

- Kalik, S. (1975) "... Like Anne's gynaecologist or the time I was almost raped": personal narratives in women's rap groups", in C. Farrar (ed.) *Women in Folklore*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Lakoff, R. (1975) *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row.
- LeMasters, E. (1975) *Blue Collar Aristocrats: Life-Styles at a Working-Class Tavern*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Lever, J. (1976) "Sex differences in the games children play", *Social Problems*, 23, 478-83.
- Lever, J. (1978) "Sex differences in the complexity of children's play and games", *American Sociological Review*, 43, 471-83.
- Meditch, A. (1975) "The development of sex-specific speech patterns in young children", *Anthropological Linguistics*, 17, 421-33.
- Philipsen, G. (1975) "Speaking 'like a man' in Teamsterville: cultural patterns of role enactment in an urban neighbourhood", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61, 13-22.
- Sacks, H. (1974) "An analysis of the course of a joke's telling in conversation", in R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (eds) *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Savin-Williams, R. (1976) "The ethnological study of dominance formation and maintenance in a group of human adolescents", *Child Development*, 47, 972-9.
- Soskin, W. and John, V. (1963) "The study of spontaneous talk", in R. Barker (ed.) *The Stream of Behavior*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Strodbeck, F. and Mann, R. (1956) "Sex role differentiation in jury deliberations", *Sociometry*, 19, 3-11.
- West, C. (1970) "Against our will: male interruptions of females in cross-sex conversation", in J. Orasanu, M. Slater and L. Adler (eds) "Language, Sex and Gender: Does La Difference Make a Difference?", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 327, 81-100.
- West, C. and Zimmerman, D. (1977) "Women's place in everyday talk: reflections on parent-child interaction", *Social Problems*, 24(5), 521-9.
- Zimmerman, D. and West, C. (1975) "Sex roles, interruptions, and silences in conversation", in B. Thorne and N. Henley (eds) *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Talk in the Intimate Relationship: His and Hers

Deborah Tannen

Male-female conversation is always cross-cultural communication. Culture is simply a network of habits and patterns gleaned from past experience, and women and men have different past experiences. From the time they're born, they're treated differently, talked to differently, and talk differently as a result. Boys and girls grow up in different worlds, even if they grow up in the same house. And as adults they travel in different worlds, reinforcing patterns established in childhood. These cultural differences include differing expectations about the role of talk in relationships and how it fulfils that role. [...]

To see how male-female differences in conversational style can cause misunderstandings that lead to complementary schismogenesis - a mutually aggravating spiral - in close relationships, let's start by seeing what some of those differences are.

He Said/She Said: His and Her Conversational Styles

Everyone knows that as a relationship becomes long-term, its terms change. But women and men often differ in how they expect them to change. Many women feel, 'After all this time, you should know what I want without my telling you.' Many men feel, 'After all this time, we should be able to tell each other what we want.'

These incongruent expectations capture one of the key differences between men and women. Communication is always a matter of balancing conflicting needs for involvement and independence, but although everyone has both these needs, women often have a relatively greater need for involvement, and men a relatively greater need for independence. Being understood without saying what you mean gives a payoff in involvement, and that is why women value it so highly.

If you want to be understood without saying what you mean explicitly in words, you must convey meaning somewhere else - in how words are spoken, or by meta-messages. Thus it stands to reason that women are often more attuned than men to the metamessages of talk. When women surmise meaning in this way, it seems

mysterious to men, who call it 'women's intuition' (if they think it's right) or 'reading things in' (if they think it's wrong). Indeed, it could be wrong, since metamesages are not on record. And even if it is right, there is still the question of scale: how significant are the metamesages that are there?

Metamesages are a form of indirectness. Women are more likely to be indirect, and to try to reach agreement by negotiation. Another way to understand this preference is that negotiation allows a display of solidarity, which women prefer to the display of power (even though the aim may still be the same – getting what you want). Unfortunately, power and solidarity are bought with the same currency. Ways of talking intended to create solidarity have the simultaneous effect of framing power differences. When they think they're being nice, women often end up appearing deferential and unsure of themselves or of what they want.

When styles differ, misunderstandings are always rife. As their differing styles create misunderstandings, women and men try to clear them up by talking things out. These pitfalls are compounded in talks between men and women because of their different ways of going about talking things out, and their different assumptions about the significance of going about it.

