CONVENTIONS THAT SHAPE SOCIABLE INTERACTION

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Back in the 1950's, I worked on a study of sociability, [1] defined simply as

the interaction that occurs between people when they are being sociable. A major part of this study was the examination of conversation at parties.

Although some of the tangential reports of the study have been published, there has been no published report of the central findings. There are a number of reasons for this. Partly it was the delay in completing the report of the study.   Partly it was because the study was both quantitative and qualitative, and did not seem to fit anywhere on the scene of current research.

I have recently re-read the reports of this study, and found it still relevant and interesting. I have decided to offer here a short account of what we did, and, as I see it now, of the view of sociability that emerged from this research.

I. OVERVIEW OF THE PARTY STUDY

1) THE DATA. Parties come in all shapes and sizes. In choosing which ones to observe for the study, we looked for parties that were small enough so that one observer could get a sense of the entire party. A large cocktail party, for example, would be unsuitable because one could report only on oneself and one's immediate contacts. Also, it was necessary that the parties we selected include conversation as a major activity.

Such parties were defined by participants as private. The demand for privacy was a major barrier for us. We tried several different methods of access, but in the end we found that we had to have the same relationship with participants as they had with each other. As outsiders, we would miss the significance of much of the interaction, and indeed, would be so much of a disturbing factor as to destroy the phenomena we wished to observe.

Several observers were working on the project. We each tried to expand as much as possible the range of parties to which we had natural access, but we could not get a detailed report of party conversation except at parties that included ourselves, with friends and/or acquaintances.   We supplemented this central body of data with briefer party reports from other people and other places, so that in the end we had reports of 60 parties from 10 different cities and 8 different states. In preparation for the final report, we prepared an appendix giving a brief summary of each of the 60 parties.

The 60 party reports were uneven in quality. We divided them into three categories.

i.) Twenty-six parties that were most fully reported were selected for intensive study. Each written report was divided into episodes, and we coded each episode[2].

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FN 2. For more detail on the definition of an episode, see Watson and Potter, "An Analytic Unit for the Study of Interaction." In episode analysis, the speaker(s) and listener(s) are treated as a single unit; they work together to shape what happens. The shift of the speaking role back and forth between them is unimportant.

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The code was lengthy and, befitting an exploratory study, included many different qualitative codes. Two persons coded each party, and every difference between them was discussed and resolved. Parties selected for coding ranged in number of episodes from 40 to 149, giving us a total of 1873 episodes with an average of 72 per party.

ii.) A second set of 14 parties was reported in detail sufficient to permit coding of "sequences." Each party was divided into sequences, with an average of 9 per party. An experienced coder coded each party, using the full episode code for each sequence. This gave us an auxiliary sample against which we could check any findings from the first analysis.

iii.) A third set of 20 parties increased the range of our observations, but reports could not be used to identify either episodes or sequences. Instead, each report gave information about the party as a whole.

Combining the three sets of parties gave us 60 parties that we used to develop a classification of party type.

The 26 parties that received the most exhaustive attention were all in our own general milieu – directly or indirectly connected with a university, in the metropolitan area of either Detroit or Chicago. The larger set of 60 parties included 15 (25%) from non-academic milieus.

This set of parties was in no sense a representative sample. Rather, it was an enlarged and objectified representation of the slice of life visible to a particular set of people at a particular time and place. Other people in other places would see other parties, even then, Now, with the passage of time, there is even more reason to expect difference.

For comparison with the party informaton, we collected two other sets of data. We obtained reports over several months of the conversation of a group of graduate students who lunched together regularly; and we collected reports over a number of weeks of the conversation among college students who provided the staff for a large family- and-conference summer resort.

2) WHERE WE STARTED. To study sociability meant that we took seriously the things people said when they were not being serious. We started with the proposition that party conversation was an expressive art form that must be described in its own terms. We found that a party gave expressive recognition to the feelings that participants had about one another

as <u>persons</u>, about themselves as a <u>group</u>, and about their <u>shared concerns</u>. Each of these provided a separate vantage point for the analysis of sociability, although all three could be present in the interaction at the same time.

3) OUR CONCLUSION. Party conversation is a form of collective behavior, governed by conventions familiar to participants. These conventions represent the distillation of experience as to how the persons present can pool their individual energies to achieve a satisfactory form of collective activity. Each convention provides a stereotyped solution to the question of how to talk together in a sociable situation.

