8

Discourse analysis: speech and writing

8.1 Introductory

If you have worked through Part B of this book, you should by now be equipped to analyse the structure of English sentences. In this chapter and the next we aim to demonstrate how this knowledge of grammar can be applied to the analysis of DISCOURSE, or pieces of language which are bigger than a single sentence.

The term DISCOURSE applies to both spoken and written language (literary and non-literary), in fact to any sample of language used for any purpose. In Part B we used mostly invented sentences for analysis, and did not pay much attention to the context in which they might have occurred. This was necessary in order to focus on the sentence as a unit of language structure, but now we shall expand our horizons to look at chunks of language in actual use.

In 1.3.3 we briefly examined the categories of language use which affect language variation for all language users. These categories were TENOR, MODE and DOMAIN. The category of MODE is particularly important because it is related to the distinction between speech and writing. As we said in 1.3.3, mode 'has to do with the effects of the medium in which the language is transmitted'. The obvious distinction for English is between the auditory and visual medium, that is, between speech and writing.

In 1.1 we made the point that grammar is at least as much the study of speech as the study of writing. Writing is intrinsically no 'better or 'worse' than speech, but each performs different functions in society, uses different forms, and exhibits different linguistic characteristics. In this chapter we shall compare speech and writing in detail, and our comparison will be illustrated by the analysis of spoken and written discourse.

8.2 Speech and writing: which comes first?

In 1.1 we said that the written language is 'secondary to its spoken form,

which developed first'. However, it should not be secondary in our consideration, for as we shall see, written and spoken language have different functions, different forms and different linguistic characteristics.

In the history of the human race, spoken language certainly came before writing. We have no evidence of the existence of a writing system of any kind before about 3500 BC, whereas we assume that spoken language existed well before then. In the history of individual societies, spoken language also pre-dates written language, and many languages spoken today have no written form. For the individual, too, spoken language comes first, since children learn to speak before they learn to write.

However, in societies which do have writing systems (such as the Roman alphabet, used for English and many other languages), the written language is very important from a social and educational point of view. It would be impossible to imagine our own society functioning as we know it without the advantage that writing gives (see 8.3). Literacy is closely associated with civilisation and education. It is no wonder, then, that the written language usually has greater social prestige than the spoken language, and more official recognition. Speech is often evaluated socially according to its closeness to the written language, which explains why standard spoken English is probably closer to written English than is any other spoken variety. Written language is often viewed as more 'correct' than spoken language, and as more worthy of study. Also, from a legal point of view, written language takes precedence: a written contract, for example, is more binding than a verbal or spoken agreement. However, from a linguistic point of view we can only say that speech and writing are different; we cannot say that one is superior to the other.

8.3 Functions of writing and speech

The social prestige of written language is probably derived from the added functions which a written variety can fulfil for a society.

Writing has the advantage of relative permanence, which allows for record-keeping in a form independent of the memories of those who keep the records. It also allows for communication over a great distance (by letters, newspapers, etc.), and to large numbers simultaneously (by publications of all kinds). The invention of the tape-recorder, the telephone and the radio have helped to overcome the limitations of the spoken language regarding time, distance and numbers, but these are relatively recent developments in human history.

Another advantage of written language is that it is not only permanent, but also visible. An important consequence of this is that it can be care-

fully planned and revised by the writer in a way that spoken language cannot. And for the reader, written language can be processed at leisure, with parts of it re-read and others omitted at will. This characteristic of written language promoted the development of literature, and intellectual development in general. Written language makes possible the creation of literary works of art in ways comparable with the creation of paintings or sculpture. It also promotes intellectual development by overcoming the limitations of human memory and allowing the storage of visually accessible knowledge.

Speech, of course, retains functions which writing will never be able to fulfil, such as quick, direct communication with immediate feedback from the addressee. Speech is particularly important in integrating an individual into a social group, and those who cannot speak, even though they may be able to write (e.g. deaf people), often experience severe social isolation. Speech is used far more than writing: speech is an everyday activity for almost everyone, whereas writing may not be.

Thus speech and writing are complementary in function, and we cannot say that one is more important than the other. Ideally we need to be able to use both appropriately as members of an English-speaking (and writing) society.

