

Topics of Conversation and Gender in French Single-Sex Friendship Groups

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Abstract

The paper analyses the nature and function of topics of conversation raised between French friends, recorded in **single-sex friendship groups**. It confirms the importance of topics of conversation in the construction of friendship. While some of its conclusions echo the findings of previous research regarding the interaction patterns of male and female friends in a unisex setting, it also highlights some interesting differences with other studies' conclusions on the conversational strategies of both sexes in a single-sex friendship group.

Keywords friendship, gender, single-sex, topics of conversation; French

1 Gender, Topics and Friendship

In this paper I hope to further our understanding of the role of talk in the construction of male and female friendship, by analysing the nature and function of the topics of conversation raised in some single-sex interactions between French friends.

I am using the word topic as defined by Chafe (2001: 674) to refer to:

a coherent aggregate of thoughts introduced by a participant in a conversation, developed either by that participant or by another or by several participants jointly, and then either explicitly closed or allowed to peer out.

Chafe (2001: 674) also explains that topics are 'segments of discourse during which one or more speakers talk about 'the same thing''. This notion of 'the same thing' was also used by Jennifer Coates (1996: 68) when she defined a topic as 'any chunk of talk that hangs together because it is about the same thing'.

Earlier research focusing on unisex conversations between women demonstrates 'the wide range of topics arising in friends' conversations and the fact that women talk predominantly about people, drawing heavily on personal experience.' (Coates, 1996: 71) This rapport talk is often opposed to men's report talk, where both the subject-matter and the purpose are different: indeed, in the latter, talk focuses on things, not people and the main point is clearly the exchange of information. This is also referred to as the affective/instrumental split, which has long been associated in the US and many other English-speaking societies with a female/male division of labour not only in talk but also in many other kinds of social activities. Indeed, women have been shown to pay greater interest to the affective function of talk (Coates, 1998: 139) which covers:

both the overt expression of emotion and everything that has to do with the maintenance of social relations. It is generally contrasted with the referential or instrumental function, conveying information (presumably about thing other than emotional states) or trying to establish 'facts' or get things accomplished.

Aries carried out a longitudinal experimental study of conversation in same- and mixed-gender groups of college students and found out, among other things, that the topics they discussed were different. These reflected 'the themes of intimacy and interpersonal relations for women and themes of competition and status for men' (Aries, 1976: 13).

Males engaged in dramatizing and story telling, jumping from one anecdote to another, and achieving a camaraderie and closeness through the sharing of stories and laughter. Females discussed one topic for a half hour or more, revealing more feelings, and gaining a closeness through more intimate self-revelation.

(Aries, 1976: 13)

But focusing on what is different between men and women, ignoring the large preponderance of behaviour that is the same, gives the impression that men's and women's concerns and conversations are overwhelmingly different. It elevates what is a proportional difference at the margins to something resembling an overall difference. Most of the time, the difference is not what men and women talk about, but how much time they devote to those topics. It is generally said that these differences in the balance of topics within men's and women's conversations show women to be more affiliative than men, to seek connection and intimacy. In contrast, these differences are said to show that men are more individualistic and competitive.

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Another interesting element about topics of conversation is that:

The topics that people choose may well reflect their particular responsibilities – and even preoccupations – in the world. And the gendered expectation of such topics may be part of policing these preoccupations. (Coates, 1998: 123)

2 The Study

The topics of conversation that I analyse here come from conversations that I recorded in 2002 and 2003 in a small village called Le Monteil in the Ardèche (South of France). I carried out a naturalistic study by recording an existing established group of friends. In fact, like other researchers before me, I actually chose to use my own circle of friends.

After carrying out both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of this friendship group, using two analytical concepts in conjunction with one another, namely Community of Practice and Social Network, I was then able to distinguish two sub-groups (which I called G1 and G2), largely based on age but also on other factors such as whom each individual associated with, the lifestyle they had or the activities they were involved in. This multi-faceted approach also allowed me to identify the core group members and to select as the object of the linguistic study the single-sex conversations they took part in.

I was left with a corpus of 8 conversations in total (which I called C1, C2 etc), between 3 participants each: 4 for each sub-group, 4 female only conversations (C1 to C4) and 4 male only (C5 to C8). Overall, the total corpus lasted 6 hours 35 minutes. The average conversation length was 45 minutes: 33 minutes on average for the conversations between the male participants and almost double, 65 minutes to be precise, for those of their female counterparts.

3 Findings

3.1 Verbosity

This brings us to the 1st interesting difference between the male and female conversations in my study: the fact that the women, both in G1 and G2, talk a lot more than the men in my recordings. Indeed, the conversations under scrutiny revealed that men tended to express their repeated desire to end the conversation whereas women seemed very happy to carry on talking.

Let me give you a few examples. Several times during C7, we find some sort of reference to ending the recording. For instance, twenty six minutes into the conversation precisely, Léon jokes by inquiring whether their time is up yet (*c'est pas-c'est pas bientôt l'entracte là?*), which is echoed by Kris's *si si on s'casse*. And a couple of minutes later, Ivan announces *on a tout fini hein*, then Léon concludes with *on n'a pus rien à dire*.

