

Gender in Interruptive Turns at Talk-In-Interaction

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, gender and its role in interruptive turns at talk-in-interaction are examined. Research on the topic of gender in interaction and gender and interruption reflects a tension between essentialist and contextual views. Using the research methods of conversation analysis, this paper examines interruptions in a transcript of a conversation between a male and a female speaker. This examination of the form and function of the interruptions appears to support the idea that gender as a construct is situated rather than fixed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at how gender is a factor in everyday talk-in-interaction. I am interested in the insights that can be gleaned from a micro-level, bottom-up investigation of basic conversation management. One of the most basic elements of conversation is turn taking. My analysis centers on interruptive turn taking in particular, mainly because of the ways in which the occurrence of overlap and interruption have been shown to be related to gender. My use of a transcript is prompted by the idea that situated language use is the most effective way to investigate patterns in language. The analysis in the paper grows out of the conversational analysis of the transcript, to which I apply theories concerning the role of gender in interaction. What results is a layered look at the balance between being and becoming that constitutes modern attitudes about the significance of gender in everyday conversation.

This investigation grew out of an analysis of the transcript of a conversation between two interlocutors, one female and one male. The analysis showed that there were several instances of interruption. What was striking was that in each case, the female speaker was interrupting the male speaker. Tannen (1990) describes two different types of interruption, cooperative and competitive. She describes cooperative interruption, or “words of agreement and support and anticipation of how their sentences and thoughts would end” (p. 210), as characteristic of women’s style of speech. Competitive overlap on the other hand is attributed to men’s style and is described as having a tendency to “usurping or switching the topic” (p. 210).

Based on this understanding, I considered it interesting that all five of the interruptions in my transcript were committed by the female speaker. I considered it notable that only two of those interruptions could be considered cooperative overlap and that the remaining three could

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be considered competitive. The analysis below intends account for the apparent anomaly of the female uncooperative overlap by looking at other perspectives on the role that gender plays in interruptive turns at talk-in-interaction.

METHODS

While this paper is concerned mainly with gender relationships, it is based on a detailed conversation analysis of the transcript. A main goal of conversation analysis is to investigate “how interaction unfolds across sequences of actions by different participants” (Stubbe et al., 2003, p. 354). The transcript takes account of pauses, overlap, stress, intonation, latching and how each of these devices contributes to the management of the talk-in-interaction between the two interlocutors on a local or sequential level.

Gender issues are often looked at via Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS), which takes account of ethnographic information and, “of the unstated assumptions and background knowledge the participants in an interaction bring to bear as part of the interpretive process” (Stubbe et al., 2003, p. 362). It is this layer of analysis that brings information about the context of the conversation into consideration. Specifically it asks who are the interlocutors and what are their conversational goals.

The Data

The transcript is of a conversation between two interlocutors, Mark and Erica. They are peers, both graduate students at Teachers College. They are also co-workers, both employed by the Office of External Affairs at Teachers College: Mark as a workstudy student and Erica as an Administrative Assistant. Both are non-Hispanic white and in their mid-twenties. Mark is from upstate New York and Erica is from Georgia.

This conversation takes place in the office. They are discussing the practice of downloading music files from the Internet. They share a good amount of common knowledge and common vocabulary about the subject and their argument reflects the differing opinions surrounding this issue in the larger culture. Mark’s point is that as long as artists receive credit, or attribution, for their work, then the sharing of that work shouldn’t be an issue for regulation. Erica argues that the mass sharing of music files on the Internet discourages people from buying music, depriving artists of much-needed revenue.

The transcription is of three minutes from the middle of a longer conversation in which they cover a diversity of topics. This segment, while it picks up in the middle of their conversation, is focused on the music file subtopic. The transcription is numbered according to turns. A full transcript is attached in Appendix A, while Appendix B shows the transcription conventions used.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Interruption and Turn-Taking

“One of the basic facts of conversation is that the roles of speaker and listener change, and this occurs with remarkably little overlapping speech and remarkably few silences” (Coulthard, 1977, p. 59). Interlocutors in a conversation are able to manage their conversation according to some generalizable rules. For example, according to Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), turn-taking is “a basic form of organization for conversation” (p. 700). In their “simplest systematics,” the ways in which interlocutors in talk-in-interaction manage turn-taking is governed by rules. Among other things, these rules stipulate that a transition relevance place (TRP) will be the location of a turn.

