ORAL CULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY: THE CASE OF SPEECH PROCESSING

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Abstract

In the 20th Century modern scientific research into speech and spoken language was launched by the pioneering efforts of men like Gunnar Fant, Ken Stevens, Al Liberman, Frank Cooper, and others. As this research progressed it had gradually to shake off the straight-jacket of traditional grammatical-linguistic conceptions, and to develop entirely fresh views. This paper will spell out some of the conceptual differences and discuss their probable consequences for the future in some detail.

The term "oral culture" in the title of this paper refers to the culture of spoken language, as contrasted with written language.

Of these two phenomena, speech, or spoken language, isprimary both historically and conceptually. Since the implications hidden in the relationship between the two have kept me busy for a number of years in my job as responsible for the General Linguistics program at Uppsala university, I should like to take this opportunity to communicate some of my ideas on this rather fundamental matter.

WRITING

I think of the use of alphabetic script in Western writing systems as a technique applied in bringing an adequate writing tool (typically a "pencil") to work on some writing medium (typically a "piece of paper"), according to a code by which a mental representation of the sound of the speaker/writer's speech is interpreted as a linear string of grámmata, i.e. script signs. The encoding is made by the speaker/writer using her/his auditory sense and language competence, but without the aid of any external instruments besides the "pencil" and the "paper". The resulting text is to be readable by anyone mastering the same script code. This description seems to fit not only western, alphabetic writing systems but also others such as ancient and modern Chinese and Japanese scripts, ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, Maya hieroglyphics, and many others. Here I focus on western alphabetic scripts, since they have been the source from which modern linguistics has picked up most of its ideas.

THEORY

This writing technique, script included, is informed by a system of specifically construed theoretical concepts which, together, constitute the theory of the script in question. Generally, since mening is use, a theory acquires its sense/meaning from its concrete applications. The theory of writing is, of old, also called Grammar.
(from classical Greek grámma = script sign). In its modern version this theory has evolved into what is nowadays called Linguistic Theory.

A central point is that the vast majority of the most widely used grammatical-linguistic concepts of today are rooted in the gradual invention and practical employment of the writing technique. They are ad hoc conceptual constructions once worked out to facilitate the use of letters for purposes of linguistic communication.

I stress that grammatical-linguistic concepts such as the letter (phoneme), the word, the clause, the sentence, the paragraph, and so on are NOT "structures already present in speech" by the very "physical nature of speech". The belief that they are, may be termed realistic in the technical sense in which this term is used to denote the confusion of concepts with things. The bonus of my approach is that we are under no obligation to conceptualize speech in the grammatical-linguistic way. On the contrary, as I try to show, we would do better to shake off the conceptual burden of contemporary linguistic theory! We may find other ways – fresh ways - that suit our purposes better. Digital coding is an excellent example with an out-and-out nonlinguistic theory.

LETTERS

In other words. Any representation of speech should be evaluated with respect to its performance in its practical applications! That is the true meaning of the concept of "adequacy" in linguistic theory.

Let me illustrate this point with two examples, the letter and the word.

The original use of a letter in script, say the letter \( t \) could roughly be said to be this: In writing down a speech utterance, write the letter \( t \) whenever you hear the speech sound we call \( t \)!

In formulating this description for print in the proceedings of this conference I obviously couldn't have replaced the phrase "the speech sound we call \( t \)" by the audible sound itself, since that sound is not a visible script sign which can be fixed on the page, but something that can only be heard. Of course that is the whole point of alphabetic script – to replace audible speech with visible script. Understanding script theory is understanding this among many other things. The letters of the alphabet were once invented by Semitic peoples in the Middle East, and this invention was at the same time a construction of certain useful script concepts, e. g. those we associate with our most common speech sounds. This construction created an internal relation between the visual letter shapes and the corresponding auditory sound impressions; "internal" in the sense that we cannot know one, e. g. a sound, without at the same time knowing the other, i. e. the letter. Clearly this construction could have been done in many different ways, but the one that has survived is motivated, i. e. it passes the adequacy test mainly by its success in implementing conventional writing and reading. This, of course, does not guarantee that it is adequate also for the speech processing purposes of our own digital-electronic age. We of course also have scientific notations for speech sounds available in phonetics and phonology, and again the formal stipulations of how these notations are to be used bring about new internal sound-sign relations. But these notations are still not adequate for electronic speech processing.

