

Is Speaking Easier than Writing?: Exploring the Complexity of Spoken Language

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Abstract: This article attempts to demonstrate the complexity of spoken language. First of all, the general characteristics of both varieties of language are discussed, followed by an analysis of the differences between the spoken and written language. As spoken language is usually associated with non-standard language, the notion of standard and non-standard English will also be discussed. The spoken and written language discussed here refers to English only. In addition, spoken data were taken from spontaneous speech (conversation), whereas the written language data were taken from formal written works. Finally, it is argued that both spoken and written language are complex in their own way; thus one will never be easier or simpler than the other.

Key words: spoken language, written language, standard and non standard English, paralinguistic, prosody.

Speaking and writing are two language skills which are acquired at different stages within the span of a child's language development. The acquisition of the former starts from the very beginning of his life in a natural way while the latter is learned in a formal (i.e school) setting. The learning of the second skill usually occurs after the child has the ability of using

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the language orally. This is probably the reason why spoken language is considered to be primary in comparison to the written language. As soon as a baby is born, it is exposed to listen to its mother tongue and then some time later is made to speak the language. Neither teaching media nor special techniques are needed here.

An evidence that writing is secondary can be explored in the history of human nature in which there is no evidence of the existence of a writing system of any kind before about 3500 BC whereas spoken language is assumed to exist well before that. (Leech et al., 1985). This explains how language actually starts from orality for quite some time before writing system was found.

One of the major differences between spoken and written language is put forward by Milroy and Milroy (1986) for whom the two language skills are usually associated with unplanned and planned language. The spoken language which is normally 'quick' and 'direct' is usually produced without plan (i.e. unplanned) and it can be understood immediately by the listener. However, the written language needs to be planned before it comes out to be understood. The plan here may at least include the preparation of the instruments needed such as a paper and a pen, the idea to be written, the choice of words, and how those all to be put together (the organization).

All the explanation above gives us an impression that speaking is simpler as well as easier than writing. We do not need to 'struggle' much or do much effort when we want to be able to speak in our mother tongue. We do not feel as we have gone through a difficult process for this. On the other hand, writing requires us to be 'a hard worker' for remembering all the writing system, and to do more in order to make our written language is readable as well as understandable. However, this is only an impression and a linguistic analysis needs to be carried out to prove it.

SPOKEN VERSUS WRITTEN LANGUAGE: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

It is widely agreed that spoken language is primary; or in other words, children learn to speak before they learn to write. This process is natural, since children do not need 'formal instruction' in learning to speak. Painter (1986) points out that during the first years of their life

children naturally learn the basic grammar of their parents' language. In addition, Milroy and Milroy (1986) state that the knowledge of grammar enables children to use and understand their language as well as to judge what sentences are possible in their language. The idea that speaking is acquired naturally is also pointed out by Halliday (1985). According to him, speaking and listening come naturally unless one is born deaf; ...they are learned young without instruction. To get to read and write, however, one is usually taught... (p 2).

What Halliday states above supports Pinter and Milroy's idea that speaking and listening are natural and those activities start more or less from birth. As natural activities, children do not need to get special/formal instruction for being able to speak unless they are born deaf. On the other hand, in order to be able to read or write children have to have special instruction (usually school instead of family setting). Thus up to this point, we can not decide whether spoken language is 'easier' than the written language. All we know is that it is not because the spoken language is easier than the written language that make children acquire listening and speaking first but because speaking and listening occur naturally in family setting while writing occurs 'unnaturally' in formal (school) setting.

Leech et al. (1985) point out that written language is not intrinsically 'better' or 'worse' than spoken language (speech), but each performs different function in society, uses different forms and exhibits different linguistic characteristics. Halliday (1985) seems to agree with this idea. He states that speech and writing are different but we can not say that one is superior to the other.

