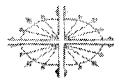


Gender  
and  
Discourse

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## Introduction

ENTERING THE ARENA of research on gender is like stepping into a maelstrom. What it means to be female or male, what it's like to talk to someone of the other (or the same) gender, are questions whose answers touch people where they live, and when a nerve is touched, people howl. Yet it is my hope that through the din, scholarly research can be heard, and dialogue can take place among researchers, even those who have entered the room of scholarly exchange through different disciplinary doors.

One of the aspects of gender studies that makes it most rewarding and meaningful is also one that makes it especially risky: its interdisciplinary nature. When scholars from different fields try to read and comment on each other's research, they find themselves on dangerous ground. Interdisciplinary dialogue is in itself a kind of cross-cultural communication, because researchers bring with them completely different notions of what questions to ask and how to go about answering them.<sup>1</sup> Assumptions that are taken for granted by those in one discipline are often deemed groundless by those in another. For example, psychologists trained in experimental methods may scorn and discount ethnographic or hermeneutic studies because they lack large data bases, random sampling, control groups, and statistical analysis. And anthropologists trained in

ethnographic methods may scorn and discount psychological studies because they are based on data elicited in experimental rather than naturally occurring situations and reduce the complex texture of human behavior to quantifiable and “codable” abstractions.

The study of gender and language might seem at first to be a narrowly focused field, but it is actually as interdisciplinary as they come. Researchers working in this area have their roots in wildly divergent academic disciplines, including sociology, education, anthropology, psychology, speech communication, literature, and women’s studies, as well as my own field of linguistics. Though one might expect scholars trained in linguistics—the academic discipline devoted to the study of language—to figure prominently in this group, linguists are in fact the smallest contingent. I suspect this is mostly because the field is very small to start with, but also because mainstream contemporary linguistics has been concerned with the formal analysis of language as an abstract system, not language as it is used in everyday life. The situation is further complicated for researchers whose individual training or fields of specialization span multiple academic disciplines.

Interdisciplinary dialogue, like all cross-cultural communication, requires compassion, flexibility, and patience, as well as the effort to understand the context from which interlocutors emerge. In light of this, I approached the task of collecting my academic writings on gender and discourse with a sense of caution. The essays gathered in this volume were originally written with my academic colleagues in mind, that is, readers in my own (already interdisciplinary) field. But I realize that they may now be read not only by colleagues in different disciplines but also by a range of readers of *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* who want to see the detailed analysis and scholarly references that led to the writing of that book, as well as the theoretical discussion that was beyond its scope. So I begin by explaining my scholarly heritage and assumptions in order to contextualize the chapters that follow. In the process, this introduction also sets forth and explores

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some of the issues raised by a sociolinguistic, anthropologically oriented approach to gender and language—the approach that characterizes the essays in this volume.

### METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Within the discipline of linguistics, the work I do is referred to as “discourse analysis.” This term reflects the aspect of my approach that is most significant for linguists in that it contrasts with the dominant strains in the discipline. Whereas most contemporary linguistics takes as the object of study sounds (phonetics and phonology), words (lexicon and morphology), or sentences (syntax, that is, the arrangement of words in sentences), discourse analysis focuses on connected language “beyond the sentence,” as linguists often put it. On the other hand, I sometimes identify myself as a “sociolinguist,” partly because I teach in the sociolinguistics program within the linguistics department at Georgetown University, but also because my work addresses the intersection of language and social phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I refer to my approach as anthropologically oriented because my method involves closely examining individual cases of interaction, in many of which I was a participant, and takes into account their cultural context.

