

1 The spoken language

1.0 Preliminaries

In this chapter we shall explore some of the differences in form and in function between spoken and written language. We shall point out that, within spoken language, certain distinctions need to be drawn, because they have an effect on the forms of language which are produced. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to considering the uses to which spoken language is put by native speakers of English, with extensive transcribed illustrations of this use. In the last sections we consider the implications of research findings about the behaviour of native speakers for the teaching of the spoken language to foreign learners.

1.1 Spoken and written language

For most of its history, language teaching has been concerned with the study of the written language. The written language is the language of literature and of scholarship. It is language which is admired, studied, and rich in excellent exemplification. Any well-educated person ought to have access to literature and scholarship in the language he is acquiring. The obvious procedure, it must follow, is to teach him the language through the excellent written models which can be selected and ordered by his teacher.

While the student is acquiring an understanding of the written language of these splendid models on the one hand, on the other he is himself practising the art of producing sentences of the language. An obvious advantage of the written language is that it has been described by generations of grammar-writers and dictionary-makers. There is a comforting sense in which it is possible to say that a written sentence is correct or not. The rules of writing English sentences are really rather well known and well described. Furthermore, written language does not vary greatly over a couple of centuries, and it does not vary very much depending on where it is written. Texts selected for foreign students to study were nearly all written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and are selected

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from writers who wrote standard English. Even American writers only deviate from this standard in relatively trivial ways, which can always be presented to the student in a 'corrected' form.

The serious consideration of the spoken language as a subject for teaching has a long history, but only made a decisive impact on foreign language teaching in general after the end of the Second World War. Initially major attention was devoted to the teaching of pronunciation. Students of the spoken language spent many hours learning to pronounce the 'sounds of English', first of all in isolation, then in short isolated words, and finally in short isolated sentences like:

- (1.1)
- We'll have tea for three, please, for Jean, Steve, and me
(practising i)
 - Pretty little Mrs Smith lives in the vicinity
(practising ʊ)

Students spent hours in language lab booths listening to, and repeating, the vowels and consonants of English. Later on, stress patterns were added and, eventually, practice in intonation patterns. It is still possible to visit parts of the world where 'teaching the spoken language' is largely conceived of as teaching students to pronounce written sentences.

During the last twenty-five years, horizons for most foreign language teachers have widened. Students are not only taught to pronounce, but they are given practice in listening to, examples of carefully spoken English. They are required to discriminate between sounds or words spoken in isolation (a task which many native speakers have problems with). They are required to identify stressed words in taped sentences read aloud. In some cases they are required to identify intonation nuclei (or 'tonics') in short texts read aloud. Even more dramatically, many courses have abandoned using written texts read aloud, and have begun to use extracts from texts of 'real', 'authentic' conversations, radio broadcasts, lectures, etc. With the breaking out of the written mode, students are encouraged to use spoken-language forms spontaneously, not simply to utter 'written-language sentences'.

This expansion must obviously be welcomed because it provides, for many students, the ability to talk and listen in a foreign language, to communicate with speakers of the foreign language. In theory, at any rate, that's what it provides. For the teachers it often provides a real headache. Dozens of practical problems, which could be ignored when the subject-matter being taught was the written language, suddenly surface when the subject matter is the spoken language.

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There is no longer a secure, tried-and-tested, teaching tradition to lean upon.

What is the appropriate form of spoken language to teach? From the point of view of pronunciation, what is a reasonable model? How important is pronunciation? Is it any more important than teaching appropriate handwriting in the foreign language? If so, why? From the point of view of the structures taught, is it all right to teach the spoken language as if it were exactly like the written language, but with a few 'spoken expressions' thrown in? Is it appropriate to teach the same structures to all foreign language students, no matter what their age is or their intentions in learning the spoken language? Are those structures which are described in standard grammars (like Quirk et al., 1972) the structures which our students should be expected to produce when they speak English? How is it possible to give students any sort of meaningful practice in producing spoken English? If you are teaching a class of twenty or more adolescents at a time, surely it must be obvious that a student will only receive sporadic practice in producing the spoken language as he answers the teacher's questions (except in the language lab which only permits the student to produce a limited answer to a limited question). Don't we have to accept that we are doing all we can?

From the point of view of listening comprehension, what is there that's different about written language from spoken language? Is it all right to play the student a tape and then ask him to answer multiple-choice questions on the content of what he has heard? How are materials for listening comprehension to be selected? Is there any way to grade them? What is the teacher to do about the incompleteness and frequent ungrammaticality of spontaneous native speech? Pretend it doesn't exist? Bend the rules for native speakers – talk about 'performance variability'? Is it reasonable anyway to bother to use 'authentic' materials when invented dialogues read aloud can be made so much more interesting, witty, clear, and correct?

The list of problems stretches on and on, and for many conscientious teachers the demands of teaching the spoken language are really worrying and put the teacher in a disadvantageous position. There is, to begin with, no influential description of spoken English which has, say, the status of grammars of written English. Spoken English appears very variable, and is very different from one dialect area to another. Even between speakers who mostly speak 'standard English' there is a different emphasis in their selection from forms in standard English. So, for example, many educated Scots, like many educated southern English speakers, will use all of the

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forms *I shall* / *I will*, and the relative pronouns *that* and *which*, but the Scottish speaker will use more of the forms *I will* and *that*, whereas the southern English speaker will use more of the forms *I shall* and *which*. Are these local differences worth commenting on?