However, there are instances where these turn-taking rules are violated. “Incursions have the potential to disrupt turns at talk, disorganize the ongoing construction of conversational topics, and violate the current speaker’s right to be engaged in speaking” (West & Zimmerman, 1983, p. 105). The transcript being analyzed in this paper exhibits several instances of turns that do not fall within the framework of the simplest systematics. These are turns that do not wait for the speaker to construct a turn construction unit or even a first possible completion point. I am referring to instances in which the interlocutor self-selects prior to the occurrence of a TRP. From this point on, I will call these instances, or “violations of speakers’ turns at talk” (p. 103), interruptions. There are five interruptive turn transfers in the transcript that do not occur at TRPs. Before the TRP is reached or projected in these turns, the interlocutor self-selects and begins her turn in the middle of the speaker’s utterance. In all five cases, the same speaker, Erica, makes the interruptive remarks.

I am labeling these turn transfers interruptions even though each occurs in a lull or pause in Mark’s speech. For this reason, it could be argued that Mark has reached a TRP. However, I do not consider these pauses to be TRPs as Sacks et al. (1974) would define them, as points that “any unit-type instance will reach”, that is, the first possible completion of that unit (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 703). From this point of view, his turn unit is not at a projectable end as he is still talking and not approaching a point that reflects the falling intonation of a TRP.

Interruption and Feminine Style

The first two interruptions occur in turns 5 and 7 of the transcript. At the beginning of this segment, Mark has just finished a long turn in turn 1. At the TRP after turn 1, Mark self-selects as the next speaker in turn 2:

- 2 Mark: you know you-an album is not really music it’s (1.0) a
 pro:ject.
- 3 Erica: [[paj-
- 4 Mark: [[you know uh [incorporates]
- ⇒ 5 Erica: [uh package?]
- 6 Mark: yeah incorporates (1.0) ↑you know ↓art and now they have
 cds with bonus material and all that stuff that you can put
 i:n and with interviews and — [so it’s like

Interruption in Context

In contrast to the two interruptions previously described, in the rest of the interruptions in my data, Erica completely disrupts Mark's turn and not only threatens, but succeeds at taking over the floor. The next interruptive remark occurs in line 13 of the transcript.

- 10 Mark: ... I don't-understand how we can ↑sue: somebody — for
(1.0) um
(2.0)
- 11 Erica: Downloading music?=
12 Mark: =Yeah for wa:nting to be (2.0) °you know° >>if if<< a file
if a music file has the artist's name — and the track and all
that-you know [and what it is
- ⇒ 13 Erica: [↑and nobody goes out and buys it, then.
(1.0)
- 14 Erica: When when everyone's ((cough)) >>excuse me<< when
everyone's downloading music then no one goes out and
buys it.

Erica's interruption in line 13 is characterized by a raised intonation to begin. She interrupts not at a TRP, but after a listener-oriented hedge in Mark's conversation. She begins her utterance with the word "and," which gives it the appearance of being an utterance completor or supportive comment. In addition, she quickly comes to a TRP, which could indicate that she is not interested in taking over the floor. However, the content of what she is saying shows that she is not only not completing his comment, but that she is not even responding to what Mark is saying in turn 12, but to an idea from an earlier turn. In turn 12, Mark does not get the opportunity to finish his thought when Erica interrupts to respond to his previous assertion from turn 10 (which she completed) about not understanding how people could be sued for downloading music.

The interruptions in the first set we looked at, in lines 5 and 7, are in accord with the cooperation/competition model used by Holmes (1999) and Tannen (1990). Following from that, Erica as a female is more likely to engage in this type of talk. However, this reading does not hold true for this second interruptive segment. Erica's interruption might appear cooperative, but it is clearly a competitive remark. According to the earlier analysis of gender as style, Erica could be said to be using a masculine style by interrupting to take over the floor. While it is possible that Erica is consciously subverting her female gender role, I feel it is an uneasy reading of the situation.

