



American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS)

"Pictures of Pronunciation": Typographical Travels Through Tristram Shandy and Jacques le Fataliste

Author(s): Michael Vande Berg

Source: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 21-47

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#). Sponsor: [American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies \(ASECS\)](#).

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2739025>

Accessed: 08/11/2014 11:45

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press and American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Eighteenth-Century Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

“Pictures of
Pronunciation”:
Typographical Travels
Through *Tristram
Shandy* and *Jacques
le fataliste*

MICHAEL VANDE BERG

COMMUNICATIONS HISTORIANS have in the last several decades begun to trace the outlines of a great cultural shift which began with the invention of the phonetic alphabet and accelerated with the invention of print, and which saw man proceed from conceiving of the world primarily in oral terms to conceiving of it in terms of sight. This emerging historical framework can help to account for the development of a narrative technique which at first glance seems of little consequence, and which has thus received less attention than it deserves: the typographical practice of authors who wrote during the latter part of the “age of conversation,” the period in which orally-based rhetorical culture went into its final decline. The role of typography in sustaining rhetorical culture is especially prominent in the works of Sterne and, to a lesser extent, in those of his contemporary Diderot. These two authors are frequently cited together, Diderot being accused of having too freely borrowed from Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* much of the material in *Jacques le fataliste*. Yet while the similarities between these two authors and their works are striking, for the purposes of communications history the differences in their attempts to achieve a conversational effect in their work are more important.

With Sterne, “conversation” means the active oral participation of his reader, a verbal involvement that is based to a large extent on Sterne’s creative use of typography, especially in his heavy use of rhetorical punctuation.

For Diderot’s reader, “conversation” still implies a kind of involvement, but as a silent observer within the novel’s created dramatic environment rather than as a verbal participant. Diderot’s punctuation, like our own today, is for the most part grammatical; it helps the reader identify the structural architecture of the sentences passing before his eyes. This difference between the two writers’ typographical practice is not simply a matter of personal stylistic preference. It stems from two very different viewpoints about the relationship between speaking and writing. In fact, to the extent that Sterne’s and Diderot’s beliefs represent those of their respective contemporary national cultures—and as we will see, with regard to oral culture they are indeed representative—their differing typographical usage reflects a basic difference between English and French attitudes toward language and literature during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Sterne’s typographical practice within *Tristram Shandy* has been attracting comments almost from the moment of its publication, not surprising given the novel’s exaggerated print displays. Most of the critical reactions to this often puzzling performance—including recent insightful commentaries about the extent to which typography contributes to Sterne’s “conversational style”—have suffered from too narrow a focus. Limited to an analysis of Sterne’s works alone—and usually only to *Tristram Shandy*—prior studies have lacked the kind of historical/linguistic framework against which Sterne’s practices must be judged if we are to understand how he intended his typographical devices to function—that is, how he intended his readers to react to these devices in his text. This failure to consider the norms which prevailed in Sterne’s day regarding such things as punctuation placement and capitalization has resulted in what amounts to the imposition of twentieth-century linguistic attitudes on eighteenth-century material.¹ However, the nec-

¹See Eugene Hnatko, “Sterne’s Conversational Style” in *The Winged Skull*, eds. Arthur H. Cash and John M. Stedmond (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 235–36: Hnatko’s conclusion that the “speaking presence” in the novel is merely an artistic “illusion,” while insightful, is based on our modern perspective

essary historical/linguistic context can be provided for Sterne’s work by referring to available secondary evidence—to the considerable number of punctuation grammars and commentaries which began to appear in England in the sixteenth century, and which continued to appear throughout and beyond the eighteenth. The typographical practices described in these commentaries—practices both of writers in placing the various marks, and especially of readers in decoding them—demonstrate that at the very historical moment during which Sterne was writing *Tristram Shandy*, his English readers were prepared, to a greater extent than ever before or since, to treat his punctuation symbols as specific, detailed verbal reading clues—as types of “in-text” directions which signalled pauses, intonation, accent and emphasis—for what they conceived of as an “accurate” verbal rendering of the voice or voices that Sterne had coded into the text. This state of punctuation practice suggests that Sterne’s readers might have found his typographical usage idiosyncratic—but only because he exaggerated the conventional punctuation strategies of the age, not because he departed from them. To the extent that Sterne’s eighteenth-century English readers were aware, as we are today, of the limitations of typography in capturing the nuances of the human voice, they would have appreciated Sterne all the more for apparently overcoming them.

The late eighteenth-century English punctuation strategies which underlie Sterne’s usage are based on a concept of language fundamentally different from our own. The difference is merely expressed, and not explained, with the traditional references to “rhetorical” versus “structural” practice, with the older system signalling the rhythm, or the pauses, within written discourse—with a comma, for instance, directing the reader to take a short breath; and the newer system (the one we in the English-speaking world largely adhere to today) using the various punctuation marks to signal the grammatical or structural units of discourse—so that the comma now appears after an introductory adverbial clause, and so forth.

about the differences between speaking and writing. Sterne’s contemporaries, who did not yet share this perspective, would have taken his art to be a reasonable representation of speech. See in the same collection Louis T. Millic, “Information Theory and the Style of *Tristram Shandy*”; and William Holtz, “Typography, *Tristram Shandy*, the Aposiopesis, etc.”; see also Ian Watt, “Introduction,” Houghton Mifflin edition of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, p. xxvii.

What we need to do to explain this difference is to start with a recognition that today we understand much more about “Language” as a phenomenon than most people in the English eighteenth century did. Today no one seriously questions the idea that writing and speaking are essentially two different processes, that the one is not, and cannot be, an accurate reflection of the other. Writing is widely taken to be a spatial and visual, rather than an oral, phenomenon, with its own distinct conventions regarding syntax, diction, and punctuation. These distinctions, rather than any overlapping similarities between speaking and writing, are now stressed, for instance, in teaching composition; and a beginning writer must master these writing conventions if he or she is to write acceptable English prose.

However, these differences were fully codified only recently, during the nineteenth-century: the reader and writer trained in the rhetorical tradition—a tradition which held sway roughly from the time of the ancient Greek rhetoricians until, and to some extent even beyond, the advent of romanticism—conceived of writing in oral terms, treating the written word as an adjunct to, and as a reflection of, the writer’s spoken word. Rhetoric, understood to be the art governing oral delivery, which paradoxically emerged as a discipline, as Walter Ong has shown, only with the appearance of writing, “perpetuated [the] oral psychological structures” of pre-literate society by enshrining these oral traditions within the written word:

Rhetorical culture is basically oral culture shrouded in writing. It is an oral culture whose institutions (in the sociological sense of this term, ways of doing things, patterns of behavior) have been codified, put into manuals, made the object of reflection and of reflective training, and thus both artificially sustained and reinforced by writing—the very instrument which was ultimately to make these institutions obsolete.²

There thus existed an inherent contradiction in rhetorical culture—a tension between two competing systems of thought, the older, pre-literate, oral world, one which was preoccupied with dispute and commitment, and which viewed language in all its forms as a social,

²The first quote appears in *Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), p. 31; the second in *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), p. 261.

external instrument of persuasion; and the emerging visual world, a silent world preoccupied with space, one which would eventually, in eclipsing the older patterns of thought, come to treat language, especially written language, as a silent and visual phenomenon, an instrument of individual reflection relatively uninvolved with communication.

