A Likely Language? Recorded Input in Language Course Books as a Source of Students' Speaking Skill

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Introduction

The present research originates from the consideration that the students' results in the acquisition of oral interaction at secondary level are, on average, far from the expected performance in relation to the assessment parameters defined in the *Framework of Reference* of the European Council (1998).

Researchers know only too well that the number of variables influencing the students' performance are often elusive and hard to come by, such as, among other things, the individual aptitude, the motivation for the learning of a particular language, the quantity and quality of practice, the methodology guiding the teacher, along with her/his professional skills.

There is, however, another source of language acquisition, the oral input, which, thanks to its close relation to spoken language, should play a pivotal role in the overall pedagogical planning and implementation of the speaking skills. In the following pages I will discuss some points related to the processing of input data in an ordinary situation of exposure to English in formal classroom language learning, to

a.) examine the quality and quantity of oral input to which intermediate students of English are exposed in an ordinary one-year course;

b.) describe the linguistic features which characterise some English course books through the comparative analysis between a corpus of spoken language texts presented in the course books as input for listening skill and other corpora of spoken language.

1 Input in the language classroom

For the scope of this study, it will be useful to recall some features of language input in the language classroom: it should be "comprehensible" and "large" (Krashen 1985), "salient" (VanPatten 2004), "embedded in interactive activities, naturally oriented to the execution of a task" (Skehan and Foster 2001), compatible with the learner's stages of "interlanguage"

(Pienemann 1998), but also naturally "parsed in language chunks" to match the processing procedure of the human brain, which exploits the recursive association of lexico-pragmatic chunks (MacWhinney 2001; Willis 2003; Hoey 2006) into an increasingly "automatic" performance (McLaughlin 1987; DeKeyser 2001).

If we confine the present discussion to the spoken input only, the main sources of speech in the classroom are provided by teachers themselves. Most of the speaking is done by them, either through the so-called classroom-English, made up of structuring moves and instructions (Fanselow 1977), or by repetitions, questions and answers, explanations, error correction etc. This kind of input appears inadequate for al least two reasons. The first one is that the teacher's talk is only occasionally dialogical and interactive, with little or no improvisation required from the learner. The second reason of inadequacy derives from the quality of the language spoken by most language teachers, who are not native speakers and have, consequently, limited fluency, restricted control of intonational patters, uncertain knowledge of collocations, but, above all, in the great majority of cases, little experience with the flavour of colloquial English (Timmis 2005) made, as will be argued below, of a distinctive grammar and memorized chunks which enable the speaker to cope with the cognitive demands of on-line processing and production.

Language teachers can make up for the natural shortcomings typical of non-native speakers with the use of educational technology which offers the class first-rate specimens of spoken English, from TV clips and films, to recorded tapes and CDs; as for the use of recorded material as a source of spoken language, language courses are accompanied by a set of cassettes and CDs reproducing the texts for the listening comprehension practice. These recordings, often reproduced in scripts somewhere in the student book or in the teacher's guide, represent an irreplaceable model of all the instances of good spoken language: pronunciation, intonation, turn taking, register variation, communicative and strategic competence, and the many more threads woven into face-to-face communication. In many course books analysed, the number and length of the recorded texts do not vary significantly; authors tend to confine the spoken input to about 60 samples of approximately 350 to 500 words each. The average recording lasts from 60 to 150 seconds; teachers often play the tape (or CDs) two or more times during the lesson. In other words, a typical intermediate English course consists, at best, of about four-hour exposition (input) to original native language in a school year, about three or four minutes per lesson. It goes without saying that the recorded material, together with the teachers' own

contribution, is far too limited to build up a workable model of oral production.

