Coming to terms with conversational grammar

'Dislocation' and 'dysfluency'

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Recent analyses of large spoken corpora targeted at particular registers, i.e. "situationally defined varieties" (Biber et al. 1999:5) have advanced the study of conversational grammar considerably. This paper questions the use of writing-based conceptual frameworks and terminologies in the description of conversational grammar. It is argued that conversation as the major situationally defined variety of the spoken language requires for its adequate description concepts and terminologies that are based on the situational factors that determine the conversational situation. The paper attempts to demonstrate that, conversely, a descriptive apparatus derived from the written code, which by necessity fails to reflect the situational factors governing conversation and implicitly compares features of conversation to the norms of the written language, inevitably conveys negative evaluation of the conversational features observed. This claim will be illustrated by functional and terminological analyses of two conversational key features commonly labelled 'dislocation' and 'dysfluency'. The analyses will be carried out using data from the BNC. Potential alternative concepts and terminologies will be discussed.

Keywords: CANCODE, LGSWE, BNC, spoken grammar, conversational grammar, situational factors, semantic prosody, dislocation, dysfluency, speech management

1. Introduction

Owing to quantitative and qualitative analyses of large electronic corpora containing conversational sections, much progress has been made in the study of conversation in recent years. As a result, what is commonly called 'spoken

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grammar' as the grammar of natural conversation is beginning to take shape. Yet, the shape it is beginning to take is obscured by conceptual and terminological issues. This paper aims to point out some of these issues.

Arguably, the most outstanding contributions to corpus linguistic research into conversation are coming from two epicentres of corpus research: analysis of CANCODE (the *Cambridge-Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English*), conducted at the University of Nottingham, and exploitation of the LSWE (*Longman Spoken and Written English*) Corpus. On the latter, the hitherto most comprehensive spoken and written corpus grammar of English is based, Biber et al.'s (1999), ground-breaking *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (LGSWE).

Both the CANCODE and the LSWE Corpus are based on what McCarthy (1998:8–12) calls a 'genre approach', that is, they attempt to target particular genres, or registers, that is, "situationally defined varieties" (Biber et al. 1999:5) of the language rather than reflect the language *per se*.[1] The major registers considered in the LSWE Corpus are conversation, fiction, newspaper language, and academic prose (cf. Biber et al. 1999:8ff.), whereas five broad context types were identified for the CANCODE: transactional, professional, pedagogical, socialising, and intimate (McCarthy 1998:9). Underlying this genre approach, it may safely be assumed, is the premise "that overall generalizations of a language are often misleading, because they average out the important differences among registers" (Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1998:35).

Given the register approach that is shared by both teams, it may come as a surprise that the emerging grammar model is termed '*spoken* grammar' rather than *conversational* grammar. Note that Biber et al.'s grammar is titled *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* and that the Nottingham researchers predominantly use the term 'spoken grammar' (cf., for example, McCarthy & Carter 1995; Hughes & McCarthy 1998:272 ff.). The only spoken register accounted for in Biber et al. (1999) is conversation and the five broad contexts of use identified for the CANCODE largely overlap with conversation; McCarthy and Carter (2004:149) straightforwardly refer to the CANCODE corpus as a "corpus of everyday English conversation." It would appear that in a register-sensitive description of the grammar of conversation the notion of 'spoken grammar' is misleading because it refers to mode rather than register and too general because it includes all spoken registers; it should therefore be replaced by the register-specific notion of 'conversational grammar'.

Size and register-orientation have enabled the CANCODE analysts and the LGSWE team to identify numerous distinguishing features of the grammar of conversation. For space considerations it may suffice to refer the reader

to research by the 'Nottingham school' on 'tails' (McCarthy & Carter 1997), speech reporting (McCarthy 1998:150–175), the *get*-passive (Carter & McCarthy 1999), and backchannels (McCarthy 2003). Similarly noteworthy is the wealth of differential analyses of conversational and written texts laid out in Biber et al. (1999), in particular, the large chapter dedicated to the grammar of conversation (ibid.:1038–1125), which provides an account of the workings of conversational grammar that is as yet unparalleled in its breadth and depth.

Given this growing body of insights into what characterizes the grammar of conversation, broadly two conclusions can be drawn, 'Approach A' and 'Approach B', to use Leech's (2000) terms. Approach A "emphasizes the radical *differentness* of spoken grammar from previously articulated models of grammar" (p. 687). Approach B, on the other hand, "asserts the underlying *sameness* of spoken and written grammar" (ibid.). Approach A is represented in the work of, for example, Brazil (1995) who attempts to elaborate a 'linear grammar' that is able to systematically account for the fact that "speech proceeds linearly" (p. 4); likewise, Miller and Weinert (1998), who stress the differentness of syntactic constructions in the spoken and the written variety, and, finally, the CANCODE analysts. McCarthy, for example, advocates "the independence of spoken grammar" (McCarthy 2001:128). Approach B, conversely, is taken, for example, by Leech (2000), who argues for a 'unified grammar of English', claiming that "what has been discovered about the nature of spoken grammar is compatible with the thesis that there is a common underlying grammar system" (p. 691). Biber et al.'s (1999) stance on this matter is somewhat complex in that, on the one hand, the researchers clearly deny the question, "is there a distinctive grammar of spoken language, operating by laws different from those of the written language?" (p. 1038) by stating that "the same 'grammar of English' can be applied to both the spoken and the written language" (ibid.) only to include, on the other hand, the above-mentioned chapter on 'the grammar of conversation' and, finally, to propose that "it may be useful to see the grammar of conversation as to some extent a different system with different rules from the grammar of written English" (p. 1066).

