

A DEFENSE OF THE CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH TO MALE-FEMALE (MIS)COMMUNICATION

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Abstract Starting from the realization that gender-related discriminatory practices are still encountered frequently enough as to account for the coinage of words like *mansplaining* (2008) and *hepeated* (2017), this article retraces the roots of divergent linguistic behaviours to the gender stereotyping underlying parental behaviour or social normativity and articulates the importance of analyzing cross-sex interaction by using the cross-cultural communication framework of analysis. This approach has the potential for equity-inducing change by helping people break the psychological hold of the gender-related ideologies thrust on them in childhood and by ensuring that members of both sexes are sensitized to the others' interactional idiosyncrasies and encouraged to accommodate them.

Keywords mansplaining, hepeated, gender stereotyping, cross-sex interaction, cross-cultural communication.

Whilst the different biological markers that characterize the two sexes are a biological given, gender norms and gender roles are historically, geographically, socially and culturally shaped. Since gender demonstrates such a flexuous nature and gender roles defy easy categorization, advocates of gender equality have often misguidedly refused to acknowledge that gender differences exist, failing to realize that denying the facts actually does a disservice to their agenda. The *nature* versus *nurture* conundrum cannot be solved until we agree to approach the issue with an open mind, willing to accept that gender differences are incredibly complex and cannot be accounted for in terms of *either... or*, but rather in terms of *both ... and*. Denial is an obstacle on the path to cross-sex cooperation, as it prevents us from obtaining profound insight into the actuality of our existence. Only once we accept the reality of both sex and gender idiosyncrasies can we understand if and how they are connected, to what extent they

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are the result of nature or nurture, as well as whether we can diminish their occurrence so as to foster true equality in spite of such differences as there may be. By taking our ideological blinders off, we are much more likely to be able to accept dissimilarities and to focus on viable solutions that will eventually lead to better communication and real social equality. Starting from the realization that gender-related discriminatory practices are still encountered frequently enough as to have given rise to the coinage of words like *mansplaining*, in 2008, and *hepeated*, in 2017, this article reassesses the distinctions that have been made between male and female communication styles, retraces the roots of divergent linguistic behaviours to the gender stereotyping that underlies parental behaviour or social normativity, and articulates the importance of implementing change on the basis of the justified assumption that, when it comes to cross-sex communication, the interlocutors come from different cultures, the male culture and, respectively, the female culture, which rest on specific beliefs, attitudes and rituals bound to yield misunderstandings unless these cultural differences are acknowledged, assumed and suitably bridged.

We have come a long way since the year 1727, when Jonathan Swift's poem, "The Furniture of a Woman's Mind," portrayed women as chatterboxes that never make sense but only noise, reinforcing the widely-held belief that women are supposed to be pleasant to look at, graceful and alluring yet, just like children, they should only be seen, not heard.¹ If, however, they dare express so-called intellectual views, they need to be "effectively silenced through ridicule;" their voices, public and private, must be trivialized, because nothing a woman might say could ever be of consequence to "adult – male – society":² "Never to hold her Tongue a Minute;/While all she prates has nothing in it./[...] Her Arguments directly tend/Against the Side she would defend."³ The progress that our society has made was, nevertheless, extremely slow. Towards the end of the 1950s, for instance, Keith Thomas's proposal to introduce at Oxford University a series of courses focusing on seventeenth-century women met with dismal failure: "the subject was perceived as neither relevant nor interesting."⁴ Over the next twenty years women persistently sought to establish political, social and economic equality between the sexes, accelerating the process of change and leading to the crystallization of novel fields of enquiry into women's roles and experiences in society.

The year 1975 marked the advent of 'gender and discourse' as a field of inquiry, following the publication of three pioneering works that would shape developments in this interdisciplinary domain for decades to come: *Language and Woman's Place* by Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Male/Female Language* by Mary Ritchie Key and the volume edited by Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley entitled *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. As Shari Kendall and

¹ Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes* (London: Verso, 1986), quoted in Valerie Shepherd, *Literature about Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 119.

