University of Massachusetts - Amherst

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January 2010

3. The Process of Speaking: What Can It Offer Writing?

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Peter Elbow May 2010

Chapter 3

Speaking as a Process: What Can It Offer Writing?

In this chapter and the next I will mine speaking for its potential virtues--even if some are not exploited by all groups or cultures. I'll focus on the *process* of speaking and explore four features that might be borrowed or adapted for writing. In the next chapter I'll focus on the product of speaking: spoken language.

When I contrast the role of culture on speaking and writing versus what is potential, I am of course talking about the venerable distinction between nature and nurture. Speech is particularly valuable to investigate if we want to avoid the trap of either/or thinking about nature and nurture. Nature makes us genetically predisposed to speak. Yet *whether* we speak and *what* and *how* we speak is entirely dependent upon nurture or culture. Even people like Chomsky who stress linguistic universals or Universal Grammar acknowledge the many central features of speech are dependent upon culture. Universal Grammar has to produce Chinese, English, and Inupiat.

For an interesting example of nature and nurture interacting, consider this recent experiment. Monkeys traditionally fear snakes. But researchers raised lab monkeys in an environment that led them to have no fear of snakes. Yet when these monkeys saw films of normal monkeys exhibiting fear of snakes, they too developed this fear. But the researchers didn't stop there. Next they showed these laboratory monkeys films that were doctored in such a way as to show other monkeys exhibiting fear of flowers. When the lab monkeys saw these films they *didn't* come to fear flowers. In short, it appears that monkeys have an inborn genetic *disposition* to be afraid of snakes, but they don't get this response unless it is activated by social experience. (20-21) "Beyond the Brain." *National Geographic.* (March 2005): 2-31

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1. Speaking Is Easy

I know, I know; speaking may not be easy if you live in a culture or even a family that keeps telling you, *Don't talk too much*, or *If you say the wrong thing you'll get in big trouble. What you have to say is not important*. These messages can get into the sinews. And children who are treated badly will be hesitant to speak; if they are treated badly enough they won't speak at all. And when a whole culture treats easy speech as a danger and teaches vigilance at all costs (as I described in Chapter 1), it is failing to exploit this potentiality of speech.

So the human capacity for speech carries the potentiality of fluent and automatic language--of easy casual communication and the exploration of thought. In situations of comfort, most people can call on a miraculous ability to find words without trying, without looking for them, without planning. We need only open our mouths and words come out. Indeed, we sometimes open our mouths and utter words before we quite know what we are saying. There wouldn't be so many strong warnings against unguarded speech in so many cultures if humans didn't have a propensity to blurt. We've all been burned for it. In some U.S. states, children can be ruled legally "incorrigible" and confined to an institution when they refuse to *not blurt*--when they insist on "talking back."

It's usually safety that loosens the tongue. Yet sometimes when people are scared or threatened, they rise to the occasion and blurt just the words they need or want to say--not carefully choosing or planning the words they speak. For a famous example, Fannie Lou Hamer is

quoted with these unscripted words that had a decisive influence on the 1964 Democratic convention:

> All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings - in America?"

When Senator Hubert Humphrey suggested a compromise position he'd worked out with Walter Mondale, Walter Reuther, and J. Edgar Hoover, and argued that his position on the ticket was at stake, Hamer replied:

> Do you mean to tell me that your position is more important than four hundred thousand black people's lives? Senator Humphrey, I know lots of people in Mississippi who have lost their jobs trying to register to vote. I had to leave the plantation where I worked in Sunflower County. Now if you lose this job of Vice-President because you do what is right, because you help the MFDP, everything will be all right. God will take care of you. But if you take [the nomination] this way, why, you will never be able to do any good for civil rights, for poor people, for peace, or any of those things you talk about. Senator Humphrey, I'm going to pray to Jesus for you. [Find source]

It wasn't safety that loosened her tongue.

