

Across Cultures: Pakistani All-Female Speaking Rituals

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Abstract

A common finding in Language and Gender studies is that women aim for a united conversational dynamic, while men tend towards the opposite. However, I argue that native culture plays a more significant role in Language and Gender studies than has previously been considered. To do so, I compared previous conclusions—from Jennifer Coates's *Gossip Revisited* (2011)—to my own drawn from data collected during a gathering of Pakistani Muslim women and analyzed that data, considering culture as well as gender. The following hypotheses were made prior to collection of data: Culture, religion, and ethnicity will heavily influence the frequency and overall use of certain, typically female, linguistic rituals generally observed in Western contexts, and certain rituals will be used in an exaggerated or minimized capacity in comparison to Coates' findings. Over five days, I observed three conversations among a group of five to eight Pakistani women, aged between 50 and 60. The following rituals were observed: interruptions, floor sharing, tag questions, code-switching, minimal responses, "butterfinger buts," and razzing. Certain rituals were just as consistent among my participants as they were in Coates'. However, use of razzing, "butterfinger buts," floor sharing, and tag questions differed greatly—all were used in a different context and capacity than expected. These rituals were significantly affected by culture, religion, and ethnicity; further analysis revealed that additional factors such as age and familiarity between speakers also play a role in motivating ritualistic behavior.

Keywords: linguistic rituals, floor sharing

Throughout the variety of previous studies done on the relationships between language and gender, it has been found that women tend to aim for a united, cohesive conversational dynamic, while men tend to do almost the opposite (Coates, 2003; 2011; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Tannen, 1994). In order to achieve this, women tend to talk over each other and interrupt or overlap each other to collaboratively construct the conversation up rather than to individually hold the floor as men do. This is a common finding; however, many of the foundational studies have focused primarily on men and women native to western culture and ideology. In comparison, very little notable scholarship has been done within culturally specific contexts, particularly among the female Pakistani community. Even now, western scholarship dominates the field, the findings of which are considered conclusive for the female gender regardless of cultural background. However, I argue that native culture plays a bigger role in language and gender studies than has previously been considered. Social and familial influences and expectations have already been accounted for in a western context, but not as much in a culturally diverse one.

Thus, I aim to compare previous conclusions—specifically from Jennifer Coates's *Gossip Revisited* (2011)—to my own findings drawn from data I collected during a gathering of Pakistani Muslim women and to analyze that data from a *culturally* gendered linguistic standpoint rather than simply a gendered linguistic one.

Literature Review

Over the past few decades, various studies have been conducted on the topic of language and gender, focusing on a wide spectrum of factors such as linguistic rituals, personal perception, and societal influences. Throughout these studies, many have found

that “women’s speech style is a more collaborative, supportive, and empathetic style,” while men’s speech leans more towards saving face (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013, p. 38; Tannen, 1994).

According to these studies, women talk to build conversation, while men talk to be heard by their conversation partners. One such study done in 2016 on a Facebook chat forum found that “the language most characteristic of self-identified females was warmer, friendlier, and focused on people, whereas self-identified males’ most characteristic language was more socially distant, disagreeable, and focused on objects” (Park et al., 2016, p. 22). The female participants were more inclined towards topics that would encourage unity, camaraderie, and emotional connections, whereas the male participants leaned more towards topics favoring the classic “male” image, usually regarding competition, politics, occupation, and other topics meant to build one’s reputation. However, the study found that women did tend to use more assertive language than men when conveying warmth and camaraderie (Park et al., 2016), indicating that these qualities, while certainly observed in a very gendered context, are not exclusive to any particular gender.

Society, culture, individual backgrounds, personalities, and other factors all claim attention to the ways in which people speak (Tannen, 1994). One cannot use the duality of the male and female sexes to generalize that *all* men razz each other in order to conform to society’s views of masculinity, nor that *all* women tend to take submissive roles of speech in order to achieve collaboration and camaraderie. While some rituals may always remain predominantly characteristic of one particular gender, others come about as a result of culture or regional identity rather than of gender, as evidenced through the

following study. Despite the biology of the sexes—which even now is becoming less and less dualized—gender and language both are “built up in an ongoing fashion through the daily practices of social interaction” (Foley, 2011, p. 84). Gender is a constantly shifting entity that ebbs and flows with the will of society, and language is no different. As gender continues to change, so too will language.

