Ten criteria for a spoken grammar

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Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter

University of Nottingham, UK

Introduction

In recent papers and books, we have reported some of the findings of our research into the grammatical characteristics of the five-million word CANCODE spoken corpus (Carter and McCarthy 1995; 1997; McCarthy and Carter 1995; 1997; Carter, Hughes and McCarthy 1998; McCarthy 1998; Hughes and McCarthy 1998). Although these works have tended to focus on specific aspects of spoken grammars, a common thread unites them: the belief that spoken grammars have uniquely special qualities that distinguish them from written ones, wherever we look in our corpus, at whatever level of grammatical category. In our work, too, we have expressed the view that language pedagogy that claims to support the teaching and learning of speaking skills does itself a disservice if it ignores what we know about the spoken language. Whatever else may be the result of imaginative methodologies for eliciting spoken language in the second-language classroom, there can be little hope for a natural spoken output on the part of language learners if the input is stubbornly rooted in models that owe their origin and shape to the written language. Even much corpus-based grammatical insight (for example the otherwise excellent early products of the University of Birmingham COBUILD corpus-project) has been heavily biassed towards evidence gleaned from written sources. It is therefore, we believe, timely to consider some of the insights a spoken corpus can offer, and to attempt to relate them more globally to the overall problem of designing a pedagogical spoken grammar. We shall do this in the form of ten principles which might inform any spoken grammar project, and, which we feel, give us a distinct purchase on this relatively recent area of pedagogical interest[i]. Each of the ten

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[i] Although we claim that widespread interest in spoken grammars is recent, we do not wish the dismiss the pioneering work of grammarians such as Palmer and Blandford (1924), who were way ahead of their time in seeing what was important for a grammar of spoken language (for examples and a brief discussion, see McCarthy 1998: 17-18). Early spoken grammars, however, did not have the benefit of large-scale computerised corpora, and it is this we refer to in our use of the words 'relatively recent'.

principles will be exemplified with extracts from the CANCODE spoken corpus. CANCODE stands for 'Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English'; the corpus was established at the Department of English Studies, University of Nottingham, UK, and is funded by Cambridge University Press, with whom the sole copyright resides. The corpus consists of five million words of transcribed conversations. The corpus tape-recordings were made in a variety of settings including private homes, shops, offices and other public places, and educational institutions (though in non-formal settings) across the islands of Britain and Ireland, with a wide demographic spread. For further details of the corpus and its construction, see McCarthy (1998).

1   **Establishing core units of a spoken grammar**

Even a cursory glance at a conversational transcript immediately raises the problem of the frequent occurrence of units that do not conform to the notion of well-formed 'sentences' with main and subordinate clauses (see Lerner 1991). Conversational turns often consist just of phrases, or of incomplete clauses, or of clauses with subordinate clause characteristics but which are apparently not attached to any main clause, etc. Hockett (1986) pertinently notes that linguists have tended to ignore such phenomena, but 'speakers and hearers do not ignore them - they carry a sizeable share of the communicative load'. Example 1 shows some of the kinds of units frequently encountered in a spoken corpus. Problematic areas for a traditional grammar are highlighted:

1.   [Speakers are sitting at the dinner table talking about a car accident that happened to the
         father of one of the speakers]
☐   <Speaker 1>   I'll just take that off. **Take that off.**
☐   <Speaker 2>   **All looks great**.
         <Speaker 3>   [laughs]
         <Speaker 2>   Mm.
         <Speaker 3>   Mm.
         <Speaker 2>   I think your dad was amazed wasn't he at the damage.
         <Speaker 4>   Mm.
         <Speaker 2>   It's not so much the parts. It's the labour charges for
☐   <Speaker 4>   ˜ **Oh that. For a car.**
         <Speaker 2>   Have you got hold of it?

                     <Speaker 1>   Yeah.

☐   <Speaker 2>   **It was a bit erm.**

                     <Speaker 1>   Mm.

                     <Speaker 3>   Mm.

☐   <Speaker 2>   **A bit.**

                     <Speaker 3>   That's right.

☐   <Speaker 2>   I mean they said they'd have to take his car in for two days. And   he   says All it is is s= straightening a panel. **And they're like**, Oh no. It's all new panel. You can't do this.

☐   <Speaker 3>   **Any erm problem.**

☐   <Speaker 2>   **As soon as they hear insurance claim**. Oh. Let's get it right.

☐   <Speaker 3>   Yeah. Yeah. **Anything to do with**+

☐   <Speaker 1>   **Yow**.

☐   <Speaker 3>   +**coach work is er**+

                     <Speaker 1>   Right.

☐   <Speaker 3>   +**fatal isn't it.**

☐   <Speaker 1>   **Now.**

Here we may observe the following phenomena:

(a) Indeterminate structures (is the second *Take that off* an elliptic form of *I'll just take that off*? Is it an imperative? Is *All looks great* well-formed? What is the status of *And they're like*?).

