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How Men and Women Talk

In Disney's film The Little Mermaid, Ariel strikes a questionable bargain with Ursula, the sea-witch. Ariel bargains for legs, and with these a chance to become human. The mermaid wants to become human to get her man. The deal is that Ariel can stay in human form if she wins from her man a kiss of true love. The price that Ariel must pay in order to get legs is to give up her voice. Ursula the sea-witch is rather flip as she insists on this part of the bargain. She claims that men do not like women who talk anyhow. “True gentlemen avoid ‘em, when they can. . . . It’s she who holds her tongue, who gets her man.” Ursula offers Ariel the feminine Faustian bargain—to gain success in romance she must mute her voice.¹

To be muted is to be quieted. A musical mute is a device that is put in the throat of a trumpet to make it sound soft and whiny. Are there social pressures to systematically soften or silence women's speaking? A woman's place includes a number of nonspeaking roles, and roles where her prescribed voice is soft and whiny. Does getting a man entail muting a woman?²

If you get your man, do you lose your voice?

One feminist charge is that marriage is an institution designed by men and systematically unfair to women. Certainly it has proven a theme in this book that marital communication bears much of the responsibility for the perception that men are very different from women in communication style.

The muting of women also shows in the history of public speaking. Few women orators are represented in anthologies of famous speeches. This is no coincidence. In the most civilized places on earth, women have rarely been allowed to assume the public podium. In American history, women won
limited public voice during anti-slavery and women's suffrage movements. Yet even today there are very few women orators and politicians. Women are less likely than men to develop a public voice. Given many centuries in which males prevented women from speaking in public, such shyness of the limelight may have become a stable feature of feminine culture. There is evidence that women avoid public speaking opportunities even now.³

There is also evidence that men speak more than women, not only in public but in all settings. Deborah James and Janice Drakich examined fifty-six studies of the amount of talk by males and females. Twenty-four of these studies were of formal task activities.

Of these twenty-four studies thirteen found men to talk more than women overall, and three found men to talk more in certain circumstances. . . . Only one study found that women talk more than men overall.⁴

These differences could be due to men's positions of status or power in formal organizations. Of sixteen studies examining amount of talk in non-task male-female dyads five found males to talk more than females overall, one found men talk more in certain circumstances, nine found no difference, and one found that women talk more.⁵

It seems likely that stereotypes about talkative women are based on a background expectation that women should talk very little, rather than on empirical evidence about female loquacity.

**DO MEN INTERRUPT WOMEN?**

Many investigators have studied whether women's speech is muted through the hypothesis that men interrupt women. "Interruption is an intrusion, a trampling on someone else's right to the floor, an attempt to dominate."⁶ This hypothesis rings true to experience, but it is difficult to prove in concrete terms because interruption is a slippery discourse concept. To understand the difficulties let us begin with one example of an interruption from a student's experience. Mom, a professional health researcher, is teaching her daughter some biology when her husband breaks in:
Mom has started a "when" clause, which projects a second clause to complete the utterance-unit. Dad breaks in to add a scientific detail, and his breaking in prevents the completion of Mom's utterance. The fieldworker wrote:

It really, really made her mad. And the thing about dominance is that my mother has worked under my father for years, then they split up professionally. They're still married, but they no longer work together and my mother has been fighting tooth and nail to get out from under the shadow of my dad. And to stop helping him.

This man's interrupting of his wife seems to reflect power relations in their professional world—as well as their family world, and this particular interruption did some harm. Yet just what speech characteristics make this interruption interruptive? Well, one speaker (Mom) is not finished talking, when another (Dad) takes the floor. How do we find a rigorous definition to describe a large number of such instances? That is a difficult question that has perplexed dozens of researchers.

Interruption seems to be a concept about messages, but it labels enormously diverse examples. Also, one rarely applies to oneself the term interruption. Sometimes one might say "I'm sorry I interrupted you," but mostly one says, "You interrupted me," or "He interrupted her." Interruption is usually seen as a bad thing done more or less intentionally by someone else to dominate or ignore a previous speaker. Interruption, then, is not a concrete specific speech feature, but rather a broad interpretive category that sounds more specific than it is.7

Ignoring this complexity, dozens of researchers have completed studies of interruptions that have characteristics missing in the example given previously. (See figure 2.)