Although this observation fits right in with the widespread belief in our European societies that women talk a lot and indeed talk a lot more than men, there seems to be no study which supports this belief as far as adults are concerned while there are several which consistently show the opposite (see Wood, 1966; Argyle, Laljee and Cook, 1968; Bernard, 1973; Parker, 1973; Swacker, 1975).

So why is it different in my study? This has probably something to do with the context and the recording settings, i.e. being indoors in a rather restricted group and without any kind of activities to keep the participants busy other than talking. This particular setting corresponds more to the setting adopted naturally by the women in my study, for both sub-groups. The men, usually tend to talk in larger groups, outdoors and while they are carrying out some kind of activities like cutting wood or building something for the older ones or for the younger ones, watching television.

This latter point seems to be consistent with other research such as Cameron’s study of young men’s talk among others which showed that ‘watching sports on television was a resource for talk available to North American men of all classes and racial or ethnic groups’ (Cameron, 1997: 50).

After having touched on how much the men and women talk in my recordings, I’d like now to turn to what they talk about, in other words the topics of conversation themselves. We shall start by examining the female-only conversations.

3.2 The female-only conversations

3.2.1 *What do women talk about?*

To give you some idea of what women friends talk about in my recordings, I have listed in Table 1 and Table 2 the main topics of conversation in the four unisex conversations between the female speakers. Table 1 lists the main topics occurring in the conversations between G2 female members and Table 2 enumerates the main topics found in the conversations between G1 female members.

The numbers refer to how many times a specific speaker talked about a general topic. I also distinguished who, among the speakers, introduced each topic, both successfully and unsuccessfully. A topic was considered to be introduced unsuccessfully when it was not picked up straight away by the rest of the conversation participants.

Table 1: Listing of topics of conversation and of who first introduced them in the conversations between G2 female speakers

Topic introduced by → Topics of conversation ↓	Lise	Zita	Francine
References to the recordings		3	1
Medical-related topics, hospital anecdotes	9 (1)	7 (5)	5
Zita’s interview to get in nursing school, nursing studies & nursing profession in general	9	12	23 (1)
Today’s individualist society			1
Dieting	2	1	1
Marijuana		1 (1)	
Good summer	1	1	
Group of friends: -close-knit group	1		
-possessiveness within group	2	2	
-more male members than female ones	2	1	
Friends & family: -Zita’s: -Manu		1 (1)	
-Ludo		1	
-Léopold	1	5	
-Anne & her ex boyfriend	2	2	
-Zita’s brother & his girlfriend	2	3	
-Camille (girl)	2	2	
-Xavier	4	1	
Ex boyfriends: -Zita’s: -Eric	4 (1)	17	
-Will	1	2	
-Jérémy	1	8	
-Lise’s: -Nico	7	3	1

-Baptiste	5	1	
Zita's latest style: punk		1	
Zita's embarrassing Halloween story		1	
Zita's identification with Bridget Jones		1	
Anne Cozeret	1	2	
Number of topics introduced successfully	56	79	32
Number of topics introduced unsuccessfully	2	7	1

I have put parentheses around the number of unsuccessful topics i.e. topics which were not picked up by the rest of the conversation participants.

Table 1 reveals that the speaker with the highest rate of successful introductions also has the highest score for unsuccessful ones. This can be explained quite logically by the fact that if you play an active role within a conversation, leading its direction in a way, proportionally you are likely to fail in introducing a new topic more in fact than someone who rarely takes the lead.

Table 2: Listing of topics of conversation and of who first introduced them in the conversations between G1 female speakers

Topic introduced by → Topics of conversation ↓	Anick	Roberte	Lucienne	Dorine
Food-related topics				
-Tea		1		1
-Cooking tips		1	1 (1)	2
-Anecdotes				2
-Dieting		1		
Preparations for New Year celebrations	1	3	2	2
Work-related topics, Retirement	7	3	7	
Temperature indoors			1	
Children-grand children		(1)	(1)	
Haircuts		1		
Tea cups and saucers		1		
Anecdote re. fact they're always carrying loads in car		1		
Dogs	1	1		1
Solange	2			
Léon	1		1	
Roberte's furniture restorer		2		
Number of topics introduced successfully	12	15	12	8
Number of topics introduced unsuccessfully		1	2	

I have put parentheses around the number of unsuccessful topics i.e. topics which were not picked up by the rest of the conversation participants.

Contrary to what happened in the conversations between G2 female members, Table 2 reveals that the highest number of unsuccessful introductions does not belong to the person with the highest score for successful ones. Maybe older female speakers generally have a less 'offensive' speaking style and they give each other more consideration overall.

Among G1 female speakers, the difference between the person who introduces the most topics and the person who introduces the least topics is not very big and far smaller than the one we found between G2 female speakers. This seems to reveal a more balanced way of sharing the floor at least of leading the conversation among G1 female speakers. Maybe with age women

learn that what matters in conversations with their friends is not how many topics they introduce successfully but rather how well they manage to develop each one of them.

In fact, the following finding seems to corroborate this very conclusion since fewer topics were raised overall in the conversations between G1 female members with a total of 15 subjects being discussed compared to 26 in the conversation between G2 female members.

