4.1 Exclusive features of occupational language

ACTIVITY 4.1

Reflecting on your own experiences

If you have worked part-time, think about the language you used at work. Discuss:

- any specialised terminology you had to learn and why that was essential
- ways in which colleagues addressed each other
- any training you received in terms of how you should talk to customers/clients.

By reflecting on your own experiences, you have already begun thinking about how the workplace can influence language use. Research has shown that almost every occupation has its own special lexicon – a vocabulary that is specific to the occupation. This occurs in spoken and written modes. Some aspects of occupational language can be influenced by mode and whilst the specific language may differ from one occupation to another, there are common patterns. To build a picture of common discourse features, this section starts by exploring some of these key patterns – acronyms, jargon and codes – and then explains their use.

KEY TERM

Lexicon: the words used in a language or by a person or group of people

4.1.1 Acronyms

Organisations across the world are referred to by well-known acronyms: NHS in England (National Health Service), BMW worldwide (Bayerische Motoren Werke), CBS in America (Columbia Broadcasting System) and AENA in Spain (Aeropuertos Españoles y Aeronavegación Aérea). Whilst everyone may not be familiar with what these acronyms stand for, they are likely to recognise some of them and associate them with a particular business or type of organisation. However, occupational acronyms used within organisations will be far less

understandable to outsiders and can therefore be regarded as part of a special lexicon.

Think about an occupation you have experience of – teaching. You may think you are familiar with 'teacher talk' but how many of the following acronyms do you know: AST, APP, AFL, CLA, CPD, EBD, ECM, FFT, FSM, IEP, NEET, PP? These particular acronyms are likely to be specific to the British education system so don't simply exclude non-teachers but also fellow professionals from other countries. Similarly, some of the acronyms listed on the Australian government's education website (www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6007) will be alien to British teachers:

- ASL: Aboriginal Student Liaison Officer
- NAPLAN: National Assessment Program in Literacy And Numeracy
- EDNA: Education Network Australia
- RAM funding: Resource Allocation Model (for education funding).

Acronyms are one form of specialised language used in many occupations. On the Metropolitan Police's website (www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6008) there is a glossary section for all the acronyms used by the police. The list is extensive; there are 61 entries under 'A' alone. These include some you may be familiar with (e.g. 'A&E' for 'Accident and Emergency') and many you are unlikely to understand (e.g. 'ASU' for 'Air Support Unit'). Other websites from across the world contain similar glossary pages. You could visit some of these to further understand how exclusive the use of acronyms can be:

- www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6009
- www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6010
- www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6011

It is such exclusivity that makes acronyms powerful. They create a discourse community. Those who use and understand the acronyms may feel powerful as they have knowledge others do not have.

KEY TERM

Discourse community: a group of people with shared interests and belief systems who are likely to respond to texts in similar ways

4.1.2 Jargon

Another way in which occupational language can instil a sense of exclusivity is in the use of jargon.

KEY TERM

Jargon: the vocabulary and manner of speech that define and reflect a particular profession but are difficult for others to understand

Recruits in the US Navy, for example, need to learn a fair amount of jargon. You may know or be able to guess the meaning of terms like: 'chow hall' (dining area), 'deck' (floor), 'jarhead' (a Marine), 'ladderwell' (stairs) and 'skivvies' (underwear). You may struggle with others: 'rainlocker' (shower), 'salty' (experienced), 'maggot' (sleeping bag), 'banjo' (sandwich), 'rollers' (hot dogs).

Another familiar source of jargon is the local supermarket. On a recent visit the author made to one particular store, a tannoy announcement asked 'Could all team leaders report for today's 4 o'clock rumble'. Whilst you can probably guess from the context that a 'rumble' is some form of meeting, its purpose is less obvious and it is possible that its use in this way is unique to this company. In the section headed 'How do we communicate with each other?', the staff handbook for another supermarket includes various phrases that are unlikely to be understood by non-employees. According to the handbook, communication in this company is achieved through 'Team5', 'SQTs', 'Protector Line' and 'Steering Wheel'. It is unlikely that these phrases are used by other companies; they appear unique to this particular employer and create a shared knowledge and understanding amongst employees.

Some jargon can be linked to roles or jobs within specific industries. You may recognise the various roles, or job titles, within police forces. In the UK, there are titles such as Detective Inspector, Police Constable and Superintendent, whilst in Australia the ranks include First Constable, Senior Constable and Commander. However, roles/jobs in other industries may be less easy to understand. In the UK mining industry, for example, the following job titles were used and, most likely, only understood by workers and the mining community.