The definitions of interrupting vary from study to study. Still:
FIGURE 2. TECHNICAL GUIDE TO INTERRUPTION STUDIES

Three sets of criteria have evolved for characterizing instances of interruptions, though few studies employ all three.

Speech overlap. Two classic studies by West and Zimmerman tabulate only interruptions in which there is speech overlap—the second (interrupting) speaker begins to talk while the first speaker is still speaking. You can diagram a speech overlap in transcription format like this:

A: xxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx [ xxxxxxx
B: [ xxx xxx xxx xxx

West and Zimmerman assume that when a speaker begins a turn unit, he or she is entitled to complete it. Therefore, if a next speaker overlaps a prior speaker’s turn-in-progress—as indicated by the schematic above—then this may be considered a micropolitical overpowering of the other. Therefore, West and Zimmerman would not tabulate the instance in the story about antibodies, even though the second utterance seems interruptive of an utterance, because the instance does not include any overlap.9

However, West and Zimmerman do not count all overlaps as interruptive, but only “deep overlaps,” those at least two syllables from a turn-unit boundary. For example, they would not count this instance because Carol’s utterance could be heard as complete at the word “nine.”

[2] UTCL D8.2
Cara: Should be around nine [or so
Rick: [Well do you have an extra bed in your uh (.)
place?

This overlap occurs right at a transition-relevance place, and therefore Rick’s starting up in overlap with the two final syllables of Cara’s prior utterance is not really interruptive but an instance of “normal overlap.” Normal overlap is rarely noticed or found to be a power issue. Yet it can be.
Facilitation. An interruption is not facilitative. The overlap cannot be just to say "Yeah," or "Uh huh," or to say the same thing as the other person. If you say "yeah," you are not trying to dominate the other person, but support him or her.

[3] UTCL J10.1

Kay: ... You can [write requisitions
Ed: [Yeah [Right

Ed's overlaps in this instance do not override or contradict Kay's point. Ed offers something additional and facilitative, not interruptive. Tannen distinguishes supportive and nonsupportive interruptions, and argues that women do the former, and men the latter. "Whereas women's cooperative overlaps frequently annoy men by seeming to co-opt their topic, men frequently annoy women by usurping or switching the topic."10

Successful vs. unsuccessful interruption. The overlapping candidate-interruption drives another person from the floor in midturn. It makes a difference whether the prior speaker drops out before completing a turn unit, or apparently completes a turn unit, as in this example:

[4] UTCL F1.7

D: ... I don't know mother lemme check my calendar I don't know what I'm gonna [be doing
M: [I need two more people to do phoning for Phil Gramm.

To summarize: even with these three criteria for distinguishing interruptions—criteria that require the critic to overlook many instances that participants may feel are interruptive—it still is not always clear which way to classify an example. Interruption is really a folk category, not a clear linguistic concept. Different studies count it differently. Furthermore, counting interruptions misses much of the phenomenon of interrupting—which often unfolds across many speaking turns.
Of twenty-one studies which have compared the number of interruptions initiated by females and by males in dyadic interaction, only six . . . have found men to interrupt women more than the reverse. Thirteen studies have found no significant difference between the sexes . . . And two have found women to interrupt men more.¹¹

To summarize: The hypothesis that men interrupt women has not been proven—though it may well be true. It is not a simple matter to decide when interrupting is taking place. These difficulties in studying interruptions should make us cautious as we approach the issue of male-female speech differences related to social power.

**Studios of Female-Male Speech Differences**

In two and a half decades since Robin Lakoff put into modern linguistic dress the notion that men and women speak different dialects of English, scholars have repeatedly searched for speech differences between the sexes. These claims carry a difficult burden of proof. In previous chapters of this volume, I argued based upon examples that—for instance—certain language features emphasize men over women. However, if one argues that men and women talk differently, the standard of proof shifts from certain features in particular examples to the claim that all (or most) talk by men is different from all (or most) talk by women.

For instance, to test the claim that men speak more than women (thereby showing and maintaining micropolitical dominance) one must find a way to tally speech features to document this general pattern within a large and carefully chosen sample of talk. In spite of these difficulties, many investigators have rushed to the argument that men and women speak differently—probably because the notion of male-female speech differences seems so plausible.