The choice between Approach A and Approach B may seem a matter of predominantly academic interest. In actual fact, however, adopting either approach has far-reaching consequences affecting the conceptual organization of conversational grammar. Broadly speaking, Approach A, which highlights the differentness of conversational and written grammar, suggests that "we cannot assume that grammars modelled on written language can simply be imported wholesale into the description of spoken language. Spoken grammar must always be elaborated *in its own terms,* using spoken data" (McCarthy 1998:90;

added emphasis). That is, conversational grammar understood as a grammar in its own right requires that we formulate it independently from grammars based on the written language, thoroughly examining the applicability of established writing-based terms and concepts and, possibly, replacing them by conversational-grammar specific ones. On the other hand, if Approach B is taken, which emphasizes the underlying sameness of conversational and written grammar, no need is felt to elaborate a whole new terminology for the description of conversational features, but, instead, established terminological and conceptual frameworks are thought sufficient and adequate for their description. This is the stance taken by Leech (2000) and the authors of the LGSWE, who acknowledge their debt to *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985), stating that "From CGEL we have also borrowed, with few exceptions, the grammatical framework of concepts and terminology which has provided the present book with its descriptive apparatus" (Biber et al. 1999:viii).

This terminological transfer is indeed surprising given the fundamentally different approaches the two grammars take. Although the CGEL is based on a corpus, the *Survey of English Usage* (SEU) consisting of two equal halves of 500,000 words each of written and spoken data,[2] this 'precursor' grammar does not claim to provide a register-specific description of the English language. Rather, it seems, the aim of the CGEL is to describe English *per se*, that is, the approach is "to focus on the common core that is shared by standard British English and standard American English" (Quirk et al. 1985:33). Since there is little doubt that "there is a close relationship between standard English and the written language" (Carter 1999:158) — Cheshire (1999), for example, characterises "standard English as a primarily written variety" (p. 131) — it follows that the CGEL focuses primarily on standard *written* English. Further, the spoken data "is based mainly on tape-recorded formal English conversations between, for example, university dons in a University of London common room in the 1960s" (Carter 1999:166); the English used is thus "a quite restricted code" (ibid.). In short, the CGEL can be seen as a grammar that is based on the standards of the written language and whose spoken data, if used at all, is little representative of informal conversation in everyday talk. The contrast with Biber et al.'s (1999) 'successor' grammar is striking. This grammar, it is safe to say, rests on the central assumption of "the heterogeneity of language" (Stubbs 1993:11). As a consequence, the LGSWE is consistently register-specific, that is, it "describes the actual use of grammatical features in different varieties of English, mainly conversation, fiction, newspaper language, and academic prose" (Biber et al 1999:4).

In many areas of grammar description, the terminological transfer from the CGEL to those sections of the LGSWE that deal with features of conversational grammar may be completely unproblematic since much grammar is shared by conversation and the written language (McCarthy 1998:76; Hughes & McCarthy 1998:272). Problems, however, arise where the terms imported are made to accommodate features that are not shared by conversation and writing but are peculiar to conversation.

This paper attempts to outline these problems. It will be shown that a writing-based descriptive apparatus can only explain features of conversational grammar from a perspective *ex negativo* operating with terms that state what the phenomena under scrutiny are *not* but fail to explain in positive terms what the phenomena *are*. The reasons for this shortcoming are seen in the fact that a writing-based terminology necessarily reflects those situational factors that govern writing but is blind to the exigencies of interacting face-to-face. Two basic situational factors that constrain speakers and recipients in conversation and inevitably affect their grammar will be considered: 'real-time processing' and 'interactiveness' (for initial accounts of these and other relevant situational factors see Biber et al. 1999:1041–52 and Leech 2000). Further, it is argued that grammatical terms derived from descriptions of the written language are problematic in descriptions of conversation because the implicit comparison with the written language encoded in the writing-based terminology inevitably conveys a negative evaluation of the conversational features observed.[3] This claim will be supported by evidence from the *British National Corpus*. It is argued that for an adequate description of conversational grammar generally, and conversational syntax specifically, conceptual frameworks and terminologies are needed which reflect the situational factors governing informal talk in interaction. It is only then that features of conversational grammar can be fully understood and appreciated as skilled adaptations to the circumstances and needs of conversation.

I will illustrate my argument by corpus excerpts from the BNC featuring two key phenomena of conversational syntax, commonly labelled 'dislocation' and 'dysfluency'. The discussions of the phenomena and the concepts and terms used to describe them will include (i) analyses of the functions the phenomena perform in conversation as well as (ii) analyses of the extent to which the labels 'dislocation' and 'dysfluency' devalue the phenomena they are meant to describe. These latter terminological analyses will be based on quantitative methods. Finally, potential alternative concepts and terms will be discussed.

2. Discussing conceptual and terminological choices

The concepts 'dislocation' and 'dysfluency' are widely used to describe a number of grammatical features which may be called prototypical of conversational language. Underlying these concepts, however, are the codes and norms of the written language. The use of the concepts and terminologies in a description of conversational grammar is therefore questionable. This is shown below.

2.1 'Dislocation' vs. 'heads' and 'tails'

2.1.1 *Characterisation of features*

The term 'dislocation' is commonly used to describe syntactic choices which "involve a definite noun phrase occurring in a peripheral position, with a co-referent pronoun in the core of the clause" (Biber et al. 1999: 956), as in (1) and (2) ('dislocated' noun phrases in bold, co-referent pronouns in square brackets):

(1) Oh I reckon [they] lovely I really do **whippets**.

(2) **Natalie**, [she]'s a right little squealer, she is.

The most striking syntactic feature in (1) is *whippets*, a post-posed item following the main body of the clause. It finds its structural mirror image in *Natalie* (2), a pre-posed item preceding the clause. These syntactic choices are commonly referred to as 'left-dislocation' (*Natalie*) and 'right-dislocation' (*whippets*) (e.g. Aijmer 1989; Ashby 1988; Cheshire 1999). Leech's (2000) terms are 'front dislocation' and 'end dislocation'. Biber et al. (1999:956ff.) term them 'prefaces' and 'noun phrase tags' respectively treating them under the heading 'dislocation'. Carter and McCarthy (1995), by contrast, refer to 'left-dislocation' as 'heads' and to 'right-dislocation' as 'tails'.

