WHY CAN'T HE HEAR WHAT I'M SAYING?"

BY DEBORAH TANNEN, PH.D.

If you're always fighting over minor misunderstandings, it's probably because you're not speaking the same language. Here's how to unscramble those mixed signals

You know the feeling: You meet someone for the first time, and it's as if you've known each other all your lives. The conversation goes smoothly. You each know what the other means. You laugh at the same time. Your sentences are in perfect rhythm. You're doing everything right.

But you also know the other feeling: You meet someone, you try to be friendly, but everything goes wrong. There are uncomfortable silences. You fish for topics. You both start talking at the same time and then both stop. Whatever you do to make things better only makes them worse.

Most talk falls somewhere between these two patterns. And, if sometimes people say things that sound a little odd or if someone doesn't quite get our point, we let it go, the talk continues and no one pays much attention. But, when the conversation is with the most important person in your life, the little hitches can become big ones, and you can end up in a dialogue of the second sort without knowing quite how you got there. Sometimes strains in a conversation reflect real differences between people—they *are* angry or at cross-purposes with each other. But at other times trouble develops when there really are no basic differences of opinion, when everyone is sincerely trying to get along. To say something and see it taken to mean something else; to try to be helpful and be thought pushy; to try to be considerate and be called cold—this is the type of miscommunication that drives people crazy. And it is usually caused by differences in conversational style.

I got hooked on linguistics, the study of language, the year my marriage broke up. Seven years of living with the man I had just separated from had left me dizzy with questions about communication. What went wrong? Why did this wonderful, lovable man turn into a cruel lunatic when we tried to talk to each other? I remember one argument near the end of our marriage. It stuck in my mind because it was so painfully typical and because my frustration reached a new height. It was one of our frequent conversations about plans—in this case, about whether or not to accept an invitation to visit my sister.

Cozy in the setting of our home and willing to do whatever my husband wished, I asked, "Do you want to go to my sister's?" He answered, "Okay." To me, "okay" didn't sound like a real answer; it seemed to indicate he was going along with something. So I said, "Do you really want to go?" He blew up. "You're driving me crazy! Why don't you make up your mind what you want?"

That explosion sent me into a tailspin. I was incredulous and outraged at his seeming irrationality. "*My* mind? I haven't even said what I want. I'm willing to do whatever *you* want, and this is what I get?" I felt trapped in a theater of the absurd. I thought my husband was crazy and that I was crazy for having married him. He was always getting angry at me for saying things I'd never said or for not paying attention to things I was sure *he* had never said.

I had given up trying to solve these communication impasses but was still trying to understand how they developed when I heard Professor Robin Lakoff lecture about indirectness at a linguistic institute at the University of Michigan. Lakoff explained that people prefer not to say exactly what they mean because they're concerned not only with the ideas they're expressing but with the effect their words will have on those they're talking to. They want to maintain camaraderie, avoid imposing / *turn to page 22*

"What do I want? After all this time you should know without my telling you."

FROM THE BOOK "THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT! HOW CONVERSATIONAL STYLE MAKES OR BREAKS YOUR RELATIONS WITH OTHERS." BY DEBORAH TANNEN, PH. D., TO BE PUBLISHED BY WILLIAM MORROW & CO., INC.

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and give (or at least appear to give) the other person some choice in the matter being discussed. And different people have different ways of achieving these potentially conflicting goals.

Suddenly I understood what had been going on in my marriage. I had taken it for granted that I could say what I wanted and that I could ask my husband what he wanted and that he would tell me. When I asked if he wanted to visit my sister, I was seeking information about his preferences so I could accommodate them. *He* wanted to be accommodating, too, but he assumed that people don't just blurt out what they want. To him, that would be coercive because he found it hard to deny a direct request. So he assumed that talkers hint at what they want and listeners pick up on those hints.

A good way to hint is to ask a question. When I asked my husband if he wanted to go to my sister's, he assumed I was letting him know, indirectly, that *I* wanted to go. Since he agreed to give me what I wanted, I should have gracefully—and gratefully—accepted. When I then asked, "Are you sure you want to go?" he heard that I didn't really want to go and was asking him to let me off the hook. From my husband's point of view, I was being capricious while he was trying to be agreeable—exactly my impression, but with our roles reversed. The intensity of his explosion (and of my reaction) came from the cumulative effect of repeated frustrations like this.

Although these differences in attitudes toward questions and hints could arise between any two people, perhaps it was not a coincidence that we were man and woman. Studying the way people talk convinced me that male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication. Culture, after all, is simply a network of habits and patterns based on past experience—and women and men have very different past experiences. Between the ages of five and 15, young girls and young boys are learning—mainly from their playmates—how to have conversations, and during those years they play mostly with friends of their own sex. So it's not surprising that they learn different ways of having and using conversations.

