Gender Language Differences
Do men and women really speak differently?

Abderrazak Mohammed Saeed Chouchane
Sohar University (GFP), Sohar 311
Sultanate of Oman

Abstract

The focus of this research is in the area of Language and gender. It investigates the major linguistic differences between men and women speech by examining the validity of the conversational differences claimed by the Deficit and Dominance Theory. The research delves into the major linguistic features that characterize women's speech by analyzing a mixed gender conversation. The findings from the conversation analysis provide evidence of significant linguistic differences between female and male speech in using lexical hedges and fillers, intensifiers and the lexical choice and intonation which supports the Deficit and Dominance claims. However, in other features like the rising pitch and overlapping and interruptions in turn taking, the conversation analysis does not clearly show a bias to neither side. Although many of the linguistic features between both genders still exist, some other features are starting to weaken as they do not show clear bias, which will keep the debate open to further studies and theories.

Keywords: Gender   sex   deficit   dominance   status   linguistic   conversation

1. Introduction:

Gender language differences are one of the controversial issues in linguistics which generated a substantial debate among linguists and resulted in a massive literature about language usage between men and women. It would make sense looking at differences between men's and women's language competences from an angle of superiority and inferiority in societies where women are really suppressed and subordinated, which is thought to be something of the past, at least for Western societies since a few decades back when women were supposed to stay at home, take care of family domestic life, listen and obey commands from a man dominated society. To still interpret language differences in terms of women low and subordinate social status in the 21st century with the influential women's rights and liberation movements and the

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IMPACT FACTOR: 2.9

unlimited communal and equivalent social roles women are playing side by side with men, casts qualms and spurs desire to investigate the validity of the claimed conversational differences between both genders.

The study is based on an analysis of a 25 minute casual mixed-sex conversation between three men and three women English native speakers of equal social status and delves into the major features that characterize women's speech suggested by Robin Lakoff and the Deficit, Dominance Theory.

2. Overview of Language and Gender

2.1. Gender versus Sex

In common speech, sex and gender are used interchangeably to refer to the male and female characters, whereas linguistically, they do make a difference. Sex is defined from a biological angle whereas Gender is considered as a "social construct" involving genetic, psychological, social, and cultural differences between men and women. Gender is a technical linguistic term for sexism, (Wardhough, 2002). Romaine (2000), and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) state that sex is a biological categorization primarily based on productive potential, while gender is the social elaboration of this biological sex. Romaine (2000) sees differentiating between sex and gender is differentiating between what is "innate" and what is "environmental" and points out to the clear difference between female and male pitch; which supports Wodak's (1997) interpretation of gender as not what a person "has" but what a person "does" in accordance with the social norms of that particular person, (cited in Wardhaugh, 2002). Cameron (1998) and Elsewhere, (1997) both agree that to be a man or a woman cannot be interpreted in isolation of the different social factors surrounding them, but they are determined in relation with their ethnic, religious groups and social classes, as well as the different situations, circumstances and positions of interactions they are put in. According to Bonvillain (2008) men and women are assigned different social roles, values and communicative behavior, which makes gender vary among generations, societies, and even settings. "…women and men are socialized to express themselves in different ways in accordance with cultural norms that teach and reinforce differentiated gender roles". To wrap up, sex refers primarily to the biological differences between male and female sexes while gender refers to the characteristics of their behavior constructed throughout from their childhood by their social and cultural surroundings resulting in presenting themselves as "gender being" behaving as man or woman, as explained by Coates (1998). It is through the social gender concepts and norms that binary attitudes towards men and women are established.

2.2. History of Language and Gender Studies

Concern about language and gender can date back to Otto Jesperson's book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* in 1922; and later, in the 1940's, the work of Simon de Beaulivard, which apparently inspired linguists like Robin Lakoff in the 1970's. At first, Gender language was interpreted as a sociolinguistic variable like ethnicity, social class, age, race and religion etc… It was not until the 1970's when mainly Lakoff's book, *Language and Woman's place*, was released that language and gender started to attract a major concern of linguists and sociolinguists as a separate science, questioning men's language as a "norm" and posited a split between " biological sex and sociocultural constructs of gender", (Kendall and Tannen, 2001). Since then, debate about language and gender among linguists and sociolinguists, the majority of them feminists, started to intensify. Throughout the years, a substantial amount of research has been carried out about language and the influence of social characteristics in shaping language use and language change, and how language reflects the way its speakers behave and think. Research about language and gender conversational differences during the 1990's was classified into two main categories. The Dominance theory adopted by Fishman, West, and Zimmerman in support of Lakoff's claims and they ascribe these differences to their "unequal roles". The Difference approach which emerged after Maltz and Broker (1982) and Tannen (1990) interprets those differences as evolving from two separate sex cultures, (Kendall and Tannen, 2001). Generally speaking, the majority of linguist researchers in language and gender ascribe differences in language use between men and women to three main models: the Deficit model, the Dominance model, and the Difference model.

