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**When “difference” is “dominance”:  
A critique of the “anti-power-based”  
cultural approach to sex differences<sup>1</sup>**

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the dichotomization of two opposing approaches to studying sex differences in language use: the “difference/cultural” approach, which treats women and men as having “different but equally valid” rules of conversation, and the “dominance/power-based” approach, which focuses on male dominance and sexual division of labor in talk. I critique the stance taken by the difference approach. First, its notion of women and men as belonging to different “cultures” is too simplistic to account for everything that occurs in mixed-sex conversation. Second, the dichotomization of “power” and “culture” as two separate, independent concepts is inappropriate, because social interaction always occurs in the context of a patriarchal society. As a direction for further research, I propose that the relationship between gender and language should be approached from the viewpoint that we are *doing* gender in interaction. (Sociolinguistics, communication, conversational style, gender, sex differences)

A “CULTURAL” APPROACH TO SEX DIFFERENCES<sup>2</sup>

In their article published in 1982, anthropologists Maltz and Borker suggested a framework for examining the differences in speech between American women and men.<sup>3</sup> This framework has attracted many researchers to this day, and the influence can be most clearly seen in the works of Tannen (1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c), which directly apply and advocate this approach. This framework adopts the view that sex difference is culture difference, that cross-sex communication is cross-cultural communication.<sup>4</sup> Women and men “come from different sociolinguistic subcultures”; specifically, because the rules for informal interaction are acquired during the period of childhood and adolescence when girls and boys socially interact and play primarily with

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peers of their own sex, women and men “learn to do different things with words in a conversation” (Maltz & Borker 1982:200).

This “difference/cultural” approach is based on Gumperz’s (1982) framework for studying problems in interethnic communication. Members of different cultures will bring their own assumptions and rules of communication and apply them in intercultural encounters to understand what is going on. Differences in such assumptions and rules will result in asynchrony in the flow of conversation and misinterpretation of each other’s intention, which tend to be negatively attributed to the personality of individuals or cultural stereotypes. Maltz and Borker maintained that the same thing happens in communication between the sexes. Women and men carry over to their adulthood the conversational patterns they learned from interacting with their same-sex peers during childhood, and the differences between these patterns creates conflict and misunderstandings when they try to engage in a friendly female–male conversation. Problems of sex differences are, therefore, primarily caused by this cross-cultural miscommunication.

This cross-cultural view has been considered by its proponents and by some linguistic theorists as presenting an alternative to the explanation for sex differences in speech behavior in terms of power, commonly regarded as the “dominance or power-based” approach (Aries 1987; Cameron 1990; Coates & Cameron 1988; Graddol & Swann 1989; Maltz & Borker 1982; Mulac, Gibbons, & Fujiyama 1990; Tannen 1990b, 1990c). The position taken by the cross-cultural view is that dominance and power have little to do with the explanation of sex differences, because the differences – although their outcome may be male dominance – exist without any intention on the part of the males to dominate. “[E]ven if both parties are attempting to treat one another as equals, cultural miscommunication results” (Maltz & Borker 1982:200). The cross-cultural approach, compared with the dominance approach, allows us to account for the miscommunication without casting blame on either sex (Tannen 1990b).

But how adequate is this assessment? There seem to be two points regarding this position of using a two-culture framework that are worth questioning. Both stem from the practice of dichotomizing the two concepts of *dominance* and (cultural) *difference*. My first argument is that the proponents of the difference/cultural approach, as well as theorists who perceive a dichotomy of two opposing views of sex differences in speech, are falsely assuming that every study including the concept of power and male dominance in its analysis could be categorized under the dominance approach. My second, and more important, point is that it is a mistake to separate power and culture of women and men – and to assume that the two are independent constructs, much less that one would sufficiently explain any sex difference. It is not only wrong on the part of the difference/cultural approach

to underestimate the effects of power structure and dominance; it is harmful. These two points are discussed in the rest of this article.

THE "DOMINANCE/POWER-BASED" APPROACH:  
FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The history of research on sex difference in speech behavior is not a long one, but quite a few researchers have noted some shifts in the framework for analysis in this area (e.g., Cameron 1985; Coates & Cameron 1988; Graddol & Swann 1989; Henley & Kramarae 1991; Johnson 1983; Kramarae 1990; Spitzack & Carter 1987; Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley 1983). It has been pointed out that the early articles on sex difference (dating up to the early 1970s) described women's "different" use of language; the authors regarded speech style they labeled as "women's" (whether true or stereotyped) as inferior compared to the "normal," "standard" usage of men, attributing this deficiency to the psychological and personal traits of women. The most (in)famous classic work expressing this view may be Jespersen's account in his book *Language* (1922).

