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## **BIG TALK, small talk**

**BT takes a look  
at British telephone culture**

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This paper outlines the semiotic/cultural analysis and qualitative research that went towards the creation of BT's high-profile *'It's good to talk'* advertising campaign. It charts the development of a culturally complex research and advertising strategy, the aim of which was to change deeply-held gender assumptions about the way people use the telephone.

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### **Introduction**

Most people will understand what is meant by the labels 'big talk' and 'small talk', when applied to the two main genres of telephone conversation.

'Big talk' is important, information-bearing, serious - and usually typified by men talking to men.

'Small talk', on the other hand, is trivial, discursive *chat* - mostly seen (by both sexes) as the province of women, when talking to other woman.

This duality of modes was the startpoint of a semiotic analysis of British telephone culture, begun for BT in 1993 by *Semiotic Solutions*.

BT were looking to understand more fully the perceptions and behaviours that surround informal, 'leisure' telephone behaviour, particularly that of their residential customers.

Their brief called in particular for some

*"understanding of the cultural position of 'telephone chatting', within an overall communications context... and within that, an understanding of what the 'rules' for telephone chatting are, and how they may differ from 'rules' for other types of communication".*

### **A new approach**

*Semiotic Solutions'* methodology draws upon semiotic and structuralist theory, which it has adapted; and currently applies to the demands of the marketing industry. The consultancy has developed a comprehensive

armoury of techniques with which it systematically analyses and charts the *cultural* dimensions and significance of all types of marketing communication - advertising, packaging, corporate identity, etc - both in terms of form as well as content.

The analytical process generates hypotheses, which are explored, validated and fleshed out through complementary programmes of qualitative research.

### Paradigms of opposition

The BT semiotic analysis soon revealed the existence of clusters of comparative cultural assumptions, that surround and define each of the genres of Big Talk and small talk.

These assumptions - meanings taken for granted by the culture at large - can be grouped into two sets of paired but *opposed* paradigms (incidentally demonstrating one of the principles of semiotics: that things only mean something to us by our comparison with what they are *not*.)

Within British culture, therefore

Big talk is represented as	Small talk is represented as
Important	Unimportant
Male	Female
Metonymic ('rational')	Metaphoric ('poetic')
Serious	Trivial
Official	Popular/carnival
'Correct'	'Incorrect'
Emphatic ( <i>'meaning-based'</i> )	Phatic ( <i>'sound-based'</i> )

Subsequent qualitative research demonstrated that *both* sexes devalue small talk. Men, for obvious reasons: it blocks the lines against important and serious messages; it wastes money, and understandably, (because men agree that they aren't much good at it) they tend to dislike and mistrust it.

But, surprisingly, women devalue it too. Often with great affection, but fully mindful of its perceived unimportance (to the male view) in the Scheme of

Things. Even those women who sense some real cultural values in small talk tend to be diffident about airing them.

Focus groups of both sexes, when asked to 'doodle' the two modes, are consistent in their representation. With great regularity, Big talk is portrayed through the disciplined geometric forms of squares, rectangles and boxes; small talk is doodled as flowers, wiggles and other organic curves and curlicues.

### Consistent findings

These preliminary findings were consistent with those from a number of other research projects and academic studies BT had separately commissioned.

For example:

*"Men emphasise the telephone as a tool, to achieve something else, (eg meeting, drink, information) - especially a work tool. Men who*

*make calls for 'pleasurable chats' often disguise their true purpose, by artificially focussing on an arrangement or a particular issue. Women see the telephone as both a tool and a social end in itself."*

The Planning Partnership, 1993

*"Women, unlike men, seem to use the phone as an 'intimacy' mechanism. Women often call for a chat, and - unlike men - do not seem to need a significant reason. They simply desire contact for emotional reasons.*

*Men particularly tend to feel that phoning just to make contact (ie intimacy) is seen as too revealing and open to a negative interpretation."*

Chris Payne Associates, 1989

*"Do you think men and women use the phone differently?"*

*"Yes" 73% "No" 27%*

NOP 1994

*"Significant sex differences of telephone apprehension were found. This sex difference was remarkably consistent across the whole adult range, with males reporting significantly higher levels of telephone apprehension than females.*

