

## **A Powerful Father: An Interview with a Greek-Australian Family**

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### **1 Introduction**

This paper aims to examine the powerful role of the father in a Greek-Australian family. The segments are taken from a study of family storytelling among three generations of Greek-Australian women. The women were involved in an interview conversation where the father and husband opted to participate. This uninvited participation and the forms of father participation are evidence of asymmetrical relations in male-female relationships. The aims of the analysis focus on demonstrating the various ways the father inserts his talk into the interview conversation.

My study contributes to the studies of family discourse and family talk as well as providing insight into the micro level working of family politics. An interesting study on the hierarchical aspects of family discourse was carried out by Ochs and Taylor (1992). Their results indicated the prominence of the father in storytelling sequences in dinnertime conversations. Specifically, Ochs and Taylor have identified the father as the primary recipient of the children's stories. They also discussed the role of the mothers in initiating the storytelling of the children as well as the unwillingness of the children to narrate stories. The father is also described as the family "panopticon", a control tower positioning which places everyone under surveillance. My study elaborates the aspect of hierarchy in families through an analytic presentation of the powerful conversational role of the father in the interview.

This study contributes to gender studies in discourse as well as to research on ethnic and more specifically Greek gender roles. Dubisch (1986) and Herzfeld (1991) have conducted cultural and sociological studies on gender asymmetries in Greek families. They have discussed the patriarchal character of the families and the silent role of women. Moreover, in the conversation analytic framework, Makri-Tsilipakou (1994a, 1994b) has examined disagreement, agreement and topic movement in male and female interactions and found significant differences. She found that men use face-threatening acts in their interactions whereas women use politeness strategies even in disagreement. Moreover, men use topic movement as a means of introducing opposition in the conversation whereas women use it to bring hostilities to an end (1994, p. 392). The presentation of the husband's contribution to the interview in this study will provide novel insight into Greek gender roles, through the scope of the unplanned interview. Although this analysis is based on single interaction, it forms an incentive for further research on Greek gender roles in interaction.

## **2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

### **2.1 Family discourse**

This study provides an insight into family relations by looking at family interaction. Family life is described as an object embedded in social activity. As Gubrium and Holstein contend, "the social world and its forms are made concrete and meaningful through everyday talk and interaction" (1990, 1993, p. 66). Family is "both discursively constituted and resisted in organisational context, making visible the substance and margins of family's 'organisational embeddedness' " (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, 1993, p. 67). In this way, the study of family talk will demonstrate aspects of family relationships in a Greek-Australian family.

### **2.2 Conversation analysis**

The analysis of the talk in the interview will employ concepts of conversation analysis, as introduced by Sacks and Jefferson (1995). Conversation analysis is a bottom up procedure that focuses on the study of human interaction through the study of naturally occurring conversation. Moreover, among the basic aims of conversation analysis is to examine "how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk, with a central focus being on how sequences of actions are being generated" or stated differently, the study of the "interactional organisation of social activities" (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998, p. 14).

Intrinsic in the methods of conversation analysis is a rejection of any judgements and a reliance on the data as revealed and evidenced within the interaction (Heritage, 1984, p. 243). In other words the analysis of data is done through the logic of induction without importing any preconceived notions or assumptions about the interaction.

Another essential element in conversation analysis is that the talk is sequentially organised, (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973, p. 296; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984, p.6; Have, 1999, p. 20-21). It has been found that a turn's talk is directed to a prior turn's talk unless special techniques are used to locate some other talk to which it is directed (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974, p. 728; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984, p. 7). Moreover, the producer of the next turn will display an analysis, understanding, or appreciation of the previous turn (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984, p. 8). The turn taking leads the interactants into understanding each other and communicating (Clayman and Maynard, 1995, p. 12; Heritage, 1984).

The notion of context in conversation analysis is built on the notion that every speaker's action is "context shaped and context renewing" (Heritage, 1984, p. 242; Goodwin and Heritage 1990, p. 289). A speaker's action is "context shaped" in that its contribution to an ongoing sequence of actions can only be understood with a reference to the context, as built up through prior talk. Moreover, it is "context renewing" in that the action in the particular context will contribute to the way a subsequent action is understood (Heritage, 1984, p. 242; Goodwin and Heritage 1990, p. 289). Heritage adds that context is incrementally built up or re-created during and through the interaction (Heritage, 1984).

