

# The Interactive Presenter: Using Conversation Analysis to Improve Presentation Skills

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There is nothing simple about giving a presentation to an audience. From its verbal and non-verbal aspects to designing your presentation so that your audience can understand it, doing a presentation is an activity rich with interactional resources that presenters should be actively utilising. It might be, however, that presenters are not fully utilising these interactional resources. The aim of this paper is to examine how presenters can use interactional resources to increase displayed engagement with their audience. The key to this is to remove ourselves from an “information-giving mindset” and to instead adopt an “interactive mindset” for presentations. Using findings and key concepts from an approach to natural-occurring interaction called “Conversation Analysis”, I focus on one interactional resource – gaze. I will discuss how gaze is used in both conversations and presentations in regards to engagement and disengagement. I will argue that getting students to think about the interactive nature of a presentation, which is akin to a conversation, is a useful way for developing better presentation skills. It reminds us that presentations are done for our audiences and not done for merely sprouting information. The consequence of this will be increased engagement with the audience and a more successfully delivered presentation. I hope to show that far from being a just monologue, presentations share features with our everyday, mundane conversations that we can take advantage of for our presentations.

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## 1. Introduction

“Information is information, presentation is presentation!”

As a teacher of presentation skills, I was over-the-moon when one of my students said this to me. Although what he said may sound a bit redundant, he seemed to have finally realised that there is a difference between merely giving information and doing a presentation. Indeed, the “information-giving mindset” is the trap that most of my students fall into. They get so caught up in what they want or need to say (i.e., “information-giving”) that they end up doing things like reading word-for-word from lengthy scripts or reading slides with their back turned to the audience. It seems that they have forgotten all about us, the audience. In order to get my students to combat this information-giving mindset, I tell my students to think of a presentation like a conversation.

Why do I do this?

I do this because presentations and conversations are both kinds of social interaction. Although it might sound strange to refer to a presentation as a type of interaction as the presenters are the primary speakers and the audience is more or less quiet, it is important to remember that presenters are still doing their talk for, and interacting with *the audience*. This means that just giving the audience information is not enough. Presenters need to display engagement with their audience too. If they do not, this could develop into an interactional problem and lead to a less successfully delivered presentation. Thus, adopting an “interactive mindset”, not an “information-giving mindset”, is important. This is why I get my students to think about the interactive nature of conversation and how being interactive is important in presentations too. Thinking about how we interact with each other in conversation should be very relatable for all of us because conversations are at the very heart of our everyday lives. This is an easy way to get presenters to think about how they interact with others, which will in turn help to improve how they deliver their presentations for their audience.

The purpose of this paper is to show how approaching a presentation with an interactive mindset can help presenters to increase engagement with their audience. The emphasis on interaction will help presenters to understand the importance of maintaining engagement while they are doing their presentations, as well as understanding the pitfalls of not displaying engagement during their talk. I will be focusing on non-verbal interactional resources and in particular, gaze.<sup>1</sup> I will utilize key concepts and previous literature from Conversation Analysis to delve deeper into gaze in order to understand how we use it in conversations and presentations.

In this paper, I will firstly introduce Conversation Analysis. Secondly, I would like to discuss the importance of adopting an interactive mindset for presentation. Thirdly, I will move onto the discussion of gaze's interactional roles. I will then summarise and conclude my argument.

## **2. Our window into the mechanisms of talk: Conversation Analysis**

I would firstly like to briefly discuss the analytic framework of Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA). Emerging as a discipline in the 1960s through the work of Harvey Sacks, and his associates Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (ten Have 2007), CA is the study of talk in naturally-occurring, social interaction. The name "Conversation Analysis" is somewhat of a misnomer because CA examines other kinds of talk too (i.e., CA is the study of natural "talk-in-interaction"), as well as embracing both verbal and non-verbal conduct. Aside from conversations, CA examines talk in task- and institutional-oriented settings, such as doctor appointments, classroom lessons, courtroom sessions, business meetings and of course, presentations.<sup>2</sup> Presentations and conversations are both kinds of interaction, but they also differ in several regards too. Unlike conversations, presentations are a kind of institutional talk where the participants have institution-relevant identities and are trying to achieve certain goals in interaction. The interactional contexts determine the rules and structures for the interaction and are very different from our everyday conversations. The institution-relevant identities here are the presenter, audience and perhaps a moderator. In regards to the rules and structure, there is a set time limit, focus on one topic, one person overwhelmingly talks and the audience does not tend to talk (if they do, any interruptions should be related to the presenter's topic). Deviations away from the rules and structure are "marked", and thus the participants in the interaction will find such behavior unusual (Rendle-Short 2006). The interactional goal here is to do the presentation.

