CONVERSATION is Henri Matisse’s title for a painting completed about 1909, in the fortieth year of the artist’s long life. Matisse wrote that this work is a study in the color blue, but it is also a study in gendering talk.

The pictured figures face one another: The artist himself stands in pajamas, and a woman, presumably his wife, sits across a window from him. The interior of their room is monochrome dark blue, a deep, rich, depressed color that contrasts with the bright colors visible through the window. Matisse frequently included colorful windows in his paintings. In this painting the bright window separates the deadpan spouses.

This is a picture of a prosperous midlife marriage. This woman and man remain in their sleeping clothes when the riot of color in the window between them suggests that the sun is well up in the sky. Yet these partners do not look out the window. They look straight, unblinkingly, at one another, opposing each other across the window. The man stands upright in straight, stark stripes of blue and white. The seated woman appears as rounded dark curves. Her eyes and forehead bear a dark smudge. Her right hand is visible; his is in his pocket.

The figures face each other eyeball to eyeball across the bright window. Perhaps the window grillwork connecting the estranged bodies of husband and wife spells the French word non, but probably that is a forced interpretation. Still, the painting does reflect opposition, a contest of wills such as occurs with an accusation or an unwelcome announcement. At such a problematic moment partners seek explanations for their stiff, careful discomfort: “Here we go again.”

At couple crises, gender is particularly available to explain problems. How and why we gender the talk in our lives, a topic in Matisse’s painting, is also the subject of the book you are now beginning to read.

Matisse sold Conversation to a rich Russian ninety years ago. My parents were babies then, cars and radios were novelties. The wiring of telephones and electronic lights was in its first generation. That time may now be seen as the cradle of modern consciousness, yet the painting was created before two world wars, the Holocaust, television, the Soviet Union, rock music, the baby boom, LSD, or the silicon chip. Still somehow this painting continues to ring true today. It points to our implicitly gendered conversation performances. We are still going about gendering talk.

Gendering talk is a phrase with two meanings. It refers to certain features in talk that are strongly saturated with gender, for example, my use of the word “woman” to describe a character in Matisse’s painting. The sense that some talk seems more gendered than other talk is communicated by emphasis on my title’s first word—gendering talk. To use the word “woman” is to infuse gender into the human conversation. Such gendering action may be implicit or subliminal. To say “woman” is not necessarily to think about gender. Gendering talk creates social problems because there are so many ways that gender creeps into talk, and we employ them so often.

A second sense of this phrase, pronounced gendering talk, refers to the ongoing, taken-for-granted project to gender the world of social experience. Talk is not the only thing we gender: We also gender clothing, jewelry, room decor, career paths, public restrooms, household chores, and above all, sexuality. Yet gendering talk binds together our many disparate social senses of sex difference, sexuality, and stereotype. The consequence is a world in which the difference between men and women is taken for granted, as is sexual pair-bonding, as is a mythical battle between the sexes which from time to time propels us into these stymied conversations with a member of the opposite sex.

Why do we say opposite sex? Well, it is argued, men and women are quite different from one another, and this difference leads women and men to communicate differently—to speak different languages—and hence to misunderstand each other. Men and women face each other numbly and grimly before the world’s colorful window. “You just don’t understand,” each of us
rails at the opposite other. The prototype case, the person who understands us least, is a spouse at midlife. How can this be? Did God Almighty invent marriage to introduce me to one person completely different from me?

I wrote *Gendering Talk* after many years of married conversation with Kay, to whom I gratefully dedicate this book. At certain problematic moments, Kay has seemed to represent much that differs from me. The marriage conversation manufactures a special kind of social lens, a fun house mirror that stretches the notion of sex differences. Writers of self-help books about male-female differences concentrate on examples of conversations between members of midlife married couples. Many of these authors, John Gray and Deborah Tannen, for instance, write at length of their own frustrations in married midlife—the age of Dante when he became lost in the woods, the age of Matisse when he painted *Conversation*.\(^1\) Midlife marriage makes a prototype case that men and women act differently. Even Matisse’s title, *Conversation*, suggests that the painting takes up a topic more general than a certain conversational moment at midlife marriage. The title suggests that experiences in marriage can be taken as indicators of communicative problems—gender troubles that evolve out of gender differences.

Marriage partners affect not only each other but also their societies. Parents teach to children their own special preoccupation with sex differences, mostly by example. This social preoccupation is present to some degree at every age of the life cycle. This week (in early 1998) Kay and I eagerly await sonogram evidence of the sex of our unborn first grandchild. Of any expected or recently born child we ask, “What is it?” which means, “Is it a boy or a girl?” Friends and relatives ask this question to know what color gift to buy and how to greet the child. To a boy child I may say, “Hey slugger,” delivered deadpan from deep in the throat and accompanied by a tummy tickle. To a girl child it is more likely I will say, “Hello sweetheart” in a high pitch and accompanied by a gentle knuckle dimpling the cheek.

