

Written and spoken English

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Written and spoken languages are very distinctive ways of communication. They have always had different purposes and characteristics.

In writing we usually have time to plan our message, to think about it carefully while writing, and to revise it afterwards if necessary. In speech (unless it is, say, a lecture prepared in advance), we have no time to do this, but must shape our message as we go. Often we use in speech 'empty' words and phrases like *'well'*, *'you see'*, *'you know'* and *'kind of'*. We also often hesitate, or fill in gaps with 'hesitation fillers' like *'let me see...'* *'er...'* and *'um...'* while we think of what next to say. We may fail to complete a sentence, or lose track of our sentences and mix up one grammatical construction with another. All these features do not normally occur in writing.

▣ What follows is an extract from a book on railways written for children:

'In bridging river valleys, the early engineers built many notable masonry viaducts of numerous arches.'

▣ A natural spoken version, still retaining the same lexical items, might run somewhat as follows:

'In the early days when engineers had to make a bridge across a valley and the valley had a river flowing through it, they often built viaducts, which were constructed of masonry and had numerous arches in them; and many of these viaducts became notable.'

The ideational content is the same in both, and it has now been distributed across six clauses instead of two. In general, the grammar of spoken sentences is simpler and less strictly constructed than the grammar of written sentences. It is difficult to divide a spoken conversation into separate sentences, and the connections between one clause and another are less clear because the speaker relies more on the hearer's understanding of context and on their ability to interrupt if they fail to understand. But in 'getting across' their message, the speaker is able to rely on features of intonation which tell us a great deal that cannot be given in written punctuation.

● If we compare pairs of wordings that are paraphrases of each other, one typical of writing, the other typical of speech, we find regular patterns, like the following:

1) We tend to use fewer words in writing than in speech (16 versus 28 in the example below)

▣ WRITING: *Business community lunchers relax in this dappled midcity sanctuary while saving something for the resident seagulls.*

▣ SPEECH: *Members of the business community relax while they lunch in this dappled sanctuary in the middle of the city, and save something for the seagulls who live there*

- 2) Written language displays a much higher ratio of lexical items (content words) to total running words, in other words: it has high **lexical density** (L-10; G-6, in the example above)

Speech, on the contrary, makes far more use of grammatical items (function words such as determiners, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, some adverbs and finite verbs). Spoken language is said to be sparse: it has lower lexical density, but it is more **intricate** than written, a kind of grammatical complexity (L-12; G-16, in the example above).

- 3) Written language represents phenomena as **products**. Spoken language represents phenomena as **processes**. Each code represents reality as being like itself.

A piece of writing is an object: so what is represented by written language is also given the form of an object. That's why a written text features a large quantity of (abstract) nouns.

But when we talk, we are doing: so when we represent by talking we say that something happened or something was done; instead of nouns, we prefer to use verbs, adjectives or clauses.

Although, with modern technology, the distinction between writing and speech is being blurred, there is still a marked preference for using nouns in writing and verbs when speaking.

- Compare:

▣ WRITING: *Opinion in the colony greeted the promised change with enthusiasm* (L-6; G-4)

▣ SPEECH: The people in the colony rejoiced when it was promised that things would change in this way (L-7; G-10)

- Here's another example:

▣ WRITING: *A grey-faced Dr Coffin unlocked the door* (L-6; G-2)

▣ SPEECH: *Dr Coffin unlocked the door, and as he did so his face was grey*
(L-5; G-9)

- ⊙ The complexity of written language is **crystalline**: the ideational content is tightly packed, in structural patterns that are basically simple in form.
- ⊙ The complexity of spoken language is **choreographic**: the ideational content is loosely strung out, in dynamic patterns that are highly intricate in movement.

Now you might feel ready now to either of the tasks which follow. . .