Even more obviously, what is the status of the difference between the sort of speech produced by young members of the British speech community and that produced by adults, especially highly educated adults who spend their lives immersed in written language? The adults' speech may frequently have a great deal in common with the written language – hardly surprising, since they spend so much of their time reading it and writing it. If you only listen to speech produced by these people, as they are speaking fluently and confidently, on matters they have expressed themselves on many times before (like the speaker in extract (1) on the tape), it would be very reasonable of you to suppose that teaching the spoken language does indeed only mean teaching the student to speak the written language together with a few characteristic spoken phrases. If, however, you were to study the detail of the language of most of the rest of the speakers on our tape, which includes speech by educated adult speakers, undergraduate students and other highly intelligent members of the population, you would find that the transcripts of what they say do not strongly resemble written language in all particulars. It is obviously the case that the vast majority of the speakers of English are not highly educated, written-language immersed. Most speakers of English produce spoken language which is syntactically very much simpler than written language. The vocabulary is usually much less specific. Highly literate speakers may produce utterances with complex syntactic structures, a good deal of subordination and a confident marking-out of what they are going to say by phrases like *in the first place*, *in the second place* and *finally*. This is particularly common when speakers are reproducing expressions of opinion which they have thought a lot about, mentally 'rehearsed', or uttered on previous occasions. Most spoken language is not structured like this. Most spoken language consists of paratactic (unsubordinated) phrases which are marked as related to each other, not so much by the syntax as by the way the speaker says them. The speaker uses the resources of pausing and rhythm and, to a lesser extent, intonation, to mark out for the listener which parts of his speech need to be co-interpreted. Of course, what syntax there is will contribute to this structuring, but it is frequently the case that the syntax is rather simple. Consider extract (1.1). There is a certain amount of subordination in this extract, all introduced by simple common clause conjunctions *so*, *when*, *and*, *then*, *but*, *because*.

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- (1.2) (1)
- D: on occasion we do a bit proof reading along there +
 K: uhuh
 D: and we're all sort of called on to do that from time to time
 K: what does that involve
 D: well + one of our main jobs in the Botanics is writing for the flora of Turkey +
 K: uhuh
 D: they haven't got the scientists to do it so + we sort of supply the scientists for that +
 K: uhuh
 D: well when + you've got all the scientific work written up + we all sort of check through it and one – reads and the others +
 K: oh I see you read aloud
 D: uhuh that's right
 K: I see
 D: and then you sort of switch back and forward like this +
 K: uhuh + and that doesn't bother you
 D: it does actually (laughter) I'm terrible at it + but I don't know
 K: even when it's something you're interested in +
 D: well it makes it a bit easier to read certainly but + em just because you're reading to somebody else you feel + a bit uneasy somehow
 K: uhuh
 J: I think it comes from + having to stand up and read in school +

The speakers here are all graduates, professional academics. The main speaker, D, was due to give his first lecture the following week. Despite the fact that these young adults spend their working lives immersed in the written language, the spoken language they produce here is relatively simple. D's first two remarks consist of simple clause structures. He next remarks:

well + one of our main jobs in the Botanics is writing for the flora of Turkey + they haven't got the (uhuh) scientists to do it

His second statement simply follows the first, and the listener has to work out the relationship between them, how the second statement relates to the first. In the written language, where sentences are frequently more complex, it would be quite likely that a writer would have inserted *because* before the second statement, thus explicitly subordinating the explanatory statement to the first one. Consider now D's remark:

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well when + you've got all the scientific work written up +
 we all sort of check through it and one – one reads and the
 others +

Here there is an explicitly marked temporal subordinate clause, *when*. . ., but then note the simple addition of *we all sort of check it through and one reads* which a writer of expository prose (this same speaker in another role) would probably feel obliged to impose some more structure on.

Notice, too, in the extract the 'incomplete sentences' which are such a typical feature of spoken language:

- and one – one reads and the others
- and that doesn't bother you
- but I don't know
- even when it's something you're interested in

Observe, as well, the use of general non-specific words and phrases which, again, are typical of spoken language:

- *they* haven't got the scientists to *do it*
- so we *sort of* supply the scientists for *that*
- we all *sort of* check through it
- and *one* reads and *the others*
- *that's right*
- *like this*
- *and that doesn't bother you*
- *it does actually*
- even when it's *something*
- *a bit* easier
- *to somebody else*
- *somehow*

The combination of loosely organised syntax, the number of general non-specific words and phrases, the use of interactive expressions like *well*, *oh*, *uhuh*, all contribute to the general impression that information is packed very much less densely in spoken language of this sort than it is, say, in expository prose like the prose you're reading at the moment. Notice how relatively little information is provided in each of the information-bearing chunks:

- one of our main jobs in the Botany is writing for the flora of Turkey
- they haven't got the scientists to do it
- so we sort of supply the scientists for that
- when you've got all the scientific work written up
- we all sort of check it through
- one reads and the others
- you read aloud

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- and then you switch back and forward like this
- and that doesn't bother you etc.

It is only in the first introductory statement that we encounter fairly complex noun phrases, *one of our main jobs in the Botanics* and *the flora of Turkey*. Elsewhere it is fairly rare to find an adjective modifying a noun. Occasionally you find one or two adjectives premodifying a noun in spoken language, but the sort of heavy premodified noun phrase (like that one) which constantly crops up in written language is very rare in most spoken language. Speakers prefer to add one piece of information at a time as in:

- (1.3) draw a square + a red square + red square + equal sided
 + quite small side quite a small square ++

Noun phrases like *a small red equal-sided square* do not seem to occur in the spoken language as it is spoken by most speakers. Such a phrase is, of course, perfectly acceptable and normal in the written language. One major difference between spoken language and written language is the density of packing of information. It will be obvious from our discussion that information may be packed densely in the written language, using heavily premodified noun phrases with accompanying post-modification, heavy adverbial modification and complex subordinating syntax. It is rare to find spoken language produced like this, with this dense packing of information, except, as we have already said, in the speech of those who spend a lot of their time in the written language and are producing 'pre-rehearsed' opinions.

