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INTERACTION: THE WORK WOMEN DO*

Pamela M. Fishman

The oppression of women in society is an issue of growing concern, both in academic fields and in everyday life. Despite research on the historical and economic bases of women's position, we know little about how hierarchy is routinely established and maintained in daily experience. This essay analyzes conversations between women and men in their homes, demonstrating how verbal interaction helps to construct and maintain the hierarchical relations between men and women.

Weber (1969: 152) provided the classic conception of power as the ability of one actor in a social relationship to impose their will on another. Recently, Berger and Luckmann (1967: 109) have discussed power from a perspective which specifies an important way of "imposing one's will" on others. They define power as a question of potentially conflicting definitions of reality; that of the most powerful will be "made to stick." Imposing one's will can be much more than forcing someone else to do something. Power may also involve the ability to impose one's definition of what is possible, what is right, what is rational, what is real. Power is a product of human activities, just as the activities are themselves products of the power relations in the socioeconomic world.

Power usually is analyzed macrosociologically; it cannot be solely a result of what people do within the immediate situation in which it occurs. What people do in specific interactions expresses and reflects historical and social structural forces beyond the boundaries of their encounters. Power relations between men and women are the outcome of the social organization of their activities in the home and in the economy. Power can, however, be analyzed microsociologically, which is the purpose of this paper. Power and hierarchical relations are not abstract forces operating on people. Power must be a human accomplishment, situated in everyday interaction. Both structural forces and interactional activities are vital to the maintenance and construction of social reality, including hierarchies.

Recent work on gender and the English language shows that the male-female hierarchy is inherent in the words we use to perceive and name our world: the use of the generic "man" to refer to the human species (Stanley, 1977); the addition

of suffixes ("authoress," "actress," "stewardess") when referring to female practitioners (Miller & Swift, 1976); the asymmetrical use of first and last names (women are more often called by their first, men by their last, even when they are of equal rank) (see McConnell-Ginet, 1978, for a full discussion). These and other studies document the male-dominated reality expressed through our language.

Much less attention has been directed toward how male-female power relations are expressed through the dynamics of conversation.[1] To complement other language and gender studies, we need more analyses of the interactional production of a particular reality through people's talk.

Conversational activity is significant for intimates. Berger and Kellner (1970) have argued that at present, with the increasing separation of public and private spheres of life, intimate relationships are among the most important reality-maintaining settings. They apply this argument specifically to marriage. The process of daily interaction in the marital relationship is ideally

> ... one in which reality is crystallized, narrowed, and stabilized. Ambivalences are converted into certainties. Typifications of self and other become settled. Most generally, possibilities become facticities (1970: 64).

In these relationships, in these mundane interactions, much of the essential work of sustaining the reality of the world goes on. Intimates often reconstruct their separate experiences, past and present, with one another. Specifically, the couple sustain and produce the reality of their own relationship, and more generally, of the world.

Although Berger and Kellner have analyzed marriage as a reality-producing setting, they have not analyzed the interaction of marriage partners nor the differences and inequalities which may be involved in the reality-construction process. I shall focus here on the interactional activities that constitute the everyday work done by intimates and the different activities of the partners which emerge. It is through this work that people produce their relationship to one another, their relationship to the world, and those patterns normally referred to as social structure.

WORK IN INTERACTION[2]

Sometimes we think of interaction as work. At a party or meeting where silence lies heavy, we recognize the burden of interaction and respond to it as work. The many books written on "the art of conversation" call attention to the tasks involved in interaction. It is not simply an analogy to think of interaction as work. Rather, it is an intuitive recognition of what must be accomplished for interaction to occur.

Interaction requires at least two people. Conversation is produced not simply by their presence, but also by the display of their continuing agreement to pay attention to one another. That is, all interactions are potentially problematic and occur only through the continual, turn-by-turn, efforts of the participants.

