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Communication Matters:

"That's Not What I Meant!": The Sociolinguistics of Everyday Conversation

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Deborah Tannen
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

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Georgetown University

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Course Syllabus

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About Your Professor

Deborah Tannen

Deborah Tannen holds the distinguished rank of University Professor at Georgetown University, where she has been on the faculty of the linguistics department since 1979. Her book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for nearly four years, including eight months as number one; has sold more than two million copies; and has been translated into twenty-nine languages. It was also on best-seller lists in Brazil, Canada, England, Germany, Holland, and Hong Kong. This is the book that brought gender differences in communication style to the forefront of public awareness. Of her other eighteen books, *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work* was a *New York Times* business best-seller; *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words* won the Common Ground book award; and *I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs and Kids When You're All Adults* won a Books for a Better Life award. Her books written for scholarly readers include *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge University Press), *Gender & Discourse* (Oxford University Press), and *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends* (Ablex Publishing and Oxford University Press).

Dr. Tannen is an internationally recognized scholar who has received fellowships and grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. She is associate editor of *Language in Society* and is on the editorial boards of many other journals. She is also an advisory editor of the book series *Oxford Studies in Gender and Language*. She has been awarded five honorary doctorates and has been McGraw Distinguished Lecturer at Princeton University. She was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California, following a term in residence at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey.

Dr. Tannen is a frequent guest on such news and information shows as *20/20*, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *ABC World News Tonight* as well as such networks as CNN and National Public Radio. She has written for most major magazines and newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *Harvard Business Review*.

Dr. Tannen is also a frequent and popular lecturer to business, professional, and academic groups. Her audiences have ranged from such major corporations as Motorola, Chevron, JP Morgan Chase, and Capitol One to a gathering of United States senators and their spouses.

In addition to her linguistic research and writing, Dr. Tannen has published poetry, short stories, and personal essays. Her first play, "An Act of Devotion," is included in *The Best American Short Plays: 1993-1994*. It was produced, together with her play "Sisters," by Horizons Theater in Arlington, Virginia, in 1995.

Dr. Tannen's website is *deborahtannen.com*.

A videotaped lecture, "That's Not What I Meant!: Language, Culture and Meaning," is available through Into the Classroom Media at 1-800-732-7946.

Introduction

The following series of lectures draws on linguistics, or the scientific study of language, to show the many ways in which language has a profound effect upon human relationships. These lectures address the various aspects and implications of what Professor Tannen calls "conversational style." It also looks at the dynamics of specific situations such as the workplace and classroom where the role of conversational style is of particular importance.

A person's conversational style includes far more than the words that he or she speaks. Each conversation is composed of contextual cues, unspoken messages, body language, and the rhythms of speech. For the most part, people communicate without a conscious focus on the subtleties of language. Through this course, the complexities of language, and all that language entails, will become more apparent.

A better understanding of language, of how we communicate, and of how our ways of communicating differ based on who we are talking to should lead not only to a better understanding of ourselves and of those with whom we have relationships, but should also lead to improved communication. Our language shapes our lives in numerous, complex ways. These lectures help us to make sense of our language and will help to improve our relationships with friends, spouses, and coworkers.

Acknowledgments

Many of these lectures include excerpts from accounts written by students in my classes at Georgetown University. I would like to thank these students for permission to use their words. In the order in which they appear, they are: Lecture 3: Erica Duelks; Lecture 5: Jeff Civillico, Emily Nash, Shannon Semler, Scott Sherman; Lecture 6: Maureen Russo; Lecture 8: Jinnyn Jacob, Tracey Jarmon, Anthony Marchese, Julie Sweetland; Lecture 12: Stan Yunick; Lecture 14: Donald Wei Hsiung.

Lecture 1: Conversational Style: The Power of Language in Your Life

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read the introduction to Deborah Tannen's *That's Not What I Meant!*

Introduction:

Linguistics, the academic discipline devoted to the scientific study of language, can shed light on relationships.

Consider this . . .

In addition to the actual words we speak, what factors influence the meaning of what we are trying to communicate?

A. The Power of Language.
   1. A perfectly tuned conversation is a vision of sanity. It reassures that you're a right sort of person and all's right with the world.
   2. Nothing is more deeply disquieting than a conversation gone awry.
      a. If the conversation is a fleeting one, the consequences may be minor, though the cumulative effect can be dire.
      b. If the conversation is at work, it can get in the way of your job satisfaction and advancement.
      c. If the conversation is in a close relationship, you can begin to question yourself, your partner, or the relationship.
   3. We tend to think of the meaning we want to convey, but the way we say what we mean carries meaning.
   4. Linguistics is the academic discipline that studies language; this course introduces a subfield: interactional sociolinguistics, sometimes called discourse analysis.
   5. The concept I'll be introducing and returning to is "conversational style."

B. What is conversational style?
   1. I'm often asked, "Wouldn't we all be better off if we just said what we mean?" We do, but in our own conversational style.
   2. Conversational style is everything about how you say what you mean. It is learned growing up, and it varies by culture in the broadest sense: the country or region of the country you grew up in, the language you spoke at home and at play, your ethnic background, but also class, age, gender, and many other influences—sexual orientation, profession (psychologist, military, lawyer), and so on.

3. Conversational style is invisible: We draw conclusions in terms of abilities and intentions—or cultural stereotypes.
4. When we speak, we focus on what we think we're saying or doing, but we have to say it in some way—and the way conveys not only information but impressions of yourself.

C. All aspects of how you say what you mean make up conversational style.
1. Amplitude: How loudly or softly you speak.
2. Pacing and pausing: How quickly or slowly you speak.
3. Turntaking.
4. Intonation: Shifts in pitch, the music of speech.
5. Directness and indirectness.
6. Stories: What about, how you get to the point.
7. Joking, teasing, sarcasm.
8. How you show you're listening.
9. Nonverbal correlates (kinesics).
   a. Physical distance.
   b. Touch.
   c. Body orientation.
   d. Eye gaze.
   e. Laughter.

D. Principles of conversational style.
1. It's not unconscious but automatic and invisible.
2. We tend to look through language and seek psychological explanations.
3. We draw conclusions based on personality, intentions, abilities, or group stereotypes.
4. Knowing the culprit may be conversational style differences lifts the burden of pathology and blame.
5. Becoming aware of conversational style provides a first line of defense.

E. Woody Allen in "Annie Hall":

> This guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, "Doc, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken." And the doctor says, "Well, why don't you turn him in?" And the guy says, "I would, but I need the eggs." Well, that's pretty much how I feel about relationships.

F. The conversational chicken doesn't give us the perfect communication eggs we seek, but we keep at it, because we need relationships with others—not just romantic relationships, but all the fleeting and ongoing interactions that make up our lives. This course shows how linguistics can begin to shed light on how conversation works—what's going on when it

goes well, what can be the cause when it goes awry, and how you can make changes to increase the chances that more of your conversations will go well. As a result, you'll be more likely to have successful relationships, both at work and at home.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. What are the major elements of conversational style?
2. In what ways might conversational style affect relations between business people or political figures?

Suggested Reading

Tannen, Deborah. Introduction. *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1986.

Books and Articles of Interest

Gumperz, John J. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Gumperz, John J. "Interactional Sociolinguistics: A Personal Perspective." *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Eds. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton, 215-228. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

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Lecture 2: Linguistic Signals, Devices, and Rituals

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Michael Agar's *Language Shock*, Chapters 5-7 and 8-10.

Introduction:

In this lecture, we'll look more closely at the linguistic elements that make up conversational style and further distinguish among them: signals, devices, and rituals. I'll also introduce a concept that we'll revisit throughout our lectures: complementary schismogenesis—a process by which small differences become big ones and things often get worse instead of better when people have different conversational styles.

Consider this . . .

What might you expect to be the most influential elements of conversational style?

