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Relative focus on involvement in oral and written discourse

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Introduction

Most research on spoken versus written language has analyzed casual conversation as spoken language and expository prose, or what Olson (1977) calls "essayist literacy," as written. This is not by chance. There is something typically spoken about face-to-face conversation and something typically written about expository prose. These genres typify but do not exhaustively characterize spoken and written discourse. In recent writings (Tannen, 1982a, 1982b, 1983) I have demonstrated that both spoken discourse and written discourse exhibit combinations of features that have been identified with spoken and written language, respectively, or, more generally, with an oral and a literate tradition. I have previously called these features *oral and literate strategies*.

I have suggested, furthermore, that these features do not reflect orality versus literacy per se. Rather, what I was calling oral strategies and others have called features of orality or of spoken language in fact are the result of relative focus on interpersonal involvement. And what I was calling literate strategies and others have called features of literacy or of written language are actually the result of relatively less focus on interpersonal involvement, with consequently more focus on the information conveyed. Thus, the terms *oral strategies* and *literate strategies* are misnomers. For this reason, I would like now to move away from them and refer instead to features reflecting relative focus on interpersonal involvement.

The significance of relative focus on involvement is not an arbitrary or trivial notion, nor is it limited to issues of orality and literacy. One of the reasons it is appealing as an explanatory hypothesis is that it accounts for variation in all forms of discourse, including conversation. The framework of relative focus on interpersonal involvement

related to a framework that runs through the recent work of many scholars on interaction – the universal simultaneous but conflicting human needs to be connected to others and to be independent. This has been discussed in linguistics under the rubric of universal politeness phenomena (R. Lakoff, 1973, 1979; Brown & Levinson, 1978) and as the cline of person (Becker & Oka, 1976) and in sociology as deference (Goffman, 1967).

The concept of relative focus on involvement is related to what Bateson (1972) describes as the double bind in communication – a phenomenon that he introduced to account for pathology but that, Scollon (1982) demonstrates, characterizes all human communication. As rephrased by Becker (1982), humans continually subject each other to simultaneous conflicting messages to the effect that "You are like me" and "You are not me," or, put another way, "I want to be close to you" and "I want to be separate from you." These two conflicting messages necessarily grow out of the conflicting human needs to be connected to other people and to be distant from them – that is, not to be engulfed by closeness.

Indeed, humans are not the only creatures caught in this double bind. Bettelheim (1979) cites the example of porcupines who seek shelter in a cave during a cold winter. They huddle together for warmth, but their quills prick each other, so they pull away. Then they get cold again. They must continually adjust their closeness and distance in order to balance their simultaneous but conflicting needs to be close to each other and not to get pricked.[1]

The need to serve these conflicting goals motivates linguistic choices. For example, indirectness is used in conversation to avoid imposing one's wants or opinions on others; and much of casual conversation has little significant information to impart but is important because it shows connection. In Bateson's terms, it carries a metamessage of rapport: The fact that it is said communicates that the speaker wants to be involved with the addressee.

In this chapter I first outline the evolution of my own thinking about oral and written discourse, then describe and further discuss the features that grow out of relative focus on involvement (previously called "oral strategies" and "literate strategies"), explain how they grow out of relative focus on involvement, and demonstrate that they cut across spoken and written modes, using examples from my own and others' research. Finally, I suggest that the features reflecting relative focus on involvement seem to underlie successful production and comprehension of discourse in both spoken and written modes.

From oral/literate tradition to involvement

My use of terms has evolved from *oral and literate tradition* (Tannen, 1980a) to an *oral/literate continuum* (Tannen, 1980b, 1982b), to *oral and literate strategies* (Tannen, 1982a, 1983), to *features of involvement focus versus content focus*,[2] to my present notion of *features reflecting relative focus on involvement*.

In the process of analyzing narratives told in English and Greek about the same film I found myself faced with a "So what?" problem. I had identified certain differences between Greek and American narratives – for example, the Greeks tended to approach the narrative as a storytelling task whereas the Americans tended to approach it as a memory task, with complex discourse consequences in both cases – but I could not figure out the significance of these differences. John Gumperz suggested that I turn to research on oral versus literate tradition and directed me to Goody and Watt (1963). Eureka! This seemed to explain the differences I had found. One after another of the discourse phenomena in the Greek and American narratives could be explained by the hypothesis that the Greeks were using narrative strategies associated with oral tradition – for example, selecting an overall theme of the film, including only those details that contributed to the theme; making use of culturally familiar explanations, personalizing, and philosophizing – whereas Americans were using strategies associated with literate tradition – for example, listing details for correctness, fussing over temporal accuracy, critiquing the filmmaker's skill, and analyzing the film as an artifact (Tannen, 1980b.)

