

ARTICLES ABOUT GENDER

Robin Lakoff's Predictions:

Robin Lakoff, in 1975, published an influential account of women's language. This was the book *Language and Woman's Place*. In a related article, *Woman's Language*, she published a set of basic assumptions about what marks out the language of women. Among these are claims that women:

1. **Hedge:** using phrases like “sort of”, “kind of”, “it seems like”, and so on.
2. **Use (super)polite forms:** “Would you mind...”, “I’d appreciate it if...”, “...if you don’t mind”.
3. **Use tag questions:** “You’re going to dinner, aren’t you?”
4. **Speak in italics:** intonational emphasis equal to underlining words – so, very, quite.
5. **Use empty adjectives:** divine, lovely, adorable, and so on
6. **Use hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation:** English prestige grammar and clear enunciation.
7. **Use direct quotation:** men paraphrase more often.
8. **Have a special lexicon:** women use more words for things like colours, men for sports.
9. **Use question intonation in declarative statements:** women make declarative statements into questions by raising the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement, expressing uncertainty. For example, “What school do you attend? Eton College?”
10. **Use “wh-” imperatives:** (such as, “Why don’t you open the door?”)
11. **Speak less frequently**
12. **Overuse qualifiers:** (for example, “I Think that...”)
13. **Apologise more:** (for instance, “I’m sorry, but I think that...”)
14. **Use modal constructions:** (such as can, would, should, ought – “Should we turn up the heat?”)
15. **Avoid coarse language or expletives**
16. **Use indirect commands and requests:** (for example, “My, isn’t it cold in here?” – really a request to turn the heat on or close a window)
17. **Use more intensifiers:** especially so and very (for instance, “I am so glad you came!”)

18. Lack a sense of humour: women do not tell jokes well and often don't understand the punch line of jokes.

Dominance and Difference

Studies of language and gender often make use of two models – that of dominance and that of difference. The first is associated with **Dale Spender, Pamela Fishman, Don Zimmerman and Candace West**, while the second is associated with **Deborah Tannen**.

Dominance theory

This is the theory that in mixed-sex conversations men are more likely to interrupt than women. It uses a fairly old study of a small sample of conversations, recorded by **Don Zimmerman and Candace West** at the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California in 1975. The subjects of the recording were white, middle class and under 35. Zimmerman and West produce in evidence 31 segments of conversation. They report that in 11 conversations between men and women, men used 46 interruptions, but women only two. As Geoffrey Beattie, of Sheffield University, points out (writing in New Scientist magazine in 1982): “The problem with this is that you might simply have one very voluble man in the study which has a disproportionate effect on the total.” From their small (possibly unrepresentative) sample Zimmerman and West conclude that, since men interrupt more often, then they are dominating or attempting to do so. But this need not follow, as Beattie goes on to show: “Why do interruptions necessarily reflect dominance? Can interruptions not arise from other sources? Do some interruptions not reflect interest and involvement?”

Dale Spender advocates a radical view of language as embodying structures that sustain male power. She refers to the work of Zimmerman and West, to the view of the male as norm and to her own idea of patriarchal order. She claims that it is especially difficult to challenge this power system, since the way that we think of the world is part of, and reinforces, this male power:

“The crux of our difficulties lies in being able to identify and transform the rules which govern our behaviour and which bring patriarchal order into existence. Yet the tools we have for doing this are part of that patriarchal order. While we can modify, we must none the less use the only language, the only classification scheme which is at our disposal. We must use it in a way that is acceptable and meaningful. But that very language and the conditions for its use in turn structure a patriarchal order.”

Geoffrey Beattie claims to have recorded some 10 hours of tutorial discussion and some 557 interruptions (compared with 55 recorded by Zimmerman and West). Beattie found that women and men interrupted with more or less equal frequency (men 34.1, women 33.8) – so men did interrupt more, but by a margin so slight as not to be statistically significant. Yet Beattie's findings are not quoted so often as those of Zimmerman and West. Why is this? Because they do not fit what someone wanted to show? Or because Beattie's work is in some other way less valuable?