A. Linguistic signals.
   1. Amplitude: How loudly or softly you speak.

      For example, a New Yorker did not know she was hard of hearing until she moved to the Midwest; a man did not know his coworker was angry because her voice got lower rather than louder.
   2. Rate of speech: How quickly or slowly (varies by age as well as region and personal style).
   3. The music of speech: Intonation, voice quality.
   4. Uses of and attitudes toward overlap, talk, silence.
   5. Laughter.

B. Linguistic devices: What we do with these signals.
   1. Turntaking.
   2. Indirectness.
   3. Questions: What about? How?
   4. Complaining.
   5. Insulting/teasing/irony.
   6. Topics and how and when to raise them.
   7. Stories: What about? What's the point?
   8. Joking: What about? How?

9. Listenership.
10. Agonism: Ritualized opposition.

C. Conversational rituals.

1. Conversation has a "ritual" nature insofar as we have a sense not only of what a given utterance means but of what the next utterance is expected to be—how the whole exchange is expected to go.
   a. In the United States: "How are you?" "Fine" (or "Good," "Not bad," "Hangin' in there").
   b. In Burma: "Where are you going?" "Over there."

      "Have you eaten yet?" "Yes, I have."
   c. Apologies: "I'm sorry for X" is followed by "I'm sorry for Y."
2. Ritual complaining or praising.
3. "Where would you like to go for dinner?" "Hamburger Hamlet." The question is intended as the first step in a negotiation. But naming a restaurant may also be the first step in a negotiation.
4. Whenever a ritual is not shared, the utterance is interpreted literally.

   This can have positive consequences, as linguist Siti Suprapto (1983) found in her study of an Indonesian gynecologist working in the United States.

D. Complementary schismogenesis (term from Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*).

When pacing habits differ, speakers polarize into a voluble one and a taciturn one (Scollon, 1982).

E. Questions as a conversational device.

Questions can show interest or intrusion:

1. Interest: Proceeds on assumption that people like to talk about themselves.

   One woman complained: "Your family isn't interested in me; they never ask me any questions."
2. Others regard asking personal questions as nosy, overbearing, intrusive.
3. Rate of speech, pitch, and intonation all signal how questions are meant, but also influence the impression made. Here is an example of "machine-gun questions":

   "You from LA?" ("Yeah.")

   "Y'visiting here?" ("Yeah.")

   "Whaddya do there?" ("Uh ... uh, I work for Disney.")

   "You a writer? Artist?"

   a. The high pitch and fast pace indicate a casual tone, a show of interest, but can reinforce the impression of intrusion.

b. Complementary schismogenesis: Asking more questions made the interlocutor more hesitant.

c. A machine-gun answer comes equally fast and does not interfere with the flow of talk.

F. Conclusions are drawn not about conversational style but about personality, ability, and intentions.

Understanding conversational style can correct for these misinterpretations of intent.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. What factors might affect how a particular region develops a unique conversational style?
2. How might the "ritual" nature of conversation promote harmony within society?
3. What aspects of conversational style have caused problems for you in the past?

Suggested Reading

Agar, Michael. *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Language*. New York: Ballantine, 1972.

Books and Articles of Interest

Adger, Carolyn. "When Difference Does Not Conflict: Successful Arguments between Black and Vietnamese Classmates." *Text*, 6:2.223-237, 1986.

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine, 1972.

Suprapto, Siti A. "Negotiation of Meaning in Cross-cultural Communication: A Study of Doctor/Patient Interaction." Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 1983.

Tannen, Deborah. *Conversational Style*. New York: Oxford University Press, [1984] 2004.

Lecture 3: Framing and Reframing: How Metamessages Frame Meaning

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Deborah Tannen's *That's Not What I Meant!*, Chapter 5, and *I Only Say This Because I Love You,* Chapter 1.

Introduction:

In this lecture, I'll introduce two key concepts: framing and metamessages.

Consider this . . .

Can you think of an instance where the context in which a conversation is "framed" is more important than the actual words being spoken?

A. Framing is what makes it possible for us to use language in interaction. Words, phrases, and sentences carry meaning, but framing tells us how to interpret that meaning.
   1. Conversational signals send metamessages—what you think you're doing (e.g., Is "How are you?" a ritual greeting or an inquiry about health? Is a remark meant to be friendly, angry, or humorous?).
   2. The terms and concepts "framing" and "metamessage" trace to anthropologist Gregory Bateson ("A Theory of Play and Fantasy").
   3. Bateson developed his theory of framing watching monkeys at play in the Fleishhacker Zoo in San Francisco.
      a. How do monkeys know that a playful nip is not a literal bite?
      b. The monkey sends a signal, a metamessage, saying, "This is play."
      c. Among humans, teasing and roughhousing are aggressive acts framed as "play."

B. Frames are generally signalled implicitly.
   1. Recall the question, "Where would you like to go for dinner?" "Hamburger Hamlet." Neither speaker holds up a verbal sign that reads "STEP ONE IN NEGOTIATION." But that's how the utterances were intended, or framed.
   2. A man yelled "Stop it!" to a dog while talking on the phone.

      Dogs understand only tone of voice as framing. When the man explained, "I say to him, 'Go get that ball!' the dog missed the framing, "I say to him."

3. Jokes often depend on frames and frame shifts.
    a. A man holding a whip offers to take people to the next village for half the usual fare. It turns out he has no horse and wagon.
    b. A woman in a restaurant complains to the waiter about her chicken, “One leg is longer than the other.” The waiter replies, “What are you gonna do? Eat it or dance with it?”
4. Framing in medical interaction: This section is based on a study I did with Cynthia Wallat of a pediatrician examining a child with cerebral palsy in the mother’s presence. The physician operates in at least three “frames”: examining the child, consulting with the mother, managing the interaction (Tannen and Wallat, [1987] 1993).
    a. Linguistic registers: Ways of talking signal who the intended audience is (the child, the mother, the medical residents who might eventually view the videotape).
    b. Shifting registers can signal frame shifts.
    c. Frames are more complex than registers; within each register, different frames are served.
    d. Seeing the physician balance competing and sometimes conflicting frames explains the cognitive burden placed on her when she examines the child in the parent’s presence.

        “Leaky frames” show the cognitive burden of frame shifts.

C. The concepts of framing and of metamessages will remain crucial in all the lectures that follow.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. How might people of two separate cultures face obstacles in communication because of different "framing"?
2. Identify three examples of metamessages from a recent conversation you've had.

Suggested Reading

Tannen, Deborah. Chapter 5. *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1986.

Tannen, Deborah. Chapters 1–3, 6. *I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs, and Kids When You're All Adults*. New York: Ballantine, 2001.

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Tannen, Deborah, ed. *Framing in Discourse*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Tannen, Deborah, and Cynthia Wallat. "Interactive Frames and Knowledge Schemas in Interaction: Examples from a Medical Examination/ Interview." *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 50:2.205-16, 1987. Reprinted in *Framing in Discourse*. Ed. Deborah Tannen. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 57-76.

Lecture 4: Power and Solidarity: The Interplay of Hierarchy and Connection

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Deborah Tannen's *That's Not What I Meant!,* Chapter 6 and *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*, Chapter 7.

Introduction:

So far we have been talking about the linguistic signals, devices, and processes by which language creates meaning when people talk to each other. In this lecture, we'll look behind language, you might say, to consider the human dynamics that drive our uses of language.

Consider this . . .

How does the balance of power in a relationship affect the meaning of the words spoken?

How does connection interplay with power?

A. Anytime we talk to another person, we negotiate two dynamics: On one hand, we negotiate how close or distant we feel, how connected we want to be. But we also negotiate who has more power in the situation. If two people want to stand on the same spot, who will step aside?

B. Those who study language have written about these simultaneous but potentially conflicting human needs as "power" and "solidarity."

   1. The first to write about this dynamic and its effect on language were Roger Brown and Albert Gilman in a 1960 article entitled "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity."

      a. They looked at pronoun choice in languages where a speaker must choose between formal and informal pronouns, like French "*tu*" and "*vous*" or Spanish "*tu*" and "*usted*." A parallel in English: First name vs. title-last name.

      b. Power obtains when one person addresses another by first name but receives title-last name in return.

      c. Solidarity can be mutual first name or mutual title-last name.

