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The Effects of Gender on Interruption among Peers

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THE EFFECTS OF GENDER ON INTERRUPTION AMONG PEERS

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

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Abstract

Studies of mixed-gender conversation have established that the gender of speakers plays a role in talking power, conversational dominance, topic control, and perception of the speaker's communicative ability. The purpose of this study was to expand upon previous research of interruption by examining its function and frequency in conversation among peers. While previous research in this area has focused on interruption in the workplace or the home, this research examines its place in mixed-gender conversation between university students. Participants in this study were recorded in group conversation and the transcription was later analyzed for general trends of interruption with relation to each gender. From these results, it was concluded that while men and women interrupt each other in different ways, both genders interrupt frequently and exercise control over the floor. We hypothesize that greater awareness of the patterns of interruption and conversational dominance between genders will improve the inclusion of all speakers in discussion and topic development.

Chapter One: Introduction

Background Information

For many years, there has been a stereotype that women speak too much without delivering a meaningful message; for instance, consider the description of a group of women sounding like “clucking hens.” This belief has even given rise to a variety of jokes and maxims, such as the Scandinavian proverb “The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman be at a loss for a word” (Tannen, 1990 p. 75).

Throughout the twentieth century, sociolinguistic research began to focus on communication between the genders and where our differences lie. A significant portion of research has dealt with a so-called “power struggle”; when women and men speak together, are they competing for dominance? This, and perhaps more importantly, the question of whether men have more power in conversation by virtue of being men, has been re-visited time and time again by various researchers since the 1970’s.

As research became more complex, linguists began to focus on the emerging trends of interruption between men and women. With each gender complaining that the other interrupts too much, there did not exist a definitive explanation for who is the real culprit. In fact, a clear understanding still eludes linguists today, although much progress has been made. When the phenomenon first began to be investigated, there was not an agreed-upon definition for an interruption. Thus, before progressing to the role of gender in conversation, researchers first had to explore what constituted an interruption and why it occurred. Eventually, when a greater understanding of interruption was reached, further study was conducted with respect to the genders. As we will see in the next chapter, researchers were now able to observe men and women in conversation in public and

private spaces, with varying degrees of familiarity and with different levels of authority, when dealing with different subject matters.

Statement of Problem

The study of interruption by men and women has improved rapidly in the last twenty years. However, in order to avoid interference by outside variables, each study must focus on conversation in a specific environment or between people of certain relationships. This restriction means that research still has not been conducted on some frequently-occurring conversational scenarios. Thus, this study aims to examine interruption among men and women in a context not yet examined in linguistic research.

Objectives of Study

The objective of this study is to examine the rates of interruption among peers and, if possible, the relationship between gender and interruption. Much research has taken place that investigates the general phenomenon of interruption; some of this literature even focused on interruption in regards to gender. However, there have been few studies involving interruption among peers, as opposed to coworkers, close friends, couples, or adult-child interactions. Thus, this study is designed to investigate how acquaintances converse when placed in an environment without a strict hierarchy of authority, like that which is present in a workplace.

Interruption in this research is defined as any instance of simultaneous speech – two parties speaking at once – in which a speaker is deprived of the so-called “floor,” or his or her opportunity to speak. The primary objective of this study is to discover the association, if one exists, between gender and interruption; specifically, whether one gender interrupts more frequently, what differences are present in the way each gender

interrupts, and whether these interruptions are preventing speakers of either gender from communicating their ideas.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to answer the following research questions: does one gender interrupt the other more frequently? Does each gender interrupt for different purposes?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Definition of Interruption

When examining prior research of gender and interruption, one main issue emerges: what is an interruption? There is disagreement across most texts, because the definition of interruption has become more complex over time.

In early gender and conversation research, such as that of Zimmerman and West (1975)¹, an interruption was defined as any violation of the “one party at a time” turn-taking structure described in Sacks *et. al* (1974). Sacks *et. al* described the ideal turn-taking model as one in which each speaker has the right and opportunity to reach the end of a speech-unit (usually a sentence). Any violation of this model, e.g. any instance in which a second speaker began before the end of the unit was reached, was considered an interruption. This turn-taking structure distinguished between brief overlaps and interruptions, but did not provide for other instances of supportive speech. Zimmerman and West (1975) did not consider what they called “minimal responses” – or brief responses that signaled active listening like “yeah,” or “mmhmm” – to be interruptions; rather, they described them as positive reinforcement for continued talk. However, they did not allow for signals of active listening that extended past one syllable; for example, when a second speaker talks along with the first speaker to finish the utterance, signaling understanding or agreement.

