chafe, for writers and readers. They both work "off line" and therefore don't need this chunking. Writers can take as much time as they want to pack meanings into their clauses and sentences, and readers can take as much time as they want to unpack and swallow and digest the contents of those rich unchunked stretches of language. Chafe's view here is common--almost universal--and it has two obvious arguments to support it. First, writers and readers *can* take as much time as they want. Second, most writing--or at least most essayist expository writing--*does* have longer more complex sentences and clauses than we find in speech.

Linguists, teachers, and copy editors tend smile benignly on this difference between speech and expository writing--especially essayist writing. But I don't smile. They affirm a kind of wall between speaking and writing that I want to knock down. I say that writers should *exploit* this gift



for intonational chunking that we've learned all our lives from the pressures of time and listener presence. For reading is *not* immune to time. The text may be laid out in space, but readers can take in only a few words at a time. In fact our reading experience is always "on line" (more about this in Chapter 15 and my "Music of Form"). Do readers really have all the time in the world? They're usually in a hurry. Often enough they stop reading if have to reread sentences to figure out the meaning. They appreciate language they can understand first time around--which means language sculpted in terms of intonational units. Most writers want readers to keep reading.

Besides it's no good saying that writers should emulate the *average* of *all* expository writing. Our goal ought to be *good* expository writing. I think I see *good* writers making their writing clearer by using more of the intonational instincts they learn from speaking. Why shouldn't writing heed the "strong constraints" imposed by human consciousness? Of course the intonation units in writing can be longer than the two second needs of speech, but good writing needs units short enough so that readers don't have to take extra time to extract the meaning.

This sounds like an argument for simple plain writing. It is. Simpler would be lovely, even for academic writing. Note the short intonation units in the preceding three sentences. In the following paragraph, I've allowed myself longer ones--but I'd say that this intonational phrasing makes the writing easier to understand.

Yet good prose that's *complex* also harnesses intonational architecture and the constraints of consciousness. The pauses in complex prose often grow out of self-interruptions--a feature characteristic of speech. Look again at late Henry James and all the intonational pausing in that characteristic sentence we saw quoted earlier (p N). I've underlined separate intonational units and put slashes at points of greatest implied pause:

But she saved herself in time, / conscious above all that she was in the presence of still deeper things than she had yet dared to fear, / that there was "more in it" than any admission she had made represented--/ and she had held herself familiar with admissions: / so that, not to seem to understand where she couldn't accept, / and not to seem to accept where she couldn't approve, / and could still less / with precipitation, advise, / she invoked the mere appearance of casting no weight whatever into the scales of her young friend's consistency. (Golden Bowl 184)

He builds astounding intricacy out of a deeply *spoken* habit of intonational pausing and chunking. In much seventeenth and eighteenth century prose too (for example, in Hume or Gibbon), we see a similar complexity of syntax that nevertheless builds on intonational chunking characteristic of speech. And by the same token, we see it in good contemporary writers who favor rich flexible syntax. Note Geertz:

The recent tsunami in southern Asia, in which perhaps a quarter-million people of all ages and conditions were swept indifferently away by a blind cataclysm, has, at least for the moment--perhaps only for the moment--concentrated our minds. (5)

In short, the goal for writers is to do what speakers do: chunk language into intonational units--allowing of course for somewhat longer units on the page. This kind of chunking makes prose clearer and more pleasing for readers.

There's no need to work at a precise technical definition of intonation units, for it's easy to understand them well enough by ear. They are something as short as *still less* (James), or as long as *perhaps a quarter-million people of all ages and conditions* (Geertz). We could say that an intonational unit is a phrase that's comfortably sayable in one nonstop piece of rhythm: a phrase

with a bit of musical shape or intonational rhythm to it, and a phrase that ends with a natural pause. Any definition needs some looseness. Maybe there are two intonation units in that Geertz phrase: *perhaps a quarter-million people of all ages and conditions*--or this one: *swept indifferently away by a blind cataclysm*. The “performer” (reader) always has some choice. Strictly speaking, intonation don’t exist except in oral performance--and any set of words can be performed in any way. But of course syntax can strongly suggest intonation units. (Halliday says they are *wholly* a matter of grammar; Crystal disagrees at length.) It’s worth holding fast to the practical fact that written words can helpfully invite intonational shaping and pausing in readers’ ears, even without punctuation marks. Writing without this kind of intonational shaping is harder on readers--clunky and not easily sayable.

