Refining Stylistic Discourse Categories

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In a stone-age introduction to stylistics (Crystal & Davy, 1969: 68ff.), we find a distinction drawn between two categories of discourse: *medium* and *participation*. Under the former heading are grouped features distinctive of speech vs. writing; under the latter heading, features distinctive of monologue vs. dialogue. The authors devote most of their discussion at this point to the general properties of these two categories, then add two paragraphs introducing a complication:

> The categories of medium and participation may also function in a 'removed' or 'explanatory' way . . . [that is,] we are trying to explain certain features of a variety which would fall as a general rule within one kind of discourse by reference to features which would normally be expected to occur only in another.

They are referring to a concept of *complex medium*, introduced to account for 'language which involves a switch (eg language which is spoken to be written, as in dictation, or language written to be spoken, as in news broadcasting)', and also of *complex participation*, needed for such cases as 'the presence of dialogue features in an utterance produced by only one person . . . or for the tendency for monologue to be introduced into a conversation, as when someone tells a joke'.

The authors add, somewhat disingenuously:

> Further sub-classification of complex medium [and participation] is theoretically possible . . . , but it would seem wise not to introduce further complications until the initial distinction has been tested as fully as possible.

Authors tend to say this kind of thing when their book is getting uncomfortably long or their publisher's deadline is dangerously near. They forget about them, once the book is out, and only a really special event, such as a Magnusfest, will force them to live up to their responsibilities[1]. It can take 25 years.

The intellectual source of these distinctions is the Survey of English Usage, which in its classification of textual samples made the speech/writing division fundamental. However, as can be seen from Figure 1 (from Svartvik, 1990: 13), an undesirable asymmetry creeps into the next stages of classification. The written node is subclassified in terms of further categories of medium, whereas the spoken node is subclassified into further categories of participation; and neither direction of thinking is followed through across the diagram in a systematic way. The question naturally arises: what kinds of stylistically interesting situations might come to light should further logical possibilities be explored under each of these headings?

Complex Medium

The distinction between the medium of speech and the medium of writing at first sight seems clear-cut: either things are written or they are spoken. In practice, the situation is considerably more complex. When we choose to use either one of these mediums, the reason for our choice may require us to bear in mind the existence of the other, and that then influences the nature of the language we use. Figure 2 summarizes the chief alternatives which are likely to produce distinctive styles of spoken or written English, and the text illustrates some typical situations under each heading.

Speech

If we choose to speak, we may intend our utterance to be heard immediately. This is the normal state of affairs. But there are several interesting alternatives.

