WOMEN'S PLACE IN EVERYDAY TALK: REFLECTIONS ON PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION*

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In this paper, we compare the results of our previous study of interruptions in same-sex and cross-sex conversations (Zimmerman and West, 1975) with similar data from parent-child verbal interaction and find that there are striking similarities between the pattern of interruptions in male-female interchanges and those observed in the adult-child transactions. We use the occasion of this comparison to consider several possible interactional consequences of interruption in conversation, particularly as these consequences relate to the issue of dominance in face-to-face interaction.

INTRODUCTION

It is sometimes said that children should be seen and not heard and that they should speak only when spoken to. To be sure, situations abound in which children are seen and most definitely heard without prior invitation to talk from adults. Nevertheless, these maxims do tell us that children have restricted rights to speak resulting in special problems in gaining adults' attention and engaging them in conversation. For example, Sacks (1966) has observed that children frequently use the form "D'ya know what?" when initiating talk with an adult. The answer to this particular question is ordinarily another question of the form "What?" and the adult so responding finds that he/she has given the child opportunity to begin an utterance to which a listener attends—at least for the moment.

Fishman (1975) observed that in fifty-two hours of tape-recorded conversation collected from three couples the women employed the "D'ya know what?" opening twice as frequently as men. Overall, the women asked almost three times as many questions as the men. The implication is, of course, that the greater reliance on such question forms by women stems from *their* limited rights as co-conversationalists with men.

The difficulties children encounter in verbal interaction with adults follow perhaps from their presumed lack of social competence. A child is a social actor whose opinion may not be taken seriously and whose verbal and non-verbal behavior is subject to open scrutiny, blunt correction, and inattention. It is thus potentially illuminating when parallels between the interaction of adults and children and men and women are observed.

Goffman (1974), characterizes the relation of middle-class parents to their children in face-to-face situations as one of benign control. The child is granted various privileges and the license to be a child, i.e., merely to play at or practice coping with the manifold demands of the social occasion. Goffman (1976:72-73) notes that "there is an obvious price that the child must pay for being saved from seriousness," a price that includes suffering parents' intervention in his/her activities, being discussed in the presence of others as if absent, and having his/her "time and territory . . . seen as expendable" due to the higher priority assigned to adult needs. This sort of relation in face-to-face interaction can characterize other encounters between subordinate and superordinate parties:

> It turns out . . . that in our society whenever a male has dealings with a female or a sub-ordinate male (especially a younger one), some mitigation of potential distance and hostility is quite likely to be induced by application of the parent-child complex. Which implies that, ritually speaking, females are equivalent to subordinate males and both are equivalent to children (Goffman, 1976:73).

Perhaps this ritual equivalence of women and children includes as a common condition the risk that their turns at talk will be subject to interruption and hence control by a super-ordinate.

In this paper, we compare the results of our previous study of interruptions in same-sex and cross-sex conversations (Zimmerman and West, 1975) with similar data from parent-child verbal interaction and find striking similarities between the pattern of interruptions in male-female interchanges and those observed in the adult-child transactions. We use the occasion of this comparison to consider the function of interruptions in verbal exchanges, particularly in conversations between parties of unequal status. Since interruptions are a type of transition between speakers, our point of departure in this as well as the previous paper is the model of turn-taking in conversation advanced by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (1974) which provides a systematic approach to speaker alter-nation in naturally occurring conversation.

THE TURN-TAKING MODEL

Sacks, *et al.* (1974) suggest that speech exchange systems in general are arranged to ensure that (1) one party speaks at a time and (2) speaker change recurs. These features organize casual conversation, formal debate, and high ceremony. Conversation is dis-tinguished from debate and ceremony by variable distribution of turns, turn length, and turn content.

A turn consists of not merely the temporal duration of an utterance but of the right and obligation to speak allocated to a particular speaker. Turns are constructed out of what Sacks *et al.* (1974) call "unit-types" which can consist of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences.[1] Unit-types are projective, that is they provide sufficient information prior to their comple-tion to allow the hearer to anticipate an upcoming transition place.