2 The language data of spoken input in English course books

It has already been pointed out that most authors of SLA agree that the input must be rich, motivating, comprehensible, timely and salient for the learner to profit from it. Nevertheless, few studies have been devoted to analyse the quality of the input, and the level of pertinence or relatedness to the skill it is assumed to develop. For Krashen (1985), just to make an example, speaking practice is unnecessary for acquiring the productive speaking skills, as its acquisition will largely depend on the processing of speech (i.e. listening), while writing will develop naturally as a by-product of the processing of the written text (Krashen 1984). Any attempt at noticing, rehearsal, storing and recall, in short, "practice", (DeKeyser 2007: 1-18), according to Krashen, will not lead to significant steps ahead in the stages of interlanguage.

The assumption of this article, on the other hand, is that the relationship between spoken input and spoken production is closer than Krashen and other researchers have considered, in that the input must be consistent (Muranoi 2007: 51-84) in form and content, both lexical and pragmatic, with the kind of output the students are supposed to produce. Teachers and materials writers, then, should offer learners a selection of language used in face-to-face communication, not because pupils have to imitate it and store it *verbatim*, as in the days of audio-lingualism, but because the processing and the analysis of spoken language will help them cope with the challenge of on-line processing, in much the same way as the native speaker does. In the following paragraphs a quantitative and qualitative analysis of spoken input in English course books will be presented, to find evidence supporting the feeling, shared by many teachers, that the language exemplars in course books are not adequate, neither linguistically nor pragmatically. To study some statistical features of these texts a corpus of recorded spoken texts has been collected, extracted from the following language course books:

L. and J. Soars, *The New Headway* (intermediate level);
C. Oxenden and Latham-Koenig, *English File* (intermediate level);
N. Kenny, First Certificate *PassKey*;
V. Evans and J. Dooley, *Upstream* (intermediate);
M. Swan and C. Walters, *The Cambridge English Course.*

The collected corpus (hereafter referred to as CSI – *corpus of course book spoken input*) consists of about 250 files, totalling about 100,000 word tokens drawn from the above different courses. The intermediate level was chosen because here it is possible to observe certain features of orality, while lower levels (beginner and lower intermediate), apart from the familiar set of gambits, show a predominant use of grammaticalised language (Lewis 2002: 41), whose major purpose seems to embody the structures introduced and practiced in the different units.

The corpus contains different spoken text types. On the score of the taxonomy of spoken texts proposed by Sinclair (1991) the corpus has been divided in two major classes; the monological and the dialogical, the former being about 45% of the whole collection. Of course, being the corpus made up of recorded material targeted for pedagogical use, there are no surreptitious texts, that is, texts recorded without the speakers' awareness. The recorded files of dialogical scripts were grouped into 4 categories: face-to face conversations, telephone calls, transactions and interviews.

The recorded files of monological texts, all prepared (as opposed to spontaneous) to be spoken, yielded the following grouping: Informative, Descriptive, Argumentative, and Narrative. There is also a further text type, which does not fall into any of these categories, the *structure or sentence manipulation*, very well represented in the corpus, which can hardly be considered a model of naturally-occurring discourse.

3 The procedure

All the scripts of the recorded texts were electronically scanned, post-edited by hand and run through the concordance programme *Wsmith* to obtain information about (a) the average type: token ratio, which is indicative of the lexical load and complexity of the corpus; (b) the frequency of certain lexical items that are considered to be distinctive of spoken as compared to written texts; (c) the amount of lexicalised language (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992; Lewis 2002); (d) the quality of speech, in terms of a grammar of spoken language.

The results given by the computation of CSI (*corpus of course book spoken input*) were compared to data obtained by parallel searches in available corpora of spoken and written English, normalized for size to my CSI. The LLC (London-Lund Corpus) was taken as the benchmark for spoken language. The results were occasionally compared to data resulting from similar searches through the FROWN Corpus (Freiburg-Brown Corpus of

written English) supplied with the ICAME package; in some cases also the COLT Corpus (Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language) was utilized.

