

# Gender and Conversational Interaction

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# Editor's Introduction

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This volume explores the relationship between gender and language through the analysis of discourse in interaction. Some chapters compare the discourse of females and males; others analyze interaction among females. All the analytic chapters both provide model analysis of conversational interaction and make significant theoretical contributions to the literature on gender and language.

Of the many methodological and theoretical approaches to this topic currently being pursued, the one embodied in this collection can be thought of as ethnographically oriented discourse analysis or, alternatively, interactional sociolinguistics. The chapters provide context-sensitive microanalysis based on observation, tape-recording, and transcription of language as it is used in interaction. The time is ripe for this approach, as gender and language research nears the close of its second decade.

The year 1975 can be regarded as having launched the field of gender and language. That year saw the publication of three books that proved pivotal: Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* (the first part appeared as an article in *Language in Society* in 1972), Mary Ritchie Key's *Male/Female Language*, and Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley's edited volume *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. These groundbreaking books made it possible to talk about—indeed, to see—systematic differences in the ways women and men tend to use language.

Lakoff's work in particular became a touchstone for subsequent research. Previous linguistic research had described the phenomenon of women and men using different forms of speech in American Indian lan-

gauges such as Yana (Sapir 1929) and Koasati (Haas 1944). Lakoff used this as a point of departure to describe patterns of language use that, according to her observations, distinguished women's and men's speech in American English. She arrayed these differences on the traditional linguistic paradigm: lexical, syntactic, and intonational levels. The succeeding generation of researchers (fewer of whom were from Lakoff's own field of linguistics than from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and speech communication) tested her observations about "women's language" in a variety of settings. Lakoff also examined language used about women and men—in other words, the way language uses us. For example, one of Lakoff's illustrations (as relevant now as it was then) identified the differing connotations of the word "aggressive" when it is applied to a man and a woman; in the first case fairly positive, in the second quite negative.

Since that watershed year the relationship between language and gender has become the focus of a vast multidisciplinary literature. Innumerable journal articles have been supplemented by review articles (e.g., Aries 1987, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992, Gal 1991, McConnell-Ginet 1988, Philips 1980, Smith 1979, West & Zimmerman 1985), book-length edited collections (e.g., Coates & Cameron 1988, Dubois & Crouch 1976, McConnell-Ginet, Borker, & Furman 1980, Philips, Steele, & Tanz 1988, Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley 1983, Todd & Fisher 1988), and monographs (e.g., Baron 1986, Coates 1986, Hill 1986, Graddol & Swann 1989, Kramarae 1981, Preisler 1986, Smith 1985). The research reported in these sources covers aspects of language and gender such as language socialization in young children; lexical, phonological, and syntactic differences in the language used by women and men; discourse strategies; and language used to refer to women and men. In order to quantify features of women's and men's speech, many studies have been carried out in an experimental paradigm, and operational definitions have been devised to facilitate coding and counting. This volume is not intended to provide a cross section of such research. Rather, it presents a broad and in-depth sampling of work that combines anthropological, sociolinguistic, linguistic, and ethnographically oriented discourse analysis.

There has been a recent tendency to bifurcate the gender and language field into two camps, roughly conceived as the "dominance" approach and the "cultural" approach. The "dominance" approach is most often associated with the work of Nancy Henley, Cheri Kramarae, and Barrie Thorne. The "cultural" approach can be traced to an article by Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982) and is often associated with my own work (Tannen 1990, chapter 7 in this volume). This bifurcation is unfortunate because, like most bipolar representations, it belies the complexity of the issues and the subtlety of the scholars' research. I hope that the analyses and arguments contained in this volume will serve to obliterate this dichotomy. Those who take a "cultural" view of gender differences (many of the authors included here would fall into this group) do not deny the existence of dominance relations in general or the dominance of women by

men in particular. Likewise, recognizing that men dominate women in our culture does not preclude the existence of patterns of communication that tend to typify women and men. What is needed—and what this volume contributes to—is a better understanding of the complex relationship between the cultural patterning of linguistic behavior and that of gender relations.

