

## **Contents**

- 2. Aim and Introduction**
- 3. Methodology**
- 4. Hypothesis**
- 5. Results**
- 6. Analysis:**
  - 7. -Conversation 1**
  - 8. -Conversation 2**
  - 9. -Conversation 3**
  - 10. -Conversation 4**
  - 11. -Conversation 5**
  - 12. -Conversation 6**
- 13. Further analysis (conversation type)**
- 16. Conclusion**
- 17. Appendix**

**Aim**

I aim to investigate the different ways in which my mother enforces power and control in conversations depending on the person she is speaking to, and/or the context in which she is speaking.

**Introduction**

Enforcing power is an important skill when attempting to gain control of, or mitigate, a conversation. Last year, I learned about the theory of power in ENB2 and noticed how well it could be applied to real life conversations. I noticed this mostly when hearing my mother speaking on the telephone to, for example, double-glazing companies and to her friends in such a notably different tone and style. I then wondered whether the theory of power I learned in ENB2 could actually be applied to these differences, help explain the differing tone, and aid in analysing the differences between the language my mother uses with different people in different situations and different types of conversations.

My mother's personality is a notably powerful one, and I have observed that she feels uncomfortable when not in control of a conversation. I feel, therefore, as though analysing her use of power will provide substantial findings. I will focus on the ways my mother uses power in different spoken conversations with different people. The frameworks I will be using in my analysis are lexis, discourse and phonology.

## **Methodology**

### Design

My investigation will take the form of analysis of voice-recorded data, transcribed for ease of statistical analysis. With the aid of charts and graphs, I will analyse the comparisons between conversations with different people and outline and explain any patterns in this.

### Participants

I will be recording primarily my mother, along with any person(s) she is speaking to face-to-face. Although I understand the disadvantages of this and how it may limit my data, I will also be recording telephone calls, as although the response of the other participant is unknown, this is the context in which I have noticed my mother using speech techniques most.

### Apparatus and materials

I will be recording the conversations with a Dictaphone. I will use covert and overt non-participant observation techniques to acquire my data. The disadvantage of overt recordings is that the conversation may be unnatural. Some conversations will be recorded covertly (my mother has given me permission to record and analyse her speech) for more reliable results.

### Procedure

Recording speech with a Dictaphone is simple, however I will also need to develop a method of covert recordings. I will then use the data recorded on the Dictaphone to create transcriptions, and will retain the data on the Dictaphone in order to analyse the conversations phonetically.

## **Hypothesis**

I predict to find that, due to my mother's personality, she will enforce power and attempt to take control of the majority of conversations.

I predict that the main ways she will take control will be quantity of speech, interruptions, high level of formality and accommodation theories, with upward divergence used to gain power, and convergence used to mitigate. It must be noted that although they may also be important, features such as sarcasm will be awkward to identify and in some situations unavoidably overlooked.

A major way she may try to gain control of a conversation rather than just power is by the use of questions and long speech utterances (quantity) to gain topic control. I feel that when talking to children she will enforce power by restricting slang and elision, and outlining the adult-child relationship, however not to such an extent that her tone would become formal. I also feel that she will limit interruptions when speaking informally, to be polite and avoid being offensive.

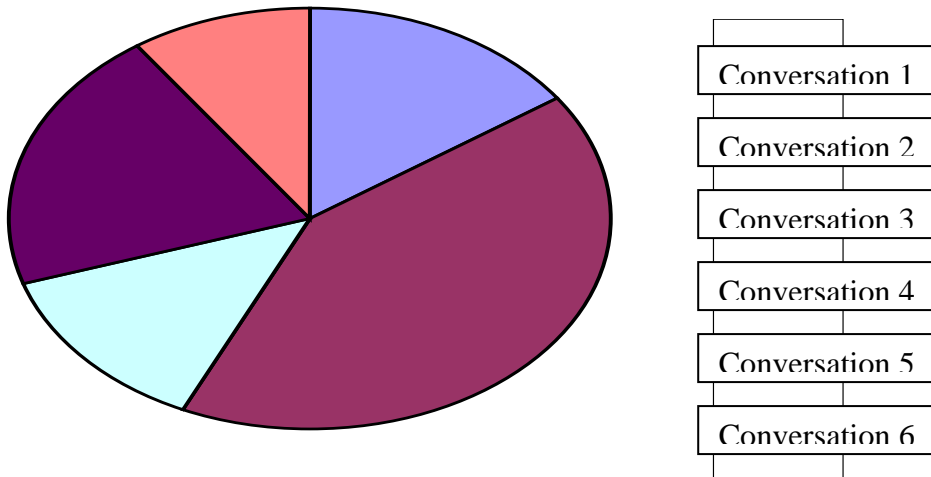
In formal situations, I predict that my mother will use advanced lexis, an extremely formal tone and will minimise elision and slang in order to gain complete power in the conversation. I predict she will use tag questions as a form of patronisation in some circumstances, for example, 'isn't it?' or 'don't they?' When trying to gain power in this aggressive manner, I feel she will also attempt to minimise space fillers and pauses in order to create an assertive, powerful tone.

