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## Between Speech and Writing

Writing, especially literary works, used to be seen as the true form of language and was held as primary and spoken language as nothing more than an imperfect or reflection of it. Spoken language was not studied by linguists until the nineteenth century, when Grimm (1785-1863) in Germany began to study speech and then Henry Sweet (1845-1912) in Britain started phonetics as a separate linguistic branch. Soon this trend of seeing speech as the true language flourished and has been dominating the whole field of linguistic study until today. From then on, writing has been treated as visual symbol system (Sapir, 1921), visible marks (Bloomfield, 1933), derivative of the face-to-face conversational norm (Fillmore, 1981), or simply an artifact (Aronoff, 1985). In a word, writing is no longer primary in linguistic study.

Linguists are right from historically viewpoint because speech developed much earlier than writing. Individually, they are also right because human beings normally develop their speech earlier than they learn how to write. In addition, many humans who are able to communicate orally never learn to write. Judging from the value or function of the two forms of language, we cannot deny that speech is more widely used than writing in (1) that in this world there still exist some tribes in which only speech is used, (2) that, in the society where

both speech and writing are used, not everyone who can communicate orally can write, and (3) that even those who can write speak much more than they write (except, probably, for those professional writers or speech-disabled people).

On the other hand, however, writing or composition classes in academic schools have never stopped. People who read and write have generally been in more important positions which usually represent higher ranks in a society. In addition, written records have always been only documents to be trusted or legal (e.g., video- or audio- tapes still cannot fully serve as judicial evidence) at least in the United States. Written language, though it cannot compare with speech in historical length, in personal development, or in use as means of daily communication, is loaded with heavy duties. One important feature that accounts for this is the stability of the written form of communication which enables written documents to be not affected by time and place. Ever since there were written records, the descendants of that specific culture have had chance to understand, to doubt, to reevaluate, or to recreate those records. Without the stability of written records, a lot of knowledge concerning human civilization becomes impossible.

Understanding these facts, as Chafe (1992) concluded that “writing and speaking each has its won validity” (p. 257), more linguists have started comparing the linguistic features of the two forms of language. Educators have started observing how children develop their written language from speech. Some researchers even treated learning writing as learning a second language (Neilson, 1979; Horning, 1987).

## 2.1 What have linguists found?

After decades of investigating how speech and writing differ, linguists have done studies ranging from lexical density (e.g., Halliday, 1979), syntactic structures (e.g., O'Donnell et al., 1967; Halliday, 1979; Beaman, 1984) to situational features (e.g., Goody & Watt, 1963; Chafe, 1982; Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1981). These studies provide overall linguistic characterizations of speech and writing. According to Biber

(1988) in summarizing the results of previous studies in this field, writing is claimed to be

1. more structurally complex and elaborate than speech, indicated by features such as longer sentences or T-units and a greater use of subordination (O'Donnell et al., 1967; Chafe, 1982; Tannen, 1982a, 1985; Gumperz et al., 1984);
2. more explicit than speech, in that it has complete idea units with all assumptions and logical relations encoded in the text (Olson, 1977; Chafe, 1986);
3. more decontextualized, or autonomous, than speech, so that it is less dependent on shared situation or background knowledge (Gumperz et al., 1984; Olson, 1977);
4. less personally involved than speech and more detached and abstract than speech (Blankenship, 1974; Chafe, 1982; Chafe & Danielewicz, 1986);
5. characterized by a higher concentration of new information than speech (Stubbs, 1980; Brown and Yule, 1983); and
6. more deliberately organized and planned than speech (Ochs, 1979; Rubin, 1980; Akinnaso, 1982; Brown & Yule, 1983; Gumperz et al., 1984) (p. 47).

