

From: You Just Don't  
Understand

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1990

## PREFACE

Each person's life is lived as a series of conversations. Analyzing everyday conversations, and their effects on relationships, has been the focus of my career as a sociolinguist. In this book I listen to the voices of women and men. I make sense of seemingly senseless misunderstandings that haunt our relationships, and show that a man and a woman can interpret the same conversation differently, even when there is no apparent misunderstanding. I explain why sincere attempts to communicate are so often confounded, and how we can prevent or relieve some of the frustration.

My book *That's Not What I Meant!* showed that people have different conversational styles. So when speakers from different parts of the country, or of different ethnic or class backgrounds, talk to each other, it is likely that their words will not be understood exactly as they were meant. But we are not required to pair off for life with people from different parts of the country or members of different ethnic groups, though many choose to. We are expected to pair off with people of the other gender, and many do, for long periods of time if not for life. And whereas many of us (though fewer and fewer) can spend large portions of our lives without coming into close contact with people of vastly different cultural backgrounds, few people—not even those who have no partners in life or whose primary relationships are with same-sex partners—can avoid close contact with people of the other gender, as relatives and co-workers if not as friends.

*That's Not What I Meant!* had ten chapters, of which one dealt with gender differences in conversational style. But when I received requests for interviews, articles, and lectures, 90 percent

wanted me to focus on 10 percent of the book—the chapter on male-female differences. Everyone wanted to know more about gender and conversational style.

I too wanted to find out more. Indeed, I had decided to become a linguist largely because of a course taught by Robin Lakoff that included her research on gender and language. My first major linguistic study was of gender and cultural differences in indirectness, and I was fairly familiar with others' research on the topic. But although I had always inhabited the outskirts of gender research, I had not leaped into its inner circle, partly because the field is so controversial.

Whenever I write or speak about conversational style differences between women and men, sparks fly. Most people exclaim that what I say is true, that it explains their own experience. They are relieved to learn that what has caused them trouble is a common condition; and there is nothing terribly wrong with them, their partners, or their relationships. Their partners' ways of talking, which they had ascribed to personal failings, could be re-framed as reflecting a different system. And their own ways of talking, which their partners had been hounding them about for years, could be defended as logical and reasonable.

But although most people find that my explanation of gender differences in ways of talking accounts for their own experience—and they are eager to offer their own examples to prove it—some people become agitated as soon as they hear a reference to gender. A few become angry at the mere suggestion that women and men are different. And this reaction can come from either women or men.

Some men hear any statement about women and men, coming from a woman, as an accusation—a fancy way of throwing up her hands, as if to say, "You men!" They feel they are being objectified, if not slandered, by being talked about at all.

But it is not only men who bridle at statements about women and men. Some women fear, with justification, that any observation of gender differences will be heard as implying that it is women who are different—different from the standard, which is

whatever men are. The male is seen as normative, the female as departing from the norm. And it is only a short step—maybe an inevitable one—from "different" to "worse."

Furthermore, if women's and men's styles are shown to be different, it is usually women who are told to change. I have seen this happen in response to my own work. In an article I wrote for *The Washington Post*, I presented a conversation that had taken place between a couple in their car. The woman had asked, "Would you like to stop for a drink?" Her husband had answered, truthfully, "No," and they hadn't stopped. He was later frustrated to learn that his wife was annoyed because she had wanted to stop for a drink. He wondered, "Why didn't she just say what she wanted? Why did she play games with me?" The wife, I explained, was annoyed not because she had not gotten her way, but because her preference had not been considered. From her point of view, she had shown concern for her husband's wishes, but he had shown no concern for hers.

My analysis emphasized that the husband and wife in this example had different but *equally valid* styles. This point was lost in a heavily edited version of my article that appeared in the *Toronto Star*, which had me advising: "The woman must realize that when he answers 'yes' or 'no' he is not making a non-negotiable demand." The *Star* editor had deleted the immediately preceding text, which read: "In understanding what went wrong, the man must realize that when she asks what he would like, she is not asking an information question but rather starting a negotiation about what both would like. For her part, however, the woman must realize that . . ." Deft wielding of the editorial knife had transformed my claim that women and men should *both* make adjustments into a claim that women must make a unilateral effort to understand men. Informing women of what they alone must "realize" implies that the man's way is right and the woman's wrong. This edited version was reprinted in a textbook, and the error proliferated.

We all know we are unique individuals, but we tend to see others as representatives of groups. It's a natural tendency, since

we must see the world in patterns in order to make sense of it; we wouldn't be able to deal with the daily onslaught of people and objects if we couldn't predict a lot about them and feel that we know who and what they are. But this natural and useful ability to see patterns of similarity has unfortunate consequences. It is offensive to reduce an individual to a category, and it is also misleading. Dividing women and men into categories risks reinforcing this reductionism.

