Conversation and Gender

Edited by **Susan A. Speer** and **Elizabeth Stokoe**

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Conversation and Gender

Conversation analysts have begun to challenge long-cherished assumptions about the relationship between gender and language, asking new questions about the interactional study of gender and providing fresh insights into the ways it may be studied empirically. Drawing on a lively set of audio- and video-recorded materials of real-life interactions, including domestic telephone calls, children's play, mediation sessions, police-suspect interviews, psychiatric assessments and calls to telephone helplines, this volume is the first to showcase the latest thinking and cutting-edge research of an international group of scholars working on topics at the intersection of gender and conversation analysis. Theoretically, it pushes forward the boundaries of our understanding of the relationship between conversation and gender, charting new and exciting territory. Methodologically, it offers readers a clear, practical understanding of how to analyse gender using conversation analysis, by presenting detailed demonstrations of this method in use.

SUSAN A. SPEER is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Manchester. She is the author of *Gender Talk: Feminism, Discourse and Conversation Analysis* (2005).

ELIZABETH STOKOE is Professor of Social Interaction in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. She is the co-author of *Discourse and Identity* (2006).

Contributors

WAYNE A. BEACH is Professor in the School of Communication at San Diego State University, Adjunct Professor in the Department of Surgery, School of Medicine, and Member of the Moores Cancer Center, University of California San Diego, USA. His research focuses on the interactional organization of everyday conversation, as well as how family members, providers, physicians, oncologists and patients communicate about a wide variety of illness dilemmas. He is currently principal investigator of a grant funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) examining how cancer patients and oncologists orient to hopes, fears and uncertainties about cancer. Recently completed books are *A Natural History of Family Cancer* (2006) and the first *Handbook of Patient–Provider Interactions* (2006).

CARLY W. BUTLER is a Lecturer in Social Psychology in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University, UK. Her research interests include ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, children's interaction and play, and helpline interactions. She is author of *Talk and Social Interaction in the Playground* (2008) in the Directions in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis series.

JAKOB CROMDAL is Professor in Child Studies at Linköping University, Sweden. His research focuses on talk and social interaction among children and youth in a variety of mundane and institutional settings, including classrooms, detention homes and calls to the emergency services.

LISA M. FISHER is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Cincinnati, USA. She is primarily interested in social psychology in small-group and organizational settings, as well as work–family issues. Her research examines structural and cultural contexts and the ways in which they influence identity, communication and behaviour. She is currently studying flexible work arrangements.

ANGELA CORA GARCIA is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Bentley University, USA. Her conversation analytic research includes studies of mediation hearings, emergency phone calls to the police, computer-mediated communication, and gender in talk. In addition she is currently engaged in ethnographic research on voluntary organizations and leisure activities.

PHILLIP GLENN is Professor of Communication Studies at Emerson College, Boston, USA. He is the author of *Laughter in Interaction*, which received the Outstanding Scholarly Publication Award from the Language and Social Interaction Division of the National Communication Association. He was co-editor of *Studies in Language and Social Interaction* (2003) and serves on the editorial board of *Research on Language and Social Interaction*. Besides continuing studies of laughter, his research interests include interaction in mediation/negotiation settings and in employment interviews. He has held Fulbright appointments in the Czech Republic and Republic of Moldova, and he was a Visiting Scholar at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School.

MARJORIE HARNESS GOODWIN is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, USA. Her work focuses on how people build their cognitive and social worlds through the use of language in interaction in a range of natural settings. An extended ethnographic study of an African American peer group formed the basis of her book *He-Said-She-Said: Talk as Social Organization Among Black Children* (1990). She has also investigated interaction in the workplace (as part of the Xerox PARC Workplace Project), daily life in families (as a core faculty member of the UCLA Center for Everyday Lives of Families) and interaction in the home of a man with severe aphasia, and is continuing to look in detail at the lives of preadolescent girls. Her most recent book is *The Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status, and Exclusion* (2006).

