



## All Ears English Episode 227:

### Four Rules to Master the Poetics of Conversation with Travis Wolven

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**Lindsay:** This is an All Ears English Podcast, Episode 227: “Four Rules to Master the Poetics of Conversation with Travis Wolven.”

[Instrumental]

**Gabby:** Welcome to the All Ears English Podcast, where you’ll finally get real, native English conversation with your hosts, Lindsay McMahon, the ‘English Adventurer’ and Gabby Wallace, the ‘Language Angel’, from Boston, USA.

[Instrumental]

**Lindsay:** In today’s show, we have Travis Wolven. He is an ESL teacher at the Harvard Bridge Program here in Cambridge, Mass (Massachusetts) and he’s going to show you the four rules to master the poetics of conversation when you speak English in a new culture.

[Instrumental]

**Lindsay:** Are you on our email list yet? Join more than 5,000 other All Ears English listeners and make sure you don’t miss any of our amazing All Ears English episodes. Get on our list now and we’ll send you a weekly summary of the most exciting and interesting All Ears English moments every week. These



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**[Instrumental]**

**Lindsay:** Hey, guys. Welcome. Thank you for listening to All Ears English today. We have an awesome guest today. Our guest today is an English teacher at the Harvard Bridge Program here in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is interested in language learning through storytelling. He's taught English in South Korea, Mongolia in the Philippines and he's here to help you get better at English conversation. Today's guest is Travis Wolven. Welcome Travis, how are you?

**Travis:** Hello. Good morning. I'm, I'm doing really, really well. So, so yeah.

**Lindsay:** Awesome. [crosstalk] I'm so glad you're... Yeah, I'm glad you're here. Thanks for joining us and today you're going to talk to us about this interesting concept of the poetics of conversation. That's such an intriguing phrase to me. What does that actually mean?

**Travis:** Well, the poetics of conversation, when you're talking about that, you're actually talking about a part of linguistics, which is under pragmatics. Pragmatics is (kind of) the social constructs of language and the poetics of conversation, specifically, (um), is actually the form and flow of (kind of) conversation. It's (kind of) – if, if you look at conversation as a whole, (uh), how is it formed, how does it flow between people.

**Lindsay:** I see. So the form and flow of conversation. So Travis, this is right on for our listeners because our listeners are, (you know), often they're memorizing grammar points and they're struggling. But really what they want to do is be able to put it all together into a cohesive conversation and connect with people. So we want you to help us with that today. So where... how do we break down this concept of the poetics of conversation? How can we become better at conversation?

**Travis:** (Hmm). That's a good question.

**Lindsay:** I know.



- Travis:** So, (uh), basically, this is a really huge concept. And we could talk about this for *days*. Essentially, I'll just go over some basic principles, (um), thought of by Paul Grice, who is actually a philosopher of language from England. And, (um), generally, whenever two people are talking, (um), they're cooperating, which is the 'cooperative principle'. So...
- Lindsay:** Okay.
- Travis:** So any time there's any kind of conversation, you should think about what are we cooperating towards. Are we making a podcast? Are, are we, are we learning something? Are we...
- Lindsay:** (Uh-huh).
- Travis:** ...bonding, becoming closer as friends?
- Lindsay:** (Uh-huh).
- Travis:** And then once you (kind of) realize what the cooperation principle is, you can (kind of) progress from there. (Um), then there are actually four topics, which are kind of – when I bring them up – aren't so, (um), mystical – they'll be (kind of) obvious to you, but these are great ways to actually (kind of) break down conversation and analyze what you're saying and what other people are saying. So I'm gonna (going to) give these four maxims.
- Lindsay:** Awesome. So wh-where do we start with these four maxims? This is really useful. We like to have really practical takeaways. So what's the first maxim that you can let us know about poetics of conversation? What's the first one?
- Travis:** Okay. (Um), the first maxim is the 'maxim of quantity'. And the 'maxim of quantity' states that, (um), one should be informative as possible, but not give too much information.
- Lindsay:** (Um), okay, what does that mean on a practical level? Can you give us an example of some time that someone gave too much information perhaps?



**Travis:** (Uh), yes. So, so, (aga-), a basic example would be if someone was to say, (you know), "How are you doing today?" and then I start to explain about how I feel terrible, that my mom called, and I got really angry at her. (Um), and then keep going and the other person's just like, "I just wanna (want to) know if you're doing well."