Women Listen for Metamesages

Sylvia and Harry celebrated their golden wedding anniversary at a country club. Some of the guests were there for the whole weekend, most just for the evening of the celebration: a cocktail party followed by dinner. During dinner, the headwaiter approached Sylvia. 'Since we have a rich dessert tonight, and everyone has already eaten at the cocktail party, perhaps you would prefer to cut the anniversary cake at lunch tomorrow?' Sylvia asked the advice of the others at her table. All the men agreed: 'Yes, that makes sense. Save the cake for tomorrow.' All the women disagreed. 'No, the party is tonight. Have the cake tonight.' The men were focusing on the message: the cake as food. The women were thinking of the metamesage: serving a special cake frames an occasion as a celebration.

Why are women more attuned to metamesages? Because they are more focused on involvement, that is, on relationships among people, and it is through metamesages that relationships among people are established and maintained. If you want to take the temperature and check the vital signs of a relationship, the barometers to check are its metamesages: what is said and how.

Everyone can see these signals, but whether or not we pay attention to them is another matter – a matter of being sensitized. Once you are sensitized, you can't roll your antennae back in; they're stuck in the extended position.

When interpreting meaning, it is possible to pick up signals that weren't intentionally sent out, like an innocent flock of birds on a radar screen. The birds are there – and the signals women pick up are there – but they may not mean what the interpreter thinks they mean. For example, Mary looks at Larry and asks, 'What's wrong?' because his brow is furrowed. Since he was only thinking about lunch, her expression of concern makes him feel under scrutiny.

The difference in focus on messages and metamesages can give men and women different points of view on almost any comment. Harriet complains to Mark, 'Why don't you ask me how my day was?' He replies, 'If you have something to tell me, tell me. Why do you have to be invited?' The reason is that she wants the metamesage of interest: evidence that he cares how her day was, regardless of whether or not she has something to tell.

A lot of trouble is caused between women and men by, of all things, pronouns. Women often feel hurt when their partners use 'I' or 'me' in a situation in which they would use 'we' or 'us'. When Mark announces, 'I think I'll go for a walk,' Harriet feels specifically uninvited, though Mark later claims she would have been welcome to join him. She felt locked out by his use of 'I' and his omission of an invitation: 'Would you like to come?' Metamesages can be seen in what is not said as well as what is said.

It's difficult to straighten out such misunderstandings because each one feels convinced of the logic of his or her position and the illogic – or irresponsibility – of the other's. Harriet knows that she always asks Mark how his day was, and that she'd never announce, 'I'm going for a walk', without inviting him to join her. If he talks differently to her, it must be that he feels differently. But Mark wouldn't feel unloved if Harriet didn't ask about his day, and he would feel free to ask, 'Can I come along', if she announced she was taking a walk. So he can't believe she is justified in feeling responses he knows he wouldn't have.

Messages and Metamesages in Talk Between Grown Ups?

These processes are dramatized with chilling yet absurdly amusing authenticity in Peiffer's *Grown Ups*. To get a closer look at what happens when men and women focus on different levels of talk in talking things out, let's look at what happens in this play.

Jake criticizes Louise for not responding when their daughter, Edie, called her. His comment leads to a fight, even though they're both aware that this one incident is not in itself important.

JAKE: Look, I don't care if it's important or not, when a kid calls its mother the mother should answer.
 LOUISE: Now I'm a bad mother.
 JAKE: I didn't say that.
 LOUISE: It's in your stare.
 JAKE: Is that another thing you know? My stare?

Louise ignores Jake's message – the question of whether or not she responded when Edie called – and goes for the metamesage: his implication that she's a bad mother, which Jake insistently disclaims. When Louise explains the signals she's reacting to,

198

Jake not only discounts them but is angered at being held accountable not for what he said but for how he looked – his stare.

As the play goes on, Jake and Louise replay and intensify these patterns:

LOUISE: If I'm such a terrible mother, do you want a divorce?

JAKE: I do not think you're a terrible mother and no, thank you, I do not want a divorce. Why is it that whenever I bring up any difference between us you ask me if I want a divorce?

