

Introduction to grammar and spoken English

SPOKEN LANGUAGE

82

Until recently, items and structures most typically found in spoken communication have not been fully described. Most grammars of English have had a bias towards the written language. It is only recently that advances in audio-recording and associated technology have made it possible for sufficient quantities of spoken language to be used for analysis.

This chapter focuses on spoken English in its own right. Most chapters of this grammar book include mention of differences between spoken and written grammar and aspects of context that affect choices of grammar. Those chapters give more detailed examples of items and structures described in this chapter.

It is difficult fully to represent spoken grammar in a written book. Although the corpus used as the source of examples in this book provides useful evidence of spoken usage, the corpus has not been systematically coded for phonetic and prosodic features. Variations in stress, intonation contour, voice quality and other aspects such as loudness and tempo, rhythm and length of pauses are not indicated. And the citations from the corpus are presented in written form so that there always remains an underlying bias towards writing in the transcription itself.

This bias towards written language also means that appropriate terms for describing special features of spoken grammar are not always available in existing grammatical frameworks. In some cases new terminology has to be introduced. An example is the use of the terms *headers* and *tails* in 96–97.

The chapters on spoken English in this book are constructed on the basis of four main features of spoken language:

- 1 Spoken language happens in real time and is typically unplanned.
- 2 Spoken language is most typically face to face.
- 3 Spoken language foregrounds choices which reflect the immediate social and interpersonal situation.
- 4 Spoken language and written language are not sharply divided but exist on a continuum.

The four features overlap. For example, the very fact that spoken language typically occurs face to face means that it is usually unplanned. It should also be acknowledged that written language involves social and interpersonal choices, for example in the writing of personal letters or emails, or in constructing persuasive arguments.

EVERYDAY INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS

83

The following extract from an informal, casual conversation illustrates several of the important features of informal spoken grammar. The features are used regularly by speakers of British English across different regions and contexts of

use and by speakers of different ages, genders, social classes and occupations. Potentially problematic areas for a traditional, written-based grammar book are highlighted in bold.

[Four speakers are sitting at the dinner table talking about a car accident that happened to the father of one of the speakers. At the end of this sequence they switch to another topic. *I'll just take **that** off* and *Have you got hold of **it**?* are references to a large pan which is on the dinner table.]

The = sign indicates an utterance which is cut short

The + sign indicates an interrupted turn which continues at the next + sign

A: *I'll just take that off. **Take that off.***

B: ***All looks great.***

C: [laughs]

B: *Mm.*

C: *Mm.*

B: *I think your dad was amazed wasn't he at the damage.*

A: *Mm.*

B: *It's not so much the parts. It's the labour charges for=*

D: ***Oh that. For a car.***

B: *Have you got hold of **it**?*

A: *Yeah.*

B: ***It was a bit erm=***

A: *Mm.*

C: *Mm.*

B: ***A bit.***

A: *That's right.*

B: ***I mean** they said they'd have to take his car in for two days. And he said all it is is straightening a panel. **And they're like,** 'Oh no. It's all new panel. You can't do this'.*

C: ***Any erm problem.***

B: ***As soon as they hear insurance claim.** Oh. Let's get it right.*

C: ***Yeah. Yeah. Anything to do with+***

A: ***Wow.***

C: ***+coach work is er+***

A: ***Right.***

C: ***+fatal isn't it.***

A: ***Now.***

The following features can be observed:

- 1 Sentences in the written sense (i.e. units beginning with capital letters, consisting of at least one main clause and ending in a full stop) are difficult to identify in spoken language. What seems more important is the production of adequate communicative units and the taking of turns rather than the transition from one sentence to another.
- 2 Speech is marked by small units of communication often consisting of just single words or phrases, rather than complete sentences, and these units may be separated by pauses, intakes of breath, falls and rises in pitch, and so on (e.g. *Oh that. // Right. // Any problem.*).

- 3 The minimal unit of communication is the tone unit, which consists of at least one intonation contour which ends in a rising or falling tone. If a unit does not have one such intonation contour, it is heard as incomplete. A tone unit typically coincides with a clause, hence the clause may be considered the basic unit of grammar in spoken language, but tone units can also be phrases or single words:

Complete tone units: stressed syllables in bold capitals

I'm **LOOK**ing for a **PEN**cil.

AREn't you **REA**dy?

I **KNOW**! it's **CRA**zy!

(two tone units: two falling tones)

DID she?

ANYway.

ME?

Incomplete tone units: stressed syllables in capitals

I'm **LOOK**ing for a ...

(incomplete because no rising or falling tone is present, only a level tone)

DID she ...

