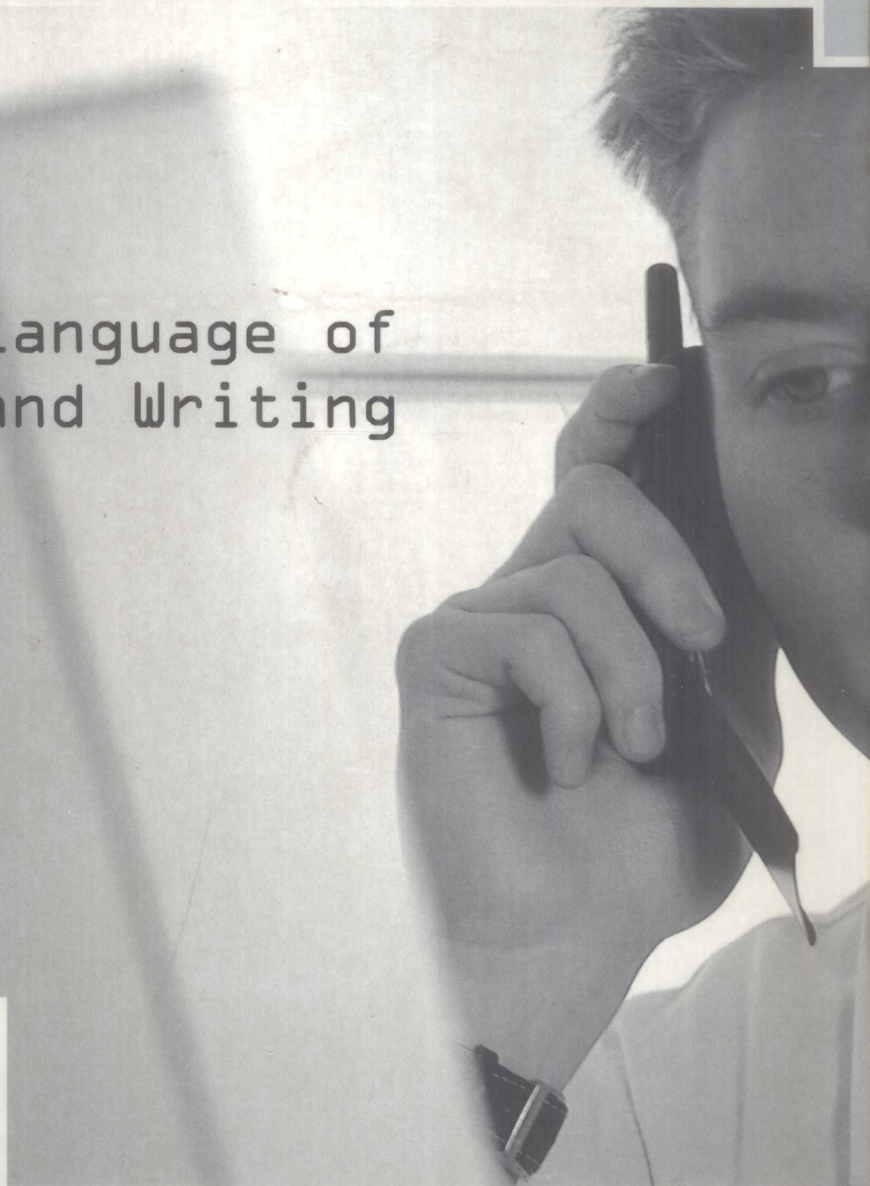
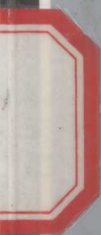


*Inter*text

Sandra Cornbleet  
and Ronald Carter

The Language of  
Speech and Writing



*Inter* text

# **The Language of Speech and Writing**

- Sandra Cornbleet and Ronald Carter



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# introduction

This book explores the nature of speech and writing and the overlaps between spoken and written language. We do not normally think much about speech and speaking. When we speak, we do so largely automatically and unconsciously but when we write, we have to be much more aware of what we are doing. Do we type it or write it? Do we send a card or handwrite a letter? Is the message better as an email? Why? And how does the language change? This book aims to make us think more about written and spoken language.

We normally don't learn to write until we are already able to speak. Speech comes before writing. While there are some languages which are only written and which are used mainly for ceremonial or religious purposes, it is almost impossible to imagine a society which only communicates through writing. On the other hand, in the history of civilisation there have been many societies which have relied only on oral communication and many languages today are used without there being a written record. Why? Here we explore the consequences of speech coming before writing. During the course of an average day we also speak much more than we write. This book explores the dominance of spoken language in everyday communication.

