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THE POETICS OF EVERYDAY CONVERSATION

Deborah Tannen

Poets, playwrights, and listeners to everyday conversation are in love with the speaking human voice. In poems, in plays, and in telling friends about something that happened, writers and speakers strive to capture the lilt, the verbal twist, the particular nuance of what someone said.

Many fiction writers locate the roots of their art in conversational stories. The Black South African writer Mark Mathabane, for example, grew up in the ghastly shacks of apartheid-era Alexandra, Johannesburg, in a world where no books were in view and neither of his parents could read or write. Years later, when an American talk-show host asked how he developed his love of literature, Mathabane answered:

The seeds of this love for knowledge and for reading were planted . . . when my mother would gather us around the fire—usually we were wracked with pangs of hunger, because there was nothing to eat—and she would tell such mesmerizing stories, vivid images, deeply entertaining and instructive. And then we'd forget that we were hungry. And I think that her knowledge of these stories became our library, and if I am asked, "Where do you trace your creativity to," I think to those days.¹

Most of us tend to think of literature as the artful use of language, and of everyday conversation as a messy, graceless use of it. But the magnetism of stories told in conversation, and the fascination that everyday language holds for so many verbal artists, belies that belief. In my research, I have tried to figure out how the voice talking in conversation casts its magical spell. The answer, I have concluded, is through literary-like features that are pervasive in everyday talk. I have found that forms of language that

we think of as “literary” are basic to everyday conversation. That is what I have in mind when I speak of a poetics of conversation.

These poetic linguistic elements drive both conversational and literary language by means of patterns of sound and sense. Sound patterns make up the musical level of language, including rhythm and intonation. Just as the rhythm and sound of music involve dancers with each other and with the dance, so the rhythm and music of language involve the audience with the speaker or writer and the discourse by sweeping them along, luring them to move in its rhythm.

At the same time, involvement is created on the level of sense, as listeners do some of the work of creating meaning from the words they hear. Conversation is not a game of serial passivity, in which one person actively speaks while the other passively listens. Engaging in conversation is always active for both speaker and listener, thanks to these two types of involvement: a listener is caught up in the music of the speaker’s language, often nodding in rhythm, and also does active work helping to make meaning from the words spoken.

Three poetic elements of language that are fundamental to conversation as well as to literary language are repetition, dialogue, and details. Repetition establishes rhythm and also meaning by patterns of constants and contrasts. Dialogue—the representation of voices (what some people call “reported speech”)—creates rhythm and musical cadence as well as setting up a dramatic scene in which people interact with each other and engage in activities that listeners recognize. Details provide seeds from which listeners sprout characters, meanings, and emotions.

It is easy to identify all these poetic features in any everyday conversation. Take a tape recorder with you for a day as you talk to people, and ask their permission to tape the conversations. If anyone is uncomfortable, don’t turn the tape recorder on. But when you talk to one or more people who don’t mind being taped, then record the conversation. Afterwards, listen to the tape and choose a segment to transcribe. It could be just a few minutes long, or up to five minutes at most. When you transcribe the conversation, write down every word you hear and check it carefully against the tape several times, until you are sure you have captured all the words that were spoken, including hesitations like “uh” or “um.” Then you can examine the transcript for poetic features, just as you would a novel, short story, or poem. It does not have to be a conversation that seems important. The more trivial the conversation, the more exciting it is to find patterns in the transcript.

SAV IT AGAIN: REPETITION

One of the easiest patterns to find in transcripts of conversation is repetition. Just as poems often repeat lines to emphasize meaning and to create

nuances of meaning, so do speakers in everyday conversation. Here is a short excerpt from a dinner-table conversation that I taped some years ago. The speakers were all friends; Steve was the host, Peter was his older brother, Steve and I had been close friends since our teen years, and Chad was a new acquaintance—a friend of a friend.

In this part of the discussion, we were talking about how Peter’s wife had recently told him that she wanted a divorce. He was explaining that his relationship with his wife had always been difficult, but he would have stayed with her nonetheless. As a participant in the conversation, I supported what Peter said, and he accepted my support. His brother, Steve, however, made a comment (and a joke) by turning Peter’s words around to disagree:²

Peter: It was very difficult.

Both of us were—

Deborah: mhm

both of us were struggling, and even when I think of—
yknow I would’ve stayed in the relationship but it wasn’t .. from .. that it was so great,

Deborah: mhm

it’s just that I felt .. like .. in terms of bringing up your children, and Deborah: That’s what you do, yeah.

Peter: .. That’s what you do.

Deborah: mhm

...

Steve: I hate to tell you, Peter, but that’s not what you do anymore.

[all laugh]

Deborah: This is what you do.

