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CHAPTER TWO

## Interpreting Interruption in Conversation

*One of the discourse strategies discussed in chapter 1 is interruption. Chapter 2 focuses entirely on this phenomenon. It draws on my research, spanning more than a dozen years, examining patterns and functions of overlap and interruption.*

*The phenomenon of interruption has been of focal interest to me for as long as I have been in the field of linguistics. My dissertation, later rewritten as Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends (1984), examined a two-and-a-half-hour Thanksgiving dinner conversation between two Californians, three New York Jews, and a native of England. The study ended up being an analysis of what I called "high involvement style"—the conversational style of the New York Jewish speakers, of whom I was one. One of the most striking aspects of high involvement style that I found and analyzed in detail was the use of what I called "cooperative overlap": a listener talking along with a speaker not in order to interrupt but to show enthusiastic listenership and participation. The concept of overlap versus interruption became one of*

the cornerstones of my argument that the stereotype of New York Jews as pushy and aggressive is an unfortunate reflection of the effect of high involvement style in conversation with speakers who use a different style. (In my study I called the other style "high considerateness").

This insight is the basis of my reluctance to jump on the "men dominate women by interrupting them" bandwagon. It is not that I deny that men often dominate women and that interruption is one way they often do so; however, my years of painstaking research into the workings of conversation have shown me that one cannot simply count overlaps in a conversation, call them interruptions, and assign blame to the speaker whose voice prevails.

In this chapter I address the theoretical issue of defining "interruption" in order to show that apparent interruption is not necessarily a display of dominance. The chapter is structured by the opening observation that the assumption that overlap is always interruption and that interruption perpetrates dominance has been questioned on methodological grounds, can be questioned on sociolinguistic grounds, and must be questioned on ethical grounds. I examine each of these objections in turn, juxtaposing research that finds men using interruption to dominate women with my own and others' research demonstrating that overlapping talk can be supportive rather than obstructive. Moreover, the conclusion that those who are observed to "interrupt" are intending to dominate, if applied to interactions among speakers of certain ethnic groups or among women, reinforces negative stereotyping of members of those groups—including women.

**A** JOKE HAS IT that a woman sues her husband for divorce. When the judge asks her why she wants a divorce, she explains that her husband has not spoken to her in two years. The

judge then asks the husband, "Why haven't you spoken to your wife in two years?" He replies, "I didn't want to interrupt her."

This joke reflects the commonly held stereotype that women talk too much and interrupt men. On the other hand, one of the most widely cited findings to emerge from research on gender and language is that men interrupt women far more than women interrupt men. This finding is deeply satisfying insofar as it refutes the misogynistic stereotype and seems to account for the difficulty getting their voices heard that many women report having in interactions with men. At the same time, it reflects and bolsters common assumptions about the world: the belief that an interruption is a hostile act, with the interrupter an aggressor and the interrupted an innocent victim. Furthermore, it is founded on the premise that interruption is a means of social control, an exercise of power and dominance.

This research has been questioned on methodological grounds, can be questioned on sociolinguistic grounds, and must be questioned on ethical grounds, as it supports the stereotyping of a group of people on the basis of their conversational style. I here examine each of these objections in turn, juxtaposing the research that claims to find men interrupt women with my own and others' research on ethnicity and conversational style.

#### MALES INTERRUPT FEMALES: THE RESEARCH

Most widely cited for the finding that men interrupt women is the work of Candace West and Don Zimmerman (for example, Zimmerman and West 1975), West and Zimmerman 1983, 1985). This is not, however, the only research coming to the conclusion that males interrupt females. Others include Bolin and Sturman (1983), Eakins and Eakins (1976), Esposito (1979), Gleason and Greif (1983), and McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, and Gale (1977).<sup>1</sup>

Zimmerman and West (1975) recorded naturally occurring casual conversations on campus locations. They report that 96 percent of the interruptions they found (46 out of 48) were instances of men

interrupting women. (The range is from no interruptions in one conversation to 13 in another). Following up with an experimentally designed study in which previously unacquainted first- and second-year undergraduates talked in cross-sex dyads, West and Zimmerman (1983) report a similar, though not as overwhelming, pattern: 75 percent of interruptions (21 of 28) were instances of men interrupting women.

Eakins and Eakins (1976) examined turn-taking patterns at seven faculty meetings and found that "men generally averaged a greater number of active interruptions per meeting than women, with eight being the highest average and two the lowest. For women the range was from two to zero" (58).

Some of the research finding that males interrupt females was carried out with children rather than adults. Esposito (1979:215) randomly assigned 40 preschool children to play groups and found that boys interrupted girls two to one. Examining the speech of 16 mothers and 16 fathers, Gleason and Greif (1983:147) found that fathers interrupt their children more than mothers, and that both interrupt female children more than male children.

