

Sudanese Women's Usage of Interruptions

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Abstract

This paper investigates the way Sudanese women interact in friendly talk in relation to Turn-Taking in conversation. It examines women's use of interruptions in interactions. The main assumption the researcher has in mind is that Sudanese women's linguistic behavior, considering interruption, has a role to play in creating co-operation and intimate social relationships among them. The analysis is based on recordings of naturally occurring talk among women friends in Khartoum, the capital state of Sudan. Recording was used in data collection as it is the most reliable method in such kinds of studies. The recording covered forty-one women from different age groups and educational levels. The subjects were divided into three groups (named as Maya, Malak, Homy) according to their ages. The total period of the recorded data was twenty-three hours and thirty minutes. One hour transcribed talk from each group was used in the process of data analysis (three hours in total). The selection of the samples was based on the occurrence of the linguistic devices to be examined. The data have been transcribed, transliterated, and translated (line by line) into English. The Conversation Analysis approach was adopted in analyzing the data. Results show that the subjects tended to break the rules of turn-taking by using interruptions. Results also suggest that the women in the sample adopted this linguistic form to co-operate in completing communicative tasks during natural interactions.

Keywords: Interruptions; Collaborative talk; Co-operation; Intimate social relationships

Introduction

Since the early 1970s, researchers have considered the belief that male and female speakers differ in their communication behaviors leading to the existence of different speech communities [1]. Language has been viewed as reflecting men's power and social advantage and women's lack of power and social recognition [2]. Research on gender differences has shown that power is evident in language use. In the study of speech style, for instance, men were found to employ interruption in mixed-sex speech as a means of controlling the floor in conversation depending on their assumed power and dominance. This makes men's voice gets heard and their language becomes powerful. Weather all [1] claims that the early feminist language researchers believe that patterns of language and communication reflect gender differences in social power and the different cultural values related to men and women. However, little has been dealt with all-female speech [3].

In comparison, when the floor is all-female talk, there is no power to be found controlling the speech, but rather, all women speak collaboratively in a friendly atmosphere [4]. Coates [5] argues that in the past, women's co-operative strategy in speech was viewed negatively. It was seen as unassertive and weak [2]. However, such style is now valued positively as Coates [4] suggests. By adopting co-operative strategy in conversation, women maintain good social relations in the sense that women's socialization is constituted through co-operative interactions.

In the Sudan, women tend to be intimate, supportive, and co-operative. This nature is reflected, more or less, in the language they use. Sudanese women use many euphemisms in order to show their interest in the topic under discussion, and confirm each other's' opinions, even if they do not see eye to eye in some views. In other words, women employ some linguistic functions to create intimacy and socialization. Most of the studies on language and gender have been conducted in the West among middle-class heterosexual women and men. The main focus of these studies was to examine conversational behavior in mixed-sex talk. For instance, Zimmerman and West [6], and Tannen [7] have found that men used interruptions to dominate conversations

as a means of power control. Swann's [8] study of mixed-sex classroom's discourse shows how the boys took more turns at talk than the girls did. Similarly, in studies of family conversations, Erickson's [9] and Greif's [10] findings have demonstrated male domination in talk. Moreover, Beattie [11] has empirically proved, when analyzing Margaret Thatcher's interview, that women get interrupted by men even when they are in political leading positions.

Having demonstrated different research on turn-taking in conversation, the need for similar studies in non-Western setting is urgent in particular in all-female interaction since it is rarely found in the literature. For example, Coates [4,5,12], in examining women's conversations, finds that women friends talk collaboratively and their speech can be described as co-operative. So, investigating this tendency, in relation to interruption, is the prime objective of this paper.

Methodology

Sociolinguistic research has focused on quantification differences in women's and men's speech behaviors such as that of interruption [6,13,14]. In the present study, however, we analyze Sudanese women's conversation adopting descriptive and qualitative research methods. Recording was used in data collection as it is the most reliable method in such kinds of studies. Researcher's observation was also taken into account in the process of the analysis. The recordings covered the period between March 2010 and January 2011. The recordings took place in different settings: in a mourning house, a university teaching staff room, a university campus, friends' houses. The participants

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were forty-one women from different age groups and educational levels. Conversations had been recorded surreptitiously in order to get natural data. For ethical reason, after recordings were completed, all participants were informed that a recording had been made for research purposes, and asked whether they allow us to use the recording in the study. All participants agreed that the data be used for research agenda.

