

“DON'T JUST SIT THERE—INTERRUPT!”  
PACING AND PAUSING IN CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

DEBORAH TANNEN, *Georgetown University*

A theme that has run through my research from the start is reflected in the title of my first book, *Conversational Style* (1984). I use this phrase to refer to the many linguistic aspects of how speakers say what they mean, including pacing and pausing, indirectness, tone of voice, intonation, syntactic patterns, genre (tell a story? make a joke? ask a question?), and so on. One feature of conversational style that continues to fascinate me (and, from what they tell me, audiences at my lectures) is pacing and pausing—a seemingly minor element with major consequences.

When two people have different assumptions about how long a pause is “natural” between one speaker’s turn and another’s, conversations between them become unbalanced. The one who is waiting for a longer pause finds it harder to get a turn, because before that length of pause occurs, the other person begins to perceive an uncomfortable silence and rushes to fill it, to save the conversation. The result (especially if the speakers are romantically or maritally involved) can be hurtful and unfair: the one who waits for and never gets the longer pause accuses: “You’re interrupting me,” “You’re self-centered—you only want to hear yourself talk.” The shorter pauser accuses: “You’re withholding,” “You’re hostile,” “You never tell me what’s on your mind,” or even “You have nothing on your mind!” In other words, characteristics of speaking style are interpreted as evidence of character and intentions.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Conversational styles are learned growing up, as one learns to talk. So our styles are influenced by the social groupings that determine whom we hear and talk to growing up—all the ethnic, regional, and class distinctions that have so many reverberations in society. So we end up not only accusing, “You interrupt me,” but also generalizing, “Jews (or blacks or Northerners or Anglos or city people) are pushy, loud, and self-centered,” or “Christians (or whites or Midwesterners or Indians or country people) are dull,” or “You can’t tell where they stand.” In countries all over the world, there are speakers from some geographic regions who speak more slowly than those from others. And in every one of those countries that I know about, people from the slower-speaking regions are stereotyped as stupid, and those from the faster-speaking regions are stereotyped as too aggressive.

Differences in conversational style are always relative, not absolute. It's not a matter of some people being fast talkers and others being slow, but of how relatively fast or slow a speaker is in relation to the others in the same conversation. The same person can be an apparent victim in one conversation and an apparent perpetrator in another.

My colleague Ron Scollon, who has written about these phenomena too (1982), grew up in Detroit; I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. When I talk to Ron, I have to be careful to give him what seems to me extra time to respond; otherwise, I inadvertently interrupt him. Ron's wife, Suzie, is Hawaiian of Chinese descent, and she expects longer pauses than he does. So she accuses him of interrupting, of not giving her a chance to answer his question before he asks another. Ron and Suzie worked among Athabaskan Indians in Alaska (Scollon and Scollon 1981). When Suzie talked to Athabaskans, she became the conversational steamroller, as Athabaskans are comfortable with longer silences than she could tolerate.

But the story doesn't end there. The Scollons invited me to a workshop in Alaska, after which they sent me on a bush flight to an Athabaskan village, Fort Yukon, just inside the Arctic Circle. They were curious how someone who thinks friendly verbosity is next to godliness would fare as a stranger in a setting where no one talks to people they don't know. Ron later assigned my book *Conversational Style* (1984) to students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and asked them on a midterm exam, "Deborah Tannen spent a day in Fort Yukon. What do you think she experienced there?" Most students answered correctly that I was unnerved when no one would talk to me. (After several hours of failed attempts to spark conversations, I broke down and called the local American missionaries.) But a student who came from the northernmost village in the Arctic Circle wrote, "People in Fort Yukon talk so fast, she probably fit right in."

In books, articles, and lectures, I have tried to show that negative impressions often result from differences in conversational style—differences among women and men; Easterners, Southerners, and Northerners; people of different ethnicity, class, and age. But again and again I come up against some people's resistance to the idea that there are different ways of doing things that are equally valid. A friend, for example, tried to explain to a European that when Americans ask personal questions of new acquaintances, they are trying to show interest and establish rapport. The European thought he knew what was really going on and kept repeating, "The point is, Americans are rude." Similarly, I had a student from Texas who sent her mother a tape of an interview in which I explained about conversational style. Her mother didn't like it at all; she wrote to her daughter, "The one thing that was never brought out [was that] not speaking out or interrupting is not so much culture as it is manners."

Years ago I was invited to talk about New York City conversational style on a Voice of America radio show hosted by Arlene Francis. I explained that people who have what I call a “high-involvement” style often talk along with others, not to interrupt but to show enthusiastic listenership. If an interruption results, it is created by the speaker who stopped instead of keeping right on talking. But Francis could not give up the idea that interruption is one person’s doing, and it’s wrong. She said, “It’s just not polite. There are no manners considered here, are there?” In attempting to explain that “politeness” is culturally relative, I began, “You may not think it’s polite . . .” She interrupted to say, “I don’t. I absolutely don’t,” and tried to get me to talk about New York accents. When the show ended, Francis warned her millions of listeners, “If you talk like that, I’ll be very angry!”

Nonetheless I remain convinced that understanding conversational style is crucial not only for linguists who want to know how meaning is created and communicated in conversation but also for the wider reading public, to help engender the respect for diversity that is one of the greatest challenges we face as a society.

Copyright © 2000 by Deborah Tannen

DEBORAH TANNEN is University Professor and professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. Her books include *The Argument Culture* (1998), *Talking from 9 to 5* (1994), *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990), *Talking Voices* (1989), *That’s Not What I Meant* (1986), and *I Only Say That Because I Love You* (forthcoming).

Tannen, Deborah. "'Don't Just Sit There—Interrupt!': Pacing and Pausing in Conversational Style." American Speech 75.4 (2000):393-395.