2.3. The Deficit Model

In *Language and Woman's Place*, one of the earliest studies in language and gender, lakoff (1975) argued that in comparison with the established men's linguistic conversational norms, women's language has characteristics showing its deficiency. She particularly argues that woman's language differs from men's in the lack of authority and assertiveness. Lakoff identifies several linguistic features which are more typical of the feminine speech and indicate the woman's tentativeness and uncertainty. Lakoff suggested the following 10 features being characteristics of woman's speech, (cited in Holmes 2001):

1. Use of lexical hedges and fillers, e.g. *you know, sort of, well, you see.*
2. Tag questions: e. g. *she is very nice, isn't she?*
3. Rising intonation on declaratives: e.g. *it's really good?*
4. Using 'empty' adjectives like: *charming, cute, divine.*
5. Using precise colour terms, like *magenta, aquamarine.*
6. use of intensifiers, like *very, so, extremely*
7. Hypercorrect grammar: consistency in using standard verb forms.

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IMPACT FACTOR: 2.9

8. Super polite forms by making indirect requests and euphemism
9. Avoidance of strong swear words, like *fudge, my goodness.*
10. Emphatic stress, e.g. it was a BRILLANT performance.

These features are interpreted and categorized by many linguists from several angles. Holms (2001) divides them into two categories, "hedging devices" and "boosting devices" were they linguistic or stylistic features. Hedging devices are features which may be used for hedging or weakening the "force of an utterance", like tag questions, lexical hedges and fillers, and rising intonation on declaratives. Whereas, boosting devices include features that may boost or intensify a statement like intensifiers and emphatic stress. Lakoff, (1975), states that, in occasions where hedges reveal the woman's unassertiveness to her statement, intensifiers add force to it. She considers that women's use of hedges and intensifiers in mixed-gender conversation reflects her lack of power in comparison with men. O' Barr and Atkins (1980) in their research on women's language in courtroom discourse pointed out that women use these speech styles more than men because it is associated with their lower-status positions. Hence, it is understandable why many linguists refer to the Deficit and the Dominance models inseparably and in many occasions as one approach.

2.4. The Dominance Model

Building on the previous claims of the Deficit model explaining reasons why women's language is described as deficient, the Dominance model presents the woman's speech from a negative traditional attitude evolved from the social, cultural and political subordination of women with regard to men. Investigations of this theory focused on mixed-sex conversations to explain men's tendency to dominate and how women are subordinated. Zimmerman and West (1975) in their research about speech styles in mixed-sex conversations, found that 95% of interruptions were made by men, and that men interrupted women more than women did to men. Freeman and McElhinny (1996) attribute the linguistic conversational inadequacies of women to the social inequalities between both genders, and similarly men's conversational dominance reflects males' social and political dominance over females. Lakoff (1975) adds that women's different conversational performance reflects their subordinate social status, and the gender-differentiated language is a result of the men-oriented society where men have more power and influence and where women tend to be careful, more considerate and polite when they speak.

2.5. The Difference Model

The assumption of relating gender talk to power and social status is challenged by the emerging dual-culture which attribute sex differences to "…contrasting orientations towards relations", (Montgomery, 1995). This model could probably have evolved as a reaction to Lackoff's

