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Oral and Literate Strategies in Spoken and Written Discourse

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What Is Discourse?

The term "discourse" has been used by many people in many different ways, some using the term to refer to face-to-face conversation (e.g., Coulthard); others, to refer to two hypothetical sentences in a row (e.g., Bolinger). I use it to mean anything "beyond the sentence"—any two or more sentences taken together to form a text in any mode.

Charles Fillmore once opened a class on text analysis with the following demonstration of textness. Imagine a sign posted at a swimming pool that says, POOL FOR MEMBERS' USE ONLY. Now imagine a sign posted at a swimming pool that says, PLEASE USE REST ROOMS, NOT THE POOL. And now imagine these two warnings placed together: PLEASE USE REST ROOMS, NOT THE POOL. POOL FOR MEMBERS' USE ONLY. These two sentences are funny when they are juxtaposed in this order because the interpretation of "use" is carried over from the first sentence to the second. Meaning spills beyond words and sentences when they are joined in discourse.

Thus I am using the terms "discourse" and "text" interchangeably,¹ and although I use "discourse" in this essay, I might just as well have chosen to use "text." The point is simply to refer to a stream of language as opposed to sentences taken out of context. I should also add that in my own studies of discourse and in the work of others that I refer to, I only concern myself with actual discourse—spoken or written language that has actually been produced and used by people in real contexts.

Why Spoken versus Written Language?

If discourse is a stream of language, spoken or written, why talk about spoken versus written language? In addressing questions of literacy with a view to helping educators meet future social requirements for reading and writing, we immediately confront the question of what it is about reading and writing that

makes them so difficult to master. Why is it that every child learns to talk fluently, while many never learn to write with anything near fluency?

Investigating the relation between spoken and written language is crucial to understanding how language works for people. Theoretical linguists of many different traditions continually seek to understand the underlying structures and recurrent patterns that distinguish the two by analyzing different kinds of discourse. In what follows, however, I suggest that the distinction between writing and speech, literacy and orality, is not primary but that the differences between them may in fact grow out of other factors: specifically, communicative goals and relative focus on interpersonal involvement.

Past studies of spoken versus written language have typically compared conversation to expository prose (or "essayist literacy" [Olson]). These genres have not been the focus of such research by chance. There is something typically spoken about conversation and something typically written about expository prose. But by limiting our analysis to these genres, we are likely to draw conclusions about spoken and written language that are incorrect. For instance, contrary to what a comparison of these genres suggests, strategies typically associated with spoken discourse can be and are used in writing, and strategies typically associated with written language are likewise realized in speech.

In this essay I show how both spoken and written discourse can each reflect both oral and literate strategies. Further, I make the perhaps radical suggestion that oral strategies may underlie successful production of written discourse. Before proceeding, however, I will sketch briefly what these oral and literate strategies are.

Two Hypotheses about Spoken versus Written Discourse

Two general hypotheses have been made about spoken versus written discourse: one is that written language is decontextualized while spoken language is highly context-bound; the other, that spoken discourse establishes cohesion through paralinguistic cues while written discourse relies more on lexicalization.

The Contextualization Hypothesis

Three major arguments have been introduced by scholars in support of the view that spoken discourse is highly context-bound. First, a speaker can refer to the context of immediate surroundings visible to both speaker and hearer. For example, I can say, "Look at this!" and rely on hearers to see what "this" refers to. A writer and a reader, however, are generally separated in time and place, so immediate context is lost. Second, speakers are free to be minimally explicit since confused hearers can ask for clarification on the spot.² Readers, however, can't ask for clarification when confused, so writers must anticipate all likely confusion and head it off by filling in necessary background information and all

the steps of a logical argument. Third, speakers normally share similar social backgrounds and hence all sorts of assumptions about the world, their mutual or respective histories, and so on. Writer and reader, however, are likely to share minimal social context, so the writer cannot make assumptions about shared attitudes.

Clearly, in such a schema, "spoken discourse" is typically spontaneous face-to-face conversation, and "written discourse" is typically expository prose. For these genres it makes sense to hypothesize that spoken language is highly context-bound, while written language is decontextualized. But I suspect that the differences between conversation and expository prose are due not to the fact that one is spoken and the other written, but to the communicative goals inherent in each. In face-to-face spontaneous conversation (e.g., dinner-table conversation), the fact of speaking is relatively more important than the content of the message conveyed. That is, what Malinowski calls "phatic communion" is relatively significant in the interaction. It is almost a form of talk for talk's sake. In fact, most of what is said in social settings is not new information. But that is not to say that the communication is not important. Quite the contrary, something very important is communicated—what Bateson calls the metamessage: a statement about the relation between interactants.³ Far from being unimportant, such messages (e.g., "I am well disposed toward you," "I'm angry at you," and the like) are the basis for carrying on the interaction.

