

# *The discourse dynamics of male-to-female street remarks: insulting compliments or complimentary insults?*

*Elizabeth J. Pretorius*

*Department of Linguistics, University of South Africa*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A woman walking across campus passes three men observing her. One of them gives her a smile and says *Nice nipples*. A young woman passes a man on the street who says to her *You're beautiful*. He then follows her down the block repeating his comment every few seconds. A young woman walking down the street on a chilly day hears a man say to her *Whatsamatter with you. No stockings on a day like this*. Remarks like these (taken from Gardner 1984) delivered by men to women in public places are a fairly common feature of Western urban centres. Traditionally women are advised to treat such remarks as harmless forms of flattery, yet many women feel uncomfortable when they're the recipients of such public comments. This paper looks at this particular form of English language use and examines the discourse dynamics underlying male-to-female street remarks (henceforth M-F street remarks) to show why this form of discourse is interactionally ambiguous and therefore often difficult for women to respond to and to construe positively. The data in this article are taken largely from an article on the same topic written by Gardner (1984), who looks at street remarks from a sociolinguistic perspective. This paper re-analyses the data from a discourse analy-

sis perspective. Although most of the data derive from American experiences, an examination of this marginal type of discourse in terms of exchange structure and shared pragmatic knowledge clearly reveals how street remarks violate English-speaking norms of discourse interaction. It is argued that the delivery of an ambiguous speech act such as a street remark is a means of asserting and maintaining dominance in social interaction. Because discourse norms of interaction are culture-specific, no claims are made about how such remarks are construed in non-English-speaking cultures.

The paper is structured as follows: in section 2 some cursory remarks are made about structure and expectations in discourse, while section 3 looks at M-F street remarks in terms of the extralinguistic context within which verbal interaction occurs. Section 4 looks at M-F street remarks in terms of the linguistic context of verbal encounters, based largely on Stubbs' (1983) predictive model of exchange structure. Section 5 summarises the findings of the discussion.

## **2. STRUCTURE AND EXPECTATIONS UNDERLYING DISCOURSE**

A factor that consistently emerges from findings in all related fields studying human behaviour is that human behaviour is expectation-based. Expectations set up predictions. Expectations and predictions are possible because virtually all aspects of our lives, including language, are to a greater or lesser extent structured.

The fact that we experience verbal interaction as a meaningful, coherent and purposive phenomenon (most of the time, at least) implies that there is structure, and hence expectations, underlying the open-endedness and variability of verbal interaction. We are in fact guided and constrained in language use by a set of operating principles, strategies, values and norms of interaction and appropriate language behaviour, though some of these may operate at an unconscious level. Some of these operating principles are culture-specific, some universal. However, in any given speech community there is 'a

structured knowledge accessible to the members of the community, and so, to great extent, to science' (Hymes 1974:102). The two most important factors that constitute this 'structured knowledge' to which Hymes refers are the **extralinguistic context** and the **linguistic context** in which verbal interaction occurs.

In 1935, long before the serious study of discourse was undertaken, J.R. Firth, writing about the importance of conversation as the key to a better understanding of what language is and how it works, stated:

Conversation is much more of a roughly prescribed ritual than most people think. Once someone speaks to you, you are in a **relatively determined context** and you are not just free to say what you please (as cited in Rosen 1981:18); (emphasis mine - E.J.P.).

This 'relatively determined context' to which Firth refers is termed the **extralinguistic context**. This extralinguistic context within which verbal interaction occurs determines to a large extent what is said, where it's said, how it's said, how it's construed and what the role relations of the participants are. Firth further identified a crucial aspect of verbal interaction when he stated that

(t)he moment a conversation is started, whatever is said is a determining condition for what, in any reasonable expectation, may follow (as cited in Stubbs 1983:84).

