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BACKCHANNEL SUPPORT AND INTERRUPTION IN THE SPEECH OF MALES AND FEMALES

Communication is one of the most important aspects of everyday life. One of its most characteristic features is its diversity as "it rangers from the mass media and popular culture, through language to individual and social behavior" (Fiske 1990:13). The way we talk depends on a number of factors, such as where a conversation takes place, when, why, how and with whom. Thus, "One person's language use will vary widely according to the needs of the social context" (Jule 2008:27). One has to learn how to communicate successfully through many situational interactions since both communicative competence and success consist in making appropriate choices in contextual, situational and social settings.

It is usually stressed that whereas men's communication styles are associated with competition and dominance, women's conversation strategies are based on cooperation and politeness (Trask 1999:183). In the following paper we intend to verify the linguistic data obtained so far and focus on the most principal aspects of communication, which are: *turn taking, backchannels* and *interruptions*. The purpose of the analysis is to investigate characteristics of conversation strategies in the speech of both male and female speakers talking to each other and exchanging their views on a particular topic during relatively spontaneous male-female interactions, that is mixed-gender interviews. We will seek to analyze the occurrence of backchannels and interruptions the use of which could be indicative of either support, agreement, involvement or dominance, competition and even hostility on the part of the speakers. The participants consist of randomly selected students at the age of 20-25 who study English at the English Department.

1. Introduction

It is undeniable that the speech which we produce daily usually occurs spontaneously and naturally. In a typical everyday situation, when we communicate or interact with each other, we concentrate on the meaning or content and wish to exchange some information within as little time as possible. In addition, the

relationship between the interlocutors is also significant since it will probably focus on the incidence of overlaps and interruptions which occur in spontaneous communication. Apart from that, there are other factors which contribute to the incidence of interruptions, such as our personality, the interlocutors themselves, the circumstances in which a particular conversation takes place, the topic which is discussed, the mood, the attitude towards the topic, other interlocutors and also cultural differences. In the following article we will investigate the occurrence of backchannels and the incidence of interruptions by interviewing students from the English Philology Department and asking them to make a natural conversation with each other.

2. Turns, backchannels, overlaps and interruptions

Before making an analysis, it is advisable to concentrate on the distinction between *turns, backchannels, interruptions and overlaps*. Let us briefly define each terms and make a comparison in order to avoid unnecessary confusion.

- *turn* – might be defined as having control of the right to speak. If control is not arranged beforehand, there may be as many attempts as speakers trying to get control, which is referred to as turn-taking (Yule 1996: 72).
- *back-channel speech / backchannels / minimal responses* – constitute short responses, supportive comments which do not involve an attempt to take the floor, for instance *hhmmm, uh-hhuh, yeah, yes, I see, right*. They are not regarded as interruptions; in fact they encourage speakers to continue. "These type of signals ('uh-uh', 'yeah', 'mmm') provide feedback to the current speaker that the message is being received. They normally indicate that the listener is following, and not objecting to, what the speaker is saying" (Yule 1996: 75-76). At other times backchannels serve to indicate involvement or just the fact that we are listening to someone although in fact we might be already bored with what they are saying but keep confirming that we are interested and involved. It is also necessary to mention that if one does not wish to lose the floor, they might use various kinds of fillers, such as *umm, uh* etc the purpose of which is to fill the pauses which unexpectedly occur and at the same time maintain the right to talk. According to Yule (1996: 75), the best way not to lose the floor is to evade open pauses at the end of a syntactic unit and if they do occur – fill them inside instead.

We should make a distinction between *interruption* and *overlap*:
- *overlap*:
  - occurs in spoken conversation, in communicative situations
  - is an unintentional error, occurs if we misjudge the speaker's completion point
  - could consist in making a supportive sound

- • is neutral and means simultaneous talk without any negative connotation or desire to prevent someone from speaking (Tannen 1983). When two speakers speak at the same time, it does not have to mean that they strive to prevent each other from talking, "to get the floor" or "get a word in edgewise". In other words, simultaneous talk can equally be associated with supportive interaction and not necessarily dominance and competition. Thus, it is undeniable that "…there are other kinds of overlap and they are interpreted differently. For many (often younger) speakers, overlapped talk appears to function like an expression of solidarity or closeness in expressing similar opinions or values" (Yule 1996: 74).

