

3. What reasons do linguists give for why women use more personal pronouns than men? Do you agree with their reasoning?
4. In paragraph 14, Thompson asks "what the heck is gender anyway?" Answer this question with your own point of view. Beyond biology, is gender innate or is it a cultural construction?
5. Some critics of gender linguistics fear that the information we accumulate regarding communication differences could be used to "oppress women." Do you think such fears are valid? Why or why not?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Read more about gender detection computer programs at www.universiteacher.org.uk/lang/herring.txt. While programs that are able to detect gender based on writing styles are interesting, does the fact that women and men seem to write differently matter? Can this information be useful? Write a short essay explaining why you feel that gender difference in writing (a) doesn't matter at all, (b) matters a little depending on the circumstances, or (c) matters a lot. Support your viewpoint with examples where appropriate.
2. This article describes how some computer scientists developed a program that could detect the gender of an author with high accuracy. Can we detect gender using our intuition? Many people think so. As part of a class writing assignment, each student should write a one-page description of a recent event leaving out any references to their own gender that could "give away" their sex. Your instructor should either post the samples online or provide copies of each student's writing, giving each sample a number. Try to "guess" the gender of the writer of each sample, citing words or phrases that you think are more male or female. After everyone has reviewed the samples, check and see how accurate your guesses were.

The Party Line

Rachel Rafelman

When it comes to social conversation, are women more interesting than men? Do men tend to monopolize conversations? Are women more likely to depreciate their own viewpoints? In this essay, Rachel Rafelman explores the social dynamics of men and women in conversation.

Rachel Rafelman is a Canadian journalist. Her articles have appeared in several newspapers and magazines including the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail*. She has also co-produced several programs, including *Plague City: SARS in Toronto*, and most recently, *Alice, I Think*. This article appeared in the November 1997 edition of *Toronto Life Magazine*.

¹ "Everyone" was there—the media moguls, the so-called glitterati, the captains of industry, and, less importantly, the captains' wives—all elbow-to-elbow at a gala reception for the opening of a new arts centre. Flotillas of martinis on silver trays floated through the crush and were duly consumed, as gradually the crowd began to split up into discreet groups, each defined exclusively by gender: tipsy women talking "girl talk"; even tipsier men discussing business, sports and politics.

² The time could have been 1956, but it was, in fact, last winter (the martinis were a nice retro touch). I was there, and not being accustomed to such gatherings, I was astonished. It wasn't supposed to be like this, the guys with the guys and the girls with the girls. That was what we did in junior high. Didn't gender splits like this disappear with whitewall tires? Apparently three decades of feminism and at least one of public programs like affirmative action and gender-sensitivity training had no impact, once a certain quantity of gin and vermouth had been imbibed.

³ "The gender split at parties happens, but it isn't planned," says writer and columnist Robert Fulford. "Suddenly you see six women in one group and another group of men standing in the opposite corner and this is among people who are often 30 years younger than I am! I have to say this tendency hasn't declined the way I would have predicted 15 years ago, and I don't see a big decline in the foreseeable future, either."

⁴ "What can I tell you?" says Sondra Gotlieb, writer and wife of Allan Gotlieb, former Canadian ambassador to the United States, with what I interpret as being a sigh of deep resignation. "It's the same old story. The women gravitate to each other and talk about their personal lives. The men talk business."

⁵ Not much new here. Victorian men sent their women off to the "sitting room" while they smoked cigars, drank port and talked about . . . well, we'll never really know what they talked about. True, this practice has largely disappeared (though Sondra Gotlieb reports it is still standard dinner party protocol in Eastern Europe). Men no longer banish us. They don't have to. We do it all on our own. What's more, it seems we prefer it that way.

⁶ Here is a truly interesting fact: When you start canvassing men and women on the subject of their social conversational preferences, you find a great deal of agreement. Ten successful, self-confident men and women ranging in age from mid-twenties to 60—something concurred on two key points. The first, and perhaps most surprising, is that, in mixed company, men are boring. The second: Under similar conditions, women are not. The second point is kind of a corollary to the first. Given a choice, everyone prefers talking to women.