Consider the miracle of human speech. By age four or earlier, every human child who isn't brain damaged or left in the woods to be raised by wolves, has mastered the essential structures of a native language--or two or even three. It's not that learning to speak is easy. Babies expend heroic exertion in the process. But they seem to take frequent frustration in stride and look for more. Indeed babies and toddlers seem to get pleasure from the struggle of mastering their native language.

Every human who learns a language from infancy possesses a rich, intricate, and complete native language. When any child talks without planning, his or her words obey complex rules--an intricate set of grammatical bells and whistles comparable to (though not the same as) every other human language. As children get older they acquire further complexities of syntax and lexicon, but the essential miracle happens early. Steven Pinker puts it this way:

> A preschooler's tacit knowledge of grammar is more sophisticated than the thickest style manual or the most state-of-the-art computer language system. . . . The complexity of language, from the scientist's point of view, is part of our biological birthright; it is not something that parents teach their children or something that must be elaborated in school. (6)

It *can* happen that babies are exposed only to a *limited incomplete* language, a *pidgin*, that lacks the bells and whistles of a full human language--for example if the only language they hear is an incomplete second language spoken by parents or neighbors--a language not fully mastered by the speakers. For example, early U.S. slave owners often separated slaves from the same African tribes in order to impede communication. So those slaves had to work out a pidgin. Many of their babies didn't hear a fluent first language. Similarly in Hawai'i, imported plantation workers from various countries spoke different languages and often worked out a pidgin. Here's an example of pidgin English from China: "Tailor, my have got one piece plenty hansom silk my want you make one nice evening dress" (Wei Yun and Fei Jia: "Using English in China: From Chinese Pidgin English through Chinglish to Chinese English and China English." *English Today* xxx, 42).

A pidgin is an incomplete language that people create when they need to communicate but don't understand each others' languages. Pidgins "have a limited vocabulary, a reduced grammatical structure, and a much narrower range of functions, compared to the languages which gave rise to them" (Crystal 443). But if babies grow up hearing only an *incomplete* pidgin, they half-acquire and half-create a creole by virtue of their brains' linguistic brilliance--a *full* language with all the grammatical and syntactic complexities of any other fully developed and sophisticated human language. This remarkable ability can be summarized with a simple formulation (though it slides over a few complexities and disputes): if babies and tiny children hear only a *pidgin*, they create a *creole*.

The language commonly called "pidgin" in Hawai'i is not a pidgin, it's a creole. So too is the language often called *patois* in the Caribbean regions. Like all creoles, these are fully developed, sophisticated languages. African American English could be called a creole, though it's so well established that it tends to be called simply a language. Indeed, we could call English itself a creole given all the different languages it has grown from. (John McWhorter is a linguist who questions some of the commonly accepted ideas about pidgins and creoles that I am drawing on.)

Arthur Palacas gives interesting examples of intricacy and complexity in AAL:

> The well-known use of Ebonics "invariant be" expresses events or states that are durative, characteristic, or repeated--events that happen "all the time," and the absence of "be" means "right now." This distinction is not always made in standard English. Thus, the standard "The office is closed" is ambiguous and would be translated as either "The office closed" or "The office be closed," depending on whether "The office is closed right now" or . . . "The office is closed all the time" (348).

Bill Bryson gives an example of the linguistic complexity that children naturally master early:

> . . . with certain types of verbs we use a present participle to create sentences like 'I am going for a walk' but with other verbs we dispense with the present participle, which is why we say 'I like you' and not 'I am liking you' [a phrase that newcomers to English often use]. Very probably you have never thought about this before. The reason you have never thought about it is that it is seemingly instinctive. Most children have mastered the distinction between stative and nonstative verbs by the age of two and are never troubled by it again. (3)

He alludes to a theory advanced by ---------- that creole languages give us a glimpse of the built in language-creating capacity in all children: "Intriguingly, all creole languages make precisely the same distinction." (19)

But Can We Borrow the Easiness of Speaking when We Write?