A primary goal of CA is to describe how ordinary talk is organised. It encompasses many aspects of talk, such as turn-taking, sequence organisation and action formation. As it looks at how people actually talk in their everyday lives, CA is data-driven and is based on audio- or video-recorded interaction from our everyday lives rather than artificial examples. It teases apart human interaction and how we do it, so CA can help us identify and improve how we can do presentations. In fact, CA can be "applied to a practical problem as it plays out in interaction, with the intention of bringing about some sort of change" (Antaki 2011, 1). For this paper, the interactional problem is the problematic lack of displayed engagement from presenters. CA can help us to shed light on how presenters can improve upon their presentation delivery skills to increase engagement.

Next, I will uncover the importance of adopting an interactive mindset for a presentation and consider why presenters should keep the audience in mind.

## **3. Shedding the information-giving mindset, adopting an interactive mindset**

Books about presentation skills have highlighted the relationship between conversations and presentations. In the book *Presentation Zen*, Garr Reynolds states, "Like a conversation, presentation requires your full presence at that time and place" (2008, 199). That is, more than just the co-presence of the presenter and audience, presenters also need to display engagement. Thus, getting students to adopt an interactive mindset is a simple way to force them to think about how they should best deliver their presentation for their audience. In the information-giving mindset, they become too focused on what they should say. For instance,

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<sup>1</sup> Although gaze can be defined in different ways, gaze in CA refers to where the speaker is looking with their eyes. CA focuses on gaze's communicative functions and where sequentially in the talk gaze is produced (Rossano 2012).

<sup>2</sup> In these kinds of settings, it does not necessarily mean that conversation does not occur within them. For instance, in the classroom, the students could be talking to each other about their daily lives.

in our daily conversations, how engaging is it when someone is talking at you and does not even try to engage you in this talk? They talk, but do not look at you or even face you. You would feel that something is up.

The same applies to the presentation, which is why the interactive mindset is key. You should be doing your talk with the recipient in mind, as we do in everyday conversation. In CA terminology, this is referred to “recipient design” and is defined as “the multitude of respects in which the talk by a party in a conversation is constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the co-participants” (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974, 727). This can be demonstrated in many ways in talk, such as how speakers refer to other people in talk (e.g., Schegloff 1996, Oh 2007, Hacothen and Schegloff 2006, Schegloff 2007). For instance, depending on how well the speaker thinks the recipient knows another person, they could call this person by their name (e.g., “Eve”) or use a descriptor (e.g., “the woman that sits at the front of our Academic Skills class”). In presentations, this orientation to the audience can be demonstrated through the presenter’s gaze and body posture (Rendle-Short 2006). This is not determined in an unsystematic way, but designed moment-by-moment in an organized way. In short, we design our conversations and presentations for the recipients.

Therefore, the presenter should always keep in mind that they are doing their presentation for the audience. Next, I would like to focus on the interactional importance of gaze and its role with engagement.

#### 4. To gaze or not to gaze

As mentioned in the Introduction, my students had a tendency to *read* their presentations rather than *do* them. I use to say things like “you need to look more at the audience!” to stop this behavior, but alas, it did not cause a change in behavior. It was then that I realized that it is not as easy as looking more at the audience because gaze is context-sensitive and there will be times during talk where gaze aversion is natural. Nowadays, I ask my students to think about why gaze is important when we talk in our everyday lives and then think about why it is important in a presentation. I typically do this by asking my students the following questions:

When you are having a conversation with a group of people, why do you look at the other conversational participants?

Do you look at everyone or just one person? Why?

What would happen if you do not look at anyone? How would this make you feel?

When is it okay to not look at the audience during a presentation?

In this section, I will cover the potential answers for these questions by examining previous research from CA. I will also briefly discuss how my students responded to these questions.

From a CA perspective, gaze is viewed as a social act (e.g., Egbert 1996, Heath 1984, Robinson 1998, Goodwin 1980, Rossano 2012, Rossano, Brown, and Levinson 2009). This is exemplified with the following quotation by Christian Heath.

Nonvocal behavior [including gaze] in social interaction is not only a manifestation of psychological disposition, but also it itself social action. Like speech, nonvocal behavior is employed to do things, to accomplish certain types of work and achieve particular ends... As social action, nonvocal behavior or body movement entails a social organization, an organization that provides for its production and recognition in particular instances. (Heath 1982, 147)

Gaze has been researched in three primary ways in CA: participation/engagement, turn-taking and how gaze helps to accomplish actions in talk (Rossano 2012). Although research into gaze is somewhat extensive, I will not be going into it in detail as it will not be directly relevant to my discussion of having an interactive mindset for a presentation. I will, however, focus on how gaze is used as a display of engagement.

