In many respects the nature of fluency in spoken language is under-researched, despite the fact that the term is deeply embedded in lay linguistic perceptions as well as in professional considerations. For instance, the words “I am fluent in [language x]” will return tens of thousands of hits on Google and the term fluency is used widely in the applied linguistics and language teaching literature. Lennon (1990) underlines the less than sharp delineation of the concept in noting that the term fluency is often used as a cover-all for general oral proficiency, as well as to refer to a more restricted component of proficiency (e.g., in the way it often appears as one of a list of factors for assessment of proficiency in oral examinations). Most dominant in the literature over a long period, however, has been the debate on fluency versus accuracy (Brumfit, 1984; Hammerly, 1991; Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985). Fluency (viewed as unfettered, meaning-focused performance) is often assumed to be something different from accuracy (viewed more as reflective, form-focused performance), though Brumfit (1984) notes that fluent language does not necessarily imply inaccurate language. Furthermore, both are studied as variables in investigations into the output of task-based learning, where conditions such as the presence or absence of pre-planning are seen to affect fluency, or accuracy, or both (Ellis, 2003; Foster & Skehan, 1999).

What is spoken fluency?
Fillmore (1979) famously characterized fluency as including the ability to talk at length without abnormal pauses, the ability to talk coherently, employing semantically dense sentences, the ability to have appropriate things to say in a broad range of contexts, and the ability to be imaginative and creative in language use. Later, Brumfit (1984) argued that fluency involved natural use of language and that continuity and speed were involved. Schmidt (1992) includes an element of automaticity, or the ability to retrieve language forms immediately and without conscious searching, in the characterization of fluency. In dictionary entries too, we find an emphasis on rate of speaking and automaticity. Hartmann and Stork’s (1976) definition of fluency includes the notion of automaticity and normal conversational speed (p. 86). Automaticity presumably brings with it the accuracy of form which the fluent native speaker seems to display effortlessly. Another dictionary entry, by Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985), includes mention of native-like rhythm, intonation, stress, and rate of speaking. This aligns with the frequent attention paid to prosodic factors in fluency, so-called phonological fluency (Pennington, 1989). Some linguists additionally point to other factors that must be held in consideration in adjudging fluency, such as distinguishing knowledge about language and the procedural ability to use it appropriately (Fillmore, 1979; Schmidt, 1992).

Other, less researched factors
The question I wish to explore here is whether an emphasis on rate of talk, lack of pausing, the presence of particular phonological qualities such as natural rhythm and stress are the whole of (or even the most important part of) the story. If we look at native speaker corpora of natural language use, we find ourselves in the presence of large numbers of what would typically be judged as fluent speakers, who perform accurately in the sense that none of the lexico-grammatical principles—such as normative grammar and appropriate collocation—are violated. But we will not always find those speakers performing at speed, not pausing, using ideal rhythm, and so on. In fact their performance often appears dysfluent by some of the criteria mentioned above. In the following extract from the North American spoken component of the Cambridge International Corpus, the speakers are talking

weblink: www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2005/06/mccarthy
about what to do and where to go in Italy. The conversation does not seem to present any problems of comprehension to the interlocutors, and, as already stated is accurate, yet it seems in parts, by any standards, disjointed:

A: Where would you tell me to go? And then to a two week trip. Where would you tell me to go?
B: Okay. Um well let’s see. You’re gonna want to... You’re gonna want to see I mean since you’re there for two weeks you’re probably gonna you know you’re just gonna have to see the ... You’re not gonna have time to really wander around and so you’re gonna want to go where the churches are and+
A: Uh-huh.
B: +the museums are+
A: Uh-huh.
B: +so I would say go to Rome and go to Florence and point... I mean I could you know I could probably tell you small small little churches that aren’t you know the huge uh Saint Peters+
A: Right.
B: +like this but...
A: But in made the honor in the guide books or whatever.
B: Right.
A: Uh-huh.
B: Right. Right. Um you know but so I’d say defi-nitely hit the big cities and I don’t know some people are no and my friends parents went over there and they asked me the same ques-tion and they were renting a car just and that really allows you a lot of freedom because especially in I mean all over Italy really there are just these tiny you know tiny towns that ha= you know that are easily accessible by car+
A: Uh-huh.
B: +with like monasteries and woods. It’s big and that you just sort of have to pull off and be like ‘Oh I don’t know what this is all about but let’s [laughing] just+
A: Let’s check it out.
B: +park and go see’.

