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Area of Focus: Pedagogic Grammar

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What are the main differences between spoken and written English grammar? To what extent and in what circumstances is it appropriate to teach ‘spoken grammar’?

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1. Introduction

Until recently, the spoken grammar of English has been relatively neglected in terms of research, but this is changing due to the appearance of spoken corpora (Biber et al., 2021). A consequence of this is that it has begun to assume a greater importance in teaching materials.

This paper has two main aims: first to provide an overview of the main differences between the grammar of spoken English (SG) and that of written English (WG); the second to consider pedagogical implications of teaching SG in the classroom. In section 2, I first outline some generally accepted differences between SG and WG, before focusing on a number of salient syntactical features of SG that distinguish it from WG. Since the differences are numerous, and due to the limited space here, the features chosen stem from what I believe is generally absent from learner materials. Section 3 considers pedagogical issues, specifically, the extent to which it is appropriate to teach the SG in the classroom and explores some ways in which this is currently being carried out in classrooms.

2. SG and WG: differences

Section 2.1 outlines some general differences between the SG and WG of English. In Section 2.2, I present some features of English syntax found in SG and ones which rarely appear in ELT materials.

2.1 General differences between SG and WG

2.1.1 Real-time production

Carter and McCarthy (2006) discuss the fact that spoken discourse usually happens in real time, i.e., as a thought is being conceived, it is being uttered and heard by the interlocutor.

These three events happen almost simultaneously. (The only exceptions are recorded spoken discourse, which is listened to at a later time, and prepared speeches, which are actually just

written texts read aloud.) Furthermore, written discourse leaves a trace or record (unlike spoken discourse which is evanescent), it is planned, consists of more carefully constructed sentences, and can go through stages of editing before it is seen by the language receiver, i.e., the reader. Even text messaging is not as instantaneous as spoken discourse as the composer has time to formulate the message before hitting send. Biber, et al. (2021) elaborate on this by commenting that a result of the online nature of speech, ‘qualification of what has been said’ is typical, whereby afterthoughts can be tagged onto what has preceded forming a chain of connected chunks.

2.1.2 Face-to-face interaction

Carter and McCarthy (2006) note that spoken discourse typically occurs in face-to-face situations even if this is via video-conferencing provided cameras are being used. An exception would be a telephone conversation. This point links back to the point above and emphasises the lack of planning time available from a thought being expressed to the moment it is received. Writing, on the other hand, seldomly occurs face-to-face, and the time between a text being written and being received can be vast. Moreover, the immediate social and interpersonal situation determines speakers’ choices. This explains why written discourse is typically elaborate as the reader is detached in time and space from the reader; however, in spoken discourse, the shared space of the speech participants means much can be taken for granted in terms of reference to surrounding objects, people and events. This results in spoken discourse being heavily deictic, something most forms of written discourse cannot do easily without leading to confusion; the only exception may be online written communication which is often very context dependent.

2.1.3 Repetition

Willis (2003) notes the spoken discourse is typically very repetitive whereas written discourse is generally more concise and composed of more carefully chosen words. He explains the repetition found in speech is a result of the speaker providing the listener(s) with processing time. He notes that it can also function to add emphasis. Biber, et al. (2021) add that spoken discourse is also typically more restrictive than writing, relying on a narrower range of prefabricated lexical chunks, which they call 'lexical bundles'.

2.1.4 The interactive nature of speech

Spoken discourse is more frequently dialogic than writing (although one may argue that social media is changing that): what is produced is dynamic and is dependent on what proceeds it. Conversation is typically made up of adjacency pairs, i.e., utterance-response sequences, a typical example being question-answer. Biber, et al. (2021) state that questions are three to four times more common in speech than in written registers and imperatives even more so. Other features that they identify which index interactivity include backchannelling (oral and nasalised response forms such as *um* and *uh huh* used by an interlocutor to indicate they are following what is being said) and supportive overlapping (whereby a speaker talks at the same time as another speaker to demonstrate an interest in what is being discussed).

