

Lesson 11

Reading Material

correctly if they are only exposed to them in the spoken mode, especially if they are required to remember them over an extended period of time. This aspect of communication is obviously what written language is supremely good at, whether for the benefit of the individual in remembering the private paraphernalia of daily life, or for the benefit of nations in establishing constitutions, laws and treaties with other nations.

The major differences between speech and writing derive from the fact that one is essentially transitory and the other is designed to be permanent. It is exactly this point which D. J. Enright makes in the observation that 'Plato may once have thought more highly of speech than of writing, but I doubt he does now!' (Review in *The Sunday Times*, 24 January 1982).

1.2.6 *Differences in form between written and spoken language*

It is not our intention here to discuss the many different forms of spoken language which can be identified even within one geographical area like Britain. Clearly there are dialectal differences, accent differences, as well as 'register' differences depending on variables like the topic of discussion and the roles of the participants (see e.g. Trudgill, 1974 and Hudson, 1980 for discussion of these sorts of differences). There is however, one further distinction which is rarely noted, but which it is important to draw attention to here. That is the distinction between the speech of those whose language is highly influenced by long and constant immersion in written language forms, and the speech of those whose language is relatively uninfluenced by written forms of language. It is of course the case that it is the speech of the first set whose language tends to be described in descriptions of the language (grammars), since descriptions are typically written by middle-aged people who have spent long years reading written language. In particular situations the speech of, say, an academic, particularly if he is saying something he has said or thought about before, may have a great deal in common with written language forms. For the majority of the population, even of a 'literate' country, spoken language will have very much less in common with the written language. This, again, is a point appreciated by Goody: 'Some individuals spend more time with the written language than they do with the spoken. Apart from the effects on their own

personalities . . . what are the effects on language? How do written languages differ from spoken ones?' (1977: 124). In the discussion which follows we shall draw a simplistic distinction between spoken and written language which takes highly literate written language as the norm of written language, and the speech of those who have not spent many years exposed to written language (a set which will include most young undergraduate students) as the norm for spoken language.

In 1.2.1 we discussed some of the differences in the manner of production of speech and writing, differences which often contribute significantly to characteristic forms in written language as against characteristic forms in speech. The overall effect is to produce speech which is less richly organised than written language, containing less densely packed information, but containing more interactive markers and planning 'fillers'. The standard descriptive grammars of English (e.g. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1972) typically describe features of the written language, or that form of the spoken language which is highly influenced by written language. From the descriptive work of a number of scholars studying spoken language (e.g. Labov, 1972a; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Chafe, 1979; Ochs, 1979; Cicourel, 1981; Goffman, 1981) we can extract some (by no means all) features which characterise spoken language:

- (a) the syntax of spoken language is typically much less structured than that of written language
 - i. spoken language contains many incomplete sentences, often simply sequences of phrases
 - ii. spoken language typically contains rather little subordination
 - iii. in conversational speech, where sentential syntax can be observed, active declarative forms are normally found. In over 50 hours of recorded conversational speech, Brown, Currie and Kenworthy (1980) found very few examples of passives, it-clefts or wh-clefts. Crystal (1980) also presents some of the problems encountered in attempting to analyse spontaneous speech in terms of categories like *sentence* and *clause*.

As a brief example, notice how this speaker pauses and begins each new 'sentence' before formally completing the previous one:

it's quite nice the Grassmarket since + it's always had the antique shops but they're looking + they're sort of + em + become a bit nicer +

- (b) in written language an extensive set of metalingual markers exists to mark relationships between clauses (*that* complementisers, *when / while* temporal markers, so-called 'logical connectors' like *besides, moreover, however, in spite of*, etc.), in spoken language the largely paratactically organised chunks are related by *and, but, then* and, more rarely, *if*. The speaker is typically less explicit than the writer: *I'm so tired (because) I had to walk all the way home*. In written language rhetorical organisers of larger stretches of discourse appear, like *firstly, more important than* and *in conclusion*. These are rare in spoken language.

- (c) In written language, rather heavily premodified noun phrases (like that one) are quite common – it is rare in spoken language to find more than two premodifying adjectives and there is a strong tendency to structure the short chunks of speech so that only one predicate is attached to a given referent at a time (simple case-frame or one-place predicate) as in: *it's a biggish cat + tabby + with torn ears*, or in: *old man McArthur + he was a wee chap + oh very small + and eh a beard + and he was pretty stooped*.

The packaging of information related to a particular referent can, in the written language, be very concentrated, as in the following news item:

A man who turned into a human torch ten days ago after snoozing in his locked car while smoking his pipe has died in hospital.

(*Evening News* (Edinburgh), 22 April 1982)

- (d) Whereas written language sentences are generally structured in subject–predicate form, in spoken language it is

quite common to find what Givón (1979b) calls topic-comment structure, as in *the cats + did you let them out*.

