



Differences between Spoken and Written Discourse

Discourse Analysis by Brian Paltridge

Differences Between Spoken and Written Discourse

- 1. Grammatical intricacy
- 2. Lexical density
- 3. Nominalization
- 4. Explicitness
- 5. Contextualization
- 6. Spontaneity
- 7. Repetition, hesitations, and redundancy

I. Grammatical Intricacy

- **View:** Written discourse is more structurally complex and more elaborate than spoken discourse .
 - Sentences in **spoken** discourse are **short** and **simple**, whereas they are **longer** and more **complex** in **written** discourse.
 - **Embedded** sentences is more of a written discourse characteristic which means having clauses in the sentence.

I. Grammatical Intricacy

- **Rebuttal:** Halliday argues that spoken discourse is **NOT** less organized. He claims that spoken discourse has its own kind of complexity.
 - In spoken discourse, **clauses** are **long** and **spread out**. So, Spoken discourse can be grammatically intricate as well.

Example

Book, P: 14,

“You are fabulous, truly, truly fabulous. And you know what’s fabulous about you? I believe that the real, true artists, the people that are around you for a long time, who touches people’s lives, are those artists that have lots of contradictions within them, and you had many contradictions within you when you first rocked up. You looked like a skate punk and you had this aura of “ Don’t mess with me” about you, and, but every time you step in front of us you take another step towards being what we wanna create here, which is a superstar artist. That was a fantastic song for you. You just rocked the house and I can’t believe they have got you in heels! Absolute class act, darling.”

2. Lexical Density

- **Lexical density:** The ratio of content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) to grammatical or function words (pronouns, prepositions, articles) within a clause.
- **View:** Spoken discourse is less lexically dense than written discourse.
 - Content words tend to be spread out over a number of clauses, whereas they seem to be tightly packed into individual clauses.
- **Rebuttal:** In some types of spoken discourse, you will find a high number of content words but they are spread out in different clauses compared to the written discourse in which they are tightly packed.

Examples

Book, P 15

A- *If Casablanca defined true love for a generation of incurable romantics, it also defined the aesthetic possibilities of cinema for a generation of film lovers.*

B- Yvonne: *Who do you think you are, pushing me around? What a fool I was to fall for a man like you.*

Written or spoken?

3. Nominalisation

- **Nominalization:** Presenting actions and events as nouns rather than as verbs.
- **View:**
 - a. Written discourse has a high level of nominalization: i.e. **more nouns than verbs**.
 - b. Written discourse tends to have longer noun groups than spoken discourse.
- **Rebuttal:** Sometimes spoken discourse may exhibit a higher level of nominalisation such as in **lectures** and **debates**.

Examples

A- I studied last night and it was tiring.

B- Studying last night was tiring.

Written or spoken?

4. Explicitness

- **View:** Writing is more explicit than speech.
 - This is because in written discourse, we lack body language and gestures.

Rebuttal:

- This is not absolute as it depends on the purpose of text.
 - A writer/speaker can state something explicitly or infer it depending on how direct they want to be and what they want their listener/ reader to understand.
 - , e.g. a poem is not necessarily explicit and a university lecture is most likely going to explicit even though it is spoken.

Examples

Book, P 16:

Yvonne: Will I see you tonight?

Rick: I never make plans that far ahead.

- She asks him a yes or no question but hasn't been given a yes or no answer.
- She has to work out Rick's intended meaning from the situation.

5. Contextualisation

- **Contextualisation:** The knowledge of context needed to interpret a text.
 - It is closely tied to explicitness.
- **View:** Writing is more decontextualised than speech: Speech is more attached to context than writing because speech depends on a shared situation and background for interpretation.
 - **Example:** One can read a textbook without knowing whether it is written by a male or female writer.

5. Contextualization

- **Rebuttal:**

This may be true for conversations, but not in all types of spoken discourses. Some types of written discourse may show high dependence on shared contextual knowledge.

- **Example:** Personal letters between friends do need context while some academic lectures (spoken) are decontextualised; if one attends, he/she can understand.

6. Spontaneity

- **View:**
 - Spoken** discourse **lacks organization** and is **ungrammatical** because it is spontaneous, whereas **written** discourse is organized and grammatical.
 - Spoken** discourse contains more **uncompleted** (fragments) and reformulated sentences
 - Topics** can be **changed** in the middle.
 - Speakers may **overlap** and **interrupt** each other.

6. Spontaneity

- **Rebuttal:**

Spoken discourse *is organised*, but it is organised differently from written discourse.

