

Deborah Tannen How Everyday Conversation Affects Relationships

Deborah Tannen: [00:00:00] people often will ask me, so what's the best way to talk and what's best in one situation may not be the best in the other, but it's always best to be aware of all these phenomena all these parameters that affect conversational style so that you can ask if.

I'm not having the effect I want. How could I have talked differently? to have a different effect when you get an impression of what somebody else means you could stop and ask yourself, could I be getting the wrong impression? Could they have a different conversational style,

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Yael Schonbrun: From coast to coast. I'm Dr. Yael [00:01:00] Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

Jill Stoddard: And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book Of Act Metaphors.

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Yael Schonbrun: so I'm here today with Yael to introduce this episode with Dr. Deborah Tannen. And I found the information in this episode really [00:03:00] fascinating because what Dr. Tannen talks about is conversational style and how. We often have misunderstandings when we have a mismatch in the way we talk about things.

So for example, , she talks a lot in the episode about directness versus indirectness. And sometimes we think we're being direct when really we're being indirect and vice versa. And what I came away from this with is needing to have a keener ear and noticing when the people that we're talking to might have a different conversational style.

And that when we notice there's a mismatch, . It might allow us to work around misunderstandings, but Yael, I was excited to do this intro with you, given that you're a couples therapist and I am not a couples therapist. So I'm curious, what are your thoughts in terms of, you know, what we can learn from this episode and how we can really apply this knowledge?

[00:04:00] yeah. As I was listening to the episode, it just really struck me how relevant so many of these messages are for the kind of couples work that I do because one of the core messages really is to gain flexibility. And awareness of what conversational style works best in a given circumstance. And so I think this question of, you know, how does it come up in couples therapy?

And then what are tools that couples might take away from couples therapy is, is one that most listeners might benefit from. So for example, I often have partners that miscommunicate a lot without understanding why.

And so part of the couple's work is to figure out where the misunderstanding comes from.

So one of the culturally familiar examples of different ways that people talk and express love is this idea of love languages. This comes from Gary Chapman's work and he offers five different love languages that people.

Sort of have primacy in so I may be more likely to communicate my care for somebody through words. And my partner may be more likely to [00:05:00] express their care for me through gift giving. Those are two of the love languages, and yeah, if you can kind of figure out your style of language and then your partner style of language, then it becomes a little bit easier to figure out where the flexibility needs to come in.

And so just to carry this metaphor a little bit further, what I often explain to couples is that right? You can think about your own love language as your primary language. So say I know that my primary language is English. It was the first language I ever spoke. It's the language I'm really fluent in.

And you can think of your partner's primary , love language as, as a different language entirely. So for example, that their primary language is French. Now you would never expect somebody who is raised in France and who had for the majority of their life spoken exclusively in French to all of a sudden be.

Perfectly fluent in English. And so when we think about flexibility in that way, the expectations shift, so we might expect that our partner gains some language and some ability to have conversation in our language [00:06:00] English, and that we might try to learn some of their language to be conversant in French, but we're never going to expect ourselves or our partner to speak fluently in the language that wasn't primarily theirs.

And so if you can. Develop some flexibility around your expectations and also develop a willingness to sort of meet your partner halfway. Then you can have a more effective conversation. so those are some of the ways that, , I offer the differences in, in how to think about conversational style to couples.

One other thing that she talks a bit about is that. There can be changes that we make in speaking, but then there can also be changes in how we listen to one another. And this is also something that comes up a lot in couples therapy because often both partners are really longing to have somebody hear them.

And so they're, they're kind of speaking as loud as they can, as often as they can and still feeling like the other person isn't getting it. And I think what often happens there is that there's this cultural, , Imperative, I [00:07:00] think of speaking and, and what she brings up is that that's not true.

Cross-culturally that in some other cultures, listening is much more emphasized. And when we listen better, we can hear more deeply and then we can actually end up having a more effective turn at speaking, right. If we really hear our partner, and we let them know that we heard them.

It's much more likely that they're going to then give us a turn to speak. And so I talk a lot with couples about how important it is to listen and listen well, and one of the tools that we

go over and over, and this can be kind of annoying for couples. Cause I do broken record. This is the utility of reflective listening and what that is.

Summarizing what it is that you heard. So therapists do this all the time. So what I'm, what I thought I heard there was, and you kind of do just a real brief summary of what it is that, , you think the main messages and the great news is if you get it right, then the speaker feels really good.

You've got them. You understood. And if you didn't get it right, [00:08:00] then the speaker has a chance to correct. You.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. So it really builds the rapport, which has to be a better state from which to have a conversation, especially if it's a difficult conversation. And I love the speaking French example like that just. Hit me. It made it make so much sense to me. And I noticed having this like immediate sense of greater empathy for my partner.

And when you talk about, speaking versus listening, I immediately, I immediately flashed to the scene in pulp fiction, the movie where Vincent Vega and Mrs. Mia Wallace are out on a date and she asks him, , I might be paraphrasing here, but she says, do you listen?

Or do you wait to speak? And he says, I'd like to say I listen, but really I wait to speak. And I think that was such a universal moment where we all kind of go. Oh, shoot me too. And that part of it that comes [00:09:00] from, you know, like some anxiety, especially if you're having a difficult conversation or if you feel like you want to prove your point and you want to be right.

When really the best thing we can do is just kind of like open up and receive what the other person is saying. And you're setting the stage for a much more, potentially much more productive conversation as is. That's what I'm hearing you say Yael. Did I get that right?

