

Features of academic spoken English



Spoken language is different from written language for many reasons. One important reason is that it usually has to be understood immediately whereas written language can be read many times. For that reason, spoken language has many different features.

Spoken language has the following characteristics (Halliday, 1989, p. 31):

- Variation in speed - but it is generally faster than writing
- Loudness or quietness
- Gestures - body language
- Intonation
- Stress
- Rhythm
- Pitch range
- Pausing and phrasing

As well as this, there are differences in the actual language used (Biber, 1988; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999; Chafe, 1982; Cook, 1997; Halliday,1989).

Less Complex

Spoken language is less complex than written language.

Spoken language is grammatically less complex than written language. It has fewer subordinate clauses, fewer "that/to" complement clauses, fewer sequences of prepositional phrases, fewer attributive adjectives and more active verbs than written language.

Spoken texts are longer. This means that there is more repetition. According to Ure (1971), the percentage of different words in a text is generally below 40% for spoken texts and above 40% for written texts.

Spoken texts also have shorter, less complex words and phrases. They have fewer nominalisations, more verb based phrases, and a more limited vocabulary. Spoken texts are lexically less dense than written language - they have proportionately more grammatical words than lexical words.

Spoken language has more words that refer to the speaker, more quantifiers and hedges, and less abstractness.

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Spoken language has:

- more verb based phrases (e.g. having treatment (W), being treated (S), hospital care (W), go to hospital (S))
- more predicative adjectives (misleading statistics (W), statistics are misleading (S))
- more pronouns (*it, they, you, we*)
- more lexical repetition
- more first person reference (*I*)
- more active verbs than written language
- fewer complex words and phrases

Spoken texts are:

- more fragmented - more simple sentences and more use of coordination *and, but, so, because* rather than subordination (embedding)
- lexically less dense
- longer

Halliday (1989, p.79) compares a sentence from a written text:

The use of this method of control unquestionably leads to safer and faster train running in the most adverse weather conditions.

with a typical spoken variant:

If this method of control is used trains will unquestionably (be able to) run more safely and faster (even) when the weather conditions are most adverse

and a more natural spoken version:

You can control the trains this way and if you do that you can be quite sure that they'll be able to run more safely and more quickly than they would otherwise, no matter how bad the weather gets.

The main difference is the grammar, not the vocabulary.

Another example from (Halliday, 1996, p. 347).

The written text:

Obviously the government is frightened of union reaction to its move to impose proper behaviour on unions.

is more lexically dense than the spoken version:

Obviously the government is frightened how the unions will react if it tries to make them behave properly.

Other equivalents are given below (1989, p.81):

Written	Spoken
Every previous visit had left me with a sense of the futility of further action on my part.	Whenever I'd visited there before, I'd ended up feeling that it would be futile if I tried to do anything more.
Violence changed the face of once peaceful Swiss cities.	The cities in Switzerland had once been peaceful, but they changed when people became violent.
Improvements in technology have reduced the risks and high costs associated with simultaneous installation.	Because the technology has improved its less risky than it used to be when you install them at the same time, and it doesn't cost so much either.
Opinion in the colony greeted the promised change with enthusiasm.	The people in the colony rejoiced when it was promised that things would change in this way.

Active verbs

In formal written English, we often use a passive when we do not want to specify who the agent is. In spoken English we can use a subject such as "people", "somebody", "they", "we", or "you".

Compare:

They're installing the new computer system next month.

The new computer system is being installed next month. (more formal)

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