

## Rethinking Power and Solidarity in Gender and Dominance

Deborah Tannen  
Georgetown University

In analyzing discourse, many researchers assume that all speakers proceed along similar lines of interpretation. But Gumperz 1982 makes clear that this is so only to the extent that cultural background is shared. To the extent that cultural backgrounds differ, lines of interpretation are likely to diverge. My own research shows that cultural difference is not limited to the gross and apparent levels of country of origin and native language, but also exists at the subcultural levels of ethnic heritage, class, geographic region, age, and gender. My earlier work focused on ethnic and regional style; my most recent work focuses on gender. I draw on this work here to demonstrate that utterances have widely divergent potential implicatures, because of the ambiguity of power and solidarity.

**Power and Solidarity.** Since Brown and Gilman's 1960 pioneering study, and the subsequent contributions of Friedrich 1972 and Brown and Levinson [1978]1987, the concepts of power and solidarity have been fundamental to sociolinguistic theory. (Fasold 1990 provides an overview.) Power is associated with nonreciprocal forms of address: a speaker addresses another by title-last-name but is addressed by first name. Solidarity is associated with reciprocal forms of address: both speakers address each other by title-last-name or first name. Power governs asymmetrical relationships where one is subordinate to another; solidarity governs symmetrical relationships characterized by social equality and similarity. In my own work (Tannen 1984, 1986) exploring the relationship between power and solidarity as it emerges in conversational discourse, I argue that although power and solidarity, closeness and distance, seem at first to be opposites, they also entail each other. Any show of solidarity necessarily entails power, in that claiming similarity and closeness limits freedom and independence. At the same time, any show of power entails solidarity by involving participants in relation to each other.

I once entitled a lecture "The Paradox of Power and Solidarity." The respondent to my talk appeared wearing a three-piece suit and a knapsack on his back. On one level, the suit represented power, the knapsack solidarity. Now wearing a knapsack would also mark solidarity at, say, a protest demonstration. And wearing a three-piece suit to the demonstration might mark power by differentiating the wearer from the demonstrators, perhaps even reminding them of his superordinate position in an institutional hierarchy. But wearing a three-piece suit to the board meeting of a corporation would mark solidarity, and wearing a knapsack in that setting would connote not solidarity but disrespect, a move in the power dynamic.

This ambiguity gives rise to what has been a major thrust in my previous decade's work analyzing conversation: What appear as attempts to dominate a conversation (an exercise of power) may actually be intended to establish rapport (an exercise of solidarity). This occurs because power and solidarity are bought with the same currency: The same linguistic means can be used to create either or both. The paradigm example from my analysis of a two and a half hour dinner table conversation

(Tannen 1984) involves interruption, or, more accurately, overlap, which can be interpreted as interruption. For some, speaking along with another is a show of enthusiastic participation in the conversation (solidarity); for others, only one voice should be heard at a time, so any overlap is an interruption (power). The result was that enthusiastic listeners who overlapped cooperatively, talking along to establish rapport, were perceived as interrupting. This doubtless contributed to the impression reported by the other speakers that they had "dominated" the conversation. Indeed, the tape and transcript also give the impression that they had dominated, because their overlap-aversant friends tended to stop speaking as soon as another voice began.

The key to solving the puzzle of whether power or solidarity is primary is symmetry. If Speaker A repeatedly overlaps and Speaker B repeatedly gives way, the resulting communication is asymmetrical, and the effect is domination. But if both speakers avoid overlaps, or if both speakers overlap each other and win out equally, there is symmetry and no domination.

The dynamics of power and solidarity are also seen in the tension between similarity and difference. Scollon 1982:344-5 explains that all communication is a double bind because of the conflicting needs to be left alone (negative face) and to be accepted as a member of society (positive face). Becker 1982:125 expresses this double bind as "a matter of continual self-correction between exuberance (i.e. friendliness: you are like me) and deficiency (i.e. respect: you are not me)." I (Tannen 1984:17) have described this double bind as inherent in communication in that we send and receive the simultaneous and conflicting messages, "Don't assume I'm the same as you" and "Don't assume I'm different from you." All these formulations elaborate on the tension between similarity and difference, or what Becker and Oka 1974 call "the cline of person," a semantic dimension they suggest may be the one most basic to language; that is, one deals with the world and the objects and people in it in terms of how similar, or close, they are to oneself.

