Writing and Speaking

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IT IS POPULARLY ASSUMED that everyone has always realized the difference between writing and speaking. Obviously, one is written and the other is spoken. At the same time, however, most people realize that the problem is not quite so simple. After all, writing can be spoken and speaking can be written. But that idea is precisely the source of the confusion: for it is not the writing that is spoken nor is it the speaking that is written, but rather the language in both cases! Writing and speaking are but reflections of language. As such, they are frequently identified with each other. It is not surprising, then, that comparisons are made between the two. In fact, a kind of folklore has evolved on the subject.

In the literature of contemporary linguistics, for instance, there seems to be imbedded the doctrine that a written text is but an imperfect representation of a possible spoken utterance. Lacking the accompaniment of facial expression, other forms of gesture, and especially "the rich resources of the human voice," writing is said to offer instead only a small number of rather limited cues supplied by the text and its punctuation. And so it has been said that only an individual who has a considerable mastery of the spoken language is able to infer how a written text might reasonably be spoken. As to whether most readers (or, for that matter, most writers) make such inferences as they read (or write) is quite another matter. Indeed, if the ability to make such inferences were actually necessary, who could understand languages that are no longer spoken (i.e., "dead" languages)? Still, writing has been characterized as a "derived and secondary system" of expression by Edward Sapir; a "way of recording" speech "by means of visible marks" by Leonard Bloomfield; and a "reminding system to the native speaker of something someone said or could say" by Henry Lee Smith, Jr.

Writing, however, has not gone undefended in this controversy. As compared to speaking, writing has been said to be a "more deliberate mode of expression" and a "more intellectualized medium." In form and content alike, writing "implies more care and attention than the spoken word, which is impulsive and spontaneous in its very essence. *Hence the relatively higher level of style peculiar to writing.*" (The words are Stephen Ullmann's; the italics are ours.) Though many border-line cases are allowed, by and large, "writing sets a higher standard of expression than speech, and its influence throughout history has been exerted in that direction."

It should be obvious that there is no contest in this dispute. The two sides are simply not talking to the same points. One side argues that the historical primacy of speaking and the greater number of dimensions inherent in the vocal-auditory channel are evidence of the superiority of speaking over writing. The other side presents writing solely as a deliberate mode of expression, apparently the product of emendation and revision in contrast to speaking, which is conceived solely as impulsive and spontaneous in its very essence. The occurrence of either impulsive and spontaneous written expression or of deliberate and edited spoken expression seems to have been overlooked entirely. It should be obvious that

any complete appraisal of writing and speaking must take all four possibilities into consideration. The assessment of the differences between a carefully attended activity on the one hand and an impulsive and spontaneous one on the other is asymmetrical, to say the least. A true examination of the difference between writing and speaking implies *the same conditions of expression.*

This was precisely what we set out to do. A series of experiments was therefore designed to examine the nature of expression in both written and spoken form produced *under the same conditions.* The complete report of these experiments was published in the June 1964 issue of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* (LXVIII, 640-47). It is the purpose of the present article to discuss the results and implications of these experiments as they may pertain to the special interests of the readers of *College Composition and Communication.*

As for the experiments themselves, suffice it to say here that two topics were selected to be presented as questions to a group of subjects. The topics were selected because (a) they evoked ideas easily, although each required some thinking; (b) they were arguable, but did not lead to argumentativeness; and (c) they were nearly equally balanced linguistically and psychologically. The topics used were "What does a good teacher mean to you?" and "What does a good citizen mean to you?" In the first experiment, forty college students were chosen at random, twenty of whom spoke on one topic and wrote on the other, and the other twenty reversed the procedure. Each subject was presented a topic, asked to think about it for thirty seconds, and then to say (or write) all he could about the topic for a period of two minutes.

The thirty-second thought period was designed to assure a flow of ideas with a minimum of time-consuming or labored thinking during the experimental period. The two-minute experimental period provided a basis of comparison of spoken and written expression with longer experimental periods of written expression. The written expositions were done with pencil and paper provided by the experimenters. The spoken expositions were also recorded in the experimenters' presence.

