

# Is speech really more important than writing?

## A study of spoken and written language in society

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### Abstract

The roles of spoken and written language in society has been long been a source of contention, with speech often considered the primary form. However, this may not be the case. The purpose of this study was to address the societal roles of the two forms of language, how these roles may influence the debate, and the impact this may have on language teaching. The conclusion is that writing plays a more important role in communities than traditionally assumed. Moreover, speech and writing should receive equal consideration for two main reasons: they are mutually influential and transposed through contemporary forms of communication. Finally, this extends to the language classroom as the dominance of speech has led to the exclusion of writing in some learning contexts, resulting in a failure to help students understand the relationship between the two forms.

**Key words:** speech, writing, sociolinguistics, language primacy, language teaching and learning.

### Introduction

Throughout history and across many cultures, speech has held a higher status than writing. Stories, culture, customs, technological advances and laws were passed down via the oral tradition before the written form came into existence. Even today, illiteracy remains a global problem, yet people who cannot read or write are perfectly capable of working and leading normal lives without needing to write. Therefore, spoken language is viewed by many as being the primary form of language.

However, it is important for us to reconsider this stance. Governments and NGOs press for better education for all, technology and the Internet develop at astonishing speeds, and globalisation continues to spread. Without paying proper attention to the role of writing, students all over the world are in danger of being excluded from these developments. As educators, this topic is relevant because we must ensure that our students do not neglect writing as a skill. It is easy to set and provide quick feedback on discussion tasks in the classroom, it is more time-consuming to provide proper support for writing skills development.

In terms of previous research, the relationship between spoken and written language has been the cause of much debate in linguistic circles. Some linguists, for instance, have claimed that “written language has no existence in its own right, but is a shadow cast by speech” (Cook, 2004, p. 31). However, writing may not be as subservient as Cook suggests and there are strong arguments to suggest the roles could actually be reversed. It certainly seems unreasonable to suggest that one form should be given a higher status than the other considering the different roles spoken and written language play in society.

Yet, it continues to be a point of deliberation. Broadly speaking, the division has focused on traditional grammarians on the one side and contemporary linguists on the other. The former have tended to make the assumption that spoken language is somehow inferior to and reliant upon written language, whereas the lat-

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ter, “in conscious opposition to this view”, have maintained that “spoken language is primary and... writing is essentially a means of representing speech in another medium” (Lyons, 1968, p. 38).

This paper will argue that it may be important to consider the duality of their roles as language forms, not as contrasting mediums of communication, given that the lines between written and spoken language are often blurred. The roles of spoken and written language in society will be discussed, firstly, through an analysis of their functional differences. Secondly, the focus will switch to the arguments made by linguists for the primacy of speech and the opposing views held by society that writing should hold the superior status. Finally, the role of spoken and written language in relation to language teaching and learning will be examined and whether the issue of primacy extends to the classroom.

### **Spoken and written language: functional differences in society**

As means of communication, the differences between speech and writing need to be defined. At the most basic level, the former can be described as “sounds passing through the air” and the latter as “visible signs on a surface” (Cook, 2004, p. 32). However, these obvious physical distinctions are not enough to truly distinguish the two mediums. As two distinct forms of language they are essentially variant means of linguistic expression and alternative ways of conveying meaning (Halliday, 1989, p. 92).

The most significant difference can be seen in everyday communication. Speech is both produced by the speaker and processed by the listener(s) in real time (Cook, 1989, p. 115). As a result, “speech is normally unrehearsed” and resembles “an unedited first draft” which cannot be altered once it has been uttered as “the text is no longer available for editing” (Cook, 2004, p. 34). We produce speech in the moment and often via complex cognitive processes that remove any major conscious effort in terms of our verbal response, prosodic clues or paralinguistic additions. Therefore, spoken language “is bound to the fleeting moment” (Cook, 2004, p. 33) and instantly vanishes into history unless it is freed from “the domination of time” by video and audio recording (Cook, 1989, p. 115). In contrast, “written language has a solid existence outside of our minds” (Cook, 2004, p. 33) and is, principally, permanent and “waiting to be activated in someone’s mind”.