Yael Schonbrun: You did and it feels so good. The other point, the other point that I'll just make, which, which I think is sort of consistent with the value of listening is just the value of slowing down. And I think we are so in a rush to hear, to speak, to get things solved, that we value efficiency over effectiveness.

What's ironic about that is sometimes when we're really, really efficient and we're really ineffective. Ultimately we're not that efficient because we've got to sort of come back and read it, do it. And in your conversation [00:10:00] with Dr. Tannen, and you also talk about this sort of the importance of slowing down.

Problem solving in order to increase effectiveness. And that is something that I talk a lot about that sometimes a part of why we're so in a rush to speak is that we think we have the answer or the fix, or we already understand, but when we don't slow down to just be curious, we often don't give ourselves a chance to understand more deeply, and that is ultimately, and most often going to be what's most effective.

And I'll say that even knowing that I have a hard time slowing down. And so that's one of the things that I'm constantly working on is to slow down, to listen more, to be more patient. And it's it's hard work, but when I'm successful, I notice I'm much more effective.

Jill Stoddard: Well, I think this is a really cool call to action for listeners. We're all still, you know, stuck at home a lot in a pandemic with the same people. It's a lot of together time. So maybe we can all take [00:11:00] this. Next week or two and practice slowing down and listening and see what kind of impact that has on our everyday conversations.

So enjoy this episode with dr. Deborah Tannen.

Dr. Deborah Tannen is university professor and a professor of linguistics at Georgetown university and the author of many books and articles about how the language of everyday conversation affects relationships. She is best known as the author of *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, which was on the New York Times bestseller list for nearly four years, including eight months as number one and has been translated into 31 languages.

Her other books have won many awards and several have spent time on the New York Times bestseller list, including *You Were Always Mom's Favorite: Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives*, *You're Wearing That? Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation*, and *Talking from Nine to Five: Women and Men at work*. Dr. Tannen has been a [00:12:00] frequent guest on television and radio news and information shows, including the *Colbert Report*, *20/20*, *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, the *Rachael Ray Show*, PBS news hour, *Oprah*, *Hardball*, and *Nightline*.

welcome Dr. Tannen. Thank you so much for being here. You have done so much. I don't even know where to begin, but first I'd like to congratulate you on your recent memoir, which I'd like to talk about at the end of our interview, but the, the way that I came . To reach out to you actually is that I'm slowly, you're working on a memoir of my own. And in doing that research for that to make sense of some experiences related to gender and power apologies, guilt, conflict criticism, assertiveness, everywhere I turned, I came across you. and I found it all just so incredibly fascinating.

And so I thought, why not see if I can have a conversation directly with dr. Tannen that others might benefit too. So since you are an expert in all things [00:13:00] communication, , maybe we can start with how this is most relevant with everything that we have going on today. I mean, you know, between the pandemic and the election and the racial justice movement.

There's certainly no shortage of places that we can go. , but I thought, yeah, maybe we could start with communication at home.

Deborah Tannen: Thank you. , thank you for that lovely introduction and for mentioning my memoir, which yes, I am very excited about so different from everything else I've written. My own work is about ways of speaking. the huge difference is that now everybody's home.

All the time. so if you have certain frustrations with your partner or whoever you're living with your kids, your parents, if you worked, you got out of the house and you were in a different environment.

And, it's been fascinating that some research, including the work of Arlie Hochschild, she would be a great person for you to talk to if you could, that many women looked [00:14:00] forward to going to work. They found that easier to manage than their lives at home. that the second shift at home was more challenging than the first shift, at work so because, , couples are home all the time.

Parents and children are home all the time. Siblings are home all the time. The kinds of frustrations that, , were common across genders across ages just across different conversatioal styles, that's going to be amplified now. So let me just say a little bit about it. What I mean, when I say conversational style, When I first wrote the first book that I wrote for general audiences, rather than academic audiences was a book called That's not what I meant.

And, when I was, is interviewed on that book, people would often say to me, well, wouldn't this be a better world? If , people just said what they meant. And my comment at the time was [00:15:00] we do say what we mean. But we say it in our own conversational style. If you talk to someone whose conversational style is relatively similar, chances are you're going to understand what they mean.

They're going to understand what you mean, and you may have some problems, but it's not going to be. endemic. When you talk to someone whose conversational style is relatively different, then you assume they would mean what you would mean. If you said the same thing in the same context, and if the conversation style is different, they don't so some examples that frequently caused issues between women and men, , include what I call indirectness.

I'll just give you an example of that. Cause it's kind of a. Emblematic example of how you draw conclusions that are based on how you would have meant it. And it may not be accurate for how the other person meant it. So this was a real [00:16:00] example. Somebody told me he was driving along with his wife. They were coming home from somewhere and she said, um, are you thirsty deer?

Would you like to stop for a drink? And he wasn't. So he said, no. And then it turned out that she was kind of frustrated because she had wanted to stop for a drink and his feeling was, and he said to me, why does she play games with me? Why didn't you just tell me that she wanted to stop? And I said, I'm pretty sure it wasn't that she wanted you to stop.

And you didn't. She probably wanted a different conversation. So when she asked, are you thirsty? Would you like to stop for a drink? She probably did not expect a yes, no answer. She probably expected something more like, um, I don't know, how do you feel about it? And then she could say, well, I don't know, how do you feel about it?