Expository prose is a special genre in which content is relatively important. Thus Kay points out that the form of discourse that has been associated with writing—what he aptly calls "autonomous language"—has come with technological advancement. A complex technological society has need for much communication, typically among strangers, in which interpersonal involvement is beside the point, and communication is more efficiently carried out if such involvement is conventionally ignored. (This convention may be peculiarly American or at least Western. It certainly creates misunderstandings when American business executives try to ignore personal involvement and get right down to business with Japanese, Arabs, or Greeks, for whom the establishment of personal relations must lay the groundwork for any business dealings.)

Thus, it is not a coincidence that the genres of conversation and expository prose have been the focus of study for linguists interested in spoken versus written language. There is something typically "written" about content-focused communication; indeed it was the innovation of print that made communication with people in other social contexts popular. And there is something typically "oral" about interpersonal involvement. In communicating with friends or family, it is hard to focus exclusively on content. (Hence the common observation that one should not take driving lessons from spouses and parents, and the fact that any comment can touch off a fight between speakers or any comment can seem particularly charming, depending on the place of the interaction in the history of the relationship between participants.)

But a look at other genres will show the conclusions discussed above to

be faulty. In some personal letters, for example, the fact of communication is more important than content. Certainly it is just as possible and common to *write* a lot of nothing as it is to whisper sweet nothings with just as much satisfaction for all concerned. Note passing in school is another example of written communication that contradicts the contextualization hypothesis since the copresence of writer and reader makes it possible for the writer to refer to the context of immediate surroundings and for the reader to ask for clarification on the spot. Similarly, oral communication is often minimally context-bound and very content-focused, as in lectures and radio or television broadcasts.⁴ Ritual language also makes use of literate strategies in that the speaker performs a chant or ceremony that was composed long ago by authors far away, addressed to a large and impersonal audience (see Chafe, "Integration").

Thus, the above discussion makes possible two sets of observations. First, while the contextualization hypothesis is applicable to certain types of discourse, it does not apply to written and spoken language *per se*. Second, differences in discourse types spring not from their status as written or spoken language but from their communicative goals. And it appears that the goals of one-way communication differ as a rule from those of two-way communication.⁵ One-way communication is typically associated with relatively more focus on conveying a message (i.e., content is important), while two-way communication is typically associated with relatively more focus on interpersonal involvement.

A final observation about the close connection between interpersonal involvement and speaking on the one hand and between focus on content and writing on the other concerns the differing levels of "immediacy" involved in each mode. The slowness of writing makes it an ill-formed medium for the communication of nonsignificant content. In communicating with deaf people, for instance, when writing is the only medium available for communication, I have found myself choosing not to communicate all sorts of relatively unimportant asides because they didn't seem worth the trouble of writing.⁶ And yet it is just such seemingly meaningless interchange that creates a social relationship. That is precisely why deafness is such a terrible handicap: it is socially isolating.

Cohesion in Spoken and Written Discourse

A second hypothesis that has been made about spoken versus written discourse is that cohesion is accomplished in spoken discourse through paralinguistic and prosodic cues, whereas in written discourse, cohesion must be lexicalized (Chafe, "Integration"; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz; Gumperz, Kaltman, and O'Connor; Ochs).

In spoken communication, everything is said at some pitch, in some tone of voice, at some speed, with some expression or lack of expression in the voice and on the face. All these nonverbal and paralinguistic features reveal the speaker's attitude toward the message and establish cohesion—that is, show relations

among ideas; show their relative importance; foreground and background information, and so on. Just as Bateson observes that in a social setting one cannot not communicate (the act of keeping silent is a communication within the frame of interaction), one cannot speak without showing one's attitude toward the message and the speech activity.

