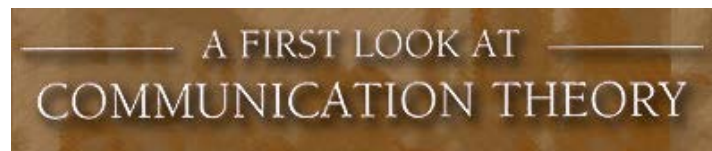


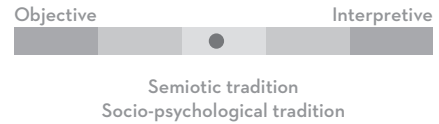
Genderlect Styles – Deborah Tannen
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Genderlect Styles

of Deborah Tannen

“Male–female conversation is cross-cultural communication.”¹ This simple statement is the basic premise of Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand*, a book that seeks to explain why men and women often talk past each other.

Tannen is a linguistics professor at Georgetown University, and her research specialty is conversational style—not what people say but the way they say it. In her first book on conversational style she offers a microanalysis of six friends talking together during a two-and-a-half-hour Thanksgiving dinner.² Tannen introduces this sociolinguistic study with a quote from E. M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India*: “A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry.”³ Forster’s novel illustrates how people of goodwill from different cultures can grossly misunderstand each other’s intentions.

Tannen is convinced that similar miscommunication occurs all the time between women and men. The effect may be more insidious, however, because the parties usually don’t realize they are in a cross-cultural encounter. At least when we cross a geographical border we anticipate the need to bridge a communication gap. In conversing with members of the opposite sex, Tannen notes, our failure to acknowledge different conversational styles can get us in big trouble. Most men and women don’t grasp that “talking through their problems” with each other will only make things worse if it’s their divergent ways of talking that are causing the trouble in the first place.

Tannen’s writing is filled with imagery that underscores the mutually alien nature of male and female conversational styles. When she compared the style of boys and girls who were in second grade, she felt she was looking at the discourse of “two different species.” For example, two girls could sit comfortably face-to-face and carry on a serious conversation about people they knew. But when boys were asked to talk about “something serious,” they were restless, never looked at each other, jumped from topic to topic, and talked about games and competition. These stylistic differences showed up in older kids as well. Tannen notes that “moving from the sixth-grade boys to the girls of the same age is like moving to another planet.”⁴ There is no evidence that we grow out of these differences as we grow up. She describes adult men and women as speaking “different words from different worlds,” and even when they use the same terms, they are “tuned to different frequencies.”

Genderlect

A term suggesting that masculine and feminine styles of discourse are best viewed as two distinct cultural dialects.

Tannen's cross-cultural approach to gender differences departs from much of feminist scholarship that claims conversations between men and women reflect men's efforts to dominate women. She assumes that male and female conversational styles are equally valid: "We try to talk to each other honestly, but it seems at times that we are speaking different languages—or at least different genderlects."⁵ Although the word *genderlect* is not original with Tannen, the term nicely captures her belief that masculine and feminine styles of discourse are best viewed as two distinct cultural dialects rather than as inferior or superior ways of speaking.

Tannen realizes that categorizing people and their communication according to gender is offensive to many women and men. None of us like to be told, "Oh, you're talking just like a (wo)man." Each of us regards himself or herself as a unique individual. But at the risk of reinforcing a simplistic reductionism that claims biology is destiny, Tannen insists there *are* gender differences in the ways we speak.

Despite these dangers, I am joining the growing dialogue on gender and language because the risk of ignoring differences is greater than the danger of naming them.⁶

WOMEN'S DESIRE FOR CONNECTION VS. MEN'S DESIRE FOR STATUS

Tannen says that, more than anything else, women seek human *connection*, whereas men are concerned mainly with *status*. While women are focused on cultivating a sense that they're *in touch*, men are working hard to preserve their *independence* as they jockey for position on a hierarchy of competitive accomplishment. When they're together, women's longing for *intimacy* threatens men's desire for freedom and sidetracks the masculine quest to be *one up* in all relationships. Empirical evidence for Tannen's assertions emerged back in 1979 in a study published in *Psychological Bulletin*, one of psychology's most prestigious journals. Adelaide Haas, now retired from the communication department at the State University of New York at New Paltz, found that men use more directive speech, talking about sports, money, and business, while women are often more supportive, polite, and expressive, talking about home and family and using more words implying feeling.⁷

