

## Review essay: Selling the apolitical

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Review of DEBORAH TANNEN's *You Just Don't Understand* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990).

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ABSTRACT. The main thesis of Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* is that conversation between women and men (presumably she is talking about white American middle- and upper middle-class women and men) is cross-cultural communication, and therefore women and men become victims of misunderstandings that are due to their different speaking styles. Tannen's therapy for the communication conflicts between women and men is that each group should 'learn to understand each other's style' and 'learn to use it on occasion' (p. 148). They will then be 'in a better position to confront real conflicts of interest—and to find a shared language in which to negotiate them' (p. 18). In tune with the non-engaged and apolitical stance of this thesis, the male style is never identified as the dominant style which brings advantages to its speakers and gives them privileges just because they are men. Rather than acknowledging that the male style is valued highly and the female style is considered inferior, Tannen claims that the two conversational styles are 'equally valid'. Looking at her sample dialogues, however, we find in one after the other that men dominate and women have to submit, i.e. the social hierarchy between women and men is reproduced. Given the power difference between women and men, 'mutual understanding' of, and 'mutual adjustment' to, each other's style is an unrealistic solution. Tannen fails to acknowledge a political dimension to our conversations, selling us the personal again as merely personal, flawed by just a bit of miscommunication that can easily be straightened out. We are back in the 1950s, before feminism and other important political movements occurred that were concerned with power, control and domination. Knowing about these movements if not identifying with them, or at least seeing social injustice if not being moved by it, might have helped Tannen to avoid the separate-but-equal argument for the conversational styles of women and men.

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Reading Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*—the lamentation of the title alone places it squarely into the profuse relationship literature à la Ann Landers, along with books of the caliber of Norwood's *Women Who Love Too Much* and selling as well—one might believe feminism had never happened in this country.

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This is a book for the present period of restoration, undoing the upsetting politics of the last three decades, adjusting and accommodating to those in power, namely men, providing appeasement for the male chauvinist backlash so that it does not hurt the wrong women, and appealing to readers who have lived through these decades untouched and untroubled by the analyses of social and economic injustice all around them. 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.

This is a dishonest book precisely because of its non-engaged and apolitical stance. It veils and conceals the political analysis to which women have given their energy during the last 30 years, and the changes they have brought about with the help of fair men. It waters down our insights; it equalizes where differences have to be acknowledged; it hardly ever talks about inequity—and never with real concern; it again and again stops short of drawing any political inferences that would suggest that significant changes are needed in the communication and relationships between women and men.

The author shields her readers also from linguistic knowledge. Thus if one would not know, one would never find out that there is an enormous body of feminist literature presenting a critical analysis of the differences in power and access to power between women and men, on all levels, public and private, and in all areas—work, pay, family, sexuality, the professions, the institutions, e.g. medicine, the court system, even academia (where Tannen is located), and even conversational analysis (which is her field).

The main thesis of Tannen's book is that women's and men's conversation *is* (not even *is patterned like*) cross-cultural communication (pp. 18, 42, 47). This is entirely unsupported and unproven. What Tannen claims, that 'if adults learn their ways of speaking as children growing up in separate social worlds of peers, then conversation between women and men is cross-cultural communication' (p. 47), simply does not follow. Even if it were true that girls and boys grow up in different linguistic worlds, it would not follow. Girls and boys, women and men (always remaining within the white middle class) live together in shared linguistic worlds, be it in the family, in schoolrooms, in the streets, in colleges, in jobs; they are probably spending more time in mixed-sex contexts than in single-sex contexts, and, above all, they are not victims of constant misunderstandings. On the contrary, they understand each other quite well. They know who is allowed to use dominant speech acts, like commands, orders, explanations, contradiction, doubts, advice, criticism, evaluations, definitions, punishment, attacks, challenges, accusations, reproaches; and who has to apologize, defend, ask for favors, beg, request permission, justify herself, agree, support, adjust, accommodate, and accept someone else's definition of the situation.

By using these speech acts to a large extent asymmetrically, a conversational reality is being constructed in which men claim more authority and autonomy for themselves, and women become more dependent and non-

autonomous. We are acting out our social roles and producing, via our speech acts, a conversational world in which our social reality is reflected and corroborated: men have power, women submit.

