

Conference of the Birds

by stephen hastings-king

Let me tell you a story. In the back yard, hundreds of birds gather in the same tree every day at the same time. Once they have gathered, they establish an agenda. The agenda is: Everybody Talk at Once.

I imagine them taking care of lots of questions simultaneously while updating their maps of the area and its hazards and deliberating improvements that might make conferences of the birds less cumbersome.

But with them, a sentence that is said in one place can become a sentence that is said in many places. It depends on the timing. If in the course of a discussion of improvements someone says: “I have no idea” in a particular way at a particular moment, “I have no idea” will migrate and soon lots of people will find themselves saying “I have no idea” again and again without knowing quite why.

Anything that happens to migrate might bounce around long enough to develop momentum. When momentum stops in a particular place, it spills over into a standing wave. That's the pressure that seems to build once you start repeating something to repeat it more and more. So you'd think this sort of process would build on itself and the system of talk would tend toward everyone everywhere saying the same thing over and over.

But a sentence may change as it travels. “I have no idea” can become “No idea I have” or “Ideas I no have.” So one sentence becomes lots of versions and they go ping ponging around the dense mat of talk that goes on all the time when the birds meet, sometimes under the surface and sometimes as one of the main things that get said for a time.

Just as a sentence might move out from a center, so sentences might also be moving in from others. Two or more can arrive in the same place at the same time: they'll crash into each other and produce sprays of fragments. So what people repeat is what they think they heard from among the shower of fragmented sounds.

Or as "I have no idea" moves around, it could encounter another sentence that has more momentum. When that happens, the sentence with less is absorbed into the sentence with more. So "I have no idea" might be absorbed by "We are the chorus" as if it was never there. And soon many find themselves saying "We are the chorus" again and again like it still was "I have no idea."

Now, even if a sentence like "We are the chorus" arose from confusion, once it is on the move there can problems. Speakers must not find themselves caught in a loop. Loops are dangerous. They can make your head spin and grind everything into one thing and that one thing to a halt.

Statements like "We are the chorus" are different from "I have no idea." The latter is a simple repetition of a state of mind. The former involves doing something that makes no sense outside a particular context. So sentences like "We are the chorus" can never travel by themselves. Each must be followed by something like: "We advance the plot."

But because birds don't have much memory, and because "the plot" also requires a context, it must also be followed by something else, something like: "The plot that we advance is that we are the chorus." When that happens and you then hear: "That is the plot we are advancing," which is a restatement of the same thing, you can understand it as an almost sigh of relief.

Sometime, like me, you'll find yourself among the birds. You'll become one of them.

Because of what you are doing at the time, you'll say:

I am wearing a curious hat.

And your statement will ramify through a network. Soon lots of others will be saying:

I am wearing a curious hat

So as you are becoming one of them, lots of them are becoming you.

But "I am wearing a curious hat" is both a repetition of what you're doing and an indication of a function that only makes sense in a particular context. So "I am wearing a curious hat" threatens everyone who says it with getting stuck in a loop. So it cannot for long be by itself.

Q. Why are you wearing a curious hat?

A. What do you mean?

Silence

I am wearing a curious hat

Silence

Q. It has to fit somewhere.

Silence.

A It fits on my head.

Silence.

I am wearing a curious hat

So you see that things do not always work out. And that is why birds do not stay in one place for very long.

