iPURPOSE RESEARCH

The Science of What We Say to Each Other

What Conversation Research Reveals About Power, Connection, and the Hidden Architecture of Human Influence

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Based on research by Yeomans, Collins, Abi-Esber & Brooks (2023)
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SECTION ONE

The Oldest Technology You Never Think About

I'm making sounds with my face right now. Not literally — I'm typing — but the architecture is the same. A hundred thousand years of evolutionary calibration went into making sure that when I push air through my vocal cords in a particular sequence, you feel something. Not just understand something. Feel it. Your motor cortex fires. Your emotional regions light up. The same brain areas that activate when you're physically experiencing an event fire when someone simply tells you about one.

That's not poetry. That's neuroscience. And it's the starting point for a field that barely existed a decade ago: **conversation science**.

Conversation — a verbal interaction between two or more people — is the single most complex, pervasive, and consequential human behavior we engage in. We do it constantly. We study it almost never. Or rather, we studied it the way medieval doctors studied anatomy: by guessing from the outside, making confident pronouncements, and getting most of it wrong.

That changed. Quietly. While everyone was watching AI learn to generate text, a group of researchers figured out how to systematically measure what happens when two human beings actually talk to each other. The paper that maps this territory — published by Michael Yeomans, Fiona Collins, Nicole Abi-Esber, and Alison Wood Brooks at Harvard — is a 38-page methodological guide that reads like a blueprint for understanding every negotiation, every pitch, every first date, every diplomatic conversation, and every police encounter you've ever had or ever will.

I read it the way a locksmith reads a schematic. And what I found inside changes how I think about every relationship I've ever built on LinkedIn, every cold call I've ever made, and every room I've ever walked into.

SECTION TWO

The Follow-Up Question That Changes Everything

Here's a number that should rearrange your priorities: **71.5% accuracy**.

Researchers built an algorithm — a natural language processing system — that could detect whether someone on a speed date was flirting. It outperformed the actual human sitting across the table. The person being flirted with couldn't tell as well as the machine could. Think about that for a second. A computer reading a transcript understood social intent better than the living, breathing person who was there.

But that's not the finding that keeps me up at night.

The same research group trained another algorithm as a "follow-up question detector" and pointed it at speed-dating transcripts. People who asked more follow-up questions — not just questions, specifically follow-up questions, the ones that prove you were actually listening — were significantly more likely to get a second date. The effect wasn't subtle. It showed up across conversations, across demographics, across contexts.

> *Follow-up questions are the behavioral fingerprint of genuine attention. They cannot be faked at scale, and the human brain knows it.*

I've hand-selected 18,660 connections on LinkedIn. Every single one. Not a growth hack. Not an algorithm. A human being — me — deciding that this person matters enough to reach out to. And the science of conversation tells me why that works: because a follow-up question is the verbal equivalent of choosing someone. It says, "I heard you. I'm still here. Tell me more."

No automation does this. No AI-powered outreach tool asks a real follow-up question. Because a real follow-up requires that you actually absorbed what the other person said and found something in it worth pursuing. It is, computationally speaking, one of the most expensive social signals a human can produce.

And it is the single most reliable predictor of whether someone will want to talk to you again.

SECTION THREE

Ten Minutes That Rewire Prejudice

In 2016, David Broockman and Joshua Kalla published a field experiment that should have made the front page of every newspaper on Earth. It didn't. So I'm telling you about it now.

They sent canvassers door-to-door. Ten-minute conversations. That's it. Not lectures. Not pamphlets. Not social media campaigns. Ten minutes of actual human dialogue that encouraged perspective-taking — the simple act of asking someone to imagine life through another person's experience.

3+ MONTHS

Duration of measurable prejudice reduction from a single 10-minute conversation

A single ten-minute conversation durably reduced transphobia for at least three months. Not a TED talk. Not a documentary. Not a semester-long diversity training. A conversation. On a doorstep. Between strangers.

