

**An Analysis of Gender Differences in Interruption
based on the American TV series *Friends***

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1. Introduction

Conversation is indispensable in our life. People use it to exchange information, ideas and feelings. It is so important that many linguists, including Coates (1993) and Tannen (1992), have studied its characteristics. Conversation is a social and psychological, as well as linguistic activity, so it is difficult to make a brief and clear definition. It is a speech style of communication, and it is a process of speech turn from one participant to another. The basic rule of turn-taking is only one speaker speaking at any one time. The next speaker begins to talk at the Transition Relevance Place (TRP) which is the right place where there is a pause or other implication to give up the turn by the current speaker. But in real conversation it always takes place that people violate the rule. Many people may talk simultaneously to show their attention, interest, enthusiasm and support, by using for example minimal responses and back-channel items. Some others may cut in during the speech, intend to grab the floor and dominate the conversation when the current speaker is speaking. From this point of view, there are cooperative speech behaviors and competitive speech behaviors in conversation. The cooperative speakers often support in conversation by using more tag-questions, compliments and mitigated directives. The competitive speakers, however, often use more aggressive commands and directives to control the conversation.

Men and women could be seen as being different in nature. They often have different sexual characters, different interests and hobbies, different preferred names and so on. Men are sometimes portrayed as being strong and are responsible for protecting women and the family members, meanwhile they are regarded as the main breadwinners of the whole family. By contrast, women are often being depicted as being gentle and soft. Same with children, women may also belong to the vulnerable group in the society and need protection. Certainly men and women often have different views of the society; they have different ways and means to deal with affairs and have different speech behaviors.

Many aspects of language have been studied, but the area of language and gender is new. This area has not been attached importance to until about 30 years ago. Fortunately, the study of language and gender has been developing rapidly within the recent 30 years. It is very important to help people understand the language differences between men and women, and to help to reduce the misunderstanding between them. The recent research indicates that, to men, life is a contest. They try their best to get power and struggle to protect themselves from being put down and being pushed around, preserve independence and avoid failure, so men will pursue a speech style based on power and try to dominate the conversation. To many women, life is a community. They try to create an environment with closeness and consensus. Sometimes they communicate with others just to show friendship to others and to keep close relationship with them, and they struggle to protect themselves from being pushed away, preserve intimacy and avoid isolation, so women are inclined to support others when talking and pursue a speech style based on solidarity and support (Tannen, 1992:25).

1.1 Aim and Scope

The aim of the present investigation is to find out the different conversational styles among male and female speakers, based on the six protagonists in the American TV series *Friends*. The focus of the study is on the phenomenon of interruption, its frequency and function in same-sex conversations compared to mixed-sex conversations in the TV series.

1.2 Material

The primary material used in the present investigation consists of video resources together with the transcripts from nine episodes in different seasons, which are chosen randomly from the famous American TV series *Friends*. The video material lasts 3:34:40, and following is the length of every episode:

Table 1: The length of every episode

Season	I			II			III		
episode	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
length	29:39	24:21	23:52	22:47	22:47	22:47	22:49	22:49	22:49

The TV series is mainly about the daily life of the six protagonists. They are three males named Ross Geller, Chandler Bing and Joey Tribbiani, and three females named Rachel Green, Monica Geller and Phoebe Buffay. The numbers of men and women are same, which is one reason why I choose *Friends* to be the primary material. Another reason is that there are plenty of scenes concerning conversations among six protagonists. Some of them live in the same apartment, some are close neighbours and some become lovers later. In short, all of them are close friends and always stay together in Monica's apartment and Central Park (a cafe) to chat. The TV series reveals many aspects of gender differenced in real life and reflects the six protagonists' different speech behaviors through their face-to-face conversations, which are very spontaneous, casual and informal. In such informal conversations between close friends, they may need not care much about politeness, so there may be many different uses of interruptions. The material of *Friends* is scripted, but it is based on natural speech in real life.

1.3 Method

Both video materials and transcripts should be dealt with, since only video materials or only transcripts are not enough to formulate an analysis. With the help of transcripts almost every sentence or even every word could be understood. With video materials, the gestures, facial expressions, body languages and some other signals of the protagonists could be seen to help to analyze and identify many unfinished sentences with "...” in the transcripts. Therefore, using them simultaneously is necessary to identify the interruptions and their functions.

The American TV series *Friends* is watched first to get the general idea of the story and meanwhile the duration of all male conversations, all female conversations and mixed-sex conversations are calculated. Then the video materials are watched carefully to check every simultaneous speech and speaker-switch to see if it can be identified as an interruption with the help of the transcripts. At the same time, the function and topic-change of every interruption are analyzed and taken down in some tables, which are used to compare the use of interruptions between male and female speakers. The next step is to count all useful numbers of interruptions, respectively, followed by the most important process of analyzing and comparing. Two items are analyzed and compared in this process. One of the item is the gender differences in the frequency of using interruptions and being interrupted to find out who use more interruptions and who are more inclined to be interrupted between males and females. Another item is the gender differences in the use of cooperative interruptions, competitive interruptions and the neutral interruptions (neither cooperation nor competition) to find out which function of interruption is preferred to be used by males and females respectively.

2. Theoretical Background

Language has been studied for a long time, and many kinds of books involving conversation analysis have been published. This study is focus on interruptions in conversation. Following is the introduction and summary of the previous works and theories related to the aim of the present study. The mentioned areas are about conversation analysis, turn taking, cooperative, competitive behavior in conversation, feedback in conversation (minimal responses and back-channel items) and the most important is unhesitatingly the interruptions in conversation. All of these conversation-related studies indicate that there are many differences between male and female language.

2.1 Conversation analysis

Conversation is a social behavior. It is very common and important in our life. From different points of view, conversation can be divided into face to face conversation, telephone conversation, formal and informal conversation or private and public conversation, and dyadic and non-dyadic conversation. No matter what kind of conversation it is, its basic function is to mutually exchange information, thoughts, ideas, and emotions. It will be difficult to give a brief and clear-cut definition because conversation is a both social and psychological, as well as linguistic activity. It should be taken into consideration that who talks, whom one talks to, when, where and in what circumstances speakers are talking. If a conversation is to be meaningful, relevant, and comprehensible, the definition must then include both linguistic and non-linguistic criteria. Many linguists have tried to make a definition for conversation, but they hardly convince each other and their definitions are not in consensus (Stenstrom, 1984 and Orestrom, 1983). Stenstrom (1984) discusses Crystal and Davy (1975) who define conversation in the general sense as “any stretch of continuous speech between two or more people within audible range of each other who have the mutual intention to communicate, and bounded by the separation of all participants for an extended period” (Stenstrom, 1984:11). Orestrom (1983:21) explains that Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974) note that conversation is a member of a set of *speech exchange systems* and Goffman (1963) refers to it as a form of *focused interaction*. Abercrombie (1963) gives one general characteristic of conversation:

Under *conversation* I would include all those linguistic occasions when there is opportunity for give and take; when it is understood that, at least in theory, there is more than one active participant, however long one of the participants may go on for.

(Orestrom, 1983:21)

The characteristics of face-to-face conversation and telephone conversation are different. The beginning and end boundaries are arbitrary in a face-to-face conversation, where a specific opening and closing section seldom appears and the overall pattern will vary largely according to situation. In the telephone category,

however, the pattern is more regular. The natural boundaries are often intact with a *hello* opening and a *good-bye* closing. Compared with face-to-face conversation, telephone calls usually have a definite purpose to make an appointment, ask for or give some information. The crucial difference between face-to-face conversation and telephone conversation is that the latter lacks of non-verbal signals completely, and needs more explicit explanations (Stenstrom, 1984 and 1994).

Conversation is to exchange information, thoughts, ideas, and emotions, so it has a cooperative characteristic. Speakers want to see if a point has been understood, to see if others are interested in what was said, to figure out whether a comment is taken as relevant, acceptable, surprising and shocking in conversation. Together, they can try to figure out the topics that are of mutual interest and the common purpose in communicating. The conversation in informational formats will be more cooperative, because the informational formats consist of common, logical sequences which enable the listeners to make a clear sense with ease (Newman-Nowicka, 2003).

