

You say Goodbye ... and I say, Yep, see ya

So you're talking to someone on the street or at a party, and you want to stop chatting with them. Without consciously knowing it, you engage in what I call "the Western goodbye ritual." Like other rituals, it's filled with conventions, rules and even a cadence all its own.

Ending a conversation can be socially somewhat problematic. The person initiating the ending is basically saying "I choose to do something else now instead of talking anymore with you."

When it comes to ending, you have two choices. 1) Say nothing. Let the conversation dwindle then go your separate ways. This is a toughie. In Anglo-American culture, silence is considered uncomfortable once conversation has begun. Silences of more than a few seconds are interpreted as disapproval, boredom or confusion. Because of this intolerance for silence, the initiator must arrange for silence without creating disapproval or a sense of failure for the other person.

Your other option: Find the right words to say goodbye. Here's where the ritual comes in.

Usually the initiator (Alice) begins the goodbye with a transition (**Well ... So ... OK ...**) and follows it with one of several devices:

- 1) Return to the beginning of the conversation, (**Well, I'm so glad I ran into you**).
- 2) Offer an excuse for needing to go, (**So, I have to get to a meeting**).
- 3) Suggest that the other person should go do something (**Well, have a good time tonight or Don't work too hard**).

At this point, the other person (Bob) can do one of two things. He can refuse to close the conversation by initiating a new discussion (**Oh, before you go I need to tell you about ...**), or he can enter into the goodbye.

To join the ritual, Bob agrees with whatever Alice said (**Yeah ... OK ...**) and then refers to a possible next encounter (**See you soon ... Let's do something ...**). This can be said even if Bob knows he will never see Alice again.

Alice agrees. (**Yeah ... OK ...**).

Bob says a closing (**Goodbye ... See ya ...**), and Alice returns the close (**Bye**). After three or four exchanges, finally they can walk away.

Telephone goodbyes are similar. In this situation you can notice that once the ritual begins, the phrases get increasingly shorter until the conversation fully tapers off. (A: **Well, so I'll get the bread on the way home**. B: **OK. That sounds good**. A: **And I'll see you soon**. B: **Yep, see ya**.)

A: **OK. Bye**. B: **Bye**.)

Next time you're saying goodbye, pay attention to the exchange. See what happens if you violate the ritual. It may not feel like a good goodbye.

Poet and presenter Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer lives near Telluride, Colorado. Visit her at www.word-woman.com.