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The rise of conversation studies

This paper considers the state of the art; not the art of conversation itself, but that of its study and it will adopt the time-honoured framework of reflections on the past, the present and the future of the field.

A scholarly interest in conversation goes back quite a long way. It was in the middle of the 17th century that Guez de Balzac wrote his essay on the conversation of the ancient Romans, and in 1857 that Emile Deschanel published a book entitled *Histoire anecdotique de la conversation*. As that title suggests, though, the subject was not taken very seriously. For a long time, the study of conversation remained an academically marginal subject¹. In the 1970s, though, a rise of interest in the topic took place, especially among sociologists and students of literature, although the two groups did not speak to each other². Publications continued at more or less the same level in the 1980s³.

By the 1990s, this interest seems – for whatever reasons – to have reached a critical mass, including on the humanist side some important essays by Marc Fumaroli. A sign of the future importance of the topic was the publi-

¹ W.L. WILEY, *Concepts of Genteel Conversation in the French Renaissance*, Washington, South Atlantic Studies for S.L. Leavitt, 1953, pp. 137-46.

² J.P. DENS, *L'art de la conversation au 17^e siècle*, "Les Lettres Romanes", 27, 1973, pp. 215-24; E. SCHEGLOFF - H. SACKS, *Opening Up Closings*, "Semiotica", 7, 1973, pp. 289-327; C. HENN-SCHMOLDER, *Ars conversationis*, "Arcadia", 10, 1975, pp. 16-73; E. GOFFMAN, *Replies and Responses*, "Language and Society", 5, 1976, pp. 257-313; D.A. BERGER, *Die Konversationskunst in England 1660-1740*, Munich, Fink, 1978; CH. STROSETZKI, *Konversation: ein Kapitel gesellschaftlicher und literarischer Pragmatik im Frankreich des 17. Jhts*, Frankfurt, Lang, 1978.

³ C. GOODWIN, *Conversational Organization*, NY, Academic Press, 1981; L.E. WARREN, *Turning Reality round Together: Guides to Conversation in 18th-Century England*, "18th-Century Life", 8, 1983; *Structures of Social Action: studies in CA*, ed. by J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984; D. TANNEN, *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends*, Norwood NJ, Ablex, 1984; K.-H. GOTTERT, *Kommunikationsideale: Untersuchungen zur europäischer Konversationstheorie*, Munich, Ludicium, 1988.

cation of a collection edited by Alain Montandon, a scholar and organizer of conferences who is sensitive to the rise of new trends. At this time, a few historians (by which I mean 'plain' or general historians rather than specialized historians of literature) entered the field, treating conversation as an institution, with its own rules, and linking it to practices of sociability, which were also attracting increasing interest on the part of historians at this time⁴.

Since the year 2000, the upward trend has continued, including major studies by Benedetta Craveri, Antoine Lilti and Amedeo Quondam⁵. Quondam has remarked on what he calls an 'explosion' of interest in the topic in contemporary culture, which he presents as a response to another explosion, that of 'mass society' and its 'nuovi codici', 'questa nostra società della comunicazione, non più della conversazione'⁶. The owl of Minerva takes flight once again.

At the moment, these studies occupy a space at the cross-roads of disciplines, notably sociology, anthropology, linguistics, literature and history, although different groups of scholars have defined the topic in rather different ways.