Floor Sharing

Women speak to collaborate, to build conversation. This sharing of the floor is not possible without multiple members of the conversation talking over each other, interrupting each other, and generally providing constant support and commentary to whomever the main speaker in the conversation may be. While some may initially believe that such interruptions are rude and inconsiderate, according to Coates (2011), it is an almost unconscious ritual for female speakers. To women, “overlap is often a supportive conversational strategy, enhancing rather than violating a speaker’s right to the floor” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013, p. 96). Furthermore, such interruptions also serve as strategies to build up others’ contributions to the conversation. Previous studies on women’s conversation have shown that women tend to use this strategy consistently during informal situations (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

Tag Questions

In most cases in English, a tag question would consist of a question at the end of a sentence or phrase spoken with a raised inflection (i.e. “The weather is nice outside today, *isn’t it?*”). A tag question in most situations can indicate an assortment of messages: “hesitancy, a willingness to entertain alternative positions, to connect the speaker more firmly to others by soliciting

their opinion, or to coerce” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013, p. 38). According to Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2013), these tag questions are usually used by women in both formal and informal situations. Tag questions can vary between creating a relationship to indicating a disclaimer to one’s ideas or suggestions. If one ends a suggestion with a tag question, they automatically convey hesitancy, thus avoiding any face-threatening acts that an unpopular suggestion could result in.

Minimal Responses

Minimal responses are a linguistic device that—when used by all-female speakers—serves the purpose of building a conversation by “[supporting] the speaker and [indicating] the listener’s active attention” (Coates, 2011, p. 137). A minimal response generally consists of a short aside or an exclamation of assent by the listeners of a conversation during the current speaker’s anecdote or argument. Alternatively, when used by male speakers, delayed minimal responses have generally been found to indicate a disinterest or lack of attention to the current speaker (Zimmerman, et al., 1996). According to Jennifer Coates’s findings in *Gossip Revisited* (2011), minimal responses are used to ensure that the conversation is a result of collaboration when concerning all-female groups.

As previously mentioned, all-female conversations involve enough floor sharing to include all participants of a conversation at all times, and the use of minimal responses is one of the ways this floor sharing is achieved. Furthermore, “women’s use of minimal responses demonstrates their sensitivity to interactional processes; they use them where they are appropriate.” (Coates, 2011, p. 137). All-female groups of speakers usually seem to capitalize on both the use and even the placement of minimal

responses to ensure the flow of the conversation.

Razzing

While razzing is a generally male characteristic in English and in Western societies, it is a linguistic ritual that exists across genders in different cultures and regions. Typically, in Western English, “male speakers express solidarity with each other through the use of linguistic strategies such as swearing, ritual insults, sexist and homophobic remarks, and competitive banter” (Coates, 2003, p. 104). The above details are usually elements involved throughout informal, all-male conversations, and generally serve the purpose of increasing one’s sense of solidarity with his male peers, or simply conforming to a particular society’s idea of masculinity.

Razzing is not considered a very female quality, as women tend to build up conversations together as a show of solidarity rather than as a method of saving face and maintaining hegemonic masculinity as men do. Razzing rituals, “such as the use of insults and taboo language, may achieve solidarity, but at a cost, since such strategies are also highly face-threatening” (Coates, 2003, p. 105). A face-threatening act involves comments during a conversation that endanger a speaker’s pride, reputation, or position within the conversation. The “male pride” that masks the urge for companionship and solidarity underneath the razzing rituals has not been observed as frequently among female conversations. Instead, women tend to communicate this urge without suffering any face-threats at all, supporting each other more directly during the conversation.

