

# Hey, Did You Catch That?

## Why They're Talking as Fast as They Can

By DEBORAH TANNEN

"Slow down!" I interrupt the brilliant young student in my graduate seminar, who is making an important contribution to the discussion. To justify my rude interjection, I add, "We have non-native speakers in the class. They may not be able to follow if you talk that fast."

But the truth is, I'm having trouble following her myself. I feel as if I'm hanging on by the skin of my earlobes, still trying to figure out the point she just made while she's already on to the next one—and the

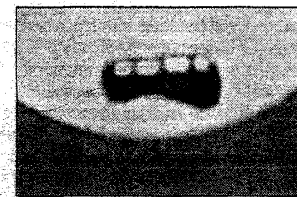
next, and the one after that. The student confesses, "My mother tells me the same thing. She goes . . ." and demonstrates the mouth-noise her mother uses to re-create the impression made by her daughter's fast speech: Her tongue trills while her throat emits a steady, high-pitched sound, like a tape recording of someone making motor sounds played back at Donald Duck speed. I'm relieved to learn that my student's mother feels as I do: that I'm running to catch up with someone who is widening the gap between us with every word.

This feeling comes over me not only when I'm listening to some of my students, but also when I'm watching many popular forms of entertainment. The scenes in movie trailers flit by so fast, I'm still trying to decipher and digest the single line (or half-line, or quarter-line) from one scene while the picture has zipped through three more. (I've clocked it: two seconds per scene.) And, as the executive producer of one television news magazine confirmed, segments on these shows are shorter now, with more frequent shot changes.

If it's tough for me, it's even tougher for my father, a lifelong devotee of political talk shows. When I ask him what he thinks of Chris Matthews, he says he has no idea: Matthews talks too fast for him to understand. It's not as if TV producers don't know they might be losing the older generation, even as they court the younger one. Aaron Sorkin, creator and chief writer of "The West Wing," says that each week, he gets a call from his parents, saying "Great show. Tell them to

See TOO FAST, B4, Col. 1

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Can you spot these fast talkers on TV?

Page B4

ILLUSTRATION BY DAN HUBIG FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

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# IT'S NOT JUST WHAT YOU SAY, BUT HOW FAST YOU SAY IT

TOO FAST, *From BI*

talk slower." Apparently his parents don't know that their son and other producers are doing just the opposite: egging on the actors to talk faster.

This is one more way that the gap between old and young is widening as fast as the frequently noted gap between rich and poor. My father is frustrated not only

by fast-paced commentator talk but also by countless other ways technology has made the world harder to navigate. When he makes a phone call to a business, he rarely encounters people he can ask to slow down, speak louder or explain what they said. Instead he gets menus that fly by too fast, are too hard to hear and offer choices that don't apply to the purpose of his call.

It's easy to see why cost-conscious companies prefer

automated phone systems to employees who require salaries, rest rooms and health insurance. But why would TV and film writers want to obscure the dialogue they worked so hard to create, making it harder for us to hear their words?

I've always assumed it was a miscalculation, a misstep in the quest for ever snappier and more riveting shows. But it turns out that I'm the one who didn't understand: This is the result of a deliberate determination to speed up dialogue, comprehension be damned.

This thinking was explained by the producer of a popular TV show on the WB network, "Gilmore Girls," which features a mother-daughter duo who are more like friends than like parent and child. The elder Gilmore, Lorelai, became a single mother while still in her teens; now she is in her early thirties and her daughter, Rory, is a teen. The creator, Amy Sherman-Palladino, told the *Wall Street Journal* recently that zippiness is the motivation for many aspects of "Gilmore Girls": no close-ups (they slow things down); frequent shots of characters talking as they walk from place to place; and scenes shot over and over to shave a few seconds off the already dizzying pace. Screenwriters traditionally figure a page of dialogue to a minute on air; Sherman-Palladino figures 20 to 25 seconds a page.

Surely the fast-forward speech of "Gilmore Girls" helps the characters sound like hip teenagers, just as their jeans and midriff-baring blouses clinging skin-tightly to their teen-thin bodies help both "girls" look like teens. But network shows aimed at fully adult audiences, like the wildly popular "West Wing," follow the same trend. Hollywood producers, according to the *Wall Street Journal* article, think people seem smarter if they talk faster.

This is an attitude I've encountered myself, especially among fellow natives of New York City. For example, when I was studying linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, another graduate student from New York remarked about one of our professors, a Midwesterner, "The problem with him is that he isn't very bright!"

I didn't agree with her evaluation—and neither, incidentally, did the many linguists around the world who regarded him with respect verging on awe—but it wasn't until I wrote my doctoral dissertation on conversational style that I figured out exactly why she would draw this conclusion. In the talk-focused culture of intellectual New Yorkers, intelligence is demonstrated by fast-paced repartee. Quick talk is taken as evidence of quick thinking, which is synonymous with smart thinking. So our professor's habit of pausing before speaking, and then speaking slowly, did not impress her (as it would a fellow Midwesterner or a rural New Englander) as deliberative and thoughtful. It appeared to her as a sign of dull wit.

