THE MACHINE-GUN QUESTION: AN EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATIONAL STYLE *

DEBORAH TANNEN

Scholars in many disciplines have written about *style*, a term Hymes (1974) aptly calls "protean". In a paper originally published in 1927, Sapir includes style as one of five levels of speech contributing to judgments of personality, defining it as "an everyday facet of speech that characterizes both the social group and the individual" (1958:542). Robin Lakoff (1979) follows Sapir in identifying speech style with what is popularly perceived as "personality".

Ervin-Tripp (1972) places the study of style in the framework of theoretical linguistics. She discusses use of the term by Hymes, Geertz, and Labov, and suggests that linguistic choices are made on two levels. Syntagmatic relations, following rules of co-occurrence, result in identifiable styles. Paradigmatic relations, following rules of alternation, result in choices among styles and make possible style-switching, on the model of code-switching. Hymes (1974) builds on this work, noting that a speech community is comprised of a set of styles, and asserting that he uses the term in "the root sense of a way or mode of doing something". Thus speech styles are simply "ways of speaking". He terms styles associated with specific situations *registers,* thus accounting for what is often thought of as formal *vs.* informal speech.

The sense in which I shall use *style* is perhaps closest to Hymes' term *varieties:* "major speech styles associated with social groups". My use of *style* refers as well to no more nor less than a way of doing something. Conversational style, then, is a way of accomplishing conversation. It is crucial to note that *style* does not refer to a special way of speaking, as if one could choose between speaking plainly or with style. Rather, anything that is said must be said in some way. *Plain* is as much a characterization of style as *fancy*.

As all the cited scholars have observed, people expect coherence among stylistic features of talk, as among elements of dress and other forms of behavior. The codi-

fication of such *co-occurrence expectations* (Gumperz 1964) amounts to a grammar of style (Lakoff 1979). Perception of style operates in the way Bartlett (1932) hypothesized for memory: in encountering a person, scene, or event, one grasps a small number of elements, and associates them with a familiar schema based on prior experience. In recall, one postulates the existence of the entire schema. Thus a grammar of style assumes a schema or frames approach which underlies much recent work in linguistics (Chafe 1977; Fillmore 1976) as well as other disciplines. (See Tannen 1979a for summary and discussion of these and related theories.)

Ways of talking — the use of language in all its phonological, syntactic, paralinguistic, and pragmatic variety — are part of the schema which constitutes personal and interactional style. Ultimately we will want to link analysis of language use, or conversational style, to a comprehensive analysis of elements of behavior, including kinesics, proxemics, facial expressions, and so on. For the present, however, I have concentrated on the linguistic channel and chosen for microanalysis the language used by six speakers in a single setting: informal talk at a dinner gathering [1,2].

Theoretical background

Before proceeding to the analysis of the linguistic features constituting conversational style in the dinner conversation, I will briefly sketch some of the theoretical work that underlies the present approach. My notion of conversational style grows out of Lakoff's work on communicative style and Gumperz' on conversational inference. Gumperz and his collaborators have demonstrated that speakers use paralinguistic and prosodic features (intonation, pitch, pauses, and so on) which he calls *contextualization cues* to maintain thematic cohesion and signal how their conversational contributions are intended. In other words, speakers use such cues to signal what *speech activity* (Gumperz 1977) or *frame* (Bateson 1972) is intended; that is, whether they are joking, lecturing, arguing, or discussing.

Ways of signalling frames or "metamessages" about the relationship of interlocutors (Bateson 1972) seem self-evident to speakers but are culturally-specific. It is these that make up speakers' styles. Insofar as speakers who come from similar ethnic, geographic, or class backgrounds tend to use contextualization cues in similar ways, style is a cultural phenomenon. Insofar as speakers use features in unique combinations in response to actual settings, to that extent style is an individual

phenomenon. (See Gumperz and Tannen 1979 for a discussion of individual *vs.* social differences in language use.)

Just as one's own dialect seems like "language", and others may seem to have accents while we simply talk, similarly "style" is perceived only in others, when it differs from our own way of talking. Furthermore, while use of features which constitute style is automatic, nonetheless it may be seen to serve interactional purposes. Therefore, we may speak of stylistic "strategies", in the sense of investigating the interactional function of stylistic features, without implying that the use of such features is consciously planned or thought out.