Several scholars claim that women’s speech contains powerless features that mitigate each woman’s social power. Despite the widespread appeal of this thesis, it has been supported and refuted by equal numbers of studies.

Clearly, most speakers believe men’s speech to be different from women’s. That belief, along with ways we talk about women and perform sexuality, sustains
our perceptions of genderlects. Numerous studies in the 1970s described features alleged—or reported to distinguish men’s and women’s speech.\textsuperscript{12}

- **Quantity of talk.** Men are reported to talk more than women, in male-female interaction at least; and men interrupt women. This constitutes micropolitical domination of the floor.
- **Questions.** Women are reported to ask more questions than men, especially tag questions and questions that are grammatical statements except for rising terminal pitch. Men say: “Dinner at six.” Women say: “Dinner at six, all right?” or “Dinner at six?” The women’s forms give the recipient more options; the men’s forms limit the others’ options.
- **Qualifiers.** Women are reported to clutter their speech with qualifying particles and disclaimers, thereby hedging the force of utterances. Men say: “I’m against the tax reform bill.” Women say: “I’m no expert, but I think I’m sort of against the tax bill.”
- **Politeness.** Women’s speech is reported to be polite and supportive, carrying the burden of keeping interaction going. Men’s speech is blunt, self-assertive, and political. Women say “uh huh,” and follow up on men’s topics, but this is not reciprocated.\textsuperscript{13}

Genderlect sociolinguists is the 1970s claimed to have discovered in gender a new source of dialect variation. These researchers argued that women’s use of these features contributes to their own political victimization. The most-recommended short-term solution to such problems is for women to take assertiveness training—even though there has been limited evidence that women are less assertive than men.\textsuperscript{14}

Most of these early genderlect studies used self-report data, and written rather than spoken stimuli. Some researchers were discerning enough to describe such work as studying folklinguistics, or how people believe men and women speak. Other writers confused stereotypes with evidence. Most English speakers do report their belief that men and women use different language patterns. However, evidence taken from tape recordings of natural talk rarely confirms that men and women speak distinct dialects.\textsuperscript{15}

To the extent that actual male-female speech differences exist, these differences show only weak association with power. Men, for instance, may
actually use more nonstandard pronunciation or grammar, and have smaller vocabularies and lower voices than women. These differences are widely believed in, but few researchers have examined them rigorously because they seem remote from the issues of male dominance that fuel the research.

The sex dialects literature evolved into the powerless speech literature during the 1980s. Researchers did not find that women use hedges, question forms, or polite speech. Instead, they found that persons holding little power use these features: inexperienced court witnesses, unemployed persons, assembly line workers, uneducated persons. If women use these features more, this reflects social position more than gender. It is not too surprising that there are more powerless women than men; but powerless men use the same features. The features do not seem to be specifically gendered.

Powerless speech hypotheses improve upon stereotype-based positions because they may be tested in details from actual speech samples. These studies also emphasize that women sound powerless because gendered social practices keep them in subordinate positions.

One problem with most genderlect research is that it remains insensitive to the addressee in coproducing discourse. Linguist Dede Brouwer, who studied ticket purchasing at a Dutch railway station, argues that we may be “on the wrong track” if we look only for male-female differences in speech patterns. Her studies actually showed more message variation associated with sex of addressee than with sex of speaker—especially in use of politeness markers such as “please,” or in use of modal auxiliaries (e.g., could, should).

Certain features of most utterances change with different recipients. This insight broadens the genderlect issue by suggesting that speech pattern should be studied not just as a characteristic of female speakers, but as stuff that emerges within three sex-relevant dyads: male-male, female-male, and male-female. Larger groups of speaker-listeners create added complications.

