

In other public contexts, too, such as seminars and debates, when women and men are deliberately given an equal amount of the highly valued talking time, there is often a perception that they are getting more than their fair share. Dale Spender explains this as follows:

The talkativeness of women has been gauged in comparison not with men but with silence. Women have not been judged on the grounds of whether they talk more than men, but of whether they talk more than silent women.

In other words, if women talk at all, this may be perceived as “too much” by men who expect them to provide a silent, decorative background in many social contexts. This may sound outrageous, but think about how you react when precocious children dominate the talk at an adult party. As women begin to make inroads into formerly “male” domains such as business and professional contexts, we should not be surprised to find that their contributions are not always perceived positively or even accurately.

Conclusion

3 We have now reached the conclusion that the question “Do women talk more than men?” can’t be answered with a straight “yes” or “no.” The answer is rather, “It all depends.” It depends on many different factors, including the social context in which the talk is taking place, the kind of talk involved and the relative social confidence of the speakers, which is affected by such things as their social roles (e.g., teacher, host, interviewee, wife) and their familiarity with the topic.

24 It appears that men generally talk more in formal, public contexts where informative and persuasive talk is highly valued, and where talk is generally the prerogative of those with some societal status and has the potential for increasing that status. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to contribute in private, informal interactions, where talk more often functions to maintain relationships, and in other situations where for various reasons they feel socially confident.

25 Finally, and most radically, we might question the assumption that more talk is always a good thing. “Silence is golden,” says the proverb, and there are certainly contexts in all cultures where silence is more appropriate than talk, where words are regarded as inadequate vehicles for feelings, or where keeping silent is an expression of appreciation or respect. Sometimes it is the silent participants who are the powerful players. In some contexts the strong silent male is an admired stereotype. However, while this is true, it must be recognized that talk is very highly valued in western culture. It seems likely, then, that as long as holding the floor is equated with influence, the complexities of whether women or men talk most will continue to be a matter for debate.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. How do the proverbs at the beginning of Holmes’s essay set the tone? What is remarkable about these proverbs? Have you heard any of them? Which one do you like or dislike the most, and why?
2. In what ways does the context and setting of the conversation influence men’s and women’s talking patterns? Explain.

3. Holmes explains that in situations where talk is valued—in the classroom or boardroom for instance—males are likely to speak more than females. If this is true, what accounts for the excess of proverbs and sayings regarding women’s talk? Explain.
4. In paragraph 20, Holmes cites a 16-year-old girl who explains why she doesn’t speak more in class. Evaluate this girl’s response in the context of your own social and classroom experiences in high school.
5. What, according to Holmes, are the differences between men’s and women’s use of talk? Do you agree or disagree with her conclusions? Explain.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Ben Jonson, a seventeenth-century writer and playwright, wrote a popular play called *Epicene*, or, *The Silent Woman*. Locate a copy of this play and write an essay in which you make connections between attitudes toward women’s talk three hundred years ago and today. How have things changed, and how are they similar?
2. Do you think that understanding gender patterns in conversation will change the way men and women speak to each other? Do you think that such changes are necessary and healthy? Alternatively, do you think that some men and women have a need for the established patterns? Explain.

No Detail Is Too Small for Girls Answering a Simple Question

Tony Kornheiser

A common complaint between the sexes is that men and women just don’t speak the same language. In the next piece, sports columnist and humorist Tony Kornheiser observes the differences in the communication style of his daughter and son, and by extension, women and men. His conclusion is that “women have more to say on everything.”

Tony Kornheiser writes for the *Washington Post*, hosts *The Tony Kornheiser Show* on ESPN radio, and co-hosts *Pardon the Interruption* with fellow *Post* sports columnist Mike Wilbon on ESPN2. He is the author of several books, including *Pumping Irony* (1995) and *Bald as I Want to Be* (1997).

- 1 The last time I ventured into my favorite column area—differences between men and women—was when the infamous Teen Talk Barbie doll came out. Barbie was given 270 things to say, and one of them was “Math class is tough!” This, of course, is infuriating, because it plays into the damaging sexual stereotype that girls are stupid in math.
- 2 Well, I got cute and wrote how everyone knows girls are stupid in math. I gave an example of my own daughter, whom I love dearly, and who is a sensitive and caring soul, and how when I ask her, “If a bus leaves Cleveland at 7 p.m. heading for Pittsburgh, 200 miles away, and traveling 50 miles per hour, when will it arrive?” she answers, “Do all the children have seat belts, Daddy?” I thought it was a pretty good line. But I received all kinds of nasty mail, much of it—so help me—from female mathematicians, and female actuaries and female physicists specializing in subatomic

particle acceleration. In that same column, I wrote that boys are stupid in English, yet I didn't get a single letter of protest from boys. Obviously, they couldn't read the column.