Three groups of subjects were used in the second experiment which simply extended the time for writing. The subjects in the first group were tested under identical conditions to the first experiment except that they were told they would be allowed four minutes for writing and were stopped at that time. The second group was told that they would be given six minutes to write but were actually allowed eight minutes if they were still writing after six minutes had elapsed. The third group was given no time limitations in their instructions for writing. Pretesting had indicated that twelve minutes would permit the production of an approximately equal number of words in writing as had been spoken in two minutes; and so all subjects were stopped after twelve minutes had elapsed.

The data from both experiments were analyzed in two major ways designed to reveal differences in the character of written and spoken utterance. First, type-token ratio (TTR) analyses were made. This method of analysis investigates the form, or quantitative aspect, of an utterance by comparing the occurrence of word-types with the frequency of their token recurrence. Thus, in the utterance "The boy hit the ball," the word-type *the* has two tokens, while the word-types *boy, hit,* and *ball* have one token. The TTR of this utterance, then, would be ⅘ or .8, which is within the normal range for English.

Second, a psychological analysis was made to catalogue the number and types of units of expression and to determine differences in other aspects of content

between the two modes. These units were catalogued as follows. *Ideas* were defined as utterances that expressed a thought or concept in a meaningful, relevant, and unique way. An exposition of material that made sense, cognitively, to the experimenters was considered "meaningful," regardless of its grammatical construction or rhetorical presentation. Relevance, of course, was largely determined by the topic, and only material that had direct bearing on the topic and its particular development was considered relevant. Uniqueness referred to nonrepetitiveness. There is a tendency, especially under pressure, for ideas to be repeated, rephrased, or refurbished, but otherwise to remain essentially the same. Such reiterations were not considered to be additional ideas.

Idea utterances that were repeated, rephrased, or refurbished were catalogued as *subordinate ideas,* regardless of whether they may actually have been subordinate to, coordinate with, or even superordinate to their primal utterance. Though relevant to the topic, subordinate ideas are not unique: they expand previously presented material. Meaningful material that derived from the topic but did not bear directly on it or its particular development, regardless of whether it was unique or not, was catalogued under the heading of *ancillary ideas.*

The remainder of the material expressed was categorized under the heading of *signals.* These were so called because they served to signal to the speaker (or writer) his awareness of his own physical presence and of his activity in the process of expression while in the presence of the experimenters. Much of the linguistic material of which signals are constructed is that required by the grammar of the language and the conventions of its usage. At least as much more of this linguistic material, however, is the product of the psychological pressures put upon the speaker (or writer) in the experimental situation. Though an analysis of such signal material deserves separate consideration, some of the more common and obvious instances are worth mentioning here.

The subject who would start an utterance by saying (or writing) something like "Well, in the first place, let me say that . . ." was producing what is here called signal material. Linguistically, such utterance segments can be grammatically or rhetorically justified. Psychologically, of course, their genesis may be otherwise considered. In any case, since they signalled that the sender was about to transmit an idea, such utterance segments were catalogued as *communicative signals.*

In other instances, a subject might say something like "I can't think of what [else] to say"—and yet go on to produce cognitive material anyway. Sometimes he might interject something like "How much time do I have left?" Such material was catalogued as *orientation signals.* Signals of any kind were not considered as ideas of any type, regardless of any other criteria that might pertain, because they were not relevant to a cognitive response to the question posed or requisite to the expression of such a response.

Thus, these experiments showed that even when spoken expression and written expression are reduced by control to their most basic levels, a great many differences exist between them. Perhaps the greatest part of these differences is a function of the greater muscular facility of speaking as compared to writing. A direct result of this greater facility is a significantly greater number of word-tokens produced per unit time in speaking, as was shown in the TTR's. More important, however, is the fact that spoken expression produces from its greater amount of token-material a significantly greater number of ideas of all kinds (viz., main ideas, subordinate ideas, and ancillary ideas) as well as of

the other expression units catalogued. Speaking is more prolix than writing and so is less efficient in terms of number of ideas per word per unit time. As the time allowed was increased, however, the TTR's of the written samples became lower and lower until, at twelve minutes, they became almost the same as they were for the two-minute spoken samples, indicating a lessening efficiency in this regard in writing as well.

Writing also differs from speaking in style. Not only is there a greater repetition of word-tokens in ratio to word-types in speaking, but phrases and sentences are also repeated to a much greater degree than in writing. It was common in the spoken samples, for instance, for subjects to state an idea and then to restate it virtually verbatim, partially for emphasis and partially for elaboration. This rarely occurred in the written samples.

