


The grammar of conversation

BELTA webinar – 20th May 2021



Acknowledgements

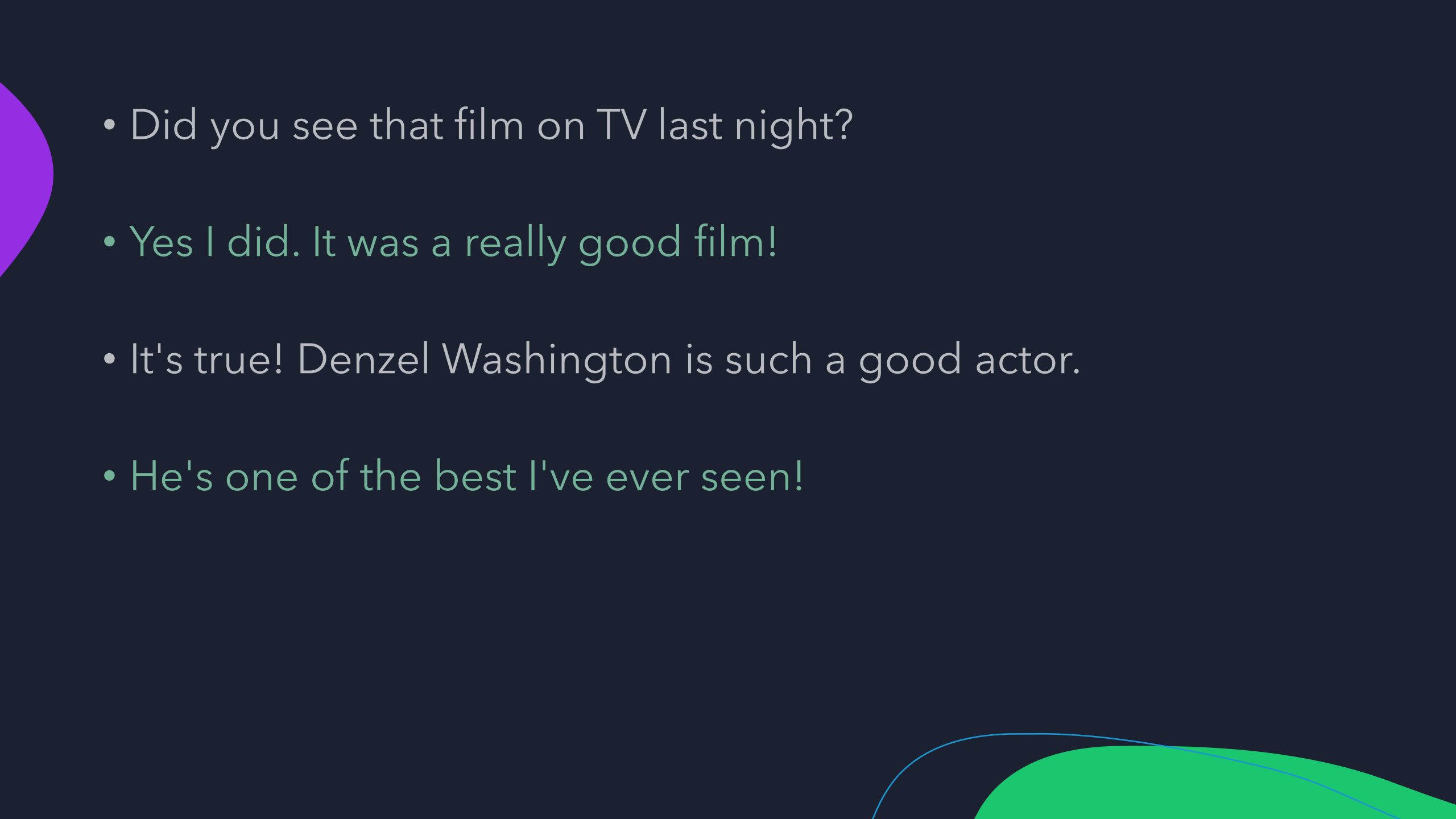
- Mike McCarthy
 - Geraldine Mark
