Chapter 5
Spoken language

In this chapter you will:

- Examine the patterns, organisation and functions of spoken language

- Explore some ways in which politeness and impoliteness are exhibited in language

- Analyse various features of spoken interaction, and how speakers construct meaning

5.1 Working with spoken language

Up to this point we have largely focused on written texts, and so we now turn our attention to spoken language. For most people, speech is the dominant mode of communication, and we spend far more of our time speaking and listening than we do reading and writing. Speech is clearly different from writing in a number of ways: it is typically spontaneous, it is the chosen channel of communication when people are face-to-face, and it cannot be edited or deleted. Whereas writing is a human invention that requires a tool (such as a pen or a keyboard), speech is largely thought to have developed naturally.

5.2 Speech acts

Language gets things done, and is highly performative – things that we say can have enormous bearings on things in the world, changing people's futures, statuses and perceptions in a number of ways. Consider how these short utterances change the world:

I now pronounce you husband and wife.

You are hereby sentenced to life imprisonment.

We would like to offer you the job.

Each of these is an example of a speech act, where there is a specific intention behind the utterance, that impacts upon the world. In the first example, the speech act changes the legal status of two people and performs a specific event that brings about tangible change. Of course, the speech act must be uttered by the right person at the right time – I am not a qualified registrar, and could not change the legal marriage status of two people by simply telling them they are now husband and wife. These conditions and contextual requirements are known as felicity conditions.

KEY TERMS

Speech act: an utterance considered as an action that does something

Felicity conditions: the conditions that a performative speech act must meet if it is to be appropriate or successful

According to John Austin (1975), there are three elements of felicity conditions.

- Firstly, there should be a conventional procedure for what is being carried out.

- Secondly, the participants within the event need to fulfil their roles properly – in our marriage example, we would need a professionally qualified registrar and two willing people that wanted to marry each other.

- Thirdly, all participants must have the necessary thoughts and intentions, in what are known as sincerity conditions: people must be sincere about what they are saying. For example, if a speaker says 'I'm really sorry I haven't finished the homework' when they have failed to complete a piece of set homework, and they are sincerely sorry that they have failed to do so, then the sincerity conditions have been met. If they are not genuinely sorry, then this is not a legitimate apology. Of course, we cannot always know whether speakers are fulfilling sincerity conditions: we cannot accurately read people's minds and people can be good at pretending!

There are various ways of classifying speech acts as a whole, but perhaps the most useful is by John Searle (1969) who proposed five groups:

- **Assertives**: these commit the speaker to believing something, e.g. *believe, suggest, put forward, swear, boast, conclude.*

- **Directives**: these try to get the hearer to perform an action, e.g. *ask, order, request, invite.*

- **Commissives**: these commit the speaker to doing something in the future, e.g. *promise, plan, vow.*

- **Expressives**: these express how a speaker feels about something, e.g. *thank, apologise, welcome.*

- **Declarations**: these change the state of the world in certain ways, e.g. *I resign, you are fired, I plead guilty.*

Finally, all speech acts can be direct or indirect. A direct speech act is where the meaning of the utterance is literal – for example, a person asking her friend 'Do you want to go to the pub tonight?' is a genuine question seeking a genuine

response. Picture the same two friends – one of them says 'Could you pass me the water?'. Despite its interrogative form, its function is a directive: the speaker is not really asking whether she is physically able to 'pass the water'. This is an indirect speech act, where the meaning of the utterance depends upon context and the hearer's ability to understand the implicature behind the utterance. Two further examples are:

It's quite cold in here (indirectly uses a directive, e.g. *turn the heating on*)

That was silly of me (indirectly uses an expressive, e.g. *I apologise*)

We often use indirect speech acts, in attempts to be polite and not to impose too much on those around us. Section 5.5 explores this in more detail.

5.3 Narrative

A narrative is essentially a story, a re-telling of events that are either real or imaginary. We will look at oral narratives here, and use William Labov's 1972 model of narrative structure as a framework. The appeal of this model is that it arose out of normal, everyday discourse of real speakers in real situations. Labov analysed a corpus of hundreds of narratives and found a recurring structural pattern, which he organised into six categories. Each of these categories fulfils a different role or function in the narrative, and they are listed in Table 5.1. I have invented a very short narrative to illustrate each category.