The theoretical and methodological approach found here derives from the work of Robin Lakoff and John Gumperz, who were my teachers at the University of California, Berkeley. It was Lakoff (see especially Lakoff 1975, 1979, 1990) who introduced me to the concept she calls communicative style (I later began using my own term, “conversational style”) and the notion that misunderstandings can arise in conversation, both cross-cultural and cross-gender, because of systematic differences in communicative style. Gumperz (see especially Gumperz 1982a) calls his type of analysis “interactional sociolinguistics” to distinguish it from the more common type of sociolinguistics that typically examines phonological variation (see Labov 1972). From Gumperz I learned the methodological approach, which is characterized by: (1) tape-recording naturally

occurring conversations; (2) identifying segments in which trouble is evident; (3) looking for culturally patterned differences in signaling meaning that could account for the trouble; (4) playing the recording, or segments of it, back to participants in order to solicit their spontaneous interpretations and reactions, and also, perhaps later, soliciting their responses to the researcher's interpretations; and (5) playing segments of the interaction for other members of the cultural groups represented by the speakers in order to discern patterns of interpretation.

The last two steps are not an afterthought; they provide critical checks on interpretations, given the hermeneutic (that is, interpretive) methodological framework. They are also crucial to ensure that the scholar's work is grounded in the experience of the speakers whose behavior is the object of study. I am reminded here of Oliver Sacks, the brilliant neurologist and essayist, who demonstrates that in order to understand a medical condition, physicians need to not only examine their patients but also listen to them. Whereas modern medicine may provide invaluable insight into chemical and biological courses of disease, only patients hold the clues to what their diseases are "really like" (Sacks 1987:40). In the same spirit, attention to how participants experience conversations under analysis provides invaluable insight into the workings of interaction that are otherwise unavailable to the researcher. Furthermore, and crucially, it also provides an ethical and humanistic foundation for the research, making us accountable to those we study.

The chapters gathered here constitute the totality of my academic writings on gender and language prior to and since the publication of *You Just Don't Understand*, my eleventh book. My previous books and articles were on other topics—mostly analyzing conversation (Tannen 1984a), comparing speaking and writing (Tannen 1982a, 1982b, 1984b), and exploring the relationship between conversational and literary discourse (Tannen 1989).<sup>3</sup> My work on gender-related differences in conversational style is a natural development of my earlier research and writing on subcultural differences in conversational style. Thus, my approach to gender

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and language follows in the tradition of Gumperz and of Maltz and Borker (1982), who were similarly influenced by Gumperz. According to this view, some frustrations in conversations between women and men can be understood by reference to systematic differences in how women and men tend to signal meaning in conversation. This is quite different from the impetus behind some other work on gender and language, especially the work that grows out of a political agenda.

The roots of my approach can clearly be seen in my book *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends* (1984a), and dozens of articles I have published in scholarly journals and books make exactly the same claims about conversational style differences resulting in systematic misjudgments that I make in *You Just Don't Understand*. Indeed, the theoretical and methodological framework I use is found not only in the work of John Gumperz, but also in the work of others who studied with him (see the papers collected in Gumperz 1982b) or work in similar traditions. Among those who come immediately to mind are Thomas Kochman (1981) on black-white styles; Frederick Erickson (for example, Erickson and Shultz 1982, Erickson 1986), who examines the styles not only of blacks and whites but also of Italian-Americans, German-Americans, and Polish-Americans in interaction with each other; Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1981, Scollon 1985) on Athabaskan-Anglo style; and Susan Philips (1983), who compares Warm Springs Indian and Anglo styles. The list could go on and on.

### THE ROLE OF DOMINANCE IN A CULTURAL DIFFERENCE FRAMEWORK

Some who are not familiar with this research tradition have misinterpreted the theoretical framework to imply that explaining the interactional consequences of style differences denies the existence of other societal forces at work. Specifically, there are those who believe that approaching gender differences in ways of speaking as "cultural" differences implies that men do not dominate women, but

only misunderstand them. There is no basis for this assumption, as a glance at all the research in this tradition—including my own—makes clear. When Gumperz claims that job interviews between speakers of British English and speakers of Indian English end badly for the Pakistanis and Indians because of differences in discourse strategies, he is not denying that there are numerous and pervasive forms of discrimination against Asians in British society. When Erickson and Shultz show that white counselors end up talking down to black community college students because of differences in conventional ways of showing listenership, they are not denying that racism exists in American society, any more than Kochman denies the existence of racism when he shows systematic differences in attitudes toward “rights of expressiveness” and “rights of sensibilities” among American blacks and whites. When Susan Philips shows that Warm Springs Indian children are systematically misjudged in Anglo-taught classrooms—due, in part, to different assumptions about self-display and self-control—she is not denying that American Indians suffer many forms of discrimination in Anglo society.

