

# A Register Approach to Teaching 5 Conversation: Farewell to Standard English?

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10 Owing to analyses of large spoken corpora the linguistic knowledge of conversation has grown in recent years exponentially. Up until now little of this knowledge has trickled down to the EFL classroom. One of the reasons, this paper argues, is the failure in the relevant literature to spell out clearly how teaching conversational grammar affects the role of what is the major variety in the EFL classroom, Standard English (SE). My aim in this paper is threefold.  
15 First, I briefly discuss some neglected conversational features in relation to SE, concluding that the contrast between the grammars of conversation and SE is so stark that the notion of SE is problematic in talking of the spoken language. Second, I consider what this contrast implies for EFL teaching, arguing that for authentic conversation to be taught effectively it is necessary to reduce the role  
20 of SE to ‘a core variety’ that has its place in teaching writing while conversational grammar might serve as the underlying model in teaching speech. I argue that such a redefinition of SE would best be implemented in a ‘register approach’ which shifts the emphasis from a monolithic view of language to a register-sensitive view thus acknowledging the fundamental functional diversity  
25 of language use. Third, I discuss some important issues arising from this approach and, finally, outline what may be gained by it.

## INTRODUCTION

30 It seems safe to say that analyses of corpora have fundamentally altered the ways in which linguists research and view language. Evidence of this ‘corpus revolution’ (Crystal 2003: 448) is not only the fact that all major publishers produce dictionaries these days which are corpus-based but also the fact that in recent years two major corpus-based grammars, the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE)* (Biber *et al.* 1999) and the *Cambridge Grammar of English (CGE)* (Carter and McCarthy 2006) have appeared on the  
35 stage challenging dearly held conceptions about the nature of the grammar of English. While applied linguistics has seen lively debates about the usefulness, or otherwise, of using corpus data in EFL, the field of EFL itself has been slow to respond to these developments. Signs suggesting that the corpus revolution might ultimately reach the EFL classroom are coming from applied  
40 corpus linguistics. A growing body of research comparing corpus and classroom

English suggests that the English taught is considerably at variance with the English spoken (e.g. Mindt 1997; Conrad 2004; Römer 2004, 2005). Also, principled attempts have been made to introduce and establish what has been termed, respectively, 'spoken grammar' (e.g. Carter and McCarthy 5 1995) and 'conversational grammar' (cf. Biber *et al.* 1999; Rühlemann 2006) and to develop initial methodologies on how to teach it (e.g. Carter and McCarthy 1995; Timmis 2005). However, there are few signs, if any, that the notion of 'conversational grammar' is in effect being taken on board in classrooms (Timmis 2005: 117). This may be due to multiple reasons. I am concerned in this paper with one of these reasons: the fact that the relationship 10 between conversational grammar and the model variety traditionally underlying EFL teaching, Standard English (SE), has to date not been made explicit, and what teaching conversational grammar implies in terms of the role of SE has not been discussed in detail.

The aim of this article is therefore threefold. First, it aims to outline the relationship between conversational grammar and the grammar of SE. Some distinctive features of conversation to date that have not received much attention are discussed. The intention here is to illustrate that and how the language of conversation works largely by rules that deviate from the rules of SE. 20 Second, considering what seems to be the most important implication of the difference between conversational grammar and SE, I argue that for conversational grammar to be effectively taught in EFL classrooms a rethinking of the role of SE is necessary: SE needs to be qualified in the sense that it can no longer be seen as 'the one-and-only variety' but should be reduced to 25 'a core variety'. Given its intricate relationship with written registers, SE as a core variety would have its place in teaching the written language, while in teaching the spoken language the underlying model variety should be conversational grammar. I further argue that such a redefinition of SE as a core variety would best be implemented in a register approach, that is, within the 30 context of shifting the emphasis in EFL from a monolithic view of language to a register-sensitive view which acknowledges the fundamental functional diversity of language use. In the final section, I discuss the issues arising from this approach and outline what may be gained by it.

At first though it may be useful to characterize the notions of register and SE 35 in some detail.

## ON REGISTER AND SE

Biber *et al.* refer to registers as 'situationally defined varieties' (Biber *et al.* 1999: 5). This characterization is useful in that it combines the two essential 'ingredients' of register: variation and situation. These are briefly explained in the 40 following.

Registers are social (Crystal 2003: 290 ff.) or functional varieties (Halliday 2004: 27), such as sports commentaries, legal discourse, academic discourse, and conversation, to name a few. Registers contrast with 'dialects',

or regional varieties, such as Indian or British English. In Systemic Functional Linguistics, registers are situated between the two poles of system and text: they occupy an intermediate location as ‘instance types’, that is, text types that ‘vary systematically according to contextual values’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 27). Central to an understanding of how context and register interact is the notion of *situation type*: ‘[L]ooking at how people actually use language in daily life, we find that the apparently infinite number of different possible situations represents in reality a very much smaller number of general types of situation’ (Halliday 1978: 29). That is, while texts, or instances of language, unfold within concrete ‘contexts of situation’ [a term Halliday borrowed from Malinowski (1923)] which are determined by myriads of situational details, the notion of register refers to an abstract level at which it becomes possible to discern what is shared by essentially similar situations. These shared properties of individual situations, referred to as ‘external determinants’ (Biber *et al.* 1999: 1041), ‘functional categories’ (Leech 2000: 694 ff.), or ‘situational factors’ (Rühlemann 2006, 2007), constitute situation types.

But registers are varied not only in terms of the situation types that give rise to them but also in terms of the language use that is characteristic of them. Being social in nature, a register is a ‘variety according to use’ (Halliday 1978: 35) and to ‘what a person is speaking, determined by what he is doing at the time’ (*ibid.*: 110). That is, a second characteristic of register is ‘the fact that the language that we speak or write *varies* according to the type of situation’ (*ibid.*: 32; emphasis added). Thus, the notion of register is best seen in a double perspective: an extralinguistic perspective, in which registers are intimately associated with certain situation types, and a linguistic perspective, in which registers are distinguishable on the basis of the linguistic features distinctive of them (cf. Crystal 2003: 290).