⁷ Of course there are boring women and interesting men. What we're dealing with here are broad strokes, generalities, even stereotypes. Okay? So now we can ask the following: Why are men boring? At least why are they so much more boring than women? The consistent answer from my interviewees is that women get involved in conversation. They get personal. Men do not.

⁸ "Men only want to talk about business. They don't want to get into personal stuff," says Bob Ramsay of Ramsay Writes, a Toronto communications firm. "I mean, God only knows what we would get into there!" For many men, a party is just a business meeting with food and drink, an occasion to trot their high-level contacts, deals and even resumes around the table with impunity (unless, of course, being deemed a dullard is an undesirable consequence). But for a woman to do the same would be breathtakingly inappropriate, even if she were the CEO of General Motors. Women downplay their accomplishments as a rule. "This is a good thing. It makes them more approachable. It's socially graceful," comments Margaret Wentle, the editor of the *Globe and Mail*'s "Report on Business." "Women are looking for a way to connect and that, in my opinion, is a strength." Wentle, who's in the unusual position of being regularly chatted up by men who believe she has inside

information, doesn't necessarily regard this as a perk. "I have to tell you, these business conversations are usually as boring as bad jokes."

9 Business, although it does literally make the world go round, just doesn't make for good party talk, unless of course it is approached in a personal way. For example: "I invested heavily in Bre-X and now I can't afford to ship Reginald Jr. off to boarding school next semester." A woman might say this, a man never would. Money, as one male wag once observed, is life's report card. For women, money's a grade, but only in one subject—and something second-tier like phy ed at that. Intriguingly, Wenthe, insists that at her own parties the women often chat about mutual funds while the men discuss gardening. (I can hear it now: "My clematis is bigger than yours.")

10 No matter what the topic, girl talk entails the rapid disclosure of details, with the expectation of immediate and enthusiastic reciprocation. The male verbal strategy is to divulge as few personal details as possible, while assiduously avoiding all expressions of emotion that could be interpreted as weakness. "Loose lips sink ships," a popular Second World War motto, seems to rule male social discourse even 50 years later.

11 According to Geoff Pevere, a broadcaster and critic, "This personal/private thing is one of the last frontiers of gender distinction." The recent discovery of his own conflict in this realm took him aback: "I came home after spending an evening with an old [male] friend and my [female] partner asked about his partner and their baby. I couldn't answer. Those things just hadn't come up." This is the kind of omission few women comprehend since asking after spouses and offspring is nearly axiomatic in their social discourse.

12 A short time later, at a dinner party with friends, the women began to discuss an absent couple who were having marital problems. As Pevere remembers it, he and the men fell silent. "I felt it was inappropriate and yet I imagine the women felt they were sharing their concern for friends, and that the couple themselves—at least, the woman—might have interpreted it similarly."

13 Despite this, Pevere, who confesses to having been born "without the sports gene," prefers the conversation of women. Robert Fulford also finds the traditional male topics of little interest. "Most things are more interesting than business," he says. "And absolutely everything is more interesting than sports."

14 In fact, the increasing number of women now interested in competitive sports is one interlocutory development that neither welcomes. According to Pevere, it has "taken its toll on the quality of contemporary conversation." Fulford longs for the old days when "by God, at parties, you could rely on the fact that the women wouldn't know about the infield fly rule and all that stuff."

15 Kate Fillion, author of *How to Dump a Guy: A Coward's Manual* (HarperCollins), doesn't feel it matters what a man is talking about. "In my experience, men are usually monologuing at each other and at women. It's not an exchange of ideas; it's a competition." Writer Allan Fotheringham, who claims Canadian men are especially dull, agrees. He refers to male competitive chat, which politicians are particularly prone to, as "pecker stretching."

16 Fillion reports having attended many dinner parties where the men "hold forth and the women tune out," or else the women have a conversation among themselves.

And if a woman declines to conform with the gender split, or genuinely finds herself interested in their topic and aligns herself conversationally with the men, Fillion says, a price is paid. "It can be seen as flirtatious or showing off. I've also seen the other women become annoyed because she is prolonging a very boring conversation."