As both Ong and Marshall McLuhan have shown, this tension between the oral and visual was introduced with the invention of the alphabet just before the dawn of rhetorical culture—an invention which, in allowing for a rough correspondence between specific written symbols and individually spoken vowels and consonants, suggested that seeing letters was somehow equivalent to hearing sounds. Two major historical events intensified this sound/sight tension. First, movable type was invented in the fifteenth century, the regularity and uniformity of which helped dissociate words from their oral roots by accelerating reading speed, and led readers, more strongly than before, to treat language as a “thing,” as something to be conceived of spatially, rather than as an integral part of human behavior. Second, the Renaissance humanists revived Latin language and culture, thereby revitalizing the institutions of the old rhetorical tradition and forestalling the rapid submersion of oral culture.³ Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century linguistics, hard pressed to balance their linguistic explanations between these spatial and rhetorical pressures—to explain language, an oral behavior, in spatial terms—relied increasingly on a language model that presented writing as a kind of perfect mirror of speaking. Thus Robert Robinson, arguing in 1605 that it is possible to ensure a perfect “fit” between all spoken sounds and written symbols, defines writing as “an artificiall framing of certain marks and characters different in forme and shape for every severall sound in mans voice, whereby each simple sound having a proper mark appointed to it selfe, may be the same as apparently seen to the eye, as the sound it selfe is sensibly discerned by the eares.”⁴ It is this view of language, seeking, as Ong puts it, “to assimilate the world of sound . . . in a bizarre

³See the above-cited works of Ong and McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: The Univ. of Toronto Press, 1962) for discussions of communications history.

⁴*The Phonetic Writings of Robert Robinson* (1605; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), p. 19.

fashion to the world of vision,”⁵ that underlies the rhetorical punctuation conventions which prevailed in England from the sixteenth until the early part of the nineteenth century. Such rhetorical punctuation conventions were in force prior to the sixteenth century. But it was during this century, within the same historical climate of thought which prompted Robinson’s contorted explanations regarding perfect sound/sight “fits,” that rhetorical punctuation practices were first codified by being placed in manuals. The history of rhetorical punctuation practice from this moment until the romantic period is the history of the tension created in this clash between sound and sight, between rhetorical and print culture—the clash created in the codification and systematization of oral language habits through the printed word.

We can see in the very earliest treatments of punctuation in English the belief that writing is a reflection of speech: John Hart’s 1569 *An Orthographie* is subtitled, “conteyning the due order and reason, howe to write or print thimage of mannes voice, most like to the life or nature.” The sound/sight tension inherent in the century’s attitudes toward written language is reflected in Hart’s discussion of the usefulness of punctuation, which “maye yelde the matter, much the readier to the senses, as well to the eie as to the eare. For it sheweth us how to reſte: when the ſentence continueth, and when it endeth: how to underſtande what is written, and is not needfule to the ſentence.”⁶ Hart’s awareness of the role of punctuation in serving both the “eie” and “eare” is echoed in Francis Clement’s *The Petie Schole*, published in 1587: Clement notes that when punctuation is observed, “the breath is relieved, the meaning cõceived, the eye directed, the eare delited, and all the ſenſes ſatisfied.”⁷ Both Hart and Clement attend to this dual role of punctuation throughout their essays, alternating between loose advice about grammatically placing punctuation—“directing the eye”—and suggestions for reading punctuation as cues for pausing—appealing to “the eare.” Hart’s comparison of the pauses signalled by punctuation with the pauses in musical notation—for instance, the

⁵*Presence*, p. 64.

⁶*An Orthographie* (1569; rpt. Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1969), p. 40. The paragraph’s later quote is on p. 40A.

⁷*The Petie Schole* (1587; rpt. Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1967), pp. 24–25.

comma “is in reading the shortest rest, neare the time of a Crachet in musique”—will reappear in punctuation commentaries throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Sterne himself will lean on the analogy in his pointing of *Tristram Shandy*.

Seventeenth-century commentaries, with few exceptions, became more explicitly rhetorical in their punctuation discussions than had their sixteenth-century counterparts. In Simon Daines’ 1640 work *Orthoepia Anglicana*, the potential of punctuation marks for capturing the voice in print has greatly increased. A comma is to be used, for example, “in the most convenient places to make a small pause for the necessity of breathing; or in Rhetoricall speeches (when many words are used to one effect) to make a kinde of Emphasis and deliberation for the great majesty or state of the Elocution.”⁸ The writer’s “Emphasis,” or his tone, could additionally be expressed in print through the use of capital letters. The last spelling rule in Elisha Coles’ *The Compleat English Schoolmaster* indicates how common the practice of rhetorical capitalization had become in 1674:

Whatsoever words the author laies any kind of stress or force upon, these he either writes in a different character, or else prefixes a Capital before them, or both. Hence those that think they write nothing but strength of wit and thunderbolts, will scarce vouchsafe you two words together without a Capital. They are indeed so much in fashion, that I reckon this is a good rule to go by, viz:

Whensoever you are in doubt, whether you had best write a little letter or a great one, be sure you write a great one. For this is the safest hand to erre on.⁹

Nearly a century later the practice was being described in much the same way: Ann Fisher notes in one rule of her 1750 *A New Grammar* that “any Part of Speech, when there is a *Force*, or *Emphasis*, laid upon it, may be printed with a *Capital*.”¹⁰

Not only were seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers and writers taught that punctuation could signal “Force” or “Emphasis”

⁸*Orthoepia Anglicana* (1640; rpt. Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1967), p. 70.

⁹*The Compleat English Schoolmaster* (1774; rpt. Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1967), p. 107.

¹⁰*A New Grammar* (1750; rpt. Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1968), p. 135.

as well as pauses; the four most common marks of punctuation—the comma, semicolon, colon and period—also came to signal, in precisely defined ways, progressively longer pauses in reading. In Daines' 1640 work, the analogy between pauses in reading and musical rests that Hart had touched on in 1569 has been expanded into a teaching technique:

I remember my singing-master taught me to keep time, by telling from 1, to 4, according to the nature of the time which I was to keep, and I found the practice thereof much ease and certainty to me, till I was perfect in it. The same course I have used to my pupils in their reading, to insure them to the distinction of the pauses, and found it no lesse successfull.¹¹

Such precise attention to the relative duration of pauses in reading seems more than a bit fantastic to us today, with our emphasis on rapid visual reading. Yet such statements appear so frequently in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century discussions of pointing as to amount to a commonplace of the rhetorical punctuation tradition. In *A Treatise on Stops*, an anonymous 1680 work which was the first of many English grammars devoted exclusively to punctuation, the commonplace is expressed in even more precise terms:

A Comma is a Breathing Stop: No more,
Stop at it while you may tell one, Therefore.

