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# **‘Listening’ to the Neanderthals in William Golding’s *The Inheritors*: A Sociopragmatic Approach to Fictional Dialogue<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In their work on William Golding’s fiction, Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (1967) claim that *The Inheritors*, more concerned with matters of mythic significance, forfeited “most of the possibilities of the dialogue” (71). While in-depth treatments of language in Golding’s *The Inheritors* have since been offered (Halliday 1971; Hoover 1999; Clark 2009), the “possibilities of the dialogue,” in particular the conversational register of the Neanderthal characters, remain largely neglected. In this sociopragmatic re-reading of *The Inheritors*, I employ theory of mind and intentionality (as outlined in Dunbar 2004) as analytical tools in order to ‘listen’ more closely to the Neanderthals in Golding’s text. Paying particular attention to these characters as they express their religious beliefs, engage in storytelling, and work through interpersonal conflicts, I argue that readers are invited to infer that the Neanderthal characters are themselves inferring beings, and further demonstrate that this interpretation has implications not only for how individuals approach the novel, but for the way *The Inheritors* as a cultural text can be understood to participate in discursively mediating our relationship with the figure of the Neanderthal.<sup>2</sup>

**Key Words:** *The Inheritors*, Neanderthal, sociopragmatic, pragmatic stylistics, theory of mind, dialogic, intentionality

## **1 Introduction**

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<sup>2</sup> A version of this paper was delivered to the Pragmatic Literary Stylistics Special Interest Group at the 2015 Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA) conference *Creative Style* (University of Kent, Canterbury). I would like to thank the convenors of the Special Interest Group, Billy Clark and Siobhan Chapman, for the opportunity to give the paper and the participants for their valuable feedback. I would also like to extend my thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this paper, although of course any weaknesses or errors remain my own.

This paper offers an analysis of William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955), an "imaginative exploration" (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 68) of the human/Neanderthal encounter as it might have happened some 30,000-40,000 years ago when the direct ancestors of modern humans arrived on the Eurasian landmass. The text presents eight Neanderthal characters, an elderly male (Mal), an elderly female ("the old woman"), two adult males (Lok and Ha), two adult females (Fa and Nil), and two children (a youngster, Liku, and an infant). In Golding's vision of the meeting between "the people" (as the Neanderthals call themselves) and the modern humans nearly all of the Neanderthals, gentle and rather harmless on the whole, are slaughtered by the invading humans. Of the exceptions, only the elderly patriarch figure Mal dies of natural causes. The infant is kidnapped and Lok, the sole survivor, returns to their ancestral cave and lays himself down to die, overwhelmed by grief.

## **2 Previous research on *The Inheritors***

Studies on *The Inheritors* (1955) are many and varied, encompassing divergent approaches and concerns. The novel has been evaluated for its engagement with the scientific record (DePaolo 2000), lauded as "a work of rare literary merit" (Carroll 2004: 162), employed as data in tests of Darwinian literary theory (Carroll 2004) and functional grammar (Halliday 1971), chosen for stylistic analysis (Black 1993; Nelson 1986; Halliday 1971; Adriaens 1970), analysed in Freudian terms (Sugimura 2002), read as a re-telling of the biblical Eden story (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 91-93; Clark 2009: 187), explored for its relationship to fantasy literature (Timmons 1996), claimed as science fiction (Elsbree 1999; Walker 1981) and, more recently, defined as one of the classic texts in the emerging genre of prehistoric fiction (Ruddick 2009: 76).

As divergent and wide-ranging as this body of work at first appears to be, a salient theme running through much of it is that of cognition and a frequent conclusion is that the Neanderthal characters exhibit a number of cognitive deficits that leave them unable to cope

when the modern human characters arrive. While it is conceded that they may be “morally superior” (Hoover 1999: 52) in many ways – they are ‘unfallen’ (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor and 1967: 69; Clark 2009: 187); socially harmonious (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 73-75; Walker 1981: 298-299; Hoover 1999: 5); invest their environment with life and respect that life (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 72); and believe in a benign Mother Goddess (Hoover 1999: 52) – many accounts are also quick to claim that their cognitive skills lag behind those of the modern human characters, particularly in the areas of logical deduction, abstract thought, imagination, complex planning, and innovation (DePaolo 2000: 429; Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 67; Hackett and Dennell 2003: 823; Walker 1981: 300; Halliday 1971: 350; Black 1999). According to such sources, the Neanderthal characters are more animal than human in “their appearance and low level of evolution” (Hackett and Dennell 2003: 818) and depend on their physical senses for information about their world, only infrequently employing reflection or analysis (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 70; Black 1993: 43, 45; Nelson 1986: 307; Walker 1981: 300; Adriaens 1970: 21). And while the text makes it “easy to believe that Neanderthal man had language” (Nelson 1986: 307), that language as it is represented in *The Inheritors* differs systematically from the language of the human characters and is frequently characterised as nascent in its development (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 72; Hackett and Dennell 2003: 819; Black 1993: 41; Nelson 1986: 307), lexically restricted (Black 1993); morpho-syntactically simple (Halliday 1971: 349, 351-353), dependent on gesture (Adriaens 1970: 27), only a poor tool for thought at best (Black 1993: 45), and perhaps “only one stage beyond expressive noises” (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 72). *Log*, for example, can mean *fallen tree*, *bridge*, or *canoe* (Black 1993: 41, examples hers), and the *ears* on a tree are for the Neanderthals literal ears, not a metaphoric description of the fungi growing on the bark (Sugimura 2002: 281; Black 1993: 45). Other characterisations of their language include a tendency to cast inanimate objects

and body parts as such as *stick* or *nose* subjects (Halliday 1971: 349; Adriaens 1970: 19); the over-use of intransitive verbs (Halliday 1971: 349); a preference for expressing perceptions as noun phrases (*the tightness of his skin*) rather than actions (*His skin felt tight*) (Adriaens 1970: 23, examples his), and a limited use of instrumental expressions such as *by means of a weapon* (Nelson 1986). Halliday's (1971) conclusion on the language of the Neanderthal characters, while specific to his work, set the tone for much of the subsequent linguistic work on the text and can be taken to summarise the consensus view.