### Intonation Units and Syntactic Glue or Spontax

“Cultured” people like to badmouth speech because it’s so often messy and full of “mistakes.” Perhaps even I go too far when I so often refer to speech as messy. But I let myself talk about speech as messy because I’m so in love with its *virtues*, and I fear readers will think I’m blind to its problems. Look again look at this bit from Albertine’s talk about why she likes to travel. It shows why people so often complain about speech. The syntax is so broken or strained:

that was after I married.  
and we decided-  
I wanted to know  
the great question that was on my mind-  
I’ll never forget-  
that’s folk curiosity.  
I wanted to know

People really speak that way. I certainly do. Often after we’ve just started to say one thing, we break off and start something new because we have a new thought or a qualification or a little story. The connections between phrases are often weak or faulty. We see some of these messy problems in writing too when people write very fast or speak onto the page.

However, what’s important to notice is that most of these bad connections come *between* intonation units--at the points of pause--when the speaker is shifting attention from one bit of meaning to another. Weak glue. Scene of syntactic crime. But look at the strong glue *within* the intonation units. Strong connections: the words inside the intonation unit follow each other naturally. So look again at that “broken illiterate speech” from Albertine in the retirement community. Notice this time how *unbroken* the links are within each intonation unit:

that was after I married.  
and we decided-  
I wanted to know  
the great question that was on my mind-  
I’ll never forget-  
that’s folk curiosity.  
I wanted to know

-----  
 John Ashbery has won just about every poetry prize on earth for poems that often seem like mere strings of intonational units characteristic of spoken language. Here's an example:

The Virgin King

They know so much more, and so much less  
 "innocent details" and other. It was time to  
 put up or shut up. Claymation is so over,  
 the king thought. The watercolor virus  
 sidetracked tens.

Something tells me you'll be reading this on a train  
 stumbling through rural Georgia, wiping sleep  
 from your eyes as the conductor passes through  
 carrying a bun. We're moving today,  
 today on the couch.

-----  
 Why is the syntactic glue so strong between words inside the intonational phrases? The answer is a little startling at first: because of nonplanning. The words came in a "spurt," to use Chafe's word. We usually give birth to the whole phrase as a single unit. People utter words like this without choosing them--often even without any awareness of the words they are in the act of not choosing. When we utter one word, the next word is pulled along or just pops out--no effort or forethought. The unplanned words in an intonational phrase tend to integrate the syntactic and semantic meaning at a finer level than we see in planned or monitored or "constructed" language. The sequence feels natural and unplanned because it *was* natural and unplanned. The syntactic glue is so strong because we did so little work.

In other words, intonation units are good not just for the pausing that I celebrated in the previous section--the pausing that helps listeners and readers catch their syntactic and semantic breath. In addition intonational chunking generates powerful glue between words. So if we want to talk about syntactic coherence in spontaneous spoken language, we need to make sure and look at two locations: the weak glue *between* the phrases and strong glue *inside* the phrases.

-----  
 Some words are even more tightly glued because they come in ready-made clumps like "paying attention" or "as we speak." In recent years, linguists have become more and more interested in these "lexical bundles" or "familiar collocations" as basic building blocks in a language. See Biber, end. But these clumps explain only a small part of the glue in intonation units.

-----  
 What's so good about the well glued words within an intonation unit? My claim--and I can't help putting it crudely--is that if words *came out* of one mind easily all together, then they'll *go into* another other mind easily too. Or at least they will if the speaker and listener share the same language or dialect or speech community--that is, if the listener has a mind that's organized by the same syntactic structures as the speaker's mind. For example, unplanned intonational language by computer geeks won't sound so natural and easy to computer-phobes--even when they are brother and sister.

So if we want *written* words to be clearest and easiest for readers to understand, then here's another virtue of intonational chunking: Writing is clearer and stronger when we have that unplanned connection between word A and word B that we find inside intonation units, those natural, almost unsplitable links. Consider James' phrase "*still deeper things than she had yet dared to fear*"; or Geertz's "*perhaps only for a moment*." They might have well labored over the wording, but if so their labor was to replicate the linguistic virtue of a natural intonational phrase. And that virtue is clarity and ease of comprehension.

