Review

The Conversational Circumplex: Identifying, prioritizing, and pursuing informational and relational motives in conversation

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Abstract

The meaning of success in conversation depends on people's goals. Often, individuals pursue multiple goals simultaneously, such as establishing shared understanding, making a favorable impression, having fun, or persuading a conversation partner. In this article, we introduce a novel theoretical framework, the Conversational Circumplex, to classify conversational motives along two key dimensions: 1) *informational*: the extent to which a speaker's motive focuses on giving and/or receiving accurate information; and 2) *relational*: the extent to which a speaker's motive focuses on building the relationship. We use the Conversational Circumplex to underscore the multiplicity of conversational goals that people hold and highlight the potential for individuals to have conflicting conversational goals (both intrapersonally and interpersonally) that make successful conversation a difficult challenge.

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People communicate constantly, and nearly every human activity involves a conversation [1–3]. We define conversation as *any verbal interaction—written or spoken, synchronous or asynchronous, scheduled or spontaneous—between two or more people*. It typically involves repeated turn-taking, but does not require it; for example, an individual could say 'hello,' expecting a response, but fail to receive one. Conversation is a rich environment filled with verbal, nonverbal, and prosodic cues, and within every conversation, individuals pursue at least one goal, but often more than one. To assess conversational success, we need to understand conversational goals [4–6].

Prior work has defined the basic goal of conversation as achieving 'common ground' — building shared understanding [7–10] or, at least, the *feeling* of shared understanding [11,12]. The goal to build shared understanding between two or more minds accounts for many turn-level conversational behaviors [13–15], such as sharing information [16–18], asking questions [19–22], signaling understanding [23,24], and seeking clarification [25–27].

However, psychologists have demonstrated that human behavior is often subject to a vast array of competing and complex goals [28–30]. We assert that this is particularly true of conversational behavior. That is, people pursue a broad set of goals in conversation beyond seeking to understand each other — they aim to agree and disagree, to help others and hurt them, to fall in love and break up, to make decisions and avoid making them, to disclose and conceal information, to flatter and denigrate, to incite conflict and avoid it, and on — motives that vary idiosyncratically across people, relationships, contexts, and time. Consider just one common motive, to make a favorable impression on one's partner, which itself has myriad varieties (e.g. to come across as warm, competent, funny, informed, aloof, authentic, a good listener, attractive, innovative, witty, high status, neutral, relatable, wealthy, and on).

In this article, we introduce a theoretical framework — the Conversational Circumplex — to classify the many goals people pursue in conversation. We discuss the implications of this framework for how people successfully and unsuccessfully understand and advance their goals within their conversations.

The Conversational Circumplex: A new framework to understand conversational goals

We introduce a novel framework to classify conversational goals, the Conversational Circumplex, which classifies motives along two key dimensions: 1) *informational*: the extent to which a speaker's motive focuses on giving and/or receiving accurate information; and 2) *relational*: the extent to which a speaker's motive focuses on building the relationship (see Figure 1).

A conversationalist with goals characterized by high informational intent is keen to exchange accurate information. These goals involve giving and/or receiving information. To advance high informational goals, individuals may choose verbal behaviors such as asking questions, giving directions, making decisions, or brainstorming new ideas. In contrast, goals characterized by low informational intent do not focus on the accurate exchange of information. Instead, these conversationalists may seek to fill time, avoid awkwardness, or conceal information. To advance goals characterized by low informational intent, speakers may choose verbal behaviors such as dodging questions, telling a joke, staying quiet, or lying.

A conversationalist with goals characterized by high relational intent seeks to build their relationship. These goals include objectives such as building trust, finding shared understanding, or learning about each other. To advance goals with high relational intent, individuals may choose verbal behaviors such as apologizing, making concessions, revealing a weakness, admitting mistakes, or flattering their partner. In contrast, goals with low relational intent seek to advance a speaker's own interests without regard for the relationship. For example, individuals seeking to advance goals with low relational intent may choose verbal behaviors such as claiming credit, assigning blame, withholding laughter, lying for their own benefit, or telling nonaffiliative jokes for their own amusement.

As humans navigate their social lives, they are likely to pursue goals across all four goal quadrants: {high/low informational x high/low relational}. Each of the four quadrants includes appropriate goals for specific situations, but individuals who seek to simultaneously pursue motives in different quadrants on the circumplex will need to prioritize, reconcile, and manage the sequencing and transitions of their verbal, nonverbal, and prosodic micro-decisions within and across conversations.

