

Disruptive and Cooperative Interruptions in Prime-Time Television Fiction: The Role of Gender, Status, and Topic

By Xiaoquan Zhao and Walter Gantz

Speech characteristics of male and female characters in fictional television have received only scant attention in media content research. A content analysis of prime-time television revealed that male characters were more likely to initiate disruptive interruptions than female characters whereas female characters were more likely to use cooperative interruptions than male characters. Such differences, however, were moderated by status differential between interactants and topic of conversation. Significant gender differences persisted only when the interrupters were of higher status than the interrupted and when the topic of the conversation was about work. Theoretical and practical implications of the results are discussed.

Differential representation of men and women in the media has received a good deal of attention from mass communication researchers (e.g., Seidman, 1992; Signorielli, McLeod, & Healy, 1994). A shared theme in this line of research is that the way in which people, particularly women, are portrayed and treated in the media reflects and reinforces the commonly held beliefs about them in society at large (Gunter, 1995). However, although research on men's and women's physical and social images in the media abounds, the two sexes' speech characteristics in the media world are seldom investigated. This scarcity is especially surprising given the fact that language plays a central role in the creation and development of media characters. In view of this, the present research focused its attention on one particular conversational phenomenon, the interruption, in prime-time television fiction. A week's worth of prime-time sitcoms and dramas from the four major commercial networks were content analyzed. We investigated the patterns in which different types of interruptions are distributed between male and female television characters and examined the effects of status and conversation topic on the occurrence of interruptions and their interplay with gender effects.

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Rationale and Literature Review

Why Interruptions in Television Fiction?

Studying interruptions on television is a meaningful undertaking on several accounts. First, the media often serve as guidance for audiences. Indeed, the "investigation of gender role patterns in television program content rests on the assumption that by providing an experience of how characters react to different situations, television drama functions as an orientation to the outside world" (Barbatsis, Wong, & Herek, 1983, p. 148). In this light, serious concern over television dialogue's influence on people's perceptions, attitudes, and communicative behaviors with respect to gender seems to be warranted, given the salience of television in many people's lives. Indeed, if television viewers are constantly exposed to conversations featuring, for example, an unfavorable interruption pattern for women, we have reason to suspect that the viewers' own views and behaviors might reflect this pattern in the long run.

Secondly, studying interruptions on television may add a new perspective to our understanding of gender stereotypes presented by this medium. The audience often witnesses stereotypical portrayals of women on television. However, the bulk of the research on televised female stereotypes is focused on either physical appearance (e.g., Signorielli, McLeod, & Healy, 1994), vocation (e.g., Vande Berg & Strechfuss, 1992), behavior patterns (e.g., Barner, 1999), or personality traits (e.g., Seidman, 1992). Comparatively less attention has been paid to the stereotypical language characteristics of female characters. The results of the present study, from the perspective of interruptions, may proffer empirical evidence to demonstrate the existence of gender stereotypes on television.

Thirdly, fictional television dialogue offers an additional data source for interruption research. Actually, using the media as a data source is not unusual in speech communication research and conversation analysis (e.g., Bull & Mayer, 1988; Coon & Schwanenflugel, 1996; Hutchby, 1992). The advantages of doing so are well documented in the literature. Lakoff and Tannen (Tannen, 1994) argued that "artificial dialog may represent an internalized model or schema for the production of conversation—a competence model that speakers have access to" (p. 139). In other words, compared to naturally occurring interactions, conversations in movies and fictional television may be more centrally expressive of the communicative principles (including gender-related beliefs) widely held by society members. This view was echoed by other language researchers who believe that the media, especially television drama, "provides widely available representations of language use in the real world" (Wober, 1992, p. 61, quoted in Weatherall, 1996).