Soon I had immersed myself in the literature on this topic (for example, Olson, 1977; Goody, 1977; Ong, 1967, 1977; Havelock, 1963; Kay, 1977; Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1981). The oral/literate dichotomy had the power and fascination of a revelation.

Looking back on research I had done on conversational discourse, I saw that this too could be explained by the oral/literate dichotomy. Analyzing taped, transcribed spontaneous conversation among friends, I had discovered that certain speakers tended to use such conversational strategies as cooperative overlap, that is, talking at the same time without interrupting; exaggerated paralinguistic features such as dramatic changes in rate of speech, loudness, and pitch; and frequent storytelling in which the point of the story is dramatized rather than stated and tends to be about personal feelings. These and other conversational strategies could be seen as sacrificing the explicit and clear statement of information for the demonstration of

interpersonal involvement. (This phenomenon will be illustrated presently. See also Tannen, 1981, 1984.) Thus I began to think in terms of an oral/literate continuum.

It occurred to me, then, that the broad perspective of research on oral and literate tradition went far to account for features that had been identified as associated with spoken versus written (Chafe, 1982; see also Chapter 6) and unplanned versus planned discourse (Ochs, 1979). However, as my students and I systematically looked for these features in spoken and written narratives, it became clear that some written genres – for example, literary prose – combined features of spoken with features of written discourse (Tannen, 1980b, 1982b).

For example, the analysis of a personal narrative first told and then written by the same narrator suggested that written literary narrative combined what Chafe calls features of integration expected in writing with features of involvement expected in speaking. There-fore, it seemed preferable to refer to oral and literate strategies that could be used either in speaking or writing (Tannen, 1982a, 1983).

In all these discussions, I stressed that the key differences moti-vating discourse are not orality versus literacy per se but rather relative focus on interpersonal involvement and relative focus on content or information conveyed. In a sense, my use of *oral* and *literate* in referring to these features reflected my own heuristic process – it was through research on oral and literate tradition and spoken and written language that I had come to identify the significance of relative focus on interpersonal involvement. However, terminology tends to reify concepts. Since what is really significant is not the distinction between orality and literacy per se but rather relative focus on involvement, I would now like to adopt terminology that places that key dimension in the foreground.

Two features of relative focus on involvement

Two hypotheses have been advanced to account for differences that have been observed between spoken and written discourse. I will refer to them as the contextualization hypothesis and the cohesion hypothesis. I will consider each in turn, determining whether it is in fact descriptive of spoken versus written discourse and considering it in terms of relative focus on involvement.

The contextualization hypothesis

Many scholars have characterized spoken discourse as highly context-bound and written discourse as decontextualized. Thus, a speaker

can refer to the context of immediate surroundings visible to both speaker and hearer who are copresent in time and place. For example, I could say, "Look at this!" relying on hearers to see what *this* refers to. Second, speakers are free to be minimally explicit because if the hearer(s) are confused, they can ask for clarification on the spot. Finally, speakers frequently share social background and hence many assumptions about the world, their mutual or respective histories, and so on.

In contrast, according to the contextualization hypothesis, a writer and reader are generally separated in time and place, so immediate context is lost. Second, the reader cannot ask for clarification when confused, so the writer must anticipate all likely confusion and preclude it by filling in needed background information and as many as possible of the steps of a logical argument. Third, because the writer and reader are likely to share minimal social context, the writer can make fewer assumptions about shared attitudes and beliefs.

Clearly, in such a schema, what is thought of as spoken discourse is spontaneous face-to-face conversation, and what is thought of as written discourse is expository prose. For these genres it is informative to point out that spoken language is highly context-bound, while written appears to be less so. Of course, the notion that written discourse – or any discourse – is actually decontextualized is at best an exaggeration. Many scholars, including Fillmore (1979a), Nystrand (1982), and Rader (1982), have demonstrated that no piece of discourse can be understood without prior knowledge of many kinds of contexts. Hymes (personal communication) points out that to verify this one need only read a scholarly article in a discipline other than one's own. Hence, I suggest that the features described grow out of the respective genres and their own contexts rather than out of the spoken and written modes per se.