In reality, any one of these characterizations may be criticized as not being able to generalize to all spoken or written genres because most of the studies cited are based on observing linguistic features of one or two situations. In other words, if the situations change, the results can be different or even contradictory to other studies. To avoid misunderstanding, Tannen (1982a, 1985), for example, notes that the characterization that writing is more decontextualized while speech is more contextualized is true only between conversation and expository prose, the two genres most frequently used to present speech and writing. It is not true of speech and writing in general.

However, not all linguists agree on the characterizations listed above. Some find that the elaboration and complexity of sentence in

speech are higher than those of writing (Poole and Field, 1976; Halliday, 1979), which is contradictory to what were listed previously. Beaman (1984) suggested that this contradiction results from their choice of samples. Because of the sample selection problem, Beaman pointed out, “what looks like differences between spoken and written discourse may really be differences in the register, purpose, formality, or amount of planning time of each task” (p. 51).

In addition, the definition of the variable, for instance “sentence,” can also be a factor to cause different results in similar studies. Blankenship (1962) found sentence length in speech and writing to be nearly the same, which is also contradictory to what Chafe (1982) or Tannen (1982a) discovered. Biber (1988) commented that “a major problem here concerns the definition of ‘sentence’ in speech (in English), and since most studies do not define the particular use of the term, there is no basis for comparison” (p.49).

Not satisfied with these contradictory findings and finding that pure quantitative studies have not addressed the important issues concerning speech and writing, Akinnaso (1982) and Gumperz et al. (1984) proposed to study thematic cohesion in the spoken and written texts, attempting to uncover the underlying differences between speech and writing. Biber (1988), furthermore, combined the quantitative methods used in most of the previous studies in the field of speech versus writing and the qualitative notions that examine the underlying dimensions drawn from explicit linguistic features. He developed a new method to compare multiple writing styles and multiple speaking styles with respect to a variety of features that might differentiate some, but not all, of the samples. Biber’s new study method has a strong hypothesis that informal conversations (represent speech) and academic/official documents (represent writing) are the two ends of a multi-featured and multi-functional continuum. He pointed out that “no absolute spoken/written distinction is identified; rather, the relations among spoken and written texts are complex and associated with a variety of different situational, functional, and processing considerations” (p. 24).

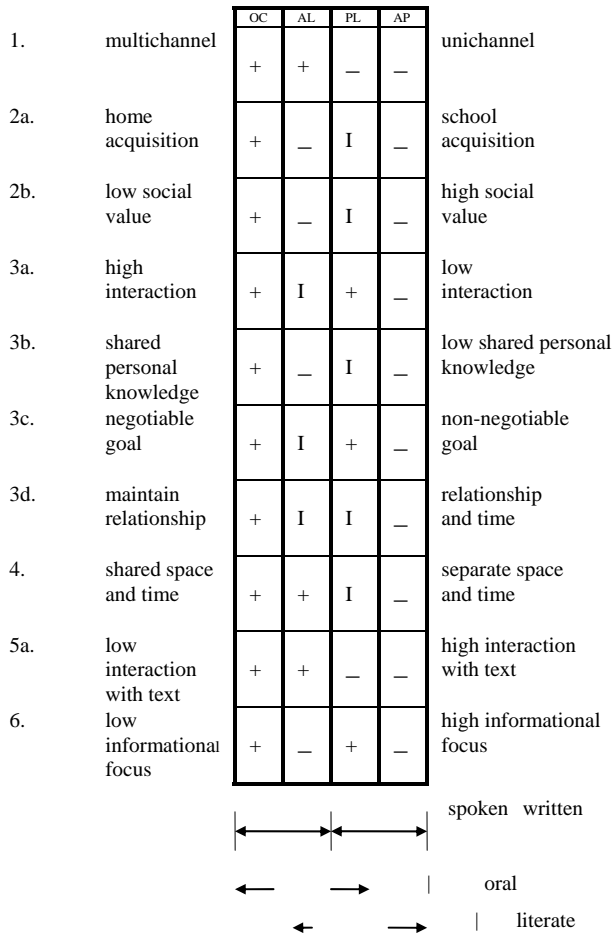


Figure 2.1 Oral and literate situational characteristics of four genres (1988, D. Biber, *Variation across speech and writing*, NY: Cambridge University Press).