Thus spoken language which has much more in common with written language may be found in the speech of public speakers (e.g. politicians), lawyers, and academics. It is interesting, though, to note that many highly effective public speakers use comparatively 'simple language' (the British politicians Michael Foot and Enoch Powell spring to mind as examples) and that, in many universities, academic lectures are increasingly produced in the simpler style which is characteristic of spoken language – which packs in less dense information, and less highly structured information. There are good reasons to suppose that such language is a great deal easier to understand in the oral mode than 'written language spoken aloud'.

The language we have exemplified so far has been language produced by educated adult speakers. It is important for those who teach adolescents to realise that the language used by native-speaking adolescents is typically very different in some respects from the language used by adults. Consider some of the expressions cited by David Wilkins in his book *Notional Syllabuses* (1976) as examples of 'a wide range of utterances which are habitually associated with

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the seeking of permission’. We cite the shortest ‘simplest’ explicit set:

Can		I use your telephone, (please)?	
May			
Could			
Might			
Might		I	possibly use your telephone?
Could			
			perhaps

All of these forms are perfectly appropriate adult forms. The first set is appropriate for adolescents (though we might note that most adolescents do not distinguish between *can* and *may* in a regular way, are more likely to use *can* than *may*, and are more likely to use the present tense forms *may* and *can* than the past tense forms *could* and *might*). The second set is much less characteristic of adolescent use, simply because adolescent spoken language typically produces much less *modality* than adult language. The combination of *might / could* (modal verbs, ‘polite’ past tense form) and the modal operators *possibly / perhaps* is not typical of adolescent speech (though it may be found in the speech of some atypical teenagers brought up in highly ‘modal’ environments). Some of the longer forms suggested by Wilkins, while certainly possible written forms, would look unlikely as speech in the mouth of any but the most pedantic elderly scholar, or in a speaker who is ‘taking the Mickey’ by producing an elaborately over-polite form as in: ‘Would you consent to me using your telephone?’ Wilkins discusses the general difficulty of determining appropriate use, but not the particular difficulty with respect to adolescent speech. It does seem reasonable that young foreign speakers should not be taught to *produce* forms which young native speakers do not typically produce. Such an approach would not of course suggest that young foreign speakers should not encounter such expressions, appropriately used, in the mouths of adults who they observe talking on film, television, etc. They should be able to recognise such formally polite expressions. If teachers of younger students wish to ensure that their students are able to express themselves politely, it is probably far more important that they should learn to produce a polite *manner* of speaking, a polite voice quality, a polite smile, than that they should produce complex modalised expressions which merely sound ‘odd’ in the mouths of young speakers. Naturally, as students grow into adults, they can appropriately begin to use the more complex adult expressions.

If our characterisation of the formal differences between typical written language and typical spoken language is correct, several implications for teaching follow from this. First, it seems to be the

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case that rather limited syntax is required for adequate performance in producing the spoken language. As we have suggested, simple noun phrases and a very few subordinate declarative structures, together with an interrogative structure to ask questions with, appear to characterise typical spoken language produced by native speakers. Similarly, a great deal of the vocabulary which is produced is of a very general, non-specific sort: *chap, guy, individual, one, other(one), place, thing, be, have, got, do, fine, good, bad*. Where specific vocabulary is introduced it is often made to do a good deal of work. You will have observed this in extract (1.2):

scientists – scientists – scientific writing – written up
 read – read – read – reading – read

and again in extract (1.3):

square – square – square – square
 red – red
 sided – side
 quite small – quite a small

Speakers repeat not only words (and related forms) which they themselves have introduced, but forms which have been introduced by previous speakers. On the one hand this makes it clear that the same topic is still being talked about, on the other, it saves the speaker from constantly having to hunt up a different word, since he can use a form which has already been recently activated and is readily available. We suggest, then, that the first implication that follows from the assertion that the production of spoken language is relatively undemanding, in terms of syntax and vocabulary, is that students should be encouraged to talk from a very early stage since, from a *linguistic* point of view, the level demanded of them is much less stringent than that of written language. The problems in the spoken language are going to be much more concerned with on-line production, and with the question of how to find meaningful opportunities for individual students to practise using a rather minimal knowledge of the foreign language in a flexible and inventive manner, than with linguistic complexity. We discuss these problems in chapter 2.

The implications of what we have said about typical spoken language for listening comprehension are, in a sense, less encouraging. On the one hand spoken language tends towards less specific vocabulary and far more general use of items like *thing* and *do*. This initially sounds hopeful from the point of view of the foreign learner. On the other hand, it seems at least plausible that this less specific language is actually quite hard to understand unless the

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listener has access to information about context and background knowledge of a sort which conventional listening comprehension teaching tends not to supply. Listening comprehension consists of far more than understanding what words and sentences mean; it involves understanding what speakers mean. Until we can get some sort of handle on teaching what speakers mean by using language in particular types of context our progress in the field of teaching listening comprehension will necessarily be slow. We return to this question in chapter 3.

1.2 Functions of language

In most of the discussion so far we have simplistically assumed that there is, on the one hand, written language and, on the other hand, spoken language, and that spoken language differs from written language primarily in the way information is less densely packed in spoken language, which has implications both for syntactic structure and for vocabulary selection.