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[1]This paper is a revised and expanded version of a lecture given to a conference which Magnus Ljung organized at the University of Stockholm in 1992.
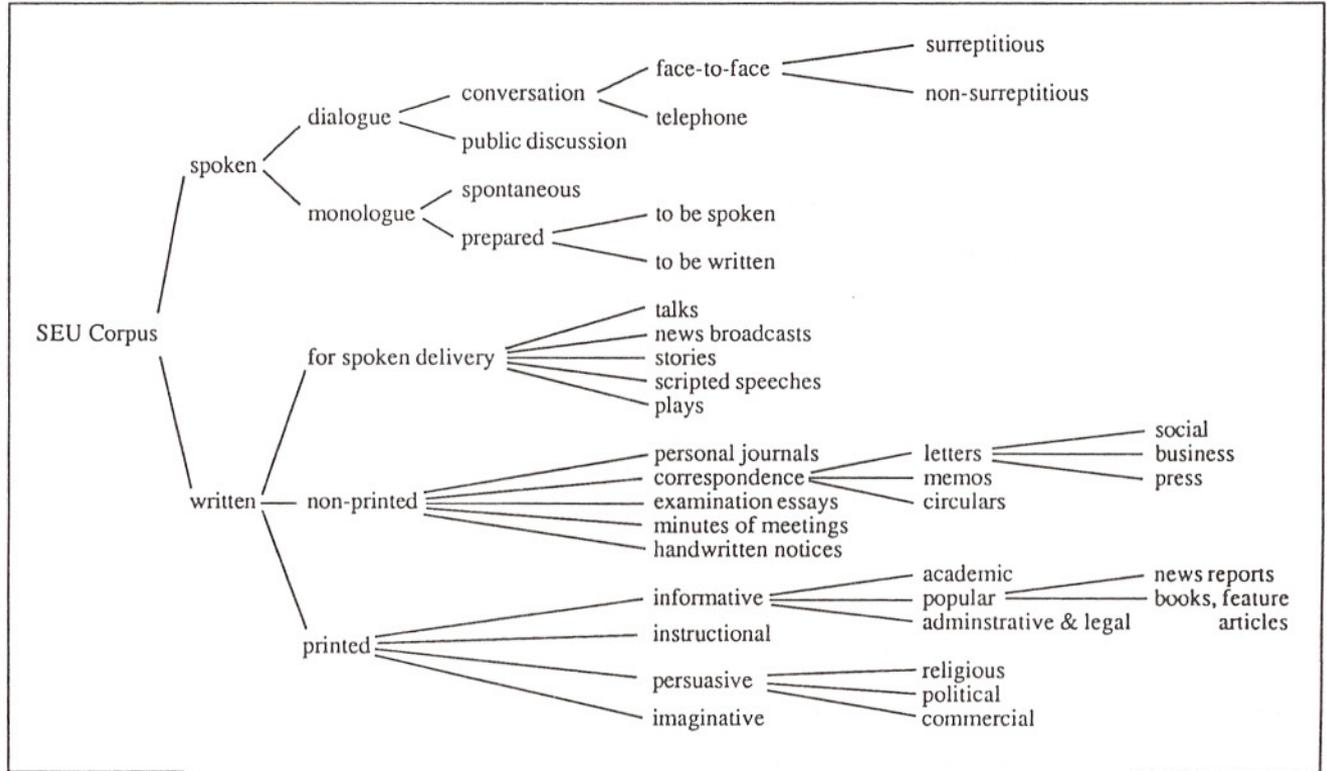
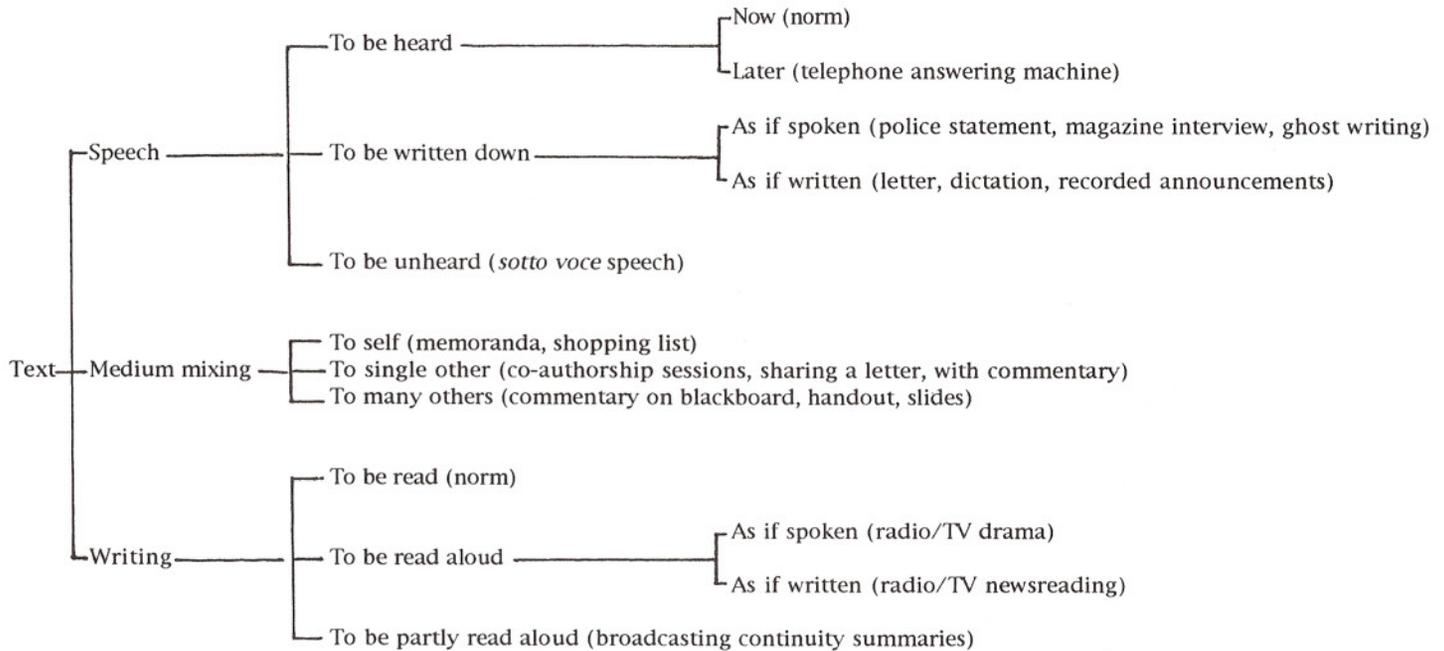Figure 1 Classification of texts in the Survey of English Usage.