In contrast, nonverbal and paralinguistic features are not available in writing. You may wrinkle your face up until it cracks while you write, but this expression will not show up on the written page. You may yell or whisper or sing as you compose sentences, but the words as they fall on the page will not reflect this behavior.⁷ Therefore, in writing, the relations among ideas and the writer's attitude toward them must be lexicalized. There are a number of ways to make those relations clear: for example, (1) by making outright statements (e.g., instead of laughing while saying something one may write "humorously" or instead of winking while speaking one may write, "I don't mean this literally");⁸ (2) by carefully choosing words with just the right connotation; or (3) by using complex syntactic constructions, transitional phrases, and so on. Thus a number of linguists have found that in spoken narrative (and here the genre narrative is important) most ideas are strung together with no conjunctions or the minimal conjunction "and" (Chafe, "Integration"; Kroll; Ochs). In contrast, in written narrative, conjunctions are chosen that show the relation between ideas (e.g., "so," "because") and subordinate constructions are used to do some of the work of foregrounding and backgrounding that would be done paralinguistically in speaking.⁹

Thus we have the second hypothesis: spoken discourse typically relies on paralinguistic and nonverbal channels whereas written discourse relies on lexicalization for the establishment of cohesion. An examination of varied discourse types shows this hypothesis to be valid.

Oral and Literate Strategies in Discourse

The idea that spoken discourse can exhibit strategies associated with orality and literacy (that is, with typically spoken- or writtenlike discourse) can be traced to Bernstein's research into children's use of language.¹⁰ Bernstein found that children's discourse, as elicited by experimental tasks, fell into two stylistic types, which he identified as restricted and elaborated "codes." In describing a picture, a child using restricted code, for example, might say, "They hit it through there and he got mad." A child using elaborated code might say, "The children were playing ball and hit the ball through the window. The man who lived in the house got mad at them." The second version is easier to understand only when the picture is not in view. Though Bernstein did not associate these two codes with orality and literacy, Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz point out that the overt lexicalization of background material in the elaborated code is akin to literacy.

I would now like to cite some of my own and others' work to demonstrate that both written and spoken discourse can reflect either oral or literate strategies. First I will show some uses of oral and literate strategies in spoken discourse, and then I will do the same in written.

Preparation for Literacy in Oral Discourse in School

Let us assume that typically oral strategies are those that are highly context-bound, that require maximal contribution from the audience in supplying background information and doing interpretive work, and that depend on paralinguistic and nonverbal cues instead of on lexicalization for cohesion and evaluation. Literate strategies, we will suppose, are more decontextualized, require less audience contribution in supplying necessary information and connections, and rely on lexicalization to show the author's attitude toward material and the relationship among parts of the text.

Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz suggest that children make a "transition to literacy" when they go to school. Michaels and Cook-Gumperz analyzed in detail an oral discourse activity in a first-grade classroom that prepares children for a literate approach to information: "sharing time." During sharing time, children are expected to address the entire class and tell about one thing that is very important. Although the children are in face-to-face communication and they share context in many ways, the teacher encourages them to repeat known information in order to give a "complete" discourse appropriate to sharing time. Michaels and Collins, in a similar study, give the example of a child who brought to class two candles she had made in day camp and began to talk about them "using highly context-bound expressions and gestures." She said, for example, "This one came out blue and I don't know what this color is." The teacher encouraged the child to produce a more literate-style discourse: "Tell the kids how you do it from the very start. Pretend we don't know a thing about candles." The teacher's use of "from the very start" and "pretend" emphasizes the counter-intuitive nature of literate discourse. The injunction to "pretend we don't know a thing about candles" sets up the reader-as-blank-slate idealization that underlies much expository writing.

Michaels and Cook-Gumperz observed that the children in this first grade class fell into two groups with respect to how they performed during sharing time and consequently how much reinforcement from the teacher and practice in literate-style discourse they received. Some children tended to lexicalize connections and focus on the main point, whereas others usually accomplished this cohesion with special intonation patterns. To better document these differences, Michaels and her coworkers showed a short film to the children and had them tell someone what they saw in the film.¹¹ These experimentally elicited narratives also exhibit oral-based and literate-based strategies in spoken narratives (Michaels and Collins).

Michaels and Collins found that literate-style speakers used complex syntactic constructions and lexicalization to identify the man, whereas oral-style speakers used special intonation patterns. For example, a literate-style speaker said,

.. there was a man /
... that was ... picking some ... pears //

Notice that she introduced the man by using an independent clause ("there was ...") and then identified him by using a relative clause ("that was picking some pears"). In contrast, a child characterized as oral-style introduced the same character by using two independent clauses:

it was about / ... this *mān* /
he was um / ... um ... takes some um ... *pēach*—/
... some ... *pēā:rs* off the *tēē* /

Even more striking is the difference in the way these two speakers identified the man when he reappeared in the last scene. The literate-style speaker used a restrictive appositive, a relative clause beginning with "who":

... and then / ... they ... walked by the man /
who gave / ... *wh-who* was picking the *pēārs* //

In contrast, the oral-style speaker again used two independent clauses, identifying the man as the same one previously mentioned by using what Michaels and Collins describe as a high rise-fall intonational contour on the word "man":

... and when that ... when he *pa:ssed* /
by that *mā:n* /
... the man ... the *mā:n* came out the *tēē* /

A special intonational contour on "man" signaled, "You know which man I mean, the one I mentioned before."

