

DEBORAH TANNEN

DEBORAH TANNEN is a linguist who is best known for her popular studies of communication between men and women. Born and raised in New York City, Tannen earned a BA from Harpur College (now the State University of New York at Binghamton); MAs from Wayne State University and the University of California at Berkeley; and a PhD in linguistics from Berkeley. She is University Professor at Georgetown University, has published many scholarly articles and books, and has lectured on linguistics all over the world. But her renown is more than academic: With television talk-show appearances, speeches to businesspeople and senators, and best-selling books, Tannen has become, in the words of one reviewer, “America’s conversational therapist.” The books include *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990), *The Argument Culture* (1998), *I Only Say This Because I Love You* (2001), and *You’re Wearing That?* (2006), the last about communication between mothers and daughters.

But What Do You Mean?

Why do men and women so often communicate badly, if at all? This question has motivated much of Tannen’s research and writing, including the essay here. Excerpted in *Redbook* magazine from Tannen’s book *Talking from 9 to 5* (1994), “But What Do You Mean?” classifies the conversational areas where men and women have the most difficulty communicating at work.

Conversation is a ritual. We say things that seem obviously the thing to say, without thinking of the literal meaning of our words, any more than we expect the question “How are you?” to call forth a detailed account of aches and pains. 1

Unfortunately, women and men often have different ideas about what’s appropriate, different ways of speaking. Many of the conversational rituals common among women are designed to take the other person’s feelings into account, while many of the conversational rituals common among men are designed to maintain the one-up position, or at least avoid appearing one-down. As a result, when men and women interact—especially at work—it’s often women who are at the disadvantage. Because women are not trying to avoid the one-down position, that is unfortunately where they may end up. 2

Here, the biggest areas of miscommunication. 3

1. Apologies

Women are often told they apologize too much. The reason they’re told to stop doing it is that, to many men, apologizing seems synonymous with putting oneself down. But there are many times when “I’m sorry” isn’t self-deprecating, 4

or even an apology; it's an automatic way of keeping both speakers on an equal footing. For example, a well-known columnist once interviewed me and gave me her phone number in case I needed to call her back. I misplaced the number and had to go through the newspaper's main switchboard. When our conversation was winding down and we'd both made ending-type remarks, I added, "Oh, I almost forgot—I lost your direct number, can I get it again?" "Oh, I'm sorry," she came back instantly, even though she had done nothing wrong and I was the one who'd lost the number. But I understood she wasn't really apologizing; she was just automatically reassuring me she had no intention of denying me her number.

Even when "I'm sorry" is an apology, women often assume it will be the first step in a two-step ritual: I say "I'm sorry" and take half the blame, then you take the other half. At work, it might go something like this:

A: When you typed this letter, you missed this phrase I inserted.

B: Oh, I'm sorry. I'll fix it.

A: Well, I wrote it so small it was easy to miss.

When both parties share blame, it's a mutual face-saving device. But if one person, usually the woman, utters frequent apologies and the other doesn't, she ends up looking as if she's taking the blame for mishaps that aren't her fault. When she's only partially to blame, she looks entirely in the wrong.

I recently sat in on a meeting at an insurance company where the sole woman, Helen, said "I'm sorry" or "I apologize" repeatedly. At one point she said, "I'm thinking out loud. I apologize." Yet the meeting was intended to be an informal brainstorming session, and *everyone* was thinking out loud.

The reason Helen's apologies stood out was that she was the only person in the room making so many. And the reason I was concerned was that Helen felt the annual bonus she had received was unfair. When I interviewed her colleagues, they said that Helen was one of the best and most productive workers—yet she got one of the smallest bonuses. Although the problem might have been outright sexism, I suspect her speech style, which differs from that of her male colleagues, masks her competence.

Unfortunately, not apologizing can have its price too. Since so many women use ritual apologies, those who don't may be seen as hard-edged. What's important is to be aware of how often you say you're sorry (and why), and to monitor your speech based on the reaction you get.

