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Interpreting Interruption in Conversation

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A joke has it that a woman sues her husband for divorce. When the judge asks her why she wants a divorce, she explains that her husband has not spoken to her in two years. The judge then asks the husband, "Why haven't you spoken to your wife in two years?" He replies, "I didn't want to interrupt her."

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

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

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

Zimmerman and West (1975) recorded naturally-occurring casual conversations on campus locations. They report that 96% of the interruptions they found (46 out of 48) were perpetrated by men on women. (The

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

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

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

Interruption as dominance. West and Zimmerman (1983:103) are typical in calling interruption "a device for exercising power and control in conversation" and "violations of speakers' turns at talk." But they also claim that silence is a device for exercising dominance. They cite (p. 108) Komarovsky (1967:353) to the effect that the "dominant" party in a marriage is often the more silent one, as revealed by the wife who says of her husband, "He doesn't say much but he means what he says and the children mind him." That men control and dominate women by refusing to speak is the main point of Sattel (1983), who illustrates with a scolding excerpt from Erica Jong's novel Fear of Flying in which a wife becomes increasingly more desperate in her pleas for her husband to tell her what she has done to anger him. If both talking and not talking are dominating strategies, one wonders whether power and domination reside in the linguistic strategy at all or on some other level of interaction.

Methodological objection. All researchers who report that males interrupt females more than females interrupt males use mechanical definitions to identify interruptions. This is a function of their research goal: Counting requires coding, and coding requires "operational" definitions. For example, Zimmerman and

West, following Schegloff,² define an interruption as a violation of the turn exchange system, an overlap as a misfire in it. If a second speaker begins speaking at what could be a transition-relevance place, it is counted as an overlap. The assumption is that the speaker mistook the potential transition-relevance place for an actual one. If a second speaker begins speaking at what could not be a transition-relevance place, it is counted as an interruption: The second speaker had evidence that the other speaker did not intend to relinquish a turn, but took the floor anyway, consequently trampling on the first speaker's right to continue speaking.

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

Operationally defined criteria, requisite and comforting to experimentally-oriented researchers, are anathema to ethnographically-oriented ones. Interruptions provide a paradigm case for such objections. Bennett (1981) points out that overlap and interruption are, in Russell's sense, logically different types. (Barbara Johnstone [p.c.] suggests the linguistic terms "etic" and "emic" may serve here as well.) To identify overlap, one need only ascertain that two voices are going at once. (Overlap, then, is an "etic" category.) But to claim that a speaker interrupts another is an interpretive, not a descriptive act (an "emic" category). Whereas the term "overlap" is, in principle, neutral (though it also has some negative connotations), the label "interruption" is clearly negative. Affixing this label accuses a speaker of violating another speaker's right to the floor, of being a conversational bully. Claiming that one has "observed" an interruption is actually making a judgment, indeed what is generally perceived to be a moral judgment.

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

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

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

Stephen Murray has mounted a number of attacks on Zimmerman and West on methodological grounds (Murray 1985, 1987, Murray and Covelli 1988). He argues, for example, that there can be no "absolute syntactical or acoustical criteria for recognizing an occurrence of 'interruption'," because a speaker's "completion rights" depend on a number of factors, including length or frequency of speech, number of points made, and special authority to speak on particular topics (Murray 1985). He observes, too, that whether or not a speaker feels interrupted is not absolute but varying by degree. His example, however, of what he considers a "prototypical case of interruption" -- one in which a speaker has not been "allowed to make one point at all" -- is equally questionable:

- (2) H: I think [that
 W: [Do you want some more salad?

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

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

Furthermore, the contention that interruption is a sign of dominance reflects two assumptions that are neither universal nor obvious. One is that conversation is a fight for the floor. The validity of this contention varies with subcultural, cultural and individual predisposition as well as with the context of interaction. Yamada (1989), for example, argues that Japanese speakers prefer not to speak in potentially confrontational situations, since talk is seen as a liability. A similar view is attributed to Finns by Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985).

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

Not only is it the case that a transcript might evidence overlap where participants did not feel that their speaking rights had been infringed upon, but participants might feel that their rights have been infringed upon where the transcript indicates they have not. For example, Greenwood discusses a segment in which Dara (age 12) and her sister Stephanie (11)

have performed a humorous routine which climaxes with the utterance of a tongue twister for the benefit of their brother's dinner guest, Max (14). Although this routine sparked delighted laughter on other occasions among other friends, Max did not laugh and claimed not to get the joke. Dara and Stephanie try to explain it to him. Max recalls a tongue twister that he knows. When Dara and Stephanie continue their explanation, Max complains about being interrupted:

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

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

that either one of them is trying to dominate the other either.