Clearly the picture is a great deal more complex than this. Written language has many different functions ranging through literary functions, expository functions (academic, legal, journalistic), to straight informative functions ('news', familial letters, domestic 'key under the doormat' type notes), to recording functions (Hansard recording Parliament, minutes of meetings, lecture notes, doctor recording patients' medical histories) etc. In each function, language is used for a somewhat different purpose, and hence takes on a somewhat different form. There are appropriate 'styles' for different functions, different 'registers' – different typical selection of vocabulary and type of structure, different conventions of organisation of information, etc. We shall now assert that the use of language in literary forms is a special, privileged outcrop on the fundamental functions of the written language. This is in no way to undervalue the function or place of literature in our lives, which, as people privileged to live in a culture with a rich literary history, we enthusiastically endorse. It seems to be a fact, however, that written literary forms emerge long after the arrival of the written language and its use for other, more basic purposes (cf. Goody, 1977). What are these other 'more basic' purposes? They appear to be recording facts about society, and the individual in society, which may give rise to dissension or unhappiness if individuals disagree about those facts; to record who owns what, who left who what in his will, what was agreed in the treaty at the end of a bout of hostilities, who agreed to pay who how much, who agreed that who should have which

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powers, etc. They appear to include messages, giving information about who is going where to do what and when, messages which can be left to yield up their information at a later time than the time of writing, and in a place where the writer no longer is. If we generalise across the uses of written language in our society (still excepting literature) we find that the fundamental function common to most uses of the written language is the transmission of information, whether recording information about what is past, or recording the intentions of writers about what is to happen in the future. We shall call this information-transferring function of language the *transactional* function of language. We shall assume that when the transactional function is at issue, it matters that information is clearly conveyed, since the purpose of the producer of the message is to convey information. In written language, generally, we shall expect to find the transactional function uppermost. There are genres (other than literary genres of written language) where this function is not primary: 'thank you' letters, love-letters, party games, come to mind as examples.

These last examples in many ways have in common what is clearly the overriding function of spoken language: the maintenance of social relationships. Most people spend a great deal of their everyday lives in 'chat', where the primary purpose is to be nice to the person they are talking to. Sometimes transactional spoken language is embedded within such chat. Thus a visit to the dentist or the driving instructor or the caretaker usually begins with a greeting which is followed by comments on the weather or what is happening in the world. The transactional element is then performed, and the meeting finishes up with farewells. Many social interactions seem to contain very little transactional content. People meeting on the bus or train for the first time, people meeting at parties, people meeting at the beginning of a new lecture course, will tend to conduct a type of talk where one person offers a topic for comment by the other person, responds to the other person if his topic is successful and, if it is not, proffers another topic of conversation. Such primarily interactional chats are frequently characterised by constantly shifting topics and a great deal of agreement on them. In the following extract, notice how often the speakers begin their turns with *yes* and how the conversation, even in this short extract, shifts from 'the couple' (*they*), to *sunsets*, to a *postcard*, to *last year's calendar*, to *this year's*, to *the Anderson's house*, to *the Andersons*.

- (1.4) (The preceding discussion has included a mention of a couple who visit the area each summer.)
 A: you know but erm + they used to go out in erm August

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- + they used to come + you know the lovely sunsets
 you get + at that time and
 B: oh yes
 C: there's a nice new postcard a nice – well I don't know
 how new it is + it's been a while since I've been here +
 of a sunset + a new one +
 A: oh that's a lovely one isn't it
 D: yes yes it was in one of the + calendars
 A: yes that was last year's calendar it was on
 D: was it last year's it was on + it was John Forgan who
 took that one
 A: yes it's really lovely + this year's erm + the Anderson's
 house at Lenimore's in it + at em Thunderguy I should
 say +
 D: they've sold their house
 A: yes + the Andersons
 B: oh have they
 A: yes yes + erm + they weren't down last year at all +

It is a characteristic of speech of this kind that it should yield a situation in which the participating speakers should end up feeling comfortable with each other and friendly. It is very noticeable that speakers in such 'chat' do not typically challenge each other, do not argue, do not require repetition of something that the other person has said. If a participant in such an interaction does not hear exactly what it was the speaker said, he is quite likely simply to nod and smile. The remarks we made about 'generalised' vocabulary and sparse information-packing apply most of all to casual interactional chat. A close post-hoc analysis of what was said in such a chat often reveals quite large areas of unclarity and non-specificity where it seems likely that the listener was only partially processing the message coming in, doing the listening equivalent of 'skimming' in reading, which we could characterise as listening for the 'gist', the overall impression, rather than for the detail.

We assume that normal individuals in any culture easily acquire the ability to participate in primarily interactional chat. From a very early stage the human infant is talked to by its mother. Long before the infant can possibly understand the language being addressed to it, the mother addresses *yes / no* questions to it (particularly questions which can be answered by *yes*), and watches the baby's face for any flicker of muscle, produced for whatever physiological reasons, which she can interpret as the baby agreeing with her. The infant has long training in participating in an interaction under conditions where it cannot be expected to understand the *language* addressed to it. What is required is agreement and, when the infant agrees, the mother is pleased. When toddlers are taken to visit their

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grandparents, they are frequently addressed in terms which they cannot understand, even if they recognise the words, and they continue to learn that what is required is agreement. Most interactional chat contains, apart from more-or-less formal patterns of greeting and farewell, a great deal of expression of opinion by one participant which is then agreed to by the other, who may then take his turn in expressing opinion or merely continue to take the role of agreeing with the other, dominant, participant.

