Women's talk in public contexts

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the distribution and function of women's and men's contributions to formal discourse. Evidence is provided that males talk for longer and make more frequent contributions than females in formal contexts such as seminars, TV discussions and full-class exchanges in classrooms. These contexts are ones in which talk is highly valued because contributions generally have status-enhancing potential. Moreover, the predominant function of talk in these contexts tends to be expository. Women tend to contribute more talk in less formal contexts and their contributions often facilitate exploratory talk—talk which assists a more extensive exploration of issues. An analysis of the types of elicitations which occurred in formal public seminars in New Zealand and their distribution between the sexes illustrates these points. The paper ends with some practical suggestions of ways in which the unequal distribution of public discourse between women and men might be reduced.

KEY WORDS: elicitations, exploratory talk, formal discourse, gender, power, sex, women's talk

> I've noticed this over the years as we've got more women in the House that, whereas we men can talk across the House in measured terms ... when the ladies get at each other the knives get out. ... Frankly I'm a little bit scared of them. (Sir Robert Muldoon quoted in Wellington *Evening Post*, 20 June 1991)
>
> 'I'm waiting for a leader to establish himself so I can go for his throat', said one male participant in the discussion. (Schick Case, 1988: 51)

INTRODUCTION

There is now an extensive literature exploring ways in which women's and men's talk differs (see Holmes, 1991, for a review). In general, contrary to Sir Robert Muldoon's observations, analyses of typical female ways of interacting have identified features which can be described as cooperative, facilitative and 'other-oriented'. By contrast male talk has been characterized as typically competitive, argumentative and verbally aggressive. Women tend to be process-oriented where men are more task- or product-

DISCOURSE & SOCIETY © 1992 SAGE (London, Newbury Park and New Delhi) VOL. 3(2): 131–150.

oriented. Women use interactive devices which encourage others to contribute and participate, and signal that they are paying attention, while men tend to compete for the floor, interrupt frequently, assert their views strongly and disagree baldly with others.

While these features are widely attested, at least for white middle-class adults, there is some disagreement about the relative amounts of talk that women and men contribute to interaction. Some researchers have found that women talk more than men, but others report just the opposite.[1] One explanation for these apparently inconsistent results can be found by looking at the contexts in which the data have been collected, and the different purposes of the talk.

Language serves many functions—often simultaneously. One useful and widely accepted distinction is that between social, interpersonal or affective talk on the one hand, and referential or informative talk on the other (e.g. Hymes, 1974; Halliday 1980, 1985). In contexts where the primary function of talk is interpersonal or social, women tend to contribute more. When the primary function of talk is referential and focused on information, men often talk more. These tendencies become even more apparent in different contexts. Women tend to be more comfortable in private, informal contexts of talk, whereas men are generally more willing than women to contribute in more public or formal contexts. In general, then, women are most comfortable talking one-to-one or in small groups, and they are generally more concerned with affective or social meaning than men are. Men, on the other hand, are most comfortable with referential or information-oriented talk, and they are more willing than women to contribute in public, formal contexts. Clearly these are broad generalizations, and it is always possible to find exceptions, but they are helpful background in trying to account for the differential contribution to talk by women and men in different contexts.

In this paper I focus on talk in more formal contexts, examining both the social and the referential function of talk in such contexts, and the implications for women in particular. It will become clear that there are a number of arguments for a more equal distribution of talk between women and men in more formal contexts. The paper concludes with a number of suggested strategies for achieving this goal.

VALUED AND VALUABLE TALK

Who talks most?

Studies of conferences (Spender, 1979; Swacker, 1979), seminars (Holmes, 1988; Bashiruddin et al., 1990; Holmes and Stubbe, forthcoming), formal meetings (e.g. Eakins and Eakins, 1979; Edelsky 1981; Schick Case, 1988; Woods, 1988; Graddol and Swann, 1989), mock jury deliberations (Strodtbeck and Mann, 1956) and television discussions (Bernard, 1972; Edelsky and Adams, 1990) have demonstrated that in general men take more

frequent and longer turns than women in such contexts. I will give just two very clear examples of this pattern based on research in New Zealand.[2]

Margaret Franken (1983) recorded three television programmes involving interviews with three (male) public figures. In each programme there were three interviewers: the front-person, who was a woman, and two invited guests who were different in each interview, one male and one female. Franken compared the contributions of the different interviewers to the discussion. There was no reason why any one of them should talk more than any other, though one could argue that the front-person, who had responsibility for the success of the discussion, might legitimately have been expected to contribute more than her two guest assistants. The results, however, revealed that she spoke least, and in a situation where each of three television interviewers was entitled to at most 33 percent of the interviewers' talking time, the males appropriated at least 50 percent of it on every occasion.