2. Criticism

A woman who cowrote a report with a male colleague was hurt when she read a rough draft to him and he leapt into a critical response—"Oh, that's

too dry! You have to make it snappier!” She herself would have been more likely to say, “That’s a really good start. Of course, you’ll want to make it a little snappier when you revise.”

Whether criticism is given straight or softened is often a matter of convention. In general, women use more softeners. I noticed this difference when talking to an editor about an essay I’d written. While going over changes she wanted to make, she said, “There’s one more thing. I know you may not agree with me. The reason I noticed the problem is that your other points are so lucid and elegant.” She went on hedging for several more sentences until I put her out of her misery: “Do you want to cut that part?” I asked—and of course she did. But I appreciated her tentativeness. In contrast, another editor (a man) I once called summarily rejected my idea for an article by barking, “Call me when you have something new to say.”

Those who are used to ways of talking that soften the impact of criticism may find it hard to deal with the right-between-the-eyes style. It has its own logic, however, and neither style is intrinsically better. People who prefer criticism given straight are operating on an assumption that feelings aren’t involved: “Here’s the dope. I know you’re good; you can take it.”

3. Thank-You's

A woman manager I know starts meetings by thanking everyone for coming, even though it’s clearly their job to do so. Her “thank-you” is simply a ritual.

A novelist received a fax from an assistant in her publisher’s office; it contained suggested catalog copy for her book. She immediately faxed him her suggested changes and said, “Thanks for running this by me,” even though her contract gave her the right to approve all copy. When she thanked the assistant, she fully expected him to reciprocate: “Thanks for giving me such a quick response.” Instead, he said, “You’re welcome.” Suddenly, rather than an equal exchange of pleasantries, she found herself positioned as the recipient of a favor. This made her feel like responding, “Thanks for nothing!”

Many women use “thanks” as an automatic conversation starter and closer; there’s nothing literally to say thank you for. Like many rituals typical of women’s conversation, it depends on the goodwill of the other to restore the balance. When the other speaker doesn’t reciprocate, a woman may feel like someone on a seesaw whose partner abandoned his end. Instead of balancing in the air, she has plopped to the ground, wondering how she got there.

4. Fighting

Many men expect the discussion of ideas to be a ritual fight—explored 16
through verbal opposition. They state their ideas in the strongest possible
terms, thinking that if there are weaknesses someone will point them out, and
by trying to argue against those objections, they will see how well their ideas
hold up.

Those who expect their own ideas to be challenged will respond to 17
another's ideas by trying to poke holes and find weak links—as a way of *help-*
ing. The logic is that when you are challenged you will rise to the occasion:
Adrenaline makes your mind sharper; you get ideas and insights you would
not have thought of without the spur of battle.

But many women take this approach as a personal attack. Worse, they find 18
it impossible to do their best work in such a contentious environment. If
you're not used to ritual fighting, you begin to hear criticism of your ideas as
soon as they are formed. Rather than making you think more clearly, it makes
you doubt what you know. When you state your ideas, you hedge in order to
fend off potential attacks. Ironically, this is more likely to *invite* attack because
it makes you look weak.

Although you may never enjoy verbal sparring, some women find it help- 19
ful to learn how to do it. An engineer who was the only woman among four
men in a small company found that as soon as she learned to argue she was
accepted and taken seriously. A doctor attending a hospital staff meeting
made a similar discovery. She was becoming more and more angry with a male
colleague who'd loudly disagreed with a point she'd made. Her better judg-
ment told her to hold her tongue, to avoid making an enemy of this powerful
senior colleague. But finally she couldn't hold it in any longer, and she rose to
her feet and delivered an impassioned attack on his position. She sat down in
a panic, certain she had permanently damaged her relationship with him. To
her amazement, he came up to her afterward and said, "That was a great rebut-
tal. I'm really impressed. Let's go out for a beer after work and hash out our
approaches to this problem."

