

## **The nature of advanced conversation: stereotype and reality in foreign language teaching\***

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My starting-point is the widespread conviction amongst applied linguists that language teaching materials have not as yet bridged the gap between classroom language and language in use. It is clear that there are many excellent courses which help students to get through the introductory and intermediate stages of learning a language; but there are few which have attempted to go beyond this point, and those which do seem to fall far short of the goal of making students encounter and participate in the language of normal, everyday conversation. The advanced learner, typically, is aware that his usage does not match the norms of native-speakers, but he finds little guidance as to how he can achieve a closer approximation to these norms. Often, indeed, he finds it extremely difficult to obtain any samples of genuine conversational usage at all to study, and even if he does, they will be unlikely to have accompanying analyses, commentary, or drills. In this chapter, then, I wish to argue that the main reason for the lack of progress in this area is that we (theoretical linguist and language teacher) have been operating for too long with a stereotyped notion of "everyday conversation", an ideal of conversational usage which is so far removed from the actualities of everyday speech that it becomes a hindrance instead of a help when presented in the form of materials to the advanced learner. I shall begin by examining the implications of this view in a general way, and then attempt to justify it by presenting a set of results taken from some recent analyses of conversational data.

\* This chapter was originally given as a lecture to the 1972 annual meeting of the German Applied Linguistics Association, and published in G. Nickel and A. Raasch (eds.), *IRAL—Sonderband: Kongreßbericht der 4. Jahrestagung der Gesellschaft für angewandte Linguistik GAL e.V.* (Heidelberg: Groos, 1974), pp. 1–20. The approach was subsequently expanded as Crystal and Davy (1975).

But first, what is meant by this label, "everyday conversation" (or "natural" or "informal" conversation)? I am deliberately not talking about "conversation", without qualification, as on its own this term is too vague and broad to be helpful—after all, it may be used to refer to almost any verbal interchange, from casual chat to formal discussion. The adjective "informal" suggests which end of the conversational spectrum I am concerned with—conversation on informal occasions, between people who have come to know each other, and where there is no pressure from outside which would cause them to be self-conscious about how they are speaking. They are not on their best linguistic behaviour. Now it is this kind of language—with our family, our friends at work, our neighbours at home, the people in the local shops and bars and buses, with whom we want to mix and "be at one", and demonstrate linguistically that we are at one with them—this is the kind of language which we use very much more than any other during our speaking lifetime. But what happens when people simply want to talk in a friendly relaxed way? The result is very different from what introductory textbooks about conversation usually lead us to expect, both in subject-matter and construction. And for the foreign learner, there are immediately problems of comprehension and oral fluency.

Here is a brief example of what I mean: it is an extract from a conversation recorded at home over coffee after dinner. Two teachers, who knew each other as undergraduates, are discussing sex education. They are male, and aged about 30.\*

A it's 'very àwkward/ it's difficult mínd you/ with a 'class of thirty 'odd/ -occasionally with the sècond 'form/- you 'get- you knów/.well we'll.we'll- 'have erm- a débàte/--

B ì/

A 'what do you 'want to tálk àbout/ and 'this is 'something I 'usually 'spend 'one 'lesson. arrànging 'what they 'want to tálk àbout/ and 'then- 'tell them to 'go away and thínk àbout it/ and we- 'have the díscussion a 'later.a 'later lèsson/ and 'often enòugh/. 'round àbout the sècond 'form/ òh/. 'sex before màrriage 'sir/ or 'just seǵ/ or seǵ ínstruction/ or 'should 'sex be 'taught ín schòòls/ you knów/

B ì/

A and- I 'say alríght/. we'll tálk àbout it/- and-- they 'don't knów.'what they're going to say/ and they don't reàlly 'know what.erm-- 'what we're going to 'talk àbout at àll/- but,you've 'got.a 'whole 'lot of 'different àttítudes 'there/- 'you knów/- as 'soon as it 'comes ùp/ that there's àbout- 'half a dòzen 'littlé bóys/. 'who are perhàps/-- a 'littlé yòunger than the óthers/.or who 'come fróm 'different bàckgròunds/- who dón't wànt to 'talk àbout it/-

\* For transcriptional conventions, see p. 49.