The picture is one in which the people act, but they do not act on things; they move, but they move only themselves, not other objects [ . . . ] [T]he scene is one of constant movement, but movement which is as much inanimate as human and in which only the mover is affected – nothing else changes.

The syntactic tension expresses this combination of activity and helplessness (Halliday 1971: 349).

Given the preceding account, we might conclude that the cognitive deficit reading of the Neanderthals in *The Inheritors* has robust support in the critical literature. Curiously, however, this very same literature indicates that this thesis may be difficult to sustain. Many studies, for example, instance scenes where the Neanderthal characters engage in complex planning, make logical deductions, and show an awareness of cause and effect, but then seem to sidestep the issue, explaining away evidence contrary to their thesis rather than confronting it. It is acknowledged, for example, that the Neanderthal characters do eventually develop some of the higher cognitive abilities, but too little and too late to give them any advantage (Elsbree 1999: 234; Walker 1981, 303; Sugimura 2002: 281; Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 87, 100, 104; Black 1993; 45, 37). In other cases, it is conceded that Lok and his people are represented with higher cognitive abilities, but only in a very limited form (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 73; Hackett and Dennell 2003: 822), and even this is stifled by their fierce resistance to change (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 63; Walker 1981: 303).

So what are we to make of this often held but difficult to maintain view that characterises much of the previous work on *The Inheritors* (1955)? Applying Stamou's (2011: 2014) work on the way "mass cultural texts" (2011: 329) represent sociolinguistic variety provides some useful avenues for answering this question. In a review of how such representations tend to be analysed and interpreted, Stamou (2014) finds that the research falls largely into two broad camps, *variationist* and *constructionist* (122). Analyses adopting the variationist stance, as Stamou (2014) explains, tended to treat sociolinguistic variation in a fairly "static" way (122). According to this view, representations of linguistic difference work by reflecting pre-existing and relatively fixed sets of social categories and meanings (Stamou 2014: 122). Analyses falling into the constructionist paradigm, by contrast, tended to view linguistic variation as a communicative "resource" (Stamou 2014: 122) available to speakers involved in "a meaning making process" (122). When we apply this distinction to the research record on *The Inheritors*, we find that much of the previous work on the language of the text fits into Stamou's (2014) variationist paradigm. Where linguistic difference was discerned, it was nearly always considered to indicate deficit and the "ready-made social meaning" (Stamou 2014: 122) thereby reflected and reinforced is what can be called the discourse of human ascendancy.<sup>3</sup> According to this view the Neanderthal characters, with their "limited analytic abilities" (Black 1993: 45), were not as linguistically or cognitively advanced as the modern human characters and so the latter "triumphed" (Hackett and Dennell 2003: 822). Confronted with characters who were difficult to understand, the prevailing critical assumption seems to have been that they were failing at "meaning making" (Stamou 2014: 122).

It is only in more recent work that we tend to find more constructionist readings of *The Inheritors*, readings that are willing to explore what previous studies tried to explain

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<sup>3</sup> The literature on *The Inheritors* is apparently not alone in this tendency. As Hackett and Dennell (2003) have noted, many scientific and fictional accounts of human evolution share the same basic structure and elements as fairy tales, with humans emerging as triumphant after overcoming a series of obstacles.

away, the possibility that morpho-syntactic simplicity may not indicate primitive and limited modes of thought.<sup>4</sup> Hoover (1999), for example, challenges many of Halliday's (1971) claims in a more nuanced exploration of transitivity. While he notes that transitive verbs are sometimes absent, he points out that this can often be linked to the topic at hand. In the scene where the Neanderthal characters are resting after a meal, for example, he points out that intransitive verbs certainly do occur, but as a natural consequence of the topic (*Liku's head nodded; the bubbles rose busily*, 62), not because the people are helpless or ignorant of cause and effect (Hoover 1999: 47). In addition, Hoover (1999) suggests that when transitivity choices do seem to co-occur with difficulties in comprehension, poverty of cognition may not be the best explanation. In the well-cited scene where Lok fails to understand that one of the modern human characters is aiming a weapon at him, Hoover (1999) agrees that intransitive verbs are noticeable, but his conclusion is not that Lok is represented as failing to grasp cause and effect or lacking the ability to see himself as an active agent (41, 46). Instead, he points to a number of contrasting instances where the people are engaging in activities that are a normal part of their daily lives, and notes that transitive verbs in such scenes occur in abundance (Hoover 1999: 50). When Lok and Fa are butchering a deer carcass and fighting off hyenas interested in the same kill, for example, we find items such as *Lok brandished his thorn bush* (53) and *Fa seized a foreleg* (53) (examples also noted in Hoover 1999: 50). As Hoover (1999) points out, there is no failure of cognition or agency here. The Neanderthals are represented as planning their attack, understanding their actions, understanding that their actions will have effects, and intending those effects. In such scenes they are not ineffectual

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<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that Stanley Fish's comments on *The Inheritors* in his 1973 paper 'What is Stylistics and Why are People Saying Such Terrible Things About It?' constitutes an example of this kind of exploration. In his now famous response to Halliday (1971), he points out that his analysis does not necessarily motivate a Darwinian reading. It could, he says, just as easily indicate an Edenic interpretation "in which the language of 'the people' reflects (or embodies or enshrines) a lost harmony between man and an animate nature' (1973/1996: 102-103). While Fish's comments pose interesting questions about the text and its interpretation, he does not propose them in a considered and detailed analysis dedicated to the novel itself; rather, his primary aim is a robust critique of formalist stylistics and Halliday's analysis is just one of his examples.

and unaware, but ‘competent, powerful, efficient’ (1999: 50) and Hoover (1999: 46, 49) concludes that when Lok encounters the modern human characters it is them – their behaviour, their artefacts, and their violence – that he does not understand, not cause and effect *per se*.