However, other factors are to be considered here: first, the overall duration of conversations of course. The conversations between G2 female members lasting 2 hours 37 minutes compared to 1 hour 43 minutes for the conversations between G1 female members, it seems only natural and logical that in that time, more topics were discussed.

Finally, the circumstances in which these conversations were recorded were different: C1 for instance took place at a time when G2 female participants had not seen each other for a while, a few months to be precise and therefore, their conversation aims at going over a lot of topics quite rapidly in order to inquire on as many areas of each other's life as possible. On the other hand, in C3 and C4, G1 female speakers met for afternoon tea, as they often do and it had not been long at all since the last time they saw each other. So their conversation fulfils a different goal; they are in fact simply maintaining their regular contact and do not have that much news to share with each other.

3.2.2 *What function do these topics have?*

This brings us to the various functions of talk. Indeed, a quick look at Tables 1 and 2 confirms how varied the topics of conversation talked about by women friends in spontaneous conversations are. However, as we have just discussed, it is possible to organise these topics around their function within the conversation.

For example, some of the topics allow women friends to catch up, and this is consistent with the conclusions of previous research (see Coates, 1996: 70). Women friends like and need to keep each other up to scratch with what is happening in their own lives. For example, in 'work-related topics, retirement' (Table 2), Lucienne tells Anick and Roberte she recently retired and how she feels about it; in 'medical-related topics, hospital anecdotes' (Table 1), Zita describes how the work experience she is doing is teaching her many things about hospitals in general and the nursing profession in particular.

Among G2 female speakers, another topic that fulfils this role of catching up is that of 'ex-boyfriends'. This topic can also be described as talk which is about significant people in women's lives (which has also been shown to be a key feature of women's talk in previous research projects, see Coates, 1996 among others).

In the conversations between the female speakers in this study, such talk is particularly found in the conversations between G2 members. Indeed, G1 female speakers only develop the topic of 'children and/or grand children' twice whereas G2 female speakers spend a large proportion of their time talking about their ex-boyfriends, friends and family.

Indeed, at one point in the conversation, Zita and Lise are telling each other about their summer and their summer flings. In doing so, they even exchange intimate details of sexual relationships. The fact that these young women feel comfortable enough with each other to talk about such personal things as their relationships with their partner (or partners) hints at an essential side of women's talk: its intimacy, the sense of connection between women that it engenders, and also its potential as a collaborative tool for exploring our world.

Women also feel they can talk about intimate things because of the mutuality of their talk. This leads us to a different function of women's talk: the sharing of experiences. Coates (1996: 52) suggests that women believe that 'this mirroring exchange of personal experience' might improve understanding and therefore improve the quality of relationships.

She noticed that this function of mutual self-disclosure is typical of women friends' talk because 'it allows us to talk about difficult subjects, to check our perceptions against those of our friends, and to seek support'. Women friends feel safe with each other; they feel they can be themselves, which helps them get involved in what Coates (1996: 58) calls 'vulnerable talk' precisely because it is 'exchanged', not just one-sided.

We can find examples of this in my recordings. If we look at the following excerpt, we can see that the women in this conversation tend to reinforce this mutuality of their talk by often using the personal pronoun *moi*.

(1) [in C4, G1 female speakers are talking about retirement]

→ **Anick:** remarque selon le-Claude je vois / y va toucher la MSA / c'est la (mutuelle)
Lucienne: et oui /

Anick: agricole / 3000 Francs par mois /=
Lucienne: =et oui / et oui / il est de mon âge Claude / il a-il

Anick: [mm / [je
Lucienne: m'avait [dit là cet été / y m'a dit / Lucienne / je suis en train de faire mon [mon

→ **Anick:** veux dire si tu fais-un commerçant / on touche heu [3000 Francs /=
Lucienne: (plan) retraite [et oui / =et oui / les

Anick: =3000 Francs par [mois /
Lucienne: commerçants / m'en parle pas /= [et oui / ... alors moi / quand j'

Anick: [c'est pour ça que /
Lucienne: ai fait mon [dossier retraite / y m'ont dit / mais Madame heu / vous êtes certaine

Lucienne: que vous allez plus travailler? / je l'ai regardée la dame / ah non / non non

Anick: [j'ai travaillé 38 ans pour 3000 Francs par mois [hein /
Lucienne: non [non / [et oui / et oui / et j'ai

Lucienne: dit / non non /= =je sais pas pourquoi elle m'a
Robertte: =pourquoi elle demandait ça? /=

Lucienne: posé cette question dernièrement / j'ai dit / Madame / ah / j'ai dit / non non / j'

Lucienne: ai 60 ans bientôt et je-j'arrête hein / je sais pas parce que peut être y'en a qui

→ **Anick:** [ah ouais? /
Lucienne: vont peut être au delà? / j'en sais rien [hein / j'ai dit / non /=
Robertte: =moi / y'a une

Anick: ah [oui? /
Robertte: enseignante à l'école / elle vient-elle arrête en mars / elle aura 65 ans / [ça fait

