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Spoken Grammar and Its Teaching

Jiacheng Liu

Huaibei Institute of Technology, Huaibei 235000, China

Abstract

This study systematically examines the distinctive features of spoken English grammar and their application in language teaching. Drawing on empirical analyses of spoken corpora (e.g., Carter & McCarthy; Cullen & Kuo), it identifies core characteristics: omission (situational, textual, structural), head/tail structures, and interactional markers like fillers, feedback signals, and lexical bundles. Crucially, spoken grammar prioritizes realtime processing and interpersonal functions over formal complexity, contrasting sharply with written norms. Pedagogically, while introducing spoken grammar post-written mastery is widely endorersed(e.g., Goh,2009), we advocate awareness-raising before production— exemplified by McCarthy & Carter's Illustration-Interaction-Induction framework and Timmis's four-stage tasks. However, tensions arise betweeen native-speaker (NS) models and English as a Lingua Franca(ELF) needs, necessitating a pedagogic filter. Current textbooks underrepresent key features, and exam-oriented systems may penalize informal expressions. This research underscores the need to align corpus insights with classroom practice, urging future work on cross-cultural pedagogy and the lexicogrammar interface.

Keywords

Spoken grammar, Pedagogical Approaches, Corpus Linguistics.

1. Introduction

Thanks to the advent of the technology, for example, language corpora, as well as the focus on 'anthropological approaches' to language study [1], spoken grammar, as contrast to written grammar, come into light. However, it is noticeable that although many features specific to spoken language have been identified, analysed, and categorized through descriptive analysis of existing English language corpus by many scholars and researchers, the question still remains, as Goh[2] puts that the differences between spoken language and written language should be recognized, given that few researches have been directly point to it. Apart from it, it is still under hot debate whether spoken grammar should be taught at all [3], and if it should be taught, to what extend and in what circumstance it is appropriate to teach?

This essay will try to address the questions about the main differences between spoken and written English grammar, and to what extent and in what circumstances is it appropriate to teach 'spoken grammar' mentioned above. Firstly, l will divide the former question into several parts but mainly focus on the main features of spoken grammar, and this part is primarily based on Carter and McCarthy's and Cullen and Kuo's findings and taxonomy. Then l will briefly discuss the differences between spoken language and written language and whether there is a missing link between spoken lexis and spoken grammar. Secondly, in response to the latter question as how much, when and whom with is appropriate to teach spoken grammar, l will start with looking at some scholars' analytical researches based on corpus findings and introduce some approaches of teaching spoken grammar. Finally, l will examine some pedagogical researches and practices proposed by some researchers and argue that such practices push us nearer to spoken grammar teaching.

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2. Difference Between Spoken Grammar and Written Grammar

2.1. Spoken grammar and written grammar

Here is an example Thornbury gives when illustrating the differences between spoken grammar and written grammar.

A: *Great* sausages, these, *aren't they*?

B: Yes, the ingredients are guaranteed free of additives and artificial colouring.

A: Had to laugh, though. The *bloke* that makes them, *he* was telling me, he doesn't eat them himself. Want a *ciggie*?

B: No, thanks. Patrons are *requested* to *refrain* from smoking while other guests are dining… [4].

By presenting a dialog where one participant speaks in a style more of a talk between friends, and the other more of a formal written English (grammatically correct and appropriate), Thornbury [4] argues that speaker A uses 'question tags' and sentence 'with two subjects' which are common in spoken grammar, while speaker B uses 'syntactically complex constructions' such as passive voice and clause which are associated with written grammar. Therefore, he points out that often the differences between spoken grammar and written grammar could be attributed to the differences between spoken language and written language. In other words, it may be argued that spoken language and spoken grammar, and perhaps written language and written grammar, differ in a way similar to language differs from grammar in general. Besides, he observes an overwhelming focus on written grammar and he ascribes it to the unnaturally formal style of dialogues embedded in many of today's coursebooks. What is more, he also warns that the recent shift from written grammar to spoken grammar could lead to 'strong regional and idiomatic feature'. Therefore, he supposes that for the sake of 'mutual intelligibility', these whose first language are not English should use it in a 'neutral' way, which means the 'regional and cultural' characteristics should be reduced to minimum without differentiating spoken grammar from written grammar on purpose. [4].