Where Semi-Colon placed is; There you
May pleas to make a Stop, while you tell two.

A colon is a longer Stop; Therefore,
Stop at each Colon, while you may tell Four.

Ye Stop, while you tell Sir, do not forget,
Where you do see a period to be set.

As is the case with most of the century's punctuation commentaries, this work offers little advice to writers regarding grammatical placement of the marks; it does, however, repeat five times a charge to readers to "give each of the marks . . . their du time."¹² The English seventeenth century was aware that there existed a structure within

¹¹P. 70.

¹²*A Treatise on Stops* (1680; rpt. Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1968), pp. 4–5.

language, but it paid relatively little attention to it in dealing with punctuation.

During the eighteenth century the English continued to point rhetorically, using the various marks to help create the “conversational” quality typical of their age, a quality which depended, as Stedmond observes, on a “blurring of the stylistic distinction between conversation and prose.”¹³ The degree of creativity of course varied from author to author, but most of the age’s fictional prose writers—from Behn through Swift, Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, and to some extent through Austen and even beyond—did rely on rhetorical punctuation in their works as one means of achieving what *The Tatler* called “an air of common speech.”¹⁴ Such rhetorical usage, identifiable through what seems to us today to be an excess of punctuation marks and italics, and also in the use of very long “periods,” or sentences, is evident, for instance, in this passage from the original (1719) edition of *Robinson Crusoe*:

Animated with this, he took the Musket, I had given him, in his Hand, and a Pistol in his Belt, and his two Comrades with him, with each Man a Piece in his Hand. The two Men who were with him going first, made some Noise, at which one of the Seamen, who was awake, turn’d about, and seeing them coming, cry’d out to the rest; but it was too late then; for the Moment he cry’d out, they fir’d: *I mean the two Men*, the Captain, widely reserving his own Piece: They had so well aim’d their Shot at the Men they knew, that one of them was kill’d on the Spot, and the other very much wounded. . . .¹⁵

With the knowledge provided by the age’s punctuation treatises, we can imagine how expressively, with what careful suspensions of voice, precise pausing and emphasis, Defoe’s contemporaries would have read these two sentences—the second of which continues without a full stop for another nineteen lines.

The punctuation treatises also tell us, however, that Defoe probably depended to some extent on structural as well as rhetorical criteria in punctuating his sentences. The fact that each of the marks

¹³John Stedmond, *The Comic Art of Laurence Sterne* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 32.

¹⁴Quoted in Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 125.

¹⁵Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (London: W. Taylor, 1719), pp. 304–05.

within the above passage falls between, rather than within, grammatical word clusters—between phrases and clauses—does not in itself indicate that Defoe was punctuating structurally, using the marks as visual parsing symbols as we do today. For one thing, his use of italics indicates that he expected his readers to react rhetorically to his typography. In addition, most of the notable pauses that occur naturally in speaking fall between, rather than within, these word clusters. And finally, the relatively high number of marks that Defoe uses demonstrates that he—like other late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers—was trying to encode in his writing as many of these pauses as he could for his reader. On the other hand, the precision and regularity of his typography—the fact, again, that his punctuation marks *do* all act as parsing symbols, and that only nouns are capitalized¹⁶—suggest that while Defoe was indeed sensitive to the possibilities of encoding in print the nuances of the voice, he was also relatively responsive to the logical structure within language. In this too, Defoe was typical of his age.

For a great surge of grammaticality was beginning to sweep over England during the first decades of the eighteenth century. While in all the years leading up to 1600 fewer than fifty English grammars had been published—and those dealing primarily with vocabulary, not with syntax, in the period from 1700–1750 alone almost fifty new grammars appeared; and between 1750 and 1800 over two hundred new titles were published.¹⁷ This rage for structure, for treating language as a spatial phenomenon, profoundly altered attitudes toward typography. The commentaries began to treat punctuation in contradictory terms: while on the one hand they continued to instruct readers, in precisely defined ways, to decode the various marks as rhetorical reading cues, they also increasingly directed writers and printers to place the marks according to structural cri-

¹⁶As we have seen in punctuation commentaries like Coles' *The Complete English Schoolmaster*, and Fisher's 1750 *A New Grammar*, English writers were advised to encode "stress" or "Force" by capitalizing nouns. However, by the early eighteenth century the capitalizing of nouns had become so routine in most English books that the presence of this typographical feature alone in a text cannot be regarded as evidence of an author's rhetorical intentions. The increasingly routine use of capitalized nouns in fact offers evidence that authors and printers were shifting their concern from encoding speech properties to identifying the structure of their sentences.

¹⁷Arthur Kennedy, *A Bibliography of Writings about the English Language* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1927).

teria. There is no question that the printers themselves exercised an important, and conservative, influence on typography, frequently standardizing authorial rhetorical punctuation in the same way that they “corrected” phonetic spelling. Moxon, in his 1683 *Mechanick Exercises*, addressing the problem of what should be done with an author’s “faulty” copy, declares that “the carelessness of some good Authors, and the ignorance of other Authors, has forced Printers to introduce a Custom, which among them is look’d upon as a task and duty incumbent on the Compositor, viz. to discern and amend the bad Spelling, and Pointing of his Copy. . . . it is necessary . . . that [an author] have so much Sense and Reason, as to Point his Sentences properly.” A printer concerned with “the Sense and Reason of sentences” was not likely to tolerate rhetorical pointing that did not help identify the architecture of sentences; and with the passing of the custom, around the end of the seventeenth century, of allowing the author to attend in person the printing of his copy, the possibilities of that copy being altered by the printer increased greatly. A writer who cared about his punctuation still could, of course, make revisions in the proofs that the printers of the day normally sent back to the writer for perusal; but as the century progressed, more and more authors appear to have left decisions about spelling and pointing to the printer. Smith, in *The Printer’s Grammar*, published in 1775, complains that “most Authors expect the Printer to spell, point, and digest their Copy, that it may be intelligible and significant to the Reader.”¹⁸ Thus while readers were still being trained to read punctuation rhetorically, in the eighteenth century the books they were reading were increasingly being punctuated grammatically by the printers. With writers and printers applying more strictly regularized, and fewer, marks than before, the visual world was steadily undermining the oral habits of the rhetorical.