*They (the findings) are also consistent with the identification of the telephone as 'a female instrument' (Pool 1977, 1983). The popular belief that the telephone is particularly suited to women's talk, and is used in particular by women, is supported by these findings."*

Dr G Fielding

Queen Margaret College 1990

### **Five cultural barriers to small talk**

The semiotic analysis and its related qualitative research identified five critical semiotic/cultural barriers to the spread of telephone small talk. If BT were to champion the informality of telephone chatting in any way, then these five barriers would have to first be negotiated.

The barriers were

- 1. Male 'ownership' of the domestic phone*
- 2. Male reluctance to chat*
- 3. The Protestant ethic*
- 4. Demographics of telephone technology*
- 5. Concentration on content (which devalues small talk)*

This paper examines each of these barriers in turn.

#### **Barrier 1. Male 'ownership' of the domestic telephone**

The semiotic analysis revealed an interesting marketing paradox:

*Culturally speaking, men 'own' the domestic phone but dislike using it...*

*Women love the domestic phone*

*but have for years been disempowered in its usage.*

This paradox has long formed a hidden ‘cultural countertext’ to BT marketing and advertising targeted to residential customers. It is only in recent times that economic, social, political and cultural events and awareness have turned this picture (along with so many other traditional family market models) on its head.

The anomaly, however, is still perpetuated in the way people talk about the domestic ‘rules’ of phone usage. Men almost invariably lay down these rules from the perspective of seeing much of women’s use of the telephone as ‘wastage’. Most men still feel they have the right to set the agenda for phone usage on the basis of this taken-for-granted ‘ownership’, and its place in the family budget.

And they do this while admitting, when questioned, that their wives, partners and older children often share in the cost of the phone bill. The male codes of Big talk - the informational *content* of the message, rather than its *form* - still dominate the telephone discourse in many families, and set the criteria against which small talk is judged (*eg* not chatting ‘aimlessly’ for too long.)

Many men are particularly shocked by the idea that women and children telephone close neighbours. It is also interesting to see how women are influenced by this male puritanical mode: they giggle shamefacedly about it, while in the same breath justifying the quick phone call next door as something they do when they haven’t time for a long chat!

Even the telephone instrument itself has historically personified Big talk: solid, rational in presentation (latterly moving towards computer-style design codes), mechanically efficient-looking, functional, *masculine*.

Only recently, with sophisticated development of plastics, have some more organic, softly-curved, feminised shapes begun to appear.

## **Barrier 2. Male reluctance to chat**

The reluctance of the British male to talk ‘aimlessly’ is well-known - and culturally ingrained.

It is deeply entwined with the Protestant ethic, which privileges ‘industriousness’ over ‘idleness’, purposefulness over purposelessness, good housekeeping over wastefulness.

The ‘non-wasteful’ qualities built into the concept of Big talk are reflected in the language:

*don't waste words*  
*keep it short and sweet*  
*cut a long story short*

together with the avoidance of verbosity, *waffle* and *flowery* language.

As work was historically man’s domain, it was inevitable that Big talk would become the principal medium of male interaction. And, with the privileged position of man and work in society, it was also inevitable that Big talk would become the ‘proper’ language for telephone communication. This superior positioning of Big talk semiotically locked small talk in cultural opposition: as inferior, domestic, the taken-for-granted province of women and girls.

It is this historical encoding of small talk that has produced a deep-seated

cultural aversion to chatting among British men. The aversion runs so deep, that - within our research sample - most men and women believe it represents a biological difference between the sexes.

When 'doodling' the difference between women and men on the telephone, women would usually draw themselves lying down, often with tea and biscuits; they drew their partners, phoning, always standing up

### **Barrier 3. The Protestant ethic**

The Big talk/small talk paradigms of opposition, previously shown and referred to, can also be described as mapping the Protestant ethic onto the language of the telephone.