The syntactic quality I'm interested in here is like something we see in graceful human walking, or good running by a dog, or good lying down by a cat. One movement follows the next with a kind of rightness. The unplanned relationship of one submovement to the next one without rehearsal or control is *efficient*. So by the same token, the sequence of unplanned words in an intonation unit is "syntactically efficient" for both the human *production* of language and human *reception*.

This quality that's so helpful in writing, then, is *spontaneous syntax*. It's this sinewy bond between individual words in unplanned speech that helps both writers and readers. Let's bottle it!

### **SponTax.**

**Spontaneous Syntactic Glue. Extract of Speech. Available in liquid or tablet form. Consult your doctor to see what SponTax can do for you. Possible side effects include cliches, logorrhea, and bored listeners. If writing persists for more than thirty-six hours, consult your physician.**

With a few well placed bribes, perhaps we could get the Language and Drug Administration to approve it. The demographic is brilliant: it works for all ages and populations. We could get rich!

But damn! We have a problem. It's free. Every human from the age of three or four already has an infinite supply of SponTax in his or her system. People never run out. In truth, the bureaucrats have been pushing the other way. Long ago, some group bribed the Language and Drug Administration into *discouraging* the use of SponTax in all "serious writing." A good deal of money has been made getting people to fear the strong clear effective syntax they get for free. Everyone has been subjected to a campaign that says, "Writing means conscious vigilance! Never relax, never use an unplanned word, never just let words come." Of course (as I will argue as forcefully as I can in Chapter 9), vigilance is needed at *certain* periods in the writing process--especially in revising and editing. But now I'm arguing for the syntactic benefits of nonvigilance.

I can illustrate the deep cultural prejudice against spontaneous syntax from first hand experience. Here are two phrases that I used in my writing that were changed by copy editors in such a way as to destroy SponTax. I wrote *always comes with* and it was changed to *is always accompanied*. I wrote *who has a strong sense of* and it was changed to *who retains a deep conviction that*. There was no *mistake* for the copy editor to root out (I'm always grateful when they do). He or she was rooting out SponTax--or what I like to call (in a phrase that's best said with a wrinkled nose) "the *taint* of speech." Academic copy editors sometimes say they are fighting "too much informality" or "low register." And spontax is often strong in casual or slangy speech. But my

offending phrases were not low or slangy--unless you call any naturally spoken phrase low in register. Plenty of spontax is available in noncasual, nonslangy language.

Consider difficult this letter to a local paper:

We fund-raise with and for Amherst homeowners who abut empty lots, as the developer (with finance and political allies) is more than a gentle, humble, nonprofit agency. Could the financial investors' tax credits exceed their largess? Wealthy developers play hardball with MGL 40B, hitting any vacant lot abutter. While, we're told, it's fortunate, the generous developer is restrained, "not 60 units" on a lot zoned for a single house, the litigation continues. Expenses show, MGL 40B injures. Our will is steeled!

Perhaps we could say there are tiny units of spontax--tiny intonation units--but there is no comfortable stringing together of them. There are various ways to describe the problems here, but as a teacher, I've come to speculate about the *process* that lies behind a text. In this letter I see lots of thought and care, but the inexperienced writer, like many students (sometimes very conscientious students), kept stopping to choose and consciously decide what word to use next or how to construct the following phrase. All the sentences are "constructed," not "uttered." This stopping and deciding caused the writer not just to lose the SponTax that the mouth creates so effortlessly in short phrases, but sometimes even to lose the thread of syntax for longer passages. How much clearer and more effective if the writer had just trusted his or her spoken language.

Of course I'm not arguing against conscious choosing and deciding. In the end, as we revise and edit, we are doing nothing *but* making conscious decisions. My argument is against the powerful forces that tell writers *never* to use unplanned syntax. Indeed, the reason skilled writers are good at careful revising is *because* they learned the feel of *unplanned* syntax in their mouths and ears.

### *Hand-crafted Spontax.*

Some readers will charge me with romantic sentimentality for my praise of spontaneity--and I cannot deny the charge. Yet I turn around and insist on my equal love for conscious craft. There's no conflict between my two loves. The fact is that good writers down through the ages have been using careful conscious craft to *synthesize* SponTax in their home laboratories. In Chapter X, I quoted even Aristotle on the goal of working hard and consciously to create language that sounds genuinely spontaneous and natural.