A second example is provided by an analysis which I undertook of the questions asked by participants in 100 public meetings or seminars on a very wide range of topics. Once again, men dominated the discussion time. Overall they asked 75 percent of the questions. In formal and public settings, it is not surprising to find men made up the majority of the audience at almost every meeting—on average they constituted 66 percent of the audiences. But even in sessions where the numbers of women and men were approximately equal, men asked 62 percent of all the questions during the discussion. In fact, men asked the majority of the questions in all but seven of the 100 sessions. Women participated much less than men in these formal and public discussions. (I return to these data in the discussion of elicitations below.)

In classrooms too, at all levels, especially in full-class sessions and group discussions with the teacher, the same pattern holds. Males dominate the talking time (Brophy and Good, 1974; Elliott, 1974; Safilios-Rothschild, 1979; Spender, 1980a, 1982; Brooks, 1982; Sadker and Sadker, 1985; de Bie, 1987; Swann, 1988; Swann and Graddol, 1988; Craig and Pitts, 1990). Among adults and older children, males also tend to dominate in small group discussions (Munro, 1987; Holmes, 1989; Gilbert, 1990), and the same is true in at least some experimental laboratory discussions (Leet-Pellegrini, 1980; West and Zimmerman, 1983).

Solidarity and status

One explanation which has been proposed for male domination of the talking time in more formal contexts is that women are more concerned with solidarity or 'connection' (Gilligan, 1982; Tannen, 1990), while men are more interested in status and being one up. Features of female talk, such as facilitative pragmatic particles, agreeing comments, attentive listening and responsive feedback (Strodtbeck and Mann, 1956; Edelsky, 1981; Holmes, 1984, 1986, 1990; Coates 1988; Schick Case 1988), very obviously reflect concern for others and a desire to make contact and

strengthen relationships. Male talk, on the other hand, appears to be more concerned with dominating others. Challenging utterances, assertive disagreements and disruptive interruptions are all examples of strategies which typically characterize male rather than female talk, in both black and white communities, and which may function to claim the floor and so dominate the talking time (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987; Goodwin, 1988; Pilkington, 1989; van Alphen, 1987; Schick Case, 1988; Tannen, 1990).

These male talk strategies also serve the purpose of asserting status or power in some contexts. While talk in public formal contexts generally has a relatively high information content, it also has a social function—to signal and possibly increase the status of the speaker. Talk in public contexts is potentially status-enhancing; effective public speaking is one strategy for achieving status in a group. One might call it *valued* talk, since effective contributions clearly have the potential to considerably increase a person's status or mana. Typical examples of such valued contexts would be public meetings, seminars, conferences and formal management meetings, though certain less formal interactions involving influential or significant 'others' may also be contexts where talk is valued as a potential source of increased status. It is in these *valued* contexts that men tend to talk most.

The interactive patterns which characterize women's and men's talk can thus be interpreted as reflecting the different social orientations of the speakers. If women are concerned with solidarity and connection, it is easy to see why they tend to talk least in formal and public contexts, while the opposite tends to be true for men. The more private the context, the more appropriate the focus on interpersonal, affective meanings. The more public and formal the context, the more likely considerations of status will be relevant. And while men appear to be comfortable contributing in contexts where demonstrating one's expertise is acceptable behaviour, women seem to be less comfortable in such status-oriented contexts.

Expository and exploratory talk

Talk in formal and public contexts such as seminars, conferences and meetings also has an important referential function. Indeed, some would down-play, if not deny, the 'status-enhancing' social function discussed above, and claim that conveying information is the primary function of talk in such contexts. Certainly, much of the talk in these contexts can be described as *expository*—it is an exposition of facts and/or opinions. However, by virtue of the context, it is usually also 'display' talk—an opportunity to display what you know—and this is one basis for the claim that from a social point of view it is potentially status-enhancing 'valued' talk.

