Spoken and written ellipsis in (and not in) the experience of adult literacy learners

Margaret Childs
Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick

Abstract

Interference from spoken language can hinder adult learners' reading, so it is helpful for tutors to be aware of differences between spoken and written syntax. Study of the incidence of ellipsis in two adult learners' conversational language demonstrates the absence of most forms of coordination and subordination ellipsis typical of writing, and the frequent omission of subordinators, including the total absence of *that* relatives from one informant's corpus. Examples of typically spoken situational ellipses draw attention to the different locus of reference (situational or textual) in spoken and written ellipsis, and therefore the different strategy of interpretation required in reading. It is also shown that the use and non-use of ellipsis often have communicative functions in the dialogues that reflect linguistic skill rather than sloppiness or incompetence. Implications for tuition are suggested.

Introduction

One of the challenges in learning to read is that written language is in many ways different from spoken language, so that a learner reader has not only to master the graphic symbols but also to acquire competence in new language patterns. Differences between written and spoken modes are likely to cause a particular problem for adult learners since, as poor readers, they tend to compensate for their unreliable decoding skills by making predictions based on preceding syntactic and semantic context (Stanovich 1980 and Klein 1993). However, if the language of the target text is at variance with the reader's own grammar, syntactic prediction is liable to be misleading. Adult literacy tutors can support their students' reading more effectively if they are aware of likely points of 'interference', but, although there are studies which identify problematic syntax for children (e.g. Reid 1972 and Tunmer, Nesdale, and Wright

1987), information about adult learners' language is not easily found. Through an examination of spontaneous speech in an informal setting, this article contributes empirical findings about one significant feature in the language of two particular speakers that will illustrate the linguistic challenge facing people who strive to improve their reading ability in the adult literacy context.

The article draws upon a detailed analysis of the conversational language of two adult literacy students, referred to as 'Mark' and 'Vonnie' (Childs 2002).[1] The original study describes the speakers' vocabulary and grammar qualitatively and quantitatively, comparing them with reported norms of spoken and written English. Ellipsis has been chosen here as a discourse feature which is 'a key area of difference between spoken and written norms' (McCarthy 1998: 76).

The aim at the simplest level is to identify forms of ellipsis that occur or apparently do not occur in Mark's and Vonnie's language, and beyond that to observe various functions that those reductions and repetitions perform. The findings will be seen to have pedagogical implications in regard to highlighting unfamiliar language structures, developing strategies of interpretation in reading, and encouraging appreciation of the communication skills underlying oral language.

Ellipsis in writing and in conversation

First it is necessary to be clear what is meant here by ELLIPSIS. McCarthy provides a definition that is serviceable for both speech and writing: 'the omission of structural elements which can be understood from context' (McCarthy 1998: 76). To qualify as ellipsis any perceived omissions in a clause must satisfy the requirements of syntactic necessity and recoverability, as in McCarthy's examples (1) and (2), where ellipsis sites are marked by square brackets [ ], and their antecedents are italicized

(1) *We* ran for the bus but [ ] missed it.

(2) The chair was broken and the table [ ] too.

A simplified outline of different categories of ellipsis is given below in Table 2, based on Wilson's 'rough guide to gaps' (2000:

105). Other omissions arising from the difficulty of on-line production in conversation, such as false starts, 'abandoned clauses' (Eggins and Slade 1997), or 'lapses in conversation' are categorized as NON-ELLIPTICAL GAPS (Wilson 2000: 105).

Conversation differs from writing both in the elements that are typically ellipted and in the context from which their meaning is supplied. In prose writing, elements may be omitted from various positions in a clause, excepting sentence-initial position. They are retrieved linguistically from the textual context, usually from the other clause in a compound or complex sentence as in McCarthy's examples (1) and (2) above.

On the other hand, ellipsis in casual conversation is usually sentence initial (example 3a). It is also SITUATIONAL, in that the meaning of the absent element is inferred from the extralinguistic situational context, rather than from the adjacent text (Quirk et al. 1985: 861).

However there is not a simple contrast between written and spoken modes. For example, CONVERSATIONAL REJOINDERS are characteristic of spoken dialogue, but their interpretation depends on textual context, as in example (3b) from Trask (1997: 76).

