FOUR-PARTY CONVERSATION AND GENDER

Astrid Berrier

1. Introduction

Conversation has been defined in numerous ways, but primarily as an activity "that enables one to describe the means used to construct the social order" (Coulon 1987: 70). Moreover, it is an activity that facilitates the construction of interpersonal relations (Carroll 1987). The present study analyzes the types of roles participants play in conversation and the allocation of these roles. In this study, the term "role" is used to refer to the ad hoc position assumed by each participant in a particular interactional situation (interviewer, topic-initiator, etc.). Traditionally, the role of women in conversation has been stereotyped as that of facilitator (sometimes mediator), that is, to make sure that conversations unfold according to certain social conventions such as those defined in books on etiquette (Bernage 1953; Folcalvez 1967). For example, one of the traditional roles of women belonging to higher social classes has been to steer the conversation away from less acceptable topics (e.g., politics). Women's role has been described as that of facilitator, or go-between, in other words as someone in charge of the flow of conversation without having any real power over it. This article attempts to challenge the stereotypes about women's roles within the context of four-party conversations.

At this stage, I should like to recall Traverso's (1995) statement that conversation operates on the basis of equality among its participants, since they are all subject to the same rules. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) made this point clear years before, when they argued that conversational participants (regardless of their numbers) are equal to the extent that they enjoy the same rights and obligations.

A growing number of empirical studies (Bouchard 1987; Traverso 1995; Zamouri 1995) have been examining the positions of participants in interactional situations. As an example, let us consider Bouchard's (1987) analysis of a two-party discussion involving a man and a woman, which exhibits some interesting characteristics about interactional roles. The transcript of the discussion - in which the two participants were assigned the task of talking about fashion for five minutes - reveals that the man assumed the role of interviewer from the outset, leaving the woman with no other choice but to answer his queries. For the remainder of the discussion, the woman's one and only objective was to try

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1 I would like to thank Benoit Ouellette for the translation of the present article.

2 Our translation.

3 Data supplied in Bouchard’s article and “revisited” here by taking gender into account.
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to escape a role she had not chosen for herself. One may ask whether the male strategy of question-asking reflected a feeling of insecurity (Berrier 1994a) or constituted a form of control-taking. In the end, the conversation no longer had the features of a discussion, having gradually transformed into an interview. Other research, this time on oral proficiency of French as a second language (Berrier, 1990), showed that some of the second language (L2) speakers in four-party conversations between two native French speakers and two L2 students took on specific roles and did not relinquish them: one student took as many speaking turns as possible and enjoyed some of the longest turns; another L2 student primarily initiated topics of conversation; and yet another confined herself to the role of question-asking (without actually assuming the role of conversational leader, nor having been assigned the role of interviewer or facilitator).

This study examines the roles played by the participants in four-party conversations, and the allocation of these roles. Two four-party conversations are analyzed in details - one consisting of three women and a man, and the other of two women and two men- and a third one consisting of three men and one woman is also used. I have focused on the following aspects, which I believe are crucial in determining interactional roles: i) turn-taking, especially the relationship between its frequency and leadership; ii) topic initiation also with respect to leadership; and iii) the speech acts of agreement and disagreement and their impact on alliances and schisms.

The primary reference article for research on the organization of conversation is still that of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), which, as we recall, outlines a set of four rules and fourteen observable facts that must be taken into consideration in this type of analysis. However, examining the data and defining a turn has always been problematic. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, an utterance has been defined as any verbal attempt at turn-taking - which may take the form of a simple word, such as "Yeah" - which can be used as a springboard for a longer utterance.

2. Number of parties and roles

As far as the number of conversational participants is concerned, research has been primarily interested in two-party conversations, or simply large-group situations. On two-party conversations, let us make particular mention of the research on telephone conversations (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Whalen et al 1987), doctor/patient interviews (Bange 1992), conversations among intimates (Fishman 1983) and thematic discussions (Bouchard 1987). As for large-group conversations, researchers have been partial to situations in the classroom (Mchoul 1978; Mehlan 1982; Schultz et al 1982), or in university departmental meetings (Edelsky 1981). Until recently, however, three- and four-party conversations had generally been neglected. My interest in the group size of four has sprung out of the following observations made by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) about turn-distribution in a conversation with four or more parties: i) the possibility of some participant(s) being left out; ii) the absence of next-turn guarantees, and the ensuing constraint to seize an opportunity to speak - such conversational dynamics are particularly interesting in that turn-taking is sometimes more difficult in a conversation involving four parties than a conversation involving two, since more people are competing for the floor; iii) some pressure from certain participants for shorter turns; iv) the
occurrence of private conversations in an aside; and v) the possibility of conversational schisms (i.e., two dialogues on two different topics each involving two interactants).

Recently, a number of studies have addressed the topic of three-party conversations and the roles played by participants in this context (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1995; Traverso 1995; Zamouri 1995). Analyzing six conversations in all, Traverso (1995) describes the different roles that are possible in three-party conversations: the spokesperson is a participant who speaks on behalf of two people; the evaluator is a third party, whose evaluation is made in the final turn (1995: 41); the intruder is a participant who responds in the place of another; and the facilitator is one who allocates turns.

By looking at coalitions in three-party conversations, Zamouri's (1995) research ties in with the issue discussed in the present article. Zamouri analyzes two conversations (one among friends and another among strangers) and identifies two exclusive forms of organization: either two of the three participants are antagonistic and the other is a neutral third party who remains uninvolved in the exchange; or the three participants each take turns at being the third party. More specifically, the third interactant either sides with one of the protagonists, or remains a third party, in which case he or she "stays out of the conflict," as Zamouri (1995) comments about one of her conversations, and may play one or more of the following roles: mediator, moderator, provoker and/or facilitator - where the role of facilitator consists in applying rules and in maintaining order in the conversation. Finally, Zamouri (1995) discusses some of the coalition strategies adopted by the interactants in three-party conversations: namely, taking the turn of one's ally, making joint arguments, using the personal pronoun "we" instead of "you," and employing verbal agreement markers, such as "ummm's," softly spoken words or echoes.

The proposed role definitions used in this paper developed out of the conversations in this particular set of data, and are not based on a pre-determined model. I should mention from the outset that in all the four-party conversations (whether symmetrical or not) examined here two people almost systematically stood out and played the interactional role of "leader," while the other two participants assumed the position of ally or moderator, which I hesitate to qualify as secondary. In most cases, it appears that the leaders' objective was to control the conversation, not to facilitate it as is the case in three-party conversations (Traverso 1995). In short, control-takers distinguished themselves from the outset without necessarily turning the situation into a two-party conversation; in fact, the dynamics of this twosome was highly dependent on and, consequently, modified by the interplay of alliances and opposition of the other two participants. When playing the role of allies, the latter were reduced to speech acts of agreement or disagreement, but when playing the role of moderators, they functioned as intermediaries who ensured the smooth running of the interaction. To be more specific, the data examined here showed examples of two leaders, or control-takers, whose relationship was characterized by i) sustained antagonism, ii) unsustained antagonism, or iii) non-antagonism, as well as the emergence of allies (or followers) who were i) relatively constant or ii) periodic, or iii) who also played another role (facilitator). Finally, the data also revealed the emergence of a moderator.
3. Data and methodology

This study attempts to analyze two natural four-party conversations among French-speaking Québécois: an asymmetrical conversation (coded E-14) composed of three women and a man aged between 20 and 25; and a symmetrical conversation (coded E-E) consisting of two women and two men aged between 24 and 30. I shall also refer, although briefly, to a third conversation (coded E-8), another asymmetrical conversation composed of three men and a woman aged between 30 and 35. The conversations were one half-hour long and come from a larger set of data consisting of a dozen hours of tape-recorded conversations. The subjects in E-14 knew each other, since they were all students enrolled in the same university programme. They were brought together in an informal setting over a cup of coffee between classes on campus. The subjects in E-E knew each other more intimately, and their conversation was recorded during an evening dinner party with their consent. E-8 follows the same pattern as E-E. Although the microphone was visible (for ethical reasons), the participants seemed to forget this constraint fairly quickly and adopted their usual conversational style.

While the topics of conversation were left to the participants' own initiative, it should be noted that no "official" facilitator was assigned to either group. In other words, the conversations were neither interviews, nor discussions on a pre-determined topic. Since topic selection is an important aspect of conversational studies (Fishman 1983), knowing who initiates and who forces conversation topics on others, and how these topics are received and/or pursued is useful to understanding the dynamics of any conversation. It is also important to observe if one of the participants attempts to appoint himself or herself as leader, or if the others agree to let that person perform such a role, since it is part and parcel of the process of individual position-taking in the course of conversation, as psychologists have pointed out, or of the mode of group organization, as ethnomethodologists have shown (cf. Bouchard's data, 1987).

Thus the following variables were observed and controlled, respectively: the number of parties in the conversation (four), the gender composition of the conversation (two versus two, or three versus one, etc.), the subjects' age and level of education.