Dominance model. Deborah Tannen (9990) the most prolific linguist of the Difference model attributes differences between men and women in conversational behavior not to their social status based on weakness and subordination, but rather they have to be interpreted in the same way as cultural differences because men and women grow up in two different subcultures, brought differently and they both fill different roles, (Wardhagh, 2002). In her book *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen (1990) argues that men dominate conversation over women does not really mean they intentionally intend to, but this is due to the fact that both of them behave in accordance with their sex class traits. From their childhood, girls are trained, encouraged and reinforced to play a feminine role, whereas boys are brought up to play the masculine role. Thus differences in gender-differentiated forms of language use stem from their early dual socialization. "Men and women are social beings who have learned to act in certain ways. Language behavior is largely learned behavior. Men learn to be men and women learn to be women, linguistically speaking", (Wardhough 2002). Maltz and Broker (1982) look at gender differences within "cross-ethnic miscommunication" and relate cross-sex conversation differences to "cultural differences between men and women" in their way of perceiving, engaging and interpreting friendly conversation,(cited in Bonvillain, 2008). In conversations, women tend to ask questions, to encourage responses from their interlocutors, make minimal responses and allow interruptions, while men usually tend to interrupt, challenge their interlocutors' speech and make direct assertion of opinion and control topics. Women tend to "create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality" and men tend to "assert positions and dominance, attract and maintain audience", (Maltz and Broker, 1982). These dual contrasting sex tendencies are due to what each sex has learned throughout childhood. Tannen (1986) deepens the dichotomy more than Maltz and Broker by strongly claiming that women and men grow up in "different worlds" in their childhood and in their adulthood they "travel in different worlds". Tannen (1990) interprets women's and men's conversations from a perspective where man sees himself as "an individual in a hierarchical social order in which he is either one-up or one-down. In this world, conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from others' attempts to put them down and push them around." The woman, on the other side, sees herself as "…an individual in a network of connections. In this world, conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus. They try to protect themselves from others' attempts to push them away." Tannen considers that contrary to men who see life as "a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure", women, see it as "a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation. Though there are hierarchies…they are…more of friendship than of power and accomplishment." Tannen looks at sex conversations from a motivational

perspective according to the objectives and agendas each sex has behind conversation. She conversely interprets the underestimations of the Dominance and Deficit theories of woman's speech from a positive perspective. Tannen (1990) makes distinction between men's "report" talk agenda and women's "rapport-building" talk agenda. Her interpretations can be summarized in six contrastive points: Status vs. support, independence vs. intimacy, advice vs. understanding, information vs. feelings, orders vs. proposals, and conflict vs. compromise. To justify her interpretations, Tannan suggests the following differences between women's and men's conversational behavior:

Women:	Men:
Talk too much	Get more air time
Speak in private contexts	Speak in public
Build relations	Negotiate status
Overlap	Speak one at a time
Speak symmetrically	Speak asymmetrically

3. Conversation Analysis

This study is based on a case study of a casual mixed-sex conversation between English native speakers. For the sake of balance, variety of topics and talk continuity, six persons are approached to take part in the conversation, three males and three females. The participants are all English teachers in the same university, and their relationship is merely a work friendship. The conversation was video-taped and then transcribed as per Jefferson's transcription system, (1972).

3.1. Vocabulary Differences

3.1.1. Lexical Hedges and Fillers

Lexical hedges and fillers can take the form of vocalized pauses like *"ah", "yeah", "er", "um"* etc… They also include other relatively meaningless words or phrases that fill a silence. According to lakoff (1979) women's speech is characterized by the use of hedges and fillers like *"well", "you know", "Sort of", kind of", "you see".* Hedges also include disclaimers like *"I think", "I guess", "maybe", and "perhaps" etc..*, (Bonvillain, 2008). Lakoff (1979) claims that these hedges and fillers reduce the force of utterance and reflect the woman's tentativeness, lack of confidence and feeling of social insecurity. Holmes (2001) points out that the use of these "non-essential" hedging devices "weaken the strength of an assertion", although they can serve other functions like attracting the addressee's attention or inviting the interlocutor to contribute.

While analyzing this conversation, the lexical fillers such as "well", "like", and "I mean" are easy to distinguish. However, some others are subject to different interpretations. The vocal fillers "mm" and "eh" and "yeah" have different functions. When they occur in the beginning of a speech turn or individually in minimal responses, they usually mean a "yes" answer or they show the listener's agreement and follow of the speaker. When they occur in between the same speech, they are usually considered as fillers. Hence, the count is done on this basis. In the conversation, the number of lexical hedges and fillers used by women is nearly double that used by men. Out of a total of 92 hedges and fillers, 57 are used by women. Females use much more vocal pauses "eh" and "mm" than males. The most frequent lexical feature here *"like"* is used 15 times by women and 8 times by men. Wendi alone used it 6 times in her only two "extended" speech turns, which may indicate that the use of these words are a matter of personal and individual conversational habits far from being generalized. The two sample speeches of Wendi and Cathy below illustrate clearly the frequency of these devices.

