

EL DISCURSO PÚBLICO DE LAS MUJERES EN LOS LIBROS DE ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS

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RESUMEN

Tras una breve introducción sobre las diferencias entre el habla de hombres y mujeres en lengua inglesa, el objetivo de este estudio es presentar la distribución y función de las contribuciones de las mujeres al habla en ámbitos públicos en diez diálogos procedentes de libros de texto de inglés de secundaria. Se ofrecen ejemplos que demuestran que los hombres hablan más y consumen más turnos que las mujeres en estas conversaciones. A continuación se analiza el diálogo *Moondown* con mayor detalle en el que se ejemplifica cómo las mujeres hablan menos en contextos formales. El artículo concluye con sugerencias para equilibrar la distribución asimétrica entre el discurso femenino y masculino en los libros de inglés, recomendaciones que ayudarán a las estudiantes a participar más y mejor en contextos comunicativos formales reales.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Discurso público, habla de hombres y mujeres, libros para la enseñanza del inglés, distribución asimétrica del habla.

ABSTRACT

After some introductory remarks on women's and men's talk in English, this paper focuses on some aspects of the distribution and function of women's contributions to formal discourse in ten dialogues of English Language Teaching (ELT) texts at secondary school level. Evidence is provided that males talk for longer and make for frequent contributions than females in formal speech. A case study is presented as an example of how women tend to talk less in formal, institutional contexts. The paper ends with some suggestions of ways in

which the unequal distribution of public discourse between men and women in ELT textbooks might be reduced for women participants. These suggestions will help to empower female learners' public discourse in real contexts of talk.

KEY WORDS

Public discourse, women's and men's talk, ELT textbooks, unequal distribution of talk.

RÉSUMÉ

Après une brève introduction sur les différences entre le langage des hommes et des femmes en anglais, l'objectif de cette étude est de présenter la distribution et la fonction des contributions des femmes au discours public en prenant dix exemples provenant de manuels d'anglais destinés au secondaire. Nous donnons des exemples où nous montrons que les hommes parlent plus, et interviennent plus souvent dans la conversation que les femmes. Ensuite nous analysons dans le détail le dialogue *Moondown* où l'on remarque que les femmes parlent moins dans des contextes formels. L'article conclut avec des suggestions pour équilibrer la distribution asymétrique entre le discours masculin et féminin dans les manuels d'anglais, suggestions que permettront aux étudiantes de participer d'une façon plus longue et plus riche dans les contextes communicatifs formels de la vie quotidienne.

MOTS-CLÉ

Discours public, langage des hommes et des femmes, manuels pour l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise, distribution inégale du langage.

I/INTRODUCTION: WOMEN'S AND MEN'S TALK

There is now an extensive literature exploring the ways in which women's and men's speech differs in the English Language¹. In general,

1. For surveys and overviews, see Bodine (1975); Haas (1979); Kramer et al. (1978); McConnell-Ginet (1980); Thorne and Henley (1975); Thorne et al. (1983).

analyses of typical female ways of interacting have identified features which can be described as cooperative, facilitative and "person-oriented" (Tannen, 1991). By contrast, male talk has been characterized as competitive, argumentative and more verbally aggressive². Women use interactive devices which encourage others to contribute and participate -i.e. minimal responses, facilitative question tags (Holmes, 1986:1)- and signal that they are paying attention while men tend to compete for the floor, interrupt frequently, assert their views strongly and differ with others³.

There is some disagreement, however, about the relative amount of talk that women and men contribute to interaction. Some researchers have found that women talk more than men but others consider it is the opposite (Thorne et al, 1983:279-81). One explanation that can account for these apparently inconsistent results is bearing in mind the contexts where the interactions take place and the different purposes of the talk.

II/ A MULTIFUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON MIXED-SEX CONVERSATION ANALYSIS IN ELT TEXTBOOKS

Language is said to have many functions which are often simultaneous. A useful and widely acknowledged theoretical distinction is that between social, **interpersonal** talk on the one hand and **referential** or informative talk on the other (Halliday, 1980, 1985 ; Hymes, 1974). The ten dialogues imitating real speech out of a corpus of twenty-four ELT texts⁴ show that in contexts where the main function of the talk is *interpersonal or social women tend to contribute more* (texts nº 11, 12, 17, 19, 23). On the contrary, when the most important function of the talk is *referential and focused on information, men often talk more* (texts nº 2, 4, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20 and 23). These proclivities become even more

2. Bing and Bergvall criticize this binary model of difference stating that it overlooks similarities and overlapping categories of women's and men's language, ignoring as well individual differences within or across groups. It is necessary to move beyond binary thinking because "these binary models (deficit, difference and dominance) suggest dichotomies separated by clear boundaries....these boundaries can raise or maintain very social barriers for women and people of colour". (Bing and Bergvall, 1996:24).

3. See West (1979:91); Poynton (1989:70) and Coates (1986:117).

4. See appendix for corpus data. For further information about the complete corpus, see Molina (1997).

apparent in different contexts. Women tend to be more comfortable in private, informal contexts of talk (texts 6, 10) whereas men are generally more willing than women to contribute in more public contexts (text 4, 7). Generally speaking, women are most comfortable talking one-to-one or in small groups and they are more concerned with affective or social meaning than men. Men, on the other hand, are presented more at ease with referential or information-oriented talk in ELT dialogues. Clearly, these are broad generalizations and it is always possible to find exceptions but they are helpful background in trying to account for the differential contribution to talk by women and men in several ELT contexts. Apart from learning the morphosyntactic and lexical items, the female ELT student is also likely to adopt this stereotyped conversational style while facing a real life conversation.

In this paper, a sample of talk (text eighteen of corpus) that takes place in a formal context between a journalist, Cathy Edwards and her boss, Mr Eastwood will be analyzed from a language and gender perspective, examining both the social and referential function and the implications for the woman participant in particular. In the referential function, attention will be paid to two typical male talk strategies in exploratory talk and contrast them with Cathy's contributions. Finally, it will be revealed in the social function that there is an asymmetrical relationship between the male and female speaker in this particular interaction.

III- CASE STUDY: MOONDOWN⁵

"Now, Cathy, what's the problem? What's this letter that you want to talk to me about?"

"Here it is. You see...it's about Moondown power station. I think.."

"Just be quiet for a moment, Cathy. Give me a chance to read it, please".

"Sorry, Mr Eastwood".

"Mmm...very interesting. What do you want to do about it?"

"I'd like to write an article about it. I'd like to go to Moondown and ask a few questions".

5. This dialogue comes from Mode SB2, page 32 by Radley and Millerchip. See bibliography.

“Well, Cathy, you know very well we can’t do that. How do we know this letter is genuine?. It could be some madman trying to cause trouble. We can’t risk it”.

“Why not?”

“Can you imagine the reaction of the director of the power station? He’d sue us for every penny we’ve got”.

“I suppose you’re right”.

“Of course I’m right. I’ve been in this business a long time, Cathy. I can’t take risks like that”.

“Well, why can’t we publish the letter on the Readers’ Letters page?”

“Mmm....I suppose we could”.

“Oh, go on, Mr Eastwood. I’m sure the letter is genuine!”

“All right, Cathy. You can put it in the Reader’s Letters section on Friday. But if there’s any trouble, you’re responsible!”

“Thanks, Mr Eastwood. And can I go to Moondown and ask some questions?”

“Definitely, not, Cathy. We don’t want any trouble with Moondown”

“All right, Mr Eastwood. And thanks again”.

Although at first sight it seems a perfectly ordinary conversation taking place at a job setting, a careful study suggests that Mr Eastwood’s turns are longer than Cathy’s: he uses 148 words out of the 231 conversation words and Cathy the remaining 83.

Bearing in mind the fact that he speaks *more*, I shall deal now with the devices Mr Eastwood enacts to exercise control and constrain the contributions of the less powerful participant.

This conversation is a semi-formal exchange with a relatively high information content between the editor of the newspaper *Westfield Gazette* and the journalist Cathy Edwards. Both are discussing what to do with the letter Cathy has received about Moondown power station. This dialogue, whose primary function is undoubtedly referential, can be classified as “exploratory talk”

(Barnes, 1976:28). Exploratory talk is defined as talk that allows people to explore and develop their ideas through the joint negotiation of meaning. This type of talk is a cognitively valuable means of thinking through the implication of proposal on which decisions for future action can be based.

High quality exploratory talk is said to be an essentially collaborative enterprise. Nevertheless, Mr Eastwood uses certain talk strategies generally more typical of male interaction (Barnes and Todd, 1977:72) which result in less effective discussion. These talk strategies are basically two:

a) **rejecting and disagreeing with other participants contributions**

“Well⁶, Cathy you know very well we can't do that”(Mr Eastwood's fourth turn).

“Definitely⁷ not Cathy” (Mr Eastwood's last turn).

b) **Interrupting and belittling**

Cathy-....it's about Moondown power station. I think....”

Mr Eastwood- Just be quiet for a moment, Cathy. Give me a chance to read it”.