Nevertheless, it is customary to make a distinction between the two notions, that is *interruption* and *overlap*. Hence,
– *interruption:*
  - • is an intentional action and a violation of another speaker's floor; it constitutes an act of preventing someone from speaking
  - • occurs in simultaneous speech, in natural speech
  - • it is a violation of a speaker's turn at talk (at the same time a violation of a social rule)
  - • it is also a way of exercising power, dominance and control the conversation or interaction
  - • usually is used for competing for the floor or getting the floor
  - • according to Beattie (1981), the interruption takes place when a particular speaker loses the floor and as a result leaves his / her current utterance incomplete
  - • according to James and Clarke (1993), the interruption can be observed when one person starts to talk while another person is already talking
  - • occurs when one speaker disrupts the turn of another with a new utterance; (Smith-Lovin, Brody 1989: 425)
  - • does not need to have negative connotations since it can be associated with both dominance and solidarity, disruption or participation, engagement or involvement in a conversation

Apart from the abovementioned features, it is significant to stress that interruption may have positive, negative and neutral connotations:
positive: interruption does not have to be associated with disruption, dominance, assertiveness or hostility. Interruption can also involve support, cooperation, collaboration and solidarity between or among participants (James and Clarke 1993)
negative: interruption constitutes a clear violation of turn-taking norms and is associated with dominance, competition and even hostility; it is also associated with lack of respect, hostility, rudeness and dominance (Tannen 1994)
neutral: sometimes interruptions are neither associated with disruption or violation nor with solidarity since they can also be neutral (James and Clarke

1993). For instance, it occurs when a speaker does not understand what another speaker is saying and needs to ask for clarification or in case of spontaneous situations which make the participants use immediate speech (anyway the interruptions which occur in such situations are neither positive nor negative and under no circumstances can we regard them as inappropriate).

In conclusion, there are a number of functions which can be performed by interrupting and they depend on particular circumstances. All in all, interruptions do not always have to be associated with the desire to demonstrate power, dominance, competition, selfishness or aggression. they can also indicate cooperation and solidarity on the part of the speakers.

3. Interruption

An *interruption* will occur in a situation in which there are at least two or more participants or interlocutors. It must be a kind of real *talk-exchange* or more specifically a real, natural *conversation* in a contextual setting.

According to Ulijn and Xiangling (1995), we distinguish two types of interruption: *marked interruption* and *unmarked interruption*. Whereas the former occurs at a clause boundary or in the middle of an utterance, is unexpected, abrupt, obtrusive, aggressive or competitive and solely serves to get the turn, to get a word in edgewise, the latter is based on normal, natural, even cooperative turn-switch.

The phenomenon of *interrupting,* which means preventing someone from speaking and is regarded as a violation of conversational rules, in the western cultures it is often perceived as assertive, dominant, impolite, even hostile, argumentative, even aggressive and undesirable (Ulijn and Xiangling 1995). According to social manners, it is polite to wait until the current speaker finishes talking and reaches *TRP [Transition Relevance Place]*. In other words, it is socially appropriate not to start talking when someone else is already having the floor. The clearest indication that a person has finished talking are the end of a structural unit, which might be a phrase or clause, and a pause (Yule 1996: 74). Additionally, apart from breaking social rules or norms, there are also other aspects which are associated with interruption. When someone is interrupting another person, we often make judgments about that person – and the judgments are usually negative for simple reasons: culturally and socially we are expected to let another person finish and then start talking and if someone does not observe the rule, it means that they are not well-mannered, are unable to behave suitably and seem "to stand out". Paradoxically, although we know that interrupting is wrong, impolite and socially inappropriate, we are sometimes unaware of the fact that we ourselves interrupt others while they are talking because we are so actively involved in a particular conversation.

