1. INTRODUCTION

As the ‘default’ method for teaching foreign languages for the last twenty years (at least in the industrialized West – cf. Canagarajah 1999, Phillipson 1992), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has re-oriented teachers’ and learners’ priorities towards the acquisition of practical speaking skills in the foreign language (L2). The demand for oral communication courses has increased exponentially and so has the number of schools that claim to offer a truly communicative learning experience, with communicative often being a synonym of full-immersion, grammar-free, fun. However, in spite of the optimism that has accompanied the design and implementation of CLT-based programmes in almost every corner of the world, it has become increasingly clear that a strong version of CLT, such as the one informing the famous Canadian immersion programmes (cf. Lightbown 1985), with its emphasis on the acquisition of coping strategies and the rejection of traditional form-focused instruction, may contribute to the fossilization of learners’ L2 grammatical systems (cf. Ellis 1997, Sheen 2002), thus hampering the development of accurate expression in the foreign language. Second language acquisition theorists, who were the first to advocate a «natural approach» to foreign language learning (Krashen 1981, 1985; Krashen and Terrell 1983), are now keen to stress the need for a «focus on form» (Doughty and Williams 1998, Long 1991) within meaning-based CLT as an antidote to the development of ‘pidgin’ L2s.

After decades of neglect, grammar teaching thus seems to be back on the language teaching professional’s agenda. This fresh interest in grammar is
undoubtedly to be welcomed; however, any proposals for new, research-driven options of form-focused instruction are bound to turn out to be little more than old wine in new bottles if they rest on outdated views of grammar. Traditional grammatical descriptions stem from a written model of language (McCarthy 1998) and are thus likely to be of little help in designing language programmes that aim at learners’ development of accuracy in oral communication. Arguably, what teachers would need most are descriptions of the grammar of the spoken language originating from the analysis of spontaneous (unrehearsed) native speaker interactions. They would also benefit from being aware of what features of L2 spoken grammar are actually represented in their learners’ interlanguage. Teaching is a complex activity, and whatever theoretical knowledge a teacher acquires is always filtered by his/her set of personal beliefs, attitudes and accumulated experience (Woods 1996). That said, there is no gainsaying that a more aware teacher is in a better position to make principled decisions and manage the teaching/learning process efficiently.

This paper is an attempt to shed some light on the way an important feature of the grammar of spoken English, tails, is used by native English speakers and Italian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. To do so, it will draw upon two native-speaker corpora — the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE) and the spoken section of the Longman Spoken and Written English (LSWE) Corpus1 — as well as a corpus of Italian EFL learners’ spoken interlanguage, the Role Play (RP) Corpus, which has been assembled in the Department of Language Studies and Comparative Literature of Milan State University.

I shall start by providing a brief overview of recent developments in the description of spoken English grammar. I shall then zero in on the analysis of tails. First, the distribution and the formal and functional characteristics of tails in native speaker English will be highlighted. Next, the use that undergraduate and postgraduate EFL students at Milan State University make of tails in their spoken output will be analysed. Finally, possible learning and teaching implications of the issues raised in this paper will be discussed.

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1 The CANCODE consists of 5 million running words of informal spoken English recorded in five broad contexts (transactional, professional, pedagogical, socialising, intimate – cf. McCarthy 1998). The LSWE Corpus is made up of over 40 million words, 6.5 million of which are from conversation.
2. WHAT IS SPOKEN GRAMMAR?

Linguists’ interest in spoken English grammar is far from a recent phenomenon. Indeed, Palmer (1924) is often quoted (Leech 2000, McCarthy 1998, McCarthy and Carter 2001) as an early example of research into this aspect of English grammar. It is, however, the availability of large computerised corpora of spoken English and the development of sophisticated concordancing software that have been associated with the recent surge of interest in the grammar of conversation, as evidenced by the plethora of articles and books on the subject that have been published in the last 10 years. Corpora such as the CANCODE and the LSWE Corpus have opened up avenues of research that were unthinkable only 20 years ago. Indeed, unlike other spoken corpora, which tend to be heavily biased towards broadcast speech, the CANCODE and the conversation component of the LSWE Corpus are based chiefly on recordings of unrehearsed spoken exchanges, thereby providing a reliable and unadulterated picture of informal spoken English across a range of settings (shops, offices, private homes, educational institutions).

