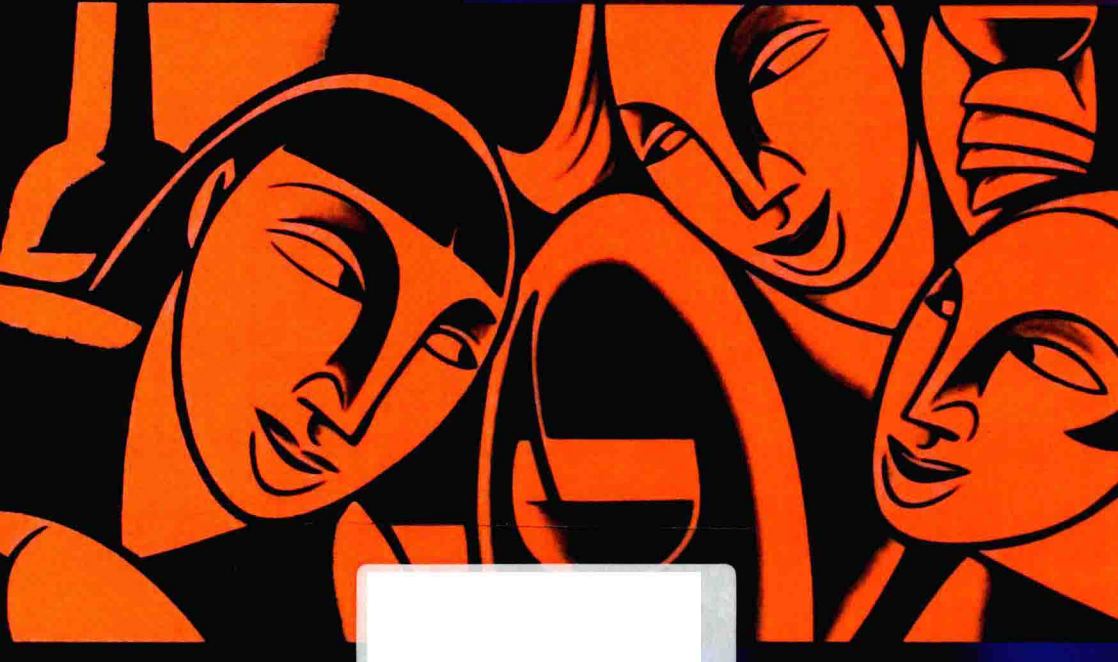
women talk



Jennifer Coates

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Conversation between Women Friends

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Women Talk

This book is dedicated to the members of the Oxton 'Ladies', past and present – Ann, Anne, Caro, Carol, Margaret, Moira, Rhiannon, Roslin, Rossanna, Sue – in celebration of over twenty years of friendship; and to Gina, in celebration of over forty years of friendship.

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I'd also like to thank my friends and colleagues in English Language and Linguistics at Roehampton Institute for the many stimulating discussions we've had over the last ten years on issues dealt with in the book: I am indebted to them for listening to me and for challenging me. I'm also grateful to friends and colleagues in Australia and

New Zealand who discussed the ideas presented in this book with me. I am sure much of what I say derives from such discussions, and in that sense it is nonsense to claim that this book is my own unaided work: all I can say is a heartfelt thank you to all my colleagues and friends. I'm grateful to my publisher, Philip Carpenter, for his intelligent comments and suggestions throughout the writing of the book, and for his constant support for the project.

And last but not least I want to thank my women friends for their support over the years: it is my relationships with them which have been the inspiration for this book.

Notes on the Transcription of the Conversations

The examples in this book come from two sources: interviews and conversations. While interview material is relatively easy to transcribe (because it consists of a series of questions and answers), conversational material is much more difficult. The transcription of spontaneous conversation involves taking important decisions which have significant consequences for the ensuing analysis. After all, in a very important sense, transcription is theory.[1]

I have had to decide between timing pauses and using symbols which indicate 'short pause' or 'long pause'. Since pauses of any length seem to be such a rare feature of women friends' talk, I adopted the simpler system, distinguishing only between longer pauses – more than 0.5 of a second – and shorter ones. I have also had to decide whether to include prosodic features of talk (intonation patterns, rhythm, stress, etc.). In the end, I decided to exclude such features, except in the chapter on questions, where I have marked intonation patterns in key utterances. I have also taken the decision to mark all utterances that I am going to count as questions with a question mark, irrespective of intonation.

