The tongue has the power of life and death.
—PROVERBS

5

Gendered Verbal Communication

Knowledge Challenge:

- Do women or men generally talk more?
- Why are more people killed by hurricanes with feminine names?
- What is *conversational maintenance work* and who generally does it?

Consider these three statements:

The woman judge cast the deciding vote.
Jason babysat his son while his wife attended a meeting.
Freshmen find it difficult to adjust to college life.

What do these sentences reflect about Western culture's views of women and men? The first sentence highlights the sex of the judge, reflecting an assumption that it is odd for women to serve in this capacity. In the second sentence, the word *babysat* implies that the father was performing a special service, one for which we usually pay people who are not related to the children. Have you ever heard someone say that a mother babysat her children? Unless the third sentence refers to first-year students at an all-male school, the word *freshmen* erases first-year female students.

In this chapter and the one that follows, we look closely at relationships between communication and gender. This chapter focuses on verbal communication, and Chapter 5 concentrates on nonverbal communication. We will explore how communication reflects cultural views of sex and gender. In addition, we will consider how individual women's and men's communication embodies or challenges cultural prescriptions for femininity and masculinity.

Verbal Communication Expresses Cultural Views of Gender

Language is one of our most complex symbol systems. The language we learn and use both reflects and reinforces cultural views and values, including those about gender. We'll discuss six ways that language and gender are connected.

Male Generic Language Excludes Women

One way that language erases women is through the use of **male generic language**, which purports to include both women and men yet literally refers only to men. Examples of male generic language are nouns such as *congressman*, *spokesman*, *mailman*, and *mankind*, and pronouns such as *he* and *his* used to refer to both women and men.

Research makes it clear that inclusive language is about something far more substantial than political correctness. In a classic study (Schneider & Hacker, 1973), children were asked to select photographs for a textbook with chapters entitled "Urban Man" and "Man in Politics" or "Urban Life" and "Political Behavior." The children almost always chose pictures of men when the titles included male generic language. When the titles did not refer only to men, the children chose more photographs that portrayed both sexes. The language of the titles shaped what the children thought chapters would discuss.

Later research confirmed the finding that male generic language leads many people to assume that only males are included (Gastil, 1990; Hamilton, 1991; Switzer, 1990). In a particularly interesting study, students from first grade through college were asked to make up a story about an average student. When the instructions referred to the average student as he, only 12% of students composed a story about a female. However, when the instructions defined the average student as *he* or *she*, 42% of the stories were about females (Hyde, 1984).

Because there is convincing evidence that male language is not perceived as generic, all the major dictionaries and national newspapers now have policies requiring inclusive language. In addition, new dictionaries and writing style manuals caution against using male generic language.

Language Defines Men and Women Differently

A recent study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (Jung et al., 2014) found that hurricanes with feminine names are more deadly than those with masculine names. The findings showed that, because of gender stereotypes that associate masculinity with greater risk and strength, people were more likely to ignore warnings for hurricanes with feminine names. For high-damage storms with masculine names, people heeded warnings and there were an average of only 11 deaths. Storms with feminine names were not taken as seriously and there were 59 deaths on average. The study shows that we attach distinct meanings to masculinity and femininity.

Women are frequently defined by appearance and by relationships with others, whereas men are more typically defined by activities, accomplishments, and positions. Throughout the 2008 Democratic primary contest, commentators discussed Hillary Clinton's appearance—she was being suggestive when she wore a V-necked top; her pantsuits were dowdy; she had crow's feet (Mandziuk, 2008). The male contenders' appearance was not scrutinized in the same way. Also, coverage of women's sports frequently focuses more on women athletes' appearance than is the case with male athletes. Commentators' describe women athletes' outfits, bodies, and hairstyles, whereas their descriptions of male athletes more typically focus on athletic skills.

ANDY

For a long time, it seemed really clear to me that a word like mankind obviously includes women or that chairman can refer to a girl or a guy who chairs something. I thought it was pretty stupid to hassle about this. Then, last semester I had a woman teacher who taught the whole class using she or her or women whenever she was referring to people, as well as when she meant just women. I realized how confusing it is. I had to figure out each time whether she meant women only or women and men. And when she meant women to be general, I guess you'd say generic for all people, it still made me feel left out. A lot of the guys in the class got pretty hostile about what she was doing, but I kind of think it was a good way to make the point.

During the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, news commentators regularly referred to professional adult female athletes as "girls" and one analyst stated that women skiers were highly skilled in their ability to manage extreme courses "while in a Lycra suit, maybe a little bit of makeup—now that is grace under pressure" (Feeney, 2014). Can you imagine similar comments about male athletes? Consider, in another example, professional WNBA player Brittney Griner—at times celebrated for challenging beauty standards and at times ridiculed through social media for her masculine appearance (Trebay, 2010). Despite Griner's status as a world-class athlete, both traditional and social media coverage of Griner consistently comment on her appearance and gender performance. The significance of appearance for girls and women is also evident in a story from the Beijing Olympics. Based on talent, Yang Peiyi won the competition to sing "Ode to the Motherland" at the opening ceremony. Officials decided that although Yang Peiyi had the best voice, she was not attractive enough. The officials chose third grader Lin Miaoke to stand on stage and lip sync the song while Yang Peiyi, hidden from view, sang (Yardley, 2008).

Language also reflects social views of women as passive and men as active participants in sexual activity. You may have noticed that people say, "He laid her," "He balled her," "He screwed her," "She got laid," and "He made love to her." Each of these phrases suggests that, in sexual activity, men are active, whereas women are passive. Perhaps because men are expected to be sexual initiators, inappropriate sexual initiative by men is sometimes described in language that makes it seem acceptable. For instance, why did no one challenge Arnold Schwarzenegger's use of

EXPLORING GENDERED LIVES *Parallel Language?*

Parallel language means equivalent terms. For instance, male and female are equivalent, or parallel. But what about some other allegedly parallel terms?