Michaels and Collins further wanted to compare children's speech style with their written discourse styles, so they included in their study fourth-grade children who saw the film and both told and wrote narratives about it. Oral-literate style differences appeared in the oral narratives of the fourth graders, very much like those described for first graders; furthermore, the children who used literate style strategies in speaking were able to write unambiguous prose, whereas the children who relied on paralinguistic channels in speaking were more likely to write discourse that was ambiguous. In other words, the children neglected to make the switch and lexicalize connections that were lost with the paralinguistic channel.

Oral and Literate Strategies in Conversational Style

I turn now to my own research on conversational style. By tape-recording and transcribing two and a half hours of naturally occurring conversation at Thanksgiving dinner among six participants of various ethnic and geographic backgrounds, I was able to describe the linguistic and paralinguistic features that

made up participants' speaking styles in this setting. I focused on such features as pacing, rate of speech, overlap and interruption, intonation, pitch, loudness, syntactic structures, topic, storytelling, irony, humor, and so on (Tannen, *Conversational Style*). Many of these features turned out to cluster in the styles of participants such that three of them seemed to share what might be called one style, while the other three clearly did not share this style.¹² I have called the "dominant" style high-involvement, since many of the features that characterize it can be understood as serving the goals of interpersonal involvement. In this sense the style can be associated with oral strategies. The others, who did not share this style, expected speakers to use strategies that may be seen as more literatelike in style.

One way in which the different patterns of speech emerged was in the speakers' attitudes toward and tendency to use overlapped or simultaneous speech. Three of the participants in the conversation I studied were what I call "cooperative overlappers." That is, two or more of them often talked at the same time, but this overlapping speech did not mean they were not listening to each other, and it did not mean that they wanted to grab the floor—that is, to interrupt each other.¹³ Often, a listener talked at the same time as a speaker to show encouragement, or showed understanding by uttering "response cries" (Goffman), told ministories to demonstrate understanding, or finished the speaker's sentences to demonstrate that the listener knew where the sentence was headed. All this overlapping gives the speaker the assurance that he or she isn't in the conversation alone. The active listeners often asked questions of the speaker, which the speaker obviously would have answered anyway, not to indicate that they thought the speaker would not get to that point but to assure the speaker that the information was eagerly awaited. (Space does not permit the presentation of examples to demonstrate this type of interaction, as they require detailed discussion and line-by-line explication, but such examples and analysis can be found in many of my articles on conversational style.)

The preference for overlapping talk in some settings has been reported among numerous ethnic groups—Armenian-American, Black-American, West Indian, Cape Verdean-American, to name just a few. This preference sacrifices the clear relay of information for the show of conversational involvement, and in that sense, it is typically interactive or oral as opposed to literate in style. The effect of overlapping or "chiming in" with speakers who share this style is to grease the conversational wheels. But when speakers use this device with others who do not expect or understand its use, the effect is quite the opposite. The other speaker, feeling interrupted, stops talking. A paradoxical aspect of this style clash is that the interruption is actually created by the one who stops talking when she or he was expected to continue. Yet this reaction is natural for anyone who assumes that in conversation only one person speaks at a time. Such a strategy is literate in style in the sense that it puts emphasis on content, on uttering a complete message, on a kind of elaborated code.¹⁴

Another aspect of the differences between oral and literate strategies that emerged in this study of conversational style is how speakers got to the point of their stories (i.e., narratives of personal experience), and what the point of their stories was likely to be. In the conversation of speakers whose style I have characterized as oral-like: (1) more stories were told, (2) the stories were more likely to be about their personal experiences, (3) the point of the story was more likely to concern their own feelings about those experiences, and, perhaps most important, (4) the point of the story was generally not lexicalized but was dramatized by recreating the speaker's own reaction to or mimicry of the characters in the narrative.

