

## Spoken and Written Language as Medium of Communication: A Self-reflection

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### ABSTRACT

Speaking and writing are the most important communicative tools among human beings. While speaking is considered to be older and more widely employed, spoken and written language have not been treated equally. Spoken language is seen as the natural productive tool among people that is more common and normal, whereas written language is seen as being intricate and complicated due to its extensive rules. Therefore, spoken language has attracted the attention of researchers to a greater extent compared to written language due to the belief that spoken language has primacy over written language. This paper is an attempt to shed some light on these two communicative elements and the differences between them. A self-reflection, based on Dewey's (1997) ground-breaking work, is presented in terms of when/where spoken or written language is more appropriate as a medium of communication. It can be argued, therefore, that both speaking and writing are important means of communication without prioritising one over the other; yet, conventions are the real indicators as to which medium of communication is more appropriate.

**Key words:** Communication, Language, Medium, Spoken, Written

### INTRODUCTION

Spoken utterances and written scripts are the most important methods that people use to express their thoughts, feelings and opinions, although it is argued that spoken language has gained more attention than written forms due to its naturalistic behaviour. In recent times, however, the relationship between spoken and written language has caught the attention of linguists, anthropologists, educators and psychologists (See Roberts & Street, 2017; Wiese, 2016; Cook, 2004; Halliday, 1992). In particular, this applies to linguists and teachers who are more concerned with the lexical and grammatical differences between spoken and written language. Therefore, this paper attempts to shed some light on the relationship between the spoken and written forms. Also, it aims to discuss the reasons behind the assumption of the primacy of the spoken over the written form. The paper is divided into seven parts including this introductory section. The second part deals with the literature regarding this issue, followed by a comparison between speech and writing and reviews of some implemented research. Next, the assumption of the primacy of speech over writing is discussed. Before concluding this paper, a self-reflection concerning when to use speech or writing is highlighted.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the creation of mankind, people have been communicating through verbal utterances. Children are a good

example of how a new-born child starts to communicate almost straight away, by using gestures and oral sounds. Afterwards, s/he starts to imitate people around him/her by articulating word sounds. This innate process indicates that speech is the dominant communication medium for human beings. On the other hand, it could be argued that our ancestors used to draw pictures and symbols on rocks or cave walls as a way of communication. However, this type of communication could not be described as a form of language because language must consist of "meaning, words and sounds", which pictures and symbols lack. Moreover, those written pictures and symbols are not called writing either, because writing has the ability to be read aloud, which pictures and symbols lack (Halliday, 1989). Hence, there is no definite agreement about the real meaning of reading (speaking) and writing among linguists. For example, Stubbs (1980:5) suggests that reading is "...the ability to decode written words into spoken words"; however, others have said that this refers to the mechanics of reading. Recently Cook (2004:32), in his attempt to explore the two forms, states that speech is "...spoken sounds passing through the air" whereas writing is "...visible signs on a surface". He simply associates speech with ears, and writing with eyes. In addition, in the 1930s and 1940s, written language was seen as a reflection of spoken language. It was assumed that writing was a secondary system which represents the spoken language. However, Stubbs (1980) argues that this is not true as, if so, learning how to

read would be like transferring language skills from speech to writing. So, he believes that the "...writing system does not represent speech" (p.21).

Instead of the above assumption, spoken and written language could be related to each other. Based on the intention of the speaker and the writer, spoken language on the one hand can be heard, as in conversations, and written, as in dictation. On the other hand, written language can be read, as in silent reading, and spoken, as in reading aloud. For example, Gruner et al. (1967) found that the twenty-five words that participants in his research used most frequently were similar in both speaking and writing. However, spoken language is different from written language due to the distinct modes of acquisition (Akinnaso, 1982). A distinction between speech and writing can be seen in their grammatical structures, because each medium of communication serves a different purpose and function (Smith, 2012). For example, according to Stubbs (1980), writing's administrative functions are "...storage of information, permanency, transportability of information and legal aspects" and its intellectual functions are "building on previous knowledge, discovery of new inventions, and provision for critical analysis". This indicates that each form has its own values.

