

Men's English, Women's English: Should we be teaching them the same?

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Abstract

The field of sociolinguistics has been researching the phenomenon of men's and women's speech patterns for almost 20 years now. While in many ways, we speak more similarly than differently, distinctions have been documented. One explanation for the differences stems from the different expectations men and women bring to a conversation: men are concerned with the dynamics of power, while women are concerned with the dynamics of solidarity. These dynamics affect such conversational strategies as politeness, turn-taking, agreeing and disagreeing, and topic management. In this article, the dynamics of sociolinguistic power and solidarity are explained. Illustrations of how these phenomena are displayed in real communication are included from the research literature and from actual transcripts. Finally, a technique for bringing these insights to the classroom is presented.

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Consider the following conversation between a husband and wife (Tannen, 1986, 23):

He: Let's drop by Toliver's house tonight.

She: Why?

He: All right, we don't have to go.

Sound familiar? It is to most English-speaking westerners. At the end of this conversation, both he and she are unhappy, yet neither of them knows what went wrong. According to linguist Deborah Tannen, they are speaking different languages, even though they are both speaking English. It is the language of men, in contrast to the language of women.

Research in the area of language and gender over the last two decades demonstrates that men and women have typical patterns of difference in their speech. We show interest in our interlocutor differently; we disagree differently; we participate in turn taking differently; we control topics of conversation differently. It's not that *what* we talk about is different, although it may be, but it's *how* we participate in a conversation is different.

So when we teach English to our adult students, are we allowing them to be aware of the linguistic gender differences in their culture, and helping them to participate more appropriately in the gendered English world?

Sociolinguistic theory (see Fasold, 1990, for an overview) tells us that the dynamics of power and solidarity underpin our social relations. *Power* can be seen in strategies to dominate a conversation, and *solidarity* is accomplished by trying to establish rapport. The same phrase can be interpreted as being a

strategy of power or of solidarity depending on the context, who the speakers are and how they interpret the remark.

For example, consider the following situation (Tannen, 2001): Two women are walking outside on their way to a meeting. A man exits a nearby building and joins the women on the way to the same meeting. Upon seeing the man, one of the women says "Where's your coat?" The man responds, "Thanks, Mom." He understands her comment as an attempt to demonstrate or show power such as when a mother chastises her child. But she may have meant the question as a show of concern and friendliness, thus she may have been trying to build solidarity. It is clear from the man's response that he saw it as a power play, but we don't know the woman's intention. The language itself is ambiguous. It is only through interpretation that we can know the meaning. In cases like this, the man's response may not have been what she expected, as her intent was not what the man interpreted. In the literature of gender and language, the difference in interpretation of the same remark is one of the areas of difficulty between men and women.

In the conversation between the husband and wife quoted above where he suggest going to Toliver's house, we have a similar difficulty. He brings an assumption to the conversation that her question "why" is an assertion of power which challenges him. She intends that her question "why" will build solidarity by being able to share his thoughts. He dislikes the challenge and so drops the plan; she is hurt that her attempt to understand his thinking (and that for her builds intimacy) is responded to by him as shutting down the conversation.

The research on gender and language has largely been conducted among middle class people in the western world, and it shows that women tend

to stress solidarity more than men do in their use of language. Also, women tend to focus more on the affective or emotional content of interactions more often than men do. Furthermore, women tend to interact in ways that maintain and increase solidarity, while men, especially in formal contexts, tend to interact in ways that will maintain and increase their power and status. (Holmes, 1993). To date, there is not sufficient research to determine whether these patterns are universal in all cultures, or only among westerners.

These tendencies can clearly be seen in research conducted by Janet Holmes (1999) who explored how men and women show agreement and disagreement. Women tend to emphasize agreement both in all-women and mixed-sex contexts. They build on each other's contributions, complete each other's utterances and affirm each other's opinions. In contrast, men rarely offer explicit agreeing responses. Men's talk is actually "typically combative, a kind of verbal sparring" (Holmes, 1999, 338.). In fact, in casual conversation men will use insults and abuse as strategies for expressing solidarity. When it comes to disagreeing, men will overtly challenge the other speaker, whether male or female; in contrast, women tend to soften their disagreeing utterances.

To explore these dynamics, I recently videotaped a 15-minute segment of two popular American television talk shows: *Real Time with Bill Maher* and the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. I then transcribed about 15 seconds of interaction.

Bill Maher (Bill) is talking with his guests D.L. Hughley (DL) and Bill Kristol (BK).

DL: I think we went in there and kicked a** and now nobody got nowhere to go. What do we do now?

Bill: Right

DL: It's, it's

Bill: Plus you know this is an interesting statistic, we are spending a billion dollars a year

BK: A week

Bill: No, no, in Afghanistan

Bill, as host, clearly agrees "right", and baldly disagrees, "no, no", with his guests. His conversational strategy of maintaining power is clear with his direct agreement and disagreement. In contrast, Oprah (O) interviews Madonna (M) and the following interchange occurs.

O You're, you're calmer

M Um hum

O You're definitely more calm than you were the last time

M Yeah

O Your energy is a lot, it's a, it's a just a softer vibration coming from you than before

M Good

O It's a good thing

M It's a very good thing

O Yeah, it's a good thing.

Notice how Madonna reinforces Oprah's words with "um hum", "yeah", "good" and they each support each other through repetition of "It's a good thing." Clearly these techniques build solidarity, which is valued in women's talk.

Are these values and strategies similar in our students' L1? One way to explore this question is to have the students act as ethnographers: the students tape record and analyze conversations among L1 speakers. Heidi Riggerbach's

(1999) textbook *Discourse Analysis in the Language Classroom* provides students with strategies that are easy to implement so that they become researchers of their own L1 and their interlanguage. They should consider which variables they are interested in: same sex conversations or mixed gender; intimate partners, casual conversations, workplace/educational settings or formal situations. And as I did, the students should transcribe small segments of the conversations that reveal solidarity and/or power relationships: how the speakers agree with each other, disagree, interrupt, and take turns.

After gathering the data, the students can make generalizations about how people accomplish them in their L1. The students can also make generalizations about the frames of these conversations, i.e., what are the assumptions the speakers are bringing to the conversation? For example, an interruption that is spoken between two women might be perceived as solidarity building. This is seen in the conversation between Oprah and Madonna. On the other hand, the same interruption may be understood as a dominance tactic if it occurs between men (as in Bill Maher's conversation) or between a man and a woman. The students' findings can be compared with what is known about how men and women converse in the English-speaking world.

As teachers who hope to promote the fluent and appropriate use of English by our students, we will assist them when they can identify and manage the different patterns of language use that are characteristic of men's talk and women's talk. When our language teaching textbooks provide dialogues as models, we ought to explore whether both men and women really talk this way. Is the agreeing too feminine? Is the disagreeing too direct and masculine? When is it appropriate? Are the active listening techniques of "uh huhs" and

“really” and “no kidding” the way that men talk with men? How much interrupting is appropriate, and will it be perceived as a display of power, or of solidarity? What variables are important in the context? These are sociolinguistic questions that we ought to raise with our students. Consequently, they will become speakers who can interact smoothly and in the manner they intend with their English interlocutors.

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