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The elicitation of spoken English - DRAFT

1 Introduction

This paper sets out to describe and offer initial comments on a series of experiments in the recording of spoken interaction which were carried out at Birmingham University in 1984 and mid 1985. It expands on oral reports made to the 1984 Conference on Computers and English Language Research, held in Windermere, England, and to the Symposium on English in Speech and Writing, held at Uppsala University in the same year.

At Birmingham, we have been active in the field of corpus creation for some time, and we hold about 1.3 million words of speech in our computerized text collection, with further material on audio-tape. Nevertheless, we maintain an interest in accumulating spoken data, and have over the last eighteen months turned our attention again to the recording of informal conversation.

There are a number of problems associated with the gathering and preparation of informal spoken data which those who have worked in this field will recognise. It is a laborious and expensive process. The range of language use which is captured in many hours of recording is often still rather limited. Environments which are conducive to informal behaviour are characteristically unsuitable for recording purposes, in that the conversation cannot be distinguished from ambient sounds, and the subsequent task of transcription is made difficult or impossible. Totally natural and spontaneous conversation will only occur if the speakers are unaware that they are being recorded, but this may conflict with ethical and legal considerations. At the other end of the scale, there are enormous advantages to be gained, in terms of clarity and ease of recording, in using actors and scripted dialogue, but our experience with existing corpus data leads us to suppose that there is an unacceptably wide divergence between scripted and natural language.

Reviewing these facts, we decided last year to embark on a new recording venture according to principles which we hoped would achieve an acceptable compromise, in terms of the quality and usefulness of the data on the one hand, and an economy of effort on the other. The initial plan was to build a pilot corpus of task-based interaction under laboratory conditions. Re

recording subjects were to be allotted tasks which would attempt to prescribe discourse type, so that the language produced by a series of such tasks would be rich and varied, but which would still allow room for linguistic choice. The sessions were to be conducted informally, but in a recording studio. The data which would result was seen not as a replacement for naturally occurring language, but as a complement to it, replicating some but not all of its features.

The immediate impetus for the first two batches of recordings we were intending to make was the desire to produce data which would be suitable for use with a learner of English, in that the language was clearly recorded, somewhat controlled in range, and accessible in small units. The recordings were to be built into a new English course which we were then involved in designing (the first volume of the series, provisionally entitled *The COBUILD English Course* and based on recordings using the technique outlined, is now nearing completion).

Since the outset, we have made three sets of pilot recordings—in March 1984, July 1984 and July 1985, respectively. Each time, we have adjusted parameters (see Appendix A) in the light of experience gained, and according to the prevailing focus of interest. To date, we have a total of approximately 120,000 words to examine. As a pilot corpus this is fairly substantial and capable of easy extension. It is big enough to indicate that we are on the right track, that in spite of its shortcomings, studio-recorded data is capable of revealing useful insights into informal discourse. Detailed analysis of the texts will soon be taking place. In the meantime, this paper offers a first set of observations.

2 Batch 1 recordings—March 1984

2.1 The recording subjects were eight first-year English undergraduates, four male and four female. Students were chosen because they were a ready source, and because they were close in age and interests to the target users of the proposed English course. People who did not know each other were invited, so that self-introductions would be genuine. On the first day, one of them brought a friend, so that he, too, could be genuinely introduced.

The recording sessions took place in eight hours over three afternoons, in a university recording studio. This was to allow time on alternate days for appraisal of the data produced. In three days, approximately 70,000 words were recorded, comprising task-based talk, and the desultory chat in the coffee-breaks.

People worked in pairs or groups of four, and were asked to follow

instructions provided verbally or on card inside the studio. The tasks were both 'naïve', that is, involved with the performance of an operation, such as discussion and formulation of advice for new students, or the joint construction of a picture from given shapes; and 'experiential', that is, involving the evaluation of a position- for instance, in considering the significance of the colour red. In order to encourage lexical variety, topic was also specified in the tasks set. In the interests of naturalness, we did not build role-play into the proceedings. Task instructions were worded to guide the discourse to varying degrees. For example, compare: 'Where would you go? (a) On your own, think of a place in the UK where you would like to spend a week's holiday, paying for yourself. Write the name down. (b) Find out what place your partner has chosen and why', with 'Decide which are the three most fashionable sports in the UK today'. Wherever appropriate, we suggested a time limit of two minutes for each task.

This was an exploratory set of recordings. We were interested simply to discover what happened, what effect the different features had on each other.

2.2 Participants

The subjects are seen to behave informally towards each other. There is evidence of this even in the initial introductions, as is clear from Extract (1) below. (Transcription conventions are given in Appendix B.)

