In other words, if women talk at all, this may be perceived as “too much” by men who expect them to provide a silent, decorative background in many social contexts. This may sound outrageous, but think about how you react when precocious children dominate the talk at an adult party. As women begin to make inroads into formerly “male” domains such as business and professional contexts, we should not be surprised to find that their contributions are not always perceived positively or even accurately.

Conclusion

We have now reached the conclusion that the question “Do women talk more than men?” can’t be answered with a straight “yes” or “no.” The answer is rather, “It all depends.” It depends on many different factors, including the social context in which the talk is taking place, the kind of talk involved and the relative social confidence of the speakers, which is affected by such things as their social roles (e.g., teacher, host, interviewer, wife) and their familiarity with the topic.

It appears that men generally talk more in formal, public contexts where informative and persuasive talk is highly valued, and where talk is generally the prerogative of those with some societal status and has the potential for increasing that status. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to contribute in private, informal interactions, where talk more often functions to maintain relationships, and in other situations where for various reasons they feel socially confident.

Finally, and most radically, we might question the assumption that more talk is always a good thing. “Silence is golden” says the proverb, and there are certainly contexts in all cultures where silence is more appropriate than talk, where words are regarded as inadequate vehicles for feelings, or where keeping silent is an expression of appreciation or respect. Sometimes it is the silent participants who are the powerful players. In some contexts the strong silent male is an admired stereotype. However, while this is true, it must be recognized that talk is very highly valued in Western culture. It seems likely, then, that as long as holding the floor is equated with influence, the complexities of whether men or women talk most will continue to be a matter for debate.

**Thinking Critically**

1. How do the proverbs at the beginning of Holmes’s essay set the tone? What is remarkable about these proverbs? Have you heard any of them? Which one do you like or dislike the most, and why?

2. In what ways does the context and setting of the conversation influence men’s and women’s talking patterns? Explain.

3. Holmes explains that in situations where talk is valued—in the classroom or boardroom, for instance—males are likely to speak more than females. If this is true, what accounts for the excess of proverbs and sayings regarding women’s talk? Explain.

4. In paragraph 20, Holmes cites a 16-year-old girl who explains why she does not speak more in class. Evaluate this girl’s response in the context of your own social and classroom experiences in high school.

5. What, according to Holmes, are the differences between men’s and women’s use of talk? Do you agree or disagree with her conclusions? Explain.

**Writing Assignments**

1. Ben Jonson, a 17th-century writer and playwright, wrote a popular play called Epicene, or, The Silent Woman. Locate a copy of this play and write an essay in which you make connections between attitudes toward women’s talk three hundred years ago and today. How have things changed, and how are they similar?

2. Do you think that understanding gender patterns in conversation will change the way men and women speak to each other? Do you think that such changes are necessary and healthy? Alternatively, do you think that some men and women have a need for the established patterns? Explain.

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**Sex Differences**

Ronald Macauley

Contrary to popular belief, men and women do not speak different forms of English. Nor are there innate or genetic differences in the way men and women acquire or use language. So argues Ronald Macauley, a professor of linguistics and an expert on language acquisition. Although social background can generate some differences in the way the sexes speak, it is pure myth and stereotyping that sex differences show up in language patterns. Males do not, for instance, instinctively gravitate to coarse language; and females are not preternaturally drawn to the language of nurturing.


*I think the English women speak awfy nice. The little girls are very feminine just because they’ve a nice voice. But the same voice in an Englishman—nae really. I think the voice lets the men down but it flatters the girls.*

—Aberdeen housewife

More nonsense has been produced on the subject of sex differences than on any linguistic topic, with the possible exception of spelling. Perhaps this is appropriate. The relations between the sexes have generally been considered a fit topic for comedy. In his book Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin, Otto Jespersen has a chapter entitled “The Woman” in which he manages to include every stereotype about women that was current at the time. It is almost unfair to quote directly but even in the 1920s Jespersen should have known better, particularly since he
lived in Denmark where women have traditionally shown an independent spirit. Here are a few examples:

There can be no doubt that women exercise a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions.