A convention must follow rules that are known to participants and within their sphere of competence.   Each person at a party should be able to participate freely. A convention must be sufficiently <u>well-defined</u> to be quickly recognized; sufficiently <u>resonant</u> among the persons present to engage their support; and sufficiently <u>familiar</u> so that persons present now what to do. In a sense, conversing at parties is a participatory sport. The conventions reflect the vision, needs, and expectations of the participants.

Individuals can exert only limited influence on what happens at a party. It would be judged unsociable if one were to require that others at a party act in ways for which they were unprepared, or which they considered inappropriate. Similarly, it would be considered unsociable for one person to monopolize the conversation, talking only about the things that were important to her or to him. Successful interventions by individuals are likely to be ones that initiate a move from one convention to another.

Some conventions are widely known throughout a culture; others are unique to a particular group or sub-culture.

II. SEVEN SOCIABLE CONVENTIONS

The idea that conventions shape sociable conversation became clear only recently.   It grew out of two parts of the research.

The first of these was what we called "motive-style". We defined motive-style as an organizing, energizing constellation of <u>demand</u>, <u>expectation</u> and <u>performance</u> that serves to model behavior in a particular situation.

The motive-style does for the sociable group what a motive does for an individual: when aroused, it propels persons forward into action, signaling which topics and sentiments are appropriate to include in the conversation and which ones are inappropriate or irrelevant.

Unlike work-oriented interaction, sociable interaction offers no formal goal to give structure to the conversation.   Instead, it is the pathway that gives structure. Participants "take off" from some commonly recognized point of departure, and find their way because the path is familiar. Both the "motive" (type of gratification to be attained; emotions to be expressed) and the "style" (approved means of achieving the gratification; kind of belief to be expressed) contribute to the definition of "what to do". It is the conventional fusion of motive and style that serves to pattern behavior and generate movement.

The definition of motive-style could also serve as a definition of sociable convention.

In the study, we treated motive-styles as expressions of positive or negative affect. For persons and objects not present, we distinguished between enthusiasm and mockery. If the conversation expressed positive feelings between partners, we described the motive-style as affiliative.

The second aspect of the research that contributed to the idea of sociable convention was the development of party type. We were able to classify all 60 parties, using categories based upon the indicators of festivity, thoughtful appraisal and identity maintenance. I would say now that each of these indicators represented one or more sociable conventions.

Working from these two classifications, we developed a list of 7 conventions that apply to sociable conversation. It seems to me that these seven conventions still have validity today for the description of sociable interaction, although they may be only a beginning: there is no limit to the number of additional conventions that may be discovered.

1) Mockery: a style in which participants join together to mock others. Most often, this means that members of an in-group mock members of an out-group having special significance for them.

2) Festivity: playful, perhaps boisterous, conversation that expresses a sense of having fun.

3) Thoughtful appraisal: serious discussion of topics that are important to participants.

4) Prospecting: topics chosen are ones for which information is widely available, although perhaps not of great interest, and people who do not know each other use the topics to find a way of connecting with one another.

5) Self disclosure: participants engage in self-disclosure and empathy, often in a dyad.   They may or may not have been acquainted prior to the party.

6) Routine identity-maintenance: individuals talk in a friendly way about their current activities.

7) Tending the parish: people who share membership in some school, work group, profession, institution, community, or other collective unit come together in sociable activity that complements their collective enterprise.

A more detailed discussion of each of the seven conventions is given below.

Mockery referred to interaction in which people joined together to literally "make fun of" others with whom they were somehow connected. Typically, the in-group mocked the out-group, although the mocking attitude also could be extended to others. Mockery was more likely to occur in some situations than others. It was higher in groups than in dyads, higher for men than for women, and high under certain conditions of acquaintance.

A study of acquaintance by Robert J. Potter[3] indicated that one kind

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FN (3) Potter, Robert J. "Interpersonal Ties and Interaction."
Doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1965.

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of relationship was closely connected with mockery. He classified acquaintance by the frequency with which persons saw each other prior to the party, and the degree to which they had voluntary control over meeting. The "familiar" relationship was one in which people belonged to the same face-to-face group and had no choice about maintaining frequent contact with each other. "Institutional colleagues" also shared membership in some form of institution, but did not have frequent contact. Familiars were strongly inclined toward mockery, using it to convert an ambivalent relationship into a resource for festivity.

