

A language in common

Deborah Cameron disposes of some widespread misconceptions about differences in the ways men and women use language

Many people hold firm beliefs about the differing ways in which men and women communicate, the reasons why they are different and the problems their differences cause. Yet surprisingly few of these widespread beliefs are supported by the evidence of recent research on language and gender. That research does not say that there are no differences between the sexes. It does, however, challenge the perception that what divides them is more significant than what they have in common.

We are constantly hearing that men and women use language differently. Women are the more verbal sex: they do more of the talking and are generally better with words. Typically they use language in a collaborative and supportive way: they are good at listening and creating rapport. Men are more competitive, good at arguing their corner and asserting themselves. They are also more direct communicators, who say what they mean, mean what they say, and are often confused by women's less direct approach.

These observations are truisms, but are they actually true? Is it true that gender, along with other dimensions of identity, such as age and social class, has some influence on verbal behaviour?

The evidence

Linguistic research has revealed gender differences in pronunciation, grammar, politeness and writing style – though the same patterns do not appear in every community, and they are not usually clear-cut differences between all men and all women (the variation within each gender group is typically at least as large as the difference between the two).

But the observations I began by listing have little to do with this tradition of inquiry – or indeed with any kind of evidence-based research. They owe their status as received wisdom to self-help books of the *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* variety. These do not pretend to be scientific; they deal in anecdote and intuition rather than

empirical research findings. Recently, however, the anecdotal folk-wisdom of self-help has been creeping into sources that do claim scientific status. Sex-differences are a favourite theme in current popular science writing, and language features prominently among the subjects discussed. But the accounts given in many sources owe less to the relevant scholarly literature than to the lore of Mars and Venus.

In her book *The Female Brain*, for example, the neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine (2006) backed up the familiar assertion that women talk more than men by giving concrete statistics: women on average utter 20,000 words per day, whereas for men the average is only 7000. These figures were widely reported by the media, using their favourite 'studies have shown...' formula. But when the linguist Mark Liberman investigated, he discovered that there were no studies: Brizendine had taken her numbers from a self-help book (Liberman, 2006). Similar statistics appeared in other self-help texts, but since their word-counts varied wildly, and no research was cited to support any of them, Liberman concluded that they were probably just invented. His suspicions were confirmed when researchers in Arizona conducted a real study (Mehl et al., 2007). They used remotely activated portable recording devices to sample the speech of 380 participants at 12.5 minute intervals over several days, then calculated each participant's average daily word output. They found extensive individual differences, but no difference between men and women: the mean for both sexes was around 16,000 words.

What about the other truisms? 'Women are better with words' (i.e. have more advanced verbal abilities than men) is a common belief among trained psychologists as well as laypeople, and this difference has been reported in numerous studies. However, two large meta-analyses carried out in the past 20 years have raised questions about its size and significance (Hyde, 2005; Hyde & Linn, 1988). Whereas gender has a large effect on some

questions

Why are so many people so receptive to the kind of popular literature that claims that men and women 'speak different languages'?

Do linguistic stereotypes of men and women have any serious consequences in everyday life?

resources

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non-linguistic variables, like aggression and throwing accuracy, its effect on most measures of verbal ability is small or close to zero. (The clearest exception, though the effect is still only moderate, is spelling – a skill that seems unlikely to be what most people have in mind when they say that women are ‘better with words’.)

Popular writers on ‘brain sex’ often inform their readers that the superior verbal abilities of females arise from evolved sex-differences in the functional organisation of the brain. Women are able to make more use of both hemispheres when performing linguistic tasks, while men are more dependent on a single hemisphere (in healthy right-handers, normally the left one).

However, it is misleading to present this as an established fact, because the findings are mixed and inconclusive. While some neuroimaging studies have indeed reported

significant sex-differences, others using the same protocols have reported none (Frost et al., 1999; Knecht et al., 2000). There have also been studies that did find differences at the level of brain activity, but were unable to correlate these with any differences in subjects’ performance (Jaeger et al., 1998). In time a consensus may emerge among scientists, but for now, the jury is still out.

The source of the ideas

The idea that men are competitive status-seekers while women are cooperative rapport builders is a central argument in

Deborah Tannen’s popular bestseller *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990). Tannen proposed that these differing orientations are acquired by young children interacting in single-sex peer groups – large hierarchically structured groups for boys, and smaller, more egalitarian groups for girls. Her account drew on research done in the 1980s by communication scholars who were influenced by the work of the developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan. Even at the time, though, these scholars’ claims were disputed, and today they are rejected by almost all language and gender researchers. The

more evidence has accumulated, the clearer it has become that the reality is much more complex.

Time has been particularly unkind to the claim that interaction in girls’ peer groups is fundamentally cooperative and egalitarian.