For this analysis, I will be employing the concept of power which is not extensively studied in the conversation analytic literature. We will view power as an "emergent feature of oriented to discourse practices in given settings" (Hutchby, 1996, p. 482). Power is seen

in the "systematic organisation of features integral to discourse itself" (Watson, 1990, p. 280). By analysing the father's turns in relation to those of the women, we will examine asymmetrical relations between male and female members of the family.

### **3 INTERVIEW DESIGN**

The interview is part of a study which aims at studying relationships and storytelling in three generations of Greek-Australian women. The interviews had an open-ended form and were semi-structured, allowing for co-operation between interviewer and respondents (Fontana and Frey, 1994 as discussed in Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). My role as an interviewer was based on the notion of the "active interview" (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 1997) where "interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within respondents" (Manning, 1967 as discussed in Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.3).

My primary objective was to collect stories from the women in the family regarding their relation with their mother and father. The family was introduced to me by a mutual friend and we arranged an interview through a phone call. My husband came along to accompany the father while the interview took place, as arranged over the telephone. The aims were clearly explained to the whole family, and the mother, after some discussion with the father agreed to participate in the interview. The daughters also agreed to participate in the interview. Contrary to prior expectations, the father decided to remain in the interview. My husband, was the only participant who remained silent during the whole interview. The father's participation and arrangement with his wife aroused my interest and constitutes one of the reasons for writing this paper.

The interview involved a 40-year-old mother (M), the 40-year-old father (F), the 21-year-old daughter (D1), 20-year-old daughter (D2), the interviewer (I) and her husband. The language used in the transcripts studied is mainly English with very limited language shift to Greek. An analysis of language shift is beyond the scope of this paper.

### **4 ANALYSIS – FATHER TALK**

In the interview it was noticeable how the father persistently contributed to the conversation. It is significant to say that his talk was "uninvited" as the interview clearly aimed at the storytelling of the women in the Greek-Australian family. At the same time, the interview involved troubles telling and storytelling of personal experiences which the father did not share, and therefore he was not positioned on equal terms with the other participants. I intend to provide the details of his powerful contributions by analysing sequential aspects of talk in segments of the interview.

I observed that the father engaged in various activities during the conversation. I organised his actions into four categories, which are not strictly exclusive of one another, but can be dependent and inclusive of one another. The categories are: the father's a) defending his actions, b) arguing, threatening and preaching, c) changing topics and d) accusing his wife. I will examine the placement and design of his turns to show how he performs all the activities of defending, preaching, changing topics and accusing.

#### **4.1 Defending his actions**

In the first segment, D2 is narrating a story concerning her and her father.

1 D1<sup>1</sup>: Yeah, I remember once I was younger I think I was grade 6 (2.0)  
2 haha there was this boy I liked haha(.) and he liked me and I  
3 used to keep his poems you know things that you used to find in  
4 magazines and we used to send stuff to each other and I kept  
5 everything in return from him in a box and we were going to  
6 Kens on that week and I had it in my bag that I had packed not  
7 thinking that anyone's gonna find them (1.0) so I just kept in  
8 there (.)next thing I know is dad has found them  
9→ F: Oh, you were in the age of 12  
10 D2: Yeah I was grade six yeah I said that [do not worry]  
11 I: [Haha]  
12→ F: Oh, you did sorry hahaha  
13 D2: Yes dad had found the letters and on seeing these letters and I  
14 was a bit upset for dad seeing all these letters and poems ' oh  
15 my god what are you doing?' haha so hhhh excuse me so dad got a  
16 bit upset (2.0) haha and he started threatening me I'm not going  
17 to go to Kens because I did not tell him and I should be more  
18 careful and I started crying and dad felt sorry for me  
19→ F: But you were too young  
20 D2: Yeah and I stopped after that  
21 D1: Yeah I remember at high school when dad used to tell us to tie  
22 our hair up (2.0) haha every morning we used to have our hair  
23 tied up and our chests tucked in hahaha (3.0) so when dad used  
24 to leave we left our hair scranchy and around the waists we've  
25 got our jumpers haha then again when he came to pick us up  
26 . . . ((difficulty in hearing ))

D2 is about to reveal something concerning a problem with her father, where F puts the story on hold to remind the interviewer of her age (9). In fact, he is referred to in line 8, and that makes it difficult for him not to participate, as the story concerns his strictness. However, his utterance in line 9 is not a simple statement, or an additional element to the story but seems to be significant for his part in the story. He interrupts the story before D2 manages to complete it, to account for his behaviour as a presequence to an accusation (Atkinson and Drew, 1979). He is expecting to be accused and takes measures by accounting for it: she was young, that is why he acted in this way. D2 in the next turn reminds him that she has already mentioned how young she was, proving his insertion redundant. F acknowledges it and responds with laughter, as if realising that his insertion was intentional for his positive image, but redundant.

