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Introduction to Part One: Defining "Speech" and "Writing"

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PART ONE

What's Best in Speaking and Writing

Introduction

Defining Terms

My overall project is to find what's best about speaking and bring it to what's best about writing. So the task here in Part One is to explore advantages in both. But first I need to take some care about the meaning of these slippery words.

St. Augustine said he knew just what "time" meant--until he stopped to ask. So too with "speaking" and "writing." In this book I want to use these words with some precision. After all, in the end, I'll be celebrating what might be called mixtures and hybrids between speaking and writing--so I can't write clearly about mixtures unless I try to be clear about the two ingredients being mixed.

Much of the confusion about speaking and writing comes from not noticing how these words operate in multiple realms or dimensions. We need to distinguish three dimensions:

- *Speaking and writing as verbs for different physical activities:* moving our mouths versus moving our fingers;
- *Speaking and writing as nouns for different physical media or modalities:* audible sounds existing in time versus visible marks existing in space;
- *Speaking and writing as nouns for different linguistic products:* language that comes from mouths versus language that comes from fingers.

I'll wait till the Introduction to Part Two to conclude the process of definition by comparing speaking and writing as *mental processes*.

There's been a good deal of ink spilled in trying to compare *oral societies* and *literate societies* and the mentalities, ways of thinking, or identities that such societies are alleged to produce. I will ignore this topic. That is, I have no need to enter what have been called the "orality/literacy wars." At the end of the book, however, I will try to talk about some important characteristics of our present "culture of literacy."

Speaking and writing as different physical activities

We mostly don't get confused as to whether we are using our mouths or our fingers to produce words. There are some borderline perplexities--such as when people dictate to a scribe or use voice recognition software--and I can deal usefully with them in the Introduction to Part Two. For now the obvious everyday distinction between physical speaking and writing will do.

Speech and writing as different physical media or modalities

Normal speaking produces sound, and since sounds are nothing but air molecules that are squeezed closer together than usual, spoken words decay the moment they are heard.

She: *How could you have said that to me?*

He: *But I never said that.*

They'll never know whether he said it or not. The words are gone forever (unless a recorder had been on).

Sounds also exist in the medium of *time*. It's a medium that traps us in *now* and sweeps us implacably forward. Past and future don't actually exist--only *thoughts* or *conceptions* of past and future.

Writing, on the other hand, produces visible marks that persist through time--on the page or the screen or the billboard--as long as we want them to persist (or longer!). We can examine written words at whatever time or pace we want--looking forward to see who dunnit or back to find who the heck Stepan Arkadyich Oblonsky is. We can skim or re-read.

And visible words exist in *space*. Space is a medium of remarkable freedom, for we can look back where we came from and forward where we're headed--and look left and right, up and down--often for great distances. We can compare two or three versions of a visible text almost simultaneously, whereas it's extremely difficult to compare multiple spoken discourses. (We can *record* audible words now and thus "check the audible record," yet even after the speech is recorded, we cannot listen to or hear more than a few words at a time.)

In short, the physical and sensory modalities of speech and writing are as distinctly different as the physical processes of speaking and writing. And here too we have an intriguing borderline example: sign language is a kind of "speaking" that is visual-and-spatial, yet also temporal.

Speech and writing as different linguistic products

People commonly assume that spoken and written language are different. But strictly speaking, there is no real difference between them. Linguists like to create huge "corpora" of millions of strings of spoken and written language. When they jumble together all the strings, they find they can't usually identify which ones were spoken and which were written. That is, when we look at spoken and written language that was produced in a full range of human contexts and purposes, we find that almost any kind of language can be found coming out of a mouth or from a hand. The linguist Douglas Biber probably has more experience and authority than anyone else on this topic, and in a 2007 survey of all the research on speech and writing, he and Camilla Vasquez conclude as follows: "[T]here are few, if any, absolute linguistic differences between the [language that is produced by the] written and spoken modes" (537; see also Biber *Variation*).

That is, people tend to assume that writing is more formal than speaking, but that's not always the case. Some *writing* (such as what people write in some diaries and letters) is more "speechy" than some *speech* (such as what people utter in some carefully planned lectures, announcements, and interviews).

But after linguists are done demolishing the distinction between spoken and written language, they turn around and start using it again--but in a careful way. They recognize that it's useful to distinguish what they call "*typical speech*" and "*typical writing*." That is, they distinguish between two common *kinds* or *genres* or *registers* of language: everyday conversational *spoken* language versus the *written* language that's common in careful informational or expository prose--"essayist" writing.