There is widespread agreement that the two phenomena are not only virtually restricted to but also frequently used in conversation (Biber et al. 1999:957, Hughes & McCarthy 1998:272, Miller & Weinert 1998:237). Biber et al. (1999:957) observe that "Both types of dislocation occur over 200 times per million words in conversation and occasionally in fictional dialogue, but very rarely in written prose."[4] Carter (1999:154) notes with regard to tails that they are "widespread and are neither regionally nor socially restricted." Carter proceeds to conclude that tails are "examples of *standard spoken* English" (ibid.). Moreover, heads and tails are frequent features not only of conversational English but also of numerous other languages (e.g. Ashby 1988; see Hughes & McCarthy 1998 for more references).

This cross-cultural universality of heads and tails in speech is not surprising, for functionally they can be seen as an adaptation to "the exigencies of face-to-face interaction and the real-time nature of talk, as compared with the more reflective, composed nature of most writing" (Hughes & McCarthy 1998:273). The exigencies at work here have been described as "real-time processing" and "interactiveness" (e.g. Leech 2000). A brief account of these situational factors follows.

2.1.2 *Situational factors governing the use of 'dislocation'*

Real-time processing, or 'online planning pressure', constrains speakers basically in three ways. Unlike writers, who may enjoy unlimited time to prepare the what and how of their intended communication, participants in spontaneous conversation often have only split-seconds time to plan ahead ('limited planning ahead'); this limited ability to plan ahead is exacerbated by turn-taking, since speakers cannot simply reduce planning pressure by slowing down or pausing because then other speakers might 'usurp' their turn. Second, unlike writers, who can change or delete phrasings 'offline', that is, without leaving any trace and the recipient ever noticing, speakers in conversation cannot erase starts or lapses but anything they say will be 'on record' and they can alter their course only by adding alternative words, structures or clauses ('online editing'). Further, unlike writers who can comfortably retrace and change what they wrote in earlier sections, speakers cannot easily review their production, since "there is a severe limit to the amount of incomplete syntactic structure [speakers] can hold in the working memory at one time" (Biber et al 1999:1067) ('limited working memory'). Evidently, real-time planning thus understood disfavours the architectural integration typically found in writing but strongly favours, beside avoidance of lexical elaboration (cf. Biber et al. 1999:1044ff.), the "analysis of speech into clause-like chunks" (ibid.:1068). So-called 'left-dislocated' elements, it will be shown, are an effective means of providing just this syntactic break-up.

'Interactiveness', on the other hand, derives from the fact that "conversation is co-constructed by two or more interlocutors, dynamically adapting their expression to the ongoing exchange" (Biber et al. 1999:1045). The most obvious way that speakers interact with one another is by turn-taking (see Section 2.3.3); the interactive nature of conversation, however, is also "powerfully associated with the expression of feelings and attitudes" (Leech 2000:697), including the use of polite formulae (*Thank*s, *Sorry*, *Could you …*), endearments (*love, darling*), and interjections (*oh*, *wow, Christ*), to name only a few means by which speakers express affect in conversation. Research suggests that so-called 'right-dislocated' elements, too, play an important part in expressing affect.

Any attempt at functionally understanding and explicating both 'left- and right-dislocation', it would appear, will have to take account of these situational demands.

2.1.3 *Functional analysis*

Both heads and tails, under varying names, have received some attention in the corpus-linguistic literature. As to heads, there is agreement that the main function of heads is to sequence and mark information and that heads benefit speakers and recipients in conversation alike. As to tails, there is less agreement, some viewing them as retrospective topic markers and others ascribing them a predominantly affective function.

Quirk et al. (1985) provide a useful functional analysis of 'left-dislocation' (their term being 'anticipatory identification') based on the situational factor 'real-time planning'. They define the phenomenon as "a device that may be a convenience alike to hearer (in receiving an early statement of a complex item) and speaker (in not having to incorporate such an item in the grammatical organization of his utterance)" (p. 1417). Similarly, Biber et al. (1999:957) treating the phenomenon under 'prefaces', emphasize its role in "establishing a topic", a point similarly made by Carter and McCarthy (1995) who stress the proclivity of the phenomenon "to carry topic-prominent items". Aijmer (1989) functionally interprets 'left-dislocation' (her term being 'Themes') as part of a 'simplification strategy', that is, as "a device for breaking up the utterance into more manageable units" (p. 147). In sum, heads seem to have a role in the hierarchization of information in the sense that they mark information as thematic rather than just new. It is important to note that heads thus understood as topic markers can be seen as performing a discourse-deictic function (cf. Levinson 1983:88).

'Right-dislocated' items, on the other hand, frequently have a clarifying function as "retrospective topic markers: a speaker has treated something as given information by referring to it with a pronoun, but then realizes that it may be unknown or the references unclear" (Biber et al. 1999:958). This description seems well-suited to capture the function performed by the 'right-dislocated' element *whippets* in (1) above (Section 2.1.1). More often, however, 'right-dislocated' items reflect the 'interactiveness' of conversation in that they "tend to occur with phatic, interpersonal functions, usually in contexts of attitudes and evaluations" (Carter & McCarthy 1995:151). Similarly, Aijmer (1989) concludes that 'right-dislocated' items are "used as a grammaticalized device for creating an affective bond with the hearer" (p. 150). Examples (3) and (4) feature 'right-dislocations' which evidently function less as means of disambiguation than affectively:

(3) [It] was a really good night **that**.

(4) What do you reckon? I reckon [it]'s disgusting **that is**!

McCarthy and Carter (1997) finally view 'right-dislocation' (their term being 'tails') as central components of what they term 'reciprocating moves', that is, moves "in which there is a general expression of mutuality and convergence by the speaker […] positively inviting an interlocutor to maintain the ongoing topic in a relatedly interpersonal and reciprocal manner" (p. 413).

To conclude, what is commonly labelled 'left and right-dislocation' performs vital discourse functions benefiting both speaker and recipient in that 'left-dislocation' relieves planning and processing pressure through simplification of information structure and marking topic structure, while 'right-dislocation' predominantly contributes to the mutuality and intimacy of the ongoing interaction. The conversational phenomenon of 'dislocation' can hence be seen, and appreciated, as "well adapted to the circumstances of speaking" (Cheshire 1999:145).

