

**Language and Gender:  
Analyzing Interaction in a Brazilian Portuguese and  
English Language Mixed-sex Setting**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation attempts to investigate some interactional features in the conversation of women and men taking into account verbosity, turn-taking, use of standard forms, directness and assertiveness. To do so, an ethnographic method of natural conversation video-recording was utilized within a group of 2 females and 2 males Brazilian Portuguese speakers and 2 females and 2 males in a group of English speakers. This study suggests that the amount of talk uttered by women and men when they are in informal occasions may not vary so drastically. Accordingly, this investigation also shows that females and males may interrupt each other's conversation almost equally and may make the same use of colloquial language in informal settings. However, it also shows that women are more likely to make more use of hedging devices than men. Hence, the observation of natural talk between women and men seems to suggest that both genders might make similar use of the language with respect to some interactional features of language found in their conversation in informal settings such as the ones described throughout this paper.

## **DEDICATION**

To my parents who always encouraged me to proceed with my studies and to countless friends who gave me the boost to finish the M.A. program by asking: ‘how’s your master’s’?

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

IPROR – Interrogative Pronoun Repetition

PC – Preposition Contraction

VC – Verb Contraction

VCHO – Verb Choice

VT – Verb Tense

VA – Verb Agreement

HDC – Hedging Device Contraction

AVC – Auxiliary Verb Contraction

## Transcription Convention utilized in this dissertation based on Ochs (1999)

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| [     | simultaneous speech                                 |
| //    | interruption (first speaker stops speaking)         |
| // [  | interruption (first speaker does not stop speaking) |
| ...   | pause   |
| (...) | unclear utterance                                   |
| (xxx) | possible interpretation of unclear utterance        |
| ↘     | falling intonation                                  |
| ↗     | rising intonation                                   |

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Significance of the problem

There is certainly plenty of evidence of differences between women and men in the area of language. It is well established, for instance, that girls are verbally more precocious than boys (Chambers, 1992:199)

Over many years, women have demonstrated an advantage over men in tests of fluency, speaking, sentence complexity, analogy, listening, comprehension of both written and spoken material, vocabulary and spelling.

(Chambers, 1992:199)

By contrast

Men are more likely to stutter and to have reading disabilities. They are also much more likely to suffer aphasic speech disorders after brain damage... Males are also four times more likely to suffer infantile autism and dyslexia than are females.

(Chambers, 1992:200)

There is no doubt that interest in the way women and men talk has grown considerably since the mid-1970s and sociolinguistic research carried out in many different cultures means much more is known now about the ways in which women and men interact and about the ways in which their patterns of talk differ. Additionally, in all known societies, the way men speak that is held in high esteem, whereas women's ways of talking are compared unfavorably with men's (Coates, 1993: 16-37). However, as will be shown in this study, as far as interactional features of conversation are concerned,

women and men appear to make similar use of the language, especially in natural conversation analysis.

Early research on gender differences in language tended to focus on mixed talk, that is, talk involving both women and men. Firstly, researchers concentrated on what was seen as core features of language: phonetics and phonology, syntax and morphology. Later, researchers began to focus their attention on broader aspects of talk such as the conversational strategies characteristic of male and female speakers.

For instance, conversation analysis has found that most women enjoy talk and regard talking as an important means of keeping in touch, especially with friends and intimates (Holmes, 1995). They use language to establish, nurture and develop personal relationships. Men tend to see language more as a tool for obtaining and conveying information. They see talk as a means to an end and the end can often be very precisely defined – a decision reached, for instance, some information gained, or a problem resolved. These different perceptions of the main purpose of talk may account for a wide variety of differences in the way women and men use language.

As a result, the analysis of everyday conversation has gained increasing attention in the disciplines for which language and human interaction are of central concern: linguistics, anthropology, communication, sociology and psychology. Moreover, *The handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton, 2001) is an example of this, whereby a thorough account of researches taking into consideration the use of language and interaction in diverse fields of human knowledge is described. Amongst the proliferation of research broadly referred to as discourse analysis, the analysis of

everyday conversation holds a special place. Thus, a grasp on the part of scholars in all of the fields concerned with language and human interaction regarding conversational style becomes necessary for it provides a foundation for understanding both human interaction and the workings of language in any context.