In the next lines, D2 (13-18) completes her story and F finds a chance to insert another comment (19). Again this comment is a repetition of his account as a way to emphasise the reason for his behaviour "she was young" and thus puts the blame on D2's youth (19). In that way, he is also interested in presenting a positive image of himself, a morally good father in front of the interviewer. D2 (20) seems to accept his account and agrees with his proposition that she was the one who was wrong as she was young and careless. By saying

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription conventions followed include: (.) A small untimed pause, usually less than a second; (0.5) a pause in tenths of a second; ( ) Presence of unclear fragment on the tape; . A stopping fall in tone; , A continuing intonation; (( )) Non verbal activity or transcriber's comments,- ~ Marking rising or falling intonation correspondingly, ' ' Speech enclosed in direct speech, **Under** Speaker's emphasis; **CAPITAL** Louder fragment in comparison to the rest of the sentence; ... This is not the end of the turn; [ ] Onset and end of overlapping talk; **She:::r** Prolonged sound; **a:Yes= b:=it** is Latching / no interval between utterances/Continuation of the same utterance; **Hahaha** Laughter

that she stopped after that, she clearly implies that she became wise, after this incident with her father.

In sum, we observed the father's powerful insertion of his accounts to provide a positive image of himself. This was done by interrupting the story and by repeating and thus stressing his defence to display this constructive fatherly figure.

## 4.2 Arguing, threatening and preaching

In the following sequences we notice the father's stringent and inflexible character which is met with equally strong arguments by his daughters, unlike the silent and passive behaviour of the mother.

- 27 M: oh very very different, no not like now, now the kids are much  
28 more developed mo:re  
29 D1: it depends  
30 M: well, it depends because their father [was strict  
31 D1: [dad is not bad] but there are o:thers!  
32 M: yeah, haha  
33→ F: we'll talk friends, if you wanna talk friends (.) I can go to  
34 the toilet or the other room  
35 D1: I'm sure you know what you're like dad, we don't have to tell you  
36 M: K was a bit strict with the girls yeah  
37→ F: well, I am, I am not embarrassed of it, I do what I do I do it  
38 for your own good (1.5) that's what I know I have to do that's  
39 what I'm doing  
40 D1: We're not complaining=  
41→ F: =Good(.)as you were the eldest didn't you have other experiences?  
42 M: what? wi::th  
43→ F: In housework

The example starts with the mother, talking about the difference between her strict upbringing and children nowadays (27-28). This is met with a sentence of equivocation by D1 which hints at the fact that maybe her father was strict too (29). At this point (30), M reveals for the first time and admits that F, her husband was indeed strict. In a way, she is trying to prevent a possible conflict and show a positive image of her family to the interviewer. D1, however, tries to correct any misunderstanding which might be heard as a charge against her father and explains that this was not directed at her father, he is "not bad" but there are others (31). However, her attempt to clarify her statement is not very strong as she is using "is not bad" instead of "is good" which offers some doubts about her father's strictness.

The responses to D1's statement differ in the mother's and the father's turns. The mother (32) hears or tries to hear it as a joke, possibly attempting to alleviate a potential argument between father and daughters. The father however, seems not to have accepted D1's correction and has heard her accusation. As a result, he utters a threat which is translated as "either you behave properly in my presence or I leave", which is a powerful move (33). In particular, he sets up a false offer to leave by putting the onus on the women to tell him to go knowing however, that they will not ask him to do that. D1 in the next turn defuses this threat and replies that he knows who he is whether she says it or not, inviting him in a way to admit his strictness. At this point again M tries to mediate any possible conflict and admits again that her husband has been "a bit" strict, this time downgrading his strictness. Then it is the father's turn to offer his defensive lines (37-39). In fact, he does not admit

that strictness is bad but argues that this is part of his fatherly responsibility. D1 in the next turn (40) attempts to correct her possible accusation "we are not complaining" but it is already too late. Her father (41) stops her with an acknowledgment token and changes the topic by addressing the mother.