2.1.4 *Terminological analysis*

The term 'dislocation' has met with criticism. While Miller and Weinert (1998:238) declare the term "entirely inappropriate for the analysis of spoken language", Carter and McCarthy (1995:149) observe that the term suggests that "something has been pushed out of place to a somewhat aberrant position" and view it as "a misnomer and a misleading metaphor". The reasons why the term 'dislocation' is indeed misleading are twofold: the term presupposes the written language and it carries negative evaluation. This is shown in the following.

A detailed account of the prefix *dis-* is given in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (9th edition: 383), which lists six distinct senses:

> 1 expressing negation (*dishonest*). 2 indicating reversal or absence of an action or state (*disengage*; *disbelieve*). 3 indicating removal of a thing or quality (*dismember*; *disable*). 4 indicating separation (*distinguish*; *disperse*). 5 indicating completeness or intensification of the action (*disembowel*; *disgruntled*). 6 indicating expulsion from (*disbar*). [Latin *dis-*, sometimes via Old French *des-*]

It would appear, thus, that the prefix *dis-* primarily expresses negation (note that 'reversal', 'absence', 'removal', 'separation', 'expulsion' have similar negative meanings). As research on evaluation in text has shown, negation functions as a 'comparator', that is, a means of providing evaluation.

> Evaluation involves comparison of the object of evaluation against the yardstick of some kind: the comparators. These include: comparative adjectives

> and adverbs; adverbs of degree; comparator adverbs such as *just*, *only*, *at least*; expression of negativity (morphological, such as *un-* and other affixes, grammatical such as *not*, *never*, *hardly*; and lexical such as *fail*, *lack*)
> (Thompson & Hunston 2000:21; cf. Labov 1972).

In the case of the prefix *dis-,* this yardstick is not made explicit; rather, it is implied in the context as a presupposition. Jordan (1998), for example, argues that "negation presupposes the expected opposite" (p. 710). So, just as " 'NO EXIT' signs on library doors acknowledge that people expect to be able to leave an area via any door" (ibid.:713), so the label 'dislocation' presupposes syntactic integration as the default syntactic variant; as a consequence, the phenomena labelled, viz. 'left- and right-dislocation' or 'heads' and 'tails', are taken as the marked syntactic variants. Since 'syntactic integration' as the unmarked syntactic variant typifies writing while 'syntactic break-up' through heads and tails typifies spontaneous speech in interaction, the yardstick against which tails and heads are tacitly measured is found in the standards of the written language. For, clearly, these features, we would perceive them as inappropriate in writing, wouldn't we, tails and heads? The fact that by using the term 'dislocation' we presuppose the written language as the yardstick to judge features of the conversational language becomes even clearer where the term is modified by the adjectives 'left' and 'right' as in 'left-dislocation' and 'right-dislocation'. As Hughes and McCarthy (1998:274) note: "Spoken language cannot have a left or right in the way that words on a page do; instead it has a before and an after" (see also McCarthy 1998:78).

Further, the implicit comparison of conversational features with written standards encoded in the term 'dislocation' is not just an ideational means of distinction to 'keep things apart'. Rather, it has evaluative meaning. Written standard English, after all, is not just any variety but widely seen as the prestige variety. Trudgill (1999:123), for example, characterizes standard English as "by far the most important dialect in the English-speaking world from a social, intellectual and cultural point of view". Given this enormous value assigned to standard written language there is little doubt that the implicit comparison of features of conversational language with the standards of the written language cannot simply serve to discriminate between characteristics of conversational and written syntax but rather serves to discriminate against conversational syntax and in favour of syntactic choices typical of the written language. That is, the term 'dislocation' covertly evaluates heads and tails as syntactic choices that fail to meet the standards of the written language and, as a result, devalues them.

Finally, an analysis of corpus data suggests that the prefix *dis-*, where it is used as a productive morpheme to express negation, results in negative semantic prosody (e.g. Sinclair 1991; Louw 1993). Using the *British National Corpus*, a query for lemmas starting with *dis-* was conducted. Lemmas with occurrences below 1,000 were discarded. Since the aim of the query was to get at those lemmas only in which *dis-* fulfils the function of a productive prefix conveying negation of the item with which it is fused, as in *dis-location*, which can be seen as a negation of the item *location*, the remaining results were subjected to further selection. The most frequent item, it turned out, was the lemma of the verb *discuss* (14,764 occurrences). However, *dis-* in this item, as in numerous others, does not perform the function of a prefix since there is no such word as *cuss*; rather, the item *discuss* is a single unit which morphologically cannot be analysed further. Other such monomorphematic items that were discounted were, for example, *district* (9,740 occurrences), *distance* (7,317 occurrences) and *discipline* (6,563 occurrences). Likewise, all items that are morphologically derived from monomorphematic items, such as, for example, *discussion* (11,533 occurrences) which is formed by derivation from *discuss*, and *distinction* (4,826 occurrences), which is derived from *distinct*, were also excluded. Finally, those lemmas were filtered out in which *dis-* does function as a prefix but does not express negation, as, for example, in the verb *distribute* (3,103 occurrences), which is not semantically contrasted with the noun *tribute*, and the noun *discourse* (2,704 occurrences), which is not an antonym to *course*.

Table 1 presents the results of this selection process, listed in descending order. Further, the table attempts to categorize the items in terms of negative (indicated by –), or positive (+) evaluation. The question mark, finally, is used for items whose evaluative tendencies are ambiguous.

Disease, which is the most frequent item (10,683 occurrences) has obvious negative connotations. Similarly obvious is the negativity of *disappear* (5,317), *dismiss* (4,223), *disabled* (3,089), and *disorder* (2,452) to name only a few. On the whole, it turns out that of the 21 lemmas selected, 17 convey negative meanings.