Yet most societies value writing more than speech. Most examinations test knowledge by means of reading and writing tasks and most examinations, including the driving test, cannot be passed without competence in the use of written language. The most highly valued texts in most societies are written texts. The term literature is used to refer to written material, including dramatic texts. Why? In this book we examine some of the reasons for the high prestige of writing.

Speaking can often be difficult. We can have false starts, repeat ourselves, forget what we wanted to say, but, generally, speaking is easier to learn than writing. Learning to write requires us to be more conscious of what we are doing and, from the early stages of forming letters to the more advanced stages of moving from one style to

another, the process has to be learned and practised before we get proficient. This book investigates the difficulty of writing.

Even though it is difficult to learn to write, the medium of writing is often lacking when you want to express feelings or give emphasis to something. Punctuation such as using capitals or exclamation marks helps but does not help much. Speech very often consists of spontaneous, unplanned face-to-face communication and is a much richer resource for getting your message across. In addition to language, a range of other means is open to us when we communicate face to face. And that includes using silence.

The choices between spoken and written language are normally obvious. For example, if you don't want to risk someone hearing or overhearing what you want to say, then you write a note. If you are a long distance away in time and space and can't access any electronic communication, you have no choice but to write. In *The Language of Speech and Writing* we explore the consequences of the choices between spoken and written texts.

There are, of course, many links between speech and writing. There are many written messages such as text messages on mobile phones, emails or communications on computer chat lines which work like spoken language. And if we want to give a talk to a group of people or to a large audience, the chances are that we'll write down in advance what we plan to say. Most political speeches are written to be spoken and are carefully crafted texts, even if they are written to sound spontaneous. Why? What are the continuities and overlaps between spoken and written language?

The book does not aim to make you write or speak better but it does include a wide range of tasks to help you understand the use of written and spoken language. And a better, more explicit understanding and conscious awareness of language often do lead to a more effective use of language.

When using this book, it is important to be aware of the difference between the following pairs of terms:

### Top down and bottom up

It will be obvious from a review of the *Intertext* series alone that linguists love name pairs! Top down and bottom up have nothing to do with standing on your head or turning somersaults – they are, instead, approaches to text analysis. Working from lower level items upwards to the text as a complete unit is looking at texts bottom up; that is,



paying attention to the component parts – spelling, grammar, sentence construction, paragraphing, etc. – which build up incrementally to form a written text. Alternatively, we can look at a text as a whole, top down, to consider the genre, style, readership, etc. in order to tease out how it has been created. This would be a top-down approach.

Both of these approaches will need to be kept in mind throughout the investigations in this book of written and spoken texts as they will both be appropriate for different purposes.

### Text and discourse

Text can be used for both written and spoken language. It usually refers to a stretch, an extract or complete piece of writing or speech. Texts generally adhere to broad conventions and rules which determine the language and structure used in particular text types. Discourse is a much wider term. It can also be used to refer to language in action, such as legal discourse, which has characteristic patterns of language. Discourse studies look at how writing, and speech, is patterned and linked across the text as a whole.

### Sentence and utterance

In spoken discourse analysis, it's more common to refer to an utterance – a stretch of language orally produced – than a sentence, which is a grammatical construct. We do *not* set out to speak in sentences – in fact, in informal speech we rarely do that – rather, we set out to achieve a purpose which may or not require full, accurate sentences: 'speech is characteristically used in pursuit of a purpose . . . The practice of inventing a sentence . . . is a practice of the sentence grammarian, not the user' (Brazil, 1995, pp. 26–7).

### Exchange and conversation

Conversation is a social activity between two or more people. It usually involves hopping to and fro in speech over a period of anything from a few minutes to several hours. Within a conversation, a pair of utterances between the parties is known as an exchange.



# Unit one

## The nature of writing

### Aims of this unit

This unit aims to investigate:

- ③ the nature of writing;
- ③ some sub-divisions of writing;
- ③ the process of writing;
- ③ ways in which writing is taught and learnt;
- ③ some of the main features of writing.

特征.

### What is writing?

Writing is all around us. We *see* written texts every day, even if we don't always *read* them. We write something every day, from a quick shopping list to an academic essay. We all *know* what writing is, somehow, but could we define it precisely?

### Activity

Write a one-sentence definition of writing *without* looking in a dictionary. Then compare with other people. What synonyms appeared? Can you think of any other synonyms (or near synonyms)?

