

Tonya Kaushik

ESL 5302

October 20, 2011

Dr. Doina Kovalik

## Literature review

Studying dinner table conversations is a useful way for sociolinguists to examine the ways participants organize their social practices and their conversations. In their classic 1974 study, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson found that people are naturally inclined to take turns during casual conversations such as those held during a family meal. Participants are aware that there are only certain times when another speaker can take over the floor, such as at the end of a clause or a phrase, or when the current speaker pauses, slows down, or draws out words (Johnstone 2008, Wardhaugh 2006). There are also unspoken rules for who is allowed to speak and when. The current speaker can choose the next speaker by addressing a person directly or through a nonverbal cue such as a steady gaze. Alternatively, participants in a conversation can self-select by simply beginning to speak (Wardhaugh 2010).

There are some situations, however, where the participants in a conversation are in an asymmetric power relationship, such as in a family. Many cultures place the husband in the role of head of the family, with his wife and any children subordinate to him (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). This power relationship affects who has the right to speak during conversations. Children learn from an early age the practice of turn taking and the expectation that a response is required when they are asked a question, and they also learn from their families when they are permitted to speak (Bonvillain 2000). In other words, the rules of conversation are largely determined by the roles of the participants and their relationships to one another (Mondada 2009). These relationships can be reinforced through the seating arrangements during meal times. In many cultures, dinners are held around rectangular tables with the father or head of the household given the place of honor at the head of the table (Perianova 2011). This position reinforces his role as the overseer of the family and the ultimate authority during conversations.

In addition to varying among cultures, dinner table conversations vary among social classes. Bonvillain (2000) draws on earlier research by Milroy and Milroy when describing working class and middle class communities. The working classes feature more close-knit networks, “whereas weak social networks, characterized by greater geographic mobility, looser kinship ties, and relationships with a wider range of people, predominate among the middle classes” (Bonvillain 2000, p. 136). The professions of members of different classes affect topics of conversation at dinner, as well as the type of language used. Classic studies by Labov in the 1960s and Trudgill in the 1970s found that in addition to being separated by socio-economic factors, members of different classes have distinct speech patterns that are often used to build solidarity among members of the same class (Bonvillain 2000, Wardhaugh 2010). The dinner table conversations presented in this report demonstrate some, but not all, of these class- and culture-based differences.

### Method

For this report, I selected four video clips from three different sources. The selections reflect two different social classes, as well as two different situations: a formal meal with a guest or guests present and an informal meal where only family members are present. Two video clips are from the 2002 television series *Firefly*, a science-fiction western set 500 years in the future. The third clip is from the current television series *Blue Bloods*, a drama about a family of police officers. The final clip is from the 1972 movie *The Heartbreak Kid*, a comedy about a newlywed man falling in love with another woman while on his honeymoon. I viewed each of the video clips multiple times, making notes about the topics of conversation, the apparent rules of turn taking, and the roles each of the participants played. Finally, I briefly analyzed what I found based on the literature reviewed above.

## Data Analysis

The television series *Firefly* combined elements of science-fiction and old-fashioned Westerns, focusing on the adventures of a band of lower class outlaws living in a future where space travel and colonization are routine. The action of the series takes place primarily on a “firefly class” spaceship named *Serenity* several years after a failed rebellion against the American-Chinese Alliance that has dominated the universe. Two of the main characters in the show are veterans of the losing side of that war: Captain Malcolm Reynolds and his second-in-command, Zoe. Other characters include Zoe’s husband, the pilot Wash; a male mercenary with an unlikely first name, Jayne; and Kaylee, the ship’s female mechanic. The first clip I selected from *Firefly* shows the first meal shared among the members of the crew listed above and their new passengers: Dr. Simon Tam; Shepherd Book, a priest; and an unnamed man.

It is apparent that Mal is accepted as the “father” of the family, partly because of his position as captain (and his seating position at the head of the table) and partly because of his personality. He remains outside the conversation and even reprimands Jayne for making a rude remark, sending him away from the table. Since not all of the participants know each other, there are attempts at small talk and longer pauses between turns as the crew members try to learn more about their passengers and make them feel comfortable at the dinner table. There are few overlaps or interruptions.

Even though they are considered lower-class outlaws, the topics of conversation the crew members engage in are civil and focus mainly on the newcomers’ occupations and the food they are eating. Shepherd Book brought fresh produce from his monastery that he willingly shared, which received high praise. Kaylee complimented Dr. Tam on becoming a physician at such a young age, which led to Jayne making the inappropriate comment mentioned above. Overall, the

dinner table conversation seems typical of how a family would act when sharing their meal with guests: overly polite, relatively quiet, and very complimentary.