(1) R: This is my pal. Erm. This is S who does law, and is from Liverpool-well, is from Birkenhead, on the other side of the river. Erm. He's eighteen years old, he's got dark hair and I'm doing it for the benefit

G: [You can see him

R:] of the tape, you understand. I can't really think of anything else, he's so uninteresting. Erm. He plays the guitar.

G: Electric?

R: In training at the moment.

S: Well, it's classical.

G: Oh, really?

R: He lives in Maple Bank, in the same flat as me, but lived in Mason Hall before and, er, moved out.

G: Couldn't stand the food.

R: Yeah, moved out last term.

N: He looks a second year though, really, for a first year.

R: What, have we got to introduce ourselves as well?

N: Yes.

R: My name's R, I live in the same flat as S, in Maple Bank.

S: You ought to be doing this to me.

R: No, we're supposed to do it to us, each other, I think. . .

We also observed that the group tended to move closer together in the studio, sitting side by side rather than opposite each other and, because of this, speaking softly rather than projecting their voices to the microphone

The subjects do not readily relate to matters of less immediate relevance or familiarity to them, and respond unpredictably to such tasks. Thus, in response to the instruction: 'FUTURE PLANS FOR JOBS. Find out from your partner what their future plans are after leaving university, and see what you have in common', the subjects talk of their past work experience and former aspirations-cf (2):

(2) N: I don't think so. Well, what do you want to be when you grow up then?

R: Well, when I'm grown up, I really don't know, honestly. I have absolutely no idea what I want to do. I did at one time want to be a journalist, but I went off that idea. Urn.

N: Have you had any practical experience, at all? Do you write for university magazines or anything?

R: No, I don't want to be a journalist any more, but I did. But I don't really know what on earth I want to do. I'd quite like to. . . I mean, I'm doing French, 'cos I, basically just 'cos of the year abroad, and, er, I'd quite like to sort of maybe, work, go to France for a while, but I don't know in what capacity.

N: Did you have a year off? Before coming here?

R: No, I spent three years doing A-levels. I did a year at school, and, er, I really couldn't stand it, so I left and started again at technical college. There's nothing technical about it at all-it was just a bunch of people doing A-level and O-level retakes, you know, so I spent two years there and eventually passed them.

N: Congratulations. Urn, I suppose one thing we've got in common is I don't really know what I want to do either. Er, I took a year off, though, I travelled around for a bit, I went to France, too, and then, urn, and then I settled down and worked for nine months, I worked in a bank.

R: Ah, really, what was that like?

This group is not disturbed by asking and answering questions which could have generated hesitancy and embarrassment. See the task below and the response in extract (3):

'ASKING FOR MONEY. Find out how much money your partner (1) gets from parents, (2) gets as a grant, etc':

(3) N: How much money do you get from your parents?

R: Er, I get a parental contribution, but that only just makes up the grant. It's a hundred and, about a hundred and seventy, I think, a term.

N: Yeah, mine's a hundred and eighty a term.

R: Yeah, well, a hundred and seventy, eighty, it's about the same as yours then. N: Mm. How much do you get for a grant?

R: Well, urn, I don't know, the same as you if I get the same parental contribution.

N: Which is about four hundred pounds a term.

R: Yeah, about, yeah.

N: Yeah, which isn't enough, urn.

R: Get that down on tape. It isn't enough.

2.3 Tasks

Tasks which interest the participants are more likely to be given full treatment. For example, the following tasks produce lengthy and animated discussion, and are rounded off as requested:

- 1 'Think back to your first two or three days at university. What did you do then that you now laugh at/regret?'
- 2 (reverse side of card) 'Decide, between you, on three pieces of advice or information that you would give to newcomers.'

Conversely, tasks which do not interest this group tend to receive poor treatment, even if the subjects are actually able to do what is required, and the instructions are clear and simple. In response to the topic of windsurfing: 'Formulate an explanation of what windsurfing is for an older person who has never heard of it. Write this down in four or five sentences', one set of participants responds minimally, as in (4):

- (4) S: [. . .] Do you know anything about windsurfing?
P: Urn, I can't say I do really, not very much.
S: Well, that makes two of us, so we'll give this one a miss, I think.
P: Oh yeah. That's a good idea. D'you want to try that one?

However, on request, they are subsequently quite able to produce (5):

- (5) S: Right. Well, I suppose the first thing that needs to be said is that it is a water sport.
P: Right. One, it's a water sport. Urn, is it something that you do on your own? Do do you just have one person on on a windsurfer?
s: Yes, yes.
P: So it's individual. What would you call it-you couldn't call it a boat, could you?
S: Urn, I think one of the best ways of describing it is that it is a surfboard with a small sail on it.
P: That's fine. Okay. So it's firstly a water sport. It's an individual water sport, and its appearance is such that it's like a surfboard with a sail.
S: That's right, yes.
P: Plus, urn, what else? Er, you need the wind for it, obviously. It's powered by the wind.
S: Powered by the wind, yes. And the idea of the sport is just to chug around lakes or the sea, trying
P: Chug?
S: trying to go as fast as you possibly can, I think.
P: Is is?
S: And staying upright. The idea is not to get wet.
P: Okay, the idea is to stay upright, and move with the wind. Okay, that's five points.
S: Right.

