

Concept of Interruption and Gender Differences

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Abstract:

The use of interruption may, in some cultures, be welcomed or encouraged whereas, in other cultures, it may be considered rude, aggressive, or disrespectful to the speaker. The phenomenon of interruption is closely studied in conversation analysis. In fact, interruption in conversation is affected by various social and personality variables.

Keywords:

Turn-taking, verbal, non-verbal, turn-change, interactions, variables, simultaneous speech, interactional strategies, discourse, power, rapport, midutterance, seize, aggression, etc.

Introduction:

Interruptions are used within the system of turn-taking. The coordination between the speaker and the listener is perfect in that the speaker sends the right signals to the speaker and the listener when a turn change is due. Interruption is social, psychological, and phenomenon. According to some people, interruptions are viewed as rude and disrespectful act. According to Murata (1994) interruption is an intentional action of interrupting the conversational partner's utterances at non-TRPs. The phenomenon of interruption is closely studied in conversation analysis.

What is Interruption?

According to Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), an ideal conversation is organized so that no interruption occurs. The coordination between the speaker and listener is perfect in that the speaker sends the right signals-verbal and/or non-verbal to the listener when a turn change is due. The listener understands and takes the signals for a turn change.

However, interruption is social, psychological and universal phenomenon. Therefore, interruption is felt to be a serious part of what goes wrong in interactions. In conversation, while taking turns the current speaker sometimes gets interrupted or other speaker/speakers interrupts/interrupt the current speaker. This is bound to happen in each and every language

while taking turns. In fact, interruption in conversation is affected by various social and personality variables. Some scholars claim that interruption is dominant in psychological literature. But others do not claim so. According to Bettie (1981, p. 18) interruption is a social phenomenon affected by many variables of interactants. Further he suggests that interruption may be indicative of social relationship.

Definitions of Interruption:

- Emphasizing on a violation of current speaker's right Sacks et al. (1974) claim "that interruptions are a violation of a current speaker's right to complete a turn, or more precisely, to reach a possible transition place in a unit-type's progression."
- West and Zimmerman's (1983) definition based on turn-taking model says that "interruption is a form of simultaneous speech defined as a violation of a speaker's turn at talk."
- Considering interruptions as strategies, Goldberg (1990) defines it as "interruptions are interactional strategies for exerting and overtly displaying power or control over both the discourse and its participants." (p. 884)

Types of Interruption:

Goldberg (1990, pp. 883-903)

Goldberg has classified interruption into

1. **Power interruptions and**
2. **Rapport interruptions.**

The fundamental difference between these two types of interruptions is in the degree to which the positive and negative wants of the interrupted speaker are addressed. As speaker wants are essentially to be listened to (a negative want) and to feel that what he has to say is of interest to others (a positive want), when the listener-cum-interrupter cuts off the speaker to insert remarks which are neither coherent nor cohesive with the speaker's remarks, what s/he has done is to ignore both the speakers positive and negative wants.

1. Power Interruption:

Power interruption is clearly intended by the interrupter to seize control of the process and/or content of the conversation by taking the floor and/or the topic from the current speaker at midutterance. The classification of interruptions as power oriented is predicated on the assumption; therefore, the power involves the interactants in divergent goal orientations reflecting their own individual interests and wants.

Power-oriented interruptions are generally heard as rude, impolite, intrusive and inappropriate; conveying the interrupter's antipathy, aggression, hostility, dislike, disdain, apathy, etc. towards the interrupted speaker and/or the talk at hand. Interruption is concomitantly treated as an act of conflict, competition, or non-involvement. 'Power' is assignable to those interruptions which are off topic, which re-introduce topics or which contain few coherent-cohesive ties with the interrupted utterance.

Power type interruptions are designed to wrest the discourse from the speaker by gaining control of the conversational process and/or content. Such power type interruptions typically involve topic change attempts accomplished by questions and request (process control strategies) or by assertions or statements (content control strategies) whose propositional content is unrelated to the specific topic at hand. The Power Interruptions are further divided into:

- i. Process Control Interruptions
- ii. Content Control Interruptions

2. Rapport Interruption:

Rapport involves the interactants in mutual, shared or overlapping goal orientations whether or not their individual approaches to their common goal coincide. Rapport-oriented interruptions are generally understood as expressions of open empathy, affection, solidarity, interest, concern, etc. Rapport interruptions are viewed as acts of collaboration, cooperation, and/or mutual orientation providing the interruptee with immediate feedback, filling in informational gaps, and elaborating on the interruptee's topic or theme. Rapport interruptions are facilitated the process and/or the content of the conversation by encouraging the speaker's ongoing talk.

Rapport interruptions encourage and contribute to the development of the (speaker's) talk by inserting (short) information or evaluative comments or by requesting the speaker to supply evaluative or informative remarks.

