

Gender Differences in Mixed-Sex Conversations

A Study of Interruptions

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Aim and Scope	3
1.2 Material	3
1.3 Method	4
2. Theoretical Background	5
2.1 Conversation and gender-differentiated perception of conversation	5
2.2 Gender-differentiated communicative competence	6
2.2.1 Turn-taking in conversation	7
2.2.2 Interruption in conversation	8
2.3 Other factors that may cause interruptions	9
2.4 Identification and interpretation of interruptions	11
3. Analysis	15
3.1 Information and details about the transcriptions	16
3.2 The identification of interruptions in this study	17
3.3 The functional categories of interruptions	18
3.3.1 Exemplifying functional categories of interruptions	20
3.3.2 Uncertain cases of interruption found in the conversations	22
3.4 Gender difference in the use of interruptions in the conversations	24
3.4.1 Comparisons made between the male and female speakers in the use of neutral and rapport-related interruptions	26
3.4.2 Comparisons made between the male and female speakers in the use of dominance-related interruptions	28
4. Conclusion	32

List of References

1. Introduction

With the growth and the development of the feminist movement in America in the 1960s, language and gender as a field has been the research topic of some interest within sociolinguistics. The concentration has shifted from being on the form of the language, such as pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax to the gender-differentiation in conversational strategies, discourse style, and other areas of study. Linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, and even psychologists notice the difference between the genders in daily communication and try to seek explanations hidden behind from different perspectives.

Conversation as social interaction among people is a necessity of everyday life. The language used by conversational participants is a kind of embodiment of people's thoughts, thus it inevitably reflects and maintains gender differences and even social inequalities. People can sense hierarchical structures in conversations which again contribute to perpetuate them by simultaneously providing the means through which that inequality is maintained. It is well acknowledged in folk linguistics that males and females have different communicative competence and that they tend to adopt different conversational strategies to accomplish interactional goals. This is to say that they have different knowledge of the appropriateness of an interaction, which means when to interact and how to interact correctly and appropriately. Stenstrom claims that "spoken interaction is a joint, here-and-now social activity which is governed by two main principles: speakers take turns and speakers cooperate" (Stenstrom, 1994:1). To put it more simply the smoothness of the conversation somewhat depends on the strategies adopted by the participants.

An important factor of successful conversation is whether the participants adhere to the ideal model of the conversational turn-taking system, which means one speaker speaks at a time. A turn is the basic form of conversation which presupposes a shift of speakers. Participants normally try to keep smooth speaker shifts to make conversation going. However, in a specific stretch of talk, people often violate the turn-taking aspect of conversation. It is quite a common phenomenon for a speaker to interrupt the current speaker and so obtain the speaking right, that is to say one simply takes the turn when one wants to speak, regardless of whether the current speaker has stopped

speaking or not, as in the following example.

[a brother and sister are discussing wild rice]

*Anna: wild rice is nice/ you 've never tasted it **so (xx)-***
*Bill: _____ **well the** Indians*

Anna:
Bill: don't eat it so why the bloody hell should you?

Anna: they probably do/
Bill: _____ they don't/

(from Coates, 1993: 114)

Note: (xx) indicated words at this point were impossible to decipher; boldfaced part indicated overlapping

Here the interrupter Bill prevents the speaker Anna from finishing her turn, at the same time gaining a turn for himself.

A frequently pointed to finding is that in mixed-sex conversations men interrupt women more frequently than women do men. James and Clarke (1993) quote several researchers who support the assumption and one of whom is Rosenblum (1986) who states that men are more likely to interrupt and overlap women's speech than the reverse. Empirical research has provided considerable evidence suggesting that women prefer a collaborative speech style to show their support and to achieve closeness and solidarity, while men on the other hand tend to pursue a more competitive style to show their individuality and dominance in conversations. Gender differences in communicative style lead to women's and men's different adoption of strategies to achieve their different conversational goals. Thus women tend to avoid interrupting other speakers while men tend to grab the conversational floor to interrupt the flow of the conversation or to control topics.

However, previous studies pay much attention to and oversimplify the difference of gendered talk, and enhance the stereotype towards women. Conversational strategy mirrors the difference in conversation style which can be explained in terms of gender, culture and context. That is to say, apart from gender the style differences in male and female conversations are also constrained by such factors as for instance setting, topic, role relationships and socio-cultural conventions. Therefore, male and female conversational styles are relative, interactive and pluralistic. Only from a socio-

cultural and situational perspective can people better locate and interpret gender differences in mixed-sex conversation. What is more, language changes with society and the gender-related differences seem to be diminishing. Unlike some earlier linguists who thought that the females were in an inferior position in cross-gender communication and that men were dominant and powerful while women were submissive and powerless, some modern sociolinguists believe instead that with the development of society and culture, the female's status has been changing day by day. So has been women's status in cross-gender communication as seen from the point of view of conversation strategies. Empirical evidence about the turn-taking and interruptions in mixed-sex conversation is somewhat contradictory as regards some hypotheses and stereotypes. This is to say, the conversational situation is complex and therefore far from straightforward to analyze. As a consequence overemphasizing the difference of cross-gender communication without taking a lot of variables into account will lead to the gender stereotype.

1.1 Aim and Scope

The aim of the study is to investigate informal face-to-face English conversations in the TV-series *Friends* in order to find out whether there exist any differences or similarities between the male and female speakers as regards turn-taking in mixed-sex conversations with a particular focus on interruptions.

1.2 Material

The primary material used in the present investigation consists of three transcripts of informal, face-to-face conversations taken from the famous American TV sitcom *Friends*. Three transcriptions chosen randomly are: Season I episode 2 which lasts 24:21; Season V episode 2 which lasts 25:10 and Season X episode 1 which lasts 30:05. Both transcriptions of the chosen episodes and the counterpart scenes of video recording are relied on to identify the phenomenon of interruptions.

Mixed-gender conversations involving at least one man and at least one woman have been selected and analyzed in the episodes. In each chosen episode the total length of mixed-gender conversations including at least one person of the six main characters that are three males and three females named Ross, Chandler, Joey, Rachel, Monica,

Phoebe is roughly the same - 22:43, 22:30 and 23:10 respectively.

As one of the most popular TV-series all over the world, the language used in *Friends* is realistic, resembling and to a large extent reflecting real life conversations. The conversations can be assumed to be the representative of spontaneous, informal interaction by speakers of Standard English.

1.3 Method

A detailed and careful reading of the written transcripts of the selected episodes lies at the foundation of the present analysis. In addition a close watching of the sitcom has also been conducted. Every mixed-sex conversational fragment involving at least one person of the main six characters in each episode has been singled out and timed and the time has been added up to get the total length of the mixed-sex conversation in each episode. Three seasons have been chosen which have roughly the same length in time based on the recorded time of the mixed-sex conversation as the material. The transcriptions of the three chosen seasons have been studied in detail and analyzed carefully in order to identify every phenomenon of interruption produced by the participants in each mixed-sex conversation. Interruptions caused by non-verbal signals such as eye gaze and gestures are excluded from this study.

As mixed-sex conversations involve two or more participants there exist interruptions conducted by male speakers to other male speakers or female speakers, but also those conducted by female speakers to other female speakers or male speakers. A particular focus has been on finding out the number of different kinds of interruptions made by both male and female speakers. Furthermore the number of interruptions with competitive and cooperative intention has been compared in order to see whether there are any differences or similarities between men and women as to the use of these two types of conversational behavior as well as the distribution of interruptions in relation to the different genders. Finally, possible reasons as to what creates and constitutes interruption concerning the relationships, the social status, and the age of speakers together with contexts in conversation and women's and men's choice of certain conversation strategies have been speculated about and explored.