Identifying, discerning, and advancing conversational goals

To successfully advance their conversational goals, individuals need to identify and prioritize their own goals,
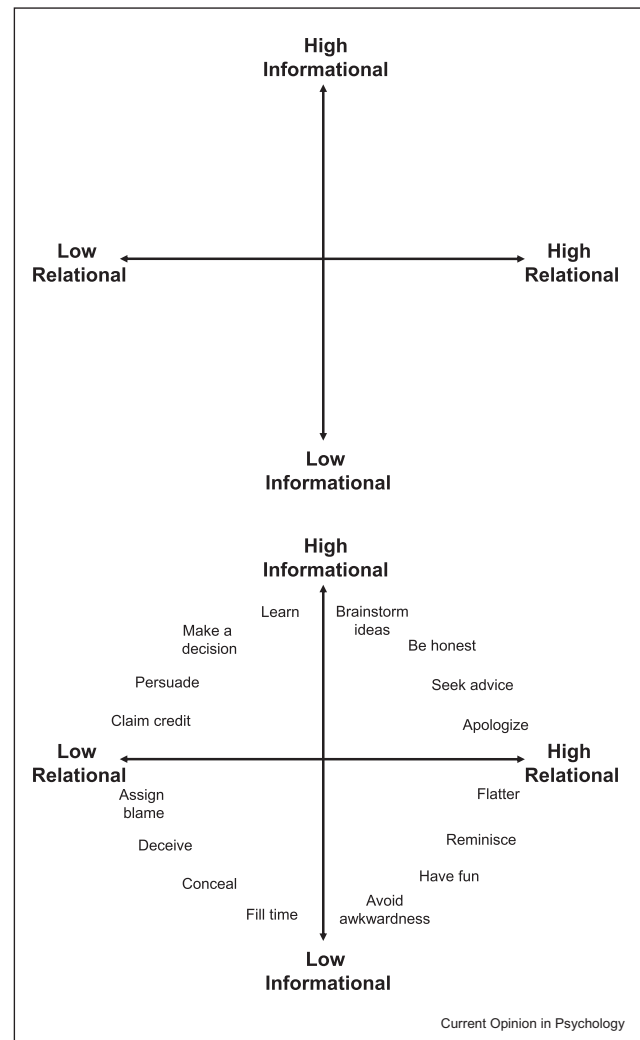
The Conversational Circumplex. This framework classifies conversational goals along two key dimensions: *informational* and *relational*. The first panel shows the two axes of the Conversation Circumplex ready to be populated by conversational motives. The second panel shows where a conversationalist might plot some of their conversational goals on the Conversational Circumplex. Importantly, the placement of motives on the Circumplex is subjective, and the goals depicted here represent a small subset of the vast array of motives that conversationalists might have.

discern others' goals, and choose behaviors to achieve them. The Conversational Circumplex highlights how difficult each of these tasks can be, by illustrating the wide range of possible goals each person can have. As individuals strive to navigate conversations and advance their goals, they are almost certain to fall short [31].

Decades of research investigating individual judgment and decision-making reveal that people routinely err when forming judgments, preferences, and beliefs [32]. In this article, we build on this foundational work and

assert that the same is true of conversational judgment and decision-making. Specifically, we argue that people often fail to achieve their conversational goals because they fail to clearly identify their own conversational objectives, to accurately discern their partners' conversational goals, and to select behaviors that achieve their goals.

Identifying one's own conversational motives

Successful conversationalists need to recognize their own conversational goals. There are many barriers that make this first step surprisingly challenging.

First, we often lack self-awareness (*What do I want?*). Unless individuals are prompted to introspect about their goals, they often fail to identify what their key objectives actually are [33–36]. We expect this to be the case for conversations. People constantly and intuitively engage in conversations. As a result, we postulate that people often enter conversations without explicitly identifying what their conversational goals are.

Second, preferences are malleable (*What do I want now?*). Changes in context, conversation partners, and time can cause individuals to change their priorities across different conversations and even within the same conversation. In fact, a single exchange within a conversation can instantly shift one's motives [37]. And even small external cues (e.g. it starts to rain) can have a surprising influence on what people choose to talk about (e.g. umbrellas; [10,38].

Third, individuals struggle to make trade-offs across their own competing priorities (*What do I want the most?*). For example, people choose between short-term goals (e.g. the enjoyment they derive from eating ice cream) and long-term goals (e.g. losing weight; [39]). Within conversations, many behaviors may advance one goal at the expense of another. For example, individuals may want to learn about their partners but also be polite and respectful. Behaviors such as asking sensitive questions may advance learning at the expense of politeness [19].

