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METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE ANALYSIS OF TALK-IN-INTERACTION

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Abstract: *This article attempts at demonstrating that methodological paths should be carefully chosen depending on the research questions and the materials available. The discussion draws a comparison between the case study approach and other methodological procedures, stressing on the importance of the former to a comprehensive analysis of gendered talk-in-interaction.*

Keywords: *methodology, case study, gendered talk-in-interaction.*

1. Introduction

This paper is focused upon methodological issues in the analysis of gendered talk-in-interaction, discussing the various approaches that the analyst may choose when studying the structure and functions of spoken data. The following considerations are centred around a comparison between the case study approach and other methodological procedures, stressing on the importance of the former to a comprehensive analysis of talk-in-interaction.

Paul Ten Have emphasizes the importance of methodological descriptions drawing the attention to the fact that "most practitioners of CA (Conversation Analysis) tend to refrain, in their research reports, from extensive theoretical and methodological discussion. CA papers tend to be exclusively devoted to an empirically based discussion of specific analytic issues. This may contribute to the confusion of readers who are not familiar with this particular research style" (Ten Have 23).

The choice of the study path starts from the assumption that talk among friends is a special and crucial kind of communication and its study is only made possible by the presence of the analyst as a participant in the recorded conversation. Recording a naturally occurring conversation among friends "makes available for study patterns of language use that do not emerge among strangers, such as playful routines, irony and allusion, reference to familiar jokes and assumptions" (Tannen, 1984, 33).

The disadvantage is that the true meaning does not reside only in the immediate conversation but has been created over time. Nevertheless, this negative side of the issue does not constitute a sufficient reason for the analyst to avoid this crucial aspect of human behaviour. It is crucial indeed, because it is in talk-in-interaction that people often "fail to communicate precisely and entirely what one intends, and they communicate more than one intends, including […] images of oneself" (Tannen, 1984, 151).

The choice of the methodological approach is always related to the purpose of the research and the materials available.

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"Depending on his or her RQ [research question], the researcher might be conceptually concerned with a phenomenon, speech act, topic or concept, or more materially with a genre, domain, institution, group of people, event or setting, which he or she feels is revealing and fruitful in some way" (Sunderland 69).

Ten Have urges the researcher to pair the research questions and data available with appropriate study paths as "methodological procedures should be adequate to the materials at hand and to the problems one is dealing with, rather than them being pre-specified on a priori grounds" (Ten Have 23).

No matter the *how*, the *where* and the *who* that the researchers employ for their study, they must provide a rationale for why they have chosen that particular research context. Establishing the justification for the data being used "may include acquainting the reader with the range of potential sites considered and rejected […]. There should always be a principled reason for the data in question, meaning that data choice, like choice of the epistemological site, should be motivated" (Sunderland 71). The needed data is not always available and accessible to the researcher and, in the real world, the researcher must consider the best data they can reasonably get.

2. The Data Collection

Regarding collection of spoken data, there is a number of issues that must be taken into consideration in the recording of naturally occurring conversations: "access, ethics, the 'observer's paradox', methods (for example, fieldnotes, audio- and video-taping, transcription), the role of the researcher, researcher commitment vis-à-vis objectivity, relationships with research participants" (Sunderland 65).

The recorded conversation method does not have advantages only, it also has numerous weaknesses; first, participants might not behave as naturally as they would in ordinary circumstances, being aware of the voice recorder. Nevertheless, the recording methods have progressed along the years, the devices no longer being as encumbering as they used to be. Whereas in the 1980s and the 1990s the researcher used a regular tape recorder that the participants needed to have in the middle of the table, thus being aware of its presence at all times, nowadays the recording may be done with the help of a proficient, cell-phone sized voice recorder (the one used for most of the recordings in my study is an Olympus WS-331M).

