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With summer holidays behind us, I find myself missing the precious time spent in the company of a great novel.

While you can typically find me buried under piles of academic articles by day, there is nothing like a gripping novel to keep me company at night.

But not just any story will do. Spinning a good yarn is not just about the yarn but also about the spinning.

The grown-up me is indulgent. How sweet – this last late flowering of love. The daughter me is outraged. The traitor! The randy old beast! And our mother barely two years dead. I am angry and curious. (Marina Lewycka, 2005, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, Penguin)

One notoriously difficult element to get right is the dialogue or a particular character's internal thoughts. Writing speech down is hard because what we write and what we say are very different things.

Many of us write using standard grammar and punctuation, and we are



Authentic dialogue

Language Matters

regularly exposed to this kind of writing: letters from employers, rental contracts, notices from medical providers, news articles just like the very one you are reading right now.

What we are not so used to seeing on a page is genuine spontaneous dialogue. If I asked you to write down – as accurately as possible – the precise formulation of your last conversation, you would almost certainly not be able to do it.

First, because we don't remember exact wording, we tend to remember content but not form. Sometimes, bilinguals don't even remember which

language was used. But also because we tend to instinctively "translate" from spoken-ese into written-ese, overlooking *ums* and *ahs*, ignoring unfinished words, reformulating instinctively from one genre into another. Striking the authentic voice of spoken language is no mean feat.

"Peacocks," said Frau Wolff. "Over in the falconry. They make a terrible noise, but they're lovely for the children." (Catherine Chidgey, 2020, *Remote Sympathy*, Victoria Univ Press, p. 68)

Good dialogue leaps off the page and we recognise it immediately. Ironically, it takes a writer with a rare ability for listening to capture the true nature of a spoken dialogue. In the excerpt above,

peacocks followed by the stranded phrase *over in the falconry* show typical ways in which speakers build up meaning in conversation, namely, in short bursts of information, adding content incrementally, like beads on a string.

The grammar of speech (and there is indeed one) is not just different from the grammar of writing but more than that, it is fine-tuned to serve speakers, not writers. We cannot edit our speech once produced. We can sometimes plan it but, unless we memorise it, spontaneous conversation is unedited. It is uttered off-the-cuff, in real time.

Writing, on the other hand, is frequently edited. Our use of writing is often to impart information. Speech is very different. Most of our speaking time is spent building relationships, establishing group allegiances and providing opinions and evaluations.

"No: it was a private agreement – and Shepard has the only copy of the deed." Nilssen sighed. "Listen," he said. "I'm sorry for having sprung it on you – for having asked, you know – and doubted you. But I knew you were Lauderback's man – and, well, I had to make sure." (Eleanor Catton, 2013, *The Luminaries*, Penguin, p. 496)

We spend more time speaking than we do writing, and we take it for granted. In Western societies, we elevate the status of literacy high above that of being able to produce spontaneous off-the-cuff speech.

Yet being able to write down authentic dialogue is notoriously difficult and sometimes so important.

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THE IRISH TIMES

Wearing a mask an act of generosity

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

When the requirement for mask-wearing in shops, schools and on public transport lapses, one of the last visible signs of the extraordinary public health measures imposed on the country for two years will finally be gone.

The move to end the requirement demonstrates the confidence among the government's health advisers that harm from Covid-19 is continuing to reduce and that, barring the emergence of new variants, the worst of the pandemic has passed.

A measure such as this one is by definition extraordinary; once the scientific and public-health rationale for imposing it no longer applies,

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it is right that it be lifted. To retain measures when that rationale does not exist could risk weakening public support for the reimposition of restrictions if and when that becomes necessary.

Across the country, the medically vulnerable and immuno-compromised will worry that little bit more about the risks. Their fears and concerns should not be underestimated.

In fact, they should be uppermost when people decide whether to mask up or not. Wearing a mask means we are less likely to catch Covid, and less likely to pass it on. Wearing a mask in enclosed spaces, in other words, is an act of generosity and solidarity with others.