Mr Eastwood shows with this deep interruption⁸ a typical male behaviour which tends to break off women's contributions to talk⁹. This interruption plus the two minimal responses from Mr Eastwood (“ **Mmm** ...very interesting/ **Mmm**.... I suppose we could”) are considered by Zimmerman and West (emphasis mine):

an assertion of the right **to control the topic** reminiscent of adult-child conversations where in most instances the children has restricted rights to speak and be listened to. (Zimmerman and West, 1975:124).

SOCIAL FUNCTION

The interpersonal function reveals an *asymmetrical* relationship between the two participants. Several linguistic structures back up this assumption. In the first place, Cathy behaves like a “compliant actor”

6. Schiffrin (1987:102-3) indicates how the discourse marker *well* is used to initiate turns which show disagreement with former coherence choices: “Well is a response marker which anchors its user in an interaction when an upcoming contribution is not fully consonant with prior coherence options”.

7. “**Definitely** is a content disjunct which signals the speaker's comment on the content of what s/he is saying expressing conviction as a direct claim” (Quirk et al. 1985:620).

8. “Deep interruptions are defined as instances of simultaneous speech that involve deep intrusions into the internal structure of speaker's utterances. By **deep** I mean more than two syllables away from the terminal boundaries of a possibly complete utterance (a word, a phrase, clause or sentence depending on its context)”. (West, 1979:82).

9. “There is a marked asymmetry between males and females with respect to interruption”. (West, 1979:17).

(Fairclough, 1989:126) when Mr Eastwood asks her explicitly to be quiet in his second turn by using an imperative form. Some of his declarative sentences also have the illocutive force of commands ("Definitely not, Cathy. We don't want any trouble with Moondown"). Secondly, vocatives show that Mr Eastwood uses Cathy's first name only whereas she makes use of title plus last name four times (turns 2, 7, 8, 9). Both commands and vocatives correlate with the pragmatic presupposition that he is socially superior to Cathy.

In addition to this, *Cathy asks most of the questions* which are replied by the participant who has got the power to answer them, the editor of the newspaper. Besides, he displays his authority over Cathy using the modal verb **can**¹⁰ to grant his permission: "All right, Cathy you **can** put it in the Reader's Letters section". Other utterances with **can** ("I **can't** risk it/ I **can't** take risks like that") indicate how Mr Eastwood makes very assertive statements which offer a *transparent* version of reality, which do not require any further interpretation from the hearer. Therefore, Cathy is in a very difficult position indeed to reject them overtly.

Last but not least, two other facts show that Cathy behaves like a close subordinate. First, she uses *polite* forms like "sorry" (turn 2), "thanks" (turns 8 and 9) and second, she uses the *softening connective* (Crystal and Davy, 1975: 96) **you see** (" Here it is. **You see**...it's about Moondown power station) to make sure her boss will pay attention.

IV/ CONCLUSION AND THREE POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

The former case study analysis has attempted to demonstrate how some sexist ideological views of the role of women in our society - women less assertive and talkative in public speech, more polite and with a lower social status than men- still shape conversations "for learning English" where women do not usually get their fair share of the talking time in public or formal contexts, despite the several guidelines issued by British and American ELt publishers whose aim is to avoid a biased representation of women. This means the females have less access to potentially status-enhancing talk. It also means the resulting

10. Fairclough (1989:126-7) calls this type of modality *relational modality*. It is when one participant shows his/her authority with other participants.

The study of modality is interesting from an ideological point of view as an utterance can indicate explicitly or not who has got the authority and the power relations among the interactants. See Fowler (1991); Hodge and Kress (1993).

talk does not benefit from their input as much as it could. How might one change this?

I conclude merely sketching just three practical suggestions for increasing women participants' share of talking time in formal contexts in ELT textbooks:

- 1) ELT authors and publishers can show women willing to contribute to public speaking and who are not afraid of indicating clearly they want to do so.
- 2) Show confident women who are able to challenge interruptions. In other words, women who do not give up the floor until they have finished what they want to say.
- 3) A 50/50 male/female split can be aimed at in cross-sex dialogues with referential function.

APPENDIX: CORPUS DATA

TEXT	TITLE	ELT TEXTBOOK
2	Dialogue at the students' common room	New Generations 2
4	Jackie's surprise	Hotline Elementary
7	She doesn't like interviews	Grapevine 1
12	You can say that again	Cambridge Eng. Course 1
13	Trouble at the hotel	Opening Strategies
17	Jealousy	Mode 1
18	Moondown	Mode 2
19	The Bighead 2	Mode 3
20	Could you ring Japan?	English for the 90's 1
23	Janet's story	On the Line 3

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