Men will certainly with great justice object that there is a danger of the language becoming languid and insipid if we are always to content ourselves with women’s expressions.

Women move preferably in the central field of language, avoiding everything that is out of the way or bizarre, while men will often either coin new words or expressions or take up old-fashioned ones, if by that means they are enabled, or think they are enabled, to find a more adequate or precise expression for their thoughts. Woman as a rule follows the main road of language, where man is often inclined to turn aside into a narrow footpath or even to strike out a new path for himself....

Those who want to learn a foreign language will therefore always do well at the first stage to read many ladies’ novels, because they will there continually meet with just those everyday words and combinations which the foreigner is above all in need of, what may be termed the indispensable small-change of a language.

Woman is linguistically quicker than man: quicker to learn, quicker to hear, and quicker to answer. A man is slower: he hesitates, he chews the cud to make sure of the taste of words, and thereby comes to discover similarities with and differences from other words, both in sound and in sense, thus preparing himself for the appropriate use of the fittest noun or adjective.

The superior readiness of speech of women is a concomitant of the fact that their vocabulary is smaller and more central than that of men.

Such stereotypes are often reinforced by works of fiction. Since little information about prosodic features or paralinguistic features is contained in the normal writing system, novelists frequently try to indicate the tone of voice by descriptive verbs and adjectives to introduce dialogue. An examination of several novels revealed an interesting difference between the expression used to introduce men’s or women’s speech:

**MEN**
said firmly
said bluntly
said coldly
said smugly
urged
burst forth
demanded aggressively
said challengingly

**WOMEN**
said quietly
asked innocently
echoed obediently
said loyally
offered humbly
whispered
asked mildly
agreed placidly

The surprising part is that the two lists are totally distinct. No doubt the novelists intended to be realistic in describing two very different styles of speech but, in doing so, they also reinforce the stereotypes of men and women.

In the past twenty years the question of sex differences in language has been a growth industry as scholars have attempted to claim and to counter claims that there are or are not important differences in the ways in which males and females use language. It would, of course, be surprising if there were not. Both men and women will use the forms of language, registers, and styles appropriate to the activities in which they are engaged. To the extent that these activities differ between males and females, it is to be expected that their language will differ. This much is obvious. There is no need to look for a genetic basis for such differences. It is also obvious that those in a position of power often expect to be treated with deference by those over whom they have power. To the extent that in Western industrialized societies men have more often been in positions of power over women rather than the reverse, it is hardly surprising if women are sometimes found to have used deferential language. There have also been certain violent activities, such as fighting or contact sports, that until recently have been exclusively a male province, and there are forms of language appropriate to them that may have been less common among women.

Even in making such banal statements, one must qualify them by reference to “Western industrialized societies” or by limiting them to a single section of the community. For example, it is probably true that in Britain until World War I middle-class women were less likely to swear in public than middle-class men, but working-class women were less inhibited. (G. K. Chesterton reported that in an argument with a fishwife he could not compete in obscenities with her but triumphed in the end by calling her “An adverb! A preposition! A pronoun!”)

In sociolinguistic studies of complex communities such as Glasgow, New York, and Norwich, it has been shown that women in the lower middle class are likely to be closer in their speech to the women in the class immediately above them than are the men, who are likely to be closer to the men in the class immediately below them. It has been suggested that this is because lower-class speech is associated with toughness and virility and the men in the lower middle class choose to identify with this image rather than with the less "masculine" speech of the upper-class men. It may not be unimportant that in these studies the interviewers were all men.

There seems, however, to be a deep-seated desire to find essential differences between the speech of men and women that can either be attributed to some discriminatory kind of socialization or, even better, to genetic disposition. This can be seen in many references to sex differences in language development. Popular belief and scholarly opinion has generally maintained that girls are more advanced in
language development than boys at the same age. Jespersen, for example, claimed that girls learned to talk earlier and more quickly than boys, and that the speech of girls is more correct than that of boys.

