

## 1 Speech, sex, and gender

Men and women talk differently. We know this because we hear them conversing, and may have witnessed their failures to connect – or experienced these difficulties in our own relationships. Many of us have also read accounts in the popular press of “he said–she said” types of communication breakdowns.

By focusing on the ways men and women talk *to each other*, however, writers have overlooked an important issue: how members of the two sexes communicate when they are with “their own kind.” This seems odd, since same-sex friendships are far more prevalent, and more natural, emerging spontaneously in the second or third year of life, intensifying in later stages of development, and continuing throughout adulthood. Opposite-sex friendships are relatively rare. Many people don’t have *any*.

The fact is: if you want to witness speaking differences, look at what happens when men talk with men, and women with women. Now here are some *variations* – ones that are far more extensive, and far more compelling, than anything that has ever been described in the literature on mixed-sex conversations.

There is a second oddity nestled in the literature. Most writers see “culture” as the source, even the sole source, of men’s and women’s distinctive ways of speaking. Perhaps this makes some sort of sense, or is convenient or satisfying to believe. But there is not a shred of evidence that it is true.

I will attempt to demonstrate that the more dramatic differences that occur when men talk with men, and women with women, are not the “gendered” effects of modern culture but the “sexed” expression of ancient biological dispositions. These dispositions are as different as they are because ancestral men and women competed for the things they needed in two fundamentally different ways. This created separate evolutionary trajectories,

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endowing the two sexes, in modernity, with unequal bodies and brains, developmental paths, and patterns of behavior.

Men have characteristic ways of talking with other men, and women with women, and there are good reasons why these distinctive verbal styles or, better, *strategies* would have evolved. It is less clear that there was ever a need for a *third* speaking strategy, one that would be used exclusively in male–female relationships, or that such a “uni-sex” way of talking ever evolved.

I have now used a form of the word “different” several times. Some might wonder how it benefits us to think about the ways that one half of the world’s population differs from the other half. Would it not be easier for men and women to live together if we downplayed, or even ignored, our differences?

As a scientist, my goal is to discover, describe, and explain what exists. It is surely not to look around for opportunities to express my personal views, or to gloss over inconvenient truths. But there are ways of putting these things in a larger – and possibly more harmonious – perspective. In the past there has been a tendency to write about the verbal styles that cause men and women to *clash* in their conversations. The paradox is that these same modes of speaking make it possible for male and female partners to *mesh* in their lives. I have come to believe that biologically supported sex differences in verbal behavior increase the benefits of collaboration in modern life, much as they once conspired, in antiquity, to broaden the foundations for human language.



Suppose that some ordinary people have been asked to speculate on why zebra finches sing. Reasoning that these birds must gain something by exercising their vocal talent, each person offers a theory of the possible benefits. Lacking evidence, the discussion quickly becomes a matter of personal opinion. Arguments ensue.

It is decided that the birds will have to be watched. In time, one of the new ad hoc empiricists notices that it is only the males that

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sing. Everyone's attention is now drawn to this sex difference. Eventually a further qualification is discovered – a seasonal one. It is that the males only sing in the spring. This raises a possible connection between singing and courtship. Finally, the more and the less tuneful males are compared, and a trend is noticed: the impresarios have more success with the ladies than the monotones.

Our amateur ornithologists are on the right track. Male melodies do attract females, and it is adaptive that they do. Research indicates that singing is enabled, and ornamented, by testosterone. This sex hormone acts directly on brain mechanisms that evolved specifically for singing. In the spring, testosterone levels rise, the song mechanisms expand, and singing increases.

These findings help explain the courtship and mating patterns of zebra finches. Females who cast their lot with a melodious male are likely to get a mate that has above-average levels of testosterone. This will facilitate reproduction, and it will continue to benefit the female long after she and her new mate take up housekeeping. One reason, among others, is that testosterone promotes self-defense.

This “androcentric” story is correct, as far as it goes. But it is incomplete. For there is something equally special about the role of females: they *like* the sound of male songs. If they did not, males would not sing as beautifully or as often as they do.

The females call the tunes. Literally.

If our amateur ornithologists had been forced to explain bird-song *without reference to sex differences*, they could only speculate on why “some birds” have complex and attractive songs and “other birds” do not. True, they still might discover the seasonal variations, but this would not be enough to understand the functions of birdsong. For science to work, everything must be on the table.

Now suppose that a second group of lay people is impaneled. They are asked to speculate on a different question: how *our own species* acquired the ability to produce complex vocalizations, including the multitude of sound sequences that are manipulated

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when a person speaks. In most languages, these sequences number in the tens of thousands.

This question intrigues the new panelists, because they sense that the emergence of this phonetic capacity may have paved the way for what is arguably the most important of all human traits: language. Unfortunately, the new theorists, unlike their predecessors, are told that they must solve the assigned problem *without reference to sex differences*, whether in other species or our own.