- **Cathy:** *Some people eat in their kitchen, from here TV, bedroom, eating,* **like that**. *So I need the bedroom to be a* **kind of**, **it's like** *when I go to* **mm, you know** *to Baskin-Robins…*

- **Wendi***: Because we I have a friend and her daughter, their daughter is* **like** *twelve* **I guess**, *and she's too embarrassed to go with her parents... It was awful, we had to stand there for* **like** *two and a half hours waiting for him to come on stage and it was only standing and it's* **just like** *packed in with ten year old sobbing girls …*

Fishman (1998) argues that when the woman uses more hedges than men does not necessarily show lack of confidence or insecurity, rather it is a conversational strategy to draw her listener's attention and engage him/her more in the conversation when her partner becomes careless or loses concentration. Maltz and Broker (1982) claim that women use these fillers to indicate they are listening while men use them to express agreement. This supports Tannen's claim that women are rapport-builders and during their conversation they tend to "preserve intimacy and avoid isolation", (Tannen, 1990).

Apart from the interpretation dichotomy that lies behind the dual perspective of the Dominance theory and the Difference theory, it is evident from this conversation that women use more hedges and fillers than men do.

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IMPACT FACTOR: 2.9

3.1.2. Lexical Choice: Empty Adjectives and Specific Colors

Among the other vocabulary choices that characterize women conversational behavior is the use of certain "empty adjectives" such as *charming, cute* and *divine* Lakoff, (1975)*.* Jespersen, adding other adjectives like *"lovely" and "wonderful",* relates the woman's use of such adjectives to her tendency for exaggeration and superficiality, (cited in Bonvillain, 2008). Lakoff (1975) states that beside their literal meaning, adjectives express "the speaker's approbation or admiration of something". There are neutral adjectives used by both men and women alike and others in their figurative use are specific to women's speech. In the conversation, the adjectives *"beautiful", "great" and "fantastic"* are used equally. However, the adjectives *"awful", "fabulous",* and *"hysterical"* occurred exclusively in female speeches; *"fabulous"* is used 5 times and *"hysterical"* twice and none of these adjectives are used by male speakers. These adjectives not only reveal an empty meaning, but in their figurative use can be interpreted in terms of women's tendency to intensify utterances and exaggerate meaning, (Lackoff, 1975).

Similarly, Lackoff points out that women tend to choose specific terms denoting colors such as "mauve", "lavender", "magenta" and "turquoise". These are not very common colors to occur frequently in conversations. Nevertheless, Cathy's choice of the colors "**velvet** bag**"**, "**pale** green**"**, and "**pink** spoons" supports in some way the claim that the use of colors is also a feature differentiating male and female speeches.

3.1.3. Intensifiers

"Intensifiers are words like very, rather, absolutely, that modify adjectives, adverbs, and verbs by heightening or lowering their intensity", (Thornbury, 2006). Jespersen (1922) and Lackoff (1975) point out that women tend to use intensifiers such as *"so", "very",* and *"extremely"* more than men do to exaggerate and superficially reinforce their statement. The Dominance theory attributes this to the negative view subordinating and lowering the woman's social status. So she includes intensifiers to support and empower her speech by using boosting devices.

There is a number of 38 intensifiers used in this conversation, 25 of them are used by the female participants, which proves the claim that intensifiers occur more in women's speech than men's. The conversation analysis reveals that females use "*so*" and "*very*" more often than other intensifiers, while men tend to use *"really"* more frequently than *"so"* or *"very"*, which is a point raised by Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) when they studied the use of "*very*" and "*really*" by different age groups in York. In the same sense of boosting devices, the quantifier *"all"* is used 8 times by females and only once by males, which again shows that women tend to intensify and exaggerate their utterances. This can be achieved by either using lexical features or even other ways like metaphors or intonation. In the following example, Cathy, not only uses

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IMPACT FACTOR: 2.9

"*very*" and "*so*" to boost her statement, but also adds a vocal booster "*ooh*" with emphatic form.