The notion of SE is no less complex. In a definition which is as precise as it is concise, Crystal (2003: 110) points out five essential characteristics of SE. First, SE is ‘a minority variety’ in that it is not widely produced. In fact, Trudgill estimates that SE is ‘spoken as their native variety, at least in Britain, by about 12–15 per cent of the population’ (Trudgill 1999: 124). This low percentage suggests that SE is not a *spoken* variety at all. Second, although not widely produced, SE is very widely understood. Indeed, SE seems to underlie not only most serious writing but also the phenomenon of World Standard English (cf. Crystal 2003: 111 ff.), that is, the phenomenon underlying the fact that, for example, newspaper texts produced in New Zealand are as intelligible for British readers as academic papers written by a scholar from India are for readers in South Africa. Third, because those (few) speakers that come closest to actually speaking SE are found ‘at the top of the social scale’ (Trudgill 1999: 124) SE is the variety which carries most prestige. So, although historically a regional dialect in the southeast of England, SE today is a ‘clearly marked, socially symbolic dialect’ (Carter 1999: 163). Fourth, because it is the prestige variety, SE is associated, indeed even equated,

with 'educated English' (e.g. Quirk *et al.* 1985: 18). It hence represents 'a desirable educational target' (Crystal 2003: 110). Finally, and most crucially in the present connection, probably because of its prestige and its central role in native-speaker education, SE has been the major model in EFL.

5 Quirk *et al.* (1985: 7), for example, note that '[i]n countries where English is a nonnative language, the major models for both writing and speech have generally been the standard varieties of British and American English.' That SE has been the major model in EFL for both writing *and speech* is of particular interest, for it is widely agreed that 'there is a close relationship between standard English and the written language' (Carter 1999: 158):

10 Trudgill (1999: 118) notes that SE 'is the variety of English normally used in writing, especially printing', Cheshire (1999: 131) views SE 'as primarily a written variety', and Quirk *et al.* (1985: 18) note that SE is 'almost exclusively the language of printed matter.' An anonymous reviewer even went

15 as far as to note that 'the term SE can in any case only be referred to the written language.' It is therefore little surprising that examination of corpus data shows that conversational language and SE display significant differences.

## SOME NEGLECTED FEATURES OF CONVERSATION

20 Analyses of large corpora strongly suggest that conversation works largely by rules different from those prescribed by SE grammar. As Biber *et al.* (1999: 1050) note: 'Conversation employs a vernacular range of expression.' A considerable body of research has been gathered in the past two decades or so highlighting in unprecedented detail those features by which the language of

25 conversation is essentially distinguished from other registers and for which existing models of description, including SE, were found unsatisfactory. Beside the numerous differential analyses of features distinctive of conversation laid out in the *LGSWE* (Biber *et al.* 1999) and the *CGE* (Carter and McCarthy 2006), it may suffice to refer the reader to research, for example,

30 on the GET-passive (Collins 1996; Carter and McCarthy 1999), conversational 'speech reporting' (McCarthy 1998; Rühlemann 2007: ch. 6), vague language (Channell 1994; Overstreet and Yule 1997; Cutting 2007), tails and headers (Aijmer 1989; Carter and McCarthy 1999), and the discourse marker *like* (Miller and Weinert 1998; Adolphs and Carter 2003; Levey

35 2003). In the light of this large body of evidence it is not necessary in the following to *prove* that distinctive features of conversation are largely at odds with SE; we may, instead, take this for granted. The intention is merely to *illustrate* that conversation is essentially distinguished from SE in order to base the subsequent discussion of implications for EFL teaching on ground that is

40 shared with the reader.

In the following, we will look at a few selected conversational features that have to date seen little detailed analysis: the phrase *I says* used in presentations of extended conversations and aphetic forms such as *yeah* and *cos*.

All illustrative examples in the following section are taken from the demographically-sampled subcorpus of the *British National Corpus* (BNC). This subcorpus comprises four million words (cf. Aston and Burnard 1998). It contrasts with the context-governed subcorpus, the second spoken subcorpus in the  
 5 BNC, which comprises six million words: while the context-governed subcorpus contains data from a broad range of public speech events such as lectures, radio-phone-ins, sales-demonstrations, etc., it is widely agreed that the data contained in the demographically-sampled subcorpus is informal everyday  
 10 conversation (e.g. Crowdy 1995: 224; Rayson *et al.* 1997: 133; Aston and Burnard 1998: 28; Biber *et al.* 1998: 14, 1999: 28).

### I says

The phrase *I says* is interesting for three reasons. To begin with, the use of the third-person *-s* morpheme with the first-person subject *I* is, from an SE perspective, a clear case of subject–verb ‘discord’. Further, *I says* is frequent in  
 15 British conversation (cf. Biber *et al.* 1999: 191; Cheshire 1999: 138; Carter and McCarthy 2006: 823; Rühlemann 2007: 169 ff.). The conversational subcorpus of the BNC attests the form in 911 occurrences altogether, corresponding to a normed frequency per million words of 228 occurrences; in the written subcorpus, by contrast, the form has a normed frequency of one occurrence only.  
 20 *I says* is thus virtually restricted to conversation. Finally, *I says* seems not just a non-standard variant of SE *I say*. As is shown in a detailed quantitative analysis in Rühlemann (2007), *I says* and *I say* occupy fairly different functional territories. *I say* can be observed to carry out a large number of different functions—ranging from its use as a response token, as in (1); a focusing  
 25 discourse marker, as in (2); an emphatic discourse marker, as in (3); and a quotative, as in (4). With regard to this latter, quotative, function it is interesting to note that *I say* tends to introduce presentations not of actual utterances but potential utterances, that is, utterances which might occur in recurring situations (note the use of the zero conditional indicated by *when*  
 30 and *then*):

- (1) PS04U >: (...).Now she gets them and she sells them for ten quid.  
 35 PS04Y >: **I say**.  
 40 PS04U >: And they're not, I mean they're pretty but they're not... (...)
- (2) PS01A >: So I my opinion, what this government's doing is stopping  
 stopping the lower class, well **I say** lower classes, the lo the the  
 45 PS01B >: [...] isn't it.  
 50 PS01A >: poorer people, they stop'em getting educated.That I'm I'm  
 almost convinced.  
 PS01F >: Yeah.
- 55 (3) PS03W >: I wonder how much it would cost the town, like?I know it  
 sounds silly, but **I say**, the silly things like that are the ones  
 that sometimes...are the

PS000 >: Mm.