(We need only recall the Ten Commandments, which seek to safeguard Big talk - religion - from everyday 'debased' usage, with its prohibition on oaths and the taking of God's name 'in vain'.)

In terms of Protestant ethic

Big talk is also  
Self-denial  
industriousness  
work

Small talk is also  
self-indulgence  
idleness  
'leisure'

In the workplace, the polarities of Big and small talk are played out in a different environment, but in much the same hierarchical relationship. The proportion of 'hard' information determines the call-worthiness status of the phone call.

The embarrassment of receiving a private call when with a group of workmates often results in fictitiously 'formalising' the call, using Big talk codings to cope with a small talk message.

As one female respondent put it:

*I'll blow him a kiss or something and he'll say 'How interesting - yes, I find that as well.'*

### **Barrier 4. Demographics of telephone technology**

In today's hi-tech world, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate that - for about two-thirds of the market - the telephone was a luxury item in their cultural background.

Most older age cohorts - now aged 55 and over - grew up in phoneless homes, during wartime and postwar years of austerity. For them, making a call meant a trip to the public phone-box (where, throughout the war, brevity was further fostered by warnings that 'careless talk costs lives'.) Most of this age-group remember exactly when the phone arrived in their homes - rather like TV and The Coronation. And because of this, many of them still treat the telephone with a kind of respect, and a feeling that it should be used sparingly. Even today, they are often not completely comfortable with it.

Their children, the 'baby boomers', are now in their late forties/early fifties. They grew up with a phone in the house, but - because of their parents' own backgrounds - were disciplined by those parents towards its 'responsible' usage (*ie* Big talk messages, rather than time-wasting chat). Their homes certainly did not have today's multi-phone points; and they

tend to be quite strict, in turn, with their own children's phone usage. Only the younger age cohorts - those under 30 - are the truly phone-literate generation. They were born into telephone-equipped homes, learned to use the phone and relax with it right from early childhood... and now have phoning built in as an essential part of their lifestyles. (Their particular culture shock comes when they finally leave the parental home; and are suddenly faced with an unsubsidised phone bill.) Telephone location in the home has also had an important influence on usage, as the old fixed location in the hall gave way to multiple socket points around the house. The cordless phone even brings the garden within phone-range; and it is often carried around the house while doing housework - acting as a permanent reminder to phone someone.

### **Barrier 5. Concentration on content**

This devalues small talk. Big talk is metonymic in form: which means it expresses itself in what appear to be straightforwardly rational, unambiguous terms. It sees its purpose as communicating *information*; certainly not as playing imaginatively and sympathetically with language and meaning.

Big talk is also 'power talk'; the verbal representation of male power. From this lofty position it can look down with condescension on the sheer unimportance of small talk, using its own Big talk vocabulary to circumscribe it.

There are literally dozens of words and phrases in the English vocabulary that describe small talk in pejorative and devaluing terms:

*chatter, yakkety-yak, jabber, prattle, idle gossip, tittle-tattle, waffle, blether, hot air, rabbit on, blah blah, rhubarb rhubarb, drivel, girl talk, sweet nothings, etc. etc.*

What this dismissiveness ignores is the sheer emotional tenacity of small talk; its value as a kind of social knitting (usually knitted woman to woman), that helps strengthen the cultural fabric binding together not only families but whole cultural communities.

Small talk values embody a real psycho-cultural need, reflected in language. To understand the deep emotional values enshrined in small talk, we must first translate emotions into language. As we cannot transmit actual 'feelings' down the line, we use sounds: phonemes combined into words; words combined into sentences; sentences combined into whole messages.

To simplify complex linguistic theory: the essential difference between small talk and Big talk language is that, in small talk, *all sounds count*. All the *ums, ers, uhs*, and other phatic noises are as important as - often more important than - the words themselves.

Conversely, in Big talk, the sounds are made to 'disappear', so that the meaning shines through, as though the words themselves were no more than a transparent screen.

