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Womanspeak and Manspeak

NANCY HENLEY, MYKOL HAMILTON, AND BARRIE THORNE

Misunderstandings in interactions can occur in verbal and nonverbal language and in nuances of meanings in interaction; this is especially evident between people of different cultures. However, an increasing body of literature focuses on the differences in interaction and language usage between women and men in the same culture. Elaborating on the meaning of interaction and differences in socialization experiences, the authors of this reading discuss differences in female and male forms and experiences of communication.

As you read this selection, consider the following:

1. *What are behaviors that cause misunderstandings when women and men are communicating?*
2. *Can you recall examples of gender miscommunication in your experience?*

GLOSSARY

Grammarians Those who study the uses of grammar.

Deprecating Putting down others.

Demeanor How one presents oneself to others.

A WOMAN STARTS TO speak but stops when a man begins to talk at the same time; two men find that a simple conversation is escalating into full-scale competition; a junior high school girl finds it hard to relate to her schoolbooks, which are phrased in the terminology of a male culture and refer to people as "men"; a woman finds that when she uses the gestures men use for attention and influence, she is responded to sexually; a female college student from an all-girl high school finds a touch or glance from males in class intimidating.

What is happening here? First, there are differences between female and male speech styles, and the sexes are often spoken about in different ways. Male nonverbal communication also has certain elements and effects that distinguish it from its female counterpart. Moreover, females and males move in a context of sexual inequality and strongly differentiated behavioral expectations. Because interaction with others always involves communication of some sort, verbal and nonverbal, it is through communication that much of our pattern of sexist interaction is learned and perpetuated. . . .

Language has been used in the past, and is still used, to dehumanize a people into submission; it both reflects and shapes the culture in which it is embedded.

The Sexist Bias of English

Sexism in the English language takes three main forms: It ignores; it defines; it deprecates.

IGNORING

Most of us are familiar with ways in which our language ignores females. The paramount example of this is the masculine "generic," which has traditionally been used to include women as well as men. We are taught to use *he* to refer to someone whose sex is unspecified, as in the sentence, "Each entrant should do his best." We are told that using *they* in such a case ("Everyone may now take their seat") is ungrammatical; yet Bodine (1975) reports that prior to the eighteenth century, *they* was widely used in this way. Grammarians who

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insist that we use *he* for numerical agreement with the antecedent overlook the disagreement in gender such usage may entail. Current grammars condemn "he or she" as clumsy, and the singular "they" as inaccurate, but expect pupils to achieve both elegance of expression and accuracy by referring to women as *he*. Despite the best efforts of grammarians, however, singular *they* has long been common in informal conversation and is becoming more frequent even in formal speech and writing.

Many people who claim they are referring to both females and males when they use the word *he* switch to the feminine pronoun when they speak of someone in a traditionally feminine occupation, such as homemaker or schoolteacher or nurse, raising questions about the inclusion of females in the masculine pronoun. Although compared to specific masculine reference, the masculine "generic" occurs infrequently, but it still has a high occurrence in many of our lives. MacKay (1983) estimates that highly educated Americans are exposed to it a million times in their lifetimes. . . .

DEFINING

Language both reflects and helps maintain woman's secondary status in our society, by defining her and her "place." Man's power to define through naming is illustrated in the tradition of a woman's losing her own name, and taking her husband's when she marries; the children of the marriage also have their father's name, showing that they too are his possessions. The view of females as possessions is further evidenced in the common practice of applying female names and pronouns to material possessions such as cars ("Fill 'er up!"), machines, and ships. . . .

The fact that our language generally ignores women also means that when it does take note of them, it often defines their status. Thus "lady doctor," "lady judge," "lady professor," "lady pilot" all indicate exceptions to the rule of finding males in these occupations. Expressions like "male nurse" are much less common, because many more occupations are typed as male and because fewer men choose to enter female-typed occupations than vice versa. Even in cases in which a particular field is female-typed, males

who enter it often have a term of their own, with greater prestige, such as *chef* or *couturier*. Of course, patterns of usage subtly reinforce our occupational stereotypes, and deeper undertones further reinforce stereotypes concerning propriety and competency. . . .

DEPRECATING

The deprecation of women in the English language can be seen in the connotations and meanings of words applied to male and female things. The very word *virtue* comes from an old root meaning *man*; to be *virtuous* is, literally, to be "manly." Different adjectives are applied to the actions or productions of the different sexes: Women's work may be referred to as *pretty* or *nice*; men's work will more often elicit adjectives like *masterful*, *brilliant*. While words such as *king*, *prince*, *lord*, *father* have all maintained their elevated meanings, the similar words *queen*, *madam*, and *dame* have acquired debased meanings.