The categories occur in the sequence that they would normally do in natural narrative, apart from 'evaluation' which can appear at any point. It may be useful to think of evaluation functioning as a kind of adverbial, in that it has a flexible position and provides additional information about other parts of the narrative. It tends to sit 'outside' the main narrative and is important in explaining the relevance of the story itself. In the evaluation category in Table 5.1, the speaker provides an opinion on the event, providing a reason and motivation for wanting to tell the story.

Not all narratives will include all six categories, and the order of them may slightly change, but Labov's model is a useful and fairly robust one nonetheless. You could try applying the model to narratives you hear or read, and test it out against things that weren't included in Labov's original corpus: newspaper articles and literary fiction, for example.

Table 5.1: Labov's narrative categories (adapted from Simpson, 2014: 115)

Narrative category	Narrative question	Narrative function	Linguistic form	Example
Abstract	What was this about?	Signals that the story is about to begin and catches the attention of the listener	A short statement, provided before the narrative begins	*So*
Orientation	Who or what are involved, and when or where did it take place?	Helps the listener to identify the time, place, people, activity and situation of the story	Typically uses past continuous verbs and adverbs of time, place and manner	*me and mum were out looking for Christmas presents*
Complicating action	What happened next?	The core narrative category providing the main bulk of the story	Temporally ordered clauses with a verb in the simple past or present	*and we bumped into a friend from school who I haven't seen in years*
Resolution	What finally happened?	Recaps the final key event of the story	Expressed as the last of the narrative clauses that began the Complicating action	*turns out she lives just around the corner about two streets away*
Evaluation	So what?	Makes the point of the story clear; expresses an opinion about the story	Intensifiers, modal verbs, negation, repetition, embedded speech, comparisons with unrealised events	*I couldn't believe it, what are the chances of that*
Coda	How does it all end?	Signals that a story has ended	A generalised statement which is 'timeless' in feel	*funny how things turn out isn't it*

5.4 Multi-speaker interaction

Next, we consider spoken language that involves more than one participant, which we can call conversations, or multi-speaker interaction. This involves participants collaborating and jointly negotiating meaning, taking turns and interrupting each other along the way. Just like written language, spoken language exhibits patterns and conventions that can be analysed in detail.

5.4.1 Turn-taking

Generally, people collaborate successfully during a conversation and achieve what they set out to do. Speakers take turns to offer their own thoughts at the right time and allow other people to speak, in what is known as the turn-taking system. The simplest pattern of turn-taking is an adjacency pair, consisting of two turns by two different speakers, in response to one another. This will often be a question-answer structure:

A: shall we get a takeaway tonight?

B: yes please!

> **KEY TERMS**
> **Turn-taking:** the process by which speakers co-construct conversation
> **Adjacency pair:** a simple structure of two turns

In this example A and B cooperate together in conversation, and B's response is expected, in what is called a preferred response. If B had responded with something unexpected or irrelevant, then this would be a dispreferred response. However, human conversation is not always as straightforward as simple turns like these, and turns are often added before the sequence is completed:

A: shall we get a takeaway tonight?

B: good idea! what are you thinking?

A: maybe Indian?

B: yes please!

Here, B's first turn is a request for more information, to which A responds. This is called an insertion sequence. Often, the beginning and ending of a turn is indicated by a discourse marker, which are words like *well*, *like*, *of course*, *yeah*,

right, and *oh*. As well as marking the beginning and end of turns, discourse markers carry several other functions:

- For a speaker to show the listener that they are listening
- Creating solidarity with the listener
- Appealing to the listener for understanding and showing how the speaker feels.

KEY TERMS

Preferred response: a second part of an adjacency pair that fits in with what the speaker of the first part wants to hear

Dispreferred response: a second part of an adjacency pair that doesn't fit in with what the speaker of the first part wants to hear

Insertion sequence: an additional sequence between the two parts of an adjacency pair

Generally, we get along well, and people are skilled at anticipating the boundaries of turns so that they begin speaking as soon as (or before) their interlocutor has finished. Of course, people often interrupt or overlap one another – if they are keen to convey how much in agreement they are, or keen to challenge or add something of their own. This is known as holding the conversational floor, where speakers negotiate who is speaking when, and give cues that they want a response from their interlocutor. Cues can be given by interrogatives, use of direct names, dropping intonation, pauses or body language such as open-handed gestures. Try and notice these things when next having a conversation with somebody. How do speakers hold the floor? How are the boundaries between turns established? Do interruptions and overlaps suggest agreement or disagreement? To illustrate, look at Text 5A, where two friends discuss the merits of living in Barcelona compared to England:

