

# SPEECH VERSUS WRITING IN THE DISCOURSE OF LINGUISTICS

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## 1. *Language under Description versus of Description*

Among the most memorable yet evidently unremembered aphorisms of the redoubtable J. R. Firth, Britain's founding 'university professor' of the field, was that "four-fifths of linguistics is invention rather than discovery": "just language turned back on itself" (1968 [originals 1952-1959]: 124; 1957 [originals 1934-1951]: 173). Well ahead of his time, he recommended "stating linguistic facts" whilst clearly distinguishing between '*language under description*' (exemplified by texts) versus '*language of description*' (technical terms, notation, etc.). He remarked that "linguists have always disagreed most about terminology and nomenclature in their own technical language" (1957: 71; 1968: 83), even though "linguists should be the first to control, direct, and specialize almost every word they write in linguistic analysis and should remain language-conscious at all levels" (1968: 34).

My own work has consistently sought to be 'exemplified by texts' in step with a clearly defined terminology (e.g. Beaugrande 1980, 1984, 1997, 2004, 2007). But only in the late 1980's, when I was undertaking a detailed analysis of the discourse of some prominent linguists, did I come to appreciate the implications when linguistics has not done the same. I was particularly struck by the discourse of the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev in his little-known *Resumé of a Theory of Language* (1975 [original 1941-42]). He later described himself as a 'linguistic theoretician',

a group he said “overwhelm their audience with definitions and with terminology” (1973: 103). And his *Resumé* was surely a case in point, postulating 454 terms — not one of them illustrated with linguistic facts— such as ‘ambifundamental exponent’ or ‘heterosubtagmatic sum’ (1975: 177, 198). There, the ‘word’ was obscurely designated as a “sign of the lowest power, defined by the permutation of the glossematics entering into it”; a noun as ‘a plerematic syntagmateme’; a verb as ‘a nexus-conjunction’; an adjective as “a syntagmateme whose characteristic is a greatest-conglomerate of intense characters”; and so on.

The 1960’s ushered in a better-known proliferation of terminology. Yet now the terms were not so much technical in themselves, but rather than seemingly ordinary terms expediently endowed with technical meanings, viz.:

- [1] Using the term ‘grammar’ with a systematic ambiguity to refer, first, to the native speaker’s internally represented ‘theory of his language’ and, second, to the linguist’s account of this, we can say that the child has developed and internally represented a generative grammar in the sense described. [...] We are again using the term ‘theory’ [...] with a systematic ambiguity to refer both to the child’s innate predisposition to learn a language of a certain type and to the linguist’s account of this. (Chomsky 1965: 25)

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These ‘ambiguities’ magisterially *equated* actual human capacities with ‘the linguist’s account’. Merely to use the ‘terms’ this way in effect confirmed the account and thus bypassed the demonstrations or proofs that other sciences demand.

## 2. Speech versus writing in ‘linguistic descriptions’

The issue I wish to address here is the unsettled relations among ‘descriptions’ in respect to terminology between speech and writing, which to my mind has constituted a serious obstacle to progress. Already in the foundational discourse of Saussure, we were apprised that

- [2] Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. [...] The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object (1966 [original 1916]: 23f)

This same discourse indicated some indignation about ‘the tyranny’ whereby “writing usurps the main role” (1966: 31, 24). Grammarians were chided for “drawing attention to the written form”, and indeed “reversing the real, legitimate relationship between writing and language” (1966: 30).

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[3] Writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise [*in French, travestie*] (1966: 30).

Perhaps the byzantine orthography of Saussure's native French, conditioned by the history of the language, encouraged him to decry 'spelling' for its 'inconsistencies', 'aberrations', 'irrational' or 'illegitimate' forms, and 'absurdities' (1966: 28f). "Visual images lead to wrong pronunciations", 'pathological' 'mistakes', 'monstrosities', and 'deformations' —fit for 'teratological' inquiry (i.e. 'the study of monsters').

I surmise that this hostility may be informally related to the commonplace reflex among traditional language purists and grammarians to regard language change as mere decay (see now Beaugrande 2007). I might adduce one segment of the same discourse [4].

[4] By imposing itself upon the masses, spelling influences and modifies language. (1966: 31)

In still another turnabout, Saussure rejected "the notion that an idiom changes more rapidly when writing does not exist" yet granted that "spelling always lags behind pronunciation" (1966: 24, 28).