Since the initial assumption was that the recorded scripts actually represent written texts to be spoken (rehearsed), also two corpora of similar text types were collected. The first is a corpus of film scripts of the same length (about 100,000 tokens), here called *Film Script Corpus* (FSC), including the following film scripts randomly downloaded from the Internet:

Body of Evidence, screenplay by Brad Mirman;
84 Charlie Mopic, screenplay by Sheane Duncan;
Conquest of Paradise, screenplay by Roselyn Bosch;
Croupier, screenplay by Paul Mayersberg.

The second corpus consisted of the scripts of a dozen episodes from *Friends* (about 110,000 words), the popular American *sit-com* created by Marta Kauffman, Kevin Bright and David Crane produced by Warner Bross, because is presents short highly interactive sequences of conversational turns.

A further comparative analysis was carried out to assess the level of speech distinctiveness of CSI through the *Distinctiveness Lists contrasting Speech and Writing* of the spoken section of the British National Corpus available in Leech, Rayson and Wilson (2001).

4 Results

Type: *token ratio*. One of the sharpest distinctions between written and spoken texts is given by the lexical load, that is the number of different word forms to be found in a text. The writer, unlike the speaker, creates his/her message without the cognitive pressure imposed by on-line processing. S/he has more time to select the wanted word, retrieving it from the large archive of his mental lexicon. The writer is also expected to comply with the stylistic, educational or literary tradition of his/her culture, to avoid repetition of the same word and to establish anaphoric co-reference through the use of synonyms or hyper- or hyponyms: if the writer has to refer to *pupils* in a preceding portion of the text, s/he might use such words as *learners*, *students*, *children*, or *teens*, *lads*, *boys and girls*. Speech, on the other hand, being produced in real time, puts great computational load on the speaker, who has little or no occasion for feedback, correction, elaboration. Also her/his lexical choices are often determined by the natural feature of redundancy of spoken language. If we bear in mind that the working memory is a limited-capacity tool, both in terms of number of

words which can be processed and the time window allowed for their recognition and comprehension (Baddeley 1990; Anderson 1993), redundancy, together with repetition, is a means of contrasting the processing load. The proportion between the individual word form (*type*) and the number of its occurrences (*token*) provides a measure of the lexical elaboration and care with which the text was built.

Table 1 type: token ratio in written and spoken corpora

Corpus	**Type: token ratio**
Frown Corpus	9.93
LLC	3.05
COLT	3.53
Film Script Corpus	9.36
CSI	10.04
Friends	6.23

The comparison of the different corpora shows that the spoken corpora (LLC and COLT) have a comparatively low content of word forms (*types*), which means that words are repeated rather then replaced by other anaphoric substitutes; this ratio also confirms the sensible prediction that spoken texts are less complex in terms of content and information (but see Brazil, 1995, for a different conception of the complexity of speech). What is interesting to note in table 1 is that the Film Script Corpus, the CSI and the Frown Corpus, a collection of written texts, yield much the same result: a very high ratio, about three times higher than most spoken corpora. This remarkable lexical variety found in the scripted dialogues of CSI, recorded to be heard and processed by non-native speakers, can be justified by the authors' urgency to introduce contextualized new words in each listening comprehension activity; in doing so, however, they do not offer an appropriate sample from which the learners can draw any generalizations about the nature of spoken language; moreover, the high lexical load makes understanding (processing) more challenging than naturally occurring speech for the reasons stated above. The other corpus of written texts to be rehearsed (sit-com *Friends*) shows a significantly lower ratio, owing to its numerous features of oral interaction.

Frequency of lexical items. Leech, Rayson and Wilson (2001) have systematically contrasted a corpus of spoken language and one of written language to individuate items which characterize either corpus. The items which show the highest likelihood (log likelihood, LL, that is, the significance of the differences between the frequencies in speech and writing) of belonging to a spoken text are the hesitation marks *er*, *mhm*, *mm*, *agh*, *hum*, and interjection, *yes*, *no*, *phew yeah*, *ouch*, *wow*, *oh*, certain determiners

(*it*, *its that*), some verbs (*got*, *know*, *get*, *know*, *think*, *mean*, *go*, *say*, *do*) and some colloquial short forms (*gonna*, *gotta*, *wanna*). The frequency of a single item, however, may depend on the context, and on its different meanings: the word *man* shows a very high frequency in *Friends*, when compared to other corpora, but a closer, hand-edited analysis reveals that in one third of its occurrences, in AmE, the word is used as an interjection in addressing someone "Wow. Man, so Joey must've really taught…" to express surprise or excitement.

