Exploring Conversation with David Crystal’s 

*Let’s Talk: How English Conversation Works (2020)*

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Abstract. What can be considered a successful and meaningful conversation? Are we truly good at it? The reason David Crystal has written *Let’s Talk* proves the topic’s ongoing universality and significance since being a good conversationalist is quite demanding. For this reason, this book proves to be a goldmine of gripping and insightful observations of various aspects of conversation throughout history. It encompasses quite a plethora of topics, such as greetings and farewells, clichés, turn-taking, simultaneous feedback or interruption, semantic fuzziness, parenthesis, the choice of conversation topics, storytelling, telephone and online etiquette, vocal and visual cues in conversation, style, cultural conflicts, breaking maxims of conversation, and the future of conversation.

Key Words. Conversation, clichés, cultural differences, ESL, Grice’s Cooperative Principle (CP) maxims, interaction, intonation, non-verbal communication (NVC), pragmatic disorders

Being one of the most prolific writers on the English language of all time, this time Professor David Crystal publishes a book that equips its readers with the necessary tools to navigate a more conscious conversation. The book is available in print and as an e-book and consists of 18 chapters, focusing mainly on linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic aspects of conversation. Crystal’s books are known for their user-friendly style and fluidity of language, and this one is no exception. *Let’s Talk* is supplied with examples and carefully selected snippets of conversation transcripts and passages ranging from Caedmon, Ælfric’s *Colloquy*, Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl Who Played with Fire* to Haruki Murakami’s *Firefly* and many more, accompanied by an Appendix and suggestions for further study.
There have been numerous books published on the nature of conversation, fundamentals of different techniques, practices, tools on how to put conversation to work. Nonetheless, Crystal’s book still manages to stand out for its insightful, light-hearted, and witty observations.

In *Let’s Talk*, Crystal explores various aspects of linguistic and non-linguistic communication. He addresses the factors which motivate different kinds of talk and reveals the unconscious rules of routine exchanges of everyday conversation, or as the author calls them “conventions, fashions, expectations” (Crystal 2020: x) and explores how these rules work and the way speakers can bend or break them when circumstances permit it.

The book begins with the prologue, which carefully introduces its purpose. The author devotes the first chapter to greetings and touches upon some British peculiarities and exceptions, such as what we should say and when, and how many times to achieve a(n) (un)desirable effect. In this regard, Crystal introduces such terms as a conversational turn, conversational ball, and pragmatics, a study of choices and the effect those choices convey (5-6).

True to himself, in the subsequent two chapters, the professor refers to history and traces the evolution of the term *conversation* and its main types, features, and content. Conversation has been around since times immemorial, meaning that indeed it has changed considerably and continues to do so each time adapting to the needs of the speakers, various circumstances, and reactions it generates.

*Simultaneous feedback* (38), or feedback response, according to the author, can be vocal, non-linguistic (a laugh, a whistle), or non-vocal (a nod, a tap), is yet another essential factor that keeps the conversation going. Sometimes, this feedback can lead to overlapping speech, or interruptions, meaning that turn-taking has been violated at some point. The author distinguishes two types of interruptions: ‘combative’ and ‘collaborative’ (44). The first is considered both irritating and impolite, whereas, on the other side, it may signal that the listener has been paying close attention and is trying to contribute remembering that “[a]ny worthwhile conversation starts with good listening” (Sinek 2021). The author, however, does not stop here, he further outlines some ways of how to do it politely (e.g., occasionally adding some ‘ms’, ‘ahs’ fillers, nodding, smiling, or establishing eye-contact) and in a constructive way in case somebody monopolizes the conversation.

But what do we converse about? What are the dos and don’ts when it comes to topic selection? We normally do not talk about taboo topics pertaining to politics, religion, sex, money, race, or personal health unless it is appropriate to the situation. In this regard, the author provides some tips on how to switch the topic of conversation, ensure its smooth transition, and maintain its continuity by providing some examples. It appears to be a good idea to resort to clichés to connect with others, “to fill in an awkward gap in a conversation” (Crystal 1996: 0:45-0:50). David Crystal sees these language fragments as “lexical zombies”, which are unable to die (0:18-0:25). Yet, at the same time, they are extremely handy in keeping a conversation alive since they act as a “lexical lifejacket” and “social lubricant” (0:53-1:18). Moreover, being “the readiest and most effective tool available for quickly introducing informality into a discourse”, they help “to smooth the steady flow of speech” and “to establish confidence in an audience by introducing to them a note of familiarity from speakers” (Hargraves 2014: 11-12). Be that as it may, some trite clichés should be used sparingly, because incorporating them in speech or writing too frequently may suggest that “nothing is being said or written that merits attention” (13).

Sadly, conversation as such is not taught at schools or universities probably because it is perceived as something that comes naturally and instead the curriculum is designed to focus more on developing written communication skills. Since conversation and communication are inherent parts of our everyday life, they should be given equal attention, especially now, when youngsters tend to spend more time in the virtual world. As practice shows, even though they
are great at online chatting, when it comes to face-to-face conversation, which was the norm in earlier days, they may feel challenged, awkward, and uncomfortable, therefore, unable to carry on a meaningful conversation with each other due to their dormant and undeveloped verbal communication skills.

Continuing this line, in Chapter 12, “The Vocal and the Visual,” Crystal proves that there is still much more to it. One comes to realize that simply being aware of a couple of rules and following them consciously or unconsciously proves insufficient. Apart from certain conventions that we follow, there is also a tremendous role to play for intonation and non-verbal communication.