Further inconsistencies could be noted. He freely allowed for change in the 'privileged dialect' [5] without specifying just what that term designates. I would expect it at least to include 'literary language', defined as "any kind of cultivated language, official or otherwise, that serves the whole community" (1966: 195). However, it was associated with 'written language' and hence with 'stability' and 'preservation' [6], albeit this importance was decried as 'undeserved' [7]; and its influence was even diagnosed as a threat to 'linguistic unity' [8] (and all before *Finnegan's Wake*).

[5] The privileged dialect, once it has been promoted to the rank of official or standard, seldom remains the same (1966: 195)

[6] Literary language breaks away from spoken language [and] adds to the undeserved importance of writing (1966: 21)

[7] Literary language, once it has been formed, generally remains fairly stable, and its dependency on writing gives it a special guarantee of preservation (1966:140)

[8] When a natural idiom is influenced by literary language, linguistic unity may be destroyed (1966: 25)

Why any such threat should be worrisome would be unclear if in any event, "given free reign, a language has only dialects and habitually splinters" (1966:195f).

Despite these various claims and disclaimers, Saussure conceded that since ‘the linguist’ is often unable to observe speech directly, he must consider written texts’ and ‘pass’ through ‘the written form’ ‘to reach language’ (1966: 6, 34). “The prop provided by writing, though deceptive, is still preferable” (1966: 32). Moreover, “far from discarding the distinctions sanctioned by spelling”, Saussure would “carefully preserve them” (1966: 53, 62).

On the other side of the Atlantic, the equally influential would-be ‘founder’ Leonard Bloomfield even more roundly degraded written language, viz.:

[9] Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks (1933: 21)

[10] For the linguist, writing is merely an external device, like the use of a phonograph. (1933: 282).

The drastic consequence could be that we do not “need to know something about writing in order to study language” (1933: 282).

The equally byzantine orthography of Bloomfield’s native English may have been responsible for the demurral that “the conventions of writing are a poor guide for representing phonemes”, ostensibly because “alphabetic writing does not carry out the principle of a symbol for each phoneme”, though ‘a few languages’ were commended as exceptions: Spanish, Bohemian (i.e. Czech), Polish, and Finnish (1933: 79, 85f, 89, 501). ‘Philosophers’ and ‘amateurs’ were chided for ‘confusing’ ‘the sounds of speech’, the ‘phonemes’, with the ‘printed letters’ of ‘the alphabet’ (1933: 8, 137). Bloomfield too seemed indignant, namely about the ‘alterations’ inflicted on speech by ‘orthography’, and quaintly counselled on ‘aesthetic grounds’, to ‘eliminate’ ‘ugly spelling-pronunciations’ (1933: 501) But in another passage, alphabetic writing was judged as working “sufficiently well for practical purposes”, and its ‘help’ as instrumental in “listing phonemes” (1933: 128, 90).

In any event, Bloomfield felt reassured that “the effect of writing upon the forms and development of speech is very slight” (1933: 13). “In principle, a language is the same, whether written or not”; and “the conventions of writing develop independently of actual speech” (1933: 282, 486). Yet elsewhere he averred that “the written record exerts a tremendous effect upon the standard language, at least in syntax and vocabulary” (1933: 486). A lesser contradiction obtruded when ‘writing’ was said to display ‘conservatism’, albeit in a ‘superficial’ manner (1933: 292, 488).

In social terms, Bloomfield suggested that “all our writing is based on the standard forms and on the literary standard” in particular (1933: 48, 52). Moreover, the “native speakers of the standard forms are those born into homes of privilege” (1933: 48). And ‘if ‘writing’ is ‘the property of chosen few’, it could serve as a tool for “the discrimination of elegant or ‘correct’ speech” (1933: 13, 22).

Still another objection was that ‘written records’ are ‘misleading’, providing “an imperfect and often distorted picture of past speech”: besides, they “acquaint us with only an infinitesimal part of the speech-forms of the past” (1933: 60, 481, 293,60). Their use is ‘a handicap’; “we should always prefer to have the audible word” (1933: 21). Elsewhere, however, Bloomfield inconsistently claimed that “written records give direct information about the speech-habits of the past” (1933: 21). Also, his own survey of ‘languages of the world’ (1933: 57-73) continually referred to ‘written records’, ‘manuscripts’, and ‘inscriptions’.

