From increasingly restrictive abortion laws, unsafe breast-enhancing devices, legislative bodies composed almost entirely of white men, sexual harassment in the workplace, pay differentials for women and men, and an epidemic of violent crime, both sexual and nonsexual, against girls and women, we learn daily of the reality of patriarchal rule in our culture. It is within this context that I begin my comments about Deborah Tannen's (1990) book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Indeed, it in this context that any discussion of interaction between women and men in the United States must be situated.

This book is an anachronism. Perhaps more accurately it is part of what Susan Faludi describes as the "force and furor" (1991:xxi) of a backlash against women and feminism. Its popularity and overwhelming acclaim are both astonishing and troubling. Its title has been accepted as a metaphor for what ails American female-male relations—a simple misunderstanding. As Senta Troemel-Ploetz comments, "that such a deeply reactionary book should appeal to so many readers informs us, disconcerting as it may be, that what is non-threatening to the status quo sells better than critical analysis" (1991:490).

Yet a critical analysis of the book is needed not only in scholarly journals but in public forums and the popular press as well. One particularly disturbing aspect of this undertaking is that an otherwise well-respected linguist has publicly and successfully promulgated a theoretical framework that is widely disputed within the academic community. It is not the expression of her own opinion that is objectionable. It is touting that point of view to the public without acknowledging its questionable status as a theory within the academic field which she represents. As early as 1975, Barrie Thome and Nancy Henley discussed the need for consideration of both difference and dominance in the study of language and gender.\(^1\) Publicly ignoring this dichotomy does those of us who have studied language and gender for the past twenty years a tremendous disservice and significantly undermines, perhaps even sabotages, other legitimate research agendas.

When the difference or two-cultures model of cross-sex miscommunication first engaged in a quiet debate with the dominance model of miscommunication within the privacy of the academy, the objections to it were muted and polite (see Coates & Cameron 1988). With the publication and extraordinary success of Tannen's book, however, the stakes have become much higher. Now the general public, already ignorant about fundamental principles of language and rather
tolerant of male dominance, embraces a theoretical model of communication that simultaneously perpetuates negative stereotypes of women, excuses men their interactive failings, and distorts by omission the accumulated knowledge of our discipline. Therefore, the objections must be more forceful and more public.

We might start by asking why the book is so immensely attractive to so many individuals. There are first of all the stories of conversations between women and men, which are certainly familiar in tone to scores of people; they are even familiar to me. When we can identify with what we read, we read on. If we are unschooled in a topic of interest, as is the American public, yet searching for comfortable explanations, then we are more easily seduced by interpretations such as Tannen's, which sound plausible when presented without counterclaims. And as Penny Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet explain, “the appeal [of the two cultures] theory is that it minimizes blame for cross-cultural tensions for both the dominating and dominated group” (1992:467). That is not to suggest that Tannen ever acknowledges the existence of men as a truly dominant group or of women as oppressed. She refers only to a set of asymmetries and carefully avoids a discussion of patriarchy. In fact, even some who otherwise praise her work as brilliant and scrupulously fair point out this flaw. Writing in a 1991 paper originally presented at a Stone Center colloquium, psychiatrist Stephen Bergman states that “if the goal of talking is the caretaking and growth of the relationship, it is not accurate to portray men and women as having separate but equal skill and power. They rarely do” (1991:9). He believes that women are taught the skill while men are taught the power.

Another point in the book's favor, as also assessed by Eckert and McConnellGinet, is that Tannen gives equal time to female and male verbal behavior: “Where much work on language and gender ignores male behavior by treating it as a neutral norm from which women deviate, this work has the great merit of trying to account for men's behavior as well as for women's” (1992:466). Yet equal time does not bring with it evenhandedness. Tannen is an apologist for men. She repeatedly excuses their insensitivities in her examples and justifies their outright rudeness as merely being part of their need for independence. While not explicitly setting men up as the norm, Tannen emphasizes the importance of women's adjusting to men's need for status and independence over men's need to understand women's desire for connection. In an August 1991 piece in the London Review of Books, Mary Beard writes, “if you follow [Tannen's] line of reasoning very far, you soon find that these genderlects turn into nothing more than convenient alibis for all the old male powergames. ‘I can't help it, honest, it's my language’” (1991:18). In Tannen's book, for example, we read about Josh, who invites an old high-school friend who is visiting from another town to spend a weekend with him and his wife, Linda. The visit is to begin immediately upon Linda's return from a week's business trip but Josh doesn't first discuss the invitation with her. Linda, of course, is upset by his failure to do so. Tannen would have us believe that Linda's hurt feelings would disappear if only she understood that for Josh, “checking with his wife means seeking permission, which implies that he is not independent, not free to act on his own. He feels controlled by her desire for consultation” (1990:26). This sense of entitlement to act entirely on one's own and to make unilateral decisions is part of the social empowerment that men enjoy. It has precious little to do with communicative style or language.