Defining Interruption

Although few mass communication studies have touched upon conversational interruptions (three rare examples are Brinson & Winn, 1997; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999; Zhao, Barnett, Cai, & Crane, 2001), a rich literature on this interactional phenomenon has accumulated in the realms of social linguistics and sociology. A

widely assumed theoretical perspective in the research on conversation interruption is that of conversation analysis, a sociological approach derived from the ethnomethodological studies of verbal interaction. The cornerstone of the conversation analysis framework is the rules of turn-taking (Sack, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). According to these rules, speakers take turns to contribute in a conversation, but only one person speaks at a time. The turn, thus, is not merely a segment of speech from a single person; it denotes speakership—the right to speak. Speakership switches can happen smoothly when the current speaker's turn has reached a Transition Relevant Place (TRP), such as the end of a sentence. When the second speaker simply cuts into the first speaker's turn and starts talking, rules of turn-taking are violated and an interruption happens. Based on this understanding, the present study formally defines interruption as follows: An interruption is an act in which a new speaker starts a turn while the current speaker has not yet reached a possible point of completion in his turn, to the (potential) effect that a smooth switch between speakers is made impossible.

Gender Differences in Interruption

Because of the social significance of gender and the popular view that interruption is essentially an expression of power and dominance, most studies on interruptions have addressed gender differences either focally or tangentially. This tradition started with the classic study by Zimmerman and West (1975). This study found that in same-sex conversations, interruptions were rare and appeared to be evenly distributed between speakers, whereas in cross-sex conversations, almost all the interruptions (96%, $N = 48$) were initiated by male speakers. These findings led the authors to conclude that “men deny equal status to women as conversational partners with respect to rights to the full utilization of their turns” and that “male dominance is exhibited through male control” of the “micro-institution” of conversation (Zimmerman & West, 1975, p. 125). Many other studies have found similarly that men interrupt more than women and, to varying degrees, have embraced this male dominance point of view (e.g., Makri-Tsilipakou, 1994; Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1989; West, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1977; Willis & Williams, 1976). Such gender difference in interruption was also found among children, where boys tended to interrupt more than girls (Esposito, 1979; Peterson, 1986). Moreover, in a recent meta-analysis, Anderson and Leaper (1998) found that the tendency for men to interrupt more than women was significant across 43 published studies.

However, studies reporting no differences between sexes also abound (e.g., Dindia, 1987; Hannah & Murachver, 1999; Kennedy & Camden, 1983; Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985; Marche & Peterson, 1993; Roger & Nesshoever, 1987). In fact, some studies found women to interrupt more than men. A notable example is Murray and Covelli (1988), in which the authors collected lengthy conversations from several different settings and coded the 400 interruptions in the data using Zimmerman and West's coding instructions. They found that across contexts women interrupted far more often than men (76% vs. 24%). Thus, “contrary to the assertion of Zimmerman and West . . . women are quite capable of interruption” (p. 103).

Some synoptic reviews of the literature on interruption have also produced evidence against the “men interrupt more than women” proposition. In their 1989 report, Smythe and Schlueter summarized 10 studies on interruption and found that 5 of them did not find significant differences; 3 found that men interrupted women more; and 2 found that women interrupted men more. James and Clarke (1993) and Aries (1996) likewise reported that the majority of the studies they reviewed found no significant sex differences.

A Typology of Interruptions

The inconsistency of findings in the research on interruption has triggered some critical reviews (Anderson & Leaper, 1998; Aries, 1996; James & Clarke, 1993). One common observation made by these reviews is that multiple conceptual and operational definitions of interruptions exist in the literature. This multiplicity of definitions conceivably has contributed to the inconsistency of research findings. At the same time, however, it also alerts researchers to the fact that interruption is a complex interactional phenomenon with rich meanings, diverse functions, and various structural features. Thus, instead of embracing a notion of interruption with uniform properties, this research has to recognize the necessity of further classifying interruptions on multiple levels.