In face-to-face spontaneous conversation such as that which occurs at a dinner table, the fact of speaking to each other is often more important than the information or messages conveyed. Moreover, most of what is said in social settings is relatively insignificant, as teenagers are quick to notice in their parents' conversations. But that is not to say that the utterances are not important. Quite the contrary: They communicate what Bateson (1972) calls metamessages – statements about the relationship between interactants. Far from being unimportant, metamessages are the necessary basis for any interaction. Typical are such metamessages as "I am [or am not] well disposed toward you," "I'm teasing you," and the like.

Expository prose is a special genre in which the message (as distinguished from the metamessage) is relatively important. Thus Kay (1977) points out that what has been associated with writing, what he 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 ostensibly beside the point and communication is more efficiently carried out if such involvement is conventionally ignored. When carried over to face-to-face communication, however, such conventional ignoring of interpersonal involvement may be seen as peculiarly American or Western. It tends to create misunderstandings when American businessmen and diplomats try to ignore personal involvement and get right down to business with their Japanese, Arab, or Greek counterparts, for whom the establishment of personal relationships must lay the groundwork for any business or diplomatic dealings.

It is not a coincidence that the genres of casual conversation on the one hand and expository prose on the other have been associated with spoken and written language, respectively. There is something typically written about message-focused communication, for it is the innovation of print that made it common to communicate on a large scale with others who are not in one's immediate context. And there is something typically oral about interpersonal involvement. In communication with others with whom one has a close social or personal relationship, it is hard to focus on information exclusively, because the importance of the relationship is too keenly felt to be ignored. This involvement is reflected in the conventional wisdom that one should not take driving lessons from a spouse or parent, or by 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.

Nonetheless these two genres, conversation and expository prose, are by no means exclusive. It is possible and indeed common to have written communication in which it hardly matters what the content is; the fact of communication is paramount – for example, in some personal letters, where it is just as possible 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 and at lectures can fall into this category as well. Similarly, it is possible, indeed common, to have communication that is message-focused in an oral mode, as in lectures

and radio or television broadcasts (though contemporary radio and television broadcasts, including the news, seem to be getting more involvement-focused and less message-focused). It seems, moreover, that ritual language in traditional society has some of the features usually associated with written texts: The speaker performs a chant or ceremony that was composed long ago by authors far away, addressed to a large and impersonal audience (Chafe, 1982).

A key dimension distinguishing discourse types, then, is whether it is one-way or two-way communication, and this dimension is closely associated with relative focus on involvement, as contra·ted with relative focus on information (in Bateson's terms, the metamessage and message, respectively).

One more observation is in order about the close connection between interpersonal involvement and speaking, on the one hand, and focus on information and writing, on the other. The slowness of writing makes it an ill-formed medium for the communication of nonsignificant messages. I have experienced this in communicating with deaf people, wherein writing is the only medium available for communication. Straightaway, I find myself choosing not to communicate all sorts of relatively unimportant asides because they do not seem worth the trouble of writing.[3] Yet it is just such seemingly meaningless interchange that creates social relationships. That is precisely why deafness is such a terrible handicap: It is socially isolating.

Cohesion in spoken and written discourse

A second major observation that has been made about spoken and written discourse – one that indeed seems to be an outgrowth of spoken versus written modes and that accounts for the second major strategy difference I refer to – is the observation that in spoken discourse, cohesion is accomplished through paralinguistic and prosodic cues, whereas in written discourse cohesion must be lexicalized (Chafe, 1982; Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1981; Gumperz, Kaltman, & O'Connor, 1984; Ochs, 1979).

In speaking, everything that is said must be said in some way: 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 of the speaker. All these nonverbal and paralinguistic features reveal the speaker's attitude toward the message – what Labov (1972) identified as "evaluation" in narrative – and establish cohesion, that is, show relationships among ideas, highlight relative importance, foreground

or background certain information, and so on. Just as in a social setting one cannot not communicate – the act of keeping silent within the frame of interaction communicates something (Bateson 1972) – one cannot speak without showing one's attitude toward the message and the speech activity.

In writing, on the other hand, the nonverbal and paralinguistic channels are not available. You may wrinkle your brow until it cracks while you write, but this 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. Print, and to a lesser extent handwriting, is a great leveler; it reduces or inflates all utterances to lines of equivalent evaluative status on a page. Writers try to overcome this limitation by using such devices as capitalization, underlining, italics, exclamation points, and the like.

