Lend Me Your Ears

PROFESSOR MAX ATKINSON

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About the Book

Whether the best man at a wedding or a presenter at a business meeting, speaking in public can be a very nerve-wracking experience.

With his groundbreaking and refreshing approach, which combines the latest empirical research with the rules of classical rhetoric, Professor Max Atkinson highlights the secrets of successful persuasion, and provides readers with a host of techniques to help win the attention and approval of their audience and avoid some of the most common pitfalls.

This new and provocative way of looking at presentation and speech-making includes practical and simple guidelines on:

- inspiring your audience
- getting your message across and winning applause
- the truth about body language
- maximising the potential of PowerPoint

An original, easy and definitive approach to the art of public speaking and presentation for any occasion – business or pleasure.

About the Author

Max Atkinson is a Visiting Professor at the Henley Management College, and runs a consultancy specialising in public speaking and presentation skills. In 1985, he ran a seminar on speech writing in the Reagan White House and, from 1987 to 1999, was a close advisor to Paddy Ashdown, former leader of the Liberal Democrats. See Max Atkinson's website – **www.speaking.co.uk** – for further information.

By the same author

Discovering Suicide: Studies in the Social Organisation of Sudden Death. London: The Macmillan Press, 1978.

Order in Court: The Organisation of Verbal Interaction in Judicial Settings (with Paul Drew). London: The Macmillan Press, 1979.

Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis (edited with John Heritage). Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Our Masters' Voices: The Language and Body Language of Politics. London: Methuen, 1984 (reprinted by Routledge, 1988 onwards).

‘For all those who are serious about the art of making speeches, Max Atkinson’s previous book, *Our Masters’ Voices,* was a bible. There was scarcely a single major speech in my eleven years as leader of the Liberal Democrats that I made without benefiting either from it or from his personal advice and help. *Lend Me Your Ears* includes many new insights into the art of effective speaking, and will be invaluable to all those interested in making words count and using verbal communication to influence people.’

Paddy Ashdown
Leader of the Liberal Democrats, 1988–99

‘As a speechwriter for Ronald Reagan, I relied for rhetorical direction on the great speakers from Demosthenes to Churchill, on the great guides from Aristotle to the President himself, and on Max Atkinson. No one surpasses Atkinson in the rigor and clarity with which he spells out how to move audiences to applause, get quoted in the media and become known as the most brilliant presence on any podium.’

Clark Judge
Managing Director, White House Writers Group

‘Over the last 30 years I have spoken in 28 countries, launching cars, opening buildings and guest speaking at conferences. Throughout I have read any book on oratory that I can lay my hands on and Max Atkinson’s *Lend Me Your Ears* is by far the best. I had planned, in my retirement, to write the perfect book on public speaking. I will now have to find something else to do!’

Peter Hancock
Managing Director, Peter Hancock International, Ltd.

LEND ME YOUR EARS

All you need to know about making
speeches and presentations

Professor Max Atkinson

Vermilion
LONDON

For Joey

Preface

When academic research delivers findings that attract interest beyond a narrow field of specialisation, it is an added bonus for the author. If the results turn out to have practical applications that directly benefit other people, it's an even bigger bonus. So I count myself fortunate that my previous book[*1] apparently hit the mark on both these counts. The analysis of political speeches on which it was based was originally motivated by a purely technical interest in the workings of speaker-audience interaction, and its practical potential only started to become apparent after publication. In the original preface, I had written:

> The question of how far this study could be exploited in training politicians to become more effective speakers is one to which no definite answer can be given at present: as far as I know, it has not yet been tried.

Twenty years on, it has been tried and tested on countless occasions, not only in the training of politicians, but also in coaching business presenters and speakers from almost every possible industry and walk of life.

The approach was first put to the test in full view of a mass television audience, an opportunity for which I have to thank former editor of Granada Television's *World in Action* series, Gus Macdonald (now Lord Macdonald of Tradeston). It was his idea to make a programme in which I was challenged to coach a novice to make a speech at the SDP Conference in 1984. Armed with a script, bristling with all the most powerful rhetorical devices that trigger applause in speeches (see Chapters 6–7), Ann Brennan became the only non-platform speaker at that year's conference to win a

standing ovation, and some previously unpublished background to this is included in Chapter 8. Her success was to change my life. The day after the programme was transmitted, I was inundated with phone calls from people asking if I could do the same for them. After completing only one experiment, I suppose I should have told them that I really did not know. But my interest had been aroused enough to want to find out whether the techniques would work for other people making other kinds of speeches in other situations.

