Most studies of language written for non-specialists seem to concentrate on the content of what we say. How We Talk takes a different approach that is radical and refreshing.

It is a fascinating study of those parts of verbal communication that tend to be disregarded, yet are vital – the pauses we insert and the seemingly inarticulate sounds we utter without thinking. These may seem meaningless but are loaded with significance, according to N.J. Enfield. How we express our thoughts in speech turns out to be just as important as the thoughts themselves.

A linguistics professor at the University of Sydney, Enfield aims to show that verbal exchanges operate as a collaborative enterprise, where even utterances such as er, ah, oh or like perform a vital function in communicating shared meanings and signalling acceptance of speech protocols.

A profound set of meanings is concealed in the apparent gaps in conversation. A pause isn’t just a break – the timing and length can be definitive in conveying a message whose meaning is beyond words. Rather than demonstrating how socially awkward someone is, imperfections in everyday speech may indicate that they are really listening to the person with whom they are talking.

Enfield likens the function of outwardly incoherent expressions to the monumental yet vastly overlooked role Charles Darwin identified in the natural world as being played by earthworms. “I feel this way about the ‘lowly organised’ elements of language...the rules we follow when taking turns in conversation, the on-the-fly ways we deal with errors and misunderstandings, and the functions of little utterances such as ‘um’, ‘mm-hmm’, and ‘Huh?’”

Not all sense the importance of linguistic earthworms. There have been politicians who by all accounts were more fluent and confident in private than in public. On the other hand, Enfield discusses how a remote-seeming leader such as Margaret Thatcher did not speak in a normal manner, and hence was notoriously difficult to interview because journalists found it hard to judge from her idiosyncratic pauses when to move on to the next question.

Enfield dubs the mechanism powered by these basic drivers the conversation machine. It is the engine of social cognition. What is remarkable is the extent to which we engage in conversation for the sake of it and are willing to let go of surface coherence in our effort to prolong dialogue with another person.