

# CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES, TOPIC, AND GENDER\*

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*This research work intends to discuss some strategies used in conversation, such as indirectness, pause, interruption, laughter, and overlap, and their relation to gender, dominance/solidarity, and topic. The theoretical framework applied is Tannen's (1994) proposals for the analysis of conversations to enquire into gender differences, and Coates' (1997) characterisation of the collaborative floor. The results show that pause and indirectness are gender-related, that laughter and overlap are used to signal solidarity, and that the occurrences, use and meaning of the characteristic features mentioned above are topic-related.*

## Introduction

“Some of the people around here may not understand, their customs are different.”

“(...) it was this anger and the other thing, much worse, the fear of being nothing.”<sup>1</sup>

The objective of this paper is to discuss some strategies used in conversation, such as indirectness, silence, interruption and overlap, and their relation to gender, dominance/solidarity, and topic. This paper is divided into two sections: the first is devoted to an account of the main proposals and findings of the relevant research. And the second, to the study itself, which includes a discussion of the occurrence of the conversational strategies present in the corpus analysed, in terms

\* Trabajo presentado en el Seminario de “Análisis del Discurso”, dirigido por la profesora Alfonsina Doddis J.

<sup>1</sup> Atwood, M., *Life Before Man*.



of their relation to the number and gender of the speakers, and most importantly, in an attempt to identify the meaning these occurrences have.

The goal of the study is, then, to go beyond a quantitative analysis, since the emphasis is placed on meaning rather than form.

## Theoretical background

### *(The relativity of) linguistic strategies*

“He’s a prick, you know. Underneath all that understanding stuff.”<sup>2</sup>

“«What did he want?»  
«I’m not sure,» says Lesje.”<sup>3</sup>

Many discursal strategies have been claimed to show dominance, among these interruption and overlap. However, it has been pointed out<sup>4</sup> lately that there is never a one-to-one relationship between a linguistic device and an interactive effect. Thus, it has been suggested that the intention of an utterance cannot be determined only on the basis of its linguistic form, and that, in order to understand conversation, one has to look more deeply, since conversation is ultimately the result of the interaction of two participants.

Take indirectness. According to Lakoff<sup>5</sup>, it has two benefits, defensiveness and rapport. The first one is a speaker’s preference not to make explicit a certain idea in order to be able to modify it if it does not meet agreement, and the second, is the fact of getting what one wanted not because one demanded it but because the other person wanted it too. It has been claimed that women’s language is powerless, because its indirectness means that they (or rather “we”) do not feel entitled to make demands. However, those in power often may prefer not to make demands, seeking the more pleasant result of rapport; in this reasoning, indirectness is a prerogative of the powerful. Take, for instance, a master who says, “it’s cold in here” and may expect a servant to close the window. If the servant says the same thing, the master is not likely to react in the same fashion<sup>6</sup>. Tannen states that

<sup>2</sup> Id.

<sup>3</sup> Id.

<sup>4</sup> Tannen, D., *Gender and Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Discussed in Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Example taken from Tannen, D., *op. cit.*, p 33.



indirectness is not necessarily related to subordination, rather, it can be used by the powerless or the powerful, depending on the setting, linguistic conventions, status of the individuals, and their relationship to each other.

Silence has also been associated to dominance, the assumption being that men dominate women by silencing them. Silence alone, though, is not necessarily a sign of powerlessness, actually it can be a way of exerting power. Tannen<sup>7</sup> quotes, from a novel by Erica Jong, a pathetic 'dialogue', in which a woman asks her husband a question. He does not answer but only looks at her; and after asking over six questions and having him only look at her, she ends up on the floor, grabbing his pyjama leg, without knowing what was wrong. Also silence can be a result of the type of talk (for instance, an interrogation) or style differences. There are cultural and subcultural differences, too, in terms of the length of pauses. If a long pauser is talking to a shorter pauser, the latter is likely to feel uncomfortable with the silence, raise a topic, do most of the talking, and be seen as dominating the conversation.

