



Università degli Studi di Udine  
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PROVA SCRITTA DI INGLESE

(Classe Umanistica)

Read the following text from Deborah  
Tannen's *Gender and Discourse* (1994)  
and answer the questions.

↳ Read

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## **Interruption**

That interruption is a sign of dominance has been as widespread an assumption in research as in conventional wisdom. One rarely encounters an article on gender and language that does not make this claim. Most frequently cited is West and Zimmerman's (1983) finding that men dominate women by interrupting them in conversation. Tellingly, however, 5 Deborah James and Sandra Clarke (1993), reviewing research on gender and interruption, do not find a clear pattern of males interrupting females. Especially significant is their observation that studies comparing amount of interruption in all-female versus all-male conversations find more interruption, not less, in all-female groups. Though initially surprising, this finding reinforces the need to distinguish linguistic strategies by their inter-  
10 actional purpose. Does the overlap show support for the speaker, or does it contradict or change the topic? I explore this phenomenon in detail in chapter 2 of this volume, but I will include a brief summary of the argument here.

The phenomenon commonly referred to as "interruption," but which is more accurately referred to as "overlap," is a paradigm case of the ambiguity of power and solidarity. This is 15 clearly demonstrated with reference to a two-and-a-half-hour Thanksgiving dinner conversation that I analyzed at length (Tannen 1984). My analysis makes clear that some speakers consider talking along with another to be a show of enthusiastic participation in the conversation, of solidarity, creating connections; others, however, assume that only one voice should be heard at a time, so for them any overlap is an interruption, an attempt to  
20 wrest the floor, a power play. The result, in the conversation I analyzed, was that enthusiastic listeners who overlapped cooperatively, talking along to establish rapport, were perceived by overlap-resistant speakers as interrupting. This doubtless contributed to the impression reported by the overlap-resistant speakers that the cooperative overlappers had "dominated" the conversation. Indeed, the tape and transcript also give the impression that the cooperative  
25 overlappers had dominated, because the overlap-aversant participants tended to stop speaking as soon as another voice began.

It is worth emphasizing the role of symmetry, or balance, in determining whether an overlap becomes an interruption in the negative or power-laden sense. If one speaker repeatedly overlaps and another repeatedly gives way, the resulting communication is  
30 unbalanced, or asymmetrical, and the effect (though not necessarily the intent) is domination.

*G. Rosen*

35 But if both speakers avoid overlap, or if both speakers overlap each other and win out equally, there is symmetry and no domination, regardless of speakers' intentions. In an important sense, though — and this will be discussed in the last section under the rubric of adversativeness — the very engagement in a symmetrical struggle for the floor can be experienced as creating rapport, in the spirit of ritual opposition analogous to sports. Further, an imbalance can result from differences in the purpose for which overlap is used. If one speaker tends to talk along in order to show support, and the other chimes in to take the floor, the floor-taking overlapper will tend to dominate.

40 Thus, to understand whether an overlap is an interruption, one must consider the context (for example, cooperative overlapping is more likely to occur in casual conversation among friends than in a job interview), speakers' habitual styles (for example, overlaps are more likely not to be interruptions among those with a style I call "high involvement"), and the interaction of their styles (for example, an interruption is more likely to occur between speakers whose styles differ with regard to pausing and overlap). This is not to say that one  
45 cannot use interruption to dominate a conversation or a person, but only that it is not self-evident from the observation of overlap that an interruption has occurred, was intended, or was intended to dominate.

From: Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*, O.U.P., 1994, pp. 34-36

G. Row

**Part A: Approaching the text**

**Exercise 1:** *In this text there are 4 physical paragraphs. Match each sub-heading with the physical paragraph(s) which is / are conceptually related to it. DO NOT INSERT THE SAME PARAGRAPH INTO MORE THAN ONE SUB-HEADING*

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| 1. Overview of previous literature in the field     | (par. _____ ) |
| 2. Tannen's main argument and relevant research     | (par. _____ ) |
| 3. Relationships between overlaps and interruptions | (par. _____ ) |

**Exercise 2:** *Match each connective below with the function it performs in the text by filling the corresponding blank with either*

- a (for Additive)  
b (for Temporal)  
c (for Causal)  
or d (for Contrastive).

**(PAY ATTENTION TO THE REFERENCE LINE IN BRACKETS AND WRITE ONLY ONE LETTER IN EACH BLANK)**

- |                        |       |
|------------------------|-------|
| 1. however (l. 4)      | _____ |
| 2. though (l. 8)       | _____ |
| 3. so (l. 19)          | _____ |
| 4. indeed (l. 24)      | _____ |
| 5. but (l. 31)         | _____ |
| 6. further (l. 35)     | _____ |
| 7. thus (l. 39)        | _____ |
| 8. for example (l. 40) | _____ |

**Part B: Intensive reading**

**Exercise 3:** *Read the text carefully and tick (√) the appropriate answer:*

1. What is the overall function of this text?
- to describe differences between all-male and all-female conversations
  - to compare and contrast the ways in which males and females interrupt each other
  - to clarify the concepts of *overlap* and *interruption* in relation to those of *power* and *solidarity*
2. Choose another possible title for this text:
- Interpreting interruption in conversation
  - Interruption as dominance
  - Stereotyping and conversational style