A vigorous counterpoint between these European and American views was enunciated by J.R. Firth himself a founder of repute in British linguistics noted here at the outset. He vowed that “scientific priority cannot be given to spoken language as against written language” (1968 [originals 1952-59]: 30). Indeed, “in a sense, written words are more real than speech” in being “portable, tangible, material, permanent, and universal” (1964 [originals 1930-37]: 40, 146). Though ‘written language’ does entail “an abstraction from insistent surroundings”, and its “context is entirely verbal”, it is still “immersed in the immediacy of social intercourse and largely ‘affective’”; and it “refers to an assumed common background of experience” (1968: 14; 1964: 174f). In any ‘symbol’ like a ‘written form’, “the general and particular meet”, and “a high standard of literacy is the foundation of modern civilized society” (1964: 30, 40, 135).

So “the actual forms of writing or spelling are a near concern for the linguist in dealing with his material” (1968: 31). ‘Orthography’ can “transcend the vagaries of individual utterance”, being “grammatically and semantically representative as well as phonetically” (1964: 48). “Grammar must concern itself with letters and marks”, because “spelling and writing present the first level of structural analysis in sorting out the grammatical meanings of texts” (1968: 116). Also, “explorations in sociological linguistics” use “the pedestrian techniques of the ABC as the principal means of linguistic description” (1959 [originals 1934-51]: 75).

Still even Firth conceded that “the linguistic ‘economies’ of speech are not those of writing”, and “it is impossible to represent fully to the eye what is meant for the ear” (1964: 174, 146). “For the masses of people, too, the written language shows very little correlation with speech behaviour” (1964: 116). “Spoken and written languages are two distinct sets of habits”: “ear language is intimate, social, local”, “eye language is general and nowadays everybody’s property” (1964: 198). Thus, “unwritten languages have a freedom of progressive economy” (1964: 174f), i.e., are more open to change —just the factor hedged by Saussure and Bloomfield.

### 3. Plausible motives

These implications of these convoluted discursive moves across the long-range evolution of linguistics might be traced back to several historical, social, and technological motives. For centuries, most descriptions were simply forced to be compiled and illustrated in written language. Even well after speech had been officially declared the ‘object’ of linguistics, ‘formal linguistics’ revived the tradition with spatial terms that would be meaningless except for written language, such as ‘right-branching’ and ‘left-branching’, or ‘subject-raising’.

Though spoken language is of course historically antecedent to writing, the questions of how and how far generally defy any comprehensive demonstration for lack of sufficient evidence. Historical investigations have mainly drawn their scant data from occasional clues in written texts, such as rhymes, puns, onomatopoeia, and sporadic projects for spelling reform aimed at a better fit with speech, most of which failed. Already in 1569, John Hart’s buoyant *Orthographie, conteyning the due order and reason, howe to write or paint th’image of mannes voice, most like to life or nature* proposed a code that nowhere prevailed:

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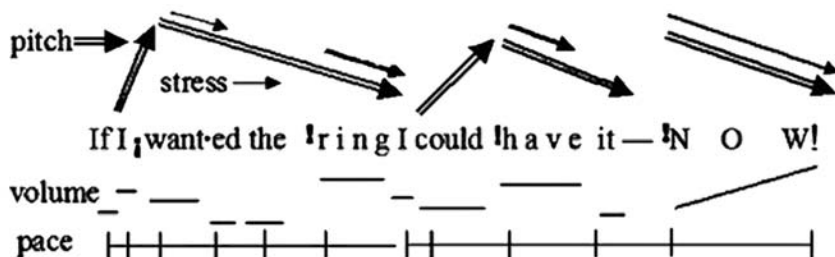
*Our fader hui& art in hevn hallu-éd bi  
dei nam. Sei kingdum kum. Sei uil bi ðun  
in erth, az it iz in hevn.*

Lord's Prayer in Hart's 'orthographie'

It does, however, tell us now that voiced and unvoiced ‘th’ were kept distinct; the vowel sounds in ‘who’ and ‘thy’ were pronounced as diphthongs; the past ending of verbs was assigned its own syllable; and so on.