- **Cathy**: *Well, just because I'm a concerned citizen, yesterday when we went to the new Chinese restaurant upstairs in Carrefour,* **very** *nice with the Chinese=*

- **Andrew:** *= There's a new Chinese restaurant?*

- **Cathy**: **OOH so** *good*

Exaggeration and boosting reach a peak in the metaphor used by Cathy to describe Andrew's musical ability.

- **Cathy**: *Well, he knows more about music* **than I ever dreamed [to know in my life]**.

3.2. Grammatical Differences

3.2.1. Tag Questions

A question tag is a yes/no question about the assertion added at the end of a "declarative statement", (Bonvillain, 2008). Question tags are a common feature of spoken speech and their functions lies behind the speaker's intention. It can be an invitation to the addressee to respond when the speaker is uncertain about his statement and wants the addressee to either confirm or correct. In this case a rising intonation is used. If a falling intonation is used with the tag question this means he just expect an agreement and confirmation to his/her statement, (Thornbury, 2006). Many linguists consider tag questions as hedging devices that show uncertainty and unassertiveness. Lakoff associates the woman's use of tag question to her lack of power and reluctance to make direct assertion. She usually tends to avoid committing herself to taking decision instead of her interlocutor. Rather, she wants the addressee himself/ herself to confirm the information, either by correction or assertion. Women use tag questions because they usually tend to take the role of conversation facilitator, (Cameron et al. 1989). Holmes (2001) adds that while men use tag questions for "speaker-oriented" goals to get confirmation of information about their statement, women usually use them for "addressee-oriented" goals as an invitation to the addressee to engage in the talk. Holmes (2001) describes speaker-oriented tags as "modal tags" seeking additional knowledge from the addressee.

Addressee-oriented tags are "affective tags" with double function either facilitative to engage the addressee in the conversation or as an indication of politeness to mitigate and soften "the force of a command of criticism".

In the conversation, 5 question tags occurred; three are used by men and 2 by women. 2 of the question tags used by men are speaker-oriented, in which the speakers just need a confirmation of the statement to continue the talk, whereas the 2 used by women are "facilitative" and have an "affective" function inviting interlocutor to contribute and take turn.

- **Cathy***: I gave you a voucher, Sherlyn, didn't I?*

- **Sherlyn***: Yeah, I have a drawer full of pink spoons. Thank you, Cathy.*

Apparently the number does not support the dominance theory claim that women use question tags more than men. However there are certain utterances which can be interpreted as having the same function as question tags.

- **Cathy**: ***You were playing harmonica in Korea, for what? Three years?***
- **Andrew**: *Three years, em.*

3.2.2. Standard Grammar

The Dominance theory interprets woman's use of language based on her lower social status with regard to men. Lakoff claims that women are socialized to see the men as a norm and accordingly they are supposed to speak formally and try to take care of the language they use. Trudgill (1993) explains that women being more conscious of their social status than men, they not only tend to use "correct" forms, but "better" and more prestigious forms. In the conversation, there are four attempts from female speakers to self-correct themselves, whereas no attempt is made by male speakers, which indicates that females are self-conscious of the language they are using and tend to use correct grammatical forms.

- **Cathy**: Does anybody else **play music**? Play **musical instrument**?

- **Wendi**: Because **we I** *have* a friend and **her** daughter, **their** daughter is ....

3.3. Intonation

3.3.1. Dynamic Pitch

Intonation is an important feature in spoken language. It can add meaning to a statement as well as it can influence the way that statement is interpreted. Generally speaking, research investigating gender intonation patterns found out that women use a "wider range of pitches within their repertory and a more rapid and marked shift in volume and velocity", (Bonvillain, 2008). Men, on the other hand, have lower-pitched voices and their speech is characterized by "narrow intonational patterns" with less pitch changes; and this indicates "control and restraint", (McConnell-Ginet, 1983 and Romaine, 2000). Dynamic speech which applies a variety of intonation patterns indicates "emotionality and natural pulses". The woman's change in pitch and volume has a social function as it attracts and holds the listener's attention and renders this to her "powerlessness". This feature of using a variety of pitches in women's speech is evident throughout this conversation.