#### INTERRUPTION AS DOMINANCE

West and Zimmerman (1983:103) are typical in calling interruption "a device for exercising power and control in conversation" and "violations of speakers' turns at talk." But they also claim that silence is a device for exercising dominance. They cite (108) Kormarovsky (1962:353) to the effect that the "dominant" party in a marriage is often the more silent one, as revealed by the wife who says of her husband, "He doesn't say much but he means what he says and the children mind him." That men control and dominate women by refusing to speak is the main point of Sattel (1983), who illustrates with a scalding excerpt from Erica Jong's novel *Fear of Flying*, in which a wife becomes increasingly more desperate in her pleas for her husband to tell her what she has done to anger him. If both talking and not talking are dominating strategies, one wonders

whether power and domination reside in the linguistic strategy at all or on some other level of interaction.

#### METHODOLOGICAL OBJECTION

All researchers who report that males interrupt females more than females interrupt males use mechanical definitions to identify interruptions. This is a function of their research goal: Counting requires coding, and coding requires "operational" definitions. For example, Zimmerman and West (1975), following Schegloff (1987),<sup>2</sup> define an interruption as a violation of the turn exchange system and an overlap as a misfire in it. If a second speaker begins speaking at what could be a transition-relevance place, it is counted as an overlap. The assumption is that the speaker mistook the potential transition-relevance place for an actual one. If a second speaker begins speaking at what could not be a transition-relevance place, it is counted as an interruption: The second speaker had evidence that the other speaker did not intend to relinquish a turn, but took the floor anyway, consequently trampling on the first speaker's right to continue speaking.

Most others who have studied this phenomenon have based their definitions on Zimmerman's and West's. For example, Esposito (1979) considered that "Interruptions occur when speaker A cuts off more than one word of speaker B's unit-type." Laffer, Gillespie, and Conary (1982:156) did not distinguish between overlap and interruption. They included as interruptions "all vocalizations where, while one subject was speaking, the other subject uttered at least two consecutive identifiable words or at least three syllables of a single word." They eliminated, however, instances of repetition.

Operationally defined criteria, requisite and comforting to experimentally oriented researchers, are anathema to ethnographically oriented ones. Interruptions provide a paradigm case for such objections. Bennett (1981) points out that overlap and interruption are logically different types. (Barbara Johnstone [personal com-

munication] suggests the linguistic terms "etic" and "emic" may serve here as well.) To identify overlap, one need only ascertain that two voices are going at once. (Overlap, then, is an "etic" category.) But to claim that a speaker interrupts another is an interpretive, not a descriptive act (an "emic" category). Whereas the term "overlap" is, in principle, neutral (though it also has some negative connotations), the label "interruption" is clearly negative. Affixing this label accuses a speaker of violating another speaker's right to the floor, of being a conversational bully. Claiming that one has "observed" an interruption is actually making a judgment, indeed what is generally perceived to be a moral judgment.

One of West's and Zimmerman's (1983:105) examples of interruption is a case of an overlap that seems justified in terms of interactional rights:

(1) Female: So uh you really can't bitch when you've got all those on the same day (4.2) but I uh asked my physics professor if I couldn't change that |

Male: [Don't | touch that

(1.2)

Female: What?

(#)

Male: I've got everything just how I want it in that notebook (#) you'll screw it up lea'n' through it like that.

This interruption is procedural rather than substantive. Many would argue that if the male feels that the female's handling of his notebook is destroying his organization of it, he has a right to ask her to desist immediately, without allowing further damage to be done while he awaits a transition-relevance place.<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Murray has mounted a number of attacks on Zimmerman and West on methodological grounds (Murray 1985, 1987; Murray and Covelli 1988). He argues, for example, that there can be no "absolute syntactical or acoustical criteria for recognizing an

occurrence of 'interruption'" because a speaker's "completion rights" depend on a number of factors, including length or frequency of speech, number of points made, and special authority to speak on particular topics (Murray 1985). He also observes that whether or not a speaker feels interrupted is not absolute but varying by degree. He shows, for example, that the following interchange was judged an interruption by half the women he polled, but not by the other half:<sup>4</sup>

(2) H: I think [that

W: [Do you want some more salad?

Harvey Sacks observed that offering food often takes priority at a dinner table, and is heard not as an interruption but an aside. In this as in all matters of conversational rights and obligations, there are individual and cultural differences. Some people would feel interrupted if overlapped by an offer of salad; others would not. Many similar examples can be found of what might appear to be interruptions but are actually procedural metacomments that many consider rightful to override ongoing substantive talk.

#### SOCIOLINGUISTIC OBJECTION

Interpreting interruption as evidence of power or dominance assumes that interruption is a single-handed speech act, something one speaker does to another. But sociolinguistic research (for example, Duranti and Brenneis 1986; Erickson 1986; Goodwin 1981; McDermott and Tylbor 1983; Schegloff 1982, 1988) establishes that conversation is a joint production: Everything that happens is the doing of all participants. For an interruption to occur, two speakers must act: One must begin speaking, and another must stop. If the first speaker does not stop, there is no interruption. Thus even if an overlap is experienced as an interruption by a participant, it is wrongheaded for a researcher to conclude that the interruption is the doing of one party.

Furthermore, the contention that interruption is a sign of dominance reflects two assumptions that are neither universal nor obvious. One is that conversation is a fight for the floor. The validity of this contention varies with subcultural, cultural and individual predisposition as well as with the context of interaction. Yamada (1992), for example, argues that Japanese speakers prefer not to speak in potentially confrontational situations, since talk is seen as a liability. A similar view is attributed to Finns by Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985).

