

Cultural Patterning in *Language and Woman's Place*

DEBORAH TANNEN

I ambled into the sphere of Robin Lakoff—and of linguistics—in the summer of 1973. A teacher of remedial writing named Debby Paterakis, I knew nothing of linguistics except that it was a way of studying language—and language had always been my passion. Nearly everything I have written about conversational style—and about language and gender, which to me is a subcategory of conversational style—was seeded by the course I took with Lakoff at the 1973 Linguistic Institute at the University of Michigan. My decision to abandon a secure faculty position in the academic skills department at CUNY's Lehman College, and my native New York City, for a distant territory out west and an indeterminate future as a linguistics PhD can also be traced to that summer, that course, and that professor.

Several years before, while working on my master's degree in English literature, I had looked longingly at a poster advertising the upcoming Linguistic Institute at SUNY-Buffalo. The topics listed on the poster were intriguing and inviting but completely out of the range of possibility, since I was married to a man from the island of Crete whose idea of marriage did not include his wife going away for the summer to take courses because they interested her. (It wasn't that he needed to keep me near: he offered that if I wanted to go away for a couple of months, I could spend the summer in Crete with his parents.) When in 1973 George Paterakis decided to return to Greece and I decided not to go with him, I knew immediately where I would go instead: to that summer's Linguistic Institute in Ann Arbor.

The fates were looking out for me. The summer I found myself free to attend a Linguistic Institute was the summer the institute was devoted to "Language in Context" and the year Robin Lakoff was on the faculty. In addition to "Introduction to Linguistics" (which was taught by A. L. Becker, whose view of language was deeply anthropological), I took Lakoff's class. What captured my imagination most in the course was Lakoff's elegant notion that communicative style resulted from three differentially applied rules, each associated with a different sense of politeness (see

Holmes, this volume). I saw in this system an explanation for the crazy-making frustrations I had experienced and been helpless to understand or explain in seven years living with a man born and raised in a different culture. In the term paper I wrote for that course, which I titled "Communication Mix and Mixup: How Linguistics Can Ruin a Marriage," I worked out how Lakoff's schema illuminated the causes of those frustrations. Her rules of politeness allowed me to reframe many of my husband's and my grievances as conversational misunderstandings.

A year later, in 1974, I began graduate study at the University of California at Berkeley—not as Debby Paterakis, but as Deborah Tannen. The paper I had written for Lakoff's class became the first paper I delivered at a linguistics conference: a regional meeting held at San Jose State University. (It also became my first linguistics publication, in the mimeographed, staple-bound *San Jose State Occasional Papers in Linguistics* [Tannen 1975]). In that paper, I recast myself as "Wife," George Paterakis as "Husband," and the two of us as "the couple." Here's how Lakoff's rules of politeness accounted for our repeated arguments, reframed as examples in my academic paper: "Husband" was applying Rule 1 of politeness, *Don't impose*, when he dropped hints rather than telling "Wife" directly what he wanted; "Wife" was applying Rule 3, *Maintain camaraderie*, when she missed those hints, assuming "Husband" would tell her directly what he wanted. He was angered because his clearly expressed preferences were continually ignored, and she was angered because her clearly demonstrated efforts to accommodate were continually unacknowledged; instead of gratitude, she got grief.

That early paper said nothing about how Wife and Husband had come by their contrasting notions of politeness. It did not address whether their differing applications of rules of politeness reflected their cultural differences. Nor did it say anything about gender-linked patterns. I assumed, however, that our contrasting notions of politeness reflected not our genders but rather our cultural backgrounds: Greek and American, respectively.

The year of that crucial institute, 1973, was also the year Lakoff published two influential essays: "Language and Woman's Place" and "The Logic of Politeness" (Lakoff 1973a, 1973b). Scholars in English departments refer to "the linguistic turn" whereby some literary theorists began to borrow terms, concepts, and perspectives from our field. In the 1960s and early 1970s, a different kind of "turn" was taking place in linguistics—a turn of attention by some to the language of everyday conversation. And Lakoff's work, as reflected in these two essays and in her 1975 book *Language and Woman's Place* (LWP), played an enormous role in accomplishing that turn. Furthermore, just as an understanding of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics is enhanced by comparing those elements in vastly different languages, so also is an understanding of the pragmatics

of politeness enhanced by cross-language comparison (see Ide, this volume). In *LWP*, Lakoff uses cross-cultural encounters to explain her rules of politeness:

Consider what happens when an American, a German, and a Japanese meet. Suppose they all want to make a good impression and to be "polite" according to their own standards. Chances are, unless the members of the group are very sophisticated and have had prior exposure to the other cultures, the American will seem to the others overly brash, familiar, and prying; the Japanese will seem cloyingly deferential; the German will seem distant and uninterested in the others to the point of arrogance. (*LWP* 91-92)

Lakoff goes on to explain that the impressions made by individuals can become the basis for national stereotypes when generalized to the entire group of which the individuals are members:

Americans are "too personal"; Japanese are "too humble"; Germans are "too stiff." Actually, what is happening is that each is conforming to a cultural stereotype of what constitutes polite behavior toward a slight acquaintance. At this stage of a relationship, a German will emphasize Rule 1, a Japanese Rule 2, and an American Rule 3. (These are of course the stereotypical norms; there are plenty of participants in these cultures whose rule application, for various idiosyncratic reasons, is different.) (*LWP* 92)

This is the sense in which Lakoff's rules of politeness, and her related notion of communicative style, were revelatory to me: their explanatory power to shed light on everyday interaction, especially interactions that could be called cross-cultural. No doubt, part of my visceral response was my personal experience in a cross-cultural marriage as well as the more general experience of having lived in Greece and taught English as a second language there. (Our personal experiences often—perhaps always—play a role in our choice of research topics, although we rarely acknowledge this in our academic writing).