But there is another kind of talk whose primary function is undoubtedly referential, which may also occur in such contexts, though it is typical of less formal interaction. It has been called *exploratory* talk (Barnes, 1976; Barnes and Todd, 1977; Marland, 1977; Cazden, 1987). Exploratory talk is defined as talk that allows people to explore and develop their ideas

through the joint negotiation of meaning (Barnes, 1976: 28). In contrast to expository talk, which I have described as *valued* because status-enhancing, exploratory talk could be labelled *valuable* talk. It is cognitively valuable as a means of coming to grips with new concepts and integrating them with existing knowledge. It is also cognitively valuable as a means of thinking through the implications of proposals on which decisions for future action can be based.

It is easy to see that high-quality exploratory talk is essential in a range of contexts. It seems obvious that the quality of the discussion in the more public and formal kinds of contexts described would benefit from being less expository and more exploratory. Such talk could move the discussion from exposition alone towards a fuller understanding of difficult issues, for example, and towards the exploration and development of the ideas presented. Many would see this as desirable, and indeed it is the professed goal of many public meetings, conferences and seminars. How might this be achieved?

THE FEMALE ROLE IN EXPLORATORY TALK

Classroom discussion

It seems that one strategy for shifting expository talk towards exploratory discussion with its attendant cognitive benefits might be to increase the numbers of females contributing to the discussion. There is little research on sex differences in this area, but what there is suggests that the features of women's talk described above facilitate 'exploratory' talk, and that women's talk strategies tend to improve the quality of the discussion.

High-quality exploratory interaction is essentially collaborative. Successful collaboration is based on the use of facilitative devices such as soliciting contributions from others, providing supporting feedback, extending others' contributions and disagreeing in a non-confrontational manner (Barnes and Todd, 1977). It will be clear from the discussion above that these are characteristics of female talk. By contrast Barnes and Todd (1977: 72) note that competing for the floor, belittling, rejecting and disagreeing with others' contributions and exchanging insults were talk strategies which resulted in less effective discussion. These strategies are generally more typical of male interaction. It appears, then, that where females are involved in referentially oriented interaction, the likelihood of thoughtful exploratory discussion is increased.

Recent New Zealand research supports this. Jane Gilbert (1990) analysed the speech of fifteen Wellington teenagers in a series of discussions which formed part of the work for some science modules. She found that in mixed-sex groups of four or five pupils, the boys talked most, and they were also the most frequent interrupters. Girls were much more likely to provide positive and supportive feedback, and to facilitate talk. In particular, boys in the single-sex group interrupted each other almost twice as often as students in any other group. Jane Gilbert comments that this

group was also the one in which least 'cognitive' talk took place. ('Cognitive' talk was defined as exploratory talk concerned with developing and explaining ideas and reflecting full engagement in the science content of the task.)

In her conclusion, reflecting on the overall quality of the discussion in different groups, Gilbert comments:

> The girls in both the single-sex and mixed group were more skilled in providing the conditions in which exploratory talk is most likely to take place. They provide considerable amounts of feedback to other group members, most of which is supportive, and they rarely interrupt other speakers. In the single-sex girls' group it was particularly noticeable that students almost always allowed other group members to continue talking until it was obvious that they had no more to say. (1990: 149)

Her study also provides support for the view that most discussion of this type benefits from having girls as group members:

> The boys were clearly advantaged by being in a mixed-sex group. They had considerably larger number of opportunities to talk in an exploratory way than the boys in the single-sex group did. They also received much more feedback on their contributions, most of which was positive. (1990: 149)

Gilbert's study thus provides convincing evidence that female ways of talking have advantages in furthering educational goals and in facilitating exploratory talk.

In a somewhat similar study, Maria Stubbe found that putting younger children in pairs rather than in groups tended to reduce sex differences in features of interaction (Stubbe, 1991). She notes, for instance, that working in pairs reduces the amount of competition for the floor, and that overall the boys were not noticeably aggressive in their style. Nevertheless, the boys were much more likely to express disagreement baldly, while girls were more likely to qualify disagreement. The boys' disagreement strategy tended to cut the discussion off short, while qualified disagreements encouraged further exploration and clarification of the area of contention. Modified disagreements acknowledged the validity of the other person's viewpoint, posed the issue as a shared problem and encouraged the pair to search for a solution which accommodated both their opinions. Interestingly, Stubbe noted that boys produced fewer bald disagreements when talking to girls than when in single-sex pairs, and, like Gilbert, she found that the quality of the discussion was generally highest when girls were involved. Indeed a tendency to qualify disagreements and look for areas of agreement generally reflected the likely progress of a pair towards the fuller and more sophisticated understanding of a complex issue which results from considering alternative points of view and attempting to reconcile and integrate them. These strategies were generally more typical of interactions involving girls.

