

Signaling Meaning through Punctuation in Writing: Children Transitioning from Oral to Written Argumentation

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ABSTRACT

Researchers interested in the development of writing have looked to speech as central to writing development. However, there are differing opinions about how speech relates to or enters into writing. Bloomfield (1933) characterized writing as speech ‘writ’ down while other linguists have taken a more cautious position noting that speech and writing are quite different forms of communication (Chafe & Danielewicz, 1978) and meaning systems (Halliday, 1987). Biber (1986), however, found with adults, there was no single, absolute difference; rather there are a number of different dimensions of variation, with particular types of speech and writing similar or different, depending upon the dimension.

The present study examined how children translate speaking into writing during expressions of persuasion. This is a complex activity because an audience is not present when writing, unlike talking. Further, written language is a symbolic

expression which incompletely represents sound, gestures, body language—rather often signals meaning through punctuation. We studied oral and written argumentation, recognized by researchers as a complex form of syntactic construction with cause-effect structures. Seven case subjects were three to thirteen years of age, at different stages of language development.

We were specifically interested in a) the subject’s oral expression, use of prosodic features of oral language—pauses, pitch, intonation, and stress words—and how they were translated into writing through use of punctuation—commas, signs of exclamation, period use—as part of argumentation (Cordiero, 1988; Horowitz, 2007). Undergraduates preparing to be teachers, enrolled in a child/adolescent based writing development course, asked a subject to persuade mom or dad to take them to Disney World, to participate in a summer camp, to buy new clothes, favorite video,

or water slide. The speech was audio-taped and/or video-taped, followed by the writing, with the oral and written transcribed.

Using a scoring system, we recorded in the oral modality a) use of prosodic features, b) use of vocalizations, such as whining, begs, c) paralinguistic features, such as head tilts, body language, facial expressions, puppy-like eyes, and in the written modality a) use of punctuation, b) sentence structures, c) sentence length, d) genres of writing. Findings: a) There was considerable variation in persuasion in

speaking and writing, with older students more able to create complex cause-effect, b) Individual differences were found in personality expression in speaking, with limited punctuation, most not accurate. d) With age, children's writings become more elaborated, adapted to target audience. Teachers and parents can capitalize on this information by having children speak their ideas before they write, incorporate spoken strategies, where appropriate, into writing, develop use of punctuation signals for the reader.

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