The word class that ranks at the top in the log likelihood list of speech is that of interjections. We include in this class hesitation marks, exclamations (*great*, *oh my god*, *gosh*) negative and affirmative particles (*yes*, *yeah*, *no*, *not*). Interactive spoken discourse also shows a significant frequency of adverbs used as discourse markers. When *right*, *well*, *so* or *actually* are used in isolation, followed by a pause (in the scripts a comma or a full stop), that is, not in their function of adjective or verb modifiers, they carry out a variety of pragmatic functions: to signal a new start (*well*, *so*, *right*), indecision or embarrassment (*actually*) or polite surprise to encourage a new turn (*really?*). The data from the corpora are not univocal and deserve careful analysis. The class of interjections is better represented in the CSI than in all the other corpora, with the exception of the other corpus of speech, *Friends*, while, as expected, the occurrences in the FROWN Corpus are very low, but not that rare. Also for the group of selected discourse markers, the corpus with the highest frequency is *Friends*, while CSI lags far behind both LLC, and, quite expectedly, the Frown Corpus, which has the least occurrences. Speech, according to Leech, Rayson and Wilson (2001) makes great use of anaphoric determiners *it* and *that*, but in this case the difference between CSI and of LLC on the one hand and the written corpus (FROWN) is surprisingly slight, the three corpora being all above a 2% frequency of the whole tokens. An item which, instead, characterises written texts rather than speech is the possessive *its*. The results obtained meet the expectations, with a very high frequency of *its* in FROWN, while the lowest number of occurrences are found in *Friends*; CSI and LLC have almost the same frequency rates. A sure indicator of spoken language is also given by *get/got*; as most de-lexicalised verbs, it has lost its definite meaning and owing to the very rich range of occurrences in different patterns and different noun or prepositional phrases, its occurrences are extremely high in spoken language, where it often functions as verb *passpartout*:

Table 2: occurrence rates of interjections (*Oh*, *mhm*, *yeah*, *yes*, *ah*, *err*, *erm*, *great!*, *ok*, *no*, *my god* etc.), of discourse markers (*well*, *right*, *now*, *so*, *actually*, *really*), determiners and the lexical item *got*

Corpus	**Interjection**	**Discourse markers**	**yeah**	**That/it**	**Its**	**Got**
LLC	0.44%	0.80%	86	2.21%	14	202
Film Script Corpus	0.67%	0.53%	17	1.49%	24	17
CSI	1.27%	0.41	104	2.10%	18	104
Frown Corpus	0.70%	0.06%	11	2.14%	64	109
Friends	1.67	0.90%	323	1.83%	4	131

If we check the corpora for the frequency of a group of verbs including *get*, *know*, *think*, *mean*, *get*, *go*, *say*, *do*, which, according to the distinctiveness list of speech, rank in the top 10 verbs (Leech, Rayson and Wilson 2001: 218), the following results are obtained

Table 3: occurrences of a class of verbs (*get*, *know*, *think*, *mean*, *go*, *say*, *do*) typical of spoken language. Not lemmatized

CSI	2.23%
Film scripts	1.13%
Frown Corpus	1.58%
LLC	1.22%
Friends	1.80 %

This is quite surprising, because the CSI and *Friends* corpora show a collective frequency of these verbs from 60 % to about 90% higher than the LLC, which has been used as a benchmark for the analysis of speech.