 - Caroline Caygill, Ken Paterson, and Rebecca Sewell
 - Ivor Timmis
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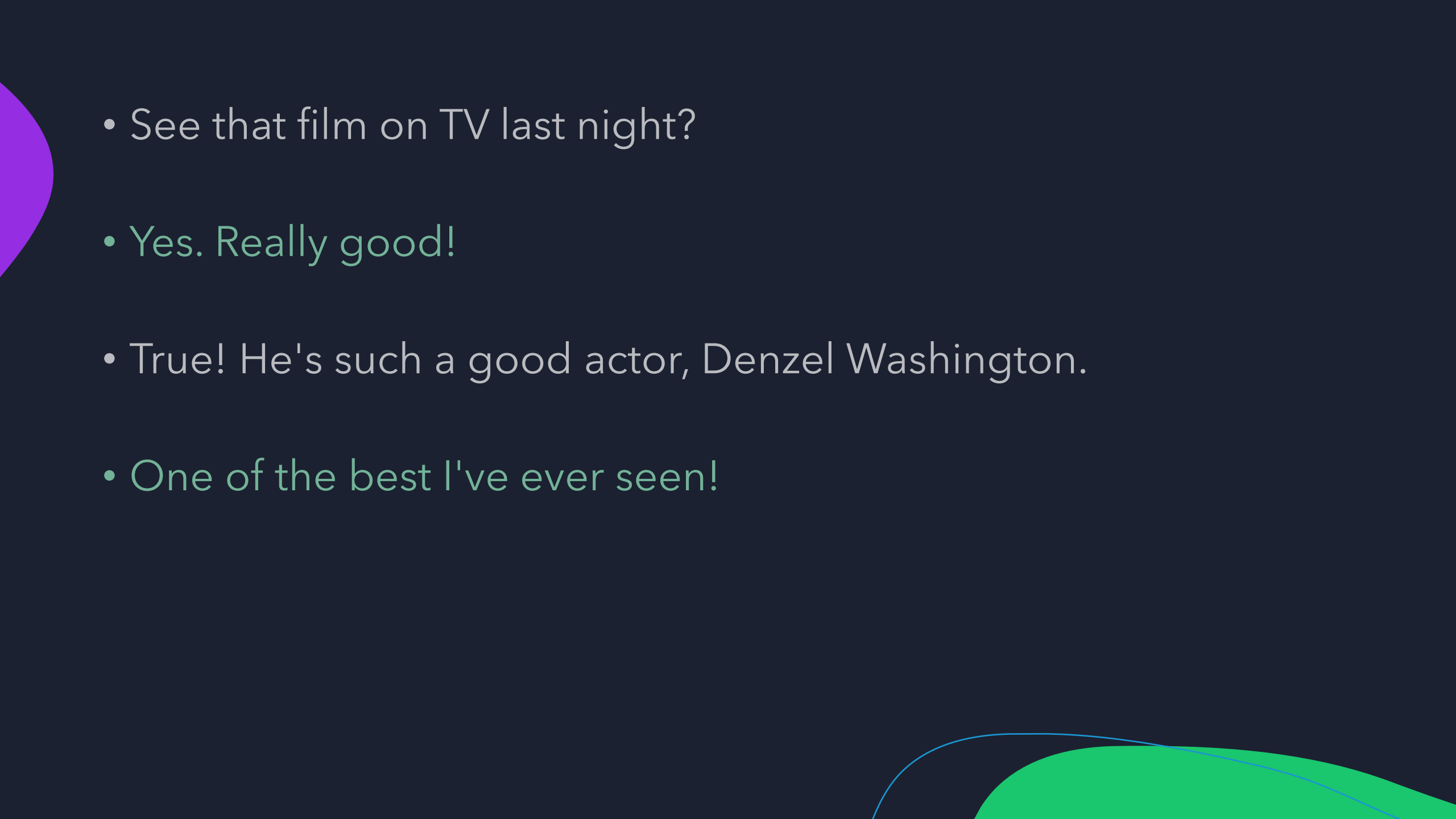


