



DEBORAH  
**TANNEN**

**INSTRUCTOR'S PACKAGE**



**That's Not  
What I Meant!**

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Language, Culture, & Meaning

# About This Guide

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This guide is intended to assist in the use of the video THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT! for instructional purposes.

The following pages provide an organizational schema for the video along with general notes for each section, key quotes from the video, and suggested discussion questions relevant to the section.

The program is divided into eight parts, each clearly distinguished by a section title during the program.

## **Structure:**

**Part 1** Language and Meaning

**Part 2** Signals, Devices, and Rituals

**Part 3** Framing, Metamessage, and Schismogenesis

**Part 4** Pacing and Pausing

**Part 5** Overlap and Interruption

**Part 6** Indirectness

**Part 7** Listenership: Co-creating Meaning

**Part 8** Conversational Style and Relationships

# 1. Language and Meaning

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Deborah Tannen begins by stressing how conversational interaction — with friends, family members, coworkers, in service encounters, and so on — informs virtually every aspect of our daily lives.

(from the video)

*[I]f it [the conversation] goes well, it's like a vision of sanity... But when conversations don't go well, it's the opposite. It's like the earth starts shifting under your feet... And it's those conversations that make you start questioning yourself, the other person, and [your relationship].*

Tannen explains that while sometimes a conversation doesn't go well because of ill intent on the part of one of the speakers, dissatisfaction can also be due to differences in conversational style.

*So if you talk to someone whose conversational style is similar, chances are that what you mean and what they hear are pretty likely to be more or less similar. But if you talk to someone whose conversational style is different, then the chances that you're going to be understood in the way that you meant what you said go way down.*

## **Discussion topic:**

- Discuss how conversational style differences might be significant in a variety of situations (for example, business, academic, diplomatic, as well as in personal relationships).

## **Suggestion for outside assignment:**

- Recall a conversation you participated in that did not go well. What factors, including differences in conversational style, could have played a part in “derailing” the conversation?

## 2. Signals, Devices, and Rituals

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In this section, Tannen introduces the different components of conversational style that she will be discussing later in the video. She defines conversational signals that we employ in our conversations — such as loudness, speed, pacing, pausing, intonation, and the use of silence— and the factors that are likely to affect how we use them: our ethnic background, regional background, age, class, and gender, as well as other influences.

These signals are the building blocks of conversational devices — strategies by which we say what we mean in a conversation: taking turns, asking questions, teasing, raising topics, showing we are listening, to name a few.

Finally, Tannen discusses the ritual nature of everyday interaction. She explains that she is not using the term “ritual” in the formal sense, such as marriage ceremonies, but rather in the sense that conversation follows a conventionalized pattern. Consider, for example, greetings. In Burma, typical greetings include “Where are you going?” and “Have you eaten yet?” The first might be interpreted literally by non-Burmese as an intrusive request for information, the second as an invitation to lunch! As greetings, however, these questions are ritual in nature and, like our “How are you?,” they have ritual replies: “Over there” and “Yes, I have eaten,” like our “Fine, thanks.”

In addition, though, almost any conversation we have can be thought of as a kind of ritual. For example, Tannen discusses apologies. For many Americans, she says, apologizing is a two-part ritual: one person apologizes for *x*, and the other counters with an apology for *y*, or with a rejoinder such as “Don’t worry about it.” When the conversational ritual is not shared by participants in a conversation, miscommunication can result. Thus, if you apologize for *x* and your interlocutor says, “Don’t do it again,” you may regret that you offered the apology.

*All conversational rituals are like a seesaw. You do your part and you expect the other person to do their part. If they don’t, it’s like they got off and you go plopping to the ground and you don’t know how you got there. That’s the feeling you get often when you’re talking to someone whose conversational style is not shared.*

In summary, then, conversational style is composed of conversational signals (such as pacing, pausing, intonation, pitch), which make up the conversational devices we use to do the work of participating in a conversation, such as asking questions or taking turns. Moreover, virtually all of our verbal interaction has a ritual nature, and is guided by conventionalized understandings of how words and phrases are to be interpreted in conversation. As Tannen shows in subsequent sections of the program, conversational style differences can arise at any of these levels, leading to misunderstandings.

## **Discussion topics:**

- Elaborate on Tannen's discussion of how conversational signals might vary according to such factors as ethnic background, regional background, age, class, and gender. Can you think of other factors that might affect the use of conversational signals?
- How do you show you are an attentive listener in a conversation? What are some other ways that people indicate listenership?
- Tannen discusses apologies as an example of a two-part ritual. Can you think of other examples of two-part rituals?

## **Suggestions for outside assignment:**

- Observe a series of "service encounters," such as customers making purchases at a café or store. See if you can note the workings of the conversational signals, devices, or rituals discussed by Tannen in this section.
- Ask several different people for directions to a landmark in your city. Note how their responses differ from one another and from the sort of response you yourself would offer in such a situation.

### 3. Framing, Metamessage, and Schismogenesis

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In this section, Tannen defines additional terms that she will be using in her discussion of conversational style: metamessage and framing, the power/connection grid, and complementary schismogenesis.