The more he denies any meaning beyond the message, the more she blows it up, the more adamantly he denies it, and so on:

JAKE: I have brought up one thing that you do with Edie that I don't think you notice that I have noticed for some time but which I have deliberately not brought up before because I had hoped you would notice it for yourself and stop doing it and also – frankly, baby, I have to say this – I knew if I brought it up we'd get into exactly the kind of circular argument we're in right now. And I wanted to avoid it. But I haven't and we're in it, so now, with your permission, I'd like to talk about it.

LOUISE: You don't see how that puts me down?

JAKE: What?

LOUISE: If you think I'm so stupid why do you go on living with me?

JAKE: *Dammit! Why can't anything ever be simple around here?!*

It can't be simple because Louise and Jake are responding to different levels of communication. [...] Jake tries to clarify his point by overelaborating it, which gives Louise further evidence that he's condescending to her, making it even less likely that she will address his point rather than his condescension.

What pushes Jake and Louise beyond anger to rage is their different perspectives on metamesages. His refusal to admit that his statements have implications and overtones denies her authority over her own feelings. Her attempts to interpret what he didn't say and put the metamesage into the message make him feel she's putting words into his mouth – denying his authority over his own meaning.

The same thing happens when Louise tells Jake that he is being manipulated by Edie:

LOUISE: Why don't you ever make her come to see you?

Why do you always go to her?

JAKE: You want me to play power games with a nine year old? I want her to know I'm interested in her. Someone around here has to show interest in her.

LOUISE: You love her more than I do.

JAKE: I didn't say that.

LOUISE: Yes, you did.

JAKE: You don't know how to listen. You have never learned how to listen. It's as if listening to you is a foreign language.

Again, Louise responds to his implication – this time, that he loves Edie more because he runs when she calls. And yet again, Jake cries literal meaning, denying he meant any more than he said.

Throughout their argument, the point to Louise is her feelings – that Jake makes her feel put down – but to him the point is her actions – that she doesn't always respond when Edie calls:

LOUISE: You talk about what I do to Edie, what do you think you do to me?

JAKE: This is not the time to go into what we do to each other.

Since she will talk only about metamesages, and he will talk only about messages, neither can get satisfaction from their talk, and they end up where they started – only angrier:

JAKE: That's not the point!

LOUISE: It's *my* point.

JAKE: It's hopeless!

LOUISE: Then get a divorce.

Conventional wisdom (and many of our parents and English teachers) tell us that meaning is conveyed by words, so men who tend to be literal about words are supported by conventional wisdom. They may not simply deny but actually miss the cues that are sent by how words are spoken. If they sense something about it, they may nonetheless discount what they sense. After all, it wasn't said. Sometimes that's a dodge – a plausible defence rather than a gut feeling. But sometimes it is a sincere conviction. Women are also likely to doubt the reality of what they sense. If they don't doubt it in their guts, they nonetheless may lack the arguments to support their position and thus are reduced to repeating, 'You said it. Yes you did.' Knowing that metamesages are a real and fundamental part of communication makes it easier to understand and justify what they feel. *Edie pt - Normal etc*

'Talk to Me'

An article in a popular newspaper reports that one of the five most common complaints of wives about their husbands is 'He doesn't listen to me any more.' Another is 'He doesn't talk to me any more.' Political scientist Andrew Hacker noted that lack of communication, while high on women's lists of reasons for divorce, is much less often mentioned by men. Since couples are parties to the same conversations, why are women more dissatisfied with them than men? Because what they expect is different, as well as what they see as the significance of talk itself.

The Strong Silent Type

One of the most common stereotypes of a 'real' man is the strong silent type. Jack Kroll, writing about Henry Fonda on the occasion of his death, used the phrases

199

'quiet power', 'abashed silences', 'combustible catatonia', and 'sense of power held in check'. He explained that Fonda's goal was not to let anyone see 'the wheels go around', not to let the 'machinery' show. According to Kroll, the resulting silence was effective on stage but devastating to Fonda's family.

The image of a silent father is common and is often the model for the lover or husband. But what attracts us can become flypaper to which we are unhappily stuck. Many women find the strong silent type to be a lure as a lover but a lug as a husband. Nancy Schoenberger begins a poem with the lines, 'It was your silence that hooked me, / so like my father's.' Adrienne Rich refers in a poem to the 'husband who is frustratingly mute'. Despite the initial attraction of such quintessentially male silence, it may begin to feel, to a woman in a long-term relationship, like a brick wall against which she is banging her head.