### Commentary

*Chambers English Dictionary* gives this definition of writing:

**write** *v.t.* to form (letters or words) with a pen, pencil, or other implement on a (usu. paper) surface: to express in writing: to compose: to draw, engrave, etc.: to record: . . . to indicate (a quality, condition, etc.) clearly: to communicate, or to communicate with, by letter. – *v.i.* to perform, or to practise, the act of writing: . . . to compose . . .

The range is huge – from letter formation to (creative, original) composition. So writing isn't easy to define. It's impossible to come up with a simple, one-dimensional answer to the question 'What is writing?'.

### Activity

Think back to when you first learnt to write. Try to remember what you were taught and how you felt at the time.

- ◎ *What?* What exactly were you taught? Letter shapes and sizes? Capitalisation? Cursive writing? One handwriting style? Were you continually corrected?
- ◎ *Where?* Were you taught at home or at school or both? Did you feel comfortable in those surroundings? Did your environment affect your ability?
- ◎ *Who?* Who taught you? Did you like the teacher and the teaching methods? Why/why not?
- ◎ *How?* How were you taught? Did you have special handwriting books? Did you copy a model from a book or the board? Were they single letters, words or full phrases or sentences? Could you practise free writing?
- ◎ *Attitude and emotion* How did you feel when you were learning to write – puzzled, frustrated, confident, interested, bored, motivated?

### Commentary

We saw in *Chambers Dictionary* that the first definition was 'to form letters or words'. Handwriting is one of the first things we learn to do at school in relation to writing and the physical manipulation, involving motor

control and eye-hand co-ordination, must be mastered before going on to anything else. Today, of course, we aren't restricted to writing only by hand in order to produce written texts; texts are produced by printing and electronic methods. The term **graphic** can be used to incorporate all of these. However, these various techniques aren't equivalent to each other. They will produce or avoid certain features of language and text production which we'll consider later. **Graphology**, at any rate, is just one of the many component skills, known as **sub-skills**, of writing.

In your discussion, you may have mentioned some of the sub-skills involved in writing. Some of these are generally taught at an elementary level such as:

- ⊙ spelling;
- ⊙ punctuation; <sup>Δ?</sup>
- ⊙ capitalisation;
- ⊙ grammar.

You may have been taught certain spelling rules, such as 'i before e except after c'. At a later stage, this may have been extended to 'and before ght'. Later still you will have come across numerous exceptions to the rule! You may have been taught how to use the apostrophe and semi-colon. You'll have been taught when, and when not, to use capital letters. You might have also been taught some grammatical terminology, some **meta-language**, such as the terms 'noun', 'pronoun', 'verb', 'preposition', etc. Many of these are fairly rudimentary but of course throughout your education, and your life, you keep refining, adding to and subtracting from this knowledge as new expressions and new vocabulary are learnt and different skills are needed.

Other writing sub-skills which usually form part of later education processes are organisational features, such as sentence and paragraph construction, link words such as 'although', 'nevertheless' and **cohesive devices** like demonstrative pronouns (*This theory . . .*) etc. Later still, you'll probably have been taught some of the requisites and conventions of text structure and different text types, as, for example, the organisation of information, degrees of formality, style and register, layout and **formulaic expressions** (Dear Sir/Yours faithfully). So we all learn the fundamentals of writing from formal instruction. But we also acquire and refine many skills from our daily experiences.

Writing, as we've said, is therefore not one-dimensional. There are many aspects to consider of this very common, quite normal everyday activity.

## Activity

The two texts given are notes written by different students for the same teacher. Read them and pick out the various features of the written medium, the different sub-skills, which are represented here. Use the list above as a guide but others should come to light.

### Text: Letter 1

Dear Jacqueline,  
I can't attend <sup>to</sup> your lesson today as I have an important appointment at the Sports Injury Clinic.

Apologies,

Sarah Granger.

### Text: Letter 2

Dear Jackie Shepherd,

I am writing to apologise <sup>be apologise for</sup> for not attending your lessons last week. This was due to some confusion on my part as I believed my lectures all started this week. I am very sorry.