Yes. This claim will sound wrong to the many people who struggle to write. But their struggle comes from the fact that our culture (like many others) assumes that "writing" means being careful to make good sense and using a dialect with a grammar that differs from what anyone can speak with ease--not to mention getting the spelling correct. If we look past cultural assumptions and allow ourselves to write whatever language comes easily to mind or mouth and not worry over spelling, then writing is very easy.

Some people learn the easiness of writing as they email (sometimes getting burned). Some people learn it gradually in the safety of private journal writing. The quickest way to learn the easiness of writing is through the common exercise of freewriting:

> *Write without stopping for ten minutes. It's just an exercise and it's private so don't worry about any mistakes or even whether anything makes sense. Allow garbage. If you run out, just repeat the last word over and over and more words will come.*

People learn that they can write words almost as easily as they can speak--and with more safety. (See Chapter 7 for more on freewriting.)

Many kindergarteners and first graders are showing us vividly the difference between "writing" and "writing correct language." Here's a short passage from a first grader:

> I DAY VVAL IF THAR WAS A DAY. THAR WASSAND AND DAST AND ROK SSTONS AND SUM ATHR TYGS AND IT WAS A TUNDR CLAPS! AND APLANIT BEGAN TO RIS AN THA COD IT EARTH AND DO YOU NOW WAT IT RAND AND RAND AND RAND FOR THRITY DAYS ON THE BIG HOLS

He can read this writing back to you and so can his teacher and his parents. Here's what he would say:

> One day, well if there was a day, there was sand and dust and rocks and stones and some other things. And it was a thunderclaps! And a planet began to rise. And they called it Earth. And do you know what? It rained and rained and rained for thirty days in the big holes.

(More about this process in Chapter 16 on Benefits.)

Here's an example of Lajuanje, a ninth grader, learning that he can use his speaking gear for writing. Early in the year he wrote:

> I Realy Injoy the sport. I like Hiting and running. We had a great team and great year. I would like to encourage all to play the sporth.

This is the kind of play-it-safe defensive writing that students often produce when they are scared or anxious about writing-as-right-language--a medium where he has probably been corrected over and over for wrongness. When his teacher responded to this paper, she didn't make corrections; she invited him not to worry about right and wrong and instead use whatever language came easily to mouth and mind. And she asked questions. When he revised, here's what he came up with:

> When the halmut toches my Head my body turns Like doctor Jeckel and Mr. Hide. I become a safage. And there's no one who can stop me when this happens. My blood starts racing my hart pumping. Like a great machine of power. And when the football moves that's the time for me to move and get that quarterback. And anyone who get's in my way is asking for problems. (Christensen 20)

His teacher helped him realize that he could exploit speech or a speech-like process of talking onto the page--instead of trying to "write writing" or use correct language.

In her teaching, Linda Christensen went on to work on issues of proper literacy--but one problem at a time very systematically, starting with what she decided was easiest, the rules for capitalization. And when students make "errors" that come from Black English or African American Language ("She say. . . "), she helps them see that they are following a coherent grammar--and see the simple differences between those rules and what's needed for standardized written English.

In our culture (like many others), people are likely think, *Everyone can talk, but not everyone can write.* No. If we pay attention to the fact that we can speak onto the page and not worry about spelling and grammar, a more powerful truth emerges: "*Since everyone can talk, therefore everyone can write.*" (We have to exclude the Chinese from this happy story: they write with visual symbols that have no relationship with the sounds of their speech. There are some other cultures with written languages that don't use an alphabet or syllabary.)

The language we speak with ease may be messy and disorganized, but consider this. Uttering onto the page is an easy way to produce bad writing. That's no joke. In fact most people

have to work very hard to produce bad writing. The linguist Chafe puts it bluntly: "Writing has to be taught, and the average person never really learns to do it very well." (44 *Consciousness*) This ease in producing spoken language is a big deal--politically and psychologically. Ease goes a long way toward compensating for many of the features in spoken language that are not right for serious writing.

