

Words that Work

Bill Noble • MIT Center for Constructive Communication

CLASP-Linguistics Seminar

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Center for Constructive Communication (CCC)

- research lab led by Prof. Deb Roy at the MIT Media Lab
- social media and media analytics tradition → focus on face-to-face conversation
 - piloting programs that seek to build a culture of listening
 - technology and design for facilitation of small-group conversation
- **Cortico** - not-profit technology company / CCC field partner
 - **Fora** - a speech platform designed to bring communities together for listening, understanding, and sharing.
 - Through a balance of human-led and AI-assisted analysis – or “sensemaking” – Cortico helps you surface patterns, themes, and insights across conversations.

Previous work on lexical meaning: Bridging dictionary*

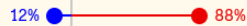
*Jiang, H., Beeferman, D., Brannon, W., Heyward, A., & Roy, D. (2024). Bridging Dictionary: AI-Generated Dictionary of Partisan Language Use. *Companion Publication of the 2024 Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*, 79–82. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3678884.3681820>

Term

government spending



Usage share % ⓘ



Fox News predominantly uses the term "government spending" in a critical context, often associating it with negative outcomes such as inflation, debt, and economic mismanagement. For instance, ⓘ states, "Prices are rising because of their out-of-control government spending." This reflects a conservative viewpoint that emphasizes fiscal restraint and skepticism towards expansive government intervention.

In contrast, **MSNBC** discusses "government spending" in a more neutral or even positive light, often highlighting its benefits or necessity in certain contexts. For example, ⓘ notes, "It's never been more clear that government spending helps Americans, with coronavirus spending causing a record drop in poverty." This reflects a more progressive stance that sees government spending as a tool for social good. **Fox News** uses the term more often because their discourse is heavily focused on critiquing government policies and advocating for reduced spending.

Alternative terms that might appeal to both groups include "public investment" or "fiscal policy," as these can be framed positively or negatively depending on the context.

View samples from Fox News



Term

Usage share % ⓘ ↑

government spending	12% 88%
leftists	12% 88%
racists	13% 87%
bureaucracy	13% 87%
liars	14% 86%
right wing	85% 15%
left wing	15% 85%
inflation	17% 83%
deportation	18% 82%
evangelical	81% 19%
liberties	19% 81%



How do words work in conversation?

- linguistic meaning depends on **common ground**
- **lexical common ground** is our shared vocabulary
 - *speakers of English*
 - *members of FLoV*

How do words work in conversation?

- linguistic meaning depends on **common ground**
- **lexical common ground** is our shared vocabulary
 - *speakers of English*
 - *members of FLoV*
- Non-linguistic(?) common ground also affects lexical interpretation:
 - shared **perceptual context**
 - **interactive context**

***Ad hoc* lexical meaning**

In-context word meaning which is arrived at through a combination of shared lexical resources and interactive context.

- word sense disambiguation
- lexical adaptation (e.g., vague predicates)
- lexical innovation (metaphor, metonymy, ...)

Example: Implicit coordination

D: A docksider

M: A what?

D: Um

M: Is that a kind of dog?

D: No, it's a kind of um leather shoe, kinda preppy pennyloafer

M: Okay, okay, got

thereafter referred to as *the pennyloafer*.

Matching task transcript*

*Brennan, S. E., & Clark, H. H. (1996). Conceptual Pacts and Lexical Choice in Conversation. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, And Cognition*, 22(6), 1482.

Example: Explicit coordination via *contrastive focus reduplication**

- 1 GM: She [Ann] loves Saddam Hussein.
- 2 M: I'm sure she doesn't *love* Saddam. I'm sure she's **interested** in him as a subject, you know.
- 3 GM: Right. That's what I meant.
- ...
- 14 GM: I kind of **love** her. [*referring to Ann*]
- 15 M: You mean you love her like... like she loves Saddam, right?
- 16 GM No, no. I mean, like, I *love-her-love-her*.

Arrested Development S1E14[†]

*Ghomeshi, J., Jackendoff, R., Rosen, N., & Russell, K. (2004). Contrastive Focus Reduplication in English (The Salad-Salad Paper). *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 22(2), 307–357. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:NALA.0000015789.98638.f9>

[†]<http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~krussll/redup-corpus>

Finding words that work

Finding words that work

- When and how does **implicit** and **explicit** lexical semantic coordination contribute to *constructive communication*?
 - ▶ What dynamics are at play in the **salient reuse** of key lexical items?
 - ▶ How do participants and facilitators use **word meaning negotiation**?

Finding words that work

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 - What dynamics are at play in the **salient reuse** of key lexical items?
 - How do participants and facilitators use **word meaning negotiation**?
- How can we encourage productive coordination?
 - through **facilitation strategies**
 - with tools that encourage **critical reflection**

Relevance theory

- the meaning of an expression *type* underdetermines the *content* that is communicated
 - not only implicatures but also **explicit propositional content**
- Meaning modulation involves interaction between lexically encoded concept, other concepts in the utterance, contextual information, and expectations of relevance.*
 - outcome is the *ad hoc* concept → derived for the particular occasion of use

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a. I've eaten.

