

New York Jewish Conversational Style

Deborah Tannen

A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry. (E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*)

Conversation, New York's biggest cottage industry, doesn't exist in San Francisco in the sense of sustained discourse and friendly contentiousness. (Edmund White, *States of Desire*)¹

Take, for example, the following conversation.²

F: How often does your acting group work?

M: Do you mean how often we rehearse or how often we perform.]

F:] Both.

M: [Laughs uneasily.]

F: Why are you laughing?

M: Because of the way you said that. It was like a bullet.

Is that why your marriage broke up?

F: What?

M: Because of your aggressiveness.

Of the many observations that could be made based on this interchange, I would like to focus on two: the general tendency to extrapolate personality from conversational style, and the specific attribution of aggressiveness to a speaker who uses fast pacing in conversation. In the discussion that follows, I will suggest that the stereotype of the 'pushy New York Jew' may result in part from discourse conventions practiced by some native New Yorkers of East European Jewish background. After examining some evidence for the existence of such a stereotype, I will (1) briefly present my notion of conversational style, (2) outline the linguistic and paralinguistic features that make up New York Jewish style and (3) demonstrate their use in cross-stylistic and co-stylistic interaction. In conclusion, I will (4) discuss the personal and social uses of conversational style.

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9.1 The Negative Stereotype

Evidence abounds of the negative stereotype of New York speech in general and New York Jewish speech in particular. The most widely recognized component of this speech is, of course, phonology. An Associated Press release (Boyer, 1979) reports on California therapists who help cure New York accents. One such therapist is quoted: 'It's really a drag listening to people from New York talk. It upsets me when I hear a New York accent. . . . We're here to offer a service to newcomers to this area, especially to New Yorkers. . . . When they open their mouths, they alienate everyone. We're here to help them adjust to life in Marin County.'

A third-grade teacher in Brooklyn wrote to Ann Landers complaining of native-born children who say, for example, 'Vot's the kvestion?', 'It's vorm ottside', and 'heppy as a boid'. Ann Landers advised the teacher, 'With consistent effort, bad speech habits can be unlearned. I hope you will have the patience to work with these students. It's a real challenge.'

Teachers in New York City have been rising to the challenge for a long time. Not so long ago one of the requirements for a license to teach in the New York City public schools was passing a speech exam, which entailed proving that one did not speak with the indigenous 'accent'. I myself recall being given a shockingly low midterm grade by a speech teacher in a Manhattan high school who promised that it would not be raised until I stopped 'dentalizing'. I am not aware of any other group whose members feel that their pronunciation is wrong, even when they are comfortably surrounded by others from the same group and have never lived anywhere else. Labov (1970) has documented the hypercorrection that results from the linguistic insecurity of middle-class Jewish New York women. I confronted this myself each time I recognized a fellow New Yorker in California by her or his accent. The most common response was, 'Oh is it THAT obvious?' or 'Gee, I thought I'd gotten rid of that'.

Unfortunately, moreover, evaluations of 'accent' are not applied merely to the speech itself but form the basis of personality judgments. In an attempt to evaluate the effect of Southern-accented speech on judgments of employability, Van Antwerp and Maxwell (1982) serendipitously tapped the negative valence of New York speech. One of their sample non-Southern speakers happened to be a woman from northern New Jersey whose speech approximated the dialect of New York City. Commentators from the Washington, D.C. area evaluated her employability negatively, attributing to her such characteristics as 'inability to articulate', 'disorganized and dull', 'seemed educated but not very together', 'a little too energetic, sort of in a hurry to get it over with', 'didn't seem to have things straight in her head before she spoke', 'sounded aggressive'. These findings demonstrate the possible consequences of negative evaluations based on speech style when cross-stylistic interaction takes place in 'gatekeeping' (Erickson, 1975) situations.