And good writers sometimes use SponTax in an interestingly oblique way. That is, they try for language that *doesn't* sound spontaneous or unplanned, and yet it also sounds *as though* it were spontaneous. It has the *feel* of unplanned syntax. Look at this poem by Robert Hass:

#### Mouth Slightly Open

The body a yellow brilliance and a head  
Some orange color from a Chinese painting  
Dipped in sunset by the summer gods  
Who are also producing that twitchy shiver  
In the cottonwoods, less wind than river,  
Where the bird you thought you saw

Was, whether you believe what you thought  
 You saw or not, and then was not, had  
 Absconded, leaving behind the emptiness  
 That hums a little in you now, and is not bad  
 Or sad, and only just resembles awe or fear.  
 The bird is elsewhere now, and you are here.

The poem is largely made of well shaped intonation units within which the words are well glued. But look at some of those phrases: *dipped in sunset* and *twitchy shiver* and *less wind than river* and *the emptiness that hums a little in you now*. They are intonation units that give the feeling of “naturalness” and even spontaneity--that kind of rhythm and audible architecture--and yet they also give us the pleasure of the unexpected that’s created by conscious elegant craft. They use the same glue that makes clichés work--but they are as far away as you can get from clichés. Hass’s language is not speech, but he crafts his written elegance out of the *resources* or *features* of everyday speech. Spontaneous syntax follows well used grooves, but writers can consciously choose unexpected words to lay down in well used syntactic grooves.

Cliches are built out of spontax, but that’s not their problem; their problem is in being overused as total word-packages. The actual syntax in clichés is precious for writing. (In many or even most other cultures, people welcome clichés or sayings in serious nonfiction writing. See Fox.)

As a poet, Hass can even exploit the *weak* glue that speakers so often use between intonation units--the weak glue that creates the “bad grammar” that grows like weeds in careless speech:

. . where the bird you thought you saw was, whether you believe what you thought you saw or not, and then was not, had absconded, leaving behind . . .

Understandably, we aren’t allowed to write that kind of grammar in school essays or committee reports or letters to the editor--or even in this book. He purposely confuses us into a breakdown or misunderstanding in our first reading--and in this way he makes us go back and *say* and *hear* the words because speaking/hearing is the only way to understand the syntax. It wouldn’t be as confusing if we heard it spoken naturally in context--with full intonational stress, rhythm, and melody. I love how he puts the rhythms of careless speech in a highly wrought poem. He exploits the *intricacy* of casual spoken grammar--a grammar that highlights the music of intonation. And his larger strategy is to insist that we *hear* his poem, not just take it in conceptually. In this way, he builds pleasure in the counterpoint between the spoken rhythm and his line breaks.

-----  
 I’m praising speech, then, not just for the strong glue it creates within intonational phrases, but confessing affection even for some of the weak but intricate (“bad-grammar”) glue it allows between intonation units. I’ll enlist Halliday as a linguist to describe and somewhat justify what I love.

. . . Neither [speech nor writing] is more organized than the other, but they are organized in different ways. . . . Spoken language tends to accommodate more clauses in the syntagm (to favour greater “grammatical intricacy”), with fewer lexical items in the clause. Written language tends to accommodate more lexical items in the clause (to favour greater “lexical density”), with fewer clauses in the syntagm. (71) So while spoken English is marked by intricacy in the clause complex, written English is marked by complexity in the nominal group. (73) (“Written Discourse”)

When he writes of speech that “one element is bound or linked to another but is not a part of it” (74), he is saying that speakers create intricate structures because they so often move from phrase to phrase, clause to clause and create

links that are only implied but not specified explicitly with words like “since” or “however.” And as we saw in the last chapter, speakers don’t so often use nominalizations to create logical embeddings.

For another snapshot of this intricacy in spoken language, here is a bit of Adam Gopnik on Damon Runyon:

So Runyon’s key insight into American slang is double: first, that street speech tends to be more, not less, complicated grammatically than “standard” speech; but, second, that slang speakers, when they’re cornered to write, write not just fancy but stiff (70).” I think his point pertains beyond Runyon to most nonskilled writers: they produce complicated speech but stiff writing. Gopnik, Adam. “Talk It Up.” *The New Yorker* (March 2 2009): 66-70.

-----

The goal for writers? The same as I stated earlier: create intonation units. But now I can elaborate. *Inside* your phrases, use strong glue--like that found in unplanned spoken language. But *between* your phrases, use better, stronger glue than we find in much speech. Crudely translated, this means “Use good grammar,” but I hope my analysis in terms of intonation units can show scared or inexperienced writers that they can get correct grammar and still not be stuck with simple “Dick and Jane” grammar.