Moreover, in light of the methodological objection that one cannot interpret the "meaning" of an overlap on the basis of its occurrence, many instances of overlap are supportive rather than obstructive. When students in one of my classes counted overlaps in half-hour casual conversations they had taped, the vast majority of overlaps, roughly 75 percent, were judged by the students who had taped the conversations to be cooperative rather than obstructive. Greenwood (1989) found that a high rate of interruption was a sign of social comfort in conversations among preadolescent boys and girls having dinner with their friends: The more comfortable the children reported feeling with their age-mate dinner guests, the more interruptions Greenwood observed in the transcript of their conversation.

Not only is it the case that a transcript might evidence overlap where participants did not feel that their speaking rights had been infringed upon, but participants might feel that their rights had been infringed upon where the transcript indicates they had not. For example, Greenwood discusses a segment in which Dara (age 12) and her sister Stephanie (age 11) have performed a humorous routine which climaxes with the utterance of a tongue twister for the benefit of their brother's dinner guest, Max (age 14). Although this routine sparked delighted laughter on other occasions among other friends, Max did not laugh and claimed not to get the joke. Dara and Stephanie try to explain it to him. Max recalls a tongue twister that he knows. When Dara and Stephanie continue their explanation, Max complains about being interrupted:

- (3)
- 1 Dara: Listen, listen, listen, listen.
  - 2 Max: Say it in slow motion, okay?
  - 3 Steph: Betty bought a bit of bitter butter and she said this butter's bitter. If I
  - 4 put it in my batter, it will make my
  - 5 batter bitter. So Betty bought a bit
  - 6 of better butter to
  - 7
  - 8 Dara: You never heard
  - 9 that before?
  - 10 Max: No. Never
  - 11 Dara: Max, seriously?
  - 12 Max: Seriously.
  - 13 Dara: It's like the famous to
  - 14 Steph: tongue twister.
  - 15 Max: No. The famous tongue twister is
  - 16 Peterpiperpicked
  - 17 Dara: Same thing. It's like
  - 18 that. It's like that one.
  - 19 Max: You keep interrupting me.

Though Dara and Stephanie repeatedly cut each other off, there is no evidence that either resents the other's intrusions. Rather, they are supporting each other, jointly performing one conversational role—the common phenomenon that Falk (1980) calls a conversational duet. Though Max complains of being interrupted, the turn he has taken in 15–16 ("No. The famous tongue twister is Peterpiperpicked-") can easily be seen as an interruption of the girls' explanation, even though there is no overlap. In this interchange, the girls are trying to include Max in their friendly banter, but by insisting on his right to hold the floor without intrusions, he is refusing to be part of their friendly group, rejecting their bid for solidarity. It is therefore not surprising that Dara later told her mother that she didn't like Max. Although Dara does "interrupt" Max at 17 to tell him he's got the idea ("Same thing. It's like that."), there is no evidence that she is trying to dominate him. Further

more, though Dara and Stephanie intrude into each other's turns, there is no evidence that they are trying to dominate each other either.

An assumption underlying the interruption-as-dominance paradigm is that conversation is an arrangement in which one speaker speaks at a time. Posited as an operational tenet by the earliest work on turntaking (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), this reflects ideology more than practice. Most Americans *believe* one speaker *ought* to speak at a time, regardless of what they actually do. I have played back to participants tape recordings of conversations that they had thoroughly enjoyed when they participated in them, in which many voices were heard at once, only to find that they are embarrassed upon hearing the recording, frequently acting as if they had been caught with their conversational pants down.

My own research demonstrates that simultaneous speech can be "cooperative overlapping"—that is, supportive rather than obstructive, evidence not of domination but of participation, not power, but the paradoxically related dimension, solidarity. Applying the framework that Gumperz (1982) developed for the analysis of cross-cultural communication, I have shown apparent interruption to be the result of style contact—not the fault or intention of one party, but the effect of style differences in interaction.

In a two-and-a-half-hour Thanksgiving dinner conversation that I analyzed at length (Tannen 1984), interruptions resulted from conversants' differing styles with regard to pacing, pausing, and overlap. The conversation included many segments in which listeners talked along with speakers, and *the first speakers did not stop*. There was no interruption, only supportive, satisfying speaking together. For these speakers in this context, talking together was cooperative, showing understanding and participation. In the framework of politeness phenomena (Brown and Levinson 1987), overlaps were not perceived as violating speakers' negative face (their need not to be imposed on) but rather as honoring their positive face (their need to know that others are involved with them). It is an exercise not of power but of solidarity. The impres-

sion of dominance and interruption was not their intention, nor their doing. Neither, however, was it the creation of the imaginations of those who felt interrupted. It was the result of style contact, the interaction of two differing turn-taking systems.