In my own writing, there are times when I have to relearn the easiness of writing--especially when I'm tangled up in the necessarily slow and painstaking process of revising. I find myself revising something important that I've slaved over and suddenly I see that it's crucially wrong. I start to rewrite--revising sentences, changing words, feeling unsure, slowing down, slowing down. I feel I'm trying to write my way through thick molasses. This leads to growing self-doubt, anxiety, and finally--as the deadline approaches--panic. Something is tangling up my language and thinking gear. It's as though my thoughts have right handed threads and my words have left handed threads. I can't screw my thoughts into my words--or is it that I can't screw my words into my thoughts? As long as I stay mired in frustration and anxiety, my panic grows and I get nowhere.

But over the years, I've finally learned to force myself to "wake up" and remember: "Speech! Freewriting." I can forcibly *stop* trying to "write" and strong-arm myself into radically blurted *talking onto the page*–forcing myself to write without stopping and not think so much about the words--just open my mouth and blurt. In conditions of anxiety, the resulting language is often an odd hybrid: *more* messy and ungainly than regular talking, yet it also has a kind of blurted directness--as though someone grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me and said, "*But what hell are you trying to say?*" This often gets me out of my stuckness. I've noticed that I have to keep learning this lesson over and over. For when I'm anxious and panicked, it's as though I'm in a bad dream (*writing*!) and I don't realize that I have the choice to wake up and take some control by talking.

2. Speaking is good for connection, for dialogue, and for suiting our words to the needs of the audience.

When we speak, there's usually someone in front of us or on the phone in real time. (Is time ever unreal? The computer folks like to call time "synchronous."). We get immediate feedback and hear when we're unclear or when our listener is bothered or takes offense. We get a chance to clarify or even apologize. The process of speaking gives us constant practice in suiting our words to our audience--and we've been getting that practice all our lives. Even when we give uninterrupted monologues--giving a long explanation or set of directions or even making a formal speech--we get visual feedback. We can see from faces and bodies if listeners are involved or tuning us out. (We don't get this when we leave phone messages or talk on the radio).

When two or more people want to think together, what is better than speaking? They can share their ideas and spark new thinking. It's quick and easy, and the process builds personal connection and intellectual energy.

Speaking is also ideal when people want simply to *be* together--to be closer or in better communication and contact with each other. Of course, speaking isn't the only way: taking a walk, sitting in silence, or kissing are all are rightly celebrated for getting close--but those avenues are not always available. Speaking is surely the most common and reliable way to turn distance into intimacy. Deborah Tannen finds "involvement strategies" characteristic of spoken language: language that connects with listeners and even brings them closer.

Wallace Chafe analyzes complex details of speech through an interesting wider lens. He insists on noticing what we usually ignore: that speaking is a continual attempt by us when we are locked inside our own heads to get a meaning inside someone else's head--which we are locked out of. It turns out to be a perplexity as to how we manage this--and in fact we never quite do. There's *always* some gap between what I say and what you understand. What's interesting, though, is how close we sometimes come. Chafe looks at the details of speech to show some of the specific vocal moves and adjustments that all people naturally make because of their long history of feedback from listeners. These linguistic moves increase the chances of a miracle: successful communication. (More on this in Chapter 5, "Intonation.")

On top of everything else, speaking conveys brute *presence*. We tend to recognize people immediately by their voices--often over a bad phone connection or when they have a cold--even after many years. "Voice prints" are evidently as reliable as fingerprints. And our speaking often communicates how we're feeling. "Peter, you sound depressed," someone once said when I answered the phone with nothing but "Hi." In short, we are usually more "in" our speaking voices than in our writing (though let's not try to define "we" or "in"). Plato complained in the *Phaedrus* that writing was a bad invention because it created language with no presence. Written texts are "orphans," he said, that go around the world with no parents. He insisted that language should always create live dialogue and so it should always be accompanied by its author.