Facility of utterance is certainly an underlying factor in producing these differences, but it is not the only one. Psychologically, written expression represents a more serious commitment than speaking and apparently represents a more permanent record to the subject than even a recorded spoken statement. There is something about putting pen to paper to record ideas that creates inhibitions that seemingly do not exist in recording ideas by means of speech. Apparently the subject feels that what is spoken can be retracted, disavowed, or excused on the grounds of lingual slippage or the failure to realize fully the import of what was said under the pressure of saying it. What is written down, however, can stand as a self-incrimination forever.

These characteristics need not be regarded as shortcomings or deficiencies in either case. Full advantage may well be taken of them in the separate practice of the two different modes of expression. For instance, whether it be done before pen is put to paper or after a first draft is formulated even as one is writing, the revision and emendation which are so integral a part of the process of written utterance can help bring about the very elegance of style and standard of expression which was formerly considered inherent in it. Since prolixity and repetition are so characteristic of spontaneous speaking, advantage may well be taken of them in the phrasing of ideas and their expression in spoken form.

A tremendous amount of new material is produced in spoken expression by virtue of the fact that the subject does not remember precisely what he said a moment ago. The subject's apparent feeling of less compulsion for good form and apt phrasing in speaking under pressure also seems to exist in different degrees no matter what the particular situation. Spoken expression can, therefore, be frequently disjunctive, if not actually disjointed. This does not seem to be nearly as characteristic of written expression. The record is spread before one as he writes, and one reads it before writing the next sentence. Few of the subjects tested wrote freely or in telegraphic style, perhaps because they tried to have a presentable exposition in terms of complete sentences and acceptable grammar. This was rarely, if ever, the case in spoken expression.

Under the conditions of these experiments, it turned out that although speaking may be "looser" in style and structure than writing, it is not vaguer than writing in message content, as has been widely reported. Perhaps speaking is "looser" in this sense because it is less inhibited than writing, because of its greater facility in output as a result of greater practice and lesser effort, and because these circumstances permit the speaker to come more directly and immediately to the point *if he so chooses*, regardless of the strictures of sentence structure and the rules of good grammar. Writing is more constrict-

ing in terms of grammatical and syntactical demands than speaking if for no other reason than the fact that the writer sees before him the sentences that he has initiated and so feels compelled to complete them as well as he can. Speakers often seem not to remember—or simply to disregard—the introductory clause in the utterance of a single sentence. Disjointed sentences, or anacolutha, are so frequent in speaking as to be characteristic of it. Still, *under the same conditions of expression,* speaking is richer, fuller, and more precise than writing because of its greater elaboration of ideas as here described.

Writing seems to be regarded as more exact, more precise, and clearer than speaking. Hence, it seems that ideas in writing need not be elaborated and proliferated to the extent they are in speaking. And yet it is precisely this verbosity, this prolixity, even these repetitions that cause speaking to seem richer, fuller, and more to the point than writing. Stories and anecdotes are not told in the course of writing as they are in speaking; and examples and illustrations are fewer, certainly sparser, than they are in speaking. A writer tends to answer the question, while the speaker tends to "meander." Yet this very "meandering" seems to generate such stuff as speaking is made of, distinguishing it from writing in diction, structure and style.

It is possible that part of the difference between written and spoken expression is a function of the tendency in speaking to fill in "empty space," especially silence. Even a ten-second pause seemed to create noticeable uneasiness. Though silence tended to be filled in with signal material and repetitions of previously presented and/or developed relevant and non-relevant ideas, new ideas were also produced, frequently consequent to the compulsion simply to fill up the silence with the sound of the speaker's voice.

Finally, our data have led us to a psychological conclusion. Writing and speaking clearly represent different strata of the person. Although both functions funnel thought processes, speaking evidences more feeling, more emotive expression, and more "first thoughts that come to mind," while writing is more indicative of the intellectualized, rational, and deliberate aspects of the person.

Though the rhetorical implications of these experiments are considerable, any specific suggestions in regard to the teaching of written and spoken composition should await the results of further studies along these lines that are currently in progress. It should, however, be very clear that *although writing and speaking can represent each other, that fact should not be taken to mean that they are aspects of each other.* Writing and speaking share in the manifestation and communication of language. Otherwise they are fundamentally and essentially different—as modes of verbal formulation and expression, as indicators of different psychological aspects of the person, and as channels of communication.

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