Gender Differences:

According to Nicola Woods (1988 in Hirschman, 1974) there is much evidence to suggest that firstly, a significant difference exists in the way that men and women organize conversation; and secondly, that the power assumed by males is reflected in their domination of mixed-sex interaction and thus also in disproportionate floor-holding. For instance, the study of a number of mixed and same-mix dyadic conversations, that the most 'striking' differences between male and female organization of conversation is to be found within their differing use of assent terms: in particular, that 'females use the mm,hmm response much more often than males'. A number of studies have demonstrated that interruption in conversation is affected by a number of social and personality variables. Feldstein, Alberti, Ben Debba and Welkowitz (1974), cited by Feldstein and Welkowitz, 1979) analysed the relationship between frequency of interruption of

simultaneous speech and the personality characteristics of all females. They found the 'Women who are relaxed, complacent, secure and not overly dependent on the approval of others tend to initiate more simultaneous speech than women who are generally apprehensive, self-reproaching, tense and frustrated'. Although Roger and Jones (1975) reported a trend for males to interrupt each other more than females did, the effect was not statistically significant. This is a surprising finding, in view of earlier research showing that men tend to interrupt more than women do. On the other hand, the studies reported by Thorne and Henley and others were based on mixed-sex interactions, and the results are seen as reflecting sex-role stereotyped behavior.

Zimmerman and West (1975, p. 105) claim that power and dominance constitute significant aspects of many recurring aspects of many recurring interactions such as those between whites and blacks, adults and children, and of specific interest here, men and women. It should be surprising, then, that the distribution of power in the occupational structure, the family division of labor, and other institutional contexts where life chances are determined, has its parallel in the dynamics of everyday interaction. The preliminary findings of the research reported here indicate that there are definite and patterned ways in which the power and dominance enjoyed by men in other contexts are exercised in their conversational interaction with women. Further, they report striking asymmetries between men and women with respect to patterns of interruption, silence, and support for partner in the development of topics. They found that in male-female conversation men interrupt much more frequently than women. In fact, in ten male-female conversations, of a routine type, they found that virtually all the interruptions were initiated by men. They interpret their results in terms of male dominance and the power relationships between men and women: '...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'.

Leet-Pellegrini's study of the power bases of gender and expertise suggested that while women generally tended to use more assent terms than men, nevertheless, male dominance was not a salient feature of mixed sex conversation. In fact Leet_Pellegrini's study showed that such domination only occurred when the power base of expertise was given specific information that allowed them to be 'experts' within a conversational encounter.

Doubt has been cast on the male dominance hypothesis by other recent studies. For example, McCarrick, Manderscheid and Silbergeld (1981) found that wives in the marital couples they studied not only initiated more of the within-couple interruptions that occurred, but also tended to 'interrupt back' in cross-couple interactions rather than adopt the submissive, silent role. On the basis of her own and other recent research, Aries (1982) has argued that male-dominant conversational behavior associated with traditional sex-role stereotypes may be changing.



In common with the findings reported by Rogers and Jones, the mean interruption rate was greater for the male dyads than it was the female dyads.

Molm (1985) argued that "women can use power as effectively as men when placed in structurally equivalent positions, and that the most blatant form of stereotyping-assigning articular characteristics and attributes to women solely on the basis of their sex may be changing" (p. 286). This study shows that people's level of verbal aggressiveness is a better predictor than gender for whether or not they will judge simultaneous talk to be interruptive in situations of conflict.

According to Coats (1986, p. 101) control of topics is normally shared equally between participants in conversation. In conversations between speakers of the same sex, this seems to be the pattern, but when one speaker is male and one female, male speakers tend to dominate. When talking with women men seem to use interruptions and delayed minimal responses to deny women the right to control the topic of conversation.

Dinda (1987) found that women are more likely to interrupt informative speech and less likely to interrupt supportive talk. She concluded that "women in pre-interruption did not have less assertive speech interrupted, nor did they engage in less assertive types of interruptions, nor did they respond to interruptions less assertively". (p. 365).

According to Nicola Woods (1988, p. 141) an important element of the method used in the study was that the variables of gender and occupational status were separated out for the purposes of the analysis. It has often been suggested that quantitative findings on male dominance in conversation can be explained to a significant extent by the fact that males on average hold higher-status positions than do women: that is, it is not simply gender which causes men to dominate and women to defer. If this is true it should also follow that:

- i. Where women are in positions of power they will dominate conversation in ways similar to men; and
- ii. That where men are in subordinate positions their dominant behavior will diminish or disappear.

Redeker and Linssen-Maes (1993) found that male professionals in same-gender groups were competitive, but contrary to expectations, female professionals in same-gender groups used more disruptive interruptions, less affiliation, and relatively longer turns than expected.

Mulacad Van Dyke (1992, p. 174) found that when women interrupted men with agreement interruptions, their male partners rated them as more dynamic and competent but having low socio-intellectual status, whereas men using any kind of interruption were rated as having high socio-intellectual status by their partners.

Conclusion:

In sum, these studies show differences in the way that women and men use simultaneous talk depending on group compositions, status differences, and features of the social and communicative context. Differences in performance suggest that another useful line of inquiry might be ask whether women and men recognize interruptions differently. A common theme in the discussion of interruption is the concept of an aggrieved party who reacts to turn intrusion.

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