In this study, in which same-sex and cross-sex pairs were recorded in public areas of a university campus, Zimmerman and West concluded that in cross-sex conversations, men interrupted women more often than men interrupted each other in same-sex

¹ The earliest research on gender and talk was Strodbeck and Mann in 1956.

conversations. Their further research (Zimmerman and West 1978) concluded that similar patterns emerged even when the cross-sex dyads were complete strangers. These researchers also asserted that men interrupt women and control the topic of conversation in the same pattern that an adult controls conversation with a child (Zimmerman and West, 1975 p. 124).

It is important to distinguish between simultaneous speech, overlaps, and interruption before elaborating any further. Simultaneous speech is exactly as it sounds: any instance in which two voices are heard at once, regardless of context or length of time. Both overlaps and interruptions are types of simultaneous speech. In order to understand the difference, consider the following from Zimmerman and West (1975):

In our view, overlaps are instances of simultaneous speech where a speaker other than the current speaker begins to speak at or very close to a possible transition place in a current speaker's utterance... It is this proximity to a legitimate point of speaker alternation that leads us to distinguish overlaps from interruptions. (p. 114)

In other words, overlaps are brief and occur reasonably close to an accepted transition point between speakers, like the end of a word or phrase. Interruptions, then, are instances of simultaneous speech that occur when the original speaker is not nearing a possible transition point. This distinction between overlap and interruption is important, because although the two were once considered equal, there is now an accepted difference between them. The terms cannot be used interchangeably. Cowie (2000) further elaborates on the differences between overlapping and interruption. Citing Deborah Tannen's *Talking from 9 to 5*, Cowie clarifies that the term "overlap" is seen as

inherently neutral – it describes a case when two voices are heard simultaneously, but says nothing of power or dominance. Interruption, conversely, is an interpretive (and generally negative) term and cannot be applied without making judgment about the speakers' power in the conversation. Discussing the matter even further, Tannen (2001) claims that whether an overlap is negative also depends on conversational symmetry – if one person constantly overlaps and the other yields, the overlapping is negative; if each person overlaps and yields, there is symmetry that justifies the overlapping.

More recent research, particularly that of Deborah Tannen, proposes that interruption is more complicated than was once suggested, although the basic definition of interruption remains the same. In order to determine whether an overlap is also an interruption, Tannen (1990) in her book *You Just Don't Understand*, suggests that one must consider the relationship of the speakers, how long they have been speaking, and the interrupted party's reaction. More than all of these factors, however, recent research (such as that of Stratford 1998) focuses on *why* the second speaker initiated an overlap. Was it to agree or contradict? To signal understanding? To seek additional information? To change the subject? Today, it is a widely held belief that even among interruptions, there is a spectrum of positive and negative motivation and response. In her 2012 article "Would You Let Me Finish..." Tannen describes the varied factors that can affect how an interruption is interpreted, including gender, class, age, and ethnicity.

Stratford (1998) maintains Zimmerman and West's (1975) basic definition of interruption: "violation of speaker's turns to talk which disrupt the speaker's turn to speak" (p. 386). However, in this study, Stratford also supports Tannen's (1990) claim that in order to determine whether an interruption violates a speaker's rights, one must

first examine the conversational context of the interruption, i.e., how long have they been speaking and what is their relationship? How does the original speaker react to being interrupted? What purpose does the second speaker's utterance serve – to support or seize the floor?

As these examples of recent research suggest, although the ground-level definition of interruption as a violation of a speaker's rights has not changed, the tools and examinations used to determine their severity have become more complex over time.

In summary, the act of interruption once included overlaps and any instance of simultaneous speech, and was generally viewed as a hostile or aggressive act. Today, the definition is more flexible; an interruption can be considered rude, collaborative, or neutral, depending on its context. Due to this complex, fluid definition of interruption, research is subjective and affected by the researcher's interpretation of conversational context.

Male Dominance in Conversation

A common theme, male dominance, emerges in nearly every text regarding gender and interruption. When research of interruption first began in the 1970's, American society was still heavily dominated by men, and the conversational subjugation of women was a frequently discussed topic amidst the contemporary feminist revolution. In this environment, early research such as that of Robin Lakoff (1975) and Zimmerman (1975) focused on men as the conversational "enemy." Many of Lakoff's later works, including those cited here, continue this theme set forth by her early research during the feminist revolution. In Lakoff (1995), we are introduced to three methods through which men can control power in conversation: interruption, topic control, and nonresponse.