In our study, the persons with familiar acquaintance most often were graduate students, and the out-group whom they mocked was most often the faculty. Other examples of familiar groups might be neighbors who saw each other frequently, work groups, or, by our definition, married partners after several years of marriage.

Familiars have a special problem in sociability. A party is normally an event that celebrates the coming-together of persons who have something in common, but who have been apart. Familiars have not been apart. They have no special pleasure in coming together. Instead, they need to find a way of having fun that celebrates their distance from the daily situation that requires their presence, and yet affirms their positive connection with each other.

At the parties we observed most closely, familiars often took the route of mockery, joining together to make fun of their teachers and of others in the

university. We also encountered other conventions. In one set of friends reported to us, each person adopted a kind of mythological character, and successive parties served to manifest and explore these mythological characters. At the luncheon group of graduate students, the conversation typically referred to an ongoing radio comedy team, repeating and enlarging on the most recent comedy routines.

Examples.

Mocking the out-group:

Someone asked if everyone had seen the article in the student newspaper asking who runs the University. Karl agreed with the article that the Development Office does. There was general disapproval of "development offices"; laughter and jokes.

Mocking Others:

Derek told a story about an Austrian lieutenant in World War I, who gave the order to "charge" and jumped up to lead his men. As he got outside the trench he turned to find the men all clapping for him. David said they must have been replacement troops.

The two conventions of thoughtful appraisal and festivity were very much alike in some ways, and quite opposite in others. Each of these conventions was rooted in the party as a whole, rather than in the composition of the episode. Each required a group situation, in which the contributions of one partner built upon another. Persons did not talk about themselves and their ordinary lives, except as these might contribute to the cooperative group product. Each might generate a kind of excitement compounded of pleasure in association and pleasure in the ongoing collective activity.

In other ways, these two conventions were opposite and incompatible.

Festive conversation might be deliberately playful, departing from normal in the direction of being trivial, silly, exhibitionistic, impulsive, noisy, or stereotyped. It might move toward expression of ideas and emotions usually surrounded by taboos: aggressive or sexual impulses; non-responsible, destructive, or nihilistic views. Or it might take the form of culture-building, in which participants cooperated in using fantasy, nonsense, or artifacts of the party to build a verbal product that was resonant for them while they were together, but that would not outlast the party. The content of such conversation was almost irrelevant. People were not supposed to think, but to feel and do, express, using humor and often talking nonsense.

Example: Festivity.

> (This episode is taken from a report obtained when the host invited guests to reassemble at his house on a Sunday afternoon two weeks after a Saturday night party. In the presence of a tape recorder, they reconstructed the party. Report was divided into sequences.)
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> **(Kevin, a pharmacist)….and rat…rat…rat poison…warfarin. (all laughing; Pete says:) What? (Kevin) Warfarin. Todd and I had a discussion on rat poisons and warfarin…(laughter) (Betty:) The main thing… (Kevin:) …and that was brought up at least a dozen times. (Pete:) We kept returning to it. Like the theme in Beethoven's Fifth. How does that sound? The party would get going and .. What do you call that? (Kevin:) Warfarin. (Pete:)…and somebody would say, Well, now, what about warfarin? And then everybody just roared. (laughter)**

Festivity was a fragile art form.   It needed cooperation among the guests in taking risks – fun comes partly from the element of novelty, or challenge to ordinary taboos – but it also was important for guests to know which norms they would observe while disregarding others. When guests had to manufacture their own festivity out of conversation, they had to know and trust each other. Festivity could not succeed unless guests had it within their power to relate successfully to one another and/or to the festive resources. Otherwise, there might be a single moment of pleasure -- perhaps a shout of "surprise!" – followed by a period of silence or embarrassment as guests struggled to find a way to talk together.

Thoughtful Appraisal, in contrast to festivity, called for people to think; to be serious and responsible. They might try to demonstrate artistry and imagination; they might use enthusiasm or dramatization to heighten interest. Creativity was needed to maximize insight into the subject being discussed.

Example: Thoughtful appraisal.

> (Talk had been about the recent presidential campaign, in which Anne had worked for the losing candidate.)