Clark (2009) goes even further in his interpretation of the Neanderthals in *The Inheritors*. In an extension of Hoover’s (1999) work, he looks specifically at what the language of the text allows readers to infer about them and finds, significantly, that we are invited to believe their system of communication is not simple but highly complex (192). Consider, for example, the scene where the people discover that their normal means of crossing the river, a fallen log, has disappeared (13). As the people discuss their dilemma, the narrator reports that Fa questions Ha, and that Ha “answered her with his mouth” (13). As Clark (2009: 192) notes with reference to Hoover’s (1999: 4) Gricean (1975: 45, 49) account of this scene, our ordinary assumption is that we talk with our mouths, so to be told “Ha answered her with his mouth” is over informative for the circumstance and thus a flout of quantity. This leads us to search for an interpretation, a reason for why we are being over informed, and an available interpretation is that the Neanderthal characters “communicate nonverbally or even telepathically” (Clark 2009: 192, drawing on Hoover 1999: 4-5). Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (1967) also arrive at the interpretation of telepathy, but for them it is a kind of cognitive crutch, a thing the Neanderthal characters do because they find complex verbalisations difficult (73). For Clark (2009: 194), however, something more complex is going on: whatever the nature of Fa’s unspoken question in the log scene above, Ha’s response allows us to infer a great deal. We can conclude, for example, “[t]hat the question was very specific, expecting an answer about a duration of time measured in days, and that [Ha] understood exactly what this fairly precise question was” (Clark 2009: 194). For Clark (2009), the fact that the Neanderthal dialogue is sometimes difficult to understand

is not necessarily evidence of their simplicity. Instead, he turns this assumption on its head, concluding that the deficit may be in us.

*We are missing out on something which they possess in their ability to communicate so effectively without words* (2009: 194, italics mine).

Just because we do not fully understand the Neanderthal language as represented in the text does not necessarily mean it is simple or undeveloped. That we find the Neanderthal characters difficult to understand may be our failure to listen, not their failure to communicate.

Inspired by these more “constructionist” (Stamou 2014: 122) accounts of linguistic variation in *The Inheritors*, my aim in this paper is to demonstrate that the Neanderthal dialogue in the text is not restricted or limited as Kinhead-Weekes and Gregor (1967: 71) have claimed but alive with meaning, and that the Neanderthal characters emerge as accomplished negotiators of those meanings. To do this, I extend Clark’s (2009) inferential analysis by applying theory of mind and intentionality as analytical tools in a sociopragmatic investigation of the Neanderthal speech in the novel, moving outside the ‘normal’ range of applied theory in pragmatic stylistics in order to ‘listen’ more closely to the Neanderthal characters. Paying particular attention to Lok and his people as they express their religious beliefs, tell stories, and argue with each other during personal conflicts, I arrive at a fresh understanding of the mental, emotional, and social worlds we are invited to imagine for them. In particular, I argue that 1) readers are invited to infer that the Neanderthals are themselves inferring beings who can be read not only as having theory of mind but also advanced orders of intentionality; and 2) that this interpretation has implications not only for individual readings of the novel, but also for how *The Inheritors* as a cultural text operates in our continually evolving relationship with the figure of the Neanderthal.

### **3 Methodological issues**

As noted above, I am using theory of mind and intentionality in this investigation to demonstrate that the Neanderthal characters in *The Inheritors* can be read as making inferences in much the same way we do. Since applying theory of mind and intentionality takes us off the beaten path in pragmatic stylistics, it will be useful to explain what they are and how they relate to inference, and why they can be considered legitimate as tools of analysis in the interpretation of fiction.

### **3.1 Intentionality, Theory of Mind, and Inference**

Understanding what people say to us or what we read often involves us in making inferences, working out what is meant when this is frequently different from what is actually said or written (explanation after Leech and Short 2007: 236; Wales 1990: 248). Our ability to make such inferences, as Dunbar (2004) notes in his account of human social and cognitive evolution, entails what is called theory of mind and this, in turn, requires a sufficiently advanced state of intentionality. To clarify these terms, I will follow Dunbar's (2004) account, starting with intentionality. Intentionality, as Dunbar (2004: 45) explains, is a concept from philosophy that refers to mental self-awareness, our knowledge that we have minds and that our minds contain our thoughts. This kind of knowledge can be classified into a series of "orders" (Dunbar 2004: 45). At zero order we might, as Dunbar (2004) suggests, think of a computer, a machine that stores and manipulates information without any awareness that it does so (45). At first order, knowing one's own mind (*I am tired; I am nervous*) becomes possible (45). It is at second order that theory of mind develops (44). At this stage, we are not only aware of our own minds, but become aware that other people have minds as well. With this comes the ability to imagine someone else's point of view and to infer from this what they might be thinking (43-44). Thus, at the second order of intentionality, we can have beliefs about what someone else believes (*Jane believes her husband thinks their new car was a waste of money*). As the orders of intentionality increase,

so do the required powers of imagination and inference. At third order, we are able to keep track of three states of belief (*I think that Molly believes that Karen wants to cancel the meeting*) (44-45). With orders four and five, we can engage in more complex and shared imaginative experiences, such as understanding and telling stories (162-3), creating and interpreting literature (120-121), and participating in communal religion (168-9,185).