Spoken language may also have a primarily transactional function (though few speakers produce language which is not to some extent 'recipient-designed', that is carefully produced so that the listener can understand it, taking account of the listener's state of knowledge). When spoken language is used for a primarily transactional function, what is primarily at issue, as in the case of transactional written language, is the transference of information. The purpose of the speaker in speaking is primarily to communicate his message rather than to be nice to the listener. We could say that primarily interactional language is primarily *listener-oriented*, whereas primarily transactional language is primarily *message-oriented*. Primarily transactional spoken language is frequently concerned to get things done in the real world – so a boss dictates a letter, a car-salesman explains how the electric window-winding device works, a customer complains to the garage, a patient discusses her symptoms with a doctor, a teacher explains an English construction to a class, a pupil requests permission to leave the room, a hairdresser orders shampoo from a sales representative, a neighbour gives instructions about feeding his canaries while he's on holiday, a magistrate explains to a social worker the conditions of supervision for a truanting pupil, a child tells Santa Claus what she would like for Christmas. In each case the speaker is concerned to make his message clear – it matters that the listener gets it right and the speaker may well be angry, distressed, or disappointed if the listener hasn't understood correctly. If the listener doesn't understand and shows that he doesn't understand, the speaker will repeat what he has said. In some cases he will conventionally repeat it anyway. In some cases the recipient is conventionally expected to make notes in writing, in order to form a permanent record of what was said (secretary, doctor, student – each makes a record of what was said).

Speakers typically go to considerable trouble to make what they are saying clear when a transaction is involved, and may contradict the listener if he appears to have misunderstood. When the *message* is the reason for speaking, then the message must be understood. Successful transactional speech often involves more use of specific vocabulary. A driver may tell a friend that the car is behaving in a

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‘woozy’ manner, which may be perfectly acceptable as chat between friends, but this will not be particularly helpful as an instruction to the garage mechanic. The garage mechanic will require some properties to be specified of ‘woozy’ like ‘it makes a grating noise each time I change gear’.

In transactional situations, where information transference is the primary reason for the speaker choosing to speak, the language tends to be clearer, more specific, than in primarily interactional situations. We assume that normal speakers of a language achieve an ability to express their needs, to communicate information, at least in short bursts. Even infants only just learning to speak, typically use a good deal of that speech to acquire what they want with cries of ‘more’, ‘icecream’, ‘no socks’, etc. and to inform their listeners what it is they want them to pay attention to, as in exclamations of ‘doggy’, ‘Daddy’, ‘car’, etc. We assume that few normal speakers have much difficulty with communicating their simple transactional intentions, at least when they only need to express what they want to say rather briefly. Depending upon the complexity of the information to be communicated, however, even adult native speakers sometimes find it difficult to make clear what they want to say. We shall return to this point in the next section.

It is obvious that all foreign learners of English, who wish to learn the spoken form of the language, need to be able to express their transactional intentions. When they use language transactionally, it is important that they are able to make clear what it is they want to say. It is inappropriate to produce, or to try to interpret, in terms of this level of clarity when the purpose of speech is primarily interactional. Consider the following interaction:

- (1.5) G: I watched that film last night + remember that – did you see it
 H: no I’m afraid I didn’t – haven’t got a television + what was –
 G: it’s eh + it was about eh + the assassination of + President Carter + I think it was
 H: mm
 G: aye it was him and you saw it it was a good film + I watched it all +
 H: what happened in it
 G: well eh you just saw the ashassina + assassination and there was somebody taking the part of what the man had done that got shot him eh + that shot him and they was following all the things and all that and then + eh this other man went and shot him because he liked the President + and then after that it just ended up that he got took to prison +

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H: oh I see
 G: so it was good ++

G is a sixteen-year-old Scottish school girl (with some dialectal, non-standard features in her speech) who is chatting, in familiar surroundings in her own school, to an interviewer. The formal part of the interview has not yet begun. G chats on and on, interactionally very competently. She checks on her listener's state of knowledge in her first utterance. When she finds that her listener did not see the film which she wants to comment on, she tells her what happened in it. Summarising and narrating the content of a film is a cognitively very difficult task. If there were some overriding transactional requirement here, the speaker would need to express what she is saying a great deal more clearly, and her listener would probably keep on interrupting to check that she understood who was doing what to whom at any given point in the summary. As it is, neither speaker nor listener comments on the inappropriateness of talking about a film which recounts the assassination of 'President Carter'. Similarly the speaker – and presumably the listener as well – does not keep a very close control over the possible referents, in the speaker's last long turn, of expressions like *the man, him, they, and all that, this other man, him, he, he*. If the listener needed to, she could probably work out who was being referred to at any given time, given that she has any background knowledge of the events portrayed in the film. It is important to realise that this lack of specificity in primarily interactional speech generally does not matter. Neither speaker nor listener needs to keep tight track of the detail.

The position with respect to primarily transactional speech is different. Here, we repeat, it really matters that what is said is clear. Consider the case where a patient goes to see a doctor. What is important for the patient is that the doctor should reassure her and make her feel better. What is important for the doctor is that he should understand what it is that the patient is complaining of. This is not simply interactional chat, this will have an effect on events in the world. Consider the following transcript of part of what a patient says to a doctor in answer to his question 'what can I do for you?':

(1.6) Patient: well, uh, I was concerned about, uh . . . last summer I guess. . . I was very low in hormones, and he – uh – the estrogen
 Doctor: mh
 Patient: the count was so low he said I didn't get it so he put me on uh . . . on the estrogen pills. Now about four years ago when I went through Phipps, uh, they had cut me down to a half and I still was

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getting a lot of uh swel-swelling and soreness in my breasts and they told me to get one about every six months, but, I sort of took myself off the estrogen and found that I didn't have any of that feeling . . .