The present study is concerned with the nature of interruptions that may vary as conversational environments vary. As early as in the 1970s, researchers began to notice that, in certain kinds of interactions (e.g., among women in rap groups), interruptions were frequent, but seldom objected to, and often seemed to be supportive and cooperative in nature (Kalcik, 1975). Many other researchers have made similar observations in their studies and noted that it is an overly simplistic view to treat interruption as an invariable symbol of dominance—interruptions are also used to show support, build rapport, and enhance solidarity in actual interactions (e.g., Dindia, 1987; Kennedy & Camden, 1983; Murata, 1994; Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1989; Tannen, 1994).

Based on such insights from previous research, the present study proposes a dichotomy distinguishing between cooperative and disruptive interruptions. Cooperative interruptions include those showing agreement or support, helping finish the current speaker's thought, or asking for clarification and elaboration. These types of interruptions either facilitate the carrying on of the present topic, or indicate rapid return of the floor to the interrupted party, and may have a potentially positive influence on the interpersonal relationship between speakers. Disruptive interruptions, on the other hand, include those showing disagreement, rejection, or simply disinterest and those geared toward subject change. These types of interruptions often serve as indications of a struggle for control over the communication, thus they have the potential to bear negatively on the interpersonal relationship between speakers.

Status and Topic

Previous literature on interruption suggests that the nature and distribution of interruption may be contingent upon some subject and situational variables. One important subject variable is status. Status difference in a conversation environ-

ment sometimes could outweigh the effects of gender differences such that individuals with high status would interrupt lower status individuals more than the reverse, regardless of their respective sexes (Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985). Given the dichotomy proposed in this study, it would be interesting to see whether such powerful effects of status, if they exist in the television world, vary across different types of interruptions.

The topic of conversation also determines how interruptions are allocated between men and women. In conversations dealing with “female areas of expertise,” women may perceive themselves as more authoritative and feel more justified in initiating interruptions (James & Clarke, 1993). In conversations with sex-neutral goals or tasks, however, males are likely not only to interrupt more, but also to interrupt females more than males (Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1989). Besides, when the conversation is casual and unstructured, interruptions would most likely be supportive and solidarity building than dominance related (Dindia, 1987). These findings strongly recommend that the present research also take into consideration the role of topic of conversation while looking into gender differences in interruption.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Literature on language and gender shows that, generally, males are loud, dominating, aggressive, and straight to the point in their speech. Women, on the other hand, are gentle, friendly, polite, and use many details when conversing (Basow, 1986; Holmes, 1995; Tannen, 1994). Based on these findings, it seems reasonable to predict that men and women might be scripted to use interruptions differently in television fiction. More specifically, men in television fiction might be more inclined to use interruptions to disagree, to reject, or simply to change topic; women, on the other hand, might be portrayed to use interruptions more often to agree, to support, to ask for clarification, or to indicate interest in the current topic. Such differences between men and women have been documented in some empirical studies of naturally occurring interruptions (Chan, 1992; Makri-Tsilipakou, 1994; also see James & Clarke, 1993). It seems reasonable they also would be present in television conversations. Hence the first hypothesis:

H1: In prime-time television fiction, male characters are more likely to use disruptive interruptions whereas female characters are more likely to use cooperative interruptions.

As an interactional phenomenon, the nature of interruptions may also be influenced by the sex of the targeted individual. Literature specifically dealing with this issue is meager and short of reliable conclusions (James & Clarke, 1993). In view of this, the present study will propose a general research question rather than a specific hypothesis to examine the role of interruptee gender in the organization of interruptions in television conversations:

RQ1: What is the relationship between the sex of the interruptee and the type of the interruption in prime-time television fiction dialogue?

As mentioned, status tends to impact the distribution of interruptions such that high status interactants interrupt lower status interactants more than the reverse. Sometimes the effects of status may even override the gender effects in interruption (Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985). However, it should be noted that the effects of status observed in Kollock et al. (1985) were based on a dominance approach, and that the gender differences they considered were differences only in the total number of interruptions initiated by men or women. The present research argues for a typological dichotomy and distinguishes between disruptive and cooperative interruptions, the former related to dominance, the latter solidarity. With this distinction in mind, it seems reasonable to predict that characters of higher status may be more likely to initiate disruptive interruptions whereas characters of lower status may be more likely to utilize cooperative interruptions. In other words:

H2: Status influences the distribution of interruptions in prime-time television fiction such that higher status characters are more likely to interrupt disruptively and lower status characters are more likely to interrupt cooperatively.