“Butterfinger Buts” (a term coined by Tannen (1994) in *Talking Nine to Five*)

According to Tannen (1994), a “Butterfinger But” refers to a disclaimer of

sorts, inserted at the beginning of a suggestion, idea, or other possibly controversial topic that “prevents others from objecting on the grounds [one may] have mentioned” (Tannen, 1994, p. 279). This strategy is often used by women in both formal and informal situations, as a method of saving or conserving face and ensuring that the greater conversation veers away from any heated arguments or disagreements. A “Butterfinger But” indicates to listeners that the speaker’s ideas or suggestions may not be entirely correct, complete, or accurate; instead, the speaker is then immediately given some leeway in case their utterance has any objections or inaccuracies. Additionally, this ritual includes the succinctness of one’s explanations so as to conserve the listener’s time or patience, as well as the raised inflection or lowered volume of one’s voice (Tannen, 1994). All of the qualities included in a “Butterfinger But” serve to indicate a willingness to cooperate and collaborate on the given topic, even if that collaboration ends up in an entirely opposite direction from what the speaker had initially intended.

Code-Switching

Unlike the previously examined rituals, code-switching is not quite a gendered linguistic quality. It is, however, a very important and very significant marker of the Pakistani linguistic identity, for males and females of all ages, because—in Pakistani communities—many children are exposed to at least two or more languages: English, Urdu, and their native, regional language (i.e. Gujarati, Katchi, Punjabi, etc.). Many children also learn Arabic for religious or educational purposes (Fayyaz & Kamal 2014). Thus, it is very common to observe Pakistani conversations jumping between multiple languages within the span of a few minutes. The Pakistani identity is at least partially composed of multilingualism,

and therefore the Pakistani *gendered* linguistic identity likely follows the same principle.

Background

It is likely that much of the following data and conclusions are heavily influenced by factors beyond what has been previously studied over the past years, such as culture, religion, ethnicity, and other non-gendered features of the wider western community. Among the wide variety of sects that exist within the global Muslim community, I have narrowed my research to only the particular demographic surrounding a family from an Indo-Pak, Shi'a Muslim community. Additionally, I focused solely on the gender-based linguistic rituals present among my participants in order to compare the results to Coates's *Gossip Revisited* (2003). My goal then is to find what differences, if any, exist between the two, and to determine whether these differences are a result of the cultural, religious, and ethnic differences between Coates's participants and mine.

During the course of this study, I was in a unique position to observe the conversations between eight closely related female family members during a family member's wedding. Six of these women are sisters, and two are in-laws. All members of the documented conversations were born and raised in Pakistan, and each is a native speaker in at least three languages (Urdu, Gujarati—or Katchi, in the case of Participant H—and English). Aside from these chief three, most of the speakers are fluent in other languages, including Hindi, Dutch, French, and Sindhi. A traditional Pakistani wedding among Shi'a Muslims typically lasts between four and six days, usually with a total of five events. The wedding in question lasted for five days and included five events. Throughout these five days, I discreetly observed three conversations between a group of eight late-

middle-aged women and documented my findings as quantitative data. The participants' profiles are as follow:

- Participants A, B, and C: The elder sisters,
- Participants D, E, and F: The younger sisters,
- Participant G: The wife of the youngest sibling, who is the only male sibling. Participant G is also the youngest among the other sisters, and
- Participant H: An in-law of Participant D, similar in age to the older sisters, but not directly related.

In accordance with the participants' request for privacy, the above information is all that will be given in addition to cultural and religious roots. Professional and educational information, as well as exact ages, have also been withheld per the participants' requests.

Prior to my observations, I expected to find my group of participants following rituals similar to those that Jennifer Coates (2003, 2011) and Deborah Tannen (1994) found in their studies; however, I aim to determine what differences exist between the two cultures and how those cultures may affect the way certain rituals are expressed between the members of an all-female conversation.

Methodology

For the purposes of this study, I observed a series of conversations held between an all-female group over the course of five days and compared my results to the existing scholarship by Jennifer Coates (2011) done on similar conversations within other cultural groups. Mine is a group of five to eight Pakistani women, all sisters or sisters-in-law, aged between 50 and 60. The further identities of the members of these conversations will remain anonymous, and will be referred to using the series of pseudonyms stated above. Upon the

participants' request, I refrained from recording their conversations. Instead, I observed their conversations and manually documented any important information or commentary pertaining to the chosen linguistic rituals.