2.4 Instructions

The presence and wording of instructions clearly play an important role in shaping the discourse, as can be seen in Extract 5 above.

Conversational openings are typically bound up with responding to the task requirement. A written instruction is normally read out verbatim, and some attempt is usually made to build a context for it, as in (6) and (7) below:

- (6) S: Right, this one's on television: 'Avoiding actual programme names, make a list of the different types of programme on UK television.'
- (7) A: Okay. This is a group survey about languages. I've got to chair this one carefully and I'd like a secretary to take notes.
H: Me, me!
A: Of course, of course. 'How many different languages are spoken by the group as a whole?'

Unclear instructions can divert the discourse into a discussion of what is meant by them, as shown in extract (1), and in (8) below:

- (8) S: 'Get information from your partner so that you can fill in one of the attached cards. When you have finished, help your partner to fill in the other card, giving your own details, family trees.'
P: Oh, is this about the family tree?
S: Yes.
P: Okay, so the card says, 'Your partner's family tree', and it's got blanks as far as grandparents, er
S: Okay, so
P: Is that right?
S: Shall I ask, I assume they want us to put names in, do they?
P: So that's 'Student A', let me read the card again. Okay, so you've got to ask me now.

We have learned from this first pilot study that instructions have to be clear and simple; those which are long or complex are often only partially carried out, unless the topic is of overriding interest.

3 Batch 2 recordings - July 1984

3.1. In the light of our experiences in March, we changed some of the specifications for the second pilot. First of all, we decided to use older subjects. Availability was more of a problem here, so for speed and convenience we turned to friends and colleagues who were able and willing to help us. Of the six females and eleven males involved, therefore, it turned out that nine were based within the university, nine were, or had been, teachers of English, and all were university-educated. Contributing some variety were

la computer officer, one lecturer in mechanical engineering and two in maths, two university administrators, two housewives, and a publisher. Some of these people already knew each other.

We also made changes to the tasks. This time, we concentrated on tasks with relatively fixed agendas, of the kind that are typically found in 'communicative' classroom activities for the language learner. We were also more specific in the instructions given, and a time limit of one minute was suggested. Our aim was twofold: in practical terms, we wanted to see if we could elicit more concise chunks of conversation which were still relatively natural and suitable for inclusion unedited in the proposed course series; in theoretical terms, we were interested in testing the hypothesis that the functional and communicative analyses which underlie language teaching can predict linguistic choice—to test the assumption prevalent in the teaching of English as a foreign language that if people are given certain tasks to carry out, they will generate certain types of language.

On this occasion, we recorded approximately 40,000 words, in a timescale similar to that of the previous experiment. The smaller collection was due to a change in procedure, whereby participants were invited to read and discuss the instructions before embarking on a recorded task. This was designed to isolate the discussion of the tasks from the performance of them. The aim here was to record language models for the course book which did not reflect details of the recording situation, because these would be difficult to interpret out of context.

3.2 Participants

The subjects bring a range of attitudes and experiences to the event. The group co-operates well, but does not take for granted a shared outlook.

The subjects function more differently in different combinations than did the students. In (9) below, for example, two unacquainted people working together take longer over their task than one of them might with a different partner:

(9) D: My name is DW.

R: And I'm RP.

D: Shall I start, er, R?

R: Please, yes.

D: I think the first question was to describe the woman briefly.

R: Yes.

D: Er, I suggested that she, that, er, the person was a female, medium build, aged around thirty, short, dark hair with a fringe, no outstanding features, but has a speckled complexion.

R: Ah, that accords very closely with, er, my impression, urn, I mentioned the short, dark, straight hair, and, urn, guessed the age at thirty as as you did.

D: Um, yes.

R: I noticed that she has a rather strong, slightly masculine face, but I didn't notice the speckled complexion, I, er, I must say. Erm - average build.

D: Um.

R: Height, of course you can't tell because of the way she's sitting

D: Sitting, yes, yes.

R: um, and of course, if we were to recognise her on another occasion, urn, her clothes could, well, be be different.

D: Um, quite, quite.

R: But I think that probably is about as far as we can go on on the description.

D: Yes, er, I take your point about looking slightly masculine, erm, that could well be due to the clothes she's wearing.

R: Yes.

D: Urn, as you say, in different dress, may look quite different.

R: I think nevertheless her face has got, urn, quite, er, a strength

D: Yes.