(Quoted from Cicourel, 1981)

Cicourel comments that the doctor's notes of what the patient is suffering from record different details from those which the patient appears to have said. It is clear that speaking in this kind of interactional mode is not helpful to the cause of the transference of information. We said above that we assume that native speakers will generally be able to express transactional intentions 'at least when they only need to express what they want to say rather briefly'. How are we to account for this native speaker's apparent inability to explain clearly what she is worried about to the doctor? We approach this problem in the next section.

1.3 Structured long turns

In this section we are going to make a distinction between 'short turns' and 'long turns'. A short turn consists of only one or two utterances, a long turn consists of a string of utterances which may last as long as an hour's lecture. There is clearly no principled point of cut-off between them. We may note, however, that short turns do not demand much of the speaker in the way of producing structure. Consider the following conversation:

- (1.7)
- C: whisky sour mix + did you +
 - J: whisky sour + daiquiri +
 - C: do you like –
 - K: it was all right
 - C: my mother's favourite is daiquiri + but I love whisky sour + it's a super –
 - K: and marguerita I love as well – it's beautiful
 - C: what's that
 - K: it's some + it's er tequila and lime + with something else +
 - C: I don't know it
 - J: salt + no
 - K: yes and it's got the rough really rough salt round the edge of the glass and you drink it through the salt + and it's whipped up somehow
 - C: I've never tasted it
 - K: it's a Mexican drink + absolutely beautiful + really liked it

Structured long turns

This primarily interactional conversation between three female, graduate, native speakers consists of swapping short turns. Even the longest of these short turns only consists of statements of additional information: *it's got the rough . . . salt, and you drink it through the salt, and it's whipped up somehow*. If you compare what is needed to contribute a short turn like this to a conversation as opposed to what is needed to summarise the content of a film (as in extract (1.5)) or to summarise your relevant medical history for your doctor (as in extract (1.6)), it immediately becomes obvious that what is required of a speaker in a long turn is considerably more demanding than what is required of a speaker in a short turn. As soon as a speaker 'takes the floor' for a long turn, tells an anecdote, tells a joke, explains how something works, justifies a position, describes an individual, and so on, he takes responsibility for creating a structured sequence of utterances which must help the listener to create a *coherent* mental representation of what he is trying to say. What the speaker says must be coherently structured. He must make it clear who or what he is talking about, and specify any relevant properties, before he moves on to saying what happened. If he is recounting a narrative, he will, conventionally, establish where and when the events happened, and who the main participant was, before he recounts the series of events. He will recount the series of events in the order in which they happened or, if for some reason he chooses not to do this, he must explicitly mark the deviation from this normal unmarked ordering. Consider the following extract:

- (1.8) there were + some very very good houses rather old-fashioned but quite good houses + with very big rooms and that + and these were sort of better class people + people with maybe + minor civil servants and things like that you know that had been able to afford + dearer rents and that in those days you know ++ but the average working-class man + the wages were very small + the rents would run from anything from about five shillings to + seven shillings which was about all they could've possibly afforded in those days . . .

This is a long turn taken by an elderly man reminiscing about how things were when he was young. He has mentioned a particular area of the town. He goes on to say that there were, in that part of the town, *very very good houses*; he then adds some properties to those houses: *rather old-fashioned, quite good houses, with very big rooms*. He then speaks of the people who lived in those houses, *minor civil servants*, and the essential requisite shared by such people *that had been able to afford + dearer rents*. He then contrasts the

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condition of people who could afford to live in such houses with the condition of *the average working-class man* who only earned *very small wages*, only enough to pay a very small rent *from about five shillings to + seven shillings*. The structure of progression in this extract is reasonably easy to perceive. It is by no means always made explicit by the speaker, and the listener has to do a certain amount of work to see how the succeeding statements fit together to form a coherent representation of what the population in that part of the town was like and why. Consider now a further long turn by another elderly speaker reminiscing about his past:

- (1.9) I was + I was only eh + I was seven when the First World War broke out + I can remember the First World War though + I can remember + soldiers marching up the Canongate you know + of course being a kid and + following the band and + you know thinking it was wonderful and I can remember soldiers coming home + with mud still on them and all that sort of thing + these are things that do stick in your memory

This speaker begins by relating himself at the tender age of seven to the breaking out of *the First World War* and follows this by stating that, despite this early age, he can *remember the First World War*. He then gives examples of some memories, *soldiers marching up the Canongate*; and remarks that *being a kid* (of seven or so), *following the band* (presumably the band leading the marching soldiers), he thought it *was wonderful*. He then adds a further, different memory, presumably of later in the War, *soldiers coming home*; and then generalises, *these are things that do stick in your memory*. Just as the previous speaker moved from a part of town to houses in that part of town, to people living in those houses, gradually narrowing down, so this speaker begins with a global statement about remembering *the First World War* and then narrows down to *the soldiers marching* and *the band*. In each case it is not difficult to perceive a structure in what the speaker says.

The third example of a long turn is provided by a young woman who is commenting on recent changes in a part of Edinburgh:

- (1.10) actually I was coming down the Grassmarket + today and + it's quite nice just now the Grassmarket since + it's always had the antique shops but they're looking – they're em become a bit nicer and they've got the fair down there too which is + the Grassmarket Fair on the left hand side + it's an open-air market + er not an open-air market it's an indoor market on the left-hand side you know

She first identifies what she's talking about, *the Grassmarket*; and

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gives her credentials for having an opinion about it, *I was coming down . . . today*; and provides some properties for it, *it's quite nice just now* (general), *it's always had the antique shops* (particular); and adds some properties to them, *but they're looking . . . become a bit nicer*. She then adds a further piece of information about the Grassmarket, *they've got the fair down there too*; and further specifies 'the fair', *the Grassmarket Fair on the left-hand side*; adds a further piece of information about 'the fair', *it's an open-air market*; realises she has said the wrong thing, and corrects herself. Again, even in this rather loose interactional description, it is possible to discern a structure, a structure of the kind which necessarily underlies long turns which clearly do not consist simply of lists of unstructured statements.