Topic raising has been assumed to signal domination, i.e., the speaker that raises more topics is seen as dominating. However, this is too simple an equation, since one should also look at the nature of the topics. Tannen<sup>8</sup> quotes a conversation between two tenth-grade friends, in which one of them proposed most of the topics, but all of them had to do with the other girl, her mother, her friendship to another girl, etc. And the same as with silence, raising topics may be an effect of differences in pausing.

Interruption and overlap have normally, in most articles on gender, been interpreted as signs of dominance, the assumption being that men dominate women by interrupting them. However, later research has found no clear pattern of men interrupting women, and what is more, discourse analysts have found more interruption in all-female groups than in mixed-sex or all-men groups<sup>9 10</sup>. It appears to be that overlap and interruption can show both dominance and support, depending on the relationship between the participants, and on how they understand the conversational space available to them.

<sup>7</sup> Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Also Peter Kunsmann, in *Gender, Status, and Power in Discourse Behaviour of Men and Women*. Available Internet: [www.Linguistik\\_online.de/1\\_00/KUNSMANN.HTM](http://www.Linguistik_online.de/1_00/KUNSMANN.HTM)







Minimal responses are brief utterances that occur in all forms of talk, but apparently more in a collaborative floor, since here speakers are expected to signal their presence and involvement, and their acceptance of the shared floor, e.g.

Bea:	having to	[completely
Jen:	yes/	
Mary:	mhm/ completely review your [view of your	
Bea:	change] your view of your husband =	
Mary:	husband] =	= that's right/
Sally	= yes/	
Meg:	yeah/	mhm/ <sup>19</sup>

Normally, the collaborative floor is defined in terms of the single floor, and is said to have shorter turns, more overlap, more repetition, and more joking and teasing. Coates<sup>20</sup>, though, says that the two types are not only quantitatively but also qualitatively different.

## Topic

“She’s stopped accepting invitations to dinner: she’s no longer willing to be that bored simply to eat.”<sup>21</sup>

“He was telling Len a story, which seemed to be about hunting.”<sup>22</sup>

Tannen<sup>23</sup> analysed conversations of pairs of male and female best friends to study gender differences in terms of physical alignment and topical cohesion. She found that females established topics quickly and produced lengthy talk on a small number of topics. Little boys, on the other hand, produced little talk, on different topics, and older boys and men produced extended talk on a smaller amount of topics, indirectly discussing their personal problems in a more abstract way. The conversations were videotaped with a different purpose, but when Tannen<sup>24</sup> saw them she could not help but noticing gender-related patterns at every age level, so she decided to study the conversations more closely. She took a cross-cultural cross-gender approach, in which girls and boys, women and men, “can be

<sup>19</sup> Coates, J., *op. cit.*, p 77.

<sup>20</sup> Coates, J., *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Atwood, M., *Life Before Man*.

<sup>22</sup> Atwood, M., *The Edible Woman*.

<sup>23</sup> Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Tannen, D., *op. cit.*



seen to accomplish and display coherence in different but equally valid ways.”<sup>25</sup> Males and females learn their conversation styles in single-sex peer groups, which is as if they grew in different cultural environments, learning different habits to signal and decode their intended meanings. In cross-cultural communication, this is, cross-gender communication, these cues are bound to be misinterpreted.

The groups were second-grade, sixth-grade, tenth-grade, and twenty-five-year-old females and males, and across these Tannen found some similarities. Second and sixth-grade boys did not elaborate on any topic at all. Second-graders did not discuss any topic for more than a few turns, and there were only two extended turns in the 20-minute recording; besides, they seemed extremely uncomfortable in the situation of having nothing to do but talk. Second-grade girls, on the other hand, seemed comfortable talking, and discussed one main topic with different sub-topics. This can be read in relation to Coates’ claim that boys’ play is activity-oriented, whereas girls’ play is talk<sup>26</sup>.

Sixth-grade boys touched 55 topics; these including school, homework, things in the room, cable television, girls, their friendship, and others. No topic was extensively elaborated, and only two turns extended more than a couple of utterances. Both girls and boys started talking about what had happened at home the night before, but they took extremely different starting points; one of the boys opened by mentioning a jet plane and a TV, and one of the sixth-grade girls started by recounting an emotionally charged incident. All the three topics in the girls’ group were variations on the same one, concern with intimacy, its loss, and separation.