G. Pagan

3. What is Tannen's main criticism against West and Zimmerman's research?
- that they assume that all speakers proceed along similar lines in interpreting interruptions
  - that they assume that interruption is a sign of dominance
  - that they assume that it is only males who interrupt females
4. An overlap is defined as:
- a violation of speakers' turns at talk
  - a device for exercising power and control in conversation
  - a more precise, less negatively connoted term for what is usually called an "interruption"
5. On the grounds of what is stated in the text, which of the following claims do you think the writer would subscribe to? (choose **3 answers** among the following):
- one cannot simply count overlaps in a conversation and call them interruptions
  - men dominate women by interrupting them
  - overlapping talk can be supportive rather than obstructive
  - intention and effect are not always synonymous
  - the function of an overlap can be determined from examination of its linguistic form

**Exercise 4:** *Making reference to the text, decide whether the following statements are TRUE (T), or FALSE (F), or INCOMPLETE (I) paraphrases of the information conveyed (N.B.: the various statements appear in the order in which the information is presented in the text):*

1. Most articles on gender and language claim that interruption is a sign of dominance ( \_\_ )
2. Deborah James and Sandra Clarke have identified regularities in the behaviour of males interrupting females ( \_\_ )
3. All-female conversations show the same amount of interruption as all-male ones ( \_\_ )
4. Different speakers may interpret the same interruption as a show of power or as one of solidarity ( \_\_ )
5. Overlap-resistant speakers perceive overlaps as attempts to dominate the conversation ( \_\_ )
6. Cooperative overlapping is less frequent in casual conversation among friends than it is in a job interview ( \_\_ )
7. An overlap can be said to be an interruption only on the grounds of the context of conversation and of speakers' habitual styles ( \_\_ )

**Exercise 5:** *The following is a list of synonyms for words/expressions which appear in the text in the physical paragraph indicated in brackets and in the order given on the list. Find*

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*the corresponding words/expressions and write them down, together with their respective line number:*

- |   |       |             |
|---|-------|-------------|
| 1. good sense and judgement (par. 1)                    | _____ | (line ____) |
| 2. revealingly (par. 1)                                 | _____ | (line ____) |
| 3. the regular way in which sth. is done (par. 1)       | _____ | (line ____) |
| 4. discussion / set of statements (par.1)               | _____ | (line ____) |
| 5. typical example (par. 2)                             | _____ | (line ____) |
| 6. fully / in great detail (par. 2)                     | _____ | (line ____) |
| 7. to struggle to obtain the right to speak (par. 2)    | _____ | (line ____) |
| 8. underlining (par. 3)                                 | _____ | (line ____) |
| 9. equilibrium (par. 3)                                 | _____ | (line ____) |
| 10. allow(s) sb. to [here] interrupt / overlap (par. 3) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 11. to take place / happen (par. 4)                     | _____ | (line ____) |

### Part C: Guided writing

**Exercise 6:** *Re-read the lines indicated in brackets and then complete the following paraphrases by circling ONE word/expression for each missing item:*

- (ll. 8-10) The problem of how we interpret interruptions (like / as) shows of power or of solidarity cannot be properly addressed unless we (don't consider / consider) the interactional purposes of the overlapper.
- (ll.33-34) If (both of / both) speakers are engaged in a ritual struggle for the floor they (might / should) experience the entire conversation as a pleasurable one.
- (ll. 39-44) The meaning of any linguistic strategy (must / can) vary, at least depending on context, the conversational styles of participants, and the interaction of participants' styles and strategies.

**Exercise 7:** *Complete the following extract from the study by Deborah James and Sandra Clarke quoted in the text you have been working on so far. Circle one letter for each item from the list below:*

[...] Males have been hypothesized (1) more likely than females to use interruptions (2) a means (3) dominating and controlling interactions. It (4) widely cited that, consistent with this hypothesis, (5) research has found males to interrupt females more than the reverse. This review has pointed out that (6) conclusion is incorrect; the majority of studies have found (7) significant difference (8) the sexes in this respect. This (9) be a consequence of the fact that a large proportion of the simultaneous talk in an interaction may not represent attempts to dominate or control the interaction. Various efforts have been (10) by researchers to find simple, objective criteria by (11) those instances of interruption which constitute attempts to dominate (12) be reliably distinguished from those which do not. It is clear, however, that no such criteria exist. [...] A small amount of evidence (13) that females may use interruptions of the cooperative and rapport-building type to a greater extent than do males, at least in some circumstances. (14), definitive conclusions as to (15) males and females differ in the ways they use interruptions [...] must probably be dependent (16) analyses of conversations

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which take into detailed account the larger context in which the interruptions occur [...].

- |      |                |               |                 |
|------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| (1)  | a. being       | b. be         | c. to be        |
| (2)  | a. as          | b. like       | c. such         |
| (3)  | a. of          | b. to         | c. in           |
| (4)  | a. was         | b. has been   | c. is being     |
| (5)  | a. most of the | b. most of    | c. most         |
| (6)  | a. such        | b. such a     | c. a such       |
| (7)  | a. no          | b. any        | c. some         |
| (8)  | a. within      | b. among      | c. between      |
| (9)  | a. may         | b. will       | c. ought to     |
| (10) | a. effected    | b. made       | c. done         |
| (11) | a. whom        | b. what       | c. which        |
| (12) | a. can         | b. should     | c. must         |
| (13) | a. exist       | b. exists     | c. there exists |
| (14) | a. Therefore,  | b. Meanwhile, | c. However,     |
| (15) | a. whether     | b. if         | c. ---          |
| (16) | a. from        | b. on         | c. of           |

**Exercise 8:** Write ONE paragraph (approx. 200 words) illustrating commonly-held stereotypes (e.g. about men and women in conversation and about the way in which interruptions are conceived of) reflected in the following joke quoted by D. Tannen (op. cit., pp. 54-55):

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