

**Conversation, International Diplomacy and Playing Truant from School: What the *really* detailed analysis of language in interaction can tell us about the not-so-small and the really quite big things in life (including how it was that Bush got the better of Blair)**

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Paul Drew  
University of York, UK

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The study of ordinary interaction – through Conversation Analysis – lies at the intersection between linguistics, psychology and sociology. I'll explain what I mean by that intersection, by considering the case of Andras Toma, a Hungarian soldier taken prisoner by the Soviets in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and only discovered in a Russian mental hospital in the summer of 2000. His inability to hold a conversation is a kind of mirror image of the inability of *enfants sauvage* to speak.

The famous linguist Noam Chomsky distinguished between language *competence* and *performance*. He regarded the former as the key to language (the essential structures of language, and how we come to acquire language); the latter, language performance or use, he regarded as just a mess – a corrupted and disorderly form of our linguistic competences gone wrong. Here's an example of the kind of mess to which Chomsky would pay no attention; it's a brief excerpt from a telephone conversation.

Nan: We:ll dih you wanna me tuh be tih js pick you Ken u you (.)  
get induh Robins'n? so you c'buy a li'l pair a'sli↑ppers?h  
(.)  
Nan: I mean er: c'n I getchu some↑thin:g? er: sump↑'m:? er sum'm:?

Now here are those same lines, but now I've blocked out parts of Nancy's turn in order to highlight the syntactic disfluencies.

Nan: We:ll dih you wanna me tuh be tih js pick you Ken u you (.)  
get induh Robins'n? so you c'buy a li'l pair a'sli↑ppers?h  
(.)  
Nan: I mean er: c'n I getchu some↑thin:g? er: sump↑'m:? er sum'n?

Notice that Nancy's repeats something three times. I'll come back to that towards the end of this lecture.

#1 **“Yo, Blair!”: Overheard conversation and the ‘special relationship’** (George Bush and Tony Blair, recorded at the G8 meeting, St Petersburg, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2006. Bush’s microphone happened to have been left on; Blair was passing his chair as they were breaking for lunch)

1 Bush: Yo, Blair. How are you doing?  
2 Blair: I’m just...  
3 Bush: You’re leaving?  
4 Blair: No, no, no not yet. On this trade thingy (inaudible)  
5 Bush: Yeah, I told that to the man.  
6 Blair: Are you planning to say that here or not?  
7 Bush: If you want me to.  
8 Blair: Well, it’s just that if the discussion arises...  
9 Bush: I just want some movement.  
10 Blair: Yeah.  
11 Bush: Yesterday we didn’t see much movement.  
12 Blair: No, no, it may be that it’s not, it may be that it’s impossible.  
13 Bush: I am prepared to say it.  
14 Blair: But it’s just I think that we need to be an opposition...  
15 Bush: Who is introducing the trade?  
16 Blair: Angela\*  
17 Bush: Tell her to call me  
18 Blair: Yes.  
19 Bush: Tell her to put me on, then on the spot. Thanks for the sweater it’s  
20 awfully thoughtful of you.  
21 Blair: It’s a pleasure.  
22 Bush: I know you picked it out yourself.  
23 Blair: Oh absolutely, in fact (I knitted it) ((both laugh))  
24 Bush: What about Kofi? (he seems alright. I don’t like his ceasefire plan.)  
25 His attitude is basically ceasefire and everything else ... (sorts  
26 out/happens).  
27 Blair: Yeah, no I think the (inaudible) is really difficult. We can’t stop  
28 this unless you get this international business agreed.  
29 Bush: Yeah.  
30 Blair: I don’t know what you guys have talked about, but as I say I am  
31 perfectly happy to try and see what the lie of the land is, but you  
32 need that done quickly because otherwise it will spiral.  
33 Bush: I think Condi is going to go pretty soon.  
34 Blair: But that’s, that’s, that’s all that matters. But if you... you see it will  
35 take some time to get that together.  
36 Bush: Yeah, yeah.  
37 Blair: But at least it gives people...  
38 Bush: It’s a process, I agree. I told her your offer to...  
39 Blair: Well...it’s only if I mean...you know. if she’s got a... or if she  
40 needs the ground prepared as it were...Because obviously if she  
41 goes out, she’s got to succeed, if it were, whereas I can go out and  
42 just talk.  
43 Bush: You see, the irony is what they need to do is to get Syria to get  
44 Hizbollah to stop doing this shit and it’s over.