It's not that writing is wholly "dumb." Writing will almost always convey a fair amount about the writer--at least for readers skilled at reading the "voice". But one of the benefits of writing is how it helps us *avoid* presence--helps us hide how we feel or even what we are like. Writing is ideal for anonymity--though shy literate people sometimes show themselves more in writing than speaking.

Can We Bring Any of these Dialogic Virtues into Writing?

Writing seems decidedly poor at doing all these dialogic audience-related jobs. Part of the problem is inherent in the physical differences between speaking and writing, but much of the problem comes from certain cultural practices that are deeply bound up with writing for most of us.

When we write, we are often alone and distant from our readers. What we write seldom goes immediately to readers unless we are texting, writing email, or writing in a real time chat-room. The more serious the writing, the longer the delay--sometimes it's years. As writers we are often told, *Remember your audience when you write,* but the absence of readers and the prolonged struggle over *meanings* and *words* leads many of us to forget about audience. Besides we often don't know our readers or even what kind of people they might be.

Forgetting audience is probably the main cause of weakness in student essays--a failure to create thinking and language that connect well with readers. But the student's audience problem is acute. The real reader is the teacher--the one who grades--but students are often asked to write to a different audience, for example that famous person, the "general reader." Indeed, students are usually criticized if they write to the actual reader, the teacher. ("I disagree with what you said last week in class about this poem by Robert Frost.")

The audience situation for student writers is intriguingly perverse. School writing is mostly *not* private and safe since it has to be handed to a teacher--often graded. Yet much school writing

goes *only* to the teacher--whose only job is to judge--so this seldom feels to students like communicating with a human. When James Britton and colleagues examined masses of school writing, they noticed that the children tend to write as though to no audience.

Deborah Tannen writes of how often in writing for school, students are asked to strip away the linguistic features that create involvement with audience. These audience-oriented features are discouraged because they undermine the alleged goal for "literate" or "essayist" prose: decontextualized or message-centered language. Tannen notes how this decontextualized language with no involvement strategies is usually harder for a reader to connect with. The linguist Elinor Ochs compared stories told orally and those same stories written out two days later by the same persons. She found that "the expression of social acts tends to take more discourse 'space' in the spoken versions" (72). "Naive" students sometimes use the second person "you" in their academic essays, but they are usually told to get rid of it: "In writing, we don't talk to readers." (We don't?)

Writing may never be as effective as speech for dialogue and connection, but there's a lot we can do to help it do this job. The internet has given a hugely dialogic dimension to lots and lots of writing: email; chat rooms; texting; and classrooms or meeting rooms where everyone is linked by computers. Even blogs are helping people make writing into a process with lots of almost immediate dialogue and response--not just absence and solitariness.

There's a new cultural practice that brings a more literal kind of *presence* to writing. More and more people get together to keep each other company, as it were, during the "solitary" process of writing. People gather in living rooms, restaurants, outdoors. Jay Parini tells of having written lots of his massive scholarly biographies of poets and writers in places like McDonalds and Burger King. He said he wanted to be around other people while he wrote solitarily. Body heat. (Now with lap tops, we can call up all our notes and drafts and many readings, also zap onto the web for new material.) People have always been able to gather and write in each others company, but I've heard about much of it till recent decades. There's a fairly long tradition of writing retreats like Yado, but they always pride themselves on providing *solitary* sites. Here at UMass, for nineteen years, the Center for Teaching has run well used all-day retreats for faculty to write together in a large room or two with lunch and coffee laid on. Other colleges and universities are following suit. (See Sorcinelli and Elbow)

In schools, of course, students have traditionally been asked to write while in each others' presence, but usually this has been for exams--and, classically, for punishment or when the teacher is stuck for something to do. It's only since the process movement in our field that many teachers had students write together in each others' presence with a sense that it is a positive, productive, and even pleasant activity.