Tenth-grade girls also talked about one of the girls’ problematic relations to other people, and as in the sixth-graders’ group, it is the other girl the one who raised the topics. Tenth-grade boys were partly anomalous, in that they discussed each topic a lot, and the two topics discussed had to do with relationships. One boy was concerned about his drinking, and the other, with his feeling of alienation from the group. These conversations were peculiar because they proceeded in parallel tracks: each boy commented on his worries, and did not say much in relation to what the other one had said. And when they did, they downplayed or dismissed the concerns of the other, denying the reality of the problems. This is not lack of empathy, as women would probably perceive it, but rather a means of reassurance.

Twenty-five-year-old men experienced difficulty in finding a topic they would consider serious; finally, they settled on marriage, a topic they discussed for the rest of the time, and their discussion was carried out on a theoretical, rather than personal, level. Actually, at a particular point one of them said,

<sup>25</sup> Tannen, D., *op. cit.*, p 88.

<sup>26</sup> Coates, J., *op. cit.*



“Yknow I don’t just want to talk about my situation.<sup>27</sup>” Whenever they expressed their feelings, they did so indirectly, using general statements. Twenty-five-year-old women, on the other hand, talked about their personal lives and choices. The conversation had an odd tension, apparently due to an earlier misunderstanding, but both women were strongly encouraging, and when they discussed their positive qualities, they belittled them.

In general, it seemed easier for girls and women to find a suitable topic, this having to do, for the oldest as well as the sixth-graders, with interpersonal disagreement and harmony. Males divided into two groups: the youngest ones repeatedly expressed their desire of having something to do, and, as well as the sixth-graders, touched, but did not develop, a great number of topics. Ten-graders as well as twenty-five-year-old men, though showing discomfort, talked at length about a small number of topics, these being potentially personal. However, they discussed them in abstract and impersonal terms.

## **The study**

### *The data*

The data were transcribed from a movie called “St. Elmo’s fire”, filmed in the eighties. The story deals with seven young people (classmates) who have just finished college; three women: Leslie, Wendy, and Jules; and four men: Billy, Alec, Kevin, and Kirby. They are all friends. Also important in the story is that Alec and Leslie are going steady.

The movie was chosen because the characters are all the same age and have the same level of education; thus, it was assumed that the problem of these two factors having a bearing on the results would be overcome. It is important that they are peers, because this is a feature of casual conversation. It can be pointed out that due to the nature of the data, the conversations are not spontaneous; however, it can be claimed that the dialogues reflect the stereotypes found in the movie industry, and thus, mirror our mentalities in general.

### *The analysis*

Only the conversations that took place among the characters mentioned above were transcribed. They were divided according to the participants, i.e., if, for example, in one scene there were two characters (A and B), and then a third (C) arrived, and then one of them (A) left, the text transcribed was divided

<sup>27</sup> Coates, J., *op. cit.*, p 121.



into three conversations: one with two speakers (A and B); one with three speakers (A, B, and C); and another one with two speakers (B and C). This has to do with the fact that in the movie a change in the participants coincided with a change of topic too. The conversations were classified into men-only, women-only, and mixed-sex.

The analysis of the conversations included the following aspects: occurrence of conversational strategies: silence, overlap, interruption, and indirectness; presence of pauses and laughter; identification of topic. The results are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Types of conversation and characteristic features

