Sex, Lies, and Conversation

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Reading Tip

Notice how the author begins with a personal example, immediately catching the reader's interest. Pay attention also to her use of supporting evidence.

Previewing the Reading

1. What is Tannen comparing and contrasting in this essay?
2. Identify at least one point of comparison.
3. Why does Tannen think understanding is important?

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DEBORAH TANNEN

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I was addressing a small gathering in a suburban Virginia living room—a women's group that had invited men to join them. Throughout the evening, one man had been particularly talkative, frequently offering ideas and anecdotes, while his wife sat silently beside him on the couch. Toward the end of the evening, I commented that women frequently complain that their husbands don't talk to them. This man quickly concurred. He gestured toward his wife and said, "She's the talker in our family." The room burst into laughter; the man looked puzzled and hurt. "It's true," he explained. "When I come home from work I have nothing to say. If she didn't keep the conversation going, we'd spend the whole evening in silence."

This episode crystallizes the irony that although American men tend to talk more than women in public situations, they often talk less at home. And this pattern is wreaking havoc with marriage.

The pattern was observed by political scientist Andrew Hacker in the late '70s. Sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman reports in her new book *Divorce Talk* that most of the women she interviewed—but only a few of the men—gave lack of communication as the reason for their divorces. Given the current divorce rate of nearly 50%, that amounts to millions of cases in the United States every year—a virtual epidemic of failed conversation.

In my own research, complaints from women about their husbands most often focused not on tangible inequities such as having given up the chance for a career to accompany a husband to his...
or doing far more than their share of
daily life-support work like cleaning,
kneading, social arrangements, and
errands. Instead, they focused on com-
munication: “He doesn’t listen to me.”
“He doesn’t talk to me.” I found, as
Hacker observed years before, that most
wives want their husbands to be, first
and foremost, conversational partners,
but few husbands share this expectation
of their wives.

In short, the image that best rep-
resents the current crisis is the stereotypi-
cal cartoon scene of a man sitting at the
breakfast table with a newspaper held
up in front of his face, while a woman
glares at the back of it, wanting to talk.

Linguistic Battle of the Sexes

How can women and men have such dif-
ferent impressions of communication in
marriage? Why the widespread imbalance in their interests and expectations?

In the April issue of American Psy-
chologist, Stanford University’s Elan-
or Camic reports the results of her
own and others’ research showing that
children’s development is most influ-
enced by the social structure of peer
interactions. Boys and girls tend to
play with children of their own gender,
and their sex-separate groups have dif-
ferent organizational structures and
interactive norms.

I believe these systematic differences in childhood socialization make talk
between women and men like cross-
cultural communication, heir to all the
attraction and pitfalls of that enticing
but difficult enterprise. My research on
men’s and women’s conversations uncov-
ered patterns similar to those described
for children’s groups.

*norms Behavior that is typical of a group or
culture.

For women, as for girls, intimacy is
the fabric of relationships, and talk is
the thread from which it is woven. Little
girls create and maintain friendships by
exchanging secrets; similarly, women
regard conversation as the cornerstone
of friendship. So a woman expects her
husband to be a new and improved ver-
sion of a best friend. What is important
is not the individual subjects that are
discussed but the sense of closeness,
of a life shared, that emerges when
people tell their thoughts, feelings, and
impressions.

Bonds between boys can be as intense
as girls’, but they are based less on talk-
ing, more on doing things together. Since
they don’t assume talk is the cement that
binds a relationship, men don’t know
what kind of talk women want, and they
don’t miss it when it isn’t there.

Boys’ groups are larger, more inclusive,
and more hierarchical, so boys
must struggle to avoid the subordinate
position in the group. This may play
a role in women’s complaints that
men don’t listen to them. Some men
really don’t like to listen, because being
the listener makes them feel one-down,
like a child listening to adults or an
employee to a boss.

But often when women tell men,
“You aren’t listening,” and the men pro-
test, “I am,” the men are right. The
impression of not listening results from
misalignments in the mechanics of con-
versation. The misalignment begins as
soon as a man and a woman take physi-
cal positions. This became clear when I
studied videotapes made by psycholo-
gist Bruce Dorval of children and
adults talking to their same-sex best
friends. I found that at every age, the
girls and women faced each other
directly, their eyes anchored on each
other’s faces. At every age, the boys and
men sat at angles to each other and
looked elsewhere in the room, periodi-
cally glancing at each other. They were
obviously attuned to each other, often
mirroring each other’s movements. But
the tendency of men to face away can
give women the impression they aren’t
listening even when they are. A young
woman in college was frustrated: When-
ever she told her boyfriend she wanted
to talk to him, he would lie down on the
floor, close his eyes, and put his arm
over his face. This signaled to her, “He’s
taking a nap.” But he insisted he was lis-
tening extra hard. Normally, he looks
around the room, so he is easily
distracted. Lying down and covering his
eyes helped him concentrate on what
she was saying.