Qualifying one's own or another's contribution is one of the features of good discussion identified by Barnes and Todd (1977). Another key feature of good exploratory talk is the occurrence of non-threatening open-

ended elicitations which encourage participants to explore the implications of their statements and to support them with explicit argumentation.

Questions and elicitations in public contexts

The studies described above were based on a small number of discussions involving no more than twenty school pupils in each case. In order to test further the claim that females are more likely to use elicitations which facilitate discussion, I looked in more detail at the types of elicitations used by women and men in a wide range of formal public seminar discussions.

In research examining tag questions (Holmes, 1984) I found that such questions served a variety of functions. Tags might express uncertainty and request confirmation of the validity of a proposition. (The / above the tag question indicates rising intonation.)

(1) *Context: boss to secretary*

that meeting with Fenton is at three isn't it /

Alternatively they might encourage contributions to a conversation or invite participation in a discussion, as (2) illustrates. (The \ above the tag question indicates falling intonation.)

(2) *Context: chairperson to committee member at a meeting*

you've done some work on this, Jim, haven't you \

A third type of tag served to soften a directive or a criticism, as illustrated in (3).

(3) *Context: mother to son after he has dropped a plate of food on the floor*

well that was a dumb thing to do wasn't it \

Without the tag, the criticism would have sounded more severe.

These three types of tag can be labelled Epistemic (expressing uncertainty), Facilitative (inviting participation) and Softening (reducing negative affect). The first type (Epistemic) is more content- or propositionally-oriented, the other two (Facilitative, Softening) more affective or social in function.

Examining data which were carefully matched in quantity for women and men speakers across a range of contexts such as classrooms, informal conversations, formal interactions and interviews, I found that women used tags quite differently from men. Women used tag questions more often than men in this data (57 vs 43 percent). But the most interesting finding concerned the distribution of the different types of tag questions. Women used Facilitative tags far more often than Epistemic tags (59 percent of all female tags were Facilitative), while just the opposite was true for men (61 percent of all male tags were Epistemic). So men tended to use tag questions more often to express uncertainty. By contrast, women used tags significantly ($p = .001$) more often than men to support others in conversation, and to facilitate their contributions to a discussion. (Neither

sex used many Softening tags in this corpus.) This finding is consistent with other findings which suggest that discourse devices used by men are often oriented to the proposition or content, while those used by women are more likely to be affective or social in orientation.

Elicitation types

Turning to more formal contexts, I analysed in some detail the different types of elicitation which occurred in the seminar discussion sessions referred to above. The data was collected from 100 public meetings or seminars which involved a formal presentation followed by a discussion. The presentation normally took about 45 minutes and the discussion which followed ranged from about 10 to 45 minutes. The topics were extremely varied, and so, consequently, were the audiences. They included people from a wide range of government departments, diplomats, politicians, people from industry and the commercial world, bankers, trade unionists, policy-makers, historians, teachers and academics.

Focusing on the function of the elicitation in relation to the previous discourse (usually the formal presentation), I identified three broad categories of elicitation: Supportive, Critical and Antagonistic.

Supportive elicitations. Supportive elicitations implied a generally positive response to the content of the presentation, and invited the speaker to expand or elaborate on some aspect of it: (4), (5) and (6) provide three (edited) examples.[3]

(4) You've described the formal features of this structure very clearly. I wonder if you could elaborate a little on the social implications? What do you see as the possible social outcomes of adopting this structure?

(5) Just building on that last point, I'd be interested in your views on the extent to which it's expected that parents will be able to modify the curriculum in their local schools?

(6) Can you tell me what methods of feedback the school uses for informing parents about their children's progress?

In (7) I have provided a range of examples of elicitation 'openings' which were clearly supportive in function, inviting the speaker to develop a point or expand on an area of their presentation. Often such elicitations were quite explicitly positive.

(7) I really liked your comments on . . . could you expand a little. . . .
The Thai data is really interesting. What do you think is going on in table 2?
Could you comment more fully on . . . it sounds very promising.
I liked your explanation of . . . could you tell us a little more about. . . .

Another group of supportive elicitations consisted of comments which drew out the implications of the presentation in other areas and made links to further material which supported the speaker's point of view. Some examples are provided in (8).

