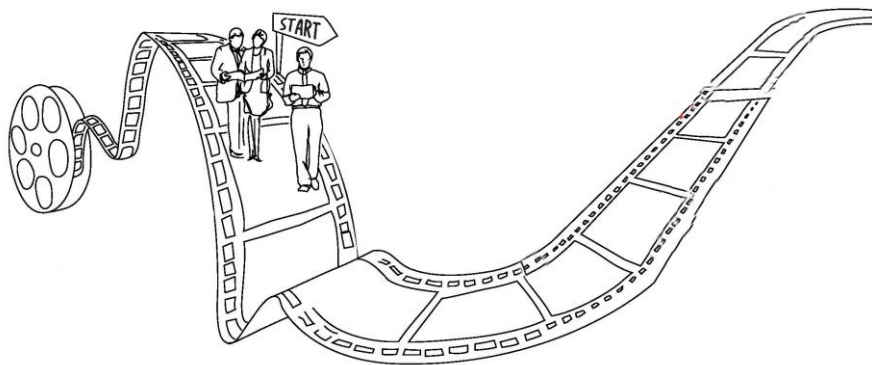


Chapter 1

The Conversational Racetrack



This book will change the way you think about talk. It will show you how to lift the lid on the engine that drives our everyday lives. It will show you why there is a big pay-off to understanding talk scientifically.

Of course, when we try to understand something like talk scientifically, it is not the same as trying to understand something like a black hole. Talk, as a phenomenon of social life, exists only to be understood¹. It is designed by humans for humans to get every facet of life accomplished. We build, maintain and end our personal and professional relationships through talk. We buy and sell. We get and give help. We are excited, persuaded, irritated, embarrassed, and consoled in response to things others say to us. Talk is the tool we have to do all of these things.

Talk is also our resource for fixing things that go wrong. When we characterize some aspect of our talk as ‘communication breakdown’, we are probably referring to feeling trapped in a conversation, or that we are struggling to get heard, or as though we are on the back foot. This book will show you how to unpack and understand talk and what to say to anticipate, resist, avoid – or further aggravate – these problems.

Scientists strive to understand black holes, even though they do not exist in the first place to be understood by humans. Talk, on the other hand, exists *only* to be understood by humans. In that sense, a book about the science of talk should be an easy read; the conceptual gap between the audience and the phenomenon is small. On the other hand, it might be a challenge to convince you that we need a scientific approach to the study of something thing

¹ Edwards (2012)

that seems, on the surface, so easy to understand. Can we really gain anything by analysing something that we “just do”? The chapters in this book will show you that the answer is ‘yes’. And it will show you that the science of conversation is not just interesting, or fun. It is crucial.

Along with many other academic colleagues around the world, I have spent the last twenty years working as a conversation analyst, studying recordings of real talk from real people talking to each other in real time. While the linguist Noam Chomsky once described conversation as a ‘disorderly phenomenon’, it is, in fact, highly organized. And we are quite unaware of how systematic our talk is, and how different words lead to different outcomes. But while we all keep talking, we are not good at understanding precisely what went wrong in an encounter, or what went right. Analysing real talk in the wild – and in slow motion – shows us the incredible power talk has to shape our daily lives.

Think about the last time you went on a rollercoaster². You might have seen – even if you did not purchase it – the snapshot of yourself as you zoomed down the steepest incline. Rollercoaster snapshots reveal how you looked at a particular moment, even though you are unable to remember or reproduce it later. Similarly, we are not capable of recalling and reproducing – with the exact words, the exact intonation, and the exact facial expression – what we said at, say, 33 seconds into a particular conversation. Studying talk scientifically allows us to freeze-frame that moment and scrutinize it to see *how* it worked, *what* worked, and what did *not work*.

In this opening chapter, we investigate what happens at the start of encounters. Talk can run smoothly or awkwardly from the very first ‘hello’. We can predict what is likely to happen next from the first words uttered. This is because all conversations have a landscape; a conversational racetrack. We start at the beginning of an encounter with another person or people and, along the way, complete projects. We anticipate and avoid or crash into hurdles. Conversations become tense, difficult, or all-out war. An opening ‘hello’ can even be, quite simply, a matter of life and death.

“Hello!”

The discipline of conversation analysis was invented by three academics in the 1960s: Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson³. Sacks was killed in a car crash in 1975 and, like celebrities who die young or in mysterious circumstances, there is something of a rock ‘n’ roll mystique about him. There are also many arguments over his legacy and competitive in-groups and sub-camps typical of any academic field.

This book is not the place for lengthy accounts of the discipline, but it is worth knowing that each of these three figures holds a special position in the hearts and minds of conversation analysts around the world. And, as an advocate for conversation analysis to a likely non-specialist audience, and for context, you might be surprised to learn that

² Albert et al (2018)

³ Sacks et al (1974)

conversation analytic research is amongst the most cited in academia, even compared to ‘hard science’ disciplines⁴.

Before we see our first example of two people starting to talk, let me explain briefly how their talk will be presented. As with all the other data analysed in this book, recordings of real (generally anonymized) interactions are transcribed using a technical system developed by Jefferson⁵. The system is the first stage of analysis and cannot be reproduced by a machine – even though speech-to-text software will produce reasonably accurate verbatim transcripts (see ‘The future of talk’, in Chapter 7).

The ‘Jefferson system’ is designed to represent not just *what* is said but *how* it is produced, placed, timed and so on. It includes information about intonation, lengths of pauses and gaps within and between turns at talk, the onset and end of overlapping talk, and the precise moment when who is speaking changes. It also tells us how speakers build *actions* through talk – the component activities that comprise complete encounters. At first, the transcripts might seem overly technical. But this is how people talk – keeping in the detail of how talk works, rather than stripping it away to the words alone. It’s what actually happened.