8.4 The form of speech and writing

As well as being different in function, speech and writing differ in form as a result of the difference of medium. Features of speech which are absent in writing include rhythm, intonation and non-linguistic noises such as sighs and laughter. Since speech is typically used in a face-to-face situation, it can also be accompanied by non-verbal communication such as gestures and facial expression. None of these features can easily be conveyed by conventional writing systems, and those wishing to represent them have had to devise special transcription systems. Writing, on the other hand, has several features which speech lacks, including punctuation, paragraphing and the capitalisation of letters. Written language can be spoken probably more easily than spoken language can be written, but features of speech such as intonation have to be introduced by the speaker. Intonation can to some extent be conveyed by punctuation (especially commas, full stops and question-marks), but not completely. The intonation of the sentence I'll take a taxi to the station will differ according to whether the means of transport ('taxi') or the destination ('station') is the most important idea. This will be clear if you try reading the sentence aloud in different ways. The different meanings implied by differences of intonation would be difficult to convey in writing without changing the structure of the sentence.

8.5 Linguistic characteristics of speech and writing

Having compared the functions and forms of speech and writing, let us now compare their linguistic characteristics. For the sake of clarity we shall outline the characteristics of 'typical' speech compared with 'typical' writing, though (as we shall see) there is actually some overlap between the two.

INEXPLICITNESS. As we have said, 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); (b) 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. Speech tends to make frequent use of pronouns such as *it, this* and *that*, all of which reflect its inexplicitness. Consider the following imaginary conversation (inadequately represented in writing):

A. How did it go?
B. Not too bad. I'm just glad it's over.
A. Was it the last one?
B. Yes, for the time being.

Unless we were participants in this conversation, we could only guess at what it might be about, e.g. an examination or a tooth extraction.

LACK OF CLEAR SENTENCE BOUNDARIES. Related to inexplicitness in speech is the absence of clearly defined units we can call sentences. In written language, a grammatical sentence as described in 2.2 is expected to begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop, and it is the accepted norm for people to write in sentences. The same applies to scripted speech, like that of radio news bulletins. But 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. The following is an excerpt from an actual conversation (dashes represent pauses):

and he was saying that erm – you can go to a nightclub in Birmingham – and watch Tony Bennet for about thirty bob – something like this a night with Tony Bennet – have a nice meal in very plushy surroundings very nice pleasant –

(Quoted in Crystal (1980 b), transcription simplified)

Even with information about intonation, it is difficult to work out how the above could be divided into sentences. In particular, what is the status of the last group of words, *very nice warm pleasant*? We cannot give a definite answer to this question, but it has been suggested (by Crystal in the above-quoted article) 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 elements do the clauses contain, and how many levels of subordination are there? A sentence with the structure [S P O], like (1), will be less complex than one with the structure [A S P O O A], like (2):

(1) [John read a book]
(2) [Last night John gave me a book]

But the second sentence not only has more clause elements, it also has more subordination, since there is a subordinate adverbial clause, *when he came home.* The following sentence has even more subordination:

(3) [Last night John gave back the book [he had borrowed [when he had last seen me]]].

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)? A noun phrase such as *a book* is clearly less complex than *an interesting book about grammar on the table in the kitchen.* The second noun phrase is horizontally complex; consisting of two premodifiers, a head, and two postmodifiers. It is also vertically complex because the prepositional phrase *in the kitchen* is contained in another – *on the table in the kitchen* – and this structure as a whole constitutes one of the postmodifiers of *book.*

(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'). This can be illustrated by drawing abbreviated tree diagrams of the following two sentences (Figures 8.1 and 8.2):

(4) [The man [who is a friend of the woman [who lives in the house [which used to belong to us]]] came to see us yesterday].

(5) [Yesterday we saw the man [who is a friend of the woman [who lives in the house [which used to belong to us]]]].

Most people would probably agree that the second sentence is easier to understand, and in that sense simpler. As we have shown, this can be explained in terms of the location of complexity.
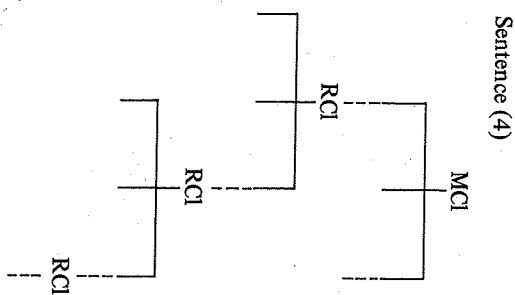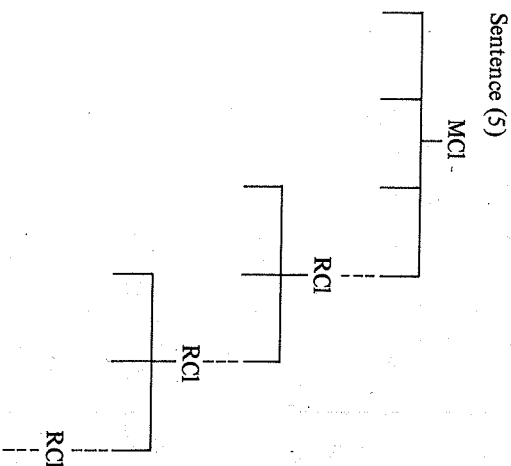
Figure 8.1   Figure 8.2