Sacks and his followers (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff & Sacks, 1974; Schegloff, 1972) have sought to specify how conversationalists accomplish such things as beginnings and endings. They have ignored, however, the interaction between intimates. Schegloff and Sacks (1974: 262) characterize intimates in home situations as "in continuing states of incipient talk." Thus, they contend that their analysis of the activities involved in opening and closing conversations, and in keeping conversation going, do not apply to intimate conversations. But this perspective disregards the many conversations that do not begin with greetings nor end with good-bye's. If one sees a movie with friends, conversation afterwards does not begin anew with greetings. In social gatherings lulls occur and conversation must begin again. In any setting in which conversation is possible, attempts at beginning, sustaining, and stopping talk still must be made. And these attempts must be recognized and oriented to by both parties for them to move between states of "incipient" and "actual" conversation.

In a sense, every remark or turn at speaking should be seen as an *attempt* to interact. It may be an attempt to open or close a conversation. It may be a bid to continue interaction, to respond to what went before, and elicit a further remark from one's partner. Some attempts succeed; others fail. For an attempt to succeed, the other party must be willing to do further interactional work. That other person has the power to turn an attempt into a conversation or to stop it dead.

DATA

The data for this study come from fifty-two hours of tape-recorded conversation between intimates in their homes. Three heterosexual couples agreed to place tape recorders in their apartments. They had the right to censor the material before I heard it. The apartments were small, so that the recorders picked up all conversation from the kitchen and living room as well as the louder portions of talk from the bedroom and bath. The tapes could run for a four-hour period without interruption. Though I had timers to switch the tapes on and off automatically, all three couples insisted on doing the switching manually. The segments of uninterrupted recording vary from one to four hours.

The three couples had been together for various amounts of time—three months, six months, and two years. All were white and professionally oriented, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. One woman was a social worker and the other five people were in graduate school. Two of the women were avowed feminists and all three men as well as the other woman described themselves as sympathetic to the women's movement.

The tape recorders were present in the apartments from four to fourteen days. I am satisfied that the material represents natural conversation and that there was no undue awareness of the recorder. The tapes sounded natural to me, like conversations between my husband and myself. Others who read the transcripts

agree. All six people reported that they soon began to ignore the tape recorder; they were apologetic about the material, calling it trivial and uninteresting, just the ordinary affairs of everyday life. Furthermore, one couple forgot the recorder sufficiently to begin making love in the living room while the recorder was on. That segment and two others were the only ones the participants deleted before handing the tapes over to me.

METHOD

I began the research in order to explore the ways in which power was reflected and maintained in daily interactions. I had some ideas of what to look for, but generally my categories and concepts developed out of the conversations on the tapes. For example, I did not start the analysis with the conception of interactional work, but as I noticed the frequency of questions on the tapes and began to think about how they functioned conversationally, I came to the notion of work.

The frequency counts reported in the body of the paper are from twelve and a half hours of transcribed tapes. Five hours of the transcripts were the first ones I did and these were selected for two reasons. First, when I started the research I was looking for examples of decision-making and references to Garfinkel's (1967) "essential features" of conversation. I transcribed segments which showed either of these. Second, I also had the sense while listening to the tapes that some of the conversations were "good" ones and others were "bad." I transcribed some of each in hope that I could find what was going on conversationally that led me to those vague evaluations. The identification of conversational strategies and the conception of conversational work came out of my analysis of these first five hours.

The remaining seven and a half hours were transcribed with no motive but that of transferring more of the tapes to paper. They represent all the talk on one side of tape from each of the three couples.[3] I then used these to double-check the frequency counts of the strategies I had by then specified (the variation has not been significant). The analysis of topic initiations which comes later in this paper was based on all the transcripts.

PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE

Some evidence of the power relations between couples appeared while I was still in the process of collecting the tapes. During casual conversations with the participants after the taping, I learned that in all three couples the men usually set up the tape recorders and turned them on and off. More significantly, some of the times that the men turned the recorders on, they did so without the women's knowledge. The reverse never occurred.

To control conversation is not merely to choose the topic. It is a matter of having control over the definition of the situation in general, which includes not only what will be talked about, but whether there will be a conversation at all and under what terms it will occur. Control over specific details of the situation can be important. The addition of a tape recorder in the home is an example of a change in a routine situation. The men clearly had and actively maintained unilateral control over this new feature in the situation.