9.2 Background of the Study

My own findings on New York Jewish conversational style were in a way serendipitous as well. I had begun with the goal of discovering the features that made up the

styles of each participant in two-and-a-half hours of naturally occurring conversation at dinner on Thanksgiving 1978. Analysis revealed, however, that three of the participants, all natives of New York of East European Jewish background, shared many stylistic features which could be seen to have a positive effect when used with each other and a negative effect when used with the three others. Moreover, the evening's interaction was later characterized by three of the participants (independently) as 'New York Jewish' or 'New York'. Finally, whereas the tapes contained many examples of interchanges between two or three of the New Yorkers, it had no examples of talk among non-New Yorkers in which the New Yorkers did not participate. Thus, what began as a general study of conversational style ended by becoming an analysis of New York Jewish conversational style (Tannen, 1979).

The dinner at which this conversation was taped took place in the home of Kurt, a native New Yorker living in Oakland, California. The guests who were also New Yorkers living in California were Kurt's brother, Peter, and myself.³ The three other guests were Kurt's friend David, a native of Los Angeles of Irish, Scotch and English parents from Iowa and North Dakota; David's friend Chad, a native and resident of Los Angeles whose father was of Scotch/English extraction and whose mother was from New York, of Italian background; and Sally, born and raised in England, of a Jewish father and American mother.⁴ Complex as these ethnic backgrounds are, the group split into two when looked at on the basis of conversational style.

9.3 Theoretical Background

My notion of conversational style grows out of R. Lakoff's (1973; 1979) work on communicative style and Gumperz' (1977; 1982) on conversational inference. 'Style' is not something extra, added on like frosting on a cake. It is the stuff of which the linguistic cake is made: pitch, amplitude, intonation, voice quality, lexical and syntactic choice, rate of speech and turntaking, as well as what is said and how discourse cohesion is achieved. In other words, style refers to all the ways speakers encode meaning in language and convey how they intend their talk to be understood. Insofar as speakers from similar speech communities share such linguistic conventions, style is a social phenomenon. Insofar as speakers use particular features in particular combinations and in various settings, to that extent style is an individual phenomenon. (See Gumperz and Tannen, 1979, for a discussion of individual vs. social differences.)

Lakoff (1973) observes that speakers regularly avoid saying precisely what they mean in the interest of social goals which they pursue by adhering to one of three *rules of politeness*, later renamed *rules of rapport* (Lakoff, 1979). Each rule is associated with a communicative style growing out of habitual application of that rule:

1. Don't impose (distance)
2. Give options (deference)
3. Be friendly (camaraderie)

To illustrate (with my own examples), if a guest responds to an offer of something to drink by saying, 'No thank you; I'm not thirsty', s/he is applying R1. If s/he says, 'Oh,

I'll have whatever you're having', s/he is applying R2. If s/he marches into the kitchen, throws open the refrigerator, and says, 'I'm thirsty. Got any juice?' s/he is applying R3. Individuals differ with regard to which sense of politeness they tend to observe, and cultural differences are reflected by the tendency of members of a group to observe one or the other sense of politeness in conventionalized ways.

These differing senses of politeness are associated as well with two goals of indirectness: *defensiveness* and *rapport*. Defensiveness, associated with R1 'don't impose', is the desire to be able to renege, to say 'I never said that', or 'That's not what I meant'. Rapport, associated with R3 'be friendly', refers to the fine feeling of being 'on the same wave length' which accrues when one gets what one wants without asking for it or feels understood without having explained.

Another deeply related strand of research in sociology is brilliantly elaborated by Goffman, building on the work of Durkheim. Durkheim (1915) distinguishes between negative and positive religious rites. Negative rites are 'a system of abstentions' which prepares one for 'access to the positive cult'. Goffman (1967: 72–3) builds upon this dichotomy in his notion of *deference*, 'the appreciation an individual shows of another to that other, whether through avoidance rituals or presentational rituals'. Presentational rituals include 'salutations, invitations, compliments, and minor services. Through all of these the recipient is told that he is not an island unto himself and that others are, or seek to be, involved with him . . .'. Avoidance rituals 'lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient' (Goffman, 1967: 62) and include 'rules regarding privacy and separateness' (Goffman, 1967: 67). Following Lakoff and Goffman, Brown and Levinson (1978) refer to two overriding goals motivating linguistic forms of politeness: negative face, 'the want of every adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others', and positive face, 'the want of every adult member that his actions be desirable to at least some others'.