2. Theoretical Background

In the area of language and gender, the discussion about the form and function of interruptions has been a central issue. Interruption as a kind of linguistic phenomenon in conversation has received a great deal of attention in recent years which is primarily due to the fact that interruption deals with the operationalization of dominance in conversation, among other things. The research on interruption can help to release the gender differentiation in adopting communicative strategy. It touches on a major topic of feminist research, that is, the analysis and change of power imbalance between men and women.

2.1 Conversation and gender-differentiated perception of conversation

It is known to all that conversation is a social activity; it is a spoken interaction involving at least two or more people. Some linguists view conversation as work, which indicates that conversation is not something casual which can be engaged in spontaneously and without much conscious effect as most people think. As Graddol and Swann (1989) point out that conversation can be regarded as a structured activity that the talk has to be sequenced, effectively opened and brought to a close. To keep a conversation going, participants should follow certain rules such as for example aspects like what one is supposed to say, when it is appropriate to say it, how to continue the current topic or talk on a topic exactly about what is under communication and also how to relate to the turn-taking system. From this perspective, conversation is a cooperative endeavor. Conversation can be the establishment and maintenance of relationship between speakers. Through talk people can express intimacy or show respect, friendliness or hostility.

When gender is taken into consideration, conversations exhibit different functions to men and women. According to Tannen (1992), to men, as they are in a hierarchical social order in which they are either one-up or one-down, conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from other's attempts to put them down and push them around. This view seems to express that life is a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure. But from the perspective of women, as an individual in a network of connections, conversations are negotiation of closeness in which people try to protect

themselves from others' attempts to push them away. Life is a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation.

2.2 Gender-differentiated communicative competence

In mixed-sex conversations, communication can be a continual balancing act, juggling the conflicting needs for intimacy and independence, because women and men tend to develop differentiated communicative competence to achieve their interactional goals. Evidence from a range of studies shows that gender differences in communicative competence are presented in male and female speakers' different use of particular conversational strategies. A lot of research confirmed the stereotype that women tend to adopt the cooperative while men competitive conversational strategies. There may be a general explanation for the gender-differentiated tendencies. Coates quote Cheshire and Trudgill's claim (Coates, 2004:126):

It seems clear that, other things being equal, women and men do have a preference for different conversational style. Women---in most western societies at least--- prefer a collaborative speech style, supporting other speakers and using language in a way that emphasizes their solidarity with the other person. Men, on the other hand, use a number of conversational strategies that can be described as a competitive style, stressing their own individuality and emphasizing the hierarchical relationships that they enter into with other people.

It is known to all that in order to carry out a conversation participants should introduce conversational topics and pursued (or, of course, dropped). However the US researcher Fishman (1983) suggested that topics have different survival rates depending upon whether they are introduced by women or men. The success rate of topics initiated by men is much greater than that by women. Women tend to elaborate on the topics initiated by men. While men are being addressed, they tend to adopt non-cooperative strategies to undermine the current speaker and reinforce their dominance by using uncooperative feedback signals such as delayed minimal responses or even silence to show a lack of interest indifference and impatience and tend to interrupt to change topics to their favor. While women do not have the intention to dominate as men do even when they are well informed of the topic and can be called as an expert of the field under discussion, according to Coates (2004). Instead, women tend to be facilitative and supportive conversationalists and to respond positively to their

addressees by accommodating their speech. They tend to use interactional styles based on solidarity and support to build on the others' contributions and develop the topic and keep the conversation going. What is more compared to men, women tend to use greater politeness devices which can be regarded as another aspect of their consideration of the addressee.

Fishman (1983) also claims that women and men do have unequal distribution of work in conversation. Women do most supportive work while men are talking and women generally do active maintenance and continuation work in conversations. That is to say, men tend to dominate conversations.

2.2.1 Turn-taking in conversation

According to Coates (2004), conversational dominance is the phrase used to refer to the phenomenon of a speaker dominating others in interaction. Brown (1993:155) claims that interactional antagonism is carried out to a large extent in breakdowns and manipulations of the turn-taking rules. That is to say when a speaker is described as dominating conversation, it usually means that he or she is in some way breaking the underlying rules of the turn-taking model – one speaker speaks at a time, and speaker change recurs.

The organization of talk is often regarded as turn-taking. A turn is everything the current speaker says before the next speaker takes over (Brown, 1993:155). Stenstrom (1994) claims that what people say in a turn may start a conversation and may keep it going or terminate it. By producing certain utterance, the addressers should try to make the addressees understand and expect response in one way or another; otherwise there would be no conversation. That is to say, the turn is part of the structural organization of the conversation, and what is said is part of the interactional and pragmatic strategies adopted by the speakers to make the listeners understand their intention. According to Graddol & Swann (1989:77) that people take turns at speaking is in fact an achievement requiring considerable skill. As the gap between two speaking turns is often very short, the listeners should be aware of the appropriateness that the current speaker is likely to finish speaking and a new turn can legitimately begin, thus rapid and smooth transitions can be achieved. That is to say, listeners should predict transition-relevance places – points where a sequence is grammatically

complete, and at which it might be reasonable for a turn to end. However information conveyed by words can not be interpreted the same by the addressee as the addresser expected because the string of words produced can have more than one meaning. One speaking turn may contain several transition-relevance places; listeners may cut in the stream of the current speaker in the wrong position. So some unintentional or intentional irregularities will occur in spontaneous conversation. It is very common that speakers do not keep to the one-at-a-time rule. Actually a conversation without any simultaneous speech indicating receipt of information agreement and involvement is not a very spontaneous lively or personal conversation. According to Stenstrom (1994), a smooth speaker shift is an ideal case that is speakers wait for each other to stop talking before starting to speak but unsmooth speaker shift is quite common that is one party takes over without waiting for the other to stop talking and part of what one speaker says overlaps with part of the other says or s/he is simply cut off. After quantitative study, Zimmerman and West (1975) labeled the two sorts of irregularity they identified in the transcribed conversations as overlaps and interruptions. Overlaps are instances of slight over-anticipation by the next speaker, that is to say the next speaker begins to speak at the very end of the current speaker's turn, overlapping the last word (or part of it). Overlaps are often caused by the use of minimal responses which often signal involvement in the conversation; while interruptions are violations of the turn-taking rules of conversation, that is to say, the next speaker begins to speak while the current speaker is still speaking.

2.2.2 Interruption in conversation

Interruption is often described as evil intention to cut the flow of the current speaker's speech and to grab the floor to make one's own points. According to Stenstrom (1994:73), there are three most obvious reasons for interruptions in a conversation: speaker B is under the impression that speaker A has nothing more to say; speaker B feels he or she is well informed and speaker A need not elaborate on the topic; speaker B wants to speak at a particular point in the ongoing talk before it is too late. All these reasons can lead to competitive talks and tend to break the symmetry of the conversational model: the interrupter prevents the speaker from finishing her or his turn, at the same time gaining a turn for her-/himself.