But what would an utterance lose if intonation were omitted? If every syllable were pronounced on the same pitch level, with no pauses or changes in speed and loudness, it would be a speech produced by a mechanical device. The utterance would be dull, it would lose its personal touch, and would reveal no feelings whatsoever. In his other book (Sounds Appealing: The Passionate Story of English Pronunciation, 2019), Crystal treats intonation as fundamental, claiming that “It ain’t what we say, but the way that we say it’: that’s what makes the real impact, whether in a political speech, a religious homily, a stage performance, or just an everyday conversation” (31). Not only do meticulously chosen words and proper grammar help us express ourselves, but intonation as well. In writing, the same function is performed by punctuation, which, on the page, performs a grammatical function, “but in the mind of the reader it does more than that. It tells the reader how to hum the tune” (Truss 2003: 63).

In fact, intonation is much more complex than punctuation. Apart from indicating where the sentence boundaries are, their communicative types, and marking the turn-taking process in an exchange between speakers, it also provides clues about the speaker’s emotions and attitudes towards the information conveyed in the utterance. Therefore, intonation helps to recognize the language or understand the message of the utterance that you hear in the same way as the melody of a song helps to recognize the song that you hear.

To test this theory, it is enough to pronounce just one word, ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ with a low fall, high fall, mid-level, high rise, low rise, rise fall, fall rise, or rise fall rise intonation. Each time ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ will imply something else, such as relief, disbelief, surprise, irritation, interest, uncertainty, impatience, indignation, displeasure, scepticism, disapproval, or playfulness, just to name a few. The same exercise can be done with longer sentences, such as ‘Jane bought a red car’, giving greater prominence to a different word in the sentence or just pronouncing it with various intonation patterns, i.e., falling, rising, or level intonation, the meaning will shift. If the speaker chooses to stress all the words in the sentence, he/she will sound irritated and may be perceived as speaking to an imbecile audience.

It is worth noting that non-verbal communication (some prefer to call it ‘body language’) also constitutes an intrinsic part of communication. Mehrabian in his Silent Messages (1971) is convinced that in some cases it is even more important than the tone of voice and the choice of words or grammatical structures and supports his claim with his experimental results: “Total liking = 7% verbal liking + 38% vocal liking + 55% facial liking” (43). These figures suggest that body language (facial expressions, posture, gestures), comprises an inherently substantial part of communication. Our physical communication, or the non-verbal techniques we apply, reveals who we really are. Mastering body language, enabling you to interpret non-verbal communication correctly can help you tailor or (re)adjust your conversation accordingly so that both sides can reap the benefits and find themselves in a win-win situation. Amy Cuddy believes that “we make sweeping judgments and inferences from body language. And those judgments can predict really meaningful life outcomes like who we hire or promote, who we ask out on a date.” (Cuddy 2012: 01:57). Indeed, to become efficient in conversation, one should strive to “achieve real consistency and congruency
between the messages you send verbally and those you send nonverbally” (Bowden 2010: xix) and should remember to consider some cultural differences.

Chapter 16 “Breaking the Rules” deals with the maxims of Paul Grice’s Cooperative Principle (Quality, Quantity, Manner, and Relevance), and the consequences once these maxims are violated. In this connection, Crystal also discusses some medical and psychological conditions, such as autistic spectrum disorder, stammer, brain damage, dyslexia, which can hinder normal conversation due to some pragmatic problems. Certainly, as the author states, the examples provided in this chapter “only scratch the surface of the nature of pragmatic disability; but they are enough to show how the norms of everyday conversation can be seriously disturbed” (p. 164). This chapter is of great value since it draws attention to cases we might not be familiar with but may experience on a daily basis.

The final chapters are dedicated to language change and trends which are already affecting and reshaping conversation norms. In this sense, the epilogue closes on a very optimistic note about the present and the future of conversation. David Crystal dispels parents’ and teachers’ fears about the harm spending too much time watching television or being online can cause. Children are practising and mastering new types of conversation with new conventions, be it on Facebook, WhatsApp, or Twitter, and do it more often than we did when we were their age. It is just a different form of communication whose aim is “to make everyone feel happy or satisfied at the end of it” (192).

Finally, having read this book, the only drawback I can point to is the length of some of the chapters. Since all of them are quite engaging, I would expect to read and learn a bit more from such a prominent author on some of the issues he raises, such as intercultural communication. Despite this, the value of this book far outweighs this single flaw in a number of ways. On a personal level, empowered by the knowledge and all the tools that the book offers I feel better equipped to observe conversations more closely, discern what is going on, anticipate the outcome, and, consequently, opt for better choices and, eventually, become a better conversationalist. On a professional level, being a teacher myself, I intend to incorporate Let’s Talk into my classes in order to build and substantially improve students’ conversation skills, make them aware of British culture, and help them understand how real-life conversation works, pointing out some natural aspects such as randomness, semantic fuzziness, or spontaneity. These major features of natural conversation make actual conversation distinct from the balanced and carefully proofread dialogues found in ELT books. For that matter, a whole list of parenthetical expressions is provided ranging from highly colloquial to very formal, and their functions are explained, which makes this book practical and applicable in diverse situations.

Also viewing it as an informative self-help book, I would recommend Let’s Talk to almost everyone, and specifically to those who take interest in language history, language change, British culture and etiquette, intercultural communication, or ELT. All things considered, it becomes obvious that even though so much is already known about conversation and communication, there is always something new to say, something new to learn.

Works Cited


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