

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

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Computers are usually blamed for the rise in newspaper line-setting errors. We have all frequently had the experience: reading to the end of one line of text, only to find that the next line has no grammatical connection. The answer is usually a dropped line or transposed lines. If several lines are printed in scrambled order, the result can be a challenge to re-order.

We are lucky, however. English contains many parts of speech, which can only occur in certain sequences. We know something is wrong in the line "We are lucky only occur in certain sequences" If our grammatical heritage were less structured, random lines could be easily interposed with no loss of sense. Then we could not rapidly read from right to left, since that requires a confident visual jump at the end of each text line. We would also have no grammatical cues to tell us when typesetting errors were made.

Sometimes the misread lines in a newspaper story make sense, albeit in an unintended way. Some of the best are reprinted as squibs in the New Yorker magazine. This suggested an easy, amusing and illustrative exercise. Copy the first line of a text, and skip the second line. Skip to the next line that can follow grammatically after the first line. Copy that line, skip the next line, and proceed as before, until you reach the end of the paragraph. If the copied passage does not come to a natural end, omit one of the copied lines and proceed from an alternate line of the original text.

A few examples follow. The first is appropriately the opening lines of the Book of Genesis (King James Version). Slashes indicate where lines end in the original translation:

In the beginning God created the / void; and darkness was upon the face of / good; and God divided the light from / firmament from the waters which were / called the Seas; and God saw that it was / the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, / and it was so.

The beginning of Tom Paine's tract Common Sense becomes even more elliptical than the original, as 21 pages are condensed into:

Some writers have so confounded society with govern- / ing that we furnish the means by which we suffer. Govern- / ment is not sufficiently lasting to ensure that any thing which we / neither love nor honor, / will be forced and unnatural, and / ask: Hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been / worth worth an age if rightly employed, but if lost or neglected, the /

stretch of human wisdom cannot, at this time, compass a / degree of convenience, by a power so distant from us, and so / clearly, positively. and conscientiously persuaded that it is the / convenience, which would have sufficiently balanced the re- / lished without the following calculations, which are now given / standing, our fisheries blocked up, and our sailors and ship- / chants, to build and employ in their service ships mounted / young, and we have been distressed; but our concord hath / manner, and then, where will be our freedom?

The opening lines of an Agatha Christie mystery could be misread in haste:

It was in June of 1935 that I came home from my / various affairs to see to in England that I felt I could / lay square eggs?

In a logophilic vein, Richard Lederer's playful Crazy English yielded new insights when I dropped lines in the chapter "English at Play":

Vowels in Order. At least five English words contain / **adventitious, facetious** and **parecious**. At least six contain / **rstu** - in order.

Repeated Vowels. The longest common English / names are **Tennessee** (nine letters, four e's) and **Missis-** / visibilities [which] contains seven i's and one e.

Letter Words. A number of words, when pronounced, / roll along one letter at a time. A crystalline five-layer snowballer is **tempera-** / **brown fox jumps over a lazy dog** as a / sampling of the best pangrams of even fewer letters.

The above discussion and illustrations are closely related to the concept of redundancy in the modern science of information theory. Redundancy is an inherent feature of every language and every information structure. Our examples above illustrate grammar rules as a form of redundancy. After a given line, grammar narrowly restricts the universe of possible following lines, thus enhancing the speed and accuracy of reading.