Women talk By Jennifer Coates (review)

Timothy C. Frazer

This book does not provide any truly original insights into language use, but it does establish a skillful synthesis of the work done on this issue in the Anglo-American tradition (although the extensive research into language use carried out in France and Switzerland, for example, is ignored). It will become indispensable as a reference work to students of language use, conversation, discourse, and so on in linguistics, psychology, and sociology. [BRIGITTE NERLICH and DAVID D. CLARKE, *University of Nottingham.*]

Women talk. By JENNIFER COATES. Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996. Pp. xv, 324. $19.95.

This is an ethnographic study of conversation between women friends in Great Britain. The analyses are based on over nineteen hours of recorded conversation between groups of women interacting socially. Coates' purpose is to define the role that talk plays in female friendship and to some extent even to determine linguistically what female friendship is and why women participate in it.

What to me is most illuminating about this work is that these conversations, which are full of occasions when two or more women are talking at once, would seem utterly chaotic if analyzed according to turns. But these are not conversations in which the floor is passed from one speaker to the next; neither do they conform to Gricean maxims. C shows instead that such conversations are in fact joint efforts which include a number of identifiable (if unconsciously used) linguistic strategies. Such conversation has a 'collaborative floor' in which participants work together to achieve a sense of unity. These women 'work together, rephrasing what each other says and adding new material to it, to arrive at an account that satisfies' all participants. Stories are shared on a common topic before a discussion finally leads to consensus; this 'reciprocal self disclosure'—which C labels 'mirroring'—is normally lacking in men's conversations (61).

The first three chapters discuss the problems, genesis, and methodology of the project (with, it is worth noting, a refreshing candor). The next six chapters analyze the conversations themselves. After discussing the range of conversation topics, C examines the function of stories (topic introduction and community building) and the organization of friendly talk, which is frequently overlapping. Other salient features of these conversations are hedges, questions, and repetition. All the linguistic features discussed in these chapters are instrumental in enabling the supportive sort of discourse that C has recorded. Hedges, for example (including qualifiers such as *sort of, like,* and *maybe* as well as the modals *might* and *may*),

allow the speaker to decline the 'expert' role, which is not conducive to collaborative talk. Questions, especially tag questions, play a similar role, avoiding signals that a speaker's utterance is the final word on any subject and inviting others to make their own contributions.

While these features all underpin the collaborative nature of these discourses, they also have the dual function of helping to structure conversations. This is true of questions, for example, which not only invite others' participation but also serve to introduce topics and to begin narratives. A major structuring burden is borne by repetition which provides points of reference which tie together the various participants' contributions.

The final two chapters argue the importance of this research not just to professional linguists but to a presumably humane society in general. Ch. 10, which shows how talk allows the participants to construct 'different femininities', provides examples of conversations in which women covertly identify with one or more value systems, whether traditionally patriarchal or feminist. Ch. 11, on the linguistic nature of friendship, presents an interesting discussion of communicative competence failure in this group—when a woman, for example, talks too much or too little according to the norms of the group.

While this text is important reading for specialists in discourse, it is accessible to lay readers as well, so it is both an important research text as well as a good tool to use in introducing students to discourse analysis. [TIMOTHY C. FRAZER, *Western Illinois University.*]

Experimental syntax: Applying objective methods to sentence judgments. By WAYNE COWART. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997. Pp. xii, 187. Paper $17.95.

Linguistic theory traditionally relies on evidence from acceptability judgments which are typically obtained in an informal, intuitive fashion. Cowart's book discusses potential problems with this informal approach and introduces a framework for eliciting judgments based on standard methods from experimental psychology.

The book consists of a methodological part (Chs. 1, 2, 4, 6), which investigates the empirical properties of acceptability judgments and presents relevant experimental results, and a tutorial part (Chs. 3, 5, 7–12), which contains an introduction to the design and statistical evaluation of judgment experiments.

Ch. 1, 'Introduction: Are judgments stable?' (1–30), discusses the stability of judgments within populations of linguistically naive speakers. C presents experimental data for subjacency, *that*-trace ef-