The second conflict sees similar problematic behaviour between the father and one of the daughters.

- 50→ F: HAHAHAHA  
51 M: Does D3 have to say anything? ((her third daughter))  
52 D1: D3 is good so far  
53 M: D3!((calling her))  
54→ F: she doesn't untie her hair!  
55 D1: How do YOU know↑  
56→ F: I KNOW!  
57 D1: HAHA  
58→ F: I know. If she's going to leave her hair down she tells me  
59 D1: Hahaha you didn't know that did you?  
60→ F: no I didn't ↑  
61 D1: Haha  
62→ F: You're laughing now but where did it get you?  
63 D1: What's leaving your hair down has to do with going well at  
64 school?  
65→ F: Well, there you go (!) that's why you didn't go well!  
66 I: [Hahahaha]  
67→ F: [hahaha]  
68 D1: [they're excuses↑  
69→ F: Because your mind was somewhere else! Hahaha (5.0)  
70 I: Anything with your friends or teachers at school?

M asks whether her third daughter would like to participate in the interview after her other daughters have talked, and calls her (51), as she is in another room studying. Then D1 continues the topic about D3 and tries to offer a compliment for her sister: she is good so far at school. In the next line, F makes a comment apparently about D3 but said to D1 effectively. In fact, he directs a criticism and an accusation against D1 in line 54. D1 has revealed earlier in the interview that she had untied her hair without her father's permission at school. Later it was also revealed that D1 quit University, and started working which her father disapproved of. In other words, F is trying to link D1's failure in University with the untying of the hair.

As a response, D1 is powerfully challenging his knowledge (55) to which he replies with great confidence (56). We observe a game of power between the daughter and the father in their attempt at knowledge display in the conversation. D1 responds with laughter to make him suspicious of D3 and assert her own knowledge (61). F however, shows his complete trust and control he has over D3: He would know if she did, representing a strong provocation claim. Then D1 issues a challenge by attempting to rationalise and understand the link between the untying of the hair and her failure at school (62-63):

- 62→ F: You're laughing now but where did it get you?  
63 D1: What's leaving your hair down has to do with going well at  
64 school?

In the next turn, F clarifies his point: he suggests that this was the reason of her failure in her studies (65). D1 however, continues to disagree with him "they're excuses" thus accusing him that his dissatisfaction with her quitting University is the reason for this argument of his. This sequence causes extreme laughter by the interviewer as well as the father, which celebrate his victory in the argument. The father continues to explicate his point further by clearly suggesting now that "her mind was somewhere else". Having a clear knowledge of the Greek culture and its meanings, and taking into account the rest of the interview which is fraught with innuendos about the strictness of the father in his daughters' relationships with boys, this sentence constitutes a pejorative and highly depreciatory comment for D1 and clearly downgrades D1's image as a student. It suggests that by leaving her hair down, she was displaying an interest in being beautiful and in attracting boys rather than her studies. The sequence ends the sequence with extreme laughter full of irony and feeling of a victory.

In summary, the father has asserted his power by being involved in strong arguments with his daughters. In the first instance, he issues a threat towards D1 which might falsely be taken as a kind offer from his side to leave. However, it is a provocative statement, as he is very well aware that he will not be asked to leave. In the second instance, he criticises D1 about her quitting University and issues a derogatory comment about her qualities as a student.

### 4.3 Changing topics

We also observe the powerful way the father changes topics in the daughter's storytelling. He has also behaved in a similar way in his wife's storytelling. With his daughters, he introduces topics where he is not presented as faulty or problematic or inserts stories involving the mother. In line 72, he directs his topic into talking about a fairly delicate experience involving D1's embarrassment at school. This is done right after a sequence where he is constantly accused and is presented as having misunderstandings with his daughters (77). In that way, he diverts the direction of the conversation to other topics to show to the interviewer that the rest of the family makes mistakes as well.

- 71 D1: Yeah I remember at high school when dad used to tell us to tie our hair up (2.0) haha every morning we used to have our hair tied up and our chests tucked in hahaha (3.0) so when dad used to leave we left our hair scranchy and around the waists we've got our jumpers haha then again when he came to pick us up...  
(difficulty in hearing )
- 72→ F: What about when you had a D in year 10?
- 73 D1: When I got a D? that was year 9 and I felt embarrassed in front  
74 of my school! (2.0)
- 75 I: What's that?
- 76 D1: I got D for maths and that was actually my worst result as a  
77 whole and it was first semester 2 and I had used the excuse I did . . .

