On Lazy Talk

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In Lakshmikanta Mohapatra’s celebrated Oriya novel *Kanaa Maamu*, published about fifty years ago, there are a few pieces of conversation of considerable length, which we take to be creative renderings of a subcategory of conversation that we might call “lazy talk”. What is worth noting about such talk is that whereas its form gives the impression that the goal of the interaction is information-seeking, its content shows that it is not really so. The overall purpose of the exchange is not always to start or maintain a relationship; one does not always come across any explicit signals or underlying suggestions that show that one of the participants is seriously concerned with making the interaction particularly friendly for the other. Even when an interaction happens to be the first for the participants, there is no special strategy that is adopted in order to show any particular concern for one another. This, however, may not come as a surprise; in certain situations there may not be any need for it. For instance, in the socio-cultural situation of a village in Orissa (surely elsewhere too, at least in India), where the inhabitants relate to one another by virtue of simply being its inhabitants, special, relation-building conversational devices become unnecessary. It appears that the goal of lazy talk is to create talk for the sake of some recreation.

This paper is concerned with one instance of such talk. The label “lazy talk” is indeed somewhat misleading in that it is neither about laziness nor confined to the lazy. It might appear to be close to gossip, and might get reduced to it on occasions, but it may not really belong to this category since it lacks its negativity. It is not rumour, but might degenerate into it; however, it is useful to distinguish it from rumour as it is not motivated by any mischievous or malicious intention - it does not aim to spread scandal or panic, etc. through calculated manipulation of information. Although it might appear to be so, it is not always a “time pass” talk, borrowing the expression from the so-called Bombaiyya idiom. “Time pass” suggests an effort to make the best of a rather difficult situation; for example, one has to commute for two hours in a local train to go to work, and one is trying to do something that would minimize the boredom and the unpleasantness. But the context of the interaction is very different in lazy talk. At this stage we would merely like to observe that it is more like friendly, leisurely talk, an eminently enjoyable conversation under no difficult circumstances. Owing to pressures of modernization, social life in changing in certain obvious ways, and as a consequence, at least the particular kind of lazy talk that is dealt with here, may be on its way into oblivion.

Lazy talk of the kind under discussion here has probably its ancestor in what we might call “tease talk”. In the Oriiya culture (and surely in many others too), certain relations are “tease relations”, such as the ones holding between the grandparents (more specifically...
maternal) and grandchildren, elder sister-in-law and unmarried younger brother-in-law, brother-in-law and unmarried younger sister-in-law, etc. Among them tease talk, which has sexual overtones is licensed.\footnote{This does not necessarily mean that the girl likes such talk or is expected to encourage the same.} Rath Nayak’s generalization is that tease relation holds between the (sexually) experienced and the inexperienced.\footnote{The source is my telephonic conversation with him on August 26, 2006. There seems to be an exception to this generalization. Tease talk is not strictly ruled out between the brother-in-law and the younger sister-in-law, even after her marriage.} It does not hold between the experienced – for instance, the elder brother and the younger brother’s wife. Thus as part of tease talk a septuagenarian grandfather (or grandmother) could ask even his ten or eleven year old granddaughter (or grandson) to marry him (or her), and she (he) could say in reply that she would never marry an ugly, old man (woman).\footnote{According to some, such talk between the “grandfather” and the “granddaughter” is permissible when they are not biologically related. Thus one could say this to the neighbour’s or his close friend’s kid with whom he has a grandfatherly relation.}

The grand parent-grandchild tease talk, \textit{ajaa naati kathaa} (literally, the grandfather-grandson talk), may be somewhat of a special kind of tease talk for at least the following reasons: the participants engage in it more often in family groups than do, say, the brother-in-law and his younger sister-in-law. Besides, here the subject of the talk may only occasionally have sexual overtones. A grandchild could pleasantly embarrass the grandfather by asking him about, say, the computer or the mobile phone or some new music system and laugh at his ignorance. In return the grandparent might ask the grandchild the name of his grandfather’s father, and tease him about his failure. Whereas among other relations either party could initiate such talk, here the grandparent would initiate it if it has to have sexual overtones. Incidentally the grandparents and the grandchildren may not be biologically related; this relation can be social too, as is often found in villages, and old towns and cities where social bonds between families are strong. Sometimes a father may introduce his colleague’s father to his children as their grandfather to show his affection (real or professed) for his colleague’s family. Tease talk is obviously for some good fun, and no one is supposed to take offence, and no one actually does, unless permissible limits are rather seriously violated. Grandparent-grandchild tease talk is often quite short, generally and quite expectedly, not exceeding just a few statement-response sequences. Further details of this category of exchange need not detain us here.