- 4 Speakers' turns, unlike written sentences, are not neat and tidy. The speakers regularly interrupt each other, or speak at the same time, intervene in another's contribution or overlap in their speaking turns. And any transcript of a real conversation is much less tidy than the layout of a dialogue in a drama script or in a course book for learning a language.
- 5 Listeners are not just passive recipients. There are back-channel items (e.g. *Mm, Yeah*), by which listeners give feedback, and other (normally supportive) responses (e.g. *Right*).
- 6 There are abandoned or incomplete structures (e.g. *It was a bit erm ... A bit.*). 'Incomplete' structures rarely cause any problem of understanding, and can be collaboratively completed by others. For example, the utterance *For a car* shows one speaker completing the utterance of another.
- 7 References to people and things in the immediate situation may be incomprehensible to an outsider reading the transcript. The speakers say *Take that off* and *Have you got hold of it?* Without being present at the time of speaking or without a considerable amount of previous text, it is not clear at all to an outsider what *that* and *it* refer to, or *off* where it is supposed to be removed.
- 8 'Subordinate' clauses are present but they are not always obviously connected to any particular main clause (e.g. the clause *As soon as they hear insurance claim*).
- 9 There are structures which are difficult to label (is the second *Take that off* an ellipted form of *I'll just take that off*? Is it an imperative? What is the status of *And they're like*? *Like* appears to function here to mark a direct speech report (i.e. *And they said ...*). (For this use of *like*, → 49 and 501e.)

- 10 Ellipsis is common (e.g. [it] *All looks great.*). Ellipsis occurs when words usually considered 'obligatory' (e.g. a subject for a verb in a declarative clause) are not needed because they can be understood from the immediate context or from the knowledge which is shared between speakers. For speakers and listeners, there are no words 'missing', and what we call ellipsis is simply an economical and sufficient form of communication which is different from the typical grammar of written English, where greater elaboration and specification is usually necessary because the written text is usually being read at a different time and place from when it was created.
- 11 Some 'words' have an uncertain status as regards grammar. (e.g. *Wow. Now.*) For example, *wow* has an exclamative function, showing the speaker's reaction to something that has been said or that has happened, and seems to stand on its own. *Right* and *now* at the end of the extract seem to be organisational or structural (rather than referring to time), functioning to close down one topic or phase of the conversation and to move on to another phase. This use of *right* and *now* is a discourse-marking use. Such frequent words often connect one phase of the discourse with another and are outside of 'grammar' when grammar refers to the structure of phrases, clauses and sentences. → 113 Interjections and 106 Discourse markers
- 12 Despite these special characteristics of spoken transcripts, it is important to remember that the majority of grammatical items and structures are equally at home in speech and writing. In this chapter the emphasis will be on those structures which are most frequently found in the everyday informal conversations in the spoken corpus used in the creation of this book and which differ most markedly from the grammar of the texts in the written corpus.

THE NOTION OF STANDARD SPOKEN GRAMMAR

84

The term 'standard grammar' is most typically associated with written language, and is usually considered to be characteristic of the recurrent usage of adult, educated native speakers of a language. Standard grammar ideally reveals no particular regional bias. Thus 'Standard British English' grammar consists of items and forms that are found in the written usage of adult educated native speakers from Wales, Scotland and England and those Northern Irish users who consider themselves part of the British English speech community.

The typical sources of evidence for standard usage are literary texts, quality journalism, academic and professional writing, etc. Standard grammar is given the status of the official record of educated usage by being written down in grammar books and taught in schools and universities.

Spoken transcripts often have frequent occurrences of items and structures considered incorrect according to the norms of standard written English. However, many such forms are frequently and routinely used by adult, educated native speakers. Examples of such structures are split infinitives (e.g. *We decided to immediately sell it*), double negation (e.g. *He won't be late I don't think*, as compared to *I don't think he will be late*), singular nouns after plural measurement expressions (e.g. *He's about six foot tall*), the use of contracted forms such as *gonna* (*going to*), *wanna* (*want to*), and so on.

Standard spoken English grammar will therefore be different from standard written English grammar in many respects if we consider 'standard' to be a description of the recurrent spoken usage of adult native speakers. What may be considered 'non-standard' in writing may well be 'standard' in speech.

Speech and writing are not independent. Although some forms of spoken grammar do not appear in writing (unless in written dialogues), there is considerable overlap and there is an increasing range of forms appearing in informal written texts which previously were only considered acceptable in speech. In 120 the presence of typically spoken grammatical forms in such contexts as emails and internet chat-room exchanges is discussed.