- A 'checkweighman' was paid for by the miners themselves to check the records of the man who weighed the coal as it was taken out of the mine.
- A 'hewer' was someone who cut the coal.
- A 'putter' used to bring empty tubs up to the workers at the coal face and take loaded tubs to the pit bottom.
- A 'shaftsinker' was employed to sink the shafts of a new mine. He usually migrated to new coalfields as these were developed.
- A 'trapper' was a child employed to open and close the door in a roadway through which coal was brought (www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6012).

4.1.3 Codes

The use of codes within certain jobs is a further feature of occupational language. All retail and hospitality outlets, for example, use coded tannoy announcements which, it is expected, will only be understood by staff. These coded messages can be quite clear ('This is a staff announcement. We have a code 3') or less obvious by using a name to signify a situation ('Can Mr Stack please report to the manager's office').

Codes to signify a specific situation are also used extensively by the emergency services. The British police, for example, use codes to describe people of different origins. IC1 is the code for a white person whilst IC5 is used when referring to a Chinese, Japanese or South-East Asian person. The American police also use codes to refer to a particular crime, for example 215 refers to carjacking, 211 is used for a robbery and 586 for illegal parking.

Coded language relies on exclusive shared knowledge and understanding, and the link to discourse communities is very clear.

4.1.4 The power of exclusive language

One of the reasons why professional organisations may develop their own vocabulary is to be part of a discourse community. This choice of language gives employers a form of status – they can use and understand language which 'outsiders' cannot. They are the experts.

Janet Holmes and Maria Stubbe (2003) discuss the similar idea of 'communities of practice', a concept which was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2000). Holmes and Stubbe define it as 'groups who regularly engage with each other in the service of a joint enterprise and who share a repertoire of resources which enables them to communicate in a kind of verbal shorthand which is often difficult for outsiders to penetrate'. It could be argued that through use of jargon (as well as acronyms and codes) occupational groups form one of these communities of practice.

Penelope Eckert (2006) recognises the importance of language use in such communities. She argues that, 'It provides an accountable link between the individual, the group, and place in the broader social order, and it provides a setting in which linguistic practice emerges as a function of this link'. The use of an exclusive vocabulary creates a sense of identity for all those involved. Bernard Spolsky (1998) says that 'A specialised jargon serves not just to label new and needed concepts, but to establish bonds between members of the in-group and enforce boundaries for outsiders. If you cannot understand my jargon, you don't belong to my group'. Andrzej Kollataj (2009) argues that using such jargon is not stigmatised when compared to other language choices (for example, slang) that mark group boundaries. Thus it is accepted as a form of language; such acceptance makes it powerful.

ACTIVITY 4.2
Exploring language used for precision

There may be other reasons behind language choices within a given occupation or industry. One such reason may be the need for precision and to avoid any confusion. In these two definitions, consider how the precision helps avoid ambiguity and makes the differences in the offences very clear:

- Aggravated burglary: entering premises armed with a weapon, intending to steal goods.
- Burglary: entering a building without permission with the intention of stealing or doing damage.

With this example in mind:

- Which other professions are more likely to use exclusive language or jargon for precision?
- What are the benefits of using exclusive language or jargon for precision?

4.2 Workplace interactions

Interaction within the workplace occurs in different contexts, both formally and informally. One of the most common formal contexts is meetings. Holmes (2009a) cites research which indicates 'that meetings occupy anything between 25% and 80% of work time'. As they are such an integral part of many people's working days, it is perhaps unsurprising that there has been a great deal of research into the way language is used in workplace meetings.

4.2.1 Roles and hierarchy in workplace meetings

Within any meeting, it is likely that the participants have different róles and that there is a hierarchical structure in place. At the top of this hierarchy is the chairperson, who runs the meeting and has personal power. Due to their status and authority, you might expect the chairperson to hold the floor, initiate topics, ask questions and control who speaks. This can happen, as shown in research from Holmes (2009b), who reported how one chairperson, 'Kenneth', had an authoritative leadership style; this was reflected in his structured and controlling way of chairing meetings. The agenda was followed closely and he took an active role in controlling the talk by allocating speaking turns to his colleagues. There was a focus on individual accountability. Colleagues addressed their responses to him; they knew they were accountable to him in the meeting.

