ADVANCED CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH

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Preface

This book represents a departure from the previous volumes in the *Applied Linguistics and Language Study Series,* in that the authors both characterize an applied linguistics problem and provide with their analysed data a set of practice materials which can be used by teachers and advanced learners, and which, importantly, can serve as models for further teacher-produced materials.

Recent concern with the nature of discourse has called further into question the oral dialogues of many ELT textbooks which, because of their sentence-structure illustrating task and a lack of ready-to-hand criteria for the treatment of actual speech, have borne little resemblance to the hesitations, false starts, speed and volume changing characteristics of everyday conversation. As a result, learners have been handicapped in their powers of interpretation of *real* spoken data, and have felt that their learning has not equipped them to seek the guidelines with which to steer a path through the oral jungle.

From this common experience, the authors set out to chart the nature of conversational speech, looking not only at the linguistic and phonetic markers to provide a clear classification, but also to indicate how these markers are typically employed sociolinguistically within the personal tactics of general conversational strategies. One can then discern from the wide variety of analysed and annotated extracts not only what typical intonations and conversational 'set phrases' actually occur, but what particular selections and co-selections can be made from the inventory for the particular ulterior conversational motives of the speaker.

The analysed and annotated extracts perform two important functions: firstly, they extend considerably our knowledge of the distinctive features of conversational English. It is no longer possible to relegate 'well . . .' to the category of a 'meaningless element', or simply to state that its frequent occurrence in speech is one way that

speech is distinguished from writing. There are several 'well'-like items—'you know, I mean, sort of, kind of,' etc., and the authors suggest and exemplify what their meanings can be within discourse, and indicate, too, that we are only beginning to chart what turns out to be a highly complex area of English in use. Secondly, the example materials admirably serve the purpose of 'developing appropriate response behaviour in conversational interaction, for which the development of receptive, or interpretative abilities in language is the first essential stage'. Moreover, as the authors make clear in their final chapter, these analysed materials have a productive function in suggesting ways in which teachers may develop further exercises in the analysis of conversation for their own learners.

Above all, the book indicates in a clear analytical way what 'happens' in conversation as such, and it supports a growing concern that learning materials which have communication as their aim should themselves be based on accurately reported models with essential features distinctively highlighted.

Christopher N Candlin
General Editor
May 1975

Introduction

We first became aware of the need for information about informal conversational English as a result of our experiences on English language teaching courses and summer schools abroad. There we met many teachers and advanced students who had a good command of formal English, but who were aware that there existed a conversational dimension to the language that they had little experience of, and who expressed dissatisfaction with the kind of English they were regularly encountering in their coursework. Despite all the available materials, the request to 'say some real English into my tape-recorder' was disconcertingly persistent. It was more in evidence in those parts of the world which have little regular contact with English-speaking areas, such as South America, but we have come across a comparable demand in many parts of Europe too. In a way, the original motivation for this book was to present a compilation of material which would avoid the inconvenience and artificiality of the 'talk into the tape-recorder' exercise. It is more than this now, as we have included, in addition to the basic data, commentaries, analyses, general discussion, and suggestions for extension. But the basic aim is the same —to help students who feel they have a grasp of the structural patterns and usage of their regular coursework, and who want to develop their abilities in comprehension and fluency by using informal conversation as a model.

We began in early 1971. The delay has been largely due to the difficulty of obtaining natural conversational data in good recording conditions, dealing with ranges of subject-matter likely to be of interest to students of English. As one might expect, we had to record many hours of conversation before we could make a final selection which preserved this balance between spontaneity, recording quality, and interest. We attach particular importance to the naturalness of our data, which has not been edited in any way. We have not come across commercially available material that is so in-

formal or realistic, and it is in this respect that we hope the main contribution of this book will lie. We see *Advanced Conversational English* as a source book of information about the standard educated colloquial language. It is not designed as a teaching handbook. For one thing, we are ourselves unclear as to how data of this kind can best be used in a teaching situation. We are aware that colloquiality sparks off attitudes about when, how, and how much it should be taught—or whether it can be formally taught at all. We have had relatively little experience of these matters; consequently we have restricted the teaching section of this book to some general remarks and suggestions about how the data might be approached. To develop real productive and receptive fluency in this area is a task yet to be thoroughly investigated by teachers and applied linguists. But we are clear about one thing: no progress will be made towards an improved ELT pedagogy without a clear understanding of the realities of English conversation. For too long, English language teachers have been operating with a stereotype of conversation: whether it proves best to stay working with this stereotype or not, it is time to develop a more accurate perspective about conversational structures and usage, within which such matters can be properly evaluated.