**Key:** OC=ordinary conversation, AL=academic lectures, PL=personal letters, AP=academic prose. “+” marks an oral situational value, “-” marks a literate situational value, “I” marks an intermediate situational value.

Furthermore, he added that “there is no single, absolute difference between speech and writing in English; rather there are more or less similar with respect to each dimension” (p. 199). With this hypothesis, he presented a very simple picture, as shown in Figure 2.1, for how to visualize the relationship between the multiple linguistic features and multiple dimensions.

This figure (Figure 2.1) is of course a simplified one to let the reader have a quick understanding of this new approach. In Biber’s real studies, he used six dimensions (1. involved versus informational production; 2. narrative versus non-narrative concerns; 3. explicit versus situation-dependent reference; 4. overt expression of persuasion, 5. abstract versus non-abstract; and 6. on-line informational elaboration). He observed twelve types of texts (or genres) (from conversations to official documents) to see the quantitative data of the co-occurrence patterns of linguistic features that mark underlying functional dimensions (these linguistic features, such as nouns, verbs, etc., are treated as variables in six factors in each dimension). Biber’s series of studies (1985, 1986) proved that this multi-feature/multi-dimension (MF/MD) approach is the most efficient one to date.

This approach has already been applied to the field of the general composition research. Grabe and Biber (1987) used the model of textual relations developed in this MF/MD approach in a pilot study of the linguistic characteristics of good and poor essays written by native and non-native writers of English. That study found almost no difference between good and poor essays. The most striking result is that student essays are unlike any of the published genres of English; they use the surface forms of academic writing (e.g., passives), but they are relatively non-informational and involved, and they are extremely persuasive in form [based on Biber’s study, being non-informational and involved is the characteristic of face-to-face conversation, rather than academic composition]. This finding indicates that compositions do not have a well-defined discourse norm in English (Biber, 1988, p. 204).

It is true that students generally fail to distinguish one genre from the other when they produce their writing. What causes this may be ascribed to the writing instruction in class or to students' incapability of acquiring their judgment from reading model essays (the relation between reading and writing will be discussed in next chapter). However, if Biber's MF/MD method can be applied to the study of students writing with elaborate designs, it undoubtedly may provide rich information about where student compositions stand between speech and official documents.

## 2.2 A cognitive perspective

In order to see the distinctions between speech and writing underlying the linguistic features, Chafe (1991) proposes that writing differs from speech in that writing experience a process with a "displaced consciousness." He established two basic modes: (1) Language and consciousness in the immediate mode; and (2) Language and consciousness in the displaced mode (See Figures 2.2 and 2.3). Writing basically belongs to the second displaced mode with separate experiencing consciousness. In other words, writers do not experience what they write while they are writing. They write what they have experienced before (See Figure 2.4).

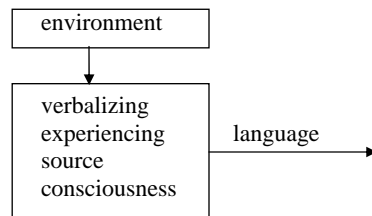


Figure 2.2 Immediate mode by Chafe (1991)

Chafe (1986), based on empirical evidences, also concluded that speech and writing are different in that, owing to the constraint of both the speaker and the hearer, each "intonation unit" in speech can

hold only “one new concept at a time” (p. 25), whereas a punctuation unit in writing may consist of more than one new concept at a time. Apparently the “unit of consciousness” in speech (intonation units) and in writing (punctuation units) apparently function differently in processing. The consciousness between the speaker and the hearer is constrained by time and full involvement (or attention) whereas in writing, less constrained in both aspects.