Lakoff (1973, 1979) shows that uses of language which result in stylistic differences can be understood as ways of observing one or another of the following "rules of rapport":

(1) Don't impose
(2) Give options
(3) Be friendly

Observation of Rule 1 yields a style Lakoff calls "distance"; Rule 2 is associated with "deference", and Rule 3 with "camaraderie". Of course, speakers do not adhere consistently to only one rule of rapport but may observe one or another rule in response to differing contexts, with the result that their styles may be seen as a range on a continuum.

Lakoff's rapport schema is related to Goffman's notion of *deference:* "the appreciation an individual shows of another to that other . . ." (1967:72). Goffman distinguishes between *avoidance rituals and presentational rituals.* Avoidance rituals are ways of being nice to others by keeping distance; in other words, observing Lakoff's Rule 1 "Don't impose". Presentational rituals are ways of being nice to others by showing involvement; in Lakoff's system, maintaining camaraderie. Brown and Levinson (1978) build upon the work of Lakoff and Goffman to demonstrate that ways of talking in any language can be seen as ways of observing what Goffman has called "face", and which they characterize as negative and positive face wants.

All these schemata for understanding interaction point up the universal and conflicting human needs to be involved with others and to be left alone. In order to avoid unintended value judgment, I prefer to avoid the terms "positive" and "negative", in favor of the more neutral and more descriptive terms *community* and *independence.* These terms reflect as well a dimension I have found useful in understanding many other linguistic phenomena; that is, the degree of involvement overtly recognized between speaker and hearer [3]. Thus, conversational style can differ with respect to the degree of speaker/hearer involvement made explicitly, as

[3] I have written about this dimension in relation to cross-cultural communication (Tannen 1980a), spoken and written language (Tannen 1980b), and discourse in general (1980c).

well as in the conventions by which such involvement is recognized in speech. The analysis which follows demonstrates that the conversational style of three of the participants can be understood as growing out of conventionalized ways of observing the need for community or interpersonal involvement, but was perceived by three other participants as violations of their need for independence, that is, not to be imposed upon.

Thanksgiving dinner

The ensuing analysis is based on two and a half hours of naturally occurring conversation which took place before, during, and after Thanksgiving dinner at a home in Oakland, California in 1978. The gathering was made up of six people (four men, two women), all single, ranging in age from 28 to 34. Three were natives of New York City; two were from Los Angeles, California, and one was from London, England. I was one of the native New Yorkers; the others knew I was taping their conversation, but neither they nor I knew that I would use this tape for extensive microanalysis. After transcribing and beginning analysis of the tape, I played back segments of it for each participant in order to check my interpretations and learn theirs. Finally, I played key segments for others who had not been there in order to determine whether there were cultural patterns of interpretation [4].

In carrying out analysis, I had to confront my own subjectivity. The process of playback is crucial as a check in this regard. Furthermore, I believe that the advantage of insight into what was going at the time of interaction outweighs the disadvantage of loss of objectivity. In any case, discourse analysis is an interpretive process (Fillmore 1974), and an analyst is inescapably a native speaker of one stylistic dialect. That is, certain uses of contextualization cues will seem "obvious" while others will seem opaque, depending on whether or not one has encountered their use in one's speech community. The more dangerous situation is that of presumed objectivity where none is possible. In the present analysis, subjective reactions are tempered by the search for recurrent evidence in the data as well as verification by participants and non-participants [5].

Recalling Thanksgiving dinner several months later, two of the New York participants felt it had been a fine gathering, with "great" conversation. A third native New Yorker recalled it had been very nice indeed, but at times the conversation had been a bit "competitive". In contrast, two non-New York participants said that they had enjoyed themselves, but they had felt a bit left out. Furthermore, they characterized the conversation as being typically "New York".

As one of the New York participants, I was surprised by this reaction. However, detailed analysis of the tape and transcript made these differing recollections easy

[4] My method is modeled on that of Gumperz.
[5] For more detailed discussion of methodology and accountability see Tannen 1979b.

to understand. Whereas the tape included many examples of conversation between or among native New Yorkers with no non-New Yorkers taking part, it contained no segments of talk among non-New Yorkers in which no New Yorkers participated. In this sense, the New Yorkers had indeed "dominated". But this is not to say that there is something inherently dominating about the styles of these three speakers or of New Yorkers. Rather, as Sapir notes, "It is always the variation that matters, never the objective behavior" (1958:542). Whenever speakers differ with respect to pacing, loudness, and willingness to volunteer talk, whoever is accustomed to talking faster, louder, and more willingly, relative to the other, will appear to dominate. Thus someone who does all the talking in one setting with a certain other speaker, may not be able to get a word in edgewise with another speaker in another setting [6].