TYPE	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Men-only	4	4	14	-	-	-	-	X	-	Billy lost another job (raised by Alec)
Men-only	6	3	22	-	X	-	-	X	-	The meaning of life, Kirby's crush on a girl, love, divorce, lawyers, Kevin's sex life (the two of them make comments and ask questions)
Men-only	9	2	11	-	-	-	-	-	X	Alec's affairs (raised by him)
Men-only	10	2	5	-	X	-	-	-	X	Alec's affairs (raised by him)
Men-only	19	2	9	-	X	-	X	-	-	Alec and Leslie's break up (raised by Alec)
Women-only	3	3	16	-	-	-	-	-	-	Wendy's relationship with Billy (unclear who raised it)
Women-only	11	3	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	Wendy's new boyfriend (raised by Leslie)
Women-only	12	3	7	-	X	-	-	-	-	Jules' affair with her boss (raised by Wendy and Leslie)
Women-only	13	2	9	-	X	-	X	X	-	Leslie's relationship with Alec (raised by her)
Women-only	15	3	3	-	-	-	-	X	-	Jules' affair with her boss (raised by her)
Mixed-sex	2	2	12	-	-	-	X	X	X	Billy's suspended licence, women's anger management, Kevin's mood, Kevin's job, the meaning of life, Kevin's attitude towards women
Mixed-sex	5	7	14	-	X	-	-	-	-	Alec's new job, Alec's intention of marrying Leslie, Alec's attitude towards sex
Mixed-sex	7	2	34	-	X	X	-	-	X	Jules' new apartment, Kevin's sexual preferences (raised by Jules)
Mixed-sex	8	2	19	-	X	-	X	-	-	Leslie's feelings for Alec, women and marriage, divorce, the one time Kevin was in love, Kevin's writing (both of them ask questions and make comments)
Mixed-sex	16	2	12	-	X	X	-	-	-	How they're doing. (both of them ask questions)
Mixed-sex	18	2	13	-	X	-	X	X	-	Leslie's relationship with Alec (raised by her).
Mixed-sex	20	2	13	-	X	-	-	-	-	Alec and Leslie break up (raised by Leslie)
Mixed-sex	21	2	11	-	X	-	-	X	-	Jules' depression (raised by Billy)
Mixed-sex	22	2	15	-	X	-	X	-	-	Jules' breakdown, Billy's future (raised by him) <sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Conversations 1, 14, and 17 were not included in the analysis.



Type of conversation (men-only, women-only, mixed-sex), A: conversation number, B: number of speakers, C: number of turns, D: silence, E: pause, F: interruption, G: overlap, H: laughter, I: indirectness, J: topics.

X = presence, - = absence.

## Discussion of the results

The results were examined in an attempt to find relations between the occurrence/absence of the conversational strategies and the length of the conversations, the gender and number of the speakers, and the bearing topic may have had in their use of the strategies.

Concerning silence, it was found that nobody kept quiet when explicitly expected to speak, for instance, after being asked a question. Some speakers did say less, but this was probably due to the personality they have, or to their participation in the story. Thus, Wendy is portrayed as a very shy woman, and most of her contributions to the talk took place when she was asked a question; she did not volunteer her opinions.

Concerning the length of the turns, these tended to be rather short, which is, according to Coates<sup>29</sup>, one major feature of the collaborative floor. They varied from one single word to no more than forty, the longest, with the exception of two turns, in conversation number 21, which resembles a sermon, in length and in meaning.

Laughter was present in seven of the nineteen conversations. It is interesting to note that in all conversations, except number 18,<sup>30</sup> the occurrences of laughter were also instances of overlap, i.e., these occurrences of laughter were cases in which two or more characters laughed together, as in the following examples:

1. (in conversation 4, men-only)

Billy: it's all right, the wet look is in, asshole.

Alec: Mr Asshole. Do you. [(laughter).

Kirby: [(laughter)

Kevin: [(laughter)

Billy: [(laughter)

<sup>29</sup> Coates, J., *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> This conversation is different from the others probably because the two characters in it are a bit drunk; therefore, they behave oddly.



2. (in conversation 13, women-only)

Leslie: men, you can't live with them, you can't [shoot them (laughter)

Wendy: [shoot them. (laughter) (pause) have you seen  
Billy?

3. (in conversation 2, mixed-sex)

Alec: of course you do know what it means to have a suspended license for drunk driving on your record?

Billy: yeah, it means I'll never be a cop in D.C. [(laughter)

Wendy: [(laughter)

Kevin: [(laughter)

Jules: [(laughter)

Kirby: [(laughter)

Laughter was not related to the number of turns, and it was present in two of the five men-only conversations (conversations number 4 and 6), and in two of the five women-only conversations (conversations number 13 and 15), but only in three of the nine mixed-sex conversations (number 2, 18, and 21). Though the difference is not big, there might be some relation between the gender of the speakers and the occurrence of laughter, which cannot be determined with the data analysed.