A similar effect is achieved, when he overtly attempts to divert the topic into talking about his daughters' problems with the mother (79). He is inserting himself between respondent and interviewer, thus assuming the role of the interviewer:

- 78 D1: . . . He was a bit disappointed when I told him I was going to quit the Uni..haha I think he was stressed about what I was going to do after that and he was stressed about the job as

well but they got over it as well  
79→ F: Say some things about your mother!  
80 I: No no no daughter  
81 D1: No everything as a daughter that's right!  
82 I: No no daughter thinks of a father and a mother!  
83 D2: Mum says things we say and you go and tell dad!

Again, he diverts the attention from him being the problematic person in the family. However, the interviewer in line 80 disagrees with him and makes clear that the interview should involve experiences as a daughter irrespective of whether they involve the father of the mother. D1 confirms and agrees with the interviewer's correction while the interviewer reasserts the sentence (82). However, D2 decides to follow the topic her father has suggested (83). This has the effect of balancing the situation between the father and the mother in the talk.

#### 4.4 Accusing the mother

Finally, there are some segments where the father is seen to align with his daughters in accusing his wife. In the segment below, the daughters are accusing their mother of being too detailed and demanding in the house cleaning (84) and F adds his open agreement with them. Then M appeals to her husband to rescue her from this accusation (86). Instead, F seems to take no responsibility and clearly refuses to support her. In that way, he agrees with the accusation put by the daughters, which helps them continue with their complaints (88-89).

84 D1: And she does that in cleaning too!  
85→ F: oh, yeah!  
86 M: Sometimes I let them F come on!  
87→ F: Here are the witnesses!  
88 D1: Then we ask you for help and you yell 'NO! DON'T DO IT LIKE  
89 THAT

In the second segment, the daughters are talking about their cooking and attribute their talent to the father's instructions. F at this point who is mentioned in line 90 accuses the mother of cooking like her grandmother without any creativity (92). D1, downplaying the accusations made by her father provides an account for her mother: she naturally cooks like her mother since she is the one who taught her how to cook. This does not seem to take effect as D2 continues with a story accusing the mother of her insistence in her own way of cooking (94-97).

90 D1: We use our own recipes (2.0) I remember dad told us 'use your  
91 imagination! Be creative!(.) even when you cook'!  
92→ F: Like mum cooks like her grandmother used to cook!  
93 D1: How your mother taught you that's it!  
94 D2: Just before you arrive, I was making er bread and I had it in  
95 the dish I was going to put it in the oven and I was waiting  
96 for it to (.) settle..  
97 M: You said 'it did not rise' I told you 'put some more yeast'  
(.) but you put it as the cookbook said. If you make it like  
the cookbook it will not rise the one you made should have two  
spoonfuls of yeast and you put one it won't rise after that,  
will it? You didn't put any yeast! Hahaha



## 5 CONCLUSION

I have described various ways in which the male participant has contributed in an interview aimed at women's storytelling. The father, although not invited to the talk, seemed to be an active participant and was involved in various activities. Moreover, his contribution was different from everyone else's as he did not share any personal experiences of his own and took the position of a critic of what the women were saying. At the same time we observed ways that he inserted his power in the conversation either by directing the topic, or by accusing and blaming the mother, other times by threatening and arguing with his daughters, or accounting for his actions.

The analysis has offered an understanding of the father's position in a patriarchal family. His persistent interruptions and contributions are indicative of a dominant figure of the father and husband in the Greek-Australian family. Moreover, he resembles the family "panopticon" description of father in the study by Ochs and Taylor (1992).

In this paper, I have drawn on the idea that these four people, in the interview show their family in action (Gubrium and Holstein, 1993). They are "doing family" presumably but not necessarily their everyday version of their family - but within the interview. It just happened that the father chose not to leave the interview and in staying he performed his identity as a father. His identity is displayed by arguing with his daughters, criticising them, directing the conversation. In that way, the storytelling interview turns to be a display of family, not only talk about it. Although this paper draws on a single instance of family storytelling, I hope it constitutes an incentive for research concerning gender roles in Greek-Australian families.

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