The context of the lazy talk under discussion here is the visit to the local “gymnasium” of Bairam Khan, popularly called Khalipha Saheb. He is an old and genial Muslim gentleman from a neighbouring village. When he was young, he was known as a wrestler in the locality. He was credited to have defeated some wrestlers from the very land of wrestlers, namely, Punjab. He visits the gymnasium with Kana Mamu (“blind uncle”), who is the inspiration behind the gymnasium, and who is loved, feared and revered by the young men of the village who use the gymnasium. Incidentally, Kana Mamu is blind in one eye, and that is how he came to be called “Kana Mamu”. As the Khalipha Saheb and Kana Mamu arrive, the latter asks the young men present there to salute the former, and
introduces them to the guest saying they are his grandchildren. With an indulgent smile the guest acknowledges the relation. It is as though Kana Mamu performed an illocutionary speech act! It is only a bit later that he gave the group some more informative introduction of Khan Saheb, who, he said, was his trainer.

The maternal grandfather-grandchild relation is established when the guest responds to Kana Mamu’s introduction of the young men as his grandchildren by saying in so many words that they are indeed his grandchildren. Then the talk proceeds in the manner of the familiar maternal grandfather-grandchild talk. But in contrast with normal tease talk, here the tease talk is not so short; in fact it’s somewhat longish. The theme of the talk is the Khalipha Saheb’s pilgrimage to Mecca for Haj, from where he had just returned, as Kana Mamu informs the group.

After he blesses those present in the traditional manner, in the true wrestler style, he asks them whether they eat eggs. On being told that they don’t and that they eat water rice, he advises them to discard this degenerating food, and eat four eggs a day for their “youth to blossom”, a phrase that has a mild sexual suggestion. Incidentally, he talks in a mixed code, as do the Oriya Muslims in real day-to-day life, especially when they talk to the Oriya Hindus. The Oriya Muslims mix Urdu / Hindi words with Oriya in varying degrees, as in (1) se (O), dusraa (U) achi (O) “that – different – is” (“that’s different”), and (2) tabiyat (U) maati (O) banijiba (O) “body – earth – will become” (“body will be reduced to earth.”), etc. Occasionally they also use one or two syntactic patterns of Urdu, - for example, the copula construction ((as in (1)). In Oriya, the copula does not surface when the tense is simple present. Notice the absence of the copula in dilli bhaaratara raajadhaani “Delhi – India’s – capital” (“Delhi is the capital of India.”). In Urdu the copula surfaces; thus the corresponding code-mixed sentence would be dilli bhaaratara raajadhaani achi, where the last word is the copula in the simple present form and has the necessary agreement features. To take another example, in a bi-clausal sentence, there could be two locatives, one in each clause, and the postposition of the first locative could be main (U) and that of the second clause, re (O). Such code mixed language is hilarious for the native speaker; in fact, in certain contexts it could be endearingly sweet. There is no negative evaluation of the code. Khalipha Saheb’s language on the one hand makes the portrayal of this character realistic, and also the interaction realistic, and on the other hand sets the tone to an extent for an entertaining discourse.

In the grandfather-grandson talk, the grandfather is supposed to be encouraging, generous, and indulgent, and he would fondly allow the grandson to dictate terms of the exchange in various ways, such as choosing the subject matter, the approach to it, and the tone of the talk, among others. Then it is he who has to keep the grandchild sufficiently

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4 It is a typical example of introduction in the traditional village culture of Orissa and elsewhere in the country. In the village the kinship relation is superimposed on the inhabitants, which in effect amounts to the following: two unrelated persons can use kinship terms to describe their relation; thus one could call a person of an appropriate age badabaapaa “father’s elder brother” or daadaa or saanabaapaa “father’s younger brother”. In this context, Kana Mamu’s introduction is perfectly natural in the given context.

5 What receives censor is the code mixed language of a native speaker of Oriya, especially the so-called standard Oriya.
interested, if the talk is not to end too fast. Now if keeping the interest alive is an over-
riding concern, then facts could take the backseat, if necessary.