Men and women act different in many aspects, including in conversation. Men and women pursue different conversational styles and have different interpretation to others' words. Sometimes they just can not understand each other. This phenomenon is described vividly in by Deborah Tannen (1992), a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Men view the world in a hierarchical way. They hold the idea that there must be one person in a superior position and another in an inferior position during a conversation. They are more independent and attach more importance to power, and hence they talk more, swear more and use aggravated directives to get power in the conversation. They try their best to achieve and maintain the upper hand and prevent others from psychologically putting them down or pushing them around. Women, by contrast, tend to think of the world in a non-hierarchical way. They pursue intimacy in life and pay more attention to friendship. They will feel close and comfortable through getting and giving empathy and support. Consequently, women use more hedges, compliments and linguistic

forms associated with politeness in conversation to minimize differences and try to reach consensus (Coates, 2004). Based on these differences of interactive styles between men and women, men's language is considered powerful while women's powerless. Coates (2004:109) discusses that O'Barr and Atkins even equate women's language with powerless language.

2.1.1 Turn-taking

Speech is distributed on a turn-by-turn basis. A turn constructed by the speaker consists of single words, phrases, clauses or sentences. Stenstrom (1984:11) explains that the *chaining principle* (cf eg Good 1979), which distinguishes dialogue from monologue, implies conversational partners take turns and the organization of talk refers to turn-taking. A normal string in two-party conversation is ABAB¹, which can be called the basic structure of talk. According to Stenstrom (1984), the fundamental principles of interaction in terms of turn-taking are accentuated by Schegloff (1972a). Later, according to Zimmerman and West (1975:106-107), Sacks et al (1974) outline a model of turn-taking in naturally occurring conversation which is widely used in the discourse and conversation analysis. The model provides a turn-taking mechanism for conversation and tells us 1) the current speaker may select the next speaker (by asking questions or addressing his or her name directly), then the person selected has the right to speak and meanwhile has to take the turn. 2) If the current speaker does not select the next speaker, any other participants can speak next. 3) If none of above cases happens, the current speaker can hold the floor and continue to speak. According to the model, there are no gap and no overlap between the turns. Sacks et al (1974) say that one party speaks at a time and speaker change recurs (Coates, 2004:112). According to Orestrom (1983:31), Duncan (1972 and 1973) has mentioned four basic types of signals for the operation of the turn-taking mechanism. In general, a proper operation is 1) the current speaker gives a turn-yielding signal, 2) the listener claims the speaker-turn and 3) the current speaker gives up his turn. In a smooth turn-

¹ A and B refer to two speakers. ABAB refers to the the turn of speech initiated by speaker A and speaker B.

taking process, the current speaker finishes the speech and the next speaker begins to talk around Transition-Relevant Places (TRP). However, sometimes the listener is uncertain where TRP exactly is; sometimes a lot of people, especially women, speak at the same time when they are excited or enjoying something together; and in some cases, competitive speakers break the rules of turn-taking model on purpose to grab the floor, so simultaneous speech is very common in conversation. These are unsmooth turn-taking processes.

Differences exist in the turn-taking behavior between male and female speakers, which has been claimed by Key (1975) according to Orestrom (1983:146). Female speakers, especially in all female conversations, often break the rule of one person at a time. Many of them speak at the same time. Coates (2004:131) explains that this collaborative mode of organizing talk is first identified as *collaborative floor* by Carole Edelsky (1993) and calls it a conversational *jam session*. In this mode, all participants take the conversational floor simultaneously, but the different voices work with each other, not against each other, to construct meaning. Although this way of talking is available to all speakers, Edelsky finds that women are more inclined to use it than men in mixed-sex conversations (Coates, 2004:131). Coates (2004:136) claims that women often adopt the jam session model while men prefer a one-at-a-time model of turn-taking, so overlapping talking is rare in all-male talk. Even if men are in a more gladiatorial style of talk, they will also pursue a well-timed exchange of speaker turns. Based on Mary Talbot's (1992), Coates (2004:137) indicates that men do not like others to join in when they have not finished their speaking. They will think of others' words as intruding on their right on a solo floor even if the others' words are collaborative comments and support for their speeches.

With the variation of situation and topic, some things will be changed. Women may obey the rule of one-at-a-time model when they have high social status and are in a very formal conversation. Men may enjoy overlapping each other when they are

jointly discussing a topic and become noticeably excited. Differences in turn-taking between males and females do exist.

2.1.2 Cooperative and competitive speech behavior in conversation.

Grice (1975) argues that conversational partners are expected to preserve a general *cooperative principle* (Stenstrom, 1984:21). The cooperative speakers create language that responds to the interests of the listeners and the purpose on communicating. They will use more tag questions, more hedges and softer words to support others and seldom interrupt others to grab the floor and also they care much if others understand what they have said. They try their best to make the atmosphere harmonious and make all the conversational partners feel comfortable and happy. Consequently, they can maintain a good relationship with others. In reality, many conversations violate Grice's cooperative principle. The competitive speakers swear more and use more taboo words, confrontational words, aggravated directives and aggressive interruptions. Their speeches are characterized by silences, lack of verbal feedback, monologues and direct expressions of disagreement. They care less about the face of others and just want to dominate the conversation and to show their powers.

Men and women pursue different speech behavior in conversation. Coates (2004:126) argues that "it seems that men pursue a style of interaction based on power, while women pursue a style based on solidarity and support." She also discusses that men pursue competitive behavior while women pursue cooperative behavior. In fact, the gender-differentiated speech behavior in conversation has come into being in childhood. Coates argues that Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982) claim that girls learn to 1) create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality; 2) criticize others in acceptable ways; and 3) interpret accurately the speech of other girls, while boys learn to 1) assert a position of dominance; 2) attract and maintain an audience; and 3) assert themselves when another speaker has the floor. The girls' talk is characterized as cooperative and the boys' as competitive by Maltz and Borker (Coates, 2004:160-161). Among adults, the gender-differentiated speech behaviors

continue. Women use more minimal responses, tag-questions, compliments, questions with *uncertain* rising intonations and mitigating directives with *let's, gonna, can, could, maybe, etc.* Women's speech is softer and more polite. They try to create an environment with closeness and consensus. Men often use explicit and aggressive commands and directives to get the upper hand in conversation to protect themselves psychologically from being pushed around (Tannen, 1992; Coates, 2004).

The workplace is considered as a competitive arena, where men's competitive behavior and women's cooperative behavior will be more obvious, since most high positions are occupied by men in the present society. Unfortunately, high status women will be in a dilemma in the workplace. If they use an adversarial, aggressive and competitive speech style, they will be perceived as un-feminine. If they pursue a soft, supportive and cooperative style, they will be considered that they are powerless and do not deserve that high position. The career women are really in a Catch 22 situation in the linguistic field (Coates, 2004:201-202). Although, men and women pursue very different speech behavior, their common goal of most conversations are to achieve solidarity.

2.1.3 Feedback in conversation

The current listeners may not be passive but instead give simultaneous expressions during the current speakers' utterance to show their activeness and attentiveness to the current speakers. These simultaneous expressions are called feedbacks. There are verbal and non-verbal feedbacks, such as head-nod, smile, eye-glance and laugh. Orestrom (1983:105) argues that feedbacks have a positive effect and show support to the current speaker to achieve consensus between the conversational participants. Pilkington (1998) has concluded that women are inclined to give more positive feedback while men provide fewer verbal feedback (Coates, 2004:138). Both minimal responses and back-channels belong to feedback. Some linguists, including Coates, regard them as the same thing, while others, such as Orestrom (1983), minimal response seems to be just a part of backchannels.

Minimal responses are forms such as *mhm*, *yeah*, *right*, which intersperse through the current speaker's ongoing utterance. The conversational partner can interject such comments between breaths—rarely overlap the current speaker's utterance. Even if any short pause is caused, the current speaker can continue his or her turn after insertion of *yeah* or *um*. According to Zimmerman and West (1975:108), both Schegloff (1972b) and Fishman (1973) consider that such items may not interrupt the current speaker, instead they view these minimal responses as a kind of positive reinforcement for continuing talk and hold the idea that the provider of such response must do an active work and he or she can display continuing interest and co-participation in topic development. However there is an exception, which Zimmerman and West (1975:124) point out when saying that sometimes the retarded minimal responses are indeed signals of non-support to the continued development of a topic by one speaker over a series of turns, and they will serve, at a minimum, to bring the topic to a close.