Besides, laughter was always used to signal solidarity<sup>31</sup> and it was always, except in conversation 18, related to the relief of some tension, as the following examples show. In example number 1 (above), the situation is somewhat tense because, since they finished college, Alec has been finding jobs for Billy, jobs he seems unable to maintain. This is a source of tension during the movie, which can be described as a movie of initiation, i. e., it narrates the process through which these seven people enter society and find their place in it as grown-ups. Example number 2 also has to do with Billy. Billy and Wendy have a very close friendship that he abuses; he knows that Wendy has a major crush on him, and takes advantage of this by borrowing money from her, which he never returns. In example number 4, laughter occurs after Billy's entrance:

4.

Billy: I just can't deal with the little Mrs. Can I crush? [(laughter)

Kevin: [(laughter)

Kirby: [(laughter)

<sup>31</sup> As pointed out above, whenever possible there was an attempt to find out whether these strategies were related to dominance or solidarity.



Billy is not only irresponsible about work, thus, when they were at college he got his girlfriend pregnant, and married her. The marriage does not seem to be working now; Billy goes out, comes back late at night, drunk, and, in general, behaves like a single man. Because of this he and his wife quarrel a lot, and all his friends know this. When he asks if he can spend the night there, it is the “ump-teenth” time that Felicia, his wife, has asked him to leave. His friends do not say much because when they have done so, it has not worked; so now they just laugh at it to relieve the tension. Laughter also occurs related to the relief of some tension in examples 5 and 6:

5.

Jules: Forrester said he wanted to know exactly what I was looking for in this relationship. I told him love, companionship, and the vice-presidency [(laughter)

Leslie: [(laughter)

Wendy: [(laughter) Jules, it sounds like you've got your boss wrapped around your little finger.

In a previous conversation, Wendy and Leslie tried to talk with Jules -who, after they finished school, has been behaving in a way that her friends consider too modern- about an affair she is having with her boss, who is married. Jules answered that it did not matter, because “it is the eighties”; then she said she had forgotten she had an appointment, and left. Jules having avoided the topic before, now when she says things are going just fine, her friends know this might not be true; thus, they just laugh.

6.

Jules: I'm just so tired Billy. I never thought I'd be so tired at twenty-two.

Billy: join the club. You know? No one was buying this together woman of the eighties stuff anyway.

Jules: and all this time I was afraid you'd find out I wasn't fabulous. [(chuckles)

Billy: [(chuckles) it's cool, all this time I was afraid you'd find out I was irresponsible. [(laughter)

Jules: [(laughter)

In this conversation, Billy is trying to console Jules, who is very depressed, so much so, that her friends think she might try to kill herself. He tells her her problem is not really a problem, and tries to be funny.

Concerning pauses, men produced the turns with more pauses in them, when referring, in one way or another, to their feelings:



7. (in conversation 18, mixed-sex)

Kevin: ok (pause) dangerous question uh (pause) well (pause) I think I hang around you guys so much personally because (pause) well (pause) you're all I think about.

Leslie: (pause) me?

Kevin: I (pause) I think that the reason I'm not interested in other women and why I haven't had sex in so long (pause) is because I'm desperately, completely (pause) in love with you (pause) uf!

8. (in conversation 19, men-only)

Alec: I believe you, Kevin. I want you to know that I believe you and I'm sorry I hit you (pause) Kevin (pause) I don't think (pause) that I'm ever gonna be able to (pause) get Leslie back.

No relation between the length of the conversations and the occurrence or absence of pause was found. Pauses occurred in a 5-turn conversation, as well as in a 34-turn one. Concerning gender, pauses were present in three of the five men-only conversations, in two of the five women-only conversations, and in seven of the nine mixed-sex conversations. The number of speakers and the presence of pauses seemed to be related, since these were present in ten of the twelve two-speaker conversations, and in two of the five three-speaker conversations; and absent in the one four-speaker conversation, and in the one seven-speaker conversation. However, it can be claimed that the presence of pauses, rather than being determined by the number of speakers or their gender, has to do with the topics of the conversations.

Concerning interruptions<sup>32</sup>, these were not related to the number of speakers since all of them took place in two-speaker conversations. There seems to be, however, a relation with the gender of the speakers; thus, interruptions did not occur in any of the men-only conversations, nor in any of the women-only conversations, but in two of the mixed-sex conversations.