The machine-gun question

Many of the linguistic features which resulted in the New Yorkers dominating the Thanksgiving conversation were brought to bear on an identifiable linguistic device I have dubbed the *machine-gun question.* This device combines such characteristic features as fast pacing; dramatic use of pitch shift; reduced syntactic forms (associated with a more general tendency to leave much crucial information implicit rather than making it explicit); a feature I have called "cooperative overlap": the expectation that more than one speaker can and will talk simultaneously, with no perception of interruption by either party; and a preference for personal focus of topic.

The prototypic machine-gun question is spoken at a rapid rate and is timed to come either as an overlap or a latch (Sacks' term for turn-taking with no inter-turn pause) on another's utterance. It has reduced syntactic form and marked high or low pitch. It requests information of a personal nature and often comes in a series. The effect of the use of this device with speakers accustomed to its use is to grease the conversational wheels: keep talk flowing rapidly and smoothly. The reduced form, marked pitch, and turn-timing carry the metamessage, "I am so interested that I can't wait for you to finish before asking this, and I don't want to interrupt your turn at talk, so answer quickly if it fits in, and if it doesn't, forget it". Evidence that these intentions are clear to co-stylists will be seen presently. Resulting conversation is rhythmically smooth and, by their testimony, satisfying to participants.

In contrast, the effect of machine-gun questions on cross-stylistic talk, that is

---

[6] A colleague who works with Athabaskan Indians finds himself doing all the talking in conversations with native informants, but when he talks to me, he has a hard time getting the floor. I, in turn, have been in conversations with other New Yorkers in which I couldn't get the floor at all.

with interlocutors who are not accustomed to their use as cooperative devices, is the opposite of what is intended. The rapid and abrupt questions seem startling, even rude. They catch the interlocutor off guard and make him or her feel cornered. The resulting interchange is rhythmically uneven and, by their testimony during playback, unsatisfying to all participants.

The machine-gun question in cross-stylistic interchange

I first became aware of the machine-gun question as an identifiable device in an informal way. My sister was visiting me in California at the time I was beginning analysis of the Thanksgiving tape. One of the participants had the chance to meet her at an informal gathering at my house. After he had been talking to her for a while, he came up to me with great animation. "Your sister talks just like you!" he exclaimed. "I was talking to her, and I told her that I had been in New York last summer. And she said, *"Where"'*. He mimicked my sister's response by tacking the word "where" right onto his sentence, very quickly and abruptly, with falling intonation, like a poke. As he said it, he darted his head at me, giving the impression of physical imposition on "my space". He repeated, "Just 'where'. Just like that!" as if this were the oddest utterance he had ever encountered. "She didn't say, 'Oh really? Where did you go in New York?' or anything like that. Just 'Where'". Again he imitated the abrupt question. "And then I realized that that's what you do. And at first I thought it was really rude, but then I got used to it. And your sister does the same thing. If I hadn't known you, I would have thought it meant she was bored and wanted the conversation to be over quickly".

Thus I became aware of an instance of what Lakoff calls pragmatic homonymy (Lakoff and Tannen 1979), by which the metamessage of the machine-gun delivery signalled to David just the opposite of its intention. His explanation of his reaction to my sister's question sent me back to the Thanksgiving tape and transcript with renewed focus. Sure enough, I found numerous instances of similar use of abrupt questions by the three participants who had grown up in New York City. There were clear differences in the effects of these questions when used with other New Yorkers and when used with non-New Yorkers [7].