Tannen does believe that some men are open to intimacy, just as some women have a concern for power. You'll recall that Baxter and Bakhtin's relational dialectics theory assumes that all people feel a tension between connection and autonomy in their relationships (see Chapter 11). Tannen agrees that many men and women would like to have intimacy *and* independence in every situation if they could, but she doesn't think it's possible. As a result, these differences in priority tend to give men and women differing views of the same situation.

Girls and women feel it is crucial that they be liked by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on symmetrical connection. Boys and men feel it is crucial that they be respected by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on asymmetrical status.⁸

RAPPORT TALK VS. REPORT TALK

Why is Tannen so certain that women focus on connection while men focus on status? Her answer is that she listens to men and women talk. Just as an ethnographer pores over the words of native informants to discover what has meaning within their society, so Tannen scrutinizes the conversation of representative speakers from the feminine culture and the masculine culture to determine their core values. She offers

numerous examples of the divergent styles she observes in everyday communication. These linguistic differences give her confidence that the connection–status distinction structures every verbal contact between women and men.

Julia Wood, communication professor emerita at the University of North Carolina and co-author of standpoint theory (see Chapter 32), thinks that Tannen’s observations have merit and that the connection–status distinction is evident even in childhood. In her book *Gendered Lives*,⁹ Wood draws upon research with children to highlight the different rules that girls and boys learn as they grow up.¹⁰ Understanding those rules provides insight for some of the key differences Tannen believes characterize the genderlect styles that are at the root of miscommunication between men and women. Three of the key rules boys learn are:

1. Communicate to assert your ideas, opinions, and identity.
2. Use talk to solve problems or develop a strategy.
3. Speak in a way that attracts attention to yourself.

In contrast to these rules, girls learn to:

1. Use communication to create and maintain relationships.
2. Involve others in conversations and respond to their ideas.
3. Show sensitivity to others and to relationships.

Consider the following five types of talk. Each of these speech forms shows that women value *rapport talk*, while men value *report talk*.

1. Private Speaking vs. Public Speaking

Folk wisdom suggests that women talk more than men do. Tannen cites a version of an old joke that has a wife complaining to her husband, “For the past 10 years you’ve never told me what you’re thinking.” Her husband caustically replies, “I didn’t want to interrupt you.” Tannen grants the validity of the wordy-woman–mute-male stereotype as it applies to a couple that’s alone together—In private conversations, women talk more than men do. She also endorses Alice Walker’s notion that a woman falls in love with a man because she sees in him “a giant ear.”¹¹ But in the public arena, men vie for ascendancy and speak much more than women do.

James Pennebaker, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, is skeptical of the wordy-woman stereotype. After recruiting 2,000 men and women to carry voice-activated recorders all day long, he discovered that men and women each speak about 16,000 words a day.¹² This empirical evidence calls into question the supposed gender difference in the quantity of talk, but not necessarily the quality—its tone and intent.

Setting quantity aside, I (Glenn) believe that if Tannen studied the talk of professors at faculty meetings, she’d gather a wealth of data to support her claim that men are more likely to engage in report talk rather than rapport talk. In 30-plus years of attending these meetings, I’ve witnessed countless examples of men who pontificate in order to hold the floor, make a point, or badger colleagues into reluctant agreement. It’s not surprising that the faculty members who usually bristle at these male monologues are women. In most cases, what women say in these meetings shows more concern about building and maintaining community by drawing others into the discussion rather than scoring points. My perception of this difference fits the childhood conversational rules summarized by Julia Wood. Girls

Report talk

The typical monologic style of men, which seeks to command attention, convey information, and win arguments.

