

Conversational style . . .

When men and women talk— why don't we say what we mean?

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

A perfectly tuned conversation is a paradigm 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 sail effortlessly about the room, only to end up feeling like a conversational clod who can't pick up the beat—either failing to get into the chorus line of talkers or breaking in abruptly and bringing the verbal dance to a halt—such failure at talk undermines one's sense of competence and of being a right sort of person.

Conversation is a risky business, steering a course between the conflicting human needs to be both connected to other people and independent. It's like Bruno Bettelheim's example (borrowed from Schopenhauer) of porcupines trying to get through a cold winter. They huddle together for warmth, but their sharp quills prick each other, so they draw apart—and become cold again. They have to keep adjusting their closeness and distance, balancing their needs to keep warm and to keep from getting pricked—exactly like two people trying to live together or to maintain a friendship.

This drawing together and backing off is done continually through conversation—not only in the major heart-to-heart talks that occasionally are necessary to untangle the knots we have talked ourselves into (and that often get us more tangled up), but also in the seemingly meaningless thread of talk with which we find our ways through the labyrinth of daily life. Any show of involvement threatens the need for independence, and any show of respect for independence threatens involvement. The only way to resolve this paradox is not to say things outright. Enter *INDIRECTNESS*.

Indirectness is a necessary compromise between coming out and demanding what we want (which would violate others' needs not to be imposed upon) and sitting around with fingers crossed hoping it will arrive anyway (though most of us do our share of this, too)—in search of the proof of rapport that comes with getting one's way without asking, with being understood without explaining.

Indirectness (as linguists call it) makes all conversation an activity comparable to picking your way through a minefield, but the minefield is particularly hazardous in talk between men and women. While many people are prepared to stumble in cross-cultural communication—that is, with people from differ-

ent countries—few realize that talk between men and women is cross-cultural communication. Culture is simply a set of expectations and habits of interpretation based on prior experiences—and the experiences of men and women are different. We grow up in different worlds, even if we grow up in the same house.

Little girls make and maintain friendships through talk. They tend to play in twos—with a best friend, with whom they exchange secrets. The secrets themselves may or may not be important, but the fact of exchanging them makes the friendship. If a secret is told to a third little girl, the teller has a new best friend. Boys tend to play in groups, and spend more time doing things than talking. When they talk, it is about the game, or competitive talk about who is better at what.

When they grow up, women and men often retain their discrepant habits. For many women, talk is a way of creating and demonstrating friendships; for many men, talk shouldn't be needed between friends (John Wayne comes to

who doesn't understand me or can't tell a story? Or, what's wrong with me that I don't get the point or don't make myself clear?

If it happens so often that husbands and wives, friends and lovers have such a hard time figuring out what the other means, why do they keep resorting to indirectness? Why don't we just say what we mean? For one thing, we may not know what we want or mean—and not be ready to defend it or compromise for it—until we have a sense of what the other person wants or means. And by remaining off-record, we can avoid outright confrontation, we can take back what we said by protesting, "That's not what I meant." But another reason lies in what I call the "birthday present routine."

Many people won't come out and say what they want for their birthdays. That would ensure them a gift they want, but it wouldn't give them what they want even more—proof of rapport. We want to know that those close to us care enough, and know us well enough, to choose just the right gift—without being told what to get. (Anyone could get just the right gift if we told them.) At the same time, we don't want to take a chance entirely—so we hint. ("Gee, isn't that a nice photograph.") The dangers, however, are obvious. One may get a photograph, wrapped up with ribbons, that one sincerely admired but had not wanted at all.

Once you realize that people don't say what they mean, it is natural to hunt down their meaning by attending to how they say what they say—to tone of voice, loudness, intonation, significant hesitation or quickening of pace, as well as to nonverbal signals such as gestures (a wave of the hand), facial expres-

Women are so attuned to monitor conversation, they may pick up signals that are unintended—and inaccurate

sions (a smile or smirk), body movements (leaning in or backing off). Many men tend to pay no attention to anything that is not said in words, so when women pick up information from these subtle signals their conclusions seem mysterious to men, who call it "women's intuition," or they seem unfounded, the result of "reading things in."

In fact, when interpreting meaning, it is possible to pick up signals that weren't sent out, like an innocent flock of birds mistaken for planes on a radar screen. For example, Maryellen looks at Ralph and asks, "What's wrong?" when he is thinking about lunch and frowning a bit. She is showing concern, but he feels under scrutiny.

Or, while Sarah listens to Frank, she expresses interest by gasping, exclaiming, and sighing in response to his story. Her normal style of response seems to him an overreaction. Then she tells him something, and he listens attentively and quietly. She thinks he isn't paying attention and isn't interested because he's just sitting there.

When two people communicate with each other over months or years, simple little conversations create little frustrations, which build up to a cumulative effect of big frustrations.

For example, Jane (Continued on page 192)

Deborah Tannen, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of linguistics at Georgetown University and is writing a book on conversational style.