4. Conversation E-14 involving one man and three women

Conversation E-14 begins with the participants (three women FA, FD and FB and a man MC) discussing the following topics: predictions, fortune-telling through cards, the experience of a "déjà vu", and dreams. Ten minutes into the conversation, however, the topic shifts to homework assignments. While everyone seems to cooperate to make the conversation flow smoothly, two of the female participants (FA and FD) emerge as leaders.

4.1. Competition for the role of leader

In the early stages of E-14, the two female participants FA and FD take turns leading the conversation and make many more utterances than FB and MC:

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4 This study was made possible through a grant from the Fonds pour la formation de chercheurs et l'aide à la recherche (FCAR) of the Government of Québec.
Excerpt (1) drawn from E-14 (p.4)

FD: That's just an example! But I mean, y'know, me, I had one of my friends, like, the first time I saw her, like, I got along really well with her y'know as if I'd known her all my life. An', I came home I told myself "It's going to end badly." And naturally it ended badly.

FA: Yeah, well if you thought that from the start

FD: No no. But it happened like, just like that y'know. Everything was going great overnight (?) weird thing

(pause)

FA: But me it- I've already had déjà vus. Sometimes I experience something an' I've- I'm sure I've seen it before

FD: J'tai donné un exemp' là! Mais j'veux dire, tsé moé j'avais une de mes amies, genre, la première fois que l'ai vue là, genre là, j' m'entendais super bien avec elle tsé comme si j'l'avais toujours connue c't'fille là. Pis, j'rent' je me suis dit "Ça va finir mal avec elle". Pis naturellement ça fini mal.

FA: Ouen, bin si tu t'lisais dès l'départ

FD: Non non. Mais c't'arrivé comme, de même là tsé. Ça allait super bien du jour au lend'main (?) truc bizarre

(pause)

FA: Mais moi c'é- J'c déj déjà des impressions déjà-vu. Des fois j'vis un moment pis j'é- chu sûre d'avoir déjà vu c'moment-là

At the start of conversation E-14, FA and FD take successive turns at relating personal anecdotes which are frequently supported by the attention-beginning (Fishman 1983) phrase "Moi, je..." ("Me, I"). According to André-Larochebouvy (1984), this French phrase is used as a means of making oneself stand out and is part of the "agonistic", or competitive, aspect of conversation. The following excerpt provides another example of the competition between FA and FD:

Excerpt (2) drawn from E-14 (p. 7-8)

FA: Yeah- yeah

FD: Well me, I always have these weird dreams

FA: Yeah- yeah

FD: Me, it's like, my psychoanalyst, he tells me (yeah, 'cause I see a psychoanalyst). (laughter) He's always telling me uh, I'm always askin' 'im what they mean my dreams An' he never answers. It's 'cause I always have these dreams like uh the earth is blowing up uh There's a nuclear bomb that blows up uh Like all kinds of things like that. It's really super gross

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5The page numbers are given for reference purposes and as indicators of the length of the conversation. According to the system used here, one page corresponds to 40-60 seconds of conversation.
FA: That's a drag, me-I
FD: [It's awful
FA: [I love sleeping 'cause I'm always having these beautiful dreams
FD: [Ah, you're lucky
FA: [ (?)
FD: 'cause, me, I
FA: But the worst nightmare I had it's gross. It was e: a
FD: But the worst nightmare I ever had, it's gross. It was, uh, a huge dog with big big teeth. He had one tooth here, one here, and two in my back. Right, and he was shakin' me y'know like you shake a rag doll.
FD: Oh, gross!

FA: Ouaoui
FD: Ben moi, j'fais tout l'temps des rêves bizarres
FA: Ouaoui
FD: Moé là, genre mon psychanalyste là, i'm'dit (ouï, pasque j'vas chez un psychanalyste). Rires. I'm'dit tout l'temps e: j'i d'mande tout l'temps qu'est-ce que ça veut dire mes rêves. Pis i'mrépond jamais. C'pasque j'fais tout l'temps des rêves du genre e: la terre explose e: Y-a une bombe nucléaire qui saute e: Genre toute sorte d'affaires de même là. C'est vraiment dégueu au boutte.
FA: C'é platte. Moi, moi j'a
FD: [C'é l'enfer
FA: [J'adore dormir pasque j'fais tout l'temps des beaux rêves
FD: [Ah t'é chanceuse
FA: [ (?)
FD: pasque moé là
FA: Mais le pire cauchemar que j'ai faite c'est dégueu. C'tait e: un gros chien avec des gros gros crocs. Y'avait un croc là, un croc là, pis deux crocs dans mon dos, okay. Pis i'm'brassait tsé comme on brasse une catin là
FD: Ah ouache

Some forty seconds later, FD tells another anecdote about her husband and a car. Thus the conversation unfolds as if the two leaders are quite content to take turns at holding the floor.

4.2. Conversational schisms

A schism occurs when a four-party conversation breaks up into two distinct, simultaneous discussions on different subjects, each involving two participants. It generally lasts a short period of time and can either emerge smoothly and seamlessly (i.e., some participants want to discuss a subject while the others wish to pursue another topic), or be brought about through force. I have chosen to discuss conversations E-14 and E-E in the present article partly because they exemplify the two types of schisms described above.

A schism can be observed in E-14 after twelve minutes of conversation, resulting in a dialogue between FB and FA, and another between FD and MC, the only man in the conversation. As shown in excerpt (3), the schism consists of many utterances barely
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intelligible because of their overlap, with at least three people talking simultaneously:

Excerpt (3) from E-14 (p. 16-7)

MC: [Yeah, that's right (?)
FA: [theory and empirical research, y'know
MC: (?)
FD: Huh?
MC: [(?)
FA: [But, I had this really hard management course that I was sure to flunk
FD: Well now (?)
MC: Ah, yeah
FD: [(?)
FA: [My roomie, she told me she'd climb up the stairs of the St. Joseph Oratory on her knees if she passed.
MC: [(?) that class?
FD: I'm missing two (?)
FA: In the end, she passed, just barely, [except she got (?) C,
MC: [saw yesterday (?)
FA: [an' I got an A-
FD: [Are you serious? How?

MC: [Ouais c'é ça (?)
FA: [théorie et pratique naturelle tsé
MC: (?)
FD: Hein?
MC: [(?)
FA: [Mais, j'avais un cours d'administration super tough que j'tais sûre d'couler
FD: Ben là (?)
MC: Ah ouen
FD: [(?)
FA: [Ma coloc a dit qu'a montrait les marches d'Oratoire Saint-Joseph à g'noux si a l'a passait
MC: [(?) cours là?
FD: I m'en manque deux
FA: En fin d'compte a l'a passé de justesse, [sauf (?) un C.
MC: [(?) voir hier
FA: [Pis, j'ai eu A moins
FD: [É-tu sérieux? Comment ça?

As we can see from the excerpt above, FA has a tendency to monopolize the conversation and, more importantly, to impose herself without taking the other participants' utterances into account - a fact which MC and FD manifestly resent. The situation is aggravated when FA comes across as boasting about her success at school (she complains about her marks which are actually quite good):
Excerpt (4) from E-14 (p. 16)

MC: You got what? You got 82
FA: Yeah, an' it was (laughter)
MC: [It was bad y'know. It was bad
FA: [It was the worst. But I got A minus. I was so pissed off, y'know. A minus.
MC: Ohhhhhh!
FA: No, no but it makes me mad A minus. Y'know, that's not good
FD: [It's awful
FA: [It's average
MC: [It's terrible
FA: A minus
(pause)
MC: That's about right
FA: That's right. No, it's average

MC: T'as eu combien? T'as eu 82, là
FA: Ouen, pis c'tait (rires)
MC: [C'tait poche tsé. C'tait poche
FA: [C'tait l'plus poche. Mais j'ai eu A moins. Ça m'a faite chier là, tsé. A moins.
MC: Ohhhhhh!
FA: Non, non mais ça m'écoeure A moins. Tsé, c'é pas fort là
FD: [C'é épouvantab'
FA: [C'é la moyenne,
MC: [C'teffrayant
FA: A moins
(pause)
MC: A peu près ouen
FA: C'é ça. Non, c'é la moyenne

Occurring immediately before the conversational break-up, this sequence demonstrates that the schism is a form of protest by both MC and FD against FA, and is therefore a context specific schism. FA imposes herself as an uncooperative leader from the outset of the conversation: although she is often asked questions, she never reciprocates, thereby showing a lack of interest in other people's business; furthermore, she never uses the informal personal pronoun "tu" to address the other participants (with one exception on page 4). Her remark about her good marks is, in a manner of speaking, the last straw. FA is so self-absorbed that she does not realize that two of the other participants (MC and FD) are making fun of her. In this case, the schism appears to function as a form of protest, or a "coup," letting FA know that she is breaking the conversational rule of cooperation.

