

Turn Taking in Academic Meetings at Hebron University: A Socio-Linguistic Study

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the gender differences with reference to turn taking phenomenon in academic settings at Hebron University. The analysis relied on naturally occurring data that were gathered from two different academic meetings that took place in Department of English at Hebron University during the spring semester of 2016. This research aimed at providing empirical evidence regarding gender stereotypes; the extent to which these stereotypes accurate. The findings indicated that females are more likely to take turns in conversation which supports the proposal that women's greater turn taking rates can be attributed to interpersonal sensitivity rather than lack of assertiveness.

Keywords: Gender, Interruptions, Stereotypes, Turn taking.

1. Introduction:

Most scholars adopt the idea that gender differences and being born or raised as a male or female affect how we act in the world and how the world treats us (Leviton et al., 2015; Raux and Eskenazi, 2009; Coats, 2004; Talbot, 1998; among others). The language we use and the language used about us help us to function in our daily interactional domain and the language used about us describes us and our gender and identity. Research of conversation reveals that it is a highly structured practice, and that participants in a conversation stick to some norms and conventions in a co-operative way. One of these conventions is turn taking. The distribution of talking among speakers, however, is not random; it is governed by 'turn-taking' norms and conventions which determine who talks, when, and for how long. A speaker who does not have a good knowledge of 'turn-taking' rules and techniques is one who does not let others get a word in any conversation. According to Abdelrahim (2006), conversational conventions handle some of this work by providing routines for such issues as initiating and ending conversations as well as for signaling that one is coming to the end of one's turn – that one is at a "transition-relevant" place, a point where there might be transition to another speaker.

According to Coats (1998: 120-121) females in western cultures have more curiosity to take turn in conversation while men stick to their own point, remain silent, and rejected the offer of turn taking. This supports the assumption that women in the west are more talkative than men. However, recent research by Western scholars opposed this assumption that women are more talkative (Mehl, M. R., Vazire, S., Ramírez-Esparza, N., Slatcher, R. B., & Pennebaker, J. W. 2007). In contrast, Abdelrahim (2006), in his study of turn taking in Arab communities, states that "[I]n the presence of males, females remained silent and shy. In contrast, men dominated the conversation".

The significance of this study arises from its attempt uncover certain linguistic norms that govern academic meetings at Hebron University, taking into account well-known stereotypes about women in cross-gender conversation. The study aims at finding out the impact of gender and power on turn taking in academic settings.

To conclude, it is clear that conversation, similar to other group and collective activities requires organization and

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management of the roles of people who are involved in it. In conversation, turn taking system is used to distribute the chances of participation. Turn-taking and gender differences vary from culture to culture and from language to language. There are no specific rules for 'taking turns' for each language but there are general rules for all languages all over the world. One of these general rules is that one must or should listen when others are speaking, because if this does not happen there will be a kind of misunderstanding or miscommunication among speakers.

2. Material and Method

The data for this qualitative study were drawn from a corpus of two formal cross-gender academic meetings collected by one of the authors between February 2016 and March 2016 in the Department of English at Hebron University in Palestine. Both meetings included the same number of participants (six instructors: three males and three females). The speech contributions of participants in the meetings were supposed to be in English, but sometimes they switched to Arabic.

The procedure for the data collection was simple: one of the authors recorded spontaneous academic conversations. The data consisted of spontaneous and naturally occurring situations within real environments of academic meetings in the English Department. Whenever we tried to collect the data no attempt was made by us to inform the participants being involved in the interactions about our intention. The participants were unaware that their interaction was being recorded. Overall, a 90 minute- recording from both meetings was collected, transcribed and analyzed in order to find out which one of the genders was dominant in the conversation and which one had more influence.

To analyze data from the transcripts, the coding process of Strauss and Corbin (1990) was adopted. It consists of (1) transcribing all recordings so as to make transcripts; (2) open coding which refers to labeling ideas and concepts relevant to turn-taking strategies. Labels with similar qualities were grouped together as a category; (3) axial coding in which relations among different categories were examined; and (4) making conclusions where answers to the research question were revealed and concluded.