Marjorie Goodwin (2006) spent three years observing a group of 9- to 12-year-old girls, recording over

100 hours of their interactions for detailed analysis. She found that their group had a clear internal hierarchy; they were intensely concerned with status, and habitually engaged in competitive verbal practices like boasting, bullying, arguing and giving orders. Similar behaviour has been observed among adolescents (Baxter, 2006). Goodwin suggests that earlier researchers idealised girls, partly because they had limited data (in those days it wasn’t so easy to video-record 100 hours of natural interaction), and partly because their dualistic model of gender led them to focus on differences and downplay similarities.

Tannen’s work is also an important source for the idea that men and women systematically misunderstand one another because of differences in their ways of using language. In developing her theory of ‘male–female miscommunication’, Tannen drew on her experience researching communication problems between people from different ethnic groups and cultures. She suggested that because girls and boys learnt their habitual ways of communicating in single-sex peer groups, interaction between men and women was an instance of cross-cultural communication, with the same potential to go awry. Many commentators have found this analogy unconvincing, pointing out that the linguistic and social distance between speakers from different cultures is far greater than that between men and women in one society. But in addition, when researchers have looked for empirical evidence to support speculations about male–female miscommunication, they have generally failed to find any.

One speculation, advanced in an influential theoretical article (Maltz & Borker, 1982), concerns minimal responses like ‘yeah’ and ‘mhm’. Women, it is argued, take the absence or low frequency of these responses as a sign that men are not listening to them. This, however, is a misunderstanding, which arises because of a gender difference in the way minimal responses are used. A woman’s ‘mhm’ means ‘I’m listening’, but a man’s means ‘I agree’. In most conversations it is only to be expected that agreement will be signalled less frequently than listening. But while this argument is ingenious, research suggests it is wrong. Reid-Thomas (1993) played recorded extracts from real conversations to male and female judges who were then asked to indicate what they thought the minimal responses meant. Both sexes interpreted some examples as meaning ‘I’m listening’ and others as meaning ‘I agree’, and there was near-unanimity on which examples were which. The judges’ interpretations were based on context, not gender.

Another speculation is that since men communicate more directly than women, they are prone to misunderstanding women when the latter are less than direct. This is the reasoning behind the advice given to women to refuse unwanted sexual invitations as directly as possible. But research on naturally occurring conversational refusals has demonstrated that indirectness is the norm for English-speakers of both sexes. Unless people are actively trying to give offence, they do not refuse even trivial invitations (like ‘D’you want to grab some lunch after the meeting?’) by just saying ‘No’ (or ‘No



Empirical findings suggest that men and women are actually from Earth...

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thanks' or 'No, sorry'). Typically what they do is hesitate, hedge and offer some socially acceptable excuse ('Uh, well, I'd love to, but I've got a report to finish'). In sexual situations, where the potential for rejection to cause offence is far greater, putting directness above tact could actually increase the risk of violence (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999).

Many writers point to differences in men's and women's attitudes to communication as a source of conflict in their relationships. Women are said to regard conversational sharing as indispensable for intimacy, whereas men accord more importance to regular sexual contact and involvement in joint activities. But the validity of this generalisation has been challenged by some research. In one study of intimacy in long-established relationships, involving 72 heterosexual and 36 gay/lesbian couples, Mackey et al. (2000) found that attitudes did not differ along the lines of either gender or sexual preference. Respondents in all categories defined intimacy as 'the verbal sharing of inner thoughts and feelings', and all ranked this as more important for a successful relationship than any other factor.

Research that includes same-sex as well as mixed-sex couples has the potential

to shed more general light on whether gender differences are a major cause of communication problems in intimate relationships. If they are, then we might expect to find gay and lesbian couples, for whom gender difference is not an issue, reporting fewer or less severe problems than heterosexuals. But while more investigation is needed, the evidence to date does not seem to bear out this expectation. Mackey and colleagues found that individual incompatibilities, particularly in partners' approaches to managing conflict, were the source of the most serious problems in both same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. They concluded that 'factors within relationships themselves had a more powerful effect... than did social and demographic factors' (2000, p.225). Such findings raise the possibility that 'couple problems' have been too readily conflated with 'male-female problems', simply because the prototypical couple consists of one person of each sex.

Questioning the 'facts'

Questions about gender differences in language and communication are relevant in many areas of psychology: they are not

just of theoretical interest to academic researchers, but are potentially matters of some practical consequence to psychotherapists and counsellors, educational and occupational psychologists. If these professionals are influenced (consciously or otherwise) by beliefs and assumptions that the evidence does not support, they risk doing their clients a disservice. But no professional can be an expert on every subject. Unless you have the time and expertise to make a detailed study of the research literature, it is difficult not to be influenced by ideas that are as widely circulated, and as seldom challenged, as the ones I have been discussing.

Nevertheless, we should be cautious about accepting at face value what are often presented as self-evident facts. There are some linguistic differences between men and women; but many of the commonest claims made about them have their roots in cultural mythology rather than scientific research.

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