

Corrine Monet's essay on gender roles in conversation is a classic in French anarchist and feminist circles. Using a range of references, Monet charts the expanding study of how women and men communicate in everyday conversations.

The original title of the essay seems at first puzzling and intriguing: *The distribution of tasks between women and men in the work of conversation*. This refers to Monet's final thesis that for communication between the genders to flow requires work on the part of women participants; a form of work as invisible today as domestic work a century ago.

Gender Roles in Conversation



Contrary to what one might imagine, conversation is not an activity which happens spontaneously and without conscious thought. It requires structure; if only a beginning, a middle and an end. And of course, it also requires active participation.

Conversations, dialogues and discussions: These are all terms we use to describe an exchange of words. They are not scripted and both participants are, in theory, equal (unlike an interview, ceremony or debate). In this text we are going to be mainly interested in mixed gender dialogue with particular regard to the gender of those involved. We hope to see how conversational practices are dependent on gender and the consequences of this observation on the flow of conversation.

Conversation is a fundamental form of communication and social interaction and so it has quite an important function. It establishes and maintains the links between people but is also a political activity, which means there are inherent power relations. In a society where division and hierarchy of gender are so important, it would be naïve to think that conversation should be exempt. As a practice on which we base our daily life it can only reflect the gendered nature of society. We ask ourselves if aside from being a mirror of society, conversation also might reinforce and reaffirm the inequalities of gender as well.

The Length of Contributions

We will be making reference to the model of conversation described by H. Sachs, E. Schegloff and G. Jefferson in 1974. According to this model, verbal exchanges are generally organized to ensure two things: first, that one person speaks at a time; second, that the speakers take turns. The speaker may decide who will speak next, but in general it's everyone involved in the conversation who decides the order of speaking. The ideal conversation has one person speaking while the other listens and vice-versa. They do not speak at the same time, interrupt each other, or pause between turns. The theory is that this model works for all speakers and all conversations. When applied, it should tend to be equally balanced on both sides. This model is described outside of any context - factors such as the number of people, their social status, or the topics discussed. Once applied however, it becomes case-sensitive and adapts to the factors already mentioned.

The first question which we shall investigate in mixed gender dialogue concerns the amount of time granted to each speaker. We generally assume that both speakers should have a similar amount of time to adequately express their point of view, feelings, intentions or projects. Dialogue is commonly perceived as a place to share and exchange, to understand one another, and where no one speaker is supposed to take up more time than another.

It is a commonly held assumption that women speak more than men. When we think about gender and how much we speak, the stereotype of the woman chatterbox immediately jumps to mind. Paradoxically, not one study has ever confirmed this. On the contrary, a number of studies have demonstrated that in reality it's men who speak more. As early as 1951, Strodtbeck showed that in heterosexual married couples men speak more than women.

How can we explain such a discrepancy between the stereotype and the reality? How is it that even though we've all found ourselves in situations where it was clear that men monopolized the conversation so few of us have taken the opportunity to question where this idea comes from?

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Even as a respected linguist, Tannen's study was considered controversial by her colleagues. The way she defended her study was by saying she wasn't writing about inequalities or male domination but what she calls "daily conversational frustrations" (Crawford, 1995 :195). According to her, women should accept their role in conversation with little hope for change. When 'inequality' becomes 'cultural difference', there is little room for anything but acceptance. This approach is not a feminist approach in the sense used by current feminist studies as it omits reference to male domination and speaks of sexual difference with no mention of hierarchy. Just because it is written by a woman or the subject is gendered patterns in conversation it does not necessarily follow that it is a feminist study. It's more a question of approach and bias. Fortunately, a number of studies on language and conversation "continue to adopt a profoundly political stance. They don't just aim to shed light on the relations between men, women, and language but also to transform them" (Henley, Kramarae & Thone, 1983:20).

Mixed gender conversation reflects and maintains inequalities. Women do almost all of the work for a dialogue to function. They are obliged to propose topic after topic and allow them to be ignored, as well as being constantly interrupted by men. They work for men's topics of conversation, supporting them and nurturing the conversation. Meanwhile, men interrupt them, impose subject matter, influence and dominate the conversation. Women are held responsible for conversation yet remain under the control of men. If ideology determines expectations in dialogue it's still true that interactions also participate in the social construction of gender division. In the words of West & Zimmerman (1983) this is a major way in which we "do gender". As we have shown, a number of studies are not only interested in gender differences in communication but also the way in which discussions create a patriarchal reality.