Masculine Term	*Feminine Term*
Master	Mistress
Wizard	Witch
Patron	Matron
Bachelor	Spinster
Name/Name	Maiden Name/ Married Name
Stud	?

TAKE A STAND: What other terms can you think of that do not have equivalent masculine and feminine forms?

"playful" and "rowdy" to describe the multiple incidents of sexual harassment? And why did Fox News commentator Greta Van Susteren refer to Kobe Bryant's rape trial as a "sex scandal" (Morgan, 2003/2004, p. 95)? A sex scandal refers to unconventional but consensual sexual activity; rape refers to violation and violence.

Our language also reflects society's view of women as more defined by relationships than men are. On prime-time television, even professional women are often depicted primarily in interpersonal contexts, and their appearance is highlighted (Dow & Wood, 2006). Historically, women who don't marry have been referred to in negative ways such as *spinsters* or *old maids* (contrast this with the nonpejorative term *bachelors* for men). Similar attitudes are expressed in other cultures. For example, journalist and sociologist Leta Hong Fincher (2014) examined a recent state-sponsored campaign in China that negatively depicts single, professional women over the age of 27. Referred to as *leftover women*, they are deemed useless by society without marriage and motherhood, as this quote from the campaign suggests: "Girls with an average or ugly appearance … hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is that they don't realise that, as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls" (quoted in Lovell, 2014).

BRIAN

I never considered whether my wife would take my name. I just assumed she would. I'm proud of my family, and I feel tied to who we are, and my family name represents that. I always thought it would be a great honor for a woman to have my family name. But my fiancé doesn't feel the same way. She says she's proud of her name, too, that it's who she is, too. I can understand that in a way, but still it seems like she should want to take my name. She turned the tables on me by asking if I would take her name.

A majority of women take their husbands' names upon marrying, but there are alternatives to the traditional ways of naming ourselves (Foss, Edson, & Linde, 2015).

Some heterosexual women choose to retain their birth names when they marry. A number of men and women adopt hyphenated names, such as Johnson-Smith, to symbolize the family heritage of both partners. In some countries, such as Spain, both the mother's and father's family names are used to construct children's family names. Another alternative, one less often practiced so far, is renaming oneself to reflect **matriarchal** rather than patriarchal lineage. (The term *matriarchy* means "rule by the mothers" and generally refers to systems of ideology, social structures, and practices that are created by women and reflect the values, priorities, and views of women as a group.) This involves changing a last name from that of the father's family to that of the mother's. Because that course of action, however, still reflects male lineage—that of the mother's father—some women use their mothers' first names to create a matrilineal last name: For example, Lynn Franklin's daughter, Barbara, might rename herself Barbara Lynnschild.

Language Shapes Awareness of Gendered Issues

Naming is important. We give names to things that matter to us. We don't bother to name what doesn't matter (Spender, 1984a, 1984b). The power of naming is clear with sexual harassment and date rape (Harris, 2011a; Wood, 2008, 2009a). For most of history, sexual harassment occurred frequently but was unnamed. Because it wasn't named, sexual harassment was not visible, making it difficult to recognize, discipline, or stop. If sexual harassment was discussed at all, it was described as *making advances*, *getting out of line*, or *being pushy*. None of these phrases conveys the abusiveness of sexual harassment. Only when the term *sexual harassment* was coined was it recognized as unwanted behavior that ties sexuality

EXPLORING GENDERED LIVES *What's in a Name?*

Laws concerning marriage and naming have undergone significant transformation. Prior to 1975, U.S. states insisted that a woman assume her husband's last name on marrying in order to vote, drive, or participate in basic forms of public life (Emens, 2007; Goldin & Shim, 2004). The issue resolved when a Hawaiian statute requiring women to give up their birth names on marriage was ruled unconstitutional in 1975 (Schroeder, 1986).

Research demonstrates that a great number of heterosexual men prefer that their partners change their names upon marriage, and some indicate disappointment or a feeling of loss if their partners refuse (Emens, 2007). While the number of women retaining their surnames rose greatly in the 1970s, the number has declined since the 1990s (Goldin & Shim, 2004; Foss, Edson & Linde, 2015).

Elizabeth Suter and Ramona Oswald (2003) conducted a study to find out how lesbian couples chose names. They found that, like heterosexual couples, women who placed high priority on social recognition of their relationship preferred that one or both partners change her name. For women who kept their names, individual identity was a higher priority.

TAKE A STAND: Do you have different perceptions of women who choose to keep their birth names and women who choose to take their partners' names on marrying?

to security and advancement. With recognition came efforts to redress sexual harassment.

Similarly, for many years women who were raped by their dates had no socially recognized way to name what had happened to them. Until we coined the term *date rape*, women had to deal with their experiences without the language to define grievous violations that often had lifelong repercussions. Even today, not all women are comfortable using the term *date rape* to refer to nonconsensual sex with friends and dates. Drawing on its historical meaning, they associate rape with violent assault by a stranger (Harris, 2011a).

As our discussion shows, language is not static. Instead, we continually change language to reflect our changing understandings of ourselves and our world. We reject terms we find objectionable (male generics), and we create new terms to define realities we think are important (*sexual harassment, Ms., womanism*). As we modify language, we change how we see ourselves and our world. Further, we shape meanings of our culture.

TRISHA

As a nontraditional student, I remember when language was very different. I was sexually harassed when I first started college in the 80s, but I didn't know what was happening because there was no name. A man I dated for a long time tried to rape me, but I would never have called it rape then. No one would have. I just thought he "went too far." You really do see situations differently when you have different language to describe them.

