

# Spoken Grammar: Where Are We and Where Are We Going?

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This article synthesises progress made in the description of spoken (especially conversational) grammar over the 20 years since the authors published a paper in this journal arguing for a re-thinking of grammatical description and pedagogy based on spoken corpus evidence. We begin with a glance back at the 16th century and the teaching of Latin grammar in England, with its emphasis on *speaking* the target language. Later grammars were dominated by written standards, a situation that persisted till the 20th century, when recording technology and spoken corpora enabled new insights into the grammar of everyday speaking. We highlight those insights which especially challenge grammars derived only or mainly from written sources. We evidence the view that conversational grammar is non-sentence-based, co-constructed and highly interactive, and that it poses questions concerning metalanguage. We briefly review debates concerning spoken grammar and ELT/ESL pedagogy. We then consider 21st-century Internet technologies and e-communication, and implications for the spoken/written grammar distinction, arguing that description and pedagogy may need to undergo further re-thinking in light of the multi-modality which characterises e-language.

## SOME HISTORICAL NOTES

### Why this article?

A quarter of a century ago, English language pedagogy had entered a new era, one in which the homogenous notion of ‘proficiency’ had been replaced by skills-based, communicative approaches that included the speaking skill. Amid this revolution, grammar remained largely unscathed, clinging to the models and descriptions beloved of the old era. Against this background, in 1995, we published two papers advocating a greater role for the grammar of everyday speaking in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language, including one in this journal (Carter and McCarthy 1995; McCarthy and Carter 1995). We offered evidence from spoken data that everyday conversations manifested common grammatical phenomena that were marginalised in description and neglected in pedagogy. Twenty years on, we now aim to synthesise interim achievements, and to ponder where the study of spoken grammar and its applications might take us in the future. Many of the arguments against the incorporation of spoken grammar into second language pedagogy have been

challenged, and globally successful reference grammars and classroom materials are available (references below). Spoken grammar has, in many respects, come of age. However, problems remain. We are still struggling under the burden of a grammatical metalanguage inherited from writing that does not seem always to work for speaking, and many teaching resources have yet to reflect what everyday speaking is really like. Meanwhile, technology forces us to re-think the conventional spoken/written distinction.

As a first step, we look back on the history of grammar in relation to speaking, since the issues involved long precede the debates of today. The secondary status attached to speaking and its grammar in most language teaching up to the final decades of the 20th century has deep historical roots. We have much to learn from the past, and the long-ago past is sadly neglected in our profession. We deal mostly with English, with occasional reference to relevant work in other languages.

### Grammarians at war

In the early 16th-century Tudor period in England, arguments raged, accompanied by satirical attacks among grammarians, concerning Latin grammar pedagogy. The controversy consisted of a series of academic and personal spats that became known as *bellum grammaticale*, the Grammarians' War (Nelson 1939: 148–57; Carlson 1992; Orme 2006: 122). The dispute, among other things, involved the status of rival *Vulgaria*, the school grammar texts used in the teaching of Latin. *Vulgaria* were called thus since they contained sentences from ordinary, everyday life, as opposed to high-literary extracts (Latin *vulgus* = the common people). The war centred round the opposing merits of teaching rules (or *precepts*) first before working with examples, or vice-versa (Wallace 2010: 37–8). The main task English pupils undertook was translation to and from Latin. The example sentences for translation in the *Vulgaria* were often colloquial and redolent of conversation, 'suggesting that the students spoke Latin on the school premises and used it for "real-life" situations' (Pendergast 2006: 72; see also Orme 2006: 109–18). Typical sentences included 'Thou stynkest' (you stink) (White 1932: 19) and 'Sit away or I shall give thee a blow' (Sit away from me or I'll hit you) (Pendergast 2006: 72). The classroom was often a lively place, where pupils performed what we would nowadays call dramatic dialogues or role-plays in Latin, which were, according to Sullivan (2008), rehearsals for social self-advancement while simultaneously providing entertainment and pleasure.

The Tudor Grammarians' War provides us with a window into grammar pedagogy in early 16th-century England. It resonates with contemporary debates concerning grammar. It reminds us to avoid reinventing the wheel, and that grammar pedagogy has a long historical relationship with the activity of speaking and language associated with speaking (see Orme 2006 for pre-Tudor examples), and that grammar has long been a source of controversy, with age-old themes rearing their heads periodically.

