

Activity 21.1 - Contemporary spoken English

Non-fluency features in italics:

- A well what do they put| . in a . computing programme?| - -
- B well| you'll hear a lot about it in due course |. it's what they call $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{IL} \\ \text{A mm} \end{array} \right]$ tests .
- B which $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{stands} \\ \text{A mm} \end{array} \right]$ for investigating language acceptability|
- A mm
- B and they've done those on groups of undergraduates| . we don't know what
- A $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{erm} \\ \text{Berm} \end{array} \right]$ battery things| *erm* yes| . *erm sort of* . science graduates|
- B $\left[\begin{array}{l} \cdot \\ \text{A mm} \end{array} \right]$ German graduates| English graduates| $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{and so on} \\ \text{A mm} \end{array} \right]$ and asked them| -
- B there are various types of test they give them| . they give them a sentence| and *there are four a* . there are three answers they can give| either it's acceptable| it's not acceptable|
- A mm| - -
- B it's marginal| . or you know| it's somewhere between| and then . we *they*| when they mark up the results| have a fourth category| which is their answer was incoherent|
- A yes|
- B if it was heard and they couldn't hear it| . if it was written they couldn't read it|
- A mm|
- B that's one type| . then there's an operation test| they're interested say in . well particularly seeing various adverbs| and they write something like I entirely| dot dot dot| - and the student has to complete the sentence| -
- A mm| -
- B well with entirely| they'll nearly all write agree with you|
- A yes| .
- B and entirely and agree $\left[\begin{array}{l} - \\ \text{A mm} \end{array} \right]$ go together|
- A mm|
- B collate or something it's called|
- A yeah|
- B [*laughs* - -] and then they in fact try another adverb| and then there'll be an absolute range of verbs ^{that} $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{go with it} \\ \text{A mm} \end{array} \right]$ you know it's quite interesting| the way in the thesis| they had a sentence with entirely| . and got people| to *er* transform it into the negative|
- B mm|
- A this is very tricky| . I should have thought there were .

- B yes| well quite| they do that sort of thing you see| and then they see what they've produced| and then *they* [*sort of*] they score them up| in a certain [*way*] and they'll say have they . *erm* -
 - have they [*A yes*]
 done| what they were told to| and if not why not| and then there are various
 reasons why not| and they were scored| and given a mark| and it's quite in [*credible*]
 [*A I think*] that's
 thought was being done| *in* . [*in*] in the battery
 [*B mm*]
 one of the most valuable things| that I've
 test| because it should relate| quite directly| to| the meaning of the word| -
- B yes|

The following tidied-up version retains all the lexical and grammatical features of the spoken conversation, and only omits those features of speech production and interaction which we normally ignore when listening, like hesitations, repetitions and fillers. There are in fact comparatively few.

Setting out the text in "sentences" makes the grammatical structure of the conversation clearer.

- A *MCl* or well what do they put in a computing programme?
- B *MCl* well you'll hear a lot about it in due course
MCl it's what they call IL tests
Rel Cl (non-restr) which stands for investigating language acceptability
- B *MCl* and they've done those on groups of undergraduates
MCl we don't know what *unfinished*
- A *MCl* battery things
- B *MCl* yes science graduates German graduates English graduates and so
 on
MCl and asked them
MCl there are various types of test [*RelCl* they give them]
MCl they give them a sentence
MCl and there are three answers [*RelCl* they can give]
MCl either it's acceptable it's not acceptable it's marginal
MCl or it's somewhere between
MCl and then we
AdvCl [when they mark up the results]
 have a fourth category
RelCl (non-restr) which is their answer was incoherent
- A yes
- B *AdvCl* [if it was heard]
MCl and they couldn't hear it
AdvCl [if it was written]
MCl they couldn't read it
- A mm
- B *MCl* that's one type
MCl then there's an operation test

