

GENDER AND CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION

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Languages contain a large amount of internal variation. The variety of language used can indicate which groups an individual belongs to within a society. Studies show that the way a speaker uses language e.g. the choice of words, the ways of conversing etc can distinguish differences such as regional or ethnic origin, extent of education, social class, age, gender etc. In this study a summary of the literature on the differences between how males and females interact within conversations is followed by a discourse analysis of a cross-sex English conversation.

Gender-based research into the English language has shown many differences between the ways men and women speak. Lakoff (1973) suggested that women use precise colour shades, such as mauve, aquamarine, lavender, etc more commonly than men. It has also been suggested that certain adjectives are used more by women than men – adjectives such as lovely, darling, cute, charming etc (Wardhaugh 1992). Brend (1975) noted that the intonation patterns used by men and women vary – women using patterns related to surprise and politeness more than men (Wardhaugh 1992). Lakoff (1973) agrees with this and adds that women are more likely to use rising intonation – as usually used in a question – in a statement, and they use more question tags than men. She suggests that this is because women need to have their statements clarified (Wardhaugh 1992).

Several studies have been carried out in Australia that show phonological differences between men's and women's speech (Finegan, Bresnier, Blair and Collins 1992). Shnukal (in Cessnock), Shopen (in Canberra) and Horvath (in Sydney) all report significant differences between males and females in the pronunciation of -ing. All three found that males were more likely to use the /n/ pronunciation than females. It has been suggested that /n/ is a more masculine form than /ŋ/, due to /ŋ/ being associated with higher socio-economic status and the fact that women prefer prestigious speech. Hence the

preference for a less prestigious variety may confer masculinity. This indicates that language reflects the social identity of gender roles.

In conversations involving members of both sexes (cross sex conversations) several differences have been noted regarding women's and men's speech features. Although there is no doubt about speech differences in men and women, it's important to be aware that the claims made below need to be considered carefully, as do the studies that the claims are derived from. Factors demanding consideration include; the personality of the speaker, as this will affect the way he or she responds when engaged in conversation, and the context of the conversation i.e. the relationship between the speakers, the topic being discussed etc. To reduce these variables the same speakers could be recorded over time, hence the situations in which they're interacting will vary and a more realistic view of the way they interact in cross-sex conversations will be available to base claims upon. The way the data is collected, the size of the sample analyses and whether the way of speaking was significantly different between males and females is also important when considering the assertions made below. These claims are based on studies done in the USA during the 1970's (Maltz and Borker, in Gumperz 1982).

Firstly, women tend to ask more questions and they're more likely to make utterances that need a response than men. Fishman (1978) sees this as women being more involved in maintaining social interaction i.e., they're "more actively engaged in insuring interaction that the men." Secondly, women use more positive minimal responses such as "mm hmm" and comment more while listening to someone speaking (Fishman 1978), whereas men are more likely to offer no response (Hirschman 1973) or to respond slowly in what Zimmerman and West (1975) termed a "delayed minimal response". Thirdly, several studies show men to be more likely to challenge or disagree with women's utterances, and therefore interrupt a woman's speech. However, further research shows that the number of interruptions made within a conversation is not necessarily gender-related. Roger and Schmacher (1983) and Roger and Nessoever (1987) found that individuals with personalities high in dominance initiated significantly more interruptions than those with personalities low in dominance, regardless of sex. Zimmerman and West (1975) suggest that when interruptions happen women are more likely to accept them, by adopting a "silent protest" after they've been interrupted or received no response to their comments. Fourthly, women tend to acknowledge the existence of the other speaker by using the pronouns 'you' and 'we' when speaking more than men (Hirschman 1973). Finally, men use more mechanisms to control

the topic of conversation than women – either to change the topic, or develop the topic in a way they wish (Zimmerman and West 1975). They also tend to dominate the conversation, in that they speak more than women in a cross sex conversation.

