



Talk is a Creature

Poems on Conversation Analysis

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Charlotte Albury**

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“Between my branches are ‘pauses’; in the natural world there is a ‘conversation’ between branches, leaves and the tree trunk. The difficulty of ‘conversation’ is represented by complex scaffold which forms the backdrop, and being ‘understood’ is captured in the way the colours of the leaves are different but complimentary, hence they are understood as a thematic palette. Finally, ‘interruption’ and ‘layers of conversation’ are illustrated by dark branches and solid scaffolding piercing the delicate fabric of the leaves of conversation.”

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FOREWORD

The world around us is often buzzing with 'talk', including spoken language, sign language, body language and all those things humans do to communicate with each other. But how does 'talk' really work? You might think talking is random or unpredictable but, actually, when you peer beneath the surface, you see talk is not random at all.

Under the surface there are mechanisms and rules that govern how and when you talk, and what effect your talk will have. When you understand those mechanics you can see that even small changes to talk can make a big difference to how conversations unfold.

As conversation analysts, we study these mechanisms that run under the surface of talk. To do this we collect and analyse real conversations. We transcribe words, intonation, and speed, and measure pauses in fractions of a second. We spend our days listening closely to recorded talk.

When you spend time listening so closely and carefully to talk, it's parallels with poetry become evident. Running invisibly beneath both talk and poetry are mechanisms, and rules, scaffolding form and function. In both talk and poetry we create and convey meaning, we work through misunderstandings and difficulties, we stretch vowels or sharpen consonants. The power of both phenomena lies in how words are used, shaped and delivered.

Discussing conversation analysis and poetry together we felt that these two were a natural fit. We set about considering how poetry could be a creative way to share those mechanisms running under the surface of talk, and bring the scientific study of conversation to new audiences.

This led to the creation of seven poems on conversation analysis. The poems ‘overlap’, ‘silence’ and ‘repair’ each explore a common aspect of conversation, capturing how this aspect works as a part of ‘talk’. ‘Post-script’ shares how we painstakingly transcribe each micro-second of talk, explicitly paralleling the format of our transcriptions, with poetry laid out on a page.

We analyse conversations to better understand what happens in real life, as conversations as they unfold are often different to what we remember afterwards. By looking at hundreds of conversations, we can see common patterns and identify which ways of communicating may be more or less useful in a given setting, or under particular circumstances. Our team mostly works with doctor/patient interactions, looking to learn how communication might be improved. The poems ‘delicacy features’, and ‘personalisation’ share results from our recent scientific studies of over 200 real doctor/patient interactions.

Here we weave together science and poetry. We share scientific explanations of the mechanisms of talk, and poetry to illuminate and explore these.

- Charlotte Albury and Grace Copeland

POST-SCRIPT

Conversation Analysts study very tiny details of talk. Because of this we need a way to capture the ebb and flow of how people really speak. We transcribe talk in a special way to represent how <slow> or >fast< someone was speaking, whether they spoke °quietly° or LOUDLY, with rising? or falling. intonation, with emphasis or whether speaking at the [same time] in our transcripts. All details matter to conversation analysts—from how long a silence lasts, to what someone’s laughter sounds like (is it a rapturous HAHAHA., or a soft °£ehelih?°)—the art of accurately transcribing the tiny details means we can see what actually happens, and when we can see what actually happens we can see just how orderly, systematic and important these small features of talk really are. The poem ‘Post-script’ follows the process of starting with a blank page, listening to conversations, transcribing, and filling the page with talk.

- Jack Joyce

“Imagination is not, as is sometimes thought, the ability to invent; it is the ability to disclose that which exists.”

- John Berger

Deep from within nothing

()

There -

()

Hear that?

The silent landscape stretching into sound,
wind running like a bow over power lines,
a pastor beating his chest like a drum.

From nothing

Something

with shape and depth and gravity -

()

There -

()

Hear that hush

between the mother's chide
and the child's withdrawal?

There -

The patient and the doctor

[clashing voices like two notes]

[adjacent on a scale]

a pause away from listening.

This music washes up
without a score,
a wild thing,
a flesh thing

There -

()

A nature thing,
with laws that scrawl beneath the skin

Listen -

Give me a blank page
and I will give it lungs,
a home to haunt:

Now look -

(3.7)

See that silence?
See the way the question rises?
See the way that *understa:::nd* arches its long back?
See the patient sitting forward= ears open,
see the ((little flicker)) of the doctor's busy eyes?
Feel the impact of that *REALLY*,
that *benefit*, that *it would be great IF*,
feel the heavy load they give
when they say it with such weight?

