

GENDERED SPEECH COMMUNICATION

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Annotation

The Communication can be viewed as a microcosm of social behavior. Much of human interaction occurs at the linguistic level. The content of the article is dealt with, the speech of the feminine and masculine and their differences. A tentative style of speaking supports women's general desire to create equality and include others. It is important to realize, however, that people outside of women's speech community may misinterpret women's intentions in using tentative communication. In interaction with women, who have learned to demonstrate interest more vigorously, minimal response cues generally inhibit conversation because they are perceived as indicating lack of involvement.

Keywords: Feminine, masculine, tentative speech, communication, verbal behaviors, condescension, tendency, men's speech, verbalizations

Introduction

Gendered Speech Communities Writing in the 1940s, Suzanne Langer introduced the idea of "discourse communities." Like George Herbert Mead, she asserted that culture or collective life, is possible only to the extent that a group of people share a symbol system and the meanings encapsulated in it. This theme recurred in Langer's philosophical writings over the course of her life. Her germinal insights into discourse communities prefigured later interest in the ways in which language creates individual identity and sustains cultural life. Since the early 1970s, scholars have studied speech communities, or cultures. William Labov [5:121] extended Langer's ideas by defining a speech community as existing when a group of people share a set of norms regarding communicative practices. By this he meant that a communication culture exists when people share understandings about goals of communication, strategies for enacting those goals, and ways of interpreting communication.

For most women, communication is a primary way to establish and maintain relationships with others. They engage in conversation to share themselves and to learn about others. This is an important point: For women, talk is the essence of relationships. Consistent with this primary goal, women's speech tends to display identifiable features that foster connections, support, closeness, and understanding. Equality between people is generally important in women's communication. To achieve symmetry, women often match experiences to indicate "You're not alone in how you feel." Typical ways to communicate equality would be saying, "I've done the

same thing many times," "I've felt the same way," or "something like that happened to me too and I felt like you do." Growing out of the quest for equality is a participatory mode of interaction in which communicators respond to and build on each other's ideas in the process of conversing.

Rather than a rigid you-tell-your-ideas then-I'll-tell-mine sequence, women's speech more characteristically follows an interactive pattern in which different voices weave together to create conversations. Also important in women's speech is showing support for others. To demonstrate support, women often express understanding and sympathy with a friend's situation or feelings. "Oh, you must feel terrible," "I really hear what you are saying," or "I think you did the right thing" are communicative clues that we understand and support how another feels.

Related to these first two features is women's typical attention to the relationship level of communication. You will recall that the relationship level of talk focuses on feelings and the relationship between communicators rather than on the content of messages. In conversations between women, it is common to hear a number of questions that probe for greater understanding of feelings and perceptions surrounding the subject of talk. "Tell me more about what happened," "How did you feel when it occurred?" "Do you think it was deliberate?" "How does this fit into the overall relationship?" are probes that help a listener understand a speaker's perspective.

The content of talk is dealt with, but usually not without serious attention to the feelings involved. A fourth feature of women's speech style is conversational "maintenance work" [3:375-384]. This involves efforts to sustain conversation by inviting others to speak and by prompting them to elaborate their experiences. Women, for instance, ask a number of questions that initiate topics for others: "How was your day?" "Tell me about your meeting," "Did anything interesting happen on your trip?" "What do you think of the candidates this year?" Communication of this sort opens the conversational door to others and maintains interaction. Inclusivity also surfaces in a fifth quality of women's talk, which is responsiveness

Women usually respond in some fashion to what others say. A woman might say "Tell me more" or "That's interesting"; perhaps she will nod and use eye contact to signal she is engaged; perhaps she will ask a question such as "Can you explain what you mean?" Responsiveness reflects learned tendencies to care about others and to make them feel valued and included. It affirms another person and encourages elaboration by showing interest in what was said. A sixth quality of women's talk is personal, concrete style.

Typical of women's conversation are details, personal disclosures, anecdotes, and concrete reasoning. These features cultivate a personal tone in women's communication, and they facilitate feelings of closeness by connecting communicators' lives. The detailed, concrete emphasis prevalent in women's talk also

clarities issues and feelings so that communicators are able to understand and identify with each other.

Thus, the personal character of much of women's interaction sustains interpersonal closeness. A final feature of women's speech is tentativeness. This may be expressed in a number of forms. Sometimes women use verbal hedges such as "I kind of feel you may be overreacting. " In other situations they qualify statements by saying "I'm probably not the best judge of this, but . . ." Another way to keep talk provisional is to tag a question onto a statement in a way that invites another to respond: "That was a pretty good movie, wasn't it?" "We should get out this weekend, don't you think?" Tentative communication leaves open the door for others to respond and express their opinions. There has been controversy about tentativeness in women's speech. R. Lakoff who first noted that women use more hedges, qualifiers, and tag questions than men, claimed these represent lack of confidence and uncertainty. Calling women's speech powerless, Lakoff argued that it reflects women's socialization into subordinate roles and low self-esteem.