The belief in sex differences is elaborated and buttressed by myths of romantic love between a man and a woman—myths that frame many adolescent struggles. Any understanding of gendering talk must take this mythology as a central social fact. I discovered the importance of talk during adolescence by noticing my conversational failures at early courtship. This discovery of conversation led quite directly (if accidentally) to my life’s vocation:
thirty years as a college teacher of speech communication. I have taught more 
than fifty semester courses about speech and gender to students at the 
University of Texas at Austin. During this time, I have launched a dozen scholarly 
attends to describe the communicative differences between men and 
women. Each of these attempts has failed.

As a social scientist I have slowly and grudgingly become convinced 
that men and women are more alike than different and that our experience 
of male-female differences is an artful, cultural construction, a trick of the ear, 
something we all believe in, regardless of the facts. As a member of our cul-
ture I believe in sex differences, too. However, in comparative studies I have 
failed to unearth substantial male-female speech differences. I conclude that 
women and men do not actually talk so differently from one another. Rather, 
men and women listen and talk similarly: We all listen to women differently 
than we listen to men. Sometimes we talk differently to a woman than to a 
man. We all talk differently about men than about women. We all talk dif-
fently to a sexual partner than to anyone else (whatever our sexual pre-
ference). We make gender in the social world by practices of gendering talk.

Many writers suggest that gender troubles result only from male-female 
differences. John Gray has sold millions of books claiming that men and 
women are so different from one another as to hail from different planets. 
Others suggest that patriarchal traditions divide males and females, as well as 
members of different races and social classes. Yet such generalizations do not 
help us much unless we describe, in detail, how ordinary people commu-
icate to make gender salient to any particular moment.

Men and women are not from separate planets; instead, we are co-
performers of gender in the social planet we all inhabit. Let us listen carefully 
to each other, with that special attention we might lavish upon poetry being 
read aloud. Let us not be so sure what the problem is. The problem has many 
parts and a long history.


Gender hangs around us like a communicative albatross. We slouch toward 
possible male-female political equality, while at the same time we fear that 
communication between the sexes is biased and troublesome. We struggle to 
communicate with intimate others. Sometimes we believe the problems stem
from communicating with a differently gendered other. We worry about sex discrimination in employment and discrimination against those of unpopular sexual orientation. We worry about sexual harassment and sexual violence. Sometimes we fret about the political correctness of gendered language.

Whatever our politics on matters of gender—feminist, traditionalist, or gay rights activist—each of us routinely encounters gender in everyday social interaction. Naming practices illustrate how often gender is marked in talk. We gender the names for occupations from priest to president. We gender most of our personal given names (Tom, Sallie). We gender our terms for intimate relationships (mother, son, girlfriend).

Most humans believe that males and females are pretty different, but our theories about gender remain a patchwork of partially contradictory folklore and inconclusive research. In our confusion we follow different standards of sexual politics within different settings. In matters of public professions, Western laws and customs increasingly ask us to turn a blind eye to sex and gender. However, in matters of sociality and intimacy, *vive la différence!* Many of us attempt to enact egalitarian scripts in our careers, yet abandon notions of sexual equality or similarity when we pair up to dance, flirt, or start a family.

We may momentarily forget gender, only to find that it crops up unexpectedly, like a neighborhood dice game, to affect a plan or to transform a social setting. "We have been engendered," writes social historian Donna Haraway. This wording suggests that being infused with gender is something that has happened to us. Yet who are the actors in this gendering? Gendered scenes and actions always happen here and now. However, gendering talk unfolds so obviously, so smoothly, that we seldom even notice our own actions.

Even our understandings of communication itself are gendered. We hold two partial understandings of how communication works: monologue and dialogue. We associate those notions with myths about masculine and feminine talk.

In a monologue view, communication is the travel of information from a source to a recipient. The monologue view, which grows from the study of writing, characterizes precise achievements of command and control, grammar, computer programming, and scientific reports. Effective monologue is
accurate (high-fidelity) communication, in which an information source expresses a clear meaning that a recipient understands as accurately as possible. Communication problems occur when message flow is distorted or stopped or when sender and receiver differ in code.

Monologue is associated with masculine gender, getting the right answer, and dominance. Monologue is the primary understanding most educated people hold about communication. In this view gender troubles are consequences of male-female speech differences.

A dialogue understanding of interpersonal communication is difficult to formulate in (monologic) writing. Effective dialogue occurs over time, through interaction of more than one participant, in listening with care, in keeping the conversation going, in opening possibilities, in letting more than one speaker contribute to the direction of events, and in building community.

Consider the first moments of a telephone conversation: "Hello," "Hi Pat," "How are you," and the like. These utterances show modest content but are saturated with the dialogic demands of relationship and culture. The telephone opening sets implicit ground rules for more content-laden talk that follows. Therefore, the telephone opening is a very important phase of an encounter, even though it has little content. Dialogue carries the stream of consciousness; dialogue works the amorphous gel of both cultures and human relationships. The concept of social interaction as dialogue within a network of relationships is associated with feminine gender.

Monologue views of gender trouble in talk emphasize male-female differences that distort clarity; dialogue hearings emphasize that men and women are all in the same boat, trying to solve problems. In monologue each individual speaker should be assertive and clear in each speaking turn. Effective dialogue entails each speaker listening carefully and responding appropriately within evolving goals and outcomes.

