

Ethnic style in male-female conversation

DEBORAH TANNEN

This chapter focuses on indirectness in male-female discourse, seen as a feature of conversational style. The present analysis investigates social, rather than individual, differences in the context of conversation between married partners; however, the phenomena elucidated operate in individual style as well. Investigation of expectations of indirectness by Greeks, Americans, and Greek-Americans traces the process of adaptation of this conversational strategy as an element of ethnicity.

Misunderstandings due to different uses of indirectness are commonplace among members of what appear to (but may not necessarily) be the same culture. However, such mixups are particularly characteristic of cross-cultural communication. There are individual as well as social differences with respect to what is deemed appropriate to say and how it is deemed appropriate to say it.

It is sharing of conversational strategies that creates the feeling of satisfaction which accompanies and follows successful conversation: the sense of being understood, being "on the same wave length," belonging, and therefore of sharing identity. Conversely, a lack of congruity in conversational strategies creates the opposite feeling: of dissonance, not being understood, not belonging and therefore of not sharing identity. This is the sense in which conversational style is a major component of what we have come to call ethnicity.

As has been shown in earlier chapters in this volume, conversational control processes operate on an automatic level. While it is commonly understood that different languages or different dialects have different words for the same object, in contrast, ways of

signalling intentions and attitudes seem self-evident, natural, and real.

Much recent linguistic research has been concerned with the fact that interpretation of utterances in conversation often differs radically from the meaning that would be derived from the sentences in isolation. Robin Lakoff (1973) observes that sociocultural goals, broadly called *politeness*, lead people to express opinions and preferences in widely varying linguistic forms. Lakoff's (1979) recent work demonstrates that characteristic choices with respect to indirectness give rise to personal style, and that an individual's style is a mixture of strategies which shift in response to shifting situations. Ervin-Tripp (1976) has shown the great variation in surface form which directives may take in American English. Brown and Levinson (1978) argue that the form taken by utterances in actual interaction can be seen as the linguistic means of satisfying the coexisting and often conflicting needs for *negative face* (the need to be left alone) and *positive face* (the need to be approved of by others). As a result, people often prefer to express their wants and opinions *off record* – that is, indirectly.

Indirectness is a necessary means for serving the needs for *rapport* and *defensiveness*, associated respectively with Brown and Levinson's positive and negative face. *Rapport* is the lovely satisfaction of being understood without explaining oneself, of getting what one wants without asking for it. *Defensiveness* is the need to be able to save face by reneging in case one's conversational contribution is not received well – the ability to say, perhaps sincerely, "I never said that," or "That isn't what I meant." The goals of *rapport* and *defensiveness* correspond to Lakoff's politeness rules "Maintain camaraderie" and "Don't impose."

An individual learns conversational strategies in previous interactive experience, but chooses certain and rejects other strategies made available in this way. In other words, the range of strategies familiar to a speaker is socially determined, but any individual's set of habitual strategies is unique within that range. For example, research has shown that New Yorkers of Jewish background often use overlap – that is, simultaneous talk – in a cooperative way; many members of this group talk simultaneously in some settings without intending to interrupt (Tannen 1979, 1981). This does not

imply that all New Yorkers of Jewish background use overlap cooperatively. However, a speaker of this background is more likely to do so than someone raised in the Midwest. And it is even more unlikely that such simultaneous talk will be used by an Athabaskan raised in Alaska, according to the findings of Scollon (forthcoming), who has shown that Athabaskans highly value silence and devalue what they perceive as excessive talk.

The present analysis and discussion seeks to investigate social differences in expectations of indirectness in certain contexts by Greeks, Americans, and Greek-Americans, tracing the process of adaptation of this conversational strategy as an element of ethnicity. The research design is intended to identify patterns of interpretation, not to predict the styles of individual members of these groups.

A Greek woman of about 65 told me that, before she married, she had to ask her father's permission before doing anything. She noted that of course he never explicitly denied her permission. If she asked, for example, whether she could go to a dance, and he answered,

(1) An thes, pas. (If you want, you can go.)

she knew that she could not go. If he really meant that she could go, he would say,

(2) Ne. Na pas. (Yes. You should go.)