Also the marginal modal *got to*, and especially its colloquial form, *gotta*, has a fairly high frequency in spoken corpora as compared to corpora of written language. What is worth noting, on the other hand, is that the informal, colloquial non standard form *gotta* is present in the FROWN Corpus (twice) and in the Film Script Corpus (10 times) but is absent in the CSI and in the LLC; also *gonna*, which in informal discourse is replacing the auxiliary form *going to*, does not occur in the two corpora of spoken language (CSI and LLC) while it occurs 8 times in the Frown Corpus, in contexts where spoken informal register was reproduced. The short colloquial forms *gotta*, *gonna* and w*anna*, on the other hand, are almost absent in any of the corpora under scrutiny, but are quite common in *Friends*.

Table 4: occurrences of marginal modals *got to*, *gotta*, and *want to* and related spoken forms (*gotta*, *gonna* and *wanna*)

	gotta	**gonna**	**wanna**
LLC	0	0	0
CSI	0	0	0
Frown Corpus	2	8	0
Film Script Corpus	10	19	2
Friends Corpus	44	192	50

Lexical chunks. The production of connected speech in real-time interaction, as has been already pointed out, makes great demand on the speaker's working memory and attention. It requires fast lexical access, automatic retrieval and adaptation of a semantic configuration of the message to be mapped into a syntactic structure (Levelt 1989, 1993; Marslen-Wilson 1995: 148-173), the ability to rephrase an inadequate semi-sentence, the activation of a strategic behaviour, such as paraphrase, circumlocution, prolonged word search, to overcome communication problems.

If we accept a naïve representation of language use depending only on the speaker's generative production of rule-governed sentences (i.e. "competence" in a chomskyan view), we will get well short the point of accounting for the challenging performance of producing about 200 words per minute, two or three per second, in spite of the narrow span of working memory (about 7 units in 10-15 seconds). As a matter of fact, the language system itself comes to rescue the speaker, because it consists, in addition to stretches of language generated by rules at the moment of codification, of memorized chunks of up to ten words which the speaker can produce with a very low allocation of memory and attention; while uttering such chunks as *you know*, *I mean*, *you know what*, *what I'm saying…*, *by the way*, *no way*, *as a matter of fact*, *what's the matter*, *are you/no kidding*, etc., the speaker fills part of his/her sentence or turn and takes time to plan the less automatic or lexicalized part of speech. A chunk is neatly defined by Newell (quoted by N. Ellis 2001: 39) "as a unit of memory organisation, formed by bringing together a set of already formed chunks in memory and welding them together into larger structures recursively". Many of these chunks fulfil a direct communicative goal because they are a "sort of bridge" between lexical meaning and pragmatic function, by-passing, so to say, the grammatical encoding, which becomes opaque to the linguistic awareness of the speaker (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992: 12-30). Thus, the lexical phrase *What, me worry?* performs a complex illocutionary act, that of criticism through ironical denial, which would require a long and ineffective turn of

phrases and would also openly disclose the speaker's self-pity in a more socially-threatening way.

Thanks to this net of lexical relations, patterns and chunks, halfway between grammar and lexis (Willis 2003), the language can be parsed, and computed fast and easily, allowing the speaker to perform routine social interaction, gain fluency and show his/her membership to the shared trove of the target language. It is difficult to say what part idioms, gambits, chunks, sentence slots, cliché and fixed collocations play in the general economy of the language use and learning (Weinert 1995). What is certain is that speech in everyday interaction is densely intertwined with such pieces of language, which, like sealed "*grammar-proof* packets" make the language predictable and free the speaker and listener from the pressure of original on-line encoding, thanks to their priming effect on the recalling of extended chunks or patterns of language (Hoey 2006). As Lewis put it effectively (Lewis 2002: 41), the more the language is predictable (*likely*), the more it is lexicalized, and the more it is "natural".

The corpus of recorded input from the course books seems to downplay the importance of this language feature by relegating the lexicalised language to a pure ad-hoc embellishment, a sort of linguistic make-up in favour of structure-bearing sentences.