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                                                    ┌─ Now (norm)
                          ┌─ To be heard ───────────┤
                          │                         └─ Later (telephone answering machine)
                          │
                          │                         ┌─ As if spoken (police statement, magazine interview, ghost writing)
          ┌─ Speech ──────┼─ To be written down ────┤
          │               │                         └─ As if written (letter, dictation, recorded announcements)
          │               │
          │               └─ To be unheard (sotto voce speech)
          │
          │                  ┌─ To self (memoranda, shopping list)
  Text ───┼─ Medium mixing ──┼─ To single other (co-authorship sessions, sharing a letter, with commentary)
          │                  └─ To many others (commentary on blackboard, handout, slides)
          │
          │                  ┌─ To be read (norm)
          │                  │
          │                  │                       ┌─ As if spoken (radio/TV drama)
          └─ Writing ────────┼─ To be read aloud ────┤
                             │                       └─ As if written (radio/TV newsreading)
                             │
                             └─ To be partly read aloud (broadcasting continuity summaries)
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Figure 2 Classification of complex medium texts.

• We may intend our utterance to be heard at a later point in time, as when we use a telephone answering machine.

• We may intend that what we say should *not* be heard, as when we speak *sotto voce* ('under our breath'). There are of course two further options here: the genuine *sotto voce*, which our listener does not hear, but which nonetheless makes us feel better for having said it; and the pseudo *sotto voce*, which we intend our listener to hear (usually for jocular purposes). Unintentionally overheard *sotto voce* can lead to trouble for the speaker, though this depends on non-linguistic factors (such as the relative physical build of speaker and listener).

• We may intend our utterance to be written down. If so, there are two further possibilities: we may leave the task of representing what we say to the listener, thus speaking in a relatively 'natural' way (as in some magazine interviews or police statements); or we may speak 'carefully', instructing the writer to ignore non-fluencies and errors (as in letter dictation).

Writing

If we choose to write, we normally intend that what we have written should be read; and the norm, at least since late classical times, has been for the recipient to read silently. Here too there are several alternatives.

• We may choose to write with the intention that what we have written should be read aloud. If so, we must make a further choice. We may write in such a way that our end-product, when read aloud, will sound like written language. It will be relatively formal and controlled. Those who prepare the text for radio news-readers fall into this category. Alternatively, we may write in such a way that the end-product will not sound scripted, as those do who write material for radio and television drama. The latter are not always successful, of course.

• We may choose to write with the intention that only *some* of what we have written should be read aloud, the rest being ignored. An example of this rather unusual situation can be found in a radio channel's continuity studio, where information of potential interest to the listener (e.g. about the weather, traffic delays) is continually coming in on a television screen or being passed to the presenter in note form. The presenter selects what there is time to incorporate into the running order of the programme. The material arrives in a variety of styles, often highly elliptical, reflecting the ongoing rush of the live broadcast situation.

Mixing

There remain a few situations where speaking and writing are mutually dependent: the language used is partly made up of speaking/listening activities and partly of reading/writing activities, in proportions that are sometimes difficult to disentangle. There are three chief possibilities, depending on the nature of the addressee.

• We may address ourselves in this mixed way, as when we compile a shopping list simultaneously questioning ourselves about what we want while writing down some of what we say.
• We may address a single listener, as when people work together in a co-authorship situation, jointly pouring over a text (an academic paper, a sitcom script) and each contributing suggestions to it.
• We may address a group of listeners, as when a teacher is using the blackboard, keeping up a running commentary to a class while doing so.

In such cases, an audio recording would tell only half the story, as would a photograph of the written work. Both mediums jointly work together to produce a successful use of language.

