



WRITING ABOUT CONVERSATION WHILE  
DOING IT: AN ANTHROPOLOGIST IN  
WONDERLAND  
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The invitation to spend a year at the Wiko came at a particularly opportune time for me, when I was facing “retirement” and wondering what I would do with myself for the next 30 years (I come from a long-lived family). Although I was already immersed in writing a book on Tzeltal space, I proposed a different project for the Wiko, one that I had been thinking about intermittently since my doctoral research in Tenejapa, Mexico in the early ’70s: a book on the characteristics of Tzeltal conversation, in what respects it is similar to conversation in other languages and cultures and in what ways it is different. Funnily

enough, my prior experience with the Wiko included a wonderful conference organized by Esther Goody when she was a Fellow here in 1989–90, where my contribution was about politeness and irony in Tzeltal conversation. Coming here 20 years later I have returned to matters closely related to this theme.

Once here, I set aside my space book and for ten months thought and read and dreamed about conversation, ordinary everyday talk. I also did plenty of it, and I put on my anthropological hat more than once to observe how my conspecifics communicate with one another in seminars vs. over the dinner table vs. in German class vs. in the Café Floh vs. on bicycles on the way to the lake. Retreating to my monastic cell (in this very luxurious monastery), working without any pressures and with relatively few interruptions, reading very widely, engaging in discussions on any and every topic with my fellow Fellows – the feelings during this year re-evoked those of my first few months at college, age 16, entering a new and wide-open intellectual and social world.

My research agenda was, I thought, relatively clear at the start: write a book on interactional principles and conversational structure in Tzeltal Mayan, the language spoken in southern Mexico where I've conducted fieldwork for nearly 40 years. Taking as data videotaped recordings of naturally occurring Tzeltal interactions, the idea is to examine particular conversational practices – turn-taking processes, mechanisms for repairing misunderstandings, ways of conveying a speaker's knowledge, stance, attitude toward what they are saying, ways of performing particular speech acts like questions, requests, complaints – and analysing them from a conversation analytic (CA) perspective. Looking at language usage in all its multimodal richness (speech, intonation, gesture, gaze, facial expression) and embedded in its ethnographic context, I would examine these diverse aspects with an eye to the sorts of issues verbal interaction raises for humans everywhere and the sorts of solutions that are commonly found. The focus, then, as initially construed, was on the interplay of universal principles and cultural specifics in social interaction, and the aim was to contribute to a crosslinguistic base for conversation analysis and for social interaction more generally.

So much for the plan. Two sources of distraction derailed this original intention somewhat. One was the informal biweekly discussion group on “What makes humans unique?” convened by the sociologist Steven Lukes and comprising a spontaneously assembled group of Fellows hoping for some interdisciplinary insights into this perennially gripping topic. In this group we tried to address the evolutionary origins of putatively human-specific traits by looking at what precursors or analogous behaviours other animals have

evolved, reading articles in the biological, anthropological and psychological literature ranging across many topics – cooperation, language, theory of mind, social cognition, play, social emotions (shame, guilt, pride), coalitions, morality, music, culture. Lubricated with a glass of wine we discussed these issues energetically and enthusiastically, never coming to any definitive conclusions but getting a good sense of one another’s perspective, expertise and biases. The process motivated me to think about my own project more widely in terms of the nature of the human communication system in contrast to those of nonhuman animals.

The second source of derailment was comments I received in response to my colloquium, and other discussions, which made me think more deeply about what I was aiming for. My colloquium was about “feedback” in conversation – words like “uhuh”, “yes”, “yeah”, “yup”, eye contact, repeats – as ways of establishing and maintaining common ground. I looked at this in conversation data from two small-scale societies – the Tzeltal Maya of Mexico and the Rossel Islanders of Papua New Guinea – trying to show how culture shapes solutions to generic interactional problems like turn-taking and response systems, by demonstrating how different linguistic repertoires, gaze practices and cultural preoccupations in these two societies combine to produce distinct “styles” of interaction. In response to my argument that what Rossel Islanders do with intense face-to-face gaze and rapid visual signals like nods and eyebrow flashes, Tenejapans do with gaze avoidance and extensive next-turn repetition, my fellow Fellows asked questions and made comments like the following:

Do we really need to look at these small remote nonliterate cultures? Can’t we find universals by looking just in one culture or in one of the major cultures of the world? (Galín)

Could we have a measure of the amount of communication per moment – Rossels seem to pack much more in. Is this – the compression ratio of information – something that differs across languages? (Adam) Klaus also asked: Are Rossel Islanders in general quicker – more information-full per minute – than Tzeltal speakers, and could you generalize this to the two kinds of feedback (especially visual vs. non-visual)?

What does it take to override the threat meaning of mutual gaze that all primates have? Is there evidence that Rossels have had to do something extra to re-value gaze? Or that the Tzeltal gaze-aversion practice is more natural? (Vincent)

Do people in these two cultures have different views of space and the body – it would seem so. What’s the same? What’s different? Why? (Ewa)

Are you looking for causal effects of interactional style, not just correlations? And is there something deeper than interactional style at stake? Like social relationships? (Steven)

Couldn’t you treat these characteristics (+/- mutual gaze, etc.) as traits and trace their evolutionary development, just like is done with linguistic traits? Or is this more imperialism from biology? (Manfred)

Such comments, informed by their speaker’s own domain of expertise and interests, raised issues remarkably different from those I was used to considering and made me sit back and take stock.