The occurrences of overlap were not related to the number of speakers either, because all of them took place in two-speaker conversations. They might be related to the gender of speakers, since they occurred in one of the men-only conversations, one of the women-only conversations, and in three of the mixed-sex conversations<sup>33</sup>. These are examples of the occurrences of overlap in the data:

<sup>32</sup> Interruptions are understood as different to overlap, since in them the intention of the speaker is to grab the floor or change the topic (even when this might mean overlapping speech). In overlap, on the other hand, the parallel contribution is not considered a bid for the floor, or an attempt to change the topic of the conversation.

<sup>33</sup> Neither of these two strategies is, in the data, related to the length of the conversations.



<sup>34</sup> Though no stress or intonation marks here were used, it is relevant to point out that both in 12 and 13 the utterance previous to the overlap had falling intonation.

In these, each of these occurrences of overlap can be explained on different bases, being all related to different phenomena. Number 9 will be referred to when dealing with topic. Number 10 is an example of how conversations are not only about exchanging new information, but also about solidarity and companion-ship. The two women, by saying "shoot them" at the same time, and laughing afterwards signal not only agreement, but also solidarity: both of them have been there, they know what it feels like. This is a perfect example of the above-men-tioned collaborative floor. In 11 there are seven speakers, which explains the over-lap: the people interacting in this particular part of the conversation are three; one of them, Kevin, says something to which the other two, Wendy and Billy, respond verbally at the same time. Finally, numbers 12 and 13 are both cases in which the supportive move was issued too early, probably because a pause was understood as the end of the turn.<sup>34</sup>

9. (in conversation 19, men-only)  
Alec: oh, gee! I'm [sorry.  
Kevin: [it's all right.
10. (in conversation 13, women-only)  
Leslie: men, you can't live with them, you can't [shoot them (laughter)  
Wendy: [shoot them. (laughter)
11. (in conversation 2, mixed-sex)  
Kevin: never trust a woman who says she's not angry.  
Wendy: [I'm not angry.  
Billy: [tell me about it.
12. (in conversation 8, mixed-sex)  
Kevin: listen, Les, uhm (pause) do you think that my attachment to Alec is unnatural?  
Leslie: no, [I think mine is.  
Kevin: [no?
13. (in conversation 18, mixed-sex)  
Leslie: tell me something. What do you think about our relationship, as an outsi-der? I want you to be honest. [Really.  
Kevin: [you want me to be honest?  
Leslie: I don't know (laughter) yes.



Indirectness was present in a total of four conversations, two of them being mixed-sex, and the other two, men-only conversations. These instances took place in two-speaker conversations as well as in a four-speaker one, and in a 5-turn conversation as well as in a 34-turn one. This means that indirectness in the data was not related to the number of speakers or the length of the conversations, but was gender-related, since it never occurred in women-only conversations. This belies the assumption that indirectness is a feature of women's speech, and, along these lines, possibly, the idea that it is used by those with no power. However, the presence of indirectness had to do also with the topic being discussed. Consider the following:

14. (in conversation 9, men-only)

Alec: Leslie has to marry me soon.

Kevin: why? are you pregnant? What is the marriage hurry?

Alec: I'm gonna kill myself.

Kevin: it's only peppers, Al.

Alec: I can't believe what I just did. I innocently go downtown to buy the night-gown, and this amazingly leggy blonde salesgirl offers to model it for me. So we end up doing it standing up in front of a three-way mirror.

15. (in conversation 10, men-only)

Alec: do you have an extra key to your apartment that I can borrow tomorrow?

Kevin: what for?

Alec: uh (pause) the (pause) lingerie salesgirl has been calling me at the office.

16. (in conversation 2, mixed-sex)

Jules: the meaning of life is fun, good time. Don't you enjoy anything in the world, like girls?

Kevin: I enjoy being afraid of Russia, it's a harmless fear but it makes America feel better and Russia get an inflated sense of national worth from our paranoia, how's that.