The ability to construct such long turns appears to vary with individuals, in part, no doubt, depending on the opportunity they have had to produce long turns which other people bother to listen to. The ability to produce long transactional turns, in which clear information is transferred, is, we claim, not an ability which is automatically acquired by all native speakers of a language. It is an ability which appears to need adequate models, adequate practice and feedback. Several recent surveys in Britain have thrown up comments by employers, potential employers, Income Tax offices, Social Security offices and other public services, that many school-leavers, particularly among those who leave school at sixteen, are 'inarticulate'. We assume that this means that they do not succeed in transferring information effectively in long turns. The patient describing her medical history (extract (1.6)), and many of the extracts we cite in chapter 4, exemplify partial failure to communicate information in transactional long turns.

How does this finding affect foreign language teaching? If such a large number of native English speakers find difficulty with communicating information effectively in long turns, it seems reasonable to suppose that native speakers of other languages may suffer from the same disadvantage. If one of the demands in the English syllabus turns out to be transferring information effectively in English, it may be that the most satisfactory response to the problem would be first to train the student to talk effectively in this mode in the native language before being required to perform this cognitively complex task in the foreign language.

The general point which needs to be made, however, is that it is important that the teacher should realise that simply training the student to produce short turns will not automatically yield a student who can perform satisfactorily in long turns. It is currently fashionable in language teaching to pay particular attention to the

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forms and function of short turns – regarded in a ‘communicative’ or ‘functional’ light, in terms of categories of ‘speech acts’. This seems an excellent development in the early stages of language learning, in that it is a development which appears to mirror the normal acquisition of language skills in all cultures. It must be clear, however, that exclusive concentration on short turns throughout the curriculum will yield speakers who are only able to take part in the sort of conversation we illustrated in extract (1.7). Indeed if the behests of some courses which deal exclusively with ‘speech acts’ uttered in complete sentences are taken seriously, the foreign speaker will not actually be able to participate in a conversation of that sort, but only perform in highly dramatic conversations caricatured in the following extract:

- (1.11)
- A: (greet B) Good morning.
 - B: (greet A) Good morning.
 - A: (requests) Might I possibly borrow your garden fork?
 - B: (agrees) Yes. (warns) It’s rather heavy.
 - A: (accepts) Oh. (thanks) Thank you very much.
 (apologises) I’m sorry I stuck it in your foot.
 - B: (accepts apology) That’s all right. (generalises) I’m used to it. (warns) Careful you don’t do it. (exclaims) You have! (offers) Can I lend you some iodine?
 - A: (accepts) Yes, please. (thanks) Thank you.

The concern with teaching short turns arises fairly naturally from the traditional view in language teaching, which was that the only structure the student was required to master was the sentence. Recently the focus of attention has shifted from the form of the sentence to the functions it can be used to perform. This should yield a student who is able to produce correct sentences in a short turn, responding correctly to an identified social stimulus. It must surely be clear that students who are only capable of producing short turns are going to experience a lot of frustration when they try to speak the foreign language. They may have achieved basic interactional skills and they may have the language forms available to permit them to request information, services etc., but they are very far indeed from the expressed aim of many courses which is to permit the students to ‘express themselves’ in the foreign language. In chapters 2 and 4 we return to this problem.

1.4 Spoken language models and feasibility

One of the pleasures of teaching the written language is that it is so easy to provide good models of almost any kind of writing. Models

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of texts created for different purposes can be provided and models of sentences created for different purposes. And in each case the model is one which the student can profitably base his own production on. If he copies the model carefully, the teacher can tell him that what he produces is 'right'.

This comfortable notion of 'correctness' is a good deal less obvious when it comes to teaching the spoken language. It is not at all obvious what sort of model is appropriate to offer the foreign learner since native spoken language so obviously reflects the 'performance' end of the *competence–performance* distinction. It reveals so many examples of slips, errors, incompleteness, produced by the speaker, speaking in the *here-and-now*, under pressure of time, trying to tie in what he is saying *now* with what he has just said, and while he is simultaneously working out what he is about to say. Clearly the foreign student should not be *taught* to produce incomplete sentences. The teacher has to work out some satisfactory compromise. Presumably, in the early stages, students will be offered, as models to copy directly, short complete sentences and phrases produced by the teacher. When the student attempts to reproduce such model phrases and sentences in 'conversation' exercises, it seems reasonable that he should not be corrected if he produces partial sentences, incomplete phrases, of the sort produced by native speakers. When the student listens to native speakers talking, most of the time listening to language produced spontaneously, he should realise that speakers of this foreign language talk like human beings, like he talks in his native language. They don't produce ideal strings of complete, perfectly formed, sentences. They use language manipulatively, exploratorily, to communicate with and make up what they say as they go along.

It is sometimes said of some foreign speakers of English, particularly speakers from northern Europe, that they speak language which is 'more perfect' than that spoken by native English speakers, because they produce complete sentences and articulate clearly. A recent article in *The Guardian* newspaper said just this of some Russian speakers of English. The only way you could tell they were foreign, it said, was because they spoke English so 'perfectly'. This is a very odd notion of 'perfection'. The effect, as a native speaker being addressed by a foreign speaker with such 'perfect English', is that one is being addressed as if one were an audience at a public meeting, where the speaker is speaking formally and precisely on a matter which he has thought about many times before. The language may be *formally* correct but it is certainly *inappropriate*, and the reaction of many native speakers of English might reasonably be that it is quite hard to feel friendly towards someone who

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addresses you as if you were an audience at a public meeting. It would seem more sensible in a syllabus for advanced learners to concentrate on exposing them to a range of modes of speech *appropriate* to different contexts of situation, than to demand of them an unreasonable 'non-native' standard of 'correctness' in all situations.

