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Authors	Elbow, Peter
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Using Careless Speech for Careful, Well-Crafted Writing —Whatever Its Style

Peter Elbow

Here's the epitaph I want on my grave: "He loved thinking."

Imagine me standing in front of you in a button-down white shirt, necktie, and sports jacket. I've created this essay from an informal talk at the annual 2013 AEPL conference, and I used formal dress to call attention to something that my readers often forget: my traditional side. My father ran a men's clothing store with his father, and they sold high quality, well-crafted clothes. That's the theme here. I've not been fighting all these years just to make writing easier, I've been fighting to make writing *better*. I've been trying help people break out of the unclear, roundabout, or mashed-potatoes prose they so often produce—the various weaknesses that commonly result when people try to write right.

My recent book is about bringing speech to writing (*Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*), so it might seem as though it's a book about overthrowing old fashioned, writerly standards of writing. But it's not. It's a book about how to make writing better—more eloquent. In my opening analogy for the book, I say that it represents not just my wild love affair with speech, but also my conviction that I can bring her home to live with me and my wife, writing, and that we'll all get along just fine. My focus today is not on the excitement of a new love affair, it's on my commitment to a stable, long term *menage a trois*. My goal in the book is to show how we can use the resources of careless speech to create high-quality, well-crafted writing—whatever its style.

The Resources of Speech, Not Speech Itself

I got the germ of my thinking here when I read a thoughtful, gracious review of the book by Chris Anson: "Review Essay: A Word for Peter" (in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*). He expresses "great admiration and fascination" for the book and calls it a "must read" for all teachers and writing program administrators. Of course, he finds plenty to question, and I'm grateful to him for his careful reading.

Chris and I share a long interest in the relationship between speech and writing. He points to his early and ongoing use of dictation for responding to student writing: "I began using cassette tapes in 1982 to respond to my students, who would first talk to me on the same cassette about what they'd tried to do in their papers" (160). He's gone on to diverse explorations of speech and writing and the uses of speech for writing. So it's fun that he wrote a review in the mode of an oral response to a draft—almost as though it were a transcript of a spoken cassette. (But where were you when my book was only a draft?) Chris starts off, "Hi, Peter. I've read your remarkable book . . .," and the entire review uses second-person direct address. In addition, he

writes as though he's telling reactions as they occur: "My own countering instinct wants to say . . . I can already hear your counterpoint . . . Part of me screams . . ." (164); "So I'm agreeing with you about . . ." (165); "I get an almost fleshy feel from your descriptions of 'blurring' onto the page . . ." (163). This is a rhetorical mode that I appreciate. Ever since *Writing Without Teachers*, I've celebrated responding by giving "movies of the mind" in the act of reading.

About his speech-inflected style, Chris says, "I think I've followed the spirit of your [book]" (187). His oral register works intriguingly well for a review, even in a scholarly journal. But he gave me pause when he wrote this near the end:

There's something about really *written* text that I'm drawn to, even when it leans toward the formal and stylized. It may be that I need to unlearn this, or that I haven't yet seen the shortcomings of such prose. But it may also be that what you gain from a strongly spoken text you also lose in the polish that formal, written prose can often yield. (167)

Perhaps he's just saying that he's pondering whether he actually prefers a "really written" style—despite his successful experiment in this review. But could he be implying this interpretation of me: that I was not just arguing *for* "strongly spoken text" but was actually arguing *against* "the polish that formal written prose can often yield"? Could he be implying that I was making an either/or argument? I'm not sure. His ambivalence about his own writing style obscures a clear statement about the logic of my argument.

But I'm grateful that the worrisome thought came into my mind. It's helped me figure out what I need to focus on today: that I'm definitely not making an either/or argument. The goal of my book is good quality writing of *any kind*—not just informal oral-inflected, good quality writing. What I celebrate in *Vernacular Eloquence* is careless unplanned speech, but my reason for celebrating it is for the sake of good writing: it is full of linguistic and rhetorical values that writing badly needs—even formal or high-register writing. In short, what speech has to offer good quality writing of all sorts is *not* spoken language itself as it comes out of our mouths, but rather *the resources of speech*.