- MCl* they're interested say [*PrepCl* in particularly seeing various adverbs]
- MCl* and they write something like [*Quoted Cl* I entirely dot dot dot]
- MCl* and the student has to complete the sentence
- A mm
- B *MCl* well with *entirely* they'll nearly all write [*Quoted Cl* agree with you]
- A yes
- B *MCl* and *entirely* and *agree* go together
- MCl* collate or something it's called
- A yeah
- B [laughs - -]
- MCl* and then they in fact try another adverb
- MCl* and then there'll be an absolute range of verbs [*RelCl* that go with it]
- A *Comment Cl* you know
- MCl* it's quite interesting the way in the thesis
- MCl* [*AppCl* they had a sentence with *entirely*
- MCl* and got people to transform it into the negative]
- B mm
- A *MCl* this is very tricky
- MCl* I should have thought [*NCl* there were ... *unfinished*]
- B yes well quite
- MCl* they do that sort of thing
- Comment Cl* you see
- MCl* and then they see [*NCl* what they've produced]
- MCl* and then they score them up in a certain way
- MCl* and they'll say [*NCl* have they done [*NCl* what they were told to]]
- AdvCl* and [if not]
- MCl* why not
- MCl* and then there are various reasons why not
- MCl* and they were scored
- MCl* and given a mark
- MCl* and it's quite incredible
- A *MCl* I think [*NCl* that's one of the most valuable things [*RelCl* that I've
- AdvCl* [because thought was being done in the battery test]
- it should relate quite directly to the meaning of the word]
- B yes

Points to note:

- 1 B does most of the talking, and her narrative consists principally of a series of main clauses [MCl] or simple sentences. The subordinate clauses are few and uncomplicated.
- 2 The main clauses tend to be linked by *and*, which functions rather like punctuation in writing, to separate off the clauses, rather than as a formal conjunction. This is especially noticeable in the sequence:

	<i>MCl</i>	they do that sort of thing
	<i>Comment Cl</i>	you see
and	<i>MCl</i>	then they see [<i>NCl</i> what they've produced]
and	<i>MCl</i>	then they score them up in a certain way
and	<i>MCl</i>	they'll say [<i>NCl</i> have they done [<i>NCl</i> what they were told to]]
and	<i>AdvCl</i>	[if not]
	<i>MCl</i>	why not
and	<i>MCl</i>	then there are various reasons why not
and	<i>MCl</i>	they were scored
and	<i>MCl</i>	given a mark
and	<i>MCl</i>	it's quite incredible

which would not normally be acceptable in written English.

If we set out the text in the form of a dramatic dialogue - that is, a written form intended to be spoken but using normal written punctuation- we find that although it is a completely authentic example of spoken English conversation, it would not prove acceptable if acted on a stage:

A Well, what do they put in a computing programme?

B Well, you'll hear a lot about it in due course. It's what they call IL tests, which stands for "Investigating Language Acceptability", and they've done those on groups of undergraduates. We don't know what

A Battery things?

B Yes. Science graduates, German graduates, English graduates and so on, and asked them. There are various types of test they give them. They give them a sentence, and there are three answers they can give: either it's acceptable, it's not acceptable, it's marginal, or it's somewhere between, and then we, when they mark up the results, have a fourth category, which is their answer was incoherent.

A Yes.

B If it was heard and they couldn't hear it, if it was written they couldn't read it.

A Mm.

B That's one type. Then there's an operation test. They're interested, say, in particularly seeing various adverbs and they write something like "I entirely dot dot dot", and the student has to complete the sentence.

A Mm.

B Well, with "entirely" they'll nearly all write "agree with you".

A Yes.

B And "entirely" and "agree" go together - "collate" or something it's called.

A Yeah.

B [*laughs* - -] And then they in fact try another adverb, and then there'll be an absolute range of verbs that go with it.

-
- A Mm. You know, it's quite interesting the way in the thesis they had a sentence with "entirely" and got people to transform it into the negative.
- B Mm.
- A This is very tricky. I should have thought there were
- B Yes, well, quite. They do that sort of thing, you see, and then they see what they've produced and then they score them up in a certain way and they'll say have they done what they were told to and if not why not and then there are various reasons why not and they were scored and given a mark and it's quite incredible!
- A I think that's one of the most valuable things that I've thought was being done in the battery test, because it should relate quite directly to the meaning of the word.
- B Yes.

What makes this conversation unacceptable as dramatic dialogue? The answer lies partly in the requirements of dramatic dialogue, which is not simply overheard ordinary conversation, though it may give this impression in the theatre.

The sequence previously referred to,

They do that sort of thing, you see, and then they see what they've produced and then they score them up in a certain way and they'll say have they done what they were told to and if not why not and then there are various reasons why not and they were scored and given a mark and it's quite incredible!

could be written as,

They do that sort of thing, you see. Then they see what they've produced. They score them up in a certain way, and say, have they done what they were told to, and if not, why not. Then there are various reasons why not, and they were scored and given a mark. It's quite incredible!
