DOMINANCE AND SEX:
TWO INDEPENDENT VARIABLES IN THE
ANALYSIS OF INTERRUPTION

Mercedes Bengoechea Bartolomé
Universidad de Alcalá de Henares

When studying female-male differences in speech, most textbooks consider interruption as a typical male feature. This seems to be so both when the book deals specifically with language and sex, or when it is a basic book on sociolinguistics:

«In what follows, I have endeavoured to present a fairly comprehensive list of what is currently known about differences between men and women speaking English [...] : men interrupt women and not vice versa in mixed-sex conversations» (Language and gender: making the difference, C. Poynton, 1989: 70).

«It has also been observed that [...] in cross-sex conversations, too, men frequently interrupt women but women very infrequently interrupt men (Zimmerman and West, 1975)» (An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, R. Wardhaugh, 1992: 319).
Wardhaugh's reference to Zimmerman and West's work is not fortuitous. Theirs is the most widely cited research on sex and interruption, and the foremost reference. Zimmerman and West conducted several studies of conversations involving female-male couples. On their earlier research on same sex and cross-sex exchanges in a variety of public places in a university community (Zimmerman & West, 1975), they found that males initiated all but two of the forty-eight interruptions, that is, 96% of the interruptions were done by males to females. In same-sex conversations, men rarely interrupted one another; it was when talking to women that they used interruptions. Apparently, the women of their study accepted being interrupted, because they did not complain or protest. Zimmerman and West deduced that «just as male dominance is exhibited through male control of macro-institutions in society, it is also exhibited through control of at least a part of one micro-institution» (125). In a subsequent study, they studied parent-child interactions, finding that parents interrupted children on twelve of the total fourteen occasions. They noted that there were striking similarities between the pattern of interruptions in male-female interchanges and in those observed in the adult-child transactions, and inferred that females and young children seemingly receive similar treatment in conversations with males and with adults (West & Zimmerman, 1977). In a later investigation among previously unacquainted dyads, 75% of the interruptions were male-initiated (West & Zimmerman, 1983). Zimmerman and West's findings were verified by Eakins & Eakins (1976), Esposito (1979), Natale, Entin & Jaffe (1979), and West (1984), and have somehow become the foundation of the idea that interruption is a male conversational feature and a signal of his dominance —«a device for exercising power and control in conversation» (West & Zimmerman, 1983: 103).

The identification of interruption and dominance is a natural consequence of applying Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson's model to the analysis of conversation, as Zimmerman & West did. Sacks et al examined turn-taking, and constructed a model for speaker-selection which operates free of context. IN ANY TYPE OF CONVERSATION
[emphasis mine\textsuperscript{1}], they contend, speaker change can occur without any perceptible gaps. The facility with which one speaker can take over from another is evidenced by the split-second transition between speakers, and by the fact that often a second speaker is able to complete a sentence begun by the first speaker. This is so because when a person begins a turn, s/he speaks in units which have recognizable endings or boundaries. These boundaries, which coincide with linguistic “unit-types” (sentential, clausal, phrasal, and lexical constructionss), can be predicted by other speakers, and signal possible transition places where speakers change can occur appropriately. The turn-taking system obliges any willing or potentially intending speaker to listen to and analyse each utterance across its delivery before s/he takes her/his turn. In Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson’s model, the ideal conversation is structured in such way that there is not simultaneous talk. However, as the organization is susceptible to errors, violations, and troubles, repair mechanisms exist for dealing with them (repeats or recycles of parts of a turn overlapped by others, interruption markers such as excuse me, premature stopping by parties to simultaneous talk, etc). But, «overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time. [...] the system allocates single turns to single speakers: any speaker gets, with the turn, EXCLUSIVE RIGHTS to talk to the first possible completion of an initial instance of a unit-type [emphasis mine]» (706).

Now, as sociolinguists are tired of repeating, simultaneous talk DOES occur, and is NOT context-free. «Indeed the way turn taking is “interactionally managed” reflects the social reality of any situation. Simultaneous speech [is] problematic and indicator of how power is

\textsuperscript{1}Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson seemed to realize that this was one of the weakest points in their model. Although they clair the validity of their assertion 'for an undetermined number of languages' (among them, the Thai materials examined by Moerman in 1972), they recognized that the heading 'in any conversation' had raised the question of cross-cultural validity and the issue had to be settled empirically, by examining varieties of conversational materials. Moerman himself contradicted their claims in his 1987 study.
distributed and influence exercised in conversation» (Leet-Pellegrini, 1979: 30). That is why Zimmerman and West speak of “domination”: because, apart from errors of the turn-taking mechanism, there exist instances of simultaneous speech penetrating the boundaries of a unit-type prior to what could define a possible terminal boundary which can be seen as violations of the speaker’s EXCLUSIVE RIGHTS. Since males seemed to interrupt females overwhelmingly, and the “repair devices” apparently did not work -it took women a long time to begin a new turn after the interruption-, Zimmerman & West interpreted that when talking to women, men seem to use interruptions to deny women their rights, a preeminent act of dominance.