It was not until the current women's movement started raising our consciousness of female subordination and male dominance in society that this notion of women's inferiority was reassessed in academic and popular media. Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* (1975) was one of the first and most influential works stating that it was inequality between the sexes in society that was reflected in language use, rather than the genetic inferiority of women. Because of the low status of women and the social pressure for them "to talk like a lady," Lakoff stated that women tend to use more hedges, qualifiers, empty adjectives, polite forms, and so forth, conveying their unassertiveness and insecurity, trivializing their speech, and denying accountability and responsibility for their talk.

Several charges against Lakoff have been raised. Some critics have questioned the validity of her methodology, noting that her analysis was based on unsystematic observations and intuition. Other researchers have tested her hypotheses about "women's speech" (the most famous of which is her presupposition that tag questions are used more by women) and have come up with contradicting results (e.g., Crosby & Nyquist 1977; Dubois & Crouch 1975).<sup>5</sup> In addition, what Lakoff identified as "women's language" has been seen as confounding social status with sex (e.g., O'Barr & Atkins 1980).<sup>6</sup>

In addition, Lakoff's judgments about women's speech – that it is a deficient and ineffective style, deviant and inferior compared with the usage of "canonical" speakers – have been criticized. There are two problematic issues. One is that the canonical speaker of the language in the United States, who is seen as the most representative of its speakers, is the adult, middle-class,

white male speaker (Shibamoto 1985:19). There is already a male bias built in regarding “the standard” and “the norm” of the language, which Lakoff did not question. The other issue is that, therefore, characteristics of women’s speech were identified by their difference not from a truly neutral standard, but from the male norm. Women’s speech, and *only* women’s speech, was seen as a deviation from the norm and as marked. Although she called attention to male dominance and the double bind women have while speaking, Lakoff did not acknowledge the asymmetrical treatment of women and men and showed androcentrism in her judgment of what is *the* proper, desirable use of language. Thus, although some researchers (e.g., Coates & Cameron 1988) regard Lakoff as taking the dominance approach, because she brought the issue of power into the analysis, others see her as taking more of the “deficit position” (see Henley & Kramarae 1991; Johnson 1983; Kramarae 1990; Spitzack & Carter 1987). This “female deficit theory” has led to the belief held by some that to be effective speakers women must learn to “speak like a man,” for example, learn how to be assertive.

Since Lakoff presented her hypotheses on sex differences in language, many studies have been carried out on this issue. Research has been done, on the one hand, by researchers who deal with isolated variables in speech such as counting the occurrence of tag questions or other social stratification studies (e.g., Trudgill 1975).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, there are researchers who look at variables in contextually situated interactions. Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley (1983:14) maintained that it is the study of language in contexts of actual use that has yielded the most fruitful results. Such studies on mixed-sex interaction, for example, have been done by Fishman (1983) and by West and Zimmerman (1983), and their analyses have been sensitive to the effect of power and dominance. These works have claimed that there is a sexual division of labor in conversation and that male dominance is not only a cause of this difference, but the difference in turn maintains the dominance. Power and dominance are not only the attributes of individual males; the power the society grants to males affects and is reflected in the conversation, because interaction does not happen in a vacuum (West & Zimmerman 1983, 1985). These studies have been regarded as the main proponents of the dominance or power-based approach.

The dominance approach of this type, then, sees sex difference as something that occurs in the context of interaction, and this difference is analyzed within a larger context of patriarchy.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Lakoff’s approach, it sees language practices of women as neither deviant from, nor inferior to, the male norm, distinguishing their studies from those taking the deficit position. However, at least two major shortcomings of this dominance/power-based approach can be ascertained. First, similar to the deficit position, it also tends to confound power with sex. As is discussed later, sex structure and power structure are indeed closely tied together (Henley 1977). Yet, sex differences

in speech cannot be equated only with power difference: "there are dimensions to gender other than power" (Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley 1983:15). For example, Woods (1988) found that in mixed-sex conversations in a work setting, sex differences in the pattern of floor management overrode the status differences. The problem is that the dominance/power-based approach neglects to conceptualize sex except in terms of power. Its notion of the female-male category system seems too simplistic; power is not the *only* factor that differentiates the sexes.