R:um

D: That's right.

R: about it.

D: That's right. Shall we go on to the [. . .]

This group introduces a new set of reoccupations. In particular, three have recently become parents, and a further two are clearly family-minded. This has its effect on the discourse, with the instruction 'What are you going to do in your next free time?' being responded to in terms of 'If I had free time, I would. . .'; and 'Describe your typical day's routine' being met with an account of baby's breakfast, nappy change, morning nap, and so on.

3.3 The language produced

Our data indicates that the linguistic choices made by our subjects in response to the tasks prescribed are not those which would be predicted by theorists or materials writers in the field of English as a foreign language. This is important, since it means that, at present, learners are not being given the means to achieve classroom tasks in a way that accords with native speaker practice, because language specialists are typically not taking account of authentic language behaviour.

Here are some examples from the data. Unexpected features in the language are underlined.

The first task was worded 'FREE TIME. Find out three things that your partner is planning to do when he/she next has some free time.' We predicted that the lexical realisations *I'll*, *I'm going to*, and *I'm planning to* would occur. The actual response was (10):

(10) C: Oh, you're going to ask me, oh! Well, urn, I'm half-way through, urn, replacing a fence post at the back of my garden which rotted and, urn, I've put the post in part of the way, but *I've got to* bang it in the rest of the way and make

the whole thing secure. So that's one thing *I've got to* do, urn, the sooner the better, or the wind will blow it down. Urn, a somewhat longer project which *I want to* do when I've got some free time is to construct a sort of shed or caboose place outside to keep our garden tools and things in, but as I said, that'll take rather longer. Er, another thing which *I would like to* do when I've got some free time is to, er, take the car, and drive out into the countryside in Wales and have a, have a look round there, because I've lived here for about a year now and haven't really inspected any of the surrounding countryside. All right, so those are three things *I'd like to* do.

The second task was: 'A TYPICAL DAY. Describe to each other, simply, what you do on a typical day (give times where appropriate). Find out what you have in common (try to keep to 1 minute each).' Here we predicted the occurrence of the lexical realisations *generally*, *usually*, and other common adverbs of frequency; and the use of the simple present to express habitual action. The actual responses which were produced can be seen in (11), (12), (13) and (14):

(11) M: Urn, and then in the afternoon, er, oh dear, it's very difficult to have a typical day for me really, but, *er, I might*, urn, go off to, er, at this stage I, *I'd probably* go off and pick fruit or, urn, *I might*, urn, go and see somebody, urn, I do some visiting of older people round about, urn, I think you could say in the afternoon *it's mostly* that sort of thing, but it's not, *it could be* either morning or afternoon that I do this and, er, I don't have lunch usually, er, in the middle of the day or unless, er, I'm having it with someone.

(12) K: Erm, my first class-now this varies from day to day-begins at nine o'clock and *I will* teach for one or two hours in the morning. Erm, after I've done these one or two hours, *I will* normally have a break and a period during the day when I can get on with some work I need to get done, rather than just teaching work and *it could be* administration or some reading I have to particularly get on with. Then the afternoons vary, *I may have* two hours of classes or three hours of classes, depending on the number of students I have coming in [. . .] Erm, my day is very structured, I have to get certain things done, so when I finish work, which can be from about three-thirty to four-thirty, *I'll try to* go to the swimming pool, erm, at least twice or three times a week and *I'll* swim for an hour or so, urn, then *it's* home or if I have to get some little bits and pieces then *I'll try* and go into the City Centre and buy my supper.

We also predicted that Task 2 would elicit full syntax, but the actual responses revealed frequent omission of the subject, with this ellipsis often marking subject change-cf (13) and (14):

(13) S: Then in the afternoon, normally, either we go and visit somebody or a friend comes, or we go shopping or whatever. Then, teatime. Then we play, usually, sort of play outside or play in the sitting room for a bit. Then *she has* her bath, *goes* to bed, *cook* the supper. Then *do* whatever *we're* going to do in the evening.

(14) M: So I I then have a meal, er, I take the the children out to the allotments on a sunny day and perhaps spend half an hour on the allotments. If not, um, *play*

with the children a bit, *go* upstairs, *read* them stories in bed, er, *put* them down if *we can*, by nine o'clock.

The third task was: 'DAILY ROUTINES. Compare your daily routines to find out what you have in common, answering questions such as who gets up earlier, who has the longest working day, etc (be concise-2 minutes).' We predicted that this would generate the same language as did the instructions for Task 2, but in fact, as can be seen in (15) and (16), the results are different.