Communicating: I'VE EATEN DINNER TONIGHT

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b. He told her the combination and she opened the safe

Communicating: TOM TOLD SUE THE COMBINATION FOR THE LOCK AND SUE
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c. The water is boiling.

Communicating: THE WATER IS VERY HOT [NOT NECESSAIRILY AT BOILING POINT]

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Meaning potential*

- lexicalized meaning does not express a concept *per se* but rather a **semantic affordance** for computing in-context meaning (cf. relevance theory[†])
- parts of a word's meaning potential are **evoked, activated or materialised** depending on context
- formally construed: in-context word meanings have the traditional semantic type of lexical items; meaning potentials are functions from contexts to those types
- there are Construction Grammar treatments of this view...[‡]

*Norén, K., & Linell, P. (2007). Meaning potentials and the interaction between lexis and contexts: An empirical substantiation. *Pragmatics*, 17(3), 387–416. <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.17.3.03nor>

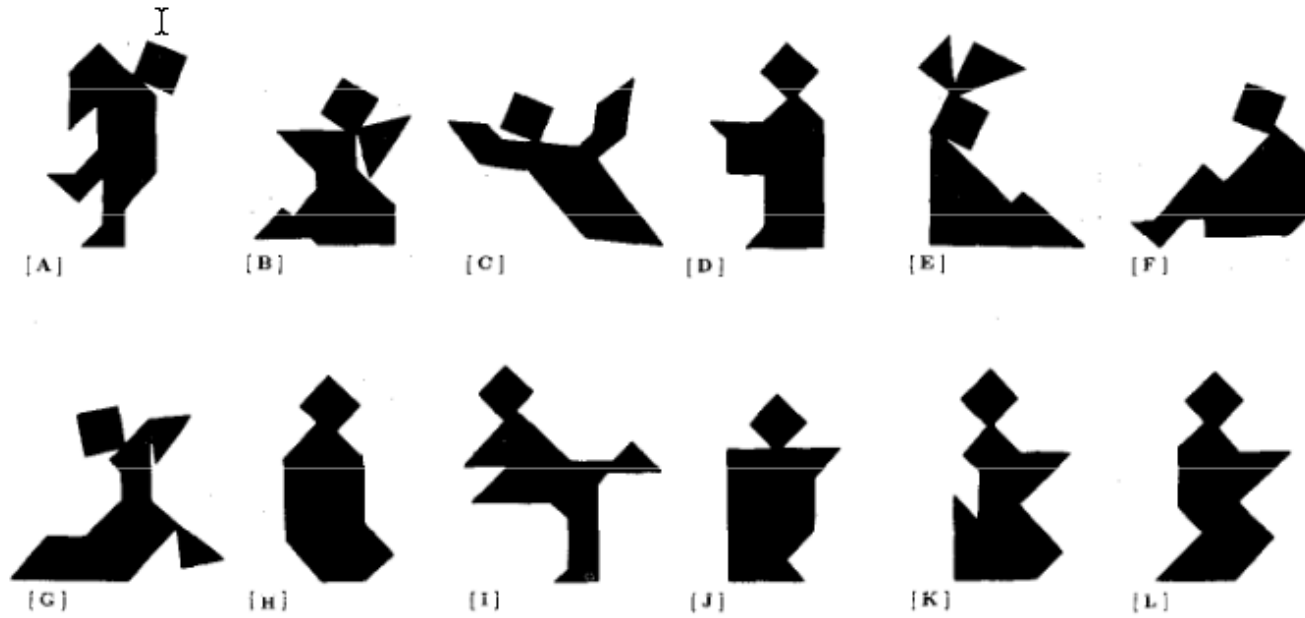
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Figure 1. *The 12 Tangram figures arranged by directors and matchers.*



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Figure 1. *The 12 Tangram figures arranged by directors and matchers.*

General patterns

For a broad picture of what occurred, consider this very simple series of utterances by one director for figure I on trials 1 through 6:

1. All right, the next one looks like a person who's ice skating, except they're sticking two arms out in front.
2. Um, the next one's the person ice skating that has two arms?
3. The fourth one is the person ice skating, with two arms.
4. The next one's the ice skater.
5. The fourth one's the ice skater.
6. The ice skater.