On the other hand, interrupting might also be regarded as positive. One should not ignore a distinction between *power-oriented interruptions* and *rapport-*

oriented interruptions. While *power-oriented interruptions* are interpreted as rude, hostile, unfriendly and impolite, *rapport-oriented interruptions* can express open empathy, affection, agreement, solidarity and concern (Ulijn and Xiangling 1995).

It is important to stress that regarding the incidence of interruptions, one must not ignore a cultural aspect since some cultures are more interruptive than others. Stated simply, there are cultures in which silence is natural and acceptable, but there are also cultures in which interruption and competition prevail. According to Jaworski (1993), for instance Indians, Amish and Finns are highly tolerant of silence. It is necessary to stress that interruptions do not have to be negative – they also occur for good purposes. "It should not be surprising that conversations reflect both social and linguistic principles; they are, after all, both social and linguistic events, and as such they vary to some extent from culture to culture" (Akmajian 1997: 374). Nevertheless, everything is associated with a culture since there are cultures that regard silence as positive or at least normal, such as Japanese and Chinese people as opposed to other cultures in which for some people silence is unacceptable and even impolite as "English speakers who meet each other but have nothing in particular to say will begin talking about the weather, since silence is considered unacceptable; but Chinese-speakers in the same position may choose to remain silent without giving offence" (Trask 1999: 59).

Moreover, we should also mention the phenomenon of *adaptation*: when people talk, they adapt the way they talk to other participants or interlocutors in a particular speech event. The so called *speech accommodation* is common in a number of communicative situations:

> So called 'patient' cultures in East Asia, such as Korean and Chinese, seem to me less silent and more interruptive than one would expect. People from Latin cultures interrupt more than those from Anglo cultures, but members of an Anglo-Germanic culture such as Dutch appear to increase the number of interruptions on meeting someone from a Latin culture, such as Italian (Ulijn and Xiangling 1995).

It is also necessary to emphasize that adapting to the way other people talk does not necessarily concern different cultures. We often adjust our speech to the speech of our interlocutors – we modify it and make it similar to theirs and vice versa – they modify their speech to make it closer to ours,

> Any style of speaking will work just fine in some situations with those who share the style. The most common culprit is style differences. This is not to imply that misunderstandings or other tensions will never arise when styles are shared. (…) But all styles will at times fail with others who don't share or understand them, just as your language won't do you much good if you try to speak it to someone who doesn't know that language (Tannen 1994: 77).

Therefore, continues Tannen (1994: 159), "If more and more people understand the workings of conversational style, they will be able to adjust their own ways of talking and stand a better chance of understanding how others mean what they say." All in all, during a conversation, there are certain rules to be observed, for instance not talking or starting to talk when another person is already speaking. Hence, "there appear to be clear rules determining when and how the floor is handed over from one person to another; if there were not, a conversation would be merely a noisy jumble of several people trying to speak at once" (Trask 1999: 216). As a result, conversational interruptions contribute to certain violations by breaking social rules (LaFrance 1992). If these rules are violated and there are more people talking at the same time, the conversation might be chaotic, clumsy, confusing and even impossible to continue. Thus "when disruptive overlap does happen for any length of time, the result is usually embarrassing to other members of the conversation" (Akmajian 1997: 373).

At other times, interruption does not impede communication at all. For instance, it is often humorously said that since women usually speak and listen faster than men, they can talk at the same time and still make the whole conversation successful. There are also situations where interruptions are not considered to be negative – quite the opposite – they are regarded as positive due to the high involvement of the interlocutors. On the other hand, apart from overlaps when people are trying to speak simultaneously and apart from interruptions when people prevent others from talking in order to get the floor, long, uncomfortable and undesirable silences in conversations might also be regarded as a violation of certain social rules since we are expected to participate actively and show enthusiasm and involvement,

> Transitions with a long silence between turns or with substantial overlap (i.e. both speakers trying to speak at the same time) are felt to be awkward. When two people attempt to have a conversation and discover that there is no 'flow', or smooth rhythm to their transitions, much more is being communicated than is said. There is a sense of distance, an absence of familiarity or ease (Yule 1996: 72-73).