Language Organizes Perceptions of Gender

Two ways in which language organizes perceptions of gender are stereotyping men and women and encouraging polarized perceptions of sex and gender.

EXPLORING GENDERED LIVES *Seeing the Unseen/Naming the Unnamed*

Naming helps us notice things we otherwise don't see. Scholars from the United States and Germany collaborated to see whether people became less tolerant of sexist behavior when they were given names that allowed them to detect it. Results showed that learning to name sexism made women, but not men, less tolerant of the behavior.

Of particular interest to the researchers was participants' learned ability to detect **benevolent sexism**, which is a paternalistic attitude that describes women affectionately but assumes they aren't competent to do particular tasks. For instance, "that sweet little thing can't change a tire" is benevolent sexism (Swim & Becker, 2011).

TAKE A STAND: Can you think of communication strategies for responding to a benevolent sexist comment?

A **stereotype** is a generalization about an entire class of phenomena based on some knowledge of some members of the class. For example, if most women you know aren't interested in sports, you might stereotype women as uninterested in sports. This stereotype could keep you from noticing that many women engage in sports and enjoy attending athletic events. Relying on stereotypes can lead us to overlook important qualities of individuals and to perceive them only in terms of what we consider common to a general category.

Many people stereotype women as emotional and weak and men as rational and strong. Stereotypes such as these can distort our perceptions. For instance, women's arguments are sometimes dismissed as emotional when, in fact, they involve evidence and reasoning (Mapstone, 1998). Women who use assertive speech are frequently described as rude or bitchy (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011), whereas men who employ emotional language may be described to be wimps or weak (Rasmussen & Moley, 1986).

The English language may also encourage **polarized thinking**, which is conceiving of things as absolute opposites. Something is right or wrong; a person is male or female or masculine or feminine. Our commonly used vocabulary emphasizes all-or-none terms and thus all-or-none thinking. Queer performative theory challenges polarized language for sex, gender, and sexual orientation, claiming that the polar—or binary—terms obscure the range of identities that humans express. Our culture's binary labels for sex, gender, and sexual orientation encourage us not to notice how much variation there is among people. The polar categories of men and women erase transgender and intersex people.

Language Evaluates Gender

Language reflects cultural values and is a powerful influence on our perceptions. Women are often described in trivializing terms. Numerous terms label women as immature or juvenile (*baby doll, girlie, little darling*) or equate them with food (*sugar, sweet thing, cookie, cupcake*) and animals (*kitten, catty, chick, pig, dog, cow, bitch*). Diminutive suffixes designate women as reduced forms of the standard (male) form of the word: *waitress, stewardess.* Calling women *girls* (defined as a female who has not gone through puberty) defines them as children, not as adults. Women who are sexually active may be called derogatory names such as *slut*, whereas men who are equally sexually active are described with terms such as *stud* or *man whore*, which our students say is a compliment. In addition, terms frequently used to degrade boys and men equate them with girls, women, femininity, or queerness (*sissy, momma's boy, bitch, gay, girly-man*).

ANTHONY

Until we talked about language in class, I hadn't really thought about the double standard for sexually active girls and guys. Or if I had thought about it, I probably would have said that the double standard doesn't exist anymore. Our discussion got me thinking, and that's not really true. Guys who have sex

with a lot of girls are studs or players. Girls who have sex with a lot of guys are sluts or easy. It's not as bad as it used to be, but I guess there still is kind of a double standard.

Language Allows Self-Reflection

We use symbols to name and evaluate not only the phenomena around us, but also ourselves. Self-reflection is thinking about yourself—how you name and evaluate yourself. Yet, self-reflection is not just personal. Each of us has society's values in our heads, so we tend to reflect on ourselves from society's perspective. In the 1950s, a 5-foot 5-inch woman who weighed 140 pounds would have considered herself slender. In 2010, a 5-foot 5-inch woman who weighs 140 pounds might view herself as overweight. In 1950, a man would not feel pressure to be as muscular as is the current masculine ideal. We live in a celebrity culture (Lamb & Brown, 2006; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Newsom, 2011), which makes it tempting to define ourselves in comparison to celebrities—or the airbrushed, digitally manipulated images of them. According to Michael Rich (2008), Director of the Center on Media and Child Health, "exposure to body ideals of impossibly thin women and unrealistically muscular men can contribute to negative self-images and viewers' attempts to alter their bodies through restrictive eating, exercise, or drugs or surgery" (p. 90).

"Masculine" and "feminine" are not the only ways we can label our gender. We may also label ourselves androgynous, a concept we first mentioned in Chapter 1. Androgynous people possess qualities the culture defines as masculine *and* feminine instead of only those assigned to one sex. Androgynous people are, for example, both assertive *and* sensitive, both ambitious *and* compassionate. Likewise, people who define themselves as gender queer or gender nonconforming choose not to place themselves in a single, narrow identity.

EXPLORING GENDERED LIVES *Fat Talk*

"I'm fat." "You're not half as fat as I am. Look at my big butt." "I need to give up eating." Fat talk is common. In fact, it's almost obsessive among some people, both male and female (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009). Almost always fat talk is negative, self-critical comments about how the speakers' bodies don't measure up to ideals advanced by media.

Fat talk isn't harmless. Engaging in fat talk predicts lower body satisfaction and greater depression and increases perceived pressure to be thinner (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012). At the same time, people who have lower satisfaction with their bodies are more likely to engage in fat talk. In other words, fat talk and body dissatisfaction make up a self-defeating cycle (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012).

TAKE A STAND: Have you encountered or engaged in fat talk? What are some steps you could take to avoid or stop fat talk when you hear it?

