

Gossip in Face-to-Face Conversations

A Study of Gender Differences in Gossip in the American Movie

Couples Retreat (2009)

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1 Introduction

Traditionally, gossip is a term used almost exclusively of women's talk. Gossip is always cited as characteristics of female speech (Graddol and Swann, 1989: 70). It usually has pejorative connotations, for example idle talk or tittle-tattle. In many societies, people grow up to believe that women talk more than men and that women gossip. It is conventionally accepted that gossiping is something women do. Using the term gossip rather than all-female talk draws attention to the fact that the language women use has not been considered to be serious linguistic data or real talk, which is instead labeled as male talk (Coates, 2004: 103). There may be different views on whether men gossip or not and the opinions about the social function of gossip also vary a great deal. Anthropologists point out that gossip maintains "the unity, morals and values of social groups" (Gluckman, as quoted in Coates, 2004: 104). Gossip is a basic process in everyday life, since it provides us with information to cope with the world and people around us. Deborah Jones redefines gossip as a way of talking in women: they use intimate style and personal topics in domestic setting (Jones 1980: 194).

According to the stereotype, gossiping is something women do. It is mainly due to the following two reasons. First of all, women talk more than men, and secondly women's topics are trivial. However, many studies find in contrast that it is always men who talk more. Men and women often have different ideas of what is important, and then it is a prejudice to claim that women's topics are trivial. Unfortunately, stereotypes like these still persist not only in linguistics but perhaps even more so in everyday life. We can perhaps not in any simple way change the lexical meaning of gossip, but it is a continuing struggle to redefine it and to raise people's consciousness by confronting them with their conscious or unconscious prejudices.

1.1 Aim and Scope

The aim of the present investigation is to analyze the conversations in the American

movie *Couples Retreat* (2009). The study is to examine the different functions of gossip as well as gender differences in the function of gossip. The study is also to examine gender differences in the amount of talk, topic choice, and private versus public talk considering the differences in single-sex conversations and mixed-sex conversations.

1.2 Material

The American feature film *Couples Retreat* (2009) makes up the primary material in the present study. The film lasts 1 hour, 48 minutes and 48 seconds in total.

The movie, which is directed by Peter Billingsley, portrays four couples: Dave & Ronnie, Jason & Cynthia, Joey & Lucy, Shane & Jennifer. Dave, a dealer for some electronic games, and Ronnie, a housewife, they are a typical couple with two young boys. They experience various types of problems and stress including that of redecorating their house and raising the children. Jason and Cynthia are considering a divorce since they cannot conceive. Joey and Lucy fell in love when they were in high school, but now their marriage is in danger. Shane and Jennifer have recently separated, and Shane now has a very young girlfriend: Trudy. In order to save the marriage of Jason and Cynthia, the four couples are going to a resort—Eden for a holiday where they are going to take a course which is called: couples' skills building. In the movie, the vast majority of the conversations involve the four couples. These couples all have close relationships.

Janet Holmes points out that “gossip describes the kind of relaxed in-group talk that goes on between people in informal contexts” (Holmes, 2001: 298). As the movie concerns family life, the relationship between husband and wife, friendship and work, there are many such conversations to be found in the movie. The movie is suited to the area of study. We have a comparatively large primary material to analyze and the results of the analysis will be more reliable. The language used in the movie is

realistic and resembles real life conversations, despite being scripted. There are altogether 102 conversations in the movie: the longest lasts for 6 minutes and 59 seconds while the shortest lasts for only 4 seconds. The conversations will be divided into single-sex conversations and mixed-sex conversations. Single-sex conversations are further divided into all-male conversations and all-female conversations. There are altogether 86 mixed-sex conversations (1 hour, 29 minutes, and 14 seconds in total), 11 all-male conversations (16 minutes and 18 seconds in total) and 5 all-female conversations (2 minutes and 5 seconds in total).

1.3 Method

Firstly, in the mixed-sex conversations, the conversations between each of the four couples, the conversations in all the four couples and the conversations where there is an expert involved (here the expert refers to the therapist in Eden where the four couples are taking the course for couples' skills building) are analyzed respectively identifying all instances of gossip. Each conversation will be timed. The name of the speakers and the length of their conversations will be taken down. Then the different functions of gossip are established and any gender differences in the function of gossip noted. The results will be presented in Section 3. Finally, gender differences in the amount of talk, topic choice, and private versus public talk in single-sex conversations and mixed-sex conversations will also be discussed.

The conversations on the phone and other conversations (26 mixed-sex conversations and 1 all-male conversation altogether) are excluded from this study, since the study focuses only on the face-to-face conversations amongst the couples and between couples and experts. In order to obtain a large primary material, all the rest of the conversations will be included in this study. That is to say, in the analysis part, 60 mixed-sex conversations (1 hour, 3 minutes, and 44 seconds in total), 10 all-male conversations (7 minutes and 50 seconds in total) and 5 all-female conversations (2 minutes and 5 seconds in total) will be taken into consideration.

2 Theoretical Background

In descriptions within the field of Language and Gender, there are many different opinions about how to define gossip. This state of affairs will be addressed below in the Theoretical Background. The discussion about the function of gossip is a central issue to the present study. It is conventionally accepted that gossip is something belonging to women, but many researchers show that gossip is not restricted to women alone, and sociolinguists have in fact begun to explore gossip as a more general phenomenon. This aspect is also included in the section to follow.

2.1 Definition of Gossip

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010), gossip is: “(disapproving) informal talk or stories about other people’s private lives, that may be unkind or not true”. This is very similar to the definition from *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010): Gossip is “(a) conversation or reports about other people’s private lives which might be unkind, disapproving or not true”. In the dictionaries, it is clear that gossip as a phenomenon has some pejorative connotations.

In anthropological work, the term gossip refers to informal communication among members of a social group. The social function of gossip maintains “the unity, morals and values of social groups” (Gluckman, as quoted in Jones 1980: 194). According to Emler (2001), gossip “provides people with information essential to their capacity to cope with their social worlds, to solve the various problems they face, and to deal with the people around them” (Emler, as quoted in Coates 2004: 104). Robin Dunbar (1996) argues that gossip is vital in maintaining the cohesiveness of the social group. It is from this clear that anthropological researchers interpret gossip as a basic process in everyday life and it has a positive sense.

Gender differences in communicative competence are part of folk knowledge. In Britain, people seem to grow up with the belief that women talk more than men and

that it is the women who gossip (Coates, 2004: 86). In everyday talk, gossip is a term used almost exclusively of women's talk and it usually has pejorative meanings (Coates, 2004: 103). Janet Holmes points out that "in Western society, gossip is defined as idle talk and considered particularly characteristic of women's interaction" (Holmes, 2001: 298). However, sociolinguists have begun to reevaluate the notion of gossip in recent years. Deborah Jones redefined gossip as "a way of talking between women in their roles as women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic and setting" (Jones, 1980: 194). Sally Johnson and Frank Finlay argue that men also gossip, but "the main difference is that the seemingly casual, superficial talk of men is rarely defined as such" (Johnson and Finlay, 1997: 137). Research in this area often directly challenges the stereotype which turns out to be contradictory.

