FROM WRITTEN TO SPOKEN – AND IN BETWEEN

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Abstract

The paper looks at the differences in syntactic and information structure in four types of discourse produced by a single author, the British cosmologist and astrophysicist Sir Martin Rees: a written academic text, a text from a book of popular science, unprepared spoken discourse, and an academic lecture, i.e. a text written to be presented orally. The analysis of the variation in one speaker/writer is expected to highlight systematic differences between the separate types of discourses and to eliminate possible variation across different authors. The paper aims to show how, perhaps even subconsciously, competent language users modify the structure of discourse to fulfil their communicative goals in different types of communication.

Key words

functional sentence perspective, spoken discourse, syntactic structure, variation, word-order, written discourse

1 Introduction

There is now considerable agreement among linguists that spoken and written language differ in many more respects than just in the channel, i.e. the modality through which messages are transmitted between participants in communication (Halliday & Hasan 1989: 58). They are best understood as two partly autonomous subsystems of language, each with its own characteristic features such as grammatical complexity, lexical density, typical patterning of words, etc. The recognition of the autonomy of these two subsystems is demonstrated, for example, by the treatment of written and spoken language in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al. 1999), in which Chapter 14: The Grammar of Conversation is devoted to the distinctive features of spoken language, with additional references throughout the book to grammatical features of conversation compared to fiction, news writing, and academic prose.

Most studies exploring the differences between spoken and written discourse are based on sources produced by a variety of writers/speakers. Unlike these studies, the present article deals with variation in texts produced by a single writer/speaker. On the one hand, such an approach may be considered somewhat limiting; however, it is hoped that it might identify some of the essential differences...