> **We also got into a discussion of the type of cabinet he (the losing candidate) would have picked, and the probability that it would have been composed of experts in the various branches, rather than men who have simply proven their business ability.**

The convention of thoughtful appraisal has come down to us from the elite salons of Europe, London, and New York. We are told that practitioners of this art knew and kept themselves informed about the topics likely to be discussed at a party. At a public school in England, for instance, students

knew that they must read the morning newspaper before coming down to breakfast, so that they could take part in the breakfast conversation. With respect to parties, there would be implicit agreement on the pool of resources appropriate for sociable conversation – resources with which all were familiar.

Conversation of this kind was analyzed by Georg Simmel in his essay on sociability.[4] He saw sociability as talk for its own sake, a "pure" form of

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FN 4. Translated by Kurt H. Wolff as Part One, section III, Sociability, in <u>The Sociology of Georg Simmel</u>, The Free Press, 1950.

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of sociology in which form was freed from all ties with content. He emphasized that personal concerns must be eliminated as factors in sociability, so that all could come to the conversation as equals. Attributes of individuals were present only in shadow-play. Attention was focused outward, away from the persons present and toward matters in the outer world.

The examples that came to our attention were somewhat different. Participants did not share a general culture of sociable resources, of the kind described above. Instead, conversation drew upon the resources of individuals who were present, but generalized these so that they became topics accessible to all. Although attention might appear to be focused on some part of an outer world, interest was heightened for these particular people because of their knowledge that this particular resource had special meaning for one or more of the persons present. In our examination of such conversation, it was crucial to have the help of the observer. An outsider considering only the written record would not be able to identify the personal significance of the various topics.

Individuals brought many potential resources to a party -- experience, knowledge, points of view, sentiments, types of awareness. For these resources to be made available to others, they had to be presented in ways that were interesting; evocative of response from others; responsive to different points of view; and sufficiently separate from the individual so that he or she need not assimilate either criticism or praise. This was a matter of art, but not of disengagement.

Possibly our difference from Simmel reflects the democratization of sociability. Sociability as such emerged in the experience of an upper-class elite. As it became part of the lives of other groups and classes, a more relativistic view came to be appropriate. The convention of salon sociability -- thoughtful appraisal -- remains attractive to those who choose to be bound by it. To others who choose different conventions, the model can appear stilted, irrelevant, and pretentious.

Prospecting, There are certain topics that resemble news of the day in being always available for an update. These include the weather; sports; the stock market; TV; perhaps a movie or other public entertainment.

Discussion of these topics could occur as part of another convention – thoughtful appraisal; routine identity-maintenance; self-disclosure.

When one or more of these topics was used as a way of establishing connections among strangers, there seemed to be a different convention. The problem was given by the need to converse with others without knowing

anything about them. The solution was to utilize topics presumed to be public, accessible to everyone. The object was not so much to explore the topics, which might not be particularly interesting in themselves, as to be able to communicate with strangers.

Identity-Maintenance. Sociability is largely a process of selective association. The host chooses the guests to invite, and the participants choose others who will be appropriate partners for conversation. In so doing, the participants select various attributes and identifications that will be appropriate for the particular partner and occasion. These are the aspects of identity that will be confirmed.

Parties are often given to celebrate identity-relevant occasions.   The young child begins with birthday parties, and later there will be parties to celebrate engagements, weddings, graduations, and even deaths. Similarly, parties are given to mark the significant points in collective life.   Parties are given when someone is leaving, and when someone new arrives. They are given to celebrate completion of one phase of work or school, or in celebration of national or religious holidays.

Pleasure in identity maintenance is heightened at points of transition, when it may be necessary for persons to catch up on what has happened to one another during a period of absence, or to prepare for the continuation or cessation of a relationship in a future that will be changed.

Most of the identity-maintaining conversation that we saw moved along comfortably, without any particular effort to be creative. The image of

sociable interaction as a form of behavior calling for skillful management did not seem to exist, as it might do under the conventions of thoughtful appraisal or festivity. Talk seldom violated prevailing norms. Rather, it explored the range of perspective that was normative for the set of people assembled.

We found three motive-styles that contributed to the maintenance of identity, each in a different way.