(3) a. [ ] Seems we have *a problem*.
     b. Yes, we have [ ]

The missing element in the response [*a problem*] is recovered lexically from the preceding text, but it is from the previous turn rather than from within the sentence. If the response is a reply to a direct question, the antecedent is transformed, rather than transferred precisely, as in example (4) (Crystal 1997: 119).

(4) a. Where did you see the car?
     b. [ ] In the street. [I saw the car].

Conversely, situational ellipsis is found in writing, in highly context-dependent texts such as notices, instructions, and labels on packaging (Carter and McCarthy in press). The telegraphic form of newspaper headlines is another widely encountered type of written situational ellipsis. These items are often important texts in poor readers' day-to-day experience, but they lie outside our present scope.

A further complication is that the ellipses characteristic of spontaneous speech are also found represented in writing, especially in fiction, subtly altered by literary and print conventions. Fictional spoken ellipsis can be confusing for a learner reader since he cannot interpret it by reference to his actual physical situation as he would in live conversation, but must look to an imaginary environment created by the text.

Thus an inexperienced reader will encounter in written text some forms of syntactic gap that are totally new, and others that are familiar in everyday talk but need a different approach to interpretation because of their detachment from a real interactional situation. The transcribed conversations of the informants provide a substantial amount of continuous conversation from which to identify the types of ellipsis they are accustomed to using.

Data and methodology

Informants

Since there is no established typical adult literacy student, Mark and Vonnie were selected for the study on the grounds that our friendship outside literacy tuition favoured the recording of long stretches of natural talk and minimized the effect of 'the observer's paradox' (Labov 1972 and Milroy and Milroy 1985). They were both clients of an adult literacy service at the time, and although they have very different reading levels they share similar backgrounds.

The informants (see Table 1) are both middle-aged natives of working-class areas of Limerick city. Their primary education was limited, in Mark's case because of serious illness and truancy, and in Vonnie's case because she was often sent home as being unable to do the set work. They had left school before free secondary education was introduced in Ireland.

By Mark's account, although he learned 'the basics' of reading in school, he was functionally illiterate until he became motivated to practise reading in his twenties, starting with the Bible, and then using it as a key to other texts. He can read adequately for everyday purposes, but he found the vocabulary and structures in an advanced level test passage (Klein 1993) difficult. He reads the newspaper and some non-fiction, and he listens attentively to radio and television. He writes little and was attending the literacy service for

tuition in spelling. Thus he has some, mainly receptive, familiarity with written language to add to his oral competence.

Vonnie, on the other hand, left school able to transcribe but unable to read or write, apart from her name. She has general learning difficulties which have never been professionally addressed, but she lives more or less independently, having been employed for some years in a factory. She began literacy tuition with me once a week aged about 50. At the time of the recordings, about four years later, she could read about 60 words with minimal prompting, both isolated and within text, but was still struggling with beginner-level texts, and only wrote from letter-by-letter dictation or by copying. She watches television, especially soap operas, but also news and weather reports. Vonnie's language has been developed totally through the spoken channel, mostly in the immediate environment of family and neighbours, and her experience of written language is negligible.

Table 1: The informants

	Mark	*Vonnie*
Age	40s	50s
Home	Working class Limerick city.	Working class Limerick city.
Employment	Worker in electronics factory.	Disability pension. Formerly assembly line worker.
Education	Primary school. Often absent. Repeated classes.	Primary school. Often sent home.
Reading level	Intermediate. Competent at everyday level. Difficulty with complex words and structures.	Very basic. A few dozen sight words. Some unreliable symbol/sound and orientation skills.
Literacy tuition	Recently availed of help with spelling.	About four years weekly beginner's tuition.
Language variety	Urban working-class Limerick Irish English.	Urban working-class Limerick Irish English.