- (15) S: Okay, urn, what do you do at half past seven in the morning every day?
K: Er, *I'm normally in the shower* at half past seven.
S: And at eight o'clock?
K: At eight o'clock *I'm just leaving* my house. To come to work and catch the bus.
S: What do you do at seven o'clock?
K: In the morning?
S:Mm.
K: *I'm still asleep* at seven o'clock-I don't get up until ten past seven.
S: Mm, um, what do you do at one o'clock?
K: At one o'clock *I'm normally eating* my lunch. I eat it, I begin my lunch at twelve-fifteen and finish at one-fifteen.
S: Mm, mm, thank you. And, what do you do at seven to seven-thirty in the evening?
K: Seven to seven-thirty I normally read or watch television or er, *I've just eaten* my supper normally and then *I'm just sitting down* relaxing, so *it can be reading* a book or *it can be watching* television.
- (16) M: Mm, mm. Do you do any work in the evenings, I mean does it carry on, your work?
B: [*try not to* take any work home, *I like to* keep
M: Mm, very sensible.
B: home and work as separate as possible, but, erm, I I do some academic work, as such, erm, which I keep my interest in my historical, er, work, and then *tend to* go to bed I suppose, about, er, half-ten, eleven. [. . .] What about yourself? M: Well, er, I'am afraid we *tend to* be rather late birds actually, though I must admit, er, I I *try to* keep it before midnight, but very often it's after midnight when we go to bed.

Task 4 was: 'FAVOURITES. (a) Look at the lists below. (1) Write down your favourites, (2) Find out what your partner's favourites are, (3) How many do you have in common?

	FRUIT	SPORT	OTHER	TYPE OF HOLIDAY
COLOUR	bananas	football	ACTIVITIES	camping
red	oranges	tennis	music	skiing
blue grey	apples	squash	television	walking
green pink	pineapple	swimming	jogging	sightseeing
	mangoes		dancing films	sunbathing'

We predicted that the lexical choices *my favourite x is, I like x best, I prefer x* would occur, and that full syntax would be used. However, as can be seen in extract (17) below, this was not the case. The speakers were obviously responding to the format of the instruction card, talking hypothetically about what they would choose from the list of items given, and reporting on the actual choices they had made as requested. The listing of items in the instructions caused their fronting in the discourse, as in line 2 of the extract:

- (17) B: All right? What about now sport-are you sporty?
C: Er, *tennis, I would choose*. What about you?
B: Tennis. *I would, er, oh I'd go for* football.
C: Football. Urn, other activities. Music, television? Or do you like jogging? Oh, I see.
B: Yes, er, several of those but I suppose *if I had to pick one, then* films. C: I've put down films as well, yes I've put down films.
B: Taking films broadly. And then what about holiday enjoyment?
C: Um, *walking, I've put down*.

Task 5 was: 'FAVOURITES. (1) Find out from your partners their favourite fruit/drink/vegetable, (2) Remember and write down the answers, (3) Check your answers.'

We predicted that the language generated would be as for Task 4, but as can be seen in extract (18), the instructions here played an even greater role in structuring the discourse:

- (18) J: Right S, could I ask you what your favourite fruit is?
S: Loganberry.
J: Loganberries. D?
D: Strawberries.
J: JC?
JC: Melon.
J: Loganberries, strawberries and melon.
JC: Yep, good.
J: Now, can I do the same thing for drinks? Drink-your favourite drink? S: Does it have to be alcoholic or non-alcoholic?
J: It just says drink, I think water would do.
S: Rum.
D: Rum.
J: Rum. D?
D: Erm, a nice whisky.
J: Whisky.

Task 6 was: 'WHAT HAS YOUR PARTNER GOT? (1) Find out what important things your partner always has on him/her. Work through the list below, and add any extra items:

diary calculator

address book

driving licence

(2) Put these into 3 categories.'

pen

keys

comb

purse

wallet

We predicted that the linguistic choices *I've always got an x on me, I generally/usally/always/carry an x* would occur, and that full syntax would be used. The actual responses showed that, as in Task 4, the provision of listing in the instructions caused these items to be fronted for thematic purposes. It was also discovered that a wider range of lexis was used to express the notion of 'having things on one' than was anticipated, covering the additional notion of where such things were kept on one's person-*cf* extract (19):

(19) S: Erm, so you put notes and coins and bank cards and everything in your, straight into your pocket?

C: Oh *bank cards I've got in one of these horrid plastic things from the bank. / keep in, / keep it in there, yeah.*

S: Sort of card case.

c: Yeah.

S: Or something. And *the notes you just stuff* into your pocket?

C: That's it. It's the best way of not losing them I reckon. [. . .]

S: I see. And *do you put, do you take your*

C: Erm.