## Three ways of offering

### Conditionals, “If X, (then) Y...”

- #2 [Telephone call] (Lesley has called Serena to tell about a job at her husband’s company, which Serena’s father might like)
- 1 Ser: Yeah. No th- (0.2) that would be brilliant uh ac[tually
- 2 Les: [It is
- 3 actually a very well paid jo:b.
- 4 (0.3)
- 5 Ser: Oh:.
- 6 Les: Yea:h, .t.hh Anyway eh:m .t.h tell him if he wants to have a word
- 7 Ser: Yeah what’s the=
- 8 Les: =.hhh to ring my husband up when we c-come back from Newcastle

### Interrogative forms, such as “Do you want (me to)...?”

- #3 [Telephone call]
- 1 Lot:: W’l ↑lissin (.) e-uh: do you want me to come dow’n ↑getchu
- 2 to[morrow or ]a n y t h]ing?
- 3 Emm: [↓n:N o : : ] dea↓:r.]
- 4 Emm: No[: I’m] ↑fine]
- 5 Lot: [to the] sto: :]re’r anythi:ng?

### Declarative forms, variously “I’ll (do) X/I have X/You can (have) X” (though occasionally the interrogative “Can I..?”)

- #4 [Telephone call]
- 1 Emm: W’l anyway tha:t’s a’dea:l so I don’know what to ↓do about
- 2 Ba:rbra .hhhhh (0.2) c’z you see she w’z: depending on: him
- 3 takin’er in tuh the L.A. deeple s:- depot Sundee so [e siz]
- 4 Lot: [I:’ll ] take’er in:  
Sundee,

These three lexico-syntactic formats are used in quite different (sequential) environments. So these are not equivalent forms – they have their ‘proper place’ in conversation; speakers select from among these three formats the one which is appropriate to the particular ‘place’ in conversation.

- *If..then* conditionals are used when the call has been made for the purpose of making the offer (the reason for calling), which can include telephoning or stopping by someone’s office (as in #2)
- Declaratives are used when they have talked quite explicitly about a difficulty or a trouble, in the immediate prior turn before the offer (so the offer is prompted or interactionally generated by the trouble, as in #4)
- Do you want forms are used when a difficulty has been implicit, usually much earlier in the conversation (never in the immediate prior turn) (much earlier before #3 Emma has mentioned a problem about getting her Thanksgiving turkey)

**You'll recall the brief excerpt that I showed first, as an example of the kind of mess that occurs when we talk with one another. We don't speak in syntactically correct sentences – instead we find syntactic disfluences, speech perturbations and so on. Here's a longer excerpt showing what came before the offer which finally is made in line 16.**

#5 [NB:II:4:2] (Emma has just has a small operation to remove a toe nail: Nancy has called to ask if she'd like to join her to go shopping. She met a man last night, and wants to tell Emma all about him)

1 Nan: AWoh doggone I [thought] maybe yih [c]ould  
 2 Emm: [I : 'd ] -LIKE TIH [GET S 'M  
 3 LID'L[E slipper]s but uh:  
 4 Nan: [Y e :\*a h.]  
 5 (0.7)  
 6 Emm: .t.hhh \*I jis do:n't think I better walk it's -jis bleeding  
 7 a tiny bid'n a:nd u-I think I'm gon'stay o:ff of it it  
 8 thro:bs: a liddle b\*it. Yihknow thet's no fun tuh have a  
 9 naj:l tak[en \*off.]  
 10 Nan: [°Y e a h] r\*ight.° hh[hh  
 11 Emm: [°Oh: G\*o:d,°  
 12 (.)  
 13 Nan: We:ll dih you wanna me tuh be tih js pick you Ken u you (.)  
 14 get induh Robins'n? so you c'buy a li'l pair a'sli-ppers?h  
 15 (.)  
 16 Nan: I mean er: c'n I getchu some-thin:g? er: sump-'m:? er sum'n?