The conversations

Mark's conversations were recorded on two social occasions, the first (February 2000) after Sunday lunch in my home, and the second (April 2000) in Mark's home over an evening cup of tea. Also

taking part were his wife, 'Tracy' (on both occasions), and my husband (in February). Mark held the floor most of the time, usually pursuing topics initiated by himself, apart from some lengthy responses to questions about his work and local industrial history. It was understood that the purpose was to record Mark's speech as part of a study of 'how people speak'. Apart from triggering some remarks about dialect, this did not noticeably affect his usual manner of speech.

Vonnie's data was recorded in her home at two sessions in October 1999 and one in November 1999 as part of our usual social time before her reading tuition. The declared purpose was to create improved reading materials for her. Vonnie generally led the conversations, while my contributions were mainly supportive responses.

The transcribed texts

The data consist of 9,480 words in Mark's corpus, and 4,410 in Vonnie's. Mark's was transcribed from about three hours of conversations, with reading passages and other participants' turns deleted. Vonnie's corpus is smaller, transcribed from about 90 minutes' conversation, since irregularities of articulation and prosody in her speech make transcription difficult and time-consuming.

Prosodic features were not recorded, apart from perceptible pauses and question intonation. Neither was note made of phonological variation due to dialect or rapid speech, with the exceptions of usual spoken contractions, e.g. *don't, he'd*, and Vonnie's phonological confusions where they were very distinctly articulated. The transcribed texts represent my interpretation of the tape recordings, as a researcher informed by shared knowledge as a participant in the conversations.

The transcription conventions were those of the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (see Farr et al., this volume), but the extracts quoted here are presented in a simplified convention for the sake of readability (see Transcription Conventions at the end of this paper).

I sometimes refer to Vonnie's or Mark's 'microtexts'. These are continuous extracts each containing approximately 1,000 of the informants' words (plus the other participants' turns), which were subjected to detailed syntactic analysis (Childs 2002). They form more or less coherent texts based on continuity of topic. Vonnie's microtext consists of chat about her friends and acquaintances,

centring on two funerals she had recently attended. Mark has two microtexts: the February extract is informational, informally describing his factory work, while the April text is anecdotal, giving accounts of heart attack incidents.

Every elliptical and non-elliptical gap in the three microtexts was identified and marked manually, being analysed within its discourse context. Quantitative analysis of co-ordination and subordination reduction was conducted over the whole corpus (total 13,890 words) using *Wordsmith Tools* concordancing (Scott 1999) of *and* and *that*. Other instances of ellipsis in the overall corpus were treated qualitatively and selectively.

Analysis

Wilson's 'rough guide to gaps' in spoken and written styles provides a useful framework for analysing ellipsis and other forms of omission in the data (Wilson 2000: 105). His categories are set out as markers on 'the continuum of linguistic gaps' rather than as an exhaustive typology (2000: 17), and they will be supplemented when necessary. I have added the columns on the right (see Table 2) to give a general indication of the relevance of each to spoken and written modes.

Table 2: Categories of elliptical and non-elliptical structures (adapted from Wilson 2000: 105)

Elliptical Gaps		
	Spoken	Written
TEXTUAL CONTEXT		
Intrasentential (within sentences)		
Coordination reduction		
i. Leftmost	some	yes
ii. Rightmost	yes	yes
iii. Central (Gapping)	no	typical
Subordination reduction	yes	yes
Intersentential (between sentences or utterance turns)		
Conversational rejoinders	typical	fiction

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

Sentence initial ellipsis	typical	fiction
Telegraphic ellipsis	no	headlines
Situational ellipsis	yes	labels, signs

Non-elliptical Gaps

Lapses in conversation	typical	fiction
Nonrealization	yes	fiction
Inferential gaps	yes	fiction

Co-ordination reduction

CO-ORDINATION REDUCTION, in which an item omitted from one clause of a co-ordinated sentence can be retrieved lexically from the other, is a very frequent type of ellipsis in writing, yet not one of the sub-categories illustrated by Wilson (2000: 105) and shown in (5)-(7) below — all of which involve deletion of the lexical verb — is matched in Mark's or Vonnie's conversations.

(5) *Leftmost*: *Mars gave* peace a chance and [ ] war a rest.

(6) *Rightmost*: Hingist *lost to Novotna* but Davenport didn't [ ].

(7) *Central (Gapping)*: Pyramus *died lovingly* for Thisbe and Thisbe [ ] for Pyramus.