Everything we say comes not only with a message (the literal meaning of the words) but also with a metamessage that tells our listeners how to interpret the message. Metamessages signal framing; that is, how we mean what we say, what we think we are doing by saying these words in this way at this time. For example:

*The metamessage frames the message. . . . Let's say you've just been to the doctor and you come back from the doctor and your partner says to you, "How are you?" Well, how do you know which one it is [a conversational ritual or a request for a medical report]? That's framing. . . . The conversational signals indicate how you mean what you say.*

In other words, signals such as tone of voice, loudness, pitch, and facial expression convey the metamessage (in this case, one of concern for the other person's health) and situate the inquiry in the proper frame (the "concern about your health" frame rather than the "greeting" frame).

Next, Tannen discusses how we use conversation to adjust how close to or distant from our interlocutors we are. How equal or unequal do we believe ourselves to be — or do we want to be? Tannen envisions this dynamic as a two-dimensional grid, with a continuum of hierarchy and equality on the vertical axis and a continuum of distance and closeness on the horizontal axis. Anything we say, Tannen explains, is interpreted from the perspective of these dynamics.

Finally, Tannen introduces the term "complementary schismogenesis," which describes a process by which people's different conversational styles ironically result in even more exaggerated expressions of the differing styles. For example:

*Two people are speaking and one is speaking a little bit more loudly than the other. The person whose natural level of speech is a little bit louder wants to encourage the softer speaker to speak up. So she speaks a little louder to set a good example. But this one already is thinking, "You're talking too loud. I'm going to talk a little bit more softly to set a good example, so you'll quiet your voice a bit." . . . So you end up with somebody shouting and somebody whispering. And that's often the ironic result of different conversational styles; you end up further apart rather than closer.*

## **Discussion topics:**

- Tannen discusses the phenomenon of teasing, by which playful insults show affection. What are some of the conversational signals that could indicate to the participants in the conversation that it is a friendly discussion (“teasing” frame) and not a genuine insult (“insult” frame)?
- Think of some other situations where the same word meanings (messages) might convey different intentions (metamessages). How would the different metamessages be indicated by conversational signals?
- Discuss different ways in which we indicate both distance and hierarchy in speaking with others. Include examples from other cultures and languages, if possible.

## **Suggestion for outside assignment:**

- Read chapter 6, “Power and Solidarity,” in Tannen’s book *That’s Not What I Meant!*.

## 4. Pacing and Pausing

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In this section, Tannen begins a more extensive exploration of the conversational devices, introduced in part 2, whereby we use language to create meaning in conversation. In part 4, Tannen discusses pacing and pausing, which she explored in depth in her early work. She presents the example of a Thanksgiving dinner conversation attended by six people: three people from New York City of Eastern European Jewish background (including Tannen herself), two gentiles from California, and an Englishwoman. The New Yorkers later reported that the conversation had been “great,” while the Californians reported they had enjoyed the conversation, though it had been dominated by the New Yorkers. Tannen’s analysis of this conversation revealed that these differing impressions were due to very slight differences in pacing and pausing. Tannen describes how this works when one speaker in a conversation expects a longer pause than the other:

*Now when you start talking to each other [the shorter] pause comes first, and when you get past [the brief pause], the other speaker becomes uncomfortable. “I guess you have nothing to say. I’ve given you enough pause and you’re not saying anything. So because I’m a good person and I want to keep the conversation going, I fill that pause. And I keep giving you these pauses but you’re not taking them, so I keep filling them.” And you end up with a situation where one person is doing all of the talking and the one who’s waiting for the longer pause never gets to say anything.*

Tannen shows that there is no right or wrong way to pause in a conversation; rather:

*[T]hese differences in pacing, pausing, and everything else are always relative. It’s never absolute. It’s always a function of how your style compares with the styles of the people you’re talking to.*

Anyone can find himself or herself interrupting when speaking to someone who expects longer pauses, unless he or she is able to make allowances for the longer pauses expected.

### **Discussion topic:**

- Discuss how pacing and pausing work among your own families and friends. Are there those who you feel are always interrupting? Are there those who you feel don’t do their share of talking? What factors might affect how pacing and pausing operate in your families?



## **Suggestions for outside assignment:**

- Observe pacing and pausing in a group setting, such as a classroom discussion or a group conversation. Note, for example, how long pauses in the discussion last, and who does and doesn't speak up to fill them.
- Next time you are asked a question in an ordinary conversation, try waiting before answering. How long before you yourself begin to feel uncomfortable? How long before the person you're talking to fills in the gap in the conversation?
- When talking with someone who talks too much, try speeding up to leave no pause. When talking to someone who doesn't talk enough, try holding back to leave long silences. Do these adjustments change the balance of talk?

## 5. Overlap and Interruption

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In this section, Tannen discusses what happens when two people are talking at the same time: Why do people “talk along”? How is “talking along” interpreted? How does conversational style affect these patterns? Tannen, as a New Yorker herself, notes that New Yorkers tend to talk along with others as a way of showing enthusiasm — a means of connecting. However, when your interlocutor has a different conversational style, this can be interpreted as a grab for the floor — a power play.