A necessary corollary of an educational system which puts great emphasis on 'correctness' in speaking a foreign language must be that many students feel themselves to be failures, since only relatively few, exceptional, individuals will achieve this ability to hold conversations in which they produce exclusively 'correct' and 'complete' forms.

It is worthwhile considering what the motivation for students learning a foreign language is, in determining the content of their curricula. Most students, it seems, would like to be able to speak the foreign language very well, but retain their cultural identity. This is interpretable as meaning that they would like to understand fairly easily what is said to them. It follows that they will require a lot of training in listening comprehension. In spoken production it means that they should control a range of abilities from taking short turns in primarily interactive 'chat' to taking longer transactional turns. As you will see from the transcripts of native speakers talking which we pepper this book with, native speakers relatively rarely produce complete correct sentences in spoken language. It seems reasonable then that foreign students should not be obliged to do so all of the time, since to do so merely makes them sound very foreign. In spoken production it probably means that students are not going to be highly motivated to improve their pronunciation beyond a certain point. Most students identify 'how they speak' with their own personal and cultural identities. Many foreign speakers of English who have lived in Britain for twenty or thirty years understand English just about perfectly, and produce English just about perfectly in every respect, except that they still retain a foreign accent. Many such French, Polish, Hungarian, or Gujarati speakers wish to produce the language like native speakers in every respect save that of pronunciation. They wish to preserve their own identities to be known to be, say, a French speaker speaking superb English, not to be taken for an Englishman or a Welshman. Of course there are a few rare individuals who are superb mimics and quickly adopt a native-like pronunciation, often in a variety of languages – splendid potential undercover agents. Such individuals appear to be able to do this quite independently of the educational system. It would be absurd to suppose that a performance of this kind should be the target set by an educational system since it would necessarily follow

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that the vast majority of both teachers and students would spend most of their time feeling that they were failures. A more reasonable approach would seem to be one where a much more relaxed attitude to ‘correctness’ is adopted, and many more students can attain success.

1.5 Feasibility – what can be taught?

We have said that the primary function of written language is *transactional*, to convey information (though there are relatively major exceptions, like literature, and relatively minor interactional ones like love letters). We have said that the primary function of spoken language is *interactional*, to establish and maintain social relations. However, an important function of spoken language is primarily transactional – to convey information. We shall schematically represent these functions in figure 1.1.

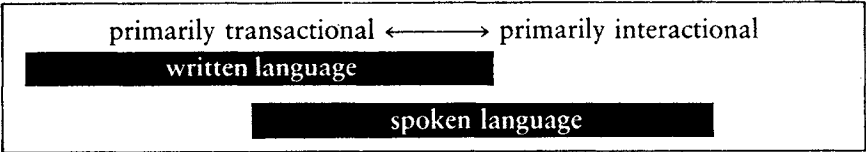


Figure 1.1 *Functions of language*

Notice that spoken language, while mostly under ‘primarily interactional’, protrudes well under ‘primarily transactional’ as well (where it will often be associated, as we pointed out, with note-taking, i.e. with the written language).

In language teaching it seems reasonable to assume that much of what the student has learnt about the nature of primarily interactional speech in his own language can be transferred to the foreign language. It may be necessary to bring to his attention what happens in his native language, since our ‘knowledge’ of such communicative matters is usually held well below the level of consciousness. Listening analytically to a tape of what goes on in the student’s native language may be a valuable preamble to listening to a similar tape in the target language. Much of what the student produces in primarily interactional language may be modelled more or less directly on his native language experience, and on the tapes which he hears in listening comprehension classes.

In primarily transactional spoken language the problem is different. As we have demonstrated (and will further demonstrate in detail in chapter 4) many native speakers of a language have

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particular difficulty with controlling extended transactional turns. The performance of native speakers can be improved by training. It seems reasonable to suggest that the explicit teaching of the production of the spoken form of the foreign language should be particularly concerned with the teaching of extended transactional turns. For one reason, because these are likely to prove difficult for most speakers; for another, because foreign students visiting a native-speaking English country will have to cope in an industrialised, bureaucratised, society which depends very much on the ability of individuals to use spoken language to communicate information efficiently; for yet another reason, because foreign students who require spoken English out of a native-speaking context are likely to require it primarily for transactional reasons, for acquiring and disseminating information; and, lastly, as we shall suggest in chapter 2, it is methodologically much more feasible to teach control of transactional turns than to teach explicit control of interactional turns.

1.6 Texts

The word 'text' is familiar as applied to the written language. We shall apply the term to spoken 'texts' as well, where 'text' means 'verbal record of communication'. We shall assume that the taped record we deal with has 'primary' status, and that the transcript we accompany it with represents our *interpretation* of what was said. In some cases the tape may not be clear and your interpretation may differ from ours. The same is almost certainly true of a great deal that we listen to in our everyday lives. We all construct reasonable interpretations which we assume do, for the most part, coincide. It would be a mistake, in teaching the spoken language, to assume that it is always clear what the speaker said, or what he intended to say (even to him), or to suppose that there is only one single 'correct' interpretation of the smudged acoustic signal which the speaker produces. Throughout this book we shall constantly appeal to the notion of 'reasonable interpretation of a text' rather than 'correct interpretation of a text'.