Social investigations, in contrast, confront if anything far too plentiful data. The situation of fieldworkers on previously unrecorded languages is emblematic for the laborious problems of capturing the features of live speech: not just the ‘phonemes’, but the overall flow of prosody or intonation which signals such clines as stress, pitch, volume, and pace (Beaugrande 2004). The more precise the transcription, the harder it becomes for a wider interpretation beyond the transcribers themselves. Here is my own rendition of Strider’s threat to the hobbits at Bree in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Beaugrande 2007). I am assuming three tone groups with a short rising pitch on the opening unstressed syllables and then a longer falling pitch starting from the first point of stress and arriving at a strong stress for end weight. The first two tone groups move toward louder volume and slower pace; the final one is quite slow and unites falling pitch with increasing volume.

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This is more staged than the way Viggo Mortensen speaks it in the cinematic masterpiece, but then his Aragorn —except in battle— is mostly a low-key, soft-spoken lord.

Technological resources have chiefly offered tardy and cranky remedies. The confidence placed by Firth (1964: 151, 159; 1957: 148-55, 173-76) in such heavy-handed ‘machines’ as the ‘gramophone’, the ‘X-ray’, the ‘kymograph’, and ‘the palatograph’ may strike a wistful note alongside today’s computer programs for ‘speech analysers’ and ‘voice recognition’. But all these are aimed primarily at the front end of spoken language, complementing and refitting the international phonetic alphabet in written language.

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Meanwhile, swashbuckling attempts to build a general ‘parser’ or ‘tagger’ to capture the grammar or syntax of language in large data sets are still wrestling with the formal indecisiveness of a language like English, the preferred target. They are nearly all frankly dependent on writing rather than speech; they rely on quite conventional terms and categories; and they accordingly confront the stubborn perplexities inherent in the extent to which context rather than form determine the categories of many ‘words’, e.g., whether one counts as a modifier [11-12] or a verb [13-14].

[11] ‘Pleasant little place, this, I think’, he said with a *detached* air. ‘Not much to do, I fear’ (*Father Brown*)

[12] Sylvestra le Touzel has a face with an *arresting* aristocratic beauty (*Telegraph*)

[13] Metaphase kinetochores regain bright staining if they are *detached* from spindle microtubules and kept *detached* for 10 min. (*Journal of Cell Biology*)

[14] A day after *arresting* five Russian officers for spying, Georgia today demanded the handover of a sixth suspect, (*Now Public*)

In some data, this distinction may not be easy to draw even for a human native speaker:

- [15] The commissioners found evidence of *staggering* brutality and systematic use of torture (*Keesings*)
- [16] A few *staggering* drunks near the centre were the only people about (*Roads That Move*)
- [17] Somehow the country looked more *rested*, fresher, cleaner to Cameron than when he had last looked upon it (*Corporal Cameron*)
- [18] When you are *rested*, when you are restored, I pray that things may once again assume their proper aspect. (*Sea Hawk*)

In short, technology has yet to advance beyond labour-saving devices to reliable descriptions. Even the sound sequences of spoken language continue to remain open to more human and indeed personal interpretation than do the letter sequences of written language. All in all, the questions technology is best suited to explore are also those which stop far short of any complete description of a language.

38 **4. Parallel terms and descriptions**

What seems to me required are sets of terms for parallel descriptions which are acknowledged to be distinct in principle yet can occur ‘mapped upon’ each other in suitable contexts. For English, our table of terms might read like this:

<b>Speech</b>	<b>Writing</b>
<u>discourse</u> episode	paragraph sequence
<u>conversational</u> turn	paragraph
<u>utterance</u>	sentence
<u>pause</u> or hesitation	punctuation mark
<u>stress</u>	special type (bold, italics, underline, upper case, etc.)
<u>tone</u> group	clause
<u>pitch</u> contour	phrase, clause, sentence
<u>spoken</u> word	written word
<u>spoken</u> syllable	written syllable
<u>phoneme</u>	written letter

Obviously, the table is at best a sequence of plausible approximations which if carefully handled, might assist transcribing speech into writing, or, more obliquely, rendering speech in a written text like a novel. Yet texts intended as writing from the start implicate or enforce more definitive decisions, and generally present tidier data.



In this paper, I must be content with some concise demonstrations. The **utterance** is spoken as an integrated sequence which constitutes a contribution to a **discourse** as an interactive event, and which is intended and accepted as such. It most commonly occurs in a **conversational turn** subsuming what one speaker says at a given point to one or more others, which in turn commonly occurs in a discourse episode subsuming a sequence of turns relating to a shared topic. Here is an authentic sample from the British National Corpus (BNC) in an episode of the familiar scenario where Mumsey ‘helps’ her kid with homework; a slash indicates a short pause, and two slashes a longer one, though this transcriber additionally marked them with punctuation.

