

Interruptions - A device to establish control and authority? An analysis of the Psychological function of Interruptions Deployed to Avert Domination in Conversation

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Abstract:

The use of language may influence the society both in terms of what is said by the people and about the people. Research in language and gender considers how language impacts upon society. The present study examined most influential theories regarding gender discrimination and analyzed the data empirically. According to deficit theory women's language style is deficient; lacking in authority and assertiveness. While the dominance approach attributed the language variation between men and women to male dominancy. The difference model however, suggests that men and women use different language styles. The proponents of difference model criticized the dominance view of women's conversational style as linguistically inadequate and deficient. They focused on the difference between men and women language styles. Zimmerman and West (1975) analysed the interruption in conversation and observed that in mixed sex conversation men interrupt more than women and attributed it to male dominancy. However, the speech accommodation theory provided a different framework to reexamine the dominance approach. But in many of the earlier studies supported the dominance approach

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observed and analyzed the mixed gender conversation exclusively. Many researchers criticized the methodologies used in previous studies and argued that conversational style differs from situation to situation. The role relationship of conversational partner also affects the conversational style. Considering all the points mentioned above, the present study compared and analysed interruptions in three types of pairs: male to male conversation (MM), female to female conversation (FF) and male to female in mixed sex conversation (MF). Three types of conversation samples were taken from Radio, TV and casual conversations. The results showed that males interrupt more than females. The greater number of interruptions on the part of males has been attributed to male dominance. The study also revealed that males interrupt more in male to female (in mixed sex conversation) as compared to male to male conversation. Since, Asian societies are considered to be more male dominating societies. It would not be erroneous to ascribe interruptions to male dominance. It was assumed that in order to maintain their dominancy they try to influence over women in conversation via interruptions.

Key words: interruption, control, authority, the psychological function of interruption, conversation

INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination issues have been the center of attention in the past few years. As a result change has been observed in the society related to women's rights. In the past, girls have been treated differently than guys. Due to this huge discrimination they were less confident, timid and restricted to home or in less prestigious professions than men. But in today's world women are not seen as that much weak, timid and helpless as it was in the past. In spite of all this progress there is still a lot to be covered in the area of gender issues related to language. One of the areas that require further investigation is the functional use of language. The most essential area that

requires further investigation is the functional use of language. The use of language comes under the area of sociolinguistic competence (Hymes, 1971) that competent communicators need to learn more than just the correct grammar of a language. In order to communicate appropriately they need to learn how to use appropriate language suitable in various social contexts. The use of language may influence the society both in terms of what is said by the people and about the people. Research in language and gender considers how language impacts upon society. Jespersen (1922) studied language with respect to gender and put forth the deficit approach. Jespersen (1922) suggested that men use standard language while women use nonstandard language. Jespersen considered Women's language as deficient while men's language as powerful and strong having larger vocabulary, complex sentence structure and proficiency (247-248). However, Jespersen's work has been criticized on the basis that most of the data he has taken from literature, information from friends and books and supported his arguments with anecdotal evidence. He used fictional examples from literature to support his views about women's manner of speaking as evidence. However Jespersen also presented the same objective arguments based on linguistic differences due to social class and customs but this distinction is not drawn on the basis of sex but on the basis of rank. In spite of all these weakness, his work has been deemed as a starting point for further study. After him, Lakoff (1975) continued the work on the same line and argued that women's conversational style lacks authority and assertiveness. According to Lakoff women's linguistic inadequacies deprives them from power and authority. She presented a set of basic assumptions about women's language that reflect linguistics inadequacies like the use of hedges, polite forms, tag questions, adjectives, overuse of quantifiers, intensifiers and apologise etc. she referred to all these characteristics as signs of uncertainty,

approval seeking and weakness. She argued that women are trained to talk like ladies. Like Jespersen she also used anecdotal evidence largely and lacks empirical evidence. Moreover, she did not take into account class, race and occupation etc.