However there is a more common type of initial (leftmost) co-ordination reduction, seen in (8), from Biber et al. (1999: 156), which both Mark and Vonnie do use, as shown in (9) and (10).

(8) He squeezed her hand but [ ] met with no response.

(9) M: ... people come and [ ] take your raiment.

(10) V: the van comes around and [ ] brings their dinners.

Indeed their frequency of ellipsis in such clauses is unusually high for spoken language, although Mark's is still lower than written norms (Meyer 1995: 251, 262). His same-subject co-ordinated clauses are divided almost equally between ellipted and unellipted

forms. The choice is apparently not random, since the alternative structures are seen to perform several distinct functions. For example, the unellipted repetition of the subject pronoun (indicated below in bold) may act as a narrative linker, marking the sequence of time between related events as in example (11):

(11) *he* was going through this tunnel **and he** died.

It may also elaborate a description, as in example (12) about a driver:

(12) *he* was good enough to stop like **and he** was smelling of drink **and he** was wobbling round.

The repetitions also create rhythm and spread out the information to a manageable density for the listener (see Tannen 1989: 49).

On the other hand the reduced form, shown in (13)-(14), suggests a closer relation (indicated in bold) between two clauses:

(13) They had group meetings **and** [ ] found it exciting

(14) And a van comes along **and** [ ] brings the stuff to the hospitals.

In written style these might be expressed by subordination such as (13)′ and (14)′:

(13)′ They had group meetings, **which** they found exciting

(14)′ And a van comes along **to** bring the stuff to the hospitals.

However it might be overstraining interpretation to find motivation for every instance, as in example (15):

(15) Then *I* get them **and I** put them in the machine **and** [ ] press stand.

In Vonnie's corpus there are few explicitly co-ordinated clauses, since she usually adds on clauses by contact only. (It could be argued that the lack of a co-ordinating conjunction is itself elliptic, but it would be so only if the conjunction were regarded as

syntactically obligatory). She shows a strong preference for initial co-ordination ellipsis, exceeding even written norms. Of her 15 same-subject co-ordinated clauses (in 4,500 words) she reduces 11, as in (16), in three instances ellipting a modal auxiliary as well as the subject, as shown in (17).

(16) *you* get up in the morning and [ ] feel real cold.

(17) *I should* bring them all out and [ ] play them all.

This result is somewhat surprising since Vonnie seemed to find particular difficulty in reading aloud the elliptical clause *and [ ] said...*, persistently tending to insert the repeated subject pronoun. This suggests that the relation between syntactic prediction and the reader's own language habit is not simple.

The few instances where Vonnie uses the full form seem to be motivated by narrative staging, as in (18), or semantic distinctiveness between the conjuncts (see Meyer 1995: 246) in example (19) (in this case between the living women and the dead husband):

(18) Tim was below **and he** was getting the coffee **and he** says…

(19) ah I knew Rita and Susan <slight pause> **and I** knew her husband.

To summarize: the only type of co-ordination ellipsis that appears in the corpus is omission of the subject, and sometimes the auxiliary, at the beginning of the second conjunct. The choice of reduction or repetition seems to be associated with communicative function.

Subordination reduction

Another type of textual ellipsis is SUBORDINATION REDUCTION, which is defined as an ellipse in a subordinate clause or in the main clause of a complex sentence (Wilson 2000: 41, 107). Again the lexical antecedent occurs within the sentence, so that in example (20), the ellipted verb phrase in the sub-clause *so you'll have to [ ]* is retrieved from the main clause *do the dishes*:

(20) Brian won't *do the dishes,* so you'll have to [ ]
(Wilson 2000: 105).

In example (21), the post-predicator portion missing from the main clause *Jim went [ ] too* is carried over from the preceding sub-clause *Because John was going to Silverstone* (Wilson 2000: 105).

(21) Because John *was going to Silverstone,* Jim went [ ] too.

Again there are no utterances to match Wilson's examples in either Mark's or Vonnie's conversations. There is even a counter-example, (22), where Mark repeats the subject and verb in a comparative clause, albeit omitting the adverbial *likely*:

(22) *You're* more likely to die than *you are* to be like <unclear = resuscitated>.