- (e) in informal speech, the occurrence of passive constructions is relatively infrequent. That use of the passive in written language which allows non-attribution of agency is typically absent from conversational speech. Instead, active constructions with indeterminate group agents are noticeable, as in:
Oh everything they do in Edinburgh + they do it far too slowly
- (f) in chat about the immediate environment, the speaker may rely on (e.g.) gaze direction to supply a referent: (looking at the rain) *frightful isn't it*.
- (g) the speaker may replace or refine expressions as he goes along: *this man + this chap she was going out with*
- (h) the speaker typically uses a good deal of rather generalised vocabulary: *a lot of, got, do, thing, nice, stuff, place and things like that*.
- (i) the speaker frequently repeats the same syntactic form several times over, as this fairground inspector does: *I look at fire extinguishers + I look at fire exits + I look at what gangways are available + I look at electric cables what + are they properly earthed + are they properly covered*
- (j) the speaker may produce a large number of prefabricated 'fillers': *well, erm, I think, you know, if you see what I mean, of course, and so on*.

Some of the typical distinctions between discourse which has been written and that which has been spoken can be seen in the following two descriptions of a rainbow. (No direct comparison is intended, since the two pieces of discourse were produced in strictly non-comparable circumstances for very different purposes.)

- (1) And then, in the blowing clouds, she saw a band of faint iridescence colouring in faint shadows a portion of the hill. And forgetting, startled, she looked for the hovering colour and saw a rainbow forming itself. In one place it gleamed fiercely, and, her heart anguished with hope, she sought the shadow of iris where the bow should be. Steadily the colour gathered, mysteriously, from nowhere, it took presence upon itself, there was a faint, vast rainbow.
(D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, chapter 16)

In the first extract (1), the rich lexis and well-organised structure are indications that the writer has taken time in the construction, and possibly reconstruction after several rewritings, of the final product. There are complete sentences, containing subordinations, frequent modifications via adjectives and adverbs, and more than single predicates per referential expression. In extract (2), there are frequent pauses, often interrupting major syntactic units, repetitions, incomplete sentences, generalised vocabulary, fillers and one example of a tongue-slip.

- (2) normally after + very heavy rain + or something like that + and + you're driving along the road + and + far away + you see + well + er + a series + of + stripes + + formed like a bow + an arch + + very very far away + ah + seven colours but ++ I guess you hardly ever see seven it's just a + a series of + colours which + they seem to be separate but if you try to look for the separate (kaz) – colours they always seem + very hard + to separate + if you see what I mean ++
(Postgraduate student speaking informally)

The speaker planning in the here-and-now, possibly threatened with his interlocutor wanting to take a turn, typically repeats himself a good deal, using the same syntactic structure, the same lexical items, using the first word that comes to mind rather than hunting for the *mot juste*, filling in pauses with 'fillers'. The overall effect is of information produced in a much less dense manner than is characteristic of written language. We must assume that the density of information packing in spoken language is appropriate for the listener to process comfortably. Most people have experienced expository prose read aloud which they have found difficult to follow in the spoken mode. Few people can extract a great deal from a lecture which is read aloud with no visual support. Goody

points out that the written form of language releases us from the linear experiential mode: 'the fact that it takes a visual form means that one can escape from the problem of the succession of events in time, by backtracking, skipping, looking to see who-did-it before we know what it is they did. Who, except the most obsessive academic, reads a book as he hears speech? Who, except the most avant-garde of modern dramatists, attempts to write as they speak?' (1977: 124).

1.3 Sentence and utterance

It might seem reasonable to propose that the features of spoken language outlined in the preceding section should be considered as features of utterances, and those features typical of written language as characteristic of sentences. In this convenient distinction, we can say, in a fairly non-technical way, that utterances are spoken and sentences are written and that we will apply these terms to what Lyons describes as 'the products of ordinary language-behaviour'. In the case of the term **sentence**, it is important to be clear about the type of object one is referring to. Lyons makes a distinction between 'text-sentences' and 'system-sentences'. He describes the latter in the following way:

system-sentences never occur as the products of ordinary language-behaviour. Representations of system-sentences may of course be used in metalinguistic discussion of the structure and functions of language: and it is such representations that are customarily cited in grammatical descriptions of particular languages.

(Lyons, 1977: 31)

Since the linguistic exemplification presented in support of our discussion throughout this book is overwhelmingly drawn from 'ordinary language behaviour', we shall generally employ the term 'sentence' in the 'text-sentence', and not the 'system-sentence' sense.

Although the linguist who undertakes the analysis of discourse has ultimately the same aims as a linguist who uses 'system-sentences' in his grammatical description of a language, there are important methodological differences involved in the two approaches. Both linguists wish to produce accurate descriptions of the particular language studied. In pursuit of this goal, the