I enrolled in graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley, because that's where Lakoff taught. But once there, I discovered other faculty members whose perspectives shaped my thinking about language. One whose work dovetailed particularly elegantly with Lakoff's was John Gumperz. During those key years, the early 1970s, Gumperz was developing his theory of conversational inference based on the analysis of everyday conversations among speakers of British English and speakers of Indian English in London. Gumperz focused on how culturally variable contextualization cues signal the speech activity to which utterances contribute. Lakoff's theory of communicative style provided a way to characterize the

interactional goals (distance, deference, and camaraderie) that motivate patterns of contextualization cues. Drawing on both these conceptual frameworks, I focused my own research on "the processes and consequences of conversational style" (as my dissertation was titled) in everyday conversations, especially those among friends and intimates.

Thus my interest in conversational style focused not on gender but on regional differences. Again I had a personal motivation: as a native of Brooklyn, New York, of East European Jewish background, I was experiencing culture shock in northern California. In New York City I had been regarded as so diffident, polite, and indirect that one friend habitually referred to me as a WASP. In California I was surprised and hurt to realize that I was sometimes perceived as aggressive and even rude. For example, in New York City if you are in a department store and you want to ask a quick question such as "Where is the ladies' room?" it is perfectly acceptable—indeed, unmarked—to interrupt an ongoing service encounter to do so. It would be unacceptably rude for a salesperson to expect you to wait while she finishes a lengthy interchange, when you only need a brief moment of her time to answer a question. But in Berkeley, my ever-so-polite, deferentially high-pitched "Excuse me, could I just interrupt to ask where the ladies' room is, please?" was met with an obviously annoyed "I'll help you when I'm finished with this customer." Clearly, the ladies'-room query, which in New York City came under Rule 3, *Maintain camaraderie*, was regarded in California as governed by Rule 1, *Don't impose*.

I figured out these contrasts, reassured myself that I was still a good person, and developed my notion of conversational style in writing my dissertation. I investigated the conversational style differences among six friends at a Thanksgiving dinner: three natives of New York City of Eastern European Jewish background (I was one); two southern California natives of Christian background; and one woman who had grown up in London, England. I found that three speakers (the New Yorkers) shared what I called a "high-involvement style" characterized by such Rule 3 (*Maintain camaraderie*) strategies as overlapping another speaker's talk to show enthusiasm, which was often interpreted as interruption by the three who shared what I called a "high-considerateness style," governed by Rule 1 (*Don't impose*). In other words, one style shows good intentions by emphasizing interpersonal involvement, whereas the other shows good intentions by emphasizing social distance. In doing the analysis for this study, I tried to explain how conversational style accounts for what goes on in all conversations, as well as to explain cross-cultural differences based on ethnic and regional background. I did not focus my analysis on the gender of the speakers (although I did take into account their sexual orientation, as three of the four men at the dinner were gay).

When I joined the faculty of the linguistics department at Georgetown University in 1979, my colleague Muriel Saville-Troike suggested I offer a course on gender and language. I unhesitatingly rejected the idea

on the grounds that neither my expertise nor my interests prepared me to teach such a course. I was in fact slightly offended, certain that she would never have asked this question had I been male. (At the time—and continuing for more than a decade—I was one of only two women in the eighteen-member department). In contrast, when Saville-Troike left Georgetown the next year, I eagerly assumed responsibility for a new course she had proposed but had not yet taught: “Cross-Cultural Communication.” That course, which I came to regard as my signature course, led to my first general-audience book, *That's Not What I Meant!* (Tannen 1986).

In that book I mention five social categories that affect conversational style, which I still think of as the “Big Five”: geographic or regional background, ethnicity, age, class, and gender. (There are, of course, many others, including sexual orientation and profession.) In order to cover these areas as best I could, and to reflect my abiding interest in how ways of talking affect close relationships, I included a chapter entitled “Talk in the Intimate Relationship: His and Hers,” in which I combined the framework Lakoff had laid out in *LWP* with the perspective of a paper by anthropologists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982) titled “A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication.” Maltz and Borker drew on Gumperz’s framework of cross-culturally variable contextualization cues to integrate and explain a broad range of findings in the field of language and gender. They used the term *cultural* as a metaphorical way to represent the pattern they had discerned in the seemingly unrelated findings reported by such researchers as Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1980a, 1980b), Candace West (1979; West & Zimmerman 1977), Pamela Fishman (1978), and Lynette Hirschman ([1973] 1994). That pattern, Maltz and Borker showed, could be traced to ways of using language that girls and boys learn as children at play in sex-separate groups (see Cook-Gumperz, this volume)—this is the sense in which women and men grow up in “different cultures.”

