

Between Speech & Writing



Chapter 2

Why speech is target of linguistic studies

We cannot deny speech is more important 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).
- (4) that speech is more challenging in many ways, and
- (5) that speech is of presumably great economic values that are unknown to the world yet.

What have linguists found?

Writing is

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);

What have linguists found?

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);



This picture, devised by E. Rubin in 1915, can be seen either as a pair of black faces in silhouette, or as a white vase

What have linguists found?

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);
6. more deliberately organized and planned than speech (Ochs, 1979; Rubin, 1980; Akinnaso, 1982; Brown & Yule, 1983; Gumperz et al., 1984) (p. 47).

Consider the following two claims

1. Tannen (1982a, 1985) notes 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.
2. 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.

Biber's model

1. multichannel
- 2a. home acquisition
- 2b. low social value
- 3a. high interaction
- 3b. shared personal knowledge
- 3c. negotiable goal
- 3d. maintain relationship
4. shared space and time
5. low interaction with text
6. low informational focus

OC	AL	PL	AP
+	+	-	-
+	-		-
+	-		-
+		+	-
+	-		-
+		+	-
+			-
+	+		-
+	+	-	-
+	-	+	-

unichannel

school acquisition

high social value

low interaction

low shared personal knowledge

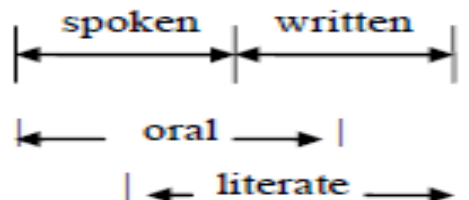
non-negotiable goal

relationship and time

separate space and time

high interaction with text

high informational focus



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

Consider the following examples

1. I, Elvis A. Presley, a resident and citizen of Shelby County, Tennessee, being of sound mind and disposing memory, do hereby make, publish and declare this instrument to be my last will and testament, hereby revoking any and all wills and codicils by me at any time heretofore made.
2. I soberly declare that this is my last will and revoke any previous wills.

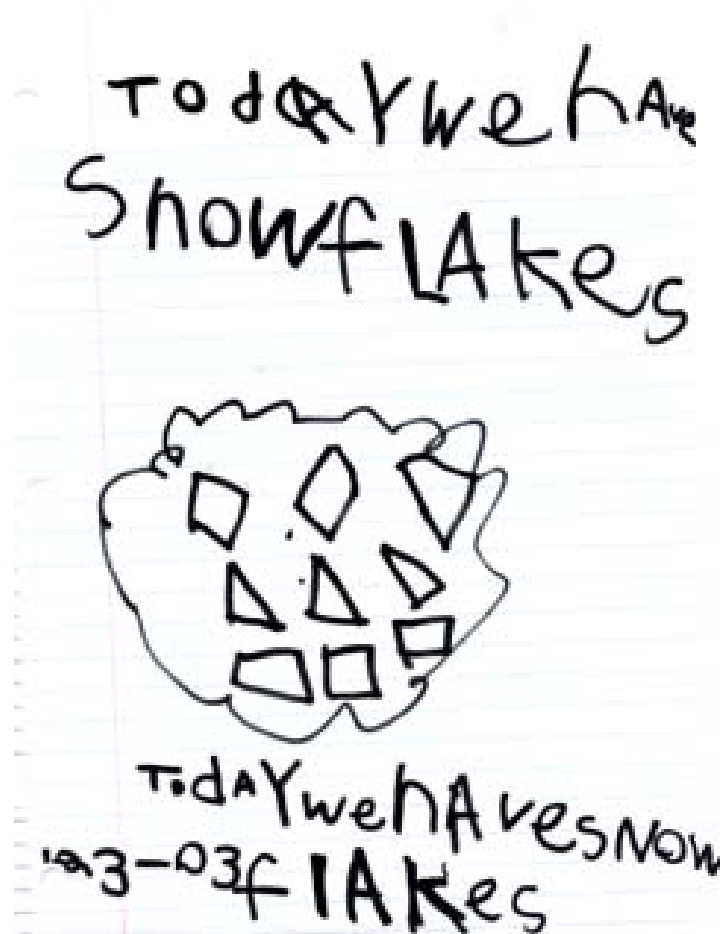
Consider Biber's comments

“...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. This finding indicates that compositions do not have a well-defined discourse norm in English (Biber, 1988, p. 204).



What about children?

The script for journaling at the writing table was "Today we have snowflakes." Four-year-old Nicole chose to copy the script and draw the snowflake.



What's the use of written English?

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.

What about EFL students?

- 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