[G]



[H]



[I]



[J]



[K]



[L]

Adaptation creates systems of reference*

Semantic negotiation in dialogue: the mechanisms of alignment

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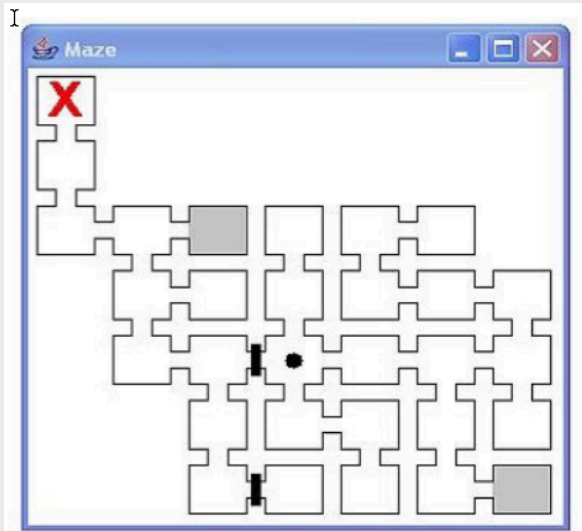


Figure 1: Example maze configuration. The solid black circle shows the player's current position, the cross represents the goal point that the player must reach, solid bars the gates and shaded areas the switch points.

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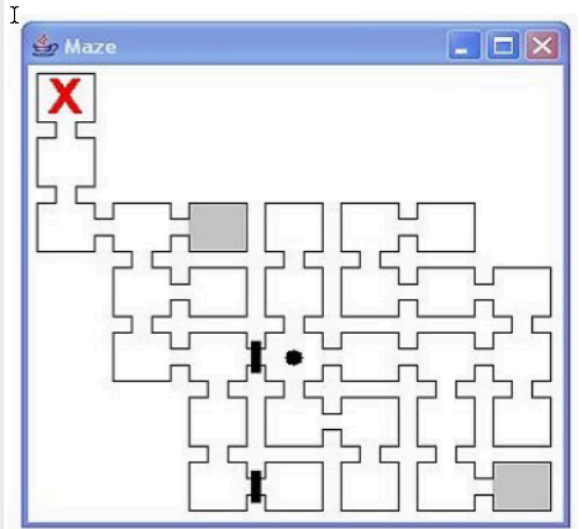


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0 mins:	The piece of the maze sticking out
2 mins:	The left hand corner of the maze
5 mins:	The northernmost box
10 mins:	Leftmost square of the row on top
15 mins:	3rd column middle square
20 mins:	3rd column 1st square
25 mins:	6th row longest column
30 mins:	6th row 1st column
40 mins:	6 r, 1 c
45 mins:	6,1

Table 1: Semantic shift from “Figural” and “Path” descriptions to “Line” and “Matrix” observed in maze task dialogues.

Identifying *conversational contingency* in lexical meaning

Can we find expressions whose meanings are particularly **contingent** on dialogue context?

How does contingency map onto conversational structure and facilitator behavior?

Main idea: Use *definition modeling* to capture conversational contingency

Definition modeling

- **sequence-to-sequence:** given a in-context usage of a word, generate a definition^{*}
- **embedded definitions** have been used for word-in-context, word sense disambiguation and lexical semantic change detection^{†‡}

^{*}Ni, K., & Wang, W. Y. (2017). Learning to Explain Non-Standard English Words and Phrases. In G. Kondrak & T. Watanabe (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Eighth International Joint Conference on Natural Language Processing (Volume 2: Short Papers): Proceedings of the Eighth International Joint Conference on Natural Language Processing (Volume 2: Short Papers)*. <https://aclanthology.org/I17-2070/>

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Conversational contingency of lexical meaning (a preliminary metric)

- $p(w)$ is a prompt-for-definition template filled in with expression w
- u_n is an utterance containing w
- u_1, \dots, u_{t-1} are the *conversational context* of u_t
- **LM** is a generative language model equipt with a decoding algorithm
- N is a fixed number of samples

$$\text{CC}(w) = 1 - \text{cos_sim}(\text{centroid}(\{x_i \mid i < N\}), \text{centroid}(\{y_i \mid i < N\}))$$

where each

$$x_i \sim \text{LM}(p(w) + u_t[w/**w**])$$

and

$$y_i \sim \text{LM}(p(w) + u_1, \dots, u_{t-1} + u_t[w/**w**])$$

Fora Corpus*

262 facilitated multi-party dialogues gathered in partnership with civic organizations across the US