Quite the opposite, every one of these scholars, like me, explicitly states that the consequences of style differences work to the disadvantage of members of groups that are stigmatized in our society, and to the advantage of those who have the power to enforce their interpretations. This is the very kernel of the term and concept of “gatekeeping”—first developed by Erickson (1975) and adopted by Gumperz—which underlies much of their own work as well as that of others working in this tradition: when style differences are found in encounters between those who hold the keys to societal power—such as community college counselors, state government representatives, or job interviewers—and those who wish to benefit from the encounter by getting career advice, governmental services, or a job, it is the person seeking benefits who systematically loses as a result of style differences. In other words, socially determined power differences are an inextricable element of cultural difference theory and research.

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Another major impetus of Gumperz's work, as well as my own and that of the other scholars working in this and related traditions, is to confront and counteract the social inequality that results from negative stereotyping of minority cultural groups. Thus, when I show (Tannen 1981) that the stereotype of Jews as aggressive and pushy results in part from differences in conversational style, I am not denying that anti-Semitism exists in American society, but attempting to combat it.

Part of the cause, or perhaps the result, of this misinterpretation of the theoretical framework that approaches interactional distress as "cultural" patterning lies in an unfortunate dichotomy that has emerged in the literature, suggesting that approaches to gender and language fall into two categories: the "cultural difference" approach, as opposed to a "power" or "dominance" approach. I first became aware of this framework when I read a paper that had been presented by Nancy Henley and Cheris Kramarae at a meeting of the National Women's Studies Association in 1988. (See Henley and Kramarae [1991] for a published version.) At the time it struck me as an interesting distinction, insofar as the work of Henley, Kramarae, and others who work on gender and language in the fields of communication and sociology use dominance as the starting point of their analysis, whereas Maltz and Borker (1982) and I (the proponents of the "cultural" approach who are identified by Henley and Kramarae) use the Gumperzian framework of cultural difference as a starting point.<sup>4</sup> However, since I have seen this dichotomy not only referred to repeatedly by language and gender researchers but also elaborated and embroidered upon, I have come to feel that it is really a false one that obfuscates more than it clarifies. It implies that those who work in the so-called "power" or "dominance" framework have a corner on the market of hierarchical relations: if the two phenomena are conceptualized as mutually exclusive poles, then those who suggest that women's and men's styles can be understood in the framework of cultural difference are represented as denying that dominance exists. In other words, it implies that "difference" precludes "dominance," which is totally without basis.



Quite the contrary, the cultural difference framework provides a model for explaining how dominance can be created in face-to-face interaction.

It would be absurd to claim that approaching gender differences in verbal behavior as “cultural” in origin and character translates into a denial of dominance—male or any other kind. As I wrote in *You Just Don’t Understand*:

No one could deny that men as a class dominate women in our society, and that many individual men seek to dominate women in their lives. And yet male dominance is not the whole story. It is not sufficient to account for everything that happens to women and men in conversations—especially conversations in which both are genuinely trying to relate to each other with attention and respect. The effect of dominance is not always the result of an intention to dominate. (18)

In other words, far from denying the existence of dominance, examining the workings of conversational style in interaction can help explain how dominance is actually created in interaction.

