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AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER AND STATUS AFFECTING CONVERSATIONAL INTERRUPTIONS

Orapan Sapabsri

Master Student, Department of Western Languages, Burapha University, Chonburi, Thailand
orapan@buu.ac.th

Ubon Dhanesschaiyakupta

Assistant Professor, Kasetsart University, Sriracha Campus, Chouburi, Thailand
ubdst@yahoo.com

Tipa Thep-Ackrapong

Associate Professor, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand
tipa1999@gmail.com

On-Usa Phimswat

Lecturer, Department of Western Languages, Burapha University, Chonburi, Thailand
onusa@buu.ac.th

Abstract

Interruptions as conversational strategies can be used to achieve either dominance or cooperation in a talk. The purpose of this study was to analyze conversational interruptions between Thai genders with different social statuses. Five episodes of the talk show BeMyGuest sponsored by the Thai Government's Department of Public Relations were selected to analyze which type of interruption, intrusive or cooperative, males with different social statuses made in interacting with the woman show host. A total of 217 utterances were analyzed for interruptions

under Zimmerman and West's (1975) guidelines. The results revealed that in the context of the woman having a higher or equal status as a man, the male interrupted the conversation more often than his conversation partner. However, in the case the host having a lower social status than the male guest, it was found that the woman interrupted more often than the man. The result in the last case does not support the dominance approach, which points out that men dominate women in conversation. Culture is considered an important factor accounting for the genders' behavior of interruptions in the conversation.

Keywords

Conversational Interruptions, Gender and Interruptions, Social Status and Interruptions, Dominance in Conversation

1. Introduction

Conversation is a necessity in everyday life. It refers to an activity consisting of interlocutors engaging in a form of communication. In this form, turn-taking is required to manage the conversation as Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) have proposed in their model of turn-taking--only one person speaks at a time and that person is recognized to be the one whose turn is taken to speak. However, people often violate the rules. Some interlocutors take too long a turn. Some bring in a topic irrelevant to the conversation. One of the most common violations of the conversation rules is interruption. This is a linguistic strategy used to achieve dominance in conversation as James and Clarke (1993) have noted that interruptions represent negative conversational behavior and violate the rights of others.

One of the factors affecting conversational dominance is gender. Zimmerman and West (1975) have noted that men interrupt more frequently than women.

In the Thai cultural heritage, men dominate women. Tamuang (2012) describes occurrences of dominance in the Thai culture. Previously, men were leaders, while women were followers. Aeusrivongse (2014) claims that women are taken advantage of and are always abused by men. However, education plays a role to support women to have a higher status than men. For example, nowadays, with completion in advanced education, women are politicians, physicians, lecturers, and others while some men, with less education, are security guards, taxi drivers, etc. This suggests that social status can be changed by education.

With the Thai woman's higher status, how does it affect conversational interruptions?
The aims of the present research were to answer the following questions:

1. How does the Thai woman social status affect the conversational interruptions?
2. What types of interruptions, cooperative or intrusive, are found?

The research results obtained will throw light onto the gender role played by Thai females and males and to see if the Thai cultural heritage has been affected by the societal change.

1.1 Definitions of Terms

The definitions of terms in this research are as follows:

1. **Interruptions** are the overlapping speech that occurs between the speaker's speech turns.
2. **The type of interruption** is classified into two categories according to Murata (1994): cooperative and intrusive interruptions.
3. Murata (1994) identifies **cooperative interruptions** as those intended to assist the interlocutor by continuously coordinating the conversation. Kennedy and Camden (1983) and Li (2001) explains that this type comprises three subcategories as follows:
 - Agreement: it is to support and to show concurrence to the conversation partner (Kennedy & Camden, 1983).
 - Assistance: this is to assist the speaker (Li, 2001).
 - Clarification: this is to encourage the speaker to clarify or to explain the previous information (Kennedy & Camden, 1983).
4. **Intrusive interruptions** are disrupting the speaking of a current speaker by interfering the ongoing content. According to Li (2001), there are four subcategories as follows:
 - Disagreement: it shows disagreement with the speaker (Murata, 1994).
 - Floor taking: the listener takes over the floor from the speaker. Then he/she continues to develop the current speaker's topic (Murata, 1994).
 - Topic change: the listener interrupts the speaker by changing the topic of conversation (Murata, 1994).
 - Tangentialization: it is an interruption what takes away from the conversation course (Kennedy and Camden, 1983).
5. Other overlapping types which are not considered interruptions are feedback-- *yeah, ok* and back channeling--*um huh, really*, etc.

