

THE DANCE OF CONVERSATION

"Con conversationally, we were Fred and Ginger – spin, slide, shuffle, bend."

– Marisa de los Santos



I remember one Christmas, at about 8-years-old, suddenly finding myself alone for a moment in a room with an uncle I rarely met and being completely tongue-tied. What on earth could I say? I think he must have felt the same, for the silence seemed to go on and on. I can still remember my acute embarrassment. You may have examples of your own from social occasions, networking events or other one-to-one encounters, where the awkwardness that crept into the situation stole every thought from your head. I just couldn't figure out how conversation *worked*. What *did* one say?

1.1 A dance for two

Conversation is clearly about talking, but talking doesn't make a conversation. George Bernard Shaw once commented to a young lady that she had lost the art of conversation but not, unfortunately, the power of speech! If everyone talks incessantly without listening to anyone else, there's no conversation. It's just people talking one after another or, more often, one over another. You've probably found yourself in a group at some time where everyone's busy expressing opinions and no one's listening to anyone else. It isn't a very satisfying experience.

The word "conversation" is made up of *con*, "with" and *versare*, "turn". Conversation is turn and turn about – you alternate.



Conversation is all about taking turns. It's a dialogue, not a monologue. You share the talking time; you also listen and acknowledge.

One person may talk more than another, just as in a dance one person may perform more complicated steps than another, but there's equality in conversation. It's very hard to have a good conversation with someone who intimidates or patronizes you or with someone who is intimidated by you.

The to and fro of a good conversation feels easy and natural, with both parties taking part and responding spontaneously to each other. Mme de Staël, a great French conversationalist of the eighteenth century, described conversation as a means of "reciprocally and rapidly giving one another pleasure; of speaking just as quickly as one thinks; of spontaneously enjoying one's self".

In the dance of conversation, both players take part in the steps of the dance with their thoughts, feelings and body language. You don't shut down your listening to think of what to say next or to make unspoken comments internally. The dance doesn't stop. The art is as much in drawing out the other person as in airing your own thoughts and opinions. There's mutual respect for each other – I'm okay, you're okay. In most conversations you don't make it deliberately difficult for the other person to dance their steps – you facilitate their moves, even when they appear clumsy.

When musicians and actors want to describe a particularly satisfying performance, they often call it a "conversation" to describe the feeling of connection that travels both ways. "My stand-up is quite good now – it's just like a big conversation each time", says the comedian Eddie Izzard. "A good quartet is like a good conversation among friends interacting to each other's ideas", suggests the saxophonist Stan Getz. "When I play live, it's a conversation that we're all having with the song", says the singer-songwriter Tori Amos.

A SUBTLE HUMAN ART

Like music, good conversation is a subtle art. When you converse with someone, you are doing many things simultaneously. You are listening to what the other person has to say, while picking up the nuances of voice tone and the clues in their appearance and body language, and at the same time you are in a state of readiness to respond easily and naturally with words of your own. No wonder doing it well takes practice!

In 1950, the computer scientist Alan Turing tested to what extent computers could learn how to converse naturally. He published a paper on artificial intelligence, *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, in which he described a test where a subject attempts

to have a conversation with a computer. The computer would be said to "think" if its responses in conversation resembled those of a real human being. Anyone who tries the test finds it doesn't take more than a few words before you know it's a machine!

Here is a transcription of a test conversation I had with the computer. The computer is called Eliza, and "she" begins the conversation.

ELIZA: Is something troubling you?

ME: *Well, yes it is.*

ELIZA: You seem to be quite positive.

ME: *Not at all. I've just said something is troubling me.*

ELIZA: That's quite interesting.

ME: *Well, do you want to hear what it is?*

ELIZA: You're not really talking about me – are you?

ME: *No, I'm trying to tell you about my troubles if you'll just listen!*

ELIZA: Why "no"?

ME: (reacting in frustration, even though I knew it was a machine!) *Oh, you just don't get it!*

The sentences individually sound plausible, but the conversation as a whole doesn't make sense. It's easy to detect that it's not two live people. Human conversation is indeed complex and harder to replicate than we might imagine.



If you'd like to try the Turing test for yourself, you can currently find it at: <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2012/06/turing-test/>.

1.2 The traditional “conversationalist”

Much advice on conversation takes little heed of this subtle dance for two. Almost all books on the art of conversation from the twentieth century and earlier, emphasize the need to be articulate and witty, and have interesting things to say on any subject. Apart from general advice to be pleasant and courteous, they mostly ignore the complex dance of connection.