² Shepherd, *Literature about Language*, 119.

³ Jonathan Swift, "The Furniture of a Woman's Mind," 1727, quoted in Shepherd, *Literature about Language*, 117–118.

⁴ Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect before Her* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 3.

Deborah Tannen pertinently pointed out in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* published in 2001, the focus of discourse and gender research fell, from the beginning, on “documenting empirical differences between women’s and men’s speech, especially in cross-sex interaction,” on “describing women’s speech in particular” and on “identifying the role of language in creating and maintaining social inequality between women and men.”⁵

In their preface to *Language and Sex*, a volume comprising twelve articles on the topic, Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley argued that there are dire social consequences if a language “tends to deprecate or ignore a whole class of human beings, and to set them apart by usage” and explained the urgent need to figure out exactly what had led to the unacceptable position of second-class citizens that women found themselves in, as well as the urgency to identify and to assess the possibilities for change, in order to foster gender equality, a state that would eventually prove beneficial to all.⁶ Mary Ritchie Key’s expansion of the paper she had delivered in 1970 at the American Dialect Society after having taught a course on Male/Female Language in 1968 illustrates how a book written by a female author on women can both convey information on and offer solutions to problems related to human relationships by focusing not only on women’s concerns, but also on male issues.⁷ Inspired by the works of Margaret Mead, Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, Mary Ritchie Key emphasizes “the inextricable relationship of living and language,”⁸ the need to acknowledge multiple perspectives and to respect the various contributions of different individuals “to making the family and the society”⁹ as well as the fact that “male and female behavior can only be understood within the matrix of the power structure of the total society.”¹⁰

Human beings cannot escape the influence of cultural frames. We are never genuinely free, but shackled by the gendered cultural ideology thrust on us in early childhood, when we develop our conceptual models of how the world around us works. The concept of ‘frame’, defined by Stephen C. Levinson as “a body of knowledge that is evoked in order to provide an inferential base for the understanding of an utterance,”¹¹ dates back to the 1970s, when cognitive theorists were searching for a way of analyzing how experience and language affect one another, and refers to the set of expectations that allow us to make predictions and generalizations. Communication is facilitated when the interlocutors share the same frame, but any sudden frame-shift may foster misunderstandings, requires adjusting and can thus be disconcerting and distressing. Yet any process of social and cultural change is bound to trigger

⁵ Shari Kendall and Deborah Tannen, “Discourse and Gender,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 548–567, 548.

⁶ Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (eds.), *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, 1975), 9.

⁷ Mary Ritchie Key, *Male/Female Language* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1996), vii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹¹ Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 281.

such antagonistic workings like sheltering old frames or actualizing new ones through language. We tend to perceive as ‘normal’ the particular state of affairs that we are used to, and it is only when we are able to imagine an alternative that objectivity regains its rightful place in our analysis of the situation. For instance ‘racism’ and ‘sexism’ are both types of prejudice rooted in generalized presuppositions regarding certain groups of people and they had been in existence long before finally being given a name. The first cited occurrence of ‘racism’ dates from 1907, although the practice had been attested even among English speakers for long before that time. Moreover, it was not given an entry in the 1933 edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, though Nazism was booming at the time, so its manifestations cannot be said to have been sporadic. The word made its first dictionary appearance only in 1970 in a Supplement: “it was not until recently that our culture evolved enough to enable us to step outside the frame in which such behavior was normal, and so invisible” explains Lakoff, adding that racism “could only be named when speakers could imagine a world in which it did not exist. Similarly, even though the constellation of attitudes and behaviors constituting what we call ‘sexism’ had existed for centuries, as they were built into our socio-cultural norms, the word made the dictionary only in the second half of the 20th century, as a result of “the raising of female consciousness witnessed from 1960s till now.”¹²