The 'phatic noise' style of small talk is the feminine form of language. (In psychoanalytical theory, it is also the mode of speech before the child grows independent from its mother; that time of its life when it believes

itself at one with the nurturing caring object.)  
 Small talk actually replicates the process of identifying with the one you love; which is why saying goodbye on the phone is hard - it is a mini-bereavement. And because the phone transmits language *only as sound* - with no supporting body language, eye contact or physical touch - the quality of identification via small talk is all the more intense. The cultural hierarchy that rates Big talk above small talk is not based on sounds, but on the *meaning behind* the sounds. Thus - particularly over the telephone - Big talk misses out on most of the deep emotional comforts and values embedded in what it dismisses as 'idle chatter'.

### The voice of BT

In its own corporate communications, an essential commitment to new technological introduction has positioned BT as an exponent of Big talk. This 'voice' has, until now, tended to overwhelm its use of small talk. Various earlier advertising campaigns have attempted to rectify this imbalance; noticeably Maureen Lipman's *Beattie*. However, her manic phone-lust - with its *genre* of caricature and exaggeration - had one unfortunate side-effect: it helped to reinforce the cultural trivialisation of small talk.

Only latterly, in the more sensitively observed "*Get Through to Someone*" TV campaign, did this balance begin to show some signs of change. There is an overwhelming historical correspondence between the paradigms of Big talk (listed earlier) and those of the 'language of communications technology' as spoken by BT to *all* its customers, regardless of whether they were primarily big or small talkers:

Big talk is seen as	BT 'techno-language' is seen as
Important	Scientific/important
Male	Male
Metonymic	Metonymic
Serious	Serious
Official	Official
'Correct'	'Correct'
Emphatic	Emphatic

BT had almost unavoidable reasons for speaking in Big talk. From its days as a state industry, when its proclamations were delivered to customers in the codes of the public announcement, to its most recent position as pioneer of exciting new technologies and new communication possibilities (primarily for the business user or dedicated 'communicator') BT has felt itself constrained to play by the rules of the male/Big talk game.

Over the years, this has inevitably led to feelings of deeper and deeper disenfranchisement by women, the leading exponents of small talk. Apart from the long-standing devaluation of their language-style into *purposeless chat*, BT (and men) were now also treating them as innocents abroad with regard to technology.

Yet, ironically, it was this purposeless female chat that was helping to finance technological development by keeping so many phone-lines

humming for so much of the time!

### **BT's gender hat**

In its use of and support for Big talk codes, BT had made an unequivocal *cultural* statement: that its feet were firmly planted in the male world. This positioning is culturally taken for granted by men. It is also acutely *sensed* by women, even when they are unable clearly to articulate it. Big talk - backed by BT - was setting the agenda, the unwritten 'rules' for *all* telephone behaviour:

Keep it short (*time is money*)

Don't say hello (*save time by saying who you are*)

Think first (*choose your words carefully*)

"The reason I called..." (*there must be one*)

"How can I help you?" (*think of something quickly*)

The strategic communication problem was this: Big talk was casting its shadow even over telephone chatting - and that somehow small talk needed to get out from under that shadow and develop codes of its own. If BT were to start down a road leading to the empowerment of the female domestic customer - their heaviest domestic user - they must first of all change their own cultural positioning.

They must find a way to step *outside* gender - to be able to view their marketplace from a wider perspective than simply through the eyes of male Big talk.

They would have to see Big talk and small talk as occupying equal status in culture; albeit serving different ends.

### **Rethinking the advertising strategy**

It was at this juncture that BT decided to redefine its advertising strategy. It asked for competitive tenders from four advertising agencies. The brief for a new campaign for BT set the objective of persuading people to make more and longer calls. The requirement of the brief was for an advertising campaign that could achieve this task in the Personal market, and in doing so, build a strong BT brand personality with which customers would want to be associated.

As part of the pitch briefing, *Abbott Mead Vickers.BBDO* was supplied with quantitative calling behaviour data, and several pieces of qualitative research into calling motivations, including the semiotic work outlined here.

An examination of all calling behaviour data underlined the constant difference between men and women, in the amount and length of calls made. This did not appear to be due to the more functional, or 'rational' calls that people of either sex make. The critical difference between the sexes lay in the quantity and duration of so called 'purposeless' calls.