The Conversational Circumplex can help individuals identify their own motives. For each conversation, a speaker may have a number of goals and have limited time and attention to identify and resolve conflicts and make trade-offs among their goals. The Circumplex can help people think concretely about what their goals are, whether they have too many (or too few), and how they might experience their goals as conflicted (or not). We postulate that the distance between any pair of goals within the Circumplex is a signal of how compatible those goals might be within a single conversation (or relationship). Goals that are close together may be easier to pair within a conversation, such as filling time and telling a joke, or coordinating plans and brainstorming ideas. On the other hand, goals that are further apart may be harder to pursue simultaneously — such as apologizing and also assigning blame, or persuading and also avoiding awkwardness.

Accordingly, we call for individuals to prepare for conversations by reflecting on their own goals. This advice is consistent with emerging work that suggests that even 30 seconds of forethought can help conversationalists choose more mutually-productive and enjoyable topics [40,41]. Preparation may also help people follow through on their intentions during the conversation [42] and improve their conversational skills over time by allowing them to reflect on their goal attainment after the fact. Reflecting on one's goals on the Conversational Circumplex, over time, can also help individuals reflect on their underlying values. Specifically, by mapping their goals within the Circumplex, individuals can assess their overall orientation (and others') toward relational and informational motives.

Discerning others' conversational motives

The Circumplex also highlights when and why interpersonal motives collide — when one person's goals stand in direct opposition to another's goals. To begin to navigate these trade-offs, speakers must be able to discern their partners' motives. In some cases, this may be relatively easy. For example, a manager may anticipate that their subordinate is keen to create a good impression. In many cases, however, discerning others' goals can be very challenging.

First, people underappreciate how much others' motives can diverge from their own (*Do we want the same things?*). One key challenge is simply recognizing that others have their own goals, which might differ from our own. Seeing the world from another perspective, the 'other minds' problem, is extremely difficult [43], even when individuals are highly motivated to do so [44]. We egocentrically over-rely on our own goals as information about others' goals (e.g. I want to have fun, so you must want to have fun, too; [45,46]). And overconfidence in our ability to take others' perspectives may prevent us from seeking more information, compounding the problem.

Second, relationships can be fluid (*What do you need from me now?*). Just as one's own needs change over time (slowly or spontaneously), so too do a partners' needs. This presents an interpersonal challenge — how to understand evolving goals. Prior work suggests that people fulfill 'multiplex' roles for others [47]. For example, spouses toggle across the roles of friend, coparent, intimate, and caretaker. Success in close relationships is in part due to our proficiency at sifting across these complicated roles over time, and appreciating when our partners do the same [48,49].

Third, speakers may not receive accurate information about their partner's motives (*Are you telling me what you really want?*). Sometimes this lack of information is due to outright deception [50,51] or strategic concern for relational consequences [52,53]. Discerning others' goals is particularly difficult when conversation partners are motivated to mislead their targets [54,55]. This challenge can be exacerbated by power and status differences [56,57].

Other times, the lack of clear information about a counterpart's goals is unintentional. People often suffer from an illusion of transparency, incorrectly assuming that their own internal thoughts and feelings are accurately conveyed to others [58−60] and that they are judged by others the same way they judge themselves [61]. Even when goals are aligned, people may fail to convey information their partners want to know (including the fact that their goals align), degrading coordination, especially over time [62]. The assumptions people make about others may also lead to decisions that prevent them from learning how their partners actually feel [46,63].

Fourth, people struggle to perceive accurate information about others' motives (*How well do I understand you?*). Even when our partners provide valid cues about themselves, emerging work suggests that people are bad at noticing and interpreting them. They do not predict others' intentions, preferences, and personality traits as well as they could, even when empirical benchmarks reveal that they have more than enough information to do so [54,64−70]. These difficulties are likely exacerbated by greater cognitive load, when people feel stressed, distracted, or when there are more than two people participating in the conversation [71,72].

The Conversational Circumplex can help individuals understand others' motives as well. This framework provides an opportunity to reflect on the many potential goals others might have and the ways in which the goals of conversational partners might align (e.g. they both want to coordinate plans), might be complementary (e.g. one wants to give advice and another wants to receive advice), or conflict (e.g. both want to claim credit). Conflict is common. For example, someone who wants to learn information may find it difficult if their partner wants to conceal information. Similarly, someone who wants to make a decision may find it difficult if their partner wants to relax and avoid making a certain decision.

By making conversational goals explicit, the Conversational Circumplex provides a foundation for understanding motives in conversations. We call for future work to integrate the Conversational Circumplex with emerging research on a learning mindset during conversations [66]. By improving both the passive perception of others' conversational behavior and the active elicitation of information (e.g. via question-asking and reciprocal disclosure), a learning mindset may improve a conversationalist's ability to recognize others' goals and make conversational choices that advance their underlying interests.