In this analysis, the gender role assigned to the style of what Erica is doing in her speech, and whether or not she is subverting it, is less important than what she is actually saying. According to Goodwin (1990), "stereotypes of feminine speech fall apart when talk in a range of activities is examined" (p. 9). In her study, Goodwin examined the talk of young African-American girls in a peer group setting. From this data she observed not only that "girls can hold their own in arguments with boys," but also that "cooperation and competition are not mutually exclusive agendas and often coexist within the same speech activities" (p. 284).

With this in mind, it is possible to look at Erica's uncooperative and cooperative overlaps or interruptions not in terms of her gender, but in terms of the speech activity. The idea that she can be both cooperative and competitive at the same time shifts the focus from who she is to what she is doing. And this is congruent with Goodwin's (1990) conclusions that the "relevant unit of analysis is not the group, or the individual, but situated activities" (p. 9). The behavior of the girls defies traditional notions about gender and leads Goodwin (1990) to advocate for a more nuanced, "situated rather than unidimensional" (p. 284) understanding of how gender manifests itself in everyday life.

Instead of reading this second set of interruptions as an aberration, or exception to the rule, which it would likely be under a gender as style reading, what becomes clear is the importance of content and context over style. Cameron (1999) puts forth that "models of gendered speech which imply that masculinity and femininity are monolithic constructs" can be unhelpful and that the substance of what is said matters more than the style (p. 456).

The intention here is not to understand the data (the behavior of Goodwin's young girls, for example) as performing a *male* gender when they are defying *female* behavior patterns. This would give rise to an understanding of gender that goes beyond the essentialist view of gender as a characteristic of a group of people, or even as inherent within an individual, but more as a characteristic that develops out of a situation. Essentially agreeing with this analysis, Kotthoff and Wodak, (1997, as cited in Thorne, 2001) similarly argue that the meaning of interruption depends on the framing of the situation.

One way to reconfigure how we look at gender is to consider the post-modern idea put forward by Butler (1990) that shifts the gendering away from the individual toward what is actually performed by that individual in a given context that "gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity" (p. 112). Here the fact that Erica is a woman does not determine what she says, nor does it gender the utterances themselves. This reverses the traditional approach, which views that who a person is (including what gender they are) determines how they speak, and it suggests "that people are who they are because of (among other things) the way they talk" (Cameron, 1999, p. 444). This removes the debate from the realm of attributing certain behaviors to certain genders and brings the discussion to another level. Cameron describes the shift in focus as a "subtler and more complex inquiry into how people use linguistic resources to produce gender differentiation" (p. 444).

This movement away from defining gender as an individual or group construct more aptly characterizes the ways in which we view Erica's interruptive turns. Similarly, West and Zimmerman also see gender not as a fixed construct, but as a process or activity (1983, as cited in Thorne, 2001, p. 6). They introduce the idea of "doing" gender, or seeing it as a process, where "as a dimension of social situations, gender varies in organization and meaning and assumes a more fluid quality" (p. 6). This approach also enables us to move away from seeing cooperation and competition as mutually exclusive endeavors. And it introduces the idea that one individual can act in a variety of ways, depending on the circumstances. This interpretation seems a better fit for the interruptive data in this transcript.

Interruption as Power

Referring to Butler's performative theory of gender, Thorne (2001) points out that it is rooted in Foucault's conceptions of power and knowledge. As Foucault's concepts often serve as

a basis for discussions of power in discourse, the co-mingling of both power and gender at this point is interesting. Interruptions involve “violations of speakers’ turns at talk” and are, as a result, “a device for exercising power and control in conversation” (West & Zimmerman, 1983, p. 103).