I characterized the styles of the speakers who left little or no inter-turn pause, and frequently began speaking while another speaker was already speaking, as "high involvement" because the strategies of these speakers place relative priority on the need for positive face, to show involvement. When high involvement speakers used these (and other strategies I found to be characteristic of this style) with each other, conversation was not disrupted. Rather, the fast pacing and overlapping served to grease the conversational wheels. But when they used the same strategies with conversants who did not share this style, the interlocutors hesitated, faltered, or stopped, feeling interrupted and, more to the point, dominated. I characterized the style of these longer pause-favoring, overlap-aversant speakers as "high considerateness" because their strategies place relatively more emphasis on serving the need for negative face, not to impose.

I present here two examples to illustrate these two contrasting situations and the correspondingly contrasting effects of overlap on interaction. Example (4) shows overlapping that occurs in a segment of conversation among three high involvement speakers that has a positive effect on the interaction. Example (5) shows overlapping that occurs between high involvement and high considerateness speakers that results in mild disruption. Example (4) occurred in the context of a discussion about the impact of television on children. Steve's general statement that television has damaged children sparks a question by Deborah (the author) about whether or not Steve and his brother Peter (who is also present) grew up with television:<sup>5</sup>

- (4) 1 Steve: I think its basically done damage to  
2 children.... That what good it's  
3 done is ... outweighed by ... the

- 5 damage.
- 6 Deborah: Did you two grow up with  
7 television?
- 8 Peter: Very little. We had a tv in the  
9 quonset
- 10 Deborah: How old were you when your parents got  
11 it?
- 12 Steve: We had a tv but we didn't watch it  
13 all the time. .... We were very young.  
14 I was four when my parents got a  
15 TV.
- 16 Deborah: You were four?
- 17 Peter: I even remember that. ....
- 18 I don't remember /?/?/
- 19 Steve: I remember they got a TV before we  
20 moved out of the quonset huts. In  
21 1954.
- 22 Peter: I remember we got it in the  
23 quonset huts.
- 24 Deborah: [chuckle] You lived in quonset huts?  
25 .... When you were how old?  
.....
- 26 Steve: Yknow my father's dentist said to him  
27 "What's a quonset hut." ... And he said  
28 "God, you must be younger than my  
29 Children. .... He was. ....  
30 Younger than both of us.

This interchange among three high involvement speakers evinces numerous overlaps and latching (turn exchanges with no perceptible intervening pause). Yet the speakers show no evidence of discomfort. As the arrows indicate, all three speakers initiate turns that are latched onto or intruded into others' turns. Peter and Steve,

who are brothers, operate as a duet, much as Dara and Stephanie did in (3).

Note, for example, lines 8–15: Peter's statement in 8 that begins "We had a TV in the quonset" is cut off by my question: 10 "How old were you when your parents got it?" Prior to answering my question, Steve repeats the beginning of his brother's sentence and completes it: 12 "We had a TV but we didn't watch it all the time." This statement blends smoothly into an answer to my question: 13–15 "We were very young. I was four when my parents got a TV." The change in focus from completing Peter's previous statement to answering my question can be seen in the change from first-person plural in "We had a TV" to first person singular in "I was four when my parents got a TV," as well as in the change in focus from the children having a TV (repeated from Peter's unfinished statement) to the parents getting it (repeated from my question). That Steve finished another thought (the one picked up from his brother) before answering my question, and the smoothness of the transition from one to the other, is evidence that he did not find the overlapped question intrusive.

A similar, even more striking example of the cooperative effect of overlapping in this example is seen in 26–30, where Steve ignores my question: 24–25 "You lived in quonset huts? When you were how old?" in favor of volunteering a vignette about his father that the reference to quonset huts has reminded him of. Part of the reason he does not find my questions intrusive is that he does not feel compelled to attend to them. Finally, the positive effect of overlapping in this interchange was supported by the participants' recollections during playback.

In (5) overlapping and latching were asymmetrical and unintentionally obstructive. David, an American Sign Language interpreter, is telling about ASL. As listeners, Peter and I used overlap and latching to ask supportive questions, just as I did in (4). (Note that the questions, in both examples, show interest in the speaker's discourse rather than shifting focus.)<sup>6</sup>

(5) 1 David: So: and this is the one that's  
 2 Berkeley. This is the Berkeley ...  
 3 sign for .. "Christmas  
 4 Deborah: sign for .. Do you figure out those ...  
 5 those um correspondences? or do-  
 6 those um correspDavid: /?/  
 7 when you learn the signs, /does/  
 8 somebody tells you.  
 9 David: Oh you mean watching it? like  
 10 Deborah: Cause I can imagine  
 11 knowing that sign, ... and not ...  
 12 figuring out that it had anything to do  
 13 with the decorations.  
 14 ....  
 15 David: No. Y- you know that it has to do with  
 16 the decorations.  
 17 Deborah: 'Cause somebody tells  
 18 you? Or you figure it out.  
 19 David: No. Oh ...  
 20 You you talking about me, or a deaf  
 21 person.  
 22 Deborah: Yeah  
 23 You. You.  
 24 David: Me? Uh: Someone tells me, usually ...  
 25 But a lot of 'em I can tell. I mean  
 26 they're obvious. .... The better I get  
 27 the more I can tell. The longer I do  
 28 it the more I can tell what they're  
 29 talking about. ....  
 30 Deborah: Huh.  
 31 Without knowing what the sign is.  
 32 Deborah: That's interesting.  
 33 Peter: But

34 how do you learn a new sign?  
 ....  
 35 David: How do I learn a new sign?  
 36 Peter: Yeah. I  
 37 mean supposing ... Victor's talking and  
 38 all of a sudden he uses a sign for  
 39 Thanksgiving, and you've never seen it  
 40 before.

