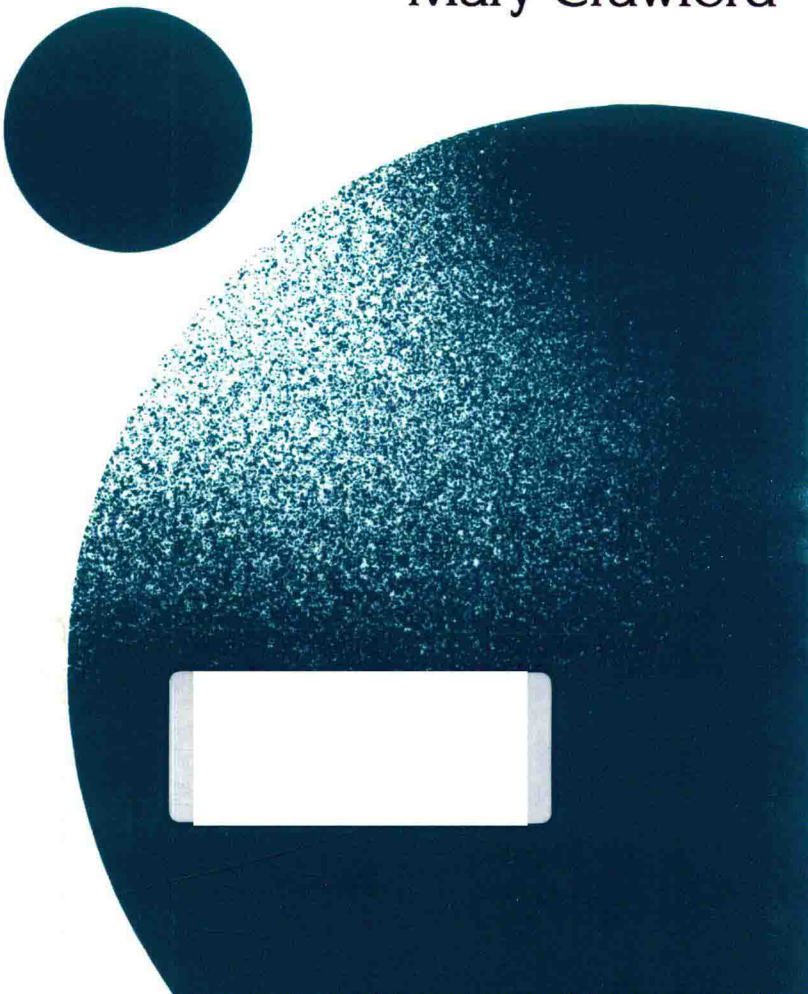
Talking Difference

On Gender and Language

Mary Crawford



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Talking Difference

Gender and Psychology

Feminist and Critical Perspectives

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This international series provides a forum for research focused on gender issues in – and beyond – psychology, with a particular emphasis on feminist and critical analyses. It encourages contributions which explore psychological topics where gender is central; which critically interrogate psychology as a discipline and as a professional base; and which develop feminist interventions in theory and practice. The series objective is to present innovative research on gender in the context of the broader implications for developing both critical psychology and feminism.

Sue Wilkinson teaches social psychology and women's studies at Loughborough University. She is also Editor of *Feminism and Psychology: An International Journal.*

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To Roger

Preface

Like music, talk is a set of skills and a performing art. Its rich and subtle nuances are open to many interpretations. It unfolds in 'real time,' and written representations can capture only a small part of its meaning. People use talk to persuade, assert, harass, and harangue; to make love and to arouse hatred; to delight and to dominate.

Do women and men use talk differently? With the re-emergence of the women's movement in the 1970s, scholars in psychology, linguistics, speech communication, anthropology, and other disciplines began to search for relationships between language and sex, and to think about how cultural gender roles influence speech style. Is the talk of women deficient or devalued? Are women unassertive? Is speech style fixed in the gendered experiences of childhood? Why does it seem that cross-sex communication is fraught with ambiguity and danger? All these questions have been the subject of research scrutiny and a continuing source of mass media interest.

This book is not a disinterested survey of research in which studies are amassed and tallied in an attempt to pin down the 'true' sex differences in language use. Instead, I critique the emphasis on essential sex differences that has characterized research on gender and language. I explore what I believe are more fruitful ways to think about women, men, and talk. The book is aimed primarily at researchers and students in gender and language, whatever their disciplinary background. My involvement in interdisciplinary Women's Studies programs over the past sixteen years has taught me that gender – what culture makes of the (perceived) dichotomy of sex – is a complex system of classification and social control operating at social structural, interactional, and individual levels. To understand it, and to effect social change, we must speak and theorize across the traditional boundaries of our academic disciplines. My greatest hope for *Talking Difference* is that by stimulating transdisciplinary thought and dialogue, it will foster more sophisticated research and theory.