Therefore, I decided to analyze natural conversations of two groups of mixed-sex English language and Brazilian Portuguese speakers in order to investigate what aspects of language are salient in their talk with respect to some interactional features such as the amount of words produced by them, turn-taking, the use of standard forms and hedging devices so as to correlate language and gender in the study. It is also important to note that there were other interactional features which could be analyzed in their talk, but, due to word limit constraints, only the four aspects mentioned above were taken into consideration in this paper.

According to Hesse-Biber, S. and Carger, G. L. (2000), gender is determined socially and is used to describe those characteristics of women and men which are socially constructed and has been the term utilized in this research. Having this in mind, the term ‘gender’ differs from ‘sex’, which is determined biologically.

The friends who took part in the conversation analyzed in this dissertation seem socially homogeneous – that is, from the same “culture” and the analysis shows that both women and men use language to signal their conversational intentions in systematically similar ways, although both groups come from different linguistic fields, where the English speaking group acquired their conversational styles in the United States of America and Australia, and the Brazilian Portuguese group grew up in the same country

but in different ethnic and regional settings. Therefore, the whole analysis relates to some interactional features in the conversation of women and men and attempts to find out how similarities and/or differences in their talk might emerge.

## **1.2 Objectives and organization of the dissertation**

The objective of this study is to analyze women's and men's talk with regard to some interactional styles of conversation in an English speaking setting and a Brazilian Portuguese mixed-sex interaction by presenting microanalysis of a video-taped dinner conversation of the two groups at two different moments. The following aspects will be observed and contrasted: 1) verbosity, 2) turn-taking, 3) Use of standard forms, 4) directness and assertiveness.

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the studies in language and gender and sets the purposes of this study as well as gives a rationale for limiting the scope of this investigation into four conversational features, which will be revised in chapter 2. Chapter 2 firstly provides the reader with a general view on what is considered underpinning studies in language and gender with respect to language variation between women and men and secondly goes on to take into consideration micro-aspects of conversational styles such as verbosity, which is the amount of words used by the speakers, turn-taking, use of standard forms, directness and assertiveness. Chapter 3 sets up the context of the research, the subjects and the methodology used to carry out the investigation. Chapter 4 shows the results of the four features analyzed in both conversations by giving the results found in both groups in relation to the gender of the speakers. Chapter 5 summarizes and interprets the most

important findings of the data by contrasting women's and men's talk in the two groups analyzed and the current literature. Chapter 6 establishes the final considerations of this study by showing the limitations of such study and by suggesting the necessity of further studies in the area. The next section of this paper deals with some of the most relevant works related to language and gender which have been published throughout the years and sets up the scope of this study by providing the reader with more specific studies with respect to some interactional features used by women and men.

## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE AND GENDER

### 2.1 Overview

This section will firstly provide the reader with a more general overview of works on language and gender starting with Lakoff's work given the importance of her research in the area, which brought about other findings with respect to the usage of language by women and men and will secondly report about the difference and the dominance approaches, which attempt to explain the different use of language. All this is intended to be a lead-in to more specific works carried out in the area regarding some interactional features of conversation such as verbosity, turn-taking, use of standard forms, directness and assertiveness. Finally, subsection 2.5 below will show the researcher's assumptions about the issues discussed in the literature review and will give comments on the overall result of the research.

### 2.2 Lakoff's work

In 1975, Robin Lakoff published an article entitled "*Language and Woman's place*, which is claimed to be a landmark in the works of language and gender (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). She published basic assumptions about what she felt constituted a special woman's language. In fact, much of what she proposed agreed with theories originally proposed by Otto Jespersen in the 1920s (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003) and (Jespersen, 1922). As a result, scholars started doing research in the area so as to confirm Lakoff's claims. Her article argued that women have a different

way of speaking from men – a way of speaking that both reflects and produces a subordinate position in society. According to her, women’s language is “rife” with such devices such as mitigators (*sort of, I think*) and inessential qualifiers (*really happy, so beautiful*). This language, she went on to argue, renders women’s speech tentative, powerless, and trivial; and as such, it disqualifies them from positions of power and authority. In this sense, language itself is a tool of oppression – it is learned as part of learning to be a woman, imposed on women by societal norms, and in turn it keeps women in their place.

