

■ Afterword

“They’ve done it again,” I thought to myself as I sat before the entire manuscript for this edited collection. And the phrase came to me as a sound image—not as a visual image, which didn’t come until I started typing.

Once again, Diane Belcher and Alan Hirvela have put together a volume that usefully crosses over modalities of linguistic communication. The connection is undeniable even for me, a writing specialist who is always ready to refute—passionately, I might add—the early-20th-century views that speech should *always* be learned before writing; that speech *always* precedes writing; that speech *is* the language and writing is but an inaccurate, secondary representation of speech. But, as John Swales points out in his foreword to this volume, the connection between orality and literacy, or speech and writing, tends to be less obvious than the connection between reading and writing. Why?

One of the possible reasons is that language specialists working in Western intellectual traditions have been conditioned—by our disciplinary training—to think of them not as complementary but as competing areas of interest. In the dominant Western tradition, the history of antagonism goes back to ancient Greece, when Socrates chose not to acquire literacy because he considered it to be a hindrance to memory—an essential component of oratory. In ancient Western civilization, it was oratory that occupied a key position in education as well as social, political, economic, and religious affairs.

Literacy came to the fore as a highly privileged skill in the Judeo-Christian academic tradition, where it was used to preserve and disseminate (and sometimes withhold from the masses) the holy scripture and other important documents containing culturally valuable knowledge. The rise and fall of the Roman Empire and the spread of Latin as a *lingua franca* of legal and academic communication also led to the privileging of writing because of the conflated binary between Classic Latin/writing and vernaculars/speech. With the invention of literate technology such as the printing press and the development of dictionaries, writing became highly conventionalized, while spoken language was always in flux.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the rise of nationalism and the desire for a national language in Europe, especially Germany, led to the development of philology—the study of national language, literature, and culture. While it united the study of speech and writing briefly, the situation began to change in the late 19th century with the rise of scientific linguistics with phonetics at its core. In their quest for respectability as a scientific discipline, linguists at the time drew a stark contrast between dead languages and living languages, conflating the distinction with that between writing and speech.

Thus began the audiolingual era, when descriptive linguists strenuously argued the primacy of speech. One of the key motivations was to correct the widening gap between the conventionalized spelling systems and the actual speech sounds they were supposed to represent, which precipitated spelling reform movements. Despite Saussure's distinction between *la langue* and *la parole*, it didn't occur to many language specialists back then that an alternative conception might be possible—that both speech and writing represented language and that each might be mediated by the other in the language acquisition and production processes. Disciplinarity blinds us as much as it enlightens us.

In the 1960s, second language writing finally became a subject of serious and sustained inquiry—initially in the context of U.S. higher education—for at least two reasons. First, the number of international ESL students had grown to the point that their literacy needs could no longer be ignored. Second, literature-oriented English specialists (i.e., prescriptive grammarians) were frustrated by linguists' insistence on the relevance of speech-focused linguistics to all areas of English teaching, and in order to deflect a series of attacks, some linguists felt they had to prove their worth by showing that they were not without interest in writing.

Fast forward to the present, and we see the study of spoken and written discourse well established in their own rights and in a wide variety of geographic and institutional contexts. The trend is to integrate the “four skills” that had traditionally been separated rather arbitrarily. Perhaps the time is ripe. It is no longer necessary to fight the ghosts of age-old disciplinary politics; it is no longer necessary to strenuously argue that we are interested only in speech or only in writing. It's OK to say that we are interested in addressing whatever issues that we find in our classrooms, using all available means.

The present volume brings together authors who represent a wide range of perspectives and agendas. They don't necessarily represent a

unified theoretical perspective, or agree on how or to what extent orality and literacy interact with one another. Collectively, they have also presented many questions and gaps that need to be explored further. These qualities, of course, make for an excellent starting point of further discussion and inquiry into the relationship between speech and writing.

They've done it again, indeed.

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