My own contribution (Tannen 1982) to the volume in which Maltz and Borker’s article appeared, based on my master’s thesis, addressed the issue of cultural patterning in the use of directness and indirectness. Once again I presented a conversation between Wife and Husband but did not examine the speakers’ verbalizations in relation to their gender. I did, however, home in on the cultural patterning, comparing the responses of Greeks, Americans, and Greek Americans.

I have presented this personal account to show why I believe that Lakoff’s work on language and gender is grounded in her notion of communicative style, which is inseparable from the notion that rules of politeness are learned in cultural context. I would like to make one more point about why I believe the influence of culture is embedded in *LWP*. Lakoff’s work on language and gender grew out of a concern for social justice that was so much a part of the zeitgeist that accompanied and inspired the turn

in linguistics and related fields to the language of everyday conversation. For example, William Labov's *Language in the Inner City* (1972) was grounded in and grew out of a concern for the civil—and linguistic—rights of speakers of Black English Vernacular (now called African American Vernacular English). Similarly, Gumperz's (1977) studies of mismatched contextualization cues between speakers of Indian English and British English were fundamentally aimed at addressing pervasive discrimination against South Asians living in London. A similar concern can be seen in Erickson's (1975) analyses of culturally relative patterns of listener response to explain why counseling interviews produced better results for students who shared a cultural background with their school counselors. In all these and many other studies of language and language use in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the revolution in linguistics that turned attention to the language of everyday conversation, of which Lakoff was both a part and an inspiration, was inseparable from the drive to right social wrongs and empower members of socially disadvantaged groups.

In this spirit, Lakoff's pioneering attention to the topic of language and gender was very much motivated by the women's movement, which was beginning to make visible the many ways that women were relegated to second-class citizenship. *LWP*, as Lakoff makes explicit in her introduction, "is an attempt to provide diagnostic evidence from language use for one type of inequity that has been claimed to exist in our society: that between the roles of men and women" (*LWP* 39). She closes the book, moreover, by concluding that "the kinds of 'politeness' used by and of and to women do not arise by accident; that they are, indeed, stifling, exclusive, and oppressive." Finally, she expresses her hope that "this book will be one small first step in the direction of a wider option of life styles, for men and women" (*LWP* 102).

Remembering that Lakoff's examination of gender and language was part of the activist 1960s and 1970s, an era in which many of us tried to do our part in seeking social justice, is inextricable from locating the notion of culture in *LWP*. Remembering this is also essential to understanding why so many, myself included, found the book so necessary, so motivating, so inspiring to our own work.

REFERENCES

- Erickson, Frederick (1975). Gatekeeping and the melting pot: Interaction in counseling encounters. *Harvard Educational Review* 45:44–70.
- Fishman, Pamela M. (1978). Interaction: The work women do. *Social Problems* 25:397–406.
- Goodwin, Marjorie Harness (1980a). Directive-response speech sequences in girls' and boys' task activities. In Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, &

- Nelly Furman (eds.), *Women and language in literature and society*. New York: Praeger. 157-173.
- (1980b). He-said-she-said: Formal cultural procedures for the construction of a gossip dispute activity. *American Ethnologist* 7:674-695.
- Gumperz, John (1977). Sociocultural knowledge in conversational inference. In Muriel Saville-Troike (ed.), *Linguistics and anthropology: Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1977*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. 191-211.
- Hirschman, Lynette ([1973] 1994). Female-male differences in conversational interaction. *Language in Society* 23:427-442.
- Labov, William (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lakoff, Robin (1973a). Language and woman's place. *Language in Society* 2:45-80.
- (1973b). The logic of politeness, or minding your p's and q's. In Claudia Corum, T. Cedric Smith-Stark, & Ann Weiser (eds.), *Papers from the Ninth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Department of Linguistics. 292-305.
- Lakoff, Robin (1975). *Language and woman's place*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Maltz, Daniel N., & Ruth A. Borker (1982). A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication. In John J. Gumperz (ed.), *Language and social identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 196-216.
- Tannen, Deborah (1975). Communication mix and mixup, or how linguistics can ruin a marriage. Michael Noonan (ed.), *San Jose State Occasional Papers in Linguistics*. Vol. 1. San Jose, CA: San Jose State University Department of Linguistics. 205-211.
- (1982). Ethnic style in male-female conversation. In John J. Gumperz (ed.), *Language and social identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 217-231.
- (1986). *That's not what I meant! How conversational style makes or breaks relationships*. New York: Ballantine.
- West, Candace (1979). Against our will: Male interruption of females in cross-sex conversation. In Judith Orasanu, Mariam Slater, & Leonore Loeb Adler (eds.), *Language, sex and gender*. *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 327:81-100.
- West, Candace, & Don H. Zimmerman (1977). Women's place in everyday talk: Reflections on parent-child interaction. *Social Problems* 24:521-529.