*A woman called in [to a radio talk show on which Tannen was the guest] and her husband was in the background.... She said, ... “when my friends come over we’re all talking at once and then everybody goes home and my husband accuses me of not giving him a chance to talk. I say to him, ‘You’re a big boy. You could find your way in just like the rest of us can.’” And then I [Tannen] hear his voice in the background: “You need a crowbar to get into those conversations.”*

Tannen shows how a simple difference in conversational style, such as this one, may be misinterpreted as a difference in personality, ability, or intentions. In the case above, the wife attributed her husband’s difficulty in joining in the conversations to a sort of stubborn, babyish attitude (“You’re a big boy!”), whereas he felt personally slighted by her fast-paced conversation. Understanding that different conversational styles result in different abilities to participate removes the burden of pathology and the accusation of ill intent.

In another example, Tannen analyzes a conversation she had with another New Yorker who was telling a long story, in the middle of which she mentioned her brother. Tannen asked, “What does your brother do?” and the woman telling the story replied, “Lawyer,” and went on with the story. Since both participants shared the same conversational style, Tannen’s question was intended, and interpreted, as a way of signaling that she is interested in and attending to the story. To someone used to different ways of showing listenership, Tannen’s question might have seemed to be an interruption.

Finally, Tannen discusses cultural stereotypes that arise as a result of differences in pacing and pausing. Research has shown that throughout the world, those from slower-speaking regions are stereotyped as dull, even stupid, and those from faster-speaking regions are stereotyped as aggressive and overbearing.

### **Discussion topic:**

- Using the example of cultural stereotypes given in the lecture, think of other stereotypical conversational styles, associated with, say, ethnicity, age, gender, or other influences on speech, and discuss how they may give rise to ethnic-, age-, or gender-based stereotypes.

## **Suggestions for outside assignment:**

- Keep an informal log of, for example, classroom discussions. When students are invited to speak in class, how long is the pause before a hand goes up? Whose hand is it? How many hands go up at the same time? Are there students who begin speaking without raising hands?
- For more discussion on issues of interruption and overlap in the context of communication between the sexes, read chapter 7 of Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*.

## 6. Indirectness

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Here, Tannen explores indirectness: an aspect of conversational style by which speakers' intentions are not spelled out in the message, or literal meaning, of their words. She reads from a field note submitted by one of her students, which describes an interchange that took place between the student's parents while they were looking for a place to have dinner:

*As we passed J. Paul's my mom asked, "Do you know this place, Bill?" Without stopping, my dad looked over his shoulder, shrugged "no," and we all kept walking. When we got to the next corner . . . my mom answered, "That place J. Paul's looked nice, and I think I saw an open table for four." My dad turned to look at her and asked, "That place we passed a block back? Why didn't you say something?" "I did," she responded. "No, you didn't," he almost yelled back.*

Tannen explains that it's not that the student's mother wanted to eat at J. Paul's, but that she didn't want to say so. By using indirectness she was trying to start a negotiation. The difficulty occurred because the father missed the invitation to consider J. Paul's as a potential place to eat; instead, he interpreted his wife's question literally, replied that he didn't know J. Paul's, and put the interchange out of his mind.

Tannen describes another conversation to illustrate that when indirectness is shared and understood, it is not perceived as indirectness, but simply as communication. Two women had discussed the participation of a third woman in a conference. The absent woman, who usually spoke at that conference, had told the organizer that she'd had a difficult week and would prefer to have the weekend to rest, but would let the conference organizer decide — she would come if she was really needed. The conference organizer told the speaker, "I need you to stay home and have a good rest."

*They both felt better not having to say "I'm letting you down" or "You're letting me down." They both felt better saying "It's my decision that you won't speak at my conference," or "It's your decision that I'm not going to speak at your conference."*

In this case, both speakers had the same strategies of indirectness, and there was no misunderstanding. In fact, the conference organizer reported it as an example of "perfect direct communication."

In another example, one that shows how a particular kind of indirectness — irony — leads to misunderstanding, two friends of Tannen's are discussing what kind of salad dressing to make for dinner. John says, "What kind of salad dressing should I make?" His friend Steve replies, "Oil and vinegar, what else?" Tannen explains that John takes this as a demand that he make oil and vinegar, whereas Steve intended it as an ironic comment on his own lack of imagination, an indirect way of implying "Make whatever you want."

*Once something has hit you wrong and you think the person is being rude or irrational, it's very hard to get back [on track]. And so everything that Steve said to imply "make whatever you want" was heard by John as being more and more demanding.*

In the above example, we also see how Steve's attempt to reinforce the "closeness" dimension in their relationship by using ironic, self-deprecating humor is misinterpreted by John as a power play (the "hierarchy" dimension).

### **Discussion topics:**

- Discuss other ways in which direct and indirect communication can be used to accomplish the same ends; for example, "Could you please close the window?" or "Brrr! It's chilly in here!" to get someone to close a window. Think of some examples where irony can be used in this way, as in the "salad dressing" example above.
- Discuss how you personally use direct and indirect communication. Do you tend to be more direct or more indirect? In what ways? In what situations?

