

# Relevance in Casual Conversation between Males and Females

Chuenjet Ativoragoon  
Dr. Siriporn Panyametheekul

## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์ความเหมือนและความแตกต่างในการเลือกใช้วิธีการรักษาความเกี่ยวข้องของเรื่องที่สนทนา และวิเคราะห์ว่าเพศของผู้สนทนาส่งผลต่อการเลือกใช้วิธีการรักษาความเกี่ยวข้องของเรื่องที่สนทนาหรือไม่ โดยเก็บข้อมูลจากนิสิตของมหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒทั้งหมด 15 คู่ ได้แก่ กลุ่ม ช-ช 5 คู่ กลุ่ม ญ-ญ 5 คู่ และกลุ่ม ช-ญ 5 คู่ ซึ่งจากผลการวิเคราะห์พบว่าถึงแม้ว่าทั้ง 2 เพศเลือกใช้วิธีการรักษาความเกี่ยวข้องของเรื่องที่สนทนาทั้ง 4 ข้อ เหมือนกัน คือ การรักษากฎ การทำกฎ การละเมิดกฎโดยจงใจ และการขึ้นหัวข้อสนทนาใหม่ แต่พบความแตกต่างกัน คือ เพศชายเลือกใช้วิธีการรักษากฎมากเมื่อสนทนากับเพศชาย และใช้วิธีการรักษากฎน้อยลงเมื่อสนทนากับเพศหญิง นอกจากนี้ เพศชายมีแนวโน้มที่จะใช้วิธีการขึ้นหัวข้อสนทนาใหม่มากกว่าเพศหญิง ส่วนเพศหญิงเลือกใช้วิธีการรักษากฎมากเมื่อสนทนากับเพศชาย และใช้วิธีการรักษากฎน้อยลงเมื่อสนทนากับเพศหญิง ดังนั้น สามารถสรุปได้ว่าเพศของผู้สนทนาส่งผลต่อการเลือกใช้วิธีการรักษาความเกี่ยวข้องของเรื่องที่สนทนา

## Background

### Relevance

In Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), the maxim of relation was the maxim for participants to be relevant to the topic of conversation; however, there are various arguments that this maxim creates several misunderstandings because there is no clarification of how to be relevant while having a conversation. Then in order to clarify the use of the maxim of relation, some studies have developed the maxim further. One of the studies is the study of Panyametheekul (2003). The study is **Coherence of Interactions in a Thai Chatroom: interplay of cohesion,**

**turn-allocation, and relevance.** In the study, the maxim of relation has been developed into six rules of relevance: observation; flouting; violation of relevance; violation of relevance non-sequitur; intentionally turns; and introduce new topic to analyze whether the participants in the chatroom are similar or different from face-to-face conversation in the way they use the rules of relevance when talking to one another. The study reveals that in the chatroom participants use six rules of relevance: observation; flouting; violation of relevance; violation of relevance non-sequitur; intentionally turns; and introduce new topic. The brief details for the rules of relevance are following:

### Rules of relevance

1. Observation of relevance were the contributions that were relevant to the topic of the conversation.

(1) The conversation between Toon (Male)<sup>1</sup> and Keng.(Male). Toon wanted to know what Keng was doing when Keng had free time.

Toon : Hah! Keng What are you doing in your free time nowadays?

▣▣▣▣▶ Keng : Playing games and reading.

(1) Keng answered Toon's question relevantly.

2. Flouting of relevance consisted of the contributions that were not directly relevant to the topic of the conversation but the hearer could understand immediately that the speaker was talking about the same topic.

(2) This conversation was between Pump (Male) and Palm (Female). While they were talking Palm felt hungry, so he asked Palm to have lunch with him.

Pump : Do you wanna have lunch?=  
=

▣▣▣▣▶ Palm : I'm hungry

(2) Pump invited Palm to have lunch with him, but Palm flouted the rules of relevance by not answering the question directly instead simply answering "hungry". Yet Pump understood that Palm was talking about the same topic because having lunch and being hungry are related.