Therefore, in writing, the relationships between ideas, and the writer's attitude toward them, must be lexicalized. This can be done in a number of ways, including (1) explicit statement (for example, the contrast between smiling, smirking, or chuckling while speaking, as opposed to writing, "In a humorous vein . . ."; or winking while speaking as opposed to writing, "I don't mean this literally"); (2) careful choice of words with just the right connotations; or (3) complex syntactic constructions and transitional phrases. Thus a number of linguists have found that in spoken narrative – and here the genre is important – ideas are strung together with no conjunctions at all or the minimal conjunction *and* (Chafe, 1982; Kroll, 1977; Ochs, 1979). In contrast, written narrative uses conjunctions such as *so* and *because*, which express the relationship between ideas and subordinate constructions that foreground and background information as is done paralinguistically in speaking.

Thus we may think of discourse in which meaning and attitudes are expressed paralinguistically, nonverbally, or indirectly as being typically spoken, that is, using strategies that are basic to face-to-face conversation and possible only in spoken discourse. These strategies, furthermore, build on interpersonal involvement, since filling in unstated information and relationships between propositions, as well as deducing evaluation from voice quality and other paralinguistic features, requires the hearer to share prior communicative experience and background knowledge and to do some of the work of sense making, all of which create a feeling of involvement. In contrast, discourse that relies on lexicalization of meaning and relationships between propositions either is written or uses strategies that are frequently found in written discourse. And note that lexicalization

is message-focused; it draws less on the reader's shared social knowledge and makes the reader do less of the work of sense making. However, written discourse may try to create the effect of face-to-face interaction as novelists do when they add to dialogue such comments as "She said with a wink."

Involvement focus and information focus in discourse

The observation that spoken discourse can exhibit strategies generally associated with either an oral or a literate mode can be traced back to what Bernstein (1964) calls restricted and elaborated codes. Bernstein found that children's discourse, as elicited by experimental tasks, fell into two stylistic types, which he identified as different "codes." For example, in describing a picture, a child using restricted code 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, but only when the picture is not in view, that is, when the immediate context is not shared. To speak an "elaborated code," that·is, to fill in referents and contextual information when it is provided by the immediate context, may be perceived as a denial of shared context and might elicit an offended protest: "I've got eyes. I can see that." It would be perceived as appropriate only in contexts that require such otherwise redundant information, as for example some school or school-like tasks.

Bernstein did not associate these two codes with orality and literacy, but this correspondence is pointed out by Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1981), Hill and Varenne (1981), Kay (1977), and Olson (1977).

I would now like to cite some of my own and others' work to demonstrate that both written and spoken discourse can reflect both features typically associated with speaking and those typically associated with writing – that is, features of relative focus on involvement. I will show examples of such features first in spoken and then in written discourse.

Focus on involvement in conversation

Let us assume that involvement is marked by discourse that is highly context-bound, that requires maximal contribution from the audience

in supplying background information and doing interpretive work, and that depends upon paralinguistic and nonverbal channels rather than lexicalization for cohesion and evaluation. Message-focused discourse relies less on immediate context, it requires less audience contribution in supplying necessary information and connections, and it achieves cohesion through lexicalization.

In my own research on conversation I have identified systematic differences in features I refer to, collectively, as conversational style. These can be understood as different ways of observing relative focus on interpersonal involvement.

In one extended study, I tape-recorded and transcribed two-and-a-half hours of naturally occurring conversation at Thanksgiving dinner among six friends of various ethnic and geographic backgrounds. I identified the linguistic and paralinguistic features that made up participants' speaking styles in this setting, focusing on such features as pacing, rate of speech, overlap and interruption, intonation, pitch, loudness, syntactic structures, topic, storytelling, irony, humor, and so on (Tannen, 1984). I found that many of these features clustered in the styles of participants such that three of the participants seemed to share what might be called one style. (This, of course, is an idealization; each person's style is a unique cluster of devices used in particular ways.) In contrast, the other three clearly did not share this style (that is, they did not use the features identified in the ways the others did, and they did not interpret those features in the way the others intended them). I have called this identifiable style high-involvement, since many of the features that characterize it can be understood as placing emphasis on interpersonal involvement, or the interpersonal dynamic of the interaction. Those who did not share this style expected strategies that may be seen as more message-focused (some would say literate-like) in the sense that they placed more emphasis on the information conveyed.

