Spoken grammar: what is it and how can we teach it?

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The teaching of grammar is regularly based on written examples and on a proscriptive approach to 'correct' English. This article argues that consideration by teachers of spoken English shows that learners need to be given choices between written and spoken grammars, that the inter-personal implications of spoken grammars are important, and that methodologically inductive learning may be more appropriate than the 3Ps (Presentation–Practice–Production) approaches adopted in traditional grammar books.

Written and spoken grammars

The history of the description of the properties of English grammar has been largely a history of the description of English grammar as it has occurred in the written language. This situation has historical parallels in lexicography, as when Dr Samuel Johnson excluded entries from his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) which were not attested in written literary sources, on the grounds that they constituted no more than ephemeral vulgarisms. Such a view of language explains to some extent why, in mother tongue language education at least, writing and reading normally carry greater prestige than speaking. The same view surfaces in even more complex form in arguments over what is correct and what is standard English (see Bex 1993 for a recent re-assessment). Popular conceptions of the spoken language are often that it is corrupt and that its influence on grammatical norms is corrosive (Rosenthal 1993), and that 'correct' English grammar is what is codified in grammars of English; yet what is codified in English grammars does not tell the whole story. One teaching outcome of such circular discussion is that there are dangers, in both English as a mother tongue and EFL/ESL domains, of producing speakers of English who can only speak like a book, because their English is modelled on an almost exclusively written version of the language (Rings 1992).

It is not our main purpose in this paper to criticize existing grammars of English, but rather to underline the point that learners need to be given more grammatical choices if they are to operate flexibly in a range of spoken and written contexts. There will thus be an emphasis on grammatical *choice*, and on the notion that certain grammatical forms, revealed by corpus-based scrutiny of spoken English, enable a greater degree of interpersonal and interactive language uses—uses of language which are in keeping with the goals of most communicative language teaching projects.

The Nottingham corpus   The corpus to which we shall refer is being collected at the University of Nottingham, and has the following main characteristics: it is constructed for the purposes of studying spoken grammar, and targets informal and conversational language rather than more formal varieties, such as broadcast talk; particular *genres* of talk are collected; that is, the data is assembled with reference to sociolinguistic contexts and functions, such as narrative, language-in-action, service encounters, problem-solving, information exchange, and casual talk (McCarthy and Carter 1994: Ch. 1); the speakers reflect a full social, cultural, and geographical range (within the British Isles) with samples which are also representative of age and gender differences.

The corpus is not planned as a large one, nor in our view does it need to be. Lexicographical studies require evidence from millions of words of text, but core grammatical forms recur more saliently. Significant patterns can be found in data totalling 100,000 words or less, though for the forms to be significant they need to be distributed across a range of genres and speakers, or, more interestingly still for the language teacher, to cluster with special prominence in some genres rather than others.

The following pages contain two examples from data we have collected. Sample 1 illustrates the genre of language-in-action, that is, language used interactively while an action or task is being completed. Sample 2 involves the genre of narrative. We shall examine this data for its features of 'spoken grammar' and then consider some implications for English language teaching.

Sample 1   **Preparing for a party, Cardiff 27.11.93**

A: Now I think you'd better start the rice
B: Yeah . . . what you got there
[4 secs]
B: Will it all fit in the one
A: No you'll have to do two separate ones
C: Right . . . what next
[17 secs]
C: Foreign body in there
B: It's the raisins
C: Oh is it oh it's rice with raisins is it
B: [
                            No no no it's not supposed to be
    [laughs] erm
C: There must be a raisin for it being in there
D: D'you want a biscuit
C: Erm
D: Biscuit
C: Er yeah
[9 secs]
D: All right

Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter

C: Yeah

[10 secs]

D: Didn't know you used boiling water

B: Pardon

D: Didn't know you used boiling water

B: Don't have to but it's erm . . . they reckon it's erm [inaudible]

[5 secs]

D: Tony was saying they should have the heating on by about Wednesday

One of the most salient grammatical features of Sample 1 is a pervasive ellipsis, as in 'Didn't know you used . . . ', 'Don't have to', in which subjects are ellipted. Ellipsis involving predicates and auxiliaries is also present, as in 'Biscuit', and 'Foreign body in there'. The ellipsis involved is of a different order from that recorded as of primary significance in standard descriptive grammars. Such grammars accord particular importance to 'textual ellipsis' in which items in co-ordinated clauses which are present elsewhere in the text are omitted from, for example, structures such as 'Jean danced and sang', where it is taken as understood that Jean remains the subject of both clauses.