What are the main issues that corpus-based research into spoken English grammar has brought to the fore? According to Leech (2000), the crux of the problem of any description of the grammar of spoken English lies in the definition of the status of spoken grammar with respect to the grammar of the written language. Does English have only one overarching grammatical framework or is the grammar of speech so fundamentally different from that of writing to qualify as an autonomous system? Valid arguments have been put forward in support of both the ‘one grammar’ and ‘two grammars’ hypotheses.

Proponents of the first hypothesis (D. Biber, S. Johansson, G. Leech, S. Conrad and E. Finegan, authors of the ground-breaking corpus-based Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English – cf. also Leech 2000) stress the fact that the grammatical differences between the registers of English are more a matter of quantity than one of quality. The same phenomena are present in each variety; only their numerical distribution is different. For example, it is pointed out that even such features as dysfluencies and repetitions, which are traditionally viewed as a trademark of conversation, do indeed recur, albeit to a far lesser extent, in written English. Leech (2000) char-

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2 The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English analyses the grammar of four main registers of the English language – three written registers (fiction, newspaper language, academic prose) and one spoken register (conversation).
acterises Biber et al.’s approach to language description as inherently bottom-up, in that they first concern themselves with grammar, viz. the formal features of the language, and subsequently address more wide-ranging issues of discourse. Underpinning their analysis of four main registers of English is a common «descriptive grammar». The maximal syntactic unit in this grammar is the «C-unit», which is an umbrella term that characterises both «clausal and non-clausal units»³. The overarching «descriptive grammar» is instantiated in specific «performance grammars» for each register. What determines the form that the «performance grammars» take are the different frequencies of occurrence in the four registers of the same core of formal features. To account for the observed differences in «performance grammar» between registers, possible functional explanations are subsequently put forward, thereby shifting the focus of the analysis on discoursal considerations. Table 1 below shows a list of grammatical features which are more frequent in spoken than in written English grouped according to the functions with which they are associated. The high incidence of situational ellipsis⁴ in spoken English – to take an example – is thus seen by Biber et al. as a consequence of the fact that oral communication takes place in a shared physical and temporal context.

Table 1 - Form-function associations in spoken grammar (from Leech 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTION</th>
<th>FORMAL FEATURES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared context</td>
<td>Personal Pronouns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pro-forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ellipsis (Didn’t know)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nondclausal material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low specification</td>
<td>Low mean phrase length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elliptic genitives (hers, mine, yours...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hedges (sort of, kind of, like..)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low lexical density</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ A clausal unit is «a structure consisting of an independent clause together with any dependent clauses embedded within it» (Biber et al. 1999: 1069). The concept of C-Unit originated from descriptions of the grammar of conversation but it is now proposed (Leech 2000) that it should also be employed to describe written registers.

⁴ Situational ellipsis is the omission of grammatical elements – normally pronouns and auxiliary verbs – which are recoverable through situational knowledge. In the utterance Got a pen? (Biber et al. 1999: 1048) we have ellipsis of the subject (you) and the auxiliary (have).
The opposite camp to the one I have just been describing is represented by the researchers that Leech (2000) has called the «Nottingham school» (Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy, both professors at the University of Nottingham) as well as by David Brazil, the author of *A Grammar of Speech* (1995). These scholars maintain that categories rooted in a written model of grammar are often ill-suited to describe spoken English grammar. Traditional sentence-based syntax, for example, does not account for such phenomena as indeterminate and incomplete structures and jointly produced grammatical units, which are endemic to spoken English (cf. Carter and McCarthy 2001).