2. Theoretical Background

This study focuses on conversational interruptions which are related to concepts and theories as follows: the dominance approach, language and context, turn-taking, interruptions and women and men in the Thai culture and finally related research on interruptions.

2.1 The Dominance Approach

This approach is a study of the power relations between genders resulting from inequalities between men and women that remain in society. The interaction between men and women is different; men are usually found to dominate women, and women are subservient. The research related to this concept are such as Fishman (1978), Zimmerman and West (1975) and West (1984). These linguists studied gender and interruptions. The results indicated that males tended to dominate women such as using interruptions, topic change and so on.

2.2 Language and Context

Trudgill (1974) has claimed that social context especially the relationship of social status between interlocutors is one of the variables affecting language patterns. It depends on the degree of relationship between the social status and intimacy. This is a symbol of power difference and the social distance within interlocutors.

Brown and Gilman (1960) studied the use of pronouns T and V in French. It seems that the use of V, which is employed by the power-less to the power-full signifies a difference of power. The use of such becomes generalized to symbolize all types of social differences and distances. For this reason, the use of the pronoun T is in the case of wanting to show intimacy when there is solidarity between the listener and the speaker. This indicates that the meaning of solidarity depends on the degree of relationship of the speaker and listener.

However if the relationship of the interlocutors is asymmetrical, the use of linguistic strategy can be interpreted as expressing the power. Hence the use of linguistic features can be conveyed to power or solidarity depending on the degree of relationship between the interlocutors.

Likewise, the study of power and solidarity can be traced in conversational interruptions. A dominating conversation participant will perform more interruptions to disrupt the flow of the conversation. Another point to take into account is the type of interruption; a dominant conversation partner will use the intrusive rather than the cooperative interruptions.

2.3 Turn-Taking

The organization of talk is often referred to as turn-taking. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) have proposed the turn-taking model to conduct systematic conversation. Orderly a conversation normally takes place and one can speak at a time. The model is widely used in discourse and conversation analysis and helps to achieve a speech event that can be called conversation, not chaos.

2.4 Interruptions

If all conversations match the ideal described by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), then there should be no instances of overlapping. Zimmerman and West (1975) have accounted for conversational interruptions between sexes. They have identified irregularities from the turn-taking model: overlapping and interruptions. Interruptions are perhaps the most unambiguous linguistic strategy which can achieve dominance because to interrupt someone is to deprive them – or at least to attempt to deprive them – of the right to speak. Tannen (1994) and West and Zimmerman (1983) have claimed that interruptions are a symbol of power overcast or control in conversation. Hence interruptions seem to function as a way of controlling topics.

2.4.1 The Use of Interruptions in Gender

Asymmetry of power relations exists between males and females in conversation. As a result, in the research of social and cultural context of males and females, it has been found that the male is often the one who interrupts the talk in the conversation. West and Zimmerman (1975) have observed that men tend to interrupt women in the talk. Tamuang (2012) has found that males often interrupt females in order to express intentions. In other words, males tend to show power that they have to show outstanding ideas and always show that they are right.

2.4.2 Interruption Interpretation

Interruptions can be interpreted in two categories. The first type of interruption refers to the use of power which interrupts the right to speak of others. The second type is meant to express support and to show solidarity. Murata (1994) has divided the meaning of interruptions into power and non-power. The use of interruption depends on the background of culture or gender. In a culture that has male dominance, the use of interruption of the male tends to mean power. On the other hand, females tend to use non-power interruption or cooperative interruptions.

