THE SKILLED ART OF CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION:
VERBAL AND NONVERBAL SIGNALS IN ITS REGULATION AND MANAGEMENT

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"It is an important and unreasonable fault in conversation for one man to take up all the discourse".
Richard Steele, The Spectator (1711-12)

PROLOGUE

This chapter will differ from many others in this book because it concentrates upon one specific, single, low-level social skill. Many of the other chapters will provide broad and general accounts of higher-level skills and direct criticism of the concept of social skills. This chapter will provide a different kind of criticism of social skills by presenting an argument almost in the form of a fable (and I don't mean by this that the story is untrue), in that the chapter will, hopefully, illustrate some general principles (in this case, of skilled social performance) by providing a detailed account of one low-level but common phenomenon. Unlike the characters from traditional fables - the woodcutters, the bakers and the shoe makers - the central figure in this story has not been chosen at random. The central figure in this story, the process of turn-taking in conversation - seems to have always been near the centre of the stage in attempts by social psychologists to apply the concept of skill to social performance (see Argyle, 1967, 1974; Argyle & Kendon, 1967). Here, I want to provide a detailed and up-to-date account of the way in which this phenomenon has been approached by social psychologists. Through so doing, I hope to demonstrate that psychologists are now, at last, coming to grips with the complexity and richness of some of the more basic processes which underlie all skilled social performance.
Face-to-face verbal exchanges between human beings are very common and very important. People still do most of their business through conversation. Infants and children develop important linguistic skills by indulging in conversations with their mothers or caretakers (Snow, 1977; Freedle & Lewis, 1977). Evidence suggests that the alternating vocal style between mothers and infants is very similar to the conversational style of adults (Bateson, 1975; Stern et al., 1975). Freedle & Lewis, in a longitudinal study, demonstrated a significant relationship between conversational style of mother and infant (at age three months) and linguistic development of the child at two years. The infant's proportion of conversational closings at age three months was inversely and significantly correlated with the mean length of utterance at age two. So also was the proportion of conversational sequences begun by the mother. In other words, a responsive mother in conversational interaction with her child at three months results in an acceleration of the child's capacity for complex linguistic production at age two years. Like most important phenomena, however, conversational processes can produce casualties. It has been suggested, for example, that aspects of communication in conversation play a central role in the process by which maladaptive and psychopathological states are developed and maintained (Bateson et al., 1956; Bateson, 1973; Bugental et al., 1971; but see Schuham, 1967). Bugental et al. in a study of videotaped parent-child communication, within families containing a "disturbed" child (referred by schools for chronic behaviour or emotional problems) and normal control families, found that significantly more disturbed mothers produced messages containing evaluative conflict between channels (verbal/vocal/visual) than did normal mothers.

One fundamental and apparently universal (Miller, 1963) feature of conversation is the fact that turn-taking occurs - participants take turns at alone holding the floor in conversation for a limited period (see Sacks et al., 1974). Unlike some so-called strong linguistic universals (see Chomsky, 1968, 1972), such as question formation which cannot, it is argued, be generally explained in terms of communicative efficiency or "simplicity" and for which there seems to be no functional explanation, turn-taking can be rather easily explained in functional terms. Turn-taking would appear to be essential because people find it difficult, or impossible simultaneously to act as speaker and listener. Some rather gross division of attention between speaking and listening is possible, for instance whilst speaking, in the context of a cocktail party, one may "hear" one's name (or may discern other pieces of highly pertinent information) in a distant conversation. Nevertheless, division of attention between these two tasks is not efficient. Turn-taking allows for much greater efficiency.