- **Cathy**: *Did I tell you the first mm 3D film I saw in Oman was Conan the Barbarian and there is a beautiful part in there where he says mm, ((**with a rough man's voiced pitch**)) "Oh Conan is going to the cave on the hill, beautiful young woman would you like to join him because the ship doesn't sail until tomorrow". She says ((**changing voice into rapid soft girly voice**)) > "yes, yes, I'll go to him"<. So she ran up the hill to go to Conan and the next second **PUVV** like that, it's dawn she says "bye"… the **whole** Omani audience, the **WHOLE** audience **OOUUUU**. They knew something had happened in the cave.*

3.3.2. Emphatic Stress

Cathy, in the statement above not only does she change her pitch deliberately but also gives emphatic form to some of her words to intensify their meaning, like the words "WHOLE" and "PUVV". Holmes (2001) categorizes emphatic forms as boosting devices like intensifiers. In the example below, the adjectives "AWFUL" and "HYSTERICAL" are pronounced with an emphatic form to intensify their meaning by giving them both louder pitch and a slower velocity.

- **Cathy**: *I went to see it in 3D version because I hadn't seen it for a long time, that was <**AWFUL**> but, when I saw mm what's the one with the cat Puss n' Boots. That was <**HYSTERICAL**> on 3D < **HYSTERICAL**> when he jumps from roof to roof and he's flying over the=*

According to Lakoff, the fact that women tend to exaggerate and amplify utterances, was it by means of lexical devices or speech intonation, reflects a lack of confidence and state of devaluation due to her early socialization.

3.4.3   Rising Pitch on Declaratives

Another very important difference between women's and men's conversational styles is applying rising intonation on declaratives. A declarative sentence is usually closed by a falling pitch, while the rising pitch is an indication of a question, (Bonvillain, 2008). The rising intonation can be interpreted as a sign of doubt and uncertainty as indicated by the study of O'Connor & Arnold (1973) on intonation attitudes. A frequent feature of women's speech is rising pitch at the end of a declarative sentence, thus giving it the function of an interrogative tone and makes a declarative statement look like a question, (Lakoff, 1975). Lakoff interprets this as an indication of the woman's inability to make firm statements or commands because she often looks hesitant, and unassertive, which again reiterates her subordinate and unauthoritative social status, (Romaine, 2000). The conversation statistics do not show clear difference between both genders as men used rising pitch on declaratives 4 times and women 6 times.

- **Andrew**: *So you decided?*

- **Cathy**: *Because you varied it too much?*

3.4. Turn Taking

Overlapping and interruptions are better analysed in terms of turn taking and speakership. There are several ways of taking turn in conversation. Turn taking can be arranged in two ways; either the current speaker selects the next one or the listener himself decides to speak. In the second case, many turn-taking attempts start with an overlapping speech either nearly by the end of the speaker's turn or before a speaker finishes his talk.

3.4.1.   Overlapping

West and Zimmerman define overlapping speech as "simultaneous speech where a speaker other than the current speaker begins to speak at or very close to a possible transition place in a current speaker's utterance (i.e., within the boundaries of the word)", (cited in Bonvillain, 2008). Both Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) and Bonvillain (2008) contrast overlapping and interruptions. They describe overlapping as the failure of the next speaker to recognize the end

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IMPACT FACTOR: 2.9

of the current speaker's talk and that most overlapping speeches occur during talk turn transitions, they are merely a wrong estimation of the start time of the next turn, whereas, interruptions are violations of the current speaker's rights. Fishman (1983) in his study of talk between couples, found out that women exert more effort to gain the listener's attention and respond to his/her talk, and to show they are interested and listening, they tend to put their minimal responses like *"yeah", "em", "ok", "that's right"* within the speaker's turn as a strategy of encouraging and maintaining conversation. This strategy occurred frequently in this conversation. Among the 32 overlapping speeches 22 are women's and 18 of these 22 are speeches within the interlocutor's speech. On the other hand, male speakers have 10 overlapping speeches only 6 of them are speeches at the end of the interlocutor's talk and end in turn taking. This proves that while men's overlapping speech is a signal of taking conversation turn, women's simultaneous speeches appear mostly in the middle of the speaker's turn to show interest and support. Tannen interprets this in terms of the woman's agenda behind conversation, which is her tendency to maintain conversation and be intimate, collaborative and a rapport-builder.

