

Gender Language

**~ Interruption and Overlapping: how to interpret the two
categories of simultaneous speech**

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1. Introduction

In 1922 the first piece in modern linguistics on "women's language" was published by Otto Jespersen, who is regularly referred to as "the father of linguistics"¹. He stated that "women talk too much, that they go round in circles, that they never finish their sentences"². Whereas Jespersen describes women as "*empty vessels that make the most noise*"³ modern linguists research if women lack some specific ingredient necessary for effective communication and why they are often not taken seriously as speakers.

Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, claims that "*there are gender differences in ways of speaking, and we need to identify them in order to avoid needlessly blaming*"⁴. These gender differences appear because of the fact that boys and girls are differently socialised. Women communicate for intimacy and to build community, while men use language for information and contest.⁵ Boys learn in childhood to maintain relationship primarily through their activities, so discussion for adult males becomes a kind of competition⁶. Within a conversation they often interrupt or overlap their interlocutors in order to gain the discussion floor. In a study by Zimmerman and West in 1975, for example, men were responsible for 96% of the interruptions⁷. Some people – mostly women – feel disturbed, stop talking and refuse to go on, others simply ignore the interruption or even feel supported and confirmed.

Being a very important linguistic feature interruption and overlapping are objects of many researches and studies. Also the paper on hand wants to deal with this phenomenon. It will examine to what extend an objection is an interruption rather than an overlapping and how one can categorise it. Questions like *what exactly is*

¹ Spender, p.1

² *ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Githens (e), p.1

⁵ Githens (a), p.1

⁶ Githens (e), p.2

⁷ Githens (b), p. 1

the difference between interruption and overlapping, what are the circumstances they appear in and how the interlocutors react to them, will be treated.

In the next chapter I would like to examine different linguistic strategies and with what intention and to what extent they are used by men and women. I will try to define and categorise different conversational styles so that I can go into detail with interruption and overlapping later on in chapters three and four. Attempts to find convenient definitions and examples for successful and unsuccessful overlappings are going to lead to get an answer to the question who interrupts who and if women are really the victims of interruption and overlapping.

The last point considered will be cross-cultural communication, how people from other cultures use conversational styles and to what extent they go along with interruption and overlapping.

2. Linguistic strategies and their occurrence within a conversation

According to Deborah Tannen and other linguists like Robin Lakoff, West and Zimmerman or Dale Spender, within a conversation one can find linguistic strategies such as indirectness, silence or volubility, topic raising, adversativeness and interruption or overlapping.

All of them do create or express dominance or subordination. They are ambiguous or polysemous with regard to dominance or subordination, which is referred to as power, and distance or closeness, which is referred to as solidarity. Power in this circumstance is a synonym for hierarchy and solidarity goes along with equality.

By the same reasoning a master who says, "It's cold in here," may expect a servant to make a move to close the window, but a servant who says the same thing is not likely to see his employer rise to correct the situation and make him more comfortable.⁸

As one can see in this example the "meaning" of any linguistics strategy can vary, context as well as conversational styles of the participants and the interaction of the participants' style and strategies must be considered. The most important factor to interpret different conversational strategies is the interactional purpose.

2.1. Indirectness

In her book "Language and women's place" Robin Lakoff identifies in 1975 two benefits of indirectness: defensiveness and rapport. The former means that the speaker do not want to go on record with an idea. By talking this way he will be able to disclaim, rescind or modify his statement if it does not meet with a positive response. The other benefit of indirectness is the rapport, which means "*the pleasant experience of getting one's way not because one demanded it (power) but because the other person wanted the same thing (solidarity)*"⁹.

Indisputable the widespread opinion is that women tend to use more indirect statements than men. Conley, O'Barr and Lind state in their essay "The power of language: Presentational style in the courtroom" that women's language is a really

⁸ Tannen (1996), p.33

powerless language. Their tendency to be indirect is the evidence that they do not feel entitled to make demands¹⁰.

But there are lots of situations where indirectness is a sign of power. A prosperous couple, for example, does not need to give direct orders to the servants. If the head of the house says "It's time to diner", the butler will provide the masters with the meal¹¹. The highest form of indirectness is to get somebody to do something without saying anything: Tannen gives the example of the host who rings the bell in order to get the maid to serve the meal¹².