What then, makes these speakers fluent, or should we condemn them as dysfluent and as bad examples, especially for language pedagogy? In some senses they do live up to the classic criteria for fluency: they talk continuously, appropriately, without awkward pauses. Where speaker B does pause (indicated by ...) it is usually in order to re-cast the utterance, something native-speakers and non-native speakers need to do constantly, though in the non-native this is often deemed to be evidence of a problem or of poor proficiency. On the other hand, sentences are left half-finished, and there are numerous apparent redundancies and hesitations.

I would like, nonetheless, to suggest that three significant aspects of the conversational extract make it a model of fluency rather than dysfluency.

(1) The speakers do fulfill some of the central criteria established in the literature, as discussed above.

(2) Both speakers use formulaic chunks, one of the key elements contributing to speech rate and conversational flow, but only recently beginning to be fully researched in corpora of spoken language use.

(3) The conversation itself is fluent. Speakers contribute to each others' fluency; they scaffold each other's performance and make the whole conversation flow. There is a confluence in the talk, like two rivers flowing inseparably together.

In relation to (2) the conversation contains high-frequency chunks which occur in the top 1000 list for that length of chunk in the spoken segment of the Cambridge International Corpus (the rank is in parenthesis, based on the 2-word chunk frequency list, the 3-word list, etc.):

- And then (14)
- I mean (12)
- You know (1)
- You're gonna (665)
- I would say (227)
- Or whatever (502)
- I don't know (2)

There are also chunks of lower frequency—let’s see, let’s check it out, etc. Chunks, by their nature, are retrieved whole; they are not created anew each time; they are part of that automaticity which enables effortless accuracy. They operate either as sentence frames to which new content may be attached (e.g., you're gonna ...) or as pragmatically specialized units, i.e., self-contained units which have developed specific pragmatic functions (e.g., or whatever, used to refer vaguely to shared categories). They are typically spoken quickly and as one tone unit; they are thus part of phonological fluency as well as lexico-grammatical fluency. The rest of the utterance (i.e., the newly synthesized, non-chunked content elements) can be spoken more slowly without
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damaging fluency. The reverse (slow chunks and fast content) is more difficult to contemplate as sounding fluent. Speed is not everything, at least not constantly rapid talk; some parts of conversations may be uttered rapidly, but it may often be desirable to slow down in crucial parts of one’s message.

In relation to characteristic (3), a socioculturally embedded notion of conversation sees speakers as supporting one another, in other words as “scaffolding” each other’s performance, in Vygotsky’s terms (Vygotsky, 1978), either by back-channeling (uh-huh, right) or by predicting and completing each other’s turns (B: ... but let’s [laughing] just+ A: Let’s check it out.). The conversation, and its flow, are seen as a joint responsibility, and our perception of fluency, I would argue, is much influenced by the cooperatively created flow of talk, rather than just the talent of one individual speaker.

Conclusion
In sum, the notion of fluency has its roots in linguistic qualities related to lexico-grammatical and phonological flow accompanied by apparently effortless accurate selection of elements, created by individual speakers, and in the ability of participants to converse appropriately on topics, but also, crucially, in the ability to retrieve chunks, and in the degree of interactive support each speaker gives to the flow of talk, helping one another to be fluent and creating a confluence in the conversation. Judging a speaker on monologic performance, on an oral examination where assessors hold back from interacting like normal conversational partners, or basing measures of fluency on solo performances of read speech analyzed by speech recognition software which counts speech rates, pauses, and so forth, (Cucchiarini, Strik, & Boves, 2000), would seem to be missing a great deal of what fluency really is.

References

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