Second, there is a certain amount of information that is lost when one channel of communication only is employed. Nevertheless, "information lost from non-verbal channels, such as facial expressions, gestures, and body movements, is rarely totally different from that preserved in the speech channel. Rather, it reinforces the messages communicated through language" (Tannen, 1984, 36).

Videotaping would prove more efficient to overcome such shortcomings. Tannen discusses sociologist Bruce Dorval's experiment by means of which he was able to study conversational topics along with body language. He discovered that, within his work groups, the girls and the women sat closer to each other and looked at each other directly, whereas the boys and the men tended to sit at angles to each other and never look directly into each other's faces (Tannen, 2001, 245-246).

3. The Transcript

The talk-in-interaction itself, its recording and the transcript are different entities. Transcripts are not supposed to be treated as if they were the data, but "an analytic convenience to make the data accessible to readers" (Coates and

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Thornborrow 594-595). Because of the numerous variations in transcription convention systems (categorized by many researchers as errors or inconsistencies (Bucholtz 785), the spoken discourse has recently come to be seen as "a movable object that can be transferred to new contexts" (Bucholtz 785).

A transcript is an evolving flexible object; it changes as the transcriber engages in listening and looking again at the tape, endlessly checking, revising, and reformatting it. These changes are not simply cumulative steps towards an increasingly better transcript: they can involve adding but also subtracting details for the purposes of a specific analysis, of a particular recipient-oriented presentation, or of compliance with editorial constraints.

When replacing spoken words with written ones, a part of the actual meaning is lost, "utterances that were pronounced imperfectly and in a particular way are rendered as complete words in an idealized form" (Tannen, 1984, 36). No matter how elaborate the systems of transcription conventions might be, they could never attempt at perfectly rendering tone of voice, voice quality, pitch, amplitude, pronunciation. When choosing the appropriate conventions, the analyst decides what is relevant for the particular point they need to make. Coates and Thornborrow affirm that "unless phonetic or prosodic quality is central to the researcher's analytic focus, or significantly marked in some way, little is to be gained by deviating from the standard orthography" (Coates and Thornborrow 595). Since my case study analysis of gendered talk-in-interaction is concerned with capturing the interaction of different voices, the transcription does not focus on a fine-grained phonetic rendering, but on the way participants interact conversationally.

Dascălu Jinga (30-32) mentions various transcription systems that researchers have proposed over time: Sacks et. al., Schegloff et.al. These systems propose conventions that render conversational aspects such as pauses, stress, intonation, non-verbal signals (breathing, cough, speech hesitation), as well as the transcriber's perception (uncertainty in perception, comments, marking of elements of special interest).

The analysis of conversation requires the presence in the transcription of elements that go beyond the lexical level, namely unarticulated utterances, speech hesitations, backchannel signals, stammering, laughter, especially when these represent manifestations of communicative functions, as well as relevant cases of lack of speech (silences, pauses) or latching and overlaps (Dascălu Jinga 32).

Paul Ten Have asserts that "transcriptions cannot represent the recordings in their full detail. They are always and necessarily selective. The system used in CA is specifically designed to reveal the sequential features of talk. As the system has developed over the years, more and more details of the actual sequential production of talk-in-interaction have been added to the basic 'text', written in standard orthography" (Ten Have 25).

4. The Choice of the Study Path

There are several methodologies that researchers have used in the study of gender and language: "introspection, sociolinguistic surveys, focus groups, [and] observation, and collection of naturally occurring spoken data" (Sunderland 56).

Deborah Tannen proposes the case study approach for the analysis of talk-in-interaction. In an audio course called *HE SAID/SHE SAID: Women, Men and Language*, she describes the case study approach and opposes it to the

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experimental psychology that uses statistics based on recordings of speech from a large number of people who agree to take part in the experiment and to the clinical psychology that uses reports from people who answer questions on how they act or feel. Tannen (2003) considers the methods of experimental psychology and clinical psychology inappropriate since, in the case of the former, behaviour is not real and in the case of the latter, the conclusion may be distorted by the mind filter of the interviewee. In the case study approach, the focus point is not on generalisability, but on the study of samples, the research not being a quantitative one.

