

The listener as psychic and sub-editor

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How often do we interrupt someone struggling to find the right word or words with an expression such as 'I know what you mean'? This is not always a ploy to end the tedium of listening to an inarticulate speaker: we are frequently able to predict the end of sentences not our own, to supply the appropriate word or to sum up what we have just heard with an expression such as 'what you mean is ...'. I want to look more closely at the listening process, using the recorded conversation below as a base. The participants are brother and sister.

TRANSCRIPT OF AN ACTUAL CONVERSATION **(Surnames have been changed)**

TESSA Did he get his promotion?

RICHARD Ja, he did ... against all expectations, because he'd been sukkeling for a long time.

TESSA (*laughs*) You know, but Venter seems to be the sort of man that ... I mean, he has these ... play-play aeroplanes, and er just the way he likes coming in with his authority ... he seems very ... immature almost, as though he hasn't ...

RICHARD Ja, well, I feel that you got to take a lot into account, like, for instance, his background and ...the fact that he didn't have a strong father figure when he was ... er ... you know ... brought up.

TESSA Ja.

RICHARD So um I think this directly ... He has a great inferiority complex I think too, um, even though he appears to be able to manage his affairs O.K. and everything. In dealings with people, he seems to lack that sort of hidden quality a boss should have. You can't say what it is. He just hasn't got the sensitivity to tune into people's wave-lengths.

TESSA But when you first knew him you said that was just 'cos he was a Sagittarian, you know, you said that he was just ... tactless. But d'you think it's deeper than that?

RICHARD I think it's much more deeper than that and because he is like ... uneasy about relationships with others, he conveys it to you, so that ... um ... you also feel uneasy when you're with him.

TESSA Ja.

RICHARD It's almost like he's waiting for you to take the lead and show him how to be a boss.

TESSA Mmm

RICHARD And that's impossible because ...

TESSA Ja, like the time with the grammar, I mean er when you said that ... that split infinitive thing ... I don't know ... or if it was ... the letter ... and, and I mean ... you couldn't actually tell him it was wrong because he wouldn't accept it. I mean somebody who's got more ... almost ... self-respect for themselves would be quite willing to, but he seemed to ...

RICHARD But on other times I mean he ... when we've got this new guy in the office then he seems to want to have as least to do with it as possible.

TESSA With the work?

RICHARD Ja, he'll just come in and say: 'O.K., so-and-so will you just teach him how to do this?', and then he'll remain out of the office. He won't take control, see is this guy getting work, is he you know integrating himself, how is the situation? And so ...

TESSA You think he doesn't like responsibility, really?

RICHARD I don't know, I think um, even though he's getting a big salary and everything, he just wants to retire. He's angry at the government for not allowing people to retire at sixty.

TESSA Mmmm

RICHARD ... he's sixty-three now.

TESSA Mmm

RICHARD He's got to wait until he's sixty-five ... and um basically he's just coming in to earn his money and leave in the afternoon everyday. There's no ... and actually most of the people at the P.A. are like that, you know they ...

TESSA ... they just come and go. I remember when I was working there hey, it was, it was ... the way everything revolved around the breaks ... you know, like coffeekbreaks.

RICHARD There's a lack of actual job satisfaction.

TESSA Ja.

RICHARD I mean, money isn't enough, you know. You get other departments where the people are actually quite happy.

TESSA Yes.

RICHARD But it depends on the ... on how interesting their work is. I mean in the programming section the people are like ... will be *far* happier in every respect.

TESSA Ja, and the thing is, there's such a hierarchy in the P.A. ... you know you have all these ... you know that's your job ... and you, you can't make any ... you can't *help* the organization like you would in a smaller firm.

RICHARD Ja.