The Thanksgiving data include several instances of precisely the same question

---

[7] I am characterizing the three speakers who shared a fast-paced style as "New Yorkers", since this is a characteristic they shared, and because the others present perceived their conversational style as "New York". These speakers were also of East European Jewish background. Since the present analysis is based on a case study approach, I have not attempted to generalize findings, but simply to demonstrate the process of conversational style. While it is clear that many Americans associate such a style with New Yorkers of Jewish background, nonetheless it is equally clear that many New York Jewish speakers do not speak with this style, and many non-Jewish New Yorkers, Jewish non-New Yorkers, and speakers of a variety of other languages and dialects do use many of the features described here.

which my sister asked David later, asked in the same way and with similar effects. In the following excerpt from the Thanksgiving transcript, the context is almost exactly the same as well. Here, it is David's friend Chad, like David a native of Los Angeles, California, who makes reference to having visited New York City. Kurt, the native New Yorker who is hosting the dinner, asks "Where", in staccato fashion, with low pitch, and timed to overlap preceding talk. (Kurt and Chad have met only once before, and then briefly.) The third speaker in this interchange is David, Kurt's good friend who has brought Chad with him to the dinner [8].

(1) *Chad*:	Thát's what I expected to find in New York was	
	acc	
	lòts of bágels.	
(2) *Dave*:	Yeah lots of bágels and when you go to Bóston you	
	expect to find ⌈béans.	
(3) *Kurt*:	⌊Did you fínd them?	
(4) *Chad*:	No no. What I found were uh: . . . croisuh- crescent	
	rolls? and croissant? and all that? . . . . . thE . .	
	créscent rolls mostly. Lots of thát kind of stuff.	
	But it was⌈	
→ (5) *Kurt*:	⌊Where.	
(6) *Dave*:	Croissant.	
(7) *Chad*:	Í don't know. . . . Í didn't go aroùnd a whole lot for	
	breakfast. I was kind of stuck at . . . the Pláza	
	for a while which was interesting.	
	'pp	

[8] *Transcription conventions:*

..   noticeable pause or break in rhythm

...   half second pause, as measured by a stop watch; an extra dot is added for each additional half second pause

´   primary stress

ˋ   secondary stress

.   sentence final falling intonation

,   clause-final intonation ("more to come")

?   yes/no question rising intonation

—   glottal stop, or cutting off of speech

:   lengthened vowel sound

→   arrow at the left highlights machine-gun questions

→   arrow at the right of a line indicates sentence continues without break in rhythm (look for continuation on next line)

    Musical notation is used for amplitude and pace:

p   piano (spoken softly)

pp   pianissimo (very softly)

acc   spoken quickly

dec   spoken slowly

All above notations continue until punctuation.

/??/   question marks in slashes indicate incomprehensible talk

[brackets between lines indicate overlapping or latched utterances.

In this interchange, the dynamic interaction is between Chad and Kurt. Although David participates, he does not offer new information but rather makes a joke (2) suggested by and verifies (6) Chad's comments. Kurt directs his response/questions directly to Chad. It seems in this segment that David and Chad, good friends, are operating somewhat as a duet (Falk 1979); that is, they are jointly holding one conversational role, with Chad the main speaker and David his support. Thus Kurt's interruption of David in (3) functions like an interruption of Chad. (3) is also a machine-gun question, and it focuses attention directly on Chad. Chad's reply (4) is fairly long and repetitive, slowed down by a filler (uh:), a false start ("croisuh-"), repetition and rewording ("crescent rolls", "croissant", "crescent rolls"), empty phrases ("and all that?", "that kind of stuff"), and pauses. Kurt interrupts this reply to ask (5) "Where". The contrast between Chad's diffuse and repetitive (4) and Kurt's abrupt question (5) could not be more dramatic. In (7) Chad replies to Kurt's question with another diffuse response. He begins with a hedge ("I don't know"), pauses, hedges again ("a whole lot", "kind of"), and pauses again before reaching the answer that he ate breakfast at the Plaza hotel, after which his voice trails off. During playback, Kurt commented that Chad's reply seemed very uncertain and evasive. Chad explained that the abrupt delivery of Kurt's questions made him feel "on the spot" and probably aggravated his slight feeling of defensiveness, since he was the only new member of the group. Indeed, there are other segments in the tape which show Chad to be a particularly articulate and loquacious talker. In this instance, however, Kurt's attempt to show interest in Chad and make him comfortable had the opposite effect [9].

Interest *vs.* interrogation

Precisely the same process can be seen when another dinner guest attempts to show interest in Chad and make him feel comfortable. In this segment, I am the machine-gunner. I have met Chad for the first time; we have found ourselves temporarily alone at the table where the tape recorder is placed; and I begin trying to be nice to Chad by asking him questions.