There also may be connections between the recipient’s role in genderlects and certain speech evaluation research, which communication researcher Anthony Mulac has labeled a gender-linked language effect. This effect emerges in contrasts in ratings of male and female language samples. Most of these samples come from monolog situations, and in most studies the samples are rated in written form only. Raters cannot tell male from female samples, but somehow various projective ratings do distinguish male from female
monologs. Males and females are rated differently in esthetic quality (females higher) and in dynamism (males higher). In some studies, women's speech is rated higher in status, which runs somewhat counter to language and power theories. Mulac also argues that, although no single feature distinguishes male from female speech patterns in his stimulus material, a statistical combination of over a dozen features does allow such predictability. Mulac argues that this combination of findings shows clear, if subtle, male-female speech differences that lead to differing evaluations. Yet perhaps his ingenious set of studies shows something less than this: When raters make evaluative decisions about writing, they may utilize gender stereotypes in this task.

One speech evaluation study used matched guise procedures to distinguish evaluative consequences of female speech features (sex-dialect hypothesis) from the evaluative consequences of attributing speech to a female (stereotype hypothesis). Results slightly favored the latter hypothesis—that identifying a speaker as female leads to rating speech as attractive, and identifying a speaker as male leads to evaluating the speech as dynamic.

These diverse approaches suggest the need to study the impact of speaker sex on speech features in a way that allows us to compare it with sex of addressee. May we compare what the same person would say when speaking to a male and when speaking to a female? May we, conversely, compare how similarly male and female speakers speak to one and the same addressee? May we compare these against other variables, such as social status?

A Study of Language, Power, and Gender

We did such a study of tape-recorded telephone calls to a healthcare information service. Callers were half men and half women. Therefore, these materials included recordings of (female) information specialists talking to men and talking to women in very similar circumstances (allowing us to ask how speakers adapt to sex of addressee). This same sample revealed male and female callers talking to the same addressee (the information specialist), allowing tests of hypotheses about speaker sex.

Further, we compared callers' speech to that of the information specialists, who hold information power and are experienced in this speech event. We calculated quantitative measures associated with each of three
independent variables: sex of speaker, sex of addressee, and speaker power.

Dependent variables included four sets of language features: quantity of speech, questions, qualifiers, and indicators of politeness. Some specifics on these measures:

- **Quantity**—We compared the number of syllables spoken by each partner. We also tabulated deep interruptions as a ratio of successful interruptions over total interruption attempts.
- **Questions**—We tabulated questions, separating tag questions and all other questions.
- **Qualifiers**—We distinguished qualifiers that shield the speaker's state of uncertainty (e.g., I think, I'm not sure) from those that approximate speech content (e.g., maybe, sort of).²³
- **Politeness**—We tabulated these indicators of politeness: salutations by name or title, expressions of gratitude, modal auxiliaries (e.g., might, could), the particle “uh huh,” and praise.²⁴ Table 9.1 shows the number of instances of each speech feature—according to speaker, addressee and role (information power).

To summarize table 2: The role difference between callers and information specialists was associated with more contrasts than either notion of genderlect—connected with speaker or connected with addressee. Some of the apparent gender differences (e.g., males say “uh huh”), appear to contradict the findings predicted in the powerless speech literature. A tabular summary shows that genderlect variations pale before power as a predictor of speech variation.

- **Sex of speaker** (speech patterns of male vs. female callers)
  - Quantity: No differences
  - Questions: No differences
  - Qualifiers: No differences
  - Politeness: Males use more *uh huhs* (70/24).
- **Sex of addressee** (talk to male vs. female callers)
  - Quantity: No differences
  - Questions: Females may be asked more tag questions (13/5).
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Table 2. Gender-Relevant Features by Sex of Speaker, Sex of Addressee, and Speaker Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech Features</th>
<th>Sex of Speaker</th>
<th>Sex of Addressee</th>
<th>Speaker Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syllables</td>
<td>3,899</td>
<td>4,148</td>
<td>6,053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interruptions</td>
<td>5/9</td>
<td>4/10</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tags</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifiers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-limits</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approximators</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modals</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salutations</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gratitude</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uh huh</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>praise</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Qualifiers: No differences
- Politeness: Males receive more praise (17/1).
- Females receive more salutations (5/0).