Without realising it at the time, I had embarked on an irreversible metamorphosis from Oxford researcher to freelance training consultant. I found myself working for more and more companies, running courses, writing speeches, coaching individuals and advising on special events like stock market flotations, reports to shareholder meetings, new product launches and pitches for new business.

These experiences did more than merely confirm that the approach first tried in the televised experiment could be adapted to work just as well for other speakers, regardless of subject matter, audience or particular aims of the speaker. By giving me the chance to observe different types of presentation, they also enabled me to extend my studies and to test out the results in practice in a wide variety of settings. Even more important than watching so many speakers in action has been the experience of listening to thousands of them discussing video recordings of their own and each other’s performances. This has provided a rich source of data about what members of audiences actually like and dislike about different styles of speaking, steadily adding new material that has been fed back and incorporated into training programmes over the years.

According to many who have attended these courses, the approach differs from others on the market in a number of ways. Delegates seem to appreciate the fact that the

practical advice is grounded in empirical research, rather than one person's subjective opinions about what constitutes good or bad practice. The emphasis on rhetoric and how to make more effective use of language is also often mentioned as something that is not widely taught elsewhere. The focus on understanding and responding to audience needs seems to strike chords with people's own experience of having been on the receiving end of so many uninspiring speeches, lectures and presentations, and helps to build their confidence in trying to do things differently.

On the practical front, the main finding to report is that the more a speaker uses the approach and techniques described here, the better their impact on audiences and the more their confidence improves. So anyone who masters all the principles will be equipped with, in the words of the subtitle of the book, 'all you need to know about making speeches and presentations'. This is, of course, not the same as 'everything anyone could ever possibly know' about the subject, which is unlikely to be available in my lifetime, if ever. The crucial words are 'all you *need* to know', which is intended to make the point that any speech or presentation composed and delivered in accordance with the principles outlined in the following pages is more or less guaranteed to go down well with an audience. The primary purpose of the book is therefore to encapsulate as much as possible of what I have learnt about the impact of speeches on audiences, and to make it available for anyone to use for themselves.

More people than it's possible to mention have played a part in this journey of discovery. Without the pioneering research into conversation by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson*2 at the University of California, I would never have thought of studying talk in the first place. My original research into political speeches benefited greatly from being replicated and developed in a major statistical follow-up study by John Heritage and David

Greatbatch.*3 I owe a great debt to Paddy Ashdown for being a model pupil and giving me the chance to test the principles out on the national political stage for more than a decade. I am also grateful for his permission to use background material on work we did together to illustrate some of the points in Chapter 8.

Teaching presentation skills on various executive and MBA programmes at the Henley Management College continues to give me access to business speakers from a very wide range of companies, organisations and nationalities. For this and the chance to work with and learn from the late David Ellis-Jones, I shall always be grateful to Professor Keith Macmillan, also sadly no longer with us. David Woodward joined me as a co-tutor for a few years, and did a good job in educating me about the virtues and vices of computers. More recently, courses run both at Henley and by Atkinson Communications have benefited greatly from the arrival of Anne Danks, whose many helpful comments on earlier drafts of this book have been greatly appreciated.

The people from whom I have learnt most are the countless pupils whose contributions to workshops have been a continuing source of insight into the minds of audiences. But the greatest support and encouragement in writing this book, as in everything else in my life, has come from my family – Simon, Anne, Holly, Isobel, Joe, James, Edward, William and Bridget – and especially from my wife Joey, who insisted that it be written, and without whom it would not have been.