Two dialogues

How much do they resemble 'real' conversation?



- 
- Did you see that film on TV last night?
 - Yes I did. It was a really good film!
 - It's true! Denzel Washington is such a good actor.
 - He's one of the best I've ever seen!

- 
- See that film on TV last night?
 - Yes. Really good!
 - True! He's such a good actor, Denzel Washington.
 - One of the best I've ever seen!

Background to spoken grammar

- Grammar presented in textbooks traditionally based on written English.
- Improvements in sound recording devices.
- Improvements in computer technology.
- There are many items of conversational grammar that rarely/never feature in textbooks.

Examples


- Conditionals.
- Only around 40% of conditional structures in spoken language are one of the three types presented in course books.
- Reported speech
- Past continuous: "Chris was telling me that they're closing all the shops next week."



Writing

- Not time-bound
- Planned
- Has one voice
- Often needs to explain context
- Complete sentences, punctuation

Conversation

- Time-bound
 - Unplanned
 - Co-constructed
 - Reflects immediate context
 - Full of incomplete structures
- 

What are some key examples of spoken grammar?



I was thinking that Ibiza might be a, um, a good place to go this summer.

Yeah although it might be a bit crowded.

Where else then?

Ever been to Sardinia?

No but that could be alright.

It's one of the nicest islands, Sardinia.

Near Corsica right?

Mhm, think so.



This colleague of mine, Mark, he was telling me that it had the best beaches he's ever seen.

Which is why we should go!

Examples of spoken grammar

- ~~"Have you ever been to Sardinia?"~~
- ~~"I think so."~~
- ~~"Do you need a hand?"~~
- ~~"It sounds good!"~~
- Situational ellipsis.

- "This colleague of mine, Mark, he was telling me that it had the best beaches he's ever seen."
- Those pens, are they yours?
- That teacher you mentioned yesterday, does she do exam classes?
- Heads

- 
- “It’s one of the nicest islands, Sardinia.”
 - It’s terrible, this traffic.
 - They’re so sneaky, these politicians!
 - Tails
- 


- I was thinking that Ibiza might be a, um, a good place to go this summer.
- Yeah, although it might be a bit crowded.
- This colleague of mine, Mark, he was telling me that it had the best beaches he's ever seen.
- Which is why we should go!
- Co-construction

Other features of spoken grammar

- Flexible use of tenses:
- We **want** to know if there's anything within our budget.
- We **wanted** to know if there's anything within our budget.
- We **were wanting** to know if there's anything within our budget.
- Grammar of 'choice'.




A point of contention


- Should we include it in our lessons?
 - Native-speakerism?
- 


In favour of bringing spoken grammar to the classroom (Paterson, n.d)

- Often economical and easy.
- Can help learners connect better with their interlocutors.
- Gives learners more choice.
- Many learners *want* to learn it (Timmis, 2005).
- Spoken grammar may be the future – e.g., text messaging, blogs, etc.



Activity one – Situational ellipsis (adapted from Timmis, 2005)

- 
- Did you see the game last night?
 - Yeah, it was brilliant, wasn't it?
 - Yep – it was the best game this season without doubt.
 - Yeah probably.
 - Have you got your tickets for the final next week?

- ~~Did you see the game last night?~~
 - Yeah, ~~it was~~ brilliant, wasn't it?
 - Yep – ~~it was the~~ best game this season without doubt.
 - Yeah probably.
 - ~~Have you got your tickets for the final next week?~~
- 

Reflection task

- When speakers in the dialogue left out words, was the meaning still clear?
- In what kind of conversations does this often happen?
- Is it appropriate to do this in all types of conversations?
- Why do you think speakers leave out words when they talk?
- What kinds of words were left out in the dialogue?
- Do speakers of your language ever do similar things?
- Would you like to try this in English? Why/Why not?

Activity two – Co-construction (1)

- Adapted version of an activity by Caygill, Paterson, and Sewell (2011).
- Synonymous responses.
- A: The weather is so bad today.
- B: Awful. I should bring the clothes in actually.
- A: He's good, isn't he?
- B: Brilliant. I'm really glad we hired him.

1. Hot today, isn't it?

_____! I should have left my jacket at home!

2. That meal was amazing.

_____! We should come here again!

3. Our hotel room was pretty dirty.

_____, more like! I left a bad review on TripAdvisor!

4. That was a really bad decision by the referee.

_____! He hasn't got anything right!

5. Her children are so sweet.

_____! And so well-behaved, too!

6. The view is lovely, isn't it?

_____! You can even see the mountains in the distance!

7. The subway was a bit crowded today.

_____! It must be because it was a public holiday.

8. This new vacuum cleaner is rubbish.

_____! What a total waste of money!

Packed

Useless

Adorable

Boiling

Filthy

Stunning

Delicious

Ridiculous

1. Hot today, isn't it?

Boiling! I should have left my jacket at home!

2. That meal was amazing.

Delicious! We should come here again!

3. Our hotel room was pretty dirty.

Filthy, more like! I left a bad review on TripAdvisor!

4. That was a really bad decision by the referee.

Ridiculous! He hasn't got anything right!

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Adorable! And so well-behaved, too!

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- That soup wasn't very good, was it?
 - That was an interesting documentary.
 - His flat is so clean!
 - You're angry, aren't you?
- 



Activity three – Co-construction (2)

- Adapted version of an activity by Caygill, Paterson, and Sewell (2011).