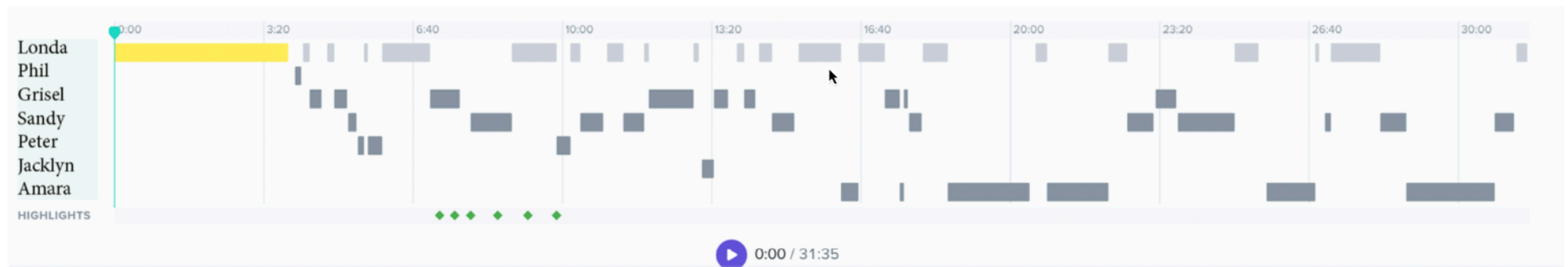
collection	n	turns
Maine ED 2050	76	12444
United Way of Dane County	43	4979
NYC Community Voices: COVID-19 & Beyond	22	4923
Public Narrative	19	2122
EGI Conversations	19	4312
Cambridge City Manager Selection Project	18	2589
Virtual Open Newsroom	13	2761
Engage 2020	8	874

collection	n	turns
Cap Times People's Agenda	6	752
Foundation for Black Women's Wellness	6	672
Digital Coverage of Crime & Justice Conversations	6	542
LPA Yo Soy Conversations	6	555
Santa Cruz Local	5	455
Police & Fire Commission Conversations	5	480
Equitable Economies Dialogues	5	776
Census 2020 Conversations	5	675

*Schroeder, H., Roy, D., & Kabbara, J. (2024). Fora: A corpus and framework for the study of facilitated dialogue. *Proceedings of the 62nd Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics (Volume 1: Long Papers)*, 13985–14001. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2024.acl-long.754>