Once begun, the shift from rhetorical to structural punctuation strategies rapidly went to completion. In 1785 Robertson in *An Essay on Punctuation* noted that with less and less punctuation appearing within printed texts, rhetorically trained readers—in the

¹⁸Moxon and Smith are quoted in Percy Simpson, *Proof-Reading in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1935), p. 53; see pp. 42–104 for an overview of the influence that printers exercised on rhetorical typography.

absence of verbal reading cues—could continue to read expressively only by dramatically improvising: “[B]ooks are no certain guides; for most of them are carelessly and irregularly pointed; and many pauses are necessary in reading, where no point is inserted by the printer.” Thus he contends that since “not half the pauses are found in printing, which are heard in the pronunciation of a good reader or speaker; . . . if we would read or speak well, we must pause, upon an average, at every fifth or sixth word.” While Robertson does advise writers to punctuate structurally—he claims that punctuation “is founded on rational and determinate principles”—his feeling for grammar and semantics is still rather inexact, his rules for correct placement of punctuation markers dependent on relatively inexact grammatical criteria. A semicolon, for example, “is used for dividing a compounded (sic) sentence into two or more parts, not so closely connected, as those, which are separated by a comma; yet not so independent of each other, as those, which are distinguished by a colon.”¹⁹ Given such a degree of imprecision, it is somewhat surprising to find in Stackhouse’s 1800 *A New Essay on Punctuation* a precise and fully codified definition of punctuation’s role in signalling grammatical and semantic information. Robertson fifteen years earlier had called pointing an “art”; Stackhouse calls it a “science” and speaks of carrying it to “its highest state of attainable perfection.” There is consequently little latitude in his system; for instance, in describing the placement of the colon, he says that “when two clauses come together both complete in sense, but connected, they require to be separated by a colon; such are sub-periods.”²⁰ And while Stackhouse is more prescriptive than Robertson and other earlier commentators with regard to grammatical and semantic placement, he is also more prescriptive than the others in terms of his treatment of pause duration; he advises that “the brevity or length of the leading pause is best determined by the light and sprightly, or weighty and solemn, tension of the subject.”²¹ As an extreme advocate both of rhetorical and of structural punctuation strategies, Stackhouse embodies, at the turn of the century,

¹⁹Joseph Robertson, *An Essay on Punctuation* (rpt. Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1968), pp. 18, 75, and 77.

²⁰P. 18.

²¹Thomas Stackhouse, *A New Essay on Punctuation* (London: T. Bensley, 1800), pp. ii, v, and 64.

a high point of tension between the two traditions.

Half a century later the shift to punctuating by structure is virtually complete. The Reverend James Stormonth, whose description of writing as “written speech” in his 1861 *The Handy English Word Book* still indicates a rhetorical training, is nevertheless wholly committed to placing punctuation according to structural criteria: “The only true method of determining the right application of the grammatical points to written speech, is its analysis; that is, to take and examine the different parts that make up written speech, and ascertain the positions where the voice might be expected naturally to pause a longer or shorter time, and where the eye requires a break to fit the sense.”²² It is clear from the rules that follow, that Stormonth intends the phrase, “ascertain the positions where the voice might be expected naturally to pause” to mean “ascertain the grammatical and semantic constructions which determine punctuation placement.” The voice is in fact relatively unimportant here: it is “the eye” that “requires a break to fit the sense,” not, as in previous centuries, “the voice” re-creating a break to fit the sense given by the tones and intonations of the writer’s voice. Writing now no longer related to sound, but to sight; it had become a spatial, rather than an oral, phenomenon. A considerable gap had opened between the spoken and printed word.

However, just prior to this visual resolution of the long-standing tension between sight and sound, attitudes toward punctuation became remarkably oral, probably more than in any previous period—a resurgence of oral culture which recalls nothing so much as a terminally ill patient who dramatically and temporarily goes into remission. During this period some punctuation treatises went to extraordinary lengths to explain how an author could, with the aid of typographical devices, encode the sounds of his voice in print, as James Burrow’s 1771 *An Essay on the Use of Pointing* illustrates:

The General Idea of Pointing seems to include nothing more than marking down upon Paper, by different Signs or notations, the respective Pauses which actually were or ought to be made in pronouncing the words written or printed; together with like Hints for a different Modulation of Voice, where a just pronunciation would require it.

²²James Stormonth, *The Handy English Word Book* (London: William P. Nimmo), p. 479.

As letters are the Marks of *articulate Sounds*, and Words the Signs of *Ideas*, and *Language* the Representation of *Thoughts*; so Writing and Printing may be rendered Pictures of Pronunciation. The *Pauses*, the *Accents*, the *Emphasis*, and even the Tone of Voice may, perhaps without Difficulty, be noted upon Paper.

... He [the writer] may describe them so well upon Paper, that his Reader may form an Idea, how the Writer did or would pronounce the Words; and how the Reader may, if he pleases, pronounce them in the very same manner.

* * *

... it might in some Measure answer *their* [the writers'] Purpose, or at least help them a little, if they would only habituate themselves to *pronounce aloud* the Words they have been writing down; and then point them.²³

Burrow's explanation concerning the potentialities of typography for capturing in print the author's voice offers considerable insight into his contemporary Sterne's punctuating of *Tristram Shandy*, a work which Hazlitt would later describe as "the pure essence of English conversational style."²⁴ Sterne, who wrote in his novel the familiar statement that "writing, when properly managed . . . is but a different name for conversation,"²⁵ relied considerably on the creative use of typography to achieve his conversational effect. Sterne's eighteenth-century readers, trained as they were to decode rhetorically in reading aloud, were fully prepared to interpret his punctuation, what Borrow would have called his "Pictures of Pronunciation," as cues to an "accurate" verbal reading of his work.

Sterne's punctuation, idiosyncratic insofar as it extended beyond previous usage—especially with its many dashes of varying lengths, and in the frequency with which the dashes are coupled with other marks—demanded of readers a higher degree of creative involvement than ever before. Sterne's system would by no means have been incomprehensible—"indecipherable"—to his English contemporaries: it was still based in the reading responses illustrated in the age's punctuation commentaries, on the predictable responses

²³*De Use et Ratione Interpungendi: An Essay on the Use of Pointing, and the Facility of Practicing It* (London: J. Worrall & B. Tovey, 1771), pp. 8 and 14.

²⁴Quoted in Stedmond, p. 31.