Carter and McCarthy, in particular, have been very vocal over the last 10 years in advocating that spoken grammar should be approached with an open mind:

The sequence in italics in the following extract is an example of an indeterminate structure:

«I mean they said they’d have to take his car in for two days. And he says All it is is s=straightening a panel. And they’re like, Oh no. It’s all new panel. You can’t do this» (McCarthy and Carter 2001: 53).

A joint construction of a grammatical unit is illustrated in the following short dialogue:

Speaker 1: «Yeah. *Let’s just have on*»
Speaker 2: «*Some rice*»
Speaker 1: «Yeah» (McCarthy and Carter 2001: 54).
Spoken grammar must always be elaborated in its own terms, using spoken data. If, at the end of the exercise, spoken and written are shown to have many features in common, then this is a convenience to be thankful for, and not something that can be prejudged without careful research (McCarthy 1998: 90).

Reversing the grammar-to-discourse approach adopted by Biber et al., the proponents of the ‘two grammars’ hypothesis point out that, to appreciate the distinguishing features of spoken grammar, it is crucial to start off by analysing the context in which communication takes place (McCarthy 1998) and the speakers’ communicative needs and purposes (Brazil 1995), in that, as McCarthy (1998: 78) has very cogently put it, it is «discourse» that «drives grammar, not the reverse» (cf. also Hughes and McCarthy 1998). A consequence of this change in perspective is the emphasis placed on genre-sensitive grammatical descriptions. McCarthy and Carter (1995) note, for example, that situational ellipsis does not occur indiscriminately in all genres of informal spoken English, as is often maintained. Indeed, it does not seem to be attested in familiar spoken narratives. The probable reason for this state of affairs is that the events recounted in narratives are usually distant in time and space from the ‘here-and-now’ of the interaction. In such circumstances, the speaker needs to make references as clear and as explicit as possible. Ellipsis is thus avoided as any unrealised element would be extremely hard – well-nigh impossible – for the listener to recover.

Although convenient for heuristic purposes, Leech’s (2000) grouping of recent theories of spoken grammar into two opposite camps runs the risks of obscuring important issues raised by commentators of both philosophical orientations. I shall touch upon two in particular which, I feel, will be at the heart of academic research in years to come. The first issue concerns the language in which descriptions of spoken English grammar are couched. It has been pointed out (Leech 2000, McCarthy 1998), for example, that the same phenomenon is often given a host of different labels in the literature. This terminological confusion is probably one of the reasons why spoken grammar is still scarcely represented in reference and pedagogical materials for students and teachers of English (cf. Carter and McCarthy 1995 and section 5 below). Another issue that has been raised is the fact that many forms of communication nowadays involve mixed-mode language. Does the language used in e-mails and text-messages, to mention but two topical examples, display features of written or spoken grammar? It is not too far-fetched to envisage that the impact of new technologies on everyday communication will make the boundaries between genres, registers and varieties even fuzzier and the distinctions between spoken and written grammar less definite.
3. Tails

In the previous section, I sketched out some general characteristics of the grammar of spoken English. I shall now focus my analysis on the phenomena variously called «tails» (Carter and McCarthy 1995; Carter and McCarthy 1997; McCarthy 1998), «amplificatory tags» (Quirk et al. 1985), «tags» (Biber et al. 1999) and «right dislocation» (Huddleston and Pullum 2002). For the sake of clarity, I will henceforth refer to them with the term tails.

To start with, I shall explore the form, functions and patterns of distribution of tails in native spoken English, as displayed in the CANCODE and in the conversation section of the LSWE Corpus.