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asks Jim, "Where shall we go for dinner?" He suggests The Smokehouse. They go, and the food is terrible. Jane says, "It was terrible the last time I ate here, too." Jim feels tricked: "Why didn't you say so?" Jane answers, "You didn't ask." And then she accuses, "You never care what I want. We always do what you want."

To Jim, it seems that Jane never says what she wants and then gets angry because she doesn't get it. What is he supposed to be, a mindreader? He can't imagine that she knows what she wants but is reluctant to impose it on him. When she asks him where they should go for dinner, she expects him to respond vaguely ("What are you in the mood for?"), and turn the question back on her. By asking first, she intends to start a negotiation so they can agree on something that will satisfy both. But that negotiation never takes place because in his answer, she hears Jim demanding what he wants. She can't imagine that when he names a restaurant, he is just throwing out a suggestion, expecting her to counter with a suggestion of her own—another way to start a negotiation. Since she expects a negotiation to start vague and work its way into a specific answer, and he expects it to start specific and

Then there's the "birthday present routine"

work its way out, she never gets a chance to say what she wants and assumes it's his fault—he's not interested; and he thinks she doesn't know what she wants—and is (always) forcing him to decide.

Differing expectations about indirectness as a mechanism can lead to direct combat. For example, Sam and Maria:

SAM: We didn't go to the party because you didn't want to.

MARIA: I wanted to go. *You* didn't want to.

One of them must be remembering wrong, or lying, no? Not at all. Sam and Maria reconstructed the conversation that led to the decision not to go:

MARIA: Bob's having a party. Do you want to go?

SAM: Okay.

MARIA (later): Are you sure you want to go?

SAM: Okay, let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

If each partner could assume that both will come right out and say whether or not they want to go to a party, then "okay" would mean "Yes, I want to go." But if even one partner feels it would be impossible to oppose the other's stated preference, then it is better to hint. In this system, Maria's mentioning the party in the first place is a hint that she wants to go and Sam's "okay" probably means that he is going along with what she wants. In fact, Maria was simply reporting. When she asked a second time, Sam assumed she was hinting that, after all, she didn't want to go to the party. To spare her guilt about his sacrifice (he *did* want to go), he added, "I'm tired anyway." Being equally considerate, Maria—when Sam

said, "Let's not go"—suppressed the fact that she wanted to go to the party. Not listening for indirectness, she missed the clue in the sour-grapes word, "anyway." So each one concluded the other didn't want to go—and they ended up doing what neither wanted.

Similar problems can arise from the seemingly innocent but potentially deadly little word "Why?" For example, Bill said, "Let's drop by my mother's tonight." Sally asked, "Why?" Now anyone who speaks English knows what the word "why" means. But what did Sally mean when she said it? She might be just asking for information, wondering, say, if Bill's mother is all right. Or preferring not to go but not wanting to refuse, she might be asking "why" as a stalling tactic.

Questions are notorious for their multifaceted power. They can be literal requests for information, or hidden ways of manipulation. ("Can you reach the salt?" or "Are you free tonight?") They can put others down by requiring them to reveal compromising information ("Have you actually *read* it?"), or build them up by inviting them to reveal flattering information or by putting them in the position of expert (something women are frequently observed to do).

Bill answered Sally's question "Why?" with "All right, we don't have to go," assuming that she was indirectly refusing. But he was angry at her for being selfish.

Sally, for her part, who really just wondered why he wanted to go, ended up asking herself what she was doing with such an erratic man, who first suggested that they go, then changed his mind on the spot, refused to explain either inclination, at all, and then started sulking for no reason.

Of course, Sally's "why" could have been an indirect refusal. It's common to hear—and comforting to use—the self-defense "I was just asking," even when there really was a hidden motive lurking.

In all these examples, confusion arises because people derive meaning not from what is said but from how it is said, like a running report on emotional weather.

A great deal of casual conversation—maybe most—is relatively insignificant in what it says, but people don't wait until they have something important to say in order to talk. If they did, we'd have a lot more silence, and no way to show how we feel about each other; if we want to be involved—or not—and how.

All conversation is important for what it says about the relationship between the people communicating, as in T. S. Eliot's line, "How much it means to me that I say this to you." Since women have their antennae way out to monitor relationships, they're often more attuned to this function of talk. But being so attuned means picking up a lot of subtle signals which may or may not be intended—and may or may not be accurate.

Why don't we just say what we mean—"put our feelings out there" and "check out" our interpretations, as was recommended in some encounter-group parlance of the 'sixties? Because any utterance, including any explanation or request for one, is subject to the same multiple interpretations ("What do you *mean*, 'what do I mean?!'"). And the act of asking for or giving an explanation itself becomes evidence for lack of rapport—a breakdown in a system of communication we feel ought to be effortless. Underneath, most of us believe, as linguist Robin Lakoff put it, "Love means never having to say, 'What do you mean?'" ▽

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