The collection of data of which our extracts form a part is now housed at University College London, in the files of the Survey of English Usage, which is financed by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Many people have helped us in the preparation of this book—not least our anonymous conversationalists, and the many teachers of English in this country and abroad on whom the extracts and the accompanying analyses were first tried out. We are grateful to all of them, and particularly to Brian Abbs, Christopher Candlin, Peter Clifford, and David Wilkins, for advice on specific pedagogical issues while the book was being written.

DC, DD
July 1974

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Conversational English

The idea for this book arose out of an awareness that currently available English language teaching materials have not as yet bridged the gap between classroom English and English in use. It is clear that there are many excellent courses which help students to get through the introductory stages of learning the language; but there are few which have attempted to go beyond this point, and those which do so fall far short, in our opinion, of the goal of making students encounter and participate in the normal language of conversational English. The intermediate or advanced learner, typically, is aware that his English differs from the norms adopted by native speakers, but he finds little guidance as to how he can achieve a closer approximation to these norms. Often, indeed, he finds it extremely difficult to obtain any samples of conversational English at all to study, and even if he does, they will be unlikely to have accompanying analyses, commentary, or drills.

This state of affairs is not the learner's fault. The reasons for it are bound up with the stage which language-study has reached at the present time, and are part of a more general neglect of conversational norms in English language studies. There are, after all, two main difficulties over obtaining information about these norms. The first of these is that accumulating usable and reliable samples of natural, everyday, informal conversation is by no means easy. The problems embrace the technical (ensuring satisfactory recordings), the linguistic-psychological (for instance, ensuring that the speech is natural), and the legal (avoiding the many problems involved in publishing such material). Secondly, once one has accumulated such samples, there arise the difficulties of analysing them. The kind of English found in these samples is in many respects quite different from the kind confidently analysed in the standard textbooks and manuals (as we shall see); consequently, a great deal of analysis has to be carried out before pedagogically useful generalizations can be made. As a

result, it takes many years of experience in collecting and analysing material of this kind before one can speak confidently about informal conversation; and it is for this reason that little has been done. In this book, we are relying very much on our experience of analysing English in connection with the Survey of English Usage at University College London, and related projects; and we hope that we have therefore been able to make some headway into these problems. But it is only a beginning.

There are a number of general comments which have to be made by way of introduction to the data and approach of this book. The main aim, as already suggested, is to provide samples and analyses of 'natural, everyday, informal conversation', and to make suggestions as to how this material might be pedagogically used. But what is meant by this label? We might simply have talked about 'conversation' throughout; but we feel that this term, on its own, is too vague and broad to be helpful. After all, it may be used to refer to almost any verbal interchange, from casual chat to formal discussion; hence we have used the term 'informal conversation', to emphasize which end of the conversational spectrum we are concerned with—conversation on informal occasions, between people who know each other, where there is no pressure from outside for them to be self-conscious about how they are speaking. What happens when people simply want to talk in a friendly relaxed way? The result is very different from what introductory textbooks about conversation usually lead one to expect, both in subject-matter and construction. And, for the foreign learner who finds himself a participant in such informal situations, there are immediately problems of comprehension and oral fluency.