For the first few extracts in this chapter, though, I will present a verbatim version of the transcript alongside the technical version, to enable you to become familiar with the system. A key to all of the symbols appears at the end of the book. You can also listen to some of the examples I present online⁶, where they feature as part of a lecture or presentation.

Our first example is an ordinary domestic telephone call between two American friends, Hyla and Nancy. Hyla is calling Nancy; this is a telephone line without caller ID⁷. Her dialling is the summons that starts the conversational ball rolling. It is the first action that must be completed for any further talk to happen.

Example 1: Hyla and Nancy

‘Jefferson’ transcript			Simplified transcript		
01		((telephone rings))	01		((telephone rings))
02	Nancy:	H’llo:?	02	Nancy:	Hello?

Take a look at Nancy’s answering turn, “H’llo:?” The punctuation marks help researchers, and you, understand exactly *how* she said it. For instance, the colon indicates that the ‘o’ sound is slightly elongated. The question mark indicates ‘questioning intonation’. You might be surprised to learn that ‘questioning intonation’ does not always accompany the spoken

⁴ An article in *Nature* entitled ‘The top 100 papers’, listing the most-cited research of all time, identified papers in the ‘hard’ sciences with citations ranging from 305K to 12.2K, at the time of publication in 2014. The foundational piece by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson currently has over 16K cites in March 2018; Schegloff has 76K citations; Jefferson 45K and Sacks 50K. For a relatively unknown discipline, its impact is actually rather massive!

⁵ Jefferson (2004)

⁶ Listen to Hyla and Nancy in my TEDx talk available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtOG5PK8xDA [04m20secs]

⁷ Comparing mobile calls to landlines without caller ID, “answers to the summons of a mobile call treat the summons as being personalized in giving information on the caller, and allowing the answer to be designed accordingly” (Arminen & Leinonen, 2006)

production of a question. In fact, questions are more often delivered with *falling* or ‘closing’ intonation, indicated by a full stop. This is one of many communication myths that we will bust in this book.

Systematic patterns exist in the way conversation starts, and not just on the telephone. This is because although the *means* of communication might be different (e.g., language choice, modality, gesture, sign language, written, spoken), and the exact words used also vary (e.g., “hello”, “hiya”, “yo!”), the *actions* being done remain the same.

Watch how Hyla and Nancy’s conversation unfolds.

03 Hyla Hi,
04 Nancy HI::.

03 Hyla Hi
04 Nancy Hi!

When Hyla says, “Hi:,” she delivers a *greeting* but also communicates *recognition* of her friend’s voice. The comma indicates what conversation analysts call ‘continuing intonation’ – think how it sounds to read items on a shopping list or the digits in a telephone number.

At line 04, Nancy gives a second greeting, but it sounds very different to her answering-the-phone ‘H’llo:?’ . This time, the “HI::.” is louder, brighter, and more animated. It conveys recognition of Hyla’s voice.

Next, Hyla and Nancy exchange ‘how-are-yous’.

05 Hyla How are yuhh.=
06 Nancy =Fi:ne how’re you.

05 Hyla How are you?
06 Nancy Fine, how are you?

Hyla and Nancy exchange ‘how-are-yous’ rapidly, and reciprocally. The speed of exchange is represented by the equals signs (=) which indicate that the two turns are ‘latched’ together. The quick pace of their turn-taking is also indicated implicitly, because when gaps occur between turns – as we will see in later examples – they are measured and included in the transcript.

On the face of it, this is utterly mundane. There’s no science here! Well, actually there is. Conversation analysts have shown that, across settings including phone calls, face-to-face encounters, Skype calls and even instant messaging, conversations recurrently open with three rapid, reciprocal, component pairs of actions:

1. The summons and answer (the opening at lines 01-02)
2. The greetings and identification (for Hyla and Nancy, just the sound of the voice is enough for identification at lines 03-04)
3. The initial enquiries (the ‘how-are-yous’ at lines 05-06).

This sequence of actions is pretty robust across opening sequences, whether on the telephone or face-to-face. In Example 2, Dad and Liz are Skyping. The pound signs indicate ‘smile-voice’ – how people sound when they smile as they talk. You can watch this clip online⁸.

Example 2: Dad and Liz

⁸ www.risky-business.com/video.php?id=268 [03min10sec]

01	Dad	£Hi Liz, how're you.£	01	Dad	Hi Liz, how are you?
02	Liz	£I'm fine thanks.=	02	Liz	I'm fine thanks.
03		how're you.£	03		How are you?

In Skype conversations, the ‘summons and answer’ sequence still occurs because someone still has to ‘go first’ in any interaction. However, the identification part may be redundant, because we generally know who we will talk to when we initiate a video chat. Of course, I can use my partner’s mobile phone or Skype account to make a call, and the recipient may not expect to see or hear me when they answer the summons.

Example 3 comes from a written exchange between two friends on a social media messaging app⁹.

Example 3: Isla and Joe

01	Joe:	hey isla
02		how are you?
03	Isla:	hey you :-)
04		i'm not too bad thanks :-) :-)
05		you?

The same components are in place: ‘summons and answer’; ‘greetings and identification’, and the reciprocal ‘how-are-yous’. They take a bit longer, because writing is slower than talking. But otherwise, the same actions happen.

Example 4 is from a conversation between two office workers from different departments of the local council.

