

Chapter 12

Crossing over

Writing (and talking) for general (as compared to academic) audiences

Deborah Tannen

Georgetown University

Drawing on my own experience, I address some of the challenges and benefits of writing for both academic and general audiences. I note, for example, that when I write for general audiences, I can't say much of what I know because it would take too long to explain. In my academic writing, I can't say much of what I know because I can't prove it. Among the challenges are the scorn for and misconceptions about each world that are held by denizens of the other. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of moving from academic to trade publishing is not the writing itself but getting published. To illustrate, I recount the tortuous sagas behind the publication of my first two general-audience books. I conclude by observing that understanding the vicissitudes of writing for these two audiences sheds light on how language works.

Some years ago I was chatting with a colleague in the corridor outside our academic offices. In the course of our conversation, he remarked that he had given up presenting papers at academic conferences because he had concluded, "You can't say anything in twenty minutes." When our chat ended, I returned to my office and checked my voice mail. There was a message from the producer of a radio program on which I was scheduled to appear later that day. Among the instructions the producer offered was the caution: "I know you're a professor, but please keep your answers to twenty seconds. We've got the driving-home crowd here, and all they really want is a few ideas to take home to their wives." Leaving aside the assumption that all listeners were men – and men married to women, at that – I was struck by the contrast: if you can't say anything in twenty minutes, what exactly can you say in twenty seconds?

The answer, of course, depends on what type of "anything" you want to say. I assume my colleague meant that twenty minutes isn't enough time to explain fully how he designed and conducted his research, what he found, the subtleties of his research design and findings, and the contribution he was making to the field. The producer, I

surmise, meant that twenty seconds is ample time to convey a single interesting and, preferably, surprising finding. In that context, the method and theories that led to the finding are immaterial. And therein lie some of the differences – the frustrations but also the pleasures – of communicating to general as compared to academic audiences.

Two audiences, two voices

When I write for general audiences, I can't say much of what I know because it would take too long to explain. In my academic writing, I can't say much of what I know because I can't prove it. I have been criticized by academic editors for writing too simply, and by a newspaper reviewer for using a single technical term in a book. An editor told me, after reading one of the first articles I'd written for a magazine, "You have to get from point to point more quickly." This is the opposite of what I do in revising academic papers: I explain and discuss complexities and expand transitions by articulating connections, thereby getting from point to point more slowly.

I suspect that most of my fellow academics can immediately see the benefit of elaborating connections and explicating complexities, and that many can see drawbacks to eliding nuances and caveats. But I believe I benefit intellectually from both approaches. As with teaching of any kind, the need to present ideas succinctly, in non-technical terms, helps me clarify my thinking. It is easier to camouflage fuzzy thinking in technical language, because using technical terms can give a false reassurance that what one has just said or written sounds right. But I would not want to live permanently in a world where I could only sum up and never spend hours and pages exploring an idea by laying out – and thereby working out – the subtleties of an analysis in detail. Research and writing are like cooking: a continual back and forth between distilling and elaborating, letting the stock boil down to intensify the essence, then adding vegetables and powders to enhance substance and flavor. Being able to distill to the main point is essential, but so is being able to fill in details that give texture and richness. Popular writing helps me distill. Academic writing helps me elaborate.

The need to move quickly from point to point is a concern not only in writing for general audiences, but in talking to them as well. While speaking on radio and television, I soon learned that I could not try to build up to a point, or set the stage for it. If I did, I'd usually be cut off before I got to it. The first words out of my mouth had to be my main point. I could add subtlety or related points if I was lucky enough not to be cut off when that first point was made. But I couldn't count on having time to do so.

Reshaping my research findings to make them comprehensible and useful for general audiences, including reducing them to nuggets that can be expressed in twenty seconds, forces me to be crystal clear not only in how I articulate my findings but also