Pamela Fishman argues in *Interaction: the Work Women Do* (1983) that conversation between the sexes sometimes fails, not because of anything inherent in the way women talk, but because of how men respond, or don't respond. In *Conversational Insecurity* (1990) Fishman questions Robin Lakoff's theories. Lakoff suggests that asking questions shows women's insecurity and hesitancy in communication, whereas Fishman looks at questions as an attribute of interactions: Women ask questions because of the power of these, not because of their personality weaknesses. Fishman also claims that in mixed-sex language interactions, men speak on average for twice as long as women.

Christine Christie has shown gender differences in the pragmatics of public discourse – looking, for example, at how men and women manage politeness in the public context of UK parliamentary speaking. In *Politeness and the Linguistic Construction of Gender in Parliament: An Analysis of Transgressions and Apology Behaviour*, she applies pragmatic models, such as the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson and Grice's conversational maxims, to transcripts of parliamentary proceedings, especially where speakers break the rules that govern how MPs may speak in the House of Commons.

Deborah Tannen and Difference

Professor Tannen has summarized her book *You Just Don't Understand* in an article in which she represents male and female language use in a series of six contrasts. These are:

Status vs. support

Independence vs. intimacy

Advice vs. understanding

Information vs. feelings

Orders vs. proposals

Conflict vs. compromise

In each case, the male characteristic (that is, the one that is judged to be more typically male) comes first. What are these distinctions?

Status versus support

Men grow up in a world in which conversation is competitive – they seek to achieve the upper hand or to prevent others from dominating them. For women, however, talking is often a way to gain confirmation and support for their ideas. Men see the world as a place where people try to gain status and keep it. Women see the world as “a network of connections seeking support and consensus”.

Independence versus intimacy

Women often think in terms of closeness and support, and struggle to preserve intimacy. Men, concerned with status, tend to focus more on independence. These traits can lead women and men to starkly different views of the same situation. Professor Tannen gives the example of a woman who would check with her husband before inviting a guest to stay – because she likes telling friends that she has to check with him. The man, meanwhile, invites a friend without asking his wife first, because to tell the friend he must check amounts to a loss of status. (Often, of course, the relationship is such that an annoyed wife will rebuke him later).

Advice versus understanding

Deborah Tannen claims that, to many men a complaint is a challenge to find a solution:

“When my mother tells my father she doesn’t feel well, he invariably offers to take her to the doctor. Invariably, she is disappointed with his reaction. Like many men, he is focused on what he can do, whereas she wants sympathy.”

Information versus feelings

A young man makes a brief phone call. His mother overhears it as a series of grunts. Later she asks him about it – it emerges that he has arranged to go to a specific place, where he will play football with various people and he has to take the ball. A young woman makes a phone call – it lasts half an hour or more. The mother asks about it – it emerges that she has been talking “you know” “about stuff”. The conversation has been mostly grooming-talk and comment on feelings.

Historically, men's concerns were seen as more important than those of women, but today this situation may be reversed so that the giving of information and brevity of speech are considered of less value than sharing of emotions and elaboration. From the viewpoint of the language student neither is better (or worse) in any absolute sense.

Orders versus proposals

Women often suggest that people do things in indirect ways – “let's”, “why don't we?” or “wouldn't it be good, if we...?” Men may use, and prefer to hear, a direct imperative.

Conflict versus compromise

“In trying to prevent fights,” writes Professor Tannen “some women refuse to oppose the will of others openly. But sometimes it's far more effective for a woman to assert herself, even at the risk of conflict. ”

This situation is easily observed in work-situations where a management decision seems unattractive – men will often resist it vocally, while women may appear to accede, but complain subsequently. Of course, this is a broad generalization – and for every one of Deborah Tannen's oppositions, we will know of men and women who are exceptions to the norm.

Professor Tannen concludes, rather bathetically, and with a hint of an allusion to Neal (first man on the moon) Armstrong, that:

“Learning the other's ways of talking is a leap across the communication gap between men and women, and a giant step towards genuine understanding.”

The male as norm

One of Deborah Tannen's most influential ideas is that of the male as norm. Such terms as “men”, “man” and “mankind” may imply this. The term for the species or people in general is the same as that for one sex only.