Anick: =[[oui /= [oui / =c'est
Lucienne: =[[mm /= =oui oui /=

- Roberte:** tard hein /= =même avec les élèves / ça fait un [décalage /=
-
- Anick:** sûr /= [[c'est à dire-
Lucienne: [et oui / et puis c'
Roberte: =hein? / ... [[on voit- on voit qu'elle a du mal à les suppor[ter hein /
-
- Anick:** =t'as pas les mêmes idées après /=
Lucienne: est vrai heu-= =tu as pas les mêmes idées et puis
-
- Lucienne:** / on voit après c'est...
Roberte: mais enfin / les élèves heu l'aiment bien / ils lui ont offert
-
- Roberte:** là parce que le-c'est les aide-les élèves aide soignant donc heu / leur formation va
-
- Anick:** mm /
Roberte: s'terminer / et ils lui ont offert un vélo hollandais avant Noël / pour sa
-
- **Anick:** =moi je vois hier / j'ai travaillé pour la-la journée / et ben / y'a
Lucienne: ah ouais /
Roberte: retraite /=
-
- Anick:** une-une dame qui était de Paris et [bon heu / on a discuté deux minutes / elle m'a
Lucienne: [mm /
-
- Anick:** [parlé de Axia tu sais /= =elle m'a demandé de ses nouvelles parce qu'elle
Lucienne: [oui / =oui oui /=
-
- Anick:** m'a dit / c'est elle qui me coiffe d'habitude / j'lui ai dit / vous êtes d'Aubenas? /
-
- Anick:** elle m'a dit / non / je suis de passage / [j'ai une maison ici donc je viens [de
Lucienne: ah [oui / [oui...
-
- Anick:** temps en temps / et pis-j'ai su sa vie quoi en dix [minutes de couleur / je me disais-
Lucienne: oui oui / [ça c'est terrible / ah oui /
Roberte: <LAUGHTER>
-
- Anick:** heu j'ai plus l'habitude de la [clientèle moi /=
Lucienne: oh la la / c'est ça hein / [non / =et non non non / ça c'est
-
- **Anick:** [je me disais / tu pourrais plus le supporter /
Lucienne: sûr / moi je le com[prends /
-

More traditionally 'feminine' or domestic topics, associated with women's appearance, women's activities and their home, also appear in the female conversations, especially the one taking place in G1.

G2 female speakers in my recordings talk about 'dieting' but apart from that, they mostly concentrate on interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, G1 female speakers develop topics on 'haircuts', 'food', 'home furnishing' and 'preparations for the New Year celebrations'.

In my recordings, I also found a few topics involving the discussion of serious more intellectual ideas but, as the conversational data reveals, such talk nearly always makes links between the general and the personal, and very often discussion of serious issues will either arise from the telling of a personal anecdote or will be reinforced by such stories related to personal experience.

This finding corresponds to those of similar studies (see Coates, 1996 among others). In C4 for example, while talking about work-related issues, G1 female speakers mention how hard it is to work in an all female environment and also how tough it gets to do your job as you grow older. The question of retirement and pensions is also raised and G1 female speakers express their fear regarding the future of the system. As for G2 female speakers in C1, they discuss at great length the health system and criticise the way hospitals are managed, complaining about how individualist today's society has become. Again, these discussions are complemented by various personal stories and anecdotes.

Contrary to what Coates (1996: 71) found in her study of women talk, work seems to be a prominent topic in my recordings, and for both groups, if only as a starting point to discuss deeper more serious issues as we have just seen.

3.3 The male-only conversations

Let's now turn to the male-only conversations. Generalisations regarding 'men's talk' often describe the informal talk of male friends as being centred on impersonal topics and the exchange of information. Let us examine whether this stereotype of all-male interaction is borne out by the data in the Monteil study.

3.3.1 *What do men talk about?*

I have listed the main topics of conversation taking place between the male speakers in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Listing of topics of conversation and of who first introduced them in the conversations between G2 male speakers

Topic introduced by → Topics of conversation ↓	Albert	Louis	Léopold
References to the recordings	7	3	7
Food & drink-related topics	2	2	
Preparations for New Year celebrations		1	
Weather			1
Le Monteil			
-Le Monteil in winter	1		
-Coste restaurant	1	1	
-good memories	1		
Smoking joints	1	1	1
Playstation, internet, computer	5		
Television, MTV, DVDs	3		
Albert's mobile phone: texts & ring tone	5	2	2
Conversational styles			
-male conversational style			1
-difference between male and female topics of conversation			1
Anecdotes re. road directions			1

Ashtray made of yogourt pot	1		
Game called Loup Garrou		1	
Albert's band	2	1	2
Albert's birthday	1		
Louis's girlfriend, Virginie		1	
Gerard & his daughter	2		1
Xavier	3	2	
Camille		1	
Anne		1	
Ludovic	1		1
Number of topics introduced successfully	36	17	18
Number of topics introduced unsuccessfully			

I have put parentheses around the number of unsuccessful topics i.e. topics which were not picked up by the rest of the conversation participants.