## The embedding of grammar in writing

The Tudor Grammarians' War was set against a period of transition. Latin was becoming less a language to be spoken in social, religious and educational circles in Europe and was becoming more the language of scholastic and scientific thinking and writing, accentuated by the penetration of humanism in education, which held the classical writers of antiquity in high esteem (Simon 1966/1979: 59–63, 89–90; Orme 2006: 118ff).

The *Vulgaria* had offered a grammar *for* speaking, rather than a grammar *of* speaking. Latin had left no authentic spoken record; the rules were those derived from great writers. Latin grammars, for example that of Lily (Gwosdek 2013), were in their turn the guiding paradigm for English grammars. This approach was seen in influential grammars such as those of Jonson (1640/1909) and Lowth (1762/1799), which set a trend that continued until relatively recently, that of prescriptivism, along with explicit *proscriptions*, typically aimed squarely at the grammar of speaking. Jonson referred to some types of diminutive endings as 'abusions of speech' rather than as 'proper English words' (p. 82). Lowth (1762/1799) relegated to the 'familiar style' features of speaking such as stranded prepositions and ellipsis of relative particles. The stranded preposition 'prevails in common conversation' (p. 95) but is not suited to the solemn style, while omitted relatives are 'too much indulged in the familiar style' (p. 103). Lowth, like others, was aware of a common, demotic spoken grammar but saw no place for it in correct and elegant expression. Harris's (1773) famous treatise on universal grammar, *Hermes*, dismissed interjections such as *Ah!* and *Alas!* as 'adventitious sounds; certain voices of nature; rather than voices of art' (pp. 289–90). Not all 18<sup>th</sup>-century grammarians adhered unswervingly to Latin-inspired prescriptivism however, and Greenwood's (1737) work listed 'social' interjections such as *Oh*, *Ha* and *Now* as 'immediately tending to discourse with others, in which the party speaks with design to procure some change in his hearers' (p. 133), a statement which would not sound out of place in a 21st-century discourse grammar or grammar of spoken English.

The age of prescriptivism cast a long shadow over the development of grammars during the subsequent centuries; although grammar was often mentioned in the context of speaking, authority almost always rested with written conventions.

## A change in the status of speaking

Developments such as the growth of international commerce and travel in the 19th century and broadcasting and recording technology in the 20th century, along with anthropological approaches to the study of languages, re-asserted the importance of speaking in description and pedagogy. Henry Sweet's (1899) work on the teaching and learning of languages stressed the principle of 'starting from the spoken rather than the literary language' (p. vii), rejecting

the notion that speaking was a corruption of writing (p. 50). Sweet pointed to the paratactic nature of spoken utterances, noting the importance of phrases, (today's chunks or clusters) which, he asserted, were neglected in pedagogy because they could not be brought within the purview of the conventional grammar rules (p. 121). However, he admitted that everyday conversation, with its characteristic ellipses and disconnectedness, if reproduced unedited, would be an unsuitable model for foreign language learners (p. 169). Conversely, he had harsh words for those who wrote unnatural-sounding dialogues for language learning (pp. 215–18). In his 1900 grammar, Sweet refers frequently to distinctions between the grammar of speaking and the grammar of writing, pointing out such features of speaking as not inflecting *who* to *whom*, the non-preference for words such as *lest* and *therefore*, omitting the complementiser *that* in reported clauses and many other features, suggesting a grammar *of* and *for* speaking.

In the burgeoning field of English as a foreign language, perhaps the most significant work of the early part of the 20th century was Palmer's (1924/1969) *A Grammar of Spoken English*. Palmer is acknowledged as one of the founding figures of 20th-century applied linguistics. He was greatly interested in the nature of spoken language (see Smith 1999 for an account of Palmer's career and his thinking; see also Tickoo 1982). The 1924 grammar displayed attributes of a grammar of speaking, with examples not just in the form of sentences but also dialogic exchanges, for example, involving ellipsis. There is also recognition that informal speech favours clause co-ordination over embedding (p. 283) and that some spoken grammatical phenomena are manifestations of real-time processing (p. 193), themes we return to below.

### **The 20th and 21st centuries: new technology**

Palmer saw the value of gramophone records in the teaching of the spoken language (Smith 1999: 131) but he could little have foreseen present-day advances, where speech is routinely transmitted globally, in real-time and recorded with relative ease. Audio-visual technology saw its earliest impact in the gramophone, cinema and broadcasting. Even before the late 20th century, scholars advocated using technology faithfully to record the spoken language (Dykema 1949; Soskin and John 1963). However, Mitchell (1957: 8) could still state that it was 'the common view that the written form is the only one deserving serious attention, study and cultivation', despite the fact that speaking outweighed writing in terms of output.