The silence of women in conversation, just as much as their communication, brings about their invisibility in the world. If speaking is a determining factor in the construction of reality, those who control speech also control reality. The equality of the sexes cannot be reached without a change in the way conversation unfolds, but that's no reason to underestimate its importance. During any discussion, we are engaged in an important political activity, that can allow the renegotiation of social reality. If interactions can play a part in the construction of gender and its hierarchy, they can also open the path to its deconstruction.

CORINNE MONET, 1997

Dale Spender looks into the myth of the talkative woman as well as analyzing how it functions. The stereotype is often interpreted as confirmation that women are considered talkative compared to men, who speak less. But studies show something different. It's not in comparison to the amount that men speak that women are considered talkative, but in comparison to a silent woman. (Dale Spender, 1980). The norm here is not the masculine but silence, as we're all supposed to be silent women. If the place of women in a patriarchal society is first off in silence, it's not surprising that as a consequence, all speech by women is considered too much. Moreover, we ask most importantly of women to be seen rather than heard and in general women are more observed than men (Henley, 1975).

Already we can see well that it's not speech in itself that's important, but gender. A woman who speaks as much as a man will be perceived as making longer contributions. Our impressions of the length of speech voiced by women or by men are systematically deformed. Here I will return to the double standard used by feminists to explain a number of situations related to gender. The same behavior will be perceived and interpreted differently according to the gender of the person and the expectations we assign them. Whatever the behavior in question, the double standard will tend to give a positive interpretation for a man and a negative interpretation for a woman. Men can speak as much as they want, while women will be severely reprimanded for doing the same.

A study of mixed conversations in one university showed an enormous difference in the amount of time which men and women spoke (Eakins & Eakins, 1976). While the average time a woman spoke was between 3 and 10 seconds, for a male it was between 10 and 17 seconds. In other words, the most talkative woman spoke less than the most concise man.

Many studies on this subject were carried out in educational environments, such as the classroom. Although this may seem slightly irrelevant, it seems interesting to give this a brief mention. I'm not going to list the differences in socialization between the genders which determine access to speech, just those which specifically concern the amount of speech accorded to schoolgirls and schoolboys.

Children do not have equal right to speech (Graddol & Swann, 1989). In classroom interactions, boys speak more than girls. Teachers pay more attention to boys. They are more responsive to disruptive behavior in boys, which exaggerates this imbalance of attention. Boys are also encouraged a lot more. Lengthier verbal exchanges tend to happen with boys, as well as explanations. And we know how difficult it is to be fair even if we're trying. A study by Sadker & Sadker (Graddol & Swann, 1989) on 100 classrooms showed that boys spoke 3 times as much as girls. Furthermore, boys were also 8 times more likely to respond without asking while girls were often reprimanded for the same behavior.

The reason I wanted to begin with this first myth is because the more someone speaks in a dialogue, the more power and influence they have. For example in Strodbeck's study, both women and men in the couples interviewed associated more speaking time with greater influence. Now, it's a question of examining more concretely how this influence is exerted and how greater speaking time is an indication of domination in a conversation. Speaking time is related to numerous interacting factors, including being able to finish speaking without being interrupted by the other speaker - perhaps one of the most important.

Conversational Practices of Men

1. Interrupting Women

For this study of interruptions I mostly used the text of West & Zimmerman which is found in *Language and Sex* (Thome & Henley). They continually refer to the model of conversation I have already described. West and Zimmerman make an important distinction regarding when two people speak at the same time. They divide this event into two categories: overlaps and interruptions. The overlaps happen at a moment of possible transition. There is an issue with the order of speakers between turns - for example, when a new speaker begins speaking as close as possible to when the previous speaker stops speaking. West and Zimmerman thus consider overlaps to be an error in the conversational system itself.

The second category, which we will go into in more detail, is that of blatant interruptions. They consist of deep intrusions in the internal structure of the speech of the speaker, who can not finish their turn at all. Thus, interruptions are violations of the turn-based system and do not belong in it. West and Zimmerman say they show a real refusal of equality of access to a place in the conversation.