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<sup>1</sup>(M) stands for males. (F) stands for females.

3. Violation of relevance refers to the contributions that were not directly relevant to the topic of the conversation. This is similar to the flouting of relevance, but the hearer could not understand immediately. The hearer must interpret the speaker's utterance in order to understand that the speaker was speaking about the topic.

(3) The conversation between Pu (Female) and Jum (Female). Before the conversation they were talking about shopping and then Pu told Jum that she just bought a box of hair dying liquid.

Jum : //[Does it take much time?] or Do you just wash it?=  
 Pu : No. Well, he told me to leave it for half an hour. Oops! I need to leave it there for 30 minutes, but I left it for 50 minutes because I was talking to my friend through MSN // and I forgot that.

Jum : //[And is it irritated?]=

▶▶▶▶ Pu : It doesn't smell bad. It's like the smell of a shampoo that's got a very strong smell.  
 It made my eyes hurt.

(3) Pu violated the rules of relevance by not answering Jum's question whether leaving the hair dying liquid on Pu's head longer than 30 minutes would irritate her head. Instead of answering directly, Pu was talking about what the smell of the hair dying liquid was like and that her eyes were hurt. In order to understand that Pu was answering Jum's question, Jum had to interpret that how the smell of the hair dying liquid and that Pu's eyes were hurt were relevant to her question.

4. Violations of relevance non-sequitur were the contributions that could not be deduced as relevant from the previous turn because the participants only wanted to show participation in the conversation.

(4) A : Where is your house?  
 B : Roses are red. Violets are purple.

(Panyametheekul. 2003: 86)

(4) B's answer could not be deduced as being relevant or irrelevant to A's question. However, B wanted to participate in the conversation, so he or she answered the question.

5. Accidental turns are the contributions that are unintentional. The reason was that the participant was talking to the other participants or answered to the wrong participant in the another chatroom at the same time.

6. Introduce of a new topic to the conversation includes the contributions that were not relevant to the topic of the conversation or where the topic had been shifted.

(5) Ti (Male) and Aum (Male). Before this excerpt, they were talking about a teacher who was late for class today and then Ti changed the topic of the conversation.

- Ti : You help me look for Richard//coming
- Aum : //[[Yeah]If he comes, then I'll call you //but I hate
- Ti : //[[He won't come yet. I'll sleep]]
- Aum : //[[Richard/ Richard must come on time::]]
- Ti : Perhaps he comes before class 5 minutes
- ▣▣▣▣▶ Aum : Yeah and/ Did you had lunch already?

(5) Ti and Aum were talking about Richard coming to class late today and then Aum changed the topic by asking Aum whether he had lunch and the question was not relevant to Richard coming to class.

### **Gender Differences in Conversation**

Gender differences in conversation were investigated in order to recognize whether there were similarities or differences in conversation. Several studies show that males dominate the conversation while females try to continue the conversation. For example, in Zimmerman & West's study (Zimmerman; & West. 1998) about interruption in mixed-gender conversations, they find that males interrupt females more often than females do in order to get the floor of the conversation; Fishman's study (Fishman. 1983) of interaction shows that even though females initiate topics of conversation, these effort fail due to their content in that the males did not pay attention to keep the conversation going. However, males' initiation of topics would be successful because females responded with attention in order to keep the conversation going. Further, West and Garcia's study (West; & Garcia. 1988) finds that males tend to shift topics, but females tend to develop them. Moreover, there were also some studies that reported the misunderstandings because of gender. For example, Slade's study of cross-cultural misunderstandings (Thornbury; & Slade. 2006; citing