Example 4: Katy and Debbie

01	Katy:	Katy Green, good
02		morning, c'n I hɛ:lp
03		you,
04		(0.3)
05	Debbie:	Hɛ:llo Katy good
06		morning t'you.=it's
07	Debbie:.	
08	Katy:	.pt £Hello Dɛ:bbie,
09		how're you.£
10	Debbie:	^'right thank you?= 're you [m'duck,]
11		
12	Katy:	[Myeah] not
13		too bad.

01	Katy:	Katy Green, good morning,
02		can I help you?
03	Debbie:	Hello Katy, good morning to
04		you, it's Debbie.
05	Katy:	Hello Debbie, how are you?
06	Debbie:	All right thank you – are you,
07		my duck?
08	Katy:	Yeah, not too bad.

In this recording, the square brackets at lines 11 and 12 represent overlapping talk. So as Debbie says “m’duck” – one of many terms of endearment used in the UK, such as ‘love’, ‘hen’ or ‘pet’ – Katy begins to respond to Debbie’s ‘how-are-you’.

There are several features that you may not initially notice in this example, but are important when it comes to understanding the more complex conversational openings we

⁹ Meredith (2014)

come to later. So, first, note that the way Katy answers the phone tells us that this is not a domestic setting, but a workplace. Second, Katy's next turn, at lines 08-09, is delivered with 'smile voice', *after* she knows who she is speaking to. She does not smile when she answers the phone.

Third, Debbie and Katy do not know each other well enough for Debbie to simply respond "Hi" at line 05, as we have seen in previous examples: she returns Katy's greeting fully and identifies herself explicitly. But Debbie and Katy *do* know each other well enough to now move into a reciprocal 'how-are-you' sequence.

The equals signs at lines 06 and 10 indicate when speakers rapidly add another part to a turn that is potentially already complete. Conversation analysts refer to the 'point of possible completion' that happens when a speaker has done something that can be responded to by the next speaker, such as asking a question. These are usually grammatically complete, too. Points of completion are also indicated strongly by intonation. As you read this book, read out loud, if you can. Each time a full stop happens, your intonation should fall. In the Jefferson system, full stops indicate 'closing intonation' and indicate that a 'unit' of a turn has been completed.

It is worth pausing here, to point out that in everyday written text, full stops ("periods" in the USA) are not, however, intonation markers! They are grammatical markers, placed at the end of grammatical sentences. That is something that all readers of this book will know, whether intuitively or explicitly. Jefferson borrowed and re-assigned the full stop and other conventions of written text (colons, commas, question marks, etc.) to talk's intonational patterns. Of course, *both* transcription and everyday written punctuation are technical and precise – we are just more used to the conventions for written text.

Returning to Debbie and Katy's conversation, at lines 05-06, Debbie's turn is complete as she says "good morning t'you." but she rapidly adds a second 'unit' to the end of her turn: ".-it's Debbie:." What the simplified verbatim transcript does not show is Debbie's tacit analysis of her response to Katy. The rapid addition of a second unit reveals Debbie's ongoing monitoring of the unfolding interaction. She needs to identify herself. This is not my analysis of what Katy and Debbie are doing, it is *Debbie's*. My job is to reveal their analysis to you.

Think about when a friend invites you for dinner. They may say something like, "Do you fancy dinner on Friday? Or Saturday?" The addition of "Or Saturday" shows their ongoing monitoring of your lack of immediate response. The idea that taking a turn in a conversation requires 'processing time', producing pauses, is another myth about talk that we will bust in this book. In fact, we can and do respond very quickly within milliseconds. Indeed, speakers are actually monitoring reactions while their own turn is in progress, which is what enables such rapid interchange to take place. And the fact that we (can) respond quickly provides us with the evidence that delays, gaps, silences indicate an upcoming problem. Of course, we can respond quickly with turns that start with built in delay-tactics (e.g., "Um:::::"). But a delay in responding to an invitation indicates an upcoming turndown. Because they are fast to recognize a possible turndown, your friend quickly adds another option, to which you can hopefully say 'yes' ...!

This is the tacit knowledge that people have for interacting. We reveal it as we construct our turns, word by word, turn by turn, although we cannot articulate what we are

doing. But, without knowing it, we anticipate hurdles on the racetrack of conversation, and try to avoid them.

Finally, look closely at the overlapping talk at lines 11 and 12. The overlap shows that Katy has heard enough of the second unit of Debbie’s turn to know what action Debbie is doing even though it is not complete: she is doing a reciprocal ‘how-are-you’. This sort of overlap is very common in interaction: people can anticipate the action that is coming enough to begin to respond without leaving any gap between turns.

You might be thinking that everything you have read so far is worthy of an entry in a *Private Eye* ‘Pseud’s Corner’ jibe – and, in fact, an early observation from Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, that ‘one speaker speaks at a time and speaker change recurs’, actually was! It is certainly common to hear people describe or reflect on conversational components like ‘how-are-you’ sequences critically, as a bit of pointless ‘filler’, said ‘just to be polite’, in a meaningless and ‘non-genuine’ way. I will show that these sorts of comments misunderstand the importance of starting to unpack the basic machinery of talk as a precursor to persuading you of some crucial insights into how talk works.

You might also be thinking that there are numerous instances where conversation openings are quite different. And, of course, they are. Here are four quick examples.

Example 5: Patient and doctors’ reception

01 ((ring))
 02 Recep: >Good< mornin:g,
 03 surgery: Cath
 04 speaking,
 05 (1.6)
 06 Patient: Hello have you got an
 07 appointment for
 08 Frida:y afternoon or
 09 teatime please.