I now come to the study already mentioned, a study on conversations recorded in public places at a local university. We have 20 couples; 20 single gender couples (10 pairs of women, 10 pairs of men) and 11 gender mixed pairs (composed exclusively of students except one where the female is a teaching assistant).

The subjects of conversation vary from polite exchanges to the most intimate subjects, depending on whether the people are meeting for the first time or have known each other for much longer. So though they counted 22 overlaps and 7 interruptions in the non-mixed exchanges, they found 9 overlaps and 48 interruptions in the mixed exchanges. We can make several remarks on these results.

The overlaps were more frequent than interruptions in non-mixed dialogue than in mixed dialogue. However, interruptions were much more frequent in mixed groups than overlaps. Only 3 out of 10 non-mixed dialogues contained interruptions which are more or less symmetrically distributed between speakers, while only one mixed dialogue out of 11 contained many. Interruptions were endemic in the mixed dialogues.

Most overlaps and interruptions were due to men. In 96% of cases men interrupted women. This is far from random and at the very least we should note an obvious male dominance with regards to interruptions in mixed gender dialogues. When carrying out this study again, in different conditions on 5 mixed gender conversations with people that didn't know each other at all, West and Zimmerman again found more or less the same results.

The mixed gender dialogue with the most interruptions (13) took place between a female teaching assistant with a higher social status than the other speaker, a male student. This was also the only time that a woman interrupted a man. In another of West's studies (1984), on interactions between doctors and patients, it came out that gender was more indicative of social status than profession. Female patients were interrupted by male doctors, but female doctors were also interrupted by male patients. A woman remains a woman regardless of her social status.

I should remind you that the model we discussed earlier should not contain an unbalanced

demonstrate a link between power and hiding vulnerability. Expressing one's emotions has a strong tendency to reduce one's position of power, this is where we can deduce that it is the desire to dominate - and not only socialization - that can bring men to have difficulties in their relations with others. Also, an examination of some feminist studies on women's psychology shows that certain supposedly "feminine" characteristics, like excessive care toward others or dependency, can be seen as consequences of domination. Why does Tannen not discuss these analyses?

Even if we assume that people have good intentions, communication is such an important form of social practice we cannot ignore it by arguing that they meant well. Crawford also remarks that analysing conversation in terms of intention has a very important implication - that of distracting our attention from the effects and, of course, included the effects of the interaction in maintaining the hierarchy of genders (Crawford 1995: 107). Tannen said it elsewhere herself: "And thus there are also these different ways of speaking, that mean an individual can have the impression they have been interrupted even if the other didn't have the least intention of doing so." (Tannen, 1993:201)

Crawford equally critiques this conception of miscommunication between the sexes because it has today become the main model used to explain rape committed by men who were known to the women they raped. As in the case of someone who puts the responsibility on women, or who sees rape as a societal problem, no real strategy is put in place for preventing rape, and men are never directly named as the agents of rape. According to this "two culture" perspective, conjugal rape can be seen as an extreme result of bad communication. Crawford does not deny that a sincere miscommunication can exist in a heterosexual couple, especially regarding sexuality, where the interaction is heavily molded by gender norms. But she shows, with the help of recent work done on violence against women, the troubling implications of the miscommunication model. Some students were asked which characteristics they saw as responsible for violence committed by men. When violent behavior was put in a context of miscommunication, male students put more responsibility on the victim of the violence than they did in other contexts (Crawford 1995:126). The idea of miscommunication between the sexes can thus be seen as a powerful tool, even necessary to maintain the structure of male supremacy (Crawford 1995:128).

3. Some other examples

As I've already explained, Tannen is not the only one to opt for this model of miscommunication rather than domination. Borker and Maltz also lay out the problems of communication in terms of a misunderstanding without taking into account the fact that these characteristics favor men and allow them to dominate the exchange (Graddol & Swann, 1989). For Smith (1985) the differences in the conversational strategies of men and women are also due to their respective aims; affinity for women, control for men. But that doesn't necessarily mean that men dominate. Another example from a recent study on this topic informs us that the differences are not so much a question of power but a question of socialization- in fact, nothing to do with power (Bradac & Mulac, 1995).

This view of mixed conversation as an intercultural exchange always seems to lead to the same conclusions: a refusal to accept male domination, legitimizing the current state of affairs. I don't know if these writers have asked themselves the question whether such a depoliticized message is necessarily politically neutral.

