Title

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Publication Date

1981

Differences between Colloquial and Ritual Seneca

or How Oral Literature is Literary

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In recent years we have come to realize more clearly that languages with a long written tradition have evolved a kind of language that is quite different from ordinary spoken language. Any language is characterized by a variety of styles appropriate to different uses, but a tradition of writing, when it is present, leads to a special style all its own. It is true that written language is no more homogeneous than spoken language; different kinds of writing are appropriate to different uses. And a particular sample of either spoken or written language may contain a mixture of spoken and written features. Nevertheless, for a language like English there are certain features which belong predominantly to writing. I have recently been looking at two rather extreme language types: the kind of English that is used in dinnertable conversations and the kind used in academic journals. The objective has been to isolate differences between these two styles as part of a larger goal of understanding many of the ways in which written language is different from spoken (see Chafe, in press, for a preliminary report).

For many years I have also been interested in Seneca, a language which has essentially no written tradition whatsoever. One might expect that such a language would lack the stylistic differentiation brought about by the long existence of writing in a language like English. In fact, however, there appear to be styles in Seneca which

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in various interesting ways parallel the spoken-written distinction
in English. I refer to the difference between colloquial, conver-
sational Seneca on the one hand, and on the other hand the kind of
Seneca that is sometimes called "oral literature". I want to suggest
that this etymologically peculiar term is in fact appropriate, to the
extent that oral literature exhibits some of the same features that
characterize written language in languages where writing has had a
significant influence. I will focus in this preliminary study on the
differences between colloquial Seneca and the kind that is used in cer-
tain ritual speeches, in particular the kind of speech that is called
the ganö:nyök, or Thanksgiving Address (Chafe 1961, Foster 1974). For
a different look at other, related aspects of ritual language see
DuBois (in press).

        I will suggest that written and ritual language have six traits
in common which set them apart from colloquial spoken language. First,
they tend to be more conservative, where colloquial language is more
innovative. Second, they tend to be more polished, where colloquial
language is rougher. Third, they tend to be more integrated, where
colloquial language is more fragmented. Fourth, they tend to be more
stylized and constrained, where colloquial language is freer. Fifth,
they tend to be more detached, where colloquial language is more in-
volved. Sixth and finally, they tend to be more authoritative in
their assertions, where colloquial language is more hesitant. I will
discuss each of these traits in turn, giving examples from spoken and
ritual Seneca where appropriate.

Conservatism

Colloquial spoken language is evanescent. It is produced and then is gone. We are more likely to remember the gist of a conversation than the particular words that were used. Only under peculiar circumstances would we memorize or record a conversation in writing. Even when it was a good one, we do not normally repeat a conversation over and over so that we can enjoy it anew each time. Both written and ritual language, on the other hand, have a kind of permanence. Written material can last indefinitely. Rituals also are performed again and again, often over many centuries or even millenia. In the ritual we are considering as an example, no two performances are identical in wording. Nevertheless, both performers and listeners believe that the same thing is being repeated each time, and there is a certain level of content and wording at which in fact there is identity. Associated with their relative permanence is the judgment that rituals are intrinsically valuable objects; their value is thought to transcend that of conversation or other everyday uses of language. Such value, of course, is the reason they are repeatedly performed.

One result of this permanence of written and ritual language is that they both tend to be the repositories of conservative lexicon and grammar. Colloquial language, not being pinned down either by writing or by frequent repetition of the same linguistic performance, is more of an arena for language change. Compare written English child, for example, with spoken English kid, or written must with spoken have to. It is well known that ritual language preserves archaisms, and that ordinary speakers of a language may even have lost the ability to understand various items that appear in rituals. Seneca examples range

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from words whose referents are no longer identifiable, like sga:né?neh, a kind of tree, to the incorporation of noun roots in ways that are no longer familiar to everyday speakers of the language: for example, o?gío?kdɛ̈? 'I finish the matter' (referring to the end of a ritual), not now something that is said in everyday speech. Innovation in colloquial Seneca remains to be systematically studied, but as one example I might cite the use of a new counting pattern, as illustrated by sɛ̈ niwáshɛ̈: sga:d 'thirty-one' in place of earlier sɛ̈ niwáshɛ̈: sgá:sgae? (literally 'thirty-eleven'). Both written language and ritual language thus appear to follow a tendency toward lexical and grammatical conservatism, while colloquial language tends to be the vehicle for innovation.