The London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English, collected from the 1960s onwards, represented a major advance in the availability of spoken data for the analysis of English (Svartvik 1990). This and other spoken corpora developed in the latter part of the 20th century (see McCarthy 1998 for a brief survey), alongside studies taking a conversation-analytical, discourse-analytical or pragmatic approach based on individual pieces or smaller collections of spoken data, resulted in an explosion of publications exploring features of

spoken English, especially everyday conversation. Among the many contributions these studies made was the incorporation into the purview of grammar of what, in previous centuries, had typically been regarded as marginal word-classes or as aberrations, items such as discourse markers and interjections. Research into patterns of grammar operating beyond sentence-level and across speaker turns meant that the notion of discourse grammar became established. Furthermore, corpus investigations into the ubiquity of chunks in everyday spoken language forced a re-thinking of the grammar–lexis distinction. The everyday language of ordinary people, as opposed to only that of the great writers, returned to the fore.

## SPOKEN GRAMMAR: SOME RELEVANT FINDINGS

### **Spoken grammar or conversational grammar?**

Biber *et al.* (1999) investigated grammatical differences of distribution and function between written registers (fiction writing, news writing and academic writing) and, notably, conversation. Carter and McCarthy (1995) listed common grammatical features found in their spoken corpus, predominantly taken from face-to-face conversational data, that were rare or which functioned differently in writing; their reference grammars also underscore cases where items and configurations are particularly associated with either conversation or writing (Carter and McCarthy 2006; Carter *et al.* 2011).

Consequently, Rühlemann (2007: 11) suggests that much description of grammar in spoken corpora should be better termed *conversational grammar*, since it is there that outstanding differences have been brought to light. Leech (2000), referring to the register categories of Biber *et al.* (1999) mentioned above, also noted how it was often the conversational data which stood out as different from the rest. We accept this characterisation and see the global ubiquity of real-time, face-to-face conversations as the benchmark for a grammar of speaking (as does Rühlemann 2006), from which other forms of speaking may depart, to greater or lesser degrees (see also Quaglio and Biber 2006). In retrospect, we perhaps should have titled our 1995 paper in this journal *Grammar and conversation*, though this might have suggested only casual, social conversation and obscured the fact that speaking in contexts such as service encounters, academic and business English is often fully ‘conversational’ (McCarthy 2000; Handford 2010; Buttery *et al.* 2015).

Speech, according to Leech (2000), shows a tendency to simplified, loosely integrated and disjunctive construction, giving grammatical structure a lesser role in the overall communication process than is characteristic of writing. Leech advocates a unitary view, whereby English has but one grammar distributed differently across different contexts of use, in both speaking and writing. That position, however, can only be ratified when the full spoken grammatical repertoire is comprehensively described and understood, and should not be taken to necessarily imply that grammars of speaking should

be based on writing, as a sort of spin-off. The unitary approach of a grammar such as that of Sinclair and Mauranen (2006) gives no lesser status to speaking than to writing.

There is a consensus, however, among those who research grammar in speaking/conversation that reveals a primary interest in phenomena that (a) are markedly more frequent or differently distributed in speaking (e.g. the freestanding items discussed below and their place outside of the clause structure), (b) have been neglected or overlooked because of the emphasis on writing as the source of grammatical description (e.g. aspects of speech reporting and the notion of subordination), and (c) further illuminate face-to-face speaking and the conditions under which it unfolds (e.g. ellipsis and the headers and tails discussed below).

### Small words in out of the cold

A number of recent studies have foregrounded items infrequent in writing but common in everyday speaking. Murray (1979) describes the use of *well*; Aijmer (2002) explores a range of small items such as *sort of* and *kind of*, *oh*, *ah*, *actually*, *just*, *well* and *of course*; Östman (1981) and Erman (1987) examine *you know* and *I mean*; Ferrara (1997) deconstructs *anyway*; Schiffrin (1987) writes on discourse markers in general (see also Carter *et al.* 2011: 172–7). Such items, ubiquitous in face-to-face conversations but typically standing outside of the conventional clause structure, enable speakers to project interactive understandings such as politeness, emotional engagement and shared knowledge. A significant effect of these studies has been the recognition of the ubiquity of freestanding items, a key concept in spoken grammar, and the challenging of prejudices and perceptions concerning the use of these and similar words and phrases (Watts 1989; Stubbe and Holmes 1995; Mishan 2005: 57–8).