⁴ *Talk at Work*, ed. by P. Drew and J. Heritage, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992; M. FUMAROLI, *L'art de la conversation ou le Forum du royaume* [1992], in ID., *La diplomatie de l'esprit, de Montaigne à La Fontaine*, Paris, Hermann, 1998, pp. 283-320; H. SACKS, *Lectures on Conversation*, Oxford-Cambridge (Mass.), Blackwell, 1992; P. BURKE, *The Art of Conversation*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993; L. KLEIN, *Gender, Conversation and the Public Sphere in Early 18th-Century England*, in *Textuality and Sexuality*, ed. by J. Still and M. Worton, Manchester, Manchester Univ. Press, 1993; D.A. BERGER, *Maxims of Conduct into literature: Jonathan Swift and Polite Conversation*, in *The Crisis of Courtesies*, ed. by J. Carré, Leiden, Brill, 1994, pp. 81-92; T. MCLOUGHLIN, *Fielding's Essay on Conversation: a Courtesy Guide to Joseph Andrews?*, in *The Crisis of Courtesies*, cit., pp. 93-104; *Du goût, de la conversation et des femmes*, éd. par A. Montandon, Clermont, Assoc. des Publ. de la Fac. des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, 1994; *Art de la lettre, art de la conversation*, éd. par B. Bray and Ch. Strosetzki, Paris, Klincksieck, 1995; D. ANUNCIACION - I. BELCHI, *El estudio de la conversación*, in *Actas del III Congreso Internacional de historia de la lengua española*, ed. by A. Alonso González et al., Madrid, Arco Libros, 1996, pp. 725-35; D. DENIS, *La muse galante: poétique de la conversation dans l'oeuvre de Madeleine de Scudéry*, Paris, Champion, 1997; *L'art de la conversation*, éd. par J. Hellegourarc'h, Paris, Dunod, 1997; N. RIES, *Russian Talk: culture and conversation during Perestroika*, Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1997; H. ROODENBURG, *To converse agreeably*, in *A Cultural History of Humour*, ed. by J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997; D.S. SHIELDS, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997; E. BOURGINAT, *Le siècle de persiflage*, Paris, PUF, 1998; I. HUTCHBY - R. WOOFFITT, *Conversation Analysis: principles, practices and applications*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998; TH. ZELDIN, *Conversation*, London, Harvill, 1998; A. MILON, *L'art de la conversation*, Paris, PUF, 1999.

⁵ B. CRAVERI, *La civiltà della conversazione*, Milano, Adelphi, 2001; E. GODO, *Histoire de la conversation*, PUF, 2003; *L'arte della conversazione nelle corti del Rinascimento*, a cura di F. Calitti, Roma, Ist. Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2003; *Salotti e ruolo femminile in Italia*, a cura di M.L. Betri e E. Brambilla, Venezia, Marsilio, 2004; A. LILTI, *Le monde des salons*, Paris, Fayard, 2005; S. MILLER, *Conversation: a history of a declining art*, New Haven, Yale Univ. Press 2006; A. QUONDAM, *La conversazione: un modello italiano*, Roma, Donzelli, 2007; J.A. SECOND, *How Scientific Conversation became Shop Talk*, "Transactions of the Royal Historical Society", 17, 2007, pp. 129-56.

⁶ QUONDAM, *La conversazione*, cit., pp. vii, 9.

On one side, the linguists and the sociologists tend to operate with a wide definition of conversation as informal talk of any kind rather than a specific 'speech genre', to use Bakhtin's term. We might call this 'low' conversation. Many of them, though not all, are interested in universal features of talk, rather than cultural variations.

The literary scholars, on the other hand, focus on particular places and particular times. They also concentrate on a particular form or style of talk, conversation as an art or *Kunstwerk*, or what we might call 'high' conversation. They reject what Quondam, like a new Pietro Verri, has called "un chiacchiere senza più regole condivise e rispettate... una babele di voci"⁷.

The sources used by the two groups also vary. The humanists concentrate on representations of conversation in print (in dialogues, plays and novels as well as treatises), while the social scientists work from tape-recordings.

The two groups of scholars generally ignore one another's work. Historians might think that the practitioners of CA have re-invented the wheel, since their 'rules of rapport' were anticipated by the old treatises on the art of conversation⁸. On the other hand, the CA people doubtless regard our work as merely impressionistic.

All the same, I believe in the possibility of dialogue between the adepts of CA and historians of conversation, replacing a sharp distinction between high and low by a spectrum of possibilities: talk that is more or less spontaneous, more or less instrumental, more or less stylized. This conclusion might be supported by a juxtaposition between two texts that were written just over 400 years apart. The first is Stefano Guazzo's *La civile conversazione* (1574), which, as you know, ends with a description of talk at a dinner for ten people in Casale. The second is the close analysis of conversation at a Thanksgiving dinner for six people in Berkeley, an analysis conducted by one of the participants, the sociolinguist Deborah Tannen⁹.

