

## **"Can't We Talk?" (condensed from: You Just Don't Understand) by Deborah Tannen**

A married couple was in a car when the wife turned to her husband and asked, "Would you like to stop for a coffee?"

"No, thanks," he answered truthfully. So they didn't stop.

The result? The wife, who had indeed wanted to stop, became annoyed because she felt her preference had not been considered. The husband, seeing his wife was angry, became frustrated. Why didn't she just say what she wanted?

Unfortunately, he failed to see that his wife was asking the question not to get an instant decision, but to begin a negotiation. And the woman didn't realize that when her husband said no, he was just expressing his preference, not making a ruling. When a man and woman interpret the same interchange in such conflicting ways, it's no wonder they can find themselves leveling angry charges of selfishness and obstinacy at each other.

As a specialist in linguistics, I have studied how the conversational styles of men and women differ. We cannot lump all men or all women into fixed categories. But the seemingly senseless misunderstandings that haunt our relationships can in part be explained by the different conversational rules by which men and women play.

Whenever I write or speak about this subject, people tell me they are relieved to learn that what has caused them trouble - and what they had previously ascribed to personal failings - is, in fact, very common.

Learning about the different though equally valid conversational frequencies men and women are tuned to can help banish the blame and help us truly talk to one another. Here are some of the most common areas of conflict:

### **Status vs. Support.**

Men grow up in a world in which a conversation is often a contest, either to achieve the upper hand or to prevent other people from pushing them around. For women, however, talking is often a way to exchange confirmation and support.

I saw this when my husband and I had jobs in different cities. People frequently made comments like, "That must be rough," and "How do you stand it?" I accepted their sympathy and sometimes even reinforced it, saying, "The worst part is having to pack and unpack all the time."

But my husband often reacted with irritation. Our situation had advantages, he would explain. As academics, we had four-day weekends together, as well as long vacations throughout the year and four months in the summer.

Everything he said was true, but I didn't understand why he chose to say it. He told me that some of the comments implied: "Yours is not a real marriage. I am superior to you because my wife and I

have avoided your misfortune." Until then it had not occurred to me there might be an element of one-upmanship.

I now see that my husband was simply approaching the world as many men do: as a place where people try to achieve and maintain status. I, on the other hand, was approaching the world as many women do: as a network of connections seeking support and consensus.

### **Independence vs. Intimacy.**

Since women often think in terms of closeness and support, they struggle to preserve intimacy. Men, concerned with status, tend to focus more on independence. These traits can lead women and men to starkly different views of the same situation.

When Josh's old high-school friend called him at work to say he'd be in town, Josh invited him to stay for the weekend. That evening he told Linda they were having a house guest.

Linda was upset. How could Josh make these plans without discussing them with her beforehand? She would never do that to him. "Why don't you tell your friend you have to check with your wife?" she asked.

Josh replied, "I can't tell my friend, I have to ask my wife for permission!"

To Josh, checking with his wife would mean he was not free to act on his own. It would make him feel like a child or an underling. But Linda actually enjoys telling someone, "I have to check with Josh." It makes her feel good to show that her life is intertwined with her husband's.

### **Advice vs. Understanding.**

Eve had a benign lump removed from her breast. When she confided to her husband, Mark, that she was distressed because the stitches changed the contour of her breast, he answered, "You can always have plastic surgery."

This comment bothered her. "I'm sorry you don't like the way it looks," she protested. "But I'm not having any more surgery!"

Mark was hurt and puzzled. "I don't care about a scar," he replied. "It doesn't bother me at all."

"Then why are you telling me to have plastic surgery?" she asked.

"Because you were upset about the way it looks."

Eve felt like a heel. Mark had been wonderfully supportive throughout her surgery. How could she snap at him now?

The problem stemmed from a difference in approach. To many men a complaint is a challenge to come up with a solution. Mark thought he was reassuring Eve by telling her there was something she could do about her scar. But often women are looking for emotional support, not solutions.

When my mother tells my father she doesn't feel well, he invariably offers to take her to the doctor. Invariably, she is disappointed with his reaction. Like many men, he is focused on what he can do, whereas she wants sympathy.

### **Information vs. Feelings.**

A cartoon shows a husband opening a newspaper and asking his wife, "Is there anything you'd like to say to me before I start reading the paper?" We know there isn't - but that as soon as the man begins reading, his wife will think of something.

The cartoon is funny because people recognize their own experience in it. What's not funny is that many women are hurt when men don't talk to them at home, and many men are frustrated when they disappoint their partners without knowing why.

Rebecca, who is happily married, told me this is a source of dissatisfaction with her husband, Stuart. When she tells him what she is thinking, he listens silently. When she asks him what is on his mind, he says, "Nothing."

All Rebecca's life she has had practice in verbalizing her feelings with friends and relatives. But Stuart has had practice in keeping his innermost thoughts to himself. To him, like most men, talk is information. He doesn't feel that talk is required at home.

Yet many such men hold center stage in a social setting, telling jokes and stories. They use conversation to claim attention and to entertain. Women can wind up hurt that their husbands tell relative strangers things they have not told them.

To avoid this kind of misunderstanding, both men and women can make adjustments. A woman may observe a man's desire to read the paper without seeing it is a rejection. And a man can understand a woman's desire to talk without feeling it is a manipulative intrusion.

### **Orders vs. Proposals.**

Diana often begins statements with "Let's." She might say "Let's park over there" or "Let's clean up now, before lunch."

This makes Nathan angry. He has deciphered Diana's "Let's" as a command. Like most men, he resists being told what to do. But to Diana, she is making suggestions, not demands. Like most women, she formulates her requests as proposals rather than orders. Her style of talking is a way of getting others to do what she wants - but by winning agreement first.

With certain men, like Nathan, this tactic backfires. If they perceive someone is trying to get them to do something indirectly, they feel manipulated and respond more resentfully than they would to a straightforward request.

### **Conflict vs. Compromise.**

In trying to prevent fights, some women refuse to oppose the will of others openly. But sometimes it's far more effective for a woman to assert herself, even at the risk of conflict.

Dora was frustrated by a series of used cars she drove. It was she who commuted to work, but her husband, Hank, who chose the cars. Hank always went for cars that were "interesting" but in continual need of repair.

After Dora was nearly killed when her brakes failed, they were in the market for yet another used car. Dora wanted to buy a late-model sedan from a friend. Hank fixed his sights on a 15-year-old sports car. She tried to persuade Hank that it made more sense to buy the boring but dependable car, but he would not be swayed.

Previously she would have acceded to his wishes. This time Dora bought the boring but dependable car and steeled herself for Hank's anger. To her amazement, he spoke not a word of remonstrance. When she later told him what she had expected, he scoffed at her fears and said she should have done what she wanted from the start if she felt that strongly about it.

As Dora discovered, a little conflict won't kill you. At the same time, men who habitually oppose others can adjust their style to opt for less confrontation.

When we don't see style differences for what they are, we sometimes draw unfair conclusions: "You're illogical," "You're self-centered," "You don't care about me." But once we grasp the two characteristic approaches, we stand a better chance of preventing disagreements from spiraling out of control.

Learning the other's ways of talking is a leap across the communication gap between men and women, and a giant step towards genuine understanding.