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Spoken Grammar

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Key Questions

The key questions in this chapter are:

1) Is there a distinct spoken grammar separate from written grammar, and, if so, precisely how do they differ? Are there, for example, special rules and forms for speaking that simply do not exist in writing?

2) Are the meanings of grammatical structures different in speech from their meanings in writing, and why should such differences in meaning exist?

3) What do the forms and patterns of spoken grammar enable us to do in speech to reflect the special circumstances of face-to-face communication? In other words, what sorts of communicative functions does spoken grammar perform and how do these contribute to successful spoken interaction?

~~2~~ An example

We illustrate our arguments in this chapter with evidence of how people use grammar in speaking taken from several corpora. Corpora are collections of written and spoken texts, often

consisting of tens or hundreds of millions of running words, stored on computers, which can be searched using dedicated software to see exactly what words and patterns of grammar the speakers and writers use most frequently (or indeed least frequently), who uses them, and in what contexts. The statistical and contextual evidence the software can provide us with enables us to make more reliable interpretations of speakers' and writers' communicative purposes. For full information about corpora and their uses, see O'Keeffe, McCarthy, and Carter (2007) and O'Keeffe and McCarthy (2010). In this chapter we look at speech samples taken from corpora of different varieties of native-speaker English and from the English of learners.

Our first example shows a non-native learner of English speaking during a classroom conversation. The students in this class are all trainees who will work in the international hospitality industry when they graduate, where a good command of spoken English will be very important. This student (a male non-native speaker) is asked by the teacher why he chose the hospitality industry as his profession. The teacher (a female native speaker) is also a participant in the conversation. How should she evaluate the student's performance as she listens? Should she focus on accuracy in grammar or should she be lenient and allow the student to converse fluently? To what extent should the teacher consider whether the grammar is appropriate for speaking in this particular context? Finally, does it matter that she herself, a native speaker, seems to be less than 100% accurate in her use of English?

The words in bold in Example 1will be of particular interest to our subsequent discussion of spoken grammar.

Example 1

<student 1> I wanted to experience the different cultures within the hospitality industry as uh, **you know**, you have different people from different backgrounds working within the hotel **like**

we have for placement, **I had different, like, around nineteen different** nationalities working within the restaurant itself. So I wanted to **experience ...**, and, **plus** giving the service to the guest, making them feel important really makes me feel nice about providing good service to a customer **and everything like that**. So that was one key aspect that uh drove me into the hospitality industry, **plus**, **my father, he planned** to open a hotel in the later stages so he said it's better if you also do something within the hospitality industry so that you can take it forward **and everything**. So I chose hospitality industry.

[intervening turns]

<teacher> You had mentioned teaching at some stage. **Do you see**+

<student 1> Yeah.

<teacher> +**you teaching** in your future?

<student 1> I had I thought about it but um it's so confusing right now that's **it's not** ... But I would love to teach as **like** it's a **total different** experience **I guess** so **you should be knowing** it better.

<teacher> [laughs]

<student 1> [laughs] So I wanted to teach in between because I have been helping my fellow students as well so they are **like**, oh you should try and teach, and and so that's why I wanted to teach in between but if I want to teach I'll be in the finance side as well if ever I plan to teach I have, **so**… (CLAS)

We would hardly doubt that the English of the student in Example 1 is both accurate and fluent – his grammar is of a high standard and his language flows without too much hesitation. He has a good command of the vocabulary he needs for this topic. However, the transcript, and in

particular the way the transcriber has punctuated it (with commas indicating pauses or boundaries of groups of words), raises some grammatical dilemmas. We can list these:

- The student says *you know*, without any object. Normally the verb *know* is transitive; it requires an object (you know a person or a thing). Is this something that is acceptable in both speaking and writing, or only in speaking, or neither?
- The student uses *like* five times. On two occasions *like* seems to mean 'similar to' (*like we have for placement / everything like that*). On two other occasions, *like* seems to act as a marker of pausing to think or to re-phrase something (*different, like, around nineteen different / as like it's a total different experience*). On the last occasion, it seems to introduce direct speech (*they are like, oh you should try and teach*). Are all these uses of *like* acceptable in speech and writing, only one, or neither?
- Some of the student's sentences seem incomplete, breaking off half-way, and the Example ends with *so* ... Should the teacher insist that the students always finish their sentences?
- The student says *and everything like that*, then, later, *and everything*. What do these expressions mean, and are they acceptable or common in writing?
- The student uses *plus* to connect ideas. Is this an acceptable conjunction in all types of English?
- The student says, *my father, he planned* ... Is it grammatical to have two subjects before the verb (a noun phrase and a pronoun)?
- The teacher says *Do you see you teaching?* Although she is a native speaker, this seems incorrect: it should be *Do you see yourself teaching?* Similarly, the student says *a total different experience* and *you should be knowing it better*. Is the use of *total* instead of

totally before an adjective okay? Is this use of the progressive with a stative verb (*know*) okay? Are these errors, or are they normal and acceptable in spoken grammar?

Wherever we look at transcripts of spoken language, whether the speakers are native- or expert-users or learners, we find these and similar dilemmas presenting themselves. To solve the dilemmas, we need to establish whether the apparent grammatical anomalies really are oddities/errors, or whether they are a normal part of face-to-face speaking in real time. In short, we need to know what is normal in spoken language before we can evaluate someone's performance and decide what to correct or focus upon in teaching.

What is spoken grammar?

The simplest answer to this question is that spoken grammar is the grammar we find in regular and repeated use by the majority of native- and expert-speakers of a language in the majority of their spoken interactions. Most people spend most of their speaking time having ordinary, everyday conversations, and only very rarely engage in special types of speaking such as speeches, interviews, sermons, lectures, academic presentations, and the like. So it is in everyday conversations that we are likely to find the most basic and widespread forms of spoken grammar. This does not mean that all such forms will be applicable to or acceptable in, for example, situations such as the classroom context in Example 1, above, where a more professionally-oriented or formal/academic style of speaking may be what the teacher hoped to encourage. But without knowledge of what constitutes everyday, informal spoken grammar, we are hardly in a position to draw the boundaries between it and other, more formal or specialized ways of speaking.