(8) I find this quite fascinating. It fits very well with . . . Given what you've described, I'm wondering whether your analysis might also illuminate a related issue. . . .
Would you imagine that the patterns you've described could be extended to. . . .
I was interested in your comment that . . . I wonder what you think of. . . .
To what extent do you think that age might be a factor in accounting for. . . .
The policy you've described has implications for some work I'm doing . . . how would you interpret. . . .
Another area I'd be very keen to hear your views on is . . . I wondered if you'd care to comment on. . . .

In all these cases the elicitation functioned to support the presenter's approach, often by referring to further material which could be interpreted as consistent with it.

Critical elicitations. A second group of elicitations was somewhat more critical in tone, less whole-heartedly or explicitly positive. They often consisted of a modified agreement or a qualified disagreement. They might express a degree of negative evaluation or scepticism, though it was usually qualified. Examples 9–13 provide some illustrations.

(9) It isn't always possible to collect all the information required in order to undertake a fully comprehensive costing, as you suggest. Are you aware, for instance, that in a recent argument about the cost of providing a telephone service to a particular rural consumer, no one was able to identify the real cost?

(10) I'm curious about your comment that a lot of these changes are gripped by ideology and I was hoping you could elaborate that?

(11) I can see what you're getting at, but it seems to me the material in your figure 5 could be interpreted somewhat differently. . . .

(12) In your discussion of domestic economic policy you did concentrate on the domestic policy and you didn't mention any of the constraints imposed by the international situation . . . how important do you think international constraints will be?

(13) You've presented a very positive picture of X. Did he have no weaknesses, no Achilles' heel?

The tone of voice in which any elicitation is expressed is extremely important in interpreting its function in order to classify it accurately. This is particularly obvious with this type of elicitation. Example (10), for instance, bears some resemblance to examples in the Supportive category, but it was uttered with a distinctly sceptical tone of voice which implied that the questioner needed convincing of the validity of the position taken by the presenter. Other examples began with positive feedback such as 'I find this really interesting' or 'Your presentation has raised some fascinating points', but they went on to question some aspect of the presentation. Such comments functioned in some cases as modified agreements and in others as mitigated or hedged disagreements.

Antagonistic elicitations. A third type of elicitation was overtly antagonistic to the content of the presentation. Such utterances generally involved challenging, aggressively critical assertions whose function was to attack the speaker's position and demonstrate it as wrong. The following examples illustrate this category of elicitations.

(14) I have to say that I disagree with your analysis. The elements you have identified as important seem relatively insignificant to me compared to the crucial influence of. . . .

(15) I've listened with interest to your presentation and I found your outline of the current state of the theory fascinating. However I simply cannot go along with your interpretation of these data. It makes no sense to me.

(16) Did you look at every instance?

(17) I find it hard to believe you have embarked on this project without harnessing the resources of the X database. Are you aware of the current power of large-scale databases in this area?

(18) You're being inconsistent. If you don't believe in streaming, why are the maths classes streamed?

(19) It's not much use having a policy if it's not going to be effective is it?

This last example, incidentally, includes a fourth type of tag to add to those listed above—the Challenging tag (see Holmes, 1990: 186–8).

Distribution of elicitation types

Having identified three types of elicitation it is instructive to examine their distribution by gender of speaker. Table 1 presents the results of an analysis of 100 seminars.

TABLE 1. Distribution of elicitations by sex of speaker in formal seminars

	F		M		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Participants	1153	34.7	2261	66.2	3414
Elicitations	501	25.3	1482	74.7	1983
Elicitors	196	17.0	685	30.3	881
Types of elicitation					
Supportive	390	77.8	1148	77.5	
Critical	98	19.6	255	17.2	
Antagonistic	13	2.6	79	5.3	

Of the total number of participants in the seminars, just over 66 percent were men and just over 34 percent women, though the proportion of women and men varied quite widely from one session to another. Three-quarters of all the elicitations came from men, so that, as mentioned in the discussion of the distribution of talking time above, men had more than their fair share of the end-of-presentation discussion time. This point is

further illustrated by the fact that only 17 percent of all the women asked questions compared to around 30 percent of the men.

Turning to the type of elicitation, Table 1 also shows that by far the majority of all elicitations were supportive (77.8 percent of male and 77.5 percent of female elicitations). In other words, most elicitations invited the speaker in a positive and non-confrontational way to elaborate on his (or more rarely her) presentation, or to develop further a point the questioner was interested in. Quite clearly there was no statistically significant difference between the sexes in the proportion of supportive elicitations, nor in the proportion of critical elicitations. The pattern for antagonistic elicitations was, however, different.