FA does not venture to speak again until seven speaking turns after the end of the schism. Moreover, the frequency of her turns in the ensuing two minutes is considerably reduced, as is illustrated in excerpt (5):
Excerpt (5) from E-14 (p. 17)

FD: Are you serious? How's that?
MC: I went to see him in his office. An' he said "I'm goin'." He should be back on Monday
FD: He should be back on Monday. Y'know, it's a drag
FB: There's gotta be- He must have a deadline for handin' in his marks
MC: [Yeah yeah
FD: That's right. It's growing
MC: It's getting bigger uh The secretary was there
FA: Ah he's so slow, it's awful
FD: He was already slow at school
MC: [Yeah but he got loads of homework in the end eh?
FA: Yeah that's right. He had a huge pile

FD: T'é-tu sérieux? Comment ça?
MC: J'ai été le voir à son bureau. Pis i a dit "J'vas". I devrait rentrer lundi
FD: I devrait rentrer lundi. Tsé, ça écoeure
FB: Non mais tsé faut qu'i aille. Faut qu'i ait- Y-a sûrement une date limite pour les rend' ses notes
MC: [Ouais ouais
FD: C'é ça. Ça grandit
MC: Ça s'agrandit e: La secrétaire était là
FA: Ah qu'i yé pas vite, c'é l'enfer
FD: Y-était déjà pas vite dans ses cours
MC: [Ouen mais y-a r'çu plein d'travaux à fin hein?
FA: Ouen c'é vrai. I n'avait une méchante pile

The schism has the effect of putting FA in her place and brings about a new distribution of the interactional roles, at least among the three women. For instance, FB is allowed to fully assume her role as facilitator: she can be heard asking many questions (excerpt 7) and showing an interest in the other participants' experiences, thus providing verbal recognition of the leaders' contribution and legitimizing their position (see her interaction with FA in excerpt 6). Her role as facilitator is clearly illustrated in excerpts (6) and (7) below:

Excerpt (6) from E-14 (p. 31)

FA: Yeah- yeah, a-a haemorrhage
FD: It's awful
FA: Me too, those towels, the big towels for pregnant women. It would take me fifteen minutes, an' they were full
FB: Yeah
FA: Hell, I bled 'till I was dry
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FB: Yeah

FA: Oua-ouais, une-une hémorragie, là

FD: C'est l'enfer

FA: Moi aussi les serviettes là, les grosses serviettes pour femmes enceintes là là. Ça m'prenait quinze menutes, pis i' z'étaient pleines

FB: Ouais

FA: tab, m' su vidée fouuu, là

FB: Ouais

Excerpt (7) from E-14 (p. 25)

FD: Well anyway, I-I-I had a week between my operation an' the end of my camp. An', I thought it wasn't enough 'cause

FA: [No

FD: [I was pretty bushed

FA: [Yeah

FD: An' I was going into university so

FB: What were you operated for?

FD: I was operated four times on my jaw. It was really wild

FB: What was wrong with your jaw?

FD: It's crooked

FB: Were you born that way or what?

FD: Bin d'toute façon, j-j- j'avais une s'maine entre mon opération pis la fin d'mon camp. Pis, j'trouvais qu'c'était pas assez pasque

FA: [Non

FD: [J'étais pas mal claquée

FA: [Ouais

FD: Pis j'rentrais à l'université fait que

FB: Tu t'es faite opérer pour quoi?

FD: Me su faite opérer quatre fois pour la mâchoire. C'tait super tripant

FB: Qu'est-ce qu'elle avait ta mâchoire?

FD: E croche

FB: T'es née comme ça ou bin tsé?

MC is also able to assume his rightful place, even though he takes very few speaking turns. As a matter of fact, MC begins making long utterances (and even initiates a topic of conversation) toward the end of the recording only:

Excerpt (8) from E-14 (p.33)

FD: Let's talk about something more pleasant (laughter). Y'know (?)

FA: Umm, umm
(short pause)
MC: Yeah well me I've been bitten three times by dogs. So
FB: Oh me, just once in the palm of my hand
FD: Listen! you attract them
MC: Oh I don't know. Anyway, they uh
FA: But are you scared? They can feel it when you're scared
MC: No no it's- No but I didn't used to be scared (laughter)
[laughter
FD: [?] you played with big dogs (?)
MC: (?) well it's 'cause I played with a dog and then at one point in time uh it was on
drugs an' he'd get really uh I dunno what. An' uh anyways, he bit me, he bit my feet.
An' there was another one, it was at one of my neighbour's in Sept-Îles

FD: Parlons d'autres choses plus gaies (rires). Tsé (?)
FA: Mum mum
(courte pause)
MC: Ouen bin moé j'm' su faite mord' trois fois par des chiens. Fait que
FB: Ah moé, jus' une fois dans l' creux d'la main
FD: 'Coudon! tu 'es attires
MC: Ah j'l'sais pas. En tout cas, i e:
FA: Mais t'as-tu peur? I' l'sentent quand t'as peur
MC: Non non c'- Non bin j'avais pas peur avant (rires)
[rires
FD: [?] t'avais joué avec des gros toutous d (?)
MC: (?) bin c'pasque j'avais joué avec un chien pis un m'ment d'nné e: i était su' d'la
dope pis i'dev'nait super e: Chais pas quoi là. Pis e: entuka, i m'a mordu, i m'a
mordu les pieds. Pis y-en a un aut', c'était chez un d'mes voisins à Sept-Îles

A sort of balance is established between FA and FD: the former addresses the latter
directly (using the more familiar "tu" pronoun) and more frequently than before the schism.
The same is true of the relationship between FA and MC, as is shown in excerpt (8) above. In
fact, FA no longer takes control of the conversation in a boastful,"look at me" sort of
way.

4.3. Alliances

Observing the stream of speech acts in conversation - especially those of agreement and
disagreement, and to some extent support, which may be expressed in various ways - can
provide useful clues about the interplay of alliances and opposition among participants. For
instance, before the schism in E-14, a certain partnership appears to be forming between
FD and MC, while FA is working to maintain her role as conversational leader and FB
maintains her independence. Excerpt (9) illustrates the alliance between FD and MC:

Excerpt (9) drawn from E-14 (p.4-5)
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FA: But me it- I've already had déjà vus. Sometimes I experience something an' I've- I'm sure I've seen it before
FD: An'
FA: That, that happens to me
FD: Yeah
MC: Umm, umm.
FA: Imagine
FD: Not you?
MC: No
FD: No?
FB: Me yes
FD: It never happens to you? But you, you all remember your dreams?
FA: Mais moi c'é- J'é déjà des impressions déjà-vu. Des fois j'vis un moment pis j'é- chu sûre d'avoir déjà vu c'moment-là
FD: Pis
FA: Ça, ça m'arrive
FD: Ouen
MC: Mum mum
FA: Imagine
FD: Pas toi?
MC: Non
FD: Non?
FB: Moi oui.
FD: Ça t'arrive jamais? Mais vous vous rappelez de vos rêves, vous aut’?

As we can see, FD behaves as if she were having an exchange with MC only, repeating her question to him and disregarding FB's utterance.

As mentioned earlier, the schism seems to have established a balance among the women (FB and the two former leaders, FD and FA). It has given the participants an opportunity to play their roles freely, even if FD still ignores some of FB's utterances (see excerpt (9) above). After the schism, the alliance between FD and MC remains intact, and FB emerges not only as a facilitator but also as a periodic ally, although she remains independent for the most part.

4.4. Other conversations involving three women and a man

At this stage, it might be useful to examine another conversation (E-10) involving three women and a man, which was recorded among intimate friends (for further analysis of this conversation see Berrier 1997). The topic of discussion in E-10 revolves around what anniversary gift (a concert ticket or a trip) to buy for a couple, how the occasion should be celebrated and who shall organize it. The only man in the conversation (H) clearly wants to "hold the stage" and competes fiercely for the role of leader with one of the women, F2. His preferred strategy to achieve his goal appears to be to ask as many questions as
possible, as is shown in excerpt (10):

**Excerpt (10) from E-10 (p. 6)**

F2: Uh no, F3. Well, I bought the same thing that I bought for F3
F1: Maybe he didn't see it
F2: It was a prof at my school who made a batik
**H:** What's that?
F2: A painting
H: Ah
F2: It's like watercolour
**H:** Ah yeah, the painting that's in- in the living room
F2: With a little Eskimo, an' uh
F1: N- no it's not the same
F2: It's similar
**H:** I didn't see it
F2: Well I, uh
**H:** Well what's that thing in the living room?
F2: Well last year when we talked about it, it- we wanted to get some money to uh buy them a trip.