Similarly, Cullen and Kuo [5]emphasis their research on 'conversational grammar' and some spoken grammar features related to 'regional dialects' and 'ill-educated usage' are excluded. Moreover, in terms of relationship between spoken grammar and written grammar, they conclude that speaking and writing works under the same grammar system, however, the same system changes dynamically and ingeniously between the written form and the spoken form. [5, 6, 7].

The writer also finds the definition of spoken grammar given by Cullen and Kuo comprehensive and relevant.

Spoken grammar is the manifestation of systematic grammatical phenomena in spoken discourse that arise from the circumstances in which speech (i.e., conversation) is characteristically produced. , [5]

They also describe some traits of speech, for example, speech is 'spontaneous and unplanned', therefore it needs 'real-time processing'. Speech usually happens 'face to face', thus 'interpersonal factors' as well as 'shared context' should be taken into consideration. [5,7]. Besides, speech is 'highly interactive' and 'cooperation and contextual sensitivity' are required mutually. [5].

On the other hand, McCarthy and Carter[8]provide a chronological view of English grammar as a whole and that spoken grammar was considered vulgar and unworthy. By contrast, written grammar was viewed as orthodox and therefore justified its domination of English grammar teaching so far. However, they also recognize that only teaching the so called 'correct' English

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dose not reveal the whole picture not only for students whose mother language are English but also for those whose are not, and the consequence of teach only conventional grammar could be that their talking sound like a coursebook talking. For those who do not use English as their mother tongue, learning English is within English as a foreign language (EFL) or English language teaching (ELT), or even English as a lingua franca (ELF), which the writer will discuss in more detail later in section3. In regard to the so called 'well-formed structures', Thornbury [4], admitting the importance of notice and produce of it in second language learning, questions how should it be developed. Besides, many naturally emerging speeches could blur the boundary between the conventional grammar and spoken grammar.

On the next sections, l will discuss a number of salient features of spoken grammar that either noticed and analysed by some corpus linguists such as Carter and McCarthy, Biber et al, or compiled and compared by some scholars such as Timmis, Cullen and Kuo, and Hilliard. These particular features are argued to be the main difference between written grammar and spoken grammar. l will try to list these spoken grammar features as much as l could and illustrate some with examples l take from the authors mentioned above. However, it is extremely hard to pay every tribute of the examples to the original source, l shall endeavor to give credit where credit is due.

2.2. Features of spoken grammar

In this section, l will first list some spoken grammar features discovered by some pioneering linguists, for example, [1,8]. Because their descriptive analysis into spoken corpora data paved the way for future research on spoken grammar. However, it is not enough just studying their case, as they rightly summarize this concern.

There is no common, agreed metalanguage for talking about the features of spoken grammar that we have focused on in this article. Our surveys of current grammars reveal a bewildering and often user-unfriendly variety of terms used to describe the features illustrated. This makes it difficult to find and compare information, even where it exists. [1]

As a result, later scholars' findings or taxonomy will also be covered in this section, for instance, Hilliard's[9] summary of main features of spoken grammar and Cullen and Kuo's [5] taxonomy of divide spoken grammar features into category A, B, and C. Apparently, there would be some overlapping in illustrating the main features of spoken grammar, but it may be understandable that the writer try to list and compare the features as comprehensive as possible.

2.2.1. Ellipsis

As Carter and McCarthy admit that ellipsis is a 'good starting point' for the reason that it is often been ignored but exists in many of spoken data. [1]. According to them, there are three types of ellipsis, namely, *situational* ellipsis, *textual* ellipsis, and *structural* ellipsis.

Here is an explanation [1] give to ellipsis as general and three types of it. Ellipsis is the 'omission of elements' which is necessary in constituting a structure. Situational ellipsis is different from textual ellipsis and structure ellipsis for its omitted items from the original structure are 'retrievable from the immediate situation', and for the hearer, interpretation of the ellipsis is easy and it seems to him the omitted version of the structure in itself is complete. Situational ellipsis happens in 'language in action' dialogue where two or more participants are aware of the speaking environment (real time and real space) and what they are referring to by omitting some words or phrases.