Since Lakoff's work, however, other scholars have suggested different explanations of women's tentative style of speaking. Dale Spender in particular, points out that Lakoff's judgments of the inferiority of women's speech were based on using male speech as the standard, which does not recognize the distinctive validity of different speech communities. Rather than reflecting powerlessness, the use of hedges, qualifiers, and tag questions may express women's desires to keep conversation open and to include others. It is much easier to jump into a conversation that has not been sealed with absolute, firm statements.

Masculine speech communities define the goals of talk as exerting control, preserving independence, and enhancing status. Conversation is an arena for proving oneself and negotiating prestige. This leads to two general tendencies in men's communication. First, men often use talk to establish and defend their personal status and their ideas, by asserting themselves and/or by challenging others. Second, when they wish to comfort or support another, they typically do so by respecting the other's independence and avoiding communication they regard as condescending [1:66]. These tendencies will be more clear as we review specific features of masculine talk. To establish their own status and value, men often speak to exhibit knowledge, skill, or ability. Equally typical is the tendency to avoid disclosing personal information that might make a man appear weak or vulnerable [1:376-389]

For instance, if someone expresses concern about a relationship with a boyfriend, a man might say "The way you should handle that is . . ." "Don't let him get to you," or "You ought to tell him . . ." This illustrates the tendency to give advice that Tannen reports is common in men's speech. On the relationship level of communication, giving advice does two things. First, it focuses on instrumental activity-what another should do or be-and does not acknowledge feelings. Second, it expresses superiority and

maintains control. It says "I know what you should do" or "I would know how to handle that." The message may be perceived as implying the speaker is superior to the other person. Between men, advice giving seems understood as a give-and-take, but it may be interpreted as unfeeling and condescending by women whose rules for communicating differ. A second prominent feature of men's talk is instrumentality—the use of speech to accomplish instrumental objectives. As we have seen, men are socialized to do things, achieve goals [9:123-139].

In conversation, this is often expressed through problem-solving efforts that focus on getting information, discovering facts, and suggesting solutions. Again, between men this is usually a comfortable orientation, since both speakers have typically been socialized to value instrumentality. However, conversations between women and men are often derailed by the lack of agreement on what this informational, instrumental focus means. To many women it feels as if men don't care about their feelings. When a man focuses on the content level of meaning a woman has disclosed a problem, she may feel he is disregarding her emotions and concerns. He, on the other hand, may well be trying to support her in the way that he has learned to show support suggesting ways to solve the problem. A third feature of men's communication is conversational dominance. Despite jokes about women's talkativeness, research indicates that in most contexts, men not only hold their own but dominate the conversation. This tendency, although not present in infancy, is evident in preschoolers. Compared with girls and women, boys and men talk more frequently and for longer periods of time. Further, men engage in other verbal behaviors that sustain conversational dominance. They may reroute conversations by using what another said as a jump-off point for their own topic, or they may interrupt. While both sexes engage in interruptions, most research suggests that men do it more frequently.

Not only do men seem to interrupt more than women, but they do so for different reasons. L. P. Stewart and her colleagues suggest that men use interruptions to control conversation by challenging other speakers or wresting the talk stage from them, while women interrupt to indicate interest and to respond. This interpretation is shared by a number of scholars who note that women use interruptions to show support, encourage elaboration, and affirm others. Fourth, men tend to express themselves in fairly absolute, assertive ways. Compared with women, their language is typically more forceful, direct, and authoritative.

Tentative speech such as hedges and disclaimers is used less frequently by men than by women. This is consistent with gender socialization in which men learn to use talk to assert themselves and to take and hold positions. However, when another person does not share that understanding of communication, speech that is absolute and directive may seem to close off conversation and leave no room for others to speak. Fifth, compared with women, men communicate more abstractly. They frequently

speaking in general terms that are removed from concrete experiences and distanced from personal feelings [7:255].

Finally, men's speech tends not to be highly responsive, especially not on the relationship level of communication. Men, more than women, give what are called "minimal response cues", which are verbalizations such as "yeah" or "umhmm." In interaction with women, who have learned to demonstrate interest more vigorously, minimal response cues generally inhibit conversation because they are perceived as indicating lack of involvement. [3:375-384] Another way in which men's conversation is generally less relationally responsive than women's is lack of expressed sympathy and understanding and lack of self-disclosures [9:261-271] Within the rules of men's speech communities, sympathy is a sign of condescension, and revealing personal problems is seen as making one vulnerable.

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