### **Suggestions for outside assignment:**

- For discussion of indirectness in the workplace, read chapter 3 ("Why Don't You Say What You Mean?: Indirectness at Work") of Tannen's book *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*.
- Take notes of how people use directness or indirectness in a variety of group settings in which you might participate. For example, in a restaurant, how do the people you are with decide what food will be ordered? Negotiate sharing dishes? Decide what drinks to order? How do they make requests of the server? If there are complaints, how are they handled?

## **7. Listenership: Co-creating Meaning**

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In this section, Tannen explores the ways in which we indicate listenership, how these ways may differ, and how these differences may lead to misunderstandings. For example, in the United States, girls and women talking together tend to maintain direct eye contact while they talk, whereas boys and men tend not to look directly at each other. When the man she's talking to is not looking at her, a woman is likely to assume (sometimes correctly, sometimes not) that he is not listening. Similarly, women tend to do more "backchanneling" ("uh-huh," "mm-hmm") in conversations than men do; when a man backchannels less than a woman is used to, she may interpret this too as a failure to listen.

In many cultures, children are taught to show respect by looking down. In others, children are admonished to "look at me when I talk to you." This difference got another student of Tannen's into trouble:

*Her mother would accuse her of being insolent when she was trying her best to be respectful. . . . The Korean-American young woman had learned in class to show respect by looking [at the person talking to her], and the Korean-born parents had always believed that a child shows respect by looking down.*

Troubles and misunderstandings frequently arise when participants in a conversation have different expectations about how to demonstrate listenership:

*Anytime you're talking to someone who's doing more listener behavior than you expect, you can draw the conclusion that they're rushing you along. Anytime they're doing less listener behavior than you expect, you come to the conclusion that they're not really paying much attention.*

Tannen shows that differences in conversational style can be responsible for these false impressions: the Korean-American daughter is not trying to be disrespectful, nor does a man listening to (but not looking at) a woman necessarily intend to signal that he is not interested in what she is saying.

### **Discussion topics:**

- Discuss how you yourself indicate listenership, including both visual and verbal signals. Do you think this is affected by, for example, your sex, regional background, or ethnic background?
- If you have spent time in a different country, describe how listenership is indicated there, by both verbal and nonverbal means. Could this be taught in foreign-language classes?

## **Suggestions for outside assignment:**

- Take notes on a television or radio interview. How does the interviewer indicate that she or he is listening to the interviewee? If it is a television interview, what visual signals indicate listenership?
- Read chapter 9 (“Look at Me When I’m Talking to You! : Cross Talk Across the Ages”) from Tannen’s book *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* for more discussion of listenership across genders and at different ages.

## **8. Conversational Style and Relationships**

In this final section, Tannen sums up the elements of conversational style:

*Everything you say you have to say in some tone of voice, at some speed, [with] some intonation pattern, some directness or indirectness. If you tell a story, how are you going to go about it? If you tell a joke, how are you going to go about that? Everything that you say entails making some decisions about conversational style.*

We use particular conversational signals to convey metamesages about how we mean what we say.

*These metamesages are ways of framing. So framing is the set of instructions that tell the person what you think you're doing by talking in that way.*

And, as Tannen notes, differences in conversational style are liable to be interpreted as evidence of intentions, abilities, or even pathology rather than as simple style differences.

*Reactions to metamesages are often emotional, and that's why it gets so complicated.... We draw conclusions about the individual's personality, abilities, or their attitude toward us, and our reactions are emotional.*

Tannen also discusses how we may deal with these differences. Awareness that they exist can be an important and effective step, she stresses, toward mitigating the confusion and disappointment that may result from communication between people with different conversational styles.

*[Understanding the workings of conversational style] lifts the burden of blame, the burden of guilt, and the burden of pathology.*

Additionally, some people may wish to try to modify their own conversational styles. Tannen describes the case of a woman who co-ran a workshop with a man who tended to answer all the questions asked by participants in the workshop. At first she blamed him for doing all the talking, as if she weren't there. After learning about conversational style, she forced herself to speak more quickly and answer questions before he could:

*He was delighted, and he said to her, "Gee, I'm really happy to see that you're finally pulling your own weight." So he had been resentful too. She was resentful he wasn't giving her a chance. He was resentful that she wasn't doing her part.*



Finally, as Tannen notes, anyone can benefit from an awareness of differences in conversational style:

*If you're just an average person trying to get through your life you still need to know about conversational style because so many of the frustrations that we encounter in personal relationships . . . could be cut off at the pass, if we start off with the question, "Could it just be a difference in conversational style?"*

### **Discussion topics:**

- Characterize your own conversational style, summing up points that you have discussed in previous sections. Do you tend to be direct or indirect? Does this vary by situation? Do you “talk along”? How do you indicate listenership? How comfortable are you with short or long pauses in conversation?
- Discuss memorable disagreements you have had. Could differences in conversational style have played a part in these?

### **Suggestions for outside assignment:**

- Observe a political debate. Characterize the debaters’ conversational styles using the elements discussed by Tannen in this video. How do their conversational styles differ? What conversational signals frame this event as a debate? Can you distinguish between message and metamessage in each utterance?
- Watch a film that highlights differences between classes, regions, sexes, or ethnicities (examples: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Maurice*, *What Women Want*). Does conversational style play a role in these differences?
- Watch a reality show (examples: “Real World,” “Survivor”) that emphasizes conflict among the cast members. Do differences in conversational style contribute to this conflict? How?