Spender (1980) continued the debate and promoted the dominance approach but with a different lens to look at how men dominated and controlled women and language. She ascribed the difference between men and women language to male dominance within the society. She advocated the view that language comprises structures that support and establish male power. She presented the idea of “patriarchal order” and asserted that it is not easy to change this power system because this is the way we perceive the world around us which reinforces male power:

“The crux of our difficulties lies in being able to identify and transform the rules which govern our behaviour and which bring patriarchal order into existence. Yet the tools we have for doing this are part of the patriarchal order. While we can modify, we must nonetheless use the only language, the only classification scheme which is at our disposal. We must use it in a way that is acceptable and meaningful. But that very language and the conditions for its use in turn structure a patriarchal order” (Dale Spender, 1980)

Zimmerman and West (1975) observed male dominance in interaction by analysing the interruptions and silence in conversation. They argued that interruptions are used to stop the conversational partner, and this way is used to control the conversation. They reported that men interrupt more than women in mixed sex conversation. West and Zimmerman considered interruptions “a device for exercising power and control in conversation” (1983: 103). The dominance approach was also criticized. The problem with the dominance approach is that it is based on men’s dominant position within the society

and women are presented as meek, powerless and helpless. They are portrayed as victims of patriarchy which leads them to act as a weak, passive and ineffective ways (Freeman & McElhinny 1996: 236).

Jennifer Coats (1986, 1988, 1989 and 1998) expanded the same idea and stated that the way people use the language affects their behavior within the society and their “social expectations” have great impact on their use of language. Further, Tannen (1990) linked the use of language to gender and maintained that men and women use language for different purposes. Tannen (1991) presented the difference Model. According to this model “women’s conversational style” has been misinterpreted. Instead of considering women as linguistically deficient (as suggested by the dominance theory) Jennifer Coates (1988) and Tannen (1984) believed that men and women use different language styles. Women are trained to pay more attention to intimacy while men are trained to pay more attention to aspects of power e.g. Men are trained to be competitive while women are trained to be cooperative. This leads to conflict in mixed sex conversation, because both of them follow different ways of speaking suitable to their agendas. Language is performance; Tannen maintained that each gender understands these performances in different way. Men see conversation as an exchange of information (Report) while women see it as a chance to relate to other person (Rapport). They believed that men and women are trained to use language differently because of their different subcultures and not because one group dominated over the other. Bernard’s (1981) maintained that male and female have dissimilar cultures indicating that both men and women (the different genders) perceives and interpret conversation differently. Maltz and Broker (1982) argued that:

“Different genders interpret conversation differently because of their different sub-cultures. A notion of cultural differences between men and women in their conceptions of friendly

conversation, their rules for engaging in it and probably most important, their rules for interpreting it. We argue that American men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures, having learned to do different things with words in conversation, so that when they attempt to carry on conversation with one another, even if both parties are attempting to treat one another as equals, cultural miscommunication results” (Maltz and Broker:1982: 199-200)

Commonly, people hold a belief that females are more likely to interrupt during conversation than males because they are considered to be more talkative than males. However, the literature review revealed that researchers have different and often opposite findings about interruptions in mixed gender conversation. Zimmerman and West (1975) reported that in a mixed gender conversation men interrupt more than women. They attributed it to power and dominance. While, Geoffrey Beattie (1982) opposed and criticized this theory and stated that “they might simply have one very chatty man in the study which has a disproportionate effect on the total”. However Beattie found no gender difference in men and women interruption rate in conversation and reported that men and women interrupted each other with almost equal frequency. A lot of research has been done on this issue but Zimmerman and West’s findings are mentioned and cited more (Murray 1987; Nolasco 1987; Coates 2004; Selma Ersoy 2008) than Beattie’s findings. This directed the researchers to some other questions; “does this mean that they do not fit what someone wanted to show? Or because Beattie's work is in some other way less valuable?” Can we apply Zimmerman and West’s theory to the whole world or it stands true only for a specific region. Are there any cross cultural differences that may influence it? The present research tried to explore the phenomenon in Asian context. The interruptions in conversation can reflect the inequality in mixed sex male female interaction.

