

# Hey, You Still Just Don't Understand

By Richard A. Shweder

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## Hey, You Still Just Don't Understand

*The author's scholarly essays in support of her thesis that men and women are separate 'speech communities.'*

### GENDER AND DISCOURSE

By Deborah Tannen.

203 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. \$19.95.

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**T**HIS collection of five scholarly essays, "Gender and Discourse," reprints all of Deborah Tannen's previously published disquisitions on how men and women talk to each other. The book presents itself as the academic counterpart to her widely read and admired "You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation" (1990). The author, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University who specializes in discourse analysis (she studies communication in everyday life), has made a mark on the popular mind by arguing that a conversational encounter between a man and a woman is analogous to a hazardous cross-cultural expedition, and that men and women have difficulty talking to one another, not because they have different brains but because they are members of different speech communities. It is thus ironic that Ms. Tannen is at her best in these essays when she is not making claims about the sexes.

Ms. Tannen is an effective linguistic therapist who has eye-opening and entertaining things to say about the way in which speakers of any language are unaware of their own speech conventions and thus get into trouble when interpreting the linguistic moves of others. One of her favorite examples concerns "high involvement" speakers (stereotypically New York Jews of Eastern European descent), who tend to express sociality and solidarity by means of linguistic signals (interruption, disagreement) that members of other subcultures misinterpret as aggressive, hostile or pushy.

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Her approach to conversational catastrophes is simple yet powerful. She begins with some elementary linguistic principles: for example, that objectively defined conversational signals, like silence or interruption or an abrupt change in topic, have no fixed or inherent meaning. She then demonstrates that the subjective meaning of such signals varies with context and by culture; for example, when one person interrupts another person this is not necessarily experienced as aggressive or as an act of domination. Depending on the context and the culture, interruptions and other kinds of overlapping asides, interjections, corrections, footnotes and parenthetical remarks may — by intention or in effect — promote solidarity and lots of fellow feeling.

In the current context of the gender wars on Ameri-

**Richard A. Shweder** is a cultural anthropologist and a professor of human development at the University of Chicago. He is the author of the forthcoming book "Why Do Men Barbecue: And Other Recipes for Cultural Psychology."

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can college campuses (where traditional linguistic practices like criticism and debate are increasingly misinterpreted as "hate speech," as something that men do to oppress women), Ms. Tannen's balmy message is fraught with political implications. She even runs the risk of seeming too pluralistic and open-minded, a bit too forgiving of men. In the introduction to "Gender and Discourse," the author, apparently a bit self-conscious about her reputation among feminists, feels the need to defend herself against power analysts and other radical feminist critics of her "cultural difference" approach to conflict between men and women. Apparently not wanting to be misapprehended as an apologist for men or as a counterrevolutionary, Ms. Tannen tries to make it clear that her cultural-difference thesis — that men and women do not share the same signal system for communicating their meanings — is not necessarily incompatible with the image of men versus women as two castes or classes — the "dominance" thesis.

Ms. Tannen writes stylishly about language in general. It is when she turns to the topic of differences between the sexes that she is vulnerable to criticism. A woman says to her husband, "John's having a party. Wanna go?" Is this a "direct" signal (the wife wanting to know if the husband wants to go to the party) or an "indirect" signal (the wife wanting the husband to know that she wants to go to the party)? The author presents results from a questionnaire showing that 73 percent of American men (8 of the 11 who were surveyed!) and 64 percent of American women (9 of the 14 in her sample!) interpret the signal as direct. This difference, she tells us, suggests "a stylistic gulf between American men and women."

Even overlooking the fact that real, uncontrived everyday conversation is almost never examined in "Gender and Discourse" (the book does contain an analysis of an English translation of the scripted Swedish dialogue from Ingmar Bergman's movie "Scenes From a Marriage"), the evidence Ms. Tannen presents for the cultural-difference approach seems thin indeed. I cannot overlook the possibility that "exaggeration" is a speech style with a different meaning in Ms. Tannen's speech community than in my own, and that I am a victim of my own speech norms and "just don't understand." I think a more plausible interpretation of one or two of the essays in this collection is that perhaps some previously published papers are best left buried in the past.

**C**ERTAIN ideas are so tantalizing they almost deserve to be true, such as the idea that men and women have a hard time living together because they live in distinct cultures, governed by different linguistic conventions for signaling and communicating meaning. Unfortunately, fascination and glamour do not equal truth. If "Gender and Discourse" is indeed the scientific grounding for Ms. Tannen's popular book, one must conclude that the case for sexually based discourse codes has yet to be rigorously made. While I continue to be full of enthusiasm for the cultural-difference approach to the analysis of conversational disasters across cultures, the experience of reading "Gender and Discourse" led me to wonder whether sexual stereotypes of conversational styles are anything more than dangerous and ideologically seductive figures of speech. □