

- (8.11)
- S1: Do you want tea John? *offer*
 S2: No.
 S3: **Are you sure** John? *re-offer*
 S2: Yeah I'm fine thanks.
 S1: Yeah do you want some of this bread? *modified re-offer*
 S3: No I'm alright. (LCIE)

- (8.12)
- S1: . . . will you have a cup of tea? *offer*
 S2: No thanks.
 S1: **Are you sure** do you want a bag of Taytos³ or something? *re-offer + modified re-offer*
 S2: No thanks.
 S1: **Are you sure?** *re-offer*
 S2: No I have to be back for around six. (LCIE)

All of the uses of *Are you sure?* in the New Zealand spoken corpus relate to the seeking of further clarification in relation to the offer. In a two-million-word conversational sample of the spoken data of the North American segment of CIC, we find a similar pre-dominance of requests for clarification, for example:

- (8.13)
- S1: That big enough?
 S2: Uhuh.
 S1: **Are you sure?**
 S2: Certain. (CIC)

This adds weight to those who assert, contrary to Searle (1969), that speech acts, and the strategies and linguistic means available for their realisation, are not universal, but are bound by particular cultural contexts of use (see Fraser and Nolen 1981; Wierzbicka 1985; Fukushima and Iwata 1987; Blum-Kulka 1989; Olshtain 1989; Kasper 1992; Barron 2003, 2005).

8.3 Small talk

In example (8.3) (see p. 161) from the shop encounter, we saw that the shop assistant and the customer engaged in some chat about the weather:

- S2: . . . Coolish isn't it?
 S2: So it is shur. Tis grand. Tis great shur tis kind of dry.

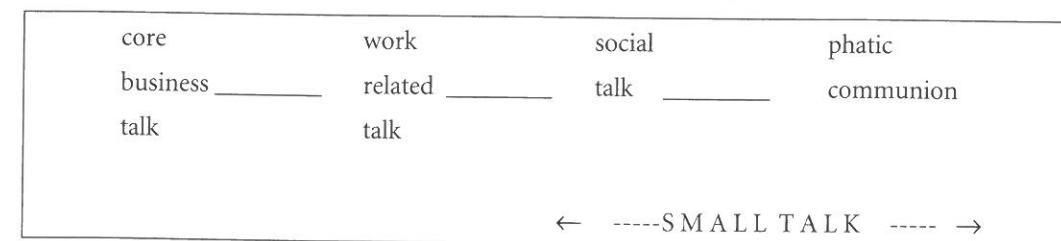
³ *Tayto* is an Irish brand of potato crisps.

Small talk such as this is a very common relational feature of conversation and something which occurs frequently in a corpus of casual conversation (see Eggins and Slade 1997; McCarthy 2002, 2003). However, *small* talk, as Candlin (2000) warns, should not be confused with unimportant talk. It has an important socio-relational function.

This type of talk was first identified as *phatic communion* by Malinowski (1923, reprinted 1972). His definition cast it in a rather negative light, as a mode of communication which could establish human bonds or communion 'merely' by talking (Coupland 2000). As noted by Coupland (2000), this definition created a legacy whereby small talk was dismissible as 'aimless, prefatory, obvious, uninteresting, sometimes suspect and even irrelevant, but part of a process of fulfilling our intrinsically human needs for social cohesiveness and mutual recognition' (Coupland 2000: 3) (see also Turner 1973; Leech 1974; Wolfson 1981, for examples of negative perceptions of small talk).

More recent reassessments of non-transactional talk, for example Coupland et al. (1992) who build on Laver's work (e.g. Laver 1975), see phatic exchanges as a type of talk that should not be relegated or seen as in some way communicatively deficient. As McCarthy (2000) notes, Laver's work was important, in that he saw phatic exchanges not only as constructing and consolidating social relations, but as strategic mechanisms for creating transitions into and out of transactional talk. Thus, McCarthy (2003) points out, small talk is not something that just sits in the gaps between transactional episodes, but actually facilitates them and enhances their efficiency; it threads them into socially recognisable fabrics which constitute our everyday spoken genres (e.g. service encounter, job interview, etc.). A number of studies have looked at the role of small talk in different contexts, for example Schneider (1989) looked at small talk during hotel check-ins (see also Schneider 1988); Komter (1991) focused on job interviews, where he finds that small talk plays an important role at the beginning of an interview; Ylänne-McEwen (1997) examines the strategic role of small talk in the task of buying and selling in a travel agency (see also Coupland and Ylänne-McEwen 2000); Farr (2005) shows how small talk is used at the start of a post-observation teacher training interaction (this is discussed in chapter 11). Holmes (2000), who looks at 121 hours of workplace interactions in four government departments, concludes that the distinction between business talk and small talk can be difficult to draw and she offers the following continuum, which reflects the cline along which small talk occurs (figure 3):

Figure 3: The small talk continuum from Holmes (2000: 38)



Holmes comments that small talk in the workplace functions like knitting, which can be easily taken up and easily dropped. It is 'a useful and undemanding means of filling a gap