²⁵Ian Watt's Houghton Mifflin edition (1965), II, xi. Hereafter volume and chapter references are given in the text. I have also consulted the first edition in the Rare Book Room at the University of Illinois ([London] 1760–67, 9 vols.) to confirm the placement and length of dashes.

to such marks as the comma, semicolon, colon, period and dash, the devices Burrow calls the “signs . . . which signal the respective Pauses which actually were or ought to be made in pronouncing the Words written or printed.” Sterne actively experimented with typographical devices throughout *Tristram Shandy*—including not only his dashes, but also the asterisks, the Gothic, italic and capital letters, the exclamation points, the pointing fingers, the squiggly lines, and more. He was so confident in the success of these and other practices as to inform his reader that “never do I hit upon the invention or device which tendeth to the furtherance of good writing, but I instantly make it public” (IX, xii). His contemporaries would not have been unduly startled by even his most experimental devices; the age’s commitment to capturing in print the sounds of the spoken voice encouraged active experimentation, as Burrow’s punctuation treatise goes on to point out:

. . . Every artifice that can be invented, [leads] the Reader’s Apprehension into the Track of the Writer’s Meaning. And if a writer finds himself a little hardbound now and Then, and not easily delivered of his own Meaning, he will the better conceive how serviceable it must be to his reader to furnish him with *any* Clew to guide him through the mazy Labyrinth.²⁶

The “Clews” that Sterne furnishes his reader to make the Meaning clear involve more than the creative use of typographical devices. His detailed descriptions of characters’ accents and tones of voice—Walter Shandy speaks “in a tone more expressive by half of sorrow than reproach” (I, iii), or “in the sweetest modulation” (IV, xvi); Tristram speaks “in the most persuasive tone imaginable” (VII, viii), and so on—frequently provide the reader with what amount to dramatic reading cues, complements to typography which help in reproducing ever closer approximations of the several voices in the text. For Sterne the meaning of a work of fiction—or for that matter, of language itself—was not communicated by the printed words alone, but by the way that the words were spoken and delivered. As he expresses it, a single word like “*fiddlestick*” may be pronounced with “such an infinitude of notes, tunes, cants, chants, airs, looks and accents . . . [that] every one of ’em impresses a sense and meaning as different from the other, as *dirt* from cleanliness” (IX,

²⁶p. 8.

xxv). The way the words were spoken—first by the writer in putting the words down on paper, and then by the reader in speaking them aloud—would ultimately determine their real meaning.

Sterne's sensitivity as a writer to the tones of the voice in reading is further apparent in his topical introduction of another type of conversational device—cadence marks—into a discussion of Yorick's sermons. Cadence marks were still used in Sterne's day by clergymen—perhaps by Sterne himself—in approximately the same way as standard rhetorical punctuation markers, as reminders, when reading a sermon, of the manner of delivery intended in the writing of it. Sterne's wry description of the notations that Yorick uses as cadence marks in the text of his sermons indicates that he saw them as serving the same function as musical directions:

What Yorick could mean by the words *lentamente*,—*tenute*,—*grave*,—and sometimes *adagio*,—as applied to theological compositions, and with which he has characterized some of these sermons, I dare not venture to guess. ——— I am more puzzled still upon finding a *l'octave alta!* upon one; — *Con Strepito* upon the back of another; — *Scicilliana* upon a third; — *Alla capella* upon a fourth; — *Con l'arco* upon this; — *Senza l'arco* upon that. ——— All I know is, that they are musical terms; and have a meaning; — and as he was a musical man, I will make no doubt, but that by some quaint application of such metaphors to the compositions in hand, they impressed very distinct ideas of their several characters upon his fancy. (VI, xi)

Yorick, of course, is Sterne himself, and as a “musical man” Sterne wanted to visually convey to his readers—through any means possible, including typographical experimentation and dramatic descriptions—his sense of the music he heard running throughout the spoken language. As writing is another name for conversation, so writing a book “is for all the world like humming a song” (IV, xxv); and those “who know nothing of musical expression, and merely lend their ears to the plain import of the world” (IV, xxvii)—or to put it another way, those who are insensitive to the potentialities of print for capturing the musical properties of the voices—simply miss this entire dimension of meaning in the work.

While Sterne's attempts to capture through written symbols the subtle musical tones of the spoken voice seem extreme to us, it is important to bear in mind the fact that his attempts were not isolated, that others during the period were striving in various ways

to attain the same end. It was not only Burrow who vigorously advocated that writers employ “every artifice that can be invented” to capture in print the spoken word: other contemporaries of Sterne’s, among them the linguist Joshua Steele, also lent their creative hands to the attempt. In his 1779 treatise, *“Prosodia Rationalis,” Or, An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech, To Be Expressed and Perpetuated By Peculiar Symbols*, a work published at the behest of the Royal Society, Steele outlined a notation system which he hoped would overcome what he perceived to be the unfortunate limitations of conventional typography. Steele noted that only accent, quantity and pauses could be coded with conventional (rhetorical) typographical devices, with the result that what he calls “emphasis” and “force” (or loudness) were largely ignored. To correct this lamentable oversight, he designed a system that resembles—and in complexity, far surpasses—musical notation; with its dozens of symbols, and its ability to capture extremely subtle vocal distinctions, this late eighteenth-century creation resembles nothing so much as a manual tape-recording system.²⁷ Its very complexity, as well as the rapidly accelerating shift from the oral to the visual world, from rhetorical to structural punctuation strategies, guaranteed its quick demise.

Steel’s desire for precision in typographical matters is common to most late eighteenth-century English punctuation commentaries. Even at the end of the period, readers were still expected carefully to observe the relative values of the various punctuation marks when pausing: thus Stackhouse in his 1880 *A New Essay on Punctuation* notes that “the pauses, or spaces of time assigned to each of these [the four most common punctuation markers], for respiration, are in the proportion to each other of 1,2,3,4; or 2,4,6,8.”²⁸ With the reader following these formulas, he could, as Burrow puts it, “form an Idea how the Writer did or would pronounce the Words,” presumably with as much precision as was possible in the decoding of eighth, quarter, half and whole notes from musical notation. The precision of this system never extended to the dash, the fifth device used at the time to mark pauses, and the one that Sterne used most frequently. Sterne places dashes of varying lengths in *Tristram*

²⁷*“Prosodia Rationalis”* (London: J. Nichols, 1779).

²⁸p. i.

Shandy—the standard dash lengths in the original edition are 3, 5 and 7 mm—a practice which indicates that he wanted his reader to pause for progressively greater durations of time as the dash's length increased: as Burrow puts it, with the dash the writer could "leave proportionately longer or smaller spaces between his sentences, as the pronunciation may require longer or shorter pauses."²⁹ This much potential for imprecise variability led many grammarians to discourage the use of the dash, Robertson, for instance, in his 1785 *An Essay on Punctuation*, stating that it was "frequently used by hasty and incoherent writers, in a very capricious and arbitrary manner, instead of the regular point."³⁰ Sterne's use of the dash therefore labelled him as capricious and arbitrary with his more prescriptive contemporaries—at least with those who weren't already offended with his many other departures from what he ironically called "the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding" (II, xi).

Sterne naturally rejected attempts to measure anything prescriptively; he thus reacted to the mathematically precise punctuation conventions of his day by exaggerating his own usage. This parodying reaction to his age's norms is an important element of Sterne's novelistic method, as numerous critics have pointed out. Stedmond, for instance, observes that "clearly Sterne was no blind follower of traditional rules . . . He emphasized the ludicrous aspects of standard rhetorical patterns by carrying them to extremes or otherwise parodying them."³¹ Sterne was indeed aware of how ludicrous the prescriptive punctuation conventions of his own day had become; he exaggerated the precise norms governing pause duration, especially in his use of the dash, and in a passage which depicts a conversation between Tristram and a critic, he openly ridicules the age's punctilious pause-watching:

²⁹P. 20.