Conditional co-construction

- He won't pass his test unless he studies.
 - If you buy it for me, I'll pay you back on Monday.
 - Always the same speaker.
-
- A: We can go for a walk tomorrow.
 - B: If it's sunny.
-
- A: You won't like the food they serve, trust me.
 - B: Unless you enjoy eating dog food.

- He's not working hard enough. I think he'll fail.
- If/Unless he makes big changes very soon, you're right.
- So, we'll meet at 8 o'clock outside the cinema?
- Sure, if/unless you want to meet a bit earlier and have something to eat?
- Tomorrow's hike is going to be great.
- If/unless it's sunny, yes, but if it rains it's going to be miserable.
- I'm just going to run out to get some chicken and I'll start cooking.
- Alright, if/unless you want me to pick it up on my way home?
- He's got great talent. I think he'll be one of the best musicians in the country before long.
- If/unless he works hard, absolutely.

- 
- A: This might be one of the best summers ever!
 - B: If/unless.....
-
- A: Face-to-face classes should start happening again soon.
 - B: If/unless.....
-
- A: The economy should start to pick up again next year.
 - B: If/unless...
- 



Activity four – co-construction (3)

- It's got great beaches, which is why we should go.
- They don't allow pets in the hotel, which is a problem because Mum can't take Jimmy.
- Just one speaker.

Activity four – co-construction (3)

- A: It's got great beaches.
- B: Which is why we should go!
- A: They don't allow pets in the hotel.
- B: Which is a problem because my Mum can't take Jimmy.
- A: He never shows up on time.
- B: Which is exactly why I try not to make plans with him!

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1. This is an awful place to work. → a) Which is why I'm going to have a word with them later.
2. Your hair is getting really long. → b) Which is why I'm handing in my notice.
3. The new neighbours are so loud. → c) Which is why I bought clippers today.
4. There are some pretty dark clouds coming this way. → d) Which is why I've just brought the washing in.

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- The meeting has been postponed until next week.
 - Which is good because
 - He never ever smiles!
 - Which...
 - Your office computer is really old.
 - Which...
 - Your boss really doesn't treat you very well.
 - Which...
 - A study just came out saying the vaccine is 96% effective.
 - Which...

Activity five – Reported speech

- But the other day I was talking to James and he said 'Look, don't take anything they say seriously.'
- And then the shop assistant said 'it's only 10 euros', so I just said 'Oh, are you sure?'
- And then Christine said 'Listen, I don't agree with any of this!'
- They asked me if I was happy to work some weekends, so I said 'Okay, but only if you tell me in advance.'
- He asked me if I wanted to go to the dog park, and I said 'Well, maybe, but it's a bit wet today don't you think?'
- So Angela said 'Hey! What do you think you're doing?!'

Activity five – Reported speech

- But the other day I was talking to James and he said 'Look, don't take anything they say seriously.'
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- And then Christine said 'Listen, I don't agree with any of this!'
- They asked me if I was happy to work some weekends, so I said 'Okay, but only if you tell me in advance.'
- He asked me if I wanted to go to the dog park, and I said 'Well, maybe, but it's a bit wet today don't you think?'
- So Angela said 'Hey! What do you think you're doing?!'

What function(s) do the highlighted words have?

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- And then the shop assistant said 'it's only 10 euros', so I just said 'Oh, are you sure?'
- And then Christine said 'Listen, I don't agree with any of this!'
- They asked me if I was happy to work some weekends, so I said 'Okay, but only if you tell me in advance.'
- He asked me if I wanted to go to the dog park, and I said 'Well, maybe, but it's a bit wet today don't you think?'
- So Angela said 'Hey! What do you think you're doing?!'

Which signal words show:

- A different idea/opinion?
 - Surprise?
 - Hesitation or doubt?
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Which signal words show:


- A different idea/opinion? Look, Listen
 - Surprise? Oh, Hey
 - Hesitation or doubt? Okay, Well
-
- But the other day I was talking to James and he said 'Look, don't take anything they say seriously.'
 - And then the shop assistant said 'it's only 10 euros', so I just said 'Oh, are you sure?'
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 - So Angela said 'Hey! What do you think you're doing?!'

Extension?

- Think about a conversation you had when someone mentioned a different opinion, or showed surprise, hesitation, or doubt. Write it out using some of these marker words.
- My friend was telling me that online teaching will never catch on, so I said “Listen, I know a lot of teachers and students who don’t even want to go back to face-to-face classes!”



Reflection

- Do you think spoken grammar is something worth including in our lessons? Why/why not?
 - What, if anything, will you 'take away' from this session?
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References

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Contact

- mattdone8@gmail.com
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