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PROFESSOR VACHEK (REVISITED) – SOME CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF SPEECH AND WRITING

Paul L. Garvin

When Vachek wrote his seminal papers on speech and writing, the ideas of Marshall McLuhan on the decreasing importance of writing in favor of orality were not yet as current as they have become since. In the spirit of Vachek's broad-based conception of these issues, it is worth reexamining McLuhan's points in the light of the use of computers in communication which point in the direction of the renewed importance of writing in today's technological society.

McLuhan's main point is, as is well known, that the electroacoustic media such as telephone, recording devices, radio and television, mainly the latter, have led to a decrease in the importance of writing by virtue of the increase of the use of oral communication through these media. One might even expect, he suggested, that these media might contribute to something like the "death" of written communication, since the massive transmission of oral messages now is possible and makes written communication unnecessary and uninteresting.

In this connection, it is worth recapitulating some of the major differences that have traditionally been considered important between speech and writing. One can then first look at what has happened to these as a result of the various communications technologies that were current in McLuhan's time. Second one can thereafter consider what new issues have been raised by the more recent emergence of computer technologies and widespread computer use and their effect upon communication.

The differences between speech and writing before either of these stages of technological developments were present can be summed up as follows:

SPEECH
spontaneous
interactional
ephemeral
localized

WRITING
edited
one-sided
lasting
transportable

Even in pre-technological days these oppositions are only valid in terms of the predominance of a characteristic, rather than its exclusive applicability to a given mode of language use. The following illustrations may serve to make this point.

Speech is clearly more likely to be spontaneous than edited, and equally clearly writing is more susceptible to editing than speech. At the same time, prepared speech such as formal oratory can certainly be heavily edited. And who doesn't have the memory of informal little notes being passed behind the teacher's or other supervisor's back. And can't these be as spontaneous as any orally conducted communication?

Similarly, in most situations speech is obviously more likely to be interactional than writing. But once again, prepared speech such as formal oratory can be used as an example of how oral communication can be one-sided and not truly interactional, since the sender and receiver roles are not truly interchangeable as they are in conversational interaction. Likewise, passing little notes may serve as a common example of written interaction in which the roles of sender and receiver are as readily interchangeable as in spoken conversation.

It is likewise obvious that speech is likely to be more ephemeral than lasting. Without technological assistance, speech can only be preserved through the human memory, and to make an utterance truly lasting under those circumstances writing has to be called upon. Equally obviously, writing seems to have been invented to make a permanent record possible, as is indicated by the fact that the earliest writing was done through inscriptions on materials that are indeed as permanent as can be. But once again think of the persistence of oral tradition where human memory is used to make the ephemeral repeatable and thus lasting. Think also of the very transitory nature of much of the written messages as more and more perishable materials become available. Now when written materials are thrown away, they disintegrate and no longer remain preserved for the benefit of future archeologists. Today, ordinary people's letters and restaurant checks are likely to wind up in wastebaskets and then landfills rather than to remain to be studied by future generations.

Finally, speech is usually localized in the sense that it is perceived only within earshot of the hearer. By comparison, writing is transportable from place to place even when no technological means are available. But even in pretechnological days, there was transmission of speech over a distance by shouting from one mountaintop to another, although there clearly was serious danger of distortion through mishearing. There could also be transmission by messengers, though here again there clearly could be danger of distortion, this time not only through mishearing but also through false memory. While writing is more suitable for transportation, not every piece of writing was deemed worth transporting any more than it was deemed worth preserving.

Nevertheless, the very clearcut advantages of writing of being more permanent and transportable than speech remained. In addition to its social exclusiveness and difficulty of acquisition in many periods and places, these advantages of writing contributed to its prestige.

In the above frame of reference, McLuhan's points can be interpreted as stating that the electroacoustic media have given speech added advantages of permanence and transportability that previously were almost exclusively associated with writing. Thus, permanence was insured by recording devices and transportability in increasing degrees by the telephone and the electronic mass media of radio and television. In his view, thanks to these technologies, speech was thus empowered to do everything that writing could do and more. More, since the psychological effect of the electronically transmitted spoken word is often vastly greater than that of writing coming from the same distance. Hence, one could expect that with time, writing would become superfluous.

In come computers. Unfortunately, with all their increasing sophistication, computers still have no strong speech recognition capabilities. Until they acquire them, communication with (and between) computers will continue to be through writing. Current technology allows input through keyboarding. Output, which earlier used to be limited to more cumbersome means such as line printers, is now done more conveniently through displays of written messages on screens on which they can also be combined with increasingly useful and pleasing graphics. Add to this recently facsimile transmission, which likewise is confined to writing, embellished as it may be by graphics. Thus, writing has suddenly reacquired its place in the sun: storage in computer memories (right now on all sorts of discs, who knows what media in the future?) enhances its permanence capabilities; networking, faxing, and who knows what other future developments enhance the transportability of writing.

Thus, Vachek, who was one of the few linguists to pay serious attention to issues of writing, was right in stressing its importance, and McLuhan turned out to be a false prophet.

Note: A detailed examination of these issues has been made in a recent doctoral dissertation by Deborah DuBartell presented to the Department of Linguistics of the State University of New York at Buffalo.

VACHEK STÁLE AKTUÁLNÍ – K SOUČASNÉ PROBLEMATICE MLUVENÉHO A PSANÉHO JAZYKA

Autor zvažuje ve světle Vachkových prací McLuhanovy téze o mluveném a psaném jazyce, zejména tvrzení, že následkem vývoje elektroakustických zapisovacích a sdělovacích prostředků psaný jazyk zastaral a může vymizet. Poukazuje na to, že současný vývoj počítačů, s nímž v své době ovšem McLuhan nemohl být obeznámen, naopak silně zvyšuje význam psaného jazyka a tím přispívá k vyvrácení McLuhanova tvrzení.