<u>Self disclosure.</u> This is a familiar sociable convention. Individuals engage in a kind of mutual interviewing, with each seeking to learn more about the other. A classic example of this convention would be the conversation between two strangers who meet while in transition, as on a bus, train or airplane, and use the time to reveal to each other a great deal about themselves.

In the process of self-disclosure, individuals choose what to say about themselves and what to ask of others. This might mean providing information by which one could be classified – line of work, astrological sign, place of origin, etc. (Members of the sociability project found it a considerable deprivation that, in most sociable situations, they could not mention their interest in studying sociability.) The conversation could develop themes of current concern or emotional engagement. Sometimes it was a matter of providing more detail about a characteristic that was already partly known. Flirtation was another example. However, we found self-disclosure to have the same quality and frequency for same-sex pairs as for cross-sex pairs.

Example: Self disclosure.

After dinner Amelia and Michelle had a brief and intense spell of sharing mutual feminist ideas and worries about the young married women who settle too soon for domesticity.

<u>Routine identity-maintenance</u>. British social-psychiatrist A.T.M. Wilson has suggested [5] that a person tests and reaffirms his basic assumptions about

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(5) "Latent aspects of human association." Mimeo, 1954.

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who he is and what he is on every day of his life.   He does this in part by observing that the world in which he lives is the same today as it was yesterday, and in part by observing that other people have the same impressions of him today as they had yesterday. It is the continuing set of responses received from others that gives stability to his world and to his image of self.

One example of such response and affirmation was the conversation that we termed routine identity-maintenance. The individual was seen realistically, in the context of his contemporary concerns and identifications, and the interaction mobilized esteem and affection within this context. Conversations expressed feelings of warmth between persons; explored recent activities, difficulties, or achievements; and affirmed the validity of whatever concerns were discussed. Conversations served not only to maintain the sense of self for participants and the friendly relationship between them, but also to give definition to the world in which they lived.

Example: Routine identity-maintenance.

 (Report of an open house in a southern town. Report was divided into sequences.)

The people who were good friends living in town talked of their children and what their family had been doing the past few days. If someone was present who had not been around in a long time (like myself), part of the conversation was devoted to talk of changes in the town, catching the wanderer up on local news about friends -- houses built, children born, etc.

Tending the Parish. Parties were often given to bring together people from the same membership group – work group, school group, network, organization, community, or other collective enterprise.   (I shall use the terms "group" or "parish" to mean any face-to-face collective unit.) Parties might occur on an occasional basis, or they might be a regular part of the weekly, monthly, or yearly schedule of the group.   We have called them parochial, to emphasize the way in which, under this convention, conversation was restricted to the concerns of the parish.

Parochial parties affirmed the articles of faith held by the group, and explored matters of concern to the group. Insiders at such a party could engage in gossip and shop-talk. There might be exchange of information and opinion about distant part of the parish. Outsiders were excluded, unless they could show themselves able to take part in the rituals of the group. A person was of interest only in the context of his or her role. A committed member of the parish would enjoy parochial parties, while an outsider would find them dull.

Parochial sociability served to maintain the boundaries of the group, demonstrating who was included and who was excluded. Also, conversation made clear the position of the parish in relation to outsiders: who were allies, who were antagonists.

Parochial parties might include "visiting firemen", entertainment, games, or other stimuli to a change of focus. Insofar as they served to maintain identity, it was the identity of the group that was affirmed.

Example: Tending the parish.

> **A mathematician accompanied me to a party of sociologists. He was asked repeatedly whether he was interested in mathematics for the social sciences. When he said no, the conversation came to an end: there was nothing more for them to talk about.**

III. DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTY CONVERSATION

A review of the many qualitative party characteristics examined in our study indicates two that should be given special attention. Each is a way of behaving found fairly uniformly across a wide range of parties. Each is less frequent in non-party interaction.   Consequently, each may be considered to be specifically characteristic of parties. One involves the treatment of self, the other, the treatment of the conversational topic, or resource.
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<u>Personal surrogates</u>

People coming to a party were likely to select from their own experience topics that they could make interesting to others. When they succeeded in doing this, so that the topic proved to be of interest to the listener(s), we would say that the connection between the participants was provided by a personal surrogate. If the topic was not in itself interesting to the listener(s), so that the listener(s) continued in the conversation only out of a friendly feeling toward the speaker, then we would consider the tie between persons to be one of friendship or goodwill rather than a personal surrogate.