The “cultural” approach to gender usually refers to the proposal by Maltz and Borker that males and females can be thought of as belonging to two different cultural groups since they tend to socialize in primarily sex-separate peer interaction during childhood. Another aspect of cultural patterning that bears on gender and language is the recognition that gender is only one of many cultural influences affecting linguistic behavior. A number of chapters included in this volume investigate such cultural patterning. Penelope Brown’s chapter is the most palpably anthropological in that it examines discourse recorded in a Mayan community in Mexico. Somewhat closer to home but still culturally diverse are the subjects of Marjorie Harness Goodwin’s chapter describing discourse in an urban black neighborhood, Barbara Johnstone’s analysis of conversational narratives of midwestern men and women, and my own chapter distinguishing the conversational styles of Americans of varying ethnic, regional, and class backgrounds.

All the analytic chapters examine actual discourse as it occurred in interaction. The chapters by Carole Edelsky and by me use the topic of gender differences as a starting point to explore theoretical issues in discourse and to demonstrate that they must be understood before questions about gender differences in language use can be addressed. A number of other chapters also emphasize the complexity of issues involved in theorizing gender, and the necessity of understanding them before differences in discourse styles can be understood. The final two chapters are particularly important in that they provide critical reviews of the literature on two topics that have been the subject of extensive investigation and debate. With the explosion of research on gender and language being carried out by scholars in a wide range of disciplines employing widely divergent methodologies, such efforts to bring the research into the view of a single lens are absolutely necessary.

Finally, this volume can be used as a kind of casebook for the field of interactional sociolinguistics since it demonstrates how work in the field addresses a particular sociolinguistic issue. The collection also sheds light on a central theoretical and methodological problem: the transcription of oral discourse. As discourse analysis has gained greater prominence, the complexity of the transcription process has received increasing attention. The question of transcription is not only methodological but also theoretical. This volume provides rich material for an investigation of the implications of the various transcription systems found in the chapters. For example, juxtaposing the nontraditional systems employed by Eckert and Edelsky with the more traditional but still individually unique systems

used by the other authors would provide an unusually fruitful entry point to this topic.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Edelsky discusses in detail the reasons she found traditional transcription formats inadequate and potentially misleading, as well as how the system she developed for this study led her to questions about turn and floor that became the focus of her study.

This volume, then, provides an in-depth introduction to research on gender and language that has been carried out in the tradition that might be called ethnographically oriented discourse analysis or interactional sociolinguistics.

### *Overview of the Chapters*

Part I of this volume examines conversational discourse, including two chapters focusing on the talk of adolescent girls. Chapter 1, Donna Eder's "Go Get Ya a French!": Romantic and Sexual Teasing Among Adolescent Girls," represents the first extended treatment of the conceptually complex speech activity teasing among junior high school girls. Combining sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods, Eder taped the naturally occurring interactions of girls, and in some cases girls and boys, in a middle school at lunchtime. Eder observed the girls engaging in romantic and sexual teasing about boys they were interested in or "going with"—a relationship that could be as short as a few days in duration and might involve little or no direct contact. Eder shows that teasing provides the girls with ways of reinforcing bonds among themselves, experimenting with and reversing traditional gender roles, and managing newly experienced feelings of jealousy.

In chapter 2, "Cooperative Competition in Adolescent 'Girl Talk,'" Penelope Eckert draws on insights gained during two and a half years of participant observation in a suburban Detroit high school in order to analyze a discussion arranged, at her request, by six girls who had been part of the same group in junior high but have assumed different positions in high school. Three have found their place in the mainstream popular crowd, and three are involved in alternative social networks. Eckert examines their multitopic discussion to uncover its purpose and the verbal means by which that purpose is accomplished. Because the girls in high school, like women in society, gain "symbolic capital" and status on the basis of their character and relations with others rather than their accomplishments, possessions, or institutional status, they need to negotiate norms of behavior and balance conflicting needs for independence and popularity. Eckert shows how the girls accomplish this through group talk that expresses disagreement at the same time that it negotiates consensus.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter 3, "Community and Contest: Midwestern Men and Women Creating Their Worlds in Conversational Storytelling," Barbara Johnstone argues that differences between women's and men's conversational stories reflect and create women's and men's divergent worlds. Rather than seeing women's stories as reflections of women's powerlessness,