To discuss the historiography of conversation a little more precisely, let's distinguish three dimensions of the subject; its geography, its sociology and its chronology. So far as the geography of the topic is concerned, studies of France dominate, as if accepting the claim by the French that conversation is a distinctively French art. Then comes Italy and England, which may surprise people who think that the English do not talk very much. Many German scholars have made contributions, but they have said relatively little about

⁷ *Ivi*, 19; on Verri's criticism of conversational 'anarchy', 285ff.

⁸ R. LAKOFF, *Stylistic Strategies*, in "Annals of the New York Academy of Science", 327, 1979, pp. 53-78.

⁹ STEFANO GUAZZO, *La civile conversazione* [1574] a cura di A. Quondam, Modena, Panini, 1993; D. TANNEN, *Conversational Style: analyzing talk among friends*, Norwood-NJ, Ablex, 1984, pp. 44-151.

conversation in German¹⁰. Many American scholars have also contributed, but with rare exceptions they have said little about conversation either in colonial America or the US¹¹.

As for the sociology of conversation, historians, following their sources, have concentrated on the upper classes, while linguists listen to ordinary people. For once, however, the contribution of women seems to be receiving its due thanks to the widespread interest in the hostesses of salons in France and elsewhere¹². The settings of conversation have attracted increasing attention and include, besides salons, cafés, dinner-tables and in Russia, kitchens¹³.

Chronologically speaking, the humanists reveal a strong emphasis on early modern Europe, although studies of the 19th century and occasionally the 20th are beginning to appear¹⁴. The social scientists, on the other hand, focus on the immediate present. The topos of ‘the decline of conversation’, like the decline of so much else, remains alive. Jonathan Swift dated the decline of conversation to the early 17th century. The abbé Morellet dated it to the French revolution. However, recent writer, the American Stephen Miller, focuses on the late 20th century. According to this author, the golden age of conversation was the eighteenth century, especially in the Britain of David Hume, Samuel Johnson and their friends. He has little good to say about conversational practices in his own country in the 19th century, but that period looks like a silver age compared to what Miller says about “modern enemies of conversation”, from Norman Mailer to the rapper Eminem, and about “the ways we don’t converse now”¹⁵.

Looking towards the future, let me return to the three dimensions of analysis. Chronologically speaking, much work remains to be done on the 19th and 20th centuries¹⁶. There might also be more emphasis on the balance between change and continuity over *la longue durée*.

Geographically speaking, much work remains to be done on cultures other than France, Italy and England. There is too little written on Spain, for instance, despite the tradition of the *tertulia*¹⁷. There is little on Northern

¹⁰ M. FAUSER, *Das Gespräch im 18. Jahrhundert: Rhetorik und Geselligkeit in Deutschland*, Stuttgart, M&P Verlag, 1991.

¹¹ SHIELDS, *Civil Tongues*, cit.

¹² DENIS, *La muse galante*, cit.; CRAVERI, *La civiltà della conversazione*, cit.; LILTI, *Le monde des salons*, cit.; *Salotti e ruolo femminile in Italia*, cit.

¹³ On dinner-tables, TANNEN, *Conversational Style*, cit.

¹⁴ SECORD, *How Scientific Conversation became Shop Talk*, cit.; RIES, *Russian Talk*, cit.

¹⁵ MILLER, *Conversation*, cit.

¹⁶ R.E. GARCIA, *Conversación y identidad en el mundo contemporáneo: variaciones y enlaces teóricos a partir del pensamiento de Peter Burke*, in *La cultura en tiempos modernos: Peter Burke y la historia cultural*, Morelia (Mich.), 2010, pp. 73-93.

¹⁷ BELCHI, *El estudio de la conversación*, cit.

Europe¹⁸. There is little on Eastern Europe, despite the Russian passion for conversation, symbolized by Colonel Vershinin in *Three Sisters*¹⁹. There is remarkably little on the world outside Europe.

Sociologically speaking, I would expect future work to place more emphasis on the varieties of conversation associated with different social groups and social settings, “specialized forms of talk”²⁰. Conversation is not so much a single speech genre as a cluster of genres with their own styles and conventions and it may be becoming increasingly specialized, like so much else in contemporary culture. A few studies have been published concerned with the conversation of nuns, of scholars and of scientists, but there is much more to do in this domain²¹.