Coates discusses that the research on the use of minimal responses shows unanimously that women use them more than men and mentions that Holmes (1995) even wonders if minimal responses are “a female speciality” (Coates, 2004:87). In one of her studies, she finds that women are skillful and sensitive in using the minimal response – they neither overlap nor interrupt the current speaker's utterance, which is agreed by Fishman (1980b) according to Coates (2004:87). Men also use minimal responses, but Coates (2004) points out that men often use delayed minimal responses, which are viewed as a tactic to undermine the current speaker and reinforce male dominance.

Backchannels are emitted by the listener as feedback signals (Orestrom, 1983:23). They vary considerably in length, from short vocalizations like *mm*, *yeah* (which are also called minimal responses) to very long expressions, such as *I think you are right*. According to Orestrom (1983:107), Duncan & Niederehe (1974) list four types of

backchannel and Hene (1978) takes the listener's role into consideration and gives such items from visual, non-linguistic signs, lexical signs, idioms to sentence completions. Based on the classification of Duncan and Niederehe (1974), Orestrom (1983:107) gives five types of backchannel items: 1) Supports: (*mhm, yes, sure, right, OK, fine, I see, that's nice, that's right, etc.*) the listener has understood the message and expresses acceptance, agreement. 2) Exclamations: (*oh, oh dear, oh God, bloody hell, etc.*) the listener shows emotional expressions, like surprise. 3) Exclamatory questions: (*what, really, did he, was it, etc.*) the listener asks short questions with an exclamatory tone. 4) Sentence completions: (*a: ... eventually, it will come down to more concrete issues.../ b: As she gets more comfortable*) the listener completes a sentence that the speaker has begun. 5) Restatements: (*a: ... having to pick up the pieces/ b: the broken dishes, yeah*) the listener briefly restates the speaker's preceding thought immediately in his or her own words. As these examples show, Stenstrom (1994:81) argues that backchannels can reflect empathy, enthusiasm and indignation. Moreover she makes a further argument that they can also reflect a lack of interest, indifference and impatience sometimes.

Backchannels, as a signal of feedback, are preferred by women, but some types of backchannels, such as *mhm* and *yeah*, are used by men much more than women. People give backchannels with three tones—falling tone, level tone and rising tone. The finding in Stenstrom's (1994:121) study is that the falling tone is the most common one, followed by the level tone. She also finds that men use level tone three times more than women.

2.2 Definition and types of interruption

Interruption is one of the conversation phenomenons. Broadly speaking, it means that the next speaker cuts into the current speaker's ongoing utterance. Many linguists have studied the categories of interruption and have tried to define it, but it seems that they hardly achieve consensus. Zimmerman and West define "interruptions as next speaker turns that begin within the current speaker's turn, that is, at least two syllables

after the beginning or before the end of the current turn unit. Interruptions are to be distinguished from interventions which facilitate a current turn.” (Ahrens, 1997:80). According to Orestrom (1983), Kendon (1967) argues that the intentional interruptions should be distinguished from those caused by misinterpretation and that Meltzer, Morris and Hayes (1971) just define interruption as “two persons vocalizing at once” (Orestrom, 1983:136).

Orestrom (1983:136) explains that several types of interruption have been discussed by the following linguists. Clancy (1972) distinguishes between two types of interruption: 1) the current speaker’s speech is cut in and leaves unfinished sentences. 2) the current speaker still completes his sentence although the next speaker is already beginning his speech. Ferguson (1977) concludes four types of interruption. Most types of interruption seem to involve some simultaneous speech:

Simple interruption: simultaneous speech, ongoing speaker’s utterance is incomplete, new speaker takes the floor.

Butting-in interruption: simultaneous speech, new speaker’s utterance is left incomplete, no floor-taking.

Silent interruption: no simultaneous speech, ongoing speaker’s utterance is incomplete, new speaker takes the floor.

Overlap: simultaneous speech, no apparent break in continuity, new speaker takes the floor.

(Orestrom, 1983:136)

According to Beattie (1983:124), a study of Ferguson (1977) shows that overlaps are the most common category of interruption followed by simple interruptions and butting-in interruptions with silent interruptions the least common. Ferguson has classified the overlap into interruption in her study, but many other linguists, including Tannen, do not agree with it. Overlap can be one type of interruption, but it is not always identified as an interruption. The context must be considered. Two cases *interruption without overlap* and *overlap without interruption* have are discussed by Tannen (1992).

2.3 Functions of interruption

James and Clarke (1993: 232) state that the basic function of interruption is to prevent the current speaker from being able to finish his or her utterance and to allow the next speaker to take the floor. Most interruptions are considered to be competitive, because the interrupters are rough to stop the other's ongoing speech and want to take the floor. Sometimes listeners do not really want to interrupt the current speaker and take the floor. They are just very high-involved and want to support or agree with the speaker's speech. Therefore, some simultaneous or repeated speeches can be thought of as cooperative ones. Moreover, some interruptions are neither associated with collaboration, nor considered to be violations of turn-taking rules, since they are neutral.

Interruptions are usually considered to be competitive, because the proportion of dominance-related interruption might be higher than others. Many studies, as discussed in the following, have been carried out to test the relationship between interruption use and dominance and some have found out clear link between interruptions and dominance, especially in interactions where competition and conflict are present. According to James and Clarke (1993:243), Kollock, Blumstein and Schwartz (1985) find that the initiating of interruptions is linked with power—the more powerful partner attempts more interruptions, and suggest that a significant percentage of interruptions is associated with dominance and disruption. According to James and Clarke (1993:243), Roger and Schumacher (1983) and Roger and Nesshoever (1987) find that dominant or competitive interruptions are used frequently when one wants to convince others and that the individuals with dominating personalities initiate significantly more such interruptions than those without dominating personalities. James and Clarke (1993:243-244) hypothesize that a high proportion of dominance-related interruptions would occur in formal task settings, especially during the task-oriented segments of interaction, for the participants are seriously required to reach a collective decision, and that dominance-related or

competitive interruptions are less likely to occur in informal or casual conversations between friends, which is supported by Ferguson (1977) according to her study of conversation between friends.

Interruptions break off the turn-taking rules which are put forward by Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974) according to Orestrom (1983) and accepted widely, then they are naturally viewed as negative and dysfunctional acts. However, there is no firm evidence to indicate that interruption must constitute a dominance attempt. According to James and Clarke (1993: 239), Kalcik (1975) is one of the first to put forward this comment. He notes in a study that interruptions are frequently produced as women enjoy a topic or story together. Few interruptions are related to opposition, instead most of them are primarily supportive or collaborative in nature. Many other researchers also find that interruptions frequently have a supportive or cooperative function in conversation. For example, according to James and Clarke (1993: 239), Edelsky (1981) finds in his well-known study of faculty committee meetings that interruption is a signal of a high degree of involvement in conversation. Participants interrupt each other and talk simultaneously to develop an idea together, produce a joint answer to a question, and share funny things in joking. Similarly, Tannen (1983 and later works) proves that interruption can have a cooperative function, which is considered to be a way of indicating that one is interested in, enthusiastic about, and highly involved in the conversation (James and Clarke, 1993: 239).

James and Clarke (1993: 240) mention that many linguists, including Goldberg (1990), Bull and Mayer (1998), Tannen (1989), Testa (1998), Jefferson (1973), Coates (1989), Dindia (1987), Murray (1987) and so on, do find some instances of interruptions, in which the interrupters do not want to take the floor on purpose and also there is no clear support or agreement. In a word, these interruptions are neither clear cooperative, nor clear competitive. They are neutral cases of interruptions. Some interruptions are considered to be caused by a problem with the communicative process. They are neither associated with collaboration or rapport nor associated with negative or

disruption. For example, if the listener does not understand what the speaker said or does not catch the important word or information, the listener might break in to ask for a repetition or explanation; if A finds that B misunderstands A's question when B is answering, A might interrupt B in order to make the question more clear; and if it is an emergency situation that needs an immediate speech, such as the examples *Fire!*; *Don't touch that, it's hot!* from Tannen (1989) and Goldberg (1990) according to James and Clarke (1993: 240), the interruptions here are obviously appropriate. One further type of similar example is given by Testa (1988) according to James and Clarke (1993: 240): if A gets the points of B in the middle of B's explanation, it also might be appropriate and not disruptive for A to interrupt B and this point is in line with Jefferson's (1973). In some cases, a simultaneous talk is just caused by a mistake in judging whether the current speaker is ready to finish. James and Clarke (1993: 240) explain that Coates (1989) thinks this kind of mistiming error is likely to be caused by enthusiasm and that Dindia (1987) thinks it is caused by nervousness or awkwardness. However, it is still quite problematic whether or not such mistiming errors should be excluded from the count of interruptions.