To highlight this point, I use extended quotations in the book. I point to three passages of excellent writing from three different writers: from the 18th century, an elegant passage from David Hume that is full of extended "periodic" cadences (231); from the 19th century, a passage from Henry James' late style that is amazingly intricate and mannered in syntax (114, and interestingly, he produced his late prose by dictation); and from the 20th century, a passage from Clifford Geertz that is highly stylized yet modern (114). The speech resource that I focus on in these examples of "highly written" prose is intonation or prosody—and in particular intonation units: tiny groups of words that carry a shaped tune and tend to be separated by pauses.

Intonation units are ubiquitous in all human speech, even careless speech, but what Hume, James, and Geertz exploit for excellence are *well-shaped* intonation units. I argue that such intonation units are a common feature in good prose of

completely different styles throughout the centuries—some of them very florid, as with Euphuus (251). My point is that good writers have produced wildly different kinds of music, but for all the differences, they are always mining the resources of intonational rhythm, pitch, and stress that are universal in human speech.

A Hierarchy of Values for Good Writing?

My book is called *Vernacular Eloquence*, and it celebrates unplanned spoken language—and I even argue that good writing can accept some grammatical features that are condemned by purists as bad grammar. So perhaps some readers will think I'm saying that a vernacular style of writing is *more* eloquent than other styles.

In a small book, Dante did something like that. He argued that the everyday vernacular language spoken by uneducated people on the streets of his native Florence was more eloquent than Latin. (He called his short book *De Vulgare Eloquentia*. His word *vulgar* stood simply for the spoken language “of the people.” It's worth noting that a term that used to mean “of the people” has now, in our culture, come to mean crude and ugly.) **But** I'm not calling the vernacular better.

Just because I say that high quality writing *can* be looser and more speech-like in register and grammar than is currently acceptable to purists, it doesn't follow that I'm calling this kind of writing better or the only kind of good writing. My point is that we can harness features of spoken language (not speech itself) in order to produce careful, good writing of all sorts—even of the sorts written by Hume, James, and Geertz.

A Process for Harnessing a Speech Resource for Any Kind of Good Writing

In my book, I suggest an out-loud revising process for mining the power of intonation for good writing. This means taking every sentence or longer passage and reading it aloud—respectfully but without commitment to it—and fiddling with the words if necessary till they feel right in the mouth and sound right in the ear. This process can be trusted to produce well-crafted sentences—or at the very least, major improvement in the quality of writing. This process is not so different from what many good writers naturally do quietly in their heads. Here are two examples of how it can work.

One common problem in writing—even of skilled professionals—is too much nominalization. Consider this example:

The conversion of hydrogen to helium in the interiors of stars is the source of energy for their immense output of light and heat. (from Halliday 79)

We'd be lucky if this was the worst writing we had to deal with, but too many nominalizations can sap the energy from writing and make the meaning less clear and harder to process. Reading aloud leads many writers to notice the muffling of linguistic energy that carries meaning. When revisers fiddle with new versions to

please the mouth and ear, they tend to come up with fewer nominalizations and more energy. For example:

Stars need energy for putting out so much light and heat, and they get it by converting hydrogen into helium in their cores.

Or:

Stars convert hydrogen into helium in their cores, and that's how they get energy for so much light and heat.

Speakers may speak carelessly in many ways, but it turns out that they characteristically *avoid* this kind of over-nominalization. No native speaker would ever *utter* a sentence like that nominalized sample. Speakers tend to use active verbs like “stars convert hydrogen.” We can’t count on speech (or freewriting) to yield crisp clear sentences, but when we harness the *resources* of speech by reading aloud to revise, we can count on the intonational habits of the mouth and ear to produce sentences that are stronger and clearer than are often produced when people try to write with care.