Although she briefly discusses interruption, Lakoff focuses more on nonresponse, explaining:

Annoying and discouraging as interruption is, at least someone who is interrupted knows that she exists and has been noticed. Nonresponse is by contrast annihilating; it signifies that the speaker does not exist, that her utterance did not happen at all. (p. 28)

In this article, Lakoff considers interruption a minor player in a major issue: the powerlessness of women in conversation. In her 1975 work *Language and Woman's Place*, Lakoff claims that from an early age, girls are conditioned to speak differently and are scolded if they speak as directly as boys; then, as adults, they are denied full access to discussion on the grounds that they don't communicate as effectively. In other words, we train women to have less power in conversation and as Lakoff (2004) says: "because of the way she speaks, [she] will be accused of being unable to speak precisely or to express herself forcefully" (p. 41). Lakoff further asserts that the way women speak – and the way we speak about them as a society – perpetuates the dominance of men and is "stifling, exclusive, and oppressive" (p. 102) to women. Although these claims from Lakoff are well-supported, they are also heavily accusatory towards men, assuming that men actively subjugate women in conversation.

Kunzman (n.d.) builds upon Lakoff's work, examining the two arguments for gender and power in conversation – dominance and difference. Citing Lakoff (1975), Zimmerman and West (1975), and Eakins and Eakins' 1978 study of mixed-gender faculty meetings, Kunzman claims that power in conversation can be viewed as a matter of dominance – in which men exert their higher social status by dominating their female

interlocutors – or difference – in which the powerlessness of women in conversation is simply a byproduct of the different speech cultures of men and women. After comparing the two theories, Kunsman concludes that power in conversation is a matter of both dominance *and* difference.

Supporting the idea of conversational difference, Deborah Tannen (1990) developed the theory of report talk versus rapport talk in order to describe the differences in how the genders speak. She describes the way women and men speak as the difference between giving a report and establishing a rapport. In order to highlight the differences in style, Tannen offers several examples: men offer more comments or questions after a lecture, women speak more in the home and share more of their fleeting thoughts. Men talk more when in a public setting such as a party (which often leads to a wife complaining, “he’s the life of the party here, but he never has this much to say to *me*”).

According to Tannen (1990), men favor report talk - also called public speaking – because they are accustomed to using talk to demonstrate their independence or importance. Men speak to impart knowledge, to tell stories, and to share jokes. This means that men are more comfortable speaking in larger groups of people that they do not know very well. Women, in contrast, prefer rapport talk, or private speaking; when women converse, “emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences” (p. 77). The style of speech used by women is more collaborative, with speakers generally accepting contribution from others and sometimes even speaking simultaneously in order to express their meaning (a practice referred to as cooperative overlap by Tannen). Jennifer Coates offers an analogy for this collaboratively developed floor preferred by women, calling it a “jam session” (Coates 1996: p. 151). She

elaborates on this idea, saying “solo passages alternate with all-in-together ensemble passages. We improvise on each other’s themes... our individual voices merge and blend in a joint performance” (p. 151). Coates calls this idea “talk as play” (p. 151) - in other words, talk between women, especially in a less public setting, is viewed more as an opportunity to have fun with friends and less an opportunity to relate information.

Report talk and rapport talk can be seen as irreconcilable opposites, especially because the conflict between them leads to the oft-described scenario in which the husband sits at the table reading his morning paper, and the wife sits across from him wishing he would talk to her. However, Tannen (1990) describes the two styles in great detail, and also goes on to describe how they can be made compatible if both parties are aware of their differences. For instance, Tannen suggests that if both genders are conscious of their differences in speech, they can avoid conflict and ensure that both parties are afforded the same opportunity to share ideas; men can directly ask a woman for her opinion in a group setting in order to offer a comfortable opportunity to speak to the group; and women can remember men’s general dislike of speaking at home and try not to force conversation.

Earlier research tends to treat every interruption by a male as an attempt to unfairly seize the floor from his female conversation partner. Zimmerman and West (1975) even compared cross-gender conversation to the interaction between adults and children, asserting that men interrupt women as often as adults interrupt children, demonstrating a similar disrespect for women’s intellectual contribution (p. 124). Although this early research is undeniably interesting and well argued, I believe the results were skewed by the contemporary feminist movement. As time progressed, the

focus in sociolinguistic research shifted from the conversational dominance of men to the differences between the genders in conversation.

In this study, nearly 40 years later, I have endeavored to conduct my research without an anti-male bias. Rather than focusing on whether traditionally masculine speech or traditionally feminine speech is correct, this study seeks to investigate how the styles differ in relation to interruption, without declaring one to be the ideal style of communication. This is an important distinction between this study and previous gender-based interruption research: by not seeking to declare one gender better or worse for interruption, this study differs from most early research, which tended to place blame for so-called incorrect styles of interruption.