There are no simple and objective ways to determining the functions of interruptions. As James and Clarke (1993: 247) have pointed out, there are no clear boundaries between cooperative interruptions and competitive interruptions. It is not a black-and-white matter but a matter of degree to distinguish negative, disruptive or competitive interruptions from "relationally neutral" ones (the term is created by Goldberg according to James and Clarke (1993: 240), and means that it can neither be identified as cooperative nor competitive). When interruptions are analyzed and identified, a large context should be taken into account, together with the general trend, the content or topic of the conversation, the place and time of the conversation, the relationship between the participants and the interrupter's conversational style and cultural background. James and Clarke (1993: 246) explain that Murray (1987) agrees with the above comments and holds the similar idea that there is no simple dividing line between cooperative and competitive interruptions because the identification will be

affected by various aspects of interaction. Anyway, according to the research and studies of many linguists, such as Berger, Rosenholtz and Zelditch (1980), it would be clear that the proportion of cooperative interruptions may be higher in informal and casual conversations, while the proportion of competitive interruptions may be higher in formal task settings and highest in conversations involving competition and conflict (James & Clarke, 1993).

2.4 Gender differences in use of interruptions

Men and women have different speech behaviors, including the use of interruptions, which have been studied by many linguists such as Graddol and Swann (1989) and Coates (2004). Actually some disagreements do exist. The studies are carried out in different situations and among different people. Furthermore, the disagreement on the definition and identification of interruption and a number of methodological problems may also lead to different results.

2.4.1 Gender differences in the frequency of interruptions

One widely cited finding within the language and gender literature is that men interrupt women more than women interrupt men. The study of Zimmerman and West (1975) indicates that in mixed-sex conversations men always infringe women's right to finish a turn and roughly grab the floor, while women are concerned not to violate the man's turn but to wait until he has finished speaking. Coates (2004:115) discusses that other researchers (e.g. Eakins, 1979; Leet-Pellegrini, 1980; Rosenbulum, 1986; Aries, 1987; Mulac et., 1988; Schick Case, 1988; Holmes, 1995; Gunnarsson, 1997) confirm the above comment and find that men are more likely to interrupt others, and men are also much more likely to interrupt women than women are to interrupt men. In line with the above linguists, Leet-Pellegrini (1980) finds that well-informed males talk more and infringe the other speaker's turn more, since they use a style of interaction based on power, not as well-informed females on solidarity and support (Coates, 2004:116). Some studies, like Ferguson's (1977), do not support this conclusion, and find no significant difference between men and women in the number

of interruptions used both in mixed-sex and same-sex conversations. For example, Ferguson (1977) finds no sex differences in the frequency of interruption in one of her studies (Beattie, 1983:125). The difference in the frequency of interruption may be partially caused by the definition and identification. There are disagreements on the mistiming-error simultaneous and silent interruptions (silent interruptions are excluded in the earlier studies (Beattie, 1983:124)). Beattie (1983:125) says that women are found to interrupt more and Zimmerman and West (1975) argue that in some cases, women can and do use interruption as frequently as men.

Some researchers, such as Kollock, Blumstein and Schwartz (1985), finds that the interruption is associated with social status and power (James and Clarke, 1993; Coates, 2004). It seems that more interruptions may be used by the speakers with power and high social status. However when it comes to gender, it is gender that overrides status, which is proved by West (1998b) and Woods (1989) respectively in their studies of doctor-patient interaction and the conversation between a woman with a high-status position in the workplace and her male subordinate (Coates, 2004:115). Winter (1993) also gets a similar finding in the study of two political interviews, one involving a male interviewer and the other a female interviewer (Coates, 2004:116).

2.4.2 Gender differences in the functions of interruptions

Interruption is interpreted by some linguists, as discussed in the following, as constituting an attempt to exercise power, to control the topic and dominate the conversation through grabbing and holding the floor. For example, Wishler and Waxler (1968) state that interruption is a person-control strategy; Octigan and Niederman (1979) observe that an interruption is viewed as a violation and a sign of conversational dominance; West (1984) states that the interrupter violates the current speaker's right to finish the utterance (James and Clarke, 1993:232). Given the preceding statements, it will not be surprising to suppose that men are more likely to take the floor from women and initiate more competitive interruptions directed against

women. However, no clear conclusions can be drawn from the existing research findings with certainty to support this hypothesis strongly and firmly. Few differences have been discovered comparatively and many research results are contradictory as discussed in the following: according to James and Clarke (1993:248-249), Dindia's (1987) finding can only partially support that more disruptive and competitive interruptions occur in all male conversations, and Smith-Lovin and Brody's (1976) study seems not to support that at all. Willis and Williams's (1976) results suggest that more disruptive and competitive interruptions may be against women than against men, but other results, such as Dindia's, do not support such a conclusion. Overall, the central problem, as mentioned above, is that there are no clear, simple and objective criteria to determine or identify whether the interruption is cooperative or competitive. A large context should be taken into account in detail.

Some evidence is provided by James and Clarke (1993:239) that women are more likely than men to use simultaneous talk to show involvement, rapport, interest and enthusiasm. For example, many studies, such as Tannen (1992) and Coates (2004), have found that women do more agreeing and showing of support; female listeners give more backchannel responses; women are more likely to express interest in others' opinions or feelings by using tag questions. Given these findings, one might hypothesize that women would be more likely than men to use supportive and cooperative interruptions. James and Clarke (1993:259) claim that the above hypothesis is confirmed by McLachlan (1991), who reports in a study that when dealing with a problem in which they are in an agreement as to the solution, female dyads produce more non-disruptive interruptions than male dyads do and that in all the three studies conducted in all-female groups by Kalcik (1975), Booth-Butterfield (1988), and Coates (1989) respectively, women are inclined to use interruptions to show interest and rapport. Moreover, more cooperative interruptions are produced by all female groups than all male groups to serve a positive socio-emotional function, indicating interest and enthusiasm, which will be the real case especially in high-involved style of conversations. This finding is considered by James and Clarke

(1993:259) to be one type of indirect evidence which suggests that interruptions may tend to be more common of the supportive, collaborative, or cooperative type in all female conversations than in all male conversations.

3. Analysis

When the primary material is analyzed, only video materials or only transcripts are not enough to identify interruptions in conversations, both of which are needed. Native speakers always speak quickly, and maybe some slang or some other words are not well known. Without the help of transcripts, it is almost impossible to understand every sentence or word, and without video materials, the gestures, facial expressions, body languages and some other signals could not be seen. Then it will be difficult to analyze and identify many unfinished sentences with “...” in the transcripts. It will be difficult to estimate what the unfinished sentences mean. Probably, the speakers just pause to rearrange their speeches or yield the floor by themselves, and also they may be interrupted and grabbed the current floor by others. Consequently, using video materials and transcripts simultaneously is necessary when the primary material is analyzed.

3.1 Primary material information

It is necessary to give more detailed information about the primary material randomly chosen from the American TV series *Friends* before carrying out the analysis, because some relevant cases may influence the characters' speech style and their use of interruption. The six protagonists are all young people roughly at the age of 28. All of them are close friends and there are other close relationships among them. Table 2 displays complete information about gender, occupation, relationship and important cases of the six main characters in the chosen episodes.

Table 2: Complete information about six main characters

Name	Gender	Occupation	Relationship and important cases
Ross Geller	Male	An enthusiastic paleontologist at a museum of Prehistoric History	He falls in love with Rachel in Season III Episode 1 after breaking up with Julie and his ex-wife Carol, who is a lesbian and his son's mother.
Chandler Bing	Male	An company employee	He is picky about his girlfriends and has broken up with many girls. He worries all day that he may be alone till death after an old picky neighbor died lonely and begins to be busy in having dates with girls.
Joey Tribbiani	Male	An amateur actor and salesman	He says he has had many girlfriends, but not in the chosen episodes in the present study.
Rachel Green	Female	No job at first, but becomes a waitress later	She is a fashion lady. She likes shopping but does not like work. She is Monica's good friend from high school, and falls in love with Monica's brother—Ross in Season III Episode 1.
Monica Geller	Female	A chef	She has had a date with several boys, but none of them becomes her boyfriend throughout the chosen episodes. She wants to have a baby through artificial fertilization in Season III Episode 3.
Phoebe Buffay	Female	An amateur singer	Nothing special happened to her in the chosen episodes except the meeting with her sister's boyfriend.