17 Keeping a conversation going is one of the traditional female social functions. "It's part of what we do," observes Wenthe. "We are the social grease people." Indeed, for centuries women have been trained to draw people out, to get others talking about themselves, and to smooth over any alarming lulls in the conversation.

18 At the same time, the verbal capabilities of women have been undermined in almost every age and culture. This is probably the reason there are no celebrated female raconteurs. Speaking, especially in a social setting, is a method of asserting oneself, something women have rarely been taught (at least by example) to allow males to dominate in conversation and they, for their part, will do so—often without being conscious of it.

19 Moreover, from early childhood, females are spoken to differently than males. The content of their speech is correspondingly soft; declarative sentences are stylistically "unfeminine" and opinions are to be expressed obliquely, with an unflagging awareness of the feelings and sensitivities of others. It's amazing how tenacious this early training can be.

20 Even highly confident, accomplished women temper their speech (often by adding a qualifier to take the edge off an expression of power) and defer, often without being aware of it, to men. Women who are otherwise liberated and articulate can be heard uttering inanities like "Oh, really" and "How fascinating" in support of a male in mid-narrative. They will nod their heads, smile a lot, assume sympathetic expressions and, most important, keep their gaze fixed unwaveringly on the speaker's face.

21 "This has always worked well. It still does," says Golieth, who has seen many succeed against heavy odds in the corridors of power through their so-called conversational skills. "They absolutely hang on a man's every word and make him feel as if he's the center of the universe." The man, almost invariably, walks away muttering something like, "Brilliant woman . . . great conversationalist."

22 Many of us find this very aggravating. I myself, who in the paraphrased words of Erica Jong, "can scarcely think of anything not to say," have witnessed similar scenes and been bewildered by them. How can a grown man not realize that while he's been talking nonstop for 20 minutes, his female audience has said virtually nothing? The men I polled were as perplexed as I. "Maybe it has something to do with conversation as performance, which it is for most men," says Geoff Pevere. "If you've made such a rapt audience of one woman, then you walk away feeling you've succeeded." I wasn't entirely convinced, and neither, I suspect, was he.

23 Evan Solomon, editor of *Shift* magazine, talks about the different male and female "social vocabularies." "Men talk loudly and opine with great certainty on issues they haven't got a clue about," he explains. "This is genetic stuff, developed over centuries of bragging and eating hors d'oeuvres." Women, who've presumably eaten fewer hors d'oeuvres and bragged less, have a different catalogue of social behavior. There is no gene for pontificating on their double helix. "Women ask a

question and actually listen to the answer, which is something men do not love to do," Solomon observes. "That is why, I think, we sometimes miss the point."

²⁴ Listening is an important aspect of girl talk since it is at the very center of reciprocal communication. Women require it of each other. "I'll converse on almost any subject, but I will no longer, not ever, participate in one-sided conversations," says writer Katherine Govier. If this means chatting with women only, during the course of a four-hour cocktail party, well, so be it. "I finally feel comfortable moving away from an arrogant person who talks only about himself or herself. I don't encounter the situation as often as I used to, but I honestly have to say that lately, I've voted with my feet."

²⁵ Not listening to women is embedded in our culture. Probably because historically, they haven't been credited with enough intellect to say anything worth hearing. And even current studies show conclusively that women talk less frequently than men, that they tell fewer narratives (especially lengthy ones) and that they are routinely interrupted by men—who just as routinely get away with it. Women who may no longer consciously believe that their silence is golden, will still instinctively endure almost any degree of conversational tedium if the speaker is male. What's more, in the very popular and egregious 1995 book *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right*, authors Ellen Fien and Sherrie Schneider unabashedly advise single women to "follow [the man's] lead . . . be quiet and reserved . . ." Female loquacity, they warn, has dire consequences: "We know one man who stopped calling a woman he was physically attracted to because she simply didn't stop talking."

²⁶ There is also still little gender parity in the realm of humor. Publicist Liza Herz finds herself reining in her slightly offbeat sense of humor when men are around. "I don't really want to do it, but witty women do make men nervous, and then things feel awkward. To them," Herz says, "a woman with a good sense of humor is one who laughs at their jokes." At a recent party, Herz, while talking to a man, made a quip that connected their current topic with an earlier one. "My remark wasn't even all that clever, but his reaction was 'Yeah. I get it. Oh, you're good!' as if I was trying to trip him up."