2.5 Women and Men in the Thai Culture

The Thai culture is a male dominated society. Tamuang (2012) explains that women are supposed to use a polite language and support a conversation while men are allowed to interrupt a conversation to show power. Aeusrivongse (2014) points out that females and males have different gender roles in the Thai culture; women are taught to be subservient and are always abused by men. This reveals inequality in the power relationship of men and women that has remained in the Thai society.

2.6 Related Research

Ueno (2003) has studied the interruption of the Japanese. It has been found that males and females have employed cooperative interruptions more than dominating interruptions. Both genders tend to give up the floor when they are interrupted. And both genders prefer to backchannel to use interruptions. This indicates that the Japanese always support each other and avoid arguments. This corresponds to the Japanese characteristics. They live in harmony.

Tamuang (2012) has studied inequality of genders in the context of discussion in the classroom. It has been found that males always disrupted females to show power. On the other hand, females avoid arguments and always support males. This corresponds to Thai culture in which the male are the leader and the female are followers.

In conclusion, these findings indicate that the cultural factor influences the use of language. So far, the dominance theory explains that mostly males dominate a conversation by interruption. Secondly the context of the conversation plays a role. A conversation partner with a high social status dominates the conversation, while the one with less power will listen and use polite language. Third, according to the conversation rule, one speaker takes a turn at a time. However, conversation partners violate the turn-taking rule, for example, by interruption. Most research has pointed out that males dominate females by interrupting more often. The interruptions can show either power or solidarity. In the Thai culture, it has been found that men dominate women. In the Japanese research, Japanese conversation participants have been found to mostly avoid arguments, and they prefer to use back channeling rather than interruptions in a conversations.

3. Methodology

The focus of this study was to analyze the gender and status affecting conversational interruptions in the Thai context by using qualitative research methodology. The purposive sampling was used.

3.1 Data for the Study

The data in this study consisted of five episodes of the English-speaking program: *BeMyGuest*, hosted by a female. In each episode, she interacted with a male guest who had a different social status. All of the data are available on *NBT WORLD* television station of Thailand and the audience can view the show on www.youtube.com. Each of the five episodes was approximately 27 minutes in length. The five TV shows selected were as follows: *Gastronomy Tourism 2017*, *Thai Literature to the World*, *SkillLane a successful startup in Thailand*, *Pui Nun Project*, *Investory Investment Discovery Museum*.

The social status involving the participants in the show were as follows: the woman had a higher, equal and lower status than the man. The social status was analyzed by the criteria of the occupational prestige (Chanthawanit, 1991). The female host worked as a TV employee. The occupations considered higher than the female host were, for example, university professors. Those that had equal statuses were an entrepreneur and a writer. Finally, a man who worked as a cook had a lower status than the female host.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected as follows:

First, the five episodes were transcribed. The transcription was supported by the subtitle on the *YouTube*.

Second, the overlapped conversations were analyzed and counted. Feedback and back channeling were ruled out.

Third, the type of interruption was identified whether it was an intrusive or cooperative one.

Fourth, in order to account for the reliability of the data, the analysis was separately submitted to two experts: one was a native speaker of English who had a bachelor's degree in business and the other was a Thai who had a master's degree in IT from overseas, and he worked in Australia.

Fifth, all the analysis of interruptions was positively confirmed except for five items. They did not agree with the results. Therefore, more explanations of the context were given.

Sixth, the experts agreed to the analysis. That is all the analyzed items were confirmed as interruptions.

Seventh, the analyzed items were identified by the researcher for the type whether they were cooperative or intrusive.

Finally, the analysis was submitted to the experts again. Three items were not confirmed by the experts. Then these items were discussed. Eventually, the experts agreed to the type analyzed.

In short, all overlapped conversations were analyzed and the results of interruptions and types were confirmed by two experts to account for reliability.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed. The results revealed that the number of the interruption in each episode was very low. Therefore, the raw data will be presented. In order to answer the research questions: How does the Thai woman social status affect the conversational interruptions? The effect was measured by the number of interruptions made by an individual conversation participant in each episode. In the second question, what types of interruptions, cooperative or intrusive, are found? The frequency of either intrusive or cooperative interruptions were counted.