In some situations, for example talking with a friend, she may actually mitigate her power by convergence, however she will still want some level of control in the conversation, which I predict will be achieved by questions and quantity.

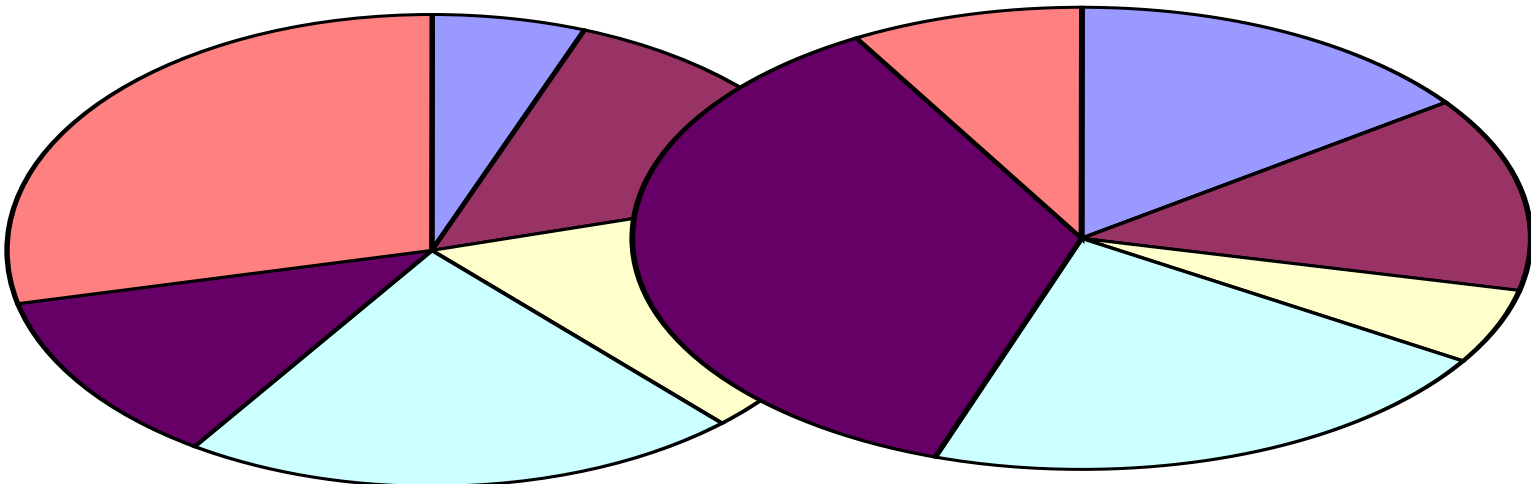
## Results and Findings

I have scaled the usage (due to each conversation extract being a different length) of the main speech features I analysed and displayed those which showed the clearest results below. For numerical statistics see excel printouts in the appendix.