However, the literature review revealed that researchers have different and often opposite findings about interruptions in mixed gender conversation. Zimmerman and West (1975) recorded a small sample of eleven conversations between men and women at the University of California and reported that in eleven conversations men interrupted 46 times while women interrupted only two times. They attributed it to power and dominance. In another study on interruption in cross sex conversation Zimmerman and West (1983) found that men interrupt more than women in mixed gender conversation (46 out of 48 and 21 out of 28 instances of interruption). They argued that the power and dominance enjoyed by men in other contexts (occupational structure, institutional context, family division of labour etc.) are also exercised in their conversation with women. Geoffrey Beattie (1982) opposed this theory and stated that “the problem with this study is that they might simply have one very chatty man in the study which has a disproportionate effect on the total”. Beattie found no significant gender difference in mixed gender conversation, both of them interrupted with equal frequency (men 34.1, women 33.8). Similarly, Murray and Covelli (1988), Ahrens and Hoffman (1990) have shown women to be indulged in more interruptions or almost all of the interruptions. Ahrens and Hoffman (1990) distinguished between two types of interruption i.e. interruption with topic continuation and before topic development. The above mentioned research work associated the interruptions directly with dominance, but some other researchers examined different aspects of interruptions that also reinforce the relation of interruptions to dominance e.g. the attainment of status through interruptions and the interrupters’ self-perception as an influential person etc.. There are some researchers who examined the effect of interruptions on interrupter and the person who is interrupted and the way both are perceived. Robinson, L.F., & Reis, H.T. (1989)

examined “the effect of interruption, gender and status on interpersonal perceptions”. They analysed the way interruptions are perceived and attributed towards an interpreter differ according to gender and status. They examined the mixed gender interruptive styles of individuals how these individuals are perceived and its impact on their status. They used a rating scale comprised of masculinity, femininity, sociability, competence and attractiveness indexes. The subjects listened the conversation recordings and rated the interrupters. The interrupter’s sex, style of interruption and status were diverse in conversation samples. They found that interruptions were taken as a sign of negative personality of the interrupter. As, interruptions are used to stop others, interrupters were perceived less sociable and more assertive than non interrupters. They also reported that interrupters were perceived as more masculine and less feminine than non interrupters. Farley, S. D. (2008) examined the effect of status expectations on the way we interrupt conversation. Two experiments were conducted to examine how interrupters and the persons who were interrupted (Target of interrupters) were in same gender and mixed gender dyads. In the first experiment the subjects listened to an audiotape conversation in which one person interrupted the other person five times. While in the second experiment, four partners (two men and two women) systematically interrupted “naïve participants” during the discussion on an article. They found that interrupters gained status whereas the targets of interrupters lost status. They reported that the participants who were interrupted more rated themselves as less influential than those who were interrupted less or none interrupted. However, female interrupters likeability decreased as compared to those who didn’t interrupt. The study revealed that female interrupters gained status at the expense of likeability. Bilous, F.R. (1988) discussed speech accommodation theory and the