What of the book's premise itself, that girls and boys grow up in two separate cultures where they learn two different ways of relating to each other, which in turn results in two distinct
communicative styles? That gender-differentiated socialization practices exist was one of the earliest lessons of feminist research. That these socialization practices are used to instill in our children the values and gender assignments of our society is equally well established. To find that some differences emerge in speaking styles is therefore not surprising. However, to speak of these gender arrangements without connecting them to the power arrangements which they enforce and enhance as well as reflect is intellectually naive. And given the highly integrated lives of American women and men, to ascribe full-fledged cultural status to patterns that result from socialization is of doubtful validity.

We see then that Tannen moves from the premise that girls and boys grow up in two separate cultures, itself a disputed fact, to the assertion that communication problems between adult females and males are therefore equivalent to other cross-cultural miscommunication – another questionable claim – to the extraordinary conclusion that miscommunication between women and men results simply from our lack of familiarity with each other's sex-specific communicative styles. I agree with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet when they state that “the emphasis on separation and resulting ignorance misses people's active engagement in the reproduction of and resistance to gender arrangements in their communities” (1992:466).

The earliest version of the two-cultures model for interpreting male-female miscommunication was presented by Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker in 1982. They explain that their work developed from John Gumperz's (1982) research on interethnic communication and Marjorie Harness Goodwin's 1980 study of black children in Philadelphia (1982:196). It is precisely this model, originally presented as a short theoretical paper, that Tannen transforms into her popularized bestseller. In the process, some significant alterations take place. Most noticeable is the discrepancy between the conclusion of Maltz and Borker's article and the principal theme of Tannen's book. Maltz and Borker end their article by stating that the differences between women's and men's communicative style are strongest in childhood and diminish in adulthood due to adults' progressive adjustment to each other. Tannen's account is quite different: she asserts that no such adjustment takes place. If adaptation of this sort fails to occur, as exemplified by Tannen's reported conversations and the ones we all experience, we must wonder what beyond a misunderstanding prevents the adjustment.

The work of Marjorie Goodwin (1980) is central to the development of the two cultures model of miscommunication. Here again, there are disturbing inconsistencies between the conclusions that Goodwin herself draws from her research and the conclusions that we read in Tannen. Tannen cites Goodwin's work at least a half dozen times. She accurately cites the factual elements of Goodwin's findings, but time and time again, she omits Goodwin's own conclusions. Whereas Tannen underscores the differences in the way girls and boys construct social realities through words, Goodwin stresses the importance of the similarities between the girls and boys whom she studies. Tannen's emphasis on difference despite the author's insistence on similarity constitutes a genuine distortion.

In her 1980 article, Goodwin states, “it should ... be emphasized that the girls being studied not only have full competence with aggravated forms of actions but systematically use them in appropriate circumstances” (1980:170). Elsewhere she says, “In cross-sex situations girls are just as skillful at countering another party as boys” (1980:171). In Goodwin and Goodwin
(1987), again the point is made about the similarities between girls' and boys' talk: “Though there are some differences in the ways in which girls and boys organize their arguing ... , the features they use in common are far more pervasive. Were one to focus just on points where girls and boys differ, the activity itself would be obscured” (1987:205). Finally, in Marjorie Goodwin's 1990 book *He-Said-She-Said*, a title included in Tannen's list of references, Goodwin affirms her previous position, this time still more emphatically:

Given the frequent interaction among boys' and girls' groups, it would appear that a major failing of recent reviews of gender and language (for example, Maltz and Borker 1983 (sic)) ... has been acceptance of a “separate worlds” model of social relations, which as Thorne (1986:168) argues “has eclipsed a full, contextual understanding of gender and social relations among children.” ... It will be seen that as important as the differences between groups are the interactional structures they share in common. (1990:52-3)

The anecdotal nature of much of the material that Tannen provides emerges as still another area of weakness in her work. She uses her stories as a basis for sweeping generalizations, claiming, for example, that men but not women offer advice when others are seeking what Tannen calls understanding and that men but not women provide unrequested information in response to questions. Tannen follows Maltz and Borker and others in positing that women and men in general use questions differently, both in quantity – women asking more questions than men – and in the kinds of things that questions are thought to accomplish for the speaker. These assertions are based on very limited data from cross-sex communication (Fishman 1978, 1980) and cannot be generalized to same-sex interchanges. In my research with Alice Greenwood on questions between same-sex pairs of friends (Freed & Greenwood 1992) little difference was found in either the number or type of questions used by women and men. Again we find overgeneralized claims presented by Tannen as if they were well-established facts.

