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Did You Say What I Just Heard?

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**BODY:**

A WOMAN WHO LED workshops with a male colleague was distressed because he did all the talking. When anyone asked a question, he answered before she had a chance to speak. She blamed him for dominating her. (If their roles had been reversed, he would have accused her of being overly aggressive.)

One common way of understanding this situation would be to suggest that men are chauvinists and think nothing of interrupting women. Another would be to look for psychological motives in one or both parties: She is passive; he is narcissistic. But another, more elegant explanation is possible: a linguistic one.

Linguistics could tell us that these two individuals have different timing habits for when they take turns. She expects a slightly longer pause between speaking turns than he does. So, while she was waiting for what seemed to her the proper pause, he became restless. The appropriate pause to him had come and gone. To avoid what he thought would be an uncomfortable silence and the appearance that neither of them had anything to say, the man began to answer.

The linguistic solution worked in this case. No therapy was needed, no consciousness-raising other than linguistic. The woman pushed herself to begin speaking just a bit sooner than seemed polite to her. The miraculous result was that she found herself doing much of the talking, and her colleague was as pleased as she was.

This practical approach to language is part of a new trend in linguistics. It analyzes mechanisms, such as turn-taking, that are the gears of conversation. These linguistic signals include shifts in pitch, loudness, pacing, tone of voice and intonation, and linguistic devices such as questions, storytelling and relative

indirectness.

Linguists, and especially sociolinguists like me, are concerned with linking the surface level of talk -- what people say and how they say it -- with the semantics (the meaning derived) and pragmatics (what people are seeking to do or show by speaking in that way at that time). This has brought the discipline into the arena of human interaction and real-world communication problems, and it offers a genuinely new way of understanding human interaction.

### Real People, Talking

The application of linguistics to real-world communication problems is received with mixed emotions within the discipline. Many contemporary linguists see the study of the mechanisms of conversation as basic to the work of linguistics. They applaud the fact that applying linguistic analysis to these mechanisms means that linguistics can play a role not only in elucidating how language works but also in grappling with the real-world problems caused by miscommunication.

But there are many other linguists who are uneasy about this development. Some feel certain that it stretches the scope of the field so far as to weaken it. Modern linguistics has been heralded as the science of language, and many linguists feel it is crucial to maintain both the rigorous methods of scientific investigation and the concomitant severe limitations on appropriate data.

The branch of linguistics that was most influential in the '60s and '70s was the transformational grammar of MIT's Noam Chomsky. Its concern is the abstract representation not of real language as it is spoken (which is dismissed as "mere performance") but of an idealized form of language believed to exist in the mind of an ideal speaker-hearer. For transformational grammar, the limit of data is the sentence, and the limit of inquiry is syntax: the order in which words are put together, not the meaning of those words (semantics) and certainly not the intentions of, or effects on, the real speakers of actual sentences.

Turning the lens of linguistics onto real-world language has meant broadening the scope of investigation beyond the sentence to spates of language as large as people produce. And the study of discourse -- the most popular new subdiscipline in linguistics -- entails studying language in its natural settings: language in education, doctor-patient communication, language and the law, public negotiations and the most common, most encompassing form of discourse: everyday conversation.

Included in all these contexts is the issue that is perhaps the most widely appealing outside of the discipline but also particularly controversial within it -- male/female differences in language use.

'Do You Love Me?'

Issues of male/female communication strike at the heart of everyone's everyday experience, at home and at work. A linguistic approach offers the reassurance that experiences of frustration in communicating across genders is neither idiosyncratic nor pathological but universal and explicable.

For example, a frequent complaint of women about men is that they don't listen to them. Men frequently protest, "I was listening!" The question of listenership reflects the core of relationships: "Are you listening?" means "Are you interested?" which means "Do you love me?" The questions, "Are you listening?" and "Are you interested?" lie at the center of most conversations, including, for example, job interviews and business negotiations.

There may be instances in which people actually are not listening, but these are far fewer than people think. A linguistic approach suggests that many of these misunderstandings can be traced to habits for displaying listenership. For example, research has shown that, on the average, women give more frequent overt signs of listening: "mhm," "uhuh," "yeah," head nods, changing facial expressions. Expecting the same show of responsiveness, women see men who listen quietly and attentively as not really listening at all, like the specter of silence on a telephone line that causes one to inquire, "Are you still there?"

Conversely, a man who expects a woman to show she's listening simply by fixing her eyes on his face, feels she is overreacting when she keeps up a steady stream of "mhms" and "uhuhs." Whereas women tend to say "yeah" to mean "I'm listening and following," men tend to say it to mean "I agree." So part of the reason women offer more of these listening noises, according to anthropologists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker, is that women are listening more often than men are agreeing.

