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Modelling Spoken and Written Language: An Introduction

Spoken language and written language are linked in complex and intricate ways. However, the widespread consensus among linguists seems to be that 'spoken language comes first' – at least in evolutionary terms but potentially also with regard to its perceived relevance for linguistics. Writing is, after all, often perceived as a 'mere' human-made technology that followed oral communication in human evolution (see Coulmas 2003 for a discussion). Consequently, written language may be considered as a 'secondary instance' of language as suggested by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916). The primary purpose of writing might simplistically be construed as putting language 'on paper' as a way to conserve it, which is not possible for spontaneously produced spoken language unless, of course, speakers are being recorded. Such spontaneous spoken language holds the key to language variation and change, since this is where innovations tend to emerge first, making their way into formal spoken registers and, eventually, written language only at a later stage (if at all) (see Schneider 2004). The fact that codification makes written language seemingly less dynamic than spoken language might imply for some linguists that it is a less interesting research object.[1] This is in direct contrast to views widely held by linguists in the past:

> For a long time, linguists saw written language as the only object worthy of investigation. The reasons for this view were theoretical and methodological – e.g., an unhistorical preoccupation with norms, a literature-oriented ideal of language, and the ephemerality of spoken utterances. (Koch and Oesterreicher 1985/2012, 451-452)[2]

Whatever the theoretical repercussions of such discussions and changing views of linguistic primacy, the matter is even more complex when approaching the direct relationship between the two levels of language production. While "linguists have generally been oblivious to the spoken-written distinction" (Schaefer 2012, 1275) before the 1970s, the question of how spoken and written language are connected have attracted a great deal of interest in the following decades. Uncovering and systematically describing these connections have ever since occupied scholars from various fields, including anthropology, history, communication science, cultural studies, philosophy, and linguistics. Central questions of interest in particular but not exclusively for linguists are the following:

(1) How has the development of literacy affected societies?
(2) When and how is written language 'similar' to spoken language and vice versa?

1 We would like to stress here that we agree with Schaefer's (2012, 1275) support of Laing and Lass's view that written language "should be studied in its own right, not just as a representation of spoken language" (2007, Introduction, I.1.5).

2 The article was originally published in German by Koch and Oesterreicher (1985). We refer to its translation into English by Franz H. Bäuml and Ursula Schaefer, edited and published in Lange et al. (2012).

Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies **32.2 (Summer 2021): 7-14.**

Anglistik, Jahrgang 32 (2021), Ausgabe 2

(3) How can we describe the relation between spoken and written language in increasingly multimodal and blurred communicative settings?

These being older questions in principle, the 1980s were a crucial time for their discussion. In German and Romance linguistics, interest in the relation between spoken and written language peaked after Koch and Oesterreicher (1985/2012) first published their model of 'language of immediacy' and 'language of distance.' The model illustrates convincingly how language may be conceptually spoken or conceptually written irrespective of whether it is presented in graphic or phonic form. This model did away with the common approach to spoken and written language as a binary distinction and added a conceptual dimension to the traditionally static and binary dimension of the communication channel. As we briefly point out below and as Heyd (this issue) discusses in more detail, it is important to note that defining communication channels has become an increasingly complex matter over the last decades. Although the point could be made that the difference was more clear-cut in the past, modern technology requires an updated concept for defining the traditionally binary notions.

The conceptual dimension of the model acknowledges that, while spoken language may be quite distant (such as in the courtroom or in speeches), written language may be quite immediate (such as in personal letters, or, in more recent times, WhatsApp communication, SMS, etc.); boundaries are sometimes fuzzy. Immediacy and distance, in this context, encompass a range of features that characterise the two poles: the use of discourse markers (such as *I think*, *well*, or *yeah*) is certainly more typical of immediacy, whereas a very complex syntax suggests (and creates) distance. In order to determine if a linguistic production is closer to one pole or the other, linguistic features need to be taken into consideration in conjunction with numerous contextual factors. These are factors such as spontaneity (spontaneous vs. planned), emotionality (high vs. low emotionality), and physical proximity between interactants (closeness/immediacy vs. distance) (see Koch 1999, 400-402 for a detailed description). Figure 1 depicts the relation between the communication channel (graphic vs. phonic) and the continuum between conceptually spoken and conceptually written language in Koch and Oesterreicher's model.

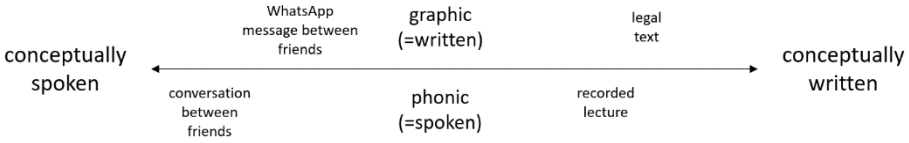

Figure 1: Simplified version of Koch and Oesterreicher's (1985/2012, 444) model of 'language of immediacy' and 'language of distance'

The explanatory power of the model stems from its combination of the communication channel and the continuum between conceptually spoken and conceptually written language as well as the parameters that describe the communicative context. The model acknowledges that "a comparison of the phonic with the graphic codes […] tells us *nothing* about language variation dependent on orality and literacy" (Koch and Oesterreicher 1985/2012, 445; original emphasis) and represents a tool to study such

language variation systematically. Since its publication, the model has been applied to, for instance, the study of orality in Early Modern English texts (Culpeper and Kytö 2010). In addition, it was enhanced by Landert and Jucker (2011) to accommodate new forms of communication that emerged as a result of new technologies. While the model proved highly successful in the German and Romance philologies after its original publication, it went largely unnoticed in the anglophone world.