I would like to say that the description I have just given of the use of the letter \( t \): "Write down \( t \) whenever you hear the sound \( t \)!” is typical of all
contemporary alphabetic signs, "Write down $p$ whenever you hear the sound $p$!", "Write down $k$ whenever you hear the sound $k$!", etc. - but that would obviously not be quite true. Capital letters have essentially the same uses as the corresponding lower case letters. But the difference in appearance is used for syntactic purposes and have no audible cues in the speech signal. Something similar may be said about script signs such as the space, the comma, the period, the exclamation and question marks, and some other signs as well. They are script concepts that we acquire in learning to play with these signs in writing practice. One might say that they are non-phonetic as against the phonetic letter uses such as that of the letter $t$ just mentioned.

Note that what I have just termed "script concepts" are things you do in writing. To have such a concept is to have the ability to do the relevant thing. For instance, having the concept of the letter $t$ is to be able to write down the letter $t$ under the appropriate auditory-phonetic circumstances.

Moreover, the use of the letter $t$ is not always elicited by the sound we call $t$. This letter may be written upon hearing other speech sounds also, as in the word nation, n-a-t-i-o-n, for instance. This is so in part for historical reasons, but also because in modern western script the letters are integral parts of lexical script words. Actually, in writing, speech is not coded primarily as a sequence of sounds associated to letters, but as a sequence of words, i.e. short sub-strings of letters forming characteristic visible units called Bouma shapes after the great Dutch psychologist of reading Herman Bouma. These shapes are visual units or "script Gestalts".

Before going into the matter of words we might note that a letter may have two or more phonetic uses, and that that which is commonly called a phoneme is usually one such use. A phoneme, as I understand it, and as usually talked about, is hence not necessarily anything mental but something thoroughly practical - a use of a letter in conventional writing. It is as misleading, as it is common to treat concepts as being mental images. Mental images may be helpful in guiding the application of a concept but the concept itself is not an image, but something more stable - a practical ability.

WORDS

Having at this point completed my account of what is involved in writing down the letter $t$, I now turn to the more adventurous task of explaining the writing of a word.

Erudite paleographers like Paul Saenger in his highly informative recent book Space Between Words (1) and Malcolm Parkes in his Pause and Effect (2) have shown in detail how the practice of dividing the string of letters into script words is the result of many centuries of experimentation starting relatively soon after the Phoenicians taught the Greeks to write, some six or seven centuries BC. The Greeks changed some of the Semitic consonant letters into vowel signs, a truly momentous step for Western Civilization, according to the American historian Eric Havelock(4). But they kept the Semitic practice of separating words by means of a special sign, the so-called interpunctum, a single dot. Soon the use of this sign was abandoned, however, and the Greeks started to employ so-called scriptura continua characterized by its paucity of punctuation - no word division, no sentence division, just a plain, long string of 'samecase' letters in all texts! This was taken over by the Romans, and was the normal form for manuscripts well into the early Middle Ages. Scriptura continua was usually read aloud since
silent reading made parsing, and grasping the
meaning of the text very difficult for the reader,
since it forced the eye to jump back and forth
over the line in whimsical saccades.

In the sixth Century AD the Roman grammarian
Priscian gives a definition of the word (Latin
dictio) as the smallest meaningful part of a
sentence (Latin oratio - in everyday Latin oratio
meant speech – to "parse" means originally to
detect the parts of speech. i.e. the words –
Priscian does not tell us which the words of Latin
were however!). This definition suggests that by
this time Latin scribes had started to practice
word division in preparing manuscripts, an
assumption which is born out by Saenger's
investigations. The conventions for what to
include between the spaces that mark out a word
was however a matter of experimentation for
several centuries. As anyone even superficially
familiar with modern acoustic phonetics will
know there are no obvious acoustic cues in the
acoustic speech signal to indicate any "natural"
cuts corresponding to the word divisions of
writing. The script units we call words have had
to be stipulated conventionally, and we learn all
words - all Bouma shapes along with learning to
write and read. And when writing was first
introduced into the various western so-called
"vulgar languages" (i.e. modern languages) in
the Renaissance and later the rules for word
separation, for the collection of letters into
individual words, had to be invented anew for
each new language.