The present study aims to compare and find differences in turn taking between males and females. It attempts to find out the extent to which gender and power affect turn taking in academic meetings. In fact, the study attempts to provide empirical evidence of women's interpersonal sensitivity in conversational environments and thereby refuting gender stereotypes discussed by some scholars (Abdelrahim, 2006). The significance of the study arises from the fact it aims at finding whether the participants (instructors) in the two meetings succeeded in organizing turn-taking techniques and other conversational tactics in respect to their gender.

3. Theoretical Background & Literature Review:

Turn taking is defined by Goffman (1976) as the "opportunity to hold the floor, not what is said while holding it" (p. 2270-271). Schmitt (2002) further clarifies that a turn starts when a participant takes the floor and ends when another speaker seizes it. Moreover, a turn could be taken when the speaker himself/herself seizes the floor or when he/she is nominated to speak by a previous speaker (Sacks, 1974).

Deborah Tannen (1995) considers turn taking to be one element of linguistic style, i.e., the group of culturally determined elements that help us communicate with others and understand what they mean. Thus, turn taking, according to Tannen, entails a tacit negotiation of signals that helps determine when a certain turn ends and another one begins.

Other researchers have also argued that patterns of turn taking are culture dependent to a large extent. In some cultures, such as the Japanese, it is considered rude to interrupt someone while speaking, while in France, failing to seize the turn as soon as your interlocutor finishes speaking may be seen as a sign of lack of interest in the conversation as a whole (Aidinlou and Dolati, 2013). Tannen further argues that not only the country but also the region where you come from as well as your ethnic background determine how long a pause should be to be considered appropriate.

Recent studies in sociolinguistics, as it is the case in the current study, have focused on turn taking among men and

women, thus, highlighting different models and approaches. Raux and Eskenazi (2009) used their finite state turn taking model to foresee when the turn is likely to end. Selfridge and Heeman (2010) focused on the bidding concept where participants compete to seize the turn based on the conceived relative importance of what they are going to say. Aidinlou and Dolati (2013) identified five ways of turn taking in their study, namely, overlapping, back-channeling, completion, body talk and silence when not taking the turn. In their study, it was found that females take more turns when conversing among each other while males tend to complete the utterances of other males. As for overlapping, it happens twice as much in female than in male talk.

Some researchers worked on the patterns of turn taking between mothers and children. It was found that interaction patterns among mothers and their kids revolved around a question-answer-reinforcement pattern. Mothers use questions to stimulate their children to speak then they reinforce their answers to keep the conversation going (Bateson, 1975; Bloom, 1988).

Recently, however, some researchers such as Ford (2008) have provided a new perspective with regard to the issue of women talk in the workplace. In her book: *Women Speaking Up*, she shows how women skillfully use conversational techniques at formal meetings in order to gain the floor in what has traditionally been classified as a male-dominated arena. The analysis in her book is built on the careful transcription of 23 hours of video recorded meetings at work settings. The meetings were mixed in gender, i.e., having both male and female participants. Ford targeted in her analysis the communication of women who hold high positions in what has traditionally been deemed as male-dominated spheres.

As claimed by the present paper, one, hence, may question the generalizability of Ford's conclusions and whether they could be applied to women who do not possess a similar educational or socioeconomic status. Ford's analysis of the follow up interviews showed that women considered gender to be one of the factors that influenced their turn taking patterns besides other factors such as their personality, social background, as well as rank in the workplace. Tannen goes on to clarify that when considering a woman's rank, we should distinguish between the formal authority which is associated with the position a woman holds and the actual authority that is negotiated on a daily basis with colleagues and subordinates and that might be discredited by them. In fact, the present study attempts to gauge the importance of gender and power that might influence turn-taking in cross-gender academic meetings. By examining the conversations recorded for the purpose of data analysis in this study, it is important to show whether the number of interruptions and overlaps by women was clearly the same or higher than those by men.

Like mothers in the classic sociolinguistic studies, women in high ranking positions use questions to give the other participants the chance to expand or elaborate on their viewpoints. They also use them to incorporate an opposing viewpoint within the question itself, hence, indirectly challenging the views of interlocutors. Tannen (1995) elaborates on the feature of indirectness in men and women talk. She argues that women tend to be indirect when giving instructions to others while men are indirect when admitting a mistake or a flaw. Degree of indirectness could also be associated with the level of confidence. Generally speaking, sociolinguistic studies have traditionally shown that people in subordinate positions tend to speak indirectly to those in higher up ranks. Hence, when a person in charge, whether a man or a woman, adopts the indirectness strategy, it may be mistakenly judged as a sign of lack of confidence.