Sacks *et al.* (1974) represent the mechanism for speaker transition as an ordered set of rules speakers use to achieve a normatively constrained order of conversational interaction. For each possible transition place, these rules provide, in order of priority: that (1) current speaker may select the next speaker, e.g., by using a term of address, and if not choosing to do so, that (2) a next speaker may self-select, and if not, that (3) the current speaker may continue. The exercise of any of these three options recycles the rule-set to the first option. The operation of the rule-set accounts for a number of regularly occurring features of ob-served conversations—including the alternation of speakers in a variable order with brief (if any) gaps or overlaps between turns, as well as variable length of turns. That is, the model provides for the systematic initiation, continuation and alternation of turns in everyday conversation.[2] Our concern here is with the phenomenon of simultaneous speech, i.e., the occurrence and distribution of overlap among categories of speakers.

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[1] The criteria for determining a unit-type are only partially syntactic. For example, the status of a word as a unit-type is a sequential and hence, social-organizational issue, as in saying "Yes" in answer to another's question.

[2] The model is further characterized as *locally managed,* i.e., it operates to effect transitions between adjacent turns, the focus being upon the next turn and next transition. The turn-taking system is also said to be *party administered* and *interactionally managed,* i.e., under the control of speakers and em-ployed on a turn-by-turn basis by conversationalists each exercising options contingent upon, and under-taken with the awareness of, the options available to the other.

Elsewhere (Zimmerman and West, 1975:114) we have defined overlap as a brief stretch of simultaneous speech initiated by a "next" speaker just before the current speaker arrives at a possible transition place, often in a situation where the current speaker has elongated the final syllable of his/her utterance (Cf. Sacks, *et al.*, 1974:706-708; Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975:3):[3]

(T14:213-214)   B2: Um so where's your shoror- sorORity
                       house. Is it on campus or off: :?
                  B1:   [No] it's
                       off=all thuh sororities and fraternities
                       are off campus.

The significance of overlap occurring in such an environment follows from the fact that speakers apparently "target" the starting of their stream of speech just at completion by the current speaker (Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975). When successfully managed, the next-speaker "latches" his/her utterance to the utterance of the preceding speaker as in the following:

(Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975:3)
                  Earl: How's everything *lo*ok.=
                  Bud: =Oh looks pretty *goo*:d,

Jefferson and Schegloff (1975:3) also observe that the addition of tag-questions or conjunctions to a possibly complete utterance furnishes another locus for overlap:

(Sacks, *et al.*, 1974:703, n. 12)
                  Bert: Uh *you* been down here before [havenche]
                  Fred: [Yeh.   ]
(T14:59-60)   B1: I don't like it at all [but-   ]
                  B2:   [You d]on't

An interruption, in contrast, involves a "deeper" intrusion into the internal structure of the speaker's utterance, i.e., prior to a possible transition place:

(T1:114-115)   A1: It really sur[prised me becuz-]
                  A2:   [It's jus' so smo :g]gy . . .

Thus, what we call "overlaps" (Sacks, *et al.* use the term to refer to all instances of simultaneous speech) are events occurring in the immediate vicinity of a possible transition place and can be seen as generated by the ordinary workings of the turn-taking system (cf. Sacks, *et al.*, 1974:706-708). Interruptions, however, do not appear to have a systemic basis in the turn-taking model as such, i.e., they are not products of the turn-constructional and turn-allocation procedures that make up the model. Moreover, there is nothing in the model to suggest that patterned asymmetries should occur between particular categories of speakers. Quite to the contrary, the model is posited to hold for all speakers and all conversations (cf. Sacks, *et al.*, 1974:700) and represents a mechanism for the systematic allocation of turns across two or more speakers while minimizing gap and overlap.[4]

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[3] The transcribing conventions used for our data are presented in the Appendix to this paper.