- When we **change** the topic, there is an indication (e.g. **By the way...etc**) which means that we are aware that there is a structure that we should follow, so change is not made haphazardly. Speakers signal change.
- When we **interrupt**, we use expressions like “ **I don’t mean to interrupt but...**” which expresses an apology. This shows that we are aware of the system. Usually, there is a structure, but it is not written anywhere. People follow it, and when they don’t, it is marked.
- When **overlapping** occurs, usually one of the participants stops.

7. Repetition, Hesitation, and Redundancy

- **View:**
 - a. **Spoken** discourse contains more repetition, hesitations, and redundancy because it is produced in **real time** (i.e. on the spot).
 - b. Spoken discourse has many **pauses** and **fillers**, such as 'hhh', 'er' and 'you know' so that speakers give themselves time to think about what they want to say.

Example

Book, P 18:

Bashir: At this early stage would you say that you were happily married

Diana: Very much so (1) er the pressure on – on both as a couple (.) with the media was phenomenal (1) and misunderstood by a great many people (1) we'd be going around Australia for instance. Hhh (2) and (.) you – all you could hear was oh (.) she's on the other side (1) now if you're a man (1) like my husband a proud man (.) you mind about that if you hear it every day for four weeks (.) and you feel (.) low about it y-know instead of feeling happy and sharing it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RR00zvbz9hU>

(1), (2) *pauses in seconds*

(.) *a micro pause*

II. A Continuum View

- McCarthy (2001) argues for a **continuum view** rather than simple, one-dimensional difference between spoken and written discourses.
 - Differences are viewed as being on a continuum.

A. Grammatical Complexity

Tightly packed
and integrated

-----Fragmented



Published
academic
writing

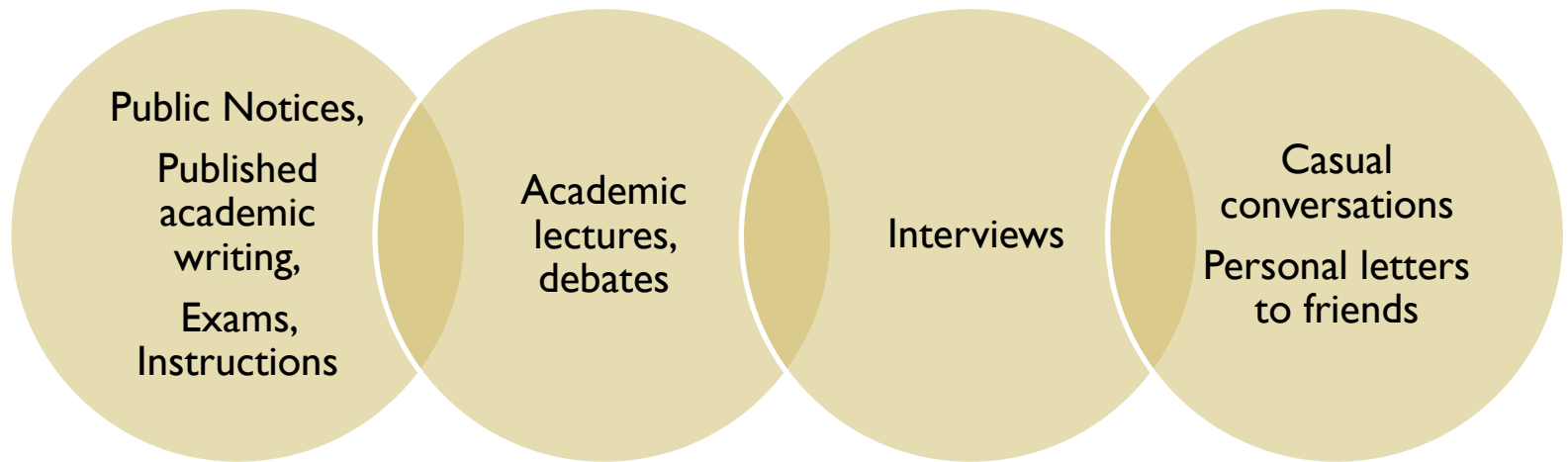
Prepared
academic
lectures

Personal
letters to
friends

Casual
conversations

B. Detachment/inter-personal involvement

Detached-----Interpersonally-
involved



Biber's Corpus-Based Study

Biber's (1988) corpus-based study:

- ❑ **No absolute difference** between speech and writing in English
- ❑ There are dimensions of **variation** for different kinds of texts (i.e. genres).
- ❑ Considerable variation may occur even within particular genres.

- ❑ **Corpus-based study:** Analysing a huge amount of linguistic data online by using special software to measure the frequency of using them.

EXERCISES