I found a similar situation in the clip from *The Heartbreak Kid*. In the dinner conversation from this movie, Lenny Cantrow is dining with Kelly Corcoran and her parents at their home. The scene is very formal and typically upper class. The meal takes place in a formal dining room, and a servant brings in and serves the food. Mr. Corcoran is silent throughout the scene, but his wife makes small talk with Lenny, who replies with overly complimentary remarks about the meal. In this example, it is the guest who is trying to make himself feel a part of the family rather than the family trying to accommodate the guests, as in the example from *Firefly*. I think the main reason for this is that Lenny is trying to get permission to date Kelly and earn Mr. Corcoran's respect. In *Firefly*, the guests were paying passengers. The status differences affected the conversation participants' speech acts as well. Both Lenny and the crew members from *Firefly* wanted to be accepted by members of slightly higher classes: Lenny faced the wealthy Corcorans, while the lower class crew members shared a meal with a doctor and a priest, two professions that are generally held in high esteem.

In my opinion, the families' reactions to having a guest or guests for dinner were similar across cultural and social boundaries. All the participants – with the exceptions of Jayne in *Firefly* and Mr. Corcoran and *The Heartbreak Kid* – worked to make the others comfortable and included in the dinner table conversation. However, when my sample lower class and sample upper-middle class families dined alone without guests, there was a marked difference in how they interacted with each other. In the selection from *Firefly*, the crew and their passengers are laughing boisterously and sharing jokes during a meal that slowly changes into a surprise birthday party for Dr. Tam. There is a great deal of conversational overlapping as the participants encourage the narrator of the funny story to continue. There is a general party

atmosphere which is only interrupted by an explosion in the ship. It is clear from the conversation, however, that the formal roles that were in place in the first sample from *Firefly* are no longer necessary since the crew and passengers are now all friends. Even Mal has loosened up and enjoys himself, even though he retains his position at the head of the table. Their actions at this meal are stereotypically lower class: Almost everyone is drinking alcohol, and the jokes and laughter seem louder than necessary.

The Sunday dinner scene from *Blue Bloods* is also stereotypical, but in this example, the family is upper-middle class and meal time is quiet and calm, even though one of the sons has been publicly reprimanded for something he did at work. The father of this family, Frank Reagan, is the police commissioner for New York City. He sits at the head of a long dining table, opposite his father, Henry, who had also served as police commissioner. They are joined by Frank's sons and daughter and their families. Danny is a police detective who is accompanied by his wife and his two sons. Jamie, the younger brother, recently graduated from Harvard Law School but decided to become a police officer like the other men in the family. Their sister, Erin, is an assistant district attorney and single mother, a teenage daughter. Needless to say, the topics of conversation at the Reagan dinner table tend to center around police work and investigations.

In the clip I chose as an example of an upper class dinner conversation, the topic of conversation centers around Danny entering a bank after a robbery to try to end the hostage situation. During the meal, Danny's grandfather, father, sister and brother all weigh in on the situation; the general agreement is that Danny acted inappropriately even though his actions were considered by some to be heroic. The interesting thing about this scene, however, is the reaction Danny's wife has. In other episodes, she has sat beside her husband, but in this clip, she is

seated across from him. The two share meaningful glances, and the scene ends with Danny's wife leaving the table in frustration.

Despite the family's concern, there are no overlaps and no interruptions. Each speaker waits until the previous speaker has finished before joining the conversation. The pauses are longer than in the *Firefly* example without guests, which may be characteristic of the difference between an upper class and a lower class conversation. There is no overly loud laughter; all the family members, even the children, speak in quiet, even tones and remain calm and polite regardless of their feelings about Danny's actions at work.

### Conclusion

Class seems to be a greater factor in informal family conversations than in formal dinner conversations where a family has to interact with a guest or guests. In the examples I selected, the formal dinner table conversations were marked by politeness and compliments in both the lower class example from *Firefly* and the upper class example from *The Heartbreak Kid*. The father in the latter clip did not say a single word during the conversation, which implies that he is above the family or wants to keep himself distant. In the lower class example, Mal, the father figure, behaved in a similar manner, only entering the conversation to enforce his rules of what is acceptable at the dinner table. The informal examples, however, showed more of a difference between the classes. The party atmosphere of the lower class example is in direct contrast to the more subdued familial atmosphere in *Blue Bloods*. This difference may be attributed to occupation, since the "family" in *Firefly* is made up of outlaws and the family in *Blue Bloods* are police officers and attorneys.

## References

- Bonvillain, N. (2000). *Language, culture, and communication: The meaning of messages*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003). *Language and gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Green, R. (Writer), & Hemecker, R. (Director). (2011). Critical condition [Television series episode]. In Goldberg, L. (Producer), *Blue Bloods*. Los Angeles, CA: CBS.
- Johnstone, B. (2008). *Discourse Analysis*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Mondada, L. (2009). The methodical organization of talking and eating: Assessments in dinner conversations. *Food Quality and Preference*, doi: 10.1016/j.foodqual.2009.3.006
- Perianova, I. (2011). Interacting through food: Food discourse as politeness. *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, 3(8), 248-255.
- Sherick, E. (Producer), & May, E. (Director). (1972). *The Heartbreak Kid* [Motion picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Whedon, J. (Writer), & Whedon, J. (Director). (2002). Pilot [Television series episode]. In J. Whedon (Producer), *Firefly*. Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Whedon, J. (Writer), & Whedon, J. (Director). (2002). Out of gas [Television series episode]. In J. Whedon (Producer), *Firefly*. Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox.