

AS English Language: Language and Gender

Focus: analysing interruptions and overlaps

Relevant assessment objectives:

AO1 Apply appropriate methods of language analysis, using associated terminology and coherent written expression

Key terminology: interruption, overlap, latch-on, interlocutor, idiolect, context, stereotype, co-operative overlap, competitive overlap

AO2 Demonstrate critical understanding of concepts and issues relevant to language use

Key concepts/issues: Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West, Dominance Theory, Deborah Tannen, Difference Theory

Q1. What's the difference between an interruption and an overlap?

Q2. a. Consider your own everyday language use. Are interruptions and overlaps part of your idiolect?

b. Record a two-minute conversation between two interlocutors, then play it back and identify interruptions and overlaps. Suggest reasons why the interruptions and overlaps took place (or if there weren't any, suggest reasons why not).

Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West and Dominance Theory

- Zimmerman and West's 1975 study has become a classic, even though later research often appears to contradict it.
- They recorded 31 conversations in public places such as cafes and shops around the campus of the University of California.
- All the interlocutors were white, middle-class and aged between 20 and 35.
- Each conversation involved two interlocutors. There were 10 male-only conversations, 10 female-only conversations, and 11 mixed conversations.
- Zimmerman and West noted the frequency with which speakers of each gender overlapped and interrupted.
- Zimmerman and West assumed that an interruption/overlap was an attempt to **dominate** the conversation. This is why their research has become known as the **Dominance Theory**.

Zimmerman and West found that:

- In both the male-only conversations and in the female-only conversations, interruptions and overlaps were equally divided between the two speakers. There were only 29 interruptions and overlaps in the two same-sex groups combined.
- In the mixed-sex conversations, there were 57 interruptions and overlaps in total. 55 of these were used by males interrupting/overlapping females. Only 2 were used by females interrupting/overlapping males.

- Q3. To what extent does Zimmerman and West's study seem relevant to your findings in 2a) and 2b)?
- Q4. In what ways is Zimmerman and West's study limited in its usefulness?

Deborah Tannen and Difference Theory

- Deborah Tannen argues that there are gender differences in communication style which we need to identify and understand in order to gain insights into our personal relationships.
- Her first book *Conversational Style: Analysing Talk Among Friends* (1984) investigates the conversational styles of a small number of speakers who were Tannen's friends, engaged in informal interactions.
- *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (1990) had a more specific focus on gender. Similarly, it was based on data - often anecdotal - from friends, family and students in conversation, was aimed at a popular audience, became a bestseller and was translated into 30 languages.
- Tannen has subsequently written a variety of other books on the impact of gender on conversational interaction, including her latest, *You're the Only One I Can Tell: Inside the Language of Women's Friendships* (2017).

Tannen found that:

- The term 'overlap' is more useful than 'interruption', perhaps because overlaps occur more frequently in conversation and are often more complex than interruptions.
 - There are different types of overlap. A **co-operative overlap** can be the overlapping speaker's way of showing interest in the conversation, and/or encouragement to the other speaker. In contrast, a **competitive overlap** may be the overlapping speaker's way of trying to get control of the conversation.
 - Women tend to overlap, whereas men speak one at a time, avoiding overlaps, and will aim to maintain their current right to talk.
- Q5. Compare and contrast the views of Tannen and Zimmerman and West. How far are they similar/different?
- Q6. To what extent does Tannen's research seem relevant to your findings in 2a) and 2b)?
- Q7. In what ways is Tannen's research limited in its usefulness?

Teacher prompt

Q1. An **interruption** is the term used to describe what happens when an interlocutor stops speaking at the point when another interlocutor begins to speak. An **overlap** is sometimes called a **latch-on**; this is when one interlocutor is speaking, another interlocutor also begins to speak but the first doesn't stop, so they speak simultaneously.

Q2. For task b) if it is not practical to record conversations, two students could come to the front of the class to hold a conversation while other students count the numbers of interruptions/overlaps.

For both tasks, students should be encouraged to consider the impact of **contextual factors** such as gender, age, setting and subject of conversation on language use. For example, young people are often stereotyped as liable to interrupt others; is this supported by students' own experiences?

Q3. Students should try to think critically and analytically about the usefulness of Zimmerman and West's study to their findings, rather than just making a simple link. Again, consideration of the impact of contextual factors is key to developing their analysis.

Q4. Suggestions for class discussion:

Zimmerman and West used a small sample of data. Why could this be an issue? Consider how just one interlocutor's language could dramatically affect results.

The interlocutors' language may have been affected by the contexts of the conversations (e.g. cafes, shops). Why would it be misleading to generalise these as typical of all conversations?

Zimmerman and West counted up how many interruptions/overlaps there were per conversation, but didn't take into account how much the participants actually spoke. Consider how this could give misleading results. For example, if a male spoke 15 times in a conversation and 3 of these times were interruptions/overlaps (20% of the time), this would give a very different picture from if the male spoke only 3 times in the conversation and interrupted/overlapped every one of those 3 times (100% of the time).

Zimmerman and West are making the assumption that if you interrupt/overlap, it's because you want to dominate the conversation. Are there other reasons why interruptions/overlaps happen? Should Zimmerman and West have differentiated more significantly between interruptions and overlaps?

This study is quite old (1975) - has the way we use language changed? Maybe gender differences are not so clear-cut now? As an extension task, students could compare Zimmerman and West's study to **Geoffrey Beattie's** study of interruptions and overlaps in the conversations of teachers and students at the University of Sheffield in 1981.

Q5. Some points of similarity/difference:

Both studies make clear connections between interruption/overlap and gender of speaker.

Zimmerman and West's study, although small-scale, seems to take a more academic approach to gathering data than Tannen does.

Zimmerman and West assume that an interruption or overlap is an attempt to dominate the conversation, whereas Tannen differentiates between different types of overlaps and notes that overlapping can be a sign of support for another speaker.

Q6. As with Q3, students should try to think critically and analytically about the usefulness of Tannen's research to their findings, rather than just making a simple link. Again, consideration of the impact of contextual factors is key to developing their analysis. Gender cannot be separated from all the other contextual factors affecting the ways we communicate.

Q7. Suggestions for class discussion:

Tannen's approach is not really a 'theory'; it's not very scientific. It's largely based on anecdotal evidence.

Tannen's approach can encourage simple generalisations: 'men do this, women do that.' In reality, men and women come in many varieties! Men are capable of being supportive and encouraging in conversations, just as women are capable of seeking to dominate.

It permits negative stereotypes of both men and women. These stereotypes are presented as 'natural' and therefore can be damaging because they are justifying gender inequality, as well as perpetuating miscommunication.

Deborah Cameron has challenged the idea that men and women are fundamentally different in the ways that they use language to communicate. As an extension task, students could compare Tannen's research to Cameron's *The Myth of Mars and Venus* (2007).