This research also raised the issue of a typically private interaction becoming available to a third party, the researcher. The men more often played back the tapes for possible censoring, and they made the only two attempts to exert control over the presentation of the data to me. One case involved the "clicks" that are normally recorded when the recorder is turned off. Since more than one time segment was often on the same side of a tape, I relied on the clicks, as well as my sense of the conversations, to know when a new time segment began. One man carefully erased nearly all the clicks on the tapes, making it difficult to separate out recordings at different time periods. (He said he wanted to make the recording sound smoother.)

The second instance was a more explicit illustration of male censorship. Early on, I made the error of asking a couple to help transcribe a segment of their tape. The error was doubly instructive. First, I saw that the participants could rarely hear or understand the problem areas any better than I even though they had been "on the spot" and were hearing their own voices. Second, the man kept wanting to know why I was interested in the segment, repeatedly guessing what I was looking for. At the time, I only knew that it was an example of decision-making and did not know specifically what I wanted. He never accepted this explanation. He became irritated at my continued attempt at literal transcription and kept insisting that he could give me the sense of what occurred and that the exact words were unimportant. He continued the attempt to determine the meaning of the interaction retrospectively, with constant references to his motives for saying this or that. It took hours to withdraw from the situation, as he insisted on giving me the help that I had requested.

The preliminary data suggest that the men are more likely than the women to control conversation. The men ensured that they knew when the tape recorder was on and, thus, when their interaction was available to a third party. They were unconcerned, however, whether the women also knew. Further, in at least two cases they attempted to control my interpretation of the tapes.

FINDINGS: INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES

Textual analysis revealed how interactants do the work of conversation. There are a variety of strategies to insure, encourage, and subvert conversation. The differential use of these strategies by women and men suggests that there is inequality in talk between the sexes. Conversation is more problematic for

women, who work harder to make it happen. Talk seems less problematic for women, who exert control over when and how it will occur. As these findings indicate, there are specific ways to see this inequality in action.

While there are problems with generalizing from three couples to male-female conversations overall, I do so for a number of reasons. First, this work suggests many areas for further study: Will other researchers find the same patterns among other heterosexual couples? Do these patterns appear in other hierarchical relations, like bosses and workers, teachers and students? Are there male-female conversational differences in larger groups and are the patterns similar or different? What will we find in video-taped interactions? Second, while the findings are based on the conversations of three couples, they have been confirmed many times by my own informal observations and by reports from other people of their experience. Finally, the findings are helpful. Since the strategies are quite concrete, they can be noticed in conversation. They are cues by which people, and particularly women, can figure out what is happening in their own interactions.

Asking Questions

There is an overwhelming difference between female and male use of questions as a resource in interaction. At times I felt that all women did was ask questions. In the transcripts the women asked two and a half times the questions that the men did.

Other research (Lakoff, 1975) suggests that women ask more questions than men. Lakoff has interpreted women's question-asking as an indication of their insecurity, a linguistic signal of an internal psychological state resulting from the oppression of women. But a psychological analysis is unnecessary to explain why women ask more questions than men. Since questions are produced in conversations, we should look first to how questions function there.

Questions are interactionally powerful utterances. They are among a class of utterances, like greetings, treated as standing in a paired relation; that is, they demand a next utterance. Questions are paired with answers (Sacks, 1972). They "deserve" answers. The absence of a response is noticeable and may be complained about. A question does work in conversation by opening a two-part sequence. It is a way to insure a minimal interaction—at least one utterance by each of the two participants. By asking questions, women strengthen the possibility of a response to what they have to say.

Once I had noted the phenomenon of questions on the tapes, I attended to my own speech and discovered the same pattern. I tried, and still do try, to break myself of the "habit" and found it very difficult. Remarks kept coming out as questions before I could rephrase them. When I did succeed in making a remark as a statement, I usually did not get a response. It became clear that I asked questions not merely out of habit nor from insecurity but because it was likely that my attempt at interaction would fail if I did not.