- Information Power (information specialists vs. callers)
  - Quantity: Information specialists speak 60 percent of the time. A high percentage of information specialists' interruptive overlaps succeed.
  - Questions: Information specialists ask more questions (145/35).
  - Qualifiers: No differences
  - Politeness: Information specialists use more modal auxiliaries (142/54).
  - Information specialists give more praise (18/4).
  - Callers more frequently express gratitude (30/11).
Few powerless language features are used differently due to sex of speaker or recipient. The differences that do appear are either counter to predictions (males' "uh huh" use) or cannot be interpreted due to small numbers of occurrences. Some of these features, however, do correlate with speaker power. The quantity variables differed in the predicted direction, but questions differed in the opposite direction of predictions, as did modal auxiliary use and use of praise. The powerless speech hypothesis, in some complex form, can be supported. However, it must be separated from the genderlect hypothesis. These results agree with a summary of speech evaluation research by social psychologists Ng and Bradac:

Lakoff's claim is that women . . . have been socialized into a low-power role and that a part of this role entails using a style of speech labeled the feminine register. The language features representing this register are very similar to the features representing the low-power style. . . . [T]here is some reason to believe that males and females . . . differ to some extent in their use of language, albeit in ways differing from the style suggested by Lakoff . . . . It seems likely, however, that situational factors such as communicator role are stronger influences on language production than is language per se. . . .

Even though objective linguistic differences appear to be small and their relationship to objective differences in power unclear, there appear to be widely shared, strong beliefs or stereotypes about how men and women talk.²⁵

Although self-report studies have indicated female-male speech differences associated with power, close examination of discourse features from tape recordings supports only "powerless speech" hypotheses—not genderlect hypotheses. Perhaps genderlects are products of stereotyping. More likely, gendering occurs in ways that do not make distinctive use of power-relevant features. Powerful people, most of whom are men, may have multiple grounds for how they talk. Studies of power in language should take these directions:

- Studies such as the one reported here should be replicated across larger and more varied records of naturally occurring speech samples. Sex of speaker and of recipient should not necessarily be the only focus for
curiosity. Kinds of power (e.g., information, position, status) should be systematically investigated. Results will not be simple, and may not clarify the issue of male-female speech differences.

- Genderlects must be addressed in terms of power issues. Most genderlect research to date has tabulated males' and females' use of speech features presuming equal social power.
- We should find ways to integrate genderlects with issues of courtship, marriage, and the family. Since these are highly gendered settings, such talk may show more of the distinctive properties of genderlects than turn up elsewhere.
- Certain modes of talking that we consider masculine may actually be features of monologue/dialogue. This issue is discussed in the remaining pages of this current chapter.

**In a Different Voice**

Another version of the genderlect hypothesis has become widespread in the 1990s: Men speak in the voice of public rationality and women in the voice of relational sensitivity. This concept may be traced to Carol Gilligan's 1982 book, *In a Different Voice.* Gilligan's topic is the moral development of children. This work grows from the theories of cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget, who pictured human cognitive and social development occurring in stages. Gilligan joined a team of researchers who had been studying how children use moral prescriptions as guides to action. One mark of such development is that older children learn to take into account more than one moral issue at a time. The child first masters absolute rules for action, but later learns that certain rules contradict others. An adult is able to state two contradictory rules that apply to a situation and then choose which one is most salient to the current moment.

To illustrate this skill, let us consider one of the problems that researchers have posed to children of various ages: Heinz's dilemma. Heinz's wife is ill and will die unless she receives a very expensive medicine that they cannot afford. Heinz realizes that he could steal the drug and probably not get caught. The question: Should Heinz steal the drug? This problem poses two value statements (you should not steal, and you should help a loved one
in need), then forces a choice between them. According to Piaget's theory, an adult, or an older child, should be able to verbalize these conflicting value statements, then choose between them.

In the early studies in this tradition, results for boys seemed quite clear and supported Piaget's theory, but girls' development seemed less clear. Perhaps for this reason these researchers studied only boys for many years. Gilligan asked whether studies of girls might show a different picture of development. Her interview studies found that girls and women resisted answering the Heinz's dilemma as posed. Rather than choosing between the two abstract values (not stealing, helping a loved one) girls suggested talking things over with the druggist, or with people from social agencies. Girls, claims Gilligan, approach such problems with a relational voice. Women see life as a network of relationships with people. Males (and also science and government) view life as physical and factual. Life has right and wrong answers. Men perceive life in terms of rules and hierarchy, whereas females are concerned about a network of relationships. Women, it is argued, calculate the personal and social costs of any course of action. Women also discuss a problem with others rather than searching alone for an objective solution. Deborah Tannen labels this female pattern rapport talk, which she distinguishes from the male pattern of report talk.**