And then they could talk about how they both felt about it and make a decision [00:17:00] taking everybody's preferences into account. And that's, what's key in everything I write

about. I talk about message and meta message. So the message is the meaning of the words. The metamessage is what it says about the relationship that you're saying these words in this way, at this time.

So when she started by saying, asking him, did he want to stop for a drink rather than simply stating her preference, the Meta message is she was taking his preferences into account. And when he answered, no, the metamessage from her point of view was. I don't care what you want. I'm just going to tell you what I want and that's what we're going to do.

And so that often leads to later frustration. , so I've heard about a conversation that goes something like, why didn't you tell me, well, you, we always do what you want anyway. You never listened to what I want. And I think it's as frustrating to him as it is to her. A way to look at [00:18:00] these conversational style differences is if you have a decision to make, you could start vague and find out, work away to a decision by finding out where everybody stands on it, or you could start specific and work your way out, which assumes. you're edging toward a decision that the other one is not happy with.

They'll tell you. And interestingly, this actually happens in the workplace as well. , a book I wrote about women and men at work, it was called talking from nine to five. , I actually encountered a manager who told me when he has a decision to make. He makes a decision. He announces it and he assumes, if anybody isn't happy with it, they'll tell him that's kind of similar to, , making a decision about what restaurant to go to.

I'll tell you the restaurant I want. And I assume if you don't like it you'll tell me that will work for some people, but not others. And I'm sure that the manager who told me that, who happened to be a guy. he would have [00:19:00] done that. So he assumes others would also do it. And I'm sure that there are many who work for him, who would feel like the wife felt when she said, are you thirsty?

You want to stop for drink? And he said, no, that that's the end of the discussion. That there are many people I'm sure who worked for this manager who felt he made his decision. It's a done deal. He doesn't care what we want.

Jill Stoddard: And he's also in a position of power.

Deborah Tannen: Oh, absolutely.

Jill Stoddard: And so the degree to which someone will speak up if they perceive themselves in a power position or a one down position.

I think there was an article I came across, correct me if the details of this are wrong, but where you talked about a research study, looking at pilots and co-pilots and the amount of time that they would spend speaking, depending on whether they saw themselves in the. Power position or non power position.

So what you're talking about gets so complicated because we have this intersection of gender and what happens culturally, and societally in terms of the way girls versus boys are raised in terms [00:20:00] of the ways. One ought to speak. And for girls, if they are too

direct or they talk, quote, unquote, if they talk too much or more than boys, there's a true likability penalty.

You know, there are consequences to that, which you talk a lot about. And then there's this intersection of gender with status and power and the way those things interact with one another.

Deborah Tannen: Yes. , every statement you just made, , made me think, I want to make a little hour long lecture on each aspect of it.

So let me see how many I can hit briefly.

first of all. the workplace, the arrow airline pilots.

That was fascinating. I'm so glad you pointed that out. , this was a research done by other linguists where they actually listened to the black box recordings, preceding accidents, and discovered that often the copilot four saw the problem and tried to tell the pilot, but tried to tell them indirectly, the pilot ignored it.

, Charlotte Lindy is one person [00:21:00] who worked on this for NASA and they, , apparently based on her insight, decided to train copilots to be more direct. we read this article , in a seminar. I was teaching at Georgetown, and I had a student in the class. These were grad students from Japan. And he thought that that was a peculiar way to go about correcting for this.

Why don't they train their pilots to listen for indirectness. And I love that because it is definitely a bias of. Kind of mainstream American discourse. That directness is good and indirectness is bad. And people often will say things that I have come across statements. If so-and-so had been more direct, then the outcome would have been better.

And I know sometimes directness even means honesty to Americans, but. Many Asian culture. Certainly Japanese is very much an [00:22:00] example of this indirectness is the norm. The best communication is where people understand each other with nothing being said directly. so a tiny example of that, many years ago when, bill Clinton was president and he made some kind of reference to.

The fact that it would, he said it as a fact that often when Japanese, they say yes, they mean no. And the then prime minister, premier of Japan was very upset by that. And he said that that was completely, , untrue. He, there was Influencive , and at that point I had a Japanese grad students. She was, , again, PhD student, and I said, but.

It is true. We know that there's an article by a Japanese linguist. That's called 18 ways of saying no in Japanese and not one of them was no.

So why was he taking offense? And she said, because we are saying no, [00:23:00] When we say those things we are saying no, and that is so revealing. It is so significant. And this happens with conversations among Americans of different ethnic backgrounds, regional

backgrounds, and often gender. So, so often, like, let me give you another, just a couple of examples again about this indirectness in gender and how it comes in the workplace.

so I was the speaker at a conference and happened to be a conference for women and in professional life. So the speakers were all women, the attendees were all women and I was one of the speakers. And when I arrived, the conference, organizers said that another speaker one who we both knew was not gonna make it.

And she said, Judy called me this morning. And she said, I'm coming down with something. I have a, I have a slight fever and feeling horrible, but if you need me to come and give my paper, of course [00:24:00] I'll do it. and she told the organizer, said to me, and I told her, I need you to stay home and take care of yourself.

And I said, I love that. That is wonderful. Can I use that in my talk because I was going to talk about indirectness and she said, yes, of course, it was an example of great direct communication.

Wow.

Jill Stoddard: Then it became an even better example to you.

Deborah Tannen: Exactly. Yeah. Even better example. Thank you exactly. The kind of thing that this Japanese student of mine commented about when we hear ourselves as saying no, she, it was completely self evident that when Judy said, I'm sick, but if you need me to come and give my talk, I will, she knew her friend.