Have these new technological and cultural practices made students, scholars, and other citizens expert at suiting their words to the audience when they write important or high stakes pieces of writing? I sense they have helped, but I'm struck with how much of the high stakes writing I see is audience-deaf--whether from students or scholars.

The fact remains that when we fail to suit our writing to an audience--as we commonly do--we are simply bypassing an incredibly well developed skill we already have for using language to connect with an audience; we've acquired this gift naturally and easily through years of practice in speaking. So the question is how to awaken and bring that skill to the writing process.

We can simply decide to write as though we are speaking--to "speak onto the page." This means producing language in the mode we are best at, that is, as though we are actually talking to someone. Writing a letter is almost as good as speaking if we want to connect with someone (and sometimes it's better--especially for shy people). Teachers have long given this advice to students struggling to be clear: "Write me a *letter* with your thinking. Start off, 'Dear Peter.'" John McPhee is said to have begun all his writing projects with "Dear Mother." When we speak or write a letter, we use lots of those forbidden "*you*"s--and this helps us write words that connect better to readers. Experienced writers learn to *remove* them in revising--if the genre or audience really requires it--while nevertheless *keeping* that valuable "flavor of address" in the words. In this book I've decided to keep some of my "*you*"s.

It's my argument that the speech-derived practices that I am suggesting in this book--speaking onto the page at the early stages and reading aloud to revise at the late stages--will give us more of a feeling of addressing an audience when we write and this will help us create language and thinking that connects better with readers.

3. Speaking Is Good for Naked Blurting: Gisting, Talking Turkey, Hitting the Nail on the Head

We often beat around the bush when we talk casually. We (some of us, anyway), open our big mouths before we know what we want to say. And yet after we've rambled and digressed and explored and blabbed, it turns out that speech is a remarkably powerful modality for cutting through the thicket of language and digression to find our main point. When someone after a while has the sense to say, "Peter, what are you trying to say?" it's remarkable how often I can come right to the point.

Most teachers of writing have learned the same essential trick for harnessing the power of speaking for writing. When we get a passage or a whole essay that is utterly tangled or opaque, we simply ask, "What are you getting at here? I was completely lost." More often than not the student simply blurts out the point he or she was trying to make; it's often concise and sometimes eloquent. Sometimes it takes another try ("I still don't understand"), but the gist almost invariably pops out. "Stop" we say, "Write that down! You need those very words in your paper."

Freewriting, like speaking, often leads to digression, yet like speaking it also helps us gist and crunch--sum things up--especially if we ask it to take on that task. That is, after we have freewritten on a topic for a while and followed its wandering path, we can pause and stretch our limbs and take a deep breath ask ourselves, "So what is all this about?" "I wonder what I'm really trying to say." This usually produces a piece of "crunching" or "gisting" freewriting that sums up our thinking--or rather (and this is an added advantage) it usually provides a few different summings up to help us decide among various potential main points.

At one point as I was trying to revise one of these chapters, I got confused about what I was really trying to say. So I did what I often do. I stopped and hit the CAPS LOCK key (to indicate this was a time out from the text itself) and simply blurted a freewritten response to my perplexity:

> TIME OUT. IN A WAY I'M JUST INTERESTED IN EASINESS. DOESN'T HAVE TO BE SPEECH. BUT SPEECH IS THE EASIEST LANGUAGE WE HAVE.

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BUT ACTUALLY I ACM INTERESTED IN SPEECH.  CAUSE SPEECH HAS
VIRTUES I WANT TO HARNESS
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This quick blurt helped me realize that I was tangled up between two different main points, speech and easiness. The blurt helped me to see how they overlap but differ and to decide where my priority lay. (To find our real point, it also helps to "consult felt sense." This is a rich and complicated topic that is not central enough to this book. For more on it, see my "Foreword" and "Three Mysteries"--and also the extensive literature on "Focusing" at a website with that title.)