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February 2004

Introduction

Audiences Are Always Right

Lecturing has been defined as ‘the transmission of the lecturer’s notes to the students’ notebooks, passing through the minds of neither’. It would be nice to think that this is just a witty quote, far removed from any reality that members of an audience ever have to experience. But there was a history teacher at my school who followed the definition more or less to the letter. For him, teaching meant dictating notes, complete with headings, subheadings and sub-subheadings, from a thick hard-backed notebook. The job of those of us on the receiving end was to copy out his dictation into identical hard-backed notebooks. There was a good reason why our notebooks were exactly the same as his, because years of dictation took their toll on his master copy. So, every two or three years, when our books were full and the exams were over, he would tour the classroom to find out which one of us had the neatest handwriting. The winner’s reward was to have his pristine notebook exchanged for the teacher’s dog-eared copy, so that the dictation could continue, uninterrupted by torn pages or fading ink, for the benefit of later generations of victims. The teacher’s nickname, not surprisingly, was ‘Dry Jack’.

Later on, at university, we had a philosophy lecturer whose discourses on Plato and Aristotle were punctuated by a minimum of four cigarettes per hour. And there was the economics professor, for whom lecturing was such a chore that he would lean on a radiator doing *The Times* crossword, while droning on about the supply and demand for oranges.

It would be unfair and inaccurate to say that a flagrant disregard for the needs of audiences is only to be found in

the world of academia, where there are, of course, some highly accomplished communicators. In fact, there can be few people who have never had to sit through wedding speeches that convey more bad taste than good cheer, or eulogies at funerals that demonstrate little more than the speaker's total ignorance about the life and character of the deceased. Countless times a day, audiences the world over are being subjected to speeches, presentations, sermons, briefings and lectures that are inaudible, incomprehensible or uninspiring. And, when it comes to inflicting maximum pain on listeners, there are few styles of speaking more stultifying than the modern slide-driven presentation. I deal with this in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, but the following preview highlights some of the general problems audiences are up against, and the central premise of this book, namely that the key to effective speaking is an objective understanding of the needs of your listeners.

1. Death from 1,000 slides: the Industry standard model of presentation

The past few decades have seen the emergence of an industry standard model of presentation, currently in a stage of transition as overhead slides give way to the projection of computerised graphics driven by programs like PowerPoint®.*1 In the earlier form of this ritual, speakers would stand next to an overhead projector, putting on one slide after another. Some presenters would position themselves between a section of the audience and the screen, depriving them of access to the gems of wisdom emanating from the screen. All too often, the commonly heard line 'I'm going to talk to some slides' meant exactly that, with speakers spending more time looking back at their slides than at the audience. Many seemed to have little or no idea what to say next until another slide was safely in place, not that getting slides in place was always a simple or straightforward matter. Frequently it involved a frantic

shuffling through piles of acetates, as slides fell to the floor or floated gently across the illuminated area of the overhead projector on the cushion of warm air generated by the bulb below. Few speakers bothered to remove the backing paper from the acetates in advance, so yet another source of irritation became institutionalised as part of the ritual: every slide change would be prefaced by the sight and sound of paper and acetate being ripped apart – the dread signal of yet another awful slide to come.

> All too often, the commonly heard line ‘I’m going to talk to some slides’ means exactly that, with speakers spending more time looking back at their slides than at the audience.

The audience’s agony of having to endure regular 10-to 15-second gaps between slides would sometimes be aggravated further by speakers who insisted on repeatedly turning the projector off and on as part of the slide-changing routine. On one occasion I saw a professional training consultant criticising one of his class for failing to do this. The hapless pupil complained that, when he was in an audience, he found it extremely annoying when speakers kept turning the projector on and off. He even dared to ask *why* it was deemed to be good practice. After some initial hesitation, the consultant quickly recovered his capacity to sound authoritative in the face of mindless ignorance with the memorable line: ‘because it’s correct’.

2. Technological progress and technical hitches

Then came computer graphics, and Microsoft’s inevitable domination of the marketplace with PowerPoint. The ability to change slides at the push of a button has eliminated some of the fumbling routines of the overhead era, but new nightmares have arrived in its wake. Now audiences are obliged to watch speakers trying to find plugs, leads and

sockets, or to see them getting more and more flustered in their attempts to persuade the local resident projector to marry up with a visiting laptop. With luck a volunteer from the audience will come to the rescue. Otherwise, there may have to be an unscheduled comfort break, while a technician is summoned to the rescue from the furthest corner of the building.

