And Rarely the Twain Shall Meet

Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, is well known for her books on the differences between male and female speech patterns. Her first book, entitled You Just Don’t Understand, explains her general theories on male/female speech patterns, while later books, such as Gender and Discourse and The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue, explore these issues in more specific ways. For example, this article was based on material in Talking from Nine to Five, which focuses on male/female speech patterns in the workplace. In this article Tannen argues that the speech patterns males and females exhibit in the workplace are very similar to those male and female children exhibit.

Bob Hoover of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette was interviewing me when he remarked that after years of coaching boys' softball teams, he was now coaching girls and they were very different. I immediately whipped out my yellow pad and began interviewing him—and discovered that his observations about how girls and boys play softball parallel mine about how women and men talk at work.

Hoover told me that boys' teams always had one or two stars whom the other boys treated with deference. So when he started coaching a girls' team, he began by looking for the leader. He couldn't find one. "The girls who are better athletes don't lord it over the others," he says. "You get the feeling that everyone's the same." When a girl gets the ball, she doesn't try to throw it all the way home as a strong-armed boy would; instead, she throws it to another team member, so they all become better catchers and throwers. He goes on, "If a girl makes an error, she's not in the doghouse for a long time, as a boy would be."

"But wait," I interrupt. "I've heard that when girls make a mistake at sports, they often say 'I'm sorry,' whereas boys don't."

That's true, he says, but then the girl forgets it—and so do her teammates. "For boys, sports is a performance art. They're concerned with how they look." When they make an error, they sulk because they've let their teammates down. Girls want to win, but if they lose, they're still all in it together—so the mistake isn't as dreadful for the individual or the team.

What Hoover describes in these youngsters are the seeds of behavior I have observed among women and men at work.

The girls who are the best athletes don't "lord it over" the others—just the ethic I have found among women in positions of authority. Women managers frequently tell me they are good managers because they do not act in an authoritarian manner. They say they do not flaunt their power, or behave as though they are better than their subordinates. Similarly, linguist Elisabeth Kuhn has found that women professors in her study inform students of course requirements as if they had magically appeared on the syllabus ("There are two papers. The first paper, ah, let's see, is due . . . It's back here [referring to the syllabus] at the beginning"), whereas the men professors make it clear that they set the requirements ("I have two midterms and a final"). A woman manager might say to her secretary, "Could you do me a favor and type this letter right away?" knowing that her secretary is going to type the letter. But her male boss, on hearing this, might conclude she doesn't feel she deserves the authority she has, just as
a boys' coach might think the star athlete doesn't realize how good he is if he doesn't expect his teammates to treat him with deference.

I was especially delighted by Hoover's observation that, although girls are more likely to say, "I'm sorry," they are actually far less sorry when they make a mistake than boys who don't say it, but are "in the doghouse" for a long time. This dramatizes the ritual nature of many women's apologies. How often is a woman who is "always apologizing" seen as weak and lacking in confidence? In fact, for many women, saying "I'm sorry" often doesn't mean "I apologize." It means "I'm sorry that happened." Like many of the rituals common among women, it's a way of speaking that takes into account the other person's point of view. It can even be an automatic conversational smoother. For example, you leave your pad in someone's office; you knock on the door and say, "Excuse me, I left my pad on your desk," and the person whose office it is might reply, "Oh, I'm sorry. Here it is." She knows it is not her fault that you left your pad on her desk; she's just letting you know it's okay.

Finally, I was intrigued by Hoover's remark that boys regard sports as "a performance art" and worry about "how they look." There, perhaps, is the rub, the key to why so many women feel they don't get credit for what they do. From childhood, many boys learn something that is very adaptive to the workplace: Raises and promotions are based on "performance" evaluations and these depend, in large measure, on how you appear in other people's eyes. In other words, you have to worry not only about getting your job done but also about getting credit for what you do.

Getting credit often depends on the way you talk. For example, a woman tells me she has been given a poor evaluation because her supervisor feels she knows less than her male peers. Her boss, it turns out, reached this conclusion because the woman asks more questions: She is seeking information without regard to how her queries will make her look.

The same principle applies to apologizing. Whereas some women seem to be taking undeserved blame by saying "I'm sorry," some men seem to evade deserved blame. I observed this when a man disconnected a conference call by accidentally elbowing the speaker-phone. When his secretary reconnects the call, I expect him to say, "I'm sorry; I knocked the phone by mistake." Instead he says, "Hey, what happened? One minute you were there, the next minute you were gone!" Annoying as this may be, there are certain instances in which people improve their fortunes by covering up mistakes.