- TESSA Because you feel so tiny ... you've been told ... Like I remember the first day I went, Mr Kenny had this big chart on the wall, and he said to me ... he says 'here's the head of the P.A.' (*she gestures as if to a chart*) and then he came like this (*bringing finger down imaginary chart*) down with his stick to the bottom where there was, what's it called, clerical assistant.
- RICHARD Ja, ja.
- TESSA And then he says: 'and ther're you, at the end'. I mean when I went to work there I just didn't feel like doing anything.
- RICHARD In the end I think, slowly, you start feeling yourself becoming a regulation. You yourself, to actually do that work well, you've got to be a walking regulation book.
- TESSA Yes.
- RICHARD You know and um, if you're like me, you can never really get the hang of these regulations. I feel the more I actually take an interest in it, the more I become like it.
- TESSA But the thing is like, Richard, you said times before when you made like, innovative ideas, I mean you've thought of a way to cut out a lot of ... make it shorter ... they almost resent the fact that you are cutting a few steps out.
- RICHARD Ja, ja. Mr Venter for instance doesn't like anybody who uses too much initiative. He sees it as a challenge to his own little personality.
- TESSA (*laughs*) I remember when I was there and I thought it would be nice to do the letters in cursive. You know, very beautiful handwriting on the envelopes, and um ... got flung back at me, and she said: 'I want this in *block capitals*' ... because I'd addressed them all prettily. I mean they were still *legible*, but the fact that such creativity ... not creativity ... but it really shocked them, you know.
- RICHARD Ja, ja.

TESSA They don't like anything like that... .

An interesting phenomenon emerges from this conversation, and this is that the abundance of false starts, hesitations and unfinished sentences does not in fact impede the communication process. To some extent, these features actually force the two speakers to become more involved in their shared discourse. Certainly, the speaker Tessa is engaged in a process of simulating Richard's thoughts to the point where she compensates for his linguistic shortcomings. Look at how she finishes one of his sentences:

RICHARD: and actually most of the people at the P.A. are like that, you know they ...

TESSA: they just come and go.

As I have pointed out, this act of completion is common among listeners, but I would argue that Tessa falls into that clichéd category we call 'the good listener'. Her role as a facilitator in the conversation is a product of her unconscious adoption of a subordinate female role. On no less than seven occasions she makes an encouraging listening noise such as 'mmm' or simply 'ja' which invites Richard to continue or expand. Richard responds in this way only three times, and on two of these occasions he is not necessarily being encouraging. His utterance 'ja, ja' suggests impatience and is more calculated to curtail his sister's speaking activity than to sustain it. Tessa also asks four questions, directly requesting information, whereas Richard asks none. Thus Tessa helps the conversation to proceed smoothly through questions, affirmative utterances and laughter, and not least through ensuring that the topic under discussion is always of interest to her brother. For example, she refers twice to specific cases where Richard apparently showed intelligence or innovation in the workplace. Richard does not flatter her ego in this way, and she has to introduce her own brief reminiscences.

Apart from this contribution on the part of one of the individuals, there are other important ways in which the communication process is facilitated. The expression 'you know' is like a refrain in

the transcript, and it acts as an injunction to listen and to infer meaning. The expression thus has a deep affective significance. It is a constant request for attention and even vigilance on the part of the listener because it implies that the speaker has merely sketched an outline of his or her real message which the listener must complete.

The do-it-yourself aspect makes the listening process an extremely rapid one, and much more is heard than is actually said. Take for example Richard's abandoned sentence:

RICHARD: So um I think this directly ... He has a great inferiority complex I think too, ...

The probable conclusion of the unfinished sentence above can be inferred from what we have already heard. Its likely conclusion could be predicted thus: 'I think this directly (affected his character)'. The listener's powers of inference are thus considerable, and, I would argue, greater than the reader's.

The function of completion is accompanied by another, similar function, that of internalised editing and correcting. While we do occasionally correct aloud the speech of others, as listeners we more often accept that what we hear is an instantaneous verbal expression of thought, unplanned and unedited. Our listening skills include the ability to edit and correct where necessary, and when we speak, we often rely on this ability in our listeners. Would it then be possible to argue that as our listening skills improve (as they must, considering their extensive practice) so our speaking skills are likely to deteriorate?