Also reproduced by Tannen is the stereotype that men are direct in their speaking style whereas women's language can be characterized as indirect. In order to argue against the notion that indirectness of style is a signal of powerlessness, Tannen cites research on both Greek and Japanese speakers (1990:226) that demonstrates that indirectness, widely valued as a communicative style in non-western societies, does not reflect low status. While there is no argument with this discussion, on what basis does she tie it in with her claims about women? How does she establish that women are indirect in the first place? And what sort of communicative style can one expect to find in a woman, who by sexual classification should be an indirect speaker but who happens to belong to an ethnic group that places a high value on directness and confrontation? Tannen never addresses the resolution of conflicting ethnic and sex-related verbal styles. As an American Jewish woman married to an Irish American man, the constellation of conversational traits that I live with is completely at odds with those described by Tannen. Consider that research has shown that the Irish, known for their humor and verbal indirectness, generally avoid the expression of anger within the family (McGoldrick 1982). Research shows that Jews, on the other hand, tend to express themselves directly and engage easily in family arguments (see Tannen 1981; Schiffrin 1984). Unlike Tannen, Monica McGoldrick and Nydia Garcia Preto (1984), writing on ethnicity and family therapy, do discuss the interplay of sex and ethnicity. In an article on ethnic intermarriage they remark, "Given that
women are generally raised to talk more easily about their feelings, an Irish wife with a Jewish husband will probably have an easier time than a Jewish wife with an Irish husband" (1984:349).

Tannen appears to be of two minds on this subject. In her 1982 article on ethnicity and style in male-female conversation, she concludes that "conversational style is both a consequence and indicator of ethnicity" (1982:230). Yet in the book under discussion here, despite frequent references to the effect of ethnicity on speaking, she argues that conversational style is a result of being raised female or male. She asserts that understanding genderiects will make it possible to change how we speak and will “take the sting out” of the differences (1990:279). In 1982, she expressed the opposite opinion. Then she offered that “it is far from certain ... that awareness of the existence of differences in communicative strategies makes them less troublesome since their operation remains unconscious and habitual” (1982:229). If the difference in these statements constitutes an evolution in her thinking, then her readers should be so informed. Regardless, the interaction of ethnicity, gender, and a variety of other factors must be addressed.

Whatever their genesis, it is worth considering the phenomenon of cross-sex miscommunication in more detail. Henley and Kramarae (1991) proffer the suggestion that miscommunication may in fact be a smoke screen that allows people to emphasize issues of difference over issues of unequal power. They ask how male dominance could be maintained if communication from women were as valued as communication from men. They believe that “the construction of miscommunication between the sexes emerges as a powerful tool, maybe even a necessity, to maintain the structure of male supremacy” (1991:30).

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point out that both real differences between women and men and “the belief in differences serve as interactional resources in the reproduction of gender arrangements, of oppression and of more positive liaisons” (1992:467). Both pairs of authors provide compelling reasons for dismissing the notion that men lack knowledge of the differences between women's way of talking and their own. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet ponder the means by which men sometimes interpret a woman's saying “no” to mean “yes.” When a man insists that her “no” means “yes,” is he simply applying, they ask, the rules that he learned in his own same-sex peer group for accepting sexual advances by pretending to reject them? Or is he “exploiting his ‘understanding’ of the female style as different from his in its indirectness?” (1992:7). If women's and men's use of minimal responses is indeed different, as suggested by Maltz and Borker and Tannen, then why, as Henley and Kramarae ask, do men respond so well to women's use of positive minimal responses as reinforcement; that is, why “do they keep talking” when another speaker keeps saying, “um hum” (1991:12)?