In her introduction to the 2004 revised and expanded edition of *Language and Woman’s Place*, Lakoff pointed out that one of her aims in writing the book had been “to use linguistic discrepancies between women and men as a diagnosis of social and psychological inequities between the sexes”¹³ and that this was frowned upon by some linguists who viewed language as “a string of forms unrelated to function” and claimed that linguistics should not be politicized, but allowed to remain objective, scientific and “properly academic”.¹⁴ But language *has* functions, it does not exist in a vacuum and it is not employed in the abstract: the way in which language is used to refer to the members of the two sexes both mirrors and reinforces society’s expectations regarding the desirable manifestations of femininity and masculinity. The structure of the basic discourse as well as that of the metadiscourse and their content in terms of both *what is* and *what is not* stated *are the result of* and also *result in* specific combinations of meaning, responsibilities and power relations.

The “set of culturally learned signals by which we not only communicate what we mean but also interpret other people’s meanings and then evaluate one another,” explains Deborah Tannen, constitute our “linguistic style”.¹⁵ The aspects that shape the speaking pattern characteristic of a person include “ethnic background” – the country of origin for that particular person, but also for his/her parents and relatives, the language or languages spoken

¹² Alina Preda, “Language and Society: Misogyny, Homophobia and Heterosexism,” *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Philologia*, XLIX, 1 (2004), 99–108, 102.

¹³ Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place*, revised and expanded edition, edited by Mary Bucholtz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ Deborah Tannen, “The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why,” *Harvard Business Review* 73 (September-October 1995): 138–148, 139.

by them all, “regional background”, “age”, “class”, “profession”, “gender” and “sexual orientation”.¹⁶ The term “linguistic style” comprises the choices we make when trying to get our message across in terms of “conversational signals, devices and rituals”.¹⁷ *Conversational signals* cover the amplitude of the voice – loudness or softness; the speed and the pacing – quickness or slowness; the pausing – frequency of pauses, length and placement within discourse; “the music of speech, the voice quality, the intonation patterns;” the attitude and even the use of silent moments.¹⁸ *Conversational devices* include but are not limited to norms of turn-taking; relative indirectness; complaining as a means of strengthening a bond, of getting things done and of finding solutions to problems; types of questions asked and reasons for asking; topics of discussion; uses of irony, figures of speech, teasing, insults, stories, jokes, as well as sensitivity to listenership.¹⁹ *Conversational rituals* must be recognized as such if one is to respond properly, as expected. Ritualistic conversational exchanges must not be taken literally. Greeting rituals, for instance, require that you give the proper answer and keep it brief: just like an American asking “How are you?” upon encountering someone expects nothing more than “Fine, thanks” or another very similar short retort, two people meeting in Burma would engage in a crisp conversational exchange that sounds like this: “Where are you going?”/“Over there.” or “Have you eaten rice yet?”/“Yes, I have.” These are ritual greetings and you obviously have to be familiar with them so as to know how to interpret the utterances and “what the proper response is.”²⁰

Our different communication styles, our views on how language should be used to further our aims and our conversation-related expectations can be traced back to the distinct experiences we may have had as children.²¹ When playing in same-sex environments, Tannen explains, boys put the same amount of effort into “proving that they can top each other” (even by making statements they know to be false) as the girls are putting into “proving that they are the same, even if they are not.”²² Through the way in which they talk, our parents pass-on gender-differentiated asymmetrical assumptions with “different power structures built in” that we unawaresly absorb.²³ Table 1 systematizes the factors that influence the development of linguistic styles in the case of boys and in the case of girls:²⁴

¹⁶ Deborah Tannen, “That’s Not What I Meant! Signals, Devices, and Rituals,” *Reading Course English I*, (11 Feb 2014), video, 1:05–2:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfA2m-tLlaE&t=18s> (accessed on 13 November 2017).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 0:13–0:15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 0:15–0:57

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:35–4:28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:37–6:19.

²¹ Deborah Tannen, “The Open Mind: Language, Sex and Power,” Part 1 (14 Aug 2015), video, 12:57–13:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0wgJAKsvGE&t=1s> (accessed on 13 November 2017).

