

## Raising Awareness of Gendered Story-telling in ESL Classrooms

L. V. Knyshevyytska

Division of Foreign Languages, Department of Law and International Relations, Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Kyiv, Ukraine  
Corresponding author. E-mail: l.knyshevyytska@kubg.edu.ua

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**Abstract.** The current study investigates a possibility of accommodation of the male and a female subject to the different genders of the interviewers in the situation of telling narratives of personal experience. Conversational analysis was the primary method of collecting and analysis of the data. Four narratives of personal experience were collected in the course of four conversational interviews conducted by a female and a male interviewer. The time difference between the first two interviews and the second two interviews is four weeks. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Intonation units were the criteria for transcription. The transcription followed vertical format of arrangement of turns and was done in wide standard notation. As the result of the study, three working hypotheses were confirmed. 1) The analysis of narratives showed variability of pragmatic, prosodic and linguistic features in the stories of both participants told to the interviewers of the same gender (only men interaction and only women interaction); 2) It also revealed variability in a discourse of the stories that occurs due to accommodation of both participants to the gender of the interviewers of different genders; 3) Finally the study registered variability in nature of questions of the interviewers across gender. The study emphasizes pragmatic importance to introduce speech act theory into the curriculums of ESL classrooms.

**Keywords:** *Speech act theory, gender, storytelling, narratives of personal experience, conversational analysis, accommodation, variability, ESL classrooms*

**Introduction.** Apart from the primary, hard-wired in our brain urgent need for food, water and shelter, there is another, no less powerful and quintessential need of mankind to understand, transform and share human experiences by means of telling stories. People engage in creating narratives out of their personal experiences and experiences of other people from the early days to the last. In this sense, the ability of narrating a story, a joke, or an unforgettable experience is universal; it is neither a prerogative of a certain culture or language.

Out of countless genres of oral narratives, narratives of personal experience are perhaps the most common and convenient way of relating past events and memories. It is also the most fruitful source for the study of narrative discourse due to personal involvement of a narrator who usually is relating a certain episode from his or her personal life that insures credibility of a narrative.

In general, the format of an interview is a very interesting area for the study of discourse of the subjects' responses. If asked correctly, questions about dramatic experiences in one's life elicit narratives of personal experience with the native speakers of English in the context of an interview. Considering the universality and international nature of storytelling, it might be possible that the same or a very similar question would elicit a story from a second language speaker in the context of an oral interview in English. If so, the instructors of English in ESL/EFL classrooms are to introduce the theory and practice of English story-telling and teach the students in classes not only linguistic, communicative and pragmatic competence, but also directly teach our students the theory of speech acts and the theory of a narrative structure (Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Coda) in L2 classes as well as gendered variation and accommodation in story telling that will be helpful to the students during their language learning and further use of English in the natural context.

**Review of Literature.** Examination of interaction and storytelling across gender by Tannen [8], Johnstone [4], Sheldon [7], Coates [8], Maltz and Borker [6], West [9], and other researchers revealed distinct tendencies and

preferences of male and female styles of interaction and storytelling. Among others are such features as adversarial, agonistic and competitive men's style vs. affiliative and cooperative mode of involvement of women's interaction, different interpretation of messages according to the preference for either direct vs. indirect styles, attention to different kinds of details (women remember details related to emotions and feelings, men remember details related to events, facts and actions), differences in preferred topics for discussion and so on [8; 4; 7; 8; 6; 9; 10]. These are the features that are characteristic of either a male or a female style. To introduce this information and to teach ESL students the techniques to narrate successfully in English using gendered factor and gendered accommodation seems crucial. Our students only gain from awareness of what happens during the mixed gender interaction.

If female's and male's strategies and preferred styles are so different how do they communicate? What happens in a mixed gender environment when both genders have to receive, decode and send messages to the interlocutor of the different gender? In other words, if men and women still are capable to understand each other and communicate, they must be accommodating for each other's styles no matter whether they speak English as a native language or they are second language speakers.

The present case study focuses on the problems of gender variation in narratives of personal experience, namely dating stories of two white, middle class, educated subjects, native speakers of English, a husband and a wife.

**Research Question:** The current study investigates a possibility of accommodation of the male and a female participants to the different genders of the interviewers in the situation of telling stories of personal experience.

**Working Hypotheses:**

1) There will be variability of pragmatic, prosodic and linguistic features in the stories of both spouses told to the interviewers of the same gender (only men interaction and only women interaction);

2) There will be variability in a discourse of the stories

that occurs due to accommodation of both participants to the gender of the interviewers of different genders;

3) There will be variability in nature of questions of the interviewers across gender.

**Method.** Four narratives of personal experience were collected in the course of four conversational interviews conducted by a female and a male interviewer. The time difference between the first two interviews and the second two interviews is four weeks. Both subjects were asked to tell dating and marriage stories. The topic was constrained to dating and marriage of this particular couple in order to eliminate variability in the topic interpretation. To control the topic for this study was very important, as the gender differences between Mindy and John (names we gave the married couple who participated in the study) among other factors would result in the tendency to discuss completely different topics altogether and to tell different stories. And this went counter to the objective of the current study to investigate a possibility of accommodation of the male and female subjects to the different genders of the interviewers in the situation of telling dating stories. Since dating is considered in general a female topic, men would not deliberately choose to discuss it. Therefore, topic control allowed us to artificially achieve overlap in topic and to elicit variability in gender of the participants in personal experience storytelling.

