



The Theory of Dialogue

By

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Fiction, as we learned earlier in this series, is about conflict. It is the conflict human beings have with other human beings, with nature, or with themselves. Even if the characters who inhabit a piece of fiction aren't human in the strictest sense of the word – they can be mobile marine mines seeking an enemy ship to attack, or rattlesnakes living life as rattlesnakes do – they must still have human qualities. For without human qualities, they won't evoke sympathy from the readers. And it is this sympathy that causes readers to care about your characters. Sympathetic identification by the readers for the characters is what it is that makes your story effective.

This is a very important point for a writer to grasp. Your characters *must* be sympathetic, even if one of them is named Adolf Hitler. One of the things that made Herman Wouk's *The Winds of War* so effective was that Wouk (who is Jewish) did not telegraph his distaste for Hitler early in the book. In the scenes leading up to the onset of war on September 1, 1939, Wouk views Hitler as anyone would have in the 1930s, namely as an ambitious German politician with an unsavory reputation. Only later do we see him as the monster he really was. In a way we pity him at the same time we loath him, and that pity turns him from a cardboard cutout into a real, living, breathing human being. From our empathy flows a hatred stronger than any Wouk would have evoked had he written Hitler as a one dimensional villain.

Remember, if the readers can't identify with your characters, be they white knight or vile villain, then they won't care what happens to them. And the moment your readers stop caring about your story, you have failed as a writer.

In most stories inhabited by human beings (including ersatz human beings), you eventually come to the point in the plot where someone has to say something to somebody else. When this happens, the writer faces one of the most daunting tasks of his craft. He must write *dialogue*!

"Dialogue?" you ask. "What's that?"

Dialogue is the part of the text where a person's spoken words and various punctuation marks are preceded and succeeded by those funny double characters known as quotation marks (the things that look like double apostrophes). The preceding paragraph ("*Dialogue?*" you ask. "*What's that?*") is an example of dialogue. It is, to put it simply, an agreed upon convention for recording spoken words on the written page.

Except that dialogue is not just speech written down on paper. It is much more than that ... and much less. The next time you are sitting in a restaurant or riding public

transportation, listen to the people talking around you. Don't listen to *what* they are saying, but *how* they are saying it. If you listen carefully, you will note that their speech is peppered with all manner of pauses, extraneous noises, incomplete thoughts, and sentence fragments that seem to have little to do with the topic. In fact, my wife often communicates entirely in sentence fragments, expecting me to understand what it is she has said. Luckily, through long training, I have become adept at deciphering incomplete sentences.

If you write down *exactly* what people say in conversation, you will have written a mess. Anyone who has ever read the transcript of a trial understands my point. A transcript *is* a verbatim recording in print of what was said at the trial. Often, when one reads a transcript, the first question that comes to mind is whether or not the speaker was truly awake at the time.

For those of you who are old enough and who resided in the United States in the early 1970s, you may remember the trouble Richard Nixon got himself into when he decided to have a look at his opponents' private records late one night just before the 1972 election. One thing that struck me about the ensuing Watergate flap was the effective use Nixon's opponents made of the transcripts from his private tapes. It seems to me that the written record of his conversations in the oval office made him sound much more sinister than the actual words on tape would have. And who can forget the impact of peppering the transcripts with "(expletive deleted)" throughout? Those two words allowed people's imaginations run wild, and in so doing, had far greater impact than an occasional "damn" or "hell" would have had.

One of the reasons why a literal transcription of human speech leaves the reader cold is that speech communicates on a far deeper level than merely the information imparted by the words. When you listen to someone speak, you also take into account his or her tone of voice and inflection. You see their expression and can interpret their mood from how they hold their body. There is the context of the situation to be judged, something that hardly ever comes through on paper. And, of course, there is the fact that we speak much more quickly than we read, meaning that the sheer volume of information being processed is greater.

However, I believe the reason why transcribed speech is so difficult to read lies deeper than all of these factors. The dichotomy between written speech and spoken speech is, in fact, physiological. We don't read the same way that we hear because of the way in which our brains process information.

Although I am getting grayer with each passing year, I am (genetically speaking) a member of the smallest minority on the face of the planet. I am a redhead. So is my wife, and since the gene for red hair is recessive, so are all of our children. (My wife and I tell everyone that we are trying to start our own race.)

People with red hair have a common desire when they are growing up. We would all like to be brunettes. That is because of the teasing we get from the other children in school, where any difference is a source of entertainment by those who find themselves in the majority. A few years ago, when she was fourteen and just beginning summer vacation, my daughter decided to do something about the problem. She and her friends dyed her hair black ... at night ... in the public park. Needless to say, it wasn't the

greatest dye job the world has ever seen, and over the months of summer vacation, her ever-lengthening red roots did nothing to enhance the look.