(b) Phrasal utterances, communicatively complete in themselves, but not sentences (*Oh that. For a car. Any problem.*)

(c) Aborted or incomplete structures (*It was a bit erm ... A bit.*)

(d) 'Subordinate' clauses not obviously connected to any particular main clause (*As soon as they hear insurance claim*)

(e) Interrupted structures with other speaker contributions intervening (*Anything to do with ... coach work is er ... fatal isn't it*)

(f) Words whose grammatical class is unclear (*Yow. Now.*)

An even more complex question arises with *joint-production* grammatical units, that is to say, where a grammatical unit is complete only when a second participant adds his/her contribution, as in example 2:

1.   [Customer and waiter in restaurant]

            <Customer>   Yeah. **Let's just have er**

            <Waiter>   ˜**Some rice**?

            <Customer>   Yeah.

These phenomena, normal in everyday talk, raise questions about the nature of basic units and classes in a spoken grammar, and the solution would seem to be to raise the status of the word, phrase and clause to that of (potentially) independent units, to recognise the potential for joint production of units, and to downplay the status of the sentence as the main target unit for communication. But the fact that well-formed sentences exist side-by-side with a variety of other types of units raises further questions too, which include: What status does the traditional notion of SVO clause structure for a language like English have in conversational data? Are the 'ellipted' utterances of conversation really just a reduced and partial form of the 'real' grammar? Or are the well-formed sentences of written texts elaborated versions of the sparse and economical basic spoken structures, elaborated because they have less contextual support in writing and therefore necessarily must increase the amount of redundancy? There is by no means a simple answer to these questions, but one's stance towards them can have major implications for what is considered correct or acceptable in a pedagogical grammar. If we accept the integrity of non-standard units in a spoken grammar, then in general terms a spoken grammar is likely to be more liberal in what it accepts as 'adequately formed', which itself may be preferable to the term 'well-formed', with its connotations of native-speaker intuition. Native speakers, when asked to judge the grammaticality of decontextualised sentences are more than likely to attempt a minimal contextualisation (something akin to a written sentence), and their judgements may have no greater validity than that (i.e. that the sentence is grammatical or ungrammatical by written standards). Corpus evidence is different from intuitive judgements: it is not 'in there' (internal, in the grammarian's or informant's head); rather it is 'out there'(external, recorded as used, and preferably supported by widespread occurrences across a number of speakers). External evidence points us towards a socially-embedded grammar, one whose criteria for acceptability are based on adequate communicability in real contexts, among real participants. It is evidence that cannot simply be dismissed as 'ungrammatical'.

2   Phrasal complexity

Pedagogical grammars generally describe the full structural complexity of any given unit (e.g. see Swan 1995: 8) on the potential sequences of adjectives before noun heads), but significant differences may exist in the distribution of potential elements in actual discourse. The noun phrase is a good case in point. Although, in English, there is considerable potential for accumulating adjectives and noun modifiers before the head noun, this rarely in fact happens in everyday conversational data. If we take the noun *house* in headword position, for example, we find 1379 occurrences of it in a 2.5 million-word sample of the CANCODE corpus. In these examples, where attributive adjectives occur, there is an overwhelming preference for simple *determiner + one adjective + noun* configurations, such as:

3.   <Speaker 1> Yeah it's **a big house**, six bedrooms
4.   <Speaker 1> It's **a large house**, lovely, just right

The longest adjectival structure which occurs with *house* is: *Detached four-bedroomed house*. It will be noted, furthermore, in examples 3 and 4, that further specification of the house is given in post-head appositional items (*six bedrooms* and *just right*). In a mixed written corpus sample of the same number of words, it is not difficult to find more complex adjectival configurations:

3.   Living in **a big, dirty communal house** eating rubbish ...
4.   The **cosy lace-curtained** house ...

The point about these examples is not what *can* be said, but what *is* routinely said. Any speaker may clearly exercise the option to create a structurally complex noun phrase in ordinary conversation, but he/she will probably be heard as at best rather formal and at worst pedantic and bookish. However, a pedagogical issue of some importance arises here: if we label structures as *said* or *not said*, we run the risk of returning to the bad old days of behaviourism, describing behaviour rather than the system of language that users make use of. A partial solution lies in how we define 'grammar'. A useful distinction can be made between deterministic grammar and probabilistic grammar. Deterministic grammar addresses structural prescription (*e.g.* that the past-tense morpheme in English is *-ed* rather than *-ing*, or that *the* precedes the noun rather than follows it). Determinism has served language teaching for centuries. Probabilistic grammar, on the other hand, considers what forms are *most likely* to be used in particular contexts, and the probabilities may be strong or weak. Itkonen (1980: 338) makes a distinction between 'correct