Slade. 1996) shows that the topics of conversation differ according to gender differences. When males talk to males, the topics include joking or teasing, telling stories, and leisure and entertainment. When females talk to females, the topics include gossiping or chatting about others, personal information, exchanging opinions, leisure and entertainment, and telling stories of personal experience. When males talk to females, the topics include telling stories, joking or teasing, employment, leisure and entertainment, personal information, chatting about others, future plans, and illness and death. Tannen's study (Tannen. 1986) about the miscommunication between the genders due to the different approaches to communication, shows that females talk about internal affairs such as home, close relationships, and intimacy, whereas males talk about external affairs such as sports, politics, females, and sex. The miscommunication is that females discuss intimate affairs because they reflect the relationship, whereas males want to keep them because they prefer factual exchanges. Therefore, females look for the implied utterances when having a conversation with males but males do not, instead taking females' contribution as factual exchange.

The studies above showed that gender differences were the factor that caused contradictions in conversation because males and females used language differently. The most frequent claims were that males would have a certain way of talk while females would have another way. It conveyed the differences between males and females and caused misunderstandings in conversations.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

The primary research question in this study was how gender affects relevance in casual conversation. To answer this question, we analyzed relevance in light of Panyametheekul (2003), taking into consideration the independent variable of the gender of the participant.

### **Data**

The data were recorded and transcribed from 15-minutes conversations of undergraduate students who were studying in the same level. All of them were taken at Srinakharinwirot University from five pairs of males, five pairs of females, and five pairs of males with females, which were totaled 15 pairs.

### Methodology

The procedures were to first collect 15 conversations from males, females, and males with females; secondly to analyze 15 conversations by using the rules of relevance and then count the frequency of rules of relevance that each gender used in the conversations. The relevance framework in this study was brought from Panyametheekul's study because the rules of relevance were based on the concept of Grice's maxim of relation. However, two rules of relevance, including 4) violation of relevance non-sequitur and 5) accidental turns were not considered in this place due to the fact that they were hardly occurred in face-to-face conversation; moreover, those rules were developed to be suitable for analyzing relevance in the chatroom conversations.

### RESULTS

The results revealed that males, females, and males with females used rules of relevance from the highest frequency to the lowest frequency: observation, flouting, violating the rules of relevance, and introducing new topics.

#### Single-gender conversations

In the conversations between two males, they observed rules of relevance 54.65% of the time, flouted 21.98% of the time, violated them 18.18% of the time, and introduced new topics 5.19% of the time. On the other hand, in the conversations between two females, they observed rules of relevance 41.94% of the time, flouted them 29.91% of the time, violated them 23.61% of the time, and introduced new topics 4.55% of the time. (See Table 1)

**Table 1** Percentage of use of rules of relevance of males and females in same-gender conversations

Rules of relevance	Males Frequency(%)	Female Frequency(%)
Observation	54.6	41.94
Flouting	21.9	29.91
Violation	18.18	23.61
Introduction new topics	5.19	4.55
Total	100	100

**Mixed-gender conversation**

In mixed-gender conversations, they observed rules of relevance 44.05% of the time, flouted them 26.70% of the time, violated the rules of relevance 23.30% of the time, and introduced new topics 5.95% of the time. In addition, when the tallies were counted separately according to the gender of the speaker, it was found that males observed rules of relevance 38.35% of the time, flouted them 29.61% of the time, violated them 24.27% of the time, and introduced new topics 7.77% while females observed 49.76%, flouted 23.79%, violated the rules of relevance 22.33%, and introduced new topics 4.13% of the time. (See Table 2)

**Table 2** *Percentage of use of rules of relevance between males and females in mixed-gender conversations*

<b>Rules of relevance</b>	<b>Males-Female Frequency(%)</b>	<b>Males Frequency(%)</b>	<b>Female Frequency(%)</b>
Observation	44.05	38.35	49.76
Flouting	26.70	29.61	23.79
Violation	23.30	24.27	22.33
Introduction new topics	5.95	7.77	4.13
Total	100	100	100

**The comparison between males and females in single-gender conversations and mixed-genders**

Table 3 summarizes all the results (See Table 3). When the percentage of use of rules of relevance of females in singled gender and mixed-gender were compared, females observed rules of relevance more often than they flouted them as shown in table 3, flouting 29.91%, 23.79%, violated the rules of relevance 23.61%, 22.33%, and introduced new topics 4.55%, 4.13% respectively (See Table 3).