Henley (1977) has also observed that gender and power structures are closely tied. In the previous set of interruptions, where Erica takes over the floor, as in the two that follow, there are issues of power at play. In the last two interruptions we will look at gender and power, and how they come together in their conversation. The next interruption occurs in turn 21:

- 19 Erica: °uh forgot what I was going to say.°
20 Mark: °Yeah I think [that°
⇒ 21 Erica: [↑OH! oh I know I read an article recently in
the ↑times that said that they’re gonna decrease the prices of cds
— by thirty per ↑cent so a cd that used to cost eighteen dollars is
gonna cost like thirteen, ↑now.

Here Erica forgets her line of thought in turn 19 and gives up her turn. Mark self-selects as the next speaker and begins his turn when Erica interrupts him with turn 21. This turn beginning is marked by raised intonation like the interruption before, but the first word is emphasized and spoken louder than the rest. In this interruption, Erica may feel that the floor is hers for the taking back, as she indicated in turn 19 that she did indeed have something to say but could not remember what it was. Mark began speaking, but not in a loud voice, that in conjunction with Erica’s surprise at remembering what she had to say, could explain why this interruptive remark begins so dramatically.

Another interpretation explains her intonation change as a way to resist being interrupted herself. “Speakers reject interruption, if they choose not to yield the floor, by speaking more loudly, more quickly and in a higher pitch (Coulthard, 1977, p. 64). From this, it could even be argued that Erica, because she sees herself as continuing a turn, is using these conversational tools to resist what she sees as Mark’s interruption attempt in turn 20.

The final interruption in the transcript occurs in turn 23:

- 22 Mark: ...people would hear the-one track on the internet then
they’d go out and buy the cd so it was increasing sales.
23 Mark: so [the ↑more it’s more of a] °moral° (hhh)
⇒ 24 Erica: [but what’s happening is is]
25 Erica: what’s happening is is people are buying-some people are
buying those cds and they download it and they put it on
like sites like ↑kazaa you know=

In this interruption, Erica may have intended to jump in at the TRP at the end of Mark’s turn in 22. But he self-selected to speak again in 23 and this is when Erica interrupts him. It could be argued that this last interruption is not an interruption at all, but an instance in which a TRP is reached by Mark at the end of turn 22. Jefferson (1983) argues that each has “equal rights to the turn space” (p.6). So, while it might not officially be an interruption, it can still be considered a power move. One of the speakers will stop talking and let the other continue, and one speaker will continue speaking. So, in this case, since it is the interlocutor, Erica, who begins

and persists in speaking, we can still look at it as an interruption, but the location of the interruption has simply shifted from the supposed TRP to the point in Mark's continuation where talking ceases. This interruption is pretty clearly an attempt by Erica to retake the floor as she continues to speak and Mark trails off with his utterance to let her continue, which she does in turn 25.

Erica's interruption in turn 21 has the effect of stopping Mark's turn prematurely or before a TRP. In turn 24, Erica not only effectively ends Mark's turn, but also resets the agenda of the conversation. Mark again was beginning to shift the talk from economic issues to the morality of downloading music. Erica, who likely did not hear Mark introduce the morality topic due to overlap, reintroduces her topic of the artists not getting economic credit for their work. In turn 21, Erica takes the floor with an interruption that is clearly not an utterance completor or an agreement marker. Her opening word is marked by higher volume, rising intonation and emphasis all contributing to the baldly interruptive nature of her utterance. This interruption is notable as it leads to a string of turns where Erica is dominating, as it were, the conversation. From turns 24 through 36, Erica is laying out her position and Mark is contributing only backchannels as agreement markers.

These last two interruptions, while not totally identical in nature, demonstrate how interruptions can be used to wield power in talk-in-interaction. First, I'd like to address how the power dimension of gendered talk is exhibited by this transcript. It could be argued that Erica, by wielding power and taking over the floor in these two interruptions, is exhibiting tendencies to defy traditionally female talk. This again goes against the gender as style arguments of Tannen (1990) and Holmes (1999). For them, she might be defying gender roles. However, it may be a flaw of this particular vision of gendered style to say that the female style is inherently a powerless one.

