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Small Talk Is Essential For Primate Bonding, However Boring It Might Be

Your awkward banter with your coworkers can be explained by evolution.



Chit chat is an evolutionary skill. PHOTOS: STEPHEN MALLON/GETTY IMAGES

BY CHARLIE SORREL

2 MINUTE READ

Talking about the weather in the elevator may never have seemed something essential to society. But a new study shows that idle chit-chat may be an evolved behavior that helps bonding.

The research, from Princeton university, suggests that small talk might be similar to grooming, an essential primate bonding activity, with the advantage that talking can be done at a distance and while engaged in another activity.

Humans may be the only primates to engage in semantic conversation about how hard it was to find a parking space outside the restaurant, or whether those Eagles will lose the sports championship again, and it's their own damn fault, but other primates also vocalize in a similar manner.

Lemurs “groom at a distance” through vocal exchanges, says [the study](#), in order to bond. While foraging for food, for example, they call back and forth with their closest friends whenever they get separated.



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The lemurs also chat constantly when not out foraging. Studying at Duke University's lemur center, the research team found that even though the lemurs engaged in back and forth conversations with each other, they only chatted to lemurs they had already bonded with through frequent physical grooming. The researchers saw that when a lemur called out, only those that it had bonded with previously would answer.

"Talking is a social lubricant, not necessarily done to convey information, but to establish familiarity," lead author Ipek Kulahci [says](#). "I think these vocalizations are equivalent to the chitchat that we do"

This means that talking about the weather or wondering out loud whether that actor and that other actor's husband are really having an affair, is important to our social relationships. Dull small talk helps us to get familiar with each other, and it may be the act itself that is important, not the content.

"People think that conversations are like exchanging mini-lectures full of information," says Kulahci, "but most of the time we have conversations and forget them when we're done because they're performing a purely social function."

"No one doubts the ability of language to transmit information," says neurolinguistics researcher John Locke in a [2008 article](#) on speech and language, "and yet it is unclear, from the abundance of joking, teasing, and 'chit-chat' that occurs in many societies, how much information is actually embedded in linguistic structure. For example, in an extensive analysis of the conversations of a young American couple in the 1960s, it was found that three-fourths of all the utterances contained no facts or impersonal information."

Wikipedia's list of the [purposes of small talk](#) characterizes it as a learned activity, carried out to avoid social awkwardness, but Kulahci's new research suggests that the need to chat about

nothing is as embedded in us as the need to build close bonds with other humans. Knowing this won't make it any easier to endure your best friend wittering on about his favorite route to the office (again), but at least now you'll understand that he's only doing it because he likes you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Previously found writing at Wired.com, Cult of Mac and Straight No filter. [More](#)
