

TESOL FRANCE 2007

THE LOGIC OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE, AND HOW TO TEACH IT

A IS THERE A GRAMMAR OF SPOKEN ENGLISH?

(Much of the content of this talk can be found in Willis, D. *Rules, Patterns and Words* CUP 2003 (*Chapter 9*) and Willis D. and J. Willis *Doing Task-based Learning* OUP 2007 *Chapter 7*)

1 Three possibilities

View 1: Spoken English has no grammar at all: it is grammatically inchoate.

(That view) ...does not need to be taken seriously, although it is surprisingly persistent in the mind of the folk grammarian.

View 2: Spoken English does not have a special grammar: its grammar is just the same as the grammar of written English

...conversational grammar is seen to be just a rather special implementation of the common grammar of English: a discovery which does not necessarily in any way diminish the interest of studying the grammar (i.e. the grammatical use) of spoken language.

View 3: Spoken English does have a special grammar - it has its own principles, rules and categories, which are different from those of the written language.

In handling spoken language, (David) Brazil ... argues for a linear model moving dynamically through time, and puts aside the more traditional architectural model in terms of hierarchies of units. Although Carter and McCarthy do not take this thorough-going approach, they do throw the spotlight on grammatical features of spoken language which they feel have been largely neglected by standard grammars entrenched in the 'written tradition'.

(Leech 1998 *English Grammar in Conversation*)

<http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/english/chairs/linguist/real/independent/llc/Conference1998/Papers/Leech/Leech.htm>

Comment: I believe Leech is misinterpreting Brazil in ascribing to him the view that the grammar of speech is quite different from the grammar of written English. Brazil certainly believes that current grammars are based on written English and that cannot account for many of the features of the spoken language. But he is quite explicit in his claim that, in principle, it is possible to devise a grammar of speech which will also encompass the written form:

This book, then, is a 'grammar of speech' in that it is a grammar which gives due consideration to those circumstances in which speech is characteristically produced. There

is no intended implication in the title that the resulting formalism will be any less capable of accommodating written English than spoken English. (Brazil 1995: 12)

So Brazil's claim is that it is, in principle, possible to devise a grammar of speech which will also encompass a description of the spoken form of the language. In order to achieve this, however, we need to get away from the kind of description which, Brazil argues, is the invariable outcome of grammars based on writing.

Such grammars, he claims, regard language as product. They are based on the post facto description of sentences. He takes a Chomskyan grammar as typical of this approach. Such as description is, he believes based on the assumption that:

Knowledge of one's language comprises one's knowledge of how all the sentences of the language are recognized as sentences and of how to make and interpret them as such.

He contrasts this with an alternative assumption:

Knowledge of one's language comprises one's ability to engage in those communicative events with which one is from time to time confronted. (Brazil 1995: 9)

Following from this Brazil's grammar of speech is a process grammar. He sets out to produce a description which accounts for the way in which we produce and interpret sentences word-by-word in real time. His basic unit is not a sentence, but a unit of communication roughly parallel to a phonological tone unit. Brazil takes as data a story produced in relatively informal spoken English and uses the description to account for the way such a stretch of language might be produced and interpreted in real time, word by word. Having tried it out for myself I can attest that the description is also capable of accounting in the same way for written language.

If, however, we start from a sentence based product grammar we can only account for speech by listing ways in which that grammar fails to account for many of the features of spoken language, and then listing those features in the way that Carter and McCarthy do. One of the problems with this procedure is that highlighting such features in this way seems to suggest that they are aberrations or oddities of some sort. In fact nothing could be farther from the truth. The most essential feature of language is its ability to adapt rapidly to changing demands in all kinds of ways. Any product description which fails to take this into account must be seriously flawed.

Unfortunately David Brazil died shortly after the publication of *A Grammar of Speech* and was unable to carry it through. Any young linguist looking for a lifetime's absorbing research could do much worse than take Brazil's work as a starting point.

2 Working conclusion: a pedagogical view

Most pedagogic models teach neither written grammar nor spoken grammar. They teach a sentence grammar – they teach learners how to make sentences. Learners are then required to adapt this basic sentence grammar to meet a range of communicative needs. If they are to do this they need to explore wide variety of communicative modes, including casual conversation, and they need to be required to meet a wide variety of communicative demands.