In addition to these images of male and female behaviour – both the result and the cause of them – are differences in how women and men view the role of talk in relationships as well as how talk accomplishes its purpose. These differences have their roots in the settings in which men and women learn to have conversations: among their peers, growing up.

Growing Up Male and Female

Children whose parents have foreign accents don't speak with accents. They learn to talk like their peers. Little girls and little boys learn how to have conversations as they learn how to pronounce words: from their playmates. Between the ages of five and fifteen, when children are learning to have conversations, they play mostly with friends of their own sex. So it's not surprising that they learn different ways of having and using conversations.

Anthropologists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (e.g. this volume, p. 417) point out that boys and girls socialize differently. Little girls tend to play in small groups or, even more common, in pairs. Their social life usually centres around a best friend, and friendships are made, maintained, and broken by talk – especially 'secrets'. If a little girl tells her friend's secret to another little girl, she may find herself with a new best friend. The secrets themselves may or may not be important, but the fact of telling them is all-important. It's hard for newcomers to get into these tight groups, but anyone who is admitted is treated as an equal. Girls like to play cooperatively; if they can't cooperate, the group breaks up.

Little boys tend to play in larger groups, often outdoors, and they spend more time doing things than talking. It's easy for boys to get into the group, but not everyone is accepted as an equal. Once in the group, boys must jockey for their status in it. One of the most important ways they do this is through talk: verbal displays such as telling stories and jokes, challenging and sidetracking the verbal displays of other boys, and withstanding other boys' challenges in order to maintain their own story – and status. Their talk is often competitive talk about who is best at what.

From Children to Grown Ups

Feiffer's play is ironically named *Grown Ups* because adult men and women struggling to communicate often sound like children. 'You said so!' 'I did not!' The habits they learned as children – which they don't recognize as attitudes and habits but simply take for granted as ways of talking.

Women want their partners to be a new and improved version of a best friend. This gives them a soft spot for men who tell them secrets. As Jack Nicholson once advised a guy in a movie: 'Tell her about your troubled childhood – that always gets 'em.' Men expect to do things together and don't feel anything is missing if they don't have heart-to-heart talks all the time.

If they do have heart-to-heart talks, the meaning of those talks may be opposite for men and women. To many women, the relationship is working as long as they can talk things out. To many men, the relationship isn't working out if they have to keep working it over. If she keeps trying to get talks going to save the relationship, and he keeps trying to avoid them because he sees them as weakening it, then each one's efforts to preserve the relationship appear to the other as reckless endangerment.

How to Talk Things Out

If talks (of any kind) do get going, men's and women's ideas about how to conduct them may be very different. For example, Diana is feeling comfortable and close to Tom. She settles into a chair after dinner and begins to tell him about a problem at work. She expects him to ask questions to show he's interested; reassure her that he understands and that what she feels is normal; and return the intimacy by telling her a problem of his. Instead, Tom sidetracks her story, cracks jokes about it, questions her interpretation of the problem, and gives her advice about how to solve it and avoid such problems in the future.

All of these responses, natural to men, are unexpected to women, who interpret them in terms of their own habits – negatively. When Tom comments on side issues or cracks jokes, Diana thinks he doesn't care about what she's saying and isn't really listening. If he challenges her reading of what went on, she feels he is criticizing her and telling her she's crazy, when what she wants is to be reassured that she's not. If he tells her how to solve the problem, it makes her feel as if she's the patient to his doctor – a metanessage of condescension, echoing male one-upmanship compared to the female etiquette of equality. Because he doesn't volunteer information about his problems, she feels he's implying he doesn't have any.

Complementary schismogenesis can easily set in. His way of responding to her bid for intimacy makes her feel distant from him. She tries harder to regain intimacy the only way she knows how – by revealing more and more about herself. He tries harder

200

Complementary schismogenesis

by giving more insistent advice. The more problems she exposes, the more impatient she feels, until they both see her as emotionally draining and problem-ridden. When his efforts to help aren't appreciated, he wonders why she asks for his advice if she doesn't want to take it.

'You're Not Listening to Me'

The other complaint wives make about their husbands is, 'He doesn't listen to me any more.' The wives may be right that their husbands aren't listening, if they don't value the telling of problems and secrets to establish rapport. But some of the time men feel unjustly accused: 'I was listening.' And some of the time, they're right. They were.