However, chairpersons do not always take on such an authoritative role. Instead, some act more as a facilitator in a meeting. In the same piece of research from Holmes (2009b), the meeting management style of 'Tricia' was also explored. 'Tricia' took on a facilitator role, encouraging team members to participate in discussions and bring up topics of their own – she was not as rigid with the content of the meetings as 'Kenneth'. Furthermore, she encouraged social talk and humour during her meetings. She took on a more empowering leadership style, recognising and encouraging the importance of collaboration, consultation and cooperation. That is not to say that 'Tricia' was herself lacking in power and authority. She was leading this type of meeting; it was her conscious decision to run meetings in this way. She was still in charge, directing how the meetings ran.

Read Text 4A, a transcript in which it is clear that Pam, the chairperson, is taking on a role much more like 'Tricia'.

Text 4A

Pam:	okay (.) what we got on the agenda for today (.) who wants to go first (.)
Mark:	well Kate's two items are still left over from last week
Kate:	yeah I don't mind I'll do my bits first (.) I just wanted to check first of all what we were (.) what the plan is for replacing Tony
Joe:	I think it's part of a bigger discussion we need to have (.) to think about staffing (.) I don't know what you think Mark
Mark:	yeah (.) there's lots to discuss and look at (.) there might be others leaving (.) we might need to hang on for a bit longer (.) you know to (.) see the whole (.) the bigger picture (.) and look at what we need

Pam: yeah I think that's the best way forward (.) there's no point in making plans which we might have to change anyway (.) that's what I'm thinking anyway (.) don't know about anyone else

Kate: yeah I was thinking the same (.) I wasn't meaning (.) I wasn't thinking we sort it now (.) I just wanted to check the plans

Joe: do we know if anyone else is making noises about leaving this year

Mark: not that that I know of

Pam: no one has been to me so I don't think so (.) unless anyone else has heard anything

In this transcript, Pam's use of the discourse marker 'okay' to start the meeting signals she is in charge and ready to begin. However, she doesn't dictate the agenda and rather invites one of her colleagues to take the floor through her use of the interrogative 'who wants to go first'. What follows is a discussion between the other colleagues, in which they encourage each other to participate in the meeting (for example, when Joe nominates Mark to speak). Pam becomes involved on a similar level to the others. Her utterances after the initial introduction to the meeting do not suggest she is trying to be authoritarian. When she gives her opinion or offers some information, she follows it up with a cue for others to respond and become involved: 'don't know about anyone else' and 'unless anyone else has heard anything'. She opens this up to the whole group rather than allocating a speaking turn to an individual as 'Kenneth' had done in Holmes' study.

However, in Text 4B, Pam is leading a different meeting in which the results are not similar at all. In this transcript, she is leading a meeting with a larger group of staff.

Text 4B

Pam: morning everyone (.) hope everyone had a great break (.) welcome back (.) year 7 (2) Alex

Alex: just to let everyone know we've got a new starter this morning (.) the family have moved into the area (.) I've emailed all his teachers but any issues just let me know

Pam: thanks Alex (.) any more year 7 (2) year 8 (1) Tim

Tim: yeah (.) there are some year 8s who want to do a (.) something extra for Children in Need (.) so they've organised a bake sale (.) they'll be selling cakes and stuff at break and lunch outside the Maths block (.) if we can pop along and see (.) support them that'd be brill (.) thanks

Pam: that's great Tim (.) I'll definitely be there (.) year 9 (3) no (.) ok year 10 (1) yes Laura

Laura: this is for 10 and 11 (.) can tutors please remind their tutor groups that there's a D of E meeting today at break in S5 (.) thanks

In this transcript, Pam is clearly following a set structure and does so rigidly. She leads the discourse and invites other colleagues to speak by name ('Yes Laura'). There is no negotiation of roles here – Pam is in control and the other staff respond only when appropriate.

The difference between the two transcripts could perhaps lead to the conclusion that the most influential factor is not the personality or authority of a specific person or the authority of the role of chairperson. Instead the most influential factor could be the context, the purpose of the meeting and the participants involved. In the first transcript, Pam is in a meeting with six colleagues who are all part of a small team of equals. In the second transcript, Pam is talking to the whole staff in a far shorter meeting in which the sole purpose is to share key information. In this latter context, the more authoritarian manner is most appropriate.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Chairing a meeting

There is further research on the different ways someone in authority will chair a meeting. Some research supports the findings from 'Tricia', whilst other findings are more in line with what Holmes concluded about 'Kenneth'.

Investigate the following research, exploring what conclusions are drawn and how they support each of the management styles that Holmes discovered:

- Barnes, R. (2007) 'Formulations and the facilitation of common agreement in *meetings* talk', *Text & Talk*, 27 (3).
- Kangasharju, H. and Nikko, T. (2009) 'Emotions in Organizations: Joint Laughter in Workplace Meetings'. Available at: www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6014
- Pomerantz, A. and Denvir, P. (2007). In F. Cooren (ed.) *Interacting and Organizing: Analyses of a Management Meeting*. London: L. Erlbaum.