F2: E: bin non, F3. Bin, j'avais acheté la même chose que c'que j'avais ach'tée à F3 là
F1: I l'a p't'êt' pas vu
F2: C'était un prof à mon école qui avait faite un batik
**H:** C'é quoi ça?
F2: Une peinture là
H: Ah
F2: C'é comme d'l'aquarelle là
**H:** Ah la peinture qu'y-a dans- dans l' salon
F2: Avec un petit esquimaud pis e:
F1: Ne- non c' pas la même
F2: C'é semblable
**H:** J'l'é pas vue
F2: Bin moi, ben
**H:** Bin c'é quoi qu'y-a dans l' salon?
F2: Bin l'année passée quand on n'avait parlé, c'é- on voulait ramasser d'argent pour e: leur payer un voyage

It is clear from excerpt (10) that, although H does not exactly know what a batik is, he seems to know what the discussion is about and is able to say where the object in question can be found (with the help of F2's two explanations). Consequently, one would expect that the topic of explaining the "batik" has come to its conclusion. Nevertheless, H reintroduces this very same topic by asking another question (i.e., "Well what's that thing in the living room?"), thereby making the conversation go round in circles. F2 completely ignores the question and attempts to steer the conversation toward another aspect of the
overall conversation topic (i.e., the anniversary gift). It is interesting to note that, at the end of conversation E-10, the opposition between F2 and H can still be felt, as is illustrated in excerpt (11):

**Excerpt (11) from E-10 (p. 34)**

F1: (...I dunno why, but I don't even know where to ask for my birth certificate. Y'know, before you used to go to your parish
F2?: Umm, umm. Yeah. It isn't there anymore
F1: But now, it's no longer there
H: Well it's at City Hall, I think
F2: It's in the hospital where she was
F1: No, it's at the Court/
F3: No, it's in Montreal now. It was changed. It used to be, Montreal.
F1: (...) Ché pas pourquoi, mais je sé même pas où le d'mander, l'acte de naissance. Tsé avant t'allais dans ta paroisse
F2?: Hum, hum. Oué. C'é pu là asteure
F1: Mé là, c'é même pu ça
H: Bin c' t'a l'hôtel de ville, j'pense
F2: Bin c'é dins hôpitaux où qu'elle était
F1: Non c'é l'palais/
F3: Non, c'é t'à Montréal asteure ça. Ça a été changé. C'tait ça, Montréal

At this point, however, the opposition has spread to all the participants, with each and everyone putting in their two cents' worth. Thus E-10 is a conversation in which the leadership struggle between two participants (H and F2) is sustained for the entire duration of the exchange.

The data for this study also contains a conversation between three women and one man (E-13) in which the role of leader is again shared by two women, though not in a competitive manner. The two women (F1 and F3) are in fact accomplices with one of the two also assuming the role of facilitator. It goes without saying that E-13 is a conversation among close friends. The next two excerpts will illustrate how the two leaders in conversation E-13 successively play the roles of leader, facilitator and accomplice. These two participants (F1 and F3) are by no means antagonistic, nor in competition for control of the conversation. Excerpt (12) establishes the context of the conversation which begins with a participant (F1) trying on a wedding-dress, while her friends (especially F3) are pouring out opinions and advice.

**Excerpt (12) from E-13 (p. 2-3)**

F2: You can try it as well
F3: Try it
F1: I have to try it
F?: Yeah, yeah
F3: It depends on the jewellery you'll wear it with
F2: Well, yeah
H: La-di-da-di-da La-di-da-di-da
F1: Me, I have no jewellery
F3: Well, would you like me to lend you some pearl necklaces? Stop by my place tomorrow
F1: Ah pearl necklaces, I've got some, but
F3: I've got some, if you want some- some jewellery
H: La-di-da-di-da La-di-da-di-da

F2: Tu peux l'essayer aussi
F3: Essaye-là
F1: Faut l'essayer
F?: Oué, oué.
F3: Ça dépend quels bijoux tu vas mettre avec
F2: Ben oué
H : Tou rou tou rou tou rou rou tou rou tou rou
F1: Moi, j'en ai pas d'bijoux, moi
F3: Bin tu veux-tu que j'te prête dé colliers d'perles? T'arrêteras chez nous demain
F1: Ah dé colliers d'perles, j'en é, mais
F3: J'en é si t'en veux dé - dé jewels
H : Tou rou tou rou tou rou tou rou

This particular context (trying on clothes) seems to make the role of facilitating the conversation easier, particularly since the dress F1 is trying on has a rather transparent bodice:

**Excerpt (13) from E-13 (page 9)**

All: laughter
F3: An' everybody on the road can see you there
F1: Mmm! What?
F2: Ah ah
F1: That's nothing
F3: The neighbours 'cross the street, they can see you. Ah! ah!
F2: They'll think it's Paula
F?: Ah ah (?) y'know

Tous: rires
F3: Pis toute le monde dans l'ch'min i te voit là
F1: Hum! Quoi?
F2: Ah ah
Excerpt (13) provides a good illustration of the comradeship that exists among the leaders and the other participants, including H.

Thus, in conversations involving three women and a man, leadership roles are assumed and positions allocated in diverse ways. Moreover, there appears to be little correlation between gender and leadership-role taking and position allocating. However, the symmetrical four-party conversation (two men and two women) included in the data seems to tell a different story.

5. Conversation E-E involving two men and two women

Conversation E-E is composed of two men (H1 and H2) and two women (F1 and F2) who are not only colleagues, but also close friends. After briefly discussing the topics of flying - since one of the male participants (H2) has his pilot's licence - and smoking, the interactants begin discussing the subject of a boat trip to Florida made by a mutual friend of F1’s and H1’s.

5.1. Competition for the role of leader

Since F1 and H1 possess the same information regarding their friend's boat vacation, they quickly begin competing for the role of leader:

Excerpt (14) from E-E (p. 2)

F1: Anyway Paul seemed to be in good health all suntanned
H2: Ah yeah!
F1: It's crazy [he's dark
H2: [Did he have a nice trip?
F1: Yes. [Well they had
H1: [He went to Florida with his boat.
F1: [ (?) boat
H2: It true. Yeah yeah yeah yeah
H1: That's where- when we went to see him, he'd just c- [come back
F1: [he'd just come back
uh [a week or two
H2: [Okay
H1: Wh- [at a wild trip
F1: [?] [?] He showed us some pictures. Uh some-some boats uh big like these ones. Four times bigger than his (?) Y'know like quite respectable
F2: [Paul's boat
F1: [Yeah
F1: Paul's
H1: His brother
F2: Ah
H1: Paul's brother, he sells cars in Quebec City
F2: (?) sells cars?/
H1: An' he's a good friend of mine uh an' I do work lots- uh lots of work at his place an' uh lots of business. [So

F1: En tu cas Paul avait l'air en santé là toute bronzé
H2: Ha oué!
F1: Ça pas d'allure [yé noir
H2: [Est-ce qu'y-a passé un bon voyage?
F1: Oué. [Ben i z'ont
H1: [Y-était allé [en Floride avec son bateau là.
F1: [(?) bateau
H2: C'é vrai. Oué oué oué oué
H1: C'é là que quand on é t'allé l'voir, i v'nait d'a- [d'arriver de d'là
F1: [I v'nait d'arriver e: [une semaine ou deux là
H2: [Okay
H1: Mé: [chante aventure
F2: [Oué
F1: à Paul
H1: Son frère
F2: Ah
H1: son frère à Paul, i vend dé voitures à Québec
F2: (?) vend dé voitures?/
H1: Pis c't'un bon ami à moi e: pis chez qui j'vais é ben dé travaux pis e: ben des affaires là. [Ça fait que

F1 relates her friend's story, leaving little room for H1 to tell his own version of the story, as can be observed in the above excerpt by the numerous overlaps between the two (Bouchard, 1987) and the way F1 rushes in to say the word "bateau" (boat) before H1 has had a chance to do so. H1 then attempts to introduce the new topic of cars, but without success since H2 returns to the subject of boats. The competition between F1 and H1 resurfaces a little later after the conversation has shifted to the topic of the card game of rummy:

Excerpt (15) from E-E (p. 3-4)

F1: Look at Isabelle. That child's well raised, it's awful
H1: We played with her
F1: We played, yeah!
H1: Like uh/
F1: Rummy, it's called a game of rummy
H1: Rummy?
F1: [Yeah! ]
H1: [Okay ] It's a sort of card where you have to make associations
you have to find the two matching figures
F1: [ (?) first. Rummy, yeah!
F2: [Rummy
H?: [Yeah!
H1: Yeah! they're uh- She had cards with cartoon figures- from comics an' all kinds of stuff
F1: [Yeah, Walt Disney
H1: an' you had to make associations with-
F1: All six of us played,
H1: Let's just say that-
F1: All five of us
H1: Let's just say we were pretty well taken in all of us
H2: Oh yeah! Ah! Ah!

F1: Ergarde Isabelle. Est ben el'vee c't'enfant-là, c'é l'enfer
H1: On a joué avec elle
F1: On a joué, wouen!
H1: Genre euh/
F1: Rami, ça s'appel' au jeu d'rami
H1: Rami?
F1: [Wouen!]
H1: [ Bon ] c't'une sorte de carte là qui faut qu'tu fasses dé associations
[ faut qu'tu trouves lé deux mêmes figures là.
F1: [ (? ) d'abord. Au rami, wouen!
F2: [Rami.
H?: [Wouen!
H1: Wouenye! c'é dé e:- Elle c'tait dé cartes avec dé p'tits bonhommes là- de bandes
dessinées pis tous sortes [ d'affaires
F1: [ Ouais, Walt Disney là
H1: pis fallait qu'tu fasses lé associations de-
F1: On a joué tous é six,
H1: Mettons que-
F1: tous é cinq
H1: Mettons on s'é faites avoir pas mal toute la gang là.
H2: Ah oué! Ah! Ah!