Academic interest in whether there is a spoken grammar and what it consists of is was considerably facilitated by the advent of miniaturized recording technology and, later, computerised spoken corpora, which really gave impetus to studies of spoken grammar. In parallel with these technological developments, language teaching was, in the 1970s and 1980s, going through the communicative revolution, where greater emphasis was emerging on the interpersonal functions of language (e.g. requesting, apologising, inviting, etc.). The functional categories were closely associated with the spoken language rather than the traditional written forms such as literary works and formal writing, which had been the backbone of language teaching for centuries. It is not surprising, therefore, that voices urging a greater understanding of the role of grammar in speaking and interpersonal communication grew louder towards the end of the last century. McCarthy and Carter (2001), for instance, in an article laying out criteria for a spoken grammar, voiced the opinion that speaking-skills pedagogy which did not take into account what we know about the spoken language was hardly adequate. More and more research was published over the next ten years which offered persuasive evidence of the independence of spoken grammar and its characteristics, and it is to such characteristics that we now turn.

Incomplete clauses and sentences

Many of the features of spoken grammar we deal with here arise from the nature of face-to-face talk in context and in real time. The first of these to consider is the status of that most basic unit of grammar, the sentence. The sentence has occupied, and most probably will continue to occupy, a central part in language teaching, for it is a good vehicle for illustrating grammar. In sentences, we can see clauses in combination (e.g. main clauses and how they combine with subordinate clauses), the functions of subjects, verbs, objects, and so on, and how they relate to one another through various rules and conventions, and how ideas are ‘packaged’ grammatically.

In writing, we have the added benefit of punctuation. Speaking is different. Native-speaker conversations seem to unfold naturally and quite happily without always forming complete sentences. In Example 2, two native-speaking co-workers are looking at some documents and talking informally about them.

Example 2<speaker 1> **If you'd like to have a a quick look through those while I 'm er**, please ask any questions while you 're looking through, and I 'll ask any questions that I'll need to here.

<speaker 2> **Right okay okay**. (BNC)

Speaker 1 uses an *if*-clause that does not seem to be attached to the typical kind of main clause we find in conditional sentences. This is a common use of freestanding *if*-clauses to make suggestions or to issue polite instructions (e.g. *If you'd like to come this way, please*.). We then have *while I'm er*, an incomplete time-clause. Neither clause seems to create any problem of communication in this face-to-face context, but both clauses would look odd 'stranded' in this way in a written text. And, obviously, *Right okay okay* is nothing like a complete clause or sentence, but performs the crucial function of listener feedback, a point we return to later. The need to speak in full clauses and sentences is not an absolute when speakers clearly understand the meaning in context, and things are often only half-said. Our student in Example 1 was doing the same as in the examples cited above. Although by the standards of written grammar, many clauses in informal speech seem incomplete, to the participants, nothing is incomplete or missing; communication is sufficient and efficient.

Main and subordinate clauses

We have noted that *if*-clauses can have a special pragmatic function in spoken language (giving polite suggestions or instructions). Other subordinating conjunctions also seem to have functions that are more prominent in spoken contexts. *Because* has been shown frequently to have an 'I'm justifying what I'm saying to you' function rather than a cause-effect function in conversation (Schleppegrell, 1992), as illustrated in Example 3, where a teacher is commenting on the talent another teacher has for handling her students in class and the lessons learnt from observing her.

Example 3

<speaker 1> What sort of, what sort of things did you learn from her? What were you watching?

<speaker 2> Well her introduction was good, like, she didn't just launch into things **cos I used to be a bit blunt and just start, launch right in** and you know they're not going to be responsive if you haven't somehow like broached the subject a little bit [laughing].

<speaker 1> Eased them in a little bit, yeah. (L-CIE)

The speaker's use of *cos* here is not a reference to cause-effect or to a reason for someone's actions, but means 'this is why I am telling you this'. From observations of this kind of function in spoken grammar, some linguists have even questioned whether the notion of 'subordinate clause' is viable for everyday spoken language (Blanche-Benveniste, 1995; Schleppegrell, 1992). Much informal spoken language seems to consist of clausal and phrasal units linked together linearly like the coaches on a train which is not surprising since informal speech is created online, in real time. In Example 4, the speaker is commenting on the difficulties of working unjustifiably long hours and the pressures this puts on a marriage. Notice the use of *plus* with main clauses (clauses that are not dependent on other clauses), to add ideas in this linear way.

Example 4

<speaker 1> It was kind of, it's sort of, it seemed unfair to me to, um, to subject her to that, and **plus**, I mean, the schedule was just starting to take a toll on me as well, and you can only put in so many 80 hour weeks before you kind of break down from it.

<speaker 2> Uh-huh.

<speaker 1> **Plus** I really wasn't making the kind of connections that I wanted to make. (ANC)

This usage is extremely rare in a comparable written corpus. So we can see our student in Example 1 above doing something quite natural to the grammar of spoken language by using the word *plus* to connect main clauses, though we will probably not want to have students writing that way in their essays.

Clause functions: subjects, objects, etc.

The student in Example 1 said *my father, he planned* .... On the face of it, this looks like two subjects (*my father* and *he*) competing for the same verb. Once again, we find this pattern often occurring in the spoken language of native- and expert-users of English. The speaker in Example 5 is talking about the decline of neighbourhood stores.

Example 5

<speaker 1>Well you know **all the old neighborhood customers they**'ve died. And **the young people they** go to the big supermarkets or the ... (ANC)

Twice in this Example the speaker 'doubles' the subject with a noun phrase and a pronoun on each occasion referring to the same entity (*the old customers* and *the young people*, respectively).

Using a noun phrase, then repeating it as a subject pronoun, is a way of creating a 'headline' for the listener, stating: 'this person or thing is my topic, what I want to say something about'. Again, a structure like this is rare in written texts and the 'header' pattern seems to be a characteristic of face-to-face interaction. It is another example, also, of the way spoken grammar arranges its information linearly (for further examples, see Carter & McCarthy, 1995, 2006 and Carter, McCarthy, Mark, & O'Keeffe 2011).