Rapport talk

The typical conversational style of women, which seeks to establish connection with others.

learn to involve others in conversations, while boys learn to use communication to assert their own ideas and draw attention to themselves.

2. Telling a Story

Along with theorists Clifford Geertz, Michael Pacanowsky, and Walter Fisher (see Chapters 19 and 24), Tannen recognizes that the stories people tell reveal a great deal about their hopes, needs, and values. Consistent with men's focus on status, Tannen notes that men tell more stories than women do—especially jokes. Telling jokes is a masculine way to negotiate status. Men's humorous stories have a *can-you-top-this?* flavor that holds attention and elevates the storyteller above his audience.

When men aren't trying to be funny, they tell stories in which they are heroes, often acting alone to overcome great obstacles. On the other hand, women tend to express their desire for community by telling stories about others. On the rare occasions when a woman is a character in her own narrative, she usually describes herself as doing something foolish rather than acting in a clever manner. This downplaying of self puts her on the same level with her hearers, thus strengthening her network of support.

3. Listening

A woman listening to a story or an explanation tends to hold eye contact, offer head nods, and react with *yeah, uh-huh, mmmn, right*, or other responses that indicate *I'm listening* or *I'm with you*. For a man concerned with status, that overt style of active listening means *I agree with you*, so he avoids putting himself in that submissive, or *one-down*, stance. Women conclude that men aren't listening, which is not necessarily true.

When a woman who is listening starts to speak before the other person is finished, she usually does so to add a word of agreement, to show support, or to finish a sentence with what she thinks the speaker will say. Tannen labels this *cooperative overlap*. She says that from a woman's perspective, cooperative overlap is a sign of rapport rather than a competitive ploy to control the conversation. She also recognizes that men don't see it that way. Men regard any interruption as a power move to take control of the conversation, because in their world that's how it's done. Those who win the conversational game can take a don't-talk-while-I'm-interrupting-you stance and make it stick. Tannen concludes that these different styles of conversation management are the source of continuing irritation in cross-gender talk. "Whereas women's cooperative overlaps frequently annoy men by seeming to co-opt their topic, men frequently annoy women by usurping or switching the topic."¹³

Cooperative overlap

A supportive interruption often meant to show agreement and solidarity with the speaker.

4. Asking Questions

Tannen thinks that men and women also annoy each other with their different ways of asking questions—or *not* asking them. When we were first married, my wife Cheri and I set out on a trip from Chicago to Muskegon, Michigan, to visit friends. I glanced at a map before the trip—today's GPS was the stuff of science fiction back then—and noted that I needed to take I-94. About an hour into the trip, Cheri encouraged me to stop and ask for directions because the road we were on didn't

seem familiar to her. Knowing that we were on I-94, I confidently declined her request. But when I saw signs for Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I was finally persuaded to stop at a gas station. To my horror, I discovered that I-94 went up *both sides* of Lake Michigan. I was driving up the wrong side. Cheri and I can laugh now about our late arrival in Muskegon, but when she tells the story, she always emphasizes my stubborn refusal to stop and ask for directions.

According to Tannen, men don't ask for that kind of help. Every admission of ignorance whittles away at the image of self-sufficiency that is so important to a man. "If self-respect is bought at the cost of a few extra minutes of travel time, it is well worth the price," she explains.¹⁴ In my case, I gained no self-respect at a cost of several hours of travel time. But I'm still not fond of asking others for directions.

Women ask questions to establish a connection with others. Even a five-minute stop at a gas station to check the best route can create a sense of community, however brief. Tannen notes that when women state their opinions, they often tag them with a question at the end of the sentence: "That was a good movie, *don't you think?*" *Tag questions* soften the sting of potential disagreement that might drive people apart. They are also invitations to participate in open, friendly dialogue. But to men, they make the speaker seem wishy-washy.