Given our focal concern over gender differences, this study also asks to what extent status may be able to suppress or moderate the effects of gender on the distribution of the two types of interruptions.

RQ2: Controlling for status, does gender (still) make any difference in the distributions of disruptive and cooperative interruptions in prime-time television fiction?

As discussed earlier, topic of conversation may also play a part in shaping the distribution of interruptions. The present study makes a distinction between social-interpersonal and work-related conversations in television dialogue. Experimentation has found that cooperative interruptions are characteristic of casual, unstructured conversations (Dindia, 1987), whereas disruptive interruptions are particularly likely to emerge in task-oriented conversations that may involve conflict and competition (Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985; Roger & Nesshoever, 1987; see also James & Clarke, 1993). Although the distinction between casual and task-oriented conversations in well-controlled experimental settings may not be identical to the general topical distinction between social-interpersonal and work-related interactions, it seems safe to assume that these two distinctions will be consistent in most cases. This study therefore predicts that

H3: In prime-time television fiction, disruptive interruptions are more likely to happen in work-related conversations than in social-interpersonal conversations; cooperative interruptions are more likely to occur in social-interpersonal conversations than in work-related conversations.

As in the case of gender and status, the relationship between gender and conversation topic also raises an interesting issue—gender and topic may work in the same direction and confound one another. This could easily be the case because

in the television world men typically are found in work-related environments and women appear more often in domestic or social settings (Gunter, 1995). In view of this, the present study asks whether different patterns of gender differences emerge in conversations with different topics.

RQ3: In prime-time television fiction, does gender influence the distributions of disruptive and cooperative interruptions differently as conversation topic varies?

Method

Data for this study came from a videotape database gathered for another large-scale study conducted at a Midwestern university in the United States. This database contains a composite week of television programming from 10 networks between March and July 2000. The present study, however, used only prime-time fiction (sitcoms and dramas) from the four major U.S. commercial television networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX.

Conversations in the selected television fiction shows were coded for interruptions. Interruptions were identified by two crucial criteria: (a) The current speaker's turn is stopped before it shows any sign of reaching a transition relevant place, and (b) the second speaker starts speaking in the middle of the current turn with the intention of taking over the floor. According to these criteria, "overlaps" in Zimmerman and West's sense (1975) did not count as interruptions. That is, if a character began to speak "at or very close to a possible transition place in a current speaker's utterance (i.e., within the boundaries of the last word)" (Zimmerman & West, 1975, p. 114), the segment of speech would not be coded as an interruption. Minimal responses, such as "mhm," "uh-uh," and "yeah," which were typically used by the listener to indicate active listening did not count as interruptions either. Furthermore, situations with multiple parties speaking at the same time, for example, in chaotic crime scenes or hospital scenes, were not considered in the coding because it was generally difficult to discern who was speaking to whom.

Coding Instrument

A coding instrument was designed to code the interruptions encountered in the sampled television shows. The variables coded include network (ABC, CBS, NBC, or FOX), genre (sitcom vs. drama), program, gender of the interrupter and interruptee, status differential between the interrupter and interruptee (positive vs. neutral vs. negative), conversation topic when interruption happens (work vs. social-interpersonal), and type of interruption (disruptive vs. cooperative). Operational definitions of key variables in the instrument follow:

Gender. Both the interrupters and interruptees were coded for gender. Three levels were given in the instrument: male, female, unknown/undetermined.