On the other hand, textual ellipsis is retrievable from the text where the ellipsis happened. While structural ellipsis happens when 'a purely structural element is omitted', for example, he

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suggests (that) we should go for a ride. However, it is noticeable that most of the focus is on the *situational* ellipsis. [1,5,8,9].

What is more, according to Cullen and Kuo's [5] taxonomy based on their research on EFL coursebooks conversations, the features of spoken grammar are divided into three categories, namely, category A, category B, and category C. (see more on next sections). Category A are 'productive grammatical constructions', which means the speaker express what they want to say and the listener try to understand them when they see or hear them. They use a parallel analogy 'encoding and decoding' compared with this process. [5]. Ellipsis is put into category A together with *noun phrase prefaces* (*left dislocations or heads*) and *noun phrase tags* (*right* dislocations *or tails*) for the reason that the ellipsis embedded in a conversation needs to be firstly, encoded by the speaker and then decoded by the listener (e.g., too old to change, aren't we?). [5]

Back to McCarthy and Carter [8] research, as some ellipsis happens in real time and real space, there are ellipsis and other prominent spoken grammar features happen in 'displaced' time and space, for example, in narratives. They analysis a narrative example for 'telling ghost stories' and find a rather contrasting notion(compared with ellipsis) 'orientation' which functions as 'a kind of frame for what follows', because in some narratives, time and space is remote to one or both participants, so they will need some orientations to help them keep up with the conversation. [8]. Thus, it leads us to two other features of spoken grammar, *heads (left dislocations or noun phrase prefaces)* and *tails (right dislocations or noun phrase tags)*.

2.2.2. Heads and tails

Head is 'a fronting device used to orient the listener to the topic the speaker is introducing'. [5], and it allows not only listener, but also speaker more time to process. Here are some examples taken from Cullen and Kuo [5] and Hilliard [9]

This little shop—it's lovely

Those Marks and Sparks bags, can you see them all? (British English)

You know, the vase, did you see it? (American English)

The soccer game last night, it was really exciting. (With head)

The soccer game last night was really exciting. (No head)

Heads, as McCarthy and Carter [8] observe, are frequently recorded in their data, 'especially in that which involves personal narrative and anecdote'. Heads are also easy to be recognized for the structure is 'unusual or deviant' compared with standard written grammar, and thus made itself a salient feature of spoken grammar different from written grammar.

Tails, on the other hand, is 'a slot at the end of clauses for particular grammatical patterns which enable a speaker to amplify or extend what has just been said'. [8]. Below are some examples of tails.

l reckon they're lovely. l really do, whippets [5]

My teacher is really nice, the one from America (With tail)

My teacher from America is really nice (No tail) [9]

And he's quite a comic, that fellow, you know [8]

Tails has many functions, including express 'affect, personal attitude, or evaluative stance' [8] and 'personal judgement of an item, or serving an interpersonal function'. [9,10]. It also

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functions 'retrospectively clarify the subject of the preceding clause' on 'discourse and pragmatic' levels. [11].

Carter and McCarthy [1] conclude that 'headers give a lead-in to the main entity of the topical noun phrase or pronoun, while tails correlate strongly with evaluative contexts', Cullen and Kuo [5]summarize that both heads and tails can 'reduce the burden' for both speaker and listener who will need to process it.

2.2.3. Other features

Reporting verbs: it is also called past progressive tense which is included in Cullen and Kuo's category A features of spoken grammar. It is used to introduce 'reported speech' based on past continuous tense instead of past tense and it shows the speaker's preference for a less strict grammar choice and has an interpersonal feature of it. (e.g., l mean l was saying to mum earlier that l am actually thinking…)

Fillers and backchannels: fillers are utterances and words that do not have concrete meanings such as 'er', 'well', 'hmm', and 'um'. Backchannels are expressions such as 'uh-huh', 'oh', 'yeah', and 'l see' that are used as acknowledgement and encourage the speaker to go on. [9].

Category C: according to Cullen and Kuo, the incorrect use of 'fewer' and 'less' in spoken grammar may be considered acceptable, but it is totally unacceptable and wrong in written text. However, the category C features can be made correct from spoken form to written form. [5].