in how I conceptualize them. In a way, this is not different from what is necessary in academic writing, but there is a difference in degree. One stark difference is diction. I avoid the passive voice, polysyllabic words (unless I really need them, like the term for which I was castigated by a newspaper reviewer, “complementary schismogenesis”), nominalizations (forget “language acquisition”; think “learning a language”) and the impersonal “one.” For example, I wrote above, “...what one has just said or written.” If this were an essay for a general audience, I would have changed that to, “what you just said or wrote.” At the start of this paragraph, I wrote, “...forces me to be crystal clear not only in how I articulate my findings but also in how I conceptualize them.” If this were an article for a magazine, newspaper, or website, I would have written, “I have to be crystal clear in my choice of words – and in my thinking.” And that is another way that writing for general audiences allows me to indulge even more in a pleasure that I also find in academic writing: I can use words – and punctuation – to add expressiveness and emotional overtones, as well as, yes, nuances of thought. The dash before “– and in my thinking” forces readers to stop and savor the surprise of the second phrase. In popular writing I can play more with language – repeat sounds, reverse syllables, introduce metaphors, then stretch and flip them. In scholarly writing, I have the soberer satisfaction of developing a personal voice and tone while conforming to the format of an academic paper (though there, too – here, too – you’ll find language play, similes and metaphors, and expressive use of dashes, but somewhat less of them).

I enjoy the challenge of writing the same ideas using different diction. I have a clear memory of how I wrote the chapter in *You Just Don't Understand* entitled “Look at Me When I'm Talking to You!": Cross Talk Across the Ages.” I began by opening the file of an academic paper I had written, and went through it, rewriting every sentence I wanted to use in a more conversational register. Anyone interested in seeing the results can compare that chapter to the paper it's based on: “Gender Differences in Conversational Coherence: Physical Alignment and Topical Cohesion” (Tannen, 1990). The change in title is exemplary: “Physical Alignment” refers to the pattern I observed by which girls, talking to their best friends at a range of ages, tended to face each other directly and maintain a face-to-face gaze, while boys tended to sit at angles or parallel and look around the room. Whereas the title of the academic paper highlighted the technical concept of alignment, that of the book chapter used a line of dialogue, “Look at Me When I'm Talking to You!” to highlight the effect of this gender difference on individuals in interaction.

Another contrast is illustrated by another recollection. Around the time that *You Just Don't Understand* was receiving a great deal of attention, I was asked to write an article for a women's magazine, conveying some of the main points of the book. I wrote a piece making all the points I wanted to make by referring to a conversation I had recently had. I was riding in a taxi, heading for a TV studio in Manhattan, and

chatting with the driver. At one point, he asked me why I was going to a TV studio, and I replied that I would be interviewed about a book I'd written. He asked what the book was about, and I said it was about communication between women and men. At that, he said, "My wife and I have good communication." Then he added, "But sometimes when she talks to me I just don't answer." This didn't sound to me like good communication, so I asked him why he wouldn't answer. He explained, "Sometimes what she says just doesn't make any sense." I asked for an example, and he provided one: "The other day, we're watching TV, and she says to me, 'What should my brother do?'" Glancing at me in the rear view mirror, he said, "Her brother's 35. Why should I give him advice?"; I also asked for an example of their good communication. He said that when they have a decision to make, like where to go on vacation, they talk about it, both express their preferences, and work out a plan taking both their preferences into account.

This conversation allowed me to explain, first, that there are differences in the ways many women and men tend to regard the role of talk in a relationship. The driver's example of good communication was a conversation with an instrumental goal: deciding where to go on vacation. In *You Just Don't Understand*, I referred to this as "report-talk." The term I used to describe the kind of talk I believe his wife was trying to initiate when she asked, "What should my brother do?" is "rapport-talk": talking about personal topics to create a sense of connection. (I should note that I concocted this pair of terms deliberately, at my editor's urging. She said that I needed "buzz-words," so readers could more easily remember points I had made, and more readily recognize my observations as original. Though taking her suggestion richly paid off – I still frequently hear references to report-talk and rapport-talk – for reasons I can't explain, this is the sole instance in which I took advantage of it.) A type of rapport-talk that many women value is what Gail Jefferson (1988) dubbed troubles talk: talking about personal problems, which yields the comforting sense that someone cares about their lives. Because men are less likely to engage in troubles talk as rapport-talk, they often approach it as report-talk, assuming that a woman who tells about a problem is looking for a solution. That explains why the driver assumed his wife must have been seeking his help in giving her brother advice.

In my book, I explained that these different assumptions and habits often lead to mutual frustration when a woman tries to initiate troubles talk with a man, and he tells her how to fix her problem. She doesn't want advice – at least not right off the bat. She wants to talk about it. Her objection frustrates him: Why talk about it if you don't want to do anything about it? Most frustrating to her is that the solution shuts down the conversation – the rapport-talk – when starting a conversation was her purpose from the start. The distinction between rapport-talk and report-talk does not mean that men don't seek rapport; it just means that they are less likely to seek it in that way. For the taxi driver, I surmise (and I note that I added "I surmise" in revising this

essay; the epistemic need to say how I know what I claim being far stronger in academic writing), watching television was a satisfying way to spend the evening with his wife: doing something together creates connection. But his wife probably felt something was missing: rapport-talk. Since she didn't have troubles of her own to talk about, she borrowed her brother's.