The six main characters live together or near each other. Monica and Phoebe live in Monica's apartment and Rachel moves in later. Joey and Chandler are their neighbors and Ross is Monica's brother. The six characters are very familiar with each other and always get together in Monica's apartment or Central Park (a cafe). All of them are kind and open-minded. Every one knows others' characteristics and speech styles.

They always get together and chat about or discuss almost everything, so they are high involved in the conversations among them. On some occasions, they just express what they want to say directly and freely, while on others, they will make a very careful speech in order to consider others' emotions. In the conversations between such close friends, their speech styles will display thoroughly. All the information about them will help to make the analysis comprehensible.

3.2 The identification of interruption

There is no agreement on the definition of interruption among linguists. Silent interruptions and mistiming errors may be or not be counted as interruptions in different studies. Beattie (1983) discusses that silent interruptions are excluded in the earlier studies, but according to Orestrom (1983), Ferguson (1977) views them as one of four types of interruptions. James and Clarke (1993) argue that mistiming errors may be excluded from the count of interruptions, but they, rather than backchannels, should be identified as interruptions. Whether all simultaneous talks are simply identified as interruptions has not achieved an agreement yet. Furthermore, the methodology may also lead to a different result. In the present study, the identification of interruption will be based on a certain criterion. The phenomenon of violating the current speaker's utterance right or deviating from the smooth speech-swift will be identified as one kind of interruption. No matter what function it is, the phenomenon can be identified as an interruption as long as the new speaker begins to speak before the current speaker wants to yield the floor. Silent interruptions and mistiming error interruptions will be included as interruptions. However, simultaneous talk will not be counted as interruption directly. Many factors will be taken into consideration. For example, the phenomenon of feedback, such as minimal responses and back-channels will not be regarded as interruption. The non-verbal interruptions are excluded. Moreover, only the interruptions which occur among six main characters will be considered and counted in the present study.

3.3 Hypothetical cases of interruption

According to Stenstrom (1994), an utterance can have more than one meaning. The literal meaning is the sum of the lexical and the syntactic meanings of the utterance isolation. The pragmatic meaning varies with the situational context in which the utterance occurs. Furthermore, the same utterance may be interpreted differently depending on the listener's emotion, speech style and cultural background. Sometimes it is really uncertain or ambiguous if one speech can be thought of as an interruption. In total, three hypothetical interruptions are found in the present study. Following are examples of hypothetical cases in the chosen episodes:

(1) **Ross:** *I'm divorced! I'm only 26 and I'm divorced!*

Joey: *Shut up!*

Chandler: *You must stop!* (Chandler hits what he is working on with a hammer and it collapses.)

(Friends Season I Episode 1)

In the above example, Joey and Chandler stop Ross by using direct words, but the intonation is soft. Ross is very depressed because he is just divorced with his lesbian ex-wife, Carol. He does not want to believe that he has divorced at such a young age. He says he is divorced in front of his two guy friends. From the video material, Ross just finishes one sentence, but it is unsure if he wants to continue his soliloquy. Maybe he just murmurs by himself, or maybe he is about to tell his friends and hopes that they will come to comfort him. If Ross just murmurs by himself to let off his depressed emotion and it is still not enough to make himself feel better, he will feel interrupted by his friends although their intonations are a little bit soft. If one is not allowed to take his bad mood out through shouting, crying, or murmuring, he or she may feel more depressed, even become insane sometimes. At that time, continuing murmuring is needed for Ross. From another angle, if Ross does not want to say anything more and just waits for his friends to comfort him, he will not feel

interrupted in spite that Joey and Chandler require him to stop talking by using direct words.

(2) **Joey:** *I can't believe what I'm hearing here.*

Phoebe: *(sings) I can't believe what I'm hearing here...*

Monica: *What? I-I said you had a-*

Phoebe: *(sings) What I said you had...*

Monica: *(to Phoebe) Would you stop?*

(Friends Season I Episode 1)

In example (2), Phoebe repeats Joey's words through singing after Joey finishes speaking. There is no simultaneous talk here. It depends on Phoebe's intention and Joey's interpretation if his right to speak is violated by Phoebe's singing. From the video, Phoebe's intention is not very clear and it is not known whether she begins to sing unconsciously or on purpose. Compared with her immediate singing before Monica could finish her utterance, it seems that the singing after Joey is more natural or unconscious. On the other hand, it is also not sure if Joey will mind Phoebe's singing. No hint shows whether Joey has finished his utterance. So it is really ambiguous. If Phoebe wants to disturb Joey's speaking right as she disturbs Monica, then the phenomenon of this example can be identified as an interruption. But if Phoebe sings unconsciously and Joey has finished his utterance and intends to yield the floor, then it may not be an interruption.

3.4 Clear cases of interruption

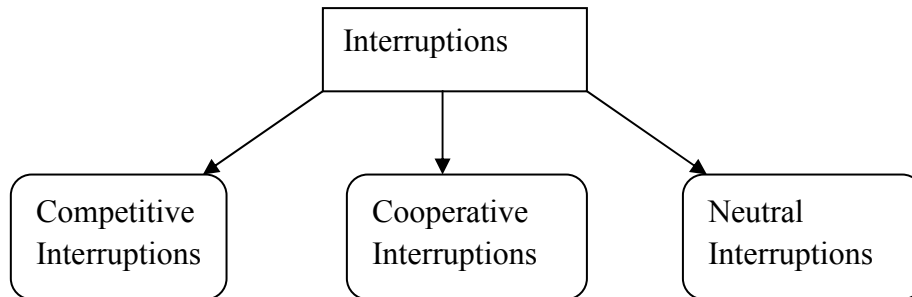
Although the definition and identification of interruptions are not consensual, there are clear cases to serve different functions. The criterion of identifying clear cases of interruption has been given in the previous section 3.2.

3.4.1 Functional categories of interruption

Based on the previous works discussed in 2.4.2, the clear cases of interruptions in the primary material are divided into three categories according to the functions. The

following diagram shows these functional categories clearly and Table 3 displays every interruption in more detail.

Diagram 1: Functional categories of interruption



From diagram 1, it is clear that the interruptions are divided into competitive interruptions, cooperative interruptions and neutral interruptions. These three functional categories will be analyzed in the present study.

Table 3: The functional categories of interruption among six speakers in detail

	Competitive interruptions	Cooperative interruptions	Neutral interruptions
S I E1	Joey—Chandler (M-M) Ross—Chandler(M-M) *C Monica—Phoebe (F-F) Phoebe—Monica (F-F)	Monica—Ross (F-M)	Rachel—Ross (F-M) Phoebe—Rachel (F-F)
S I E2	Rachel—Monica (F-F)	Rachel—Chandler (F-M) Monica—Ross (F-M)	
S I E3	Monica—Joey (F-M)	Phoebe—Ross (F-M) Monica—Ross (F-M) Monica—Rachel (F-F)	Monica—Phoebe (F-F) *C
S II E1		Ross—Rachel (M-F)*O Chandler—Ross (M-M)	
S II E2	Monica—Phoebe (F-F) Monica—Ross (F-M) *O	Joey—Ross (M-M)	
S II E3	Ross—Phoebe(M-F) *O Ross—Phoebe (M-F)	Monica—Joey (F-M)	
SIII E1	Chandler—Ross (M-M)		
SIII E2	Phoebe—Ross (F-M)*O Rachel—Ross (F-M)		Monica—Ross (F-M)
SIII E3	Ross—Monica (M-F)*O	Ross—Monica (M-F)*O Monica—Ross (F-M)*O	Chandler—Ross (M-M)
number	14	12	5

C means topic change; O means overlap; F-M means a female is interrupted by a male.

