

■ Foreword

Several years ago I wrote a foreword for a volume entitled *Linking Literacies: Perspectives on L2 Reading-Writing Connections*. Recently, I was asked by the same editors, Diane Belcher and Alan Hirvela, to write a similar small piece for this new volume—one that deals essentially with L2 speaking-writing connections. The former task was relatively straightforward because of the obvious synergies and synapses that link academic reading and writing and the many “school genres” that exploit and develop those intersections: book reports, summaries, reviews, critiques, responses to readings, as well as the “researched papers” that are often taught as the centerpieces of undergraduate composition courses.

The Oral-Literate Connection (as the title of this fine collection is called) is less self-evident, as several of the contributors themselves suggest. After all, most introductory linguistics courses around the world devote considerable time and attention to significant differences between speech and writing; indeed, it is not uncommon to find examination questions asking the students to cite as many of those differences as they can. Michael Halliday (2002) has written particularly memorably about these contrasts as they pertain to English. He notes that spoken English tends to be grammatically intricate but lexically sparse, while the converse holds for formal writing. Lucy Pickering and Patricia Byrd, in Chapter 6 in this volume, sum this up well when they note that academic speech tends to be “verb-centric,” while academic writing is “noun-centric.” But Halliday goes on to say that the complexity of English speech is *choreographic* as opposed to the *crystalline* complexity of prose. He concludes, “The complexity of spoken language is in its flow, the dynamic mobility whereby each figure provides a context for the next one, not only defining its point of departure but also setting the conventions by reference to which it is to be interpreted” (2002, p. 336). My own investigations of the discourses collected in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) reinforce this sense of the divide between spoken and written academic language because the former register turns out to be primarily conversational and consensual, while the latter is formal and not without its competitive and critical elements. Further, the linguistic characteristics of academic spoken utterances—highly fragmented yet highly phraseological—mean that they cannot be easily or simply mapped

onto the subject-verb-complement patterns of written academic sentences, and thus raise questions about whether the “same grammar” of English will work equally well across the mode divide.

And yet there are affordances that mitigate these stylistic divergences. One is the reliance on “inner” or “private” speech (I am not entirely sure I always perceive the difference). Every time we are faced with a non-trivial speaking or writing task, we run through options in our minds as we prepare to either address an audience or place our fingers on the keyboard. We rehearse, and we try to imagine the effects of various possible plays, as indeed I did when I considered how much of Halliday to quote directly in the previous paragraph. (I changed my mind a couple of times.) Another is the emergence of hybrid communicative styles in electronic genres such as emails and blogs, the latter excellently discussed in the final chapter by Joel Bloch. A third affordance, which is linked to the second, concerns the growing interconnectedness of individual members of the academic world. When I first arrived at the University of Michigan more than twenty years ago, the doctoral students I met in humanities departments such as Linguistics and English functioned largely independently, often immured in their library carrels, emerging only occasionally for meetings with their advisors. Today, in my home department of Linguistics, there are formal sub-groupings of faculty and graduate students in each specialty as well as various kinds of informal collectivities for study and/or mutual support. The advantages of these arrangements are well brought out in Chapter 4 by Lisy Seloni, who concludes her careful ethnographic study with the following: “Looking at intertextual links doctoral students establish on the way of acquiring academic literacy practices does not only expand our views of academic textual worlds, but it also increases awareness of the juxtaposed and interactive nature of texts and events (i.e., spoken, written, electronic, etc.).”

These juxtapositions give rise to a fourth affordance. The fact that today we have a growing body of research that gives us insights into the structures and functions of spoken genres in the academic and research worlds—such as proposal meetings, student presentations, research group meetings and thesis defenses—means that these speech events are now seen as integral rather than peripheral to educative and communicative processes. Chapters that further explore this kind of speaking-writing connection include Christine Tardy’s discussion (Chapter 10) of student-generated genre-system portfolios and that by Don Rubin and Okim Kang (Chapter 11), which, *inter alia*, discusses the forms of oral interaction that swirl around the scientific poster presentation. More generally, Rubin and Kang argue that models of

speaking-writing interaction tend to consider the oral component as subordinate or preparatory and suggest instead that:

A more apt model might be a double helix with a writing strand and a speaking strand intertwined. At any particular stage one strand may be the focal outcome, drawing upon the other. But as a whole, the two strands are reciprocally supportive and leading in the same direction.

In a volume with this title, it is not surprising to find a fair number of papers that discuss the various roles of group and peer discussion, both online and face-to-face, in the creation and development of written texts. Of these, I would single out the very impressive essay by Robert Weissberg (Chapter 2), which provides a critical review of the currently popular socio-cultural approaches to both first and second literacy education, typically inspired by Vygotskian perspectives of various kinds. While not unsympathetic to these approaches, Weissberg offers a number of important caveats about their simplistic adoption in second language (L2) settings. Among other concerns, he notes, “Because SCT [socio-cultural theory] invariably sees social interaction as the necessary trigger for cognition, it leaves us with a monolithic account of literacy acquisition, insensitive to differences in modality strength and cognitive style among L2 learners.”

Two of the chapters I have already mentioned—those by Rubin & Kang and by Weissberg—are of considerable theoretical interest. A third is the opening chapter by Jessica Williams, particularly her exploration of “the less obvious” side of the bidirectional relationship: the move from writing into speaking. She notes that the slower and more decontextualized pace of writing offers greater opportunities for planning (perhaps via inner speech) and greater opportunities for focusing on form; as a consequence, L2 learners may be better able to recognize “holes” in their own competence. However, she also concludes that the literature on this directional connection is somewhat less robust than on the much more traveled converse.

Despite the pioneering work of a few scholars such as Don Rubin, a collection of papers by a wide range of authors on the speaking-writing connection would not have been possible a decade ago. The editors are therefore to be congratulated for putting it all together at this opportune time and bringing it to our attention. Readers will find much to reflect on here, such as the effect of new technologies (not excluding corpus linguistics), the interrupted literacy trajectories of Generation 1.5 students, the continuing influence of Vygotsky and Bakhtin, the role of “backstage” fora as a useful

surrogate for L2 students, and the need for students to understand the genre repertoires with which they need to engage. Readers will also find in many of these chapters numerous useful pedagogical suggestions and ideas that can be experimented with in their own classrooms and tutorial settings. Finally, the volume raises some important questions for future research, such as when today's increasingly socialized writing classroom can operate to the disadvantage of certain types of second language learner, and how differently or how similarly speech and writing relate to second language acquisition. Finally, we might further ponder the double helix analogy for our better understanding of speaking-writing connections.

REFERENCE

Halliday, M. A. K. (2002). *On grammar*. London: Continuum.

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