Gendered Styles of Verbal Communication

In addition to expressing cultural views of gender, language is a primary means by which we express our gendered identities. In the pages that follow, we'll explore the ways we use verbal communication to perform masculinity and femininity. Keep in mind that we're looking at *gendered* styles of communicating, not necessarily sex-based styles. In other words, although most girls are socialized to communicate primarily in feminine ways, some boys learn feminine modes of communicating; although most boys are encouraged to cultivate primarily masculine styles of communicating, some girls learn masculine modes as well. Also, some people work to become fluent in both masculine and feminine modes of communication, and perform genders beyond the conventional binary.

Gendered Speech Communities

Philosopher Suzanne Langer (1953, 1979) 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. Langer's attention to the ways in which language sustains cultural life is consistent with the symbolic interactionist and cultural theories that we discussed in Chapter 2. William Labov (1972) extended Langer's ideas by defining a *speech community* as a group of people who share norms about communication. By this, he meant that a **speech community** exists when people share understandings about goals of communication, strategies for enacting those goals, and ways of interpreting communication.

It's obvious that we have entered a different speech community when we are in countries whose languages differ from our own. Distinct speech communities are less apparent when they rely on the same language but use it in different ways and attach different meanings to it. Yet, as standpoint theory points out, belonging to a particular race-ethnicity, economic class, and gender influences what we know and how we communicate.

Males and females are typically socialized into gendered speech communities. To understand these different communities, we will first consider how we are socialized into feminine and masculine speech communities. After this, we will explore divergence in feminine and masculine speech communities. Please note the importance of the word *typically* and other words that indicate we are discussing general differences, not absolute ones. Not all women learn or choose to perform only a feminine style of communication, not all men learn or choose to perform only a masculine style of communication.

The Lessons of Children's Play

A classic study by Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982) gave us initial insight into the importance of children's play in shaping patterns of communication. As they

watched young children engaged in recreation, the researchers were struck by two observations: Young children usually played in sex-segregated groups, and girls and boys tended to play different kinds of games. Maltz and Borker found that boys' games (football, baseball, war) and girls' games (school, house, tea party) cultivate distinct communication styles.

More recent research on children's play confirms Maltz and Borker's original findings. Sex-segregated groups and forms of play remain the norm for children in the United States (Clark, 1998; Gray & Feldman, 1997; Kovacs, Parker, & Hoffman, 1996; McGuffey & Rich, 2004; Moller & Serbin, 1996; Wood, 2009a). Even children as young as two or three years old (about the time that gender constancy develops) show a preference for same-sex playmates (Ruble & Martin, 1998).

Boys' Games Boys' games usually involve fairly large groups—nine individuals for each baseball team, for instance. Most boys' games are competitive, have clear goals, involve physically rough play, and are organized by rules and roles that specify who does what and how to play (Rudman & Glick, 2010).

Because the games boys typically play are structured by goals, rules, and roles, there is limited need to discuss how to play, although there may be talk about strategies to reach goals. In playing games, boys learn to communicate to accomplish goals, compete for and maintain status, exert control over others, get attention, and stand out. Specifically, boys' games cultivate four communication rules:

1. Use communication to assert your ideas, opinions, and identity.
2. Use talk to achieve something, such as solving problems or developing strategies.
3. Use communication to attract and maintain others' attention.
4. Use communication to compete for the "talk stage." Make yourself stand out, take attention away from others, and get others to pay attention to you.

These communication rules are consistent with other aspects of masculine socialization. For instance, notice the emphasis on individuality and competition. Also, we see that these rules accent achievement—doing something, accomplishing a goal. Boys learn that they must do things in order to be valued members of the team. Finally, we see the undercurrent of masculinity's emphasis on invulnerability: If your goal is to control and to be better than others, you need to show only your strengths.

Girls' Games Many girls today also play competitive games. In addition, most girls play some games that few boys play. The games played primarily by girls cultivate distinct ways of communicating. Girls tend to play in pairs or in small groups rather than large ones (Benenson, Del Bianco, Philippoussis, & Apostoleris, 1997). Also, games such as house and school do not have preset, clear-cut goals and roles. There is no touchdown in playing house, and the roles of daddy and mommy aren't fixed like the roles of guard and forward. Because traditional girls' games are not highly structured by external goals and roles, players have to talk among themselves to decide what to do and what roles to play.

When playing, young girls spend more time talking than doing anything else—a pattern that is not true of young boys (Goodwin, 2006). Playing house, for

instance, typically begins with a discussion about who is going to be the daddy and who the mommy. The lack of stipulated goals for the games is also important because it tends to cultivate girls' skill in interpersonal processes. The games generally played by girls teach four basic rules for communication:

1. Use communication to create and maintain relationships. The process of communication, not its content, is the heart of relationships.
2. Use communication to establish egalitarian relations with others. Don't outdo, criticize, or put down others. If you have to criticize, be gentle.
3. Use communication to include others—bring them into conversations, respond to their ideas.
4. Use communication to show sensitivity to others and relationships.

The typically small size of girls' play groups fosters cooperative play (Rudman & Glick, 2010) and an open-ended process of talking to organize activity, whereas the larger groups in which boys usually play encourage competition and external rules to structure activity (Campbell, 1993). In a study of preschoolers, boys gave orders and attempted to control others, whereas girls were more likely to make requests and cooperate with others (Weiss & Sachs, 1991). In another investigation, 9- to 14-year-old African-American girls typically used inclusive and nondirective language, whereas African-American boys tended to issue commands and compete for status in their groups (Goodwin, 1990).