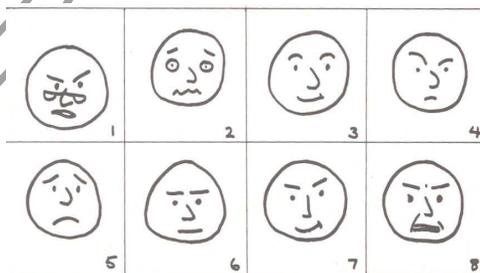
S: driving licence and things like that *with you all the time?*

C: Not usually, no. Well, I think I, it might be in my briefcase sometimes. I'm a very disorganised sort of person about that sort of thing. *Address book / don't take with me, no, driving licence, no, calculator-/ often have one of them with me, yes.*

Task 7 was: 'PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION. Match the following words with the set of pictures below:

worried confident disgusted happy
angry depressed doubtful curious'

(The pictures in Fig. 1 were based on models given in Wright 1984.)



We predicted that the lexical choices looks, seems, could be, might be would occur, together with full syntax along the lines of I think the man in the first picture looks angry, but he could also be disgusted- what do you think? The man in picture number two looks worried, because he's raising his eyebrows and not smiling. But he might be doubtful or depressed-do you agree? The actual responses show the participants speaking with reference to the shared context, again a list of items, and operating according to principles of economy rather than elegance-cf extract (20):

(20) JC: Right, what have you got?

J: Erm, one was angry.

JC: Hey, yes, I got that. One, angry.

J: You got one was angry. Yes, that seems to be

JC: The only other thing was disgusted, which was close. What did you put for disgusted?

J: Eight.

JC: Yep, I put eight as well.

J: Yes.

JC: Yes, so we agree on one and eight.

J: So we we agree on, we should have put ticks.

JC: Well on just eight, just so we, those ones we agreed on.

J: Sort, put lines on them. Yes, they, they, one was, was fairly easy, erm, five was depressed.

JC: yes, I got five.

J: You got that as well?

JC: Yes.

J:Mm.

JC: Doubtful. Four?

J: Four, yes, erm.

JC: Yes, erm, that's very good.

4 Batch 3 recordings-July 1985

4.1 In July 1985, a third pilot study was run. On this occasion, the impetus was the availability and participation of Martin Warren, who has assessed the naturalness of speech in the classroom setting according to a set of 'discourse principles' suggested by Sinclair (1983), and whose findings seemed relevant as a control on authenticity (cf Warren 1985). We wanted to try to improve on, and provide a check for, the degree of naturalness achieved in the previous batches of recordings, and felt this could be done by:

i. providing stimuli which could be expected by their nature to encourage spoken interaction; for example by virtue of being shocking, boring, or by entailing co-operative behaviour;

ii. minimizing such instructions as were given, so as not to provide a skeleton for the discourse but to allow it to develop naturally;iii. omitting time constraints, so that the discourse could reach its own conclusion.

For this study, four undergraduates, two male and two female, from the group used in March 1984, were brought together for an afternoon in the recording studio. Working in twos and fours, they produced about 10,000 words in 96 minutes of activity.

A range of tasks and interactional stimuli were devised and then presented to the participants with care. Some were operational tasks which did not require language to be achieved: in these, the students were handed job application forms to fill in, and a baby chair to assemble. Some were operational and experiential tasks which did require verbal interaction, for example, in identifying smells in closed containers, in answering obscure general knowledge questions, and in discussing the attitude of the public towards AIDS.

Visual stimuli, such as photographs of the Bradford City Football Club fire, were also used. These did not require, but were intended to provoke, verbal reactions, as were a container full of contraceptives, and one of maggots.

4.2 Participants

This group of subjects sometimes see implications for action in the various stimuli provided which were not intended. Perhaps this is explained by their previous experience with us of more tightly-controlled tasks.

To give an example, at one point, the group of four was handed four magazine pictures, of male and female body-builders and of an obese woman. They made two assumptions in response: one was that the sheets of paper had to be distributed among the group-cf (21):

(21) S: Okay, there's four sheets this time, so there's one each.

The other was that this was a task in which they were supposed to make comparisons and contrasts between the people depicted, and from which a message was to be derived-cf (22):

(22) S: I think it's just suggesting, y'know, for moderation by showing the two extremes

N: Mm.

S: that neither is better than the other, and we ought to be looking for something in the middle.

N: Mm.

This interpretive behaviour possibly also reflects the speaker's indecision as to who is ultimately in control of the discourse, a factor which is examined in more detail later in relation to conversational closings.

4.3 The discourse

Although the language produced on this occasion is far less externally controlled, it is still obviously not entirely spontaneous. As in Extracts 6 and 7 of the March 1984 recordings, conversational openings show the influence of written instructions wherever these were given-cf (23) and (24):

(23) S: Right.

N: 'How many marbles are there in the jar? Try to guess without opening the jar.' I want to know what the prize is, though.

S: Right, does anyone know [. . .]

(24) P: Okay. Shall we take it in turns with a question?