Ready-made chunks

It is now widely accepted that much of our language output comes in ready-made chunks, mostly consisting of between two and four or five words (see the many excellent chapters in Schmitt, 2004). Among others, these are also referred to as 'lexical bundles', 'multi-word units' or 'clusters' (see Greaves & Warren, 2010). Chunks are automatically produced strings of words which we use repeatedly. Corpus evidence shows us just how frequent the most commonly used chunks are. By far the most common chunk in everyday conversation is *you know* (which our student in Example 1 used). Other common two-word chunks include *I think, I guess* (see also Example 1), *I mean*, all of which signal positions and attitudes between the speaker and the listener: *you know* projects an assumption that speaker and listener are on the same wavelength, *I think/guess* suggest the speaker does not want to be too dogmatic or direct, while *I mean* suggests the speaker feels the need to explain, elaborate, etc. Once again, these chunks are rare in written texts. The fact that they consist of verbs that normally require objects but do not have objects in these interpersonal uses underlines the fact that the chunks have developed pragmatically specialized meanings in talk. Another aspect of chunks is that they can appear incomplete, but many of the seemingly incomplete chunks operate as building blocks or utterance frames. For example, the high frequency four-word chunk in spoken language, *one of*

the things, appears to be a fragment, but when we look at it in more detail within a spoken corpus we can see that it performs some important functions as a frame at the beginning of a speaker's turn, when speakers are flagging and framing their ideas:

One of the things I'd like to do…
One of the things I'd like to know is…
One of the things we need to think about is…
One of the things you may notice is… (BNC Spoken)

Clearly, these prefabricated chunks are an important part of how we structure our turns and a spoken grammar would not be complete without taking into account this phenomenon.

Example 1 contained two other notable chunks: *and everything like that* and *and everything*. These chunks are examples of what is often termed *vague language* (see Cutting, 2007), and, along with similar chunks such as *(and) things like that, (and) that kind of thing, or whatever, and stuff (like that)*, form a category of items that are extremely common in spoken language but rare in writing, which project to the listener that he/she will be able to fill in the 'missing' items in classes of things and actions that are only vaguely referred to. So, the indefinite pronoun *everything* in a statement such as the student's *you can take it forward and everything* is not to be taken too broadly or literally; it simply means 'and other actions associated with taking a business forward, which I, the speaker, can assume you, the listener(s) will know'. Chunks often contain what seem to be grammatically anomalous forms and meanings, but in their regular use, they acquire pragmatic meanings necessary for the functioning of face-to-face interaction. A spoken grammar must include an inventory of chunks that perform important interactive functions related to the state of knowledge between speakers

and listeners, the organization of talk, and the stances and attitudes conversational participants adopt vis-à-vis one another.

'Missing' elements: ellipsis

Because real-time conversation characteristically takes place between speakers who are in the same time and place and who often have deeply intermeshing lives, not everything need be said explicitly in the way that a written text, which has to stand on its own two feet and persist in time and be read in a different place, needs to do. In everyday informal talk, speakers often do not say items which would normally be considered obligatory by the conventions of written grammar. Example 8 is taken from the same type of classroom as Example 1 (students training for the hospitality industry). The teacher has set the students a task to evaluate the benefits and downsides of tourism.

Example 8

<teacher> **Everybody finished?**

<student> Yeah.

<teacher> So overall do you think tourism is of a benefit to a country or is the, is the negative side too much? (CLAS)

The teacher does not feel the need to say *has* before *everybody*; it is obvious that this is a question (partly owing to its intonation) and it is one the teacher probably often asks. This is what we call *situational ellipsis*, the non-necessity of stating explicitly everything in the situation, because one can assume that the listener(s) will simply understand. Auxiliary verbs (*do, be, have*), along with subject pronouns, are often not present in situations like this (*Want a*

coffee? Going out tonight? You ready yet?). Situational ellipsis of this type is a very important part of a spoken grammar, one which distinguishes it from written grammatical conventions. Conventional language pedagogy, with its emphasis on written-based norms, usually does not expose learners to a good deal of situational ellipsis in example dialogs, nor does it offer opportunities for learners to develop the skill of its appropriate use. For more examples of different types of situational ellipsis, see Carter and McCarthy (2006).

Grammar and the listener

Since face-to-face interaction includes listeners, the role of listener and speaker alternates, and listeners are rarely passive, silent participants. There are three things that listeners regularly do which are of interest to anyone wishing to understand the special nature of spoken grammar. Firstly, listeners often complete a grammatical structure only partly or incompletely stated by the speaker (so-called *sentence-completion*).

Example 9

<$3> No they're like, like the pole thing you know they're like the gutter, a pipe, big silver pipes right with like square rectangular extractors like fans

<$2> On them (LCIE)

Secondly, listeners routinely add extra clauses to the ‘sentences’ formed by another speaker. Example 9 shows how a listener adds a *which*- comment-clause to a statement made by the speaker. The speakers are discussing the allocation of parking spaces on a college campus.

Example 10

<speaker 1> It's st- it's a little, it's a little strange with those parking because I mean were they for, visitors as well or were they for, the faculty, were they assigned?

<speaker 2> No I think the parking, because there are so few parking spaces they would be assigned spaces. So, we were going to move it to show for, but they're not public. **The public arrive by foot, to this building.**

<speaker 1> **Which is strange** because what do you do w- with, you know, I mean it's pretty much you get around this campus by car. (MICASE)

We can consider what is happening here to be a kind of joint production of a sentence, with its main clause at the end of the previous speaker's turn, and the sentential *which*-clause starting the new speaker's turn. Tao and McCarthy (2001) observed this phenomenon in spoken corpora and noted how the *which*-clauses enable conversational participants to evaluate events and situations, whether used by the same speaker or by another speaker, as in Example 9. Joint production of grammatical patterns in this way connects speakers with one another and shapes the conversation as a collaborative artefact. In summary, we may say that the space between two speakers' turns is not like a period/full stop in a written text; in face-to-face dialogue, the grammar can flow across turns, contributing to a sense of 'confluence' (McCarthy, 2010), when the whole conversation flows seamlessly.