Status differential between interrupter and interruptee. The effect of status was measured via the status differential between the interrupter and interruptee. Status

differential was coded directly rather than by coding interactants' statuses first and then calculating out the status differential for the interruption. This approach was based on the following considerations: First, coding the status of each interactant would require a very sophisticated coding scheme if reasonable validity was to be achieved. Second, compared to coding status differential directly, coding each interactant individually would be less sensitive to the contextual particularities of each interruption because it takes the interactants out of context in the coding.

Three categories of status differential were used in this study: positive (the interrupter had higher status than the interruptee), neutral (the interrupter and interruptee had equal status), and negative (the interruptee had higher status than the interrupter). When coding for status differential, gender was not the basis of status appraisal. Thus, on encountering an interruption, the coder took into account the interactants' social-economic information, level of superiority, familial relationship, and so on, in order to figure out the status differential between them. At the same time, the specific context of the interruption was considered in the coding decision. For example, normally a conversation between a business manager and his employee would have a status differential in favor of the boss. However, if the boss and the employee went on a business trip together, had an accident, and wound up in the woods struggling to survive, the status differential could be different—especially when the employee turned out to be a person conversant with survival skills.

Conversation topic. This study differentiated two categories of conversation topics in television fiction: work and social-interpersonal. Work topics included those predominantly relevant to the speaker fulfilling his or her occupational responsibilities. Business talk, discussion of homework, doctor-patient interaction, and the like would be examples of conversations with work topics. Such conversations typically would occur in workplaces. But they could also emerge in other conversation settings, such as in a restaurant where potential business partners sought to cut a deal over dinner. Social-interpersonal topics, on the other hand, were primarily about socializing, sharing non-work-related information and fostering and developing interpersonal relationships. A chat about sports between friends, a talk between parents and children on the forthcoming vacation, a conversation about the weather between coworkers during a coffee break, for example, would represent instances of social-interpersonal conversations.

Type of interruption. Disruptive interruptions included those that served to disagree (e.g., "I don't think so," in response to an expressed opinion), disconfirm (e.g., "That is not true," in response to a statement of fact), reject (e.g., "That is a bad idea," in response to a suggestion), or change the topic (e.g., "Where is my notebook?"—an irrelevant topic started in the middle of whatever the current speaker is saying). Cooperative interruptions, on the other hand, served to show agreement ("You are right, this shirt is a little small," in response to "My shirt feels so tight"), understanding ("I definitely see what you mean," in response to an expressed opinion), interest in the topic ("That's interesting! Did you also..."), or the need for clarification ("Did you just say a thousand?").

Data Collection

Coding was done in two stages in April and May 2001. In the first stage two coders independently coded about 10% of the sampled television shows. They identified cases of interruptions, which represented more than 10% of the total number of interruptions existing in the sample (435). We subjected their coding of the 49 interruptions to a Krippendorff's α test and obtained high intercoder reliability scores on all variables (network 1.0, genre 1.0, gender of interrupter 1.0, gender of interruptee 1.0, status .97, topic, .96, type of interruption .92).

Because of the satisfactory level of intercoder reliability, one of the coders went on to the second stage of coding and alone coded all the remaining programs. This coder's coding of the cases used for intercoder reliability test was included in the final dataset.

Results

Altogether 55 television shows were coded in this study; 27 of them were dramas, 28 were sitcoms. We identified a total of 435 interruptions. In 245 (56%) cases, the interrupters were males; in 189 (43%) cases, the interrupters were females; in one case, the interrupter's gender was unknown or undetermined. Among the characters interrupted, 273 (63%) were males, 161 (37%) were females, 1 was unknown or undetermined in gender.

In 145 (33%) interruptions, the interrupters were of higher status than the interruptees. In 241 (55%) interruptions, the interrupters and the interruptees were of equal status. In 49 (11%) interruptions, the interrupters had lower status than the interruptees. Two hundred and one (46%) interruptions occurred in work-related conversations and 233 (54%) in social-interpersonal conversations. In one case, the topic of the conversation was unknown. Of the 435 interruptions, 329 (76%) were disruptive, 106 (24%) were cooperative.

