ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

VOLUME IV

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Michael Lynch and Wes Sharrock

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ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

Contents

Volume IV

Section Eight: Ethnomethodology and Social Institutions

Section Nine: Language, Interaction, Embodied Conduct

Section Eight: Ethnomethodology and Social Institutions

59

Against Our Will: Male Interruptions of Females in Cross-Sex Conversation

Candace West

Introduction

A disturbing suggestion is sometimes made to the effect that women "ask for" discriminatory and even brutal treatment by men. In lay communities, the most blatant form of this suggestion (i.e., women invite rape) is increasingly deplored.[1] However, when they are made in the context of empirical inquiry, suggestions with similar implications may go overlooked. In discussions of the initiation of simultaneous talk (cf. Zimmerman and West, 1975; West and Zimmerman, 1977) reports of males' systematic interruptions of females often draw questions regarding women's part in creating, sustaining or inviting men's interruptions of their utterances. For example, I have observed females falling silent for longer and longer durations after repeated interruptions by males (Zimmerman and West, 1975: 117–124). One interpretation of this observation is that females engage in a form of silent protest against male intrusion into their turns. Another explanation I have heard offered for this finding is that females' silence "encourages" males' interruption. In fact, the topics women talk about, the "style" of "women's talk," and the extent to which they protest when men violate their conversational turnspace have all been offered as reasons for males' interruptions of females. Male dominance in conversation might be likened to our cultural (and sometimes legal) conceptions of rape. Women are seen by some to invite rape by the clothes they wear, the "style" of "women's walk" and, especially, for their failure to "put up a fight."[2] However, the extent to which we find empirical bases for

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the existence of a struggle is the extent to which dominance in conversation and physical rape may both be defined as conflict situations and not willing submission.

Elsewhere (Zimmerman and West, 1975; West and Zimmerman, 1977), I report findings of a study of 20 same-sex and 11 cross-sex exchanges between pairs of college-age adults recorded in various natural settings within a college community, and five parent-child exchanges recorded in a physician's office. Results of that investigation suggested that females and children receive similar treatment in conversations with males and parents respectively: both women and children were much more frequently interrupted by their conversational partners.

Here, I report findings on a collection of cross-sex conversations between previously unaquainted persons recorded under controlled conditions, which bear upon the reproducibility of my earlier findings. Further, I extend my analysis of the initiation of interruptions to consider how speakers negotiate who shall drop out and who shall continue when these intrusions occur. My results indicate that females, in conversations with unacquainted males, do not appear to "invite" the males' interruption of their utterances through any female failure to compete for a turnspace or retrieve their interrupted utterances. And yet, males interrupt females far more often than the reverse, even in brief conversations in a laboratory setting.

Since the central concern of this paper is the negotiation of simultaneous turns at talk, I begin with a description of conversational turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974) and a series of observations on orderly procedures for resolving and retrieving simultaneous utterances (Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975).

Negotiating Simultaneous Speech

Sacks *et al.* (1974) suggest that conversations are organized to ensure that (1) one party speaks at a time and (2) speaker change recurs. These features describe a normative order of interaction (i.e., the preferred order from the viewpoint of conversationalists.) Therefore, given the onset of two or more speakers talking at once, the most immediate problem they are faced with is the resolution of that state of simultaneity.

My earlier work (Zimmerman and West, 1975; West and Zimmerman, 1977) distinguishes between two types of simultaneous speech: overlaps (briefly, errors in transition-timing) and interruptions (violations of speaker turns). Here, I am interested in deep interruptions, which are defined as instances of simultaneous speech that involve deep intrustions into the internal structure of speakers' utterances. By "deep," I mean more than two syllables away from the terminal boundaries of a possibly complete utterance (a word, phrase, clause or sentence depending on its context.) This definition is based on

Sacks *et al.*'s suggestion that a turn consists not only of the temporal duration of an utterance but of the right and obligation to speak which is allocated to a current speaker. Turns are constructed of what they term "unit-types," which can consist of words, phrases, clauses or sentences depending on their context. Each speaker, upon being allocated a turn, is provided the "right" to complete at least one unit-type before turntransition ought properly to occur. (See Sacks *et al.*, 1974; and Zimmerman and West, 1975 for more detailed discussion of the turn-taking model.)

