

Although language may be what separates us from other animals, it is conversation—the ability to communicate and interact with each other—that is at the heart of our humanity. As social animals, conversation forms the foundation of our daily interactions. But conversation is more than simply speaking; it is a collaborative exercise. How we interact with each other, in social groups, with our families, among friends and acquaintances, in work situations, and with our significant others, is a critical factor in our success as human beings. This chapter explores the social dynamics of conversation, differences between male and female communication styles, and new trends in communication as we increasingly become part of the fabric of an online and wired world.

He Says, She Says: Gender Differences in Discourse

Some sociologists and psychologists claim that men and women talk differently—either due to social conditioning or basic physiology—and that the “male” form of discourse is the preferred form of communication. With the great interest in communication, a growing number of scholars are attempting to prove that important differences distinguish the way men and women use language. Most researchers present theories that such differences are the results of either discriminatory socialization or genetic disposition. The first two essays in this cluster face off as they address the assumption that women speak more than men. In “Women Talk Too Much,” Janet Holmes explains that the stereotype that women speak more than men is rooted in how our society values speech and claims this stereotype simply isn’t true. Tony Kornheiser, however, comparing conversations between himself and his daughter and son, asserts, “No Detail Is Too Small for Girls Answering a Simple Question.”

In “Sex Differences,” linguist Ronald Macaulay says that although some differences in expression reflect social and cultural conditioning, much of the controversy regarding gender-based linguistic differences are based on myths and age-old stereotypes. Then, Clive Thompson describes how computer software can accurately determine the gender of the author of a piece of writing. While such findings may be interesting, Thompson questions the meaning of the data in “He and She: What’s the Real Difference?” Rachel Rafaelman explores the communication differences between men and women in social situations in “The Party Line.” Finally, best-selling author and sociolinguist Deborah Tannen demonstrates how social and cultural conditioning often creates inequalities in conversations, where men dominate discourse and women let them—causing tension and resentment in “I’ll Explain It to You: Lecturing and Listening.”

Let’s Talk About It: Conversation in Action

Conversation forms the foundation of our social interactions. This section discusses the social elements of conversation, its importance to our very existence, and its role in our culture. Ronald Wardhaugh describes the unspoken, and often unconscious, expectations we bring to everyday conversation. In “The Social Basis of

Talk,” Wardhaugh explains that trust, shared experience, and expectations of universal truths play a vital role in the success of social conversation. Margaret Wheatley discusses how conversation has the power to effect social change in “Some Friends and I Started Talking.” David Grambs explains why he feels defeated by “uptalk” and misuse of the word *like*, which seems to have permeated the speech of the younger generation. After years of trying to fight this insidious invader, Grambs reveals his fear that “like” is here to stay in “The Like Virus.” And Robert Kuttner discusses what he feels are the detrimental effects of the instant nature of e-mail in “The Other Side of E-Mail.” The section closes with a review of some common IM and text messaging terms and slang in “r u online?” by Kris Axman.

HE SAYS, SHE SAYS: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DISCOURSE

Women Talk Too Much

Janet Holmes

Do women really talk more than men? Many people seem to think so, but is this assumption based on stereotypes or facts? And who determines how much talk is “too much”? In this essay, linguist Janet Holmes sets out to debunk the “language myth” that women talk too much. In fact, explains Holmes, women speak less than men do in situations where their talk is most “valued.” She also asserts that the claim that “women talk too much” is inherently biased because it is men, who tend to hold positions of power, who determine when there is too much talk (such as women speaking in informal settings) and when it is appropriate (men speaking in public forums).

Janet Holmes is a professor of sociolinguistics at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her publications include *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2001) and *Women, Men and Politeness* (1995). She has published many articles on numerous sociolinguistic topics, including spoken New Zealand English, sexist language, humor, and workplace discourse.

Do women talk more than men? Proverbs and sayings in many languages express the view that women are always talking:

Women’s tongues are like lambs’ tails—they are never still. —English

The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for words. —Jutlandic

The woman with active hands and feet, marry her, but the woman with overactive mouth, leave well alone. —Maori

Some suggest that while women talk, men are silent patient listeners.