### **3.2 Intentionality and Theory of Mind in the Analysis of Fiction**

Having defined intentionality and theory of mind, we can now turn our attention to the second methodological issue, establishing that they are appropriately applied in the analysis of fiction. Towards this end, I will demonstrate here that they are a good fit with other analytical frameworks that have been thus applied in the study of represented talk, that the orders of intentionality lend themselves to the process of systematic classification, and that their representation in fiction exists as a stylistic choice.

#### **3.2.1 A Good Fit**

As Herman (1995: 6) notes with respect to drama dialogue, actual talk and represented talk have an interesting relationship. While it is clear that they are different, it is nevertheless the case that

the principles, norms and conventions of use which underlie spontaneous communication in everyday life are precisely those which are exploited and manipulated by dramatists in their constructions of speech types and forms in plays (Herman 1995: 6).

This means that

‘ordinary speech’ or, more accurately, the ‘rules’ underlying ordinary and meaningful exchange of speech in everyday contexts are the *resource* that dramatists use to construct dialogue in plays (Herman 1995: 6).

Herman’s (1995) insights about drama dialogue apply equally well to fiction and fictional dialogue. As Fowler (1977) has noted, fiction presents us with what are essentially represented minds, narrators and characters portrayed as having thoughts and beliefs which

motivate particular behaviours, including linguistic behaviours. We understand these minds, as many analysts point out, with reference to our own minds, intuitively comparing what they think and say with what we would think and say in the same circumstances (Nuttall 2015; Leech and Short 2007; Zunshine 2003: 273; Herman 1995; Burton 1980; Culpeper 2001; Dunbar 2004: 66, 120). Thus, in the same way that the “principles, norms and conventions of use which underlie spontaneous communication in everyday life” are a “resource” for writers of fiction and drama, they are also a resource for readers of those texts (Herman 1995: 6). In order to better understand how this works, studies in pragmatic stylistics (e.g. see Nuttall 2015; Gregoriou 2009; Leech and Short 2007; Culpeper 2001; Culpeper *et al.*, eds. 1998 and the papers therein; Short 1996; Herman 1995) frequently draw on frameworks that have been devised to specify just what these “principles, norms and conventions of use” (Herman 1995: 6) might be and how they might operate. Such frameworks include speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), which seeks to explain how we understand the intended purpose of utterances, their illocutionary force, when the actual linguistic form of the utterance may or may not make this clear, and sets out to systematically define a range of speech acts (promise, invite, request, etc.) in relation to a set of social and psychological criteria; politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987), which invokes the mutual need to maintain face to account for how and why we often diverge from maximally clear and efficient communication; and the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975), developed to explain how we so frequently and accurately manage to understand what others imply rather than state. Theory of mind and intentionality, also devised to shed light on human cognitive behaviour, are a good fit with these frameworks, particularly as they are also concerned with the role of inference in everyday language. As Dunbar (2004) suggests, theory of mind and the higher orders of intentionality seem fundamental to the business of talk, since in order to have conversations we have to operate with some fairly sophisticated hypotheses about what our interlocutors

actually mean, and what they are likely to understand by what we ourselves say (2004: 119-120). Consider as well that Dunbar's (2004) own account, while concerned primarily with human evolution, suggests a role for textual analysis. Using Shakespeare's *Othello* to illustrate the orders of intentionality, he slides into interpretation, noting that it is the audience's understanding of Iago's intentions "that makes the play work" (Dunbar 2004: 120).

As Herman (1995: 8) also points out, represented talk can confirm what we expect from natural talk, or diverge from this, but in either case there are implications for interpretation. In Valerie Lowe's (1998) work on Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, it is divergence that is at issue. Citing reader "unease" (133) at the point in the play when Reverend Hale declares that Tituba, a slave, has confessed to witchcraft, Lowe (1998) draws on Austin's (1962) to argue that Tituba's utterance cannot legitimately count as such, and suggests that it is the mismatch between Hale's interpretation of Tituba's speech and ours that drives the sense of injustice that emerges from the text. Here, by contrast, I demonstrate that it is a correspondence with our expectations that is meaningful. Using theory of mind and intentionality as analytical devices, I argue that the Neanderthal dialogue in *The Inheritors* shows us characters who make inferences about what their interlocutors mean in broadly the same way we would.

### **3.2.2 Suitable Units**

In addition to being a good theoretical fit, theory of mind and intentionality also provide a suitable unit of analysis, the orders of intentionality. Expressible in mental process verbs (*believe, think*), the orders are discrete and countable (first order, second order, etc.) and give us a powerful way of systematically classifying the inferencing powers of the represented minds we find in fiction. In addition, they are also suitable for comparative purposes. Applying the orders as Dunbar (2004) outlines them, we have a baseline, the zero

order; a norm, and an “upper limit” (46). Generally speaking, as Dunbar (2004) notes, “most everyday situations probably require no more than second order intentionality” (46), and the story comprehension tests he and colleagues conducted with university students revealed that the majority in the sample handled “any given order up to fifth order” correctly (47), suggesting that “in actual practice, the limit for most people is probably about fourth or fifth order” (47).

### **3.2.3 Available as a Choice**

The final test of whether theory of mind and intentionality are appropriate additions to our analytical arsenal, however, is whether their reflections in fictional texts occur as choices. As Dunbar (2004) points out, our own mental states and abilities can be so natural to us that it can be difficult to think beyond them (see also Zunshine 2003: 272). This means that if we determine a fictional character has, along with other represented traits, theory of mind, we have to ask if that is represented as a choice, or whether it emerges simply because it may be difficult to create character without it. If theory of mind is available as a choice for representation, then we should be able to instance examples of characters that are represented without it, and this does seem to be possible. As Dunbar (2004: 44, 68, 76, 170) suggests, our powers to imagine the world as different from the way we find it are limited without theory of mind, and the character of Benjy in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* has often been described in this way. In their analysis of the opening of this text where we eventually realise that Benjy is watching a game of golf, Leech and Short (2007), for example, note that “Benjy’s world appears to be a simple and concrete one” (164) characterised by a failure to understand the intentions of others: “he appears to perceive no purpose in the golfer’s actions” (165). In Benjy then, we appear to have a character at first order, aware that he perceives but unable to imagine what others might perceive.