For about fifty years after Jespersen this view was maintained in the scholarly literature on children's development. In 1954 Professor Dorothea McCarthy published an article summarizing what was known about children's language development at that time. Her conclusion about sex differences is:

One of the most consistent findings to emerge from the mass of data accumulated on language development in American white children seems to be a slight difference in favor of girls in nearly all aspects of language that have been studied.

What McCarthy actually found, however, was that the differences were not large enough to be statistically significant. Although psychologists are normally very careful not to make claims about differences that could be the result of chance (that is, are not statistically significant), McCarthy was so convinced that girls were more advanced in their speech that she chose to interpret the evidence the way she did. In a survey of the literature up till 1975, I found that none of the studies provided convincing evidence of consistent sex differences in language development. I concluded that the burden of proof remained with those who wished to claim otherwise. To the best of my knowledge, the situation has not changed since then.

What I did find were many examples of preconceived notions of sex differences from the assertion that girls have an innate tendency toward sedentary pursuits to claims that it is easier and more satisfying for the girl baby to imitate the mother's speech than it is for the boy baby to imitate the father's. One example will illustrate the kind of attitude:

The little girl, showing in her domestic play the over-riding absorption in personal relationships through which she will later fulfill her role of wife, mother, and expressive leader of the family ... learns language early in order to communicate. The kind of communication in which she is chiefly interested at this stage concerns the nurturant routines which are the stuff of family life. Sharing and talking about them as she copies and 'helps' her mother about the house must enhance the mutual identification of mother and child, which in turn ... will reinforce imitation of the mother's speech and promote further acquisition of language, at first oriented toward domestic and interpersonal affairs but later adapted to other uses as well. Her intellectual performance is relatively predictable because it is rooted in this early communication, which enables her (environment permitting) to display her inherited potential at an early age.

This is contrasted with the interests of boys:

Their preoccupation with the working of mechanical things is less interesting to most mothers and fathers are much less available.

As a result the boy's language development is slower:

His language, less fluent and personal and later to appear than the girl's, develops along more analytically lines and may, in favourable circumstances, provide the groundwork for later intellectual achievement which could not have been foreseen in his first few years.

Girls, of course, are more predictable:

The girl, meanwhile, is acquiring the intimate knowledge of human reactions which we call feminine intuition. Perhaps because human reactions are less regular than those of inanimate objects, however, she is less likely to develop the strictly logical habits of thought that intelligent boys acquire, and if gifted may well come to prefer the subtler disciplines of the humanities to the intellectual rigor of science.

I am not sure whether the writer considered himself a scientist, but if his writing is an example of intellectual rigor, then give me the subtlety of the humanities any day. What makes his statement all the more incredible is that it comes after describing a longitudinal study of children that showed no important sex differences in language development.

One of the problems with attempting to demonstrate differences in language development is that measures of linguistic proficiency, particularly for young children, are extremely crude instruments. Thus it is not surprising that samples of linguistic behavior will reveal occasional differences between subgroups of the sample. Such sex differences that have shown up on tests are much smaller than those that have been shown to relate to social background. The fact that most studies show no sex differences and that many of the findings of small differences have been contradicted in other studies should be sufficient warning against drawing conclusions about the linguistic superiority of either sex.

There are some differences between males and females that do not depend upon unreliable tests of language development. Boys are much more likely to suffer from speech disorders, such as stuttering, than girls. Adult males on average have deeper voices than adult females because the vibrating part of the vocal cords is about a third longer in men. However, there may be social influences on this physiological difference. It has been claimed that in the United States women may speak as if they were smaller than they are (that is, with higher-pitched voices) and men as if they were bigger than they are (that is, with lower-pitched voices). The "Oxford voice" common among Oxford fellows (all male) at one time was remarkably high pitched, and other social groups have adopted characteristic pitch levels that are not totally "natural."

