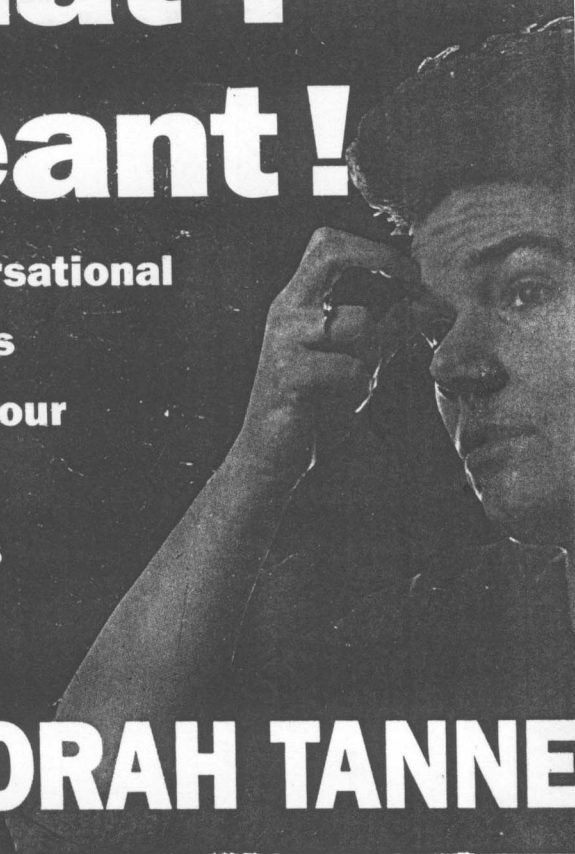


By the bestselling author of
'You Just Don't Understand'

LGH
374

That's Not What I Meant!

How conversational
style makes
or breaks your
relations
with others



THE ARTS NOT WHAT I MEANT!

LGH
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DEBORAH TANNER

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Preface

A student who took the course on cross-cultural communication that I teach in the Linguistics Department at Georgetown University commented that the course saved her marriage. At scholarly meetings, my fellow linguists stop me in the hall to tell me that they showed one of my articles to friends or relatives, and it saved their marriages.

What can linguistics have to do with saving marriages? Linguistics is the academic discipline devoted to understanding how language works. Relationships are made, maintained, and broken through talk, so linguistics provides a concrete way of understanding how relationships are made, maintained, and broken. There are branches of linguistics that are concerned mainly with the history or the grammar or the symbolic representation of language. But there are also branches of the field—sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and anthropological linguistics—that are concerned with understanding how people use language in their everyday lives, and how people from different cultures use language in different ways. This book grows out of these branches of linguistics.

But the student who said my course saved her marriage and her husband are both American. What does cross-cultural communication have to do with them? It has to do with everyone, because all communication is more or less cross-cultural. We learn to use language as we grow up, and growing up in different parts of a country, having different ethnic, religious, or class backgrounds, even just being male or female—all result in different ways of talking, which I call conversational style. And subtle differences in conversational style result in individually minor but cumulatively overwhelming misunderstandings and disappointments.

Preface

As E. M. Forster put it in *A Passage to India*, 'a pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry'. When conversations go awry, we look for causes, and usually find them by blaming others or ourselves. The most generous-minded among us blame the relationship. This book shows how much of this blame is misplaced. Bad feelings are often the result of misunderstandings that arise from differences in conversational style.

A chat-show host once introduced me by saying that in his long career he had read many books about speaking, but they were all about public speaking. Yet most of the talk we engage in during our lives is not public but private speaking: talk between two or among a few people. This book is about private speaking: how it works, why it goes well sometimes and badly at other times. It explains the invisible processes of conversational style that shape relationships. Understanding these processes restores a sense of control over our lives, making it possible to improve communication and relationships in all the settings in which people talk to each other: at work, in interviews, in public affairs, and most important of all, at home.