Crawford also remarks that the rhetorical strength of a number of anecdotes used by Tannen on frustrations due to mixed gender communication are always attributed to difference and not to the role of power in the dynamics of the conversation (Crawford, 1995: 107). Thus, the conversational differences are never seen as being produced by the political relationship of women and men. Tannen does not question herself about the power dynamics that drive these differences. Crawford names this approach 'essentialist' (1995: 8). It's not the origins of sex characteristics (social or biological) that define essentialism for her, but rather the presence of these characteristics in the individual. In effect, the gendered characteristics of conversational style that we have found with Tannen become static personality traits. The differences are conceived as anchored in the individual themselves, as are differences in personality traits (Crawford, 1995:1). We have already exposed and critiqued how communicative work done by women is made invisible with Fishman (1993). We can easily take this up again here.

The term 'gender' was created in order to differentiate biological sex from social sex and to make clear that the relationships between sexes are socially constructed. Tannen seems to forget that whatever has been constructed can be deconstructed, even if it is a difficult task. Contrary to Tannen, Crawford comes from a social constructionist perspective. According to her, thinking of gender in terms of difference rather than domination denies the process by which the differences are created and power attributed. Gender is a system of markers that organise interactions and govern access to power. She describes this system as operating at the level of social structures, from interaction and of individuals. Gender doesn't really exist in people, but is created by interactions, transactions, and social practices.

For example, at the interpersonal level, Crawford thinks that sexual categorisation doesn't serve only to observe differences, but also to create them. When women and men are treated differently in everyday interactions, they will behave differently afterwards (1995: 14). She remarks that "gender can be conceived of as a self fulfilling prophesy. It is the same at the individual level 'women are different from men'. But, paradoxically, it's not because they're women. Each of us behaves in a gendered way because we are placed in gendered social contexts." (Crawford 1995:16).

Crawford critiques the dominant studies made on gender and communication: this approach neutralises power relationships. Even if these studies tried not to be sexist, she reproaches them for generating more problems and paradoxes than they resolve. For her, the question is not that of language differences between women and men, but how gender relationships are established and maintained in conversation (1995:3). The biggest fault in Tannen's theory is her claim that intimate and everyday interactions can exist outside of the power relationships which define and construct gender, contrary to all the studies that we have previously examined. But a number of analyses have shown how these inherent inequalities are reproduced in personal relations. Power relationships affect personal relationships. Mixed conversations are so familiar and banal to us. But that doesn't mean they exist outside of the gender system (Crawford, 1995). Tannen presumes a certain innocence in people's intentions when communicating. In a world separated by different conversational styles, Tannen explains that the goals of conversation themselves are gendered. But the desire remains the same for the two genders: to be understood (Crawford,1995:106). By analysing the intentions of women and men at every stage, Tannen tries to show her impartiality towards the two sexes, Crawford how artificial and unbalanced it is. Effectively, the only intention which is never attributed to someone is a desire to dominate.

However there is something Tannen fails to take into account. A number of studies

distribution of interruptions between speakers. There is no excuse for interruptions within the turn-based system so we can conclude that it is due to an external factor. The results obtained from this research show this factor to clearly be that of gender. Even if interruptions are not themselves means of domination these practices are undeniably gendered.

2. Silencing Women

The occurrence of silence in non-mixed dialogues is fairly balanced but in mixed conversations it's the women who have a tendency to fall silent, especially after being interrupted. West and Zimmerman have also closely studied these silences. They found that 62% of women were silent after confronted with three types of masculine conversational strategies- overlaps, interruptions, and late minimal responses.

Minimal responses or agreement signal to the speaker that they have been understood and can continue. These are, for example, a nod of the head, an "mmm" or a "yes". When they occur at the right moment, the minimal response shows active listening. When women use them, they tend to show constant attention, participation and interest in the conversation and the speaker. When men use them, they often use them after the appropriate moment to support the subject. The minimal confirmations are thus delayed, showing disinterest and a lack of attention paid to the speaker and their speech. The conversation demands these minimal contributions from the listener. If they don't come, the speaker may begin to repeat their ideas, prolong the pauses, hesitate, and end up going silent (Slembek, 1990). The strategy used by men in delaying these minimal responses becomes yet another means of domination, through which they obtain women's silence.