Ford (2008) states that "features of spontaneous talk normally considered sloppy might actually be well-adapted to important functions in interaction" (p. 173). This view is supported by Dubois et. al. who argue that studying turn taking is an important aspect of human interaction and that it is best done through investigating a corpus of spontaneous conversations rather than traditional sociolinguistic interviews.

Interruption, for instance, in Tannen's view could be classified into two types, namely, cooperative and competitive. In cooperative interruption, which is generally characteristic of women's speech, a speaker would help the other interlocutor finish an utterance. Competitive interruption, on the other hand, is characteristic of men's talk and pushes them to change the topic.

Tannen (1992) argues that men and women do talk differently, not for any essential or innate reason, but because they are socialized differently. If they understand each other, they can avoid miscommunication and breakdown their relationships. She argues that in general women converse for the sake of communication, to connect with another person, to feel closer, whereas men view conversation as a means of conveying information, and so tend to be direct, often hearing their female partner.

Levitan et al., (2015) and Zimmerman and West (1975) state that one of the major differences in women and men's speech is that men have been found to dominate conversations through the use of interruptions and overlaps, and that the amount of these conversational irregularities that took place rose significantly when men were talking to women. The current study, as illustrated in the next section, attempts to explore turn taking phenomena and types of interruptions in cross-gender academic meetings at Hebron University taking into consideration the above mentioned claims by Zimmerman and West (1975) and Levitan et al. (2015).

Research on amount of speech shows that not only do men talk more than women, but that women and men tend to talk more in different kinds of situations (Levitan et al., 2015; Eckert and Mc Connell, 2003). On a recent review of the literature on amount of speech, Deborah James and Janice Drakich (1993) found that out of 56 studies of adult mixed-gender interaction, 34 (6) percent showed males talking more than females overall, while only 2 studies showed female talking more overall. The remaining 20 studies showed either no gender differences (16) or sometimes males and sometimes females talking more (4).

Finally, this paper will examine and discuss turn-taking and gender differences using a 90-minute recording of two academic meetings. After detailing the background of research within this section, we will then move on to analyze the recordings, considering comparisons that can be made between the research carried out here and previous studies in the field. This will also include a discussion of relevant issues which arise from the analysis of this research.

4. Analysis:

The present qualitative study analyzed turn taking in cross-gender formal academic meetings. Results indicate that women managers are more likely to take turns in conversation which supports the proposal that women's greater turn taking rates can be attributed to interpersonal sensitivity rather than lack of assertiveness (Leaper, C., & Robnett, R. D. 2011). The academic setting is considered as a competitive arena, where men's competitive behavior and women's cooperative behavior will be more obvious, since most high and/ or important positions are controlled by men in Arab societies. Unfortunately, in most cases high status women will be in a dilemma in the workplace. Zhao (2010:12) states that "[I]f they use an adversarial, aggressive and competitive speech style, they will be perceived as un-feminine. If they pursue a soft, supportive and cooperative style, they will be considered as powerless and do not deserve that high position". Although, men and women have different speech behavior, their common goals of most conversations are to achieve solidarity.

Our recordings included two meetings where the chair was a female manager. So we were able to look at whether the female managers dominated talking time in academic meetings. Data analysis revealed that women managers consistently and repeatedly dominated the talking time when they were in the chair. In other words, it seems that a person's role in the meeting is more important than his/her gender in determining how much he/she talks. If a person is chairing the meeting, he/she is likely to talk more in order to dominate the meeting in an attempt also to cover all issues in the agenda of the meeting. In most cases, status or authority determines the extent of freedom to talk in meetings.

Data analysis revealed that the use of minimal responses in academic meetings shows unanimously that women use them more than men. It is clear that minimal responses are "a female speciality" (Coates, 2004:87). In our data, Raghad, the female manager of the meeting, and Bayan, another new female member in the meeting, produced the maximum number of minimal responses. However, both Raghad and Bayan had different goals for their minimal responses. The excessive use of *mm*, *ahh*, *yeah*, etc. by Bayan revealed her inferior status or position in such meetings; it was Bayan's first attendance of such academic meetings. Her speech was characterized by silences, lack of verbal

feedback. On the other hand, Raghad usually attempted to reveal her power, as a chair, by using such minimal responses. One very distinctive characteristic of the style of Raghad, the female manager in our study, was her skill in negotiating consensus as it is the case in the example (1) below:

رغد: اذا بدنا منه شيء بدنا نحدد بالضبط شو بدنا منه.