Although discourse is not as tightly rule-governed as the formal morpho-syntactic component of language, it is by no means an ad hoc collection of utterances randomly strung together. The concept 'structure' in discourse is used more loosely and is accounted for in terms of patterns or regularities rather than the categorical rules of syntax. The unit of analysis is not the grammatically defined clause or sentence, but a patterning of functional units which occur across sentence boundaries. Well-formedness in discourse is closely aligned to the fact that a previous utterance (i.e. the linguistic context) sets up expectations about what follows, and such expectations impose constraints on the way in which participants interact during verbal

encounters. The constraints on these units may relate to knowledge about the world in general, about social interaction and language behaviour, about the context, appropriacy and purposiveness of utterances, and about states of affairs outside language as expressed in the propositional content of utterances. I shall refer to this broad knowledge base as **pragmatics**. Expectations in discourse thus derive largely from the fact that discourse occurs within a specific extralinguistic and linguistic context against a background of shared pragmatic knowledge. Deviant discourse results when such expectations are breached, either unintentionally or intentionally.

Now M-F street remarks are not always offensive to women. Indeed, 'traditional folk interpretations counsel women that street remarks are innocuously intended and flattering' (Gardner 1984:151) and many street remarks may be just that. However, it is significant to note that despite such soothing advice, women do not uniformly construe M-F street remarks as innocuous and complimentary and they may come away from the encounter feeling uncomfortable, or even bewildered, humiliated or angry. Gardner reports that many women 'find street remarks offensive or, at the least, intrusive' (1984:151). The important question is thus: if street remarks are supposedly innocuous, why then do women not readily construe them as such? In this paper I would like to show that 'what follows' in a street remark often defies 'any reasonable expectation' concerning both the extralinguistic as well as the linguistic context. M-F street remarks defeat discourse expectations to a large degree, thereby becoming ambiguous in terms of both content and the interactional 'rules of the discourse game', which is why such forms of verbal interaction are difficult for the recipients to respond to.

In the next section I shall identify some of the extralinguistic contextual variables that constrain language use and see how they relate to M-F street remarks.

### 3. THE EXTRALINGUISTIC CONTEXT AND M-F STREET REMARKS

Hymes (1974) identified 16 contextual variables which he termed the 'components of speech'. His classificatory scheme was intended primarily as a model for analysing ethnographic data, to uncover general socio-cultural patterns of speech behaviour and cross-cultural differences, and to establish the defining criteria of speech events. The use of this classificatory scheme in discourse analysis helps determine the extralinguistic context of discourse and thereby helps to identify and clarify the paradigmatic constraints on the production and interpretation of language in use. These extralinguistic contextual variables form a predictive framework within which we interpret and respond to discourse. Hymes' scheme has been modified for the purposes of this paper and five extralinguistic contextual variables that are relevant to this discussion are singled out, viz. **genre, setting, topic, participants, and norms of interaction and interpretation**. We shall look at the interrelationship of these variables and the expectations they ordinarily generate, and then see how these expectations are defeated in street remarks. Because these variables all intersect, they will not be discussed under separate subheadings.

The **genre** variable refers to discourse categories such as poems, myths, commercials, editorials, etc. Genres have distinctive characteristics and influence the kind of language used, the way it is used and the topic(s) dealt with. The **genre** of discourse dealt with here is, of course, the street remark, more specifically the male-to-female street remark. Gardner (1984:148) defines a street remark as 'a comment in public taking place between the unacquainted'. The specific street remarks that we are looking at involves those delivered by males to females. The phrase 'a comment in public' implies that a single speech act is initiated by one person to another. Although M-F street remarks often consist of a single move only (e.g. a comment), thus suggesting a monologistic genre of discourse, they may involve more than one move, and are in fact interactive because the move covertly or overtly predicts a response from the woman, albeit usually a non-linguistic response. The defining characteristic of this

genre, namely that it occurs in public between the unacquainted, has important implications in terms of the setting and the norms of interaction that govern appropriate language behaviour, as we shall see further on.