Thus, indirectness is not in itself a sign of subordination, as claimed by Conley, O'Barr and Lind. The interpretation depends on the setting, on individuals' status and their relationship to each other.

Modern linguists, like for example Tannen, say that both men and women are indirect and they usually mean more than they put in words¹³. A very common example used by men and women are questions like "*Do you have a pen?*" or "*Do you know what time it is?*". We surely do not expect answers like "*Yes, I even have two!*" for the former or a simple "*Yes!*" for the latter.

Since women tend to use indirectness more often than men do there might be misunderstandings which result of the different usage of linguistic styles.

2.2. Silence vs. Volubility

Traditionally silence has been seen by linguists as simple boundary markers to highlight the beginnings and endings of speech patterns¹⁴.

Nowadays a widespread opinion is that powerful people talk and powerless ones are silent. Dale Spender assumed in 1980 that men dominate women by silencing them and Jennifer Coates notes in 1986 numerous proverbs that instruct women and children to be silent¹⁵.

⁹ Tannen (1996), p. 32

¹⁰ cited in Tannen (1996), p. 49

¹¹ Tannen (1998), p. 249

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Doran/Minion/Pitcher, p. 4

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ both cited in Tannen (1996), p. 36

A very good example for the assumption of Dale Spender is the following scene from Erica Jong's novel *Fear of Flying* where taciturnity is shown as an instrument of power.

"Why do you turn on me? What did I do?"
Silence
"What did I do?"
He looks at her as if her not knowing were another injury.
"Look, let's just go sleep now. Let's just forget it."
"Forget what?"
He says nothing.
. . .
"It was something in the movie, wasn't it?"
"What, in the movie?"
". . . It was the funeral scene. ... The little boy looking at his dead mother. Something got you there. That was when you got depressed."
Silence.
"Well, *wasn't* it?"
Silence.
"Oh come on, Bennett, you're making me *furious*. Please tell me. Please."¹⁶

To come back to the assumption that powerful people speak more than powerless ones, researchers have counted numbers of words spoken to demonstrate that men talk more than women and thereby dominate interactions.

But there are two things to say: firstly the association of volubility with dominance does not hold for an interview or interrogation, where the interrogator does little of the talking but holds all the power, and secondly volubility and taciturnity can result from style differences rather than speakers' intentions. There are cultural and subcultural differences in the length of pauses expected within and between speaking turns: the often cited antipathy between Nancy Reagan and Raissa Gorbatschowa resulted mostly from the different styles they used. Being American Nancy Reagan expected longer pauses between speaking turns in order to gain the floor whereas Raissa Gorbatschowa as Russian was used to shorter pauses and faster pacing¹⁷. A successful conversation was not possible because neither of them knew about the cultural differences of conversation strategies and so misunderstandings could not be avoided.

I will go more into detail in chapters three and four on interruption and overlapping.

¹⁶ cited in Tannen (1996), p. 37

2.3. Topic raising

Following a conversation where one person permanently raises a new topic may lead to the realisation that this person dominates the conversation. The effect of raising a new topic can also be an effect of differences in pausing and pacing. A speaker who is used to shorter pauses might think that the other person has nothing more to say on the topic and might contribute by raising another topic. But a speaker with the intention to say more and who was waiting for the appropriate turn-exchange pause could feel dominated.

Once again, different usage of style leads automatically to misunderstanding or even to an unsuccessful conversation.

2.4. Adversativeness or verbal conflict

Research on gender and language has found out that male speakers are more competitive and more likely to engage in conflict. Females present themselves cooperative and more likely to avoid conflict. Whereas men tend to take opposing stands women rather agree, support and make suggestions rather than commands.

Penelope Eckert found out in a 1990 research on high school students that the friendship of many boys began by fighting.¹⁸ Others studies found out that in many cultures of the world arguing is seen as a sign of intimacy.¹⁹

In her book "Gender and Discourse" Deborah Tannen gives the example of an conversation between a Greek woman and herself. The woman is complaining about a construction crew that illegally continued drilling and pounding through the siesta hour:

Deborah: You're right.

