

The complexity of spoken English

David Crystal

A regular assessment of other disciplines in relation to our own can only be beneficial; but these days, as journals and research projects proliferate, it is becoming increasingly difficult even to keep abreast of developments, let alone find time to evaluate them in relation to our own field. For Linguistics, and the work carried on into the structure of English which takes place under that heading, the proliferation is particularly noticeable at the moment. Hence, some thoughts about current trends may be opportune.

In my view, Linguistics has made, and continues to make three distinct kinds of contribution to the study of language. First, it has an 'empirical' role: it finds out new facts about the structure of language and the way in which language is used, paying special attention (these days at least) to the social and psychological characteristics of the language users. One of the most important aspects of this role involves the study of the rate and range of language change, and of popular attitudes to change, especially in pronunciation. Secondly, Linguistics has a 'methodological' role: it develops reliable general techniques for analysing language—procedures for determining what the linguistic 'facts' are, and how they should be inter-related. Methods of phonetic and grammatical notation provide the most obvious instances of this concern. Thirdly, there is a 'theoretical' role in the aim to establish general principles of explanation for language—principles which will shed some light on why languages are as they are, and give us a precise means of talking about them. In any research or teaching enterprise, of course, each of these roles is present, and they are closely related. It is not really possible for example, to talk about a linguistic 'fact' without considering to at least some extent the way in which we found out about it, and the way we have chosen to relate it to other 'facts' in the language. Consider, for instance, the way in which Daniel Jones' transcription of the English long/short vowels, as in 'beat'/'bit', reflects his view that the most important 'fact' about these vowels is that they are of different lengths, whereas A. C. Gimson's reflects a view that the vowels are qualitatively as well as quantitatively different. (D.J.'s is /bi:t v. /bit/, Gimson's is /bi:t/ v. /bit/.) However, for purposes of discussion, it is sometimes useful to talk about 'facts' independently of the theoretical and methodological issues which form a part of their identification and definition, and that is what I propose to do here.

What I want to emphasise is the tremendous number of fresh facts about English which have emerged over the past five years, especially in the experimental work going on in psycholinguistics (studies of the normal development of language in children, in particular) and in the field work which has produced a number of sociolinguistic surveys. Whatever field of applied language studies we may work within—whether native or foreign language teaching, speech therapy, speech and drama . . .—this information is inevitably going to effect our view of the nature of language and language-teaching, in all its forms, as it will provide us with a different set of

expectations about the complexity and diversity of linguistic utterances and their functions, a new awareness of what is meant by the phrase '*Command* of a language'. And the best way of illustrating his claim is to look at some of the recent work on spoken English.

Readers of this Journal do not need to be told that spoken English is different from written English; but one of the things which has emerged very clearly from linguistic research is that the *extent* of the difference between the two media is very much greater than anyone had imagined. Many people still operate with a stereotype of spoken English, which they derive from the BBC, perhaps, or from public speakers, and which is strongly influenced by the norms of the written language and the pressures of formal occasions. Few in fact have ever tried or been in a position to listen in detail to the normal linguistic variability which characterises everyday spontaneous conversation, which after all takes up 95% of most people's speaking lifetime. This is not very surprising, of course, as my phrase 'been in a position to' implies. It is not easy to obtain good samples of real spontaneous conversation. When most people see a microphone, they instinctively alter their speech; they begin to talk more carefully, they hesitate differently from normal. Only the experienced can learn to ignore the microphone, and these, by definition, are not typical speakers. A lot of time has been spent developing satisfactory recording techniques here, and these days a lot of material is available, much of which has been analysed. When I say, then, that people tend to underestimate the complexity and character of spoken English, it is to the spontaneous everyday conversation of educated people that I am referring, in what follows.

In syntax, for example, there is often an unspoken assumption that whatever spoken English is, its structures will for the most part be very similar to those we are used to working with in the description of written language. But there are fundamental differences, affecting our most central grammatical concepts. Take the notion of 'sentence'. In the study of written English, this rarely causes any problems: a sentence is something which begins with a capital letter and ends with a full-stop; and this definition is satisfactory for most purposes. But in speech it is *very* often difficult to say where one sentence ends and the next begins—nor does this matter, for purposes of intelligibility. Here is an unpunctuated utterance which illustrates the problem.

there are two issues here the first is a matter of confidence the second is a matter of safety

There is no difficulty over intelligibility here, but how many sentences are there? In writing you have to make up your mind, and punctuate it either as a single sentence, with a colon after 'here', or as three sentences. But in speech you do not have to make up your mind. Whichever way you say it would permit alternative punctuations. So how *do* you describe the structure of such 'utterances'?

A second example of this difficulty occurs when we have two clauses which are coordinated, and which could be punctuated in one of two basic ways:

John came at three, and Mary came at four.

John came at three. And Mary came at four.

In writing, the choice is clear-cut: either you view the two clauses as constituting a single sentence, or the second is seen as a kind of 'after-thought' to the first. But in speech, the move from one interpretation to the other is much less clear. The normal prosodic interpretation of the first version would be to put a rising tone on 'three', followed by a slight pause, and a falling tone on 'four'. If the sentence is spoken in this way, and people are asked to write it down, they will do so punctuating the utterance as a single sentence. But the more the pitch movement on 'three' is made to fall, the more people will tend to punctuate the utterance as two sentences; and likewise, if we gradually increase the length of the pause, the more we move in the direction of a two-sentence reaction. The point is that in speech, intonation and pause (and related features) provide us with continua along which we can range—as if we were able to vary the degrees of size or blackness of our punctuation marks. It is perfectly possible to say the above sentence with such an intonation and pause that no-one could be sure which of the two versions you were intending; and in spontaneous conversation people are doing this all the time.