Closely aligned to the genre variable is the **setting** variable. **Setting** refers in general to the physical circumstances of a speech event and more specifically, to the time and place in which it occurs. The setting can have a marked effect on the kind of language that is used, the topics spoken about, the general expectations of the participants, and so on. M-F street remarks typically occur in an urban setting, in public places. There are conversational norms pertaining to unacquainted people in a public urban setting. For example, it is considered impolite to make audible comments about people in public and children are explicitly instructed not to do so. When the female children grow up, these norms retain their applicability. However, the occurrence of M-F street remarks indicates that the applicability of these norms becomes elastic, for when the male children grow up they can make audible comments, many of which are dubiously complimentary if not downright offensive, about certain people in public, namely women. The setting variable thus intersects in an important way with the variable pertaining to participants and norms of interaction.

The **participant** variable refers to all those who are present or who are in some way directly or indirectly involved in the interaction. Participants thus include addressor as well as addressee. The participant component involves several variables such as age, sex, status, profession, etc. It should be clear by now that the way in which participants interact and use language is also revealing of their role relationships. Gardner claims that street remarks 'are delivered by all classes and races of men, singly and in groups' (1984:151) and they're directed to all women, whether attractive or not, although younger women are usually the recipients of these remarks. At this point it is appropriate to look at gender role behaviour traditionally prescribed for women and the concomitant conversational rights of women in general. Research has shown that women are traditionally verbally more polite than men (e.g. the polite indirect request

*Could I please have a cup of tea?* uttered by a woman versus the more direct request *A cup of tea, please* as uttered by a man) and they tend to be more conservative in their use of language. They are brought up being cautioned not to speak to strange men, to be polite, not to use vulgar language and to ignore male coarseness. Furthermore, in public women are, as Gardner puts it, 'subjected to a free and evaluative commentary by men that is neither the lot of men nor the prerogative of women to deliver if they so choose' (1984:151). Women traditionally are not expected to respond to such remarks and it's considered improper or 'unladylike' to do so. Likewise, women are constrained from initiating similar remarks to men. The woman is thus not a ratified speaker in this kind of verbal encounter and is cast in the role of an overhearer. In other words, in accordance with her gender role prescription, she should not participate in the exchange as a proper interlocutor. (Many women object to the obliged passivity expected of them when men breach civil norms. One feminist has referred to it as 'an obligation towards "autism"' (Damrosch 1975, as cited in Gardner 1984:158).)

**Norms of interaction** refer to the underlying 'rules' that govern the appropriate language behaviour of participants in social interaction. These pertain to, for example, turn-taking, taboo topics or words, forms of respect, norms for greeting or leave-taking, the physical distance maintained during face-to-face interaction, and so on. These norms are intimately tied up with social structure and relationships, and reflect the attitudes and values of that particular society. These norms may differ considerably from community to community, and provide fertile areas for cross-cultural areas of misunderstanding and stressful or failed communicative interaction. We shall now see how the setting variable links up with these norms of interaction.

Gardner (1984:148) identifies a **norm of civil inattention** between the unacquainted in large urban centres, and the linguistic aspect of this civil inattention is silence (recall the 'silence in the lift' syndrome!). In other words, unacquainted people in public urban places are under no social obligation to interact verbally with one another. (Note that this norm is typical of English-speaking cultures and not

necessarily of other cultures.) However, this norm may be breached in different ways and for different reasons, for example requesting information concerning the time or directions, requesting aid or summoning help. In such cases the person requiring information has the right to address a stranger and the stranger addressed has the right to respond and is a ratified participant in the verbal interaction. Such breaches are considered to be 'legitimate'. M-F street remarks, on the other hand, also breach this norm of civil inattention but in ways that cannot always be considered to be legitimate. For example, a man in a sincere tone of voice says to a woman passing by *Excuse me, miss*. This move is a legitimate attention-getter. When she turns to see what he wants he says *You sure have got great boobs, miss* (Gardner 1984:156). His second move is not legitimate because he is making an audible comment in public about a personal part of a stranger's anatomy. Furthermore, unlike legitimate breaches of the norm of civil inattention where both participants partake in the verbal encounter, in M-F street remarks, the female participant to whom the remark is addressed does not have the sanctioned right to respond and is therefore not a ratified speaker in the encounter. In other words, the man is sanctioned to breach norms but not the woman. Ironically, if the woman does respond angrily to the man's breach of norms, the man's next move is often 'an escalation to a high level of verbal abuse' (Gardner 1984:159). It would appear then, that if a woman does respond, she runs the risk of being made the culprit; the man can now justifiably abuse her verbally since she has breached a norm, the no-response norm. In other words, men can breach norms with greater impunity than women. Men who deliver street remarks thus start off with an advantage and this enables them to assert and maintain dominance during the verbal encounter.