When both husband and wife wear pants it is not difficult to tell them apart—he is the one who is listening. —American

Nothing is so unnatural as a talkative man or a quiet woman. —Scottish

Others indicate that women's talk is not valued but is rather considered noisy, irritating prattle:

Where there are women and geese there's noise. —Japanese

Indeed, there is a Japanese character which consists of three instances of the character for the concept "woman" and which translates as "noisy"! My favorite proverb, because it attributes not noise but rather power to the woman speaker is this Chinese one:

The tongue is the sword of a woman and she never lets it become rusty.

So what are the facts? Do women dominate the talking time? Do men struggle to get a word in edgewise, as the stereotype suggests?

The Evidence

2 Despite the widespread belief that women talk more than men, most of the available evidence suggests just the opposite. When women and men are together, it is the men who talk most. Two Canadian researchers, Deborah James and Janice Drakich, reviewed sixty-three studies which examined the amount of talk used by American women and men in different contexts. Women talked more than men in only two studies.

3 In New Zealand, too, research suggests that men generally dominate the talking time. Margaret Franken compared the amount of talk used by female and male "experts" assisting a female TV host to interview well-known public figures. In a situation where each of three interviewers was entitled to a third of the interviewers' talking time, the men took more than half on every occasion.

4 I found the same pattern analyzing the number of questions asked by participants in one hundred public seminars. In all but seven, men dominated the discussion time. Where the numbers of women and men present were about the same, men asked almost two-thirds of the questions during the discussion. Clearly women were not talking more than men in these contexts.

5 Even when they hold influential positions, women sometimes find it hard to contribute as much as men to a discussion. A British company appointed four women and four men to the eight most highly paid management positions. The managing director commented that the men often patronized the women and tended to dominate meetings:

I had a meeting with a [female] sales manager and three of my [male] directors once . . . It took about two hours. She only spoke once and one of my fellow directors cut across her and said 'What Anne is trying to say Roger is . . . ' and I think that about sums it up. He knew better than Anne what she was trying to say, and she never got anything said.

6 There is abundant evidence that this pattern starts early. Many researchers have compared the relative amounts that girls and boys contribute to classroom talk. In a wide range of communities, from kindergarten through primary, secondary and tertiary education, the same pattern recurs—males dominate classroom talk. So on this evidence we must conclude that the stereotype of the garrulous woman reflects sexist prejudice rather than objective reality.

Looking for an Explanation

7 Why is the reality so different from the myth? To answer this question, we need to go beyond broad generalizations and look more carefully at the patterns identified. Although some teachers claim that boys are "by nature more spirited and less disciplined," there is no evidence to suggest that males are biologically programmed to talk more than females. It is much more likely that the explanation involves social factors.

What Is the Purpose of the Talk?

8 One relevant clue is the fact that talk serves different functions in different contexts. Formal public talk is often aimed at informing people or persuading them to agree to a particular point of view (e.g., political speeches, television debates, radio interviews, public lectures, etc.). Public talk is often undertaken by people who wish to claim or confirm some degree of public status. Effective talk in public and in the media can enhance your social status—as politicians and other public performers know well. Getting and holding the floor is regarded as desirable, and competition for the floor in such contexts is common. (There is also some risk, of course, since a poor performance can be damaging.)

9 Classroom research suggests that more talk is associated with higher social status or power. Many studies have shown that teachers (regardless of their gender) tend to talk for about two-thirds of the available time. But the boys dominate the relatively small share of the talking time that remains for pupils. In this context, where talk is clearly valued, it appears that the person with most status has the right to talk most. The boys may therefore be asserting a claim to higher status than the girls by appropriating the majority of the time left for pupil talk.

10 The way women and men behave in formal meetings and seminars provides further support for this explanation. Evidence collected by American, British and New Zealand researchers shows that men dominate the talking time in committee meetings, staff meetings, seminars and task-oriented decision-making groups. If you are sceptical, use a stopwatch to time the amount of talk contributed by women and men at political and community meetings you attend. This explanation proposes that men talk more than women in public, formal contexts because they perceive participating and verbally contributing in such contexts as an activity which enhances their status, and men seem to be more concerned with asserting status and power than women are.

11 By contrast, in more private contexts, talk usually serves interpersonal functions. The purpose of informal or intimate talk is not so much status enhancement

as establishing or maintaining social contact with others, making social connections, developing and reinforcing friendships and intimate relationships. Interestingly, the few studies which have investigated informal talk have found that there are fewer differences in the amount contributed by women and men in these contexts (though men still talked more in nearly a third of the informal studies reviewed by Deborah James and Janice Drakich). Women, it seems, are willing to talk more in relaxed social contexts, especially where the talk functions to develop and maintain social relationships.