In short, SponTax comes to us free when we speak, but it disappears when we are struggling to work out a difficult train of thought in writing. If I’m trying to be clear about an idea that is buried or tangled in a draft--for example if I’m trying to figure out why X seems true and Y seems true but X and Y contradict each other--I find I often have to choose individual words, slowly and painfully, one word, then the next; then sometimes discover I need to stick another word between those two. I have to change words, change the order of words, and try to muscle words into saying some idea or distinction that I’m struggling to understand. I have to stop and ponder and make conscious decisions about which word to use and what comes next. Like that writer of the letter to the Amherst paper, I too lose track of the syntax of my whole sentence as I try to fix this little phrase of it; I too lose track of my larger train of thinking as I work on this paragraph. I need lots of conscious planning to get my thinking as straight as I can.

But that whole process kills SponTax every time. So I need a later stage of revising to harness a different kind of conscious planning--in order to try to make my language look like it’s not so consciously planned--to make that thought or distinction I struggled so hard to untangle sound as though it came naturally and easily to my mouth as an uttering human. Otherwise too many readers can’t or won’t read it. In Part Three of this book, I’ll explore that precious later stage of writing.

### **Summary Illustration of the Virtues of Speech**

I’ll try to illustrate the virtues of speech that I’ve described in this and the preceding chapter (“Eight Virtues”) by recasting three sentences from Chafe’s book. He’s a good academic writer whom I admire not just for his insights and research but for his writing. He’s not one of those who are painful and frustrating to read. But I’ll try to make some of his sentences even clearer and stronger by calling on the virtues of speech.

CHAFE: [E]ach intonation unit verbalizes the information active in the speaker’s mind at its onset. Let us hypothesize that an intonation unit verbalizes the speaker’s focus of consciousness at that moment.

SPEECH GEAR REVISION: When speakers create intonation units, they are finding words for the meanings that are active in their minds at that moment.

CHAFE: At the completion of an intonation unit the speaker must intend that a reasonable facsimile of his or her focus of consciousness will have become active in one or more other minds.

SPEECH GEAR REVISION: At the end of an intonation unit, the speaker hopes to have gotten his or her focus of consciousness into the active consciousness of a listener.

CHAFE: It is through this dynamic process of successive activations, first for the speaker and then, through the utterance of an intonation unit, for the listener, that language is able to provide an imperfect bridge between one mind and another.

SPEECH GEAR REVISION: When speakers shape their words into intonation units, each unit represents a speaker's focus of attention, and each one invites a new focus of attention in the listener. This dynamic way of structuring speech increases the chances that one mind will understand another.

It's surely obvious that I didn't get these revisions by just blithely speaking onto the page--just as I didn't rewrite that astronomy sentence in the previous chapter except by conscious effort and deliberation. In both cases, I had to try phrasing after phrasing in my mind's ear (or out loud). It took conscious work. But my goal in this work was to reproduce the syntactic *quality* that I've learned to value by paying attention to what comes free in casual conversation. If we speak our words onto the page using our nonplanning speaking gear, we will get language with lots of intonation units, but that language won't work for careful writing. In Chapters 11 and 12 I'll explore more concretely and practically how to harvest intonation--and the other virtues described in the previous chapter--for careful effective writing.

## Some Works Cited

Ashbery, John. "The Virgin King." *The New Yorker* (September 29 2008): 75/

Chafe, *Discourse*

Chafe, "Punctuation"

Chafe, Wallace. "Reading Aloud." In Rebecca Hughes (ed.), *Spoken English, Applied Linguistics and TESOL: Challenges for Theory and Practice*. London: Palgrave, 2006. 53-71.

Danielewicz, Jane and Wallace Chafe. "How 'Normal' Speaking Leads to 'Erroneous' Punctuating." *The Acquisition of Written Language: Revision and Response*. Ed. Sarah W. Freedman. Norwood NJ: Ablex 1986, 213-25.

Elbow. "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries." *College English* 70.2 (Nov 2007): 168-88.

Halliday, M. A. K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold, 1985.

McConnell-Ginet, Sally. "Intonation in a Man's World." *Sign* (Spring 1978): 542-59.