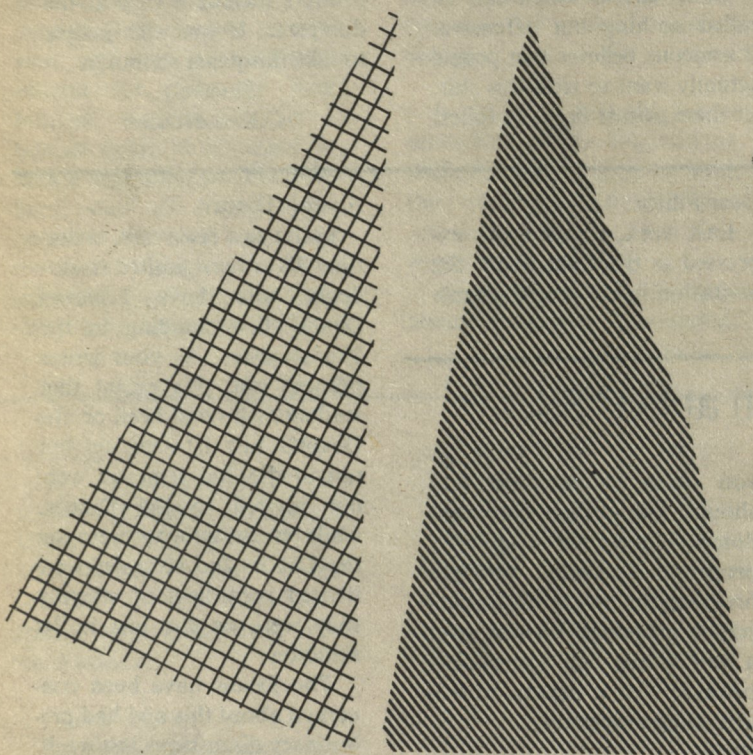
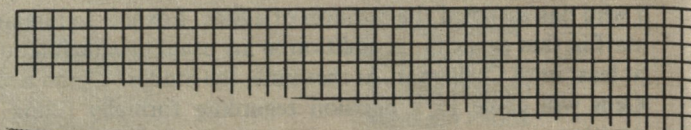


Speaking A Different Language



By Maggie DeVries
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A researcher, pen and paper in hand, is sitting in on an informal meeting between students planning a benefit concert to raise money to send school supplies to Nicaraguan students, hit badly by the U.S. trade embargo against the Sandinista government.

She is listening carefully to the discussion, noting words and pronunciations, documenting the number of hesitations and interruptions, and timing the length of the students' utterances.

Jeremy: "I think the benefit

should take place a week Saturday ... I've made arrangements for three bands to play ... at this point, we only need to delegate duties — Tara how would you like to take care of the information tables at the benefit?"

Tara: "um, well sure, I guess I wouldn't mind too much, but, well (pause), I'm sorry to say this, but I don't know if we should have the benefit so late though because the ship for Nicaragua is leaving two days before and ..."

Jeremy (interrupting): "Well, we've already established that the date of the benefit is Saturday." (seven second pause.)

Tara: "Don't you ... I

(stammer), well it seems to me you ... you ... you ... probably (pause) well, maybe it is too late, but I fel —"

Jeremy (interrupting): "You are right Tara. It is too late to change the date ..."

Later in the day, the same researcher goes to lunch in the student cafeteria, and picks up on a conversation between three men and one woman sitting at the same table.

Susan: "I may be wrong, but I think the exam is next Tuesday, isn't it?"

Jeff: "Let's get together and study Wednesday night."

Susan: "But the exam is ..."

Bruce (interrupting): "Why don't you all come over to my place, at say, about 8 o'clock okay? We can cram until the exam starts at 9 in the morning."

Greg: "yeah, but I thought the exam was on Tuesday."

Bruce: "You're right Greg ... how about Monday night?"

Jeff: "Sounds okay to me, how about you Susan?"

Studies such as this are part of a growing field of language research — the role of gender in speech. The emphasis rests primarily on how, under what conditions and why the sexes talk differently.

Recent studies, like the one by University of California sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman, have found that, in average conversation, women ask 70 per cent of the questions while 96 per cent of all interruptions are made by men.

Not only do men do the lion's share of the interrupting, but

men speak with more conviction and often appropriate women's ideas as their own. Women are more likely to turn statements into questions, preface their statements with apologies and seek male validation for their ideas.

From board of trade meetings to local peace groups to student councils to classrooms this pattern is typical.

More and more researchers are trying to discover how and why these differences in the use of language between women and men came about. And feminists have connected these differences to discrimination against women.

"Inspired by the women's movement," writes John Pfeiffer in the journal *Science* '85, "the boom (in the research) started little more than a decade ago."

Prior to the mid-'70s, differences in speech patterns were often explained by researchers — mostly male — as innate, biologically-determined inferiorities on the part of women. Pfeiffer uses the example of Otto Jespersen, a Danish linguist who, writes Pfeiffer, "has earned a prominent place in the feminist rogue's gallery."

In 1922, Jespersen wrote in his book *Language*: "Women much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say."

This loaded statement intimates that women are somehow less 'rational' than men, rather than looking to the underlying reasons why women speak differently than men and how that is connected to their subjugation in a sexist society.

Jespersen neglects to mention that men are usually the culprits that succeeded not only in breaking off women's sentences through interruption but also in judging what is a legitimate thought. Jespersen's statement is an attempt to justify the interruption of women by men.

"Such belittlement of female conversation may be somewhat less frequent nowadays. But it lives on in everyday contexts, hardly surprising since it involves attitudes embedded in thinking that gets passed on like bad genes from generation to generation," writes Pfeiffer.

Over the last decade, studies such as West and Zimmerman's have succeeded in telling us more about the different ways in which men and women use language as well as exposing myths concerning the differences in speech patterns between the sexes.

Nancy Henley and Barrie Thorne write in *Womanspeak and Manspeak: Sex Differences and Sexism in Communication Verbal and Non-Verbal*, "the first myth is that women speak more and longer than men. This is simply not so," they write. "In study after study, men have been found to speak more often and at greater lengths than women, and to interrupt other speakers more than women do."

Henley and Thorne go on to quote from a study conducted in 1975 which asked both men and women to describe their reactions to "stimulus" picture with no time limitations. "Females took an average of around three minutes, and males averaged 13 minutes — in fact, some of the males talked beyond the half an hour that the research had of recording tape, and could only be counted as talking half an hour."

Another study by Zimmerman and West, based on same-sex conversations and mixed