But if, in fact, people believe that men's and women's speech styles are different (as Tannen does), it seems that it is usually the women who are told to change. Tannen says, “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.” Susan Githens comments on Professor Tannen's views, as follows:

“If we believe that women and men have different styles and that the male is the standard, we are hurting both women and men. The women are treated based on the norms for men, and men with good intentions speak to women as they would other men and are perplexed when their words spark anger and resentment. Finally, apart from her objection to women having to do all the changing, Tannen states that women changing will not work either. As Dale

Spender theorized, women who talk like men are judged differently — and harshly. A woman invading the man’s realm of speech is often considered unfeminine, rude or bitchy. ”

Report talk and rapport talk

Deborah Tannen’s distinction of information and feelings is also described as report talk (of men) and rapport talk (of women). The differences can be summarized in a table:

Women	Men
Talk too much Speak in private contexts	Get more air time Speak in public
Build relations	Negotiate status/avoid failure
Overlap	Speak one at a time
Speak symmetrically	Speak asymmetrically

Interruptions and overlapping

Tannen contrasts interruptions and overlapping. Interruption is not the same as merely making a sound while another is speaking. Such a sound can be supportive and affirming – which Tannen calls cooperative overlap, or it can be an attempt to take control of the conversation – an interruption or competitive overlap. This can be explained in terms of claiming and keeping turns – familiar enough ideas in analysing conversation.

High involvement and high considerateness

Professor Tannen describes two types of speaker as high-involvement and high-considerateness speakers. High-involvement speakers are concerned to show enthusiastic support (even if this means simultaneous speech) while high-considerateness speakers are, by definition, more concerned to be considerate of others. They choose not to impose on the conversation as a whole or on specific comments of another speaker.

Tannen suggests that high-involvement speakers are ready to be overlapped because they will yield to an intrusion on the conversation if they feel like it and put off responding or ignore it completely if they do not wish to give way. In the British House of Commons, there is a formal procedure for this, whereby a speaker requests permission to take the turn (“Will you give way?”) and the speaker who has the floor will often do so (“I will give way”) – on the understanding that the intervention is temporary (a point of information or of order) and that when this contribution is made, the original speaker will have the floor again (that is, be allowed to stand and speak).

Jennifer Coates

Jennifer Coates looks at all-female conversation and builds on Deborah Tannen’s ideas. She returns to tag questions – to which Robin Lakoff drew attention in 1975. Her work looks in detail at some of the ideas that Lakoff originated and Tannen carried further. She gives useful

comment on **Deborah Jones'** 1990 study of women's oral culture, which she (Jones) calls **Gossip** and categorizes in terms of House Talk, Scandal, Bitching and Chatting.

House Talk – its distinguishing function is the exchange of information and resources connected with the female role as an occupation.

Scandal – a considered judging of the behaviour of others, and women in particular. It is usually made in terms of the domestic morality, of which women have been appointed guardians.

Bitching – this is the overt expression of women's anger at their restricted role and inferior status. They express this in private and to other women only. The women who bitch are not expecting change; they want only to make their complaints in an environment where their anger will be understood and expected.

Chatting – this is the most intimate form of gossip, a mutual self-disclosure, a transaction where women use to their own advantage the skills they have learned as part of their job of nurturing others.

(The use of these terms shows a new confidence – Deborah Jones is not fearful that her readers will think her disrespectful. She is also confident to use the lexicon of her research subjects – these are category labels the non-linguist can understand.) Coates sees women's simultaneous talk as supportive and cooperative.

Coates says of tag questions, in **Language and Gender: a reader** (1998, Blackwells):

“...it is not just the presence of minimal responses at the end, but also their absence during the course of an anecdote or summary, which demonstrates the sensitivity of participants to the norms of interaction: speakers recognise different types of talk and use minimal responses appropriately.

Lexical items such as perhaps, I think, sort of, probably as well as certain prosodic and paralinguistic features, are used in English to express epistemic modality...women use them to mitigate (weaken) the force of an utterance in order to respect addressees' face needs.