Hence, there are two extremes which might equally be regarded as negative. On the one hand, interruption is definitely considered to be socially inappropriate. On the other hand, the likelihood of conversation coming to frequent silences and standstills can also cause embarrassment.

4. Women and men talking

There are some particular language features which are typical of the speech of women and men. Men and women differ in the way they talk; thus stereotypes about men and women' conversational styles are ubiquitous.

First of all, there is the widespread conviction that most women possess better verbal skills as opposed to men (they are equipped with better verbal skills).

According to stereotypes, it is women who talk a lot more than men since "modern stereotypes are not much different from those expressed in the old proverbs. Women are believed to talk too much" (Tannen 1990: 111). It is also necessary to take Tannen's distinction between *high-involvement speakers* and *high-considerateness speakers* into consideration (Tannen 1994). Whereas the former show enthusiasm and enthusiastic support (and do not mind speaking simultaneously), the latter are primarily considerate of others.

Apparently, in public speaking, men tend to dominate (they talk a lot more in public conversations), whereas in private speaking, it is women who dominate and thus they participate more willingly in circumstances which are based on private conversations (Tannen 1990: 111). Undeniably, men and women use communication for different purposes: for a man, a conversation serves to get the information, for a woman, a conversation serves to interact and indicate involvement (Tannen's distinction between *report-talk* vs. *rapport talk*, pertaining to men's and women's speech styles respectively, Tannen 1994). Thus, Tannen (1990) continues, "To him, talk is for information. So when his wife interrupts his reading, it must be to inform him of something that he needs to know… But to her, talk is for interaction. Telling things is a way to show involvement, and listening is a way to show interest and caring (Tannen 1990: 113)

It is often emphasized that whereas women focus on cooperation and interaction, men pay attention to competition, power and dominance. Hence, women's objectives in social interactions are regarded as positive as opposed to men's which are undeniably negative because, stereotypically, they are associated with aggressiveness and hostility since "That is, a conversation among women is a collaborative enterprise, with all the women pulling together to construct a satisfactory discourse which is the product of all of them, while a conversation among men is rather a sequence of individual efforts" (Trask 1999: 183). It is also a well-known fact that it is women who tend to use minimal responses, such as *Yeah, hhmm, eee* more often, with a view to indicating uncertainty, indecisiveness, hesitation, involvement in a conversation, co-operation and support, depending on a context (Fishman 1980a; Coates 1989; 1991). All in all, they are more co-operative and supportive than men in the way they talk.

According to Lakoff (1975), women tend to be more polite, indecisive, insecure, subordinated and hesitant than men. Therefore they:
- Hedge: phrases such as *sort of, kind of, I guess, probably, perhaps, it seems like*.
- Use polite forms: *Would you mind…, Would you please…, I'd appreciate it if…, …if you don't mind.*
- Use tag questions: *You're going home, aren't you?*
- Use correct grammar more frequently
- Use hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation

- Use correct or more standard pronunciation more frequently: for instance using the velar consonant /ŋ/ instead of its alveolar counterpart /n/ in words like *doing, crying, washing* etc. In other words, a high prestige pronunciation is typical of women's speech whereas low prestige forms pertain to men's speech style, which was presented in various experiments conducted by a number of sociolinguists, such as Trudgill, Fischer, Labov (Wardhaugh 1998: 159)
- Use "wh-" imperatives: such as *Why don't you do the shopping for us?, Why don't you help me with that?*
- Apologize more: for instance, *I'm sorry, but…, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but…, Sorry to bother you, but …*
- Avoid coarse or bad language (invectives, curses, swearwords)
- Use indirect commands and requests, as in *It's quite hot in here*
- Are not very good at telling jokes
- Use backchannel support or use positive minimal responses
- Do not interrupt as often as men do

The above features which pertain to women's speech may, however, contribute to making judgments about the women as to their alleged insecurity, lack of assertiveness, alleged subordination, lack of confidence, powerlessness, passiveness etc.