[19] BRENDA: How long’s the diary got to be?

LEE: I dunno /, page /, one page

BRENDA: Would you write it like an actual /, can you fit it in a diary or have you got to write it /, the date /, just /, just like a proper diary /?

LEE: I’m not sure /.

BRENDA: You should really do it like a /, like make a little folder thing up and then date it Monday /, you know //

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Transcribed, the spontaneous qualities become readily evident, notably when a grammatical unit is incomplete (‘page /, one page’), abandoned unfinished (‘like a /, like make’) or emended (‘write it /, the date’). Each turn is fairly self-contained and relevant to the same topic. A new episode begins when Brenda turns to news of the day, asking ‘What ‘s the matter with Gary Lineker’s baby?’

The contrast with fictional written episodes is instructive, e.g.:

[20] She set out the bottle of Scotch and the glasses. Bob declined.

‘Tell you the truth, Jess’, he said. ‘I’ve cut out the drink. Help yourself, of course. If you don’t mind I’ll try some of the seltzer straight.’

‘You’ve stopped drinking?’ she said, looking at him steadily and unsmilingly. ‘What for?’

‘It wasn’t doing me any good’, said Bob. ‘Don’t you approve of the idea?’

Jessie raised her eyebrows and one shoulder slightly.

‘Entirely’, she said with a sculptured smile. [...] Jessie, with an unreadable countenance, brought back the bottle of Scotch and the glasses and a bowl of cracked ice and set them on the table.

‘May I ask,’ she said, with some of the ice in her tones, ‘whether I am to be included in your sudden spasm of goodness? If not, I’ll make one for myself. It’s rather chilly this evening, for some reason.’ (O. Henry, *The Rubaiyat of a Scotch Highball*)

Some authors, O. Henry among them, carefully specify the manner of speaking, including non-verbal but meaningful behaviour.

What might be an episode by its sequencing stands out if the topic is unstable or discontinuous, as in a note left by a hastily departed wife:

- [21] Dear John: I just had a telegram saying mother is very sick. I am going to take the 4.30 train. Brother Sam is going to meet me at the depot there. There is cold mutton in the ice box. I hope it isn't her quinzey again. Pay the milkman 50 cents. She had it bad last spring. Don't forget to write to the company about the gas meter, and your good socks are in the top drawer. I will write tomorrow. Hastily, KATY (O. Henry, *The Pendulum*)

The **utterance** seems to me best defined by as a speaker's intentional contribution rather than too narrowly as 'a natural unit of speech bounded by breaths or pauses' (*Summer Institute of Linguistics Glossary of Linguistic Terms*). As we see in sample [19], pauses can and do occur within a sequence that ought to count as a single utterance, as when Brenda was trying to clarify just how to 'write' that 'diary' as a silly school assignment. On the other hand, the stipulation, also from the *Institute's Glossary*, that 'in dialogue, each turn by a speaker may be considered an utterance' seems too me too broad, witness these data from the same London family:

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- [22] LEE: I don't know if got Bob Marley one or not /.

BRENDA: We can buy you that then /, if you want it /, we never know what to buy you //. Right now that's it /, we're now in the Argos [an 'Online Catalogue for Home Shopping' on the television just then] // So did you get your good work for /, your good sticker for work again or what? // or what?

Brenda's single turn evidently subsumes three utterances as contributions, whereas neither pauses nor turn boundaries would yield the same description.

I find the common practices counterproductive and misleading of either using 'utterance' as the simple production of a 'sentence' [23] or defining it as the result of some 'pragmatic supplementation' of a 'sentence' [24].

- [23] Semantics provides [...] specifies the truth conditions of the *sentences* of the language. Pragmatics provides an account of how *sentences* are used in *utterances* to convey information in context. (Ruth Kempson, *Grammar and Conversational Principles*)<sup>www</sup>

- [24] we must just acknowledge the fact that some *sentences* are semantically incomplete, [...] and that understanding *utterances* of them requires pragmatic supplementation. (Kent Bach, *The Semantics-Pragmatics Distinction: What It Is and Why It Matters*)<sup>www</sup>

The two are plainly units of different orders. The ‘utterance’ must indeed be ‘used’ if that means ‘spoken’, but if ‘truth conditions’ were antecedent, speakers would rarely be ‘understood’. How should Lee understand the ‘truth’ (ostensibly unrelated to ‘information in context’) of Brenda’s assertion that “we never know what to buy you” when she has just declared her intention to buy him Bob Marley? Or of her clueless question about “Gary Lineker’s baby”, who was reportedly battling against leukaemia?

