

The Differences between Spoken and Written Grammar in English

Introduction

In early times, there was no writing, and people exchanged information only by speaking. Through the historical stages of development, the writing system was shaped. Nowadays, writing is an indispensable means of communication for people in life as well as work. Parallel to writing, speaking has also become more adequate and perfect day by day. As a result, research into spoken and written language in English, the global language, has been properly addressed. One of the principal aims of this reflection is to analyze how to distinguish between spoken and written grammar. Based on this, the teaching of English at school may take the direction of differentiating between spoken and written grammar.

There are many different definitions of spoken and written language. However, in a minor scope of the paper, I will give a definition given by Horowitz and Samuels (1987):

Oral language is typically associated by linguists with conversation that is produced, processed, and then evaluated in the context of face-to-face exchange and grounded in interpersonal relationships that are often clearly established. Oral language is adapted to a specific audience and to socio-cultural settings and communities that are presumably present, functioning in a context of here and now. (p. 56)

In contrast:

Written language is typically associated with language of books and explanatory prose such as is found in schools. Written language is formal, academic, and planned; it hinges on the past and is reconstructed in such a way that in the future it can be processed by varied readerships. (p. 21)

Table 1. The oral-written dichotomy (Horowitz and Samuels, 1987)

Oral language	Written language
Talk	Text
Face to face conversation with reciprocity between speaker and listener	Face to text with limited reciprocity between author and reader
Narrative-like	Expository-like
Action-oriented	Idea-oriented
Event-oriented	Argument-oriented
Story-oriented	Explanatory
Here and now	Future and past
In given space and time	Not space – or time – bound

Informal	Formal
Primary discourse	Secondary discourse
Natural communication	Artificial communication
Interpersonal	Objective and distanced
Spontaneous	Planned
Sharing of context (situational)	No common context
Ellipsis	Explicitness in text consciousness
Structureless	Highly structured
Cohesion through paralinguistic cues	Cohesion through lexical cues
Single predication	Multiple prediction
Repetition	Succinctness
Simple linear structures	Complex hierarchical structures
Paratactic patterns	Hypotactic patterns
Right branching with limited subordination	Left branching with multiple levels of subordination
Fleeting	Permanent
Unconscious	Conscious and restructured

From the above definition, this paper will attempt to distinguish some differences between spoken and written grammar. English and Vietnamese are adopted to be compared. The foundation of this paper is partly based on the author's personal understanding and mostly on a collection of arguments from other authors.

Literature Review

From historical research up to now, there have been a variety of understandings about spoken and written language in English. However, it is undeniable that oral and written narratives are two components constructing English. As a result, the aspects of spoken and written language such as grammar are always a current topic for researchers. There are many different ideas about the occurrence of written and spoken language, such as the frequency in narrative, which is more important, and whether they work together or separately.

Townend and Walker (2006) suppose that both spoken and written language are closely interdependent. They emphasize that from primary time, spoken language was a means to express ideas and information while written language was a symbol system to represent the spoken form. Cook (2004)

states that although there are some similarities of the systems of speech and writing, there are many differences. Written language can easily show various words by varying the spelling. “Many of the devices of written language have no spoken equivalent” (p. 12). Biber (1986) also shows that “linguistic differences between speaking and writing have been attributed to differing processing constraints and to differing situational characteristics” (p. 23).

From the above evaluations, it can be seen that although there are some similarities, there are also remarkable differences between spoken and written grammars in English. Actually, in grammar books, the concentration is on written grammar, and students are usually taught this rather than spoken grammar. It should be recognized that normally, when people speak, they often do not pay much attention to the words, sentences, structures or conjunctions. As a result, grammar in spoken language is usually not strict; it is less rigid and more flexible than in writing.

As in Townend and Walker’s analysis, there is an interdependence between spoken and written language, but they still have to find the answer for the question, “Why does language have two parts?” Because of that, there should be a distinction between spoken and written language. At school, besides written grammar, spoken grammar should also be properly addressed because it has been an indispensable part of languages in general and English in particular.

Spoken Grammar Less Rigid than Written Grammar

In spoken language, the participants usually do not pay much attention to lexical content and meaning, which are strictly used in written language. Biber (1986) gives two examples (p. 15-16), one from face-to-face conversation and one from an official document.