Table 3 shows every clear case of interruption in all episodes chosen and displays the function and the interrupter's gender in each case. In the present study, a topic changes in only two cases and overlap or simultaneous talk takes place in seven cases. Obviously, it is simplistic to identify the interruption according to the overlap or simultaneous talk. There are many cases without overlap in the present study. In fact, the overlap without interruption also exists as Tannen (1992) dicusses in her book. Many other factors should be taken into consideration.

3.4.1.1 Competitive interruptions

The competitive interruption is the most comprehensible one. Kollock, Blumstein and Schwartz (1985) suggest that a significant percentage of interruptions is associated with dominant and disruptive (James and Clarke, 1993). The fundamental characteristic of interruption is deviating from the smooth turn-taking. He or she may grab the floor and hog it to elaborate on the previous topic to control the direction or simply change the topic to dominate the conversation. If the interrupter intends to control the topic and dominate others, the interruption has a negative connotation, implying violation of another's right to speak. Such kind of interruption is considered to be dysfunctional, disruptive and competitive as shown in the following examples:

(3) **Ross:** *I just feel like someone reached down my throat, grabbed my small intestine, pulled it out of my mouth and tied it around my neck...*

Chandler: *Cookie?*

Monica: *(explaining to the others) Carol moved her stuff out today.*

(Friends Season I Episode 1)

Ross's lesbian ex-wife leaves him, so he is sad. He describes his bad feeling disgustingly. Chandler cannot endure anymore and interrupts Ross with a sudden topic change. Obviously, Chandler does not want Ross to continue his disgusting description and interrupts him to control the topic. It is competitive rather than supportive, because Chandler does not know what has happened to Ross at that time and it is impossible to change the topic in order to help Ross get out of the sad mood.

(4) **Monica:** *What? I-I said you had a-*

Phoebe: *(sings) What I said you had...*

Monica: *(to Phoebe) Would you stop?*

(Friends Season I Episode 1)

No sooner does Monica begin to speak than Phoebe sings. Monica is a little bit angry and stops Phoebe directly. Monica wants to hold the floor at that time and does not

allow others to disturb. She dominates the conversation, so the interruption in this example is competitive.

(5) **Rachel:** *Yeahh, but, but those really go better with pants. Maybe I should wear pants?*

Ross: *Yeah, pants, what, what an idea. Or better yet, um, how 'bout you go without any pants. Look, I don't know what you're trying to do to me, but just get your butt in there and pick out any shoes that fit your feet, okay. No, no I don't care if they match. I don't care if they make your ankles or your knees or your earlobes look fat. Okay.*

Rachel: *But I...*

Ross: *No, no, no just do it. Go in there and pick something out so we can go.*

(Friends Season III Episode 2)

All the friends invited by Ross are just about to go to a museum benefit, which will begin soon and there is only little time left for them to choose and change clothes. During this short time, many other unexpected things happen to them. These things are neither important nor urgent, but do prevent them from getting dressed. Ross is in a hurry, but Rachel is still racking her brain in choosing the color of shoes. She has not decided whether she should wear pants or not and keeps on asking for Phoebe's and Ross's suggestions. Ross tells Rachel angrily that he does not care what she wears, just urges her to be quick. Hardly does Rachel begin to explain when he interrupts her immediately, roughly and disruptively. He asks her to choose one randomly and then they can go at once. Ross does not permit Rachel to say anything more. He grabs the floor and controls the conversation competitively.

(6) **Monica:** *What?! Why? Why is this crazy? So this isn't the ideal way to something....*

Ross: *(interrupting her) Oh, it's not the ideal way...*

Monica: *Lips moving, still talking. I mean it may not be ideal, but I'm so ready. No, I-I-I see the way Ben looks at you. It makes me ache, you know?*

(Friends Season III Episode 3)

It is a typical example of competitive interruption initiated by Monica to Ross. Monica is somewhat emotional, and a little bit angry with Ross's interruption, although Ross's interruption is gentle and is not dominance-related. She wants to

continue and finish her explanation in order to convince his brother and other friends that she is sane and is not crazy to have a baby through artificial fertilization and raise the baby alone. According to James and Clarke (1993), Roger and Schumacher (1983) and Roger and Nesshoever (1987) find that dominant or competitive interruptions are used frequently when one wants to convince others. In this example, Monica stops Ross's statement, does not want to listen to his explanation, and violates Ross's right to speak. She grabs the floor back, and holds the floor. She wants to monopolize the floor to finish her utterance and control the conversation at that time. Her interruption is disruptive and competitive.

3.4.1.2 Cooperative interruptions

Many linguists, such as Edelsky (1981) and Coates (1989) have found that some people may use many simultaneous speech or interruption frequently to show their interest, enthusiasm, and high-involvement and to show that they are active listeners, enjoying a topic or trying to seek a joint solution to a problem. These interruptions are cooperative, supportive rather than disruptive and competitive (James and Clarke, 1993). The interruptions shown in the following examples can be seen as cooperative.

(7) **Rachel:** *Come on, they were not that huge.*

Chandler: *I'm tellin' you, she leaned back, I could see her brain.*

Monica: *How many perfectly fine women are you gonna reject over the most superficial (insignificant things)?*

Joey: *(Hold it hold it.) I gotta side with Chandler on this one. When I first moved to the city, I went out a couple of times with this girl, really hot, great kisser, but she had the biggest Adam's apple. It made me nuts.*

(Friends Season II Episode 3)

Chandler has just broken up with a girl. Others are high involved in commenting on Chandler, and Rachel and Monica think that he is picky. Joey begins to argue on Chandler's side before Monica finishes her question to Chandler. The simultaneous talk here just shows that Joey is interested in the topic and high-involved in it. He

wants to produce a shared view on Chandler's behavior rather than dominate others or control the topic. The interruption here is cooperative rather than disruptive and competitive as explained by Coates (1989) according to James and Clarke (1993).

(8) **Ross:** *Look, you can't do this Mon. All right, if you do this, I'm, I'm gonna, I'm, I'm gonna...*

Monica: *You're gonna what?*

(Friends Season III Episode 3)

Monica wants to give birth to a baby by herself through an artificial way and raise the baby by herself, but her brother Ross does not agree with her and wants to prevent her. Ross declares that if Monica insists on doing that, he will take some kind of measure. Monica is interested, curious and eager to know what Ross will do next, so she begins to ask when Ross is still ongoing his utterance. Here it is very clear that Monica is interested in what Ross will say and her simultaneous talk prompts conversation forward instead of intending to grab the floor or to dominate the conversation.

(9) **Monica:** *What?! Why? Why is this crazy? So this isn't the ideal way to something....*

Ross: *(interrupting her) Oh, it's not the ideal way...*

(Friends Season III Episode 3)

Monica thinks she can give birth to and raise a baby without a husband, but Ross does not agree with her and gives his viewpoint with an interruption. His intonation is very soft in this example. He does not intend to dominate or control the conversation, he just blurts out his viewpoint naturally and subconsciously. He wants to help Monica make clear that it is not realistic to have a baby without a marriage and her idea is not ideal. He is Monica's brother, he cares about her very much and does not wish Monica's life to be in trouble in the future because of a single-parent baby. He is eager to make Monica give up the baby plan, so he takes part in discussing the topic actively. Although it is a disagreement, it is very gentle. Ross just gives his opinion and tries to reach an agreement with Monica on this serious topic. His intonation indicates that he

just wants to develop an idea together with Monica, and does not want to hold the floor, monopolize the floor or control the topic.

(10) a. **Monica:** *Okay, umm-umm, I'll just--I'll be right back, I just gotta go ah, go ah...*

Ross: *A wandering?*

Monica: *Change! Okay, sit down. (Shows Paul in) Two seconds.*

(Friends Season I Episode 1)

b. **Rachel:** *I know I had it this morning, and I know I had it when I was in the kitchen with...*

Chandler: *...Dinah?*

Rachel: *(looks at the lasagne and realizes something) Ohhhhh, don't be mad...*

(Friends Season I Episode 2)

c. **Monica:** *Can I ask you guys a question? D'you ever think that Alan is maybe... sometimes...*

Ross: *What?*

Monica: *...I dunno, a little too Alan?*

(Friends Season I Episode 3)

The function of these three interruptions in example (10) is similar, so these cases are grouped together here. The next speaker begins to speak (shown with underlines) when the current speaker is wondering what to say next. Although the next speaker begins to speak before the current speaker has finished the utterance, he or she does not intend to grab the floor, but to help the current speaker continue his or her utterance. It is clear that the next speaker is an active listener; he or she is high-involved in the topic; and he or she supports the conversation rather than disrupts the turn taking. The next speaker has no intention of controlling the topic and dominating others. The function of the interruptions in this example is cooperative.