Whether or not someone is listening only that person can really know. But we judge whether or not we think others are listening by signals we can see — not only their verbal responses but also their eye contact and little listening noises like 'mhm', 'uh-huh', and 'yeah'. These listening noises give the go-ahead for talk; if they are misplaced along the track, they can quickly derail a chugging conversation.

Maltz and Borker also report that women and men have different ways of showing that they're listening. In the listening role, women make — and expect — more of these noises. So when men are listening to women, they are likely to make too few such noises for the women to feel the men are really listening. And when women are listening to men, making more such listening noises than men expect may give the impression they're impatient or exaggerating their show of interest.

Even worse, what women and men mean by such noises may be different. Does 'uh-huh' or 'mhm' mean you agree with what you heard, or just that you heard and you're following? Maltz and Borker contend that women tend to use these noises just to show they're listening and understanding. Men tend to use them to show they agree. So one reason women make more listening noises may be that women are listening more than men are agreeing with what they hear.

In addition to problems caused by differences in how many signals are given, there is bound to be trouble as a result of the difference in how they're used. If a woman cheers a man on in his talk by saying 'mhm' and 'yeah' and 'uh-huh' all over the place, and it later comes out that she disagrees with what he said, he may feel she misled him (thereby reinforcing his stereotype of women as unreliable). Conversely, if a man sits through a woman's talk and follows all she says but doesn't agree, he's not going to shower her with 'uh-huh's' and she's going to think he's not paying attention.

Notice that the difference in how women and men use listening noises is in keeping with their focus in communication. Using the noises to show 'I'm listening, go on' serves the relationship level of talk. Using them to show what one thinks of what is being said is a response to the content of talk. So men and women are being stylistically consistent in their interactive inconsistency.

'Why Don't You Talk About Something Interesting?'

Sometimes when men and women feel the other isn't paying attention, they're right. And this may be because their assumptions about what's interesting are different. Alison gets bored when Daniel goes on and on about the stock market or the world soccer match. He gets bored when she goes on and on about details of her daily life or the lives of people he doesn't even know.

It seems natural to women to tell and hear about what happened today, who turned up at the bus stop, who called and what she said, not because these details are important in themselves but because the telling of them proves involvement, that you care about each other, that you have a best friend. Knowing you will be able to tell these things later makes you feel less alone as you go along the lone path of a day. And if you don't tell, you are sending a metamessage of condescension: that curtailing it, clipping its wings.

Since it is not natural to men to use talk in this way, they focus on the inherent insignificance of the details. What they find worth telling are facts about such topics as sports, politics, history, or how things work. Women often perceive the telling of facts as lecturing, which not only does not carry (for them) a metamessage of rapport, but carries instead a metamessage of condescension: I'm the teacher, you're the student. I'm knowledgeable, you're ignorant.

A *New Yorker* cartoon shows a scene — probably the source of a thousand cartoons (and a million conversations) — of a breakfast table, with a husband carting a newspaper while the wife is trying to talk to him. The husband says, 'You want to talk? Get a newspaper. We'll talk about what's in the newspaper.' It's funny because everyone knows that what's in the newspaper is not what the wife wants to talk about.

Conversations About Conversations

When women talk about what seems obviously interesting to them, their conversations often include reports of conversations. Tone of voice, timing, intonation, and wording are all re-created in the telling in order to explain — dramatize, really — the experience that is being reported. If men tell about an incident and give a brief summary instead of re-creating what was said and how, the women often feel that the essence of the experience is being omitted. If the woman asks, 'What exactly did he say?', and 'How did he say it', the man probably can't remember. If she continues to press him, he may feel as if he's being grilled.

All these different habits have repercussions when the man and the woman are talking about their relationship. He feels out of his element, even one down. She claims to recall exactly what he said, and what she said, and in what sequence, and she wants him to account for what he said. He can hardly account for it since he has

forgotten exactly what was said – if not the whole conversation. She secretly suspects he's only pretending not to remember, and he secretly suspects that she's making up the details.

One woman reported such a problem as being a matter of her boyfriend's poor memory. It is unlikely, however, that his problem was poor memory in general. The question is what types of material each person remembers or forgets.

Frances was sitting at her kitchen table talking to Edward, when the toaster did something funny. Edward began to explain why it did it. Frances tried to pay attention, but very early in his explanation, she realized she was completely lost. She felt very stupid. And the indications were that he thought so too.