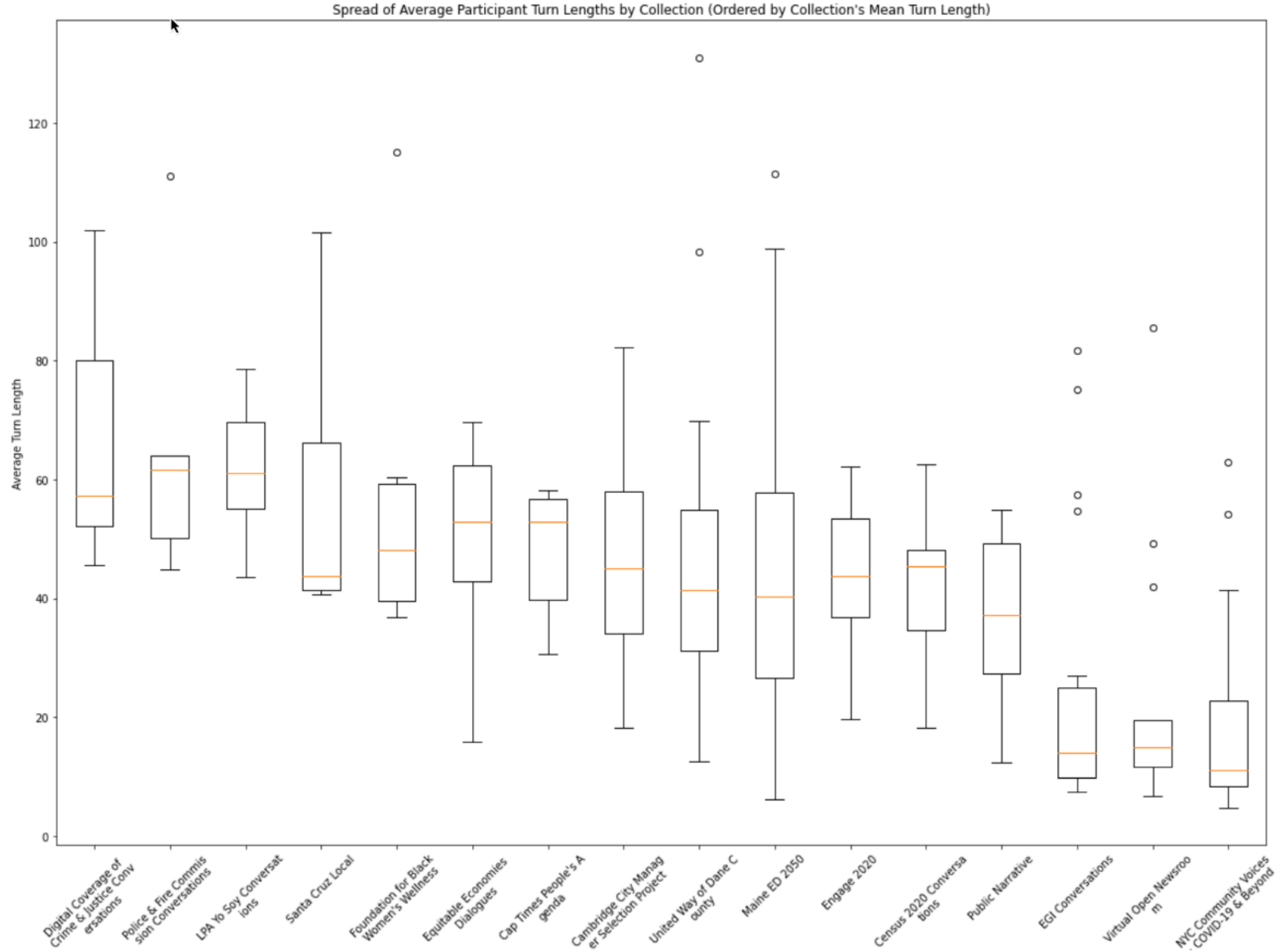
Facilitated dialogue

- Collection-specific *conversation guides* include open-ended questions designed to elicit personal stories and experiences from participants.
 - developed in collaboration with partner org.
- Facilitators start with context-setting script & transition to request for sharing
- Conversations typically end with a question like “What is one change you would like to see happen?”



Highly variable “conversationalness”

Words that
High



Corpus Annotation

A sample of 70 conversations (10,625 turns) are annotated for:

- Participant sharing behaviors (can also be exhibited by facilitators)
 - **Personal story** – a series of events involving the speaker (possibly ongoing)
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- Participant sharing behaviors (can also be exhibited by facilitators)
 - **Personal story** – a series of events involving the speaker (possibly ongoing)
 - **Personal experience** – a mention of personal background, identity, habitual actions, feeling, etc
- Facilitator strategies
 - **Express appreciation**
 - **Express agreement or affirmation**
 - **Open invitation to participants to participate**
 - **Specific invitation to participate** (addressed to a particular speaker)
 - **Model examples** (e.g., answer to the question or prompt)
 - **Follow-up question** (facilitator addresses a follow-up question)
 - **Make connections** (between participants or across topics)

Experiment

- we sampled 60k non-overlapping noun phrases (excluding pronouns) from the Fora Corpus
- for each NP we prompted a LLM to generate 5 definitions given the utterance and 5 definitions given the entire conversation up to and including the utterance
 - Llama-3.2-1B-Instruct; nucleus sampling (temperature: 0.6)
- we embedded the sampled definitions and computed CC
 - DistillRoBERTa-v1

Below is an excerpt pasted from a dialogue transcript. You will be asked to give a context-sensitive definition for the word or multi-word expression indicated [% like this %] in the transcript.

```
{context.format(w)}
```

Please write a definition for what the speaker means by the indicated expression "{np.chunk.text}" in the above turn by {speaker}. Please only respond with a short one-sentence definition without additional commentary or preamble.

Example generated definitions: “talent”

- **turn-only:** Talent refers to a highly skilled and accomplished individual who excels in their field, often with a high level of expertise and achievement, but may also face challenges in finding suitable opportunities.
- **full-context:** The speaker uses the term “talent” to refer to individuals with strong skills, abilities, or qualities that are valuable to the community, often in fields such as education, social work, or entrepreneurship.