Gaps in Literature

While more recent research has not had a gender bias as severe as that present in 1970's literature, it has investigated different subtopics within gender and interruption than those I seek to investigate.

A large portion of previous research has focused on interruption in specific settings; most often, the workplace, as in recordings from board rooms or staff and faculty meetings. Edelsky (1981) examined mixed-sex conversations in faculty meetings and found that both sexes participate equally during informal discussions in which multiple speakers could take the floor. However, she also concluded that men spoke much more when the meeting proceeded in a single-speaker manner.

In a workplace, there is often a hierarchy or chain of command that affects how individuals communicate; those with the most authority speak the most frequently and feel more comfortable taking the floor. However, Eakins & Eakins 1978 (cited in

Kunzman), who also recorded faculty meetings, concluded that while the hierarchy of authority affects rates of interruption – for instance the chairman of the department was the least interrupted male – women are still more frequently interrupted, with the most-interrupted member being a female without her doctorate. This research demonstrated that although authority may play a role in the frequency of interruption, men are more likely to interrupt women than women are to interrupt men - regardless of authority level. For example, Candace West's 1998 study of interaction between doctors and patients (qtd. in Coates 2004: p. 115) found that the usual tendency is for doctors to interrupt their patients more than patients interrupt the doctors – an understandable trend given the authority level of the doctor. However, this tendency shifted when the doctor-patient interaction involved a female doctor: male patients interrupted female doctors more than doctors interrupted patients. This study helps demonstrate that although authority can play a role in interruption, it does not always negate the influence of gender.

In addition, many past studies have dealt with gender and interruption with respect to close relationships, like that of an intimate couple. Fishman (1983) studied the private conversations of heterosexual couples in graduate school in order to examine male conversational dominance and found that the men used strategic silences and interruption in order to dominate their partners in conversation. The men also would not adopt the new topics proposed by their partners; this behavior in combination with interruption and nonresponse meant that women rarely managed to initiate a conversation about a topic they chose. Conversation in such an intimate relationship is significantly different than conversation among peers, and any interruptions by a husband or wife in

heated discussion often have highly complicated causes that incorporate the history of the couple and the potentially sensitive nature of the argument.

This study involved the recording of a different population than either of the above: university students. By recording a group of peers, this study avoided both the power struggle that occurs in a hierarchical workplace setting, as well as the sensitive and often psychological motivations for interruption in the conversation of an intimate couple.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Study Site

Data for this study was collected at a public university in the southeastern United States. In order to investigate the research questions, a group of college-aged men and women was recorded in conversation. The recorded group was a student organization that consisted of thirteen college students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. A smaller group was chosen so that more individuals would have an opportunity to speak. The participants were recruited via email, in which they were informed they would be recorded and their speech analyzed, although they did not know the specific area of research. Following this email, the participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and the subsequent opportunity to remove themselves from the recorded group. All participants consented to being recorded without knowledge of when data collection would take place.

Study Population

A group with a limited age range was selected so that the possibility for age-respective deference could be avoided. As many people defer to their elders in conversation as a sign of respect, the rate of interruptions could have been drastically affected by the participation of an older student or advisor. It is also worth noting that the student organization did not include any first-year students, thus avoiding the similar phenomenon between freshmen and upperclassmen.

Young adults of similar age who were not members of the chosen student organization and university were excluded as research participants. The exclusion of non-students and students from other schools existed so that all the participants knew one

another, and the awkward speech of the newly acquainted could be avoided. When people first meet, conversation is uncomfortable and slow-moving, and the participants are often on their “best behavior” in speech; they do not interrupt, they are overly polite, and they rarely proceed to a topic that inspires in-depth discussion or heated exchange. With friends and acquaintances, however, speakers are entirely willing to interrupt one another and usually know each other well enough to converse comfortably about many topics. Thus, only students within the chosen student organization were included as participants. Within the organization, there were varying levels of friendship; some members are close friends of several years, some are casual friends connected mostly by their membership in the club, and some are relatively new members – there is also one engaged couple in the recorded participants. However, despite these different levels of familiarity, all the members were on comfortable speaking terms with one another.

The recorded participants included 8 women and 2 men; thirteen people originally gave consent to be recorded, but three women were not present on the day of recording. The group was mostly white, with one woman of Pakistani descent.

Recording a group of students that volunteered their time with the same campus organization also carried the benefit of avoiding the hierarchy of authority associated with a workplace. Although the group had an executive director who presided over the meetings, also a university student, the remainder of the participants were not organized or ranked by authority or seniority. The absence of a chain of command, coupled with the director’s relaxed style of guiding the conversation, led to more free exchanges than are normally found in a work environment in which those of highest ranking speak the most.