and who are 'rather.shÿ/ and a 'bit frightened 'of it/- whereas you've got òther 'little bóys/ 'who are- decidedly advënturous/.and who 'probably know every 'bit as much about it as I do/ (*A and B laugh*) and er- 'you've 'got this enòrmous/ dispàrity/- and- it's 'difficult to 'strike a bàlance/- because in a sènsè/ if 'you tãlk/.if you like/ as frãnkly/ 'as the- 'more òpen/ 'little bóys a'bout it/- 'then 'you're.clòsing/ the òthers up/.'even mòre/ the shÿer ones/- 'are are 'getting 'more and more nèrvous about it in 'fact/ and 'you're creating bàrriers 'for them/- whereas 'if 'you 'talk about it-- 'on their 'level/ 'or 'try and 'help thèM/-- 'then the òthers/ are.are re'acting against it/ it's er it's 'most pecùliar/--

I shall discuss some of the linguistic features of this kind of data later. First, some general remarks. If we think for a moment of the specimens of language in use which the learner is regularly presented with under the heading of "conversation", it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that they are highly stylized—stiff imitations of the dynamic spontaneity of real life. With few exceptions, the language of tape-recorded dialogues is controlled, relatively formal, and articulated clearly by fluent professionals, either phoneticians or actors, reading from scripts. The characters which are developed in textbook families are nice, decent and characterless; the situations in which they find themselves are generally unreal or dull. People in textbooks, it seems, are not allowed to tell long and unfunny jokes, to get irritable or to lose their temper, to gossip (especially about other people), to speak with their mouths full, to talk nonsense, or swear (even mildly). They do not get all mixed up while they are speaking, forget what they wanted to say, hesitate, make grammatical mistakes, argue erratically or illogically, use words vaguely, get interrupted, talk at the same time, switch speech styles, fail to understand, or manipulate the rules of the language to suit themselves. In a word, they are not *real*. Real people, as everyone knows, do all these things, and it is these things which are part of the essence of informal conversation. And it is an important part of the language teacher's job to avoid bringing up his students as battalions of ideal speaker—hearers, by extending their "feel" for such matters.

Of course, it is not easy to make classroom dialogues real in the *early* years of learning a language. If you have learned but a few hundred words, and a small number of grammatical structures, then naturally dialogues are likely to be pale reflections of conversational reality—though even here something can be done to improve things, as I shall shortly suggest. This is not the range of language learning that I am primarily talking about. I am more concerned about those students who would have become advanced practitioners of a language if they had had any advanced materials to make them so—students who have already completed the half-a-dozen books or

so of a published course, who have passed some kind of proficiency exam, and so on. These are people who want to go beyond the relatively measured, synthetic utterances of the classroom, to develop the linguistic expertise to be able to participate confidently and fluently in informal conversational situations. The extent of the difference is generally underestimated, but may be informally appreciated by observing the reactions of many students when they step off the boat or plane in a foreign country, and find that acclimatization applies as much to language as to weather! It surprises many to realize that most people do not speak like their teacher, or their local cultural attaché at cocktail-parties, and that there is far more variation in the standard forms of the language than their textbooks would lead them to think. We can look at this as an aspect of the unpredictability which any communication situation presents, and which any foreigner may expect to encounter. Speaking to a porter on a railway station, all foreign learners find, is a far cry from the calm atmosphere of the classroom, and the familiar accents of one's teacher and classmates. Nor is it solely a question of accent. It is a fundamental change from a pedagogically oriented world, in which people make allowances for mistakes and incomprehension, to a world of a quite different character. In class, if a point is not understood, the teacher will almost certainly carry out some recapitulation. In real life, this sometimes happens, but usually people are in too much of a hurry to make allowances or recapitulate, and they rarely attempt to be fully explicit. In giving street directions to an enquiry, for instance, the speed of speech is far greater than that normally used in classroom work, and any requests for a diminution in tempo are often thought to come from lack of intelligence on the part of the enquirer rather than any lack of linguistic practice. (A similar state of affairs is discovered by many native school leavers as they move from school to job; it is not solely a foreigner's problem.) Or again, a speaker's presuppositions may make his responses largely unintelligible, as in "You don't want to turn left at the end of that street, 'cos of the cricket". Here the intermediate stages in the argument are passed over in silence, namely, that this is the time when the crowds watching the cricket match will be leaving the ground and thus causing congestion, which should be avoided. There are many problems of this kind. Moreover, this is a peculiarly advanced difficulty. As your ability in a foreign language improves, there seems to come a stage when the better you are, the worse the problems become! The reason is simple. If your command is awful, then it's obvious; and if you can find a nice enough person to talk to, a pleasant enough (albeit chaotic) dialogue will ensue. But if your competence is quite good, and especially if you do not look particularly foreign, the native speaker will assume that you are like he is, and will talk accordingly. This is the problem period, when

production ability is a false guide to overall comprehension, and it is a stage at which a great deal of practice is needed. It is unfortunately a stage which seems to be passed over in silence in the language-teaching literature.