All the hypotheses and research questions were tested and answered by chi-square analyses. Cross tabulation between gender of interrupter and type of interruption showed that 81% of the interruptions initiated by men and 68% of the interruptions initiated by women were disruptive. Correspondingly, 19% of the interruptions conducted by men and 32% of the interruptions by women were cooperative. The difference between men and women was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 434) = 9.72, p = .002$. H1 was supported.

RQ1 asked whether male and female characters would differ in the types of interruptions they received. About three quarters of the interruptions directed at men (76%) and women (75%) were disruptive. The remaining one fourth were cooperative. There was no significant relationship between the sex of the interruptees and the type of interruptions they received, $\chi^2(1, N = 434) = .025, p = .88$.

We did find significant relationship between status and type of interruption, $\chi^2(2, N = 435) = 9.19, p = .01$ (see Table 1). However, the significant relationship was mainly manifested in the differences between cases with neutral status differentials and those with either positive or negative differentials. Most (83%) of the

Table 1. Status and Type of Interruption

Status	Type of interruption	
	Disruptive	Cooperative
Positive	121 (83%)	24 (17%)
Neutral	169 (70%)	72 (30%)
Negative	39 (80%)	10 (20%)

interruptions with positive status differentials (the interrupters had higher status than the interruptees) turned out to be disruptive, followed closely (80%) by interruptions with negative status differentials (the interrupters had lower status than the interruptees). In comparison, only 70% of the interruptions with neutral status differentials (interrupters and interruptees were of equal status) were disruptive. The reverse was true for cooperative interruptions. This pattern of results did not provide unequivocal support for H2. Whereas the differences between interruptions with positive differentials and interruptions with neutral differentials were in line with the hypothesis, the differences between interruptions with neutral differentials and interruptions with negative differentials ran counter to the hypothesized relationship.

RQ2 asked whether gender would still make any difference after controlling for status. To answer this question, we conducted a three-way cross tabulation. The results are summarized in Table 2. As the table shows, the significant relationship between gender and type of interruption (H1) held only in the positive status differential category, $\chi^2(1, N = 144) = 7.57, p = .013$. The influence of gender of interrupter on type of interruption became insignificant when status structure was neutral, $\chi^2(1, N = 241) = 1.64, p = .21$, or negative, $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = .86, p = .48$.

Cross tabulation between topic of conversation and type of interruption revealed a significant relationship, $\chi^2(1, N = 434) = 9.97, p = .002$. In work-related conversations, 83% of the interruptions were disruptive; in social-interpersonal conversations, 70% of the interruptions were disruptive. On the other hand, 30% of the interruptions in social-interpersonal conversations were cooperative, whereas in work-related conversations, only 17% of the interruptions were cooperative. Thus, H3 was supported.

Finally, we conducted a three-way cross tabulation to examine the interaction between gender and topic of conversation (RQ3). As Table 3 shows, the pattern of gender differences observed earlier (H1) remained significant when the topic of conversation is work-related, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 8.69, p = .004$. It became insignificant in social-interpersonal conversations, $\chi^2(1, N = 233) = 1.01, p = .2$.

In further exploratory analysis, the hypotheses and research questions were examined in the contexts of sitcoms and dramas respectively. Because of small sample sizes, some of the tests were unreliable (containing expected values less than 5). These analyses will not be presented here.

Table 2. Gender of Interrupter and Type of Interruption Controlling for Status

	Gender of interrupter	Type of interruption	
		Disruptive	Cooperative
Positive	Male	89 (89%)	11 (11%)
	Female	31 (70.5%)	13 (29.5%)
Neutral	Male	88 (73.9%)	31 (26.1%)
	Female	81 (66.4%)	41 (33.6%)
Negative ^a	Male	22 (84.6%)	4 (15.4%)
	Female	17 (73.9%)	6 (26.1%)

^aOne cell has expected value less than 5.