**Lindsay:** Oh, no. Yeah. And, and some people do give a little too much information sometimes, don't they?

**Travis:** Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. And, and sometimes, you can accidentally do this and so, for an example from myself, (um), when I was in Korea about a year ago, (um), I went to a fried chicken restaurant. (Uh)...

**Lindsay:** Okay.

**Travis:** ...it was, it was our favorite fried chicken restaurant. My fiancé and I just love it and so, I walked in...

**Lindsay:** (Uh-huh).

**Travis:** ...and went up to the, the cash register, the front desk and...

**Lindsay:** (Uh-huh).

**Travis:** ...and asked the person there who was actually the manager – I'd been there regularly, so I recognized this guy.

**Lindsay:** (Uh-huh).

**Travis:** And I asked in Korean, but I was thinking in English, and I asked him, (um), literally, "Can you deliver this to my apartment?"

**Lindsay:** Okay.

**Travis:** Well, now, in Korean, if you are asking for a request or an order of some kind, you don't use the word 'you'. [crosstalk]

**Lindsay:** Oh, interesting.

**Travis:** ...the object and the verb.



**Lindsay:** Oh.

**Travis:** But I specifically said you, (dangsin), which is (kind of) the respectful term. [crosstalk].

**Lindsay:** (Mm-hmm).

**Travis:** Yeah, and this person's the manager and he (kind of) gave me this look and then he just (kind of) nodded his head and I just (kind of) went, I just walked home and waited for my delicious chicken. Well, about 30 minutes later, I heard knock on the door and it is that exact same person...

**Lindsay:** Okay.

**Travis:** ...who's not a delivery boy and he looked at me bewildered and he said, "Well, wh-what do you want? Wh-why did you want me to come here?" [crosstalk]

**Lindsay:** Oh, my gosh. I can't believe it.

**Travis:** ...English. Huh?

**Lindsay:** I can't believe it. So he, he didn't just assume you were making a mistake in Korean, he actually showed up at your apartment?

**Travis:** Yeah. Yeah, 'cause (because) he thought I meant "Can you, sir... my apartment." And so – and that was, (I mean), it was such a, a, a simple, easy to make mistake and (um), and...

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Travis:** ...too much information, yeah.

**Lindsay:** Too much information. I like it. Okay. So that sort of thing happens to us when we're, we're abroad. I spent a couple of years, a year and a half in Japan, right, as a Gaijin, a foreigner and I made my own mistakes. But the important thing, as you've said, to keep it concise.

**Travis:** (Uhn).



**Lindsay:** (Right), don't give too much information. Okay. Thank you for that Travis. What's the next maxim that you can tell us about?

**Travis:** Okay. The next maxim is the 'maxim of quality'. And in the 'maxim of quality', (um), it's about truthfulness, (uh), that one should always be truthful, or as truthful as they can be in the context. And, (um), so for a personal story about truthfulness or the 'maxim of quality', (um), that's actually about being socially and culturally aware of what's okay and what's not okay to talk about.

**Lindsay:** Right.

**Travis:** And, (um), (you know), when I was, (um), in Korea teaching – I keep giving these Korea examples, but...

**Lindsay:** Well, that was your time abroad, right?

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Lindsay:** So that's okay. (I mean), that's – please let us know. We have a lot of listeners in Korea. So I bet they would find this interesting.

**Travis:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Go Korea. Awesome. So, (um), so yeah, actually, (um), I remember when I was teaching, (um), one of my students who was just six years old came up to me and looked me in the eye so sweetly and patted me on the belly. [inaudible]. Baby?

**Lindsay:** Oh, no.

**Travis:** And then I didn't know what to do and the rest of the students said, "Oh, teacher, you fat, you fat."

**Lindsay:** Oh, no.

**Travis:** Yeah. Yeah. I really wanted to cry and it really, (I mean), it led me to (like) work out intensely and get really nuts about it, but, but it was okay for me, but there's a lot of, (um), (you know), people who were worried about their weight, men and women, that I watched just break down into tears.



**Lindsay:** So, so one question. Was that only coming from kids or was that also coming from adults like your friends who were, who were told that they were fat, like women? Was that adults in Korea that were saying that to them or just children?

**Travis:** Oh, it's all ages. It's...

**Lindsay:** Oh, wow.

**Travis:** ...very pervasive. I, (um), I actually met, (um), a group of people from this city hall, that I was, (uh), the town I was working in. And, (um), (you know), so I dressed up nice and it was really official. And it was, it was a, a gentleman, an, an older man who was high up in the city hall and then two women who worked with him, and he looked at the two women and then looked at me and then he just said, "Well, which one is more beautiful? I think she's more beautiful," then pointed to one girl. And then...