Often, the learner is given the impression that all he has to do to achieve the goal of fluent connected speech is simply increase the quantity and speed of production of the structures already learned. (A similar point can be made for speeding up one's processes of comprehension.) But fluency here involves far more than merely stringing together the sentence-structures and patterns of pitch-movement that have been picked up over the previous six years or so. A qualitative difference is involved, which affects many aspects of linguistic structure and function. For example, one kind of structural modification which has to be considered is the many kinds of linkage which sentences may display—using pronouns, articles, adverbials, lexical repetitions, and so on—which are not relevant (or are relevant in a different way) to the study of a sentence seen in isolation. Another example involves intonation. Having learned of the major types of tone-unit in a language, the student must now learn that putting them together into acceptable sequences—to express parenthesis, or persuasiveness, for instance—involves his using a quite separate range of pronunciation features—new variations in pitch-range, for instance. And a third example would be the need to develop the skill of knowing what to leave *out* of a sentence, of what can be taken for granted in a dialogue. To take a simple case, one should be aware that permissible answers to the question "Where are you going tomorrow?" include the following: "I'm going to the library", "To the library", "The library" and "Library". Sometimes it does not particularly matter which answer you choose; but sometimes a careless choice can produce an unintentional and embarrassing stylistic effect—as when the last of these is used with a clipped intonation pattern, giving an impression of impatience, and perhaps leading to the interpretation "Mind your own business". I do not wish to overrate the nature of the problems involved in these examples of connected speech; but I do want to avoid the opposite impression, that there are no problems at all. As so often in language learning, recognizing the existence of a problem is the first step along the road to its solution.

The gap that has to be bridged may be highlighted in a rather different way. I am of the opinion that introductory courses do not, on the whole, teach the student how to *participate* in a conversation. They do not attempt to increase his skills systematically in the whole range of behavioural cues which help effective social interaction, some of which are visual and tactile, as well as linguistic. For instance, it is rare to find any systematic attempt to introduce information about facial expressions and bodily gestures into a

language-teaching course, even these days, despite the fact that research in social psychology and elsewhere has shown very clearly that inter-cultural differences in these effects are much greater than used to be supposed, and that the number of variables of this kind which can change the "meaning" of a piece of social interaction within a single culture is considerable. Here are some typical problems, which I think any course should attempt to answer. How does one hesitate in a language? Are there different kinds of hesitation which have different meanings? Does facial expression affect our interpretation of intonation? (The answer is "yes" to both these questions.) How do you indicate that you would like to speak if someone else is already speaking? Or (more to the point) how do you do this politely? Here is an example in more detail. It is sometimes thought that a foreigner can relax in a conversation while the native speaker is talking—but nothing is further from the truth. On the contrary, full participation in a conversation requires continual alertness. Normal conventions require the person *not* doing the talking to nonetheless keep up a flow of brief vocalizations, such as (in English) "m", "mhm", and so on. If you do not put these in, the person talking will begin to wonder whether you are paying attention, or if you are being rude. If you put too many in, the impression may be one of overbearing pugnacity or of embarrassing friendliness (depending on your facial expression). And if you put them in in the wrong places, you may cause a breakdown in the intelligibility of the communication. For instance, if the speaker pauses after the definite article in the following sentence, as indicated by the dash, a "m" inserted at this point is likely to sound quite inappropriate: "You see it's the—exercise that's the problem". If you use a falling tone (especially the one which falls from high to mid in pitch, used to express non-committal sympathy), the speaker is puzzled, for he has not said anything for you to sympathize with yet, and he may get the impression that you are so anxious to break in that you can not bear to wait for him to say it. And if you give an encouraging rising tone to the vocalization, you would sound like a television interviewer prompting him to speak—which he might not appreciate!

