

trouble with a client on the Bustos case. . . ." This response lets the speaker know that she is not alone, that she is understood.

Another characteristic of feminine conversational style is its *tentative* nature. This is reflected in questioning forms ("Could we go now?" "Would you type that for me?"), hedges and disclaimers ("I'm not sure about these figures. . . ."; "This might not be a good time to bring this up, but. . . ."), and tag questions ("The report is due today, isn't it?"). While these forms exhibit the less powerful characteristics described earlier in this chapter on pp. 85–86, linguist Deborah Tannen describes them more as a bid for solidarity than a sign of weakness:

Many women are frequently told, "Don't apologize" or "You're always apologizing." The reason "apologizing" is seen as something they should stop doing is that it seems synonymous with putting oneself down. But for many women, and a fair number of men, saying "I'm sorry" isn't literally an apology; it is a ritual way of restoring balance to a conversation. "I'm sorry," spoken in this spirit, if it has any literal meaning at all, does not mean "I apologize," which would be tantamount to accepting blame, but rather "I'm sorry that happened."²⁹

Speech forms such as apologizing, especially when used by women, can create the impression of less authority, status, certainty, accuracy, or credibility. However, tentative speech doesn't have to be regarded as weak.³⁰ Another interpretation is that it builds rapport by avoiding dogmatism and supporting equality.

Conversational initiation and maintenance are also characteristic of feminine speech. Women have long been taught to ask questions to get a conversation going, to find out what others are interested in, and to show interest in a conversational partner. So, many women ask questions to start and maintain conversations: "Did you hear about . . . ?" "Are you going to . . . ?" "Did you know that . . . ?" In addition, women use "listening noises" ("uh, huh," "yeah," "mmhmm") to show interest. If women do interrupt, it is often to support or affirm the speaker, not to challenge or threaten.

Masculine Language Use Whereas women use talk to build rapport, men are more comfortable with what linguists have labeled **report talk**—speech that focuses less on feelings and relationships and more on information, facts, knowledge, and competence. Men are more inclined to use language to claim attention, assert a position, establish status, and show independence. Research shows men need to be just as sensitive as women, but they may use that awareness differently. In one study, male managers who were more accurate at emotion perception received higher satisfaction ratings if they used the information to be more persuasive. By contrast, more emotionally perceptive female managers received higher satisfaction ratings when they demonstrated more supportiveness.³¹

Characteristically masculine speech uses language *instrumentally* (as opposed to expressively) to get things done: report information, solve visible problems, achieve, accomplish, attain, execute, and perform. The results are often tangible and the reward is visible: "Fax these reports to accounting"; "I'll make reservations at Sara's"; "Finish that proposal by Monday." Men often use language to define status.

When dealing with personal problems, a characteristically masculine approach is to offer *advice* that will lead to a solution. Empathizing to show sympathy and establish solidarity just doesn't seem helpful or appropriate to many men.

Characteristically masculine speech is more *assertive, certain, direct, and authoritative*. Men often use statements of fact rather than opinion: "That deduction belongs on Schedule C" rather than "I think that's a Schedule C deduction." Declarative sentences and dropped pitch at the end create a sense of sureness and authority. Men are more likely to speak directly, giving clear and unambiguous commands or directions rather than couching requests in the form of questions.

Men's speech style typically includes several characteristics of conversational *dominance* or *control*: verbosity, topic control, and interruptions. Most research supports the statement that in public conversations between men and women, men talk at greater length.³² Often in response to questions from women, men decide which topic of conversation to pursue and talk longer than the women in the same conversation. Research on interruptions is mixed regarding who interrupts more, but it appears that the purpose of men's interruptions is often to gain control of the conversational topic or the conversation itself. Table 4-2 below summarizes research findings on characteristics of feminine and masculine speech styles.

Meeting Gender-Related Language Challenges Problems can arise when stereotypically masculine and feminine language styles clash on the job—often without anyone knowing exactly why. For instance, a woman who says, "I'm having difficulty with the Garcia account," may want to hear her concerns acknowledged and know that others have experienced similar problems. Her goal may be to gain support, establish connection, and seek rapport. Or she may just want to talk about the situation. A man, conditioned to use speech to solve problems, might respond with advice: "Here's one way you could handle it . . ." If the woman wanted support and connection, being given advice might produce an effect just the opposite of the rapport she was looking for: The woman might feel her male colleague was trying to appear "one-up," coming across as a superior. From his frame of reference, the man *was* being helpful: He offered useful information at the request of someone in need.

Another gender-related problem can arise when a man pays attention to the content of a message while a woman focuses on the relational dimension of the words. If a male supervisor says, "I can't do anything about your hours; the boss says they're set and can't be changed," a woman may hear a relational message of "I don't care" or "I don't want to be bothered." The man, used to dealing with communication at the task level, isn't being unsympathetic; he is just responding to a request.

Both masculine and feminine language styles work well—as long as listeners use the same rules. Frustrations result when people expect others to use the same style as theirs.³³ The following suggestions can help communicators understand and adapt to one another's differing uses of language:

- *Be aware of different styles.* Once you are aware that men and women have been taught to use language differently, there's less likelihood of being dismayed at a style that doesn't match yours. The cultural analogy is apt here: If you were traveling in another country, you wouldn't be offended by the inhabitants' customs, even if they were different from yours. In the same way, accepting gender differences can lead to smoother relationships—even if members of the other sex behave differently from you.

Table 4-2

Characteristics of Feminine and Masculine Speech Styles

Characteristically Feminine Speech	Characteristically Masculine Speech
Builds rapport	Reports facts
Is expressive	Is instrumental
Offers support	Offers advice
Sounds tentative	Sounds certain
Initiates and maintains conversation	Controls conversation