Summary

Our results showed that gender differences exist in the initiation, but not in the reception, of disruptive and cooperative interruptions. Overall, male characters are more likely to interrupt disruptively and less likely to interrupt cooperatively than female characters. Status differential and conversation topic are also associated with interruption type. Compared with cooperative interruptions, disruptive interruptions are more likely to occur in interactions with either positive or negative status differentials and less likely to occur in interactions with neutral status differentials. Disruptive interruptions are also more likely to occur in work-related conversations and less likely to occur in social-interpersonal conversations than cooperative interruptions. Moreover, the effects of status and topic tend to moderate the effects of gender, such that significant gender differences persist only when the status structure of the situation is positive and when the topic of the conversation is about work.

Discussion

The most important finding in this study is apparently the differential use of disruptive and cooperative interruptions by male and female television characters. This finding clearly suggests that the distinction between disruptive and cooperative interruptions is necessary and important. This distinction does justice to the subtlety of interruptions that are largely overlooked in the dominance tradition of interruption studies. Among all the interruptions identified in this study, about one fourth were cooperative in nature. This proportion alone speaks loudly to the possibility of misleading conclusions if all interruptions were indiscriminately treated as manifestations of power and conflict.

Table 3. Gender and Type of Interruption Controlling for Topic of Conversation

Topic	Gender of interrupter	Type of interruption	
		Disruptive	Cooperative
Work	Male	118 (88%)	16 (12%)
	Female	47 (71%)	19 (29%)
Social-interpersonal	Male	80 (73%)	30 (27%)
	Female	82 (67%)	41 (33%)

Among the three hypotheses, H2 (the relationship between status and type of interruption) is the only one that did not receive full support from the data. Curiously, we found that interruptions with negative status differentials are more likely to be disruptive and less likely to be cooperative than interruptions with neutral status differentials. One possible explanation for this phenomenon may be that in the television world, people at the bottom of the social hierarchy have a stronger sense of defiance than people who are in the middle. They can afford to interrupt disruptively more often because they have less to lose. People of middle-level status, on the other hand, tend to be more cautious in conducting disruptive interruptions because more is at stake for them if other people, particularly people of higher status, are offended by their disruptive interactional strategies.

Besides gender and status, topic of conversation also plays a role in determining the use of disruptive and cooperative interruptions in fictional television. Overall, more disruptive interruptions and less cooperative interruptions emerge in work-related conversations than in social-interpersonal conversations. Such differences are largely in line with the findings of some earlier studies of real-life conversations (Dindia, 1987; Roger & Nesshoever, 1987; also see James & Clarke, 1993).

This research also produced some interesting results with respect to the moderating effects of status and topic on the observed gender differences. Two observations can be made from these findings. First, gender differences uncovered in this study are not the overarching force in deciding how and what kind of interruptions are used in the television world. The effect of gender may become indistinct when status differential is neutral or negative, or when topic of conversation is social-interpersonal. Second, and on the other hand, gender differences persist even when controlling for the effect of status or topic. As previously reviewed, many researchers, frustrated by the inconsistency of findings in traditional interruption research, have suspected that gender differences may not exist at all in interruptions (Aries, 1996; James & Clarke, 1993). Findings from this study offered no support for this suspicion. In prime-time television fiction, gender appears to play an important role in determining how a character interrupts, particularly when the character's status is high or when the topic of conversations is work.

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. First, as discussed above, the typological approach has proven to be a rewarding perspective in the study of interruptions. The gender differences uncovered in this study would be completely obscured if the distinction between disruptive and cooperative interruptions was not made. Furthermore, this typological approach has enabled this study to look in greater depth into the effects of status and topic and their relationship to gender. None of this would have been possible in a study that treats interruption as an invariant expression of dominance and power.