In short, casual talk may lead to lots of blarney and gab, but speech can also help us hit the nail on the head in ways that are hard to achieve in writing.

* * *

The phrase "talking turkey" implies more than merely getting to the point; it implies *not evading* the point. Honesty. It turns out that unplanned talk seems to help prevent evasive language. Yes, everyday speech can be full of evasive beating around the bush, and a few people can be smooth and fluent and persuasive at not saying what they are saying. Lawyers and Presidential spokespersons get training. But when we talk, we have our audience right in front of us (or on the phone) and we don't have the time that writing gives us to plan a smooth evasion. When most of us talk, our attempts to evade tend to show--or rather *sound*.

Lincoln called attention to the way writing can help people hide their meaning:

> In all matters but this of Slavery the framers of the Constitution used the very clearest, shortest, and most direct language. But the Constitution alludes to Slavery three times without mentioning it once! The language used becomes ambiguous, roundabout, and mystical. They speak of the "immigration of persons," and mean the importation of slaves but do not say so. In establishing a basis of representation they say "all other persons," when they mean to say slaves--why did they not use the shortest phrase? In providing for the return of fugitives they say "persons held to service or labor." . . . Why didn't they do it [refer to slavery]. We cannot doubt that it was done on purpose. [Speech delivered March 6, 1860. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1953.]

Imagine if the constitution writers had been at a meeting or in a living room and someone asked them to explain what the constitution says about who is a citizen. They would have had a hard time hiding their real meaning behind phrases like the "immigration of persons" and "all other persons" and "persons held to service or labor." In everyday talk, that kind of evasive language sticks out like a sore thumb and calls attention to how it's not saying what it's saying.

In a classic essay, Eric Havelock points to a striking example of spoken evasion that countless people heard on TV. It was the morning of January 18, 1986 and the Challenger space shuttle had just exploded right after launch. Havelock describes the sound track:

> First a brief pause, perhaps to swallow, while the clouds of the explosion hovered in the air. Then the pronouncement, "A major malfunction has occurred." (129)

That NASA media spokesman did more than swallow. He quickly suppressed any blurt and called on his extensive training and came up with that wonderful phrase, "A major malfunction has occurred." Not even the syntax is characteristic of everyday speech.

I like to imagine a different scene for this skilled "spokesman." (A "spokesman" is someone in charge of speaking--which means not letting his speech sound too much like speech.) Imagine he'd been sick that day and stayed at home and watched the explosion on TV from the living room couch. Imagine his audible gasp when the Challenger exploded. His wife calls from the kitchen "What happened, honey?" "My God, it blew up," he'd say. "They're all killed!"

Havelock points to another case where NASA spokespersons used their careful training for the sake of evasive speaking. When a committee member asked them, "Was the launching considered dangerous under the circumstances?" they answered, "We considered the flight safety implications in the expressed area of interest." It's *possible* that those words rolled off the tongue with quick fluency; these men had good training. But it's hard not to imagine a pause while they *construct* rather than *utter* that sentence.

I'm not pretending that the goal of writing is always to talk turkey. But insofar as we *want* clear writing, we need more of what speaking makes easy--blunt directness. Havelock actually spent his career celebrating the way writing and literacy *separated* themselves from speech in Greece during the sixth and fifth centuries, yet he argues eloquently here that writing needs to call on the resources of speech: "When one writes, this kind of misuse [evasiveness] can be corrected by sticking as closely as possible to oral idiom (129)."

4. Speaking Is Self-Rewarding and Helps Children Learn to Master Language

Think of how babies babble so much in their cribs and as toddlers. Linguists like to say they are practicing speech, and no doubt they are, but they are also getting sensual pleasure or having fun. The physicality of speech has this underlying potentiality of pleasure. Children like to hear their shout in a quiet church. People who aren't too "civilized" will sometimes give in and shout in a cavernous hall or at the Grand Canyon: we want to feel the body making that loud noise and hear it come back. Most of us have also had the experience of speaking a sentence that we particularly like and finding ourselves saying it over and over all day--out loud or in our minds.