5 PS03W >: ones that are took seriously.(...).

- (4) (...) when we put the rubbish out, then Paddy says is that everything  
and **I say** well you know it's not, you know that it's going to blow up  
10 again as soon as you've come inside, but don't worry.

*I says*, by contrast, functions solely as a quotative. Moreover, *I says* has its place  
in a particular type of quotation, namely in the presentation of extended  
15 exchanges of a point-counterpoint nature. Consider (5): here, the speaker  
constructs a conversation she had with Steve. The utterances by Steve and  
the presenting speaker respectively are mostly very short and they are numer-  
ous, requiring frequent insertion of the reporting phrases *he says* and *I says*  
respectively to mark out whose speech is being presented:

- (5) Cos **he says**, **Steve says** to me, is he in? **I says**, no. **He says**, he's not in?  
**I says**, no. And a bit later on **I says** to him... I think he's at Cadets. **He says**,  
he's not, he's in. **I says**, eh? **He says**, he's in. And he's just walked past me.  
25 **I says**, well you could of told me he were in. **He says**, he's gone and done  
summat. I'll tell you, he's gone and done summat.

It seems that *I says* owes its high frequency in conversation to two aspects:  
unlike *I say* which is multi-functional, *I says* is mono-functional, serving  
30 solely as a reporting phrase. Second, being preferably used in presentations  
of multi-turn exchanges which require frequent shifts between the presenting  
speaker's anterior speech and a displaced speaker's anterior speech and,  
thus, between reporting phrases, the form *I says* is a welcome alignment to  
the forms *he says* and *she says* with which it frequently alternates. It is welcome  
35 both phonologically because the presenting speaker need not produce the  
two distinct vowel phonemes in *says* and *say* but only the one in the form  
*says*, and it is grammatically welcome, because the speaker need not mark  
the reporting verb for both first- and third-person by means of different  
morphemes. This phonological and grammatical reduction can be seen as an  
40 alleviation of the speaker's processing and production load. The quotative form  
*I says* is thus a prime example of the principle of 'economy of speech', that is, of  
how conversational language use is adapted to needs arising from  
constraints set by the scarcity of planning and processing time in real-time  
conversation.

#### 45 **Conversational contractions**

Negative contraction and verbal contraction have been found to be signifi-  
cantly more frequent in conversation than in any other register (Biber *et al.*  
1999: 1129). In addition to these two types of contraction a third type can be  
observed: the use of particular aphetic forms such as *dunno* (for *don't know*),  
50 *gonna* (for *going to*), *gotta* (for *got to*), *innit* (for *isn't it*), and *yeah* (for *yes*).  
I propose to refer to these forms as 'conversational contractions'. While  
strictly avoided in all serious writing, they are very frequent in conversation.

Table 1: Comparison of raw frequencies of two ‘conversational contractions’ and their full forms

	Contracted	Full	Ratio
<i>yeah/yes</i>	58,706	17,871	3.28
<i>cos/because</i>	11,374	6,600	1.72

Among the most frequent such forms are unarguably *yeah* and *cos*. Table 1 presents the raw frequencies of these contracted forms and the respective noncontracted forms in the conversational subcorpus of the BNC.

It is interesting to observe that the contracted forms are, by far, more frequent than the noncontracted SE-conformant forms. While *cos* is, roughly speaking, almost twice as frequent as its noncontracted counterpart, the ratio for *yeah/yes* is even more in favour of the contracted form: *yeah*, with its impressive raw frequency of 58,506 occurrences in the conversational subcorpus, is more than three times as frequent as *yes*. This very high frequency is no doubt due to the central role that *yeah* plays as a backchannel, that is, as a response token which is not intended to launch a bid for the turn but rather as a ‘carry-on signal’ (Stenström 1987) for the current speaker. Because of this ancillary role of backchannels as tokens of listenership, it is not surprising that backchannels are frequently found in overlap (McCarthy 2003: 59). Consider (6) (turns are numbered, overlapping speech is aligned and in curly brackets):

- 20 (6) 1 PS1CX >: So... **yeah**. Are you okay?  
 25 2 PS000 >: **Yeah**, I’m fine thanks.  
 3 PS1D1 >: {How’s}  
 30 4 PS000 >: {So}  
 35 5 PS1D1 >: married life?  
 40 6 PS000 >: Smashing!  
 45 7 PS1D1 >: Good!  
 8 PS000 >: **{Yeah.}**  
 50 9 PS1CX >: {Good!}  
 55 10 PS000 >: it is.  
 60 11 PS1CX >: Oh that’s {good!}  
 65 12 PS000 >: **{Yeah.}** I wished I’d have met when I was  
 [laughing] fifteen []!  
 70 13 PS000 >: [laugh]  
 14 PS1CX >: It’s usually er case innit?  
 75 15 PS000 >: **Yeah.**  
 80 16 PS1CX >: You feel you’ve wasted a lot of years {probably}  
 85 17 PS000 >: **{Yeah.}**

18 PS1CX >: but

5 19 PS000 >: But only I can say I didn't know before, I thought I was happy.