In the mixed dialogues studied, no woman complained of being interrupted. When the man was interrupted he didn't stay quiet about it. In mixed conversations, women make pauses on average three times longer than in non-mixed conversations, whether that be after an interruption or a late minimal response. The male practices of dialogue silence women, and perhaps go some way to explain their shorter contributions. Some have tried to interpret the silences of women following these interruptions as a sign of encouragement for men to interrupt them. West compares this situation to the conception of rape in our culture. Are women not often seen as inviting rape by their way of dress- showing cleavage or wearing a skirt, or by their inability to defend themselves?

But if we want to fully analyze the silence in women we would need to also examine the language which excludes and denigrates them (Spender, 1980). As we will see later, if women are only required to support male discourse, it is understandable that they should remain silent (Spender, 1980). Men systematically impede the right of women to finish what they have to say, and deny them an equal status as conversational partners.

West and Zimmerman also make an analogy between female-male dialogues and child-adult conversations: conversations where the child has only a limited right to speak. As with children, the speech of women appears to be non-essential. Women and children receive, from men and adults respectively, a similar treatment in conversation. However, unlike children, they seem more likely to push their way into the conversation, even if men often interrupt them to retake control (West, 1983:157).

So here are the conclusions drawn by West (1983:157):

“When a man interrupts a woman it is a display of power and control.”

These interruptions are “real (and not merely symbolic) instruments of control.”

“This misbalance of interruptions in mixed exchanges suggests that certain situations contribute clearly to demonstrating the social distinction of genders.”

Interruptions are a characteristic trait of interactions between men and women. They are unbalanced and depend clearly on gender. Studies have found them in a wide variety of contexts and we have seen that even having a higher professional position doesn't protect women from being interrupted. As such, interruptions help to build and reinforce gender inequality. Being interrupted is not an inherent trait of women's speech itself. West and Zimmerman show the repetition of interruptions made by men is much more than the consequence of their elevated status, it's a path that permits the establishment and maintenance of this hierarchical gender division.

Choice of Subjects

Interruptions and late minimal responses don't just have the effect of silencing women. They also work as a mechanism to control the subjects of conversation. As West and Zimmerman were able to observe, a series of late minimal responses can bring a subject to its end. In a similar fashion, repeated interruptions lead to a change of subject.

West closely examined these intrusions by men (1983:160-168). She studies the way in which discussions continue after an overlap or interruption, focusing on the turn-taking system. As speaking at the same time does not help mutual understanding, we might ask ourselves what can really be gained from it. West focuses on whose speech is followed once the conversation resumes its flow and its order. When the transitions in the turn-based system are broken, various means can be used to overcome this difficulty. One can, for example, return to the original idea you were speaking about beforehand, or you can take up the idea of the other speaker once it's your turn to speak. West states that generally speaking, people rarely return to a subject they were already discussing; this happens in only 26% of cases. It happens 14% of the time after overlaps, and 35% of the time after interruptions. So it's more likely that people will return to their original subject matter after an interruption. This goes to confirm the aforementioned distinction between the two forms of simultaneous speech (overlaps and interruptions) and shows that the distinction between the two is not just a theoretical one as the speakers themselves distinguish between the two in real conversations. In this way we can see that mistakes in the turn-based system (overlaps) are less disruptive to conversation than removing the other speaker's right to speak (interruptions).

This is really a question of removing the right to speak. We've already discussed women's silence following men's interruptions. Here, West observes in detail the development of conversations after men have interrupted female speakers.

She states that men's interruptions are: First off, followed by men continuing to speak about the same subject matter, while women retract. Secondly, by a failure of men to recognize the subject matter introduced by the woman speaker. By ignoring the ideas introduced by the woman speaker, men refuse to yield to them. By going back to their own subject matter, they

employ a language of sympathy and intimacy. Man's place in the world is as an individual in a hierarchical social order where conversing becomes negotiating, searching to acquire and maintain status. Women are individuals inside of a network of relationships and their goal would be interdependence and relationships with others. If the question of the man is: “Do you respect me?”, that of the woman is: “Do you love me?” (Tannen, 1993).

