

Gender based interruption in student debates: sociocultural perspectives

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This paper analyzes communicative culture of Sri Lankan secondary school student debates. Communicative culture is perceived beyond ordinary passing or exchange of information. Rather, it encompassed how culture regulated participants' communication and interrupted each other in face-to-face interactions. The paper used the discourse community theory postulated by John Swales. The theory argued that it is only through a community being part of some ongoing discourse that people communicate. Similarly, a discourse community determines what speakers can do and will do since members have shared goals and mechanisms for communicating with members. In order to meet the requirement of the interactive nature of students in the sociocultural context in which debates occurred, linguistic and non linguistic data was obtained by audio tape recorder and observation of speeches during the competitive interaction. Tape recordings offered the researcher dense linguistic information while field notes provided an opportunity to jot down non linguistic materials which could not be part of the audio recording. The researcher transcribed the recorded speeches and analyzed it. The results were obtained using both quantitative and qualitative methods based on their distinctive advantages in interpreting human experiences. Students' debates were live events in which speakers were exerted prospectively by assigning orderly turn-taking and giving the floor to speakers according to pre-establishment. However, there were instances in which speakers have to speak simultaneously because interruptions represent an inter-discursive mechanism in interactionally organized communication. While it looked unhealthy to interrupt an ongoing speech, academic debates have their own features which are regulated by institutional norms and discourse community convention. The paper revealed that Sri Lankan culture presented an interesting scenario in which prolonged eye contacts or repeated head nods could mean a request for the floor. Also, speakers stared more at the audience than at their interlocutors. One possible reason for this strategy is that, by looking away from the addressees, they (other debaters/participants) might feel uneasy to scramble for the floor. Additionally, the study indicated that male debaters interrupted more frequently than their female counterparts.

Keywords: interruption; conversation; culture; turn-taking; hierarchy