F1 and H1 are once again in possession of the same information and compete for the floor: H1 and F1 often overlap; F1 repeats H1's utterances ("We played, yeah!") or complements others ("Yeah, Walt Disney"); F1 even seizes on H1's hesitation to take his
turn ("Let's just say that-"). Although H1 imposes himself a little more than F1 in this particular passage (since he succeeds in explaining the card game), they alternate in controlling the conversation for a short period of time, at the exclusion of the other two participants. At the end of conversation E-E, F1 and H1 fluctuate between phases of partnership and competition, the latter occurring less frequently as the conversation becomes more characterized by bantering from all parties. It must be said that F1 shows herself to be a rather good conversationalist capable of adapting to different situations: she listens to other participants and asks questions, thereby manifesting her interest in other people; she initiates topics; and, despite several long turns, does not monopolize the conversational floor. Consider the following example where the participants are engaged in bantering as the conversation shifts to the topic of sex shops:

**Excerpt (16) from E-E (p. 15)**

H2: That means you went in a
F1: [There was
H2: [sex shop
F1: Well yeah
H1: Yeah yeah, we go there
F1: We go regularly to look around
H2: Okay, allright
F1: **Does that answer your question?**
All: Ah ah ah!
H2: Yes, yes. That answers my question
H1: **Do you want more details?**
F2: [No no. But, it's interesting. It's- it's funny
H2: [No no. I don't need any more details (?)
F2: [ (?)
H1: **Do you want to know what we don't have, y'know? Ah ah**
F1: **Do you want to know what we got, what we didn't get?** No, we rarely buy. But we look around eh when we're out for a walk, we stop, an' we have a look
H1: **No no, we take whatever's marked 30-day trial**

H2: Ça veut dire qu'vous êtes entrés dans un
F1: [Y'avait
H2: [sex-shop
F1: Ben oui
H1: Oué oué, on y va
F1: On va régulièrement faire dé tours
H2: Okay, d'accord
F1: **Ça répond à ta question?**
Tous: rires
H2: Oui, oui. Ça répond à ma question
H1: **Veux-tu plus de détails?**
F2: [Non non. Mé, c'ê l'fun. C'ê- c'ê curieux
As we can see in excerpt (16), F1 and H1 are clearly accomplices in teasing H2, overdoing it and giving him details which he does not want to hear. Thus E-E is a good illustration of a conversation that is founded on periodic competition. It is characterized by alternating phases of competition and of complicity between the two leading interactants. As one might expect, the conversation is also marked by competition between F1 and H2. For example, H2 takes advantage of H1's hesitation or pauses to challenge F1 for the conversational floor (see excerpt 17):

**Excerpt (17) from E-E (p. 4-5)**

F1: She's going to be spoiled
H2: Ah, she's going to be spoiled
F1: She's spoiled, but not spoiled rotten. She knows how to appreciate it
H2: That much, I hope
F1: [she's quite uh,
H2: [That much
F1: [she's quite respectful
H2: [No. She's like that. Not/
F1: Anyway, I'll tell you when Paul says:"No" [she doesn't ask again
H1: [Hey! an' we were there uh- F1: When Paul says: ["No" she doesn't ask again/
H2: [Yeah! well y'know when Paul says:"No"[it's cause Évelyne told him about- (laughter)
H1: [ (?)
H2: Y'know what I mean: "Okay now uh Paul you spoil her a little too much"
F2: [(?)
F1: [(?)
H2: [That's how Paul says: "No"
F1: It's his mother
F2: It's his mother okay
H2: Yeah 'cause Paul doesn't know how to say, no-
F1: Yeah! but
H2: [to his girl
F1 [does he-
H2: He doesn't know
F1: [ (?)
H2: [He's real motherly
F1: [an' you know it makes him happy, well uh for us it isn't the-
H1: Oh yeah he's motherly, he's a motherly

F1: A va être gâtée
H2: Ah, a va être gâtée là
F1: É gâtée, mé é pas gâtée pourrie. A sé l'apprécier
H2: Ça là je'l souhaite
F1: [est t'assez euh,
H2 [ça
F1: [é t'assez respectueuse
H2: [Non. É d'même. Pas/
F1: En tout cas m'a 't' dire quand Paul dit:"Non" [a r'demande pas
H1: [Aye! pis on a été là euh-
F1: [é t'assez respectueuse
H2: [Non. É d'même. Pas/
F1: Quand Pierre dit: ["Non" à l'er demande pas
H2: [Wouen! ben c'é-tu quand Paul dit: "Non" là [c'é qu'Évelyne
H1: [(?)
H2 tsé dire: "Ben là là euh Paul là tu la gâtes un peu trop"
F2: [(?)
F1: [(?)
H2: [C'é comme ça qu'Paul dit: "Non"
F1: C'é sa mère
F2: C'é sa mère okay
H2: Oué parsque Paul i s'é pas dire, non-
F1: Wouen! mé
H2: [envers sa p'tite
F1: [est-ce qui-
H2: I'l sé pas
F1: C'é dur quand t'as lé moyens
H2: [C't'un papa poule
F1: [pis tu sé qu'ça i fait plaisir, ben euh nous aut' c'pas le-
H1 Ah oué y-é papa poule, y-é papa poule

Finally, F1 is determined to play an active role in the conversation, so much so that when it revolves mainly around the two men, she uses challenging devices to remain involved, as is illustrated in excerpt (18):

Excerpt (18) from E-E (p. 22-3)

H2: Oh yes yes yes. That's right
H1: I (?) that. Western
H2: Yeah yeah
F2: Yeah
H2: An' he always had bowling trophies
F2: Yeah
H2: an' base[ball
Astrid Berrier

F2: [ball]
H2: Oh man
H1: Darts, and everything you can think of
H2: laughter
F1: Curling
H2: Y'know, he always had, I dunno but, a trophy, that's right but a pin
F1: It's not [bowling]
H2: [y'know]
F1: what he plays is curling
H1: He goes bowling
H2: [Oh yeah yeah yeah!]
F1: [Bowling. Yeah!]
H1: [He goes bowling]
F1: Curling too
H1: No
F1: [he doesn't (?) curl]
H1: [He went once] with you to curl
F1: I thought he (?) still their (?) bowling- curling also
H1: No but you think that darts is funny but, the guy who works-who has the same day job as me at CEGEP, Sébastien
H2: Yeah!

H2: Ah oui oui oui. C'ê ça
H1: J'me (?) ça. Western là
H2: Oué oué
F2: Ouais
H2: Pis y avait toujours dé trophées d'quilles
F2: Ouais
H2: pis de base[ball]
F2: [ball]
H2: 'stie
H1: Dé darts, pis tout c'que tu voudras
H2: rires
F1: Curling
H2: Tsé, y'avait toujours, ché pas mé, un trophée, c'ê ça mé une quille
F1: C'ê pas aux [quilles]
H2: [tsé là]
F1: qui joue c't'au curling
H1: I joue aux quilles
H2: [Ah oué oué oué!]
F1: Aux quilles. Wouen!
H1: [I joue aux quilles]
F1: Au curling aussi
H1: Non
F1: [il é pas (?) au curling]
H1: [Y- é t'allé une fois ] avec toi jouer au curling
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F1: J'pensais qu'i (?) encore leur (?) de quilles- de curling aussi
H1: Non mé tu ris pour le darts là mais, le gars qui travaille-qui a la même job que moi au cégep de jour, Sébastien
H2: Wouen!

After remaining silent for eleven speaking turns, F1 attempts to re-enter the conversation by expressing her opposition/contradiction at H1: the latter maintains that a mutual friend is a bowler, while the former argues that he is a curler. The two are clearly competing for the floor. It should be noted that as is typical of four party-conversations, the two people of opposite sex who compete the most to take the floor are those who are the closest or most intimate.