Table 4: Listing of topics of conversation and of who first introduced them in the conversations between G1 male speakers

Topic introduced by → Topics of conversation ↓	Ivan	Kris	Léon
References to the recordings	4	6	4
Apéritif-alcool	2	2	
Weather & its consequences	2		
Renovation work			
-Lise's house	3		1
-Léon's beams & Raphael's wood work	10	3	5
Sports			
-Football	4	6	5
-Rugby	1		1
Hunting-related topics	6	2 (1)	7
Mushroom picking	3	4	2 (1)
Bin collection		1	1
The village baker's oven & how people use it to put garbage	2	3	2
Lise's freezer	1		
George	2	2	2
Antoine	1	1	
Louis		1	1
Maria	1		
Number of topics introduced successfully	42	31	31
Number of topics introduced unsuccessfully		1	1

I have put parentheses around the number of unsuccessful topics i.e. topics which were not picked up by the rest of the conversation participants.

The first noticeable thing which emerges from Table 3 is the fact that none of the younger male speakers were unsuccessful in trying to introduce topics and Table 4 reveals that only twice did a topic failed to be picked up in the conversation. This might in fact reveal that, contrary to what is usually thought, the organisation of men's talk can be smooth and collaborative. Syntactic, semantic and prosodic clues are interpreted so accurately to predict the end of current speaker's turn that there are no interruptions which silence current speaker. And very little gap too between the end of one turn and the beginning of the next.

If we compare Tables 3 and 4, we can see that the difference between the person who introduces the most topics and the one who introduces the least topics is greater in the conversation between the younger male participants. As with the female speakers, it seems things are slightly more balanced among the older male speakers whereas in the conversation between the younger male participants, one of them seems to have slightly more hold on the direction of the conversation.

The fact that both men and women in the Monteil study seem to have different attitudes towards topic introduction and control according to which sub-group they belong to could mean that age is the decisive factor here as opposed to sex. Indeed, with time, both male and female speakers seem to learn that introducing a topic successfully is not everything. They seem to value talking about a topic extensively rather than rushing through different subjects.

This conclusion is reflected in the fact that fewer topics were raised overall in the conversation between the older male participants with a total of 16 subjects being discussed compared to 24 in the conversation between the younger male participants. This is quite surprising since the conversation between the older male participants lasted 37 minutes in total whereas the younger male participants only managed to speak for 29 minutes.

As for the nature of the topics being discussed between the male speakers in my recordings, we can notice that some of them could be described as being more traditionally masculine: drinking, smoking marijuana and modern technology in general (mobile phones, playstation and video games, internet) for the younger ones as well as the television which they insisted was left on in the background and for the older ones, politics (when discussing the new laws on hunting), hunting, building work, drinking, sports (football and rugby) and a specific interest of this group of friends, i.e. mushroom picking.

Talking about politics has been looked into in previous research in terms of its function for men. According to Cameron (1990: 111), 'exchanging details about public news rather than private news has the advantage that it does not make men personally vulnerable: the information they are bartering has nothing to do with them'. In this way, she suggests that 'men are able to preserve the 'sacred boundary between inside and outside', the private and public spheres' (Cameron, 1990:109). This seems to be the case in my recordings of the older men's conversations too.

I would also like to pay more attention to the topic of sports (developed by the older male friends in my recordings) as the subject has been touched on in previous research (see for example Cameron, 1997; Johnson and Finlay, 1997). Indeed, 'the status of sports as a resource for talk available to North American men of all classes and racial/ethnic groups, to strangers as well as friends' has been highlighted in the past (Cameron, 1997: 50 reporting one of her students' analysis) and it was even suggested that "'sports talk' is a typically masculine conversational genre in the US' (ibid.). Johnson and Finlay (1997: 137) argue that talking about football solidifies relationships between men and Sabo and Jansen (1992: 173) refer to 'the social construction of hegemonic masculinity typically perpetuated through sporting activity and sports reporting'.

The older men in my recordings all talk about football and rugby quite a lot (17 times in total out of 103 topics: 5 times for Ivan, 6 for Kris and 6 for Léon) but could we go as far as saying that 'sports talk' is characteristic of men's talk in my study? The fact that the younger male friends do not mention sports once in their conversations would contradict this statement and this brings us to a crucial point which was made by Cameron (1997): unisex conversations are not only about masculinity or femininity but they are a 'sustained performance' of masculinity or femininity. 'What is important in gendering talk is the 'performative gender work' the talk is doing; its role in constituting people as gendered subjects' (Cameron, 1997: 59). What this means is that the men in my study are performing

gender; they are constructing their masculinity through the talk they do with their male friends (and respectively for the women of course). But what becomes apparent is that different groups of male friends have different ideas of what being a man is all about. These ideas might change with age and with the general setting in which they meet among other things, in particular in mixed and single-sex company. Cameron (1997: 69) argues that 'in many circumstances, men are under pressure to constitute themselves as masculine linguistically by avoiding forms of talk whose primary association is with women/femininity' and maybe this is why the older male speakers in my study behave this way. As for the younger male friends in my recordings, maybe they feel 'sports talk' does not constitute a 'manly enough' topic anymore since more and more young women are interested in various sports and do often talk about it. Perhaps as a consequence, the G2 male speakers have chosen another topic which helps them enforce certain norms of masculinity, that of modern technology in all its shapes and forms (mobile phones, video games, internet).