Once the relation is established, those concerned must conduct themselves in
accordance with the demands and expectations of that relation; if it requires some
“suspension of disbelief”, then the participants must not be unwilling, and if it requires a
bit of acting, none of them must be grumbling.

Consider some extracts of the talk. The English version is not a translation of the Oriya
dialogue, but only a rendering of it that captures the sense of the original to the extent
required for the present purpose.

Khalipha Saheb wants to be called “Haji Saheb” rather than “Khalipha Saheb”. Mamu
does not understand the term, so Khalipha Saheb explains that those who go to Mecca
and Madina on pilgrimage are called “haji”. This is the context of the first extract, a
conversation in which there are three participants, Khalipha Saheb, Kusuni, and the
narrator:

(a) Kusuni: Why are they called haaji?

Butting in, I said, “Does one become a haaji by saying haanji, haanji in Alla Mian’s
Court, Dada Saheb?”

Mian: This grandchild is very naughty. Come now, wrestle with me, and let me give
you a real hard one!

I: I apologize, Haji Saheb – please do tell me the meaning.

Mian: All this is in Koran Sarif – in Sariat. Have you read Persian and Arabic?

I: Moulavi Saheb was saying that people get lost (haji jaa-aanti) when they go to
Mecca. That is why they are called haaji.

Mian: Good, good! That’s a clever chap! You are right. I had got lost too, but by the
grace of Mohammed Saheb I came back.

I: Haji Saheb, do tell us how you got lost and how you got found!

Mian: O there’s a lot to say –I’ll tell you some other day. (p.1091)

Before discussing the extract, we invite attention to a point about language since the
talk revolves round the Oriya word haaji. There is a word play here based on this word.
If, for the sake of fun, one breaks up the word, treating it as a compound, into haa and ji,
then it brings to mind the Hindi-Urdu haan (yes) (differing from the Oriya haa in the
nasalization of the vowel), and ji, a term of respect in Hindi-Urdu. Thus haanji translates
into “yes sir”. Now, the noun haaji and haji (lost), the verb in its participial form, have
one difference at the phonological level – in the length of the first vowel. Thus if, for the
sake of fun, one relates haaji and haji, then haaji comes to mean “the one who got lost”.

What is most conspicuous in the conversation is the cordiality of tone. Here are two
affectionate and naughty grandchildren talking to an indulgent grandfather, who is
willing to play the game as dictated by the former. He knows that the young men are
pulling his leg, but he would not let them know that he knows it. He allows the initiative
to the young men, but does not totally give up control on the exchange - he is the one who decides when to close a topic, and close the topic he does with grace and élan.

Khalipha Saheb is religious, and an endearingly simple person. Like most ordinary people he does not know the full meaning and the significance of religious practices, which he himself observes. The young men know that he does not know which is why their (information-seeking) questions lack sincerity. They are engaged in a word play, and one can see that they are trying to tease him a bit, without of course meaning any offence to him. Grandchildren often know that their old grandfather does not always know what he pretends to know, and embarrass him by suggesting to him that they are aware of his ignorance.

Consider another extract, which occurs in the middle of the same exchange. At this stage, there is a specific subject to talk about. When someone returns to his village from a visit to some far off place, people ask him about the place, the people there, and about what he saw there and also what all he ate there. In the villages this was, and still is, part of normal, informal discourse of “welcome back”, as it were. The following extract is in that mode.

(b) Nidhi: Where is Mecca? How far from here?
Mian: Do you know about your Oriya people’s Lanka – beyond the seven seas?
Nidhi: Where Ravan lived?
Mian: Yes, yes, that Lanka. Mecca is seven days’ by sea from the same Lanka.
I: Did you go via Lanka?
Mian: That’s the route to Mecca! One has to stay for two days and a half in Lanka.
I: Are there choultries there or hotels?
Mian: Nothing of that sort! One has to stay in the jungle itself – Aasak jungle!
I: What we call asoka vana?
Mian: That’s right! There Ravana was infatuated with Sita; so it is called aasak jungle.
Kusuni: Okay, did you see demons?
Mian: Demons! Oh yes! Such big, big demons!, he said, pointing to the palm trees nearby.
I: They didn’t make tiffin of you, those demons?
Mian: Do you know? Your payagambar (divine messenger) – Ram, those demon people are very much afraid of him.
I: Hadn’t Lord Ram destroyed those demons!
Mian: All-knowing chap! Do you also know that Ram had attacked Lanka with an army of monkeys?
I: Not just monkeys, bears too!
Mian: Yes, yes, monkeys and bears. Demons are the children of the devil; and from that day they are dead scared of monkeys, bears and Ram. The demons surrounded the aasak forest to eat us up. We thought that that would be the end of us. But there was with us an old maulaanaa; he said, some of you cover yourselves with blankets and become bears, and some wear black paint on your faces, and become monkeys. And shouting haaraam, haaraam, attack the demons.
And we all became monkeys and bears as told, and jumped around shouting \textit{haaraam, haaraam}. What fun! The demons – male and female both – fled in fear. There wasn’t a trace of them when the day broke. (pp. 1091-1092)