In this interchange, all Peter's and my turns are latched or overlapped on David's. In contrast, only two of David's seven turns overlap a prior turn; furthermore, these two utterances: an inaudible one at 6 and David's "No" at 19 are probably both attempts to answer the first parts of my double-barreled preceding turns (4-5 "Do you figure out those . . . those um correspondences?" and 17 "'Cause somebody tells you?"). David shows evidence of discomfort in his pauses, hesitations, repetitions, and circumlocutions.

During playback, David averred that the fast pace of the questions, here and elsewhere, caught him off guard and made him feel borne in upon. It is difficult for me to regard this interchange in the merciless print of a transcript, because it makes me look overbearing. Yet I recall my good will toward David (who remains one of my closest friends) and my puzzlement at the vagueness of his answers. The comparative evidence of the other example, like numerous others in the dinner conversation, makes it clear that the fast-paced, latching, and overlapping questions (which I have dubbed "machine-gun questions") have exactly the effect I intended when used with co-stylists: They are taken as a show of interest and rapport; they encourage and reinforce the speaker. It is only in interaction with those who do not share a high involvement style that such questions and other instances of overlapping speech create disruptions and interruptions.



As Scollon (1985) argues, whenever interactants have different habits with regard to pacing, length of inter-turn pause, and attitude toward simultaneous speech, unintended interruptions are inevitable because the speaker expecting a shorter pause perceives and fills an uncomfortable silence while the speaker expecting a longer pause is still awaiting a turn-signaling pause. This irritating phenomenon has serious consequences because the use of these linguistic strategies is culturally variable. It is no coincidence that the speakers in my study who had high involvement styles were of East European Jewish background and had grown up in New York City, whereas the speakers whose styles I have characterized as high considerateness were Christian and from California.

It is crucial to note that pacing, pausing, and attitude toward simultaneous speech have relative rather than absolute values. Characteristics such as "fast pacing" are not inherent values but result from the styles of speakers in interaction *relative to each other*. Whereas Californians in my study appeared to use relatively longer inter-turn pauses relative to the New Yorkers, Scollon and Scollon (1981) show that in conversations with midwestern Americans and Athabaskan Indians in Alaska, the Midwesterners become aggressive interrupters and Athabaskans their innocent victims, because the length of inter-turn pause expected by the midwesterners, while longer than that expected by Jewish New Yorkers, is significantly shorter than that expected by Athabaskans. In conversation with Scandinavians, most Americans become interrupters, but Swedes and Norwegians are perceived as interrupting by the longer pause-favoring and more silence-favoring Finns, who, according to Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985), are themselves divided by internal regional differences with regard to length of pausing and pacing. Labov and Fanshel (1977) claim that Rhoda, the 19-year-old psychotherapy patient in the therapeutic discourse they analyze, never ends her turn by falling silent. Rather, when she has said all she has to say, she begins to repeat herself, inviting the therapist to

take a turn by overlapping her. This is an effective device for achieving smooth turn exchange without perceptible inter-turn silence, a high priority for speakers of a conversational style that sees silence in conversation, rather than simultaneous speech, as evidence of conversational trouble. It is not coincidental that the therapeutic interaction analyzed by Labov and Fanshel took place in New York City between Jewish speakers.

Reisman (1974) was one of the first to document a culturally recognizable style in which overlapping speech serves a cooperative rather than obstructive purpose. He coined the term "contrapuntal conversations" to describe this phenomenon in Antigua. Watson (1975) borrows this term to describe Hawaiian children's jointly produced verbal routines of joking and "talk story." As part of these routines, "turn-taking does not imply individual performance" but rather "partnership in performance" (55). Moerman (1988) makes similar observations about Thai conversation. Hayashi (1988) finds far more simultaneous speech among Japanese speakers than among Americans. Shultz, Florio, and Erickson (1982) find that an Italian-American boy who is reprimanded at school for unruly behavior is observing family conventions for turn-taking that include simultaneous speech.

Lein and Brenneis (1978) compared children's arguments in three speech communities: "white American children in a small town in New England, black American children of migrant harvesters, and rural, Hindi-speaking Fiji Indian children" (299). Although they found no overlaps in the arguments of the black American children and only occasional overlaps in the arguments of the white American children, the Fiji Indian children evidenced a great deal of overlap, continuing for as long as 30 seconds. Lein and Brenneis do not interpret these as mishres or errors but as "deliberate attempts to overwhelm the other speaker" (307). Although not cooperative in the sense of supportive, this use of sustained overlap is cooperative in the sense of playing by rather than breaking rules.<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically (in light of the men-interrupt-women research), another group that has been described as favoring overlapping talk

in in-group conversation is women. One of the first to make this observation was Kalcik (1975). Edelsky (1981), setting out to determine whether women or men talked more in a series of faculty committee meetings, found that she could not tackle this question without first confronting the question of the nature of a conversational floor. She found two types of floor: a singly developed floor in which one person spoke and the others listened silently, and a collaboratively developed floor in which more than one voice could be heard, to the extent that the conversation seemed, at times, like a "free-for-all." Edelsky found that men tended to talk more than women in singly developed floors, and women tended to talk as much as men in collaboratively developed floors.<sup>8</sup> In other words, this study implies that women are more comfortable talking when there is more than one voice going at once.