01 Phone rings
 02 Recep: Good morning, surgery,
 03 Cath speaking.
 04 (Pause)
 05 Patient: Hello, have you got an
 06 appointment for Friday
 07 afternoon or teatime
 08 please?

Example 6: Salesperson calling a business

01 ((ring))
 02 Business: Good afternoon,
 03 =Advance Services
 04 Management,
 05 (.)
 06 Sales: Hi.=↑Can I::- (0.5)
 07 ↓speak with John
 08 Stornoway please.

01 Phone rings
 02 Business: Good afternoon,
 03 Advance Services
 04 Management?
 05 Sales: Hi, can I speak with
 06 John Stornaway please.

In Example 5, a patient phones her local surgery. The parties greet each other (“>Good< mornin:g,” and “Hello”), but, in this opening moment, only the receptionist provides identification of both the surgery and her first name. Who the patient is becomes relevant later; for now, the main action is making an appointment. There are no ‘how-are-yous’ –

potentially tricky in this setting! Example 6 has two people at work calling each other, but, unlike Katy and Debbie, they do not know each other.

Example 7 is a domestic phone call, but Lesley, who answers the ringing phone, is being called by someone who wants to make a delivery to Lesley’s house. Example 8 is another of Katy’s calls, but this one is to her daughter at home.

Example 7: Lesley and Mr Harris

01 ((ring))
 02 Lesley: Hello:?
 03 (0.3)
 04 Harris: Hello Missiz Fie:ld it’s
 05 Leslie Harris here fuh
 06 Castle Kerry’s
 07 [(Group)]
 08 Lesley: [O h hello,]
 09 Harris: Hello Missis Field .hh
 10 uhm .t.h Wouldju be
 11 available for supply on
 12 Thu::rsda:y.

01 Phone rings
 02 Lesley: Hello?
 03 Harris: Hello Mrs Field, it’s Leslie
 04 Harris her from Castle Kerry’s
 05 (inaudible) Group
 06 Lesley: Oh hello.
 07 Harris: Hello Mrs Field. Would you be
 08 available for supply on
 09 Thursday?

Example 8: Katy and her daughter

01 ((ring))
 02 Daughter: hHello:?
 03 Katy: .pt Hi £sweetie.£= it’s
 04 only me,
 05 Daughter: h[Hi::]
 06 Katy: [.pt] did’ya get in an’
 07 unlock the ala:rm?

01 Phone rings
 02 Daughter: Hello?
 03 Katy: Hi sweetie, it’s only me.
 04 Daughter: Hi.
 05 Katy: Did you get in and unlock the
 06 alarm?

There are reciprocal greetings – spot Lesley’s second one at line 05 in which she also shows she recognizes Mr Harris and has expected him to call. See also that Mr Harris recognizes Lesley from her answering ‘hello’. As the caller, he is in a position to know who is likely to answer the phone. However, he identifies himself using his own name and the name of the business. He does not expect Lesley to recognize him from his voice alone; they do not have the kind of relationship where Mr Harris could simply say “Hi!” next.

Example 8 neatly demonstrates how we calibrate the purpose of our call by including or dispensing with things that would ordinarily happen in the conversation. While mother and daughter exchange greetings, there are no ‘how-are-yous’. Why not? Dispensing with ‘how-are-yous’ helps us know the kind of conversation we are in. This is going to be a quick call to check on the important activity of getting into the house and disabling alarms. So the fact that, in the slot usually filled with a ‘how-are-you’, Katy asks a question about the house’s alarm, her daughter can understand the type of call this will be.

Call openings vary, then, depending on contingencies like who is calling whom; whether or not speakers know each other; the urgency of the situation, and so on. These are not random, messy variations, but systematic ones, by which we construct and recognize the

particular nature of each type of call. It is the fact that we do this – making our actions recognizable for each other – that makes those same actions and methods recognizable for conversation analysts.

We conclude this section on “Hello!” by focusing again on the three actions done in openings: the summons and answer; greeting and identification, and ‘how-are-yous’. Example 9 is another call in which we encounter Hyla, this time talking to her boyfriend, Richard. Their opening shows the irresistibility of completing these three actions, which further undermines the notion that they are pointless ‘filler’. They are doing something important in an interaction: framing it, establishing its footing and the relationships involved.

Harvey Sacks made a classic observation about ‘how-are-yous’ in a paper called ‘Everyone Has to Lie’¹⁰. He was referring to the kind of social situation that *requires* a “fine, thanks, how are you” response, not a long (happy or sad) answer to the question. Not everyone is the right person to receive the ‘true’ answer (e.g., “I’m feeling lousy”; “I’m so excited!”), but neither is every slot in a conversation the right place to say it. In Hyla and Nancy’s call, it later turns out that Hyla is not fine – after the opening ‘how-are-yous’ she goes on to recount to Nancy her problems with Richard. But everybody has to lie.

The call between Hyla and Richard has an extended opening. There is a lot of laughter and breathiness in the call; Richard arrived home to hear the phone ringing inside the house and has raced in to answer it. The transcript represents the laughter and breathiness. I hope that, by now, you can see how impoverished the verbatim transcript is, when compared to the technical version. Imagine if you were not permitted to use emoticons or emojis when writing SMS or instant messaging messages. Imagine I presented an analysis of SMS interaction and deliberately removed these features. Representing talk with this technical system is not just good science. It’s an ethical decision. This is how people actually talk, and I want to show you what really happened when Hyla called Richard.

Our target three actions – the summons/answer; greetings/identification; and ‘how-are-yous’ – are highlighted.