# When You Shouldn't Tell It Like It Is

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By Deborah Tannen

A woman asked another woman in her office if she would like to have lunch. The colleague said no, she was sorry, she had a report to finish. The woman repeated the invitation the next week. Again her colleague declined, saying she had not been feeling well.

The first woman was confused. So she asked her colleague what her refusals meant: Was she really just busy one week and ailing the next, or was she trying to say she simply didn't want to have lunch, so stop asking? The response only confused her more: "Well, um, sure, y'know, I really haven't been feeling well and last week really was difficult with that report which, by the way, was about a very interesting case. It was ..."

The woman was frustrated. She couldn't understand why her colleague didn't just say what she meant. But the other woman was frustrated too. She couldn't understand why she was being pushed to say no directly, when she had made perfectly clear that she was not interested in pursuing a friendship.

One woman was expecting directness; to her, indirectness is dishonest. The other was expecting her indirectness to be understood; to her, directness is rude, and being direct would mean being a sort of person that she finds unappealing. Both felt that their own ways of talking were obviously right. Neither realized that both systems can be right or wrong; each works well with other people who operate on the same system, and both fail with people who do not. They instinctively tried to dispel the tension by doing more of the same. Neither thought of adopting the other's system.

Many Americans believe that the only purpose of language is to convey information and that information should be stated outright. But there are many reasons why

meaning should not be stated outright, why indirectness is useful and even necessary.

The study of indirectness and other politeness phenomena has received increasing attention in linguistic scholarship. This is a drastic departure from the trend dominant in linguistics in recent decades: formal representation of language not as it is used but as an abstract system. A linguist working in the latter tradition would be concerned with whether a given sentence is grammatical, regardless of whether it might actually be spoken by anyone, let alone how frequently it might be spoken. For linguists concerned with language as it is used in everyday life, sentences that are actually spoken — and often spoken — are the ones of interest, not those that are theoretically possible but never encountered.

## Keeping One's Verbal Distance

Using language to communicate requires balancing two conflicting needs: to be involved with others and to be independent. This duality has been identified by scholars in many fields. Psychologists write of the urge to merge and the urge to independence, and of the complementary fears of separation and intimacy. Sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote of positive and negative religious rituals (such as prayers and taboos). Later, sociologist Erving Goffman showed that daily life is also a compendium of should-do presentational rituals (greet people, ask after someone's health and family, show concern, and show interest) and should-not-do avoidance rituals (invade another's personal terrain, ask nosy questions, touch too much, remark on embarrassing conditions).

Anthropologist Thomas Kochman, author of

“Black and White Styles in Conflict,” speaks of the rights of feelings (for example, the right to laugh loudly at a play, talk loudly in public or blast a radio) as compared to the rights of sensibilities (the right not to be disturbed by someone else’s laughter, talking or radio).

Linguist Robin Lakoff, author of “Language and Woman’s Place,” suggests that in deciding what to say and how to say it, people apply different rules of politeness. A distant or deferent style of politeness applies the rules “Don’t impose” and “Give options.” A camaraderie style of politeness applies the rule “Be friendly.” For example, in answer to an offer “Would you like to stay for lunch?” a distant response would be, “No, thank you, I just ate.” A deferent response would be, “I don’t want to put you to any trouble.” And a camaraderie-motivated response would be, “Thank you, I’d love to.” An even stronger dose of camaraderie might entail volunteering, “I’m starving! Have you got anything to eat for lunch?”

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, an anthropologist and a linguist, use the terms positive politeness (for showing involvement) and negative politeness (for not imposing).

All of these systems for understanding human behavior reflect the universal human needs to be involved with each other and yet not to become engulfed or overwhelmed by involvement. Indirectness is a universal device for expressing ideas, opinions and desires — that is, showing involvement — in a way that does not impose on or offend others.

Furthermore, there is pleasure in being understood without stating explicitly what one means. Everyone wants to get an appropriate birthday gift. But few come out and say what they want, because that would defeat its purpose: to show that the giver knows one well enough to choose an appropriate gift and cares enough to spend time getting it.

Differences in directness are a major source of confusion and dissatisfaction in communication. At weekly staff meetings, the director of a counseling agency never issued peremptory orders; decisions were reached after all

staff members had expressed their opinions. Yet more often than not, the decisions reached were those the director thought best. One staff psychologist thought the director manipulative; if she knew what she thought best, she should just tell them so directly. But others appreciated the chance to express their opinions. They felt they had been part of the decision-making process, and if they happened to decide on a course the director preferred, they did so with an understanding of her reasons.

A real-estate appraiser complained to a colleague about a client who had called to say that she was leaving for vacation. His colleague knew immediately why the client had called: She was letting him know, indirectly, that she was impatient to receive her appraisal. The vacation provided an excuse to remind him.

The appraiser did not understand the indirect approach and didn’t realize that the client wanted reassurance that her appraisal would be ready by the time she returned. He preferred the client who called and said, “Where the hell is my appraisal?” On the other hand, his less-direct colleague would have been shaken by such a call — perceiving it not as direct but as nasty — and therefore could not have assured the client that all was well.