¹² Another piece of evidence that supports this interpretation is the *kind* of talk women and men contribute in mixed-sex discussions. Researchers analyzing the functions of different utterances have found that men tend to contribute more information and opinions, while women contribute more agreeing, supportive talk, more of the kind of talk that encourages others to contribute. So men's talk tends to be more referential or informative, while women's talk is more supportive and facilitative.

¹³ Overall, then, women seem to use talk to develop personal relationships and maintain family connections and friendships more often than to make claims to status or to directly influence others in public contexts. Of course, there are exceptions, as Margaret Thatcher, Benazir Bhutto and Jenny Shipley demonstrate. But, until recently, many women seem not to have perceived themselves as appropriate contributors to public, formal talk.

¹⁴ In New Zealand we identified another context where women contributed more talk than men. Interviewing people to collect samples of talk for linguistic analysis, we found that women were much more likely than men (especially young men) to be willing to talk to us at length. For example, Miriam Meyerhoff asked a group of ten young people to describe a picture to a female and to a male interviewer. It was made quite clear to the interviewees that the more speech they produced the better. In this situation, the women contributed significantly more speech than the men, both to the male and to the female interviewer.

¹⁵ In the private but semi-formal context of an interview, then, women contributed more talk than men. Talk in this context could not be seen as enhancing the status of the people interviewed. The interviewers were young people with no influence over the interviewees. The explanation for the results seems to be that the women were being more cooperative than the men in a context where more talk was explicitly sought by the interviewer.

Social Confidence

¹⁶ If you know a lot about a particular topic, you are generally more likely to be willing to contribute to a discussion about it. So familiarity or expertise can also affect the amount a person contributes to a particular discussion. In one interesting study the researcher supplied particular people with extra information, making them the "experts" on the topic to be discussed. Regardless of gender, these "experts" talked more in the subsequent discussions than their uninformed conversational partners (though male "experts" still used more talking time in conversation with uninformed women than female "experts" did with uninformed men).

¹⁷ Looking at people's contributions to the discussion section of seminars, I found a similar effect from expertise or topic familiarity. Women were more likely to ask questions and make comments when the topic was one they could claim expert knowledge about. In a small seminar on the current state of the economy, for instance, several women economists who had been invited to attend contributed to the discussion, making this one of the very few seminars where women's contributions exceeded men's.

¹⁸ Another study compared the relative amount of talk of spouses. Men dominated the conversations between couples with traditional gender roles and expectations, but when the women were associated with a feminist organization they tended to talk more than their husbands. So feminist women were more likely to challenge traditional gender roles in interaction.

¹⁹ It seems possible that both these factors—expert status and feminist philosophy—have the effect of developing women's social confidence. This explanation also fits with the fact that women tend to talk more with close friends and family, when women are in the majority, and also when they are explicitly invited to talk (in an interview, for example).

Perceptions and Implications

²⁰ If social confidence explains the greater contributions of women in some social contexts, it is worth asking why girls in school tend to contribute less than boys. Why should they feel unconfident in the classroom? Here is the answer which one sixteen-year-old gave:

Sometimes I feel like saying that I disagree, that there are other ways of looking at it, but where would that get me? My teacher thinks I'm showing off, and the boys jeer. But if I pretend I don't understand, it's very different. The teacher is sympathetic and the boys are helpful. They really respond if they can show YOU how it is done, but there's nothing but "aggro" if you give any signs of showing THEM how it is done.

Talking in class is often perceived as "showing off," especially if it is girl-talk. Until recently, girls have preferred to keep a low profile rather than attract negative attention.

²¹ Teachers are often unaware of the gender distribution of talk in their classrooms. They usually consider that they give equal amounts of attention to girls and boys, and it is only when they make a tape recording that they realize that boys are dominating the interactions. Dale Spender, an Australian feminist who has been a strong advocate of female rights in this area, noted that teachers who tried to restore the balance by deliberately "favoring" the girls were astounded to find that despite their efforts they continued to devote more time to the boys in their classrooms. Another study reported that a male science teacher who managed to create an atmosphere in which girls and boys contributed more equally to discussion felt that he was devoting 90 per cent of his attention to the girls. And so did his male pupils. They complained vociferously that the girls were getting too much talking time.

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 *Epicheire*, 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