In my most recent work (Tannen 1990c) I have continued to explore the paradoxical and mutually entailing relationship between power and solidarity by examining how conflict is negotiated in conversational interaction. This involves exploring how what appears as dominance may not be intended as such, but also how what seems like cooperation may actually be intended to dominate. Throughout, I demonstrate that the linguistic strategies by which power and solidarity are achieved and expressed can be the same, so intentions such as dominance cannot be correlated with linguistic strategies. Rather, the "meaning" of any strategy depends on context, the conversational styles of participants, and the interaction of their styles and strategies with each other.

**Similarity and Difference.** Harold Pinter's most recent play Mountain Language, composed of four brief scenes, is set in a prison in the capital city of an unnamed country. In the second scene, an old mountain woman is finally allowed to see her son across a table as a guard stands over them. But whenever she tries to speak to her son, the guard silences her, telling the prisoner to tell his mother that their mountain language is forbidden. Then he continues:

**GUARD:** And I'll tell you another thing. I've got a wife and three kids. And you're a pile of shit.

Silence.

**PRISONER:** I've got a wife and three kids.

**GUARD:** You've what? Silence. You've got what?

Silence. What did you say to me? You've got what? Silence. You've got what?

[He picks up the telephone and dials one digit.] Sergeant? I'm in the Blue Room ... yes ... I thought I should report, Sergeant ... I think I've got a joker in here.

The Sergeant soon enters and asks, "What joker?" The stage darkens and the scene ends. The final scene opens on the same setting, with the prisoner bloody and shaking, his mother shocked into speechlessness. The prisoner was beaten for saying, "I've got a wife and three kids." This quotidian statement, which would be unremarkable in casual conversation, was insubordinate in the hierarchical and oppressive context because the guard had just made the same statement. When the guard said, "I've got a wife and three kids. And you're a pile of shit," he was claiming, "I am different from you." By repeating the guard's words verbatim, the prisoner was saying, "I am the same as you." (I have demonstrated at length [Tannen 1987, 1989a] that repeating another's words creates rapport on a meta level.) The guard was asserting his own humanity and denying the prisoner's; by claiming his humanity and implicitly denying the guard's assertion that he is "a pile of shit," the prisoner challenged the guard's right to dominate him. Similarity is antithetical to hierarchy.<sup>1</sup>

The ambiguity of closeness, a spatial metaphor representing similarity or involvement, emerges in a nonverbal aspect of this scene. In the performance I saw, the guard repeated the question "You've got what?" while moving steadily closer to the prisoner, until he was bending over him, nose to nose. The guard's moving closer is a nonverbal analogue to the prisoner's statement, but with opposite effect: he was "closing in." The guard moved closer and brought his face into contact with the prisoner's not as a sign of affection (which such actions could signify in another context) but as a threat. Closeness, then, can mean aggression rather than affiliation in the context of a hierarchical rather than symmetrical relationship.

**The Ambiguity of Linguistic Strategies.** The potential ambiguity of linguistic strategies to mark both power and solidarity in face-to-face interaction has made mischief in language and gender research, wherein it is tempting to assume that whatever women do results from their powerlessness. But all the linguistic strategies that have been taken by analysts to be evidence of dominance can under certain circumstances be instruments of affiliation. These include indirectness, interruption, silence vs. volubility, topic raising, and conflict and verbal aggression. For the remainder of this paper, I demonstrate the ambiguity of each of these strategies in turn.

**Indirectness.** Lakoff 1975 identifies two benefits of indirectness: defensiveness and rapport. Defensively, a speaker can later disclaim or rescind an indirect communication that does not meet with a positive response. At the same time, indirectness yields the pleasant experience of getting one's way not because one demanded it (power) but because the other wanted the same thing (solidarity). Many researchers have focused on the defensive or power benefit of indirectness and ignored the payoff in rapport or

solidarity. Conley, O'Barr and Lind's 1979 claim that indirectness is the language of the powerless has been particularly influential. Women are then seen as indirect because they don't feel entitled to make demands. Yet those who feel entitled to make demands may prefer not to, seeking the payoff in rapport. Furthermore, there are circumstances in which a party is so powerful that it is unnecessary to make a demand. For example, an employer who says, "It's cold in here" may expect a servant to close a window, but a servant who says the same thing is not likely to see the employer rise to correct the situation. This may explain the otherwise surprising finding of Bellinger and Gleason 1982 (reported in Gleason 1987) that fathers' speech to their young children had a higher incidence than mothers' of both direct imperatives ("Turn the bolt with the wrench") and implied indirect imperatives ("The wheel is going to fall off").