Text 5A

Rob: it's not that cold (.) but it does get cold cos the (.) it gets very wet and windy

Cat: yeah mhm I used to

Rob: but you can only compare it with the summer, over here you can't compare it with

Cat: yeah but

Rob: cos when you're over there it seems colder than it would normally do

Cat: yeah

Rob: cos it's icy and so windy (.) really windy there by the sea

Cat: right

KEY TERM

Conversational floor: the 'space' containing a conversation. Participants can share this floor, or hold the floor in attempts to control a conversation

In this short exchange, it is clear that Rob holds the floor and dominates the conversation. He speaks more than Cat, even though they have the same number of turns. Cat repeatedly tries to take a turn by overlapping ('yeah mhm I used to'; 'yeah but') but this is largely ignored by Rob, who perseveres. Cat employs a number of backchannels (see Table 5.2) to show that she is listening, but seems more interested in seeking a way to get her turn in rather than asking Rob further questions or details.

5.4.2 Non-fluency features

Although we might have an idea of what we want to say, most conversations are unplanned and naturally occurring speech is peppered with hesitations, repetitions and sounds that you would not find in the dictionary. Together these are known as non-fluency features and have a range of functions – from giving speakers a chance to think, for dramatic effect, to highlight what is coming next, and so on. Pauses are a common non-fluency feature, and can be made up of silence or fillers such as *hmm*, *erm*, or *like*. In Text 5B, pauses under a second are represented by a dot in a bracket, for example (.) and pauses over a second are represented by the number of seconds in a bracket, for example (2).

> **KEY TERMS**
>
> **Non-fluency:** features of speech that disrupt or repeat spoken discourse
>
> **Filler:** a non-verbal sound that acts like a pause

Text 5B

erm so I mostly listen (.) I listen to R&B (1) I must admit that I have some dodgy tracks (3) I've got a spice girls number on there (.) wannabe I think (.) erm (.) just because it reminds me of school (.) hmm (.) well got out of (.) which (.) what about you?

Here, the speaker pauses to think as he remembers details about his past, and hesitates to admit some of the 'dodgy tracks' he feels embarrassed about. Fillers such as 'erm' and 'hmm' also indicate his apparent uncertainty and unwillingness to talk about his taste in music. There is also an example of a repair, where he corrects himself and starts again, in what appears to be a move to shift the focus away from himself:

'well got out of (.) which (.) what about you?'

Repairs occur for a number of reasons: remember that speech is often spontaneous, and so speakers do not always get it 'right' on their first attempt. They might be a grammatical mistake, or the speaker may have chosen the wrong word to express what they mean.

Speakers might also use a false start, which is a little bit like crossing out in writing, as in:

So I mostly listen (.) I listen to R&B

Here, the speaker begins to speak, stops and then starts again. The second attempt allows the speaker to clarify his intended message.

> **KEY TERMS**
>
> **Repair:** when a speaker corrects some aspect of what they have said
>
> **False start:** when a speaker begins to speak, stops and then starts again

5.4.3 Other features

There are lots more features of spoken language, some of which are listed in Table 5.2:

Table 5.2: Features of spoken language

Feature	Definition and function	Example
Tag question	A question structure that usually consists of an auxiliary verb + pronoun, and is usually placed at the end of a declarative. It typically conveys a negative or positive attitude towards something, or can be used to seek verification.	She's late, isn't she? It's at 9 p.m., is it?
Hedge	Words that imply a sense of vagueness, evasiveness, are non-committal, express imprecision or down-tone the meaning of the following word.	I'm sort of annoyed with him It's more or less the same price We might come home at the weekend
Backchannel	Sounds, words, phrases or body language that show feedback, in terms of attention or agreement. May be used to encourage a speaker to carry on talking, or to imply boredom or frustration.	I guess so mhm <nods head>
Deixis	Words that refer to an object or person in the immediate context that is shared by participants (the deictic centre).	I will have this one please. Can you bring that over here?