³⁰P. 129.

³¹P. 38. See also Watt, p. xxi, where he sees Sterne's reaction to realist fictional norms as "one of skeptical and subversive parody"; and Victor Shklovsky, "A Parodying Novel: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*," in John Traugott, ed., *Laurence Sterne: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 66–69, discussing how Sterne's exaggerated time shifts, digressions and ellipses call attention to the basic principles underlying all fiction, calls *Tristram Shandy* "a parodying novel."

——— And how did *Garrick* speak the soliloquy last night? Oh, against all rule, my Lord, —— most ungrammatically! betwixt the substantive and the adjective, . . . he made a breach thus, —— stopping, as if the point wanted settling; —— and betwixt the nominative case, which your lordship knows should govern the verb, he suspended his voice in the epilogue a dozen times, three seconds and three fifths by a stop-watch, my Lord, each time. —— Admirable grammarian! —— But in suspending his voice —— was the sense suspended likewise? Did no expression of attitude or contenance fill up the chasm? —— Was the eye silent? Did you narrowly look? —— I look’d only at the stopwatch, my Lord. —— Excellent observer! (III, xii)

Sterne mocks the critic for the attention he gives to the precise duration of Garrick’s pauses—“three seconds and three fifths by a stop-watch, my Lord, each time.” However, he derides even more the critic’s reaction to Garrick’s “ungrammaticality,” the critic’s horror at Garrick’s tendency to “suspend his voice” during the delivery of his lines in places where the structure calls for no pause—as, for instance, “betwixt the substantive and the adjective.” Sterne—and Garrick—like Burrow, Steele and many other contemporary writers and readers, were aware that pauses are carriers of meaning, and that the creative placement of a pause could significantly change the “sense” of a word or sentence. The critic, concerned only with the grammatical placement and precise duration of the pauses, misses the real significance of the performance.

Sterne’s satirization of the critic’s concern for grammar, and especially his own exaggerated manipulation of typography for rhetorical effect—an extravagant display which suggests his frustration with, and even hostility toward, the limitations of the printed word—indicate that he was acutely aware of the extent to which his age’s preoccupation with structure had undermined the older oral habits of mind and disrupted the close rhetorical relationship between reader and writer. By the early part of the next century the norms governing this relationship had become predominantly structural; as punctuation lost its oral basis,³² reading became an increasingly silent and visual affair. The gap between the spoken and written word having widened into a rupture, attempts like Sterne’s to achieve

³²See, for instance, the authoritative John Wilson, *A Treatise on English Punctuation* (1826: 31st ed. New York: American Book Co., 1871), p. 17, “Punctuation is founded rather on grammar than on rhetoric.”

the effect of conversation by wholly assimilating the oral into a spatial context were rendered obsolete.

This shift from rhetorical to structural typography, which can be figuratively described from the reader's standpoint as a shift from *hearing* punctuation reproduce the writer's voice to *seeing* it reflect the logical ordering of language within the writer's mind, represents one manifestation of the profound revolution in thought and language which was first expressed through the theories of Descartes and the Port Royal grammarians in the seventeenth century. As Ong points out, by the eighteenth century the Cartesian revolution had profoundly disrupted the old rhetorical/dialectical economy of thought:

By the eighteenth century Descartes' logic of personal inquiry, silent cerebration, had ousted dialectic, an art involving vocal exchange, as the acknowledged sovereign over human intellectual activity. The new logic was not the art of discourse (*ars disserendi*) as earlier ages, following Cicero, had commonly taken dialectic to be. Rather, it was the art of thinking—that is, of individualized, isolated intellectual activity, presumably uninvolved with communication.³³

And as Descartes' concepts shifted the locus of "thought" from the external world into the individual mind, so the Port Royal grammarians' notion that all languages share certain universal structural, or grammatical, categories, also promoted a shift from the external to the internal, from basing language in speaking and communication to basing it in the human mind. This struggle between the rhetorical world, oral and social, and the emerging structural and spatial world, silent and private, lies behind the attempts of Sterne and many of his English contemporaries to achieve the effect of conversation—to bridge the gap between the spoken and written word—by wholly assimilating the oral into a spatial context.

Among Sterne's French contemporaries, Diderot stands in the first rank of those who wrote in the conversational style. He consciously strove to achieve his easy and familiar, conversational effect: like Sterne, who told his readers that "writing . . . is but a different name for conversation," Diderot penned, "I chat with you in writing as if I were sitting beside you."³⁴ The similarity between

³³Ong, *Presence*, p. 63.

³⁴Denis Diderot, quoted in Stedmond, p. 160.

Sterne and Diderot does not end, of course, with their shared notion that writing is like conversation. As is frequently pointed out, the two authors employ many of the same techniques in creating the effect of conversation; in fact, Diderot is often accused of having freely borrowed from Sterne many of the narrative techniques that appear in his works, especially those that he employs in *Jacques le fataliste*.³⁵ Whatever the extent of Sterne’s direct influence over *Jacques*, the fact remains that there do exist striking similarities between the two novels. Both Diderot and Sterne experiment with, and parody, the fictional prose conventions of their day, and both address and satirize the reader who complacently accepts such conventions. However, while they both experiment with printed book format as one means of bridging the gap between the spoken and written word, both the nature and extent of their experiments differ. Sterne, of course, uses—or mis-uses—every typographical device he can to bridge the gap, including standard punctuation marks, dashes of varying lengths, asterisks, italics and capital letters. Diderot’s typographical experimentation, much more limited, consists mainly in his adoption of dramatic written format: the names “Jacques” and “Le maître” appear at the front of many of these characters’ “lines” throughout the work:

Le maître
Tu as donc été amoureux?

Jacques
Si je l’ai été!

Le maître
Et cela par un coup de feu?³⁶

³⁵The critical argument over the extent of the novel’s indebtedness to *Tristram Shandy* has a long history. Francis Brown Barton, *Etude sur l’influence de Laurence Sterne en France au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1911), p. 118, speaking for those who believe Diderot to be a “plagiarist,” notes both Diderot’s admission in the novel that he borrowed from Sterne, as well as many strikingly similar passages between the two novels, and concludes that “on peut regarder un bon tiers de *Jacques le fataliste* comme l’imitation de *Tristram Shandy*.” Alice Green Fredman, *Diderot and Sterne* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1955), p. 131, argues that the extent of the borrowing is not so great as is generally believed, that the similarities “should be attributed more to mutual interest than to influence.”

³⁶Denis Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste*, in Vol. 12 of *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Le Club français du livre, 1969), p. 17. All subsequent citations of the novel are from this edition.