Asking "D'ya Know"

In line with the assumption that children have restricted rights to speak in the presence of adults, Harvey Sacks (1972) describes a type of question used extensively by children as a conversational opening: "D'ya know what?" As with other questions, it provides for a next utterance. The next utterance it engenders is itself a question, which provides for yet another utterance. The archetype is, "D'ya know what?" "What?" "Blahblah (answer.)." Sometimes, of course, the adult answers with an expectant look or a statement like, "Tell me what." Whatever the exact form of the first response, initial questions like "D'ya know what?" set off a three-part sequence, Q–Q–A, rather than a simple Q–A sequence.

Sacks points out that the children's use of this device is a clever solution to their problem of insuring rights to speak (at the same time, their use of this strategy acknowledges those restricted rights). In response to the "What?" the children may say what they wanted to say in the first place. Finding such three-part "D'ya know" sequences in interaction informs us both about the work of guaranteeing interaction and the differential rights of the participants. This device was used twice as often by the women.

Attention Beginnings

The phrase, "this is interesting," or a variation thereof, occurs throughout the tapes. Ideally, the work of establishing that a remark is interesting is accomplished by both interactants. The first person makes a remark; the second person orients to and responds to the remark, thus establishing its status as something worthy of joint interest or importance. All this occurs without the question of its interest ever becoming explicit.[4] The use of "This is really interesting" as an introduction shows that the user cannot assume that the remark itself will be seen as worthy of attention. At the same time, the user tries single-handedly to establish the interest of their remarks. The user is saying, "Pay attention to what I have to say, I can't assume that you will." The women used twice as many attention beginnings as the men.

There are also many instances of "y'know" interspersed throughout the transcripts. While this phrase does not compel the attention of one's partner as forcefully as "this is interesting" does, it is an attempt to command the other person's attention. The women said "you know" five times as often as the men (for further analysis of this phrase, see Fishman, 1980).

Minimal Response

Another interaction strategy is the use of the minimal response, when the speaker takes a turn by saying "yeah," "umm," "huh," and only that. Women and men both do this, but they tend to use the minimal response in quite different ways. The male usages of the minimal response displayed lack of interest. The

monosyllabic response merely filled a turn at a point when it needed to be filled. For example, a woman would make a lengthy remark, after which the man responded with "yeah," doing nothing to encourage her, nor to elaborate. Such minimal responses operate to discourage interaction.

The women also made this type of minimal response at times, but their most frequent use of the minimal response was as "support work." Throughout the tapes, when the men are talking, the women are particularly skilled at inserting "mm's," "yeah's," "oh's," and other such comments throughout streams of talk rather than at the end. These are signs from the inserter that she is constantly attending to what is said, that she is demonstrating her participation, her interest in the interaction and the speaker. How well the women do this is also striking— seldom do they mistime their insertions and cause even slight overlaps. These minimal responses occur between the breaths of a speaker, and there is nothing in tone or structure to suggest they are attempting to take over the talk.

Making Statements

Finally, I would like to consider statements, utterances that do nothing to insure their own success or the success of the interaction. Of course, a statement does some interactional work: it fills a turn and provides for a response. However, such statements display an assumption on the part of the speaker that the attempt will be successful as is; it will be understood, the statement is of interest, there will be a response. It is as if speakers can assume that everything is working well; success is naturally theirs.

In the transcribed material, the men produced over twice as many statements as the women, and they almost always got a response, which was not true for the women. For example: many times one or both people were reading, then read a passage aloud or commented on it. The man's comments often engendered a lengthy exchange, the woman's seldom did. In a discussion of their respective vitas, the man literally ignored both long and short comments from the woman on her vita, returning the conversation after each remark of hers back to his own. Each time, she turned her attention back to his vita "as directed."

TOPIC INITIATION

Women use many of these strategies so frequently because conversations are generally more problematic for them than for men. This can be seen by looking at what happens to the topics women and men introduce into conversation.[5]

I considered an utterance to be a topic initiation if it addressed itself to a different subject from the utterance preceding it, or if it reinitiated a topic after an outside interruption, like a phone call, or after a very lengthy silence. In the latter case, I relied on a sense from the tapes that the topic had been dropped and the next mention of it was thus a reintroduction.

