Towards a Harmonious Coexistence of Spoken and Written Language

H.B. Lee, CBE, Ph.D.
Prof. Emeritus of Phonetics and Linguistics, Seoul Nat. Univ.
hanslee@snu.ac.kr

Abstract
Spoken and written languages, despite their different nature and function in human society, have often been in conflicts rather than in harmony for centuries. Despite the incessant efforts made by phoneticians, linguists, speech therapists and more recently speech technologists to describe the interrelations and relative merits of written and spoken languages, the written language still enjoys its dominant status as a more authoritative and reliable means of communication in many countries. More serious and combined research efforts are required in future on the part of phoneticians, linguists, speech scientists and technologists, and speech therapists in order to bring about an ideal and balanced interchange and intercourse of spoken and written languages.

- Contents -
1. Introduction
2. Interrelation between Spoken and Written Language
3. Language-specific Features Widening the S/W Gap
4. Preference for Written Language
5. Awareness of the Importance of Spoken Language
6. Attempt Made to Bridge the S/W Gap
7. Conclusion
References

1. Introduction
Let me quote a quaint word to start with, “Ghoti” for the audience. Ghoti(=fish <gh=f(enough), o=t(women), ti=f (nation) meaning “fish” is an artificial English word which has been deliberately coined to dramatize the notorious inconsistency of the English spelling system. It symbolizes in an exaggerated manner the unfortunate relation between the spoken and written English. It also demonstrates to what extent the spoken language can be kept apart from the written language. Notice that this kind of gap between the spoken and written language varies greatly from one language to another. For instance, some languages including English (<lettuce>[letʃ], <Leicester>[lɛstə], <knight>[nɔtʃ], <cupboard>[ˈkʌbɔd]) and French (<point>[pwɛt], <paix>[pe], <billet>[bijɛ], <Je ne saï pa>[jɛpɑ]) exhibit wider gap between S/W than others, e.g. Kor.<sonamu>[sonamu] “pine tree”, <gangsan>[ɡat̚san] “river and mountain”. In some languages such as Spanish, Italian and Finnish the spoken/written(S/W for short) gap is known to be much narrower. On the other hand, Chinese is quite unique in that its S/W gap is extremely wide, i.e., in fact the widest possible since its ideographic writing system hardly shows any systematic information about the actual pronunciation of Chinese characters. Japanese is almost as complicated as Chinese since it has incorporated Chinese characters into its writing system in addition to the Kana syllabary.

2. Interrelation between Spoken and Written Language
Spoken language has a history much longer than written language in any human society, the former dating from time immemorial while the latter having a relatively short history. Even today, we come across many languages throughout the world that are spoken but not written. For instance, Lahu is basically a spoken language of a hill tribe people living in northern Thailand, China and Myanmar, which has no proper writing system of its own except for some Romanization systems devised by western missionaries for some Christianized Lahu people as well as a special Lahu writing system that I have designed on the basis of the International Korean Phonetic Alphabet. Thus, for most Lahu people spoken Lahu is still the only means of communication.

The fundamental differences between spoken and written languages may be tabulated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written</th>
<th>Spoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Static</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit</td>
<td>Segmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>Lasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen in the tabulation above the main difference between spoken and written language lies in the type of media used, i.e., visible (eye) and audible (ear), and all other attributes such as abstract/concrete, still/living, segmental/segmental+prosodic, lasting/ instantaneous, conservative/changeable are all derivable from the basic medium of language.

It is also clear from this that the written language is a relatively simple, fossilized and mute system of communication whereas the spoken language is a complicated, versatile and audible and lively system. All in all, one might conclude that the written language is an incomplete and simple means of communication compared to the spoken language, which is complete and yet complicated.

The incomplete and abstract nature of the written language may be demonstrated by a concrete sentence. A Korean sentence <매일> “eat”, which consists of <매> “to eat” + <일> “sentence final verbal ending” can be a statement, “I’ve eaten”, a question, “Have you eaten?” or a command, “You eat!” when spoken with a relevant intonational tune. However, the same sentence is simply ambiguous in the written form as to the grammatical mood.

3. Language-Specific Features Widening the S/W Gap

As has been stated above, some languages reveal much wider gap than others between the spoken and written forms. This has much to do with various features of individual languages, some of which can be enumerated below:

1) Writing system - Alphabetic/Syllabic/Idiographic: In general, the S/W gap is narrower in languages using an alphabetic writing system (Spanish, Italian, Korean, etc.) than those using a syllabary (Japanese, etc.) and an ideographic system (Chinese, etc.), the latter revealing the widest gap as in Chinese. However, unless the “one letter for one sound” principle applies, even the alphabetic system does not necessarily guarantee a good W/S fit. English is a case in point where a letter may represent many different sounds, i.e., <cat> [kæt], <calm> [kæm], <call> [kɔːl], etc., and at the same time one and the same sound [i] is represented by different letters or combinations of letters, e.g., seat, see, leave, key, etc.