This differentiation in levels of permanency has “immediate consequences for the processing of written and spoken language” (Cook, 2004, p. 34). The comprehension of speech is dependent on both the perception of speech sounds and the way they are stored in the working memory whilst the sentences are being processed. Thus, each person uses “different mental processes for speech and writing” and “speech is intensive on working memory in a way that writing is not” (ibid).

Nevertheless, there exists an intermediary area where spoken and written language transpose and distinctions become blurred. Cook (1989, p. 115) suggests that it may be more appropriate to represent the differences between the two forms, not as a straight division, but on a continuum where the distinction between speech and writing can vary depending on the purpose of the text, for example audio transcriptions or literature recitals. This intermediary area highlights a failing in the more traditional views on the division between speech and writing.

That failing lies in the fact that definitions tend to disguise “an even more important division within the category of spoken language, between ‘one-way’ speech and ‘two-way’ speech” (Cook, 1989, pp. 115-116). There are a number of examples where ‘one-way’ speech is more allied to writing than it is with other varieties of ‘two-way’ speech. If we consider monologues, such as lectures or news broadcasts where the content is prepared beforehand, it is difficult to ignore the similarities with written texts. Similarly, the same notion may apply to writing. McCarthy (1991, p. 152) argues that “all other important factors constraining what is said and how it is said are present in writing as much as in speech”. Thus, a written text must take into account its audience in much the same way a speaker should take account of theirs.

Irrespective of a text’s audio or visual form when delivered to its audience, the different properties of spo-

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ken and written language remain inherent (Halliday, 1989, p. 97). These properties provide a means of distinguishing the two forms regardless of whether they have been transposed into the other. Halliday goes on to identify three main points which outline the major differences between speech and writing, and which also raises questions about the simplification that speech and writing are “saying the same things” (1989, p. 93).

Firstly, he suggests that “writing does not incorporate all the meaning potential of speech” (ibid). Writing is devoid of prosodic and paralinguistic effects which would be evident in “direct, face-to-face confrontation” between speaker and listener (Lyons, 1968, p. 40). Creative punctuation and variations in typography are often used by writers in an attempt produce some of those effects but the result is rarely the same. This point is underlined by Cook’s analogy that the division between speech and writing “is like the difference between watching a play and reading a book” (2004, p. 34). A reader is required to infer a great deal more from a writer than an audience member is from an actor.

Halliday’s second point is that, in practicality, the two forms have differing contextual roles (1989, p. 92). This is supported by McCarthy who states that “both spoken and written discourses are dependent on their immediate contexts to a greater or lesser degree” (1991, p. 149). This “variation in context-dependability” can be found in both spoken and written texts. Though some forms of writing do have a tendency “to be more freestanding”, they can still be encoded with “shared knowledge between reader and writer” making them just as “opaque” as spoken language, which contains context-dependent and anaphoric references (ibid).

Finally, Halliday asserts that the two forms are essentially “creating different realities”. Whereas “writing creates a world of things”, speaking “creates a world of happening.” This suggestion is based on the notion that written language represents “a synoptic view of the world” in that it “defines its universe as product”, whereas spoken language signifies “a dynamic view” and thus “defines its universe primarily as process” (1989, p. 97). This further outlines the point that speech is produced in the moment and is thus contributing to the processes around us, while writing is permanent and often conveys information about the resulting production of those processes.

Halliday continues this point on differing realities by maintaining that “language is, at one and the same time, a part of reality, an account of reality, and an image of reality”. Therefore, speaking and writing are both a part and an account of reality in that they contribute to and record the world around us. However, they differ in how much they represent reality as an image because “spoken language happens” but “written language exists” (1989, pp. 98-99). This concept of differing realities indicates the influence of both forms in society in relation to their functions and processes, and highlights the fact that it is problematic to assign primary status to speech alone.