Though they constituted a small percentage of the total number of elicitations, the distribution of antagonistic elicitations differed significantly between women and men. In their contributions to the discussion, men expressed proportionately twice as many of the antagonistic elicitations as women did. In other words, the men baldly disagreed with or explicitly challenged the presenter significantly more often than the women did. Moreover, on the few occasions when women made such critical comments, they were almost always in an environment where criticism had been explicitly invited or encouraged, or where it was expected, as, for example, when a politician or policy-maker had been invited to give a presentation specifically for the purpose of explaining an unpopular or controversial policy, as opposed to the more usual presentation where a guest was invited to describe their current work or discuss an issue of general interest. Particular topics also seemed more likely to elicit critical questions. Seminars which focused on issues in women's health and education, for example, presented by advocates of the process of devolution, were among those most likely to elicit critical questions from women in the audience.

In general, supportive elicitations and modified criticisms are most likely to facilitate good-quality open-ended discussion. Aggressively negative questioning leads people to take up entrenched positions—especially in a public debate. Those attacked tend to respond defensively and little cognitive progress is made. In formal public contexts bald disagreements and overt challenges rarely encourage further discussion and exploration of the area of disagreement. They set up an oppositional confrontational structure with the speakers as opponents. Within this kind of framework there is no room for a beneficial exploration of the issues.

If these patterns are found to hold more widely, they provide a basis for arguing that the quality of a discussion benefits when women get a more equal share of the talking time. Female interactive strategies appear to encourage high-quality exploratory talk. They facilitate contributions and encourage participants to pursue ideas and elaborate their reasons for holding a particular position. The issues are more fully explored, arguments are more explicitly justified and participants' level of understanding of the issues increases. Clearly the result must be a better thought-through outcome.

In analysing contributions to these public formal seminars, it became clear that the distribution of women's contributions was not random. Under certain conditions women tended to contribute more often. Overall, the women were far more likely to ask questions when the presentation or the paper was given by a woman. On just seven occasions (i.e. 7 percent of the total number of seminars), the women actually asked more questions than the men. In five of these seven seminars women were a majority in the audience—an unusual situation overall in this sample of formal public meetings.[4] One occasion involved the presentation of a paper by two women alongside a male presentation. The remaining session in which women asked more questions than men involved a group of about twenty-five people, almost half of whom were highly qualified women colleagues at a session focusing on their particular area of expertise (cf. Leet-Pellegrini, 1980; Appelman et al., 1987).

It seems possible, then, that women asked more questions in these sessions simply because they found the setting less uncomfortable than usual. It was in fact generally true that women were much more likely to contribute to the discussion when there was a woman speaker, when there were more women in the audience and when the topic was one on which they could claim expert knowledge. All of these factors accounted for an increase in women's level of participation in the discussion.

Finally, it also seems that when women contribute more equally, the discussion is likely to be more enjoyable. In an analysis of departmental meetings, Carole Edelsky (1981) noted that participants commented that the parts of the discussion where women contributed more were the most enjoyable for everyone. These were sections Edelsky describes as consisting of a jointly constructed or 'collaborative floor', a 'more informal cooperative venture' than the male-controlled monologues with which they contrasted (1981: 416). Similarly, at two recent seminars presented by young women where women formed a majority of the audience, exactly this kind of 'shared floor' developed, resulting in an excellent discussion in both cases. The participants moved from addressing questions to the presenter to responding to each other's comments. The result was a lively and very productive exploration of the topic. Edelsky comments that this type of 'high involvement, synergistic, solidarity building interaction' (in which the number of women's contributions more closely matched the men's) provided a 'high level of communicative satisfaction' (1981: 416–17) which both men and women enjoyed. These enjoyable interactions have all the features of successful exploratory talk.

All in all, then, there are a number of good reasons to attempt to increase the contributions of women in more formal speech contexts.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Women do not get their fair share of the talking time in public. This means they have less access to potentially status-enhancing talk. It also means the

resulting talk does not benefit from their input, and it is clear from the discussion above that the benefits to the quality of the discussion may be considerable. How might one change this?

