

David Crystal: Speaking of Writing and Writing of Speaking (1995)

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THE FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION

The distinction between speech and writing is traditionally felt to be fundamental to any discussion about language. Indeed, many would find the difference so basic and obvious that they might question the need to devote any space to it at all. The distinction is transparent, they might say. Speech uses the transmitting medium of ‘phonic substance’, typically air-pressure movements produced by the vocal organs, whereas writing uses the transmitting medium of ‘graphic substance’, typically marks on a surface made by a hand using an implement. It is simply a physical thing. The study of sounds is one dimension; the study of symbols is another; and that is that—apart from the nuisance of having to bring the two dimensions together when getting to grips with spelling.

RELATIONSHIPS

But that is not, unfortunately, that. We need to see the relationship between speech and writing, like sex, as being more than just something physical. Spoken and written intercourse take place in fundamentally distinct communicative situations, and the differences go well beyond the contrast in medium. There are also several differences in language structure: the grammar and vocabulary of writing is by no means the same as that of speech, nor do the contrasts available in the writing system correspond to those available in the sound system. As an example of the latter point, there is no way of pronouncing the graphic contrast between Allies and allies (in World War contexts);

nor is there a way of writing down the spoken contrast between ‘she’s brown all over’, uttered throughout in a normal tone of voice (and meaning that only the routinely observable bits of her body are brown) and ‘she’s brown all over’, uttered with a whispered tone on the last two words (and meaning that every part of her body is brown, routinely observable or not).

INDEPENDENT METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

Writing is sometimes thought to be little more than ‘speech written down’. Speech, correspondingly, is often judged by its closeness to writing. ‘You have to pronounce the *t* in often, because there is a *t* in the spelling.’ Neither position is valid. The two mediums, though historically related, function as independent methods of communication. There are few circumstances where we are faced with a genuine choice between speaking or writing. Normally, whenever two people are in earshot, they speak to each other. Only very special circumstances—wicked children passing secret messages in class; partners who are ‘not talking’ to each other; a jury foreman passing a verdict to a court official; someone who cannot speak or hear (and who is unable to use sign language)—would motivate the enormous trouble of writing down what we wish to ‘say’. Conversely, people who are separated by distance in space or time, and who lack electronic means of communication, have no alternative but to write to each other.

Moreover, the status of the two mediums is not the same. Written formulations, such as contracts, are usually required to make agreements legally binding. Historical documents, ancient inscriptions, original manuscripts, first editions, sacred writings, and other such material are given a kind of respect which is rarely accorded to speech (though archives of recorded sound are beginning to introduce a balance). Above all, written English provides the standard that society values, and its relative permanence and worldwide circulation have given it a very special place within the life of the community.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPEECH AND WRITING

The relationship between speech and writing can be analysed in terms of seven points of contrast:

S1 Speech is time-bound, dynamic, transient. It is part of an interaction in which both participants are usually present, and the speaker has a particular addressee (or several addressees) in mind.

W1 Writing is space-bound, static, permanent. It is often the result of a situation in which the writer is usually distant from the reader, and often does not know who the reader is going to be.

S2 The spontaneity and speed of most speech exchanges make it difficult to engage in complex advance planning. The pressure to think while talking promotes looser construction, repetition, rephrasing, and comment clauses ('you know', 'mind you', 'as it were'). Intonation and pause divide long utterances into manageable chunks, but sentence boundaries are often unclear.

W2 Writing allows repeated reading and close analysis, and promotes the development of careful organisation and compact expression, with often intricate sentence structure. Units of discourse (sentences, paragraphs) are usually easy to identify through punctuation and layout.

S3 Because participants are typically in face-to-face interaction, they can rely on such extralinguistic clues as facial expression and gesture to aid meaning (feedback). The lexicon of speech is often characteristically vague, using words which refer directly to the situation (deictic expression, such as 'that one', 'in here', 'right now').

W3 Lack of visual contact means that participants cannot rely on context to make their meaning clear; nor is there any immediate feedback. Most writing therefore avoids the use of deictic expressions, which are likely to be ambiguous. Writers must also anticipate the effects of the time-lag between production and reception, and the problems posed by having their language read and interpreted by many recipients in diverse settings.

S4 Unique features of speech include most of the prosody. The many nuances of intonation, loudness, tempo, rhythm, and other tones of voice cannot be written down with much efficiency.

W4 Unique features of writing include pages, lines, capitalisation, spatial organisation and several aspects of punctuation. Only a few graphic conventions relate to prosody, such as question marks and underlining for emphasis. Several written genres (e.g. timetables, graphs, complex formulae) cannot be read aloud efficiently, but have to be assimilated visually.

