

SEX DIFFERENCES IN CONVERSATIONAL INTERRUPTIONS BY PRESCHOOLERS

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ABSTRACT

Interruptions of a conversational partner was assessed in both same-sex and cross-sex dyads of preschoolers; half of the children were 3 years old and the remainder were 4 years old. Each child was successively paired in counterbalanced order with a same-sex and an opposite-sex peer of the same age, and frequency of interruptions was tabulated. In same-sex pairings, both boys and girls interrupted each other equivalently. However, in cross-sex pairings, boys significantly increased and girls significantly decreased interruption frequency; this was equally true for both ages. Thus, children learn at least some aspects of sex-differentiated conversational patterns at a very early age.

1. Introduction

Conversation is a complex verbal interaction that requires an extensive knowledge of discourse rules in order to be managed successfully. One set of rules involves turn-taking, i.e., how the discourse participants pass the role of speaker back and forth between them. These rules have been described by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) and more recently by Wilson, Wiemann, and Zimmerman (1984). Children learn them surprisingly early, and have been found to be proficient at conversational turn-taking in the preschool years (Garvey and Berninger 1981).

Recently, attention has been focused on a violation of smooth turn-taking in conversation: instances in which one speaker interrupts the other before he or she has finished. In particular, interruption patterns seem to reflect our cultural sex role attitudes. Zimmerman and West (1975) tape-recorded both cross-sex and same-sex conversations in various public places such as in drug stores or coffee shops, and they found that 96% of the interruptions occurring in cross-sex interaction were by men. When they compared same-sex conversations, they found that frequency of interruptions did not differ between men and women when they were talking to another person of the same sex. This imbalance in frequency of interruption was replicated in

a later study in which pairs of unacquainted adults were placed together and instructed to "get acquainted" (West and Zimmerman 1983). In this study, 75% of the interruptions in cross-sex conversations were made by men. Interruptions in conversation do not seem to reflect a lack of knowledge about the rules of good conversational management; rather, they are a social tool that can be used to indicate status, dominance, confidence, anxiety, and a host of other variables (Beattie 1981; Rogers and Jones 1975). Men are much more likely to interrupt women than vice versa.

When does this sex-differentiation in interruption patterns become acquired? To date, Esposito (1979) has been the only researcher to study the incidence of interruptions in the speech of young children. She placed preschoolers (age range: 3.5 years to 4.8 years) together in either same sex or opposite sex pairs and tabulated the frequencies of interruptions that occurred. Her results are comparable to those of researchers studying adults: she found no differences between girls and boys when they were conversing with a same-sex peer, but boys interrupted girls at the rate of 2 to 1.

This study is a partial replication and an extension of Esposito's study. The sample is chosen from a preschool operated by a University for its students and staff, and thus the parents of the children are likely to be among the least sex-stereotyped in our society. Two groups of preschool children are studied, 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, to see if there is an acquisition during the preschool years of the sex difference found by Esposito; in her study, such a developmental shift might have been missed by starting at age 3.5 and combining the data from all ages. Furthermore, the present study is a within-subjects design, i.e., the same children are assessed during conversation with a same-sex peer and a cross sex peer. In Esposito's study, different children were chosen for each conversational partner.

2. Method

2.1 Subjects

Twenty 3-year-olds and twenty 4-year-olds, half girls and half boys in each age group participated (mean ages, 3.3 and 4.3 years respectively, ranges 3.0 - 3.10 and 4.0 - 4.7). All were children of University students or staff and attended a University preschool.

2.2 Procedure

After an initial period of getting acquainted, the children were twice taken in pairs to a separate room and encouraged to talk with an experimenter who was female. She prompted them to talk about activities in the preschool, holidays, etc., and then played the part of listener. They were audio-recorded for 15 minutes, of which the last 10 was used for data analysis. The order of partners (same sex or cross-sex) was counterbalanced across children. An interruption was defined as one member of a pair beginning his or her turn before the other child had finished.