As the principal investigator and a member of the student organization, I was recorded as a participant along with the rest of the group. As Michael Quinn Patton described in his book *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, there is a broad spectrum of participation in which a researcher can fall; from spectator on one end, to participant in full on the other. I chose to act as a full participant in the discussions being recorded because as Patton states, “the participant observer is fully engaged in experiencing the setting under study while at the same time trying to understand that setting through personal experience, observations, and talking with other participants about what is happening” (207). Because they were recorded by a fellow participant and group member, the remainder of the participants were willing to speak more freely than if the recording process had involved a spectator.

In this study, the participants conversed about one central topic: the business of the club. This fixed-topic nature was ideal for the research, because it ensured that all the participants were knowledgeable and invested in the topic of conversation; one speaker could not speak at length about a topic without others contributing their thoughts, because the business of the meeting was familiar to everyone present.

Procedure

This sample was obtained using a small audio recorder, four inches in length and two inches across. The recorder was hidden from the participants by being placed amidst the personal belongings on the table.

The group was recorded during its usual weekly meetings, unbeknownst to its members. Although the participants gave consent to be recorded, they did not know which club meetings would be recorded. The participants also did not know which part of

their speech was being examined, only that the way in which they interacted in conversation would later be analyzed. After data collection was completed in accordance with Institutional Review Board requirements, those recorded were debriefed and informed that the specific focus of the study was interruption. The debriefing was necessary due to the so-called “partial deception” involved in this study, and was distributed as mandated by the Institutional Review Board.

The recording from this organization meeting was then transcribed, after each speaker was designated a code letter to replace his or her name. The recording was not transcribed in its entirety; several minutes at the beginning and end of the meeting were not transcribed due to the nature of the talk occurring during that time. Because the meeting began and ended with the executive director speaking at length – without interruption or contribution from others – those portions were not included in the transcription due to their lack of application for this study. The rest of the recording was transcribed word for word. The full transcript is available upon request. A key of symbols used in the transcription process is included in Appendix A.

After the completion of this manual transcription, each instance of simultaneous speech was then analyzed so that all of the inter-related aspects mentioned in the literature review could be considered (the relationship of the speakers, the interrupted party’s reaction, etc.). Following this analysis, trends that had emerged in the transcription were further examined for their relationship to the research questions and cross-gender communication as a whole. These trends were discussed on a thematic basis; quantitative analysis of the number of interruptions was not conducted.

Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the data obtained from the recordings described above along with discussion of the results. The results have been organized into subheadings describing different trends that emerged during analysis. These subheadings are arranged in order of their relationship to gender differences in conversation, with minimal responses being the most striking difference between men and women.

Minimal Responses

One behavior, called minimal response in Zimmerman and West (1975), is associated primarily with the speech of women. When a person speaks at length to explain an idea or ask an involved question, other speakers interject short words like “yeah,” “mhm,” or “okay” in order to signal to the original speaker that they have understood what has been said so far, and he or she should continue with the utterance. This practice is not typically viewed as an interruption, but as an example of non-threatening simultaneous speech; the second speaker does not attempt to take the floor, but rather wishes to express support and comprehension. As stated, this cooperative behavior usually occurs with women, as seen in the exchange between women below:

H: Just because there's... I feel like especially with the Greeks there's a lot of spirit during the event.

I: Mmhmm.

H: And, um, they're sort of already getting rewarded for being spirited

F: Mmm.

H: You know? Like, that's what homecoming is about, is being

F: Spirited?=
 =

H: =Involved and=

F: =Yeah.

H: School pride and all that. So, they're already being rewarded=

I: =Mmhmm.

In this excerpt (which continues in the same manner), Speakers F and I – both female – repeatedly offer minimal responses by responding to Speaker H's (also female) explanation with short words and sounds to signal their understanding. This behavior occurs throughout the recording, in almost unbelievable numbers; in the entire recording, which lasted approximately one hour and eighteen minutes, women offered minimal responses more than one hundred times, while men did so fewer than five times. Even after accounting for the ratio of men to women, there is still a significant difference: 8 minimal responses per woman, and two per man.

In her article “Gender Differences in Topical Coherence: Creating Involvement in Best Friends’ Talk,” Tannen explores the difference in speech patterns between men and women by examining them as cross-cultural interactions. She argues that because men and women learn their speech behaviors in separate peer groups or environments, they learn to use language in different ways and for unique purposes. Men use language to relate information, while women use it more often to build a speech community. This behavior in women helps explain why they more frequently offer minimal responses: to support the original speaker and signal their intense involvement.

