Authentic What, Who(m), and When

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One of the most interesting developments in the field of language teaching in recent years has been the concern to provide students with 'authentic' spoken materials with which to work. The concern is understandable – a reaction, largely, against the concocted texts and artificial situations which used to be so common in language teaching textbooks. Both mother-tongue and foreign-language teaching contexts have been influenced by this trend, which has parallels in such areas as language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and phonetics, where there has also been a preoccupation with naturalistic samples and uncontaminated recordings.

It is however easy to be impressed by the glitter of authenticity, and fail to appreciate the nature of the problems which arise in using such materials, some of which are quite unexpected. My own experience is illustrative. Some years ago, Derek Davy and I became involved in a project which aimed to provide authentic conversational materials for advanced foreign students of English (and which was later published as Crystal & Davy 1975). Standing on the shoulders of Quirk, Labov, and others, we were aware of the need to eliminate observer bias, and to obtain recordings which were spontaneous and unselfconscious. But we also wanted to make recordings which were of excellent auditory quality, sufficient to enable a detailed phonological transcription to be made.

The procedure we used can be briefly described. On one particular occasion, for example, I invited a group of friends round to my house, for the specific purpose of making a recording of their speech. I had told them I was interested in regional accents, and I needed their voices. It would take only a few minutes, and there would be beer to follow. When the people arrived, they were shown into the lounge,

where the equipment had been arranged in advance. Each chair had a microphone close by, and the leads all ran to a tape recorder in the middle of the floor. Everyone was very selfconscious, as they sat down by the microphones, so they were told that the 'formal' part of the evening would be concluded as quickly as possible. I switched on the tape recorder, and asked each to count from 1 to 20 – which they did, with great care and solemnity. I then said that there was nothing more to do, and switched off the tape recorder. Everyone immediately relaxed, drinks were poured, and an evening of normal conversation followed – all of which was recorded, because of course the microphones were connected, not to the tape recorder in full view, but (via the carpet) to a different recorder which was turning away in the kitchen. The microphones stayed where they were, close by the speakers' mouths, but were totally ignored by the participants. At one point, I was 'called away', so that even unconscious bias due to my participation was eliminated. The result was the best quality recording I've ever been able to make, and it produced a level of informal spontaneity which I'd never heard before. (It was also, incidentally, one of the most expensive recordings ever made – not because of the equipment (microphones, mixer unit, etc.), but because of the multiple rounds of whisky which I had to provide in subsequent months, once I admitted the trick at the end of the evening. Even today, over ten years later, one man insists it's my round, ever time we meet, because of that evening. Multiply that by the number of people and evenings involved in building up the corpus, and you'll get a sense of the problem. But still, it had to be done. Surreptitious recordings are all very well, but I had no desire to end up as a linguistic watergate.)

The subsequent analysis brought to light several interesting linguistic features, many of which I had not noticed when making previous studies of informal conversation. Some of these features – certain distinctive patterns of clause connectivity, for instance – have been described elsewhere (Crystal 1980). But to illustrate further: the effort spent in obtaining good auditory quality was well repaid, for it would not otherwise have been possible to identify the many effects conveyed through variation in loudness and speed of speech. For example, the very rapid rate at which participants talk on these occasions resulted in a much more fundamental use of assimilation and elision than one usually sees explained in manuals of pronunciation. *Wouldn't have been able to,* for instance, emerged at one point as /wʊ²mbnéblə/, but even this transcription is misleading, for the whole was articulated, not syllable by syllable, but as a single rhythmic beat. Or again, there was

the frequent reduction of the indefinite article to a glottal stop, in initial sentence position, as in *a man was walking . . .* The remarkably wide range and frequent use of comment clauses and related constructions (*you see, well, the trouble is,* and the like) was a further finding. This important area of discourse connectivity was very much neglected at the time, though it is good to see that it has attracted increasing attention in the last decade (compare, for example, the page and a half outline given in Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik 1972, with the several pages devoted to the topic in the revised edition of that grammar, 1985). At a lexical level, there was an extraordinary range of nonsense items (e.g. *thingummy,* /ˈwɒtʃəməkɔlɪt/), neologisms and nonce words (e.g. *that table's rather coffin-like*). At a phonetic level, there was an even more extraordinary range of vocal effects in use, as people adopted mock accents and voice qualities in order to emphasise points or tell jokes.

In due course, extracts from the recordings were published, along with a tape, and from time to time I have used the material for teaching. The book has done very well, and has come to be quite widely used; but there were some surprises in store. The first came when I was discussing a point of colloquial syntax with an experienced foreign-language teacher, who said that the grammar of these extracts was quite unlike anything she'd ever been taught. 'But these are authentic materials', I reminded her. 'Yes, but I don't want material to be *that* authentic', she replied.

