

For the Distinctive Dichotomies category

Spoken Language versus Written Language

By Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

Think back to the 80's, to the time when the answerphone was still only halfway to becoming the ansaphone. Would you say the language that callers used in their messages was spoken expression or written? At a Pilgrims workshop recently a participant told us that that at first she would put her phone down when she hit the "I'm sorry I'm not here" voice. She then took a piece of paper and wrote her message, re-dialled and read out what she had down in front of her!

Her message was oral in medium but written in terms of its thought process and probably its grammar.

As the above example shows it is not always easy to know whether a stretch of language is spoken or written.

What are some of the general characteristics of these two manifestations of human language?

Spoken	Written
-Immensely ancient	comparatively recent
-The primary form of language	the secondary form
-universal among humans	an attribute of wealth
-invented/acquired by age 5	learnt by puberty, if at all
-quantitatively the major form	quantitatively the minor form
-carries people's interactive, emotional life	in 1st world carries knowledge and information
-carries internal monologue and internal dialogue	is often public
-dominated by women- mothers-	is frequently in the male domain

-has low prestige in 1st world	has high prestige in 1st world.
-spoken language dies without trace	dies but leaves traces.
-modifies rapidly	modifies more slowly
-In English, grammar codification just beginning	codified in various systems

The grammar of oral English

The grammar we teach in our EFL textbooks is mostly the grammar of written English, though, paradoxically, we have our students' oral competence as a major, conscious aim. Work at Nottingham University, (McCarthy and Carter) shows clearly that the English of conversation has a very different grammar from the grammar of the written language.

An example:

If reporting takes place in the past, in the written language (excluding perhaps personal letters) the reporting verb will be in the past simple:

" She told me that....."

In spoken conversational genre (as opposed to spoken narrative genre) the reporting verb will typically be in the past continuous:

" She was telling me that....."

Do any coursebooks you have ever come across teach students to use the past continuous in sentences like the above?

No, because coursebook writers use the description of WRITTEN English to teach the ORAL language. No wonder their books can make you linguistically seasick.

If I say: " She was telling me that... " I imply that I have a relationship with the speaker. One of the major Carter and McCarthy's discoveries is that you cannot describe the grammar of spoken English without constant reference to the RELATIONSHIP between the speakers. In their growing description of the oral language, SPEAKER RELATIONSHIP has major value as a grammatical variable.

The messy cline between spoken and written.

Let me take you back to the ansaphone example at the start of this piece. It is often hard to decide how "spoken " or how "written" a piece of language actually is.

Maybe the best we can do is to think of different stretches of language as strung out along a continuum from " very spoken" to "very written ".

Where would you place the following areas of language on the continuum :

a mother's baby talk
a law report in a newspaper
a chat show interview on radio or TV (1)
a personal letter
a person mumbling to themselves as they walk down the street
the pages of Hansard, the records of UK parliamentary proceedings (2)
a Dennis Potter TV drama
a the language of adverts you see on the London Tube.

Oh dear, have I given RSA teacher trainers another "language awareness " exercise to persecute their trainees with?

Sorry.

(1) If you listen hard to a series of interviews by the same chat show host/ess you will realise that they organise their discourse according to quite palpable formulas, just as market showmen/salesmen do their patter. What relation does " oral-formulaic " have to spontaneous oral language. Ask Michael Lewis.

(2) researchers working with Carter and McCarthy at Nottingham have found that Hansard is not a true linguistic record of what is actually said in the UK parliament. It is a tidied-up and "written-ised " version of the Commons' raucous proceedings.

Biodata: Mario works for Pilgrims, the humanistic EFL teacher training centre in Canterbury, UK, as a teacher, writer and trainer. His most recent book, LETTERS, written with Levy, Gray and Burbidge came out in May 1996.

The next one on Student Process, will be with CUP.

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