There are a number of reasons why pedagogical grammars give only a very partial description of the language:

- Some aspects of language description are difficult, even for the specialist grammarian. For example teachers regularly give learners the helpful ‘rule’ ‘the past perfect tense is used for an event that happened in past time before another past time’ (Hughes and McCarthy 1998). Hughes and McCarthy go on to cite the sentences *I spoke to Lisa Knox yesterday for the first time. I had met her 10 years ago but had not spoken to her then*, and go on to point out that, although this exemplifies the rule ‘the two sentences would be equally well formed if the second were in the past simple.’ What Hughes and McCarthy do not point out is that, according to the rule the sentence *I opened the door when the postman had knocked* would be quite unexceptional, but to most speakers it seems a most unlikely sentence of English.
- Some aspects of the grammar are inadequately described even in formal grammars. We do not have grammars which deal adequately with the way words behave in continuous discourse. Even the kind of classroom exchange that is used at the elementary level is fiendishly complex in terms of discourse grammar. Why for example is:

What’s this?
It’s a pen

Perfectly acceptable, while:

What’s it?
That’s a pen.

Would be very odd. *What is it?* with the stress on *is* and an exaggerated questioning intonation might be possible in certain prescribed circumstance, but *What’s it* with an elided *is*, seems to be ungrammatical.

- It is quite impossible to conceive of a complete grammar of any language:

... and account of the grammar of a language in only 400 pages is no more than a thumbnail sketch. (Halliday 1994: x)
- The sensitivity with which accomplished users operate cannot be accounted for in the grammar. How is it that, without even thinking about it, we vary the lexical density of our language according to the communicative circumstances?

Finally there is a very difficult question for those who claim that there is a separate grammar of speech. They would then be required to answer the question *how many separate grammars are there?* The language used in reporting scientific research is very different from the language of a narrative. The language of the *Sun* is very different from the *Guardian*, and the *Beano* is different again. Are these all different grammars? Or is it a case of the same grammar being exploited in different ways?

3 How does the grammar of spoken language differ from pedagogical grammar?

- 1 CB: I don't particularly like heights. Erm. Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall. Erm, the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind, because there's a barrier around you. But heights where you think you may be able to fall.
- 2 BB: Yeah. I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere. But er, I was er, on a lighthouse actually. We were being taken round it. We went up all the stairs and to the light, er, room. And then the chap says 'Oh, come on. Right, we'll go out here.' I went through the door. And I was on this very very narrow little parapet...
- 3 CB: Yeah.
- 4 BB: ... with a rail about - perhaps eighteen inches high ...
- 5 CB: Mm.
- 6 BB: ... and then a sheer drop of about a hundred feet or something. I was absolutely petrified. I've never been as scared like that before or since.
- 7 CB: That's very frightening.
- 8 BB: And, you know, I sort of edged round. I couldn't go back through the same door. I edged round and managed to find the other door. And that's it. Ever since then if I go up a ladder I'm scared stiff now. It really is, it's er, changed my whole life, you know. Absolutely frightening, that.

- a) Look at turns 1 and 2. There are several occurrences of *er* and *erm*. What function do you think these noises serve?
- b) Why do the speakers say *something like a lighthouse or something; I sort of edged round*?
- c) In turn 2 BB says *I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay*. Why does he repeat himself?
- d) Are there any words in turn 2 which you would not expect to find in written English?
- e) What is unusual about the structure of the sentence *The top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind*'?
- f) How many 'sentences' are there in turn 1?
- g) What is the verb in the last sentence in turn 8?
- h) Is turn 6 grammatical?
- i) At turns 3, 5 and 7 CB actually interrupts the narrative. Is she being rude?
- j) It is often said that you should not start a sentence with *and* or *but*. How many sentences in this extract start with *and* or *but*? Why do you think this is?
- k) What about the final sentence in turn 1?

Some features of casual conversation

- a) It appears to be untidy
- b) It omits words and phrases
- c) It is additive
- d) It is often repetitive
- e) It is often 'vague'

- f) Conversation is overtly interactive
- g) Exchanges are often formulaic
- h) Some speech acts are governed by routines

B HOW TO 'TEACH' IT

1 Apply appropriate criteria:

This is typical of spoken language:

There was a little boy and he was cycling down the street and a car came round the corner and the driver didn't see the boy and he tried to stop but it was too late.