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

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

In a two-and-a-half hour dinner table conversation that I analyzed at length (Tannen 1984), interruptions resulted from conversants' differing styles with regard to pacing, pausing, and overlap. The conversation included many segments in which listeners talked along with speakers, and the first speakers did not stop. There was no interruption, only supportive, satisfying speaking together. For these speakers in this context, talking together was cooperative, showing understanding and participation. In the framework of politeness phenomena (Brown and Levinson 1987), overlaps were not perceived as violating speakers' negative face (their need not to be imposed on) but rather as honoring their positive face (their need to know that others are involved with them). It is an exercise not of power but of solidarity. The impression of dominance and interruption was not their intention, nor their doing. Neither, however, was it the creation of the imaginations of those who felt interrupted. It was the result of style contact, the interaction of two differing turntaking systems.

I characterized the styles of the speakers who left little or no inter-turn pause, and frequently

began speaking while another speaker was already speaking, as "high-involvement," because the strategies of these speakers place relative priority on the need for positive face, to show involvement. When high-involvement speakers used these (and other strategies I found to be characteristic of this style) with each other, conversation was not disrupted. Rather, the fast pacing and overlapping served to grease the conversational wheels. But when they used the same strategies with conversants who did not share this style, the interlocutors hesitated, faltered, or stopped, feeling interrupted and, more to the point, dominated. I characterized the style of these longer-pause-favoring, overlap-aversant speakers as "high-considerateness," because their strategies place relatively more emphasis on serving the need for negative face, not to impose.

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

- (4) 1 Steve: I think it's basically done damage to
2 children. That what good it's
3 done is ... outweighed by ... the
4 damage.]
--> 6 Deborah: [Did you two grow up with
7 television?
8 Peter: Very little. We had a tv in the
9 quonset
--> 10 Deborah: [How old were you when your parents got
11 it?
--> 12 Steve: [We had a tv but we didn't watch it
13 all the time. We were very young.
14 I was four when my parents got a
15 tv.]
--> 16 Deborah: [You were four?
17 Peter: I even remember that.
18 [I don't remember /??/
--> 19 Steve: [I remember they got a tv before we

20 moved out of the quonset huts. In
 21 1954.]
 --> 22 Peter: [I remember we got it in the
 23 quonset huts.
 24 Deborah: [chuckle] You lived in quonset huts?
 25 When you were how old?

 26 Steve: Yknow my father's dentist said to him
 27 "What's a quonset hut." ... And he said
 28 "God, you must be younger than my
 29 children. He was.
 30 Younger than both of us.

This interchange among three high-involvement speakers evinces numerous overlaps and latching (turn exchanges with no perceptible intervening pause). Yet the speakers show no evidence of discomfort. As the arrows indicate, all three speakers initiate turns that are latched onto or intruded into others' turns. Peter and Steve, who are brothers, operate as a duet, much as Dara and Stephanie did in (3).

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

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

in this interchange was supported by the participants' recollections during playback.

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

(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. ...
 20 You you talking about me, or a deaf
 21 person.]
 --> 22 Deborah: [Yeah
 23 You. You.
 24 David: Me? Uh: Someone tells me, usually. ...
 25 But a lot of 'em I can tell. I mean
 26 they're obvious. The better I get
 27 the more I can tell. The longer I do
 28 it the more I can tell what they're
 29 talking about.
 30 Deborah: Huh.
 31 Without [knowing what the sign is.]
 --> 32 Deborah: [That's interesting.]
 --> 33 Peter: [But
 34 how do you learn a new sign?

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

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

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

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

It is crucial to note that pacing, pausing, and attitude toward simultaneous speech have relative rather than absolute values. Characteristics such as "fast pacing" are not inherent values but result from

the styles of speakers in interaction relative to each other. Whereas Californians in my study appeared to use relatively longer inter-turn pauses relative to the New Yorkers, Scollon and Scollon (1981) show that in conversations between midwestern Americans and Athabaskan Indians in Alaska, the Midwesterners become aggressive interrupters and Athabaskans their innocent victims, because the length of inter-turn pause expected by the midwesterners, while longer than that expected by Jewish New Yorkers, is significantly shorter than that expected by Athabaskans. In conversation with Scandinavians, most Americans become interrupters, but Swedes and Norwegians are perceived as interrupting by the longer pause-favoring and more silence-favoring Finns who, according to Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985), are themselves divided by internal regional differences with regard to length of pausing and pacing.

Labov and Fanshel (1977) claim that Rhoda, the 19-year-old psychotherapy patient in the therapeutic discourse they analyze, never ends her turn by falling silent. Rather, when she has said all she has to say, she begins to repeat herself, inviting the therapist to take a turn by overlapping her. This is an effective device for achieving smooth turn exchange without perceptible inter-turn silence, a high priority for speakers of a conversational style that sees silence in conversation, rather than simultaneous speech, as evidence of conversational trouble. It is not coincidental that the therapeutic interaction analyzed by Labov and Fanshel took place in New York City between Jewish speakers.