Johnstone finds in their narratives evidence that for them the community is a source of power. Analyzing naturally occurring conversational narratives, Johnstone finds that the women's stories tend to involve social power, as "disturbing or dangerous events are overcome through the power of interdependence and community." The men's stories involve "worlds of contest in which power comes from the individual acting in opposition to others." Accordingly, the men and women provide details about different elements: the men about places, times, and objects; the women about people and their speech. Finally, Johnstone examines written narratives relating to a flood that occurred in the town in which these stories were told. She finds that the flood story—a community story—has much in common with the women's narrative mode.

Part II is concerned with "Conflict Talk." Two of the authors whose chapters are included in this section, Penelope Brown and Marjorie Harness Goodwin, were pioneers in anthropological studies of gender differences in interaction: Brown's 1979 dissertation ("Language, Interaction and Sex Roles in a Mayan Community") and Goodwin's 1978 dissertation ("Conversational Practices in a Peer Group of Urban Black Children") were landmarks in using extended fieldwork and recorded interaction to address issues of gender and language use. Taken together, the chapters in this section lay to rest the frequently heard claim that only boys and men are competitive and frequently engage in conflict whereas girls and women are always cooperative and avoid conflict. At the same time they make clear that neither is it the case that females and males tend to engage in conflict to the same extent or in the same way.

The first two chapters of this section compare male and female styles, showing systematic differences in how the two groups use language in their play. Chapter 4, "Pickle Fights: Gendered Talk in Preschool Disputes," by Amy Sheldon, opens with an invaluable review of the literature on gender and language in general and gender differences in children's conflicts in particular. Sheldon then examines conflict talk among female and male triads of three-year-old friends. In the same kitchen corner of a day care center both groups (on different occasions) fight over possession of a plastic pickle. The gendered aspects of the disputes are made visible by interpreting them in terms of two models. Maltz and Borker's anthropological linguistic model characterizes feminine language style as affiliative and masculine style as adversarial. Gilligan's psychological framework, describing gender differences in reasoning about moral conflicts, characterizes the feminine orientation as focusing on the relationship and the masculine as focusing on the self. Sheldon finds the two dispute sequences she analyzes to be consistent with predictions that the boys' conflict process is more heavy-handed and their discourse strategies more controlling, whereas the girls' conflict is more mitigated and their discourse strategies more collaborative. Thus the study demonstrates the gendered nature of children's peer talk at ages as young as three. However, Sheldon emphasizes that although the boys' and girls' styles tend toward the gender-

specific paradigm, they are not mutually exclusive. The children share the same discourse competencies, and there is overlap in their discourse choices.

Chapter 5, "Tactical Uses of Stories: Participation Frameworks Within Boys' and Girls' Disputes," by Marjorie Harness Goodwin, examines how children use narrative discourse to arrange and rearrange their social organization. Goodwin spent a year and a half observing and recording children ranging in age from four to fourteen playing in their West Philadelphia black working-class neighborhood. She finds that boys use stories to further an ongoing argument while transforming the participation structure of the event. The boys' stories function as a direct challenge in negotiating current status within a hierarchical social order. The girls use stories as part of an "instigating" routine by which talking behind someone's back leads to future confrontation—an early stage in an ongoing process of negatively sanctioning behavior the girls deem inappropriate. In this way a girl's story can elicit a promise to confront the offender and thereby spark a dispute that can mobilize the whole neighborhood. Whereas the boys' disputes are localized, the girls' disputes extend over time and can lead to ostracism from the group.