I stated one problem with Tannen's position in chapter 6: Her most compelling evidence is examples from couple members. If there are any sex differences in couples, these might grow as much from the way couple culture develops as from the nature of males and females in general. A second problem emerges when we consider the notion of dialogue (chapters 1, 4) as primarily a sex difference. Undoubtedly, social stereotypes link femininity to relationship and dialog—and link men to monologue and content. How far can we go from there toward saying that men and women actually do speak in these different modes?

Investigators who rely on self-report data confirm this view that men are monologic and women are relational-dialogic. How we may test this idea in samples of naturally occurring talk is a more difficult problem. We need to determine the features by which we can identify these two forms of talk and find out how discrete they are from each other. Are there really two ways of talking, or just two ways of analyzing any talk? Can we list the features that
count as monologue vs. dialogue? (Is this only a male way to put the issue?)

To the extent that there may be actual (and not just stereotypical) evidence of male-female speech differences in the relational dimension, these arise out of all-female groups, compared with all-male groups. Marjorie Goodwin gives examples related to this contrast in her studies of African American boys’ and girls’ play groups.28 Boys, she argues, play competitively and hierarchically. Their directives express personal desires:


Michael: Gimme th pliers!
Poochie: (Gives pliers to Michael.)
Juju: Terry would you go hurry up and get it!
Terry: No. I’m not going in there. I don’t feel like it.

Aggravated directives receive aggravated responses; mitigated requests receive mitigated responses—except from the leader of the group, who is likely to give an aggravated response to a mitigated request. This is one way that boys show their pecking order.

Girls, argues Goodwin, indicate joint participation in play groups. Their directives use collective wording and project future collaborative activities:


Sharon: Come on. Let’s turn back y’all so we can safe keep em.
Come on. Let’s go find some.

Girls use on-record hostility only when there are breaches of etiquette—or when they play in mixed boy-girl groups. This last point is worth emphasis. Girls can and do compete with boys in an assertive environment. The girls can interact in the masculine voice, but the boys seem not to be bilingual in the girls’ style.

In the business world it is sometimes charged that women are too relational, not political enough. Goodwin finds that the boys are disadvantaged in terms of communication skills. Girls can do things in both the relational voice and the directive voice.29 This is one model for tomorrow’s manager: to have control of both monologic and dialogic voices. Are monologue and
dialogue intrinsically marked for gender, or is this only a product of stereotypes that insist on gendering a dimension in talk?

HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

In the 1970s, and again in the 1990s, scholars have claimed that men and women speak differently. These positions entail that the sexes are different to begin with, and must communicate interculturally. Popular science publications now feature arguments that men's and women's brains are different. This is being used to support the notion that women are holistic, while men are left-brain rational.

There is also currently an attempt being made to put language and gender issues in terms of race, class, situation, and so on. This is undoubtedly important, but no one has yet figured out how to assemble detailed evidence to show how such factors work together. Studies in the 1990s do give some consideration of the moment-to-moment achievement of gendering practices. This promising development provides the subject of the next chapter.

Is difference always a problem for communication? Clearly if monolingual speakers of English and Chinese try to talk philosophy, they will experience problems in understanding. Yet it is much less obvious what grows from minor speech differences, such as the regional difference between dialects spoken in Boston and Dallas, or the difference between the speech of Caucasians and African Americans, or the suspected—but-not-well-proven male-female speech differences. We do not know much about how small differences impact talk, except as they engage stereotypes that become embedded in subsequent talk. Do two speakers who differ in use of a dozen or twenty features—out of a language-scape of thousands of words and hundreds of grammar rules—face inevitable misunderstanding? I do not think so, unless we speak to each other in an environment of suspicion or rely too much upon monologue assumptions about how communication works.

We create gender in our communicative performances—of courtship and family building, or sexuality and violence, and of how we talk about women and men. If scholars should finally isolate subtle female-male speech differences, these may prove of minor importance compared to factors such as talk about women or couple talk.