5.2. Alliances and allies

Conversation E-E also instantiates a particular type of alliance which is brought about through a "plebiscite," where the participants collectively agree to give someone the opportunity to speak. In this case, F2 has been somewhat withdrawn from the beginning of the conversation; a fact she herself brings to the attention of the group in the following excerpt:

Excerpt (19) from E-E (p. 5-6)

F2: I'm not talking enough, eh? But look with people I don't know uh-
F1: Wait let's talk about (pause) Simon (laughter)
F2: Oh no
H2: We don't know him
H1: Yeah Simon. Oh yeah
H2: Now you're going to tell us about Simon
F1: Yeah, tell us [about Simon
H2: [We want to hear about Simon
F2: Ah ah come on
H1: (laughter)
H2: We want to hear about Simon
F2: [Ah you're embarrassing me. Ah
F1: [(?)]
H2: [Come on
F1: [Tell us about Simon. (?) Simon
F2: Simon, he's a very ordinary guy
H2: Okay
F2: Very very very ordinary. He had a difficult past
H2: He had, you say he had a difficult past?
F2: J'parle pas assez là, hen? Mé r'gard' les gens que j'connais pas euh-
F1: Attends on va parler de (pause) Simon (rires)
F2: Ah non
H2: Nous on l'connait pas
H1: Oué Simon. Ah oué
H2: Là tu vas nous décrire Simon
F1: Ouen, décris-nous [Simon
H2: [On veut connaître Simon
F2: Ah ah voyons donc
H1: (rires)
H2: On veut connaitre Simon
F2: [Ah vous m'gênez. Ah
F1: [(?)
H2: [Ben non
F1: [Décris-nous Simon. (?) Simon
F2: Simon, c't'un gars ben simple
H2: Okay
F2: Ben ben ben simple. Y-a eu un passé difficile
H2: Y-a eu, tu dis qui y-a eu un passé difficile?

After bringing to the attention of the group the fact that she has been withdrawn, F2 has put herself on the spot. F1 tries to help her find a topic and H2 offers his support by making a remark ("Okay") and asking her questions. Thus the three other participants have in a manner of speaking agreed to hand her the floor "on a silver plate". Even H1 cooperates, though less overtly.

While excerpt (19) provides a fine example of group collaboration (a rare piece in our data), there are very few other cases of such "plebiscite" alliances in the data. As a matter of fact, the type of alliance that prevails in E-E is that which most predictably occurs in four-party conversations involving two men and two women, namely the alliance between men whatever the circumstances. Consider excerpt (20):

Excerpt (20) from E-E (p. 2)

H1: An' he's a good friend of mine uh an' I do work lots uh- lots of work at his place an' uh lots of business. [So
H2: [Oh yeah! Me I'll never forget the time I went boating on on the Saint-Lawrence, it's was great. Really now the Saint-Lawrence was [(?)
H1: [The time he didn't manage to get in touch with me
F1: That's right, the day he didn't manage [(? get in touch
H1: [No no. No- no he remembers, he remembers
H2: At least we tried H1
H1: That's right
H2: Still thought of you 'cause I say: "Hey!"
H1: But that that's happened to me twice in my life
H2: Ah ah
H1: Once I missed a helicopter ride
H2: Oh yeah that (?) yeah yeah
H1: I missed Quebec City, Quebec City-Montreal by helicopter
H2: You're kidding! Oh yeah! [So then let's just say (?)
H1: [With a helicopter (?)
F1: Who had/
H2: The coast guard helicopter [now that-
F1: [Who was doing this?
H1: No it's my father coming from James Bay, he was heading out to fly over high-voltage power lines. They went through Quebec City they dropped one person off in Quebec City. An' my father since his car was in Montreal/
F1: He goes up to Montreal/
H1: He was going on to Montreal by helicopter so he called me

In excerpt (20), we can see that H1 and H2 take alternate turns in relating the information they share about the topic of conversation (though F1 is also privy to it in this case). The data show that the two female participants have more difficulty in achieving such alternation. The alliance between the two men in E-E lasts for short periods of time
and is made in a friendly, joking manner, instead of seriously or defensively. For example, consider excerpt (21) where F2 talks about her delinquent friend Simon:

**Excerpt (21) from E-E (p. 6-7)**

H1: You didn't tell him where we were tonight  
F2: No  
H1: Oh well anyway, I've got an alarm system on my car so  
All: Ah ah ah  
F2: No but that's it.  
H2: [It's/ It's funny, but I did see a tow truck. But it was on Saint-André in front of your car  
H1: Yeah. That's it uh  
F2: No but you think that's funny and all. But me, I think it's great 'cause he's the kind of guy who dropped out of high school, who wasn't into it at all, who worked (...)

H1: Tu y-a pas dit ou est-ce qu'on était à soir  
F2: Non  
H1: Ah okay de toute façon, j'é un sytème d'alarme sur mon auto fak  
Tous: rires  
F2: Non mé c'é ça.  
H2: [C'é/ C'é drôle, mais j'é vu un towing par exemp'. Mé qui était sur Saint-André en face de ton char  
H1: Wouen. C'é ça hen  
F2: Non mé vous réagissez comme ça, mé moi j'trouve ça l'fun pasque c'é l'genre de gars qui a décroché au secondaire, qui était pu d'ans pantoute, qui a travaillé (...)

H2 interrupts F2 to respond to H1's joking remarks about the meeting place. While their interaction is competitive, it is acceptable since the conversation is allowed to revert back to the ongoing topic, Simon's personal life, and the floor is returned to the person who initially held it, F2. The alliances between H1 and H2 are usually short, and may result in a topic change, as is illustrated below:

**Excerpt (22) from E-E (p. 9)**

F2: That's what a woman from Saguenay does  
H2: Ah Saguenay women, they babble, eh an' then after a while y'know you feel comfortable an' uh  
H1: You drink an'-  
H2: [That right  
F1: [You know all about it, eh the last time I came. Why don't you tell us about it. Ah ah  
F2: Une fille du Saguenay c'é ça qu'ça fait
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Excerpt (23) from E-15 (p. 39)

MB: That's why I'm saying there's gonna be a movement that's gonna be set up, maybe in the United States, maybe in Europe, but I think more in the United States

MD: In the United States, an' then it'll scatter (sic) all over

MB: An' it's gonna sea- that's right

MD: the planet

MB: An' then here we'll end up feeling the aftershocks, an' then we'll also, like, jump on the bandwagon

In the above excerpt (from E-15), MD demonstrates his support for MB by reiterating "United States," to which then MB reciprocates by repeating the first syllable of "scatter" and adding the corroborative remark "that's right."

Excerpt (24) drawn from E-11 (p. 23)

H1: A what?
F1: A metronome. (?) has a metronome
F2: Y'know, it's really there
H1: Well, I don't know what it is. I come from Lachute
F1: H1, I'm a pianist, an' you don't know what it is
H1: Well, you're the pianist, not me
F1: Anyways

H2: I'm not a pianist either, I dunno what a metronome is.
In this excerpt, taken from conversation E-11, H2 supports H1, even if it means claiming his own ignorance about the nature of the object being discussed.

According to the data examined in this study, it appears that men tend to support each other from the outset of four-party conversations, regardless of their ties (i.e., colleagues as in E-15, or close friends as in E-11). However, it would be necessary to examine more data to confirm this point.

5.3. Conversational schism in E-E

One may wonder whether schisms occur along gender lines in symmetrical four-party conversations (i.e. two men and two women). The following excerpt (25) features two discussions occurring simultaneously, one on the topic of alcohol and the other on the cost and purchase of an unknown thing:

Excerpt (25) drawn from E-E (p. 11)

F?: [Oh that. I saw some yesterday
H2: [Do you want any vodka?
F?: [Twenty-five dollars
H2: [No you don't want any vodka?
F?: [ (?) bought
H1: [I'll wait and see, if I don't have to go out maybe then
H2: [Ah Ah
F?: [ (?) no alcohol
H2: [ (?) some brandy? There's no brandy here eh?
F1: Of course
H2: No?

F?: [Ah ça. J'n'é vu hier
H2: [Veux-tu avoir d'la vodka?
F?: [Vingt-cinq dollars
H2: [Non tu veux pas d'vodka?
F?: [ (?) acheté
H1: [J'vas voir ça, ça si ch' pas obligé d'sortir peut-être là
H2: [Ah Ah
As we can see from the excerpt above, the first schism in E-E takes place along gender lines, but is soon brought to an end following H2's question about alcohol. The second schism takes place along gender lines also; in this case, the men begin talking about an evening out and the women go on talking about smoking.

Excerpt (26) drawn from E-E (p. 13)

H1: An' uh, that's it. So then we went to join them
F1: [We can't all smoke at the same time
H1: [Uh we'd known about it for a while
H2: [Umm umm
F?: [ (?)
F: [ (?) An' I had approached him
H1: [So then
F?: Okay
F1: [So then, we had each taken one
H2: [Well that's what he was telling me uh he didn't know about it
F1: (?) like (?)
F2: Okay
F1: But eh if you swipe my place again uh

H1: Pis euh, c'é ça. Fait que on é allé lè r'joindre là
F1: [Faut pas qu'on fume toutes en même temps
H1: [Euh s'faisait un bout d'temps qu'on l'savait là
H2: [Hum hum
F?: [ (?)
F: [ (?) Pis j'avais approché
H1: [Ça fait que
F?: Okay
F1: [Là, on n'avait pris chacun une
H2: [Ben c'é ça qu'i'm'contait euh c'tait à son insu
F1: (?) comme (?)
F2: Okay
F1: Mé là si tu m'chippes ma place e:

It seems that in this second schism the women do not want to embark on the topic initiated by the men.