When something finally does materialise on the screen, it usually turns out to be a message telling us to wait. More time goes by before the familiar icons of the Windows®*2 desktop display finally appear. Then we are treated to the exciting spectacle of an arrow whizzing around the screen in search of the PowerPoint folder. A double click later, and we get the opportunity to inspect a long list of files, as the arrow moves up and down in search of the particular delights in store for us today. It comes to rest on the chosen file, we get a glimpse of the first 20 slides and are left wondering just how many more lie in wait after that. Finally, the presenter clicks triumphantly on the slide show icon, and up comes the opening slide with the first two breathtaking pieces of news: the title of the presentation and the name of the speaker, both of which had been widely advertised in advance, and were perfectly well known to everyone in the audience long before they arrived anywhere near the meeting room.

Apart from the size and legibility of fonts, few changes for the better, and some for the worse, have accompanied the replacement of overhead slides by computerised projection. In spite of the tremendous scope for using pictorial and graphical material provided by programs like PowerPoint, and the ease with which lists of bullet points can be built up one by one, positive assets such as these are not yet being exploited to the full. The vast majority of slides are still much the same as they always were, consisting of written words, phrases or sentences, usually given a semblance of order by being arrayed as lists of blobs and bullet points.

This prompted one recent observer to suggest that, if a Martian were beamed down into the middle of a PowerPoint presentation, he would think it was either an adult literacy class or a mass eyesight test.

In short, the industry standard model of presentation not only survives, but, as will be seen in Chapter 5, some of its most dubious assumptions are actually built into the templates that come with PowerPoint and similar programs. They encourage presenters to produce headings, subheadings and sub-subheadings, with the result that the typical presentation amounts to little more than a series of lists. These are invariably far longer than anyone in an audience could ever possibly remember, and serve little useful purpose other than to remind the speaker what to say next.

3. The silent majority

Yet the extraordinary fact is that anyone who takes the trouble to ask audiences what they really think of the typical slide-driven presentation quickly discovers a deep groundswell of dissatisfaction. The depth of this feeling first came to my notice on the only occasion in more than 30 years of teaching that an audience suddenly started clapping in the middle of a lecture. In response to a question, I heard myself saying something that even I thought might be overstating the case: ‘the more I work in this area, the more I’m coming to the view that the slides are the biggest single obstacle to spoken communication ever invented.’ I had apparently touched a nerve, and the applause it prompted turned out to be only the first hint of mass audience discontent. Other evidence began to accumulate. One example was a visit by the president of a major American multi-national corporation to one of his UK offices. The night before his local managers were due to give presentations to him, he had all the overhead projectors in the building locked away in cupboards and

pocketed the key. When they pleaded their inability to speak without them, he told them that he was ‘sick and tired of travelling the world looking at slides. I just want you to tell me what you’re up to, and how things are going.’

To these admittedly isolated examples must be added the much more extensive evidence that has come from running hundreds of group workshops, in which speakers are invited to comment on positive and negative aspects of each other’s presentations. One of the main findings from these is that the vast majority of comments about visual aids are negative ones. This highlights an intriguing contrast in people’s attitudes, depending on whether they are speakers or members of an audience: the same people who use slides in their own presentations are often highly critical of exactly the same kinds of slide when it comes to listening to similar presentations by others. They also tend to be just as critical of their own slides when they see themselves on videotape, often becoming confessional in tone, with comments to the effect that the slides are more of a crutch for their own benefit than for the enlightenment of the audience. As if to underline just how entrenched and universal the industry standard model has become, another common refrain is that colleagues, superiors or clients *expect* them to use slides, and would not otherwise consider it to be ‘a proper presentation’.

4. Time to face facts

The fact that attitudes towards this model of presentation differ so dramatically, according to whether a person is speaking or listening, raises a number of intriguing questions. Why is it that so many people continue to aspire to a style of speaking that fails to impress or inspire them when they are on the receiving end? Why has the modern business presentation become such a bore? Why do so many companies pay out so much money per hour for so many of their staff to prepare and deliver slide shows, and

yet more money per hour for others to endure the tedium of having to listen to the resulting presentation. And if there are tens of thousands of people a day attending presentations from which they get little or no benefit, how many millions or billions of pounds, dollars and euros are being wasted each year by the world's leading economies?