This association between sex, dominance and interruption was brought to question by Beattie (1981), who guessed that it was probably much more complex than what Zimmerman and West credited, and intended to determine how frequency and type of interruption varied with the sex and the status of interacts in university tutorials in Britain. He found that students interrupted tutors significantly more often than tutors interrupted students; and students interrupted other students significantly more frequently than tutors interrupted students, something which would have not been predicted from the hypothesis that holds that interruption is invariably a reflection of dominance in social interaction. Thus he suggested not only that the social context had an important effect on some of the most basic processes of conversation (which means, of course, that conversational models cannot operate context-free, as Sacks et al claimed), but also that the concept of interruption as a measure of dominance should be highly questionable. As for the sex, he found no differences among female and male speakers in either the frequency or type of interruption. The reason was not that men interrupted less than in previous studies, but that women interrupted more. He concluded that «women certainly seem to possess the interactional competence to engage in interruption as frequently and as effectively as men»(33); and when there is a third party observing the proceedings, or «when the social context demands that interacts make a
good impresion (for example, in tutorials), women can and do use interruption as frequently as men» (31).

This fact - that men are not the only ones who practise interruption successfully- was also proved by Murray & Covelli (1988) who, with a corpus of 400 interruptions to contrast to the 55 in Zimmerman and West (1975), found that women interrupted men more than twice as often as men to women, and concluded that interruption is, after all, a part of middle class North American women’s communicative repertoire. In spite of that, and of the fact that some years before Hirschmann (1973) had studied conversations in dyads, finding that it was women whose words overlapped more, and who interrupted each other more frequently, and females more than males interrupted their partners in mixed-sex dyads, interruption is still considered in the literature of Language and Gender a male characteristic, as I have already mentioned.

There are, however, other intrusions into speech which are not considered interruptions (Schegloff, 1972: 379; Meltzer, Morris & Hayes, 1971: 395), do not constitute full turns, and whose function seems to be to demonstrate continued, coordinated hearership - yeah, right, umhmm, yes, uh huh. They have been called “minimal responses”, “assent terms”, or “back-channel utterances”. They are supportive, indicate that the listener is carefully attending to the stream of talk, and appear to ensure that the speaker who is holding the floor continues to do so (Duncan, 1973). They are usually included among the traits of “powerless language”. Research is unanimous in demonstrating that women use more minimal responses than men, and at points in conversations which indicate support for the speaker (Hirschmann, 1973 and 1974; Zimmerman & West, 1975; Fishman, 1980).

Leet-Pellegrin (1979) attempted to furnish some variety in the research on interruption, sex and dominance by introducing, besides the sex of the speaker, “expertise” or knowledge as another variable which could predict dominance in conversation. She studied 70 same- and
mixed-sex dyads discussing the negative effect of television violence on children. All participants were unacquainted with each other. In half of the dyads, one member had previously been provided some reading material on the subject discussed, thus s/he was the “expert”. In the other half of the dyads, neither of the participants had been given additional information -both were “non-experts”. She hypothesized that men and informed persons would intrude upon the ongoing speech of women and uninformed persons respectively, with no reciprocal occurrence of intrusion for same sex or equally uninformed pairs. She also hypothesized “assent terms” or “minimal responses” to be inversely related to power resources, and as such, they would be uttered in an assymmetrical pattern by women and by uninformed partners in support of the ongoing speech of men and informed partners respectively. Contrary to expectations, she found that power imbalances were constructed in unequally informed pairs compared to equally uninformed pairs only for those with a male expert in same-sex pairs, with the female-female combination responsible for the lowest incidences of interruptions. As for “assent terms”, she found that when a woman was informed, she used “minimal responses” in conversation with an uninformed partner, male or female, more than did informed males in the same situation. Most interestingly, she found that female experts did a special case of assenting which included recycling words or extending thoughts but which did not work as a vehicle to take over current speaker’s turn, and which was only reciprocated if the non-expert was a woman too. Leet-Pellegrini suggested that this was a special class of supportive language phenomena which «may be used primarily when women talk together and not when either two men or even a man and a woman talk together» (101), and additionally, that women HAVE A DIFFERENT STYLE to use expert power in interaction (112) -male speakers preempt forms related to power while women preempt forms related to support and nurturance (127).