Actually interruptions are regarded as the most unambiguous linguistic strategy that

helps to achieve dominance, since to interrupt someone is to deprive them – or at least to attempt to deprive them – of the right to speak. In mixed-sex conversation, it is men who tend to dominate especially when they are with great knowledge of the topic discussed. They dominate conversations by interrupting, hogging the floor and even controlling the topic development.

According to Zimmerman and West (1975:116), based on their analysis of eleven mixed-sex conversations, only two of the total forty-eight interruptions were caused by women and women used no overlaps in conversation with men while men performed nine overlaps. These again indicate that in mixed-sex conversations, men infringe women's right to speak, especially women's right to finish a turn, while women are concerned not to violate the man's turn but to wait until he's finished. In a more recent study (reported in West and Zimmerman, 1983) the researchers found that the men interrupted more often than the women (the average was 75 per cent male interruptions to 25 per cent female). West and Zimmerman (1983) concluded that the gender of participants has more important conversational consequences and that interruptions are one way on which power relations may be worked out. Their findings have been supported by many studies followed.

2.3 Other factors that may cause interruptions

Early linguists seem to consider gender as the only factor that influence speakers' use of interruptions. However after the substantial research has been conducted, it is well acknowledged that rather than gender *per se*, there are other variables which have an impact on the use of interruptions including the context of conversation, the relative status of participants, the role of participants and the possible relationship between the participants and others. Most researchers drew this conclusion that men interrupt women by recording conversations and counting instances of interruption without taking the following into account: what's the topic being discussed, what's the intention of the speakers', what are the reactions to the each other, and what effect the interruption has on the conversation.

Linguists Deborah James and Sandra Clarke (1993) did not find a clear pattern of males interrupting females. Actually more interruptions not less are found in all-female conversations than in all-male conversations. Tannen (1994) claims that in

order to understand this pattern, it is necessary to ask what the speakers are doing when they talk over other speakers; does the interruption show support for the other speaker, or does it contradict or change the topic? Some speakers consider talking along with another to be a show of enthusiastic participation in the conversation; others assume that only one voice should be heard at a time, so for them any overlap is an interruption, an attempt to wrest the floor, a power play. Thus to understand whether an overlap is an interruption, one must consider the context, the speaker's habitual styles, and the interactions of their styles (for example, an interruption is more likely to occur between speakers whose styles differ with regard to pausing and overlapping).

Coates (2004) based on the study found that in the context of family, fathers tend to interrupt more than mothers and both parents tend to interrupt girls more than boys. It seems that fathers try to control conversation more than mothers, and both parents try to control conversation more with daughters than with sons.

Norman Fairclough (1989) describes the exercise of power in a type of 'face-to-face' discourse where participants are unequal ---what might be called an unequal or asymmetrical encounter. From an extract by a male doctor and a group of medical students, a striking feature can be found--- the number of times the doctor interrupts the students. On the basis of examples of that sort, it seems that powerful participants tend to control and constrain the contributions of non-powerful participants by interrupting and taking the turn. It seems that it is social status that matters in the control of the conversation. Graddol & Swann (1989) quote Eakins and Eakins (1979) found similar patterns in their research that interruptions may be related to social status and speakers with higher status in the university department interrupted more often than lower speakers.

This is not the real case that women in powerful positions in society take on a dominant role in interaction. According to the investigation about doctor-patient interaction carried out by West (1984, 1998b), females patients were interrupted by male doctors, while female doctors were still interrupted more often by male patients. That is to say when a woman is in a position of power (in the role of doctor), it is her gender not her status, which enables people to predict who interrupts whom. In the conventional idea male has a super status to women so that no matter what kind of role or what kind of

professional level a woman achieves she is still treated like a woman. The findings that gender overrides status is confirmed by Woods (1989). According to his findings that occupational status did have some influence on floor-holding, it was men who dominated, whether they were boss or subordinate; being the boss did not lead to women holding the floor more than men; having a high-status position, a woman is still more likely to be interrupted by a male subordinate than to interrupt him. Coates (2004) claims that this pattern is found again by Winter (1993) in a study of broadcast interviews on Australian TV. Male interviewer interrupted his interviewee four times more than the interviewee interrupted him whereas the female interviewer did not interrupt at all but was interrupted five times by her interviewee. That is to say, where status and gender are in conflict, then gender seems to override status.

The result can not be totally true. A British study by Beattie (1983) showed different evidence. Beattie found a high frequency of interruption phenomenon in an analysis of talk in university tutorials which came as often from female as from male students. He related his findings to the fact that students' performance may contribute towards their assessment.

Tannen (1992) thinks that interruption can be partly caused by speakers' different conversational styles. Based on her analysis of two and a half hours of dinner table conversation among six friends, she thought the inadvertent interruptions – and the impression of domination – came about while high consideration speakers were waiting for the proper pause, the high involvement speakers got the impression that they had nothing to say and filled in to avoid a possible uncomfortable silence. Under some circumstance when high involvement speakers chimed in to show support to the current speakers and their participation of the topic, high consideration speakers misinterpreted their motivation and stopped talking to avoid two voices at once. They yield their floor then the so-called interruption phenomenon occurred.

2.4 Identification and interpretation of interruptions

Interruptions are so common a phenomenon in everyday verbal communication that people would be under such impression that there is a general agreement about what an interruption is and that this object of research can be easily described. However in reality the identification of interruptions is quite problematic in conversational

research and there exists considerable disagreement in opinion about what constitutes an interruption and which interactive functions it serves.

In the past years linguists have conducted numerous studies to deal with gender differences in the use of interruptions. So far lots of findings have inconsistent or even contradictory nature. No criterion approaches being a fully adequate measure of whether an instance of simultaneous talk constitutes an interruption contributes partly to the discrepancy in the results of the previous studies.

The discussion about the function and form of interruption has been a central issue in the area of language and gender. Zimmerman and West's (1975) studies of interruptions triggered the notion that interruptions are potential conversational control devices which are very often adopted by men to exert dominance over their conversational partners. They think interruptions are violations of the turn-taking rules of conversation. The next speaker begins to speak while the current speaker is still speaking, at a point in the current speaker's turn which is not a transitional- relevance place. Interruptions break the symmetry of the conversational model and are interpreted as being undesirable behavior and as showing an attempt to exercise power and to dominate and control the interaction through grabbing the floor and seizing and shifting the topic of conversation.

Lots of researches proved that the assumption that interruptions serve primarily to dominate and control conversations is overly simplistic. A considerable body of recent research suggests that simultaneous talk can be unrelated to dominance. Ahrens (1997) claims that the most well-known counter-argument is the one brought forward by Tannen (1990), Coates (1989) and others that instead of showing dominance the use of an interruption in certain context can be a way for speakers to show involvement and closeness in a conversation . Beattie (1983) also claims that interruptions do not always fulfill the function put forward by Zimmerman and West that they are the signs of conversational dominance but still can be seen as the signs of competition for the floor. Like other conversational features interruptions should be interpreted in context. Intentions and effects are not always the same. When people adopt different conversational styles, the effect of what they say may be very different from their intention. Sociolinguists talk about this by saying that all interaction is a joint

production and every utterance can be potentially ambiguous and even have many meanings at once (Tannen, 1994: 240). Interruptions in many cases do give the interrupter the opportunity to dominant and take over the conversation, but under certain circumstance they do not appear rude and may even be supportive.

According to Tannen (1992) interruption is not a mechanical category. It is a matter of individual perceptions of rights and obligations, as they grow out of individual habits and expectations. So people should not only use mechanical criteria whether one tries to speak in the middle of the current speaker's contributions to identify interruptions. While overlap can be mechanical, as one can determines whether or not two voices are going at once, interruption is more of a matter of interpretation regarding individuals' rights and obligations.

