THE ADVANTAGES OF ODD EXCLUSIONS

ROBERT IAN SCOTT
Saskatoon, Canada

Every novel constitutes an interestingly complex set of linguistic experiments demonstrating some of the possibilities of its language to and by the exclusion of all the rest. Extreme cases may demonstrate these possibilities most clearly, and at least in English, no novel seems more arbitrarily extreme than Gadsby, which Ernest Vincent Wright apparently wrote in 1936-37, with the E typebar of his typewriter tied down with string because, he said in his introduction, someone had told him he could not write coherent grammatical English without using its most common letter. The Associated Press (The New York Times, March 23, 1937, p. 27) reported a different reason:

Letter 'E' is not used in 50,110-word novel... Los Angeles. A man at the National Military Home has written a novel of 50,110 words without using a single 'e.' He tied down the 'e' bar on his typewriter. The author is Ernest Vincent Wright, 66, of Company 14, a musician in the World War and a Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate of 189. Wright undertook the task after reading a statement that the letter 'e' occurred five times more often than any other and after seeing a four-stanza poem without an 'e.'

The Wetzel Publishing Company of Los Angeles published Gadsby in 1939, the year Wright died. Whatever Wright's reasons and intentions -- and they seem to include a reaction against the sense of dissipated hopes and energies that F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby expresses -- Wright's novel shows the effects of a limited choice of words as a result of excluding E, and the importance of exclusions in shaping not just every novel, but all our uses of language.

In 1913, the Russian mathematician A. A. Markov's statistical study of Eugene Onegin described the probability of finding various words after each word that which novel in verse uses. As a result, linguists now speak of samples of language Markov 'chains,' in which each choice of a word or letter depends in part upon the choice or choices made before (Shannon and Weaver, 1948; Pierce, 1972; Roberts, 1956; Fries, 1952). Because it does, once given enough context we can supply missing words or letters with remarkable accuracy, and we know that in English, the next letter will turn up E more often than any other letter, except after Q. The total absence of E for 50,110 words makes Gadsby a staggeringly improbable sample of English, and yet it seems unremarkably ordinary, coherent, and grammatical, as page 201 of it may show:
Gadsby was walking back from a visit down in Branton Hills' manufacturing district on a Saturday night. A busy day's traffic had had its noisy run; and with not many folks in sight, His Honor got along without having to stop to grasp a hand, or talk; for a Mayor out of City Hall is a shining mark for any politician. And so, coming to Broadway, a booming bass drum and sounds of singing, told of a small Salvation Army unit carrying on amidst Broadway's night shopping crowds. Gadsby, walking toward that group, saw a young girl, back toward him, just finishing a long, soulful oration, saying:--

"...and I can say this to you, for I know what I am talking about; for I was brought up in a pool of liquor!"

As that army group was starting to march on, with this girl turning toward Gadsby, His Honor had to gasp, astonishingly:--

"Why! Mary Antor!!"

"Oh! If it isn't Mayor Gadsby! I don't run across you much, now-a-days. How is Lady Gadsby holding up during this awful war?"

If not forewarned, how long would most readers take to notice the absence of E, and on this page of Gadsby, of J, X, and Z? As long as the combinations of letters seem familiar, the words will; as long as the combinations of words do, the sentences will seem English, whether or not they make much sense, and a lipogram, a composition excluding one or more letters as Gadsby does, will seem a successful trick. Perhaps a tendency to dismiss such compositions as only tricks keeps us from seeing that their exclusions can have rhetorical and semantic consequences which illustrate some of the most general and important characteristics of language.

For example, by using familiar combinations of letters, Claude Shannon coined the words grocid, pondenome and deamy, which seem as if they should mean something. Computers scrambling words into familiar sentence-patterns have produced such poems as Marie Boroff's The river / Winks / And I am ravished. However meaningful that may seem, and its very novelty can make it seem a discovery, a novel produced by such scrambling would wander from subject to subject, with a new subject in almost every sentence, and no larger pattern or set of references common to every subject, unless otherwise programmed -- a disorganization characteristic of some schizophrenic's writing, and some modern poetry. But every sentence of, say, Great Expectations refers in some way to what Pip expected. Some such net of interconnecting yet extremely selective references underlies and organizes the whole of every coherent plot, including that of Gadsby, and this involves a second and much more common improbability. A branch of linguistics called information theory suggests that achieving such coherence involves choosing the appropriate word from many possibilities, over and over again, word after word after word, which makes every novel improbable because so organized, and interesting in so far as its choices seem unpredictable and yet convincingly appropriate.

Structural 1 of sentence-patterns in composition of words and possible their overall pattern of mass-producing while risking the work by considering previous choices of ways or situations exactly, and could high school textual method entails that they put their own content in the resulting set of necessarily an apparent technique to that long, and probably technique obvious to Scott Fitzgerald's Mayor Gadsby would parodic of exclusions, also excluding a response to Fitz's very odd exclamations. Gatsby, though...

Unlike The shows conventional simplification of cause of the final his introduction.

1) He thought verbs ending - of was and did of optimism novel impression he like a child he using such common of was and did it.