### Re-examining established features

Face-to-face conversational data have facilitated the re-examination of, for example, coordination and subordination (see below), cleft constructions (Collins 1991; Geluykens 1991; Weinert and Miller 1996; Calude 2009) and speech reporting (Tannen 1986, 1988; Johnstone 1987; Romaine and Lange 1991; Yule *et al.* 1992; McCarthy 1998: ch. 8). The analyses have centred on the different distribution and function of items and structures in speaking as compared with writing but have also raised questions about the viability of grammatical terminology derived only from conventions of writing. This is particularly so in the case of the main/subordinate clause distinction and the status of the term ‘sentence’.

Conjunctions such as *and* (Lazaraton 1992) and *because* (McTear 1980; Schleppegrell 1991; Ford 1994) are not only very frequent in speaking but play a key role in chaining clauses together paratactically, indicative of real-time pragmatic constraints and at the same time challenging the notion of

'subordination' (Schleppegrell 1992; on spoken French, see Blanche-Benveniste 1982; on various languages, see Laury and Suzuki 2011). Combinations of main and subordinate clauses are traditionally held to constitute sentences but the identification of sentences in conversational data is problematic and some have focused on the clause as the basic unit and preferred core element in a spoken grammar (Halliday 1989: 66–7; Miller 1995; Miller and Weinert 1998: ch. 2; Biber *et al.* 1999: 1038–9). Brazil (1995) in his grammar of speech suggests that 'we do not necessarily have to assume that the consideration of such abstract notions as "sentences" enters into the user's scheme of things at all' (p. 15). On this basis, 'subordinate' clauses which appear to be freestanding and not related to any main clause can be explained in terms of discursual/pragmatic constraints and are not in any way aberrations in the grammar (see also (3) below and Cheshire 2005).

### Beyond the sentence and across turns

If we discard the problematic notion of sentence in relation to speaking, especially with regard to the most common activity, face-to-face conversation, the way is open to deal with a number of spoken phenomena whose exegesis best lies in considering their place within or across speaker turns. Situational ellipsis is a case in point.

Situational ellipsis refers to shared understandings, based on the immediate situation, of items normally considered obligatory in the grammar but not occurring on the spoken or written record. This kind of ellipsis has proved a fertile area of research (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 895–900; Carter and McCarthy 2006: 181–8; Carter *et al.* 2011: 191–3). Non-occurrence of items such as subject pronouns and auxiliaries, e.g. *Can't find my keys, You finished yet?*, and of other items such as articles, as in *A: What you looking for? B: Screwdriver*, are among the defining qualities of the grammar of everyday speaking (Levin 1986; Thomas 1987; Greenbaum and Nelson 1998; Caines and Buttery 2010). The interpretation of situational ellipsis includes taking response into account, which invariably shows that, for the hearer, nothing is 'omitted' from the utterance and nothing needs to be 'retrieved'; the utterance is complete in itself (Warren 2006: 204–6). The idea that something is omitted is a hangover from the grammar of writing.

Two other features of conversation occurring outside of the sentence boundary are so-called left- and right-dislocated elements as in (1) and (2).

- 1 **A friend of mine, his uncle** had the taxi firm when we had the wedding. [authors' data]
- 2 And **he's** quite a comic **the fellow**, you know. [authors' data]

These are rare in formal writing but have been attested as common in conversations in various languages (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1310, 1416–17; Aijmer 1989; Givón 1993: 213–15; Heilenman and McDonald 1993; Blasco 1995; Fretheim 1995; McCarthy and Carter 1997). Carter and McCarthy (2006: 782–3; Carter

*et al.* 2011: 236–7) refer to these constructions as *headers* and *tails*, respectively, in order to avoid the Western, writing-based metaphor of left- and right-, and the idea that something is ‘dislocated’; in the grammar of speaking, the headers and tails are perfectly located to do their interactive job. Hallidayan grammar avoids the spatial trap by referring to *pre-posed* and *post-posed* elements, thus neatly encompassing time and space (Halliday 1985a). The sequences in (1) and (2) above are pragmatically motivated. Headers give a lead-in to the main entity of the topical noun phrase or pronoun, while tails correlate strongly with evaluative contexts. Other phenomena of spoken word-order have also been considered significant in terms of discourse functions (Hinds 1981; Melchers 1983; Halliday 1985b; Hasselgård 1992; Kaltenböck 2005; Deppermann 2011). Hockett (1986) noted the significance of non-sentences, false starts and the like in conversation, asserting that such phenomena carry a considerable share of the communicative workload (see also Greenbaum and Nelson 1995). Allwood *et al.* (1990) observed that speaking displays a wide range of management processes not found in written language, including actions such as pausing and re-casting (see also Biber *et al.* 1999: 1052–66). In short, there has been an increasing desire not to exclude from the scope of grammatical description what might otherwise be dismissed as the vagaries of ‘performance’ and the potentially negative connotations of such terminology.