Zimmerman and West (1975) also address the difference between minimal responses in men and women, expressing it not as a matter of frequency but of timing. According to their research, when women offer minimal responses, they do so with such

precise timing that there is little to no gap, and little to no overlap of speech. In fact, they claim that women often manage to time their minimal responses so perfectly that they land when the original speaker is breathing. Men, conversely, tend to offer minimal responses on a delay, several seconds after the original speaker has stopped talking. As described by Zimmerman and West, “poor timing... can quickly betray feigned involvement or at least call attention to some difficulty in the course of talk” (p. 122). This delayed response, rather than suggesting active listening, makes it seem as if the men are not interested in what is being said – similar to the “yes, dear,” of stimulated or prompted listenership. When repeated several times, a delayed minimal response can even give the impression that the speaker wishes to draw the topic to a close.

In her article “Interaction: The Work Women Do,” Pamela Fishman also examines the differences in minimal responses in men and women. Fishman explains that, while both sexes use minimal responses, they use them for different purposes. For men, the monosyllabic words used as minimal responses “merely filled a turn at a point when it needed to be filled” and that these responses do “nothing to encourage... nor to elaborate” (Fishman, 1978 p. 96). Women, in contrast, use minimal responses to demonstrate participation and intense interest. In a conversation with mixed genders, women continue to contribute the majority of minimal responses, doing most of the work of supporting selected topics – work that Fishman gives the colorful term, “interactional shitwork” (qtd. in Coates 2004 p. 88).

Thus, it appears that even if men were to offer minimal responses more frequently, it would not give the same impression as the active listenership implied by women.

Cooperative Overlap

Cooperative overlap, described briefly during the review of previous research and defined by Tannen (1990), is a style of speech associated with women in which several people speak simultaneously or in close turns, finishing each other's utterances in order to convey a shared message. There are several instances of cooperative overlap in this data; however, one is of particular importance in highlighting the differences between masculine and feminine speech patterns.

Shortly after the meeting began, two women demonstrated typical cooperative overlap with the following exchange about whether the selection of "most spirited" should be determined by the organization's committee or a popular vote of the event's attendees:

I: Because, not to think less of the Greeks, but I think they're more likely to vote based on loyalty, based on who=

H: =Oh yeah=

I: =has actually been spirited, whereas=

H: =Yeah=

I: =We're more able to step back and=

H: =And say, who actually has been spirited=

I: =Who has actually done this?=
 H: =in the way that we imagine spirited to be?=
 I: =Right. Instead of just loud and=

This conversation is a classic example of cooperative overlap among women; the two speakers are talking over each other for the entire exchange, both finishing each other's ideas and contributing their own, with neither taking offense at the apparent interruption. However, what is most noteworthy is the response that directly follows when a man (Speaker G) joins the conversation:

I: =Right. Instead of just loud and=

G: **That's**... my thought too.

At this point, the cooperative overlap ceases. He begins with one word, "that's," and then pauses. The loud volume with which he interjects seems to startle the other speakers and causes them to fall silent; thus yielding the floor to Speaker G. Because he pauses after a single word – an unusual point for silence within a turn – it sounds like he is waiting for the other two to cease talking before continuing. It is clear from this interaction that cooperative overlap, which comes so easily to some, is not easy for this male speaker.

In her 1984 book *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends*, Tannen describes a scenario in which two brothers engage in a so-called "conversational duet"; the two men finish each other's ideas, answer questions posed to the other brother, and work together to tell a shared story from their childhood (63-64). This example demonstrates that while cooperative overlap may be more common among women, it is not unheard of in men, especially men who are familiar with their interlocutors. This is one possible reason that the man in this study (Speaker G) had difficulty engaging in cooperative overlap; he did not have the level of familiarity necessary.

In Coates (2004), this practice is described as producing "jointly constructed utterances," in which several women work together "so that their voices combine to

produce a single utterance” (p. 118). The exchange above, between speakers H and I is a prototypical example of this highly collaborative behavior. According to Coates, this kind of collaboration can only occur when the listener is intensely involved in the original speaker’s utterance; he or she must be aware of the meaning, the grammatical structure, and sometimes even the intonation and rhythm of the original speaker. Coates goes on to describe different types of joint utterances, which range anywhere from the second woman completing a sentence, all the way to two women saying the same words at the same time – both behaviors that are impossible without extreme focus and attention from the listener.

It is possible that Speaker G simply did not have the familiarity or intense focus described by Tannen and Coates as required to seamlessly join the conversation.

