Spoken and Written English:  
The Case for Distinct Languages

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ABSTRACT: Five possible relationships among speech, writing, and language are evaluated. These relationships are: that writing is related to language through the medium of speech, that speech is based on writing, that spoken and written forms of a language are decodable one to the other, that spoken and written language are related only through the single language they represent but cannot be translated one to the other without recourse to the grammar of that language, and that speech and orthography represent distinct languages.

The conclusion reached is that the grammars underlying speech and writing are distinct — that they employ different conceptions of morphology and syntax — and thus may be said to represent different languages.

KEYWORDS: Language, literacy, grammar, orality, writing, speech.

Preliminaries: Definitions
This article will discuss some relationships among speech, language, and writing. It will be necessary, in order for this discussion to make any sense, to have a shared conception of the principal terms.

Language is here defined, initially, in the common-sense way that terms like English and French and Havasupai are normally used and understood. If asked, for example, "Do you know English?" a person could nod "Yes" even though physical limitations prevented the person from ever speaking or writing. In this sense Noam Chomsky and William F. Buckley and the most illiterate of illiterates all know and use English. What varies among the users of a language involves vocabulary, of course, and the user's consciousness of morphology and syntax — that is, the grammar.

A language user's grammar consists of a set of elements (morphemes) having external or internal reference and a set of rules (syntax) by means of which morphemes are concatenated into meaningful constructions. Morphemes having reference to things outside of the language itself are termed content forms or contentives (Hall, 1964, p. 15) or lexical morphemes (Sampson, 1985) or, in my own work (Scholtes, 1988; Scholes & Willis, 1991), extensional morphemes. Morphemes having reference to operations within the grammar of the language are variously

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known as *functors* or *grammatical morphemes* (Hall, 1964; Sampson, 1985) or, in my own writings, *intensional morphemes* (Scholes, 1988; Scholes & Willis, 1991).

The distinction between language and grammar, as well as the distinction between extensional and intensional morphology may be illustrated with the sentence, "John was found by the post office." To some users, this statement might be taken to mean that someone found John near the post office building, while other users may understand it to mean that people who work for the postal service found John. While both users demonstrate a knowledge of English (they share a language), the specific morphology and syntax they use in understanding this language are different (they show different grammars). For the user who interprets 'by' as 'near', the morpheme 'by' is extensional — it has a real-world (spatial) reference; for the other user the meaning of 'by' is a grammatical function (i.e., that the noun phrase following is the subject of the verb) and has no extra-linguistic reference.

Within linguistics the term *grammar* often refers both to someone's knowledge of language and to the linguist's description of that knowledge (Fromkin & Rodman, 1988, p. 13). In the present context, it will be used only in the sense of a language user's knowledge. This usage is due to the fact that claims will be made that the grammars of literate and nonliterate users of English are distinct while no claims will be made concerning the linguist's ability or motivation to describe both types of users with a single set of constructs and rules.

*Speech* is defined as the vocalization of language. As such, it is distinguished from non-linguistic vocalizations such as infants' babbling and cooing and adults' wheezes, grunts, and groans. Speech is typically described in linguistics in terms of *phonology* (phonemics and phonetics), but it must be kept in mind that a (phonetic or phonemical) transcription of speech is less a visual representation of the utterance than a form of writing in its use of discrete symbols.

*Writing* is defined as the graphic realization of language. As such, writing is distinguished from graphic representations (e.g., pictographs) which may be produced and understood independently of the knowledge of any particular language. Writing, as defined here, can only be produced and comprehended in terms of the language it represents.

**Overview**

There are five imaginable relationships among language, speech, and writing (as defined above). These conceptions, schematized in Figure 1, are as follows: a) writing is written speech and is related to language only through the intermediary of speech, b) speech is spoken writing and is related to language only through the intermediary of writing, c) writing and speech are variant ways of coding a single underlying