Raghad: *We need to specify exactly things we want...*

عبد الكريم: المسابقة راح تكون...

Abdelkarim: *The competition will be...*

رغد: اه.

Raghad: *Ahh...*

عبد الكريم: كلمات... و تهجئة.

Abdelkarim: *Vocabulary and spelling*

رغد: اه. راح نختار الكلمات الدارجة أقل

Raghad: *We'll choose the less frequent ones.*

عبد الكريم: تحديد الوقت.

Abdelkarim: *We need to limit the time.*

رغد: أه. نعم. الاسهل. اه. اوكي.

Raghad: *Ahh.mm. Yes. The simplest. Ahh. Okay.*

Raghad, the female manager, often took specific steps to ensure that participants had reached agreement before moving on to the next issue or agenda item. One very clear example of negotiating consensus involved the allocation of responsibilities in relation to a range of tasks. A number of possibilities were discussed in the first meeting. None of such suggestions were rejected by the female manager; instead she kept producing minimal responses in an attempt to dominate the conversation and to show her power. It seems that the female manager pursued a style of interaction, even though collaborative, based on power, while other members, including other females, pursued a style based on solidarity and support. Example (2) below illustrates such use of minimal responses.

رغد: شو رأيكم يا جماعة؟ ايش يكون النهائي؟ كم طالب؟ واحد من خمسة أو ثلاثة؟

Raghad: *What do you think about the finals? How many students? One out of five or one out of three?*

عبد الكريم: أربعة.

Abdelkarim: *four.*

رغد: اه... أه... بالضبط.

Raghad: *Ahh... Ahh... Exactly.*

بيان: اه.

Bayan: *Ahh.*

رغد: شو يكون جوائز؟

Raghad: *What about the prizes?*

أيمان: كتب؟

Iman: *Books?* (Directing her question to the female manager.)

رغد: اه. مليح.

Raghad: *Ahh. That's really right.*

Men also produced some minimal responses but they are not comparable to those produced by women. Back-channels are emitted by the female listener as feedback signals (Orestrom, 1983:23). They vary considerably in length, from short vocalizations like *mm*, *ahh*, *yeah* (which are also called minimal responses) to very long expressions, such as *I think you are right* and *that is really right* in addition to some other Arabic equivalents.

Moreover, the study showed that the female manager was somehow exceptional since she did not represent the

stereotype about Arab women in the workplace. Sometimes the female manager did not give others enough fixed length for turns in conversation and she kept interrupting them. In line with Clancy's (1972) dichotomy of interruptions, we noticed that interruptions, most of them were done by the female manager, occurred in our data as follows:

1) the current speaker's speech was cut in and the speaker did not have enough time to finish his/her utterances. About 65 % of her interruptions were of this type.

2) the current speaker still completes his sentence although the next speaker has already begun his speech.

The female members of the meeting, Bayan and Iman, used more minimal responses, tag-questions, compliments, questions with *uncertain* rising intonations and mitigating directives with *let's, gonna, could, maybe, etc.* Their speech was softer and more polite. They tried to create an environment characterized by closeness and consensus. When Abdelkarim started talking about salaries of the employees, we noticed that the females, Iman and Bayan, commented freely due to that fact that it was somehow informal discussion.

Generally speaking, our observations of the speakers' contributions in the two meetings were as follows:

No gap, no overlap model: This is an ideal model, but there were no example of this practice in the two meetings. This model refers to the notion that *ideally* when one speaker stops speaking, the other begins in a predictable manner with no gaps or overlaps. In doing so, the listener interprets a variety of cues from the speaker, including semantic and syntactic units, which enable them to take part in smooth conversation (Coates, 2004: 112).