[4] The model is proposed as a context-free mechanism that is at the same time finely context-sensitive. "Context-free" here means that it operates independently of such features of actual conversations as topics, settings, number of parties, and social identities. Given this independence, the mechanism can accommodate the changing circumstances of talk posed by variation in topic, setting, number of speakers and their identities; that is, its context-sensitivity permits it to generate the particulars of unique conversations. The model is thus posited to pertain to "any speakers" and "any conversation" (cf. Sacks, *et al.*, 1974: 699-701, especially n. 10 p. 700 for a brief consideration of the issues raised by this claim). Such a

Viewed strictly in terms of the turn-taking model, then, the deep incursion into the turn-space of a current speaker constitutes a violation of turn-taking rules.[5] Interruptions accomplish a number of communicative acts, among them the exhibition of dominance and exercise of control in face-to-face interaction.

FINDINGS

Our preliminary findings (Zimmerman and West, 1975), suggested marked asymmetries in overlaps, interruptions, and silences between, same-sex and cross-sex conversational pairs. These interactional episodes were (like the parent-child segments introduced below) selected from longer stretches of talk by excerpting all topically coherent segments exhibiting (a) two or more noticeable silences between speaker turns or (b) two or more instances of simultaneous speech, without regard for who overlapped whom. That is, they were selected precisely because of the presence of gaps and overlaps. Three fourths of the exchanges between eleven adult male-female, ten adult male-male, and ten adult female-female parties were recorded in coffee shops, drug stores, and other public places in a university community; the remainder in private dwellings (cf. Zimmerman and West, 1975:111-112).

The same-sex transcripts displayed silences in nearly equal distributions between partners. And while overlaps occured with greater frequency than interruptions, both were distributed symmetrically between male-male and female-female speakers. In all, there were seven interruptions in the same-sex conversations coming from three transcripts: in two of these there were three interruptions, and in one of them, a single interruption. These were divided as equally as possible between the two parties in each conversation: 2 vs. 1, 2 vs. 1, and 1 vs. 0. By comparison, cross-sex conversations displayed gross asymmetries. Interruptions were far more likely to occur than overlaps, and both types of simultaneity were much more frequently initiated by males than females. For example, forty-six out of forty-eight, or 96%, of the interruptions were by males to females.[6] Females, on the other hand, showed a greater tendency toward silence, particularly subsequent to interruption by males. These patterned asymmetries—most striking in the case of interruption—led us to conclude tentatively that these females' rights to complete a turn were apparently abridged by males with impunity, i.e., without complaint from females.[7]

Recall Goffman's (1976:73) observation that children—in interaction with adults—are

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proposal of course runs counter to the basic sociological notions of social and cultural variability. Can different ethnic groups, social classes, or even males and females within such categories be assumed to use the same mechanisms for effecting turn transition? Here we simply assume that white, middle-class university students—male and female alike—are oriented to turn-taking in the fashion Sacks, *et al.*, (1974) assert, thus permitting us to focus on the communicative and interactional implications of violations of turn-taking rules. The issue of the generalizability of the model across other social and cultural categories we leave to further inquiry.

[5] The turn-by-turn organization of talk means that both the relevance and coherence of talk are locally managed by participants at any particular point in conversation (e.g. given a subsequent occurrence, what may have begun as topic X may be transformed into topic Y). Clearly, not all instances of simultaneous speech are disruptive. Jefferson (1974) for example, comments on the precision placement of a characteristic class of events which overlap a present speaker's utterance in such a way as to indicate both active listenership and independent knowledge of what the overlapped utterance is saying. Such displays occur *prior* to completion of a unit-type (i.e. by our schema, at points of interruption). Our point here is that beginning to speak prior to a possible transition place can be a communicative act with sequential consequences for conversation (cf. Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975).

[6] Ten of the eleven cross-sex interactions exhibited interruptions, ranging from a low of two to a high of thirteen and averaging 4.2 per transcript. In every conversation, the male interrupted the female more frequently than vice versa.