Although the subtitle of this book, 'On Gender and Language,' is a general one, my focus is quite specifically on conversation – talk as an interpersonal event. There are, of course, many other topics that could be subsumed under 'gender and language:' the representation of women, including 'linguistic sexism;' relationships between language

and thought; and language change, such as the move toward 'nonsexist' usage. Each of these has been a fascinating area of exploration for feminist thinkers about language, and I have participated in those explorations in some of my other writings. But the topic of talk – language as social action – deserves an analysis of its own, especially in light of claims that have been made about fundamental differences in speech style between women and men.

This book builds on my earlier published work, some of which was collaborative. My interest in the assertiveness training movement is longstanding. The employment of speech act theory and the analysis of the implied philosophy of assertiveness training originated in work done with Amy H. Gervasio. The overall emphasis on gender as a complex social system rather than just an attribute of individuals, and my belief in the importance of situational determinants of behavior, have been developed in ongoing collaboration with Rhoda K. Unger. My critical approach to the history and rhetoric of psychology, including feminist psychology, has been shaped in working with Jeanne Marecek.

Talking Difference was conceived in one feminist community and brought to birth in another, as I moved from West Chester University of Pennsylvania to the University of South Carolina during its gestation. People from both communities, as well as others more geographically scattered, helped me throughout the process. My analysis of the 'date rape' talk show transcript in Chapter 4 was enriched by discussions with Mary McCullough. Jeanne Marecek, Marjorie Harness (Candy) Goodwin, Deborah Cameron, and Janis Bohan generously offered helpful suggestions on various early drafts of chapters. Series editor Sue Wilkinson provided constructive feedback and an abundance of patience. Jeri Barber transcribed the date rape text from audio tape, and Kathleen Anderson helped to annotate it. Mary McCullough, Judith James, and Gabriela Imreh offered whatever I needed to keep me going, from cups of tea to an afternoon of roller blading to a serious shopping trip. The graduate students in women's studies at the University of South Carolina have been a constant source of energy and insight. Stopping my writing to go to class usually turned out to have surprising bonuses. Lori Fitton, graduate assistant *extraordinaire*, assisted me daily, always with calm competence, humor, and a 'can-do' attitude. In the process I suspect she learned more than she ever wanted to know about inter-library loan, APA format, oddball word-processing programs, and the demands of a professor's life.

This work was also supported by a special sabbatical for the purpose (1991–92) from West Chester University. Psychology department chairs at both my academic homes have facilitated my efforts to combine research, teaching and service: Edward Pollak, Lester Lefton, and Keith Davis.

The person most central to the development of this book – and all my work – is my life partner Roger Chaffin. Because he is an accomplished cognitive psychologist and a generous colleague, his critiques of my arguments and evidence have been informed and constructive. Because he is committed to an egalitarian relationship, his equal participation in parenting and domestic life have provided me with that most precious gift, time to do my work. At this moment in history, there are no easy paths for women and men who want to be colleagues, friends, parents, and partners to each other, no ready scripts for how to do it all. Instead, there is constant negotiation leading to difficult decisions and very real sacrifices. Roger has done all that and managed to find time for love, laughter, music, and adventure as well. For his sacrifices, his support, and the joy he brings to my life I am grateful to Roger.

To all who have supported my work and believed in its value, I offer my thanks.

Columbia, South Carolina
February 3, 1995

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Talking across the Gender Gap

People believe in sex differences. As one best-selling book puts it, when it comes to communication, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992). Social scientists have helped to create and confirm that belief by conducting innumerable studies of every conceivable linguistic and stylistic variation between the sexes and by developing theories that stress differences rather than similarities and overlap (West and Zimmerman, 1985). In *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) the linguist Robin Lakoff proposed that women use a speech style that is ineffectual because it is overly polite, hesitant, and deferent. The assertiveness training movement of the 1970s and 1980s – a therapeutic fad led by psychologists whose clients were largely women – engaged perhaps hundreds of thousands of people in attempts to change their way of communicating. A rationale for the movement was that some people (especially women) suffer from poor communication skills and irrational beliefs that prevent them from expressing themselves clearly and directly. More recently, linguists and communication experts have created another conceptual bandwagon by applying theories of cross-cultural communication to women and men. According to this view, 'men from Mars' and 'women from Venus' are fated to misunderstand each other unless they recognize their deeply socialized differences.