5. Praise

A manager I'll call Lester had been on his new job six months when he 20
heard that the women reporting to him were deeply dissatisfied. When he
talked to them about it, their feelings erupted; two said they were on the verge
of quitting because he didn't appreciate their work, and they didn't want to
wait to be fired. Lester was dumbfounded: He believed they were doing a fine
job. Surely, he thought, he had said nothing to give them the impression he
didn't like their work. And indeed he hadn't. That was the problem. He had

said *nothing*—and the women assumed he was following the adage “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything.” He thought he was showing confidence in them by leaving them alone.

Men and women have different habits in regard to giving praise. For example, Deirdre and her colleague William both gave presentations at a conference. Afterward, Deirdre told William, “That was a great talk!” He thanked her. Then she asked, “What did you think of mine?” and he gave her a lengthy and detailed critique. She found it uncomfortable to listen to his comments. But she assured herself that he meant well, and that his honesty was a signal that she, too, should be honest when he asked for a critique of his performance. As a matter of fact, she had noticed quite a few ways in which he could have improved his presentation. But she never got a chance to tell him because he never asked—and she felt put down. The worst part was that it seemed she had only herself to blame, since she *had* asked what he thought of her talk. 21

But had she really asked for his critique? The truth is, when she asked for his opinion, she was expecting a compliment, which she felt was more or less required following anyone’s talk. When he responded with criticism, she figured, “Oh, he’s playing ‘Let’s critique each other’”—not a game she’d initiated, but one which she was willing to play. Had she realized he was going to criticize her and not ask her to reciprocate, she would never have asked in the first place. 22

It would be easy to assume that Deirdre was insecure, whether she was fishing for a compliment or soliciting a critique. But she was simply talking automatically, performing one of the many conversational rituals that allow us to get through the day. William may have sincerely misunderstood Deirdre’s intention—or may have been unable to pass up a chance to one-up her when given the opportunity. 23

6. Complaints

“Troubles talk” can be a way to establish rapport with a colleague. You complain about a problem (which shows that you are just folks) and the other person responds with a similar problem (which puts you on equal footing). But while such commiserating is common among women, men are likely to hear it as a request to *solve* the problem. 24

One woman told me she would frequently initiate what she thought would be pleasant complaint-airing sessions at work. She’d talk about situations that bothered her just to talk about them, maybe to understand them better. But her male office mate would quickly tell her how she could improve the situation. This left her feeling condescended to and frustrated. She was delighted to see this very impasse in a section in my book *You Just Don’t* 25

Understand, and showed it to him. “Oh,” he said, “I see the problem. How can we solve it?” Then they both laughed, because it had happened again: He short-circuited the detailed discussion she’d hoped for and cut to the chase of finding a solution.

Sometimes the consequences of complaining are more serious: A man might take a woman’s lighthearted griping literally, and she can get a reputation as a chronic malcontent. Furthermore, she may be seen as not up to solving the problems that arise on the job. 26

7. Jokes

I heard a man call in to a talk show and say, “I’ve worked for two women and neither one had a sense of humor. You know, when you work with men, there’s a lot of joking and teasing.” The show’s host and the guest (both women) took his comment at face value and assumed the women this man worked for were humorless. The guest said, “Isn’t it sad that women don’t feel comfortable enough with authority to see the humor?” The host said, “Maybe when more women are in authority roles, they’ll be more comfortable with power.” But although the women this man worked for *may* have taken themselves too seriously, it’s just as likely that they each had a terrific sense of humor, but maybe the humor wasn’t the type he was used to. They may have been like the woman who wrote to me: “When I’m with men, my wit or cleverness seems inappropriate (or lost!) so I don’t bother. When I’m with my women friends, however, there’s no hold on puns or cracks and my humor is fully appreciated.” 27

The types of humor women and men tend to prefer differ. Research has shown that the most common form of humor among men is razzing, teasing, and mock-hostile attacks, while among women it’s self-mocking. Women often mistake men’s teasing as genuinely hostile. Men often mistake women’s mock self-deprecation as truly putting themselves down. 28