Polish

The relative permanence of written language and rituals allows them to be planned and polished in ways unavailable to fleeting conversations. Normal spoken language is full of false starts, repetitions, and afterthoughts, which in spontaneous spoken language are quite acceptable, and normally fail even to be noticed:

Cause .. um .. there were ... four fam .. four? Yeah four families.

Or from a Seneca conversation:

Ne?ho nö́: neh,
That's maybe,

sɛ̈ niwáshɛ̈:h,
thirty,

dekhni: nö: khoh,

and maybe two (i.e. thirty-two)

heyótkathwǚh,

miles,

niyo:we? nǚkhoh,

how far to there,

ohi:yo?,

(from) the Allegany Reservation,

nǚkhoh,

to there,

niyo:we?,

how far

ne ga:nǚwogǚ:h.

(to) Warren.

That is, "It's maybe thirty-two miles from the Allegany Reservation to
Warren." In contrast we find the polished language of English academic
prose:

Rules are seen as abstract representations of the generative
capacity of the language and do not necessarily pertain to ques-
tions about what people are actually doing.

or of a Seneca ritual:

Tgaye:i? wai hawe:?ǔh,

In fact he decided,

ne:? di neh,

that also

hǔ:ǔwe ǔyǒǔdza:de:g,

on the earth,

ne:? n ǔyot?eohdǔní:ag.

plants would be growing.

That is, "In fact he decided that plants would also be growing on the
earth." Both written language and ritual language thus appear to be
smoother, while colloquial language is full of rough edges.

Integration

Besides the absence of disfluencies from written language and
ritual, both show a higher degree of integration as compared with the
fragmentation of spoken language. Spontaneous spoken language is
characteristically produced in a series of spurts, or "idea units"
(Chafe 1980):

It was ... it .. had .. evidently ... been under snow,
and just recently melted off,
and the mosquitoes were ... incredible.
... So we also left.

Written language has a variety of devices for integrating more infor-
mation into idea units and sentences: devices such as nominalization,

attributive adjectives, and various means for embedding clauses within
other clauses. Note the characteristic use of multiple nominalizations
in the following example:

> One <u>tendency</u> is the <u>preference</u> of speakers for <u>referring</u> to
> entities by <u>using</u> words of an intermediate degree of <u>abstractness</u>.

The following example of spoken Seneca shows the fragmentation
typical of spoken language. Each line, or idea unit, stands more or
less independently:

> Da: ne:ʔ di neh,
> And so,

> ga:nʊ̆wʊ̆gʊ̆: gaya:sʊ̆h,
> it's called ga:nʊ̆wʊ̆gʊ̆:h.

> jʊ̆ʊ̆dzʉ́ʔsyʊ̆ʔ gʉ̆:s hadi:ya:s nónʉ̆hjih.
> joedzeʔsyoʔ they used to call it long ago.

> Ne:ʔ neʔho waʔagwanʊ̆dayʉ̆:ʔ.
> We camped there.

> Dedzá:ʊ̆gwa: nʊ̆ʔgʉ̆hʊ̆di wa:yanʊ̆geʔ.
> There are berries on both sides of the river.

In the following ritual example, on the other hand, there is a tight
dependence of the idea units on each other. To describe this depen-
dence in English terms, the second line explains the <u>it</u> in the first
line, the third and fourth lines give temporal modifications, the fifth
line explains the <u>we</u> of the second line, and the last line gives a

spatial modification. The information is coherently interdependent as
that in the spoken example above is not.

Da: ne:ʔ wai ne tgaye:iʔ,

And so in fact it's true:

Ʊgwajǘ:ʔdahgʊh,

we are using it,

haʔdewʊ̈:níshage:h,

every day,

haʔdéwahsʊ̈dage:h,

every night,

neʔho deyʊ̈gwadawʊ̈nye:h,

we who are moving about,

hʊ̈:ʊ̈we yʊ̈ʊ̈dzadeʔ.

where the earth is.