Pseudonym was used to identify the participants (using the initial letters of the informants' names). The total period of the recorded data was twenty-three hours. One hour transcribed talk was used in the process of data analysis. The selection of the samples was based on the occurrence of the linguistic device to be examined. Following Jefferson's [15] transcription system, the data have been transcribed, transliterated, and translated into English. The Conversation Analysis approach [16,17] was adopted in analyzing the data since it gives more detailed analysis, considering the immediate communicative situation.

Data Analysis

Liddicoat [17] argues that interruption is a miss-cue in the turn-taking system, when a next speaker interrupts the previous speaker's turn. However, when women engage in private conversation, they adopt interruptions as a strategy to support each other's talk, attempting to enhance good social relations. In this sense, interruptions can be regarded as a sign of high involvement in conversations [7]. We will discuss this phenomenon in relation to the Sudanese women's context by demonstrating instances of interruptions that were found in our data and the functions they served.

Eliciting talk

The data at our disposal suggest that interruption to elicit talk is common in Sudanese women's conversations. It is a strategy women employ to elicit some information that the interactants need. The following extract from the group under investigation illustrates this use of interruption.

[Two young women talked about a facial cream]

1-N: ihna ga·di:n naji:b ā:(.)nista·mal EM(.)EM lo:s<han

1-N: we bring(.)we use um EM(.)EM lotion

2-R: < ā:y EM lo:shan

2-R: yeah EM lotion

3-N: awwal hāja bi(.)allakhdar da(.)...[.....

3-N: first(we use) with(.)the green one(.).

4-R: [allakhdar zātu(.).ana// ↓

4-R: the green one, itself(.).i

5-R://mājibtu fillijāza(.)<·amaltu yo:mein bas(.)//

5-R: brought it in the holiday(.).i used it for only two days(.)

6-N: <u:

6-N: yeah

7-R://[washshi da biqa lo:nu la'(.).washshi ↑ da biqa aḥmar aḥmar//

7-R: my face's colour became, no(.).my face became red, red

8-N: [fataḥ leuk washshik?

8-N: did it enlighten your face?

9-R://aḥmar(.).ṭawwāli waqqaftu(.).amal ley ḥasāsiyya.....

9-R: red(.).i stopped it immediately(.).it caused me allergy.....

We can discuss this extract under the notion of Community of Practice (henceforth CofP, participants have mutual engagement of particular practices within their community [18], in that both N and R share the same practice of using facial treatments since they are young, caring about beauty. Then, the resulted interruptions were due to their shared experience with this product rather than for domination. So, at the moment N (3) mentioned "green lotion" R (4) entered her Turn-Constructional Unit (TCU; a turn at talk which is made up of units of language; word, phrase, sentence [19]; to show her experience with the same type of the product. R (4)↓slowed down the pace at "zātu" (itself), which was central to her turn. Then, slowing down the pace was employed to emphasize that R used the same kind of cream.

It is obvious that elicitation of talk occurred when N (8) interrupted R enquiring about the effect of the cream. R's (7) utterance "washshi da biqa lo:nu" (my face's colour became) occurred simultaneously with N's (8) question "fataḥ leuk washshik?" (did it enlighten your face?). With her question, N attempted to elicit more explanation from R since she was eager to know the effect of the cream on the face. Because R was speaking and listening at the same time, she abruptly cut herself off to answer N, after N finished her enquiry, saying "la'" (no) in a relatively faster pace so as to keep her turn. Then, R completed her speech, explaining the product's negative effect on her face by stressing "aḥmar" (red), and repeating it twice. By so doing, N succeeded at eliciting the information she needed from R about the cream.

Gaining solo speakership

Interruption is not always a miss-cue in the turn-taking system, but it can be placed inappropriately in a speaker's turn where a change does not occur at the possible completions [17]. In conversation, speakers can continue to speak beyond a possible completion of the same TCU. Ford et al. [20] argue that talk which continues beyond the first TRP (a place where speaker's change occurs) may be designed as a further bit of talk of the same TCU. This is what sometimes makes another participant enters, unintentionally, into a prior speaker's turn which may create instances of solo speakership. We will demonstrate this kind of interruptions in the following extract.

[Talk about moving to new houses]

1-A: dakhkhalna el·afash u qa·adna<(.).//

1-A: we put the furniture and settled(.).

