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Collaborators or Warriors?
A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Discourse Patterns of Men and Women in their Claim for Space in the Public/Formal Workplace

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Introduction

In this century, women may appear to be liberated, sophisticated and educated. In fact today, we even have radical feminist movements. Men are 'seemingly' no longer the oppressors and enemy, but partners, and women are involved in almost all the professions that were initially held by men. These professions range from engineering, to medicine, to law, to commerce, to politics, the clergy, and the list is endless. In all these professional workplaces, both men and women are supposed to be viewed as collaborators, and not warriors. We are made to believe that people are judged on an individual basis, and that everything is possible for every one, and that gender differences are nothing but a social construct. However, if we look at any society, even in Europe and America, which are about the most developed of all, we find the following scenario:

- The unemployment rate among women is still higher than men.
- Women are placed in less qualified jobs and less prestigious jobs.
- Women earn less than men, even when they are in relatively the same positions.
- There are few women in top echelons in boardrooms and middle-management positions.

- As regards this last point, it can be remarked that whereas women often encounter a 'glass ceiling' that prevents them from advancing upwards in male dominated professions, men encounter a 'glass escalator' that prevents them from remaining in lower-level positions. As Williams puts it; 'As if on a moving escalator, they must work to stay in place' (Williams 1995:127).

Women are consequently still very much aware of gender differences, as they constantly have to face disadvantages due to their biological sex. If it is true that more women today can now be found in top positions, even though we have moved on to a new century, these women have had to fight their way up the ladder. The question thus asked is this; Why is it that we have such few females chief executive officers (CEOs) and managers in and around the world? And even in cases where we have them, the pattern is usually as follows. Increasingly they are women who had just reached the 'Glass ceiling' in the mainstream organisations, and it seemed apparent that they had reached their apex, and that there was no more upward or vertical mobility, whatever their performance. Maybe out of frustration, or maybe due to being ambitious, the women who have been 'able' maybe financially, have thus moved out, and gone on to form their own companies, which they subsequently head as CEO or managing director (MD) or senior managers.

Gender and Discourse

One of the main weapons for these struggles for one's place at the workplace, and in society at large, is language. Language determines who we are and how we position ourselves in relation to others. Language creates social reality, and societal reality is transferred through it. If it is a social reality that women compared to men are disadvantaged in our societies even at the beginning of the 21st century, it has to be expected that those differences will surface in the use of language by men and women. Language is never trivial or neutral. It is an extremely powerful tool for looking at, and (re)creating reality in different ways. What is communicated is much more than an individual means of expressing how the world is viewed. It constantly reflects and helps to create the social structures and systems that control us. As a result, one comes to recognise the relationship between language and power. For researchers on discourse and gender, power relations get articulated through language.

Kendall and Tannen (1997) argue that the workplace is characterised by many constraints. The workplace is an institutional structure, in which individuals are hierarchically ranked. It also has a history of greater male participation in most work settings, and this is especially so at the higher ranking levels such as middle management and top management. The workplace has a still existing though

recently permeated pattern of participation along gender lines. The workplace therefore provides a special challenge to gender and language researchers, as well as an opportunity to observe interaction in the context of these constraints (Kendall & Tannen 1997:81).

We may also look at the workplace as a 'community of practice' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1998: 490), within which participants perform their various identities. The 'community of practice' in this case takes us away from the community defined by a location or by a population. Instead, it focuses on a community defined by social engagement, and it is this engagement that language serves, and not the place or the people as a collection of individuals. Gender is thus produced (and often reproduced) in differential membership in communities of practice. From our studies of interactional behaviour, we see that women do the work necessary for interaction to occur smoothly. But it is men who control what will be produced as reality by that interaction. They (men) already have, and they continually establish and enforce their rights, to define what the interaction and reality will be about (Fishman: 100).

This paper therefore looks at gender and discourse in a work place setting, and at how language is an invisible tool of discrimination, and is rarely given much thought. In most cultures, those with power may exercise the right to speak for longer in contexts such as meetings. They may interrupt others, or use joking insults as silencing devices. Because men in general more often hold positions of power in particular interactions, they (men) contribute to the construction of normative masculinity. As a group, women rather than men are more often excluded from power. With women entering the situations that were previously all male, where established norms of behaviour are based on the ways men behaved in those roles, expectations must give way; either expectations of how someone in that role should behave, or expectations of the women who move into those roles.