All these schemata for understanding human interaction recognize two basic but conflicting needs to be involved with others and to be left alone. Linguistic systems, like other cultural systems, represent conventionalized ways of honoring these needs. I would like to suggest that the conversational style of the New Yorkers at Thanksgiving dinner can be seen as conventionalized strategies serving the need for involvement, whereas the non-New York participants expected strategies serving the need for independence.

9.4 Features of New York Jewish Conversational Style

Following are the main features found in the talk of three of the six Thanksgiving celebrants. (More detailed discussion of these can be found in Tannen, 1979; 1980a; 1981; 1987.)

1. *Topic* (a) prefer personal topics, (b) shift topics abruptly, (c) introduce topics without hesitance, (d) persistence (if a new topic is not immediately picked up, reintroduce it, repeatedly if necessary).
2. *Genre* (a) tell more stories, (b) tell stories in rounds, (c) internal evaluation (Labov, 1972) is preferred over external (i.e., the point of a story is dramatized rather than lexicalized), (d) preferred point of a story is teller's emotional experience.

3. *Pacing* (a) faster rate of speech, (b) inter-turn pauses avoided (silence is evidence of lack of rapport), (c) faster turntaking, (d) cooperative overlap and participatory listenership.
4. *Expressive paralinguistics* (a) expressive phonology, (b) pitch and amplitude shifts, (c) marked voice quality, (d) strategic within-turn pauses.

All of these features were combined to create linguistic devices which enhanced conversational flow when used among the New Yorkers, but they had an obstructive effect on conversation with those who were not from New York. Comments by all participants upon listening to the tape indicated that they misunderstood the intentions of members of the other group.

Perhaps the most easily perceived and characteristic feature of this style is the fast rate of speech and tendency to overlap (speak simultaneously) and latch (Sacks' term for allowing no pause before turntaking). I have demonstrated at length elsewhere (Tannen, 1979; 1980) that overlap is used cooperatively by the New Yorkers, as a way of showing enthusiasm and interest, but it is interpreted by non-New Yorkers as just the opposite: evidence of lack of attention. The tendency to use fast pace and overlap often combines, moreover, with preference for personal topics, focusing attention on another in a personal way. Both the pacing and the personal focus can be seen repeatedly to cause Sally, Chad and David to become more hesitant in their speech as they respond in classic complementary schismogenetic fashion (Bateson, 1972). That is, the verbal devices used by one group cause speakers of the other group to react by intensifying the opposing behavior, and vice versa.

9.5 Cross-Stylistic Interchange

The following conversation illustrates how both Peter and I use fast pacing and personal focus to show interest in David's discourse, with the result that he feels 'caught off guard' and 'on the spot'. (This is only one of many such examples.) David, a professional sign interpreter, has been talking about American Sign Language.

- (1) D So: and this is the one that's Berkeley. This is the Berkeley . . . sign for . . . for
 [Christmas
- (2) T $\left[\begin{array}{l} p \\ f \end{array} \right. \text{Do you figure out those . . . those um correspondences?}$
 Or do? when you learn the signs, /does/ somebody tells you.
- (3) D Oh you mean [watching it? like
- (4) T [Cause I can imagine knowing that sign, . . . and not . . . figuring out that it had anything to do with the decorations.
-
- (5) D No. Y you know that it has to do with the decorations.
- (6) T [Cause somebody tells you? Or you figure] it out.
 D: [No]
- (7) D Oh. . . . You you talking about mé, or a deaf person.
- (8) T [Yeah.] [You. You.

- (9) D Me? uh: Someone tells me, usually. . . . But a lot of em I can tell. I mean they're obvious. . . . The better I get the more I can tell. The longer I do it the more I can tell what they're talking about.
- Without knowing what the sign is.]
- (10) T [Huh.] [That's interesting.]
- (11) P [But how do you learn a new sign.
-
- (12) D How do I learn a new sign?]
- (13) P [Yeah. I mean supposing, . . . Victor's talking and all of a sudden he uses a sign for Thanksgiving, and you've never seen it before.