So, on the day before she was to start high school, we took her to a beauty parlor and told them to turn her hair back to its natural color. The whole process took six hours! My wife and I entertained ourselves by reading the old magazines in the beauty shop waiting area while getting high on the fumes. It was in one of those magazines that I found an article that explains the underlying reason why dialogue cannot be written as transcribed speech.

The article was the cover story for the July 17, 1995, issue of *Time Magazine*, and dealt with recent findings in studies of the human brain. The brain, it turns out, is much more complicated than even the brain researchers initially believed. For instance, people whose brains have been injured develop odd disabilities. One woman couldn't read nouns! Verbs and adverbs were fine, but nouns were beyond her. Other people with brain damage speak perfectly, but cannot understand language at all; and *vice versa*.

Studies of healthy brains have also revealed a great deal about the way we think. People who are bilingual use different neurons when speaking one language than when speaking the other. Also, a different part of the brain is at work when we say a word out loud than when we hear that same word spoken.

What this proves is that when the human brain receives information in the form of aural speech, it runs that information through a filter that parses the sentences into their component words and *sends each of those words to a different location in the brain, depending on their function!* Nouns appear to be centered in the temporal lobe of the brain's left hemisphere, while the frontal cortex handles verb activity. A different location seems to be used for assembling nouns and verbs into sentences. Our ability to decipher words that we hear appears to be distributed through various sites within that 50-watt electronic computer in our heads. (What I find fascinating about all of this is that while most people don't know the difference between a noun and a verb, their brains have no trouble making the distinction!)

Nor are these findings limited to spoken language. When you read a word, a different part of the brain handles the information processing than when you say that word out loud. Does it not follow then, that the locations where spoken speech is processed are different than the places where our brains decipher the black smudges on paper that we call writing? Of course it does.

Remember, virtually all human beings learn to speak instinctively, but everyone must go through an arduous process to learn to read. This has long argued that hearing and reading are independent skills that use different pathways in the brain to obtain the same information. Modern science has merely provided the experimental evidence to prove what all writers have long known instinctively, which is that written speech is not the same as the spoken variety!

When you realize that different areas in the brain process spoken and written speech, it becomes obvious (to me, at least) why dialogue cannot merely be a record of the exact words that were spoken. Speech received through the ears seems to go through some sort of gibberish filter. The function of this filter is to remove all extraneous sounds and to place into sensible order all of the disjointed sentence fragments that are

common to human speech. This is why we can listen to a single conversation in a crowded room while tuning out the dozen unrelated conversations swirling around us.

Our eyes, which are attached to a different portion of the brain than our ears, seem to bypass this gibberish filter. This is probably good from an evolutionary standpoint. Since vision is our primary sense, we wouldn't want our brains filtering out sights that it concluded were not significant – say the sight of a lion charging at us through the underbrush. Unfortunately, this means that when our eyes scan text and find gibberish, our brains attempt to process that gibberish as part of the whole. Instead of ignoring all of the *ah's*, *er's* and *hmmm's* the way our ears do, our eyes attempt to process everything. The result is a splitting headache if you keep at it for long enough.

So if written speech is processed by a different part of the brain than spoken speech, how must written speech be different to make it intelligible? Simply put, written speech must be a more orderly, less wide-ranging version of the spoken word. For this reason, you can think of dialogue as distilled speech in which all the extraneous noises and disjointed thoughts have been removed. It is the essence of what is being said, not the verbatim recording.

True, you can include an occasional “Uh” or “Hmmm” to give dialogue flavor, or if quoting a California valley girl, can say “Like, wow, you know...” a few times for local atmosphere, but that's about it. To write dialogue you must

A Digression: Gender and Brains

Although it is not popular to say so, brain researchers are beginning to understand the difference between the way men and women think. Women, it turns out, have a much greater degree of communication between the two hemispheres of their brains than do men. The reason for this appears to be the different roles the two sexes have played throughout human evolutionary history. Since before our ancestors could speak, men have hunted animals and women have gathered food while simultaneously caring for the children. This dichotomy of task has caused the evolutionary pressures on the two sexes to be different. The result is that women have general purpose brains, agile at communication and socialization. Men seem to have single purpose brains (and no, it isn't *that* purpose I'm talking about!). The male brain is optimized for doing parabolic trajectory analyses in real time, giving males an inherent advantage in visualizing spatial relationships. After all, you aren't much of a hunter if you can't predict where the spear or arrow is going to land!