2.1.5 A continuum of mediums

It is important to note the division between spoken and written language: the reality is there is no cut-off point. Carter and McCarthy (2006) describe language as existing on a continuum, with written discourse at one end and spoken discourse at the other. Between the two extremes exist forms of language displaying features of both. One good example could be text messaging. On the one hand it is written, but more often, it is composed in a style that reflects spoken utterances rather than the conventions of written language. For instance,

punctuation is often omitted, syntactic constructions typical of speech are abound, and it is, to a great extent, unedited. Moreover, it is typically received almost as quickly as real speech would be.

2.2 Syntactic Features of Spoken English

2.2.1 Ellipsis

A form of ellipsis commonly found in WG is textual ellipsis. McCarthy and Carter (1995) explain this as items in co-ordinated clauses being omitted as they appear elsewhere in the text. They provide the following example:

(1) Jean danced and sang.

where it is understood that Jean was the person both dancing and singing. This could be made more explicit by writing ‘Jean danced and Jean sang’, but most language users would agree that this sounds odd in most contexts.

Although SG does employ textual ellipsis, there is another form of ellipsis that is rarely found in the WG. The following example is from my own informally collected data of social discourse from December, 2021:

(2) *Katie*: Don’t know what’s going on at Laura’s.

Marvin: Not heard anything yet?

Katie: Not answering.

Marvin: She’ll have it on silent.

Here it is clear that certain words have been omitted. Using Biber, et al.’s (2021) terminology, there are a number examples of what they call initial situational ellipsis. First, the subject of the verb *know* in the first utterance is not provided, i.e., ‘*T*’; second, the auxiliary verb and subject of the question uttered by Marvin is missing, i.e., ‘*Have you*’, as is the subject and auxiliary verb from Katie’s response: ‘*she is*’. The type of question posed by

Marvin is termed a condensed question by the authors and this specific example is condensed by way of ellipsis of subject and operator (auxiliary verb). The response to the question is an example of indirect anaphoric ellipsis. In this case, the question is not answered directly with 'yes' or 'no', but the elliptical response is interpreted to mean 'No, I haven't heard anything yet because she's not answering the phone when I call her.' Note that the response here is not only an example of initial ellipsis, but final ellipsis too, since the verbal object 'the phone' is omitted. Finally, it could be argued that the head noun in the noun phrase (NP) 'Laura's ____' is omitted, which is understood to mean 'Laura's house' or 'Laura's place'.

A further type of situational ellipsis found in SG identified by Biber, et al. (2021: 1102) which is not illustrated in (2) is that of medial (operator) ellipsis. Here is one of their own examples in which the operator is ellipted:

(3) When < -> you gonna do that then?

Finally, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) discuss situational ellipsis as found in fixed phrases and lexical formulae. For example, *well done*, *sounds fantastic*, *good job you noticed* all have elements ellipted.

Despite all the omissions of words in the examples presented above, the conversations in which they occur proceed without any comprehension difficulties. Carter and McCarthy (2005) explain that in utterances containing this type of ellipsis, enough contextual information is provided for the purposes of communication. McCarthy and Carter (1995) also use the term 'language-in-action' to label discourse in which descriptions of actions take place in front of participants' eyes with shared knowledge playing a role.

In summary, situational ellipsis is one important feature of SG that distinguishes speaking from writing. We have seen how the immediate and face-to-face nature of speech allows for language to be cropped without meaning being lost.

2.2.2 Orienting Structures

i. Framing structures

McCarthy and Carter (1995: 210) identify a feature of SG found typically in narrative. The example they provide is:

(4) You saying about the chap with the newspaper.

They assign this framing structure the function of creating “a piece of interactive space in which [a speaker] can highlight a topic in such a way as to provide an orientation to their listeners for what will follow.”