Indeed, the claim that such social relations as dominance and subordination are *constructed* in interaction is one of the fundamental tenets and most important contributions of the interactional sociolinguistic approach to analyzing conversation. In a way, it is the very heart of the theory underlying that approach and is exactly why interaction is seen as so important to analyze. Fundamental principles of interactional sociolinguistics include the convictions that (1) roles are not given but are created in interaction; (2) context is not given but is constituted by talk and action; (3) nothing that occurs in interaction is the sole doing of one party but rather is a “joint production,” the result of the interaction of individuals’ ways of speaking;<sup>5</sup> and, as I demonstrate in everything I’ve ever written and discuss directly in chapter 1, (4) linguistic features (such as interruption, volume of talk, indirectness, and so on) can never be aligned on a one-to-one basis with interactional intentions or meanings, in the sense that a word can be assigned a meaning. No

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language has meaning except by reference to how it is “framed” (Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974) or “contextualized” (Becker 1979, 1984; Gumperz 1982a).<sup>6</sup>

In this spirit, one of the main themes of *You Just Don't Understand* is that the systematic differences in women's and men's characteristic styles often put women in a subordinate position in interactions with men. I will give just three of innumerable specific examples. In the chapter “Lecturing and Listening” illustrating that women frequently take the role of listener and men the role of lecturer, I make the following comment:

Once again, the alignment in which women and men find themselves arrayed is asymmetrical. The lecturer is framed as superior in status and expertise, cast in the role of teacher, and the listener is cast in the role of student. If women and men took turns giving and receiving lectures, there would be nothing disturbing about it. What is disturbing is the imbalance. . . . If men often seem to hold forth because they have the expertise, women are often frustrated and surprised to find that when they have the expertise, they don't necessarily get the floor. (125)

In a chapter on conflict I show that women's inclination to avoid conflict puts them at a disadvantage: “Women who are incapable of angry outbursts are incapable of wielding power in this way. Far worse, their avoidance of conflict opens them up to exploitation” (182–83). Finally, in a chapter on interruption I show that men often end up interrupting women because:

men who approach conversation as a contest are likely to expend effort not to support the other's talk but to lead the conversation in another direction, perhaps one in which they can take center stage by telling a story or joke or displaying knowledge. But in doing so, they expect their conversational partners to mount resistance. Women who yield to these efforts do so not because they are weak or insecure or deferential but because they have little experience in deflecting attempts to grab the conversational wheel. (215)

The way in which my approach differs from that of the so-called "dominance theorists" is that I believe I have shown that these processes can result in dominance in conversational interaction without every individual intending to dominate in every instance. Once again, that does not deny the fact that there are numerous instances in which individuals do set out to dominate, and numerous other (nonlinguistic) sources of gender-related power differences.

BEYOND THE NATURE/NURTURE DICHOTOMY

Thus, the "cultural difference versus dominance" dichotomy misrepresents the claims and aims of the so-called "difference" framework. A similar misrepresentation lies at the heart of another source of criticism, namely, the complaint that describing gender differences in verbal behavior at all is "essentialist." This line of attack assumes that describing differences between women and men is synonymous with ascribing those differences to women's "essential" nature. This assumption, too, has no basis in the research itself and results from lack of familiarity with the intellectual framework in which linguists work.

In my own work, as in that of my colleagues in linguistics, the question of the origins of gender or other linguistic differences is not addressed. Contemporary linguistics is descriptive—our charge is to describe the patterns of language we observe—and decidedly not prescriptive. (Unlike grammarians, we don't tell anyone how they *should* speak; rather, we try to account for the ways they *do* speak. We are more like anthropologists, who approach a distant culture to understand it, than like missionaries, who seek to change it.) Thus, to describe differences is not to ascribe them to either biological or cultural sources. There are those who believe that the existence of gender differences at very early ages is evidence that these differences are biological or genetic in origin. But there are also those who argue that children of any age, even infants, are treated differently depending on their gender, and that the socialization of the group is primary, even for very young children.