Now such information is really rather elementary—in the sense that it is so basic to the relative success or failure of conversational interaction that it could usefully be brought into any language-teaching course from the very beginning. If beginners were exposed more to real conversation, it might be argued, they would have less to "un-learn" in later years. They would not understand the whole of any conversation they were presented with, naturally; but they would at least begin the long process of developing their intuitions about rhythm, tone of voice, speed of speaking, gesture, and all the features of conversational strategy, which, if left until

much later, tend never to be acquired satisfactorily at all. There is some sense in the idea that one of the very first things to learn in a foreign language is how to hesitate in it! And I would also argue the need for early introduction of information about facial expressions, basic intonation tunes, response vocalizations, and so on, largely on the grounds that it will take longer to develop automatic reactions in these things than in the more familiar levels of linguistic structure. But whether elementary or not, the fact of the matter is that on the whole this kind of information is not brought into courses as they exist at present. The reason for this state of affairs has already been indicated: authors as well as students are aware of the problem, but until very recently, the basic research needed to isolate and define the range and complexity of these factors had simply not been done, and it always takes years for fundamental research to percolate into the classroom. Paradoxically, then, such "elementary" information has to be permitted in my notion of supposedly "advanced" conversation.

It seems to me that in order to participate effectively in a conversation, the foreigner needs to be well aware of the implications of two quite distinct issues. First, he needs to be totally "in tune" with the behaviour, language patterns and presuppositions of whoever he is talking to and with the social situation in which the conversation is taking place. And secondly, he needs to be able to respond to all of this in the appropriate way, using language along with other forms of behaviour. Both these issues are complex, and so I shall restrict my comments to the first of them here. "Being in tune" clearly has an overlap with the traditional notion of "comprehension", but it involves far more than understanding the logical and grammatical structure of a conversation and the vocabulary contained therein. It means, for instance, being able to identify any linguistic or social distinctiveness in the other participants' speech or general behaviour. It means being able to recognize from someone's accent that he is (say) from America—if only to avoid unintentionally making rude remarks about Americans in the course of the conversation! It means recognizing when you have offended someone, by noting the change in the "tone" of the conversation. It means recognizing when people are being natural, or formal; knowing when to laugh and when not to laugh; and so on. It also means being able to continue with a difficult conversation, where background noise interferes—as at a railway station, or when listening to someone with a cold. These are all part of "being in tune". They amount to what may be called a "receptive fluency" or "command" of language. I quite agree with the view that, ideally, the foreigner should be able to deal with the same range of linguistic variation as the native speaker. Approximations to this ideal will of course depend on a variety of factors, of which motivation is perhaps the most important; but there is little point, it seems

to me, to set our language learning sights any lower than equivalence with the native speaker, and it is his familiarity with a range of linguistic distinctiveness which advanced materials need to capture, and which on the whole they do not succeed in capturing.

I do not think any blame can be assigned for the present state of affairs. The reasons for it are bound up with the stage which language-study has reached at the present time, and are part of a more general neglect of conversational norms in language studies. There are, after all, two main difficulties over obtaining information about these norms. The main hindrance is that accumulating usable and reliable sample of natural, informal conversation is by no means easy. The problems embrace the technical (ensuring recordings of a satisfactory quality), the linguistic-psychological (for instance, ensuring that the speech is natural), and the legal (avoiding the many problems involved in publishing such—often libellous—material). Secondly, once one has accumulated such samples, there arise the difficulties of analysing them. The kind of language found in these samples is in many respects so different from what we are used to analysing that it often involves our modifying our most cherished assumptions about language use (e.g. about the nature of “connected” speech) and devising new theoretical categories to handle the linguistic constraints involved. In this paper, I am relying very much on the cumulative experience which has been gained as a result of the Survey of English Usage at University College London. Most of the following examples are taken from the materials used by Derek Davy and myself as part of the teaching project on Advanced Conversational English, (see Crystal and Davy, 1975). But while my examples will be from English, I believe that the principles involved apply equally to the study of other languages.

To illustrate the distinctiveness of what I have been calling informal conversation, I propose to take a set of examples from each of three main levels of linguistic structure, phonology, lexis, and grammar. First, phonology.