Yet Mark does have one instance of deletion in a dependent (conditional) clause: *If you don't [ ],* seen in (23). But the ellipsis refers back to an antecedent in a previous turn (*get a new one on the market*) rather than forward to its own main clause.

(23) M: We've got to.
R: Yes
M: If you don't [ ] you are going to ...<interrupted >.

So, although Mark's ellipsis resembles the written type of sub-ordination reduction in having a textual reference, its reference differs by being intersentential, not within the same complex sentence. It appears that subordination reduction as it occurs in written mode is rare or non-existent in Mark's and Vonnie's language.

However the conversations have numerous instances of a third type of subordination reduction, in which the subordinator itself is omitted. Ellipsis of subordinators (*zero relativizers* and *zero complementizers*) is moderately common in all registers, although more characteristic of speech than writing (Biber et al.1999: 609). Example (24), from Wilson (2000: 105), shows deletion of the relativizer:

(24) *The model* [ ] she had dressed in black swept down the catwalk.

The missing element *whom/that* is retrieved from knowledge of grammatical structure (Quirk et al. 1985: 861).

Zero relativizer

Of the 14 relative clauses in the microtexts, the great majority (71%) omit the relativizer. This far exceeds the 25% found in conversation, and the 17% or less found in written registers by Biber et al. (1999: 620).

Most of Mark's and Vonnie's zero relatives are of the standard type. That is, they occur when the subject of the relative clause, *your man* in (25) from Mark and *they* in (26) from Vonnie, is different from the antecedent.

> (25) and it comes out like you know *the ice cream* [ ] **your man** has in the van.

> (26) *all* [ ] **they** need to come when anyone is dead.

But some of their ellipses occur when the antecedent is also the subject of the relative clause:

> (27) M: there's a *fellow* today in Hospital [ ] got a heart attack [Hospital is a place-name]

> (28) M: I mean it's *the mould* [ ] comes down on top of it

> (29) V: I asked her was it *makeup* [ ] was causing … .

This is recognized as 'a marginally non-standard usage' which occurs in some conversational varieties (Biber et al. 1999: 619), most commonly when the main clause has an existential *there* construction, as in (27). The other two instances involve *it*-clefts (inverted in (29)).

Elsewhere Mark follows the standard usage, inserting *that*, both as subject in (30) and complement in (31), and in a *there* construction as in (32).

> (30) You know *that man* **that** was on the paper.

> (31) that's *the way* **that** Limerick people talk.

(32) Then there's *a checker* **that** checks.

He also occasionally uses other relativizers: *who*, *which*, and *where*. Thus, although Mark has a strong preference for omitting the relativizer, he also employs a variety of relative structures, including standard written types.

Vonnie has no *that* relativizer at all in her corpus (4,500 words). Relative clauses are in any case rare in her language, and example (29) above is one of only two in her microtext. The other is a *who* relative in the highly reduced (33), tentatively reconstructed in (33)':

(33) Jenny told me [ ] said [ ] *Marita's mother* **who** died

(33)' Jenny told me. [She] said [that it was] Marita's mother who died.

This implies that Vonnie is likely to have considerable difficulty dealing with *that* relatives in written text since they are foreign to her own language.

Zero-complementizer

Both Vonnie and Mark usually delete *that* following reporting verbs. This is usual in informal speech, which prefers deletion of complementizer *that* to its retention in the proportion of 5:1 (Biber et al. 1999: 680). Formal writing is exactly opposite, preferring retention to deletion in the same proportion. However the occurrence of the complementizer *that* in written text would not be strange for Vonnie and Mark, since they do sometimes include it.

Both informants follow the spoken norm in using zero-*that* after the most common reporting verbs *say* and *think*, shown in (34)-(35), and in retaining *that* after less usual verbs, for example Mark's *assume* and *insist* in (36) and (37).

(34) I'd *say* [ ] he came home alright.

(35) I *thought* [ ] you mightn't have the car.

(36) you *assume that* the next word is going to be such and such.

(37) she *insists that* they left her her hand belongings.