sentences' and 'factually uttered sentences', and that is the direction we are also pursuing here. Probabilistic grammars by definition need real data to support their statements of probability, as well as analytical evaluation to get at the form-function relationships in particular contexts, from which usable probabilistic statements can then be constructed. Probabilistic grammar as a concept has been around for some time: Halliday (1961: 259) saw the basic nature of language as probabilistic and not as 'always this and never that'. He has in recent years re-focussed on this problem, with the help of corpus evidence. His concern is principally with how often the items in binary grammatical systems (*e.g. present* versus *non-present*) actually occur in relation to each other in real data. He concludes that the statistics of occurrence are 'an essential property of the system - as essential as the terms of the opposition itself' (1991:31).   Halliday would acknowledge that a probabilistic statement such as 'single-adjective noun phrases are *x* times more frequent in corpus A than in corpus B' does not necessarily have great predictive power, but he argues that it is important for interpreting the choice of form. Halliday (1992) supports our present position in arguing for the importance of examining different probabilities of occurrence in different registers, since it is unlikely that items in binary systemic opposition will be equiprobable in a corpus of any particular register.   Halliday's disciples within the systemic-functional school of linguistics have further investigated unequal probabilities of occurrence of grammatical forms: for example, Nesbitt and Plum (1988) take a similar quantitative line in their research into the distribution of clause complexes. In our own published research (Carter and McCarthy 1999), we have used grammatical probabilities to describe the occurrence of the English *get*-passive verb phrase (e.g. *He got killed*, in contrast to *He was killed*) which occurred 139 times in a 1.5 million-word sample of CANCODE spoken data. In our sample, 124 of the 139 examples referred in some way or another to what have been called 'adversative' contexts (Chappell 1980), i.e. a state of affairs that is seen by the conversational participants as unfortunate, undesirable or problematic. This is a strong probability, but does not preclude the occurrence of utterances such as *I got picked for the county*, which is newsworthy, but not 'unfortunate' in its context (a tennis player describing the climb to success). Such 'glad-tidings' examples, however, account for less than 5% of the relevant data. Equally interesting was the fact that 130 of the 139 *get*-passive examples had no agent explicitly stated, which is another case of a structural potential simply not being realised, in 93% of the recorded occurrences. We would argue that such probabilistic statements are in fact extremely useful in a pedagogical grammar; indeed it is hard to envisage a proper description of the *get*-passive that would be pedagogically useful without including information for the learner about its overwhelming probability of occurrence in informal spoken contexts, with 'unfortunate' events,

and the *un*likelihood of the occurrence of a typical passive *by*-agent phrase.

Thus the issue of phrasal and other types of complexity and their different distribution in data may be subject to the principles of a probabilistic grammar, with the reminder that probabilities are not determinations, and that creative freedom and potential variation are always possible, in special circumstances, in order to avoid the grammar becoming overly-behaviouristic.

3   Tense, voice, aspect and interpersonal and textual meaning

Linguists have long recognised the different distributions of tense- and aspect-forms in different kinds of data. A good example of this is Waugh (1991), who looks at the distribution of the French *passé simple* (or preterite) form, which seems to be restricted to certain types of written text. One of the key factors, she asserts, is the concept of *detachment*: novels, stories, historical works, tales, legends, newspaper and magazine articles etc (where the *passé simple* is most used) 'are addressed to whom it may concern' (p243), in other words an unnamed and only vaguely conceptualised recipient. It is this interpersonal consideration rather than the pastness of events *per se* which determines the use of the detached *passé simple* form; in conversation, the same events would normally be expressed with the 'involving' present perfect tense form, projecting and reflecting a quite different set of participant relationships.

Waugh studied written data, but in spoken grammar, the fact that communication is face-to-face (or at least, in the case of phone talk, in real time to a real listener) clearly also affects grammatical choices that construct and reflect participant relationships. One such feature of the 'real listener' relationship is tentativeness and indirectness, a politeness strategy that minimises imposition and threat to face (Brown and Levinson 1987). This often manifests itself in tense and aspect choices that have traditionally been proscribed in pedagogical grammar, such as the use of progressive forms with verbs considered to be unamenable to progressive contexts, for example *want*, *like*, *have to*, etc. Progressive forms of these verbs may indeed be rare or non-existent in written data, but are by no means rare in spoken, as in examples 7 and 8, where the speakers seem to be adopting an indirect or non-assertive stance:

3.   [Telephone enquiry to travel agent]
          <Customer>   Oh, hello, my husband and I **are wanting** to go to the Hook of Holland next
                         weekend.
3.   [Speakers in a business meeting]
          <Speaker 1>   So all of that. You see, when you devolve power as they did with the

divisional structures, just all went off and did their own thing. And unfortunately **we're having to sort of come back** from that and say, Well is that the most cost effective, because we've got to cut our costs.

<Speaker 2>   Yeah.

Here, once again, we have a case for separating spoken and written grammar, and for making sure that our spoken grammar reflects the range of tense and aspect choices open to speakers to create appropriate interpersonal meanings.