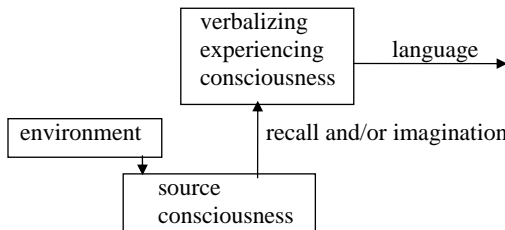


Figure 2.3 Displaced mode by Chafe (1991)

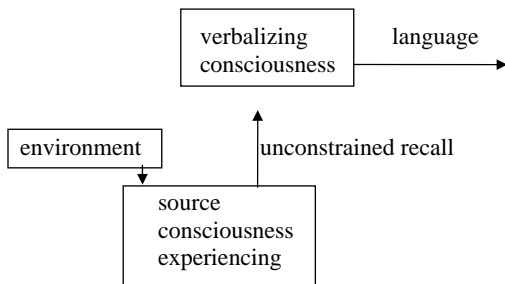


Figure 2.4 The mode of written fiction by Chafe (1991)

Hildyard and Olson (1982), looking at the attention from the viewpoint of the hearer and the reader, also concluded that the hearer pays primary attention to the theme of the context, building a coherent representation of what is meant, and that the reader, on the other hand, “are able to pay closer attention to the meaning of the sentences per se, recalling more incidental but mentioned details and being more accurate in their judgments of what was in fact stated in the text” (p. 32).



Most researchers (linguists or psychologists) who are interested in mental processes focus either on speech or on writing. Chafe may be the first linguist who thinks it is worthwhile investigating how consciousness plays different roles in speech and in writing. But like other cognitive studies, it is always difficult to define the domain of the variable (e.g., the domain of consciousness) and how to measure it empirically. Obviously, this theory is expected to be accompanied with more well-designed studies to provide sufficient empirical evidence to indicate psychological reality.

### 2.3 The cultural and social factors

The linguistic findings we have had so far contribute a great deal to the understanding of the explicit characterizations of what a typical spoken discourse (e.g., conversation) and how it differs from a typical written discourse (e.g., expository prose). These findings, however, do not help much in explicating why so many voluble children, as well as adults, have a hard time learning how to write. If a person cannot write because he never has a chance to learn, the reason may be simple: it is generally agreed that writing needs to be overtly taught (Martlew, 1986). But what about one who also goes to school and learns writing under the same instruction as his peers but still fails to learn to write well? Indeed, in the real world, there exist such students and the causes are still everyone's guesses. One of the possible causes may be related to the different modes of communication in speech and in writing. Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz (1981) pointed out that

Children whose speech shows dialect features judged deviant by "standard" English speakers are not necessarily the worst at literacy skills. Test results moreover indicate that the gap in verbal ability between minority group children in many inner city schools is relatively low at the start of primary school but increases to alarming proportion by the fifth year (p. 90).

Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz then added that what impedes educational success (with literacy included) is not grammar (linguistic features), but the social or cultural gap between the oral community and the written community. They proposed that the introduction of writing system has great impact both on the individual cognitive process and on cultural practices in a society.<sup>1</sup> For the individual cognitive process,

the introduction of the writing systems changes the basic character of the storage and transmission of knowledge. In preliterate cultures, one of the key ways that knowledge is transmitted is through such oral performances as the recitation of mythological folk narratives and oral genealogies. What is stable over time in these situations are story schemata, not details of content (Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1981, p. 91).