'The customer is always right' may have become a standard motto in the world of business, but the idea that 'the audience is always right' has yet to make much of an impression on the world of presentation, even though, for the duration of the presentation at least, the audience is the speaker's only customer.

The starting point of this book is that it is high time we began to face up to these questions. This will include an argument to the effect that the modern business presentation has lost its way, and should certainly not be used as a model for making other kinds of speeches. The problem of public speaking, in all its various manifestations, lies in a profound and widespread misunderstanding of how spoken communication works. At the heart of this is a failure to appreciate that there are important differences between speaking to an audience and other much more familiar forms of communication, notably everyday conversation and the language of the written word. Somewhere along the line, speakers seem to have stopped thinking about the needs and preferences of their audiences. 'The customer is always right' may have become a standard motto in the world of business, but the idea that 'the audience is always right' has yet to make much of an impression on the world of presentation, even though, for the duration of the presentation at least, the audience is the speaker's only customer.

If the battle against boredom is to be won, a crucial first step is to be clear about the precise nature of the problems

that audiences face. Only then does it become possible to come up with practical solutions that will give their listeners a more rewarding, stimulating and inspiring experience. Once speakers begin to understand the techniques that impress audiences, they are well on the way to mastering them. They will discover how to liberate themselves from the all-too-familiar feelings of nervousness and fear that come with the prospect of having to make a speech or presentation. And the more they are able to do this, the sooner they will realise that effective public speaking does not have to be the monopoly of the gifted few, but is the product of a set of techniques that anyone can learn to use.

PART I
THE LANGUAGE OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Battle for Audience Attention

Keeping Listeners Awake and Engaged

Most of us find it easy enough to discuss aspects of our life or work with one or two colleagues, friends, or even with complete strangers. But it’s a very different story when it comes to standing up and talking about the same subjects to an audience. Confident communicators suddenly find themselves crippled by nerves, the normally articulate sound muddled and confused, and enthusiasts for their subjects come across as dull, boring and monotonous. You will almost certainly have seen this happen. It may even have happened to you – but you may not be quite sure exactly why it happens.

This difference in our level of confidence and effectiveness, depending on whether we’re speaking in a conversation or to an audience, is so great and so debilitating for so many people that it demands an explanation. The chapters in Part I set out to provide an answer by showing that there is what amounts to a

‘language of public speaking’. Less complicated and much easier to learn than a foreign language, it involves subtle deviations from everyday speech that can make life difficult for anyone who isn’t fully aware of them. Knowing what these deviations are is an essential first step towards understanding and mastering the techniques of effective speech making.

> Speaking to an audience requires different skills from those that serve us so well during the rest of our talking lives. The trouble is that it is not immediately obvious what these are, let alone why our normal resources are failing us.

1. Different ways of speaking

Speaking in public is obviously different from just about any other form of communication we ever get involved in. The sense of unease experienced when making a speech or presentation tends to be accompanied by a vague realisation that our normal, everyday style of speaking doesn’t seem to be working in quite the way we expect. Speaking to an audience seems to require skills other than those that serve us so well during the rest of our talking lives. The trouble is that it’s not always immediately obvious what these are, or why our normal resources are failing us. This is why we can find ourselves, often good communicators in every other way, struggling and bewildered against the tide of polite indifference washing over us from an audience who would clearly rather be somewhere else.

One reason for this is that our ability to speak is something that we have taken for granted since infancy. Apart from a few academic researchers who specialise in the study of talk, hardly anyone ever gives much thought to the detailed mechanics of how speech works. Most people’s

technical understanding of conversation is similar to their technical understanding of what's involved in riding a bicycle. Both are things we can do, without so much as a second thought, but the basic principles of how to do them are far from easy to put into words.