At this stage, however, I should like to make the caveat that although there is evidence of two gender-based schisms in conversation E-E (which is, as we recall, an
informal dinner party among friends), it is still difficult to prove that this pattern is typical of symmetrical four-party conversations. Participants who know they are being recorded tend to make an effort to make their conversations audible and produce few schisms. It seems that the less formal the four-party conversation is and the better the participants know each other, the more schisms are likely to occur.

6. Conversations involving three men and one woman: some brief observations

The data contains only a few conversations (coded E-AG, E-B, and E-8) involving three men and one woman. In this section, I shall discuss one of these conversations, E-8, while using another, E-B, to highlight other characteristics of four-party conversations with this type of gender distribution.

6.1. Traditional roles

Let us begin by briefly looking at the dynamics of conversation E-B which takes place among colleagues who are preparing a university assignment in which they must answer questions about classroom situations. The participants are so involved in their task that they sometimes play the role of pupils.

Excerpt (27) drawn from E- B (p. 13)

H1: This uh super bingo, super bingo. I absolutely agree. I have an idea uh regarding the host uh It might be - it might be fun if uh uh whoever plays the role of the host in a situation like okay. You recommend me in th/

F: Yeah

H3: first

H1: I accept it'll be really good. I'll try and go more -more into this subject [that-
F: [Oka

H1: I think and if I see the debate isn't going anywhere or whatever, I'll suggest some ideas like Claire Lamarche does

F: Yeah

H1: Y'know that

F: (laughter)

H1: Well y'know- y'know deep down I don't- I don't want to do like Claire Lamarche but [I mean that

F: [Yeah, yeah

H1: The idea is that (pause) when no one's talking you come up- you come up with ideas you make the words come out. [You- you y'know

H2: [Stimulate

H1: Stimulate the debate
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F:  Umm! Yeah, yeah

H1: Ça e: super bingo. Super bingo. Chu parfait'ment d'accord. J'é une idée euh concernant l'animateur même euh- (pause). Ça s'rait p'têt'- ça s'rait p'têt' le fun si euh (pause) euh celui qui va jouer le rôle d'animateur dans un scénario comme- Okay, vous m' suggérez moi dans le/

F: Oué

H3: dans l'premier

H1: Je l'accept'. Ça va être super bien. J'vais essayer moi de d'approfondir ce sujet-là [que

F: [Okay

H1: j'pense et que si j'vois que l'débat débouche pas ou quoi que ce soit, j'vas am'ner dé idées comme Claire Lamarche a fait

F: Wouen!

H1: Tsé ça à/

F: rires

H1 ben tsé tsé dans l'fond, j'veux pas faire comme Claire Lamarche mé [j'veux dire que

F: [Oué, oué

H1: le principe é que (pause) quand y-a personne qui parle tu sors, tu sors dé z'idées, tu sors un mot tu-[tu tsé

H2: [Stimulation

H1: Une stimulation d'débat

F: Hum! Oué oué

Excerpt (28) drawn from E- B (p. 15)

H1: It's funny I had- I had a flash of a technique using humour, a student who- who doesn't stop throwing things (pause) an' you you take- take the garbage can. There's always a garbage eh in high schools

H?: [Yeah

H1: You take the garbage can an' you-

F: laughter

H1: "There, give it a try" y'know

H3: Yeah

H1: An' if you dare, you have- you have- you have- you get two points uh you get two percentage points in your exam, or you get two points in your homework

H?: Can you explain

H1: Give it a try y'know

F: [Yeah

H1: [So then the student uh he'll concentrate more on doing something well I don't know. Anyway,

H3: Yeah

H1: It's funny, but in- in a situation like that I-I-I that's what I'd do. What I'd do,

F: Yeah
H1: I wouldn't start clowning around for fifty minutes that's for sure. But I'll uh
H3: No but for instance my boy uh y'know that one time he was in a class an' the prof was talking something an' well he made a joke about what he had just been talkin' about. An' I thought it y'know it was— it was a [quick response
F: [Umm
H3: y'know it was spontaneous an uh y'know. An' the prof it looks like he didn't appreciate it at all
H1 and F: laughter

H1: C'é drôle j'en j'é eu euh un flash de technique de l'humour là, un élève qui qui cesse pas de lancer dé affaires (pause) pis toi tu prends- tu prends la poubelle. Y-a toujours une poubelle hen d'ins écoles se [condaires
H?: [Oué
H1: Tu prends la poubelle là pis tu-
F : rires
H1: "Tins essaye-toi là" tsé
H3: Wouen
H1: Pis si t'as ça ben t'as- t'as-t'as- ça t' donne deux points là à euh ça t'donne deux points là dans ton examen, ou ça t'donne deux points dans ton devoir
H?: Explique toi
H1: Essaye toi là tsé
F: [Oué
H1: [Facque là l'élève euh i va êt' plus concentré à faire quekchose ben je sé pas. En té cas,
H3: Wouen
H1: C'é drôle là, mé dans-dans une situation comme ça moi moi moi c'é ça que j'frais. Ça que j'frais,
F: Oué
H1: j'commenc'rais pas à faire le bouffon durant cinq- cinquante minutes certainement. Mé j'vais euh
H3: Non mé comme moé mon gars euh tsé ce que un m'ment donné y-était d'in cours pis l'prof parlait quekchose pis bon y-a faite une joke en rapport avec c'qui v'nait dire. Pis moi jé trouvé ça tsé c'tait- c'tait vite tsé comme [réaction
F: [Hum
H3: là tsé c'tait spontané pis euh tsé. Pis l'prof ça l'air qui l'a pas pris pantoute
H1 et F: rires

Excerpts (27) and (28) are representative of the whole of conversation E-B. Excerpt (28) shows that the three men take more speaking turns than their lone female colleague. and that their turns are much longer (as many as 66 words versus one word for F). Excerpt (27) shows that F takes many more one-word turns which, moreover, always express agreement with, or recognition (and consequently legitimation) of the men's utterances. F’s utterances also often overlap one or more of the other participants’ utterances. According
to Edelsky (1981), this is one of the preferred mode of interaction used by women in this kind of situation. Excerpt (27) above is followed by two long sequences (24 turns and 19 turns) shared by the three men exclusively. The two sequences are separated by a simple utterance ("Yeah") on the part of F. Thus, during a stretch of 44 turns, F's only speaking turn is a monosyllabic response. It seems that men rarely use devices such as question-asking to help women integrate into an ongoing conversation, a fact that is reflected throughout conversation E-B.

6.2. Less traditional roles

In contrast to E-B which, as we recall, takes place among colleagues, E-8 is a four-party conversation among friends (three men and a woman) recorded at the home of one of the participants (H3). The lone female participant in E-8 fares much better than the one in E-B: the former manages to achieve an average of one turn out of every two at the beginning of the conversation, before settling down to a rhythm of one turn out of every four during the next few minutes of conversation:

Excerpt (29) drawn from E-8 (p. 4)

F: Pierre what's your dog's name?
H3: It's a/
H2: Limbo
H3: (?)
F: No but his fam- his first name/
H3: Ah Dingo
F: Dingo. Ah it's nice!
H1: Say hello to Pierre
H2: [Dingo the dog
H3: [(?]
F: No, the (?)
H3: (?) once a month
H2: Wasn't Dingo also an elephant?
F: (laughter)
H1: Yeah yeah
F: Oh come on (?) No no. It's Bimbo
F: Pierre c'é quoi l'nom d'ton chien?
H3: C't'un/
H2: Limbo
H3: (?)
F: Non mé son nom d'fam- son p'tit nom/
H3: Ah Dingo
F: Dingo. Ah c'é beau!
H1: Dis bonjour à Pierre
6.2.1. Competition for the role of leader?

As in all the other asymmetrical four-party conversation recorded for this study, the competition for leadership in conversation E-8 appears to take place between a man and a woman. This situation is reflected more in topic initiation than in the number of utterances. During the first ten minutes of E-8, F competes with H-3, the host, in trying to impose the topic of conversation, as is shown in excerpt (30):

Excerpt (30) drawn from E-8 (p. 7)
In the above excerpt, F attempts to introduce the topic of sugar shack by linking it to the topic being discussed, plastic. H1 points out that the two subjects are unrelated by asking a question. After the topic of her friend's sugar shack is aborted, she again introduces another topic in the same way as is illustrated in excerpt (31):

**Excerpt (31) drawn from E-8 (p.10)**

F: [laughter. Okay, scrunchies are blue ](?)
H3: [Come on
F: An' you eat-
H3: (?) scrunchies. But then it seemed [(?]
H2: [Those aren't scrunchies now
H3: (?)
H1: The squirrels eat them
H3: Well now
F: Speaking of bacon, [that's right/
H2: [But now we're going to wait for Pierre's promotion to have the answer. So then we'll go back next year
H3: Well according [to me, it's it's
H1: [Now (?)
H3: only salted lard. It's a little salty, but it's grilled only in the oven
H2: Yeah yeah [(?]
F: [Speaking of bacon, have you sailed too?
H3: Well they're greasy
H2: No, what's the connection?
F: Well the swell I dunno
H3: The swell?
H2: No no, but [maybe I-
H?: [(?)
H2: maybe I- I had a boat, it would've cost, in labour- in Marseille, uh-
The topic being discussed is "scrunchies", a popular roasted lard dish prepared during the sugaring-off season in Québec. In an obvious attempt to change topic, F abruptly introduces the topic of sailing. When H2 asks her to explain this topic switch, she makes up an explanation.