²² Deborah Tannen, “Gender-specific language rituals,” (22 Dec 2013), video, 5:37–5:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUxnBZxsfoU> (accessed on 13 November 2017).

²³ Teresa Pierce, “Lecture - Language & Gender,” (7 Feb 2011), video, 40:38–41:00.

²⁴ Tannen, “Gender-specific language rituals,” 0:20–7:44.

Table 1

BOYS	GIRLS
play mostly outdoors	play mostly indoors
engage in more competitive games	engage in more cooperative games
prefer large teams	prefer small social circles (play in pairs or in very close-knit groups)
have best team-mates	have best friends
the activity is central (getting things done) and establishing hierarchy is essential	the talking is central (secrets are shared) and the question of connection is essential
use language to negotiate their status in the group but as a game, a conversational ritual	use language to identify similarities, shared interests, to form friendships
interaction is about competition, about developing and putting to use power-gaining and power-conveying techniques	interaction is meant to create friendships, so as to later strengthen the bonds, and to sort out problems
try to be the centre of attention, to take centre-stage, to be in the limelight	do not try to be the centre of attention, to take centre-stage, to be in the limelight
manifest high respect for the better man, the one who gives orders, makes them stick and pushes others around	do not like to play with girls who issue orders telling others what to do and will exclude from the group those girls who give orders and push others around
are afraid of losing their higher status once gained; of being forced to take orders, to follow them through, shun being pushed around	are afraid of being left out, excluded from the group, ignored, not allowed to partake in secret-sharing

In childhood we thus learn speech patterns that will influence our future interactions, because we carry them over to our private and public spheres in adulthood, namely they will eventually transpire into our family life and at our workplace. As a result of the different socialization instances, male-female communication is marred by gross misunderstandings whenever ritualized talk comes into play, as offering apologies, giving feedback and engaging in ritual fighting all represent potential minefields difficult to avoid. Men are less willing to act in ways bound to undermine their status so they shun making apologies, refrain from acknowledging guilt and rarely concede that they do not know something or do not have specific information. Men normally think highly of themselves and if feedback sessions begin with their strong points and end with the weak ones they often disregard the latter and fail to make improvements in the respective areas, unless directly asked to implement clearly stated suggestions. Similarly, when giving feedback, men straightforwardly point out the problems and tend not to mince their words. Women are said to apologize more often, yet they do not use "I'm sorry" merely as an apology but rather to express concern for the other person's unpleasant experience, in a ritualized fashion misunderstood by men, who believe this

expression reflects the “internal psychological state” of the speaker.²⁵ However, women are, indeed, more willing to acknowledge guilt and more prone to concede that they do not know something or do not have specific information. Yet they are likely to take clearly stated suggestions for improvement as negative criticism and are surprised if negative feedback is given directly, since they themselves would ensure that positive feedback is offered first and negative feedback downplayed, in order to spare the interlocutor’s feelings. Women are less confrontational and, when fighting, they use different strategies, so they are stunned at witnessing violent verbal arguments between male colleagues followed only minutes later by jocular conversations. They believe that men get over these instances surprisingly quickly and are convinced they would never recover so easily after such an encounter, failing to recognize its ritualistic nature. Men are used from early childhood to challenge one another’s ideas, to defend their position, not taking to heart the fight, as it is just a game. *Ritual opposition* characterizes another male strategy, namely playing *devil’s advocate* – “trying to poke holes” into the idea put forward by a colleague, yet this is tantamount to play-fighting, the aim being simply to further explore the viability of that idea. Nevertheless, in such situations women view the devil’s advocate strategy as real opposition, renouncing their idea, or may consider it a personal attack and take it to heart.²⁶ Women ask questions more often and have no difficulty asking for directions, whereas men ask questions less often so as not to be put in a one-down position and refuse to ask for directions for three main reasons: so as not to show weakness by asking for help, so as not to admit they do not know something and, interestingly, because they believe that should the one asked not know the way, he will make-up an answer and misdirect them rather than say he does not know.²⁷