   2. In my own writing, I refer to the dynamics of power and solidarity by using the alternative words "status" or "hierarchy" for "power" and "connection" or "involvement" for "solidarity."

   3. I point out that power and solidarity entail each other.

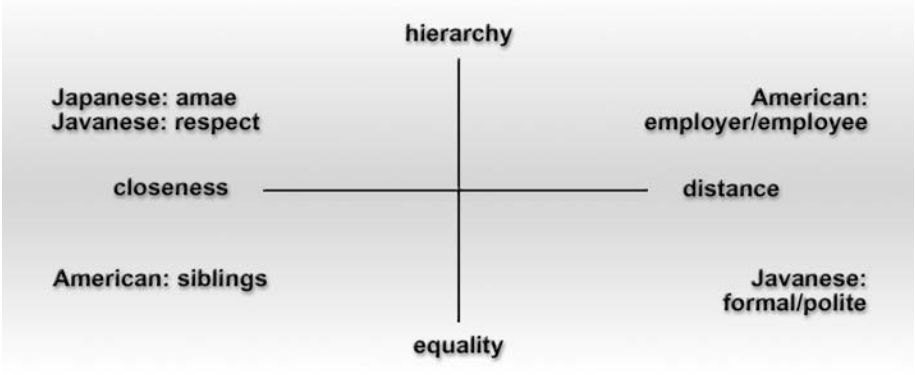
      a. Solidarity (or connection) entails power, because if you care what someone thinks, this limits your freedom.

      b. Power entails solidarity, because if you are in hierarchical relation, you are involved and connected.

4. Anything anyone says can be ambiguous (that is, it can mean either) and polysemous (it can mean both at once) with regard to power and solidarity.
    a. Jack's grandmother boasts that she is "in" with the nurses at her nursing home because they call her "Millie." For her, it's a sign of solidarity, but Jack fears it's power: insufficient respect for her age.
    b. "Where's your coat?" "Thanks, Mom."
    c. A man was invited to contribute to a book by his rival. His wife said, "How nice; he's trying for a *rapprochement*." The man said, "No way. He's the editor, I'm a contributor. He's trying to get me under his thumb."
    d. Women are more often addressed by first name; is this because they are not respected or because people feel friendlier toward them, find them more approachable? It is ambiguous (could be either) and polysemous ("means" both at once).
        i. Women are more often addressed by doctors by first name.
        ii. Women doctors are more often addressed by first name.

C. I point out that power and solidarity are not situated along a single continuum but rather a multi-dimensional grid with two axes. (See figure on p. 19.)
    1. A horizontal axis runs between the poles of connection and distance.
    2. A vertical axis runs between the poles of hierarchy and equality.
    3. Specific conversational style moves and relationships are placed on the grid of these two axes. Americans tend to think that closeness goes with equality, but a parent-child relationship is both very close and very hierarchical. Even sibling relationships are deeply hierarchical.
    4. A manager in my study who spent time befriending others at all ranks had more power to get things done.
    5. In this view, seeking international cooperation strengthens rather than weakens a nation.

D. All the linguistic signals we discussed can be ambiguous and polysemous with regard to power (or hierarchy) and solidarity (or connection). We are used to speaking of "power maneuvers" but less used to speaking of "connection maneuvers."
    1. Talking-along.
        a. It can seem self-evident that talking-along is an interruption, an attempt to grab the floor (power).
        b. It can also be a show of enthusiastic listenership (solidarity).
    2. Indirectness.
        a. It's been said that those who have less power are more likely to be indirect: e.g., women, witnesses (Conley, O'Barr and Lind).



b. Those who hold power have the privilege of being indirect (master/servant).

3. Silence vs. volubility.
   a. The powerless are silenced ("children should be seen and not heard").
   b. Being together in silence can show the deepest rapport.
4. Verbal aggression.
   a. Shouting and arguing against what someone else says can seem self-evidently "aggressive"—a display of power.
   b. A dynamic, high-volume verbal argument can be a sign of sociability and friendship.

E. Frustration in conversation often results from the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity.

F. The principles of power and solidarity, like processes of framing and reframing, apply in all interactions. These concepts will recur in all subsequent lectures.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. How does the "power" a person holds in a relationship influence word choice?
2. How does the relative connection influence word choice?
3. How do the ambiguity and polysemy of power and connection cause confusion?

Suggested Reading

Tannen, Deborah. Chapter 6. *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1986.

Tannen, Deborah. Chapter 7. "Talking Up Close: Status and Connection." *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*. New York: Quill, 1994.

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Conley, John M., William M. O'Barr, and E. Allen Lind. "The Power of Language: Presentational Style in the Courtroom." *Duke Law Journal*, 1978.6, pp. 1375-1399, 1979.

Tannen, Deborah. Chapters 1-3. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: Quill, 1990.

Tannen, Deborah. Chapter 1. "The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies: Rethinking Power and Solidarity in Gender and Dominance." *Gender & Discourse*. New York: Oxford, 1994.

Tannen, Deborah. Chapter 3. "Fighting for Love: Connection and Control in Family Arguments." *I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs, and Kids When You're All Adults*. New York: Ballantine, 2001.

Lecture 5: Indirectness: The Ways and Whys We Communicate Meaning Not in So Many Words

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Chapter 3 of Deborah Tannen's *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work.*

Introduction:

Among Americans, indirectness has a bad rap. We tend to associate directness with honesty and indirectness with dishonesty. But when we talk, the needs for power and solidarity, for involvement and independence, give us many reasons for not saying exactly "what we mean"—at least, not in so many words.

Consider this . . .

Take any conversation and write down as many unstated assumptions and implications as you can that underlie what was said.

A. Linguist Robin Lakoff mentions two reasons for not saying what we mean in so many words: rapport and self-defense. Related to these motives are the goals of saving face for the other person and avoiding open confrontation.
   1. The payoff in self-defense.

      If your statement is met with disagreement, you can deny having said or meant that.
   2. The payoff in rapport.
      a. The birthday present routine.
      b. A woman was annoyed at a man for fixing himself a snack without offering her any, so he offered her the snack he had just fixed and she turned it down, saying she wasn't hungry. Why was she annoyed if she wasn't hungry? Why wasn't she direct in asking for a snack?
         i. Being direct wouldn't help.
         ii. She wants to know he thought of her on his own.
      c. A Greek woman recalled that when she was young, she would ask her father, "Should I go to this party?" If he said, "Yes," she knew she shouldn't go. If he really approved, he'd say, "Yes, of course you should go." I call this the enthusiasm constraint.
      d. A question can be an indirect way of opening a negotiation, so you do not risk forcing the other to reject a suggestion.
   3. To avoid hurting someone's feelings.

"Would you like to go to lunch?" Complementary schismogenesis: The more insistent Richard is about getting a direct answer, the more evasive Mary becomes.

4. To avoid open conflict.

   Roommates concerned over who washes dishes and keeps the bathroom clean: "Is that your hair dryer, Nan?" Sign in the kitchen: "WE LOVE A CLEAN SINK."

5. Irony and sarcasm are also forms of indirectness.

   a. A roommate asks, "Are you starting a bottle collection?"

   b. Roommates protest but comply.

B. Those who tend to use one style of directness/indirectness find other styles inscrutable, manipulative, or even dishonest.

   1. You may genuinely miss another's meaning.

   2. You may understand the intention but resent the indirectness.

   3. You may understand the intention but resent the directness.

   4. It's hard, but crucial, to recognize styles of indirectness or directness different from our own as valid, indeed, as styles, not evidence of others' negative personalities, abilities, or intentions.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. Think of examples in which indirectness achieves a desired effect.
2. Think of examples in which indirectness produces an adverse effect.
3. Think of instances when indirectness led to misinterpretation.

Suggested Reading

Tannen, Deborah. Chapter 3. "'Why Don't You Say What You Mean?': Indirectness at Work." *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*. New York: Quill, 1994.