2) Elision and Contraction: Elision and contraction phenomena tend to widen the S/W gap, e.g., Eng. <listen> [lisɪn], <postman> [pəʊstmən].

3) Assimilation phenomenon: Assimilated word forms that are different from the base forms are bound to widen the S/W gap, e.g., Kor. <신聞> [simmun] “newspaper”, <분리> [bunri] “separation”, Eng. <seat belt> [seatbəlt], <good people> [gʊdpəpl].

4) Prosodic features: In general, the prosodic features of stress, pitch, duration, rhythm, and intonation are seldom represented in the written language. Therefore, the more complicated the prosodic systems of stress, pitch, duration, rhythm, and intonation in a language, the wider the S/W gap tends to become. For instance, the English word “democratization” [dɪˌmɒkɹəˈtɪzaʃən] pronounced with two stresses reveals wider S/W gap in English than in French where the same word “democratie” [demɔkrasj] is spoken with even stress except the last syllable and therefore displays a much better S/W fit.

5) Word form variation: Word form variation or sandhi in many languages can be an important factor responsible for widening the S/W gap: e.g. strong and weak forms in English, as in <can> [kæn], <should have> [ʃʊd hæv], <French bon> [bɔ̃], <bon air> [bɔ̃ɛʁ]. As in Sanskrit, Korean is full of examples of word or morphemic form variations as conditioned by various factors, e.g., <gwami> [ɡwʌmɪ] “control”, <aggogyo> [dʒaŋˈko], “composition”, <gugryeog> [ɡuˌɾiŋɡ] “national power”, <koch> [ko] “flower”, <kojachman> “flower only”, <kocheuro> [koʃuɾo] “with flower”.

6) Tonal Sandhi: In tone languages some tones undergo sandhi phenomenon just like words or morphemes do as described above. For instance, when two third tones come together in Chinese the first third tone is realized as a second tone, e.g., <ni hao> [niˈhao] “Hello!”

4. Preference for Written Language

And yet we have been accustomed to take the written language as a means of communication much more important, reliable and more often than not, authoritative than the spoken counterpart. I think this is almost a universal and ubiquitous phenomenon, regardless of time and space. Why is it so? Is it because we are more susceptible to visible signs and letters than auditory signals and speech sounds? It might be that visible signs take their place in our brain and are stored there much more easily and efficiently compared to auditory signals which are generally short-lived and ephemeral, dying away right after they have been produced.

Written documents are therefore considered to be more important and credible than the corresponding spoken versions. Naturally any civilized modern society can not do away with written documents of one kind or another. And contracts of all kinds are not normally valid or honored unless they are in the form of written documents.
Spoken language is discriminated against even in courts. While written documents, hand written or typed and duly signed or sealed are highly respected as a reliable piece of evidence in courts of justice, recorded speech material is only rarely accepted, at any rate with some reservation.

Sometimes an undue preference is given for one particular type of writing system over another. For instance, Japanese immigration officers at the airports usually refuse to admit travelers from Korea and other Asian countries unless they write their names in Chinese characters in addition to the Roman alphabet in the entry form. Notice that nowadays many Koreans no longer write their names in Chinese characters.

5. Awareness of the Importance of Spoken Language

After having been preoccupied with the importance of the written language for thousands of years, it has taken quite some time for us to realize the importance of the spoken language.

1) Ancient Indian Linguists: Perhaps the earliest recognition of the tremendous value of the spoken Sanskrit was made by ancient Indian linguists, who carried out a phonetic and linguistic analysis with rigour and accuracy, largely for religious reasons, i.e., to keep intact the original pronunciation of the Vedic scriptures. In particular, Panini is known to have carried out in-depth phonetic and morphological analysis of Sanskrit. The high standard of the Indian linguistic scholarship has not only made invaluable contribution to phonological studies in China and eventually to Korean phonetics and phonology but also highlighted the importance of the spoken Sanskrit.

2) Comparative philologists: It was mainly comparative philologists in Europe from the 19th century onwards who realized the need to operate with phonetic entities, rather than orthographic letters, in comparative studies of genetically related languages, i.e., Germanic or Romance languages. Sound changes, phonetic laws, Grimm's Law, etc. are the terms used in historico-comparative linguistics to refer exclusively to the spoken forms of languages.