Stella: I am right. My dear girl, I don't know if I'm right or I'm not right.
But I'm watching out for my interests and my rights.²⁰

The response of Tannen to Stella's complaint was to support her by agreeing. But Stella disagrees with the agreement. She does not simply say "yes" or stop after "I am right" but reframes the statement in her own terms. In addition she uses the

¹⁷ Tannen (1998), p. 227

¹⁸ Tannen (1996), p. 44

¹⁹ *ibid.*

diminutive form "*My dear girl*", showing a kind of dominance because by saying this she is in superordinated position in comparison to Tannen.

This is one more example to show that both partners should know about the others' conversation strategy in order to avoid misunderstandings.

3. Interruption and overlapping: how to interpret the two categories of simultaneous speech

As this linguistic feature is one of the most important and one of the most remarkable in a conversation I would like to dedicate a separate chapter to it.

Many studies have already been made on this specific topic, the results often diverge whether women are "victims" of men's interruption or men have simply to defend themselves from over-talkative women.

In the following chapter I will examine the different features of men and women in a conversation, what exactly are interruptions and overlappings and how a talk can be successful despite of simultaneous speech. I will show with help of examples that interruption is not necessarily an attempt to disturb the interlocutor and that overlapping talk can be supportive rather than obstructive.

3.1. An attempt to define interruption and overlapping

There are many linguists who have already tried to define and to distinguish between the two features. West and Zimmerman, for example, define interruption as "a device for exercising power and control a conversation" and "*violations of speakers' turn at talk*"²¹. Schegloff stated in 1987 that interruption is a "*violation of the turn exchange system*", whereas overlapping is "*a misfire in it*"²². A third linguist, called Esposito, considered in 1979 that "*Interruption occurs when*

²⁰ Tannen (1996), p. 45

²¹ cited in Tannen (1996), p. 56

speaker A cuts off more than one word of speaker B's unit-type."²³ Leffler, Gillespie and Conaty do not make a distinction between interruption and overlapping, they include as interruptions *"all vocalisations 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."*²⁴ All these examples include words like *"violations"*, *"cut off"* or *"power and control"* which leads to the conclusion that interruption is something with a clearly negative and power-laden connotation. Also Tannen states that *"Affixing this label accuses a speaker of violating another speaker's right to the floor, of being a conversational bully"*²⁵.

On the other hand, the term "overlap" is, in principle, neutral. Linguists refer to it as *"two voices that are simultaneous"*²⁶. Tannen states that overlapping is *"beginning to make a sound while someone else is speaking."*²⁷ Whereas interruption is *"an interpretative, not a descriptive act"*²⁸, overlapping is a way to keep conversation going without risking silence. In her book "Talk from 9 to 5" Deborah Tannen explains a way how to distinguish between interruption and overlapping.

Whether an overlap becomes an interruption depends on whether or not there is a symmetry. If one speaker repeatedly overlaps and the other gives way, the communication is unbalanced and the effect is domination of that conversation. If both speakers avoid overlap, or if both speakers overlap each other and win out equally, there is a symmetry and no domination.²⁹

To examine whether it is a question of interruption or overlapping the researcher has to concern about the topic of the conversation, how long has each of the interlocutors already spoken, what kind of relationship do they have and how do they react to the other's interruption. Had the speaking rights been infringed or had simply the interlocutor the feeling that his rights had been violated. The most important point to consider is how does the interruption or overlapping belong to the actual topic: is it a support, a contradiction or even a change of topic. As much as the intention is necessary to consider there is also the reaction to it. Tannen

²² cited in Tannen (1996), p. 57

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ cited in Tannen (1996), p. 58

²⁶ Doran,/Minion/Pitcher, p. 1

²⁷ Githens (e), p. 2

²⁸ cited in Tannen (1996), p. 58

distinguishes between "high-involved" and "high-considerate" speakers³⁰. While the former tend to interrupt more often than the latter they also do not mind being overlapped because they will yield to an intrusion on the conversation if they feel like it and put off responding or ignore it completely if they do not.³¹ Thus, a support can be seen as an attack and a change of topic can be a hidden support. Examples for both possibilities I will show later on.