Another example comes from *The Inheritors* itself. As Clark (2009: 185) notes, the novel is typically described as having three parts. In between the first part of the novel, which gives the Neanderthal perspective, and the final part, which gives the modern human perspective, there is a section in which

the narrator's voice is that of a detached, quasi-scientific observer. He is apparently unaware of the preceding action, so that the significance of his observations is lost upon him. The narrator reports: the reader derives the implicatures' (Black 1993: 38).

This distanced and seemingly disembodied narrator would seem to be at first order, describing what it observes but seemingly unaware of the implications of those observations, or even zero order, simply recording and 'playing back' information.

#### **4 Analysis**

Having defined theory of mind and intentionality and made the case for their use as analytical categories, we can now move on to the analysis and its implications. As noted earlier, much of the previous work on *The Inheritors* (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967; Adriaens 1970; Halliday 1971; Nelson 1986; Black 1993) concluded that the Neanderthal characters had only limited powers of cognition and understood the world primarily "through their senses" (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 48), remaining tied to the physical world in a perpetual present. Such findings would seem to indicate a largely first order awareness without theory of mind (Lok's *I have a picture*, 33; Liku's *I am hungry*, 21), suggesting that the Neanderthal characters remain trapped in a juvenile state of cognition. "Without theory of mind," as Dunbar (2004) reminds us, we "take the world exactly as it comes" (51), unable to "imagine that it could be other than what [we] perceive it to be" (44). As I will show here, however, the Neanderthal characters go well beyond this. Paying careful attention to their talk as they express religious their religious beliefs, tell stories, and engage in complex interpersonal conflicts, I will demonstrate that these interchanges invite us to conclude that

the Neanderthal characters are possessed of powerful imaginations and have the ability to make sophisticated inferences about each other's beliefs and intentions.

#### **4.1 Expressing Religious Beliefs**

To say that the Neanderthals are represented as having religious beliefs is not new, as most of the accounts discussed earlier acknowledge their belief in Oa, their mother goddess. Less discussed in previous work on *The Inheritors*, however, is how these beliefs are expressed in their dialogue and the implications this has for what we can infer about their powers of inference. Consider the following four scenes where their religious beliefs become apparent in their talk. For ease of reference, I have named them. In the first scene, the creation scene, Mal recites the story of how the Oa created them and the earth (35). In the second scene, the intercession, the old woman decides that Fa must ask Oa for help in healing Mal (70). In the third scene, the doe scene, Lok reacts with guilt to their butchering activities (54). In the fourth scene, the fire scene, Mal addresses the old woman as she prepares to cross the river with the lit embers they use to re-start their fire (19). What do such scenes allow us to infer about the cognitive powers of the Neanderthal characters? Firstly, in order to believe in their Oa at all, their concept of the world must extend beyond what they can physically perceive (see Dunbar 2004: 184), and there are many other examples in their dialogue that indicate this. When Mal dies and they bury him, it is clear that this is not simply a physical act; for them, it means "Oa has taken Mal into her belly" (91). As they walk through their landscape, the ice is not just ice, but a reflection of their Oa (28, 70), and the earth is not just dirt beneath their feet but the child of their goddess "brought forth . . . from her belly" (35). Similarly, the tree root Liku carries is not just a tree root: it is "the little Oa" (33) (discussed further below, see section 4.2). When the old woman carries their lit embers over the river, it is clear from their talk that she is not just an old woman at this particularly dangerous moment (if she falls in the river both she and the embers are at risk),

and the lit embers are more than a mechanism to re-igniting their fire. In this scene, Mal directly addresses the old woman in the third person with *she* (“Will she carry it across now?”, 19) encoding extreme deference (after Brown and Levinson 1987: 198-201), and refers to the fire only indirectly as *it*. Significantly, both uses are represented as systematic divergences from their ‘normal’ talk. *She* in direct address is used only with the old woman here, as in the very next interchange he addresses Liku with the unmarked 2<sup>nd</sup> person *you*, and later dialogue indicates that they do have a word for fire which they readily use during the course of their normal activities (*Let her stay by the fire*, 46;). So what do the pronouns *she* and *it* tell us here? In Gricean (1975: 45-46, 49) terms, they are flouts of manner and quantity, *she* being mysteriously formal here and *it* being under informative. These flouts send us off on a journey of interpretation (Grice 1975: 49-50) and an available conclusion in context is that the old woman, as their matriarch and fire-guardian, is not just the old woman but an instantiation of their goddess and the embers are not just live coals but sacred objects too precious to be mentioned.