methodological flows in earlier studies supporting the dominance hypothesis. The speech accommodation theory provided a different framework to reexamine the male dominance approach. According to communication accommodation theory (CAT) “when people interact they adjust their speech, their verbal patterns and their gestures to accommodate to others” (Giles et al. 1987). It explores the various factors people use to minimize their social differences by focusing on both intergroup and interpersonal factors. The proponents of accommodation theory criticized the methodologies used in previous studies and argued that conversation style differ from situation to situation and role relationship of the conversational partner also affect the conversational style. Both micro and macro contextual concerns affect the conversational behavior of communicators. Disproportionate and dissimilar accommodation is expected with more power or status difference between the interacting parties. It is more likely that individuals with low power need approval, may exhibit greater convergence (more similar conversational behavior) in conversational behavior. Speech convergence is a strategy to reduce the dissimilarities between “interlocutor’s speech styles and codes” and consequently the social approval will be increased. However, “speech divergence” may increase dissimilarities between styles and may decrease social approval Giles et al. (1987). The use of language and verbal behavior changes from situation to situation to accommodate or adjust to the speech of conversational partner. Accommodation theory assumes that the speakers’ perceptions about the speech of conversational partner help them to assess their speech and to build up the strategy how to behave with them. In order to examine this kind of variation, it is crucial to observe speakers in different situations. Bilous, F.R. (1988) criticized the “earlier studies supported the male dominance hypothesis and highlighted some of the methodological

weaknesses of the older studies. Bilous, F.R. (1988) argued that in these studies data was derived mostly from mixed gender groups exclusively. Considering, all the points mentioned above, the present study investigated the conversational behavior of three types of pairs Male to male conversation (MM), Male to Female conversation (MF) and Female to female conversation (FF) in three types of medium/ situations i.e. on radio, on TV and in casual conversation.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

The data was collected from 3 radio programs, *The Mani Show* (3 episodes, 20 minutes each) which is the male to male conversation program, *Jagtee Subha* (3 episodes, 20 minutes each) which is female to female conversational program and *Live @101* (3 episodes, 20 minutes each), which is male to female conversational program. Similarly three TV programs were taken, *Fashion Today* (3 episodes, 20 minutes each) in which two male designers were conversing about fashion, another TV program was taken in which two females were conversing named, *Mahira Show* (3 episodes, 20 minutes each) and another program named *Hum do Humara Show* (3 episodes, 20 minutes each) which is male to female conversation is taken for analysis. From each program three episodes were analysed. Another set of conversation was taken from QAU university students of linguistics department on the same pattern as taken of radio. Overall, 60 minutes recording from each medium (radio, TV, casual conversation) was collected and analysed. In order to find out which one of the both genders is dominant in the conversation and which one influences more in conversation the data was transcribed and analysed statistically.

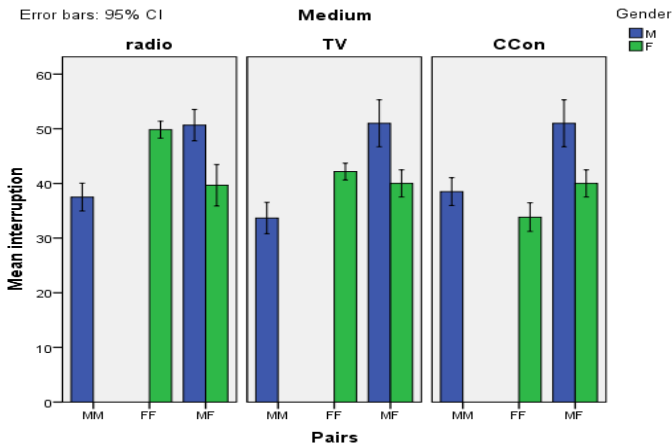
RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics					
Dependent Variable: interruption					
Medium	Pairs	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
radio	MM	M	37.50	2.429	6
		F	49.83	1.472	6
	MF	M	51.67	1.155	3
		F	39.33	1.528	3
	Total	M	41.89	6.882	9
		F	46.44	5.270	9
TV	MM	M	33.67	2.733	6
		F	42.17	1.472	6
	MF	M	51.00	1.732	3
		F	40.00	1.000	3
	Total	M	39.44	8.974	9
		F	41.44	1.667	9
CCon	MM	M	38.50	2.429	6
		F	33.83	2.483	6
	MF	M	52.72	1.732	3
		F	38.28	1.000	3
	Total	M	42.67	6.595	9
		F	35.89	3.689	9
Total	MM	M	36.56	3.203	18
		F	41.94	6.949	18
	MF	M	50.89	1.364	9
		F	39.89	1.054	9