Another topic which is absent from the list of traditionally masculine topics found in my recordings of the men's conversations, this time for both G1 and G2 male friends, is the topic of work. This is quite surprising and very interesting indeed, especially since it was a topic discussed at some length by both G1 and G2 female friends as we saw in the previous section. It could be argued that the main reason why the older male speakers did not talk about work is because they are now retired but this cannot be taken as a valid explanation since G1 female friends are also retired but it did not prevent them from talking about their working life and especially about how hard working full-time became as they grew older. As for the younger male friends, not once did they mention their work whereas G2 female friends shared their experience of working in a hospital for some time, which then led to more general discussions about the medical system in general.

3.3.2 *What function do these topics have?*

Let us now see whether the claim that most topics raised by men in unisex settings are impersonal is true in the Monteil study. As soon as you examine Tables 3 and 4, it becomes apparent that in fact all the topics discussed by the men in my recordings are indeed quite impersonal: take for example the weather for both age groups, the various topics dealing with modern technology for the younger male speakers and for the older male friends, sports, renovation work and hunting. At no moment does it seem like the male friends in my study are discussing personal subjects or sharing intimate talk. They are not talking about their feelings, nor are they sharing experiences. No vulnerable talk takes place in the male-only conversations under scrutiny, no self-disclosure of any kind. They do not mirror each other's turns, not to the same extent than women do anyway, and do not seem to expect their talk to be mutual. The function of their conversations does not seem to be to support each other. Maybe male friends do not feel the need to disclose their intimate thoughts and feelings to each other as women do or maybe they do not feel doing so would be appropriate for them because it does not correspond to their idea (and society's in general for that matter) of masculinity.

All these observations have been made by other researchers such as, for example, Coates (1996) or Pilkington (1998) and they also correspond to previous accounts of male patterns of friendship (Johnson and Aries, 1983b; Pleck, 1975; Miller, 1983; Seidler, 1989). Pleck (1975: 233), for instance, argues that, in the case of American male, friendships are sociable rather than intimate: 'male sociability (...) is not characteristically a medium for self-exploration, personal growth or the development of intimacy'. As for Seidler (1989: 7), a social theorist working in Britain, he argues that 'masculinity is an essentially negative identity learnt through defining itself against emotionality and connectedness'.

The men in my corpus, both from G1 and G2, do not seem to talk about significant people in their life as the women do. Indeed, only once did a male speaker talk about his partner (Louis in C6 but just to mention she has been involved in designing a video game) and quite rarely do they mention family members. However, they quite often talk about friends, neighbours or acquaintances (either positively or negatively, sometimes even gossiping¹) using narratives for example. But they do not seem to use the conversations they have with their male friends as a way to catch up as the women do.

What seems to matter for the male speakers in my recordings is the exchange of information. Of course, all talk involves information exchange but we have seen that in the talk of the women's friends in the Monteil study, exchanging information is less important as a goal of talk than establishing and maintaining good social relations. However, it seems that the accomplishment of friendship for the men in my recordings involves precisely this exchange of information. Coates (1997: 125) found the same thing in her study and she explained that 'this valuing of information, that is, of factual information, is clearly related to men's preference for impersonal topics, and for topics which coincide with areas of expertise'.

She also found that that in a unisex setting, men do indeed often tend to play the expert, which means 'that conversational game where participants take it in turns to hold the floor and to talk about a subject which they are expert on' (see Coates, 1997: 120). Coates (1996: 283) showed that, on the contrary, women's conversations are characterised by women friends avoiding being positioned as an expert. The men in my recordings (especially the older ones) seem to do exactly what Coates described when talking with their male friends, i.e. they want to play the expert, in other words they want to appear to be the most knowledgeable person on a specific topic. The following excerpt is a good illustration of this.

(2) [in C7, the older male friends are talking about hunting; Kris gives his friends a few figures he came across in an article and soon after, Léon tells them about this new hunting law he read about in the same article; Kris disagrees on the information given by Léon and they seem to finally agree]

Ivan: l'autre fois / y'avait François qui était posté / ben on était ensemble non? /=
Kris: =ouais /=

Ivan: =qu'on s'est arrêté pour heu pour [parler avec lui / il avait un fusil / une carabine /
Léon: [mm

Ivan: avec le laser / =tu vois avec le point lumineux /
Kris: =ah ouais=
Léon: mm ouais /=

Ivan: [bon attends / c'est-c'est plus de la chasse ça! /=
Kris: [ouais / =ben oui mais qu'est-ce qu'tu veux /

¹ Eckert and Connell-Ginet (2003: 99) define gossip as 'evaluative (and often critical) commentary on absent parties'. Gossip was also found in the female-only conversations in my recordings but it was found more in the male-only conversations, which is quite surprising indeed. What is interesting is that for both men and women, gossip does not necessarily make the absent others look bad; the talk may be very sympathetic and understanding or even highly positive. Of course, both men and women in my recordings may share damaging observation or critical comments about absent others at some point in order to forge bonds with the other speakers and to reassert group membership.

