

Three decades in the field of gender and language: a personal perspective

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Abstract

This essay provides an account of one scholar's thirty-five-year immersion in language and gender research. I included a chapter on conversations between women and men in That's Not What I Meant!, my first book for general audiences, as part of an overview of interactional sociolinguistics. Disproportionate interest in that chapter led me to write You Just Don't Understand, which I assumed would be my last word on the topic. Then insights into gendered patterns turned out to be crucial in all my subsequent books, each of which grew out of the one before. Writing about gendered patterns in conversational interaction raised my own consciousness, illuminating aspects of a previous study that I had overlooked. It also brought me face to face with agonistic conventions in academic discourse, and the distortions and misrepresentations that result from them.

KEYWORDS: AGONISM, CONVERSATIONAL STYLE, DISCOURSE ANALYSIS, DOUBLE BIND, GENDER, INTERACTIONAL SOCIOLOGUISTICS, INTERRUPTION, MARKEDNESS, WORKPLACE DISCOURSE

I was an accidental language and gender researcher, even though I studied with Robin Lakoff at the University of California, Berkeley. Indeed, her course at the 1973 LSA Linguistic Institute played a large role in inspiring

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me to pursue a PhD in linguistics and led me to do so at Berkeley. In 1973, I was a teacher of remedial writing and freshman composition at CUNY'S Lehman College with a BA and MA in English Literature and no linguistics background at all. Nearing thirty and ready to do something different, I recalled a poster I'd seen for a Linguistic Institute that had stuck in my mind as something I'd like to do someday. For a host of reasons, 1973 became that someday. It was also the year Lakoff's groundbreaking essay 'Language and woman's place' was published in the first issue of volume two of a new journal: *Language in Society*. But the aspect of Lakoff's course that excited me, the topic about which I wrote my term paper and which, during my second year at Berkeley, became the first paper I gave at an academic conference and arguably is the kernel of all my subsequent work on conversational interaction, was her 'Rules of Rapport' and related communicative style framework.

I happened to be in Robin's office when she received the first copies of her book *Language and Woman's Place* in 1975. As I stood beside her desk, she opened the box, took one out and signed it for me. That signed copy remains my most treasured book. Yet I did not think of language and gender as an area I'd specialise in. When I received my PhD and was hired at Georgetown, I joined a department of sixteen men and one woman. Shortly after I arrived, my woman colleague asked if I wanted to teach a course on gender and language. I said I didn't – and was offended by the question. I had two areas of expertise – two topics on which I had published. One was what I called 'conversational style', building on the work of Lakoff on communicative style and of John Gumperz, who was developing the theory and method he later called interactional sociolinguistics at exactly the time I worked with him at Berkeley. The second was spoken and written language, including theories of orality and literacy and frames theory – work I'd done under the influence of Wallace Chafe. I could see no reason for anyone to think I should teach gender and language other than that I was a woman, so the question struck me as inappropriate and sexist. (In retrospect, I can see it made sense from the perspective of students' interest.)

After that first year at Georgetown, my lone woman colleague left, and I inherited a course she'd proposed but not yet taught: Cross-Cultural Communication. This was right up my alley. I had developed my notion of conversational style in my dissertation, where I analysed a dinner table conversation among speakers of different regional, ethnic and religious backgrounds: East European Jews raised in New York City and northern European Christians raised in California. The course I designed introduced the ways of speaking I had identified in my dissertation as varying between speakers of these different backgrounds, as well as ways of speaking shown by Gumperz to vary between speakers of British English and Indian

English, all of which I showed could be explained by different applications of Lakoff's Rules of Rapport. Though the book I'd written based on my dissertation (Tannen 2005[1984]) included an introduction for nonlinguists in addition to one for linguists, this course became the basis for a book specifically designed to communicate the insights of (socio)linguistics to general audiences. *That's Not What I Meant!* (1986) was the book for which I had outsized ambitions. I saw that psychologists and anthropologists – especially Margaret Mead – had made research in their fields available to readers outside the academy. I wanted to do something similar for linguistics: make people aware of the role of language, of ways of speaking, in affecting the outcomes of conversations and consequently of relationships.

