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Gender Differences in Spoken Interactions

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June, 2003

In our everyday conversation with members of the other sex we may or may not be aware of the differences in the genderlect between males and females. These differences do not stem from our nature, because at birth we are all the same regarding our cognitive abilities and behavioural patterns, but arise in the process of socialisation, cultural participation and moulding into a gender-conditioned shape. The ways of men and women split to such an extent that we get the 'weaker' and the 'stronger' sexes, of which the latter played a dominant role only some three decades ago. However, overall gender differences have been slowly declining in the meantime, but certain patterns can still be observed in speech, body language, and behaviour. The subjects of great interest this paper is about to discuss are contrasts applied to males and females, how they behave in conversations and in other situations, what influences them and why they react in a gender-specific way.

The difference between the sexes is set by parents already before a child's birth. As soon as they are told the sex of their child extensive preparations take place. There are clothes to be bought, of darker colors (blue, brown, green) and with male cartoon characters if it is a boy, and of softer colours (yellow, pink, purple) with female characters, butterflies, and ladybirds, if it is a girl. Boys get cars, big trucks, teddy bears, and girls get dollies and make-up. When the child is born they are raised according to the gender they belong to. Fathers stimulate boys to become interested in technology, sports, whereas mothers tend to prepare daughters for their future roles in the family - householding, babycare. When children start socialising, boys often play in large groups organized hierarchically. They learn confrontational speech and rough talk, while girls are encouraged for using elegant language and are thus taken away some flexibility of their expressing themselves. Girls, on the contrary, play in smaller groups. They learn to be more intimate, revealing more personal information and avoiding conflicts. This is also reflected in the school, where boys tend to create disorder and girls try to prevent it. At this stage boys are still more emotionally open than later on in their lives. They pay little attention to lessons, they are easily distracted, daydreaming may occur. They also ask fewer questions than girls and a common misconception with male professors is that they know less than boys and are therefore given lower grades. However, James Thurber may still be right to say that "women are wiser than men because they know less and understand more" since boys and girls differentiate in their brain pattern, which moulds in the process of socialisation.

Women like silent men.

Marcel Achard

There is no such thing as conversation.

*It is an illusion. There are intersecting
monologues, that is all.*

Rebecca West

There is a considerable difference with regard to which side of the brain is used with either gender. The left side of the brain is the verbal, sorting, detail-oriented side; the right side is the spatial intuitive nonverbal side (Thayer White, p.134). Thus, according to Mr. White, if a woman says something a man doesn't want to hear, he will not respond verbally but spatially; his intuitive response is to move away. So far it seems men are less talkative and conversational than women, but, taking the competitive edge into account, in public places men talk more than women. In the same place women tend to talk faster than usual; they are afraid of being interrupted, which is less likely to happen if you are a man. Men are more likely to interrupt other people without feeling bad. Being very competitive they want to express their own opinions, even by the use of something that is considered impolite – 'chipping in' (mainly from women's point of view). The effects of the male dominance are obviously still present (sexism: Spender, 1980: *Man Made Language*). An interrupted woman will find it easier to 'forgive' a man for the interruption than an interrupted man to a woman. She may often grow speechless after being interrupted by a man, which shows her powerlessness. For example, last Sunday I was listening to the BBC News in Slovene about Saddam Hussein's regime, when my mother made a remark on the USA's capturing Bin Laden. I almost exploded being so 'rudely' interrupted and shouted her to shut up. She grew quiet immediately. She became aware that recent news is more important to me than bringing up old topics and discussing them by the table. Perhaps in general it is easier for a man to interrupt (excluding me and my mother, who is a special case), because women speak in a softer voice, whereas men speak in a louder and more monotonous voice. They often monopolise the conversation so as to prove they are better informed. Female-speakers also tend to digress from the subject by involving interrelational topics and may thus sound less professional. Such topics are also not very desirable with men; they seek straightforward solutions to the problem and useful advice.

*Women speak two languages –
one of which is verbal.*

William Shakespeare

Regarding expressing emotions women are more reactive. They respond by various facial expressions; they are directly facing the interlocutor when listening and are also said to smile more often than men. When the speaker talks about problems, she tries to identify with them telling her own problems and experiences. She also gives them solace and may resort to crying just to make them feel they are not alone. Men, on the other side try to solve problems analytically without involving themselves emotionally. They reveal as little of their personal information and intimate feelings as possible. They do not want to sound like a woman. For the sake of their do-it-yourself men also rarely ask for help. It is hard to get help without revealing some personal pieces of information (even a psychiatrist cannot do without it) so they rather settle problems on their own. For example, husband and wife have a dispute at home and then they split. The wife seeks feedback, help, and opinions with her best friend telling her how ruthless and unfeeling her husband is – and her friend will support her. On the other hand, the husband will probably not mention it to his male-friend at all; also the friend is less likely to want to hear anything about it, and will probably just ward the topic off offering a simple solution – “send her flowers”.