10 *Yeah* occurs six times in this short extract. While *yeah* in turn 1 seems to be used in a discourse marking function as a marker of topic transition and *yeah* in turn 2 is, in conversation analytical terms, a component of a second-pair part of a question–answer adjacency pair (cf. Sacks *et al.* 1974), all other instances of *yeah* in the extract are backchannels, three of them occurring in overlap.  
 15 Casual inspection of conversational texts in the BNC suggests that *yeah* is indeed very commonly used as a backchannel. Thus, this short extract may suffice to highlight the importance of this item in conversation, an importance which it gains not only by virtue of being one of the 10 most frequent words in conversation (cf. <http://www.kilgarriff.co.uk/bnc-readme.html>) but also by  
 20 virtue of its various functions in discourse, the most central being the back-channel function. This prominence both in terms of frequency and function seems to make the item a worthy candidate for inclusion in the 'conversation' classroom.

The reduced form *cos*, too, is noticeably more frequent than the full form  
 25 *because*. Also, it seems that the two forms are used in different ways and for different purposes. While *because* is mainly a subordinating conjunction, *cos* 'often functions like a coordinating conjunction' (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 58; see also Biber *et al.* 1999: 1078). Hence, *cos* may be placed 'alongside  
 30 *and* and *but* in their exemplification of the add-on strategy' (Biber *et al.* 1999: 1079). Further, the two forms seem to carry out different functions. While *because* mainly 'introduces clauses of cause and reason' (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 57), *cos* also serves in this function but more importantly as a discourse marker indicating that the speaker wishes to add background information (cf. Schleppegrell 1991; Stenström 1998). Consider:

(7) 1 PS0BB >: That sink must have got a leak in. I think we must have  
 40 binged it up with some gunge!  
 2 PS0BA >: [laugh]  
 45 3 PS0BB >: **Cos** it's stopped leaking.  
 50 4 PS0BA >: [laugh]  
 55 5 PS0BB >: **Cos** I haven't a emptied it for ages.

In turn 3, the speaker is giving a reason why s/he thinks they must have 'bunged up' the leak; thus, *cos* is indeed used as a conjunction coordinating  
 60 a main clause (turn 1) and a subclause (turn 3) with the two clauses standing in an inverted cause–effect relationship. In turn 5, by contrast, no such relationship can be observed; rather, it seems, *cos* is used here to signal that the upcoming information is additional information about how the speaker arrived at the inference regarding the leak in turn 1. In that *cos* introduces  
 65 sequences that mainly serve to expand utterances by adding thematically related information, this marker seems best explained as a 'thematic marker'



contributing to 'the thematic structure and cohesiveness of texts' (Schleppegrell 1991: 131). Again, it would seem that the high frequency of *cos* and its function as a discourse marker suggest that it be covered in teaching the spoken language.

- 5 The above list of clearly non-standard features of British conversation is obviously by no means exhaustive; it could most easily be extended. A wealth of other non-standard features of conversation have been noted in the literature (see above); for overviews see Biber *et al.* (1999: 1121–5), Carter (1999), and Cheshire (1999). Thus, there seems to be good reason to
- 10 suggest that the grammars of conversation and SE do not map on to each other. As a result, the notion of SE, indispensable in talking of the written language, 'is problematic in talking of the spoken language' (Biber *et al.* 1999).<sup>1</sup> What does this imply for EFL?

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EFL TEACHING

- 15 It would appear that this inadequacy of SE for conversation has far-reaching implications. It seems consistent to ask whether SE can still serve as the underlying model for both writing *and speech*, as has traditionally been the case (see above). It would seem rather that, in teaching the spoken language, which includes first and foremost conversation, SE is an inappropriate model because
- 20 its grammar differs too much from the grammar of conversation. A more appropriate model would be what has been emerging from recent and current corpus analyses under the headings of 'spoken grammar' and 'conversational grammar' respectively (for a critique of the notion of 'spoken grammar', which equates mode with register, see Rühlemann 2006). Although, as yet, no comprehensive description of conversational grammar has been elaborated, the advances made in this field are no doubt solid enough for teaching to be based on them. If this paper advocates the rejection of SE as a model for teaching the spoken language, this is not to imply that SE should disappear
- 25 from the English classroom altogether. The fact that it is the model variety underlying serious writing and World Standard English renders SE indispensable in the EFL classroom. It seems, then, that what is called for is a redefinition of the role of SE from the one-and-only model variety to, as Bex (1993: 261) suggests, 'a "core" variety' from which other varieties can be explored. This qualification of SE would give room to teach and explore language not
- 30 only as it should be used in most writing but also as it is actually used in the core spoken register, conversation.

- Such a move toward allowing authentic conversation and its language into the classroom, it appears, is best implemented in a wider re-conceptualization of the English that we teach. Traditionally, the 'E' in EFL has stood for a kind
- 40 of *general English*, that is, a largely SE-conformant monolithic block. This view informs, for example, Quirk *et al.*'s (1985) seminal *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, whose aim is 'to focus on the *common core* that is shared by standard British English and standard American English'

(Quirk *et al.* 1985: 33, emphasis added). Corpus linguistic analyses radically diverge from this view. Indeed, one of the most significant outcomes of corpus-linguistic research is the conviction that grammatical patterns differ systematically across different registers (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1998: 35). As a consequence, the equally seminal *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* is consistently register-specific exploring how grammar varies across ‘four major registers’ (Biber *et al.* 1999: 8): academic prose, fiction, news reportage, and conversation. Similarly, the recent *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter and McCarthy 2006) describes important differences between, not registers, but the spoken and written modes. Thus, corpus analyses have uncovered sufficient evidence to suggest that the assumption of a general English is, as Conrad (2000) argues, a ‘myth’. As a consequence, Conrad (2000: 549) predicts that corpus linguistics will revolutionize the teaching of grammar in that, *inter alia*, ‘[m]onolithic descriptions of English grammar will be replaced by register-specific descriptions.’ I will refer to this shift in emphasis toward English as its registers as the ‘register approach’.

We should be aware though that the problems entailed by implementing the register approach are considerable. I will outline some of them in the following discussion.