Consequently, we find two conversational cultures or two different styles that are not equal. Men, the speakers of the dominant style, have more rights and privileges. They exhibit their privileges and produce them in every conversational situation. Men are used to dominating women; they do it especially in conversations: they set the tone as soon as they enter a conversation, they declare themselves expert for almost any topic, they expect and get attention and support from their female conversational partners, they expect and get space to present their topics and, above all, themselves—their conversational success is being produced by the participants in that conversation. Women are trained to please; they have to please also in conversations, i.e. they will let men dominate and they will do everything not to threaten men: not set the tone, not insist on their own topics or opinions, package opposing views pleasantly, not refuse support, not take more space than men, i.e. let men win conversationally and renounce their own conversational success and satisfaction in the process.

Men also exhibit and produce their conversational rights: the right to dominate, the right to self-presentation or self-aggrandizement at the expense of others, the right to have the floor and to finish one's turn, the right to keep women from talking (by disturbance or interruption), the right to get attention and consideration from women, the right to conversational success. Women, on the other hand, have conversational obligations: they must not disturb men in their dominating and imposing behavior; they must support their topics, wait with their own topics, give men attention, take them seriously at all times, and, above all, listen and help them to their conversational success. By assuming, attributing and reconstructing men's rights and privileges and women's obligations in every conversation, status differences between women and men are being confirmed and produced in most mixed-sex interactions—the social hierarchy remains intact.

Reading through what a German critic called Professor Tannen's 'chatter', one searches in vain for concepts like dominance, control, power, politics of gender, sexism, discrimination, and finds two of them mentioned after 200 pages but not explored, borrowed probably from another author. Concepts like feminism or patriarchy never occur, being evidently far too radical for the author. Tannen is selling political naïveté, but neither is sociology quite so naïve nor linguistics quite as apolitical as Tannen would have us believe. In both fields women have, long before Tannen started publishing on mixed-sex communication, given political analyses of their data and introduced new concepts from a feminist perspective that suggested a revision of the existing male models, e.g. Labov's model of the male storyteller as the protagonist; Labov's model of the language of youth which was neither the language of youth nor of black youth but the language of male black youth; Sacks' and Schegloff's turn-taking model, etc.

Significantly, the feminist literature in her own field is not even men-

tioned by Tannen or, where mentioned en passant, as in the case of Aries, Edelsky, Goodwin, Spender, it is reduced in such a way that its spark is neutralized and its critical impetus watered down so as not to offend anyone or lead him to think. But we do not hear about Lee Jenkins (1981, 1982) who first worked on story-telling in a women's group concentrating on women's competence and their high degree of cooperation, in the process doing away with the stereotypes of women's style found in linguistics as elsewhere. We do not hear about new work done on women's discourse, work on women's friendships, women's professional style, emphasizing the competence of women whose style lends itself very well to all kinds of verbal endeavors, from psychotherapy to teaching to management, and whose success is appreciated independently in these fields. Conspicuous by its absence too is the work of the psychologists of the Stone Center at Wellesley, although Tannen is tampering in relationships.

All these works, apparently, would be far too feminist to be considered by Tannen, since they attack the principle of male superiority and male dominance. Even staying within sociolinguistics, however, there is no mention of the important work by Sue Fisher and Alexandra Todd (Fisher, 1984, 1986; Fisher and Todd, 1983, 1986; Todd, 1984, 1989) who analyzed medical discourse as an unequal power contest where male doctors use their power at the expense of women and their organs. We do not hear about the analysis by Candace West (1984), looking at female doctors and male and female patients respectively, and corroborating the asymmetries as we know them in mixed-sex conversations, even where the doctor is a woman and the patient male. We do not hear about West's interesting result, the construction of symmetry—with respect to interruptions—between the woman doctor and her female patients, giving the first indication that women use power differently than men. We do not hear about Pamela Fishman's work on couples in private conversations which shows male dominance and points out that, when dominance is threatened, the man has recourse to verbal and physical violence. Of course, we do not hear about sexual antagonism (Whitehead, 1976), sexual harassment or verbal insults—Tannen stays with polite conversation.

But even discussing certain topics, e.g. gossip, the powerful analyses of Reiter (1975) and Harding (1975) are missing; in talking about body language, there is no reference to the important *Body Politics* by Henley; the discussion of jokes (pp. 90, 140) is done without using the extensive literature on the politics of humor which shows at whose expense the jokes are made, and who does the work to construct the success of the jokers.