2.2 Function of Gossip

Some researchers believe that gossip is empty and meaningless. Vermeule (2006) points out that gossip has always been a part of "charivari" with the power to turn the world upside down and it has the power to destroy lives. If it is innocent, it is only because it is meaningless (Vermeule, 2006: 102). Just as we have mentioned above, in Western society, gossip is defined as idle talk. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010), the term *idle* means "useless, with no particular purpose or effects".

Janet Holmes (2001) argues that gossip is a kind of relaxed in-group talk in informal contexts and its function for women is to establish solidarity and maintain the social relationships. Graddol and Swann (1989) point out that women are more cooperative than men in conversation. Such a cooperative style gives the impression that women are hesitant and their language is not taken seriously. Women's gossip focuses on personal experiences, relationships, problems and feelings. Coates (2004) declares that women usually talk for their own enjoyment and the conversational floor is potentially open to all the people simultaneously. Moreover, women are more inclined

to use a way of talking which is available to all participants. Deborah Cameron (1992) discovers that men also gossip about non-present others and the talk constructs solidarity.

However, Coates (2004) argues that men's gossip displays more competitive features: they want to dominate the talk and compete for grabbing the floor. Men prefer a more adversarial style and they pursue their own purpose without considering the others. Conversations with long monologues give them privileged access to the floor. The topics men discuss tend to focus on things, activities, information and facts, rather than personal experiences and feelings (Holmes, 2001: 298). According to the findings from a recent poll (*The Telegraph*, 2009), men and women agree on one thing about gossip: talking with mates, colleagues or partners make them feel like they belong. Men love a bit of scandal and will do anything to be the center of attention. For some men, hot gossip spices up another boring day at the office, all according to this poll.

2.3 Topic Shift, Topic Development and Gender Differences in Topic Choice

Frequently, topic choice is shared by all the participants in a conversation and the conversation is often organized in terms of speakers holding the floor in turn. However, Coates (2004) declares that Leet-Pellegrini (1980) has found that in conversations where one speaker is male and the other female, male speakers tend to dominate. Men seem to prefer a one-at-a-time model of turn-taking. Conversations involving long monologues give male speakers privileged access to a floor. Overlapping talk is rare in all-male talk. They think it is an attempt to grab the floor. In mixed conversation, men may think it is an interruption. Male speakers are more likely to interrupt. Interruptions seem to function as a way of getting the floor and controlling topics, and men frequently use questions to exchange turns. Delayed minimal responses, or even no responses, are used by men to reinforce male

dominance and undermine the current speakers (Coates, 2004: 88). People use minimal responses such as *mhm*, *yeah*, *right* to signal their active attention to the speakers, minimal responses are categorized as delayed minimal responses when they do not immediately follow the speaker's turn (Graddol and Swann, 1989: 78). While men have the right to talk, women are expected to keep silent. When a man does not cooperate in talk, his silence demonstrates his power to choose whether or not to participate in talk. Women, on the other hand, seem more inclined to use a way of talking available to all speakers. Coates (2004) points out that women usually talk for their own enjoyment and the conversational floor is potentially open to all participants simultaneously. Female speakers are concerned not to violate the turn. Research findings suggest that women use more interrogative forms than men, and they use questions to keep conversation going. For women, in cooperative conversation, questions are used to invite others to participate. Women use minimal responses to signal their active attention to the speakers. Women use minimal responses more than men and use them at appropriate moments to demonstrate active support for the speakers.

Considerable evidence shows that men and women tend to discuss different topics in same-sex groups (Coates, 2004: 127). Talk is very important in women's friendships. Women tend to talk about people and feelings, for example: other women, news, relationship problems, other people's relationships, sexual relationships, friend's weight gain, soap operas, other women's boyfriends or husbands, the mother-in-law and celebrities (according to the poll finding also mentioned earlier, *The Telegraph*, 2009). Such topics are developed slowly and women achieve the cooperative discourse through topic and topic development. While for men, it seems that they avoid self-disclosure and prefer to talk about more impersonal topics such as drunken friends, news, old school friends, female colleagues, the sexiest girl at work, spreading rumors, promotions, sexual relationships, salaries and the boss (according to the poll finding, *The Telegraph*, 2009). When talk does become more personal, they talk matters such as drinking habits or personal achievements rather than feelings

(Coates, 2004: 133). Such non-personal topics encourage speakers to hold the floor and play the expert by using competitive discourse.

2.4 Cooperative versus Competitive: Gender Differences in Conversational Style

Coates (2004) points out that Cheshire and Trudgill (1998) declare that women and men do have a preference for different conversational styles. Women prefer a collaborative or cooperative speech style, while men prefer a competitive style. Women and men approach the world in different ways. For many men, life is a contest or a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure. Conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand, and protect themselves from others' attempts to put them down and push them around. For many women, on the other hand, life to them is a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation. Conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support (Tannen, 1991: 24-25). It is a stereotype of all-female talk that it tends to be cooperative rather than competitive, and of all-male talk that it tends to be competitive rather than cooperative.

For most women, conversation is a way to establish connections and negotiate relationships. They can change experiences and feel the closest connections at home or in settings where they feel at home. They use a cooperative speech style to create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality. For most men, conversation is a way to exhibit their expertise and to maintain independence and status in a hierarchical social order (Tannen, 1991: 77). They are comfortable in public speaking, for example in workplace or classroom. They use a competitive speech style to assert a position of dominance and attract the audience.

Women use minimal responses, hedges and questions to signal their active attention, respect the face needs of all participants and keep the conversation going. These

so-called powerless forms can be used as a powerful sign of mutual support and solidarity. Men want to dominate discussion and they use interruptions as a way of getting the floor (Coates, 2004: 116). They prefer a more adversarial style and pursue their own agenda without considering other participants.

However, cooperation has been found in all-male talk (Coates, 2004: 143). All-female groups are not always cooperative. Many women compete with each other in personal relationships, on the job, in families and in other ways. It would be unwise to exaggerate the stereotype of women as cooperative and men as competitive.

