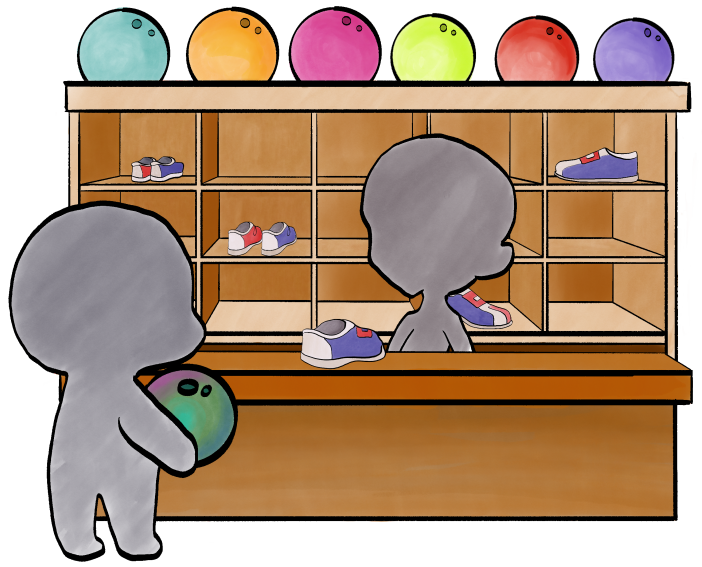


We engage in conversation every day, all the time. We talk face to face, via text messages, on voice calls... But we don't converse in the same way with friends over a meal as we do with our doctor. If your best friend changes the subject three times in the same sentence, chances are you'll let it slide without it bothering you. If your doctor does the same thing, however, it immediately becomes more worrying.



That is precisely the subject of my thesis: trying to understand how dialogue works in its various forms, and in particular how we understand what we're talking about. How we adapt to a current topic, how we move from one subject to another, and why these transitions are sometimes natural... and sometimes completely botched.

A conversation can seem easy, because we've been doing it forever, to the point where we no longer really think about what we're saying, or how we're saying it. By way of comparison, I've spent far too much time thinking about this pitch, even though it's about the only subject I've been thinking about for over three years — because it's not a way of communicating that I use every day.

But conversation is actually far more complex than it seems.

You need to know how to phrase your sentences to be understood, but also to listen to yourself speaking to check that your brain and mouth aren't quietly betraying you.



Being a good conversational partner also means knowing how to listen to the other person, observe them, adapt if they seem lost, and show them that, for our part, we're always there.

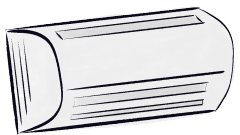
Staying on topic, and picking up on changes in subject that can sometimes be very abrupt, requires even more clues. From silences that lengthen as a topic runs out of steam to unpredictable interruptions from our surroundings that lead to discussions which, taken out of context, no longer make any sense.

For example: if a dragon flies past the window of a room where two people are on a video call with a third, the third person is likely to be completely baffled if the first two suddenly start talking about the dragon.



We come across dragons like this every day without even noticing them. A dragon is the sound of an air conditioner that we can only talk about if everyone else has heard it too. It's the inside joke that makes no sense outside our circle of friends. It's the vocabulary and abbreviations we use to talk about our favourite video game, which mean something completely different outside that specific context.

My job is to try to understand how these dragons impact our environment and to find a way to categorise them in relation to that in a manner that would, eventually, be reproducible by a computer.



More seriously, my thesis examines the differences between types of conversation, and how these differences influence our perception of topics, changes of topic, and, more broadly, our understanding of dialogue, depending on the context — be it physical, social or interactional.