Example 9: Hyla and Richard

Summons + answer	01	((ring))	01	Phone rings
	02	Richard: Hull (h)o(hh)	02	Richard: Hello? (out of breath)
Greetings 1 + identification	03	Hyla: Hull::o	03	Hyla: Hello.
	04	Richard: Hello(h)	04	Richard: Hello (out of breath)
Greetings 2 + 3	05	Hyla: Hi:: .hh	05	Hyla: Hi.
	06	(0.2)	06	Richard: Hi
	07	Richard: Hi	07	Hyla: Hi (laughing)
How-are-you Question 1	08	Hyla: Hi hehuhuhuh .hh	08	Richard: (breathing)
	09	Richard: hhh	09	Hyla: How are you?
	10	Hyla: How(hh)re you(hoo)?	10	Richard: (breathing)
How-are-you Response 1	11	Richard: .hhuh	11	Hyla: Besides out of breath!
	12	Hyla: Uh huh ha besides	12	Richard: Fine.
	13	[out of b]rea(h)th(h).	13	Hyla: I was just about to hang up!

¹⁰ Sacks (1975)

14	Richard:	[hhh]	14	Richard:	(laughs) I just got home.
15	Richard:	Uh: <u>fine</u> (hh).	15	Hyla:	I figured that. How are you?
16	Hyla:	I wuz just about tuh	16	Richard:	Oh, I love driving up to the
17		hang uhhu[h]	17		door and hearing the phone-
18	Richard:	[he]h[hh]	18		No. How are you?
19		[uh] uh	19	Hyla:	I'm fine.
20		eh	20	Richard:	Good, good.
21	Richard:	hh I jus got ho:me. .hh	21	Hyla:	What were you about to say
22	Hyla:	l::: figure th(huh)at.	22		that you were doing?
23	Richard:	.hhh			
24	Hyla:	.hh			
25	Richard:	hhhh			
26	Hyla:	How <u>are</u> you(huheh).			
27	Richard:	Oh, hhhh			
28	Hyla:	hehehuh			
29	Richard:	Oh:: (.) I love driving			
30		up to [the] door: .h			
31	Hyla:	[heheh]			
32	Hyla:	Yeh,			
33	Richard:	An' hearin the ph- no			
34		(.) How are you?			
35	Hyla:	Eh I'm <u>fine</u> . I['m]=			
36	Richard:	[Good.]			
37	Hyla:	=fine(heh).			
38	Richard:	Good.			
39	Hyla:	.hhh			
40	Richard:	hhh			
41	Hyla:	What were you about			
42		to say that you were			
43		doing?			

How-are-you
Question 2

How-are-you
Response 2

How-are-you
Question +
Response 3

All three actions are present in the call, with the summons and answer and greeting and identification done rapidly and sequentially. However, the greetings are done a second and third time, punctuated with Richard's breathiness and Hyla's laughter.

Hyla asks Richard 'how-are-you' for the first time at line 10, in the expected slot. His response is more heavy breathing, to which Hyla responds with more laughter. Her laughter is, in fact, helping Richard out. She fills in the slot for his turn with laughter, as well as providing an account for why he cannot talk – he is “out of brea(h)th(h).”, she says. Eventually, Richard produces the standard 'fine' response at line 15.

Hyla and Richard's opening sequence is extended with more talk; Hyla reports that she nearly hung up the call; Richard accounts for why he took so long to answer. It is interesting that Hyla asks a second 'how-are-you' at line 26. This time, Richard gives an ironic response: “Oh, I love driving up to the door and hearing the ph-”. But see what he does next! He cuts off this response, which is starting to sound like a complaint about Hyla making him run to the house. He then says 'no', explicitly verbalizing the fact that he 'will not go there'; he will

not keep complaining. In so doing, Richard halts the development of a possible argument before it has started. Instead, he asks a reciprocal ‘how-are-you’. He uses his tacit knowledge of *what should happen next* to avoid potential conflict, and Hyla gives the standard response.

Hyla and Richard show us that the ordinary words and phrases, like greetings and ‘how-are-yous’, are a useful resource. They start an encounter. They can be extended to help someone who is out of breath. More importantly, though, the fact that Hyla and Richard do and re-do these actions shows that they are an interactional *imperative*. They simply have to be done. People show us this all the time. Speakers monitor each other’s turns for their appropriateness of action and position.

The interactional imperative holds for written talk too, as we saw earlier in Isla and Joe’s messaging app conversation. Here is Isla talking to another friend. When Jane opens the conversation in a non-standard way (“urgh”), Isla responds a minute or so later with a comment about Jane’s inapposite conversation opener.

Example 10: Isla and Jane¹¹

01 Jane: urgh
02 (82.0)
03 Isla: what a greeting!!

These early conversational actions, whose patterns are robust across settings of all kinds, can also be usurped as resources for conflict and argument, as we will see in the next section.

“Um, hello...?”

So far, the conversations we have encountered have been friendly, or affiliative. They have started smoothly, with the speakers in alignment. In this section, we move on to examine some rather more problematic – and even life-changing – conversational openings.

We start with a call between boyfriend and girlfriend, Dana and Gordon. They are students who are home for their holidays and living with their respective parents.

Example 11: Dana and Gordon

01 ((ring))
02 Gordon: Hello;
03 (0.7)

Let us stop here, before Dana has even spoken. Lines 01-03 are all we need to see to know that there is trouble ahead. This is because of what happens at line 03; or rather, what does *not* happen. Dana does not issue a reciprocal greeting. Instead, there is a silence of 0.7 seconds. This might not seem like long, but it is. And it is just this kind of detail that allows

¹¹ Meredith (2014)

us to zoom in on parts of the conversational racetrack where there might be either smooth progress – alignment – or trouble – disaffiliation.