Sentence (4)   Sentence (5)

MCl   MCl

RCl   RCl

RCl   RCl

RCl   RCl

In noun phrases also, subordination towards the end of the phrase tends to be less complex than subordination at the beginning. So the noun phrase *my sister's husband's brother's friend* seems harder to understand than *the friend of the brother of the husband of my sister* (though neither is simple).

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 of a sentence, 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. 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. This is noticeable, for instance, in the amount of repetition that occurs in television commercials, and (for that matter) in normal conversation.

NORMAL NON-FLUENCY. This results from the unprepared nature of speech and refers to phenomena such as hesitation, unintended repetitions (e.g. *I I...*), false starts, fillers (e.g. *um, er*), GRAMMATICAL BLENDS and unfinished sentences. A blend occurs where a sentence 'swaps horses' (see 11.7), beginning in one way and ending in another; for example, in *Would you mind telling me what's the time?* the sentence begins as an indirect question, but ends as a direct question. This is slightly different from a 'false start', where a sentence is broken off mid-way as a result of a change of mind; for example, *You really ought – well do it your own way*. 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 *well, I mean, sort of, you know*. INTERACTION features invite the active participation of the addressee, as in questions, imperatives, second-person pronouns, etc. Writing, which is rarely used in dialogue, usually lacks these features.

INFORMALITY. The situations in which speech is used are generally less formal than those in which writing is used. Therefore, the linguistic characteristics of informality (see below in 9.2) generally appear in speech, while those reflecting formality appear in writing.
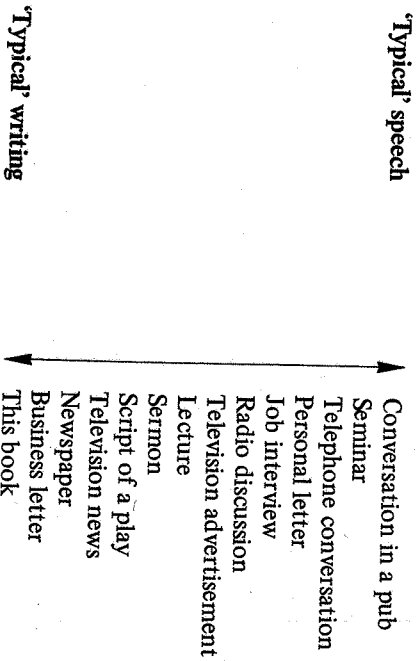
Table 8.1

'TYPICAL' SPEECH	'TYPICAL' WRITING
1. Inexplicitness	Explicitness
2. Lack of clear sentence boundaries	Clear sentence boundaries
3. Simple structure	More complex structure
4. Repetitiveness	Non-repetitiveness
5. Normal non-fluency	Fluency
6. Monitoring features	No monitoring features
7. Interaction features	No interaction features
8. Features reflecting informality	Features reflecting formality

We can summarise the above discussion by listing the characteristics of 'typical' speech and writing (see Table 8.1, previous page).

However, although these are characteristics of 'typical' speech and writing, there is some overlap. For example, a less typical use of speech occurs on the telephone, where the visual medium is not available. The result is that the language needs to be more explicit. Also, although speech is generally unprepared, it may be prepared for a lecture or debate, and we may expect more fluency as a result. Sometimes speech is pre-pared word for word in advance, as in the script of a play or a television advertisement. This speech will also appear more fluent than normal.

Conversely, writing can sometimes display the characteristics of speech, as in a personal letter, which may have monitoring and interaction features (e.g. *if you know what I mean*; *What do you think?*). Letters will also have features reflecting a lesser degree of formality than is typical for writing.

