

Differences between Spoken and Written English

Yijun Liu^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Civil Engineering, Changsha University of Science and Technology, Changsha, 410114, China*

a. 18975610333@163.com

**correspondence author*

Abstract: The link between spoken and written language has been the subject of many diverse perspectives throughout the history of language research. Many linguists considered written language a variant of spoken language in the past few decades. But over time, written language has come to hold a dominant position. Therefore, this paper reviews the differences between the two types of English language, spoken and written English, by analyzing the features of these two types of English through three aspects: production and perception, forms, and formality. This review also provides some pedagogical suggestions for writing and speaking instructors who want to engage ESL pupils better.

Keywords: spoken language, written language, differences, production and perception, form, formality

1. Introduction

The expressions used in spoken and written language are very different from one another. These disparities are significantly more pronounced than most people realize. The differences between spoken and written language are extensively discussed in the literature and are frequently examined as separate realms. In general, spoken language is depicted as spontaneous, less structured, and frequently employed in daily discussions, but written language may be properly categorized, planned, and arranged.

Recent studies on spoken English and written English have highlighted the register distinctions that are represented in many genres. According to M. J. SCHLEPPEGRELL, language users utilize a variety of grammatical and lexical tools to produce texts of various types, and research into the choices that are acceptable for particular genres helps us better understand how register differences — different configurations of these lexical and grammatical resources — play a factor in text production [1].

However, it is comprehensible though regretful that spoken and written English should have been permitted to confront each other in this way. Thus, this paper will uncover the fundamental disparities through a comparison of their various modes of production and perception, forms, and formality, and give some pedagogical implications for speaking and writing teachers to teach ESL students more effectively as well.

2. Differences Between Spoken and Written English

2.1. Comparison of Production and Perception in Spoken and Written English

According to G. Brown and G. Yule., it is obvious that spoken and written language make somewhat different demands on language-producers [2]. Meanwhile, D. Crystal considered that spoken language is time-bound, dynamic, and transient while written language is space-bound, static, and permanent [3].

2.1.1. Production

According to M. Gu and B. Ma, “Speaker can use ‘voice quality’ effect to make interlocutor easier to understand what the speaker is trying to get across, whereas the writer cannot take advantage of this useful effect” [4]. Speakers can make use of “voice quality” effects with the aid of facial expressions and gestural systems to make their ideas clearer. For example, when a speaker says “all right” with a determined look and a powerful voice, he may express that it’s OK. In contrast, if one says the same words with a depressed look and breathy voice, he might express his depression and compromise. In addition to this, other phonetic characteristics like intonation and pitch can also make speakers’ expression clearer in speaking. Z. L. Hu indicated that a difference in tone changes the meaning of a group of words. The rising tone at the end of an utterance is often used for asking yes-no questions and showing politeness or surprise, whereas the falling tone sometimes leads to rudeness and abruptness [5]. People always use intonation to change meanings. For example, there are significant distinctions in the meanings of the modal particle “Mm” with different intonations. To be specific, “Mm” with a rising tone means “What did you say?” “Mm” with a falling tone means “Yes, you’re right.” “Mm” with a level tone means “I’m thinking.”

In written English, when the same words are outputted, it’s likely to make an unclear and ambiguous statement. However, in certain situations, punctuation can play the same functional role in writing as intonation does in speaking. For example, “really?” is equivalent to “really” uttered with a rising tone; “Really!” and “really.” are equivalent to “really” uttered with a falling tone. They express completely different attitudes of the writer. To be more precise, the former expresses the writer’s suspicion and uncertainty, while the latter state the fact certainly with or without emotions.

2.1.2. Perception

As for perception, in spoken English, the speaker can observe the interlocutor’s reaction immediately and get direct feedback from them. Therefore, if he finds something wrong in his interlocutor’s reaction, he can modify what he is saying right away and make his words more acceptable to his interlocutor. As well, the interlocutor can also catch the speaker’s feelings and emotions from his intonation and facial expression, and give appropriate feedback.

In written English, however, the writer cannot get his interlocutor’s feedback directly and he has to imagine the interlocutor’s reaction. Therefore, before sending his words, he has to weigh and consider whether his words disturb his interlocutor or not. In this sense, the writer would be under more pressure for giving proper and right words to the interlocutor.

2.2. Comparison of Forms in Spoken and Written English

2.2.1. Lexical Richness

Vocabulary use is a significant aspect of speaking and writing. The importance of vocabulary in the creation and comprehension of meaningful text is generally acknowledged, as is the necessity of vocabulary for the generation, development, and presentation of ideas. H. Daller and H. J. Xue

suggested that the size and depth of a person's vocabulary are directly tied to how fluent they are in a language, and the lexical richness that is evident in spoken or written text is a product of this underpinning vocabulary knowledge [6]. According to F. O'Dell, J. Read, and M. McCarthy, there are four components of lexical richness to consider when examining written compositions: lexical variation, lexical sophistication, lexical density, and the number of errors. Lexical richness is the broad phrase for vocabulary knowledge [7].

Lexical richness is highly regarded in writing English. According to Douglas and S. Roy, the productive use of vocabulary has significant effects on writing quality, which has an impact on academic performance at the university level [8]. A wide variety of words and expressions (lexical variation), the use of uncommon or challenging words appropriate to the topic and style of the writing (lexical sophistication), a high percentage of content words rather than grammatical words (lexical density), and finally few or a low level of lexical errors (number of errors) are all considered to be characteristics of good writing.