A woman's sex is treated as if it were the most salient characteristic of her being; this is not the case for males. This discrepancy is the basis for much of the defining of women, and it underlies much of the accompanying deprecation. Sexual insult is applied overwhelmingly to women; Stanley (1977), in researching terms for sexual promiscuity, found 220 terms for a sexually promiscuous woman, but only 22 terms for a sexually promiscuous man. Furthermore, trivialization accompanies many terms applied to females. . . . The feminine endings *-ess* and *-ette*, and the female prefix *lady*, are added to many words which are not really male-specific. Thus we have the trivialized terms *poetess*, *authoress*, *aviatrix*, *majorette*, *usherette*. Male sports teams are given names of strength and ferocity: "Rams," "Bears," "Jets." Women's sports teams often have cute names like "Rayettes," "Rockettes." As Alleen Nilsen (1972) has put it,

The chicken metaphor tells the whole story of a girl's life. In her youth she is a *chick*, then she marries and begins feeling *cooped up*, so she goes to *hen parties* where she *cackles* with her friends. Then she has her *brood* and begins to *henpeck* her husband. Finally she turns into an *old biddy*. (p. 109)

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. . . Recent research on conversational interac-
tion reflects the attempt to conceptualize language
not in terms of isolated variables nor as an ab-
stract code, but within contexts of use, looking
at features of conversation within the give-and-
take of actual talk. Pamela Fishman (1983) ana-
lyzed recurring patterns in many samples
of the household conversations of three hetero-
sexual couples. Although the women tried more
often than the men to initiate conversations,
the women succeeded less often because of mini-
mal responses from their male companions. In
contrast, the women pursued topics the men
raised, asked more questions, and did more verbal
support-work than the men. Fishman concluded
that the conversations were under male control,
but were mainly produced by female work.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is another variable that involves
language but goes beyond it. Research studies
have found that women disclose more personal
information to others than men do. Subordi-
nates (in work situations) are also more likely to
self-disclose than superiors. People in positions
of power are required to reveal little about them-
selves, yet typically know much about the lives of
others—perhaps the ultimate exemplar of this
principle is the fictional Big Brother.

According to the research of Jack Sattel
(1983), men exercise and maintain power over
women by withholding self-disclosure. An in-
stitutional example of this use of power is the
psychiatrist (usually male), to whom much is
disclosed (by a predominantly female clien-
tele), but who classically maintains a reserved
and detached attitude, revealing little or nothing
of himself. Nonemotionality is the "cool" of the
professional, the executive, the poker player,
the street-wise operator. Smart men—those in
power, those who manipulate others—maintain
unruffled exteriors. . . .

Nonverbal Communication

Although we are taught to think of communica-
tion in terms of spoken and written language,

nonverbal communication has much more impact
on our actions and reactions than does verbal.
One psychological study concluded, on the basis
of a laboratory study, that nonverbal messages
carry over four times the weight of verbal mes-
sages when both are used in interaction. Yet, there
is much ignorance and confusion surrounding the
subtler nonverbal form, which renders it a per-
fect avenue for the unconscious manipulation of
others. Nonverbal behavior is of particular im-
portance for women, because their socialization
to docility and passivity makes them likely targets
for subtle forms of social control, and their close
contact with men—for example as wives and
secretaries—entails frequent verbal and nonver-
bal interaction with those in power. Additionally,
women have been found to be more sensitive
than men to nonverbal cues, perhaps because
their survival depends upon it. (Blacks have also
been shown to be better than whites at inter-
preting nonverbal signals.) . . .

DEMEANOR

Persons of higher status have certain privileges of
demeanor that their subordinates do not: the
boss can put his feet on the desk and loosen his
tie, but workers must be more careful in their be-
havior. Also, the boss had better not put her feet
on the desk; women are restricted in their de-
meanor. Goffman (1967) observed that in hos-
pital staff meetings, the doctors (usually male,
and always of high status) had the privilege of
swearing, changing the topic of conversation,
and sitting in undignified positions. They could
loungue on the (mostly female) nurses' counter
and initiate joking sessions. Attendants and
nurses, of lower status, had to be more circum-
spect in their demeanor. Women are also denied
privileges of swearing and sitting in the undigni-
fied positions allowed to men; in fact, women are
explicitly required to be more cautious than men
by all standards, including the well-known dou-
ble one. This requirement of propriety is similar
to women's use of more proper speech forms,
but the requirement for nonverbal behavior is
much more compelling.

Body tension is another sex-differentiated
aspect of demeanor. In laboratory studies of

conversation, communicators are more relaxed with lower-status addressees than with higher-status ones, and they are more relaxed with females than with males. Also, males are generally more relaxed than females; females' somewhat tenser postures are said to convey submissive attitudes (Mehrabian 1972).