These differences in storytelling styles left all participants feeling a bit dissatisfied with the narratives told by those who used a different style. Both tended to react to stories told in the other style with a variant of "What's the point?"—the rejoinder Labov has aptly called "withering."

Only the briefest examples can be given here, but detailed examples and discussion can be found in Tannen, "Implications" and *Conversational Style*.

The following is an example of a story told during Thanksgiving dinner by Kurt.¹⁵

(1) K: I have a little seven-year-old student ... a little girl who
wears those. Shé is too →
p

(2) T: She wears those? [chuckle]

K: múch. Can yóu imagine? She's seven years old, and she sits in her
acc
chair and she goes [squeals and squirms in his seat.]
acc

(3) T: Oh:: Go::d. ... She's only SEVen?

(4) K: And I say well .. hów about let's do sò-and-so. And she says
acc
...^rOkay. ...^rjust like thát.
[squealing]

(5) T: Oh::::
p

(6) D: What does it méan.
p, acc

(7) K: It's just so ...^rshe's acting like such a little girl already.
p

It is clear from the transcript that the two listeners, David and I (represented in the transcript as D and T respectively), have different reactions to the story. In (3) and (5) I show, through paralinguistically exaggerated responses, that I have appreciated the story. In contrast, David states in (6) that he doesn't understand what the story is supposed to mean. When I played this segment of the

taped conversation to David later, he said that Kurt hadn't said what it was about the girl's behavior that he was trying to point out. Moreover, when Kurt answered David's question in (7), he didn't explain at all; David said that "such a little girl" to him means "such a grown-up," whereas what Kurt meant was "such a coquette." David seemed to feel that Kurt wasn't telling the story right; he should have said what he meant. To Kurt, the point was obvious and should not be stated.

At other times in the transcript David tells about his experiences, and there the reactions of Kurt and the other oral-strategy-stylists indicate that they feel David is unnecessarily stating the obvious and not getting to the point quickly enough (see Tannen, *Conversational Style*, for examples and analysis).

By expecting the point of a story to be made explicit and by finding events more important than characters' feelings, some of the participants in this conversation were exhibiting expectations of literatelike strategies in speech. By expecting the point of a story to be dramatized by the speaker and inferred by the hearer and by finding personal feelings more interesting than events, the other speakers were exhibiting oral-like strategies.

It is particularly significant that the speakers in my study who used oral strategies are highly literate. Many of the studies that have distinguished oral and literate strategies in spoken discourse have done so to explain the failure of children of certain ethnic groups to learn to write and read well. The speakers I have found using oral strategies in speaking are New Yorkers of East European Jewish background, a cultural group that has been documented as having a highly oral tradition (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) as well as a highly literate one. Thus, individuals and groups are not either oral or literate. Rather, people have at their disposal and are inclined to use, based on individual habits as well as cultural conventions, strategies associated with literacy and orality both in speech and in writing.

Oral and Literate Strategies in Spoken Discourse

I will present one final example of how both oral and literate strategies surface in spoken discourse, suggested by recent work by Fillmore on fluency. Fillmore distinguishes four different types of oral fluency: the abilities to (1) talk at length with few pauses; (2) have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts; (3) talk in semantically coherent, reasoned, and dense sentences; and (4) be creative and imaginative with language. I suggest that the first two types of fluency are associated with strategies that have been called oral. They grow out of interactive or social goals—the need to keep talk going—where the message content is less important than the fact of talk. In contrast, the last two types of

fluency are literatelike, as they depend on the intratextual relations (3) and build on words as carrying meaning in themselves rather than triggering social meaning (4).

Oral and Literate Strategies in Written Discourse

If one thinks at first that written and spoken language are very different, one may think as well that written literature—short stories, poems, novels—are the most different from casual conversation of all. Quite the contrary, imaginative literature has more in common with spontaneous conversation than with the typical written genre, expository prose.

If expository prose is minimally contextualized—that is, the writer demands the least from the reader in terms of filling in background information and crucial premises—imaginative literature is maximally contextualized. The best work of art is the one that suggests the most to the reader with the fewest words. Rader demonstrates this claim, suggesting that maximal contextualization is not incidental to the nature of literature but is basic to it. The goal of creative writers is to encourage their readers to fill in as much as possible. The more the readers supply, the more they will believe and care about the message in the work. As Rader puts it, "The reader of a novel *creates* a world according to the instructions given by the writer." The features we think of as quintessentially literary are, furthermore, basic to spontaneous conversation and not crucial to written expository prose. A few such features are repetition of sounds (alliteration and assonance), repetition of words, recurrent metaphors, parallel syntactic constructions, and compelling rhythm.