### **The issue of primacy**

As mentioned in the Introduction, the debate over which form should be considered prominent is most commonly split between traditional grammarians and contemporary linguists. The modern arguments in favour of speech developed in reaction to the dominance of writing in linguistic research, particularly that of a literary nature because it was felt necessary to “combat the denigration of spoken language” against literary language (Stubbs, 1980, p. 24). The burgeoning research in phonetics also added weight to the discussion (ibid). Therefore, the dominant linguistic belief throughout the twentieth century was that spoken language should be considered as primary and that written language is “a pale reflection of the spoken” (ibid). Yet, Cook (2004, p. 32) argues that writing is more than a simple representation of speech and is justified by some has having the superior status, as the functional differences discussed in the previous section show.

Halliday makes the point that “in a literate culture, we tend not to take the spoken language seriously” (1989, p. 97) and through this determination to control the dominance of writing “modern linguistics has tried to redress the balance” between the two mediums (1989, p. 98). To do so linguists have stated several reasons

as to why speech has been given primacy over writing, the core arguments of which focus on the “chronological priority of spoken language” (Stubbs, 1980, p. 25), which is essentially stating that, sequentially speaking, speech should have primacy as it predates writing in a number of areas such as evolution, acquisition and literacy (Stubbs, 1980, pp. 25-29).

These arguments are convincing, yet, as Lyons (1968, p. 38) emphasises, “it is sometimes asserted that speech cannot be ‘proved’ to be older than writing”. Therefore, the suggestion that one form of language alone should be the legitimate object of linguistic study based simply on chronology, rather than function and influence in society, may appear to some as lacking in reason. Furthermore, whilst some linguists stress the primacy of speech, they rarely acknowledge that “their tools are derived from thinking about written language”. Consequently, it has been argued that the main theories of linguistic analysis are a “epiphenomena of writing” (Coulmas, 2005, p. 205).

In contrast to the chronological priority arguments in favour of speech, writing has been given a “social priority” (Stubbs, 1980, p. 30) based on “changing sociocultural factors”, such as the importance communities place on literacy and the functional benefits of having a written version of their language. Stubbs also argues that a language “is a more powerful instrument of communication” when it exists in both the written and spoken forms rather than as one which relies solely on the spoken medium. It is necessary, therefore, to recognise that, once a language has developed into the written form within a community, it will become unique and distinct from speech. This requires a distinction between “social and chronological priorities” because the new form takes on its own significance and results in the community often viewing it as a superior form of language (ibid).

Bloomfield (1933, p. 21), in favour of speech, stated that “a language is the same no matter what system of writing may be used to record it, just as a person is the same no matter how you take his picture”. However, this does not account for the fact that writing provides “another variety of language to the community’s repertory” and “frequently develops characteristics not found in the corresponding spoken language” (Ferguson and Huebner, 1996, p. 42). Therefore, the suggestion that a language remains the same regardless of its written form appears to miss the point of writing for two reasons. Firstly, a language may be considered more powerful if it exists in both forms. Secondly, societies place importance on writing due to characteristics which allow for creative expression and formal documentation.

Furthermore, the social prioritisation of writing by the “linguistically naïve” (Stubbs, 1980, p. 32) has led to the “folk belief that the written language is the ‘real’ language and speech is a corruption of it” (Ferguson and Huebner, 1996, p. 43). This is clearly in contrast to the linguist’s beliefs. The result of this paradox is that language development is based upon “the tacit assumption that changes in the written language will be followed automatically by changes in speech” and it becomes clear that “literate societies generally have a special respect for written language” (Fasold, 1990, p. 277). Within these societies the ability to access written language and the extent of writing skills “remain strong indicators of social class” (Coulmas, 2005, p. 204).

As de Saussure (1986, p. 25) puts it, “the written word is so intimately connected with the spoken word it represents that it manages to usurp the principal role” and “as much or even more importance is given to this representation of the vocal sign as to the vocal sign itself.” It would appear, then, that “what people think is important” (Stubbs, 1980, p. 32). The priority given to writing by society may be a difficult obstacle for linguists to overcome if they are to convince the linguistically naïve that speech is the primary form of language. However, Halliday (1989, p. 92) argues that both writing and speaking are “language” and we should remember that the notion of language is greater than the two independent forms. Therefore, it would be a mistake to become overly obsessed with one particular medium over the other (ibid).