In order to investigate variability across gender of interviewers as well as interviewees, the interviewers agreed only on the topic they are going to discuss, but not the questions they were going to ask. This methodology resulted in variability among interviewees' responses as well as interviewers' questions across gender and proved to be very effective. Both interviewers were consistent in a number and nature of questions they asked of the participants, as well as consistent in gender variation between a male and a female interviewer.

Intonation units were the criteria for transcription of Mindy and John's narratives. The transcription followed vertical format of arrangement of turns [3; 13] and was done in wide standard notation. Each intonation unit was provided with a detailed notation of elements of prosody: pitch, loudness, intonation, lengthening, shortening, pauses and prominence, laughter and so on (according to Du Bois et al [2], Couper – Kuhlen & Selting [1], system of notation).

The method of a discourse analysis was applied to the analysis of dating narratives. This method focuses on the immersion in the language discourse patterns and constellations of certain factors that serve as contextualizing cues for interpretation of discourse.

**Results and discussion.** In the course of discourse analysis of four dating narratives all three hypotheses were confirmed. Examination of the discourse of the stories told in a **men only** and **women only** situation concurred findings of Tannen [8], Johnstone [4], Sheldon [7], Coates [8], Maltz and Borker [6], West [9] and other researchers about distinct tendencies and preferences of male and female styles of interaction and story -telling.

1) Thus, Mindy's story told to a female interviewer had a distinctly affiliative, cooperative mode, that emphasized sharing feelings, emotional disclosure, relationship of equality and solidarity, attention to details related directly to description of feelings and emotional states, interpreta-

tion of a question about dating as a meta-message to tell about feelings rather than events.

In contrast to a woman's world, John's story told to a male interviewer displayed the agonistic, adversarial style of interaction, where disclosure of emotions is not a common mode of interaction. Attention to details in terms of events and happenings rather than feelings is characteristic of a man's story where the protagonist is a narrator himself who is in the position of power at the moment of the described events. The general mode of male interaction is a challenge.

2) The subjects of both genders tended to accommodate for the gender of the interviewer in a mixed gender situation. Mindy in her story told to the male interviewer adjusted her affiliative, intimate, confiding style to a more challenging, agonistic style of a male interviewer (joking, bantering, derogating, mocking, laughing). She focused on a summary of the events of dating rather than talking about her feelings while relating her story to a woman. Her story told to a man is much shorter and less detailed. Her style of narration is business like with predominantly falling tones, low register and lack of hedging.

John's story told to a female interviewer displays accommodation of an adversarial, agonistic men's style to a more affiliative and cooperative one, characteristic of a female interaction. He is trying to talk about his feelings and present himself as in a one down position to elicit sympathy of a female interviewer. Though the male subject did accommodate for the gender of the interviewer, he did it far less effectively than the female subject. Thus, Mindy seemed to be more finely attuned to the complete reorientation of the objective of her telling a story to a male interviewer who expected her to tell him a summary of events rather than talk about feelings in a non-serious ironic mode.

The male interviewee, in contrast, displayed partial accommodation to the style of the female interviewer and failed to interpret the underlying meta-message of the female interviewer's questions aimed at eliciting a story about feelings. Though John did make an attempt to talk about his developing feelings to Mindy, he in general remained loyal to the strategy of describing the dating process in terms of events, dates, numbers, not feelings.

3) Finally, the last finding showed that there is variability in nature of questions that female and male interviewers ask their subjects. Thus, a female interviewer asks only two questions of either a female or a male subject, but they are different. A female interviewer asked a female subject how she met her husband and how they began dating. These questions were a sufficient input in an female only environment to interpret them as meta-messages that asked the female subject to tell a story about her developing feelings towards her future husband. The questions are few as they are approached and interpreted as meta-messages and indirect requests and encouragement for emotional disclosure.

In the interaction with the male subject a female interviewer also asks the subject two questions. These however, are not interpreted by the subject as meta-messages to talk about feelings, but rather as an invitation to recollect the exact dates, times of the day and events that happened during the time of dating and provide a summary, even though the second question 'when did you realize when

you loved her' is more than a direct invitation to talk about feelings.

A male interviewer asked both subjects two main questions that were the same: 'how did you meet your wife/husband?' and 'how it happened that your business relationship became something more than a business relationship'. Besides these two, each subject received the whole series of feedback in the form of jokes, challenging and mocking remarks, bantering and ironic and sarcastic comments, typically male challenging style of interaction.

**Conclusion.** To conclude, the study allowed to empirically prove that male and female subjects will modify their preferred in a one sex situation style of interaction by accommodating to the style of the interlocutors of the other gender. Men and women despite the fact that they were raised in different sub- cultures and were differently socialized, besides having different power roles, in order

to communicate more or less successfully with one another will and do accommodate for each other even if they are not consciously aware of the process and don't know exactly what prosodic, pragmatic and linguistic means they employ to achieve this effect. This premises could be introduced into an ESL classroom while teaching the students to successfully interact with each other in a second language. We, the instructors can and should teach our students prosodic, linguistic and pragmatic features of gendered interaction and accommodation in a second language, raise the students' awareness of a crucial role of social gendered coloring of storytelling in English. Just like in any language, gender is an important factor in communication and gendered accommodation is just a proven fact and a necessary tool in teaching telling stories and interacting in English.

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