

1.5. Spontaneous Spoken Language

Spontaneous spoken language has certain key properties.

- i Spontaneous speech is produced in real time, impromptu, and with no opportunity for editing, whereas written language is generally produced with pauses for thought and with much editing.
- ii Spontaneous speech is subject to the limitations of short-term memory in both speaker and hearer: it has been said (by the psycholinguist George Miller) that the short-term memory can hold 7 ± 2 bits of information.
- iii Spontaneous speech is typically produced by people talking face-to-face in a particular context.
- iv Spontaneous speech, by definition, involves pitch, amplitude, rhythm, and voice quality.
- v Spontaneous face-to-face speech is accompanied by gestures, eye-gaze, facial expressions, and body postures, all of which signal information.

Properties (i)–(v) are reflected in certain linguistic properties.

- a Information is carefully staged, a small quantity of information being assigned to each phrase and clause.
- b Spontaneous spoken language typically has far less grammatical subordination than written language and much more coordination or simple parataxis.
- c The syntax of spontaneous spoken language is in general fragmented and unintegrated; phrases are less complex than phrases of written language; the clausal constructions are less complex. A central role in signalling relationships between chunks of syntax is played by deictics. (See Chapter 3.)
- d The sentence is not a useful analytical unit for informal spoken language.

- e The patterns of constituent structure and the arrangement of heads and modifiers do not always correspond to the patterns recognized by syntactic theory.
- f The range of vocabulary in spontaneous language is less than in written language.
- g A number of constructions occur in spontaneous spoken language but not in written language, and vice-versa.

The linguistic properties spring from the various general properties of spontaneous spoken language—but the pragmatic nature of the general properties does not mean that the syntax of spontaneous spoken language is to be treated as resulting from performance error. The properties of spontaneous spoken language and the properties of formal written language both reflect the conditions under which they are produced. This does not mean that the properties of the former result from attempts to use the structures typical of the latter—attempts which fail because of the time constraints and the different tasks that claim attention in any fact-to-face interaction. Rather, the structures of spontaneous spoken language have developed in such a way that they *can* be used in the circumstances in which conversation, for example, usually takes place.

The simple nature of phrases, the unintegrated nature of the syntax and the smaller range of vocabulary are all made possible by (iii), since typically a lot of information is shared or present in the situation of utterance and does not need to be articulated. This also leads to the occurrence of relatively simple referring expressions. Spoken language is characterized by frequent pronouns and also, especially in the case of languages such as Russian, the regular occurrence of zero noun phrases, both subject and object. (See Chapter 4 on noun phrases and Chapters 3 and 5 on zero noun phrases.) Furthermore, a certain quantity of information can be signalled by the ancillary systems mentioned in (iv) and (v).

Since the unintegrated nature of the syntax is so striking, it is worthwhile pointing out that the lack of conjunctions or subordinating links does not mean that relationships among clauses are not signalled at all. Both Schulz (1973: 19–50) and Fernandez (1994: 95–6) demonstrate that the relationships between clauses can be signalled either by particles, as in (1) and (2) or by intonation, as in (3).