Finally, the driver's explanation, "Her brother's 35. Why should I give him advice?," allowed me to discuss the different sensitivities that women and men tend to develop: many men are sensitive to any hint that they are being put down or pushed around, whereas many women have their antennae rolled out for any hint that they are being left out or pushed away. While talking about troubles can give women a sense of connection, being given advice puts you in a one-down position. That was the aspect of advice-giving that the driver focused on when his wife tried to initiate troubles talk.

I was delighted that I'd been able to explain all those key points using a single conversation, and a real one at that. But when I submitted my essay to the magazine, the editor asked me to rewrite it. "You can't have a whole article about just one example," she said. "You need a different example for each point you want to make." For her, the elegance of a single conversation was overridden by the danger that a reader might get bored, feeling she has heard enough about this one exchange. The risk of losing readers, or listeners, is ever-present in public discourse. I believe this contrasts with academics' luxurious conviction that those who choose to read an article or book have a committed interest in the topic and don't need to be continually reminded of its importance. Disappointed, I rewrote the article, illustrating each point with dialogue from a different scenario. (I'm thrilled that I finally got to present my taxi-driver example twenty-five years later – here.)

One of the general-audience genres about which I'm asked most often is the newspaper op-ed. This is for good reason: it's short, and academics frequently have significant insights and expertise to contribute to enhance understanding of contemporary issues and topics. In a way, though, it's the hardest genre to tackle, because it is a pressure-cooker version of the constraints that apply to all general-audience writing. The length – typically 700 words, though it can sometimes go a bit higher – encapsulates both its appeal and its challenge. You have to get right to the point, which must be encapsulated in a single sentence; resist the temptation to add background, subtlety, and related points; avoid technical terms that require definition or explanation (extra words you can't afford); and do all this in a voice and tone that are crisp and catchy. Ideally, there is an obvious "hook": a current event to which you are responding, and which you hone in on in the first sentence. The second sentence will establish your expertise and credentials, and the third will summarize the point you will make about it. That's your first paragraph right there. Each succeeding paragraph will add just one more point, in an equally succinct and direct way, with the final sentence wrapping it

up, ideally by returning to a metaphor, scenario or point you began with. And all this you must do in a single sitting; one day later, the news cycle has moved on, and your op-ed is outdated. If your university has a department that can do the submitting for you, that's a huge plus. If not, you must send it out, too. Using the public op-ed email address will sometimes work, but your chances are greater – chances not only of getting published but of getting any response at all – if you can address it to a specific editor. In sum, as is often the case with writing for a general audience, it entails a lot of work without a great likelihood of success (but not with none).

Mutual suspicion, mutual misunderstanding

The saddest aspects of moving between the worlds of academia and of general audiences are the scorn for and misconceptions about each world that are held by denizens of the other. Soon after *You Just Don't Understand* became a surprise best seller, the linguistics editor at a major academic press was visiting my department, scouting out potential books. When he found me in my office, he began our conversation with questions about my recent experience, evincing particular interest in how much money I was making as a result. After a series of questions aimed at that, he changed the subject to the purpose of his visit by asking, “And what are you doing for real work?”

I am as saddened by this dismissal of the work involved in popular writing as I am by the parallel scorn many non-academics express for scholarly research and writing. For example, like the resentment many people feel at overhearing a dialect they do not understand, many non-academics sneer at the use of technical terms, which they denigrate as “jargon.” Few people use this derisive term to refer to the specialized language of a group they belong to; it is usually applied to the language used by members of a group they feel excluded from. When editors in the non-academic world want me to change something I've written, they often accuse me of being “too academic.” It just happened with my most recent book, *You're The Only One I Can Tell: Inside the Language of Women's Friendships*. In responding to my first draft, my editor asked me to make changes to a chapter on friends' use of social media. As is evident from her parenthetical apology, she was aware of my allergy to this accusation, yet she wrote that the chapter “reads like an academic (forgive me!) summation of the state of social media communication. I am missing the female-specific thread (even in the section on gender).” I felt that her suggestion (like all the suggestions she made) was a good one, since the topic of the book was women's friendships. In revising, I kept only examples of social media exchanges between girls and women, and added analysis of how gender patterns illuminated them. My editor was pleased with my rewrite, and I was too; I was grateful that she had suggested it. But I still can't see that those changes made the chapter any less academic, or what was academic about it in the first place.