*Even a fish wouldn't get into trouble
if it kept its mouth shut.*

Author Unknown

Sometimes it is better not to reveal too many pieces of information, which is often impossible with women. They are unstoppable in going into details, evoking associations (what he said, what she said), scrutinizing and evaluating every spoken word, bodily expressions, facial expressions and other characteristics which appear in conversations. This is often referred to as gossiping and is considered impolite, because certain information that should stay personal or intimate is revealed. Here, a huge discrepancy between women and men can be observed. Women are said to be the winners among gossipers. The reason probably lies in the topic of conversation, which is very often of emotional nature, involving relationships, emotions, moods, feelings. These are also the topics that men tend to avoid, simply because they are too feminine and do not suit their manly qualities. However, men are

also gossipers. The only difference is that the topics of conversation are different from women's. They are more concerned with work, sports, technology, and grooming. However, it is only a recent trend that they are more likely to discuss also feminine topics as a flavour to their topics. Still, men do not have such an impact on what can happen as a result of gossiping as women do. It may destroy 'friendships', trustworthiness may be lost, also a counter-attack may be expected. These are some of the risks that gossipers take, although they may not be aware of taking risks at all.

Many people have said and many believe that an average woman uses two to three times as many words as an average man in the same period of time. Such belief comes from many jokes about women; one of them is shown below.

A man and his wife were having a conversation about an article she had read, a comparative survey about the number of words men and women use on a daily basis. She read that women speak twice as much as men do.

The woman said to her husband, "Honey, did you know the average woman speaks about 5000 words a day, compared to the average man who speaks only 2500, only half as much?" She went on to say, "The reason why women speak twice as much as men was because they always have to repeat what they say." To which her husband replied, "What?"

(<http://www.women.com>)

From this 'story' we could conclude that women are the talkative, whereas the men besides being less talkative they also do not listen. Marjorie Swacker performed an experiment by showing both sexes 3 paintings. The results confirmed just the opposite; men talked 13.00 minutes and women only 3.17 minutes about the pictures. Sociolinguists argue that the reason women talk less than men lies in the history of mankind. Not long ago women were considered inferior to men and this is reflected in their talkativeness¹. Men were also constantly active in business life; they were spokesmen, leaders, teachers, executives... Nevertheless, despite the results, if you ask a man who talks more he will say that women do, while women will even not deny it (Deborah Tannen). Men mostly hear women speaking in situations where men are almost 'speechless' – private speaking. Some professors like Tannen, a linguistics professor at Georgetown University, have noticed that men are more likely to 'break the ice' and ask a question during lectures. They use more time

¹ According to Ancient philosophers women were seen as lesser men.

asking and may ask multiple structured questions, however they will relate to personal information less often. The problem of not paying attention is in my experience the same with women as with men. Here the reason is not psychological, neither is it sociological; it is physiological – the hearing threshold lowers for subjects that are not in the centre of attention and rises for those in focus. The initiator of conversation has to disturb the potential interlocutor, say, by raising their voice.

To summarize, seeking for distinct gender differences and contrasts applied between men and women is all but a black and white job. In childhood the contrast is more recognizable because children haven't yet fully developed their characteristics; language, behavioural, speech patterns. Parents, who are the first to impress a certain pattern on child's character, are only a drop in the sea. Through socialising one side of the brain becomes more active ('more preferable'), which in general distinguishes men from women. Men also inherit power from the past (male dominance) and this is often mirrored in men's monopole in public conversations. Women are more active in private conversations with interrelational topics and tend to digress to it when talking in public. For this reason they may often be interrupted. They in general use more polite and bias-free language. When it comes to problems men try to solve problems analytically, while women initiate their emotions. They often tend to identify with a person who has problems, thus revealing private and intimate pieces of information, which is often a source for gossiping. It is also astounding that men actually speak more than women; however, they reveal much less private, 'classified' information. What in the past was a man is now becoming a bit womanized, while a woman is becoming what used to be a man as far as topics of conversation are concerned. What will become of us is yet to expect; nevertheless, I'll still stick to the saying that woman gets the last word in every argument.

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