

Synopsis

The Power of Talk

Deborah Tannen

"In every community known to linguists, the patterns that constitute linguistic style are relatively different for men and women."

Who Gets Heard and Why

How we talk and listen are deeply influenced by our culture and set of norms. Although we may think our way of speaking is natural, we can run into trouble when we interpret and evaluate others based on our own linguistic style. Ways of speaking learned in childhood affect judgment and perception of competence, confidence, who gets credit, and what gets done.

Linguistic style refers to one's characteristic style of speaking and includes directness and indirectness, pacing and pausing, word choice, use of jokes, figures of speech, stories, questions, and apologies. [LMG: Differences in linguistic style are rooted in how we are socialized and have very little, if anything, to do with sex differences.]

"Research...observing American children at play has shown that, although both girls and boys find ways of creating rapport and negotiating status, girls tend to learn conversational rituals that focus on the rapport dimension of relationships whereas boys tend to learn rituals that focus on the status dimension."

"Boys learn to use language to negotiate their status in the group by displaying their abilities and knowledge, and by challenging others and resisting challenges. Giving orders is one way of getting and keeping the high-status role. Another is taking center stage by telling stories or jokes."

Getting Credit

The trend toward teamwork in business plays to the strength of many women's leadership style. However, it complicates performance evaluation and who gets credit. Even the choice of pronouns used makes a huge difference in the getting credit game. Women are more likely to use "we," even when reporting work largely or solely done along. Again, this harks back to wanting to keep power relationships relatively flat or equal. Men more often use "I," even when discussing work done by a team.

Confidence and Boasting

Men tend to be sensitive to the power dynamics of conversation and will avoid speaking in ways that will put them in a "one-down" position. Women are sensitive to the rapport dynamic, speaking in ways that save face for others and buffering statements that would put others "one-down." So who is going to end up in the "one-down" position when these two styles interact? This clashing of linguistic styles put women at a power disadvantage in organizational life.

Verbal sparring, debate, and ritual opposition is the conversational norm in American business. Those who are uncomfortable with this style risk seeming insecure about their ideas.

"...most girls learn that sounding too sure of themselves will make them unpopular with their peers—although nobody really takes such modesty literally."

“Managers might leap to the conclusion that women who do not take credit for what they’ve done should be taught to do so.

But that solution is problematic

because we associate ways of speaking with moral qualities: The way we speak is who we are and who we want to be.”

“Studies show that women are more likely to downplay their certainty and men are more likely to minimize their doubts.”

REFERENCE

Tannen, Deborah. 1995. *The Power of Talk*. Harvard Business Review Sept–Oct 1995:138–48.

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Asking Questions

Yes, it’s true, men really do not like asking for directions. Although asking the right questions is essential to effective management, how and when questions are asked sends unintended signals about competence and power. In a group, if only one person is asking questions (even if they are the right ones), she risks being judged incompetent. People who believe that asking questions reflects negatively upon them are likely to form a negative opinion of others who ask questions in situations where they would not.

Conversational Rituals: Exchanging Compliments & Apologies

The article gives a striking example of business associates, a woman and a man, in casual conversation about presentations each had just given. The woman assumed the conversation to be a ritual exchange of compliments, and continued accordingly. However, the man took the opportunity to assume the “one-up” position of critic. It is a poignant example of how women can feel left out and “dissed” in even the most insignificant of conversations.

Women and men use apologies very differently in conversation. Women tend to say “I’m sorry” much more than men. For women, “I’m sorry” doesn’t always mean “I apologize;” rather, it is a ritualized way to show concern and empathy. Apologies tend to be regarded differently by men, who are more likely to focus on the status implications.

“Ritual apologies—like other conversational rituals—work well when both parties share the same assumption about their use. But people who utter frequent ritual apologies may end up appearing weaker, less confident, and literally more blameworthy than people who don’t.”

Negotiating Authority

Women and men deliver criticism differently to people of higher status. One might expect people to be more careful to how they deliver criticism “upward:” to those higher in the power structure. Research finds this hypothesis to be true for men, but not for women. Women showed more concern about the other’s feelings when they were playing the role of superior. (That is, women are more likely to be careful when delivering feedback to subordinates and less careful when delivering feedback to bosses.)

Indirectness

Indirectness—the tendency to say what we mean without spelling it out, is another linguistic signal that varies with power and status.

Women tend to be indirect when telling others what to do—again, to not come off as “bossy” or superior. Men tend to be indirect when admitting fault or weakness—to avoid being put “one-down.”

Skillful Action

The critical skill for managers is to become aware of the workings of power and linguistic style and to make sure that people with something valuable to contribute get heard.

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