2-M: <u:

2-M: yeah

3-A://....[. (stops)

3-A: (stops)

4-E: [lākin kān māfi shabābi:k(.).māfi ayi shi mush?

4-E: but there weren't windows(.).nothing at all, isn't it?

5-A: la di(.).deil fi(.).lākin(.).beighādi deilāk kullin(.).mā fi:n qizāz

5-A: no(.).these windows were there(.).but(.).those(.).hadn't glass

6-M: lākin[.....

6-M: but.....

7-A: [u ·ammi da jji elbarid shadi:d(.).iji eṣṣabāḥ//

7-A: and my uncle used to come in cold(.)in the morning,

8-A://badri(.)[iji iqu:l annās deil aẓin itjammadu(.)ha ha

8-A: early(.)saying these people may got frozen ha ha

9-E: [lākin elmaṭar ṣa·ab(.)//

9-E: but rain is hard(.)

10-E://māfi shabābi:k?(.)wallāy elmaṭar ṣa·ab khalās

10-E: without windows?(.)rain is really very hard

As A talked about the situation at the time she moved to her new house, E (9) interrupted her at a point where her speech was possibly complete. At this point, E became a solo speaker as she designed her talk in a monologue mode. That is, she started her turn (9) saying “lākin elmaṭar ṣa·ab” (but rain is hard), stressing in a low voice “ṣa·ab” (hard) in a painful tone. This indicated that she was suffering from being unsecured from rain when she moved to the new house which had no windows at the time. Then after a pause she (10) made her next utterance “māfi shabābi:k?” (without windows?) in a question form. At this point, she appeared as both a solo listener and a solo speaker where she asked and answered herself (10) saying “wallāy elmaṭar ṣa·ab khalās” (rain is really very hard). By asking and answering herself, E (10) employed Multi-turn TCU construction. That is, her speech was distributed over more than one turn at a talk, adopting compound TCU with two-part formats; when.....then construction as follows:

Māfi shabābi:k? wallāy elmaṭar ṣa·ab khalās

when there are no windows then rain is really very hard

Topic shifting

Topic shift can be a source of interruptions in women's conversations. Coates [4] argues that women's talk can be developed randomly from topic to topic. When women friends engage in gossip, they may adopt interruptions to speak about topics emerging within their talk. The following extract demonstrates this phenomenon.

[Conversation about gold mining]

1-R: yā bit qa·d etla·u(.).qa·d etla·u bi: dahab kimmiyāt

1-R: you see, they get(.)they get (the miners) a lot of gold

2-S: lākin fiya fiya fiya ḥayātum(.)yatmu:ti yā tamshi

2-S: but it costs, it costs, it costs (mining) their lives(.)death or life

3-R: ḥassi[rāf:i:n qaḍḍiya fi: wāḥid(stops)

3-R: now there is an accusation case of somebody(stops)

4-S: [fiya ḥayātik yā kida yā kida(.)yā[mutti yā(stops)

4-S: it costs your life, either this or that(.)either death or(stops)

5-R: [rāf:i:n fi//

5-R: an accusation

6-R:// elqaḍḍiya↓(.).wāḥid bā·lei[m(.)hināy(stops)

6-R: of(.)someone who sold them(.)like(stops)

7-S: [leih?{....

7-S: for what? (this risk)....

8-N: [yākhi//

8-N: you see

9-N: //aṣḥāb nās D deil ṭala·u leim bei dahab khurāfi(.)kimmiya khurāfiya(-)//

9-N: D's friends got a lot of gold(.)a huge amount(-)

10-N: //jo rāj:i:n sālm:i:n(.)[....

10-N: they got back safe(.)....

11-R: [hujjirām bei tis·i:n bei tis·i:n milyo:n

11-R: the gram(of gold) is ninety million

12-S: [qari:b el....

12-S: it's about...