In order to collect my data, I observed a total of three conversations among the participants over the course of the five days. Each conversation spanned two to three minutes long. Each conversation was carefully observed for the number of occurrences of each of the linguistic devices listed below, along with an account of any particular inconsistencies when compared to Coates's *Gossip Revisited*. These conversations occurred during the events and preparation for the events of a family member's wedding.

Before documenting my observations, however, I observed a handful of conversations between the participants in order to gain preliminary notes to aid the following observations. Instead of recording and transcribing the participants' conversation, I kept a record of the number of instances of the following linguistic rituals:

- Interruptions
- Holding the Floor
- Ceding the Floor
- Tag Questions
- Code-Switching
- Minimal Responses
- "Butterfinger Buts"

After reviewing my initial notes, I added the following two rituals to the list:

- Razzing
- Talking Over Each Other

In documenting my preliminary notes, I realized that both razzing and talking over each other were significant rituals to include in my analyses as most of my participants engaged in these rituals more frequently than I had originally expected.

In addition to the above, I also documented certain parts of the conversations I observed to provide qualitative data to support my findings. After gathering my data, I compared it to the existing studies done by Coates (2011) on a group of women from an English-speaking, Western societal, predominantly Caucasian community. In order to create as accurate a comparison as possible, I estimated that the first four examples provided by Coates would have lasted around two minutes, thus matching the amount of time that my observations of Conversations 1-3 lasted for. The following sections include extensive analyses regarding my findings.

Results and Analyses

Over the course of the five days, I found that out of the eight total participants, the older sisters—Participants A, B, C, and H—tended to hold the floor more, use more dictative language, and use fewer tag questions. This is likely a result of a childhood age-based hierarchy in the household; the older the sister, the wiser, and therefore the more likely to be in charge. Additionally, the younger participants were much more likely to razz both at each other and at other members of the family, particularly the younger generations. This may be another result of their age, their closeness with each other, or a result of the culture they grew up in. The following categories present the detailed findings of my research.

Floor Sharing

In observing the conversations, I found that instead of ceding the floor to build the conversation, all of my participants were generally more inclined to *take* the floor and hold it until another participant talked over her enough to take the floor again. Generally, taking the floor would involve interruptions and the speakers

talking over each other until the mantle of the main speaker switched between participants.

The following graph, Figure 1, compares the number of instances of floor sharing and interruptions throughout the first of my participants' conversations, as

well as data from the transcribed conversation from Coates's *Gossip Revisited* (2011).