Women have told me they were taken more seriously when they learned to joke the way the guys did. For example, a teacher who went to a national conference with seven other teachers (mostly women) and a group of administrators (mostly men) was annoyed that the administrators always found reasons to leave boring seminars, while the teachers felt they had to stay and take notes. One evening, when the group met at a bar in the hotel, the principal asked her how one such seminar had turned out. She retorted, “As soon as you left, it got much better.” He laughed out loud at her response. The playful insult appealed to the men—but there was a trade-off. The women seemed to back off from her after this. (Perhaps they were put off by her using joking to align herself with the bosses.) 29

There is no “right” way to talk. When problems arise, the culprit may be style differences—and *all* styles will at times fail with others who don’t share or understand them, just as English won’t do you much good if you try to speak to someone who knows only French. If you want to get your message across, it’s not a question of being “right”; it’s a question of using language that’s shared—or at least understood.

For a reading quiz, sources on Deborah Tannen, and annotated links to further readings on gender differences in communication, visit bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader.

Journal Writing

Tannen’s ANECDOTE about the newspaper columnist (par. 4) illustrates that much of what we say is purely automatic. Do you excuse yourself when you bump into inanimate objects? When someone says, “Have a good trip,” do you answer, “You too,” even if the other person isn’t going anywhere? Do you find yourself overusing certain words or phrases such as “like” or “you know”? Pay close attention to these kinds of verbal tics in your own and others’ speech. Over the course of a few days, note as many of them as you can in your journal. (To take your journal writing further, see “From Journal to Essay” on the following page.)

Questions on Meaning

1. What is Tannen’s PURPOSE in writing this essay? What does she hope it will accomplish?
2. What does Tannen mean when she writes, “Conversation is a ritual” (par. 1)?
3. What does Tannen see as the fundamental difference between men’s and women’s conversational strategies?
4. Why is “You’re welcome” not always an appropriate response to “Thank you”?

Questions on Writing Strategy

1. This essay has a large cast of characters: twenty-three to be exact. What function do these characters serve? How does Tannen introduce them to the reader? Does she describe them in sufficient detail?

2. Whom does Tannen see as her primary AUDIENCE? ANALYZE her use of the pronoun *you* in paragraphs 9 and 19. Whom does she seem to be addressing here? Why?
3. Analyze how Tannen develops the category of apologies in paragraphs 4–9. Where does she use EXAMPLE, DEFINITION, and COMPARISON AND CONTRAST?
4. How does Tannen’s DESCRIPTION of a columnist as “well-known” (par. 4) contribute to the effectiveness of her example?
5. **OTHER METHODS** For each of her seven areas of miscommunication, Tannen compares and contrasts male and female communication styles and strategies. SUMMARIZE the main source of misunderstanding in each area.

Questions on Language

1. What is the EFFECT of “I put her out of her misery” (par. 11)? What does this phrase usually mean?
2. What does Tannen mean by a “right-between-the-eyes style” (par. 12)? What is the FIGURE OF SPEECH involved here?
3. What is the effect of Tannen’s use of figurative verbs, such as “barking” (par. 11) and “erupted” (20)? Find at least one other example of the use of a verb in a non-literal sense.
4. Look up any of the following words whose meanings you are unsure of: synonymous, self-deprecating (par. 4); lucid, tentativeness (11); intrinsically (12); reciprocate (14); adrenaline, spur (17); contentious, hedge (18); sparring, rebuttal (19); adage (20); soliciting (23); commiserating (24); initiate, condescended, impasse (25); chronic, malcontent (26); razzing (28); retorted (29).

Suggestions for Writing

1. **FROM JOURNAL TO ESSAY** Write an essay classifying the examples from your journal entry into categories of your own devising. You might sort out the examples by context (“phone blunders,” “faulty farewells”), by purpose (“nervous tics,” “space fillers”), or by some other principle of classification. Given your subject matter, you might want to adopt a humorous TONE.
2. How well does your style of communication conform to that of your gender as described by Tannen? Write a short essay about a specific communication problem or misunderstanding you have had with someone of the opposite sex (sibling, friend, parent, significant other). How well does Tannen’s differentiation of male and female communication styles account for your particular problem?
3. How true do you find Tannen’s assessment of miscommunication between the sexes? Consider the conflicts you have observed between your parents, among fellow students or coworkers, in fictional portrayals in books and movies. You could also go beyond your personal experiences and observations by researching the opinions of other experts (linguists, psychologists, sociologists, and so on). Write an essay confirming or questioning Tannen’s GENERALIZATIONS, backing up your (and perhaps others’) views with your own examples.
4. **CRITICAL WRITING** Tannen insists that “neither [communication] style is intrinsically better” (par. 12), that “There is no ‘right’ way to talk” (30). What do you