3.1. Tails in native-speaker usage

Tails have suffered long-standing prejudice in linguistic research as a result of being viewed as examples of sloppy English (McCarthy 1998). More recently, they have been associated in the literature with «interpersonal grammar», insofar as, in oral communication, they «signal the relationships between participants and position the speaker in terms of his/her stance or attitude» (Carter and McCarthy 1995: 51). Their status as grammatical as opposed to discoursal units has been the subject of some controversy, with the Nottingham school (cf. Carter and McCarthy 1995) viewing them as constituents of an «extended clause structure» characteristic of spoken grammar, and Biber et al. (1999) and Leech (2000) highlighting their discoursal and pragmatic features and their lack of grammatical ties with the main clause to which they are appended. Indeed, Biber et al. (1999: 1072-1074) refer to a «composite utterance structure», in itself a pragmatic rather than a grammatical unit, in which tails follow the body of the utterance, as in the example in Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preface</th>
<th>Body</th>
<th>Tag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| North and south London | they’re two different worlds | aren’t they?...

Let us now look in more detail at the various types of tails attested in spoken English and their formal features.
3.1.1. Form

At least three possible subtypes of tails have been identified in the literature. In this paper, I will use *tail* as the superordinate term and refer to each of the three subtypes (cf. Table 3) with the label *tag*.

Table 3 - Subtypes of tails

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TAILS</th>
<th>Noun phrase tags</th>
<th>Declarative tags</th>
<th>Question tags</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

From a formal point of view (cf. Biber *et al.* 1999, McCarthy and Carter 1997), tails involve the reinforcement of a constituent of the clause (usually the subject), through two modalities:

A. the *elaboration/naming* of the antecedent pronoun, as in the following example of the first subtype of tails (noun phrase tags):

*They do I suppose take up a lot of time don't they kids?*  

Here the noun phrase tag (*kids*) appended to the end of the utterance names the subject pronoun (*they*). I should also mention, in passing, that this utterance displays a clustering of features with a similar function. Indeed, in addition to the noun phrase tag, we have another type of tail (*don't they*), and a hedge (*I suppose*). The combined effect of these structures is to make the affective impact of the utterance much more noticeable. Such clusterings of features are very common in spoken English (cf. Biber *et al.* 1999, Carter and McCarthy 1997, McCarthy and Carter 1997).

B. the *reiteration* of the subject and the main verb. The two extracts below exemplify the two other subtypes of tails (declarative tags and question tags):

*She was a character she was really*  

*So Mrs Dowling was the terror of the neighbourhood was she*  
In both cases, the subject and the auxiliary are repeated at the end of the utterance. Question tags also involve subject-auxiliary inversion.

How are tails characterised prosodically? Most tend to be pronounced with a rising intonation (Aijmer 1989, Quirk et al. 1985). Question tags, however, can admit either a rising or a falling intonation, according to whether they are used to ask real questions or just to seek confirmation.

3.1.2. Function

Overall, tails are listener-sensitive devices. They tend to be used to make the listener’s life easier by clarifying aspects of the message or creating an atmosphere of informality and an affective bond between speaker and listener. Let us look at four examples and comment in more detail on the function of each tail in turn.

A. *It can leave you feeling very weak it can though apparently shingles, can’t it?* *(CANCODE, cf. McCarthy and Carter 2001: 62)*.

As McCarthy and Carter (2001: 62) note, the tails in this extract have a clear affective function. The speaker is empathising with the listener, who has just recovered from shingles and, to do this, s/he uses the personal pronoun you and a string of tails. It is quite common in spoken English for tails to accompany evaluative statements and the expression of feelings and opinions.

B. *Did they have any, the kids?* *(LSWE, cf. Biber et al. 1999: 957)*

The noun phrase tag (*the kids*) in this utterance is aimed at clarifying the reference of the subject pronoun (*they*). The speaker realises that s/he has not given his/her interlocutor enough clues for him/her to identify who is being talked about, so s/he retraces his/her steps and adds the final noun phrase tag. The discourse-old character of this noun phrase seems to be a feature shared by most tails (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Quirk et al. 1985) ⁶.