My questions (2) (4) and (6) and Peter's questions (11) and (13) overlap or latch onto David's preceding comments. In contrast, David's comments follow our questions after 'normal' or even noticeable (5, 12) pauses.

My question (2) about how David learns about the symbolism behind signs not only is latched onto David's fading comment (1) but is spoken loudly and shifts the focus from a general discourse about signs to focus on David personally. The abrupt question catches him off guard, and he hesitates by rephrasing the question. I then interrupt David's rephrasing to supply more information (4), interpreting his hesitation as indication that I had been unclear. The real trouble, however, was the suddenness of my question and its shift from general to personal. Thus, I hoped to make David comfortable by acknowledging the fault had been mine and rectifying the matter by supplying more information right away, but the second interruption could only make him more uncomfortable; hence, the pause.

David answers my question (4) by commenting (5) 'You know that it has to do with the decorations', but he avoids the more personal focus of my question (2) about *how* he knows. I therefore become more specific (6) and again latch my question. David stalls again, this time by asking (7) for clarification. His question comes after a filler, a pause, a slight stutter: 'Oh. . . . You you talking about me . . .'. He expresses his surprise at the shift in focus. Yet again, I clarify in machine-gun fashion: (8) 'Yeah. You. You.' David then answers the question and my response (10) overlaps his answer.

Just as this interchange between David and me is settled, Peter uses precisely the strategy that I was using, with the same results. Latching onto David's answer (9), Peter asks another question focusing on David (11); David hesitates by rephrasing the question after a pause (12); Peter barely waits for the rephrasing to finish before he makes his question more specific (13).

The rhythm of this segment is most peculiar. Normally, a question-answer are seen as an 'adjacency pair' (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974), and in a smooth conversation they are rhythmically paired as well. The differences in David's pacing on the one hand and Peter's and mine on the other, however, create pauses between our questions and his delayed answers, so that the resultant rhythmic pairs are made up of an answer and the next question. This is typical of how stylistic differences obstruct conversational rhythm. While participants in this conversation were friends and disposed to think well of each other, the operation of such differences in other settings can leave participants with the conviction that the other was uncooperative or odd.

9.6 Co-stylistic Interchange

In the previous example, Peter and I directed similar questions to David, with unexpected results. The following segment shows how the same device serves to enhance conversational flow when used with each other. This segment begins when I turn to Peter suddenly and address a question to him.

- (1) T Do you réad?

- (2) P Do I l'réad?

- (3) T Do you read things just for fun?

- (4) P Yeah. . . . Right now I'm reading Norma Jean the T'ermite Queen.
 [Laughs]
- (5) T [W]hat's thát?. . . . Norma Jean like uh: Marilyn Mon'róe?
 f
- (6) P It's . . . |No:. It's a book about a housewife /?/?/
 dec
- (7) T Is it a [n]óvel or whát.
- (8) P |It's a |nóvel.
- (9) T |Yeah?
- (10) P Before that . . . I read the French Lieutenant's Woman?
 [Have you [read that?
- (11) T [Oh yeah? No. Who wrote that?
- (12) P John Fowles.
- (13) T Yeah I've heard that he's good.
- (14) P |Hé's a |gréat writer. |Í think he's one of the |bést writers.
 T: hm
- (15) T /?/?
- (16) P |Hé's |really good.
- (17) T /?/?

- (18) P But Í get very busy. [Yknow?
- (19) T [Yeah. I ? . . . hardly éver read.

- (20) P What I've been dòing is cutting down on my sléep.
- (21) T Oy! [sighs]
- (22) P [And I've been and I [s
 [K laughs]
- (23) T [Í do that tòò but it's
 painful.]
- (24) P [Yeah. Fi:ve, six hours a |n'ight, and]
- (25) T [Oh God, hòw can you
 dó it. You survive?

- (26) P Yeah late afternoon meetings are hard. . . . But outside of that I
T: mmm
can keep going [pretty well.
- (27) T [Not sleeping enough is terrible. . . . I'd much
rather not eat than not sleep.
p
[S laughs]
- (28) P I probably should not eat so much, it would . . it would uh . . . save a lot of
time.
- (29) T If I'm /like really/ busy I don't I don't I don't eat. I don't yeah I just don't
eat but [I
- (30) P [I ? I tend to spend a lot of time eating and
preparing and [/?/
- (31) T [Oh: I never prepare food. I eat whatever I can get my
hands on.]
- (32) P [Yeah.