> Sexist language also includes the depiction of women in the position of passive object rather than active subject, such as on the basis of their appearance ('a blonde') or domestic roles ('a mother of two') when similar depictions in similar contexts would not be made of men. These representations of women trivialize their lives and place an extra level of personal judgment on them (Jule, 2008: 14).

Nevertheless, we should remember that making such evaluations is unjustified and erroneous at times. Even though the features confirm the idea of women's verbosity and eloquence, they do not impede success at communication since for instance "… there is nothing inherently incomprehensible about indirect communication. In this instance, as with all the elements of conversational style, flexibility is the key to success-along with mutual respect" (Tannen 1994: 106).

According to Zimmerman and West (1975), interrupting does not frequently occur in same-sex conversations (male-male or female-female interactions). Moreover, they are more observable in the speech of men than in the speech of women (Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989), "Women interrupt all others less and allow others to interrupt them. Men interrupt others more and allow fewer interruptions, especially from women" (http://www.learnbodylanguage.org/flirting_talk.html).

According to Zimmerman and West, 1975, men interrupt women more often than women interrupt men. Similarly, Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989 claim that men disrupt women much more than women interrupt men (it is men who interrupt and overlap women's speech and not vice versa (Rosenblum 1986: 160). Hence,

"In fact, it is quite clear that, in mixed conversations, men interrupt women far more than the reverse" (Trask 1999: 183). However, it should be stressed that supportive interactions are also typical of the speech of men amongst males, but the proportion of supportive interactions declines if there are more women in the group, which was shown by Beattie (1981).

Similarly, according to Smith-Lovin and Brody (1989), men interrupt women more often than men whereas women tend to interrupt both men and women equally frequently. On the other hand, other studies demonstrate that it is women who interrupt other interlocutors more frequently than men (Kennedy and Camden 1983). In other words, it is not always true that men interrupt women more (James and Clarke, 1993) since according to some observations, it is women who interrupt more than men (when speaking to both other women and to men) (Kennedy and Camden 1983; Murray and Covelli 1988).

It must be mentioned that social status plays a crucial role in determining the incidence of interruption. Interruptions are reported to be more typical of the speech of high class people rather than low-status people (low class people) (Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989), "These violations of turn-taking norms clearly allow the powerful, high-status speakers more access to important personal resources (the "floor") at the expense of their lower-status partners" (Smith-Lovin, Brody 1989: 425).

Tannen (1994: 122) stresses that it has been proven that women adapt their styles to those of men when they interact with men (and not vice versa). As a result, they also become more like men in the way they talk and behave (they interrupt more often, become more assertive, more direct, more confident, more powerful, less polite, insecure or hesitant).

It is also necessary to highlight that interruption is associated with personality traits, for instance politeness, hostility, rudeness, dominance, shyness or inhibition etc.

All in all, we as interlocutors are not the only ones who decide about the incidence of interruption since "conversational dominance is not just about the way dominant speakers behave; it is also about the willingness of others to defer to them" (Cameron, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/01/gender.books).

5. The empirical study

There are two objectives in the following investigation. Firstly, we will attempt to identify the occurrence and non-occurrence of backchannels in mixed-gender conversations, that is male-female interactions. Moreover, we will concentrate on the incidence of backchannels in the conversations. Secondly, we will analyze the occurrence and non-occurrence of interruption in the same conversations in order to concentrate on the incidence of interruption in the speech of males and females.

