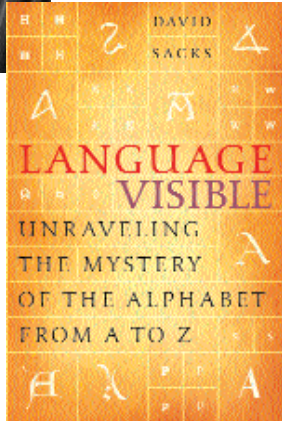


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EXCERPT


LANGUAGE VISIBLE

by David Sacks

This entertaining and accessible cultural history of the alphabet includes fun, fact-filled biographies of each of our 26 letters. Here is an excerpt from the letter R.

OUR ARRESTING R

R U C.N. an I  ? F  Y  ? U'r I's R 2  2  .
Translation: Are you seeing an eye doctor? If not, why not? Your eyes are too dear to waste.

This rebus has been brought to you by R, the 18th letter of the alphabet (and the first letter of “rebus”). A rebus—as almost everyone  —is a word puzzle in which pictures or symbols serve as phonetic substitutes for the sounds of certain words or syllables. Pronounced REE-bus in English, the name comes from the Latin phrase *rebus non verbis*, “by means of objects, not words.” Rebuses can be surprisingly fun, combining brain-teaser challenge with humorous wordplay. R is a favorite rebus tool, since its name approximates the words “are” and (cheating a bit) “our.”

R’s name displays well the letter’s remarkable sound, a sound created by vibration of the palate, throat, and tongue, with the tongue approaching the palate. If you begin making the R sound, then lift your tongue tip to your palate, you’ll find you’ve switched to L. Phonetically, L is R’s sister; the two letters constitute the small category of consonants called “liquids.” R’s open tongue position allows for more throat than L, and throatiness is R’s hallmark.



Pronunciation-wise, R ranges widely. The sound represented by the symbol R means different things to various

speakers, not only from language to language but within English itself.

Parisian French pronounces R as a demure gargle along the throat and palate—a sound whose exact pronunciation is nigh on impossible for most English speakers. (Can you say *regarder*? We want to begin the R at the tongue tip and bring in the throat afterward.) In Croatian, a written R may include a vowel sound; thus the city name Trieste is spelled as *Trst*, for example. In Spanish and Italian, the R is trilled; you say it by vibrating the tongue tip against the palate: *misericordia*. Scottish R is trilled, too, providing the famous Scots burr.

Ask an Englishman of a certain social class to say “earl” and you’ll hear “euhl,” the R flattened into a brief tightening of the throat, very unlike the earnest R of a North American or Irishman. Or maybe not: People of Brooklyn or Queens might diminish R to the point of omitting it in some words. *Meet ja’s at Toidy-toid Street at tree o’clock.*

Together, the Brooklyn accent and the cited British accent point to a more general principle—namely, R is known to slip away from some forms of spoken English. The root cause is that R takes effort to say: It has a relatively demanding pronunciation, requiring a stiff tongue tip. Witness the speech of young children, or of adults with impediments, who may replace R with the more easily formed W. “Pesky wabbit!” declares Elmer Fudd, perpetu-

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ally frustrated enemy of Warner cartoon hero Bugs Bunny. And this writer recalls playing Three Little Pigs with a three-year-old daughter who, when threatened with destruction of her last piggy house, would reply gleefully, “No! It’s stwong of bwicks!”

Studies of the Brooklyn-type accent show that R is pronounced properly before vowels but is dropped often at the ends of words—whence the cry “Beeh heeh!” from vendors who carried tall, foam-brimmed paper cups on sided trays through the stands of Yankee Stadium in the 1960s—and is especially prone to be dropped before a D, L, N, or TH. Those consonants send the tongue tip to a position rather different from the R position; thus they render the R inconvenient as a preliminary. Why say “weird” when “weeyd” is more restful to the tongue? (Not that it’s a conscious personal choice, of course; rather, the group accent develops along lines of convenience.) The human wish to conserve tongue energy lies behind many changes to spoken languages through the ages, including the kinds of slurring that helped to transform late Latin into Europe’s Romance tongues, around 200 to 800 a.d.

Far from New York City, you can find the dropped R (minus the Brooklyn vowels) in Boston. *Pahk yuh cah in Hahvahd Yahd*—and it’ll get towed away by the police! Linguists go so far as to divide all English-language pronunciation into two accent groups: rhotic and nonrhotic. (The adjective “rhotic,” from *rho*, the name of the ancient Greek R letter, is just a fancy word meaning “of R” or, in this case, “using R.”)

Rhotic speakers pronounce the R as written; nonrhotic ones drop R or diminish it in certain positions in words. Nonrhotic local accents occur in the American South, the mid-Atlantic states, and New England (but not the Midwest or West), also in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, much of the Caribbean, much of England, and Wales (but not Scotland).

The divide between rhotic and nonrhotic can be social as well as geographic. Linguistic surveys of the greater New York City area confirm that nonrhotic speakers tend to come from longtime local families of traditionally lower income, as compared with rhotic speakers. In the greater London area, just the opposite: Nonrhoticism is a part of ideal British speech—“euhl” for “earl”—and signifies education and higher income. ■



The letter's shape is cleverly and even plausibly captured in this 1836 print, part of a fanciful alphabet of human figures, published in Paris.

R IS FOR RE-DIAL

IN TORONTO, which is the vanguard of so much of what we recognize as true human enlightenment on this planet, there is a movement to have the use of cellphones in cars banned by law.

I’m not so sure that this is altogether such a healthy idea. The wonderful dexterity and nimbleness of Toronto pedestrians is one of the glories of the globe. Watching a group at any crosswalk in this city is like being in your own *National Geographic* special. Cheetahs are sluggish, gazelles are clumsy, in comparison with the Toronto pedestrian staring down a Porsche, a yuppie, and her portable hand-held.

Every person who crosses a street in this city knows that the BMW bearing down on them is really a mobile telephone booth with a licence to kill. Everyone knows that, if it’s a choice between keeping one eye on the road and one out for pedestrians, or hitting the speed-dial to negotiate the finer points of the divorce settlement at 140 kilometres an hour, the cellphone is going to win every time.

It’s helpful to think of the great highways leading into this city, the 401 and the Don Valley, as essentially a giant switchboard on radial tires, and of the people behind the wheel on these highways as so preoccupied absorbing information from their stockbrokers, their mistresses, or their nannies, as to have no time at all to acknowledge the information that they’ve just cut off an eighteen-wheeler transport truck, and are about to vacuum up some poor Ford Taurus under the bonnet of their chattering SUV. “Reach Out and Touch Someone” is such a vivid little slogan.

Some people say cellphones are as bad as alcohol. I think this is a slander on booze. Alcohol is something which, when added to the human mind, makes it lazy, and careless, and stupid. Cellphones in cars gravitate to those minds that are that way already.

In this excerpt from Rex Murphy's latest book *Points of View*, he ponders cell phones, in the way only Rex Murphy can.