Framing structures are not limited to SG as they also occur in written texts. In fact, a range of framing devices are found in writing. The way in which they differ from spoken frames, however, is in their form. Biber, et al. (2021: 736) provide the following example of a structure found typically in written newspaper reports:

(5) **East German border workers last night began** demolishing the top of the Berlin Wall at the Brandenburg Gate.

and explain that the highlighted segment is an aspectual verb which serves to ‘provide a discourse frame for the event described in the *ing*-clause indicating its start, completion, or persistence.’

ii. Headers

Carter and McCarthy (2006) identify a feature of SG that they term a header. The canonical word order of an English declarative clause, both in speaking and writing, is S-V-X, where S

is subject, V is verb and X is any other element, e.g., object (O) or adjunct (A). WG allows for non-canonical deviations from the order of declarative clauses in certain cases, particularly for emphasis, including object fronting (e.g., *That, I understand.*), cleft-clauses (e.g., *It was John who...*) and pseudo-cleft clauses (e.g., *What I said was...*) (Carter and McCarthy, 2006: 785-6). In contrast, fronting in speech is very frequent in declarative clauses and is used to emphasise a point which the speaker considers important. Consider the following examples, again from my own informal data set:

(6) a. **That field there, it** looks too boggy. Let's go this way.

b. **Reading for so long, it** makes me dose off.

c. **My friend, Zhenya, his mum** has started a knitting business on Instagram.

As is clear, the canonical word order is still present. What is different, however, is an additional element outside of the S-V-X structure, dislocated to the left. In (6)a, there is a NP pre-posed before the dummy subject 'it'. Both of these elements reference the same entity and so the repetition flags the topic of the utterance as being significant to what the speaker is saying. (6)b contains a non-finite clause which, again, proceeds the dummy subject 'it'. Example (6)c is more complex: here a number of semantically connected NPs are strung together in apposition. The first two NPs have the function of orienting the listener to whose mother the speaker is referring to. In WG, this would be unacceptable; instead, the same meaning might be rendered as 'The mum of my friend, Zhenya'.

2.2.3 Tails

Like headers, tails are found outside of the S-V-X clause structure but are, instead, located to the right of it. McCarthy and Carter (1995) define tails as being a device for emphasising what has just been said. Aijmer (1989) even argues that, in some cases, tails carry an evaluative stance towards the topic of the utterance. Take the following examples from Carter and McCarthy (2005: 195-6):

- (7) a. *They're* incredibly nice, **our neighbours**.
- b. *It* never occurred to me, **the danger I was in**.
- c. *They're* from all over the world, **those photos are**.
- d. *They* do take up a lot of time, I suppose, **kids**, don't they?
- e. *He's* crazy, **him**.
- f. She's never *one* before, **a mosquito bite**.

In each example the element in bold is the tail and the element in italics is its co-referent. In examples *a-e* the co-referent is the subject of the clause; in *f* the tail co-indexes with the object of the clause. The tails in *a-b* are NPs, whereas the second of the two is more complex as the head noun is modified by a reduced relative clause. Example *c* has a tail that includes the copula *be*. There is even more complexity in *d* where a tag question follows the tail. The tag, in fact, may also be placed after the tail with no change in emphasis (Carter and McCarthy, 2006). Finally, *e* illustrates how speakers choose object forms when the tail is only a single pronoun, even though its co-referent is the subject of the clause.

One may argue that tails are essentially cataphors (words or phrases that reference an element coming later in the syntax of a clause), in the sense that the pronominal elements found within the canonical clause structure are made explicit only in the tails of the utterances. This kind of structure is not typical in WG (Carter and McCarthy, 2006).

2.2.4 Sentence structure

Spoken discourse typically employs what Biber, et al. (2021) call the 'add-on' strategy.