The verbal lemma *dispose* (1,525) and its derivate *disposal* (2,290) require closer inspection. The verb *dispose* combines most frequently with *of* (1,292), thus forming a phrasal verb. Its predominant sense is 'get rid of', as in *Highly toxic pollutants could be safely disposed of by burning them under water …*; this negative sense clearly outweighs the neutral sense 'deal with' as in *Neither could dispose of the inheritance without the consent of the other*. A closer contextual analysis of *dispose of* suggests that typical contexts are 'property' and, more importantly, 'waste' of all sorts. This close association with 'waste'

Table 1. Most frequent lemmas with prefix *dis-* (occurrences above 1,000); +: positive evaluation; –: negative evaluation; ?: unclear

+/–/?	Word	Tag	Frequency
–	disease	SUBST	10,683
?	discover	VERB	10,298
–	disappear	VERB	5,317
–	dismiss	VERB	4,223
?	discovery	SUBST	3,452
–	disabled	ADJ	3,089
–	disorder	SUBST	2,452
+	discount	SUBST	2,396
?	disposal	SUBST	2,290
–	disability	SUBST	2,183
–	disappointed	ADJ	2,008
–	disadvantage	SUBST	2,002
–	disclose	VERB	1,789
–	disappointment	SUBST	1,644
–	dispose	VERB	1,525
–	discharge	VERB	1,505
–	discharge	SUBST	1,420
–	disagree	VERB	1,277
–	disclosure	SUBST	1,217
–	dislike	VERB	1,182
–	disagreement	SUBST	1,157
–	discourage	VERB	1,124
Total	**21**		

might suggest that the phrasal verb *dispose of* appears predominantly in negative contexts.

A slightly different picture emerges for the noun *disposal*. Of its 2,116 occurrences, roughly a quarter (529) are embedded within the pattern *at* + NP + *disposal* as in … *he has some resources at his disposal*; here it might be argued that what is at someone's disposal is under the person's control and thus carries positive connotations. The remaining three quarters of occurrences of *disposal* seem to be evenly divided between neutral to positive business contexts, with *disposal* typically co-occurring with nouns such as 'property', 'land', 'shares', 'assets', etc., and, on the other hand, clearly negative contexts such as 'waste', 'sewage', 'the dead', and so forth. Thus, it would appear, whereas the verb *dispose* tends to be used predominantly in negative contexts, the noun *disposal* seems ambiguous in terms of evaluation.

Another interesting case is provided by the lemma *discover* (10,298) as a verb and the noun *discovery* (3,452). At first sight, the verb *discover* may be expected to carry clear positive connotations. Upon closer scrutiny of corpus data, this intuition, however, seems misleading. The following are 20 concordance lines featuring the first twenty occurrences in the BNC of the past tense form *discovered* (1 per text), which is by far the most frequent form in this lemma.

1 letter to Bashir by mistake. AI **discovered** from his letter the appalling living conditions at
2 written about it. This writing was **discovered** by her; she read some material before her visit,
3 that a past is not a thing to be **discovered**. As the analyst said, it is not discovered but made.
4 I **discovered** the language and size of the plays in which I was working with all their complexities. You can't
5 I was born too late and I **discovered** what I wanted to do too late and what I did I did too late and my death
6 sensitive issue of employing staff who admit to being, or are **discovered** to be infected.
7 mother's distress when she **discovered** there was no such thing! But never fear, sergeant.
8 see their work now and tell your friends you **discovered** them first! There
9 craze was fuelled by my own furious reaction whenever I **discovered** some new example of
10 , but when they **discovered** our neighbours don't use cocopeat, they came straight back
11 launch point. Most private owners **discovered** the use of a tail and wing-tip dolly a long time
12 may cause pain but often there are no symptoms. The problem is usually **discovered** only
13 primary tools for repressing expressions of political discontent, as the miners **discovered**
14 Francis had **discovered** a photographer who only did trees and did them brilliantly.
15 it is **discovered** that you are not wearing a guard, then you will automatically be disqualified
16 drawn to poetic vision and utterance, Leonard **discovered** this world for himself, cutting the
17 forward and **discovered**, sitting at a desk which stood the right way up, a small dark man.
18 reported similar fluctuations in humans and **discovered** that, in a resting subject, this
19 she had almost disappeared to her own self! That self now needed to be **discovered** — but
20 county badminton, now has a goal to realise. **Discovered** at one of the LTA's 3 Star Clubs at

The short concordance lines are sufficient to show that in ten lines (lines 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 19) *discovered* occurs in contexts where something unpleasant is found out for the first time (*appalling living conditions*; *what I wanted to do too late*; *to be infected*; etc.). For some lines, the short concordance line is not sufficient to show the negativity, and it is necessary to obtain more co-text. Two examples from these lines are:

4 So the first thing I did was to spend ten years with the Royal Shakespeare Company! A.R. In which you played a lot of leading parts, as the days went by. D.S. That's right. And I **discovered** the language and size of the plays in which I was working with all their complexities. You can't possibly hope to get that in your early days as student.

11 one of the only countries in the world where the club members manhandle the two-seater gliders all the way out to the launch point. Most private owners discovered the use of a tail and wing-tip dolly a long time ago, making it possible to tow out with a car single-handedly on most days. It is a harsh punishment to have to walk the glider all the way back

So, *discovered* is found in 12 'bad' contexts. On the other hand, *discovered* conveys a clearly positive evaluation in only six concordance lines (lines 2, 8, 14, 16, 18, 20). As far as lines 2 and 17 are concerned, even inspection of the wider context cannot clarify whether there is evaluation in the way that *discovered* is used there. So, an item like the past tense form *discovered*, which intuition may suggest is used predominantly in positive contexts, turns out to be rather ambiguous in its ability to appear both in positive and negative contexts. Cursory inspection of further contexts in the BNC suggests that this pattern of evaluative ambiguity is representative of the other forms included in the lemmas *discover* and *discovery*.

In fact, the only clearly positive item is the noun *discount*. Its typical habitat are economic contexts. Consider: *…will quickly find filling stations only too happy to offer a substantial cash discount at the pump.*

On the whole, the prefix *dis-* is preferably used to form words that carry obvious negative meanings such as *disease* and *disabled* or appear predominantly in contexts that are negatively charged such as *dispose*. The prefix *dis-*, thus, can be said to form words that have negative prosody.

In sum, the term 'dislocation' appears of dubitable use in descriptions of conversational syntax and grammar: it not only presupposes the written language but, more importantly, covertly portrays heads and tails as degenerate syntactic variants and fails to reflect the important discourse functions which heads and tails perform in conversation and which make these choices so invaluable both for the speaker and the listener. Thus, we are in need of terms that capture the phenomena under scrutiny both unambiguously and neutrally.