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⁶ According to Quirk *et al.* (1985), the fact that tails are normally pronounced with a rise is a confirmation of their status as old information.
C. It was a strange sort of feeling walking into that place

In this case, the use of the tail is aimed at easing the processability of the utterance. Walking into that place is a ‘heavy’ constituent; it is shifted to the end of the utterance (end-weight principle), thus relieving planning pressure and making the utterance easier to process (Aijmer 1989).

D. When Sabib used to come out and make rice and your saucepan used to be it’d be thick about an inch thick on the bottom it would and that was the best part of the rice

The declarative tag (it would) is used to emphasize the preceding statement. By appending a declarative tag to the utterance, the speaker directs the listener to the key information in the message.

3.1.3. Distribution

The results of an analysis carried out by Biber et al. (1999) point to the occurrence of approximately 200 tails (noun phrase tags) per million words in the conversation section of the LSWE Corpus. Tails are thus not particularly frequent in spoken English compared to other features of spoken grammar – the discourse marker well, for example, occurs about 5500 times per million words (cf. Biber et al. 1999).

Tables 4 and 5 summarize the main features of tails in native-speaker usage that have been highlighted in this section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTIONS OF TAILS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listener-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foster affectivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 Findings based on a sample of approximately 200,000 words (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 957).
4. TAILS IN ITALIAN EFL LEARNERS’ INTERLANGUAGE

Let us now move on to consider the formal and functional characteristics and the patterns of distribution that tails have in the spoken interlanguage of Italian undergraduate and postgraduate EFL students at Milan State University. My main concern throughout the analysis will be to ascertain how the way tails are used by a sample of Italian EFL learners compares with the way they are used by native English speakers. Before I proceed with the analysis, though, I shall outline the main characteristics of the RP Corpus.

4.1. The RP learner corpus

The RP Corpus is an example of a learner corpus of spoken English. Granger sums up the defining features of learner corpora thus:

Computer learner corpora are electronic collections of authentic FL/SL textual data assembled according to explicit design criteria for a particular SLA/FLT purpose. They are encoded in a standardised and homogeneous way and documented as to their origin and provenance (Granger 2002: 7).

The corpus collection, co-ordinated by Prof. Maria Cecilia Rizzardi of Milan State University, is aimed at the description of the grammatical features which make learners’ spoken language sound foreign (cf. Rizzardi et al. 2004). The data assembly has been running for two years and it is still going on, the size of the corpus currently standing at about 28,000 words. The RP Corpus

8 Carter and McCarthy (1995: 143 – cf. also 2001) have pointed out that for corpus-based lexical studies to be valid, corpora should be very large. Studies of grammatical features, however, can be based on smaller corpora, as grammar consists of a limited set of patterns.
consists of audiorecordings of role-plays and other oral communicative tasks\(^9\) carried out by Italian EFL learners during their oral exams\(^{10}\). The design criteria of the corpus are listed in Table 6 below. The students who contributed the data on which the present paper is based were first-year undergraduates of Foreign languages and literatures and postgraduate (Master’s) students of ICT for the Humanities at Milan State University. Their level of general proficiency in English was roughly intermediate (Common European Framework Levels B1 and B2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DESIGN CRITERIA</th>
<th>Learners</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>mother tongue</strong>: Italian</td>
<td>• context: final oral exam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>learning context</strong>: large state university in Italy; students are enrolled on undergraduate degree course in Foreign Languages and Literatures and Master’s degree in ICT for the Humanities</td>
<td>• tasks: role-plays and other communicative tasks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>levels of proficiency</strong>: Framework Levels B1 – B2</td>
<td>• input: written (task cards)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>tasks</strong>: role-plays and other communicative tasks</td>
<td>• participants: two or three students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>context</strong>: final oral exam</td>
<td>• interaction: two- or three-way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>input</strong>: written (task cards)</td>
<td>• audience: one ‘assessor’ and one ‘observer’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>participants</strong>: two or three students</td>
<td>• time limit: 15-20 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>interaction</strong>: two- or three-way</td>
<td>• time limit: 15-20 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>audience</strong>: one ‘assessor’ and one ‘observer’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>time limit</strong>: 15-20 minutes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Data analysis