Complex Participation

A factor which fundamentally influences the linguistic character of a use of language is the number of participants involved in the activity. Theoretically, the distinction is clear-cut: there is *monologue*, in which only one person is involved in the linguistic act, and there is *dialogue*, in which (typically) two people are involved. We would also expect there to be a close correspondence with the two categories of medium: monologue is associated with the activities of writing and reading, and dialogue with speaking and listening. However, there are several cases where the distinctions become blurred or overlap, and it is these which provide some of the most interesting examples of the way we use language. They are summarized in Figure 3.

We can see how some of these cases arise by paying careful attention to definition. Monologue does not mean that a person is alone, as is typical of most authorial writing –the 'lonely profession', as it has been called. It refers rather to an activity in which the language producer does not expect a response, even though an audience may be present (and even
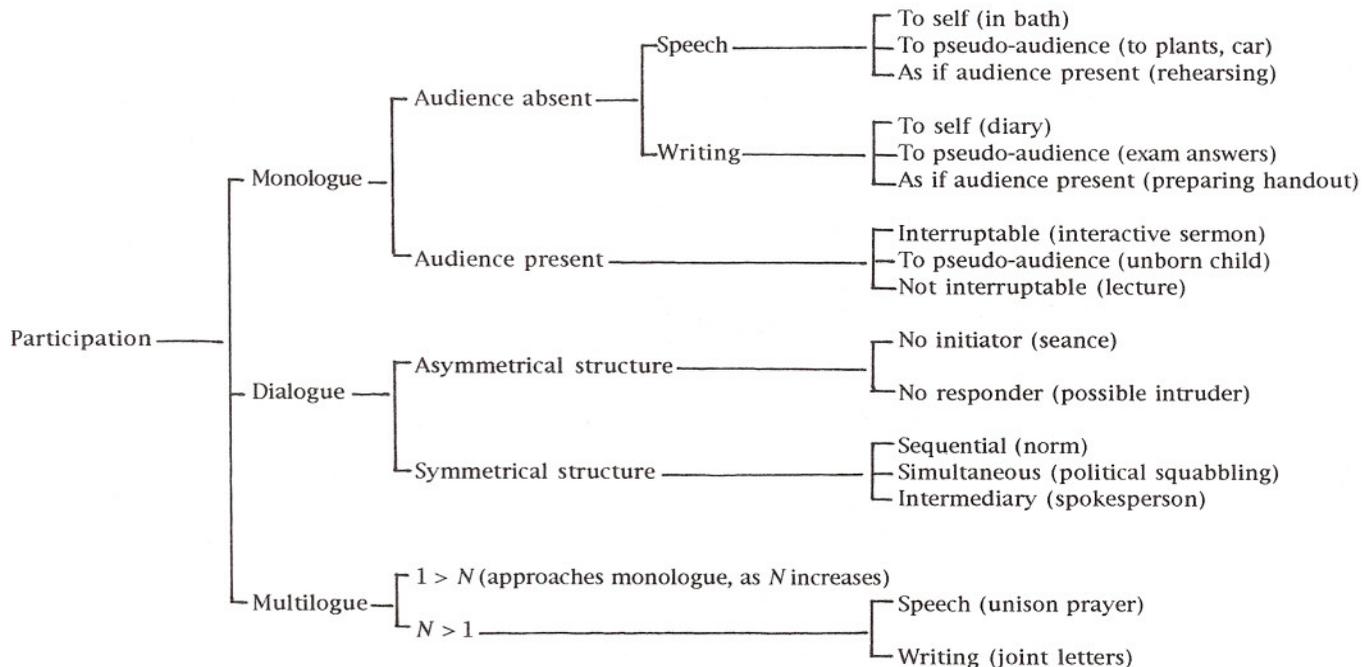
Participation

Monologue
- Audience absent
  - Speech
    - To self (in bath)
    - To pseudo-audience (to plants, car)
    - As if audience present (rehearsing)
  - Writing
    - To self (diary)
    - To pseudo-audience (exam answers)
    - As if audience present (preparing handout)
- Audience present
  - Interruptable (interactive sermon)
  - To pseudo-audience (unborn child)
  - Not interruptable (lecture)

Dialogue
- Asymmetrical structure
  - No initiator (seance)
  - No responder (possible intruder)
- Symmetrical structure
  - Sequential (norm)
  - Simultaneous (political squabbling)
  - Intermediary (spokesperson)