Second, there are dimensions to power besides gender, such as race, ethnicity, age, occupation, socioeconomic status, education, and sexual orientation. The accounts of sex difference in conversation given by Fishman (1983) and West and Zimmerman (1983, 1985) did not attempt to identify these other dimensions. Their studies focused on, for the most part, white, middle-class, and college-educated women and men, without much reflection on how the other aspects of the participants' identities apart from their gender may affect their behavior in cross-sex interactions.<sup>9</sup> For example, the functions of certain conversational behaviors, such as interruption or minimal responses, cannot be described in terms of an abstract notion of male dominance separated from the context. However, by neglecting to examine how the White-ness and middle-class-ness affect the form of male dominance, the dominance/power-based approach seems to assume that the White middle-class norm can be appropriately used as the standard and that there is no need to examine the White middle-class system of sex organization in its own right.

Along with the concern with sex differences in language use, feminist researchers have raised the need to investigate sex differences in the availability of the English code itself. In addition to inspecting how women use language, researchers are also concerned about how language, as a system that organizes the world, treats women. Some feminist researchers have challenged the assumption that language is a neutral, value-free vehicle for communicating thoughts, claiming that language does not serve the same function for the dominated as it does for the dominant. The dominant groups have the power to control the linguistic code; thus language is made fit for the expression of their thoughts and experiences, but not those of oppressed groups. Women are one such group, and the oppression is manifested in the sexism and the relative invisibility of women in the code. Therefore, women find language inadequate to express their own experiences directly.

Women's reality is not well represented in the language, making it difficult for women themselves to see their reality as "real," and even more difficult for women to have their reality treated as "real" by men.<sup>10</sup> They must reframe their experience in order to express it in the language of men; they are thus the "muted group."<sup>11</sup> As a result, what women are encoding into the same form of speech may be completely different, unique experiences of

their own, whereas most studies of language were done on men's language use by male scholars. Women speaking in women's groups may lead to their empowerment; therefore, in order to discourage them from talking, women's talk has been derided and trivialized by men.

The notions of legitimacy and value in women's talk and their meaningfulness to women's identity have been stimulated by, and have triggered the increase of, studies on all-female discourse. According to Coates and Cameron (1988), Jones's (1980) analysis of gossip as women's oral culture was a ground-breaking work that conceptualized women as a "culture." Jones actually went so far as to postulate that women constituted a "speech community" while being a part of a larger speech community. Cameron (1985) and Coates and Cameron (1988) regarded Jones as major proponent of the difference/cultural approach as opposed to the dominance/power-based approach and placed her work in the same category as Maltz and Borker.

However, Jones did not extend the cultural view to analyze mixed-sex interaction, which should be done if the researcher is taking the difference/cultural approach. Therefore Cameron and Coates's assessment of Jones's work seems inadequate. Nor did Jones propose that female-male communication problems be seen mainly as a result of cross-cultural miscommunication and not of male dominance. This point seems crucial because many works that attempt to present the communication among women as unique do *not* deny that such activities of women have been ignored, belittled, or depreciated (e.g., Jenkins 1986; Jones 1980; Kramarae & Jenkins 1989). Conceptualizing women as a culture or subculture does not necessarily contradict the view that women exist in a socially subordinate position to men and that patriarchal practices can be seen in women's and men's talk. In fact, the move toward appreciating and celebrating women's communication in a positive sense has been most strongly taken in feminist scholarship, which also operates from the position that society is essentially a patriarchy.

Thus, what makes Maltz and Borker's difference/cultural approach distinct is not so much the view that women and men are members of different cultures as it is the notion that female-male communication problems can be analyzed in terms of miscommunication occurring from *cultural difference* and not *dominance*. The statement that the difference/cultural approach allows the analysis of miscommunication without casting blame on either sex (Tannen 1990b) implies that the dominance/power-based approach *does* blame either men for dominating or women for being dominated. *Dominance* as a concept is being treated at the individual level, as a matter of intention and interpretation. It is not being treated at the social and institutional levels, which many studies taking the dominance/power-based approach actually do – a point that is returned to later.