So instead of seeing written and spoken language as watertight sub-categories of mode, we have to recognise that there is some overlap, depending on the use of the language. We might think of mode of dis-course as a continuum from 'typical' speech to 'typical' writing, with in-between examples. The continuum could be represented as below:

'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
This book

'Typical' writing

8.6 Analysis of spoken and written discourse

The above discussion should have provided the background necessary for an analysis of spoken and written discourse. For this purpose we shall use a transcript of part of an actual conversation about a summer holiday. We shall compare this with an imaginary version written in the form of a personal letter.

Since the following is a transcript of a conversation, there is no punctuation, but vertical lines indicate boundaries of the major units of intonation, and dashes indicate pauses. Laughter is indicated thus – *laughs* – and the material in brackets indicates the responses of the person who is not speaking at the time. You may wish to (a) try reading the transcript aloud, and (b) write it out in conventional orthography, using capital letters and punctuation. This may help to identify for you some of the features which characterise it as speech: these features will be discussed below.

(1) TRANSCRIPT OF CONVERSATION

	Line
B. so what how did you map out your day	you had your	1
breakfast in the kitchen		1
A. we had our breakfast	(*laughs*) in the kitchen	– and	2
then we sort of did what we liked	and er got ready to	3
go out	(m	) we usually went out quite soon after	4
that	– erm the children were always up	at the crack of	5
dawn	(m |) with the farmer	– and they went in the	6
milking sheds	and helped him feed the pigs	and all	7
this	you know we didn't see the children	– and er	8
then we used to go out	we – we had super weather	–	9
absolutely super	– and so we went to a beach	usually	10
for er but by about four o'clock it we were hot and we	11
had to come off the beach (m | m |) – so we'd generally	12
go for a tea somewhere	just in case supper was delayed	13
you know	(*laughs*) *laughs* and then we'd get back	and	14
the children would go straight back on to the farm	. . .	15
(from Crystal and Davy, 1975, simplified transcription)	16

(2) IMAGINARY LETTER VERSION

	Line
Dear B,	
I thought I would write and tell you about our	1
summer holiday, which we spent on a farm.	2
Every day, the children were up at the crack	3
of dawn with the farmer. They went to the milking	4
sheds with him and helped him feed the pigs, so that we	5
barely saw them at all.	6
Then we would have our breakfast in the	7
kitchen. After breakfast, we usually did what we liked	8
for a short while, and then went out.	9
We had absolutely super weather, and so we	10
usually went to a beach. But by about four o'clock we	11
	12

were hot and had to come off the beach. Then we'd	
generally go and have tea somewhere just in case supper	13
was delayed. When we got back, the children would go	14
straight back on the farm . . .	15
	16

We shall analyse the above samples in terms of the characteristics listed, in Table 8.1, p. 139, as identifying 'typical' speech and 'typical' writing, and numbered 1–8. However, we should remember that while the conversation is close to 'typical' speech, the letter is some distance on the continuum (see previous section) from 'typical' writing.

1. The inexplicitness of (1) is reflected, for example, in *that* (line 6), which occurs at some distance from its presumed antecedent, *break-fast* (see 12.4). *Breakfast* is repeated for greater explicitness in (2), where there is no chance for the addressee to ask for immediate clarification. Also, *and all this* in (1) (lines 8–9) is a vague, inexplicit reference to the farmer's tasks; it is eliminated in (2). The time sequence is made more explicit in the structure of the discourse of (2) than it is in (1), where events at dawn are mentioned after the description of breakfast. Lack of chronological reference to events is more common in speech than in writing, though it can occur in the latter.

2. If you have attempted a conventional orthographic transcription of (1), you may have had difficulty in deciding where the sentence boundaries should be. For example, do the occurrences of *and* indicate coordinated clauses, or new sentences? This is difficult to resolve for (1), whereas sentences are clearly marked by capital letters and full stops in (2).

3. The clause structure of (2) is generally more complex than that of (1), especially in its greater use of subordination where (1) uses coordination. Examples of subordinated clauses in (2) are *which we spent on a farm* (line 3), *so that we barely saw them at all* (lines 6–7), and *when we got back* (line 15). The last is embedded at the beginning of the main clause, which is less typical of speech than being embedded at the end. The noun phrase structure of the two samples, however, seems to be about equally complex.

4. The repetitiveness of speech is reflected in (1) in the paraphrasing of *we usually went out quite soon after that* (line 5) to *then we used to go out* (line 10), and in the repetition of *the children* (lines 6 and 9), *super* (lines 10 and 11) and *beach* (lines 11 and 13). In (2) there is some repetition, but less than in (1), and no paraphrasing.