So when identifying interruptions operational criteria should also be used to determine whether the speaker is violating other speaker's rights. In doing so, some factors should be taken into account such as the topic, the length of the talk, their relationship, and their feelings about being cut off. Most important of all, what is the content of the second speaker's so-called interruption? Compared to the first speaker, is it reinforcement, a contradictory or a change in topic? Besides, different conversational styles will lead to different consequences. A speaker might feel interrupted even if the other did not intend to interrupt. So when analyzing who tends to interrupt whom in mixed-sex conversation, people should not simply count the linguistic forms and compare the totals for women and men, instead it should be kept in mind the functions of forms in the context of the discourse in which they occur. In different discourse context, based on different intentions of speakers, interruptions can function in different ways. Particularly, there are four specific functions to look further into.

Firstly, interruptions function as a way of getting the floor. According to the model of turn-taking, if the participants in conversation are equals they have equal rights to the floor. In mixed-sex conversation, because of different understanding of conversation, men and women tend to adopt different strategies. Women seem to be collaboration-oriented while men competition-oriented. So men tend to interrupt to grab the floor to control the direction of conversations as mentioned above while women tend to wait their turn to come instead of interrupting men.

Secondly, interruptions function as a way of controlling topics. As a talk is a kind of co-constructive behavior, participants in a conversation usually have the equal rights to share topic choice. In mixed-sex conversation, women tend to work hard to keep conversation going, but often receive no support from the male participants especially in informal talk in the private sphere where being seen to talk does not signal the importance of the speaker. It seems that women introduce more topics but they are less successful than men in getting their topics accepted. Men tend to be competitive and show dominance via interrupting to control the topic or to develop a topic in different ways.

Thirdly, interruptions function as a way of showing support. Tannen (1992) says it is an assumption that interruption is an intrusion, a trampling on someone else's right to the floor, an attempt to dominate. An interruption is a hostile act, a kind of conversational bullying. The interrupter is seen as a malevolent aggressor, the interrupted an innocent victim. Interruption raises issues of dominance and control. While in real specific context, interruption can be a way to show support. For example when a friend is in a one-down position or is extremely self-blaming for something terribly done, instead of sympathizing with the friend to reinforce his or her depressing situation, an interruption of an apparent change of topic can show the speaker's support to cheer up the friend to get rid of miserable feelings. This is particularly common among males or male adolescents. Under other circumstances an interruption which offers a cue or hint to the current speaker's broken thoughts or worried concerns or which can help the current speaker out of possible embarrassment can be a sign of cooperation rather than competition or dominance.

Fourthly, interruptions function as a way of showing neutral intention. Various researchers have pointed out there exist interruptions which are not necessary supportive in function and also not obviously disruptive. James and Clarke (1993) cite that among others, Goldberg (1990) points out the existence of such relationally neutral uses. For example, one might interrupt because of a problem with the communicative process; one might interrupt in certain type of situation which may require immediate speech (for example, *Fire; Don't touch that, it's hot!*); one might reasonably interrupt in the middle of an explanation to him when one got the meaning;

one might interrupt simply because of a mistiming error. The neutral interruption is not cooperation-oriented neither dominance-oriented but is more or less from objective intention.

Different interpretations of interruption came from studies conducted by different researchers. Actually it is quite difficult to make a direct comparison of researcher's findings on interruptions as they used different criteria for interruptions. In Beattie's (1983) study, a simple interruption occurs when the first speaker's turn is left incomplete.

A: ...so he (.) he gives the impression that he wasn't able to train them up. **Now**

B: **He didn't** try hard
enough heh heh heh

(Adapted from Beattie, 1983: 115)

Note: (.) indicated a brief pause; boldfaced part indicated overlapping

Zimmerman and West may not classify the above example as an interruption since the second speaker comes in at a transition relevance place. Meanwhile some of Zimmerman and West's interruptions would fail to satisfy Beattie's incompleteness criterion. Some of the differences of their studies might be accounted for by differences in definition of interruptions (Graddol & Swann, 1989). So in many cases, it is rather doubtful whether some linguistic intervention should be classified as interruptions at all. This is the general problem in conversational analysis and a formal definition of interruption – like the intervening point; its distance from a recognizable TRP does not seem to be very helpful. So when the results are analyzed the contradictory nature of different researches on the form and function of interruptions should be taken into account.

3. Analysis

The analysis is conducted on randomly selected mixed-sex conversations from the American TV sitcom *Friends*. Before presenting the results of the quantitative distribution of the instances of interruptions and carrying out the detailed analysis of interruptions initiated by the characters in the three chosen episodes, it is quite necessary to give some more detailed information about and the interrelationship of

the main characters that have been studied in the present investigation, because relevant factors may have some influence on the speakers' use of interruption. And then as there exist many different ways to identify interruptions mechanically, which actually can lead the same research to different result, it is of great necessity that a certain way should be chosen to be relied on. After the identification of the instances of interruption, the functional classification of all those interruptions are quite necessary with regard to interruption's multifunctional nature which will help to make clear of the gender differentiation in the use of interruption.

3.1 Information and details about the transcriptions

The TV-series *Friends* features six main cast members who are close friends roughly at the age of 25-30 throughout its run, with numerous characters recurring throughout the ten seasons. Table 1 presents the complete information about the speakers' respective sex and occupation and relationship in the mixed-sex conversation.

Table 1. Detailed information of the six main characters of the chosen episodes

Rachel Green female	A fashion enthusiast and Monica Geller's best friend from high school. Rachel and Ross Geller are involved in an on again off again relationship throughout the series. Rachel has been a waitress and an assistant buyer. At the end of season eight, Rachel and Ross have a child together.
Monica Geller female	The mother hen of the group for her obsessive-compulsive and competitive nature. Monica is a chef who changes jobs often throughout the show, and marries longtime friend Chandler Bing in season seven.
Phoebe Buffay female	An eccentric masseuse and musician. Phoebe is known for her self-written guitar songs and for being ditzy yet street-smart. In the last season, she marries a character named Mike Hannigan
Joey Tribbiani male	Joey is, a struggling actor and food lover, a womanizer with many girlfriends throughout the series, and develops a crush on his friend Rachel in season eight.
Chandler Bing male	An executive in statistical analysis and data reconfiguration for a large multi-national corporation. Chandler quits his job and beco

	mes a junior copywriter at an advertising agency during season nine. Chandler is known for his sarcastic sense of humor, and marries longtime friend Monica.
Ross Geller male	A paleontologist working at a museum of Prehistoric History, and later a professor of paleontology. Ross is involved in an on-off relationship with Rachel throughout the series. Ross also has three failed marriages during the series, which include Rachel, Emily, and his lesbian ex-wife Carol, who is also the mother of his son

In brief, the six main characters are long-time close friends. They know each other very much and they are all extrovert and open-minded and they tend to know each other's habitual style and adopt high-involvement interactional style to be engaged in each conversation. So their interactional styles and personality will not be analyzed as a variable. Since every possible variable might have influence on gender-difference findings in the study, the information of these involved characters should be considered in the analysis. It will help to observe the results comprehensively

3.2 The identification of interruptions in this study

In the previous study of the male and female speakers' use of interruptions a lot of different even contradictory results are presented. Besides other factors, methodology employed in these studies of interruptions may also have caused the inconsistencies in the results. Different measures of interruption lead to different way in which interruptions have been counted. For example, the great majority of researchers have regarded interruption behavior as a way of dominance as Zimmerman and West (1975) suggested so in their research they may tend to exclude those interruptions which are non-dominance-related from their identification of the instances of interruption which may affect the result of the researches. Before counting the number of interruption initiated in the material a certain mechanical criteria should be adopted to identify the overall phenomenon of interruptions.