Consequently, her publication brought about plenty of research and debate. For some, the issue was to put Lakoff’s linguistic claims to the empirical tests. For instance, is it true that women use more tag questions than men? Moreover, there was debate about the two key parts of Lakoff’s claim – (1) that women and men talk differently (2) that differences in women’s and men’s speech are the result of – and support – male dominance. Over the years, there developed a separation of these two claims into what were often viewed as two different, even conflicting paradigms – what came to be called the *difference* and the *dominance* approaches.

### **2.3 The difference and dominance approaches**

The first is associated with Dale Spender (1980), Pamela Fishman (1983), Don Zimmerman and Candace West (1975), while the second is associated with Deborah Tannen (1993). On the one hand, the dominance theory claims that in mixed-sex conversations men are more likely to interrupt than women. It uses a fairly old study of

a small sample of conversations, recorded by Don Zimmerman and Candace West at the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California in 1975. The subjects of the recording were white, middle class and under 35. Zimmerman and West produce in evidence 31 segments of conversation. They report that in 11 conversations between men and women, men used 46 interruptions, but women only two.

As Geoffrey Beattie (1983:57), of Sheffield University, points out: "The problem with this is that you might simply have one very voluble man in the study which has a disproportionate effect on the total." From their sample Zimmerman and West conclude that, since men interrupt more often, then they are dominating or attempting to do so. However, this need not follow, as Beattie goes on to show: "Why do interruptions necessarily reflect dominance? Can interruptions not arise from other sources? Do some interruptions not reflect interest and involvement?"

On the other hand, Dale Spender (1980) advocates a radical view of language as embodying structures that sustain male power. She refers to the work of Zimmerman and West (1975) to the view of the male as norm and to her own idea of patriarchal order. She claims that it is especially difficult to challenge this power system, since the way that we think of the world is part of, and reinforces, this 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 that patriarchal order. While we can modify, we must none the less 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.

(Spender, 1980:57)

Talbot (1998) suggests that there are certain problems with the dominance framework. According to her, a major drawback is that male dominance is often treated as though it is pan-contextual. She argues the fact that all men are not in a position to dominate all

women. Such a monolithic perception of patriarchy is useless. Indeed, she considers it less than useless. It is very easily refuted. All a critic needs to do is produce a single counterexample: ‘This male dominance business is a load of rubbish, because my mother/grandmother/aunt bosses about my father/grandfather/uncle’.

She goes on to say that if we are going to make claims about male dominance, we need to be more sophisticated and this involves being more specific. What happens in schools and at home, for instance? How do patterns of male dominance vary across different cultures, and in different contexts within cultures? Furthermore, she also states it is necessary to consider in what institutions and in what genres men can and do dominate women, and how those institutions, situations and genres help them to do so. Therefore, studies in the area will certainly show different results in relation to these aspects due to the fact that language and culture vary as there are different people, places, languages and cultures. She claims that the difference model does not present the ethical, and practical, difficulty just mentioned. According to her, Tannen’s (1984) careful neutrality is likely to offend but not change their thinking:

Nothing hurts more than being told your intentions are bad when you know they are good, or being told you are doing something wrong when you know you’re just doing it your way.  
(Tannen, 1991:297-8)

Furthermore, she also states that neglect of power is a major problem with the differences model and with the cross-cultural miscommunication account that it supports. Most of Tannen’s critics have focused on it especially Cameron (1992b, 1995a) Crawford (1995), Freed (1992), Trömel-Plötz (1991), Uchida (1992). Like other two-culture proponents, Tannen offers reinterpretations of what has been identified elsewhere as dominating behavior (if one can’t get a word in, he’s not dominating the

conversation. It's just that he happens to have a competitive style...). Indeed, a major problem with the two-culture approach – on its own, as it tends to be used – is that it disregards the consequences of differences, presenting an illusion of men and women being simply equal-but-different.