**Lindsay:** Wow.

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Lindsay:** Okay.

**Travis:** I was, I, I didn't know what to... I was completely dumbfounded. I said both of them are extremely beautiful and intelligent.

**Lindsay:** Wow. Okay. So, so this is shocking to me and so I think our listeners are seeing our reactions. (I mean), we both grew up in the US, right. You grew up in the US, right Travis?

**Travis:** (Um).

**Lindsay:** Okay, so you're American. And so what we know about American culture at least is that we often want to avoid which topics? So weight, is that right?

**Travis:** Yes. Weight. (Um), and then also age.

**Lindsay:** Age.



**Travis:** (Uh-hmm).

**Lindsay:** And maybe beauty too, right.

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Lindsay:** At least negative comments about beauty. We don't wanna (want to) say, "This person is not attractive. This person is more attractive than this one."

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Lindsay:** Correct.

**Travis:** Yes, that, that's very true. And, and I've seen that occur in many different cultures where, where it's okay to compare, but, (um), fortunately or unfortunately, yeah, in, in North American and probably much of Europe, most Western nations, it's just not really something that people feel comfortable – even, even sometimes if you're talking privately with somebody it...

**Lindsay:** Right.

**Travis:** ...may not feel very comfortable.

**Lindsay:** Oh, especially the weight issue. It's so funny because it's obvious that in our country, we do have a problem with obesity. I think that's getting a little better, but we do have that problem. But we're so sensitive about it aren't we?

**Travis:** Yes. You are absolutely right. And, (um)...

**Lindsay:** Interesting.

**Travis:** And, yeah, so, (you know), one, one thing to remember if you are coming to the US, or Canada, or England, or if you are on a business meeting is, (um)...

**Lindsay:** (Uh-hmm).



**Travis:** ...if you do want to be truthful and it is really important for you to, to state the situation, maybe you can talk about how nice their clothing looks, (um), on their figure or if it's someone you've seen before, you can mention that they, they look really good or particularly good, or, (um)...

**Lindsay:** (Uh-huh).

**Travis:** ...if it's a friend, you can even say, (like), "Oh, you lost weight." Or, "You...

**Lindsay:** Right.

**Travis:** ...look really young today."

**Lindsay:** So looking for something good to say...

**Travis:** (Um).

**Lindsay:** ...instead of focusing on the thing that doesn't look so good.

**Travis:** Yes, yes. So that's, that's a big thing. Whenever, (um) – I was teaching in, in Mongolia and Korea – this, this happened in both scenarios, where I would go into work really tired and [inaudible], like was out late the night before, or [audio]...

**Lindsay:** Right, right.

**Travis:** ...feeling well. And the *first* thing that they would say, would be, (um), my co-workers would say, "You don't look very good today." And, and, (you know), honestly, they were doing it to show that they cared. They were doing it to show that they noticed me and they noticed when I have a good time and a hard time.

**Lindsay:** (Uhn).

**Travis:** But as a Westerner, it took me a moment to really get into that understanding.

**Lindsay:** Yeah, and I think that's the issue with these cultural differences. When we come from our own cultural frames, we're actually – it's probably coming from a good place of well meaning, but when it gets transferred across



cultures, it looks aggressive or it looks rude because you're coming from your cultural frame as an American, right.

**Travis:** Yes.

**Lindsay:** Yeah, tricky. Okay, let's keep moving here. This is great Travis. So what's the third maxim for great (co-), conversation?

**Travis:** (Um), the third maxim is the 'maxim of relation'. And the 'maxim of relation' is concerned with relevance. Is what you're saying relevant to what somebody else is saying. So if I ask my friend, "Hey, do you wanna (want to) go to the movies?" and he says, "I never owned a parakeet."

**Lindsay:** That would be a little crazy.

**Travis:** Yeah, yeah. Just that it's, yeah, it's not relevant. (Um), and so, (you know), in normal conversation, you may not encounter this, but in cross-cultural communication, (um), this, this can occur. (Um), (you know), when I was an MC, (um), for storytelling events in Tennessee, (um), we had a story slam where people should tell personal stories, stories about their life, things that happened to them. And, (um), we had this, this really wonderful speaker, (um), who's from Cameroon and, and he was brave enough and kind enough to share his story. And when he shared his story, it was actually about how the crocodile got sharp teeth. And...