The conclusion from much research is that girls tend to engage in more relational, cooperative play, whereas boys tend to engage in more instrumental and competitive play (Harris, 1998; Leaper, 1994, 1996; Terlecki et al., 2011).

EXPLORING GENDERED LIVES *Gender and Gaming Culture*

Contrary to popular belief, girls and women are no less interested in video games than boys and men. Gendered differences do exist, however, in how video games are played and for what reasons. Studying these differences can teach us something about gendered speech communities. Consider the following findings (Terlecki, Brown, Harner-Steciw, Irvin-Hannum, Marchetto-Ryan, Ruhl, & Wiggins, 2011):

- Of all adolescents, 90% describe technology as "cool," and the vast majority of adolescent boys and girls play video games.
- Approximately 43% of online gamers are female.
- Girls and women often seek games that privilege real-life simulation, puzzles, and strategy; boys and men often prefer sporting, action, and combat games.
- Female gamers aim to build relationships and make connections with others through gaming; male gamers tend to play video games for individual achievement.
- On average, men tend to purchase games with more violence and higher ratings from the Entertainment Software Rating Board than do women.

TAKE A STAND: Can you identify connections among traditional childhood games, video games, and gendered communication patterns?

The basic rules of communication that many adult women and men employ are refined and elaborated versions of those learned in childhood games (Clark, 1998; Mulac, 1998, 2006).

ERIN

I played house and school, but I also played softball and soccer. Most of my friends did too. We learned to compete and work with external rules and be goal oriented just as much as boys did. The games children play aren't sex segregated anymore.

Erin made the above comment when she was a student in one of our classes. She's right that young girls today often play competitive sports and that doing so allows them to learn and use the rules of masculine speech communities. This is consistent with standpoint theory's premise that members of subordinated groups are motivated to learn the standpoint of dominant groups. However, Erin is not entirely correct in saying that children's games are no longer sex segregated. The rates at which girls drop out of sports or refuse participation altogether remain significantly higher than those of boys (Messner & Musto, 2014). Also, although many contemporary girls play games that were once associated primarily with boys, few boys today play games associated with girls. How many boys play house and school?

Gendered Communication Practices

We will consider features of feminine and masculine speech that have been identified by researchers. We'll also explore some of the complications that arise when people of different genders operate by different rules in conversations with each other.

Feminine Communication

People who are socialized in feminine speech communities—most women and some men—tend to regard communication as a primary way to establish and maintain relationships with others. Feminine communicators converse in traditional and online settings in order to share about themselves and to learn about others (Wood, 2015a; Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, & Dill, 2013). Consistent with this primary goal, feminine communicators use language to foster connections, support closeness, and mutual understanding (Ye & Palomares, 2013).

Establishing equality between people is a second important feature of feminine communication. To achieve symmetry, communicators often match experiences to indicate "You're not alone in how you feel." Typical ways to communicate equality would be saying, "I've felt just like that" or "I totally know what you mean." Growing out of the quest for equality is a participatory mode of interacting 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, feminine speech more characteristically follows an interactive pattern in people to collaboratively create conversations.

A third characteristic of feminine speech is support for others. To demonstrate support, communicators often express emotions (Guerrero, Jones, & Boburka, 2006; Mulac, 2006; Ye & Palomares, 2013) to show understanding of another's situation or feelings. "Oh, you must feel terrible" communicates that we understand and support how another feels. Related to these first two features is attention to the relationship level of communication (Eisenberg, 2002; MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003). You will recall that the relationship level of talk focuses on feelings and on the relationship between communicators rather than on the content of messages. Conversations between feminine people tend to be characterized by intensive adverbs ("That's *really* exciting") (Mulac, 2006) and questions that probe for greater understanding of feelings and perceptions surrounding the subject of talk (Dunn, 1999). "How did you feel when it occurred?" "How does this fit into the overall relationship?" are probes that help a listener understand a speaker's perspective.

YOLANDA

With my boyfriend, I am always asking, "How was your day? Your class? Your jam session? Did you get such and such done? Did you talk to so-and-so?" He answers my questions, usually with just a few words, but he almost never asks questions about my day and my life. When I do talk about myself, he often interrupts and sometimes listens, but he doesn't say much in response. I'm tired of doing all the work to keep a conversation going in our relationship.

A fourth feature of feminine speech style is conversational "maintenance work" (Fishman, 1978; Taylor, 2002). This involves efforts to sustain conversation by inviting others to speak and by prompting them to elaborate their ideas. Questions are often used to include others: "How was your day?" "Did anything interesting happen on your trip?" "Do you have anything to add?" (Mulac, 2006). Communication of this sort maintains interaction and opens the conversational door to others.

A fifth quality of feminine speech is responsiveness. A feminine person might make eye contact, nod, or say, "Tell me more" or "That's interesting." Responsiveness affirms the other person and encourages elaboration by showing interest in what was said.

A sixth quality of feminine talk is personal, concrete style. Typical of feminine talk are details, personal disclosures, and concrete reasoning. These features cultivate a personal tone, and they facilitate feelings of closeness by connecting communicators' lives.

A final feature of feminine speech is tentativeness (Mulac, 2006; Ye & Palomares, 2013). This may be expressed in a number of forms. Sometimes people use verbal hedges, such as "I kind of feel you may be overreacting." In other situations, they qualify statements by saying, "I'm not sure if this is right, but…." Another way to keep talk provisional is to tag a question onto a statement in a way that invites another to respond: "*Scandal* is a pretty good show, isn't it?" Tentative communication opens the door for others to respond and express their opinions.