The meanings created by tense and aspect choices may also be textually oriented. Such is often the case in oral narrative, where speakers exercise considerable liberty in tense and aspect choice for the dramatisation of events, or for their foregrounding and backgrounding. A considerable literature exists on tense and aspect in spoken narrative, for example see Wolfson (1978; 1979), and Schiffrin (1981) for English. For other languages, see for example Silva-Corvalán, (1983) (Spanish); Soga, (1983) (Japanese); Paprotté (1988) (Greek). This is not to say that written narratives do not also exercise freedom with tense and aspect choices (see McCarthy 1995 for some instances of this), but, once again, the distribution of such choices is different in the written and spoken modes, and the variation and rate of change from one form to another tends to be more intense in spoken narratives. Example 9 illustrates some of the typical spoken patterns:

3.   [Speaker 1 is telling a story about how difficult it was to buy his favourite ice-cream, called *Magnum* in a small, provincial English town]

<Speaker 1>   So **we're looking** in there and **we can't find** any Magnums so **we turn round** and **he actually interrupts** his phone-call to say you know what you looking for and **we said** have you got any Magnums [<Speaker 2> Mm] and **he sort of shook his head** in a way as to say no you know we don't get such things it was a complete rejection [<Speaker 3> Yeah] and we, **we sort of took a step** back from the thing and **there it was** labelled Magnum.

Such variation (here between simple past and so-called historic present or HP) is by no means random or unmotivated, but coincides with important segments of the narrative, where listeners are, as it were, taken in and out of the story-world in real time, as though they are participating in

the drama themselves.

The point to be made here about spoken grammar is that a wide range of strategies is available to speakers to create and reinforce relationships, to involve or detach their listeners, and that the verb-phrase morphology plays a key role in signalling these functions. The pedagogical grammar of the spoken language must therefore ensure that the full functional range of choices is described and made available to learners, who should not be artificially restricted by proscriptive (and incomplete) rules based only on written data.

Voice is also more subtle and varied in the grammar of everyday conversation than most teaching materials would have learners think. There is, naturally, a focus on the core *be*-passive in contrast to the active voice, but when we look at a large amount of conversational data we see that, as noted in section 2 above, the *get*-passive, massively more frequent in spoken data than in comparable amounts of written data, adds a further layer of choice, reflecting speakers' perceptions of good or bad fortune, or newsworthiness. In fact, the picture is even more complicated than that in spoken data, with the *be-* and straight *get*-passives of the type discussed in section 2 forming just two points on a gradient or cline of passiveness which involves other *get*-constructions and *have* in a variety of configurations of agent and recipient roles (on the notion of a passive gradient in English, see Svartvik 1966). Some examples follow:

3.   You see, if ever you **get yourself locked out** ...
4.   Rian **got his nipple pierced** and it was so gross.
5.   She **got me to do** a job for her, fencing.
6.   Right we've got to **get you kitted out**.
7.   The tape seems to have **got stuck**..
8.   When the police came, they called a local garage and **had two recovery vehicles free my car**.
9.   Our next-door neighbour's house was broken into again and he **had a few things stolen**.

Not only do examples 10 to 16 display different syntactic patterns (e.g. reflexive and non-reflexive objects, presence or absence of infinitive *to*) but they also display different nuances of representation, with 10 suggesting some sort of responsibility on the part of the recipient, 14 being somewhat indeterminate as between an event and a state, 15 and 16 differing in terms of volition, etc. The clear lesson is that a spoken grammar will devote detailed attention to such

complex phenomena, which might otherwise be underplayed in a grammar source only from written examples.

4   Position of clause elements

Pedagogical grammars naturally look for the most robust guidelines for the user, and rules about the positions of clause elements are extremely useful. The positions for adverbials are one such area, where recurrent errors by learners are flagged and/or warned against. The Collins Cobuild English Grammar (Collins Cobuild 1990: 282-5), although stressing the flexibility of adverbial positioning in the clause, gives the basic positions as final, initial, and medial (between subject and verb), and a warning that, for some English-speakers, split infinitives (e.g *To boldly go ...*) are unacceptable. Eastwood (1994: 265) more directly warns against incorrect placement of adverbials between verb and direct object (e.g. * *She speaks very well English.*). However, in certain spoken and written registers, most notably journalism, this latter 'rule' is regularly contradicted, in examples such as 17:

3.   Mr [name] said he will fight **vigorously** attempts to extradite him to Britain. (BBC Radio 4 news, 3.8.98)

Moreover, in casual conversation in English, there is evidence that positioning is even more flexible, brought about by the exigencies of real-time synthesising. For example, adverbials may occur after tags, and adverbs not normally considered amenable to final placement in written text regularly occur clause-finally:

3.   Spanish is more widely used isn't it **outside of Europe**?
4.   I was worried I was going to lose it and I did **almost**.
5.   You know which one I mean **probably**.
6.   [Speaker is talking about his job] It's a bit panicky but I've not got any deadlines like you have **though**.

The lesson here would seem to be that ordering of elements in the clause is likely to be different in spoken and written texts because of the real-time constraints of unrehearsed spoken language and the need for clear acts of topicalisation and suchlike to appropriately orientate the listener. It is no surprise, therefore, that we find phenomena such as fronted objects to be much more frequent in conversation than in written texts, as well as emphatic placement of adverbials in first position:

3.   **Those pipes** he said he's already disconnected; **the others** he's going to disconnect.
4.   **The eighteenth** it starts.