More could be said or written about the settings and accompaniments of conversation. Settings: not only the court or the academy or the *circolo* but also the roof (in the Middle East), the well, the kitchen, the café, the inn, the restaurant; accompaniments the chairs, sofas; the drinks – tea, coffee, beer, wine, vodka etc. The history of aids to conversation needs to be written, collections of anecdotes and the encyclopaedias with titles such as *Conversationslexicon* that helped people understand historical, literary or political references in daily conversation.

I would also predict that increasing attention will be paid in the future to semi- or quasi-conversations of different kinds. Sociologists have already extended their interests to telephone conversations and to ‘virtual conversation’ on the Internet, examining the difference that it makes to the topics of conversation and the style in which they are discussed, noting, for example, ‘caller hegemony’ on the telephone and the anonymity, more exactly pseudonymity of chat channels on the Internet²².

Historians might follow this lead and pay attention to the rhetorical conventions in such forms of quasi-conversation as gossip, interviews, interrogations and talk shows. For example, some Japanese corporations have established “talk rooms” where researchers are expected to discuss one another’s work while drinking tea²³.

¹⁸ ROODENBURG, *To converse agreeably*, cit.

¹⁹ W.M. TODD III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin*, Cambridge MA 1986; RIES, *Russian Talk*, cit.

²⁰ HUTCHBY - R. WOOFFITT, *Conversation Analysis: principles, practices and applications*, pp. 7, 145-71.

²¹ M. LAVEN, *Virgins of Venice*, London, Viking, 2002, 114-31; FUMAROLI, *La diplomatie de l'esprit, de Montaigne à La Fontaine*, cit.; W. CLARK, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006; SECORD, *How Scientific Conversation became Shop Talk*, cit.

²² R. HOPPER, *Telephone Conversation*, Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1992; I. HUTCHBY, *Conversation and technology from the telephone to the Internet*, Cambridge, Polity, 2001.

²³ TH.H. DAVENPORT - L. PRUSAK, Boston, *Working knowledge: how organizations manage what they know*, Mass., Harvard Business School Press, 1998, p. 46.

In our own academic world, think of seminars, in which the general discussion that follows the presentation of a particular topic is at least as important as the presentation itself, and “discussion groups” that meet regularly at a particular time to discuss topics chosen in advance²⁴. Our own proceedings today are a kind of conversation, attempting to achieve the difficult balance between structure and spontaneity.

More emphasis could be placed on cross-cultural comparisons. On the humanities side, the stereotypes about the witty French and the silent Swedes need to be investigated. On the social science side, the vast majority of studies deal with the Anglophone world and do not seriously discuss cultural differences in conversational norms, though they are obvious enough to anyone who moves between cultures²⁵.

I happen to have spent a fair amount of time in Latin cultures, from Italy to Brazil, and much of this time has been passed in conversation. I am quite sure that in these cultures I am perceived as a rather silent person. One reason for my silence is that I was brought up to believe that it is impolite to interrupt people, so I wait for them to finish. But they never finish!

More exactly, cultures differ in the length of the pause after which it is considered acceptable to break into the conversation. The English wait a second longer than the Latins. Maybe it isn't a second but a fraction of a second, I haven't tried to measure it. The point is that the delay, however short, is fatal, because someone else always jumps in ahead of me²⁶.

To conclude. The upward trend in scholarly publications, reinforced by the present conference, suggests that we shall soon see the institutionalization of “Conversation Studies” on the model of “Translation Studies”. First we may see the foundation of a society, then the foundation of a journal, and finally the establishment of chairs in conversation studies, or CS for short, on the model of CA for “conversation analysis”.

For better or worse, or more likely for both. On the negative side, autonomy tends to make intellectual enterprises more inward looking and self-important: too much fuss. On the positive side, though, contacts between scholars working on similar topics but separated by nations and disciplines are clearly to be welcomed.

So are contacts between the rival if complementary approaches of the humanists, like us, and the social scientists, if only such contacts can be made and sustained.

²⁴ CLARK, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, cit., pp. 419-22.

²⁵ One of the rare studies by an anthropologist, based on fieldwork in Thailand, is M. MOERMAN, *Talking Cultures: Ethnography and Conversation Analysis*, Philadelphia, Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1988.

²⁶ I later discovered a discussion of this phenomenon in TANNEN, *Conversational Style*, cit., p. 3.