2) Wright a "bumpy spots, then, when, which leave Gatsby every cause had Great Gatsby, its concern as
Structural linguists see such choices as what we put into the parts of sentence-patterns -- an insight critics could extend to define novelists' styles in terms of their most recognizably characteristic choices of words and patterns, each choice made by excluding all the other possibilities. In the same way, we could classify types of novels by their overall patterns and types of exclusions. Similar novels make similar choices of words and patterns, as we may suspect writers mass-producing to a formula do repeatedly, and not very thoughtfully, while risking tediously few significant variations. Parodies often work by condensing such formulas while exaggerating their most obvious choices of words and patterns, often in absurdly inappropriate ways or situations, a technique structural linguists can describe exactly, and could make a method of teaching composition. Paul Roberts' high school text Patterns of English teaches students to produce grammatical sentences by showing them some simple patterns and how to put their own choices of words into them, though without asking what the resulting sentences may mean; they prove grammatical, but not necessarily appropriate or connected to any other sentence. Eighteenth century letter writing manuals extended this fill-in-the-blank technique to the writing of whole letters, sometimes many sentences long, and probably many form letters get written this way still; the technique obviously lends itself to parodies. Had Wright used F. Scott Fitzgerald's characteristic choices of words and patterns, Gadsby would have been a parody of The Great Gatsby by using a partially overlapping set of exclusions, but Wright could not make such a set of choices while also excluding the letter E, so Gadsby remains not a parody but a response to Fitzgerald's novel, using a style in part produced by that very odd exclusion. But the title Gadsby, of course, does parody Gatsby, though the E in The and Great forced Wright to exclude it.

Unlike The Great Gatsby, Gadsby seems tritely predictable. It shows conventional virtues rewarded every time, an optimistic oversimplification we may find unconvincing, naive, and dull, in part because of the first three of the four difficulties Wright mentioned in his introduction to his novel as consequences of not using E:

1) He thought his greatest difficulty the exclusion of past tense verbs ending -ed, and the resulting "somewhat monotonous" overuse of was and did and said (and of had and got); it also makes an already optimistic novel seem still more Pollyannish by giving the reader the impression he could not hear or see his subject precisely, or that like a child he could not make crucial distinctions vividly clear by using such concrete verbs as fled and ripped and whispered instead of was and did and said over and over again;
3) He could not use any numbers between six and thirty, which makes it hard to mention many dates or ages, and this also makes Gadsby less specific and convincing.

Wright did not mention two other difficulties not using E produces:

4) He could not use the, which excludes many generalizations, including the pattern G. Rostrevor Hamilton's book The Definite Article found characteristic of T. S. Eliot's most pontifically absolute yet empty verses: the (abstract noun) of the (abstract noun). By using this pattern repeatedly, some parts of Eliot's poems use 13 to 25 or more the's per hundred words, an extraordinarily high ratio; Hamilton found pontificating and an evasion of concrete facts sets in at ten or more the's per hundred words.

Even where we might expect The Great Gatsby to make its most general statements, in its first and last few paragraphs, and it does, it averages only three to eight the's per hundred words. Instead of the, it often uses more specific words, such as my, last, Gatsby's or more modest ones, such as one and some and a. The lower the per cent of the's, the more a passage may consider specific examples, and give us counts and measurements and estimates instead of absolute, often arbitrary and blindly emotional judgements, thus making us aware of the incompleteness and inconclusiveness of what we experience and think we know. If valid, this principle makes Gadsby perhaps the world's most modest novel, because it has no the's at all. It confines itself almost totally to specific examples. We may think an ability to make unexpected yet accurate and useful generalizations a sign of intelligence, and may prefer intelligent novels, but Gadsby's odd exclusion of the forces it into an almost totally dead level abstracting (Hayakawa, 1972) at a low level of abstraction, one particular act after another after another, and so on for more than two hundred pages, with no general summing up or explanations (Baker, 1973; Scott, 1972). For example, it cannot and does not use the balanced equation sentence pattern

the more (or less) of A, the more (or less) of B

in which the A and B label general classes of experience with a noun or adjective, and the whole pattern states some general relationship between quantities or qualities of those classes. Perhaps the most familiar use of this pattern, "The more, the merrier," may not describe parties accurately, but its other uses include such far-ranging generalities as the laws of physics. In any case, Gadsby's odd exclusion makes it modest but at the cost of its potential intelligence, by excluding the, and such ratios as the number of the's per hundred words do in part define and help us understand styles and their effects;

5) Wright could not use me, he, she, her, we, them, or they, which excludes possible ambiguities, but repeating characters' names instead of using these pronouns may make a novel seem too obviously clear, like a story meant for children; such overexplaining may make adult readers feel insulted, superior, or bored, all reactions which interest, educated, or made

In short, every difficulty, and helps about it and how

Horatio Alger creates almost every high by the sufferer's

The title, the 50,000 words are a novel as an optimal

1) while both for the first five in the story he

2) while Gatsby's

3) while both as pivotal in the

4) The Great

Of course, every

Of course, every
ty, which also makes
produces: rationalizations, infi­
nite Article 30
sute yet by using 13 to 25 or ratio; Hamil­
tons in at ten
Lize its most
lter and it does, instead of Horatio Alger could have said as much. Both he and Wright exclude
almost every hint of complexity, and of failure or misery not caused
by the sufferer's own moral failings, a dubiously simple view the
style caused by excluding E seems to suit.