This injunction is no less limiting here than it was in the case of the finches. The abilities of modern humans reflect problems that were uniquely faced, and solved, by early members of the *Homo* line, who diverged from ancestors shared with the other primates millions of years ago. Since males and females were subjected to different selectional pressures, the brains and bodies of the two sexes evolved differently. To ignore these neural and cognitive differences would be to tie at least one hand behind the panel's theoretical back.

Since the brain controls behavior, the exclusion of sex differences could also cause some related – and possibly critical – differences to go unnoticed. The panel will surely miss two modes of vocal engagement that would have helped them to explain the speech of modern humans. In birds and mammals, including the other primates, sexually mature males are prone to contend with each other in highly public vocal displays that are aggressive or “agonistic” in nature. We may think of these engagements as “duels.” In many primate species, sexually mature females have an equally strong disposition to affiliate with other females, in more private and intimate circumstances, by engaging them in subdued vocal interactions. I will refer to these interactions as “duets.” Both words contain the Latin base *duo*, for two, but dueling represents a conflation of *duo* with *bellum*, war, creating *duellum*, a war between two. Duets, of course, refer to the harmonious behaviors of a duo.

When men compete with other men, and women with women, they display two distinct ways of speaking. These differences are revealed in their purest form when contests are waged over two

things that have always been critical to our species: sex, including the things we do to get and keep mates; and dominance, or social status.



What I have chosen to call duels and duets were first described in raw form many centuries ago, and they have been documented in a broad range of human societies around the world. As we will see, a strictly vocal form of these strategies is enacted in other species. We humans are thus an interesting blend. For each of us is possessed of language – a codification of human knowledge that requires extensive cognitive support, takes years to master, and is frequently asserted as evidence of our species' rationality – but embed our words in “primal” displays that are unlearned and biologically driven, having originated long before the evolution of language.

At one time, of course, social scientists viewed allusions to sex differences suspiciously, as efforts to reinforce inequalities between women and men. I can only hope that this era has passed, because a great deal of science requires investigation of these particular biological variations. In fact, by exploring intersexual differences we make it possible to see ways in which modern men and women *complement each other* in the conduct of everyday business, much as (according to my claim) ancestral men and women collaborated in the evolution of language.

Of course, popular books on the everyday communicative differences between men and women have been rolling off the presses for some years. In 1992, couples therapist John Gray claimed that *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus*. When experiencing stress, he suggested, men – the Martians – grow silent. They go into their “caves.” Women do just the opposite. They contact a friend and talk out their problems until they feel better.

In a later book, *Eve's seed*, historian Robert McElvaine offered a qualification. He said that men and women are not as different as such separate planetary addresses would imply. “Men are from New York,” he amended, “women are from Philadelphia.”<sup>1</sup> How

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differently men and women *actually* talk, of course, is something that we will look at here.

Some years ago, researchers established that young men, in the speeches they gave in university classes, said “I” more often than women, produced more verbs of various kinds, and uttered more long or multi-syllabic words. In women’s speech, there were more prepositional phrases, rhetorical questions, and fillers such as “um.” Their utterances were also longer. Significantly, men’s speech was *perfectly* discriminable from women’s speech on the basis of these and other features.<sup>2</sup>

But let’s not get sidetracked by the bits and pieces that make up speech. These things are interesting – my first book was only about speech sounds – but we would not want to make the mistake of archaeologists who become so interested in bits of bone and pottery that they forget to ask what such discoveries might be trying to say about human civilization.

If we turn our attention to the *speaking practices* of males and females, we come face to face with those larger issues.<sup>3</sup> In same-sex groups, according to summaries of this research, males are more likely than females to:

1. interrupt each other
2. issue commands, threats, or boasts
3. resist each other’s demands
4. give information
5. heckle
6. tell jokes or suspenseful stories
7. try to top another’s story
8. insult or denigrate each other.

By contrast, research indicates that females in same-sex groups are more likely than males to:

1. agree with other speakers
2. yield to other speakers
3. acknowledge points made by other speakers
4. be polite
5. cooperate or collaborate.

There is also a rule that applies to female groups: do what it takes to preserve group harmony. This rule underlies some of the female tendencies enumerated above, and influences women's conversational speech in additional ways. In the case of males, the corresponding rule would be: do what is necessary to be seen as *the most wonderful anything* – from strong and knowledgeable to brave and resourceful – whether that means building yourself up or tearing everyone else down.

The list above might seem to be fairly complete, but these items are merely what emerged when researchers scratched the surface. The reason? They had no theory as to *why* men and women might be disposed to speak differently, and therefore they could only pursue their intuitions or just wait for something to jump out at them. But we humans, no less than other animals, are physical creatures. Our bodies and brains evolved in environments that contained resources, dangers, and competitive pressures. Since our species lives in groups, each of us is wired to interact, and there are additional pressures here, ones associated with the need to cooperate with our competitors and compete with our friends. In this context, it is possible to ask if men and women were to use speech as strategies, ones that would help them achieve their goals *as men and women*, what would they do? Approaching the matter in this way enables scientists to generate principled questions, based on what we know about men and women, not merely to follow in the footsteps of other researchers.