Analysis of the RP Corpus was carried out manually on the basis of the transcriptions of the oral interactions. I singled out and counted the occurrences of tails in the corpus. For each occurrence, I noted what specific task it was

\(^9\) The tasks are modelled on part 2 of the Speaking paper of Cambridge ESOL’s Preliminary English Test (PET).

\(^{10}\) As has been pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, this might be a drawback of the corpus since it does not comprise actual natural speech (cf. also infra). However, the tasks the students are asked to engage in are specially designed in order to replicate as much as possible the typical situations in which Italian university students might need to use English (both in their country and abroad). Recording students’ interactions during their oral exams has enabled the researchers to rely upon a larger sample of informants than would be possible if attempts were made to record naturally occurring speech.
produced in and its formal and functional features (cf. Table 7). Then I identified those occurrences which displayed the same characteristics as native English tails and those whose formal and/or functional features deviated from native English speech norms.

Table 7 - Coding tails from the RP Corpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Family Holiday – Damonte2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occurrence</td>
<td>&lt;B1&gt; yes darling I think I found a em I found one in Internet and . I think it’s good for us because there are the nursery and the baby-sitting service and it’s not so expensive this one and... &lt;\B1&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>noun phrase tag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td>foster affectivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.1. Form and distribution of tails in the RP Corpus

The RP Corpus has a total of 14 occurrences of tails and tail-like phenomena (cf. Figure 1). Most occurrences (12) are noun phrase tags, which are used in a native-like way in over 80% of cases.
The extract which follows shows a native-like noun phrase tag from the RP Corpus:

<B2> to the mountains. oh no. I don’t want to go absolutely to the mountain I prefer to go to the sea. it’s more relaxing <\B2>
<B1> it’s boring the sea <\B1>
(RP, Damonte15)

The speakers have been involved in a role-play in which they are supposed to discuss possible holiday destinations and agree on one which suits them both. They have been exchanging ideas and opinions about different options when B1 expresses an evaluation of one alternative (going to the seaside) in an utterance with a final noun phrase tag (the sea). The noun phrase tag in this extract accords with native speaker norms, both formally (it is made up of a noun phrase which names the subject pronoun anaphorically) and functionally (it lends an affective overlay to the utterance). Let us now compare this extract with one from a different interaction:

<B2> I think he considers himself very handsome and so <laughs> I think it would be better for him something like em cosmetics em items or I I know in his house there’s lot of mirrors and he likes cosmetics <\B2>
<B1> yes I know but I think it’s it would be better a city map <\B1>
(RP, Damonte5)

The speakers are discussing ideas for a present to give to a mutual friend, who has just passed an important examination. Although superficially similar to the occurrence in the previous extract, these examples have been classified as non-native-like. Despite resembling standard English tails from a formal point of view (they are both noun phrases appended to the end of clauses), they turn out to be pragmatically inappropriate. Indeed, they introduce new information, whereas, as we have mentioned above, tails in English tend to be discourse-old items. It could be hypothesised that the learners are struggling to cope with the demands of online communication, so they have resorted to these structures in an attempt to avoid having ‘heavy’ constituents at the start of the clause. Obviously, they do not yet control the pattern *it + be + adjective + to infinitive*, which would have been a better alternative in this context.

In addition to noun phrase tags, there are two occurrences of question tags but no occurrences of declarative tags in the RP Corpus. The extract below illustrates a question tag from the RP Corpus:
The question tag *have you* seems to break the traditional rule for question tags, which prescribes that the polarity of the preceding verb must be reversed (cf. Bennett 1989). This rule is, however, often ‘ignored’ by native English speakers themselves, as Carter and McCarthy (2003: 117) point out:

in real conversations... tails regularly fail to conform to this rule and... almost any tag can go with any kind of utterance.