Multilogue
- $1 > N$ (approaches monologue, as N increases)
- $N > 1$
  - Speech (unison prayer)
  - Writing (joint letters)

Figure 3 Classification of complex participation texts.

though that audience may, from time to time, respond, as in the heckling which can accompany a political speech). In a monologue, the language is conceived as a self-contained presentation. By contrast, it is of the essence of dialogue that the participants expect each other to respond, and it contains many linguistic features which enable this to happen (most obviously, question forms). The interesting cases, accordingly, are those where the situation imposes special demands or constraints upon the speaker/writer, and interferes with the normal expectations of response.

Monologue variations

There are two possible situations in which someone may choose to engage in a monologue, whether spoken or written: there may be an audience present, or there may be no audience. In each case there are several interesting variations which lead to linguistically distinctive texts.

Audience present. With an audience present, the likelihood is that the medium will be speech, and interruptability provides an interesting basis for classification. Many spoken monologues presented to an audience are in principle uninterruptable (other than by non-linguistic responses, such as applause). Examples include a very formal speech, a lecture, and a sermon (in conservative religious traditions). On the other hand, there are several such situations which do permit interruption. The preachers facing many US black congregations are reinforced in their rhetoric by responses from their listeners, and often adopt a questioning style in order to elicit them. Political speeches, likewise, regularly play to the audience in this way.

An interesting category is the case of an audience which is present but in no position to respond (a 'pseudo-audience'). Examples of these situations include the dentist who carries on a conversation (even including questions!) while the listener's mouth is full of dental equipment, and the adult talking to a prelinguistic infant (or the mother talking to the baby in her womb). It is a moot point whether such events are best described as monologue or dialogue.

Audience absent. Leaving aside the case of literary expression, which can be defended as either monologue or dialogue, the notion that there could be monologue without an audience present at first seems somewhat unusual. Why should we say anything at all, if there is no one

to hear what we say? Why write anything, if there is no one there to read it? Both speech and writing, however, provide interesting cases where monologic activities do take place.

• *Speech activities*. There is little scientific data on the point, but evidently people do speak to themselves. The author has it on good authority that academics have been known to talk through solutions to their problems while alone (e.g. in the bath). There is also the common case of another kind of pseudo-audience –this time, where no human being is present– though it is debatable whether such uses might not better be called 'pseudo-dialogues'. There are, for example, people who talk to plants (and who are ready to give reasons for doing so). There are also people who talk to their car –often to condemn it for malfunctioning. Indeed, virtually any object can be addressed as if it were a person. 'Aren't you nice?', someone in a department store was overheard to say to a dress. (Whether we include animals within this category, or in the same category as the infants mentioned above, presents a further topic for debate.)

• *Writing activities*. Here too we have the unusual possibility of addressing ourselves. The diary is the classic instance. Other examples include making notes while preparing a talk, and note-taking while listening to a talk being given by someone else. That notes are written for the benefit only of the note-taker is evident if ever we try to use another person's material –a situation which will be familiar to any student who has missed a class and tried to catch up in this way. The note-taker's selection of information will have been made with reference to what the writer already knows, and this, along with the elliptical style that comes with writing under a time constraint, limits the possibilities of shared coherence.

Pseudo-audiences for monologic writing activities are also rather unusual. Written examination answers are probably the clearest instances. There has been a dialogue in one direction (the examiner has asked the student a question), but the reply is a monologue (for the student has no expectation of a response –except indirectly, in the form of a grade). Some party-games also provide pseudo-audiences for written language. In one such game, participants each write a sentence about someone else in the room and drop their contributions (anonymously) into a hat. The sentences are then pulled out randomly in pairs and placed in a sequence. In a children's party, the enjoyment comes from the juxtaposition of

incongruous activities (such as *Michael has got a new rabbit -Jane's feeling hungry*). In adult parties, rather more risqué incongruities can transpire.

Lastly, there are cases where we can write *as if* an audience is present, because we know that at a later stage one will be. Activities here include preparing a handout for a talk, writing an essay for a tutor, or indexing a book. Indexing has sometimes been described as a task where the compiler is trying to anticipate every possible query about content which future readers of the book might have. Indexers are in effect trying to provide answers to a host of unasked questions –an interesting reversal of communicative priorities. They therefore need to work as if their audience is present –though, without knowing who this audience will be, and without receiving any feedback as to whether their judgments have been successful, the task is a difficult one, requiring exceptional communicative commitment.