What I changed was the focus. I suspect that the adjective “academic” had sprung to my editor’s mind automatically, because I am one.

Along with the mutual derision – perhaps motivating it – comes mutual envy. Members of the academy and those who inhabit the world outside it often see the other world as an Eden of privilege and reward, a lawn of greener grass. Knowing nothing of the time a professor spends preparing classes, grading papers and exams, advising students, serving on committees, and fulfilling innumerable other administrative and professional duties, outsiders ask how many hours I teach and, on hearing my answer, conclude that being a professor amounts to paid retirement. But many academics who feel thus misjudged have equally illusory notions about popular writing – not only about how lucrative it is, but also about how easy. In my experience, the task of writing itself is more or less the same regardless of the venue, once you know the parameters of each genre. But I have found the challenge of getting published to be greater with general-audience writing.

A bumpy road

Thus far I have talked about the acts of writing and speaking. But perhaps the most challenging aspect of moving from academic to general audiences is not the writing itself but getting published. My first two general-audience books both have long, tortuous sagas behind them. I’ll recount them to give an idea of some of the things that can make writing for a commercial press difficult.

That’s Not What I Meant! (1986) was the first book I wrote for general readers, and the one for which I had outsized ambition. Seeing how successful psychologists had been in communicating their knowledge to society at large, I wanted to do the same for linguistics. I set out to write a book that would tell the world that some of what they attribute to psychology might actually result from what I call conversational style – that is, culturally-learned ways of speaking. I knew that in order to interest a commercial press, I needed an agent, and I got the name of one from Walter Johnson, the founder and owner of my then academic publisher, Ablex, who was on the board of Harcourt Brace.

I began by writing a draft of an entire book, laying out the insights of an interactional sociolinguistic approach to analyzing conversation. In order to accommodate a projected naïve audience, I (rather naively) structured it as a series of questions and answers. This draft, together with an article I had published in *New York Magazine* based on my dissertation research on New York conversational style, convinced the agent to take me on. She felt, however, that the format I had used was not effective. With her guidance, I condensed the book-length manuscript to a proposal. I think it was about 50 pages. On the basis of this proposal, my agent got offers from editors at

three publishing houses. I chose the editor at Dutton, because Dutton had published the work of Gregory Bateson, one of my intellectual heroes. After signing a contract, I met with the editor, who had a different vision for my book. I thought his vision made sense – I think I pretty much assumed he knew what was best – and wrote seventy-five pages to his specifications. I sent him this draft, then traveled to New York City to discuss it with him. When I arrived at his office, I found him standing amid empty shelves and piled-up cardboard boxes. He told me that he was leaving the company, so I'd been assigned a new editor. He took me to her office and introduced us.

It turned out that my new editor did not share his vision for my book. She told me to start fresh, and write either half the book or a complete draft, without censoring myself: we could shape it together afterwards. I wrote a draft of the whole book, and sent her the resulting 300-page manuscript. She thought it was terrible – so terrible that there was no way we could work with it. Instead of providing suggestions for revision, she sent me a package of paperback self-help books, with instructions to read them in order to learn how to write such a book. After opening this surprise package, I called a friend, invited myself over, and broke down and sobbed.

After pulling myself together, I drew up an outline that went from smaller pieces of language – “conversational signals” and “devices” – to bigger ones – “conversational strategies” – and from there to sociolinguistic topics like indirectness, framing, and power and solidarity. From there I moved to the effect of conversational style differences on face-to-face interaction and consequently on relationships. Though I ended with a chapter on how understanding conversational style could improve communication and therefore relationships, my outline was not modeled on the self-help books the editor had sent me. I never looked at them. If there was anything I did not want my book to be, it was a self-help book. (I have since shed my contempt for that genre; though I still don't think of the books I write as self-help books per se, among the most gratifying aspects of writing them is being told that my books have helped people in their everyday lives and improved their relationships.) The editor approved this outline, and I wrote the first three chapters. She approved them, too, and I wrote three more. But when I sent her this second installment, she told me she was leaving the company, and I'd been assigned a new editor.