Seneca does not have the same kind of nominalization devices that
were illustrated in the written English example above. It does, how-
ever, have a particle ne which functions in part like the definite ar-
ticle in English, in part as a way of nominalizing a following con-
stituent; thus it integrates information into a larger structure as
English nominalization does. It is interesting that 69 examples of
ne were found in a thousand word sample of conversation, but 110
examples, almost twice as many, on one thousand words of ritual. In
the following ritual excerpt note that every idea unit except the last

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one contains a ne:

Ne:? wai ne tgaye:i?,

In fact it's true:

ne:? ne ĥyodehadŏní:ag,

the forests will be growing,

ne ĥyagoya?dagehashĥ́?gĕ:ŏg,

they will be a help,

ne ŏ:gweh,

(to) the people,

ne yŏĺĺdza?geh,

on the earth

o?jĎdawĕ:nye:?.

they move about.

Written and ritual language, then, both show devices for integrating
information into idea units and sentences through subordination,
nominalization, and the like, whereas colloquial spoken language is
more fragmented in its structure.

Stylization

Spoken and written language differ obviously in the fact that the
first is visual and the second auditory. These differences in com-
munication channel and sensory modality constrain the resulting product
in certain ways. For example, spoken language makes considerable use

of prosodic devices like intonation, pausing, and changes in voice quality which written language is hard put to capture effectively. On the other hand written language does well with punctuation, footnotes, tables, and diagrams, devices which are unavailable to spoken language. Differences in the medium cause differences in the product.

Spoken Seneca, of course, makes use of prosodic resources just as other languages do. Speakers vary their pitch, hesitate, laugh, and so on. Ritual Seneca of the kind I am discussing is constrained by a prosodic style which I have called "chanting" (Chafe 1961:147-148). This style consists of a series of short phrases, each ending in a rising intonation contour, at the end of which there is a final phrase with a falling pitch contour. Almost no intonational variety is possible. Occasionally a speaker lapses momentarily into a more varied intonation pattern, usually near the beginning or end of a ritual, but normally the chanting pattern prevents significant intonational elaboration. At the end of each paragraph-like section of the ritual there is a longer than normal pause before the next section begins. In one version of the ritual there is in fact a period of dancing at such points. It can be said, then, that chanting, like writing, flattens out the intonational possibilities which are available in colloquial speech, limiting these possibilities to a stylized marking of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Written language, interestingly enough, does something very similar with commas, periods, and paragraph indentations.

Spoken language normally entails direct contact of the speaker with the addressec. The context of the conversation is shared, the speaker can monitor the effect of what he or she is saying on the addressee, and the role of speaker can easily be exchanged. Writing, on the other hand, normally involves an isolation of the writer from the audience. What is written is going to be read later and elsewhere, and there is no ongoing monitoring or feedback during the writing process.

Although rituals are recited with an audience present, they involve a similar kind of isolation. In the Seneca ritual being discussed, the speaker stands at one end of the longhouse, sometimes with his eyes closed, and performs the ritual as a total monologue. It would be unthinkable for a member of the audience to interject a comment, except that each paragraph-like unit is answered by some of the audience with the exclamation nyoh, (like the amen in some Christian rituals). Like writing, therefore, the ritual performance lacks the interactive possibilities normally associated with spoken language. The result is that, whereas colloquial language exhibits various manifestations of speaker-audience involvement, both with the addressee and with the subject matter, written and ritual language show a corresponding detachment.