[7] The collection of conversations analyzed here and in Zimmerman and West (1975) does not constitute a probability sample of conversationalists or conversations. Hence, simple projections from findings based on this collection to conversationalists or conversations at large cannot be justified by the usual

accorded treatment characteristically extended to "non-persons," i.e., their status as co-participants in conversation is contingent on adult forebearance, and their "time and territory may be seen as expendable." If we regard conversational turn-space as the "time and territory" of a speaker, then the tendency of males to interrupt females implies that women's turn at talk is—at least some of the time—expendable and that women can be treated conversationally as "non-persons." With these considerations in mind, we present our parent-child transcripts.

Five interactions between parents and children were recorded in a physician's office, either in the open waiting room, or in the examination room before the doctor-patient interaction began.[8] Each author inspected the transcripts of these exchanges to locate instances of simultaneous speech. In the five parent-child exchanges, we found seventeen instances of simultaneity, of which fourteen were interruptions. Of the fourteen, twelve or 86%, were by the adult. The remaining two interruptions were by the same child to an adult (trying to get her attention).

Hence the striking asymmetry between males and females in the initiation of interruptions is reproduced in the transcripts of parent-child conversation. However, in contrast to the broader range of situations where the adult conversations were recorded, the parent-child segments are two party conversations drawn from a single setting. But one might argue that interactions between children and their parents in other, more relaxed situations might have a markedly different character.[9] The pertinent point, in any event, is whether or not interruptions occur *when* the issue of who is to control the interaction is salient. Hence, the conversational exchanges recorded in the physician's office, while insufficient in themselves to establish the point, do suggest that interruptions are employed by the dominant party, the adult, to effect control in the exchange.[10] Let us consider some of the ways interruptions may function to achieve control and to display dominance in both parent-child and male-female conversations.

DISCUSSION

Taking the similarities in the patterns of interruptions between adults and children and males and females to mean that females have an analogous status to children in certain conversational situations implies that the female has restricted rights to speak and may be ignored or interrupted at will. However, we suggest that the exercise of power by the male (or, for that matter, the parent) is systematic rather than capricious, and is thus subject to constraint. That is, wholesale trampling of speaker rights, even in the case of children, is not culturally approved, and those speakers who indiscriminately interrupt or otherwise misuse their conversational partner are subject to characterization as rude, domineering, or authoritarian. We believe interruptions are a tool used to fashion socially appropriate interactional

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logic of statistical inference. Thus, the present research is intended to illustrate the utility of Sacks' *et al.* (1974) model as a means of locating significant problems in the area of language and interaction and as a point of departure for further study.

[8] The children in these exchanges ranged from four to eight years of age. Parties to conversation include two mother-son pairs, two mother-daughter pairs, and one father-daughter pair.

[9] For example, multi-party conversations in the home might be situations in which children have greater needs to compete for the attention of adults than in the case of two-party exchanges in public. Hence, these "competitive" situations would be more likely to produce instances of interruption of adults by children. We have seen some indications to this effect, in other transcripts of exchanges in this same setting (i.e. the physician's office). However for purposes of comparability with our adult conversations, we are interested only in two-party exchanges here.

[10] We should note that more systematic study is called for to control for setting itself. Our current research utilizes variations on a standardized experimental setting in which dyads of equivalent ages and educational backgrounds—but differing sex compositions—interact.

displays which both exhibit and accomplish proper relationships between parties to the interaction.

Parent-Child Interaction

A common-sense observation about physicians' offices is: many (if not most) young children are apprehensive about what will happen to them there. Moreover, parents are likely to feel some anxiety about the behavior of their children in that setting: control over the child is necessary to insure cooperation in the medical examination, to suppress protest or other expressions of reluctance to participate, and to prevent uninvited handling of equipment in the examining room (cf. Goffman, 1976). We can thus expect interactions of the following sort:

    Child: But I don't wanna shot! ((sobs)) you said (x)
             said you said ⌈I   ⌉
    Parent: ⌊Look⌋ just be quiet and take that
             sock off or you'll get *more* than just a shot!