It is stressed that the backchannels are more typical of the speech of women rather than men. We wish to argue that the high incidence of backchannels does

not have to be associated with the speech of females. In other words, we intend to show that the occurrence of backchannels, such as *yeah, mmm hm* etc. is typical of the speech of both males and females.

It is also emphasized that it is usually women who are interrupted more frequently than men. In other words, men are apt to interrupt others as opposed to women whose incidence of interruptions is much lower (Rosenblum 1986: 160). We wish to hypothesize that the frequency of interruptions in the speech of women is as high as in the speech of men (women will not have difficulty in "getting a word in edgewise", We expect to find the relatively high incidence of interruption in the speech of females in male-female conversations.

As a result, on the basis of the abovementioned facts and the linguistic data which we will elicit, we will strive to verify the characteristics of the speech of the interlocutors and the characteristics of the interlocutors themselves. Whereas the former assumption would be indicative of the desire to show agreement, respect and solidarity on the part of both men and women, the latter would definitely be associated with competition and dominance on the part of the women, not necessarily men.

The interlocutors who participate in the interviews are students of the English Philology Department aged 19-25. Each interview consists of a natural 5-7 minute conversation between two people who are supposed to interact with each other on a particular topic. The topic is purposefully controversial in order to encourage the interlocutors to participate fully and actively in the communicative event and, at the same time, establish relatively comfortable and natural settings which might occur in a typical situation. As a result, the interviewees are exposed to the following topic and questions for discussion with each other:

TOPIC: *Cheating on your partner*
QUESTIONS: *Which of the following do you consider to be cheating?*
–   *your partner flirting with another person*
–   *your partner having fantasies about a friend of yours*
–   *your partner having fantasies about a celebrity*
–   *your partner kissing another person after a few drinks at a party*
–   *your partner frequently having coffee with another person after and sharing intimate thoughts and dreams with this person*
–   *internet chatrooms: fantasy or part reality*
(MacAndrew, R. and Martínez, R. 2002: 23)

The language used in the conversations is English. Although the students are native speakers of Polish, they are also very fluent in English (which is their second language; these are students of the English Philology Department and thus they should not have difficulties communicating).

There were 25 interviews and in each interview participated one male and one female. Their task was to interact with each other and exchange their opinions. During the interviews, the interviewer registered the number of turns,

backchannels, and interruptions. The frequency of the occurrence of backchannels and interruptions was scrupulously identified, registered and analyzed. The results which have been elicited and obtained constitute the basis for further analysis, observations, obtaining the results and drawing conclusions and also implications for further analysis.

The first table with all the data of the informants, such as the names, ages and education is given as follows. Underneath there are four more tables (tables 2-5) with the data pertaining to the incidence of backchannels and interruptions.

Table 1: Interviewees: 1-50 (name, sex, age and education / occupation)

Nr	Name	Sex	Age	Education/occupation	Nr	Name	Sex	Age	Education/occupation
1.	Oliwia	F	23	university student	2.	Amadeusz	M	20	university student
3.	Tomasz	M	23	university student	4.	Aleksandra	F	23	university student
5.	Monika	F	25	university student	6.	Jakub	M	23	university student
7.	Adam	M	22	university student	8.	Anna	F	20	university student
9.	Kasia	F	23	university student	10.	Maciej	M	19	university student
11.	Paweł	M	23	university student	12.	Magda	F	21	university student
13.	Kasia	F	22	university student	14.	Michał	M	19	university student
15.	Jakub	M	22	university student	16.	Monika	F	19	university student
17.	Aneta	F	19	university student	18.	Dawid	M	20	university student
19.	Dominik	M	19	university student	20.	Anna	F	19	university student
21.	Aleksandra	F	19	university student	22.	Wojciech	M	20	university student
23.	Michał	M	21	university student	24.	Patrycja	F	21	university student
25.	Paulina	F	19	university student	26.	Kamil	M	23	university student
27.	Marcin	M	19	university student	28.	Agata	F	21	university student
29.	Alicja	F	20	university student	30.	Dorian	M	21	university student
31.	Adam	M	20	university student	32.	Angelika	F	21	university student