Generalizations, while capturing similarities, obscure differences. Everyone is shaped by innumerable influences such as ethnicity, religion, class, race, age, profession, the geographical regions they and their relatives have lived in, and many other group identities—all mingled with individual personality and predilection. People are apt to sum up others by reference to one category or a few, such as "southern belle," "New York Jewish intellectual," "Boston Brahmin," or "hot-tempered Italian." Although these categories might predict some of the behaviors of the people so described, they miss far more about them than they capture. In innumerable ways, every person is utterly unlike anyone else—including anyone else from many of the same categories.

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. Sweeping something big under the rug doesn't make it go away; it trips you up and sends you sprawling when you venture across the room. Denying real differences can only compound the confusion that is already widespread in this era of shifting and re-forming relationships between women and men.

Pretending that women and men are the same hurts women, because the ways they are treated are based on the norms for men. It also hurts men who, with good intentions, speak to women as they would to men, and are nonplussed when their words don't work as they expected, or even spark resentment and anger.

This paradox is expressed by an American Indian woman, Abby Abinanti, describing why she found law school a difficult and alienating experience:

People did not like or accept the idea of Indians or women being lawyers. Some people could not decide which idea they hated more. Some pretended that it didn't make any difference, that we were all the same. I, too, could be "one of the boys," "one of the white boys." Not likely. Both of these approaches created problems for me.

It is easy to see how people who hate the idea of women or Indians being lawyers would create problems for an Indian woman in law school. It is harder to see how those who wanted to accept her as an equal also created problems for her. Assuming she was the same was destructive, because she was not the same; the assumptions, values, and styles that reflected and validated their identities undercut hers.

The desire to affirm that women are equal has made some scholars reluctant to show they are different, because differences can be used to justify unequal treatment and opportunity. Much as I understand and am in sympathy with those who wish there were no differences between women and men—only reparable social injustice—my research, others' research, and my own and others' experience tell me it simply isn't so. There are gender differences in ways of speaking, and we need to identify and understand them. Without such understanding, we are doomed to blame others or ourselves—or the relationship—for the otherwise mystifying and damaging effects of our contrasting conversational styles.

Recognizing gender differences frees individuals from the burden of individual pathology. Many women and men feel dissatisfied with their close relationships and become even more frustrated when they try to talk things out. Taking a *sociolinguistic* approach to relationships makes it possible to explain these dissatisfactions without accusing anyone of being crazy or wrong, and without blaming—or discarding—the relationship. If we recognize and understand the differences between us, we can take them into account, adjust to, and learn from each other's styles.

The sociolinguistic approach I take in this book shows that

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many frictions arise because boys and girls grow up in what are essentially different cultures, so talk between women and men is cross-cultural communication. A cross-cultural approach to gender differences in conversational style differs from the work on gender and language which claims that conversations between men and women break down because men seek to dominate women. No one could deny that men as a class are dominant in our society, and that many individual men seek to dominate women in their lives. And yet male dominance is not the whole story. It is not sufficient to account for everything that happens to women and men in conversations—especially conversations in which both are genuinely trying to relate to each other with attention and respect. The effect of dominance is not always the result of an intention to dominate. That is the news that this book brings.

In this era of opening opportunity, women are beginning to move into positions of authority. At first we assumed they could simply talk the way they always had, but this often doesn't work. Another logical step is that they should change their styles and talk like men. Apart from the repugnance of women's having to do all the changing, this doesn't work either, because women who talk like men are judged differently—and harshly. We have no choice but to examine our choices and their effects. Only by understanding each other's styles and our own options can we begin to realize our opportunities and escape the prison of a monolithic conversational style.

Conversational style differences do not explain all the problems that arise in relationships between women and men. Relationships are sometimes threatened by psychological problems, true failures of love and caring, genuine selfishness—and real effects of political and economic inequity. But there are also innumerable situations in which groundless allegations of these failings are made, simply because partners are expressing their thoughts and feelings, and their assumptions about how to communicate, in different ways. If we can sort out differences based on conversational style, we will be in a better position to confront real conflicts of interest—and to find a shared language in which to negotiate them.

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In opening the preface to *That's Not What I Meant!*, I told of a student who said that taking a course I taught at Georgetown University had saved her marriage. Not long ago, the same woman—now a professor, and still married—wrote me a letter. She said that she and her husband had been talking, and somehow the conversation had turned into an argument. In the middle of it he said in exasperation, "Dr. Tannen had better hurry up and write that new book, because this business of men and women talking has got to be the biggest problem around!" In closing this preface, I offer this book to him, and to women and men everywhere who are trying their best to talk to each other.