The following excerpt (6) shows women in casual conversation overlapping in a highly cooperative and collaborative interchange. It is taken from a naturally occurring conversation recorded by Janice Hornyak, that took place at a kitchen table.<sup>9</sup> Peg is visiting relatives in Washington, D.C., where her daughter Jan now lives, and is confronting snow for the first time. Peg and Marge, who are sisters-in-law, reminisce for Jan's benefit about the trials of having small children who like to play in the snow:

- (6)
- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Peg: The part I didn't like was putting     |
| 2  | everybody's snow pants and boots            |
| 3  | and   |
| 4  | Marge: Oh yeah that was the worst part,     |
| 5  | Peg: and scarves                            |
| 6  | Marge: and get them all bundled up in boots |
| 7  | and everything and they're out for half     |
| 8  | an hour and then they come in and           |
| 9  | they're all covered with this snow and      |
| 10 | they get that <i>schlack</i> all over       |
| 11 | Peg: All that                               |

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 12 | wet stuff and                               |
| 13 | Jan: That's why adults don't like snow huh? |
| 14 | Marge: That's right.                        |
| 15 | Peg: Throw all the stuff in the dryer       |
| 16 | and then they'd come in and sit for         |
| 17 | half an hour                                |
| 18 | Marge: And in a little while they'd want    |
| 19 | to go back out again.                       |
| 20 | Peg: Then they want to go back out again.   |

As in the example of Steve, Peter, and me, all three speakers in this brief segment initiate turns that either lurch onto or intrude into other speakers' turns. Like Dara and Stephanie in (3) and Steve and Peter in (4), Peg and Marge jointly hold one conversational role, overlapping without exhibiting (or reporting) resentment at being interrupted. Furthermore, Hornyak points out that these speakers often place the conjunction "and" at the end of their turns in order to create the appearance of overlap when there is none, as seen, for example, in 11-12 Peg: "All that wet stuff and".<sup>10</sup>

It is clear, then, that many, if not most, instances of overlap—*at least in casual conversation among friends*—have cooperative rather than obstructive effects. And even when the effect of overlap is perceived to be obstructive, the intent may still have been cooperative.

ETHICAL OBJECTION: STEREOTYPING  
AND CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

When people who are identified as culturally different have different conversational styles, their ways of speaking become the basis for negative stereotyping. Anti-Semitism classically attributes the characteristics of loudness, aggressiveness, and "pushiness" to Jewish speakers. The existence of this stereotype hardly needs support, but I provide a brief example that I recently encountered. In describing a Jewish fellow writer named Lowentfels, Lawrence Durrell

wrote to Henry Miller, "He is undependable, erratic, has bad judgment, loud-mouthed, pushing, vulgar, thoroughly Jewish . . ." (Gornick 1988:47).

It is clear that the evaluation of Jews as loud and pushy simply blames the minority group for the effect of the interaction of differing styles.<sup>11</sup> Kochman (1981) demonstrates that a parallel style difference, which he calls the "rights of expressiveness" in contact with the "rights of sensibilities," underlies the stereotyping of community blacks as inconsiderate, overbearing, and loud. Finally, the model of conversation as an enterprise in which only one voice should be heard at a time is at the heart of misogynistic stereotypes as well. It is likely because of their use of cooperative overlapping in in-group talk that women are frequently stereotyped as noisily clucking hens.

#### GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

The juxtaposition of these two lines of inquiry—gender and interruption, on the one hand, and ethnicity as conversational style on the other—poses a crucial and troubling dilemma. If it is theoretically wrongheaded, empirically indefensible, and morally insidious to claim that speakers of particular ethnic groups are pushy and dominating because they appear to interrupt in conversations with speakers of different, more "mainstream" ethnic backgrounds, can it be valid to embrace research which "proves" that men dominate women because they appear to interrupt them in conversation? If the researchers who have observed that men interrupt women in conversation were to "analyze" my audiotapes of conversations among New York Jewish and Christian Californian speakers, they would no doubt conclude that the New Yorkers "interrupted" and "dominated"—the impression of the Californians present, but not, I have demonstrated, the intention of the New Yorkers, nor the effect of their conversational styles in in-group interaction. My brief analysis here and extended analysis elsewhere (Tannen

1984) make clear that the use of overlapping speech by high involvement speakers does not create interruption in interaction with other similar-style speakers. In short, the "research" would do little more than apply the ethnocentric standards of the majority group to the culturally different behavior of the minority group.