→	(8) *Deb*:	Yoù live in LÁ?
	(9) *Chad*:	Yeah.
→	(10) *Deb*:	Y'vísiting here?
	(11) *Chad*:	Yeah.
→	(12) *Deb*:	What do you dó there?
	(13) *Chad*:	. . . . uh: I work at Disney Prosuh- . . . Walt Disney
		. . . . ⌈a:nd
→	(14) *Deb*:	⌊Yoù an ártist?
	(15) *Chad*:	No: no.

[9] In fact, shortly after this, Pete, Kurt, and I launch into an impassioned discussion of certain buildings and locations in New York, and Chad gets lost in the fray.

→ (16) *Deb*:   Writer?
(17) *Chad*:   Yeah:. I write . . . ádvertising copy.

Listening to the tape, I recalled my impression that Chad had been unaccountably uncommunicative. I was puzzled by his unwillingness to engage in the "friendly chat". During playback, Chad explained that two aspects of my questions had been disconcerting to him. First, he was not comfortable talking about himself, especially not to a new acquaintance, and especially not about his work. To me, it seemed self-evident that a person would like to talk about himself, and that his work is a relatively neutral personal topic. Second, the rapid pace, high pitch, and staccato form of my questions — their machine-gun nature — made Chad feel, again, "on the spot". The resulting conversation between us therefore got off to a wobbly start. The interchange has a choppy rhythm which typifies interaction between speakers who have different expectations about turntaking. Rather than a question and answer comprising an "adjacency pair" (Sacks *et al.* 1974), there are noticeably longer pauses between each question and its answer than between the answer and the subsequent question.

Another phenomenon which can be seen in this interchange is what Bateson (1972) has called *complementary schismogenesis.* When stylistic features are not shared, resultant interaction is often characterized by increasing divergence of styles, rather than convergence, as each participant applies more and more of the strategy that seems self-evidently appropriate but is not working. In the example above, I ask more and more questions, with increasingly direct focus, as I try harder and harder to make Chad feel comfortable. He, on the other hand, becomes increasingly uncomfortable in response to my questions. In retrospect, it is easy to ask why anyone, finding a strategy not working, does not simply change approaches. The answer is that at the moment of interaction, one is not consciously employing strategies but simply doing what seems the obvious and natural way to go about having conversation.

The machine-gun question in co-stylistic talk

The Thanksgiving conversation contains numerous examples of talk among the three participants who share a fast style, and these segments contain numerous examples of machine-gun questions which have a positive effect. For example, the following segment presents the transcript of an interchange among Kurt, Kurt's brother Pete, and me. The previous topic has been the effect óf television on children. I then use a machine-gun question to focus attention on Kurt and Pete as individuals, and continue to encourage them to talk about their childhoods with more machine-gun questions.

(18) *Kurt*:   I think it's basically done . . . dámage to children.

                                                                                     p
                   . . . . That what góod it's dòne is . . . outwéighed by
                       dec
                   . . . the dámage. ⌐
→ (19) *Deb*:   └Did yóu two grow up with télevision?
(20) *Pete*:   Véry little. We hád a TV in the ⌐quonset
→ (21) *Deb*:   └Hów old were you
                   when your parents got it? ⌐
(22) *Kurt*:   └We hád a TV̀ but we didn't
                   wátch it all the tíme. . . . . We were véry young. I
                   was fóur when my parents got a TV. ⌐
→ (23) *Deb*;   └You were fóur?
(24) *Pete*:   I even remember thát. . . . . . . ⌐I don't remember /?? →
(25) *Kurt*:   └I remember they got →
       Pete: ??   / ⌐
       Kurt: a TV before we moved out of ┘the qúonset huts.
                   In níneteen fifty foùr. ⌐
(26) *Pete*:   └I remémber we got it in
                   the quònset huts.
→ (27) *Deb*:   [chuckle] You lived in qúonset huts? . . . . When
                   you were hów old?
(28) *Kurt*:   . . . . . Y'Know my fàther's dentist said to him whát's
                   a quònset hut. . . . And he said Gód, yóu must be
                   younger than my chíldren. . . . . He wás. . . . . Yoùnger
                   than bóth of us.