## MALE-FEMALE CONVERSATION IS CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, thus communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said they speak different ~~languages~~.

The claim that men and women grow up in different worlds may at first seem patently absurd. Brothers and sisters grow up in the same families, children to parents of both genders. Where, then, do women and men learn different ways of speaking and hearing?

## IT BEGINS AT THE BEGINNING

Even if they grow up in the same neighborhood, on the same block, or in the same house, girls and boys grow up in different worlds of words. Others talk to them differently and expect and accept different ways of talking from them. Most important, children learn how to talk, how to have conversations, not only from their parents but from their peers. After all, if their parents have a foreign or regional accent, children do not emulate it; they learn to speak with the pronunciation of the region where they grow up. Anthropologists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker summarize research showing that boys and girls have very different ways of talking to their friends. Although they often play together, boys and girls spend most of their time playing in same-sex groups. And, although some of the activities they play at are similar, their favorite games are different, and their ways of using language in their games are separated by a world of difference.

Boys tend to play outside, in large groups that are hierarchically structured. Their groups have a leader who tells others what to do and how to do it, and resists doing what other boys propose. It is by giving orders and making them stick that high status is negotiated. Another way boys achieve status is to take center stage by telling stories and jokes, and by sidetracking or challenging the stories and jokes of others. Boys' games have winners and losers and elaborate systems of rules that are frequently the subjects of arguments. Finally, boys are frequently heard to boast of their skill and argue about who is best at what.

Girls, on the other hand, play in small groups or in pairs; the center of a girl's social life is a best friend. Within the group, intimacy is key: Differentiation is measured by relative closeness. In their most frequent games, such as jump rope and hopscotch,

everyone gets a turn. Many of their activities (such as playing house) do not have winners or losers. Though some girls are certainly more skilled than others, girls are expected not to boast about it, or show that they think they are better than the others. Girls don't give orders; they express their preferences as suggestions, and suggestions are likely to be accepted. Whereas boys say, "Gimme that!" and "Get outta here!" girls say, "Let's do this," and "How about doing that?" Anything else is put down as "bossy." They don't grab center stage—they don't want it—so they don't challenge each other directly. And much of the time, they simply sit together and talk. Girls are not accustomed to jockeying for status in an obvious way; they are more concerned that they be liked.

Gender differences in ways of talking have been described by researchers observing children as young as three. Amy Sheldon videotaped three- to four-year-old boys and girls playing in threesomes at a day-care center. She compared two groups of three—one of boys, one of girls—that got into fights about the same play item: a plastic pickle. Though both groups fought over the same thing, the dynamics by which they negotiated their conflicts were different. In addition to illustrating some of the patterns I have just described, Sheldon's study also demonstrates the complexity of these dynamics.

While playing in the kitchen area of the day-care center, a little girl named Sue wanted the pickle that Mary had, so she argued that Mary should give it up because Lisa, the third girl, wanted it. This led to a conflict about how to satisfy Lisa's (invented) need. Mary proposed a compromise, but Sue protested:

MARY: I cut it in half. One for Lisa, one for me, one for me.

SUE: But, Lisa wants a *whole* pickle!

Mary comes up with another creative compromise, which Sue also rejects:

MARY: Well, it's a whole *half* pickle.

SUE: No, it isn't.

MARY: Yes, it is, a whole *half* pickle.

SUE: I'll give her a whole half. I'll give her a *whole whole*. I gave her a whole one.

At this point, Lisa withdraws from the alliance with Sue, who satisfies herself by saying, "I'm pretending I gave you one."

On another occasion, Sheldon videotaped three boys playing in the same kitchen play area, and they too got into a fight about the plastic pickle. When Nick saw that Kevin had the pickle, he demanded it for himself:

NICK: [Screams] Kevin, but the, oh, I *have* to cut! I want to cut it! It's mine!

Like Sue, Nick involved the third child in his effort to get the pickle:

NICK: [Whining to Joe] Kevin is not letting me cut the pickle.

JOE: Oh, I know! I can pull it away from him and give it back to you. That's an ideal

The boys' conflict, which lasted two and a half times longer than the girls', then proceeded as a struggle between Nick and Joe on the one hand and Kevin on the other.