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Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. *Language and Woman's Place: Text and Commentaries*. Revised and expanded edition. Ed. Mary Bucholtz. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Lecture 6: The Rhythms of Talk: Pacing, Pausing, Silence, and Interruption

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Deborah Tannen's *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends.*

Introduction:

Differences in the rhythms of talk can lead to negative impressions. When these patterns vary by culture and gender, they may result in speakers being unfairly stereotyped.

Consider this . . .

If you feel interrupted, could this impression be the unwitting result of differences in turntaking habits?

A. I first addressed issues of conversational style in my analysis of a Thanksgiving dinner conversation between New Yorkers and Californians.
   1. New Yorkers recalled it had been a "great conversation."
   2. The Californians and the British speaker recalled it had been "dominated" by the New York speakers.

      I traced these different impressions to differences in pacing, pausing, and "overlap."

B. Style differences are always relative, not absolute.

C. Assumptions about and reactions to talking-along are automatic and deeply rooted. (Interruption or support? Power maneuver or connection maneuver?)
   1. Personal meanings:

      "You're not interested"; "You're withholding."

      "You're a big boy; why don't you just join in?" "You need a crowbar to get into those conversations."

      "Sally is nice but she talks so much ..." (French Canadian)
   2. Cultural meanings:
      a. My own study: East European Jewish speakers from New York City.
      b. Many other cultures: Mediterranean (Italian, Greek), Armenian, East European (Russian compared to Finns), African-American.

c. Gender patterns.

i. Studies find men interrupt women more than women interrupt men (West and Zimmerman).

ii. Surveying fifty-four studies, Deborah James and Sandra Clarke find that women in all-female groups interrupt more.

The solution to the puzzle: Power/solidarity.

d. "I'm tired of being told I talk like a man. What I talk like is a New Yorker."

3. Cultural stereotyping.

a. Jaakko Lehtonen and Kari Sajavaara: In many countries, those who speak more slowly are stereotyped as stupid:

Swedes toward Finns.

French attitudes toward Belgians.

Germany toward East Frisians.

Swiss toward residents of Berne or Zurich.

Finns themselves toward those from a region called Hame.

b. United States: Americans from New York City in particular and Northerners in general are misperceived and stereotyped as aggressive and rude; Southerners are seen as polite but are misperceived and stereotyped as less intelligent or efficient.

D. It's hard, but crucial, to think in terms of style rather than personality, intentions, abilities, and cultural stereotypes.

1. Our responses are emotional and automatic: A woman from the Midwest living in the Bronx cringes when talking to New Yorkers who seem too loud, stand too close, or touch too much when she talks to them. I asked: "Since you've lived in the Bronx for nearly forty years, do you find you've gotten used to this style?" "No," she replied. "I still feel invaded."

2. It's a relief to understand how others may respond: It's not personal.

3. You can adapt your style.

a. If you find you're doing all the talking, try counting to seven before starting to talk.

b. If you find you're not getting a chance to talk, try pushing yourself to start sooner.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. Are there ways of taking turns or showing interest that you previously regarded as absolute rules which you now see as relative?
2. How has cultural stereotyping influenced world events?

Suggested Reading

Tannen, Deborah. *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex/New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Books and Articles of Interest

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Lehtonen, Jaakko, and Kari Sajavaara. "The Silent Finn." *Perspectives on Silence*. Eds. Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, pp. 193-201. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985.

McDermott, R.P., and Henry Tylbor. "On the Necessity of Collusion in Conversation." *Text*, 3:3.277-297, 1983.

Scollon, Ron. "The Machine Stops: Silence in the Metaphor of Malfunction." *Perspectives on Silence*. Eds. Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, 21-30. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985.

Lecture 7: Listenership: Conversation as a Joint Production

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Observe several conversations and note how participants indicate that they're listening.

Introduction:

The act of listening entails more than consciously registering what someone is saying. Conversation is a joint production, with the listener's response to the speaker playing as crucial a role as the speaker's behavior. The two are inextricably intertwined.

Consider this . . .

What you think is another person's "personality" may be the result of their reaction to you.

A. I am often asked, "Wouldn't a lot of problems be solved if people just listened more?"

   Yes, but "listening" is only the beginning. How do you show you're listening? Here we encounter again the challenge of different conversational styles.

B. How do you show you're listening?

   1. Physical orientation and eye gaze.

      Women complain "You're not listening" because men are not looking at them.

   2. Research by Frederick Erickson examined an interview between a German-American interviewer and an Italian-American interviewee. The interviewer looked away to put the young man at ease, but it was his looking away that gave the impression that he wasn't really interested. Complementary schismogenesis set in.

   3. Linguists use the term "backchannel response" to refer to the sounds listeners make to show that they're listening (mhm, uhuh, yeah; Japanese: *aizuchi*).

      a. Too many indicates impatience.

      b. Too few indicates inattention.

c. Do the back channel responses “mhm” and “yeah” mean “I’m listening” or “I agree”?

i. Women tend to provide more (Lynette Hirschman).

ii. Many women use them to mean “I’m listening” whereas many men use them to mean “I agree.” Women are listening more than men are agreeing (Maltz and Borker).

d. Frederick Erickson and Jeffrey Shultz examined counseling interviews between white counselors and African-American community college students. Counselors and students had different expectations about eye gaze as well as other signs of listenership, which led to mixed signals. The result: The interviewer talked down to the interviewee, who felt put down. Neither suspected listenership signals as the culprit (Erickson and Shultz, *The Counselor as Gatekeeper*).

4. Other listener responses.

a. How loud or soft, emphatic or understated?

i. A woman raised in Brooklyn who raised her children in Vermont; they thought their mother overreacted.

ii. “That’s ridiculous!” (Whose veracity is being questioned?)

b. How expansive?

Telling a similar story can be intended to show listenership but can be construed to show the opposite.

c. Differences between American Indian and Anglo listenership strategies.

C. Conversation is a “joint production.” In Erickson’s words, conversation is “like climbing a tree that climbs back.” We think in terms of others’ intentions but rarely consider how our responses might be influencing how they’re talking and what they’re saying. Where you punctuate the interaction is key.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. List some ways you show you're listening. Do you know people who show listenership in different ways?
2. Think of the most successful and least successful examples of "backchannel responses" you can recall.

Books and Articles of Interest

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Erickson, Frederick, and Jeffrey Shultz. *The Counselor as Gatekeeper: Social Interaction in Interviews*. New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1982.

Goodwin, Charles. *Conversational Organization: Interaction between Speakers and Hearers*. New York: Academic Press, 1981.

Hirschman, Lynette. "Female-Male Differences in Conversational Interaction." *Language in Society*, 23:3.427-44, 1994.

Maltz, Daniel N., and Ruth A. Borker. "A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication." *Language and Social Identity*. Ed. John J. Gumperz, pp. 196-216. Cambridge (U.K.): Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Lecture 8: Agonism: Programmed Contentiousness, Ritualized Opposition

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Think of all the ways you might use opposition in conversation, such as arguing, teasing, playing devil's advocate, and so on. Read Deborah Tannen's *The Argument Culture*, Chapters 1 and 6.

Introduction:

The role of opposition, especially among males, is a crucial aspect of conversational style.

Consider this . . .

Why might men and boys employ opposition in conversation more often than women and girls? Is the use of opposition also related to culture?

A. What is "agonism"?
   1. The term comes from Walter Ong, who defines it as "programmed contentiousness," "ceremonial combat." It is, in other words, "ritualized adversativeness," using opposition or fighting as a format for accomplishing interactions that are not literal fights: debate (vs. dialogue), sports, playfighting, teasing, and so on.
   2. Ong claims that agonism plays a greater role in the consciousness and social interaction of boys and men.
   3. There is also a large cultural component.
   4. Much of the material in this lecture is drawn from my book *The Argument Culture*.

B. Agonism in boys' culture.
   1. Boys use opposition as a means to negotiate friendship; they are more likely than girls to play-fight.
      a. A mother commented: "When my friend's little girl wants to play, she says, 'You be the baby and I'll be the Mommy.' When my little boy wants to play, he says, 'You be the monster and chase me.'"
      b. This can be seen in an example of preschool boys at play (Corsaro and Rizzo).
      c. Even college-age boys engage in physical roughhousing.
      d. Physical roughhousing and verbal insults can work together to show affection among men.

e. Women can use agonism too: example of African-American college roommates.

f. Women who use agonism to show affection may get negative reactions from other women.