Analogous to the physical alignment
that women and men take in conversa-
tion is their topical alignment. The girls
in my study tended to talk at length
about one topic, but the boys tended to
jump from topic to topic. The second-
grade girls exchanged stories about peo-
ple they knew. The second-grade boys
tweeted, told jokes, noticed things in the
room, and talked about finding games
to play. The sixth-grade girls talked
about problems with a mutual friend.
The sixth-grade boys talked about fifty-
five different topics, none of which
extended over more than a few turns.

Listening to Body Language

Switching topics is another habit that
gives women the impression men aren’t
listening, especially if they switch to a
topic about themselves. But the evi-
dence of the tenth-grade boys in my
study indicates otherwise. The tenth-
grade boys sprawled across their chairs
with bodies parallel and eyes straight
ahead, rarely looking at each other.
They looked as if they were riding in a
car, staring out the windshield. But
they were talking about their feelings.
One boy was upset because a girl had
told him he had a drinking problem,
and the other was feeling alienated
from all his friends.

Now, when a girl told a friend about
a problem, the friend responded by
asking probing questions and express-
ing agreement and understanding. But
the boys dismissed each other’s prob-
lems. Todd assured Richard that his
drinking was “no big problem” because
“sometimes you’re funny when you’re
off your butt.” And when Todd said he
felt left out, Richard responded, “Why
should you? You know more people
than me.”

Women perceive such responses as
debilitating and unsupportive. But the boys
seemed satisfied with them. Whereas
women reassure each other by implying,
“You shouldn’t feel bad because I’ve had
similar experiences,” men do so by imply-
ing, “You shouldn’t feel bad because
your problems aren’t so bad.”

There are even simpler reasons for
women’s impression that men don’t lis-
ten. Linguist Lynette Hirschman found
that women make more listener-noise,
such as “mhm,” “uhuh,” and “yeah,” to
show “I’m with you.” Men, she found,
more often give silent attention. Women
who expect a stream of listener-noise
interpret silent attention as no attention
at all.

Women’s conversational habits are
as frustrating to men as men’s are to
women. Men who expect silent atten-
tion interpret a stream of listener-noise
as overreaction or impatience. Also,
when women talk to each other in a
close, comfortable setting, they often
overlap, finish each other’s sentences,
and anticipate what the other is about
to say. This practice, which I call
“participatory listenership,” is often perceived by men as interruption, intrusion, and lack of attention.

A parallel difference caused a man to complain about his wife, “She just wants to talk about her own point of view. If I show her another view, she gets mad at me.” When most women talk to each other, they assume a conversationalist’s job is to express agreement and support. But many men see their conversational duty as pointing out the other side of an argument. This is heard as disloyalty by women, and refusal to offer the requisite support. It is not that women don’t want to see other points of view, but that they prefer them phrased as suggestions and inquiries rather than as direct challenges.

In his book *Fighting for Life*, Walter Ong points out that men use “agonistic” or warlike, oppositional formats to do almost anything; thus discussion becomes debate, and conversation a competitive sport. In contrast, women see conversation as a ritual means of establishing rapport. If Jane tells a problem and June says she has a similar one, they walk away feeling closer to each other. But this attempt at establishing rapport can backfire when used with men. Men take too literally women’s ritual “troubles talk,” just as women mistake men’s ritual challenges for real attack.

**The Sounds of Silence**

These differences begin to clarify why women and men have such different expectations about communication in marriage. For women, talk creates intimacy. Marriage is an orgy of closeness: You can tell your feelings and thoughts, and still be loved. Their greatest fear is being pushed away. But men live in a hierarchical world, where talk maintains independence and status. They are on guard to protect themselves from being put down and pushed around.

This explains the paradox of the talkative man who said of his silent wife, “She’s the talker.” In the public setting of a guest lecture, he felt challenged to show his intelligence and display his understanding of the lecture. But at home, where he has nothing to prove and no one to defend against, he is free to remain silent. For his wife, being home means she is free from the worry that something she says might offend someone, or spark disagreement, or appear to be showing off; at home she is free to talk.

The communication problems that endanger marriage can’t be fixed by mechanical engineering. They require a new conceptual framework about the role of talk in human relationships. Many of the psychological explanations that have become second nature may not be helpful, because they tend to blame either women (for not being assertive enough) or men (for not being in touch with their feelings). A sociolinguistic approach by which male–female conversation is seen as cross-cultural communication allows us to understand the problem and forge solutions without blaming either party.

Once the problem is understood, improvement comes naturally, as it did to the young woman and her boyfriend who seemed to go to sleep when she wanted to talk. Previously, she had accused him of not listening, and he had refused to change his behavior, since that would be admitting fault. But then she learned about and explained to him the differences in women’s and men’s habitual ways of aligning themselves in
conversation. The next time she told him she wanted to talk, he began, as usual, by lying down and covering his eyes. When the familiar negative reaction bubbled up, she reassured herself that he really was listening. But then he sat up and looked at her. Thrilled, she asked why. He said, "You like me to look at you, when we talk, so I'll try to do it." Once he saw their differences as cross-cultural rather than right and wrong, he independently altered his behavior.