Also operating across turn-boundaries are the freestanding small words that function as response tokens, such as *fine*, *great*, *absolutely*, *definitely*, *indeed* (McCarthy 2002, 2003; Carter and McCarthy 2006: 188–92; O’Keeffe and Adolphs 2008; on Spanish, see Amador Moreno *et al.* 2013). Although morphologically adjectives or adverbs, the word-class labels fail to do justice to their ability to comment on whole previous turns and prior stretches of discourse. Their frequent occurrence in dialogue evidences the ‘intertextuality between speaking and listening’ (Erickson 1986: 295; see also Bublitz 1988; Rühlemann 2007: *passim*; Norrick 2012). Bavelas *et al.* (2000) explain the past neglect of the active role of listeners as possibly hailing from the dominance of written texts. Freestanding adjectives and adverbs operating as responses cry out for a more explanatory label in a grammar of speaking (hence our preference here and in other works for *response token*). This need to elaborate new metalanguage has been one of the more challenging tasks of describing spoken grammar. The terminology of writing is firmly entrenched and has proved difficult to shift.

Conversational transcripts also show that clause-construction and clause-combining occur across turn boundaries. In conversational data, we find plentiful evidence of coordinated clauses and combinations of main and subordinate clauses created by more than one speaker. Next speakers tag subordinate clauses onto a previous speaker’s main clause and vice-versa (Lerner 1991, 1996; Helasvuo 2004; Rühlemann 2007: 49–51), further evidence of the active role of listeners. Tao and McCarthy (2001) show instances where non-restrictive relative *which*-clauses are added by a second speaker to a first speaker’s matrix clause (see example (3)), while Clancy and McCarthy (2015)

give further examples of *which*-clauses and illustrate similar patterns with *if*-clauses and *when*-clauses (see also Rühlemann 2007: 102–14).

## Chunks and the idiom principle

A further complication is the fact that conversational corpora manifest a high incidence of recurring, prefabricated lexical bundles, also referred to as clusters or chunks, as opposed to open syntactic slots (Aijmer 1996; Altenberg 1998; Wray 2002; Schmitt 2004; Sinclair and Mauranen 2006; Biber 2009; Adolphs and Carter 2013: ch. 2). Martinez and Schmitt (2012: 313) suggest that the commonest words in frequency lists are often ‘the tips of phraseological icebergs’. Conversations, in particular, display an abundance of chunks, a phenomenon which Sinclair (1991) referred to as *the idiom principle*. Chunks can constitute more than 50 per cent of a spoken text (Erman and Warren 2000), challenging the distinction between grammar and lexicon. A lexico-grammar of speaking might better capture the sequential configurations occurring on the spoken record. Ur (2011) points to chunks as one feature of spoken grammar that has found its way into student course books, while other features listed by her and reviewed in the present article have not.

This section, by no means exhaustive, has discussed findings in relation to spoken grammar which represent, in our opinion, challenges to description, metalanguage and pedagogy. Biber *et al.* (1999: 1066–125) have major sections on spoken grammar and grammar in conversational data which complement and expand upon our discussion. Further significant features of conversational grammar are also illustrated and discussed in Quaglio and Biber (2006).

## RECENT DEBATES: SPOKEN GRAMMAR, PEDAGOGY AND AUTHENTICITY

### Authenticating spoken grammar

In the last 20 years, applied linguists have debated the extent to which authentic language should form the basis of language courses, and the role of spoken grammar has often provided the focus. It has been argued that authenticating naturally occurring spoken grammar is problematic for learners, as authentic texts are embedded in particular cultures and may thus be opaque to those outside that (usually Western) culture, providing an experience with the target language which is far from ‘real’ (Prodromou 1997). On the other hand, it is maintained that careful pedagogic selection of language forms has to be central to language materials development and that it is preferable to select grammar (as well as other forms of language) as instances captured in authentic contexts of use rather than ones in which the grammar is invented, contrived and derived solely from written forms or from the memory of schooled grammatical prescriptions. Timmis (2005), in particular, sees great value in exposing learners to spoken grammar via real example texts, and expounds

a carefully thought-through and tested methodology for fostering awareness of spoken grammar, while accepting that learners may not necessarily always want or need to reproduce its forms.