My third editor began by looking over everything I had written thus far: the six chapters I had written for editor #2, three of which she had approved; the 300-page manuscript that she had rejected; the seventy-five pages I had written for editor #1; and the proposal based on which he had offered me a contract. I don't recall whether or not I showed her the book draft I had originally shown my agent. Editor #3 pronounced everything I had written thus far unacceptable. She believed my book should focus on male/female differences. I recall her saying, “That's what people are really interested in.” (Knowing now what happened with *You Just Don't Understand*, I can say she was right.) After our meeting, I wrote a detailed outline of a book about gender differences

in conversational style, which she approved. But this time, I put off writing it. I retreated instead to the safety and comfort of writing an academic paper analyzing the words used to introduce dialogue in English and Greek conversation and fiction (Tannen, 1986). I can still recall the sense of pleasure and relief I got from immersing myself in the micro-analysis of individual sentences that I painstakingly hand-copied onto index cards which I then sorted and studied. This many-months delay turned out to be a blessing. The editor was fired, and I was once again assigned a new one.

I “met” editor #4 on the phone, not in person. She told me that none of what I had written so far was acceptable, including, now, the outline that had been approved by editor #3. And it was evident from the way she spoke to me that she felt she had been stuck with a loser who had been through so many editors and written so many rejected drafts because she was incapable of writing a book. This time, in addition to crying, I made another phone call: to my agent, who apologized for not having moved me to a different publisher sooner. She went back to the editor at William Morrow who had made one of the offers I had rejected in favor of Dutton, and showed her the six chapters I had written for editor #2. The editor liked those chapters. Dutton released me from their contract, and I signed on with William Morrow. I wrote four more chapters, and the book was published, exactly as I had written it.

Though this editor asked for no changes to my text, it would be misleading to imply that because she was happy with the book I’d written, I was home free. With this book, as with every one I’ve written since, there was a struggle over the title. The one I had come up with was, *That’s Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Your Relations With Others*. After the book was in press, I received a phone call from my editor. She told me that she was changing the subtitle to “The New Psychology of Conversation.” I told her I couldn’t live with that. I’m not a psychologist; my work is not psychology; and my whole purpose in writing the book was to show people that my field, linguistics, can make a contribution to their understanding of human relationships. My refusal pushed her over the edge. Whereas she had previously been saying that she thought this book might become a best seller, she now railed, “There’s no linguistics section in the bookstore! This book is going to go nowhere!” She ended our conversation by telling me that if I didn’t like her subtitle, I’d better find another one myself, because the one I had would not fly. In a panic, I began writing down potential alternative subtitles, and placed a call to a friend who had once helped me with wording for the dedication of an academic book. Mercifully, the editor called me back to apologize for her outburst, and to say I could keep my subtitle. (When the book was published in paperback, I myself decided that *your relations with others* was unwieldy, and suggested instead, *How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. I had in the intervening year gotten over my resistance to the word “relationships,” which I had previously thought was too redolent of psychology.)

Struggles over titles, I should note, are not limited to commercial presses: I found myself in a similar, if less heated, exchange with the editor of my next book, an academic one: *Talking Voices*. The subtitle, “Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse”, was not the one I had chosen. My subtitle was “Repetition, Dialogue, and Details in Conversational and Literary Discourse.” The Cambridge editor asked me to substitute the word “imagery” for what I actually discuss in the book: details. Though I remain uncomfortable with that substitution, I thought – and think – she might have had a point, since the study of “imagery” has a long history and ready-made following, whereas the significance of details is something I was proposing – arguing for and demonstrating – in the book. However, I still regret agreeing to the other change she insisted on: deleting “and Literary.” While most of my analysis is of everyday conversation, the book also includes analysis of plays and fiction. Indeed, the relationship between conversational and literary discourse is key to the book’s thesis: that everyday conversation is made up of the same linguistic strategies that are regarded as quintessentially literary. So deleting “and Literary,” while making the subtitle less unwieldy, misrepresents the book’s contents. Sure enough, the first review of the book that appeared in an academic journal took me to task for including literary discourse in a book purportedly about conversation.

I might note that the Cambridge editor’s suggestions for change were limited to the subtitle of my book; she did not comment on or try to fiddle with its content. This is one of the most significant differences I have encountered in writing for these two types of presses. Once an academic press has agreed to publish a book, the manuscript I send them is the one they publish. The editor at William Morrow who sent *That’s Not What I Meant!* to press without suggesting any changes to the draft I sent her, later told me that this was extremely rare. In her experience – and mine, to my surprise and often my frustration, though also often my gratitude – editors at commercial presses always ask for substantive changes to manuscripts they receive.