2.3. Spoken lexis: a missing link?

Although we have discussed many spoken grammar features, such as ellipsis, heads and tails, is it enough to reveal the whole picture of what spoken grammar really is? Just as Thornbury [4] points out that apart from sentences, words also grammar for 'there are rules governing how words are organized'.

Timmis also suggests that 'corpus based spoken language research has shed interesting light on the distinctive use of both lexis and grammar in conversation'. He goes on to suggest a qualitive research on spoken lexis through which single word lexis such as 'well, just, right, though' are made more salient. Collocations such as 'you know, a bit, and come on' are also observed due to their high-frequency use, and these collocations reflect 'the interactional nature' of discourse. [11].

McCarthy and Carter state that features as 'vague language', 'non-verbal modal expressions', 'fixed and formulaic expressions', and 'idioms' belong to spoken rather than written field and their existence should not be ignored. [8]. What is more, they also report that some 'small words', for example, 'sort of', 'kind of', 'of course', 'anyway', are also a 'key concept in spoken grammar'. Besides, clusters or chunks could make up more than half of spoken discourse and they are found in many of learners' textbooks. [1].

Indeed, their report parallel with Cullen and Kuo's research on 24 ELT textbooks. This research reports that 'conversational fillers', 'idioms', and 'fixed expressions' (belong to category B based on Cullen and Kuo's taxonomy) are found in a large amount and high frequency on these coursebooks. On the other hand, attention on features belong to category A (e.g., ellipsis, heads and tails) is little and not overt. However, unlike other scholars, they conclude that the unbalance suggests 'a rather limited view of what spoken grammar actually is'. [5].

3. Teaching Spoken Grammar

We have already discussed some main differences between spoken and written grammar and reported that the underlying differences are within the features of spoken grammar. Also, we have touched some general ideas of how to teach spoken grammar (see more on section 2.1). However, more attention should be given to the specific question as to what extent and in what circumstance it is appropriate to teach it, and findings of some pedagogical researches could be

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a good starting point. It also should be bear in mind that Timmis [3] confesses that there is not much new on the issue of teaching spoken grammar, so it is only understandable that the answer to the question may be incomprehensive and lack concrete evidence on actual teaching practice in classroom.

3.1. Pedagogical review

Pedagogical research is contrast to corpus-based research in terms of spoken grammar, in that the former focus on what happened in English language classroom, the latter emphasis purely on descriptive analysis of spoken data.

Goh [2] conducts a research based on response of teachers from China and Singapore, the questions Goh designed could be summarized as for teachers, whether some spoke language features are useful to teach, and for learners, whether these features could help to improve their performance on spoken language. (see more on section 3.4).

On the other hand, Cullen and Kuo [5] carry out a research based on a missing connection between spoken grammar and ELT textbooks. They also observe a gap between research findings and applying them into practice, therefore they propose four arguments urging further study on spoken grammar on ELT textbooks, and these arguments could also be useful for spoken grammar teaching.

Timmis [12] conducts a survey focused on about 600 teacher and learners' attitudes towards native-speaker (NS) norms and finds that most of them willing to embrace it. However, Timmis [12] later argues that the voices from ELF should also be heard. (see more on section 3.2).

3.2. NS norms or ELF

Timmis [3] concludes that English native speakers are more than just examples for non-native speakers to draw on. It triggers a 'vexed debate' between native speaker and 'expert users', which mainly focus on whose spoken grammar should we turn to. He holds that the merits of use NS models outweigh the criticism of it. However, he also admits the importance of 'current focus on lingua franca core'. [3].

Besides, Timmis [11] later states that, in terms of teaching spoken grammar using NS data, there are concerns regarding 'real English' and 'authenticity', and both are under hot debate. ELF, as an alternative, argued by Timmis whether it could work as a substitution. However, he acknowledges that 'what ELF research has to offer is not self-evident'.

In addition, regarding 'sociocultural relevance' of teaching spoken grammar, Timmis recommends an 'attitudinal survey' to look into both teachers and learners' acceptability and preferences of spoken grammar norms. He also refers to a more 'localized and detailed' study by Goh [2] and summarizes that 'attitudes will be context-sensitive' and 'social-political' environment could affect learners' stances. [11].