2.1.5 *Alternative terms: 'heads' and 'tails'*

As noted above, Miller and Weinert (1998) and Carter and McCarthy (1995) agree in rejecting 'dislocation' as a misleading metaphor. Miller and Weinert refer to the phenomenon "simply as the NP-Clause construction" (p. 238), whereas Carter and McCarthy's terminological choices are 'heads' (for 'left-dislocation') and 'tails' (for 'right-dislocation'). Biber et al.'s (1999:956 ff.) terms are 'prefaces' and 'noun phrase tags' respectively. While these latter terminological choices identify the phenomena neutrally and clearly, Miller and Weinert's term 'NP-Clause construction', while being perfectly neutral in terms of evaluation, seems to lack in clarity since the occurrence of 'noun phrase clause constructions' is not restricted to positions preceding or following the core clause. The advantage of Carter and McCarthy's terminological choices, it might be argued, is that 'heads' and 'tails' are somewhat complementary metaphors and thus reflect the fact that, syntactically, heads and tails complement each other

as phenomena typically occurring at the 'head' and the 'tail' of a core clause. Further, while Biber et al. (1999) treat 'prefaces' and 'noun phrase tags' under 'dislocation', Carter et al. (2000:147 ff.) treat heads and tails under the heading 'pre- and post-posed elements of clauses', a concept that seems to fulfil the criteria of clarity and neutrality and should therefore replace the former.

In sum, the terms forwarded by the 'Nottingham school' — heads, tails, and pre-and post-positioned elements — seem reasonable terminological and conceptual alternatives and should therefore be given preference in descriptions of these crucial syntactic choices in conversation.[5]

2.2 'False starts' and 'dysfluency' vs. 'speech management'

2.2.1 *Characterization of features*

Another telling example of how labels commonly used to designate essential features of conversational grammar can miss the point is the concept of 'dysfluency'. Consider (5):

(5) PS006 >: Yes South Africa has erm, er, er, we have a regular erm A four sheet two, two sides of A four sheet, erm it was weekly, but it's erm a fortnightly
PS007 >: Mm
PS006 >: newsletter

The main speaker is evidently struggling to formulate his/her message as evidenced by the massive presence of the filled pauses *erm* and *er,* repetitions (e.g., *sheet* and *two)* and the fact that the speaker embarks on sentence structures but abandons them in midstream (*Yes, South Africa has erm*), a feature usually termed 'false starts' (e.g. Biber et al. 1999:1062; Carter 1999). As Biber et al note, there are "four main situations where the speaker starts to utter a grammatical unit and fails [sic] to finish it" (ibid.: 1063), including self-repair, interruption, repair by another interlocutor and abandonment of the utterance (ibid.).

2.2.2 *Terminological analysis*

The terminology used in the characterization above raises questions. Are 'false starts' *false* in the sense that they invariably impact detrimentally on comprehension and interaction? What is gained by suggesting that speakers 'start to utter a grammatical unit and *fail* to complete it'? To make matters worse, Biber et al. (1999) treat 'repeats', 'retrace-and-repair sequences', subsumed under 'false starts', as well as 'utterances left grammatically incomplete' under the heading '*Dysfluency* and *error*' (p. 1052 ff.).

Clearly, what all the italicized terms convey is negative evaluation of their referents. On the one hand, the negative evaluation conveyed by *false*, *fail*, and *error* is overt. Conversely, like the term 'dislocation' discussed above, whose negative prosody is not easily accessible to the naked eye, the term *dys*fluency covertly portrays the phenomena it labels in a negative light, indeed, in a very negative light considering the semantics of typical items with prefix *dys-*. A search in the BNC for the prefix *dys-* yields the following hit list.

Table 2. Ten most common words with prefix *dys-* in the BNC

Word	Frequency
dyslexia	151
dysfunction	137
dysplasia	121
dyslexic	84
dystrophy	83
dysphagia	76
dysentery	72
dysfunctional	63
dyspepsia	57
dyspnoea	55

Evidently, the prefix *dys-* is used exclusively with words denoting physiological or psychological pathologies, such as *dyslexia, dysfunction, dysplasia*, and the like. The use of *dys-* in *dysfluency*, hence, suggests that the phenomena thus labelled testify to a somewhat pathological speech condition. Attempts at mitigating the pejorative force of the term by talking of "normal dysfluency" (e.g. Biber et al. 1999:1048) amount to a contradiction in terms since it is hard to see how a perceived 'illness' can be 'normal'.

Considering Jordan's above-cited dictum (Section 2.1.4) that negation presupposes its expected opposite, one is left wondering what the expected opposite of 'false starts' and 'dysfluency' might be. Arguably, the expected opposite will be utterances that do not feature any repeats, 'repairs', hesitation forms, incomplete structures nor any other syntactic or discoursal features that, given constraints such as real-time processing and the interactive nature of conversation, *inevitably* go hand-in-hand with spontaneous speech in interaction. The terms 'false starts' and 'dysfluency', it would seem, tacitly presuppose what could be termed '*eu*fluency', a condition that is met by some skilled speakers in some situations but certainly not by everyday speakers in everyday situations. 'Eufluency', however, is met in writing, indeed it is a *conditio sine qua non* in writing, since writers typically do not put on record pauses for thought

or display rejected phrasings and so forth (indeed, readers of this article would not be pleased to work their way through a faithful record of the many minor and major editorial changes the text went through). It is useful to bear in mind the product/process distinction proposed by Halliday (1985), according to which "Writing exists whereas speech happens" (p.: xvii): while speech is, given the fleetingness of the oral/auditory channel, inevitably 'just' process, writing is a process which is intended to yield a permanent product, and it is the product we as readers are vitally interested in not the process that led to it. It is small wonder, hence, that all traces of the process of writing are deleted in the final written product, thus creating a text that is syntactically 'fluent'. So, it would appear, by using the terms 'false start', 'dysfluency', and 'error', we judge conversational English against the background of written English and, thereby, cast spontaneous speech in the unfavourable light of being a degenerate version of the written language.