The pace of this segment is fast, with much overlap and little pause between speaker turns. The answers are as fast-paced as the questions. Pete and Kurt are operating as a duet, since they are brothers and equally knowledgeable on the topic of their childhoods. They overlap with each other (24, 25) and latch utterances onto preceding ones (22, 26). The entire interchange proceeds according to the pace set by the question (19), "Did you two grow up with television?" which contrasts sharply with the pace and tone of Kurt's comment about the effect of television on children (18), which is uttered slowly, with a very sober tone and low pitch. Subsequent questions are asked with increasingly fast pace and higher pitch (21, 23, 27), as the questions and answers intertwine to create a rhythmically smooth network of talk.

My initial question (19) shifts the focus from a theoretical discussion of the effect of television on children to Kurt's and Pete's experience with television when they were children. Throughout the Thanksgiving conversation, the New Yorkers use machine-gun questions in this way, just as was seen in the previous example. In the present example, however, the asking of this question revives a fading conversation and sparks an animated interaction. By the time I ask the second machine-gun question, (21) "How old were you when your parents got it?" Kurt has begun to answer my earlier question (19) with the answer, (22) "We had a TV but we didn't watch it all the time". He finishes his answer to the first question with no hitch in

rhythm, and then goes on to answer the second question by saying, "I was four when my parents got a TV". The constructions of the two sentences in (22) reflect the shift in focus of Kurt's answers. His first sentence, "We had a TV but we didn't watch it all the time", echoes Pete's unfinished answer to the same question, (20) "We had a TV in the quonset-" [10]. Kurt's second sentence in (22) "I was four when my parents got a TV", shifts from plural (he and Pete) to singular (he himself) and shifts attribution of ownership of the television from him and his brother to his parents, to reflect the construction of my question (21) "How old were you when your parents got it?"

My questions are timed either to overlap or to latch onto Kurt's and Pete's talk. If the questions come when Kurt is not prepared to stop talking, he either goes on talking and answers later, as in (22), or ignores the question entirely. Neither Pete nor Kurt responds to my third question (23) "You were four?" This question has very different paralinguistic features from the machine-gun questions in (19), (21) and (27). "You were four?" is spoken with much lower pitch, and slowed rather than quickened pace. The effect is to create a back-channel response (Duncan 1973) showing appreciation of what has been said, and no participant feels it requires an answer. But what of question (27) "You lived in quonset huts? . . . When you were how old?" There is no simultaneous talk when (27) is asked, yet Kurt pauses for a second and a half and then tells a little story (28) which he has thought of in connection with the topic.

My question (27) "When you were how old?" is a typical machine-gun question. It is spoken quickly, with high pitch, and is in reduced syntactic form. The meta-message signalled by these features is something like, "I'm just keeping the conversation going here. If you don't feel like answering this question, never mind. Say whatever you want". Evidence for this lies in the fact that Kurt indeed chose not to answer the question, and on listening to the tape, I felt no sense of discomfort about his doing so. Quite the contrary, as I listen to it, I feel pleased that Kurt does not "stand on ceremony" about answering every question. His lack of compulsion to answer my questions frees me to toss them out as exuberantly as I like. Once I had identified this process in the Thanksgiving conversation, Kurt and I noticed that it happens often in our casual conversations.

Following is a final illustration of a speaker's discretion in determining whether or not to permit a question to alter the course of his or her talk. Later in the same discussion, Kurt comments that some residents of the quonset huts had rats, and he continues:

(29) *Kurt*:   Cause they were built near the swámp. . . . . We used
                to go . . . hunting frógs⌈in the swámps,
→ (30) *Deb*:   ⌊Whére wàs it. Whére were yoùrs?

[10] Perhaps the term "quonset huts" needs some explanation. As the dialog shows, some young people even in the US don't know what these are. They were temporary housing put up for veterans returning from WW II because of the shortage of housing in the US at that time.

(31) *Kurt*:   In the ┌Brónx.
(32) *Pete*:   └In the Brónx. In the Éast Brònx?
→(33) *Deb*:   How long did you líve in it? ┌
(34) *Kurt*:   └Near the swámps? . . . . Now
                   there's a ┌big coóperative building.
(35) *Pete*:   └Three years.

In this segment, Kurt permits my overlapped question (30) "Where was it. Where were yours?" to become an interruption. He halts his recollection about hunting frogs in the swamps (29) to answer (31) "In the Bronx". However, when I ask (33) "How long did you live in it?" Kurt goes on answering my previous question with (34) "Near the swamps?" and adds, after a pause, "Now there's a big cooperative building". Thus he allows one question (30) to determine his talk, but ignores another (33). That question is answered by Pete, Kurt's co-speaker in this conversational duet.