3.2. Who interrupts – men women, vice versa or both to the same degree?

To answer this question one must make the distinction between what Tannen refers to as "rapport-talk" and "report-talk". Women use language to establish a community while men use language to fight battles.³² They concentrate on facts and do rarely use fillers like adjectives, intensifiers, tag questions or lexical hedges, all of them linguistic features that classify women's language.³³

Both men and women claim being interrupted but they complain about different behaviours: women claim that men often interrupt them by changing the topic, men feel interrupted when women support them with minimal responses such as "mmh", "yeah" or "right".

A possible explanation for the "men-interrupt-women paradigm"³⁴ is the different socialisation of boys and girls.³⁵ There are games for girls and games for boys. In mixed-sex interaction girls have to get used to being the weaker sex that is always defeated – within the game as well as concerning the language. So first girls and later women get also used to being interrupted.

Another point to consider is the already mentioned distinction between "high-involved" and "high-considerate" speakers. As previously pointed out (cf.³¹) the latter's only goal is not disturb the interlocutor, not to push himself to the fore front

²⁹ cited in Doran,/Minion/Pitcher, p. 2

³⁰ Githens (e), p.2

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Tannen (1998), p.230

³³ Holmes (1992), p. 314

³⁴ Tannen (1996), p. 73

³⁵ cf. Tannen (1998), pp. 40-46

and to be as much considerate as possible. The high-involved speaker wants to show as much enthusiastic involvement as practicable. They tend to interrupt more but they do not have the intention to cut off the others. They simply have the feeling that an opinion or objection cannot wait for the convenient moment. A high-considerate speaker surely feels disturbed and sees the floor taken away.³⁶

One cannot make the distinction between men and women interrupting each other. Researchers rather found differences between high-involved and high-considerate speakers. Even though women tend to be more high-considerate this cannot serve as a generalisation.

3.3. Justified and unwarranted interruptions

There often occur interruptions and overlapping that seem not to be disturbances in a conversation whereas others seem to be justified but that are in fact real confusions. With help of the following two examples I will try to point out that it is not always that obvious and lots of facts have to be considered.

The first dialog is an example for an interruption, which is on the second look rather an overlap.

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 chan[ge that]

Male: [Don't] touch that
(1.2)

Female: What?
(#)

Male: I've got everything jus'how I want it in that notebook (#)
you'll screw it up lea-fin' through it like that.³⁷

West and Zimmerman consider this as being an interruption because the second speaker starts speaking while the first one was in the middle of a word³⁸, whereas Tannen looks at it as being procedural rather than substantive.³⁹ Looking at the context it obviously is an overlapping because the female speaker is not infringed

³⁶ Tannen (1998), p.215

³⁷ Tannen (1996), p. 58

³⁸ cited in Tannen (1998), p. 209

³⁹ Tannen (1996), p. 58

in her speaking rights. The male speaker felt disturbed because his notebook was going to be disordered and there seems to be no reason why he should wait for a suitable syntactical and rhetorical moment for interrupting.

The second example is a real interruption while there are also some discussions about priorities of host offering something to eat. But let us first look at the dialog.

H: I think [that
W: [Do you want some more salad?⁴⁰

According to Harvey Sacks offering food takes priority at a dinner table, and is heard not as an interruption but an aside.⁴¹ The host has the right or even the duty to offer something to eat, no matter if there is a conversation or not. If he would wait for the appropriate moment where nobody is speaking anymore all his guests would leave hungry and disappointed. But not every moment someone offers something to eat is the appropriate moment - imagine a host who regularly interrupts at the climax of a joke or an anecdote.⁴² Whether speaker two in the above example feels interrupted or not surely depends on cultural and individual differences. One could feel disturbed and refuse to continue to talk because the offering was not that necessary to announce in this very second, whereas another does not care about it and continues speaking while nodding to show an agreement.

3.4. Interruption without overlapping and Overlapping without interruption

Within a conversation it occurs that two speakers begin to talk at the same time but they do not feel interrupted. On the other hand it might also occur that an overlap is seen as an interruption and intrusion in the personal speaking rights.