Wasn't going to say, I don't care if you're sick, you come and give that paper. So it was just an agreement to say she couldn't come in a way that, [00:25:00], was, was more polite in a way kinder, so she didn't feel like she was. Backing out of her own decision, the one running the conference didn't feel that this speaker had finked out.

She had been gracious and told her not to come. Everybody feels better about it, but it was completely clear and clear as direct then.

Jill Stoddard: when you first said, she said it was a good example of direct communication. My brain initially went, yes, it is. It is like, it took me a second to go, Oh wait. No, it actually isn't.

Yes. And not only kinder, but it, it focuses on the rapport building dimension of the conversation, which is something you talk about. A lot of the way women tend to communicate versus the way.

Deborah Tannen: Men yes. In the book, you're just don't understand. I talk about rapport talk and report talk. but report talk can [00:26:00] create rapport.

If you both agree, that's the best way to communicate. Uh, and so I think it's so important to keep in mind. This is where the linguistics come in, . That communications are ritual. We don't, we're not dictionaries, we're not walking dictionaries and grammar books. We'll use language the way other people use it.

We say what we have learned over time is the right way to say things. Someone who that's, this is where this idea of conversational style comes in. And so someone who shares our conversational style shares our idea of how this conversational rituals should go. Someone who doesn't will say it's about, you didn't say what you meant, but it's really that they don't share the ritual.

So the part two of that example of, , directness, , shortly after that, that happened. I was in the office of a colleague of mine and her phone rang. This was before emailing. It's been [00:27:00] interesting to see how this plays out email, but, , The phone rang and I heard her side of the conversation and it was something like this.

Oh, I don't see how I possibly could. I am. So over committed this chart, I am teaching an overload class. I've got two dissertation students that are finishing up this chart. , I'm on so many other, there's just no way I can do it, but if you can't find anyone else, of course, I wouldn't let you down. And then she hung up and she looked at me with genuine shock on her face.

And she said, I can't believe it. I told him I couldn't do it. And he put me on the committee anyway. And so of course I pointed out to her. You told him in your style that you couldn't do it, but you ended up saying if he really needed you to your word and he took you literally, now it could be. He knew she didn't mean it [00:28:00] and just took advantage that indirectness gives you an opening.

, but I think it's quite likely that he took, he really believed that she meant if he really needed her, she'd do it. And he really needed it just as when the sick. A speaker said, if you really need me to come and give my talk, she knew, she couldn't say, I really need you. Right. Of

Jill Stoddard: course. And this, this makes me think about what you were saying in the Japanese culture.

someone's point of view is you need to be more direct. And the Japanese students said, well, why can't you learn to listen? For indirectness. And it makes me think in, in terms of gender, you know, we're hearing a lot these days about women, you need to lean in, you need to demand a seat at the table and speak up more and you know, all of these kinds of things and, and stop apologizing so much.

Right. But in an, in essence, it's sort of like we're saying women, you need to be more like men, instead of saying, maybe men need to apologize more. [00:29:00] Maybe men need to speak less. So there's more room for women to speak up. And so it sort of reminds me of that in talking about this like mismatch in styles that there's not a right or wrong way.

That one has to be more like the other, but that, I think what you're saying is we have to be more aware of these differences and learn how to kind of be. Open to all of them. Is that right?

Deborah Tannen: Yes, that's absolutely right. , people often will ask me, so what's the best way to talk and I know what's best in one situation may not be the best in the other, but it's

always best to be aware of all these phenomena all these parameters that affect conversational style so that you can ask if.

I'm not having the effect I want. How could I have talked differently? to have a different effect when you get an impression of what somebody else means you could stop and ask yourself, could I be getting the wrong impression? Could they have a different conversational style,

Jill Stoddard: I'm so excited to announce that my book *Be Mighty* is going to be featured in a virtual book [00:30:00] club with hiitide. So if you would like to be part of a community of learners where you can work through brief exercises together in their really cool, easy to use app, and you'd like to have two live, intimate, chats with me,

you can check out *Be Mighty* with hiitide, and if you , go to offtheclockpsych.com and go to our sponsor page, you can sign up there and get a 15% off discount coupon. So check it out.

Deborah Tannen: I'm glad you mentioned that about apologies.

It was one of the most frustrating things to me. When my book *Talking from Nine to Five* was published about the workplace. I have a chapter there and apologies, I talk, say a lot about it. And I do make the point that women tend to apologize more than men. I also point out that very often. It's not an apology it's often, I'm sorry that happened.

It's taking the other [00:31:00] person's experience into account it's misinterpreted as an apology. So quick example of that, that was reported to me. A teacher had sent a difficult student to the principal. Yeah. And when she ran into the principal later, he said he had suspended the student and she said, Oh, I'm so sorry.

And he said, don't apologize. It's not your fault. She wasn't apologizing. She was saying, I'm sorry, the student was as suspended. I regret it. I'm sorry that happened. Not. An apology.

Jill Stoddard: it's sort of the way we say, I'm sorry. When someone tells us they've lost someone, you know, Oh, my grandfather died. Oh, I'm so sorry.

And in that context, we all seem to know that the person is not saying this was my fault and I'm apologizing for, for the F for this fact. But in other contexts,

Deborah Tannen: Absolutely not getting that.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah,

Deborah Tannen: that's absolutely right. , but in the workplace often we do take it to mean we missed the fact that in that context, it could be, an [00:32:00] expression of condolences, especially of a regret and take it as an apology.

but also I never say in that book, women should apologize less for the reason you just gave the double bind. A double bind is worse than a double standard, double standard. Yeah, it

means women are judged by different standard, but you'll meet that standard. They have to work twice as hard. They have to be twice as good, but they can meet that standard.