The machine-gun answer

As can be seen in the previous examples, the machine-gun question is not an isolated device but is part of a style more generally typified by rapid turntaking, marked fast or slow pacing, marked intonation and pitch, and staccato form. It is correlated as well with preference for personal focus in topics. The machine-gun question has its correlative in the machine-gun answer. An example of this occurred in the following minimal interchange which took place as an aside in a conversation between two new acquaintances in an informal setting similar to that of the Thanksgiving dinner. In the course of casual conversation, the speaker (B) mentioned her brother, and the listener (A) interjected a quick question which B answered in kind before proceeding with her talk:

(36) *A*:   What'z your brother do? ┌
(37) *B*:   └Lawyer.

The single-word response mirrors the question in its reduced form, rapid timing, and marked low pitch (in balancing contrast to the marked high pitch of the question). The result is an adjacency pair which is rhythmically synchronous. The conversation proceeded smoothly, with the added satisfaction that comes of having overt evidence that things are going well, that expectations are shared, and that each is playing her part successfully. I suggest that it is the ability to thus coordinate interaction with someone one has never met before, but who shares expectations of conversational signalling because of similar backgrounds, that accounts, in part at least, for what may appear to others as clannishness.

The operation of conversational style in interaction

The machine-gun delivery is a potentially homonymous device. Its dual interpretation correlates with findings of an earlier study (Tannen 1979c) which I call "the brevity effect". That research showed that some speakers interpreted 'brevity' in informal talk as evidence of 'casualness' and hence 'sincerity'. In contrast, others took it as an indirect way of showing displeasure or lack of agreement. The brevity of the machine-gun question and answer, combined with fast pacing, also has two possible interpretations. It is intended by at least some speakers to carry a metamessage of rapport, in service of the interactional goal of establishing community. The device fails miserably, however, when used with those who do not expect the need for community to be served in this way. It seems to them a violation of this need, and an imposition.

Such linguistic devices are not randomly distributed in the speech of members of one group or another. Though no two speakers use all the same devices in the same way, there are patterns by which certain devices, and certain features which make up devices, co-occur in the speech of individuals who have similar ethnic, geographic, or social backgrounds. A unique combination of features and devices constitutes each speaker's individual style. But the range of features and their possible conventionalized use is limited, for each speaker, by the conventions practiced in the individual's speech community. It is by virtue of individual style that one may comment, "That sounds just like Harry". But it is by virtue of cultural differences that one may, upon meeting someone for the first time, be poignantly reminded of another person one once knew from a similar cultural background. As the work of Gumperz has repeatedly demonstrated, stereotypes about people of identifiable ethnic groups can often be traced in part to their habitual use of language — what I have been calling conversational style.

Use of conversational control devices, that is, use of paralinguistic features of talk to signal how what is said is meant to be taken, becomes conventionalized in speech communities and habitual in the speech of individuals. The use of terms such as "strategy" and "device" does not imply conscious decision-making or planning. Rather, ways of talking, of having conversation, have an air of inevitability about them; the way one tries to show interest, friendliness, or anger seems self-evidently appropriate. Communication is always an imperfect business. Each person is an island, and no other person ever understands another's intent in all its motivations, ramifications, and associations. But intentions are perceived correctly in proportion to the degree to which conversational style is shared, or understood. When interlocutors' styles are relatively similar, intentions are apt to be more or less correctly perceived, without explanation. When conversational styles are relatively different, intentions are likely to be misinterpreted. If interlocutors are aware of style differences, indeed if they are aware of the process of conversational style, they can re-evaluate their interpretations after the fact. Without such awareness, they are likely to form and continue to hold mistaken judgments of others' abilities

and intentions. Sometimes understanding grows out of repeated interaction. One gets to know what Harry means when he says something in a certain way. But just as often, repeated interaction calcifies mistaken judgments, and reinforces expectations that certain individuals or members of certain groups will behave in certain ways. One may simply decide that Harry is rude or unpredictable. That is why an understanding of conversational style is crucial for everyday interaction in a heterogeneous society, as well as for theoretical linguists interested in the process of signalling meaning in conversation.