The research on gender and interruption presents a socio-linguistic parallel but a political contrast. Although not a minority, women are at a social and cultural disadvantage. This transforms the political consequences of blaming one group for dominating the other. Most people would agree that men dominate women in our culture, as in most if not all cultures of the world. Therefore many would claim (as do Henley and Kramarae 1988) that sociolinguists like Maltz and Borker (1982) and me (Tannen 1986) who view gender differences in conversation in the framework of Gumperz's (1982) paradigm for cross-cultural communication, are simply coping out—covering up real domination with a cloth of cultural difference. Though I am sympathetic to this view, my conscience tells me we cannot have it both ways. If we accept the research in one paradigm—the men-interrupt-women one—then we are forced into a position that claims that high involvement speakers, such as blacks and Jews and, in many circumstances, women, are pushy, aggressive, or inconsiderately or foolishly noisy.

Finally, given the interaction among gender, ethnicity, and conversational style, what are the consequences for American women of ethnic backgrounds characterized by high involvement conversational styles—styles perceived by other Americans as pushy, aggressive, and dominating? The view of conversational style as power from the men-interrupt-women paradigm yields the repugnant conclusion that many women (including many of us of African, Caribbean, Mediterranean, South American, Levantine, Arab, and East European backgrounds) are dominating, aggressive, and pushy—qualities, moreover, that are perceived as far more negative in women than in men. It was just such a standard that led Barbara Bush to label Geraldine Ferraro "the word that rhymes with rich"

when Ferraro spoke in ways accepted, indeed expected, in male politicians.

#### CONCLUSION

As a woman who has personally experienced the difficulty many women report in getting heard in some interactions with men, I am tempted to embrace the studies that find that men interrupt women: It would allow me to explain my experience in a way that blames others. As a high involvement-style speaker, however, I am offended by the labeling of a feature of my conversational style as loathsome, based on the standard of those who do not share or understand it. As a Jewish woman raised in New York who is not only offended but frightened by the negative stereotyping of New Yorkers and women and Jews, I recoil when scholarly research serves to support the stereotyping of a group of speakers as possessing negative intentions and character. As a linguist and researcher, I know that the workings of conversation are more complex than that. As a human being, I want to understand what is really going on. Such understanding, I conclude, remains to be delivered by discourse analysts concerned with investigating patterns of turn-taking in conversation.

#### AFTERWORD

My Chicago Linguistic Society paper (see unnumbered note) ends here, but the chapter entitled "Who's Interrupting? Issues of Dominance and Control" in *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* continues. Importantly, it includes two more examples taken from a short story entitled "You're Ugly, Too" by Lorrie Moore (1989), in which overlapping is not cooperative. In one example a man takes the floor from a woman by taking over the telling of a joke that she has already begun to tell. In the other, he changes the subject after she has announced her intention to tell a story. I added those examples to avoid the false impression that my inten-

tion was to deny that interruption exists, that overlap can be intended to interrupt, or that men can use interruption to silence women.

Since these examples are taken from literature rather than life, their status is somewhat different from that of excerpts from conversational transcripts. They are intended as illustrations of a type of interruption that can occur, not as proof that such interruption does occur, although I do not doubt that it does. The relevant passages are reproduced here. Whereas women's cooperative overlaps frequently annoy men by seeming to co-opt their topic, men frequently annoy women by usurping or switching the topic. An example of this kind of interruption is portrayed in "You're Ugly, Too," a short story by Lorrie Moore. The heroine of this story, Zoë, a history professor, has had an ultrasound scan to identify a growth in her abdomen. Driving home after the rest, she looks at herself in the rear-view mirror and recalls a joke:

She thought of the joke about the guy who visits his doctor and the doctor says, "Well, I'm sorry to say, you've got six weeks to live."

"I want a second opinion," says the guy. . . .

"You want a second opinion? OK," says the doctor. "You're ugly, too." She liked that joke. She thought it was terribly, terribly funny. (77)

Later in the story, at a Halloween party, Zoë is talking to a recently divorced man named Earl whom her sister has fixed her up with. Earl asks, "What's your favorite joke?" This is what happens next:

"Uh, my favorite joke is probably . . . OK, all right. This guy goes into a doctor's office, and—"

"I think I know this one," interrupted Earl, eagerly. He wanted to tell it himself. "A guy goes into a doctor's office, and the doctor tells him he's got some good news and some bad news—that one, right?"

"I'm not sure," said Zoë. "This might be a different version."

"So the guy says, 'Give me the bad news first,' and the doctor says, 'Ok. You've got three weeks to live.' And the guy cries, 'Three weeks to live! Doctor, what is the good news?'"

And the doctor says, 'Did you see that secretary out front? I finally fucked her.'"

Zoë frowned.

"That's not the one you were thinking of?"

"No." There was accusation in her voice. "Mine was different."

"Oh," said Earl. He looked away and then back again.

"You teach history, right? What kind of history do you teach?" (84)

When Earl interrupts Zoë, it is not to support her joke but to tell her joke for her. (To make matters worse, the joke he tells isn't just different; it's offensive.) When he finds out that his joke was not the same as hers, he doesn't ask her what hers was. Instead, he raises another topic entirely ("What kind of history do you teach?").