C. The cultural influence on agonism.

1. Ong traces Western fascination with adversativeness to Aristotle and contrasts it with Chinese philosophers' "*eirinism*" (ritualized peacefulness, or harmony).

2. In many cultures (for example, Greek, German, and French), positive value is placed on dynamic verbal opposition.

a. American students in Germany avoid arguing politics; German students seek such arguments. Both reach negative conclusions about the other (Heidi Byrnes).

b. An American recalls her year in France: "During one dinner my host mother ran through a litany of subjects, changing them every time I agreed or when there was general agreement. She would bring up one controversial topic after another, looking to start a heated intellectual debate over dinner."

c. Italians and Italian-Americans.

i. "My friends retreat to my room when my family becomes animated."

ii. Children in an Italian nursery school enjoy "*discussione*," dynamic opposition (Corsaro and Rizzo).

d. Greek friends in conversation engage in a heated debate over the color of a belt (Christina Kakava).

3. In many cultures (for example, Chinese, Thai, Japanese), negative value is placed on the open expression of opposition.

a. Haru Yamada (*Different Games, Different Rules*) describes a political scandal in Japan: Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita was accused of enlisting the aid of organized crime to stop a public harassment campaign against him mounted by political opponents. The harassment campaign depicted Takeshita "as a great leader with integrity and honor matched by no other." The Japanese press described this as *homegoroshi*, "to kill with praise."

b. Anthropologists Beatrice and John Whiting compared children playing in six vastly different cultures. In all, boys were more aggressive than girls. But they also found that girls were given more responsibility for childcare and domestic chores, and spent more time at home with their mothers. In Kenya, boys who had no sisters and therefore had to take these roles turned out to be less aggressive than other boys.

c. In a study by David Ryback, Arthur Sanders, Jeffrey Lorentz, and Marlene Koestenblatt, university students from five different cultures were asked if they would permit aggressive behavior in their

children. Those who said yes: Americans: 61 percent; Chinese: 19 percent; Thais: 5 percent.

d. Implications for personal relationships.

i. A Japanese woman married to a French man.

ii. Some couples argue in public as a kind of team sport.

D. In conclusion, agonism, or ritualized opposition, is a crucial and fascinating aspect of conversational style. It is a marvelously widespread and creative resource for communicating meaning in interaction. Habits for using agonism vary in all the ways that conversational style varies: by gender, by region, by culture. The challenge is to understand agonism not only as an expression of intentions, abilities, and personality, but also as an element of conversational style.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. Can you think of an example where the use of opposition in conversation led to successful or unsuccessful interaction?
2. Can you think of an example where someone's use of—or avoidance of—opposition differed from yours?

Suggested Reading

Tannen, Deborah. Chapters 1 and 6. *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.

Books and Articles of Interest

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Tannen, Deborah. "Agonism in the Academy: Surviving Higher Learning's Argument Culture." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 46.30: B7, B8 (March 31, 2000).

Tannen, Deborah. "Agonism in Academic Discourse." *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34.10-11:1651-1669, 2002.

Whiting, Beatrice B., and John W.M. Whiting, in collaboration with Richard Longabaugh; based on data collected by John and Ann Fischer, et al. *Children of Six Cultures: A Psycho-cultural Analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Yamada, Haru. *Different Games, Different Rules: Why Americans and Japanese Misunderstand Each Other*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Lecture 9: Gender: Women and Men Talking

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*.

Introduction:

Conversational style can differ by ethnic background, region, age, economic class, and gender, as well as many other cultural influences. In this lecture, I delve more deeply into ways of talking that pattern by gender. This is also the topic of a separate Modern Scholar lecture series, *Women, Men, and Language*.

Consider this . . .

What kinds of differences are there in the ways that men and women use language in their daily lives?

A. If you get the feeling, when you talk to someone of the other sex, that you're talking to someone from another world, it's because you are.

B. I first developed the metaphor that conversations between women and men are like cross-cultural communication when I participated in a research project organized by psychologist Bruce Dorval. Another influence was an article by Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker that brings the sociolinguistic framework of John Gumperz to bear on research describing the differing ways that girls and boys use language in their play.

C. Women's and men's uses of language can be traced to the way boys and girls play.

   Boys (and men) focus on relative status; girls (and women) focus on relative connection.

D. Patterns that tend to distinguish women's and men's uses of language can lead to mutual frustration.

   1. Why don't men like to stop to ask for directions?
   2. Making decisions: "Would you like to stop for a drink?"
      a. It's a conversational ritual: Beginning a negotiation.
      b. The question sends a metamessage of concern for the other's preferences.
      c. The monosyllabic reply is heard to show lack of a similar concern.
   3. "How was your day?"
      a. Rapport-talk vs. report-talk.

b. “My wife and I have good communication, but sometimes when she talks to me I just don’t answer.”

4. Troubles talk.
    a. He offers a solution (e.g., “If you don’t like your job, you can quit”).
    b. She: “I like my job!”
    c. He: “Why do you want to talk about it if you don’t want to do anything about it?”
    d. Troubles talk is a way to show closeness; failure to share troubles can seem like a failure of closeness.
    e. Understanding is key.
        i. It’s not enough to say, “Just listen.” It will drive him crazy.
        ii. Either might adjust. (“Let me tell you the solution and then you can keep talking if you want.”)
5. Who talks more, women or men?

E. These are just a few of the patterns that tend to distinguish women’s and men’s uses of language. I discuss these and many other gendered patterns in my books *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* and *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work,* as well as in the Modern Scholar lecture series, *Women, Men, and Language*, and in the videotapes: *Talking 9 to 5* (Charthouse International, 1-800-210-9865) and *He Said, She Said: Gender, Language, and Communication* (Into the Classroom Media, 1-800-732-7946).

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. What are some of the reasons that men and women communicate differently?
2. How can miscommunications between men and women be avoided or repaired?

Suggested Reading

Tannen, Deborah. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: Quill, 1990.

Books and Articles of Interest

Coates, Jennifer. *Women, Men, and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language*. 2nd ed.: London and New York: Longman, 1993.

Dorval, Bruce, ed. *Conversational Coherence and Its Development*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1990.

Eckert, Penelope, and Sally McConnell-Ginet. *Language and Gender*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Gumperz, John J. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Johnson, Sally, and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof, eds. *Language and Masculinity*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

Maltz, Daniel N., and Ruth A. Borker. "A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication." *Language and Social Identity*. Ed. John J. Gumperz, 196-216. Cambridge (U.K.): Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Tannen, Deborah. *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*. New York: Quill, 1994.

Videos of Interest

Tannen, Deborah. "He Said, She Said: Gender, Language, and Communication." Into the Classroom Media: 1-800-732-7946.

Lecture 10: Apologies in Private and Public Contexts

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Chapter 4 in Deborah Tannen's *I Only Say This Because I Love You* and Chapter 2 in Deborah Tannen's *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work.*

Introduction:

In the previous lecture, I explored some ways of speaking that tend to distinguish women's and men's conversational styles. Another linguistic device that women and men tend to regard and use differently, but is of great importance in many other ways too (for example, at work and in public life—the topics of the next two lectures), is apologizing.

Consider this . . .

What elements of an apology are as important as saying the words "I'm sorry"?

A. Evidence that use of and attitudes toward apologies tend to vary by gender. (The material in this section comes from a chapter on apologies in my book *I Only Say This Because I Love You.*)

   1. A three-and-a-half-year-old told his mother he didn't like the holiday Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of Atonement) because "You have to say you're sorry."
   2. Willette Coleman, creator of The Apology Line, provided the service of apologizing for clients. She found that most of her clients were men.

B. Apologies often figure in cross-gender conversations.

   He didn't mail her letter and didn't apologize. In the end, they argued not about the letter but about the apology.