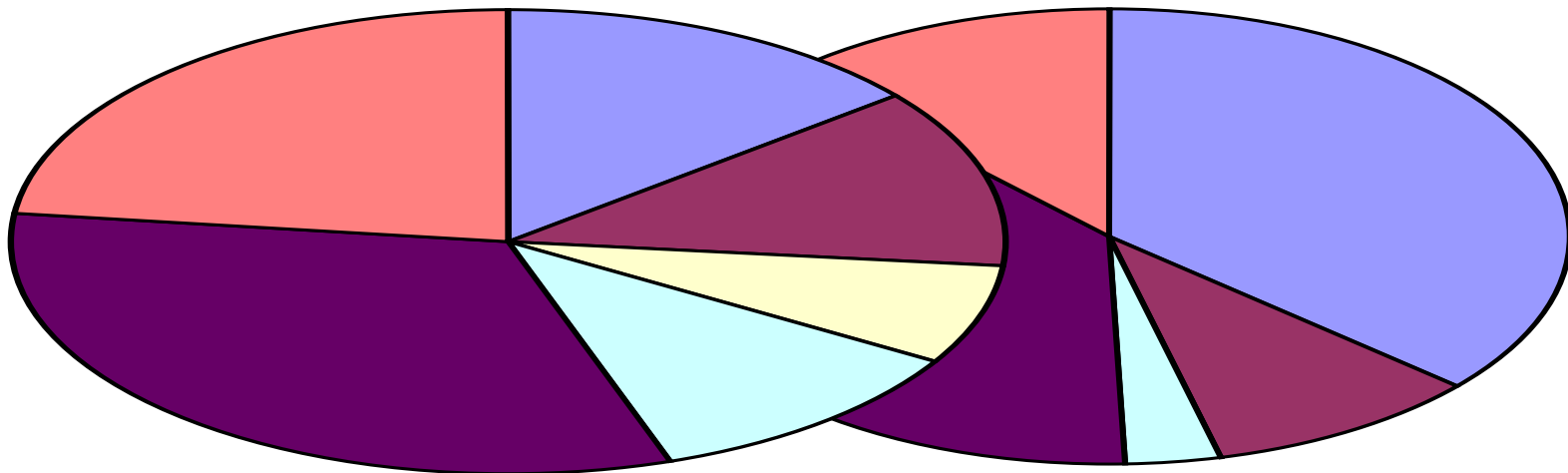
**A pie chart to show the comparative incidence of slang in each conversation**



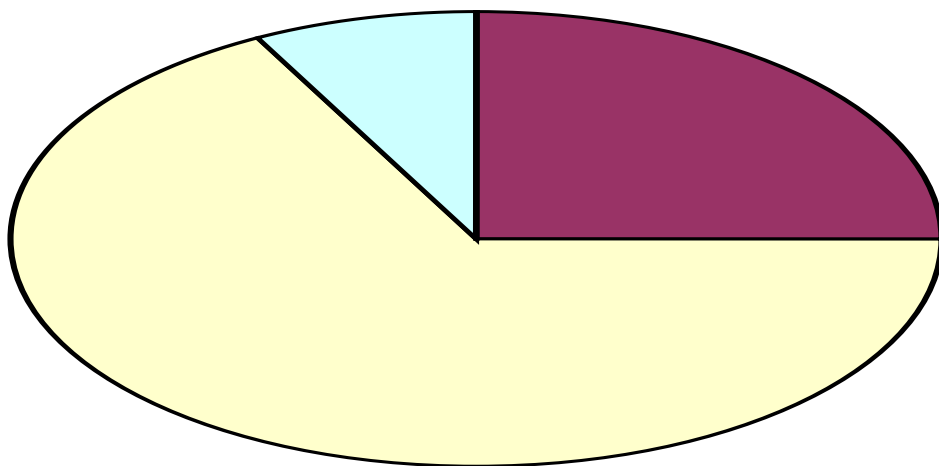
**A pie chart to show the relative usage of long speech utterances in each conversation** and **A pie chart to show the relative usage of back channel noises in each conversation**



**A pie chart to show the relative usage of  
usage of elision in each conversation**



**A pie chart to show the relative usage of  
advanced lexis in each conversation**



## Analysis

### **Conversation 1- with Emily (seven year old step sister)**

#### **Context: Light hearted discussion about Emily's school friends**

There were no examples of formal language use or advanced lexis. This was simply because my mother was speaking to a 7 year old child, who still has a limited command of English.