One of the most striking features of informal conversation is its speed. It is a commonplace to note that learners of a foreign language always think it is being spoken rapidly, and that this is a false impression deriving from their unfamiliarity; but we must not assume that therefore speed of speaking causes no difficulty at all. On the contrary. There are often considerable changes introduced into one's pronunciation solely because of the flexibility and casualness of the informal conversational situation. Knowing what these are is an important stage in developing the receptive fluency I referred to earlier, and it is also important as a means to developing natural conversational rhythms in speech production. Good intonation presupposes good rhythmic ability; and good rhythmic ability



presupposes proper articulation of the vowel and consonant sequences constituting the syllables of connected speech. Failure to use the appropriate segmental pronunciation of words and phrases, therefore, can have repercussions over a wide area of linguistic structure.

Almost all manuals of pronunciation begin by studying the sounds of English in isolated words, and "build up" sequences of sounds into acceptable connected speech patterns at a later stage. Each of the words used to illustrate sound contrasts is articulated in isolation, and consequently the syllables involved are likely to be pronounced with considerable emphasis. Care is taken to ensure that, for example, initial and final consonants are articulated clearly, or that vowels are given their full, stressed value. The student who then moves to the study of sounds in connected speech is immediately faced with a problem. He finds that many of the pronunciation rules he has learned for words in isolation have to be *un-learned* when the words are put together into sequences. He has to learn to leave certain sounds out in certain positions (what is usually referred to as *elision*), and he has to learn that adjacent sounds may affect each other to the extent of altering their "basic" identity (*assimilation*). Of course, there is a point in adopting the above pedagogical procedure, especially in a language learning course where written materials are central; but there still remains a considerable gap between the pronunciation of words and phrases in isolation and in connected speech, and this ought not to be underestimated. Some informal pronunciations, such as "perhaps" spoken as "praps", are noticed very quickly; what is often not noticed is that there are clear pronunciation principles underlying the use of such forms as "praps", and that they are operating on many other words in the language besides. Some brief examples are as follows (there is a more detailed discussion in Gimson (1980: Ch. 11)):

(a) *Vowels*. In polysyllabic words, one syllable is usually more prominent than all the others, and this I refer to as the *accented* syllable. In informal speech, the weak vowels (ə, ɪ and ʊ) in the unstressed syllables preceding and following this syllable, in certain cases, elide, and this has a considerable effect on the rhythm of the words as wholes.

(i) syllables after the accent tend to drop their weak vowels if these are unstressed and occurring between consonants, e.g. *probably* /'prɒblɪ/, *university* /ju:nɪvɜ:stɪ/, *difficult* /'dɪfɪklt/. This is especially so if the consonant following is /r/ or /l/, as in *preferable* /'pɛfrəbl/, *ordinary* /'ɔ:dnri/, *different* /'dɪfrnt/, *family* /'fæmlɪ/, *carefully* /'kɛəflɪ/.

(ii) syllables before the accent, if they are unstressed, tend to drop their weak vowels, as in *police* /plɪs/, *suppose* /spəʊz/, *balloon* /blu:n/ and

*perhaps* /præps/—the latter replacing the abnormal /ph-/ combination which would have emerged with a more familiar combination /pr-].

When writing attempts to reflect informal speech, these elisions are often represented by apostrophes, as in *op'ra*, *temp'ry*, or *s'pose*. One should note, also, that the range of elisions in (i) above applies only to British English. In American pronunciation, for instance, the stress patterns of many of these words is different, and the weak vowels are often retained—especially in words such as *temporary*, *category*.

(b) *Consonants*. The general tendency here is for consonant clusters to simplify in informal connected speech. This is especially the case with /t/ or /d/ between consonants, which tend to be omitted, as in *facts* /fæks/, *mostly* /'məʊsli/, *friendship* /'frenʃɪp/ and *dramatists* /'dræmətɪsts/. Front fricatives tend to elide before similarly articulated consonants, e.g. *clothes* becomes /kləʊz/. /l/ is commonly dropped when following a back mid-open vowel, as in *already* /ɔ:'redɪ/. And there are a few other common elisions, such as *asked* /ɑ:st/ and *recognized* /'rekənaɪzd/.