So presumptuous and pushy are some men that they often engage in *mansplaining*. The word is recent, although the idea and the practice of “explaining without regard to the fact that the explainee knows more than the explainer, often done by a man to a woman” are age-old.²⁸ Following the publication on 13 April 2008, in the *Los Angeles Times* of a fragment from Rebecca Solnit’s collection of essays entitled “Men Explain Things to Me”, which offered a glaring example of mansplaining, this blend of the words ‘man’ and ‘explaining’ appeared in the comment section of a blog, on May 21st, according to *Know Your Meme*.²⁹ It made the Urban Dictionary on 4 February 2011 and, slowly but steadily, it gained in popularity. However, as Lily Rothman argues, “seeing mansplaining everywhere – especially once you know it’s been around so long – is perhaps as dangerous as allowing it to go unnoticed. It’s a bad idea to discourage the valuable exercise of putting oneself in another’s shoes, regardless of gender.”³⁰

²⁵ Tannen, “The Open Mind: Language, Sex and Power,” 5:25–6:05.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20:20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14:50–14:57.

²⁸ Lily Rothman, “A Cultural History of Mansplaining,” *The Atlantic* (Nov 1, 2012) <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/11/a-cultural-history-of-mansplaining/264380/> (accessed on 13.11.2017).

²⁹ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/mansplaining> (accessed on 13 November 2017).

³⁰ Rothman, “A Cultural History of Mansplaining.”

The communication strategies we get accustomed to are bound to influence our behaviour and judgment of others in terms of competence and confidence, so we react to situations in ways that are gender-specific. Power games are involved in interaction, especially at the work-place: if a woman comes up with a good idea which is either ignored or dismissed and then a man takes it up, restating what his female colleague had said, it is he who gets the credit. This situation is extremely common, as the recent coining of the term *hepeated* clearly shows. On 23 September 2017, Brandi Neal posted an article on-line in which the definition of this word was given: “Hepeated just might be the new mansplaining, and it happens when a man repeats your ignored idea, and everyone thinks he’s a genius. Hepeating differs from mansplaining, which is when a man explains your experience to you in a condescending or patronizing manner because clearly you are incapable, as a woman, of understanding it yourself. You get hepeated when a man takes something you said, repeats it as his own, and takes the credit.”³¹ Neal points out that the word was coined and tweeted on 22 September 2017 by friends of social advocate and professor Nicole Gugliucci, and only 36 hours later her tweet had over 130,000 likes and more than 45,000 re-tweets, which shows how many people “can relate to the experience of being hepeated.”³² Even congresswomen face this kind of situation, as Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers’s tweet illustrates: “I certainly had those experiences where I feel like I say something and then someone else maybe says something very similar. I almost feel what I said wasn’t heard, right? But someone else around the table will be recognized for having said it, and that puzzles me. And so I’m always trying to figure out how to present in a way that will be heard.”³³

Although for a man to appropriate a woman’s idea is not uncommon, this is not to say that men always try to steal women’s ideas, or to pass them on as their own, but rather that they often assess them very briefly and select some aspects they deem positive in order to advance the conversation. What happens is that due to men’s use of the ‘power-up’ language style that they have been socialized into, external perceptions get distorted: men are perceived by the observers (colleagues, managers, associates, etc.) as the best contributors to the meeting in terms of the quality of the ideas put forward, as they take charge (assuming control), whilst women take a step back (fostering cooperation). The biased judgment becomes obvious when external perception comes under scrutiny – different demeanours are considered ‘natural’ for a man and for a woman: “women are acculturated to tend to downplay their contribution” whilst men are trained to exaggerate theirs.³⁴ The problem is that women who are in a position of authority and those seek to advance their careers must make themselves heard, get ahead, get things done, although only men are normally expected to

³¹ Brandi Neal, “What Does ‘Hepeated’ Mean? This Term Might Be The New Mansplaining,” (23 September, 2017), <https://www.bustle.com/p/what-does-hepeated-mean-this-term-might-be-the-new-mansplaining-2437535> (accessed on 13 November 2017).