3.4.2. Interruptions

In their study about interruptions, West and Zimmerman (1983, 1975) noted that interruption occurs when an interlocutor violates a speaker's turn and thus the speaker cannot finish his talk. It is when the co-participant intrudes into the current speaker's talk. They found out that men frequently interrupt women more than the other way round. Interruptions are interpreted from different angles by different linguists. West and Zimmerman (1983) and Clark (1993) see them as means for dominating and controlling interaction, whereas, Tannen (1993) interprets it as a way of maintaining conversation and supporting speakers. Research shows that women in conversation tend to be cooperative and try to maintain talk and build rapport whereas men tend to be competitive and try to dominate the talk and prove themselves as superior, (Holmes, 2001). In mixed-sex conversation, women are usually more interrupted by men, and men do not allow to be interrupted and often succeed either in usurping the conversation turn from women or in keeping their turns in case of being interrupted, (Romaine 2000 and Bonvillain 2008). Holmes (2001) and Bonvillain (2008) ascribe this difference to the woman's social status being subordinated to men from their early childhood socialization.

There are 31 interruptions in the conversation; 16 by men and 15 by women. What is significant here is that 14 out of the 16 of men's interruptions were towards women while women interrupted men only 9 times. The claim that men do not allow interruption is clearly illustrated when Cathy tries to interrupt Andrew, but he "rebuttals" and does not give up the floor and

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IMPACT FACTOR: 2.9

insists to continue his talk and consequently speaker switch fails and Cathy's attempt of interruption was "unsuccessful".

- **Andrew***: … that type of harmonica is diatonic which means you need the twelve different key harmonicas, Ok, you can't play them all on the one instrument. So [so, if you got twelve major keys], that's one harmonica, as far as I am concerned.*

- **Cathy***: [So if you are going to do a sound?]*

- **Andrew***: Yeah, so that's what you carry around.*

Notice that the overlapping speech starts just after the phrase "*so if*" and Cathy poses the question [*"So, if you are going to do a sound]"* thinking that they are going for a "common goal". Surprisingly that does not happen and Andrew ignores her and continues his talk. Cathy surrenders and loses the "conversation struggle" and does not even bother to pose her question when Andrew finishes his talk. This supports the claim that boys are trained to dominate talk from their early childhood and girls in parallel are socialized to expect being interrupted and lose the talk without any protest. Consequently, men usually end up dominating the conversation in spite of all the woman's attempts of maintaining conversation and building equal opportunities of interaction, (Romaine, 2000).

On the other hand, Cathy's intervention in the following example, which may be considered neither an interruption nor an overlap, is an attempt to facilitate, support and encourage Andrew to express his thought.

- **Andrew***: That's fun. There's a lot of them. I don't know, I won't discuss the opening scene because ((looking at the camera)) we're being recorded but mm but, but but there's an opening <u>scene</u> on it which is is [which, which would]=*
- ***Cathy***: = [a lot of <u>porn</u>?]*
- **Andrew***: would send most Omanis into hospital with heart palpitations if they saw it.*

Andrew wants to speak about an open porn scene but he is hesitant least his listeners should feel offended as some of them are not very close friends. Cathy, recognizing his hesitation by making repeated gap fillers and vocal pauses (*but em eh, but but)* and *(which is is which which),* intervenes to facilitates and maintain the conversation. The latching of their speech turn taking shows Andrew released and assured to continue. Holmes (2001) and James and Clarke (1993) point out that women use interruptions and overlaps not as "disruptive", but for "cooperative and rapport building" goals.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this case study of a mixed-sex conversation aimed at evaluating the different features that characterize women's speech as claimed by the Deficit and Dominance theory. Many of the features, in particular the lexical ones, show compatible evidences to those claims, whereas others do not clearly figure out a pure bias to either of the genders such as rising intonation on declaratives and question tags. It is apparent that gender language differences has been one of the controversial issues in language change and variation among other variables within the social dimensions of change variation, like age, ethnicity, regional and social dialects; and as Wardhaugh (2002) stated, it "generated considerable amount of thought and discussion … and many are still unresolved". The issue will still spawn debate and research as women's "social status" does not seem to be stagnant and is changing rapidly with regard to the call for equality in society, politics, and work place. The woman does not seem to still have that subordinate status she had half a century ago. In several societies, particularly Western countries, the woman reached a high social status not that very underestimated than men, which might put in question the whole Dominance theory and gives way to other approaches to prevail.