Note: In any discussion of one of the "forbidden subjects" of our age, it is important to point out that generalizations such as these are statistical in nature. The best "visualizers" among women are much better than the average male at visualizing in three dimensions; while the best communicators among men are much better than the average female at communicating. However, since there are entire schools of comedy built around the fact that men and women tend to look at life differently, it seems silly not to study such an obvious fact.

extract the thoughts imbedded in the speech, distill them like a good whiskey, rearrange them for clarity, and then write them down on paper in a form that will convey to the reader the *essence* of what was said, not the detail. This, of course, is what makes writing dialogue so difficult.

Which brings up an interesting question for writers. If writing dialogue is so difficult, why do it at all? The answer to this question is simple. You write dialogue because it is the writing form with the greatest impact on the reader. You do it to make your stories strong.

To make sure that everyone is with us at this point, let's define a couple of terms. The two ways to write fiction are *narration* and *dialogue*. In narration, the writer tells the story, usually as the invisible storyteller. Narration is always about events that have taken place some time in the past. Dialogue, on the other hand, is the record of someone speaking. And since we are used to hearing words in real time, when we encounter the written record of those words, we absorb them as though they were actually being said in our presence. The reader treats dialogue, then, as taking place at the moment of reading. It is immediate rather than delayed, and as such, has a far greater impact on the reader than does narration.

This is an extremely important point, so let us dwell on it a bit. When you narrate the story, you are always speaking as the author. You say things like:

He walked across the dark moor, listening for the howl of the hound that he knew to be out there. He clenched his over-under shotgun more tightly against his sweating palms, and strained to hear every cricket chirp and soft sigh of the wind, the better to listen for the panting breath of the big, ferocious dog...

Note the verbs in that passage. "He *walked*," "He *clenched*," "He *strained* to hear." All of them are in the past tense. It is as though I, the author, am recounting events long past, events that cannot be undone. It is as though the reader is watching a tape of the 1990 Super Bowl football game. He may find the action interesting, but some of the excitement is taken out of the game. What was, will be – "Mene mene, tekel upharsin!" — the hand, once having writ, moves on!

Why should we care about the fate of that stranger on the moor? Either the hound got him or it didn't, and whichever the case, there isn't much we can do about it. We'll be sad if the traveler gets his throat ripped out in the next paragraph, but no sadder than we are for the passengers who went down with the *Titanic*. After all, it was a great tragedy, but none of our business. Barring the invention of a time machine, there is nothing we can do to affect either event.

Dialogue is different than narration. When a character speaks, it is *now*, this very second! We aren't listening to a story of some long ago time whose people were dead and dust before we were born. We are observing the story with our own two eyes and listening with our own two ears. There isn't even a nanosecond's delay between the utterance of the words by the characters and our hearing them. Assuming the author has done his or her job well, dialogue transports us from our comfortable armchair to the cold of an English moor at night, and we, too, feel the cold, clammy rivulet of fear-induced sweat trickling down between our shoulder blades.

So if dialogue is an immediate way to tell a story, if it has that powerful an impact on the readers, why don't we tell the entire story in dialogue?

Some people do ... sort of. It's called first person narration, and is basically a modified form of dialogue. You've all read stories that were written in the first person. Don't they have a spontaneity and a reality that third person narrative lacks? Consider our example in first person:

I walked across the dark moor, listening for the howl of the hound that I knew to be out there. I could feel the sweat on my palms as I clenched my over-under shotgun more tightly while I strained to hear every cricket chirp and soft sigh of the wind, the better to listen for the panting breath of the big, ferocious dog...

First person narrative is basically the author, who is also the main character, telling his or her personal story to the reader. Yet, if you note the verbs, you will see that they are still in the past tense. It's as though the author has returned to his London gentlemen's club, has his feet up, and is regaling his cigar-smoking cronies with the tale of his adventure. One thing is certain in this form – he didn't get his throat ripped out. Unless, of course, this is a horror story, in which case, you can never tell.

To truly be dialogue, a first person narrative should be written in the present tense (“I walk across the dark moor...”, “I feel the sweat on my palms as I clench my over-under shotgun more tightly while I strain to hear ...”) However, present tense narration is a form that most readers find irritating if it goes on long enough. This, of course, is why writers use present tense narration sparingly, and stick mostly to first person narration in the past tense.

Why not write a story in true dialogue, with one character talking and another character asking questions? This was very popular in the nineteenth century when readers were less sophisticated than they are today. (At least, we would like to think that we are more sophisticated than they were. After all, we have had the dubious benefits of watching 10,000 hours of television growing up.) During the Victorian Age, it was very popular to have a narrator character tell the story essentially as one long piece of narrative dialogue. This story structure is known as a “frame,” as in picture frame. Basically, a small story frames the larger tale, which is narrated by the character that had the adventure, or at least, observed it. Rudyard Kipling was very fond of the frame story, as were most of the writers of his time. Those of you who have seen the movie *The Man Who Would Be King* with Sean Connery and Michael Caine will know what I am talking about.