ALEXA HEPBURN is a Reader in Conversation Analysis in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University, UK. She has studied school bullying, issues of gender, violence against children and interaction on child protection helplines, as well as writing about the relations of the philosophy of Derrida to the theory and practice of social psychology. Currently she is applying conversation analysis to core topics in interaction. She has written two recent books, *An Introduction to Critical Social Psychology* (2003) and *Discursive Research in Practice* (2007), as well as co-edited a special issue of *Discourse and Society* on developments in discursive psychology.

CLARE JACKSON is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of York, UK. She is using conversation analysis to explore gender and person references in mundane talk-in-interaction for her doctoral research.

CELIA KITZINGER is Professor of Conversation Analysis, Gender and Sexuality and Director of the Feminist Conversation Analysis Unit at the University of York, UK. She researches basic structures of talk-in-interaction as well as exploring the reproduction of culture – including power and oppression – in mundane interaction.

NOA LOGAN KLEIN is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA. Hir current teaching and research focuses on genders, sexualities and the socialization of bodies. Ze is working on a book entitled *Loving Touch: Therapeutic Massage, the Socialization of the Body and the Healing of US Culture.*

VICTORIA LAND was a Research Associate in the Digital World Research Centre, University of Surrey, UK, studying patterns of interaction across written, spoken and electronic media for a cross-media communications project in partnership with British Telecommunications plc, prior to beginning her maternity break. She is also a member of the Feminist Conversation Analysis Unit at the University of York, UK. Victoria's research interests include conversation analysis, gender and sexuality research, feminism, mediated communications, and sociological understandings of the everyday world.

JONATHAN POTTER is Professor of Discourse Analysis at Loughborough University, UK. He has studied racism, argumentation, fact construction, and topics in social science theory and method. His most recent books include *Representing Reality*, which attempted to provide a systematic overview, integration and critique of constructionist research in social psychology, postmodernism, rhetoric and ethnomethodology, and *Conversation and Cognition* (2005, with Hedwig te Molder), in which a range of different researchers consider the implication of studies of interaction for understanding cognition. He is one of the founders of discursive psychology.

JACK SIDNELL is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, Canada. His current research focuses on the structures of social interaction with special emphases on the organization of turn-taking and repair. He has conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork in two Caribbean communities (Guyana and Bequia) and is currently studying repair and understanding in the talk of children between the ages of 4 and 8. His other publications include *Talk and Practical Epistemology: The Social Life of Knowledge in a Small Caribbean Community* (2005) and an edited collection, *Conversation Analysis: Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

SUSAN A. SPEER is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Manchester, UK. Her research uses conversation analysis to study psychiatrist–patient interaction, and how gender is produced and oriented to in talk and embodied action. She recently completed an ESRC-funded project investigating interaction in a gender identity clinic, and is the author of *Gender Talk: Feminism, Discourse and Conversation Analysis* (2005).

ELIZABETH STOKOE is Professor of Social Interaction in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University, UK. Her research interests are in conversation analysis and social interaction in various

ordinary and institutional settings, including neighbour mediation, police interrogation, speed-dating and talk between friends. She is the author of *Discourse and Identity* (with Bethan Benwell, 2006).

ANN WEATHERALL is a Reader in the School of Psychology at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her interests include conversation analysis, discursive psychology, feminist psychology, gender and language, and language and social psychology. She is the author of *Gender, Language and Discourse* (2002) and an editor of *Language, Discourse and Social Psychology* (2007, with Bernadette Watson and Cindy Gallois).

SUE WILKINSON is Professor of Feminist and Health Studies in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University, UK. She is the founding editor of the international journal *Feminism and Psychology*, and her publications encompass six books – including *Feminist Social Psychologies* (1996), *Feminism and Discourse* (1995) and *Heterosexuality* (1993) – and more than eighty articles in the areas of gender/sexuality, feminism, health and qualitative methods. She has a longstanding academic interest in the social construction of inequality and is also a campaigner for equal marriage rights for same-sex couples. She (re)trained in conversation analysis (CA) at the University of Los Angeles, California, USA, in 2001–2, and her recent work uses CA to study helpline interaction. She is also particularly interested in technical specifications of repair.