Almost the entire conversation is in the same vein; therefore this extract can be seen as a representative sample of the entire exchange. One or two observations on language before we come to the nature and the content of the conversation: \textit{asok} is analysed as a (negation marker)- \textit{sok} (unhappiness); as the qualifier of \textit{vana} (forest), it means “beautiful”, although it literally means “not unhappy”. Now Khalipha Saheb perceives it as the mono-morphemic \textit{aasak}, after Urdu, and gives it an entirely different meaning – the meaning it has in Urdu - as evident from the above. Consider then \textit{haaraam} (the forbidden). In Oriya, in order to call (in the present context, “invoke”) someone, one would just use the person’s name (or the name-like term), or use the vocative \textit{he} (or one of its equivalents) and the name in that order: \textit{raam} or \textit{he raam}. The guest perceives the invocation \textit{he raam} as a single entity, i.e., \textit{haaraam}, of Urdu, which has negative connotations. Here it amounts to saying that taking the word Ram is forbidden, but it can be resorted to as a means to fight the devil. Treating \textit{he raam as haaraam} in this sense may or may not be intentional on his part; if at all it is intentional, the intention is not to hurt, but to engage in word play. His addressees take no offence, surely under the assumption that the speaker had no intention to give offence, his use of \textit{aasak} and \textit{haaraam} being simply instances of language interference. Incidentally, there is a certain divide in the language use: the young men who are all Hindus use honorific language (in the form of post-position, agreement, etc.) for Ram and for the Prophet; the guest does not use such language for Ram, but only for the Prophet. But no one minds, it leads to no talk. Interestingly, there is a certain balance in the discourse: in the beginning the young men play with the word \textit{haaji} in order to mildly tease the guest; later, the guest seems to exploit (assuming that this is deliberate, but it may not really be so) the possibilities of \textit{he raam} for fun. But the guest’s action does not smack of a tit-for-tat attitude. Therefore no offence is taken.

It may be noted that it is the guest who controls the discourse now, which is to be expected since it is his narrative that constitutes the subject matter of the conversation at this stage. Both parties know that it is fantasy that is being created collectively and cooperatively. Khalipha Saheb knows that he is only creating a fantasy, and is deluding himself that his listeners do not know it. On the other hand the young men know that the old man is just weaving a tale, a bit of a “mock-myth”, but do not want to let him know that they know what he is up to. In fact, they actually encourage him in that act. Exaggerating a bit, we might observe that no subject, no treatment of a topic is excluded in principle in the grandfather-grandchildren conversation. Here the young men’s questions are slightly ironical, but the guest’s answers appear to be sincere, and without a tinge of irony. The tone of the exchange is entirely friendly, and both sides enjoy the conversation. In tone and content, the entire exchange is reminiscent of the canonical grandfather-grandchild talk, which itself is an instance of a particular kind of lazy talk.
In this section we consider the conversation between the young men and Khalipha Saheb from the point of view of the Gricean maxim of quality, which is in two parts: (i) do not say what you believe to be false, and (ii) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. The special importance of this maxim lies in the fact that unless this maxim is believed to being observed, a conversation cannot just proceed. It is obvious that the extract (b), which is part of a conversation, clearly violates the maxim.