Ever since *You Just Don't Understand* was published, Tannen has entertained questions during television interviews, radio call-in shows, and discussions following lectures. Women almost always seek more information or offer their own experiences that validate her insights. That's now true for men as well. But when the book was riding high on best-seller lists, men would often pose questions that seemed designed to bring her down from her high horse or to establish their own expertise. Even though she understands that public face is crucial to men, she identifies with the words of a wife in a short story: "I'd have been upset about making the mistake—but not about people *knowing*. That part's not a big deal to me." Her husband replied, "Oh, is it ever a big deal to me."¹⁵

Tag question

A short question at the end of a declarative statement, often used by women to soften the sting of potential disagreement or invite open, friendly dialogue.

5. Conflict

After his divorce, Rob Reiner decided to direct the film *When Harry Met Sally*, a humorous depiction of the relationship between a man (Billy Crystal) and a woman (Meg Ryan). Nora Ephron wrote the script and, after interviewing Reiner, used him as the inspiration for Harry's character. The film became a classic after its release in 1989, and is listed among Bravo's "100 Funniest Movies." Reiner's divorce provided the grist for an argument between Harry and Sally, in which Harry blows up at their friends Jess and Marie and then storms out of the room. After making an excuse for his behavior, Sally goes to him to try to calm him down.

HARRY: I know, I know, I shouldn't have done it.

SALLY: Harry, you're going to have to try and find a way of not expressing every feeling that you have every moment that you have them.

HARRY: Oh, really?

SALLY: Yes, there are times and places for things.

HARRY: Well the next time you're giving a lecture series on social graces, would you let me know, 'cause I'll sign up.

SALLY: Hey. You don't have to take your anger out on me.

HARRY: Oh, I think I'm entitled to throw a little anger your way. Especially when I'm being told how to live my life by Miss Hospital Corners.

SALLY: What's that supposed to mean?

HARRY: I mean, nothing bothers you. You never get upset about anything.

This scene illustrates Tannen's description of much male-female strife. Since they see life as a contest, many men are more comfortable with conflict and are therefore less likely to hold themselves in check. By trying to placate Harry and excuse his anger toward their friends, Sally responds in what Tannen believes is an equally typical fashion. "To most women, conflict is a threat to connection—to be avoided at all costs."¹⁶

The dialogue illustrates another feature of conflict between men and women. As often happens, Sally's attempt to avert a similar outburst in the future sparks new conflict with Harry. Tannen says men have an early warning system that's geared to detect signs that they are being told what to do. Harry bristles at the thought that Sally is trying to limit his autonomy, so her efforts backfire.

6. Nonverbal Communication

Curiously, Tannen doesn't extend the connection-status distinction to the ways in which men and women communicate nonverbally. Susan Pease Gadoua, a licensed marriage counselor who writes a regular column for PsychologyToday.com, finds it difficult to analyze the way men and women talk to each other without including the nonverbal component. Based on her years of experience helping married couples, she's learned to anticipate a common scenario when she sees a man and a woman trying to get over a serious fight or navigate a rift in their relationship.

Each partner has a different way of wanting to resolve the problem: women want to talk things out and perhaps make love later (when they feel more connected); men want to connect by making love and (maybe) talking later.¹⁷

Gadoua recalls one husband who told her that all of his marital problems would be solved if only he and his wife could go away for a whole weekend and dedicate the entire time to sex. His wife saw this solution as a superficial gesture that wouldn't solve anything. Deborah Tannen might see it as a way for the husband to score in a never-ending game of who's on top. The husband's solution seems like a classic acting out of one of the early rules that boys learn at play—communicate to assert your identity. The wife's solution reflects one of the rules girls learn—connect through conversation. Sadly, Gadoua observes that when women want to connect and men want to have sex, it's often the case that neither activity takes place.

MEN AND WOMEN GROW UP IN DIFFERENT SPEECH COMMUNITIES

Do men and women really live in different worlds? Tannen cites dialogue from Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist*, Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, and Jules Feiffer's *Grown Ups* to support her claim that the different ways women and men talk reflect their separate cultures. If these fictional examples depict an accurate view of the separate worlds of real men and women, it makes sense to find out how and when these worlds formed.