2.2.3 *Situational factors governing 'dysfluency'*

The situational factors that underlie conversational phenomena such as the ones grouped under 'false starts' and 'dysfluency' are mainly found, again, in the fact that conversation happens online ('real-time processing') as well as in 'interactiveness' referred to in Section 2.1.2. The basic fact that "conversation is interactive" (Biber et al 1999:1045ff.) is reflected in the tendency of interlocutors to express affect and attitude, as mentioned above; interactiveness, however, is even more obvious in "the to-and-fro movement of conversation between speaker and hearer" (ibid.:1045), commonly known as 'turn-taking' (e.g. Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974). Conversation Analysis has shown that turn-taking in conversation is systematic and rule-governed. Among these rules, 'one party speaks at a time', 'speaker change recurs', and 'no gap/no overlap' are seen as quintessential. On the other hand, other aspects of turn-taking, such as turn order or turn size, are not fixed but variable. It is precisely in the way speakers take, keep, claim and yield turns in conversation that phenomena awkwardly subsumed under 'dysfluency' assume an important role. This is explained in the following two sections.

2.2.4 *Functional analysis*

A wealth of research suggests that, for example, so-called 'false starts' (repeats, 'repairs', etc.) as well as so-called 'hesitations' (that is, pauses and sounds like *er* and *erm*), can serve vital interactional and informational functions in conversation. Thus, Biber et al. (1999:1058) note that those 'repeats' that occur "at the beginning of an utterance — often at the beginning of a turn — where the

build-up of planning pressure on the speaker is great" may serve as a tactics to relieve that planning pressure. Further, research in the tradition of Conversation Analysis has shown utterance-initial repeats and reformulations to be used by speakers as a means to obtain the gaze of the listener and thus to help "achieve a state of mutual orientation at the beginning of the turn" (Goodwin 1981:9). Further, utterance-initial repeats may be a device for successful turn-bidding: thus, repeats may display "the turn-bidder's attempt to recycle the beginning of a turn, signalling that there is more to follow and that it is being withheld until the new speaker has gained sole occupation of the floor" (Anping & Kennedy 1999:18). So, repeats in conversation may serve speakers and potential next speakers as effective means in the way they organize their turn-taking.

Likewise, silent and filled 'hesitations', which are, according to Biber et al. (1999:1053), "the most obvious form of dysfluency", have been shown to perform critical functions in turn-taking. Biber et al. (1999:1054), for example, note that "filled pauses are devices for signalling that the speaker has not yet finished his or her turn, and for discouraging another speaker from taking the floor". Stenström (1990), using the *London-Lund Corpus*, observes that turn-final silent pauses generally serve as "turn-yielders" while filled pauses "served as turn initiators" (p. 227). Wennerstrom (2001) reports research on "the "rush-through", a floor-keeping strategy whereby speakers speed up through syntactic boundaries and then pause in the middle of a syntactic or intonational phrase rather than at its end" (p. 171). Chafe (1992), finally, observes that both silent and filled pauses may play an important part in signalling tone unit boundaries, which are "identifiable on the basis of prosodic contours and hesitations" (p. 91). Since tone units, in his view, are essentially restricted to 'one new idea', pauses, along with intonation contours, would thus be a convenience to the listener in that they 'frame' information units. So, very similar to repeats, pauses potentially fulfil critical functions in the organization of turn-taking and turn-giving, and in facilitating information structure and comprehension. It would therefore be a gross misunderstanding if we characterized pauses simply as a failure to speak fluently and coherently, that is, as 'dysfluency'. Rather, it appears, speech management phenomena can be seen as adaptations to the needs arising from the interactive nature of real-time conversation.

2.2.5 *Alternative concept: 'Speech management'*

In contrast to the negatively charged concept of 'dysfluency', the same speech characteristics can be studied and accounted for by concepts and terminologies that do not presuppose the conventions that hold for the written language but reflect the situational factors that affect the way language is used in conversation.

A pragmatic concept that accommodates the whole inventory of phenomena commonly treated under 'dysfluency' is the concept of 'speech management' (SM), elaborated by Allwood, Nivre and Ahlsén (1990). Speech management focuses on "externally noticeable processes whereby the speaker manages his or her linguistic contributions to the interaction and to the interactively focused informational content" (ibid.:3).

In Allwood, Nivre and Ahlsén's view, speech characteristics such as pauses, restarts, hesitations, etc. are seen less as fluency deficiencies but rather as active control and organization tactics deployed by the speaker in the service of interaction and information processing. Such a clearly positive view of speech management phenomena seems justified considering the manifold findings of research supporting this view, some of them briefly reviewed above.

Since the concept of 'speech management' is firmly founded on the acknowledgment of the situational factors that constrain and structure speech in interaction and since its rather positive prosody reflects the substantial contributions to interaction and information processing that SM phenomena can make, it seems a reasonable alternative to the writing-based, heavily negatively charged concept of 'dysfluency' and might therefore replace the latter in future accounts of conversational grammar.

3. Summary and conclusion

Terms such as 'dislocation', 'false' starts, 'dysfluency' and 'error' reveal upon closer scrutiny their origins in writing-based grammar descriptions. Using them in the description of conversational language, it has been argued, leaves us "locked in a written, sentence-based view of language" (Hughes & McCarthy 1998:274), which presupposes situational factors that hold for writing but not for conversation. When used to describe features that discriminate conversational language from written language, these terms can only enlighten the phenomenon under scrutiny *ex negativo*, that is, by stating what the feature concerned fails to be or fails to provide. Such a negative perspective, however, necessarily evaluates the phenomenon discussed. I have attempted to demonstrate that the evaluation conveyed is invariably a negative one, regardless of the evaluation being overtly negative, as with the items 'false', 'error', 'repair', etc. or the evaluation being covertly negative, as is the case with the prefixes *dis-* and *dys-* in 'dislocation' and 'dysfluency'.

