

# Why Don't You Understand? Male-Female Communication

Giulia Suci

University of Oradea

[giulia\\_cociubei@yahoo.com](mailto:giulia_cociubei@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Relationships are made or broken through talk. Communication between the sexes has been an area of interest for both scholars and lay people and people have looked everywhere to find the sources of communication differences. It has been suggested that we come from different planets, that we have different ways of talking, thinking, different brain organisations etc. The present paper tries to point out some of the male/female differences in communication and to find the answer to the question many people ask themselves when communicating with the other sex "Why don't you understand?"

**Keywords:** Key words: communication, genderlects, difference, language

## ***Communicating gender***

Communication between the sexes has been an area of interest for both scholars and lay people for quite some time. Some of them claim the battle between the sexes can never be won, others claim there is no battle, only a struggle to understand each other and communicate.

Gender is one of the axes around which our world revolves and through which we encode our experiences. Gender is a dynamic and inherently communicative process and language is fundamental to understanding our gendered selves. Not only do we communicate gender in these ways, but we also do it with our words. Because we construct and enact gender largely through discourse, language plays a crucial part in doing gender and displaying ourselves as gendered beings.

According to some researchers (Deborah Tannen – *That is not What I Meant*, Gray – *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* etc), communication is more or less cross-cultural and men and women are genetically unsuited to communicate successfully to each other. We learn to use language as we grow up, and since we grow up in different geographical areas, have different religious beliefs, class backgrounds etc. - all these lead to different ways of speaking. Even being male or female leads to different conversational styles. The term *genderlect* has been coined to define the language of the sexes. Similar in form to the word "dialect", genderlect is a variety of a language that is tied not to geography or to family background or to a role but to the speaker's sexual gender.

The study of genderlects has been dominated by one word: difference. Differences between men and women and the way they speak have filled the pages of thousands of articles, researches, books and a lot has been said about the topic.

## ***The Difference Approach***

Are men and women really different? They're different anatomically, of course, but are they different in any other ways? Do their hormonal differences influence their behaviors and attitudes? Do they process information differently?

Linguists that have adopted the difference approach claim that women are simply different from men as a result of belonging to different subcultures, and their differing conversational styles

reflect these subcultures. According to them men and women speak differently because they were brought up in different sociolinguistic subcultures. The socialization process, including family, school, games, friends etc. contribute to our femaleness or maleness. "Culture is simply a network of habits and patterns gleaned from past experiences, and women and men have different past experiences. From the time they were born they were treated differently, talked to differently, and talk differently as a result." (Tannen 1986:125)

We acquire our linguistic competence from an early age. From early childhood girls and boys socialize in different ways. From early childhood they are taught what is appropriate conduct for their gender. Girls usually play in small groups or in pairs, their whole life being centered around a best friend. Girls' games are not competitive; their aim is to establish connection. In their games, like hopscotch or jumping rope, everyone gets a turn; it is not about winning or losing. While girls spend time talking, boys spend their time doing things, playing games that are by excellence competitive, their aim being to prove who is the best. In their games there are winners and losers, their groups are hierarchically structured and status is negotiated by giving orders. It goes without saying that girls' and boys' expectations in what conversation is concerned are quite different. Each style is valid in its own group, but in mixed groups misunderstandings are bound to occur.

Grammarians have long been aware of these speech differences. Dennis Baron, in his book *Grammar and Gender* states "That women's speech differs from men's is accepted in much the same way that the psychological differences between the sexes are accepted, and because language is perceived as an innate and essential part of our humanity, sex differences in language are treated as natural, genetic, only to be expected and frequently to be reinforced." (Baron 1986:55)

The majority of linguists regard men's speech as the norm and characterize it as forceful, efficient, authoritative and serious, while women's language is viewed as a deviation from the norm, and is characterized as trivial, hesitant, super polite and euphemistic.

For men conversation is competitive, they seek to achieve the upper hand or prevent others from dominating them. For women conversation is synonym for support and confirmation. Men see the world as a place where people try to gain status and keep it. In using language women are more emotional as opposed to men's talk which is seen as bold and straightforward. Their language is aggressive, contrasting with women's language which is seen as passive.