To be sure, there are instances of simultaneous speech that appear to ratify – rather than disrupt – the talk of a current speaker, e.g., the emphatic "YEAH" interjected to display recognition of that which is in-the-course-of-being-said (Jefferson, 1973). Deep interruptions, on the other hand, cannot be seen to be "warranted" by such considerations of active listenership. Instead, this type of simultaneous speech is seen to disrupt turns at talk, disorganize the ongoing construction of conversational topics; and violate the current speaker's right to be engaged in speaking (cf. West and Zimmerman, 1977). The following example provides an illustration of its effect. (The transcribing conventions employed here appear in the Appendix to this paper. In this example, the brackets enclosing the female's and male's utterances indicate those portions of talk which are simultaneous.)

(Excerpt from Zimmerman and West corpus, 1975)

Male: Where the hell have *you* been?
(1.4)
Female: Well I had to find Foster n' [then
Male: [Do you realize
what time it is?
(2.0)
Female: Uh *yeah* but I couldn't find [Fos
Male: [I've been *standing around* in
that cruddy reserve bookroom for the last half hour!
(#)
Female: Sshush! the whole hall is gonna hear [you
Male: [I don't care!
Next time you wanna "just stop off on campus" you can use your legs!

In this example, the male who is inquiring as to the prior whereabouts of the (evidently late) female does not appear to be seriously interested in listening to her answer. Repeatedly, he interrupts her attempts to explain, even by posing a further question ("Do you know what time it is?") *over* her ongoing answer to his initial inquiry ("Where the hell have *you* been?"). Note that the female resolves the state of simultaneity produced by his first incursion by dropping out midsentence (". . .'n then".) Dropping out could indeed be seen as tantamount to "not putting up a fight" in this context, since the turnspace is

ceded to the interrupting party (cf. Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975).[3] However, note too that the female *reintroduces* her objection-thus-far in her very next turn ("... *yeah* but I couldn't find Fos"). While her recycling of the explanation can hardly be seen to confront his prior intrusion head on, it does suggest that more than "passive surrender" is involved here.

Jefferson and Schegloff (1975) specify a variety of procedures employed by speakers to resolve a state of overlap and restore talk to a state of one-party-at-a-time.[4] One method, of course, is dropping out to cede the turn-space to the other. But any given speaker in a particular state of simultaneity might not exercise the option of dropping out and instead persevere by continuing the construction of an utterance – waiting, perhaps, for the other speaker(s) to drop out. Or, a speaker might struggle for conversational space by progressively getting louder over the talk of a co-conversationalist:

(Excerpt from West and Zimmerman corpus, 1978)

Male 1: There was no things like tow::els ['r anything like that.
Male 2: ⟶ [We:ll TOW:] els er
go:od, but the sheets are scREWed cuz ther're not fi:dded sheets y'know?

Jefferson and Schegloff (1975) also suggest that a speaker might even engage in an active fight for the floor by recycling portions of a speech object over the talk of another, in order to project the rest of that utterance in the clear:

(Excerpt from West and Zimmerman corpus, 1978)

Male 1: Yeah, for sure, I gu:ess. Y'know [I don't
Male 2: [Of the- in the] ↙ in the top of
the atmosphere

In the above examples, we see speakers manipulating the sounds and structures of their utterances within a state of simultaneity, and resuming "normal" pronounciation in the clear. In the first excerpt, "Male 1" proceeds to completion of his utterance, then yields to "Male 2's" progressively louder claims for the floor. "Finishing" within a state of simultaneous speech is, in my view, yet another distinct means of resolving it. While this procedure cedes the turnspace to another, it virtually denies that the incursion was disruptive by leaving a completed utterance in its wake. In contrast, the speaker who drops midsentence leaves "unfinished business" behind.