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### **Relationship to language teaching**

Those who support these arguments in favour of the primacy of speech have had a major influence on language teaching methodology. So much so that “the overriding importance of the spoken language is implicit in almost all language teaching methods” used in contemporary classrooms (Cook, 2005, pp. 424-425). On the other hand, Cook also highlights that the arguments for speech have no direct bearing on second language acquisition or “the desirability of teaching spoken rather than written language to students who are already literate” (2005, p. 425).

Language teachers cannot make the assumption that if a student is literate in their native language, they will be able to write effectively in a second language. Likewise, those who do not progress well in second or foreign language learning often tend to have weak L1 literacy skills. By ignoring writing in favour of more speech based activities we are in danger of denying learners the opportunity to acquire language via the written form. This is principally the case during the early stages of language learning where writing can provide “an excellent platform for learners to test hypotheses about the new language” and allows “time for learners to process meaning” (Kern, 2000, p. 172). These may be unavailable when speaking due to the various cognitive processes occurring, such as the silent rehearsal and monitoring conversational turns.

Teachers should be aware that learners require exposure to both forms in order to maximise their learning potential. By denoting speech as primary in the classroom, as well as in everyday life, linguists and language curriculum planners are ignoring the fact that people learn differently and may be more comfortable with one medium than the other. As Halliday notes; “reading/writing and listening/speaking are different ways of learning because they are different ways of knowing” (1989, pp. 96-97). Furthermore, it allows teachers ample opportunity to address mistakes which may affect both forms if permitted to become entrenched in the learner’s language skills. It could certainly be argued that errors in spelling are as important as those in pronunciation (Cook, 2008, p. 87) in terms of the impact these have on the student’s audiences and the judgements they may make based on these errors.

As mentioned, the two forms often transpose. This alone necessitates a focus on both if one also considers how relationships are now maintained via email and social networking sites. Providing language learners with the necessary skills to communicate competently within a variety of scenarios, spoken and written language should be viewed as “a complex set of relationships between language forms and contexts of use” and much more than “a simple division between written and spoken media” (McCarthy and Carter, 1994, p. 9). In a practical sense, students require speaking skills in order to develop general fluency and competency in everyday social interaction, such as building relationships and participating in transactions or negotiations (Hedge, 2000, p. 261). Equally, they need writing skills for education and employment requirements, such as academic writing and various applications.

It is, then, important to consider both spoken and written language as equal in the context of language teaching. The arguments for the primary status of both forms involve good reason for the equal inclusion of writing and speaking on a language curriculum and teachers and planners should be more aware of the impact and influence of both. Similarly, learners often believe that their focus should be on speaking and are blind to the potential that writing can bring to their studies. The exception to this is in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching where there is a greater focus on writing due to the importance placed on the written form in academia. Ironically, this often results in less focus on speaking to the extent where students are able to communicate their ideas much more vividly in writing than speech. It would seem, then, that there may be need for a general change in focus across teaching and learning in order to give writing and speaking equal footing in the classroom.

## Conclusion

The issue of primacy in language appears to be divided along lines of chronological and social priority: between the general consensus amongst linguists that speech is the principle form and the “linguistically naïve” who hold writing in higher esteem. Both make convincing arguments and state valid reasons, yet to give either form primary status would seem inappropriate given that the functions that differentiate them are of equal importance in society and that their roles are becoming more transposed with the increase in popularity of digital texts such as text messaging, email and instant messaging.

If linguistic study were to focus on both in equal measure then the result may lead to a more articulate and literate society in which people are aware of the importance of both forms and prestige is afforded, justifiably, to spoken and written language in education. Certainly, in the language classroom the role of speech has been prominent, however, there are good reasons to suggest writing should receive dual attention in order to fully develop learners’ language skills. By concentrating on the individual functions of each form; on how they can interact with each other to create more interesting text varieties; and the importance of their chronological, literacy, acquisition and social influences, we may be able to align the two forms of language rather than divide them.

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