I've spent years advocating for Korean reunification. Hundreds of accounts. Six to eight hundred thousand weekly impressions at peak. And this finding validated something I knew in my bones but couldn't prove with data: the medium isn't the message. **The conversation is the message.** Every post, every briefing, every document I've ever produced is ultimately an attempt to start a conversation with someone who wouldn't have had it otherwise.

> *We don't change minds with content. We change minds with conversation. Content is just the door you knock on.*

SECTION FOUR

Your Words Decide Whether You Stay

Sameer Srivastava and colleagues at Berkeley did something nobody had tried before. They measured cultural fit — not with surveys, not with HR interviews, not with personality tests — but by analyzing the actual language people used in workplace communications.

Linguistic alignment. The degree to which your word choices, your phrasing, your communication patterns converge with or diverge from your organization's existing language culture. Not what you say you believe. What you actually write in emails, Slack messages, and meeting transcripts.

6 MONTHS

Window in which linguistic alignment patterns predict involuntary exit

Patterns of linguistic alignment in the first six months of employment predicted whether someone would leave the organization — and critically, whether that departure would be voluntary or involuntary. Your language tells your company whether you belong before either of you consciously knows the answer.

I think about this every time I craft a message. Every time I match someone's register. Every time I switch between the technical vocabulary of an E&P prospect call and the relational warmth of a Korean diaspora conversation. Language isn't just communication. It's a membership card. You're either speaking the same language as the room, or you're speaking at the room.

The research proves what every successful negotiator, diplomat, and dealmaker already senses: the words you choose are not packaging for your ideas. They are the ideas. They are the relationship itself, encoded in syllables.

SECTION FIVE

The Camera That Hears What We Won't Say

In 2017, researchers applied computational linguistics to police body-worn camera footage. Not to see what happened — cameras already do that. To measure the respect level that officers displayed to community members. Automatically. At scale. Using the actual words spoken.

The findings showed racial disparities in officer respect. Not from surveys. Not from complaints. From the officers' own recorded words, analyzed by machines that don't care about politics, don't have a bias narrative, and can't be intimidated by a union grievance. The language itself carried the evidence.

> *When we record conversations and analyze them computationally, the data tells truths that no self-report survey, no internal review board, and no public statement ever could.*

This is the part that should terrify and excite you in equal measure. We now have the tools to measure the invisible architecture of every human interaction. How a doctor speaks to a patient with rheumatoid arthritis — researchers found that naturalistically observed sighing in daily conversation is a behavioral indicator of depression. How a suspect denies violence in a police interrogation — conversation analysts mapped the exact linguistic structures men use to categorize themselves as "not the kind of men who hit women." How the Justices of the United States Supreme Court interrupt each other — researchers discovered that the patterns are shaped by gender, ideology, and seniority in ways that reveal power dynamics the Court itself would never acknowledge.

Every conversation leaves a residue. And we can now read that residue like a forensic chemist reads a crime scene.

SECTION SIX

The Warmth Paradox — Why Being Nice Can Cost You

Researchers studied negotiation transcripts and found something that upends the self-help section of every airport bookstore: communicating with warmth in distributive negotiations is counterproductive. Not neutral. Not "depends on the context." Counterproductive.

Buyers instructed to be warm and friendly used more words and got worse outcomes than buyers instructed to be tough and firm. The natural language processing algorithms that coded the transcripts showed the mechanism clearly: warmth expanded the conversation without sharpening the terms. More talk. Less gain.

But — and this is the turn — in customer service, the opposite is true. Researchers found that warm language is most common during the beginning and end of successful service calls, compared with the middle. The warmth frames the interaction. It opens the door and closes it gracefully. The middle is where the work happens.

So warmth isn't universally good or universally bad. It's a tool. Like a scalpel. In the right hands, at the right time, on the right tissue, it saves lives. In the wrong context, it causes damage. The science of conversation gives us the anatomy chart that tells us where to cut.