**Then compare the conditional form in #2 with Tony Blair's 'offer to George Bush (and remember that Blair has walked past and behind Bush's seat at the conference table; Bush is seated, with Blair standing and leaning slightly to one side).**

34 Blair: But that's, that's, that's all that matters. But if you...you see it will  
 35 take some time to get that together.  
 36 Bush: Yeah, yeah.  
 37 Blair: But at least it gives people...  
 38 Bush: It's a process, I agree. I told her your offer to...  
 39 Blair: Well...it's only if I mean...you know. If she's got a... or if she  
 40 needs the ground prepared as it were...Because obviously if she...

#6 [US High School Truancy Office: Call 2]

1 Mom: Hello:

2 Off: .hhh Hello is this Missus Fieldwald?

3 Mom: Yes it is:

4 Off: Uh: This is Miss Medeiros from Redondo High School

5 calling?,

6 Mom: Mm hm::,

7 Off: .hhh Uh I'm calling about Michelle she has a couple of

8 a:bsences: since <o::h las:t Thu:rsday,>

9 (.)

10 Off: She's been reported absent (.) all day last Thursday,

11 (.)

12 Mom: Uh huh well she hasn' been home i:ll.

13 (0.5)

14 Off: We:ll, (.) she was absent Thursday, Friday, (1.0) .hh

15 an' again today.

16 Mom: Are these all day absences? er are they (0.2) <jus'

17 certain periods.>

18 Off: Uh::: hhhhh .hhhhh (0.8) Well let's see it looks like

19 first second (.) third and fourth period for last

20 Thursday 'n Friday, .hhh an' here's sixth period so

21 it's- (.) we'd have to assume that it's an all day

22 a:bsence, yes.

23 Mom: Uh hmm,

24 Off: .hhh And u:hh (0.8) mptch you don't kno:w that she's

25 been home ill huh?

26 Mom: No:: not to my knowledge I (.) I'm stay at home so

27 (0.5)

28 Off: [[Mm hm

29 Mom: [[.hhhh I would know if she was out.

30 Off: Yea:h. Well, u::h the- obviously she's not going to

31 her cla:sses an' we need tuh find out where she is:

32 going would you: talk t'her about it tonight'n .hhh

33 send her into the attendance office tomorrow morning so

34 that we c'n straighten these out.

35 Mom: Mmmkay[: I'll see what she says about it.

36 Off: [Uh::: we have a new-

37 Off: .hhh Okay:. We have a new uh:: detention system now

38 (.)

39 Off: that if they don' clear the:se they'll become truants.

40 (.)

41 Off: .hh A:nd she will need to come in en clear them up.

42 (.)

43 Mom: Nnk[ay

44 Off: [Okay?

45 Mom: Do: I have tuh get back t'you 'r (.) jus' sending her

46 is that enough.

47 Off: .hhh Well if you c'n excu:se any of these with a

48 note saying yes she's been home ill er at the

49 doctor's or whatever .hhhh uh:: (.) just send a note

50 but othe[rwise you don' need tuh come in.

51 Mom: [(Yeah)

52 Mom: Okay then.

53 Off: Mka[y

54 Mom: [I'll talk tuh her about it en (.) we'll get back tuh you.

55 Off: O;kay

56 Mom: A[lright

57 Off: [Thank you

58 Mom: Mb'bye

59 Off: Bye bye

[from #6]

- 16 Mom: Are these all day absences? er are they (0.2) <jus'  
17 certain periods.>  
18 Off: Uh::: hhhhh .hhhhh (0.8) Well let's see it looks like  
19 first second (.) third and fourth period for last  
20 Thursday 'n Friday, .hhh an' here's sixth period so  
21 it's- (.) we'd have to assume that it's an all day  
22 a:bsence, yes.

#7 [Parent-teacher: from Allistone 2002] (T=teacher, P=parent)

- T: Maths:  
(1.4)  
T: (tk) Level four  
(0.6)  
T: >So we< want him to be a level four.