## 20 ISSUES ARISING

Shifting the emphasis in the EFL classroom from general English to register-sensitive descriptions of English with a smaller, yet still central, role given to SE and an equally central role awarded to the register of conversation no doubt constitutes a fundamental change; as such, it is small wonder that it entails difficulties that are by no means negligible.

To start with, it would appear that a fundamental prerequisite to teaching authentic conversation in the EFL classroom is a change in attitude toward conversation. There is good evidence to suggest that the spoken language has traditionally been seen as ‘an ill-formed variant of writing’ (Hewings and Hewings 2005: 216) and that this tradition is still going strong not only in linguistics but also in EFL classrooms. Certain terminologies used widely in the description of conversational key features bear witness to this. The terms ‘dysfluency’ and ‘dislocation’ are prominent examples. ‘Dysfluency’ refers to speech management phenomena such as pauses (filled and silent), restarts, repetition, etc. while ‘dislocation’ refers to the use of noun phrases in clause-peripheral position, with a co-referent pronoun in the core of the clause (Biber *et al.* 1999: 956). Example (8) is an illustration of what is commonly referred to as ‘left dislocation’ (the ‘dislocated’ element is in bold, the co-referent pronoun in square brackets):

(8) **Them on the bottom** [they]’re bound to get their feet wet aren’t they?

The problem with these terminologies lies in the prefixes *dis-* and *dys-*. The negation they convey suggests that the concepts presuppose the expected

opposite—syntactic integration, in the case of ‘dislocation’, and uninterrupted delivery, or ‘eufluency’, in the case of ‘dysfluency’. Both syntactic integration and eufluency are obviously characteristics of written texts but very rarely, if at all, found in conversation. Thus, when used for the description of conversational features, the concepts of ‘dislocation’ and ‘dysfluency’ describe, less the features themselves, but rather the fact that the features fail to satisfy the expectations raised by written standards and by the situational factors that underlie writing (such as the abundance of planning and editing time which helps writers achieve eufluency). As a result, ‘dislocation’ and ‘dysfluency’ tacitly devalue the conversational features thus labelled (Rühlemann 2006; cf. also Carter and McCarthy 1995; Miller and Weinert 1998). This ideological bias is likely to extend to perceptions of the public at large (Hughes 2002: 14). Thus, many teachers are likely to perceive the advent of conversational grammar as a threat to dearly held habits and convictions. To them, conversational grammar may simply be ‘bad grammar’ and, hence, not worth teaching. It would appear that, in order to remedy this basic prejudice, a functional approach in a Hallidayan sense can help, that is, an approach that ‘build[s] in the situation as an essential ingredient’ (Halliday 1978: 29; for a situation-functional account of the particularly ‘bad’ quotative *I goes* see Rühlemann 2008). For situation-sensitive functional analyses can show that, for example, the features subsumed under ‘dislocation’, far from merely being stranded in aberrant positions, as the terminology suggests, fulfil crucial functions in discourse and interaction benefiting both the speaker and the recipient in multiple ways (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985; Carter and McCarthy 1995). Obviously, other conversational features also lend themselves to a situation-functional reading. Generalized *I says*, for example, can be seen as primarily serving to help speakers economize what is, in spontaneous conversation, scarce and hence sought, time to process and plan ahead (cf. Biber *et al.* 1999: 1041–52; Leech 2000; see Rühlemann 2007 for a principled attempt to view conversational grammar as adapted to constraints arising from the conversational situation type).

A second problem arising from the register approach is intimately linked up to this first problem in that it too concerns teacher attitudes. It may not only be hard to persuade teachers to accept, beside SE, conversational grammar as another model variety but at least equally hard to convince them that the notion of ‘correctness’ is, in a register approach, of limited use. Indeed, as Conrad (2000) argues, this notion, which is closely associated with SE, may have to give way to the notion of ‘appropriateness’. This notion refers to the set of contextual conditions that determine the use of alternative structures. That is, in a register approach, what is appropriate depends on the register and the specific set of conditions in that register constraining the use of the form in question. The problem arising is less that correctness may be a dearly held notion that is hard to dispense with than rather that appropriateness is more difficult to handle. A monolithic view of English whose underlying model variety is SE enables the teacher to teach language

in a simple either/or fashion—either it conforms to the rules of SE and is hence correct or it does not and hence is incorrect. In this view, contextual factors reaching beyond the confines of the sentence are disregarded as irrelevant. In a register-sensitive view of English, by contrast, consideration of above-sentence and non-linguistic context is quintessential. To illustrate this point: if a learner uses the form *I says* in academic writing, it will have to be judged inappropriate because, as noted above, *I says* is virtually restricted to conversation and, thus, ill-placed in a serious written register such as academic writing; if, however, the learner uses the form as part of an informal account of a lively point-counterpoint conversation he or she had the day before, the form might be accepted and even appreciated by the teacher as being particularly idiomatic and adequate to the register. If the learner uses in the same context (an account of an anterior point-counterpoint conversation) SE *I say* in frequent alternation with *he/she says* or *he/she said*, this use might be considered at least questionable because, as noted above, the quotative function of *I say* is a marginal one in conversation and the form typically occurs in potential-speech presentations but not in actual-speech presentations. Thus, clearly, the notion of appropriateness is a complex one because it views language integrated into a wealth of context, while the notion of correctness views language largely out of context. As a result, both teaching and learning English in a register approach is a more complex task. For a good many teachers the notion of appropriateness will therefore be less attractive, particularly if they tend to regard variation first and foremost as a nuisance (cf. Conrad 2004: 68; Sinclair 2004b: 274). Others, it might be assumed, may welcome the register approach (and, thus, the notion of appropriateness that goes with it) because this approach is more likely to get EFL teaching anywhere close to reflecting the linguistic richness and functional diversity of real language use. The increased complexity that a register approach entails for the learners is no doubt a major issue that calls precisely for what is, according to Widdowson (2000), the *raison d'être* of applied linguistics: mediation. That is, the issue at stake is the issue of 'how to simplify and stage the language presented to learners, and to simplify the rules used to explain it, in a way which will enable them to come gradually closer to native speaker use (if that is their goal)' (Cook 1998: 61).