How can we account for the distribution of the three subtypes of tags in the *RP Corpus*? I have said that 10 occurrences of *tails* in the corpus are native-like noun phrase tags. If we work out their ratio of occurrence per million words we arrive at a figure of over 350, which is higher than the frequency that noun phrase tags have in the *LSWE Corpus* (cf. Figure 2).

![Figure 2](http://www.ledonline.it/mpw/)

*Figure 2 - Distribution of noun phrase tags in the LSWE Corpus and the RP Corpus*

A possible hypothesis for the extensive use of noun phrase tags by Italian learners is that, since these right-dislocation phenomena are also attested in Italian\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Some researchers (cf. Miller and Weinert 1998) hypothesise that spoken grammar is one of the «language universals» which are realised in different ways in all languages.
(cf. Renzi et al. 2001: 145-148), learners are simply transferring these features from their L1. However, as question or declarative tags do not occur in Italian, their emergence in Italian learners’ English interlanguage can arguably be brought about only by considerable exposure to informal registers of spoken English or focused teaching. Neither condition seems to be relevant to our informants, who have been learning English mainly (if not exclusively) in an Italian context, and have been exposed to formal (chiefly written) registers of English. It is thus scarcely surprising that these two types of tails should be very rare in their interlanguage.

4.2.2. Functions of tails in the RP Corpus

I shall now attempt to shed some light on the functions of the 12 native-like tails attested in the RP Corpus. The four categories that were identified in section 3.1.2 (cf. also Table 4) have also proved useful in characterising the role that the tails produced by the EFL learners play in context. As the graph in Figure 3 shows, more than half of the occurrences (7 out of 12) seem to have a broad affective function.

![Figure 3 - Functions of tails in the RP Corpus](http://www.ledonline.it/mpw/)

This is clearly illustrated by the following example, in which the noun phrase tag (*hair*) is associated with an evaluative stance:
also in <name of place> there is a male and female hairdresser

oh yeah but it’s not important for you hair for me I have a long hair <laughs>

Of the remaining 5 occurrences of native-like tails, 4 seem to be aimed at clarifying some aspect of the preceding statements and 1 at making the utterance easier to process. I could not find any occurrence of tails used for emphasis. The two extracts that follow exemplify the clarification and the easing processability functions of tails respectively:

Ok ehm I’d like to know how many record ehm this «Wild Woman» sells their hit single

mm isn’t it boring

no I don’t think [ so

just seeing two people

The data I have been analysing seems to point to the fact that the tails from the interlanguage of the sample of students who took part in this RP Corpus project have a predominantly affective function. Indeed, they very often co-occur with evaluative adjectives (in the body of the utterance), such as «boring», «interesting», «not so expensive». These findings accord with the results of an investigation of native speaker speech reported in Aijmer (1989), whereby 86% of tails in a sample of the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English display a phatic (i.e. social, affective) function. Also, the non-occurrence of tails used for purposes of emphasis in the RP Corpus is in keeping with the fact that this kind of function tends to be associated with declarative tags in the CANCODE, which are not attested in the RP Corpus. What sets the patterns of distribution of the Italian learners’ tails apart from native English speech patterns, however, is the fact that clusterings of tails, hedges, modal adverbs and vague language, which are very common in native spoken English and play an important role in the creation of «intimacy» between the interlocutors (cf. McCarthy and Carter 1997), are few and far between in the RP Corpus. The affective impact of the learners’ interlanguage is hence much lessened. A possible reason for the virtual absence of clusterings of features of interpersonal grammar in the learners’ interlanguage may be the fact that
the oral interaction tasks on which the RP Corpus is based were carried out under exam conditions and the learners often reported feeling anxious about their performance. It is admittedly difficult in these circumstances to expect completely natural language use.