In the present study, the identification of interruptions has been mainly based on a precedent which interprets interruption simply as any deviation from a smooth speaker switch between speakers. Interruptions are singled out first with no implication as to

whether speaking rights are violated or not. This is to say besides those competitive interruptions cooperative interruptions are included only if they deviate from the smooth turn-taking in form. The phenomenon of other simultaneous talk as back-channels and overlaps are excluded from the present study. Besides, in real conversation an utterance which can present the function as an interruption without involving simultaneous talk may occur. For example, the second speaker may begin to speak immediately without overlapping upon the current speaker's completing the utterance of a word while still in the middle of the turn and the current speaker may consequently stop speaking and give away the turn. These are most commonly referred to as silent interruptions (James and Clarke 1993) which are not analyzed in the present study either.

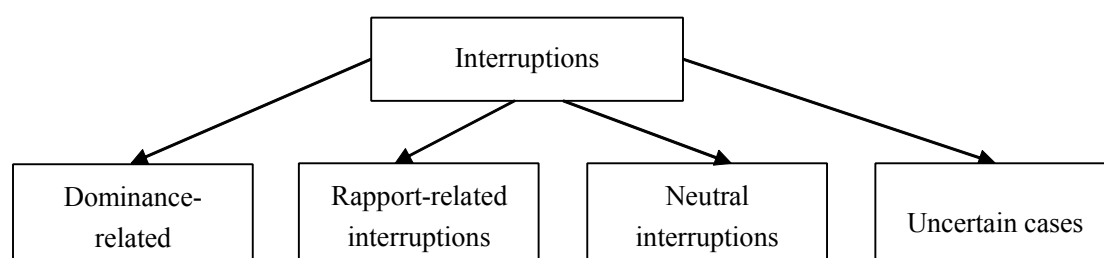
What the present study focuses on is a sitcom which is somewhat different from the real conversation. So when identifying interruptions both transcriptions and video recording should be based on. Actually there are a lot of incomplete sentences in the chosen transcriptions, a careful watching of the video recording is quite necessary to identify whether there are pause behind these incomplete utterances or they are stopped by other speakers. Only based on the participants contributions displayed on the page, a misleading impression can be made of who interrupt whom. So the discrepancy between the impression created by the transcription display and the felt sense of what really happens in the counterpart in the video recording should be taken into account. Thus the data of the interruptions can be safely obtained.

3.3 The functional categories of interruptions

The word interruption both in ordinary usage and in the usage of the most researchers has negative connotations implying violation or intrusion of another's right to speak. That is to say, interruption is a way to dominate. It is quite rare to find an article on gender and language that does not make this claim. A lot of recent research does suggest that interruption can not be definitely regarded as dominance-exerting procedures. Instead interruptions can and do perform useful and healthy functions in conversation. Especially in casual conversations, interruption is, far from being necessarily disruptive, may even function to signal and promote solidarity between speakers and is primarily supportive or collaborative in nature. In other words one can use interruption to dominate a conversation or a person, but it is not self-evident that

any interruption is intended to dominate. Besides dominance-related and rapport-related interruptions, various researchers have pointed out other uses of interruption which are not necessarily associated with cooperation and rapport and nevertheless do not conduct violations of conversational rules. James and Clarke (1993) cite that among others, Goldberg (1990) points out the existence of such relationally neutral uses. Similarly certain types of situation may require immediate speech and here interruptions are obvious appropriate and seem neutral. The neutral interruptions are included in the study. As far as the chosen material is concerned, the multifunctional nature of interruption should be included in the analysis. Thus in the present study the instance of interruptions identified in the chosen episodes are analyzed according to functional categories as follows:

Diagram 1. Functional categories of interruptions used in the present study



As can be seen from the above diagram, interruptions in the present study are classified into four categories that are dominance-related interruptions, rapport-related interruptions, neutral interruptions and uncertain cases of interruption. The interruptions identified suggest that simultaneous talk may frequently be unrelated to dominance. In casual conversations a lot of interruptions may be supportive or collaborative rather than disruptive or competitive. Besides there exists one kind of simultaneous talk which is neither supportive nor competitive which is regarded as neutral. Some cases are not certain because sometimes whether an interruption is negative or positive is not a black-and-white matter, but rather a matter of degree which depends on interrupter's intention and interruptee's interpretation. There is no simple, totally objective ways of determining the function of an interruption. So from different angles some interruptions may belong to different classifications which in this study are analyzed in the uncertain category.

3.3.1 Exemplifying functional categories of interruptions

The analysis of gender difference in use of interruption is conducted based on the functional classification mentioned in the diagram 1. All together, thirty-three instances of interruption including one uncertain case which are analyzed in 3.3.2 are identified in the chosen material. The general distribution of interruption can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Functional classifications of interruptions in three chosen episodes

	Dominance-related interruption	Rapport-related interruption	Neutral interruption	uncertain case	Total
men	3/5(tc)	4	0	0	12
women	8/6(tc)	4	2	1	21

*3/5(tc) means three interruptions without and five with topic changing. 8/6(tc) means eight interruptions without and six with topic changing.

Each category will be explained with the specific examples cited from the chosen episodes. More details relevant to Table 2 will be analyzed in 3.4.

Dominance-related interruptions: though interruptions serve different functions, to dominate may enjoy the higher proportion than any other function-related interruptions. At least, mechanically speaking, to speak while other speakers are talking leaves an impression of dominance. A speaker may break the turn-taking rule by interrupting the current speaker and grabbing the floor. He or she may hog the floor to elaborate on the previous topic to control the direction or simply change the topic to dominate the conversation as shown in the following examples.

(1) **Ross:** *Well... you never know. How's, um.. how's the family?*

Carol: *Marty's still totally paranoid. Oh, and, uh-*

Ross: *Why- why are you here, Carol?*

(Friends Season 1 Episode 2)

Carol is Ross's lesbian ex-wife, who is expecting his baby. Ross is still in depression of his ex-wife's lesbian identity and their divorce. He still can not face up to the fact that his ex-wife lives with another woman. So when realizing that Carol may be about

to talk about her family member – her life partner Susan, he interrupts to dominate the floor and initiates another question to avoid confronting the possible embarrassing situation. In this example, interruption occurs with the shift of topics.

(2) (Monica and Chandler's room. Phoebe, Monica and Chandler have their ears pressed against the wall, and Joey looks at them)

Joey: *I don't believe this... Have you guys been...*

Phoebe: *Shhh... This is the listening side of the wall.*

(Friends Season 10 Episode 1)

In this example, several friends eavesdrop what is happening in the next rooms. Joey after coming into the room realizes that he has been eavesdropped just before and tries to show his annoyance, but is interrupted by Phoebe. It seems that Phoebe interrupts not simply because she wants to do all the talking, as people sometimes do. She interrupts in order to control the contributions of Joey thus they can still concentrate on the listening without disturbance.