It’s fun to call on stylistic theory to illuminate what the mouth and ear know without thinking: The nominalized sentence allegedly talks about *action*, but there is no action in the sentence itself. The only verb is *is*. The sentence allegedly talks about *concrete things*: hydrogen, helium, stars, light, and heat. But what is the subject? *Conversion*. The sentence’s claim is a dead abstraction that has nothing to do with things or actions: *A conversion is a source*.

It’s important to note that this revising process is not quick and effortless like unplanned speaking: it takes time to dream up and try out alternative wordings. But the time and effort are not devoted to thinking about what makes good writing; they are devoted to trying to please the mouth and ear. (Reducing nominalization is one of the nine virtues of spoken language that I treat in *Vernacular Eloquence*.)

Here’s another example. Consider this sentence I freewrote as I was drafting an essay for publication:

When I set up my classes so that students have to read some of their words aloud—read their drafts, read their revisions, read short exploratory pieces—read something at least once a week in pairs or small groups—or even in ten or fifteen minute conferences with me—I think I see them more often writing words in which readers hear meaning—words that do a better job of silently giving meaning to readers.

I gave this to one of my classes to revise by mouth-and-ear. When students read it aloud, they could hear the repetition and feel the loss of energy as I kept piling on caboose phrases—making the sentence go on too long and sort of dribble out. This kind of syntactical “tacking-on” is characteristic of speech and freewriting as we search to work out our meaning. One of the students, using mouth and ear, revised it as follows:

I set up my first year writing classes so that students have to read some of their writing aloud every week. They read a draft, a revision, an exploratory exercise; they read in pairs, in small groups, or they read to me in mini-conferences of ten or fifteen minutes. I think I see them gradually learning to write words in which readers hear meaning.

No doubt one could do better, but the process calls on the *resources of speech*—in this case, the tongue’s sense of intonation that carries meaning. It doesn’t lead to speech itself. Let me call attention to two contrasts between this revising process and the process of speaking:

- This revising is *not* like speech because it doesn’t let us just open our mouths and let the words come out quickly with little or no effort. It takes time and effort (like writing). You have to try one version after another and make a conscious choice.
- And yet this revising process is *like* speech in this interesting way. When we use it, we don’t call on our conscious knowledge of what makes for good sentences; we call only on the mouth and ear. I like to put this crudely and say that we use only the body, not the mind. To say this is to skate over the thin ice of centuries of philosophical and psychological precision about mind and body. I can add some precision by acknowledging that of course the body is part of the mind, and the mind is part of the body. Still, most of you know the difference between two very different linguistic experiences: trying to *think* about whether words are right versus trying to tell which words *feel* and *sound* better.

What might seem startling in my book is this central hypothesis: the mouth and ear know what good writing is. Without the help of conscious thinking, the mouth and the ear *want* well-crafted sentences. The hypothesis is radical because it derives from the root of spoken language.

What is Good Writing?

So how do I define good or well-crafted writing? I think my standards are both linguistic and rhetorical. I’d point to these qualities:

- It makes no sense to call writing good unless it says what the writer wants to say. (It’s often a long struggle for us to finally manage this.)
- The language is clear and strong because it is crafted into well-formed intonation units—intonation units that comfortably *enact* both the intended meaning and also the grammar of the language. When we achieve this kind of language, we help readers hear our meaning.
- The organization or structure also invites comprehension, helping readers hear the architecture of our larger meanings.

I need to repeat from my book an important clarification here. Sometimes the mouth and ear want “bad grammar” (“Ain’t nobody don’t like double negatives”), or a low slangy register (“Obama knocked the socks off Romney in the 2012 election”). The mouth and ear do know grammar, but it’s grammar as linguists define it—the vernacular or spoken grammar of one’s native language. The mouth and ear don’t know “proper,” school-marm grammar that’s considered necessary for serious public writing. So for a traditional register of serious writing, the mouth and ear are not enough. A writer needs some “book” or conceptual knowledge. But this knowledge, I’m insisting, is *not* central to what makes good writing good.