One suggested solution is consciousness-raising. Like Maltz and Borker (1982), Deborah Tannen (1990) argues that the reason that women and men use different interaction strategies is that they belong to different cultural groups. If women and men only 'understood' each other's different rules for speaking, all would be well. Make people more aware of the unfairness of the current patterns, she suggests, and they will voluntarily change their ways:

> ... understanding genderlects improves relationships. Once people realize their partners have different conversational styles, they are inclined to accept differences without blaming themselves, their partners, or their relationships. ... Understanding the other's ways of talking is a giant leap across the communication gap between women and men, and a giant step towards opening lines of communication. (1990: 297–8)

It is an appealing argument, well supported by abundant reference to relevant research evidence, as well as swathes of entertaining anecdotes. Nevertheless, despite its appeal, Tannen's analysis does not go deep enough, and her solution is over-optimistic.

It is certainly true that as a result of different childhood and adolescent patterns of socialization, women and men develop different rules for interaction. It may also be true that with a great deal of goodwill and mutual tolerance, individual private cross-sex miscommunications by couples who are fully committed to each other's happiness can be resolved. But most of the world is not like that. Most interaction problems (such as the unequal distribution of talk in public contexts) are the result of structured inequality in our society. Women's ways of talking differ from men's because each group has developed interaction strategies which reflect their societal position. Most cross-gender communication problems in public contexts are women's problems, because the interactional rules in such situations are men's rules. So consciousness-raising and mutual understanding may resolve some problems of cross-cultural miscommunication between the sexes, but in the real world *power* is the issue.

So when consciousness-raising can be backed up by power or authority, it may be effective. Gilbert (1990), for example, recommends that teachers should explicitly focus on inequities in patterns of talk and draw them to the attention of the participants so that groups can explicitly address the problem of allowing all participants an opportunity for expressing their ideas and contributing to the decisions made. With the backing of the teacher's authority, it has been demonstrated that changes can be achieved (Whyte, 1984, 1986; Sadker and Sadker, 1985). Graddol and Swann (1989) document strategies for linguistic intervention which have been successfully adopted in Britain in a variety of contexts to redress gender imbalances. One of the case studies they describe was a project developed by a Birmingham schoolteacher, Jackie Hughes, to challenge racist and sexist stereotypes. Her aims included 'to facilitate respectful and creative interac-

tion ... between pupils and staff' (Graddol and Swann, 1989: 185). They comment:

> Jackie Hughes found that in small discussion groups it was relatively easy to intervene: the composition of groups could be chosen so that they weren't dominated by more talkative pupils; it was also possible to discuss with small groups why some pupils might find it difficult to contribute. Whole class discussion was more difficult to change, but again involving the pupils themselves in a discussion of classroom talk seemed to make them more sensitive and aware of others' needs. (Graddol and Swann, 1989: 186–7)

This suggests that consciousness-raising may be effective in encouraging participants to share the talking time if it is backed up by someone with status and power whom participants have an incentive to please.

But there is often no obvious incentive for adult males to give up highly valued talking time in public contexts. Raised consciousnesses are certainly not enough in contexts where males are in control and where the rules of interaction are based on male norms. Even well-intentioned males will not succeed in sharing valued talking time without some assistance (or even insistence) from women (Spender, 1980b; Coates, 1986), though a firm chairperson, concerned to share out speaking turns, can make a difference (Whyte, 1984, 1986; Appelman et al., 1987). And it is not possible, of course, for the improved quality of discussion which can result from women's participation to act as an incentive until women succeed in obtaining more of the talking time. This can only be a persuasive argument once the current male-dominated interaction patterns change, and more talking time has been effectively claimed and used by women. Consequently, women who want more of this talking time (and some may not) need to devise strategies to ensure they get it.

The research discussed in this paper illustrates a discourse problem for women—getting a fair share of public and valued talking time—which has its roots in the unequal distribution of power between the sexes in society. Changing the power structure would alter the patterns. In the meantime, analyses of the distribution of talk can not only provide some insight into the discourse processes involved but can also suggest some practical steps which can be taken to ameliorate the problem. I conclude, then, with some practical suggestions for increasing women's share of talking time in public formal contexts. These suggestions do not involve adopting male strategies, but rather require some preparation in advance, and willingness to take initiatives as opportunities arise.[5]

A. Strategies for participants

1. Organize in advance.
   (i) If you know before a seminar or meeting that you have a point you wish to contribute, tell the chairperson before the meeting starts that you wish to speak.
   (ii) Discuss in advance with other women whether they also wish to

contribute, and agree on a strategy for passing the speaking rights to another woman when you have spoken.