Text Sample 1 (Face-to-face conversation)

B: it doesn’t need to

but it does in fact

by tradition

all the

A: finalists

B: finalists go

and so the others mmm

the others sort of feel

that things won't go on much longer

A: well they really haven't any reason to
because I mean finalists are

B: mmm

A: and they actually do finish

B: exactly
of course they do

A: and the others don't
well
I don't know

B: but I don't think it's feasible
I mean I know this is the first time I've done it
and I'm not in a main line paper
but I'm sure it'll take me all my time to do it
in three weeks
I mean I've seen what it's been like for you
I know... had more
on the other hand
I must allow myself good time
the first time I do it

A: I don't think I'm going to go on with it

B: are you doing two or one paper this year

A: only one

Text Sample 2 (Official document)

The University expects its students to conduct themselves at all times in an orderly manner creditable to the good name of the University. Regulations for the maintenance of good order and discipline are promulgated from time to time...

The official dates of University terms are published in the Calendar apply to all students. Students (other than new students at the opening of a session and research students) are required to arrive in Hull on the first day of term and, except with the special permission of the Dean of their Faculty, may not go down until the last day. The first and last days of term as published are regarded as travelling days on which no lectures or classes will be held...

Text Sample 1 uses interpersonal interaction and personal attitude (*I, you, are you doing?, ...feel that I don't think that, I know this is..., what it's been...*). Text Sample 2 uses longer and more academic words to present meaning (*an orderly manner creditable to..., regulations for the maintenance...*).

Additionally, in spoken narratives, people often use elliptical and abbreviated forms. When somebody asks us "What are you doing?" we can answer "cooking" or "studying." The answer stands for the complete sentence, "I am cooking" or "I am studying," which is unnecessary in the form of the question. Townend and Walker (2006) typify an instance: A child went to find his grandmother in another room, saying as he left "better see ... Bromma's up to." Grandfather who overheard this repeated it later to grandmother as "I'd better see what grandma's up to" (p. 18). It is quite complicated to understand the content if we do not base on specific context, but it is often accepted in spoken language.

Horowitz and Samuels (1987) show that in writing people use complete sentences, but in speaking we usually use incomplete sentences. They take the following example: People can say, "Just going to check the reserve stock out of the back. Won't be a minute" (p. 27). The written version of this would be "I am just going to check the reserve stock out the back. It won't be a minute." It should be noted that in conversations or speech, people speak to exchange information with each other in a restricted context. In contrast, in writing, the author presents his or her ideas for the public, so the style must be academic and formal.

According to Leech (1998), conversation, which is the most common type of spoken language, takes place in real time, so it often expresses personal politeness, emotion, and attitude. Specifically, conversation usually uses syntactic reduction such as *You better..., What you doing? We gonna...* Moreover, people also use familiarizing vocatives like *honey, mum, guys, dude, mate...* When people desire others to do them a favour or ask someone to do something, they often use polite formulae and indirect requests such as *Thank you, Sorry, Please, Would you..., Could you..., Can I...* Another feature of the spoken language is that, when people speak, they often use expletives such as *God, Jesus Christ, My gosh, Bloody hell, Geez.*

It can be explained that spoken language often does not require strict rules, so it is less rigid and more flexible than the written language. Moreover, people communicate with each other anytime and anywhere, so most of the frequency of spoken language is informal and less academic. This is the reason why speakers can have chances to use vocatives, expletives, exclamation and

abbreviations. In contrast, the language in writing is often formal and academic, so it usually needs strict and appropriate words.

Unlike English, which usually uses the elliptical and abbreviated form, Vietnamese does not have this characteristic either in spoken or written language. In English, especially in using modal verbs, the speaker and writer often use the reduced form such as *won't* (*will not*), *can't* (*cannot*), *shouldn't* (*should not*) or *couldn't* (*could not*). On the contrary, in spoken and written stories in Vietnamese, the full form must be used. People have to speak and write fully *không thể* (*cannot, could not*), *sẽ không* (*will not*), *không nên* (*should not*). Some following examples are the typical demonstrations.

Ngày mai tôi sẽ không đi chơi. (I will not go out tomorrow)

Anh không nên làm việc đó. (You should not do that stuff)

Cô ta không thể trả tiền cho tôi. (She cannot afford to pay me money)

Not unlike English, spoken grammar in Vietnamese is less rigid and informal than written grammar. Binh (1971) shows that there are many spoken sentences in Vietnamese which have no subjects, while they are strictly constructed in the written language. He demonstrates a few forms:

- The negative forms *đừng*, *chớ* and *hãy* are often used in sentences which contain no subjects.

Hãy đợi một chút nữa (Let's wait one little more)

Chớ đi nhanh quá (No go fast very)

- 'Half-questions' is also one kind of the questions containing no subjects, for instance:

Cơm chưa? (Eaten yet? Lit.: Eat question word?)