### When a Man Says 'No'

Another linguistic mechanism that is basic to communication but is also the source of miscommunication is indirectness, and this too characterizes problems in female/male communication.

Riding home in a car, a woman asks, "Are you thirsty? Would you like to stop for a drink?" The man answers "No" and they do not stop. The man is later surprised to learn that the woman is displeased. She wanted to stop. He wonders why she didn't just tell him what she wanted.

The woman is disgruntled not because she didn't get her way but because she felt her opinion wasn't sought and wasn't considered. When she asked, "Would you like to stop," she did not expect a yes/no answer. She expected a counter-question: "I don't know. Would you like to?" She could then respond, "Well, I'd kind of like to. How tired are you?" Thus would commence a gradual

negotiation in which both articulated their dispositions. If at the end of this negotiation they had agreed not to stop for a drink, she would have been satisfied.

In understanding what went wrong, the man must realize that when she asks what he would like, she is not asking an information question but rather starting a negotiation about what both would like. For her part, however, the woman must realize that when he answers "yes" or "no," he is not making a non-negotiable demand. If she has other ideas, he expects she will state them without being invited to do so.

In simply answering what was asked, the man took the question literally, as a request for information. The woman, however, was using the question as a way of accomplishing a more subtle interactional goal. This difference is often at the root of female/male differences in assumptions about language. Put in the terms of the communications theory of Gregory Bateson, women are more attuned to the metamessage level of talk, the level on which information about relationships is communicated.

For example, a man fixes himself a snack and is about to eat it when he notices that his wife looks hurt. He asks what's wrong and is told, "You didn't offer me any." "I'm sorry," he says, "I didn't know you were hungry. Here, have this." She declines: "You didn't make it for me." He is confused because he regards the snack as a matter of food: the message. But she is concerned with the metamessage: Does he think of her as she would think of him?

Another example is a conversation in which a man asks a woman, "How was your day?" She responds with a 20-minute answer, full of details about whom she met, what was said and what she thought -- regardless of whether she spent her day at home with the children or in an executive office. Then she asks him, "How was your day?" and he responds, "Same old rat race." Conversations like this lead women to complain that men don't tell them anything and lead men to complain that they don't understand what women want.

### Telling Secrets

Maltz and Borker report extensive research that shows that men and women develop assumptions about the role of language in close relationships from their childhood friends. Little girls play with other girls, and the center of their social life is a best friend with whom they share secrets. It is the telling of secrets that makes them best friends.

Boys, in contrast, tend to play in groups, so their talk is less likely to be private. Rather, it is competitive talk about who is best at what, or performance talk that places the speaker at center stage, like Othello telling about his travels. What makes boys friends is not what they say to each other but what they do together.

So when a man is close to a woman, doing things together makes them close; nothing is missing for him if they don't talk about personal details. But she is missing what, for her, is the definitive element in intimacy.

Neither of these styles is right or wrong; they are just different. The frustration that both feel comes from the conviction that his or her own way is logical and self-evident. When viewed as culturally learned habits of conversation, differences do not go away, but they need not be interpreted as evidence of individual pathology ("He is not in touch with his feelings") or individual failure ("He doesn't love me") or a joint failure ("This is a bad relationship: We don't communicate").

A linguistic approach relieves individuals of the burden of psychopathology. For example, a psychological interpretation commonly applied to others is manipulateness. A linguistic approach explains that one may feel manipulated without the other intending to manipulate. Rather, whenever linguistic habits differ, each person is likely to make the other feel manipulated simply in an attempt to get comfortable in the situation.

For a nonverbal analog, imagine two people who have slightly different senses of the appropriate distance between conversants. The one who feels comfortable standing farther away keeps backing off to adjust the space, but the conversational partner who expects to stand closer keeps advancing to close up the space, so they move together down the hall until one is pinned against a wall.

This is analogous to many of the linguistic processes discussed. For example, differences in habitual pacing result in both conversants feeling manipulated. One is pushed to begin speaking before it feels right; the other is forced to hold back artificially. Differences in indirectness have the same result. One who is accustomed to directness will try to get the other to state meaning more directly, with the result that the indirect one will feel manipulated into stating what obviously should not be stated. The direct one also feels manipulated, expected to understand what has not been said.

The key to a linguistic approach is that neither one nor the other must bear the blame for being manipulative. Rather, the culprit is the difference in their styles. The offending behavior is assigned to neither one but to the interaction between them. The world needs this ecumenical approach to understanding communication. It is a waste for the insights of linguists into how language works to be hidden in scholarly journals.

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