Acknowledgments

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Nearly everyone I encounter becomes a potential source of examples. My family, friends, students, and colleagues, and also unnamed members of audiences and callers to chat shows on which I've appeared, have all generously offered their own experiences, which have helped me understand conversation and illustrate that understanding for others. Many of these have to go unnamed (but are hereby thanked). Some of those whose names I know are: Tom Anselmo, Tom Brazaitis, Mark Clarke, Sysse Engberg, Ralph Fasold, Crawford Feagin, Thaisa Frank, Jo Ann Goldberg, Karl Goldstein, Paul Goldstein, Walter Gorman, Donald Wei Hsiung, Imelda Idar, Deborah Lange, Bill Layher, Joyce Muis-Lowery, Susie Napper, Carol Newman, Mathilde Paterakis, Marcia Perlstein, Eileen Price, David Rabin, Laurel Hadassah Rabin, Lucy Ray, Dan Read, Chuck Richardson, Cynthia Roy, Debby Schiffrin, Ron Scollon, Naomi Tannen, Jackie Tanner, Anne Walker, and David Wye. My thanks to them, and to those who have found their way into my examples through no act of will, but simply by interacting with me.

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who selflessly gave me the insights of their work
to form the foundation of mine, even as they
encouraged me to do my own work and to write
and talk about it in my own voice, both within
and beyond the bounds of academia

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Linguistics and Conversational Style

1

The Problem Is the Process

You know the feeling: you meet someone for the first time, and it's as if you've known each other all your lives. Everything goes smoothly. You know just what she means; she knows just what you mean. You laugh at the same time. Your sentences and hers have a perfect rhythm. You feel terrific; you're doing everything right. And you think she's terrific too.

But you also know the other feeling: you meet someone, you try to be friendly, to make a good impression, but everything goes wrong. There are uncomfortable silences. You fish for topics. You bump into each other as you both start at once and then both stop. You start to say something interesting but he cuts you off. He starts saying something and never seems to finish. You try to lighten the mood and he looks as if you punched him in the stomach. He says what may be intended as a joke but is more rude than funny. Whatever you do to make things better makes them worse.

If conversation always followed the first pattern, I wouldn't have to write this book. If it always followed the second, no one would ever talk to anyone else and nothing would ever get done. Talk is mostly somewhere in the middle. We do get things done; we talk to family and friends and colleagues and neighbours. Sometimes what people say seems to make perfect sense; sometimes it sounds a little odd. If someone doesn't quite get our point, we let it go, the talk continues, and no one pays much attention.

But if an important outcome hangs on the conversation—if it's a job interview, a business meeting, or a doctor's appointment—the results can be very serious. If it's a public negotiation or an international summit conference, the

results can be dire indeed. And if the conversation is with the most important person in your life, the little hitches can become big ones, and you can end up in a conversation of the second sort without knowing how you got there. If this happens all the time—at home, at work, or in routine day-to-day encounters, so that you feel misunderstood all the time and never quite understand what others are getting at—you start to doubt your own ability, or even your sanity. Then you can't not pay attention.

For example, Judy Scott is applying for a job as office manager at the headquarters of an ice-cream distributor—a position she's well qualified for. Her last job, although it was called 'administrative assistant', actually involved running the whole office, and she did a great job. But at the interview, she never gets a chance to explain this. The interviewer does all the talking, Judy leaves feeling frustrated—and she doesn't get the job.

Or at home: Sandy and Matt have a good marriage. They love each other and are quite happy. But a recurring source of tension is that Sandy often feels that Matt doesn't really listen to her. He asks her a question, but before she can answer, he asks another—or starts to answer it himself. When they get together with Matt's friends, the conversation goes so fast, Sandy can't get a word in edgewise. Afterwards, Matt complains that she was too quiet, though she certainly isn't quiet when she gets together with *her* friends. Matt thinks it's because she doesn't like his friends, but the only reason Sandy doesn't like them is that she feels they ignore her—and she can't find a way to get into their conversation.

Sometimes strains in a conversation reflect real differences between people: they *are* angry with each other; they really are at cross-purposes. Books have been written about this situation: how to fight fair, how to assert yourself. But sometimes strains and kinks develop when there really are no basic differences of opinion, when everyone is sincerely trying to get along. This is the type of miscommunication that drives people crazy. And it is usually caused by differences in conversational style.

A perfectly tuned conversation is a vision of sanity—a

ratification of one's way of being human and one's place in the world. And nothing is more deeply disquieting than a conversation gone awry. To say something and see it taken to mean something else; to try to be helpful and be thought pushy; to try to be considerate and be called cold; to try to establish a rhythm so that talk will glide effortlessly about the room, only to end up feeling like a conversational clod who can't pick up the beat—such failure at talk undermines one's sense of competence and of being a right sort of person. If it happens continually, it can undermine one's feeling of psychological well-being.