A Greek woman explained that when she was growing up, she had to ask her father’s permission for everything. If she asked if she could go to a dance and he said, “If you want, you can go,” she knew that she should not go. If he really thought it was a good idea, he would say, “Yes. That’s a good idea. Go.” He never said no. But she understood by the way he said yes whether or not he meant it.

This sounds to many Americans like hypocrisy: He got her to do what he wanted without stating it directly. But indirectness could have advantages for both of them. The father could feel that his daughter did the proper thing of her own free will rather than simply obeying. The daughter could feel that she was choosing to please her father rather

than following orders. And if she did go against his wishes, they would both save face: He did not go on record as forbidding her, so her going would not be openly defiant.

### **“Hypocrisy!” “Dishonesty!”**

The indirect system causes misunderstandings when it is not shared. If an American cousin who spoke Greek visited the family, she might take her uncle’s hedged approval literally. Then, if she went to the party, he would be angry at her for going and she would be angry at him for his inconsistency. An indirect message is crystal clear to those who know the system but opaque to those who don’t.

American businessmen have similar problems communicating with their Japanese counterparts. An American journalist at a trade fair in Japan asked if he could see a particular robot. His Japanese host answered, “That might be possible.” To the American, this meant “yes,” so he later insisted that he had been told he could see the robot. To the Japanese, “no” is too face-threatening to be used. “Maybe” means “no,” and only an unqualified “yes” means “yes.” The Japanese host felt he had made his refusal clear and could not understand the American’s dishonesty in claiming to have been misled.

Since all speakers tend to take their own system of communication as self-evident, talking with someone who operates on a different system frequently results in mutual accusations of dishonesty (not meaning what was obviously said) and hypocrisy (not saying what was obviously meant).

Many misunderstandings are caused by unstated assumptions. For example, a telephone conversation made less and less sense until it emerged that one party assumed erroneously that the other was calling from home. The confusion could have been prevented by the caller stating where he was. But it would be absurd for all callers to begin by announcing their location. Every utterance

is based on innumerable assumptions that cause problems only when they are not shared, and no one can predict which of all their assumptions will turn out not to be shared.

Understanding how language is used is the focus of two sub-fields of linguistics, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. Analyzing language as it is used in communication immediately points up the pervasiveness and necessity of indirectness. Among the many reasons:

- Deciding to tell the truth leaves open the question of which aspects of the truth to tell. For example, everyone resents being told the obvious; it seems to imply criticism or condescension. However, what is obvious to one person is not obvious to another; it may even be unimagined.
- Social requirements are real: Stating the truth in no uncertain terms may hurt the feelings of others. For example, a woman called a friend and backed out of a dinner engagement, saying she was tired. The friend did not doubt that this was true; but she was hurt because simply being tired was so slight a reason to let her down that it implied small regard for the friendship. Had the caller invented a better excuse, such as having gotten ill, she would have accomplished her goal without implying carelessness about the friendship.
- A difference of opinion stated directly is more difficult to rescind than one that has only been hinted. In fact, one may not be sure what one wants or thinks until one has a sense of what the other wants or thinks. This need not be seen as lack of conviction. It may simply be that one has a slight but not a strong preference.
- Conversational style — including joking, irony and figures of speech — is a basic part of language and provides creativity, pleasure and the basis for a sense of com-

munity and shared style. Stylized language is open to misunderstanding because it does not state meaning directly, but being explicit would defeat the social purpose of language and rob individuals of the means to express their personalities.

## Language as We Live It

Ignoring the social and psychological functions of language is at the heart of most demands for directness, and also of those scholarly approaches which treat language solely as a grammatical system. Neurologist and essayist Oliver Sacks, author of "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat," wrote a recent article in the *New York Review of Books* about Tourette's, a neurological syndrome that causes multiple convulsive tics. Sacks noted that advances in modern medicine have resulted in "a real gain of knowledge but a real loss of understanding" because neuroanatomy "became compartmentalized... seeing the motor, the intellectual and the affective in quite separate and noncommunicating compartments of the brain." The results were "efforts . . . to 'physicalize' or 'mentalize' [the syndrome], to make it one or the other, when it is so manifestly both. . . . By the turn of the century a split had occurred, into a soulless neurology and a bodiless psychology, and with this any full understanding of Tourette's disappeared. . . . What Tourette's is really like — this has been forgotten, and we can only recapture it if we listen minutely to our patients, and observe them, everything about them, with a comprehensive eye."

The developments in linguistics discussed here parallel Sacks' account of neuroanatomy. The compartmentalization he describes is analogous to modern linguistics' separation of language into autonomous parts: phonology (the sounds), morphology (the bits that make up words) and syntax (the sequence in which words are strung together in sentences). The field of sociolinguistics arose to bridge the gap between a sociology that ignored the struc-

ture of language and a structural linguistics that ignored the social and psychological forces at play when people use language.

Sacks' concern with describing "what Tourette's is really like" parallels the concern of many in linguistics today with describing what language "is really like" — not only as a grammatical system, but also as a part of people's lives. Even the method he recommends — listening minutely to how people talk, making use of videotaping and slow-motion playback — parallels methods being used by linguists trying to understand the "full character, connection and meaning" of language.