That’s Not What I Meant! did not become a best-seller, and I scaled back my ambition. Another author told me that his hope for his books was for each to sell well enough for him to be allowed to write another. I decided that was a good goal, and figured I’d henceforth alternate books for general and academic audiences. The books I published before and after *That’s Not What I Meant!* were academic: the one before was *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends*, published by Ablex; *Talking Voices* was the one that came after. After it was published, I was ready to write another general-audience book. I figured it would be a collection of essays. My agent thought that was a fine idea and suggested I look at the essays of John McPhee for a model. But my editor at William Morrow did something that editors are not supposed to do. She told me that she had met a young agent, just starting out on her own, who was interested in representing me, and who the editor thought could do a better job than

my current agent. The new agent, she said, thought my next book should be “The Language of Love,” and the one after that should be “The Language of Work.” I said there was no way I was going to write such sequels, but the editor was adamant that I should at least meet and talk to the new agent. I went along, determined that I would never be convinced to write any such books. But the young agent, who had recently graduated from Brown with a major in semiotics, impressed me – and convinced me that I could write a book about gender differences in conversational style that I would find intellectually challenging, without pandering to anyone’s notion of what it should be. I agreed to work with this new agent, and she negotiated a contract with the same editor. (I have remained with this agent till today, and I count myself inordinately lucky to have found her when we were both starting out. Though I had the same editor for my first two general-audience books, I have had a different one for each of the seven that followed. Each switch was for a different reason, none of which is relevant to this essay, except insofar as they illustrate the volatility of the publishing industry.)

I did not expect my second general-audience book to be a best seller. That it became one, let alone that it remained one for nearly four years, was a total surprise to me and to my publisher as well. In fact, they didn’t believe it was happening for a long time. *You Just Don’t Understand* was published in May 1990 with a modest print run and modest expectations. The producers of *Donahue* (the talk show that then dominated daytime TV) declined to have me on. I did, however, appear on *The Today Show*, where the host asked about an example that, until I wrote about it, I had never heard mentioned by anyone in any context, and apparently the host hadn’t either: why men don’t like to stop and ask for directions. (When I wrote the book, this was just one of innumerable examples, something one woman told me frustrated her about her husband; I had no idea how widespread the phenomenon was. I certainly had no inkling that, because I wrote and talked about it, men not asking for directions would become a trope in our public discourse, the basis for jokes on greeting cards and cocktail napkins.) A *Donahue* producer caught this interview and booked me for that show, where I appeared at the end of June. Around the same time, Susan Stamberg did a feature on the book for NPR. Shortly after it aired, a former student phoned and told me to call NPR. When I did, I heard an astonishing recording: “If you are calling about the feature on women and men talking, press 1. If you are calling about anything else, press 2.” This was the first indication that something unusual was afoot.

Demand ratcheted up swiftly, but the publisher refused to print enough books to fill it, fearing they’d be stuck with unsold books. I kept getting emails from friends across the country telling me that my book was “out of print.” What it was was out of stock, but the result was the same: no one could get a copy. It was unavailable the entire month of August. People told me later that being out of stock for that long should kill a book, but luckily, it didn’t. After a month, the publisher finally believed that this odd

book by, of all things, a linguist, really was being bought by that many people, and they began ordering significant enough print runs to meet demand.

The drama over printing enough books was only the last step in a process plagued by nearly as much *Sturm und Drang* as had led up to the publication of *That's Not What I Meant! You Just Don't Understand* also went through a series of frustrating incarnations. The source of trouble in this case was not a changeover in editors; I had the same editor the entire time, as I said, the same one I had worked with on *That's Not What I Meant!* With this book, too, there was a bit of drama around the title. It was initially going to be "Crosstalk." (I even sought permission from John Gumperz to borrow the title of a BBC documentary based on his work.) That more listless title went along with the advice that the editor had given me. She told me not to write this book in the same way as the previous one. Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* had recently become a best seller, and she believed that the market was now welcoming to more academic books. She told me to drop the clever section headings that I'd used in the first book. "They make your book seem like cotton candy," she warned. "You're much too smart for people to think your book is cotton candy!" In the same spirit, she told me not to start each chapter with an anecdote, to cut back on the anecdotes generally, and to end each chapter with an explicit preview of the next one. Ever the dutiful author, I did as I was told. I wrote the book in a more plodding way. I suppressed the jaunty subtitles that sprang to my mind as I wrote. I began chapters not with anecdotes but with summaries of what was to come, as I would in an academic book, and I assiduously ended each chapter with an explicit link to the next. I sent the manuscript to the editor at the end of June, pointing out that I had the summer to make any changes needed. I heard nothing before the summer was over.