I have searched the corpus for the occurrences of a number of these chunks, about 45, mainly fillers and lexical phrases (*as a matter of fact*, *I mean*, *by the way*, *what about*, *I see what you mean*, *what is more*, *to start with*, *if I were you*, *don't worry*, *no matter*, *I'm sorry*, *what with… and…*, *no way*, *as I was saying*, *at any rate*, *no kidding*, *if you get what I mean*, *come on*, *there you go* etc.). They were all underrated in the corpus as compared to their frequency rates in the spoken corpora. With the exception of *what about*, *I mean* and *that's right*, which are rather common, the whole group of chunks shows a frequency of 0.28% of the whole corpus, about one expression every 285 tokens, a little higher frequency than, for instance the quite extraordinary number of occurrences of *people* (0.24%); it is worth remembering, moreover, that the average language learner will be exposed and process the recorded texts contained in one course book only. Just to give a comparative figure, in *Friends* this selection of lexicalised chunks shows a frequency of 0.70%; indeed there are turns which are largely made up of pre-fabricated chunks:

> – Probably, but, you know, I'll tell you something, Passion is way overrated…
> – Ah! Well, there you go, last to know again…
> – Ah, let's see: what next. Here we go…

5 The Grammar of Spoken Language in English course books

Until the late eighties the study of the formal features of the spoken language was a matter of academic research of linguists and grammarians. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) devoted random remarks on the topic, scattered under different grammatical headings; but in the last 15 years or so, in connection with the development of computational linguistics and the availability of large language corpora, the distinctive features of spoken language have emerged more clearly. The study of spoken language has not been confined any longer to socio-linguistic analysis of dialect variation and specific grammatical idiosyncrasies, but at present it claims for itself an autonomous research field. Brazil (1995) has advanced the theoretical model of a linear and incremental grammar opposed to product, static grammar, typical of written language. While the latter is concerned with off-line construction of sentences, the linear grammar aims to take into account the psycholinguistic mechanism which is responsible for the particular configuration that the traditional sentence undergoes under the pressure of communication. With the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan 1999) drawing on large language corpora, Biber and colleagues have finally given a thorough and coherent account of the differences between written and spoken language. Also the close scrutiny of genre and register categories reveal a gradient along certain dimensions, from the official written documents to telephone conversations (Biber, Johansson and Repper 1998: 152).

Carter and McCarthy have given the most interesting contributions to the relationship between spoken language and the teaching of speaking skills in a series of paramount studies. In their works they have individuated some basic distinctive features of a grammar of spoken language. Just to mention some of them, spoken language occurs in real time and is generally unplanned; it is generally the product of face-to face interaction; it conveys pragmatic information about the speakers' motives and interpersonal relations. There is not a sharp distinction between the grammar of spoken language and that of written language, but the two may co-occur in the same text. Apart from sentences with a neat structure, the language unit which best describes the syntax of spoken English is a *communicative clause* not clearly amenable to the traditional phrase structure with which the speaker elliptically contributes to the ongoing of the interaction. In Carter's and McCarthy's words (1995) "these units may be separated by pauses, intakes of breath, falls and rises in pitch".

These communicative units or snaps result on the one hand in different processes of structural ellipsis and on the other, in movement transformation, deletion and addition of clausal elements to the main sentence, where present, as shown in this example from Biber *et al.* (1999): *North and south London + they're two different worlds aren't they + in a way.*

The utterance consists of a preface (*North and south London*), a body, often a complete sentence, (*they're two different worlds*) and a tail (*aren't they*) plus a further addition (*in a way*), a sort of second thought to soften the statement made in the body.

More formally, the utterance allows the mapping onto an abstract pattern like this

head/ preface	body	tail/tag
topic	predication	comment

Each slot in the pattern may be filled with additional lexical items, revealing a makeshift construction which changes and reshapes the pattern, when necessary, depending on the limitations of working memory.

The movement of constituents is much more common in speech than in writing, where it often involves left-fronting of one or more phrases:

> **Car numbers**, I remember more by the letters than the numbers
> Oh **Nathan in the bathroom**, is that where he is?