2.5 The Androcentric Bias and Sexist Language

Differences between women and men have always been a topic of interest among people. Linguistic differences are one of them. In the early twentieth century, Otto Jespersen (1922), a Danish scholar, as discussed by Coates, asserts that men are the chief renovators of language. He also generalizes that the vocabulary of women as a rule is much less extensive than that of a man (Coates, 2004: 10, 12). Such scholarly comments on gender differences in language reflect the ideas of the time. The tendency has led to startling contradictions which can be explained by assuming a rule. Coates (2004: 10) calls it the Androcentric Rule. The Androcentric Rule predicts that the linguistic behavior of men is seen as the norm, while the linguistic behavior of women as deviating from that norm. To be outside of the central group and its culture, female speakers are less closely integrated into vernacular culture. Women can be called lame speakers (Coates, 2004: 82). Of course, it has a biased condition in the rule, thus it can be called the Androcentric Bias. Trudgill (2000) points out that male speakers have a lot of expressions peculiar to them, which female speakers understand but never pronounce themselves. In some societies, a number of words are allowed to be used only by men. If women use these words, bad luck is likely to result. In more than one language, therefore, women's speech is more conservative than that of men. That is, women's speech is conservative, while men's speech is innovative. It is

traditionally more acceptable for men to swear and use taboo words than for women. Women tend to use words which are considered to be polite. This tradition is usually called folklinguistic or anecdotal. It represents the speech of subordinate groups first as different, then as deviant, and its legacy has proved hard to get rid of (Cameron, 1992: 41). Stereotypes tend to exist if there are social differences and inequalities. If women are subordinate to men, their language will continue to be stereotyped as lame and powerless.

As a social phenomenon, language is closely related to social attitudes or values. Women and men are socially different because society lays down different social roles for them and expects different behavior patterns from them. Language simply reflects this social fact (Trudgill, 2000: 79). Whether we like it or not, men have dominated the society for centuries, and more likely they are going to do so in the future. Men have been considered to be experts of almost all fields, and women are the exceptions. 1960s' feminism led to increasing questioning of accepted standards and authority. Language reflects the interests of more powerful social groups in various ways, and men can be seen to have power relative to women. Since language is "permeated" with social values, and if there are social inequalities between women and men, there will be linguistic inequalities. Feminists claim that language is biased in favor of men (Graddol and Swann, 1989: 130, 132). If language contains a sexist bias, it is sexist. The term sexist language is often used to refer to expressions that exclude, insult or discriminate either sex. According to the definition, discrimination may take place against men. As a matter of fact, discrimination against women is more serious. Many commentators have noted that more words are available to insult women than men, especially in sexual terms. Words for women's bodies are more taboo than those for men's, for example: *cunt*. The masculine term remains neutral or norm, and the feminine term remains non-standard and derived from the neutral unmarked term. The derogation of women reflects a reality in which men regard women as inferior and define women above all in terms of female sexual attributes (Cameron, 1992: 107, 109).

Concern about sexist language came initially from feminists rather than from linguists. As Peter Trudgill (2000) points out, language simply reflects the social fact. If the social roles of men and women change, it is likely that gender differences in language will change or diminish (Trudgill, 2000: 79, 80). It is less important for feminists to try to establish a particular set of nonsexist language. Women and men are similar in many ways, but a fascination with sex differences is very much a fact of our lives. It is certainly not a neutral fact. Cameron (1992) says that we need to look at how sex differences in language reflect the natures, roles and statuses of women and men. We need to emphasize the existence of women in the world and to raise men's consciousness by confronting them with their conscious or unconscious prejudices (Cameron, 1992: 126).

3 Analysis and Discussion

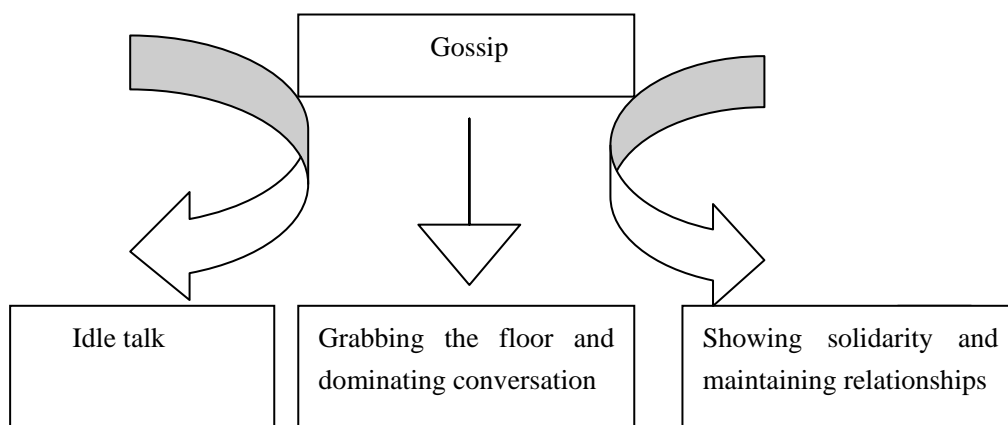
The analysis consists of the face-to-face conversations amongst the couples and between couples and experts from the movie *Couples Retreat* (2009). The objective here is to investigate and present the different functions of gossip with regard to males and females. This section is divided into three parts: the first part is about the function of gossip in the chosen conversations. The function of gossip is categorized into idle talk, a sign of grabbing the floor and dominating conversation and a sign of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships. The second part discusses gender differences in the function of gossip. The third part discusses gender differences in the amount of talk, topic choice and public versus private talk.

3.1 The Function of Gossip

As we have mentioned above, gossip has different connotations and many researchers hold different opinions with regard to the function of gossip. The working definition of gossip in this study is broad, just as we have mentioned in Section 1.2 that Janet Holmes points out that “gossip describes the kind of relaxed in-group talk that goes on between people in informal contexts” (Holmes, 2001: 298). Since the movie concerns

family life, friendship and the relationship between husband and wife, there are many such conversations to be found, even the conversations between couples and experts are very relaxed. As we have discussed in Section 2.2, traditionally, gossip is the idle talk typically referred to women's interaction. Idle talk means empty talk, with no particular purpose or effects. However, more and more recent research finds out that gossip can perform useful functions in promoting solidarity and maintaining relationships. As far as the chosen conversations are concerned, the different functions of gossip are included in the analysis. This part aims to analyze the chosen conversations (the face-to-face conversations amongst the couples and between couples and experts) and identify all instances of gossip according to the functional categories shown in Diagram 1 below.

Diagram 1. Functional categories of gossip in the conversations



From Diagram 1 above, we can see that gossip in this study is classified into three categories: idle talk, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation, showing solidarity and maintaining relationships. Idle talk refers to empty talk, with no particular purpose or effects (See Section 2.2). Speakers beat around the bush or chatter about something empty or meaningless which is irrelevant or nonsensical when they feel bored, excited, unsatisfied or even angry. Grabbing the floor and dominating conversation takes place when someone gossips about something else but

what he or she really wants to do is to try to control the conversation and be the center of the attention. Showing solidarity and maintaining relationships in a gossip indicates that the speakers pursue a style of interaction on the basis of support and they try to seek closeness. Number and percentage of each of the three functional categories in the conversations will be given in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Number and percentage of idle talk, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation, showing solidarity and maintaining relationships in the conversations

Category	Number	Percentage
Idle talk	18	24%
Grabbing the floor and dominating conversation	29	39%
Showing solidarity and maintaining relationships	28	37%
Total in number and percentage	75	100%

As Table 1 above shows, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation takes up the first place by occupying 39% with 29 times in total. The function of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships takes up the second place by occupying 37% with 28 times in total, and the percentage is quite near to that of grabbing the floor and dominating conversation. Idle talk as a function of gossip occurs less frequently with 24% and 18 times in total. The findings show that people have more specific purposes when they are gossiping, either to grab the floor or to show solidarity. From this might be understood that it is not entirely true to define gossip just as idle talk as Janet Holmes (2001) does. Each of the three categories will be explained with the specific examples cited from the chosen conversations in the movie.