But let’s not underestimate the powers of mouth and ear over register. For register is not so much a matter of form but of rhetoric: creating the kind of language that is suited to the audience. One of the most frequent weaknesses in writing stems from writers being too preoccupied with what is “right” writing or “good” writing, and forgetting to consider audience—forgetting to try to imagine the actual humans who will read their words. But when people speak, they seldom ignore the audience in front of them or on the phone line, and so they naturally tend adjust the language to those persons as well as they can. Revising by reading aloud tends to harness that rhetorical instinct rooted in speech.

A Common Slippage in Logic

In our culture it is too common to slide unconsciously into a binary, either/or logic that declares that anyone in favor of X must be against the opposite of X. I started my career with a dissertation and book about Chaucer and his ability to affirm logically opposite points of view (*Oppositions in Chaucer*). I’ve always had a soft spot in my heart for the medieval ability to live with contradictions. When I was teaching a freshman great books course at M.I.T. from 1960 to 1963, I often saw some loss of intellectual richness and sophistication some weeks into the second semester when we moved from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. (This is not to deny the obvious intellectual advances that came with the Renaissance). What I finally noticed was that we were leaving a culture where people were not so prey to simplistic, binary, either/or logic. In our post-medieval culture, we are justly proud of a greater commitment to logic, but this pride often slips into careless thinking that mistakes binary either/or thinking for logic. People who actually care about logic understand that “*X is good*” is different from “*not-X is bad*.”

I don’t actually think Chris was really saying that I’m *against* “the polish that formal written prose can often yield.” But my momentary suspicion has roots: this is exactly the kind of misreading of my work that readers have made throughout my career:

- Because I’ve been such an enthusiastic cheerleader for freewriting, many people have had a hard time seeing that I love carefully revised writing just as much—that I especially love writing that is tight, clean, and well

organized. People too often fail to see that freewriting is not just for ease in starting and finding words, it's also for better thinking and better language.

- Because I've been such an enthusiastic cheerleader for the believing game, many people have had a hard time noticing that I keep repeating my equal commitment to the doubting game. The believing game is not just for crazy thinking, but for better and more careful thinking. We sometimes need craziness for good thinking. For example we can't see the flaws in the assumptions that we unconsciously take for granted—by definition—unless we can get ourselves into an alien (crazy) world with different premises.
- I've always defended personal writing, creative nonfiction, collage form, and other experimental kinds of writing; I've always fought against the forces of propriety and conservatism that try to exclude these genres and kinds of language from the classroom and serious sites of writing. I fear I haven't been explicit enough in my commitment to the other side. But in truth, I seldom write in those genres (despite frequent claims that my academic writing is too "personal"), and I seldom read them by choice (except for many op-eds).
- And so now with *Vernacular Eloquence*: because I celebrate unplanned careless speech so vociferously, many people have had a hard time noticing that my main commitment in the book is to well-crafted good quality writing.

Summary Final Point

My argument is that we can call on the resources of speech to produce good writing in many different styles—even the styles of Hume, James, or Geertz—or indeed of Euphues or Hemingway. When writing is good in any style—so goes my argument—it is good because it builds linguistic structures out of well-formed intonation units. And intonation units are basic building blocks of all human speech. When they are well formed, they embody the grammar of the speech community's native language—the grammar-in-the-bones. For that reason, intonation units sing the music that the mind likes to hear. Of course, we all know that there's not just one style of music that humans like to hear. Sophisticated thinkers about style know that any truly good reader needs to learn to appreciate the virtues of good writing in all sorts of styles—even in styles that one is not intuitively drawn to. By the same token, sophisticated musicians and students of linguistic intonation know that any truly good listener needs to learn to appreciate the virtues of all kinds of music—even kinds that they are not intuitively drawn to. For example, truly cultured readers refrain from dismissing rap—or philosophical theorizing—just because they seem alien. They know that rap and philosophical theory are also capable of singing high quality music, but that it may require time and effort to learn to appreciate them.

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