As a third example, consider the following conversational extract:¹

Miss X: . . . I had about five thousand books | to take back to senate house yesterday | and I got all the way through the college | to where the car was | at the parking meter at the other end | and realised I'd left my coat | in my locker | and I just couldn't face

Miss Y: m |

Miss X: going all the way back again | with this great you know my arms were aching |

Miss Y: m |

Miss X: and I thought | well | I'll get it on tuesday | . . .

Given appropriate intonation, pauses, speed variations, and the like, this sounds perfectly fluent and appropriately casual (given the occasion, an evening chat over coffee). There are two questions to raise which show the problems for the analyst. Would you put a full-stop after 'aching' or not? The introduction of the 'agreement-noise' in the following line makes one wonder. Miss X hardly pauses at all after the word, but continued straight on with 'and I thought' . . . There was just time for Miss Y to insert a 'm' into the conversation. The second point to note is the loose coordination between the clauses. This is a quite typical feature of conversational English. It seems to be organised along the lines of clause + clause + clause . . . , each clause being linked using a conjunction, or by intonation. Sometimes the 'sentence' seems to go on for minutes, interspersed with numerous false starts, tongue slips, partial repetitions, and the like, all of which are far more frequent in everyday conversation than we tend to realise. When it is said of a dramatist, such as Pinter, that he has an ear for real conversation, it is instructive to compare his writing with such dialogues as the above. Real conversation is far removed from Pinter's carefully controlled syntactic progressions; it would be intolerable if it were not so.

In vocabulary, too, there is a tendency to assume that the difference between speech and writing is smaller than it really is. There is more to spoken lexis than simply grafting on a few slang words to the vocabulary of written English. The range of acceptable educated colloquialisms is very wide indeed; but it has been very little studied. Dictionaries do not help here. All dictionaries to date are based upon the written language, in the sense that words are not included in them unless they have appeared in a written form somewhere. But there are hundreds of words, like 'pong' and 'bolshy', which have been with us for some years and likely to stay for many more, that will not be found in the standard dictionaries. And when we consider the new senses that have developed from familiar words, the figure must run into thousands.

But it is in pronunciation that the greatest strides have been made in understanding the complexity of the spoken language, particularly in the field of 'non-segmental' studies—intonation, rhythm, etc. A few years ago, I worked on a number of samples of conversational English to determine the range of non-segmental features used, and to develop a system of transcription for them. It emerged that a considerable number of new categories had to be established, to describe satisfactorily the range of prosodic contrasts regularly used in everyday speech. Some of these contrasts had been noticed before, of course—early elocutionists such as Rush had attempted to list some—but there had been no systematic approach of any comprehensiveness, and the descriptions of intonation which the twentieth century had developed for foreign language teaching purposes were very much simplifications. Thus, for instance, the complex range of variations in speed of speaking, or in rhythm of speaking, used in conversation, had been almost completely ignored. The range of intonational 'tones' used turned out to be more complex than expected. 'Paralinguistic' effects, using abnormal articulatory movement, such as 'breathy' or 'husky' voices, proved to be extremely frequent as indices of attitude in everyday speech. This study is reported in full elsewhere, along with a discussion of other work of a similar kind.² Non-segmental features emerge as being a highly organised structural component of language, with a variety of functions, including the syntactic, attitudinal and social. After this, I feel that the old description of intonation as 'the punctuation of speech' is highly degrading!

Research into spoken English is thus proceeding on a number of fronts simultaneously. Moreover, a great deal of this has been published over the past five years—and this is a change from a few years ago, when it was almost impossible to recommend reading on linguistically orientated work, because next to nothing of an introductory nature had been written. But nowadays, the new student is spoilt for choice. In English phonetics and phonology there is Gimson's book, *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (Arnold, 2nd edn. 1970), which has a useful additional section on phonotactics in its new edition; and on more general matters, but still well illustrated with reference to English, J. D. O'Connor's Pelican book, *Phonetics*. In grammar, there is the major study by R. Quirk and others, *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (Longman, 1972), and F. R. Palmer's *Grammar* (Pelican, 1971). Two recent general introductions are D. L. Bolinger, *Aspects of language* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), and D. Crystal, *Linguistics* (Pelican, 1971); for those who would like to read an introduction to language study cast within the frame of reference of the transformational-generative school of Noam Chomsky and others, there is R. Langacker, *Language and its structure* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967). On current trends, *New Horizons in Linguistics*, edited by John Lyons, is particularly valuable. On sociolinguistics, there is J. Fishman,

Sociolinguistics Newbery House, 1970); on language acquisition, there is P. Menyuk, *The Acquisition and Development of Language* (Prentice-Hall, 1971); on foreign language teaching, D. A. Wilkins, *Linguistics in language teaching* (Arnold, 1972).

Whatever arguments exist concerning the usefulness or otherwise of linguistics, at least the next generation of arguers will be better informed.

DAVID CRYSTAL is Reader in Linguistics in the Faculty of Letters and Social Science at the University of Reading.

¹This is adapted from the passage transcribed in D. Crystal & D. Davy, *Investigating English Style* (Longmans, 1969), p.98. In the above, the only transcriptional convention used is the tone-unit boundary mark|.

²See D. Crystal, *Prosodic systems and intonation in English* (C.U.P., 1969).