HE SAID, SHE SAID

Women and men speak their own languages, but research reveals the conversational gender divide is not as stark as it seems.

Why don't men like to stop and ask directions? This question, which I first addressed in my 1990 book You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, garnered perhaps the most attention of any issue or insight in that book. It appeared on cocktail napkins ("Real men don't ask directions") and became a staple of stand-up comics as well as jokes that made the rounds: "Why did Moses wander in the desert for 40 years?" and "Why does it take so many sperm to find just one egg?"

The attention surprised me. I had not known how widespread this experience was, but I included the asking-directions scenario because it crystallized key aspects of a phenomenon that, I had discovered, accounts for many of the frustrations that women and men experience in conversation. I have spent more than three decades collecting and analyzing thousands of examples of how women and men interact and have found that men's talk tends to focus on hierarchy — competition for relative power — whereas women's tends to focus on connection — relative closeness or distance. In other words, a man and woman might walk away from the same conversation asking different questions: he might wonder, "Did that conversation put me in a one-up or one-down position?" whereas she might wonder, "Did it bring us closer or push us farther apart?"

But wait! All conversations, and all relationships, reflect a combination of hierarchy and connection — the two are not mutually exclusive but inextricably intertwined. All of us aspire to be powerful, and we all want to connect with others. Since the publication of You Just Don't Understand, I have continued to investigate the nuances of women's and men's ways of speaking to clarify how their conversational styles are different ways of reaching the same goals. My newest work explores the context in which women's focus on hierarchy and men's on connection is most obvious and most intense: the family. In particular, sisters provide insight into relationships among women that are deeply influenced by competition as well as connection.

So what does any of this have to do with asking for directions? The route to the answer may not yet be obvious, but read on and I promise to get you there.

"Mine's Higher" vs. "We're the Same"

My interest in the linguistic differences between women and men grew from research I conducted early in my career on conversations between speakers of different ethnic and regional backgrounds. These interactions often led to misunderstandings because members of each group had contrasting assumptions about what should be said and the appropriate way to say it. I sensed, and later showed, a parallel pattern in conversations between women and men — a gender-based culture clash.

I often illustrate — and trace — this phenomenon using video clips of preschoolers at a day care center. In one scene, four little boys are sitting together, talking about how high they can hit a ball. "Mine's up to there," one small boy declares, raising his arm above his head. "Mine's up to the sky," a second responds, pointing higher. A third boy counters, "Mine's up to heaven!" Then the fourth boy offers: "Mine's all the way up to God." These boys' verbal exchange is obviously a game of hierarchy, as each one's claim tops the preceding one.

I contrast this video clip with another from the same preschool: two little girls are sitting at a small table, drawing. One girl suddenly raises her head, looks at the other, and says (apparently referring to contact lenses), "Did you know that my babysitter, called Amber, has already contacts?" The second girl looks puzzled at first but quickly gathers herself together and announces, with apparent relish, "My mom has already contacts and my dad does, too!" The first girl laughs with glee at this echo response, which even matches the first girl's odd syntax ("has already" rather than "already has"). After a pause, during which both girls return to drawing, the first one exclaims with delight, "The SAME?!" Being the same is as pleasing to her as topping one another is to the boys.
Although the specific conversational moves — topping versus matching — are different, what these contrasting conversations have in common is that they are rituals: self-evident assumptions about how the conversations should go and what a reasonable remark or response should look like. As with cross-cultural communication, we do not recognize them as rituals until we talk to others who do not share our assumptions.

Parents tell me that recognizing these as gender-related patterns in their children helps them deal with otherwise baffling behavior. For example, a woman recalled overhearing three little boys — her son and two of his friends — talking in the backseat as she was driving. One boy said, "When we went to Disneyland, we stayed three days." The second boy said, "When we went to Disneyland, we stayed four days." Then her son said, "We're going to move to Disneyland!" She was troubled to hear him utter an obvious untruth. Should she instruct her son not to tell lies? I assured her that the boys knew that her family was not going to move to Disneyland. But her son won that round.

A father told me about a similar confusion upon overhearing a conversation between his little girl and her friend. The friend had said, "I have a brother named Benjamin and a brother named Jonathan." His daughter responded, "I have a brother named Benjamin and a brother named Jonathan, too." But she didn't. Her father wondered why she would say such a thing. I explained that she was simply offering a matching experience as a sign of goodwill, to reinforce the friendship.

The contrasting focus on connection versus hierarchy also sheds light on innumerable adult conversations — and frustrations. Say a woman tells another about a personal problem and hears in response, "I know how you feel" or "the same thing happens to me." The resulting "troubles talk" reinforces the connection between them. (Indeed, some women feel they have to dig up problems to tell friends to maintain intimacy.) Because this is not a conversational ritual he is used to, a man may well misread her conversational gambit as a request for help solving the problem. The result is mutual frustration: she blames him for telling her what to do and failing to provide the expected comfort, whereas he thinks he did exactly what she requested and cannot fathom why she would keep talking about a problem if she does not want to do anything about it.

