

# MARTEN LAMONEY'S BRIEF GUIDE TO CONVERSATION

FRANCIS BRODSKY STUMBLES UPON OLD MAN LAMONEY AND LEARNS HOW TO SPEAK PROPER

I saw Marten swotting up in the library earlier today. I approached him noisily by stamping my feet on the floor as I trod, but he was evidently too engrossed to notice me. Then when I got closer, I realised why. Old man Lamoney only had three books open in front of him, side by side, and was trying to read all three simultaneously.

When I cleared my throat to break the silence, he quickly closed two of them and said "Oh, hello. I'm just sitting here in the library, doing some reading... You know how it goes. Just reading these different books independently and separately of one another; one brick at a time." Then, realising it was me, he changed his tone: "What the fuck do you want now, Brodsky? Oh, take this if it'll keep you out of my hair." With that, he handed me one of those waterproof plastic wallets for moisture-absorbant documents.

I've transcribed the contents as faithfully as possible. Inside there were three letters attached to the file: One from Cape, an outright refusal. Another from Virago explaining that regretfully they would not be taking on his project as they felt that there were already too many farm-yard based political satires on the market, and a third from enquiring whether he would like to renew his subscription to Melody Maker, which looked remarkably like he had written it to himself.

It appears to be an extract from a textbook that he's working on.

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## Chapter One: Commenting.

Sometimes we are called upon, when conversing with other persons, to respond to propositions. Our response is sometimes called a "comment." The comment is designed to reveal an attitude or evaluate information— this is why people who wear their Parkas over their heads, instead of their arms and torsos, whilst scurrying blindly out of the magistrates' court, often say: "No comment." Which is to say, they wish to conceal something, and commenting is a poor choice of medium through which to do this.

So-called "comments" account for a

large percentage of conversation. Often, comments entail value-judgements; consider the following dialogue between Akbar and a Hypothetical Football Enthusiast:

Hypothetical Football Enthusiast: "Good morning, Akbar. Did you see the football last night? Don't you think it was very good, or what!? I like football very much and I think it is a worthwhile activity in which to engage, do you agree?"

Did you manage to spot the odd one out there? Look closely. The first question is straightforward; it is called "closed," or sometimes "binary," because it could be answered only in two of the three following ways:

Akbar: "No." / "Yes." / "An Albatross!?" On the Fifteenth— you've got to be shitting me, Larry!"



Like butterscotch you didn't!

Did you manage to spot the odd one out there? Look again, this time more closely: Akbar could have responded in either the affirmative or the negative; he had either seen the football or he had not seen it. Had he replied with the third option he may have disconcerted Hypothetical Football Enthusiast. The object of a conversation is to cooperate verbally with another person in order to reach a mutually-beneficial conclusion. To disconcert is counter-productive to this end, and should for this reason be avoided.

If Akbar did see the football, he must proceed to the next question. Now things become more difficult. The second question is of a different variety. HFE cannot contest Akbar's answer to Question One — if had commented: "Like butterscotch you didn't!" he may well have disconcerted Akbar. Question

Two, however, pertains to what is called "opinion."

If Akbar did see the football but did not enjoy it because he believed that the defending was "absolutely diabolical"\* and consequently responds "no," HFE might quite reasonably ask Akbar to explain why he did not enjoy the experience of watching the televised football game. If Akbar uses a well-chosen footballing term of art correctly, he might gain the trust, respect, even friendship of HFE who, though he may disagree, as a typical football enthusiast holds to the Voltairean ideal of defence of free expression. Here are some possible responses:

Comment I: "No, I thought the defending was absolutely diabolical!"

Comment II: "Diabolical was the defending! thought I absolutely? No..."

Comment III: "An Albatross!?" On the Fifteenth... You've got to be shitting me, Larry!"

Read these three comments quickly, then stop, then read them over again— this time, more closely. Which response would have proved most advantageous?

That's right, Comment I. Here, not only does Akbar make an intelligible and germane comment, but he does so utilising a term peculiar to the field. This might result in HFE raising his eyebrows meaningfully, shaking Akbar firmly by the hand, or even feeling compelled to buy Akbar a drink.

If you answered Comment II, do not worry too much. Here, Akbar's comment is relevant and also does contain the specialist term, albeit in somewhat scattershot form. However, Akbar, in this situation, is required simply to make a short comment, not to embark on a lengthy equivocal Jacobean soliloquy.

If you answered Comment III, it might be useful to reconult your notes on the subject of disconcertion and maybe draw some flow-charts.

\* *This is a footballing term of art and does not mean to suggest that the devil, as embodiment of evil, had had any involvement, but merely that the defending was of a poorer standard than expected.*