Grammatical acceptability

85

In this book the following criteria* are adopted for grammatical acceptability in British English to determine whether or not an item or structure is included. 'Widespread' here means across speakers of both genders and across a wide range of ages and social and regional backgrounds.

- Included: in widespread use in both the written and spoken corpus (most forms are in this category).
- Included: in widespread use in both the written and spoken corpus but not approved in more prescriptive grammar books and often avoided by many writers of formal English, for example, split infinitives, stranded prepositions (e.g. *That's the woman I gave it to*, compared with *That's the woman to whom I gave it*).
- Included: rare or not occurring in the written corpus but widespread and normal in the spoken corpus (→ for example, 96 Headers and 97 Tails), and vice versa.
- Not included: regionally or socially marked in the written and/or spoken corpus but widespread and normal within major regional/social varieties of British English (→ for example, the use of *ain't*, 119b).
- Not included: non-occurring and unacceptable in all varieties of British English (for example a structure such as *he did must speak*).

SPOKEN GRAMMAR AND REAL-TIME COMMUNICATION

86

Unplanned speech

86a

Spoken language is normally unplanned. There are occasions when what is said is memorised or read aloud from a script, but speech mainly takes place in real time. It is 'online' communication, it is spontaneous and there is normally very little time for advance planning.

Because thinking time is limited, pauses, repetitions and rephrasings are common. The flow of a communication may also be affected by interruptions or by overlaps with other speakers or by external factors in the speech situation (e.g. a phone ringing may take someone temporarily away).

In writing there are usually opportunities to plan and hierarchically structure the text. The writer can usually rephrase or edit what is written. In speech, utterances are linked together as if in a chain. One piece of information follows after another and speakers have few opportunities for starting again.

Structures which are often quite complex in writing (e.g. heavily modified noun phrases, embedded clauses) are often simplified in real-time informal speech. Some examples are discussed here and in **94 Situational ellipsis**.

Pronouns

The 'online' nature of spoken communication means that pronouns are often preferred to nouns. Pronouns are only rarely modified and are therefore easier to construct and allow speed of communication. They also indicate the shared context of the speakers and reflect the face-to-face nature of the communication, where references are often to persons and things in the immediate situation.

Pronouns referring to things in the shared context are in bold in this extract:

[four people are assembling a child's portable bed, for which they have instructions]

A: *It should fit there cos **it's** not that big I don't think.*

B: *It's warm in here, shall I turn **that** down?*

A: *We've got the instructions anyway.*

C: *I thought you'd organised **it** ... just put **it** by the window or something.*

D: *D'you want me to take **that**?*

B: *Ooh ... then there's bedding for about ten people here [laughs].*

Full noun phrases

The use of multiple modifiers before a head noun in a noun phrase rarely happens in everyday informal speech. Speakers are alert to the constraints which listeners are under in processing information. In informal conversation there is an overwhelming preference for a very simple structure of determiner (+ one adjective) + noun such as:

*Yeah it's **a big house, six bedrooms**.*

(compare the possible alternative: *It's a big, six-bedroom house.*)

*It's **a large house**, lovely, just right.*

However, in writing, it is not difficult to find more complex adjectival structures:

*Living in **a big, dirty, communal house** eating rubbish ...*

*The **cosy, lace-curtained** house ...*

Simple noun phrases are not a *rule* of spoken grammar, but it is a very strong tendency. Any speaker may use a structurally complex noun phrase in spoken communication (for example in a public speech or presentation), but in casual conversation they will probably be heard as rather formal. Similarly, a writer may wish to create a more informal, interactive and dialogic style and may make such choices for different expressive purposes.

Phrasal chaining

The constraints of thinking-time mean that speaker turns typically contain phrasal chunks of information built up in stages, often by means of sequences of adjective phrases or of simple noun phrases. This accounts for the basic

characteristic of spoken grammar as being more like the strung-together coaches of a train or links of a chain rather than a carefully constructed hierarchy of embedded structures, one inside the other:

*For that time of year you need a polo-shirt or something, **light, cool**, you know **short sleeves, cotton**.*

(compare: a light, cool, short-sleeved, cotton shirt)

*I mean Andy is very **talented** ... **good teacher, good diplomat, nice bloke**.*

(compare: Andy is a nice, talented, good, diplomatic person and teacher.)

→ 167–175 **The noun phrase**, 197–212 **Pronouns** and 140–154 **Grammar and academic English** for a wider range of examples of premodification and postmodification with reference to nouns and pronouns in both spoken and written contexts

→ also 236–241 **Adjectives and adjective phrases**

CLAUSE COMBINATION

87

Real-time communication

87a

One of the most notable features of clause combination in informal spoken English is the way in which clauses are strung together in a sequence with one clause unit added to another in a non-hierarchical way.