An ability to use language is often cited as the crucial factor distinguishing humans from other animals. But it is probably more accurate to say that the crucial factor is an ability to *converse* – and it's more than mere ability. As conversationalists we are absolute experts. We listen, we understand, we contribute, all within fractions of a second. And we're able to do this because we start learning to converse from the moment we make our first sounds. The type of speech we first learn as infants is conversation. As we grow older, it is the speaking skills of conversation that we spend most time practising and developing. In effect, we become specialists in conversational techniques, and it's as conversationalists that we spend the vast majority of our talking lives. Only very occasionally do we have to speak in ways that are clearly different from conversation, such as in classrooms, courtrooms, places of worship, interviews, meetings, debates, speeches or presentations. As narrow specialists in conversation, it's hardly surprising that we feel so uneasy when we have to speak in these less familiar situations. Nor is it surprising that the few who do develop these more specialised speaking skills – such as teachers, lawyers, politicians or clerics – come to be viewed as (and paid as) professionals.

2. Why conversation keeps us awake

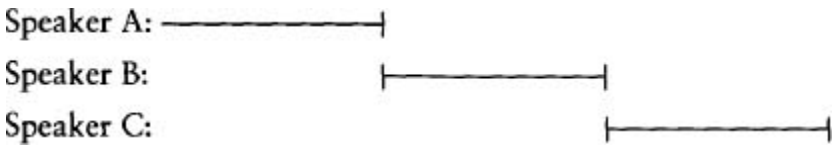
Our starting point, then, is that becoming an effective public speaker depends on having as clear a picture as possible of the key differences between conversation on the one hand, and speeches and presentations on the other. The most important of all of these is the dramatic change in our motives for paying attention that occurs as soon as we stop

conversing with other members of the audience, and settle down to listen to the speaker of the day. When I ask audiences if any of them ever find it difficult to stay awake during speeches, presentations, lectures or sermons, a typical result is that 100 per cent of them put up their hands. When asked how many have trouble staying awake listening to what someone is saying during conversations, the typical result is zero per cent.

The first statistic is proof that everyone knows that speeches and presentations have a tremendous capacity for boring audiences out of their minds, and that holding the attention of an audience is a major challenge for speakers. The second statistic points to something that people know when they think about it, but probably never give much thought to most of the time: most of us have little or no trouble in staying awake while engaged in conversation with a small number of others. This is because there are powerful incentives to pay attention built into the way conversation works. And these incentives are underpinned by implicit rules that are not written down and formally taught, but are understood by everyone capable of having a conversation.

🗨 *One at a time*

The most obvious feature of conversation is that we take it in turns to talk: one speaker says something and, when that one's turn comes to an end, a next speaker starts, and so on until the end of the conversation:



If someone else suddenly starts speaking when you are still in the middle of your turn, it's natural to feel annoyed. In fact, you're likely to regard anyone who trespasses on your space as 'rude' or 'impolite'. You are not only within your

rights to complain, but are equipped with the necessary vocabulary for referring to the misdemeanour: the words ‘interrupt’ and ‘interruption’. When you complain of being ‘interrupted’, you are actually drawing attention to the fact that a basic, though implicit, rule of conversation has been broken: *only one speaker should speak at a time, and others in the conversation should wait until the end of any current turn before starting the next one*.

Occasional failures to observe this rule may be tolerated, but anyone who makes a regular habit of starting to speak in the middle of other people’s turns soon finds that there’s a heavy price to pay. Your reputation will go into a nosedive. At best, you’ll be regarded as impolite or inconsiderate; at worst as a pushy, domineering control freak who’d rather ‘hog the conversation’ than listen to what anyone else has to say. If you’d rather not be seen like this, you have a strong incentive to pay attention at least closely enough to know when the previous speaker has finished, and when you can launch into a turn of your own without being accused of interrupting.

🗨 *Coming in on cue*

The incentive to listen during conversations isn’t just a matter of paying close enough attention to notice when a speaker gets to the end of a turn, as there is another rule about when you can start the next turn. Fail to get this right, and people will have another reason for wondering about your manners and motives. You only have to think of how you react if, after greeting someone with the turn ‘Good morning’, the other person doesn’t reply at all. Charitable explanations are that they must be half asleep, or perhaps a little deaf. But you’re much more likely to start worrying about why they aren’t speaking to you, what you’ve done to offend them or what’s gone wrong with the relationship. So the only way to stop other people from thinking such negative thoughts about you is to make sure that you start

speaking *before* the silence has lasted long enough to be deemed ‘awkward’ or ‘embarrassing’.