Đi đâu đấy? (Where (are you) going? Lit.: Go where final particle?)

Ăn không? (Want to eat? Lit.: Eat question word?)

Đẹp thế nào? (How beautiful (is that lady)? Lit.: Beautiful how?)

Subordination

One of the fundamental distinctions between spoken grammar and written grammar is subordination. Tannen (1984) defines that "subordination is the asymmetrical relationship between an independent and dependent clause(s) in which the dependent clause is introduced by an overt subordinating conjunction" (p. 24). The use of subordination between spoken and written language is not balanced and depends on different types and various functions

of the whole sentence. Two of the subordinating factors, which clearly exhibit the differences between written and spoken language, are adjectivals and adverbials.

Adjectivals. With regard to adjectival relative pronouns, this type of subordination occurs more frequently in spoken than in written language. Keenan (1975) summarizes the use of adjectival in the following table:

Table 2: Frequency indices and percentages of occurrence of each adjectival relative pronoun in spoken and written peer narratives (Keenan, 1975, p. 60)

	Spoken	Written
Total Frequency Index	11.7 (147)	6.9 (49)
Restrictive Relatives	8.0 (101)	4.8 (34)
Non-restrictive Relatives	3.7 (46)	2.1 (15)
Who	33% (48)	31% (15)
Which	11% (17)	29% (14)
That	46% (68)	20% (10)
Where	5% (7)	2 (1)
Whom	- (0)	2% (1)

Table 2 shows the frequency index for relative clauses and the percentages of overall occurrence for each relative pronoun in spoken and written peer narratives. Overall, the occurrence of relative pronouns in spoken language is approximately three times that of written language, (147 in the spoken while 49 in the written). Restrictive relative clauses are considerably more frequent in both the spoken and written stories than non-restrictive relatives. The occurrence of pronouns is also not balanced. Referring to table 2, the relative pronoun that is used in spoken much more than in written language (46% in the spoken and 20% in the written). There are some typical examples for that:

The man that lives next door is very friendly.

Where is the fruit that was in fridge?

Everything that happened was my fault.

In contrast, there is a preference for which in written narratives with 29% while 11% in spoken narratives. It would account for the social uses of language based on pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

Is it possible, argue critical pedagogues, for teachers to embrace a pedagogy which empowers students to intervene in the making of history? (Zyngier, 2003, p. 43)

Knight suggests the test or benchmark of a democratic education is not just the difference it makes to the lives of the students but also to the community to which the students belongs. (Zyngier, 2003, p. 44)

In Vietnamese, relative pronouns are rarely used in either spoken and written language (Can, 2001). Usually, the use of relative pronouns in Vietnamese causes statements and utterances to become more complicated and redundant. Some following examples can demonstrate this:

Example 1

Anh co biet nguoi phu nu song o phong ben canh khong?

Anh co biet mot phu nu, nguoi song o phong ben canh khong?
(Do you know the woman who lives next door?)

Example 2

Anh co biet dia diem toi sap chuyen den khong?

Anh co biet dia diem, noi ma toi sap chuyen den khong?
(Do you know the place where I am going to move to?)

The meaning of the two sentences in Example 1 is the same, and in Example 2 as well. However, Vietnamese speakers rarely use the pronoun *nguoi* (*who*) as in 1.2 or *noi* (*where*) in 2.2, especially in written narratives.

Adverbials. The difference is not the same in every adverbial, but in general, adverbials in written language are much more frequent than in spoken language (Tannen, 1984). Tannen constructs a table to show this distinction (p. 19).

Table 3: Frequency indices for adverbial subordinate clauses in spoken and written peer narratives

	Spoken	Written
When	1.6 (20)	3.7 (26)
As	1.3 (16)	3.7 (26)
While	.8 (10)	2.3 (16)
Because	1.3 (16)	- (0)
If	1.3 (17)	- (0)
Whether	- (0)	.8 (6)

After	.2 (3)	.6 (4)
Where	.5 (6)	.4 (3)
Like	.9 (11)	.3 (2)
Since	.2 (2)	.3 (2)
(Al)though	.1 (1)	.1 (1)
As if	- (0)	.3 (2)
Before	.2 (2)	.1 (1)
So that	.2 (2)	- (0)
Wherever	- (0)	.1 (1)
Whereby	- (0)	.1 (1)
Once	- (0)	.1 (1)
Total	8.4 (106)	13.0 (92)

There are some instances for the use of adverbial clauses:

I fell asleep while I was watching television.

I didn't get the job although I had all the necessary qualifications.