My mother spoke 125 more words than Emily, breaking Grice's maxim of quantity in order to gain control, however as Emily is only 7 this could be seen as merely leading Emily through the conversation.

Out of 21 speech turns, 12 included questions. Similarly to quantity, although in other conversations the large number of questions asked could indicate an attempt to gain power, here it could be argued that questions are only asked to again lead Emily, as she is inexperienced in the conventions of conversation.

Out of 297 words, only 4 were slang and 14 were shortened by elision. This is restricted for such an informal conversation, and will have been because Emily may misunderstand things if colloquialisms and elision are used. Compared to conversation 5, an informal chat with someone of my mother's age, relatively few slang or shortened words are used with Emily (see pie charts).

Power in the conversation could have been gained by the use of a patronising tone to illustrate the adult-child relationship, outlining her instrumental power, however I may be misinterpreting my data, as Emily is a young child.

There was notably exaggerated emotion illustrated by laughter, raised volume, patronising tone and back-channel noises. Again I feel this is more due to Emily being a child, than my mother trying to gain power in the conversation.

The use of repetition and extension along with tag questions could be evidence of some level of caretaker speech, although it is limited as a 7 year-old already has an acceptable command of English. Evidence of caretaker speech includes, 'there's something missing *isn't there*' (**tag question**), 'E: no no no no no, M: *no no no no no* okay I need a bit more information than that' (**repetition**), and 'E: what we reading ru (1) they're rushers, M: *that would be tesco bacon rashers then would it*' (**extension, rephrasal into question**). Although I am aware this is not 'textbook' caretaker speech, the style of talking to a child remains similar, which could be a way of again outlining the instrumental power of the adult in the conversation.

**Conversation 2- with Helen (my girlfriend, age 17 who was visiting the house)  
Context: Discussion about politics and Jeremy Clarkson  
(Covert recording)**

I found no examples of formal language use, illustrating an informal tone, which is relevant to the friendly conversation. Any formal language may be seen by Helen as a form of upward divergence and seem impolite and offensive, for example

M: which is hilarious (1) and George Bush god he just so hates George Bush its untrue

Is clearly more appropriate than a more formal version:

M: which I feel is highly entertaining (1) and also it is evident that Jeremy Clarkson strongly dislikes George W. Bush, to such an extent that I find it difficult to believe

To accentuate this, my mother did not restrict her use of slang (I found 8 examples), adding to the informal tone of the conversation. The two examples of advanced lexis that I found illustrate her respect for the fact that Helen is not a child and can therefore understand such language, which I feel had a mitigating effect.

Word counts in the conversation were 217 to 954 in her favour, and out of 11 turns 4 were over one statement long, 2 of which were over 2 statements long, illustrating how in this conversation the main way she attempts to be in control is by speaking the most. Gaining control in this way would have been seen as preferable, as it is not blatantly offensive or impolite, however does allow a way of gaining power. For example when compared to conversation 5, where less than a third of her utterances are over a statement long- she feels less of a need to be in control of a conversation with her friend than with a 17 year old girl.

The use of only 2 questions can be explained by wanting to avoid seeming too interrogative, as excessive questioning may seem intimidating.

Finding 4 examples of interruptions was surprising, however can be explained by my mother being enthusiastic, and Helen also interrupting 3 times shows that this surprising statistic is down to the conversation being interesting and opinion-based rather than my mother trying to gain power. This is unsurprising as the opening of the conversation is about politics. It is typically a more aggressive technique, illustrated in conversation 3- the interruptions are intentionally exaggerated by the way my mother actually acknowledges them in her speech, 'if I could just stop you there'.

### **Conversation 3- Telephone conversation with Replacement Window Company**

**Context: One of many conversations with the company who have recently fitted windows and are offering further work at discounts, however have failed to agree a price due to countless mistakes and several visits by the sales team.**

The extremely formal tone shown by my mother, illustrated by 20 examples of formal language use, 14 examples of advanced lexis and no slang, shows clear use of upward divergence. As Fairclough states, the use of Standard English is always seen as more powerful, as other dialects are stigmatised. Frustrated by the incompetence of the firm, she speaks to the secretary aggressively and attempts to gain complete power, in order to achieve what she wants, ‘...I have received monthly calls from your firm offering to do further work at substantial discounts (1) we have agreed to innumerable visits from your sales team...’ the use of the second person possessive pronoun ‘your’ enforces further power, as she makes it seem as though it is the fault of the person she is speaking to.