Tannen chooses to ignore all this work because it takes a political stand, because it is looking at interactions between women and men in terms of mechanisms of control and exertion of power, in terms of unequal rights. It is informed by a sense of justice and its authors, each in her own field, are committed to social change. Only an author who is not in touch with the women in her field could write a book in 1990 on conversations between women and men without understanding that women cannot simply adopt the male style and be powerful, too; and also that men will not voluntarily

give up their style and be powerless like women. Of course, Tannen never considers such a radical option as men giving up their style to adopt a more humane one; she suggests 'mutual adjustment'. Reading some of the women in her field, understanding the criticism of her work as it is offered in Henley/Kramarae (1991) might have helped her to avoid the superficial dilettantism of her analysis.

Unfortunately, Tannen is also not in touch with other professional women, e.g. women in law, in politics, in journalism, who are fighting for their credibility and their status. The work of these women depends entirely on language as their instrument. Acting in their professions is nothing but speaking. They are trained like the men; they speak with authority—still their experience in their professions is very different from that of men. Tannen has no explanation for this and apparently is unfamiliar with the concept of status dilemma—I return to this point later.

And as to linguistics, readers who do not know will not learn, in this book written by a linguist, that speaking has been analyzed since Austin (1962) as a social act in a social context. Utterances are acts that reflect as well as construct differences in status and power among speakers, and as such they can hurt and degrade another, they can decrease respect for and credibility of another, they can ignore, diminish, ridicule, i.e. discriminate others. They can do this quite without conscious intention by their speakers. But, of course, as social beings situated in a certain cultural context, we have the obligation to inform ourselves about which acts are seen as discriminatory, i.e. as sexist or racist or both, by our hearers and we have to guarantee that our speech acts are such that they are not offensive if we do not want to offend. If we do not want to exclude someone, we have to guarantee that our advertisement or invitation is such that they feel included. If we want to comfort someone, we have to speak in such a way that the hearer can accept it as comfort. If we fail to follow the conventions of our language to address or comfort someone then our speech acts do not succeed, they 'misfire', as Austin said. We are responsible for how we speak. We cannot arbitrarily produce speech acts and claim idiosyncratic intentions for them—there is a limit to how an utterance can be both understood and misunderstood.

This has to be kept in mind when reading Tannen where again and again what is meant by one speaker and what is understood by another is described as having merely the most tenuous connection. Tannen's linguistically innocent stance gives us no clue that speakers, when talking, are active in a social exchange that can legitimate and produce the domination of men and the subordination of women, and that their interaction just as well could undo social inequality by not reproducing utterances and acts that discriminate, by producing fairer language and more symmetric conversations.

Here may be the reason why Tannen's book is without passion, even 'linguistic' passion as we find it in Labov or Chomsky or Lakoff (Robin Lakoff, of course). Its author does not envisage change anywhere, she does not allow herself linguistic passion or political passion. She is writing in the

service of the male research perspective, not making any value judgments, especially none that would threaten the existing hierarchies, i.e. the status quo. However, in selling the status quo, her by-intention apolitical book becomes a highly political act. As such, it is not even in the tradition of American linguistics which all in all has had a deep political and social concern embodied foremost in Chomsky, but also in Labov, who in the 1960s salvaged Black English from primitive status by showing it as a creative endeavor with complex linguistic practices that white standard speakers could not dream to match. Even the anthropologist-linguists of old were more political than Tannen and more concerned with equality. They defended Native American languages (called Indian languages, then) as just as good and just as rich to express the relevant concerns of Native American life as was Standard English with respect to the concerns of its speakers. But none of these linguists would have dismissed the power differences between the speakers of Native American languages or Black English and standard speakers.

Turning away now from academia and her colleagues, to the women and men who are the subjects of Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*, it is difficult to believe that they could feel their communication adequately described. The plaintive reproach of the title is obviously a woman's utterance, resigning to not being understood instead of insisting to be understood. This is indicative of what is to come. As a critic wrote: 'Tannen's wailing lament about male conversational behavior is bound to frustrate frustrated women even more' (*Spiegel* 18, 1991: 223; translation ST-P). Women are being told that men who are unempathic, who do not care about women's feelings or their wishes, who are selfish and self-centered, speak a different language, called a language of report, and are interested in a different goal, namely the solution of problems. This will not comfort the women who think that men should also be able to communicate on an emotional level and who want to educate men to their emotional culture. Are they to give up the idea of a loving heterosexual relationship based on mutual sharing?