N: Okay.

P: The first one, the blue 'G' question at the top, is [. . .]

However, in most cases instructions were not given, and the discourse finds its own feet after an initial search.

A feature of natural language which is evident in these recordings is the large amount of evaluation and other personal interpolation which is built into the discourse. The best example of this is perhaps seen in the social conversation surrounding the essentially non-verbal task of filling in an application form-cf (25):

(25) S: Well, I've got to be honest, I don't think I'd get the job. (laugh)

N: Oh, I don't know.

S: Plenty of exams, but not much else.

G: Relationships.

S: Oh, I reckon you should put down you've got your driving licence. P:

[Oh yes, that's a good idea.]
G: (unintelligible)

P: And typing speeds.

N: G, please.

S: Only put the typing speed down if you can type. It looks pretty bad saying you can't type at all.

G: Oh, is there that? Yeah, I can do that.

N: What about failed RSA Grade I typing,

[would that impress anyone?
G: (unintelligible) distinction.]

N: Did you?

G: Yeah, only bloke in the class, only distinction.

N: It's only 'cos you had short nails-bet all the girls wouldn't cut their nails.

G: Yeah.

Actually, there was something in that. . . I had very long nails at the time. (laugh)

N: Course

S: I've got Grade I piano, as well. D'you think that'll get me the job?

P: [Yes, put it on.]

G: [Yeah, go on. (laugh)]

Topic drift is also evident in the discourse, again characteristic of conversation which is allowed to flow naturally. The discussion shown above subsequently moves away from qualifications, to qualities admired in individuals named as referees, thence to an account of the previous day's cricket match, and finally to cricket in general.

More interruption and less regular patterns of turn-taking are evident, as is consistent with the unpredictable shape of natural discourse. It is possible that the recording situation encouraged speakers to contribute more than usual, thus rendering interruption more likely, but on the other hand, the more controlled recordings of 1984 were largely devoid of such overlap.

In the closing phases of each session, one can observe, however, that loosely prescribed tasks place the subjects in an indeterminate position. Their dilemma lies in not being sure whether they are totally free, or whether someone else is responsible for the higher level units of discourse. The very provision of a stimulus may suggest that a particular closing is expected. The subjects cope with this in different ways:

They do not make detailed summaries of events at the close of each session. In naturally occurring discourse, we would only expect this when it was necessary: in summoning up the resources to take a next step, perhaps, or to demonstrate that a given agenda has been completed. In the recordings it is not explicitly required, so, perhaps on balance, not offered.

The closings instead seem to fall into three categories. The first type takes the form of a final comment which serves to draw to an end a tailing off in the interaction, as in extract (26), where the task was to find definienda for given definitions, and (27), where a baby chair was to be assembled:

(26) S: [Okay. I can't think of anything better.]

N: Right

S: We're back at the start? yes.

N: Yes.]

(27) G: Shall I get into it then?

N: Right, off you go . . . it doesn't look very safe at all.

G: No . . . "Baby Bjorn", for Swedish babies, as sponsored by Bjorn Borg. N: Well.

G: That's as far as we can get.

In these extracts, it can be seen that the closing comment functions both as a controlling move and as a signal to the 'person in charge'.

The second type of closing is marked by a humorous comment, which cuts

across the last stages of the interaction with an air of finality, as in (28), (29) and (30):

(28) (Opening tin of maggots)

N: Oh God, they stink!

P: I can't remember.

S: Oh!

G: Here, I tell you what, we could keep them and we could let them out in our next tutorial, hee hee hee.

P: I wish they'd been chocolate.

N: Oh.

S: If you'd got a bit of superglue, you could've fooled anyone it was spaghetti.

P: Oh.

(29) (Identifying smells)

S: Curry powder, isn't it?

N: Yes. Gosh, you're actually recognising

S: And they say the males are chauvinist.

N: You must admit the first three, you

S [were very dubious on
Um, yeah-curry powder, so]

N: What do you think we'd get if we mixed them all together?

The third type of conversational closing which is evident in the data is simply a gradual tailing off. This may be a natural feature of the conversation, but it could reflect an uncertainty about how or whether to proceed. Consider extract (30):

(30) (Form filling)

P: One day I'm going to get somebody to explain to me

[how you score in cricket.]

N: I have, and I still don't understand. P:]

I just don't understand.

G [Do you really want to know?]

P: Mm, it would be nice, I suppose-you can write it on forms like this: 'I

[understand how they score in cricket.']

S: Have you seen that marvellous

G: 'Cos I, I'd say that the most, well, the most characteristic, sort of resident of the cricket pavilion at Edgbaston at least are these people who go along with sort of club blazer on, and their score book, you know, and they sit there scoring these matches, you know, and if anybody across the other side of the bar sort of says 'Oh, I wonder how many Amiss got today?', they shout out 'Eightynine!' from the other side of . . . they're really anti-social.