Of course, for speakers who finish in overlap, (see the excerpt just above) and certainly for those who drop out, there is a danger that their utterances will turn out to have been "lost" following the resolution of that simultaneity. As Jefferson and Schegloff note, overlap may itself obscure hearing and/or understanding simultaneous utterances (e.g., it is difficult to make

out what someone is saying while you are in the process of talking over them). Moreover, since turn-transition is accomplished on a turn-by-turn basis (Sacks *et al.*, 1974), the relevant sequential basis for a "next" turn or next topic may be unclear in the event of simultaneous last utterances.[5]

Jefferson and Schegloff (1975) observe a variety of retrieval procedures that are used to deal with the possible sequencing and intelligibility problems posed by simultaneous speech. Speakers may, for example, retrieve by restarting their *own* overlapped utterances, as the female did her attempts at explanation in the excerpt dealing with her tardiness. A speaker might, on the other hand, retrieve portions of a *co-conversationalist's* overlapped utterance, e.g., through requesting that it be repeated:

(Excerpt from corpus reported here)

Female: Hm:m (#) Maybe the bELL's not gonna ring-henh-henh-
henh-henh-henh .hh! hunh- [heh .hh .hh-.hh
Male: [I think they're wai] tin' for us
to finish. Before they're gonna ring it.
→ *Female:* Hm:m?
Male: ((yawning)) I think they're WAITing for us to finish before
they're gonna ring it.

Other-retrieval may also be effected through incorporating portions of the other's overlapped talk in ones own next utterance:

(Excerpt from corpus reported here)

Female: So, 'r you taking Che:m?
Male: Oh: yeah. Chem One Ay. Math Three Ay. U:h Physics.
Female: Which one? (x) [Are
Male: [Eight] you taki- Uh: .h Eight's sposed
Female: to be (harder) 'n six.

In both examples, the female ensures that the male's overlapped talk will not be lost in subsequent conversation, either by asking him to repeat it or by incorporating some portion of it in her own next utterance to indicate that he has been heard and understood.

Clearly then, the negotiation of simultaneous speech is an intricate process, entailing considerable interactional work on the part of conversationalists. While the model of conversational turn-taking advanced by Sacks *et al.* (1974) provides a theoretical basis establishing speakers' rights to speak, Jefferson and Schegloff's (1975) observations are employed below in a preliminary examination of speakers' methods of preserving, protecting and defending those rights in cross-sex conversations.

Methods

The five two-party conversations analyzed in this paper were recorded in a laboratory setting. Conversationalists were university students (5 females and 5 males) who were recruited from introductory sociology classes to participate in "a study of face-to-face interaction." All participants were white, single college-age adults.[6] They were randomly paired with partners of the other sex with whom they were previously unacquainted, in order to maximize the possibility that politeness rules (e.g., "don't interrupt") would be observed. Conversations were produced by the suggestion that participants "relax and get to know one another" prior to their discussion of a problem specified by the researcher (bicycle safety on campus). Each exchange so produced lasted a total of 12 minutes. The resulting audio-tapes yielded 107 pages of transcribed conversation, in which initiations, resolutions and retrievals of interruption were classified using the coding procedures outlined below.[7]

Deep interruptions, as defined earlier, are instances of simultaneous speech which are initiated well within the internal structure of a current speaker's utterance – violating that speaker's rights to the turnspace. Operationally, classification of deep interruptions relied on two criteria: (1) identifying instances of simultaneity which were initiated more than two syllables away from the terminal boundaries of a possibly complete utterance (i.e., a word, phrase, clause or sentence) and (2) of these, coding only those instances which appeared to disrupt a current speaker's turn at talk.[8]

The alternative methods of negotiation suggested by Jefferson and Schegloff's (1975) observations were collapsed into the more general categories shown in Figure 1.