Thus, it would seem that, for example, the intricacy of how *I say* and *I says* are used across registers demands that treatment of these features be postponed until advanced levels; on the other hand, it is hard to see why the backchannel *yeah* should not be introduced at a very early learning stage.

Third, those teachers willing to familiarize learners with real conversation face the problem of how to illustrate this register. As Carter (1998) and Gilmore (2004) show, there is strong evidence to suggest that textbook dialogue is far removed from authentic interaction in that essential features of the latter are notably missing in the former, such as 'spoken grammar' features, filled and unfilled pauses, overlap, restarts, etc.; the type of 'conversation' most textbooks

present cannot serve as a reliable model for the teaching of conversation (see also Carter and McCarthy 1995: 154). Some recent textbooks, however, seem to be catching up (cf. also Gilmore 2004). Cambridge University Press's very recent *Touchstone* series (e.g. McCarthy *et al.* 2006) is no doubt a major  
 5 break-through in the history of English textbooks in that this series is consistently corpus-informed placing a major emphasis on conversational grammar. Still, however, apart from this ground-breaking textbook, and a few more modestly innovative textbooks, the serious dearth of corpus-informed teaching materials for use in the 'conversation' classroom persists. That it persists is  
 10 convincingly shown in a recent survey of 24 EFL textbooks conducted by Cullen and Kuo (2007).

The richest source for illustrating authentic conversation and its grammar in the classroom would unarguably be corpora. Here, much applied corpus-linguistic research has recently explored ways of using corpora in teaching  
 15 (e.g. Wichmann *et al.* 1997; Burnard and McEnery 2000; Aston *et al.* 2004; Sinclair 2004a; O'Keeffe *et al.* 2007). Although intriguing approaches have been outlined there are serious practical problems involved in taking corpora to the classroom. For using corpora in EFL requires that costly computer facilities be in place, which in most parts of the world cannot even  
 20 be thought of; however, their availability in classrooms seems to be spreading and has already become standard in some countries. Further, *using* corpora is not easy. On the contrary, it is agreed that asking the corpus sensible questions alone places high demands on the corpus skills of the teacher and the learners, not to mention the difficulties involved in making good sense of the data  
 25 thus generated on the screen (cf. Aston and Burnard 1998; Mauranen 2004a: 98). It seems that before teachers and, thus, learners have generally acquired a reasonable degree of what Mukherjee (2002: 179) terms 'corpus literacy' there is still some way to go. One important help in that direction is no doubt the inclusion of corpus linguistics in initial teacher education (cf.  
 30 O'Keeffe and Farr 2003). In spite of the difficulties, Mauranen's (2004b: 208) dictum that 'We need spoken corpora for teaching the spoken language' has intuitive appeal.

Finally, it is as yet quite unclear if, and how, real conversation should be taught at all. Influential voices in applied linguistics have suggested that  
 35 invented language serves the language learner better than authentic corpus data given that in a pedagogic context authenticity is less a property of text than part and parcel of the learners' ability to authenticate the text (e.g. Cook 1998, 2001; Widdowson 2000, 2003). The controversy somehow seems to rest on the tacit assumption that corpus data per se cannot be authenticated by  
 40 language learners. This assumption can easily be countered. As Mauranen notes:

Authenticity as a learner response is...like other classroom practices, socially negotiable and historically changeable. Educators can promote learners' acceptance of corpora in the classroom as

authentic data—or reduce it, but it is a matter of conscious pedagogic choice, not a law of nature (Mauranen 2004a: 93).

Thus, authenticity in Widdowson's sense does not depend on the text being  
 5 invented by a materials designer or captured in a spoken corpus, but on the  
 successful mediation through careful selection and motivating teaching.  
 Another argument against using authentic conversational language in the  
 classroom has been that it is 'inarticulate, impoverished, and inexpressive'  
 (Cook 1998: 61). This is certainly a valid observation, at least from a written  
 10 SE-informed perspective, with regard to many conversational extracts. It is,  
 interestingly, also a valid observation with regard to textbook language.  
 Schewe and Shaw (1993: 9), for example, deplore that '[m]any of the text-  
 books and coursebooks in current use are still full of banal, painfully obvious  
 and often dull dialogues and such texts.' Cook (2000: 157 ff.) himself criticizes  
 15 the preference in language teaching materials for 'the mundane transactional  
 discourse of modern work, rather than the ancient playful discourse concern-  
 ing intimacy and power', arguing that it is the latter type of language which is  
 likely to 'stimulate interest in language learning' (Cook 2000: 160). So, in  
 terms of 'dullness', invented textbook language is easily on a par with authen-  
 20 tic corpus language. Yet, while textbooks are limited in size thus presenting  
 only a small number of texts to choose from, today's spoken corpora are  
 virtually infinite resources, in which it is indeed easy to retrieve texts that  
 are more likely to stimulate interest and activate learning. [The reader might  
 re-consider extract (7) above for illustration.]