Sacks calls for "a neurology of living experience." The approach to linguistics I have been describing amounts to a "linguistics of living language," reflecting the reality of our experience using language: that we often can't say what we mean.

## Clarity vs. Color

One danger of indirectness is lack of understanding. An indirect person may assume that meaning is clear when it is not.

One person said to another, "What kind of salad dressing should I make?" The other answered, "Oil and vinegar, what else?" This was meant ironically: "Oh, you know me. I'm unimaginative. I always make oil and vinegar. So don't pay attention to me. Make whatever you like."

In this case, the irony was missed. "Oil and vinegar, what else?" was heard as a demand. And furthermore, it sounded like an implied criticism: "You should have known."

But while irony is always open to misunderstanding, banishing it and other forms of indirectness would rob speech of most of its creativity, character and expressive potential.

# Did You Say What I Just Heard?

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By Deborah Tannen

A woman who led workshops with a male colleague was distressed because he did all the talking. When anyone asked a question, he answered before she had a chance to speak. She blamed him for dominating her. (If their roles had been reversed, he would have accused her of being overly aggressive.)

One common way of understanding this situation would be to suggest that men are chauvinists and think nothing of interrupting women. Another would be to look for psychological motives in one or both parties: She is passive; he is narcissistic. But another, more elegant explanation is possible: a linguistic one.

Linguistics could tell us that these two individuals have different timing habits for when they take turns. She expects a slightly longer pause between speaking turns than he does. So, while she was waiting for what seemed to her the proper pause, he became restless. The appropriate pause to him had come and gone. To avoid what he thought would be an uncomfortable silence and the appearance that neither of them had anything to say, the man began to answer.

The linguistic solution worked in this case. No therapy was needed, no consciousness-raising other than linguistic. The woman pushed herself to begin speaking just a bit sooner than seemed polite to her. The miraculous result was that she found herself doing much of the talking, and her colleague was as pleased as she was.

This practical approach to language is part of a new trend in linguistics. It analyzes mechanisms, such as turn-taking, that are the gears of conversation. These linguistic signals include shifts in pitch, loudness, pacing, tone of voice and intonation, and linguistic devices such as questions, storytelling and relative indirectness.

Linguists, and especially sociolinguists like me, are concerned with linking the surface level of talk — what people say and how they say it — with the semantics (the meaning derived) and pragmatics (what people are seeking to do or show by speaking in that way at that time). This has brought the discipline into the arena of human interaction and real-world communication problems, and it offers a genuinely new way of understanding human interaction.

## Real People, Talking

The application of linguistics to real-world communication problems is received with mixed emotions within the discipline. Many contemporary linguists see the study of the mechanisms of conversation as basic to the work of linguistics. They applaud the fact that applying linguistic analysis to these mechanisms means that linguistics can play a role not only in elucidating how language works but also in grappling with the real-world problems caused by miscommunication.

But there are many other linguists who are uneasy about this development. Some feel certain that it stretches the scope of the field so far as to weaken it. Modern linguistics has been heralded as the science of language, and many linguists feel it is crucial to maintain both the rigorous methods of scientific investigation and the concomitant severe limitations on appropriate data.

The branch of linguistics that was most influential in the '60s and '70s was the transformational grammar of MIT's Noam Chomsky. Its concern is the abstract representation not of real language as it is spoken (which is dismissed as "mere performance") but of an idealized form of language believed to exist in the mind of an ideal

speaker-hearer. For transformational grammar, the limit of data is the sentence, and the limit of inquiry is syntax: the order in which words are put together, not the meaning of those words (semantics) and certainly not the intentions of, or effects on, the real speakers of actual sentences.

Turning the lens of linguistics onto real-world language has meant broadening the scope of investigation beyond the sentence to spaces of language as large as people produce. And the study of discourse — the most popular new subdiscipline in linguistics — entails studying language in its natural settings: language in education, doctor-patient communication, language and the law, public negotiations and the most common, most encompassing form of discourse: everyday conversation.

Included in all these contexts is the issue that is perhaps the most widely appealing outside of the discipline but also particularly controversial within it — male/female differences in language use.

### **“Do You Love Me?”**

Issues of male/female communication strike at the heart of everyone’s everyday experience, at home and at work. A linguistic approach offers the reassurance that experiences of frustration in communicating across genders is neither idiosyncratic nor pathological but universal and explicable.

For example, a frequent complaint of women about men is that they don’t listen to them. Men frequently protest, “I was listening!” The question of listenership reflects the core of relationships: “Are you listening?” means “Are you interested?” which means “Do you love me?” The questions “Are you listening?” and “Are you interested?” lie at the center of most conversations, including, for example, job interviews and business negotiations.

There may be instances in which people actually are not listening, but these are far fewer than people think. A linguistic approach

suggests that many of these misunderstandings can be traced to habits for displaying listenership. For example, research has shown that, on the average, women give more frequent overt signs of listening: “mhm,” “uhuh,” “yeah,” head nods, changing facial expressions. Expecting the same show of responsiveness, women see men who listen quietly and attentively as not really listening at all, like the specter of silence on a telephone line that causes one to inquire, “Are you still there?”