I feel that the lack of questions that I found can be explained by how in some situations the need to ask questions gives some power back to the other person, who then is seen as more in control as they know the answer.

An assertive tone is created by the use of minimal space fillers (4), again this is used as a technique to gain power. For example, ‘well that’s not possible either since the work was done at the back of the house and isn’t visible from the road’ is clearly a more powerful tone than, ‘well erm that’s not possible either since the um work was done at the er back of the house and isn’t er very visible from the road’.

She also uses quantity, with 9 out of 21 turns being over one statement, and 5 of those being several statements long.

Although difficult to observe from a telephone conversation, I found two blatant instances of interruptions, ‘if I could er just stop you for a moment there’ and, ‘again if I could just stop you there’. These are also examples of an aggressive technique to gain power, giving the impression that she is more important and therefore has a greater right to speak than the other person.

Phonologically she spoke with an upper-class accent with full pronunciation, a further example of how she uses upward divergence. The full pronunciation also seemed to create a patronising tone, as though she is implying the firm needs to be spoken to slowly and properly (like a child) because they are so incompetent. This can be backed up by conversation 1, which showed a relatively small amount of elision for such an informal conversation, as she was speaking to a young child.

I was also surprised by the lack of tag questions, which also may be used in a patronising way by mimicking the language used to a child, however I feel that phrases such as ‘isn’t it?’ and, ‘wouldn’t you agree?’ may be offensive and work against her.

#### **Conversation 4- Telephone conversation with a woman in her 20s**

**Context: The woman is attempting to claim for a minor dent in her car caused by myself, and has mentioned an unreasonably high repair cost which has annoyed my mother, who has researched repair prices herself and is calling to explain this.**

I predicted to observe upward divergence similar to that in conversation 3, however only found one example each of formal language and advanced lexis. This tone, with my mother limiting the amount of power she would like to enforce, will have been used in order to avoid sounding offensive or impolite to the other person, who has instrumental power as she is making the claim.

To aid the less formal tone, she used slang (of which I found 4 clear examples) and did not limit elision (i.e. spoke without raising the formality of her accent).

The ways she gained power in the conversation were quantity, and the use of tag questions. Over 50% of her utterances (10 out of 19) were longer than one statement long, illustrating how, although difficult to gain power whilst being cautious to avoid being offensive, she tried to acquire topic control. Fariclough stated that turn-taking is unequal between unequals- my mother tries to show how she and the other person are unequal by talking the most, and gaining power. The two tag questions I found may be a request for acknowledgement of what my mother proposes, as she is trying to limit the cost of the claim (Bollinger, in 'language, the loaded weapon', states that tag questions are a 'plea for agreement'). Alternatively, based on the context of the questions, 'that is good news isn't it?' the tag questions could be a method of gaining power by the use of a patronising tone.

The 10 examples of back-channel noises was surprisingly high, and may have been a mitigating technique by constantly accepting everything said by the other person. This gives them power, compared to constantly interrupting what is being said which would be an aggressive power-gaining technique. Alternatively it could be argued that this is actually a method of gaining power, as the other person gets the impression that everything they say must be confirmed and accepted by my mother. Either way, constant encouragement is offered to help maintain a positive feeling to a conversation that is pragmatically fraught with conflict.

I found 2 other instances that I interpreted to be patronising. These may confirm the theory that the 2 tag questions were used for this effect. This is surprising considering it is used rather than upward divergence, which I predicted to be her most common method of gaining power. Her polite and thorough pronunciation may also have contributed to the patronising tone, in a similar way to the language use in conversation 3, and how speaking like this may be a way of mimicking speech to a child (as in conversation 1, with surprisingly low elision).