This technique, in calling attention to the work's dialogue structure, creates an impression of dramatic immediacy, as do Diderot's descriptions of gestures and his creation of mock readers within the novel; however, none of these techniques helps break down the barriers between the spoken and written word in the same way that Sterne's typographical experiments do.

Sterne, by parodying the typographical conventions of his day, calls attention to the role that these conventions play in "capturing" the writer's voice, and thus heightens the reader's awareness of his own role in correctly interpreting and reproducing that voice. Sterne's eighteenth-century reader would readily have responded to punctuation in passages like the following, in which Tristram graphically describes his sea-sick channel crossing:

Sick! sick! sick! sick! ———
 ——— When shall we get to land? captain — they have hearts like
 stones ——— O I am deadly sick! ——— reach me that thing, boy ———
 ——— 'tis the most discomfiting sickness ——— I wish I was at
 the bottom ——— Madam! how is it with you? Undone! undone! un ———
 — O! undone! sir ——— What the first time? ——— No, 'tis the
 second, third, sixth, tenth time, sir, ——— hey-day ——— what a tram-
 pling over head! hollo! cabin boy! what's the matter ——— (VII, ii)

Diderot's punctuation, on the other hand, barely calls attention to itself; this passage, which seems to have been suggested to Diderot by a strikingly similar passage in *Tristram Shandy*,³⁷ is typical for its unobtrusive punctuation:

Jacques

Quoi qu'il vous plaise d'en penser, la douleur de mon genou était excessive; elle s'accroissait encore par la dureté de la voiture, par l'inégalité des chemins, et à chaque cahot je poussais un cri aigu. (20)

Even in a passage which contains what is probably the most extreme practice of Diderot's novel, a passage that strives to achieve a heightened sense of dramatic immediacy, the punctuation remains rela-

³⁷The parallels between the two passages are especially striking when the original English passage, Sterne, VIII, xx, is translated into French. The translation appears in Barton, p. 105: "Ma douleur au genou, continua le caporal, était excessive en elle-même; et les chaots de la charette sur des chemins raboteux et dans un état terrible—la rendant pire encore."

tively unobtrusive. Jacques describes how the surgeon and hostess carried him while he was wounded:

L'hôtesse approcha, les yeux baissés. “Prenez cette jambe, la bonne, je me charge de l'autre. Doucement, doucement . . . A moi, encore un peu à moi . . . L'ami, un petit tours de corps à droite; à droite, vous dis-je, et nous y voilà.” Je tenais le matelas des deux mains, je grinçais les dents, la sueur me coulait le long du visage. “L'ami, cela n'est pas doux. — Je le sens. — Vous y voilà. Commère, lachez la jambe, prenez d'oreiller, approchez la chaise et mettez l'oreiller dessus . . . Trop près . . . Un peu plus loin . . . L'ami, donnez-moi la main, serrez-moi ferme.” (49)

It is indeed a conversational style; however, the verbal rhythm of the prose—including the pauses between phrases and clauses—depends more on the disruptive, fragmented syntax than on the punctuation. Other than the ellipsis periods—which Diderot uses only infrequently in the novel—the punctuation does not much attract the reader's attention. The style successfully creates a sense of dramatic immediacy, but in a strikingly different way than Sterne's does. Sterne's style, by inviting the reader to reproduce the writer's many voices in the text, encourages him to engage himself both verbally and spatially within the created dramatic environment. Diderot's style asks only that the reader engage himself spatially. Diderot's reader is a relatively silent observer within the created environment; Sterne's is an active oral participant.

The question that immediately arises is why Diderot, who was thoroughly familiar with Sterne's work, and who was trying to bridge the gap between the spoken and written word (he bewailed the existence of such a gap in at least two of his writings³⁸) did not himself experiment with rhetorical punctuation. The answer to this question lies, at least partly, in an article within Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* entitled, appropriately enough, “Ponctuation.” The article begins by describing punctuation rhetorically as “l'art d'iniquer dans l'écriture par les signes reçus, la proportion des pauses que l'on doit faire en parlant.”³⁹ However, in a later

³⁸See Fredman, p. 190; the works which are cited are *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* and his article “Encyclopédie.”

³⁹“Ponctuation,” in Vol. 26 of *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des arts et des métiers*, by M. Diderot and M. d'Alembert (Berne & Lausanne: Les Sociétés typographiques, 1778–1781), p. 662. The translation is my own: “The art of indicating in writing through conventional signs, the proportion of pauses that one should make in speaking.”

passage which quotes Diderot himself, the article leaves no doubt that writing and punctuation are ultimately structural, based not in speaking but in thinking:

De même que l'on ne parle que pour être entendu, on n'écrit que pour transmettre ses pensées aux absents d'une manière intelligible. Or il en est à-peu-près de la parole écrite, comme de la parole prononcée: "le repos de la voix dans le discours, dit M. Diderot . . . & les signes de la ponctuation dans l'écriture, se correspondent toujours, indiquent également la liaison ou la disjonction des idées." Ainsi il y auroit autant d'inconvénient à supprimer ou à mal placer dans l'écriture les signes de ponctuation, qu'à supprimer ou à mal placer dans la parole les repos de la voix. Les uns comme les autres servent à déterminer le sens; & il y a telle suite de mots qui n'auroit, sans le secours des pauses ou des caractères qui les indiquent, qu'une signification incertaine & équivoque, & qui pourrait même présenter des sens contradictoires, selon la manière dont on y grouperoit les mots.⁴⁰

In this approach, one writes in order to portray (or "transmit") thought, not to portray speech. Writing and speaking both "servent à déterminer le sens" since both activities are held to be based in the mind; punctuation reflects the pauses of speech insofar as the speech pauses themselves reflect the ordered structure of *ideas* in the mind. In other words, punctuation effectively by-passes speech as, in Bolinger's memorable phrase, it "short-circuits directly to meaning."⁴¹ The concern is no longer with perfecting the connection between writing and speaking, but with perfecting the connection between writing and thinking. As the article goes on to say, punctuation, in reflecting the ordered structure of ideas in the mind—the universal grammatical categories shared by all languages—must

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 664. The translation is my own: "In the same way that one does not speak except to be understood, one does not write except to transmit his thoughts when an auditor is not present. Now it is almost the same with writing, as it is with speaking: 'the pauses of the voice in speech, says M. Diderot, always correspond, indicate equally the junction or the disjunction of ideas.' Thus there would be as much inconvenience in eliminating or incorrectly placing punctuation signs in writing, as there would be in eliminating or incorrectly placing the pauses of the voice in speech. The ones, like the others, serve to determine the sense; and there exist such sequences of words which would have, without help of pauses or the characters which indicate them, only an uncertain and equivocal meaning, and which could even provide contradictory meanings, according to the way that the words were grouped."