Thus, seen in this new light, Tannen explains to us a number of frustrating situations for women in daily mixed gender interactions. She says that if men and women have different conversational styles, it's because they have different conversational goals (intimacy for some, independence for others) that they learn partly during childhood games. A number of female/male imbalances brought up in conversation are thus explained by Tannen: “Communication between men and women can be compared to intercultural communication.” This explains the misunderstandings as linked to different styles of conversation.

2. Limits of this concept

My critique is not of the psycho-analytical position of Gilligan, but on the linguistic conclusions that Tannen takes from it. We cannot reproach Tannen and show the conversational style of women as deficient. Male behavior is shown to be problematic although it is not portrayed as dominant. The problem lies with the conclusions she draws. Tannen proposes a solution to this lack of communication between the sexes, a simple mutual understanding. No one is to blame, and if men and women would learn to understand that they are fundamentally different, the inequalities of gender would disappear. Among the subtitles of chapters in Tannen's book, we find for example “Understanding is the answer” and the last chapter “Living in asymmetry: opening new paths of communication.” We can't change the gendered practices of conversation, so we should learn to accept them.

The origin of the difference between the sexes for Tannen does not come from a biological determinism, but in socialization experienced differently by men and by women. According to her, women and men grow up in different worlds, and make different words, like the title of her first chapter: “Other words, other worlds, or to each their language”. She makes a constant analogy between female - male communication and communication between different ethnic cultures. Tannen manages to think in terms of “Two sexes, two cultures” or “to each their own adopted style, and each is valid in itself. But the misunderstandings pop up because of their differences. The possibility to start conversations between the sexes in an intercultural manner allows the justification of unhappiness of each without putting one or the other in the wrong” (Tannen, 1993).

The difference between the sexes is a recurring theme with Tannen. However, this difference is never analysed in terms of social hierarchy. The political and social character of this difference as well as any oppression is denied. Thus, Tannen does not try to show the social and planned character of the hierarchy of gender. For Tannen, women and men live in different worlds, and she comes to speak of categories of gender as if each existed independently of its relationship to the other. Here we can take the example of interruptions to illustrate this idea. Tannen refuses to see interruptions in terms of domination. If men interrupt women, it's simply because they don't have the same styles of conversation. Interruptions do not originate from mixed conversation and being interrupted is just a particularity of style when conversing with women (Crawford, 1995).

public. This contributes to the construction and maintenance of male supremacy” (Spender, 1980: 44).

The social rules say that men and women will win respect by communicating according to the recommendations of these same rules, but if this set up works well for men, its not quite the same for women (Lakoff, 1975). We have definitely seen that women cannot be assured this respect by following the paths of communication laid out for them. However, other paths will not help them win respect either.

Whatever the method of speaking and conversing they adopt, women will be evaluated negatively. This reinforces even more the idea that it is gender that is the sticking factor, and not such-or-such a method of conversing which is deficient or deviant.

As it is considered natural that women do the largest part of necessary work for the introduction of new topics, we should not be surprised that one of the most important sanctions that women are submitted to is when they don't participate in dialogues as they should. They will be scoffed at and their femininity questioned. “To be identified as women, we require women to appear and act in a certain way. The conversation is a part of this unified idea of behavior. Women should speak in a womanly fashion; they should be available to do what needs to be done in a conversation, do the dirty work and not complain.” (Fishman, 1983:99).

I will permit myself a brief foray into the domain of non-verbal communication. Nancy Henley (1975) remarked that some behaviors when done by men had connotations of power, but had sexual connotations when done by women. She thinks this is due to the implication that power is unacceptable when exercised by a woman, and should thus be negated. We reduce these attitudes of power to attitudes of seduction in order to deny a woman certain powers. The same thing happens in conversation, even if instead of accusing women of flirting, we tend to reproach them for aggressive and castrating behavior.

Cultural differences or male domination?

1. Presentation of the 'two cultures' approach

So far I have looked at studies of the structure of mixed conversation and the distribution of work. We have looked at imbalances as forms of domination. We have made reference to a political framework which is critical of gender based social relationships. And we have tried to shed light on unbalanced power dynamics in everyday situations. I would now like to discuss research which uses another frame of reference. In the writings that do take gender into account, there is one line of thought with very different consequences from the analysis of male domination. In the linguistic domain, Deborah Tannen is one of its most well-known representatives.