This interchange exhibits many features of New York Jewish conversational style. In addition to the characteristic use of overlap, fast pacing and personal focus, it exhibits devices I have called (Tannen, 1979) persistence, mutual revelation and expressive paralinguistics.

Both Peter and I use overlap and latching in this segment: Peter's (22) (24) and (30) and my (19) (23) (25) (27) and (31). The interchange begins with a sudden focus of attention on him by my question (1). Like David, Peter is initially 'caught off guard', so he repeats the question after a pause. But then he not only answers the question but supplies specific information (4) about the book he is reading. A common feature of participatory listenership is seen in (5) and (6). While (6) is ostensibly an answer to my question (5), it is clear that Peter would have gone on to give that information in any case. He begins, 'It's . . .', has to stop in order to answer my question with 'No', and then repeats the beginning and continues, 'It's a book about a housewife'.

Persistence refers to the pattern by which speakers continue trying to say something despite lack of attention or interruption. In this example it can be seen in (22) and (24), in which Peter makes three attempts to say that he sleeps only five or six hours a night. Persistence is a necessary concomitant to overlap. It reflects a conversational economy in which it is not the business of a listener to make room for another speaker to speak. Rather, it is the business of the listener to show enthusiasm; the speaker, in this system, can be counted on to find room to speak. The conversational burden, in other words, is to serve the need for involvement at the risk of violating independence.

The mutual revelation device can be seen in the series of observations Peter and I make about our own habits. In (19) I state that I hardly ever read as a way of showing understanding of Peter's tight schedule (18). (23) is a similar response to his statement that he cuts down on sleep. (27) is a statement of my preference to balance his statement (26) about sleeping. In (28) Peter makes a statement about his eating habits; in (29) I describe mine; in (30) he reiterates his, and in (31) I reiterate mine. It might seem to some observers that we are not 'communicating' at all, since we both talk only about ourselves. But the juxtaposition of comments and the relationship of topics constitutes thematic cohesion and establishes rapport. In this system, the offer of personal

Peter's statements (1) and (3) flow in a continuous stream, ending with 'You can't do it. There's not time'. However the last phrase echoes my words in (2). The end of the talk is signaled by a quieting down of voices as well as the pattern of blended voices and phrases.

9.7 The Opacity of Style

To those unfamiliar with the workings of particular stylistic strategies, their use seems like evidence of lack of communication – which is simply to say they don't see how they work. More often than not the features used have meaning in the speech habits of the different group, so conclusions are drawn based on what the signals would mean if the hearer had used them. To those who do not expect overlap to be used cooperatively, and would not use it in that way themselves, another's overlap will be interpreted as lack of attention. Thus an article in *New West* magazine (Esterly, 1979) tells of the work of a UCLA psychologist, Gerald Goodman, who believes that fast talkers are a conversational menace. Calling them 'crowders', he eloquently articulates the effect they have on those unaccustomed to this style:

There's a dehumanizing aspect to being crowded; there's a lack of respect involved. Interrupting arises from a variety of factors – anxiety, a desire to dominate, boredom, the need to express freshly stimulated thoughts. . . . People walk away from conversations with crowders feeling upset or dissatisfied or incompetent, though they may not understand why. (p. 68)

Clearly, this is the interpretation of fast pacing made by David, Chad and Sally during Thanksgiving, at least at times. It is the feeling of being imposed upon, in violation of Brown and Levinson's (1978) negative politeness. However, the 'dehumanizing aspect', the vague feeling of dissatisfaction and incompetence, is not a response to others' use of specific linguistic features but rather to their use of such features in an unexpected way. It is the lack of sharedness of style that is disconcerting. Fast talkers walk away from those same conversations feeling similar discomfort, most likely having interpreted the slower pacing as a failure of positive politeness.

Style is often invisible. People tend to take their conversational habits as self-evident and draw conclusions not about others' linguistic devices but about their intentions or personalities. Moreover, few speakers are aware of ways in which others' linguistic behavior may be a reaction to their own.