They also use zero-*that* after other common verbs: *bet* (Vonnie), *find*, and *know* (Mark).

Mark and Vonnie include the complementizer *that* less often, but with an overall frequency typical of conversation (Biber et al. 1999: 680). In some instances they retain it even after the common verbs of (38)-(39). This usually happens in utterances that show evidence of greater deliberation. Sometimes this is demonstrated by disfluency such as pauses in example (38), hesitant repetition in (39), and false start in (40).

(38) Yes her son, two daughters <pause> and <pause> I *think that* she's sons <unclear> I *think* [ ] she's sons.

(39) I mean I I sometimes *find that* they they say words I don't understand.

(40) I said I *told* her *that* I ah I was up all night.

But disfluency is not always involved. In Mark's example (41) the complement introduced by *said that* has been announced as a summary of a newspaper article:

(41) giving an account in a general way it *said that* people are slower.

Thus Mark and Vonnie are seen to include the complementizer *that* when they are giving greater attention to their choice of words. Consequently, written complement clauses which include *that* may be more recognizable than the reduced forms, in view of the attention required by decoding, even though they are less frequent in spoken language.

The main types of ellipsis discussed so far belong to written style, apart from the omission of relativizers and particularly complementizers, which is characteristic of speech. We now move on to categories of ellipsis that belong chiefly in spoken discourse, although they are also, of course, found represented in writing.

Conversational rejoinder

Conversational rejoinder is a form of textual ellipsis which is typical of dialogue. The antecedent is supplied in the text, but it is from the previous speaker's utterance rather than from within the sentence. The term is used in its narrow sense by Wilson (2000: 105) to refer to a reply to a question. The respondent assumes the information already given in the question and adds only the necessary new information. The few examples in the corpus are mainly responses to requests for clarification, as in (42) and (43).

> (42) R: where *was that did you say*?
>   M: [ ] a pub

Mark's reply focuses on the new material *a pub* by avoiding the redundancy of the hypothetical full form [*I said (that) that was in*] (Quirk et al. 1985: 708). Although Vonnie's economical reply *her sister* in (43b) is equally standard in dialogue, it provokes a further query '*[ ] Rita's sister?*' (which shares the same antecedent *Is Sara*). This is not because of any failure in the ellipsis, but because of the unclear reference of *her*. The sequence concludes with the most reduced form of all: a minimal response *yeah.*

> (43) a. R: who's *Sara*?
>   b. V: [ ] her sister   [*Sara is*]
>   c. R: [ ] Rita's sister?   [*Is Sara*]
>   d. V: yeah.

These exchanges also illustrate how ellipsis functions in conversation to strengthen the link between question and answer, binding interactive sequences together (Quirk et al. 1985: 708 and Eggins and Slade 1997).

In example (44) Mark foregoes maximum economy, using partial repetition of the antecedent in order to add emphasis and colour:

> (44) R: would they *sack him*?
>   M: oh they would [ ] yeah.   [*sack him*]

This concludes the categories of ellipsis in which the meaning is retrieved lexically from the textual context. The remaining

categories must be interpreted by inference from the situational context in which they occur. Although there are some special cases of situational ellipsis in written text (see Table 2) the focus here will be on the spoken varieties that are illustrated in the corpus.

Sentence initial ellipsis

The omission of SENTENCE INITIAL structural elements (one or more of: subject pronoun, auxiliary verb, and article) is a feature that is forbidden by sentence grammar but prevalent in informal talk. It is often labelled SITUATIONAL ELLIPSIS (e.g. McCarthy 1998), since the meaning of the ellipted item is understood from the dialogic situation. However I follow Wilson (2000: 105, 110) here in restricting the term *situational ellipsis* to instances where the meaning of the structural gap is inferred from an event observed in the extralinguistic situation (see next section).

Sentence initial ellipsis is illustrated in Table 3, which presents a longer extract from Mark's conversation, containing various ellipted and unellipted structures, together with brief comments in a parallel column.