Interruptions: When an interrupter inhibits the speaker from finishing their turn, viewed as a turn taking violation (Coates, 2004: 111). So many examples were noticed in the meetings:

1. Bayan interrupted others many times to confirm what others say. She did not introduce any new ideas or suggestions.
2. Raghad, the female manager, interrupted to give the floor to others. She dominated the whole meeting. She directed her speech more than once to AbedElkarim, a male member in the meetings. She attempted to ask questions which might function as cues for others to take over.

It is clear that there is a difference in the amount of use of interruptions by men and women, with the female manager being more likely to interrupt and less likely to be interrupted. Added to this example of female dominance are a number of other significant examples throughout the recordings. Due to the nature of the six person conversation there are a number of instances where two people begin to speak at the same time, and often two conversations would begin. The three times this happened they always developed into male/male and female/female conversations. It is of significance that each time this occurred it was the female manager conversation which continued when the separate conversations ended and reverted to all six people being involved in the one conversation.

Assuming the floor: When a listener interrupts the *current holder of the floor (speaker)*, thus taking over (Coates, 2004: 113). Abdelkarim, Iman and Bayan assumed the floor many times, but none of them interrupted the female manager. The fact that they did not interrupt the female manager can be attributed to such feelings inferiority and uncertainty.

Hogging the floor: When a speaker holds the floor for too long and ignores others attempting to take the floor (Coates, 2004: 113). The female manager, Raghad, hogged the floor, preventing others from contributing in most times. Basem, a male member in the meeting, initiated the conversation on many topics many times. We noticed that his contributions were somehow different due to the fact that he was an experienced talker; he is the eldest among all other members and he attended several meetings in the past.

Silence is often a sign of turn taking violations, and can follow interruptions or when someone maintains the floor for too long. In most cases, all kept silent, except Raghad, the female manager, due to certain power relations since she is the Head of the Department.

Self Selection: When multiple people start to talk at the same time, and one person dominates and selects his or

herself as the next speaker. We noticed that Raghad, in most cases, selected herself putting an end to so many interruptions by other participants.

Speaking of turn taking leads us to another area which emerged as a feature of academic meetings. Women in academic workplaces are stereotyped as having a poor sense of humor. The analysis of data revealed that humor was used mainly by two persons. Basem, the experienced speaker, used humor to help with good relationships in the meeting. According to him, humor is a polite strategy to criticize others indirectly and break the ice by being less offensive. In fact, Basem used humor successfully in conveying messages easily. Raghad, the female manager, was the other person who tried to be humorous. Again, humor for her was a successful way of reminding other participants of power relations that govern most practices in the academic settings. In the example below, the participants were suggesting different sponsors for some academic practices and competitions to be made by students. After 10 minutes of starting the first meeting, one of the female participants, Iman, made a shy contribution about nominating a sponsor, but she did not talk to the group directly. In example (3) below, she directed her speech to the female manger.

ايمان: ماذا عن راعي للحفل والانشطة؟

Iman: *What about sponsoring the different activities of the students?*

عبد الكريم: جوال ممكن...

Abdelkareem: *Jawal can sponsor such activities.*

ايمان: الوطنية ايضا.

Iman: *Al-Wataniya is another possibility?*

رغد: اه. امم. مليح. احنا عندنا راعي واحد.... هو الدكتور نبيل. هههههههه

Raghad: *Ah. Mmm. Right. Good.*

But only one person can sponsor such activities.. Dr. Nabil...

hahahahaha

After listening to the different suggestions concerning the possible sponsors, the female manager, being humorous, reminded the participants of Dr. Nabil Al-Jabari, the head of the Board of Trustees who is superior in power, as the only person who can sponsor such activities.

The study has dealt with various behaviours of turn taking mechanisms. Participants in the two meetings used different turn yielding cues, back-channel cues, and turn-maintaining cues. The study showed that the turn-taking system involves three basic strategies taking the turn, holding the turn, and yielding the turn. These three strategies seem to form a smooth and tidy system where one party speaks at a time, while the other party waits for his turn. In fact, it is not as it appears to be; sometimes the current speaker may be overlapped or interrupted by another speaker.

Therefore, an important factor of successful conversation is whether the participants adhere to the ideal model of the conversational turn-taking system, which means one speaker speaks at a time. A turn is the basic form of conversation which presupposes a shift of speakers. Participants normally try to keep smooth speaker shifts to make conversation going. However, in academic settings, participants often violate the turn-taking aspect of conversation. It is quite a common phenomenon for a speaker to interrupt the current speaker and so obtain the speaking right, that is to say one simply takes the turn when one wants to speak, regardless of whether the current speaker has stopped speaking or not.