Later they cited Tripp's (1977) study, saying that a seven-year-old girl, while writing her story on paper, kept using repeated lines or song refrains, which are common ways of cognitive processing (to enhance memory by repetition) in oral cultures but definitely not in written cultures. As for cultural practices in a society,

the change from oral to written transmission brings about a shift from a view of knowledge as a constant state which can be learned through open and varied means of creative retelling; to one of knowledge as incremental, that is, where the initial learning process is repetitious in order to teach the store of knowledge available-to-date, but to which further new knowledge can be added, since the old store is on record.... Eventually even the daily life of people who can add to the essential store of knowledge may be further separated. New classes of literati arise who specialize in and earn their living through the preservation, editing and

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<sup>1</sup> This impact may also account for the common fact that some academic failures can be very successful in non-academic world (i.e., franchise business) where their competence in oral cultures is still highly capable among the majority. Typical literate cultures, however, do not solve the problem of hunger, but "Taco Bell" does.

interpretation of written information. In doing so, over time, these groups develop strategies of processing information and conventions for dealing with language that are quite different from those used in every day interaction and which, as they grow more complex, must be learned through special schooling (Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1981, p. 91).

This difference between speech cultures and written cultures stood out more obviously after the industrialization which made the writing in mass media serve as social need for majority, not for a small percentage of elite. The increase of population in learning how to write certainly pull in more people who were, in earlier centuries, never expected to become literate at all.

The impact brought forth by the introduction of writing upon the individual cognitive process and upon the social practice in a society may apply to both children and adults. For children, Sulzby (1986) in her study found her subjects (24 kindergarten children) did not take writing as what their teachers did. One of her subjects “drew” his writing in nine pictures on nine separate pages. When the interviewer asked the boy to read the story to her, the boy did so. And then,

Adult: (Laughs) And left that neat prize there in the box. (Both laugh) That’s all right! Are you going to write your story to go with it, Doug?

Doug: What?

Adult: Are you going to write the story to go with it?

Doug: Yes.

When Doug came back, he put his name on the first page, “Da end” on the last page, and page numbers on each page. Doug’s behaviors showed that he understood what writing should be superficially--with author’s name in the first page, page number in each page, the end in the last, and pictures in each page. But he ignored the “words” because these symbols were not part of his life yet. This also accounts for his first response--What?--to the interviewer’s request to “write” something conventional to go with the pictures, because Doug probably thought

that he had already done it. And what he performed later is simply “editing.”

Knowing all these possible differences existing between the oral and written cultures, the best way to encourage people from oral cultures to move into a culture in which “language should be precision in usage, decontextualization of information and careful weighing of words” (Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1981, p. 108) is to let them realize the practical use or function of such [written] form of language. Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz suggested letting children experience the usefulness of the written form, for example, encouraging them to list down what they have gotten on Christmas.

While almost everyone is anxious about the decline of literacy in Western (or American) society, Lakoff (1982) argued that “loss of literacy is not the same as loss of culture” (p. 240). She treated the change from literate culture to oral culture as the need of modern society. She also doubted the common assumption that only literate society emphasizing linear ways of reasoning and the skills of concise expressions can develop high technology, because there has not been sufficient evidence to say this. Furthermore, she added that the change from literate cultures to oral cultures is still too young to show any significance, assuming that the multitude prefer oral cultures because they try to find back what has been lost in the literate cultures--“immediacy and warmth” (p. 257).

## 2.4 The speech-writing issues for EFL students

The gap between spoken and written cultures is so obvious, from linguistic features to cognitive, social and cultural factors, that some researchers even take writing as a second language (Neilson, 1979; Horning, 1987)<sup>2</sup>. But do these findings also apply in places where English is used or learned as a second or a foreign language? For this specific issue, few researchers seem to invest much time and energy in

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<sup>2</sup> This may also account for the insignificant difference in the writing products between Chinese and English students found by Grabe and Biber.

it. For English native speakers, the issue may be simpler by assuming that all literates are from the oral culture. In other words, all people who learn to write already know how to speak English. For ESL or EFL students, the issue is definitely more complicated. Basically, the ESL or EFL students can be divided into at least four different types:

Type A: Fluent in speech and literate in English (with a good command of speaking, reading, and writing)

Type B: Fluent in speech but not literate in English

Type C: Not fluent in speech but literate in English

Type D: Neither fluent in speech nor literate in English

Being fluent in speech is defined as being able to communicate with English native speakers without missing a punch line. People who have a chance to live in the English-speaking community may acquire fluent speech in English prior to their writing. Most of others learn to read and write first and then try to transform written language into oral expressions. In the United States, the population of type A may be very small and that of types B and C may be large. Type D may be new immigrants. Types A, B, and C ESL students are usually the population from which the samples are drawn. Type D probably will be treated differently in a specially designed bilingual class or individual studies.