3.1.1 Idle Talk

Idle talk refers to empty talk, with no particular purpose or effects (See Section 2.2). Speakers beat around the bush or chatter about something empty or meaningless which is irrelevant or nonsensical when they feel bored, excited, unsatisfied or even angry.

Example 1

Joey: I've been cheating on you! I've been cheating on you every chance I got!

Lucy: Yeah?!

Joey: For years, I've been cheating on you.

Lucy: Well, I cheated on you with more than one guy!

Joey: With two... You had a three-way with two dudes?

Lucy: No, no! But I would have! I totally would have!

Joey: Well, I would've, too!

Lucy: (surprised)

Joey: (angrily) Not with two dudes! You know what I'm talking about!

(Couples Retreat)

Joey and Lucy fell in love in high school, but now their marriage is in danger. Both of them are not willing to talk to each other. When Salvadore, the yoga instructor, appears, Lucy seems to be attracted by him. She dances with Salvadore closely in the dancing party and Joey is very angry when he sees them dancing. He punches Salvadore in the face and then comes the above conversation. As mentioned above, idle talk refers to the empty or meaningless talk which is irrelevant or nonsensical. Here Joey and Lucy talk about cheating in a really nonsensical way. Actually, such kind of talk is very typical for this couple. Let me give another example from this couple.

Example 2

Joey: I'm not saying I wouldn't go to Applebee's with you!

Lucy: Well, I'm not saying I wouldn't go to Applebee's with you!

Joey: All right, well, I would try to go to Applebee's with you.

Lucy: Well, I would try to go to Applebee's with you.

Joey: So let's try. I want to try!

Lucy: Well, let's try.

(Couples Retreat)

The above conversation takes place in the same dancing party. Here Joey and Lucy chatter about something repeatedly when they feel they are hurt or angry. It is a meaningless and empty argument for us, while the two of them seem willing to talk in this way. In the above two examples, we have discussed the conversations between Joey and Lucy, and the conversations are mixed-sex conversations. We will discuss other people talking from single-sex conversations in the following example.

Example 3

Jason: *Now, Cynthia and I are in a terrible spot. I come to this island. I come to the program to get some answers, find out my animal spirit.*

Dave: *Let me help you out on the whole animal spirit thing. It's gonna be awesome! It always is. It's like you go to a tarot card reader for past lives. You're always something cool...*

Jason: *(interrupts) Dave...*

Dave: *...like a king or a gunfighter. No one ever finds out that they were, like a shopkeeper or an asshole.*

Jason: *Is this hilarious to you? 'Cause it's not to me...*

(Couples Retreat)

Jason has just had a terrible quarrel with his wife, Cynthia. Cynthia leaves him and disappears into the jungle. Jason is disturbed and worried. Dave comes to him and says something about tarot card reader and past lives. He keeps talking for a while, which seems meaningless to do so. What he is talking is quite irrelevant to the whole thing.

From the above three examples (from Example 1 to Example 3), we can see that idle talk, as one of the functional categories of gossip, occurs in conversations to refer to some empty or meaningless talks in both single-sex conversations and mixed-sex conversations. People talk about something which is irrelevant or nonsensical when he or she feels angry (see Example 1 and Example 2). Joey and Lucy are quarrelling and they do not know exactly or clearly what they are going to say, so they repeat one sentence again and again just to show their irritation against each other. Such a talk is very typical when people are quarrelling about something in daily life, especially among people who are intimate. In Example 3, Dave is tired of Jason's stupid remarks

and he talks about something else which seems really nonsensical. When someone feels bored, excited, unsatisfied or angry, he or she gossips about something else, and at this time the gossip is more likely to be idle talk.

3.1.2 Grabbing the Floor and Dominating Conversation

We have mentioned that grabbing the floor and dominating conversation typically occurs when people gossip about something irrelevant but what they really intend to do is trying to control the conversation and be the center of attention.

Example 4

Dave: It's freezing in here. Why would they make a room like this?

Joey: You should have seen my masseuse. She was so hot. You're supposed to be relaxing out here. Why do you think I want to get a full release?

Dave: You know what? I don't even want to get into this with you.

Joey: Into what?

Dave: I don't want to get into this conversation with you.

Joey: Why is that?

Dave: Because I don't want to be put in a position where I'd have to lie.

Joey: Why are you getting all high and mighty on me?

(Couples Retreat)

In the above conversation, Dave is talking about the snow room that they are in, but Joey does not go on talking like that. He is so eager to share his experiences with Dave. He shifts the topic, and talks about the hot masseuse. Interestingly, Dave does not build on and develop Joey's topic either. He refuses to get into this talk with Joey. Both of them take turns, shift the topics and want to dominate the conversation. It supports the description of Coates (2004) that men's gossip displays more competitive features: they want to dominate the talk and compete for grabbing the floor. Men prefer a more adversarial style and they pursue their own purpose without considering the others.

Example 5

Cynthia: The rain room has fire. I did not see that coming.

Lucy: I was getting centered. I was enjoying the island.

Ronnie: *What if Joey had seen? Lucy, it was really inappropriate.*

Lucy: *Well, you know, you were so concerned about how Joey felt.*

Ronnie: *Well, that's quite should be.*

Lucy: *Let's drop it.*

(Couples Retreat)

The above conversation takes place in the rain room among the three female characters: Cynthia, Lucy and Ronnie. They are talking about personal feelings, but we can see that the three of them tend to talk about different things. Lucy and Ronnie do not show their agreement with the first speaker: Cynthia. They all want to express their own feelings and grab the floor. It shows that all-female groups are not always cooperative.

Example 6

Trudy: *Daddy, I can't wait to get my drink on tonight!*

Shane: *Damn! Is this the whole thing uphill? Where's the downhill part?*

Trudy: *We gonna get our groove on tonight. Right, daddy?*

Shane: *Of course, baby. You know how we do it.*

(Couples Retreat)

Trudy is Shane's girlfriend who is much younger than Shane. Trudy calls her boyfriends daddy, including Shane. In the above conversation, they are riding bicycles along the hillside. Trudy is talking about the drink tonight, but Shane complains about the uphill. He does not follow Trudy's topic. Trudy ignores Shane's complaint and continues her own topic. Both of them gossip about something new in order to catch the attention. In the conversation, Trudy gets the control of the topic in the end.