**Table 3** Percentage of use of rules of relevance between males-males and females-females in singled gender's and mixed-gender's conversation

Rules of relevance	M-M <sup>2</sup> Frequency(%)	M-F Frequency(%)	F-F Frequency(%)	F-M Frequency(%)
Observation	54.65	38.35	41.94	49.76
Flouting	21.98	29.61	29.91	23.79
Violation	18.18	24.27	23.61	22.33
Introduction new topics	5.19	7.77	4.55	4.13
Total	100	100	100	100

## DISCUSSION

In order to interpret these results, four rules of relevance were investigated regarding to the genders of the participants. The question was raised whether there were similarities or differences between males and females in singled gender and males and females in mixed-gender conversations. The answer to this question is that the overall use of rules of relevance in single gender and mixed-gender conversations is similar both in single gender and mixed-gender conversations. However, it differs in the frequency of each gender.

In spite of the major similarities in using the rules of relevance of males and females in single gender and mixed-gender conversations, there were also some minor differences. When comparing the use of rules of relevance of males in single gender with males in mixed-gender conversations, the observation of rules of relevance was used 54.65% of the time in single gender and 38.35% of the time in mixed-gender conversations. While the latter being lower than the observation of rules of relevance in mixed-gender, the percentages of flouting, violation of relevance, and introduction new topics were higher than those in mixed-gender conversations. In

<sup>2</sup>M-M stands for Males-Males. M-F stands for Males speaking with Females. F-F stands for Females-Females. F-M stands for Females speaking with Males.



the meantime, when comparing the use of rules of relevance of females in single gender with females in mixed-gender conversations, the observation of relevance was used 49.76% of the time in mixed-gender and 41.94% of the time in single gender conversations, the latter being lower than the observation of rules of relevance in mixed-gender conversation while the percentage of flouting, violation of relevance, and introduction new topics were higher than those in single gender conversations.

The overall result showed that in conversations between males and females, both genders chose to interact to his or her participant relevantly by observing the rules of relevance as much as possible. This showed that it was common in conversations to keep to the point even if the speaker could have said anything at anytime as keeping to the point provided the participant assurance that he or she was engaged in the conversation. However, the differences in using the rules of relevance within each gender in mixed-gender conversation could reveal the interaction of one gender with the other in the way they expressed themselves to each other because one gender was using one prioritization of the rules while the other gender was using a different prioritization. The effect of gender to these differences was that when males and females were talking, males tended to use many rules other than observation of relevance in order to show their participation in the conversations. In contrast to males, females tended to stay on the topics more often so that males could understand that they were doing so. In effect, it meant that females were paying attention to what males were talking about. The following examples show the effect of gender differences on conversations between males and females. Example (6) shows that males flouted rules of relevance when females observed of relevance and example (7) shows that males violate rules of relevance when females observed rules of relevance.

(6) The conversation between Oun (Male) and June (Female). Oun's mobile phone was ringing and June wanted to know that who was calling.

June : ((Ring Ring)) Who's calling?=  
 Oun : =It's a message  
 June : It's a message. Why did you get four messages?  
 Oun : Uhm?

(6) Oun flouted the rule of relevance by not answering who was calling. In this case, since no one was calling, he could simply say that no one called instead saying that it was the message. At the time, June continued with the word “Message” to show that she was paying attention to what Oun was saying. Yet when June asked him again, he did not answer her and pretended that he did not hear her. Finally, June knew that the ring on Oun’s mobile phone was not one that showed that there was someone calling, it was the ring of an incoming message.

(7) The conversation between Por (Male) and Kob (Female). The conversation was about finding some textbooks for composing their individual reports. Before the excerpt, they were talking about taking the book to the photocopy center to photocopy some parts of the textbooks.