Self-Repair

One important facet of interruption is that of the interrupted party’s reaction. At times, an interruption may be accidental, and the reaction of the original speaker affects how the interruption is perceived. As Tannen (1990) explains in *You Just Don’t Understand*, “sometimes you feel interrupted but you don’t mind. At other times, you mind very much... different speakers have different conversational styles, so a speaker might *feel* interrupted even if the other did not *intend* to interrupt” (p. 190). In other words, the same interruption can be perceived as more or less serious by the involved parties, and it can be dependent on damage control performed by the interrupter. One way that speakers seek to avoid a negative reaction from the original speaker is by apologizing and relinquishing the floor when they realize they have mistakenly interrupted someone.

In this recording, although there are multiple examples of such self-repair, they all involve women. For example, the following exchange between two women:

I: Yeah, or I mean – oh, sorry, go ahead.

H: No, go ahead.

In each instance of self-repair, the interrupted speaker reacts positively to the interrupter's apology, and in fact, offers the floor back to the second speaker. This demonstrates that self-repair is an effective method of preventing the interrupted party from feeling insulted.

In the entire transcription, there are no examples of men self-repairing an unintentional interruption. There is no clear explanation for the men's lack of self-repair, although I consider two possible reasons: either men are not as considerate in conversation and so feel less inclined to apologize for an interruption, or the men do not take offense at being interrupted and so do not feel they have done anything that needs excusing.

Holding the Floor

Throughout this data, an interesting trend arose in which speakers "held" or "reserved" the floor while gathering their thoughts. In other words, they used placeholders to uphold their turn to speak and prevent others from taking the floor before they could continue. Surprisingly, the placeholder of choice in this sample was "um." Although sometimes the floor was stolen regardless, it was an unusually effective method of retaining the right to speak. This trend is made relevant by the fact that it was used almost exclusively by women when they wanted to reserve the floor for their selected topic. Consider the following utterance:

H: Yes, very good logic. Thank you. Um.... (ten second pause) You lied to me!

Or:

H: So, there's something else that I wanted to talk through. Golly. Um... (five second pause) Oh! I remember!

In each of these examples, the speaker is able to use “um” to hold the floor for extended pauses while she gathers her thoughts, and no one else attempts to wrest control of the floor from her.

One possible explanation is that maybe women are accustomed to having the floor taken away, and may feel the need to preserve their claim; while men, unafraid of losing the floor, make no effort to hold it. In other words, a placeholder is a tool for the “weak” in conversation – or those who feel accustomed to the threat of interruption. In *Conversational Analysis*, Tannen explains that while men often become irritated when women overlap in order to speak collaboratively, women are equally insulted when men interrupt to switch the topic (p. 75). Women, then, may be using a placeholder to ward off what they consider the real threat: an interruption that changes the topic about which she is speaking.

It is also worth noting that “um” – such a simple word – successfully functions as a bid for the floor. When several people are speaking at once, one particularly meek woman interrupts by saying “um” quietly, and the talking ceases, after which she is able to take the floor.

Reclaiming the Floor

It was my belief before beginning this research that after being interrupted, a man will seek to regain the floor if he has not finished speaking, but a woman will not

necessarily fight to regain the floor. This belief emerged from Zimmerman and West (1975), in which they examined the silences that follow an interruption. Zimmerman and West explained that even after repeated interruptions, the women in their study did not complain about being interrupted, or even mention it to their conversation partners. In fact, the women, after being interrupted, tended to fall silent for several seconds before continuing to speak (Zimmerman and West, 1975: p. 124). In contrast, men were found more likely to register a complaint, with a remark such as “you keep interrupting me” or “let me finish” before continuing their utterance (123).

It is reassuring then, to discover that the women in this study were more willing to insist on reclaiming the floor if they had not finished speaking, as demonstrated by the exchange below, between two female speakers:

I: That brings me to my next question. Are we gonna have specific jobs at the event?

H: Uh, sure if you want them. I think specific jobs=

I: =I just wanna know, like, are we supposed to wander around and do things that need to be done? Or are there specific things that each of us should do?

Speaker I, who is female, is not finished with her question, and so “interrupts the interrupter” in order to complete her explanation. Similar exchanges occur throughout the sample.

Although the formerly “male” behavior of fighting for the floor is not necessarily more correct, it is positive to see that women, who were once believed so meek that they always yielded the floor, now feel comfortable enough to reclaim the floor when their turn is ended unwillingly. However, there was no evidence in this sample of women

reclaiming the floor after being interrupted by men, although such interruptions take place. It is promising that women are now comfortable reclaiming the floor, but it would be beneficial to examine whether this trend also exists when the interrupter is male.