Various explanations have been suggested as to why men and women use language differently, one of them being related to 'social power'. West (1975) suggests that "men's dominance in conversation parallels their dominance in society". She sees interruptions and topic control as male displays of power, "a power based in the larger social order but reinforced and expressed in face-to-face interaction with women" (Maltz and Borker, in Gumperz 1982). Fishman (1978) takes this one step further, by stating that women should support men in their control in order to be socially acceptable, as it is appropriate "to give power and interactional control to men while keeping it from women" (Gumperz 1982). Lakoff (1975) suggests that men and women have been taught to speak and act differently from an early age. It is believed by some that women should appear unassertive and insecure; hence their speech reflects this. She says, "women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behaviour along with other aspects of their behaviour; and the irony here is that women are made to feel that they deserve such treatment, because of inadequacies in their own intelligence and/or education. But in fact it is precisely because women have learned their early lessons so well that they later suffer such discrimination."

These theories are clearly based on the power structure of men over women. Most of the research presented here was done in the 1970's or earlier. Over the past thirty years there has been a big turnaround in the power structure, as seen in the number of women who now have powerful positions in the workforce and the political arena. Generally, the position of women in society has changed, they are not now seen – by more enlightened observers – as the inferior sex, and this is continually improving as time goes on. If this is the case, why are language differences still seen between males and females? Maltz and Borker (1982) propose that men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures. They base their proposal on work done in Spain by Harding (1975). "Speech is a means for dealing with social and psychological situations. When men and women have different experiences and operate in different social contexts, they tend to develop different genres of speech and different skills for doing things with words" (Gumperz 1982). They suggest that people learn how to make friendly conversation at an early age, not with their parents or other adults, but with their peers. As children usually mix in single sex groups at the

age when they're learning the genre for "chat", i.e., approximately age 4 to 15 years, (Brookes-Gunn and Matthews (1979)), they are learning to differentiate their behaviour from that of the other sex. Maltz and Borker (1982) contend that "boys and girls learn to use language in different ways because of the very different social contexts in which they learn how to carry on friendly conversations" (Gumperz 1982). Girls tend to base their friendships around talking, they support each other through conversation, become closer to each other by telling their 'secrets', they tend to criticise and argue indirectly without being aggressive and they focus on group needs rather than personal needs (Goodwin 1980). Boys, on the other hand, use speech to attain a position of dominance within the group, by being forceful and direct (Savin-Williams 1976). They tell each other jokes and stories, and have to maintain their peers' attention in order to keep the dominant position. When listening to others, they respond with side-comments and challenges, rather than agreeing and supporting the speaker, as girls do (Sacks 1972).

These interactive patterns can be seen to continue from childhood to adulthood. The features of women's speech can be related to the way girls interact. For example it is often said that women are better listeners than men. This comes from the way women socialise as children, it affects the way they use minimal responses, and supportive behaviour when listening to friends' problems, as opposed to only side comments or challenges possibly given by men in the same situation. In fact, this situation (i.e., listening to friends' problems) doesn't tend to arise as often in men's groups as in women's groups, due to the expectations of conversation within the two subcultures. Men's speech patterns also follow on from childhood, the way they interrupt and dominate the topic of conversation, comes from the way they interact within their peer groups.

The cross sex conversation analysed here is between 2 males - M1 and M2 - and 2 females - F1 and F2. Three of the four participants are familiar with each other, but the fourth - M2 - has only met M1 and F2 once before, although he is a friend of F1's. The conversation takes place in M1 and F2's apartment, in the kitchen, where M1 is cooking. Some of the speech features associated with male and female subcultures can be seen here although other aspects must also be taken into consideration. M1 and F2 are husband and wife, and M1 and F1 are siblings, hence one might expect more bantering and interruptions between them, than in a conversation between people of the opposite sex who don't know each other very well e.g. M2 and F2.

The conversation begins with F1 asking F2 a question about how often M1 cooks (line 1).

F1 *So is it true Cath that Dave usually cooks?*

F1 asks F2 rather than M1 because she feels that she'll get a more realistic answer from F1 – she knows that it is unusual for M1 to be cooking, but she expects M1 will deny this (as he does, indirectly). Therefore, by asking F2, she is giving her support in anticipation of a disagreement. M1 doesn't give F2 time to answer the question, he interrupts – in line 7 – to try and justify himself.

M1 *OK well lets have a look, lets work it out this week.*

This is continued in line 10, when he makes a suggestion, using the question tag 'shall we' but he doesn't wait for a response.