Analyzing a transcript of ordinary conversation among family members, Sacks shows that in determining why a speaker chose a particular variant of a word—for example, "because," "cause," or "cuz"—an analyst should look to see if the variant chosen is "sound coordinated with things in its environment." In the case presented, a speaker said (referring to fish they were eating), "*cause* it comes from cold water." A few lines later, the same speaker says, "You better eat something *because* you're gonna be hungry before we get there." In suggesting why the speaker chose "cause" in the first instance and "because" in the second, Sacks notes that "cause" appears in the environment of repeated /k/ sounds in "comes" and "cold," whereas "because" is coordinated with "be" in "be hungry" and "before."

Sacks goes on to suggest that another speaker chooses a rather stilted expression, "Will you be good enough to empty this in there," because at that point in the talk there are a number of measure terms (i.e., an extended metaphor) being used: in this sentence, the term "empty"; in nearby sentences, the words "more" and "missing." Hence the choice of "good enough," in which the measure term "enough" is metaphoric. (I have chosen a few representative examples. The

work of Harvey Sacks is rich with examples of poetic processes in ordinary conversation.)

Examples of parallel constructions in natural conversation are also ubiquitous. Listen to individuals talk and you will notice how often they set up a syntactic construction and repeat it for several sentences. A brief example will suffice to suggest the process. It comes from a narrative I have analyzed at length elsewhere, comparing spoken and written versions of the same story (Tannen, "Oral and Literate Strategies"). In a spontaneous conversation with some friends, the speaker impressed her audience with a co-worker's linguistic ability by saying, "And he knows Spanish, and he knows French, and he knows English, and he knows German. And *he* is a gentleman." The rhythm of the repeated constructions sweeps the hearers along, creating the effect of a long list, suggesting even more than the four languages that are actually named. (Such parallel constructions are probably an aid to speech production, since the repeated construction can be uttered automatically while the speaker plans new information to insert in the variable slot. It is a technique public speakers can be heard to use frequently.) Furthermore, the speaker can use the established rhythm of the repeated construction to play off against, as in the phrase that follows the parallelism: "And *he* is a gentleman." Contrast this with the way the same speaker conveyed the same idea in writing: "He knows at least four languages fluently—Spanish, French, English, and something else."¹⁶

Rhythm, then, is basic to this highly oral strategy of parallel constructions. Erickson and Shultz and Scollon (in "Rhythmic Integration") have demonstrated that rhythm is basic to participation in face-to-face conversation. Erickson has shown that ordinary conversation can be set to a metronome, and verbal and nonverbal participation takes place on the beat. In order to show listenership and to know when to talk, one must participate in this rhythm. In conversation with speakers from another culture or with speakers who tend to take turns slower or faster than you are used to, you can't tell when they are finished and you don't know when to come in. The effect is like trying to enter a line of dancers who are going just a bit faster or slower than you expect; if you can't adjust to the beat, you have to either drop back or bumble along, spoiling everyone's sense of harmony.

Thus rhythm is basic to conversational involvement in the most mechanical sense. It also contributes in conversation, as it does in music, poetry, and oratory, to the impact of the discourse on the audience. The rhythm sweeps the audience along and convinces them by moving them emotionally. Saville-Troike quotes Duncan to the effect that Hitler, in his foreword to *Mein Kampf*, apologizes for writing a book, since he believes that people are moved not by writing but by the spoken word and that "every great movement owed its growth to great orators, not to great writers."

Why is it that literary language builds on and perfects features of mundane conversation? I believe it is because literary language, like ordinary conversation, is dependent for its effect on interpersonal involvement. It fosters and builds on

the involvement between speaker and hearer instead of (conventionally) ignoring or underplaying it. And it depends for its impact on the emotional involvement of the hearer. In contrast, expository prose, associated with literate tradition in the way we have seen, depends for its impact on impressing the audience with the strength and completeness of its argument—that is, aspects of its content.¹⁷

Oral Strategies in Successful Spoken and Written Discourse Processes

A particularly fascinating aspect of the notion of oral and literate strategies is the possibility that strategies that have been characterized as oral may be the most efficient for both writing and reading. Successful writing requires not the production of discourse with no sense of audience but, rather, the positing of a hypothetical reader and playing to the needs of that audience. This is a sense in which writing may be seen as decontextualized: the context must be posited rather than being found in the actual setting. The ability to imagine what a hypothetical reader needs to know is therefore an interactive skill. Reading is a matter of decoding written words. But the act of reading efficiently is often a matter not so much of decoding (though this skill must underlie any reading), but of discerning a familiar text structure, hypothesizing what information will be presented, and being ready for it when it comes. By making maximum use of context, good readers may be using oral strategies.