### SPOKEN VS. WRITTEN MEDIUM

Since the late 1990s, the differences between spoken and written language have attracted the attention of linguists. In particular, the linguistic interconnections between utterances and texts have become of great interest (Gillam & Johnston, 1992). The reasons behind the interest in studying the relationship between spoken and written language, instead of studying each form separately, are first due to the present studies in the field of literacy, which indicate that writing should be examined more precisely in relation to speech rather than in isolation (Miller & Fernandez-Vest, 2006). The second reason is the interest in discourse analysis, which extends the scope of research from just linguistic competence to include data from both spoken and written language. The third reason is the current debate regarding the "linguistic discontinuity hypothesis", which is based on the impact of linguistic incompatibility on the educational achievement of lower-class or minority children (Akinnaso, 1982). Furthermore, others have claimed that reading and writing are symmetrical mirror images. However, in fact, they are not related (Smith, 1973, cited in Stubbs, 1980). Olson (1977:158) states that utterances and texts are in contrast to each other. He argues that "...there is a transition from utterance to text both culturally and developmentally" which means that language can represent the meaning autonomously (PAGE?). Akinnaso (1982) has argued that studies conducted on written and spoken language have a number of shortcomings which might affect their results. These limitations are that:

- 1- Data should be controlled,
- 2- Variables which may affect the findings lack sufficient definition,
- 3- Studies of spoken and written language have focused on the general consequences of writing on language structure, and that written language is more complex than spoken language,

- 4- Most studies were quantitative oriented, and
- 5- The use of limited samples, which concentrated on students and teachers rather than those outside universities.

This argument needs to be considered with regard to further research in order to deepen the understanding between each medium of communication. On the whole, spoken language has primacy over written language chronologically; however, in literate societies written language has social priority over spoken. Logically, although written forms represent spoken words, the representation assumed is not direct, because each is considered as an autonomous system.

### Spoken Medium

Before the 1940s, studies on speech were not feasible due to the lack of availability of tape-recording facilities; therefore, studies conducted at that time were based on what researchers heard and wrote down, which could be a form of written representation. Moreover, Chafe and Tannen (1987) claim that because of the lack of capability in terms of collecting, examining and analysing writing data, spoken language was neglected. Later, when renowned linguists (i.e. Saussure, Spair and Bloomfield) had the ability to collect and analyse spoken language because of the development of modern descriptive linguistics they insisted on the primacy of speech. However, others have seen both speech and writing as being on the same level. Furthermore, it has been stated that writing is "...not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks" (Bloomfield, 1933:21). There are some advantages of spoken language over written. It can be used between people who cannot see each other whether due to darkness, handicaps such as blindness or the inability to use their hands to write. However, some shortcomings of the spoken form are its inability to be used over long distances and its lack of accuracy due to errors in transmitting verbal information, although nowadays recording machines have overcome this limitation. Akinnaso (1982) states that spoken language is acquired naturally, which may explain the assumption of its primacy. So, it is a natural process that makes its acquisition faster, while writing is acquired through learning, which emphasises its status among literate people. Thus, it is a mechanical process that makes its acquisition slower. Speech is more closely related to the situation in which it occurs, which some call "context-dependant". Cook (2004) gives an example of using pronouns such as "He is an idiot" (p.35) that refers to physically existing people the use of which is not possible in the written form. Also, spelling is not important for speakers, unlike for writers, who depend fully on the accuracy of spelling to convey the desired message.

### Written Medium

Although the written form has been seen as secondary to speech, others claim the opposite (Gillam & Johnston, 1992). Some spoken languages do not have a written form; however, this does not mean that writing is not important. Language communities in such countries are fully aware of the importance of writing. Certainly, a language with both

spoken and written forms is more able to communicate socially than a language with only a spoken form. However, assuming that this variance would give spoken language primacy is not correct. Languages with social priority are superior as a form of language. Any community with a writing system has another knowledge resource. Writing is the best form of the production and the transmission function in the case of science, history and literature, compared with a reliance on poor human memory. Indeed, a language with spoken and written forms will use more functions than a language with only a spoken form. According to Popper's (1972) theory regarding theories of knowledge, theories should be written rather than orally discussed, because they can be more easily examined and debated as a result. Therefore, information and theories can exist in books, journals and libraries independently and autonomously. Moreover, knowledge recorded through writing can be kept for a long period of time, and is therefore analysable afterwards, which would not be the case if it were not laid out on paper. For example, Stubbs (1980) mentions that because Egyptian hieroglyphics were written, ancient details can be obtained even "without a knower".