In the transcript of a dinner table conversation by Alice Greenwood⁴³ the twins Denise and Dennis and their sister Stacey want to explain a joke to Mark, a friend of Dennis. In the course of the conversation there are lots of interruptions and overlappings. The two girls form a *conversational duet*, a kind of co-operation

⁴⁰ Tannen (1996), p. 59

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Tannen (1998), p. 210

⁴³ cited in Tannen (1998), p. 211f.

which ensues and the effect is often a show of solidarity for the first speaker's ideas. The sisters overlap by supporting and completing each other without getting angry or insulted. This co-operative overlapping is more likely to occur in casual conversation among social equals, especially among friends than in a more formal encounter where there is the norm of "one-voice-at-time"⁴⁴

To come back to the transcript, when their brother Dennis latched into the conversation in order to offer Mark something to eat Denise heavily protested: "*Listen, listen, listen, listen*". The German translation: "Hör mir doch mal zu, hör zu." is again much stronger. [remark T.T.]

This leads to the conclusion that overlapping among good friends is not seen as an interruption as long as it is a support or a completion. As soon as somebody wants to gain the floor by switching to another topic, even if it is something of priority as it is the case in the example of offering some food, the overlap is seen as an infringement of the speaking rights.

3.5. Successful co-operative overlapping: harmony among co-stylists

The following transcript is a conversation between three friends. The discussion is about the impact of television on children. All of the speakers are high-involved ones but this does not seem to have a negative effect on the interaction. Steve's general statement is that television has damaged children. Deborah, author of the book "You just don't understand", raises the question whether Steve and Peter grew up with television.⁴⁵

1	Steve:	I think it's 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?]

⁴⁴ Doran,/Minion/Pitcher, p. 2

⁴⁵ cited in Tannen (1996), p.63f.

→ 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.

The interchange evinces numerous overlaps and latching, turn exchanges with no perceptible intervening pause. Among high-involved speakers these two effect occur constantly without any signs of discomfort or anger. Rather the contrary is the case: the conversation seems to be very successful. There are no or very short pauses, turn-exchanges are very fast and many information are exchanged. The overlappings and interruptions are symmetrical and all parts win out equally. Interjections have the effect that they show interest and rapport and that they support and reinforce the speaker. All involved speakers agree that overlapping is a way to keep conversation going without risking silence.

In line 10 Deborah clearly interrupts with the question "*How old were you...*". Steve totally ignores this question, goes on with his sentence, hesitates in line 13 and finally answers in line 14. In line 17 Peter thinks of something in the past as the dots indicate. After a short break he tries to continue by repeating his sentence but is interrupted by Steve. Inspired by Peter he seems to remember something in his childhood and as a high-involved speaker he cannot wait until Peter has finished his turn. In Steve's view he supports Peter by telling an anecdote that obviously had forgotten. In line 22 Peter supports Steve by latching with "*I remember we got it in the quonset house*" which is to correct Steve's affirmation. He though does not get angry but accepts the correction by saying nothing. Peter and Steve work as a

conversational duet. Being brothers they answers the questions of Deborah, an outstanding person, together because it concerns their both childhood.

This examples proves that a conversation can be successful as long as all involved speakers use the same conversation strategies. Thereby is does not matter whether the participants are high-involved or high-considerate speakers.

3.6. Unsuccessful co-operative overlapping: difficulties with different styles

In the following example it is shown that divergence in the use of linguistics strategies automatically leads to an unsuccessful conversation where at least one part feels uncomfortable. The next transcript is a conversation between David, an American Sign Language interpreter who is telling about ASL, and the two listeners Peter and Deborah, again the author of the already mentioned book "You just don't understand". As in the above example Deborah raises questions to show interest but with David as a high-considerate speaker this seems to create disruptions and interruptions.⁴⁶

- (5)
- | | | | |
|---|----|----------|---|
| | 1 | David: | So: and this is the one that's |
| | 2 | | Berkeley. This is the Berkeley ... |
| | 3 | | sign for .. [Christmas |
| → | 4 | Deborah: | [Do you figure out those .. |
| | 5 | | those um correspondences? [or do- |
| → | 6 | David: | [/?/ |
| | 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. ... |

⁴⁶ cited in Tannen (1996), p. 66f.

Finally one can state that the most important factor for a successful conversation is the use of the same linguistic and conversational strategies. Co-stylist of high involvement interpret interruption and overlapping as support and reinforcing whereas interlocutors with different styles disharmonies and at least one part feels uncomfortable and does not see a sense in the interaction.