Data and transcription

The system of transcription used throughout the book is that developed by Gail Jefferson (2004a) for conversation analysis (see also Schegloff, 2007a).

Aspects of the relative placement/timing of utterances

=	Equals sign	Immediate latching of successive talk
(0.8)	Time in parentheses	The length of a pause or gap, in tenths of a second
(.)	Period in parentheses	A pause or gap that is discernible but less than a tenth of a second
[overlap]	Square brackets	Mark the onset and end of overlapping talk
//	Double obliques	In older transcripts mark the onset of overlapping talk

Aspects of speech delivery

.	Period	Closing, usually falling intonation
,	Comma	Continuing, slightly upward intonation
?	Question mark	Rising intonation
¿	Inverted question mark	Rising intonation weaker than that indicated by a question mark
Underline	Underlining	Talk that is emphasized by the speaker
Rea::lly	Colon(s)	Elongation or stretch of the prior sound – the more colons, the longer the stretch

c:	Underline preceding colon	When letters preceding colons are underlined, the pitch rises on the letter and the overall contour is 'up-to-down'
:	Underlined colon	Rising pitch on the colon in an overall 'down-to-up' contour
!	Exclamation mark	Animated tone
-	Hyphen/dash	A sharp cut-off of the just-prior word or sound
↑	Upward arrow	Precedes a marked rise in pitch
↓	Downward arrow	Precedes a marked fall in pitch
thē	Macron above a vowel	Indicates a long vowel pronunciation (e.g. 'thee')
<	'Less than' sign	Talk that is 'jump-started'
>faster<	'Greater than' and 'less than' signs	Enclose speeded up or compressed talk
<slower>	'Less than' and 'greater than' signs	Enclose slower or elongated talk
LOUD	Upper case	Talk that is noticeably louder than that surrounding it
°quiet°	Degree signs	Enclose talk that is noticeably quieter than that surrounding it
huh/hah/heh/hih/hoh		Various types of laughter token
(h)	'h' in parentheses	Audible aspirations within speech (e.g., laughter particles)
.hhh	A dot before an h or series of h's	An in-breath (number of h's indicates length)
hhh	An h or series of h's	An out-breath / breathiness (number of h's indicates length)
#	Hash	Creaky voice
$ or £	Dollar or pound sign	Smile voice
*	Asterisk	Squeaky vocal delivery

( )	Empty single parentheses	Non-transcribable segment of talk
(talk)	Word(s) in single parentheses	Transcriber's possible hearing
(it)/(at)	A slash separating word(s) in single parentheses	Two alternative transcriber hearings
((laughs))	Word(s) in double parentheses	Transcriber comments or description of a sound

Other symbols

→	Arrow	Placed in the margin of a transcript to point to parts of data the author wishes to draw to the attention of the reader

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1 An introduction to conversation and gender

Susan A. Speer and Elizabeth Stokoe

This book showcases cutting-edge research and current thinking by researchers writing on topics at the intersection of conversation analysis and gender. Work in this area has advanced rapidly over the past decade, and this edited collection provides the first comprehensive, book-length treatment of the field. Bringing together an international group of scholars, the chapters illustrate authors' perspectives on the operation of gender in interaction. Each chapter examines real-life audio or video interactions recorded across a range of ordinary and institutional settings, including face-to-face conversation, domestic telephone calls, children's play, mediation sessions, police–suspect interviews, psychiatric assessment and calls to telephone helplines.