3 Anyway . . . here we go again.

4 My daughter recently came home from sleep-away camp, where she'd spent five weeks. She looked great. And I was so proud of her, going away by herself.

5 The first question I asked her was "How was camp?"

6 She began by saying, "Well, the day I left, I got on the bus, and I sat next to Ashley, and she brought Goldfish, which was good because I forgot my Now and Laters, and then Shannon came over, and she's from Baltimore, and she gets her clothes at the Gap, and she had a Game Boy, but all she had was Tetris, which I have, so we asked Jenny, who was the counselor, if anybody had Sonic the Hedgehog, but . . ."

7 She went on like this for a few minutes, still talking about the bus ride up to camp five weeks ago, and I came to the horrifying realization that she was actually going to tell me how camp was, minute by minute. Because this is what girls do (and when they grow up and become women, they do it, too, as any man can vouch for). They gather information and dispense it without discrimination. Everything counts the same! It is not that women lack the ability to prioritize information, it is that they don't think life is as simple as men do, and so they are fascinated by the multiplicity of choices that they see.

8 This is why you have to be very specific with what you ask women. If, for example, you missed a Rams game, and you know a woman who saw it, never, ever ask, "What happened?" Unless you have nowhere to go until Thursday.

9 Ask:

1. Who won?
2. What was the score?
3. Was anyone carried out on a stretcher?

10 You must get them to fast-forward.

11 Left to their own devices, girls go through life volubly answering essay questions. And boys? Multiple choice is way too complicated. Boys restrict themselves to true/false.

12 Boys do not gather and retain information, they focus on results.

13 My son went to camp for six weeks—one week longer than my daughter. As I had with my daughter, I asked him, "How was camp?"

14 He said, "Good. I busted Jason's nose." Short and to the point.

15 This was followed by, "Can we go to McDonald's?"

16 Did I mention the cheers? My daughter came back with cheers. About 187,640 musical cheers, all of which are accompanied by an intricate series of hand, feet and hip movements. She went to camp a 10-year-old, she came back a Vandella.

17 It's amazing, the affinity of girls and cheers. If you've ever been to camp, you know that girls have a special gene for cheers and that even girls who have never been to camp before—or, for that matter, been to America or spoken English before—automatically know all the cheers the moment they step off the bus. As a

boy at camp, I used to look at girls in amazement, wondering why they would waste their time like that, when they could be doing useful things like me—memorizing Willie Mays' doubles and sacrifice flies during an entire decade.

18 Boys don't do musical cheers.

19 Even during "color war," that traditional camp competition when cheering is supposed to result in points, here's how boys cheer on the way to the dining hall: They look at the other team and say, "Yo, Green Team, drop dead."

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. Kornheiser, in the context of his daughter's communication style, states that women "gather information and dispense it without discrimination." Respond to Kornheiser's assertion. Is there truth to his stereotypical description of the way men and women relay information? Explain.
2. In his introduction, Kornheiser relates how his joking about girls and math resulted in angry letters from many women, yet his comments about boys and English received no such response. What accounts for this difference? Is it more important to dispel one stereotype than it is the other? Why or why not?
3. Based on his essay, can you determine which communication style Kornheiser prefers? As a writer and columnist, is Kornheiser more "male" or "female" in his communication style? Explain.
4. How would you characterize Kornheiser's tone and style? What assumptions does he make about his audience? Does his article appeal to both sexes? Why or why not?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Many of the authors in this section seem to defend their own gender's communication style. Write an essay in which you support your gender's communication style, or defend or analyze the style of the opposite sex. Is one better than the other? Why or why not? Remember to support your perspective with examples.
2. In his essay, Tony Kornheiser describes the differences between the way his children, one boy and one girl, communicate. How do his observations connect to stereotypes about how men and women communicate? Are these communication styles simply a fact of gender? Explain, using examples from Kornheiser's essay and from other authors in this section, such as Deborah Tannen and Janet Holmes.

Sex Differences

Ronald Macaulay

Contrary to popular belief, men and women do not speak different forms of English. Nor are there innate or genetic differences in the way males and females acquire or use language. So argues Ronald Macaulay, a professor of linguistics and an expert on language acquisition. Although social background can generate some differences in the way the sexes speak, it is pure myth and