Feature	Definition and function	Example
Conversational historical present	Use of the present tense in an account of past events, to emphasise a sense of vividness or immediacy.	I was in town yesterday and this bus crashes straight into a car
General extender	Words and phrases such as and stuff, and things and something that indicate the previous word is part of a set, or to be purposefully vague, or when a speaker assumes that the participants know what is being referred to.	We went swimming and stuff; I'd like some clothes and things
Intensifier	Adverbs such as very, really or well which add emphasis to the word it precedes.	That is well cheap; It's right cold; The bus was really fast
Phatic communication	A function of language to maintain or develop social relations between speakers. Phatic communication is perhaps most noticeable during the beginnings or endings of conversations, and sometimes thought of as 'small talk'.	Hello, how are you?; Have a nice day; Nice weather today, isn't it?

ACTIVITY 5.1
Transcribing and analysing speech

Record a few minutes of natural conversation between two people, making sure to ask permission first. Then, transcribe the speech as accurately as possible, following the conventions to mark non-fluency (pauses, fillers, interruptions, etc.). Analyse the finished transcription for its spoken language features: narrative categories, adjacency pairs, the features in Table 5.2, and so on. Make sure to not just label parts but try and explain why things are there and what their presence indicates. Think carefully about the relationship between the participants and the context in which the conversation takes place, and how this affects language use.

5.5 The social nature of speech

Speech is a social activity, and for the majority of the time it allows us to communicate with other people with relative ease and efficiency. It can be tiring, and frustrating – especially when language is misinterpreted or we struggle to convey or understand an intended message. In this section, we look at how speakers show politeness and impoliteness, and how they use language collaboratively.

5.5.1 Politeness and impoliteness

Why do we bother being polite? Why do we bother with phatic communication, which has no real semantic meaning and only serves a social function? Why do we worry about how we make requests, ask questions, or the way we address somebody? Why do we rely on implied meanings rather than literal ones? An interesting and useful way of exploring such questions is through the concept of face, meaning 'self-respect' or 'dignity' and most commonly associated with the work of Erving Goffman (1969). The theory suggests that due to our highly social lives, we depend upon one another to get things done and are concerned about how we appear to other people. In trying to get things done, we try to do so without losing face and we try to look after other people's face at the same time. Essentially, face theory is about ways of being polite and impolite.

5.5.1.1 Face

For sociolinguists, the most interesting development of face theory is by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987), who distinguished between positive face and negative face. Positive face is the desire to be liked and appreciated, concerned with solidarity and respect between speakers, when language shows approval for other people's behaviour. Negative face is the desire not to be imposed or intruded upon, when language exhibits respect for other people's rights and maintains a distance from them. Both positive and negative face can be threatened, in what are called face-threatening acts (FTAs). If something threatens our positive face, then we feel embarrassed or ashamed. If our negative face is threatened, then we feel offended. There are five kinds of FTA:

1 Do an FTA directly, with no politeness (e.g. 'Do the washing up, you lazy thing!').

2 Do an FTA with positive politeness, by attending to the hearer's positive face needs (e.g. 'You are so good at helping around the house. I just wish you were better at washing up.').

3   Do an FTA with negative politeness, by attending to the hearer's negative face needs (e.g. 'I know you're very tired and overworked but I would appreciate it if you could do the washing up.').

4   Do an FTA indirectly, or off-record (e.g. 'I wonder how long it's been since you did any washing up?').

5   Don't do the FTA.

KEY TERMS

Positive face: a universal human need to feel valued and appreciated

Negative face: a universal human need to feel independent and not be imposed upon

Face-threatening act: a speech act that has the potential to damage someone's self-esteem either in terms of positive or negative face

Speakers can choose how much they attend to each other's face needs depending on context: their own social relationship, the degree of power between them, or the degree of imposition. Whereas most research on spoken language has focused on how speakers try to maintain levels of politeness, the linguist Jonathan Culpeper has tried to provide an 'impoliteness framework', which is in parallel to Brown and Levinson's work. Culpeper (2011) identified a series of strategies that are orientated towards attacking face. Underlying these is the importance of context, and that certain things are only impolite depending on the situation of use. A fundamental aspect of context when discussing im/politeness is the social and power relationships between participants. Some of the strategies are:

- Mock impoliteness, or 'banter': impoliteness that remains on the surface, since it is understood by others not to cause offence.