The third important aspect of how listeners behave is engaged response. Listeners are not passive, and, in their responses they say more than *yes* or *no*, and offer more than minimal acknowledgement of what the previous speaker has said. We regularly find listeners responding to another speaker with short turns, often consisting of one or two freestanding words such as *absolutely, wonderful, great, good, cool, right, fine*, etc. Such *non-minimal responses* show

involvement with the speaker and typically express alignment with the speaker's stance and attitudes. Example 11 exemplifies this.

Example 11

[the speakers are talking about the city of Chicago]

<speaker 1> And then you could walk down Navy Pier and it must be a little bit like San Francisco only they don't have, well, they do have people down there making money, but they're mostly drawing people and stuff like that. It is beyond cool! And nobody but, you know, people say they're indifferent or whatever, but not really, it's just that it's a whole different lifestyle!

<speaker 2> **Exactly! Absolutely.** (ANC)

Exactly and *absolutely* are, in traditional grammatical terms, two *-ly* adverbs, respectively. Yet it is perhaps unhelpful from a spoken grammar point of view to see them as exponents of a major word-class. They seem to occupy a class of their own, what we have called non-minimal response tokens, and we can list the most common members of that class, which also includes some adjectives (e.g. *definitely, certainly, fine, great, sure*). Just as we need a category such as *header* to describe the doubling of subject noun-phrase and pronoun, a spoken grammar may need a new category of *response token* in order to reflect the role of a set of common adjectives and adverbs in what we may call *good listenership*, the ability to respond to and engage with a speaker, something that is essential to face-to-face spoken interaction but rare or non-existent in writing.

Word order

When we look at spoken transcripts we often see word-order patterns that are rare in writing. One example of this is the positions in the clause that common adverbs typically occupy. In conventional written grammar, adverbs such as *maybe, probably, still, nearly*, *though*, and *almost* characteristically occupy a position between subject and main verb or after a first modal or auxiliary verb (*She probably went home / He's still waiting for a decision*). Less frequently, such adverbs may sometimes come before the subject (clause-initial position – as when someone says *Probably, I'll leave at 9am*). In informal speaking, however, they routinely occupy the final position in the clause, something that is, again, rare in writing and which reflects the linear construction of spoken grammar. Examples 12 and 13 are taken from informal academic discussions.

Example 12

[discussing an economics graph]

<speaker 1> So if you wanna do the first two steps just take this out. And you have the same picture **still**. See that because this is just a slope. Right? It doesn't affect anything else. (MICASE)

Example 13

[from a math discussion]

<speaker 1> If you say so Mark how many points is that? I have a hard time believing it **though**. I haven't seen the problem yet. I'm confused.

<speaker 2> Huh? That's separate points right, that's three points. Find the image of each of these three points. Right? And what is A...? Yeah. Of th- supposed to be points **probably**. Okay. Well that's just so they don't have to write out those coordinates **probably**. Yeah. (MICASE)

In Examples 12 and 13 we see the placing of adverbs at the end of the clause, something which would be rare or inappropriate in much writing, especially formal and academic writing. Speech offers the possibility of real-time modification of what has just been said, something which in academic writing might misleadingly look like an afterthought or the result of bad planning. In writing, the sentence would simply be rewritten if an afterthought occurred (e.g…. *they **probably** do not have to write out those coordinates*).

The grammatical phenomena that we have illustrated in this section mostly consist of patterns which would be inappropriate in all but the most informal writing, and would certainly be greatly out of place in formal and academic writing. For some of our Examples we have purposefully chosen academic discussions, for the reason that people often dismiss the notion of a spoken grammar as being the grammar of the street, a corrupted form of 'correct' grammar spoken by lazy speakers and not worthy of serious linguistic analysis and certainly not worthy of inclusion in language teaching syllabi and materials. Almost all of the speakers in the Examples in this chapter are educated native- and expert-users of English, using the language in natural, efficient and highly communicative ways, and so we cannot simply dismiss their usage as non-standard or incorrect, or as merely reflecting the pressures of 'performance'.

Spoken grammar: key concepts

As with any study of grammar, the notions of form and function are central to our understanding. In this chapter so far, we have illustrated a number of forms and the patterns they enter into,

which, we have argued, show us something about how spoken grammar operates, and have suggested some communicative functions for our chosen examples. What is clear is that there are no unique items or structures that are only available to either the spoken or written grammar. Rather, what we have suggested so far is that the spoken and written grammar may draw on the grammatical resources in different ways, reflecting their different purposes and different contexts of use (see Leech, 2000 for further discussion). In this section, we widen the discussion to consider a broad framework for the interpretation of spoken grammar.

The context of spoken language

A key consideration in understanding the grammar of spoken language is its context of use. As mentioned, speech is produced in real-time, typically without the luxury of planning, correcting, revising and polishing that writing allows (Brazil, 1995). For this reason, complete and well-formed sentences, in the conventional sense, are often not present, nor do they need to be for communicative efficiency. Brazil (1995) puts it succinctly:

> In other words, we do not necessarily have to assume that the consideration of such abstract notions as 'sentences' enters into the user's scheme of things at all. (p. 15)

We may conclude that, in a spoken grammar, what matters is communicative units, and these may be sentences in the conventional sense or just clauses or verbless phrases (Ricento, 1987).

The other key consideration is that speech is produced for listeners, who are usually present at the time of its production, unlike the case of written texts, which are commonly created in one time and place and consumed in another. Listeners are obliged by social convention to actively engage with speakers (Bublitz, 1988); this engagement usually demands both non-verbal and verbal responses. One implication of this is that, in all but the opening turn

of any conversation, the primary duty of a next speaker is to show his/her listenership and respond to what has just been said. Thus the responsive features of spoken grammar (which we exemplified above with the adjectives and adverbs which commonly function as non-minimal responses) are crucial, and the teaching of responses assumes a central role in the teaching of speaking. Above all, the functions of spoken grammar relate to the work speakers and listeners do to create rapport, common understanding and good relationships; it is these things that enable conversations to achieve their goals.