Authentic spoken grammar is also frequently derived from native-speaker data and this has caused debate as to whether native-speaker models are the most appropriate basis for language learners, who may predominantly use English in various forms of ELF to operate in an international environment. However, this position has led in turn to research showing that many language learners regard the approximation to native-speaker English as a main goal in the language learning process (Timmis 2002, 2012). The debates over the use of native-speaker spoken grammar may continue, though the global success of materials foregrounding it (McCarthy *et al.* 2005–2011, 2012–2013) would suggest that users welcome it.

A more productive, compromise position is to consider the notion of the ‘expert user’ and ideas advanced by Prodromou (2010) concerning what he terms SUEs (Successful Users of English), arguing that we should not see SUEs as failed native speakers, but rather look upon all successful users of a language, whether native- or non-native-speaking, as ‘expert users’. As such, to deprive these users of access to corpus-informed naturally occurring spoken grammar would appear to disrespect their expertise and to undermine choices and capacities for learning. For a selection of different viewpoints and debates on these questions, see Carter (1998), Cook (1998), Cullen and Kuo (2007), Gilmore (2007), Goh (2009) Jenkins (2007), Leech (2000), Seidlhofer (2011), Prodromou (1997) and Widdowson (2001). We ourselves see the native-speaker debate as a potential distraction: all human verbal languages have resources in their spoken forms for interacting successfully with their fellow-human beings. What makes humane discourse different from robotic or machine-generated communication is one of the things we gain most from the study of spoken grammar, in whichever language we examine, and it is those insights which we should bring to pedagogy.

### **Spoken grammar: where next?**

Having synthesised the past and brought the discussion of spoken grammar, together with a growing bank of related published reference and teaching resources, up to the present, we now consider the future. There is undoubtedly a need for further research into the grammar of speaking and further exploration of its applications. Among the many possibilities are:

- Further investigations of characteristically spoken forms and their functions (differences between written and spoken grammars are doubtless still to be identified).
- Further work on language variation and recent change in areas such as modality (Leech *et al.* 2009), which challenges the ‘stability’ of grammatical forms in speech and writing.

- The fuller multimodal integration of the verbal and the visual across speaking turns in relation to such forms as backchannels, response tokens and related lexico-grammatical chunks and clusters (Knight 2011; Adolphs and Carter 2013): recognising that spoken language is visual and gestural and not simply a textual phenomenon is crucial for description and pedagogy.
- Increased exploitation of spoken learner corpora for the alignment of competencies in spoken grammar with assessment levels such as the CEFR (see work in relation to the English Profile Project; <http://www.englishprofile.org>). This is a significant development with considerable implications for pedagogy.
- All these and other developments should continue to be fed by the growth in spoken corpora across different Englishes [see, in particular, the ICE corpus, <http://ice-corpora.net/ICE/publics.htm> and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) corpora such as VOICE and ELFA], with many such developments constituting a challenge to the ways in which grammatical and discursal patterns and socio-cultural context are captured.

However, important though these developments will continue to be, limited space here requires us to focus and it is the rapid and pervasive changes in e-communication that seem to us to most compel a re-thinking of grammar and of the speaking/writing distinction.

### **Internet English: grammar, punctuation and voice**

With conservative estimates that 100 billion emails, 300 million tweets and 6 billion SMS messages are sent and received each day, there is in these domains of language use further salient material for scrutiny of grammar in daily interaction. One reason is that such language is characterised by communication that is written but which has features associated with the immediacy, turn-taking conventions and fluencies of spoken communication, happening almost in real time with gaps in turn-taking being limited only by Internet connection speed. Even blogs that are closest to orthodox, written, asynchronous communication indicate a marked turn to a hybridity in grammatical structures that is close to speech but is in fact associated with neither speech nor writing but with an amalgam of both (Crystal 2011: 69ff).