Women who feel abandoned and deprived when their husbands won't listen to or report daily news may be happy to discover their husbands trying to adapt once they understand the place of small talk in women's relationships. But if their husbands don't adapt, women may still be comforted that men, this is not a failure of intimacy. Accepting the difference, the wives look to their friends or family for the kind of talk. And husbands who can provide it shouldn't feel their wives have made unreasonable demands. Some couples will still decide to divorce, but at least their decisions will be based on realistic expectations.

In these times of resurgent ethnic conflicts, the world desperately needs cross-cultural understanding. Like charity, successful cross-cultural communication should begin at home.

Understanding the Reading

1. Thesis What is Tannen's thesis about gender communication?
2. Introduction What does the opening anecdote about the man at a women's group illustrate?
3. Contrasts What differences in communication are observable between young girls and boys?
4. Contrasts In what ways does body language differ between men and women? How do these differences affect communication between the sexes?
5. Organization What method of organization does Tannen use?

Analyzing the Reading

1. Thesis Is Tannen's thesis effectively placed? Why, or why not?
2. Points of comparison Identify the points of comparison that Tannen uses to support her thesis. Does she focus on similarities, differences, or both? Does she treat her subjects fairly? Explain.
3. Evidence In explaining the communication differences between men and women, Tannen explores the causes of these differences. How does this information strengthen the essay?
4. Language What sort of image does the phrase "wreaking havoc" (para. 2) bring to mind?
5. **Visualizing evidence** Tannen includes different types of evidence to support her thesis. Analyze the purpose of the supporting evidence by completing the following chart. The first entry has been done for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference to political scientist Andrew Hacker (para. 3)</td>
<td>Gives legitimacy to the thesis and demonstrates that the thesis is not a new idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman's observations from her book <em>Divorce Talk</em> (para. 3)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The author's own research (para. 4)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>American Psychologist</em> article by Stanford University's Eleanor Maccoby (para. 7)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychologist Bruce Dorval's videotapes (para. 12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The author's own research (pares. 13-16)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Linguist Lynette Hirschman's research (para. 17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to <em>Fighting for Life</em> by Walter Ong (para. 20)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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### Evaluating the Reading

1. **Organization** Why do you think Tannen chose the organization she used? Would the essay be as effective with a different organizational plan? Explain.

2. **Language** Tannen, a linguist, uses some linguistic jargon even though she is writing for the general public. Highlight these terms and evaluate their effectiveness. Are they a benefit or a detriment to your understanding of the essay?

3. **Original sources** Sometimes when authors are reporting on research for a general audience, they do not provide full citations for the work—that is, the original sources—they mention. Review the chart of sources included in question 5 under Analyzing the Reading (above). Next to each source, indicate whether full (i.e., author, title, date, publisher), incomplete (e.g., author and title but no date or publisher), or no source information has been given.
Then, jot down your ideas on how to find the original sources mentioned in the essay. For example, you might use your library catalog to locate Catherine Kohler Riessman's book *Divorce Talk*.

4. **Evidence** Use Tannen's essay as a basis for observing how men and women communicate around you. Observe the men and women with whom you attend class, participate in extracurricular activities, live, or work. Make a chart or list of your observations in relation to Tannen's descriptions. For each of Tannen's points of comparison, decide whether you agree or disagree with her findings based on this exercise and on your own knowledge and experience.

5. **Purpose** At the end of the piece, Tannen provides a reason for why we should work toward better communication between men and women. Evaluate her reasoning. Does it follow logically from the rest of her essay? Does her evidence (the comparisons and contrasts she offers) relate to her conclusion? Defend your answer using specific examples from the essay.

**Discussing the Reading**

1. Discuss the importance of clear communication in a relationship you have experienced.

2. Discuss how Tannen's findings are similar to or different from those of Dave Barry as expressed in "We've Got the Dirt on Guy Brains" (p. 402).

3. In class or in your journal, describe an incident from your own experience that confirms or contradicts Tannen's findings.

**Writing about the Reading**

1. **Essay** Tannen provides many points of comparison to support her thesis. Choose one of them and expand it into a comparison-and-contrast essay of your own. Develop the point of comparison by using information from your own experiences. For example, you could show how differences in body language do indeed reflect a common communication pattern.

2. **Essay** Tannen's essay addresses differences in communication between men and women. Consider how communication is similar or different between the other groups—parents and teenagers, employers and employees, or twenty-year-olds and forty-year-olds, for example. Then write an essay that defines each group and compares or contrasts their differences or similarities. Include descriptive details and narration to help readers "see" your subjects. Conclude with possible reasons for the differences you observed.

3. **Internet research** Using a search engine, look for articles on communication between men and women. For example, the Purdue News includes a short article on this subject at http://news.uns.purdue.edu/UNS/html4ever/2004/040217_MacGeorge.sexroles.html. After choosing an article, write an essay that compares and contrasts it with Tannen's report. Are their findings similar or different? If they disagree, why might their findings differ?