It is well-known that conversations are not constrained so as to satisfy the various maxims, such as quantity, quality, relevance, manner, etc. in the sense that the one that violates one or more of these is evaluated as necessarily ill-formed. When a maxim is violated, implicatures are generated, which are to be resolved in a manner the details of which need not detain us here. When the hearer resolves them, he (/she) arrives at, what he thinks to be, the underlying, intended meaning, in a manner of speaking. Setting aside for our present purposes discourses that are designed to mislead, since the one under discussion in this paper does not belong to this category, we might note that hyperbolic, ironical and metaphorical expressions, among others, violate the quality maxim. Consider the non-literal, and non-figurative expression *gangaayaam ghoshah* (settlement on the river Ganga), which flouts the quality maxim, since the locative marker suffixed to *gangaa* would suggest that the settlement is located on (the surface of) the river. This would give rise to implicatures, which would be resolved with the reinterpretation of the river as the river along with the shores, ignoring many details of the process.

Now what is interesting about the extract under consideration is that the procedure outlined above does not lead to any underlying meaning as in the case of *gangaayaam ghoshah*: quality is obviously flouted in the discourse, but what meaning does a possible resolution of the implicatures generated thereby uncover? It could be essentially the following: the speaker is weaving a tale in order to amuse the listeners. Apart from being hardly illuminating, it also shows that the maxim must apply to the exchange as a whole, and must not apply to the constituent units, which is rather odd.

To tarry awhile on the quality maxim, quite independently of the above, there might be something special about it when we consider it together with the other maxims. Except for the maxim of quality, a certain text is the domain within which it can be determined whether or not that text satisfies the requirement of a maxim. For example, whether a text is over informative or under informative can be determined within the domain of that text itself: in a doctor-patient exchange, the patient’s reply to the doctor’s query as to what he had had for lunch in the form of “I had just a little bit” does not satisfy the requirements of the maxim of quantity – it is clearly under informative. Similarly whether a statement is relevant, or imprecise and wordy, etc. or impolite can be determined within the domain of that statement or within the text in which it occurs. But by confining oneself to the text itself, it is obviously difficult to say whether it satisfies the requirements of the maxim of quality. In this sense the quality maxim seems to be somewhat different from the other maxims.

To return to the questions that the extract under discussion raise with respect to the satisfaction of the quality maxim. One of these is whether there are discourses to which
the maxim of quality only weakly applies - a question that receives legitimacy from most contemporary political discourses, advertisements, and artistic material too, going by Naguib Mehfouz’s statement, “… art is a fantasy, no matter how much it borrows from the truth”; and as far as the “conspiracy theorists” are concerned, the observation holds for arguably all discourses, at least in principle. “Weakly applies” in the preceding sentence means that the conversation would not be terminated or adversely affected in its natural flow even when the participants realize that the quality maxim is not being observed in the interaction. The reasons for the hearer’s tolerance could be context-dependent, and many as well, including being polite to the speaker, or fear of him or the hearer’s own sense of helplessness vis-à-vis the speaker.

In this particular instance of lazy talk, which evokes the lazy and relaxed tone of the grandfather-grandchild talk, however, there might be a different explanation. What seems to be operating here is “willing suspension of disbelief”; a generous pretension of taking as fact the fantasy of an affectionate elderly visitor. In fact, it is more than this: the young people encourage the visitor in his act of fabrication by pretending to be interested in the tale – thus it is as though they together participate in creating the tale. It is in this sense that “weakly applies” is intelligible here.

The question that arises now is whether there are any thematic constraints on such talk. Putting it in another way, would just anything go because the hearer is willing to maximally cooperate? The paper offers no answer to it at some level of generality. Narrowing the question to the present context, it gets translated into whether there is a limit indicating how much fantasy the elder can maximally bring into his tale which, when crossed, would adversely affect the interaction. Intuitively, there would certainly be a limit since the hearer would get weary with fantasy at some stage.

We tentatively suggest that fantasy material be broadly categorized as that which has a social or ethical purpose, and that which does not have any such purpose. The former is significant in a way the latter is not. Works such as Gulliver’s Travels and Animal Farm would belong to the first category, whereas the dialogue under discussion would belong to the second. Perhaps rational beings as we are, we would reach the limit of fatigue rather soon with the fantasy of the second category. We leave the matter here, conceding that our answer to the question is speculative, and unsatisfactory.

In sum, the paper has dealt with a kind of conversation which it calls “lazy talk”, and has discussed, in some detail, a literary construction of one particular instantiation of it, namely, the grandfather-grandchild talk. It notes the violation of the maxim of quality in such talk, without the generation of any implicatures that need to be resolved, which is interesting, and suggests that it is one instance of a kind of talk to which the said maxim only weakly applies.

**Bibliography**