Nr	Name	Sex	Age	Education/ occupation	Nr	Name	Sex	Age	Education/ occupation
33.	Lidia	F	20	university student	34.	Karol	M	20	university student
35.	Adam	M	22	university student	36.	Weronika	F	21	university student
37.	Marzena	F	19	university student	38.	Daniel	M	20	university student
39.	Błażej	M	20	university student	40.	Marta	F	26	university student
41.	Aleksandra	F	21	university student	42.	Robert	M	21	university student
43.	Michał	M	21	university student	44.	Żaneta	F	22	university student
45.	Sonia	F	20	university student	46.	Piotr	M	22	university student
47.	Seweryn	M	20	university student	48.	Patrycja	F	21	university student
49.	Paulina	F	23	university student	50.	Paweł	M	20	university student

Table 2: The incidence of backchannels and interruptions in conversations 1-5; speakers: 1-10

	conversation 1		conversation 2		conversation 3		conversation 4		conversation 5	
Speaker	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Number of turns	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
Backchannels	2	4	2	8	5	2	1	3	6	6
Interruptions	6	4	4	4	3	3	8	8	5	3

Table 3: The incidence of backchannels and interruptions in conversations 6-10; speakers: 11-20

	conversation 6		conversation 7		conversation 8		conversation 9		conversation 10	
Speaker	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Number of turns	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
Backchannels	4	2	1	0	3	3	3	0	2	0
Interruptions	4	4	10	3	3	3	0	3	3	1

Table 4: The incidence of backchannels and interruptions in conversations 11-15; speakers: 21-30

	conversation 11		conversation 12		conversation 13		conversation 14		conversation 15	
Speaker	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Number of turns	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
Backchannels	4	2	0	0	0	2	4	7	12	8
Interruptions	0	3	6	6	7	7	1	0	5	3

Table 5: The incidence of backchannels and interruptions in conversations 16-20; speakers: 31-40

	conversation 16		conversation 17		conversation 18		conversation 19		conversation 20	
Speaker	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
Number of turns	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
Backchannels	5	4	1	2	4	0	3	1	2	3
Interruptions	6	3	8	7	4	3	1	2	3	5

Table 6: The incidence of backchannels and interruptions in conversations 21-25; speakers: 41-50

	conversation 21		conversation 22		conversation 23		conversation 24		conversation 25	
Speaker	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50
Number of turns	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
Backchannels	2	4	1	4	5	7	3	8	2	4
Interruptions	2	3	2	2	2	0	5	2	5	0

6. Results

During each interviews, both interlocutors actively participated in the conversation. The topic and the questions selected for the discussion were interesting enough for the interviewees to make them actively involved in the dialogue and

at the same time contribute to eliciting sufficient linguistic data. Thus, we can assert that the degree of the artificiality of the situation was reduced.

The first objective of the article is the analysis of the backchannels. First and foremost, one can register a relatively high incidence of backchannels in the speech of both males and females during the interactions. It must be mentioned that they are not indicative of boredom, but either engagement and high involvement or politeness in the conversation. Thus, to show agreement, solidarity or involvement, the informants used the minimal responses considerably. The high incidence of backchannels could indicate that the interlocutors did not wish to dominate each other. Undeniably, it can be observed that there is a high incidence of backchannels in mixed-gender conversations. However, on the basis of the data given above, it is observable that the incidence of backchannels is a little bit higher in the speech of males than in the speech of females.

As far as the backchannels are concerned, out of 25 interviews which were conducted, we can make the following observations on the basis of the data obtained:
– in 12 conversations males used more backchannels than female interlocutors,
– in 10 interviews it was females whose incidence of backchannels was higher,
– in 3 conversations the incidence of backchannels was the same.