³² Ibid.

³³ Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers (@CAWP_RU, 10:01 a.m. – September 23, 2017).

³⁴ Tannen, “The Open Mind: Language, Sex and Power,” 2:40–2:44.

attempt such tasks. Whatever a man in a position of authority does to appear stronger as a boss “also makes him a better man.”³⁵ In contrast, whatever a woman in a position of authority does to appear stronger as a boss “starts to undercut people’s impression of her as a woman”³⁶ even though it has no actual influence over her femininity. This means that a woman risks being called boisterous, bombastic, pushy, domineering and, surprisingly, not a good leader, if she does her best to lead by exercising authority. Due to what is perceived as respectful demeanour within the context of a particular conversation, women encounter what Tannen calls the ‘double-bind’:³⁷ the paradoxical position that a female boss, leader, manager or CEO finds herself in as a result of the fact that the conversational style associated with someone in power is not the feminine one. Depending on what is considered appropriate in the respective society for males and for females engaging in a certain type of interaction and function of the speech style employed, one can leave the impression of being either confident (if male) or boasting (if female).³⁸ Similarly, in the political arena, points out the founder and CEO of The Representation Project, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, “women have to do an impossible dance of being ‘feminine’ enough not to be threatening, but ‘masculine’ enough to be taken seriously.”³⁹ This ‘double bind’, explains Nicola Pardy, means that “women must walk a thin line between two tricky dynamics when presenting themselves in public and on camera” – they have to “project both warmth and authority in their body language: smile, but not to the point of seeming like a pushover; take up space, but make sure [they]’re not physically intimidating others.”⁴⁰ Deborah Tannen also clarifies that a double bind “means you must obey two commands, but anything you do to fulfill one violates the other. While the requirements of a good leader and a good man are similar, the requirements of a good leader and a good woman are mutually exclusive. A good leader must be tough, but a good woman must not be. A good woman must be self-deprecating, but a good leader must not be.”⁴¹

Men and women display power differently, since it is men who supposedly have the power to interrupt, to ridicule and put down others, to control the content of the conversation, to correct or ignore others and what they say, to respond, to maintain control of

³⁵ Ibid., 2:45.

³⁶ Ibid., 2:46–2:54.

³⁷ A term first employed in the 1950s by Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley and John H. Weakland in their work on the complexity of communication.

³⁸ Tannen, “The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why,” 142.

³⁹ Jennifer Siebel Newsom quoted in Nicola Pardy , “Political Body Language : The Angela Merkel Exception,” (29 September, 2017), <http://www.refinery29.com/2017/09/173467/angela-merkel-germany-election-hillary-clinton-body-language>

⁴⁰ Nicola Pardy, “Political Body Language: The Angela Merkel Exception,” <http://www.refinery29.com/2017/09/173467/angela-merkel-germany-election-hillary-clinton-body-language> (accessed on 8 December 2017)

⁴¹ Deborah Tannen, “Clinton’s Double Bind,” *The Moderate Voice*, 2016, <http://themoderatevoice.com/clintons-double-bind/> (accessed on 13 November 2017).

the conversation.⁴² Below there are some polarized features believed to characterize the two genders:

Table 2

MEN	WOMEN
are direct and more imposing	are indirect and less imposing
take short pauses	take long pauses
speak at a fast pace	speak at a slow pace
talk loudly	talk in a low-voice
display powerful or 'power-up' speech mannerisms	display powerless or 'power-down' speech mannerisms
give praise less often, are less polite, more direct	give praise more often, are more polite, less direct
are concerned with whether the conversation is putting the people involved into a superior or an inferior position	are concerned with whether the conversation is bringing people closer or driving them further apart
obviously competitive and hierarchical	competitive and hierarchical but not in such obvious ways