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Although the question of the origins of the patterns I describe has not been a focus of my concern, probably because of my anthropological orientation I have been inclined to regard socialization (that is, cultural experience) as the main influence shaping patterns of behavior. Thus, in *You Just Don't Understand*, as in the present volume, I cite research on the role of childhood peer groups as the source of gendered patterns in ways of speaking.<sup>7</sup>

The nature/nurture question can perhaps best be addressed by anthropological researchers who undertake large-scale cross-cultural studies. The question will certainly be addressed as well by ongoing studies of gender and the brain. Even primate studies will be brought to bear on this question. Whatever the research shows, however, people have passionate attachment to one view or the other and will necessarily differ in their interpretations of the research. Most interesting to me are the assumptions that underlie the fervent contention that differences must be primarily or even purely biological or cultural in origin. Many of those who believe—in my view, wish—the differences to be purely biological in origin assume that if this is the case, then women must be subordinate and there is no point in trying to effect social change. Many of those who believe (or wish) the differences to be purely cultural in origin assume that if this is so, they can easily change whatever they don't like in the social order. Neither of these assumptions seems justified to me. Nothing is more human than to go against nature,<sup>8</sup> and cultural patterns are extremely resistant to change.

What *is* required to effect change is an understanding of the patterns of human behavior as they exist today, an appreciation of the complexity of these patterns, and a humane respect for other human beings—other researchers as well as the subjects of our research. This is what I have struggled to achieve in all my work, and I hope it is evident in what follows.

The foregoing discussion is intended to clarify the theoretical background and assumptions of the approach to gender and language that characterizes the essays collected in this volume. Overviews of the individual essays, as well as discussions of the contexts

in which they were originally written, are presented in headnotes preceding each chapter.

NOTES

Sincerest thanks to A. L. Becker, Ron Scollon, Michael Macovski, and Paul Friedrich for invaluable comments on a draft of this introduction.

1. I first encountered this point in an article by Henry Widdowson (1988).

2. I never thought of myself as a sociolinguist until I arrived at Georgetown. All the courses I took in my graduate program at the University of California, Berkeley, were simply linguistics classes. Moreover, I agree with Dell Hymes and others who have observed that the study of language in its social context is, after all, linguistics and should not be thought of as a "subfield."

3. The first book I wrote, *Lilika Nakos*, was a work of literary criticism, where I analyzed the fiction of a modern Greek writer in the context of her life.

4. I must admit that I was also flattered to be identified as representing a major strand of research.

5. Some key sources reflecting this view are Goodwin (1981), Schegloff (1982), McDermott and Tylbor (1983), and papers collected in Duranti and Brenneis (1986).

6. In a sense, the explication of how framing works in conversation to construct interactional meaning is the aim of all my work, but see especially the chapter "Framing" in *That's Not What I Meant! How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Your Relations with Others* (Tannen 1986), sections on framing in *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (Tannen 1990), and my recent book *Framing in Discourse* (Tannen 1993).

7. I realize, however, that biological factors may be at work as well, and I would hope that even those who choose to examine them (of which, again, I am not one) would not be branded by the ostracizing label "essentialist," a term that is often used as a sophisticated form of academic name-calling. At best, the quest to separate privileged cultural factors from stigmatized biological factors is hopeless. As Stephen Jay Gould has reportedly put it in an interview (Angier 1993), "[B]iology and environment are inextricably linked." Gould is quoted as saying, "It's logically, mathematically, philosophically impossible to pull them apart." At worst it prevents us from examining the interrelation of these factors and impedes our understanding of human behavior. Moreover, the stigmatizing of any reference to gender differences discourages the description and understanding of human behavior as it currently exists, whereas such understanding is a necessary first step in making whatever changes we wish to effect.

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8. I first heard this point made by Walter Ong at a panel discussion on spoken and written language that took place in conjunction with the Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1982. I think it is not coincidental that, in my experience, those who tell me they are certain all differences are biological in origin are usually men, and those who are equally certain that they are entirely culturally based are usually women.

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