3. Results

The mean number of interruptions tabulated in each group of conversational pairs is shown in Table 1. The data were analyzed by means of an analysis of variance calculation with Age and Sex the between factors and Partner (same-sex or cross-sex) the within factor. There was a significant Sex X Partner interaction, $F(1,36) = 14.46$, $p < .001$, as well as a main effect of Sex, $F(1,36) = 9.47$, $p < .01$. Girls interrupted less frequently than did boys, but this main effect must be interpreted within the context of the interaction between sex and partner. According to post-hoc Newman-Keuls calculations, there were no differences between any of the groups when they were conversing with a same-sex partner. Thus, both boys and girls interrupt each other fairly frequently when they are with conversational partners of the same gender. The story is quite different however when they are with conversational partners of the opposite sex. Girls (both 3- and 4-year-olds) significantly decrease the number of times they interrupt when their partners are boys (this difference is significant at the .01 and the .05 level for the younger and older girls respectively). In contrast, boys significantly increase the number of times they interrupt when they are talking with girls (this difference is significant at the .01 level for both ages). Thus, when the conversational dyad consists of a girl and a boy, 71% of the interruptions on average are by the boy.

	<u>Same-Sex</u>		<u>Cross-Sex</u>	
	M	SD	M	SD
3-year-olds				
Girls	5.3	3.4	3.0	1.9
Boys	5.2	3.3	7.5	3.3
4-year-olds				
Girls	4.5	2.9	2.9	1.6
Boys	3.9	2.6	6.7	3.1

TABLE 1. Interruptions per Conversational Pair Group
(M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation)

4. Discussion

Interrupting a conversational partner is not just a matter of ignorance about the rules of speaker exchange and turn-taking in conversation. The children in this study know these rules, although children may well interrupt their conversational partners more than do adults. Of more interest, boys and girls are equally proficient at using these rules, as shown by equal frequencies of interruption when talking to a same-sex partner. But children have also learned that interruption is more than an indication of poor conversational management; it is also a conversational tool or strategy that has become sex-differentiated in its use. Boys have come to believe that interrupting a girl is more appropriate than interrupting another boy, and girls have come to believe that interrupting boys is a behavior that should be minimized. Appallingly, these interruption strategies are learned before children turn 3, since the 3-year-olds (mean age 3.3 years) exhibited the same sex-differentiated pattern as did the 4-year-olds. For these differences in conversational strategies to be evident to 1- and 2-year-olds, they must be powerful and pervasive indeed in our culture.

The current study replicates the sex differentiation of interruptions found in adults by Zimmerman and West (1975), and West and Zimmerman (1983); although both found men to interrupt women more

frequently, the first study found differences of 24 to 1 and the second of 3 to 1. The two studies differed in a number of ways, including degree of acquaintance of the conversational participants, formality of the setting, and topic of conversation. In the present study, boys interrupted girls at about the rate of two and a half to one--less than in either of the other studies, even though the children were well-acquainted, as in Zimmerman and West (1975). Perhaps preschoolers are not yet as sex-differentiated as are adults in their conversational management strategies. The results of the current study also closely replicate those of Esposito (1979) even though both subject population and task differ; in her study, boys interrupted girls at the rate of two to one.

This lesson of who interrupts whom may not be learned equally by all children. A within-subjects design allows one to look at individual differences in patterns of response to same-sex versus cross-sex peers, and approximately a third of the children at both ages did not conform to the pattern of boys increasing their interruption rate when talking to girls or girls decreasing it when talking to boys. A fruitful area of further research is an investigation of these individual differences and factors that may be related to a child conforming less to these stereotyped patterns of conversational management.

Zimmerman and West (1975) suggest that interruptions operate as "topic-control mechanisms", i.e., they allow males to subtly exert dominance and control over females in conversation. Children as young as three have already learned these mechanisms.

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