Let us look in a little greater detail at the kinds of difference which distinguish what we see as the average textbook situation from what we find in our recorded conversations. We do not wish to be gratuitously critical of available teaching materials, from whose study we have profited a great deal. We simply wish to underline the important fact, often overlooked by students of English, that even the best materials we have seen are far away from that real, informal kind of English which is used very much more than any other during a normal speaking lifetime; and if one aim of the language-teaching exercise is to provide students with the linguistic expertise to be able to participate confidently and fluently in situations involving this kind of English, then it would generally be agreed that this aim is not being achieved at the present time. The extent of the difference

may be informally appreciated by observing the reactions of many foreign students when they first step off the boat or plane in an English-speaking country, and find that acclimatization applies as much to language as to weather! It surprises many to realize that most people do not speak like their teacher, or their local British Council officers at cocktail-parties, and that there is far more variation in the standard forms of the language than their textbooks would lead them to expect.

If one thinks for a moment of the specimens of English which the learner is often presented with under the heading of 'conversation', it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that they are highly stylized—stiff imitations of the dynamic spontaneity of real life. With few exceptions, the language of tape-recorded dialogues is controlled, relatively formal, and articulated clearly by fluent professionals, either phoneticians or actors, reading from scripts. The characters which are developed in textbook families are nice, decent, and characterless; the situations in which they find themselves are generally unreal or dull. People in textbooks, it seems, are not allowed to tell long and unfunny jokes, to get irritable or to lose their temper, to gossip (especially about other people), to speak with their mouths full, to talk nonsense, or swear (even mildly). They do not get all mixed up while they are speaking, forget what they wanted to say, hesitate, make grammatical mistakes, argue erratically or illogically, use words vaguely, get interrupted, talk at the same time, switch speech styles, manipulate the rules of the language to suit themselves, or fail to understand. In a word, they are not *real*. Real people, as everybody knows, do all these things, and it is this which is part of the essence of informal conversation. The foreign learner will of course be quite conversant with these features from his native language already; it is part of our purpose to extend his feel for such matters in English.

Of course, it is not easy to make classroom dialogues real in the early years of learning a language. If you have learned but a few hundred words, and a small number of grammatical structures, then naturally dialogues are likely to be pale reflections of conversational reality—though even here something can be done to improve things, as we shall later suggest. This is not the range of language learning that we are primarily talking about. We are more concerned with those students who would have become advanced practitioners of English if they had had any advanced materials to assist them—students who have already completed the half-dozen books or so of

a published course, and who may have passed a basic examination in English language use. These are students who want to bridge the gap between the relatively measured, synthetic utterances of the class-room and the spontaneous exchanges of everyday conversational life. Often, the learner is given the impression that all he has to do to achieve the goal of fluent connected speech is simply increase the quantity and speed of production of the structures already learned. But fluency here involves far more than merely stringing together the sentence-structures and patterns of pitch movement that have been picked up during the previous years of learning the language. A qualitative difference is involved, as we shall see. The point is one which many learners of English come to appreciate through bitter experience.

What we mean by qualitative differences can be illustrated very easily. The many kinds of linkage which sentences display—using pronouns, articles, adverbials, lexical repetitions, and so on—which are not relevant to the study of a sentence seen in isolation: this is one kind of structural modification which has to be considered. Another involves intonation. Having learned of the existence of six or so major types of tone-unit in English, the student must now learn that putting them together into acceptable sequences—to express paren-thesis, or emphasis, for instance—involves his using a quite separate range of pronunciation features. A third example would be the need to develop the skill of knowing what to leave *out* of a sentence, or what can be taken for granted in a dialogue. To take a simple case, one should be aware that permissible answers to the question 'Where are you going tomorrow?' include the following: 'I'm going to the library', 'To the library', 'The library', and 'Library'. Sometimes it does not particularly matter which answer is chosen; but at other times a careless choice can produce an unintentional and embarrass-ing stylistic effect—as when the last of these is used with a clipped intonation pattern, giving an impression of impatience, and perhaps leading to the interpretation 'Mind your own business'. We do not wish to over-rate the nature of the problems involved in these examples of connected speech; but we do want to avoid the opposite impression, that there are no problems at all. As so often in language learning, recognizing the existence of a problem is the first step along the road to its solution.