²⁷ If clever women are resented, women without obvious professional status are baldly ignored. The simple statement "I'm an at-home mother with two kids" can clear a space faster than a backhoe, and here, women are just as guilty as men. Professional women can be quick to judge and dismiss another less career-oriented female. Full-time parenthood certainly isn't valued as highly as it should be, but this phenomenon is more complicated than that. It's that pesky early training persisting again. Women aren't taught to blow their own horns. In fact, they're not even supposed to admit to owning any instrument of that nature.

²⁸ Some women actually go as far as to say deeply self-deprecating things like, "I'm just a housewife," accompanying the apology (and that's what it is) with a look of acute embarrassment.

²⁹ And this knee-jerk humility can intensify when there are rampant careerists in the room. Once subjected to a barrage of dinner party introductions like "Mary Black, Merrill Lynch" and "Frances Hill, Union Carbide," a woman I know responded anxiously, "Janice Freeman, nowhere." Not only was she putting herself

down, but she wasn't even being truthful in doing so. Janice was on sabbatical from her full-time professorship in medieval studies—a fact, needless to say, few people attending that evening ever found out.

³⁰ Katherine Govier recalls attending a dinner party which dissolved almost at the outset into gender camps, with the women inside and the men outside, drinking beer around the barbecue. "I remember one man came in and wanted to talk to us. He hung around for awhile, clearly intimidated, and eventually wandered away." There is more energy in female conversation she feels, "and there are men who want to interact that way, too."

³¹ Gender issues usually come down to a matter of perception. Evan Solomon feels. He considers his female co-workers to be strong and feisty; they tell him he dominates. "There's no way I can get it right because I'm a man, not a woman. The best men can do is ensure equality in areas like education and job opportunity and then if the men still talk more than the women, well, that's just the way it is. We can't tinker on that level."

³² So where do we go from here? It may be that John Gray was right and women are from Venus while men are from Mars. But maybe that's not so bad. It does give us a whole solar system to party in.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. According to Rafeliman, what accounts for the separation of men and women in social situations? What role does communication style play in this separation?
2. Rafeliman cites the different topics men and women discuss in social situations. In your opinion, is she stereotyping or is there merit to her observations? Explain.
3. If you did not know the author's gender, what conversation style does she seem to support based on her opinions in this article?
4. What cultural forces act on male and female communication? How, according to the author, can communication socialization hurt women in the business world?
5. Compare the observations Rafeliman makes in her article to your own communication experience both socially and professionally. For example, at parties do the men and women tend to separate? Do they favor certain subjects? At work, are male communication styles favored? Support your answer with examples.
6. Rafeliman implies that, at least in a party situation, female communication styles are preferable to male discourse. How does she support her viewpoint? Do you agree with her assertion? Explain.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Try to identify some of the differences between the way men and women use language through cues that are connected with language but not necessarily actual words—such as pitch, tone, volume, facial expression, and touch. Write an essay from your own personal perspective analyzing the nonverbal as well as the verbal communication of men and women. Are they indeed speaking the same language?
2. The author states that both men and women think that women are better conversationalists. Why do you think she makes this judgment? Do you agree? Is this a gender stereotype, as the author admits, or is there some basis for the

3. The author notes that in business, some communication styles get women more respect from men than others. Present your own viewpoint on this issue based on personal experience as well as outside research in business communication. In your opinion, is communication style in the business world an important issue? In what ways do women communicate differently from men in the business world? What styles are preferred, and why? What recommendations do communications experts recommend women employ, and do these specialists also offer advice to men?
4. Record a social conversation in which a group of men and women talk. You could videotape conversations at a party, or record a conversation in a dining hall in which both men and women are present. Write a paper analyzing the conversational patterns that emerge. Remember to include volume, tone, and rate of interruption in your analysis as well as the various subject matter discussed.

