

Advanced textual analysis: spoken texts

Introduction

Peter Elbow, Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, wrote an article in 2010 on “Defining ‘Speech’ and ‘Writing’” in which he defines speech and writing as different linguistic products.

People commonly assume that spoken and written language are different. But strictly speaking, there is no real difference between them. Linguists like to create huge “corpora” of millions of strings of spoken and written language. When they jumble together all the strings, they find they can’t usually identify which ones were spoken and which were written. That is, when we look at spoken and written language that was produced in a full range of human contexts and purposes, we find that almost any kind of language can be found coming out of a mouth or from a hand.

... People tend to assume that writing is more formal than speaking, but that’s not always the case. Some writing (such as what people

write in some diaries and letters) is more “speechy” than some speech (such as what people utter in some carefully planned lectures, announcements, and interviews).

But after linguists are done demolishing the distinction between spoken and written language, they turn around and start using it again – but in a careful way. They recognize that it’s useful to distinguish what they call “*typical* speech” and “*typical* writing.” That is, they distinguish between two common *kinds* or *genres* or *registers* of language: everyday conversational *spoken* language versus the written language that’s common in careful informational or expository prose – “essayist” writing.

Activity 10.1

Re-read the three paragraphs above and summarize in note form (in your own words) the main points the writer is making.

No excuses! You know how to make notes.

Discussion

The author helpfully sums up his own argument about the differences between speech and writing at the end of the article, saying that:

- they are not different if we look at the full range of spoken and written language produced in the full range of situations and contexts
- they are, however, very different if we restrict our view to easy, conversational, casual chat versus essayist writing
- it is usually this restricted view that people have in mind when they talk about spoken and written language.

This argument supports what we've found throughout the last three chapters. Most texts shift between different registers, and it's risky to jump to conclusions about the language which will be used to construct any particular text type.

We noticed in Chapter 9 that it's better to use the term "utterances" than the word "sentences" when discussing spoken language because in casual conversation people rarely speak in what would be considered grammatically perfect sentences in a piece of writing.

However, some interactions involving speech are more prepared and less spontaneous, and thus (probably) more formal, for example, presentations and interviews.

Spoken language and politics

In many situations involving spoken language, the audience will be relatively private and immediately present. In the world of public life and politics, however, speakers have to imagine possible distant and future audiences.

We will now see how audience affects language in a range of texts.

Activity 10.2

The following text is a transcript of the beginning of an audio broadcast made in 2000 by Tony Blair, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

What differences can you find between the language used here and the language you might expect in a written text?



Hello and welcome to what I am sure will be the first of many direct broadcasts from the Downing Street website. I'm sitting here at my desk in Downing Street in front of my PC terminal, which I'm just getting to use after many years of not really wanting to come to terms with the new computer technology. I did a course. I'm coming to terms with it. I'm using the new PC terminal and it really brings me to reflect upon what I wanted to say to you this week, which is of course the importance of education and skills – the importance of education and skills for everyone including adults but most particularly for our children. My children, like others, are having to learn the new technology. They have to become expert at it and they are going to be leaving school and going to work in a world in which skill and talent and ability is not just their route to personal fulfilment, it is their route to prosperity. They will need those skills and talents if they have got any chance of succeeding. And the country needs them to be highly skilled as well.

In Britain, we've always been excellent at educating an elite well. The top 20 per cent

have always been pretty well educated. But for the majority, the standards just haven't been high enough. We've had a poverty of ambition and aspiration which has meant that large numbers of people leave school either without qualifications or without nearly the qualifications they need. Our vision for the education system is really like this. We need education throughout life. Everyone understands that.

It has to begin at a young age so the first stage is nursery education for the four year olds and three year olds. And we're pretty well on the way to achieving that. The four year olds have now got the chance of decent nursery education. We've doubled the numbers of three year olds who get the chances of nursery education and will extend that further over time.

Then after that, at the second stage, we need primary schools that really focus on the basics – getting literacy and numeracy right – and I'll come back to that in a minute.

Audio broadcast by Tony Blair

You could probably find a few examples of “typical” features of spoken language.

- Tony Blair breaks the rule of formal written language that decrees you should never begin a sentence with a conjunction: “*And* we're pretty well on the way to achieving that.”
- There are some short simple sentences: “I did a course. I'm coming to terms with it.”
- He uses the **present continuous tense** to give the impression this is happening now: “*I'm sitting* here at my desk in Downing Street in front of my PC terminal, which *I'm just getting* to use after many years of not really wanting to ...”

But otherwise there are few signs of genuinely spontaneous speech. What explanations can you suggest for that from the context?