As these instances clearly show, the Neanderthal characters believe in a world beyond the one they can see and hear and smell. Drawing on Dunbar’s (2004) account, this allows us to infer that they have second order intentionality (184). From their talk on religious matters, however, it is also possible to infer that they go substantially beyond this. Consider the concession scene again. In order to get Fa to pray for Mal, the old woman must have beliefs about what Fa believes and about what their Oa believes and this involves several instances of second order intentionality. The old woman must *believe* [1] that Fa will *believe* [2] in her authority; the old woman must *believe* [1] that Fa *wants* [2] to help Mal; and she must also *think* [1] that the Oa will *understand* [2] their request (here and throughout, I adopt Dunbar’s notation to trace chains of belief). As the dialogue clearly implies, however, their religion is not just a matter of what they each believe, but what they all believe and assume each other to

believe and this makes things even more complex. For instance, the old woman must *believe* [1] that Fa *thinks* [2] that she (the old woman) *believes* [3] that the Oa will *understand* [4] that Mal needs help, which is four orders. Because their religious beliefs are mutually held, complex chains of inference are implied for Fa here, as well. Fa must *believe* [1] that the old woman *believes* [2] that she (Fa) *believes* [3] that the Oa will *understand* [4] Mal needs help. The doe scene and the creation scene provide similar examples of this type. In order to feel guilt in the doe scene, Lok must *believe* [1] that the Oa will *think* [2] he is doing something wrong. In order for him to blame it on the cat, he must be operating at three orders: Lok must *think* [1] that the Oa will *accept* [2] that he *believes* [3] it was the cat's fault. In order to tell the creation story with authenticity, which he does, Mal must *intend* [1] for the others to *believe* [2] that he *believes* [3] the Oa created them and their world. And if we assume, as is likely, that he is telling the story not just for their benefit but to honour and influence the Oa, we have five orders: Mal must *think* [1] that the others will *believe* [2] that he *believes* [3] the Oa will *understand* [4] that they *want* [5] her to care for them.

## 4.2 Telling Stories

As just demonstrated, some of the Neanderthal dialogue in *The Inheritors* focuses on their religious beliefs and practices, and as we tune into this talk we become increasingly aware that it suggests the Neanderthals have theory of mind and sophisticated inferencing abilities. This becomes even more apparent when we consider Neanderthal storytelling in the novel. As an example, let us join Lok as he tells the story of finding a tree root that he thinks looks like their Oa, and giving it to Liku as a gift (33). When Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (1967) discuss the style of this scene they say only that “Lok’s words in the passage are little more than verbal accompaniment of mime and gesture” (72). In the analysis here, however, I suggest Lok’s language achieves something far more profound: in this story Lok uses language “as ‘speech style’, as a resource for meaning making in context” (Stamou 2014:

122, with reference to Coupland 2007). It is evident, for example, that Lok is not simply narrating these events to convey information, as everyone knows the story already (*They knew it as well as he did*, 33). Instead, the story clearly has a bonding function. Applying work from Bowles (2010) on conversational storytelling, we can say here that Lok's story works to "construct affiliation" (Bowles 2010: 150). Everyone enjoys listening to it again, they laugh, and in the very next scene they fall into one of their shared silences (34). It can also be suggested, again with reference to Bowles (2009: 58), that Lok is using the story to project his identity as the group's master storyteller and comic entertainer. Applying work on conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) and represented conversational storytelling (Bowles 2009, 2010) to this scene allows us to take a more detailed look at the ways in which Lok does this. Notice first of all that features of recipient design (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974: 727) and involvement (Brown and Levinson 1987: 106-107) accumulate in the story as Lok actively engages his audience. He starts by bidding for a long turn, introducing his story with *I have a picture* (33). Throughout the tale, he uses repetition to build suspense (*I have a picture; a picture of finding the little Oa; I feel; with this foot I feel*, 33). The repetition of *feel* culminates in an audience-involving rhetorical question (*What do I feel?*, 33) to which Lok supplies three possible answers in parallel (*A bulb? A stick? A bone?*, 33), heightening the suspense further. The use of the historic present and present progressive (*am standing; feel; is*, 33) animates the story for the audience (Brown and Levinson 1987: 106-107), as do the performative elements. The narrative reports emphasis Lok's deliberate miming as he re-enacts the scene for his audience (*His weight was on his left foot. . . ; His right foot seized something*, 33), and the pauses, obvious in the text (33), are salient, co-occurring with the repetition to add dramatic effect.

For the story to operate as a bonding mechanism for the group and identity projection for Lok, both he and his audience have to understand the story and appreciate its wider social

meanings, and this allows us to infer that both he and his audience must have theory of mind and must also be able to operate at the higher orders of intentionality, as well. As the storyteller, Lok must *want* [1] his audience to *believe* [2] that Liku *thinks* [3] he is a great hero for finding her such a miraculous gift, which is three orders of intentionality. Lok's listeners are working at four orders. They *understand* [1] that Lok *wants* [2] them to *believe* [3] that Liku *believes* [4] he is a great hero.

The specific elements of recipient design in Lok's story are a further indication that the Neanderthal characters have theory of mind. They allow us to infer, for instance, that Lok must be keenly aware of his audience. In order to involve his listeners by using repetition, rhetorical questions, and animating devices such as mime, gesture and strategic pausing, he must have the ability to hypothesize how they are likely to react, and this requires second order intentionality (see Dunbar 2004: 119): Lok *intends* [1] for his audience to *find* [2] that he is entertaining. Working at three orders, the audience do seem to ratify his belief. At the end of the story, the others applaud, and Lok is "secure in their applause" (33), an indication that the audience endorses the story's value, its "tellability" (Bowles 2010: 19, 68), and by extension Lok's status as a storyteller and entertainer: they *intend* [1] for Lok to *believe* [2] that they *think* [3] he is funny.

As just shown, "Lok's words" here are far more than a simple "accompaniment of mime and gesture" (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967: 72). They represent an instance of storytelling and in so doing show us characters who, in order to tell and understand those stories, must have cognitive abilities similar to our own, for as many commentators have noted, storytelling is, after all, quintessentially human behaviour (Black 2006: 53; Dunbar 2004: 163).