This paper is motivated partly by the discussions so far of the links between language, gender and power. Robin Lakoff for example explains that norms of men's discourse styles are institutionalised, and that they are not seen as 'the better way to talk, but as the only way' (Lakoff 1990: 210). Gal argues that men's discourse styles are institutionalised as ways of speaking with authority, that institutions are 'organised to define, demonstrate, and enforce the legitimacy and authority of linguistic strategies used by one gender; or men of one class or ethnic group, while denying the power of others' (Gal 1991: 186). Recent research has shown that the power and status of conversational participants has a strong and predictable effect upon the way in which these interactions are organised.

To best examine gender, discourse and power variables in the workplace setting, we need to use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an interpretative frame-

work. CDA is very useful in moving beyond the surface level examination of discourse to the 'deep structure' subtle relations of power and inequality, and as they relate to gender. CDA sees discourse as a form of social practice. This implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situations, institutions and social structures, which frame it. Critical discourse studies see organisations not simply as social collectives where shared meaning is produced, but rather as sites of struggle where different groups compete to shape the social reality in ways that serve their own interests. It is not only economic resources that are issues of interests in these struggles, but also symbolic resources. Many scholars of organisations are therefore concerned with examining how these competing interests get resolved through the control of symbolic and discursive resources.

Critical discourse analysts tend to see power as already accruing to some participants, and not to others, and this power is determined by their institutional role as well as their social economic status, gender or ethnic identity (Fairclough 1992, van Dijk 1993). In this sense, social relations of power pre-exist the talk itself, 'power is already there as a regime of truth' (Foucault 1980: 131). As a result, in CDA, approaching the role of power in discourse tends to be a question of examining how those members of society who possess it, reflect, reinforce and reproduce it through the language they use; their discourse practices (Thornborrow 2001). Discourse is thus socially constitutive in that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, with an aim of transforming it (Fairclough & Wodak 1997). As critical discourse analysts therefore, we are inclined to look at the discourse structures more critically, and uncover those subtle discursive practices that ensure that women never climb to the top, but are instead always relegated to the rear.

A lot of research conducted demonstrates that women in authority in fact also face a 'double bind' regarding professionalism and femininity. Lakoff comments on the double bind in this case as follows. 'When a woman is placed in a position in which being assertive and forceful is necessary, she is faced with a paradox; she can be a good woman, but a bad executive or professional, or vice versa. To do both is impossible' (Lakoff 1990:206).

One of the sources for women's inability to be perceived as being both a good authority figure and a good woman is that, as Tannen puts it, the 'very notion of authority is associated with maleness' (Tannen 1995: 167). Women who attempt to resolve the double bind by using interactional strategies associated with men find that they are judged and treated very harshly by both men and women (ironically). Some researchers suggest that language strategies that women use to downplay their authority are drawn from the resources available to them as mothers; this may be seen as an attempt to (re)solve the double bind between professionalism and femininity.

As has already indicated, women in high status jobs are few (most of women in the workplace are in subordinate and relatively powerless roles). This suggests that it is most unlikely that they are getting a fair opportunity to contribute to discussions and decision-making. They are unlikely to be getting a fair share of the talking time; they are likely to be interrupted more often than men; and in interactions with a predominantly male group, they will get little encouragement to contribute (Holmes 1995: 211). Because boardrooms and work-based meetings among professionals tend to be dominated by male talk, it is generally male ways of interacting which predominate. Many interaction problems may thus be the result of structured inequality in the society. Power is the issue. As Henley and Kramarae (1991) put it: 'Greater social power gives men the right to pay less attention to, or discount women's protests, the right to be less adept at interpreting their communications than women are at men's, the right to believe women are inscrutable' (Henley & Kramarae 1991: 27).

The problem goes further than this. Women's ways of talking differ from men's because each group has developed interaction strategies, which reflect their societal positions. The different patterns of interaction into which girls and boys are socialised are not randomly different. Their features are attuned to the requirements of the society. They are determined by the power structure. Women are socialised to be polite; this means even being negatively polite in public; not intruding or imposing oneself, and being possibly polite in private as well as taking responsibility for the interaction, and ensuring that others are conversationally comfortable.