While corpus research has been carried out on individual forms of e-language (language communicated through any digital device), from SMS messages, to blogs and e-mails, many such corpora tend to be either small-scale (Tagg 2012) or they consist of one main e-language variety [exceptions are Biber and Kurjian (2007) and Grieve *et al.* (2011)]. Research involving the one million-word CANELC<sup>1</sup> corpus has enabled fuller exploration of forms and functions between and across different forms of e-language and is an example of a possible future phase in the exploration of the evolution of spoken grammar of English (see Knight *et al.* 2014).

The CANELC corpus reveals that on-line 'chat', though obviously written, is commonly laid out on the screens of mobile devices as dialogue and contains

grammatical features such as situational ellipsis, free-standing or independent 'subordinate' clauses, sentence tags and phonetic representations of speech that bring it closer to spoken than to written representation:

(3)

A: gotta go

B: ttyl

A: ok

B: which means tomorrow right?

A: I'd forgot that

B: cos we're seeing David.

A: Must go. Alright.

(Online text chat: CANELC corpus)

Vague language (see above for references) is also a common marker of an (often co-constructed) softening of interpersonal discourse in texting.

(4) Hi, been v busy with work, glad wk nearly over, v v tired! Ur wk ok? Re tomo, Jenns keen and I am kind of...ill pick you up at I dunno 6.45 PM. Thatll give enough time to get there, park and that.  
X (SMS text: CANELC corpus)

And users of Twitter for professional communication commonly adhere to a distinctly spoken style characterised by situational ellipsis.

(5) Alison Rich (@fitnessPhysio) 25/01/2014 19:11 Downloaded the @paintoolkit2 for another patient today. Fantastic resource for chronic pain management and promotion of movement: (Twitter: CANELC corpus)

The prevalence of forms normally associated with informal spoken grammar should, however, be seen as clinal (Crystal 2011), as much depends on contextual factors such as the age of the sender/recipient, the medium and the nature of the communication. The relative formality in grammar in (6) is contextually indicative.

(6) What is happening tonight? Are you going over to Jake's and then on to the concert? Do you need picking up and at what time? X

(Email message sent from father (aged 56) to son's phone (aged 17) (CANELC corpus)

One question is where different forms of e-language exist on this continuum of formality and what their precise communicative functions are in different genres or modes of e-communication.

Much e-language is also characterised by a combination of standardised and newly emergent forms of spelling and punctuation. Spelling takes us in a different direction but one topic of research interest is the changing character of punctuation. In written discourse, punctuation rules are never wholly stable as choices exist relative to the balance between the character imparted by individual expressive preferences and the overall rules and conventions governing the information structure of the message (Chafe 1988; Nunberg 1989). In much Internet communication of the kind captured in the CANELC corpus, the expressive individual voice would often appear to have precedence. The extract from a blog in (7) shows the distinct presence of a voice mediated in relatively 'non-standard' punctuation, in a liberal employment of dashes to mark changes in thought, dots to show ellipsis and unfinished ideas and commas that mark pauses, exclamations, discourse markers and vague language. Strings of clauses appear to lack the kind of sequence and associated punctuation conventions more typically found in carefully constructed written discourse.

(7) The last few weeks I've been watching sky sports on a tablet. well as much as I can anyway, cos the missus and I've only got one i-pad and - guess what - we both want to see programmes or use it for work, like checking emails, downloading stuff, going on websites at the same time — and then there's on and off connectivity — oh yes, that's Cornwall for you but as I say I've been watching a load of stuff and what has really struck me is the number of female sports presenters on sky.....(Blog. CANELC corpus)

In some cases, especially in more personalised forms such as texts and Twitter feeds, a spoken character is commonly further enhanced by the inscription (page and text metaphors continue) of a physical presence in the shape of exclamations, discourse markers, capitalizations, abbreviations, omissions of apostrophes and commas, haptic discourse (e.g. *hugz*), kisses (*xx*), emojis and smileys – punctuation, in other words, designed primarily to capture voice and to mark, signal, co-construct or negotiate identity and relationship. And these are only some of the possible forms. The absence of a face-to-face dynamic may, depending on context, contribute to a greater individual presence and identity display (not discounting 'reader' sensitivity either). Alternatively, it may be that the pressures of speed of communication override (or, conversely, reinforce an expressive and creative play with) textual choices (Carter 2004; Baron 2008; Page 2011; Sindoni 2013; Tannen and Trester 2013). Or the available array of signs and characters on mobile devices may help to promote the need to fill in the gaps and spaces of a communicative context in which we are, paradoxically, writing informally in ways that simulate face-to-face speech. As we do so, in some cases we move across data streams from one physical space or dynamic context to another or, in some digital modes such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, across multiple audiences with the added potential for re-sending, copying and re-tweeting accepted as part of the dynamic of

multiply distributed, not-always-linear, not-always-sequential communication across time and space (Tagg 2012; Seargeant and Tagg 2013). Given the importance of grammar and punctuation (and punctuation in relation to grammar) in the assessment of language learners at all levels, the dizzying nature of interpersonal communicative and social change in e-language suggests that much fuller understanding of the workings of punctuation in relation to particular forms of spoken grammar is one element in future spoken grammar research that may repay closer attention.