Chad: This is what you do?

Peter: It’s pretty crazy though, it’s really /?/

Deborah: Either way it’s crazy.

Steve: I think it’s crazy to stay together.

You’re miserable.

When Peter said that he would have stayed with his wife for the sake of their children, I paraphrased his line of argument by saying, “That’s what you do.” This paraphrase is a meaning repetition that says, “I understand your point so well that I can rephrase it for you.” Peter ratified my contribution by repeating it: “That’s what you do.” This repetition implies, “Yes, that’s what I meant: I approve of your contribution, so I will incor-

porate it into my own discourse, to show you that you got it right and I appreciate your empathy.”

Steve then used the words of our now-joint phrase to turn it around: “That’s not what you do anymore.” This repetition implied, “People no longer stay together for the sake of the kids. What people do now is get divorced, just as you’re doing.” If Steve had made this statement in new words, no one would have laughed, because it could be a serious point, but because he took our words and turned the meaning around, it came across as humorous, and everyone laughed. I then used the same strategy to support Steve’s reversal: “*This* is what you do.” At this point Chad joined the conversation by repeating my words as a question: “This is what you do?” Repetition made it easy for Chad to take part, even though he did not know the other people present very well.

Peter, maintaining his serious key and his position that one might as well stay in a difficult relationship, disagreed with his brother by saying, “It’s pretty crazy though,” because he did not want the divorce; his wife did. My response, “Either way it’s crazy,” borrowed—and thereby ratified—Peter’s words to agree with him, but also to agree with Steve’s counter-claim that couples no longer stay together despite marital difficulties. Steve rounded out this “verse” by also picking up the phrase “it’s crazy” and reshaping Peter’s (and now my) words to strengthen his own position: “I think it’s crazy to stay together.”

Line by line, you can see the repetitions performing a variety of functions in the conversation, adding new meanings in creative ways. On the relationship level, by repeating each other’s words, we picked up threads of each other’s discourse to weave a coherent conversation in which we all felt connected to each other.

SO HE SAID/SO I SAID: DIALOGUE

The term *reported speech* is often used to refer to quotations that actually represent what someone said rather than paraphrasing it. When people tell each other about their own experiences or about other people and events, representing the voices of those in the stories creates a more vivid scene than simply paraphrasing what was said. More often than not, the words represented in the story are not literally the words that were spoken. Rather, creating dialogue makes the point of the story in a more dramatic way. For that reason, I have coined the term *constructed dialogue* to replace the term *reported speech*.

It is sometimes obvious that dialogue created in conversation was not actually spoken by anyone. For example, a student in my class recorded a conversation in which a guest addressed a question to a cat, and the host answered by creating speech for the cat. The cat was sitting on the windowsill looking out:

The Poetics of Everyday Conversation

Guest: What do you see out there, kitty?

Host: She says, “I see a beautiful world out there just waiting for me.”

The host used a high-pitched, childlike voice to show that he was speaking as the cat, not as himself.

Another situation in which it is obvious that the dialogue is created, not reported, is when listeners provide lines of dialogue for stories that recount events they did not witness. Another student recorded a conversation in which someone told about the time her brother cast a fishing rod and accidentally sunk a lure in their father’s face. The speaker, Lois, described her father arriving at the hospital holding the lure in his face. Joe, a listener, offered a line of dialogue spoken by a hypothetical nurse that satirizes the absurdity of the situation:

Lois: So he’s walkin’ around—

Joe: “Excuse, me, Sir, you’ve got a lure on your face.”

Since Joe was not there, we know that he is not “reporting” what he heard but rather constructing a line of dialogue to contribute to the story. This serves a function very much like my paraphrasing the point of Peter’s story in the earlier example: it shows that Joe was listening and following the story, and that he was eager to be involved in telling it as well. By allowing Joe’s dialogue to become part of her story, Lois ratified his contribution and created connection between them.

Even when speakers recount their own experiences, there is no reason to believe that the words of dialogue they represent in their stories are the exact words that were spoken—though even if they were, choosing just those words to repeat in the story is still a creative act, constructing an effective story. One last example of dialogue comes from another story recorded by a student in my class. A medical resident returned home from a stint in a hospital emergency room and told about how three young men had come into the emergency room and caused a commotion. One of them was covered with blood, but his wound was relatively superficial:

They come busin’ through the door,
blood is everywhere.

It’s on the walls, on the floor, everywhere.

[sobbing] “It’s okay Billy! We’re gonna make it!”

[normal voice] “What the hell’s wrong with you.”

W-we-we look at him.

He’s covered with blood yknow?

All they had to do was take a washcloth at home
and go like this . . .

and there’d be no blood.