Women often think in terms of closeness and support and struggle to preserve intimacy. Men, on the other hand, are more concerned with status, more focused on independence. Research concludes that men talk more in public while women talk more in private. This conclusion is obvious when the purpose of male and female communication is understood. If men talk to establish status, most male conversation would inevitably occur in public, at the workplace. On the other hand, if women talk to establish intimacy, most female conversation would take place in private, at home.

Men are more concerned with what they can do to solve a problem, while women, in a similar situation just need sympathy. Different expectations lead to disappointments and misunderstandings. Not once has it happened for a woman to complain about a certain aspect of her life – work, health, family etc. expecting only a sign of sympathy and understanding. In complaining, the message is not what women are focused on. It is the metamessage of talking about problems, joys that binds people together. All they want to hear is something like 'I know what you mean, I've been there.' In exchange, what she gets is a piece of advice to solve the problem. For men, this is a logical part of the discourse: if she complains about something it means that she wants to fix the problem, so normally she offers to help. The woman feels rejected by the man's refusal to express sympathy, the man feels bewildered at the woman's reaction. Women complain that men are always giving them advice, men complain that women refuse to take action.

Women focus on feelings, men on the referential function of the language. Women often suggest that people do things in indirect ways, while men use a direct imperative. Women refuse to oppose the will of others openly, while men prefer an open conflict.

Women are defined by their feelings and relationships; for them communication is of major importance. Men are defined by their ability to solve problems, to achieve results, therefore to offer a man unsolicited advice is to presume he is incapable of solving the problem by himself. This might be the reason why men refuse to ask for directions, since asking for help would make them look incompetent. For men, asking for information/directions is a sign of inferiority, the one giving directions appearing as more knowledgeable or competent than they are.

Men are perceived as more likely to use hostile language and profanity than women, women being perceived as 'more proper' and being expected to adopt a more polite style in conversation.

One of the most common stereotypes is that women talk a lot without saying anything of importance, that they deal in trivial and unimportant matters. In all female conversations, women talk about a certain topic extensively, sharing a wealth of information about themselves. Men jump from one topic to another, rarely providing information about themselves. Abstaining from self-revelation and withholding personal information contribute to the maintenance of power, of a superior status. Disclosing personal details means you are no longer in control; you are vulnerable. For women conversations are therapeutical. This is not a normal component of men's discussions, but if they do come across such instances in their talk, they regard it as a request for advice, and instead of sharing similar experiences from their lives, they start giving advice.

Men are always competing, always proving who is better, who is more up-to-date with everything that is going on in the world: business, politics, economy etc. Not only what men and women talk about is different, but also the way in which they talk about these topics: women wait patiently for the other person to finish his/her turn; men interrupt, they compete for the dominance of conversation topics.

Questions may cause many arguments in male-female conversations because of the different ways that questions are perceived. For women, asking questions is a way of maintaining the wheels of conversation rolling – by asking questions they make sure the conversation moves on. Questions are interactionally powerful devices: they demand a next utterance. For men, on the other hand, questions represent a threat to their independence. But women tend to ask more questions in intimate settings; in public or formal settings it is generally men who ask questions. In male-female conversations women are the ones who use mainly supportive questions – i.e. questions that imply a positive response and invite the speaker to enlarge on his/her topic, while men are more likely to ask critical questions and antagonistic questions – i.e. questions that involve challenging and are viewed as an attack to the speaker. By asking antagonistic questions, men fight for status proving their expertise on the topic.

Gender differences in communication are obvious not only in what questions are concerned, but also in requests. A question may be asked directly or certain terms may be added to soften the impact of a direct question, terms such as '*please*', '*if you don't mind*', '*could you.*' etc. The longer forms are called compound requests and research has pointed out that women are more likely to use such requests.

Since women value involvement so much, their speech abounds in indirectness, because having someone do something without actually spelling it out has a pay-off in involvement. That is why women focus so much on metamesages. The fact that women are more interested in metamesages is obvious from their accounts of different events. They retell the whole situation, using intonation, gestures etc., they notice the feelings, reactions of the people involved. Men focus

on messages: they give a brief presentation of the event, focusing on facts, not on feelings, reactions etc.

Women's assumptions about what is interesting are also different. When women start talking about different relationships, men are often at a loss, being unable to remember all the persons involved in the conversation and their relationship to each other. On the other hand, when men start talking about what interests them, women are at a loss with so many technical details.