In mid-September, after classes had started, I received a call from my agent, who delivered the news she had gotten from the editor. At a meeting at which editors presented their books, it was agreed that "Crosstalk" was leaden, and I should rewrite it, making it more like *That's Not What I Meant!* I should rid it of the trappings of academic writing such as summaries at the beginning of chapters and previews of subsequent chapters at the end; add section subheadings like those I had pioneered in the earlier book; add more anecdotes; and generally lighten the tone, including by finding a title that was more like the title of my previous book. If I could do this within a short period of time – I think it was a month or two – the book could be published in the spring. If not, it would have to wait more than a year, because September was when publishers bring out their blockbusters, and a book like this would have no chance at all. To make the task more daunting, the manuscript had already been copy-edited, so my changes had to be made directly on the existing manuscript: I would have to cross out what I wanted to delete, and anything I wanted to add would have to be hand-written on the manuscript or typed out in attached inserts.

The timing could not have been worse. I was teaching a full load, directing eleven doctoral dissertations (all active, though at different stages) and five master's theses, and serving on or chairing a number of departmental committees. I also had numerous commitments to give papers at conferences and at other universities, and was serving on the Linguistic Society of America Program Committee, for which I was already in the process of reading and rating a huge stack of abstracts. But I did not want to put off the book's publication for over a year, so I said I'd make the changes in the small window of time. To do so, I awoke each morning at 5 AM and worked on the manuscript from 6 to 9, after which I moved on to my other commitments and responsibilities.

The drama was not entirely over when I submitted the amended copy-edited manuscript. There was a remaining bit of drama over the cover (as there has been over the covers of most of my general-audience books): the design proposed by the press featured a curved colored line in the shape of an ear that actually looked more like a contraceptive device. I hated it. The editor reluctantly agreed to reject that cover, but said that I would have to choose a new cover artist by telling her what book covers I liked. I ran to my book shelf and decided that the all-print covers of Oliver Sacks's books were classy, and told her so. That cover artist was hired, and whatever she came up with was what we would go with, since time was now short. What she came up with was very different from what had led me to choose her: since designing Sacks's covers, she had taken to using photographs. Luckily, I liked her design: photographs of a man's face and a woman's face looking at each other, one in the upper left and the other in the lower right corners of the book, with the new title *You Just Don't Understand* and my name floating diagonally in a wavy line between them. (When the paperback came out, I insisted that the faces be moved from the corners to the right and left sides of the cover, so the man and woman were facing each other on an equal level. Though this was less visually arresting, people had objected to the dominance implied by the original cover, because the man, in the top left corner, was looking down on the woman in the lower right corner. Reversing them, so the woman was looking down on the man, would have been equally unacceptable, though possibly offending different readers. On the current cover, there are no faces at all, but stick figures representing a woman and a man on either side, to avoid the specificity of race and ethnicity that photographs entail.)

Though the travails that lay behind bringing those two books to publication were the most extreme, there have been struggles associated with every one of my general-audience books – over titles and covers and, in a few cases, contents. For the title of the book that followed *You Just Don't Understand*, the publisher reluctantly acceded to my refusal to use a line of dialogue. They wanted a line I had used as a section subhead: “Didn't I just say that?”, while I wanted a title that made it clear this book was about the workplace. I also feared that always having lines of dialogue would make

all my books sound the same. Days before the book went to press, we still had found no title that was acceptable to both my publisher and me. While giving a talk about my findings at Corning Glass, one of the companies at which I had done the research that led to the book, I asked the audience for suggestions. An audience member came up with, “How We Talk from 9 to 5.” I shortened this to *Talking from 9 to 5*, my editor agreed, and he sent the book to press – and sent flowers to the Corning employee to thank her for her last-minute save. (In retrospect, I’m not at all sure that the editor wasn’t right in preferring “Didn’t I Just Say That?”)