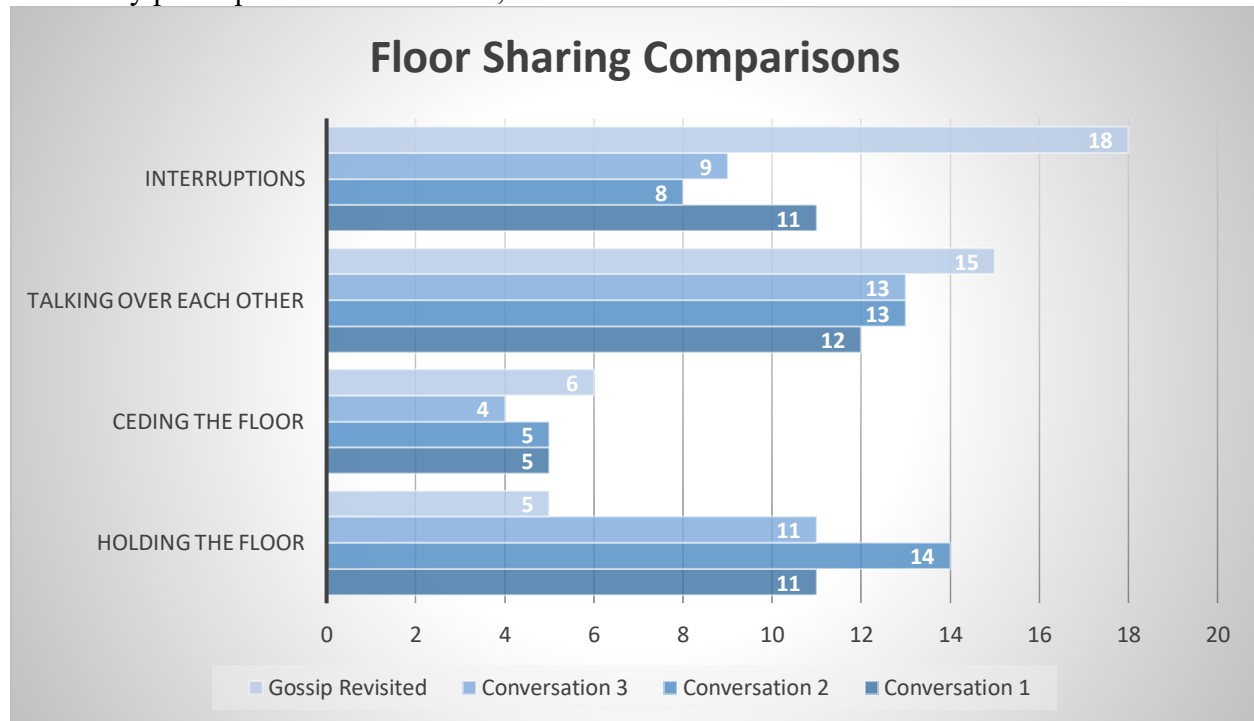


Figure 1: Floor Sharing between *Gossip Revisited* (2011) and *Across Cultures* (2019).

Despite the significant differences present between Coates's participants and my own, both conversations were relatively similar in how the respective conversation was initially constructed. Each conversation involved a series of anecdotes by the different speakers regarding the same theme, with the speakers continuously building the conversation as time passed. However, this is where the similarities between the two conversations end. The overall structure of my participants' conversations differed in other important ways from the structure created by Coates in *Gossip Revisited*, which is listed as follows:

Coates's Characterization of Women's Conversation Patterns:

1. A introduces topic;
2. B tells anecdote on same theme;
3. C tells another anecdote on same theme; leading into:
4. General discussion;
5. D summarizes;
6. A has last word (2011).

According to Coates, a "general discussion" usually does not occur until after all active members of the conversation have shared an anecdote on the same theme. However, I found that my participants' conversation followed a slightly extended structure:

1. A introduces topic;
2. B tells anecdote on the same theme;
3. General discussion follows;
4. C tells another anecdote on the same theme;

5. General discussion follows;
6. Steps 2 through 5 repeat with other members of the conversation until another topic is introduced, or until the conversation is forced to end.

While Coates's conversation involved a total of four speakers, Conversation 1 included five. The Pakistani family members' discussion differed when the participants delved into a general discussion after *every* anecdote on the same theme, rather than after all anecdotes had been shared. Furthermore, while Coates's conversations had a definite transition between topics, my participants' conversations generally jumped from topic to topic with little to no warning. Coates's steps five and six were virtually nonexistent during my observations.

Additionally, tag questions—discussed below—were usually limited to taking the floor back from another participant rather than for ceding the floor.

Tag Questions

Despite general uses of tag questions from previous research, I found that such phrases were used for a vastly different purpose than expected. In previous studies, tag questions were used as a device to gain a response from the other speakers in the conversation. During my observations, these questions and phrases were used primarily to gain attention rather than a response, and they were used more often to *take* the floor from another speaker of the conversation. The most common tag question used during the three observed conversations is transcribed and translated below:

تو میں کیا کہہ رہا تھا
"To mein kya bolreih ti"
 'So, as I was saying'

The speaker interrupting the flow of the conversation used this device as an indicator that she wanted to speak; this phrase was used more to *take* the floor rather than to *cede* the floor. Other instances of this phrase

occurred when a speaker aimed to initiate conversation. Aside from these phrases, there were no instances of tag questions in the sense that Coates (2011) and Tannen (1994) meant for them.