Even more notable in spoken data, however, are the occasions when content matter is placed outside of the core clausal positions, in the form of what have traditionally been determined 'left- and right-displaced or left- and right-dislocated' elements, or 'pre-posed and post-posed' elements. Although left-dislocated elements are most typically single noun phrases, these can fulfil a variety of functions outside of the conventional clause structure:

3.   **Paul,** in this job that he's got now, when **he** goes into the office **he**'s never quite sure where he's going to be sent**.**
4.   **A friend of mine, his** uncle had the taxi firm when we had the wedding.
5.   **His cousin in Beccles, her boyfriend**, his parents bought **him** a Ford Escort for his birthday.
6.   I mean typically, **an American**, you shake hands with an American, tell them your name and immediately they'll start using it.
7.   Well, **this little story I was going to tell you about**, I was on holiday with an elderly friend of mine in Butlins, Barry Island, South Wales, as you know, and she asked me ...

Examples 24 to 28 show the pre-placed noun phrases can provide content for the subject (24), an attribute of the subject (25), or the object (26), or can simply flag up an entity and repeat it in the upcoming clause (27), or can simply provide a broad topical framework not necessarily repeated in any subsequent element (28). Left-dislocated phenomena have been documented in a variety of languages (see eg Aijmer 1989; Geluykens 1989 for English, French and Italian; Geluykens 1992 for English; Blasco 1995 for French, Rivero 1980 for Spanish), and it is clear that such choices reflect concern on the part of the speaker to bring the listener into the appropriate frame or schema for understanding the upcoming clause (often from a person or entity known to the listener to the new person or entity that is to be the topic). One only has to think how 'unspeakable' and difficult to process similar clauses can be if uttered with the kinds of embedding often found in formal written styles (e.g. *His cousin in Beccles' boyfriend's parents bought him …*) to appreciate the naturalness of these phenomena in everyday talk. They pass without notice; conversational participants do not consider them aberrant, though they do not easily fit into the conventional bounds of the clause (hence the recourse to terminology such as 'dislocation', an issue we shall return to below in section 9).

Likewise, after conventional clause elements have been exhausted, further linguistic matter may arise on the record, as in examples 29 and 30:

3.   And **he**'s quite a comic **the fellow**, you know.
4.   (Talking about someone who has just had the disease, shingles) **It** can leave you feeling very weak, it can, though, apparently, **shingles**, can't it.

Here, noun phrase content is 'left till the end', as it were. Why should this be so? Corpus evidence suggests that these 'right-dislocated' elements have a strong evaluative function, and usually occur in contexts where speakers are expressing judgements, opinions, stance, etc. (Aijmer 1989; McCarthy and Carter 1997). It would be wrong, therefore, to dismiss such patterns as 'performance phenomena', or 'afterthoughts' (see Fretheim 1995 for a good discussion).

Our criterion here for a spoken grammar must therefore be that elements that occur in unusual word-orders as compared to written texts, and elements that do not fit easily into the conventional clause structure should not be relegated to a dusty corner of the grammar, but should be accorded proper attention, since they play key textual and interpersonal roles in conversation. That such features are not peculiar to English[ii] (on right-dislocation see Ashby 1988, 1994 on French; Heilenman and McDonald 1993 on French; Fretheim 1995 on Norwegian) and may well be universal should not tempt us to assume they will simply be automatically assimilated or transferred, and learners may need to be made explicitly aware that such patterns are licensed and perfectly normal in the target language. Exposure to only written data or absence of reference to such features in pedagogical grammars can only reinforce the prejudice that they are aberrations or irregularities of some sort.

5   Clause-complexes

In the first of our ten criteria, we raised the problem of units of description, and mentioned the issue of subordination. It is often difficult to assign to a clause the label 'subordinate'. This is

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[ii] We are often questioned as to whether right-dislocations are a peculiarity of British English, but they certainly occur in US English, as an example from National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* demonstrates: *It's the mattress money of choice, the greenback is*. (On how Russian people hoard US dollars: 8.25.98).

particularly so with what are conventionally termed non-restrictive *which*-clauses. Tao and McCarthy (1998), in a study of a corpus of British and American spoken texts, found that the majority of such clauses were evaluative in function, as typified by example 31:

3.   I can't angle it to shine on the music stand, and the bulb's gone, **which doesn't help**.

They also found that many such clauses occurred after a pause, or after feedback from a listener:

3.   <Speaker 1>   Well actually one person has applied.
        <Speaker 2>   Mm.
        <Speaker 1>   **Which is great**.

In both cases, the *which*-clause seems more like a second main clause (indeed, *which* could be substituted by *and that* in both cases, with no loss of meaning, to produce unequivocal 'main' clauses). Speakers seem sometimes to recognise this fact, and main-subordinate 'blends' occur:

3.   <Speaker 1>   Nearly a hundred quid a week. But that's the average there, you know.
        <Speaker 2>   Mm.
        <Speaker 1>   **Which it's all relative I suppose.**

In the spoken language, clause complexes need re-assessment in terms of what is to be considered 'main' and what 'subordinate'. This principle applies not only to *which*- clauses but most notably also to clauses introduced by *because/'cos*, where the same indeterminacy applies (for a good discussion of these issues of subordination, see Schleppegrell 1982).