   1. She: If he won't apologize, he doesn't care that he let me down.
   2. He: I committed a misdemeanor, but she wants me to plead guilty to a felony.

C. Why are many men reluctant to apologize?

   1. They regard an apology as "just words"; it doesn't change anything—her letter is still unmailed.

      Father: "It wouldn't mean anything" (from the documentary film, *It Will End Up in Tears,* by Israeli filmmaker Gonen Glaser).

   2. A father was upset that his daughter was angry at him, yet didn't want to apologize: "I didn't do anything wrong."
   3. Scene from *The Kid* with Bruce Willis: Demanding an apology is a degradation ritual.

D. Men's apologies are often indirect.

1. "I guess I wasn't much help."
2. Robin Lakoff: Her father sent *The Portable Curmudgeon.*
3. A boy of ten and a half accidentally knocked his seven-year-old sister over. She split her lip badly: There was blood all over, her lip was swollen way out, and he clearly felt really bad about it. He was rubbing her leg, saying over and over, "I can't believe I did that!" and showing other signs of empathy. When his father came home and was told the story, he asked, "Did you say you're sorry?" and the boy said, "Yes." His mother gently corrected, "No, sweetie, I don't think you did." He said, "Well, I didn't use that word, but I kept saying I couldn't believe I did it." Because he didn't do it intentionally, he didn't feel he should say he was sorry.

E. What to do.

1. Those who value apologies can try giving up the demand to hear the precise words and become attuned to other indications of regret.
2. Those who avoid apologizing can try saying "I'm sorry." You might find it's a magic potion to calm the roiling waters.

F. Apologies in public life. (Material in this section is drawn from my book *The Argument Culture*.)

1. The U.S. government's antitrust prosecution against the Microsoft Corporation: Microsoft executive Steve Ballmer in a *Newsweek* interview: "When you believe in the propriety, integrity, and righteousness of what you've done, I don't think the thing to do is have a *mea culpa*. The thing to do ... is to argue your position, your innocence."
2. According to *Newsweek,* Judge Thomas Penfield Jackson "went for the ax, as opposed to milder restrictions," because "the company consistently maintained that it had done nothing wrong." He was particularly angered by a videotaped interview in which Microsoft founder and CEO Bill Gates "denied the obvious."

G. Further evidence that refusing to apologize or admit fault can do more harm than good.

1. Insurance companies caution: Don't admit fault. But sometimes people sue because they want an apology.
2. A caller to a talk show on which I discussed this topic: "I'm a lawyer and I couldn't agree more. I was recently involved in a legal dispute with a neighbor. We've been paid money, but I still feel unresolved because what I really wanted was an apology.
3. According to a *Newsweek* article, health care mediators Leonard Marcus and Barry Dorn found that patients are less likely to sue if a doctor apologizes.

   A mother filed a complaint against a doctor because her three-year-old, running around the waiting room, had managed to get hold of and get stuck by a used hypodermic needle. The receptionist had chastised the mother for not controlling her child. In mediation, the doctor

"apologized for what happened and for the pain it caused them. He then described changes instituted in the office" to ensure this could not happen again. The mother dropped the complaint.

H. This doctor's response is a model of an effective apology.
   1. Admit fault.
   2. Show contrition, sound apologetic.
   3. Acknowledge the effect.
   4. Make amends: Offer to do something to counter the effect and/or ensure it won't happen again.

I. These principles work in business, too.
   1. Restaurant critic Phyllis Richman notes that when a restaurant disappoints a customer (making them wait for a table despite a reservation, serving disappointing food), apologizing and offering free wine or dessert can retrieve the customer's good will.
   2. A customer who feels that a company handled a complaint well often becomes a more loyal customer than one who never had a complaint.

J. Just like apologies, other linguistic strategies that are significant in private conversation are also key in public conversations. In the next three lectures, we'll move to more public contexts by looking at the power of language in the workplace, the classroom, and the political arena.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. Do men and women approach apologies differently? Why?
2. What are the drawbacks to apologizing? What are the advantages?

Suggested Reading

Tannen, Deborah. Chapter 2. "'I'm Sorry, I'm Not Apologizing': Conversational Rituals." *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*. New York: Quill, 1994.

Tannen, Deborah. Chapter 4. "'I'm Sorry, I'm Not Apologizing': Why Women Apologize More Than Men, and Why It Matters." *I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs, and Kids When You're All Adults*. New York: Ballantine, 2001.

Books and Articles of Interest

Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. "Nine Ways of Looking at Apologies: The Necessity for Interdisciplinary Theory and Method in Discourse Analysis." *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Eds. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi E. Hamilton, 199-214. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

Lecture 11: Talking at Work: Institutional and Interactional Power

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Watch Deborah Tannen's video *Talking 9 to 5*.

Introduction:

Talking in the workplace entails a heightened awareness of relative "power" that is markedly different from conversations held outside of work.

Consider this . . .

How do we communicate differently in an office environment?

A. Talking at work operates on the same principles as private speaking.

Differences in conversational style can lead to frustration and misjudgments of each other's intentions and abilities. For example, a colleague never gives you a chance to talk, or you resent a colleague who never contributes. These might be the same two people from each other's points of view.

B. Talking at work is different. In personal conversations, we all balance power and solidarity: We need to be connected to others, and we need to take into account our relative status. At work, however, our relative rank is in the foreground. Bosses have explicit power over subordinates, and you're not just getting and giving information, you're being judged.

In addition to "institutional power," hierarchies established by rank, there is also "interactional power": When individuals have differing conversational styles, the results can be unequal opportunity for some.

C. All aspects of conversational style come into play at work. (The material in this section is drawn from my book *Talking from 9 to 5*.)

1. Indirectness.

a. When styles are shared, it works:

Sally is talking to me in her office when the phone rings. It's Marian.

Marian: "Sal, are you busy?"

Sally: "No."

Marian: "What're you doing?"

Sally: "Just talking to Deborah Tannen. Do you need me to cover the phone?"

Marian: "Yes, I have to go to the accounting office."

Sally: "I'll be right there."

b. In this example, the speakers are women, but I found in my research many examples of men using indirectness in telling others what to do.

c. When styles are not shared, the result can be miscommunication and misjudgment.

d. The employee in the subordinate position is most likely to adapt and change styles.

e. Even when communication is successful, subordinates risk misjudgment. College president to her secretary: "Could you do me a favor and type this?" A trustee: "Don't forget, you're the president."

2. Sequencing information: A boss told a subordinate to rewrite a report, but began with praise. He thought he'd been told it was fine.

3. Agonism: A colleague pokes holes in any ideas you raise.

4. Apologies: A woman who was ranked below her abilities said "I'm sorry" more than her coworkers did.

5. Ritual complaining may be taken for disloyalty.

6. Asking questions: A young physician got a negative evaluation because "You ask so many questions."

7. If your style differs from that of your boss or the boss's boss, you may find you don't get credit for your work or don't get a chance to do your best work.

D. Knowing about conversational style gives you more flexibility to improve the situation if you feel you are not getting credit for your work or that your true abilities are not being recognized. It is also incumbent upon managers and others in high positions to become aware of conversational style differences in order to accurately judge the abilities of those who work under their supervision, to bring out the best work from those they supervise, and to assemble an organization composed of members with differing styles who can better serve a range of potential clients, who also will have a range of styles.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. How does relative rank influence office communication?
2. Why should managers be aware of differences in communication styles?

Books and Articles of Interest

Drew, Paul, and John Heritage, eds. *Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Scotton, Carol Meyers. "Self-enhancing Code-Switching as Interactional Power." *Language and Communication*, 8:3/4.199-211, 1988.

Tannen, Deborah. *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*. New York: Quill, 1994.

Videos of Interest

Tannen, Deborah. "Talking 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace." Charthouse International Learning Corporation: 1-800-210-9865.

Lecture 12: The Classroom: Talking in School

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Recall your experience as a child in school or your children's experiences at school. What was frustrating? What was enjoyable?

Introduction:

All the elements of conversational style affect interactions and outcomes in an educational environment.