### **Conversation 5- Telephone conversation with friend, Sarah, age 40+**

**Context: Quick chat to her friend as she is going away for a short while the next day**

The informal tone shown by the complete lack of formal language use, advanced lexis and the high relative usage of slang (see pie chart) is to create a friendly tone as she is speaking to one of her friends. When compared to conversation 2, with Helen, although also an informal friendly conversation there were examples of advanced lexis. This difference can be explained by, in this conversation, my mother intentionally using downward convergence to actually mitigate slightly (I know this is convergence as I know Sarah has a lower-class accent than my mother's). When speaking to Helen, any form of downward convergence from her naturally formal accent and language use may seem patronising, which is undesirable. In this case, it is clearly not patronising, as Sarah has been my mother's friend since secondary school. Trudgill's Norwich study (1974) states that the lower the class group, the more regional pronunciations are used (e.g. elision of /ng/ as in singin'). This shows that by the use of elision, my mother is converging to Sarah's lower-class accent.

This downward convergence is confirmed by the high usage of elision- 24 examples (the highest) in the conversation with the second smallest word count (see pie chart for scaled usage). This illustrates how my mother has lowered the formality of her accent in order to converge to Sarah's, and mitigate power. This is clear when compared to conversation 3, where there were only 13 examples of elision in a conversation of over twice the word count. In this conversation, my mother was attempting to gain power by upward divergence, and so raised the formality of her accent by using fuller pronunciation. Here the opposite is the case, where less full pronunciation is used to converge and mitigate.

Although I predicted the use of back-channel noises, the actual usage was surprisingly higher, with 11 examples, such as, 'I know', 'hmmm', and 'nooo'. This can be explained by my mother wanting to maintain a positive tone to the conversation. She is allowing the other person to have most of the speech in order to mitigate. This is confirmed by the way that less than a third of my mother's utterances were longer than one statement, and only one of these was over 2 statements long. She is using the maximum of quantity as a tool to mitigate rather than gain power.

The high usage of questions (8) in such a short conversation is a way of giving my mother some form of control in the conversation without having to use any aggressive techniques. She is allowing Sarah to speak the most and have control in that sense, however is dictating the topic of discussion herself.

## **Conversation 6- with me**

**Context: Discussion about what I am doing tonight and tomorrow  
(Covert recording)**

The use of no advanced lexis or formal language creates an informal tone so as to not cause conflict by being too strict.

The 27 examples of elision illustrate the fact that she is not raising the formality of her accent to gain power by upward divergence, but is mitigating her instrumental power by speaking so casually, converging with my less formal accent.

As I predicted, she used quantity to an excessive amount in order to gain control of the conversation, word counts being 352 to 89 in her favour. 7 out of her 10 utterances were over one statement long, and 5 of those were over 2 statements long. This is the way in which she chooses to outline her instrumental power- by controlling the topics that are discussed. Compare this to conversation 1, where instrumental power is so great that she only uses speech of over one statement long 3 times in 21 utterances. When speaking to me, as I naturally challenge her power (illustrated by 3 interruptions) she must use greater quantity in order to achieve control.

Although less than expected, there were two interruptions, which will have been used to again remind me of her instrumental power, and not allowing me to gain any form of power by increasing the quantity of my own speech.

The use of questions was substantial (4) considering she only made 10 utterances. These will have been used to direct the conversation and allow her to control the topic. It is notable that she asked the questions, and also speaks the most as well, exaggerating how much power and control she has.

I feel the lack of convergence or divergence is partly due to the fact that the two cancel each other out. On one hand, she will have wanted to show power by upward divergence and acting adult in her parental role, however on the other hand she may want to mitigate by convergence in order to sound less strict, making it less likely I will argue. Conversation 5 had a higher proportion of elision and slang (see pie charts), illustrating how there was no restriction on her convergence, however when speaking to me, acting in an authoritarian role limited how much she could lower the formality of her accent and language use as it may discredit what she says.

The minimal use of back-channel noises illustrates that she just wants short answers to questions such as, 'what time are you going out?' Again when compared to conversation 5, in which there is a much higher density of questions and back-channel noises, it is clear that here there is less enthusiasm for this conversation.

## **Interactional / Transactional Conversations**

I have noticed that a lot of the techniques used to gain power are similar in several of the different contexts. Therefore, I have decided to investigate further into the two different types of conversation- interactional and transactional.