When one considers that M-F street remarks are often ostensible compliments or greetings (e.g. *Hi, beautiful; Nice tits, madam; Great boobs you've got, lady*), then the woman is indeed put in a difficult position because these are speech acts that predict responses in normal verbal encounters (discussed further in section 4). She may also be reluctant to respond positively in case her response is construed by the man as a signal for a pick-up. If she participates by



responding to the remark, either non-linguistically (e.g. smiling to acknowledge the compliment or greeting, or scowling to indicate her disapproval of the liberty the man has taken at commenting on her appearance) or linguistically (e.g. returning the greeting or saying *thank-you* to acknowledge the compliment), she violates her role requirement. As we have already stated, men often become aggressive when women respond angrily to their remarks. Even non-angry responses from women can elicit aggressive counter-responses from men. Gardner states that if a woman responds to a man in a group, the male response is often group laughter, and when one man is the speaker, 'any response on the woman's part, even if it is not angry or contemptuous, may elicit an escalation to hostility' (1984:160). On the other hand, if a woman doesn't respond, she's often accused of being stuck-up or conceited. She is thus in a catch-22 situation and either way, she's at a disadvantage. Any response or non-response from the recipient of a M-F street remark seems to suggest that she's not behaving in accordance with her gender-role requirements.

The setting, participant and the norms of interaction variables also intersect with the **topic** variable. The public urban setting imposes constraints on the topics dealt with in verbal interaction. For example, personal remarks that can be construed negatively about a stranger's shape, size, appearance, behaviour, a particular part of the anatomy, etc. are considered inappropriate, as is talk about sex. If unacquainted persons do interact with one another verbally in a public setting, the topic will usually be a neutral or impersonal one, for example, making remarks about the weather, the state of the economy, etc. In other words, the participants avoid taboo topics. However, as the examples so far have already shown, M-F street remarks breach these topic constraints because the topic or content of the street remark inevitably concerns the woman's outward appearance, her behaviour and her sexuality. In other words, M-F street remarks consistently violate taboo topics.

This in turn brings into consideration certain formal characteristics of M-F street remarks which are closely linked to the genre variable, namely the **form** (i.e. how something is said) and **tone** of this particular speech act. Street remarks can be covertly or overtly sexual. For

example, a young man standing around with a group of male friends says to a girl who has just passed and who is wearing boots *Nice tail, Puss-in-Boots* while his friends guffaw with laughter. He is obviously showing off his verbal skill with his punned reference to Puss/cat/tail, but at the same time his remark carries sexual innuendo by referring to the woman's bottom and his metonymic labelling of her as a Puss - Puss/fanny/woman/bottom. Sexual innuendo and double entendre are typical features of this genre of discourse. Consider another example: a woman walking down the street feels a man looking at her breasts and as she passes him, hears him say to another man *Cantaloupes are now good eating in the local markets* (Gardner 1984:155). The speech act operates at two levels; on the one level, the remark is ostensibly an innocent comment about a mundane matter that one man addresses to another or to a group of men and which the woman happens to overhear. On the other level the remark is a deliberate veiled reference to the woman's breasts which the man intends the woman to overhear. As Gardner points out, this use of double entendre 'ensures that a man may hedge his bets whenever he chooses' (1984:160). He is simultaneously breaching norms and not breaching them. This kind of speech act is difficult to respond to because of the ambiguity of its content; if the woman indicates offence at the sexual reference, the man can always indicate that the other meaning was intended. By manipulating the 'rules of the game' in this way, the addressor can maintain dominance during the interaction while the addressee is put at a disadvantage.