The needs of real-time communication do not allow the speaker time to construct over-elaborate patterns of main and subordinate clauses. Much more common are sequences of clauses linked by coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*) or by simple subordinating conjunctions such as *because* (frequently contracted to *cos*) and *so*, which often function more like coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions:

[the speaker is talking about her friend, Melanie, who was looking for a part-time job]

*Well, no, Melanie's actually still a student **and** she still has ten hours of lectures a week, **so** she works in McDonald's in her spare time **cos** she needs the money **and** she works in McDonald's in Hatfield ...*

[the speaker is describing a motor accident in which she was involved]

*I was driving along talking to Sue **and** we'd, like, stopped at some traffic lights **and** then – bang – there was this almighty crash **and** we got pushed forward all of a sudden.*

[speakers are talking about discrepancies in a colleague's wages]

A: *I bet they've paid her for Sunday not paid her for the Bank Holiday, Friday and Monday. **Cos** that would make your nine hours wouldn't it.*

B: *Yeah. **Cos** she's got the Saturday down the same as I did **cos** we all did the Saturday.*

Informal spoken English includes subordinate clauses that occupy complete speaker turns. Such clauses often occur in conversation when one speaker takes over and maintains another speaker's topic or when another speaker provides a further comment. They often occur after a pause, or after brief feedback from a listener and often function to evaluate what has been said (such clauses are in bold in the examples below):

A: *So I turned round and chased after him.*

B: ***Just as I would have done.***

[talking about what is covered in an insurance policy]

A: *Oh I – I don't remember.*

B: *I just got liability.*

A: *Just liability.*

B: ***Which is good enough.*** *At least it's insured.*

(comment after feedback from the listener)

A: *Well actually one person has applied.*

B: *Mm.*

A: ***Which is great.***

A: *They charge nearly a hundred pounds a week. But that's the average there, you know.*

B: *Mm.*

A: ***Though it's all relative I suppose.***

For further examples → 123–139 Grammar across turns and sentences

Sometimes clausal 'blends' occur. A blend is a syntactic structure which is completed in a different way from the way it began. The blend is, however, usually communicatively complete, effective and easily understood:

In fact, that's why last year they rented a nice house, in er Spain, was it, is that it was near the airport.

(more likely in writing or careful speech: The reason they rented a nice house in Spain last year was that it was near the airport.)

They've nearly finished all the building work, hasn't it?

(more likely in writing or careful speech: They've nearly finished all the building work, haven't they? Or: All the building work has been finished, hasn't it?)

The nature of spontaneous speech means that items often appear in positions that are dictated by communicative needs and by people's thoughts as they unfold. Compared with written English, in much casual conversation in English, positioning is generally more flexible.

Adjuncts may occur after tags, and adjuncts which do not normally occur in end position in written text regularly occur in end position in informal speech:

*Spanish is more widely used isn't it **outside of Europe**?*

(compare: Spanish is more widely used outside of Europe, isn't it?)

*I was worried I was going to lose it and I did **almost**.*

(compare: I was worried I was going to lose it and I almost did.)

*You know which one I mean **probably**.*

(compare: You probably know which one I mean.)

*Are my keys in the door **still**?*

(compare: Are my keys still in the door?)

PAUSING, REPEATING AND RECASTING

89

Pausing

89a

Pauses can be unfilled or filled. An unfilled pause is simply a silence, normally only a silence of a second or two. Longer silences are rare in casual conversations and may be heard as problematic by participants. Unfilled pauses tend to occur when a shift in topic or a change in direction is about to occur. They often coincide with syntactic boundaries such as clause units:

Pauses of longer than one second are indicated by dots [...]

A: *I spoke to her last night and ... well, she's not going to take the job.*

B: *How is he taking the divorce thing?*

A: *Okay, I suppose ... Are you planning on shopping this afternoon?*

A filled pause is marked by a vocalisation such as *er* or *erm* (also written as *uh* and *um*) or a lexical form such as *like*, *well*, *you know*. A filled pause can mark a shift in topic, especially when accompanied by discourse markers such as *right* or *well* or *okay* (which commonly initiate a new stretch of discourse). They may also often indicate that speakers have not finished what they want to say and wish to continue:

*I suppose, **er**, she'll, she'll take over next week then?*

[A is on the telephone, then finishes that conversation (*Bye bye.*) and speaks to B (*Sorry about that.*)]

A: *Thanks ever so much. Bye bye. Sorry about that.*

B: *That's okay. **Er, right**, where were we?*