

282 *Why We Talk*

much more our freedom in conversation and that is the constraint of relevance. At every juncture, there are things that can be said and other things that cannot be said. Even though there is a great range of relevant utterances that would be possible at any particular moment, they are negligible when compared with the huge number of imaginable utterances. How do speakers contrive almost instantaneously to find relevant words and to assess the relevance of words spoken to them?

As a parameter of conversation, relevance is an omnipresent and necessary condition. If we take an extreme case, anyone whose utterances are consistently non-relevant is soon dismissed as mentally ill. When we take our turn to speak, we very likely have several different objectives, of which we are more or less aware: making a social contact, passing the time of day, enjoying speaking, answering a question, trying to be seen at our best, etc. But one of the foremost of these aims is the wish to say something relevant: we would like to think that the interest of our hearers will be aroused; and at the very least, we hope to be seen as somebody who is sensible and a good conversationalist. In most situations we would not say something like *I have a female cousin whose girl friend owns a bike*, even if it is true. I sometimes make students do a simple experiment that consists of saying something irrelevant when among friends or in their family circle, so as to observe the way hearers react. Here are two examples:

Context: experiment, with a green rubbish bin close by:

C1 The bin's green.

D1 What are you on about?

Context: experiment, with the family:

E1 The table's made of wood.

F1 Hey, being a student isn't your strong point.

The reactions of hearers are remarkable by their consistency, as anyone who tries the experiment will find out. D1 is not justified semantically. The speaker was perfectly aware that C had spoken about the nearby rubbish bin and had referred to a property relating to the colour of it. What D did not understand was the reason why C made the comment. In the second experiment, F decides that E1 is not relevant and replies with sarcasm.

These experiments, which are very easy to reproduce, show that the first speaker, the one who introduces a new subject into the conversation, is subject to certain constraints. The intuitive requirement is that what is said must be of interest. Our problem is to find a way to define this requirement.