Of particular importance is the way in which elision affects the vowels of grammatical words, which are often monosyllabic and usually in an unstressed position in a sentence. Articles, conjunctions, pronouns, some prepositions, auxiliary verbs and a few adverbial elements (such as introductory *there* in “there is”, etc.) are particularly affected. Examples are *an* becoming /n/, *and* becoming /n/, *but* becoming /bt/, *she* becoming /ʃ/, *some* becoming /sm/, *from* becoming /frm/, *can* becoming /kn/, and so on. Comprehension is particularly affected by the fact that sequences of unstressed grammatical words may all be influenced by this process of elision; and along with the assimilations which may follow due to the consonants being juxtaposed, the resulting speech may sound quite unlike its written form. This is especially noticeable in verb phrases, with sequences of auxiliary verbs, as in *he wouldn't have been able to go*, which may regularly be heard /i'wʊdnəbɪn'eɪblə'gəʊ/. This pronunciation is absolutely regular: the strong vowels of *have* and *been* get reduced; initial *h* is dropped in unstressed syllables; /t/ elides readily, as do front fricatives (/v/ in this case), as we have seen above—and the result is the pronunciation as transcribed.

My second set of examples comes from vocabulary. It is well known that colloquial language has its own distinctive lexis, but there has been little attempt to distinguish patterns or types of vocabulary within the general notion. Here I want to look at one of the most important features of the vocabulary of informal conversation, well represented in all our material—its lack of precision. In informal situations, of course, a deliberate use of lexical vagueness is not necessarily something to be criticized. A perfectly

succinct, precise, specific, controlled contribution to a conversation is the aim of many people participating in debates, discussions, interviews, and so on; but on informal occasions, this amount of intellectual control of our thoughts and expression is absent. Our use of lexical vagueness is undoubtedly a main sign of our social and personal relaxation; and while one would not normally expect to find someone consciously cultivating their usage in these respects, the point must be firmly made that such usages should not be "avoided at all costs"; the foreign learner must be prepared to encounter a great deal of unfamiliar lexis arising out of this situation.

There are many reasons for lexical vagueness. In my opinion, the four most important are: (a) memory loss—the speaker forgets a word, or it may be "on the tip of his tongue"; (b) there is no word in the language for what he wants to say, or he does not know the appropriate word; (c) the subject of the conversation is not such that it requires precision, and an approximation or characterization will do: and (d) the "choice" of the vague lexical item is conducive to maintaining the informal atmosphere of the situation (where the use of a precise, formal word might jar). Any one instance of lexical vagueness may stem from any or all of these factors, of course, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them. There are, in addition, other likely factors (such as personal habit, or lack of control due to emotional involvement in the conversation); but I am in no way trying to establish a final classification here.

It seems possible to group the lexical vagueness of informal conversation into a number of types. At one extreme we find a range of lexical items which express *total* vagueness. Here, the intended lexical item is not available to the speaker, for whatever reason, and he therefore substitutes an item which indicates that it is not available. English has a number of such items, though their spelling is somewhat uncertain, being features of the spoken language only. For example, *thingummy* /'θɪŋəmi/, *thingy* /'θɪŋɪ/, *thingummajig* /'θɪŋəmədʒɪg/, *thingummabob* /'θɪŋəmɪbɒb/, *whatshisname* /'wɒtsɪzneɪm/, *whatsits* /'wɒtsɪts/, *what-do-you-call-it* /'wɒtʃukɔ:lɪt/ or /'wɒtʃəmækɔ:lɪt/ (the latter presumably from an earlier "what you may call it"), *oojamaflip* /'u:dʒəmæflɪp/, *doo-daw* /'du:dɑ:/. In sentences, one might hear, *Pass me the what-sits, will you?*, *I gave the book to thingummy in the corner-shop*, and so on.

Another type of vagueness occurs at the end of a sentence, or of a sequence of lexical items (such as a list), where completion in specific terms is unnecessary. Here one might simply use a summarizing phrase, such as *and things*, *and the like*, *and so on*, *and so on and so forth*, *and so forth*, *and everything*, *and things like this/that, etcetera*, and the common *sort of thing*. For example, in response to a casual enquiry about what you

have in your shopping basket, it would not normally be appropriate to go through the entire contents, giving a precise inventory: a general indication of the content, followed by a summarizing phrase, would do, as in *I've got some tomatoes, beans, and things*.