Summary

I have suggested that previous work on the oral and literate tradition and spoken versus written language has led to two hypotheses. The first—that written language is decontextualized whereas spoken is context-bound—seems to grow out of the types of spoken and written discourse that were examined: face-to-face conversation on the one hand and expository prose on the other. I suggest therefore that the differences result not so much from the spoken and written modes as from the relative focus on interpersonal involvement on the one hand and relative focus on content on the other. In this sense, the features of discourse grow out of communicative goals.

The second hypothesis is that spoken language establishes cohesion by use of paralinguistic and nonverbal channels, whereas written language depends more on lexicalization. This observation indeed reflects differences between spoken and written discourse.

Given these views of oral and literate strategies in discourse, I then demonstrated that strategies associated with both modes can be found in both spoken

and written discourse. Finally, I have suggested—and this may be the most radical of my assertions—that oral strategies may underlie successful discourse production and comprehension in the written as well as the oral mode.

Notes

¹I recently organized a conference entitled "Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk." I intended "text" and "talk" to be overlapping categories: "talk" is a kind of text, and "texts" can be talk. Most people understood this to be a dichotomy, however, and understood text and talk as two different and mutually exclusive kinds of discourse.

²My own research on interaction suggests, however, that when signals or references are misunderstood, hearers are not likely to ask for clarification. Rather, they take their misinterpretation for a correct interpretation and construct an understanding based on it. Only when the understanding they so construct becomes completely untenable do they stop the interaction to question meaning.

³This point always brings to mind the line from T. S. Eliot, "How much it means to me that I say this to you." The impression of such metamessages is often opaque to teenagers, who become disillusioned with their parents for "saying what they don't mean" and "talking empty talk," which they mistake for hypocrisy and replace with conventionalized talk of their own, which in turn strikes their parents and other adults as "meaningless."

⁴Though current radio and tv seems to be getting more interactive than content-focused, including the news.

⁵In teaching writing, I used to demonstrate the difference between one-way and two-way communication by use of a diagram that two students tried to recreate without looking at or talking to each other. One faced the back of the room and gave instructions, while the other followed the instructions and drew the diagram as proficiently as possible without asking questions. I then allowed two other students to reproduce the diagram in the same way—only they were allowed to talk to and watch each other. Of course the second pair negotiated a fairly reasonable approximation of the diagram, whereas the one-way communication always produced something very different. The students then concluded, in discussion, that the one-way situation was more like writing, and so in writing they had better anticipate and preclude some of the confusion that might arise in the mind of the reader. (I am grateful to Marcia Perlstein for teaching me this exercise.)

⁶This reaction is likely when confronting any impediment to effortless communication: having to whisper because of laryngitis, shout because your addressee is hard of hearing or in another room, or take pains to translate because of language differences. Since I am hard of hearing, I have experienced this response from other people innumerable times, when a request for repetition elicits the maddening "it wasn't important."

⁷What I am saying is completely true only for print. In handwriting, one can capture hints of these attitudes by varying size and manner of writing, underlining, using capitalization, and so on.

⁸In fiction, as I will discuss, writers attempt to create the impact of spoken language and so may write, "She said with a wink," or "He said, laughing," instead of telling outright, "This was a joke."

⁹The question of whether spoken or written language is more "complex," and even whether one has more or less subordination, is still unsettled. Some have asserted that written language is more complex (Chafe, "Integration"; Ochs); others, that spoken language is more complex (Halliday 1979). A likely explanation is that these scholars are employing different definitions of "complexity."

¹⁰One always hesitates to cite Bernstein because of the pernicious application his theories have inspired to the effect that some children spoke restricted code and in effect didn't have language. Bernstein should be credited, however, with the identification of different uses of language conventions in discourse. He was in error in calling these different "codes," a term used by linguists to refer to different languages or registers (Hill and Varenne).