Using this method on the transcripts, I found that there were seventy-six topics raised. The women initiated forty-seven of them, the men twenty-nine. That is, the women raised between one and a half and two times more topics than did the men.

However, raising a topic does not insure that it gets talked about. Introducing a topic is an attempt to get a conversation going, not a guarantee that it will occur. In order for the topic to be successful, to turn into an actual conversation, both participants must work to make it happen. They both must orient to the topic and to one another. Not only must one person raise the topic, the other person must respond, and at least some of those responses must contribute to the topic's elaboration. At minimum, the two people need to take turns speaking, thus displaying their mutual orientation to each other and to the topic at hand.

Table 1 shows what happened to the topics raised by women and men. Of the forty-seven topics initiated by the women, seventeen succeeded, while twenty-eight of the twenty-nine topics raised by the men succeeded. Thus, while the women made 62% of all the attempts to introduce topics, they only raised 38% of the topics which evolved into conversation.

Table 1.   Topic Success and Failure

	Success	Failure	Uncertain	Total
M	28	0	1	29
F	17	28	2	47
Total	45	28	3	76

Clearly, the women had much more trouble getting conversations going than the men did. We cannot explain the women's failures on the basis of the content of the topics, since what the women and men wanted to talk about was quite similar—an article in the paper, something that happened during the day, friends, dinner, work. Topics introduced by the women failed because the men did not respond with the attention necessary to keep the conversation going.

In contrast, the men's topics succeeded not because they were inherently more interesting but because the women upheld their part of the conversations. The women responded regularly and in non-minimal ways; they displayed orientation by taking conversational turns. Topics men initiated succeeded because both parties worked to turn the initial attempt into an actual conversation.

Topics fail not only through the extreme case of nonresponse of the other party. Many topics continue to be pushed by the raiser over some period of time, yet the topic fails conversationally because there is no joint development of it. The increasing use of conversational devices like question-asking and attention beginnings is one sign that a topic is in trouble. Similarly, we can trace topic failure by noting the use of minimal responses (see above) which do nothing to develop the topic or to express interest.

The structure of pauses in the conversation is another indication of the failure of a topic. In a developing conversation, the pauses between one person's utterance and the other person's response are often a second or less, and seldom more than three seconds. (There are exceptions to this, such as when a person's pause displays appreciation of a poem or thinking about what has been said. Such displays are normally clear in the utterance following the pause.) Long pauses between turns at speaking usually indicate minimal attention and interest on the part of the responder. It is as if the responder is thinking, "Oh, yeah. I have to say something here." Minimal responses, which are good ways of saying something without saying anything particular, often follow long pauses.

Another indication that the topic is in trouble occurs when a person pauses in the midst of an utterance. Internal pauses often increase when the speaker's utterances have been continually met by minimal responses or long pauses from the other party. The number of "you know's" also increases in these circumstances, and one often finds internal pausing and "you know" together.[6]

CONCLUSIONS

There is an unequal distribution of work in conversation. We can see from the differential use of strategies that the women are more actively engaged in insuring interaction than the men. They ask more questions and use more attention beginnings. Women do support work while the men are talking and it is the women who generally do active maintenance and continuation work in conversations. The men, on the other hand, do much less active work when they begin or participate in interactions. They rely on statements, which they assume will get responses. They much more often discourage interactions initiated by women than vice versa.

These data suggest several general patterns of female-male interactional work. Compared with the men, the women tried more often and succeeded less often in getting conversations going, whereas the men tried less often and seldom failed in their attempts. Both men and women regarded topics introduced by women as tentative; many of these were quickly dropped. In contrast, topics introduced by the men were treated as topics to be pursued; they were seldom rejected. The women worked harder than the men in conversation because they had less certainty of success with the topics they raised. The women did much of the necessary work of interaction, starting conversations and then working to maintain them.