Writing is permanent in that information recorded on paper is available at any time and everywhere. On the other hand, speech is fleeting, since utterances are only available during speech (Cook, 2004). Also, written texts can be read more than once. Consequently, a full understanding can be achieved more easily than with spoken language, in which the hearer has a single chance to understand what the speaker has uttered. Another difference is that written texts can be edited more than once till they reach their final draft, while spoken words are not editable. However, editing written texts is a double-edged weapon, because the language used should be easy to understand as it is the only communication medium between the writer and the reader, and editing may make the text more complex and dense. Written texts are usually shorter than speech due to the lack of repetition, which apparently occurs with spoken utterances. Written texts consist of a larger variety of lexical items than is the case in spoken texts, due to careful editing. In addition, writing is not written speech but is a totally different system. If not, writing would not provide any of the additional functions that it does. Thus, it is very difficult to write down oral utterances literally. An example to demonstrate the variation is to compare transcriptions of an oral discussion with any written document. Moreover, Gillam and Johnston (1992:1304) state that writing and written speech differ because "...written language poses unique conceptual, linguistic, and mechanical constraints". Barnitz (1981) agrees with Stubbs's opinion that isolated letters represent isolated sounds, because writing differs from written speech.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is a growing body of research regarding the relationship between spoken and written language. In this section, reviews of some studies are presented. Lull's (1929) is one of the earliest studies implemented in this area. He asked children in grades 1-8 to write and speak about any topic they

liked. The results showed that students began to write better than they spoke. However, Blankenship (1962) conducted a study by recording the lectures of four university staff and compared them with their writing. Unexpectedly, she found that there is no difference between the two. Another study was conducted by Drieman (1962), in which he asked participants to talk and write about some pictures. He found that they tended to use shorter texts, longer words, more attributives and more varied vocabulary in their writing. A study was carried out by Horowitz and Newman (1964), who examined undergraduates talking and writing on a particular topic. They found that spoken language was more "facile", and that they used more repetition and elaboration in their speech. Gibson et al. (1966) compared students' speech and writing, and found that the spoken language was clearer, more motivating and that simpler vocabulary was used. Gillam and Johnston (1992) conducted a study involving forty school students regarding the differences between spoken and written language. The students were asked to report a story both verbally and in writing. The results revealed that the spoken stories were better linguistically. However, written stories were differently organised than spoken ones. The results of the above studies accentuate the distinction of each medium, and refute the assumption that speech has primacy over writing.

## PRIMACY OF SPEECH

It is controversially disputed whether written language is secondary to spoken language or an independent system. Both sides of the discussion have their own theories and assumptions. Chafe and Tannen (1987) argued that the reason behind claiming primacy with regard to speech is that studies were conducted by researchers from speech departments. They believed that their interests had an impact on their judgment. Moreover, the assumption that speech has primacy over writing is due to the wide spread of spoken language over the latest improvements in writing, the obvious biological nature of speech over writing, the more common use of speech, and the opposition of spoken language to mindful manipulation of several varieties. In detail, Stubbs (1980) classified the primacy of spoken over written language into eight themes:

- 1- Historically, spoken language is older than writing; initially, speaking was the only communication between people, although there is no definite evidence that supports this hypothesis. However, others argue that picture writing is much older than spoken language, which may refute this hypothesis.
- 2- Individually, spoken language comes before writing; this assumption has been reinforced by the fact that all children speak before they write. Moreover, children attain the ability to speak naturally without the need of explicit teaching, unlike in the case of writing.
- 3- Spoken language is innate and biological; deaf children have the ability to babble although they do not hear and therefore imitate, which makes speech purely biological.
- 4- Spoken language opposes conscious manipulation; for instance, when children become adults, it is quite chal-

- lenging for them to change their accent from an accent they gained naturally to a more prestigious accent.
- 5- In societies, spoken language comes before writing; some societies, such as those whose languages are dead, do not have a written form of their spoken language.
  - 6- Although literacy is a widespread phenomenon, it is a very recent event; not all people who have a written form for their language can actually read and write. For example, it has been found that people who cannot read or write comprise about 40% of the world adult population (Malmquist, 1969).
  - 7- Spoken language is used more than writing; people usually speak more than they write. For instance, a study shows that over two months the average person can speak more words than are found in Shakespeare's plays (Halliday et al., 1964:3). However, others argue that in literate societies this assumption may not be accurate.
  - 8- Functions are used more with spoken language than with written language; for example, spoken language is used with a different range of functions, such as from casual conversations to formal speech, while writing is not.

Moreover, one of the assumptions that reinforce the claim of the primacy of spoken language is the "symbols of symbols" which means that spoken language is a symbol of things or thoughts, whereas written language is a symbol of spoken words (Stubbs, 1980).