The view of gender and language encoded in these writings and therapies is that fundamental differences between women and men shape the way they talk. The differences are conceived as located within individuals and prior to the talk – as differences in personality traits, skills, beliefs, attitudes, or goals. For the millions of people who have become acquainted with issues of gender and language through reading best-selling books telling women how to be more assertive or how to understand the 'opposite' sex, or through watching television talk shows featuring communication experts who claim that talk between women and men is cross-cultural communication, a powerful narrative frame is provided and validated: that gender is difference, and difference is static, bipolar, and categorical. Absorbing such messages, it would be very difficult *not* to believe that women and men are indeed opposite sexes when it comes to talk.

As a feminist researcher/teacher in women's studies and the

psychology of women, I have found such gender-and-language research and theory both interesting and unsatisfying. I have often felt frustrated and disappointed after reading the latest journal article or book on sex differences in (fill in the variable): question intonation, talk time, tag questions, conversational topic, joke-telling. Like many people, I love to eavesdrop. Waiting on line at the bookstore, reading a bulletin board in the hallway while a couple of colleagues chat nearby, or sitting on a park bench where mothers talk while their children play, I listen to people's talk with a little thrill of voyeuristic joy. In people's casual, everyday talk we have a tantalizing glimpse into how they negotiate the terrains of their social worlds. As I listened, and later as I recalled such talk, I tried to fit it into the theories and conceptual categories of gender-and-language research. The difficulty of this task fed my frustration with the research. Increasingly, I began to feel that research on gender and talk needed to be reframed and reformulated.

Consider for a moment how people use humor and wit to interact with their friends and co-workers. An eavesdropper will quickly see that in unstructured settings there is considerable laughter and banter. Occasionally, someone might repeat a joke they have heard. But most of the humor that people encounter in mundane interaction consists of spontaneous conversational witticisms and joviality (Graeven and Morris, 1975; Kambouropoulou, 1930). This kind of humor emerges from ongoing interaction, and much of it is a form of social play, expressed in ways as varied as kidding, punning, and story-telling. People can also use humor toward more serious goals. They can introduce forbidden topics and meanings in a safely indirect way. They can even ridicule, insult, and harass others with relative impunity ('Can't you take a joke?').

Although this sort of interactional humor seems embedded in its immediate social context, psychologists have acted as though the best way to understand humor is to bring it into the laboratory, and folklorists have behaved as though collecting jokes captures it. In the prototypical psychology experiment on humor, 'subjects' sit down alone in a room, are shown a series of written jokes or cartoons, and are asked to rate how funny they are on seven-point scales. Females and males are routinely compared and when statistically significant differences are found they are discussed and explained. When similarities are found they are considered unremarkable and not in need of explanation. In folklore studies, observers often collect formulaic jokes or observe joke-telling in everyday public settings. Much of this research presents the typical female as a person who lacks both the ability to appreciate others' humor and the desire or ability to create humor herself. It reinforces and maintains the widely held belief that women lack a sense of humor.

There are interesting questions which cannot be asked from within this framework. How do people use humor to attain conversational goals? What do ordinary people mean when they say that someone has 'a good sense of humor?' Do women (and men, and members of other social categories) have characteristic forms or styles of humor, and, if so, what functions do they serve? How is the expression of humor and wit constrained by social context and social hierarchy? Conversational humor is just one example of the dynamic nature of language use. What I want to suggest with this example is the possibility that much of what appear to be 'natural' differences (for example, men creating humor, women applauding their efforts) are created in ongoing interaction and given further reality by social science research practices. This idea may seem revolutionary to some. After all, sex differences are 'there.' If they didn't exist, we couldn't measure and record them. Yet despite many hundreds of research studies, there is little agreement on the 'real' sex differences in speech style.

In this book I will critically examine research on the question of whether women and men speak differently. This research originated from many disciplines and subdisciplines, including communication studies, anthropology, sociolinguistics, linguistics, and cognitive and social psychology. Much of it is feminist in conception: its origins in the most general sense are in the rebirth of a feminist social movement starting in the late 1960s (Thorne et al., 1983). However, for the most part research on gender and language use has failed to develop a social critique that would serve feminist ends of understanding and ending sexism, racism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination. In large part, I believe, this failure is the result of how the questions have been framed. Instead of trying to delineate the real or essential sex differences in speech style, I will show why that question is the wrong one to ask. I will then reframe questions about men's and women's talk, asking: How are gender relations enacted and maintained in talk? How is this enactment connected to power and status? How is it intertwined with the enactment of racism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination? And how have feminists appropriated talk for political change?