As Goodwin (1990) observes, "typifications of female speech may support the view of females as powerless speakers" (p. 284). What this means for our analysis of Erica's interruptions is that, as with Goodwin's data, the power exerted by the successful interruptions, like the interruptions themselves, goes against the gendered feminine style. Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley (1983) put forward that, "the 'powerlessness' of the speech patterns women more often use exists only relative to the power of so-called masculine patterns" (p. 19). I would also suggest that the definition of what power means in the context of talk-in-interaction is based on a male norm, and, as a result, may need to be reconsidered.

My second point is that power moves, such as Erica taking the floor here, can be seen as not necessarily in the identity of the interlocutor, but performative, like gender, inherent in the nature of the conversation where there are likely many other explanations to explain why she is interrupting Mark. For example, power in talk-in-interaction relates to the ability to establish control over the agenda of the conversation. Hutchby's analysis (1999) of the radio talk show as an example of an agenda contest provides insights into how the power to set the agenda or topic of the conversation is operating within the larger conversation that Erica and Mark are having. She is not only taking the floor away from Mark, but at the same time reinstating her point of view (in this instance she will relate a newspaper article that supports her view) and establishing it as the topic of the conversation. Had she allowed him to continue, he may have tried to sway the agenda back to his topic, which is more concerned with artists getting written credit for their work. He was doing this in turn 12 when she interrupted him and he will introduce it again in turn 40, where she doesn't interrupt him but instead challenges his statement. Again in line 23 Erica interrupts Mark again, she is responding to his comment about mp3 downloading

increasing music sales by again bringing the agenda back to her point about how sharing music files discourages people from buying music.

These two interchanges provide support for the idea that power to establish one's position as the agenda for the conversation is fluid. It does not belong to one interlocutor in particular in this situation but is rather, as Hutchby describes, "a phenomenon brought into play through discourse" (1999, p. 586).

Just as gender can be considered performative in the context of talk-in-interaction, power also can be viewed in this way. Removing the correlation between gender and interruption also removed the correlation between gender and power, making both constructs that depend less on the gender of the interlocutor and more on the qualities of the interaction itself.

CONCLUSION

In my investigation into how turns are managed to expose gender relations, I showed that interruption is a way to build rapport or reflect a style that seeks to construct a dialog in a cooperative manner. But I also found evidence that such a line of reasoning was not applicable in all situations and could not reasonably account for some characteristics of the dialog. In a way, the results of this analysis undermine the universality of some of these assertions about gender roles. As a corollary, I found that paradigms that define conversational power were typically centered on masculine definitions of what constituted power. I suggest that a new paradigm to understand the possibilities of power would be helpful in redefining it along lines that take feminine ways of power into consideration.

Second, my data exhibited characteristics that supported a view of gender that was less based on individual characteristics than on what was happening in any given situation. Akin to the idea that gender is relative, the idea here is that gender is not comprised of a certain combination of certain characteristics, but instead is fluid and changeable.

Third, I found an unexpected correlation between the fluidity of gender and the fluidity of power. Power and the ability to wield it in a conversation do not belong inherently to one individual or the other. Instead, power exists and can be utilized by either interlocutor to attain conversational goals, be it taking over the floor, or redirecting the topic of conversation.

And finally, my conclusions above speak to the value of using a micro-level, conversation analysis-style approach to the investigation. In addition, I show how "a concerted focus on everyday interaction and social situations has generated important contributions to the understanding of gender" (Thorne, 2001, p. 7). This style of investigation yielded interesting results that may not have been available to an analysis that focused only on the macro-level. It is evidence of the importance of a similarly well-rounded approach to investigations into gender, power and meaning in discourse.