After the first schism is over, F loses ground in the leadership struggle. This is reflected in the frequency of her utterances: F takes 20 turns at talk out of a total of 104 in the rest of the conversation, for an average of 1 out of 5 utterances. This part of the conversation may be divided into two parts: first, in the sequence immediately following the first schism, F takes regular turns at talk (one out of four turns, which may be considered as fair in the context of a four-party conversation); her utterances, however, gradually become less frequent, dropping to as little as one for every 12 utterances made by the male participants.

6.2.2. F's strategies to impose herself verbally
F uses the following techniques to make her verbal presence felt throughout conversation E-8: i) abrupt topic shifts; ii) facetious remarks; and iii) schisms.

6.2.2.1. Abrupt topic shifts

Excerpts (30) and (31) are examples of situations in which F frequently jumps from one topic of conversation to another - each time a topic shift occurs one of the male participants asks her to explain her lack of coherence. This way, although she is unable to impose her topic of conversation, she still ensures her place in the forefront of the conversation (Goffman 1987)

6.2.2.2. Facetious remarks

F also attempts to make her presence felt by making facetious remarks as well as through the use of humour, as is illustrated by her remark "scrunchies are blue" in excerpt (31). It should be noted, however, that this device appears to be an overall feature of conversation E-8, since it is also used by other participants toward the end of the conversation. For example, consider H2’s utterances in the following excerpt:

**Excerpt (32) drawn from E-8 (p.25)**

H1: No but, you go in for a- for a pair of stockings. An' you come out a man
F: [with (?)] Oh but if you're
H2: That's the problem of [overconsumption and production]
F: [laughter laughter] No but I have friends who[ ( ? ) ]
H3: [Apparently those who communicate with the spirit world ( ? ) ] You have messages from the afterlife [ ( ? ) ]
F: [Hey! I don't even know ] the
H3: [You're free to believe in it or not y'know]

**H2:** But what do they say in the afterlife about Club Price?
H3: (?) that's about it

F: [ rires rires ] Non j'é des amis qui
H3: [Apparamment ceux qui communiquent avec les entités spirituelles( ? ) ] T'as des
messages avec l'au-delà

[?] F: [Aye! J'é connais même pas lé
H3: [T'é lib' d'y croire ou pas tsé
H2: Mais qu'est-ce qu'i disent l'au-delà par rapport au Club Price?
H3: (?) a peu près
rires

6.2.2.3. Schisms

When H3, a voluntary fireman, introduces an anecdote about a fire, a schism occurs with H3 turning to H1 to talk about the fire, and F and H2 discussing another topic, as is shown in excerpt (33):

**Excerpt (33) drawn from E-8 (p. 11)**

H3: But it's been a year since I'm in this fire brigade an' uh
H2: (?)
H3: It's really quiet. Some fifteen guys
H2: You can't have (?) [laughter
H3: [Y'know uh (?) they hired a secretary
H2: laughter
H3: A beautiful woman, my friend
H1: [(?) secretary
H2: [(?) round 10 o'clock
H3: a secretary from Lanaudière
H1: a voluntary secretary
? laughter
H: No but she's
H1: Now that's clever
H2: (?)
H3: [So then she (?)
F: [ (?) talk about that. Now
H3: on my answering machine. [At two or three o'clock
F: [ (?)
H1: at the other end of (?) that-that
H3: I arrive in the area
H: (?)
H3: I arrive in the area. So he says uh [at one point in time he spoke
F: [If you take into account the time when (?)
H3: (?) won't be able to go up
F: No that's it. Seven o'clock in the morning, it's different than [eight o'clock
at night
H3: [It was to
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change the water 'cause the other was too high I had to go up (?). Someone suggested that (?) four-wheel drive (?) four-wheel drive

H3: Mais c'faut un an qu'chui dans cè corps de pompiers là pis euh
H2: (?)
H3: C'é ben tranquille. Une quinzaine de gars
H2: Faut pas avoir (?) [rires
H3: [tsé euh (?) y-ont engagé une secrétaire
H2: rires
H3: Une belle femme mon homme
H1: [ (?) secrétaire
H2: [ (?) vers dix heures
H3: une secrétaire de Lanaudière
H1: une secrétaire volontaire
? rires
H: Non mé elle
H1: C'é ça bien smart
H2: (?)
H3: [Ça fait qu'là a (?)
F: [ (?) parlez d'ça. Là
H3: sur mon répondeur. [là a deux trois heures
F: [ (?)
H1: au bout d'la (?) ça-ça
H3: J'arrive à région
H: (?)
H3: J'arrive à région. Là i dit euh [un m'ment donné i parlait
F: [Si tu tiens compte de l'heure à laquelle (?)
H3: (?) pourra pas monter
F: Non c'é ça. Sept heures du matin, c'é diffèrent que [huit heures du soir
H3: [C'était
changer l'eau parcequ' l'aut' était trop élevé j'tais obligé d'monter (?). Y-a quelqu'un qu'a proposéd de (?) quatr' par quatr' (?) quatre par quatre

The schism produces the same effect as in E-14, examined above: it seems to put an end to F's contention for the leadership of the conversation. After the schism ends, the conversation switches to the topic of four-wheel drive jeeps. Later in conversation E-8, F shows her photographs of her vacation in les Iles de la Madeleine (Madeleine Islands), once again managing to assume the position of leader for a short while. However toward the end of conversation E-8, this role is played by H2.

Therefore F's attempts at "holding the stage" in conversation E-8 contrasts sharply with the behaviour of the lone woman in E-B, who simply listens and expresses her agreement and support. The woman in E-8 even manages to play the role of leader at times, though she appears to achieve this by performing conversational acrobatics, and by using humour as was illustrated in excerpt (30) (e.g."scrunchies are blue"). It should be noted that at the beginning of conversation E-8, F benefited from the support of H2. However, in the course of the conversation (Clark 1981), H2’s objective seems to shift from wanting to play
the role of ally to that of leader. Conversation E-8 ends with H2 and H3 competing for the role of leadership. Thus, H2’s behaviour is further proof that alliances play a pivotal role in four-party conversations.

7. Conclusion

The analysis presented here seems to challenge the roles that have been traditionally assigned to women in four-party conversations.

The variable of gender is intrinsically related to the nature of a four-party conversation, since it can explain much of the dynamics occurring therein. The data examined here suggests that the gender distribution of roles in a conversation among two women and two men of Québécois origin (all French-speaking) is rather predictable: the leadership "race" almost systematically takes place between a man and a woman, with the other two participants playing the ally and/or some other roles. However, the data more importantly shows that it is more difficult to make predictions about the gender of those "struggling for control" in a conversation involving three women and a man.

The analysis also suggests that alliances play an important part in four-party conversations, since they interfere with the distribution of control. Moreover, we saw that male solidarity (whether the male interactants are close friends or simply colleagues) appears to be a constant in this type of interactional situation. This form of solidarity was particularly observable in symmetrical conversations (i.e., two men and two women, see E-E, E-15 and E-11). As for speech acts of disagreement and contradiction, the data examined here suggests that they invariably emerge between the two closest friends who are of opposite sex (e.g. see F1 and H1 in E-E).

In this analysis, we also looked at the mechanisms behind another important aspect of four-party conversations, schisms. The data examined here shows that in symmetrical conversations schisms occur along gender lines. Let us recall E-15 in which FA could have worked on an alliance with FB. Had she had an ally, FB, for example, control would have been easier to achieve. E-15 shows that schism and alliances are closely linked. The interplay of alliances in groups of four could cause conversations to take quite another turn.

In a two men - two women conversation like E-15, FA, one of the women decide to act alone for the whole duration of the conversation and compete for leadership with one of the man, MB, instead of rallying FC, the other woman. She fails.

The conversations examined above, however, show that women can move from their traditional role such as intermediaries who ensure that conversational flow to that of leader in a four-party conversation. They are capable of holding the floor when the gender composition does not put them at a disadvantage (i.e. excluding conversations with three men and a women) and can compete on a par with men.

Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the influence culture has on the distribution of conversational roles. Thus, the positions and roles assumed by the interactants observed here may not be the same as in other four-party conversations among participants from other cultures.
References


Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Catherine (1994) "Notes sur le fonctionnement du trilogue". Littérature 93, février.


**Transcription conventions:**

/ interruption
[ ] two participants overlapping
HEN talks louder
(?) unintelligible parts
e = equivalent of "erm"
euh = equivalent of "erm"
je-je-je = hesitation
MB, MC, H, H1 = male participants, not the same from one conversation to another
FA, FB, FC, F1, F2 = female participants, not the same from one conversation to another