9.8 The Coherence of Conversational Style

As Reisman (1974: 110) points out, 'The conventions which order speech interaction are meaningful not only in that they order and mediate verbal expression, but in that they participate in and express larger meanings in the society which uses them'. Becker (1979a: 18) explains, 'The figure a sentence makes is a strategy of interpretation' which 'helps the people it is used by understand and feel coherent in their worlds'. The

structure and habits of language which seem self-evidently natural, serve not only as a way to communicate meaning but also to reestablish and ratify one's way of being in the world. In another paper, Becker (1979b: 241) explains:

The universal source of language pathology is that people appear to say one thing and 'mean' another. It drives people mad (the closer it gets to home). An aesthetic response is quite simply the opposite of this pathology. . . . Schizophrenia, foreign language learning, and artistic expression in language all operate under the same set of linguistic variables – constraints on coherence, invention, intentionality, and reference. The difference is that in madness (and in the temporary madness of learning a new language or a new text) these constraints are misunderstood and often appear contradictory, while in an aesthetic response they are understood as a coherent integrated whole. . . . The integration of communication (art) is, hence, as essential to a sane community as clean air, good food, and, to cure errors, medicine.

The emotional/aesthetic experience of a perfectly tuned conversation is as ecstatic as an artistic experience. The satisfaction of having communicated successfully goes beyond the pleasure of being understood in the narrow sense. It is a ratification of one's place in the world and one's way of being human. It is, as Becker calls a well-performed shadow play, 'a vision of sanity'.

To some extent there is for everyone a discontinuity between the private code, i.e., communicative habits learned at home and on the block (or in the fields) around one's home, and the public code, i.e., the form of language used in formal settings. Hence the anxiety most people feel about communicating with strangers. But the degree of discontinuity may be greater or lesser. Those who learned and have reinforced at home norms of interaction which are relatively similar to those which are widely accepted in society at large have a certainty about their linguistic convictions. If they proclaim that it is rude to interrupt or that one ought to state the point of a story outright, it is without ambivalence. But those who have grown up hearing and using norms of interaction which differ significantly from more widely accepted ones may feel ambivalent about their own styles. Thus New Yorkers of Jewish background cannot complain 'Why don't you interrupt?'. On hearing a taperecording of a conversation they thoroughly enjoyed in the process, they often feel critical of themselves and slightly embarrassed. They, too, believe that it is rude to interrupt, to talk loudly, to talk too much. The 'interruption' may actually be the creation of the interlocutor who stopped when s/he was expected to continue talking over the overlap, but the cooperative overlapper is no more likely to realize this than the overlap-resistant speaker.

The greater the discontinuity between ingroup style and public expectations, the more difficult it is for one to feel sane in both worlds. Hence it is not surprising that many speakers reject one or the other style, and New York Jews who have moved away from New York may be heard to proclaim that they hate New York accents, hate to go back to New York or hate to go home, because 'no one listens to anyone else' or 'it's so loud' or 'people are so rude'. There are probably few speakers of this background who have not at times felt uncomfortable upon seeing through public eyes someone from their own background talking in a way that is attracting attention in an alien setting, just as American travelers may feel embarrassed on seeing another American tourist who fits too neatly the stereotype of the ugly American abroad. In contrast, the comfort of

interaction in a setting in which one's home style predominates goes far to explain what often appears as clannishness – the preference for the company of those of similar ethnic background. The coherence principles (to borrow a term from Becker) that create conversational style operate on every level of discourse and contribute to, at the same time that they grow out of, people's attempts to achieve coherence in the world.

9.9 Afterword on Accountability

Perhaps a word is in order on the validity of the case-study method. How generalizable are findings based on close observation and interviews with six speakers? The most reassuring confirmation is a phenomenon I have called 'the aha factor' (Tannen, 1979). When I explain these style differences in public or private forums, a cry of relief goes up from many of my hearers – especially from intermarried couples, of whom only one partner is Jewish and from New York City. They invariably report that these style differences have been the cause of complaints; the non-New York spouse chronically complains of being interrupted, not listened to, not given a chance to talk, while the New York-bred partner feels unjustly accused and in turn complains that the other partner is unaccountably withholding. If the family does not live in New York City, the misunderstanding often extends as well to children who complain that the New York parent does not listen to them and overreacts to their talk.