It's good to remember that conversation was important for entertainment and education in the era before radio, television, the Internet and the rest, as this helps to explain the emphasis on content and performance. In the eighteenth century, conversation in the French salons was an indispensable entertainment – a cultivated and artificial art with fixed rules. Here wit, rhetoric, gallantry, flattery, teasing, joking and irony all played an important part. People learned how to perform with style. A great conversationalist was described as one who could hold the attention of everyone. In the nineteenth century, Thomas de Quincey wrote with admiration that Samuel Coleridge swept the stage with his articulate performance. The experience of spending an evening in the company of the great man was like witnessing a great unstoppable river. The poet “swept at once into a continuous strain of dissertation, certainly the most novel, the most finely illustrated, and traversing the most spacious fields of thought, by transitions the most just and logical, that it was possible to conceive”.

The twentieth-century philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin was called the greatest conversationalist who had ever lived because he was able to perform on any theme with wonderful dexterity, “soaring through every imaginable subject, spinning, flipping, hanging by his heels and without a touch of showmanship”. The novelist Virginia Woolf had a similar ability to spin off during

conversation into fantastic flights of fancy, while everyone else stopped speaking and just sat around in admiration. Churchill was another magnificent talker of the twentieth century, with a lesser reputation as a listener.

The "art of conversation" is still taught with similar emphasis in some private seats of learning, not as a meeting of minds, but as a tour de force. Thus we get many public figures and pillars of the establishment who are excellent at performing but less good at tuning-in. This interpretation of conversation is also perpetuated today in television panel games where each panel member tries to outdo the others in wit, entertainment and erudition. One example is the British television show *QI*, which appears to promote educated conversation, but in reality serves as a vehicle for bravura performances of erudition and wit – most notably those of host Stephen Fry.



Remember, the art of conversation is *not* the same as the art of talking. Wit, eloquence and knowledge are one thing. Conversational skill is something more.

In these times of mass communication, brilliance of oratory is not enough. You can't be a great conversationalist on your own. It's always a dance for two or more, consisting of talking and listening, listening and talking.

CICERO'S SUMMARY

The earliest commentators on conversation grasped this two-way dance. The Roman writer Cicero, one of the earliest writers on the art of conversation, offers practical and timeless advice:

1. Take turns in speaking.
2. Speak clearly and easily but not too much!
3. Do not interrupt the other person.
4. Be courteous.
5. Deal seriously with serious matters and gracefully with lighter ones.
6. Never criticize people behind their backs.
7. Stick to subjects of interest to both or all of you.
8. Don't talk about yourself.
9. Never lose your temper.

It's a useful list as you start to think about how to make conversation work for you . . . though I think some of us today would struggle with number 8. Maybe we could put instead, "Don't talk about yourself *all* the time!"

1.3 What's conversation for?



I'd like to ask you two questions before we continue:

- What do you think a conversation is for?
- What makes a conversation good, enjoyable or satisfying for you?

Jot down your answers before you continue reading.

One frequent answer to these questions is that conversation is about gaining information – for example, finding out interesting facts or learning new things – or getting a result. In other words, the *content* – what you actually talk *about* – is the most important thing. People who give this answer usually enjoy information and ideas, and get satisfaction out of exchange of opinions and debate.

They think of conversation as the *means to an end*. You might notice that many specialized conversations, and ordinary conversations too, are about getting something for yourself – finding out something you don't know, exchanging information, gaining new business, negotiating to get a sale, influencing people to take up your ideas, motivating them to follow your lead, and so on. (These are the subjects of many self-help books!)

Other people answer differently. They hold that conversation is about getting to know people, making friends, building relationships, understanding each other better or enjoying people's company. In other words, the *connection* between the two people is what matters most. They enjoy the feeling of getting closer to another human being, of sharing and building rapport, and

enjoying each other's company. The content of a conversation takes second place to the feelings of connection, the tone and atmosphere of the discussion, and the sense of a growing friendship.

Your view of the purpose of the exchange considerably influences your approach to conversation. Look at the answers you jotted down. Do you find they point more to *content* and *result* or to *connection*?

Successful conversations are about both content and connection in varying proportions. But connection is always key. Even if you are focused on a particular outcome from a conversation, it will go better if you pay attention to connecting with the other person as well as to getting what you want from the exchange. Connection is often the means by which you achieve a desired outcome, but can also stand on its own as the sole purpose of an exchange.

Your first and important step, in starting up a conversation with someone, is to make connection. So how do you do that? That's the subject of the next chapter.