Example 7

Marcel: *I was here before sunrise, sadly, by myself. Therefore, I chose not to wait.*

Jason: *Marcel, I've got to be honest with you. You know...*

Marcel: *Silence!*

Jason: *No, you silence! Please, just...I don't need some speech moments, okay? No more, okay? I'm sorry that we kept you waiting this morning and that we didn't respect your program. But last night my wife and I, we spent some real time together and for the first time in a long time, we woke up actually very, very happy...*

(Couples Retreat)

Marcel is the single most-recognized couples' whisperer in the entire world, according to what is said in the movie. The above conversation takes place when the couples are late for the course in the morning. Jason wants to explain, but he is interrupted by Marcel. Jason does not give up and says: "*No, you silence!*" He grabs the floor and dominates the conversation for quite a long time.

The above four examples (from Example 4 to Example 7) show that sometimes people gossip about something which seems to be irrelevant, but actually what they want to do is to manage the direction and development of the conversation as such, specifically to shift the topic and catch the other's attention, and then to be the center of the conversation.

3.1.3 Showing Solidarity and Maintaining Relationships

Showing solidarity and maintaining relationships through gossip indicates that the speakers pursue a style of interaction on the basis of support and that they try to seek closeness.

Example 8

Cynthia: *I think my marriage is over.*

Lucy: *Honey, don't say that. You're just exhausted.*

Cynthia: *I am. I'm so tired of him trying to steer everything in the direction. That he thinks is right all the time.*

Ronnie: *Listen, don't make any decisions right now. You guys just need to take a breather. Get a little bit of space, you know? You'll be okay. You know? You guys have been on top of each other ever since we got here.*

(Couples Retreat)

Cynthia has just had a quarrel with Jason, her husband, and she feels rather sad. She thinks her marriage is over. Both Lucy and Ronnie provide a sympathetic response to her. They build on and develop the same topic. Lucy and Ronnie provide sympathetic responses to the experience of Cynthia, focusing on the feelings rather than the marriage itself. It supports the argument of Janet Holmes (2001) that gossip is a kind of relaxed in-group talk in informal contexts and its function for women is to establish

solidarity and maintain the social relationships.

Example 9

Dave: ...Look, Joey, we were single. We had our fun. We're not missing out anything.

Joey: No, you were single, you had fun. I got married early, so I never got to experience this.

Dave: I have a feeling you had a chance to experience lots of things. But, look, if you want to play "Guess your disease", or "let me translate your tribal tattoo", knock yourself out.

Joey: You don't get it. I'm here trapped on an island with a woman who can't stand the sight of me.

Dave: And whose fault is that?

Joey: It's not my fault!

Dave: Dude, relationships are a two-way street, not a highway and a bike path. If it matters to you, work at it. And if it doesn't, then don't! But make a decision...

(Couples Retreat)

The above conversation takes place in the singles' hot dancing party where they are supposed to find Trudy who has gone. But Joey wants to have fun, and then comes the conversation. In the conversation, we can see that Joey is not in agreement with Dave, but they do not shift the topic. They are talking about the same thing. Dave tries to give him some suggestions and wants to persuade Joey. He is helping him to save his marriage.

Example 10

Jason: And that time that you got sick, you didn't want me to see you, so you locked me out of the bathroom?

Cynthia: No! Then I passed out! And you called the ambulance.

Jason: Well, because, before you passed out, it sounded like you were dying in there.

Cynthia: You know? I thought I was dying. I did.

Jason: Yeah, well, what was I supposed to do? I should have broken down the door.

Cynthia: You've been a really good friend.

Jason: You have been the best friend in the world to me.

(Couples Retreat)

Jason and Cynthia meet again in the dancing party after they have had a quarrel. They recall something which has happened before, and their conversation is on the basis of showing support and solidarity. They build on and develop the same topic to show

their intimacy.

Example 11

Jennifer: *Baby, remember when we first met, and I told you that you were the only man I'd ever been with?*

Shane: *You lied?*

Jennifer: *No, no, no, no, no. I was...I was completely inexperienced, and, honey, I didn't know what I had in you.*

Jennifer: *I thought I needed to know what it was like out there...I've had one-night stands!*

Shane: *Okay!*

Jennifer: *I've woken up in beds with men, whose names I didn't even remember! I was like, "How did I get this t-shirt on?"*

Shane: *Jennifer, I get it. Land your plane.*

(Couples Retreat)

Jennifer is Shane's ex-wife. She comes to Eden to look for Shane and tells him she still loves him. In the above conversation, Jennifer talks a lot, but Shane follows her topic and finally they reach a consensus.

The above four examples (from Example 8 to Example 11) show that gossip can function as a way of keeping relationships or reaching an agreement. Showing solidarity and maintaining relationships through gossip indicates that the speakers pursue a style of interaction on the basis of support and they try to seek closeness.

3.2 Gender Differences in the Function of Gossip

We have discussed the function of gossip in the face-to-face conversations amongst the couples and between couples and experts. However, the percentage of the three functional categories in single-sex conversations and mixed-sex conversations has not been presented. Different results in the function of gossip in all-male conversations, all-female conversations and mixed-sex conversations will be shown in the following tables.

Table 2. Number and percentage of idle talk, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation, showing solidarity and maintaining relationships in all-male conversations

Category	Number	Percentage
Idle talk	3	30%
Grabbing the floor and dominating conversation	6	60%
Showing solidarity and maintaining relationships	1	10%
Total in number and percentage	10	100%

As Table 2 above shows that in all-male conversations, the percentage of grabbing the floor and dominating conversation is 60%, which is much higher than the other two categories, which are idle talk and showing solidarity and maintaining relationships (See Example 4). The percentage of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships is only 10%, which is the lowest of all (See Example 9). The percentage of idle talk is 30% (See Example 3). Tannen (1991) points out that men tend to focus on independence. They want to show their own opinions, not just follow the others. They tend to achieve control in the conversation no matter it is all-male or not. It shows once again the argument of Coates (2004) that men's gossip displays more competitive features: they want to dominate the talk and compete for grabbing the floor. They will do anything to be the center of attention. What is more, as we have mentioned in Section 2.2, men love a bit of scandal and hot gossip to spice up another boring day or to kill the time. These topics are more likely to be tittle-tattles. This explains why the percentage of idle talk in all-male conversations is 30%, which is much higher than the percentage of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships (10%).