Tannen (2003) describes the methodological context of the study of cross-cultural and gendered speech-in-interaction, at the crossroads of *Discourse Analysis*, with focus on connected language "beyond the sentence", *sociolinguistics*, focusing on the intersection of language and social phenomena, and *anthropology*, which involves individual cases of interaction taking into account their cultural context.

In a study of misunderstandings in conversation, Deborah Tannen follows methodological steps described by sociologist John Gumperz (1982): "(1) tape-recording naturally occurring conversations, (2) identifying segments in which trouble is evident, (3) looking for culturally patterned differences in signalling meaning that could account for the trouble; (4) playing the recording, or segments of it, back to participants in order to solicit their spontaneous interpretations and reactions, and also, perhaps later, soliciting their responses to the researcher's interpretations; and (5) playing segments of the interaction for other members of the cultural groups represented by the speakers in order to discern patterns of interpretation"(1984, 6).

Another method of research would be the eliciting of data, through interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, accounts, diaries, simulated recall. The reporting of attitudes has numerous drawbacks since the respondents may not know what their attitude is towards something, they may not have an attitude towards it or they may not like to appear ignorant and report a false one that would mislead the researcher, or they might simply have different attitudes at different times for a multiplicity of reasons. The researcher fears as well that he/she might transfer their stance on or influence in some way the respondents.

Many feminists value neutrality and scientific detachment and thus their research involve participants to whom they are not related in any way. The greatest care is "to avoid imposing the researcher's own analytic categories and concepts on what respondents say, and to encourage them to assert their own interpretations and agendas. In this way, the researcher gains access to participants' own language, meanings and vocabulary, their opinions and conceptual worlds" (Wilkinson in Speer 784). Speer states that it is not only in the questionnaire method that the researcher represents a "potentially contaminating force" (Speer 785), but also, in the recording of the naturally occurring conversation, the analyst may impair the quality and validity of the data obtained and the conclusions that can be drawn about it. While feminist analysts are keen on avoiding researcher – researched relationships (the topics accessed often being too sensitive, private or delicate), "conversation analysts are concerned not to impose their own formulations on what gets said and thereby obscure members' ordinary, everyday accounting practices" (Speer 785).

Nevertheless, the recording of private, naturally occurring conversations between

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close friends can only be done within the framework of the presence of the researcher as a participant. For the purpose of my study, the collection of the data by means of recording private conversations where the researcher has been a participant has been considered less damaging for the data than the questionnaire method.

As opposed to the interpretation of our actions or perceptions (which can be distorted), the interpretation of the linguistic data is more accurate since they "are there, in black and white, or on tape, unambiguous and unavoidable" (Lakoff 39). Questionnaires, Lakoff claims, are "of dubious worth in exploring actual language use, of which speakers are often not fully conscious" (105).

Both methods have been used by researchers, one at a time or in combination. Sunderland claims that "it is possible to combine naturally occurring and elicited spoken data. Either type may be seen as 'shedding light' on the other, that data-type then being 'secondary' and the other 'primary'" (Sunderland 68).

Trudgill made a study of this type in 1974, and he compared his collection of naturally occurring data with the reports that his respondents gave. The result was a contradiction between what the women in his study actually spoke and what they claimed they did. They claimed they used less standard forms than they actually did. Lakoff, in an attempt at demonstrating the importance of taking into consideration a wider array of research methods claims that "dismissing all but a single personal favourite as 'unscientific' or invalid prevents linguists from studying a wide range of important phenomena, forcing them to adopt inappropriate methods and reach dubious conclusions, or prevents linguists from studying a great deal of what is especially important and intriguing about language" (Lakoff 105).