Most critical was the decision about how to set out speakers on the page. I had several options: I could adopt the conventions of the playwright (speakers alternating on the page); or I could put the words of the person who was 'the main speaker' at any point in conversation down the middle of the page, with other speakers at the edges; or I could experiment with an adaptation of the musical stave.[2] Because of the collaborative, all-in-together nature of women friends' talk (to be discussed in detail in chapter 6), I have chosen to use a musical-stave-type notation for the conversations, to make the relationship between different voices easy to grasp. This method of presentation is not easy to read at first sight, but is the only method

capable of representing the data accurately. (However, in chapter 1, where one or two examples from the conversations are used to illustrate a point, the stave notation is not used.)

Because much of the interview data is less conversational in nature, I have presented this in the simpler play-like form, with speakers alternating on the page. But there are exceptions to this practice: where I interviewed more than one woman at the same time, the interviews were much more conversation-like, and as a result, some extracts from these interviews are presented in musical-stave format.

Transcription Conventions

The transcription conventions used for the conversational data are as follows.

1 A slash (/) indicates the end of a tone group or chunk of talk, e.g.:

she pushes him to the limit/

2 A question mark indicates the end of a chunk of talk which I am analysing as a question (see chapter 8), e.g.:

do you know anyone who's pregnant?

3 A hyphen indicates an incomplete word or utterance, e.g.:

he's got this twi- he's got this nervous twitch/
I was- I was- I was stopped by a train/

4 Pauses are indicated by a full stop (short pause – less than 0.5 second) or a dash (long pause), e.g.:

he sort of . sat and read the newspaper/
why doesn't that creep – *start to go wild*/ <LAUGHING>

5 A broken line marks the beginning of a stave and indicates that the lines enclosed by the lines are to be read simultaneously (like a musical score), e.g.:

A: the squidgy stuff that they put on pizzas/
B: Mozarell [a/
C: [Mozarella/

---

6 An extended square bracket indicates the start of overlap between utterances, e.g.:

A: and they have newspapers and [stuff/
B: [yes very good/

---

7 An equals sign at the end of one speaker's utterance and at the start of the next utterance indicates the absence of a discernible gap, e.g.:

A: because they're supposed to be=
B: =adults/

---

8 Double round parentheses indicate that there is doubt about the accuracy of the transcription:

what's that ((mean))/ gayist/

9 Where material is impossible to make out, it is represented as ((xx)), e.g.:

you're ((xx))- you're prejudiced/

10 Angled brackets give additional information, e.g.:

A: this is on tape you know
B: <LAUGHS>

They also add clarificatory information about underlined material, e.g.:

why doesn't that creep – start to go wild/ <LAUGHING>
I can't help it <WHINEY VOICE>

11 Capital letters are used for words/syllables uttered with emphasis:

she BEAT him/
it's in MExico/

12 The symbol % encloses words or phrases that are spoken very quietly, e.g.:

%bloody hell%

13 The symbol .hh indicates that the speaker takes a sharp intake of breath:

.hh I wish I'd got a camera/ <LAUGHING>

14 The symbol [. . .] indicates that material has been omitted, e.g.:

Tom [. . .] says there's a German word to describe that/

15 The symbol ----> indicates that the line to the right of the arrow is the one to pay attention to.

Contents

1

'This is on tape you know': The origins of the book

In this book I want to celebrate friendships between women and to affirm the importance of talk for women friends. The talk associated with women is often given derogatory names: gossip, chit-chat, natter. These names demonstrate society's low evaluation of women's cultural practices. Women's talk is seen as trivial at best, tale-telling or 'bitchy' at worst. I want to make clear from the outset that gossip, chit-chat, natter – that is, the everyday talk of women friends – is what this book is about. I hope to demonstrate that women's talk is far from trivial, and that the label 'bitchy' betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the way stories about absent others can provide a focus for discussing and re-evaluating social norms, and for the construction and maintenance of our personal identities, our 'selves'.