Other types of clause complexes are rare in everyday conversation, even thought they might be quite evident in written texts. This applies to several types of combinations of main and non-finite subordinate clauses, such as those in examples 34 and 35:

3.   Both airports were clearly identified as to country, **it** be**ing** explicitly stated that Airport X lacked both radio and tower. (Cambridge International Corpus)

4.   First **staged** at the Glasgow Citizens in 1994, and **described** by Williams as being a 'comedy of death', the play sees Everett cast brilliantly against type as the rich dying widow Flora Goforth. (Cambridge International Corpus)

Once again, corpus evidence strongly argues for a re-examination of the types of clause-complexes found in spoken and written language, and the need for re-thinking the accepted descriptions of main and subordinate clauses.

6   Unpleasing anomalies

The title of this section refers to the fact that, in examining everyday spoken data, the researcher will often encounter features that go against the grain, either of the researcher's own notions of acceptability or of more general feelings among educated users of the language. Occasionally, aberrations do occur in spoken performance (as they do in writing too), but there is a difference between one-off oddities and recurrent, patterned usage distributed across a wide range of speakers and contexts in a corpus designed to reflect a broad demographic and social spectrum, as the CANCODE corpus is. When such patterns become so recurrent that they cannot just be ignored, one has to assimilate them into the grammar. We have already mentioned in section 6 *which*-clause 'blends' that challenge the usual rule of non-reduplication of the subject (example 33); these are by no means rare, and pass unnoticed in conversation. 36 is a further example:

3.   X's has had to be delayed because his teeth were slow coming, er, coming down, er, **which** fair enough, **that** was just one of those things, it was unavoidable.

Even more widespread are utterances that seem to contain 'double negatives', but which are natural and common in the speech of all social and regional groups:

3.   It should fit there, cos it's **not** that big I **don't** think.
4.   \<Speaker 1\>   We probably won't see much wildlife.
         \<Speaker 2\>   **Not** without binoculars we **won't**.

Both (37) and (38) occur in comment clauses, and this may be significant in opening the option of apparent 'double negativity'. It is such potential correlations that spoken grammarians have to

take into account when attempting to explain grammatical choices that defy traditional, written norms, rather than dismissing the spoken examples as aberrant.

Another kind of apparent anomaly that recurs on the corpus across a wide range of speakers are conditional clause complexes that challenge the rule that excludes a modal verb from the conditional clause:

3.   If I**'d have** stopped I probably would have wondered what she was going to say. (Instead
            of *if I **had** stopped ...*)

The important criterion here for a spoken grammar is that 'irregularities' and anomalies that may go against the grammarian's instincts concerning correctness or acceptability should first be checked as to their distribution across speakers and contexts, and where a sufficient number of examples from different speakers in different contexts suggest that a feature is normal and widespread, then it should be entered in the grammar, even though it may still be deemed unacceptable in more formal contexts or in writing.

7   Larger sequences

In a recent study, McCarthy (1998: chapter 5) looked at grammatical patterns spanning several sentences or whole paragraphs in written texts and several clauses and/or speaker turns in spoken texts. Based on earlier research, such as that of Zydattiss (1986) and Celce-Murcia (1991), McCarthy looked at how sequential patterns of verb tense and aspect varied between spoken and written texts. In some cases, the patterns were the same in both modes, as with the *used to*-plus-*would* sequence, where, in both written and spoken texts, initial *used to* provides a contextual frame for the interpretation of subsequent uses of *would* as 'past habitual':

3.   [Speakers 1 and 2 are describing how they partook in a consumer survey which involved
            a remote computer automatically ringing their home telephone to collect data in the
            middle of the night]
            <Speaker 1>   They **used to** you know ring up early hours of the morning, well you
                          would, the phone **wouldn't** ring, they**'d** ring that computer.
            <Speaker 2>   And they**'d** read it.
            <Speaker 3>   Yeah.
            <Speaker 2>   And it**'d** go through the phone.

Exactly the same sequence occurs in literary texts, as McCarthy (1998: 99) demonstrates. However, a common written (and formal spoken) pattern in news texts, involving initial *be to*-plus-*will*, as in example 41, is extremely rare in everyday conversation outside of formal contexts such as meetings, etc.:

3.   ELECTRICITY CHIEFS TO AXE 5,000

Five thousand jobs **are to** be axed by electricity generating firm National Power, it was announced yesterday.

Smaller power stations **will** close but bosses pledged no compulsory redundancies over the next five years.

(*Daily Mirror*, 27.7.90:2)

The same functional sequence of broad reference to determined future events followed by details seems to have as its nearest equivalent in spoken language the sequence *going to*-plus-*will:*

3.   [<Speaker 1> is a health-service worker informing <Speaker 2> about a new `patient's handbook' that they are producing]

<Speaker 1> I'm sort of chairing the working group, em [laughs] a document that, that it's official name **is going to** end up being something like Patient Handbook [<Speaker 2> Yeah] but at the moment it, it's lovingly known as the alternative Gideon [<Speaker 2> [laughs]] you**'ll** find it on the locker next to the bed or something, yeah.