Any aspect of a person's work, values, knowledge, experience, or any person with whom he or she was connected could serve as a personal surrogate, provided that it had intrinsic interest for the person(s) listening.   Personal surrogates were sufficiently separate from self so that others could talk about them without direct personal comment, but sufficiently tied to the protagonist to bring into the conversation something of his or her personal quality.

Personal surrogates were used in slightly less than a third of all coded episodes, and frequency of use did not vary significantly between one type of party and another.

However, there was some relation to acquaintance. Use of personal surrogates was relatively high in conversation among partners who were already in the process of becoming acquainted, and relatively low among people who saw each other routinely, or who were observed in non-party sociable situations. Familiars and institutional colleagues both showed about half the typical party usage of personal surrogates. The college students at the summer resort used personal surrogates with about the same frequency as familiars and colleagues at parties.

Example: Self-Surrogate.

>(Lila, a professional woman with children who does some of her work at home, got into) …

>**---a discussion of income tax. She noted having been called in by the IRS because she had claimed deductions for the rent of a study, for book depreciation, and such things, which the agent disallowed. He told them flatly that these considerations were out of the question, and that……**

<u>Legend</u>

Just as persons increased their interest for others through use of personal surrogates, so, too, they were likely to choose a conversational style that would heighten interest in the topic. We considered five styles, of which the legendary style proved to be the one most characteristic of parties. It may be of interest to list all five, partly to give an idea of the frequency of each in the set of parties we examined, and partly because the definition of what legend IS consists partly of what legend IS NOT.

The five styles were as follows.

<u>Referential conversation</u> (25% of all coded episodes) was believed to be accurate about the real world. It had a place at parties, particularly in connection with identity maintenance, but usually that was not enough. It was important that there should also be some expansion of focus, some departure from literal modes of thought.

Sometimes people at a party were able to move toward evaluation and exploration of ideas, and <u>exciting intellectual interchange</u>. (8% of the episodes.)

Sometimes they were able to move toward play and fantasy. (20% of the episodes.)

Sometimes they engaged in what we saw as interest in passing oddities – -- a weird story from the current newspaper, perhaps. (5% of the episodes)

However, the style of conversation that was most frequent at the parties we saw was what we called legendary (42% of the episodes).

These categories may be considered to represent different kinds of belief. In referential conversation, people talked about things they believed to be true. In fantasy, it was clear that the things they said were not true. But legend was the language of "half-truth": people could talk at the time as if they believed the legend implicitly, and yet be free to claim the next day that they did not mean what they said.

Possibly the readiness to claim that a legend should not be taken seriously was actually a means of protecting the right to take it seriously in spite of contrary evidence. In legendary conversation the rules of evidence were modified or suspended. However, if facts were missing or ambiguous, legendary communication about matters of common concern could provide an alternate route to belief. Legends could be one of the major products that remained after the party was over.

To say that party conversation was often legendary was to say that people at parties told stories. They told stories about themselves, about other people, about events of interest.   We called these stories legends, because of the way they combined facts with wishful thinking.

Legends showed imagination. They were dramatic and consistent with other legends. They were presented as if they were true.

Legends were not open to critical examination. In a legendary conversation, a listener might add to the legend, might match it with a similar legend or counter it with a competing legend, but might not introduce a (referential) set of facts to show that the legend was partly true and partly false. Example: If A said Paris was a marvelous city, B might counter that it was a horrible city, but C might not offer statistics to show that it was both.

Example: Legend.

> **Stephanie said she loved to be in the mountains in the winter when it was   so quiet. Irene picked up this idea and said that she and her husband spent three months of the summer on a mountain top in Wyoming, and how wonderful that quiet was.**
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> (See also previous examples referring to the University Development Office; the lieutenant in World War I; the sharing of feminist ideas; and the income tax agent.)

Like personal surrogates, legends were found in many kinds of parties, but were particularly high for partners who were already in the process of becoming acquainted.

This leads us to believe that for the parties we saw, a major function of party conversation was to facilitate the development of acquaintance. This process relied heavily upon legend and upon personal surrogates. At the same time, in providing an opportunity for the display of multiple surrogates, sociability allowed the individual to achieve a broader sense of self than was possible in any of his or her many separate roles.

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