There is controversy about tentativeness associated with feminine speech. Robin Lakoff (1975), who first reported that women use more hedges, qualifiers, and tag questions than men, claimed that these indicate uncertainty and lack of confidence. Calling women's speech "powerless," Lakoff argued that it reflects women's insecurity. It's important to note that Lakoff's judgment that feminine speech is powerless was based on her assumption that masculine speech is the standard. If we use feminine speech as the standard, the use of hedges, qualifiers, and tag questions may reflect not powerlessness but the desire to keep conversations open and to include others. You should realize, however, that people outside feminine speech communities may use masculine standards, as Lakoff did, to interpret tentative speech.

Masculine Communication Masculine speech communities tend to regard talk as a way to accomplish concrete goals, exert control, preserve independence, entertain, and enhance status. Conversation is often seen as an arena for proving oneself and negotiating prestige.

The first feature of masculine speech is the effort to establish status and control. Masculine speakers do this by asserting their ideas and authority, telling jokes and stories, or challenging others. Also, men maintain both control and independence by disclosing less than women. Men and boys typically use more I-references ("I have a plan," "I had a good game") than women and girls (Mulac, 2006). One way to exhibit knowledge and control is to give advice. For example, a person might say, "The way you should handle that is …," or "Don't let your boss get to you." On the relationship level of meaning, people socialized in feminine speech communities may interpret advice as the speaker saying she or he is superior—smarter, more experienced, and so on—in comparison to the other person.

A second prominent feature of masculine speech is instrumentality—the use of face-to-face or computer-mediated communication (CMC) to accomplish instrumental objectives (Kimbrough et al., 2013). Particularly when men think they are knowledgeable about a topic, they may want to show their knowledge to others (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). In conversation, this is often expressed through problem-solving efforts to get information, discover facts, and suggest solutions. Conversations between feminine and masculine communicators are often derailed by the lack of agreement on the meaning of this informational, instrumental focus. When a man focuses on the content level of meaning after a woman has disclosed a problem, she may feel that he is disregarding her emotions. He, on the other hand, thinks he is supporting her in the way that he has learned to show support—suggesting how to solve the problem.

JOANNE

My boyfriend is the worst at throwing solutions in my face when I try to talk to him about a problem. I know he cares about me; if he didn't, he wouldn't use up all that energy thinking up solutions for me. But I'm the kind of person who prefers a good ear (and maybe a shoulder) when I have a problem. I would like it so much better if he would forget about solutions and just listen and let me know he hears what's bothering me.

A third feature of masculine communication is conversational command. Despite jokes about women's talkativeness, research indicates that, in most contexts, men tend to talk more often and at greater length than women (Mulac, 2006). Further, masculine speakers may reroute conversations by using what another says as a jumping-off point for their own topics, or they may interrupt. Although both sexes interrupt, most research suggests that men do it more frequently (Farley, Ashcraft, Stasson, & Nusbaum, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1983).

Not only do men generally interrupt more than women, they may do so for different reasons. Research indicates that men are more likely to interrupt to control conversation by challenging other speakers or wresting the talk stage from them, whereas women interrupt to indicate interest and respond to others. A different explanation is that men generally interrupt more than women because interruptions are considered normal and good-natured within the norms of masculine speech communities. Whereas interruptions that reroute conversation might be viewed as impolite and intrusive in feminine speech communities, the outgoing, give-and-take character of masculine speech may render interruptions just part of normal conversation.

Fourth, masculine speech tends to be direct and assertive. Compared with women's language, men's is typically more forceful and authoritative (Mulac, 2006). An exception to this pattern is when men talk with someone of high status. In this situation, men with lower status may be less assertive and commanding (O'Neill & Colley, 2006; Palomares, 2008, 2010).

Fifth, masculine speech tends to be more abstract than feminine speech. Men frequently speak in general or conceptual terms that are removed from concrete experiences and personal feelings. Within public environments, norms for speaking call for theoretical, conceptual, and general thought and communication. Yet, within more personal relationships, abstract talk sometimes creates barriers to intimacy.

CHRIS

Once I decided to live as a woman, I had to learn a whole different way of communicating. Even though I've always identified as female, I've always hung out with guys and I learned pretty much what our textbook describes as masculine speech patterns. To be accepted as a woman, I've had to relearn how to communicate—ask more questions about others, express more feelings, describe my experiences with a lot more detail, be more indirect like saying "Maybe we need to do such and such" instead of "Do such and such."

Finally, masculine speech tends to be less emotionally responsive than feminine speech, especially on the relationship level of meaning (Guerrero et al., 2006). Men, more than women, give what are called **minimal response cues** (Parlee, 1979), which are verbalizations such as "yeah" or "um hmm." Studies suggest that this verbal communication pattern is reflected in CMC as well, with men using fewer references to emotions in email than do women (Ye & Palomares, 2013).

People socialized into feminine speech communities may perceive minimal response cues as indicating lack of involvement (Fishman, 1978). Men's conversation also often lacks self-disclosure as well as expressed sympathy and understanding (Eisenberg, 2002), although men report feeling more comfortable with higher levels of disclosure to romantic partners when communicating via CMC (Walton & Rice, 2013). Within the rules of masculine speech communities, sympathy is a sign of condescension, and the revealing of personal problems is seen as making one vulnerable. Yet, within feminine speech communities, sympathy and disclosure are understood as demonstrations of equality and support. This creates potential for misunderstanding between people who express themselves in masculine and feminine ways.

As you many have noticed, gendered patterns in online communication often reflect gendered speech communities and enhance our understanding of them. Initially, men adopted computer technologies more quickly than women. Early studies indicated that men and women tended to differ in their motivation and use of the Internet, with men emphasizing instrumentality and task completion and women emphasizing connectivity to others. Recent research demonstrates that this gendered difference in motivation persists, but because social media networks and CMC are on the rise, women now use mediated technology more than do men (Kimbrough et al., 2013).