### **Hypothesis**

I predict that she will take try to take complete control of transactional conversations in order to increase the likelihood she will achieve her goal, by the use of interruptions to put her point across firmly, formal accent and language, restricted use of questions, and a phonologically formal tone to aid with divergence. I also feel that features such as pauses, space fillers and back-channel noises will be minimised to create an assertive tone.

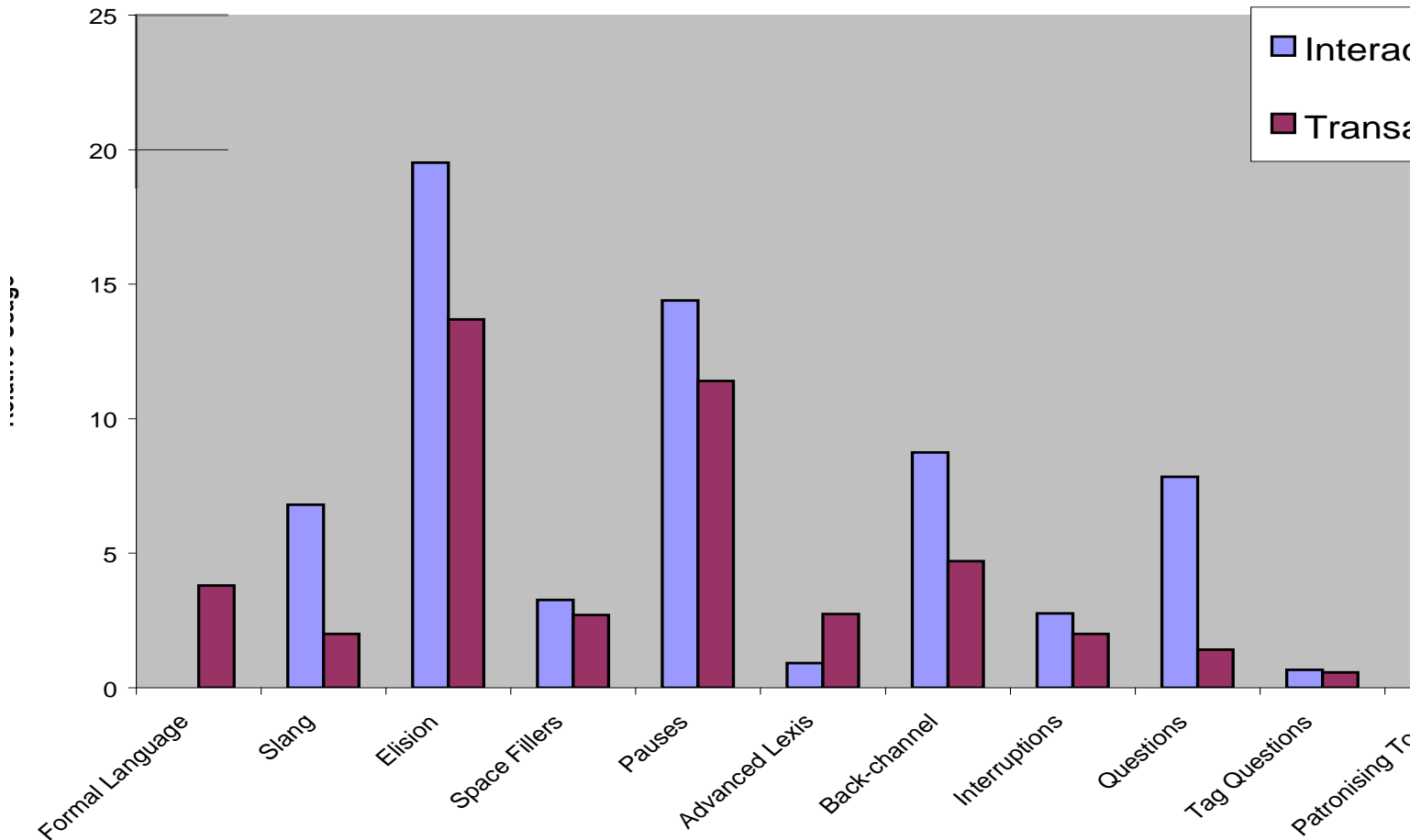
In interactional conversations, I predict convergence will be used in for an informal tone, and I predict that the use of quantity as a power gaining technique will be used in all conversations, however more so in transactional ones.