P: It's like train-spotters.

G: Yeah, exactly like train-spotters.

P: I can't believe that they exist. I'm so astonished whenever I see them.

G: 'Dawks', according to little brother. 'Dawks', he calls them.

4.4 Tasks

Looser specifications are more successful in encouraging natural language production, and in our tasks, the way is left most open by the form-filling exercise, followed by the pictorial stimuli.

Least successful in terms of naturalness is the task concerning AIDS, because here both topic and discourse framework are prescribed. It would have been better to use the stimulus of a newspaper article on the disease, so that the speakers could move off in the conversational direction of their preference.

5 Future plans

This is a continuing process of experimentation. As each new batch of data comes through, we observe its features and decide how to proceed on the next occasion. But we cannot wait for a detailed analysis, so this is necessarily an approximate technique.

We are already planning a fourth batch of recordings, and the considerations which we are currently alert to include working with subjects from a broader cross-section of society, in terms of age, training, and so on, and exploring further the idea of using stimuli rather than setting tasks.

We cannot escape from the fact that elicitation, by definition, places a limit on naturalness. However minimal our instructions, the process of recording must interfere with natural language behaviour. The university recording environment, in particular, is likely to prove inhibiting to speakers who come from outside it.

In spite of these problems, our experiences so far have shown that the elicitation approach offers major advantages over other methods of data collection. With relative speed and ease, it allows us to gather large amounts of material which usefully complement both recordings of natural speech and scripted dialogue.

Appendix A: Recording parameters and practical suggestions

The following are circumstances of the recordings which both help to characterize them and explain some of their features. Practical recording suggestions accompany some of them.

Participants

Age, sex, profession, interests, etc

Group characteristics

Constitution according to above criteria

Size - Group size is probably best varied between two, three and four, to ensure a range of interaction. More than four subjects produce data which is virtually impossible to transcribe.

Degree of familiarity

Relative status

Recording environment

Room or studio - Size of room and formality of setting should be appropriate to the task type.

Sound proofing - This can be off-putting, but is necessary for better quality recordings.

Siting of chairs - A distance between speakers is required if they are to project their voices.

Microphones - Speakers should speak into these rather than across them, whilst still facing each other where appropriate. - Microphones which can be worn allow greater flexibility in this respect.

On-off recording light - This can be inhibiting at first. - It can be switched off, while the tape recorder continues to record casual inter-task chat. Lab technicians must have the value of this explained to them.

Presence of teacher / organiser / observers, etc - Unless the organiser intends to feature in the recordings, it is advisable for him/her to remember to keep a low profile. Otherwise, the tendency among the speakers will be to make him/her a point of reference.

- Reactions of an audience which are audible or visible during the recordings are inhibiting.
- Record-keeping
- One person should document the series of tasks, noting start and end times, identity of speakers, and task title in each case. This is very difficult information to reconstruct from memory after the event.
- Instructions
- They can be verbal, written or non-existent. If they are not to intrude into the discourse they must be minimal and/or studied and internalized in advance of recording.
 - Removal of the task card will not guarantee, however, that participants will not confer over the instructions.
 - Instructions should be on card rather than paper, which rustles before the microphone.
- Transcription
- This is best done by people who were present at the event: the organisers or the participants themselves, and ideally someone acquainted with the speech characteristics of the speakers.
 - Transcription is much better done at the time: an adjacent room with monitoring facilities is ideal for convenience and speed of operation.
- Equipment*
- Tapes
- These need to be chosen carefully. The consequences of using mono or stereo, fast or slow, single or double track recording are significant.
- Fast cassette copiers
- If copy cassettes are made, each recording, as it comes through, can be transcribed by several individuals simultaneously. Each transcriber takes a certain chunk of text, located by means of the tape counter -1-200, 201-400, etc.

Appendix B: Transcription conventions

The transcription from which the extracts in this paper are taken is intended, for the sake of readability, to be reasonably close to normal orthography. It has been carried out by non-phoneticians and does not carry any phonetic or phonological implications. We have asked the transcribers to use coding which corresponds reasonably to the conventions of the written language:

thus commas and full stops mark syntactic breaks rather than pauses. Written conventions which reflect speech have been adopted wherever possible, e.g. contractions like *it's*, *can't*, *y'know*, *d'you* and the spellings *yeah*, *yep* for *yes*, *'cos* for *because*. Interjections and hesitation signals are written with ordinary orthography: *er* [(:):] , *er m* [(:):m], *um* [(:):I m] , etc. Other coding conventions are:

. . . long pause [. .

. .] omission

[] simultaneous speech

Lack of end punctuation indicates that an utterance is incomplete.

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