A double bind is a situation where you have two sets of requirements and anything you do to fulfill one violates the other in the workplace. Our expectations for how a person in authority should speak. Is, opposed to our expectations of how a woman should speak. So if she fulfills expectations for a woman should speak, she's lacking in confidence, lacking in competence.

If she's talks in a way that a manager or a person in authority is expected to speak, [00:33:00] she's too aggressive. People just don't like her. And that certainly comes up all the time in public life. It's extremely difficult for women in public life to be, think of women on the campaign trail to be forceful.

Talk about what they've done, , show, , emotion, often anger and things that are happening that they don't think are good. All those things are unacceptable in a woman. So, , I never said in the book that women should stop apologizing. In fact, , one very specific example, a woman told me when she was first promoted, she talked in the way, the previous person who had held that position talked, he happened to be a guy, , and, and kind of what they tell people often in a position of authority, never apologize.

Never explain. And she was getting a very bad reaction and she found that when she began to apologize more, she got a better reaction. [00:34:00] Oh, I'm so sorry. This is because people liked her more. This is what they expected from a woman. So I'm not giving advice either way. I'm saying you have to be cautious.

You have to be the antenna for. The effects of the ways you're speaking and consider changing how you're speaking, if you feel comfortable doing so. It's extremely frustrating that it's always women who are asked to change

Jill Stoddard: it is

I, my last interview was with Alicia Menendez who wrote the book, the likeability trap.

So, I don't know if you're familiar with that, but the entire book is about exactly this double bind that you're talking eabout and how, you know, often the advice is for women to change. When in reality, you know, this is a systemic and institutional issue. , But what you're saying is that, you know, the way we choose to behave is really context sensitive.

And in certain contexts, it is like survival to [00:35:00] do what you need to do, like in the workplace. , and sort of picking and choosing when you jump in or fight the fight if you will.

So that's tricky.

Deborah Tannen: By the way, the same is true for women in the positions of power because they also, I went into this when I wrote talking from nine to five, I, spent a significant amount of time in several, large corporations in every department where I was.

Introduce phase told me, and this is our highest ranking person, woman. She's she's got a soft touch. This is her highest ranking woman. She's kind of aggressive, but she's really good. There was always a statement about issue aggressive or is she not, is she, does she have a light touch or not? That wasn't the case with guys.

If I was introduced to a guy who was high up, , you know, this is John, he had this department that, that judgment is always over, , women's heads. And we know that there's that word that starts with B, which is always [00:36:00] hovering somewhere over our shoulder.

Jill Stoddard: Right. And the judgment is about how they are not about what they do.

And that's the other. Thing that is not, you know, men or men are not judged for their personality and how they are and the way they say things or how they look they're judged for what they do. And, you know, for women it's both.

Deborah Tannen: Yeah. I wouldn't be that absolute about it. I mean, certainly if there are aspects of men's personality that attracted attention, that might be the case, but it isn't necessarily the case for all guys.

That's right. And there's a wider

Jill Stoddard: berth for what's

Deborah Tannen: acceptable. Yeah. and there's always that question, hovering over the shoulders of women. so the quick example, I was going to give the power dynamic. , a woman who owned a bookstore had told me she, I had a problem with the manager and had to have a talk with him and it turned out.

she felt, she had asked him to do something that he had said he would do, and then he didn't do it. And they traced it to a conversation where , she had said to him, [00:37:00] something like the bookkeeper needs help with the billing. How would you feel about helping her out? And he said, fine. By which he meant I'll think about how I would feel about helping her out.

And he decided that he had something more important to do. And so he didn't do it. He didn't hear it as I am telling you to go help the bookkeeper with the billing. So I was fascinated by that. And then maybe a month or so later I was talking to her and I said, , how are things with the manager? And she said, fine, we don't have those problems anymore.

And I said, have you changed your way of telling him to do things? And she said, no, I talked the same way, but now he knows how. I mean it, I love that because she was the owner. So if he didn't adjust to how she meant what she said, she could fire him. So definitely the power dynamic plays in there, but it's not the whole story.

I mean, there are definitely, I encountered many, many examples where [00:38:00] women were the authorities and yet. Felt that they had to talk closer to the way women were expected to talk in order to get the work done. , one other example, I actually made a

training video called talking nine to five. And in there, I just video that just got picked up with a film crew that was a recording and various companies.

They were in Minnesota. So this was in Minneapolis. , and you see this woman talking to a guy and she's being so tentative. And at one point she says, do you think you could get that done? Today's we could send that out to them. And you hear him off the screen say Nope. And the audience often laughs and well, it turns out I talked to her afterwards, turns out.

He did end up doing it. Yeah. She said they were it's a PR firm. She was the manager. He was the art director and she didn't think of it as gender. She said, these arty types are very prickly and you have to handle them with kid gloves. They always want more [00:39:00] time. The artists always want more time. But I need to get the work out of them so we can give it to the client.

, and she said she has learned over time that she gets a better response. He's more likely to come around if she starts in that tentative way. And she didn't think it had to do with her gender, but I would be surprised if it wasn't at least in part that he reacted more positively when she talked in a way that he felt he just expected.

maybe he just felt better feeling that he had a little more volition in it.