The Gender-Linked Language Effect

We've discussed some gendered tendencies in communication. However, these are not as hard and fast as they may seem. Recent study identifies the **gender-linked language effect** (Mulac, 1998; Palomares, 2008; Ye & Palomares, 2013), which notes that language differences between women and men are influenced by a variety of factors including topics, speaker status, salience of gender in a communication situation, and other people present. One study (Palomares, 2008) found that women tend to speak more tentatively when talking about masculine topics (sports and automotive matters were the topics in the study), but men speak more tentatively than women when talking about feminine topics (shopping and fashion in the study). Another study showed that women communicate in more typically feminine ways when they're assigned feminine avatars than when they're assigned masculine avatars. The same is true of men: They communicate in more typically masculine ways when assigned masculine avatars. Research on the gender-linked language effect reminds us that our gender expression varies according to context and other factors.

Gender-Based Misinterpretations in Communication

In this final section, we explore what happens when gendered communication styles meet in conversations. We'll consider five communication misunderstandings that can arise.

Showing Support

Madeline tells her coworker George that she is worried about Angelina, who has been late to work several days recently. George gives a

minimal response cue, saying only, "Oh." To Madeline, this suggests he isn't interested. Yet, operating by norms of masculine speech communities, George assumes that if Madeline wants to say anything further or ask his opinion, she will assert her ideas.

Even without much perceived encouragement, Madeline continues by saying she knows Angelina has a teenage daughter who has been causing some worries lately. Madeline says, "I feel so bad for Angelina, and I want to help her, but I don't know what to do." George then says, "It's her problem, not yours. Just butt out." At this, Madeline explodes: "Who asked for your advice?" George is now completely confused. He thought Madeline wanted advice, so he gave it. She is hurt that George didn't tune into her feelings. Both are frustrated.

The problem is not so much what George and Madeline say and don't say. Rather, it's how they interpret each other's communication—actually, how they *misinterpret* each other, because they fail to understand that they are operating by different rules of communication. George is respecting Madeline's independence by not pushing her to talk. When he thinks she wants advice, he offers it in an effort to help. Madeline, on the other hand, wants comfort and a connection with George—that's her primary purpose in talking with him. To her, George's advice seems to dismiss her feelings. He doesn't offer sympathy, because masculine rules for communication define this as condescending. Yet, the feminine speech community in which Madeline was socialized taught her that giving sympathy is a way to show support.

Troubles Talk Talk about troubles, or personal problems, is a kind of interaction in which hurt feelings may result from differences between masculine and feminine styles of communicating. Carmen tells her partner, Caleb, that she is feeling down because she didn't get a job she wanted. In an effort to be supportive, Caleb responds by saying, "You shouldn't feel bad. Lots of people don't get jobs they want." To Carmen, this seems to dismiss her feelings—to belittle them by saying lots of people experience her situation. Yet within masculine speech communities, you show respect by assuming that others don't need sympathy.

Now, let's turn the tables and see what happens when Caleb feels troubled. When he meets Carmen, Caleb is unusually quiet because he feels down about not getting a job offer. Sensing that something is wrong, Carmen tries to show interest by asking, "Are you okay? What's bothering you?" Caleb feels she is imposing and pushing him to expose his vulnerability. Carmen probes further to show she cares. As a result, he feels intruded on and withdraws further. Then Carmen feels shut out.

But perhaps Caleb does tell Carmen why he feels down. After hearing about his rejection letter, Carmen says, "I know how you feel. I felt so low when I didn't get that position at DataNet." She is matching experiences to show Caleb that she understands his feelings and that he's not alone (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003). According to a masculine speech community, however, Carmen's comment about her own experience is an effort to steal the center stage from him and focus the conversation on herself.

EXPLORING GENDERED LIVES *Scholarship versus Popular Psychology*

Deborah Tannen (1990a, 1990b, 1995) declares that "communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication" (1990b, p. 42). John Gray goes further, claiming that women and men are so different that it's as though they are from different planets (1992, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). Both Tannen and Gray have sold millions of books. Should we believe what they say about communication between the sexes?

When trying to determine the worth of their claims, we might first ask about their credentials as experts in communication. Tannen is a linguist who holds a Ph.D. Gray has no graduate degree from an accredited school. Tannen bases her claims on research that she and others have conducted. Gray relies on anecdotes and his personal experience.

Second, we should compare their claims to findings from sound research. Although Tannen sometimes generalizes too broadly from limited and unrepresentative samples, her claims do have some credible support. Gray, on the other hand, portrays women and men in extreme and dichotomous stereotypes that are not supported by credible research.

TAKE A STAND: How might you develop communication strategies to bridge divides between masculine and feminine speech communities?

JAY

Finally, I understand this thing that keeps happening between my girlfriend and me. She is always worrying about something or feeling bad about what's happening with one of her friends. I've been trying to be supportive by telling her things like she shouldn't worry, or not to let it get her down, or not to obsess about other people's problems. I was trying to help her feel better. That's what guys do for each other—kind of distract our attention from problems. But Teresa just gets all huffy and angry when I do that. She tells me to stuff my advice and says if I cared about her I would show more concern. Finally, it makes sense. Well, sort of.

CATHY

When I broke up with Tommy, my dad tried so hard to help me through it. He took me to games and movies, offered to pay for it if I wanted to take horseback riding lessons. He just kept trying to DO something to make me feel better. That's how he's always been. If Mom's down about something, he takes her out or buys her flowers or something. It used to really bother me that he won't talk to me about what I'm feeling, but now I understand better what he's doing. I get it that this is his way of showing love and support for me.