[Continue on discussing gold price]

As R talked about gold mining, S (2) self-selected as next speaker describing mining as being dangerous. She started with the contrasting conjunction “lākin” (but), then she repeated “fiya” (it causes) twice, searching for the right word “ḥayātum” (their lives). Then, R (3) started to talk about an accusation case, where S (4) interrupted her. She stressed “ḥayātik” (your life) in an attempt to emphasize her opinion. Then, R (5) cut S off telling an incomplete story about someone who had been accused of a gold mining case. R (6) slowed down the pace at “elqaḍḍiya” (the accusation) to grab the attention. S (7), in turn, interrupted R talking about the mining risk as R dropped out, leaving the story incomplete. N (8) entered S's turn to shift to a new story about some people who had got a lot of gold from mining and came back safe. N's (10) utterance “jo rāj:i:n sālm:i:n” (they got back safe) was a result of S's (2,4) previous discussion about the risk of mining which indicated that there was no risk in mining. As N continued, R (11) interrupted her, shifting the topic to the dramatic increase of gold price. This shift to gold price occurred as a reaction to N's (8,9) prior story about the people who got a large amount of gold.

Telling a similar story

Women friends mirror each other in their conversations. Mirroring in women's discourse means one participant tells a story while another responds with a similar story from her own experience [4]. The story teller has the right to the floor, but since women friends talk collaboratively, they may interrupt the narrator in order to mirror her with a similar story. The following extract gives an example for such a phenomenon.

[Conversation of mirroring stories about magic]

1-B: qāl leim bittakum di ḥayya(.)lākin mabtazhar(.)illa ezzo:l//

1-B: he(the sheikh) said to them: your daughter is still alive(.)but

2-B://al·mal leya el·amal da eymu:t

2-B: she won't appear(.)unless the one who did her this magic dies

3-F: wiḥyāt ismalla yahnāya fi[kamān(stops)

3-F: i swear to God, there is also(stops)

4-M: [imu:t?

4-M: dies?

5-B: imu:t(.)azzo:l al·amal leya(.)qu:l leik kān mātāt//

5-B: dies(.)the one who did her the magic works(.)if she dies

6-B://[hi.....ew ebtaji//
 6-B: she.....and will come back (home)
 7-F: [wallāy qu:l leuk fi wāḥḍa yā M(stops)
 7-F: really, it's said there's a woman, M(stops)
 8-B://(.)[u kân mātat ba'ad miyyat sana elmara di//
 8-B: (.)and if she will die after a hundred year, this woman
 9-F: [M, qu:l leuk fi wāḥḍa(stops)
 9-F: M, it's said there's a woman(stops)
 10-B: //ḥataji[(.)lākin kida mabtalquwa
 10-B: would come(.)otherwise, you will not find her
 11-F: [yā M(stops)
 11-F: hey, M(stops)
 12-F: āyn<i
 12-F: look
 13-M: < ṣubḥān ellāh!↓
 13-M: exclamation expression
 14-B: saba·a ew ṣishri:n sana ayi[shi.....(stops)
 14-B: twenty-seven year, anything.....(stops)
 15-F: [mara(.) wallāy elbit qat leuk.....↑
 15-F: a woman(.)really, the girl said.....

This extract shows a case of women friends trying to tell two different stories. Each story was unknown by the other participant. B dominated the conversation since she initiated the story-telling. M listened to her and ignored F as F continued on her trial to hold the floor using interruptions. Moreover, M encouraged B to continue; at the beginning she (4) supported B by asking “imu:t?” (dies?). Later, after B (10) completed her turn, M (13) commented on B's story using the exclamation expression “ṣubḥān ellāh” which gave B (14) a chance for another turn. F, on the other hand, employed interruption strategy four times (7,9,11,15) to take the floor where she succeeded at the fourth (15) attempt. In addition, F (15) persisted to tell her story by employing a speeding up device so as to lead B to stop.

It seems that these women's tolerance of four trials of interruptions was due to the socio-cultural belief. That is, in this society women break the rules of turn-taking as a strategy that show co-operation and solidarity among them. Then, societies determine the amount of interruptions that is acceptable. For example, Ulijin and Li [21] have examined interruptions in intercultural multimember party business negotiations between Chinese and Dutch. The researchers note that the Chinese attempted to interrupt as a convention of their language and culture. Deng [22] confirms this, saying that Chinese speakers display relatively high rates of interruptions in conversations in comparison to speakers in other cultures.

Commenting

Comments on the speaker's talk while speaking occur frequently in Sudanese women's discourse in a way that does not threaten a speaker's turn. Interrupting comments in Sudanese women's conversations serve as a means of expressing solidarity and support. This will be proved by analyzing the next extract.