One way this pattern emerged was in attitude toward and tendency to use overlapped or simultaneous speech. Three of the participants in the conversation I studied were "cooperative overlappers." That is, two or more of them often talked at the same time, but this did not mean that they weren't listening to each other, and it did not mean that they wanted to grab the floor – that is, to interrupt. Often, a listener talked at the same time as a speaker to show encouragement, or showed understanding by uttering "response cries" (Goffman, 1981), or told mini-stories to demonstrate understanding, or finished

the speaker's sentences to demonstrate that the listener knew where the sentence was headed. All of this overlapping gives the speaker the assurance that he or she isn't in the conversation alone. In addition, the active listeners often asked questions eliciting information the speaker obviously would have told anyway, not to indicate that they thought the speaker wasn't going to tell, but to assure the speaker that the information was eagerly awaited.

The preference for overlapping talk in some settings has been reported among at least some members of numerous ethnic groups: Armenian, Italian-American, black American, West Indian, Cape Verdean, to name just a few. The preference for overlapping talk sacrifices the clear relay of information for the sake of showing conversational involvement. In that sense, it is typically interactive, valuing the need for interpersonal involvement more highly than the need for the information conveyed. The speakers who exhibit overlapping speech in a casual setting probably do not use it, or use less of it, in such settings as interviews or receiving instructions in which information is relatively more important. But when speakers use this device with others who do not expect or understand its use in this way, the effect is quite the opposite. The other speaker feels interrupted and stops talking. An ironic aspect of this style clash is that the interruption is actually created by the one who stops talking when he or she was expected to continue.

Another aspect of effects of differing focus on involvement that emerged in this study of conversational style is the way speakers got to the point of their personal narratives and what the points of their stories were likely to be. In the conversation of speakers whose style I have characterized as involvement-focused (1) more stories were told; (2) the stories were more likely to be about personal experiences; (3) the point of the story was more likely to concern feelings about those experiences; and (4) perhaps most important, the point of the story was generally not lexicalized but was dramatized by replaying the speaker's reaction or creating a similar reaction in the audience by mimicry of the characters in the narrative.

These differences in storytelling styles left all participants feeling a bit dissatisfied with the narratives told in the style other than their own. All participants tended to react to stories told by different-style speakers with a variant of "What's the point?" – the rejoinder Labov (1972) has aptly called "withering."

The following is an example of a story told during Thanksgiving dinner by Steve:

(1)   Steve: I have a little seven-year-old student ... a little
                  girl who wears those. ...... She is <u>too</u> much.
                     p

(2)   Deborah: She wears those? [*chuckle*]
         Steve: Can you imagine? She's seven years old, and she
                  acc
                  sits in her chair and she goes .... [*squeals*
                                 acc--------]
                  and squirms in his seat]

(3)   Deborah: Oh:: Go::d. ... She's only SEVen?
(4)   Steve: And I say, well ... hów about let's do sò-and-so.
                  And she says ...   Okay::. ...   Just like thát.
                  acc--------]   [*squealing*]

(5)   Deborah: Oh:::::
                  p
(6)   David: What does it méan.
                  p, acc
(7)   Steve: It's just so ... she's acting like such a little girl
                  already.
                         p

where

   ╱   indicates primary stress
   ╲   indicates secondary stress
   <u>underline</u> indicates emphatic stress
   CAPITALIZATION indicates most emphatic stress
   .   (period) indicates sentence-final falling intonation
   ?   (question mark) indicates rising intonation
   ⌐   indicates high pitch on phrase
   ╔   indicates very high pitch on phrase
  acc indicates accelerando (speeding up)
   p   indicates pianissimo (spoken softly)
   :   indicates elongation of vowel sound
  ... indicates half-second pause (each extra dot = another half-
       second pause)
  [brackets on two lines indicate simultaneous speech:
     two speakers talking at once

It is clear from the transcript that the two listeners, David and I,
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 – or at least that he is not satisfied

with the way Steve told it. When I played this segment of the taped conversation to David later, he said that Steve hadn't said what it was about the girl's behavior that he was trying to point out. Moreover, when Steve answered David's question in (7), he didn't explain at all: David observed that "such a little girl" to him means "such a grownup," whereas Steve meant "such a coquette." David seemed to feel that Steve wasn't telling the story right; he should have said what he meant. To Steve, the point was obvious, having been dramatized, and should not be stated.