5. Table of figures:

Conversation Analysis Statistics

		Male speakers	Total used by Men	Female speakers	Total used by women
Lexical	eh & mm,	8		18	
	well	3		6	

	You know	5		6	
	I mean	3			
	It's like/ like that/ just like/ sort of	8		15	
	I guess/ I think/ I don't know/ I hear/ they say	3	35	7	57
	That thing/ something etc…	3		4	
	others	probably up to(1) anyway(1)		All that stuff (1)	
intensifiers	so	1		6	
	very	1		5	
	too	3		2	
	really	6		2	
	Others	whole(1) all (1)	13	all(8) whole (1) everything (1)	25
Adjectives	Sample adjectives used	Great (3) Fantastic (1) Effective (1)		Great (5) Beautiful(2) Fabulous (4) Awful (2) Hysterical (2) Fantastic	
Colours				Velvet/ pale	

				green / pink		
Tag questions			3			2
Interruptions	To women	14		To women	6	
	To men	2	16	To men	9	15
Overlapping			10			22
Rising intonation on declaratives			4			6

6. References

Bonvillain, N. (2008) *Language Culture, and Communication*, 5th ed. London: Pearson

Cameron, D. et al. (1989) Lackoff in Context: The Social and Linguistic Function of Tag Questions In Coates, J. and Cameron. *Women in their Speech Community* London: Longman

Cameron, D. (1998), Performing Gender Identity: Young Men's Talk and the Construction of Heterosexual Masculinity. In Coates (1998), London: Blackwell

Coates, J. (1998) "Thank God I'm a Woman: The Construction of Differing Feminities", In Cameron, D. (ed), *The Feminist Critique of Language.* USA & Canada: Routledge.

Eckert, P. and McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003) *Language and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fishman, P. (1998) Conversational Insecurity. In Cameron, *The feminist critique of language.* New York: Routledge.

Freeman, R. D. and McElhinny, B. (1996). Language and Gender, In Mckay, S. & Hornberger N. (eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holms, J. (2001) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 2nd ed. England: Pearson.

Hutchby, I. and Wooffitt, R. (1998) *Conversation Analysis*. USA: Blackwell

James, D. and Clarke S. (1993), Women, Men, and Interruptions: A critical Review. In Tannen, D. Gender and Conversational Interaction. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kendall, S. and Tannen, D. (2001), Discourse and Gender. In Schiffrin, D, Tannen, D. and Hamilton H.E (eds) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. USA. UK. Australia: Blackwell

Lakoff, R. (1979). Woman's Language. In Butturff, D. and Epstein, E. *Women's Language and style*, (eds). Akron: University of Akron.

Lakoff, R. (1975), *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper & Row

Maltz,D. and Broker, R. (1982). A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication. In Gumperz, J. *Language and social identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Montgomery, M. (1995) *An Introduction to Language and Society*.   London: Routledge.

O'Barr, W. M. and Atkins, B. K. (1980). "Women's Language" or "Powerless Language". In McConnell-Ginet, S. et al (eds) *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, New York: Praeger

O'Connor, James D. & G. K Arnold. (1973) *Intonation of Colloquial English.* London: Longman.

Romaine, S. (2000). *Language in Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tannen, D. (1986) *That's Not What I meant*. New York: Ballantine

Tannen, D. (1990) *You Just Don't Understand Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: Harper

Tannen, D. (1993) *Gender and Conversational Interaction (ed)*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press

Thornbury, S. (2006) *An A-Z of ELT A Dictionary of Terms and Concepts*. Oxford: McMillan.

Trudgill, P. (1983). *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. Harmonsworth: Penguin Press

Wardhaugh, R. (2002) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 4th ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

West, C. and Zmmerman, D. H. (1983) "Small insults: A study of interruptions in cross-sex conversations between unacquainted persons. In B. Thorne, C. Kramarae, & N. Henley (Eds.), Language, gender and society. Cambridge, MA: Newbury House.

Wodak, R. (1997). *Gender and Discourse*. London: Sage

Zimmerman, D. H. and West, C. (1975). Sex Roles, Interruptions and Silences in Conversation. In Torne and Henley (1975).