Both Leech et al. and Halliday consider spoken and written language are different; however, the differences do not reveal that one is easier than the other. In terms of function, Leech et al et al (1985) point out that spoken language is quick, direct, and allows immediate feedback from the addressee. On the contrary, written language is usually 'not direct' as it needs to be planned before it comes out to be understood. It is also mentioned that as a face-to-face communication, speech is particularly important in integrating an individual into a social group. It is a 'more frequently used' language than the written language because speech is an everyday activity for almost everybody. Written language, on the other hand, is visible, relative permanence which makes possible

for record keeping. Thus, according to Leech et al (1985) the reader can process the written language at leisure and it can always be reread when necessary. Unfortunately, Leech et al. do not take into account the development of technology in deciding the differences between spoken and written language based on function. The existence of television and tape recorder, for instance, has made the two varieties of language employ the same function in society. Both spoken and written language can be recorded and of course both are possible for record keeping. However, the idea that spoken language has an 'integrating' function is supported by Milroy and Milroy (1986). These writers put forward an idea that speaking is 'social activity' whereas writing is 'solitary'.

In respect to form, Leech et al. (1985), Halliday (1985), and Milroy and Milroy (1986) share the same idea that spoken and written language differ as the result of the difference of medium. As a face-to-face situation, spoken language can be accompanied by non verbal communication such as gestures and facial expressions including features of rhythm, intonation, and non linguistic noises such as sighs and laughter. Besides, according to Milroy and Milroy a speaker can refer to something in situational contexts (e.g. over there, him, etc.). On the other hand, written language uses features of punctuation, paragraphing and the capitalization letters. It is interesting to know whether all features used in spoken language as mentioned above have their counterparts in written language. Halliday states that writing system in English is capable of representing all possible wordings in the language; however, there are various aspects of spoken language that have no counterparts in writing. The aspects include rhythm, intonation, degree of loudness, variations in voice quality, etc.

Linguistically, according to Leech et al. (as agreed by Halliday and Milroy and Milroy) speech is less explicit than writing. The reasons given are: (1) extra information is conveyed by body language, such as facial expressions and gestures; (2) the immediate physical environment can be referred to (e.g. by pointing to object or people); (3) shared knowledge of the participants in a conversation makes explicitness unnecessary; (4) there is an opportunity for feedback for clarification or repetition of the message.

Further, speech is considered to show a lack of sentence boundaries, whereas in writing a sentence is clearly recognized as it starts with capital

letter and ends with a full stop. To make clear, I quote the illustration of spontaneous speech transcribed by Halliday (1985) as follows:

and he was saying that erm - you can go to a nightclub in Birmingham
- and watch tony benet for about thirty bob - something like this
a night with tony benet - have a nice meal in very nice meal in
very nice warm pleasant

The transcript above reveals the vagueness of the boundaries of sentences that comprise the spoken discourse. In writing, this kind of problem will not occur.

In addition, Leech et al (1985) point out that spoken language has simpler grammatical structure than writing. The reason they argue for this is because of the shorter time available to produce as well as to process the speech, while writing can be redrafted and reread. This idea seems to suggest that speech is 'easier' than writing. Halliday (1995) and Milroy and Milroy (1986) disagree with this idea. The former linguist argues that both speech and writing have complex grammar; each is complex in its own way; while Milroy and Milroy state that speech is 'permissive' and 'flexible', it is not easier than writing. What the two linguists mean by 'permissive and flexible' is illustrated in the following examples.

1. *Tomorrow will be better.*
2. *In the morning will be better.*
3. *Under the table will be better.*
4. *Down the backstreets is more middle class.*

In the four sentences above, adverbials occur in subject position. In (1) the adverbial is a single word; in (2) it is a phrase; and in (3) and (4) the grammar is extended to admit an adverbial phrase of place rather than time. According to Milroy and Milroy, only sentence (1) is likely to occur in 'good' writing, but all sentences occur and acceptable in spoken language.