Think of professors and politicians and others who love the sound of their own voices and can't stop talking. Kids who develop a rap-speaking gear will go on and on; the rap cadences will start to "just come" without any planning. The same thing happens to many people who work at iambic pentameter: they develop this *gear* for speaking everything in ten syllable lines with an underlying iambic beat. These people get pleasure from just using the speaking gear and keeping it well oiled--for no other immediate purpose. The rhythm pulls language out of us. If you think my point is dubious, I'd ask you to consider the vocal medium where self-reinforcing pleasure is universally recognized: singing. There's palpable pleasure from the interaction of moving the mouth and the lungs--and the internal feedback (proprioception) that comes not just to the ears but to the face and trunk. Singers, instrumental players, and talkers--they all have the experience of "getting on a roll" and keeping going.

Can we borrow some of this pleasure and self-reinforcement for writing? Pleasure is just what is lacking for most people when they write. After we struggle to write something, we often wait months or even years to see whether the words worked. Even if we get rewarded for writing, we usually have to wait a long time. Nevertheless, the process of writing *can* reinforce itself. A friend recently sent me something she wrote and said "My writing took over." I've heard many people make the same comment, and it certainly happens to me. Laurence Sterne called attention to this in his *Tristram Shandy*:

> But this is neither here nor there -- why do I mention it? -- Ask my pen, -- it governs me, -- I govern not it. (cited in Farnsworth, p 100]

Since writing is *not* as easy as speaking, I think the feeling of "taking over" comes substantially from our experience of *overcoming resistance*. The writing door doesn't usually open unless we push with a force we don't need for speaking. Yet writing is safer than speaking. We can be more unguarded; no reader sees our written words at the stage of putting them down. Writing gives us the chance for unresisted monologue. This combination of resistance and no-resistance suggests the phenomenon that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow"--and how it requires a combination of difficulty and ease.

Many writers through the ages--especially diary writers and journal keepers--have testified to the experience of starting to recount a happening or explain a thought or express a feeling--and finding that the process somehow takes over. The energy builds and they go on and on writing till they've exhausted the expressive or creative impulse (and often exhausted themselves). Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues note that this often happens to practitioners of all the expressive arts: painting, sculpture, dance, making music.

Tomlinson explored testimony from dozens of fiction writers about a different way in which their writing took over. Most common was the experience of *characters* taking over a piece of fiction. The writers said things like, "I didn't *want* that character to commit suicide, but I just couldn't stop him." Or they spoke of the plot taking over. (But I love how the novelist Muriel Spark speaks for those writers who won't take any nonsense from their characters: "I'm in full control. . . . Nobody in my book so far could cross the road unless I make them do it" [Mallon 66]).

Perhaps the word "express" is central here--"press out": writing is ideal for helping get what is inner to become outer. Many people find writing ideal for unburdening themselves--uncovering what's hidden inside, often hidden even from themselves. Of course *speaking* is great for the same purposes, but only if we have a genuinely trusted and supportive listener. Such listeners are hard to come by. Writing is particularly valuable when we are troubled by taboo feelings or scary thoughts that we don't dare to share even with close friends.

In short, if lots of people are scared or burned and run away from writing, it just means that they haven't learned how to use some of its inherent advantages for safety, power, and even ease. After all, writing is a technology and the allegedly modern truism for technologies applies to the technology that Plato criticized two thousand years ago: we don't get the benefit of a technology unless we learn how to exploit its potentialities. Writing down our spoken language is easy (if we forget about "correct writing"), and most people find power and pleasure in the process.

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In this chapter I've been describing virtues of speaking as a *process*. In Chapters 4 and 5, I'll describe virtues of speech as a *product*: *spoken language* or the kind of language we tend to produce with everyday easy spontaneous speaking.

Some Works Cited

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