The failure of the women's attempts at interaction is not due to anything inherent in their talk, but to the failure of the men to respond, to do interactional work. The success of the men's attempts is due to the women doing interactional work in response to remarks by the men. Thus, the definition of what is appropriate or inappropriate conversation becomes the man's choice. What part of the world the interactants orient to, construct, and maintain the reality of, is his choice, not hers. Yet the women labor hardest in making interactions go.

As with work in its usual sense, there appears to be a division of labor in conversation. The people who do the routine maintenance work, the women, are not the same people who either control or benefit from the process. Women are the "shitworkers" of routine interaction, and the "goods" being made are not only interactions, but, through them, realities.

This analysis of the detailed activity in everyday conversation suggests other dimensions of power and work. Two interrelated aspects concern women's availability and the maintenance of gender. While women have difficulty generating interactions, they are almost always available to do the conversational work required by men and which is necessary for interactions. Appearances may differ by case: sometimes women are required to sit and "be a good listener" because they are not otherwise needed. At other times women are required to fill silences and keep conversation moving, to talk a lot. Sometimes they are expected to develop others' topics, and at other times they are required to present and develop topics of their own.

Women are required to do their work in a very strong sense. Sometimes they are required in ways that can be seen in interaction, as when men use interactional strategies such as attention beginnings and questions, to which the women fully respond. There are also times when there is no direct situational evidence of "requirement" from the man, and the woman does so "naturally." "Naturally" means that it is morally required to do so and a highly sanctionable matter not to. If one does not act "naturally," then one can be seen as crazy and deprived of adult status. We can speculate on the quality of doing it "naturally" by considering what happens to women who are unwilling to be available for the various jobs that the situation requires. Women who successfully control interactions are often derided and doubt is cast on their femininity. They are often considered "abnormal"—terms like "castrating bitch," "domineering," "aggressive," and "witch" may be used to identify them. When they attempt to control conversations temporarily, women often "start" arguments. Etiquette books are filled with instructions to women on how to be available. Women who do not behave are punished by deprivation of full female status. One's identity as either male or female is the most crucial identity one has. It is the most "natural" differentiating characteristic there is.

Whereas sociologists generally treat sex as an "ascribed" rather than as an "achieved" characteristic, Garfinkel's (1967, ch. 5) study of a transsexual describes one's gender as a continual, routine accomplishment. He discusses what the transsexual Agnes has shown him, that one must continually give off the appearance of being female or male in order for your gender to be unproblematic in a given interaction. Agnes had to learn these appearances and her awareness of them was explicit. For "normally sexed" people, it is routine.

To be identified as female, women are required to look and act in particular ways. Talking is part of this complex of behavior. Women must talk like a female talks; they must be available to do what needs to be done in conversation, to do the shitwork and not complain. But all the activities involved in displaying femaleness are usually defined as part of what being a woman *is*, so the idea that

it is work is obscured. The work is not seen as what women do, but as part of what they are. Because this work is obscured, because it is too often seen as an aspect of gender identity rather than of gender activity, the maintenance and expression of male-female power relations in our everyday conversations are hidden as well. When we orient instead to the activities involved in maintaining gender, we are able to discern the reality of hierarchy in our daily lives.

The purpose of this study has been to begin an exploration of the details of concrete conversational activity of couples in their homes from the perspective of the socially structured power relationship between males and females. From such detailed analysis we see that women do the work necessary for interaction to occur smoothly. But men control what will be produced as reality by the interaction. They already have, and they continually establish and enforce, their rights to define what the interaction, and reality, will be about.

NOTES

1. A notable exception is the work on interruptions in conversation by West (1979), West and Zimmerman (1977), and Zimmerman and West (1975). Other conversational research can be found in Dubois and Crouch (1976).

2. Throughout this paper, I use the terms interaction and conversation interchangeably, although I do not mean to suggest that conversation covers all the essential components of interaction.

3. The discrepancy between the possible twelve hours of tape and the actual seven and a half hours of transcript represents long periods of silence.

4. The notion that joint expression of interest is a necessary feature of conversation is discussed by Garfinkel (1967: 38–42).

5. The following is a synopsis of material in Fishman, 1978.

6. See Fishman, 1980, for a full dicussion of pause structures.

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