**B**efore you think bad thoughts about us native New Yorkers, let me tell you what else I learned in my research: All over the world, speakers from some geographic regions tend to speak more slowly than those from others. And in every country that has been studied, people from the slower-speaking regions are stereotyped as stupid. This pattern was uncovered by Finnish linguists Jaakko Lehtonen and Kari Sajavaara, who had reason to be interested because Finns are thought to be slow and dull by neighboring Swedes.

Lehtonen and Sajavaara suspected that the Finns' characteristically slower rate of speech—and greater use of silence—might have something to do with the stereotype. So they investigated and found similar attitudes where one ethnic or regional group tends to speak more slowly than others: in Germany with East Frisians, in French attitudes toward Belgians, among the Swiss toward residents of Berne or Zurich, and among Finns themselves toward their compatriots from a region called Häme (pronounced HAH-may).

The Finnish linguists tell this story from their country's folklore: A man from Häme enters his neighbor's house and sits down. He doesn't say anything. Eventually, the puzzled neighbor asks his silent guest why he has come. The visitor replies that his house is on fire. And there you have it: Not only is the man from Häme unable to report a personal emergency with appropriate speed, but he's so dumb he doesn't realize he has to talk faster if he wants to have a chance at saving his home.

Stereotyping doesn't go only one way. Those from the faster-speaking regions are typically stereotyped as aggressive, which, I later learned, is more or less what the professor in question thought about the student who thought him stupid. But television viewers don't have to worry about getting a word in edgewise in characters' conversations; they just have to watch and listen and laugh. That may explain why most viewers from all parts of the United States can like the fast-talking TV characters who keep them company.

**A**s a linguist, author and passionate lover of words, I'm a professional analyst of conversation; my life's work is deconstructing the dialogue of everyday life. So shouldn't I celebrate the news that TV shows have more dialogue? Yes, if the talk is there to communicate ideas. Yes, if it means that packing more talk into limited air time means that talk is receiving more emphasis, more pride-of-place, as I have always thought it should have in our understanding of relationships. But not if the dialogue flies by so fast that it cannot be fully processed or even, in many cases, literally comprehended. The general ideas may get through: I'm sure fans of "Gilmore Girls" and "West Wing" can recount each show's plot and theme. But I suspect that their understanding is gleaned from the general march of scenes and the gist of dialogue—rather than from the subtle nuances of phrasing and the precise wording or sequence of ideas.

From this point of view, the speeding up of TV dialogue is more like life and less like art. Letting dialogue roll over you, rather than putting it in a frame that invites you to examine it closely, is not all that different from what we do in everyday conversation, where we might not process every word that passes our ears, or every image that flits by our line of vision. We get a sense of what's going on—or at least think we do.

It isn't just speaking that's speeding up, but writing, too—with troubling results, in the opinion of writing teacher

**ANSWERS to the fast-talker photos on Page B1: Lauren Graham ("Gilmore Girls"), Bradley Whitford ("West Wing"), Kyle ("South Park"), Chris Matthews ("Hardball With Chris Matthews")**

and novelist Robert Bausch. In a recent interview on National Public Radio's "The Diane Rehm Show," Bausch remarked that his students often write in what he calls "license-plate sentences": the abbreviated syntax they habitually use in IM. That stands for "instant messaging," the missives that fly back and forth across the Internet in real time, as distinguished from traditional e-mail, which sits in a server until the recipient logs in to retrieve it. IM is like written telephone conversation, only each party has to wait while the other writes; hence the motivation to be as economical as possible in expressing ideas: the fewer the words and the faster they tumble onto the screen, the better. So abbreviations abound: "You" becomes "u," and "lol" is understood to mean "your message is making me laugh out loud."

Speed isn't the only reason young people prefer IM shorthand to lengthy, articulate messages. Using IM-speak correctly shows you know the lingo, you belong to the group. If you write the way older people write, you'll come across as stuffy and definitely not cool.

We all choose our words, and our style of saying them, not only to communicate ideas but also—perhaps mostly—to convey the kind of person we are (or want to be). Teenagers talk the way they do (not only quickly, but also with intonation that makes their statements sound like questions and with generous sprinklings of "like") because they want to sound like their friends. That's why parents who tell their teenage children not to say "like," to send their intonation down rather than up at sentence ends and to "Slow down!" are fighting a losing battle—though it's a battle most parents will win without a fight when their kids grow up.

I rarely have to tell my brilliant young student to slow down any more. This may be because she's two years older or because she'll soon be applying for jobs and knows she'll need to sound more like a professor than a teenager. I have no doubt, though, that the entertainment media will continue the lip-trilling pace of dialogue designed to appeal to the younger, free-spending viewers—as well as the graying, balding and paunching older ones who want to feel that we're still capable of being cool.