Table 3. Number and percentage of idle talk, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation, showing solidarity and maintaining relationships in all-female conversations

Category	Number	Percentage
Idle talk	0	0%
Grabbing the floor and dominating conversation	2	40%
Showing solidarity and maintaining relationships	3	60%
Total in number and percentage	5	100%

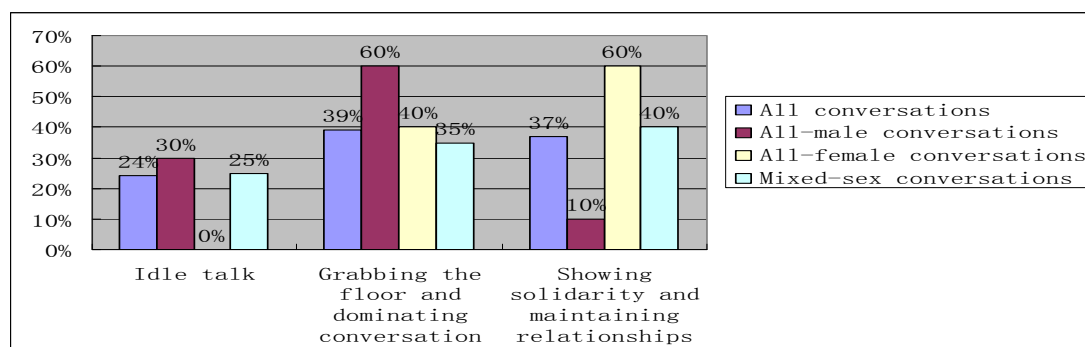
It is surprising to find that there is no idle talk in all-female conversations, as shown in Table 3 above. In fact, there are altogether five all-female conversations in the movie, which are relatively few. Every time when these women meet, they always have something serious to talk about, maybe because of the few chances for them to be together. It seems that they do not want to waste the time in the meaningless or empty talk. The percentage of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships takes up 60%, which is the highest (See Example 8). This result supports Kalcik (1975)'s opinion that the main pattern of all-female interaction is cooperative rather than competitive. Women tend to support each other and achieve closeness. The percentage of grabbing the floor and dominating conversation is 40% (See Example 5). In Section 2.4, we have mentioned that all-female groups are not always cooperative. Many women compete with each other in personal relationships, on the job, in families and in other ways. This explains the relatively high percentage of grabbing the floor and dominating conversation in all-female conversations. However, since there are relatively few all-female conversations in this movie, the reliability of the result might be more or less affected.

Table 4. Number and percentage of idle talk, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation, showing solidarity and maintaining relationships in mixed-sex conversations

Category	Number	Percentage
Idle talk	15	25%
Grabbing the floor and dominating conversation	21	35%
Showing solidarity and maintaining relationships	24	40%
Total in number and percentage	60	100%

The above Table 4 shows that the percentage of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships in mixed-sex conversations is the highest of all, which is 40% with 24 times in total (See Example 10, 11). Second is grabbing the floor and dominating conversation with a percentage of 35% and 21 times in total (See Example 6). The percentage of idle talk is the lowest, which takes up 25% and 15 times in total (See Example 1, 2). The differences among the percentages of the three categories are not so obvious. The comparatively high percentage of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships is mainly because of the collaborative style of women in the mixed-sex conversations. The high percentage of grabbing the floor and dominating conversation is partly due to men's competitive style in the mixed groups.

Graph 1. Percentage of idle talk, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation, showing solidarity and maintaining relationships in all the four different conversational types



As Graph 1 shows that the percentage of all-male conversations takes up the first place (30%) in idle talk, then comes the percentage of mixed-sex conversations which is 25%, and the third place is the percentage of all conversations. The percentage of all-female conversations is zero in idle talk. In grabbing the floor and dominating conversation, the highest percentage comes from all-male conversations (60%). The percentage of all-female conversations comes the second and the third one is the percentage of all conversations. The last is the percentage of mixed-sex conversations. In showing solidarity and maintaining relationships, the percentage of all-female conversations (60%) takes up the first, and the following are the percentage of mixed-sex conversations and all conversations. The percentage of all-male conversations is the lowest (10%). More explanations will be given below Table 5.

Table 5. Number and percentage of idle talk, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation, showing solidarity and maintaining relationships in all the four different conversational types

Conversational types	Idle talk		Grabbing the floor and dominating conversation		Showing solidarity and maintaining relationships	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
All conversations	18	24%	29	39%	28	37%
	Total number: 75			Total percentage: 100%		
All-male conversations	3	30%	6	60%	1	10%
	Total number: 10			Total percentage: 100%		
All-female conversations	0	0%	2	40%	3	60%
	Total number: 5			Total percentage: 100%		
Mixed-sex conversations	15	25%	21	35%	24	40%
	Total number: 60			Total percentage: 100%		

There are three particularly interesting findings as shown in Table 5. First of all, when gossip functions as idle talk, the highest percentage (30%) comes from the all-male group, not from the all-female group. In this study, there is in fact no idle talk at all in any all-female conversations. Many researchers claim that idle talk is something typical of women's interaction, as we have mentioned before. However, by contrast as found in this study, we can see that it is rather the men who like to chat about something meaningless or empty more than women. It must however be borne in mind that just as what is mentioned above, all-female conversations in this movie are relatively few, so the reliability of the result can be somewhat affected by this. Secondly, grabbing the floor and dominating conversation as a functional category is mostly used in all-male conversations, with a percentage of 60%. The rest of the three conversational types are relatively close in percentage as to usage. However, the percentage of all-female conversations takes the second place, which is 40%. Coates (2004) argues that in all-men groups, the chief aim of them is to seize a turn whenever possible and try to hold it. They want to be speakers not listeners. Finally, the findings in the function of gossip as showing solidarity and maintaining relationships confirm the opinions of Coates (2004), Holmes (2001), Tannen (1991), Kalcik (1975), Graddol and Swann (1989) that in all-women groups, the pattern of interaction is cooperative based on solidarity and support. While as far as this function is concerned, the percentage of all-male conversations takes up only 10%, which is much lower than all the others. It indicates that men tend to compete more in all-male groups.

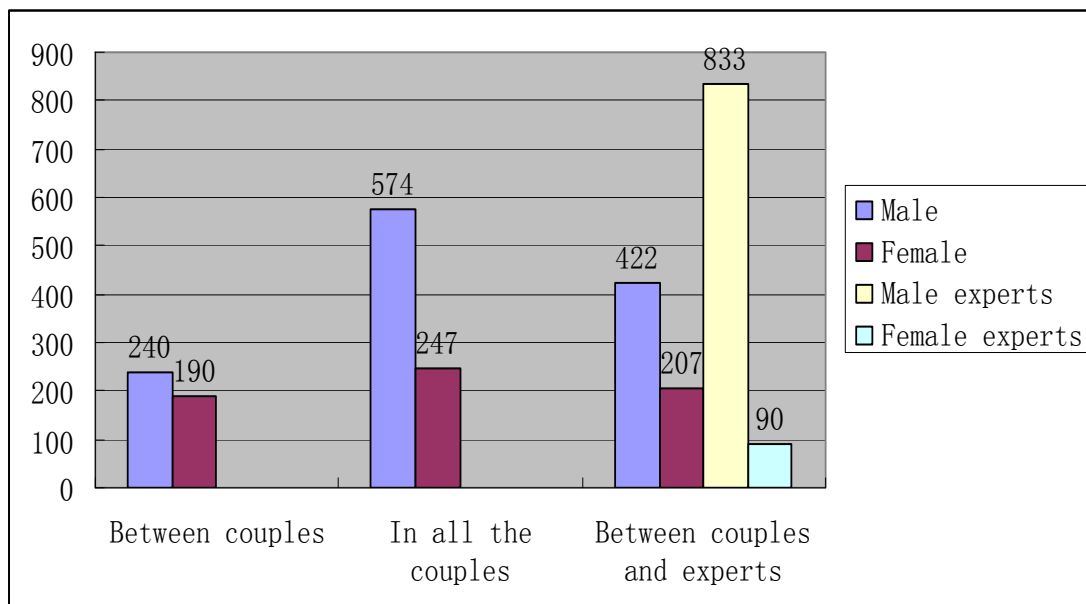
3.3 Gender Differences in the Amount of Talk, Topic Choice and Public versus Private Talk