Another approach to the study of spoken and written language, Biber's Multidimensional Analysis (MDA) (1988), proved more visible in the English linguistics community and provided the tools for more quantitatively-oriented analyses of spoken and written registers. MDA has been used, for instance, to study various registers and styles, the evolution of registers, comparative studies, discourse analysis, as well as World Englishes (e.g., Xiao 2009; Xiao and McEnery 2005). Traditional MDA compares registers by analysing six factors or dimensions, such as narrative vs. non-narrative and abstract vs. non-abstract. In Biber's original publication from 1988, he carried out a factor analysis of 67 linguistic features across 481 text samples from different sources. In essence, Biber's approach shows that certain linguistic features tend to co-occur and, in sum, represent certain foci or styles. For instance, registers that feature a lot of contractions also tend to feature many first-person pronouns and discourse particles. These three linguistic features point towards a more involved style, whereas the use of many nouns and attributive adjectives as well as long words is more informational (see Chapter 2 in Jonsson 2015 for an overview of MDA). An involved style is typical of, for instance, face-to-face conversations and personal letters, while an informational style is typical of prepared speeches and academic prose (see Conrad and Biber 2001, 27). These examples illustrate that, similar to Koch and Oesterreicher's model, MDA acknowledges that spoken and written language can both be 'involved' or 'informational' (or any of the other categories in Biber's model).

A study of interdisciplinary relevance also published in the 1980s is Ong's (1982) *Orality and Literacy*, in which he discusses how writing as a technology shapes societies and thought. In particular, Ong's focus is on the differences between primary oral cultures without writing on the one hand and literate cultures to whom writing is available on the other. This approach to orality and literacy has not only been controversial (see, for instance, Soukup 2007) but already indicates that the terms 'oral' and 'literate' are difficult to untangle when related to models such as Koch and Oesterreicher's and spoken and written language in general (see Schaefer 1994; Wårvik 2003, 14). In historical linguistics, orality and literacy have proven to be particularly useful concepts when applied to past stages of language: Since we do not have access to audio recordings of, for instance, Old or Middle English, we have to rely on written documents to deduce what spoken language during that time might have been like.[3] The fruitful investigation of spoken language by using written texts is made possible

3 However, it should be pointed out that thinking about orality and literacy has contributed to making linguists aware of the 'bad data problem' in the first place. Labov first used the term when he stated that "historical linguistics can […] be thought of as the art of making the best use of bad data" (1994, 11), which also (but not exclusively) refers to the lack of recorded spoken language from earlier language periods. An in-depth discussion of the bad data problem and how it relates to orality and literacy is given in Schaefer (2012).

due to many texts being, in Culpeper and Kytö's (2010) terminology, 'speech-like,' 'speech-purposed,' or 'speech-related.'

One of the two main motivations for this special issue is that, perhaps more so than any other development, the digital turn has reinspired researchers to look into the interconnectedness of spoken and written language and how multimodality fits into the picture. The main reason for this is that digital media provide us with new, unprecedented opportunities to communicate: Social media platforms and apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, in particular, allow us to communicate in a way that is closely linked to language of immediacy despite being in the written mode. They also offer new ways of expressing non-verbal and para-verbal signals. Analysing such digital communication through the lens of orality and literacy is, essentially, "a philosophical move to investigate unstable and richly semiotic communicative and interactional events through the paradoxically traditional keyhole of verbal language" (Sindoni 2013, 2).

The second motivation is that the 30th anniversary of Koch and Oesterreicher's model in 2015 was taken as an occasion for the publication of an edited collection featuring additions, applications, and criticisms of the model (Feilke and Hennig 2016). This edited collection, while featuring excellent contributions to the field, is written entirely in German; only comparatively few other publications (such as Culpeper and Kytö 2010; Koch 1999; Landert and Jucker 2011; Schaefer 2012; and Werner 2021)[4] discuss and apply the model in English-language publications. Neither this introduction nor the special issue in general are the places to discuss the value of publishing in languages other than English. However, we believe that the pooled expertise of scholars with an interest in the English language and a wide range of research interests which take into account different models dealing with orality and literacy constitutes an invaluable resource.