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

Lein and Brenneis (1978) compared children's arguments in three speech communities: "white American children in a small town in New England, black American children of migrant harvesters, and rural, Hindi-speaking Fiji Indian children" (299). Although they found no overlaps in the arguments of the black American children and only occasional overlaps in the arguments of the white American children, the Fiji Indian children evidenced a great deal of overlap, continuing for as long as thirty seconds. Lein and Brenneis do not interpret these as misfires or errors but as "deliberate attempts to overwhelm the other speaker" (307). Although not cooperative in the sense of supportive, this use of sustained overlap is cooperative in the sense of playing by rather than breaking rules.⁶

Paradoxically (in light of the men-interrupt-women research), another group that has been described as favoring overlapping talk in in-group conversation is women. One of the first to make this observation was Kalcik (1975). Edelsky (1981), setting out to determine whether women or men talked more in a series of faculty committee meetings, found that she could not tackle this question without first confronting the question of the nature of a conversational floor. She found two types of floor: a singly developed floor in which one person spoke and the others listened silently, and a collaboratively developed floor in which more than one voice could be heard, to the extent that the conversation seemed, at times, like a "free-for-all." Edelsky found that men tended to talk more than women during singly developed floors, and women tended to talk as much as men in collaboratively developed floors.⁷ In other words, this study implies that women are more comfortable talking when there is more than one voice going at once.

The following excerpt (6) shows women in casual conversation overlapping in a highly cooperative and collaborative interchange. It is taken from a naturally-occurring conversation that took place at a kitchen table, recorded by Janice Hornyak.⁸ Peg is visiting relatives in Washington DC, where her daughter Jan now lives and is confronting snow for the first time. Peg and Marge, who are sisters-in-law, reminisce about the trials of having small children who like to play in the snow, for Jan's benefit:

- (6) 1 Peg: The part I didn't like was putting
2 everybody's snow pants and boots
3 [and
--> 4 Marge: Oh yeah that was the worst part,

- 5 Peg: [and scarves
--> 6 Marge: [and get them all bundled up in boots
7 and everything and they're out for half
8 an hour and then they come in and
9 they're all covered with this snow and
10 they get that shluck all over]
--> 11 Peg: [All that
12 wet stuff and
--> 13 Jan: That's why adults don't like snow huh?
14 Marge: That's right.
15 Peg: Throw all the stuff in the dryer
16 and then they'd come in and sit for
17 half an hour
--> 18 Marge: [And in a little while they'd want
19 to go back out again.
20 Peg: Then they want to go back out again.

As in the example of Steve, Peter, and me, all three speakers in this brief segment initiate turns that either latch onto or intrude into other speakers' turns. Like Dara and Stephanie in (3) and Steve and Peter in (4), Peg and Marge jointly hold one conversational role, overlapping without exhibiting (or reporting) resentment at being interrupted. Furthermore, Hornyak points out that these speakers often place the conjunction "and" at the end of their turns in order to create the appearance of overlap when there is none, as seen for example in 11-12 (Peg: "All that wet stuff and").⁹

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

Ethical Objection: Stereotyping and conversational style. When people who are identified as culturally different have different conversational styles, their ways of speaking become the basis for negative stereotyping. Anti-Semitism classically attributes the characteristics of loudness, aggressiveness, and "pushiness" to Jewish speakers. The existence of this stereotype hardly needs support, but I provide a brief example that I recently encountered. In describing a Jewish fellow writer named Lowenfels, Lawrence Durrell wrote to Henry Miller, "He is undependable, erratic, has bad judgment, loud-mouthed, pushing, vulgar, thoroughly Jewish..." (Gornick 1988:47).

It is clear that the evaluation of Jews as loud and pushy simply blames the minority group for the

effect of the interaction of differing styles.¹⁰ Kochman (1981) demonstrates that a parallel style difference, which he calls the "rights of expressiveness" in contact with the "rights of sensibilities," underlies the stereotyping of community Blacks as inconsiderate, overbearing, and loud. Finally, the model of conversation as an enterprise in which only one voice should be heard at a time is at the heart of misogynistic stereotypes as well. It is likely because of their use of cooperative overlapping in in-group talk that women are frequently stereotyped as noisily clucking hens.