"I'll Explain It to You": Lecturing and Listening

Deborah Tannen

It is easy to assume that because English belongs to those who use it, men and women speak the same language. That may not be the case. There is strong evidence that male and female conversational patterns differ significantly. In fact, using fascinating examples from her own studies, sociolinguist Deborah Tannen shows that men and women use language in essentially different ways based on gender and cultural conditioning. From early childhood, girls use speech to seek confirmation and reinforce intimacy, whereas boys use it to protect their independence and negotiate group status. Carrying these styles into adulthood, men end up lecturing while women nod warmly and are bored. Is there hope for the sexes? Yes, says the author: by understanding each other's gender style, and by learning to use it on occasion to find a common language.

Deborah Tannen is professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. She is the author of many best-selling books on linguistics and social discourse, including *I Only Say This Because I Love You* (2001), *The Argument Culture* (1999), and *You Just Don't Understand* (1997), from which this essay is excerpted. She has been a featured guest on many news programs, including *20/20*, *48 Hours*, and the *News Hour with Jim Lehrer*.

At a reception following the publication of one of my books, I noticed a publicist listening attentively to the producer of a popular radio show. He was telling her how the studio had come to be built where it was, and why he would have preferred another site. What caught my attention was the length of time he was speaking while she was listening. He was delivering a monologue that could only be called a lecture, giving her detailed information about the radio reception at the two sites, the architecture of the station, and so on. I later asked the publicist if she had been interested in the information the producer had given her. "Oh, yes," she answered.

But then she thought a moment and said, "Well, maybe he did go on a bit." The next day she told me, "I was thinking about what you asked. I couldn't have cared less about what he was saying. It's just that I'm so used to listening to men go on about things I don't care about. I didn't even realize how bored I was until you made me think about it."

I was chatting with a man I had just met at a party. In our conversation, it emerged that he had been posted in Greece with the RAF during 1944 and 1945. Since I had lived in Greece for several years, I asked him about his experiences: What had Greece been like then? How had the Greek villagers treated the British soldiers? What had it been like to be a British soldier in wartime Greece? I also offered information about how Greece had changed, what it is like now. He did not pick up on my remarks about contemporary Greece, and his replies to my questions quickly changed from accounts of his own experiences, which I found riveting, to facts about Greek history, which interested me in principle but in the actual telling left me profoundly bored. The more impersonal his talk became, the more I felt oppressed by it, pinned involuntarily in the listener position.

At a showing of Judy Chicago's jointly created art work *The Dinner Party*, I was struck by a couple standing in front of one of the displays: The man was earnestly explaining to the woman the meaning of symbols in the tapestry before them, pointing as he spoke. I might not have noticed this unremarkable scene, except that *The Dinner Party* was radically feminist in conception, intended to reflect women's experiences and sensibilities.

While taking a walk in my neighborhood on an early summer evening at twilight, I stopped to chat with a neighbor who was walking his dogs. As we stood, I noticed that the large expanse of yard in front of which we were standing was agitated with the intermittent flickering of fireflies. I called attention to the sight, remarking on how magical it looked. "It's like the Fourth of July," I said. He agreed, and then told me he had read that the lights of fireflies are mating signals. He then explained to me details of how these signals work—for example, groups of fireflies fly at different elevations and could be seen to cluster in different parts of the yard.

In all these examples, the men had information to impart and they were imparting it. On the surface, there is nothing surprising or strange about that. What is strange is that there are so many situations in which men have factual information requiring lengthy explanations to impart to women, and so few in which women have comparable information to impart to men.

The changing times have altered many aspects of relations between women and men. Now it is unlikely, at least in many circles, for a man to say, "I am better than you because I am a man and you are a woman." But women who do not find men making such statements are nonetheless often frustrated in their dealings with them. One situation that frustrates many women is a conversation that has mysteriously turned into a lecture, with the man delivering the lecture to the woman, who has become an appreciative audience.

Once again, the alignment in which women and men find themselves arrayed is asymmetrical. The lecturer is framed as superior in status and expertise, cast in the role of teacher, and the listener is cast in the role of student. If women and men took turns giving and receiving lectures, there would be nothing disturbing about it.