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Studies on language and gender have tried to examine people’sreal experiences of how men and women communicate, both in single-sex andmixed-sex groups, in order to investigate the stereotypes we have: the trivia, chatting, nagging woman and the strong, silent, long suffering-man. Men and women communicate and listen in difference ways. In thisessay I will be discussing how men and women communicate through language. Do femalestalk more than males? Do men and women follow different rules when they have aconversation, are women misrepresented through language? Contrary to the streotypes of the female as the “ overtalkative” sex who “ gossips” and “ talks a lot” (as reported by Kramer (1977) who surveyedattitudes in the USA), many studies have been carried out in Britain and theUSA which show that, in a variety of contexts, it is men who talk more. Many studies carried out in educational contexts have shownthat boys speak more than girls. For example, Sadker and Sadker (1985) found that in over ahundred classes in both arts and science subjects, boys have talked on average3 times more than girls. In You Just Don’t Understand: Men and Women in Conversation(1991), Deborah Tannen argues that men are trained to become familiar withtalking in public situations, learning how to hold center stage through verbalperformance such as storytelling, joking and providing information. Women, on the other hand, are more comfortable with private speaking: for them, the language ofconversation is more about establishing connections and negotiatingrelationships.

Males therefore might think that females talk a lot morebecause they hear them talking in situations where men would not such as on thetelephone or in social situations with friends. Contemporary research on language and gender does notsuggest that male talk is “ normal” while female talk is “ deviant”, nor does itsuggest that there is anything intrinsically powerful or powerless about maleand female talk. What it does show is that men and women adopt differentconversation styles because they are trained to understand and use spokendiscourse differently as part of being socialized for different roles insociety. This approach sees male and female groups as differentcultures which, when brought together in mixed-sex situations, can clash andcause misunderstandings because the participants are applying different rules.

1.      Information andconsultation: Tannen suggests that many male-female conversations resultin difficulty because men think they are simply exchanging information, whilewomen think they are negotiating. For example a couple are driving home: Sue: Would you like to stop for a drink? John: NoThey do not stop, but when they get home they have anargument: Sue says John never takes her feelings into consideration, while Johnsays he never knows what Sue really wants because she doesn’t tell him –instead, she expects him to guess.

Tannen suggests that while John thought he was just beingasked for information about his needs, sue thought her question would open aconversational sequence through which they would reach a negotiated decisionabout whether to stop or not. 2.      Topic raising, interruptingand reinforcing: Studies have shown that women do more work in conversationthan men to raise topics and to take others to take them up; also that womenmaintain others contributions by using reinforcers (back-channels like “ yeah, mm.., aha…”) more than men do.

At the same time, men appear to interrupt women more thanthe other way around. Tannen suggests that because women are trained to look forconnections in their interactions, they make effort to get others to talk andto equalize speakers’ turns, even downplaying their own subject knowledge inthe process. In contrast because men are trained to look for power intheir interactions, they compete to control topics – interrupting if necessary –and they work to hold their turn against others’ interruptions, even when theirown subject knowledge is poor.

When these different discourse rules are applies together, women’s contributions are likely to be heard less than men’s because men willbe trying to take the floor and women will be encouraging them to do it. Tannen argues that neither side is deliberately dominatingor giving way – each is simply what it has been trained to do within its owngender group. 3.

Reporting and Rapporting: According to Tannen, one of the major complaints women haveabout men as speakers is that they don’t give enough information when they aretelling incidents – they leave out all the exciting parts of any story, givingjust the basic information. In contrast, men complain that women give too muchinformation when they tell stories – they go on and on when they could reallysum up the content of their discourse in one sentence. Tannen’s explanation is that men and women think they aredoing different things when they communicate information: Men concentrate on the information content alone (themessage) because they see the telling of incidents as reporting, while womenpay more attention to the metamessage – telling experiences is a way to relateto the listener (rapporting). 4.      Problem-solving andproblem-sharing: Research has shown that men and women also responddifferently in conversations when a problem is presented.

Because men aretrained to be active and find solutions to problems, they adopt a problemsolution approach when someone expresses personal difficulties. In contrast, women are encouraged to think of themselves aslisteners. While listening is certainly not a passive activity, it does not necessarilyinvolve making suggestions about how to change situations or take action. Whiletalking about problems, women often take turns in comparing difficulties and infinding similarities between their respective situations. Example:  Male Perspective: A man expresses a problem to his partner.

He expects problemsolution, but receives, to his intense annoyance, problem sharing: Peter: I’m really tired. I didn’t sleep well last night. Allison: I didn’t sleep well either. Peter: why are you always trying to belittle me? Allison: I’m not! I’m just trying to tell you I understandhow you feel!