Bush’s Sweet Talk

By Deborah Tannen

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"It's government's role to create an environment where everyone can dream and flourish." The purpose of prosperity is to make the American dream touch every willing heart." The greatness of America is found in the loving and generous hearts of its people."

What is this? An inspirational speech from a New Age guru? No, it's a plea for campaign contributions from georgewbush.com. Why all these "hearts" and "dreams" on a political Web site? That's what I wondered.

Seeking women's votes with an emotional lexicon.

until I realized the answer: to appeal to women voters — not through policy proposals to better women's lives, but through emotional language designed to win their "hearts."

Perhaps I should have anticipated this in 1997, when the pollster Frank Luntz gave Republican members of Congress a memo called "Language of the 21st Century." It said that Republicans need not "change our substance or create a separate women's agenda" because "listening to women and adapting a new language and a transformation of the heart and will. This is why a hopeful and decent future is found in hopeful and decent children." (Very good: one "heart," two "hopes," one "children.")

Of course, politicians have always talked about dreams and children, but none of the other current candidates are doing so with anything near Mr. Bush's intensity. And while Bill Clinton has always used words for emotional impact, in the case of women he has done so to gain support for concrete proposals to improve their lives. The Pavlovian view of women voters — plug the words in, and they will respond — sends a chill down my spine because it sounds like an adaptation of something I have written about communication between the sexes: When a woman tells a man about a problem, she doesn't want him to fix it; she just wants him to listen and let her know he understands. But there's a difference between a private conversation and a presidential election, between what we want from our lovers and what we want from our leaders.

Evidence of this distinction may be showing up in recent polls: According to Zogby International, Mr. Bush's lead among Republican women nationwide has dipped from 66 percent in October to 56 percent in January; in New Hampshire, he now trails Senator John McCain — who has made little effort to sound woman-friendly — among women likely to vote in the G.O.P. primary.

Women may not want their men to solve all their personal problems, but solving the nation's problems is, after all, what we elect our leaders to do.