Take for instance the woman who had a breast operation and felt she had been cut into and that the seam of the stitches 'had changed the contour of her breast' (p. 49). Her husband replies only one sentence to his wife's distress: 'You can have plastic surgery to cover up the scar and restore the shape of your breast' (p. 49). Then the following dialogue evolves (p. 50):

- Woman:* I'm not having any more surgery! I'm sorry you don't like the way it looks.  
*Man:* I don't care. It doesn't bother me at all.  
*Woman:* Then why are you telling me to have plastic surgery?  
*Man:* Because you were saying *you* were upset about the way it looked.

Note that in this dialogue the man has the last word and the woman afterwards 'felt like a heel'. We hear a lot about her feelings—e.g. she felt

guilty about snapping at him—but we hear nothing about his feelings, only that he was reacting to her complaint by reassuring her that there is something she could do about it. Tannen concludes: ‘Eve wanted the gift of understanding, but Mark gave her the gift of advice. He was taking the role of problem-solver, whereas she simply wanted confirmation of her feelings’ (p. 50). Tannen’s analysis ends here.

It is interesting to see who gets their needs fulfilled. The man solved a problem and presented his solution—he did what he needed to do. The woman did not get what she needed in her situation. There is not the slightest suggestion that especially in a difficult situation of that kind the man should perhaps for once not react to his wife with the usual unempathic, unconcerned, cold, problem-solving response. Is this woman to accept that even when she most needs compassion and empathy (a word that does not occur in Tannen’s book), she is not going to get it? And should she believe Tannen’s explanation that her husband did not *understand* what she wanted?

Many women know that men just do not *want* to be interested in what they need and it often shows most dramatically in situations where a woman is sick or pregnant or becomes disabled or gets old. It is not that men do not understand what women want and, if they only knew, they would generously give it. Neither women nor men are as dumb as Tannen wants us to believe: ‘Many men honestly do not know what women want, and women honestly do not know why men find what they want so hard to comprehend and deliver’ (p. 81). Many men, however, must appreciate Tannen’s analysis—they do not have to find out what women want and, above all, they do not have to change. My thesis is that men understand quite well what women want but they give only when it suits them. In many situations they refuse to give and *women cannot make them give*.

To claim, as Tannen does, that women want comfort and do not want advice or solution of problems, and that men can give only the latter but not the former, is simply ridiculous. Women also want advice and solutions to problems and men also want empathy. What is wrong is that most of the time men are getting both from women, and women often (as in the case of Tannen’s Eve) get neither.

Conversations between women and men are not as superficial as suggested by this book, and they do not fail because of miscommunication. Dialogues also do not stop where they do in this book; often women and men do go on to inquire what went wrong. They both know that they are not just expressing their caring, loving, selfless thoughts in two different ways, but that they are doing essentially different things: women care for, and support, men; empathize with them, comfort them, and especially work for men in conversations and relationships, at home and on the job; men take women’s energy and work, and use it for themselves (what Tannen calls their love of independence and autonomy), and return when and what and if they feel like returning. The majority of relationships between women and men in our society are fundamentally asymmetrical to the advantage of men. If they were not, we would not need a women’s

liberation movement, women's commissions, houses for battered women, legislation for equal opportunity, antidiscrimination laws, family therapy, couple therapy, divorce. We would not even need Tannen's book.

To pursue the subjects of Tannen's book a bit further—just like Eve, other women in her examples have to submit to male domination: The woman who came out of the hospital early and 'had to move around more' (p. 50) (obviously because her husband was not doing for her what strange nurses did for her in the hospital), was told by her husband: 'Why didn't you stay in the hospital where you would have been more comfortable?' (p. 50). A perfectly reasonable answer 'to her complaint about the pain she was suffering' from the person closest to her? Tannen herself surely would have taken such a response in her stride, understanding her husband's suggestion just as it was intended. Or the woman who, when she braked, extended her right arm to protect the man beside her from falling forward (p. 35), an automatic gesture which infuriated this man, who thought she should keep both hands on the wheel. This woman ends up 'training herself to resist this impulse with Maurice to avoid a fight, but *she felt sadly constrained* by what she saw as his irrational reaction' (p. 50, my emphasis). Or the woman who had asked her husband 'Would you like to stop for a drink?', and he said 'no', whereupon they did not stop (p. 15). Now, apart from the fact that even a very dense man can infer the indirect meaning of a request from this question, it is again interesting to see who did what he wanted to do, and who accommodated to his wishes and did not do what she wanted to do.