5. The Case Study

For the purpose of an extended study of gendered talk-in-interaction I made use of the case-study approach and I analysed chosen transcripts of recorded conversation. The aim of the endeavour was to discover whether the variable of gender might alone dictate different conversational styles in male and female participants. Through the analysis of seven transcripts made on the basis of recordings of naturally-occurring cross-gender, all-male or all-female conversations I wanted to demonstrate that the variable of gender is indeed important, but it cannot act alone in the determination of fundamental differences in conversational styles.

Research Question 1 was designed to investigate whether the variable of gender might be considered as background given information when doing the analysis of an excerpt of talk-in-interaction. Starting from the hypothesis that the variable of gender was important in the analysis of talk-in-interaction, Research Question 2 aimed at elucidating whether the researcher might attempt at generalizing the results of his/her investigation on gendered conversation.

I chose seven extracts that I named Extracts A – G, of which Extracts A, B, C, F and G I recorded, transcribed and analysed myself, and Extracts D and E were recorded, transcribed and collected by Laurenția Dascălu-Jinga in a 2002 corpus of Romanian spoken language.

The extracts A, B, C, F and G chosen for the study are a part of audio-recordings done in Brașov and they represent uncontrolled samples of naturally occurring face-to-face conversation at dinner parties among friends. Since all the participants have known each other for more than eleven years (Extracts A, B and G), or for about eight years (Extracts C and F), the atmosphere is friendly and

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informal. The recording of Extract A was done with the help of a mobile phone Nokia 6234, so the sound is not of the highest quality in all instances; this constituted a major drawback in the process of transcribing the two minutes of talk that belong to a three-hour recording. The other four recordings were done with a voice recorder Olympus WS-331M, the recording this time being of the best quality.

This recording method had, as far as I noticed, a great many advantages as opposed to the traditional tape – recorder method. While in the case of the latter, the success of the recording and the quality of the tape depended strictly on the presence of all participants around a dinner-party table. Whenever participants moved to other rooms, the sound was lost. Moreover, the psychological factor played a very important part, participants being aware incessantly of the presence of the tape - recorder being switched on in the middle of them. The voice recorder, on the other hand, is very small, and the sound quality is high even if the device is held inside the pocket or handbag. This has a double advantage. First, although the participants are aware of the fact that their conversations are being recorded, they soon forget about it and the process does no longer represent a psychological stress factor. Second, the voice recorder follows the speakers around the house, or even outside it, in no matter what location, the recording no longer being restricted to one single room, even one table, as the sound, in the case of the tape – recorder, diminishes when the speakers move away.

All the participants, in all the five recordings gave their consent to the usage of the conversation in a scientific research. Moreover, in the case of Excerpt A, they offered feedback on my analysis, thus bringing an important contribution to the study.

Following Tannen (1984, 160-161) I have used a series of steps that the researcher would need to follow in analysing an excerpt of talk-in-interaction:

- Recording (with consent) of as many interactions as possible, of which, some are chosen. The choosing criteria are the following: the sequence is intriguing or familiar and constitutes an episode, namely it has identifiable boundaries.
- Identifying the speech event, the tone of the interaction.
- Identifying marked segments, such as miscommunication, cooperative communication or a manifestation of some characteristic communicative behaviour that has been noticed.
- Studying the segments that have been identified, transcribing them and detecting elements such as introduction and maintenance of topics by participants, significant words spoken, turn-taking, repetitions, interruptions, overlaps, pauses, pitch, and loudness.
- Counting of words, pauses, topics, overlaps.
- Comparison of features found in various episodes.
- Asking for the reactions and interpretations of the participants after they have listened to the recording, read the transcription, and the analysis.
- Trying the interpretations out in the real world.
- Checking if the hypotheses generated shed light on other data or on life.