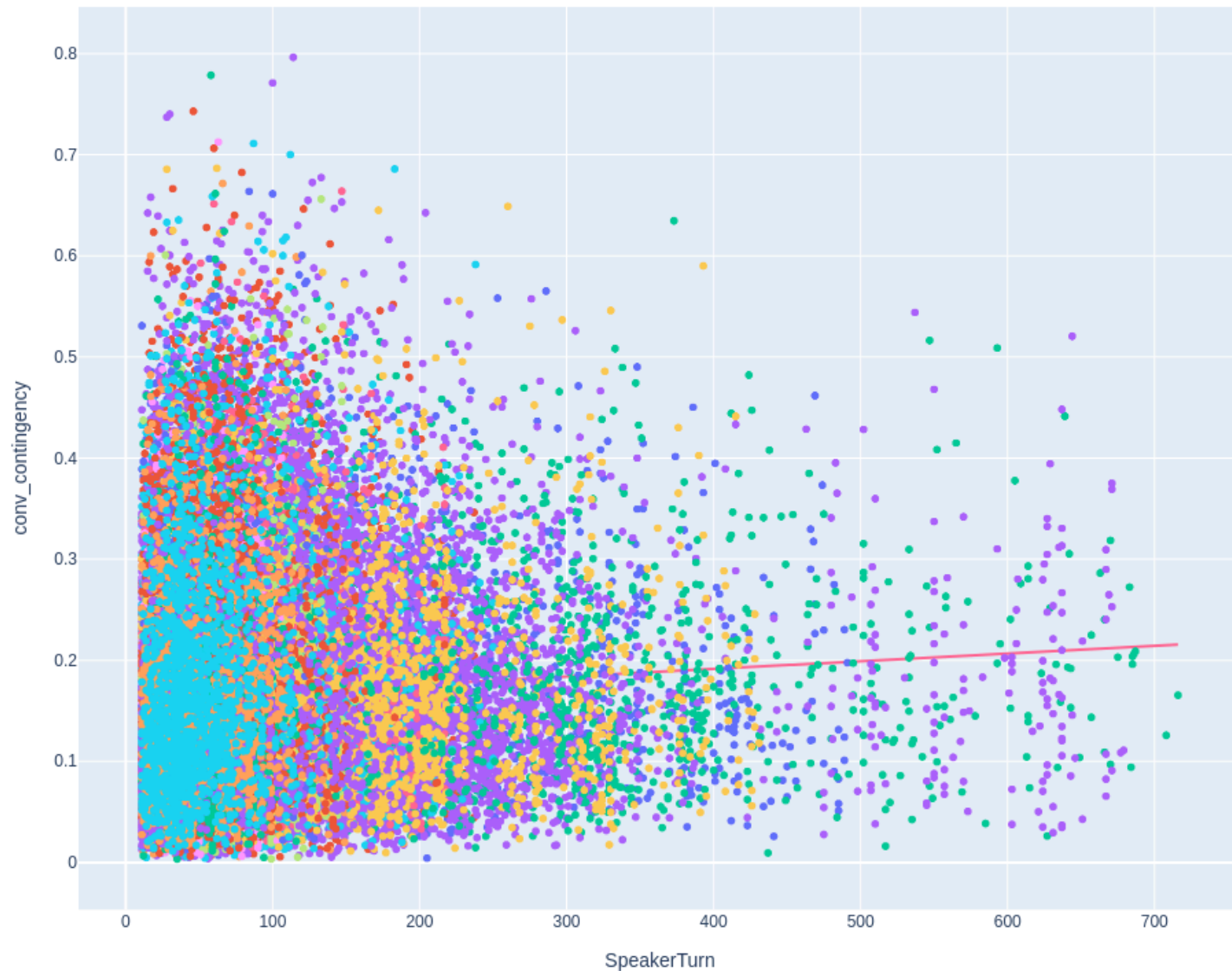
48 Dan: [...] what success looks like to me, from my standpoint for our community, is getting as many young people into practical vocational jobs in information technology, and then getting them into businesses, because that is where the opportunity lies. And that is not happening here. We import **talent**, we don't grow **talent**.

49 Mathias: I think there should be an expectation, at least in my opinion, there should be the expectation that the city, the town which you're should try to retain or should try to find you a job, if you're working to become a **therapist or a social worker**, why not provide them the job here rather than letting them... How do you say? Get their studies and then just leave? That's such a brain drain for Madison, especially being a college town.

50 Dan: Get some experience and come home. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but I think like the losses, here's a person experience, my buddy and I, we grew up went to school, same thing. He left, he never came back. He's very happy at Northwestern. And now, he's a **talented** guy. That's the type of **talent** and he's like, “You know what? Me and soon to be wife would like to settle down. [...]”