Jill Stoddard: So, so much of this, as we were saying before, sounds like an issue of match. And I'm thinking about the imbalance of responsibilities.

in heterosexual relationships with household duties and childcare and homeschooling in this current situation that we're in. And it seems like in terms of that, in terms of how we're negotiating our behavior in the pandemic, when like some people are very strict about [00:40:00] masks and social distancing and other people are maybe less.

So, you know, it seems to me that communication is more important than it has maybe ever been. And that if we're going to be navigating these difficult conversations, one of the things that we need to be listening for is different conversational style. And either calling that out by saying, well, I think what you're saying is this, or I think what you want is this, or trying to match it.

If we are sensitive enough to be picking it up, Whereas, what I think happens is people either avoid having the conversation altogether, they begin the conversation. And when there is that mismatch, they get frustrated and just cut it off. , but like not pushing forward to the point of trying to come up with a mutually beneficial resolution.

Like we don't have to agree about. Having the same rules on masks and social [00:41:00] distancing, but we have to find a way to come together if we're going to hang out as friends or if a workplace is asking staff to return, who aren't feeling safe or with holidays approaching and some family members wanting to fly to visit one another and others.

Lacking that comfort level. You know, these are all things that require really difficult conversations.

And what I'm hearing you say is that, you know, conversational style is going to be critically important in how well those conversations go, like in terms of how productive they end up being.

Deborah Tannen: Yeah, that's absolutely true. We have to also start from the assumption that everybody's nerves are raw. Yeah, everybody's under pressure.

Everybody is feeling high levels of anxiety, fear. , everybody is, is experiencing, was Michelle Obama who put it this way? A low level of depression. Yeah. Cause we're all in, [00:42:00] in this bizarre situation and getting scarier and Bizzare or by the minute. , so , keep that in mind. If something that somebody else says rubs you the wrong way, maybe stop for a moment and ask whether you also might be occasionally talking in ways that might, , rub others the wrong way because of his pressure.

That we're all under a second thing I would say is meta communicate, talk about the communication. so if you feel that you've, Interpreted as somebody, something somebody said in a way that is upsetting to you, just check that that really is how they meant it. It would be helpful more often to say to somebody, well, how could I have said that differently for you to have heard it differently?

Is there something about the way I said it that. Puts you over the edge and be open to them telling you what it was, but that's the way that puts them over the edge and [00:43:00] consider stopping for a moment and maybe trying to see the same thing, , in a slightly different way. , and it's really, really important.

I mean, if this, the psychologist say this all the time, talk as much as possible in terms of what things make you feel rather than. What's wrong about what they said or, ,

Jill Stoddard: the I statements instead of yes. Yes.

Deborah Tannen: , you know, , we talked so much about the meanings of words in conversation, but when you have an ongoing relationship, the meaning of everything you say comes partly from everything you said before.

And there, we all bring that to the current conversation. Okay. And so just being aware of that can be very helpful too, to step back and ask, , did he really say that? Did she really say that? Or am I assuming it because of conversations we've had before?

Be very careful of email. I think email is an extremely mixed blessing. [00:44:00] So often I do it myself all the time. A little, yeah. The voices saying in my head, don't do this on email. It's not a good idea, but I'm in a hurry.

I have so many other things to do. You dash off an email it's satisfying. You've gotten it done. Also. You've had the chance to express. Your side of it, but often you get carried away when, if you were had the person in front of you and they were to tell you their perspective sooner, you wouldn't keep going in that direction.

Jill Stoddard: Right. And I think the same thing happens with text messaging too. It's so it's so much emotionally easier to shoot off a text than it is to have a one on one conversation, but there's so much space for misinterpretation or assumptions about tone.

Deborah Tannen: right, exactly.

Very different ideas about what's appropriate to say, , what the, the opportunities for misunderstanding are just enormous. When it's written language, you don't have tone of voice, [00:45:00] you don't have facial expression. , you don't know what mood the person is in when they're getting it, reading it. , you may be going off on a text message that person may feel this is not a right appropriate topic for a text message.

Right? , so yeah, if, if it's a serious thing, if it's an important thing, it might be worth setting a time to have a voice to voice conversation.

Jill Stoddard: And, you know, I think that this too can become context sensitive because I'm thinking about a couple of different times where I thought, you know, this is really a conversation that should happen verbally, not over email, I'm thinking of three separate.

Situations that became very serious, where I trusted that. What happened in that verbal conversation would be honored by both sides, but because it wasn't documented. It, it became a problem. And what, actually, my dad, who's an entrepreneur. He gave me the suggestion, have the conversation, but then after the conversation, follow up with an email saying, [00:46:00] here's what we discussed.

Here's what we agreed to. If I don't hear from you by this time, I'll assume we're in agreement. So you're, you're kind of killing two birds with one stone, which I think is excellent.

Deborah Tannen: Yeah. Yeah. It's a great advice. You're getting the advantages of both. You have the conversation to negotiate, making a decision, and then you have the written form to make sure you both agree on where you went.

Jill Stoddard: Right. And, that email could reveal that what one or the other of you was assuming the other person meant. Was inaccurate, right? Like what you were saying at the beginning of this conversation is I thought I was being completely direct when in reality, this was indirect and we're hearing different things.

So it, it kind of solves that problem hopefully as well.

Deborah Tannen: , yeah.