Verbal Tug of War

In large groups, conversation often dissolves into multiple conversations occurring simultaneously, in which almost everyone is interrupted - yet talk continues. Sacks *et. al* (1974) claimed that in conversation between larger groups (four or more), there is a tendency for discussion to divide into multiple separate conversations. When two topics are being discussed at once and both are related to the previous statement, it can be difficult to determine who “should” have the floor, so each conversation often continues until someone yields the floor – or so I believed. It was my expectation that a “tug of war” over the floor between two or more conversations would eventually be resolved by one group yielding the floor to the most dominant conversation. However, the data did not exactly support this hypothesis, and in fact offered intriguing contradictions.

Seizure of the Floor

The most surprising rectification involved a member of one conversation suddenly seizing the floor of both conversations. Speaker I (a woman) asks a question of the people in her own conversation, then, upon receiving no answer, abruptly poses the question to a member of the other conversation – who is currently *speaking* when Speaker I interrupts to force the two conversations into

one. The exchange is represented below, with each column representing a separate conversation.

F: I've always wanted to do that.	D: So I think we're gonna have
I: It's in the morale dance	D: With that big amount of money raised.
F: Is it really? I wanna actually do it with money	D: It's not that big a...
	I: Right?
	A: What?
	I: Isn't that in the morale dance?

In this exchange, Speakers F and I are having a conversation, and Speakers D and A are participating in a separate conversation. Speaker I abruptly jumps into the other conversation, while Speaker D is still midsentence, in order to seek an answer to her question. This aggressive approach, although effective, was not expected as a possible resolution to multiple conversations.

Intervention by Authority Figure

When all else failed and the meeting was true chaos, the executive director called everyone back to attention. This intervention offered a restart for the conversation as a whole, effectively ending the struggle between multiple topics. However, this undeniably effective method begs the question – what happens when there is no authority figure? With no one to recall the attention of the others, it is unclear how long an extreme struggle between multiple conversations would continue before someone abandoned the floor.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear that differences exist between men and women in conversation; in various studies, conversation has been researched to ask whether one gender speaks more, or interrupts more, or asks fewer questions, or supports fewer topics. If nothing else is definite, we know there are many differences in the ways men and women speak.

By examining how men and women use behaviors such as interruption and nonresponse to control the flow of conversation, we can learn how the genders can communicate more effectively in a mixed-gender setting. A woman who is made aware that men typically have greater control of topic choice in conversation, will know that it may take several attempts to establish a topic that she wishes to discuss. A man who knows that women tend to speak collaboratively and engage in “conversational duets” will be less likely to take offense to a woman interrupting to finish his sentence along with him.

Through awareness of these issues, both genders can work to ensure that every speaker – regardless of gender or so-called conversational power - has opportunities to contribute his or her ideas to the discussion of a collaborative group.

This current study shows that men interrupt just as much as women. Both genders seize the floor and work hard to reclaim it. Unlike previous studies that tended to show women as being the weaker parties in conversation, interaction with peers tends to show that both genders are equally powerful!

Limitations and Future Research

This research examines the verbal interactions of a student organization and conversation among peers. As it analyzes the conversation of only ten people, it is not a comprehensive overview of the influence of gender on patterns of interruption.

The male-female ratio represented by the participants was not ideal for gender-related research. When it was selected for recording, the club included six men and eight women; however, by the time the study was approved and recording took place, only two men remained in the organization. The recordings still yielded useful information, but future research would be improved with a more equal representation of men and women.

This study was also severely limited by the amount of time it was kept in a static state. Approximately ten weeks passed between the submission of the necessary forms to the Institutional Review Board and approval of the research project. During this unexpected length of time, no recording could take place, nor could any permission to record be obtained from the club members. As stated above, the ratio of men to women changed while the study was waiting for approval. Thus, the extended waiting period affected the outcome of the research.

Several areas are suggested by this study for future research on gender and interruption. Most significantly, this study could be varied with populations of different ages and social settings; for instance, with middle-aged adults, or young adults outside a university setting. Future research could also benefit from exploring conversation in an environment without an authority figure like the executive director of the student organization. Many speakers deferred to the executive director when the floor was in contest; thus, further investigation into interruption without an authority figure present

would provide insight into how the patterns of interruption differ in the absence of an authority figure to mediate the conversation.

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Appendix A: Transcript Keys

Key 1: Gender of Speakers

H: Female

I: Female

Q: Female

F: Female

G: Male

D: Female

A: Female

X: Male

L: Female

B: Female

C: Female*

Y: Female*

E: Female*

*Approved study participants not present during recording.

Key 2: Transcription Symbols

. End of clause;
downward inflection

? Question; upward
inflection

... Pause

- Brief pause

! Excitement, surprise

[] Non-verbal sounds

= Simultaneous speech

italics Actions

----- Break in transcription

{ } Personal Information
Removed

() Explanation added by
Researcher