Troemel-Ploetz (1998) talks about this disparity in now a more familiar way, but nevertheless quite effective in showing how grave the situation is:

> Men are used to dominating women; they do it especially in conversations: they set the tone as soon as they enter a conversation, they declare themselves expert for any topic, they expect and get attention and support from their female conversational partners, they expect and get space to present their topics and, above all, themselves - their conversational success is being produced by the participants in that conversation. Women are trained to please, they have to please also in conversations, i.e. they will let men dominate...Men also exhibit and produce their conversational rights: the right to dominate, the right to self-presentation or self- aggrandisation, at the expense of others, the right to have the floor and to finish one's turn, the right to keep women from talking (by disturbance or interruption), the right to get attention and consideration from women, the right to conversational success. Women, on the other hand, have conversational obligations: they must not disturb men in their dominating and imposing behaviour; they must support their topics, wait with their own topics, give

men attention, take them seriously at all times, and above all, listen and help them to their conversational success. (Troemel-Ploetz 1998: 447.)

As we enter the public workplace, we do so with the following assumptions:

- That Power-relation(s) somehow exist and determine the course of actual concrete encounters, by focusing on the local management of talk-in-interaction.
- That power may be viewed in terms of differential distribution of discursive resources.
- That these discursive resources enable certain participants to achieve interactional effects that are not available to all, or are differentially available to others in the workplace setting.
- That the employment of Interruptions, Questions and Topic control within the turn-taking process, are examples of powerful interactional resources, which may place constraints on the discourse options, which are available to actors/agents/speakers in a discourse situation.
- That the more powerful people/speakers in a workplace situation may employ the use of these interactional resources, which may suppress and/or oppress their less powerful interlocutors.
- That the less powerful interlocutors in most cases, in the corporate world, are women.
- That the use of these interactional resources within conversations, may then be just one of the very many factors which may contribute to women not rising up the ranks within the corporate world, above that 'glass ceiling'.
- That the situation created thus far may create disparity or polarisation of men and women in the workplaces, and this may lead to further marginalisation and invisibility of women in this public sphere, and by extension, in the general society.

With these assumptions in mind, we therefore look at the discourse patterns of men and women in the workplace and analyse them using Conversation Analysis. (Huge corporate firms in Kenya were investigated. In this respect, the researcher attended and audio-recorded management committee meetings, which were subjected to intensive transcriptions and analysis.) To critically analyse gender and power within these interactions, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is then used as an interpretative framework. This is very effective in uncovering the subtleties of the discriminatory discursive practices, which mark institutional discourse.

Turn-Taking and Interactional Resources as Controls

Speaker change is one of the fundamental components in a conversation. In most cases, only one speaker usually speaks at a time. This is particularly true of dyadic conversations. It can therefore be assumed that in dyadic conversations, speaker change as such is not problematic since the choice of the next speaker is limited to one person only. Points of speaker change are however more interesting. Implicit in the statement that the organisation of speaker change is a fundamental principle of conversations is the notion that if this principle is really fundamental, all speakers must have a certain skill. This skill involves the ability of the interactants to correctly 'analyse and understand an ongoing sentence' as well as to 'produce immediately a relevant next utterance'.

Interactional control features broadly have to do with ensuring that the interaction works smoothly at an organisational level; that turns at talking are smoothly distributed, that questions are asked and answered, and that topics are selected and changed. O'Donnell (1990) points out that floor holding, topic control, and interruptions are closely related with power. 'Interactionally, greater power is correlated with floor holding, topic control, and interruptions. Friendly talk among equals is more likely to be characterised by utterance completions, latchings, and casual overlaps.' (O'Donnell 1990: 211.) Zimmerman and West, and other scholars also state that 'Just as male dominance is exhibited through male control of macro institutions in society, it is also exhibited through male control of at least a part of micro institutions' (Zimmerman & West 1975:125).

In this paper, we therefore look at interactional control. The objective here is to describe larger-scale organisational properties of interactions, upon which the orderly functioning and control of interactions depends. An important issue is who controls interactions at this level; to what extent is control negotiated as a joint accomplishment of participants, and to what extent is it asymmetrically exercised by one participant. In the next sections we thus examine as interactional controls the following: Turn taking, Interruptions, Questions, and the issue of Topics. One of the controlling mechanisms in micro institutions is related to the strategy of interrupting. As men interrupt more often than women, male dominance can be established in conversations. Turns are thus claimed, as topics are initiated and maintained by men or abandoned by women.

Turn-Taking and Interruptions

The study of interruption has been the locus of scholarly interest for nearly a generation. Interruption has been studied across a broad spectrum of human behaviour in both same and mixed gender exchanges. This has been done for both children and adults, in variant contexts where power, status, topic and task have been manipulated, and controlled in laboratory setting. In the current study, interruption is done in a natural setting. It involves mixed-gender exchanges for

adults in the workplace setting, and within this context, issues of power, status and gender are discussed. Interruption has also been linked with personality traits such as dominance and assertiveness (Ferguson 1977, Wodak 1981). In spite of substantial effort to explain the dynamics of interruption, there is still little consensus about what an interruption actually is, how it manifests itself in interaction, how to best measure its occurrence, and how to interpret the role and function of interruption in conversation (Hawkins 1988, James & Clarke 1993).