- Ignoring or snubbing your interlocutor, by excluding them from a conversation or refusing to engage with them. This could be through silence, or by the use of obscure or secretive language that is designed to mystify others.

- Appearing uninterested, unconcerned or unsympathetic.

- Actively seeking disagreement by selecting a sensitive topic.

- Making your interlocutor feel uncomfortable, for example by not avoiding silence or not using small talk.

- Using taboo words: swearing, abusive or disrespectful language.

- Using personal negative evaluations, e.g. *you can't do anything right.*

- Invading personal space, either literally by positioning yourself closer than the relationship permits, or metaphorically, by asking for information which is too intimate given the relationship.

- Dismissals: explicitly telling your interlocutor to leave or stop talking.

- Being sarcastic.

ACTIVITY 5.2
Language in the boardroom

Text 5C is an extract from *The Apprentice*, a reality TV show in which contestants compete for a job with Alan Sugar, a successful UK businessman. At this point, the contestants are in the boardroom and discussing the failure of a task. Analyse the transcript by using models of im/politeness and face theory as a framework. It may be easier to do this for each participant individually, and then summarise your findings.

Text 5C

A = Alan Sugar
B = Ben
P = Paula

A: what was the point you were making as a human resources manager then?

P: because you got (.) a person here who works in finance and a person who runs a restaurant

A: but **you** were the team leader (.) **you're** the team leader

P: I understand that (.) but my skills are in creativity and...

A: mm (2) it's a feeble excuse as far as I'm concerned (.) you put yourself up to come in this process and you're now using the excuse that you're a human resources manager so therefore **you shouldn't be in charge of costings** (.) if that's the case why did you put yourself in charge of costings?

P: **I didn't** put myself in charge of costings Sir Alan (.) which is why I nominated two people to look after my costings

B: I think the bottom line here (.) is that if you'd wanted me involved with those costings (.) then it's a failure on your part as the project manager for not saying Ben can you come round here and look at it and just make sure it's alright

P: surely an idiot would have worked that out

B: **we're talking about idiots now?** well let's talk about 5 pounds and 700 pounds if you wanna talk about costings at the end of the day you made **a complete balls up of it** you were the ones responsible for the cock up in the fragrances you were the project manager you were the one who should have come to me getting involved in the costings if you wanted to and

P: I asked you to

B: and the next day I **sold my bloody heart out** for you just to do damage control

P: the cost of the fragrances was a cost it wasn't a cost on its own I asked you to look after costs and you didn't

B: ok who should I fire then?

A: **Paula** should be fired

5.5.1.2 Conversational maxims

Underlying the notion of im/politeness, intention, performance, speech acts and felicity conditions is the 'cooperative principle', which is the assumption that speakers intend to mean things and hearers accept this in trying to work out what is being said. Paul Grice (1975) suggested that when engaging in conversation, people follow four 'rules' or maxims, complying with general principles and protocols for managing and negotiating discourse events.

- **Maxim of quantity**

    Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.

    Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.

- **Maxim of quality**

    Do not say what you believe is false.

    Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

- **Maxim of relevance**

    Say only things that are relevant.

- **Maxim of manner**

    Avoid obscurity of expression.

    Avoid ambiguity.

    Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness).

    Be orderly.

Grice did not mean for his maxims to be rules for speakers to learn, but a set of tools for analysing dialogue. In order to decode the communicative intention of others, people draw inferences about other people's state of mind – based on the linguistic forms used and an assumption that people generally adhere to the four maxims. In conversation then, speakers generally observe the maxims, and listeners generally assume that speakers are observing them. When the maxims are broken, they can create implicatures, which are implied meanings that have to be inferred by a text receiver as a result of the maxim being broken or

ACTIVITY 5.3
Exploring maxims

Work out which maxims are being violated in the following examples (there may be more than one in each example). Some context is given to help you do this. For each one, try and explain why you think the speaker(s) have chosen to violate the maxim.

1 Conversation between a parent (P) and teenage child (C):

    P: where are you going?

    C: out

    P: what time will you be home?

    C: later

2 Conversation between two strangers waiting for a delayed train:

    A: you can always trust the rail system in this country

    B: it's such a reliable service isn't it

3 Conversation between a customer (C) and a hotel receptionist (R):

    C: is there a problem with the internet in my room?