The proponents of the difference/cultural approach also claim that their view enables us to see females and males as conversing in different but

equally valid ways (Tannen 1990a, 1990b). However, if the implication is that the two-culture framework is the *only* approach that allows this, then the dominance approach is being confounded with the deficit position, which Coates and Cameron (1988:69) also seemed to be doing when they contended that the "dominance approach . . . by labeling men's language as 'strong' and women's language as 'weak', [was] adopting an androcentric viewpoint. The difference, or subculture approach attempts to investigate sex differences . . . from a *positive* standpoint." I have tried to point out that, of studies using the dominance/power-based approach, only those taking the deficit position were actually adopting an androcentric viewpoint. The dominance/power-based approach itself is not in conflict with the idea of the different/cultural approach in this aspect. But it does oppose the cultural view that de-emphasizes the aspect of power structure and dominance and attributes every problem to cultural difference and miscommunication.

The difference/cultural approach that uses the cross-cultural miscommunication model to analyze breakdowns in female-male interaction has appealed to a wide range of audiences. It has especially enjoyed a wide acceptance through Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand* (Tannen 1990c). The appeal this book has is understandable; it gives a description of women and men's different communicative styles and claims that they are equally valid ways of speaking, without any "male-bashing" accusations, perpetuating the belief that women and men are different but equal. The book, through its thesis and its anecdotal examples, does tap into the experiences of many readers. The situations that Tannen used to illustrate her points are those with which many are likely to be familiar through their own lives. The book may give some women readers an analytical tool they can use to figure out what is really going on in their own conversations with their male partners. It attempts to pacify the readers by suggesting that communication problems between women and men can be solved by individual awareness and cooperation. It does not urge the reader to change the world; the book is, as Troemel-Ploetz (1991:490) stated, "non-threatening to the status quo." Its message is that although women may have less power vis-à-vis men in the society, this does not have to affect the interaction between individuals who see each other as social equals.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the approach itself can be attractive to a researcher. It is culturally sensitive to both sexes, less susceptible to being interpreted as claiming female deficiency or to being accused of engaging in male-bashing activities. In addition, using this approach, the problem could be dealt with by in-depth focus on two clear-cut variables, female and male, without getting caught up in the complexity of power issues in the society. However, this difference/cultural approach has a number of problems. In the following, I first briefly describe the major arguments made by this approach, point out what I see as defective with those arguments, and then proceed to argue why the separa-

tion of dominance (or power) from difference (or culture) is impossible in the analysis of gender and why a theory of sex difference that does not consider the power issue is inadequate.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN:  
AN OVERVIEW

Maltz and Borker (1982) delineated some features that they suggested differentiate the speech behaviors of American females and males, behaviors that have been acquired by each sex from interacting with same-sex peers during childhood. In the following, I briefly discuss the main cultural differences between women and men that the proponents of the difference/cultural approach propose.

Relying on studies of children's interaction through play in same-sex peer groups, Maltz and Borker contended that American girls and boys differ in the following aspects in the way they use language: Girls learn to create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality, to criticize others in acceptable ways, and to interpret accurately the speech of other girls (1982: 205), whereas boys learn to assert one's position of dominance, to attract and maintain an audience, and to assert oneself when other speakers have the floor (1982:207). This shows a pattern similar to that suggested by Gilligan's (1982) work on sex differences in moral development. Indeed, more recent analyses of children's and adolescents' talk with same-sex friends also show sex differences consistent with these patterns (Eckert 1990; Goodwin 1988, 1990; Johnson & Aries 1983a; Sheldon 1990; Tannen 1990a, 1990b, 1990c). The notion that children's socialization with peers is accomplished through interacting primarily with those of the same sex is supported by the observation that children show a strong tendency to group and interact exclusively with same-sex peers. This is reported by Maccoby (1986), who also referred to girls and boys as forming their own culture as a result of this segregation.

Children's speech patterns also seem to match the patterns heard in same-sex conversation of American adults. A review of the increasing literature on women's discourse suggests that the interaction style learned in childhood is carried over to adulthood. Studies of women's joke-telling (Jenkins 1986), bathroom graffiti (Bruner & Kelso 1980; Cole 1991; Davies 1986), gossip (Jones 1980; that of British women, Coates 1988), women's talk with friends (Aries & Johnson 1983; Johnson & Aries 1983b) and in academic settings (Treichler & Kramarae 1983) all support the claim that women's friendly talk is, in general, "interactional, relational, participatory, and collaborative" (Treichler & Kramarae 1983). Women's speech seen in this light is said to include: more back-channeling or minimal responses used to signal the fact that they are listening, more personal and inclusive pronouns such as *you* and *we*, and more signs of interest and attention (Maltz & Borker 1982; Tannen 1986,

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1990ab, 1990c; Treichler & Kramarae 1983). These strategies can be heard as serving the function of cooperation and collaboration essential in the type of discourse in which women engage, which Tannen (1990c) termed "rapport talk" as opposed to "report talk", which calls for different norms of interaction, and in which, according to Tannen, men primarily participate.