Gender, Ethnicity, and Conversational Style. The juxtaposition of these two lines of inquiry: gender and interruption on the one hand, and ethnicity as conversational style on the other, poses a crucial and troubling dilemma. If it is theoretically wrongheaded, empirically indefensible, and morally insidious to claim that speakers of particular ethnic groups are pushy and dominating because they appear to interrupt in conversations with speakers of different, more "mainstream" ethnic backgrounds, can it be valid to embrace research which "proves" that men dominate women because they appear to interrupt them in conversation? If the researchers who have observed that men interrupt women in conversation were to "analyze" my audiotapes of conversations among New York Jewish and Christian Californian speakers, they would no doubt conclude that the New Yorkers "interrupted" and "dominated" -- the impression of the Californians present, but not, I have demonstrated, the intention of the New Yorkers, nor the effect of their conversational styles in in-group interaction. My brief analysis here and extended analysis elsewhere (Tannen 1984) makes clear that the use of overlapping speech by high-involvement speakers does not create interruption in interaction with other like-style speakers. In short, the "research" would do little more than apply the ethnocentric standards of the majority group to the culturally different behavior of the minority group.

The research on gender and interruption presents a sociolinguistic parallel, but a political contrast. Although not a minority, women are at a social and cultural disadvantage. This transforms the political consequences of blaming one group for dominating the other. Most people would agree that men dominate women in our culture, as in most if not all cultures of the world. Therefore many would claim (as do Henley and Kramarae 1988) that sociolinguists like

Maltz and Borker (1982) and me (Tannen 1986) who view gender differences in conversation in the framework of Gumperz' (1982) paradigm for cross-cultural communication, are simply copping out -- covering up real domination with a cloth of cultural difference. Though I am sympathetic to this view, my conscience tells me we cannot have it both ways. If we accept the research in one paradigm -- the men-interrupt-women one -- then we are forced into a position that claims that high-involvement speakers, such as Blacks and Jews and, in many circumstances, women, are pushy, aggressive, or inconsiderately or foolishly noisy.

Finally, given the interaction among gender, ethnicity, and conversational style, what are the consequences for American women of ethnic backgrounds which favor high-involvement conversational styles -- styles perceived by other Americans as pushy, aggressive, and dominating? The view of conversational style as power from the men-interrupt-women paradigm yields the repugnant conclusion that many women (including many of us of African, Caribbean, Mediterranean, South American, Levantine, Arab, and East European backgrounds) are dominating, aggressive, and pushy -- qualities, moreover, that are perceived as far more negative in women than in men. It was just such a standard that resulted in Geraldine Ferraro being labeled a bitch when she spoke in ways accepted, indeed expected, in male politicians.

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

Notes

1. Deborah James is currently conducting a review of the literature on gender and interruption.
2. Schegloff (1987) takes issue with Zimmerman's and West's imposition of gender as a category on transcripts in which there is no evidence that the participants' gender is a live issue. He does not, however, take issue with their definition and identification of interruptions.
3. There are other aspects of this excerpt that lead one to conclude this male speaker may be a conversational bully, other than the fact of interrupting to protect his property.
4. Overlapping is shown by brackets; brackets with reverse flaps show latching. Two dots (..) indicate perceptible pause of less than a half second. Three dots indicate a half second pause; each extra dot indicates an additional half second of pause. /?/ indicates indecipherable utterance. All the questions in (4) are spoken with fast pace and high pitch. Quonset huts were temporary housing structures provided by the American government for returning veterans following World War II.
5. The question was posed whether David's discomfort was caused by his role as spokesperson for ASL. Although this may have exacerbated it, the pattern of hesitation exhibited in this excerpt is typical of many involving David and another participant, Chad, as shown in the longer study (Tannen 1984) from which these brief examples are taken.
6. It cannot be assumed that apparent conflict is necessarily truly agonistic. Corsaro (in press), for example, demonstrates that children in an Italian nursery school deliberately provoke highly ritualized, noisy disputes when they are supposed to be quietly drawing because, as he puts it, they would rather fight than draw. Schiffrin (1984) demonstrates that apparent argument serves a sociable purpose among working class Jewish speakers in Philadelphia.
7. Edelsky notes that her initial impression had been that women "dominated" in the collaboratively-developed floors, but closer observation revealed they had not. This supports the frequently heard claim (for example Spender 1980) that when women talk as much as men they are perceived as talking more.
8. Hornyak recorded and analyzed this excerpt as part of her coursework in my Discourse Analysis class Spring 1989. I thank her for her data, her insights, and her permission to use them here.

9. Hornyak claims this is a family strategy which is satisfying and effective when used among family members but is often the object of complaint by non-family members when used with them. Though she thinks of this as a family strategy, I wonder whether it might not be a cultural one. The family is of Hungarian descent, and evidence abounds that cooperative overlapping is characteristic of many East European speakers.
10. No group is homogeneous; any attempt to characterize all members of a group breaks down on closer inspection. The high-involvement style I refer to here is not so much Jewish as East European. German Jews do not typically exhibit such style, and of course many American Jews have either abandoned, modified, or never acquired high-involvement styles.

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