Increasing interruptions are found to be cooperative rather than disruptive. Kalcik (1975) is one of the first to put forward this comment according to James and Clarke (1993).

3.4.1.3 Neutral Interruptions

Some interruptions are neither clear competitive and nor clear cooperative, they are neutral, which is a *term* termed by Goldberg (James and Clarke, 1993:240). The following are some examples:

(11) **Phoebe:** *(sings) Raindrops on roses and rabbits and kittens, (Rachel and Monica turn to look at her.) bluebells and sleighbells and- something with mittens... La la la la...something and noodles with string. These are a few...*

Rachel: *I'm all better now.*

(Friends Season I Episode 1)

Rachel is depressed and crying because of her unfinished wedding ceremony and the unhappy conversation with her father. Phoebe sings in order to comfort her. Rachel interrupts Phoebe's singing with an excuse. Maybe she really feels better, or maybe she does not like Phoebe's singing. Anyway she stops Phoebe in an indirect way, but she does not intend to grab the floor and dominate the conversation and it is also clear that there is no support here.

(12) **Monica:** *(on phone) Uh, Michelle. Yeah, that was me, I-I dialed your number by mistake.*

Ross: *Just try to be...*

Monica: *(listens) Oh, you're so sweet. Yeah, we were a great couple. I know I really miss him. Well, you know how it is, it's that....*

(Friends Season III Episode 2)

Ross has invited all these friends to a museum benefit. There is no enough time left for them to change the clothes, but Monica is still immersing in the talking on the phone. Ross tries to urge her to be quick. In this example, he is not interested in or supports what Monica is saying, and does not want to grab the floor or to control the conversation. He just hopes Monica will be quicker. That is to say, the interruption here is neither cooperative nor competitive, it is neutral.

(13) **Chandler:** *Okay, well. Janice said 'Hi, do I look fat today?' And I, I looked at her....*

Ross: *Whoa, whoa, whoa. You looked at her. You never look. You just answer, it's just a reflex. Do I look fat? Nooo! Is she prettier than I am? Noo! Does size matter?*

(Friends Season III Episode 3)

This example is typical as a neutral interruption, as James and Clarke (1993: 240) cite Testa's (1988) argument that if A understands B's meaning in the middle of B's explanation, then A's interruption to B will not be considered to be disruptive, but appropriate. In this example, Chandler wonders why his girlfriend will be angry. When Chandler is describing the things that happened between he and his girlfriend, Ross gets the idea and begins to speak to give him suggestions before he finishes his description.

3.4.2 Gender differences in the use of interruptions

In total, there are thirty-one clear cases of interruption identified in the present study on the basis of the criterion given in the previous section 3.2. That is, the phenomenons of violating the current speaker's utterance right or deviating from the smooth speech-swift will be identified as interruptions. These are presented below in Table 4. Among the thirty-one cases, twenty-nine cases are initiated in mixed-sex conversations involving two or more participants while only two are initiated in all male speakers (one is in Season II Episode 1: Ross interrupts Chandler cooperatively and another is in Season III Episode 1: Ross interrupts Chandler competitively), but no cases are found in all female speakers in the chosen episodes of the present study. These thirty-one interruptions will be analyzed according to the functional categories in different genders. Table 4 displays the numbers of three functional categories of interruption used by male and female speakers in mixed-sex cases and same-sex cases.

Table 4: The number of interruptions in the perspective of function and gender

		Competitive interruption	Cooperative interruption	Neutral interruption	Total	
Male interrupter	M-M	3	2	1	6	19
	F-M	4	7	2	13	
Female interrupter	M-F	3	2	0	5	12
	F-F	4	1	2	7	
total		14	12	5	31	

F-M means a female is interrupted by a male.

As Table 4 shows, there are nineteen interruptions initiated by a male and twelve by a female. Among these thirty-one interruptions, women are interrupted in 20 cases based on the number of 13 (F-M) and 7 (F-F) and men are interrupted in 11 cases according to the number of 6 (M-M) and 5 (M-F). Among the nineteen interruptions initiated by men, thirteen cases are used to interrupt women. The number is much higher than that used to interrupt men. Interestingly, women are also more inclined to interrupt women than to interrupt men, although the incline is not distinct as men. According to these data, it is clear that men interrupt women more than women interrupt men and women are more likely to be interrupted than men. In more detail, both men and women are more inclined to interrupt women and both are more inclined to be interrupted by men. The result in the present study is in line with the previous works studied by Zimmerman and West (1975) and Coates (2004:115). Coates (2004:115) has also cited many other linguists' studies to support it, such as Holmes (1995), Gunnarsson (1997) and so on.

Table 5: The number of interruptions initiated between opposite-sex speakers and same-sex speakers.

	F-M	M-F	M-M	F-F	total
number	13	5	6	7	31

F-M means a female is interrupted by a male.

Table 5 shows that the interruptions are more initiated between opposite-sex speakers than between same-sex speakers. The former occurs in eighteen cases while the latter in only thirteen cases. The result is mainly caused by the interruptions initiated by men to women.

Table 5 also shows that men are interrupted by same-sex speakers in 6 cases and by opposite-sex speakers in 5 cases. The difference is not great. However, compared with that of men, women are interrupted by opposite-sex speakers almost twice as often than by same-sex speakers. The number of cases is 13 and 7 respectively. That is to say, men are inclined to be interrupted by same-sex speakers while women are inclined to be interrupted by opposite-sex speakers. In fact, this result is in line with the findings based on Table 4. That is, both men and women are more inclined to interrupt women and both are more inclined to be interrupted by men. Men may pursue competitive speech style, so they may be more likely to interrupt others (Coates, 2004).

3.4.2.1 Gender differences in the use of competitive interruptions

The previous works have discussed that men are usually regarded as superior and powerful by the society because of the long-established social culture (James and Clarke, 1993; Coates, 2004). They are in higher social status and attach more importance to power. They should display their masculinity and demonstrate that they are strong enough to be women's props. For this reason, men may be aggressive in verbal communication especially in public occasions. They want to get an upper hand in the conversation to show how powerful they are. They may be more inclined to grab the floor to show their dominance and power. By contrast, women are expected to be feminine and avoid speaking more and grabbing the floor especially in the conversation with men and in public, or they will be viewed as non-lady-like. From this perspective, it seems that men are more likely to take the floor from women and initiate more competitive interruptions direct against women. However, as shown in

the following Table 6, the distribution of competitive interruptions initiated in the present study does not display the same result.

Table 6: The distribution of competitive interruption initiated to opposite-sex speakers and same-sex speakers by males and females respectively

	Male		Female	
	M-M	F-M	M-F	F-F
Competitive interruptions	3	4	3	4
Total	7		7	
Total interruptions	19		12	
Percentage	$7/19*100\%=36.8\%$		$7/12*100\%=58.3\%$	

F-M means a female is interrupted by a male.

Based on Table 6, it is a little bit surprising to find that the number of the competitive interruptions initiated by male and female speakers is the same, and the number initiated between opposite-sex speakers and same-sex speakers is equal too. Men are interrupted competitively by males and females equally in number—it is 3 respectively. Women are almost the same, only the number becomes 4 respectively. With regard to the percentage of competitive cases in the total number of interruptions initiated by male and female speakers respectively, the percentage of females is even higher than that of males—58.3% to 36.8%. If the relationship between the main characters of the present study is taken into consideration, it is not difficult to find the reason why the result will be different from the expected same thing. They are long-time close friends. They live together or nearby and always chat or discuss things together. They are familiar with each other and need not care about social status and power among them. They are equal. They may communicate in the natural way, and need not modify their speech style. The men need not try to control the conversation to show their masculinity and the women need not care more about their behaviors to be elegant and gentle. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that the men may

become relaxed and do not want to struggle the upper hand among close friends while the women may be more competitive in conversation. Moreover, the conversational situation should not be neglected. Many conversations in the present study take place in Monica's apartment, where Rachel and Phoebe live too. According to Tannen's statement (1992), the home setting for males and females is different. For a female, home is her domain, while for a male, home is a place where he does not have to prove his power or impress others through aggressive verbal behavior. In this circumstance, it is reasonable to lead to such a result. In fact, according to James and Clarke (1993) no clear conclusions can be drawn from the existing research findings to strongly and firmly support that men use more competitive interruptions than women, so further study is needed in this field to give people a clearer picture.