The aims of this collection are both theoretical and methodological. At a theoretical level, we push forward the boundaries of our understanding of the relationship between conversation and gender, charting new territory as we present the most incisive and sophisticated thinking in the field. At a methodological level, the book offers readers a clear and practical understanding of precisely how gender is analysed using conversion analysis and related methodologies, by presenting detailed demonstrations of these methods in use. Although conversation is typically understood as referring to '*talk*-in-interaction', several contributors analyse and reflect on the inextricable relationship between talk, gender and embodied conduct. This introductory chapter is divided into four sections. First, to contextualize the book's chapters and convey their distinctive analytic position, we provide a critical overview of *conversation and gender research* grounded in studies of either sex/gender 'difference' or gender identity 'construction'. We explain the background, key questions for and criticisms of both traditional studies of linguistic features and interactional styles, and contemporary studies of the construction, enactment or performance of gender identities. Second, we contrast studies of difference and construction with *conversation analytic research on gender* and other categorial topics. We provide a brief introduction to conversation analysis itself, before discussing how researchers with an interest in gender have used its techniques. Third, we provide a concise *overview of the chapters*, which have been grouped into sections according to the key analytic questions they address. Finally, we discuss some of the *implications and issues*

that emerge from the reported findings and set out some possible trajectories for the field as it moves forward over the next decade.

Conversation and gender research: From difference to construction

We start our introduction by considering two broad strands of gender and language research that have, since their inception in the 1970s and 1980s, theorized and demonstrated, with particular empirical flavours, the links between gender and language (for overviews see Speer, 2005a; Weatherall, 2002a). Methodologically diverse and interdisciplinary in orientation, research spans not just linguistics, but also sociology, psychology, anthropology and communication studies. Any attempt to categorize this large body of work inevitably disguises areas of cross-over and overlap. However, we will discuss the two types of work that represent often competing theoretical and methodological assumptions about the nature of gender and how it might best be grasped analytically: *sex differences in language* and *the construction of gender and gender identities*.

Sex differences in language

The first body of research we examine focuses on sex differences in language, in terms of both the way men and women are represented *in* language, with a focus on the encoding of sexism, and the way men and women *use* language, with a focus on the features and function of speech styles (note that the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably despite their differing etymologies and theoretical baggage). Sex/gender difference research has had a significant impact on the larger trajectory of gender and language studies, not least because it took seriously the role of language in the instantiation and maintenance of sex/gender inequality. Researchers working within this tradition have addressed several key questions.

- Do women and men talk and interact differently? If women and men talk differently, what features characterize men's talk and women's talk? Since Lakoff (1973; 1975) wrote her pioneering account of difference, hundreds of studies have identified and tested a cluster of linguistic variables (e.g., tag questions, hedges, vocabulary) and interactional patterns (e.g., interruptions, topic control, verbosity, politeness) and correlated their use with the sex/gender of speaker (for overviews see Aries, 1996; Bucholtz, 2004; Cameron, 1998a; 2007; Cheshire & Trudgill, 1998; Christie, 2000; Coates, 1998a; 2004; Coates & Cameron, 1988; Conrick, 1999; Freed & Greenwood, 1996; Graddol & Swann, 1989; Litosseliti, 2006; Mills, 2003; Swann, 1992; Talbot, 1998).

- If women and men talk differently, how do we best account for such differences? Do linguistic disparities reflect women's deficiency as speakers and their subordinate status in society (the 'deficit' model, cf. Lakoff, 1975), a patriarchal reality (the 'dominance' model, e.g., Fishman, 1978; Spender, 1980; Thorne & Henley, 1975; Thorne *et al.*, 1983; Zimmerman & West, 1975), subcultural, socialized differences between men and women (the 'difference' model, e.g., Holmes, 1995; Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990; 1994), or different interactional goals such as competition, conflict or affiliation (e.g., Coates, 1996; 2003; M. H. Goodwin, 1990; 2006)?
- How do other cultural categories, such as age, class, religion, ethnicity or sexuality, mediate sex/gender as a key variable in speech styles? For example, in the field of queer linguistics, what are the features of 'gay men's English' (e.g., Leap, 1996) or lesbian women's speech (e.g., Moonwomon-Baird, 1997; see Koch, 2008)?
- Does language encode and perpetuate a patriarchal, sexist reality? If language is sexist, how is sexism realized directly and indirectly (e.g., Spender, 1980; Mills, 2008)? How is sexist language used 'ironically' to subvert prejudice (e.g., Benwell, 2004; Christie, 2000) and how may it be challenged through policy and the practice of language reform (see Litosseliti, 2006; see also Cameron, 1992; Gibbon, 1999; Goddard & Patterson, 2000; Henley & Kramarae, 1991; Pauwels, 1998)? What are people's attitudes to sexist language (e.g., Parks & Roberton, 2008)?