- Grace Copeland

DELICACY FEATURES

Delicacy can be *done* in conversation. Like other social actions that we do when we speak, we can *do* delicacy. This does not mean performing *being* delicate. It means using language and our bodies to make the people we are speaking to feel reassured and helped, as the poem says, about pain, risk, stigma. Some ways can be: ending a phrase with ‘or’ and leave the other person the space to fill out the rest; accompanying our words with slight touch; delaying the production of a delicate topic, prefacing introducing it with kind words. All these things can occur together and are used systematically to convey the morning mist of delicacy, a crucial action in delicate interactions, like doctor-patient ones.

- Virginia Calabria

a green morning mist;
a screen atop a sea which
may be perilous

or perhaps it's fine
maybe it's, sort of, a bit
calm- much calmer

than you had first thought.
The softness of the fog
makes you sail out to see

Garden overgrown
thick with berries, rich in weeds
holds hard work untold.

But the gardener
is delighted to toil in
such a wild Eden -

The beauty of the
rose and the chirping of birds
strengthens his tired bones.

Petals may soften
a fall, honey can sweeten
the bitterest taste.

White-coated shoulders
stiffen, hands fiddle with
the pen on the desk -

how to help them feel
helped, the patient opposite

with hardships untold

how to help them hear
*you can do this, you have to
try, I know it's hard*

how to help them see
past the *pain*, the *BMI*
the stigma, the risk

how to keep to time
when the waiting lists are long,
to be frank *and* kind?

choosing the right words
is an art that requires
patience and stumbling

dealing cards gently,
swathing language in language
to kind of, you know,

usher the message
sweetly through.

If you can understand

this talk of softness

then you can see that
something like a morning mist, or a few kind words
will nestle the truth, and make a person calmer - much calmer.

- Grace Copeland

OVERLAP

When someone starts speaking at the same time as us, they are not necessarily cutting us off. This is called **overlap** and is a resource in conversation represented like this when we transcribe: [yes]

[I get] it

Depending on the point at which someone overlaps, different actions can be done: at the end of a phrase or after a specific word, overlaps can signal that we have understood what the other person is getting at (like saying *yes yes* before the other person has finished a sentence); overlap can help the other person, if they are struggling for words, by offering a possible continuation of what they are saying. Sometimes a person *catches the same thought in the same light* as you. These are all things we can do when overlapping: so much more than just interruption!

-Virginia Calabria

The end of a thought can [sometimes be caught]
[Can sometimes be taken away] when someone
gets there first.

No no, [can sometimes be-]

[Mmm, when you're just] trying to get a message across.

Yes, and sometimes somebody [gets]

[Yes,} gets there before you do

no - wait - gets there right at the same time
and catches the same thought in the same light, in the same moment.

Like, say,

a kind clinician, soft with words

moving tenderly towards the subject:

the patient needs to lose some weight

but no confidence, no self-belief.

Gently into it, careful not to pierce the peace -

hear them hover, touch down lightly

on the *diabetes*, on the *difficulties*

and then - hear the sun shine in through the window,

the moment of acceptance,

the feeling of support -

I think it would be amazing for you

if you could try and [lose a bit of weight]

[lose a bit of weight, yes, I understand.]

Two tides meeting

each suddenly indistinguishable

from the other.

For both have seen storms,

both have carried hardships on their waves.

The kind clinician knows it is never that simple,

they watched their mother, their friend, and others.

They too, have a body to which they must tend.

Two branches of ivy interlaced
twisting up as one
for both want so
to be near the sun.

The patient knows their body
the way you'd know a friend -
their dreams, their smile,
what builds them up, breaks them down.

Two people in a little room,
two lives in this moment overlap
and yet two voices can be heard
two pairs of eyes are seeing;
two souls are truly seen.

- Grace Copeland

SILENCE

Silence can be methodically used to slow the pace of conversation for different reasons. Because silence is important, conversation analysts measure the length of silences down to the millisecond. We then ask the two questions: *what type of silence is this?* And, *what is this silence doing here?* **Pauses** within someone's talk are used to emphasise the delicacy of the topic, or make sure someone is listening. **Gaps** between different speakers are the harbingers of doom—have you ever asked a question and been met with silence? That's a gap. Gaps usually occur when something unexpected is about to happen. A gap needn't be long—anything more than about 0.7 seconds is more than enough to signal trouble is brewing. **Lapses** describe extended silence when no one in the conversation chooses to speak and these are commonly described as “awkward silences”.

- Jack Joyce

Sometimes, it is easier
To let it all s l o w,
in your hand
of the lake.
is truer
Nothing can be
that words
Nothing
storm at
birdsong.
listen. Nothing is a
song. It is a plea.
speech, of sound. It is
it is never nothing.
matter how
silence

to say nothing.
to hold the pebble
watch the blue clarity
Sometimes nothing
than something.
everything
are not.
can keep the
bay and make room for
Nothing might make them
floodgate. It is a protest
It is the birth and death of
weakness and power. But
And I will listen, no
many miles your
stretches.