'If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak a language of status and independence, then communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles.' (Tannen 1990:42)

How we say something is at least as important, if not more important than what we say. Non-verbal behavior provides important clues as to our attitude towards what is communicated, towards the addressee, the situation etc. Eye contact expresses interest or attention. Research shows that women have more often contact during conversations, they use more facial expression and are more expressive than men, they speak with more expressive intonation patterns and come closest to standard speech norms, they smile more than men.

In order to see if people were aware of these differences in behavior and conversational styles, and to find out how much is known about these differences, I asked a group of 18 people (6 male, 12 female, aged between 21-64) to take the following quiz:

#### MALE/FEMALE COMMUNICATION QUIZ

1. Boys' childhood friendship is focused on what?
  - a) talking
  - b) relationships
  - c) activities
  - d) supporting
  
2. During childhood who tends to play in larger groups? Boys or girls?
  - a) no difference
  - b) impossible to tell
  - c) girls
  - d) boys
  
3. Men's language is perceived as
  - a) bold and straightforward
  - b) trivial
  - c) hesitant
  - d) polite
  
4. In conversations women are more concerned with
  - a) achieving the upper hand
  - b) maintaining their independence
  - c) preserving intimacy
  - d) gaining status
  
5. Typically, which is a goal of men's e-mail?

- a) to be seen as supportive
- b) to apologize
- c) to make suggestions
- d) to be seen as an expert

6. During a discussion how do women generally position their bodies?

- a) at right angles to others
- b) facing each other
- c) sprawling out
- d) side by side

7. In order to appear in charge, what non-verbal action might a man perform?

- a) taking up space with his body
- b) tapping his fingers
- c) keeping his arms and legs close
- d) touching someone's shoulder

8. How do men interpret questions during an argument?

- a) as information gathering
- b) as disapproval
- c) as support
- d) as manipulation

9. Why are men concerned about apologizing?

- a) it might not be accepted
- b) it might make them appear subordinate
- c) it might make them angry
- d) it might be laughed at

10. What is the goal of women when they apologize?

- a) to appear superior
- b) to avoid problems
- c) to shorten arguments
- d) to maintain connections

11. On what do men focus when trying to solve problems?

- a) facts
- b) emotions
- c) experience
- d) discussions

12. Why do women interrupt?

- a) to act superior
- b) to change the subject
- c) to show concern

d) to disrupt the conversation

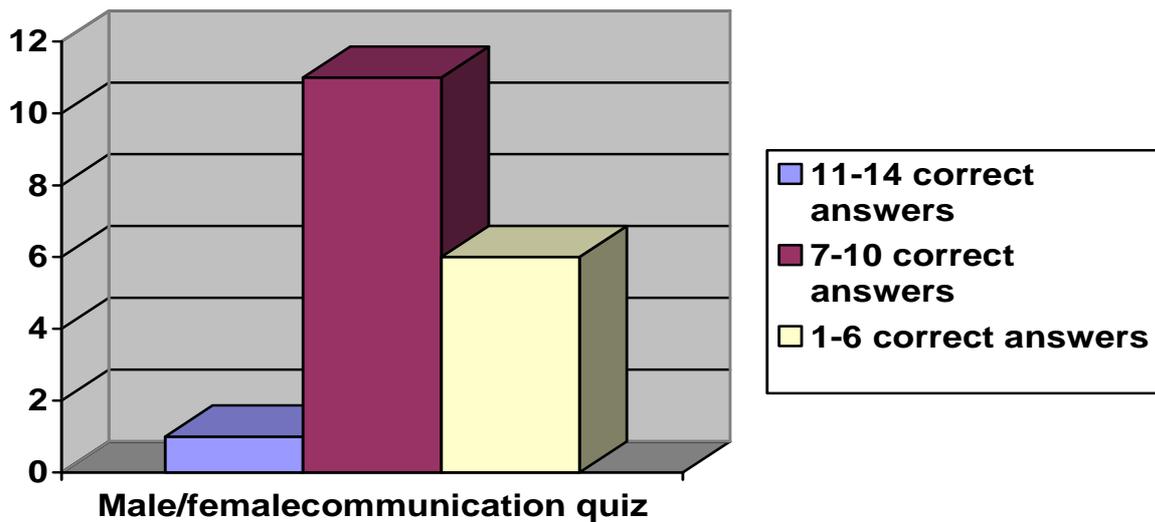
13. Who talks more?