Similar scenarios play out at work, where mutual misinterpretations may have career-altering consequences. For example, if a woman's boss overhears her telling a subordinate, "Could you do me a favor and get me a copy of that report?" he may think she lacks confidence. It appears to him as if she does not feel she has a right to ask her subordinate to do something. But the truth is probably the exact opposite. She knows the subordinate has to do what she asks. Her locution "do me a favor" is simply a way of not flaunting the power she obviously has — and thus saving face for the subordinate. If men often mishear women's ritual indirectness as lacking confidence (or even competence), women often misinterpret less indirect rituals as overbearing — and also lacking in confidence. Her thinking goes: he must really lack self-esteem if he has to throw his weight around like that.

Which takes us back to the woman and man in the car who have different assumptions about asking directions. From her point of view, asking directions means making a fleeting connection to a stranger and getting where you are going without losing anything. From his perspective, he would be putting himself in a one-down position to a stranger — an uncomfortable experience. He might even believe the effort is counterproductive because a stranger who does not know the way will be similarly motivated by a reluctance to appear one-down and send them on a wild-goose chase. For both reasons, it makes sense to avoid this discomfort and spend 10 minutes — or 20 or 30 — finding the way on his own.

Different Styles, Similar Goals

Despite these differences, women's and men's conversational styles are more alike than they may appear. Although these styles may seem opposite, they can be used for similar purposes. Boys and men are also concerned with connection, and girls and women with power, even as they may have different ways of pursuing these goals.

Verbal rituals that focus on connection often involve affirming sameness, as we saw in the little girls' exchange about contact lenses and in the familiar responses: "The same thing happened to me" and "I'm the same way." Yet the contrasting ritual, "That's nothing! Here's what happened to me..." which is typically associated with men — and interpreted as competitive — can also create connection, by implying, "You shouldn't feel bad about what
happened to you, because what happened to me was worse." In other words, "topping" each other can be another way to commiserate.

Similarly, for girls and women, what appears on the surface to be aimed at connection can also be a way to exert power. Linguist Amy Sheldon of the University of Minnesota has investigated this process by videotaping preschool children playing in same-sex groups of three. She found that both boys and girls pursued their own goals, but whereas the boys she taped were obvious about thwarting another's goals, the girls often did so in ways that appeared to honor the other girls' goals as well. In one example, two girls, Eva and Kelly, were not eager to include the third girl, Tulla, in their play. Instead of telling Tulla outright that she could not play, they included her but assigned her a role that precluded her participation: "You can be the baby brother, but you aren't born yet." Sheldon emphasizes that this is a highly assertive move, even as it maintains the appearance of accommodating Tulla's wish to be part of the game.

In this instance, the children's behavior is not a clear on-or-off application of hierarchy or connection but a blending of both. We could say that Eva and Kelly exercised power to keep Tulla from participating but also honored the connection by assigning her a role. In contrast, Sheldon observed that when boys played, they tended to insist more overtly on their own goals and even to threaten physical force. For example, when one boy, Nick, wanted to cut a plastic pickle that another boy had, he screamed, "I have to cut! I want to cut it! It's mine!" Sheldon stresses, however, that although boys and girls tended to use more of one strategy or another, the difference was not absolute but of degree. Boys did sometimes attempt to compromise, and girls did at times attempt physical force to get their way.

Sheldon's research reminds us that patterns, no matter how real, are never absolute. Again, the asking-directions example is instructive. I didn't realize how common that scenario is because my husband does stop and ask directions, whereas I am the one who says, "I'd rather find it myself on the map." In this respect, he and I are not typical, as many of us are not typical of our genders, cultures, regions or any other group to which we belong.

Gender differences are a matter of relative focus on connection and hierarchy, as we all want to accomplish both goals to some extent. We are always engaged in negotiations over connection and relative power. Eva and Kelly served both goals when they included Tulla — and kept her from participating. Similarly, the boys who verbally competed about how high they could hit a ball also created connection by agreeing on the type of verbal game to play. To understand gender patterns, then, rather than asking, "Does this way of speaking serve hierarchy or connection?" we need to ask, "How does this way of talking reflect the interplay of connection and hierarchy?" And nowhere can this interplay be better explored than in the context that is both universal and fundamental: the family.


What is Tannen’s main point in this article?

Why does she refer to her own research in the first paragraphs?

How does she use the research of other linguists in her article?

How do you respond to this article? Does it match your experience or not?

How do you feel about her use of “boys and girls” and other categories without saying “most” or “many”? Does she ever qualify her statements?

Can you tell what she is basing her conclusions on? Why don’t readers get more statistics or charts in this article?