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APPENDIX A

Transcript

- 1 Mark: ↑But gh the ↑hard thing (1.0) where where it comes down to is — they're not making the money off (3.0) you know (1.0) off what they're doing but so much of pop culture °and and° culture today is that (1.0) you can make money — you know yeah sure you create a-you make an article but really what you're doing is advertising. (2.0) you know you-an album is not really music it's (1.0) a pro:ject.
- 2 Erica: paj->[uh]<=
- 3 Mark: [you] know uh [incorporates]
- 4 Erica: =[package?]
- 5 Mark: yeah incorporates (1.0) ↑you know ↓art and now they have cds with bonus material and all that stuff that you can put i:n and with intervie:ws and — [so it's like
- 6 Erica: [it's a whole
package.=
- 7 Mark: =Yeah it's a package so=

- 8 Erica: =So that's what you're really paying for.=
- 9 Mark: =yeah (1.0) I think — the artwork and then and then the lyrics and all that
other that they print out and make uh (1.0) album notes it's really become a
(3.0) but I think (2.0) so it's interesting I don't-understand how we can ↑sue:
somebody — for (1.0) um (2.0)
- 10 Erica: Downloading music?=
11 Mark: =Yeah for wa:nting to be (2.0) °you know° >if if< a file if a music file has the
artist's name — and the track and all that-you know [and what it is
- 12 Erica: [↑and nobody goes out and
buys it, then. (1.0) When when everyone's ((cough)) >excuse me< when
everyone's downloading music then no one goes out and buys it. [you know]=
- 13 Mark: [°Yeah°]
- 14 Erica: =cuz they know they can get it for free: on the internet. um (3.0) °uh forgot
what I was going to say.° (1.0)
- 15 Mark: °Yeah I think [that°
- 16 Erica: [↑OH! oh I know I read an article recently in the ↑times that said
that they're gonna decrease the prices of cds — by thirty per ↑cent so a cd that used to cost
eighteen dollars is gonna cost like thirteen, ↑now.
- 17 Mark: ↑See I thought-people were saying that the mp3 thing that made it-what made
it interesting because-it made-music-people would hear the-one track on the
internet then they'd go out and buy the cd so it was increasing sales. — so=
- 18 Erica: =but [what's happening is is]
- 19 Mark: [the ↑more it's more of a °moral° (hhh)]
- 20 Erica: =what's happening is is people are buying some people are buying those cds
and they download it and put it on like sites like kazaa you know=
- 21 Mark: =°yeah°
- 22 Erica: where
- 23 Mark: it's mass sharing=
- 24 Erica: =yeah=
- 25 Mark: =yeah=
- 26 Erica: =like the whole album is being downloaded ↑>or, or!< like these bozos who go
to the concerts [and do] the bootlegs=
- 27 Mark: [°right°]
- 28 Mark: =°right right right°=
- 29 Erica: =you know that's that's a show that we all pay you know thirty something
dollars to go ↑see:=
- 30 Mark: °right°
- 31 Erica: =and now everyone on the world wide web is getting it for ↓free. (2.0) and the
artist is getting ↓no:thing.
- 32 Mark: see i-i-it's all about what we teach (1.0) you know as a teacher it's like — you
teach ok yeah you can-if you're writing a research paper (2.0) you have to cite
everything so the artist gets credit. somehow.
- 33 Erica: °mmhmm°
- 34 Mark: and and I always wondered you know (2.0) you know the writer gets gets

35 credit for his words um and the ideas that he's created and — and so
Erica: well isn't it the same with all the other artists?

APPENDIX B

Transcription Conventions

Overlaps

[overlap begin (mid-utterance)
[
[[overlap begin (utterance initial)
[[
]	overlap end (mid-utterance)
]	
=	adjacent utterances (marked at end of old and beginning of new) and continuous utterances (at end of speaker a utterance when there is a interruption and the beginning of the continued speaker a utterance)

Intervals

(0.0)	timed pause
—	untimed pause (less than 1.0 second)

Delivery

:	sound extension
.	stopping fall in tone (sounds like the end of a sentence)
,	continuing intonation
?	rising inflection (sounds like a question)
!	animated tone
-	halting, stammering
↑↓	rising or falling shifts intonation (prior to rise, fall)
ABC	louder utterance
° °	quieter utterance
(hhh)	audible aspiration
gh	gutteralness (placed within a word)
.	hardener (dentalized t, superscribed)
(())	encloses a noise, descriptions of scene or characterizations
><	quicker utterance