This book gives a linguist's view of what makes conversation exhilarating or frustrating. Through the lens of linguistic analysis of conversational style, it shows how communication works—and fails to work. The aim is to let you know you're not alone and you're not crazy—and to give you more choice in continuing, ending, or improving communication in your private and public life.

To give you an idea of how a linguistic analysis of conversational style can help, I'll begin by describing how I learned to love linguistics and listen for style.

I got hooked on linguistics the year my marriage broke up. Trying to turn a loss into a gain, I took advantage of my new-found freedom and attended the Linguistic Institute at the University of Michigan in the summer of 1973, to find out what linguistics was all about.

Seven years of living with the man I had just separated from had left me dizzy with questions about communication. What went wrong when we tried to talk to each other? Why did this wonderful, lovable man turn into a cruel lunatic when we tried to talk things out—and make me turn into one too?

I remember one argument near the end of our marriage. It stuck in my mind not because it was unique but because it was so painfully typical, and because the pitch of my frustration reached a new height. I felt I must be losing my mind. It was one of our frequent conversations about plans—simple plans, plans of no great consequence, but plans that involved us both and therefore had to be made in

tandem. In this case it was about whether or not to accept an invitation to visit my sister.

I asked, cosy in the setting of our home and confident of my kindness in being willing to do whatever my husband wished, 'Do you want to go to my sister's?' He answered, 'Okay.' I guess 'Okay' didn't sound to me like an answer to my question; it seemed to indicate he was going along with something. So I followed up: 'Do you really want to go?' He exploded. 'You're driving me crazy! Why don't you make up your mind what you want?'

His explosion sent me into a tailspin. For one thing, I had learned from my father that even the nastiest impulses should be expressed quietly, so my husband's volume and intensity always scared me—and seemed morally wrong. But the reason I felt not so much angry as incredulous and outraged was the seeming irrationality. (As Bruno Bettelheim has pointed out, people can put up with almost anything if they can see a reason for it.) 'My mind? I haven't even said what I want. I'm willing to do whatever *you* want, and this is what I get?' I felt trapped in a theatre of the absurd when I wanted desperately to live in a well-made play.

Reading this may give (to some) the impression that my husband was crazy. I thought he was. And I thought I was crazy for having married him. He was always getting angry with me for saying things I'd never said, or for not paying attention to things I was sure he had never said.

In the quiet of solitary thought and the recollected conviction of his good qualities, I'd decide that since we were both decent people who were generally well liked and otherwise showed no signs of mental disturbance, and since we loved each other, there was no reason for us to fight bitterly about nothing. I'd make up my mind that it wouldn't happen again. But then we'd start talking to each other, and sooner or later some insignificant comment would spark a heated response—and we'd be locking horns in irrational battle.

Linguistics to the Rescue

I had given up trying to solve these communication impasses but was still trying to understand how they'd developed,

when I went to the Linguistic Institute. There I heard Professor Robin Lakoff lecture about indirectness. People prefer not to say exactly what they mean in so many words because they're not concerned only with the ideas they're expressing; they're also—even more—concerned with the effect their words will have on those they're talking to. They want to make sure to maintain camaraderie, to avoid imposing, and to give (or at least appear to give) the other person some choice in the matter being discussed. And different people have different ways of honouring these potentially conflicting goals.

A floodlight fell upon the stage of my marriage. I took it for granted that I would come out and say what I wanted, and that I could ask my husband what he wanted, and that he would tell me. When I asked if he wanted to visit my sister, I meant the question literally. I was asking for information about his preferences so I could accommodate them. Now he wanted to be accommodating too. But he assumed that people—even married people—don't go around just blurting out what they want. To him, that would be coercive because he found it hard to deny a direct request. So he assumed people hint at what they want and pick up hints.

A good way to hint is to ask a question. My husband saw, as clear as could be, that when I asked if he wanted to go to my sister's, I was letting him know that I wanted to go. Otherwise I wouldn't have brought it up. Since he agreed to give me what I wanted, I should have gracefully—and gratefully—accepted. When I followed up with a second question, 'Are you sure you want to go?' he heard—again loud and clear—that I didn't want to go and was asking him to let me off the hook.

From my husband's point of view, I was being irrational. First I let him know that I wanted to go, and then when I got what I wanted, I changed my mind and let him know that I didn't want to go. He was trying to be agreeable, but I was being capricious—exactly my impression, but with our roles reversed. The intensity of his explosion (and of my reaction) came from the cumulative effect of repeated such frustrations.