In chapter 6, "Gender, Politeness, and Confrontation in Tenejapa," Penelope Brown examines women's discourse in a court case, the only setting in which the peasant Mayan women among whom she did fieldwork are "authorized" to engage in direct confrontation. The two women involved in the case are the mothers of a bridal couple whose marriage ended when the wife left her new husband to live with another man. The groom's mother seeks to be repaid for the bridal gifts she had given her daughter-in-law, and the bride's mother seeks to avoid payment. The litigants dramatize their confrontation not only by flouting the turn-taking and kinesic rules for courteous interaction but also by exaggerating certain characteristically female forms of polite agreement through conventionalized irony, thereby transforming it into sarcastic agreement. In other words, linguistic forms associated with women's speech in contexts of cooperation and agreement are here used to express conflict, hostility, and disagreement. Brown argues that women can breach Tenejapan norms of polite behavior in this context because such public confrontation is a means of reestablishing one's public self-image or "face." Brown ends by discussing the nature of relations between language and gender. She argues that gender is, in a sense, a "master status" in Tenejapan society, but that the "relations between language and gender are context dependent." She therefore calls for research examining situation-specific speech events—a call that is answered in part, one might add, by this volume.

The theoretical discussion with which Brown concludes her chapter leads directly into Part III, "The Relativity of Discourse Strategies." This section reinforces one of the major tenets of the ethnographic approach: that linguistic forms must be examined in interactive context. The two chapters in Part III demonstrate that specific linguistic strategies cannot be

aligned with specific interactional meanings. Rather, meaning varies with context in the broadest sense.

Chapter 7 is my own essay, "The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies: Power and Solidarity in Gender and Dominance." I demonstrate that the theoretical framework of power and solidarity is essential for understanding gender patterns in language use, and that gender and language is a fruitful site for investigating the dynamics underlying language choice, including such dimensions as power and solidarity. I use this framework to show that gender and language research cannot be approached as the mechanical search for specific linguistic devices. Analyzing examples from conversation as well as literary creations of conversations, I argue that each of the linguistic devices that have been claimed to show dominance can also show solidarity. For example, one can talk while another is talking in order to wrest the floor; this can be seen as a move motivated by power. Yet one can also talk along with another in order to show support and agreement; this must be seen as a move motivated by solidarity. The two, however, are not mutually exclusive. If both speakers are engaged in a ritual struggle for the floor, they might experience the entire conversation as a pleasurable one: an exercise of solidarity on the metalevel. My purpose, then, is not to question that particular linguistic devices, such as interruption, may be used to create dominance, but rather to argue that intention and effect may not be synonymous and that there is never a one-to-one relationship between any linguistic device and an interactive effect.

Chapter 8 is a very slightly revised version of a paper that has become a classic, Carole Edelsky's "Who's Got the Floor?" This chapter demonstrates that gendered patterns of interaction must be distinguished not only by speech event but by types of floor within a given event. Edelsky taped five complete meetings of a standing faculty committee composed of seven women (including herself) and four men. Although she initially set out to compare the women's and men's verbal behavior, she realized that she had to tackle a number of methodological and theoretical questions before she could address gender differences. Her focus therefore shifted to the nature of conversational turns and floors. Edelsky identified two types of floor: a singly developed floor in which one speaker holds forth while others listen or respond, and a collaborative floor in which several people seem to be either "operating on the same wavelength or engaging in a free-for-all." Gender differences could only be described in terms of these differing floors: Men took more and longer turns and did more of the joking, arguing, directing, and soliciting of responses during the singly developed floors; in the collaborative floors women and men talked equally, and women joked, argued, directed, and solicited responses more than men. Edelsky notes, however, that the women did not talk more during collaborative floors; rather, the men talked less. Finally she concludes that rather than asking how women and men use language to enact their different positions with respect to power, research must ask "*under what conditions* do men and women interact . . . more or less as equals and



under what conditions do they not?" The implications of Edelsky's study are enormous and, despite the frequency with which it is cited, have not yet been adequately dealt with by researchers.