The intonation in (1) rises on the conditional clause, creating a tentative effect, while the intonation in (2) falls twice in succession, resulting in an assertive effect. This informant added that her husband responds to her requests in the same way. Thus she agrees to do what he prefers without expecting him to express his preference directly.

This example is of a situation in which interlocutors share expectations about how intentions are to be communicated; their communication is thus successful. To investigate processes of indirectness, however, it is useful to focus on interactions in which communication is not successful (Gumperz and Tannen 1979). Such sequences are the discourse equivalents of starred sentences in syntactic argumentation. They render apparent processes which go unnoticed when communication is successful.

The present chapter focuses on communication between married partners. Interactions between couples reveal the effects of differing uses of indirectness over time. People often think that couples who live together and love each other must come to understand each other's conversational styles. However, research has shown that repeated interaction does not necessarily lead to better understanding. On the contrary, it may reinforce mistaken judgments of the other's intentions and increase expectations that the other will behave as before. If differing styles led to the earlier impression that the partner is stubborn, irrational, or uncooperative, similar behavior is expected to continue. This has been shown for group contact among Greeks and Americans (Vassiliou et al. 1972) and can be seen in personal relations as well. Misjudgment is calcified by the conviction of repeated experience.

Systematic study of comparative communicative strategies was made by asking couples about experiences in which they become aware of differing interpretations of conversations. It became clear that certain types of communication were particularly given to misinterpretation — requests, excuses, explanation: in short, verbalizations associated with getting one's way. One couple recalled a typical argument in which both maintained that they had not gone to a party because the other had not wanted to go. Each partner denied having expressed any disinclination to go. A misunderstanding such as this might well go undetected between casual acquaintances, but, between couples, ongoing interaction makes it likely that such differences will eventually surface.

In this case, the mixup was traced to the following reconstructed conversations:

- (3) Wife: John's having a party. Wanna go?
 Husband: OK.
 (Later)
 Wife: Are you sure you want to go to the party?
 Husband: OK, let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

In this example the wife was an American native New Yorker of East European Jewish extraction. It is likely that this background influenced her preference for a seemingly direct style. (This phenomenon among speakers of this background is the focus of analysis in Tannen 1979, 1981.) In discussing the misunderstanding, the American wife reported she had merely been asking what

her husband wanted to do without considering her own preference. Since she was about to go to this party just for him, she tried to make sure that that was his preference by asking him a second time. She was being solicitous and considerate. The Greek husband said that by bringing up the question of the party, his wife was letting him know that she wanted to go, so he agreed to go. Then when she brought it up again, she was letting him know that she didn't want to go; she had obviously changed her mind. So he came up with a reason not to go, to make her feel all right about getting her way. This is precisely the strategy reported by the Greek woman who did what her father or husband wanted without expecting him to tell her directly what that was. Thus the husband in example 3 was also being solicitous and considerate. All this considerateness, however, only got them what neither wanted, because they were expecting to receive information differently from the way the other was sending it out.

A key to understanding the husband's strategy is his use of "OK." To the wife, "OK" was a positive response, in free variation with other positive responses such as "yes" or "yeah." In addition, his use of *anyway* is an indication that he agrees. Finally, the husband's intonation, tone of voice, and nonverbal signals such as facial expression and kinesics would have contributed to the impact of his message. Nonetheless, the wife asserted that, much as she could see the reasoning behind such interpretations in retrospect, she still missed the significance of these cues at the time. The key, I believe, is that she was not expecting to receive her husband's message through subtle cues; she was assuming he would tell her what he wanted to do directly. To the listener, a misunderstanding is indistinguishable from an understanding; one commits to an interpretation and proceeds to fit succeeding information into that mold. People will put up with a great deal of seemingly inappropriate verbal behavior before questioning the line of interpretation which seems self-evident. Direct questioning about how a comment was meant is likely to be perceived as a challenge or criticism.

