road through Skipton to the Dales (McCarthy and Carter, 1995). The comment that the speaker expresses at the beginning of the clause is often an evaluation, such as *he's quite a comic, that fellow, you know*, but not always, as in *'cos otherwise they tend to go cold, don't they, pasta*. Tails emphasise the point made at the beginning of the clause, and at the same time, they create an informal tone in the talk.

Both topicalisation and tails follow clear patterns, which can be formed into 'rules' for talk. The patterns are characteristically spoken-like, but not traditionally taught in language classes or talked about in grammars. They create an impression of naturalness and interpersonal involvement in spoken discourse, and if examinees use them appropriately they could be rewarded for it. However, they cannot be punished for not using them, because they are not obligatory in any context.

To summarise the discussion on spoken grammar, speech is organised into short idea units, which are linked together by thematic connections and repetition as well as syntactic connectors. The most frequent connectors are coordinating conjunctions (*and, or, but,* etc.). Some speaking situations call for more literate grammar with complete clauses and subordination. These are typically formal speaking situations, which may involve prepared talk such as a presentation.

Speakers may emphasise points by topicalisation, which means starting their turn with the main topic and making the word order unusual, or tails, which means using the natural emphasis of the beginning of their turn for a comment or an evaluation and putting the noun that they are making their comment on at the end of the clause. This gives talk a spoken flavour. It adds interpersonal and evaluative tones, which is typical for spoken discourse.

Words, words, spoken words

Many rating scales for speaking include descriptions of vocabulary use, and at the highest levels these often talk about being able to express oneself precisely and providing evidence of the richness of one's lexicon. This can indeed be important in professional contexts or when trying to convey detailed information. Well-chosen phrases can also make descriptions or stories vivid, and learners who can evoke the listener's feelings deserve to be credited for their ability. However, very 'simple' and 'ordinary' words are also very common in normal spoken discourse, and using these naturally in speech is likewise a marker of highly advanced

speaking skills (see e.g. Read, 2000). Moreover, there is a core of phrases and expressions that are highly typical for speaking, which contribute to the listener's impression of the speaker's fluency. They work at the inter-personal level by keeping the conversation going and developing the relationship between the speakers. This aspect of word use should also be rewarded in assessing speaking.

Specific and generic words

Some forms of written language require the use of specific words to make it clear what is being talked about. For example, a written instruction for how to adjust an office chair states: *Use the ball adjustment to move the lumbar support to a position where it supports the back.* If the same instruction were given orally in a hypothetical set of video-taped instructions, similar words might well be used, but with added visual support. In an interactive speaking situation, the same instructions would probably sound quite different. The speakers would use many generic words such as *this one / that one, the round thing, move, put, fine,* and *good.* The instruction-giver and the chair-user would probably exchange several turns to make sure that the task got done properly.

Generic words are very common in spoken interaction. Even though they are not precise, they are fully comprehensible in the speaking situation because they talk about people, things or activities that can be seen or because they are familiar to the speakers. They make spoken communication quick and easy, and few people would find anything strange about this in their mother tongue. Generic words may also come naturally to second-language learners, but in a foreign language context where learners have few opportunities to speak the language outside the classroom this feature of spoken language may be harder to notice and learn. Assessment designers can help this by including descriptions of effective use of generic words in rating scales. This sends the message to learners and raters that generic words are important for the naturalness of talk.

Another common feature of interactive and relatively informal talk is the use of vague words like *thing, thingy, thingummy* and *whatsit* when the speaker cannot think of the word he or she needs to use. Channell (1994) has investigated the use of these words in English, but she refers to other researchers' examples for French and presumes that all languages have a set of such words. Vague words help the speaker go on regardless of the missing word, and at the same time they appeal to the listener to

understand and supply it if they can. They are natural in informal talk, and if learners use them appropriately they deserve to be rewarded for it.

Fixed phrases, fillers and hesitation markers

Speakers also need to know words, phrases and strategies for creating time to speak. These are sometimes called fillers or hesitation markers, and they include expressions such as *ah, you see, kind of, sort of,* and *you know,* as well as whole expressions such as *That's a good question,* or *Now let me see.* Speakers often also use repetition of their own words, or of those used by the previous speaker, to achieve the same purpose, i.e. to keep the floor while formulating what they want to say. These expressions are very common in native speaker speech, but for some reason their appearance in test performances by foreign language learners is sometimes frowned upon. When writing assessment scales, test developers should perhaps consider if examinees who manage to use such expressions successfully in a test situation should be rewarded for it instead.

Fixed conventional phrases are also used for other purposes in talk than creating time. Examples of these include responses like *I thought you'd never ask* or *I'm doing all right, all things considered.* The phrases either always have the same form, or they constitute a formula where one or two slots can be filled by various terms (e.g. *What a nice thing to say, What a horrible thing to say*). They have been called lexicalised sentence stems by Pawley and Syder (1983), and lexical phrases by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992). They are easy for speakers to use because they come almost automatically when a relevant situation arises and because, once a speaker begins such a phrase, saying it will give them time to judge the situation, perhaps plan how they want to put what they want to say next, or think of something else to say.

Word use in studies of assessing speaking

There are a few studies that support the relevance of the above-mentioned characteristics of speech for assessing speaking. Towell *et al.* (1996), for instance, show that learners' use of lexical phrases is connected with a listener's experience of the speaker's fluency. That is, if two learners use an approximately similar lexicon in their speech, but one of

them also uses a range of fixed phrases while the other does not, the one who uses the phrases is perceived to be the more fluent of the two. And if a learner uses a wide range of fixed phrases, listeners tend to interpret that as proof of a higher level of ability than when a learner is using a few stock phrases in all kinds of contexts.

Hasselgren (1998) investigated learners' use of filler words with three groups of speakers: British native speaker schoolchildren of 14–15 years of age, and two ability groups of Norwegian schoolchildren of the same age, high and low. Hasselgren called the verbal phenomenon she investigated **'smallwords'**, which she defined as 'small words and phrases, occurring with high frequency in the spoken language, that help to keep our speech flowing, yet do not contribute essentially to the message itself' (p. 4). Her results support the case that the more smallwords a learner uses, the better their perceived fluency.

Nikula's (1996) study of a range of similar expressions, which she considered under the heading of 'pragmatic force modifiers', adds the observation that even advanced learners produce a much narrower range of 'spoken-like' expressions and discourse markers than native speakers. She studied the speech habits of her non-native speakers also in their mother tongue, and was thus able to prove that the difference was not caused by personal or cultural communication style but was truly related to language ability. Together, these studies strongly support the case that the use of spoken-like words is important in speaking performance.

Slips and errors

Normal speech contains a fair number of slips and errors such as mispronounced words, mixed sounds, and wrong words due to inattention. If the listeners notice, they tend to pardon native speakers because they believe them to 'know', but in the speech of second or foreign language learners slips and errors mysteriously acquire special significance. Their slips can signal lack of knowledge, and this seems to be important for many listeners. While there are some errors that only learners make, such as using *no* + verb to express negation in English (*I no write*) or violating simple word order rules, there are others that are typical for all speakers. Assessment designers may have to provide special training to raters to help them outgrow a possible tendency to count each 'error' that they hear.