make of this refusal to take sides in the battle of the sexes? Is Tannen always successful? Is absolute neutrality possible, or even desirable, when it comes to such divisive issues?

5. **CONNECTIONS** What pictures of men and women emerge from Tannen's essay and from Dave Barry's "Batting Clean-Up and Striking Out" (p. 239)? In an essay, DEFINE each sex as portrayed by these two authors, and then agree or disagree with the definitions. Support your opinions with examples from your own observations and experience.

Deborah Tannen on Writing

Though Deborah Tannen's "But What Do You Mean?" is written for a general audience, Tannen is a linguistics scholar who does considerable academic writing. One debate among scholarly writers is whether it is appropriate to incorporate one's experiences and biases into academic writing, especially given the goal of objectivity in conducting and reporting research. The October 1996 *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association*) printed a discussion of the academic uses of the personal, with contributions from more than two dozen scholars. Tannen's comments, excerpted here, focused on the first-person *I*.

When I write academic prose, I use the first person, and I instruct my students to do the same. The principle that researchers should acknowledge their participation in their work is an outgrowth of a humanistic approach to linguistic analysis. . . . Understanding discourse is not a passive act of decoding but a creative act of imagining a scene (composed of people engaged in culturally recognizable activities) within which the ideas being talked about have meaning. The listener's active participation in sense making both results from and creates interpersonal involvement. For researchers to deny their involvement in their interpreting of discourse would be a logical and ethical violation of this framework. . . .

[O]bjectivity in the analysis of interactions is impossible anyway. Whether they took part in the interaction or not, researchers identify with one or another speaker, are put off or charmed by the styles of participants. This one reminds you of a cousin you adore; that one sounds like a neighbor you despise. Researchers are human beings, not atomic particles or chemical elements. . . .

Another danger of claiming objectivity rather than acknowledging and correcting for subjectivity is that scholars who don't reveal their participation in interactions they analyze risk the appearance of hiding it. "Following is an

exchange that occurred between a professor and a student,” I have read in articles in my field. The speakers are identified as “A” and “B.” The reader is not told that the professor, A (of course the professor is A and the student B), is the author. Yet that knowledge is crucial to contextualizing the author’s interpretation. Furthermore, the impersonal designations A and B are another means of constructing a false objectivity. They obscure the fact that human interaction is being analyzed, and they interfere with the reader’s understanding. The letters replace what in the author’s mind are names and voices and personas that are the basis for understanding the discourse. Readers, given only initials, are left to scramble for understanding by imagining people in place of letters.

Avoiding self-reference by using the third person also results in the depersonalization of knowledge. Knowledge and understanding do not occur in abstract isolation. They always and only occur among people. . . . Denying that scholarship is a personal endeavor entails a failure to understand and correct for the inevitable bias that human beings bring to all their enterprises.

For Discussion

1. In arguing for the use of the first-person *I* in academic prose, Tannen is speaking primarily about its use in her own field, linguistics. From your experience with academic writing, is Tannen’s argument applicable to other disciplines as well, such as history, biology, psychology, or government? Why, or why not? What have your teachers in various courses advised you about writing in the first person?
2. Try this experiment on the effects of the first person and third person (*he, she, they*): Write a passage of academic prose in one person or the other. (Tannen’s example of professor A and student B can perhaps suggest a direction for your passage, or you may have one already written in a paper you’ve submitted.) Rewrite the passage in the other person, and ANALYZE the two versions. Does one sound more academic than the other? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each one?