On the other hand, written languages have the priority of social functions over spoken language. It has social priority, especially in literate societies. The writing system that someone possesses indicates his/her education, which can therefore be considered in terms of social prestige. However, it is not acquired as naturally as the spoken form. Moreover, written forms are more reliable in law, financial agreements, signatures and contracts between people, than spoken language. For instance, spelling is very important in writing as the modification of a single letter may change the meaning of a whole written document. In addition, written language can be superior to spoken language in the way they affect each other. It has been argued as to which form most affects the other. For instance, a spelling mistake might influence pronunciation; however, it does not have the same impact as pronunciation influenced by spelling because it rarely occurs. Akinnaso (1982:104) states that writing, in contrast with speech, stimulates:

- 1- The use of extensive syntactic and semantic structures,
- 2- The use of subordinate more than coordinate constructions,
- 3- The use of subject predicate constructions rather than reference propositions,
- 4- The use of declaratives and subjunctives rather than imperatives, interrogatives and exclamation,
- 5- The use of passive rather than active voice verbs,
- 6- The use of definite articles rather than demonstrative modifiers and deictic terms,
- 7- The overuse of particular grammatical structures,
- 8- The construction of complete information and idea units,
- 9- Organizing ideas based on deliberate methods and

- 10- The elimination of redundancies such as repetitions and false starts.

### A SELF-REFLECTION

It is believed among educators and researchers that the practice of 'self-reflection' has its own merits (Mann et al., 2009; Lew & Schmidt, 2011). According to Dewey (1997), it emphasized the impact of reflection in improving students and teachers' critical thinking and professional development. Social functions greatly affect the choice of communication style, and determine whether oral or written means of communication should be used. It is not always straightforward to choose which communication type to use as the choice has a number of implications. Moreover, social situations and conventions have an impact on which type of communication medium should be used. It can be assumed that by choosing speech as the medium of communication, the context is dependent on other variables such as facial expressions, gestures, intonations and physical reactions. However, by choosing writing as a medium of communication, the context is free of any such variables, which may affect the conveying of the message. It can be assumed that writers rely heavily on their scripts to convey their message, while a speaker can use the situation and other variables to help him/her to convey the message. By deciding which form should be used in a specific situation, some principles need to be considered, such as whether the situation is formal or informal, monologic or interactive, public or private.

Currently, I'm teaching senior university students which means that I am employing both speaking and writing in my classroom communication, both of which are considered productive skills. Yet, speech is the dominant medium to communicate with them because of its naturalistic behaviour. Other variables such as emotions delivered through the use of the voice will definitely make speech more desirable. Prompt response and feedback are also an advantage that supports the use of speaking. Moreover, in daily life activities, it is easier to order something, ask for directions, greet people, go shopping, visit a hospital, and talk to family or friends via speech, rather than writing, as this is context-dependant. Another situation in which I would use speech rather than writing is in cases of emergency, whether by phone or face-to-face, due to the need for a quick reaction, although the current availability of online phone-apps makes writing much easier than before. Finally, I can claim that in any context-dependant situation, speech is preferable.

On the other hand, writing is preferable with regard to formal activities. For instance, as a teacher at the university, assessments are mostly conveyed through writing which, in contrast, help me document and store the students' outcome and make them applicable for further revision. In addition, I prefer to contact my students and colleagues via written emails rather than speech due to the heavy workload that sometimes may limit the time available for oral discussions. Hence, I can send a written email at any time and I will get a response in a shorter and more convenient time. Moreover, for documentation purposes, the written form is better to use with actions involving official documentation because

written documents are more reliable than speech due to their permanent validity and usage (Cook, 2004). Lastly, it can be assumed that in a situation that is context-free, writing is more desirable.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, there is no definite agreement on the nature of the differences or similarities between the two forms of communication. It seems that both speech and writing are equally important, productive and autonomous. It is impossible to rely on only one medium, especially in the EFL context where learners are supposed to participate equally through spoken and written forms. Spoken language does not have primacy over written language. Each form is distinct from the other, and has its own merits and drawbacks. Writing is an autonomous language while speech is not. The studies reviewed in this paper support the claim of equality. Conventions are what determine which medium of communication is to be used in any one situation as communities vary according to their use of each medium and the purpose of such use. Therefore, the arguments discussed in this paper regarding speech primacy over writing, or the assumption that writing is secondary, are not accurate and should be reassessed.

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