**Lindsay:** (Um).

**Travis:** ...people in the crowd were really confused 'cause (because) we were like this really is not relevant. This is not a personal story about your life and somebody even confronted him about it and, and he said, "No, this is, this is a story from my people. This is a story that was developed in, in my town. This is a story that we tell when we feel a certain way."

**Lindsay:** (Um), interesting. Interesting. So this idea that sometimes – for example, from your perspective as an American, you'd be more likely to focus on, on you, your own story, whereas he might be coming from another direction.

**Travis:** Yeah.



- Lindsay:** Yeah, interesting. Wow. Yeah, and I know in some parts of the world, we have a tendency to want to build the historical context before we get to the story, right?
- Travis:** Yeah. Oh, yeah. That, that's absolutely true. (Um), actually, I, I did, (um) – I helped a professor with some research, (um), and we went to a conference in Seoul...
- Lindsay:** (Uh-hmm).
- Travis:** ...and (um), it was on educational policy during Korean reunification.
- Lindsay:** (Uh-hmm).
- Travis:** And (um), and so, South Korea, a, a lot of the government officials in the UN (United Nations) were really trying to figure out, "Well, (you know), if we reunite, what kind of education will we have for our North Koreans?" And, (um), and so there's all this – there's a huge panel of speakers and every time a speaker would stand up to present or explain their theory, or (um), what they do – (um), let's say their speech was 20 minutes total.
- Lindsay:** Right.
- Travis:** They would spend ten to fifteen minutes of their 20 minute speech, thanking the people before them and explaining why the person before them was a great contribution.
- Lindsay:** Wow! That is so different. It is such a different communication style.
- Travis:** Yeah.
- Lindsay:** Wow. Interesting. It's just fascinating to look at these differences so that our listeners can become aware of what's going on when they're traveling to the US or to another English-speaking country to do business, like why are people approaching their speeches in different ways.
- Travis:** Yeah.



- Lindsay:** Okay, cool. Let's move on to the next one Travis. What is the fourth maxim?
- Travis:** The fourth and last maxim that we'll talk about today is the 'maxim of manner', and it is about being clear, brief and avoiding obscurity or ambiguity.
- Lindsay:** Okay. (Uh-hmm). So can you give an example of when someone was not clear, brief, or just (kind of) being obscure in their conversation? What does that mean to be obscure?
- Travis:** Well, to be obscure – for a simple example – I have another example, but for a simple example, it would be something where it's like going back to age, like "How old are you?" and then the person, "Oh, well, (you know), (I mean), (uh), I'm, (u-), I'm an adult." Like, [audio].
- Lindsay:** Okay, kind of vague.
- Travis:** Yeah, or "I'm, I'm, I'm under 50," or, "I'm around 29," like, (you know), or, or it's, it's something like, like (um), if, if somebody asks you if you like something, but you really don't like it and you don't wanna (want to) offend that person, and so – but you don't know what to say, and so you're "Well, (I mean), (you know), it was kinda (kind of) good I guess, but really I didn't..."
- Lindsay:** Okay.
- Travis:** So you can't give like a clear, one-word, sentence answer.
- Lindsay:** Okay. So it's important to be sometimes somewhat direct and answer people's questions so they don't feel like they're getting the runaround, right?
- Travis:** Yeah. Exactly, exactly. And (um), (you know), this is, this is something that's just really pervasive. Every culture has their topics. (Um), this has a lot – a lot of overlap with (um), with the 'maxim of quality'. (Um)...
- Lindsay:** (Umm).



**Travis:** And so, the example that, that I wanna (want to) give, (um), actually, one of the professors that I was speaking to here at Harvard, (um), she spent a lot of time in Madagascar.

**Lindsay:** Okay.

**Travis:** And she loves Madagascar, she loves Malagasy language and culture, and (um), she explained one day how in Madagascar, (um), people shouldn't – within that culture – people shouldn't tell where they're going. So if I was to ask you, (like), if I saw you on the street and I said, "Hey, Lindsay where you going?" and we were in Madagascar, that would make you feel really awkward. You might say something like, "Well, (you know), I'm just going around." Or, "Oh, taking care of business."

**Lindsay:** (Huh).

**Travis:** And...

**Lindsay:** And that, that must be related to something within the history or within the culture, within the, what's going on in the country?