In comparing the boys' and girls' pickle fights, Sheldon points out that, for the most part, the girls mitigated the conflict and preserved harmony by compromise and evasion. Conflict was more prolonged among the boys, who used more insistence, appeals to rules, and threats of physical violence. However, to say that these little girls and boys used *more* of one strategy or another is not to say that they didn't use the other strategies at all. For example, the boys did attempt compromise, and the girls did attempt physical force. The girls, like the boys, were struggling for control of their play. When Sue says by mistake, "I'll give her a whole half," then quickly corrects herself to say, "I'll give her a *whole whole*," she reveals that it is not really the size of the portion that is important to her, but who gets to serve it.

While reading Sheldon's study, I noticed that whereas both

Nick and Sue tried to get what they wanted by involving a third child, the alignments they created with the third child, and the dynamics they set in motion, were fundamentally different. Sue appealed to Mary to fulfill someone else's desire; rather than saying that *she* wanted the pickle, she claimed that Lisa wanted it. Nick asserted his own desire for the pickle, and when he couldn't get it on his own, he appealed to Joe to get it for him. Joe then tried to get the pickle by force. In both these scenarios, the children were enacting complex lines of affiliation.

Joe's strong-arm tactics were undertaken not on his own behalf but, chivalrously, on behalf of Nick. By making an appeal in a whining voice, Nick positioned himself as one-down in a hierarchical structure, framing himself as someone in need of protection. When Sue appealed to Mary to relinquish her pickle, she wanted to take the one-up position of serving food. She was fighting not for the right to *have* the pickle, but for the right to *serve* it. (This reminded me of the women who said they'd become professors in order to teach.) But to accomplish her goal, Sue was depending on Mary's desire to fulfill others' needs.

This study suggests that boys and girls both want to get their way, but they tend to do so differently. Though social norms encourage boys to be openly competitive and girls to be openly cooperative, different situations and activities can result in different ways of behaving. Marjorie Harness Goodwin compared boys and girls engaged in two task-oriented activities: The boys were making slingshots in preparation for a fight, and the girls were making rings. She found that the boys' group was hierarchical: The leader told the others what to do and how to do it. The girls' group was egalitarian: Everyone made suggestions and tended to accept the suggestions of others. But observing the girls in a different activity—playing house—Goodwin found that they too adopted hierarchical structures: The girls who played mothers issued orders to the girls playing children, who in turn sought permission from their play-mothers. Moreover, a girl who was a play-mother was also a kind of manager of the game. This study shows that girls know how to issue orders and operate in a hierarchical structure, but they don't find that mode of behavior

appropriate when they engage in task activities with their peers. They do find it appropriate in parent-child relationships, which they enjoy practicing in the form of play.

These worlds of play shed light on the world views of women and men in relationships. The boys' play illuminates why men would be on the lookout for signs they are being put down or told what to do. The chief commodity that is bartered in the boys' hierarchical world is status, and the way to achieve and maintain status is to give orders and get others to follow them. A boy in a low-status position finds himself being pushed around. So boys monitor their relations for subtle shifts in status by keeping track of who's giving orders and who's taking them.

These dynamics are not the ones that drive girls' play. The chief commodity that is bartered in the girls' community is intimacy. Girls monitor their friendships for subtle shifts in alliance, and they seek to be friends with popular girls. Popularity is a kind of status, but it is founded on connection. It also places popular girls in a bind. By doing field work in a junior high school, Donna Eder found that popular girls were paradoxically—and inevitably—disliked. Many girls want to befriend popular girls, but girls' friendships must necessarily be limited, since they entail intimacy rather than large group activities. So a popular girl must reject the overtures of most of the girls who seek her out—with the result that she is branded “stuck up.”

### THE KEY IS UNDERSTANDING

If adults learn their ways of speaking as children growing up in separate social worlds of peers, then conversation between women and men is cross-cultural communication. Although each style is valid on its own terms, misunderstandings arise because the styles are different. Taking a cross-cultural approach to male-female conversations makes it possible to explain why dissatisfactions are justified without accusing anyone of being wrong or crazy.

Learning about style differences won't make them go away,

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but it can banish mutual mystification and blame. Being able to understand why our partners, friends, and even strangers behave the way they do is a comfort, even if we still don't see things the same way. It makes the world into more familiar territory. And having others understand why we talk and act as we do protects us from the pain of their puzzlement and criticism.

In discussing her novel *The Temple of My Familiar*, Alice Walker explained that a woman in the novel falls in love with a man because she sees in him "a giant ear." Walker went on to remark that although people may think they are falling in love because of sexual attraction or some other force, "really what we're looking for is someone to be able to hear us."

We all want, above all, to be heard—but not merely to be heard. We want to be understood—heard for what we think we are saying, for what we know we meant. With increased understanding of the ways women and men use language should come a decrease in frequency of the complaint "You just don't understand."