To sum up, the findings do not concur with earlier studies including those of Abdelrahim (2006), Coates (1986) and Zimmerman and West's (1975). Such scholars proposed that women's silence can be attributed to such feelings of shyness and inferiority as it is the case in Arab societies. Nonetheless, the findings of this study refute the findings of such studied. The findings indicated that females are acquiring new roles at Hebron University; they are more likely to take turns in conversation which supports the proposal that women's greater turn taking rates can be attributed to interpersonal sensitivity rather than lack of assertiveness (Coats, 1986).

5. Conclusion:

It would be a mistake to believe that gender and social status are factors that are *given* (i.e. that they are determined in advance and would be accepted by all members of a community). The study revealed that people try to use language to change the other people's perception of these dimensions. Differences exist in the turn-taking behavior between male and female speakers in academic settings. Female speakers often break the rule of one person at a time. Many of them speak at the same time. In fact, women in academic meetings at Hebron University are no longer perceived as passive recipients of information in academic meetings.

The stereotypes and evidence discussed in this article have significant implications for the power structure between both genders and indeed the psyche of both men and women. Future researchers need to be cautious of making premature judgments. In any event, there is little doubt that recent interest in gender and language will continue to generate worthwhile exploration into this topic.

The results of this study contradict Abdelrahim (2006) and Zimmerman and West (1975) who state that females remained silent and shy in the presence of males. Results revealed that females who took the role of 'decision-makers' at Hebron University succeeded in choosing, developing and discussing their topics, and thus dominating the whole interaction. In fact, our study of women managers at Hebron University has allowed us to comment on some interesting communication strategies. It seems that female managers use language in ways that help assert their power in a meeting setting by clearly talking more than other participants and by summarizing progress in a meeting. But they also use strategies which may have less immediate, more long-term effect in a workplace. They negotiate consensus on contentious issues which may take longer at the time, but which may avoid dissatisfaction and rebellion amongst colleagues at a later date. They also use humor in meetings to establish a friendly and atmosphere in the workplace. In short, the female manager was firm and authoritative when necessary, but also made use of more facilitative strategies.

This study has attempted to examine the differences between female and male language, and while generalizations from such a small research group are impossible, it does point to the fact that in certain areas conversation styles differ greatly. To say whether this is a question of gender or simple differences in conversational style would require much more research. However, within this group: women interrupted the most, and men were interrupted the most. These basic facts show that there are many factors which could have and did influence this research, such as length of relationship, seniority in the English Department. These findings are remarkable when one considers that all those involved have grown up in a society very different from that of twenty and thirty years ago. The concepts of sexual equality and women's rights are not new, and the reaction of those involved to the results of this research, illustrate their awareness and desire to be equal.

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أساليب الحوار في الاجتماعات الأكاديمية في جامعة الخليل: دراسة لغوية اجتماعية

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ملخص

تهدف الدراسة الحالي إلى بحث الفروقات في أساليب الحوار وأدبه بين الذكور والإناث في إثراء الاجتماعات الأكاديمية في جامعة الخليل. إذ نقصد بأدب الحديث أساليب الأخذ والرد وترك الفرص للآخرين للمشاركة والاستماع للمتحدث وعدم مقاطعته. لقد تم الاعتماد على بيانات جمعت من سياقاتها الطبيعية في اجتماعين أكاديميين في قسم اللغة الانجليزية في جامعة الخليل في الفصل الثاني من عام 2016. وهدفت الدراسة إلى ايجاد دلائل واقعية فيما يخص التعميمات ذات العلاقة في الفروقات بين الجنسين: استقصاء مدى دقة هذه التعميمات والافتراضات. أظهرت النتائج أن الإناث أكثر تحكما بأخذ الأدوار في أثناء الحوار، مما يدعم الاقتراح بأن نسبة زيادة أخذ الأدوار لدى الإناث قد يكون ناتج عن الشعور بالذات وليس قلة الجرأة أو الخجل كما هو معتقد.

كلمات الدالة: أساليب الحوار، أدب الحديث، جامعة الخليل، الاجتماعات الأكاديمية.

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