Having stated that Lakoff's work was a landmark in the study of differences between women's and men's talk, and that her work brought about plenty of other works in the area, the following subsection will report on studies in the area of interactional features in the conversation of women and men regarding verbosity, turn-taking, the usage of standard forms, directness and assertiveness.

## **2.4 Interactional aspects of language use**

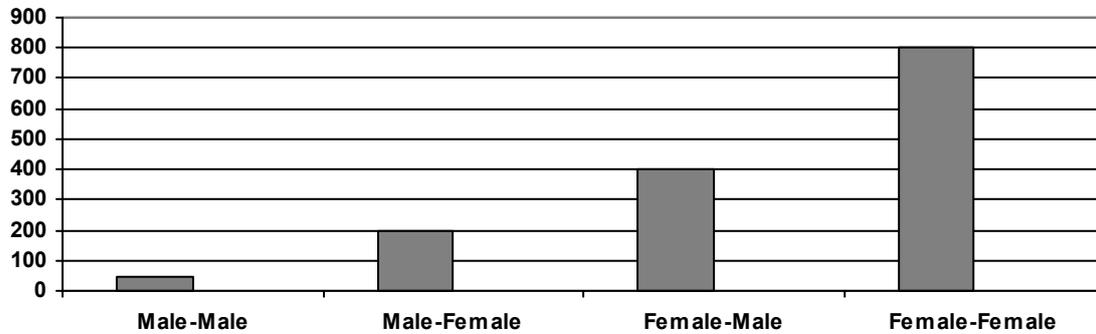
### **2.4.1 Verbosity**

A critical review carried out by James and Drakich (1993) examined the question of whether women or men talk more. As a matter of fact, the cultural stereotype holds that women are compulsive talkers who never let men get a word in edgewise. However, as has been widely reported in the language and gender literature, many studies have shown that men talk more. In their review of fifty-six studies, James and Drakich (1993) point out that there has nevertheless been considerable inconsistency in the research findings. They have argued that there have been some methodological problems in the research procedures and that neither the “dominance” approach which advocates that due to men's superiority over women, they tend to talk more nor the “cultural” approach which claims that women by nature talk far more than men, considered separately, is adequate to account for the range of results with respect to amount of talk.

Moreover, they argue that the best explanation is the 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. They conclude that 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. To illustrate this, Cameron and Coates (1985), claim that the amount we talk is influenced by who we are with and what we are doing. They also add that if we aggregate a large number of studies, it will be observed that there is little difference between the amount men and women talk. Additionally, in a recent study, Dr. Brizendine (1994) stated that women talk three times as much as men while Drass (1986), in an experiment on gender identity in conversation dyads found that men speak more than women.

Meyerhoff (1992) conducted research projects in which she tested out more formally the hypothesis that women are particularly sensitive to the appropriate 'talk requirements' of different contexts involving a picture description talk. In the study, a group of ten New Zealand women and men, carefully matched for age and social class, were asked to describe a picture in sufficient detail for an interviewer to 'spot the differences' between the copy of the picture that she or he held and the interviewee's modified copy. Each interviewee performed the task with a male and a female interviewer. It was made quite clear to the interviewees that the more speech they produced, the better. Overall, the women contributed more speech than the men in each context, i.e, both to the male and to the female interviewer (see Figure 2.1 below). Interestingly, both women and men produced more talk to the female interviewer while the men contributed notably less talk to the male interviewer. The numbers on the left represent the amount of words

uttered by the participants. In a Male-Male or Male-Female sequence, the interviewees are on the left and the interviewers on the right.