⁴¹Dwight Bolinger, *Aspects of Language* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 475.

be considered a part of “la Grammaire générale,”⁴² what Chomsky and the transformationalists would today call “Rational grammar.” Thus from Diderot’s point of view, to experiment with punctuation, to base punctuation practice on the needs of the voice, as Sterne had done, rather than on the grammatical categories of the mind, was to disrupt the very structure of thought. Diderot’s concept of language, in preventing him from actively experimenting with punctuation, thus directly interfered with his attempts to bridge the gap between the spoken and written word.

Diderot’s relative lack of interest in capturing in print the sounds of the voice represents to a great extent the mainstream of French linguistic attitudes during the eighteenth century, and even earlier.⁴³ The rationalist conviction that language was based in human “reason” had the practical effect of de-emphasizing the importance of the voice, of oral interchange, in linguistic studies—and, as Diderot’s example shows, in literature as well. For French linguists and authors the mind, not the voice, was increasingly held to be the proper object of study and of art. “Language,” conceived of as

⁴²*Encyclopedie*, p. 666.

⁴³As Gunvor Sahlin notes in *César Chesneau du marsais et son rôle dans l’évolution de la grammaire générale* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1928), p. 2, “la doctrine appelée grammaire générale . . . dominera les études grammaticales en France pendant tout le XVIII^e siècle et une bonne partie du XIX^e siècle.” In fact, even the earliest French grammars and punctuation commentaries show a marked preference for treating language spatially, or “rationally,” rather than rhetorically, as their English contemporaries had done. Even in a grammar written nearly a century before Descartes’ works were known in France, Estienne Dolet’s 1540 *La Manière de Bien Traduire d’une langue en autre. D’avantage De la Punctuation de la Langue Francoyse, Plus Des Accents d’ycelle* (Paris: I. Tastu), punctuation is treated exclusively as a means of marking the logical structure of sentences. And while Louis Meigret, in *Le Traité de le Grammaire française* (1550; rpt. Tübingen, Germany: Narr, 1980), pp. 139–41, touches on the role that punctuation plays in signalling pauses in reading, his rules for placing the marks are completely motivated by a concern for logical sentence parsing. Though there is often some provision made for the rhetorical effects of punctuation in later commentaries, discussions regarding the placement of marks are strongly dominated by structural criteria in the works of virtually all important French eighteenth-century grammarians: see especially Claude Buffier, *Grammaire française sur un plan nouveau* (Paris: Pierre Witte, 1714), pp. 423–432; Pierre Restaut, *Principes Généraux et Raisonnés de la Grammaire Française* (Paris: n.p., 1730), pp. 538–546; *Dictionnaire Universel François et Latin, Vulgairement Appelé Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, Vol. 6 (Paris: Compagnie des librairies associées, 1771), p. 889. See also the earlier cited article on “Ponctuation” in Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*. While these authors do at times discuss punctuation in rhetorical terms, in general their commitment to “rational” principles leaves no doubt that in France, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, rhetorical culture had been largely overwhelmed.

thought, and not as speech, had become a silent, spatial phenomenon by the end of the seventeenth century in France. There were those at the beginning of the eighteenth century who were conscious—as Sterne, Burrow and Steele would much later in the century be conscious—that rhetorical culture was being overwhelmed, and who lamented the widening of the gap between the written and spoken word. But unlike their later English counterparts, these French writers recognized that it was already too late to try to effect in writing a real correspondence between sight and sound. Thus the elocutionist Grimarest, in his 1707 *Traité du Récitatif Dans la Lecture*, while complaining that there are no punctuation marks capable of encoding various tones of voice—command, irony, scorn, rapture, and so forth—resignedly admits that he would only attract derision by trying to expand on current punctuation usage.⁴⁴ And while Voltaire, like Diderot, argued that words in print would reflect the spoken voice—“L’écriture est la peinture de la voix: plus elle est ressemblante, meilleure elle est”—he also left to his printer the punctuating of his prose: “Vous vous moquez de me consulter sur la ponctuation et l’orthographe; vous êtes le maître absolu de ces petits peuples-là comme des plus grands seigneurs de mon royaume.”⁴⁵ We need only recall the extraordinary typographical ingenuity of Sterne, Burrow and Steele late in the English eighteenth century to gauge how far apart the French and English were during the “age of conversation” regarding perfect “fits” between sight and sound.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Jean Leonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, *Traité du Récitatif Dans la Lecture, Dans l’Action Publique, Dans la Déclamation, et Dans le Chant. Avec un Traité des Accens, de la Quantité, & de la Ponctuation* (Paris: Jacques le Fèvre & Pierre Ribou, 1707), pp. 47–48.

⁴⁵Quoted in Ferdinand Bruno, Vol. 6 of *Histoire de la Langue française* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1966), pp. 926 and 952.

⁴⁶French rationalist theory did have a considerable effect on linguistic attitudes and practice in England, as the numerous “rational grammars” which appeared there during the eighteenth century suggest; in fact, as the century progressed, rationalist views of language became dominant. However, a strong counter-influence resisted these views, an influence most explicitly expressed in the theories of Locke and his followers. While the rationalists viewed language as an inherent property of the mind, the empiricists treated language as communication, as a form of external behavior governed largely by habit and social convention. The strength of empirical attitudes in England sustained significant vestiges of oral culture, and helped create the artistic/intellectual climate which spawned the typographical experimentation during the last half of the eighteenth century. For an overview of these two contrasting linguistic tendencies in the English eighteenth

Those French writers, like Diderot, who sought to convey the impression of conversation in their works, could and did rely on syntactical and dramatic ingenuity in pursuing this effect. However, convinced as Diderot and his readers were that writing and speaking were fundamentally different activities, his attempt to bridge the gap between the two was considerably more restrained than was Sterne's. Sterne—writing at the historical moment when the tension between the oral and visual worlds had reached its most critical stage in England—was convinced, like many of his English contemporaries, that through typographical manipulation he could effectively blur the boundary between the spoken and written word. Virginia Woolf's description of the effect of Sterne's typography bears witness that even from our twentieth-century linguistic vantage point, with our recognition that Sterne's effort to reconcile the oral and visual worlds in writing was doomed to failure at the onset, his attempt comes remarkably close to succeeding: “Sterne's very punctuation is that of speech, not writing, and brings the sounds and associations of the speaking voice with it . . . Under the influence of this extraordinary style the book becomes semi-transparent. The usual ceremonies and conventions which keep reader and writer at arm's length disappear. We are close to life as we could be.”⁴⁷

International Institute in Spain
Madrid

century, and of the influence of Locke's theories in reinforcing “behavioral,” or oral, views of language, see Sterling Leonard, *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700–1800* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Series in Language and Literature, No. 25, 1929), esp. pp. 12–19, 21–31, and 47–48.

⁴⁷Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, Second Series (London: Hogarth Press, 1932), p. 79. For additional artistic and critical reactions to Sterne's typography, and a fuller treatment of the extent to which Sterne's style approximates the conversational quality of actual speech, see Max Byrd, *Tristram Shandy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), esp. pp. 69–81.