That's Not What I Meant! did not change the world, and I scaled back my expectations. In keeping with my plans to alternate books for general and academic audiences, my next book was *Talking Voices* (2007[1989]). In it I showed that everyday conversation is made up of linguistic strategies thought quintessentially literary: repetition, dialogue and details and imagery. For my next general audience book, I delved more deeply into the topic that got disproportionate attention in *That's Not What I Meant!*: conversations between women and men. The success of *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) was not immediate. It built gradually and was a shock not only to me but to my publisher. At first they refused to print enough copies to fill orders because they were certain interest would evaporate and they'd be stuck with unsold books. Published in May, the book was out of stock the entire month of August. I was told that should have killed it, but it didn't. The publisher finally began printing more copies; the book turned up on *The New York Times* bestseller list; and it stayed there for nearly four years. Translated into 31 languages, it seemed to wake up the world – not to what I thought was its main point, how conversational style differences affect conversations and therefore relationships, but to gendered patterns in ways of speaking.

When I wrote *You Just Don't Understand*, I assumed it would be my last word on gender and language. That assumption was wrong. Though I never again set out to write a book focusing on the topic, in each of my six subsequent books, the gendered patterns I described in *You Just Don't Understand* proved key to understanding the discourse I was analysing.

The book that followed *You Just Don't Understand* grew directly out of it. I was contacted by people in several large corporations – in most cases, men – who said pretty much the same thing: they hire women who are as qualified as the men they hire, or more qualified; yet five years later, the men are being promoted, while the women are either stuck at lower ranks or have left. Those who reached out to me wondered if the ways of speaking I'd described in *You Just Don't Understand* might be playing a role.

To answer that question, I designed an ethnographic study of workplace discourse. Working with two corporations, one on each coast, I had managers (four in one case, five in the other) carry tape recorders and record everything they felt comfortable recording for a week. I then shadowed them and talked to their peers, subordinates and superiors. In one case, the CEO allowed me to shadow him for a day, too. I loved doing that research. What a privilege it was to observe people's lives day after day, listening to them talk, getting to know them, then talking to their coworkers to get their impressions, too. This study led to *Talking from 9 to 5* (1994) and an essay based on it that *The Harvard Business Review* published in 1995 and included in several subsequent collections, most recently in 2019. I observed in action the double bind faced by women in positions of authority that Lakoff named and described in 'Language and woman's place' (see also Lakoff 2021) – and that I first cited in a 1984 op-ed (my first) about vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro: if they talk in ways expected of women, they are seen as lacking confidence or even competence; if they talk in ways expected of a person in authority, they are seen as too aggressive. (Although this phenomenon has, maddeningly, not changed, a positive development is that awareness of this double bind has entered the mainstream, and the term is now regularly referred to by political candidates and journalists.)

In another chapter of *Talking from 9 to 5* that has resonated with many women, I apply the linguistic concept of markedness to show that whereas men can choose clothes and hairstyles that are unmarked – that is, relatively neutral, women must choose from a vast range of clothing, hair and makeup styles, and any choice they make is marked in that it leads others to draw conclusions about them. There is no style a woman can choose that will not be marked in this way. In other words, there is no unmarked woman.

Gendered patterns I described in *You Just Don't Understand* were central in my next five books as well. *The Argument Culture* (1998), my only book about public discourse, is about what Walter Ong (1981) calls 'agonism', which he defines as 'programmed contentious' 'ceremonial combat' – that is, ritualised opposition. With chapters on the press, politics and law, *The Argument Culture* examines the increasing tendency to approach everything in an adversarial spirit. I demonstrate that framing issues as a fight between warring camps impedes understanding and is corrosive to the human spirit. Though the gendered aspect of agonism is not part of my thesis, I could not avoid including a chapter supporting Ong's observation that agonism plays a greater role in boys' and men's lives than in girls' and women's, as in the crossculturally observed boys' preference for play fighting. (Ong also shows that agonism is more fundamental to Western than

Eastern cultures, and I include a chapter on cultural differences in conventionalised uses of agonism in interaction.)

Soon after the publication of *The Argument Culture*, I received a grant from the Sloan Foundation to investigate the discourse of dual-income families at home and at work. I adapted the research design from my workplace study: four couples who had small children at home carried tape recorders and recorded everything they felt comfortable recording for a week, then were shadowed by research assistants (see Tannen, Kendall and Gordon 2007 for a collection of papers based on the project). I included findings of this study in my next book, *I Only Say This Because I Love You* (2001), about adult family relationships.