Men are used to asserting their views at the expense of everyone else's, showing little regard for the opinions and preferences of the others involved, as they make a different assumption regarding how decisions are to be made. Women feel that decisions should be made only after taking into account the opinions and preferences of all those involved. Unfortunately, if a female boss asks for the others' views, this is misinterpreted as a lack of leadership skills or as an absence of management abilities. Moreover, women hesitate more frequently and resort to fillers in order to gain time and to be able to choose their words carefully. Women also employ tag questions, hedges – *I guess, I would*; disclaimers – *I'm no expert but, I've never really*; more polite forms – *excuse me, could I* and *I'm sorry*, though the latter is often used to express sympathy for the other person's problems, not in an apologetic sense but rather in a ritualistic fashion. The use of these power-down speech mannerisms projects a less confident image, leaving the impression that the speaker lacks competence.⁴³ Additionally, a distinction has been made between the 'report' style – the presumed masculine one, and the 'rapport style' – the presumed feminine one:

Table 3

the 'report' style	the 'rapport' style
is hierarchical	is used to form connections
employs competitive metaphors	employs cooperative metaphors

⁴² Pierce, "Lecture - Language & Gender," 4:00–5:09.

⁴³ Pierce, "Lecture - Language & Gender," 16:10–23:05.

relies on 'I' statements made from a power-up position to create the illusion that complete control and ultimate authority reside with the speaker	relies on 'we' statements made from a power-down position to avoid creating the illusion that complete control and ultimate authority reside with the speaker
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Although the conversational styles and rituals that women and men use are different, the idea that boys and men are competitive, whilst girls and women are cooperative is a cliché in dire need of reassessment and so is the belief that the latter are sensitive and the former are not. People's conversational style must not be taken for granted, as politeness does not equal lack of authority, just like asking questions does not imply lack of knowledge, but eagerness to know more. To selectively record and to mistakenly interpret conversational exchanges that fit preconceived ideas is useless and even detrimental. Conversations are not meant to always be taken literally, as they may perform a function different from the mere communication of information. Taking everything that is being said literally breeds misunderstandings, whereas mindfulness of one another's conversational style leads to positive outcomes. It is not that women lack management skills or leadership abilities; their communication strategies actually work and are appreciated by their co-workers, and their superiors need to acknowledge this, to appreciate the effectiveness and to let go of their old stereotypical views. Both men and women are sensitive, though their specific sensitivities are activated by different stimuli: women are more sensitive to what might signal rejection, lack of affection or an intention to push them away⁴⁴ whilst men are more sensitive to signals that might imply they are looked down on, "being put down" or pushed around.⁴⁵ Heightened sensitivity to one set of signals is often accompanied by blindness to the signals from the other set: "men may miss the signal that someone's pushing them away" and "women often may miss the signal that someone's putting them down" or trying to undercut their authority.⁴⁶ Men and women who judge one another based solely on the standards that they were taught to live up to are bound to err. Boys are encouraged to be assertive and to boast about their achievements whilst hiding their flaws in order to gain the recognition that they deserve, whereas girls are taught to be modest and hardworking, to wait for their accomplishments to be acknowledged by others. Consequently, "women will often appear to men as less confident than they really are, and men will often appear to women as more arrogant than they really are."⁴⁷

Neither style is wrong, neither is inferior, neither makes one a bad communicator. They are both effective at various times or in various situations and acknowledging the existence of different styles enables us to employ the most appropriate one for each particular situation and to avoid miscommunication by being flexible.⁴⁸ If we manage to identify the existing differences manifest in the way we speak and to spot the everyday realities that

⁴⁴ Tannen, "The Open Mind: Language, Sex and Power", 16:30–16:37.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 17:04–17:08.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18:22–18:28.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 25:40–26:15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 12:57–13:13.