Elsewhere in the transcript David relates his experiences, and there the reactions of Steve and the other overlap-favoring stylists indicate that they feel David is stating the obvious and not getting to the point quickly enough.

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 that speech make use of strategies typically associated with writing, that is, strategies that focus more on information and less on involvement. 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 typically oral or involvement-focused strategies.

It is particularly significant that the speakers in my study who used involvement-focused strategies are highly literate. Many of the studies that have distinguished between oral and literate strategies in spoken style (including Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1981; Michaels and Cook-Gumperz, 1979; and Michaels and Collins, 1984) have done so to explain the failure of children of certain ethnic groups, often black, to learn to write and read well. The speakers I have found using involvement-focused strategies in speaking are New Yorkers of Eastern European Jewish background, a cultural group that has been documented as having (like black cultural groups) a highly developed oral tradition (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1974), but also a highly developed literate one – in fact, one of the longest literate traditions of any cultural group. And far from having a history of failure in school, children from this community have traditionally performed successfully at literate tasks. Thus, individuals and groups are not either oral or literate. Rather, people have at their disposal and are inclined to use, in speech or in writing, combinations of strategies that have been associated with oral or written modes but that are more accurately understood as reflecting relative focus on involvement.

A final example of how both involvement- and information-focused strategies surface in spoken discourse comes from an analysis of fluency. Fillmore (1979b) distinguishes four types of oral fluency, characterized by the abilities to do the following:

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
4. Be creative and imaginative with language.

I suggest that the first two of these types of fluency are associated with involvement-focused strategies. That is, they grow out of inter-active or social goals, when the message conveyed is less important than the metamessage conveyed by the fact and manner of talk. In contrast, the last two are message-focused types of fluency; the third depends on intratextual relationships, and the fourth builds on words as carrying meaning in themselves rather than triggering social meaning.

Focus on involvement in written discourse

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

If expository prose is minimally dependent on immediate context and maximally dependent on lexicalization – that is, the writer demands the least from the reader in terms of filling in referents, background information, crucial premises, cohesive relationships, and evaluation, then literary discourse is also maximally contextual-ized, not in the sense of depending on immediate context but by requiring the reader (or hearer) to fill in maximal background and other elided information. The best literary work is the one that suggests the most to readers with the fewest words. Rader (1982) demonstrates this, suggesting that maximal contextualization is not incidental to the nature of literature but rather is basic to it. The goal of the creative writer is to encourage readers to do as much filling in as possible. The more the reader supplies, the more she or he 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" (p. 195).

The features thought of as quintessentially literary are, moreover,

basic to spontaneous conversation and less developed in written
expository prose. A few such features are repetition of sounds
(alliteration and assonance), repetition of words, recurrent metaphors
and other figures of speech, parallel syntactic constructions, and
compelling rhythm. (This hypothesis is suggested in Tannen, 1982a,
and elaborated in Tannen, 1984. See also Friedrich, 1979.)

Analyzing a transcript of ordinary conversation among family
members, Sacks (1971) 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 Sacks
presents, a speaker said (referring to fish being eaten), "cause it
comes from cold water." A few moments later, the same speaker
said, "You better eat something because you're gonna be hungry
before we get there." In considering 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 /bi/ (i.e:, "bee") in *be hungry* and
before.

Sacks goes on to suggest that another speaker chose 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, seen in this expression in *empty*
and in nearby sentences in the words *more* and *missing.* Hence the
choice of *good enough,* in which the measure term *enough* is metaphoric.
(Sacks's lecture notes are rich with examples of poetic processes in
ordinary conversation.)

Examples of parallel constructions in natural conversation are also
ubiquitous. Speakers frequently set up a syntactic construction and
repeat it for several sentences. A brief example will be taken from a
narrative I have analyzed elsewhere, comparing spoken and written
versions of the same story (Tannen, 1982a). In a spontaneous casual
conversation, the speaker emphasized the linguistic ability of a
coworker 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 that he knows even more
than the four languages named. (Such parallel constructions are
probably also 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 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 narrator conveyed the same idea when she wrote the story down: "He knows at least four languages fluently – Spanish, French, English, and something else." This sentence is orallike, or involvement-focused, in its use of the phrase *something else* in place of the name of a fourth language, creating a feeling of immediate narration. The writer could have taken as much time as she needed to think of the fourth language and add it, or choose an alternative grammatical structure and revise the text to read – for example, "including. . . ." But with regard to rhythmicity created by parallel constructions, the written statement exhibits the feature Chafe (Chapter 6) calls "integration," which he finds typical of expository prose, conflating the parallel constructions by eliminating the repeated parts. The result is a sentence that is more word-efficient but rhythmically less involving (and, one might say, less moving).