The title, the dedication, the length (Gatsby also runs about
50,000 words) and these contrasts suggest that Wright meant his
novel as an optimistic answer to The Great Gatsby:

1) while both novels start with a narrator who introduces himself
for the first five pages, Wright's narrator never becomes a character
in the story he tells, and never doubts or questions the hero who gives
his name to the novel, unlike Fitzgerald's narrator;

2) while Gatsby remains alone, lost in a private and ultimately
fatal dream of a past he cannot repeat, Wright's Gadsby has a wife
and children, succeeds in politics, and sees his hopes for the future
come true, as he becomes the champion of youth (the novel's original
subtitle) and the youth revive a dying town;

3) while both novels have fatal car accidents involving drinking
as pivotal in their plots, and a war interrupting the lives of charac­
ters, Gadsby succeeds despite such hazards, and Gatsby doesn't;

4) The Great Gatsby shows the jaded middle-aged Buchanans
wrecking things and people, but Wright has Gadsby show the young en­
thusiastically repairing shops and homes, helping the old, and dis­
covering love, making their town a garden, almost a garden of Eden,
all of which reverses the tendency of energy to dissipate, and confu­
sion to increase, the second law of thermodynamics, which The Great
Gatsby repeatedly illustrates, and perhaps most obviously in its val­
ley of ashes, the geographical center of the novel (Scott, 1975).

Of course, every coherent novel or other message decreases our con­
fusion as it increases our store of information, so every message
takes energy to assemble, transmit, and understand, but Gadsby's
optimism seems unconvincing and trivial, because it seems so mon­
otonously simpleminded and predictable. Instead of showing us unexpected connections and comparisons, it seems to exist to deny them, though it does make a few practical suggestions, such as cooperative day care centers for children.

Since a novelist makes his choices word by word as well as at the start, a novel can become a never-­quite-predictable process of discovery for him as well as for his readers. Each choice excludes something, which suggests the possibility of novels which make their exclusions purposefully systematic, by

1) excluding I (the pronoun, not the letter in all its uses) as in narratives told by impersonal records or recorders. In the dialogues recorded, the characters may or may not say I, the most frequently spoken word in English, which tells us something about the egocentricity of the speakers of English. How closely does John Dos Passos' novel U. S. A. approach such an exclusion?

2) excluding we, for such lonely heroes as Raymond Chandler's private detective Philip Marlowe, who uses we only rarely, when he does something with as well as for a friend or client. Since such relationships never last for him, the meaning of his we keeps changing;

3) excluding verbs or subordinate conjunctions for a stream of consciousness, or for the speech of a character even less organized than Mr. Jingle in Pickwick Papers. Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises uses very few such conjunctions, compared with The Great Gatsby, whose narrator tries to discover what has happened, and why, relationships involving such subordinate conjunctions as when, where, and because;

4) excluding the verb to be in all its forms, as this paper does apart from what it quotes, to avoid such dubiously general judgements and unanswerably ambiguous questions as "war is bad" and "is life absurd?" by using concretely specific reports and explanations instead to let us see what happens rather than telling us how to react to what we may not have seen, and thus not believe (Gibson, 1966; Chase, 1938; Scott, 1973);

5) excluding such abstractly general terms as love, justice, and honor, to avoid ambiguities and prejudging issues or events, or because of a disgust with blindly emotional reactions or cynical dishonesties, as in the often cited comment about politicians' patriotic abstractions in Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms;

6) excluding adverbs to avoid unneeded judgements or such unfortunately comic descriptions as: "We're doing ninety miles an hour!" Tom said swiftly. Under "Most Prolific Writers," the Guinness Book of World Records reports that Georges Simenon who has written 200-page novels in eleven days hates adverbs, but does he exclude them to avoid these absurdities, or to achieve a deadpan only-the-facts style?

Characters may have individual styles as a result of the exclusions they make, whether preoccupations can and probably will; and emotions, and perhaps a form of learning apparent on the surface. The exclusions cause and result from the exclusions of one another. In an instructively simpleminded effect, such an instructively simpleminded can shape a use.
make, whether knowingly or not, as a result and symptom of their preoccupations, and these change as their lives do. A novel's style can and probably should change as its point of view, locale, plot, concerns, and emotional tone do, causing different sets of exclusions -- a form of learning Gatsby's arbitrary exclusion of E and its moral intention apparently preclude. The greater the change and its emotional causes and results, presumably, the greater the change in the language the exclusions produce. From its single intentional exclusion of the most common letter of the language, Gatsby commits itself to other exclusions which produce its style, and much of its oddly simple-minded effect. However odd a curiosity Gadsby may seem, it remains an instructively simple and striking demonstration of how exclusions can shape a use of language.

REFERENCES

Stuart Chase, The Tyranny of Words (Harcourt, 1938), 109, 131 et al.
Paul Roberts, Patterns of English (Harcourt, 1956).