This example demonstrates, furthermore, the difficulty of clearing up misunderstandings caused by stylistic differences. In seeking to clarify, each speaker continues to use the very strategy that confused the other in the first place. In this way, interaction often

results in increasing divergence rather than convergence of style. That is, each partner's characteristic style leads the other to apply increasingly extreme forms of the conflicting strategy. In example 3, the wife's strategy for clarifying was to go 'on record,' through a direct question, as inquiring about her husband's preference, and to ask her husband to go on record about his preference. Since the husband did not expect preferences to be directly expressed, his wife's second question seemed to him an even more recondite hint. He responded with an even more subtle use of indirectness: to allow her to get her way and to offer a reason of his own in justification. And so it goes. Expectations about how meaning will be communicated are so compelling that information intended in a different mode is utterly opaque.

A key parameter here is setting. Does a participant define an interaction as one in which it is appropriate to hint? Numerous discussions triggered by the presentation of these findings have suggested possible male-female differences among Americans in this regard. An audience member commented, "When I first started going out with my boyfriend, we never had misunderstandings about where we should go and what we should do. Now that we've been going together for two years, it seems to happen all the time. How come?" My hypothesis is that, at the beginning of their acquaintance, both partners deemed it appropriate to watch out for the other's hints, to give options. However, as the relationship was redefined, the woman expected increased use of indirectness, reasoning, "We know each other so well, you will know what I want without my telling you." The man, on the other hand, expected less indirectness, reasoning, "We know each other so well that we can tell each other what we want." As the context of their relationship changed, they differed in how they expected their communicative strategies to change. In addition, when partners interact over time, they become more rather than less likely to react, perhaps negatively, to each other's subtle cues, as repeated experience leads them to expect such behavior.

Another example of a reported conversation between a married couple follows.

- (4) Husband: Let's go visit my boss tonight.
 Wife: Why?
 Husband: All right, we don't have to go.

Both husband and wife agreed that the husband's initial proposal was an indication that he wanted to visit his boss. However, they disagreed on the meaning of the wife's question, "Why?" The wife explained that she meant it as a request for information. Therefore she was confused and frustrated and couldn't help wondering why she married such an erratic man who suddenly changed his mind only a moment after making a request. The husband, for his part, explained that his wife's question clearly meant that she did not want to go, and he therefore rescinded his request. He was frustrated, however, and resentful of her for refusing. In discussion, the wife, who was American, reported that she systematically confronted this strange reaction to her asking "Why?" Certainly, the use of this question can be either a request for information or an indirect way of stalling or resisting compliance with a perceived request. The key here is which meaning of "why" is likely to be used in this context.

In order to determine to what extent cross-cultural differences are operating in patterns of interpretation of indirectness, further systematic questioning of Greeks, Americans, and Greek-Americans was undertaken. The remainder of this chapter reports results of that research.

The Greek sample was taken from native Greeks living in the Bay Area of California. Most were young men who had come to the United States for graduate study or women contacted through church organizations. Therefore the age and educational levels differed sharply for men and women. In all cases, Greek respondents had been exposed to American communicative systems. That differences emerged nonetheless is a testament to the reality of the effect.

Greek-Americans were contacted in New York City because it was not possible to find California Greek-Americans who had grown up in distinctly Greek communities. The fact that Greek-Americans from New York are compared with Americans from California is now seen as a weakness; subsequent research (Tannen 1979) has indicated that New Yorkers are less likely to expect indirectness than Californians. Again, the fact that differences do emerge is testimony to the effect of ethnicity. Finally, Americans with Greek-born parents and grandparents are lumped together in this study. There is some indication that those with Greek parents

Table 1. Respondents choosing 1-I

Greeks (27)	Greek-Americans (30)	Americans (25)
48%	43%	32%
(13)	(13)	(8)

show the effect of ethnicity more strongly than do those of Greek grandparents and American-born parents.

A questionnaire was designed to present the Greek, American, and Greek-American respondents with the conversation about going to a party. The questionnaire elicited their interpretations by presenting paraphrase choices and then asked for explanations of those choices in order to identify the interpretive strategies motivating them. The first part of the questionnaire reads:

- (5) A couple had the following conversation:
 Wife: John's having a party. Wanna go?
 Husband: OK.
 Wife: I'll call and tell him we're coming.