Cultural relativity sheds crucial light on the use of indirectness. Keenan 1974 found that in a Malagasy-speaking village on the island of Madagascar, women are direct and men indirect, although the men are socially dominant and their indirect style more highly valued. My own research (Tannen 1981) found that whereas American women were more likely to take an indirect interpretation of a sample conversation, Greek men were as likely as Greek women, and more likely than American men or women, to take the indirect interpretation. Indirectness, then, is not in itself a strategy of subordination.

**Interruption.** That interruption is a sign of dominance has been as widespread an assumption in research (for example, Leet-Pellegrini 1980) as in conventional wisdom. A frequent finding (for example, West and Zimmerman 1983) is that men dominate women by interrupting them in conversation. Tellingly, however, Deborah James and Janice Drakich (personal communication), reviewing research on gender and interruption, discovered that studies comparing amount of interruption in all-female vs. all-male conversations find more interruption, not less, in the all-female ones. Though initially surprising, this finding reinforces the need to distinguish linguistic strategies by their interactional purpose. Does the overlap show support for the speaker, or does it contradict or change the topic? Elsewhere (Tannen 1989b, 1990c) I explore at length the problems inherent in the claim that interruption can be identified by mechanical means, and I give examples of conversations in which there is overlap but no interruption and interruption but no overlap.

This is not, however, to say that interruption never constitutes dominance nor that men never interrupt or dominate women. Fictional discourse provides an example of a situation in which it is and one does. In a short story by Lorrie Moore, Zoe is talking to a man she has just met at a party. He asks, "What's your favorite joke?" When she begins, "A man goes to a doctor," he interrupts: "I think I know this one. A guy goes into a doctor's office, and the doctor tells him he's got some good news and some bad news -- that one, right?" It is obvious that this is not right, because Zoe's joke is "about the guy who visits his doctor and the doctor says, 'Well, I'm sorry to say, you've got six weeks to live.'" But instead of saying "No," Zoe says, "I'm not sure. This might be a different version," leaving open the door for him to tell his joke, which turns out to be not only different but offensively obscene. This interruption does seem dominating because it comes as Zoe is about to tell a joke and usurps the floor to tell it.

The point, then, is that in order to understand the "meaning" of an interruption, or, indeed, whether an overlap is an interruption, one must consider the context, speakers' styles, and the interactive frame -- that is, what the speakers are trying to do by their communication.

**Silence vs. Volubility.** The excerpt from Pinter's Mountain Language dramatizes the assumption that powerful people do the talking and powerless people are silenced. This is the trope that underlies the play's title and its central theme: By outlawing their language, the oppressors silence the mountain people, rob them of their ability to speak and hence of their humanity. In the same spirit, many scholars (for example, Spender 1980) have claimed that men dominate women by silencing them. Again, there are surely circumstances in which this is accurate. Coates 1986 notes numerous proverbs that instruct women, like children, to be silent.

Silence in itself, however, is not a sign of powerlessness, nor volubility a self-evident sign of domination. A theme running through Komarovsky's 1962 classic study Blue Collar Marriage is that many of the wives interviewed said they talked more than their husbands: "He's tongue-tied," one woman said; "My husband has a great habit of not talking," said another; "He doesn't say much but he means what he says and the children mind him," said a third. Yet there is no question but that these husbands are dominant in their marriages.

Indeed taciturnity itself can be an instrument of power. This is precisely the claim of Sattel 1983 who argues that men use silence to exercise power over women. He illustrates with a scene from Erica Jong's novel Fear of Flying, only a brief part of which is presented here. The first line of dialogue is spoken by Isadora, the second by her husband, Bennett. (Spaced dots indicate omitted text; unspaced dots show a pause included in the original text.)

"Why do you turn on me? What did I do?"

Silence.

"What did I do?"

He looks at her as if her not knowing were another injury.

"Look, let's just go to sleep now. Let's just forget it."

"Forget what?"

He says nothing.

...

"It was something in the movie, wasn't it?"

"What, in the movie?"

"... It was the funeral scene. ... The little boy looking at his dead mother. Something got you there. That was when you got depressed."

Silence.

"Well, wasn't it?"

Silence.

"Oh come on, Bennett, you're making me furious. Please tell me. Please."

The painful scene continues in this vein until Bennett tries to leave the room and Isadora tries to detain him. It certainly seems to support Sattel's claim that Bennett's silence subjugates his wife, as the scene ends with her literally lowered to the floor, clinging

subjugates his wife, as the scene ends with her literally lowered to the floor, clinging to his pajama leg. But the reason his silence is an effective weapon is her insistence that he tell her what's wrong. If she too receded into silence, his silence would be disarmed. The devastation results not from his silence in itself but from the interaction of their differing styles.