There is another way in which we can draw attention to the gap that has to be bridged. We are of the opinion that introductory courses do not, on the whole, teach the student how to *participate*

in a conversation. They do not attempt to increase his skills systematically in the whole range of behavioural cues which help effective social interaction, some of which are visual and tactile, as well as linguistic. For instance, it is uncommon to find any systematic attempt to introduce information about facial expressions and bodily gestures into a language-teaching course, even today, despite the fact that research in social psychology and elsewhere has shown very clearly that inter-cultural differences in such features are much greater than used to be supposed, and that the number of variables of this kind which can change the 'meaning' of a piece of social interaction within a single culture is considerable. Here are some typical linguistic issues involved in effective communication in dialogue, and which cause problems of the kind that we think an English course should attempt to answer. How do you hesitate in English? Are there different kinds of hesitation which have different meanings? Does facial expression affect the interpretation of intonation? (The answer is 'yes' to both of these questions.) How do you indicate that you would like to speak if someone else is already speaking? Or (more to the point) how do you do this politely? Here is an example in more detail. A foreigner may think that he can relax in a conversation while the English participant is talking—but nothing is further from the truth. On the contrary, full participation in a conversation requires continual alertness. Normal conventions require the person not doing the talking to nonetheless keep up a flow of brief vocalizations, such as 'm', 'mhm', and so on. If you do not use these responses, the person talking will begin to wonder whether you are still paying attention, or if you are being rude. If you use too many, the impression may be one of overbearing pugnacity or of embarrassing friendliness (depending on your facial expression). And if you put them in the wrong places, you may cause a breakdown in the intelligibility of the communication. For instance, if the speaker pauses after the definite article in the following sentence, as indicated by the dash, a 'm' inserted at this point is likely to sound quite inappropriate 'You see it's the—exercise that's the problem'. If you use a falling tone (especially the type which falls from high to mid in pitch, used to express non-committal sympathy), the speaker is likely to be puzzled, not having said anything to be sympathized with yet, and he may get the impression that you are so anxious to break in that you can't bear to wait for him to say it. And if you give an encouraging rising tone to the vocalization, you would sound like a television interviewer prompting him to speak—which he might not appreciate!

Now such information is really rather elementary—in the sense that it is so basic to the relative success or failure of conversational interaction that it could usefully be brought into any language-teaching course from the very beginning. If beginners were exposed more to real conversation, it might be argued, they would have less to 'un-learn' in later years. They might not understand the whole of every conversation with which they were presented, naturally; but they would at least begin the long process of developing their intuitions about rhythm, tone of voice, speed of speaking, gesture, and all the features of conversational strategy belonging to English, which, if left until much later, tend never to be acquired satisfactorily at all. There is some sense in the idea that one of the very first things to learn in a foreign language is how to hesitate in it —after all, when trying to remember a particular word or phrase, rather than display an embarrassed and sometimes misleading silence, an appropriate hesitant noise or phrase can be extremely effective in averting a total communicational breakdown. And we would also argue the need for early introduction of information about facial expressions, basic intonation tunes, response vocalizations, and so on, largely on the grounds that it will take longer to develop automatic reactions in these things than in the more familiar levels of linguistic structure. But whether elementary or not, the fact of the matter is that on the whole this kind of information is not brought into courses as they exist at present. The reason for this state of affairs has already been indicated: authors as well as students are aware of the problem, but until very recently, the basic research needed to isolate and define the range and complexity of these factors had simply not been done, and it always takes years for fundamental research to percolate into the classroom. Paradoxically, then, such 'elementary' information has to be permitted into our supposedly 'advanced' book.

We do not of course want to give the impression, in saying this, that the solutions to all the problems are known, or are easy. There are still many aspects of English intonation, for instance, about which very little is known. And while we are demanding that more attention be paid to the subject of real connected speech, and all that goes with it, in course-work, we are not yet in a position to outline the full list of rules wl..ch will permit the learner to construct all types of connected discourse from a knowledge of the structures of individual sentences. Research into the matter is going on in many centres now. But enough precise information has already been gathered together to enable a start to be made, and it is this which we are attempting to do

here. In this book, we shall restrict ourselves to issues where there is fairly wide agreement about the facts, concentrating in particular on the more central areas of conversational syntax, vocabulary and phonology. We shall occasionally introduce the tentative results of recent research, but whenever we are not sure of the general applicability of some work, we shall say so.

