

Has technology left us speechless?

By Anne McDonagh

Recently one of my family members said to me, "It's like, I mean, well you know, it's kind of hard to explain." A colleague told me recently about a conversation between two salesclerks whose conversation he overheard while waiting to be served. It was peppered with 'you know,' 'uh,' 'um,' 'like,' 'I mean,' 'hopefully,' 'and stuff,' 'anyways,' 'kind of,' and 'sort of,' and each 'sentence' ended in a question mark. ("I mean it was kinda like you know?") The conversation was excruciatingly painful for him to hear especially as no clear thought emerged from their incomprehensible speech patterns. Any literate person who eavesdrops on the subway or listens to talk shows will recognize the poverty of thought and vocabulary, so prevalent in our society, revealed in these two examples.

How did our wonderful gift of speech become so debased? There are, no doubt, many culprits; however, one is the seductive allure of technology, which is often a convincing substitute for person-to-person conversation. Another is simply not appreciating the value of speaking well and thus not bothering to develop the skills needed to converse intelligently.

Language unique to human beings

Human beings are the only creatures on earth who use language. Some animals, of course, use signs and signals to communicate, but no other species comes close to the sophistication of human language. Although people from different parts of the world speak different languages, they all have language. So universal is this phenomenon that some scientists have proposed that there is an organ or an instinct for language in the human genetic makeup. Others suggest that we can't even think without language.

Why did human beings invent language? The obvious answer is that we needed to communicate. As primitives we needed to be able to warn each other about dangers and to tell each other where there was food and shelter and other necessities of primeval life. And we still use language to warn about danger and to tell each other about a good restaurant or a fabulous apartment. However, we also use language to convey much more complex ideas and not just orally but in books, newspapers, emails, on television, in poetry and so on.

Clearly we still want and need to communicate as much as we ever did; however, many of us don't know how to talk to each other, to converse,

one of the most basic of language skills. We have a good deal of difficulty stating our thoughts and feelings in face-to-face encounters. For many of us technology seems to make it less necessary for us to talk directly to each other, and there is the problem.

Enter technology

We Canadians love technology, with good reason. The 'global village,' was created by technology, and despite racial, ethnic and cultural differences, we feel more a part of the whole world than ever before. Computers have revolutionized our lives in many positive ways. Many mundane tasks can now be done far more quickly and efficiently. And the Internet is a wonderful creation, connecting people and ideas around the world and putting information at our fingertips that twenty years ago was inaccessible to most of us. Nevertheless, there are reasons for us to distrust what technology is doing to our ability to talk to each other.

The trouble with technology is that it eliminates many face-to-face encounters where we could practice the skill of conversation; like any other skill, it is not going to develop very much if we don't use it. We call information and telecommunications technology (ITT) the *communications* sector of the economy; however, computers, cell phones, blackberries, television, DVD players etc. often have little to do with real communication and hardly anything to do with conversation.

In fact, modern technology has come close to wrecking conversation. There was a time when people had none of these fixtures of our technological civilization. In the evening or when they weren't working, the primary entertainment was talking.

Starved for conversation?

There are tales of townspeople attending political gatherings where they demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the issues and kept the politician answering tough questions for several hours. You may say, 'How boring!' and perhaps it was. Is it any less boring for a person to sit watching television or in front of the computer in a vegetative state ingesting mindless schlock and using very little brain power?

In ordinary discourse, we seem to have sacrificed to the gods of technology, logical thinking, clear articulation, witty repartee and the satisfaction of connecting directly with another human being. Has it been

worth it? Is it perhaps too much to ask of ourselves that we develop our abilities in language in the midst of all the pointless rubbish that we have such easy access to? I hope not, but a lot of inroads have been made by the barbarians of popular culture.

Our critical faculties have been undermined by the mindless media that assault us on a daily basis with programming geared to the least able among us. Instead of developing and expressing our own ideas through the give and take of frequent and demanding, in person, conversations, we watch people on television or in movies having conversations or expressing opinions that often have no substance and little to do with us or our lives. Often we don't even notice whether the conversations make sense or have any validity.

We watch audiences laughing uproariously as stand-up comedians utter obscenities and tell filthy jokes. Whether we think the jokes are funny or not, whether we agree with the bland opinions of television hosts or not, we do not interact with any of these characters on television. We are let off the hook! We may feel a connection with what we see, but that feeling is bogus. We have not connected with anyone! Yet think about how much of our time we spend sitting in front of the television or the computer not having a conversation!

You may say that emailing and eMessaging create a kind of conversation. Barely! Email does not involve the give and take of conversation. Even with eMessaging, we have time to tailor our remarks if we wish to, before we send them back to our friends. Besides, by their very nature, these two technologies are made for the transmission of information on the run, not for choosing words carefully to formulate complex ideas or to develop and maintain important relationships.

Apart from having an adverse effect on ordinary conversations, electronic conversations present other negative consequences. Chat rooms and other interactive programs may seem to be about communication and developing friendships, but because we don't really get to know someone without seeing them, we have pseudo-conversations—not real conversations—and pseudo relationships. Furthermore, there are the dangers of trying to find romance on the Internet and the undermining of the soul through gambling online or looking at pornography sites.

The real problem with the Internet, though, is that, even at its best, surfing the net promotes isolation, not sociability. If we spend most of our

free time on the Net, when do we talk to our family? When do we go out with friends? When do we have conversations about the world around us?

Conversation is a kind of currency we use to smooth our way through life. It is hard to imagine what our lives would be like without the ability to converse—even though these days we are not paying enough attention to developing our conversational skills.

In our next issue we will continue with this topic and discuss the different kinds of conversations and the skills needed to be a good conversationalist.

April 2006