It is very interesting and at the same time challenging to decide who tends to talk more, because many people hold different ideas. According to the stereotype, women are more talkative. However, this is not always true. To some degree, it might be just because the society asks women to speak less. An English proverb says that silence is the best ornament of a woman. If a woman talks for a relatively long time, she will be

considered having talked too much. In Section 2.3, we have discussed that men and women tend to discuss different topics. Women like to talk about people and feelings, while men prefer to talk about more impersonal topics. In Section 2.4, we have mentioned that for most women, conversation is a way to establish connections and negotiate relationships and they feel the closest connections at home or in settings where they feel at home. For most men, they are comfortable in public speaking, for example in the workplace or classroom. They use a competitive speech style to assert a position of dominance and attract the audience.

What is going to be analyzed in this section is that the amount of talk and topic choice might have a change in different conversational types. We will divide the conversational types into the following three groups: all-male groups, all-female groups and mixed-sex groups. Mixed-sex groups are further divided into groups of each couple, groups of all the couples, groups of couples and experts. Talk in each couple can be considered as the most private talk. Talk in all the couples can be considered as less private talk or more public talk. Talk between couples and experts are somewhat more formal and can be considered as public talk.

Graph 2. Gender differences in the amount of talk in three different conversational types



* Note: In the above Graph 2, the numbers stand for seconds, for example: 240 means 240 seconds, 190 means 190 seconds, etc.

From Graph 2 above, we can see that male speakers talk more than female speakers in all the three conversational types: between couples, in all the couples, between couples and experts. In the conversations between couples and experts, male experts talk the most and female experts talk the least. More explanations will be given below Table 6.

Table 6. Gender differences in the amount of talk in three different conversational types

Conversational types	Male	Female	Male experts	Female experts
Between couples	4 minutes (240 seconds)	3 minutes and 10 seconds (190 seconds)		
In all the couples	9 minutes and 34 seconds (574 seconds)	4 minutes and 7 seconds (247 seconds)		
Between couples and experts	7 minutes and 2 seconds (422 seconds)	3 minutes and 27 seconds (207 seconds)	13 minutes and 53 seconds (833 seconds)	1 minute and 30 seconds (90 seconds)

Graddol and Swann (1989) point out that Leet-Pellegrini (1980) has studied the amount of talk in relation to the speakers' sex as well as expertise. Leet-Pellegrini found that men talked more than women; experts (those who have previous

experiences) talked more than non-experts; male experts talked more than female experts. From Table 6 and the data from the present investigation, we can clearly see that men talk more than women in all three different conversational types: between couples, in all the couples, between couples and experts. In the talk between couples and experts, it is obvious that the male experts talk the most. Male experts dominate the conversations between couples and experts. The result supports the opinion of Graddol and Swann (1989) that “speakers who are both male and have ‘expertise’ tend to spend the most time talking” (Graddol and Swann, 1989: 74). It is quite necessary to mention that every time there is only one male expert or one female expert communicating with the couples, and altogether there are five male experts and three female experts in the conversations. It is interesting to find that the female experts talk the least in the four different groups of people. In the movie, male experts tend to talk more. Sometimes they even have a quite long monologue. Here are two examples.

Example 12

Marcel: *Now we will enjoy looking at the fish. See and take in with your eyes all the beauty the ocean has to offer! As these new things come at you, you may not have seen them before. But be open to them and find the beauty within.*

(Couples Retreat)

Marcel is the single most-recognized couples’ whisperer in the entire world, according to what is said in the movie, as we have mentioned before. The above conversation takes place when the couples are taking a course in couples’ skills building and they are in the ocean enjoying looking at the fish.

Example 13

Marcel: *These are only lemon sharks! This is all part of the course. It is like life, like in relationships. They will not attack unless they feel attacked!*

(Couples Retreat)

When the couples are enjoying looking at the fish, they are frightened to find that there are some sharks circling around them. They are scared, while Marcel still expresses his philosophy casually and patiently.

On the other hand, the female experts tend to listen more. The following is an example.

Example 14

Joey: So now it's my fault that you don't feel satisfied!

Lucy: Everything is my fault? Is that what you're saying?

Joey: I'm not saying that!

Lucy: I'm crazy? You don't look at me!

Lucy: You don't ever ask me how I am!

Joey: I work! You haven't looked at me in 10 years!

Lucy: I'm crazy and everything is my fault, and my family is awful, and nothing at all is your fault! ' cause you rock, Joey!

Joey: If a guy talked to me like that, I'd punch him in the face.

Lucy: Oh, you're such an asshole!

Joey: You're such an asshole!

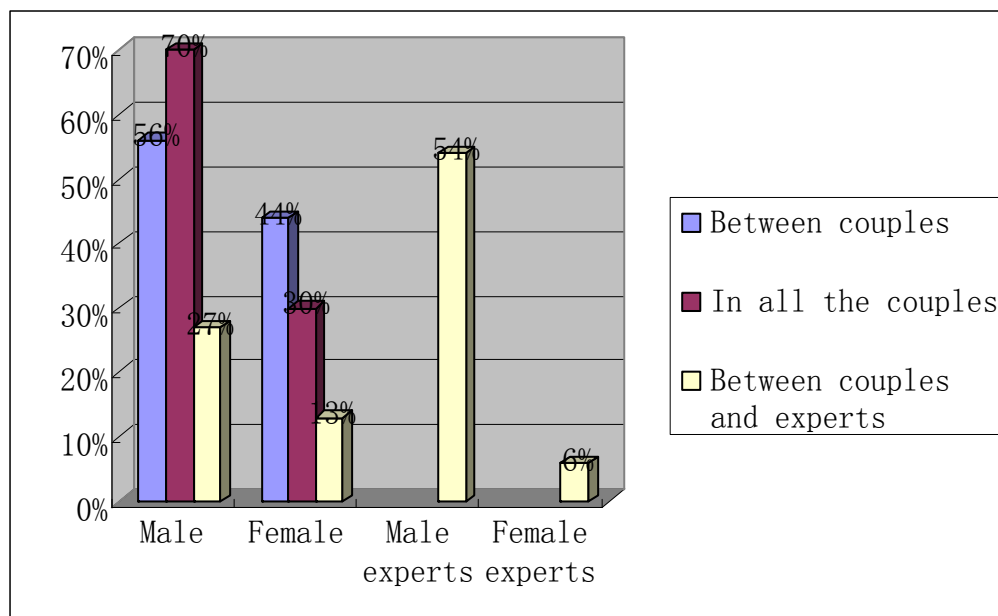
(Couples Retreat)

In the above conversation, the female expert asks Joey and Lucy to talk to each other. They have talked about for quite a long time, while the female expert just keeps listening and does not want to interrupt.