Conversational contingency / context length

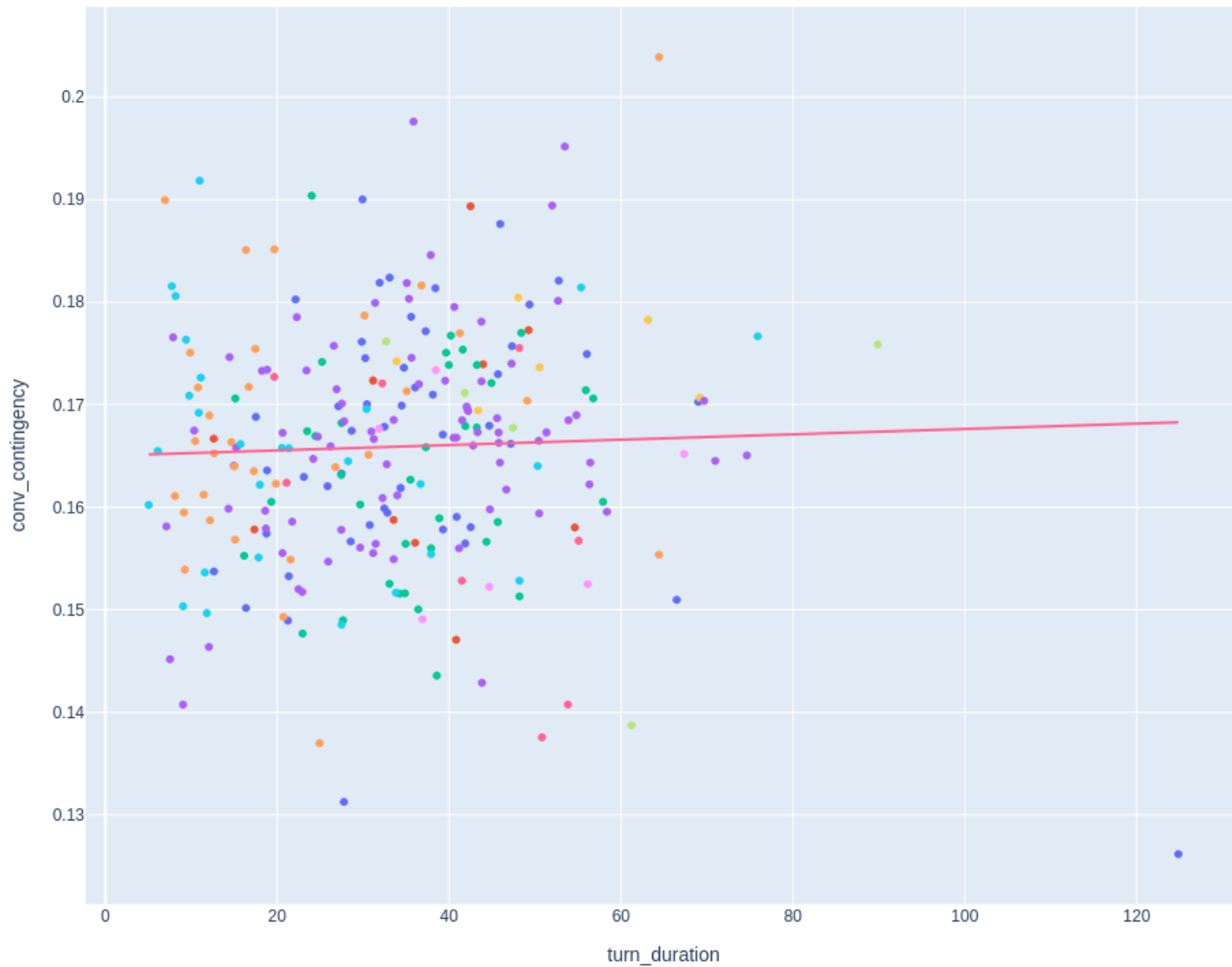
(per sampled word)



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Conversational contingency / conversationalness

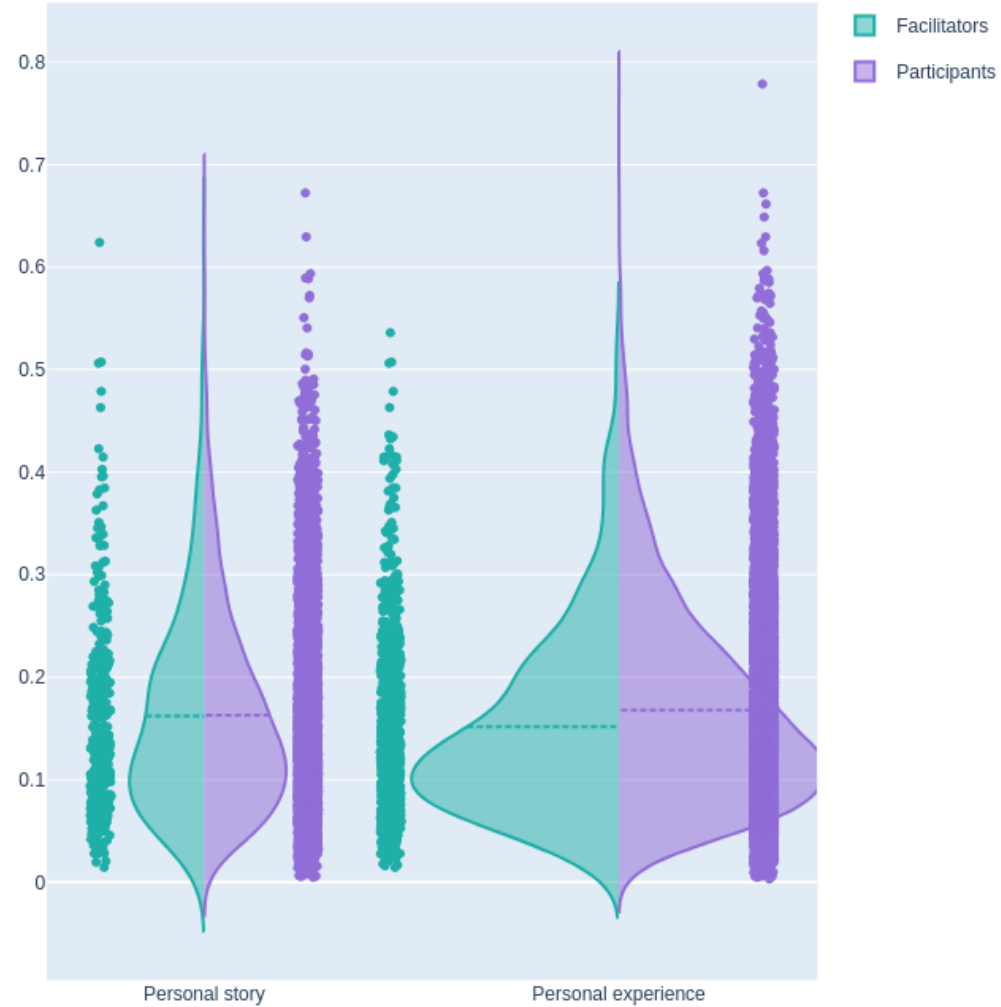
(means per dialogue)



