

The Attendee as a Conference Participant

22

Abstract

Fully participating in a conference implies not merely acquiring a conference badge and program, but also initiating interactions, starting discussions, involving oneself in friendly conversations, and asking questions—both formal and informal. Benefitting from participation in conferences is a product of a two-way communication street. Of course, it is not the role of this book to teach readers how to carry out casual conversations, even if they occur within the conference milieu, let alone engage in deeper conversational analysis. However, although to some extent individual personality will be a deciding factor in terms of success in opening less formalized dialogues or interactions, this chapter aims to highlight some common discourse strategies, phrases, and interactive techniques observed and noted at academic conferences—many not highlighted in popular or commercial books—which readers may find useful.

22.1 Questions and Comments During Discussion Sessions

Many novice conference attendees hesitate to ask questions in a formal setting for all the anxiety-heightening, face-threatening reasons mentioned in the section on discussion sessions (Fig. 22.1). But sometimes, there is something you really want, or need, to ask—so what principles should readers consider in terms of managing their inquiry?

You may remember my earlier criticism of lengthy, unfocused CP discussant questions, which often seem to be little more than attempts by the discussant to take over the stage, rather than means of legitimately advancing discussion. I strongly



Fig. 22.1 Conference free paper session participants' perspective

recommend that you have a clear, concise point, comment or question to communicate.

Interestingly, however, most of the compelling and stimulating questions that I noted at conferences did *not* start with the standard interrogative pronouns (who, what, where, when, why, and how) but involved some sort of general commentary, evaluative response, or conceptual framing. Some commonly observed examples of this were:

*In your presentation/On your last slide/In your methods section you said...
I'm particularly interested in/confused by/impressed with your X/what you said
about Y.
According to (another researcher/study)...*

These forms served as parenthetical frames and were followed later by the actual question. Many such questions were prefaced with defining cleft phrases and speech act directives such as:

So what I'd like to ask is...

So what I'd like to do is just clarify/confirm X.

Appeals for clarification or extension often followed these parenthetical frames:

So could you explain in more detail how/why (etc.)?

Could you show me the slide/part about X again?

It was rare to hear a discussant begin a turn by directly using a question form, such as, 'Why did you not use the X approach?' Instead, the preface usually marked a transition to the explicit question:

I was interested that you said that you used the Y approach. So, I'm wondering why you didn't use the X approach?

Once the discussant has delivered, their actual question they should stop talking. If the speaker does not understand the question, the discussant should wait for a signal of either confirmation of non-comprehension, and if the latter is forthcoming, only then start to negotiate or reformulate. If the presenter does indicate understanding, give them the opportunity to respond rather than continually reformulating the comment/question until an interruption is forced. Thereafter, if you are satisfied with the response you can simply say 'Thank you' and sit down, but if you do not feel your question has been answered or properly addressed you might want to re-phrase it, in which case:

What I (actually) wanted to/meant to say was.....served as a frequent repair/reformulation form.

Finally, must you state your name and affiliation before you ask a question? If the chair/moderator demands it, please do so:

John Lee, from National University Hospital, Singapore.

However, if there is no stated requirement do so, and if you notice that there is no such pattern being observed, then there is social no requirement to do so. Simply go ahead with your question. The same goes for thanking the presenter. If one discussant has already said, 'First, thank you for your very informative presentation,' the following discussants do not need to say something similar (although if you truly thought the presentation was excellent or helpful, I'm sure the presenter will be happy to hear you say so). But again, this is far from a requirement.

22.2 Questions/Comments for Presenters—Post-session or During Breaks

I have previously mentioned that it is not considered good form to raise a question during the actual CP, the exception being in cases where the speaker has explicitly asked or allowed for it. This is quite distinct from workshops and tutorials/seminars where spontaneous questions are less likely to violate the norms of interaction and are thus often encouraged. The post-presentation discussion session is the normal place for CP questions.

However, one may not have the chance or the inclination to ask a question of a speaker during the official DS. Fortunately, there are plenty more opportunities to ask and discuss post-session, often just outside the CP venue itself, in the exhibition or snack/rest areas, or during evening social events (preferably before participants start eating and drinking and might want to avoid weighty research or work-related topics). These will, naturally, require different opening strategies than you would use during the standard DS. One thing I've learned after almost thirty years' living, working, and teaching in Asia is that those who have a good sense as to how to manage a conversation in their L1 (and indeed many L1 speakers do not) tend to be more skilled at managing them in a foreign tongue. In short, being an NNES is not really a handicap when it comes to establishing one-to-one relations using the English language.

In practice, when initiating extra-session discussions with presenters, discussants may need to give their interlocutor a frame by letting the presenter know that they actually attended their session. In most cases, it would be considered more polite to use the speaker's name to start. And if the participant truly believed it was an excellent and helpful CP, one could use a form I noted on several occasions:

Dr. Kozlov, thank you for your presentation earlier/the other day. It was very helpfull/interesting.

I was at your presentation today/just now. Thank you. I found it very helpful.
(followed by some extended commentary)

Perhaps the presentation was not so interesting or helpful. A simple '*Thank you for your presentation today/earlier,*' will suffice, after which the attendee can preface the question using any of the following widely used forms:

Actually, I wanted to ask you something about...

I was hoping to ask you about...

Is it ok if I ask you something about...?

Do you have a few seconds/minutes?

In most such cases, the initiating speaker should not feel obligated to carry out any extended self-introduction, unless, of course, one expects to enter into some type of deeper relationship or prolonged discussion, in which case the standard, ‘*By the way, I’m (name) from (country or affiliation),*’ template will usually suffice.

Perhaps, it is not a question that the discussant have in mind, but a comment or suggestion. The following forms were all noted as non-face-threatening ways of doing so.

I was wondering if you’ve tried/considered X?

I wanted to mention/let you know...

After/when I heard your presentation, I was thinking...

In closing this chapter, it must be stated again the fundamental reason for attending a conference is to interact: to build and develop fruitful academic or professional relationships with others. This means breaking out of any self-imposed shells, actively cultivating new relationships, and expanding knowledge through interactions with those outside our linguistic or cultural comfort circles. Initiating discussions and then extending them long-term plays an enormous role in this process. Widely used phrases that can set these wheels in motion include:

I’d like to keep in touch.

Is it ok if I contact you (again) by email?

Most paramount, if an NNES lacks confidence in their English, they should not let their imperfect English ability hold them back from initiating the dialogue. Remember that the majority of delegates at international academic conferences (especially if held outside the core English speaking countries) will also be non-native English speakers. They will usually understand and be empathetic to your linguistic status. Most should be patient with, and accommodating of, your imperfections, because they will be cognizant of their own. Moreover, they too will likely be interested in the bigger, wider world of their respective academic fields and will also be looking for insights, knowledge, and relationships extending beyond their own environments. The accommodation game, therefore, is mutual.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 22

1. You want to ask a speaker the reason why they chose research method A over method B. Think of three ways to a) frame that question b) ask indirectly.
2. You wish to make a critical comment regarding what you consider to be a flaw in a speaker’s research while in private discussion. How would you construct the criticism so as to not make the speaker lose face?