Therefore, judging from same-sex interaction patterns, it seems legitimate to say that women and men have at least *some* different cultural rules for friendly conversation (Maltz & Borker 1982). However, as we have seen, these differences were mostly found through the comparative analyses of same-sex conversations. The difference/cultural approach to female-male communication does not stop there. The next step is to analyze what happens in communication between the sexes; that is, when the members from different cultures come together to interact as social equals.

### PROBLEMS IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH TO CROSS-SEX COMMUNICATION

The difference/cultural approach suggests that women and men will interpret each other's behavior according to their own rules for friendly interaction. Thus, if miscommunication occurs, it can be explained in terms of the cultural differences. This is where I find the first problem with this approach - it assumes that same-sex rules will directly be carried over to mixed-sex interaction. But neither Maltz and Borker nor Tannen offered any empirical evidence that women and men will indeed use the same rules to interpret their conversation partner's behavior regardless of their sex. Tannen (1986, 1990c) only provided anecdotes that imply that women will seek the same supportive response, or rapport talk, from their husbands as they receive from their female friends and that they will feel hurt or frustrated if they are instead answered with jokes or advice. Tannen (1990c) also gave her own reactions to girls' and boys' talk when she was analyzing their videotaped interaction for her study (1990b) and compared them with the reactions reported from men. Tannen found the girls' talk appealing and cute, which she noted was typical of women, whereas the boys' restlessness and mocking made her nervous. On the other hand, she found that men thought of the boys' energy and poking fun as cute, whereas they did not like the girls' behavior of sitting so still and showing obedience to the experimenter. So she concluded: "Boys and girls grow up in different worlds, but we think we're in the same one, so we judge each other's behavior by the standards of our own" (1990b:254).

This statement sums up the gist of the cross-cultural miscommunication view, and it seems to be too critical a claim to make without some results from a more systematic observation offered as support. How accurate is it to say that we would see the context as the same, and therefore the norms

of interpretation as the same, whether the interaction was between partners of the same sex or of a different sex? It may be possible for the sex of one participant to greatly affect the topic, genre, key, rules of interaction, and norms of interpretation in a speech event (Saville-Troike 1989). In their study of conversation content between same-sex friends, Aries and Johnson found that women would talk with their close friends about things they would not with their husbands (Aries & Johnson 1983; Johnson & Aries 1983b). It seems unlikely that the sex of the conversation partner would affect the topic but not the standards by which they judge her or him. Also in Tannen's example of judgmental difference between women and men on girls' and boys' behavior, if by any chance the girls had behaved like the boys (being restless, teasing and putting each other down, "challenging" the experimenter's authority, etc.), would men have interpreted that as "cute"? We have certain standards for judging people in general, and this may be developed through our living in the world of our own sex, but we also have certain standards for judging females and males, quite separately from what we have learned through our interaction with same-sex peers.

The framework of cross-sex communication as cross-cultural communication seems too simplistic, mainly because no matter how much time children spend interacting with their same-sex peers, they are not completely segregated from the other sex. While they are learning the rules for friendly conversation from their peers, they are also open to the pattern of interaction of their opposite-sex peers, to that between their parents, and to other various conversations, real or fictional. They internalize the culturally prescribed sex-role stereotypes, learning how girls and boys are supposed to differ in the ways they behave and interact. They would not be in the same situation as "real" intercultural encounters, say, between Japanese and American autoworkers assembled to work in the same plant, where each member had not been truly exposed to the other's culture prior to the encounter.