Based on this conversation only, put a check next to the statement which you think explains what the husband really meant when he answered "OK."

- [1-I] My wife wants to go to this party, since she asked. I'll go to make her happy.
 [1-D] My wife is asking if I want to go to a party. I feel like going, so I'll say yes.

What is it about the way the wife and the husband spoke, that gave you that impression?
 What would the wife or husband have had to have said differently, in order for you to have checked the other statement?

The first choice, here referred to as 1-I (Indirect), represents roughly what the Greek husband reported he had meant by "OK." 1-D (Direct) represents what the American wife reported she had thought he meant. A comparison of the percentage of respondents in the three groups who opted for Paraphrase 1-I turns out looking much like a continuum, with Greeks the most likely to take the indirect interpretation, Americans the least likely, and Greek-Americans in the middle, somewhat closer to Greeks (see Table 1).

In example 5, and throughout the present discussion, I refer to one interpretation as direct and the other as indirect. These labels reflect the two possible functions of the question: as a request for information (its literal sense) and as an off-record show of resist-

Table 2. Male respondents choosing 1-I

Greeks (10)	Greek-Americans (9)	Americans (11)
50%	44%	27%
(5)	(4)	(3)

Table 3. Female respondents choosing 1-I

Greeks (17)	Greek-Americans (21)	Americans (14)
47%	43%	36%
(8)	(9)	(5)

ance (an indirect speech act). This is not to imply, however, that anyone's conversational style is categorically direct. In a sense, all interpretation in context is indirect. What are variable are the modes of indirectness — when and how it is deemed appropriate to hint, that is, to signal unstated contextual and interpersonal information.

It has been suggested (Lakoff 1975) that American women tend to be more indirect than American men. As seen in Tables 2 and 3, percentages of respondents taking the indirect interpretation are more or less the same for Greek men and women and for Greek-American men and women, while, for Americans, separating male and female respondents yields quite different percentages, with fewer men and more women choosing Paraphrase 1-I. If these samples are representative, they are intriguing in suggesting a stylistic gulf between American men and women which does not exist between Greek men and women.

The second part of the questionnaire presents the second part of the conversation, followed by paraphrase choice and questions about interpretive strategies. It reads:

- (6) Later, the same couple had this conversation:
 Wife: Are you sure you want to go to the party?
 Husband: OK, let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

Based on *both* conversations which you read, put a check next to the statement that you think explains what the husband really meant when he spoke the second time:

- [2-I] It sounds like my wife doesn't really want to go, since she's asking about it again. I'll say I'm tired, so we don't have to go, and she won't feel bad about preventing me from going.
 [2-D] Now that I think about it again, I don't really feel like going to a party because I'm tired.

What is it about the way the husband or wife spoke that gave you that impression?

What would they have had to have said differently, in order for you to have checked the other statement?

The two paraphrases presented in the second part of the questionnaire represent the respective interpretations reported by the Greek husband (the one here labelled 2-I, Indirect) and the American wife (here labelled 2-D, Direct) in the actual interchange. This also highlights an aspect of the questionnaire which is different for male and female respondents. Women and men are both asked to interpret the husband's comments, while it is likely that women identify with the wife and men with the husband. Furthermore, the indirect interpretation is favored by the fact that the husband's response indicates that he took that interpretation.

The choice of both 1-I and 2-I reveals the most indirect interpretive strategy, by which both the wife's questions are taken to indicate her hidden preferences – or at least that the husband's reply is taken to show that he interprets them that way. Again, results fall out on a continuum with Greeks the most likely to take the indirect interpretation, Americans the least likely, and Greek-Americans in between, slightly closer to the Greeks (see Table 4).

Quantitative results, then, tended to corroborate the impression that more Greeks than Americans opted for the indirect interpretation of questions, and that Greek-Americans were in between, slightly closer to Greeks. However, the pilot study questionnaire was not designed primarily to yield quantitative data. The main function of the paraphrase choices was to serve as a basis for short answers and extended discussion about the patterns of interpretation which prompted one or the other choice, and the linguistic and contextual factors influencing them. Results of the short answer and interview/discussion components follow.