In this section therefore, we examine the concept of interruption. This is done under the general auspices of the turn taking process. The kind of questions that would therefore be asked could include questions such as; Who interrupts whom? Who interrupts the most? Who is interrupted the least? What kind of interruptions are we talking about? Are the rights and obligations of participants (with respect to overlaps, interruptions or silences, for example), symmetrical or asymmetrical? As a way of beginning, we classify the interruptions in order to see how they are spread across the speakers. All along as we undertake these discussions, we have to relate these concepts to power and gender, which are crucial to this study. We must determine whether communication at workplace is pegged on gender, or it is pegged on power, or whether there is a possibility of both gender and power being players in such contexts and situations.

From the meetings recorded and analysed (although I recorded seven meetings, I concentrated on only two of them), the percentage of interruptions out of the total turns was relatively the same in both the meetings, which I refer to as A and B. In most conversations, people usually interrupt without even being conscious of the action. It is sometimes taken for granted. Sometimes speakers only become aware of interruption when one specific speaker constantly interrupts his/her interlocutors. As Coates (1989) argued, talk then becomes interruptive when it infringes negatively on the current speaker, who in turn may respond with verbal or non-verbal annoyance.

From the meetings also, it became evident that the status of a participant within the larger context (of the firm) had a lot of influence on the turn-taking behaviour in the specific contexts; namely meetings in this case. It is also undeniably evident that the role of the chairperson in any meeting is quite powerful and in most situations, we will have the chair taking the most number of turns, and this is regardless of the gender of each chair. However, if we critically compare meetings, which had a female chairperson, and those which had a male chairperson in terms of their number of turns, an interesting scenario unfolded. The male chairpersons seemed to have longer turns and more amount of speech compared to their female counterparts. They also had less interruptions on their turns, but incidentally interrupted their interlocutors more than the female chairpersons did to their interlocutors.

It was found that Interruption is a more complex phenomenon than what we normally think when we first see it. It was also found that in order to analyse interruptions effectively, we had to conceptualise them, and consequently classify them. This was in view of the fact that it was noticed that not all interruptions were an indication of violation of speaking rights by the more powerful people. Less powerful people, it was observed, also used interruptions with their more powerful counterparts. We thus devised a categorisation (workable for the project) that showed Supportive interruptions, Neutral interruptions, and Unsupportive interruptions.[1] These were able to bring in both the power and gender variables.

On Gender, it was noted in both meetings that men used interruptions more than women. In meeting A, at first glance, this did not appear to be the case. This was obscured by the fact that the chair was female. It was only when the interruptions attributed to her were put together with those of the rest of the women that the women seemed to have more interruptions than men. When her contributions were subsequently removed, it was noted that the women fared rather badly compared to the males. This was even despite the fact that there were more women than men in this meeting. When both the chairpersons from the two meetings were observed, it was noted that the male chairperson in meeting B outperformed his female counterpart in meeting A. This may be an argument not just of power, but more so of the gender factor, since both these people were powerful in their capacities as chairpersons.

On the types of interruptions, it was found that whenever the women used interruptions, most times, they tended to use the Supportive type, whose principle aim was to express solidarity and interest in the interrupted persons. Women generally did not use the Unsupportive interruptions (which may be seen to violate a speaker's turns) although we should point out that the female chairperson used them occasionally. In general therefore, both men and women avoided the unsupportive type of interruptions. Whenever they used interruptions however, most times they were of the Supportive type, which were identified as being the least effective in violating speakers' rights. It was also found that after Supportive interruptions, both men and women in relatively the same fashion also used Neutral interruptions.

It was thus noted that before making conclusions on interruptions, you have to know exactly which kinds of interruptions you are dealing with. It was also noted that before you can make any judgement on the conversational behaviour of the participants as regards these discursive controls, the issue of context that featured in the discourse patterns very greatly had to be addressed. We thus had to look at among other things, the post-interruptive behaviour of the interrupted persons. At the same time, it was found that we had to look at the contextual backgrounds that the participants brought with them to the interaction process; these included the expertise role they brought with them to the meetings.

