

Speakers and Writers Do Different Things

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The activity of writing is fundamentally different from the activity of speaking. Among other things, people write much more slowly than they talk. And they have the chance to go back and change what they have written before anyone sees it, whereas speakers can't hide what they have said. Writers are isolated from their audiences; speakers are normally in face-to-face situations. Writers, furthermore, are likely to feel more accountable for what they say, since their product may stay around for a long time. It is interesting to consider how differences like these affect the nature of written language, as language. **How do both the special nature of what people do when they write and the special circumstances in which they write lead to the special properties of written language?**

Only recently have the unusual characteristics of the writing process received serious attention, and only recently have we begun to understand the distinctive kind of language which results from this process. Several of us at Berkeley have been looking at an extensive collection of written and spoken data, trying to learn more about what is involved in each of these distinctive uses of language.

Speaking, which people have been doing for a million years and which will probably always be the most common means of using language, is a fast-paced activity. We speak at an average of about three words a second, and we can't really slow things down very much without losing our listener's attention and our own train of thought. I suspect that this speaking rate in fact reflects the pace of natural thought processes (Chafe, "The Deployment"). Writing is nothing like this. We can write as slowly as we like, but we would have to be pretty fast at a typewriter to approach anywhere near the speed of normal speech. Writing is commonly a leisurely activity. Our thoughts, nevertheless, are likely to be jumping along at a much faster pace. Thus we have plenty of time to think about more carefully structuring the language itself as well as reviewing and revising it as we see fit. The result is a language which no longer consists of a sequence of brief spurts, as spoken language does:

*It's just a program of Victorian and Modern poetics.
It's just a seminar. It's tangential to reality.*

Instead it is a language which uses a variety of more complex syntactic devices — nominalizations, participles, complement clauses, attributive adjectives, and so on — to mold information into more elaborate, integrated products of deliberate creation:

Critics have used George Eliot's failure to accomplish her

self-proclaimed goal of writing realistic novels as evidence of the impossibility of the realistic undertaking itself.

These two examples were produced by one and the same speaker/writer. They illustrate well how the integrated quality of written language, made possible by the slow, deliberate nature of its production, contrasts with the fragmentation of language which is spoken on the fly (Chafe, "Integration").

Walter Ong has pointed out the irony of the fact that a writer who may expect his product to be read by hundreds of thousands of people sets about his task by closeting himself with his typewriter (see p. 16, this issue of *forum*). Isolated from his audience, a writer lacks the direct feedback and interaction enjoyed by a speaker; he also cannot share with his *reader* any of the immediate context and environment which he would have with his listener. Typical written language lacks the ego involvement, interaction, and liveliness of spoken language:

I'm feeling OK now (laugh), but uh I had last week I thought I was (laugh) dying. You heard that I fainted in the shower.

Evidence for the detachment of written language can be found, for example, in the impersonal references, use of passive verbs, and lack of reliance on shared context which characterizes written texts. Compare the following written example, produced by the same person, with the spoken example above:

Only by taping an event at which one is a natural participant is it possible to gather data which is not distorted by the presence of a non-participant analyst.

Written language then, tends to be detached and distant where spoken language tends to be involved.

Finally, speakers seem willing to operate with a kind of hit-or-miss epistemology, not worrying so much about the ultimate truth of what they say, but trying on ideas for size. Spoken language is sprinkled with expressions that suggest the tentative origins and reliability of what is being said:

I think if I had gotten the police, I probably would have just gotten my things back.

Not only do writers have more time to ponder what they are saying, but they are likely to realize that their product will be read by a critical audience, that it may exist for a long

time, and that it may be perused by many people. These factors impose a kind of accountability on a writer which does not normally constrain a speaker. The result is often that the writer assumes a more authoritative stance than the speaker, as evidenced by the words "specifically," "constantly," and "fact" in the following example of written language:

Since all puppet heads are specifically good or evil, the fact of struggle between the opposing forces is constantly clear, both verbally and visually.

The precise tone of much written language contrasts with the more hesitant tone which is typical of spoken language.

Qualities like **integration**, **detachment**, and **authority** are thus fostered by the process and circumstances of writing. They may appear in speaking too, of course, but in writing they are strikingly more prevalent. As we delve further into the speaking and writing processes and their products, we expect to be learning more about these differences. Both the teaching and the practice of writing should profit from a clearer knowledge of the ways in which writing is a very special use of language.