An insight that emerges from Edelsky's study as well as mine is that overlapping talk is not always uncooperative. Although it may be disruptive in singly developed floors, it is a constructive and indeed constitutive characteristic of collaborative floors. The phenomenon of overlapping talk is the focus of the first chapter in Part IV.

Part IV consists of two chapters that present critical reviews of the literature on two topics central to research on gender and language use: the questions of interruption and of who talks more. One of the most frequently cited claims in the literature is that men dominate women by interrupting them in conversation and by taking up more speaking time. In chapter 9, "Women, Men, and Interruptions: A Critical Review," Deborah James and Sandra Clarke tackle the question of whether it is true that men produce more interruptions than women in cross-sex—or same-sex—conversation. They find that of fifty-four studies, the great majority have, in fact, found women and men not to differ in number of interruptions. However, they point out that the research on interruptions has been seriously flawed by faulty assumptions (in particular, a failure to appreciate the extent to which simultaneous talk can function to show solidarity) and faulty methodology (studies have differed significantly in how interruptions were measured, have often used unreliable measures of interruption, and have taken insufficient account of a number of variables). They survey potential ways of determining whether men produce more specifically dominance-related interruptions than women, noting that no clear results emerge from the overall research based on any of these criteria. However, none of these criteria are entirely reliable. The authors suggest that to resolve this issue simultaneous talk must be examined in the framework of conversational analysis that takes into detailed account the larger context in which the simultaneous talk occurs. James and Clarke also note that some evidence does exist to suggest that women are more likely to produce cooperative overlapping talk than men—at least in all-female interaction.

In chapter 10, "Understanding Gender Differences in Amount of Talk: A Critical Review of Research," Deborah James and Janice Drakich examine the question of whether women or men talk more. The cultural stereotype holds that women are compulsive talkers who never let a man get a word in edgewise; however, as has been widely reported in the language and gender literature, most studies have found that men talk more. In their review of fifty-six studies, James and Drakich point out that there has nevertheless been considerable inconsistency in the research findings. While noting some methodological problems with the research similar to those outlined in chapter 9, they also propose that neither the "dominance" approach nor the "cultural" approach, considered separately, is adequate to account for the range of results with respect to amount of talk;

they argue that the best explanation is one which takes into account the overall social structure of the interaction, as informed by the difference in status between the genders and the differential cultural expectations about women's and men's abilities and areas of competence. As the social structure of the interaction changes, so do expectations and, consequently, women's and men's behavior with respect to amount of talk. Here James and Drakich adopt the approach of status characteristics theory (Berger, Fizek, Norman and Zelditch 1977). Both chapters 9 and 10 show that far more theoretical and methodological sophistication is required before key questions in language and gender can be answered.

It is the goal of this volume to contribute to such theoretical and methodological development. The strength of the interactional sociolinguistic or ethnographically oriented discourse analytic approaches is twofold: its focus on discourse as produced in interaction and its attention to context in the deepest sense. This volume provides a rich source of insight into studies that examine gender and language in interactional context. It points the way for a future generation of studies that will be based on more sophisticated understanding of how language works in conversational interaction; that will be sensitive to context in the broadest sense and will look at language holistically rather than as a bundle of isolated variables; that will take into account research done in a range of cultural settings; and that, ultimately, will broaden and deepen our understanding of gender, of language, and of the interaction between them.

## NOTES

1. Edelsky cites a number of key papers discussing transcription. For recent discussions of the theoretical implications of transcription, see Edwards (1990) and Preston (1982, 1985).

2. This chapter, as well as the chapters by Sheldon, Goodwin, and Brown, were originally published in a special issue of *Discourse Processes*, which I guest-edited, entitled *Gender and Conversational Interaction* (13:1 [January–March 1990]). In summarizing these chapters, I have drawn heavily on the abstracts that preceded these articles in that journal.

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