Most people would agree that Earl's interruption violates Zoë's speaking rights, because it came as Zoë was about to tell a joke and usurped the role of joke-teller. But note that Zoë yielded quickly to Earl's bid to tell her joke. As soon as he said, "some good news and some bad news," it was obvious that he had a different joke in mind, but instead of answering "No" to his question, "that one, right?" Zoë said, "I'm not sure. This might be a different version," supporting his bid and allowing for agreement where there really was disagreement. Someone who viewed conversation as a contest could have taken back the floor at this point, if not before. But Zoë seems to view conversation as a game requiring each speaker to support the other's words. It may be that Earl (or his real-life model) would have preferred if she had competed for the right to tell the joke instead of letting him go on when he hadn't really gotten it right.

Another part of the same story shows that it is not overlap that creates interruption but conversational moves that wrench a topic away from another speaker's course. Zoë feels a pain in her stomach

and excuses herself and disappears into the bathroom. When she returns, Earl asks if she's all right, and she tells him that she has been having medical tests. Rather than asking her about them, Earl gives her some food that had been passed around while she was in the bathroom. Chewing the food, she says, "With my luck, it'll be a gallbladder operation." Earl changes the subject: "So your sister's getting married? Tell me, really, what you think about love." Zoë begins to answer:

"All right. I'll tell you what I think about love. Here is a love story. This friend of mine—

"You've got something on your chin," said Earl, and he reached over to touch it. (89)

Although, like offering food, taking something off someone's face may take priority over talk, doing so just when she has started to tell a story seems like a sign of lack of interest in her story, and lack of respect for her right to continue it. Furthermore, this is not an isolated incident, but one in a series. Earl did not follow up Zoë's self-revelation about her health with questions or support, didn't offer advice, and didn't march her revelation with a mutual one about himself. Instead, he shifted the conversation to another topic—love—which he might have felt was more appropriate than a gallbladder operation for initiating a romantic involvement. (For the same reason, taking something off her chin may have been too good an opportunity for touching her face to pass up. Indeed, many of his moves seem to be attempts to steer the conversation in the direction of flirtation.)

NOTES

I presented the material included in this chapter in 1989 as an invited speaker at the 25th Annual Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society. The paper appears, almost exactly as it appears here, in the volume by the same name: *Papers from the 25th Annual Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society: Part Two*.



*Paratext on Language in Context*, ed. by Bradley Music, Randolph Graczyk, and Caroline Wiltshire, 266-87. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society. I have made only a few very minor changes and updated the references. This paper also provided the basis for a chapter entitled "Who's Interrupting? Issues of Dominance and Control" in *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. In developing the material for that book, I not only rewrote the paper in a style comprehensible to nonspecialists but also eliminated some parts of the argument and added others, including the part that appears as an afterword to the present chapter.

1. See James and Clarke (1993) for a critical review of the literature on gender and interruption.

2. Schegloff takes issue with Zimmerman's and West's imposition of gender as a category on transcripts in which there is no evidence that the participants' gender is a live issue. He does not, however, take issue with their definition and identification of interruptions.

3. There are other aspects of this excerpt that lead one to conclude this male speaker may be a conversational bully, other than the fact of interrupting to protect his property.

4. In the original publication of this chapter as well as in *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* I present this as Murray's example of a "prototypical" interruption. He has since corrected me, pointing out that he had noted that interpretations of this example vary.

5. Overlapping is shown by brackets; brackets with reverse flaps show latching. Two dots (· ·) indicate perceptible pause of less than a half second. Three dots indicate a half-second pause; each extra dot indicates an additional half second of pause. /e/ indicates indecipherable utterance. All the questions in (4) are spoken with fast pace and high pitch. Quonser hurs were temporary housing structures provided by the American government for returning veterans following World War II.

6. The question was posed whether David's discomfort was caused by his role as spokesperson for ASL. Although this may have exacerbated it, the pattern of hesitation exhibited in this excerpt is typical of many involving David and another participant, Chad, as shown in the longer study (Tannen 1984) from which these brief examples are taken.

7. It cannot be assumed that apparent conflict is necessarily truly agonistic. Corsaro and Rizzo (1990), for example, demonstrate that children in an Italian nursery school deliberately provoke highly ritualized, noisy disputes when they are supposed to be quietly drawing because, as the authors put it, they would rather fight than draw. Schiffrin (1984) demonstrates that apparent argument serves a sociable purpose among working-class Jewish speakers in Philadelphia.

8. Edelsky notes that her initial impression had been that women "dominated" in the collaboratively developed floors, but closer observation revealed they had not. This supports the frequently heard claim (for example Spender 1980) that when women talk as much as men they are perceived as talking more.

9. Hornyak recorded and analyzed this excerpt as part of her coursework in my discourse analysis class, spring 1989. I thank her for her data, her insights, and her permission to use them here.

10. Hornyak claims this is a family strategy which is satisfying and effective when used among family members but is often the object of complaint by non-family members when used with them. Though she thinks of this as a family strategy, I wonder whether it might not be a cultural one. The family is of Hungarian descent, and evidence abounds that cooperative overlapping is characteristic of many East European speakers.

11. No group is homogeneous; any attempt to characterize all members of a group breaks down on closer inspection. The high involvement style I refer to here is not so much Jewish as East European. German Jews do not typically exhibit such style, and of course many American Jews have either abandoned, modified, or never acquired high involvement styles.

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