4. Results

The results are presented after the research questions as follows:

Research question 1: How does the Thai woman social status affect the conversational interruptions? The question was broken into three smaller questions:

1.1 What is the number of interruptions found in the talk between a man and the woman who has a higher social status than the man who is the guest?

1.2 What is the number of interruptions found in the talk between a man and the female host who has the same social status as the male guest?

1.3 What is the number of interruptions found in the talk by a man and the woman who has a lower social status than the man who is the guest?

Table 1 answers the first major research question: How does the Thai woman social status affect the conversational interruptions?

Table 1: *The number of interruptions made in three different context.*

| Context | Episode | Total (Minutes) | Number of interruptions by the Female | Number of interruptions by the Male |
|--|---|------------------------|--|--|
| The woman had a higher social status than the male guest | 1. <i>Gastronomy Tourism 2017,</i> | 27 | 11 | 19 |
| The woman had an equal status as the male guest | 1. <i>Thai Literature to the World</i> 2. <i>SkillLane a successful startup in Thailand.</i> | 54 | 9 | 28 |
| the woman had a lower status than the male guest | 1. <i>Pui Nun Project</i> 2. <i>Investory Investment Discovery Museum</i> | 54 | 23 | 16 |

The table shows the number of interruptions in three contexts. It is clear that a large number of interruptions went on the men interrupting the woman. However, the woman with a lower status than the male guest had a higher number of interruptions than the men in the table. In the context where the woman had a higher social status than the male guest, the woman interrupted the man 11 times and the man did her 19 times. In terms of equal social status, the figure of interruptions on the female host shows that the woman interrupted the men 9 times and the men disrupted her talk 28 times. In the last case, the woman having a lower social status than the man, the table shows different results. The woman interrupted the men 23 times, while the men disrupted the talk 16 times.

It can be seen that in the context where the woman with either a higher or equal social status to the men, the figure of the male interruptions was higher than that of the woman.

However, when it comes to the case of the woman with a lower status than the man, the woman interrupted more frequently than did the man.

Research question 2: What types of interruptions, cooperative or intrusive, are found?

The question was broken into three smaller questions:

2.1 What type of interruption is made by the woman who has a higher social status than the man who is the guest?

2.2 What type of interruption is made by the female host who has the same social status as the male guest?

2.3 What type of interruption is made by the woman who has a lower social status than the man who is the guest?

According to, the second research question, the three tables below give information on the types of interruptions made by the woman and the men in different contexts.

Table 2 shows the interruptions that occurred when the woman had a higher status than the male.

Table 2: *Type of interruptions made by the woman who had a higher social status than the man who was the guest*

| Type of interruption | The woman interrupts the man (Number of interruptions) | The man interrupts the woman (Number of interruptions) | Total |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--------------|
| Cooperative | 7 | 14 | 21 |
| Interruptions(1) | 3 | 7 | 10 |
| Agreement | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Assistant | - | 5 | 5 |
| Clarification | | | |
| Intrusive Interruptions | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| (2) | - | 2 | 2 |
| Disagreement | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Floor taking | 2 | - | 2 |
| Topic change | - | - | - |
| Tangentialization | | | |
| All interruptions (1)+(2) | 11 | 19 | 30 |

In table 2, overall, cooperative interruptions were employed more frequently than intrusive ones by both sexes. Of all the interruptions, 21 were cooperative while nine were intrusive. The woman employed cooperative interruptions seven times and used intrusive interruptions four times. On the other hand, the men employed cooperative interruptions 14 times and used intrusive interruptions five times.

Table 3 shows the woman's interruption when she had the same social status as the male guest.