For many of us, talk is our chief form of recreation: we meet our friends to talk, and our talk is a kind of play. The conversations of women friends can be described as 'jam sessions': women's voices blend to create complex patterns, patterns which it is my aim to describe in this book. Women are well aware of the value of the talk we do with each other. Vera Brittain wrote as follows about the conversations she had with her closest friend, Winifred Holtby: 'Neither of us had ever known any pleasure quite equal to the joy of coming home at the end of the day after a series of separate varied experiences, and each recounting these incidents to the other over late biscuits and tea. Our conversations were irradiated by Winifred's delight in small, absurd trifles. She used to sit on the floor in front of the tiny gas fire . . . eagerly imploring: "Tell me some more!" '.[1] Like Vera Brittain, the women whose talk is the subject of this book are adamant that their conversations with each other are fundamental to their friendships, and that these conversations give them a very particular sort of pleasure. One of them said to me: 'I mean, you know

at the end of the evening [spent in mixed company] you feel, yes, dissatisfied . . . whereas when I [spend an evening] with Anna and Liz I come home and I feel like we've talked about what we wanted to . . . it's undescribable'.[2] Another woman described conversation with friends as 'absolutely fundamental . . . the blood of life'.

The book is based on a corpus of twenty conversations between women friends and a set of ethnographic interviews with fifteen women about friendship. In the early chapters, drawing on what was said in the interviews, I hope to demonstrate the significance of talk in friendships between women. I want to build up a picture of what friendship means to (some) women in Britain in the late twentieth century, and to show how important friends are in women's lives. I shall extrapolate from these women's accounts of talk with their friends to sketch an outline of the shape of this talk. This sketch will be fleshed out in the six central chapters, where I look in detail at the twenty conversations, focusing on some of the conversational strategies typical of women's friendly talk. In the final chapters, I will take a broader perspective, looking at the ways in which women's talk constructs and maintains friendship, and constructs and maintains gender (in the case of girls and women, this means femininity).

Doubtless there are people who will view this book as trivial and unimportant, by association with its subject matter. But we need to challenge the negative social values placed on women's talk and to assert that such talk is as culturally significant, and as deserving of attention, as any other talk.

How it all began: Birkenhead, 1983–1984

In 1983 my marriage had broken up and I was looking for a full-time university post in linguistics. In retrospect, I realize that these circumstances had two very significant effects: the first was that I was forced to see the importance of my friendships with women, since without the support of my women friends I don't know how I would have survived that difficult period of my life. Secondly, I was galvanized into getting to work on the manuscript of *Women, Men and Language* (which was eventually published in 1986), since another book on my list of publications might make all the difference in terms of finding a lecturing job.

Writing the book *Women, Men and Language* changed my life in several ways. First, it was an intensely politicizing experience. Although I already considered myself a feminist, I was unprepared for

the extent of sexism in linguistic practice which my reading uncovered, and for the strength of my response. Most importantly, however, I became increasingly uncomfortable about the ethics of writing a book which claimed to be (briefly at least) the last word on Language and Gender (or Language and Sex, as the field was quaintly known at that time) when I myself had done no original sociolinguistic work in the field. I decided that I would start a research project focusing on all-female talk, as I was unhappy at the extent to which Language and Gender research denoted research involving mixed-sex talk. Beyond this, I was vague about details. My main thought was that I must start collecting data, and that things would fall into place. It's probably a terrible confession to admit to, having had no clear research goals. Though it may be foolish of me to lay myself open to criticism in this way, I do so because I can't believe I'm the only researcher who's started a project in this way, and by speaking out I hope to draw attention to the question – how do we go about 'doing research'? I also want to challenge the notion that there is necessarily one right way of doing things.

The Oxton 'Ladies'

At this point, the germs of a research project and my support network of friends on Merseyside came together. Over several years (since 1975 to be exact), some of us had established a pattern of meeting once a fortnight at each other's houses. We would meet in the evenings, around 8.30 or 9.00 (when with any luck we had got our children to bed) and sit round and drink wine and talk. Later in the evening we always had something to eat, though this varied from simple bread and cheese to more elaborate home-made soup or pizza, depending on the whim or energy level of whoever was the host. Over the years, we came to call the group 'the Oxton Ladies' (since we lived in an area of Birkenhead called Oxton) or just 'Ladies', which is ironic, considering that we all loathe the word *lady* as a term for adult women. The name was initially a joke, parodying those polite but empty all-female Tupperware-style evenings we'd all experienced at some time or another. But the name was also a kind of smokescreen to allay the fears of those (male partners) who feared that we were setting up a consciousness-raising group. In fact, this was very much one of the functions of the group, particularly in the early years, when we were all feeling constrained in various ways by the demands of small children. But I think we also gave ourselves this jokey name because we wanted to assert the frivolous side of our