

DEBORAH  
TANNEN



GENDER &  
DISCOURSE

Featuring a new essay on talk at work

Gender  
and  
Discourse

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Deborah Tannen

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

*New York Oxford*

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York  
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bombay  
Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi  
Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne  
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore  
Taipei Tokyo Toronto

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First published in 1994 by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1996

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Tannen, Deborah.

Gender and discourse / Deborah Tannen.

p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978 0-19-508975-2; 13 978 0-19-510124-9 (Pbk.)

1. Language and languages—Sex differences.
  2. Discourse analysis. 3. Conversation. I. Title.
- P120.S48T36 1994  
401'.41—dc20 93-38839

Chapter 4 originally appeared in the journal *Semiotica* (1984) and is reprinted  
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Gender  
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*To Barbara McGrael  
and in memory of  
Larry McGrael*

# Acknowledgments

I prepared this book for publication while a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California. I shall always be grateful to have been a part of the Center for a year. I am also grateful for financial support provided through CASBS by the National Science Foundation SES-9022192.

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Gender  
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## Introduction

ENTERING THE ARENA of research on gender is like stepping into a maelstrom. What it means to be female or male, what it's like to talk to someone of the other (or the same) gender, are questions whose answers touch people where they live, and when a nerve is touched, people howl. Yet it is my hope that through the din, scholarly research can be heard, and dialogue can take place among researchers, even those who have entered the room of scholarly exchange through different disciplinary doors.

One of the aspects of gender studies that makes it most rewarding and meaningful is also one that makes it especially risky: its interdisciplinary nature. When scholars from different fields try to read and comment on each other's research, they find themselves on dangerous ground. Interdisciplinary dialogue is in itself a kind of cross-cultural communication, because researchers bring with them completely different notions of what questions to ask and how to go about answering them.<sup>1</sup> Assumptions that are taken for granted by those in one discipline are often deemed groundless by those in another. For example, psychologists trained in experimental methods may scorn and discount ethnographic or hermeneutic studies because they lack large data bases, random sampling, control groups, and statistical analysis. And anthropologists trained in

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ethnographic methods may scorn and discount psychological studies because they are based on data elicited in experimental rather than naturally occurring situations and reduce the complex texture of human behavior to quantifiable and "codable" abstractions.

The study of gender and language might seem at first to be a narrowly focused field, but it is actually as interdisciplinary as they come. Researchers working in this area have their roots in wildly divergent academic disciplines, including sociology, education, anthropology, psychology, speech communication, literature, and women's studies, as well as my own field of linguistics. Though one might expect scholars trained in linguistics—the academic discipline devoted to the study of language—to figure prominently in this group, linguists are in fact the smallest contingent. I suspect this is mostly because the field is very small to start with, but also because mainstream contemporary linguistics has been concerned with the formal analysis of language as an abstract system, not language as it is used in everyday life. The situation is further complicated for researchers whose individual training or fields of specialization span multiple academic disciplines.

Interdisciplinary dialogue, like all cross-cultural communication, requires compassion, flexibility, and patience, as well as the effort to understand the context from which interlocutors emerge. In light of this, I approached the task of collecting my academic writings on gender and discourse with a sense of caution. The essays gathered in this volume were originally written with my academic colleagues in mind, that is, readers in my own (already interdisciplinary) field. But I realize that they may now be read not only by colleagues in different disciplines but also by a range of readers of *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* who want to see the detailed analysis and scholarly references that led to the writing of that book, as well as the theoretical discussion that was beyond its scope. So I begin by explaining my scholarly heritage and assumptions in order to contextualize the chapters that follow. In the process, this introduction also sets forth and explores

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some of the issues raised by a sociolinguistic, anthropologically oriented approach to gender and language—the approach that characterizes the essays in this volume.

### METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Within the discipline of linguistics, the work I do is referred to as “discourse analysis.” This term reflects the aspect of my approach that is most significant for linguists in that it contrasts with the dominant strains in the discipline. Whereas most contemporary linguistics takes as the object of study sounds (phonetics and phonology), words (lexicon and morphology), or sentences (syntax, that is, the arrangement of words in sentences), discourse analysis focuses on connected language “beyond the sentence,” as linguists often put it. On the other hand, I sometimes identify myself as a “sociolinguist,” partly because I teach in the sociolinguistics program within the linguistics department at Georgetown University, but also because my work addresses the intersection of language and social phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I refer to my approach as anthropologically oriented because my method involves closely examining individual cases of interaction, in many of which I was a participant, and takes into account their cultural context.

The theoretical and methodological approach found here derives from the work of Robin Lakoff and John Gumperz, who were my teachers at the University of California, Berkeley. It was Lakoff (see especially Lakoff 1975, 1979, 1990) who introduced me to the concept she calls communicative style (I later began using my own term, “conversational style”) and the notion that misunderstandings can arise in conversation, both cross-cultural and cross-gender, because of systematic differences in communicative style. Gumperz (see especially Gumperz 1982a) calls his type of analysis “interactional sociolinguistics” to distinguish it from the more common type of sociolinguistics that typically examines phonological variation (see Labov 1972). From Gumperz I learned the methodological approach, which is characterized by: (1) tape-recording naturally



occurring conversations; (2) identifying segments in which trouble is evident; (3) looking for culturally patterned differences in signaling meaning that could account for the trouble; (4) playing the recording, or segments of it, back to participants in order to solicit their spontaneous interpretations and reactions, and also, perhaps later, soliciting their responses to the researcher's interpretations; and (5) playing segments of the interaction for other members of the cultural groups represented by the speakers in order to discern patterns of interpretation.

The last two steps are not an afterthought; they provide critical checks on interpretations, given the hermeneutic (that is, interpretive) methodological framework. They are also crucial to ensure that the scholar's work is grounded in the experience of the speakers whose behavior is the object of study. I am reminded here of Oliver Sacks, the brilliant neurologist and essayist, who demonstrates that in order to understand a medical condition, physicians need to not only examine their patients but also listen to them. Whereas modern medicine may provide invaluable insight into chemical and biological courses of disease, only patients hold the clues to what their diseases are "really like" (Sacks 1987:40). In the same spirit, attention to how participants experience conversations under analysis provides invaluable insight into the workings of interaction that are otherwise unavailable to the researcher. Furthermore, and crucially, it also provides an ethical and humanistic foundation for the research, making us accountable to those we study.

The chapters gathered here constitute the totality of my academic writings on gender and language prior to and since the publication of *You Just Don't Understand*, my eleventh book. My previous books and articles were on other topics—mostly analyzing conversation (Tannen 1984a), comparing speaking and writing (Tannen 1982a, 1982b, 1984b), and exploring the relationship between conversational and literary discourse (Tannen 1989).<sup>3</sup> My work on gender-related differences in conversational style is a natural development of my earlier research and writing on subcultural differences in conversational style. Thus, my approach to gender