    R: not that I'm aware of

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C: the connection seems a little funny

R: perhaps it's your computer?

C: no, it was working fine before I arrived

4 The beginning of a telephone conversation:

A: hi is that Mr Clarke?

B: no

5 Conversation between a parent (P) and a young child (C), who has just spilled paint over the floor:

P: what's happened in here?

C: I don't know

P: haven't you just been in here?

C: no I've been upstairs

P: so the paint pot just fell over by itself?

Next, rewrite each example so that no maxim is being violated. Give explanations for your changes.

violated. In a way, they are similar to indirect speech acts, which we looked at in section 5.2.

When conversational maxims are violated, the speaker is deliberately drawing the hearer's attention to a form of implicit meaning. When conversational maxims are abided by, participants are engaging in prototypical conversation.

Of course, a person's understanding of the maxims and what constitutes them being violated depends on culture. Grice was American, and theory was based on his observations of Western conversations. Within this culture, there are obviously still differences, as in Text 5D. This is part of a conversation I had with a waitress in New York City, on my first visit to the USA, whilst trying to order some breakfast.

Text 5D

Me: I'll have the fried eggs and toast please

Waitress: ok how do you like your eggs

Me: erm (.) just fried is fine thanks

Me: (1) what does that mean

Waitress: it means the yolk sits on the top

Me: oh ok (.) yes that's fine

Waitress: and the toast (.) we have white, rye, sunflower seed, pumpernickel

And so the conversation went on, for a number of minutes. For me, a native British speaker with little experience of visiting the USA, saying 'fried eggs and toast' was a simple and direct speech act that I assumed would get the job done. In American culture however, it is not so simple. For the waitress, my order was a violation of the maxims of manner and quantity: I had simply not given enough information to fulfill the requirements, and so my utterance was ambiguous and vague. For me, it felt like the same maxims were being violated for different reasons – I had no understanding of the complex ordering system in the USA, there was nothing on the menu to indicate that there was such a choice of fried eggs and toast available, and I am not used to ordering such specific ways of food being prepared. Indeed, in Britain I am often apologetic when asking for variations in my order, keen to attend to employees' negative face needs in worrying that my request will be too much of an imposition, whilst in the USA it is the norm. The poor waitress who had to deal with my limited cultural knowledge of USA food ordering practices became frustrated with this and my indecisions about what type of eggs and bread I wanted.

5.5.2 Contexts and cultures

How do we handle the vast array of social situations and contexts we find ourselves in, and how does this shape the language that we choose to use? Peter Stockwell (2002) suggests the notion of scripts for our linguistic behaviour in different social contexts. Scripts are sets of 'guidelines' or social codes for how we use language according to the situation we find ourselves in. Stockwell gives an example of a 'pub script' based on his experiences of visiting different types of pubs in the UK. A script is activated upon entering a specific social context: so, when walking into a British pub, we know that there will be familiar objects and people (beer, tables, a person behind the bar) and expected ways of behaving with language. This includes ordering drinks at the bar (as opposed to waiting at a table, as is the European convention), and knowing what kind of conversation topics are likely and deemed 'appropriate' for such a situation. In Text 5D, part of my failure to order breakfast was a result of my lack of script knowledge of American restaurants. However, scripts are not static: as I spent more time in the USA, my script knowledge was updated and expanded so that by the time I left, I knew exactly what to say and what questions I was likely to be asked.

In summary, the study of politeness and impoliteness is essential to the study of social interactions. It connects aspects of linguistic identity, social contexts and linguistic forms, and can be thought of as linguistic behaviours that are positively or negatively evaluated in a particular context. These behaviours can be positively evaluated because they attend to someone's face needs, or negatively evaluated because they attack somebody's face. The degree of your understanding of culture influences linguistic behaviour and has an outcome on what is construed as im/polite.