Kris: y'z ont tout ça et puis en plus de ça / y tuent pas alors soit disant y'a le maire qui a

Ivan: [200-250 sangliers /=

→ **Kris:** parlé là / il a dit que / on a tué ici 350 heu-= =350 / hein

Léon: =ah oui / [c'est dans l'article /

Kris: dans l'article / il l'a bien dit / 350 / j'sais pas où y sont les 350 parce qu'on dit-on

Kris: dit que normalement ici avec heu Valgorge et pis heu Laboule / y'en a eu 100 de

Kris: sangliers / tous les ans y'en a 100 / alors ces 350 / c'est p't'être pour tout [l'

Léon: [ah mais

Ivan: ouais mais y'a Rocles / y'a-=

Kris: département hein! / =ah peut être / ouais

Léon: y'a Rocles avec ! / ouais ()

Kris: ouais / (...)

...

Kris: non parce que normalement l'ouverture c'était pas hier / c'tait aujourd'hui /=

Ivan: =ça ouvre

Ivan: aujourd'hui /=

→ **Léon:** =mm / alors / j'ai lu sur l'même article qu'en fonction d'une nouvelle

Léon: loi qui était passée en heu juin 2002 / y-ils n'avaient le droit de chasser que jusqu'à

Kris: =voilà /= =non / si

Léon: midi /= =ça signifie qu'on peut s'promener dans les bois aujourd'hui? /=

→ **Kris:** t'es-si t'es [seul! / non non y'a-y a-y'en a-justement j'ai lu l'article / heu /

Léon: [aux champis / mm /

Kris: c'était une dérogation qui s'était faite depuis à partir du premier juillet ou du 15

Kris: juillet j'm'en rappelle plus j'm'en rappelle plus c'qui a-à partir du 15 juillet qu'y

Léon: mm /

Kris: z avaient le droit de telle heure le matin à telle heure et pis le soir jusqu'au

Léon: mm /

Kris: coucher du soleil / voilà c'qui était marqué /= =en solitaire /=

Léon: =ah mais en-en solitaire? /=

Kris: =voilà hein /=

Léon: =sur tes terres si tu es chasseur /= =non mais j'veux dire les battues / mais

Kris: [ben ouais non mais-

→ **Léon:** je le relierai [mieux / y me semble qu'y disaient qu'y-ils n'avaient plus le droit

Kris: ah / j'[sais pas / c'est nouveau ça / [ah peut
Ivan: [ah je l'ai pas lu ça /
Léon: que de chasser jusqu'à heu jusqu'à midi / [et oui /

Kris: être / oui remarque /= =remarque ça s'rait
Ivan: =ah ouais? / ah mais c'est pas-=
Léon: ça date de heu =juin 2002 /=

Kris: bien! /= [ben alors! /=
Ivan: =[[ben ça bien sûr! / =ben bien sûr!
Léon: =[[ben ça permet aux promeneurs ou [aux heu-

In this example, we can notice that the older male speakers use *non* or *mais* quite a lot, sometimes together (*non mais*). These words seem to be used for their contrastive function since they allow the speaker to introduce a different point of view on the topic being discussed or contrastive information to the previous speaker's turn. These introductory words which allow the older men in my recordings to express minor disagreements are one of the reasons why the older male friends' conversations are perceived as argumentative. But in fact, I believe that the older men in my study use disagreement as a means of signalling solidarity and maintaining group cohesion, not only as way to challenge each other as men. Indeed, they appear to identify with such competitive behaviour and to see it as appropriate masculine behaviour.

This does not seem to be the case for the younger male friends though. Indeed, G2 male friends do not use *non* or *mais* in their conversations and do not once try to contradict each other. They do not seem to value disagreements as the older male speakers do. It seems their understanding of masculinity is different from that of the older male friends. To the younger men in my study, being a man does not seem to mean disagreeing or arguing and this is reflected in their talk which can hardly be considered to be competitive. Indeed, the way they talk corresponds more often to a one-at-a-time floor than to a shared collaborative floor.

For example, during one of their conversations, the three friends all take on the role of football commentators, giving various facts and figures about players and matches and also adding their own comments and impressions about these things. The expert status seems to be shared equally between them, which is very interesting indeed and the floor seems to be polyphonic and quite collaborative. However, at one point in their conversations, when the older male friends talk about wood work, the way in which they share the expert status is by each holding the floor for a while, in other words by each doing a little monologue. Monologues have been found to be characteristic of the talk of male friends and to be associated with 'expertism' (see Coates (1997) among others). The presence of monologues is often consistent with a one-at-a-time floor-holding pattern and this is encouraged by non-personal topics in particular.

So it seems that, even though the men in my study like to play the expert and exchange information rather than sharing their experiences and feelings in a trusting and non-judgemental environment (as the women in my recordings do), they do so in a not entirely competitive way since they either take it in turn by each talking at some length about the topic being discussed or share the expert status expressing themselves more or less in a single voice. They also provide each other with regular feedback using minimal responses such as *ouais* or *mm*. This last observation contradicts the findings of some studies (see for example Pilkington, 1998) which showed the exact opposite, i.e. that 'males do not provide minimal feedback and often do not respond in any way to others' comments' (Pilkington, 1998: 266). But it does confirm the

conclusions of some linguists who did find that men use minimal responses to mark their continued presence in the conversation (for example, Coates, 1997: 118).