It was reported that once during a debate in the French parliament when a delegate pointed out that there were differences between men and women, another delegate shouted out Vive la difference! It is not necessary to believe that men and women are the same to be skeptical about claims as to the differences in the way men and women speak. The desire to emphasize the differences seems to be
What Language Barrier?

Deborah Cameron

Do men and women really not communicate in the same way? It would seem that the consensus holds this view to be true. But is there scientific evidence to support this Mars-and-Venus theory? Oxford language professor Deborah Cameron investigates the controversy in this essay that challenges the idea that men and women don’t understand each other.

Deborah Cameron is a feminist linguist and professor of language at Oxford University. Much of her academic research focuses on the relationship of language to gender and sexuality. She is the author of The Myth of Mars and Venus (2007), from which this essay is excerpted, appearing in The Guardian on October 1, 2007.

Do men and women speak the same language? Can they ever really communicate? These questions are not new, but since the early 1990s there has been a new surge of interest in them. Countless self-help and popular psychology books have been written portraying men and women as alien beings, and conversation between them as a catalogue of misunderstandings. The most successful exponents of this formula, such as Deborah Tannen, author of You Just Don’t Understand, and John Gray, author of Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus, have topped the bestseller lists on both sides of the Atlantic. Advice on how to bridge the communication gulf between the sexes has grown into a flourishing multimedia industry. Gray’s official website, for instance, promotes not only his various Mars and Venus books, but also seminars, residential retreats, a telephone helpline and a dating service.

Readers who prefer something a little harder-edged can turn to a genre of popular science books with titles such as Brain Sex, Sex on the Brain, The Essential Difference, and Why Men Don’t Iron. These explain that the gulf between men and women is a product of nature, not nurture. The sexes communicate differently (and women do it better) because of the way their brains are wired. The female brain excels in verbal tasks whereas the male brain is better adapted to visual-spatial and mathematical tasks. Women like to talk; men prefer action to words.

Writers in this vein are fond of presenting themselves as latter-day Galileos, braving the wrath of the political correctness lobby by daring to challenge the feminist orthodoxy that denies that men and women are by nature profoundly different. Simon Baron-Cohen, the author of The Essential Difference, explains in his introduction that he put the book aside for several years because “the topic was just too politically sensitive”. In the chapter on male-female differences in his book about human nature, The Blank Slate, Steven Pinker congratulates himself on having the courage to say what has long been “unsayable in polite company.” Both writers stress that they have no political axe to grind: they are simply following the evidence where it leads, and trying to put scientific facts in place of politically correct dogma.

Yet before we applaud, we should perhaps pause to ask ourselves: since when has silence reigned about the differences between men and women? Certainly not since the early 1990s, when the previous steady trickle of books began to develop into a raging torrent. By now, a writer who announces that sex-differences are
LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Directions: Imagine you are on a university admissions committee and you have received the following letter on behalf on one of your applicants, Jason Wilson.

ANYTOWN PUBLIC SCHOOL
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
1234 ANYTOWN ROAD
ANYTOWN, OKLAHOMA 12345

To the Admissions Committee,

I am writing to tell you what a unique individual Jason Wilson is. I have been teaching for over twenty years, and can honestly say that I have never taught anyone like him. When he turns in his work, I am always amazed at its quality. His research papers are the talk of the English department. In class, he is always energetically engaged in discussions. Your university would bring out Jason's talents and creativity. I am confident that Jason has the ability to do well in the future. He will continue to demonstrate the same level of ability and commitment that he has demonstrated in high school. I would like to recommend Jason to your university.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at (703) 555-1234. Thank you for your consideration,

Melanie Tacoma
English teacher
Sex differences in humans have been studied in a variety of fields. In humans, biological sex is determined by five factors present at birth: the presence or absence of the SRY gene (an intronless sex-determining gene on the Y chromosome), the type of gonads, the sex hormones, the internal reproductive anatomy (such as the uterus), and the external genitalia. Genetic sex is determined solely by the presence or absence of a Y chromosome. Phenotypic sex refers to an individual's sex as determined by