Secondly, this study has demonstrated further that mediated language materials are rich sources of information about interpersonal communication. Earlier research has found that basic conversational mechanisms, in particular the turn-taking system, are also at work in interactions on television (e.g., Heritage, Clayman, & Zimmerman, 1988). Proceeding from these observations, this study specifically addressed the way characters interrupt in prime-time television fiction. The findings exhibited a high level of complexity and intricacy. TV characters not only interrupt for a variety of purposes, they also adjust their interrupting behaviors according to their own gender, and the status of their conversational partners, as well as the subject matter of the conversation, much as real people converse in the real world. In this sense, such findings have rendered ample support to Lakoff and Tannen's belief that artificial dialogue represents "an internalized model or schema for the production of conversation" (Tannen, 1994, p. 139).

At this point we must acknowledge that important differences exist between interruptions in television fiction and interruptions in real life. Fictional dialogue on television is, after all, fictional. It is "unnatural" by definition. Indeed, television often makes its characters interrupt in different ways and with different frequencies than people normally would in the real world. At times such aberrations brusquely violate social conventions, and the audience is shocked. Perhaps more often, though, they tend to exploit those conventions hyperbolically just so that characters can be portrayed more vividly (for example, by making David Spade's character in *Just Shoot Me* use disruptive interruptions constantly in order to portray him as an obnoxious man).

The profound significance of this exaggerated, and sometimes distorted, reflection of the reality is richly illustrated by research considering the extent to which television viewing is also a learning process (e.g., Bandura, 1977). How, though, do we characterize the general message viewers may learn from watching television interruptions? The findings of this study may be interpreted differently by scholars holding different theoretical and political viewpoints. For mass communication scholars concerned with stereotypical portrayals of women in the media, the observed gender differences could be viewed as additional evidence for the existence of stereotypes on television. In the television world, women still need to be more polite, more supportive, and more accommodating than men in their speech, even when they are interrupting. As such, today's fictional television not only mirrors the stereotypical perceptions of women in society at large, it may also strengthen these perceptions and help reinforce the way women verbally conduct themselves in the real world.

The same line of reasoning, however, also points at some positive implications the present research may have for television production. Many currently running shows have allegedly been trying to empower women by putting women outside the home sphere and locating them in powerful positions in workplaces. The findings of this study, however, suggest that changing the ways women are linguistically portrayed on television, including the ways in which they use interruptions, may be another venue to achieve that purpose.

Limitations of the Present Study

A major limitation of the present study is its small sample. Although 55 shows were coded in this study, the number of interruptions observed was not large enough to allow for reliable genre comparison or further investigation of interactions between the major variables. The data could accommodate only three-way cross-tabulations. Four- or higher-way cross tabulations would leave many cells with expected values less than 5, thus rendering the results of chi-square analyses unreliable.

Another limitation of this study is that it looked only at television dialogue from a narrow range of programming. It did not look at daytime shows, nor did it look at shows from anywhere other than the four U.S. commercial networks. This sampling method certainly limits the scope of generalization for the findings of this study.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should tap into the possibility that different kinds of gender politics may be at work in different genres of programming. For example, in view of the different natures of sitcoms and dramas, it seems reasonable to speculate that female characters in sitcoms may use more disruptive interruptions in work-related conversations than those in dramas. The typological approach can also be applied to nonfiction programming. A few research studies have investigated the use of interruptions in political debates and talk show interviews (Brinson & Winn, 1997; Bull & Mayer, 1988). It would be interesting to see how interruptions with different natures are allocated between interviewers and interviewees, between debate participants, between sports commentators, between cohosts of news broadcasts, and so forth.

Experiments can also be designed to test the differential effects of disruptive and cooperative interruptions on television viewers' perceptions. Subjects can be presented with excerpts of different types of interruptions and then asked to evaluate both the interrupter and the interruptee and the relationship between the two. Such evaluations may then be related to the viewers' general social attitudes, particularly gender-related beliefs. Results from this kind of research would provide further justification for the study of characters' linguistic behaviors on television.

Finally, this research has illustrated the fruitfulness of using television data to study interruption. Speech communication researchers should feel encouraged to examine other conversational phenomena, such as conversational repair or topic switching, in the context of television dialogue.

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