Jill Stoddard: So this past April, , the New York times published an article. That was, it was in the, in her word section titled it's not just you in online meetings. Many women can't get a word in edgewise. [00:47:00] , and this relates to the pandemic and working from home and maybe even schooling from home.

And, you know, the article starts by talking about some of the. Universal challenges that we've all experienced working from home and being online. And in fact, it may be the case that in this very episode, people will hear my son screaming in the background. She's usually in the background of all of my episodes in some way, shape or form.

, but you know, the article, it goes on to say that remote meetings are also really highlighting how difficult it is for women to be heard in group meetings. And you're quoted in that article. And you note that, , online that gender imbalances are really amplified and that it, it boils down to these gender differences in, in conversational style and conversational conventions.

So talk to me a little bit about this and how we understand the specifically when it comes to, you know, zoom platforms and, , working remotely and meeting online versus in person.

Deborah Tannen: Yeah. This is something that has been. , disappointing and [00:48:00] surprising, , about online communication. I remember when, these kinds of meetings first became possible.

It goes back quite a few years. , I was invited by the, , director of some division at a major corporation to come and talk to them. And they were just initiating these kinds of meetings at the time. It would have been, , I don't remember the platform was, but it was a very, very early on and they was so optimistic.

They knew that it was a problem. Women weren't getting heard at meetings. In fact, , at one point the possible topic for my book, which ended up being called talking from nine to five, a possible title was didn't. I just say that. Because it was such a common experience periods of women that they said something at a meeting and it was ignored.

And then later the guy says the same thing and suddenly it's a great idea, but it now it's his idea. , and people really thought this is so great. It was only, it was not a, a [00:49:00] visual platform. It was just typed words. And so they felt people won't see if it's a woman or a man. So they'll listen to them both equally, that inequality won't surface and it turned out that it did big disappointment.

And part of it was the way that the women and men were speaking, that men tended to take more time, , take up more space, , say things with more definiteness. Not start with disclaimers. Like, , I don't know if you've thought of this, but this may not really be a good idea, but, and it's the kind of thing it's so stereotypical.

, it's easy to say, Oh, you're just doing stereotypes here, but then research finds that it still is the case. Women are still often. Starting that way other women tend to, they don't really listen to it. They just block it out. We don't hear that. We just know that's ritual again, conversational [00:50:00] ritual. We realize, Oh yeah, that's just the way she's starting.

And then you listen to what's said, but those who don't start that way ticket literally, I guess. She's not sure she gets, she doesn't know me. , have that much basis where she's saying, , and they draw conclusions based, , and not just about what she's saying with the kind of person she is, which is even more damaging to women.

So, when all these meetings started going online with zoom, it was the same optimism. Everybody's going to have a chance to get heard. And, and some women have reported that they do find it easier, but many say that they don't fit. And the research that was reported in that article indicated that there is evidence that women are still having trouble getting heard.

it seems like part of it is you don't want to interrupt. And so you're waiting for the, pause and that pause never comes. sometimes the chat box can be helpful. You type things in the chat box. And so you'd get it out there, [00:51:00] but sometimes what's in the chat box is ignored because who has time to read the chat box?

, in the book title nine to five, I talk about a Japanese, tradition, which was called Nemawashi. And I'm was told this by, a Japanese woman who wrote a book about comparing Japanese and American communication style.

And her name is Tadri Yamada, and she writes about how in Japanese culture, business culture, too. You don't try to make a decision in a meeting. Cause you know, not everybody is going to be able to say what they think at the meeting. So the person who has the power talks individually, each person privately it's the center of what everybody thinks where everybody is.

And then the meeting is a way. To get everybody's buyin and agreement on the path forward. It's time consuming, but it, it certainly would be a better way to make decisions. If you have the time to do that. [00:52:00] And women always do better at they're given a platform than if they have to claim the platform because of that double bind.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. And I think you had mentioned, I don't remember if it was this article or another one, but you talked a little bit about how this is also affecting kids and teens and young adults who are now schooling online. And there was a certain expectation that the kind of greater anonymity would help kids to talk more.

But the opposite was found, am I, am I getting that right

Deborah Tannen: to know what I'm talking? Yeah. I think we talked about how, I taught. I taught on through zoom in the spring term as I'm not teaching this term, but I did last term, and many of the students in the class I had about 16 students in the class.

, it's always a challenge to us teachers getting the quiet students to talk. And many of us thought, great, this is going to make it easier for the quiet students to talk. And it didn't, very often the quiet students found it [00:53:00] even more intimidating to talk with all these faces staring out at you.

Right. And yeah, you kind of feel like you're being stared down by everybody. And the thought that all of these faces are going to be staring you down. If you talk makes it even harder. And I

Jill Stoddard: think I read somewhere too, that they having your own face staring back at you. It's something that's become an obstacle for people.

They become more self conscious when they can see themselves even. Absolutely.

Deborah Tannen: Yes, absolutely. There is a feature, you know, where you can make yourself invisible and it's probably a good one to giant to use sometimes. Uh, but yeah, that you're facing, looking at yourself all the time and when in real interaction and face to face.

You don't stare at people nonstop. You glance at them, you glance at other people, you glance around the room, but with zoom, you're staring the whole time at this screen, which is part of, I think, why it's so exhausting. , another one thing that my [00:54:00] be instead, help me understand, and maybe people can use this in running meetings.

, the one function that they told me were even better zoom than it did in person. I frequently broke the class into small groups. Because that way everybody could participate. And they said that the small groups were even better as breakout rooms on zoom. Yeah, because they didn't get distracted. I hearing the other people in the other groups, they meet on the small group and three seem to be the best number.