3) King Sejong of Korea: King Sejong of Korea, an eminent phonetician and linguist, who invented the organic(phonetic) alphabet of 28 letters for the Korean language in 1443 on the basis of articulatory and auditory phonetic theories clearly had a good notion of the relation of the spoken and written language. The king demonstrated his preference for an alphabetic writing system for Korean when he stated that "Korean and Chinese being different from each other, Koreans can not express their thoughts adequately in Chinese characters; therefore I have devised an alphabet suitable for Korean people so that they can learn and use it with ease in every day life".

4) Henry Sweet: Henry Sweet, the undisputed pioneer and founder of modern phonetics, expounded the importance of phonetics and spoken language as follows (The Sounds of English, 1908): “Phonetics alone can breathe life into the dead mass of letters which constitute a written language; it alone can bring the rustic dialogues of our novels before every intelligent reader as living realities,"

Sweet's statement draws a realistic picture of the two different types of languages, spoken and written as well as the interrelation between them when he describes the written language as "dead mass of letters" (= fossilized skeleton) and spoken language as a "living reality into which life has been breathed" (= living body). This is a most appropriate account for the inevitable difference between the two forms of languages. As a result of life being breathed into, the living language is fully equipped with lively segmental elements such as vowels and consonants as well as suprasegmental features like stress, duration, pitch, and ultimately rhythm and intonation, which are simply non-existent in the written form of language.

5) Speech Science and Technology: In recent years following the remarkable advances in speech science and technology, the importance of spoken language has once again been brought into focus. In research areas such as speech synthesis and recognition and the text-to-speech conversion the spoken language has a key role to play.

6. Attempts Made to Bridge the S/W Gap

Despite the overall dominance of the written language over the spoken language in the course of human history a number of serious attempts have been made by scholars working in the various fields to highlight the important functions and merits of the spoken language and to eliminate the S/W gap.

1) Creation and Use of Phonetic Alphabet: Phonetic alphabets such as IPA or International Korean Phonetic Alphabet have been designed by phoneticians and linguists to represent accurately phonetic entities, quite distinct from orthographic letters or graphemes. Similarly, Sweet, Bell, Jespersen, Pike, and others who have devised phonetics alphabets of one kind or another were all leading forerunners in this direction. With the help of phonetic symbols we can represent the spoken language clearly and unambiguously.

2) Phonetic Text: Using phonetic alphabet, phonetic texts have been compiled mainly in the western world, specially in European countries as an indispensable aid for foreign language learners who wish to acquire good pronunciation. As the phonetic text shows details of the spoken language in the form of phonetic transcription, it is especially useful for learners of a language like English or French in which the W/S gap is wide.
3) Spelling Reform: The aim of spelling reform is to eliminate the gap between the spoken and written language. Notable were the English spelling reform movement that was attempted in England. Unfortunately their efforts in this direction turned out to be unsuccessful in Britain. Ironically, however, some of their efforts are positively reflected in the United States; e.g. center/centre, color/colour, labor/labour. Similar attempts were made by Korean linguists under the auspices of the Korean Ministry of Education in the 1970-80s to improve the earlier orthography which was devised in 1930s. As a result the current (revised) Korean spelling system reflects the spoken Korean better than the earlier one.

4) Adoption of Alphabetic Writing system: In an attempt to facilitate the intercourse of spoken and written language Vietnam has discarded Chinese characters and adopted instead the Roman alphabet-based writing system which was devised by Christian missionaries. The same is true of Turkey.

5) Devising a New Writing System: It is worthwhile to devise a new alphabet for the languages without any writing system of their own. In doing so care should be taken to make sure that such a newly devised writing system is an alphabetic type so that it can reflect the spoken language as closely as possible. As mentioned earlier, the Korean-based Lahu alphabet has been designed by the author in 1996 to represent the spoken Lahu as faithfully as possible.

6) Compilation of Pronouncing Dictionary: Perhaps the best way of reflecting the actual pronunciation of the spoken language is to use pronouncing dictionaries which give detailed information about segmental as well as suprasegmental features. Many pronouncing dictionaries have already been published in western world and elsewhere, e.g. English Pronouncing Dictionary (D. Jones), Standard Korean Pronouncing Dictionary(HB Lee).

7) Speech Synthesis: Speech synthesis is basically a scientific effort made by speech technologists to breathe life, in Henry Sweet's term, into the written language consisting of dead mass of letters with a view to render the synthesized speech to sound as natural as the real speech.

7. Conclusion

Like two sides of a coin, spoken and written languages, despite their inherent differences, have been in conflicts and in harmony from time to time. More often than not, however, especially in the past, written language has enjoyed its dominant status as a more reliable and authoritative means of communication in comparison to spoken language.

Attempts have already been made by phoneticians and linguists in the east and west to disclose and expound the importance of spoken language and its function in human society. More serious efforts are required in future on the part of phoneticians, linguists, speech scientists, technologists and speech therapists in order to bring about an ideal and balanced intercourse of written and spoken languages.

References