Given the finite number of *functional* calls that any person can reasonably make during the day, it was felt that encouragement of emotional 'chat-type' calls afforded far greater potential for call growth.

Subsequent qualitative research by the agency seemed to confirm this hypothesis; and suggested that 'purposeless' calls had a rationale of their

own. Women, in particular, appeared to derive great emotional benefit from - and attach great value to - just chatting on the phone.

This research even detected a begrudging envy among men, of their female counterparts' ability to let their emotions show when communicating with others.

It also seemed clear that male attitudes to the phone were definitely restricting women in their phone usage. Because of the grief given to women by their partners when the phone bill hits the mat, women do try to restrict their own-phone usage.

The agency concluded that, if advertising could somehow raise the cultural status of chatting on the phone, particularly for men, this would also have a strong effect on women - legitimising their behaviour in their partners' eyes.

It also became more and more clear that any campaign to raise the status of small talk, to be effective, should emphasise the emotional, rather than rational benefits of communication.

In the past, BT had made previous attempts to highlight the emotional value of phone communication: via the '*Beattie*' (Maureen Lipman) and "*Get Through to Someone*" campaigns. Whilst much of this advertising had been entertaining and well-liked, qualitative work revealed that consumers were somewhat unclear about the message(s) being transmitted.

The agency concluded, therefore, that - instead of alluding to the benefits of small talk - advertising could be more effective, and begin to break down cultural and gender barriers, if the benefit of small talk was illustrated by directly *contrasting it* with the absence of benefits derived from Big talk.

Hence, the "*It's Good to Talk*" campaign was born.

Executionally, several of the opening commercials in the campaign drew upon the differences in behaviour between Big Talk and small talk, as highlighted by the findings of the semiotic work.

### **Developing the role of Bob Hoskins**

Semiotics also helped in developing the role played by Bob Hoskins. The central character of the campaign, he was created as a vehicle for delivering what are essentially very direct messages, often challenging accepted human behaviour norms.

Sometimes Bob acts as a kind of conscience, telling us to be nicer to each other. He also acts as a guide, highlighting ways in which better communication can improve our relationships.

He can say these things, because his real power lies in his perceived objective stance. Nobody owns him; he is a kind of ombudsman, who is not in BT's pocket. In this way, he manages to make very direct messages palatable for the consumer.

But - beyond the need to promote call growth by highlighting the value of good communication - there is also the requirement for the campaign to accommodate price announcements, and the need to advertise products and network services, as and when necessary.

If Bob was required to advertise with a greater degree of ‘hard sell’, then great care had to be taken to ensure that his objective stance was not devalued. To help judge this, *Semiotic Solutions* created a semiotic ‘advertising model’ (the *BT AdFrame*) to provide guidance as to how Bob could and should - or should not - be used in the advertising.

### **The AdFrame**

The AdFrame was created as a way of evaluating the boundaries that define some of the touchy and complex cultural areas within which this TV campaign is unfolding.

The AdFrame charts a kind of semiotic obstacle course, through which individual scripts—particularly Bob’s role positioning within the narrative—can be assessed, and sometimes modified as a result.

The AdFrame helps provide answers to script questions like:

*Is he seeming in any way sexist or patronising?*

*Is he seeming too BT-oriented, rather than an ombudsman?*

*Is he too didactic, not letting viewers ‘negotiate’ their meanings?*

and other delicate and sensitive questions of this type.

These are all *cultural* matters; but culture is an essential dimension of investigation for a campaign like this; one that must steer itself delicately through the minefield of deeply ingrained gender perceptions.

The campaign, on its launch, was described as “*an attempt at social engineering*” by *Marketing* magazine,

This may be a true description. What the campaign is certainly doing is positioning BT clearly as a leading-edge, *socially and culturally aware* communications company: setting out to encourage better - more effective - communication between people, both on and off the phone.

And all this has long been part of BT’s ‘mission’: to help the UK become more of a ‘communication-rich’ culture (than perhaps it appears to be at this moment in history.)