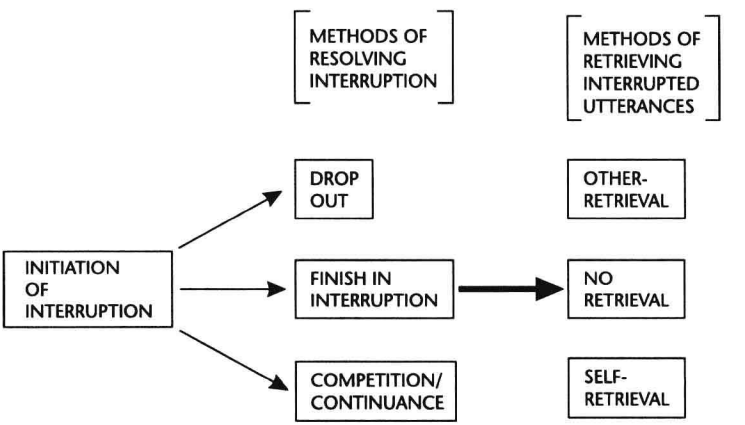

Figure 1: Negotiation of deep interruptions (hierarchically arrayed by extent to which current speakers assert their rights to speak)

Both resolutions and retrivals of interruptions are hierarchically arrayed in order of the extent to which speakers assert their conversational rights (with the "least assertive" categories at the top). For example, the most assertive method of resolving a deep interruption is "competition/continuance." This category includes those procedures that insist on ones *own* rights to a turnspace; getting louder, stuttering, stretching or recycling portions of ones talk over another's ongoing utterance. "Continuance" is also included in this category, since the speaker employing it perseveres in claiming the turn for him or herself over the other's simultaneous speech. A less assertive and less obtrusive means of resolving interruption is "finishing": completing the interrupted utterance within a state of simultaneity. This method, as noted above, cedes the turnspace to the other, but leaves an intact unit-type behind. "Dropping out" is the least assertive form of resolution provided by the scheme: abrupt termination of ones own utterance midway into production (Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975).

However, dropping out need not turn out to have been a "passive surrender" of ones talk or ones turnspace, depending on what (if any) form of retrieval is employed in its wake. Retrievals are, by definition, retroactive procedures that repair or reinstate overlapping utterances after the fact. The most assertive form of retrieval included in the scheme for a recipient of interruption is "self-retrieval": continuing from where one dropped, or restarting ones utterance anew after having dropped to restore talk to a state of one-party-at-a-time. Thus, the speaker who drops to resolve an interruption and subsequently engages in self-retrieval is (albeit belatedly) standing up for his or her rights to have been speaking before the drop occurred. But the speaker employing "other-retrieval" – by acknowledging, requesting a repetition or embedding portions of another's simultaneous talk in his or her own next utterance – retroactively cedes the simultaneous turn to the other. Moreover, one who drops to resolve a state of simultaneity and then other-retrieves further ratifies the other party's prior rights to that conversational space. By way of analogy, we might view other-retrievals in much the same way as Goffman (1967; p.56) does "deference rituals", i.e., "as a symbolic means by which appreciation is . . . conveyed *to* a recipient *of* this recipient." In this context, appreciation consists of the retroactive acknowledgment of the other's conversational rights by repairing her or his previously overlapped utterance, and by placing it in "first" position for subsequent remarks.

Retrieval of ones own or another's utterance is not guaranteed for any particular instance of simultaneous speech. So, included in the coding scheme is the general category of "nonretrieval," i.e., the absence of those procedures identified by Jefferson and Schegloff (1975) in places where they might have been employed following the resolution of simultaneous talk. The absence of retrieval is noticeable since it, in effect, denies the need for repair or restoration of *either* party's overlapping utterance. Also included in coding

is the possibility that more than one form of resolution (e.g., getting louder while recycling) and more than one form of retrieval (e.g., acknowledging and repeating) might accompany any given instance of simultaneity. Since Jefferson and Schegloff's (1975) observations only provide preliminary indications of restrictions on resolution-retrieval combinations, the scheme permits identification of multiple resolutions and retrievals by either or both speakers. I turn now to consider the distributions of these procedures in the cross-sex conversations that make up my collection.[9]

Findings

My earlier study of cross-sex and same-sex exchanges utilized data recorded in "natural settings," e.g., drug stores, coffee shops, and other public places in a university community (Zimmerman and West, 1975). Results found interruptions were distributed nearly equally between 20 same-sex conversational partners. Cross-sex exchanges, in contrast, displayed marked asymmetries: males interrupted females far more often than the reverse, initiating 96 percent of all interruptions that occurred.