Although women are submitting, annoyed, hurt and losing out in one example after the other, and men are getting their needs fulfilled, Tannen ends up rescuing the men. She explains them to us so we can perceive them as they should be perceived: in their puzzlement, confusion, frustration, while they all get their way.

However, at one point Tannen's explanation stops: men don't talk to their heterosexual partners, Tannen claims, but she does not tell us why. She fails to explain why men who talk all day long, whose business is talk, including talk of a high degree of indirectness, in politics, law, advertising, sales, journalism, on school boards, in academia, cannot say two sentences to their wives at home. Take the man who cannot answer his wife's question 'What's new with X?' and says 'Nothing' (p. 80). Do you think if his boss asked him the same question about the same X, he would say 'nothing'? And if he did indeed, and his boss reacted in anger, would he not know why? As a native speaker he knows that his answer means not only there is nothing new about X but also that it has an indirect message of 'I don't care to talk with you now', and is a refusal to enter into further conversation. But how is it that a man, when talking to his female boss, knows more about indirect meaning and indirect speech acts than when he talks with his wife? Because he can afford to. He *has to* supply information to his boss, but at home *his wife has to* work at drawing information out of him and he gives it only when he is good and ready.

So let us now look at the men in Tannen's book. So far, we have learned



that although they are emotionally retarded and impoverished, morose and taciturn—Tannen calls it ‘hampered by their style’ (p. 146)—they always have the best of intentions. To be sure, they are being sold for stupid as far as their proficiency in their native language is concerned, but that does not matter since they can maintain their privileges. Take the man who is moving out of the house and wants to tell his 12-year-old son (pp. 146–7). He ends up talking about wars and politics instead of the new situation and his feelings, not to mention his son’s feelings and fears. Tannen considers him handicapped by his style. Did he get his need to lecture fulfilled, did the boy get his needs fulfilled? Should we accept that men are total emotional illiterates even when it comes to their children? Should we accept that they do not have to be knowledgeable about emotions, not even their own? That it is just their style which makes them know more about wars than about their relationships with the most important people in their lives? And so they can lecture forth about wars and weapons, and Japan and Russia, but not say one empathic comforting word to their children or their wives when they are in distress.

Is it a matter of style that men in this country spend three minutes a day talking to their small children?

Has anyone found out how much time they spend talking to their wives?

Should we really believe what Tannen tells us about men not talking at home, namely ‘many men are deeply frustrated by feeling they have disappointed their partners, without understanding how they failed or how else they could have behaved’ (p. 82).

If men were that frustrated, they would change, and talk to their wives. If women could make them talk, they would, but women accommodate because that is all they can do. Those who do not accommodate get to feel the consequences. Women even accommodate where it is not necessary because of their family, job, or economic situation, i.e. they allow themselves to be dominated even when they could walk out of a doctor’s office or tell a man to shut up, without negative consequences.

A beautiful case in point is the author herself who, after giving a talk in a bookstore for an audience of mainly women, found that ‘the discussion was being conducted by men in the audience. At one point’, to follow her insightful description, ‘a man sitting in the middle was talking at such great length that several women in the front rows began shifting in their seats and rolling their eyes at me. Ironically, what he was going on about was how frustrated he feels when he has to listen to women going on and on about topics he finds boring and unimportant’ (p. 76). Again, the story ends here. There is no comment on the fact that a man dominated all the women in the audience, including the speaker; no comment on her letting the man ‘conduct the discussion’ at the expense of the women present. These poor women learned the lesson over that they already know: who talks and who listens, who feels disappointed and frustrated, and who feels satisfied. Only this time they learned it from the expert, by her shining example.

If you leave out power, you do not understand any talk, be it the discussion after your speech, the conversation at your own dinner-table, in

a doctor's office, in the back yards of West Philadelphia, in an Italian village, on a street in Turkey, in a court room or in a day-care center, in a women's group or at a UN conference. It is like saying Black English and Oxford English are just two different varieties of English, each valid on its own; it just so happens that the speakers of one variety find themselves in high-paying positions with a lot of prestige and power of decision-making, and the others are found more in low-paying jobs, or on the streets and in prisons. They don't always understand each other, but they both have the best intentions; if they could only learn a bit from each other and understand their differences as a matter of style, all would be well.