Consider this ...

How does communication style affect learning at all ages?

A. Styles learned in conversation at home have very different effects in public contexts. Most children's first encounter with public contexts is educational institutions: talking at school.

B. Contrasting styles often work to the detriment of those whose styles are different from the styles of those who hold institutional power: The teachers and administrators.

C. Differing habits and expectations regarding "contextualization cues" (term from John Gumperz)—framing meaning by intonation, tone of voice, etc.

   Systematic differences in how middle-class White and African-American children indicate they need encouragement (Gumperz and Tannen, 1979).

D. Differing expectations about "communicative etiquette."

   1. Does direct gaze from child to adult signal respect or insubordination? (Hispanic, Korean, Southern American.)
   2. Warm Springs Indian children give Anglo teachers the impression of inattention because they look at the teacher less and each other more and provide fewer "backchannel" responses: nodding, clapping, calling out "yay!" and "oh boy!" (Philips, 1983).

E. Differing habits and expectations regarding rhetorical questions.

   1. Teacher expectations and responses can be very different from ordinary interaction (example from Ray McDermott).
   2. Economic class often entails different experiences with rhetorical questions (Heath, 1983).

F. Differing expectations about "participation structures."

   1. Bobby, an Italian-American child in a Boston classroom (Shultz, Florio, and Erickson, 1982).

a. At dinner in Bobby's home, family members often speak at the same time but were not chastised for interrupting. There were "multiple floors" and talking-along could be a way of demonstrating listenership.

b. In a math lesson, Bobby is considered a behavior problem, in part because he "chimes in" as he would at home.

2. Warm Springs Indian children in community and school (Philips, 1983).

a. Sixth graders participate less in class and small groups led by the teacher, but more in one-on-one interactions with the teacher and in student-only group projects.

b. This reflects Indian participation structures regarding turns at talk.

c. Indian first graders are more physically exuberant than Anglo children.

d. In Indian contexts, children are more controlled, not less, than in Anglo contexts. The level of verbal excitation permitted in school is misread as "anything goes."

3. Differing styles can have positive rather than negative effects. In a study of a multicultural classroom, Carolyn Adger observed two boys who became good friends. One boy, who was African-American, had a style of argumentation by which he sought the last word. The other child, who was Vietnamese, placed value on avoiding confrontation and winning over the long haul. If one boy got the last word and the other backed down to achieve harmony, both felt they had won what they set out to achieve.

G. Gender in the classroom.

1. David and Myra Sadker: In co-ed classes, girls often become bystanders.

a. Teachers call on boys more, ask boys tougher questions, and ask more follow-up questions.

b. If teachers ignore boys, they pose discipline problems.

2. Jacqueline Madhok compared twenty-three small groups of middle-school students working on a science problem.

a. In groups with two or three girls and one boy, the girls deferred to the boy, who ended up talking twice as much as the girls.

b. In groups with two or three boys and one girl, the boys ignored and insulted the girl.

3. Eleanor Maccoby (in research done with her colleague Carol Jacklin) observed preschoolers at play: Girls avoid playing with boys in part because they "find it difficult to influence boys." Boys responded to protests from other boys but ignored protests from girls. When the researchers put pairs of preschoolers together to play, they found that girls often stood aside while the boys played with the toys. They did not find girls to be passive when playing with other girls, though they did sometimes observe boys being passive when playing with other boys.

4. Elizabeth Sommers and Sandra Lawrence compared two college writing classrooms that used "cooperative learning" techniques by which students critique each other's work in small groups. One teacher gave explicit instructions about how to structure participation in the groups; the other had the students determine their own structure. When the structure was prescribed, each student spoke in turn, and women and men students participated almost equally. In the unstructured groups, students had to get the floor for themselves, and women students took 25 percent fewer turns. They "tended to acquiesce more, to be interrupted more, and to initiate less."
5. A colleague reported a similar phenomenon in a graduate school classroom.
6. Men who "take over" may not intend or even want to do so.

   A young man in my class wrote in a journal:

   "We worked in small groups today, and for the second time out ... I ended up being the spokesperson for the group. And I find this bizarre. I don't 'like' being the spokesperson—or so I say. So if I'm exuding 'not wanna do the synthesis,' how come I seem so perfect to be elected for the task? Maybe it's by default; no one else wants to. I don't think I buy this."
7. Agonism.
   a. Another reason Eleanor Maccoby found preschool girls avoiding play with boys is that they are wary of boys' rough-and-tumble play and their "orientation toward issues of competition and dominance."
   b. I found in my research that women were less likely to speak in college classes when the professors invited students to "critique" (in the sense of attack) authors and fellow students.

H. In conclusion, all the aspects of conversational style that I have discussed in earlier lectures also play a role in the classroom, where style differences may work to the detriment of students whose styles differ from those of their teachers or school administrators. Being aware of style differences can help teachers better serve the students entrusted to them.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. How do ethnic-, class-, and gender-based communication styles affect classroom interaction?
2. Return to the experiences you recalled at the start of this lecture. Could conversational style have played a role?

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Lecture 13: Politics: Talk in the Public Arena

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read a newspaper, listen to news on the radio, or watch a news report on television. Look for elements that we have discussed in earlier lectures.

Introduction:

In politics, as in education, all the processes of conversational style operate. In this lecture, I focus on three elements that I have discussed in other contexts: framing and reframing, apologies, and agonism.

Consider this ...

How do framing, apologies, and agonism operate in politics?

A. Framing and reframing.
   1. The choice of terms frames issues and policies.
      a. Tax relief (George Lakoff).
      b. Death tax (only the top 2 percent of estates were subject to estate tax).
      c. Partial birth abortion (according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, less than one-fifth of 1 percent of abortions performed).
      d. USA PATRIOT Act (giving sweeping new powers to the Executive Branch of government). The name (an acronym for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001) implies that those who question elements of the bill are not patriotic.
   2. Reframing power and solidarity: President George W. Bush in his 2004 State of the Union address responded to criticism of his failure to get international cooperation for the invasion of Iraq (solidarity) by saying, “America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our country.”

B. Apologies: Political leaders want to be seen as strong.
   1. “Never apologize, never explain” (alternately attributed to British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli or to the Victorian Oxford classicist Benjamin Jowett).
      a. Public figures often equivocate: “I’m sorry if my remarks offended anyone.”

b. Regret can be misinterpreted as apology: Hillary Clinton to a gathering of women journalists: “I regret very much that the efforts on health care were badly misunderstood, taken out of context, and used politically against the administration. I take responsibility for that, and I’m very sorry for that.”

i. She was widely criticized for apologizing.

ii. Her “sorry” was not an apology but an expression of regret.

c. Admitting fault can show strength.

JFK was praised for taking blame for the Bay of Pigs in 1961.

C. Agonism in public life: The argument culture.

1. Politics is inherently oppositional, but the degree and depth of partisanship have increased.

a. Campaign tactics are now practiced year-round.

b. Campaign tactics increasingly feature personal attacks.

c. In 1996, fourteen Senators decided not to seek re-election, an unprecedented number. In his introduction to a collection of farewell essays by thirteen of them, Norman Ornstein singles out a recurrent theme: Many of the outgoing senators “lament the increasing level of vituperation and partisanship.”

i. Sen. Howell Heflin of Alabama: “The bipartisanship that is so crucial to the operation of Congress, especially the Senate, has been abandoned for quick fixes, sound bites, and, most harmfully, the demonization of those with whom we disagree.”

ii. Sen. J. James Exon of Nebraska: “What I have called the ‘ever-increasing vicious polarization of the electorate, the us-against-them mentality,’ has all but swept aside the former preponderance of reasonable discussion of the pros and cons of many legitimate issues.”

d. In 1994, retired Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, who had previously served in both Republican and Democratic administrations, withdrew as nominee for Secretary of Defense, citing the changes in the political climate by which public figures are now subjected to relentless attack, both in the press and in the confirmation process.

i. A senior official in the White House said: “This was a guy who knew how to play the game and thought he could play the game. ... Only he discovered that the game had gotten a lot harder and a lot hotter.”

ii. Inman said that a reporter told him he was going to write “exactly the story my editors wanted.” And he was told by an editor, “Bobby, you’ve just got to get thicker skin. We have to write a bad story about you every day. That’s our job.”