We found that whereas some speakers seemed to take the floor without a fight, others always had to struggle to do so. In terms of gender, it was generally found that men fought less to get the floor, and even when they eventually got it, the resistance they got from their interlocutors was in most cases much less, and they usually maintained the floor up to the point they wanted to exit it of their own volition. This did not always happen to the women in the meetings, of course apart from the chair in meeting A, who despite her status and position, still somehow faced some form of resistance in the form of interruptive behaviour from the male interlocutors.

When it came to power, it was also found that it was mostly the more powerful speakers hierarchically within the organisation who took the floor without a fight, and maintained it until they were through. In cases where these individuals had to fight for the floor, they always emerged as the more powerful participants in most cases, and most times they won. It was noted that the behaviour of the rest of the members in the meetings was usually less interruptive when these powerful people spoke and whenever they interrupted, it was in a Supportive way, which in most cases expressed solidarity with these people.

Turn-Taking Process and Questions

In many forms of institutional interaction, questions get asked primarily by institutional figures such as attorneys, doctors and news interviews. It is however important to mention that in most of these situations, it is the setting that makes these people more powerful, and the number of questions they ask does not quantify their immense power. Power here therefore depends on the setting, which entrusts these institutional figures with their powerful positions. Questions are however a powerful interactional resource for the simple reason that the asking of questions places constraints on the discourse options which are available to its recipients. And while individual questions constrain, sequences of questions can constrain more strongly. An example is in the courtroom discourse which Atkinson and Drew (1979) studied. The fact that the attorney is able to ask sequences of questions, which the witness is restricted to answering, gives particular powers to the attorney. Power here depends on the setting, and not really on the power pegged on the number of questions. The setting in this case entrusts the judge with a powerful position of being able to ask questions whereas the respondent can only answer them, and in most cases, is obliged to do so.

The theme of questions and questioning is an area where gender differences have been noted, in different contexts, including the public workplace. We would pose the following questions: What are questions? Who asks most questions in different contexts and why? How do they ask questions? What is the function of questions in different situations and different contexts? What types of questions are asked? One important question is whether these different types of questions

are pegged on gender? Is it possible that they are also pegged on power? Still, is there a possibility of an interplay between gender relations and power/hierarchical relations in these contexts?

Generally speaking, we can divide the types of questions into two broad categories when dealing with conversational groups. Holmes (1995) says that it is useful to distinguish between response-restricting and facilitative or supportive questions according to their function in context. Response restricting questions are more often of the Yes - No answers, whereas facilitative questions are usually more than one word answer. In her study of second language learners, Holmes found that response-restricting questions were generally more frequent than facilitative questions. She also found that more men overly used considerably more response restricting questions (88 percent) as compared to women (66 percent). This she says is because females tend to use more facilitative or supportive questions than males, opening up discussion and encouraging others to participate. Males on the other hand use 'organising' questions, or questions that restrict responses to short factual statements. A further broad categorisation was identified and found relevant to this research project. The categories were thus labelled as supportive questions, critical questions and antagonistic questions. It must however be pointed out that it was sometimes difficult to determine the question type just from the surface level, until we looked at it within its contextual framework.

Supportive questions on the one hand imply a generally positive response to the content of the presentation. They may invite the speaker to either expand or elaborate on some aspects of it. Supportive questions also provide 'openings' and invite the speaker to develop a point, or expand on an area of their presentation. Critical questions on the other hand are a type of questions which are less whole-heartedly or explicitly positive, and may contain a hint of criticism. They often consist of a modified agreement, or a qualified disagreement, perhaps expressing a degree of negative evaluation or scepticism. The tone in which any question is expressed is also extremely important in interpreting its function in order to classify it accurately. This is particularly obvious with critical questions. A sceptical tone of voice can turn a superficially supportive comment into a critical one. Antagonistic questions are a type of question which generally involve challenging, aggressively critical assertions whose function is to attack the speaker's position and demonstrate that it (the position) is wrong. These antagonistic questions are clearly very face-threatening. Somehow on the women's part, it was only the chair that used them, and even so, did it sparingly.

I would however hasten to add that it was not always easy to determine whether a question was supportive, critical or antagonistic. This is even despite the fact that the descriptions of each type was so clearly laid down. What this meant was that we also had to look at the question, in its context of situation; what had

come before the question, or what had prompted the question to be asked. Also to be considered was how the next speaker reacted to the question. In many cases, this next response gave an insight into the type of question at hand, especially if it may have been problematic in its description.