Carter and McCarthy (1995) have further identified some more structures typical of speech and almost absent in writing. Besides ellipsis and left fronting or dislocation, they describe many instances of "reinforcements" of tails and heads

> Good winter wine **that**
> And he's quite comic **the fellow**, you know
> Cos otherwise they go cold **don't they pasta**

If we bear in mind the above discussion about the role of input in language acquisition, we must then ask first whether the kind of input which is presented to language learners is a faithful instance of spoken language and, secondly, if our learners are supposed to acquire any basic features of spoken interaction from a kind of corpus typically derived by the written language. Carter and McCarthy (1995: 142) clearly raised the problem when they stated that

the models of grammar which underpin most of the laudable attempts at representing and activating the use of the spoken language are still rooted in descriptions of the grammar of written English and have failed to take on board some interesting features of the grammar of informal, interactive talk. Just as it would be questionable to base a writing skill course on grammatical statements based only on informal spoken data, in our opinion it is equally the case that spoken language instruction based solely or mainly on written language description is an unsound methodological foundation upon which to build.

6 The Grammar of Spoken English in the Corpus of Course Book Oral Input (CSI)

The present analysis of the recorded speech accompanying English course books has taken into consideration some features of spoken grammar sketched in the previous paragraph. In order to obtain the required information, the corpus has been tagged to identify the following structures:

Table 5: features of spoken language analysed in CSI

TAG	DESCRIPTION
LD	Left dislocation
HFR	Head fronting
TL	Tails
REP	Repetition/ rephrasing
DEIT	Deictic expressions (this one, just now, over there)
OMS/V	Omission of subject / verb
NAUXQ	Non aux-fronting questions
CLF	Cleft sentences
INTER	Interruptions/overlaps
WS	Word search
PR/CL	Paraphrase/ circumlocutions
FS	False starts
VL	Vague language

The features investigated through the concordancer are meant to catch some more qualitative aspects of spoken language in face-to face interaction, such as interruptions (INT), rephrasing (REP), the use of cleft sentences (CLF), and the false starts (FS). It was thought that the bundle of these features can be useful to characterize a text as belonging (and to what extent) to the class of conversational texts and to individuate the use of communicative strategies. Also vague language was included among the characteristics of spoken language, and worth investigating, as Channel (1994) has argued, especially because it is almost invisible to the linguistic perception of speakers and usually taken for granted. Such dummy words as

thing and stuff, approximates (*about*, *somewhat*, *around*) vague collectives (*bags of*, *lots*) and tags (*all and that*, *and what not*), fill in the frequent crevices in the logic of discourse.

Results. The search has released 147 items which realise some of the above classes. Some classes are more represented than others. Ellipsis (including omission of subject and verb phrase and auxiliary and *do-deletion* in questions) is common enough, with 22 occurrences. Here are some examples:

great to be here
He asked you what?
Next thing, coats
can't tell you exactly
never heard of him
one barman away ill
rather gave that one away John, eh?

The cleft sentence which creates a marked topicalization, is also well represented in the corpus, with 17 instances. Here is a short selection:

What I really hate **are** drivers who drive slow are drivers
What drives me mad **is** advertising leaflets which come inside magazines
What we found **was** that people…
What you have to do **is** cut some fishy shapes out

Other features are definitely rare, like the false start (FS) with only one occurrence: *I'm glad we're…*, *I'm glad you called me in this*; or he head fronting (HFR), with only five occurrences:

HFR **And Marcia's suitcase**, did she find it?
HFR but **this friend of mine**, he didn't wake up in time
HFR So how does **it** happen, **romance** in the work…

and six examples of word search of this type:

sometimes I **earn well yearning to erm have**,
when the when you finish cooking
the person reading the **news errrrrrr an exper**