#### **4.3 Arguing and Interpersonal Conflicts**

Thus far, I have demonstrated with respect to their religious talk and storytelling that the Neanderthal dialogue in *The Inheritors* shows us not simple and primitive creatures of limited intelligence, but beings with theory of mind and substantial inferential powers. Their cognitive capacities are underlined even further when we eavesdrop on the Neanderthals as they engage in another very human behaviour, squabbles and arguments that sometimes become bad-tempered. While a number of commentators suggest that the Neanderthals in *The Inheritors* have yet to develop a ‘higher consciousness’ (Nelson 1986: 307), show little sense of self (Black 1993: 44; Walker 1981: 300), and generally lack the capacity for introspection (Black 1993: 44), I show here that their dialogue invites us to see them as thoughtful and highly reflective individual selves who engage in “moment-to-moment negotiation and projection of identities in discursive social action” (Stamou 2014: 122). I will illustrate this with examples from three scenes which show the Neanderthals engaging in complex social interactions that require careful and accurate deductions about the beliefs and intentions of their interlocutors. The first scene to be considered is when Mal has fallen ill with a fever and proposes to send Lok, Fa, and Liku out to gather food. Fa and Lok disagree, with Fa suggesting that Liku should not accompany them, and Lok suggesting that they follow Mal’s instruction (46). Interesting in this scene is that Lok and Fa clearly engage in the complex activity of debating what their next course of action should be, which entails several orders of intentionality. Fa, operating at second order, makes it clear she has beliefs about Mal’s beliefs: she *believes* [1] that Mal *believes* [2] Liku should join them in gathering food. Notice as well, however, that she considers that belief to be false (*It is not good that Liku should come out on the plain with us, 46*), one of the hallmarks of theory of mind. When we develop theory of mind, we are not only able to imagine what others might believe, but also understand that those beliefs might be false (Dunbar 2004: 68). Also significant in this stretch of dialogue is that it shows us Fa clearly understand cause and effect: Fa believes

that Mal has a false belief *because* he is ill. Acting on this belief, she attempts to influence Lok, projecting her identity as leader and chief planner now that Mal is ill. In this, she demonstrates three orders of intentionality: Fa *wants* [1] Lok to *understand* [3] that she *thinks* [3] Mal's plan is a mistake. Lok disagrees, challenging Fa's claim to authority in the deceptively simple *Mal said* and displaying four orders of intentionality as he does so. In order to disagree, Lok has to *understand* [1] that Fa *wants* [2] him to *believe* [3] that she *believes* [4] Mal's plan is ill-advised.

For the second scene, we return to the episode where the people discover their log bridge is missing (12). Fa and Lok again find themselves in disagreement and once again the issue at stake is identity, this time Lok's identity as the group's comedian. When Lok tells Fa of the missing log, she looks "accusingly" (12) at Lok, who immediately denies that he moved the log as joke (12). In order to call into question Lok's value as the group's practical joker, Fa has to be working at three orders of intentionality. She has to *believe* [1] that Lok *believes* [2] the people will *think* [3] it is funny if he moves the log, and as the dialogue makes clear, she assumes at first that this is what must have happened. Demonstrating his own ability to understand that others can have false beliefs, Lok protests his innocence and re-asserts his value as the initiator of play, calling Fa out on her accusation. Notice that the accusation is something that Lok works out for himself (Fa "did not need to speak", 12), and that in his talk, he responds to what he thinks Fa believes, not what she says. Significantly, this requires the scale-topping sixth order of intentionality (remember that Dunbar's university students only scored accurately up to five) – not bad for the character that is generally considered to be "not particularly intelligent" (Hoover 1999: 4). Lok *understands* [1] that Fa *wants* [2] him to *believe* [3] that she *thinks* [4] it was wrong of him to *think* [5] the people would *think* [5] it was funny if he moved the log. Also worth pointing out here is that

this scene allows us to infer Lok's belief in his own agency, as he clearly believes he could have moved the log if he had wished to.

The final scene to be considered is when Fa settles a dispute between Ha and Lok. As in the previous two scenes, identity work comes to the fore. As Lok begins telling the group another story to entertain them, Ha steals his thunder by casting doubt on some of the details (38). In doing this Ha, generally the sensible and dependable one (13) -- it is he who finds a new log for their bridge, and he who has to wade into the icy water to place it (16-18) -- asserts this identity during Lok's story by challenging Lok's identity as their comedian. Returning to conversational storytelling, we can say here that that the story is not simply a narrated sequence of events but a space in which to contest status (Bowles 2010: 145). Ha challenges the "tellability" (Bowles 2010: 19, 68) of Lok's story, and thus Lok's status as the teller, by stealing his audience and ridiculing him. This requires Ha to be operating at three orders of intentionality. Ha *intends* [1] the people to *believe* [2] that he is superior to Lok because he *thinks* [3] that Lok's story is a silly exaggeration. Lok once again understands the challenge to his identity, as is clear in his signs of annoyance. In response to Ha's "cynical smile" (38), his hair raises, he blusters, he begins to "gibber" (38) and he protests with "That is a true picture!" (38). Notice once again that his protest here is made in response to what he believes Ha thinks, not in reply to anything Ha has said. Lok *understands* [1] that Ha *intends* [2] for the people to *believe* [3] that he (Ha) *thinks* [4] Lok is exaggerating, and Lok *fears* [1] the people will *believe* [2] Ha's *belief* [3] that he is exaggerating. Fa, again projecting the identity of leader, steps in to make peace. This implies some very complex processing on her part. In order to make her contribution to the talk, she has to notice what is going on, understand what Lok thinks, understand what Ha thinks, understand what Ha thinks Lok will think, understand what Lok thinks Ha thinks, and understand what they both think the people will think. In addition, she has to compute the implications arising from the dispute, the risk

to the group's harmony if the conflict escalates. Tracing the orders of intentionality involved, Fa *understands* [1] that Ha *wants* [2] the people to *believe* [3] that he is superior because he *thinks* [4] that Lok's story is silly (four orders), and she also *understands* [1] that Lok *fears* [2] the people will *believe* [3] Ha's *belief* [4] that he is exaggerating (three more orders). In addition to what she understands about Ha and Lok, she has her own intentions here. To diffuse the tension, she *wants* [1] the people to *see* [2] that she *believes* [3] that Ha and Lok each have their particular talents (and perhaps are as silly as each other) (three more orders). It is unclear whether we should see this as ten orders of intentionality or three parallel sets of inferences involving four, three and three orders respectively, but in either case it is clear that we are invited to see Fa as a character invested with a powerful emotional intelligence.