Standard grammars do account for subject and verb ellipsis, but describe such phenomena as being of minor or secondary importance.[1] In our spoken data it is of major significance. It is also not random, occurring in particular in fixed phrases and related lexical formulae and routines (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992) such as 'sounds good', 'absolutely right', 'Good job you said', etc. Furthermore, such phenomena are not random, insofar as they occur in certain genres but not in others.

This feature can be illustrated by reference to the narrative data in Sample 2, where ellipsis is not at all a significant feature. One reason for this is that 'language-in-action' involves participants in using language to refer to actions in an easy and unproblematical way because they are taking place before their respective eyes. There is therefore no need for elaboration; a lot of knowledge is shared, and a lot of referents can be mutually taken for granted. In narrative, on the other hand, the characters and events are *displaced* in time and space, which calls for more explicit references. Learners of English need to be aware of such differences and distinctions, and to make grammatical choices accordingly.

Sample 2   **Telling ghost stories, Canterbury 8.11.93**

[This story refers to an earlier ghost story about a man who has a premonition of death on the ship *Hood*, which involves a newspaper.]

A: You saying about that chap with the newspaper, that, one of Dad's many stories of how he escaped death [laughs] during his long life was one, erm, it wasn't the *Hood*, although he was on the *Hood*, but they were lined up one day for details into, you know [**B:** Yeah] wherever they were going and they needed so many men to go on to this particular boat

C: Mum, what

     [

A: and they worked their way through the line, they called them out and [**B:** Mm] Dymock was amongst them

                                                      [

C: Mum, Mum, can I just say, this boat was a really good boat to get on to wasn't it, it was one of the best

          [

A: Oh, yes, I mean they were all eager to get [**B:** Yeah] to get on it they were really looking [**B:** Mm] forward to being the chosen ones and he was one of the ones who was called up [**B:** Yeah] and he was getting ready to go and the Chief Petty Officer came back and said, oh, no, it's a mistake

                         [

C: We've got one extra

               [

A: Dymock, Dymock, er you're not needed [**B:** Mm] and he was a bit disappointed and he went back, carried on what he was doing and the boat sailed out and was torpedoed and

          [

C: by a German ship [**B:** Oh yes]

D: Everyone, everyone died

C: Anyway, all hands lost but legs saved [**All:** (laugh)]

B: Well, sailors were always getting legless, weren't they, anyway [**All:** (laugh)]

A: Finding their sea legs

B: Yeah

In the narrative data in Sample 2 other grammatical features are more salient, which accord both with the contextual nature of the event and with the relationship between the participants. For example, the data forces us to reconsider exactly what we understand by the term 'subordinate clause' (Schleppegrell 1992 on the notion of 'surbordination' in spoken language). The opening line in the narrative data is on one level 'ungrammatical': 'You saying about the chap with the newspaper'. However, the structure functions as a kind of frame for what follows. Such structures are common in a lot of our data, and would appear to be a common choice for speakers, particularly in spoken narrative, allowing them a kind of slot, a piece of interactive space in which they can highlight a topic in such a way as to provide an orientation to their listeners for what will follow. Contextually, the orientation is necessary because what is conveyed is normally remote in time and space, and cannot be taken for granted or constructed as shared knowledge between participants in the same way as much language-in-action data. Such use of language is not so much related to a topic, or to the propositions conveyed, as to an interpersonal signalling that a key topic is to follow. Elsewhere in our data the following structures occur:

Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter

Helen, her mother, she never bakes cakes.
That house on the corner, is that where you live?

In each example a topic is in some way flagged or otherwise marked as significant in the subsequent discourse. Discourse analysts refer to such structures as 'pre-posed' or 'left-dislocated' (Geluykens 1992). The very terminology is revealing, for while both the terms are circumlocutory (because there are no ready-made grammatical terms available) they simultaneously reflect a view that the structures are unusual or deviant (because the norm from which deviations occur are those of the 'standard', written, language). Of course, such terms, and the structures to which they refer, are not at all deviant, and are regularly recorded in our data, especially in that which involves personal narrative and anecdote.

Space does not allow more detailed treatment of these two samples, but we hope to have highlighted some key features, and to have underlined that speakers make different grammatical choices according to the context in which language is used. In the mainly informal contexts in which we have collected data it is also significant that speakers regularly make choices which reflect the *interactive* and *interpersonal* nature of the communication.