Observation of extended patterns such as these naturally depend on the willingness of the grammarian to look beyond the bounds of the sentence (or the immediate speaker turn in spoken texts), in other words to take a discourse-grammar perspective (Hughes and McCarthy 1998). The criterion we wish to press home here is that grammatical patterns exist across longer stretches of text, and that we must take a discoursal perspective that goes beyond the sentence or immediate utterance to establish the degree of overlap or otherwise in such patterns in written and spoken language.

8   The comparative criterion

This criterion follows directly from section 8. So far in this chapter we have emphasised difference, that a spoken grammar is in some crucial ways quite a different animal from a written one. Section 8 shows that the strong form of such a view is misleading, however. Quite clearly,

much grammar overlaps between spoken and written, and it would be a disservice to our learners to have them believe that everything has to be learnt from square one when the 'speaking skills' component of the syllabus comes on stream. What is need is a thorough examination of a spoken corpus *side by side* with a good, balanced written one, so that relevant differences can be revealed, and entered into the grammar wherever necessary. An example of this might be a comparison of conjunctions as they occur in a spoken corpus and a written one. A pedagogical grammar entry might resemble the following:

Linking in written and spoken English

Some conjunctions are particularly associated with written or spoken registers and particular positions in those registers. For example **on the contrary** is very rare in informal conversation. In written English it is more common and usually occurs in front (or much less frequently in mid-) position:

  *He had no private understanding with Mr X. **On the contrary** he knew very little of him.*

On the other hand occurs frequently in both spoken and written. But the concessive adverbial **then again** (always in front position) is much more frequent in spoken than in written:

  *If it had been at the bottom of a councillor's street then I don't think it would ever have been built. But **then again** that goes on all the time.*

Other conjunctions more common in written than spoken include **accordingly, moreover, furthermore, duly, therefore, as a consequence, in the event**.

Other conjunctions more common in spoken than written include **what's more, as I say, because of that, in the end.**

By the same token, there should be some way of indicating (perhaps as the default condition) areas of the grammar which do not differ from the written usage (e.g. the *used to*-plus-*would* pattern illustrated in section 7). The comparative criterion is thus a practical one, designed to lessen the load and learning fears for the learner confronting a spoken grammar for the first time. However, a final point needs to be made in relation to written corpora: it is relatively easy to incorporate newspapers and other journalistic texts into a corpus because of ease of availability, access on the Internet, etc, but a good written corpus should be as widely sourced as possible to include the kinds of texts people read as a matter of daily routine (not just quality newspapers). This would include mailshots, tabloid news, magazines, Web pages, e-mails, signs, notices and advertisements, etc. Some of these types of written discourse have evolved or are evolving more towards spoken styles, and it may be that the traditional conventions of written grammar, as

based on highly literate authors, are not necessarily as highly represented in such text-types as we might think, and research with such a balanced corpus might yield a better picture of the cline of usage that exists between formal, literary and technical texts at one extreme, and casual conversational ones at the other (see Biber 1988 for an excellent example of such comparative research).

9   Metalanguage

Throughout this chapter we have struggled, in some places more visibly than others, with a metalanguage that has not always been up to the task of describing the phenomena we would wish to embrace in a spoken grammar. This has been particularly noticeable in the discussions on units and on subordinate and main clauses, where we have often used scare quotes to hide our unease with the terminology. A metalanguage inherited from written-based grammars brings with it its own metaphors and assumptions which can often create dissonance when applied to spoken data. Nowhere was this more apparent for us than in section 5, where we looked at left- and right-dislocated elements. For one thing, we are unhappy with the notion of 'dislocation' or 'displacement', since it suggests either that something has been 'moved' or that it is not in its 'rightful' place. We see no evidence in real contexts that anything is in an abnormal position or that real language users have any problems with such forms when they occur. And yet we are at a loss to find a better term to described the phenomena. In a book in which we offer extracts from the CANCODE corpus for class use, we suggest *heads* (or *topics*) and *tails* as appropriate metaphors for left- and right-dislocation respectively (Carter and McCarthy 1997: 16 and 18), but many may find these terms equally unsatisfactory. What we are in no doubt about is that the metaphors of 'left' and 'right' are page-driven (and even, for that matter, western-alphabet page-driven, since other major world writing systems compose their pages vertically or from right-to-left), and totally inappropriate to spoken language, which has no 'left' or 'right', only a 'now', a 'before' and a 'next'. In this respect, the metaphor of pre- and post-posing, as used by Hallidayan grammarians, is slightly less misleading. We do not consider the discussion of metalanguage to be a splitting of hairs: metaphors are powerful, and the metaphor of the page as the repository of language is an overbearing one in our western cultures. Now that we can investigate language other than on the page (though admittedly, corpus linguists still tend to work with transcripts rather than original audio tapes), we urgently need to evolve a shared metalanguage amongst the applied linguistic professions that will adequately give form to our understandings of the grammar of everyday talk. Our ninth criterion for a spoken grammar is, therefore, a careful

reflection on the metalanguage to be used, and an attempt to devise one that can communicate the special characteristics of the grammar of speech.