In subsequent discussion, we were able to untangle several factors underlying this reaction. There was first of all the point that foreign-language learners would not ever need to use such colloquial speech themselves; therefore there was no point in presenting them with it, even at advanced level. I rebutted this by asserting the importance of such data as part of work on listening comprehension. The teacher replied that this was no more realistic, for foreigners would hardly ever be taken into families to the extent that they would routinely encounter conversation of such informality. I demurred, conscious of the problems of precisely this kind which often crop up in the 'family' of a summer school, and the like; but that was hardly a frequent situation. I tried to make the stronger point that several colloquial features of this kind were used in modern drama (I was thinking of such writers as Wesker and Pinter) which foreign students often have to read. However, the point wasn't a particularly strong one, as nothing I have ever read in modern drama remotely resembles the linguistic features of real informal conversation, with all its rambling, interruptions, varia-

tions in level (both stylistic and prosodic), overlapping speech, and domestic or parochial subject-matter. One credits such dramatists with rather more than a tape-recorder as an ear.

I then tried to use the argument that this kind of material had value as a sort of omega point. Any teacher who wished to be in control over the level of formality of the language being taught would find it helpful to have a perspective which contained all the possibilities, from maximally formal to maximally informal. This material, I thought, was as informal as you could get. Even if students did not use it, it would be useful for them (and, *a fortiori,* for their teachers) to be aware of it, in order to evaluate the relative effect of the language which *was* in active use. The point was taken, as far as teacher awareness was concerned; but there was reluctance to accept it for students. They would be confused by the variety of alternatives, it was asserted, and the standard of their written language might deteriorate, if they unconsciously allowed it to be affected by colloquial usage. I agreed about the latter point, but counter-asserted that to teach the major stylistic contrasts of a language would not necessarily lead to confusion. On the contrary, it might be argued, it could help to de-confuse an intelligent student who had noticed the existence of language variety and was puzzled by it. And it would help to eliminate the confusion which was certain to arise in due course, when students who had had no experience of language variety stepped off the boat and found that the language being used around them did not match that which they had been taught.

The argument then changed direction, as the teacher began to make various points about English for Special Purposes, examination syllabuses, amount of time available, low levels of teacher's pay in her country, and so on and so forth, and in due course we went our separate ways. Later, I reflected that there were other points which might have been raised, of greater theoretical interest. Chief amongst these is some version of the competence/performance issue. The recordings present us with authentic performance, all right, but this is performance containing all the weaknesses which flesh is heir to, and to which Chomsky drew our attention over 20 years ago. Mistakes and hesitation noises are authentic too. Should they therefore be studied and taught with the same serious intent? I have met teachers who do teach English hesitation noises, for example – and I can see the point, when a Frenchman producing an otherwise perfectly respectable English sentence interrupts his flow with a shoulder-shrugged, lip-rounded, fronted vowel instead of the lip-neutral schwa that all true Britons have been born to. Or, to take a more weighty case, should

comment clauses such as *you know* be taught? *You know* can be used either as a stylistic marker (as in the softening function of initial position, e. g. *you know, I think it's time you went home*), or as a marker of uncertain thinking (especially in medial position, e. g. *he's got a – you know, one of the . . .*), or as a marker of interaction (especially in final position, e. g. *she's too good, you know?*). One might well argue that it is merely a performance feature which all ideal speaking/hearing foreigners would do well to do without. On the other hand, foreigners are human too, and they have just as much right to think unclearly as we do. So (one could argue) they might as well express their lack of clarity using the means English makes available. The point is made stronger when we encounter usages in which *you know* operates under more well-defined structural constraints, or has a clear semantic role, as in:

   *you know, shut the door.
   *you know, is it tea-time?
   *he's just gone to New you know York.
   I've just met John and his, you know, friend!

In the light of such examples, I would certainly recommend the teaching of comment clauses. But other performance features might not lend themselves to such a definite conclusion.

A further theoretical point is more sociolinguistic in character. The trouble with authenticity is not simply that everything is authentic, from a structural point of view, but that it is so from a social and psychological point of view as well. This is the true authenticity trap: authentic materials do not solve the teacher's problem of selection; rather, they increase it. If students wish their English to be 'like' that which they hear on the tapes, then they must perforce identify with the speakers, to a greater or lesser extent. Is it right (as I have seen) for a group of 18-year-olds to be rehearsing dialogues based on extracts from authentic materials, when the original sentences were those used by 58-year-olds? Or the other way round, so that senior citizens end up producing junior citizen slang? Or, more seriously (for linguistic differences due to age seem to be few), when there are marked differences in social class? What happens to the authenticity, in such cases? Students naturally identify with their models. But what if they identify with the wrong (in some social or psychological – or even psychiatric sense (there are some funny native speakers about!)) models? I know one Englishman who learned female Japanese by mistake. And the range of swear-words which the people on our tapes used would not be entirely appropriate emerging from the lips of a gentle maiden from

Thailand. The problem has historical dimensions too. I met an Indian gentleman at a summer school last year who addressed us all in a perfectly authentic late Victorian mode of speech, and whose style was much influenced by Shakespeare, another authentic English user.