5.5.3 Using language to think together

When speakers engage in conversation, it is often not just for sharing information and interacting socially, but to work together to solve problems. When they do so, they engage in what Neil Mercer (2000) calls *interthinking*. Mercer claims that language is not just a tool for sharing knowledge, but a tool for 'thinking together'. Interthinking is defined as the 'joint, coordinated intellectual activity which people regularly accomplish using language' (2000: 16). It views language as more than just the mere transmission of thoughts from one person to another, seeing communication as a collaborative meeting of minds, or a 'mental-matrix' (2000: 105). The concept of interthinking is influenced by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962), who distinguished between *intermental* activity (social interaction) and *intramental* activity (individual thinking). So, students in a classroom discussing a poem, for example, engage in dynamic intramental and intermental thinking to collaboratively construct meaning. Mercer proposes three types of interthinking: *cumulative*, *disputational* and *exploratory*:

- Cumulative interthinking is where people are in agreement with one another – talk that is uncritical, uncompetitive and constructive. They will largely attend to others' face needs.

- Disputational interthinking is where participants are in disagreement with each other. Talk may be characterised by arguments, insults and other face-threatening acts.

- Exploratory interthinking is talk where participants are interested in reasoning and evaluating, and jointly making sense of the world. In this type of talk, discussions are constructive yet critical and typically make use of *because*, *if* and *why*, where speakers are accounting for their opinions and engaging in co-reasoning with each other.

Social relationships

Read Texts 5E, 5F and 5G. Analyse and compare the ways that participants use language to create and maintain social relationships and identities. Consider context in your ideas: purpose of talk, power relationships, age of participants, and so on.

Text 5E is a conversation that took place between two builders, who are discussing a job:

Text 5E

Philip: they've got three things, a sink, a bath and a corner shower on the other side, right

Rob: in that one room

Philip: yes it's wider than this room

Rob: no way (.) absolutely not

Philip: it's (.) it's wider than this room, and it's easily from here to the end of the kitchen

Rob: no it's not (1) whata load of rubbish Philip, no, that's an exaggeration, come on, it's about as wide, it's as long as this room

Philip: I'm telling you mate (.) you don't have a clue

Rob: mate you are mad (.) how can you possibly think that

Text 5F is a transcript from a Year 7 (age 11–12) English lesson, where the teacher (T) and class are discussing reading. Zara (Z) and Nawar (N) are students.

Text 5F

T: alright then year seven let's hear what you have to say then (.) so first question was how is reading like seeing (.) who's got any ideas about what we mean by that Zara

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Zara:	I think it's true because when you read you see lots of things because of the describing words in the book and you can kind of imagine the scene
T:	ok so when you read something that's very descriptive you can imagine what's there
Zara:	yeah if it's a good book I mean
T:	do people agree with Zara
Nawar:	I think it's sort of seeing but more like imagining
T:	ooh interesting reading is imagining
Nawar:	yeah because I imagine what something would look like

Text 5G is a conversation between two friends, in their 30s, who are out shopping in a market.

Text 5G

Lily:	I wonder when they're gonna do the renovations for the market, did you see that in the papers?
Sam:	yeah it's brilliant isn't it
Lily:	they're gonna have lovely trees, it's gonna be very quaint (1) have you finished all our fruit?
Sam:	ooh yes
Lily:	do you want some grapefruit?
Sam:	good idea yeah let's get a couple
Lily:	okay two grapefruits as well then, erm, bananas are still thirty, do you want to get a couple of bananas? It's so cheap isn't it (1) I love shopping at markets like this
Sam:	it's lovely (.) so much nicer than going to the supermarket

RESEARCH QUESTION

Exploring spoken interaction in detail

On the internet, find an example of unscripted multi-participant interaction and choose a two-minute sequence from this. Some useful contexts might be:

- A debate between politicians in the House of Commons
- A TV documentary interview between presenter and guest(s)
- A tabloid talk show (e.g. Jeremy Kyle)
- A dating show

Transcribe your chosen clip using the appropriate conventions and then explore the following:

- Describe the context and the relationship between participants.
- What features of spoken language are used, and why might this be the case?
- Can you analyse the transcript in terms of face theory?
- Do the speakers observe Grice's maxims? Do they flout these at any point? Why? How might you account for this in terms of power relationships between participants?
- Analyse how language is used to negotiate and co-construct meaning. What types of interthinking can you observe, and why might these be present?
- What about body language? What does this signal about each speaker?

Wider reading

Read more about spoken discourse by exploring the following books:

Cameron, D. (2001) *Working with Spoken Discourse*. London: SAGE.

Jones, R. (2016) *Spoken Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury.

Stenström, A. (2014) *An Introduction to Spoken Language*. London: Routledge.