The non-linguistic attendant of a street remark may be a leer or a wolf-whistle, the 'accidental' touching or brushing of the woman's body in passing, or even a deliberate pinch on the bottom. The tone of the street remark is often jocular, but it can also be delivered with veiled hostility or with varying degrees of aggression. Gardner states that sometimes such remarks 'are spoken with vehemence and even accompanied by punches, tweaks or blows' (1984:151). Considering that men initiate street remarks (i.e. women do not deliberately provoke these remarks), such aggression on the part of the man is totally uncalled for and is a forceful breach of the norms of civil inattention and politeness operative in an urban setting.

In M-F street remarks we thus find an asymmetrical role relationship because the man delivers while the woman receives without being sanctioned to respond. Generally, in asymmetrical role relationships, the one participant has greater status, power or authority, to which the other participant defers. Typical asymmetrical role relationships are king-subject, doctor-patient, teacher-pupil, parent-child. In such role relationships, the participant with the greater power controls the verbal interaction to a large extent, and if the subservient participant dominates the conversation, it is only because the power participant sanctions him/her to do so. In general, the role relationship between unacquainted people in public settings is an equitable one by virtue of the fact that both participants are strangers. The M-F street remark is thus a deviation from the expected equitable role relationship in a public setting.

The participant variable is intimately linked with conversational norms. Grice (1975, as cited in Wardhaugh 1986:281) maintained that there are two overriding principles underlying verbal interaction, namely the **politeness principle** and the **cooperative principle**. He further identified four maxims that derive from the cooperative principle, viz.:

maxim of **quantity** - the contribution is to be as informative as possible. Too little or too much information violates the cooperative principle.

maxim of **quality** - the contribution is to be as genuine as possible, not spurious.

maxim of **relevance** - the contribution is to be appropriate and relevant to the topic.

maxim of **manner** - the contribution is to be clear and unambiguous.

Speakers may deliberately violate these maxims in order to implicate something. For example, when asked if he liked Wagner, Baudelaire replied 'I love Wagner but the music I prefer is that of a cat hung up by its tail outside a window, trying to stick to the panes of glass with its claws' (Shapiro 1984: 283). By violating the principles of quality and manner, Baudelaire sarcastically expresses his dislike of Wagner. An examination of M-F street remarks reveals that these Gricean maxims are very often violated. For example, a man smiles at a passing woman and says *How the fuck are you?* She

doesn't respond. He then stands and yells *How the fuck are you?* for two blocks while she continues on her way. In this exchange all the principles and maxims are contravened. The man violates the politeness and cooperative principles by forcing unwanted attention on a stranger and not retiring gracefully when the response is not forthcoming. He further violates the maxim of quantity - the continued repetition of his greeting renders it a non-greeting. The maxim of quality is violated because the insertion of the obscenity and the repetition render his greeting spurious. The maxim of relevance is also violated by the insertion of an obscenity inappropriate to the public setting and norms of propriety. Finally, the repetition and the obscenity render the man's intention ambiguous and the maxim of manner is thus violated; instead of the greeting serving the phatic function of signalling friendliness and/or politeness, his greeting becomes a means of humiliating the woman in public by drawing unwanted attention to her.

It is also interesting to consider the asymmetry in the participant **norms of interpretation**. As has already been stated, women do not uniformly construe street remarks in a positive light. Many women regard them as an intrusion of privacy and some even as a form of verbal rape. Gardner refers to a rape victim who 'classes street remarks with rape as uninvited intimacies that women must suffer' (1984:153). Gardner reports that men on the whole do not seem to realise that women may be offended by street remarks: 'Men also offer evidence, when confronted by women who are offended or hurt by a street remark, that they meant no harm' (1984:152) and 'men do find street remarks unobjectionable, for the most part, or consider them the woman's just desserts' (1984:161). Consider the example of two female students walking down a street in Cape Town, one of whom is rather buxom. A man leaning against a shop window holds his hands several inches away from his chest and looking at the well-endowed student, says *Nice and big, hey* as they pass him. She stops, looks at him angrily, then stares at his crotch and replies *I can't say the same for you, buster* before walking on. Angrily he shouts after her *No need to get personal, lady* and then as an afterthought shouts *Fucking bitch*, a stock condemnation of a woman perceived to be acting out of role. Admittedly her response had not