#8 [Parent-teacher: from Allistone 2002] (T=teacher, C=child)

- T: °Q:kay° ma:ths:  
(0.6)  
T: I- she's in Mrs G's set-  
(1.5)  
T: (tch) .hhh A:::Nd (0.9) (u)national average (.) is a level four:  
(0.8)  
T: (tk) for these SATS.=\_now this says level three::  
(1.6)  
T: \_Is that ri:ght?  
C: I'm bad int I, (hhh)

#9 [Parent-teacher: from Allistone 2002] (T=teacher, P=parent)

- T: >If: we,< (0.7) talk about her maths: first  
P: °Yea(h)°  
T: .hh Okay so she's in: Mr D's set (0.8) y[eah?  
P: [°yeah°  
T: .hh urm and he says that- (0.4) >she's working at-< (0.9) .h level three  
P: Yea:h.  
T: The::: national average, (0.7) is level four

#10 From a study by Boyd 1998 of referrals of recommendations to perform tympanostomy; children's paediatricians are telephoned by the insurance company's doctor, who asks questions to determine whether the recommended surgery is necessary, and whether the insurance company will pay for the treatment. Boyd identified two questioning formats; the *collegial* format is associated with *acceptance* of the paediatrician's recommendation.

“hh Uh can you tell me something about this youngster?” (Boyd 1998:209)

By contrast, the *bureaucratic* format illustrated below is associated with the insurance company's doctor *declining* the recommendation.

“The information I have is he's six an'-=with a history of recurrent uh otitis and (1.0) uh I think 'e had previous tubes, (0.5) but according to the information we got from a doctor (Katz), (.) the pediatrician's office, (.) He has uh- (0.2) they I- I don't get any documentation of any problems at all in the last year” (Boyd 1998:206)

## Some examples of three-part lists in conversation, politics and advertising

### Remember this?

From #5

Nan: I mean er: c'n I getchu some-thin:g? er: sump-'m:?' er sum'n?

### Three-part lists in conversation

- #11 Ward: Well she's (0.2) she's doing very well actually um she's independent.  
Les: Oh she is.  
Ward: Yes she's walking around uh washing n' dressing herself  
Les: Oh good.
- #12 Gladys: And I think it would be good for Bud tuh  
be with those boys (.) and see them and uh (0.3) play with them
- #13 Maybelle: I think if you exercise it and work at it and studied it you do become clairvoyant.
- #14 Lot: But d\*ih-eh yihkno:w they jis seem tuh wanna hhurt us'n hurt iss'n  
hurt iss 'n we're supposetuh STAN'THERE'n TAKE \*it.  
Emm: .h I showed im my ne<sub>2</sub>w sla:cks. You think he'd say  
they're good lookin?  
(0.7)  
Emm: °Hell° no. He wouldn'say they're good lookin?

### Three-part lists in political speeches (all examples are from Atkinson 1984)

- #15 [Heseltine: Conservative Part conference]  
Hes: And however tight (0.4) the immigration legislation (0.4) and in everyone's interests (.) it should be tight (0.6) there will be a large black community in this country tomorrow (0.2) just as there is today, and there are no schemes (0.6) of significant repatriation (0.2) that have any moral  
(.)  
social  
(.)  
or political credibility  
Aud: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.....(applause for 11 secs)

- #16 (Thatcher: Conservative Party Conference, 1980)  
 Thatcher: This week has demonstrated (0.4) that we are a party  
united in purpose  
 (0.4)  
 strategy  
 (0.2)  
 and resol[ve  
 Audience: [Hear [hear  
 Audience: [XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX..(8 secs)
- #17 (Thatcher: Conservative Party Conference, 1980)  
 Thatcher: As you know we've made the first crucial changes in trade union law  
 (0.4)  
 in removing the worst abuses of the closed shop  
 (0.2)  
 to restrict picketing to the place of work of the parties in dispute  
 (0.2)  
 and to encourage secret ballots  
 [Jim Prior has carried all these  
 Audience: [XX  
 Thatcher: measures through with the support of the vast majority of trade union  
 memb[ers  
 Audience: [XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX...
- #18 (Thatcher: Conservative Party Conference, 1980)  
 Thatcher: At a time of growing danger (0.7) for all who cherish and believe in  
 freedom (0.8) this party of the soft centre is no shield  
 (0.2)  
no refuge  
 (.)  
 and no answer  
 Audience: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX... (applause for 8 secs)
- #19 (Tony Benn: Labour Party Conference)  
 Benn: ...and I make not too much of that (.) save for one  
 thing.  
 (1.0)  
 If you have a veto (0.3) those who oppose (.) policies  
 (0.2) don't bother (0.2) to argue (0.2) with  
 conference(0.4) because they wait to the Clause Five  
 meeting and they kill it  
 (0.2)  
SECRETLY  
 (0.2)  
PRIVATELY  
 (0.2)  
 and without debate [ now MY RESENT-  
 Audience: [x-xxXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.....