17. (in conversation 7, mixed-sex)

Jules: I knew you'd like it, your sensitivity. Oh, by the way, I want you to meet my decorator, Ron, he's so fabulous, he lives across the hall.

18. (later in conversation 7)

Jules: come sit down, let's relax.

Kevin: Jules, why do I feel like I'm not here by accident?

Jules: I've been wanting to talk to you.

Kevin: sounds like one of our infamous conversations is coming. Like when you met my parents and decided I was adopted, remember that?



Jules: I still think your mother's hiding something. (pause) Kevin I'm curious.

Kevin: mhm?

Jules: you know those nights we stayed up talking

Kevin: uh huh

Jules: how come you never made a pass at me?

Kevin: what?

Jules: I mean, don't you find me attractive? I mean, do you know [that you're the only guy at : school who never made a pass at me?

Kevin:

[Jules, Jules!

In examples 14 and 15, Alec is talking about his "extracurricular activities", as Leslie calls them at some point. In 14, it takes him three turns to explicitly say that he has just cheated on Leslie, again. In 15, instead of actually saying that he is planning to do it again, he says that the woman has been calling him at the office. In number 17, Jules says that she knew Kevin would like her new apartment, because of his "sensitivity", and then says she would like him to meet her decorator. Only later in the conversation (after eight turns) does she explicitly say that she thinks Kevin is homosexual. The nature of the topics, infidelity and homosexuality (especially back in the eighties) is related to the indirectness these characters, both male and female, use when discussing them.

In number 16, the topic being discussed is not a difficult one, but still Kevin is not direct when discussing it. When asked whether he likes girls, he does not answer directly, but says, "I enjoy being afraid of Russia, it's a harmless fear but it makes America feel better and Russia get an inflated sense of national worth from our paranoia, how's that". In this utterance, it was found a feature Tannen<sup>35</sup> discussed when analysing conversation among single-sex groups of different ages. She points out that when twenty-five-year-old men discussed personal topics (for instance, relationships), their discussion was carried out on a theoretical, rather than personal, level expressing their feelings indirectly, as general statements.

Indirectness was not present in the speech of all men, actually it appeared mostly in Kevin's, in three of the ten conversations in which he participated:

19. (in conversation 6, men-only)

Kevin: wow! wow! You know what love is? Love is an illusion created by lawyer types like yourself to perpetuate an illusion called marriage, to create the reality of divorce and an illusionary need for divorce, sorry.

<sup>35</sup> Tannen, D., *op. cit.*



20. (later in conversation 6)

Kirby: you're just pissed off because you've not had sex in how long is it? A year maybe two? Refresh my memory please Kevin. Have you ever heard of the sexual revolution?

Kevin: who won? Nobody! It used to be the only free thing, not anymore. Alimony, palimony, it's all financial. Love is an illusion.

21. (in conversation 9, men-only)

Kevin: I'm sorry, the notion of two people spending their entire lives together was invented by people who were lucky to make it to twenty without being eaten by dinosaurs. Marriage is obsolete.

Here what Kevin is avoiding to say, through being indirect and impersonal in these conversations, is that he has been in love with Leslie for a long time.

Yet another feature that in Tannen's data characterised the speech of men was found in this study. She says that they commented on their worries, without saying much in relation to what the other one was saying, and that when they did say something, they denied the reality of the problems, as a means of reassurance. This feature appears in example 22, when Billy tries to comfort Jules:

22. (in conversation 21)

Billy: what's the big deal here. So you lost a job. Jules, I've lost twenty of them since graduation. Plus a wife and a kid. And a handful of hair in the shower this morning (pause) you know? This smells to me like a little bit of self-created drama. I should know, having started a few of my own.

(later in the same conversation)

Billy: Jules, you know what honey? This isn't real. You know what it is? It's St. Elmo's fire. Electric flashes of light that appear in the dark skies out of nowhere. Sailors were guided entire journeys by it. But the joke was on them; there was no fire. There wasn't even a St. Elmo's. They made it up. They made it up because they thought they needed it to keep them going when things got tough. Just like you're making up all this. We're all going through this, it's out time at the edge.

These examples fit Tannen's description, since Billy, in order to make Jules feel better, tells her that her problem is not real.