Insofar as a ‘pause’ is relevant to writing, it is likely to be set off by a ‘punctuation mark’, although other motives readily apply as well, such as indicating the types of units before or after (see now Beaugrande 2007). In speech, the ‘pause’ is probably best defined as the initial and final demarcator of the **tone group** spoken as an integrated sequence, usually with at least one ‘strong stress’ mainly occurring near the end. If we mark tone group boundaries with ||, **strong stress**, articulated with the most force with a raised mark!, **weak stress** articulated with less force with a lowered and inverted mark ꞑ, and unstressed with no mark, plus a raised dot · to indicate the boundaries between ‘syllables’, then Brenda’s turn in [22] might look like this:

[22a] || We can ꞑbuy you! that ꞑthen ||, ꞑif you ꞑwant it ||, we ꞑnev-er ꞑknow ꞑwhat to ꞑbuy you ||. ꞑRight || ꞑnow ꞑthat’s it || we’re ꞑnow in the ꞑAr-gos || [an ‘Online Catalogue for Home Shopping’ on the television just then] ꞑSo did you ꞑget your ꞑgood ꞑwork for /, your ꞑgood ꞑstick-er for ꞑwork a-ꞑgain or ꞑwhat? || or ꞑwhat? ||

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To be sure, I would properly need to consult the actual recording, which the BNC doesn’t provide. Here I can merely supply my own interpretation based on plausible assumptions, such as that ‘know what’ should hint at some motherly resentment; that the strong stress in ‘good work’ falls only on the second word unless some contrast is implied with other qualities of ‘work’: that a repeated ‘or what’ would carry more stress than the previous one; and so on.

Writing relies on special type, such as bold, italics, underline, and upper case. These can associated with stress [25], but are not definitely so [26].

[25] after that there wasn’t anything to do but *hang on* —[...] All of a sudden I was *sailing* (Tom Wolfe, *The Mild Ones*)

[26] The Mississippi does not alter its locality by cut-offs alone: it is always changing its habitat **BODILY** – is always moving **bodily SIDEWISE**. (Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*).

By convention, published titles are set in italics. I myself use bold type to identify my major terms when they are being introduced and defined.

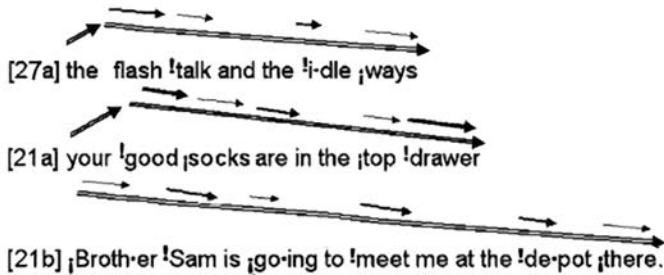
As we see in [22a], the tone group easily coincides with the clause. But such is by no means required, even in written English [27], especially when representing a conversation [28].

[27] Well, laughing or crying, this is what it has come to at last. *All the drinking and recklessness; the flash talk and the idle ways* (Rolf Boldrewood, *Robbery under Arms*)

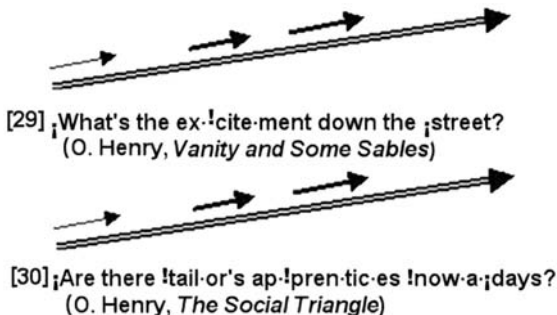
[28] ‘Come up to the corner and I’ll square up. *Glad to see you. Saves me a walk.*’ (O. Henry, *The Assessor of Success*)

Evidently, non-clause patterns can be thought to indicate a causal style.