4. Examples of cross-cultural differences in interruption and overlapping

Tannen considers conversations between men and women not only as cross-gender language but also as cross-cultural language. Men and women are socialised to use language for different reasons – men for exchanging information, women for building up a community. These purposes are so different and the styles men and women use are so divergent that one can refer to it as cross-cultural exchange.⁴⁸

In my last chapter will have a short look at "real" cross-cultural communication and how people with other life styles treat the phenomenon overlapping and interruption.

People from different cultures may follow a different conversation norm and can have different conversational styles.⁴⁹ There overlapping or interruption can be a very important part. Within a cross-cultural conversation different styles can lead to misinterpretations, miscommunication and this can even result in negative cultural evaluations and stereotyping.⁵⁰

4.1. Overlapping in cross-cultural conversation

In his field study Xudong Deng states that Chinese are relatively high involved and interruptive in conversation. They do not only interrupt more but they also overlap in a more marked way. Following Ulijin & Li he suggests that Chinese communicate this way as a matter of their of convention of their language and

⁴⁸ Githens (a), p. 1

⁴⁹ Deng, p.1

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

culture.⁵¹ In comparison to Australian speakers Chinese achieve their involvement by starting their overlap midway in the other speaker's utterance and dropping out quickly when overlap occurs. Australians, on the other hand, signal their involvement by starting their overlap at a possible completion point but preserve through the overlap with their conversation partners.⁵²

4.2. Interruption in cross-cultural conversation

In Tannen's studies and researches New Yorker Jews always occur as very high-involved speakers who do rarely cede the conversation floor. They often interrupt and do not always have an obvious reason to overlap their interlocutors. Their intention is shown as being not only high-involved but also quite obstructive.

Americans, too, are highly involved but also used to longer pauses between turn-exchanges. If we remember the example of Nancy Reagan and Raissa Gorbatschowa (cf. page 5), there the American Nancy Reagan waited for an appropriate pause to gain the floor but Raissa Gorbatschowa as being Russian used only very short pauses.

Furthermore researchers found out that for example French interrupt more than Americans do and that there are hardly differences in the frequencies of overlap and interruption by Italian and British speakers.

As a conclusion I would say that there are many cultural differences not only concerning interruption and overlapping. If the participants of a conversation are not aware of these differences it may lead to misunderstandings or even to unsuccessful communications. In important business talks the interlocutors should know about possible divergences in order to get a successful interaction where all involved speakers are equal and do not leave disappointed because they could not say what they wanted to.

⁵¹ Deng, p. 3

⁵² Deng, p. 6

5. Conclusion

Books entitled like "Gender and Discourse", "Women in their speech community", "That's not what I meant" or "You just don't understand – Men and women in conversation" make clear that there is obviously a difference between men and women and their conversational styles.

Up to now the male features are taken as the norm. While women are often asked why they hesitate, why they are indirect and why they always seem to be uncertain, men's language and its different features are beyond criticism. It is never asked why men use silence to dominate women (cf. page 4), why they tend to raise topics much more often than women do and why they use a conversation to change simply information and to contest instead of building up intimacy and community.

A possible explanation for all this lays in the evolution and the different tasks for men and women. Men always had to fight and win against others while women should support and reinforce them. Up to the middle of the 20th century boys and girls were differently socialised, i.e. boys began friendships with fighting and women get used to being interrupted. Later as adults men had to maintain in business and women had to support them by agreeing.

Today this image has changed a lot. Also women are successful in business and career and there is no reason anymore not to see them as equal partners. While writing this paper I came to the conclusion that nowadays women are from being victims of interruptions and overlappings by men. If one wants to make a distinction this is rather between high-involved and high-considerate speakers than between men and women. While women tend to be more considerate than involved they are in fact more interrupted but I think in the course of the nowadays emancipation this phenomenon will regress.

Features such as successful or unsuccessful overlapping up to uncooperative overlapping will always occur within a conversation. The reasons therefore lay in different conversational styles due to different genders as well as different cultures. The best attempt to reach a successful conversation is to inform the participants about possible divergences in order to avoid misunderstandings and disappointments – within a business talk as well as within a private partnership.

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