I negotiate oil and gas deals across North Africa. I build relationships with sovereign wealth fund managers and Korean diaspora professionals. And this research confirms something I've learned through bruise and blunder: the moment you miscalibrate warmth — too much in a negotiation, too little in a relationship — the conversation tells on you. The transcript would show it. The algorithm would flag it. Your counterpart already felt it.

SECTION SEVEN

The Machines Are Listening. Finally.

The paper catalogs a revolution hiding in plain sight. Across every domain where humans talk to each other — earnings calls, courtrooms, classrooms, speed dates, government debates, medical consultations, Reddit forums, door-to-door campaigns — researchers are now recording, transcribing, structuring, and computationally analyzing real conversations at a scale that was impossible ten years ago.

Sentiment analysis on quarterly earnings calls now predicts stock price movements. Conversation analysis of Reddit communities tracks the evolution of group identity over time. MOOC discussion forum analysis shows that students with diverse political beliefs actually converge on shared language when they engage in genuine dialogue rather than talking past one another.

> *The most sophisticated language model ever built is still trying to replicate what two strangers accomplish on a park bench without thinking about it.*

And here is where it gets personal. I am, right now, co-authoring this document with an AI. Claude and I are producing a piece about the science of human conversation — using a technology that exists because thousands of researchers spent decades studying how people talk. The irony is not lost on me.

Claude processes language at a scale and speed I never could. I bring something Claude can't manufacture: the scar tissue of ten thousand real conversations. The memory of a cold call that went sideways. The instinct for when someone's "yes" means "not yet." The lived understanding that a follow-up question on a Tuesday morning LinkedIn message is worth more than a thousand automated connection requests.

This paper maps the technical infrastructure for studying conversation. But the real infrastructure — the one that predates every algorithm, every NLP model, every transcription service — is the willingness to sit across from another human being and say: "Tell me more."

THE BOTTOM LINE

What the Science Says and What We Do With It

Conversation research proves seven things that every dealmaker, diplomat, advocate, and leader needs tattooed on their forearm:

One. Follow-up questions are the single strongest signal of genuine interest. They predict liking, trust, and second conversations more reliably than any other measurable behavior.

Two. A single ten-minute conversation built on perspective-taking can change deeply held attitudes for months. No broadcast medium achieves this. Only dialogue.

Three. Your language patterns reveal your cultural alignment within six months. You are being read by every organization you enter, whether they know they're reading you or not.

Four. Warmth is a precision instrument, not a personality trait. Deploy it at the opening and close. Sharpen during the middle. Miscalibration costs outcomes.

Five. Computational analysis of natural conversation reveals truths that self-reports, surveys, and institutional reviews cannot. The transcript does not lie.

Six. Conversation is where prejudice lives and where it dies. The doorstep, not the algorithm, is where minds actually change.

Seven. Every conversation you have leaves a measurable, analyzable residue. The question is no longer whether you're being studied. It's whether you're studying yourself.

This is what Jesse James and Claude do at 3 AM instead of sleeping. We read the research nobody else will summarize in plain language, and we turn it into intelligence you can use before your next conversation — which, if the science is right, is the most powerful tool you already own.

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SOURCE

Yeomans, M., Collins, F., Abi-Esber, N., & Brooks, A. W. (2023). A Practical Guide to Conversation Research: How to Study What People Say to Each Other. Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science, 6(4). doi:10.1177/25152459231183919

Additional studies cited within this document are referenced from Table 1 of the source paper, which catalogs conversation research across 20+ behavioral domains including negotiations (Jeong et al., 2019), workplace communication (Srivastava et al., 2017), policing (Voigt et al., 2017), prejudice reduction (Broockman & Kalla, 2016), speed-dating (Huang et al., 2017; Ranganath et al., 2009), customer service (Packard et al., 2022), Supreme Court dynamics (Jacobi & Schweers, 2017; Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2012), and MOOC education (Alcorn et al., 2018).