been complimentary but it is a telling comment that the man's admonition not to 'get personal' does not apply to men who deliver street remarks. Men and women thus differ in their perceptions of the effects of a street remark and they construe them differently. It is evident that 'women are open persons on the public streets, liable to receive street remarks at will' (Gardner 1984:151). Perhaps the fact that society sanctions men to breach the norm of civil inattention with regard to women makes them less sensitive to the feelings of the recipients of their remarks.

#### 4. EXCHANGE STRUCTURE: CONCEPTS AND ANALYTIC TOOLS

In this section I would like to shift the focus to the more formal discourse aspect of M-F street remarks to show how violations are also manifest within the syntagmatic context of street remarks. The discussion is based on Stubbs' predictability model for conversational analysis which, although it is not without its problems, provides a useful framework within which to analyse the expectations and structures underlying verbal interaction.

Verbal interaction revolves around turn-taking between participants and is defined in terms of the syntagmatic constraints on sequences of utterances in opening, developing and closing conversations. Stubbs has as his starting point the concept of continuous classification - each utterance is defined in terms of the predictions, if any, set up by the preceding utterance. Stubbs uses a matrix consisting of binary features such as predicting, predicted, initial and terminal to identify basic interactional categories. The basic moves (i.e. the smallest functional units within verbal interaction) are as follows:

	predicting	predicted	initial	terminal
I (Initiation)	+	-	+	-
R (Response)	-	+	-	-
R/I (Response-initiation)	+	+	-	-
Ir (Re-initiation)	+	-	-	-
Inf (Inform)	-	-	+	-
F (Feedback)	-	-	-	-

The basic exchange structures that are generated in verbal interaction are

[Inf]    [I R]    [I R/I R]

Although [Inf] is not a natural qualifier for status as an exchange structure, it is potentially interactive for F can always be provided, hence [Inf (f)]. Each of these basic exchange structures may be followed by any number of Ir pairs and/or any number of Fs. Moves such as openings (O) or closes (C) may also occur in basic exchange structures. Openings and closes are closed types of moves in that they signal boundaries in a conversation and do not actually contribute to the topic of conversation. A typical opening is *Hello*, *Excuse me*, or calling someone by name. Like I, it is also [+predicting], [-predicted], [+initial] but unlike I, it has more of a phatic function and is not related to the conversational topic. The exchange below serves to illustrate some of these interactional categories.

A:     O     *Excuse me -*  
         I     *What's the time, please?*  
B:     R     *It's nearly four o'clock.*  
A:     F     *Thank-you*

Stubbs' (1983:193) definition of an exchange as 'comprising an initiation and those utterances which support its preconditions, presuppositions, and so on' implicitly rests on the cooperative principle.

As we have already seen, the man makes the first move and tends to dominate the exchange. For example:

Man:        O        *Excuse me, miss.*  
Woman:     R        *Turns to see what he wants.*  
Man:        I        *You sure have got great boobs.*  
Woman:     R        ?

The opening predicts a response, which is forthcoming. The I that follows also predicts a response in that it is delivered as a compliment. According to compliment etiquette, a compliment predicts a

response in the form of some kind of acknowledgement. However, despite compliment etiquette and the politeness principle, the woman is constrained from responding to a street remark. In any case, it is difficult to respond to this kind of compliment because it is inappropriate - private parts of the body are not normally evaluated in public. Furthermore, the compliment is ostensibly respectful but it is also simultaneously disrespectful for it is publically evaluative. The maxims of relevance and quality are breached, rendering the compliment a dubious one, even offensive. The street remark is thus deviant for in terms of its exchange structure, it is an I which structurally predicts an R but its content is of such a nature that it defies a proper response.