Gender as Difference

Should social scientists study sex differences? The question is a matter of considerable debate (Kitzinger, 1994). Some researchers maintain that scientific data can dispel myths and stereotypes about women (Halpern, 1994; Hyde, 1994) and offer corrections to both feminist and antifeminist dogma (Eagly, 1994). Others maintain that the hope of such 'truths' is naive, because 'sex differences' have no real exis-

tence outside particular knowledge frameworks. These critics maintain that rather than a neutral and objective tool for uncovering the fundamental natures of women and men, science is a social enterprise embedded in relationships of power (Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1994; Hollway, 1994). This is a debate in which I have not been neutral (Crawford, 1989a; Crawford and Marecek, 1989; Crawford and Unger, 1990; Unger and Crawford, 1989, 1992). Each researcher's epistemological starting point affects the kinds of questions she or he believes are interesting and important (Unger, 1992). My own epistemological stance has developed over many years of thinking and writing about women and gender. Increasingly, I have come to believe that we should be asking different, more profound questions (cf. Kitzinger, 1994). What is the social and political context of sex difference research? What functions are served by various accounts of fundamental differences? What questions remain unasked because of social scientists' preoccupations with sex differences? And what are the relationships between academic research on women and the mass culture, especially the self-help industry?

Though many have questioned it (cf. Thorne and Henley, 1975; Thorne et al., 1983; Torres, 1992), sex difference has remained a dominant framework for research and theory on gender and language. I view this framework as invalid, not only on epistemological grounds, but because it has had particular, demonstrable negative consequences. I will discuss the consequences of a sex difference approach more generally before shifting the focus to a new perspective.

Gender Dichotomized and Decontextualized

Research on sex differences in language use has proceeded on the assumption that if the variables under study were clearly enough defined and accurately enough measured, the difference could be stated as fact and its meaning understood. However, difference is fluctuating and variable. Often, highly publicized sex differences turn out to be limited to particular subgroups, or not replicable in further studies. They have a 'now-you-see-them, now-you-don't' quality that seems inconsistent with using them as fundamentals of human nature (Unger, 1992; Unger and Crawford, 1992). And, even when a sex difference is defined in ways that are quite specific and quantifiable, its meaning is not socially neutral. Rather, the meaning of a sex difference is the product of social negotiation; it is culturally produced. And it is produced in the context of a pre-existing system of meanings in which difference is polarized.

Even if we accept the search for sex differences as a valid question, and the differences obtained in research as veridical, the 'truth' about their meaning is elusive, and ideologically influenced. Consider one

highly publicized sex difference: mathematics performance on standardized tests. Janet Hyde and her colleagues (Hyde et al., 1990) have provided a compelling example of how the meaning of this difference is distorted as a result of treating it as absolute and interpreting it outside its social context. On average, white males do slightly better than white females on standardized mathematics ability tests. However, among African–Americans and Asian–Americans, the sex difference is smaller. Age is an important variable, too: girls outperform boys until adolescence. When odd samples (such as specially selected mathematically precocious adolescents) are removed from the overall calculations, the difference shifts in the other direction – girls slightly outperform boys. Like other sex differences, the similarity is much greater than the difference, and the difference itself may be an artifact of sampling. Yet popular media continue to dichotomize the sexes, reporting that the difference is a dualism. Headlines and cover stories stress that girls can't do mathematics, announce that estrogen destroys spatial ability, and trumpet the supposed innate superiority of boys: 'The Gender Factor in Math: a New Study shows Males may be Naturally Abler than Females;' 'Do Males have a Math Gene?;' 'Male Superiority;' 'Boys have Superior Math Ability, Study says.' One would never suspect from the headlines that there is much more overlap than difference in boys' and girls' performance or that other factors besides sex are related to test scores (Beckwith, 1984; Eccles and Jacobs, 1986; Hyde, 1992; Hyde et al., 1990). And the focus on sex as an explanation impedes the recognition that ability testing is itself a social construct:

> Excluded are whole areas of human achievement that contribute to success in school and work . . . Such characteristics and skills as intuition, motivation, self-understanding, conscientiousness, creativity, cooperativeness, supportiveness of others, sensitivity, nurturance, ability to create a pleasant environment, and ability to communicate verbally and nonverbally are excluded from standardized tests. By accepting and reflecting the androcentric model of knowledge, standardized tests reinforce value judgments that consider this model of knowledge more valid and important than other ways of viewing the world. (Teitelbaum, 1989: 330)

Consider the polarization of sex differences with respect to conversational style. Suppose a study demonstrates (for example) that women use more adverbs than men. How large does that difference have to be before we are justified in labelling men and women more different than similar? Should its importance be judged in terms of a hypothetical average woman/man, in terms of the extremes of difference, or in terms of overlap? And what does that tell us about 'human nature?' The answers to these questions involve value judgments about the meaning of difference. Value judgments are also involved when researchers attempt to see 'the big picture' by comparing the results of several