

THE POLITICS OF CONVERSATION

HOW POWER PLAYS OUT IN CONVERSATION

To understand our core political institutions and the power dynamics that sustain, challenge, and transform them, we need to understand the conversations that are foundational to them. Through conversation, different actors – from politicians, to journalists, to ordinary citizens – participate, collaborate, intervene, exclude, silence, and hold each other to account.

Conversation analysis allows us to identify and describe how power is displayed and wielded – second by second, breath by breath, gesture by gesture – through communication practices such as silence, laughter, hesitation, and interruption.

Professor Elizabeth Stokoe tells the story of classic and (in)famous political conversations. These conversations show how people, from news interviewers to ordinary citizens, hold politicians to account – and sometimes get caught out in political encounters themselves.

WATCH THE VIDEO

Reid/Johnson (2022)
Gould/Thatcher (1983)
Paxman/Howard (1997)
Humphrys/Sopel (2018)
Stayt/Gaga (2016)

COMMUNICATION WITHOUT WORDS

Many of these conversations show the power of communication with resources other than words. These are “paralinguistic” and “embodied” resources like pitch, volume, intonation, pace, facial expression, gesture, and body position.

In **Gould/Thatcher**, Margaret Thatcher smiles when she forgets Diana Gould’s name, while Gould rolls her eyes in response to Thatcher’s assertion of power and status. In **Stayt/Gaga**, Charlie Stayt fills Lady Gaga’s “silence” with smiles and gestures to pursue a response, none of which she reciprocates.



THE SPECIFICS OF WAFFLE

As Prime Minister, Boris Johnson was regularly accused of “waffling”. We think we know “waffling” when we see it, but what actually comprises it? In **Reid/Johnson**, Johnson’s long, unfocused turns are littered with repetition, hesitation, incomplete words, and false starts. Waffling makes Johnson’s inadvertent admission (“No?”) an almost inevitable consequence.



THE POWER OF SILENCE

Stayt/Gaga shows how powerful – and uncomfortable – silence in conversation can be. But what is silence, especially in face-to-face interaction? Lady Gaga does not respond verbally to Charlie Stayt’s question, creating a long and painful “silence”. But silence is not absence: Gaga uses gaze and loud breaths to maintain it.

Conversely, imagine how **Humphrys/Sopel** would have unfolded if Jon Sopel had been silent instead of laughing.



THE REALITY BEHIND THE HEADLINES

The BBC Newsnight interview between **Paxman/Howard** became known as “the night of 12 times” as the media reported a dozen instances of Jeremy Paxman asking Michael Howard the same question.

But conversation analysis shows that Paxman actually asks three different types of question, and none of them 12 times.

TECHNICAL TRANSCRIPT: SUSANNA REID AND BORIS JOHNSON

In May 2022, broadcaster Susanna Reid interviewed then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, on ITV’s Good Morning Britain about the cost-of-living crisis. His response was widely seen as evidence of his lack of empathy for people like Elsie, the struggling pensioner discussed in the interview.

55 BJ: An’ the- the- the best ↓answer (0.4) is t- (0.2) help her: b- with-
56 aba:te the cost of energy (0.4) as we are, .hh but also [t- t- t’make
57 SR: [Wh’t through a
58 loan that she has to pay back,=
59 BJ: =t’make sure, (0.5) w- there’s a- there’s a: direct (0.3) #uh# cut
60 in her council tax as a result of what we’re doing, .hh uh plus the:
61 [uh the warm home- plus the warm (her) homes allowance h plus the]=
62 SR: =[She doesn’t qualify for the council tax rebate as her home comes]=
63 BJ: =[.winter fuel allowance there are-]
64 SR: [under Band F.]
65 BJ: >>There are measures that we put place t’help peopl- .hh <<But I’m NOT
66 [gonna pretend t’you .hh Susanna I’m not gonna pretend t’-] t- se==
67 SR: [Prime Minister: you can’t say anything t’help Elsie can you.]
68 BJ: =No?

Marked downwards shift in pitch
Pauses within turns timed to the nearest tenth of a second
Square brackets indicate the onset and end of overlapping talk
“Equals signs” are placed between turns that occur less than a tenth of a second apart
Hash sign indicates creaky voice
Colon indicates prolonged vowel or consonant
In- and out-breaths are indicated by hhh, with and without a full stop. The more h, the longer the in- (hhh) or out-breath (hhh)
Words or syllables in upper case are louder than the surrounding speech from the same speaker
A dash indicates a cut-off or incomplete word, often followed by a reset or restart
Carats enclose speech that is faster (>) or slower (<) than surrounding speech by the same speaker



“YOU CAN’T SAY ANYTHING TO HELP ELSIE CAN YOU”

SCAN TO HEAR MORE FROM ELIZABETH ABOUT HER RESEARCH



SCAN FOR A GLOSSARY OF SYMBOLS