Patterns of interpretation emerged from respondents' explanations of their choice of paraphrase and from alternative linguistic forms they reported would have led them to the other choice. Following paraphrase choices, the questionnaire asked, "What is it about the way the wife and the husband spoke, that gave you that impression?" and then, "What would the wife or husband have had to have said differently, in order for you to have checked the other statement?" Differences in explanations of interpretations were

Table 4. Respondents choosing 1-I and 2-I

Greek (27)	Greek-American (30)	American (25)
26%	20%	12%
(7)	(6)	(3)

systematic in reference to two aspects of the conversation: the wife's asking of questions, and the form of the husband's responses.

Paraphrase 1-I indicates that the wife's question means she wants to go to the party. The reasoning reported by Greeks to explain their choice of 1-I is that if the wife didn't want to go, she would not have brought it up in the first place. Greeks, Americans, and probably members of any cultural group are capable of interpreting a question either as a request for information or as an expression of some unstated meaning. However, members of one culture or another may be more likely to interpret a question in a particular context in one way or another. Much recent research in pragmatics has elaborated on the indirect speech act function of questions as requests for action, or commands. Esther Goody (1978:40) set out to discover why natives of Gonja do not ask questions in teaching and learning situations. She concluded that Gonjans are "trained early on to attend above all to the command function of questioning. The pure information question hasn't got a chance!" Similarly, I suggest, in the context under consideration, natives of Greece are more disposed to attend to the indirect request function of questions.

Respondents' comments explaining why they chose one or the other paraphrase often focused on the husband's choice of OK. Americans who thought the husband really wanted to go to the party explained that "OK" = "yes" (24% of the Americans said this). But if they thought the husband was going along with his wife's preference, the Americans still focused on "OK" as the cue. In this case they explained that "OK" lacks enthusiasm (20% of the Americans said this).

The expectation of enthusiasm was stronger for Greeks than for Americans. Whereas 24% of the Americans pointed to the affirmative nature of "OK," not a single Greek did so. In contrast, fully half of the Greeks who explained their choices referred to the fact that "OK" (in Greek, *endaxi*) was an unenthusiastic response. This is more than double the percentage of Americans (20%) who said

this. The *enthusiasm constraint* is in keeping with findings of Vassiliou, Triandis, Vassiliou and McGuire (1972), who conclude that Greeks place value on enthusiasm and spontaneity (as opposed to American emphasis on planning and organization). Vassiliou et al. observe that such differences in "subjective culture" may contribute to the formation of ethnic stereotypes.

Related to the enthusiasm constraint – perhaps another aspect of it – is the *brevity effect*. Many respondents referred to the brevity of the husband's response when they explained their paraphrase choices. However, if Americans made reference to his brevity, it was in explanation of their choice of paraphrase 1-D, the direct interpretation. Their reasoning was that brevity evidenced informality, casualness, and hence sincerity. This explanation is based on a strategy which assumes that people will express preferences directly in this context. More than a quarter (28%) of the American respondents took this approach. In stark contrast, any Greeks who mentioned the brevity of the husband's answer "OK" (*endaxi*), pointed to it as evidence that he was reluctant to go to the party. To them, brevity is a sign of unwillingness to comply with another's perceived preference. This interpretation presupposes that resistance to another's preference, in this context, will not be verbalized directly; 20% of Greek respondents took this approach.¹

The explanations given by Greek-Americans for their paraphrase choices were a blend of typical Greek and typical American explanations. They explained that brevity reveals lack of enthusiasm, whereas no Americans did, and they explained that brevity is casual, whereas no Greeks did, in roughly the same proportions (23% and 20% respectively). Only two (7%) said that "OK" = "yes," whereas no Greeks and 24% of Americans said this. Thus Greek-Americans were closer to Greeks than to Americans in their interpretive style.

Further corroborative results came in the form of comments volunteered by respondents following their completion of the questionnaire; the suggestion that Greeks tend to be more indirect in the context of an intimate relationship 'rang true' for respondents.