Little girls tend to play in small groups or, even more common, in pairs. Their social life usually centers around a best friend, and friendships are made, maintained and broken by talk, especially "secrets." The secrets themselves may or may not be important, but the fact of telling them is all-important. It's hard for newcomers to get into these tight groups, but anyone who is admitted is treated as an equal. Girls like to play cooperatively; if they can't cooperate, the group breaks up.

Little boys tend to play in larger groups, often outdoors, and they spend more time doing than talking. It's easy for boys to get into a group, but once in they must jockey for status. One of the ways they do so is through talk—telling stories and jokes, arguing about who is best at what, challenging and sidetracking the talk of other boys and withstanding the others' challenges in order to maintain their own story and, consequently, their status.

When these boys and girls grow up into men and women, they keep the divergent attitudes and habits they learned as children—which they don't recognize as such but simply take for granted as the way people talk. Women want their partners to be a new and improved version of a best friend. This gives them a soft spot for men who tell them secrets. As Jack Nicholson once advised a guy in a movie: "Tell her about your troubled childhood—that always gets 'em." Men, on the other hand, expect to *do* things together and don't feel anything is missing if they don't have heart-to-heart talks all the time.

If they do have heart-to-hearts, the meaning of those talks may be opposite for men and women. To many women, the relationship is working as long as they can talk things out. To many men, the relationship *isn't* working out if they have to keep talking it over. If she keeps trying to get talks going to save the relationship and he keeps trying to avoid them because he sees them as weakening it, then each one's efforts to preserve the relationship appear to the other as reckless endangerment.

If talks (of any kind) do get going, men's and women's ideas about how to conduct them may be very different. For example, Dora is feeling comfortable and close to Tom. She settles into a chair after dinner and begins to tell him about a problem at work. She expects him to reassure her that he understands and that what she feels is normal and to return the intimacy by, perhaps, telling her a problem of his. Instead, Tom sidetracks her story, cracks jokes about it, questions her interpretation of the problem and gives her advice about how to solve it and avoid such problems in the future.

All these responses, natural to men, are unexpected to women, who see them in terms of their own habits—negatively. When Tom comments on side issues or cracks jokes, Dora thinks he doesn't care about what she's saying and isn't really listening. If he challenges her interpretation of what went on, she feels he is criticizing her. If he tells her how to solve the problem, it makes her feel as if she's the patient to his doctor and that he's condescending. And, because he doesn't volunteer information about his problems, she feels he's implying he doesn't have any.

Her bid for intimacy ends up making her feel distant from him. She tries harder to regain intimacy the only way she knows how—by revealing more and more about herself; he tries harder by giving more insistent advice. The more problems she exposes, the more incompetent she feels, until they both see her as emotionally draining and problem-ridden. He wonders why she asks for his advice if she doesn't want to take it.

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In a long-term relationship, a woman often feels, "After all this time, you should know what I want without my telling you," whereas a man feels, "After all this time, we should be able to tell each other what we want." These incongruent expectations pinpoint one of the key differences between men and women. Communication is always a matter of balancing conflicting needs for involvement and independence. Though everyone has both these needs, women often have a relatively greater need for involvement and men a relatively greater need for independence. Being understood without saying what you mean is the payoff of involvement; that's why women value it so highly.

Harriet complains to Morton, "Why don't you ask me how my day was?" He replies, "If you have something to tell me, tell me. Why do you have to be invited?" What he doesn't understand is that she wants an expression of interest, evidence that he cares how her day was, regardless of whether or not she has something to tell.

A lot of trouble is caused between women and men by, of all things, pronouns. Women often feel hurt when their partners use "I" or "me" in a situation in which they would use "we" or "us." When Morton announces, "I think I'll go for a walk," Harriet feels specifically uninvited, though Morton later claims she would have been welcome to join him. She feels locked out by his use of "I" and his omission of an invitation: "Would you like to come?"

It's difficult to straighten out such misunderstandings because each person feels convinced of the logic of his or her position and the illogic—or irresponsibility—of the other's. Harriet knows that she always asks Morton how his day was and that she'd never announce, "I'm going for a walk," without inviting him to join her. If he talks differently to her, it must mean that he feels differently. But Morton wouldn't feel unloved if Harriet didn't ask about his day, and he would feel free to ask, "Can I come along?," if she announced she was taking a walk. So he can't believe she is justified in having reactions he knows he wouldn't have.