From above the conclusion can be safely drawn that interruption can function as one of the most direct ways to control topics and to dominate the other speakers and the direction of conversations.

Rapport-related interruptions: James and Clarke (1993) cite that Tannen (1983) has argued that interruption can serve as a way of indicating that one is interested in, enthusiastic about and highly involved in the conversation and as a sign of interrupter's active listenership without in any way attempting to obtain the floor. That is to say, far from being disruptive, interruption may be supportive, collaborative, and rapport-building.

(3) **Ross:** *Carol's pregnant.*

Monica: *W-w-wh-... wha-... w-w-w-...*

Ross: *Yeah. Do that for another two hours, you might be where I am right about now.*

(Friends Season 1 Episode 2)

Monica as Ross's sister is totally shocked by the news so that she could not find

suitable words to express her feelings at that moment. Though Monica's verbal expressions seem meaningless, Ross can sense the shared meanings. Initiating the interruption, Ross does not intend to take the floor but to show his understanding of Monica's unexpressed feelings and to help Monica out of the shock situation. Interruption here is more of a way to show collaboration than to dominate.

Neutral interruptions: literally, neutral interruptions are neither supportive nor competitive. The intention of these interruptions is comparatively objective and neutral. For example, one might interrupt because of a problem with the communicative process. One may reasonably break in to ask for clarification if he or she is failing to understand what the speaker is trying to communicate. When getting the point, one may interrupt to show understanding in the middle of another's explanation without involving the tendency to be disruptive or dominate.

(4) **Rachel:** *Oh God, oh God, oh God oh God oh God oh God....* (Starts to look under the couch cushions.)

Phoebe: *No, look, don't touch that!*

(*Friends* Season 1 Episode 2)

Certain types of situation may require immediate speech and like in an emergency, interruptions are obviously appropriate and necessary. In this example, Monica is getting all chaotic and twirly waiting for her parents' coming who are always fault-finding on her. So she tries to arrange everything smoothly to avoid giving the parents ammunition and she has fluffed the cushions in order to make them good-looking. Under this circumstance, Rachel's tending to mess up the cushions seems like a disaster which needs to be prevented. So this kind of interruption has nothing to do with seizing the floor or showing cooperation.

3.3.2 Uncertain cases of interruption found in the conversations

Deborah Tannen claims (1992) interruption is not a mechanical category. It is a matter of individual perceptions of rights and obligations. It somewhat depends on individual habits and expectations. Sometimes one feels interrupted, which does not always mean that another one intends to interrupt. Interruptions are characterized by multifunctional nature or diversity of meaning. So, some of the instances of interruptions are

ambiguous to classify in function. In the studied material, there exists one case of which the function can be ambiguous.

(5): **Chandler:** *I can't believe she can out run you man!*

Ross: ***HEY, SHE'S FAST!! OKAY?!!*** (Chandler is so shocked at Ross's outburst that he drops his spoon and backs up) *Oh! You-you think **you** can beat me? Let's go! Outside!!*

Ross: *I'm sorry, I'm just a little...*

Monica: *slow?*

Ross: *Oh you want some! Ok get the shoes on. Let's go man!*

(*Friends* Season 5 Episode 2)

In the above example, Ross is in a depressing situation as he lost newly-married wife – Emily at the airport and felt extremely sorry for abandoning Rachel on a plane to Greece. He is mad at his friends teasing at his inability to out run his wife. He feels hurt and challenges his friend Chandler to run. Under the situation, Monica's interruption *slow* seems a further trigger to his anger. According to Stenstrom (1994), an utterance can have more than one meaning. The literal meaning is the sum of the lexical and the syntactic meanings of the utterance isolation. The pragmatic meaning varies with the situational context in which the utterance occurs. As *slow* can be interpreted as 'not moving, acting or done quickly; taking a long time; not fast', to Ross, it is a sarcastic remark. Monica tends to dominate his expression to give him a blow. But from the perspective of Monica, the story can be different, because *slow* can also express the meaning of 'not lively or active enough, sluggish'. As Ross's sister, maybe she means to help and to show her sympathy. She may try to help her brother out of the exciting emotion and find suitable words to stand with and help him express his sorry to his friends for his irrationality as *slow* can justify his rashness. So the ambiguity of the function lies in the Monica's intention to interrupt whether she tends to dominate to ridicule her brother as other friends or just to interrupt to show her solidarity with her brother.

Actually there exist no simple, objective criteria to determine whether or not an interruption constitutes dominance or creates rapport. So actually it is not the interruption that constitutes dominance but what speakers are trying to do when they

talk to each other. As James and Clarke (1993) claim there is in any case unquestionably no hard-and-fast line between interruptions which are and are not dominance-related. It is inherently problematic to determine the extent to which the interruptions in any given interaction represent dominance attempts because this involves the understanding of the intentions of the interrupter and that can only ultimately be speculated. Thus a lot of counting of the phenomenon of interruption or the classification of interruption is made on a purely subjective basis.

3.4 Gender difference in the use of interruptions in the conversations

In the present study, all together thirty-three instances of interruption including one uncertain case are identified in the chosen material. All the identified instances are to be placed into three main general categories based on the functional classification mentioned in the diagram 1 except the uncertain one which has not been analyzed here due to its ambiguity. The total usage of each type of interruption will be counted in order to see how men and women use interruptions in a general way. Table 3 below gives information of the general distribution of interruptions. The analysis of gender difference in use of interruption is to be conducted.

Table 3. Gender difference in the use of interruptions in three chosen episodes

	Dominance-related interruption	Rapport-related interruption	Neutral interruption	Total
men	3/5(tc)	4	0	12
women	8/6(tc)	4	2	20
total	22	8	2	32

*3/5(tc) means three interruptions without and five with topic changing. 8/6(tc) means eight interruptions without and six with topic changing.

As Table 3 shows, there are totally thirty-two instances of interruption identified in the present study excluding the uncertain one. From the perspective of function of interruption, it can be seen that there are totally twenty-two dominance-related interruptions. The number is much more than that of rapport-related interruptions. Meanwhile there are only two cases of neutral interruption. This result supports the well-established assumption that interruption is a way to dominate. Despite its multifunctional nature, interruption mainly serves to be competitive more than

cooperative.

Among all these interruptions twelve are initiated by men and twenty by women. Men and women initiate the same number of the rapport-related interruption. But as far as dominance-related interruption is concerned, women initiate noticeably more than men do. The result is quite surprising as twenty-two to twelve is a striking difference which is much contradictory to the most widely cited and well-established acknowledgement that men interrupt more than women do. Actually a lot of studies dealing with gender difference in the use of interruptions do not support this conclusion either.

To understand this great discrepancy, the rooted nature of interruption should be analyzed first. An interruption is long regarded as a violation and a sign of conversational dominance. Given this assumption, it is not surprising that the stereotype would occur that men tend to interrupt women more than the reverse since men have more power and status than women. Most people even including women would suppose that men are therefore more likely and reasonably or justifiably to take the floor from others, whereas women would not make the same assumption with respect to men because of their powerlessness and subordinate positions. Under the guidance of the assumption, men would learn frequently seizing and holding the floor provides a means of achieving the goal to assert their status and to appear a leader. While women appear to learn to focus on establishing and maintaining harmonious relationships with others, which would subconsciously prevent them from violating conversational rules by interrupting others. Because of this impression, most people would subconsciously believe that men may interrupt more than women do.