M1 *Let's work it out this week shall we? Sunday? Who was it Sunday?
Me. Monday?
We got pizza. Tuesday?*

This is an example of male domination within a conversation, M1 interrupts before F2 has a chance to answer the question directed at her from F1 and he controls the topic of conversation by questioning but excluding any answers that would undermine his control of the conversation. This is seen again in line 12, when M1 asks F2 who cooked on Sunday, and as soon as she begins to respond he answers his own question. The same happens again in lines 15 – 18. In line 19 F1 interrupts before M1 has time to answer his own question again.

F1 *Look at ya Dave, you've got your () on!*

She does this to stop M1 firing any more questions at F2. This could be a way of protecting F2 and showing support without contradicting or confronting M1. In spite of this comment M1 continues, he ignores F1 – as does M2 (but this is probably due to his unfamiliarity with the speakers and the discussion) – and he continues to dominate the conversation with his own response.

M1 *I'm on a roll this week, I'm on a roll!*

F2 is the only participant who responds to F1's comment with a laugh. To conclude this topic of conversation, M1 makes a joke (line 33). He directs the joke at F2, but it is meant for an audience. He is trying to make the other participants laugh at F2's expense.

M1 *In fact the pizza mans got agooda record as you have this week Cath*

This section of the conversation can be said to reflect two of the claims made in previous gender-based studies into cross sex conversation. Firstly, M1 is dominating the conversation; this is very important as F1 is trying to turn the conversation around so that M1 is the object of humour rather than F2. The second feature noted in other research, is one of female support. Twice (lines 1 and 19), F1 comments in order to support F2 as opposed to M1. M2 isn't involved in this part of the conversation due to the nature of the discussion – it is a closed shop for anyone who is not aware of M1 and F2's domestic arrangements.

The second section of the conversation begins with F1 making a statement about a flier she received through the door (lines 38 – 40).

F1 *I got um. What was I gonna say then? Oh pizza. I got a thing through the door if you buy one pizza from Dominoes pizza y'get one free.*

Although it is a statement, therefore doesn't necessarily need a response, her intonation at the end of the sentence rises. F2 is the only person to respond initially, and she does this with a positive minimal response (line 42).

F2 *Umm.*

F1 tries again to elicit more responses by using a question tag (line 44).

F1 *Sounds good doesn't it?*

This time she gets a response from M1 (line 45), but it wasn't quite what she was

expecting. M1 turns the conversation into a joke (lines 45 & 47) again taking control of the topic.

M1 *Get one what free?*

M2 responds to this (lines 49, 52, 54) by taking M1's view of the situation.

M2 *Yeah. That's what I thought*

It is possible that M2 joins in at this point to 'bond' with M1, as he doesn't know him well, and by supporting him in his 'joke' he might gain approval. It may be necessary to point out here that M2 is F1's new boyfriend, and as M1 is F1's brother, 'approval' may be what M2 is aspiring to. As suggested by Maltz and Borker, men like to be the centre of the conversation, so by going along with M1's joke, M2 is helping M1 to keep prime position within the group. F1 tries to join in the joke, by laughing (line 59) and making a comment (line 61),

F1 *One biff in the head*

but this is ignored, and M1 continues with an anecdote to make everyone laugh (lines 63-65).

M1 *I remember when, what's his name? - Robbie said he'd buy me a case of beer. I just thought a case of beer's a case of beer. I never actually did think y'could get stubbies that small*

In line 70 F1 asks M1 a question related to a character in the anecdote, but again she is ignored and M1 continues to control the topic discussed.

F1 *Do y'still keep in touch with Robbie?*

M1 *Yeah, y'take the lid off 'n' that's it!*

It is very clear after looking at the conversation in detail, that some of the claims made about cross sex conversation are supported. For example, M1 does dominate the conversation - both by taking more turns than anyone else (M1 19, M2 7, F1 14, F2 14)

and controlling the topic. He manipulates the conversation in such a way that when the topic is changed slightly (by F1, line 38) he manages to orient it in a direction that suits his jokes and storytelling. Secondly, M1 clearly interrupts F2 and stops her from speaking on numerous occasions in the first half of the conversation, and he doesn't respond to several comments made by F1 in the second part of the conversation. F1 shows support in how she addresses her question initially to F2 and she also tries to prevent M1 from intimidating her in line 19.

F1 makes various comments that could be construed as trying to keep the conversation flowing. In line 6 she rephrases her question instead of leaving it partially answered and in lines 38 – 40 she tries to continue on the similar theme of food when the conversation regarding who cooks, has run to an end. In line 53, she tries to break the bond between M1 and M2, so that everyone can understand the joke, and she does this again in line 61. Finally, in line 69, she asks a question in order to continue the discussion, as the participants have stopped speaking and are laughing.