I prefer an analysis that has more descriptive and explanatory adequacy—and also more passion, an analysis like that of Henley/Kramarae (1991: 20) that takes into consideration that 'Hierarchies determine whose version of the communication situation will prevail; whose speech style will be seen as normal; who will be required to learn the communication style, and interpret the meaning, of the other; whose language style will be seen as deviant, irrational, and inferior; and who will be required to imitate the other's style in order to fit into the society' (p. 20); or that views US culture as 'requiring (and teaching through popular magazines) females, not males, to learn to read the silence, lack of emotional expression, or brutality of the other sex as not only other than, but more benign than, it appears' (p. 23).

Tannen's book is such a product of US culture, quite comparable to popular magazines and teaching just that.

In my own research (Troemel-Ploetz, 1981, 1982) I have shown that the gender hierarchy is stronger than the hierarchy created by social status. Thus even when women have a high social status, i.e. when they have experience and expertise, age and high professional position, younger or less-qualified men often succeed in constructing a higher conversational status for themselves.

Tannen supplies us with several examples where her expertise is questioned by men who contradict, doubt or challenge her, but she seems to have no problem with these male attempts to construct a higher status for themselves. She takes such challenges as an invitation to show her expertise (p. 145), and presumably submits, just like she let herself and her women audience be dominated by a few men. Professional women, women in politics, the women doctors of West (1984), the judges and attorneys in reports on *Women in the Courts* (1984 to present), usually arrive at different interpretations in similar situations. They know that they are questioned more because they are women, and they are challenged in ways men would not be. They would laugh at Tannen's naïve suggestion that a man's challenge is 'a sign of respect and equal treatment' (pp. 128–9), or that they are 'misinterpreting challenges as personal attacks on their credibility' (p. 129). But significantly, professional women, working women, intellectual women hardly occur in Tannen's book. The women she describes do not even read the paper (pp. 80–2). The women she describes do not talk about politics or professional matters, but about 'who was at the bus stop,

who called, what they said, how they made them feel' (p. 80). Her women are the adjusting, begging, nagging, wailing women, who regularly eat the chicken back (p. 184), and keep complying, but who are, in spite of all their efforts, just not understood.

But take a woman judge who can insist on being understood in the courtroom. She still must construct her professional competence against male attempts to deconstruct it. Kathryn Stechert describes in *Sweet Success* (1986: 185) the efforts of a female justice of the peace to demonstrate power so she can use it. The judge does this by 'maintaining a sense of awe' in the courtroom, by a stern facial expression, by raising her voice at times, by being very cold. The judge says: 'I think of it as acting and it does have an effect on people'. Stechert concludes: 'with other accoutrements of power, the black robe, the gavel, and court room bench, that place her higher than the lawyers and litigants who come before her, she retains the power that goes with her position' (p. 185).

Or take a woman attorney, who depends on making herself understood and is competent to do so. In one of the reports of *Women in the Courts*, an attorney stated that when she came up to the bar in a child custody suit, the male judge asked her: 'Are you the child?' I wonder if Tannen would analyze this insult as the male judge's 'different habitual style' or as his 'creating an imbalance'. Telling the woman attorney that 'the real problem is conversational style', 'women and men have different ways of talking', 'men are handicapped by their style', or 'hurtful and unjustified misinterpretations can be avoided by understanding the conversational styles of the other gender' (p. 95) would not be very helpful in this situation.

Fortunately, some American lawyers believe more in the power of words than the linguist Deborah Tannen does. They would throw out immediately Tannen's wishy-washy explication: 'The culprit then is not an individual man or even men's styles alone, but the difference between women's and men's styles. If that is the case, then both can make adjustments' (p. 95). They would point out to Tannen that men do not voluntarily make adjustments and women should not have to. Feminist lawyers actually did something about the 'different ways of talking' men use in the courtroom and they *made* men change *their* way of talking. They found that it was quite systematic talk used by men, to and about women, to violate women's credibility and professionalism. They defined such talk as sexist, and have shown that sexist bias against women is damaging to women on all levels in the court system, as accused and as witnesses, as jurors and court personnel, as lawyers and secretaries and judges; it does not make for justice.