It is worth restating that the silence of 0.7 seconds is not required for Dana to *think* about what her response should be. Think again about Hyla and Nancy’s call – Example 1. Between their turns at talk there was no gap, and no overlap. Their turns were produced in rapid succession – but not automatically.

Conversation analysis is not a branch of behaviourism. Saying ‘hello’ does not guarantee a ‘hello’ in response. In fact, a missing ‘hello’ can indicate mishearing, rudeness, or some other potential communication problem. But the take-home message is that because conversations *do* regularly open like Hyla and Nancy’s, something interesting is happening when the pattern breaks.

Returning to Gordon and Dana’s conversation, here is Dana’s delayed response.

04 Dana: Hello where’ve you been all morning.

So, Dana returns the greeting at the start of her turn, but immediately opens up a new action: a question. And it is a challenging question. It is not just an information-seeking question; it has got some bite in it. It is a complaint. She is Gordon’s girlfriend and so is somewhat entitled – her question presupposes this – to know where he is. She should not have had to try to get him ‘all morning’. Of course, ‘all morning’ is not meant literally. But Dana uses this rather extreme – but very ordinary and recognisable – way of describing her sustained attempts to speak to Gordon. Including – or not including – ‘all morning’ makes a difference. Every word matters, for the things we are doing with our turns at talk.

It turns out later that Gordon had phoned Dana’s house, very late and drunk, the previous evening. Now Dana is in trouble with her Mum. What possibilities does Gordon have for responding to Dana’s question? He could say, “What do you mean, where have I been all morning?”, or “We’re not joined at the hip”, or something else that meets the challenge head on, attacking or defending. And then the couple might head straight into an argument.

Another option is to push back on the trajectory started by Dana’s question, which is what Gordon does.

05 Gordon: .hh HELLO!

Gordon responds with a bright-sounding “Hello!”, very much like Nancy’s “Hi!” of recognition in Example 1. In so doing, Gordon recruits his tacit knowledge of what kind of turn typically fills this slot in an encounter. In other words, Gordon recruits the conversational racetrack.

This is not the end of Gordon’s turn, however. It unfolds in a way that further marks Dana’s question as, literally, out of turn.

05 Gordon: .hh HELLO! Uhm (0.6)

Note two tiny details that only a Jefferson transcript can magnify: an “Uhm” and a 0.6 second pause. Sounds like ‘Uh’, ‘um’, ‘uh:~::~:’ can be subtly altered in myriad ways with intonation. They are not random, or meaningless, or speech production errors. They can be systematic, cropping up in exactly the *same* types of conversational environments. For instance, a little ‘uh’ sound frequently crops up when speakers are confronted with an inapposite or unexpected prior turn – which Dana’s is. And this analysis is supported by the fact that what Gordon did first *was* what Dana could expect – he gave a ‘hello’ of recognition.

These three items at the start of Gordon’s turn, the bright ‘hello!’, the ‘uh’ and the 0.6 second gap, all push back on Dana’s first turn – her first move. The idea that Dana is a ‘first mover’ – the kind of person who opens an encounter with such a challenging first turn – is something that we will return to in Chapter 3. We will see how we use talk to assess everything about a person from their personality and disposition to their motivation, emotions and attitude. Talk is often the only evidence we have to make such assessments. We are the turns we take.

Only after these three items have been produced does Gordon answer Dana’s question. For those who are enjoying getting into the detail, there are other tiny perturbations in his turn: an in-breath right at the start (.hh) – this is what ‘take-a-deep-breath’ looks like! And he makes a lip-smack sound (.pt.).

05 Gordon: .hh HELLO! Uhm (0.6) .pt I’ve been at a music workshop

And after answering the question, Gordon once more reveals his tacit understanding of what should happen next.

06 Gordon: How are you.

So Gordon initiates the third part of a typical opening sequence: the ‘how-are-you’. Now, if Dana was satisfied with Gordon’s answer at line 05, and ready to get on with the conversation, we would expect to see her respond with ‘Fine’ (or a variant) and a reciprocal ‘how-are-you’. However, this is what happens next.

07 (0.5)

By now, you should know enough about conversation analysis to interpret a delay of 0.5 seconds as an indication that Dana is ‘not fine’. We can now predict that she is not likely to move into a reciprocal pair of ‘how-are-you’ turns with Gordon. Are we right?

08 Dana: I’m okay,

Yes! We can predict the future when we study talk scientifically. Dana’s intonation makes her response sound anything but ‘okay,’ (but everyone has to lie...). There is no smile-voice. The ‘continuing intonation’ on ‘okay,’ suggests there is more (about Dana) to come. And she does not ask Gordon how he is.

Dana has given Gordon enough evidence for him to pick up on the fact that something is wrong. So now he has another option. Should he ask Dana “what’s up?” That could, of course, open up a can of worms. So instead, he treats Dana’s “I’m okay,” as a straightforward and positive response to his question.

09 Gordon: Good,

The ongoing saga of Dana and Gordon has grabbed the interest of online commentators who have seen my talks with this clip presented with audio. People have tweeted to ask “Whatever DID happen to Gordon and Dana?”, or commented that “Gordon can do better. IMHO”. And consider the following comment from a YouTuber.

Example 12: YouTuber

01 YouTuber: Hello
02 (0.7)
03 EPIC!! LMAO!!

Audience responses such as these provide evidence that these openings are useful for explaining what conversation analysts do. And they show how accessible, recognizable, and reproducible talk is – after all, it is what we all do...