This raises the question of just how long you’ve got before the silence starts to make things difficult? The answer is that you can’t afford to let the silence last for more than a split second. Research into conversation shows that silences of less than half a second are not only long enough to be noticed, but are enough to start us thinking that some kind of trouble is on its way. Studies of how people respond to invitations, for example, have found that an immediate reply usually means that the speaker is about to accept, whereas a delay of even a fraction of a second means that a refusal is on its way. The same is true of the way people reply to offers of various kinds: positive replies start straight away, and negative ones are delayed. So the safest way of preventing people from getting the wrong impression is to pay close enough attention to be able to start speaking as soon as possible, and certainly before the silence starts to get embarrassing.

> The main incentive to pay attention in conversation is the ever-present threat that you might have to speak next. As audiences know that they won’t have to speak until a speech is over, their incentive to listen is massively reduced, sometimes even to the point where they fall asleep.

🗨 *Showing you were listening*

Another extremely important reason for listening in conversation is that you have to be continually at the ready to say something that relates directly to what was said in the previous turn. Even a small lapse in concentration can cause you to say something that leads the previous speaker to conclude that you had not been paying attention, are not in the least bit interested in what they were saying, or that

you are just plain rude. It often prompts accusations, arguments and conflict – so much so that it may well be at the heart of large numbers of domestic rows. If these could be traced back to their original source, many of them would surely be found to have started just at that moment in a conversation when one speaker says something – or perhaps says nothing – that gives their spouse or partner the impression that he or she had not been listening.

🗨 *The threat of having to say something*

Conversational success and failure obviously depend on our continually maintaining a very high level of attentiveness to what others are saying. We have to keep listening closely enough not to interrupt, closely enough to come in on time and closely enough to be ready to say something that relates to the previous turn. In short, the ever-present threat that we might have to speak next amounts to an extremely powerful incentive for us to stay alert and wide-awake during a conversation. It also points to a fundamental reason why audiences will be in a very much lower state of attentiveness when listening to a speech or presentation.

3. Why audiences fall asleep

🗨 *Speeches and presentations are long*

Compared with the talk we’re used to listening to in conversations, the most unusual thing about a speech or presentation is its sheer length. In essence, all forms of public speaking involve the production of exceptionally long turns at talk, in which one person is given the floor for far longer than anyone ever gets to speak during a conversation. Rather than having to pay attention to short conversational turns lasting an average of seven or eight seconds, members of an audience are faced with the daunting prospect of having to listen to one person speaking continuously for 10, 20 or 30 minutes – and often for even longer than that.

🗨 *Audiences know they won't have to speak for a while*

This may seem a grim enough prospect in itself, but it's only part of the attentiveness problem we face when sitting in an audience. What makes life really difficult is that our only job is to listen. We can therefore relax in the knowledge that we're not going to have to speak for however long the speech or presentation lasts. The absence of any immediate threat of having to say something at a moment's notice amounts to a massive reduction in the incentives to pay attention that work so efficiently in everyday conversation. This goes a long way towards explaining why we are so much more likely to fall asleep when in an audience than when participating in a conversation.

🗨 *If audiences get confused, they stop listening*

Another extremely important and taken-for-granted feature of conversation that also changes dramatically in speeches and presentations is the relative ease with which we're able to deal with any difficulties we may have in understanding what someone just said. If, at some point in a conversation, we're unclear about something, we can use our next turn to ask for clarification, and get an immediate solution to the problem. But, when sitting in an audience, most of us are much more inhibited. For one thing, it involves interrupting, and therefore runs the risk of offending the speaker. Not only that, but a request for clarification can all too easily sound like a public complaint about the speaker's incompetence at explaining things clearly enough. Our reluctance to intervene may also be fuelled by a fear of exposing our own ignorance in public – because, for all we know, everyone else in the audience may be finding it perfectly easy to follow the argument. So the safest and commonest option is not to ask for clarification. Instead, we start reflecting on what the speaker has been saying in a bid to disentangle what it was all about for ourselves. The