To start with, the hypothesis is that masculinity is constructed by separation from the mother, and femininity by attachment to the mother (Gilligan, 1982). The threat for masculine identity is thus found in intimacy, whilst the threat to feminine identity resides in separation. Consequently, men will have a tendency to make problems in relationships with others and women have trouble with being individuals. Tannen analyses problems of communication between men and women from this position and deduces that they do not look for the same things in a conversation. Men refer to a language of status and independence, while women

seize the role of speaker and give their speech priority.

The majority of women who have been interrupted do not defend themselves in spite of this obvious violation of their right to speak. With these intrusions, men succeed in imposing their own subject matter at the expense of women. These women will not try to reintroduce their subject matter but rather submit to the subjects introduced by men. Women's silences signify that a rule has been disrespected, and the interruption has been felt as inappropriate. Although this strategy is also used by men in conversation with other men, the men who have been interrupted will often reintroduce their subject matter later in the conversation (Slembeck,1995). These interruptions should not be viewed as signs of incompetence in conversation but as signs of dominance. They create problems in the flow of conversation, obstructing the turn-based system of subject matter in conversation and allow men to impose their topics of interest.

These are the means by which inequalities between women and men are created in conversation. West concludes her article by linking these linguistic practices which allow men to dominate others to the wider question of power and control in social life. “In other words, the distribution of power in the workplace, the division of labor in the family, as well as in other institutions run parallel to the dynamic we see here on a day to day level. In short, we can distinguish concrete and structured means by which the dominant position enjoyed by men in other environments compares with the conversations they have with women” (West,1983:169-170).

Introducing subject matter into a conversation doesn't necessarily mean it will be developed, some work is required. Ideally this work should be shared by both speakers, and once again there is no reason for any inequality in this regard. Thanks to a study of dialogues between heterosexual couples, Pamela Fishman (1983) has given us a detailed analysis of how this constitutes work. Looking closely at the development of a subject, she realized for this development to be effective, it required work from both speakers. In this way she clearly shows how in mixed conversations men impose their subject matter in conversation to the detriment of subjects brought up by women. Pamela Fishman looks at the introduction of 76 different subjects arising in these conversations. 29 were introduced by men, 47 by women. Of these 47, only 17 became a matter of any real discussion. So what's happening here? How could so much subject matter be ignored? Why do women fail to have their ideas taken up and discussed?

Conversational practices of Women

To understand this, let's look at how strategies used by women and men are different. Fishman (1983:1984) starts off by saying that women in an interaction ask two and half times more questions than men. This is the first flagrant imbalance that we observe. Men interrupt and use late minimal responses to show their chronic disinterest and in the same way they ask very few questions. Robin Lakoff (1975) has already observed this phenomenon. But for Lakoff, these questions, asked more frequently by women, were an indication of their insecurity. Fishman views them more as a way of introducing a new subject.

But Fishman doesn't stop there, she wonders why only women adopt this style of dialogue. Using her personal experience, she observes that asking a question makes an interaction more likely- thus reducing the stain of failure, because asking a question demands a response from the listener. In the same way, women use twice as many tag questions as men (like “you

know what?" or "okay?") that help them better assert their right to speak. Children when speaking with adults often use the same strategy to be listened to. This shows us less about the insecurity of women and / or children as it does as their rights to be heard. It's not by chance that we have to use these strategies just to get a response.

A third class of strategies concerns displays of attention which can be diverse and varied. Women use twice as often as men (Fishman, 1983). Like West and Zimmerman, Fishman also speaks about minimal responses and the different ways of using them, which depend on whether the user is a woman or a man. Their use by men mainly shows a lack of interest that can go so far as discouraging discussion of a topic.

This constant attitude of support and of encouragement, in these strategic practices used by women, has a direct consequence: Out of the 29 subjects introduced by men, 28 of them are taken up and developed. This shows that the level of work required for a conversation to happen. This work is not done by men, and so women are not able to discuss their own subjects. Women can introduce as many subjects as they like. But if men don't engage in this subject matter, if they don't support the speaker by responding to them; if they interrupt them, make them understand that they are not interested; in that case, the subjects introduced by women will remain in an embryonic state. If men don't collaborate, the subjects of women will remain untouched propositions.

Changing the subject: Who puts in all the effort?