Thus, I cut Biber and Vasquez off in mid-sentence when they were saying that there's no difference between spoken and written mode. They finish their sentence as follows: "[but] there are strong and systematic linguistic differences between the registers of conversation and written informational prose--not only in English, but in other languages as well (15)." And so, interestingly, the latest and most careful analysis supports the common naive assumption that of course speech tends to be more informal than writing (as long as we add the word "typical").

Typical writing. Biber and Vasquez use the somewhat vague phrase "careful written informational prose." This is a large umbrella that covers many kinds of writing that are called for in different fields at different educational levels and in many nonschool settings, but it's an umbrella that most people recognize. (See Olson '77 for the term "essayist prose"--which is a bit narrower--involving usually an argument or claim of some sort.)

Typical speech. This is what linguists mean when they use the short hand term, "spoken language." It's the language that people start speaking and internalizing from infancy. It's a language with complex and intricate grammatical rules--rules that we tend to master by around age four and usually obey without any awareness of them. This is the complex language that comes out of our mouths without planning when we have a thought or feeling to share. (But if we don't feel comfortable and safe, we may plan our words or even not speak at all.) It's also the language we usually use when we talk to ourselves inside our heads. This is the language I'll be referring to I when write about "speech" and "spoken language" throughout the book. I'll often add the terms "easy" or "uncareful" to emphasize that it's casual, everyday speech--as opposed to huge wide range of language that *can be* spoken.

There are some complications and blurred lines here. Sometimes a child acquires a *second* dialect or language so deeply and thoroughly--especially at an early age--that it counts as native. It comes equally easily and naturally without planning or monitoring. We see tiny examples of this blurring all the time. As a child I used to say *Me and Denny are going over to his house*. My parents seem to have stamped out this "me" construction well enough that it mostly doesn't pop into my mind or out of my mouth. What about this phrasing that Hillary Clinton spoke--fluently in a free give-and-take dialogue rather than in a prepared speech: "the issue with which I am most deeply involved." I suspect that this is not the grammar that comes most freely and naturally to her mind without monitoring in conditions of complete safety--but who knows? Maybe she has totally internalized it. We can't draw hard and fast lines about details of what's native and not native. George Steiner convincingly claims that he has three native spoken languages.

Here are some of the typical differences that linguists find between casual conversation and careful expository writing. Careful writing is claimed in general to be:

1. more structurally complex and elaborate than speech, indicated by features such as longer sentences
2. more explicit than speech, in that it has complete idea units
3. more decontextualized, or autonomous, than speech, so that it is less dependent on shared situation or background knowledge
4. less personally involved than speech and more detached and abstract than speech
5. characterized by a higher concentration of new information than speech
6. more deliberately organized and planned than speech (I am summarizing from Biber 47. At the end of each item, he cites multiple research as evidence of these differences.)

I invite readers not so interested intricacies of language to skip over what follows in this box, but I know that many other readers will appreciate it. First I'll explore ways in which speech and writing overlap; then some differences.

The overlap between spoken and written language

Even though Biber and Vasquez and other linguists found "few if any absolute linguistic differences between the written and spoken modes" (537) when they looked at these big pots of language (corpora), they found *other* categories by which all the items in that huge pot of language *could* be meaningfully distinguished. That is certain linguistic dimensions *override* or *trump* the difference between speaking and writing. Biber points to six dimensions:

Dimension 1: Involved versus uninvolved (i.e., detached and focusing only on the information being conveyed). How much does the speaker/writer put herself into the language or keep herself out of it? Certain linguistic features go with each dimension, but we get both involved and uninvolved language from the mouth and from the fingers. For example, academics often put themselves into their *written* personal letters and often leave themselves out of their *spoken* lectures. We can find involved language in both spoken conversation and written personal letters. We can find uninvolved language in both spoken press reporting and written official documents.

Dimension 2: Narrative versus non-narrative concerns. "[F]iction is highly narrative, while telephone conversations and official documents are both non-narrative."

Dimension 3: Explicit versus implicit. How much does the language spell everything out or leave a lot implied? Note that a spoken lecture often spells out a lot, while much written literature is striking for how much it leaves implicit.

Dimension 4: Overt expression of persuasion [or not]. "[P]rofessional letters and editorials are both persuasive, while broadcasts and press reviews are not (even though the reviews are opinionated)."

Dimension 5: Abstract versus non-abstract information. "[A]cademic prose and official documents are extremely abstract, while fiction and conversations are markedly non-abstract."