Or:

    Child: If I got one wi ⌈th a ⌉
    Parent: ⌊Leave⌋ that alone Kurt
    (1.8)
    Child: Huh?
    Parent: Don't touch that roller

The rule-set described earlier is a system of rules governing the construction of speaker turns and the transitions between them. Observance of these rules results in the distribution of opportunities to speak among participants and hence, the allocation of a segment of time to the speaker. The time slot under control of a speaker is potentially (a) a time when the speaker may engage in activities other than speaking, e.g. handling some object, and (b) a time when the speaker's utterance itself may unfold as a definite *action*, e.g. as a complaint or insult. The turn-taking system assigns the current turn-holder the right to that interval, to reach at least a first possible transition place (Sacks, *et al.*, 1974:706) and the listenership of those present and party to the talk ratifies that right. Given that many utterances project not only their ending but their sense as well (cf. Jefferson, 1973:54-60), to listen (or to be witness to some unfolding behavior), is an *act* in its own right according at least provisional approval or acquiescence to the action heard (or witnessed), and acknowledging the right of the speaker to be speaking. What is said and *listened to* combine to permit inferences about the character and relationship of the speaker and hearer.

Thus, in the case of the parent-child interactions discussed above, adult forebearance of the child's protest or failure promptly to disrobe could be seen as tolerance of—if not acquiescence to—the child's "unruly" behavior. If the child is simultaneously engaged in taking a turn at talk *and* some problematic non-verbal behavior, or if *what* the child is using the turn to do (e.g., to protest) is problematic, then the parent's presumed obligation to correct or control the child's behavior may take precedence over the child's already uncertain right to complete a turn. Moreover, the parent's intrusion into the child's turn *exhibits* the adult's control over the situation and the child, displaying it to the parent, the child, and to any others witnessing the interaction. The parent's failure to act in problematic situations also shows a lack of control or the child's dominance. Insofar as the parent-child relationship is *essentially* asymmetrical by our cultural standards, those occurrences warranting adult intervention may warrant interruption of the child's turn at talk as well.

Woman's Place

The similarity between parent-child and male-female conversational patterns in our data has been noted. The suggested parallel is clear: men interrupt women in situations where women's verbal or non-verbal behavior is somehow problematic, as in the following:

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Female:  Both really (#) it just strikes me as too
         1984ish y'know to sow your seed or whatever
         (#) an' then have it develop miles away not
         caring i ⌈f       ⌉
Male:             ⌊Now: :⌋ it may be something uh quite
         different (#) you can't make judgments like
         that without all the facts being at your
         disposal
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Or:

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Female:  I guess I'll do a paper on the economy business
         he laid out last week if ⌈I can  ⌉
Male:                              ⌊You're⌋ kidding!
         That'd be a terrible topic.
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And:

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Female:  So uh you really can't bitch when you've got
         all those on the same day (4.2) but I uh asked
         my physics professor if I couldn't chan⌈ge that⌉
Male:                                            ⌊Don't ⌋touch that
     (1.2)
Female:  What?
     (#)
Male:    I've got everything jus' how I want it in that
         notebook (#) you'll screw it up leafin' through
         it like that.[11]
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Our reflections here touch on three matters. First, we take the view that the use of interruptions by males is a *display* of dominance or control to the female (and to any witnesses), just as the parent's interruption communicates an aspect of parental control to the child and to others present. Second, the use of interruptions is *in fact* a control device since the incursion (particularly if repeated) disorganizes the local construction of a topic, as in the following:

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Female:  How's your paper coming?=
Male:    Alright I guess (#) I haven't done much in
         the past two weeks
     (1.8)
Female:  Yeah::: know how that ⌈can⌉
Male:                          ⌊Hey⌋ ya' got an extra cigarette?
     (#)
Female:  Oh uh sure ((hands him the pack))
         like my ⌈pa ⌉
Male:            ⌊How⌋ 'bout a match?
     (1.2)
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[11] This last excerpt is an exchange embedded in a longer sequence marked by pronounced "retarded minimal responses" i.e., silences prior to issuing a brief acknowledgement of prior speaker's utterance, e.g., "unhuh."