To conclude this brief analysis of the way tails are used by a group of Italian EFL learners, I would like to point out that the findings that have been illustrated are based on too restricted a sample to be generalisable to other contexts. They do, however, provide us with tentative evidence of the fact that features of spoken English grammar are attested in learners’ interlanguage, albeit with patterns of use and distribution which often diverge from native speaker norms.

In the next section I shall highlight some possible implications of the issues raised in this paper for the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language.

5. LEARNING AND TEACHING TAILS

The crucial issue that language teaching professionals should address with regard to how spoken English grammar is learnt and taught is, I think, whether spoken grammar needs to be taught explicitly or it can safely be left to ‘take care of itself’.

I have argued that since Italian has right-dislocated structures which behave in a similar way to the English noun phrase tags, a major role in the acquisition of tails by Italian learners might be played by L1-transfer processes. Formal instruction would then be unnecessary. However, it has been hypothesised that transfer may lead to the overuse of a structure which has a lower distribution in the L2 with respect to the learners’ L1. The opposite phenomenon has also been reported (cf. McCarthy and Carter 2001). Students may avoid using a structure which is present in their L1 but looks ‘strange’, largely because it does not recur often enough in the L2 input to which they are exposed. This is reason enough for favouring authentic spoken materials in classroom teaching over the sanitised ‘coursebook language’ which students are often fed. It could be

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argued, then, that even in the acquisition of spoken grammar structures that are liable to L1 transfer, teaching may have a beneficial role to play, if only to increase the likelihood of learners «noticing» (Schmidt 1990) these features.

But how should spoken grammar be taught? Carter and McCarthy (1995) advocate what they call the «three I’s» (Illustration, Interaction, Induction) model, which resembles other recent teaching paradigms (e.g. Lewis’ 1993 Observe – Hypothesise – Experiment cycle). What these proposals have in common is an exploratory, discovery-based approach to grammar teaching. Students are led to develop an awareness of features of spoken English grammar through engaging with carefully selected authentic input. The acquisition of «habits of observation» (Carter, Hughes and McCarthy 1998) is seen as a crucial learning strategy which enables students to make the most of learning opportunities outside the classroom. Examples of activities that are aimed at raising learners’ awareness (cf. Willis and Willis 1996) of structures such as tails can be found in two recently produced textbooks (Carter, Hughes and McCarthy 2000; Nettle and Hopkins 2003), which draw upon CANCODE materials, and a teacher training handbook (Willis 2003). Apart from these innovative materials, however, the number of aids that teachers can turn to both to find out more about spoken English grammar and to look for ideas on how to teach it is disappointingly low. As far tails are concerned, for example, although brief mention is made of «reinforcement tags» in Swan (1995), a reference book for teachers and learners, I found no evidence of this phenomenon being dealt with in major pedagogical grammar textbooks for EFL/ESL teachers I have consulted (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999, Kennedy 2003, Master 1996, Parrott 2000). It is hoped that recent calls for a broadening of the «unstated curriculum» of EFL courses (Kennedy 2004) will encourage material writers and teachers to pay more attention to the grammatical features of informal spoken English.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide a description of the phenomenon of tails as they are used by native English speakers and a sample of Italian EFL university students. It makes no bones about being exploratory in nature and limited in scope. As Carter, Hughes and McCarthy (1998: 83) acknowledge, research into spoken English grammar is «still in its infancy» and whatever
findings are arrived at must be viewed as provisional and open to modification. Further investigations into the interlanguage of different groups of learners, with different L1s and educational backgrounds will be needed before any generalisations can be made. However, as corpora of authentic spoken English become more widely available, it is hoped that small-scale studies like the one I have illustrated in this paper will soon be within the reach of most EFL teachers.

REFERENCES