3.3. Awareness raising or producing

It is argued that spoken grammar should be taught step by step. Firstly, it is only appropriate to teach it when students have acquired formal written grammar, as some Chinese teachers assert in Goh [2] research. Then, the teachers could expose students to some spoken grammar features embedded in a context or dialog by playing a recorded listening material. The purpose of this stage should be let students noticing the spoken features that they are not familiar with and thus raise their awareness. However, this process should be less controlled by teachers and therefore makes the noticing stage happens in a natural way. As to the stage of produce the noticed spoken grammar features, there are many different voices concerning how to make this stage happen, as Cullen and Kuo's research shows that many coursebooks follow a 'presentation and practice' mode to teach spoken grammar, and this mode is a typical 'PPP'

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mode but without 'production'. [5]. It even triggers a hot debate about whether students should produce spoken grammar at all. [3].

The writer suggests that a brief review of some approaches and methods (e.g., three I's, four tasks, four arguments) that focus on awareness-raising and perhaps producing.

3.3.1. Three I's

Three I's stands for Illustration-Interaction-Induction. Illustration means that always examine the occurring data on its 'context and use'. Interaction means discuss and share views and it focus on awareness-raising. Induction still focus on raising awareness, but it also encourages learners to develop their own abilities to notice the features. [8,13]

However, Timmis [3] observes that three I's was not a 'detailed or definitive methodology' and therefore introduces his four tasks.

3.3.2. Four tasks

The four tasks are cultural access tasks, global understanding tasks, noticing tasks, and language discussion tasks. The latter two are more related to teaching and learning spoken grammar on noticing and producing stages.

On behalf of noticing tasks, Timmis [3] believes that produce the target spoken grammar could be 'counter-productive'. In addition, it is difficult to generalize 'production rules' of spoken grammar, and there is not a common understanding whether learners are expected to produce it out of these rules.

On the other hand, in terms of language discussion tasks, it is vital that teachers should be aware of the effect of spoken grammar uses from a 'sociolinguistic' perspective. Timmis [3] also lists some questions need to be discussed, for example, 'How formal/informal do you think the dialogue is?' 'How well do you think the speakers know each other?'.

3.3.3. Pedagogic filtering process

Timmis [11] proposes a 'pedagogic filtering process' to put current spoken grammar researches into practice. This process could also work as a check list for teachers to decide the appropriateness of teach spoken grammar.

Is the item useful?
Is the item frequent?
Is the item complex?
Is the item socioculturally appropriate? [11]

He also suggests a more 'principled and coherent' approach and reports that it is teachers' own choice on how much and how far they should teach spoken grammar. What is more, he iterates the importance of conducting attitudinal research as part of the classroom research, thus teachers, as well as researchers and linguists, could get more 'confidence' and 'conviction'. [11].

3.4. Teach spoken grammar in ELT

We have discussed how much and when it is appropriate to teach spoken grammar (see more information on above sections), yet who to teach it with is hardly been discussed by researches and scholars before. However, Goh's [2] pedagogical research on teachers in East Asia, especially in China, sheds a light, and some Chinese teachers' answers reveal the picture of teaching spoken grammar in China.

Unlike Singapore English learners, Chinese learners' expose to authentic spoken language is little. Therefore, many teachers show their affection to teach spoken grammar features because they consider speak 'naturally and accurately' is a 'distinct advantage' [2]. However, some Chinese teachers also express that more time and efforts should be given to written grammar

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by which the students could better study the spoken grammar. It is also notable that some Chinese teachers are concern that students' use of spoken grammar features in Chinese oral exams could cause them lose unnecessary points.

4. Conclusion

This essay has discussed some main features of spoken grammar and argued that these salient features differentiate spoken grammar from written grammar. It also pointed out a missing link between features of spoken grammar and spoken lexis and suggested that spoken lexis is an integral part of spoken grammar. What is more, this essay also answered the questions related to spoken grammar teaching, it studied the NS norms and ELF in respond to the extent of teaching spoken grammar. Then it revealed several approaches and methods to conclude that most spoken grammar teachings focus on awareness-raising rather than producing. Finally, it also looked a particular research regrading Chinese teachers' views.

However, to reveal the comprehensive nature of spoken grammar and its teaching, future researches on descriptive analysis of corpora as well as pedagogical researches and practices are necessary.

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