

The Work of Conversation

Anne Curzan 9/27/13, chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2013/09/27/the-work-of-conversation/

I am teaching an undergraduate course called “How Conversations Work.” Taking this course is a great way to become so self-conscious about how you talk that it becomes hard to have a normal conversation at all. “It wears off,” I promise the students, knowing that this statement is half-true.

This week I put on the table an argument about conversations that will inform our discussions for the rest of the term: Conversations are work.

Conversations, at their best, may seem easy, fun, and free-flowing—but they feel that way to us only because everyone is pulling their weight in terms of the conversational work.

To understand the work involved in conversation, think about a conversation you have had recently that felt like really hard work. Did you find yourself asking all the questions and never being asked a question in return? Did your questions elicit only short yes/no-like answers, which gave you little material to work with for follow-up discussion? Were you searching desperately for topics of potentially shared interest, while the other person just waited for you to come up with something for the two of you to talk about? Did the other person’s body language give you no sense that they were engaging in what you were saying?

In all these cases, we can see the conversational work your interlocutor* was not doing, which forced you to work so hard. Being a good conversationalist requires doing your fair share of the conversational work (and perhaps going a little above and beyond)—and doing it as if there is nothing else you would rather be doing.

Here are some key forms of conversational work:

- *Asking questions:* Asking questions demonstrates your interest in other people and their experiences, opinions, and perspectives. This includes asking follow-up questions once someone has answered the first question.
- *Providing conversation-friendly answers:* Very short answers can give others little to work with in terms of follow-up discussion. (Very long answers can, of course, lead to monologue rather than dialogue!) I sometimes give the example of two different answers I could give to the question of what I do: (a) “I teach English linguistics” (not a lot to work with there); or (b) “I teach English linguistics. This means that I am a fount of random linguistic information like why the word “colonel” is spelled the way it is—and I vote for the Word of the Year.” What I’ve done with (b) is introduce some potential topics for conversation, which gets us to ...
- *Putting topics on the conversational floor:* Offering possible topics of shared interest gives all of you something to talk about.
- *Picking up other people’s conversational topics:* If someone else has done the work of offering up a topic for discussion, it is very helpful and considerate of you—if you can and are willing—to engage with that topic.
- *Listening actively and attentively:* Implicit in asking follow-up questions and picking up other people’s topics is the activity of concerted listening, so that you are aware of the topics and conversational openings being put in front of you. Listening should not be a passive activity.
- *Engaging positively with your body language and back-channeling:* Our posture, facial expressions, and gestures tell others a lot about whether we are listening in active, interested ways. The back-channeling we do through head nods and little listening noises like “uh huh” and “yeah” also helps others see we’re engaged in the conversation. It is very disconcerting to talk to someone whose body remains neutral and who provides no back-channeling. (Just try it out on someone and see how long it takes before they ask you if something is wrong!)

This list is just a start, but it already shows the active multitasking involved in any conversation, especially a good one.

I am far from the first linguist to point out that conversation is work. More than 30 years ago, the linguist Pamela Fishman published an article called “Interaction: The Work Women Do” (1978), in which she argued that women do more of the conversational “shitwork,” based on extensive recordings of three male-female couples. In other words, in her study women asked more questions, introduced more topics, provided more back-channeling, picked up more topics, etc. (I have always loved Fishman’s introduction of “conversational shitwork” as a technical term.)

We are living in a moment when a good number of people, both young and old, are worried that we are collectively losing our ability to connect through old-fashioned, in-person conversation. [A recent study](#) in *Psychological Science* suggests that meaningful conversation with others makes us happier people. So it bears repeating that good conversation doesn’t just happen; we need to do the work to make it happen. The benefits far surpass the work.

*The term “interlocutor” points to a striking lexical gap in the language: an informal term for “the person one is talking to.”

