

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.”¹

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

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¹ 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.”²

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

Many discursal strategies have been claimed to show dominance, among these interruption and overlap. However, it has been pointed out⁴ 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 Lakoff⁵, 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 fashion⁶. Tannen states that

² Id.

³ Id.

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

⁵ Discussed in Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

⁶ 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. Tannen⁷ 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. Tannen⁸ 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^{9 10}. 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.

⁷ Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

⁸ Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

⁹ Tannen, D., *op. cit.*

¹⁰ 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