Vague language has received increasing attention as a distinctive feature of spoken language since the systematic studies of Channel (1994). It is defined as a sign of personal relaxation in the social intercourse; the use of "approximators" along with "hedges" (Biber *et al.* 1999: 265) (*around*, *about*, *or so*, *whatever*, *eightish*, *yellowish*, *some sort of*, *this and that*, *and stuff*, *cupboardy type of thing*, *thingy*) extenders (*and all the rest of it*), additives or tags (*and everything*,

something like it), placeholders (*guy*, *bloke*) quantifiers (*forty or so*, *odd thirty*) are interpreted as a sign of social cohesion because the speaker can avoid appearing assertive, direct, highbrow or even offensive by using expressions which, to a certain extent, are left informationally unfinished to invite to negotiation, open as they are either to further contribution, tails or comments, from the speaker or from the interlocutor. Vague language, as used by native speakers, is a mark of shared knowledge and in-group membership. Far from flouting, in Grice's analysis of conversation, the principle of mode (Grice 1967: 41-58), vagueness is so common in everyday conversation that our speech would sound strange if it did not contain the right amount of it. Notwithstanding this, Carter (1998) notes that few English course books present examples of vague language, although it is a powerful means of expressing polite, casual and non-threatening interaction.

Although Carter (1998) remarked that *thing* and *stuff* are among the most common words of the language, *stuff* occurs 6 times only in CSI, while it is pervasive in *Friends*, with 56 occurrences. Again, it is in *Friends*, more than in the other spoken corpora, that such distinctive words (for speech) as *guy*, *kind of*, with its more colloquial variant *kinda*, occur more often. As will be noted, CSI shows a low number of total occurrences, even lower than those contained in the written corpus.

Table 6: lexical items characterizing vague language

item	**CSI**	**LLC**	**Film Scripts**	**Frown**	***Friends***
stuff	6	8	8	14	56
thing	65	84	30	45	80
and so on	3	1	0	3	0
like that	22	2	12	10	15
or so	3	1	0	3	1
guy	4	1	13	27	130
kind of	32	9	21	51	59
sort of	22	104	2	20	3
a bit	54	51	2	18	7
odd numeral + (*odd fifty people*)	0	0	0	0	1

Conclusion

The collection of these last data, illustrating some features of discourse and spoken grammar, confirms the overall picture of the specimens of spoken language contained in course books. They are basically written texts which are transformed into speech thanks to some devices, primarily the insertion of a remarkable number of interjections and some discourse markers. The answer to the question of the title of this paper, then, whether the language of scripted speech is a *likely* language, should be partly negative. If students process and study only the dialogues presented in their textbook, they are likely to miss the necessary opportunities (other kinds of oral input) which will prepare them for the improvisations required in interactions outside the classroom.

It would be unfair, though, to ignore the improvements recently made towards the representation of some features of spoken grammar. In two course books of my corpus (*Streamline* and *Passkey*), the authors have inbuilt a good number of examples of discourse and of spoken grammar; unfortunately the practice and form-focussing activities following the input do not concern these features; it is left to the teacher to take advantage of the new structure or lexical phrase or collocation. The recorded texts are also poor in examples of strategic use of the language (word search, paraphrase, rephrasing, circumlocution, vague language).

In spite of the increasing importance that lexis, lexical patterns and lexical chunks are receiving in the theoretical and pedagogical literature, course books still seem to downplay this important means of implementing fluency and communicative effectiveness; the sure command of chunking would certainly improve the learner's performance in listening comprehension and speech production, because such lexical items are processed like a single word and activate important pragmatic expectancies; from the productive standpoint, moreover, the speaker that retrieves and articulates these phrases in real time can speed up communication and free memory to focus on more conscious word selection. As N. Ellis argues (2001: 33) "a key task for the learner is to discover these patterns [chunks] within the sequence of language… And the fact that these chunks activate some meaning representations makes the sequence itself more salient in the input stream".

A discussion on the teaching of spoken language goes well beyond the scope of this paper, but the knowledge of what features, both quantitative and qualitative, characterize the scripted dialogues presented for processing, noticing and practicing, seems to be a valid starting point before studying what teachers do with the language input.

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