This has many of the features of written language.

One day a small boy was cycling down the street. Suddenly a car came round the corner. Unfortunately the driver didn't see the boy. Although he tried to stop it was too late.

There is a tendency in classrooms to aim at the second even when the first is more appropriate. I have done this myself in a 'picture composition' class, when I have found myself asking learners to speak a form of language which is appropriate only to written English.

2 Highlight the differences between spoken and written forms.

- a) Rewrite BB's story as though it were part of a letter. Begin with the words:

I've been frightened of heights ever since I had a terrifying experience a few years ago.

AS learners do this they will automatically identify and adjust forms which are appropriate in speech, but not in writing.

- b) Go from written:

I never used to worry about heights until I had a frightening experience a few years ago. We were on holiday by the coast and we went to look round a lighthouse ...

to listening. Ask learners to listen again and identify differences.

- c) Ask learners to collect data in their first language.

3 Demonstrate the interactive nature of spoken language.

Look at this dialogue:

DF: Okay can you give me your address and your phone number?

BG: Fifty-three Cleveland Square.

DF: Have you got a phone number?

BG: Yes, it's two six two oh six one nine.

DF: Thank you.

Now listen to this longer version:

*DF: Okay. Can you give me your address and your phone number?
And I'll get it down here.*

BG: Fifty three...

DF: Yeah.

BG: Cleveland Square.

DF: Cleveland Square.

BG: London west two.

DF: Is that the postcode or ...?

BG: Yeah.

DF: Just west two?

BG: Yeah.

DF: All right. Have you got a phone number.

BG: Yes, it's two six two ...

DF: Two six two –

BG: oh six one nine.

DF: oh six one nine.

BG: That's right.

What differences are there between the two versions? Can you rewrite the first version so that it is more like real spoken English? (*Hint: There are sixteen turns in the spoken version.*)

Again learners will, as a result activities like this, automatically identify many of the interactive features of the spoken language.

4 Discourse markers: WELL

- a) You use *well* to show you have come to the end of a conversation:

Well, I think it's time for lunch.
Well, I'm afraid I have to go now.

- b) You often use *well* to preface the answer to a question to show that you have heard the question and are considering your answer. You often do this if you are unable to answer a question directly.

A: What time is it?
B: Well, it must be getting on for lunch time.

A: Who's that.
B: Well, it's not the manager.
Well, I don't know really.

- c) You use *well* to correct or modify something you have said:

*He's nearly seventy now. Well, he's certainly over sixty.
I'm going home now. Well, in a few minutes.*

- d) You use *well* to add a comment to something or to introduce a story you want to tell:

*You know Mrs. Brown? Well, she's got a new job.
I went to George's last night. Well, there was nobody there so ...*

How do you do these things in your language?

By focusing learners attention on their own language we can demonstrate the importance of these discourse markers. With luck there will be lively discussion and disagreement as to what words does the job of *well* in another language. There may, of course be different words for different functions of the English *well*.

5 Formulae.

- a) Evaluations

Look at these exchanges:

A: Hey, I've just heard I've passed my exams.

B: ...

C: I've just heard that Jack has failed all his exams.

D: ...

Choose comments suitable for B and comments suitable for D:

*All of them? That's awful. Great. Congratulations. That's great. Well done.
That's terrible. Oh dear. I'm sorry. That's marvellous. Wonderful.
Oh dear. Poor old Jack.*

What are the most frequent ways of evaluating in your language?

(You might engage in a discussion of evaluations, pointing out that they are very unstable and subject to change. For that reason they often result in generation differences in dialect. Kids will say *That's wicked!* Meaning *That's great!* Grandparents should think twice before using the latest teenage expressions. I am fairly sure that this is the case in all languages.)

- b) Formulaic exchanges.

Can you arrange these sentences to make a short dialogue?

*What time?
I'm sorry, I can't. I have a computer class.*

Most of my family live abroad.

A lot of the old houses were destroyed.

Some of the spectators were attacked.

B: In spoken English possessives are often expressed like this:

Instead of saying *My neighbour's dog* we say *My neighbour, his dog.*

Instead of saying *His daughter's neighbour's dog* we can say *His daughter, her neighbour his dog.*

My friend Peter's daughter's neighbour's dog → *My friend Peter, his daughter, her neighbour, his dog...*

What could you say instead of the following:

My cousin's wife

My cousin's wife's mother

My cousin's wife's mother's boss

Mary's teacher

Mary's teacher's wife

Mary's teacher's wife's uncle.