4 Conclusion

Like most research on gender and conversational behaviour, this is a small-scale study and it is important, therefore, not to generalise beyond the limits of the data. The study suggests that topics of conversation tend to be chosen and used in different ways by the female and male speakers in this study, like conversational strategies such as questions or minimal responses (see, for discussion, Maltz and Borker, 1982). Friendship is a relationship of equals, but like much social behaviour, it is also a gendered activity and women and men draw on differential modes of conversational organisation to “do” same-sex friendship. We have seen that the choice and function of topics of conversation are one aspect among many others in which they do so. However, it is essential to remember that the similarities between the conversational practices of men and women are at least as important as the differences.

It would be interesting to see how both the male and female speakers behave in mixed conversations and I hope to be able to do so at a later date. What the analysis of the single-sex interactions has given us so far is a glimpse into the role that is played by topics of conversation in the construction and development of friendships. As Cheshire (2000: 260) pointed out, ‘perhaps a glimpse into some of the complexities is the best that we can hope to achieve’.

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Transcription conventions

Sequencing

- 1) Simultaneous utterances** Utterances starting up simultaneously are linked together with double left-hand brackets [[]].
- 2) Overlap**
 - a) beginning of overlap** When utterances overlap but do not start up simultaneously, the point at which overlap begins is marked by a single left-hand bracket [.
 - b) end of overlap** The point where overlapping utterances stop overlapping is marked with a single right-hand bracket].
- 3) Latching or contiguous utterances** When there is no interval between adjacent utterances produced by different speakers, this run-on is captured by placing an equals sign = at the end of one speaker's line and another one at the beginning of the subsequent speaker's turn. Latching can occur with more than one speaker, for instance if two speakers begin simultaneously and with no interval between their start and the end of the last speaker's talk. Similarly, latching can occur at the end of overlapped speech when two utterances end simultaneously and are latched onto by a next.
- 4) Concurrent conversations** As distinct from concurrent turns or utterances, concurrent conversations refer to extended passages of dialogue between two or more participants that occurred simultaneously with other passages of dialogue going on between other participants. The boundaries of such concurrent conversations will be clearly indicated by comments on the relevant transcripts.

Intervals within and between utterances

- 1) Hesitations** Hesitations are defined as brief pauses within turns, as opposed to those between turns. They are transcribed by three dots, as follows: ...
- 2) Pauses** Significant pauses in the conversation are marked within parentheses as follows (...). For pauses exceeding 3 seconds in length, the length of pause is specified in seconds, for instance (4.0).

Characteristics of speech production

Where possible, I have used punctuation to capture information obtained through rhythm and intonation analysis using Halliday's system (see Halliday, 1994: chap. 8). Punctuation marks are not referring to grammatical units.

1) Forward slash These mark termination (whether grammatically complete or not), or certainty, which is usually realised by falling intonation. By implication, the absence of any turn-final punctuation indicates speaker incompleteness, either through interruption or trailing off.

2) Question marks These are used to indicate a rising intonation as in questions or to mark what I interpret as uncertainty.

3) Exclamation marks These mark what I interpret as the expression of counter-expectation (e.g. surprise, shock, amazement, etc.).

4) Words in capital letters Upper case is used conservatively to show emphatic syllables and/or increased volume.

5) Softness A percent sign is used to show a passage of talk that has a noticeably lower volume than the surrounding talk.

6) False starts A false start occurs when a speaker 'rethinks' out loud and rephrases without hesitation what they were saying before completing the first version. This is shown with a hyphen.

7) Repetitions They are all shown in full.

8) Fillers Following established usage, the most commonly used fillers are represented orthographically as follows: *mm*, *ouais* (for *oui*), *ben* (for *bien*), *nan* (for *non*), *hein*. Other quasi-linguistic particles are represented quasi-phonemically, e.g. *ai!* (exclamation of pain).

Transcriber's doubts and comments

1) Non-transcribable segments of talk These are indicated by empty parentheses (). The length of the parenthesised space gives an indication of the approximate length of the untranscribed talk. In the speaker designation column, the empty parentheses indicate inability to identify a speaker.

2) Uncertain transcription Other than the timings of intervals, items (words) within parentheses indicate the transcriber's guess. They are especially dubious hearings or speaker identifications.

3) Paralinguistic and non-verbal information Additional information about relevant non-verbal behaviour is given in English within angled brackets in capitals, for instance <LAUGHTER>. Such information is only included where it is judged important in making sense of the interaction. Inferred non-verbal behaviour (e.g. clues which the transcriber assumes happened in order for the situation to make sense) is shown with the addition of a question mark.

Presentation conventions

1) Arrows When placed in the left-hand margin of the transcript, they are used to call the readers' attention to particular parts of the transcript. The researcher will inform the reader of the significance of the referent of the arrow by discussing it in the text.

2) Ellipses Horizontal ellipses indicate that an utterance is partially reported, that is, parts of the same speaker's utterance are omitted. They are represented by [...].