### Patterns and analysis

I split the conversations into 3 interactional (1,2 and 5, with Emily, Helen and Sarah), and 3 transactional (3,4 and 6, with replacement windows company, woman claiming for car damage, and me).

I calculated the amount each speech technique was used in the 2 sets of conversations, and scaled them to their length. It provided surprisingly clear results:

Chart to compare the use of each speech feature in interactional and transactional conversations



Note: Due to scaling, some features have been further altered (e.g. interruptions count divided by 10) to fit on the same chart. The chart is for int./trans. comparative purposes only.

The use of exactly no notably formal language in interactional conversations is a strong contrast to the considerable use in transactional conversations, illustrating how formality is a technique she used to gain power and make it more likely she will achieve her goal.

Incidence of slang and elision is higher in interactional conversations, and advanced lexis is higher for transactional conversations for the same reason. I was surprised to find such a little difference in the number of pauses and space fillers used for each type of conversation, although both are less in transactional conversations, illustrating how she creates a more assertive tone to gain power.

I was also surprised at seeing over double the incidence of long speech utterances in transactional compared to interactional conversations. My explanation for this would be that she has more of an incentive to have control of the conversation if she has a goal, and quantity is an effective way to gain this control. Also it may be noted that quantity is a less aggressive form of gaining power, and so may have been used more in transactional conversations to avoid being impolite by using other, more aggressive techniques.

Unexpectedly, interruptions were more common in interactional conversations, as the use of interruptions in transactional conversations may be seen as impolite, reducing the power she has gained by using a formal tone. Politeness is another tool she seems to use to increase formality.

I was surprised by the large difference in numbers of questions. Restricting the use of questions in transactional conversations limits the amount of power given to the other person. A question implies the other person has knowledge that my mother doesn't, and thus gives them power. Also, questions may be seen as an indication of enthusiasm in the conversation. As interactional conversations are more informal and enjoyable she may be more interested and ask more questions.

I was also surprised by the lack of a difference in the use of tag questions, as I predicted they may be used to indicate power by using a 'don't you agree?' tone in transactional conversations. Perhaps the reason for the limited use of these is that they may be too impolite as a means of gaining power.

## **Conclusion**

Originally I thought patterns would emerge based on the esteem in which my mother held the people she was speaking to. It transpired that the main patterns emerged when comparing the types of conversation- interactional or transactional. The main findings that I can summarise are as follows.

When speaking to a child, little power needs to be gained influentially, as instrumental power is so strong.

When holding an interactional conversation, power is gained by less aggressive techniques such as quantity and question asking, which achieves topic control.

In transactional conversations with a one-off conversation partner such as a secretary of a firm (conversation 3), more aggressive power gaining techniques are used such as interruptions and exaggerated upward divergence, a patronising tone and upper-class accent. When in a similar type of conversation but with one particular person (conversation 4), less aggressive techniques are used, divergence is less obvious, slang is less limited, and formality of her accent is reduced shown by a higher incidence of elision.

When speaking to friends in an interactional conversation there is evidence of mitigation and convergence, with the only way of gaining control (without being offensive) being through questions.

I have found that the use of questions can give power to the other person, by implying they know something that you don't. This was a surprising discovery as I had originally thought the use of questions was a technique used to gain power.

Even to a young adult (conversation 2 and 6) there is less use of techniques to gain power than I expected. Fairclough stated that behind conversations there are hidden agendas which affect it- in this case it is age. Instrumental power is a large factor in how much of these techniques must be used.

Formal language is very rarely used in interactional conversations with people of a standard register.

Space fillers and pauses seem have less of an effect on power than I suspected- there were only slightly more uses of them in interactional than transactional conversations, however back-channel noises are used much less in transactional than interactional conversations.

I discovered that politeness could be used as a power gaining technique. I predicted that interruptions would be limited when 'speaking informally' in order to be polite. This was not the case- they were limited more in the transactional conversations, as there was more of a need for politeness. Similarly tag questions were restricted in order to maintain a polite tone.