25 Further, among those who do advocate the use of authentic data in the EFL  
 classroom there is still little agreement as to what methodologies are best  
 suited to teaching conversational grammar, that is, what established method-  
 ologies can be taken on board and what methodologies must be constructed  
 from scratch. Carter and McCarthy (1995), for example, suggest that the  
 30 traditional P-P-P (presentation, practice, production) methodology cannot  
 capture the subtleties of conversational grammar and should be replaced by  
 an I-I-I methodology, based essentially on 'observation, awareness and induc-  
 tion' (Carter and McCarthy 1995: 155). The three Is stand for 'illustration',  
 preferably through authentic data samples; 'interaction' through discussions  
 35 about language features observed in the samples; and 'induction', that is,  
 'making one's own, or the learning group's, rule for a particular feature'  
 (Carter and McCarthy 1995: 155). What is notably missing in this methodo-  
 logical framework is any explicit opportunity for the learner to produce the  
 target language. However, as, for example, Mauranen (2004a: 98) notes, it is  
 40 well known from research into second language acquisition that an analytic  
 awareness alone does not lead to acquisition; rather, acquisition depends  
 crucially on 'opportunities for applying the incipient knowledge and skills  
 to meaningful tasks' (Mauranen 2004a: 103). It would appear questionable  
 therefore whether the three Is methodology may indeed lead 'to a more rapid  
 45 acquisition by learners of fluent, accurate, and naturalistic conversational and

communicative skills' (McCarthy and Carter 1995: 217).<sup>2</sup> A plausible methodological proposal comes from Timmis (2005: 119), who argues with regard to authentic spoken texts, 'that, wherever possible, the text should be listened to in the first instance'. Corpora, however, present text, written or spoken, only in written form, recent major corpora such as the BNC even present it in orthographic written form without prosodic annotation. Thus, before we can implement Timmis's proposal, spoken corpora need to be complemented by sound concordancing in synchrony with the transcript (cf. Mauranen 2004a: 92), a technological innovation much to be desired particularly in a pedagogic context given the undisputed communicative value of prosody (cf. Brazil 1985).

On the whole, it seems that discussion of what methodologies are best suited for the teaching of conversational grammar has only just begun and a lot of further applied linguistic enquiry, discussion, and development is needed.

## POSSIBLE GAINS

The problems involved in reducing the role of SE and teaching conversational grammar in the wider context of a register approach are no doubt daunting. Sceptical observers may therefore ask, why take the trouble at all? Why not ignore in the EFL classroom what corpus analyses have uncovered regarding conversation? To answer these questions we might want to consider the following possible gains.

First, efforts to keep authentic conversation and corpus-linguistic knowledge of conversation out of EFL teaching would be unwise because conversation, both as a variety of native-speaker language use and a variety in the EFL classroom, is not just any register but, in either domain, the central one. As is agreed by a broad range of linguists, L1 conversation has a special status among registers, spoken and written, for a number of reasons. To begin with, conversation is 'the most common, and, it would appear, the most fundamental condition of "language use" and discourse' (Schegloff 1979: 283) in that, unlike any other register, it is received and produced by virtually every speaker (see also Goodwin and Heritage 1990: 298; Goodwin and Duranti 1992: 22). Further, conversation is regarded as the archetypal register from which other registers, including written ones, are departures (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 11; Goodwin and Heritage 1990: 298; Biber *et al.* 1999: 1038). Finally, conversation is the most 'creative' register—the 'laboratory for linguistic innovation', as Hughes (2002: 15) puts it—in that, here, 'the semogenic potential of a language is most likely to get extended' (Halliday 2006: 294). Similarly, L2 conversation in language learning has a special status in that (i) conversation-like 'dialogue' is unarguably a backbone of EFL textbooks, which, in turn, are the backbones of most EFL courses (cf. Römer 2004, 2005), and (ii) in the Communicative Approach, which is a good generation after its inception still the overarching methodology in EFL,

the spoken language has strongly been upheld 'as the primary source of language acquisition and is fostered and facilitated as a central activity in the language classroom' (Hughes 2002: 49). Because of this centrality of conversation both in L1 and L2 contexts, it would seem consistent to argue that

5 'language pedagogy that claims to support the teaching and learning of speaking skills does itself a disservice if it ignores what we know about the spoken language' (Carter and McCarthy 1997).

Finally, excluding authentic conversation would be counterproductive because there is a chance that including it might make language learning

10 more effective. Complaints about EFL teaching being ineffective are common. Mindt (1996: 232) criticizes that 'learners who leave their school surroundings very often find it hard to adapt to the English used by native speakers' and Bex (1993: 257) deplors the fact that it frequently comes as a shock to non-native speakers that the use of SE, although widely intel-

15 ligible, 'does not always trigger equally intelligible responses'. The reasons for these shortcomings are no doubt manifold and complex. Space considerations prevent a comprehensive discussion. One reason, however, that is particularly pertinent to the present connection is worth elaborating. As noted earlier, a growing number of comparative analyses on certain lexico-

20 grammatical features suggest that the English taught is in stark contrast with the English actually spoken. The evidence for this claim is massive. To economize on space, a few examples will have to suffice to illustrate this. Mindt (1996) scrutinizes the textbook representation of (i) modal verbs such as *can*, *will*, *must*, *may*, *shall*, etc., (ii) conditional clauses and (iii) future

25 time orientation through *will* and *going to* respectively in juxtaposition to the (spoken) London–Lund Corpus. Mindt (1997) compares how (i) *any*, (ii) *will* and *would*, and (iii) irregular verbs are treated in textbooks and how they are used in a variety of corpora. Conrad (2004) studies the linking adverbial

*though* as represented in textbooks and corpora. Römer (2005) investigates

30 how forms, functions, and contexts of progressives are taught in German textbooks and used in spoken corpora respectively. All of these studies reveal a clear mismatch between the corpus evidence and what is covered in the textbooks: either the textbooks represent less frequent features at earlier stages than more frequent ones, that is, in an order which disregards their

35 importance in actual discourse, or they fail to represent them at all. For example, Mindt (1996) found that textbooks postpone treatment of *will* in favour of the much less frequent modal verbs *must* and *may*; both Mindt (1996) and Römer (2004) found that the most frequent conditional, characterized by the simple present-simple present sequence of tenses, was by far the

40 most frequent in the corpora consulted, but was not covered in the textbooks at all. These lexico-grammatical differences between school English and real English must be considered important. To make matters worse, the differences do not stop here; they extend to vital discourse features, such as discourse markers, backchannels, and what is commonly referred to as 'speech report-