However, most EFL students in Taiwan may belong to types C or D. They are not likely to be orally fluent in English because most of them are still under the traditional teachers-preaching-on-the-platform teaching methods. They spend their first six years learning English to get ready for the entrance examinations, not for real application. Not until they go to college will they have the chance to go to the language lab to improve their oral communication skills. They do not seem to have problems with the gap between the oral and written cultures. What they are faced with is how to borrow materials from the reading to their writing. However, the EFL students in college, especially in the colleges in which the English language is emphasized, will improve oral skills to such a level that oral cultures start to interfere with written cultures.<sup>3</sup> At

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<sup>3</sup> This is obviously a very difficult thing for an EFL student to accomplish. In the United States, for instance, type C ESL students are usually foreign students

this moment, the EFL students are likely to use a great deal of oral expressions in their writing. Since they lack native speakers intuition to distinguish spoken English from written English, they have little idea how written language should be specially treated. For instance, they probably do not know that written language is more structurally complex and elaborate than speech, indicated by features such as longer sentences or T-units and a greater use of subordination. Written language may be more explicit than speech, in that it has complete idea units with all assumptions and logical relations encoded in the text. Besides, writing is more decontextualized, or autonomous, than speech, so that it is less dependent on shared situation or background knowledge. As a result, the writing produced by the EFL students in Taiwan may be a mixture of oral and literate cultures. And it is time that English instructors let these students know the differences between oral and literate cultures (as are discussed in the previous chapters).

Since learning literate cultures prior to spoken cultures is not uncommon in non-English speaking countries, in Taiwan for example, what is discussed above is no less than a cruel fact indicating that not

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who come to study in universities in the United States. The fact that some highly educated ESL engineers, who learned English in non-English speaking society before coming to the United States, have mastery in the "English" used in their specific fields but have a hard time chatting with American native speakers at parties adds further evidence to Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz's hypothesis that spoken and written cultures differ. In other words, the spoken culture learned from the written cultures may not fit into the real oral culture. It is common to see an ESL student who is good at writing academic papers not able to make or understand jokes in English. It is reasonable to assume that the oral proficiency of a language can only be acquired via growing through that culture for a considerably long period of time. One ESL student may do better in comprehending academic vocabulary used in the context than in daily-used vocabulary in assuming that daily-used vocabulary comprises connotations specific to the oral culture only. From a top-down perspective, missing the meaning or connotation of one lexical entry may be the consequence of incompatibility of the whole schema of the incidence, which implies the consequence of differentiated cognitive processes in comprehending.

only there exist barriers to account for students' failure in acquiring speech competencies, but there also exist interactions between strategies of Chinese writing and English writing and the problems between oral cultures and literate cultures of the English language. It is therefore essential for composition instructors to ask their EFL or ESL students to familiarize themselves with the differences between oral and literate cultures in the English society.

On the other hand, what is mentioned above may also be a serious issue among the newly-arriving immigrants who are already literate in non-English speaking areas. By now, educators or researchers on ESL programs have been focusing much more on the relationship between reading and writing. For instance, Krashen (1984) claims that the development of writing ability and of second language proficiency occurs in the same way: via comprehensible input, which implies large amounts of self-motivated reading for interest and/or pleasure. "It is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture of reader-based prose" (p.20). This reading/writing relationship will be discussed in the next chapter.

