How to talk so people listen
[Excerpt]

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How to talk so people listen

We live our lives by talking to others. We build, maintain and end our personal and professional relationships. We buy and sell. We get and give help. We are excited, irritated, embarrassed, and consoled in response to things others say to us. Yet psychologists have often shied away from studying talk, preferring to ask people to report on their communicative lives in interviews or questionnaires, or to simulate them in laboratories. Psychologists have argued that people’s talk is too idiosyncratic or too messy to capture and study systematically. But conversation analysts have shown that talk is, in fact, highly organized.

Conversation analysis involves collecting corpora of tens to thousands of audio or video recordings of talk in the wild. The recordings are transcribed and analysed using a technical system that permits a forensic analysis of the constituent activities that comprise complete interactions. Collectively, conversation analysts have investigated all aspects of social life from first dates to medical consultations and from family mealtimes to cockpit interaction.

Conversational racetracks

It can be useful to think of a conversation in terms of a racetrack with a distinct landscape. We start at the beginning with our recipient(s) and, along the way, complete projects of various kinds. All racetracks involve ‘openings’, ‘closings’, and projects that progress them in between. Initial inquiries to an unfamiliar organization might involve an explanation of their service; calling the GP involves requesting an appointment. All of these projects can be done in more than one way. CA focuses on how different project designs lead to different outcomes.

For instance, analysis of a corpus of recorded first dates reveals that they comprise the delicate project of asking about previous relationships. Participants do this in one of two ways: asking indirectly with a trail-off ‘or’ (“So, are you divorced, or…?”) or asking directly (“So what’s your relationship history then?”). Asking indirectly is more effective – at least if you want to keep the date on course!

The natural laboratory

It’s common to measure communication success exogenously by asking people to report how they feel about their encounters. Dates rate their date; customers rate their experience; patients rate their satisfaction. However, conversation analysts establish the effectiveness of communication endogenously, inside the natural laboratory that recorded datasets provide. The effectiveness of questions about previous relationships in first dates is assessed by examining what happens after direct (misalignment) and indirect (alignment) questions. In calls from prospective clients of mediation services, callers are more likely to agree to mediate if the service is explained as a process (e.g., “Mediation works by … what happens first is … and then…”) rather than an ethos (e.g., “We don’t take sides”, “mediation is voluntary”).
Are you willing?

Knowing the right words can tilt conversations towards particular outcomes. Another finding from studying initial inquiries to mediation services shows that reluctant callers reverse their stance when asked if they would be "willing" to try it out. While asking if callers are “interested” in mediation may get some 'yeses', “willing” gets a much stronger uptake and only “willing” turns clients around from ‘no’ to ‘yes’.

From research to training

These research findings underpin a training approach called the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method. The approach presents mediators, doctors, salespeople, police officers – depending on the research setting studied – with a line-by-line transcript of a real encounter, rather than staged, hypothetical ones, allowing them to assess what really happens in their communicative world, practise what they might say next in such a situation, and see what works when completing their particular projects. CARM makes a unique research-based contribution to communication training. By looking under the bonnet at the engine that drives social life, we discover that the answer to the question of how to talk so people listen was there all along.