Another impression which we do not want to give is that failure to know and use features of conversational interaction and connected speech such as we illustrate in this book will inevitably result in the foreign learner being unintelligible to or criticized by native speakers. We are *not* suggesting that unless the student can hesitate properly in English, he might as well give up in the expectation that a terrible fate will befall him when he steps off the boat! The features taught in this book, once mastered, will produce more successful and fluent conversation, we claim, but not all of them are absolutely essential to comprehension and intelligibility (those which *are* particularly important we shall discuss at length). Moreover, some of the features we shall talk about many foreigners will know already, as there may be little difference in their use in the foreign language. This will be particularly so for students who speak languages closely related to English, or where there has been a high level of cultural contact. There are *relatively* few intonational differences between Spanish and English, for instance, that cause serious problems of intelligibility— and before the Spanish reader reaches for his pen in protest, let him think for a moment of the vast intonational differences that separate English from Japanese, which make the Spanish/English contrasts seem small by comparison. Similarly, it is not going to be a disaster if a French or German student inserts his own language's agreement noises into a conversation in English—after all, generations of students have been doing just this with apparent success.

But for those students who want more than simply to 'get by', who want to develop a confident command of the language they use, who want to know precisely what they are doing in a conversation and what effect it is likely to have—for these students, a great deal more than intuition is required. For them, lack of any basic training in what we might call 'English sociolinguistic technique' is one of the biggest stumbling blocks of all in developing a satisfactory conversational manner. Regardless of the closeness or otherwise of the foreigner's culture to English, there exist many problems, of different orders of difficulty, which have to be mastered if the goals of confident and effective communication are to be reached. A fairly well-known

example is the means used in order to get a conversation started at all in English. 'Talking about the weather' is not as widespread as is sometimes believed. What ranges of subject-matter *may* be used, then, if you want to start a conversation with a stranger? In some cultures, the permissible 'opening gambit' is very different from the type available in English. In at least one culture, for instance (which we shall keep nameless), we are told that it is the expected thing, upon entering a house, to enquire about the cost of the soft furnishings—hardly an appropriate topic for England! In a similar way, commenting on the excellence of the food is an *expected* response when invited home for a meal with an English family: it would be inappropriate, to say the least, to sit through the whole of a meal preserving a stony silence about its quality—but to comment about the food being eaten seems positively rude to many foreigners, who would never do such a thing in their own culture. Transferring one's own cultural sociolinguistic habits to English is the easiest thing in the world to do without realizing that anything is wrong, because the responses are so automatic and apparently unstructured. And as this kind of error has nothing obviously to do with interference problems of grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation, the danger is that the native speaker's reaction to a blunder here will be to assume that it is the foreigner himself who is *deliberately* being rude, or provocative. This difficulty has long been recognized in intonation studies: unlike grammar, vocabulary, and segmental pronunciation, mistakes in intonation are not usually noticed and allowed for by native speakers, who assume that in this respect a person sounds as he means to sound. 'That chap has some interesting things to say, but he's so arrogant about it all' may be a reaction to a foreigner who has little control over his low rising tones, for instance. This kind of unconscious brick-dropping is, we know, extremely common; and its eradication should be a main aim of any approach to the teaching of conversation.

It seems to us that in order to participate effectively in a conversation in English, the foreigner needs to be fully aware of the implications of two quite distinct issues. First, he needs to be totally 'in tune' with the behaviour, language patterns and presuppositions of whoever he is talking to and with the social situation in which the conversation is taking place. And secondly, he needs to be able to respond to all of this in the appropriate way, using language along with other forms of behaviour. Both these issues are complex, and in this book we shall concentrate largely on the problem of 'getting into tune'. Here there is clearly an overlap with the traditional notion of