Relying on Leet-Pellegrini’s research, some feminist reacted to Zimmerman & West’s “victimization claims”, as Murray & Covelli put it. It was not a question of “dominance”, but of “difference”, and they
determined that there was a female style of conversation which would be characterized by being more cooperative and less hierarchical than the male style. «Where men disagree with or ignore each other's utterances, women tend to acknowledge and build on them. In other words, it seems that men pursue a style of interaction based on power while women pursue a style based on solidarity and support» (Coates, 1986: 115). In the light of that perspective, female interruptions, same as "minimal responses", could be supportive acts rather than dominant ones. Drawing on Kalkic (1975), Aries (1976), Goodwin (1980), Jones (1980) and Maltz & Borker (1982), Coates argues that:

«women and men do pursue different interactive styles: in mixed-sex conversations this means that men tend to interrupt women; they use this strategy to control topics of conversation and their interruptions tend to induce silence in women. Women make greater use of minimal responses to indicate support for the speaker. [...] In women-to-women interaction, these 'powerless' forms can be used as a powerful sign of mutual support and solidarity. When used reciprocally, then, it seems that 'powerless' language approaches the ideal form of co-operative discourse [...]. However, the differences between the competitive, assertive male style and the co-operative, supportive female style mean that men will tend to dominate in mixed-sex interaction. [...] It seems, then, that women and men constitute distinct speech communities» (Coates, 1986: 117).

But linguistic forms «do not have a meaning which stands apart from who uses them, to whom and when» (Cameron, 1992: 23). The

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problem is that those investigations seem to believe in the fixed code of linguistic signs. On the one hand, the “victimization claimers”, seem unable to move away from circular definitions - as men use those strategies, and men are the dominant sex, it follows that male strategies are the dominant (ergo, the powerful) ones. Moreover it is not surprising that linguists who supposedly reject structuralist linguistics have been faulted for drawing conclusions which attempt to comprehend all female gender from a corpus of some dozens of speakers, most of them of the same geographical area, social class, race and occupation. On the other hand, there is a lot of idealization by the proponents of the “other culture”. You know as a linguist and a speaker that interruptions are not necessarily one of two possibilities, an act of dominance perpetrated by a male speaker or a supportive act performed by a female one. Things seem much more complicated when you analyse actual conversations. To start with, even granted that women belonged to another speech community, it must be recognized that now they would have become perfectly bilingual, as research as shown (Beattie, Murray & Covelli, ...). That means that not all interruptions and comments uttered by women are of the cooperative type. At present I am conducting a research on the female style of power by analysing the linguistic strategies used by Spanish women who hold positions of power to address their subordinates. I am interested in what happens when Spanish women interact with men and women of inferior professional status, and how “successful women” use language to regulate interpersonal interaction when they are in power. So my research has been focused on situations which provide Spanish women with opportunities for exerting control over both the process and the outcomes of the interaction. I have found a lot of instances where female interruptions are clear acts of dominance, such as it has been described in the feminist literature of conversational analysis, together with a really huge number of “support comments” and “minimal responses”, which also for Spain seem to be typically characteristic of women. But there are a lot of instances in between which are difficult to classify according merely to dominant-against-supportive criterion. For example, I have found that when women have a higher status, they are very likely to “overprotect” their
subordinators in a way which resembles closely to patronizing (in fact, they behave like teachers). That would entail that the line separating dominance from support is very difficult to draw. Stereotypes will not help us to move forward in the research on Language and Gender. As Cameron said:

«It seems to me that the concepts [...] `women's' and `men's' language, `powerful' and `powerless' language are too rigid to capture the subtle complexity of what is going on in talk. Instead of searching for the linguistic correlates of these monoliths, then, we might proceed by asking slightly different questions - questions about how language is being used, by real people in real situations, to construct gender and gender relations. So when women and men employ particular linguistic forms and strategies, how are these heard and used to reproduce or subvert social relations between the sexes? [...]»

This kind of approach [...] has the theoretical advantage of acknowledging what feminist theory has been saying for some time, that gender is not a fixed and monolithic entity, constant across cultures, through time or even in the makeup of a single individual. It is not socialized into us during childhood and left at that, nor is it upheld by a constant reign of terror. It is socially reproduced (and subverted) in concrete practices and activities which go on all the time. Talking -using language- is among the most fundamental of these activities» (Cameron, 1992: 24).