## CONCLUSION

The notion of spoken grammar has a long and turbulent history and is now going through a new zone of turbulence. As we have intimated, most current frameworks for the analysis of grammar, spoken or written, assume a linear, unfolding model. Indeed, we argue for linear, real-time unfolding to be privileged in terminology when confronted with phenomena such as headers and tails and co-constructed sequences of clauses. We aspire to a metalanguage that can capture such temporality and have offered examples. However, as e-communication becomes ubiquitous and pervasive in everyday life, linear models may require some re-evaluation in terms of the extent to which they can account for simultaneous, multi-channel communication and the more constantly shifting, topographically distributed and fragmented nature of contexts of use (Adolphs and Carter 2013: 180). We can no longer assume that the definition of a 'conversation' is anything as simple as a face-to-face or even an audio-visual encounter unfolding sequentially in real time; such explorations and re-thinking will need to take cognizance of multiple contextual dependencies of individual words and phrases. Multi-modal corpora are a step in the direction of a fuller breaking down of boundaries between text and context and, in the case of speaking, avoiding the separation of speech and gesture (Kendon 2004; Bergmann *et al.* 2012: 1–9), aiming ultimately at a more holistic grammar of speaking (a striking potential of the procedures outlined in Coccetta 2008). Nonetheless, e-communication presents yet further complexities with regard to the meaning potential of visual actions, whether captured as still or moving images, in relation to the multiple texts that may accompany them in social media such as *Facebook* or *Twitter*. In these and other complex social media, a mid-ground between interactive audio messages, texts that are conventionally written, those which are written-as-if-speaking, body language and other visual anchors such as photographs and video clips may emerge, creating new relationships between grammar and its contexts of use, and new, unforeseen configurations on the textual record, including new orthographic symbols and innovative punctuation.

We have advocated a greater historical understanding of the roots of our present-day debates on grammar description and pedagogy. So often, it seems to us, applied linguistics is too heavily absorbed in the present and pays scant

attention to its own long history. The early 16th-century Tudor period in England witnessed arguments concerning appropriate content and methods for grammar teaching and exploited the new technology of the printed book (with its potential for standardisation); we may now also be facing a challenge to what many consider to be our contemporary *Vulgaria*. Like the Tudor grammarians, we continue to wrestle with the task of enhancing the description and pedagogy of languages. In our time, we strive to support language teaching with spoken grammar grounded in authentic data. The achievements of corpus linguists, discourse- and conversation analysts in unveiling the special nature of face-to-face conversational grammar will remain as benchmarks, albeit against a landscape of technological upheaval. Meanwhile, EFL/ESL teaching materials such as McCarthy *et al.* (2005–2011, 2012–2013) and Paterson *et al.* (2012), with both sets of materials committed to methodologies of listening, noticing and developing awareness as advocated in Timmis (2005), are attempts to incorporate the grammar of everyday conversations as a major focus. In certain respects they are modern-day *Vulgaria*, with their emphasis on how grammar mediates the everyday conversational practices of ordinary people. Their impact will be judged by their long-term success or otherwise at the hands of teachers and learners. More such materials will undoubtedly follow, and will need to take the rapid technological changes we are witnessing into account. It is to be hoped that they do not spark off a 21st-century Grammarians' War.

## NOTE

1 CANELC stands for Cambridge and Nottingham E-language Corpus, a one million-word corpus of Internet

communication. The corpus is © Cambridge University Press. For further description see Knight *et al.* (2014)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the journal editors and anonymous readers for valuable comments on this paper; particular thanks are also due to colleagues associated with IVACS (Inter-varietal Applied Corpus Studies) from whose research meetings and annual conferences we have taken inspiration and learned so much. A first version of this paper was given at the 7th Biennial IVACS Conference at the University of Newcastle in July 2014.

*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.

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