When taking the development of sex/gender difference literature as a whole, consistent claims about difference have proved elusive. Despite this, and despite its often being presented as an outmoded line of investigation, many researchers still ask questions about sex/gender difference in language (e.g., Drescher, 2006; Menz & Al-Roubaie, 2008; Precht, 2008; Schleef, 2008). This is unsurprising when one considers the sheer unquestioned dominance of sex/gender difference research throughout both academia and popular culture, including hundreds of studies examining the neurological basis of sex/gender differences in language (e.g., Burman *et al.*, 2008; G. S. Harrington & Farias, 2008). Sex/gender difference studies – of language and all other aspects of human biology, action, cognition and emotion – continue relentlessly despite sustained criticism about methodological flaws, the reification of binaries, essentialism and so on (e.g., Bohan, 1993; Lorber, 1994; 2000). In research about difference, researchers treat sex/gender, usually implicitly, as pre-discursive, pre-theorized, natural categories which are biologically determined or socialized from birth and trait-like. This essentialist notion means that human action varies according to the independent variable of sex/gender (e.g., Uchida, 1992).

Difference studies were therefore criticized for committing what Cameron (1997a) calls the *correlational fallacy*, whereby particular linguistic features

are attributed unproblematically to one sex/gender or the other. The temptation to 'see' gender where it might not be relevant is discussed by Jefferson (2004b: 117):

> Working with interactional data, one sometimes observes that a type of behavior seems to be produced a great deal by one category of persons and not all that much by another category. But when put to the test of a straightforward count, the observation does not hold up: Category X does not after all do this thing significantly more often than Category Y does. It may then be that the apparent skewing of the behavior's distribution across categories is the result of selective observation; noticing with greater frequency those cases which conformed to some biased notion held by the observer of how these categories behave.

For many feminists and other critically oriented researchers, 'difference' studies are both theoretically and methodologically circular, and politically unproductive. It is perhaps inevitable that such studies, which prioritize the analyst's taken-for-granted assumptions about sex/gender difference, will prevent them from seeing sex/gender as anything other than a reified, dualistic category. Indeed, they start out '"knowing" the identities whose very constitution ought to be precisely the issue under investigation' (Kulick, 1999). This means that analysts are in the business of *reproducing* rather than *studying* gendered 'facts' (see Hammersley, 2001; Jefferson, 2004b). As Lorber (2000: 79) points out, 'it is the ubiquitous division of people into two unequally valued categories that undergirds the continually reappearing instances of gender inequality'. Järviluoma *et al.* (2003: 2) similarly conclude that 'gender should be understood as a concept requiring analysis, rather than as something that is *already* known about' (emphasis in original).

Throughout the 1990s, researchers began to challenge the focus on difference in the language and gender literature (e.g., Bergvall *et al.*, 1996; Cameron, 1996; Crawford, 1995; Hall & Bucholtz, 1995; Mills, 1996). Freed (1996: 69) reflected that 'as researchers, we now realize, perhaps with some reluctance, that we need to abandon a number of our early and fairly simplistic feminist ruminations about the role of gender in language'. These sorts of criticisms appeared hand in hand with a new breed of studies that followed the 'performative' or 'constructionist' turn or the 'turn to discourse' that was pervading academia and paving the way for new methodologies and research questions (see Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Within language and gender research, Crawford (1995: 18) proposed that adopting a constructionist framework would prompt analysts to ask different questions about the links between language and gender, such as 'how people come to have beliefs about sex differences in speech style' and 'how those beliefs are encoded and enacted in one's self-presentation'. In stark contrast to 'difference' studies, then, researchers began to ask questions about how sex/gender and sex/gender identities are 'constructed' in language, and how 'gender is an effect of language use, rather than a determinant of different uses of language' (Litosseliti, 2006: 44).