There is also the possibility that if a woman does respond, she may be told that the remark was not intended for her. Consider the verbal encounter between a young man leaning against a car and a young woman passing him:

- |        |           |  |
|--------|-----------|--|
| Man:   | <b>O</b>  | <i>Hi, beautiful</i>   |
| Woman: | <b>R</b>  | She smiles at him to acknowledge the greeting and the perceived compliment |
| Man:   | <b>Ir</b> | <i>Didya think it was for you, you conceited bitch.</i>                    |
| Woman: | <b>R</b>  | ?  |

The woman glances around in bewilderment and notices that there's no-one else within reasonable speaking distance whom the man might have addressed. She quickly walks on, angry and humiliated.

In each case the man's move predicts a response from the addressee but these expectations are defeated by his counter moves. The initial greeting/compliment predicts an acknowledgement. When the acknowledgement is forthcoming, the man's next move, an Ir in the form of a yes/no-question, is to negate his first move by insinuating that it was not intended for the participant to whom he directed it. An Ir formally predicts a response but the man's moves so far have been so interactionally ambiguous that it's difficult for the addressee to interpret his moves. Whatever this man's intentions, he can clearly maintain dominance in such a verbal encounter by manipulating not only the rules of the game but also the players in his game.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The variables that constitute the extralinguistic and linguistic context of discourse shape our expectations concerning the way we behave and respond in verbal encounters. When these expectations are consistently defeated in verbal interaction, the result is deviant discourse, which is a marked form of language use. An examination of M-F street remarks from a discourse analysis perspective reveals that they form an unusual genre of discourse which is characterised mainly by breaches of discourse norms along paradigmatic as well as syntagmatic parameters. In terms of the usual paradigmatic constraints imposed by the setting, topic, participant and norms of interaction variables, it is clear that street remarks do breach very basic principles underlying verbal interaction between unacquainted people in public places. The man behaves in a manner contradictory to the discourse norms and expectations operative in the society; he breaches setting and topic constraints, the participant role relationships, the norm of civil inattention, the Gricean principle of politeness and the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner underlying the cooperative principle. Yet paradoxically he is sanctioned to breach these norms. The woman is always at a disadvantage. In accordance with her gender role requirements, she is placed in the unenviable position of not being sanctioned to respond to such remarks, whether positively or negatively. She may run the risk of being subjected to verbal abuse and aggression if she objects to these breaches when offended by them. The asymmetry of the participant role relationship places the woman at a disadvantage whichever way she responds to the remark. Ironically, she is the participant who is often cast in the role of the culprit, i.e. the dynamics of the street remark often suggest that it is she who is the breacher of norms and not the man.

M-F street remarks are often ambiguous in terms of content. This ambiguity is reflected in sexual innuendo, double entendre, and greetings and compliments that become dubious because they breach the discourse norms of normal greetings and compliments. Street remarks are also interactionally ambiguous in terms of the syntagmatic constraints on verbal exchanges. The moves that men



make in street remarks are often moves that predict a response from the participant but the propositional content of these remarks simultaneously defies a response.

The fact that men can breach social norms with greater impunity than women and the asymmetrical role relationship in M-F street remarks enable men to manipulate the rules of the discourse game to their advantage. This in turn enables them to assert and maintain dominance during these brief verbal encounters. To a large extent, the dynamics of M-F street remarks can be seen to reflect the dynamics of male-female interaction in society at large.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gardner, C.B. 1984. 'Passing by: street remarks, address rights and the urban female.' In: Baugh, J. and J. Sherzer (eds) *Language in use: readings in sociolinguistics*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Hymes, D. 1974. *Foundations in sociolinguistics: an ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Rosen, H. 1981. 'The development of the social views of language.' In: *Social aspects of language*. The Open University.

Shapiro, N. 1984. *Whatever it is, I'm against it*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Stubbs, M. 1983. *Discourse analysis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwood.

Wardhaugh, R. 1986. *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.