My next book was *The Argument Culture* (again not my first choice of title, which was “The Culture of Critique”), about the increasingly adversarial nature of our public discourse. Once again, I hated the publisher’s design for the cover: a photograph of a bomb, which instantiated something I criticized in the book: the overuse of war metaphors. My objection was rejected; the publisher said that the design had cost too much to throw out – someone had actually built the bomb to photograph, and there simply was not enough time to start from scratch. Mercifully, they did not insist on keeping it for the paperback. The book that followed was about adult family relationships: *I Only Say This Because I Love You*. In that case, I struggled with my (new) editor’s request that I follow each anecdote with advice about how participants should have spoken differently to avoid whatever miscommunication or frustration I had used the example to illustrate. My identity as a linguist rather than a psychologist made me fiercely resistant to giving advice. We came to a compromise: I added observations, in some cases (by no means all), about how talking differently might have led to different outcomes. (I resolutely stopped short of saying “would have.”)

With my most recent book, again the title was a struggle. I had chosen, “Why Didn’t You Tell Me”? I felt that this captured a common complaint among women friends, and highlighted both the importance to many women of knowing what is going on in a friend’s life, and the role of telling secrets. The editor wanted a title that reflected a more positive view: “You’re the Only One I Can Tell This To.” I began asking all the women I happened to encounter which title they preferred, and the chair of my department allowed me to distribute a ballot asking my colleagues to vote on the title at a faculty meeting! It became clear that most people preferred the more positive title, so I agreed to the slightly shortened *You’re the Only One I Can Tell*. (I still think my original title would have been better. “Why Didn’t You Tell Me”? is, like all my other dialogue titles, a complaint, and this book, like the others, examines linguistic sources of interactional frustrations.) The subtitle was also a compromise. I wanted, “Women Friends in Conversation,” on the model of the subtitles of my previous books: *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*; *You’re Wearing THAT?: Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation*; and *You Were Always Mom’s Favorite: Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives*. Both my agent and my editor felt that “in conversation” was too bland for the current market. My agent suggested “Women, Friendship,

and the Power of Conversation,” and my editor suggested, “Decoding the Language of Women Friends.” Bristling at the words “power” and “decoding,” I suggested “Inside the Language of Women’s Friendships,” and got approval for that.

Moving between two worlds

I have detailed some of the complications that lay behind the publication of my general-audience books not to seek sympathy. In the spirit of All’s well that ends well, the books are published, and, to use the criterion I mentioned earlier, after each I was allowed to write another. Moreover, some of the books I’ve written have received far more attention than I could have imagined. In these and many other ways, I’ve been extremely fortunate. I have told these stories to give an idea of some of the challenges that have come with publishing for general as compared to academic audiences. Looking back, though, I am amazed that I pressed on in the face of these challenges, especially those that came with the parade of editors I worked with on *That’s Not What I Meant!*, my first attempt to write a book for a general audience. I guess I was driven. I’m sure being driven helps in any pursuit. But what exactly was driving me in this one?

When asked what motivated me to write for general audiences, I often reply, “I wanted to write a book that my mother could read.” The truth of that answer goes deeper than its flippancy might imply. My mother never graduated from high school. Born in Russia, she was eleven when she arrived in the United States in 1923, the year that rising anti-immigration animus (not unlike the present climate) led to legislation that summarily ended the decades-long massive migration of East European Jews to the United States. Like many poor immigrants of the day, she had to quit high school to go to work. My father didn’t graduate from high school either; he too left school at fourteen to support his family. He took high school equivalency tests one by one and became a lawyer by attending law school at night. Unlike my mother, he was an intellectual and an autodidact, and was able to – and did – read my academic writing. But because he got his LLB and LLM degrees, and passed the bar, during the Depression, he didn’t manage to go into the practice of law until he was fifty, and I was in junior high school. Until that time, my father worked as a cutter in New York’s garment district. I grew up in a working class neighborhood in Brooklyn, surrounded by a close-knit extended working-class family, so talking to people who would never read an academic book or article was natural to me – in many ways, more natural than was talking to or writing for those who would.

Whatever the reason I was driven to it, I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to speak to and write for both academic and general audiences. And experiencing the ways that doing so have resembled and differed from each other, has deepened my understanding of how language works, which has been my goal from the beginning and still is.

References

- Jefferson, G. (1988). On the sequential organization of troubles-talk in ordinary conversation. *Social Problems*, 35(4), 418–441. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800595>
- Tannen, D. (1986). Introducing constructed dialogue in Greek and American conversational and literary narratives. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Direct and indirect speech* (pp. 311–322). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110871968.311>
- Tannen, D. (1990). Gender differences in conversational coherence: Physical alignment and topical cohesion. In B. Dorval (Ed.), *Conversational coherence and its development* (pp. 167–206). Norwood, NJ: Ablex. Reprinted in Tannen, D. (1994). *Gender and discourse* (pp. 85–136). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.