Sentence initial ellipses occur at sites numbered 1, 2, 5, 9, 11 and 17. The items presumed from syntactic context to be missing (*the*, *it's*, interrogative auxiliary *do*, *it*) contain little or no information, illustrating the principle that speakers in dialogue add on only what they feel to be necessary. Their deletion functions to establish an informal tone while eliminating redundancy. However the principle of economy is countered by opposing needs for relative explicitness and repetition at sites [3] and [3a], and [7]. Indeed the commentary suggests that Mark needed to be more explicit in supplying information lexically about the machines and processes he was describing.

Mark's dialogue here demonstrates some of the variety of gaps and their interplay with unellipted forms that contribute to the dynamic of creating spoken communication and therefore social relationships. It is obviously very different from the structure of formal written discourse. The differences are not of a kind to cause direct interference in the process of reading, but they do highlight the dissimilarity between conversation and reading as communicative activities.

Table 3: Extract from Mark's factory dialogue

Conversation	Commentary
M: [1] machine fills up then when it gets stuck with scuttling. [2] like a mould and it [3] melts. at high temperatures. and it [3a] comes out like you know the ice cream [4] your man has in the van.	1. Initial ellipsis of the subject article [*The*]. 2. Initial ellipsis [*It's*]. Overestimation of shared knowledge of the process and its vocabulary makes the reference obscure. 3. Unellipted *it* following previous subject ellipsis might indicate a new subject, but its reference is unclear. 3a. It is unclear whether repetition of *it* implies another change of subject or narrative staging of the same subject. 4. Ellipsis of relativizer [*that/which*]
R: < laugh > M: [5] a bit like that R: [6] soft ice cream?	5. Initial ellipsis of [*It's*]. 6. Conversational rejoinder adding only a request for new information (*soft*) to a prior turn (*like…ice cream*). The missing structure cannot be exactly identified [*Do you mean? / Is it like?*]
M: [7] the soft ice cream R: yes M: but instead of coming downwards it's coming outwards. R: yes.	7. The definite article is added, referring to shared knowledge of alternative types of ice cream; *soft ice cream* is repeated as an affirmative reply.
M: [8] you know what I mean? R: yes. M: [9] coming out.	8. Initial ellipsis of auxiliary in a fixed phrase [*Do*]. 9. Initial ellipsis of [*It's*] followed by partial repetition of old information, perhaps buying processing time
P: <? > [10]	10. The third participant's turn is unclear on tape, but includes the paraphrase *extruded*.
M: extrude. yeah [11] extruded. it's three [12] there's three < ? > one [13] for the back [14] the middle and [14] the front. And so. sometimes you have to put in a dry shot if you know what I mean with no [15] with no wire inside of them. to clear out [16]. an <cough> specially when it's ah left there for a while. [17] gets gooey you know	11. Repetition indicating acceptance of the supplied word *extrude* and then reformulation to fit the required (ellipted) syntax [*It's*] extruded. 12. False start: *it's* is replaced by *there's*. 13. Ellipsis of the noun to avoid repetition of the (inaudibly) named item. 14. The phrase [*one N for*] is reduced further in its two repetitions. 15. False start. 16. Non-realization of the object of *clear out*. 17. Initial ellipsis of pronoun subject [*It*].

Situational ellipsis

Situational ellipsis arises from the interaction of speech with activity in the physical environment, of which Wilson's (2000: 105) example in (45) gives a dramatic instance:

> (45) B says: 'I wouldn't [ ], if I were you' (as A reaches for his gun).

In the relaxed socializing context of Mark's and Vonnie's conversations there was little call for it. But Mark's description of an end-product provides an example in (46), ending in an unfinished phrase which is completed by his physical action.

> (46) [ ] Comes out the factory then it looks like [ ] < tapping plastic case >

Non-elliptical gaps

In addition to the structural gaps described, the corpus naturally contains the typical lapses in conversation heard in spontaneous dialogue, such as false starts and abandoned clauses, and non-realizations of predicate structures (Wilson 2000: 105). These arise from the pressures of on-line production and are probably not relevant to reading prediction.

Conclusion

In concluding I shall summarize the main findings and draw out some implications for tutors.