Minimal Responses

I found a substantial difference between Coates's findings and my own. As shown through Figure 2 below, minimal responses were used almost half as many times during Conversation 1 between my participants as they were during the first four examples in *Gossip Revisited* (2011).

| | Minimal Responses |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Gossip Revisited</i> | 24 |
| <i>Across Cultures</i> | 13 |

Figure 2: Minimal Responses between *Gossip Revisited* (2011) and *Across Cultures* (2019).

These findings could simply be a result of closeness or sisterly camaraderie. Considering that my participants grew up together, have known each other since birth, and have spent their entire lives as both sisters and close friends, the lack of minimal responses may be an indicator that there is less need to consistently reassure the current speaker that the others are listening and responding.

"Butterfinger Buts"

Of the eight speakers, only Participant H seemed to constantly be conscious of conserving face, whether it be her own or otherwise. "Butterfinger Buts" were extremely rare and were only recorded a total of three times throughout all three conversations. Each time, Participant H was the speaker using them to preface a suggestion or idea to the others in the conversation. However, a total of ten instances of Butterfinger Buts were recorded throughout Coates's first four transcriptions

in *Gossip Revisited* (2011). As previously mentioned, this is likely due to Participant H's outsider status. She is not in any way directly related to Participants A through F, nor is she a direct in-law like Participant G. She appeared to be more concerned with maintaining her reputation than the other speakers. In other words, Participant H was more prone to saving face in front of the group of sisters than any other speaker.

Razzing

Razzing was used between the women more than expected, particularly between the younger sisters. Participants A, B, C, and especially H were less likely to razz each other, but Participants D, E, F, and G used the ritual for a variety of perspectives. Razzing was used between these women to begin conversations, interrupt conversations, and, most importantly, to communicate affection, goodwill, and shared joy. The total number of instances of razzing observed throughout all three conversations reached thirty-four, a number far higher than that observed during the first four examples from Coates's *Gossip Revisited* (2011). As these conversations were observed during the course of a wedding, the number of recorded instances of razzing were likely a result of high spirits and overall happiness.

Code-Switching

As previously stated, each of my participants is a native speaker of at least three languages. All are proficient in various other languages, as well. Therefore, it stands to reason that most, if not all, of their conversations involved copious code-switching back and forth between the common languages: Urdu, Gujarati, and English.

Throughout the three observed conversations, I noticed that most instances of code-switching occurred when outsiders entered the conversations. These outsiders included Participant H, any younger members of the family, and any non-familial speakers. Otherwise, Participants A through G tended to stick to using Gujarati with each other, with the occasional borrowed word or phrase from English or Urdu. Participant H is not proficient in Gujarati, as she comes from a region of Pakistan that uses Katchi rather than Gujarati. Additionally, many of the younger generations and non-familial speakers involved in these conversations did not speak Gujarati, either. The younger generations were more likely to speak in English, while the non-familial speakers were more likely to use Urdu.

As shown in Figure 3 below, there were more total instances of Code Switching than there were of ceding the floor, target questions, or "Butterfinger Buts."