Another illustration of flexibility in spoken language is given by Tannen (1982). According to her, in oral tradition, it does not matter whether one says 'I could care less' or 'I couldn't care less'. The meaning of both expressions depend on the context, while in literate tradition, meaning is in the text. From these illustrations it is clear that speech is more flexible and more permissive because it accepts a wider variety of grammatical structure. On the other hand, writing seems to be more re-

stricted as it only accepts correct grammatical structure. This is the reason why prescriptive grammar is closely related to written language rather than spoken language, as agreed by Milroy and Milroy: '... we live in a society that places considerable emphasis on literacy (schooling)... Many of the handbook prescriptions on correct English concern with written English' (1986:6). In addition, they say that when prescriptive rules are applied to spoken language they may sometimes damage its 'expressiveness' and its 'flexibility'.

Another difference between spoken and written language which is also widely agreed is that speech includes monitoring features (such as adverb and adverbials like *well*, *I mean*, *sort of*, *you know*) indicating the awareness of the speaker of the addressee's presence and reactions. Speech also includes phenomena such as hesitation, unintended repetitions (e.g. *I...I...*), false start, fillers (e.g. *um*, *er*), grammatical blends, and unfinished sentences (e.g. *You really ought - will do it your own way*). All the features which are typically employed by spoken language mentioned here refer to 'direct simultaneous speech'. Milroy and Milroy (1986) include this kind of speech as 'unplanned'. According to them speech is planned when it is based on written texts (such as lectures, sermons, speeches) and the presentations may be done by reading aloud, referring to notes or memorization.

Chafe (1982), who has done a research to investigate the differences between spoken and written language, comes into a conclusion that speaking is faster than writing. The researcher analyzed four sets of data: dinner table conversations, lectures, letters, and academic papers, each of which was representing informal and formal spoken and written language. It was found out that the average speed of spoken language (speech) including pauses was 180 words per minute; whereas the speed of writing depended on individual differences, as well as whether the writer used handwriting or typewriter. Chafe states that handwriting characteristically takes place at slower than one tenth the speed of speaking.

The basic principles of both spoken and written language as described above give us a clear idea that the two varieties of language are different in form, yet they are complementary in function. There is no evidence which has been shown that one is better, more complicated, or more important than the other. The discussion now will be focussed on the grammar to give the idea of how the two are different or similar.

THE GRAMMAR OF SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

The grammar of a language or dialect is actually 'something' complex and abstract. It consists of a number of rules that are imposed on usage of correctness. As has been mentioned before the most general rules of a language are learned in infancy and childhood without instruction. It has also been mentioned that those basic rules enable speakers to understand and produce sentences in various situations, as well as to judge what sentences are possible in the language. The differences between spoken and written grammar arise largely from different properties and function of the two channels, such as, as speech is adapted to social use, certain kinds of sentence structure are more common in speech than in writing. The example illustrating this is given as follows:

5. *That's me in the photograph.*

In uttering this sentence the speaker pointed to something in the environment (a framed photograph on the wall), and there is no problem for the addressee to understand this sentence. However, it is not possible to have that sentence in writing because what *that's* refers to is not clear. Consider the following examples:

6. *Where is the squirrel?*

7. *In the tree.*

Sentence (7) deletes the NP and V, but in spoken language where the context is provided, the elliptical sentence here is acceptable. Ellipsis is considered to be one of the most pervasive characteristics of human speech. In her dissertation, Levin (1985:1) points out that one of the most pervasive characteristics of human speech, one which seems to cut across all varieties, is the elimination of redundant linguistic items. The example given by Levin is:

8. *Guess what? Jupiter has a ring.*

9. *I don't believe it.*

Sentence (9) exhibits a very common reduction type, and would be judged as perfectly natural by the vast majority of English speakers.

Besides the use of ellipsis, spoken language can topicalise sentences to show the most important information the speaker wants to emphasize.

This emphasis can be made either by certain techniques such as intonation or by topicalising construction. The example of topicalising sentence is given as follows:

10. *Jack built a house.*

To draw special attention to *house*, it is suggested that the main clause containing *house* is moved to the front of the sentence, and subordinate *Jack* in relative clause *that Jack built*. The topicalising sentence becomes:

11. *This is the house that Jack built.* or

12. *It is this house that Jack built.*

When Jack is topicalised, the sentence becomes:

13. *It is Jack who built the house.*

The 'prescriptivism' in spoken language as above is impeded under certain conditions, such as : (a) when a possessive relative pronoun is involved; (b) when the relative clause contains an embedded indirect question.