If Hoover's observations about girls' and boys' athletic styles are fascinating, it is even more revealing to see actual transcripts of children at play and how they mirror the adult workplace. Amy Sheldon, a linguist at
the University of Minnesota who studies children talking at play in a day care center, has compared the conflicts of pre-school girls and boys. She finds that boys who fight with one another tend to pursue their own goal. Girls tend to balance their own interests with those of the other girls through complex verbal negotiations. 

Look at how different the negotiations are:

Two boys fight over a toy telephone: Tony has it; Charlie wants it. Tony is sitting on a foam chair with the base of the phone in his lap and the receiver lying beside him. Charlie picks up the receiver, and Tony protests, "No, that's my phone!" He grabs the telephone cord and tries to pull the receiver away from Charlie, saying, "No, that—uh, it's on MY couch. It's on MY couch, Charlie. It's on MY couch. It's on MY couch." It seems he has only one point to make, so he 'insists' it repeatedly as he uses physical force to get the phone back.

Charlie ignores Tony and holds onto the receiver. Tony then gets off the couch, sets the phone base on the floor and tries to keep possession of it by overturning the chair on top of it. Charlie manages to push the chair off, gets the telephone and wins the fight.

This might seem like a typical kids' fight until you compare it with a fight Sheldon videotaped among girls. Here the contested objects are toy medical instruments: Elaine has them; Arlene wants them. But she doesn't just grab for them; she argues her case. Elaine, in turn, balances her own desire to keep them with Arlene's desire to get them. Elaine loses ground gradually by compromising.

Arlene begins not by grabbing but by asking and giving a reason: "Can I have that, that thing? I'm going to take my baby's temperature." Elaine is agreeable, but cautious: "You can use it—you can use my temperature. Just make sure you can't use anything else unless you can ask." Arlene does just that; she asks for the toy syringe: "May I?" Elaine at first resists, but gives a reason: "No, I'm gonna need to use the shot in a couple of minutes." Arlene reaches for the syringe anyway, explaining in a "beseeching" tone, "But I—I need this though."

Elaine capitulates, but again tries to set limits: "Okay, just use it once." She even gives Arlene permission to give "just a couple of shots." Arlene then presses her advantage, and became possessive of her property: "Now don't touch the baby until I get back, because it IS MY BABY! I'll check her ears, okay?" (Even when being demanding, she asks for agreement: "okay?")

Elaine tries to regain some rights through compromise: "Well, let's pretend it's another day, that we have to look in her ears together." Elaine also tries another approach that will give Arlene something she wants:
"I'll have to shoot her after, after, after you listen—after you look in her ears," suggests Elaine. Arlene, however, is adamant: "Now don't shoot her at all!"

What happens next will sound familiar to anyone who has ever been a little girl or overheard one. Elaine can no longer abide Arlene's selfish behavior and applies the ultimate sanction: "Well, then, you can't come to my birthday!" Arlene utters the predictable retort: "I don't want to come to your birthday!"

The boys and girls have followed different rituals for fighting. Each boy goes after what he wants; they slug it out; one wins. But the girls enact a complex negotiation, trying to get what they want while taking into account what the other wants.

Here is an example of how women and men at work use comparable strategies.

Maureen and Harold, two managers at a medium-size company, are assigned to hire a human-resources coordinator for their division. Each favors a different candidate, and both feel strongly about their preferences. They trade arguments for some time, neither convincing the other. Then Harold says that hiring the candidate Maureen wants would make him so uncomfortable that he would have to consider resigning. Maureen respects Harold. What's more, she likes him and considers him a friend. So she says what seems to her the only thing she can say under the circumstances: "Well, I certainly don't want you to feel uncomfortable here. You're one of the pillars of the place." Harold's choice is hired.

What is crucial is not Maureen's and Harold's individual styles in isolation but how they play in concert with each other's style. Harold's threat to quit ensures his triumph—when used with someone for whom it is a trump card. If he had been arguing with someone who regards his threat as simply another move in the negotiation rather than a nonnegotiable expression of deep feelings, the result might have been different. For example, had she said, "That's ridiculous; of course you're not going to quit!" or matched it ("Well, I'd be tempted to quit if we hired your guy"), the decision might well have gone the other way.

Like the girls at play, Maureen balances her perspective with those of her colleague and expects him to do the same. Harold is simply going for what he wants and trusts Maureen to do likewise.

This is not to say that all women and all men, or all boys and girls, behave any one way. Many factors influence our styles, including regional and ethnic backgrounds, family experience and individual personality. But gender is a key factor, and understanding its influence can help clarify what happens when we talk.