Re-thinking grammar

In this section we list some of the other main grammatical features which we have identified in our data so far.

Tails

Just as there is, as we have observed, a slot at the beginning of clauses for inserting 'orientating' structures, there is also a slot at the end of clauses for particular grammatical patterns which enable a speaker to amplify or extend what has just been said. Examples from our data include.

'cos otherwise they tend to go cold, don't they, pasta
And he's quite a comic, that fellow, you know
It's very nice, that road up through Skipton to the Dales

We might note how such patterns cluster with different kinds of tags, and how they often serve to express, on the part of the speaker, some kind of affect, personal attitude, or evaluative stance towards the topic (see also Aijmer, 1989).

Reporting verbs

One structure in Sample 1 which is common in our data, but which may otherwise appear unexceptional and go unremarked upon, is the use in indirect speech reporting of the past continuous tense of the reporting verb. The example is: 'Tony was saying they should have the heating on by about Wednesday . . . '. Further examples from our data include:

I mean I was saying to Mum earlier that I'm actually thinking . . .
Yes, Pauline and Tony were telling me you have to get a taxi

Most grammars, based as they are on written and other literary sources, do not record these uses, illustrating such functions with almost exclusive

reference to a simple past tense form such as 'said' or 'told', as in 'They told me you had to get a taxi', or 'He said they should have the heating on by about Wednesday' (Yule *et al.* 1992).[2] It is difficult to account precisely for this feature, but its provenance in informal spoken data suggests that it provides speakers with a grammatical choice which has less to do with tense in the strict sense of past, present, and future time, and more to do with modality, enabling speakers to give more emphasis to the overall content of the message than to the authority, or certainty, or the precise words with which it was uttered. The recurrence of such a feature in informal talk may also suggest a lack of definiteness, which is in turn a not uncommon feature of a more interpersonal spoken grammar. However, the tentativeness with which we have just made this claim should underline that such functions are, of course, also available for choice by writers, and that more sustained and extensive descriptive analysis is needed.

Tend to The following uses of the verb *tend to* recur in our data with a frequency which cannot be ignored:

I tend not to use names, I tend to use direct names very little
'Cos otherwise they tend to go cold, don't they, pasta
But I tend to like to save my money and spend it, you know, in London

A: Have you got a local near the school?
B: Erm yeah but we don't tend to go there very often

According to most standard reference grammars, *tend to* is a minor and insignificant form of modality, but in our spoken corpus it is far from marginal.[3] Its use allows speakers to express points of view or describe habitual actions with a certain degree of tentativeness, where bald and direct statements may appear too assertive in an interpersonal context.

Tags Perhaps not unsurprisingly, given the nature of the Nottingham corpus, there is a lot of evidence concerning the use of tags, especially across speaking turns and, once again, such evidence does not consistently conform to the kinds of rules established for their use in standard descriptive grammars of English (see also Hintikka 1982). Here are some representative examples:

A: Have you noticed it always disappears?
B: Yeah it does, doesn't it?
A: I've got two now, yes it does always disappear, doesn't it

I'm gonna have an old timer with cheese I am
She's lovely she is
Frascati's nice, it's nice to drink isn't it?

In these examples there is a co-existence of positive statement and positive tags, a general clustering of tags, and a frequent repetition and restatement of propositions in tag-like forms. The overall effect is not simply to focus on what is said but also on how it is said, so that distinctly

Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter

personal and interpersonal inflections are conveyed, selected by the speakers as appropriate to the more informal and intimate context of the interaction. Such forms are particularly appropriate to contexts in which meanings are not simply stated but are the subject of negotiation and re-negotiation.

Will/be going to　Conventional descriptions of *will/be going to* concentrate on the temporal semantics of future actions/events rooted in the present (*be going to* e.g. 'I'm going to sell that car') as opposed to future actions/ events detached from the present (*will* e.g. 'Next Wednesday will be the last lesson before we break up') (Swan 1980: 250ff). Alternatively, textbooks often concentrate on speech acts such as expressing intention (*be going to*) and 'moment of decision' (*will*) (Murphy 1985: 40–2). In real spoken data, the picture is more complex, and the choice often seems to rest more on interpersonal stance than any of the considerations mentioned. Two examples highlight the difficulty of applying traditional norms:

> [Hostess late in the evening at a dinner party in her house]
> [Yawns] Oh dear I'm going to have to go to bed soon
>
> [In a restaurant]
> **A:** [to her friend] I'm gonna have the deep fried mushrooms, you like mushrooms don't you?
> [A couple of minutes later]
> **A:** [to the waiter] I'll have the deep-fried mushrooms with erm an old time burger, can I have cheese on it?