Whereas written texts consist of complex sentences linked with subordinators such as *although*, spoken discourse, particularly informal conversation, tends to link utterances with coordinators such as *and*, *but* and *so*. The result is stretches of discourse built up in a chain-like additive manner. The following extract from my own data illustrates this point:

(8) So he was painting the wall, **and** he'd already been round with the masking tape, **so** he wouldn't get paint on the ceiling, **and** I said 'are you sure you have put it all the way round?' **and** he's like 'yeah', **so** anyway I said nothing, **and** then he goes 'oh bloody hell, I've missed a bit with the tape **and** now I've got it on the ceiling' ...

2.2.5 *Genitive construct*

Biber, et al. (2021) explore the two syntactically different ways of expressing possessive relations in English: the genitive form of the noun with apostrophe-*s* and the '*of*-phrase'. They tell us that the second of these is still rare in SG, whereas in WG it is abundant. The reason for this is historical: the apostrophe-*s* is Germanic in origin and was the form spoken as the vernacular, i.e., Old English; whereas the *of*-phrase increased in usage during the Middle English period due to the heavy influence of Norman French and Latin. Socially, this Romance feature influenced the written language more than the spoken vernacular. These two forms have been competing ever since, with one more common in speech; the other in writing.

2.2.6 *Reporting speech*

Whereas in WG, speech is indicated either by speech marks (for direct speech) or a range of reporting verbs, such as *said*, *answered*, *told* (for indirect speech), SG employs a wider array of devices that indicate the introduction of speech. One of the most common in casual conversation is the verb *go* as a replacement for *say* (Biber, et al., 2021: 1114):

(9) Yeah, **he went** "Oh!" **He goes**, "Who put that there?" And the bit where **he goes he goes** "Urgh, cobwebs," and **she goes** "Piss off!" **She goes** "Mum, come and sit here," **she goes** "Piss off!" like that and **the mother goes** "You talking to me?"

Another increasingly common device is to use the forms *like* (which Thornbury (2019) terms ‘quotative like’) or *all*. The following example is from Biber, et al. (2021: 1115):

(10) And **I’m like**, “You were there, why didn’t you help” < unclear >. **He was all** “Well

I wanted to stay out of it.”

and they explain that *like* typically follows forms of the verb *be*, whereas *all* is usually used with the just past form of *be*. They also point out that this usage is more common among the younger generation.

This section has presented some of the more salient features of SP that distinguish it from WG and ones that are often neglected in grammar materials. I now turn to a discussion of SG being taught in the classroom.

3. Spoken Grammar in the Classroom

In this section, I discuss to what extent and in what circumstances it is appropriate to teach SG.

Carter and McCarthy (2006; 2017) explain how grammar materials generally have a bias towards WG, the main reason being that SG is typically seen as inferior to WG both by teaching institutions and by society as a whole. Knowles (1987:1) states that learners’ spoken English is “partly conditioned by [their] experience of the written language” and explains that the reason for this is that learners’ experience of learning English from textbooks and in the classroom is very often centred around WG. Paterson, Caygill and Sewell (2011: 6) add that SG has “always existed, but [has] often been excluded from the traditional grammar syllabus.” Taking a random sample of ELT course books and examining their grammar syllabi, it is clear that most of them paint a very similar picture: not only do the same grammar topics reoccur, albeit in slightly different orders of presentation, but the vast

majority of the patterns that are presented reflect WG. In fact, Cullen and Kuo (2007), in a survey of two dozen popular ELT textbooks, found an unsatisfactory coverage of SG.

Richards (2015) appears to have little problem with this and downplays the role of a focus on SG in the classroom. He argues that SG is something that only advanced learners need to concern themselves with and, even more worryingly, that “it is unlikely they will need to use [it] productively.” His justification for this view is that SG “may reflect features of regional speech or of particular age groups” as if this were something negative. This is surprising given the widespread popularity of the Communicative Approach around the world.

Leech (2000) expresses some initial scepticism of the need for providing too much of an emphasis on SG in the classroom. His reasoning revolves partly around the fact that learners would be expected to “learn two radically different grammar systems, one for speech and one for writing” and that this places a heavy burden on the learner. However, he does point out that many of the features of SG are also found in spoken languages in general.