USE OF SPACE

Women's general bodily demeanor must be restrained and restricted; their femininity is gauged, in fact, by how little space they take up, while masculinity is judged by males' expansiveness and the strength of their flamboyant gestures. Males control both greater territory and greater personal space, a situation associated with dominance and high status in both human beings and animals. Both field and laboratory studies have found that people tend to approach females more closely than males, to seat themselves closer to females and otherwise intrude on their territory, and to cut across their paths. In the larger aspect of space, women are also less likely to have their own room or other private space in the home.

LOOKING AND STARING — EYE CONTACT

Eye contact is greatly influenced by sex. It has been repeatedly found that in interactions, women look more at the other person than men do and maintain mutual eye contact longer. . . . Other writers have observed that rather than stare, women tend more than men to avert the gaze, especially when stared at by men. Public staring, clothing designed to reveal the contours of the body, and public advertising which lavishly flashes women across billboards and through magazines, all make females a highly visible sex. Visual information about women is readily available, just as their personal information is available through greater self-disclosure.

SMILING

The smile is women's badge of appeasement. . . . Women engage in more smiling than men do, whether they are truly happy or not. Research has confirmed this. Erving Goffman (1979) an-

alyzed the depiction of gender in U.S. print advertising and concluded that women's smiles are ritualistic mollifiers; women smile more, and more expansively, than men. The smile is a requirement of women's social position and is used as a gesture of submission. . . . The smile is generally thought to signal to an aggressor that the subordinate individual intends no harm. In many women, and in other subordinate persons, smiling has reached the status of a nervous habit.

TOUCHING

Touching is another gesture of dominance, and cuddling to the touch is its corresponding gesture of submission. Touching is reportedly used by primates to maintain a dominance order, and it is likely that it is used by human beings in the same way. Just as the boss can put a hand on the worker, the master on the servant, the teacher on the student, the business executive on the secretary, so men more frequently put their hands on women, despite a folk mythology to the contrary. . . . Much of this touching goes unnoticed because it is expected and taken for granted, as when men steer women across the street, through doorways, around corners, into elevators, and so on. The male doctor or lawyer who holds his female client's hand overlong, and the male boss who puts his hand on the female secretary's arm or shoulder when giving her instructions, are easily recognizable examples of such everyday touching of women by men. There is also the more obtrusive touching: the "pawing" by sexually aggressive males, the pinching of waitresses and female office and factory workers, and the totally unexpected and unwelcomed tactual familiarity women are subjected to from complete strangers on the street.

Many interpret this pattern of greater touching by males as a reflection of sexual interest and of a greater level of sexuality among men than women. This explanation, first of all, ignores the fact that touching is a status and dominance signal for human and animal groups. . . . It also ignores the findings of sexual research, which gives us no reason to expect any greater sexual drive in males than in females. Rather, males in our cul-

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of greater touch-sexual interest and among men than of all, ignores the old dominance signals. . . . It also ignores research, which gives a picture of sexual drive in males in our cul-

ture have more freedom and encouragement to express their sexuality, and they are also accorded more freedom to touch others. Touching carries the connotation of possession when used with objects, and the wholesale touching of women carries the message that women are community property. . . .

INTIMACY AND STATUS IN NONVERBAL GESTURES

There is another side to touching, one which is much better understood: Touching symbolizes friendship and intimacy. To speak of the power dimension of touching is not to rule out the intimacy dimension. A particular touch may have both components and more, but it is the *pattern* of touching between two individuals that tells us most about their relationship. When touching is symmetrical—that is, when both parties have equal touching privileges—it conveys information about the *intimacy* dimension of the relationship: much touching indicates closeness, and little touching indicates distance. When one party is free to touch the other but not vice versa, we gain information about the *status*, or power, dimension: the person with greater touching privileges is of higher status or has more power. Even when there is mutual touching between two people, it is most likely to be initiated by the higher status person; e.g., in a dating relationship it is usually the male who first puts an arm around the female or begins holding hands.

GESTURES OF DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION

We have named several gestures of dominance (invasion of personal space, touching, staring) and of submission (allowing oneself to be touched, averting the eyes, and smiling). Pointing may be interpreted as another gesture of dominance, and the corresponding submissive action is to stop talking or acting. In conversation, interruption often functions as a gesture of dominance, and allowing interruption signifies submission. Often mock play between males and females also carries strong physical overtones of dominance: the man squeezing the woman too hard, "pretending" to twist her arm, playfully

lifting her and tossing her from man to man, chasing, catching and spanking her. This type of "play" is also frequently used to control children and to maintain a status hierarchy among male teenagers.

BREAKING THE MOLD — A FIRST STEP

Women can reverse these nonverbal interaction patterns with probably greater effect than can be achieved through deliberate efforts to alter speech patterns. Women can stop smiling unless they are happy, stop lowering their eyes, stop getting out of men's way on the street, and stop letting themselves be interrupted. They can stare people in the eye, be more relaxed in demeanor (when they realize it is more a reflection of status than of morality), and touch when they feel it is appropriate. . . .

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