**Figure 2.1: Interviewee-interviewer interaction adapted from Meyerhoff (1992:415)**

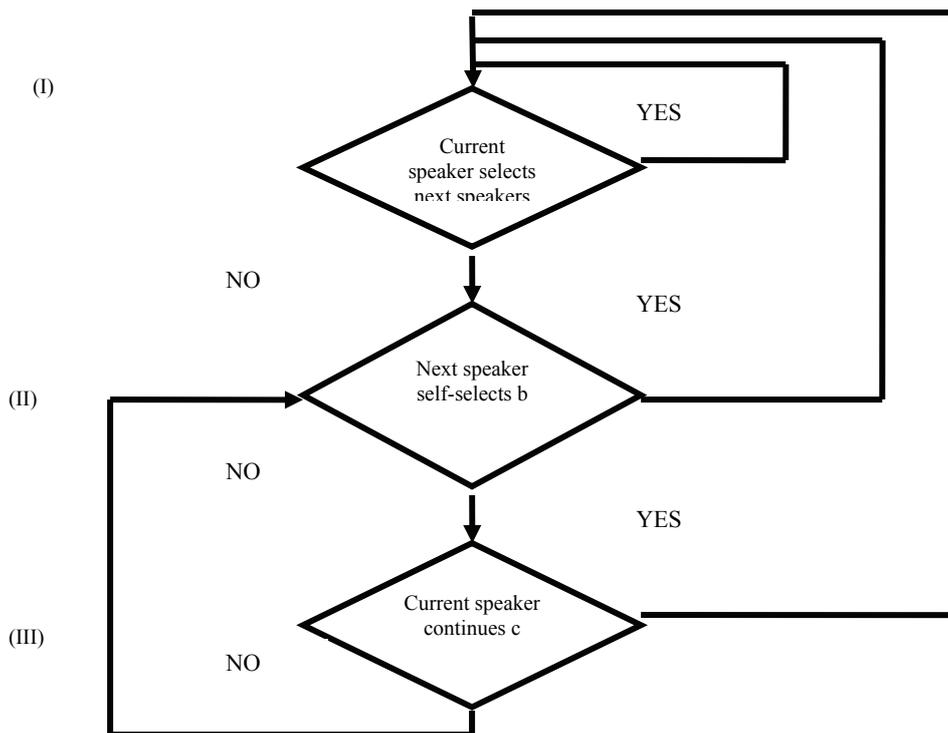
A similar but larger study on a different topic produced the same pattern. Fifteen female and fifteen male New Zealand academics were each interviewed both by a male and a female about their physical fitness. Once again, the women interviewees were more cooperative, contributing substantially more talk overall than the men (Holmes, 1993).

By contrast, when talk offers the possibility of enhancing the speaker's status, men tend to talk most. There is abundant evidence from research in the United States and from Britain demonstrating that males tend to talk more than women in public contexts where talk is highly valued and attracts positive attention (Holmes, 1991). Furthermore, there is also plenty of evidence that males tend to dominate the talking time in contexts such as classrooms, where talk is a valuable means of learning. There is less evidence on differences in patterns of interaction in less formal and public contexts, but a number of American studies suggest men are much less forthcoming in intimate contexts (De Francisco, 1991). When they were alone with their wives, the men in these studies contributed much less talk than the women. The women, on the other hand, worked hard to get a conversation going and keep it going.

This subsection has argued that the amount of talk produced by women and men depends a lot on the situations they are engaged in and that results seem to be inconsistent in this area. In fact, it suggests that there may be as many different results as researches carried out in the area. It can also be agreed that the outcomes will also have to do with the kind of relationship established among the participants and the kind of activity involved. The forthcoming subsection will discuss interruption by using a method of natural conversation system so as to investigate women's and men's occurrences of interruption.

#### **2.4.2 Turn-taking**

Any analysis of conversational interaction needs a model of normal conversation structure. This paper adopted Sacks *et al* (1974) model of turn-taking in naturally occurring conversation as can be seen in Figure 2.2 below.



**Figure 2.2: Flow chart showing turn-taking in conversation based on Sacks et al (1974)**

The diamonds represent decision points. The current speaker in conversation may select the next speaker by asking them a question, for example, or addressing them by name, in which case the person selected must speak next. If the current speaker does not select the next speaker, then one of the other participants in the conversation can opt to speak next. If none of them does so, then the current speaker has the option of continuing to speak.

Sacks *et al.* (1974) suggest that speech exchange systems in general are organized to ensure that (1) one party speaks at a time and (2) speaker change recurs. These features are said to hold for casual conversation as well as for formal debate and even high ceremony. Thus it appears that the range of speech exchange systems found in our