In a monologue view, men's and women's different language patterns create puzzles akin to intercultural communication. The sexes are doomed to gendered separateness unless we become facile translators or unless men's and women's languages converge. In a dialogue hearing, we may be unable to calculate either the extent of male-female language differences or their importance. We can, however, engage optimistically in the communicative tasks of mutual understanding, support, intimacy, and politics.
These two notions, monologue and dialogue, must be repeatedly sharpened on each other. Neither notion by itself explains human speech. An effective communicator must be able to operate in both monologue and dialogue modes. I lean toward dialogic explanation, in part to balance the dominance of monologue in the history of thought. Yet I also question the gendered stereotyping of monologue and dialogue and try to uncouple this dichotomy of communication forms from oversimplified assignment to gendered categories.

This book is a series of sketches describing how we mark gender in talk, how we cause gender troubles, and how we conceptualize these troubles in talk about male-female differences. Chapter 2 considers gender as social performance. Chapters 3 to 6 take up gendering talk in the formation and development of pair-bond sexual relationships, especially these intertwined issues:

- Flirting
- Sexual violence
- Couple formation

Flirting and sexual violence are kissing cousins out of which couples (and eventually families) form and which emphasize the performance of male-female difference within each sexual couple. Therefore, these performances of sexual coupling are important carriers of the belief that men and women differ.

Speakers also support beliefs in gender differences within the tiny details of everyday talk—not just the talk between women and men but all social interaction. This everyday performance of gender differentiation is the topic of chapters 7 to 9.

- How we talk about women and about men
- Male/female differences in speech style

The discussion of male-female language differences appears rather late in the book, partly because those issues remain unresolved but also largely because
earlier chapters explain phenomena that are commonly chalked up to male-female differences.

It is necessary to examine all of these varying issues about gender in talk in order to make progress with any of them. Many writers explore only a single manifestation of gender trouble: sexist language, sex differences in talk, powerless language, sexual violence, courtship customs, family communication patterns, or employment discrimination. I have often struggled to keep such issues distinct from one another—only to discover that, in lived experience, they mush together again. Although I treat these issues in separate chapters here, there are numerous cross-references between chapters, and the analysis grows more comprehensive as each topic is added to the mix. The book concludes with three chapters that put these varied issues back together and offer some perspective on our gendered futures.

One limitation of the present volume must be admitted at the outset. I have been limited by my own experiences and education to writing about conversation practices of North American, middle-class, Anglo heterosexuals. I welcome amendments and contrastive studies that include other social classes, ethnicities, and sexual preferences.

The focus in this book is everyday talk, the primary carrier of gendered practices. The approach is to study details of speech patterns in everyday life and in popular culture. Most of the analyses to follow are based on examples of communication events. Naturally occurring speech events that have been audio or video recorded provide the best evidence of how we talk. These examples have been transcribed to show details of timing and emphasis. Here is an example used in chapter 2 to illustrate sexual innuendo. (The colons in midword indicate that the speaker stretches out a sound. See the list of transcript symbols at the front of the book.)

[1] UTCL D8:2 (Phone call)

Cara: You queer: what’re you doin

(.) ✶ (a pause)

Rick: Uh: I dunno what’re you doin you queer bait

Almost as useful as tape-recorded talk is that gathered as field notes, or written records of speech events made from memory soon after an event. About
half of these field notes I recorded myself. The balance were recorded by undergraduate and graduate students completing a course in speech and gender. Here is one student’s field note showing sexual innuendo:

[2] Field note (at work in restaurant)
Shelly: Hey Derrick, can I have a bun?
Derrick: Do you want the left or the right?

Field notes make it possible to record personal or sexual talk that might not turn up in electronic recordings. In addition to these records of natural speech, I also use dialogue examples from fiction, especially films. In example [3] a rich man reacts with disbelief when a hooker says her rate is one hundred dollars an hour. She counters with sexual innuendo:

[3] Film: Pretty Woman
He: Hundred dollars an hour (. ) pretty stiff
     (While he is driving, she puts one hand in his lap)
She: No, no:. But it’s got potential.

Of course, a film is not life, and therefore I advance no argument supported only by fictional examples. (I use fictional examples, mostly from films, as samples of everyday talk. I do not intend to analyze mass media content or public politics.) Occasionally, I also employ less reliable forms of evidence, such as self-reports, interview data, or hypothetical examples. These examples lose the sense of dialogue, and one should be suspicious of descriptions based only on these kinds of evidence. In this book I risk mixing all these kinds of examples to make this treatment comprehensive. For example, the analysis of flirting (chapter 3) relies on film examples but confirms the analyses in examples from naturally occurring talk and field notes.

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We perform gender in talk. We make, in everyday interaction, the differences that seem to gender our lives. In addition to this, men and women may also speak differently. Evidence remains sketchy on this point, and I cannot firmly
deny this possibility. Even if this is so, however, our task is to understand the interactive gendering talk that misleads us into thinking that difference is our only problem. If we learn to understand the range and variety of gendering talk, we might yet discover that women and men inhabit a single, slowly improving planet.