As Paul Saenger shows the string of letters
making up a word normally fits into the foveal
field of vision comprising about a 4° angle, and
the next word or two on the line of writing are
simultaneously noted in the so-called parafoveal
(side vision) field of about a 15° angle. It is
factors like these that have dictated the way
words have been designed in our writing systems.
Why, for instance can "today" and "maybe" be
spelt as one word when "good morning" cannot?
And why is French "ça y est!" not one word, but
three? There are no "Bouma shapes" ready for our
ears to pick up in the speech signal, so the word
boundaries of writing must be stipulated ad hoc
by tradition and education.

In summary the grammatical-linguistic concept of
a word, though notorious in linguistics for its
elusiveness is obviously among our deepest and
oldest acquaintances in language. And we should
beware of assuming that the structures imposed
on speech in modern linguistics, e.g. morphemes,
roots, junctures, and much more of the kind,
though maybe linguistically motivated are any
less arbitrary acoustically than the traditional
ideas.

Since any representation of speech should be
evaluated with respect to its performance in its
intended practical applications, the conceptual
construction of the word has proved able to
increase the efficiency of mature readers' reading
by orders of magnitude in comparison with
reading scriptura continua.

It is worth noting, that the same type of mature
reader reaches an even higher efficiency in
reading Chinese script and Japanese Kan-ji.

A further advantage with standardized word
division is that it makes silent reading easy, so
easy in fact that practically any reader of modern
text reads almost everything silently. Nowadays
reading aloud well actually requires special
practice.

An idea I try to elaborate elsewhere (5) is that the
step from loud reading to silent reading as the
normal practice in the West has forced the loud
articulation of the text read to so to speak go
"underground". Reading has become a form of purely mental speech.

I believe that this fact carries a considerable historical responsibility for the contemporary mentalistic tendencies in linguistics. It would however lead too far to go into more detail with this matter here.

Let me repeat that any representation of speech should be evaluated with respect to its performance in its practical applications. Such an evaluation must give considerable praise to traditional alphabetic script. Our respect for its cultural prestige together with our tendency toward philosophical realism often tend to mislead us into taking for granted that the grammatical structures of linguistic theory are directly motivated by allegedly "corresponding structures" of the audible digital-acoustic speech signal. By the way, I invite all of you to listen carefully to the papers to be presented here to day, and to watch for confusions of the stuff of speech with the stuff of script! I believe you may detect many cases! Such confusions introduce metaphysics into speech research and actually flaws all attempts to measure the adequacy of the theory.

The considerable efforts that have been spent on finding the allegedly "acoustic invariants" presumed to somehow reside in the "physical matter" of speech sound have – it has to be admitted - largely failed, as could have been predicted from a consideration of the nature of the concepts that motivated the hypothesis of the physical existence of such "invariants". In all likelihood the motivating idea is the alphabetic concept of phoneme according to which a phoneme is a phonetic use of a letter, e. g. the use of the letter $t$ when one intends the sound we call $t$. This use of the letter is invariant in the sense that it is always the same in writing the sound we call $t$. But from this fact the physical-acoustic invariance of the sound is a non-sequitur, and in fact a highly unlikely hypothesis from a phonetician's point of view!

Such facts have however in no way prevented researchers from pushing the hypothesizing upward into metaphysical spheres using the language of biology, and in particular that of genetics. Thus it is hypothesized that phoneme invariants nevertheless have their whereabouts in the higher levels of the auditory nervous system!

Here we have a nice example of how a confusion of languages belonging to quite different levels of analysis, that of practical linguistics and that of modern science, may trap us into metaphysical confusion.

A similar story may be told about so-called coarticulation theory. And here again I must count my own old self among the worst sinners!(7)

For, traditionally coarticulation simply means that two consecutive phonemes in the chain of speech are produced in such a way by the speech organ that one phoneme colors the other, or so that they overlap to some degree. This is in any case how literate phoneticians have experienced the
phenomenon subjectively. My description implies that coarticulation presupposes phonemes. It is phonemes that are coarticulated. Without phonemes our theory has no object. Still it may have some kind of substance in the form of lots of carefully performed measurements that may one day become useful. The ensuing progress for speech processing endeavors such as text-to-speech, or speech-to-text systems is however probably rather slight.

FUTURE

If I were young today, I would concentrate my energies on contributing to the working out of methods for writing in audible sound directly based on the best contemporary digital-acoustic representation of spoken language, i.e. to develop a modern acoustic writing of speech for the computer. I wouldn't let abstruse linguistic theories rule over me too much, though I might not ignore them totally. In that way speech research could probably acquire a leading part in the spoken language race.

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