But besides power and status, there exist many other factors which will exert influence on people's use of interruptions. The way that people talk depends on what they are talking about, the speech situation they are in and also the one who they are talking to. In public talk, it seems true that men are more powerful and assertive than women. They tend to adopt competitive conversational method to dominate others to show their power. But in private sphere, things will be different. As the material chosen is about friends' private life, all the conversations are quite casual friendly and polite and intimate. The participants enjoy similar social status and there seem no power relationships involved in them. So, the number of initiated interruption can mean

nothing to the gender difference in the use on interruption without taking some variables into account. Besides, the most important factor which should be considered in the analysis is the different functions of these interruptions which are analyzed in the following subsections.

3.4.1 Comparisons made between the male and female speakers in the use of neutral and rapport-related interruptions

In the present study the distribution of the male and female speakers' using of neutral and rapport-related interruptions is presented in the following table.

Table 4. The distribution of neutral and rapport-related interruptions

	Neutral interruption	rapport-related interruption
men	0	4
women	2	4

The table shows men use zero neutral interruption while women initiate two. As it has been analyzed before neutral interruption is not associated with collaboration and rapport, neither to grab the floor to show dominance. For example:

(6) **Ross:** *..Dr. Oberman. Okay. And is he-*

Susan: *She.*

Ross: *-she, of course, she- uh- familiar with our.. special situation?*

(Friends Season 1 Episode 2)

In the above example, Susan's interruption is a kind of clarification of the fact that the doctor is a woman. A clarification is more often than not classified into showing cooperation by some linguists. But as the relationship between the two speakers is quite special– Ross's ex-wife Carol is living with her lesbian life partner Susan, the conversation between them seems embarrassing and awkward or even a little bit hostile. Under this circumstance, it is not quite possible for Susan to be cooperative to show solidarity or something. As she is a lesbian maybe she is more sensitive to the sex of woman. So it is more a spontaneous or instinctive reaction to the correction rather than showing collaboration. Such relational use of interruption can be done by the male or

female speakers without any intention of dominance or cooperation. Though in the study men have not initiated any neutral interruption, it has nothing to do with the exploration of gender difference in the use of interruption. It is often a situational deed. So, further analysis has not been done on this usage in the study.

What is necessary to be mentioned is that, in this study, men initiate equal number of rapport-related interruptions as women do. It is common sense that women general tend to adopt cooperative conversational strategy and their interruption is more to show involvement and solidarity than to be dominant. However how one should explain men using rapport-related interruptions is another issue.

The explanation of the general tendency of male' dominance has been analyzed above. Besides that, social expectation and conversational situation can reinforce this tendency. For whatever reason, men are regarded superior and powerful than women. So to some degree, men are expected to express their toughness by adopting competitive conversational strategy. They have to be strong to fulfill the social expectations otherwise they will be regarded as lack of masculinity and may lose some good. So under such invisible pressure, men tend to be aggressive in verbal communication especially in public sphere or when talking to women who somewhat in heart would admire men's dominance, which to some degree can be regarded as a kind of symbol of maleness. While because of long-established social culture, women tend to avoid dominating others in communication which will be viewed as non-lady-like especially when in interaction with men or in public situation. Thus a kind of set pattern occurs in male and female's communication. Male dominate to show masculinity while women cooperate to show femininity.

With regard to the characters in this study, things are totally different. They are long-time friends and live together or nearby. They spend most time together and know each other quite well. Maybe they need not to suppress their nature to express power or toughness. They can communicate in the most natural way without any modification of their style or verbal language. Another important factor is the conversations mostly occur in private situations and mainly about private life such as gossip, love affair, joke and so on. Under most circumstances they need not to be restrained to the so-called ideal image of being lady-like or gentlemen-like. Very often, they need not care too

much about their gendered behavior and sometimes they even behave like neutral-gender people. As Coates (2004) claims that to men it is a worse option to wear masks to be tough all the time and sometimes they should assert the value of emotional honesty and openness. In the study the male speakers just try to be involved in conversations, and instead of gaining power the purpose of talking is for fun, to improve friendship to achieve solidarity which can mainly be got by cooperation. So from this perspective, it seems quite reasonable that the male speakers in the study adopt cooperative interruption in interaction with females.

3.4.2 Comparisons made between the male and female speakers in the use of dominance-related interruptions

The mixed-sex conversations chosen involve two or more participants. So it is unavoidable that there will be some interruptions initiated by one speaker to the same sex speakers. In order to determine whether males interrupt females more than the reverse, the interruption initiated by the same sex interrupter should be first analyzed separately from the overall dominance-related interruptions. Otherwise there will be difficult to compare in quantity men’s interruptions of women and women’s interruptions of men.

In the present study the distribution of the male and female speakers’ using of dominance-related interruption to the same-sex speakers and to the opposite-sex speakers is presented in the following table.

Table 5. The distribution of dominance-related interruption to the same-sex speakers and to the opposite-sex speakers

dominance-related interruption initiated by	Men to men	Women to women	Men to women	Women to men
	0	8	8	6

The above table shows a striking difference between male and female’s use of interruption to the same-sex speakers. Actually of all eight competitive interruptions initiated by men none is directed to men while women contribute eight interruptions to the same-sex speakers among all the fourteen ones. But when it comes to the opposite-

sex interruptees, the number is roughly the same – men conduct eight interruptions to women while women give back six to men. The result is quite contradictory to most of researches on gender difference of interruptions in groups of more than two. There are actually some investigations which have the similar conclusion as this one. For example, James and Clarke (1993) quote Kennedy and Camden's (1983) study that women were found to interrupt others more than men overall, but women and men were found to interrupt each other to an equal extent.

In order to explain this comparatively special result, the first consideration should be given to the conversational situations. As has been mentioned above, almost all the conversations take place in the private place especially in Monica and Rachel's apartment which used to be Phoebe and Monica home. While Chandler and Joey are their next-door neighbors and they spend most of time in Monica and Rachel's apartment where Ross frequently stop by. In this sitcom, the apartment of Monica and Rachel is a central stage and is described as the home for this extended family composed of the six main characters.

As Tannen explains in *You Just Don't Understand* (Tannen, 1992), the home setting for men and women are different. For a woman her home is her domain. It is where she can be comfortable; a place where she can feel free to talk without worrying about how other people will judge her talk. Men feel the opposite, home for them is a place where they do not have to prove themselves or impress others from verbal display. Besides most women use talking as a tool for establishing connections negotiating relationships, therefore most women feel more comfortable doing private speaking.

It is often in private with trusted friends that women would explore alternative femininities and express less nice aspects of them such as being rude to others in verbal language. So in the present study, under this home-like atmosphere it is quite understandable that women would behave very naturally and freely and talkatively and maybe not so lady-like. As what they talk is mainly about people and feelings rather than about things, the dominate characters of these conversations are most possibly women. More often than not they are in the leading position in the talk and they tend to interrupt other women as well as men to show their opinion no matter agreement or disagreement, which generally indicate their high involvement of the conversation and

their eager participation not competition. Women tend to adopt a way of organizing talk where the rule of one-person-at-a-time does not apply. This model was labeled by Eedlsky as collaborative floor. James and Clarke (1993) quote that Eedlsky (1981) investigated the talk of a mixed group; it is potentially a way of talking available to all speakers, but women seem more inclined to use it than men. As Shakespeare claims when women think they must speak. Women often use more spontaneous talk for their own enjoyment particularly in private sphere.