- Grace Copeland

PERSONALISATION

In the poem ‘Personalisation’ we see two contrasting verses. In both doctors are sharing weight loss advice with patients living with obesity. But in one the doctor gives generic advice, that could apply to anyone. In the other they relate the talk to the patient’s experiences (for example, plans to walk more), meaning this conversation is ‘personalised’ for this patient. As conversation analysts we notice patterns like this in the talk - generic and personalised- and consider what impact they might have for the consultation, in terms of patient responses. As you read or listen to the two contrasting verses, consider the impact the presence or absence of personalisation can have on the consultation.

- Rachael Drewery

What I would like to discuss

mhm

is that number, your weight
against your height
your BMI, that is,

yeah

erm, it's thirty-six-point-five
which is quite a bit too high
and we're keen to try to get
everybody to get their weight down
to, what is, a healthy one, okay?

()

so that's all you have to do, really is
low fat high fibre and exercise
okay?

yep

Alright then.

*

Now Mrs J, I know today
we took your weight

Mhm

and we found that your BMI
is a little high - quite a bit higher than we'd like.

Oh, right, yes

Yes, so what we'd say is it would actually
really help you overall, to lose some weight

Lose some weight, yeah, I've
already started trying a bit,
trying to walk everywhere and things

Yes, that's a great way to keep active.
Especially with what we've been talking about
you know, your joint pain, and your lower back,
losing some weight will be a bi - a massive help.

Of course

So, there are lots of different options
like joining something like Slimming World
or just trying some regular light exercise
and keeping that diet low on fat

Yeah, maybe I can ask my
friend, she already goes to
Weight Watchers, I could see if
I can go with her

Yes, that's an excellent idea, it's good to have
somebody to support you on this journey.
And if you want to talk about this, we can
chat if you want to come back in.

Yes, I'd like that, maybe once
I've started seeing some results?

Of course. Are there any questions you want to ask?

I think I'm all set.
Thank you.

Thank you Mrs J. Now take care of yourself.

- Grace Copeland

REPAIR

Repair is changing what a speaker has said, or is saying, during the ongoing talk. People can perform repairs on their own words (self-repair) or on the other party/person's turn (other-repair). Repairs are aimed at solving problems with speaking, hearing, understanding or agreement. However, conversational repair is more than error correction. Speakers adjust their turns to sound more or less knowledgeable, direct or delicate, to avoid being held "accountable" for their words, or to prompt a particular type of response from the recipient etc. In this way, it is true to say that speech is always being fixed.

-Liliia Bespala

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

A father's favourite,
a rule by which to warm your bones.

Is there anything that can't be truly broke -
broken? Anything that comes already
shattered, or must be torn up to become itself?

Ask a father and he might say
that nothing is made to be broken -
but ask someone like me
and I will spit back
broken

 hearts, broken

 trust, broken

 speech.

If words themselves could speak,
would they get it right first time?
Every time?

Or would they splutter like a faulty tap,
run away with themselves,
freeze up like us?

Ask someone like me and I will tell you
that speech must always be broken,
because it is always being fixed.

I will tell you that talk is only built
upon cavities and fillings, its making in
the very breaking and fixing of hearts, of trust.

No poem was ever written
without the mercy
of a hundred redrafts,

no painting painted
which does not conceal
a thousand buried brushstrokes

no new land discovered
by walking straight and
never stopping to check the map.

Understanding is a poem, a painting, a mountaintop.
You must delete, paint over, double back.
Take the scenic route. Set off.

And if you left your kindness
in the house this morning,
go back and get it.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.
That is to say, I mean,
don't break your own back trying.

That is to say, I mean,
if you need help fixing something,
we - I, am here to talk.

- Grace Copeland

TALK IS A CREATURE

People often think that if you study talk, you need to study the person *doing* the talking. But, for conversation analysts, talk itself is our unit of analysis. It's a creature we observe in its natural habitat, looking at what it does, how it behaves, and what its structures and patterns are. It's a creature we look at under the microscope, in close detail, to learn about all the features that make this creature what it is. "Talk is a Creature" shows us that talk can be analysed in its own right, independent of the person doing the talking. As conversation analysts we might study hundreds of examples of the same type of conversation, and by 'watching close' and 'listening in', we can learn how talk works, and understand how it brings about social actions. This helps us, in many cases, make communication recommendations, grounded in knowledge of how talk works in its 'natural habitat'.

- Charlotte Albury

Talk is a creature
with a heart and soul,
like any other gentle thing

it has needs,
desires, instincts, patterns,
it flexes and curls and winces in the sunlight.

Talk is a creature
with tendencies and silences
and flesh softer than our own.

Talk is a creature
we can predict
by watching close, listening in -

Talk is a creature
we can know
if we learn from what it says.

Talk is a creature
we can tame,
one we can keep safe

Talk is a creature
that might bite
if we do not learn its ways.

- Grace Copeland