- Kob : Can I change the book? I’ll get a new one and discard this book. It’s also got Islamic.
- ▶▶▶▶▶ Por : I would rather do it a book a day
- Kob : You’ll do one book a day?((Kob’s laughing))
- Por : (Insane) What day is it today?

(7) Por violated rules of relevance because he did not answer Kob’s question instead asking Kob what day it was today when Kob asked whether Por wanted to do the report one book a day. This conversation showed that Kob wanted to show that she was paying attention to what Por was saying by repeating Por’s utterance, but Por only was concerned with continuing the conversation without paying attention to what Kob was asking him.

On the one hand, females frequently worked harder than males at staying on topic because females observe rules of relevance more often, so it was possible that males would understand what females were talking about. However, females had to interpret what males were talking about exactly because males often flout and violate rules of relevance, and introduce new topics. At the same time, the data revealed that it was females who put an effort to stay relevant to the topic of the conversation to gain attention from males by giving details to the topic as males shifted topics which agrees with the findings of Fishman (1983). These data also corresponded to West and Garcia’s findings (1988) in which females would develop topics while males shifted

from one set of topics to another. The following example shows that the female maintained the topic of talk while the male changed.

(8) The conversation between Kong (Male) and Lek (Female). Kong raised the topic of giving a welcome party to the new freshmen.

Lek : Your senior gave you a good welcome party=  
 Kong : No Not at all. When I was a  
 Lek : ( )  
 Kong : freshmen, I didn't get any welcome party=  
 Lek : You didn't go, did you?=  
 Kong : No. Not that I didn't go. The seniors didn't give me one=  
 Lek : Really?  
 Kong : Yeah=  
 Lek : Bad seniors.  
 Kong : Damn(x). If I I don't give my freshman any welcome party that would  
 bestrange=  
 Lek : Oho!::Then when the next students come, no giving a welcome party.  
 The seniors didn't let me give a welcome party//the seniors didn't  
 Kong : // [Uhm] End  
 give any of relations  
 Lek : Uhm Then Then what to say. Then when no one gives  
 a welcome party, no one does.  
 ► Kong : Uhm//Look at that, there're always crowded.

(9) This conversation showed that Lek made an effort to stay on the same topic by adding opinions while Kong kept his utterances short and then shifted the topic to the thing that he was doing which was uploading a movie from a website because he wanted to avoid talking about it.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study, adherence to relevance was investigated to find the similarities and differences between the genders in casual conversation. The differences were found within each gender when talking to the same gender and the other gender. These findings reflected that, on the one hand, females put more effort to continue the conversation by giving details on the topics while males tended to shift topic. Males would shift topics in order to say something else because the content of the topics before and after the shifting were not related. On the contrary, females would develop topics in order to say something more due to the connection of the content of the topics during the conversations.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

The suggestion from this research paper is that in mixed-gender conversation if a male would like to get more attention on the topic of talk from a female, he should add more details that are relevant to the previous topic because the female would add something more to the topic of talk. In the same time, if a female would like to get more attention from a male, she should keep the details short because the male would say something else. The overall suggestion would be that males should sometimes observe of relevance in order that females do not have to interpret males' utterance very often which would lead to misunderstanding while females should sometimes pay less attention to some information of some topic when talking to males in order to know something more interesting than the known topic. In addition, this study should be conducted in different cultures in order to being compared with this findings and should be investigated whether there is any universal of being relevant in conversation. The investigation is worth doing because participants from different cultures would have known how to express themselves to each other.

### Transcription conventions

- [ ] interruption and overlapping utterances
  - // the place where the utterances were interruption and overlapping  
utterances occurred of simultaneous and overlapping utterances
  - = contiguous utterances
  - ::: lengthened words
  - ? rising intonation on utterances
  - (words) indecipherable speech
  - ( ) unclear speech
  - (( ))) additional descriptions
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