However, in spoken English, people tend to use shorter words and produce utterances of a lower lexical richness in speech than they do in writing. For example, “good” and “great” are used frequently in spoken English, while in written English, writers are more likely to use words like “excellent” and “fantastic”, along with expressions of how it’s good and great in detail. Y. Shi and L. Lei argue that individuals from all social strata tend to produce shorter, less lexically complex sentences when speaking than when writing, which suggests that spoken language is more impromptu [9]. Another contributing factor to this trend is that speakers have no needs to employ complex words or utter long sentences because the main goal of speaking is to convey or communicate. Such a conversation is a perfect example: the questioner asked “coffee?” and was responded “Sure.” In this example, the question and the answer consist of only one word for each but express complete meaning.

2.2.2. Grammar

The standards for grammar in spoken and written English vary significantly. The written text requires “correct” grammar more than spoken content does. According to M. Gu and B. Ma, written language has a considerably more structured syntax than spoken language does, and spoken language often has more unfinished sentences and less subordination [4].

A grammar tool for indicating linkages in texts is the conjunction. Some of the various ways that links are indicated in speech and writing have been detailed by linguists. According to M. J. SCHLEPPEGRELL, when linking discourse fragments together, spontaneous spoken language frequently uses sentence chaining techniques that make use of conjunctions and adverbial clauses. This can be seen in the fact that spoken language has more finite verbs and clauses linked by conjunctions, as well as more adverbial clauses overall, notably reason adverbials, than written language does [1]. Written language, on the other hand, frequently employs nominalizations. Instead of using conjunctions and clause chaining, academic writers prefer to employ verbs that communicate semantic linkages through prepositional phrases or other forms of syntactic condensation to bind ideas together. Using prepositional phrases, complicated verbs, and adjectives, single-clause frameworks can condense information and concepts.

In addition to this, complementizer such as “that” and markers that connect main sentences and clauses are often omitted in spoken English, while in written English there are strict principles. For instance, the sentence “I cried, (when) it was my birthday.” is proper in spoken language, whereas in written language it lacks cohesion and coherence without the temporal marker “when”.

2.2.3. Structure

Written English and spoken English are structured in different forms. According to G. Brown and G. Yule, “In written language, sentences are generally structured in subject-predicate form, while in spoken language it is quite common to find the topic-comment structure” [2]. To be specific, in spoken English, we can say “That tree, you see?” to show the topic at the beginning. On the contrary, in written English, we may write a sentence like “did you see that tree?” to express our ideas more directly.

In these two types, there are also various rules on how to break up sentences. M. Gu and B. Ma claim that in spoken language, fillers—both verbal and nonverbal—are used to break up the silence and to break up each sentence the speaker says, while in written language, fillers and vague language are to be avoided; punctuation is used to break up sentences instead [4]. To be more precise, in spoken English, people tend to use fillers like “Um” and “Well” to separate sentences although they have no definite meanings, which are rarely used in written English. D. Crystal indicates that a writer will employ punctuation, capitalization, spatial order, color, and other graphic effects to break up phrases [3].

2.3. Comparison of Formality in Spoken and Written English

Written language is expected to be more formal than spoken language in general. F. Heylighen and J. M. Dewaele explain that such expectation results from the definition of “formality”, which is that more formal messages are less likely to be misunderstood by recipients who are not familiar with the sender's context [10]. Written language is a perfect example because there is far less context sharing in writing than in speech due to no direct touch between sender and receiver.

2.3.1. Occasions

Spoken language and written language are respectively appropriate for certain situations. Written language is more associated with significant and formal occasions like academic events or heart-felt personal expression, to be more specific, like applications and letters, while spoken language is used to communicate in daily life, anywhere and anytime. According to M. Gu and B. Ma, people frequently view written language as a fundamental instrument to record their thoughts in literate societies. They could consider spoken language to be inferior and an item to be unworthy [4].

2.3.2. Regionality

Spoken language may vary in different spaces, which we call “dialects and accents”, while written English hardly does. Accents and dialects in spoken English partly determined its informality. It is hard for listeners to understand when a speaker tries to use a dialect to communicate that the listener knows little. Therefore, every region has its standard language to avoid such a situation. As shown in the example, hosts of TV shows are required to speak standard languages instead of dialects or utterances with accents. As a result, writing is used in civilized civilizations to overcome disparities across social and geographic groups. Institutions in the fields of government, education, and literature have codified this.

2.3.3. Stability

According to D. Mendis, written texts have more permanency than their spoken counterparts [11]. As spoken language varies not only in space but in time. Due to the fact that spoken language is a type of language passed from one generation to another, it undergoes continual change everywhere and always. On the contrary, written language changes more slowly since it is permanent and standardized.

3. Conclusions

From all the aspects mentioned above, we can draw a safe conclusion that these factors are significant distinctions between spoken and written English. In terms of production, “voice quality” is an advantage of spoken English. As for perception, writers are under greater pressure in that they cannot get their interlocutor’s feedback directly and have to weigh the pros and cons of their words on their own. In terms of form, there are three causes for the differences between these two types of language: lexical richness, grammar, and structure. Generally speaking, while written English is dense compared to spoken English's sparseness, both forms of contact are structured and adhere to specific standards. Written English is formal grammatically in subject-predicate form with a large number of conjunctions, whereas spoken English is informal with unfinished sentences, little subordination, and fillers. In terms of formality, written English is more formal and stable compared to spoken English’s changeability and variability in time and space.

In order to clarify the key points in teaching ESL students writing and speaking, there are some pedagogical implications. Teachers need to learn more about the characteristics of the English language, particularly how spoken English and written English differ from one another. For instance, since speaking and writing English have different grammatical systems from one another, speaking instructors and writing teachers should emphasize separate aspects when teaching grammar. And to learn English more effectively, we must continue to research the differences between spoken and written English on a variety of levels.

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