Conversely, a man who expects a woman to show she’s listening simply by fixing her eyes on his face, feels she is overreacting when she keeps up a steady stream of “mhms” and “uhus.” Whereas women tend to say “yeah” to mean “I’m listening and following,” men tend to say it to mean “I agree.” So part of the reason women offer more of these listening noises, according to anthropologists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker, is that women are listening more often than men are agreeing.

### **When a Man Says “No”**

Another linguistic mechanism that is basic to communication but is also the source of miscommunication is indirectness, and this too characterizes problems in female/male communication.

Riding home in a car, a woman asks, “Are you thirsty? Would you like to stop for a drink?” The man answers “no” and they do not stop. The man is later surprised to learn that the woman is displeased. She wanted to stop. He wonders why she didn’t just tell him what she wanted.

The woman is disgruntled not because she didn’t get her way but because she felt her opinion wasn’t sought and wasn’t considered. When she asked, “Would you like to stop,” she did not expect a yes/no answer. She expected a counter-question: “I don’t know. Would you like to?” She could then respond, “Well, I’d kind of like to. How tired are you?” Thus would commence a gradual negotiation in which



both articulated their dispositions. If at the end of this negotiation they had agreed not to stop for a drink, she would have been satisfied.

In understanding what went wrong, the man must realize that when she asks what he would like, she is not asking an information question but rather starting a negotiation about what both would like. For her part, however, the woman must realize that when he answers “yes” or “no,” he is not making a non-negotiable demand. If she has other ideas, he expects she will state them without being invited to do so.

In simply answering what was asked, the man took the question literally, as a request for information. The woman, however, was using the question as a way of accomplishing a more subtle interactional goal. This difference is often at the root of female /male differences in assumptions about language. Put in the terms of the communications theory of Gregory Bateson, women are more attuned to the metamessage level of talk, the level on which information about relationships is communicated.

For example, a man fixes himself a snack and is about to eat it when he notices that his wife looks hurt. He asks what’s wrong and is told, “You didn’t offer me any.” “I’m sorry,” he says, “I didn’t know you were hungry. Here, have this.” She declines: “You didn’t make it for me.” He is confused because he regards the snack as a matter of food: the message. But she is concerned with the metamessage: Does he think of her as she would think of him?

Another example is a conversation in which a man asks a woman, “How was your day?” She responds with a 20-minute answer, full of details about whom she met, what was said and what she thought — regardless of whether she spent her day at home with the children or in an executive office. Then she asks him, “How was your day?” and he responds, “Same old rat race.” Conversations like this lead women to complain that men don’t tell them anything and lead men to complain that they don’t understand what women want.

## **Telling Secrets**

Maltz and Borker report extensive research that shows that men and women develop assumptions about the role of language in close relationships from their childhood friends. Little girls play with other girls, and the center of their social life is a best friend with whom they share secrets. It is the telling of secrets that makes them best friends.

Boys, in contrast, tend to play in groups, so their talk is less likely to be private. Rather, it is competitive talk about who is best at what, or performance talk that places the speaker at center stage, like Othello telling about his travels. What makes boys friends is not what they say to each other but what they do together. So when a man is close to a woman, doing things together makes them close; nothing is missing for him if they don’t talk about personal details. But she is missing what, for her, is the definitive element in intimacy.

Neither of these styles is right or wrong; they are just different. The frustration that both feel comes from the conviction that his or her own way is logical and self-evident. When viewed as culturally learned habits of conversation, differences do not go away, but they need not be interpreted as evidence of individual pathology (“He is not in touch with his feelings”) or individual failure (“He doesn’t love me”) or a joint failure (“This is a bad relationship: We don’t communicate”).

A linguistic approach relieves individuals of the burden of psychopathology. For example, a psychological interpretation commonly applied to others is manipulateness. A linguistic approach explains that one may feel manipulated without the other intending to manipulate. Rather, whenever linguistic habits differ, each person is likely to make the other feel manipulated simply in an attempt to get comfortable in the situation.

For a nonverbal analog, imagine two people who have slightly different senses of the appropriate distance between conversants. The one who feels comfortable standing

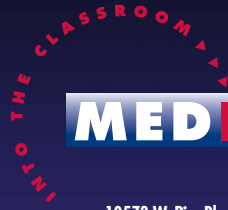


farther away keeps backing off to adjust the space, but the conversational partner who expects to stand closer keeps advancing to close up the space, so they move together down the hall until one is pinned against a wall.

This is analogous to many of the linguistic processes discussed. For example, differences in habitual pacing result in both conversants feeling manipulated. One is pushed to begin speaking before it feels right; the other is forced to hold back artificially. Differences in indirectness have the same result. One who is accustomed to directness will try to get the other to state meaning more directly, with the

result that the indirect one will feel manipulated into stating what obviously should not be stated. The direct one also feels manipulated, expected to understand what has not been said.

The key to a linguistic approach is that neither one nor the other must bear the blame for being manipulative. Rather, the culprit is the difference in their styles. The offending behavior is assigned to neither one but to the interaction between them. The world needs this ecumenical approach to understanding communication. It is a waste for the insights of linguists into how language works to be hidden in scholarly journals.



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