

# **Prolonged Conversational Pauses...**

...and what may cause them

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## Data

This video is a recording of three young women, Abbie, Maureen and Terry playing Pictionary and Pam, an older woman related to Terry is talking on the phone in the kitchen, she interacts with the three players a few times during the game. Terry knew both Abbie and Maureen before the video recording but it is unclear if Abbie already knew Maureen because at one point Maureen asks Abbie how she met Terry.

Maureen is sitting perpendicular to Abbie and Terry who sits on the same side of the table significantly diminishing their eye contact and requiring that Abbie turn to both sides in order to see both players. All the participants have drinks.



This video data is named Game\_Night.mov and was distributed by Prof. Saul Albert and downloaded from Tufts University's database.

The three clips I've selected from this video are moments in which the three players sit in silence for more than the average pause. I'm specifically interested in finding actions that might trigger the participant's silence as well as the actions that break it

### CLIP 1 (01:15)

In this clip Terry is describing a relative who according to their conversation achieved artistic recognition at the age of 10. Terry, Maureen and Abbie acknowledge the relative's achievement. Maureen is the last one to comment on the relative's achievement. The three sit silently, Terry looking directly at Maureen. Maureen then breaks the silence asking Terry the name of the relative.

#### Transcription:

- 1 Terry artistic little <guy>.
- 2 Maureen I-should <say soo>.
- 3 ((Terry nods silently twice))
- 4 (1.0)
- 5 Maureen Is that his name, (0.3) jonny (whiland)?
- 6 Terry >yep<
- 7 (1.0)
- 8 Abbie A[H
- 9 Terry W[e had him, (0.5) this summer,

In this clip the three are having a conversation about someone else and at one point they all share a mutual agreement on the subject. After the agreement there is a small notice pause on the conversation before the next comment that comes in the form of a question about the previous subject.

### CLIP 2 (02:06)

Terry, still talking about her relative tells a funny story about the time he sent her a thank you card conveniently before Christmas (**speculative context:** The joke infers Terry's relative did send the card expecting to remind her to buy him a present). All participants laugh at the same time, then they breathe and return to talk about Terry's relative still simultaneously. Once the three are done talking over each other they pause in silence for five seconds. During the silence none of the three maintain eye contact, Terry yawns then scratches her cheeks, Abbie takes a sip of her clear drink and Maureen itches her eyes. This time the one who breaks the silence is Pam who walks from another room and tells the participants she'll be there shortly.

#### Transcription:

- 1 Terry He was cute yo >send me a thankyou card< before christmas,[ h ha ha
- 2 Maureen [yea h h h
- 3 Abby [hahaha
- 4 Terry [it's true]
- 5 Maureen [strategic]
- 6 Terry we saw right through >hm<=
- 7 Maureen =he is (not)[ ha ha ha ha ah ah h.
- 8 Abby [(how cute.)]
- 9 Terry [ugh]
- 10 Abby [owwn] [At least (he sang in) list
- 11 Maureen [No sense in ending in August.=
- 13 Terry =That's right.=
- 14 Abby =Yea
- 15 (5.0)
- 16 Terry ((scratches her forehead)
- 17 Pam I'll be there very shortly.

This clip shows people talking about the same subject, and then all members of the conversation laugh together and add to the comment or a joke at the same time. When all participants are done laughing and commenting they break silence with no eye contact and display distinct body activities before the silence is broken with an affirmation by someone outside the conversation.

### CLIP 3 (03:10)

The three women return to the game after being distracted by the conversation about Terry's relative. Maureen makes a comment about the game's quick progression and Terry makes a funny comment on a high pitch voice (**speculative context:** The participants acknowledge their understanding of Terry's reference with their laughs). They all laugh simultaneously, Abbie adds to the joke by making another comment in

a high pitch voice and when the laughs stop the three return to silence. In silence none of them make eye contact, Terry gesture as if taking a big gulp of her drink then taps the empty sounding can on the table, Abbie readjusts her pose and rests her arms on the table and Maureen picks up a pen and a notepad, according to previous dialogue she is supposed to draw now. Maureen then looks at Terry and breaks the silence by commenting on the people mentioned on Terry's joke.

### Transcription:

1 Terry	Can y <u>OU</u> ? say. (.) sta <u>↑</u> <u>CY</u> ? [Gh ha ha ha ha ha
2 Maureen	[Ha ah ha h a ha ha ha ha
3 Abbie	[ha ha ha ha=
4	=h. I say we keep her h
5 Maureen	°that was a good one°
6 Maureen	God (lee)
7	((Terry leans back and takes a final sip of her canned drink))
8	(1.0)
9 Abbie	o::Oo.
10 Maureen	>what a <u>team</u> < () stacy, abbie,

This clip shows people talking about the same subject, then someone makes a joke, which references someone outside the conversation, all participants laugh simultaneously for an extended period of time. After all participants are done laughing and adding to the joke they break into silence with no eye contact and display distinct body activities. The silence is broken by a comment that adds to the previous joke.

## Discussion

The three clips above describe a form of prolonged pause during a conversation. Although the three clips display different actions before, during and after the pause they share a few similar events.

- 1) Some sort of agreement or overlapping conversation
- 2) Verbal silence
- 3) Return to conversation

In the cases where the silence is held longer (Clip 2 and 3) the pause is preceded by simultaneous conversation. I speculate the fact all members of the conversation were talking rather than listening none were prepared to answer or move the conversation with a next beat until they had time to think either about each other's comments, a different question or an unrelated comment.

Another factor that I speculate might have influenced on their prolonged silence on clips 2 and 3 is their lack of eye contact during the pause. Perhaps the lack of eye contact is a consequence of having to think of something to say and signifying to the group they aren't ready to talk yet.

A more logical theory to why in all three clips the members of a conversation break into silence after some sort of agreement is because if everyone agrees on

something and is aware that everyone else agrees on it communication may be necessary making it harder to maintain.

If people disagree they may take less time to think of an answer the awareness of a disagreement is on itself works as an argument or at least helps the speaker formulate an opposing argument.

If someone is asking a question it may also be easier to add to the conversation because a question usually outlines what the other person has to think in order to compose an answer by limiting the possibilities for the next conversational beat and perhaps diminishing the probability of breaking into silence.

## **Conclusion**

The three clips from game night outline a pattern of people in agreement and people in silence. I theorize that the cause of these conversational pauses are related to the speakers being unprepared to think of the next beat of conversation. That is due to the nature of the beat before the silence or the fact all members had an expectation someone else would add to the conversation.