Volubility and taciturnity, too, can result from style differences rather than speakers' intention. As I (Tannen 1984, 1985) and others (Scollon and Scollon 1981, Scollon 1985) have discussed at length, there are cultural and subcultural differences in the length of pauses expected between and within speaking turns. In my study of dinner table conversation, those who expected shorter pauses between conversational turns began to feel an uncomfortable silence ensuing while their longer-pausing friends were simply waiting for what they regarded as the appropriate time to take a turn. The result was that the shorter pausers ended up doing most of the talking, another sign interpreted by their interlocutors as dominating the conversation. But their intentions had been to fill in what to them were potentially uncomfortable silences, that is, to grease the conversational wheels and ensure the success of the conversation. In their view, the taciturn participants were uncooperative, failing to do their part to maintain the conversation. So silence and volubility, too, may imply either power or solidarity.

**Topic-raising.** Shuy 1982 is typical in assuming that the speaker who raises the most topics is dominating a conversation. However, in a study I conducted (Tannen 1990a,b) of videotaped conversations among friends of varying ages recorded by Dorval 1990, it emerged that the speaker who raised the topics was not always dominant, as judged by other criteria (for example, who took the lead in addressing the investigator when he entered the room). To illustrate: in a twenty-minute conversation between a pair of sixth-grade girls who identified themselves as best friends, Shannon raised the topic of Julia's relationship with Mary by saying, "Too bad you and Mary are not good friends anymore." The conversation proceeded and continued to focus almost exclusively on Julia.

Similarly, most of the conversation between two tenth-grade girls was about Nancy, but Sally raised the topic of Nancy's problems. In response to Nancy's question "Well, what do you want to talk about?" Sally said, "Your mama. Did you talk to your mama?" Overall, Sally raised nine topics, Nancy seven. However, all but one of the topics Sally raised were questions focused on Nancy. If raising more topics is a sign of dominance, Sally controlled the conversation when she raised topics, although even this was subject to Nancy's collaboration by picking them up. It may or may not be the case that Sally controlled the conversation, but the nature of her dominance is surely other than what is normally assumed by that term if the topics she raised were all about Sally.

Finally, the effect of raising topics may also be an effect of differences in pacing and pausing, as discussed above with regard to my study of dinner table conversation. A speaker who thinks the other has no more to say on a given topic may try to contribute to the conversation by raising another one. But a speaker who was intending to say more and was simply waiting for the appropriate turn-exchange pause, will feel that the floor was taken away and the topic aggressively switched. Yet again, the impression of dominance might simply result from style differences.

**Conflict and Verbal Aggression.** Research on gender and language (see Maltz and Borker 1982 for a review) has consistently found male speakers to be competitive and more likely to engage in conflict (for example, by arguing, issuing commands, and taking opposing stands) and females to be cooperative and more likely to avoid conflict (for example, by agreeing, supporting, and making suggestions rather than commands.) Ong 1981:51 argues that "adversativeness" is universal, but "conspicuous or expressed adversativeness is a larger element in the lives of males than of females."

In my analysis of videotapes of male and female friends talking to each other (Tannen 1990b,c) I have begun to investigate how male adversativeness and female cooperation are played out, complicated, and contradicted in conversational discourse. In analyzing Dorval's videotapes of friends talking, for example, I found a sixth-grade boy saying to his best friend, "Seems like, if there's a fight, me and you are automatically in it. And everyone else wants to go against you and everything. It's hard to agree without someone saying something to you." In contrast, girls of the same age (and also of most other ages whose talk I examined) spent a great deal of time discussing the dangers of anger and contention. In affirming their own friendship, one girl told her friend, "Me and you never get in fights hardly," and "I mean like if I try to talk to you, you'll say, 'Talk to me!' And if you try to talk to me, I'll talk to you."

These examples of gendered styles of interaction are illuminated by the insight that power and solidarity are mutually evocative. As seen in the statement of the sixth grade boy, opposing other boys in teams entails affiliation within the team. (The most dramatic instance of male affiliation resulting from conflict with others is bonding among soldiers, a phenomenon explored by Norman 1990.) By the same token, girls' efforts to support their friends necessarily entail exclusion of or opposition to other girls. This emerges in Hughes' 1988 study of girls playing the game foursquare. The social injunction to be "nice" and not "mean" was at odds with the object of the game, to eliminate players who are then replaced by awaiting players. The girls resolved the conflict, and formed "incipient teams" composed of friends, by claiming that their motivation in eliminating some players was to enable others (their friends) to enter the game. In their terms, this was "nice-mean." This dynamic is also supported by my analysis of the sixth grade girls' conversation: Most of their talk was devoted to allying themselves with each other in opposition to another girl who was not present. So their cooperation (solidarity) also entails opposition (power).