Contrastingly, many educators now recognise the importance of SG in the classroom. Hillard (2014: 4) argues that “learners must be exposed to spoken dialogues [...] that include common features of spoken grammar that are so often missing in ELT textbooks.” Mumford (2009) contends that the features of SG enable learners to perform better as language users and to express their thoughts more succinctly. Rühleman (2008: 687) believes that if a teacher’s goal is “to support the acquisition of speaking skills [then it should be taken] into account what we know about authentic conversation.” This can be taken to mean that knowledge of the features of SG are essential to developing learners’ speaking skills. Additionally, Timmis (2002) revealed that many teachers themselves hold that belief that SG is something their students should be exposed to.

From an ELT coursebook writer's perspective, McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford, 2014a: v) explain that by teaching SG in the classroom, learners can achieve "their goals more quickly and efficiently". Not only this, but they make the point that SG not only helps learners to speak English in a more natural way but is essential for developing listening skills. This is understandable given the fact that outside of the classroom, most of what learners will listen to in English involves natural speech teeming with features of SG. Finally, they mention that learning to communicate with authentic speech patterns provides a boost to motivation. The point is that by teaching SG, teachers are better preparing learners to understand and use English in the real-life situations in which they are likely to find themselves.

On balance, these views suggest it is appropriate to teach SG in the classroom, and despite some reservations, the benefits are compelling. The question remains, however, to what extent learners should be exposed to SG, and how this can be achieved in the classroom.

It appears that more recent course books have begun to place more of a focus on SG in their syllabi. For example, McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford's (2012; 2014b) related series of course books *Touchstone* and *Viewpoint* place a strong emphasis on SG through a section called "conversation strategies" and each unit contains a whole lesson devoted to this. Topics include using *this* and *these* to refer to people, places and events when telling a story (e.g., "I saw this man staring at me"); using quotative *like*; and using tags to soften advice. It is important to note that the choice of topics was informed by a spoken corpus rather than the writers' intuition of what they think learners may need.

Similarly, Dellar and Walkley's (2016a-c; 2017a-b; 2019) course book series *Outcomes* is fully embedded with features of SG both in the grammar sections themselves and a separate 'Developing Conversations' section.

At first glance, these materials appear to present aspects of SG through ready-made lexical chunks of language that can be incorporated into learners' speech. However, upon closer inspection, grammatical explanations and pattern exercises which differentiate between SG and WG can be found. On completion of the course, learners will have been exposed to many of the key features of SG discussed in this paper and had practice of using them in production tasks.

Where course books lack any focus on SG, Hillard (2014) suggests teachers should supplement the course with authentic multimodal material that may expose learners to the patterns of SG.

From my own experiences, students have benefited from and greatly praised a focus on SG in the classroom as it is something they do not get in their school programme; there, the emphasis being purely on WG. I have also found that by helping students to notice patterns found in speech, most of them eventually begin to employ these spontaneously in their speech. The result is output that is more natural-sounding and is a boost to their confidence in using English outside of the classroom. In this light, I wholly support the teaching of SG in the classroom and feel the huge value of materials providing such a focus.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the key differences between SG and WG. I discussed how real-time production in face-to-face situations influences how spoken discourse is shaped,

and how repetition is a major feature of SG compared to the more complex phraseology of WG. Next, I presented some salient syntactic features of SG that demarcate spoken discourse from written discourse. These are particularly interesting as they are items that are rarely covered in ELT materials despite widely occurring in conversation. Finally, I addressed the issue of SG in the classroom. Unless the focus of a course is purely on writing, I argued that it seems appropriate to include aspects of SG in all courses that aim to develop learners' communicative competence. I described how, after an increase in research into SG thanks to advances in spoken corpora, features of SG have begun to be included in teaching materials, and that many agree that this is something learners need. It will be interesting to see how materials continue to adapt being informed by ongoing research into SG.

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