But let us begin by examining their tracks. In *You just don't understand*, linguist Deborah Tannen wrote about men's tendency to use language as a vehicle for the transmission of information in factual, news-like bulletins. She called this "report talk." Women, on the other hand, devote more of their speech to an affiliative goal, "establishing connections and negotiating relationships." Tannen labeled this way of speaking "rapport talk."<sup>4</sup>

Tannen helped readers to appreciate some *linguistic* reasons why men and women, particularly married couples, might fail to communicate. But the trail ended there, almost as soon as it

started. For there was no formal account of the *reasons* why men and women use language differently in the first place.

So we have questions. For example, if our ways of speaking do not *benefit* marital relations, why do we persist in these practices? Why don't couples naturally recognize and cast aside their counter-productive behaviors? If style differences are arbitrary and optional – not supported by anything deeply *biological* or particularly *useful* – why not jettison any that happen to work against us? Speakers can presumably discard anything that is arbitrary and optional.

Doing so might seem to be fairly easy. After all, speakers routinely move into and out of various “registers” or “voices” all day long, speaking formally to some people and casually to others. Most bilingual speakers naturally “code switch,” that is, alternate between – or even combine – the languages that they know, without any particular effort. Surely, one might suppose, the rest of us can abandon styles of speaking when they no longer work for us. If we learned them, we can unlearn them.

But *did* we learn them? To be sure, we could not have acquired our native language without storing up many thousands of words and meanings. This material originated outside of us – initially in the speech of our parents – and it passed through a suite of perceptual and other cognitive systems before it came to rest somewhere in our minds. A portion of this experience may even have occurred consciously.

All of this relates to the stuff that we *talk with*. But the words we know and use – an abiding concern of linguists – have little or nothing to do with the dance of human interaction. This is enacted not only in speech but also in gestures, facial expressions, eye movements, body language, and tones of voice. Do we not care that those people are whispering? That something said to us with a straight face was actually a joke? That an insult was actually a misguided attempt to bond? If talking is the human way of *relating*, we must consider everything that goes on, whether the sights and sounds are reducible to printed words in a transcript or not.



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*How we talk*, that is, *how we use* the linguistic material that we know, is rather different from stringing words together. The ways we address and verbally interact with others are heavily influenced by internal systems that were already up and running when our ancestors left the trees. Today, aspects of this primacy of vocal communication over linguistic content are played out in human development. In the first six months of life, infants use their voices to greet, request, reject, and comment – things our prelinguistic ancestors certainly could have done – long before their newer and more abstract mental mechanisms kick in, the ones that enable them to understand and use words.<sup>5</sup>

All of which is to say that the differences between human males and females, like the avian sexes, have scientific value. We cannot achieve a complete scientific “story” about language (and many other complex behaviors) without them. Fortunately, the discoveries achieved in an impressive range of investigations have begun to come together, making it possible to tell a significant portion of that story. Important clues emerge from psychological and biological studies of human development and life history. Harmonious findings are also available in anthropological accounts of traditional societies, comparative research on primates, and studies of the human brain. Intriguingly, this material converges with trends in ancient history, and analyses of epic literature, to support a claim: men and women speak in fundamentally different ways largely because they are outfitted by Nature to do so.

## Gender and sex

In our species, the most clear-cut differences between males and females are expressed physically. One look at the genitals of a newborn and we know that it’s a boy or a girl. But if asked the *gender* of a neonate, the safest answer would be, “It’s too soon to tell.” The reason is that gender is largely a cultural construction, like *masculine* and *feminine*. This construction is sensitive to the individual’s psychological make-up and the larger community’s

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values and practices, and in special cases there is room for doubt about a person's gender.<sup>6</sup>

The distinction between sex and gender helps us to keep in mind important differences between biology and culture. These domains are where we go if our goal is to explore male and female ways of talking.<sup>7</sup> In fact, they are the only places that we *can* go, so our choice of one over the other is an important one. Which we choose – assuming that scientists will be more attracted to one or the other – is a matter of critical importance, for it determines what we will (and will not) discover, and this influences how we will (and will not) think about our human ways of relating to each other.

Unfortunately, the relative merits of culture and biology have been distorted by the personal responses of researchers. During the era when feminist linguists were attributing sex differences to gender, hence to culture, evolutionary psychologists Margo Daly and Martin Wilson were writing about “biophobia,” a naked fear of biological explanation that was working its way through the social sciences. They noted that this fear initially expressed itself in the form of several myths about human behavior. Perhaps the most important was that some human tribes are completely fierce and others totally tranquil. If that were true (sadly it is not), we might think of violence as optional, and the human species as perfectible. That may be why the myth, as Daly and Wilson wrote, lives on in the academic and journalistic corridors of American life, and “*fills a need* for social scientists and commentators.”<sup>8</sup>

I would never be confused with a “biophobe.” Indeed, I naturally take a biological approach to human language, speech, and communication.<sup>9</sup> But I do not wish to imply that culture is a total weakling where the speaking habits of men and women are concerned. Over three centuries ago, Charles César de Rochefort, pastor of a French Protestant church, visited the West Indies. He reported later that the men “have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words