Dimension 6: On-line informational elaboration (showing evidence that the speaker/writer must contend with real-time production constraints). "[P]repared speeches and interviews have frequent feature of on-line informational elaboration, fiction and personal letters have

markedly few of these features, and academic prose is similar to face-to-face conversation in having an intermediate score.” (Quoted passages are taken from p 199-200.)

In short, these dimensions cut across speech and writing. What this analysis shows is that *context*--that is, purpose, audience, genre and so on--tell more about the language we produce than whether we use our hands or our mouths. (See Biber and Barton on these matters.)

The difference between spoken and written language

But once we pay more attention to context--setting, purpose, audience, goal, genre--the more obvious differences emerge between speech and writing. In fact Biber argues that conversation is “stereotypical speech” and informational expository prose is “stereotypical writing”:

The characterization of conversation as stereotypical speaking is not controversial. All languages and cultures have conversational interactions, and it can be considered the unmarked means of spoken communication universally. (“Writing” 3)

In contrast, he calls informational expository prose “stereotypical writing” (3). He acknowledges that this is a matter of judgment. For example, Brian Street disagrees and accuses intellectuals and scholars of thinking that informational prose is stereotypical only because it’s the kind of writing *they* value. But Biber sticks to his guns and argues that

[informational expository prose *is* stereotypical writing] because it maximally exploits the resources of the written mode [and] it has the opposite situational and communicative characteristics from conversation: [thus] both exposition and conversation make maximal use of the communicative resources provided by their respective [physical and social] modes (“Writing” 4).

I have an impulse to nominate imaginative and literary writing as stereotypical writing (including poetry and memoir). Of course I wouldn’t argue that these are the most *pervasive* forms of writing in our culture; but I’d argue that these are the kinds of writing that most people seem to *want* to do when given half a chance. And since I’m writing a book about how to harness everyday speech even for careful writing, I like this idea that imaginative literature is a paradigm for writing. “Imaginative literature has more in common with spontaneous conversation than with the typically written genre, expository prose” (Deborah Tannen 137). When I do writing workshops for academics, I find that even they very often hanker to write memoirs and stories and even poetry, even though it doesn’t help them in their academic careers. I’d say that English departments in the twentieth century took it as their mission to try to stamp out what they call amateur poetry--and failed miserably. People *want* to write poetry and refuse to be stopped.

In this book, I will use opposite lenses for looking at the contrast between speech and writing. On the one hand, I’ll assume the libertine’s credo: in the realm of language, there’s nothing we can’t do with our mouths and nothing we can’t do with our fingers. That is, spoken and written language are not different if we look at the full range of human language production. This is crucial for me because I’m trying to harness more of speaking for writing.

But on the other hand, I’ll spend a lot of time focusing on the differences between speech and writing in their common forms: casual comfortable speech versus essayist writing. I’m interested in casual speech *because* it’s so easy--and I’ll show that it has many virtues for writing that people don’t notice. And I’m interested in expository or informational prose because this is the kind of writing that most people find hardest, and it’s what we have to do for school and work and many other purposes. It’s the kind of writing that can particularly benefit from the resources of speech. (People who write poetry and fiction don’t usually need much help understanding that speech is their friend.)

So I'll be inviting people who want to do careful expository informational writing to exploit what the tongue knows. Of course this is only a small part of the writing that people do in our culture (think about email, letters, newspapers, literature, diaries, blogs; see my "Spaciousness"). People probably get tricked into thinking that careful essays are typical of writing because that kind of writing made such a big dent on them when they were learning to write in school and were obliged to write in college. In our culture, carefully written essays have somehow come to be experienced as a peculiarly single doorway into adult literacy. Of course new technologies may have opened new doors into *writing*, but they haven't so much opened doors into what people feel as "true literacy" (more on this later).

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To summarize:

- There's a clear and obvious difference between speech and writing as *physical processes*: the difference between using the mouth and using the hand.
- There's also a clear and obvious difference between speech and writing as *physical media or sensory modalities*: the difference between audible spoken language and visible written language.
- However, when we look at speech and writing as *language or products*--spoken and written language--we can see them as overlapping in one sense also different in another sense. That is, they are not different if we look at the full range of spoken and written language produced in the full range of situations and contexts. But they are very different if we restrict our view to easy, conversational, casual conversation versus essayist writing. It is usually this restricted view that people have in mind when they talk about spoken and written language.

In the Introduction to Part Two, I'll look at a fourth way of contrasting speaking and writing: as *mental processes*.