underlie them, we can avoid needlessly blaming our partners; this awareness will ultimately improve our relationships and allow us to properly interpret not only the message – the actual meaning of the words, but also the meta-message – what the person is trying to accomplish by saying those words.⁴⁹ To be a good communicator you need to be able to *make yourself understood by* and to *understand* the interlocutor; this may require adjusting when the other person’s style is different to yours and you can only do this once you accept that not everyone employs the same linguistic style. It is uncontroversially true that if boys and girls undergo different processes of socialization and are exposed to dissimilar gendered behavioural models, they grow up with different expectations regarding themselves and others and display distinct strategies of communication later in life. It is also indubitable that we are all unique and do not necessarily react in the same manner to identical challenges. Some women are more rebellious than others, and even more rebellious than certain men, some men are more compliant than others, and even more compliant than certain women. A strong personality is not exclusive to men, just like an impressionable nature is not exclusive to women. Nevertheless, despite the fact that gender differences are not always unequivocal enough to allow for felicitous generalizations valid across the board, the distinctions made above are based on significantly large areas of research to grant them validity. The idea that there is a masculine subculture and, respectively, a feminine subculture is perfectly sensible, since culturally determined gender specific expectations and patterns of linguistic interaction account for many instances of communication failure: speakers of opposite genders may misinterpret or misunderstand one another “because the stereotypes of their culture impose blinders on them, making them unable to see alternatives to the world they are assuming in their arguments.”⁵⁰ It is the insidious process of gender-related acculturation that, along with individual history and specific personality, underlies interactional communication patterns, shaping language production, influencing linguistic choices, activating a preference for particular compositional conceptual metaphors and determining the use of specific discourse strategies.

Early research on the social organization of language and gender clearly identified the complex interconnections that exist among the following: differential gender socialization strategies that lead to the shaping of the gendered-self, motivation-triggers and pragmatic interactional goals that index gender and status, socially established norms of cross-sex interaction that regulate everyday conversational practices and rituals, gender-related linguistic variations in language and variations in conversational habits that lead to a display of gender-distinct attitudes and – last but not least – culturally vested expectations of femininity and masculinity that place significant gender-bound constraints especially on women’s performative use of language both in the domestic and in the public sphere. The cultural expectations regarding the way in which women are supposed to use language and the consequences incurred by those who dare violate gender stereotypes in communication mirror

⁴⁹ Deborah Tannen, UMD Policy Watch, (11 Jan, 2017), video, 5:35–5:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZj-7-osm84&t=910s> (accessed on 13 November 2017).

⁵⁰ Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place*, revised and expanded edition, 24.

unmistakably the respective society's view of women in what concerns their position, rights and responsibilities.

Building on the works of leading anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss or Clifford Geertz, and on that of influential sociologists like Norbert Elias, as well as on Michel Foucault's preoccupation with the relations between power, discourse and the body, culture can broadly be defined as "a set of shared meanings, reflecting ingrained beliefs and determining ritual[s] and practices and the expression of attitudes within a particular group."⁵¹ Feminist scholars such as Robin Tolmach Lakoff, Mary Ritchie Key and Deborah Tannen have already clearly spelled the recipe for successful cross-gender communication by showing that cultural frames delineate men's and women's outlook on life, the basic world attitudes underlying their patterns of interaction and their preferred communication strategies. Cross-gender interaction investigations can therefore benefit from the cross-cultural communication framework of analysis, as Deborah Tannen postulated as early as the 1980s, because male-female discourse may be viewed as an instance of cross-cultural interaction. Since our aim is to create an equal opportunity society, we need to make sure that both men and women can thrive on the confidence gleaned from their interactions and contribute to the prosperity of their community to the best of their abilities, benefitting from equal rights despite their gender. The male culture versus female culture idea should cease to be taken metaphorically, because it actually has the potential for equity-inducing change by helping people break the psychological hold of the gender-related ideologies that were thrust on them in childhood and by ensuring that members of both sexes are sensitized to the others' interactional idiosyncrasies and encouraged to accommodate them. Cross-sex communication evidently resembles cross-cultural communication and, since the latter has constantly been refined and enhanced with unquestionable fruition, the former is very likely to undergo a similar amelioration process if the idea is embraced and implemented by male and female academics and non-academics alike.

⁵¹ Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, 5.