When Tannen witnessed dramatic differences in conversational style between second-grade boys and girls, she concluded that the origins of speaking in genderlect

must be traced back to early childhood. Is it plausible to suggest that boys and girls as young as 7 are already segregated and using conversational styles that will follow them into adult life? Many linguists and communication scholars believe the answer to that question is yes. They refer to the segregated groups to which boys and girls belong as *speech communities*.¹⁸

Speech community

A community of people who share understandings about goals of communication, strategies for enacting those goals, and ways of interpreting communication.

Julia Wood summarized the concept of a *speech community* this way: “[A] speech community exists when people share understandings about goals of communication, strategies for enacting those goals, and ways of interpreting communication.”¹⁹ Tannen’s conclusion that the second-grade boys and girls she observed were “two different species” certainly matches up with the idea that they were from distinct speech communities. But these communities don’t appear out of thin air. To get insight into their origins, we need to look back to the preschool years.

Louise Cherry Wilkinson, professor of education, psychology, and communication sciences at Syracuse University, suggests that separate speech communities begin with the conversations young boys and girls have with their mothers. She reached this conclusion when she studied the interactions between moms and kids during a free-play session. She recruited mothers with a 2-year-old daughter or son to take part, giving no instructions as to what they should talk about. Along with her colleague Michael Lewis, Wilkinson transcribed the interactions that took place and trained coders to analyze the words that were used. The coders didn’t know whether they were coding interactions between a mother and daughter or a mother and son.²⁰

Wilkinson and Lewis discovered that mothers of girls talked more, asked more questions, used longer sentences, and were more likely to verbally acknowledge their daughters’ comments than were mothers of boys. Mothers of boys were more likely to use directives—telling their sons what to do—than were mothers of girls. Wilkinson and Lewis speculated that these sorts of differences could set early expectations in males and females about what type of conversation is most appropriate for them. The findings suggest that the differences Tannen sees between adult male and female speech have their roots in the early socialization of children.

“NOW YOU’RE BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND”

What if Tannen is right and all conversation between men and women is best understood as cross-cultural communication? Does that mean genderlect can be taught, like French, Swahili, or any other foreign language? Tannen offers a qualified yes. She regards sensitivity training as an effort to teach men how to speak in a feminine voice, while assertiveness training is an effort to teach women how to speak in a masculine voice. But she’s aware of our ethnocentric tendency to think it’s the other person who needs fixing, so she expresses only guarded hope that men and women will alter their linguistic styles.

Tannen has much more confidence in the benefits of multicultural understanding. She believes that understanding each other’s style, and the motives behind it, is the first step in overcoming destructive responses.

The answer is for both men and women to try to take each other on their own terms rather than applying the standards of one group to the behavior of the other. . . .

Understanding style differences for what they are takes the sting out of them.²¹

Tannen suggests that one way to measure whether we are gaining cross-gender insight is a drop in the frequency of the oft-heard lament *You just don’t understand*. I can personally testify to the validity of this standard. While I certainly make no claim to

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have arrived at a complete understanding of Cheri or her conversational style, I've only heard her say, "You just don't understand," in the early stages of our 42 years together. She'd say the same about me. It's difficult for a marriage to survive and thrive without partners' gaining insight into each other's conversational style.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: GILLIGAN'S DIFFERENT VOICE

For more than 30 years, Carol Gilligan was a professor of education in the Harvard Graduate School of Education; she is now a professor at New York University. Her book *In a Different Voice* presents a theory of moral development claiming that

women tend to think and speak in an ethical voice different from that of men.²² Gilligan's view of gender differences parallels Tannen's analysis of men as wanting independence and women as desiring human connection. Gilligan is convinced that most men seek autonomy and think of moral maturity in terms of *justice*. She's equally certain that women desire to be linked with others and that they regard their ultimate ethical responsibility as one of *care*.

On the basis of the quantity and quality of feminine relationships, Gilligan contrasts *women who care* with *men who are fair*. Individual rights, equality before the law, fair play, a square deal—all these masculine ethical goals can be pursued without intimate ties to others. Justice is impersonal. But women's moral judgment is more contextual, more immersed in the details of relationships and narratives.²³ Sensitivity to others, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and peacemaking all reflect interpersonal involvement.