One of the commonest complaints wives have about their husbands is, "He doesn't listen to me any more!" And a second is, "He doesn't talk to me any more!" Since couples are parties to the same conversations, why are women more dissatisfied with them than men?

The silent father was a presence common to the childhoods of many women, and that image often becomes the model for the lover or husband. But what attracts us can become flypaper to which we are unhappily stuck, and many women who were lured to the strong, silent type as a lover find he's turned into a lug as a husband. To a woman in a long-term relationship, male silence may begin to feel like a brick wall against which she is banging her head. These wives may be right in thinking that their husbands aren't listening if the men don't value the telling of problems and secrets to establish rapport. But some of the time men feel unjustly accused: "I *was* listening." And, some of the time, they're right. They were.

Anthropologists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker report that women and men have different ways of showing that they're listening. Women make—and expect—more listening noises, such as "mhm" and "uh-huh." So, when a man is listening to a woman telling him something, he's not likely to make enough such noises to convince her he's really hearing her. And, when a woman is listening to a man, making more "mhms" and "uh-huhs" than he expects or would use himself, he may get the impression she's impatient for him to finish or exaggerating her interest in what he's saying.

To complicate matters further, what women and men mean by such noises may be different. Maltz and Borker contend that women tend to use these noises just to show they're listening and understanding, while men, in keeping with their different focus in communication, use them to show they agree. Women use the noises to indicate "I'm listening; go on," which serves the relationship level of talk; men use them to show what they think of what is being said, a response to the content of talk. So, when a man sits through his wife's talk, follows it, but doesn't agree with all she says, he's not going to shower her with "uh-huhs," and she's going to think he's not paying attention.

Sometimes, when men and women feel the other isn't paying attention, they're right. And this may be because their assumptions about what's interesting are different. Muriel gets bored when Daniel goes on and on about the stock market. He gets bored when she goes on and on about the details of her day or the lives of people he doesn't even know.

It seems natural to women to tell and hear about what happened today, who turned up at the bus stop, who called and what she said, not because these details are important in themselves but because the telling of them proves involvement—that you care about each other, that you have a best friend. Since men don't use talk for this purpose, they focus on the inherent insignificance of the details. What they find worth telling are facts about such topics as sports, politics, history or how things work, and a woman listening to this kind of talk feels the man is lecturing her or being slightly condescending.

Women describing an experience often include reports of conversations. Tone of voice, timing, intonation and wording are all re-created in the telling in order to explain—dramatize, really—the experience that is being reported. But most men aren't in the habit of reporting on conversations and are thus less likely to pay as much attention at the time they're going on. If men tell about an incident, they are more likely to give a brief summary instead of re-creating what was said and how, and, if the woman asks, "What exactly did he say?" and "How did he say it?," the man probably can't remember.

These different habits have repercussions when a man and woman are talking about their own relationship. She claims to recall exactly what he said, and she wants him to account for it. He can hardly do so because he has forgotten exactly what was said—if not the whole conversation. She secretly suspects he's only pretending not to remember; he secretly suspects that she's making up the details. So women's conversations with their women friends keep them in training for talking about their relationships with men, but many men come to such conversations with no training at all—and an uncomfortable sense that this really isn't their event.

Most of us expect our partners to be both lovers and best friends. Though women and men may share fairly similar romantic expectations, they have very different ideas about how to be friends, and these are the differences that mount over time and can keep two people stewing in the juice of accumulated minor misunderstandings. Ironically, the big issues—values, interests, philosophies of life—can be talked about and agreed on. It is far harder to achieve harmony in the nuances of talk regarding simple day-to-day matters.

If you and your mate fight constantly about insignificant matters, it's natural to assume something's wrong with him—or with you for having chosen him. But, when you begin to recognize the different ways men and women talk, you can begin to accept the differences between you in habits and assumptions about how to have a conversation, show interest, be considerate and so on. And you can start to make the small, steady changes that will accommodate two conflicting conversational styles.

Sometimes explaining assumptions can help. If a man starts to tell a woman what to do to solve her problem, she may say, "Thanks for the advice, but I really don't want to be told what to do. I just want you to listen and say you understand." A man might want to explain, "If I challenge you, it's not to prove you wrong; it's just my way of paying attention to what you're telling me." Maybe you won't always correctly interpret your partner's intentions immediately, but you can remind yourself that, if you get a negative impression, it may not be what was intended.

Most of all, we have to give up our conviction that, as linguist Robin Lakoff put it, "Love means never having to say, 'What do you mean?' " ■

Tannen, Deborah. "'Why Can't He Hear What I'm Saying?"' McCalls January 1986, pp.20-24. Reprinted from That's Not What I Meant!.