What are the implications of such differences for cross-cultural communication? It is possible that a good bicultural, like a good

bilingual, sees both possibilities and code-switches. For example, an American-born woman of Greek grandparents said that she had to check both paraphrases on the questionnaire. She explained that if she projected herself into the position of the wife, she would take the indirect interpretation, but if she imagined her non-Greek husband asking, she would take the direct paraphrase. In other words, she was aware of both possible strategies. She commented that she tends to be indirect because she picked it up from her mother, who was influenced by her own mother (i.e., the grandmother born in Greece). In the same spirit, another Greek-American woman laughed when she read paraphrase 2-I, saying, "That sounds just like my grandmother."

It is far from certain, however, that awareness of the existence of differences in communicative strategies makes them less troublesome, since their operation remains unconscious and habitual. Again, a personal testimony is most eloquent: that of a professional man living in New York City, whose grandparents were from Greece. He seemed fully assimilated, did not speak Greek, had not been raised in a Greek neighborhood, and had few Greek friends. In filling out the questionnaire, he chose paraphrase 1-I, the initial indirect interpretation. In later discussion he said that the notion of indirectness "rang such a bell." He commented, ". . . to a great extent being Greek implies a certain feeling of differentness with regard to understanding others which I have some trouble with." He elaborated on what he meant: "I was trying to get at the idea of . . . this very thing that we talked about [indirectness] and I see it as either something heroically different or a real impediment . . . Most of the time I think of it as a problem. And I can't really sort it out from my family and background . . . I don't know if it's Greek. I just know that it's me. And it feels a little better to know that it's Greek."

Conclusions

These results indicate how respondents report they would interpret a conversation. In actual interaction, intonation, facial expression, past experience with these and other speakers, and a myriad other factors influence interpretation. Moreover, whenever people communicate, they convey not only the content of their message, but an image of themselves (Goffman 1959). Thus respondents must have

referred for their answers not only to their interactive experience but also to their notion of social norms.

Eventually such an approach must be combined with tape-recording and video-taping of actual interaction, to determine not only what speakers expect but what they do.

Conversational style – the ways it seems natural to express and interpret meaning in conversation – is learned through communicative experience and therefore is influenced by family communicative habits. As the Greek-American quoted above put it, one “can’t really sort it out from . . . family and background.” In other words, conversational style is both a consequence and indicator of ethnicity. Conversational style includes both how meaning is expressed, as seen in patterns of indirectness, and what meaning is expressed, as in how much enthusiasm is expected. All of these conversational strategies create impressions about the speaker – judgments which are made, ultimately, not about how one talks but about what kind of person one is. Conversational style, therefore, has much to do with the formation of ethnic stereotypes.

Conversational style is more resistant to change than more apparent marks of ethnicity such as retention of the parents’ or grandparents’ language. Seaman (1972:204) demonstrates that the modern Greek language is “practically extinct” among third generation Greek-Americans and will be “totally extinct in the fourth generation.” However, those very third generation Greek-Americans who have lost the Greek language may not have lost, or not lost entirely, Greek communicative strategies. Understanding these strategies, and the patterns of their retention or loss, can offer insight into the process of cultural assimilation at the same time that it provides insight into discourse processes in a heterogeneous society.

NOTE

1. An earlier study (Tannen 1976) presented two different versions of this conversation with a rating-scale questionnaire. The two English versions differed in that one presented the husband’s first response as “OK,” while the other presented it as “yeah.” The two Greek versions, administered in Athens, differed in that one presented the husband’s first response as “OK” (*endaxi*), while the other presented it as the informal Greek “yes” (*ne*). Whereas I had expected the shift to “yes/yeah” to produce more choices of the direct interpretation among both Greeks and Americans, I found that the substitution of “yeah” for “OK” made no difference in American responses, while the substitution of “yes” (*ne*) for “OK”

(*endaxi*) did yield fewer choices of the indirect interpretation by Greeks. In other words, “OK” and “yeah” turned out to be equivalents for English, whereas “OK” and “yes” did not turn out to be equivalents for Greeks. This difference may be explained in part by the “yes/yeah” distinction in English, but I believe it is also attributable in part to the greater expectation among Greeks that objections will not be directly expressed, so one must attend to the indirect interpretation of “OK.”