The contributors to the special issue revisit Koch and Oesterreicher's, Biber's, Ong's, and related models and concepts. The ultimate goals of the special issue are to showcase the models' explanatory power to the international research community and to apply them to hitherto unexplored contexts, and thus to highlight their relevance in recent linguistic theorizing. As a whole, the contributions tease out the potential of different models and illustrate a range of approaches to the study of oral and written language. Additionally, the two contributions framing the special issue are unique in that they offer kaleidoscopic views of modelling oral and written language in the past (Schaefer's contribution) and the future (Heyd's contribution). Furthermore, the special issue provides a sophisticated update on how spoken and written language can be approached both theoretically and methodologically in an era where the boundaries between the two are increasingly blurred.

In the first contribution to this special issue, Ursula Schaefer, one of the pioneers in applying Koch and Oesterreicher's model to the English language, discusses "Communicative Distance" and, more particular, "The (Non-)Reception of Koch and Oesterreicher in English-Speaking Linguistics." As the title of her contribution

4 Both Landert and Jucker (2011) and Werner (2021) expand Koch and Oesterreicher's original model. In addition to other considerations, Landert and Jucker (2011) make the model applicable to CMC, while Werner (2021) remodels it for applications to performed language.

suggests, she explores why neither Biber, who worked and published on the same topic around the same time, nor many other linguists in the English-speaking academic world (with herself constituting an exception) took notice of Koch and Oesterreicher's framework. While she finds that the often-cited reason that Koch and Oesterreicher's article was published in German is rather unsatisfactory, she brings forth an interesting and convincing theory-based linguistic explanation for the longstanding neglect of Koch and Oesterreicher's work in anglophone linguistics.

The second contribution to this edited volume by Cornelia Gerhardt deals with "Constructing Immediacy at a Distance" and conducts "An Additive Multi-Dimensional Analysis of the Comments Section of Vegan Online Blogs." More precisely, the author discusses whether the comments sections in vegan food blogs can be conceptualized as oral or written discourse. This discussion is based on the observation that comments sections typically contain both, features traditionally associated with spoken language in that they are dialogical, involved, expressive and affective, and written elements since they are graphically coded, public, and distal. She aptly concludes that "the comments sections of vegan food blogs represent a written genre that is involved, situation-dependent, and non-abstract."

As a third contribution, Patricia Ronan engages in "Tweeting with Trump." She examines how tweets that are sent from Donald Trump's Twitter account can be situated in the framework of language of distance and immediacy by investigating linguistic features typical of oral vs. written modes and of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Her results impressively show the use of typical features associated with language of immediacy, namely spontaneity and proximity, as well as the use of evaluative language, which would situate Trump's tweets closer to the spoken end of the continuum.

In the fourth contribution, Birte Bös and Carolin Schneider show how "Balancing Virtual Proximity and Distance in Online Care Partner Discussions" makes sure that "We are all in this together." Drawing on linguistic exchanges in a discussion forum of a support group for care partners of Alzheimer patients, they approach digital environments as social spaces and show that not only mode- or genre-specific variation exists but also differences in individual interaction and linguistic choices for balancing virtual proximity and distance.

As a final application-oriented contribution, Sofia Rüdiger shows how "Digital Food Talk" contributes to "Blurring Immediacy and Distance in YouTube Eating Shows," a relatively novel genre. She analyses the characteristics and challenges for both the eating show performer and the audience and thereby shows that this genre is "a fascinating mix [or blur] of characteristics traditionally associated with the language of distance and the language of immediacy."

Finally, Theresa Heyd investigates "Tertiary Orality" and other "New Approaches to Spoken CMC" and provides an overview of some of the linguistic implications of such new forms of orality. In particular, she re-examines Ong's (1982) notion of secondary orality as a form of technologized orality. She discusses whether and how forms of spoken digital practice that involve posthuman elements are to be conceptualized as an emerging form of orality and illustrates her line of argumentation by referring to a community of practice on YouTube, namely the Reborn community. Her contribution clearly points out new avenues and future challenges for

conceptualizing orality and literacy, which is why it is positioned as the final article of the special issue.

Framed by the two theoretical and conceptual contributions (Schaefer and Heyd), we have arranged the four applied contributions from the one closest to written language to the one closest to oral language. Considering the notions of distance, proximity, and immediacy, the comments sections of online blogs (Gerhardt) appear closer to written language than language use in Trump's Twitter account (Ronan), which, in turn, appears more written and less immediate than online care partner discussions (Bös and Schneider) and eating shows (Rüdiger). Still, we have reconsidered the order a few times, which once more underlines the fuzzy nature of the notions written and oral.

In line with this observation, all contributions impressively show how multifaceted computer-mediated forms of communicative practices are and how they contribute to our understanding of the intricate relationship between the oral and the written. CMC forms have become an integral part in many areas of our daily lives and therefore clearly deserve increased attention.

Finally, we would like to thank the contributors to this special issue for their inspiring and valuable work on a timely topic that will further engage us as linguists in the future, with ever newer forms of CMC evolving alongside of further technological advancements. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the external reviewers and to Brian Hess for his invaluable support in the final proofreading and formatting process.

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