Therefore, what is my feeling with regard to what facts must be taken into account and what must be re-examined? There seems to be
evidence that women can and do interrupt if they think it is necessary; we also know that women often insert supportive comments, especially when they interact with other women. One of the conclusions I can draw from my research is that in some contexts some women (only middle-class professional women are part of my samples) seem to use and accept some types of interruption to and by other women as "natural" and "non-aggressive". Put in a different way, women, or at least middle class professional women, use certain codes to regulate and interpret their use of certain verbal strategies in conversation among intimates, but they can and do use other codes and strategies. It has been suggested that when studying interruption, a functional analysis of the device must be employed (Aleguire, 1979). "Mechanical criteria" - acoustical or syntactical criteria for recognizing an occurrence as interruption- can be not only misleading but fruitless, unless we interpret it (Murray, 1985). A descriptive classification of the consequences of the interruption, such as that proposed by Beattie (1981) is useful if one wishes to know whether the person who is interrupted loses the floor or not (in my case, I got statistics of the amount of times female bosses, male subordinators or female subordinators lose or get the floor after interruptions), although even that fact can be misleading as a dominant act because a brief seize of the floor may lead or point to a direct support of the other's words, and then should be included among those "cooperative acts" so dear to women. But not only must the effect the interruption had on the conversation be taken into account; the interrupter's intentions and the interrupted's feelings about being cut off are also worth studying. As Murray proposed, a prospective/retrospective analysis should be needed too, such as, for example, whether the speaker has made her/his point, whether the topic has been abruptly cut off (Murray, 1985). Also, the researcher has to know a lot of the relation between the participants, the topic of the conversation and the expertise of the speakers, the amount of time they have been talking, the formality or intimacy of the situation, the content of the interruption, and the reaction of the interrupted (Aleguire, 1979; Bennet, 1981; Murray, 1985; Tannen, 1991). Most important, following Cameron,
it seems necessary to analyse the way a particular strategy ("minimal response", overlapping or interruption) is heard and used «to reproduce or subvert social relations between the sexes» (Cameron, 1992: 24), because, as the "special case of assenting" that Leet-Pellegrini reported, a device hypothesized to be uttered mainly by non-experts may be found to be a main tool used for experts who wish to be helpful, perhaps a much more effective way to exert power because it appears mitigated. That would mean that dominance and support could be not antonyms, but two different variables on two different axis.

All this, of course, confirms that a critique of current linguistic models is a must for feminisms. At the same time, it calls into question Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson's claim that their model was valid for "any conversation". Tannen (1991) has contended that the norm of one-speaker-speaks-at-a-time does not resist cross-cultural validity, and has been refuted by research in Antigua (Reisman, 1974); Hawai (Watson, 1975); Thai (Moerman, 1987); Japan (Hayashi, 1988); or even Jews from New York (Tannen, 1991). As Tannen says, in all those places, overlapping in casual conversation is not intended to exercise dominance and violate others' rights. Instead, it is a means of showing involvement, participation, connection (Tannen, 1991: 202). If we accept that this is so, it follows that some of Sacks et al's assumptions should be reexamined: first of all, the "economic" ad "spatial" metaphors on which their model rests:

«For socially organized activities, the presence of 'turns' suggests an economy, which turns for something being valued - and with means for allocating them, which affect their relative distribution, as in economies» (696).

«The social organization of turn-taking distributes turns among parties. It must, at least partially, be shaped as an economy. As such, it is expectable
that, like other economies, its organization will affect
the relative distribution of that which it organizes» (701).

«Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time. [...] the
system allocates single turns to single speakers: any
speaker gets, with the turn, exclusive rights to talk to
the first possible completion of an initial instance of a
unit-type» (706).

«The foregoing suffices to suggest a structural
possibility: that turn-taking systems, or at least the
class of them whose members each preserve ‘one
party talks at a time’, are, with respect to their
allocational arrangements, linearly arrayed» (729).

The model assumes that conversational floor can be
metaphorically structured and understood in terms of a SCARCE
RESOURCE which can be POSSESSED AND DEVELOPED
EXCLUSIVELY by only one person at a time. It is a kind of limited
“space” or “territory” which must be owned and exploited individually IN
TURNS. With the holding of the floor the speaker gets the rights to
speak, to control the topic of conversation, and to be LISTENED TO.
While “listening actively”, most speakers will patiently wait for the floor to
be “relinquished”, “yielded” or “handed over”. If a speaker “loses” the
floor, another will “gain”, “get”, “take” or “seize” it. Within this kind of
metaphorical conceptualization, it is hardly surprising the equation
between dominance and interruption.