References

Bartlett, F.C. 1932. Remembering: a study in experimental and social psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bateson, Gregory. 1972. Steps to an ecology of mind. New York: Ballantine Books.

Brown, Penelope and Stephen Levinson. 1978. 'Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena'. In: E. Goody, ed., Questions and politeness. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. pp. 56–289.

Chafe, Wallace. 1977. 'Creativity in verbalization and its implications for the nature of stored knowledge'. In: R. Freedle, ed., Discourse production and comprehension. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. pp. 41–55.

Duncan, Starkey, 1973. On the structure of speaker-auditor interaction during speaking turns. Language in Society 2: 161–180.

Ervin-Tripp, Susan. 1972. 'On sociolinguistic rules: alternation and co-occurrence'. In: J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, eds., Directions in sociolinguistics. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston. pp. 213–250.

Falk, Jane. 1979. The duet as a conversational process. Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University.

Fillmore, Charles. 1974. 'Pragmatics and the description of discourse'. In: Berkeley studies in syntax and semantics. Berkeley, CA: Institute of Human Learning, The University of California, Berkeley. pp. V1–V21.

Fillmore, Charles. 1976. The need for a frame semantics within linguistics. SMIL (Statistical methods in linguistics) 12: 5–29.

Goffman, Erving. 1967. Interaction ritual. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Gumperz, John. 1964. 'Linguistic and social interaction in two communities'. In: J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, eds., The ethnography of communication. American Anthropologist 66(6), (part 2): 137–153.

Gumperz, John. 1977. 'Sociocultural knowledge in conversational inference'. In: M. Saville-Troike, ed., Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1977. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. pp. 191–211.

Gumperz, John and Deborah Tannen. 1979. 'Individual and social differences in language use'. In: C. Fillmore, D. Kempler and W.S.-Y. Wang, eds., Individual differences in language ability and language behavior. New York: Academic Press. pp. 305–325.

Hymes, Dell. 1974. 'Ways of speaking'. In: R. Bauman and J. Sherzer, eds., Explorations in the ethnography of speaking. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. pp. 433–451.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. 1973. 'The logic of politeness or, minding your p's and q's'. Papers from the Ninth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society, pp. 292–305.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. 1979. 'Stylistic strategies within a grammar of style'. In: J. Orasanu, M. Slater and L. Loeb Adler, eds., Language, sex, and gender. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 327: 53–78.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmach and Deborah Tannen. 1979. 'Communicative strategies in conversation: the case of *Scenes from a marriage'*. In: Proceedings of the fifth annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, pp. 581–592.

Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. 1974. A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. Language 50(4): 696–735.

Sapir, Edward. 1958. 'Speech as a personality trait'. In: D. Mandelbaum, ed., Selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture, and personality. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 533–543.

Tannen, Deborah. 1979a. 'What's in a frame? Surface evidence for underlying expectations'. In: R. Freedle, ed., New directions in discourse processing. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. pp. 137–181.

Tannen, Deborah. 1979b. Processes and consequences of conversational style. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

Tannen, Deborah. 1979c. Ethnicity as conversational style. Sociolinguistic Working Paper No. 55. Reprinted in: R. Bauman and J. Sherzer, eds., Language and speech in American society: a compilation of research papers in sociolinguistics. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1980.

Tannen, Deborah. 1980a. 'Implications of the oral/literate continuum for cross-cultural communication'. In: J. Alatis, ed., Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1980. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. pp. 326–347.

Tannen, Deborah. 1980b. Spoken/written language and the oral/literate continuum. Proceedings of the sixth annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, pp. 207–218.

Tannen, Deborah. 1980c. Oral and literate strategies in discourse. The Linguistic Reporter 22 (9): 1–3.

Tannen, Deborah. In press (a). New York Jewish conversational style. International Journal of the Sociology of Language.

Tannen, Deborah. In press (b). 'Conversational style'. In: H. Dechert and M. Raupach, eds., Psycholinguistic models of production. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Deborah Tannen is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University, Washington, DC. She received her Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1979, and has published extensively in the areas of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and cross-cultural communication. Her current research is on conversational style; spoken vs. written language (the subject of a forthcoming volume she is editing for Ablex Publishing Corporation); and frame analysis applied to communication in medical settings. She is the organizer and editor of Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1981, entitled "Analyzing discourse: text and talk".