Later that day they were taking a walk. He was telling her about a difficult situation in his office that involved a complex network of interrelationships among a large number of people. Suddenly he stopped and said, 'I'm sure you can't keep track of all these people.' 'Of course I can,' she said, and she retraced his story with all the characters in place, all the details right. He was genuinely impressed. She felt very smart.

How could Frances be both smart and stupid? Did she have a good memory or a bad one? Frances's and Edward's abilities to follow, remember, and recount depended on the subject – and paralleled her parents' abilities to follow and remember. Whenever Frances told her parents about people in her life, her mother could follow with no problem, but her father got lost as soon as she introduced a second character. 'Now who was that?' he'd ask. 'Your boss?' 'No, my boss is Susan. This was my friend.' Often he'd still be in the previous story. But whenever she told them about her work, it was her mother who would get lost as soon as she mentioned a second step. 'That was your tech report?' 'No, I handed my tech report in last month. This was a special project.'

Frances's mother and father, like many other men and women, had honed their listening and remembering skills in different areas. Their experience talking to other men and other women gave them practice in following different kinds of talk.

Knowing whether and how we are likely to report events later influences whether and how we pay attention when they happen. As women listen to and take part in conversations, knowing they may talk about them later makes them more likely to pay attention to exactly what is said and how. Since most men aren't in the habit of making such reports, they are less likely to pay much attention at the time. On the other hand, many women aren't in the habit of paying attention to scientific explanations and facts because they don't expect to have to perform in public by reciting them – just as those who aren't in the habit of entertaining others by telling jokes 'can't' remember jokes they've heard, even though they listened carefully enough to enjoy them.

So women's conversations with their women friends keep them in training for talking about their relationships with men, but many men come to such conversations with no training at all – and an uncomfortable sense that this really isn't their event.

'What Do You Mean, My Dear?'

Most of us place enormous emphasis on the importance of a primary relationship. We regard the ability to maintain such relationships as a sign of mental health – our contemporary metaphor for being a good person.

Yet our expectations of such relationships are nearly – maybe in fact – impossible. When primary relationships are between women and men, male–female differences contribute to the impossibility. We expect partners to be both romantic interests and best friends. Though women and men may have fairly similar expectations for romantic interests, obscuring their differences when relationships begin, they have very different ideas about how to be friends, and these are the differences that mount over time.

In conversations between friends who are not lovers, small misunderstandings can be passed over or diffused by breaks in contact. But in the context of a primary relationship, differences can't be ignored, and the pressure cooker of continued contact keeps both people stewing in the juice of accumulated minor misunderstandings. And stylistic differences are sure to cause misunderstandings – not, ironically, in matters such as sharing values and interests or understanding each other's philosophies of life. These large and significant yet palpable issues can be talked about and agreed on. It is far harder to achieve congruence – and much more surprising and troubling that it is hard – in the simple day-to-day matters of the automatic rhythms and nuances of talk. Nothing in our backgrounds or in the media (the present-day counterpart of religion or grandparents' teaching) prepares us for this failure. If two people share so much in terms of point of view and basic values, how can they continually get into fights about insignificant matters?

If you find yourself in such a situation and you don't know about differences in conversational style, you assume something's wrong with your partner or you, or you for having chosen your partner. At best, if you are forward-thinking and generous-minded, you may absolve individuals and blame the relationship. But if you know about differences in conversational style, you can accept that there are differences in habits and assumptions about how to have conversation, show interest, be considerate, and so on. You may not always correctly interpret your partner's intentions, but you will know that if you get a negative impression, it may not be what was intended – and neither are your responses unfounded. If he says he really is interested even though he doesn't seem to be, maybe you should believe what he says and not what you sense.

Sometimes explaining assumptions can help. If a man starts to tell a woman what to do to solve her problem, she may say, 'Thanks for the advice but I really don't want to be told what to do. I just want you to listen and say you understand.' A man might want to explain, 'If I challenge you, it's not to prove you wrong; it's just my way of paying attention to what you're telling me.' Both may try either or both to modify their ways of talking and to try to accept what the other does. The important thing is to know that what seem like bad intentions may really be good intentions expressed in a different conversational style. We have to give up our conviction that, as Robin Lakoff put it, 'Love means never having to say "What do you mean?".'

202