In a recent column in *The Washington Post*, Judith Martin, assuming the persona of an etiquette expert named Miss Manners, addressed the question of conversational norms. A disgruntled reader wrote to complain that she is 'a good listener', but 'there are so many people in this world who will just talk right over me. Sometimes I'm halfway into a sentence or an idea when they burst in with their own'. Miss Manners responded in the spirit of cooperative overlap and participatory listenership:

If you are, in fact, a practiced "good listener," you have not been traveling through life in silence. You have been asking questions, inserting relevant information and providing commentary on what the chief talkers to whom you have been listening are saying. A good listener is not someone who has to be checked every now and then by the speaker to see if he or she is awake. . . . Once in the driver's seat, you should try to be a good talker. That is to say, you must allow proper interruptions that are in the tradition of good listening, and even encourage them. . . .

Surprised to find such linguistic values articulated in the popular press, I contacted the writer and was not surprised to learn that Martin is Jewish.

This raises the question of the extent to which the linguistic conventions I have discussed are 'New York' and/or 'Jewish'. My hypothesis is that the style (i.e., the combination of linguistic devices used in the way described) I have discussed represents a prototype of a kind of conversation that is familiar to most New York Jews and unfamiliar to most midwestern and western Americans of non-Jewish background. My impression is that New Yorkers of non-Jewish background and Jews not from New York City use many of the devices I have described and that there are New York Jews who use few of them. I suspect that the existence of this style represents the influence of

conversational norms of East European Jewish immigrants and that similar norms are probably general to the Levant.⁵ I have not encountered evidence to indicate that Jews of German background necessarily share this style.

The precise distribution of these and related linguistic devices, like the distribution of dialect features, can only be determined by the painstaking research of many workers in many settings, if there turn out to be enough researchers who find this a thing worth doing. In any case, there is no doubt that the acquisition, maintenance and accommodation of conversational style is a crucial linguistic and social process.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Stephen Murray for this reference.
- 2 This conversation was reconstructed from memory. Others presented are transcribed from taperecordings. The following transcription conventions are used, as gleaned from Schenkein (1978) and from those developed at the University of California, Berkeley, by Gumperz and Chafe and their respective collaborators.

. . . half second pause. Each extra dot represents another half second of pause.

/ marks primary stress

\ marks secondary stress

underline indicates emphatic stress

| marks high pitch on word

┌ marks high pitch on phrase, continuing until punctuation

| marks low pitch on word

. sentence-final falling intonation

, clause-final intonation (more to come)

? yes/no question rising intonation

ʔ glottal stop

: lengthened vowel sound

p spoken softly (piano)

f spoken loudly (forte)

dec spoken slowly

/?/ inaudible segment

[Brackets connecting lines show overlapping speech.

[Two people talking at the same time.

Brackets with reversed flaps } indicate latching (no intraturn pause)

- 3 Thus I was both perpetrator and object of my analysis, making me not a participant observer (an observer who becomes a participant) but a participant who is also an observer. At the time of taping, I was in the habit of taping many interactions and had not decided to use this one, let alone what I would look for in analysis. Nonetheless there is a problem of objectivity which I have tried to correct for by painstaking review of the analysis with participants as well as others. I believe that the loss of objectivity is a disadvantage outweighed by the advantage of insight into what was going on which is impossible for a nonparticipant to recover, and that only by taping an event in which one is a natural participant can one gather data not distorted by the presence of an alien observer.
- 4 With the exception of my own, names have been changed. Now, as always, I want to express my gratitude to these friends who became my data, for their willingness and insight during taping

and later during playback. The transcripts will reflect initials of these pseudonyms, except for my own, which is rendered 'T' to avoid confusion with 'D' (David).

- 5 The use of cooperative overlap has been reported among American blacks, throughout the West Indies (see in particular Reisman, 1974), and the Middle and Near East.

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