To understand how gaze signals participation and engagement, we will examine Charles Goodwin's (1980) two rules for gaze that account for the gaze practices of conversational participants. The first rule is "[a] speaker should obtain the gaze of his recipient during the course of a turn at talk" (Goodwin 1980, 275), while the second rule is "[a] recipient should be gazing at the speaker when the speaker is gazing at the hearer" (Goodwin 1980, 287). These two rules suggest that the gaze practices of the speaker and the recipient(s) are related. In particular, gaze identifies the intended recipient(s) of the speaker's talk (Stivers and Rossano 2010). Gaze also suggests something about the participation status of conversational participants. In addition to signaling participation availability, gaze can also be a display of engagement (Goodwin 1981, Kidwell 1997, Heath 1984, 1982, Robinson 1998). In the case of presentations, a presenter's gaze with the audience is relevant and expected when the presenter is talking because it is a way for the presenter to display engagement with the audience (Rendle-Short 2006). With saying this, gaze alone does not automatically display your engagement. It is gaze, body orientation (i.e., facing the audience or not) and gestures working together to signal who is being addressed and to display engagement (Goodwin 1981, Heath 1984, Rendle-Short 2006, Robinson 1998).

Moreover, in both conversations and presentations, moving your gaze around to all recipients lets them know that you are addressing them all. Depending on the size of the audience, you should move your gaze to each member for smaller groups or to different areas of the audience for larger groups. This will display engagement with all audience members. Determining the exact amount of time you should look at each section of the audience is up to you and should be what feels best for you. For longer presentations, continually moving your gaze to different parts of your audience is important so that engagement is continually being displayed to everyone. On the other hand, focusing too long on one audience member or one section of the audience could identify them as the sole addressee(s) of the talk (Rendle-Short 2006). This could be treated as problematic as the presentation should be directed at all audience members and could consequently lessen engagement with the audience as a whole.

While gaze is expected, not gazing at the recipients can be marked behavior (Rossano 2012). This gaze aversion is a display of disengagement because it "treats someone who is physically present as in a certain sense not relevantly present, that is, not the subject of observation or a locus for joint, collaborative activity" (Goodwin 1981, 96). If the presenter is doing gaze aversion when gaze is relevant and expected, the audience could treat it as problematic. They could interpret the gaze aversion as that they are not the intended recipients of the talk, i.e., that they are not being treated as co-participants in this interaction by the presenter.

Not all instances of gaze aversion, however, are problematic. As gaze is context-sensitive, sustained gaze with the audience may not always be natural at times, as in conversation. This means that gaze aversion will not always be treated as marked behavior by the audience. For instance, during a presentation, the presenter may shift their gaze away from the audience to a slide, a prop, a whiteboard or something else that is relevant for the on-going talk to bring the audience's attention to that relevant item (Rendle-Short 2006). In talk, gaze aversion is also common when participants are having difficulties recalling words or phrases (e.g., Goodwin and Goodwin 1986, Hayashi 2003). Gaze is a resource that signals that the speaker may be inviting the co-participation of the recipient, so if a presenter is having such difficulties in remembering, gazing at the audience may signal that you require assistance from the audience (Rendle-Short 2006). Moreover, when in topic-closing environments, gaze aversion as well as other non-verbal interactional resources such as body orientation and hand gestures can display disengagement (Rendle-Short 2006). Again, the audience does not treat these instances of disengagement as problematic.

Lastly, how did my students respond to these questions? They were able to answer these questions, but it took some time (and prodding from me). Even then, it has taken time for them to realize how important being interactive is in a presentation, which can be evidenced by the epiphany that my student had that was mentioned in the Introduction. Naturally, a change in thinking and behavior takes time and other factors are at play, such as their confidence level and English proficiency level. During the first several classes, my students were very set in their "information-giving" mindset. Over time, by bringing their attention constantly to the interactive nature of presentation, I found that my students were able to not only to improve

how they deliver their presentations, but were able to dissect how their fellow students could also increase engagement with their audience through gaze and other interactional resources.

Gaze is a way for presenters to keep our recipients engaged in a presentation. It might seem obvious that gaze is important, but it is sometimes the most obvious things we forget about. Thus, in order to rid ourselves of the information-giving mindset, utilizing gaze is a must.

### 5. Conclusion

There is more to a presentation than what we say – it is also what we do. A presentation may seem very different to the conversations that we have in our everyday lives, but they in fact share interactional features. In particular, non-verbal interactional resources such as gaze are a way for the presenter to display engagement with the audience. I believe that getting students to adopt an interactive mindset for presentation is vital because the interactive aspect is the very key for us, as presenters, to engage with the audience and to get our message across to them. Just like that student who was mentioned in the Introduction, we can all shed ourselves of an information-giving mindset and move forward with an interactive mindset to have many wonderfully interactive and engaging presentations. So let's go forth and be the interactive presenter.

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