There’d be no blood.³

The young doctor could have stated that the wounded boy's friends were reassuring him that everything would be all right. Instead, he took on the voice of the friends, giving the words a sobbing quality and thereby communicating that the young men were out of control, highly emotional, and causing a stir. The emotional way that he created the dialogue—[sobbing] “It’s okay, Billy! We’re gonna make it!”—contrasts with the calm voice of the doctors who asked: [normal voice] “What the hell’s wrong with you.” I have written this sentence with a period at the end rather than a question mark because the intonation did not go up at the end; instead it remained steady, part of the contrast between the hysterical young men and the calm, cool, and collected doctors.

In all these examples, by creating dialogue, speakers tell about experiences in a more dramatic way, just as writers of stories and plays create drama through dialogue.

DETAILS

It is not unusual to hear someone say, “Skip the details. Get to the point.” But when you are having a casual conversation with a friend, it would be just as likely—maybe more—to hear someone say, “Give me the whole story, with all the juicy details.” Indeed, the juice of a story is often in the details. When you hear details, you recognize an experience or a scene and can fill in the rest with your own memory or imagination.

An interest in details can also be a way that listeners show interest in other people because by giving details, speakers are giving a sense of their experience. A woman told me that her family referred to her grandmother, pejoratively, as “I had a little ham, I had a little cheese.” This captured what they regarded as Grandma’s boring habit of telling details they did not need to know, such as what she ate for lunch. I recalled this woman’s grandmother when my own great-aunt, many years a widow, had a love affair when she was in her late 70s. Obese, balding, her hands and legs misshapen by arthritis, she did not fit the stereotype of a woman romantically loved. But she was—by a man, also in his 70s, who lived in a nursing home but occasionally spent weekends with her in her apartment.

In telling me what this relationship meant to her, my great-aunt recounted a conversation. One evening she had had dinner at the home of friends. When she returned to her own home that evening, her man friend called. In the course of their conversation, he asked her, “What did you wear?” When she told me this, she began to cry. “Do you know how many years it has been,” she asked, “since anyone asked me what I wore?” Asking for a detail like what she wore showed personal interest in her—the kind of interest usually reserved for intimate relationships.

How often, when people tell what happened to them, do they begin by trying to recall the exact time (“It was what? ’92? ’93?”) or the exact place

(as a man recalled about an experience that occurred on a street corner in Washington, D.C., “It was 18th and M, or 18th and L”). It usually makes little difference to the point of the story whether it occurred in 1992 or 1993, or on which specific corner. But we all know the experience of trying to recall exactly where and when something occurred, so watching others try to retrieve such details from their memory gives us an impression of verisimilitude. If you know the city being described, being able to picture the specific corner makes it easier for you to create a scene in your own mind, whether or not it is exactly like the scene that the speaker experienced.

In filling in a scene based on details, listeners do some of the work of making meaning in the conversation. If they do this successfully, the result is a feeling of involvement in the conversation and with the person telling the details.

CONCLUSION

Those who study literary works such as novels, stories, and poems often analyze the language used. Among the linguistic elements that have been analyzed in literature are repetition, reported speech, and the use of imagery. These same linguistic elements are also basic to everyday conversation. By looking at transcripts of conversation for repetition, dialogue, and details, you can begin to see the seeds of literary language in the language of daily talk. Seeing the patterns of these linguistic elements also helps you appreciate the poetic power of words in conversation and how they bring us together in a community of talk.

NOTES

The material in this chapter comes from my book *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). The introductory section is similar to my article “‘Oh Talking Voice That Is So Sweet: The Poetic Nature of Conversation” that appeared in the journal *Social Research*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Fall 1998), pp. 631–651.

1. Mathabane (pronounced motta-BAH-nay) was a guest on *The Diane Rehm Show*, WAMU-FM, Washington, DC, August 28, 1989, on the publication of his book *Kaffir Boy in America*.

2. I have broken up the transcript into lines not to imply that it is really poetry but to re-create the chunking of words into breath groups that occurs naturally when people talk. Spoken language does not come out in long undifferentiated blocks, like a paragraph in writing, but rather in short spurts that are visually represented by lines in poetry. Other transcription conventions:

Period shows sentence-final falling intonation

? Question mark shows sentence-final rising intonation

, Comma shows clause-final intonation (“more to come”)

- /?/ Question mark in slashes shows inaudible utterance
 - Hyphen shows abrupt cutting off of breath
 ... Three unspaced dots show half second pause
 .. Two unspaced dots show less than half-second pause
Underline shows emphatic stress.
3. Notice the repetition of the line "There'd be no blood," which does not add any new meaning but rather adds emphasis.

V

ON DICTIONARIES AND GRAMMARS
