

# Conversational Styles of Men and Women

*By David Hoffman*

Deborah Tannen is a linguistics professor who is helping redefine our understandings of discourse and conversation. Her first book *That's not what I meant*, published in 1986, described how conversational styles work in relationships of friends or family. Her most recent work *You just don't understand!* Was written to meet the subsequent demand she heard from couples for a book that focused specifically on conversations between men and women.

I held an aching need for her writings when I found them this past winter, having come out of a communication breakdown in my primary relationship remarkably similar to the one Tannen describes in *You just don't understand!* as the motivator for her linguistics career.

The book's title might imply the tome is less than positive toward males but that's not the case. Tannen's book on couples is affirmative of both men and women and their ways of interacting. Last November, men's movement maestro and *Iron John* author Robert Bly and Tannen held a night of conversation titled "Where are Men and Women today" at New York City's Cooper Union. *The New York Times* billed the Bly and Tannen encounter as "a face-to-face, word-to-word confrontation" and *Newsweek* asked if the audience of one thousand men and women would spend "the whole time wondering if he would hit her over the head with his mandolin." In fact they did what the mainstream media hoped they wouldn't do: they cooperated, praising each other's work and outlook. The photos show a marked air of cordiality. Bly and Tannen didn't if you will pardon the expression, cross at talk- purposes.

In *You just don't understand!*, Tannen says that men and women begin in childhood to use language differently to achieve the same ends. Both boys and girls want to belong but each employs different methods to gain acceptance. Girls together socialize with each other in small groups, often one-on-one, and the structure of their interactions revolve around conversations and consensus. Boys socialize in larger groups and the structure of their interactions revolves around activities. Both have an internal pecking order and a specific set of customs to preserve group harmony. Both sexes sometimes pressure members into conforming. Witness the stigma heaped on a boy who likes to play with dolls or the "tomboy" label given to a girl who likes to play sports with the boys.

The differences between boys and girls make for different conversational styles. It's no wonder, for example, that if girls spend a lot of time talking one-on-one, they will become well versed in expressing feelings and remembering in great detail who said what and how. Nor is it any wonder that boys, sharing the experience of being out in the world and establishing themselves within a hierarchy through "display" of their qualities will become fluent in expressing themselves outwardly in a way that reflects their world. But trouble arises in later life when these former boys and girls marry or work together as colleagues. Each bringing their own gender's communication methods with them.

We cart around plenty of beliefs about men and women. "Men dominate conversations."

“Women talk endlessly.” “Men don’t express their feelings enough.” In times of frustration or fear, these beliefs can escalate into more extreme positions. “Men are aggressive and tyrannical.” “Women are manipulative and hysterical.” Or even “all men are potential rapists” or “women are castrators”.

In the recent Nova Scotian court case concerning the right of feminist magazine *Pandora* to withhold publication of men’s views. Witnesses testifying on behalf of *Pandora* said that “Men tend to dominate and direct (written and oral) discourse and women tend to be disadvantaged in such circumstances.” Tannen writes that men do indeed interrupt each other’s conversations more frequently than women. However, men also assume in conversations that others are free to interrupt them. A businesswoman at a meeting with a group of men could easily become frustrated if she didn’t realize that.

Tannen also notes that while many North Americans hold the belief that it is impolite to interrupt others, these same people, both men and women, do it quite a bit. What is different, though, is that when men display their attributes, their efforts include interruptions and attempts to redirect each other’s conversations. Men don’t only share the ideas, they’re also meeting their emotional needs and validating their own and their friend’s place in the scheme of things.

Men and women respond differently when hearing someone’s problem. Women tend to respond with affinity. “I have a similar problem.” A man is more likely to offer a solution in some way. He might say “Cheer up, it could be worse” or suggest an action. Men often don’t understand that when women talk about a problem, they may be more comfortable being met with affinity than a proposed solution.

According to Tannen (and others), women have greater emotional fluency than do men. That’s fine when women talk with each other, but potential trouble when women talk with men within the intimate confines of a marriage. Tannen says of one couple “All her life she has had practice in verbalizing her thoughts and feelings in private conversations with people she is close to; all his life he has had practice in dismissing his and keeping them to himself. For her, accustomed to expressing her fleeting thoughts and opinions as they come to her, saying nothing means thinking nothing. But he does not assume that his passing thoughts are worthy of utterance. Speaking them would give them more weight and significance than he feels they merit.”

Elsewhere she says, “Coming home and telling everything that’s happened is a ritual (women have) engaged in from the time they were very little. And in order to feel that life is going on as it should, we want to play out these rituals. But because this is not a ritual that men will understand - it’s not the one that they’ve done - the man will look for the literal reason for the talk. And he can’t find one. And it’s very frustrating to do something when you don’t understand the reason for it.” She pointed to a solution to this problem found by one couple: “she gives him a half-hour to not talk and then he gives her a half-hour to talk.”

In her latest book, Tannen says “Although each style is valid on its own terms. Misunderstandings arise because the styles are different.” This doesn’t obligate men to adopt

women's styles, or vice-versa. Just to notice "Learning about style differences won't make them go away, but it can banish mutual mystification and blame." Men and women both "want to be understood - heard for what we think we are saying, for what we know we meant."

Women don't have a monopoly on intimate, one-to-one "connection" talk. What will help men improve theirs is a conversational environment that's safe from shaming and put-downs. Increasingly, men's groups and gatherings are places where this is possible. As for men's easier grasp of conversations that feature display and information reporting reporting, why not celebrate these as manifestations of strength and beauty? Self-honouring is the birthright of every human being.

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