Here we should keep in mind that we are after all discussing a fictional movie, and it cannot be exactly the same as real life, because the preferences of the scriptwriter as well as the director may be integrated into the movie. However, let us assume that the film and therefore the conversations in it actually resemble real life, because to a large extent, the language used in the movie is realistic and reflecting real life conversations.

From Graph 2 and Table 6 above, we can clearly see who talks more in three different conversational types: between couples, in all the couples, between couples and experts. It is still not very clear in which conversational type men and women prefer to talk more, because the length of each conversational type differs. The percentage of male and female talk in different conversational types will be presented in Graph 3 and Table 7 below.

Graph 3. Gender differences in the percentage of the amount of talk in three different conversational types



As Graph 3 shows, male speakers talk most in all the couples with the percentage of 70% and they talk least between couples and experts with the percentage of 27%. Female speakers talk most between couples with the percentage of 44% and they talk least between couples and experts with the percentage of 13%. More explanations will be given below Table 7.

Table 7. Gender differences in the percentage of the amount of talk in three different conversational types

Conversational types	Male	Female	Male experts	Female experts	Total
Between couples	56%	44%			100%
In all the couples	70%	30%			100%
Between couples and experts	27%	13%	54%	6%	100%

As we have discussed that the talk between each couple can be considered as the most private and intimate talk. Talk in all the couples can be considered as less private talk or more public talk. Talk between couples and experts are somewhat more formal and can be considered as public talk. From Table 7 above, we can clearly see that women prefer to talk most in the most private occasions, and they tend to speak least in public circumstances. For men, they love to talk more in less private or intimate circumstances just as in all the couples where they meet different people.

So far we have discussed the amount of talk in the different conversational types. Now let us move on to the topic choice. Research shows that men and women tend to discuss different topics in same-sex groups just as we have mentioned in Section 2.3. Here we will discuss if there will be any change in topic choice in different conversational types.

Table 8. Topic choice in all-male group, all-female group, between couples, in all the couples, between couples and experts

Conversational types	Topics
All-male	the hot girl, sex, cheating on wives, relationships, sexual relationships, bar...
All-female	personal experiences, feelings, marriage, other women and men, sexual relationships, other's relationships...
Between couples (mixed-sex, private)	relationships, making a PowerPoint, personal experiences, feelings...
In all the couples (mixed-sex, less private or more public)	trips, jobs, personal experiences, the course, a car accident...
Between couples and experts (mixed-sex, public)	family, marriage, kids...all the topics stem from the course

As Table 8 above shows, in the all-male group, men love to talk about sex, hot girls and cheating on their wives however they tend not to talk about such topics in mixed-sex groups. In mixed-sex groups, especially in less private circumstances, men prefer to talk about more impersonal topics, such as the course or a car accident. One of the reasons is that their wives are there and it is absolutely unsuitable for them to talk about cheating on their wives and hot girls in front of their wives. Moreover, it is also embarrassing to talk about sex in front of many people.

In the all-female group, women like to share personal experiences and feelings and talk about the relationships. Almost all the topics are quite personal. While in the mixed-sex groups, women will discuss some impersonal topics like trips. When talk takes place in all the couples, which is less private and more public, women will not talk about relationships or personal feelings. As we have mentioned in Section 2.4, for most women, conversation is a way to establish connections and negotiate relationships. They can exchange experiences and feel the closest connections at home or in settings where they feel at home. In a situation which is more public, as Tannen (1991) points out, such as if there are other men except for family members present, women feel that they have to be on good behavior. They tend to speak less and keep listening and then the conversations and the topics are usually dominated by male speakers.

4 Conclusion

This study focuses on the face-to-face conversations in couples and between couples and experts from the movie *Couples Retreat* (2009). The function of gossip in the chosen conversations is categorized into idle talk, a sign of grabbing the floor and dominating conversation and a sign of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships. As the findings demonstrate that 39% of gossip functions as grabbing the floor and dominating conversation which is the highest percentage of all. Second comes the percentage of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships (37%),

which is very close to the first one. Gossip as idle talk takes up only 24%, which is the lowest of all. These findings confirm that gossip has different social functions in everyday life. In the study, most of the time people gossip in order to dominate the conversation or maintain relationships. Less frequently, people gossip without any particular purposes in mind, which can be considered as empty talk. The function of gossip is not always the same and it would be unwise to exaggerate the stereotype of gossip as meaningless talk as some researchers claim (See Section 2.2).

Gender differences exist in the function of gossip. In all-male conversations, the percentage of gossip as grabbing the floor and dominating conversation is the highest, which is 60%. While the percentage of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships is only 10%, which is the lowest of all. It confirms the argument of Coates (2004) that men's gossip displays more competitive features that they want to dominate the talk and compete for grabbing the floor. In all-female conversations, the percentage of showing solidarity and maintaining relationships is the highest, which is 60%. The percentage of grabbing the floor and dominating conversation is 40%. There is no idle talk in all-female conversations in the study. As we have mentioned before, there are relatively few all-female conversations in this movie, the reliability of the result might be more or less affected. However, it confirms the opinion of Janet Holmes (2001), who argues that the function of gossip for women is to establish solidarity and maintain the social relationships. Kalcik (1975) also points out that the main pattern of all-female interaction is cooperative rather than competitive. Women tend to support each other and achieve closeness. The findings also show that all-female groups are not always cooperative. Sometimes they also compete with each other.

Gender differences also exist in the amount of talk, in topic choice and in public versus private talk. In all the three mixed-sex conversational types: between couples, in all the couples, between couples and experts, male speakers talk more than female speakers and male experts talk more than female experts. The findings once again

show that it would be unwise to exaggerate the stereotype that women talk more than men and women gossip. According to the findings, men talk the most in the conversations in all the couples, which is more public, while women talk the most in the conversations between couples, which can be considered as the most private talk. The findings show that women prefer to talk most in the most private occasions, and men love to talk more in less private or intimate circumstances, that is in all the couples where they meet different people. According to the findings about topic choice, in the all-male group, men love to talk about sex, hot girls and cheating on their wives however they tend not to talk about such topics in mixed-sex groups. In mixed-sex groups, especially in less private circumstances, men prefer to talk about more impersonal topics, such as the course or a car accident. In the all-female group, women like to share personal experiences and feelings and talk about the relationships. While in mixed-sex groups, women will not talk about relationships or personal feelings. Women will discuss some impersonal topics like trips.

The primary material of this study, however, is a fictional movie. Although the language used in the movie is realistic and reflects real life conversations, the movie could not be real portrayal of the reality. In addition, the chosen conversations in the study involve the four couples and they have close relationships. If we examine other relationships and maybe also a larger primary material, the findings might be quite different. Therefore, it is worthwhile to conduct further research to investigate gossip in other situations.

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