For boys, power entails solidarity not only by opposition to another team, but by opposition to each other. In the videotapes of friends talking, I found that all the conversations between young boys (and none between young girls) had numerous examples of teasing and mock attack. In examining pre-school conversations transcribed and analyzed by Corsaro and Rizzo 1990, I was amazed to discover that a fight can be a way of initiating rather than precluding friendship. In one episode, a little boy intrudes on two others and an angry fight ensues in which they threaten to punch and shoot poop at each other, and to snap a Slinky in each other's faces. By the end of the episode, however, the three boys are playing together amicably. Picking a fight was the third boy's way of joining the play of the other two.

These examples call into question the correlation of aggression and power on one hand, and cooperation and solidarity on the other. Doubt is also cast by a cross-cultural perspective. For example, many cultures of the world see arguing as a

pleasurable sign of intimacy. Schiffrin 1984 shows that among working class men and women of East European Jewish background, friendly argument is a means of being sociable. Frank 1988 shows a Jewish couple who tend to polarize and take argumentative positions, but they are not fighting; they are staging a kind of public sparring, where both fighters are on the same team. Byrnes 1986 claims that Germans find American students uninformed and uncommitted because they are reluctant to argue politics with new acquaintances. For their part, Americans find German students belligerent because they start arguments about American foreign policy with Americans they have just met.

Greek conversation provides an example of a cultural style that places more positive value, for women and men, on dynamic opposition. Kakava 1989 replicates Schiffrin's findings by showing how a Greek family enjoy opposing each other in dinner table conversation. In another study of modern Greek conversation, Tannen and Kakava 1989 find speakers routinely disagreeing when they actually agree, and using diminutive name forms and other terms of endearment -- markers of closeness -- just when they are opposing each other. In the following excerpt, for example, I express agreement with my interlocutor, an older Greek woman who has just told me that she complained to the police about a construction crew that illegally continued drilling and pounding through the siesta hours:

**Deborah:** Echete dikio.

**Stella:** Ego echo dikio. Kopella mou, den xero an echo dikio i den echo dikio. Alla ego yperaspizomai ta symferonta mou kai ta dikaiomata mou.

**Deborah:** You're right.

**Stella:** I am right. My dear girl, I don't know if I'm right or I'm not right. But I am watching out for my interests and my rights.

Stella disagrees with my agreement with her by reframing my agreement in her own terms rather than simply accepting it by stopping after "I am right." She also marks her divergence from my frame with the endearment "kopella mou" (literally, "my girl").

In another conversation, presented by Kakava as typical of her family's sociable argument, the younger sister has said that she cannot understand why the attractive young woman who is the prime minister Papandreou's girl friend would have an affair with such an old man. The older sister, Christina, argues that the woman may have felt that in having an affair with the prime minister she was doing something notable. Her sister replied, "Poly megaló timima re Christinaki na pliroseis pantos" ("It's a very high price to pay, Chrissie, anyway"). I am using the English diminutive form "Chrissie" to reflect the Greek diminutive ending -aki, but the particle re cannot really be translated; it is simply a marker of closeness that is typically used when disagreeing, as in the ubiquitously heard "Ochi, re" ("No, re").

**Conclusion.** The intersection of language and gender provides a rich site for analyzing how power and solidarity are created in discourse. But prior research in this area evidences the danger of linking linguistic forms with interactional intentions such as dominance. In trying to understand how speakers use language, we must consider the context (in every sense, including at least textual, relational, and institutional



constraints), speakers' conversational styles, and, most crucially, the interaction of their styles with each other.

Attempts to understand what goes on between women and men in conversation are muddled by the ambiguity of power and solidarity. The same linguistic means can accomplish either, and every utterance combines elements of both. Scholars, however, like individuals in interaction, are likely to see only one and not the other, like the picture that cannot be seen for what it is -- simultaneously a chalice and two faces -- but can only be seen alternatively as one or the other. In attempting the impossible task of keeping both images in focus at once, we may at least succeed in switching from one to the other fast enough to deepen our understanding of power and solidarity as well as communication between women and men.

#### Note

1. Following the oral presentation of this paper, both Gary Holland and Michael Chandler pointed out that the prisoner may be heard as implying the second part of the guard's statement: "and you're a pile of shit."

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