One important manifestation of the immediacy of shared contexts is the all-pervasive nature of deixis in face-to-face interaction. Deixis refers to the way certain features of language point to people and things in the context (Grundy, 2008). At the simplest level, we see deictic items such as *this, that, these, those, here,* and *there* operating to relate the situation to each speaker. *Here* for the speaker might be *there* for the listener (as in a phone call); *this bag* in one speaker's hands might well be *that bag* for a speaker standing a little way off, or it could be *this bag* for both speakers if they are loading it or carrying it together. Likewise, *I* means the person speaking, and *you* means the person listening, and, since the roles of speaker and listener alternate in dialogue, the meanings of *I* and *you* shift accordingly, unlike in writing, where the meanings are typically relatively stable to *I* the writer, *you* the reader. Deictic systems vary across languages. Standard educated English has a binary system for nearness and distance with demonstrative determiners (*this-these, that-those*); Spanish has a three-part system corresponding to the demonstratives (*this* here, *that* there, and *that* a greater distance away). English *we* can mean *I* and *you*, but it can also mean *I* and someone else but not *you*; Malay has two separate words for these two meanings.

The spoken grammar can exploit the deictic system to create interpersonal meanings, for example, *we* can be used to create solidarity and a collective sense. McCarthy and Handford (2004) show how powerful individuals in business settings can manipulate the pronoun *we* to alternate between a general, corporate *we* representing the whole corporation, and the use of the high-frequency chunk *we need to*, which often has the force of 'you must', but without the authoritarian overtones of a commandment, that is to say, power manifesting itself most effectively and productively as an expression of (pseudo-)solidarity (see also Drew & Heritage, 1992).

The all-pervasive nature of deixis can often make it difficult to interpret conversational transcripts. Consider the following Example from the British National Corpus:

Example 14

<Speaker 1> If I can crawl **under here** < pause > I.

<Speaker 2> Yes, I **just** wanna have a look at < pause > yes you can crawl **under there** to your heart's content! < pause > You can unplug **that** for the moment. < pause >I'm not really worried about it.

<Speaker 1> No, I **just**, thinking it's easier if I take it down **this way**.

<Speaker 2> Oh alright.

<Speaker 1> Then I pull it < pause > < unclear >.

<Speaker 2> Now, < unclear >. < pause > Ultimately < pause > er < pause > they might change the lead on the end of **that** monitor. < pause >What 's the matter?

<Speaker 1> **I was wondering** < pause > where the socket is. < pause > Oh I see where it's gone! (BNC)

In Example 14, we see ample evidence of 'real-timeness' in the false starts, truncated utterances, and pausing. We see the highly context-dependent nature of *it* and the dependence on deictic references, which are relative to the speaker and listener and the objects in the context in which the interaction is taking place (Speaker 1 says: *If I can crawl under* ***here,*** Speaker 2 replies: *...you can crawl under* ***there****...*). We see examples of how the listener responds to what is being said using response tokens (*Oh alright*). We also see how the speakers carefully word what they say so as not to sound too forceful or blunt. For example: *I* ***just*** *wanna have a look…* instead of the more direct sounding *I wanna have a look…* or *I was wondering where the socket is* instead of saying *where is the socket?.* In looking at how we structure what we say, it is very important to take all of the contextual factors into account. Much of what we say and how we say it relates to the face-to-face context in which our interaction takes place. Most of all, we orient what we say to our listeners in context. We will now look in greater detail at the implications of the face-to-face nature of the grammar of spoken language.

Face and politeness and spoken grammar

The field of pragmatics has long concerned itself with how speakers relate to one another in terms of conveying and negotiating meanings and intentions in contexts, and spoken grammar is, par excellence, the study of grammatical forms and their functions in immediate, shared contexts.

The notion of *face* is key a concept in pragmatics (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and spoken grammar serves this need in face-to-face interaction. The notion of face is concerned with two goals: 1) showing esteem for one's fellow human beings (often referred to as positive face or

positive politeness), and 2) not imposing on them (often referred to as negative face or negative politeness). We can show positive face through grammar by using, where available, respectful forms (for example, many languages distinguish between respectful and familiar forms for *you*). In English, the system of situational ellipsis illustrated earlier plays a part in this (compare *Want a coffee?* with *Do you want a cup of coffee?*), as does the modal verb system. *May I help you?* is considered more oriented towards politeness and respect for the listener than *Can I help you?*. Likewise, *Would/Could you help me?* is considered less of an imposition on the listener than *Will/Can you help me?* or just *Help me!*

While the goals of positive and negative politeness pertain to both speaking and writing, there are very important differences. First of all, in the case of positive politeness (showing respect or esteem to the person we are speaking or writing to), this is particularly important in writing where how we address our interlocutor can only manifest in what we write. For example, addressing a professor as '*Hi Jenny'* in an email is not normally acceptable. However, it may be acceptable in some face-to-face situations, for example, at an end-of-semester class party where the context is very informal and where first names are generally being used. On the other hand, negative politeness (not imposing on your interlocutor) is important in writing but it is even more crucial in face-to-face communication. One of the main ways in which we show negative politeness in speaking is by softening or hedging what we say so as not to impose on our listener. This means carefully choosing less direct structures. In terms of grammar, it manifests in a number of forms. Example 15 is an example of someone making a suggestion, using *well, I was thinking, we could, perhaps* and *if that's okay* to ensure that her suggestion is not seen as too direct by her interlocutor:

Example 15

Well, I was thinking we could perhaps take her to Blagden Hall now that's open… **if that's okay** (BNC)

Forms like these may also be found in writing (polite letters or emails of enquiry, etc.), but in face-to-face interaction, their presence is even more crucial in the immediate creation of a good relationship between speakers. In this respect, hedges in English often exploit the tense-aspect system (other languages may exploit the subjunctive mood or particular types of particles). The English past tense can be used to soften requests and bald statements, and the progressive/continuous aspect can add further softening. In a graduate philosophy seminar in the MICASE corpus, one speaker says, when discussing how we perceive things: *I, I, I**'m wanting** to make a divi- a a distinction between, the way things seem to us, and the characteristics that give rise to, uh those those those seemings.* In this way, the speaker makes less blunt and less direct the stating of an opinion and, consequently, lessens the threat to face for the listener(s). Softening with forms such as *I was wondering, we were hoping*, and so on are common in speech.