From motives to behavior

Conversations are cognitively taxing. In addition to the challenges of recognizing their own and others' goals and prioritizing and reconciling conflicting goals, individuals also need to translate motives into actions that actually advance their conversational goals [73]. The cognitive complexity and time pressure of conversation may cause people to make poor choices in the moment. Even with ample time and attention, people struggle to anticipate how their choices will be perceived and received by others, owing to limits in perspective taking (e.g., [74−78]) and how their choices will be experienced intrapsychically, due to failures of affective forecasting (e.g. Wilson and Gilbert [79]. Taken together, in contrast to some scholarship (e.g. Garrod and Pickering [13]), we propose that conversation is a fraught decision environment in which people are highly likely to make mistakes.

A boom of recent research has begun to describe the conflicting motives that often surround pervasive conversational behaviors. In Table 1, we list conversational behaviors that have been shown to arise from *intrapsychic* goal conflict. Many of these behavioral phenomena seem to arise when individuals form *a priori* beliefs about how their conversational behaviors will be received by their conversation partners (and/or by observers), although not always. In Table 2, we identify examples of conversational behaviors that have been shown to arise from *interpersonal* goal conflict, which often, though not always, represent coordination puzzles that are difficult to resolve in practice (e.g. Who should talk and who should listen? Who should disclose information and when?). Importantly, many behaviors may be surrounded by intrapsychic *and* interpersonal goal conflict. For example, imagine a speaker who wants to voice a dissenting viewpoint but does not want to seem grumpy or contrarian (intrapersonal goal conflict), and, at the same time, their partner does not want to be contradicted (interpersonal goal conflict). Thus, the decision to voice his or her dissenting viewpoint (or not) is fraught — and the definition of 'success' or 'failure' will be highly context dependent.

For observers and scholars, measuring conversational errors is difficult. It requires knowing what the conversational goals are, understanding the communication behavior, assessing the outcome, and disentangling poor

Table 1

Behaviors characterized by intrapsychic goal conflict. This is a non-exhaustive list of recently-studied conversational behaviors characterized by intrapsychic goal conflict. Importantly, whether these behavioral phenomena can be considered 'errors' depends on many contextual factors.

Behavioral Phenomenon	Conflicting Intrapsychic Motives	Example	Citation(s)
Humble-bragging	You want to self-promote but do not want to seem braggadocious.	'My hand hurts from signing so many autographs.'	[80]
Backhanded compliments	You want to lavish a sincere compliment but do not want to seem ingratiating or craven.	'You know a lot about cool bands for someone your age.'	[81]
Prosocial lying	You want to be honest ('You do not look great') but do not want to hurt their feelings.	'You look great.'	[82,83]
Name-dropping	You want to seem well-connected but do not want to say so explicitly.	'I had fun while I was skydiving with LeBron over the weekend.'	[81]
Sarcasm	You want to convey information ('Mike is smart') but want to amuse, distract, or lighten the blow of negative information.	'Mike has no idea what he is talking about. Ha ha ha.'	[20]
Hiding Failures	You want to disclose negative personal information ('I was rejected from four colleges') but do not want to appear incompetent.	'I was thrilled to be accepted at this college.'	[16,84]
Hiding Successes	You want to share your joy ('I received a promotion at work') but do not want to seem braggadocious.	'Work is going fine.'	[85,86]
Avoiding sensitive topics	You want to talk about interesting topics (e.g. sex, politics, money, and relationships) and also want to avoid awkwardness or conflict.	'Do you like this weather?'	[19,87]
Declining to help by deferring	You do not want to take on effortful and unnecessary work, but you do want to be helpful and preserve the relationship.	'I am sorry I will not be able to sit on that committee but let me take some time to think of someone else who would be a great fit.'	[88]
Failing to seek advice	You think you could benefit from their advice, but you do not want to appear incompetent.	'I hope it went well. Do you have any advice?' **versus** 'I hope it went well.'	[75]
Favoring warm advisors	You want competent advice but prefer interacting with benevolent advisors.	'I know this advisor is deeply involved in the work that I want to do, but I chose another advisor because they have always been nice to me.'	[89,90]
Omitting negative feedback	You want others to improve, but you do not want them to feel uncomfortable or to dislike you.	'Your presentation was great' **versus** 'You were speaking too quickly during your presentation.'	[41]
Omitting positive feedback	You want to say something nice about the other person but do not want to seem ingratiating or make them feel uncomfortable.	'I just want to say how grateful I am for your advice and support over the years.' **versus** 'We've known each other a long time.'	[74,78]

Table 2

Behaviors characterized by interpersonal goal conflict. This is a non-exhaustive list of recently-studied conversational behaviors characterized by interpersonal goal conflict. Importantly, whether these behavioral phenomena can be considered 'errors' depends on many contextual factors.