In the first example, evoking the notion of 'intention' would not make much sense, nor would the notion of 'moment of decision' if the speaker had said *will* instead (which would have been perfectly acceptable). The force of *be going to* here seems to have to do with indirectness or politeness to the speaker's guests, stressing an interpersonal function. Similarly, in the second example, 'moment of decision' seems a little misleading for the use of *will*, since it is quite clear that speaker A has already definitely decided what she is going to order when she says 'I'm going to have the deep-fried mushrooms'. The most useful line to follow would seem to be to look at *be going to* as the verb of 'personal engagement' on behalf of the speaker, whilst *will* is a more neutral, detached verb (more suitable when addressing a waiter). It is interesting to note that if the speaker had softened and personalized her deliberations with her friend by using 'I think', then *will* would have been perfectly okay ('I think I'll have ,. . . '). This line of interpretation helps to explain why the next example has *will* rather than *be going to*:

> **A:** Before you get to Skipton now they've made a branch road
> **B:** Oh have they?
> **A:** You won't know it

'You aren't going to know it', although perfectly possible, would sound too tentative and indirect on the part of speaker A; instead, A

communicates quite directly and assertively that B does not know it and does not need to know it. This interpersonal explanation also fits well with shifts in verb choice in informal radio and TV weather forecasts, from neutral prediction to interpersonally charged evaluations:

Temperatures will be below freezing, and it's going to be icy on those country roads, so do take care if you're driving [BBC Radio weather forecast]

With the westerly winds, those showers are going to march eastwards [BBC Radio weather forecast]

Once again, it seems, real spoken data pushes us away from considerations of the semantics of time and more towards interactive interpretations of verb-form choice.

Finally, we should state that, although our main interest is in spoken grammar, it is impossible to ignore the existence of particular features of vocabulary use which mark it out as belonging to spoken rather than written domains. Such features include the prevalence of vague language (Channell 1994), the extensive use of non-verbal modal expressions, the regularity of occurrence of formulaic and fixed expression, and the use of idioms, especially for purposes of positive and negative evaluation. (See also McCarthy 1992; McCarthy and Carter 1994: Ch. 3; Powell 1992.)

Implications for teaching: text-based activities

The negotiation of meanings and an assured interaction with others are frequently stated goals of communicative language teaching, and methodologies have been developed over a number of years which attempt to create appropriate classroom conditions. It is one of our basic positions in this paper that such approaches will be enhanced by consideration of the language forms which are especially salient in the communicative uses of spoken English.

One brief example of this translation from language description to classroom materials can be given with reference to the uses and functions of ellipsis, which, as indicated above, is of considerable significance in the data we have collected. The following exercise is part of a teaching sequence aimed at upper-intermediate learners. It is characterized by a use of texts rather than invented sentences, by being based on scrutiny of real spoken data, and by including tasks and questions designed to enhance both awareness of language and a questioning approach on the part of learners.

Activity 1

Before you look at this text, cover it with a piece of paper. Then slide your paper down till you reach a line across the page.

'I'm off,' she said.	a. Who could these people be?
'Don't go,' I said.	b. What is the situation?
'Where to?' I said.	
'Not far,' she said.	
'Let's talk,' I said.	
'No time,' she said.	

'Fraid so,' she said.	**a.**	Is it any easier to work out what is going on now?
'Thought so,' I said.	**b.**	Who is the person referred to in 'Guess who?'
'Guess who?', she said.		
'Don't say,' I said.		
'I must,' she said.		
'OK,' I said.		

'Your friend,' she said.
'My Vauxhall Astra,' I said.
'You knew,' she said.

(A Vauxhall Astra is a British car, and the text is an advertisement for it, from *The Independent*, 12 July 1989: 15.)

Read the dialogue from the advertisement again, and mark places where you feel more words would be needed if this was formal, written language (for example 'I thought so', instead of just 'Thought so').

Activity 2

Which of B's answers sound correct to you, and which do not?