So what's wrong with the frame story? It's dialogue, isn't it? After a fashion. Mostly, however, it is monologue, a single character going on for page after page about what happened when he was on the great adventure. Funny thing. Readers are less tolerant of monologues than they are of author narratives, which is why the frame story has fallen into disuse, except when being used for special effect. For instance, if you are trying to write a Jules Verne or H. G. Wells-style story, then the atmosphere is enhanced if you use archaic language and an archaic literary form. You also use a frame if you are writing modern day Sherlock Holmes stories. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle used the journals of Dr. John Watson as a frame in order to keep the reader out of the brain of Sherlock

Holmes. It wouldn't be much of a mystery if we could all watch the great man think, now would it?

The one thing we learn from the frame story is that dialogue that goes on too long begins to sound a great deal like narration, but with a more complex form and more punctuation cluttering up the page. So why write your narration in a more complex format when you can more easily write it as narration in the first place?

Still, the thing that keeps readers' interest is variety. So one of the writer's most important decisions is whether he or she is going to write a scene as narration or as dialogue. Not that scenes don't contain both, of course. A narrative scene is likely to have dialogue sprinkled throughout its body, while a dialogue scene must be broken up with paragraphs of narration. Try relating conversations entirely in the third person and you will have the readers yawning in no time. Attempt to write an entire book with dialogue, and the readers will soon lose track of who is talking. Don't believe me? Try your hand at the following scene in which two couples are discussing politics over dinner. The couples are John and Mary Smith, and Sam and Louise Martin.

"Good of you to invite us to dinner," Mary told Sam.

"My pleasure. It's been too long."

"How about it, Honey? Aren't you glad the Martins could join us?"

"Damned glad."

"Me, too. It gives us a chance to argue politics."

"You would say that," his wife snorted. "Can't we have a quiet night for a change without politics."

"Hell no. It's about time I taught this heretic a thing or two."

"You and what army?"

"I agree with my friend. You men are too partisan. It's a wonder you still talk to each other."

"Pshaw! What are friends for if you can't argue with them from time to time?"

Now, after reading that exchange can you identify who is speaking each time? If you can, you're a better reader than I am. True, I cheated a bit by removing some of the usual identification tags from the speeches, but that was just to drive home the point that dialogue is inherently complex. The reader must keep careful track of who is speaking at all times, and if they ever lose track, the entire story becomes gibberish. Remember that your eyes aren't connected to the gibberish filter in your head the same way that your ears are. We become easily confused when verbal information comes to us through our sense of vision.

I first became aware of this problem when I began writing on a computer. Those of you who use a computer word-processing program (and if you are going to be a writer, you'd better start!) will recognize the problem. Sometimes while writing dialogue you omit the hard return at the end of the paragraph because the computer has chosen that point to wrap the line automatically. You then go on to write another character's speech, not realizing that there is no hard return between the two speeches. Because the computer wrapped the line where you would normally have done so, your dialogue looks completely normal on the screen.

Then, just before printing, you reformat your manuscript to make it pretty. As part of the reformatting process, you change the margins. At this point, the computer reformats all of the lines. The lines without hard returns are put together, and you have a case of run-on dialogue. One character's speech ends up on the same line as another character's and the visual clue to a transition in speakers (the new line with indent) is suddenly gone.

When this happens it is very easy to lose track of who is speaking. Suddenly, each line of dialogue is coming out of the mouth of the character being spoken to, not the one speaking. For the next half page you think the female character is spouting the male character's lines and vice versa. This goes on until you realize that either the hero is effeminate, or else the dialogue tracker in your head has jumped the track. At this point you have to go back to find the place where you lost track, and then slowly read forward to figure out who is talking.

Nor does it take a computer formatting screw-up to cause the reader to lose track of the speaker. Going too long in dialogue without the proper identifying tags will have the same effect. That is why you put all of those *he said's* and *she said's* into dialogue. They give the reader frequent clues as to who it is that is speaking, making it harder for the readers to get lost. Of course, inserting identity markers into dialogue can be overdone, thereby making your writing monotonous. To prevent boredom, you must vary the techniques used to orient the reader during dialogue.

Why not take your spouse or loved one out to a crowded restaurant and eavesdrop on the people around you? Not only will it sensitize you to the difference between written and spoken speech; it will give you a chance to study how people speak. An author can never get enough practice at studying speech patterns. They are, after all, one of the more important tools of our trade.

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The End

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After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$4.50

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$4.50

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

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Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

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The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.