Table 3: *Types of interruptions made by the woman who had the same social status as the male guest*

| Type of interruption | The woman interrupting the man (Number of interruptions) | The man interrupting the woman (Number of interruptions) | Total Total |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|------------------------|
| Cooperative Interruptions(1) | 7 | 21 | 28 |
| Agreement | 5 | 14 | 19 |
| Assistant | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Clarification | - | 6 | 6 |
| Intrusive Interruptions (2) | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| Disagreement | - | - | - |
| Floor taking | 2 | 6 | 8 |
| Topic change | - | 1 | 1 |
| Tangentialization | - | - | - |
| All interruptions (1)+(2) | 9 | 28 | 37 |

Overall, when the woman had the same social status as the men, both sexes tended to employ cooperative rather than intrusive interruptions as shown in the table, 28 cooperative interruptions over nine intrusive ones. On the part of the woman, it was found that she interrupted cooperatively seven times, and she did intrusively only twice. Regarding the men, the number of interruption was large, but the majority of the type was the same: cooperative rather than intrusive. The males employed cooperative interruptions 21 times and intrusive ones seven times.

Table 4 shows the type of conversational disruption in the case when the woman having a lower status than the male.

Table 4: *Types of interruptions made by the woman who had a lower social status than the male guest*

| Type of interruption | The woman interrupting the man (Number of interruption) | The man interrupting the woman (Number of interruption) | Total |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|--------------|
| Cooperative Interruptions(1) | 15 | 14 | 29 |
| Agreement | 9 | 5 | 14 |
| Assistant | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| Clarification | 1 | 7 | 8 |
| Intrusive Interruptions (2) | 8 | 2 | 10 |
| Disagreement | - | - | - |
| Floor taking | 8 | 2 | 10 |
| Topic change | - | - | - |
| Tangentialization | - | - | - |
| All interruptions (1)+(2) | 23 | 16 | 39 |

Table 2.3 shows that when the woman had a lower status than the man, just like in other cases, cooperative interruptions were found more frequently than intrusive ones. Of all the interruptions, 29 were cooperative, while 10 intrusive. The female host used cooperative interruptions 15 times and intrusive ones eight times. The male guest employed cooperative interruptions 14 times and intrusive ones only twice.

To summarize, the results revealed that a gender's status affected the conversational interruption. The woman with a higher or an equal status as the male tended to be interrupted by her guest more frequently. However, the results reversed in the case that she had a lower status than the male, the woman host made more interruptions. In terms of types of interruptions, in all of the woman's statuses, the cooperative interruptions were made more frequently than the intrusive ones by both genders.

5. Summary and Discussion

5.1 Summary

In summary, this study was to analyze gender and status affecting conversational interruptions. The aims of the present research were to answer the following questions:

1. How does the Thai woman social status affect the conversational interruptions?
2. What types of interruptions, cooperative or intrusive, are found?

The research method employed was analyzing five episodes of the TV program *BeMyGuest* to see the overlapping that occurred in the conversation. Back channeling and feedback were ruled out because they were not considered interruptions. In order to check the reliability, two experts were invited to see the analyzed results. Any disagreement was discussed and more explanations were given. Finally all the items were agreed upon as interruptions.

In answering the research question number 1, the finding indicated that Thai male made more interruptions than Thai female in the case of the woman having a higher or an equal status as the men's. In the case that the woman had a lower status than the man's, the woman made more interruption than the man did.

In answering the research questions number 2, the findings indicated that both genders employed more cooperative interruptions than intrusive ones.

5.2 Discussion

The results have revealed that the Thai males dominate the conversation. The results support the findings in Zimmerman and West (1975) indicating that males dominate females. Also Thai researcher Tamuang (2012) has found that Thai males are likely to disrupt Thai females in a conversation, and the females support them and always avoid conflicts in the talk. One plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that according to Aeusrivongse (2014) traditionally women are believed that they are subservient and can be abused by men. With the present research results, Thai women still accept the tradition.

However, it should be noted that the woman with a lower social status has made more interruptions. This does not support the dominance approach. Some plausible explanations to account for this are as follows. First, the type of interruption is cooperative, which indicates that the woman wants to assist the man. Second, the male guest is not fluent in English; therefore, the host interrupts more often to support the guest's speaking.

One limitation of this research was that the data might not be adequate. The male guest with a lower social status was found in only episode. Further research should recruit more data of this sort so that we can see a vivid pattern of interruptions.

As this research was a description of the data, suggestions for further research should include more reliable statistics so that they can determine statistically significant results.

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