If we return to the transcribed conversation, we find that this is not necessarily true. Richard makes a grammatical 'mistake' when he says 'its much more deeper than that', but this is not simply a result of carelessness. In fact, he is actually following two different (both acceptable) formulas, although he is unfortunately following them both at the same time. He has a choice between the periphrastic form of comparison: '(much) more deep', and the

inflected 'much deeper'. However, his meaning remains clear, possibly because his listener substitutes the correct form in an unconscious manner or, more simply, because his listener only uses a part of what she hears to achieve cognition. There are several similar examples in the transcript. Richard says 'on other times'. Here he has a choice of two prepositional phrases, 'on the other hand' and 'at other times' which he instead combines. The fact that his mind produces both phrases in the same instant is what causes the confusion. Tessa confuses the two formulas 'make a suggestion' and 'suggest an idea' when she says 'you made like, innovative ideas'. Thus these apparent 'mistakes' are more a sign of linguistic competence than the lack of it. This is proved where Richard makes a conscious attempt to correct a stylistic weakness. He substitutes the future tense of prediction for the simple present when he says 'in the programming section the people are like ... will be far happier in every respect'. This tense has the effect of greater sophistication because it implies an analysis rather than a simple description of the situation.

Clearly, the listening process in this case is also facilitated by a shared set of knowledge. It does not become clear until the third sentence that 'he' refers to Mr Venter. It only gradually becomes clear that Mr Venter is Richard's boss. Both Richard and Tessa speak of 'work', but exactly what this 'work' is remains vague. They both use the abbreviation 'P.A.', instead of the full title of the institution. They assume in one another a common interest in popular psychology and astrology (the references to 'a Sagittarian' and 'an inferiority complex' suggest this).

Although conversations from literature are far more explicit than real dialogues, they are not as easy to follow. The crucial point is that the novel reader cannot be present at the fictional conversation, and does not need to enter into the activity of completion and editing. Look at the following exchange from a Henry James novel:

'I like your mother very much, because - because -' And Isabel found herself attempting to assign a reason for her affection for Mrs Touchett.

'Ah, we never know why!' said her companion, laughing.

'I always know why,' the girl answered. 'It's because she doesn't expect one to like her. She doesn't care whether one does or not.'

'So you adore her - out of perversity? Well, I take greatly after my mother,' said Ralph.

'I don't believe you do at all. You wish people to like you, and you try to make them do it.'

'Good heavens, how you see through one!' he cried with a dismay that was not altogether jocular.

'But I like you all the same,' his cousin went on. 'The way to clinch the matter will be to show me the ghost.'

Ralph shook his head sadly. 'I might show it to you, but you'd never see it. The privilege isn't given to everyone; it's not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it. I saw it long ago,' said Ralph.

'I told you just now I'm very fond of knowledge,' Isabel answered.

'Yes, of happy knowledge - of pleasant knowledge. But you haven't suffered, and you're not made to suffer. I hope you'll never see the ghost!'

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (pp.47-48).

I chose this conversation because, like the transcribed conversation, it occurs between relatives and in an informal situation. However, there are striking differences between them, and I should like to focus on one particular difference, which might at first seem to be a point in common to both conversations. Isabel hesitates in the initial sentence, saying 'I like your mother very much, because - because -'. Her hesitation is different from Tessa's when she says that Mr Fowler 'seems very ... immature almost'. Tessa falters as she searches for the apt word, and, in fact, is not sure that she has found it, as is evident in her appending of the qualifying 'almost'. Isabel is (unusually) at a loss for words because James wants to make us aware of her strained relationship

with her aunt. Thus the hesitation here is not simply an attempt to mimic realistic dialogue: it contains a hidden code for the astute literary critic. The reader is possibly inhibited from inferring information easily (in a way that the listener is not) by the knowledge that the author is channelling or guiding his readership. The desultory, rambling quality of informal chatter is anything but intimidating, yet, ironically, more is understood. It is not my intention to discuss reading skills here, I merely wish to highlight the sophistication of some of our listening skills.

The listening process involves many more activities than its apparent passivity would suggest. The listener is constantly engaged in the communication process, even if the only reason is to annex a gap in the conversation. The apparently idle listener, leaning back in his or her chair saying 'I know what you mean' is in fact a unique combination of psychic and sub-editor.