This additiveness is a very regular feature of the spoken language. Many grammarians write about what they call *topic-comment* structure: *My next door neighbour, he's always complaining.* This structure can be regarded simply as an example of additiveness.

8 Adopt a CLIL approach with linguistic description as content:

One of the difficulties we have in the language classroom is finding something worth talking about. One of the reasons why CLIL (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*, sometimes known as content-based instruction (see www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/clil.shtml) can be so successful is that it solves this problem for us. Given this why don't we, in a language classroom, make language the subject of discussion. I have been advocating for many years the use of applied linguistics as a classroom. It doesn't have to be too abstract. Again it can make valuable links with the first language in a way that illuminates the learning of other languages. For a lesson plan on *Vague Language* go to www.willis-elt.co.uk

Look at the dialogue in section 1 and answer these questions:

1 Look at turns 1 and 2. There are several occurrences of *er* and *erm*.

What function do you think these noises serve?

2 Why do the speakers say *something like a lighthouse or something; I sort of edged round?*

- 3 In turn 2 BB says *I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay.* Why does he repeat himself?
- 4 Are there any words in turn 2 which you would not expect to find in written English?
- 5 What is unusual about the structure of the sentence *The top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind*'?
- 6 How many 'sentences' are there in turn 1?
- 7 What is the verb in the last sentence in turn 8?
- 8 Is turn 6 grammatical?
- 9 At turns 3, 5 and 7 CB actually interrupts the narrative. Is she being rude?
- 10 It is often said that you should not start a sentence with *and* or *but*. How many sentences in this extract start with *and* or *but*? Why do you think this is?
- 11 What about the final sentence in turn 1?

Reading

1 Most spoken discourse is composed in real time. Speakers are working out what they want to say and producing language at the same time. This is not easy to do. It is not surprising that even native speakers sometimes need time to gather their thoughts. So one of the functions of *er* and *erm* is to allow time for them to do this.

Ers and *erms* are often referred to as 'fillers', as though they had no meaning or function, but they often have a clear purpose. Often they come just after a possible completion point, a point at which the listener might think the speaker has finished a turn. So the *er* or *erm* often means 'Please let me continue. I haven't finished what I want to say. I'd like little time to gather my thoughts. Often you will hear *er/erm* at the beginning of a turn in response to a question. Here it means something like: 'Yes, I have heard your question and I intend to answer it. Please allow me a moment to work out my response.' It is misleading to think of *er/erm* as having no meaning or function. Hardly anything in language is there without a reason.

2 The phrases *or something* and *sort of* are examples of what is often called **vague language**. Because spoken language is produced in real time, we sometimes don't have time to find the exact word or phrase we want, so we use vague language. You will sometimes hear people, often teachers, complain about this, saying we ought to be more precise in the language we use. But vagueness is a common feature of language. Everybody uses it – even the people who complain when they notice others using it. If you use a lot of vague language when you are giving a prepared lecture you might rightly be criticized for not having prepared carefully enough. But if you are speaking spontaneously, you will certainly find yourself using a lot of vague language.

3 There is a lot of repetition in spoken language. When we are reading we can go back over the script if we have not understood. Obviously we cannot reread spoken language, so the speaker often builds in redundancy by repeating parts of the message. In this case the speaker even goes on to say *I could go anywhere*, which is simply a further explanation of what he meant by *I was okay*.

You might go on from here to ask students in groups to write up the answers to one or more of the other eight questions. Finally they could look at Willis (2003) pages 187-190 and compare their answers with the original. They may even come up with improvements, in which case I would be delighted to hear from them.

References:

Halliday, M.A.K. 1994 *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*

Hughes, R. ad McCarthy, M. 1998 From Sentence to Discourse: Discourse Grammar and English Language Teaching. *TESOL Quarterly* 32/2

Leech 1998 (Leech 1998 *English Grammar in Conversation*) see <http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/english/chairs/linguist/real/independent/llc/Conference1998/Papers/Leech/Leech.htm>

Willis, D. *Rules, Patterns and Words* CUP 2003

Willis D. and J. Willis *Doing Task-based Learning* OUP 2007