Although parts of the conversation between M1, F1, F2 and M2 support various claims made in research, it is important to be aware of other factors that could affect the way M1 uses language. He has a very strong personality as is shown by his speech patterns. Also, the fact that he had an audience, could have encouraged him to dominate the conversation – but isn't this a feature of men's speech? Would a woman with just as strong a personality have done the same? If she had, would she have appeared 'masculine'? This issue seems to revert to the traditional roles of men and women. We behave and speak in a way that is expected of us. It is these expectations that control the way we socialise i.e. it is these expectations that cause girls to sit in corners and tell their secrets, while the boys are storytelling and challenging each other. If the socialisation process changes, (as it gradually is) will the differences in the way men and women use language change, or are they innate tendencies that will always be apparent? Only further research over time will answer these questions.

APPENDIX

1. F1 So is it true [Cath that Dave] usually cooks?
2. M1 [so y'gonna do the rice Cath.]
3. (0.3)
4. M1 I didn't say usually I said often.=
5. F2 =No. huh huh=
6. F1 =Often cooks?=-
7. M1 =OK well lets [>have a look< lets work it out] this week,=
8. F2 [Only when it's fish.]
9. =O:h here [we go.]
10. M1 [Let's work it out this week] shall we?=-
11. F2 =hu hu [I knew (h)-]
12. M1 [Sunday?] who was it-(.) Sunday?
13. (.)
14. F2 I-(.)Sun[day.]
15. M1 [me.] (0.4) Monday?
16. (0.4)
17. F2 [none of us.]
18. M1 [we got] pizza. (0.3) Tuesday?=
19. F1 =| Look at ya Dave [you've got y ()] on,=
20. M1 [y'cooked Thai ()]
21. F2 =huh huh huh=
22. F1 =[()]
23. M1 =[(I'm on a roll] this week I'm on a roll,
24. (.)
25. F2 He's getting excited.=
26. F1 =Ye:ah [it's good.]
27. M1 [Well] Sunday was me? (.) Tue-Monday was pizza? Tuesday
28. was you and Wednesdays me thats (0.3) Y'well behi:nd.=
29. F2 =You're asking him on the wrong week.=
30. M1 =-[In fact-]=
31. F2 =h h [Ask him on another week.]
32. F1 [huh huh HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH]
33. M1 [In fact-] in fact the piz the pizza mans got agooda record as

34. you have this week Cath.=
35. F2 =(h) (h) have I: gotta do the rice have I? (0.4) See so you're
36. only half cooking.
37. (0.6)
38. F1 I got u:m (1.0) What was I gonna say then, (1.0) Oh pizza,
39. (0.3) I got a thing through the door if you buy one pizza from
40. (0.2) Dominoes pizza y'get one free?
41. (0.3)
42. F2 Um :m.
43. (0.7)
44. F1 Sounds good [doesn't it.]
45. M1 [Get one what] free.=
46. F1 One pizza.=
47. M1 =Are y'sure it said pizza or y'just [get one] free.=
48. F2 =['Scuse me hun]=
49. M2 =Yeah.
50. (.)
51. F2 Excuse me honey=
52. M2 =that's what I thought.=
53. F1 =Why what d'ya [mea:n]
54. M2 [Yeah] get a free one.
55. (0.3)
56. M1 Get one what.(.) Y'don't know=
57. M2 =Yeah=
58. M1 -be a surpris(h)e,
59. F1 h hu [huh huh]
60. M2 [huh huh]
61. F1 .h one biff in the head.
62. (.)
63. M1 I re I remember when er, (0.6) what's his name Robbie said
64. he'd buy me a case of beer. (.) I just thought a case of beers a
65. case of beer? I never actually did think >y'could get< stubbies
66. that small. [huh huh huh]
67. F1 [huh huh huh]
68. F2 h huh [huh huh huh]

69. M2 [huh huh huh]
70. F1 .h(.) Do y'still ke-keep in touch with Robbie?
71. M1 Yeah y'take the lid off y'go ch::>n'it<that's it.
72. M2 [huh huh huh huh] her
73. M1 [huh huh huh huh]

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