## The interactional salience of three-part lists...in the courtroom

- #20 [Drugs trial: Defendant accused of accessory to possession of drugs, found in her daughter's room. She has just testified that her daughter has been in trouble with the law before]
- 1 Counsel: What kind of trouble  
2 Def: She was found with some works in her pocket ( )  
3 Counsel: Works eh now wher- where did you pick up the sla::ng expression  
4 works  
5 Def: I've heard it u:sed quite frequently=  
6 Counsel: =What's meant by the term works  
7 Def: It means uh a nee:dle  
8 (1.6)  
9 Counsel: A syringe?  
10 Def: Yes sir  
11 Counsel: An cooker.  
12 Def: Ye- I don't know about the cooker  
13 Counsel: Pardon  
14 Def: I don't know about the cooker

## Editorial selection and headlines also make extensive use of 3-part lists

- #21 (Alan Milburn, Health Secretary, Labour Party Conference, 2000)

*"We've made a start putting right what they did wrong. The internal market - gone. Waiting lists - down. Nurse training places - up," he declaimed, to applause.... "More nurses, more power, more pay". (From a report in the Health Service Journal, 5th October 2000)*

- #22 (Tony Blair, Labour Party Conference 2000)

*"We get the message," he said. He went on "I am listening. I hear. And I will act." (newspaper headline, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2000)*

## Three-part lists in advertising

*LOOK WHAT YOU COULD SAVE WHEN YOU BUY A CAVALIER -  
YOUR TIME, YOUR CAR, YOUR LIFE*

**LYCRA - COOL, CHIC, COMFORTABLE**

**ICI - WORLD PROBLEMS, WORLD SOLUTIONS, WORLD CLASS**

**COLLECT US COMMEMORATIVES - THEY'RE FUN, THEY'RE HISTORY, THEY'RE AMERICA**

**CHALLENGE, VARIETY, LEADERSHIP. YOURS IN FIVE YEARS?**

(Advertisement for Accelerated Promotion Scheme in the police)

Question:

1. Which pain relief is strongest?
2. Which pain reliever is easiest on your stomach?
3. Which pain reliever do hospitals use most?

Answer

**TYLENOL**

## **Standard Life Bank Strength, Security, Stability**

On the train from York to London, I bought a sandwich that came in a bag which said:

Our buffet range speaks for itself.

**Delicious. Imaginative. Fresh.**

...then just as I was preparing this handout, I checked my emails to find the following message from Apple Mac: **Give iPod. Give Mac. Give happiness.**

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## Transcription symbols

Co:/Pt:	speaker labels (Co: = counsellor; Pt: = patient)
=	links talk produced in close temporal proximity
° °	encloses talk which is produced quietly
<u>underline</u>	sometimes used to mark words or syllables which are given special emphasis of some kind
s:::	sustention of sound; the more colons, the longer the sound
.hhh	inbreath, each 'h' indicating one tenth of a second
[ ]	encloses talk produced in overlap i.e. when more than one speaker is speaking
(word)	parentheses indicate transcriber doubt
(this/that)	alternative hearings
((description))	description of what can be heard, rather than transcription e.g. ((shuffling papers))
cu-	'cut-off'
(0.2)	silence in seconds
(.)	silence of less than one tenth of a second
^	sometimes used to mark high pitch
(h)	indicates laughter while speaking