Quite routine teaching problems may be raised. One of the speakers in our recording used double negatives (a normal feature of his dialect); the others did not. One used *I shall,* another used *I will.* Authentic materials, by their very nature, juxtapose usage variants in a manner that would not normally be encountered in traditional texts. Regional accent and dialect variants may also be encountered. All the forms belonging to the various acceptability gradients in a language's syntax (cf. Quirk *et al* 1985) will turn up, sooner or later. Those who are attempting to define clear-cut rules will find themselves hemmed in by marginal cases.

Here, we approach a third-order problem. Authentic speech has led us towards authentic speakers; but authentic speakers have authentic attitudes about their language – about the way in which they speak or write, and the way in which others speak or write. Authentic speakers tend to have very marked views about language, in fact, and have attitudes which are mildly or markedly prescriptive. Normally, when foreigners meet a new word, they can ask for guidance from native speakers about its meaning, pronunciation, or use, and they stand a reasonable chance of receiving help. But the kinds of problem raised by authentic materials do not readily yield helpful responses, partly because the points of usage are often quite complicated, but mainly because general requests for help about style invariably result in such stock native-speaker responses as 'You don't want to copy me. My English is awful', or even, 'You speak English much better than I do'. In short, it is of little use approaching native speakers for guidance about selection in the use or interpretation of authentic materials, because most of them are even more conservative and proscriptive than the foreigner.

How far can such problems of selection and evaluation be resolved, when using authentic materials in foreign-language teaching contexts? I submit that they can, but only if one condition obtains. The foreigners must have a grounding in the authentic materials of their own language first, and develop a general linguistic awareness which will stand them in good stead when it comes to other-language learning. Differences between speech and writing, variants of formality and informality, gradations of acceptability, canons of correctness, and other such issues seem to be universally relevant, though there is a

great deal of variation in their cultural realization. In a sense, the peculiarities of advanced conversational *English* should be no problem, therefore, because they are peculiarities which will be to some extent shared wherever informal conversation is used. Assimilation due to rapid speech, ellipsis, comment clauses, empty lexicon, and other such features are already part of an adult speaker's linguistic behaviour, whichever language is spoken. On the other hand, there will be some differences: for example, the prescriptive attitudes found amongst Arabic speakers, because of the special status of the classical Arabic of the Koran, places them at a remove from anything likely to be encountered in English (as Ferguson has pointed out). The study of such differences is yet another future domain of applied comparative sociolinguistics.

In the meantime, a great deal might be achieved by introducing foreigners to some of these issues, through the medium of their own language, while they are at the earliest stages of learning their foreign language. The point has already been recognized in such contexts as the teaching of English to immigrant children, where it has been pointed out that achievement in the foreign language bears some relationship to achievement in the mother-tongue, and that lack of respect for the latter can seriously impede progress in the former. Teaching programmes are now emerging which introduce language awareness topics at an early point in the school curriculum, as a perspective for foreign-language or mother-tongue work to be commenced later (e.g. Hawkins 1984, and the associated series of topic books). And I have seen similar approaches beginning to be used in English-teaching institutions in some European centres. If these approaches succeed and grow, I believe that many of the objections to authentic conversational materials will simply disappear. It would be a pleasure to remove the word 'advanced' from the title of Crystal & Davy 1975. But we are not there yet.

Postscript: an authentic story

When the wind blows in the wrong direction, flights from Milan airport sometimes leave from Malpensa instead. The coach journey from Milan to Malpensa takes a couple of hours, and once I was on this bus, sitting next to an American lady. It was early spring, but everything still looked very wintery. On the way, we passed a garden centre which had an English name, 'Green Ideas'. The collocation had a certain familiar ring to it, and when my travelling companion commented upon it, I seized my chance. As far as I can recall, our conversation went something like this:

Lady: What a lovely name!

Self: Yes, but the ideas don't seem to be very green, at this time of year.

Lady: No. They'll come, though. It's such a lovely climate here.

Self   (pushing his luck): They're rather colourless green ideas, in fact.

Lady   (laughs): That's true.

Self   (still pushing): Everything's still sleeping, at this time of year.

Lady: It surely is.

Self: The colourless green ideas are sleeping, indeed.

Lady: Excuse me?

Self: I said the colourless green ideas are sleeping.

Lady: That's what I thought you said.

Self   (going for broke): Mind you, I expect there's a tremendous amount of activity taking place, just beneath the surface. The colourless green ideas are sleeping furiously, wouldn't you say?

There was no reply, but I got one of those 'What-are-you-some-kind-of-nut-or-sumpin' looks, and she didn't talk to me any more.

This instance of breakdown in Anglo-American relations serves two purposes. It illustrates what happens if you push a native speaker too far, and is thus vaguely relevant to the theme of my paper. But mainly, to my mind, it makes a nice birthday present for someone who has more linguistic awareness in his little finger than most of us have had hot dinners.

Happy Birthday, Fergie!

References

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