Once again, the book that followed grew out of the topic that received the most attention in this one: conversations between mothers and daughters. A journalist interviewing me about *I Only Say This* was typical in focusing on that relationship when she asked, 'Why are conversations between mothers and daughters so fraught, since they're both women?' I stopped for a moment, then realised: 'It's because they're both women.' I had observed in my research that women tend to talk more often, at greater length and about more personal topics, so they have more opportunity to say the wrong thing and to be upset by what was said. This pattern turned out to be significant in my next three books as well: *You're Wearing THAT?* (2006), about mothers and grown daughters; *You Were Always Mom's Favorite!* (2009), about sisters; and *You're the Only One I Can Tell* (2017), about women friends. Another gendered pattern I had observed also turned out to be significant in all these books: when a mother, a daughter, a sister or a friend told me she was hurt, upset or angered by another, it was most often because she wasn't told something or wasn't included in something.

Gender was also crucial to the topic I began exploring a decade ago: the discourse of social media. (I did not write a book on this topic because social media change so fast, a book would be outdated before it could be typeset.) There, too, I did not set out to focus on gender, but it leaps out from the data. When my students compare digital messages they receive from mothers and fathers; sisters and brothers; or women and men friends, they notice that those sent by mothers, sisters and women friends tend to be longer, more frequent and about more personal topics. In addition, when they examine features like exclamation points, repetition and capitalisation – all ways of making up for the lack of intonation, tone of voice and facial expressions – they notice that girls and women tend to use more than boys and men, and are more likely to perceive negative intent when they are missing.

That gender patterns continued to prove pivotal helps to explain why *You Just Don't Understand* got so much more attention than *That's Not What I Meant!*; became a bestseller against all odds and expectations; continued on the list for so long; and is still – thirty years after its publication – my highest-selling book. In both books, I brought to bear my background in creative writing and the insights I laid out in *Talking Voices*: that ideas come through more vividly when cast as scenes, with dialogue and details. What distinguishes *You Just Don't Understand* is that the entry point for explaining the tenets of interactional sociolinguistics is conversation between women and men. That continues to be the case in talks I give and classes I teach: the topic of gender gets the most enthusiastic response from audiences and students. Whereas it was the broader phenomenon of conversational style that inspired me to enter the field and to write books for general audiences, that I still feel is what my research focuses on, and about which I continue to be messianic, the topic that excites most people – that inspires them to think about the role played by ways of speaking – is gender.

If my writing about gender and conversational styles raised consciousness in the world outside academia about gendered patterns in ways of speaking – something that continues to astonish me – it raised my own consciousness as well. In *Conversational Style* and the dissertation research leading up to it, I paid no attention to the speakers' genders (though I did to their sexual orientations, finding, for example, that the three gay participants shared a style of humour). When I looked back on that conversation through the lens of gender, patterns I had overlooked jumped out. For example, I had found that the three East European Jewish New Yorkers – my best friend Steve, his brother Peter and I – shared such features as fast pacing and brief pausing, relative directness, rapid-fire questions and what I dubbed cooperative overlapping: talking along to show enthusiastic listenership. I hadn't noticed that I rarely raised topics. Instead, I supported and built on topics Peter and Steve raised – a gendered pattern I describe in the chapter 'I'll explain it to you' in *You Just Don't Understand*. (The term *mansplaining* wouldn't appear for decades, but, as the title indicates, I described the phenomenon in that chapter, too.)

I haven't mentioned another form of consciousness-raising that resulted from my accidental immersion in the field of gender and language: it awakened me to the agonistic underbelly of academic discourse, which led me to write *The Argument Culture*. Having found in linguistics not just a career but a purpose in life, a haven and a community, and believing I was engaged in a pursuit of knowledge that could be used to better people's lives, I was completely unprepared to find myself cast as, to borrow a conceit from Jane Tompkins (1988), the villain in a Western. Nothing

I'd written about conversational interaction or spoken and written language had been subjected to anything like the 'frontal assault' (the phrase Tompkins uses to characterise her own essay that launched her career in women's studies) that seemed to become overnight the *de rigueur* opening to articles in the field. Equally baffling – and painful – were the misrepresentations of what I'd written and the venomous tones in which they were often presented. A particularly misleading and persistent reflection of this was finding myself positioned as representing a 'cultural' approach to gender patterns in opposition to a 'dominance' approach and, by this warring camps metaphor, accused of denying that men dominate women in our society. Leaving aside the fact that no one in their right mind could deny something so obvious, a theme of *You Just Don't Understand* is precisely that ways of speaking common among women and men respectively tend to reinforce men's dominance. This is the theme not only of the chapter mentioned above, 'I'll explain it to you: lecturing and listening,' but also of the chapter 'Damned if you do' and another entitled 'Who's interrupting? issues of dominance and control.'