On Turn-taking and Questions, it was observed that questions are a normal phenomenon in any kind of verbal interaction. It is also quite central in the institutional interactions that we have analysed. It was noted that questions are a powerful interactional resource, since the asking of questions places constraints on the discourse options, which are available to its recipients. It was also noted that questions are one way of handing the floor over from one speaker to another, and yet still maintain politeness. This is in view of the fact that although they may be quite effective, interruptions may be considered impolite, so speakers who are interested in politeness would prefer to use questions. However, although questions may be an alternative, it was found that this depended on the type of questions since different questions function differently in various contexts.

In the private sphere, it has been observed that women tend to ask more questions, and sometimes actually ask more questions in comparison to men. In the formal context, of which this research is a part, it was found however that this was not always the case. In meeting A, women generally had more questions than men. However, it was found that this was due to the fact that most questions emanated from the chairperson who was female. When we separated the chairperson's questions from the rest of the women, it was found that women's contributions were pathetically low. This brings us to the power interplay even within the same gender. In meeting B however, the male participation in terms of the questions was invariably higher than for the women. The fact that the chairperson was male only magnified the numbers. However, it was also found that when both the female and male chairpersons were compared in terms of their contributions on questions, the male chairperson outperformed his female counterpart. This suggested not only the interplay between gender and power, but also the fact that gender may supersede power.

In terms of the categorisation of questions, it was found that most of the speakers often used Supportive questions whenever they asked questions. It was found that the second most used type of question was the critical kind, and antagonistic types of questions were the least used.

In terms of who used what type of questions, it was found that both males and females used Supportive questions, whether they were more powerful or less powerful within the ranks. Of course the more powerful used them more, and also more men used them compared to the females in both meetings. The chairpersons of each meeting however asked more questions than the rest of the speakers, although it was found that the chairperson in meeting B generally asked more questions than the chairperson in meeting A. When looking at Critical

questions, it was also found that although both men and women speakers used them, both chairpersons tended to use them more often than the rest. At the same time, more males than females tended to use them (of course in meeting A, this is if we removed the participation of the chair). The rest of the women did not use them. Being the least used type of questions, it was hardly surprising to find out that Antagonistic questions whenever used were mostly asked by the chairpersons, and the more powerful speakers. In meeting A (with female chairperson), it is only the chairperson who used them, and also a speaker who was male, and also hierarchically more powerful. The rest of the females in this meeting refrained from using them. In meeting B, no woman speaker used Antagonistic questions at all. As for the male participation on this, all of the Antagonistic questions apart from one came from the chairperson.

In the use of and distribution of Questions across the meetings, it was noted that both gender and power seemed to have a bearing. There was usually interplay between gender and power, and in some cases observed it was found that gender seemed to be the decisive factor.

Turn-Taking and Topic Organisation

Fairclough (1992) in discussing interactional controls gives us an example of a standard medical interview, where the doctor closely controls the basic organisation of the interaction by opening and closing each cycle, and accepting or acknowledging the patient's responses. One corollary of this is that the doctor is controlling the turn-taking system in the way that the turns are distributed between participants in the interaction. The patient only takes turns when offered them by the doctor, for example when the doctor directs a question at the patient. The doctor on the other hand is not offered turns, but takes them when the patient has finished her/his response, or when he decides the patient has said enough for the purpose of the diagnosis. A further corollary of this basic organisation is to do with 'Topic control'. It is mainly the doctor who introduces new topics through his questions.

It has been suggested that the person who controls the topic is the person who controls the interaction (Shuy 1987; Walker 1987), and especially so in legal settings. Just as in the medical discourse and also classroom discourse, research on domestic discourse between female and male partners has also shown an asymmetry in the take up of topics; women offer more topics than men, but it is men's topics which are more often accepted by women than vice versa (Fishman 1983). Ethnomethodological research on topics is however based on conversation, and on an assumption of equal rights and obligations between participants. In such interactions, topics are introduced and changed only by the dominant participants, often according to a pre-set agenda or routine, which may or may not be overtly set in the discourse. What this means is that topic organisation and

control in most cases is never symmetrical, although this may depend on a lot of factors such as status/power (as seen in the medical encounter), expertise, or even gender. The context also matters greatly, and when you are talking of institutional discourse in the workplace, these factors affect a great deal the manner in which topics are organised and handled.

West and Garcia (1988) studied mixed sex dyads and analysed male dominance in interaction by investigating the frequency of instances of 'unilateral topic change', or one speaker's attempt to change topic while the other speaker is still on the previous topic. They found that men were responsible for initiating more changes of topic than women (64 percent versus 36 percent). However, in contrast to the study by West and Garcia (1988), other research conducted of conversations between strangers found no gender differences in the number of topics initiated for discussion or the number of topics developed.