Overall, the view of continual bad communication between the sexes may be entirely too pessimistic. Certainly there are women and men, even the white middle-class heterosexual couples of Tannen's world, who talk well together. And what of lesbians and gays talking together? What about nonsexual friendships? Where are the sisters and brothers affectionately engaged in conversation? And what of our teenage children who spend countless happy hours conversing with one another? These are girls and boys talking to each other intimately and with delight and comfort.

Most remarkable of all is the fact that the language of courtship supplies us with few examples of
female-male miscommunication. The men I speak of seem to know exactly how to engage in so-called “rapport talk” and sympathy-building exchanges with the women with whom they are establishing serious romantic or sexual relations. When it suits their purposes, men have no difficulty talking in a manner that women find comfortable and appealing. And why should this come as a surprise? Men as human beings require intimacy and connection just as women do, and they often find it most easily available to them when they act in nondominant ways with others. Unfortunately, this is not merely an unconscious knowledge of sociolinguistic appropriateness. Not only do men understand and use what Tannen calls “women's communicative style,” but they consciously and actively exploit this same expressive register, commonly known as sweet-talking, when in pursuit of sexual conquests. Well before the backlash of Tannen's ideas, Jack Sattel remarked that “male expressiveness is a good way of coming on.” He argued that “in a society as thoroughly sexist as ours, men may use expressiveness to continue to control a situation and to maintain their position of dominance” (1983:123).

Deborah Tannen has given us a book filled with contradictions. From her other work we know her to be an astute observer of human conversation and a researcher who is sensitive to cues related to class, ethnicity, and friendship. Yet in this work, while repeatedly discussing the importance of considering social factors such as geography, ethnicity, class, race, and situation in the interpretation of conversation, she completely neglects their crucial interplay with gender; she treats sex and gender as unidimensional categories and as the most salient features in our lives – which they are not. (See Henley & Kramarae 1991:28.)

Of all of the contradictions present in Tannen's work, the most telling revolves around the change in interpretation of the same example as written for two different audiences. In *You Just Don't Understand*, she argues that interruptions of women by men are simply part of a conversational game and are not the result of male dominance. She tells us about a conversation between Zoë and Earl at a party. Zoë begins to tell Earl a joke but Earl interrupts, saying that he thinks he knows it, checks with her, and then tells a different and very offensive joke. Tannen acknowledges that Earl has interrupted Zoë but explains that Zoë yielded to Earl's attempt to tell the joke instead of preventing him from taking it over. She states further that Zoë supports his bid and allows him to proceed since they are playing by different rules (1990:214). In a 1992 article “Rethinking Power and Solidarity in Gender and Dominance,” written for her academic peers, Tannen uses the very same example but this time concludes that indeed this “interruption does seem dominating because it comes as Zoë is about to tell a joke, so the man is usurping the floor to tell it for her (1992:140). Tannen's purpose in this more recent paper is to explain that the meaning of an interruption depends on the context, conversation styles, and communicative goals of the participants.

Ultimately what Tannen appears actually to believe, although she has not yet revealed this to the American public, is best expressed in the more recent work. In this she stresses that linguistic forms and strategies cannot be uniformly correlated with particular intentions or functions. (This does not mean that a particular social agenda, such as the theme of control that runs through men's interactions with women, cannot be regularly expressed through multiple linguistic strategies and devices.) But if what Tannen really wishes to teach us is that conversational strategies such as interruption, silence, and indirectness can convey either solidarity or power,
intimacy or independence, connection or status, depending on a large number of nonlinguistic factors, then it is this that she should be explaining to us and to our senators rather than proclaiming that “we just don't understand.” If the same set of conversational devices is available to all of us, female and male alike, and if we all make use of these forms and styles at varying times for divergent social purposes, then obviously we understand perfectly.

NOTES

1. A number of “difference” models have been suggested to explain female and male variations in language. These, however, are not related to communication between the sexes and therefore are not discussed in this review. Among the models worth noting are: Lesley Milroy’s (1980, 1997) which use social-network theory to explain how language is affected by the relation of individuals to the groups with whom they interact; Patricia Nichols' work (1983) which shows the effect of socioeconomic opportunities on women's and men's speech; and Janet Holmes’ research (1984, 1986) which emphasizes the need to study how varying forms function within their context, taking into consideration the relationship between participants. There are, of course, a large number of studies besides those cited that emphasize the role of dominance in analyzing women’s and men's language. Finally, researchers are increasingly approaching language and gender studies by combining a number of different models; see, for example, Penny Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992); Amy Sheldon (1990, 1992); and Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron (1988).

REFERENCES