The reverse side of this coin, as we have mentioned, is situational ellipsis, where a very direct and familiar relationship between the speaker and listener(s) is projected. The teacher in Example 8 who said *Everybody finished?* Is projecting a friendlier, more informal relationship with the students than might have been generated by *Has everybody finished?* Situational ellipsis can only function if all the participants are enmeshed in the same situation, and so its forms project just that assumption, that everyone is sharing the context. This is an example of another important concept that underpins spoken grammar: the shared space and assumed shared knowledge within which the conversation proceeds. Conversations rely on many shared

assumptions, and the more intimate the participants' relationships, the more that can be assumed. Shared assumptions may be related to the world in general, such that a person who says *Oh, raining now!* may be assumed to be referring to the weather, or very locally to the particular situation, such that someone who says *Kids are home!*, may be heard naturally as referring to 'our kids / the kids we both know'. The converse is also true, and situational ellipsis will be puzzling or inappropriate in a context where the speakers share few, if any, assumptions. It is for this reason that written texts created to be read in a separate situation from those of their creation are likely to be more explicit and elaborated, for they can less easily assume the reader has an immediate, shared context with the writer.

Grammar and power relations

Another important factor in the face-to-face context of use which impacts on the grammar we choose is the power relationship between the speakers. For example, above we referred to the pseudo-solidarity created by the use of *we need to* by powerful individuals in a business context when they really mean *you need to / you must*. A counter example to this is found in Healy and Onderdonk-Horan (forthcoming), who look at trainer-trainee interactions in the context of a hospitality management degree course. They found that the more bald and face-threatening pattern *you need to* prevails over the more hedged *we need to* pattern. In the context of training, the pragmatic ground rules seem to allow for the more face-threatening form because of the overt power imbalance assumed and accepted in the situation. In Example 18, trainees are working with a chef. In addition to the more direct *you need to,* we see other direct, or unhedged, uses of language, which would, in another spoken context, be face-threatening because of the reprimands and forceful directives:

Example 18

<Chef> The strawberries **should be** kept in the fridge as well, they **shouldn't be** out at room temperature. So **you need to** clean as you go, **you need to** clean as you go, okay? When you're out in the industry, you'll be lucky if you have that size of a bench to work on, and. if you don't keep it tidy you'll have nowhere to do anything. So **you have to** keep it tidy

Classroom Applications

In terms of classroom applications of the teaching of spoken grammar, we are in the early stages. Few pedagogical reference grammars, grammar practice books or general course books acknowledge that there are important differences between spoken and written grammar, and, with few exceptions, the grammar that is taught is that which is codified in the written form. Notable mention should be given to the emergence of two major grammars which do make a clear distinction between spoken and written grammar, *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan,1999) and the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter and McCarthy 2006), which focus on spoken and written grammar and usage. These two publications recognize that the grammar of writing is not the same as the grammar of speaking. Others who have made progress in this respect include those who have conducted corpus studies highlighting the inconsistencies between the English that is found in textbooks and the English that occurs in both spoken and written corpora (for example, McCarthy and Carter, 1995; Römer, 2004; Gilmore, 2004). The emergence of actual classroom material on the teaching of spoken grammar are few, however. McCarthy et al (2005, 2006) bring into the general course syllabus for an adult English language program a strong emphasis on the spoken language, and its grammar sections are informed by written and spoken corpus

data. Many of the features exemplified in this chapter are illustrated and practiced in natural spoken contexts.

A starting point: noticing

Schmidt (1994) talks about raising learner awareness through 'noticing'. This is a good starting point for the pedagogy of spoken grammar. Many learners are likely to have an educational background where grammar training was based on written norms. However, language learners already know and use spoken grammar conventions in their first language so the concepts cannot be entirely new, and the first language may need to be brought into service in the classroom to raise awareness of how speech is distinct from writing. Students' ultimate need is be equipped with how to 'do' things like deixis, ellipsis, responses, hedging, and so on, in the target language. Some basic noticing tasks are illustrated below:

Example task 1 – Deixis

The words in bold in the conversation below are being used to point to people, places, objects and time. Put the words or phrases into the grid. Can you figure out what they refer to? Some examples have been done for you.

Pointing to people	Who?	Pointing to places and objects	Where/what?	Pointing to time	When?
Line 1 "I"	points to speaker 1	Line 1 "these"	the shirts	Line 3	"another day"

[A mother and a daughter are shopping for clothes]
1 <Speaker 1> **I**'ll just have a look at **these** shirts **up here**. **They**'re nice Bev.
2 <Speaker 2> Yeah
3 <Speaker 1> **They**'re nice, aren't **they**? Oh **we**'ll come **down another day** and look. That 's
4 nice innit?
5 <Speaker 2> A bit short in the body.

6 <Speaker 1> Oh is **it**?
7 <Speaker 2> **It** looks **it** don't **it**?
8 <Speaker 1> Now look at the beautiful colours though.
9 <Speaker 2> Yeah.
10 <Speaker 1> Alright, **I**'ll go and pay for **this**. (BNC)

Example task 2 – Ellipsis

The following are real examples of people speaking from recordings of conversations.

a) If they were written sentences, how would you change them?

b) What is the effect of the changes?

1. What you going to have?

2. Where you going ice-skating?

3. [to a little child] Think you better go in the bath my love!

4. Where you going now Chantel?

5. Been to the dentist?

(BNC)

Example task 3 – hedging

In each of the examples from spoken language, take out the hedges. What is the effect?

1) Would you mind describing how you got it up there again cos I thought it was quite a good story?

2) If I could just stop you there for a couple of minutes while we have a break.

3) Here's something that you might like to consider.

4) I was wondering if you'd perhaps like to tell us how you're going to manage the business on your own.

(Examples adapted from BNC)

This first, noticing stage needs to be followed, as in any learning sequence, by opportunities to articulate what has been noticed and to practice it in meaningful controlled and freer contexts.

Examples of practice exercises

Example task 4 – Hedging

Which of the following, a or b, are direct?

1) a) Tell me the time. b) Would you mind telling me the time, please?

2) a) Could I ask you your name? b) What's your name?