## **5 Conclusion and Implications**

As demonstrated in the preceding analysis, the Neanderthals in *The Inheritors* are perhaps not, as much of the previous work on this text has supposed, represented as simple and primitive creatures surviving more on instinct than intelligence. In their religious practices, their storytelling and their interpersonal exchanges, they are represented as demonstrating cognitive abilities akin to our own, working routinely at the second, third and fourth orders of intentionality and occasionally going beyond this. We come now to the final part of the discussion, what this re-reading means for *The Inheritors* as a cultural text. While it might be considered that the novel is just one single imagining of the human/Neanderthal encounter, I demonstrate here that its implications are much wider than this. Like a stone dropped in a river, the effects of the text ripple outward and intersect with other currents of thought. For this discussion, I will be drawing on some of Bakhtin's (1981) ideas from his essay 'Discourse in the Novel'. These ideas are that 1) the utterance behaves like a living thing, "an active participant in social dialogue" that "cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads" (276); and 2) an "artistic work" (274) like a novel is not

a self-contained and finished thing, but a “rejoinder” (274) in active contact with other “living rhetorical genres” (269).

If we consider *The Inheritors* to be an utterance in this wider sense, it becomes interesting to look at some of the many “living dialogic threads’ it ‘brush[es] up against” (276). Three of these threads are the historic/scientific record on our encounter with the Neanderthal, the academic literature on *The Inheritors*, and the genre of prehistoric fiction. As Hackett and Dennell (2003) and Trinkhaus and Shipman (1994) point out, the scientific account on our encounter with the Neanderthal is at times more story than science. As Trinkhaus and Shipman’s (1994) account suggests, two competing discourses on the figure of the Neanderthal have developed since their Neanderthal bones were first recognised in 1856, one holding that the Neanderthals were subhuman brutes closer to the apes than to us, and the other that the Neanderthals were members of the human family to be accepted and embraced as such (Trinkhaus and Shipman 1994). *The Inheritors* has played, and continues to play, an active role in the dialogue between these two discourses. For some, the novel is a “rejoinder” (Bakhtin 1981: 274) to Wells. As Clark (2009: 197), Elsbree (1999: 234) and Ruddick (2009: 76) have all pointed out, the novel’s epigraph, a quote from *Outline of History* on the supposed animalistic nature of the Neanderthal, invites the interpretation that *The Inheritors* can be cast as a response or a rebuttal to that view. For others, *The Inheritors* as a piece of prehistoric fiction plays another very active role in the discourse on the status of the Neanderthal. As Hackett and Dennell (2003) have noted, both literary and scientific imaginations have a role to play in the story of how we understand the Neanderthal. According to this view, prehistoric fiction can serve as an active and productive space of speculation, a place to raise and consider hypotheses with considerably more freedom than is afforded to scientific genres (Hackett and Dennell 2003: 817; Timmons 1996: 399-400). As Hackett and Dennell (2003) also note, prehistoric fiction such as *The Inheritors* can often

intersect in a more direct way with the public conversation about our deep “archaeological past” than scientific writing (817).

Another set of voices in the dialogue on our encounter with the Neanderthal is the academic literature on *The Inheritors*. Many of the earlier studies I have discussed here (Adriaens 1970; Halliday 1971; Nelson 1986; Black 1993) saw in the novel a reflection of the Neanderthal-as-primitive discourse while later studies such as Hoover (1999) and Clark (2009) saw in this very same text challenges to that discourse. The re-reading offered here in this paper takes this challenge to the next level by listening to the Neanderthals in *The Inheritors* in a new way and suggesting a cognitively richer mental world for them, one much like our own. This trajectory in the academic record on *The Inheritors* puts it in parallel with the scientific record on the Neanderthal. As Trinkhaus and Shipman’s (1994) account indicates, the direction of travel has, with many stops, starts, reversals, and upsets along the way, been generally towards humanising the Neanderthal, and subsequent evidence has served to reinforce this view. Dunbar (2004), for example, notes that studies on Neanderthal brain size indicate that they might have been able to handle fourth or fifth order intentionality (75), and suggests that they “might not have been the intellectual slouches of common myth” (75). It appears, however, that our conversation on the Neanderthal is far from finished. The most recent findings are emerging from genetic studies and it has recently been discovered that non-Africans have Neanderthal DNA (Robin Mckie reporting on the work of geneticist Svante Pääbo and his team in *The Observer*, 2010). Such findings seem to have disrupted the emerging consensus of the Neanderthal as human, and appear to be taking our conversation on our relationship with them in a new direction. Current interest, for example, seems to cluster around the consequences of interbreeding. Some report that it weakened our immune system (Tom Whipple on the work of Professor Luis Barriero in *The Times*, 2016), others that interbreeding made us stronger (Padraic Flanagan on a study in *Molecular Biology and*

*Evolution in the i*, 2016), and on the conversation goes. It will be interesting to see how future academic work on *The Inheritors* responds to this next chapter in the human/Neanderthal story, and what future analysts will hear in the Neanderthal dialogue.

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