D. Attack gets more attention than attempts to discuss issues.
    1. A politician's attacks on an opponent are more likely to be shown on the news and reported in newspapers than policy proposals. This encourages attack.
    2. Journalists cover politics as competition rather than substance (the "horse-race approach").
        a. Journalists Haynes Johnson and David Broder examined public debate surrounding the failure of President Clinton's efforts to provide health insurance to all Americans. They concluded that the journalistic culture played a major role: "When the opponents of change began flooding the airwaves and the mail with warnings of dire consequences and mobilizing their grassroots campaigns to frighten people, the press reported their efforts" but did not examine their claims to inform people of their accuracy. Overall, Johnson and Broder found, "the politics of the battle was reported twice as often as the impact of the plan on consumers."
        b. Research by Joseph Capella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson demonstrate that covering politics as a matter of competing strategies rather than substance encourages cynicism in voters, and voter cynicism is widely believed to be a major factor in our low voter turnout. They took the actual coverage of a mayoral campaign, then persuaded the same journalists to write alternative copy and create alternate versions of broadcast news that focused on substance. Voters in different cities were given one or the other versions of coverage, then tested for how cynical they felt about the campaign. Those who had seen the actual coverage, which was focused on strategy, reported feeling more cynical about the election than those who had seen substance-focused coverage.

E. The point is not that attack, opposition, and reporting of political strategy are never called for.
    1. In the Capella and Jamieson study, it was the preponderance of strategy coverage instead of, not in addition to, substance coverage, that made voters cynical.
    2. The Yugoslavian-born poet Charles Simic: "There are moments in life when true invective is called for, when it becomes an absolute necessity, out of a deep sense of justice, to denounce, mock, vituperate, lash out, in the strongest possible language."
    3. Agonism is ritualized opposition: Pervasive, knee-jerk attack and partisanship that gets in the way of political action.

F. In conclusion, framing, apologies, and agonism are just three of the linguistic strategies discussed in the lectures that also operate in political life. All the other linguistic strategies I discussed also play a role, as I am sure you will notice in the news every day.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. How can linguistic strategies affect political elections?
2. Should political leaders "never apologize, never explain"?
3. What linguistic strategy has contributed to the rise in cynicism among voters?

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Lecture 14: What to Do with What You've Learned

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Review the terms and concepts introduced in the preceding lectures.

Introduction:

An understanding of conversational style and an awareness of that style as employed by yourself and by those to whom you speak not only sheds light on human behavior but increases the likelihood of communicating successfully.

Consider this . . .

What are some of the elements of conversational style? What are the effects on interaction and relationships when these elements differ?

A. To recap, conversational style is everything about how you say what you mean.

B. All elements of conversational style send metamessages that frame the message: How you mean what you say, what you think you are doing by talking in this way at this time.

   1. Linguistic signals.
      a. Amplitude: How loudly or softly you speak.
      b. Pacing and pausing: How quickly or slowly you speak.
      c. Intonation: The music of speech.
      d. Uses of and attitudes toward overlap, talk, silence.
   2. Linguistic devices.
      a. Ways of honoring connection or involvement and power or the desire to be independent.
      b. Questions.
      c. Relative indirectness and directness.
      d. Turntaking.
      e. Listenership.
      f. Complaining.
      g. Joking/teasing/irony/sarcasm.
      h. Topics and how and when to raise them.
      i. Stories: What about? What's the point?
      j. Agonism: Ritualized opposition.

k. Nonverbal correlates.
    i. Eye gaze.
    ii. Physical distance (kinesics).
    iii. Body orientation.
    iv. Touch.

3. Metamessages are responded to on an emotional level.
4. When styles are relatively similar, you are pretty safe in assuming others mean what you would mean if you spoke in that way in that context. But when styles differ, this assumption may not be accurate, and mutual frustration can result.
5. People don't think in terms of style but rather personality, ability, intentions, or group stereotypes.
6. Complementary schismogenesis: When styles differ, each person's style can drive the other to ever more extreme expressions of the differing behavior.
7. Participant structure: Rights and obligations about who talks and who controls access to the floor.
8. Given the dynamics of power and solidarity, we face a paradox whenever we communicate. We are always balancing the needs to show connection or involvement and to negotiate status so we don't feel too imposed on by others. But anything we say to honor involvement can be taken as an imposition of status, that is, a violation of the desire not to be imposed on. And anything we say to honor others' desire not to be imposed on can be taken as a failure of involvement. (For example, do you mention someone's failure in order to show concern, or does that remind them of their failure?)

C. Some people resist thinking in terms of style.

1. After I presented a lecture arguing that negative impressions could be the result of conversational style differences, a psychiatrist approached: "He's hostile."
2. Years ago I appeared on a Voice of America radio show hosted by Arlene Francis. I explained that for many natives of New York City, talking-along is a sign of connection, not interruption. Ms. Francis commented, "It's just not polite. There are no manners considered here, are there?" Despite my efforts to explain that "manners" are not universal but culturally relative, she closed the show by saying, "If you talk that way, I'll be very mad at you!"
3. The mother of a student, from Texas, after listening to a tape of another of my radio interviews, wrote to her daughter: "Being from the North gives a very dominant viewpoint ... The one thing that was never brought out [was that] the fact of not speaking out or interrupting is not so much culture as it is manners."

D. Our conversational styles feel like who we are, so we may not want to change.

A woman told her husband, “Why don’t you talk over me?” He replied, “I don’t want to be a competitive talker.”

E. Understanding conversational style often helps.

1. It removes blame. If you don’t know about style, you blame the other person, yourself, or the relationship.

   a. I received a letter from a copy editor (an editor who reads over articles to prepare them to appear in print) who lived in the Netherlands and had been working on an article I wrote based on my study of the Thanksgiving dinner conversation that I discussed in Lecture Six. She was relieved to have a way to explain her conversational style to her husband, and herself.

   b. A woman, Maria, objected to her mother-in-law bringing her dog when she came to visit. Maria politely let her know by saying, “You shouldn’t bring your dog because it’s not fair to him. He gets upset and barks at our dog, and then you have to lock him up so he’s not comfortable.” When her mother-in-law assured her the dog was fine, Maria said directly that she preferred the dog be left at home. Her mother-in-law seemed to be okay with that, but Maria resented being forced to be rude. “Why do I have to spell things out for her?”

      i. Both Maria and her husband are Mexican-American, but Maria is first-generation from San Antonio, whereas her husband is third generation from Los Angeles.

      ii. Realizing these are style differences made her rethink the moral judgments she had made about her mother-in-law.

   c. These examples are from the point of view of the one who resents another’s style, but the one who is criticized is also liberated by understanding style.

      i. An Italian-American man from New York who joined the army was hurt when a fellow soldier physically recoiled and said, “Stop touching me.”

      ii. A woman was hurt when she was trying to be nice to someone who snapped, “Don’t interrupt. Let me finish.” She said, “It’s a relief to think in terms of style, because it’s not personal.”

2. People are more likely to change if they think of it as style.

   A young woman whose boyfriend used to lie down, close his eyes, and put his arm over his eyes when she wanted to talk to him about something serious.

3. Understanding conversational style gives you options for correcting the situation.

   a. Change your style.

   b. Metacommunicate (“I need more time before I answer”; “When I say ‘I’m sorry’ I’m not apologizing”; “Do you want me to offer solutions or just listen?”

F. Understanding conversational style gives you the knowledge to devise your own solutions to the kinds of problems I've mentioned in these lectures.

G. Most fundamentally, understanding conversational style differences is about understanding human behavior and about mutual respect.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions and Essays

1. What are the advantages of considering "communication style" rather than automatically attributing negative impressions to "personality" or "ability"?
2. How can understanding communication styles improve personal relationships?

Books and Articles of Interest

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