[Three women friends' talk about R's (a friend) wedding]
 1-N: sh[ufti el·aru:s kānat(stops)
 1-N: you see the pride was(stops)
 2-E: [wal[lāy R ṭala·at//
 2-E: really R looked
 3-J: [libsat ḥilu
 3-J: she dressed nicely
 4-E://[ḥilwa yākhi
 4-E: beautiful
 5-N: [libsat ḥilu shadi:d(.) mā kida wallāy
 5-N: she dressed very nicely(.) it's not as that (beautiful)

This extract shows a case where one participant reacted to two other participants' comments in one turn. E (2) entered N's turn commenting that R looked nice in her wedding day. J (3) interrupted E immediately when she started to speak saying “libsat ḥilu” (she dressed nicely). After J finished her turn and before E's utterance reached its possible completion, N (5) interrupted E (4) at “ḥilwa yākhi” (beautiful) to acknowledge J's comment saying “libsat ḥilu shadi:d” (she dressed very nicely). At the point where E (4) completed her turn, N (5) disacknowledged her in the same turn uttering “mā kida wallāy” (it's not as that).

Here N's (5) turn is seen as a Multi-TCU turn in that she continued speaking after the first pause to produce a new TCU. So, N's contribution in this conversation contained two TCUs in one turn; “libsat ḥilu shadi:d” (she dressed very nicely) and “mā kida wallāy” (it's not as that). Thus, the first TCU of her turn was a response to J's (3) interrupting comment “libsat ḥilu yākhi” (she dressed nicely), while the other TCU was a response to E's (2,4) interrupting comment “wallāy R ṭala·at ḥilwa” (really, R looked beautiful). The extract shows how N addressed two recipients in one turn at talk. This is depicted in N (5) acknowledging J's (3) comment and disacknowledging E's (2,4) comment in a Multi-TCU turn. In addition, it also shows the way N listened and spoke simultaneously. That is, N's (5) response to J's (3) comment coincided with E's (4) utterance “ḥilwa yākhi” (beautiful) which N reacted to later in the same turn indicating that she heard it while she was speaking. This linguistic behavior is highly characteristic of Sudanese women as having the ability to listen and speak at the same time.

Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn is that Sudanese women tend to break the rules of turn-taking in conversations by employing interruptions. Breaking these rules is a strategy adopted to maximize solidarity, and minimize the social distance between the participants [4]. When interruption occurs, it signals a high involvement in interaction in the part of the women. Because Sudanese women are familiar with the way their talk is organized, they do not perceive interruption as a sort of communication break-down. Rather, it is a sign of active participation in conversation. This finding goes in line with a number of studies in the literature [4,5,7,12,23].

We have demonstrated that the use of interruptions in Sudanese women's talk plays a role in enhancing intimate social relationships. Sudanese women do not consider the use of this linguistic function as deviation and impoliteness. They employ this function as a strategy

that helps in developing a friendly atmosphere. Research in different parts of the world has come to similar results [21,24-26]. Generally, the literature demonstrates that women use interruptions mainly to take roles in conversation [4,5,12]. However, our data reveals that there were some instances where interruptions occurred to elicit some information that the participants seek. The study has also shown that Sudanese women adopt speech style helps them develop co-operation in conversation. In their friendly talk, the women under study created a co-operative floor by participating actively in interactions, adopting interruptions. This might stem from the fact that Sudanese women tend to be co-operative. This tendency is reflected in their sociolinguistic behavior. That is to say, Sudanese women use some linguistic functions in ways that show how they work co-operatively in private interactions which leads to good social relationships.

Transcription Conventions

The transcription conventions used for the conversational data are as follows:

1- = an equal's sign at the end of one speaker's utterance and at the start of the next speaker's talk indicates the absence of a discernible gap. It is said to be a latched utterance.

2- //, //, // double slashes sign indicates one's utterance is incomplete and will continue in the next line.

3- [a square bracket indicates the start of interruption between utterances.

4- < an angled bracket indicates the start of overlap between utterances.

5- { an angled square bracket indicates the start of an utterance simultaneously with another utterance.

6- (.) a micro pause.

7- (-) a longer pause.

8- ↑ an upper arrow indicates faster pace of an utterance than the previous one.

9- ↓ a down arrow indicates slower pace of talk than the previous one.

10- underlined utterance indicates stressed talk.

11- CAPITALIZED utterance indicates loudness.

12- italicized utterance indicates quietness.

13- : a colon sign indicates prolonging utterance

14- dots indicates missing utterances

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