Example:

14. *The roof of this house fell in.*

The topicalising sentence becomes:

15. *This is the house of which roof fell in.* or

16. *This is the house whose roof fell in.*

Sentences (15) and (16) above seem very formal and, therefore, are used in written language. There are at least two strategies to make sentence (14) sound more colloquial.

Strategy 1: avoid relative clause and use transformation known as left dislocation.

17. *This house - its roof fell in.*

Strategy 2: maintain the relative clause either by using new possessive (that's) or by using a non possessive relative clause (it's).

18. *This is the house that's roof fell in.*

19. *This is the house that its roof fell in.*

In written language sentences (18) and (19) might be unacceptable since the use of *that's* in sentence (18) as possessive relativiser is not correct ('s refers to house); the same criticism is put forward on the redundancy of *that* and *its* which both refer to *house*.

The examples of relative clause construction above give an additional insight that spoken language employs a greater variability and flexibility (this sort of variability and flexibility can also be seen in phonology). This is the reason why Milroy and Milroy (1986) state that no spoken language can ever be fully standardized. Consequently, spoken language is usually associated with non standard variety of language. They further state: '... it is difficult to point to a fixed and invariant kind of English that can properly be called the standard language, unless we consider only the written form' (p.22).

The quotation reveals that standardization seems to be possible only for written language. Standard and non standard English are similar in three points: (1) both follow the SVO word order, for example, *John likes coffee*, is acceptable in both varieties (**John coffee likes*); (2) both SE and NSE are prepositional NOT postpositional (e.g. *in the house* not *the house in*); (3) the two varieties accept the occurrence of ellipsis (e.g. *take cakes home with you*).

The description of the standard and non standard varieties of English implicitly reveals the idea that one function of written language and writing system (spelling, grammar, and word choice) is to enforce or maintain standardization. In addition, Halliday (1985) suggests that written language displays as much higher ratio of lexical items to total running words. To explain this, the following examples are given:

1. The Trust has offered advice to local government authorities on cemetery conservation. (L:8; G:4)
2. The only real accident that I've ever had was in fog and ice. (L:4; G:8)

(Note: L stands for Lexical words and G for grammatical words). Sentence (1) was taken from a written report (Annual Report of the National Trust of Australia 1982 - 83: p.14); and sentence (2) was taken from a spoken text. These examples reveal that the spoken text has twice as many grammatical words as lexical words.

Chafe (1982) puts forward an idea that written language includes more nominalization than the spoken language. In other words, written

language tends to use NOUN instead of VERB in the situation like: *Every previous visit had left me with a sense of the futility of further action on my part*; while in speech, the same meaning is expressed by *'Whenever I'd visited there before, I'd ended up feeling that it would be futile if I tried to do anything more'*. It is clear that in writing, nouns (i.e. visit, futility) are preferred instead of verbs (i.e. visited, be futile). In respect to this, Halliday suggests that written language represents phenomena as products, whereas spoken language represents phenomena as processes.

Another major difference between spoken and written language (as has been mentioned earlier in this paper) is that the former involves paralinguistic features such as timbre (breathy, creaky), voice qualities, tempo, loudness, facial and bodily gestures; and prosodic features such as intonation, pitch, stress, rhythm, and pausing. All these typical features in spoken language, according to Halliday, are difficult to represent in writing. In a dramatic dialogue, for instance, it is possible to add stage direction such as [angrily] or [with great condescension], but of course a normal written language does not have such directions. The features as described above probably the only things that do not have counterparts in written language. Thus, despite the fact that writing system of English language is capable of representing all possible wordings in the language, it cannot really codify the features of paralinguistics and prosody in spoken language.

CONCLUSION

Spoken language which employs variability and flexibility is actually as complex as written language. While written language includes some kinds of punctuations, the spoken language includes specific features of paralinguistics and prosody. Thus, we cannot say either one is superior to the other, or one is easier than the other. Each is complex in its own way.

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