The chapter on interruption exemplifies how I draw on my discourse analytic research to show how dominance is created in everyday conversation and to demonstrate the need for a more nuanced and accurate understanding of linguistic phenomena that are cited as evidence of gendered patterns. It was commonly observed that men often dominate women by interrupting them. That women are interrupted more often than men is well documented. Indeed, a recent study by Jacobi and Schweers (2017) found that women Supreme Court justices are interrupted more often than male justices – not only by their colleagues but also by advocates arguing cases before the court, in open violation of the court's rules of oral argument. However, identifying an interruption is far more complex than simply noticing one speaker beginning to talk before another has stopped. In many instances, as I observed in my dissertation research, talking-along is not interruptive but a show of enthusiastic listenership; in fact, my own and others' research has found this to be more common in women-only than in men-only conversations. There are also instances in which overlapping speech *is* interruptive, but the resulting interruptions are balanced among speakers and valued as evidence of enthusiasm and mutual respect. In yet other instances, interruption occurs without overlap, as when a speaker ignores another's point and raises a different one.

In this chapter and throughout *You Just Don't Understand*, as well as all my work before and since, I harness linguistic analysis of conversational interaction to shed light on the complex interplay of power and solidarity. This often entails pointing out that what has been characterised as an expression of power, like overlapping speech as interruption, can also be

an expression of solidarity, as is cooperative overlapping. The gendered aspects of these dynamics have been central to my understanding of them, and an understanding of what I call the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity is crucial for understanding the relationship between gender and language. (This framework is laid out in detail in Tannen 1993.) In other words, though my focus as an analyst of everyday conversation was never on ‘structural power’, my work is fundamentally concerned with the creation of power – and, equally important, solidarity – in everyday conversations.

Given that these themes are explicit in *You Just Don’t Understand*, how to account for the claim that I was denying, let alone opposing, the existence of dominance – and for that claim being repeated and amplified until it became received wisdom? I came to believe it was the academic tendency to frame intellectual inquiry as a fight between warring camps and to demonise those positioned as inhabiting an opposing camp. Kira Hall (2004:172) makes a similar observation in an essay addressing the reception of Lakoff’s *Language and Woman’s Place*. She points out that gender and language scholars ‘have essentialized the writings of various pioneers in the field in order to pattern a neat delineation of theoretical perspectives...’, with the result that they ‘canonize inaccurate representations of earlier scholarship, particularly when bits and pieces of much larger works are used in the service of distinguishing mutually exclusive standpoints’. It was this painful personal experience that spurred me to see the same tendencies in politics and the press – tendencies that have gotten more extreme and destructive since the publication of *The Argument Culture* in 1998.

You might say that in all this research and writing, I’ve shown how the personal is political and the political is personal. From the start, I have also tried to communicate beyond the academy about how linguistic analysis can illuminate political as well as interpersonal discourse. Here too, the personal and the political intersect. A case in point is the many op-eds I’ve written over nearly three decades showing how Hillary Clinton was subjected to the double bind, from a 1992 *New York Times* op-ed entitled ‘The Real Hillary Factor’ about the wife of a presidential candidate; to 2000, when she was First Lady; to numerous op-eds published when she was a presidential candidate in 2008 and 2016. In all these forays into the public discourse – and in *You Just Don’t Understand*, which was itself such a foray – I have tried to use discourse analysis to contribute to the field of gender and language as well as to the society we live in and the personal lives of the people who constitute that society. I continue to believe that this is a contribution worth making and am grateful that linguistics gave me a means to try to make it.

About the author

Deborah Tannen is University Professor in the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University. Her 26 books (13 authored, 13 edited or co-edited) address such topics as interactional sociolinguistics, conversational interaction, crosscultural communication, frames theory, conversational vs literary discourse, gender and language, and social media discourse. Her books include *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends* (Oxford University Press, 2005[1984]), *Gender and Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 1996), *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 2007[1989]) and, most recently, *Finding My Father: His Century-Long Journey from WWI Warsaw and My Quest to Follow* (Ballantine, 2020).

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