Also tied to particular grammatical structures we find the use of vague generic terms and collective nouns, such as *bags of, stacks of, tons of, heaps of, oodles of, umpteen, and a touch of*. Examples: *I've got bags of time. He's got oodles of money, I think I've got a touch of my hay-fever coming on*. All of these phrases except the last mean simply "lots of"; the last means "an instance of". Tied to a negative structure, we find *for anything*, as in *I wouldn't have his job for anything*, along with such other phrases as *for worlds, for the world, for all the tea in China*. This is close to the imprecision we associate with exaggeration or vivid description, as in *He ran like mad* (= he ran very rapidly); or to *adore* (= like very much) something. Adverbial intensification in the noun phrase, using such words as *pretty, bloody, jolly, rather*, and many others, shares the characteristic of being imprecise—though not thereby ceasing to be effective communicatively! One might also note the ways English has of expressing approximation in relation to numbers, using such conventions as *more or less, say, or odd*, as in *There were 30 there, more or less, There were, say, 30 there, and There were 30 odd there*.

Lastly, a particularly important process is the way the native-speaker readily constructs new lexical items to meet the needs of a particular occasion. By "new" here, I mean fresh coinages, words which he makes up on the spur of the moment, which are in no dictionary, and which he may never use again. They are sometimes called "nonce-words"—that is, words made up "for the nonce" (as Elizabethan English would have put it), for a single occasion of use. The use of affixes is a main means of extending the vocabulary in this way. Prefixes such as *semi-, multi-, and non-*, and suffixes such as *-like* and *-wise* are frequently used to express approximation, when precision is not of primary concern. Take such examples as *That mountain is rather table-like, isn't it*, which is a more informal version of *like a table*, or *Linguistics-wise I think she's quite clever*, where one is avoiding the cumbersomeness of a circumlocution such as *From the point of view of linguistics . . .* Native-speakers manipulate their language in this way all the time in informal speech. To my mind, it is the mark of a real command of a foreign language when the learner dares to do likewise.

My third example comes from grammar. Here, the main question affecting the definition of informal conversation is that of sentence connectivity. In the world of written language, connected discourse has a regular, predictable pattern. Sentences are clearly identifiable, commencing with a capital letter, and concluding with a clear mark of punctuation—

apart from in a few definable cases where these rules may be broken (such as in advertising). The general impression is one of premeditation and conscious organization. Errors of expression and changes of mind, if they occur, can be carefully erased, and eliminated from a final draft. If a word or phrase does not come to mind, the writer may pause until he finds it, or choose some alternative. The main factor which distinguishes written from spoken language, accordingly, is *time*. When we express ourselves in writing, there is always time to revise, to re-write. In speech, there may be a chance to preplan our expression, by using notes, or memorization, or reading aloud. But in the immediacy of spontaneous speech, on informal occasions, the possibility of producing regular and tightly controlled discourse becomes remote. Nor, on informal occasions, is there any real need or desire for such controlled or careful speech. Controlled or careful speech, after all, must be a product of a controlled or careful speaker; and if one then asks why is such a speaker being so controlled or careful, the answer would normally be: "Because the situation demands it". But situations in which controlled or careful speech is the norm are precisely *not* those which we mean when we talk about informal conversational language. The "informality" of conversation is identified primarily by the *absence* of external pressures to talk along predetermined or rigid lines, as I have already suggested. It is a use of language where—apart from certain restrictions on subject-matter—it does not matter what happens, because there is no-one present who will criticize. Thus we find a casualness, a randomness about the subject-matter and construction of informal conversation; and this regularly leads to loosely coordinated constructions, incompleteness, ungrammaticality, stylistic vacillation, and many other linguistic "errors"—but the errors remain either unnoticed or tolerated, and indeed are only called errors because we have grown up with a normative standpoint based upon formal or written language. Certainly, the person who always tries to correct others on these informal occasions will be criticized as a pedant; and the person who maintains a facade of linguistic formality rapidly becomes a bore.

In informal conversation, then, where there is no time or need to plan far ahead, what syntactic features should we expect to encounter? In what ways may fluency be maintained, without contravening our desire for informality? The short answer is that there are many such ways, and that we do not know what all of them are, for no exhaustive analysis has ever been carried out. But it is not difficult to see what the most frequently used features of discourse-building are. I shall illustrate solely the question of *continuity*: once a person has used an utterance-initiating structure, how may he continue? There are a number of possibilities.