Another aim is the identification and the incidence of interruption during the interviews. According to the results, one observes a high incidence of interruption, which, however, might be indicative of the desire to dominate the conversation. The incidence of interruption is undeniably high, but it is not only typical of women's speech styles since it occurs in the speech of both males and females. In addition, it can be observed that the incidence of interruption is much higher in the speech of females.

As far as interruption is concerned, out of 25 interviews conducted, we observe that:
– in 7 conversations there was a higher incidence of interruption on the part of the males
– in 12 conversations there was a higher incidence of interruption on the part of the females
– in 8 conversations the incidence of interruption between males / females was the same.

Hence, there are the following observations to be made.

According to the data obtained, one can easily register the occurrence of backchannels in the speech of males and females during the conversations. Another observation concerns the difference in the occurrence of the backchannels: the incidence of backchannels in the speech of males is a bit higher than in the speech of women. Nevertheless, the incidence of backchannels in the speech of males and females is approximately the same.

Moreover, as far as interruption is concerned, the data suggests that inter- ruption is ubiquitous, but not only in the speech of males, but also females. Apparently, they are not only characteristic of the speech of males who, ste-

reotypically, are associated with dominance and power. It can be observed that the high incidence of interruption is characteristic of the speech of males. The data suggests that both men and women interrupt their interlocutors quite often. What is even more interesting is the fact that it is women who are characterized by the higher percentage of the interruptions in comparison with men. It might indicate that the female interlocutors turned out to be even more competitive and dominant during male-female interactions.

7. Conclusions

The data which we have obtained during the mixed-gender interviews and the observations which we have made enable us to draw certain conclusions pertaining to the students' communication styles.

Firstly, one has to point out that backchannels or supportive responses are typical of both male and female speech patterns, but their incidence is higher in the speech of males. This leads us to conclude that both men and women strive do show solidarity among themselves (at least among mixed-gender groups), but the solidarity on the part of the male towards the female is much more notice-able.

Secondly, interruption is typical of the speech of both males and females. This leads us to conclude that both interlocutors participating in the interview were not only actively involved in the communicative event, but also attempted to express their views with a view to possibly convincing their counterparts. Nevertheless, the incidence of interruption was higher in the speech of females, which confirms the assumption that interruption is not only typical of male speech styles. Due to the higher incidence of interruption in the speech of women, one might conclude that women are becoming less subordinated, more competitive, more assertive and even hostile in the way they converse with other men. Apparently, women's subordination and deference are becoming a thing of the past. Nowadays, dominance is becoming a typical feature of both male and female speech styles, regardless of the gender of the interlocutor.

8. Implications for further analysis

I may have expected such results but still there are a number of other factor which determine the occurrence and the incidence of backchannels and interruption. Our observations and conclusions are based on and at the same time limited to mixed-gender interviews, that is male-female interactions. It would definitely be interesting to analyze the occurrence of backchannels, overlaps and interruption in same-sex interactions, such as male-male and female-female conversations. Finally, it would be worth comparing the incidence of interruption in both same-sex and mixed-sex interactions in order to contribute to the changing

trends in terms of the characteristics of speech styles of the interlocutors and at the same time the characteristics of the interlocutors themselves.

Moreover, there are other factors, such as the age and social status. The former is one of the factors which seems to play a crucial role in determining the incidence of interruption. Therefore, for future research and further analysis, it would be necessary to investigate the frequency of interruption among the speakers of different ages, such as adolescents, teenagers, youngsters, adults etc. The latter could also influence the occurrence of backchannels and interruption as speech styles are also associated with social groups. Thus interviewing the informants of various social backgrounds would also enable us to verify the variation in the incidence of backchannels, overlapping and interruption.

Finally, apart from the gender, age and social background, we might also expect style differences to occur culturally. Thus, one might compare the speech styles of the speakers from particular cultures and countries, such as Polish, German, French, Spanish or American people.

Therefore, it would be advisable to do a large-scale research encompassing all other factors, which would contribute to obtaining more data, making more profound observations and drawing further conclusions. It would also contribute to a better understanding of the characteristic features of the speech styles.

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