Gilligan's work arose in response to the theory of moral development of her Harvard colleague Lawrence Kohlberg, who identified increasing levels of ethical maturity by analyzing responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas.²⁴ According to his justice-based scoring system, the average young adult female was a full stage behind her male counterpart. Women were rated as less morally mature than men because they were less concerned about abstract concepts like justice, truth, and freedom. Instead, they based their ethical decisions on considerations of compassion, loyalty, and a strong sense of responsibility to prevent pain and alleviate suffering. Their moral reasoning was more likely to reflect Buber's call for genuine I-Thou relationships than Kant's categorical imperative (see Chapters 6 and 14).

Gilligan is comfortable with the idea that men and women speak in different ethical voices. But she's disturbed that when women don't follow the normative path laid out by men, "the conclusion has generally been that something is wrong with women."²⁵ She points out "the unfair paradox that the very traits that have traditionally defined the 'goodness' of women are those that mark them as deficient in moral development."²⁶

Although Gilligan's theory is more descriptive than prescriptive, the underlying assumption is that the way things *are* reflects the way things *ought to be*. Most ethical theorists are bothered by the idea of a double standard—justice from some, care from others. Traditional moral philosophy has never suggested different ethics for different groups. Yet readers of both sexes report that Gilligan's theory resonates with their personal experience.

CRITIQUE: IS TANNEN SOFT ON RESEARCH—AND MEN?

Aha factor

A subjective standard ascribing validity to an idea when it resonates with one's personal experience.

Is male-female conversation really cross-cultural communication? Tannen suggests we use the *aha factor* to test the validity of her two-culture hypothesis:

If my interpretation is correct, then readers, on hearing my explanation, will exclaim within their heads, "Aha!" Something they have intuitively sensed will be made explicit. . . . When the subject of analysis is human interaction—a process that we engage in, all our lives—each reader can measure interpretation against her/his own experience.²⁷

If we agree to this subjective standard of validity, Tannen easily makes her case. For example, in the book *You Just Don't Understand*, she describes how women who verbally share problems with men are often frustrated by the masculine tendency

to offer solutions. (*Qualitative linguistic analysis*) According to Tannen, women don't want advice; they're looking for the gift of understanding. When Em first read her book, he had the kind of *aha* reaction that Tannen says validates her theory. He says, "I realized that her words described me. Anytime my wife, Jean, tells me about a problem she's facing, I either turn coldly analytic or dive in and try to fix things for the woman I love. I now know that Jean would rather have me just listen or voice some version of *I feel your pain*."

Brittany's application log suggests that she's convinced. Perhaps her masculine upbringing explains why she experienced the *aha factor* even before she read about Tannen's theory.

From ages 4 to 11, I was raised by my single father. During this developmental time in my life, I conversed mainly with Dad, and therefore adopted the kind of *report talk* that Tannen characterizes as primarily male. Whenever we had conflict, we dealt with it right away. Most of my friends were boys and I had difficulties making connections with girls my age.

After my dad eventually remarried and I had a stepmother to talk with, I began to develop friendships with girls in high school. During a conversation one of them said, "You always try to think of a solution rather than just listen." I understand now that I picked up this communication trait from my dad. Whenever we faced conflict in our home, we immediately addressed it and figured out how we should deal with it. As I have developed more relationships with women I feel my genderlect style has moved toward *rapport talk*, which Tannen categorizes as primarily female. Sometimes, though, I'll have a conversation with a close guy friend back home who will say, "You're the only girl I've ever been able to talk with like this."

Apparently, Tannen's analysis of common misunderstandings between men and women has struck a responsive chord in a million other readers. *You Just Don't Understand* was on the best-seller list for most of the 1990s. And in that decade it was rated by hundreds of mental health professionals as the best of 1,000 self-help books.²⁸ But does a chorus of *ahas* mean Tannen is right? Astrologer and psychic Jeane Dixon might have made 10 predictions, and if only one came true, that's the prophecy people remembered and lauded her for. They forgot that the other nine turned out to be wrong. According to many social scientists, Tannen's "proof" may be like that.