**Travis:** Yes. Yes, precisely. And, (um), (you know), (th-), there's – I'm not qualified enough to say what, what that might be, (um), but I, I do know that they really feel that (um), a bad spirits could jump on to you or, or negativity could enter your next adventure. So wherever you are going, if you tell somebody, it could really spell out some bad news.

**Lindsay:** (Huh), interesting. Okay. So, so there are times when it's okay to go around, but generally, I guess, if we're talking about within the, within American culture here in the US, we do like to try to be direct when we can.

**Travis:** Oh, yes. Yeah, that, that's, that's a really big thing, and (uh), that's something that I encountered in Asia, (uh), (uh), quite a lot was, was actually specifically the term, 'direct'. And, (um), and I encountered it as well 'cause (because) I was born and have a family in New Jersey, but I grew up...



**Lindsay:** (Uh-huh).

**Travis:** ...in Georgia, the south.

**Lindsay:** Oh, okay.

**Travis:** And even in Georgia, they won't, they won't be very direct about a lot of ways how they feel.

**Lindsay:** (Uhn).

**Travis:** And so, even though we're in the same country, (um)...

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Travis:** ...it's even a different culture with that. And so I had to grow up where I'm used to this really strong directness of the North, where if you want something you say, "I want that," and then you go get it. But in the South, you don't do that, you try to [inaudible]...

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Travis:** ...who else might want the thing that you want or...

**Lindsay:** Wow! We might have to have you back on the show another time to talk about the differences in, within the US between the northeast and the south because I've seen those differences too Travis. It's just incredible. It's so different in terms of levels of directness.

**Travis:** Yeah. Yeah, it's, it's, it's really incredible. The US, I didn't realize till (until) I left, but the US is really like several, several different countries all kind of pushed together.

**Lindsay:** There really is. That's why it's so hard, (you know), we try to talk about American culture, but it's such a broad culture. It's really hard to generalize about American culture, about what everyone does because not everyone does the same thing.

**Travis:** Yeah. Yeah, I, I, I absolutely agree.



- Lindsay:** Totally. Okay, so are there any closing words you wanna (want to) make on, on this poetics of conversation concept? So what we've talked about is the importance of quantity, so being informative, but not saying too much; quality, being truthful; being relevant, that's the relation maxim; and using your manners, right. Those are the four maxims, right Travis?
- Travis:** Yes, yes. That's absolutely correct. (Um)...
- Lindsay:** Awesome.
- Travis:** Well, (you know), these, these concepts might be obvious when, when you really consider them, but, really, it's important to see them as (kind of) tools or building blocks for you to understand where you are and for you to (kind of) understand where other cultures are. (Um), a symbol that I like to use is, (um), you, you can't – if you look at a GPS and you see the destination point, you can't figure out how to get there, until you figure out where you are at.
- Lindsay:** (Um). I like that, I like that. And, and it's clear after today's episode, and some episodes in the past that we've had that language learning is not just about memorizing vocabulary words and grammar points. It's about being in that dance with people.
- Travis:** Yeah. (Th-), oh, I like that. That's, that's really beautiful. (Um), yeah, that's exactly what it's like. It really is, it really is a dance.
- Lindsay:** And you've helped us to (kind of) uncover a little bit of that dance today Travis. Thank you so much for coming on the show. And, and can you let our listeners know how to get in touch with you or how to find you online if they have any follow-up questions, (you know). I know a lot of our listeners are in Korea, maybe they're curious about your experience in Korea. How could they get in touch with you?
- Travis:** Okay. (Um), well, if you are interested to just chat a little bit, (um), if you need, (um), any kind of (like) edits on any kind of speeches, or (um), any essays or if you'd like an English tutor, (um), my email address is esltravisteacher (t-r-a-v-i-s t-e-a-c-h-e-r)@gmail.com.



**Lindsay:** Okay. Great. And we'll be sure to put that address in the show notes also so that they can come back to the blog and get that. Okay. That's awesome. Thank you so much for coming on the show today Travis. This has been fascinating. Again, I think we could've done one specific episode for all of these maxims, but we've done, we've done a bit of an overview here and this has been great. Thanks so much Travis.

**Travis:** You're absolutely welcome, and thank you very much Lindsay.

**Lindsay:** Absolutely. Have a good day.

**Travis:** Thank you. You as well. Take care.

**[Instrumental]**

**Lindsay:** If you wanna (want to) put your ears into English more often, be sure to subscribe to our podcast in iTunes on your computer or on your smartphone. Thanks so much for listening and see you next time.