3) a) You live in Brussels, do you? b) Where do you live?

4) a) Don't forget to lock the door. b) Lock the door, okay?

Example task 5 – Hedging

The email below from a student to her professor is too direct. Rewrite it so that it is more appropriate.

From: Eniko Varga [mailto:eniko.varga@exeter.ac.uk]
Sent: 14 April 2011 12:38
To: John Holmes
Subject: Essay extension

Dear Prof. John

Please give me more time for my essay. I am very busy because I have a lot of other essays to do at the same time.

Your student,

Eniko

Example task 6 – ellipsis

Remove one or more words from each of the following to make them more informal:

1) Have you seen Gillian?

2) Would you like to go for lunch?

3) I can't go out. It's raining again.

4) Do you need any help with your homework?

5) I don't like cities. They're too noisy, you know what I mean?

Example task 7 - ellipsis

This is an email message from a College student to her Mom. She has just has moved to Canada for summer work. Rewrite this email, leaving out as many words as you can. Then, discuss why you deleted certain words and not others:

Dear Mom

I'm getting on really well. I've found a house. I'm sharing with 3 others. I'm still looking for work. I'll email again soon. Agata

Example task 8 - responses

Which is the most appropriate response for the second speaker to use in each reply?

1) Can we have the bill please? a) Exactly. b) Absolutely.

2) This restaurant is really nice but their service is slow. a) Fine. b) Right.

3) Are you going to Paul's party? a) Not really. b) Probably.

4) I've lost my phone; I'm going to have to buy a new one! a) What a nuisance! b) Definitely.

Future Trends

As this chapter evidences, the availability of spoken corpora has greatly increased our understanding of spoken grammar. However, there is still much more to be done in this area. There is a need for more data and for these data to be more widely available, especially to language teachers. Teachers also need to have the skills to be able to examine data in a corpus to build their confidence in using electronic resources of this kind. This means that introductory

skills in corpus linguistics need to be mainstreamed in initial teacher education programmes (see O'Keeffe & Farr, 2003 and McCarthy, 2008 for a discussion).

But not only teachers can draw benefit from observing corpus data, whether spoken or written, and data-driven learning (often referred to as DDL) may be seen as an important bridge between raw data and observation-based learning for students as well (see Chambers, 2010). In DDL, the corpus data is the material, and learners work towards inductive conclusions as regards rules, patterns, and meanings. Since we have stressed that the key to approaching spoken grammar is training in noticing and awareness (because of the inherent difficulty of reflecting on language produced in real time), DDL would seem a good vehicle for exercising such awareness. However, it may still be necessary to 'clean up' some of the messiness one finds in natural conversational data and to be somewhat selective in the choice of data to present to learners, as one does not want the data itself to become a distraction in the all-important noticing process. A distinct advantage of DDL is that it typically uses concordance lines, where learners can observe many examples of the target grammar displayed together on the computer screen or printout.

There is also huge potential now in the harnessing of technology to simulate face-to-face interaction in course material where students can interact with recorded speakers and play speaking roles in a non-threatening, private environment, offering good opportunities for practice of many of the features we have highlighted in this chapter, whether in multi-media, online or blended/hybrid courses where independent online (students working individually with internet-based materials, and 'offline' (text book- and/or classroom-based learning) study are combined.

We are a long way from having a complete grammar of spoken language and it may not be attainable in any case as a single, monolithic, codified description, given that there are likely to be so many varieties of any given language. Written grammars can be more easily described in a more uniform manner, as writing in most languages tends to orient towards agreed norms. Spoken grammar has to take context and variety into account. This also has implications for the assessment of speaking. We need to see how we can better test learners in terms of their interactional competence rather than their ability to produce monologic speech, and to test their proficiency on a variety of task-types.

Most of all, there is a need to foster an acceptance of spoken grammar and an understanding of why spoken/written differences exist. Prejudices and worries may be lessened

if language educators and learners alike become more aware of how and why educated language users exploit spoken grammar, and what its role is in creating successful interaction.

Conclusion

We can conclude that nothing we observe in spoken grammar is totally impossible or completely non-existent in written grammar. Many styles of writing are highly informal and writing frequently plunders forms from speaking (e.g. advertising copy, text-messaging, internet chat and email, direct speech in fiction, tabloid journalism, etc.). The forms that characterise spoken grammar have evolved to serve the special needs of face-to-face communication; they are important and should not be dismissed as of only marginal interest. Spoken communication has become dominant in language teaching and learning in the past three decades or so, and is likely to become even more important in a global society where mobility and real-time spoken communication is likely to increase. It is for this reason that looking at spoken grammar separately from written grammar is linguistically valid, and relevant to, and useful for, language pedagogy.

In this chapter, we set out to address three key questions relating to spoken grammar. The first question asked whether there was indeed such a thing as 'spoken grammar'. The second question asked: if there was a spoken grammar, precisely how did it differ from written grammar? And thirdly, we asked why the differences existed between spoken and written grammar. We hope to have clearly established the existence of spoken grammar and to have shown how it differs from written grammar in a number of ways. The third question is probably the most important, relating to why the differences exist. Our understanding of the concept of spoken grammar hinges on understanding the difference between writing *to* or *for* someone and

speaking *with* someone. Speaking with someone is in real time and draws greatly on the real-time context of the interaction. There is real-time effort on the part of the speakers to orient what they say to their listener in order to enmesh separate but overlapping worlds, to mark and signpost what they say, to nuance it so that it does not sound too direct, and so on. Of course, many of these conditions exist when we sit down to write to someone or to address a particular audience, but we have the time and space to carefully contemplate and edit what we write, as we have discussed above. In essence, in the midst of face-to-face conversation, the stakes are higher because we do not often have the comfort of editing and starting all over again.

From a pedagogical perspective, the focus has long been on the codified grammar of the written language. It is neater and easier to package. Until the 1980s, we did not have widespread access to equipment to record everyday spoken language (though many scholars used field notes to great effect). Now we do have large samples of spoken language transcribed and more readily available to materials writers. This has no doubt brought some significant progress, as discussed above. However, there is a long way to go. We point to the great need, within teacher education, to raise awareness of the differences between spoken and written grammar and to foster an understanding of why these differences exist. The more aware language teachers are of these differences, the greater the chances of progress for learners' understanding and acquisition of spoken grammar as a natural and essential component of their developing proficiency.