S5 Many words and constructions are characteristic of (especially informal) speech. Lengthy coordinate sentences are normal, and are often of considerable complexity. Nonsense vocabulary is not usually written, and may have no standard spelling ('whatchamacallit'). Obscenity may be replaced by graphic euphemism (f ***). Slang and grammatical informality, such as contracted forms (isn't, he's) may be frowned upon.

W5 Some words and constructions are characteristic of writing, such as multiple instances of subordination in the same sentence, elaborately balanced syntactic patterns, and the long (often multi-page) sentences found in some legal documents. Certain items of vocabulary are never spoken, such as the longer names of chemical compounds.

S6 Speech is very suited to social or 'phatic' functions, such as passing the time of day, or any situation where casual and unplanned discourse is desirable. It is also good at expressing social relationships, and personal opinions and attitudes, due to the vast range of nuances which can be expressed by the prosody and accompanying non-verbal features.

W6 Writing is very suited to the recording of facts and the communication of ideas, and to tasks of memory and learning. Written records are easier to keep and scan; tables demonstrate relationships between things; notes and lists provide mnemonics; and text can be read at speeds which suit a person's ability to learn.

S7 There is an opportunity to rethink an utterance while it is in progress (starting again, adding a qualification). However, errors, once spoken, cannot be withdrawn; the speaker must live with the consequences, interruptions and overlapping speech are normal and highly audible.

W7 Errors and other perceived inadequacies in our writing can be eliminated in later drafts without the reader ever knowing they were

there. Interruptions, if they have occurred while writing, are also invisible in the final product.

BLURRING THE DISTINCTION

One thing linguists learn very early on is never to trust an apparently clear-cut distinction. Sooner or later, they will encounter a use of language which will complicate any simple categorisation. And so it is with speech vs. writing.

The electronic age has brought one type of exception. Speech is normally interactive, we have seen—but not when talking to a telephone answering machine, where we have to produce a monologue while pretending it is a dialogue. And writing is normally not interactive—at least, not in the same way as speech, because of the delay in getting the written message to the reader. Indeed, in many kinds of writing there is little expectation of a reply (none at all, pace the other sense of ‘medium’, when the writer is dead). But the advent of electronic mail and the fax machine have altered the time parameters dramatically. Questions and answers fly around the world now in written form which are very similar to those that would be used if the participants were talking to each other.

MIXED MEDIUM

And lastly, there are the many interesting cases of what has been called mixed medium. Here we choose to use either speech or writing, but the reason for choosing one may require us to bear in mind the existence of the other, and this then influences the nature of the language we use.

When we choose to speak, we usually intend our utterance to be heard immediately. But there are several interesting exceptions, as when we intend our utterance to be heard at a later point in time (telephone answering machines again), or even intend that what we say should not be heard (as when we speak *sotto voce*). We may also intend our utterance to be written down. If so, we may leave the task of

representing what we say to the listener, thus speaking in a relatively ‘natural’ way (as in police statements); or we may speak ‘carefully’, instructing the writer to ignore non-fluencies and errors (as in letter dictation).

When we choose to write, we normally intend that what we have written should be read; and the norm, at least since late classical times, has been for the recipient to read silently. Here too there are several exceptions; for example, we may write with the intention that what we have written should be read aloud, as with those who prepare scripts for radio or television drama or news.

There are also a few situations where speaking and writing are mutually dependent: the language used is partly made up of speaking/listening activities and partly of reading/writing activities, in proportions that are sometimes difficult to disentangle. For example, when we address a group of listeners using an overhead projector, we may keep up a running commentary while we write. In such a case, an audio recording would tell only half the story, as would a photograph of the written work. Both mediums here work together to produce a successful use of language.

A POOL OF RESOURCES

The differences noted between speech and writing are best thought of as trends rather than as absolute distinctions. For example, while it is true that a great deal of speech depends on a shared context, and thus uses many situation-dependent expressions (such as *this/that*, *here/there*), it is not true of all speech. A spoken lecture is usually quite self-contained, except when it refers to handouts or board diagrams. On the other hand, such written material as office memos and personal letters regularly depend on a shared context. ‘Send me another one, will you?’, begins one such memo.

There are few, perhaps no, absolute differences between speech and writing, and there is no single parameter of linguistic variation which can distinguish all spoken from all written genres. Rather, the range of potentially distinguishing linguistic features provides a ‘pool’ of resources which are used by spoken and written genres in various

ways. When we appreciate this, the distinction between speech and writing, far from being obvious and transparent, becomes a complex and intriguing domain of linguistic enquiry.

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