The first excerpt analysed represents a dinner-table conversation where there are two male and three female participants. The interlocutors frame and re-frame friendship by means of very different techniques that pertain to their genders: men use an incessant play of hierarchy whereas women use cooperation and support. The extract is dominated by differences and asymmetries: lack of balance in the quantity of speech, in the conversational devices that the

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participants use, in the choice of some vocabulary items, in patterns of intonation, in stress and loudness.

The following example shows how a male participant (I) cuts short a reply by a female interlocutor (D):

E: deci n-au o specializare .... ala care m-a :: operat de de de hernie, după cinci minute <xxxx> i-a scos fierea, i-a scos fierea =

D: = da::, nu sunt fiecare cu ...

[ ]

I: da, da' nu exista aşa ce vrei tu

While highly involved in maintaining their hierarchical male world by undercutting each other's turns and overlapping, male participants hardly ever allow women to have their turns.

The case-study analysis of Excerpt A demonstrated that there is at least one case where the variable of gender is important when analysing talk-in-interaction. After writing my interpretation of this excerpt I asked each participant to listen to the recording, read the transcript and answer some questions. I was interested in their perceptions of the event, in their perceptions of themselves and of the others. I asked them several questions to understand the way they perceived the level of aggressiveness of the dialogue.

The conclusion following the case-study analysis with participant feedback was that although the researcher cannot generalize and claim that there are distinct conversational styles corresponding to the two genders, the interactants displayed different interactional techniques: whereas the male speakers stressed conflict talk and competitive conversational devices, the female speakers displayed cooperative techniques.

The feedback is nevertheless subject to limitations of psychological nature: the participants offered their conscious perception of the communication situation, but there is still a question open concerning their subconscious perception.

The other six transcripts, carefully chosen excerpts of naturally occurring conversations between male and female participants, all-male, and all-female speakers, were used to illustrate patterns of gendered conversational styles.

My study did not aim at finding a male/female behavioural tendency as it was not based on statistics. My aim was to find, in the case of the Romanian language context, at least one case of talk-in-interaction that would contradict the traditional model described in the literature on cross-gender verbal interaction. If I could find such an instance, any generalization regarding definite characteristics for male/female conversational styles would prove impossible.

First, I found episodes that accurately followed the models: the male participants displayed disaffiliative moves, whereas the female speakers revealed cooperative conversational techniques. Thus, the pattern conceived in the Anglo-American context was found valid in the Romanian language case.

Second, I looked for episodes that would go against the model. Cooperative moves appeared in all-male dialogues and conflict talk was found in all-female conversations.

The analysis of the following excerpt, taken from Dascălu Jinga's corpus, shows how male participants may display affiliative moves in conversation. The repetition of words or phrases has cooperative value, giving the interlocutor the confirmation of listenership, together with a sense that the message has been understood and agreed upon. By means of repetition of the final part of his interlocutor's turn, GP expresses agreement with VJ's words, with the statement that the Professor had chosen people to work with among those for whom the professional life was paramount: *-diții da.*

VJ: Da, a fost marea artă a Profesorului să aleagă ASTfel de oameni pentru care

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ASTfel de argumente să fie primordiale.=
GP: = Da da da
VJ : că pot lucra în condiţii
[ ]
GP: -diţii da

The analysis of such an example clearly proved that linguistic strategies were not strictly related to gender.

The case-study approach enabled the demonstration that the researcher cannot make generalizations regarding the variable of gender when discussing conversational styles. There are indeed features, such as conflict talk or topic choice, that would fit some male verbal interactions, but these might just as easily be encountered in female talk. In the same way, there are characteristics, such as affiliative moves and troubles talk, that would fit some female verbal interactions, but these can also be encountered in male talk.

In this paper I have offered a brief overview of the methodological issues that need to be considered while engaging into the analysis of talk-in-interaction. My point has been that the researcher must carefully pair the research questions and the existing material with the appropriate methodology. I have illustrated the discussion of methodological issues with my own qualitative study of gendered talk-in-interaction where I used the case study approach.

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