The concept of conversational style assignment

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the concept of conversational style in terms of the structure and function of conversation in general and focusing on cultural and gender differences in particular. Deborah Tannen broadly defines conversational style as " a combination of features relating to meaning and management of conversation: prosody (rhythm and intonation), overlapping, repetition, use of laughter, tolerance of noise and silence, and ways of using anecdotes, asking questions, linking topics and expressing particular emotions" (1984, cited by Maybin, 2006).

The aspects of style identified by Tannen are some of the elements that constitute the structural features of conversation. Some structural features such as turn-taking and adjacency pairs may be fairly predictable. Other features may not be so obvious. For example, speakers may use language ambiguously and may not finish their sentences, they may interrupt others or remain silent for long periods, or, if they are multilingual, they may ' codeswitch', that is to say they mix in words and grammar from their native language.

Various studies have shown that these seemingly random language events are also structural features of conversation whose function within the conversation may be as significant as the actual words spoken. (Maybin 2006). When considering the functions of conversation, Maybin (1996) cites the linguist Halliday (1978) who suggests that conversation has both an interpersonal function, that of building relationships, and an ideational function, that of conveying ideas, sharing knowledge and experience and achieving purposes (Maybin, 1996).

It may be said that the ways in which people use the various aspects and features of conversation make up their personal conversation style and that people are likely to adopt different styles depending on the context. However, Maybin suggests that some aspects of style are intricately connected to where we are from, our cultural background, social class, age and gender and suggests it is possible to identify significant aspects of style by comparing different cultural groups and different genders.

Furthermore, she argues that when people with differing communication styles engage in talk, misunderstandings can sometimes result with more or less serious implications (Maybin, 1996). Diane Eades, an Australian linguist, studied the conversational style of Aboriginal English speakers in Australia. In an interview with Maybin, Eades identifies three main features of conversational style that differ from the style of White Australians.

Eades argues that these differences have serious consequences for Aboriginals in the Australian law courts. The first of these features is a general indirectness of speech and an avoidance of seeking information directly through the asking of questions. Eades (Exploring the English Language, U211) explains: " there is a cultural assumption with a lot of middle-class whites in Australia (…), if you want to find something out you ask a question.

Well that's an assumption that isn't shared in Aboriginal societies. In fact, in Aboriginal society if you want to find something out, you contribute something of your own. " Eades argues that their indirect style of interaction serves the function of personal privacy which balances their otherwise public

lifestyle. Another aspect of style identified by Eades is the way Aboriginal people use silence as an integral and positive part of conversation.

Eades argues that the use of silence has an interpersonal function: " Silence seems to be an important thing, in people getting to know each other, in people spending time with people that they already know. " The third feature is something Eades refers to as the ' yes of gratuitous concurrence' whereby the Aboriginal people often agree with what is being said not because they agree with the proposition but either to keep the conversation flowing or to avoid disagreement.

This would suggest that the function of the ' yes of gratuitous concurrence' is to maintain or create rapport between speakers. In her article, Communicative strategies in Aboriginal English, Eades (1991) argues that Aboriginal people use ' gratuitous concurrence' as a way of responding to the more direct communication style of white speakers and that this cross-cultural communication may have negative results particularly in police interviews, law courts, medical consultations and other official contexts (Eades 1991 cited in Maybin 2007).

Referring back to her interview with Maybin, Eades states that the imprisonment rates for Aboriginal people are unnaturally high and argues that this can be due to Aboriginal witnesses having their silences interrupted by lawyers while they are giving their evidence so they cannot answer properly and also because when they are standing in the witness box and being asked a series of yes/no questions, they often use the ' yes of

gratuitous concurrence' in order to go along with things thinking they can go back to it later.

Professor Janet Holmes, a sociolinguist from Victoria University in New Zealand also identified cross-cultural differences whilst researching the role of compliments in female-male interaction. Holmes (1994) suggests there are different norms between communities in how often and in what context compliments are given. Americans, for example, are seen to pay too many compliments compared to the Indonesians living in the US and likewise, Malaysian students in New Zealand consider New Zealanders to pay many compliments compared to them.

Not only do these differences influence the ways in which communities perceive each other – for example, New Zealanders perceive American's to be insincere in their compliments as a result of them being too frequent – but Holmes suggests such differences cause miscommunication or embarrassment and illustrates her point with an example of a Pekeha New Zealand woman who compliments her Samoan friend on her beautiful necklace. The Samoan friend responds by offering the necklace to the woman causing her embarrassment.

Holmes explains that the Samoan woman was simply responding in a way that was the cultural norm for her (Holmes, cited by Maybin, 2006). The main focus of Holmes's work, however, was investigating the relationship between features of conversational style and gender. In her research based on New Zealand speech patterns, Holmes found that women gave two-thirds of all the compliments recorded and received three-quarters of them showing that

complimenting is a feature of female conversation more than male conversation. Holmes gives the function of compliments as " positive speech cts which are used to express friendship and increase rapport between people" and concludes that her research is " consistent with research suggesting that women's linguistic behaviour can be broadly characterised as facilitative and co-operative and concerned with connection, rather than competitive or control oriented and concerned with status" (Holmes, cited by Maybin, 2006). In an interview with Maybin, Holmes discusses the use of ' tag questions'. An example of a tag question would be ' this is correct, isn't it? Holmes's research into tag-questions and gender was in response to claims made by Robin Lakoff that women use more tag questions than men to express uncertainty. Holmes's own research found that when looking at the use of tag questions in context men and women used them for different functions. Holmes identifies two ways tag questions are used other than to express uncertainty. One is the ' facilitative tag' which serves the purpose of facilitating communication and the other is the ' softening tag' which softens the imperative.

Holmes concludes that " although women use more [tag questions] over all, they also use considerably more than men for the facilitative function, whereas men tended to use more than women for the uncertainty function. " To conclude, conversational style can be seen as the sum total of the linguistic features that we use. The ways in which people use linguistic features can differ between cultures and gender and these differences can lead to misunderstandings which can have serious implications.

Finally, to properly understand the meaning of conversation, it is not enough to look at the structure of communication alone, but in conjunction with its function and context. Words: 1304

References Maybin J (1996) ' Everyday Talk' in Maybin J. and Mercer, N (eds) Using English: From Conversation to Canon, London, Routledge/Milton Keynes, The Open University Maybin/Eades (2007), U211: Exploring the English Language, DVD1 Maybin/Holmes (2007), U211: Exploring the English Language, DVD1