Yours Sincerely,

S Wood

(SUSAN WOOD)

## Commentary

These two letters, left as brief notes in a tutor's pigeonhole, reveal many of the features we've already identified:

- ⊙ Handwriting – Differing styles of letter formation and connection between letters. Some slips and crossings out in the hurry of the writing process.
- ⊙ Spelling – No errors – variations in use of contractions ('can't') as opposed to full forms ('I am writing', 'I am very sorry'). Knowledge of spelling rules in relation to morphological variations e.g. write > writing, confuse > confusion, apology > apologies.
- ⊙ Punctuation – Commas used in both letters after the greeting and closure; full stops at ends of sentences; apostrophe. Capitalisation of names of people and the clinic; conventional use of 'Dear' and of closures, though non-standard use of 'Sincerely'.
- ⊙ Grammar – Full sentences in standard grammar with standard word order.
- ⊙ Verbs – Manipulation of various verb forms: infinitive ('to apologise'), gerund ('for not attending') and tenses: past ('believed', 'started') and present tense for future time ('as I have').
- ⊙ Sentence construction – Complex sentences with dependent clauses ('as I believed', 'as I have').
- ⊙ Use of cohesive devices – 'This was due' – 'This' refers back to 'not attending your lessons' (**anaphoric reference**).
- ⊙ Format – Letter format with greetings and closures and positioning of first sentence beneath surname. Text 2 includes the date and a proper signature, with the name printed in block capitals in parentheses beneath.
- ⊙ Style – Text 2 is more formal than Text 1. The formality is achieved through the phrase grammar, lack of contractions, vocabulary, sentence construction and conventional closing. Text 1 is more direct, more informal, with contractions and the abbreviated note style of the closure.
- ⊙ Structure – Text 2 has a conventional formal letter structure: opens with a statement of the purpose of writing, states what has happened and explains the reason, follows with a repeated apology. Text 1 states a future event, gives the reason and offers an apology.

Two written texts, written to the same person, via the same channel, for broadly similar purposes, displaying many similar features and yet also having many distinctive features which set one apart from another.

↓  
distinguish.

## Other features of writing

### Writing is permanent

We commit writing to paper (or any other technological substitute). The physical, concrete reality remains forever, unless some external force intervenes – natural decay, fire, computer crash!

Writing can survive for centuries, for example, the Rosetta Stone, the Dead Sea Scrolls and, perhaps, the year 2000 millennium time-capsules. Writing lives on as a testament to the thought of an earlier time, not just for historical documents but for the diary we wrote yesterday. It provides concrete proof that we can refer back to again and again.

Writing something of such permanence, for essentially anyone to be able to read, gives it a weighty importance which might affect the language used.

### Writing is distant

We often, though not always, write in order to communicate with someone else. It stands to reason that if the person we want to communicate with is in the same room, we probably don't need to write to them (unless to keep something private from another party). Written messages are not only conveyed through time but also through space. We can write to someone next door or on the other side of the world.

The first time we sent an email, we talked of sending it 'out into the ether', uncertain if it would be received at all and what the response would be – we couldn't *see* the reader and the reaction the message provoked. It's just the same with other forms of writing – we compose, we trust that the message conveys what we intended and that the response is the one desired.

### Writing is planned

Writing takes time. The word 'discoloration', for example, takes the average person approximately five seconds to write but only one second to say. The physical pace of writing, which even with a keyboard is slow, allows for ongoing thought and planning *during* the writing process. As we write a sentence, we can think of each word before we write it and then we can always go back, correct it or alter it, until we're satisfied. Before we can write anything, even a shopping list, we need



to think. We can write very little of any length or sense without giving it *some* thought beforehand. Obviously, more important documents need much greater planning.

### Writing is formal

Because of all these previous attributes, writing tends to convey important messages and therefore we probably usually write in quite a formal way. The letters we've seen, even though they were quick notes, are both fairly formal and again, the more important the document, the more formal it will be.

### Writing is linear – or is it?

As you're reading this, your eye is moving from left to right. Writing in English can be said to be linear: we start on the left-hand side of the page, and move in a straight line to the right. We write one word, followed by another and then another. English is known as an SVO language: Subject – Verb – Object, this being the most common grammatical ordering. So the subject comes before the predicate, prepositions come before nouns, as the name implies (some languages have post-positions). We sequence information in a forward progression: state the cause and explain the effect (though these could easily be reversed and yet still push the text forward). All this seems to imply a straightforward movement from start to finish, left to right, beginning to end. But is it really such a direct route?

### Writing is a process

Look again at the two texts on p. 8, at the slips and crossings out. Put yourself in the writers' shoes: we may write a word, re-read it, correct a slip, go on, stop, re-read to check the sense and decide on the best way to proceed and so on. So in some ways, it's more of a cyclical process.

¶ We're so accustomed as readers to dealing with the final product of writing that we rarely consider the process – for that's what writing is, a process. Only when we struggle to produce a text ourselves or when there's something out of the ordinary in a text – some slip or something out of place which has been left over from the writing process – is our attention drawn to it.

Such re-working, isn't restricted to the realms of a literary genius – it's part of the writing process for everyone. So, although slips can,