2. Responding in context.
   (i) If you decide you want to contribute during the progress of a discussion indicate to the chairperson immediately and very clearly that you wish to contribute.
   (ii) Where you are confident a colleague has something useful to contribute to a discussion, pass the speaking rights to her, giving her a clear pointer about your reason for doing so.
   (iii) Always be prepared to make a contribution should you be asked to do so.
   (iv) Challenge the interrupter if you are interrupted. Don't give up the floor till you have finished what you want to say.

If women's contributions are communicatively effective, then this strategy should have the long-term effect of ensuring women's views are sought. In other words, if women's contributions demonstrably improve the quality of the discussion, one might hope they would be increasingly encouraged, at least in some forums. Alternatively where contributions to public talk are perceived primarily as ways of enhancing status, these strategies will help ensure that women's voices are not suppressed.

B. Strategies for organizers, chairpersons and teachers

For those with responsibility for organizing public formal talk there are further strategies which can be used to ensure greater access to talking time for females and better quality discussion.

1. Organize in advance.
   (i) Organize the programme to ensure women get an equal share of the 'official' talk and are used as 'experts' as often as men: chairing sessions, presenting papers, etc. In addition to being desirable in its own right, this will also encourage women participants to contribute from the floor (Holmes, 1988; Holmes and Stubbe, forthcoming).
   (ii) Actively encourage women to attend.
   (iii) Select topics and themes which will provide opportunities for women to excel and encourage them to contribute.
   (iv) Provide opportunities for small group discussion as preparation for full session discussions of issues. Exploratory talk will thereby be encouraged and females are more likely to contribute in the full session in the role of reporter on a small group's views.

2. Responding in context.
   (i) As chair/director of activities, ensure the females get their fair share of the contributions. Monitor your own behaviour over time to check you are achieving your goal. There is evidence that impres-

sions can be very misleading in this area (Spender, 1980b, 1982; Whyte, 1986).[6]

(ii) Where appropriate, draw participants' attention to strategies that females find uncomfortable: i.e. use consciousness-raising techniques to highlight the inhibiting effect of interruptions and bald unsupported disagreements.

Encouraging equity

The case for more talking time for women in public formal contexts can be made simply on equity grounds. Women are entitled to their fair share of the talking time and currently they do not get it. The case is strengthened by the fact that talking time in public or formal contexts is generally socially valued time, with the potential to increase the speaker's standing in the eyes of others. Public talking time increases a person's visibility. Women should have equal access to forums where their contributions may enhance their social status.

Such equity arguments are fine in principle. In practice, however, those in power are unlikely to relinquish their hold on any 'valued' good, including time, unless they can see some benefits for themselves. In this paper, I have pointed to the qualitative benefits of increasing the quantity of female participation in public and formal speech contexts. The benefits should appeal to those concerned with better understanding of issues, fuller exploration of ideas and better-based decision-making. Men who subscribe to such ideals will ensure women get the opportunity to contribute to public discussion. In the meantime, women will almost certainly need to use self-help strategies in order to give men the opportunity to experience those benefits for themselves.

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NOTES

I would like to record my appreciation to Maria Stubbe, Miriam Meyerhoff and Allan Bell who read earlier drafts of this paper and made useful suggestions and constructive comments.

1. Relevant references are provided in the more detailed discussion below, but see also Thorne et al. (1983: 279–81).
2. Most of the New Zealand research referred to in this paper derives from unpublished projects and theses undertaken by students whom I have supervised.
3. The examples are described as 'edited' only because most are based on notes rather than tape-recordings. Unconscious editing of hesitations, etc., is almost unavoidable but the content of utterances is faithfully recorded.
4. There is evidence from British research which confirms the suggestion that simple numerical domination of a situation by men appears to inhibit women's talk, though the reverse does not seem to hold (Spender, 1980b).
5. I have not discussed the option of 'separate development' or establishing separate forums for female and male talk, since I think this both unrealistic and likely to be self-defeating in most public contexts. Men have been happy to ignore women's views for too long for one to have any faith that they would feel the need to woo them should women deliberately withdraw from public debate. Indeed, on the basis of the evidence in some contexts one wonders if anyone would notice.
6. Whyte (1986: 196), for instance, reports that one male science teacher, who managed to create an atmosphere in which girls and boys contributed more equally to discussion, felt that he was devoting 90 percent of his attention to the girls.

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