10   Native and non-native users

Our final criterion relates to the notion of authority in grammatical description. Put simply, the issue is: who is to be the voice of authority with regard to a spoken grammar? The question arises because, in the past, societies have looked to their most highly literate members (usually great writers) in the quest for the establishment of standards of correctness in grammar. No such obvious authorities exist for the grammar of conversation. Equally, we have to take into account that, whereas in writing language users tend to strive towards standard norms within any linguistic community (such that in English, for instance, there are standard written norms embracing the United Kingdom, rather than a 'northern British', say, or 'west-country' norm), in informal speech variety is of the essence (in the case of Britain there are indeed northern and west-country styles of speaking, along with many others). Variety in this case also includes phonological variation, and this can affect grammatical items as much as lexical ones (e.g the various British pronunciations of the negative form of *I am*: /ˀ₉ ˀ₉:nt/, /ˀ₉ eɪnt/, /ˀ₉ aemnt/, etc.). The evidence of a spoken corpus is only as reliable as the design of the corpus, and thus, as we have already alluded, great care must be taken to ensure that any entry in the spoken grammar is represented in a wide range of speakers of any broadly based linguistic community as defined by the grammarian for practical purposes (e.g. north American English, Mexican Spanish, Swiss German, etc.).

However, in the case of widely used languages such as English, Mandarin Chinese or Spanish, a further question arises, and that is: should the spoken grammar of a language be that of the speakers of the original, colonising language, or should it be that of its present-day users? This issue is particularly acute in the case of English, which has taken over as *lingua franca* in numerous domains across the globe, such that it is no longer controversial to speculate that its native speakers are in a minority amongst the total number of its daily users. There are extreme answers to the question posed, and some less extreme. One extreme answer is to say that one norm is required, and that that norm should emanate from the dominant colonising community (candidates for which, in different parts of the world, in the case of English, would be British, American, or Australian varieties). This answer is quite understandably offensive to many highly proficient or near-native users of English in communities where robust local varieties have evolved (e.g. Malaysian English). Another extreme answer is to say that a spoken grammar

should be as varied as its users. Clearly there are both practical and theoretical problems here, since this would require a massive collection of data beyond the resources of most organisations (though the ICE corpus project at present comes the closest to achieving this aim; see Nelson 1996), and since it is theoretically very difficult to delimit the boundaries of varieties (we have suggested how difficult it is simply to delimit a variety called 'British spoken English'). Compromise solutions include targeting those nations where a language such as English has official status and is in daily use, but such a solution excludes the millions of business and professional users of English who communicate in our new global village in spoken English. The most realistic solution, at least for the present, would seem to be to have a variety of spoken corpora (some country-based, some more regionally or globally based, some native-speaker, some non-native, some mixed, etc.), which could be cross-compared to establish a core set of grammatical features in wide international usage.

Shifting the balance away from the native speakers of colonising communities has important implications for the basic concept and status of the native speaker. Just as a corpus of non-native speaker speech will contain a wide range of speakers of varying degrees of proficiency, so too will any native-speaker corpus, and it becomes more difficult and complicated to decide who are the most 'expert' users of a language like English, since many non-native users will clearly be more proficient communicators and users of English than many native speakers. We thus alter the focus and enter the territory of *expert users* of a language as those to whom we may look to as models, regardless of their status as native or non-native speakers. We have no easy way at the moment of distinguishing who these users are; we have no spoken equivalent of an international 'literary canon' of English. Nor perhaps should we even consider going down that path if we wish to be truly democratic in our description of English, in which case we are left with the (probably limited) resources of whatever corpora are available to us, and reliance on statistical evidence across groups of users (native and non-native), without evaluation of their expertise as users, as to what should and should not be included in a more internationally-motivated grammar of spoken English.

Our tenth criterion thus leaves us with more questions than answers, but it is no less important for that. The point to be underscored here is that the spoken language raises more immediate questions about the authority of its users than does the written, and where languages have become international *lingua franca*, the question of variation will almost certainly be uppermost. It is one which corpus linguistics can only partially solve, and one which raises as many

ideological questions as linguistic ones.

Conclusion

The need to investigate spoken grammars is, we believe, an urgent one within the language teaching profession. Already committed as most of us are to a communicative methodology that stresses the importance of speaking skills, any well-evidenced information about how people actually use grammar in everyday talk must be a bonus to us. What is more, in world where communications are developing so rapidly, it can only be a matter of years before anyone, anywhere in the world, can speak directly to anyone else in real time, easily and cheaply. In that world, spoken language, and the mastery of *lingua franca* (whether it be English or whatever replaces it) will be an empowering skill. We have argued that spoken grammar highlights the textual and interpersonal aspects of messages because of its face-to-face nature; it would be a severe injustice if we, as a profession, refused to investigate its grammar, or closed our eyes to what we can know about how real users use it in everyday life in order to help our learners become better global communicators. Our ten criteria are probably not the only possible ones, and the reader is invited to add his/her eleventh or twelfth, but the ten we have discussed have served the present authors as useful constraints in our own research and the applications we have made and are making of that research in the practical arena (see Carter, Hughes and McCarthy, 1999). We certainly view the design and implementation of spoken grammars as one of the most challenging areas in the practice of language teaching today.

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