The Point of the Story Another instance in which feminine and masculine communication rules often clash is in relating experiences. Masculine speech tends to follow a linear pattern, in which major points in a story are presented sequentially to get to the climax. Talk tends to be straightforward without a great many details. The rules of feminine speech, however, call for more detailed, less linear storytelling. Whereas men are more likely to provide rather bare information about what happened, women are more likely to embed the information within a larger context of the people involved and other things going on (Wood, 1998, 2011a). Women tend to include details because they matter at the relationship level of meaning. Recounting details is meant to increase involvement between people and to invite a conversational partner to be fully engaged in the situation being described.

Because feminine and masculine rules about story telling differ, men may find feminine accounts wandering and tedious. Conversely, the masculine style of storytelling may strike women as leaving out all the interesting particulars. Many a discussion between women and men has ended either with his exasperated demand, "Can't you get to the point?" or with her frustrated question, "Why don't you tell me how you were feeling and what else was going on?"

Relationship Talk "Can we talk about us?" is the opening of innumerable conversations that end in misunderstanding and hurt. In general, people who are socialized into masculine style are interested in discussing relationships only if there is a problem to be addressed. However, people socialized into feminine style generally find it pleasurable to talk about important relationships even—or perhaps especially—when there are no problems (Acitelli, 1988).

Masculine speech communities view communication as a means to doing things and solving problems, whereas feminine speech communities regard the *process* of communicating as a primary way to create and sustain relationships. No wonder many men duck when their partners want to "discuss the relationship," and women often feel a relationship is in trouble when their partners don't want to talk about it.

Public Speaking Differences in feminine and masculine communication patterns also surface in public contexts. Historically, men have dominated politics. Thus, it's not surprising that the assertive, dominant, confident masculine style is the standard for public speaking. Women who are effective in politics tend to

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manage a fine balance in which they are sufficiently feminine to be perceived as acting appropriately for women and sufficiently masculine to be perceived as acting appropriately for politicians (Sheeler & Anderson, 2013). Women who are considered effective public speakers, such as former Texas governor Ann Richards, manage to combine the traditionally feminine and masculine communication styles (Dow & Tonn, 1993).

These are only five of many situations in which differences between feminine and masculine communication styles may lead to misunderstandings. Many people find they can improve their relationships by understanding and using both gendered communication styles. When partners understand how to interpret each other's rules, they are less likely to misread motives. Thus, greater fluidity in gendered communicative norms can empower us to become more gratifying conversational partners and enhance the quality of our relationships.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have explored relationships among verbal communication, gender, and culture. We first looked at how language reflects and sustains cultural views of masculinity and femininity. By defining, organizing, and evaluating gender, language reinforces social views of sex and gender. From generic male terms to language that demeans and diminishes women, verbal communication is a powerful agent of cultural expression. We also saw, however, that symbolic abilities allow us to be self-reflective about our definitions of masculinity and femininity in general and our own gender identities in particular.

The second theme of this chapter is that we express gendered identities through our communication. Because males and females are often socialized in different gender communities, they learn different rules for expressing support, interest, and involvement. This can lead to misunderstanding, frustration, hurt, and tension. Appreciation of and respect for the distinctive validity of each style of communication are foundations for better understanding between people. Further, learning to use different styles of communication allows all of us to be more flexible and effective in our interactions with a range of people.

KEY TERMS

The following terms are defined in this chapter on the pages indicated, as well as in alphabetical order in the book's glossary, which begins on page 281. The text's companion website also provides interactive flash cards to help you learn these terms and the concepts they represent. You can access the site at www.cengagebrain.com.

benevolent sexism 106
gender-linked language effect 116
male generic language 102
matriarchal 105
minimal response cues 115
polarized thinking 107
speech community 109
stereotype 107

GENDER ONLINE

1. Visit this site to learn what sexist language is and why it matters: **http://www.sexistlanguage.com**
2. Online search terms: "gender-linked language effect," "generic language," "speech community."

REFLECTION, DISCUSSION, AND ACTION

1. Think about naming—specifically, about naming yourself. If you are a heterosexual woman, how important is it to you to keep your name or take your partner's name if you marry? If you are a heterosexual man, how much do you expect (or want) your partner to change hers? Have you or would you consider changing or hyphenating your own name? If you identify as LGBTQ, what is the naming option that you prefer?
2. Think back to your childhood games. What games did you play? Do you think the games you played affected your style of verbal communication?
3. Read several newspapers. To what extent are women and men represented differently in stories? Are women described by appearance, marital status, and family life more often than men? Are men described in terms of accomplishments and action more than women?
4. Apply what you have learned in this chapter to improve your communication. The next time you have a conversation in which you feel that gendered rules of talk are creating misunderstandings, try to explicate your expectations. For instance, if you are a feminine communicator talking with a masculine communicator about a problem, you may be offered advice. Instead of becoming frustrated for the lack of focus on your feelings, say, "I appreciate your suggestions, but I'm not ready to think about how to fix things yet. Right now, I wish you would help me work through my feelings about this issue." Discuss what happens when you explain what you want from others.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

1. Susan Ehrlich, Miriam Meyerhoff, and Janet Holmes (Eds.). (2014). *The Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality*. UK: Wiley-Blackwell. This is a useful book for those who want more in-depth coverage of relationships between language and gender.
2. Jessica Valenti. (2008). *He's a Stud, She's a Slut, and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know*. New York: Seal Press. This is a somewhat humorous look at a serious issue—double standards in how behaviors are named for women and men.
3. Nora Vincent. (2006). *Self-Made Man: One Woman's Journey into Manhood and Back*. New York: Viking. Nora Vincent spent a year and a half posing as a man, "Ned." As Ned, she discovered that the freedoms and privileges men enjoy come at the cost of suppressing emotions and enduring constant testing.