Pamela Fishman in her studies tried to find out why some topics by both men and women sometimes failed, and yet some others succeeded. In the private conversations that she studied (Fishman 1983:89-101), she found that women raise more topics than men, and they worked harder to develop those topics. She found that women raised 62 percent of the topics. While all the topics raised by men produced conversations, only 38 percent of the topics raised by women were successfully developed. Men thus did less work in interaction to develop topics than women did. Fishman found that women had much more trouble getting conversations going than men did. She further found in her study that she could not explain 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 or work. She found that topics introduced by the women failed because the men did not respond with the attention necessary to keep the conversation going. In contrast, she found that the men's topics succeeded not because they were inherently more interesting, but because the women upheld their part of the conversations. Topics men initiated thus succeeded because both parties worked in a joint development, to turn the initial attempt into an actual conversation. This study by Fishman (1983) has been widely cited, but there have been no follow-up studies that attempt to replicate her results.

In working with data on the current study, it was observed that Turn-taking and Topic organisation were also central issues in interaction, especially so when one is interested in looking at the issue of power. It was noted that the person who controlled the topic was also by extension the person who controlled the interaction. Topic control was thus seen to be a crucial factor in measuring the status of a member within the interaction and also in judging how power is distributed.

Like in the other interactional controls, the role of the chairperson here was found to be crucially important. Most times, the chairperson initiated topics, and also shifted them occasionally and also closed the topics. It was found that the laying out of the agenda was always the prerogative of the chair, and this was regardless of the sex of the chair. It was also found that a great deal of subtopics flowed from the general framework of laying out the agenda, which, as has been said, was the responsibility of the chair. With regard to this, the position of the chairperson was therefore found to be very strong and unquestionably powerful. However, of the two chairpersons, it was found that the female chairperson was more flexible in her handling of the agenda. This could be seen in situations where a member deviated from the actual topic, even though there might have been a relationship with the previous topic. In such cases, it was observed that she gave the speaker audience and listened to such contributions with a lot of patience. However, the male chairperson, it was found, had the habit of dismissing the contributions of the participants as 'not ideal for the current discussion', and he would recommend that such topics could be discussed in more relevant forums or meetings. This, it could be concluded can work to discourage contributions from participants who would thus refrain from making future novel contributions.

It was also found that the male chairperson when interrupted, as in the ringing of the telephone, could resume or abandon a topic that was in progress at the time, and if he decided to abandon it, or change it, despite what the initiator of the topic did, the chair always succeeded. The female chairperson however, in all the cases where there was an interruption as in the ringing of the telephone, always went back to the topic that had been in progress before the interruption.

It was found therefore that in connection with Topic organisation, three things became clear:

- The first was that topic initiation, topic development, topic change and topic closing were all influenced by the gender of the participants.
- The second was that different occupational status and power had an adverse influence on who raised topics and how they were received and organised in the interaction.
- The third was that both gender and power were related to context, which had an influence on how the topics were organised.

Conclusions

From the findings, various conclusions were drawn. These conclusions were based on the findings related to the different interactional resources that were found within the interaction patterns in the workplace. Understanding the complex interplay of gender and discourse required careful examination of the context of social

roles. The variation evidenced in these contextualised forms offered clues about a changing world and changing gender role expectations, where discourse participants are struggling to challenge restrictive notions and pursue new choices. Unfortunately, such participants also struggle with the continuing forces of traditional gender norms and the maintenance of the status quo by those who oppose the loss of their power and privilege. This is where Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) plays a pivotal role by making those practices more opaque so that the affected know exactly what they are up against.

It was concluded that most interaction problems such as the unequal distribution of talk in public contexts are the result of structured inequality in our society. Women's ways of talking differ from men's because each group has developed interaction strategies which reflect their societal positions. Most cross-gender communication problems in public contexts are women's problems because the interactional rules in such situations are men's rules. So consciousness-raising and mutual understanding may resolve not only some problems of cross-cultural miscommunication between the sexes, but also in the real world situation. In the real world situation, the real issue is power. (There has been unequal distribution of power between the sexes in society. Changing the power structure would probably alter the patterns.)

It has often been suggested that quantitative findings on male dominance in conversation can be explained to a significant extent by the fact that males on average hold higher status positions than women; that is, it is not simply gender that causes men to dominate and women to differ. If this is true, then it should follow that:

- Where women are in a position of power they will dominate conversation in ways similar to men.
- That where men are in subordinate positions, their dominant behaviour will diminish or disappear.