Example 13: Lyrics from ‘Telephone Line’, 1976, Electric Light Orchestra

01 Caller: Hello:
02 (2.5)
03 Caller: ~H~ how are yo:u,

If a silence of 0.7 seconds is enough to indicate trouble for Gordon, a silence of 2.5 seconds is enough for Jeff Lynne’s caller to know they are in a very poor situation. The caller moves to ask ‘how-are-you’, when no response is forthcoming. The ~tilde~ sign represents ‘wobbly voice’, a feature added to the Jefferson system by Alexa Hepburn¹² who is an expert in transcribing crying and other emotional sounds.

Dana and Gordon’s call is important because it explains some fundamental things about talk. First, it shows how two people can have quite different agendas, or projects, in their encounters. Dana’s project was to get to talk to Gordon about the trouble she is in with her mother, caused by him. Gordon’s project was to avoid having that conversation!

Next, the 0.7 second silence before Dana uttered a word shows that we can pinpoint moments of trouble very precisely. This sort of precision has big pay-offs when it comes to understanding what works and what is less effective in, say, professional or workplace encounters. For example, we can search for silences and find out what happened previously to produce it; what particular word, question, description, or phrase. Examples throughout the book will show that a question, an explanation, an offer, an assessment, an invitation – and

¹² Hepburn (2004)

lots of other actions – can be pinpointed as failing by looking at what happens in the very next turn.

There are other ways that call openings tell us there is trouble ahead, or they can misfire completely. In Example 14, Frannie has called her friend Shirley at work. She has been transferred to Shirley’s line by a receptionist. These are the first turns exchanged between the pair.

Example 14: Frannie and Shirley

- 01 ((ring))
02 Shirley: District Attorney’s Office.
03 Frannie: Shirley:ç
04 Shirley: Frannieç=
05 Frannie: ↑What is tha dea:!l.
06 Shirley: Whadayou ↑mean.

Shirley answers the phone in ‘work mode’. Stating “District Attorney’s Office” is a self-identification in a way that ‘hello’ is not¹³. In the ensuing turns, the punctuation marks and arrows indicate a level of emotional delivery that is hard to represent on paper. But it should be clear that dispensing with greetings *and* ‘how-are-yous’ are signals for turbulence ahead. Shirley uses her friend’s name with a sharp tone in her first turn, rather than ‘hello’. People often think that using names ‘builds rapport’ between speakers. This is another communication myth we will bust later in the book.

If you are reading this book looking for communication tips, then one option Shirley has to respond is to do what Gordon did: give a bright “Hello!” She could do what typically happens next, at the start of the conversational racetrack. But Shirley responds using the same format and vexed intonation as Frannie. The two are in perfect alignment, with conflict their joint project. And look at the next two turns: Frannie makes a ‘first move’ like Dana’s – a challenging question. But rather than push back on the challenge as Gordon did, Shirley responds defensively. This is not communication breakdown. It is flawlessly produced, precision-timed, start of a fight.

Example 15 comes from a business-to-business cold call. The salesman, John, is calling Mark for the first time: they have never spoken before. John’s project is to try and make an appointment to meet Mark with a view to selling a contract for telephone lines.

Example 15: Business to business cold-call sales

- 01 ((ring))
02 Mark: Hello Mark speaking,=How can I help.
03 (.)
04 John: Hello Mark, it’s John from Ocom.=£How’re you doing this morning.£

Like Katy and Debbie in Example 4, we can easily identify this as a workplace call, not a domestic call. Mark’s answer to the summons contains exactly the same components as

¹³ Schegloff (2002)

Katy's: a *greeting* (Katy said, "Good morning"); an *identification* (Katy said, "Katy Green"), and a *question about help* (Katy said, "c'n I he:lp you,").

There is a micropause (line 03) after Mark answers the phone. The first part of John's response is similar to Debbie's: a return greeting and identification ("He:llo Katy good morning t'you.=it's Debbie:."). However, things start to go wrong immediately afterwards. Note the full stop after "Ocom.", and an immediately latched next unit of subsequent talk: "£How're you doing this morning.£".

This is very similar to what happens in Katy and Debbie's conversation – except that Katy, not Debbie, does the first 'how-are-you'. Not only that, John's 'how-are-you' is delivered with premature 'smile-voice' – remember, Katy only used 'smile-voice' once she knew who she was talking to – and when she realized she *knew* the person she was talking to!

John's turn is problematic because it said in the wrong place with the wrong intonation. It is this kind of turn that people can quite rightly criticize as 'filler' or 'non-genuine'. But don't take my word for it. This is Mark's analysis too, as we can see in his response. If John and Mark knew each other, like Katy and Debbie, then we would expect Mark to reciprocate a 'how-are-you'.

05		(.)
06	Mark:	Good thanks,
07		(.)
08	John:	Not too bad,

Mark answers the question, but does not ask John how he is. This does not matter for John, who simply takes the next turn as if he has been asked a 'how-are-you'! This is one of the strangest snippets of conversation I have ever recorded, in which a salesperson embodies the problems of cold-calling and scripted interaction so transparently.

Things go from awkward to worse as John tries, unsuccessfully, to engage Mark in conversation. We will return to the cold-callers in Chapter 7 when we take up the issue of 'rapport' and examine how (not) to build it. We will think about how communication training to 'build rapport' is something of an oxymoron; if you have to train for it, you probably do not have it – as Mark and John neatly show us...

Sometimes what happens in call openings can be, quite simply, a matter of life and death. Example 15 comes from a famous conversation analytic paper called "When words fail"¹⁴. The authors analysed a call to ambulance services. The case was an early example of what is commonplace now – the intense public scrutiny of a telephone call between a member of the public and a member of an emergency service, in which communication failure results in dramatic service failure.