Rhythm, then, is a fundamental feature of the oral strategy of parallel constructions. Erickson and his collaborators (Erickson & Shultz, 1982) and Scollon (1982) 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 be able to pick up the beat. In conversation with speakers of different cultural backgrounds, or speakers who tend to take turns more slowly or quickly than one is used to, one cannot tell when others are finished and therefore cannot judge when to start or stop speaking. The effect is like trying to enter a line of dancers who are going just a bit faster or slower than one expects; one has to either drop back or break in, spoiling everyone's rhythm.

Thus rhythm is basic to conversational involvement in the most mechanical sense. It 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 (1982) quotes Duncan (1962) to the effect that Hitler, in his preface 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 involvement between speaker

and hearer rather than focusing on information or message. It also 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, with aspects of the lexicalized message. In fact, responses to all discourse are probably emotional, just as Olson (1977) points out that most people cannot distinguish between logical arguments and arguments with which they agree. But in justifying their responses to expository prose, most American readers are likely to maintain that they find the argument logical, not that they like the way it sounds. Nonetheless, some awareness of the power of rhythm and sound play can be seen in the observation "It has a nice ring to it," sometimes used to suggest that "it" must therefore be right.

Reading and writing as involvement-focused skills

A particularly fascinating aspect of the notion of involvement- and information-focused strategies is the possibility that the former, which have been associated with spoken language, may be the most efficient for both writing and reading. Successful writing, which seeks to lexicalize necessary background and cohesive relationships, requires not production of discourse with no sense of audience but rather the positing of a hypothetical audience in order to fulfill its needs. This is the sense in which writing is decontextualized: The context must be posited rather than being found in the actual setting. A better term would be *recontextualized*. The ability to imagine what a hypothetical reader needs to know is an interactive skill. Similarly, reading is a matter of decoding written words – a message-focused skill. But the act of reading efficiently is a matter not so much of accurate decoding, though this is part of it, but of discerning a familiar text structure and hypothesizing what information will be presented, so that it can be efficiently processed when it comes. By making maximum use of the context of prior texts, to use Becker's term, good readers use highly context-sensitive skills, strategies that I am suggesting are interactive or involvement-focused.

Preparation for literacy in oral discourse in school

Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1981) suggest that children make a "transition to literacy" when they go to school. Michaels and Cook-Gumperz (1979) analyze in detail an oral discourse activity in a first-grade classroom that prepares children for a literate approach to

information: "sharing time." Here children are expected to address the entire class and tell about one thing that is very important. Although the children are communicating face to face and share context in many ways, the teacher encourages them to express known information in order to give a "complete" discourse appropriate to sharing time. Michaels and Collins (1984) 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 counterintuitive nature of such elaborated-style discourse in face-to-face interaction. 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 found that children in the class they observed fell into two groups with respect to how well they performed during sharing time, how much reinforcement they received from the teacher, and consequently how much practice in literate-style discourse they received. Some children were more likely to lexicalize connections in order to focus on the main point, whereas others were more likely to accomplish this cohesion by special intonation patterns that, tragically, the teacher was not able to recognize, since she and these students came from different cultural backgrounds.

In order to document these differences better, Michaels and her coworkers showed the children a short film (as it happens, the same film used to elicit the narratives analyzed in my previously mentioned comparison of Greek and American discourse) and had them tell what they saw in the film. These experimentally elicited narratives also exhibit what Michaels and Collins (1984) call oral-based and literate-based strategies in spoken narratives. In the film a man is shown picking pears. A boy comes along, takes a basket of pears away on his bike, and later falls off his bike. Three other boys help him, and he gives them three 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 an encoding problem: In describing the last scene, narrators must identify the man as the same one who appeared in the first scene.

Michaels and Collins characterize one group of children as literate-style speakers (I will call them message-focused), who used complex syntactic constructions and lexicalization to identify the man. A

second group, characterized as oral-style speakers (in my terms, involvement-focused ones) used special intonation patterns. Thus, a message-focused speaker says, "there was a man that was picking some pears." Notice that the speaker introduces the man by using an independent clause, "there was . . . ," and then identifies him by using a relative clause, "that was picking some pears." In contrast, an involvement-focused speaker introduces the same character by using two independent clauses: "It was about this man. He was, um . . . um . . . takes some, um . . . peach – . . . some . . . pears off the tree." (Readers will notice that the second child is less fluent, but that is not significant for the phenomenon under discussion.)