From another angle, Table 6 shows that women are interrupted competitively in 8 cases while men in 6 cases. That is to say women are more likely to be interrupted competitively than men although both of them use such cases equally in number in the present study. The result is in accord with the finding in most studies, such as Zimmerman and West's (1975) and Coates' (2004).

3.4.2.2 Gender differences in the use of cooperative interruptions

Women are generally considered to use more cooperative interruptions because of their cooperative speech behaviors, which has been proved in the studies of Edelsky (1981) and Coates (1989) according to James and Clarke (1993:239). In the present study the distribution of the male and the female speakers' using of cooperative interruptions is displayed in the following table.

Table 7: The distribution of cooperative interruption initiated to opposite-sex speakers and same-sex speakers by males and females respectively

	Male		Female	
	M-M	F-M	M-F	F-F
Cooperative interruptions	2	7	2	1
Total	9		3	
Total interruptions	19		12	
Percentage	9/19*100%=47.4%		3/12*100%=25%	

F-M means a female is interrupted by a male.

Table 7 shows that nine cooperative interruptions are initiated by males and only three by females. With regard to the percentage, nine cases are cooperative among the total nineteen interruptions initiated by males. This percentage reaches up to 47.4%, which is much higher than that of females. Men are more inclined to use cooperative interruptions than women in the present study. The result is contradictory with the previous work that women generally tend to pursue cooperative conversation strategy and their interruptions are more to show interest, high-involvement, support and solidarity rather than disruption and dominance as discussed by James and Clarke (1993) and Coates (2004). In order to explain this comparatively special result, two reasons should be considered. One is the relationship of the speakers. Just as discussed in 3.4.2.1 in the present study, the six participants are close friends. They need not wear a mask before others, so men need not show power and women need not act as a gentlewomen and they can behave how they like. In this situation, their characteristics may display naturally and thoroughly. Depending on the story of the American TV series *Friends* chosen in the present study, almost all the conversations occur in private situations and the topics are mainly about private life such as gossip, love affairs, jokes and so on, so the conversations are fairly informal and casual. All the six participants, regardless of the gender, may be high involved in the conversations among them, and they may enjoy a topic, discuss together to solve a

problem, care about and comfort a friend when he or she is depressed or in trouble. During this process, both male and female speakers may do the same—they will interrupt others frequently to show their interest, concern, friendship and love. From this perspective, whether men or women will initiate more cooperative interruptions may have little to do with the gender and to some extent the result in the present study can be considered to be reasonable. Another reason, which is also the main reason leading to the current result, comes down to individuals rather than gender as Tannen (1992) claims that interruption is a matter of individuals. Among the nine cooperative interruptions initiated by men, seven cases are initiated by Ross and four out of seven are to his sister Monica. On the one hand, Ross adopts a more cooperative conversation strategy especially in the private and casual conversations. He is an active listener and always high involved in the conversations to help others continue their utterances as is shown in example (10) in the previous section of the present study. On the other hand, Monica is his sister. It is a matter of course that he will care more about Monica and pay more attention to what she says, so he may be more high-involved in her speaking.

Men are interrupted cooperatively in four cases, two by men and the same number by women. Women are much more inclined to be interrupted cooperatively than men in the present study. They are interrupted in eight cases, which are exactly twice as many as that of men. It is interesting that only one case is initiated by same-sex speaker among these eight cooperative interruptions. It is obvious that four cases are initiated by Ross to Monica as mentioned in the last paragraph. There is one more case used by Ross to Phoebe. Once again, this result is more caused by individuals rather than gender. Ross is a kind, supportive and cooperative man.

Another interesting finding in the present study is that both male and female speakers use more cooperative interruptions to opposite-sex speaker. This kind of phenomenon occurring among women is not obvious, and totally there are only three cases, two to opposite-sex speaker and one to same-sex speaker. Consequently, further studies are

needed in order to be able to discuss the result concerning women. However, the phenomenon of men is very distinct. Males initiate seven cases of interruption to opposite-sex speakers while only two to same-sex speakers. Among the seven cases to opposite-sex speakers, five cases are initiated by Ross, which has been discussed in the previous paragraph. So once more, the result has great to do with individuals rather than gender. From another side of this result, it is easy to find that much more cooperative interruptions occur between opposite-sex speakers than between same-sex speakers, and the cases occurring in opposite-sex speakers are three times as many as those in same-sex speakers. Maybe the speakers are more likely to support or more interested in what opposite-sex speakers say.

Previous works shows that men may use more interruptions than women, and men are more inclined to use competitive interruptions while women are more likely to use cooperative interruptions (James and Clarke,1993; Coates, 2004). The finding of the present study is not exactly the same. In this investigation, men are found to use more interruptions, but they use equal quantity of competitive interruptions with women and even use more cooperative interruptions than women. Besides speakers' relationships, conversational situations and individual characteristics, there might be many other factors leading to this result. For example, today many women have high social status, get higher positions in the workplace and so on. These factors need further study.

4. Conclusion

The present study is an investigation into a linguistic phenomenon in conversation— interruption. Totally there are three hypothetical cases and thirty-one clear cases of interruptions identified in the nine episodes randomly chosen from the American TV series *Friends*. The clear cases are analyzed based on the three functional categories— competitive interruption, cooperative interruption and neutral interruption.

The results in the present study demonstrate that the six main characters in *Friends* use competitive interruptions a little bit more than cooperative interruptions. Although the difference between two numbers is very slight, but the competitive interruptions do outnumber the cooperative interruptions, which confirms the wide accepted assumption that interruption is a way to show dominance and power as is discussed by Kollock, Blumstein and Schwartz (1985) according to James and Clarke (1993:243-244). From another angle of view, the numbers of competitive interruptions and cooperative interruptions are almost same, which is also plausible according to some linguists such as Berger, Rosenholtz and Zelditch (1980). They discuss that the proportion of cooperative interruptions may be higher and that of competitive interruptions may be lower in informal and casual conversations between friends (James and Clarke, 1993).

With regard to the gender difference, the present study shows that men initiate more interruptions than women; men interrupt women more than reverse; both men and women are more inclined to interrupt women and both of them are more inclined to be interrupted by men. The result is in line with the previous works. Moreover, another result interesting is found that the interruptions are more initiated between opposite-sex speakers than between same-sex speakers, which has not been seen in the previous work.

Based on the gender difference in the competitive interruptions, the present study shows that men and women use the equal numbers of competitive interruptions. The percentage of competitive cases in the total interruptions initiated by women is even higher than that of men—58.3% to 36.8% (see Table 6). The possible reason leading to this result is the conversational situation and the relationship among the six speakers focused on in this investigation. The main six characters are close friends and the most conversations take place in private situations, such as Monica's apartment. The conversations are informal and casual in such situations among close friends. Under such circumstances, men need not struggle for something and show the

power through dominating or competitive speech behavior, while women can speak freely and naturally without worrying about the judgments by others. Men may be relatively more supportive and cooperative and women may be more talkative and competitive.

In the aspect of gender difference in cooperative interruptions, an interesting result is found in the present study, that is, men initiate more such cases than women, which is contradictory with the previous findings in the studies of many other linguists, such as Edelsky (1981) and Coates (1989) according to James and Clarke (1993:239). Besides the reasons discussed in the above paragraph, another important one is the speech style of individuals rather than gender. As is analyzed in the previous sections of the present study, Ross initiates most cooperative interruptions to women. He pursues a more supportive and cooperative speech behavior and uses more cooperative interruptions to close-related speakers to show his interest, care and high-involvement.

Due to many factors, the result of this present investigation is quite limited. Besides the relationships, speech styles, social status, culture background of the speakers, conversational situations and topics, the quantity of the chosen primary material and the subjective identification may also have an influence on the result. However, the present investigation has its finding in the linguistic field—language and gender. The gender difference in the use of interruptions need further study involving more primary and secondary materials.

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