By contrast, if the situational factors that constrain conversation, such as 'real-time processing' and 'interactiveness', are taken account of, the phenomena

under investigation appear in a very different light: features such as tails, heads, pauses, restarts, repeats, etc. reveal their constructive potential in helping conversationalists process information, organize discourse, and establish interpersonal relationship (cf. Cheshire 1999 and Leech 2000). Hence, this paper has argued that writing-based terminologies laden with value judgements should be replaced by new terms and concepts that adequately reflect the conditions and constraints which structure speech in interaction. I have attempted to characterize alternative terms such as 'heads' and 'tails' as replacements for 'dislocation' and the alternative concept of 'speech management' as a potential substitute for 'dysfluency'.

Obviously, both formulating conversational grammar in its own terms and, conversely, extending writing-based terminologies to conversation have their attractions and disadvantages. The obvious advantage of transferring established concepts and terms to conversational data is that it saves us a lot of work as we just have to adapt familiar norms and concepts to the conversational variety. Further, a radical overhaul of commonly established terms and concepts will undoubtedly place heavy demands on the reader. The disadvantage of this approach, I have attempted to demonstrate, is that key features of conversational language cannot be understood as the skilled adaptations to the needs of online interaction that they are but instead appear as defective and, hence, of less value than the written variant.

On the other hand, if we attempt to formulate the grammar of conversation in its own terms, a great deal of linguistic effort and creativity is needed to invent new terms and devise new concepts and frameworks that adequately reflect the situational factors that give rise to the set of features by which conversational grammar is distinguished from written grammar. Also, much additional work needs to be done in order to advance our knowledge of the situational factors governing conversation. Two recent descriptions of these extralinguistic factors determining the conversational situation are Biber et al. (1999:1041–52) and Leech (2000). Both, however, are restricted in size and in consistency since some of the extralinguistic 'factors' presented are at least questionable, both Biber et al. (1999:1049) and Leech (2000:697) take, for example, the fact that conversation "has a restricted and repetitive lexicogrammatical repertoire" as a situational factor rather than a linguistic feature. Thus, if we take Halliday's (1978) dictum seriously that "any account of language that fails to build in the situation as an essential ingredient is likely to be artificial and unrewarding" (pp. 28–9), much research effort will have to be directed toward refining and expanding existing accounts of the conversational situation.

These 'disadvantages', though, would be amply offset by the advantages, of which two are outlined below.

Formulating conversational grammar in its own terms can help putting the mismatch right that exists between the official recognition of the "primacy of speech" (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990:21) and its practical neglect and devaluation in much linguistic practice and subsequently in the perception of the public at large. As Chafe (1992:88) argues,

> Speaking is natural to the human organism in ways that writing can never be. It is plausible to suppose that humans are "wired up" to speak and listen, that the evolution of speech was inextricably interwoven with the physical evolution of our species. The same cannot be true of writing. It is only for a brief moment in the scale of evolution that writing has been with us at all, and widespread literacy, extending beyond a few scribes or a small elite, is more recent still.

By contrast, linguistics has traditionally been concerned with the written language, for obvious reasons, given, for example, the simple fact that "it is so much more difficult to 'see' what is happening in speech than in writing" (Crystal 2003:235). Moreover, writing enjoys social prestige as the medium in which public official documents and literary language are expressed. So, there is a mismatch between linguistic theory which recognizes speaking as primary to writing and much linguistic practice which, in effect, is biased toward the written variety. Not surprisingly, conversational language is little valued among applied linguists (including teachers) and in the perception of the public (cf., for example, Carter & McCarthy 1995:142). It is clear that terminological choices that, in effect, nurture this tradition of according prestige and value to the written registers at the expense of informal everyday language, which is neglected and devalued, have little to contribute to putting this mismatch right. Therefore, to devise concepts and invent terms that describe the grammar of conversation on the basis of the situational conditions in which it originates may help redress the balance between the (rightly) valued written language and the (falsely) devalued conversational language.

Second, formulating the grammar of conversation in its own terms seems wise given that conversation has only just become accessible to large-scale study. The written language "has formed the basis of exemplification for linguistics for much of the twentieth century and for the study of grammar for the past 2000 years" (Carter 1999:152) whereas large-scale empirical research on conversational interaction has only been around for a very short period of time, precisely since the advent of large machine-readable corpora which made

it possible to literally 'see' what is happening in speech. Accordingly, many linguists are agreed that "the grammatical structure of spoken English generally is far from being well understood" (Cheshire 1999:129). Moreover, considering the severe limitations of existing conversational corpora — all major conversational corpora such as the CANCODE, the LSWE Corpus and the conversational subcorpus of the BNC rely on orthographic transcriptions, with little or no prosodic information at all, not to mention the complete lack of kinesic information, i.e., information on gestures, facial expressions etc. that are integrated with speech and greatly influence its pragmatic meaning (e.g. Arndt & Janney 1987) — it seems reasonable to assume that these are just the early days of 'conversational grammar' and that what little we already know about it may well appear as just the humble beginnings in the decades to come.

Therefore, we would be wise not to distort our view of the emerging landscape of the structure of conversation by mapping on to it the norms of the written language, thus procreating negative value judgments about conversation. Instead, there is a pressing need to invent new terms and concepts that capture the essence of conversational grammar: its adaptedness to the constraints set by interacting face-to face under real-time pressure.

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Notes

1. It is necessary to acknowledge that 'genre' and 'register' do not exactly occupy the same conceptual territory (see, for example, Widdowson 2003 for a good account of how the concepts are distinguished).

2. The SEU was compiled at University College London in the 1960s and 1970s; its spoken part (500,000 words) was published as the *London-Lund Corpus* (LLC) (cf. Svartvik & Quirk 1980).

3. It is important to note that such negatively charged terminological choices in the description of features of spoken grammar are by no means restricted to the LGSWE, but have a wide currency in much prominent research on conversational grammar.

4. The BNC is not 'parsed'; that is, syntactic features such as heads and tails cannot be searched for exhaustively. Using the BNC it is therefore not possible to determine whether syntactic choices involving heads and tails are more frequent in conversation than choices not involving heads and tails.

5. In order to avoid confusion with the term 'head' as used in syntax and descriptions of intonation, the authors of *The Cambridge Grammar of English* have decided to use the term 'header' (McCarthy, personal communication)

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