

Pragmatics 12 - Some differences between speech and writing

Characteristics of ‘typical’ speech compared with ‘typical’ writing

‘Typical’ speech	‘Typical’ writing
Inexplicitness	Explicitness
Lack of clear sentence boundaries	Clear sentence boundaries
Simple structure	More complex structures
Repetitiveness	Non-repetitiveness
Normal non-fluency	Fluency
Monitoring features	No monitoring features
Interaction features	No interaction features
Features reflecting informality	Features reflecting formality

Linguistic characteristics of speech and writing:

INEXPLICITNESS:

Speech is generally used in face-to-face situations, so that both the auditory and visual media are available. As a result, speech can be much less explicit than writing, because (a) extra information is conveyed by ‘body language’ (e.g. facial expressions, gestures); the immediate physical environment can be referred to, e.g. by pointing to objects or people; (c) shared knowledge of the participants in a conversation makes explicitness unnecessary; and (d) in a conversation there is an opportunity for feedback from the hearer, so that the message can be clarified or repeated.

LACK OF CLEAR SENTENCE BOUNDARIES:

Related to inexplicitness in speech is the absence of clearly defined units we call sentences. In spontaneous speech, sentences are often difficult to delimit: they may simply be unfinished, because the knowledge of the addressee makes completion unnecessary, or they may not be discernable as units at all. It seems that the clause may be a more appropriate unit for analysing speech than the sentence. In context, the absence of clear sentence boundaries does not mean that conversation is difficult to follow: it just shows that the conversation is organised in a different way from writing.

SIMPLE STRUCTURE:

In general, speech is more simple in grammatical structure than writing. However, when we use terms like ‘simple’ and ‘complex’, we must be careful to explain what they mean. There is no one measure for complexity of structure, but the following measures, when combined, should be useful.

A/ Clause structure – how many sentence elements, coordination and subordination
While the number of elements in the clause can be seen as ‘horizontal’ complexity, subordination can be seen as ‘vertical’ complexity.

B/ Noun phrase structure – how many modifiers do they contain (horizontal complexity), and how many subordinate phrases (vertical complexity)?

C/ Where is vertical complexity located? In clauses, subordination at the beginning (‘left-branching’) seems to make for more complexity than embedding at the end (‘right-branching’). In noun phrases also, subordination towards the end of the phrase tends to be less complex than subordination at the beginning.

We have thus outlined ways of measuring complexity in discourse. In general we can say that the greater the number of branches in the tree diagram, the more complex

the sentence will be. Also, naturally enough, there is a strong correlation between complexity and length (measured in number of words). Speech is less complex than writing because of the short time available to produce and process it. Writing, on the other hand, can be re-drafted and re-read.

REPETITIVENESS:

Because of the lack of permanence of speech, it is more repetitive than writing. Important information has to be repeated since the addressee cannot refer back to what has gone before.

NORMAL NON-FLUENCY:

This results from the unprepared nature of speech and refers to phenomena such as hesitation, unintended repetitions, false starts, fillers, grammatical blends and unfinished sentences. A blend occurs where a sentence 'swaps horses', beginning in one way and ending in another. This is slightly different from a 'false start', where a sentence is broken off mid-way as a result of a change of mind. These phenomena are edited out in written language, which consequently appears more fluent. We may also note the apparent fluency of fictional speech that appears in literature.

MONITORING AND INTERACTION FEATURES:

These appear in speech, as a result of its use in dialogue, with a physically present addressee, rather than in monologue.

Monitoring features indicate the speaker's awareness of the addressee's presence and reactions, and include adverbs and adverbials such as *as well, I mean, sort of, you know*.

Interaction features invite the active participation of the addressee, as in questions, imperatives, second-person pronouns, etc.

INFORMALITY:

The situations in which speech is used are generally less formal than those in which writing is used.

Mode of discourse

as a continuum from 'typical' speech to 'typical' writing

'Typical' speech	Conversation in a pub
	Seminar
	Telephone conversation
	Personal letter
	Job interview
	Radio discussion
	Television advertisement
	Lecture
	Sermon
	Script of a play
	Television news
	Newspaper
	Business letter
'Typical' writing	Scientific book

**Three interrelated scales of use
(formality, politeness, impersonality)**

Formal	Informal
Complex sentences Polysyllabic, classical vocabulary, e.g. <i>investigate, extinguish, decipher</i>	Simple sentence Monosyllabic, native vocabulary, especially phrasal verbs, e.g. <i>look into, put out, make out</i>
Polite	Familiar
Respectful terms of address, e.g. <i>Sir, Madam</i> Indirect requests, e.g. <i>Would you be so kind as to ...</i>	Intimate terms of address, if any, e.g. <i>John, love</i> Direct imperatives, e.g. <i>Give me ...</i>
Impersonal	Personal
Passive voice, e.g. <i>the terrorists were shot</i> Third person noun phrases, e.g. <i>the reader, customers</i>	Active voice, e.g. <i>police shot the terrorists</i> First and second person pronouns, e.g. <i>I, you</i>

Dialect – language variation according to the user

Register (style) – language variation according to use

Register can be subdivided into three categories of language use, each of which affects the language variety.

Tenor - has to do with the relationship between the speaker and the addressees (formality)

Mode - has to do with the medium in which the language is transmitted (spoken x written language)

Domain - has to do with how language varies according to the activity in which it plays a part

Language varies according to the function it is fulfilling:

Function	Task	Act of Communication
1. referential	convey information	context
2. expressive	express feelings	speaker
3. conative	persuade somebody to do st	addressee
4. phatic	make contact with somebody else	channel
5. poetic	write poetry	message
6. metalinguistic	talk about language itself	code

Domain	Dominant function	Subordinate functions
Journalism	referential	expressive, conative
Advertising	conative	referential, poetic
Religion	expressive	conative, poetic
Law	referential	metalinguistic, conative
Literature	poetic	expressive, referential
Conversation	phatic	referential, expressive