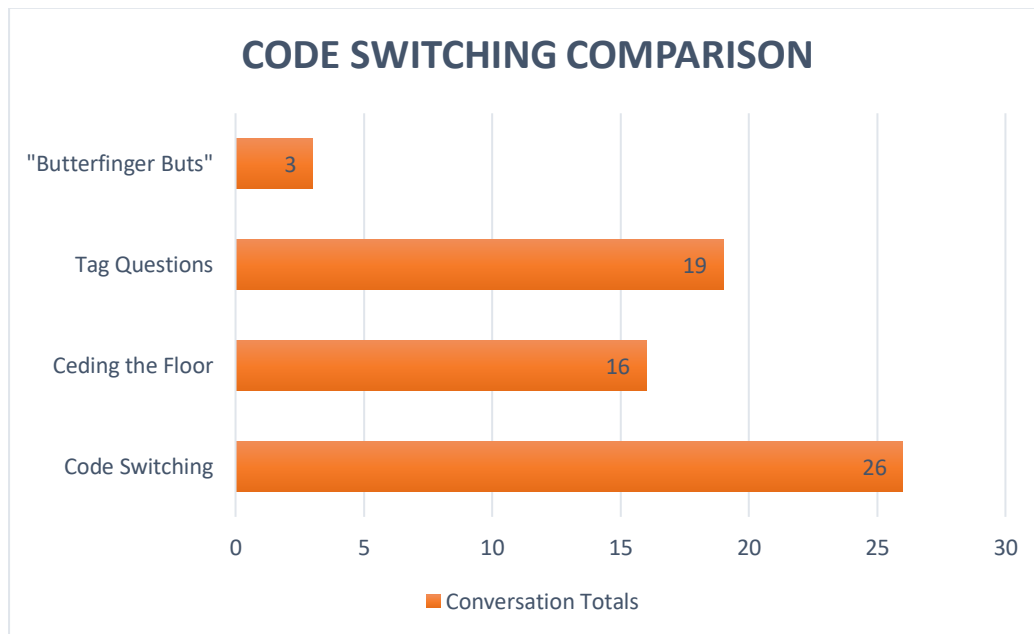


Figure 3: Code Switching Comparison.

The three aforementioned rituals in comparison to the usage of Code Switching indicate that there were few to no occurrences of face saving during the three observed conversations. The participants appeared overall to be more concerned with being understood than they were about saving face.

Final Analyses

Certain rituals (i.e. "Butterfinger Buts," tag questions, razzing, and floor switching) are used in the community in a vastly different capacity or context than was

seen through previous research. Other rituals, such as holding the floor and minimal responses, were used as they were expected to be used, following patterns claimed by Coates. While the existence of a variety of other outstanding factors should also be considered, the largest of them is the difference in culture between Coates's conversation analyses and my own. Many of the dissimilarities observed throughout these conversations are likely a result of Pakistani female speaking rituals. Figure 4 below conveys the final totals of each of the observed factors during each conversation.