The involvement characteristic of colloquial Seneca is manifested especially in the use of particles with interactional functions. In a thousand words of colloquial text the word ë:h 'yes' occurred twelve times, while it was entirely absent from the ritual. Something similar is true of first and second person singular references. Words meaning

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I and you are frequent in conversation, but present in rituals only in introductory and closing remarks. Particles expressing a speaker's involvement with his subject matter include agwas 'really' and do:gɛ̈s 'for sure', which were present five and four times respectively in one thousand words of conversation, but were entirely absent from a corresponding sample of ritual. Involvement is also expressed by the contrastive particle nɛ̈: as in tshiseksaʔá: negɛ̈ʔ nɛ̈: ni:s 'you were a child' (rather than an adult). This particle occurred 39 times in a thousand words of conversations, only twice in a thousand words of ritual. If we assume that particles tend in general to express a speaker's involvement, then it is significant here that the thousand word sample of conversation included 60 different particles, whereas one thousand words of ritual showed only 27 different ones, less than half as many.

Seneca has an indefinite verb prefix translatable as 'one', as in ɛ̈jɓdawɛ̈:nye:ʔ 'one will move about'. This prefix is used to avoid reference to a specific agent, and is thus a manifestation of a speaker's detachment from specific participants in specific events. It is a way of avoiding involvement with the particular person who did something. Of interest, then, is the fact that this indefinite prefix occurs 36 times in one thousand words of ritual, and only twice in one thousand words of conversation.

In summary, the kind of speaker's involvement expressed by first and second person singular references and by many particles is conspicuously present in colloquial Seneca and conspicuously absent in ritual. The reverse holds for the kind of detachment expressed by the indefinite prefix; it is common in ritual, but not in conversation.

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Writers, and especially writers of academic prose, are likely to
be conscious of the fact that they are producing something for which
they will be held responsible. There is, as a consequence, a drive for
accuracy of statement which casual users of spoken language do not feel.
Although hedging takes place in both spoken and written English, spoken
hedges like "sort of" and "kind of" express a subjective evaluation of
how well what one is saying matches what one is thinking, whereas
written hedges like "virtually" and "normally" express more objective
judgments of probabilities and trends, perhaps even statistically
measured.

Spoken Seneca is full of evidential particles like:

gyǔ?ǔh	"it is said"
nǔ:h	"I guess"
a:yǔ:?	"it seems"
gi?shǔh	"maybe"
i:wi:h	"I think"
o:	"oh"
gǔ:ǔje?	"about"

Note, for example, the use of four of these particles in the following
spoken sentence:

O:, ne:? nǔ: neh, sga:sgae? gi?shǔ gǔ:ǔje?
tshiwagoshíya?gǔh.

Oh, I guess when I was about maybe eleven.

These particles occur hardly at all in ritual Seneca, which is instead

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dominated by particles expressing certainty:

    waih   "in fact"

    tgaye:i?   "it's true"

The following phrase is extremely common in the ritual being discussed:

    Da: ne:? wai ne tgaye:i?,

    And so in fact it's true,

These particles, in turn, are much less common in speaking. Thus, both written and ritual language appear to express a confidence in the truth of what is being said which contrasts with the more tentative tone of much of spoken language. We can say that rituals express beliefs about which the speaker is certain, whereas no such certainty is present in everyday conversations.

Conclusion

I have presented some evidence that ritual language, like written language and in contrast with colloquial language, is conservative, polished, integrated, stylized, detached, and authoritative. This study has been based so far on a fairly small sample of data, which is nevertheless, I think, typical of the styles in question. In the future I hope to be able to report more fully on the properties of a wider range of Seneca oral literature as well as a broader sample of Seneca conversation, and to be able to compare the results with an extensive study of spoken and written English which is now in progress.

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Jane Danielewicz for her collaboration in the
study of differences between spoken and written English, sponsored by
Grant NIE-G-80-0125 from the National Institute of Education, and to
Jack DuBois for his many relevant insights into the special properties
of ritual language.

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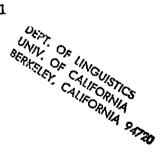nal Museum of Man, Mercury Series, Paper No. 20. Ottawa.

SURVEY REPORTS

1981

Report #1
Survey of California and Other Indian Languages

SURVEY REPORTS

1981

Reports from the Survey
of California and Other Indian Languages

Edited by Alice Schlichter, Wallace L. Chafe, and Leanne Hinton

Report #1

cover design (Santa Barbara Chumash rock painting) by Leanne Hinton

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