The **pitch contour** indicates the movement of the pitch throughout a linguistic unit which may appear in writing as a phrase [27a], a clause [21a], or a sentence [21b]. The dominant pitch contour in English is a falling one from the first stress in the tone group down to the end, as is typical of the **declarative**, mainly used in **statements**:



The **pitch contour** of the **interrogative clause**, mainly used in **questions**, is typically a rising one, both for the **question-word question** [29] and the **yes-or-no question** [30].



I have indeed undertaken elsewhere to show that all four of the familiar clause or sentence types (imperative and exclamatory as well) are primarily determined by their prosody or intonation, and only secondarily by their grammatical form (Beaugrande 2007).

The parallel between the **spoken word** and the **written word** is less secure than is widely taken for granted. The long-term struggles of ‘voice recognition’ attest to the considerable problems in just picking the words out of the raw stream of fluent speech when the analyser is a computer rather than a competent speaker of English. By comparison, much of the stir over what should or should not be written as one word and how, begin with data is pre-empted by envisioning as written forms throughout, e.g., ones ostensibly designating social ‘classes’ [31-33].

[31] For white *middleclass* males, however, pride and dignity has little resonance (Simon Reynolds, *Blissed Out*)

[32] *lower-class* juvenile delinquents find themselves confronting a legal system which has literally declared war against them (Steven Box, *Power, Crime, and Mystification*)

[33] There was never a consensus for them, as there was for *middle class* and *lower class* opinion. (Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way*)

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The situation is similarly pre-empted for the parallel between the **spoken syllable** and the **written syllable**. Even the most basic ‘rule’, stipulating that a syllable must contain at least one vowel, is honoured more in writing than in speech. If analysis shows that the final syllables of, say, ‘bitter’ and ‘bottle’ is actually spoken only as the ‘liquid’ consonants ‘r’ and ‘l’, the written form (aside from typos) hardly occurs except where the writer is deliberately defying convention, e.g.:

[34] cherish dos moments bcoz u cn nvr b prson ur ryt now w/o dos sweet & *bitt* past. (*Friendster: Clobelle*)<sup>www</sup>

[35] ai bot a *bottl* av scotch wiskey. (*Victorian Fortunecity*)<sup>www</sup>

The situation is most pre-empted for the parallel between the **phoneme** and the **written letter**. The ‘distinctive features’ that define the phoneme need not be accurately produced in speech because the phoneme is an abstract target shared by speaker and hearer (MacNeilage 1970, 1980). The ‘features’ can tell us the difference between ‘word’ and ‘bird’ but not between ‘word’ and ‘whirred’, which sound the same in British English yet (admittedly rare) juxtapositions like [36] and [37] are equally unlikely to cause mistakes in hearing.

[36] Bird after *bird whirred* up on buzzing wings (Ed Sandys, *A Day with the Quail*)

[37] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was purred, and the purred Word was with God, and the Purred *Word Whirred* through a universe yet formless and unfurred. (*Unasked4 Magical Ever-Expanding Book of Things Unasked4*)<sup>www</sup>

The egregious mismatches of orthography in English and French have not prevented them from being touted at times as the world's master languages. Writing English in 'standard orthography' resembles excavating layers of buried civilisations, and French far more so. Either of these languages, if rewritten everywhere in a 'phonetic alphabet' might incur the danger of a new illiteracy among the general population unversed in history of languages. Quixotic respellings like those displayed in [34-35] are socially rather than linguistically motivated, and nobody expects them to attain 'standard' currency.

What seems needed now is a thorough investigation of how speakers and hearers actually navigate as they speak or listen versus when they write and read. Of particular interest is whether they actually covert back and forth, e.g., by generating a 'phonemic recoding' during 'visual word recognition' (Rubenstein, Spafford, and Rubenstein 1971; Hanley and McDonnell 1997; Lieberthal, Binder, Spitzer, Possing and Medler 2005). One prospective goal might be to uncover how typical problems or errors occur, e.g., among children or foreign learners of the language.

## 5. My last word

In this paper, I have essayed to outline the perplexities among past terms for speech versus writing, and have proposed suitable terms for parallel descriptions. The heavy but insufficiently acknowledged investment in written language in linguistics and indeed in popular conceptions of language has not been conducive to progress or insight in understanding or describing language in any comprehensive manner, but forced speech into terminologies aimed at writing. Yet what prospects such a proposal may have for reanimating the stagnant situation I cannot divine, even after a lengthy career of swimming against many currents.

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