Behavioral Phenomenon	Conflicting interpersonal motives	Example	Citation(s)
Asking follow-up questions	You want to talk about yourself; They want to talk about themselves.	'Cool! Was that your first time white water rafting, or have you gone before?' **versus** 'Cool! I love the water, too.'	[20]
Boomerasking	You want to disclose information; They want to share information and feel heard.	'How was your weekend?' <Listen politely> 'Mine was great, I went skydiving with LeBron.'	[91]
Egocentric advice giving	You want advice tailored to your needs and preferences; Advisors want to talk about their own perspective.	'That makes sense for you, but what do you think I should do?'	[92,93]
Seeking broad advice	You want to collect a wide range of different advice; Advisors want to provide a single recommendation and feel heard.	'Are there options I'm not considering? Who else could I ask about this?'	[94,95]
Voicing dissent	You want to speak up and share what you know; They do not want to be contradicted or have their status called into question.	'Is there anything wrong with this proposal?' 'Nope, it looks great, boss!'	[96−98]
Receptiveness	You want to explain your view to someone you disagree with or persuade them to agree with you; They want to feel like they are being heard.	'I see your point, and I think that could be true sometimes'	[99]
Expressing warmth in distributive negotiations	You want people to make concessions in response to friendly behavior; They see your friendliness as an opportunity to exploit you.	'Could you possibly accept a somewhat lower price for your gorgeous car? Thank you!'	[100,101]
Dodging/paltering/ deflection/refusing to answer	You want to avoid answering a question without lying explicitly; They want an honest answer.	'I'm glad you asked that question because it reminds me of something else I want to talk about instead.'	[102−105]
Asking optimistic questions	You want an honest answer to an ambiguous question; They want to deceive you.	'Before I buy this used car, can you tell me why the back tire makes that noise?' **versus** 'before I buy this used car, has it ever had any major problems?'	[21]
Ending a conversation	You want to continue the conversation; They want to end it.	'So anyway has the weather been nice lately?'	[106,107]
Competence upshift (overusing jargon)	You want to be seen as competent; They want clarity of information.	'We plan to leverage the anticipated disruption in the retail furniture industry space and obtain a first mover advantage by disintermediating existing physical retail channels and selling directly to customers online.'	[108]
Competence downshift	You want to be seen as relatable; They want to be treated with respect and receive accurate information.	'I concur, this is an absolute necessity' **versus** 'yeah, that sounds about right.'	[109,110]

outcomes from poor decisions. When individuals have multiple goals, this challenge is even harder. For example, negotiators who extract concessions may be less likeable, but whether or not the actions that achieve this trade-off represent wise decisions depends on the context of the negotiation [111]. Indeed, whether people are successful in enacting behaviors commensurate with their motives will depend on many contextual and personal factors, and some of these factors may be difficult to observe. For example, whether a joke is considered successful may depend on who is listening (e.g. close friend vs boss), where the conversation happens (e.g. bar vs workplace), who the speaker intends to amuse, distract, flatter, or denigrate (e.g. himself, his conversation partner, someone else, or all of the above), and how his interlocutor reacts (e.g. public laughter vs silence; private joy vs sorrow) [112].

One approach scholars have used to identify conversational mistakes is to document 'broken mental models' (e.g. [99,100]). Scholars have documented broken mental models by identifying cases in which individuals misperceive the consequences of their actions and choose actions that actually harm, rather than promote, their desired outcome. For example, an individual motivated to appear competent may fail to seek needed advice (mistakenly believing that by seeking advice, they would appear less competent). In practice, seeking needed advice boosts perceptions of their competence [75]. In situations like these, we suggest that individuals often make poor conversational choices because of their broken mental models. That is, mistaken beliefs limit people's ability to advance their own conversational goals.

Conclusion

In this article, we introduce a novel framework, the Conversational Circumplex, to build our understanding of conversational motives. By introducing this framework, we hope to provide a generative foundation for future scholarship and a useful tool for conversationalists to identify their own motives, discern others' motives, and advance their goals more effectively in conversation. To gauge success in a conversation, we must first understand what conversationalists are hoping to achieve.

Credit author statement

Michael Yeomans: Conceptualization; Writing — original draft; Writing — review and editing; **Maurice E. Schweitzer:** Conceptualization; Writing — original draft; Writing — review and editing; **Alison Wood Brooks:** Conceptualization; Writing — original draft; Writing — review and editing; Project administration.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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