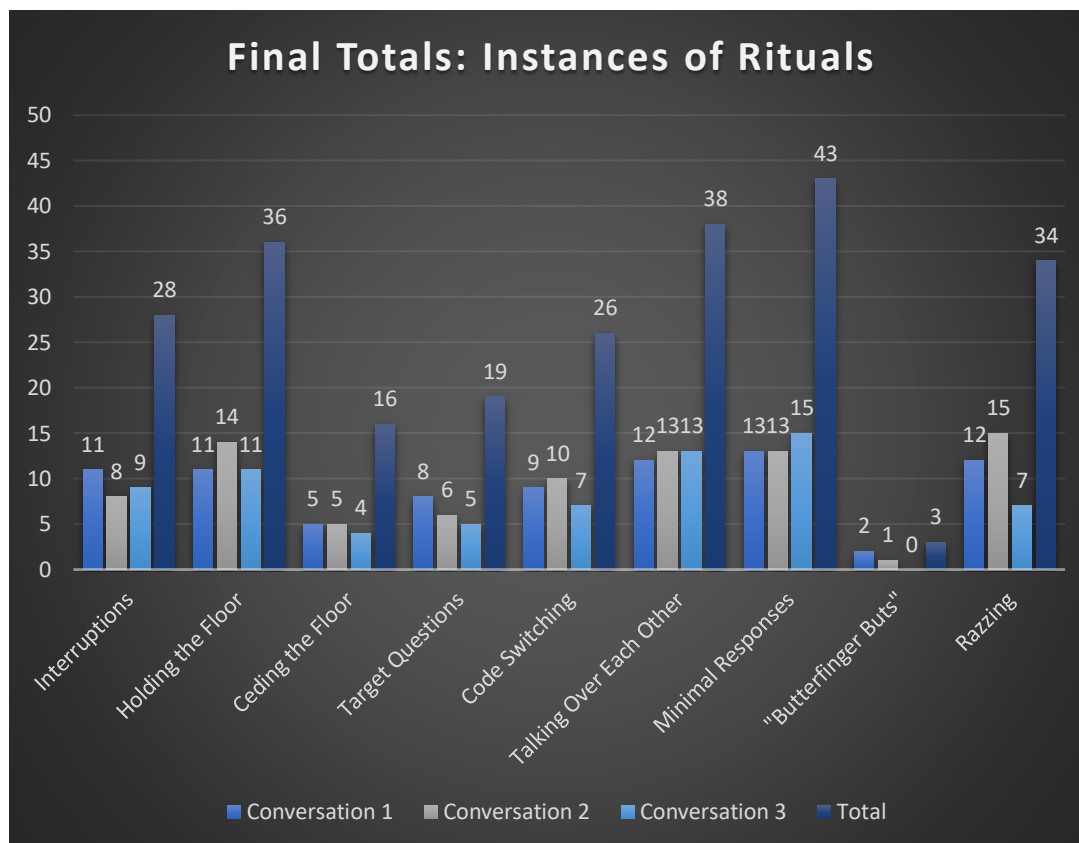


Figure 4: Final Totals: Instances of Rituals.

“Butterfinger Buts” were only used by the single true outsider, Participant H, who was present through the majority of the conversations but used more face-saving rituals than any of the other speakers. Additionally, most tag questions were used for an entirely different purpose than expected, with the exception of those spoken in English. Even then, such questions were used to include another speaker into the conversation, usually a member of the younger generations of the family. Interestingly, razzing was used more by the women—specifically D, E, F, and G—than was at all expected, and was used as a method of communicating affection and joy rather than closeness or to save face. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, floor sharing followed a different pattern from Coates’s previous research.

While this is likely a result of the participants’ home culture, it could also be influenced by their familiarity with one another. The lack of any real face saving is an indicator that the participants were all very comfortable with each other, but further study could determine just how much of these results are indicators of age, relationships, or culture.

Conclusions and Future Research

Because my time with the participants was extremely limited, I was unable to determine whether certain aspects of their conversations occurred as a result of their home language and culture or of their closeness to one another. For example, as analyzed above, I found very few instances of ceding the floor in comparison to holding or taking the floor, and while this could have been simply because the group of sisters were extremely comfortable with each other,

this could also have been a result of their Pakistani heritage. Thus, a future study could focus entirely on whether Pakistani women tend to cede the floor, hold it, or take it. Additionally, I was unable to record conversations between all-female, all-male, and mixed gender groups. Given the time and resources, the collection of such data would be invaluable in isolating certain rituals as gendered, cultured, age-related, or otherwise.

To further triangulate the data, a series of sociolinguistic interviews could be held with each of the participants in order to glean more insight on their personal histories, as well as on just how significant culture and companionship are to their linguistic behaviors. While the results of this particular study are as of yet inconclusive, the conclusions bring up a number of new questions to be answered through future investigation: Just how large a role does age play in the participants' most dominant linguistic rituals? Would a similar concept apply to a group of participants from a Western culture? How many of the observed rituals are due to Pakistani culture? How many can simply be attributed to "female" forms of speech?

Due to time and mobility constraints, I was unable to collect my own data from cultures other than Pakistani females, and instead used the existing scholarship by Coates (2011) to gather my final conclusions. For a future, more in-depth study, one could observe and record various conversations between all-female and all-male groups within the same age range, but from different ethnicities. Another future study could include second-generation immigrant youth versus their first-generation counterparts—within both the same age group and between different age groups.

I found that certain linguistic rituals were just as present among my participants as they were among Coates's and others'

research. However, other rituals, such as razzing, "butterfinger butts," floor switching, and tag questions were used in a vastly different capacity or context than was seen through the previous research. Despite the limitations of this study, I found that one's cultural background does, in fact, play a significant role in one's linguistic behavior. Simply grouping certain linguistic rituals into gendered categories is insufficient based on my findings. Other factors, such as age, familiarity among speakers, and especially cultural background play a substantial role in motivating linguistic and ritualistic behavior.

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