As you know, it's Tom's birthday next week.

(Murphy, 1995, p.46)

The above statistics are quite similar to what O'Donnell (1974) found for adverbial clauses in his research: 22 for spoken and 33 for written per 100 units. In total, the adverbial clauses occurred more frequently in written (13.0) than in spoken language. However, the occurrence among clauses is different. For example, there is no *whether* in spoken language while there are 0.8 (6) in written. Moreover, with the *subordinators* *wherever*, *whereby* and *once*, the frequency in spoken narratives is zero, but they frequently occurred .1 (1) in written samples. There are also some adverbial clauses such as *like*. This clause is used more in spoken than in written language: .9 (11) and .3 (2). It is possible that the frequency of adverbial subordinate clauses is not always fixed between spoken and written narratives. Rather, it depends on the contexts and specific situations of spoken narrative; for instance, a speech in a conference is usually more formal than a conversation between friends.

In Vietnamese, the adverbial subordinate clause is quite balanced between spoken and written language (Tu, 2002). In Tu's statistics, the occurrence

of adverbials in both spoken and written language is approximately 9.5 % of 93 stories. The following examples are typical illustrations for the use of adverbials in Vietnamese language:

Dâu phải bán cả con vì chồng cô rơi vào cảnh nợ nần.

(Dau has to sell her daughter, because her husband was in debt.)

Anh ta gọi điện cho tôi trước khi đến

(He called me before coming)

(Ngo, 1979)

Similarly to English, Vietnamese language rarely uses *có hay không, được hay không (whether) or như thế, cứ như là (as if)* in spoken language.

Coordination

SIL International (2004) defines “A coordinating conjunction is a conjunction that links constituents without syntactically subordinating once to each other” (p. 23). This could be understood as the coordinating conjunction being used to join two independent clauses which are equally important. A coordinating conjunction usually uses a comma, and it is often in the middle of sentence. There are some important coordinating conjunctions such as *and, but, so* and *or*.

Examples:

He lives in Melbourne, and he studies at Latrobe.

I was sick, so I went to the doctor.

She is Italian, but her father is French.

In the comparison between spoken and written language, the use of coordinating conjunctions is more frequent in spoken discourse than in written (Tannen, 1984, p. 17). Her statistics illustrate this distinction:

Table 4: Frequency indices for coordinating conjunctions in spoken and written peer narrative

	Spoken	Written
And	72.9 (918)	35.9 (254)
But	4.8 (61)	2.1 (15)

So	4.2 (55)	.8 (6)
Or	1.1 (14)	.1 (1)
And so	1.3 (16)	- (0)
Total	84.5 (1064)	39.0(276)

From the above table, it is clearly recognized that the use of and is much more preferred in the spoken (72.9 in the spoken and 35.9 in the written). According to Martinet (1964), “The use of and contributes to the fragmented quality of speech. This greater use of filler words and the characteristic of chaining numerous clauses together with and can be attributed to speakers’ lack of tolerance for silence” (p. 9). The following examples typify the feature of spoken discourse:

And then he gets down out of the tree,
And he dumps all his pears into the basket,
And the basket’s full,
And one of the pears drops to the floor,
And he picks it up,
And he takes his kerchief off,
And he wipes it off,
And places it in the basket
Which is very full.

It can be seen that coordinating conjunctions are one of the important factors in both spoken and written language. Depending on the specific characteristics, the occurrence of coordinating conjunctions is dissimilar between speaking and writing. This is evident in the above evaluation in a speaking situation when people do not feel confident or do not have enough words to express themselves, they usually use conjunctions such as and or so to fill the silence and make the narrative coherent.

Conclusions

The fundamental point of this paper is to describe and evaluate some differences between spoken and written grammar in English. Some of the above points were also compared with Vietnamese. This paper has illustrated that

spoken grammar is less rigid than written discourse. Moreover, the distinction between speaking and writing in terms of subordination has been highlighted. Relating to this point, the different frequency of adverbials and adjectivals between spoken and written languages is also compared and analysed. In addition, the study also examines the distinguishing features between spoken and written components in terms of coordinating conjunctions. Pragmatically, results of this study could significantly contribute to the teaching of English to Vietnamese speakers.

The above evaluation shows the crucial roles of both spoken and written English. Clearly, both spoken and written discourse are two indispensable facets of language in general, and of English in particular. Although there are considerable differences between speaking and writing in terms of grammar, they are always interdependent of each other. Furthermore, the English grammar taught at school should be balance of both spoken and written language in order to provide learners comprehensive and clear understandings about the similarities as well as differences of spoken and written English.