5. The non-fluency features in (1) are *er, erm, we – we* (line 10), *usually for er* (lines 11–12), and *it* (line 12). The latter two are false starts, where the speaker changed her mind about what she was going to say. These features do not appear in (2) (except possibly as the deletion of errors in the original handwriting).

6. The monitoring features in (1) are *sort of* (line 4), *you know* (lines 9 and 15). There are none in (2), where there is no physically present addressee.

7. An obvious interaction feature in (1) is B's question, which is missing in (2). In (1) we also find responses from B while A is speaking, in the form of *m* and laughs. In line 15 A's laughter is in direct response to B's.

8. The informality of both (1) and (2) is reflected in the simple (non-parenthetical) structure and non-technical, accessible vocabulary.

In all, we can say that although both (1) and (2) have the same speaker and addressee and cover the same topic, and although they are not too far apart on the continuum between 'typical' speech and 'typical' writing, (1) nevertheless exhibits more of the characteristics typical of speech, and (2) more of those typical of writing. One would expect to find even more characteristics of 'typical' writing in discourse which does not really have a spoken equivalent. See, for example, the legal discourse in Exercise 8 at the end of this chapter.

8.7 Conclusion

In this chapter we have exemplified the category of mode with special reference to spoken and written discourse. We hope to have shown that speech and writing are generally complementary, but that there can be some overlap in their linguistic characteristics, depending on what they are used for, and in what situation. In fact, the characteristics of spoken and written discourse can be better accounted for if we also consider the effect of the two other categories of use, TENOR and DOMAIN. These two categories will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Exercise

Exercise 8
Analyse the following samples of discourse as in 8.6, paying special attention to the linguistic characteristics which reflect mode.

a. Carriage hereunder is subject to the rules and limitations relating to liability established by the Warsaw Convention unless such carriage is not 'international carriage' as defined by that Convention.

To the extent not in conflict with the foregoing carriage and other services performed by each carrier are subject to: (i) pro-

visions contained in this ticket, (ii) applicable tariffs, (iii) carrier's conditions of carriage and related regulations which are made part hereof (and are available on application at the offices of the carrier), except in transportation between a place in the United States or Canada and any place outside thereof to which tariffs in force in those countries apply.

(From 'Conditions of Contract', Laker Airways ticket)

b. B. well I remember Dave rang me up about this business | (yes |) of changing to family grouping | - and erm - er you know | it depends on so many things | really | but I have this friend of ours who lives er erm over the other side of Reading | you know |

A. oh yes | -

B. she erm - she teaches somewhere over that side | I don't quite know where | - but she's terribly against it | (is she |) she's a far more experienced infant teacher than I am | you know | (yes |) I mean I've only been doing infant teaching for a short while | - but she won't have anything to do with it | because she says | that it puts too much strain on the teacher |

B. I'm sure it does | . . .

(From Crystal and Davy, 1975, transcription simplified; conventions as explained for passage (1) on p. 141).

9

Discourse analysis: tenor and domain

9.1 Introductory

In the last chapter we looked closely at the effect of MODE on language, and we noticed in particular how speech and writing differ from one another. In this chapter we shall see how other kinds of language differ from one another. Just as we saw how people vary their language according to whether they are speaking or writing, we shall now see how they vary it according to factors such as who they are speaking to, in what situation, and what kind of activity the language is being used for.

This will involve us in investigating the effect of the categories of language use which we call TENOR and DOMAIN. Although we are considering the effect of each of the categories separately at first, we must recognise that they have a combined effect on any discourse. We shall illustrate this combined effect in 9.6.

In this chapter, as in the last, we shall be dealing with non-literary language. This is because the next chapter deals in particular with the analysis of literary discourse.

9.2 Tenor

In 1.3.3 we said that tenor 'has to do with the relationship between a speaker and the addressee(s) in a given situation, and is often characterised by greater or lesser formality.' To illustrate this, if the relationship between the speaker and addressee is distant and official, as in a legal document, the tenor will be FORMAL, whereas if it is close and intimate, as in a conversation between a husband and wife, the tenor will be IN-FORMAL. These two examples in fact represent extremes of formality, and it is more realistic to think of a scale or continuum, from the most formal at one extreme to the most informal at the other. The tenor of a conversation between a solicitor and a client, for example, would have an intermediate degree of formality.

Other scales relating to that of formality are those of POLITENESS