Even more striking than the use of two independent clauses as opposed to an independent and a subordinate clause is the way these two speakers identify the man when he reappears in the last scene. The message-focused speaker uses a restrictive appositive, a relative clause beginning with "who": ". . . and then . . . they . . . walked by the man who gave . . . wh–who was picking the pears." In contrast, the involvement-focused speaker again uses two independent clauses, identifying the man as the same one previously mentioned by using a special intonational contour on the word *man*: ". . . and when that . . . when he pa:ssed, by that ma:n, . . . the man . . . the ma:n came out the tree." It is the special intonational contour on *man* that signals "You know which man I mean – the one I mentioned before."[4]

Although prosodic cues cannot specify which other man is intended, they can indicate that some particular other man is meant, and this is sufficient to lead a listener to infer which other man that is. (In this case, only one other man has been mentioned.) Thus the two children use different strategies to establish cohesion. Their spoken styles reflect relative reliance on context and paralinguistic cues (hence audience involvement) or on lexicalization (hence message focus).

Finally, these spoken styles have important consequences for written competence. Michaels and Collins compared fourth-grade children's speech styles with their writing styles by having them watch the same film and then both tell and write a narrative account of it. Style differences appeared in the oral narratives of the fourth graders, very much like those described for first graders; furthermore, the children who lexicalized cohesion in speaking also wrote unambiguous prose, whereas the children who relied on paralinguistic channels in speaking were more likely to write a text that was ambiguous. In other words, these children neglected to compensate for the loss of the paralinguistic channel in writing by lexicalizing connections that were signaled paralinguistically in speaking.

For example, a fourth grader who uses complex syntactic constructions and other message-focused devices in speaking uses similar devices in writing, resulting in unambiguous prose. In reintroducing the pear picker, this child begins a new paragraph and writes. "The man collecting fruits noticed. . . ." In contrast, a fourth grader who uses paralinguistic signaling rather than lexicalization to establish cohesion in speaking produces, in writing, prose that is ambiguous concerning which character he is referring to. He writes, "This man was picking pears and this boy was riding by on his bike and he saw the pears. . . ." There is nothing in the text to disambiguate *he*: Does it refer to the man or the boy? (Of course, the reader can make a good guess based on prior contextual knowledge, but that is another matter.) Thus the children's spoken discourse styles have significant consequences for their acquisition of literacy.

Conclusion

I have suggested that previous work on 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 that the identified differences result not so much from the spoken and written modes as from relative focus on interpersonal involvement typically found in conversation and relative lack of focus on involvement in favor of a focus on information or message typically found in expository prose.

The second hypothesis that had been previously put forth is that spoken language establishes cohesion by use of paralinguistic and nonverbal signals, whereas written language depends more upon lexicalization. This is indeed an outgrowth of spoken versus written modes of discourse. Nonetheless, various uses of contextualization and relative reliance on lexicalization can be manipulated both in speaking and in writing in order to produce discourse that is maximally or minimally involving of the audience. Finally, I have suggested that oral strategies may underlie successful discourse production and comprehension in the written as well as the oral mode, insofar as it requires drawing on prior experience, which in the case of written discourse includes the experience of prior written texts. All of these phenomena have implications for interpersonal communication, an understanding of discourse production and comprehension, and the acquisition of literacy.

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to Pamela Gerloff for calling my attention to this reference. Bettelheim cites Schopenhauer as the source of the simile.
2. Becker helped me to see that relative focus on content is an artifact of relative focus on involvement and that the notion of "content" invokes the conduit metaphor in communication (i.e., messages are placed in a container and sent by conduit to a receiver who extracts them from the container; cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the connotations of which I wish to avoid.
3. This is true of any situation in which there is an impediment to effortless communication – for example, when someone has laryngitis, is in another room, or is not fluent in the language spoken. Since I am hearing-impaired, I am frequently reminded of this when a request for repetition elicits the maddening "It wasn't important."
4. Not only am I substituting my terms *involvement-focused style* and *message-focused style* in place of Michaels and Collins's terms, but I am also substituting my own simplified transcription system for theirs, since theirs contains more information than is needed for the argument I am making here.

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