Here I find cross-sex conversations recorded in a laboratory setting also display asymmetries, though not in such dramatic patterns. A total of 28 deep interruptions were observed, of which 21 or 75 percent were initiated by males.[10] Table 1 presents the proportions of deep interruptions initiated in the exchanges making up this collection: dyads A, B, C, D, and E.

Generally, we find deep interruptions are asymmetrically distributed between partners in these exchanges, even in the two conversations with fewest total numbers of initiations (dyads E and A.) And, in each of these dyads, males interrupt females more often than females interrupt males (4 to 0, 3 to 1, 5 to 1, 4 to 2, and 5 to 3). Moreover, the exchange that is least asymmetrical (or, conversely, most closely approximates equality of distribution) is dyad B – which also contains the largest number of deep interruptions in the collection (8). Thus, these results parallel those found earlier (Zimmerman and West, 1975).

Table 1: Initiation of deep interruptions in 5 cross-sex conversations

	Male-initiated	*Female-initiated*	*Ratio**	*Total*[†]
Dyad E[‡]	4	0	0	4
Dyad A	3	1	3.0	4
Dyad C	5	1	5.0	6
Dyad D	4	2	2.0	6
Dyad B	5	3	1.6	8
	Mean ratio = 2.9			

* Ratios are male/female.

† These figures represent only the incidence of deep interruption in each of the twelve-minute conversations. For the analysis of other types of simultaneous speech which occurred there, see West, 1978.

‡ Dyads are listed in ascending order of total interruptions.

Conversational "Submissiveness": A Methodological Note

A complex yet striking pattern of interrelationship between resolutions and retrievals emerged in the process of coding the instances of deep interruption in these transcripts. Repeatedly, in the course of classifying these events, I noticed that deep interruptions by males were followed by: (1) the male's continuance, and the female's dropping out or finishing within the state of simultaneity; and (2) the male's nonretrieval and the female's nonretrieval or other-retrieval of the male's utterance (which interrupted her in the first instance).

Of all the possible combinations of resolutions and retrievals, these four were observed repeatedly in the transcripts. They are shown in Figure 2, hierarchically ordered by the extent to which interrupted speakers fail to "put up a fight" when their conversational rights are violated: given the interrupter's intrusion, continuance and nonretrieval, the recipient of interruption (I) drops, to resolve the state of simultaneity and then retrieves the other's interrupting talk; (II) drops, to resolve the state of simultaneity and then does no retrieval; (III) finishes within a state of simultaneity and then other-retrieves; or (IV) finishes within a state of simultaneity and does no retrieval.

Recall my earlier analogy between male dominance in conversation and our cultural conceptions of rape, where both are seen as consequences of females' "invitations" (i.e., their failure to put up a fight). Figure 2 reflects a simple, if vulgar, parallel: given that males "dominate" females through deep interruptions of their utterances, do females "ask for it?" That is, do females'

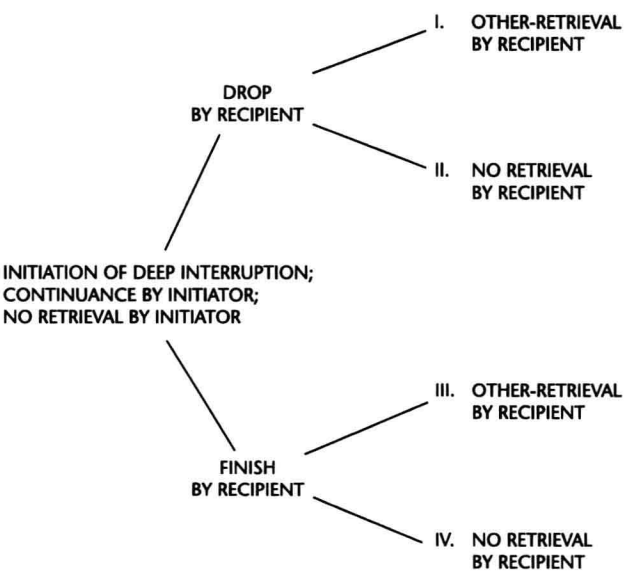

Figure 2: Patterns of submission following the initiation of deep interruption