First, the recordings of Mark's and Vonnie's conversations reveal that certain elliptic constructions found in writing are foreign to their spontaneous language. In co-ordinated clauses the only deletion they make is the omission of the pronoun (and sometimes modal/auxiliary) in initial position after the co-ordinator; there is neither gapping nor final coordination reduction. Nor do they use any subordination reduction that has its antecedent within the same sentence. On the other hand they very frequently omit the complementizer *that* and the relativizer, which is seldom done in writing. Indeed, Vonnie's corpus entirely lacks relativizer *that*, which

appears frequently in written text, and this is likely to cause confusion with other more familiar functions of *that*.

Research involving a larger number of informants would establish how general these findings are. There is also need for research to investigate whether 'interference' from spoken language does in fact cause problems, and to establish how productive spoken language relates to reading prediction and comprehension among adult poor readers.

However it is reasonable to recommend that tutors should be alert to elliptic structures that may be unfamiliar to their students and should be ready to teach them as they are encountered in written texts.

Secondly, Mark's and Vonnie's talk illustrates the way that spoken ellipsis is understood by reference to the situational context, in contrast to the textual context by which written ellipsis is interpreted. A hearer habitually relies on non-linguistic information and predictable shared knowledge within the face-to-face situation, but such clues are not available to a reader. Tutors conscious of the differing roles of situational and textual reference in ellipsis can encourage readers to make a transition from spoken to written discourse strategies, teaching them to search for the clues to missing meanings within the text, rather than from general knowledge, or even the tutor's face.

Thirdly, it has been shown how elliptic omissions have communicative functions in conversation, for example in creating informal social relationships, and are not random signs of carelessness and incompetence, as learners and tutors sometimes assume. Appreciation of the functions of the different types of gaps in spoken discourse should help to develop a positive respect for conversational language, and therefore improve confidence and motivation while learners are getting to grips with the structures of formal writing.

Transcription conventions

Ellipsis sites are indicated by brackets [ ], and antecedents are *italicized*. Angle brackets < > enclose non-linguistic sounds e.g. coughs and explanatory remarks. <?> means that the utterance is unclear. Transcribed utterances are not punctuated except that interrogative intonation is shown by a question mark.

Note

1. I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr. Anne O'Keeffe, for her very generous assistance and advice.

References

Biber, Douglas, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad, and Edward Finegan. 1999. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English.* London: Longman.

Carter, Ronald and Michael McCarthy. In press. *The Cambridge Grammar of English.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Childs, A. Margaret. 2002. A lexico-grammatical analysis of the conversational language of two adult learner readers. Unpublished MA thesis, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick.

Crystal, David. 1997. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eggins, Suzanne and Diana Slade. 1997. *Analysing Casual Conversation.* London: Cassell.

Klein, Cynthia. 1993. *Diagnosing Dyslexia: A Guide to the Assessment of Adults with Specific Learning Difficulties.* London: The Basic Skills Agency.

Labov, William. 1972. Some principles of linguistic methodology. *Language in Society* 1: 97-120.

McCarthy, Michael. 1998. *Spoken Language and Applied Linguistics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Meyer, Charles F. 1995. Coordination ellipsis in spoken and written American English. *Language Sciences* 17 (3): 241-269.

Milroy, James and Lesley Milroy. 1985. *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardization.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language.* London: Longman.

Reid, Jessie. 1972. Children's comprehension of syntactic features found in some extension readers. *Reading: Problems and Practices,* ed. by J. Reid, 394-403. London: Ward Lock Educational.

Scott, Mike. 1999. *Wordsmith Tools.* Software. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stanovich, Keith E. 1980. Toward an interactive compensatory model of individual differences in the development of reading fluency. *Reading Research Quarterly* 16: 32-61.

Tannen, Deborah. 1989. *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue and Imagery in Conversational Discourse.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trask, Robert Lawrence. 1997. *A Student's Dictionary of Language and Linguistics.* London: Arnold.

Tunmer, William E., Andrew R. Nesdale, and A. Douglas Wright. 1987. Syntactic awareness and reading acquisition. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 5: 25-34.

Wilson, Peter. 2000. *Mind the Gap: Ellipsis and Stylistic Variation in Spoken and Written English.* London: Pearson Education.