The introduction of subjects by men is done successfully because both parties are actively cooperating towards making these initiatives effective. When men introduce a new topic of conversation, women nurture them and allow them to develop. We have looked at women's conversational strategies and conclude that the distribution of labour is imbalanced (Fishman, 1983). Women support the dialogue and continue to do support work even while men are speaking: the unfair division of labour is obvious. The women make all of the effort in the conversation, and the men control it. Women are constantly struggling to get responses to their statements. They restrain their own opportunity to express themselves, while concentrating on developing subjects which were introduced by men. Finally, women are required to be available to men in conversation (Spender, 1980).

In fact, it is as if the subjects introduced by women were perceived as feeble attempts that can easily be abandoned, while those of men were seen straight away as subjects worth being developed (Fishman, 1983). Most of the time, all this plays out without apparent conflict. For the majority of people, this is simply the way it works. This work done by women is not generally considered as being real work. We have to look elsewhere to find the analogy with the traditional division of labor. It is feminists who make domestic work done by women visible, as Fishman makes that work visible in a conversation.

Just as it's considered within women's nature to bring up children, it's equally considered in their nature to support conversation. This naturalization of work accomplished by women allows yet again for them to be used without leaving much room for reproach... If we accept that it is in the nature of women to work cooperatively, for example, it makes the work invisible and all the easier to ignore completely. "The work is not seen as something that women do, but as part of what they are" (Fishman, 1983:100). Making a cooperation a 'feminine quality' confuses and ignores these valuable skills, simply innate and natural features. And the reason for this is to create confusion around the power

dynamics. "Because this work is obscured, because it's so often seen as simply an aspect of gender identity and not gendered activity, their continued expression in male/female power dynamics are also hidden" (Fishman, 1983:100).

The dismissal of ideas proposed by women is not due to their content, as Fishman was unable to find any notable difference with the subject matter proposed by men. This dismissal can be explained most of the time by the refusal of men to cooperate in this exchange. The work they are prepared to do when introducing new subject matter appears only to be to introduce it and control it. In concrete terms, we have seen for example with West (1983) the structural work necessary following interruptions and overlaps in order to continue a conversation in an intelligible manner and how little work is done by men: to remove their own speech from a situation where two people speak simultaneously. Men block and ignore themes brought up by women, refuse to cooperate at moments when it is necessary to further the discussion and focus on developing their own subject matter. So in the end, men make all the decisions in mixed dialogue: the subject, the way its handled, and the evolution of the discussion. They speak far longer than women and control the conversation with a diverse range of tactics.

I hope I have sufficiently demonstrated that the techniques used by men are not simply indications of their dominance; they are not merely for show, but rather for establishing and reinforcing domination when women adopt other conversational practices.

Having observed the development of mixed conversations in concrete terms and reached certain conclusions, it seems like a good moment to examine another element of male domination. The ideology of gender, ever present in communication, always encourages us to stick to the established rules which ultimately lead to the oppression of women (Graddol & Swann, 1989). If it's very difficult for a woman to leave this gendered form of conversation, it's also because of the sanctions she faces. It doesn't take much for her to be reminded to learn her lesson. Male strategies like interruptions or late minimal responses are means of control in themselves, if only because they directly prevent women from speaking. But if one succeeds in getting over this hurdle we encounter a second form of control that we can perhaps see more clearly as repression.

Personally, I have been more often confronted by this second form of control. Participating in a number of mixed meetings has allowed me to observe a few of these techniques employed by men. The first surprise at encountering a woman who does not conform to the stereotypical role attributed to the female gender is hostility and stigmatization. This was the moment that I really became conscious of the role of women in mixed groups. They should never upset the hierarchy of genders, that is - they should accept their sub-ordinate position. Not conforming to gender expectations shows just how much these expectations exist and must be maintained. Sticking to a subject and coming back to it, not being quiet when interrupted, not showing the desired interest in a topic of discussion, in short, any act which transgresses the rules of gendered conversation becomes a subversive act.

A large part of the studies quoted below come to the same conclusion: If women do not bend themselves to fit the expected image, if they free themselves from the control of men, they will be sanctioned. Let's start from the beginning: talkative women - you will be judged if you dare to speak. The double standard is apparent at a fundamental level and the reason for it is clear "Just as interrupting a woman is a normal practice for men, women who dare to interrupt men will be penalized. There are a whole series of beliefs which reinforce this pattern and which state that it is not right for a woman to interrupt or contradict a man, particularly in