In response to these sorts of challenges, progress on writing was interrupted while I read up about animal communication, biological methods in linguistics, the anthropology of hunters and gatherers, Steven’s book on morality, crosscultural work on shame, guilt and play. The structure of my own book widened, deepened and acquired a more biological basis. I wrote chapters on questions, person reference, feedback and repetition; other chapters are still in various degrees of half-formed transitional state. An international conference on Conversation Analysis that I attended in Mannheim in July – which turned out to be huge, some 10 parallel sessions stretched over a week – at least showed me that there will be an audience for the book I’m writing.

Other collaborative MPI projects summoned me: I wrote two papers unrelated to my book project – on the language of perception and on Tzeltal spatial metaphors for time. I revised and/or got into press eight others, on put/take verbs in Tzeltal, three child language papers, and – more closely related to my book – my comparative Tzeltal/Rossel baby interaction study, papers on feedback, Tzeltal questions and conversational repeats in three Mesoamerican languages. I also thought about writing a novel about my field-work family in Mexico.

Various people asked me how being here has influenced my working style – given that I work in a research institute, what is so different between work here and work at the MPI? The difference is profound. Here at the Wiko one has the time to pursue ideas wherever they lead, to follow the leads from paper to paper, to formulate one’s own perspective in relation to the literature, having had ample time to dwell on, ponder, and argue with the literature. It’s a freedom of time-to-think that I don’t remember having since

writing my Ph.D. dissertation: one goes where the thoughts lead, not worrying about deadlines or space limitations. If you have to weed out much of what you've read when you settle down to writing, that doesn't matter, the process still influences the coherence with which you formulate your own position. That's point one. Point two of course is the cross-disciplinary fertilization – who knows if talking and reading about, e.g., evolution and animal behavior will strongly influence my own work in the long run? But it's fascinating. And trying to explain one's intellectual obsessions to people with entirely different ones is both engaging and salutary.

Other aspects of the Berlin experience that I found wonderful: opera and museums (30 concerts!), walking, cycling and swimming in the Grunewald, cooking with my housemates in the Villa Jaffé, Eva's lessons in German history and culture along with discussions about German semantics, syntax and style. A bird-watching expedition eastward, with breaking-up ice flowing majestically down the Oder. Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano, of which I heartily approved: It's excellent to be reminded that the earth is far stronger than the creatures who inhabit her. Nostalgic trips to places I had haunted while living in Berlin with my family 20 years before – Dahlem, Zehlendorf, the John F. Kennedy school, the Schlachtensee, the FU and the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, as well as downtown treats like Turkish restaurants in Kreuzberg and the KaDeWe's 6th floor.

Not that there were no hitches: excessive complaints about food, which Adam and I, as Fellow “representatives”, had to parry. A bitterly long cold winter. No less than five colds, two complicated with bronchitis. Arguing about the colloquium format: after much discussion it became clear that you can't satisfy everyone. Some like precision and compactness, some (like me) like pretty pictures and an overview sense of what the work is about. At one colloquium X fell asleep, Y said he didn't understand a single word and Z spluttered with indignation when I asked him what he thought of it. I thought it was great, very interesting and delightfully delivered. But over lunch I sat with four Fellows who got nothing out of it, they said. I guess my vacuum-cleaner mentality (nursed by an American liberal arts education) isn't shared by everyone. I do think that the “hard” scientists bend over backwards to make their work intelligible to the rest of us, in a way that the humanists don't necessarily do; speakers in the humanities don't always seem to feel the need to introduce what they do by saying what the framing questions are or why this might be interesting to non-specialists.

Towards the end of the year I created a bestiary of this year's group (those whom I knew well enough to characterize), trying to capture their particular flavour of charm, disgruntlement, flamboyance, reserve or complacency. These are their social/interactional characters (as opposed to intellectual, which is something else altogether); the analogy here is to the Mayan animal soul companion that characterizes an individual's personality and shares his fate. This year's fellows and spouses, I reckon, include six kinds of dogs (labrador, golden retriever, terrier, Berner Sennenhund, Afghan hound, Newfoundland), a father duck, a chimpanzee, a chipmunk, a grizzly bear, a songbird, a walrus, an elephant seal, a rabbit, a marmot, a badger, a fox, a small rodent – e.g. fieldmouse – an elk, a lioness, a bear, an otter, a bonobo, a moose, a tiger, a solitary wasp, a jaguar/leopard, a lizard, a peacock, an anteater, a crow or raven, turtledoves, a beaver, a coyote, a meerkat and an antelope. Who's who? – can you guess?

The closest thing to the feeling of being here at the Wiko is the memory of my first steps into the wide world, leaving home and entering college: intellectual excitement, wonder, delight, the broadening of horizons. This Wiko year has been productive, eye-opening and immensely fun. I'm grateful for the superb infrastructure, the warm, supportive, friendly atmosphere and especially for the freedom to do one's own thing, whatever that might turn out to be.

I still don't know what I'll do with the next 30 years, but finishing this book is top of the list.