45 ing'. Treatment of conversational discourse markers is missing from most



published textbooks, although the ubiquity of discourse markers in actual conversation (cf. McCarthy 1998: 59) and the functional centrality of discourse markers as devices to create discourse coherence (e.g. Schiffrin 1987) would warrant coverage in good detail. A similar omission is the, arguably, complete lack of coverage in textbooks of backchannels, which are, like discourse markers, omnipresent in actual conversation and functionally central as tokens of active listenership and co-construction. Speech reporting, finally, is covered extensively in textbooks but, it seems, with an exclusive focus on written reporting (Rühlemann forthcoming). That is, textbooks present it with an obsession for backshift and sequence of tenses with indirect speech thus utterly neglecting the characteristics of speech presentation in conversation, such as a preference for direct reports over indirect reports, the use of reporting verbs such as GO and BE+*like*, reporting forms such as past *-ing* and *I says*, and utterance openers such as *oh* and *well* (cf. McCarthy 1998: ch. 8; Rühlemann 2007: ch. 6). Since the very high frequency of presentations renders them an essential building block of everyday conversation, the preoccupation in EFL teaching with reporting features characteristic of writing is very unlikely to foster speaking skills and hence communicative success. Although detailed comparative studies on these higher-order phenomena are still scarce it may safely be assumed that none of them are covered in sufficient detail in the vast majority of coursebooks commonly in use in EFL classrooms—maybe the most striking exceptions being Cambridge University Press's above-mentioned *Touchstone* series (e.g. McCarthy *et al.* 2006) and Carter *et al.* (2000), a corpus-informed grammar reference and practice book for intermediate to advanced learners, which covers spoken discourse markers in rich detail and also conversational speech presentation but not, for example, backchannels. Given these significant differences on both the lexico-grammatical level and the discourse level, it seems consistent to question whether it is advisable to continue giving learners the impression that by learning SE 'they are learning English *tout court*' (Bex 1993: 253). The SE-based variety of English learners are typically taught is obviously out of kilter with the variety native-speakers speak in everyday encounters; it thus fails to prepare the learners adequately for communication with them. This mismatch reveals another mismatch. As Widdowson (2000: 8) notes, 'for many learners at least, the language as realized by its users is the goal to which they aspire and to which they will seek to approximate by the process of gradual authentication.' So, the mismatch between school English and spoken English amounts to a mismatch between the end and the means deployed to reach it: SE-based school English fails to support learners in reaching their goal—to approximate to authentic English.

To sum up this section, it would seem that, because the teaching of the spoken language is still rooted in SE-based descriptions of the grammar of writing (Carter and McCarthy 1995: 141) it produces (at best) 'speakers of English who can only speak like a book' (McCarthy and Carter 1995: 207). Exposure to authentic conversation, by contrast, can enhance fundamental

speaking skills. It would appear that teaching learners how to use backchannels—such as *yeah*—and discourse markers—such as *cos*—appropriately might indeed help to make their speech more natural and idiomatic. Also, it seems safe to assume that learners who are familiar not only with SE but also other varieties, most notably conversational English, will have less difficulty adapting to a broader variety of interlocutors and situations and, hence, be more effective in communication. However, it is important to admit that claims to greater fluency, naturalness, and more communicative success through exposure to authentic language have to date not been substantiated by empirical evidence. Therefore, verifying (or falsifying) them would be a useful objective for future applied corpus-linguistic research.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper aims to question the role of SE as the major model for both writing and speech. By way of briefly discussing a number of neglected features which are both distinctive of conversation and clearly at odds with SE, I concluded that authentic speech, particularly in its most common form, conversation, diverges from SE to such an extent that using SE as the underlying model for the teaching of speech and particularly conversation is problematic and that, hence, in teaching the spoken language, SE as the underlying model variety should be replaced by conversational grammar. I suggested that such a qualified farewell to SE is best implemented in a register approach, that is, in the wider context of shifting the emphasis from a monolithic view of English to a register-sensitive view of English. I outlined some issues arising from such an approach, such as the negative value judgements associated with conversational language, the need to replace the notion of correctness by the notion of appropriateness, the scarcity of corpus-informed teaching materials including the difficulties involved in using corpora in the classroom, and the as-yet unanswered question of which methodologies are best suited to the teaching of authentic conversation. I also sketched out some of the possible gains of the register approach, arguing that teaching authentic conversation is more conducive to the learners' principal goal of approximating to the language as realized by its users.

Undoubtedly, it should be stressed again, 'applying' in EFL teaching what corpus linguistic analyses have taught us about the spoken language and, in particular, conversation demands enormous applied linguistic efforts. Will the efforts pay? Given that the integration of conversational grammar in teaching materials and EFL courses is still in its very infancy, a definitive answer is at present not possible. The prospects are good, however, that the efforts will not be in vain. It appears that teaching the spoken language on the basis of conversational grammar as the underlying model while continuing to base the teaching of the written language on the model of SE may be conducive to learning because, by adopting a register-sensitive approach, we would not

only make an important contribution to bringing school English into closer correspondence with the language actually spoken but also get closer to redressing the balance in the EFL classroom between speech and writing, a balance which has traditionally been in favour of writing. Finally, by taking  
 5 a register-sensitive approach, we would portray the target language in a more adequate way, throwing into profile one of the most fundamental properties of language, its heterogeneity (Stubbs 1993: 11). Before we will be able to reap these gains, however, much work indeed lies ahead: the work of applied linguistic mediation. Given that, as said earlier, corpus research has  
 10 triggered fundamental, indeed 'revolutionary' changes in key areas of linguistic enquiry, the need for this work to be undertaken is possibly more pressing than ever.

## NOTES

- 1 This is a somewhat generalized observation because, strictly speaking, it applies first and foremost to conversation, the only spoken register accounted for in Biber *et al.* (1999); other spoken registers such as sermons, lectures, or political speeches may well be much closer to SE and the notion of SE may hence be much less problematic in talking of these registers.
- 2 Once again, the *Touchstone* series indicates remarkable progress in that it gives learners ample opportunity, not only for noticing and induction tasks related to conversational grammar features such as reportive past *-ing*, but also for production (see McCarthy *et al.* 2006: 90 ff.).

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