Dialogue variations

One way of classifying dialogues is to examine their symmetry –to see whether the participants are co-equally involved. There may also be variation in the timing of the language contributions relative to each other. The norm is for there to be two participants, who speak in sequence (but with a certain amount of expected overlapping). However, several types of dialogic situation depart from this norm in interesting ways.

• *Symmetrical dialogue.* It is possible for people to use language simultaneously, giving the impression of dialogue, but probably with little meeting of minds. If two groups of protesters, both carrying placards expressing their views, were to confront each other, the juxtaposition of written texts would produce a kind of dialogue, but one in which all "utterances" were on display at the same time.

In speech, any simultaneity is likely to be unintelligible –but this does not stop it happening, as is regularly heard in public political confrontations. Dinner parties also bring up some interesting cases, where a person might end up contributing to two conversations at the same time –introducing remarks into each in sequence, but listening to both at once. It is something which succeeds only when one is either very sober, or very drunk.

A further variation is for a dialogue to depend on a third party, or intermediary. A common example is in foreign-language interpreting and translation, where A has to communicate with B via C. Within a single language, there are also well-known situations where one person (or group) communicates with another via an 'official spokesperson', or (in an apparently rather different domain) a ventriloquist's dummy.

An interesting variant is for a dialogue to be generated using the utterances of a third party. A loud-voiced person in a restaurant may cause a couple at another table to provide their own responses (*sotto voce*) to what is said, creating their own ongoing dialogue stimulated by the outsider's utterances. In François Truffaut's film, *Day for Night* (*La Nuit Americaine*, 1973), two of the film crew are seen passing a television set which happens to be showing a quiz game about films. They stop to watch, and try to answer the questions ahead of the participants on the screen. They talk to each other while reflecting on their answers, engaging in a dialogue which is, once again, dependent on a third party.

• *Asymmetrical dialogue*. These are the most unusual dialogues of all, as they take place with only one person apparently present. The qualification 'apparently' is important, because of course what happens is that the participant is imagining someone else to be present. In some cases, the missing person is the one who should start the conversation – as in the case of a seance, where people sit waiting for someone to talk to them. In other cases, the missing person is the one who should respond, as when we call uncertainly into the darkness 'Is there anyone there?', and hope that we really are engaged in a monologue after all.

Letters to the press or a radio station perhaps also fall into the asymmetrical category, given that there is only a remote chance that they will be used. In such cases we are trying to make a contribution to a dialogue over which someone else has control. If we do manage to get our contribution published or read out, there is no way of knowing whom we shall end up 'talking to'. Editors and programme presenters are adept in making dramatic juxtapositions of letters in this way.

• *Multilogues?* If A speaks to one person, it is a dialogue. If A speaks to several people at once, or if several people speak to A at once, the term dialogue hardly seems appropriate. Insofar as each exchange is separate from the others, we might interpret such a conversation as a

series of 'mini-dialogues'. But when there is genuine unison, something else seems to be going on—a 'multilogue'?

In speech, such situations can be found in churches (unison prayer), public meetings (*We want Bill!*), sports grounds (*Come On The Royals!*), and pantomimes (*OH yes he is!*). In writing, unison communication appears in petitions and jointly signed letters. Indeed, in the last case, it is even possible to find several groups of people communicating at once with each other, as when several joint letters to the press, taking different positions, are published side by side.

Summary

The various categories within the above subclassification have been summarized in Figures 2 and 3, with a brief illustration of each one to act as a mnemonic. The approach highlights the limited nature of the insights available if we restrict ourselves to such simple oppositions as speech vs. writing or monologue vs. dialogue, and seems to be fruitful in the way it draws attention to a range of neglected and intriguing linguistic situations. Some of the linguistic behaviour encountered in these situations is likely to be unusual, if not downright bizarre, but stylistically all the more appealing, on that account.

At this point, an editorial constraint on space and a looming publisher deadline motivates a succinct conventional ending. Further analysis is indeed theoretically possible, and it would seem wise not to introduce further complications until these first distinctions have been given some textual support.

REFERENCES

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