

# Review

## Let's talk: How English conversation works (a review)

Original work by David Crystal published by Oxford University Press 2020

Reviewed by Barry Tomalin

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What really goes on in a conversation and how do we express it linguistically in English? That's the subject of *Let's Talk* – a study of conversation by the linguist and author, David Crystal. As one of the world's leading experts on the English language and a noted broadcaster, lecturer and writer, David Crystal wears his immense learning lightly. His scholarship is muted but effective, and his style is, well, conversational.

*Let's Talk*, subtitled *How English Conversation Works*, explores the underlying conventions of conversation in eighteen chapters, covering greetings, starting conversations, turn-taking, interrupting, expressing opinions, telephone and online conversations, dealing with topical subjects and cultural misunderstandings, as well as looking at emerging 'rules' of conversation and a final discussion on how conversation is changing. There is a cornucopia of examples, many taken from Crystal's work on *The Survey of English Usage* and published in *Advanced Conversational English* in 1973. The book itself is out of print but the recordings on which it was based are available on <http://davidcrystal.com> as well as many more recent recordings taken from current corpora including YouTube clips. Founded by Lord Randolph

Quirk, then Quain Professor of English at University College, University of London in 1962, *The Survey of English Usage* was a key development in understanding how English was actually used as opposed to traditional grammatical rules and led to the magisterial *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, published in 1985.

Crystal begins by emphasising the importance of greetings as a brief verbal handshake to initiate a conversation. He goes into the variations of what Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, called 'the ball of discourse' but stresses why *Hello* became a standard greeting, especially in telephonic and online communication. Apparently, *Hello*, a fairly recent term in the English language in the 19th century, introduced as a greeting in the 1850s, became established as the basic introduction to a telephone conversation by 1878. By 1883, female telephone operators were routinely referred to as *hello girls*. However, as Crystal points out, one third of young people on their mobile phones today prefer phrases such as *Heh*, *Yo* or *Whassup (What's up)*, or more commonly, *Hi*.

As he explains early in the book the actual word 'conversation' didn't appear in English until

the 15th century, when it meant 'being in a place or among people'. Conversation as a verbal concept only emerged in the 16th century but conversations existed in early middle ages literature, from the 12th to the 15th century in works such as *Beowulf* and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. They were called dialogues.

A lover and connoisseur of conversation was Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), author of the famous *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755. It was he, writing in *The Idler*, a magazine, who said that when two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather. Many foreigners and native speakers still believe that to be true today. To have a conversation, Dr Johnson said, there must be four things: knowledge, materials (something to talk about), imagination and presence of mind. His biographer, James Boswell, reported him as saying after a dinner at a friend's house that there was talk but no conversation. Nothing was discussed, he said.

For the teacher or advanced student there are masses of insights in the book and examples of how language is used to manage conversation. One of many fascinating areas is how to change the subject. Phrases such as, *That reminds me...*, *Speaking of which maybe we should...*, *By the way...*, *Come to think of it...* and, to return to a subject when the conversation has gone off track, *Going back to what we were saying...*

I was fascinated by Crystal's discussion of 'uptalk' as a way of bonding and involving the listener in a conversation. 'Uptalk' is the use of a rising intonation at the end of a sentence, frequently used in question tags but also in statements, inviting the listener to get involved and agree or disagree. The use of the phrase *you know* with a rising intonation at the end of a sentence can invite a sense of comradeship and sharing. It became a very popular phrase in the 1960s hippie movement in San Francisco and the west coast of the USA. In the 1970s, the TV series *Neighbours*, based in Australia, spread 'uptalk' around the English-speaking world as Australians and New Zealanders are famous for the rising intonation at the end of a sentence, inviting the listener to respond. In Britain it

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is common in Wales and in Ireland and accounts for the musical lilt in many Irish and Welsh accents.

A key influence on modern conversation has been the expansion of online communication. How has that affected the way we converse and the language we use? The use of the Internet encourages anonymity and also short messages and responses often moderated by acronyms such as *LOL (Lots of laughs)* or *OMG (Oh, my God!)* to express surprise or shock and the use of emojis and emoticons to express a whole range of emotions. Another is the prevalence of slang, especially by younger users, as in *OMG, I was like, wow!*, which means *I was really impressed*. Another device is the use of the hashtag. According to Crystal, hashtags were introduced via Twitter in 2007 so that users could find all the tweets relating to a particular topic. Another feature of conversation on social media is that messages tend to get broken up so that one message may begin a thought but a subsequent message may complete it.

Information and Communication Technologies have deeply affected how we talk to each other as computer and Internet vocabulary have become part of our conversation. Some people will happily end a meeting by saying *I have to log off now* and no computer is near them. You'll often hear, *Have you got the bandwidth to deal with this?* meaning *Have you got the knowledge and understanding required?* When you are explaining a situation, someone might ask you to *backspace a minute* meaning, *Could you go back and explain it again?*

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Crystal cites Gretchen McCulloch, author of *Because Internet* (2019) as pointing out the significance of dots (. . .) in a text message to mean something left unsaid, maybe negative. One of the problems of keeping up with conversational language usage is differences in generation. Crystal cites McCulloch as saying, *'The dots (in a text or written conversation) must be indicating something left unsaid. From a peer, something left unsaid might indicate flirtation but from an older relative, that would be weird'*.

Does this use of computer language in general conversation, making exchanges shorter and using

Internet symbols and jargon, mean that conversation is dying? Crystal believes not. Texting and WhatsApp may be a different way of engaging in conversation but it is nevertheless a conversation. However, it is important in teaching English language and communication for teachers to expose students to the language and style of online English conversation, the equivalent of which students and many teachers will already be familiar with in their own language.

As David Crystal says, *'that is a task still facing schools, where there may be little or no instruction about the properties of electronic communication in all its forms'*.

For Crystal the aim of a conversation is to make every-one happy or, at least, satisfied at the end. Citing Dr Johnson once again, conversation should create 'a pleasing impression'. David Crystal has definitely achieved that.

NOTE: Readers of this review may also look at David Crystal's *Language and the Internet* published by Cambridge University Press in 2006.