I am not necessarily against economic approaches to human
behaviour, provided we are aware of what lies behind them. In Sacks,
Schegloff & Jefferson’s model, most of the assumptions have been
taken for granted probably because they are grounded on the ideology
of capitalism and therefore not open to criticism. In western societies,
citizens are allowed to singly possess and exploit scarce resources,
whose «organization will affect the relative distribution of that which it organizes» (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974: 701). Furthermore, although some individuals have more than others, the great majority of those who have less seem to accept it, even if occasionally the idea that “wealthy proprietors” may be thieving or predatory (“dominant”) crosses their minds.

The problem of this type of assumptions based on the dominant ideology is that it enables researchers to see things in a different light. James Milroy expressed his fear for this tendency of researchers to be conditioned by well-established ways of thinking when accepting linguistic explanations (Milroy, 1992). He particularly referred to the notion of prestige, which has been highlighted, and appealed to as an explanation for attested linguistic change, neglecting some other possible factors, such as a desire for solidarity, which seem less “natural”, and which somehow challenges the present state of things. In our society, most attempts to commonly own and jointly exploit properties are ridiculed and hidden. With frameworks of analysis that resemble the social organization of our society, some things are seen as “natural”, “logical”, and accepted in spite of the evidence that runs counter to it. Several studies seem to demonstrate that women’s organization of conversation may follow more than one pattern, and one of them may be ruled by the same principle as co-operatives in the economic world: the natural resource of speech, or “floor”, may be shared, enjoyed, benefited from, and enriched by the participation, jouissance, comments and remarks of more than one speaker. And women seem particularly competent in talking and listening at the same time. In spite of those findings, within the general framework of Conversation Analysis, the one-at-a-time character of conversation does not seem to have been challenged. As Edelsky put it, the adoption of that premise causes researchers to see more-than-one-at-a-time talk as degenerate, a breakdown, or something requiring repair, and makes them avoid looking for alternative explanations for and characterizations of the well-attested existence of simultaneous talk, while discrediting the possible importance of this presumably less frequent phenomenon.
(Edelsky, 1981: 397). Moreover if simultaneous talk were a feature associated mainly with women talking to other women, we could conclude that once again female verbal behaviour had been marginalized or ignored by Universal Science.

That was probably the reason why Edelsky put forward a proposal worth considering which partly questions Sacks et al’s model. Basing on the “participant-sense”, she made a distinction between “turn” and “floor” and focused her research on the latter. After defining “floor” as «the acknowledged what’s-going-on within a psychological time/space», which can be the development of a topic or a function, or an interaction of the two (Edelsky, 1981: 405), she distinguished two types of “floor”: one, F1, developed singly by one person at a time; the other, F2, collaboratively developed. She makes a further distinction for F2: one, what she labels “free-for-alls”, which consisted of stretches of talk that showed much simultaneity, joint building of an answer to a question, collaboration on developing ideas, and laughter; and other collaborative stretches of talk where it was not possible to say that any person had the floor either, but the impression was that several people were “on the same wave length”, even if in a sequence, sharing in the creation of an idea or a function (joking, suggesting, etc). For Edelsky, then, it is possible to take a turn without having the floor (406). Additionally, women were found to be more proactive and on center stage in F2’s, and reactive and on the sidelines in F1’s: F2’s found women joking, arguing, directing, and soliciting responses more and men less, while the reverse was true for F1’s.

Not only did Edelsky challenge the unicity of the current model of turn-taking by distinguishing at least two types of conversational floor, but she also defied the spatial metaphor of its representation, the LINEARLY ARRAYED allocation of turns (Sacks et al). Conversational analysts seem to have a conceptualization of conversational space which is unidimensional -linear. Instead of the conventional lineal transcription of conversations, where speakers are listed vertically, each speaker’s words occupy lines, and interruptions are represented by
double obliques (//) followed by the over-lapped occurrence on another line, Edelsky proposed a display for F2 intending to show the floor holder in the middle of the page, flanked by co-occurring talk. She felt that this kind of transcription helped to visually capture "what really is going on". Although probably not a very useful devise for analysis, as it would require a previous definition and agreement among the participants of the different "floors", it deserves to be merited as one of the few alternatives posited from a feminist critique of linguistics: the attempt to represent multiplicity against the phallogocentric drive to unify. It might be a promising field to explore too.
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