The case in question took place in Dallas, Texas, in which a caller ended up arguing for seven minutes with an ambulance dispatcher while his stepmother lay dying. Here is the very start of the call.

¹⁴ Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen (1988)

Example 15: Dispatch and caller

01 Dispatch: Fire department
02 (0.8)
03 Caller: Yes, I'd like tuh have an ambulance at forty one
04 thirty nine Haverford please
05 (0.5)
06 Dispatch: What's thuh problem sir?
07 Caller: I: don't know, n'if I knew I wouldn't be ca:lling
08 you all

I will not reproduce the whole three-minute call here. Suffice to say that the caller's first request does not sufficiently convey urgency to the dispatcher, who asks for more detail at line 06. The fact that the caller treats the dispatcher's question as problematic, and even offensive, enables us to see how quickly an encounter can escalate into conflict. It shows us, as the authors say, "how this sort of thing can happen".

In a follow-up call, the caller's roommate makes a different request: "Hello uh: I need an ambulance (for) someone that appears tuh (.) have almost stopped breathing?". However, by the time the ambulance arrives, the outcome is fatal.

Example 16 is similarly dramatic. It is the start of a call between a person in crisis, Kevin, threatening suicide, and a police negotiator, Steve.

Example 16: Crisis negotiation

01 ((ring))
02 Kevin: Hello?
03 Steve: .ptk hello Kevin=it's Steve. Thanks for: uh >putting your phone< back on,
04 .hhh uh: I'd ↑like to talk to you a bit more about this pee cee North. =cos
05 it's obviously- it's- I mean it's something that's very important to you.=It's
06 important to me:.
07 (.)
08 Steve: To find out what's going on.
09 (0.2)
10 Steve: .hhh
11 Kevin: ((hangs up))

You have probably noticed that this call opening is a failure. Our evidence is that the person in crisis says only an 'answering' hello before hanging up. He does not do a second 'greeting' hello and there are no 'how-are-yous'. What becomes clear, in analysing conversations from negotiation to selling, is that 'fake' rapport and scripted talk is easy to spot and almost always fails to do the job it is designed for.

Several components of Steve's turn do not work: thanking Kevin for putting his phone on, saying what he would like to do, saying what is important to Kevin, and saying that Kevin is important to Steve. There is also very little space for Kevin to say anything. However, Steve makes a second attempt at opening a conversation with Kevin, which is successful. It looks very different.

Example 17: Crisis negotiation

01 Kevin: Ye=hello:.
02 Steve: Hello Kevin=it's Steve.
03 (1.0)
04 Steve: .hh Kevin- (.) can you tell me: a bit more about pee cee North
05 so I can do something about it.
06 Kevin: Ri:ght. (0.3) six months ago: (0.2) there was a::- Big Power
07 had a call injunction to come in the house ((continues))

Steve's second attempt erases much of the 'rapport-building' content we saw in his earlier conversation. He also asks a 'closed' question – never recommended in communication guidance – replacing his open ended request to talk in the first attempt. Yet despite asking a 'yes/no' question, Kevin starts talking. Steve also focuses his question on action, and what can be done, rather than talking things through.

By comparing Steve's failed and successful attempts to get Kevin to talk, we can identify what works. As we will see, throughout the book, what works is not what we probably think will work. A closed question, without an attempt at rapport, is effective, in this negotiation with a suicidal person in crisis.

This is what I do as a conversation analyst. I collect lots of instances of, say, negotiation openings, analysing each word-by-word, turn-by-turn. I can then map different types of turns and patterns to different outcomes. Outcomes may be built into the very encounter being studied. They happen *inside* the encounter. A person says yes or no; buys something or does not; gets an appointment or does not – commits suicide, or does not... Talk is not trivial, easy or mundane. It is crucial.

The conversational racetrack

Conversations are encounters with a landscape, with a start and an end like a racetrack. We start at the beginning with our recipient or recipients and, along the way, complete various projects, like we saw Hyla and Nancy, and Dana and Gordon do. We design and build openings with summons and answers, greetings and identifications, and 'how-are-you'.

Think about the encounters you have with friends, partners, the check-out person at the supermarket, your children's school teacher, the doctor, a first date. Each of these has a landscape with projects, or actions, that comprise the complete encounter. Some actions will be the same, like greetings, openings, and closings. Others will be particular to the setting, like diagnoses, flirts, storytelling, complaints, requests, or instructions. We may move smoothly along the racetrack from one project to the next, like Katy and Debbie, or bump along the sides of the racetrack, on the rumble strips, like Mark and John.

Years of popular psychology has taught us to think about life and behaviour in terms of gender, culture, personality and other variables. We tend to think we are individuals who behave according to our intentions, in idiosyncratic ways. This book will show you that we

are far more interesting than this. It will also show you that we are pushed and pulled around by words, phrases, intonation – *by talk* – far more than we realize.

Conversation analysts study conversational racetracks of all kinds, from people on first dates to police interrogations of suspects; from doctors and patients in hospital to aeroplane cockpit communication. By zooming in on the projects that comprise complete encounters, and by analysing many instances of, say, a patient asking for an appointment, or a police officer asking a suspect what they did, we can understand how different ways of asking questions lead to different outcomes – patients get an appointment or do not; suspects give full accounts or do not. This book will guide you along many racetracks. You will see how to avoid an argument like Gordon did; how to avoid sounding scripted or fake like John did: how to use the ordinary resources of words to get things done.

The next Chapter will take you deeper into conversation analysis. It will introduce you to some of the technicalities involved in analysing talk. So sit back, relax ... here comes the science.