Summary

Many items and structures have greatly different frequencies in spoken and written language, reflecting the demands of the two different modes of communication.

- Because most everyday speech is face-to-face, particular features of grammar have specialized pragmatically to serve the needs of face-to-face communication.
- Spoken grammar is produced in real time, without the opportunities for careful composition, reflection and revision that most writing offers, often giving spoken texts, at first glance, an appearance of incompleteness or incorrectness.
- Typical spoken grammar features include ellipsis, a great amount of deixis, forms related to directness and politeness and forms which create and maintain interpersonal relations.
- Introducing spoken language into the classroom requires an initial awareness-raising phase before controlled and free practice can be carried out, as students will probably not be familiar with this approach to grammar.

Discussion questions

- If you were teaching at an institution where teachers regularly shared views on the syllabus, how could you convince a sceptical group of colleagues that introducing spoken grammar into the grammar syllabus was an important step to consider?
- Where and what would be the best places and situations for you to make useful and relevant audio recordings of people speaking English to use as a resource for spoken grammar? What technical and ethical considerations would you need to take into account?
- How far do you think a spoken grammar syllabus for English should be based solely on the usage of native speakers? Should the spoken English of non-native expert-users and learners be incorporated into the syllabus?

- Fluency and accuracy are often contrasted with each other as two separate skills. Do you think what you have read in this chapter has implications for our understanding of the fluency versus accuracy debate? Why? Why not?
- At what levels of proficiency do you think students could or should be introduced to spoken grammar? Elementary? Intermediate? Only advanced? What are the reasons for your choices?

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Discussion questions

1 What arguments would you use to convince a sceptical person that spoken grammar was not just 'lazy', 'incorrect', 'too informal' but was an important aspect of any language?

2 The chapter exemplifies a number of ways in which spoken grammar reflects how speakers take each other into account (e.g., by protecting 'face'). Can you add to the list of examples that the chapter presents of things we do with spoken grammar?

3 Can spoken grammar be understood properly in isolation from written grammar? Why? Why not?

Suggested activities

1 What features (e.g., ellipsis, deixis) would you choose to present in the first lesson on spoken grammar that you give to a class of intermediate students with mixed first languages? Choose two features and make a lesson plan for a 10-15 minute classroom activity.

2 How could you encourage students to increase their awareness of spoken grammar outside of the classroom (e.g., through listening to the target language, using the Internet, reflecting on their own first language)? Design a homework task or out-of-class activity that would encourage awareness of spoken grammar.

3 Access an Internet chat room, email, or a social network site in your students' target language. What features typical of spoken grammar can you observe in the

messages/postings that people leave? How could you use such material in your own teaching?

4 List some situations (e.g. friends in a café, TV chat show) where it would be fruitful to make recordings of people speaking so that you and your students could observe features of spoken grammar. Compare your list with someone else's. What problems do you foresee in collecting such data?

Further reading

Leech, G. (2000) Grammars of spoken English: New outcomes of corpus-oriented research. *Language Learning* 50(4), 675-724.

This is an important paper that surveys work done to address the broad question of whether there is a spoken grammar and how different it might be from written grammar.

McCarthy, M., & Carter, R. (2001) Ten criteria for a spoken grammar. In E. Hinkel & S. Fotos (Eds.), *New perspectives on grammar teaching in second language classrooms*(pp. 51-75). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

The authors present a list of what they consider to be the ten most important issues in describing and implementing a spoken grammar (of English) in language pedagogy.

Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (1995). Grammar and the spoken language. *Applied Linguistics, 16*(2), 141-58.

The authors not only argue in favour of many of the features discussed in this chapter but also look at whether and how popular language teaching texts of the time include them.

Links

Dancing with Words: Strategies for Learning Pragmatics in Spanish

URL: http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/home.html

This website, produced by the Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, (CARLA), focuses on the ways of teaching pragmatics in Spanish. It offers a really practical framework for exploring pragmatics in speaking that can be applied to materials development in other languages.

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Glossary entries

Chunks: sequences of words that are repeatedly used together, for example *you know what I mean, by the way, I don't know*. These can be found easily using corpus software.

Corpus (plural: corpora): is a collection of spoken or written texts which are stored in a computer, and which can be searched to investigate how language is used. They can comprise millions of words of different types of texts, for example, academic language, everyday conversation, fiction, newspapers, etc. The British national Corpus and the American National Corpus are well-known corpora.

Ellipsis: This refers to when we omit words or phrases which we can understand from the co-text (textual ellipsis) or the situation in which we are speaking (situational ellipsis). Ellipsis is common in informal speaking and writing because speakers have shared knowledge of what is being referred to.

Hedging: These are words and phrases that we use in speaking and writing so as not sound too certain or direct, for example, *just, sort of, kind of, if you don't mind*.

Pragmatics: the study of language in use. It is particularly related to understanding meaning in context, for example, *I'm very cold,* depending on the given context in which it is uttered could really mean, '*I want you to close the window', 'I want you to give me your jacket', 'I want to go back indoors', 'I want to get out of the pool',* and so on.

Response tokens: These are single words or short phrases uttered by the listener while the speaker is holding the floor. Their function is to signal listenership, at differing levels. Some are referred to as minimal response tokens, e.g. *mmm, yeah, oh,* as they show a minimal level of listenership, while others are non-minimal response tokens, *absolutely, really, too bad, that's great,* for example. Non-minimal response token show engaged listenership and can express surprise, shock, pity, empathy, etc.

Spoken grammar: this refers to differences at word, phrase and clause level in how we structure what we say compared to written grammar. This relates to the real-time, typically face-to-face nature of spoken language and how it differs from writing. For example, informal spoken language is not normally constructed in sentences. It is not organised into paragraphs on a page. It is structured between speakers in turns.

Turn: a turn is the smallest unit of interaction between at least two speakers. Turns can be very short or very long. Speakers in a conversation take turns at speaking and a new turn begins when there is a speaker change.