- a) men
- b) women
- c) neither
- d) impossible to tell

14. Women talk more than men in what setting?

- a) home
- b) work
- c) formal settings
- d) social setting

Only one person out of fourteen answered correctly to more than three quarters of the test, eleven to more than a half, and the rest of six persons to more than a quarter of the quiz, showing that though people might be aware of conversational differences between men and women, there is definitely room for improvement.



Most of the people that took the quiz seemed to be experts in male conversational style; (the questions that received most correct answers were questions regarding men's conversational style). People characterized men's language as bold and straightforward (16 correct answers out of 18!), they knew that in an argument men interpret questions as disapproval (11 correct answers out of 18), that by apologizing they are worried they might appear inferior, that, as kids, boys focus more on activities (17 correct answers out of 18) etc.

Things got more complicated when it came to women's conversational style, such as what is the main aim in women's conversations (15 incorrect answers out of 18), their posture during conversation (11 incorrect answers), the reason they interrupt (12 incorrect answers).

Stereotypes regarding the way in which men and women communicate seem to play an important part in the way people answered the quiz: out of 18 people, 15 considered that women talk more, which is but a stereotype deeply rooted in people's minds.

Men's language and women's language appear to have the same words, but the way they use these words gives rise to different meanings. Their expressions may be similar, but they have different connotations. Genderlects provide the answer to stereotypical questions like '*Why don't you understand?*', '*Why don't you listen to me?*' etc. Understanding the other's conversational style represents a leap across the communication gap between men and women.

### ***Male-Female Differences – Myth or Fact?***

The fact that men and women are different is undebatable. They differ biologically, physically, psychologically, they differ in the way they think, behave, even in the way they talk. The question that arises is 'How different are they?' Though women and men communicate to each other in a different way on a daily basis, it is a bit far-fetched to portray them as alien beings or to suggest that they inhabit different planets or belong to different cultures – let's face it, as prosaic as it may sound we all live and grow up on the same planet and we do speak the same language – with different meaning, connotations and metamessages.

While being aware of the above mentioned differences in male-female communication, one must try to separate facts from myths, evidence from anecdote and be careful not to enter the realm of clichés and stereotypes, because it goes without saying that we cannot generalize and assume that in a certain situation men will talk or act in a certain way and women in a different way. Some of the assumptions regarding men's and women's conversational styles have been proved to have no scientific basis. For instance one of the most common stereotypes is that women talk more; actually research shows that men and women speak almost exactly the same number of words a day: 16,000.

We are living in a modern society, a society in which women have claimed their equality, where they occupy the same positions as men in the workplace, where they sometimes use 'the man style' or exhibit traits that have been traditionally associated to men and vice-versa, where there is much more blurring between the roles of men and women.

### ***Conclusions***

To conclude with, I would say that the differences between men and women – in what language and communication are concerned – are mostly the result of socialization; biology has little to do with our abilities or gender roles in our society. But most of all one thing should be borne in mind: though males and females differ in their communication skills and behavior, this does not mean that one sex is superior or inferior to another; both styles of communication are equally valid and the goal in gender communication is not to change the other's communication style but to adapt it. Linguistic differences between men and women are not caused by a power imbalance but by different norms of conversational interaction; each gender has its own weaknesses and strengths.

Rather than speaking differently simply because they are women and men, women and men may differ in their patterns of language-use because they are engaged in different activities or are playing different conversational roles.

### **Cited Works**

- Baron, Dennis. *Grammar and Gender*. New York: Yale University Press, 1986. Print.  
Caesar, Ed. *Talking Tosh on Mars and Venus*. The Sunday Times, October 7, 2007. Print.

Cameron, Deborah. *The Myth of Mars and Venus. Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?* Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.

Goldberg, Steven. *Why Men Rule*. Open Court, January 22, 1999. Print.

Gray, John. *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992. Print.

Gray, John. *Men, Women and Relationships*. New York: Harper Collins. 1996. Print.

Romaine, Suzanne. *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999. Print.

Tannen, Deborah. *That's not What I Meant*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1986. Print.

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

Tannen, Deborah. *Gender and Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.