## TOPIC

When dealing with pause it was pointed out that the two turns with more pauses in them were uttered by men, and this was related to the fact that they were referring to their feelings, i. e., the presence of pauses is topic-related.



23. (in conversation 18, mixed-sex)

Kevin: Ok (pause) dangerous question uh (pause) well (pause) I think I hang around you guys so much personally because (pause) well (pause) you're all I think about.

Leslie: (pause) me?

Kevin: I (pause) I think that the reason I'm not interested in other women and why I haven't had sex in so long (pause) is because I'm desperately, completely (pause) in love with you (pause) uf!

24. (in conversation 19, men-only)

Alec: I believe you, Kevin. I want you to know that I believe you and I'm sorry I hit you (pause) Kevin (pause) I don't think (pause) that I'm ever gonna be able to (pause) get Leslie back.

Leslie has just found out that Alec has been cheating on her. It is in this context that the extracts above take place. Kevin has been telling people that falling in love is the most stupid thing they can do, that love is just an invention of lawyers so that there might be divorces, and that "love sucks". Alec, on his part, has been cheating on his girlfriend for a long time, and said that he would stop doing so when she married him, but she found out before that. This is why they have so much difficulty in saying what they want to say.

Concerning interruptions, they, too, seemed to be gender-related: they did not occur in any of the men-only conversations, nor in any of the women-only conversations, but in two of the mixed-sex conversations. In spite of this, the occurrence of interruption seems to be accounted for by the topic of the conversation, rather than the gender of the participants. Consider the following examples:

25. (in conversation 7, mixed-sex)

Jules: I mean, don't you find me attractive? I mean, do you know [that you're the only guy at school who never made a pass at me?

Kevin: [Jules, Jules!  
Well, if you notice, I never joined the army either.

(later in conversation 7.

Kevin: Jules, there's the break of insanity and there's the abyss, [which obviously you've fallen to.

Jules: [Kev, there's nothing to be ashamed of.

Kevin: = no, I'm not ashamed, I'm not gay, and I'm not staying.

Jules: Kev, look at me in this robe. [Are you hard? No. look, let me just introduce you to Ron, he's gay too and he's so fabulous. Ron, Kevin's here. Kevin, wait, please.

Kevin: [Jules, please.



26. (in conversation 16, mixed-sex)

Wendy:there's nothing to forgive (pause) actually, I should thank you. It helped me grow up a lot, see how stupid I was being

Billy: =trusting a guy like me.

In example 25, the topic was Jules' concern about Kevin. She thinks that he is gay, has not faced it, and is in love with Alec. Whenever Kevin interrupts her, his intention is to try to make her stop talking. He is uncomfortable with the topic.

The interruption in example 26 is also a product of the topic. Billy knows he has not behaved properly with Wendy (actually, the last time they met she took him to her place for dinner and he got drunk and embarrassed her in front of her family). He is not going to apologise: this is as close as he gets to doing it.

## Conclusions

All the strategies and features studied (overlap, laughter, pauses, interruption, and indirectness) were, in one way or another, topic-related. Of these, only pause and indirectness were also related to gender. Laughter and overlap were used to signal solidarity (concerning the other strategies, it was impossible to find any relation with dominance/solidarity).

It can be claimed that these results prove that the idea of relating the characteristic features studied was productive. Studying only one of the strategies and its relation to gender seemed insufficient, for the occurrences, use or meaning the features had were also related to the topic under discussion.

In general, most of the conversations had to do with relationships (the movie is about relationships), but in more specific terms the topics varied from infidelity to sexual orientation, and from the meaning of life to depression.

An interesting area for further study might be the relation between gender and laughter; according to the results of this study, they appear to be linked, but the data used did not lend itself for a more exhaustive study in this respect. Another area for further study may be an inquiry into the different ways in which genders approach the topic of relationships. And a third one might be the differences within the same gender, in terms of how, when, and what for, they use one particular strategy.

Finally, this study was particularly enriching in two respects. First, it was interesting to get acquainted with the research done so far concerning gender and conversation. Second, it was enlightening to observe conversation from a different viewpoint, that of the analyst, which concretely has meant a better understanding of the complexity of having different communicative styles when engaging in casual conversation.