Review of The Language of Speech and Writing

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The Language of Speech and Writing (LSW) is one of thirteen satellite texts that can accompany the core textbook Working with Text: A Core Introduction to Language Analysis, 2nd ed (2001). LSW, a textbook intended for advanced high school or beginning college students, contains an introduction and six units, plus a three-page glossary, one page of references, and one page of further reading suggestions.

Introduction. This chapter covers the primacy of speech vs. the higher prestige of writing, the ease of speech vs. the difficulty of writing, and "the continuities and overlap between spoken and written language" (2). Here the authors introduce useful definition pairs: top down vs. bottom up, text vs. discourse, sentence vs. utterance, and exchange vs. conversation.

Unit One: The Nature of Writing. This first chapter sets the format of alternating sample texts, activities, and commentary. The content covers subskills of writing, including graphology, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar, as well as such organizational features as sentence and paragraph construction, cohesive devices, linkwords, informational organization, degrees of formality, style, register, layout, and formulaic expressions. Next the features of writing are discussed, including its being more permanent, distant, planned, and formal than speech. The linearity of writing is questioned, and writing as a process in introduced. The chapter closes with a discussion of the three areas of Context, Purpose, and Receiver of a text, as well as a consideration of writing as a memory aid.
Unit Two: The Nature of Speaking. The chapter begins by laying out the levels of language involved in speech: sounds, intonation, rhythm, pitch, and pace. Next the authors discuss the development of speaking skills and the ways speakers learn to gauge the appropriateness of utterances. Then the authors come back to the ideas of Context, Purpose, and Receiver (CPR) as applied to speaking.

The nature of everyday speech is delineated: it occurs in real time, it takes place face to face, it has a purpose, it is interactive, and it may be used to hold the floor. The phatic nature of conversation is discussed. The choice of whether or not to speak is introduced, including issues of face. One-way conversations are looked at, and a hearer's perception of accent and dialect are considered.

Unit Three: The Language of Writing. In addition to the content of different sized chunks of text, the authors discuss the impact of visual formatting such as font size and page layout. These supporting features are shown to help us comprehend a text through its context, i.e., we view it "within its normal environment . . . and therefore we bring to the text a great deal of background knowledge, predictions and expectations, which help us make sense of what we see" (34). Next the authors discuss how language is affected by the genre of a text. To the features of CPR is added another P, that of producer. The CPPR features are interpreted through a range of recipe texts. The authors observe that there are texts from many genres (e.g., legalese, law enforcement, commerce) that we are familiar with as receivers, though we would need specialized assistance to be able to produce them. Features of specialized texts are examined for lexis, grammar, and style.

Unit Four: The Language of Speaking. This unit aims to "identify commonly occurring features of everyday spoken English" (59), focusing on the features detailed in Unit Two and looking at applications to grammar, lexis, and discourse. Grammatical issues include conjunctions, fronting, ellipsis, and indexicals. Lexical issues involve Anglo-Saxon vs. Latinate roots, delexicalized verbs, precision of terminology, and lexical creativity. Discourse issues covered include adjacency pairs, back-channeling, discourse markers, and tag questions. Finally the authors discuss the functional nature of speech, which allows it to be used indirectly.

Unit Five: The Relationship Between Speech and Writing. This unit looks at factors affecting the choice between speaking or writing and how these factors affect the style and language used. The factors examined include being face-to-face, saving face, permanency, clarity, competence, speed or urgency, formality, the amount of planning required, how personal the topic is, and social
conventions. Next the authors discuss the various positions along clines--of formality, permanence, interactivity, in formativeness, and context dependence--in which both speech and writing can be located, rather than occurring as polar opposites. A spoken and written sample on the same topic are examined, displaying differences in language use relating to grammar, lexis, and style.

Unit Six: Where Boundaries Meet. In order to point out the variability of text types along a spectrum, this unit looks at written texts which use features of spoken texts and vice versa. Intertextuality, where text of one genre relies on another for its interpretation, is illustrated. Texts are examined in which features of speech and writing are both represented. Dramatic dialogue is examined, showing how authors of different eras reveal varied purposes in the way they represent conversation, aiming not for complete authenticity but to be "sufficiently realistic" (111). The effects of technology on the forms of language are also considered, revealing the pressure of time and space constraints that result in emoticons and acronyms for familiar expressions.

Because it is intended for beginning students, one benefit claimed by the series is its being accessible: "no previous knowledge of language analysis is assumed" (111). While this is true, the book might be made stronger by listing more follow-up material. References are scarce throughout the text. Though field specific terms are introduced (e.g., phatic, face, genre, idiolect, fronting, deixis), they are not generally backed with citations from the relevant literature. For example, in discussing the "normal environment" in which readers find a text (34), no mention is made of various script, frame, or schema formats that would anchor the discussion (e.g., Schank and Abelson, 1977). In addition, the texts looked at in Unit Six "cross the boundaries between spoken and written language but not in a uniform, fixed way" (118). Besides the positioning of texts along a cline, some mention might be made of the clustering of spoken and written features found in the work of Biber (e.g. Biber 1988). Similarly the conclusion of the chapter notes that "it's a sign of the innate human quality of cooperation that we assume someone is trying to convey meaning and we struggle to identify it" (119) with no specific mention of Grice and his conversational maxims (Grice 1975). Discussion of the influence of email, real time electronic chatting, and cell phone text messaging misses the chance to refer to recent deeper work in these areas, such as that by Herring (2001). In general, the book offers an insufficient starting point for library-based research, yet, conversely, it is quite strong in promoting hands-on assignments involving data gathering and text analysis. The use of such "realia" as email postings, recipes, magazine ads, and TV script excerpts is engaging. Because of both the example texts and the tone, the book is lively and would easily capture the attention of students new to language study.
One minor point might cause some confusion: on p. 19 the authors mix up pitch and volume, defining pitch as the voice's ability to be loud or soft. Otherwise, this is an excellent introduction to text and discourse analysis, liable to stir up interest in the workings of the texts that surround us daily.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE REVIEWER
Laurel Smith Stvan received her Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 1998 and is now an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research interests include Pragmatics, Text Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics, and ESL. She can be reached at http://ling.uta.edu/~laurel.