Whereas Tannen tries to explain away male insensitivity, many sensitive men have been taking a stand during the last ten years, looking critically at themselves and their colleagues. They have supported feminist lawyers, instituted task forces in one US state after the other to identify discriminatory verbal behavior in the courts; they have worked for change. Ironically, Tannen's understanding of the social and political function of language falls below what sensitive and reasonable men in high positions know,

without being linguists. To quote one of them, Robert N. Wilentz, Chief Justice of New Jersey:

'There's no room for gender bias in our system . . . there's no room for the funny joke and the not-so-funny joke, there's no room for conscious, inadvertent, sophisticated, clumsy, or any other kind of gender bias, and certainly no room for gender bias that affects substantive rights.

There's no room because it hurts and it insults. It hurts female lawyers psychologically and economically, litigants psychologically and economically, and witnesses, jurors, law clerks and judges who are women. It will not be tolerated in any form whatsoever. (The First Year Report of the New Jersey Supreme Court Task Force on *Women in the Courts*, June 1984)

I do not think this man will change his politics to a watered-down stance about men's different style of communication. I hope other self-critical and fair men will also refuse Tannen's thesis, recognizing it for what it aims at: the cementation of patriarchy.

Knowledge gained about discourse in the courtroom or in medical practice can easily be extended to private conversations, for what is going on in this arena is, after all, not that different. The repertoire of speech acts is quite the same; the construction of dominance and superiority is quite similar. The difference is that private talk among lovers or wife and husband *could* be symmetrical. Hierarchy in private relationships is not as formalized as in the court system. Private talk has a chance courtroom interaction, unless there is an enlightened judge, does not have. (How could the attorney who was called a child demand and construct symmetry?)

This is why Tannen's book is so depressing. In one example after the other she is trying to make the man's responses understandable, to explain his ignorance, his disinterest, selfishness or rudeness. She is telling women who have gained insight in the power politics of talk that men and women do not understand each other (without her explanation). She completely misses the point that conversations are constructed, that people don't 'fall into differences of their interactional habits' (p. 125) or 'find themselves arrayed in an asymmetrical alignment' (p. 125), but that we produce equality or inequality, symmetry or asymmetry in every conversation, only it is usually the more powerful who have the choice to give up some of their privileges and rights, and the less powerful who cannot just demand equality or symmetry and get it.

To tell professional women, who have worked for two decades in rape crisis centers, with domestic violence, in universities and state women's commissions with sexual harassment, defining it on a scale from verbal utterance to date rape or acquaintance rape, to tell women lawyers and doctors who have worked with sexual abuse of girls and baby girls at home by fathers and male relatives, that 'the real problem is conversational style' (p. 79) or 'misunderstandings arise because the styles are different' (p. 47), or 'that men have a different way of showing they care' (p. 298), is more than absurd. These women know that underlying the conversational poli-

tics and the body politics is the power politics of female–male relationships where men have social control of women and, if need be, recourse to violence. There are many other manifestations of the power relationship between the sexes, e.g. an analysis of women's and men's economics shows men earn 90 percent of the world income, own 99 percent of the world property, while doing only one-third of the world's work (UN Report of 1980—with the growing poverty of women also in the USA, these figures have probably changed for the worse in the last decade).

I hope Tannen's readers will see through her 'explanations', will not be kept at the naïve level of ignorance the author assigns them to. The chances are good, because many of the women readers are giving the book to their husbands to read (p. 85). A follow-up study showing that all husbands now put down their paper at breakfast and talk, talk, talk empathically will (against all of Tannen's predictions) not be forthcoming.

I hope Tannen's readers will not stay in their place. I hope they will see through the patterns of domination in their exchanges with men. I hope they will see that *their* understanding the masculine style does not help them (p. 123) and that nothing changes if men just *understand* female style without valuing it as more humane and changing their style to become more empathic and caring. I hope they test Tannen's claim of the good intentions in males and insist on symmetry—if they are listening supportively to a man's problem, they should get the same, if they are freely giving information, they should get it just as freely, if they are open, their partner should also open up. I hope they know that the 'hope for the future' (p. 148) does not lie in *their* changing their style, but in men being less dominant, and learning from women.

This book trivializes our experience of injustice and of conversational dominance; it disguises power differences; it conceals who has to adjust; it veils differences again and again and equalizes with a leveling mania any distinction in how we experience women and men.

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