Perhaps using selective data is the only way to support a reductionist claim that women are one way and men are another. Tannen's theme of intimacy versus independence echoes a prominent dialectic discussed in relational dialectics (see Chapter 11). However, Tannen suggests none of the flux, dialogical contradiction, or ongoing complexity of human existence that's central to Baxter and Bakhtin's theory. Tannen's women are programmed within their gendered culture to embrace connection and deny any desire for autonomy. Her men seek autonomy but avoid connection. Neither group feels any sense of contradiction in their own conversation. Saying it's so may eventually make it so—self-fulfilling prophecy is a powerful force. But as stated in the introduction to this section, most gender researchers spot more diversity *within* each gender than *between* them.

Adrienne Kunkel (University of Kansas) and Brant Bureson (Purdue University) directly challenged the different-cultures perspective that's at the heart of Tannen's genderlect theory. According to Tannen's two-culture worldview, verbal

support should be highly desired in the world of women but of little value in the competitive world of men. Kunkel and Burleson's empirical research doesn't bear out Tannen's claim. While it's true that women often *do* it better, both sexes place an equally high value on comforting communication:

Both men and women view highly person-centered comforting messages as most sensitive and effective; both see messages low in person-centeredness as relatively insensitive and ineffective. . . . Both sexes view comforting skills as important in the context of various personal relationships and as substantially more important than instrumentally focused communication skills.²⁹

On the basis of this shared meaning, Kunkel and Burleson rejected the different-cultures perspective. They believed it was a myth that had lost its narrative force. Men and women do understand.

A very different critique comes from feminist scholars. For example, German linguist Senta Troemel-Ploetz accuses Tannen of having written a dishonest book that ignores issues of male dominance, control, power, sexism, discrimination, sexual harassment, and verbal insults. "If you leave out power," she says, "you do not understand talk."³⁰ The two genderlects are anything but equal. "Men are used to dominating women; they do it especially in conversations. . . . Women are trained to please; they have to please also in conversations."³¹

Contrary to Tannen's thesis that mutual understanding will bridge the culture gap between the sexes, Troemel-Ploetz believes that "men understand quite well what women want but they give only when it suits them. In many situations they refuse to give and *women cannot make them give*."³² She thinks it's ridiculous to assume that men will give up power voluntarily. To prove her point, she suggests doing a follow-up study on men who read Tannen's best seller. Noting that many women readers of *You Just Don't Understand* give the book to their husbands to peruse, Troemel-Ploetz states that if Tannen's theory is true, a follow-up study should show that these men are now putting down their papers at the breakfast table and talking empathetically with their wives. She doesn't think it will happen.

Why has genderlect styles received so much criticism? Perhaps because it draws from both objective and interpretive approaches yet doesn't satisfy the demands of either camp. It offers *understanding of people*, but doesn't seek to *reform power differences* among them. It's *relatively simple* but may not *explain the data*. Her book's *aesthetic appeal* and *practical utility* made it a bestseller, but that hasn't translated into a *community of agreement* among scholars. Nevertheless, this controversial theory has inspired both *quantitative* and *qualitative* research aimed at supporting or refuting her claims. Whether she's right or wrong, Tannen's work has encouraged people to think systematically about sex differences in communication.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Apart from the topics of nonverbal communication, conflict, questions, listening, storytelling, and public vs. private speaking, can you come up with your own examples of how *rappor talk* is different from *report talk*?
2. What are the practical implications for you if talk with members of the opposite sex is indeed *cross-cultural communication*?
3. What might be the most effective ways for men and women to gain insight into how their *conversational styles* affect their relationships?

4. Tannen's *aha factor* is similar to Carl Rogers' standard of basing our knowledge on personal experience (see Chapter 4). What are the dangers of relying solely on this indicator?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, Ballantine, New York, 1990.

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