From my findings however, less powerful men in my sample were still able to dominate more powerful women status-wise, although the truth is that more powerful women status-wise came out more strongly and more assertively in their conversational styles than less powerful women. On power, when you however look at the performance between the chairpersons in their respective meetings, although one was male and the other was female, the male chair seemed to have more of the interruptions, and these may be indications of gender variables outdoing status and power.

It was thus concluded that the gender based patterns tend to override status variables, so that even when a woman is in a higher status position or more powerful role, she is likely to be interrupted by even a lower status man within that hierarchy, more often than she interrupts him i.e. subordinate males inter-

rupted higher status females in other work situations more than they did to their male counterparts. Through 'violations' of the turn-taking model, men denied equal status to women as conversational partners with respect to rights to the full utilisation of their turns and support for the development of topics. The study has provided strong evidence to suggest that the power generally assumed by males is reflected in domination of conversational interaction.

From the current study, it is also concluded that in most cases, powerful participants will be selected to speak more often than non-powerful participants. It was noted that powerful people dominate conversation; not only because of their own efforts, but also because of the support they receive from others. Powerful participants will self-select more often than non-powerful participants. Powerful participants will interrupt and overlap others more frequently than non-powerful participants. Powerful participants will be interrupted and overlapped less frequently than non-powerful participants. However, status alone as we have seen, cannot account for the results. There is thus enough evidence from the research carried out, to suggest and conclude that a significant difference exists in the way that men and women organise conversation. Also, that the power assumed by males is reflected in their domination of mixed-sex interaction and thus also in disproportionate floor holding. More powerful participants dominate conversational organisation thereby gaining for themselves a disproportionate amount of floor apportionment, and in most cases, due to societal arrangements and structures, the more powerful participants are men. In verbal behaviour within the organisation, the participants are acting out the real life situations where men dominate, and women continue to be suppressed and oppressed.

This study showed that when the two power bases of gender and occupational status are at work, then gender seems to exert the greater influence on floor apportionment. The power base of occupational status did influence the way that both men and women organised conversation (Generally, speakers in high occupational positions spent more time holding the floor than their subordinates, and more specifically in two cases, the same speakers gained more floor space in 'boss' rather than subordinate positions). Nevertheless even when women held high-status occupational positions, male subordinates still organised the interaction in a way that allowed them to dominate the floor.

Gender and power as we have concluded, are so intricately related in the way that they influence the Turn-taking behaviour of participants, although we have singled out Gender as being more deterministic in the verbal behaviour of the participants. We should however note that the patterning of specific linguistic forms may be illuminated by many more variables than just gender. These include the role taken by participants in interaction, the objectives of interaction, the participants' relative status on a number of dimensions, and many more variables. One thing to remember is that 'women' do not form a homogeneous social

group. We have women from Africa, Europe, Asia etc, and they all come with differing cultural characteristics, which are reflected in their linguistic behaviour. Gender is crosscut with other social divisions, and their relative importance is affected by the specifics of the situation.

The question may thus really be who are the powerful speakers in a workplace setting. This domain, as has been discussed, had traditionally left out women, and as of today, the picture has not changed very much, and the linguistic equation may similarly follow the same pattern. However, we have slightly more women in these key powerful positions, but as compared to male representation in the same domain, this is still quite insignificant. Women in this domain thus need to work towards negotiating and struggling against the conditions of their oppression in these kinds of settings. They need to work towards making the so-called 'glass ceiling' more opaque, or shattering it altogether. Looking beneath the discourse patterns of men and women in the workplace, the two groups have been unveiled as working as warriors in their claim for public space. This does no good to society in general. Because these practices are bound to be made more visible and opaque, men and women should now work towards being collaborators in this crucial sector if our society is to achieve maximum benefit. This would go a long way in reforming the African public sector.

Notes

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1. Supportive interruptions include questions or statements, which are related to the speaker's topic. They are utterances by a listener, primarily to indicate interest, attention and concern to what the speaker is saying. They are thus acts of collaboration and cooperation, and encourage the development of the speaker's talk. Neutral interruptions are short statements that are not meant to challenge the current speaker in any way, or to provoke any reaction if any, especially if it is to challenge the current speaker. They may be used to repeat, repair or clarify an utterance. Unsupportive interruptions may be a violation of a current speaker's turn talking rights and may be considered interruptive, disruptive, obstructive and even dominance related. For a wider discussion on this, look at Yieke (2002b).

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