- Sandlund, E. and Denk, T. (2007). In B. Asmuß and J. Svennevig, *Meeting Talk*. Available at: www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6013
- Svennevig, J. (2008 and 2011) 'Interaction in workplace meetings'. Available at: www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6015

If you need to carry out your own research as part of your studies, you may wish to use these various theories as a starting point. You could then record and transcribe a meeting and draw your own conclusions as to the role of the chairperson. You could, for example, attend a student council meeting.

4.3 The negotiation of roles: the customer is always right

Another important context of language in the workplace is in the relationship between supplier (company employee) and customer or client. There are many industries in which the customer is involved in interaction within the workplace. This may be face-to-face or could be via technology such as email or telephone. As a worker in such industries, training is always given in how to speak to and treat customers in a respectful manner. In service industries, this leads to the question: Who exactly is in power – the customer or the worker?

Read Text 4C, the transcription of an interaction between a customer and a call centre worker.

Text 4C

Staff:	good morning (.) this is Maria speaking how can I help you today
Customer:	erm (.) hi I was just I was wanting to cancel my membership my account please
Staff:	no problem Sir (.) can I please take your post code
Customer:	yeah (.) it's W F twenty two nine double A
Staff:	thank you (.) can I also take your membership number please
Customer:	yeah (.) it's six one zero nine
Staff:	thank you (2) so that is Mr Joe Benson

Customer:	yeah that's right
Staff:	thank you (.) do you have any objection to me using your first name today
Customer:	no no that's fine
Staff:	thank you Joe (.) I see from our records Joe that you have been a customer for several years now (.) can I ask why you wish to close your account
Customer:	it's just er just that I don't use it enough to be honest so it's like a waste of money to be honest
Staff:	I understand that Joe (.) but before I close your account what I can do for you today is inform you of a very special offer due to your loyalty with us (.) does that sound like something you would be interested in Joe
Customer:	no I'm fine thanks I just wanna just want to cancel my account thanks
Staff:	yes I understand Joe (.) does a saving of sixty pounds not interest you
Customer:	thanks anyway but I'm fine
Staff:	I am sorry you are leaving us but what I will do for you is cancel your account with immediate effect and recall today's payment (5) thank you for your patience Joe (.) your account is now cancelled
Customer:	thanks very much
Staff:	thank you for calling Joe and you have a good day
Customer:	yes you too (.) bye

In this transcript, it could be argued that the member of staff has the power as she leads the conversation through question and answer adjacency pairs. It is likely this is something she has been trained to do and she may even be reading from a script. However, the customer also has power as he is dictating the outcome of the conversation. He has a clear goal which, despite some attempts to change the final outcome, is achieved.

KEY TERM

Adjacency pair: a simple structure of two turns

In his study of the language of outsourced call centres, Eric Friginal (2009) researched the discourse in calls between a Philippines-based call centre serving American customers. Friginal found some common patterns in the language of members of staff:

- use of second-person pronoun
- use of the imperative 'let's'
- use of brand names and other related proper nouns
- use of the present tense
- use of specialised, technical terms
- use of politeness markers
- use of discourse markers
- fewer topic shifts than an everyday conversation
- limited use of hedges and vague language.

KEY TERM
Hedges: words or phrases which soften what is said or written to make it less direct

When looking at the language of the customer, he also found common characteristics in the use of:

- first-person pronouns
- past tense
- interrogatives and words such as 'what' and 'why'
- informal lexis
- short responses.

From these lists, it appears that members of staff used more features of powerful language. However, they do give some power to customers through, for example, their use of politeness markers and terms of address such as 'Mr…', 'sir', 'ma'am'.

PRACTICE QUESTION
Who has the power?

Referring to Text 4C and Friginal's study, how do members of staff and customers show power? Identify key linguistic features and evaluate their success in creating or establishing power.

Wider reading

To gain a wider understanding of how language is used in the workplace and how this is linked to power, you could refer to the following books:

Dent, S. (2016) *Modern Tribes*. London: John Murray Publishers.

Friginal, E. (2009) *The Language of Outsourced Call Centers: A Corpus-Based Study of Cross-Cultural Interaction*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing.

Holmes, J. (2006) *Gendered Talk at Work*. London: Blackwell.

Holmes, J. and Stubbe, M. (2003) *Power and Politeness in the Workplace: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Talk at Work*. Abingdon: Routledge.