The obvious continuity feature is simple *addition* of another structure,

itself grammatically independent, using a conjunction. In conversation, an extremely large proportion of simple addition is through the use of *and*, which adds nothing to the meaning of the linked structures, and distributes the emphasis evenly throughout the utterance. This straightforward process of addition is learned very early in the language acquisition process. Children of three and four tell their first stories by stringing their clauses together with *and*; and teachers have great difficulty inculcating alternative forms of connectivity in the written expression of their pupils in secondary schools. It is the most neutral kind of connectivity, semantically speaking, that there is. Simple addition is, of course, a quite familiar notion, and will already have been introduced to English students in the earlier stages of learning the language. Having noted, then, its frequency of occurrence in conversations, I propose to say no more about it here, but move on to the more complex notions involved in types of sentence sequence, where we do not simply add sentences together in this "neutral" kind of way, but introduce some kind of semantic contrast between them—some kind of orientation which will guide our listeners as to the direction in which we want the conversation to go, our intentions underlying what we say, or our attitude towards them. The way this is done is by the use of a connecting word or phrase—usually an adverb or adverbial phrase or clause, but sometimes a short, parenthetic sentence. It is possible to distinguish three main functions of these connectives—though the boundary between them is sometimes obscure.

First, the connectives may be interpreted as *reinforcing*, i.e. specifically supplementing the whole or part of the meaning of what has immediately preceded. One takes what has been said and builds upon it in various ways. The reinforcement may take the form of a complete repetition of what has preceded, or a paraphrase of it, or it may add a fresh piece of information arising out of it, e.g. "I like Paris—in fact I was there last week". Examples of reinforcing connectives are: *as a matter of fact*, *to be precise*, *in other words*, *as I say*, *that is*, *I must say*, *really*, *for instance*, *in a sense*, and of course, *and* whenever it is used as a separate tone-unit or given extra prominence, e.g. "I got the jam—and I didn't forget the bread".

Second, the connectives may be interpreted as *diminishing*, or retracting the whole or part of the meaning of what has preceded, e.g. "We're looking forward to the holidays—at least the children are". Other examples would be *or rather*, *at any rate*, *actually*, *mind you*, and *I mean*.

There are some particularly productive kinds of connective, which may sometimes be reinforcing and sometimes diminishing, illustrated by *the trouble is*. This is commonly used to impose a level of organization on a conversation that has been meandering, or to give it a fresh direction. Phrases of this kind say, as it were: "a lot has been said so far, but the main

point we ought to concentrate on is the following . . ." The choice of noun indicates the speaker's attitude, whether he sees the issue as a problem, or whatever. Other examples are: *the idea/question/answer/problem/solution/point is*, and the important non-specific *the thing is*. This is very close to the common way of summarizing a discourse using initial adverbial phrases of the kind, *on the whole, in short, to sum up, all in all*, and so on.

The third category of connecting phrase is so different from the first two that it perhaps ought to be studied independently. The difference lies in the fact that, whereas so far we have been discussing only those connectives whose primary purpose is to make a clear semantic contrast between sentences in sequence, the following words and phrases have an additional, largely stylistic, function and sometimes little clear content. Their function is similar to the above, in that they are introduced into our speech in order to maintain the continuity of our discourse; but very often this is a secondary role. Their primary role seems to be to alter the stylistic force of a sentence, so as to express the attitude of the speaker to his listener, or to express his assessment of the conversational situation as informal. For this reason I refer to these as *softening connectives*, or softeners, for short. Examples are *you know, I mean, sort of, you see*, and the like. They express a wide range of nuances, and as yet it is impossible to make any satisfactory generalizations to cover all of them, as they have been almost totally ignored in the descriptive literature.

I hope the examples I have used in the second half of this chapter have warranted the claims I made in the first half, that informal conversation is a highly distinctive mode of communication, different in many basic respects from the phonological, grammatical and lexical norms that most of us are used to from the handbooks. The differences go much deeper than I have had space to illustrate: the main area I have not gone into is intonation—but that is a separate topic. But enough should have been said to suggest that we have here a much-neglected area of study, and that language teachers, as well as general linguists, ought to focus more of their attention on it. Only in this way, it seems to me, will we see reasonable progress in the field of the teaching of advanced conversation.