A one way between subjects ANOVA test was employed to investigate the possible effect of gender and medium on interruptions. The first between subject factor was medium which also had three levels (Radio, TV, Casual conversation). The second between subject factor was pairs (MM, FF, and MF). The third between subject factor was gender which had two levels (M, F). There was a significant main effect of medium $F(2, 45) = 7.369, P > .05, \eta^2 = .25$. The main effect of pairs on interruptions was highly significant $F(2, 42) = 153.44, P < .001, \eta^2 = .88$. The main effect of gender was also highly significant $F(1,42) = 132.831 P > .001, \eta^2 = .76$. The results indicated that 25 % of the variance occurred by the medium while 76 % of

variance occurred by gender. So, the effect of gender on interruptions is greater than the medium.

EFFECT OF GENDER ON INTERRUPTIONS



Graph 1 shows the comparison of gender effect on interruptions in all three mediums (Radio, TV, and Casual conversation)

The graph shows the effect of gender on interruptions in three different mediums. It shows that on radio males interrupt less ($M = 37.50$) in a male to male conversation as compared to females in a same sex female to female conversation ($M = 49.83$). Surprisingly, in a male to female conversation males interrupt more ($M = 51.67$) than females ($M = 39.33$). Similarly, in a conversation sample taken from TV males interrupts less ($M = 33.67$) as compared to females ($M = 42.17$). but like radio on TV as well in male to female conversation males interrupts more ($M = 51.00$) than females ($M = 40.00$). However in casual conversation males interrupt more ($M = 38.50$) in male to male conversation than females ($M = 33.83$) in female to female conversation. While, in male to female conversation males interrupt more ($M = 52.72$) than females ($M = 38.28$). Overall, the graph shows the main effect of gender in male to female

conversation in all three mediums. Males interrupt more in male to female conversation and this effect can obviously be ascribed to male dominance.

CONCLUSION

Overall the results support the dominance theory and analysis revealed that males interrupt females more in mixed sex conversation to establish their control and authority over women. It may not just be attributed to power and dominance but it also function psychologically as a tool to establish dominance. Interruptions are used to stop others and the interrupters mostly try to impose their opinion on others. Nonetheless, interruptions are perceived as negative thing and the interrupters are perceived as less sophisticated and uncivilized. But it has a great psychological influence on both the interrupter and the person being interrupted. In certain situations, especially in discussions, people who interrupt more are perceived as more influential and sort of controlling the conversation while the people who do not interrupt are perceived less influential. Because the interrupters take more chances to speak their mind as compared to non interrupters who have less opportunity to emphasize their view and therefore are less assertive. Williamson, G. (2011) suggested some strategies to evade the psychological effects of interruptions in conversation.

- Dropping out
- Competitive allocation
- Recycling
- Non-verbal gestures
- Subordinating
- Listing

Dropping out is the simplest strategy i.e. one simply stops talking. This option can be appropriate for some interlocutors who do not have communication difficulties, while others may get frustrated by dropping out constantly because it not only requires submissive and inactive participation in conversation but also projects a passive image of interlocutor. Instead of dropping out, one can enter in competition to override the interrupter. It requires following competitive techniques: increasing the loudness, slowing rate of speech, additional emphasis on some words by lengthening vowel sounds, adding non-verbal gestures to talk. Recycling the unnoticed part of the utterance is also an effective strategy to represent the information that has been unheard and obscured. Non-verbal gestures such as raising hand /finger, strong eye contact can be used to indicate the interrupter that one turn not finished yet. Subordinators such as because, so, it means, it suggests, it implies etc. can be used to indicate that there is more talk coming forth. The listing strategy is comprised several items in the list that interlocutor provides during talking. It indicated that more is about to come. The listener has to wait till the list is completed. We aim to explore further strategies to evade the psychological effects of interruptions in conversation in our future research.

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