A: Did she ring Norma?	**B:**	Hope so	a
	B:	Yes, did so	b
	B:	Think so, but I'm not sure	c
	B:	Think so, but not sure	d
	B:	'Fraid so. Sorry	e
	B:	No, didn't	f
	B:	Promised to	g

Based on your answers to a–g, which of these guidelines would be most useful to you? You may choose more than one.

i.   In informal speaking, we can leave out the subject 'I' whenever we want.
ii. In informal speaking we can leave out the subject 'I' at the beginning of any sentence.
iii. In informal speaking we can leave out the subject 'I' at the beginning of the sentence with mental verbs like 'hope', 'think', 'expect', 'believe'.
iv. We do not leave out the subject with the substitute verb 'do' as in 'she did so'.

Activity 3

Look at these two extracts from tape-recordings of people speaking. Sometimes you may feel there are words 'missing' that you would normally expect to find according to the 'rules' of written English sentences.

1 Underline places where you think words are missing.
2 What would they have said in full if they had put in all the necessary written grammar?
3 How formal do you think these situations are?
4 What rules can you make for this kind of ellipsis, based on the texts you have looked at?

[A is telling B what route he took in his car to get to B's house]

A: And I came over Mistham by the reservoirs, nice it was.
B: Oh, by Mistham, over the top, nice run.
A: Colours are pleasant, aren't they?
B: Yeah.
A: Nice run, that.

[In a fish and chip shop]
    Customer: Can I have chips, beans and a sausage?
    Assistant: Chips, beans and a sausage?
    Customer: Yeah.
    Assistant: Wrapped up?
    Customer: Open, please.

Questions for those concerned with materials development, which are raised by relatively small corpora of spoken English, might include the following:

1 To what extent should our grammar material reflect the existence of spoken grammars?
2 How far should materials design allow increasingly for the principle of grammatical choice to operate? That is, in place of or alongside structural prescription and proscription, how far can students be given more choice in the forms they use according to their assessment of the contexts, spoken and written, formal and informal, ideational and interpersonal (with all the gradations in between) in which they are making meanings?
3 What would be the implications of the notion of a grammar of choice for current work in language awareness and grammatical 'consciousness-raising'?
4 Should our concern with spoken grammars only begin at upper-intermediate or advanced levels?

From the three Ps to the three Is

There are two main conclusions to be drawn from this paper: one is mainly of relevance to descriptive language analysis, the other to considerations of pedagogy. First, much more detailed analysis is required of spoken language data. There is a parallel need for considerable refinement in the analysis of functions of particular patterns and structures. Such analysis also requires more extensive comparison with written norms, as well as a recognition that there are many intermediate categories along a continuum from spoken to written, so that we can properly describe one text as being more 'speakerly' or 'writerly' than another. This provision will allow more

Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter

precise formulation of the whole network of grammatical choices available to language users. Developing a feel for a language is, in part at least, a matter of developing sensitivity to this range.

Second, traditional and well-established methodologies may also need to be revised in the light of this description and analysis. For example, the 'three Ps' of Presentation–Practice–Production may need to be supplemented or extended to include procedures which involve students in greater language awareness of the nature of spoken and written distinctions, and thus of a range of grammatical choices across and between these modes. A 'three Is' methodology may be appropriate here, standing for Illustration–Interaction–Induction. 'Illustration' here means wherever possible examining real data which is presented in terms of choices of forms relative to context and use. 'Interaction' means that learners are introduced to discourse-sensitive activities which focus on interpersonal uses of language and the negotiation of meanings, and which are designed to raise conscious awareness of these interactive properties through observation and class discussion. 'Induction' takes the consciousness-raising a stage further by encouraging learners to draw conclusions about the interpersonal functions of different lexico-grammatical options, and to develop a capacity for noticing such features as they move through the different stages and cycles of language learning. If such procedures are developed in tandem with a syllabus in which the language presented is not wholly constructed on sentence-based, decontextualized abstractions, then teaching about the spoken language using a 'three Is' methodology has considerable potential for a more rapid acquisition by learners of fluent, accurate, and naturalistic conversational and communicative skills.

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Notes

1 Quirk *et al.* (1985: 861) describe the recoverability of entities in situational ellipsis as a 'lesser' kind of recoverability.

2 Quirk *et al.* (1985), Swan (1980), Alexander (1988), *COBUILD English Grammar* (1990), and *English Usage* (1992) make no mention of this core feature of reporting verbs in continuous form.

3 *Tend to* as a frequent modal of habituality is labelled as marginal in Quirk *et al.* (1985: 236), and not mentioned at all in Swan (1980).

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