¹¹The children told their narratives to an adult research assistant, but one who had been participating in the classroom over the entire year. The film is the one (affectionately) called "the pear film" which was commissioned for a project directed by Wallace Chafe at the University of California, Berkeley. Narratives told about this film form the basis of much research on discourse including Chafe's "Flow of Thought," the papers collected in Chafe's *Pear Stories*, and Tannen's "What's in a Frame?" "A Comparative Analysis," and "Spoken and Written Narrative." In the film, a man is seen picking pears. A boy comes along, takes a basket of pears away on his bike, and later falls off his bike. He is helped by three other boys to whom he gives pears. At the end, the three boys eating their pears walk past the man who was picking them in the first scene. These scenes were designed to set up a problem for the narrators: they needed to identify the man in the last scene as the same man who appeared in the first scene.

Transcription conventions used by Michaels and Collins: three dots (...) = measurable pause; a colon (:) = lengthening of vowel; a slash (/) = minor tone group boundary; two slashes (//) = major tone group boundary. Lines above and below words indicate intonational contours.

¹²I could not say whether the other three shared a style, as it was the pattern of the faster-paced speakers that "dominated." This will always be the case when one or more speakers are faster relative to the others. I have stressed in my writing, as have others (e.g., Scollon, "The Machine Stops"), that it is always the interaction that is crucial; conversation is a joint production. Speakers' styles are never absolute but always partly a response to the styles of the other participants, which are simultaneously created as a response to theirs.

¹³Note that this pattern is somewhat different from a related pattern that Erickson and his collaborators have elegantly demonstrated (Erickson; Shultz, Florio, and Erickson) of conversations that have multiple floors. In the conversation I have been describing there is one floor (though at other times there are multiple ones), but more than one speaker can speak at a time without wresting the floor; the role of listener is not a silent one.

¹⁴It is important to note, however, that this is simply one kind of elaboration, that of the message channel. The other style is using elaboration of another channel: the emotive or interpersonal one. See Tannen "The Oral/Literate Continuum" and "Indirectness."

¹⁵K = Kurt, D = David, T = DT (the author)

Transcription conventions: p = pianissimo (soft); acc = accelerando (fast); a colon (:) indicates lengthening of vowel; ˥ indicates high pitch; ˥˥ indicates very high pitch; → indicates speech continues uninterrupted (look for continuation on next line). Brackets show simultaneous speech. Three dots (. . .) indicate half-second pause. Each additional dot indicates another half-second pause. Line over "okay" shows intonation contour.

"It may seem surprising that the writer wrote "and something else." She had all the time she needed to think of what "something else" was and put it in. But this writer in this case was writing something very much like a short story, so she combined features of spokenlike and of writtenlike discourse. Elsewhere I analyze in detail which features she uses (Tannen, "Oral and Literate Strategies"). The present example is one in which she uses a writtenlike device in writing, by collapsing the information into a more efficient though less compelling construction, as well as an oral-like device in the vague referent "and something else."

"This distinction underlies a comment in a column by Meg Greenfield in *Newsweek*. She ended the column about arms control by suggesting, "We need to look at the [arms-control] agreements we have made and are going to embark on in a much more intelligent, critical, and unsentimental way" (29 June 1981). Note that the notions "critical" and "intelligent" go along with "unsentimental."

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Literacy and Cognition: A Developmental Perspective

Frank J. D'Angelo

During the past six or seven years, articles in the popular press and in professional publications have focused on what has come to be called the "crisis in literacy." According to one of the earliest articles, written in 1974 by Malcolm Scully for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*,

stories of students who "can't write" or who are "functionally illiterate" come not only from two-year colleges and four-year institutions with open admissions, but also from private colleges and major public institutions that have traditionally attracted verbally skilled students. (1)

A part of Malcolm Scully's evidence came from a survey of English department chairpersons conducted by the Association of Departments of English. The ADE found that there was a widespread concern that students coming to college, middle-class students as well as disadvantaged students, "had a far less firm grasp on fundamentals" than students in previous years (Scully 1). Some of the evidence was anecdotal. Among the comments the ADE received from teachers in private colleges, major state universities, urban colleges, and a prestigious women's school were these:

- Students are less prepared than ever for articulating thoughts in writing. They are affected by antilinguistic assumptions of our culture.
- We have to offer more remedial composition as a result of poor high-school training. In 1970, we had 106 remedial students; now we have 376. These are not minority kids but WASPs from supposedly good high schools.
- We're getting verbally gifted students who can't organize their thoughts in writing.
- We are faced with an increasingly desperate attempt to overcome the semi-literacy of most incoming students, who have had little or no practice in reading or writing.

It did not take long for the popular press to take up the cry that the level of literacy of students entering college was alarmingly low. For example, in an