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Female: Ere ya go uh like my ⎡pa    ⎤
Male:                          ⎣Thanks⎦
  (1.8)
Female: Sure (#) I was gonna tell you ⎡my ⎤
Male:                                  ⎣Hey⎦ I'd really like
         ta' talk but I gotta run (#) see ya
  (3.2)
Female: Yeah
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Third, and perhaps most important, the occurrence of asymmetrical interruption signals the presence of issues pertinent to the activation of dominating behavior by the male. That is, just as the physician's examining room is a setting likely to engender adult concerns for control of the child (and hence, interruption of the child's utterance, among other things) so too may various occasions, *and the talk within them* trigger male displays of dominance and female displays of submission. Thus, the presence of male-initiated simultaneity—particularly interruptions—provides a clue where to search in interactional materials to find the particulars accounting for the occurrence of situationally induced attempts at dominance, in part through the suspension or violation of the rule-set.[12] Those "situational inducements", viewed from within the matrix of our present culture, constitute the warrant for interruption of the female by the male.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

These are preliminary findings, based on suggestive but far from definitive results. We report them here to show their potential signficance for the study of gender behavior. The notion that language and speech communicate the cultural significance of gender is reflected by the growing literature in this area (cf. Key, 1975; Lakoff, 1975; and Thorne and Henley, 1975). Earlier research has utilized verbal interaction as an index of power in familial interaction (Farina and Holzberg, 1968; Hadley and Jacob, 1973; and Mishler and Waxler, 1968).

However, the use of features of conversational interaction as measures of power, dominance and the like has produced inconclusive—and sometimes contradictory—findings (cf. Shaw and Sadler, 1969) in the absence of an explicit model of conversational interaction *per se.* The work of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) provides a theoretical basis for analyzing the very organization of such social interaction. We have tried to sketch the outlines of an approach to the study of male-female interaction utilizing this model.

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[12] Clearly, to test a hypothesis that particular types of situations induce male displays of dominance and female displays of submission would require that we define such situations independently of the occurrence of interruption.

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APPENDIX

Our transcript techniques and symbols are based on those devised by Gail Jefferson in the course of research undertaken with Harvey Sacks. Techniques are revised, symbols added or dropped as they seem useful to the work. There is no guarantee that the symbols or transcripts alone would permit the doing of any unspecified research tasks; they are properly used as an adjunct to the tape recorded materials.

Transcribing Conventions

(x) I've (x) I've met him once	Parentheses encasing an "x" indicate a hitch or stutter on the part of the speaker.
[ ] J: Well really ⌈ I ⌉ K: ⌊ I ⌋ don't	Brackets around portions of utterances indicate that the portions bracketed overlap one another. Portions to the left and right of these denote those portions of utterances in the clear.
I know, but-	A hyphen at the end of a word indicates that the utterance is cut short at that point.
::: Well::: now	Colons indicate that the immediately prior syllable is prolonged.
= A: 'Swat I said= B: =But you didn't	An equal sign if used to indicate that no time elapses between the objects "latched" by the marks. Often used in transcribing it can also mean that a next speaker starts at precisely the end of a current speaker's utterance.
	Underscoring is utilized to represent heavier emphasis (in speaker's pitch) on words so marked.
?, !, ,, . Are you sure?	Punctuation marks are used for intonation, not grammar.
((softly)) Ha ((chuckles))	Double parentheses enclose "descriptions," not transcribed utterances.
(#) But (#) you said	Score sign indicates a pause of one second or less that wasn't possible to discriminate precisely.
(1.2)	Numbers encased in parentheses indicate the seconds and tenths of seconds ensuing between speaker's turns. They may also be used to indicate the duration of pauses internal to a speaker's turn.
(T15:50-60)	Designations appearing to the left of transcribed examples in parentheses refer to the transcript in which the example may be located, where (a) a citation indicates that it is borrowed from published material, and (b) a code indicates that it comes from other sources.
	Transcripts with no designation in the left margin are drawn from the corpus analyzed in Zimmerman and West (1975).