On the other hand, Tannen (1992) claims interruption is a matter of individual perceptions of rights and obligations, as they come from individual habits and expectations. Though women initiate so many interruptions to not only other women but also men, on most occasions interruptees have not exhibited resentment at being interrupted. Spontaneous speech does not threaten comprehension but on the contrary permits a more multilayered development of topics. Below follows an example, Example 7 which is a short conversation between Monica and Rachel in the Coffee Shop where Rachel works.

(7) **Monica:** *If you would stop thinking about Ross for one minute you would notice that there are great guys everywhere! I mean, look! Look, Gunther!* (Gunther turns to listen in.) *I mean, he's nice, he's cute.*

Rachel: *Yeah, I guess Gunther is kinda...*

Monica: (Interrupting) *Oh, what about that guy over there?* (She points at another guy and Gunther is deflated.) *Remember? **That** is the guy you flirted with at the counter that time.*

The above example shows that Monica is giving a suggestion to Rachel that she should stop thinking about Ross as he is married and she should divert her feelings from Ross to other guys. The obvious interruption does stop the flow of Rachel's speech and take the floor for Monica. But this is a further development of the suggestion and the man Monica referring to is much more handsome than Gunther, which obviously would not hurt Rachel. According to Coates (2004), Wolfson (1988) initiates a bulge model, that is to say speakers can afford to be less polite to people at the extremes of a social distance continuum: strangers and intimates. So because of their intimacy and

under that situation it can be speculated that Rachel would not feel violated instead she would be more willing to accept the suggestion.

Another phenomenon worth noticing is that men initiate eight interruptions to women but none to men. The reason may be speculated as the follows. In contrast with women's jam session model, men tend to prefer a one-at-a-time model of turn-taking in all-male talk. That means they would show respect to one's right to a solo floor. Maybe that is why no men interrupt other men in the study. Another possible reason should not be ignored. As can be seen from the above discussion, in the present study, both the conversational situations and the topics are of the great favor to the women speakers and women are inclined to be in a central position in these talks thus they would possibly do more masculinity. Different audiences require different performances. So in the private sphere which generally belongs to women, men sometimes take over a role which is conversationally typical of women. In order to create a harmonious atmosphere with these women, men tend to performance certain degree of femininity in the private talking. So, comparatively speaking men's contributions and the number of turn-takings even opinions are lesser than that of women speakers. Men's speech mainly revolves women's which may also provide rare chances for men to interrupt other men.

Coates (2004) cites that Cameron (1997) claims men tend to have simultaneous talk when friends become excited about a topic or are gossiping. In the studied material men produce a certain amount of simultaneous talk and they interrupt women eight times slightly higher than women's six interruptions to men. This seems contradictory to their solo floor preference. But actually various studies have shown male's behavior to be less sex-stereotypic in mixed-sex than in same-sex interaction. Besides according to James and Clarke (1993), it has been identified in the study of Bilous and Krauss (1988) that both males and females manifested some speech accommodation in the direction of the other gender's style (Deborah and Sandra 1993). In private sphere, if simultaneous talk is more characteristic of the female than of the male verbal style, it is possible that males may tend to increase their use of these when interacting with females. That is to say women and men tend to adopt similar conversational strategy in mixed-sex conversations. Actually in this study from the relative number of interruption produced by male and female speakers, no clear difference can be seen in

their use of interruptions.

One phenomenon which is very striking in the study is topic drift. As table 2 has shown in all the twenty-two dominance-related interruptions, eleven interruptions involve topic drift, which constitutes a great percentage. The following example shows quite typical process of topic shift.

(8) **Phoebe:** *I have to tell you this story. I was coming over here and this driver...*

Joey: (interrupting) *Was his name Angus?* (Monica and Chandler laugh.)

Phoebe: *What?*

Joey: *Oh, he was this cab driver we had in London.*

Phoebe: *Oh. Ha-ha-ha. All right, anyway...*

Monica: *Wait, what that place, that pub he took us too?*

Chandler: *Uh, The Wheatsheaf.*

Joey: *Yeah-yeah-yeah, and they had that beer! That uh...*

Monica: *Bodington's!*

All: *Bodington's! Woohoo!* (And they all high-five each other.)

The interruptions produced here are very subversive discourse. The interrupters Joey and Monica stop Phoebe's narration. They initiate a new topic which is shared by the rest of listeners except Phoebe. Because of pregnancy Phoebe had not been to London. It seems the other speakers in the above conversation are more interested in the experience in London than Phoebe's description. To Phoebe, it is an absolute violation of her floor. But to the rest listeners, the initiated new topic can lead them to present their shared experience which can help to increase their solidarity. In multi-party talk, the conversational floor tends to open to all the people present. The dominance-related interruption to Phoebe may turn out to be rapport-related to other listeners. So, competitive style can simply be a different way of achieving solidarity.

4. Conclusion

The present study is an investigation into one kind of simultaneous talk - interruption, a linguistic phenomenon in conversation. Totally there are thirty-three interruptions

identified in three randomly chosen episodes and these interruptions are further analyzed according to their functional categories. In the present study, the main functional classifications are the dominance-related interruption, the rapport-related interruption and neutral interruption and uncertain cases of interruption.

The results in the study demonstrate that both women and men use dominance-related and rapport-related interruptions. The dominance-related interruptions outnumber rapport-related interruptions and which confirms the long believed assumption that interruption is mainly a way to dominate. Anyway it is plausible dominance-related interruptions are less likely to occur in casual conversation between friends than in other contexts.

With regard to gender differences, according to the study no reliable conclusion can be drawn that men are indeed more likely to use interruption to dominate interactions than are women. Instead women initiate more interruptions than men do. Though some of them are cooperative ones and most are directed to women, still from the findings of the study, the speculation can be made that in casual mixed-sex conversations under private conversational settings and with self-disclosed topics women tend to interrupt others more than men do because under this circumstance women may enjoy a status as experts which may have the effect of making them feel more justified than men in making interruptions. The evidence shows that women are not automatically the cooperative speakers and they are likely to dominate such casual talk instead of being dominated by men.

The findings of the investigation show that it is oversimplistic to claim that women talk in this way and men talk in a different way. It is of great necessity to acknowledge that cooperation and competition as talking styles can not be simplistically separated out and attributed to one gender or the other. In the chosen conversations men participating the conversations with women is not to be assertive or competitive but to be involved and to achieve harmony and for fun.

There are aspects of interruption behavior other than simply the relative number of interruptions initiated by women and men which would be more revelatory of gender differences. In the present study one explanation for the lack of gender differences may

lie in the fact that the conversations are mostly held in private sphere which is generally the domain of women. And also the topics of conversations are often quite self-disclosed ones about people or feelings and in this field women generally can be regarded as experts. So there is obviously a certain amount of plausibility in the idea that women may behave masculinity in these conversations with men while men tend to be in disadvantageous position and to some degree their sex role is neutralized.

So when analyzing the phenomenon of interruption, a situational framework should always be kept in mind. Other factors such as topics, ages, social status, role relationships, an interruptee's possible reaction to the interruption, speakers' conversational styles, and socio-cultural conventions and so on would exert influence on speakers' use of interruption and they must be taken into any consideration of the relationship between interruption use and gender. On the whole the phenomenon of interruption is relative, interactive, pluralistic and situational. Perhaps even speakers' personality and current mood would contribute to the gender difference in the use of interruption perhaps which should arouse future researchers' attention.

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