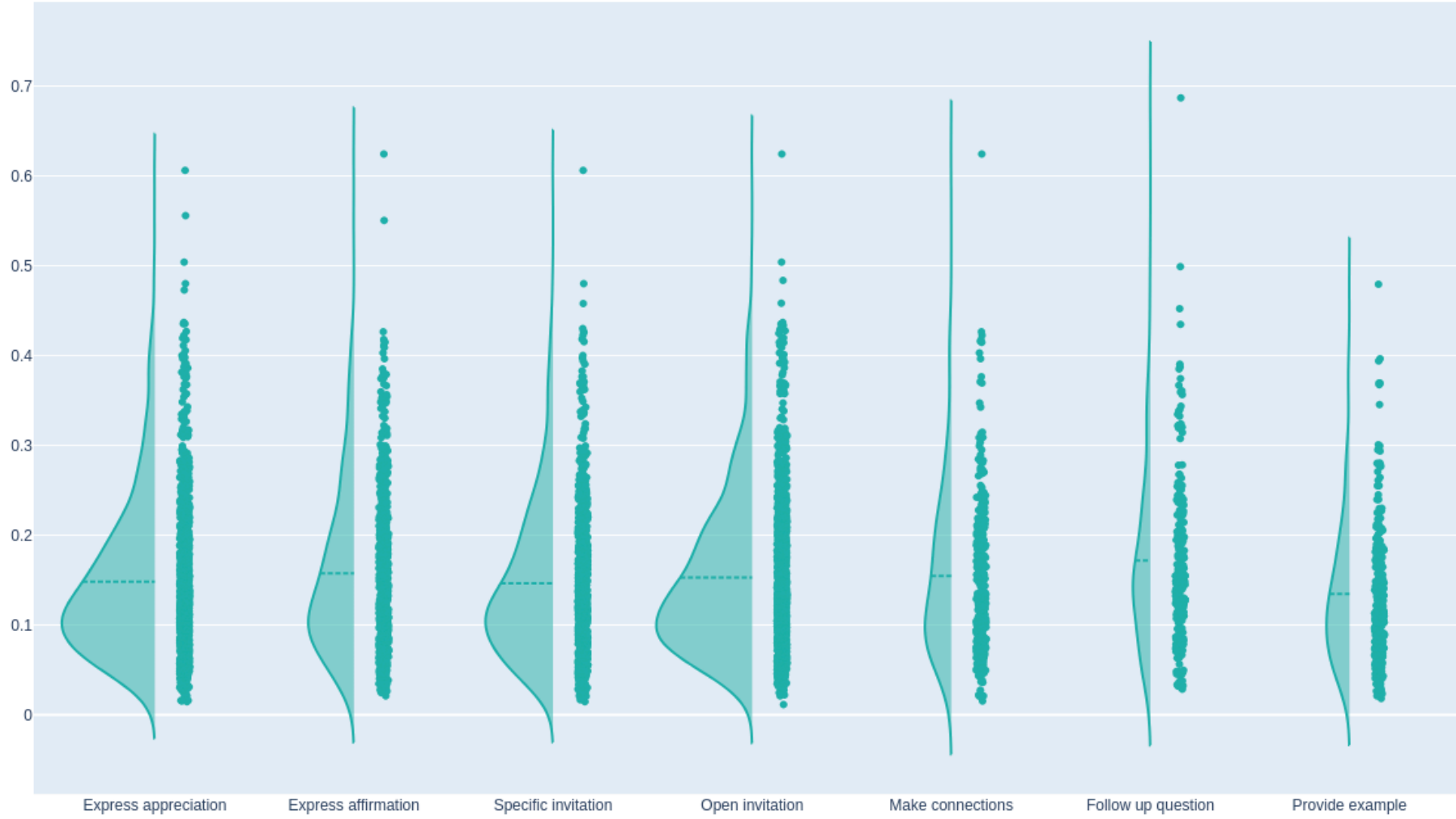
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Conversational contingency: Participant DAs

Conversational



Conversational contingency: Facilitator DAs



Conclusion

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Thank you!

References

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