Jill Stoddard: That's good to know. . I don't teach myself anymore. I did for a long time, but I do online webinars and things like that. And I'm still experimenting with some of these different modalities. So it's, it's great. When, you know, research and experience can really lend a voice to how, how best to do this, to get over some of these obstacles.

So, well, I realize we are coming close to the end of our time, so I want to make sure we take a minute. So you've just published a new book and I believe this is your [00:55:00] 26th book, right on top of all the other countless articles and things you've done. And this one is, as you had mentioned earlier, totally different from any of the ones you've written before.

So tell us a little bit about this book and why you decided to write one. That's so different from everything you've been doing.

Deborah Tannen: Yes. Thank you for asking. , this book is about my father. All my other books are based on my area of expertise, language. , how, language affects human relationships.

This book is called finding my father, his century long journey from world war one Warsaw and my quest to follow. Why did I want to write a book about my father? , and it took me so long to write sometimes I think it took me as long as it took me to write all the others put together. , I first got the idea back in the eighties.

I got very serious about it in the nineties. Then put it aside. I wrote a first draft around [00:56:00] 2012, and now here it is coming out in a pandemic as it happens. , why did I want to write it? , yeah. I can answer really on two levels, and maybe a bit of a third, , the personal and the historical, , the personal, I adored my father when I was a kid, though, he was never home.

He was at work and he was also very active in politics. So he was either doing his political work or, or his paid work. And I'm the youngest of three sisters. So even if he was home, he

didn't have a whole lot of time to spend just with me. I'm kind of envious that my oldest sister had him to herself for six, whole years before the next one was born.

I never had them to myself. , and so after he retired, he himself developed a real interest passion for talking about his past. He was born into a Hasidic family in Warsaw. In 1908. So he lived through world war one [00:57:00] in Warsaw, came to the United States when he was 12 in 1920. , and he loved talking about his past and I loved listening.

And suddenly I had this opportunity to spend all this time with him and, uh, and really get to know him in a way that I otherwise wouldn't have had the chance. So it was in a way filling up that hole, you know, to not be too dramatic about it. This hole in my heart, the day I'd been missing him so much, but as he talked, I realized.

That this was, this was an account of the 20th century. He lived to be 98 from 1908 to 2006, and he was completely with it until the end. , so it was world war II, one in Warsaw, this Hasidic community of Warsaw, which he remembered in astonishing detail. He could talk endlessly about. What life was like, who the people were, what their relationships were.

Then he comes to the [00:58:00] United States in 1920, which is the tail end of the massive influx of East European Jews to the United States, as well as the great wave of Italians, Greeks, and other Southern and Eastern Europeans to the United States.

Jill Stoddard: And I read that you, you have not only do you have recordings of him talking about his whole life and history, but that you also found journals.

Is that right? That he had written, I mean, what a gift, all of this is, I don't think it's overdramatic to say it's filling a hole. I mean, I just get the sense, it's like soul nourishing to go through this process.

Deborah Tannen: Yeah. Thank you for putting it that way. Absolutely. Right. And, and since I'm a scholar and a researcher, I love going through documents.

, he left me mountains, mountains. I think saved every letter. He got. Copies of many of the letters he wrote, he has letters, his mother wrote in God letters, his answers wrote and got, he must have, he must have just collected it. You told everybody if you don't want them, I'll take it.

But, , and yeah, he [00:59:00] gave me journals that he kept before he married. And then this was the other big dramatic, dramatic thing. , he and my mother both made reference to a woman who might've married instead of my mother. , they referred to her as my mother's rival. And he, at one point that he had saved her letters, but didn't know where they were.

So I of course got fascinated. If I could read these letters, maybe I could figure out what his relationship with her was like, why did he marry my mother and not her? He actually said at one point, your mother wasn't my girlfriend, Helen was my girlfriend. Well, you know, so what did that mean? What were their different relationships?

Well, I, I found the letters. He told me to keep them, , and, , he also had turned out, had kept copies of many of his letters to her. So I did have a picture of their relationship and I have,

uh, a long chapter on that. Many people tell me it's their favorite chapter. What's kind of led to think

Jill Stoddard: that, that, you know, for you to think.

If this had gone a [01:00:00] different way, you never would have existed.

Deborah Tannen: That is what is so funny, you know, magical thinking, maybe all thinking is magical thinking. I definitely came up, you know, sort of was veering toward the idea that she would, my father should've married her, and her letters are beautiful and I fell in love with her reading letters.

The fact that that would mean I didn't exist. Didn't really figure in it. I had to really ask myself, why am I rooting for her? And what does this represent to me?

Jill Stoddard: Well, it sounds wonderful. And I have already downloaded it myself to my E reader. So I, I love reading memoir and I also. , I appreciate you saying how long it took you to write yours, because then I feel like I still have time to get through my own.

Well, thank you, dr. Tannen so much for joining us. This was such a treat. I just, I find this incredibly fascinating and I appreciate everything that you have given to the world. , in this really [01:01:00] accessible. Way a lot of things that happen in academia and never reach most of the people who could benefit from learning about it.

So I think people who are able to translate that really important scientific knowledge for the general public have a true gift. So thank you for sharing it with us, and I really appreciate you being here.

Deborah Tannen: Well, thank you so much. It's been really a pleasure talking to you and thank you for all the nice things you said, and for a great conversation,

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