Moreover, there seems to be a problem in the use of the term *cross-cultural* itself. This term implies a static approach that "can only lead to lengthy lists of comparative differences between countless cultures; the results of which are impossible to digest or apply in any meaningful way" (De Francisco 1990a:2). The cross-cultural view of sex differences in talk can lead us to compare the differences between females and males on isolated variables of speech (e.g., how conversation involvement is expressed and interpreted). If we take this approach, there would be nothing important to note about women's communication unless a comparable difference from men's is found, and vice versa. From this standpoint, the issue of female-male communication becomes relevant only if we assume that these differences are static and constant and will directly be carried over from same-sex conversation. However, communication between members of different cultures involves more than interpreting each other according to one's own rules and

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miscommunicating. Especially regarding the interaction of women and men in the United States, the approach must be an "intercultural" one, which "encourages a focus on how these apparent cultural differences are derived from complex fabrics of cultures" (Sugimoto 1991). More precisely, "Cross-cultural" communication involves observing, comparing and analyzing one culture from the viewpoint of the other. It might be called the 'observer' approach. In contrast, 'intercultural' communication might be called the 'participant' approach and can be 'characterized by intense involvement on the part of the participant'" (Harms 1973:41, cited in Sugimoto 1991:1).

The intercultural approach views communication as a more dynamic process of adapting and negotiating and creating new meanings, in which the participants would adjust and modify their rules in response to each other. The cross-cultural view neglects the individuals' ability to take the other's perspective and adapt their speech to the listener. It also ignores the effect of social norms, such as our sex-role expectations, of our sociocultural knowledge of what to expect from females and males in interaction. And it also ignores the fact that a speaker's speech form is affected by the sex of the hearer, although it is not the only factor that creates a difference.

The final thing to note about the difference/cultural approach to sex differences is that, like the dominance/power-based approach, this view also ignores the interaction of race, class, age, and sexual orientation with sex (Henley & Kramarae 1991; Kramarae 1990). Women and men belong to many interconnected social groups in addition to that of their own sex, and an individual is more than just a "woman" when interacting with others. Maltz and Borker offered their difference/cultural framework to explain "American men and women" (1982:196), but this generalization neglects the cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as the existence of racial tension in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Tannen (1990c) used her illustrative anecdotes from a relatively homogeneous group: seemingly well-educated, middle-class, heterosexual Americans. It seems strange that although she has elsewhere (Tannen 1984, 1986) analyzed differences in conversational style between Jewish New Yorkers and non-Jewish Californians, which overrode sex differences, these findings are not incorporated into her difference/cultural approach.<sup>14</sup> Here, sex is emphasized as if it is the single major factor that affects conversation, one that could be treated independently of other variables.

### THE PROBLEMS OF DIFFERENCE AND DOMINANCE

As noted before, the difference/cultural approach is presented as an alternative to the dominance/power-based approach, stating that power has little to do with what happens in conversation between *socially equal* females and males. This approach, then, will be applicable only with situations where "women and men attempt to talk to each other as *friends and equals* in casual

conversation" (Maltz & Borker 1982:212; emphasis added). This restriction is greater than it may seem. Not too many mixed-sex interactions actually satisfy this condition; besides, who are counted as "friends" and "equals" is open to a wide and complex range of interpretation. In any event, the framework cannot be used in contexts where status is involved, such as the classroom (Aries 1987;<sup>15</sup> Treichler & Kramarae 1983), the workplace, communication between doctor and patient, salesperson and customer, mother and son, father and daughter, and even in some cases, between spouses.

Indeed, one may ask: When exactly do women and men interact as equals? It may be tempting to answer that friends would be equal. The difference/cultural approach responds to our need and desire to believe that essentially, women and men are socially equal. However, being social equals can mean two things: being socially equal in principle and being socially equal in reality. The former does not necessarily entail the latter. And when the concept of equality interacts with sex, I suggest that we have two levels to consider – an individual in relation to another individual and a member of one sex in relation to a member of either the same or different sex. Truly social equals must be equal in reality at both levels. And I assert that in cross-sex relationships this is impossible today in U.S. society. As a female, I am seldom socially equal to someone who is male, even when we share other identifies such as ethnicity, age, class, and education.

To illustrate, let us take the case of street remarks or unsolicited comments from strangers (Gardner 1980; Kissling 1991; Kramarae 1986b), a common form of mixed-sex interaction where social status is not likely to be so relevant, unless the occupation of either or both parties is obvious. These remarks occur almost exclusively in the form of males addressing females, and this asymmetry itself implies that there is some inequality involved here. Against the addressee's charge of insult or harassment, the addresser can justify himself by saying that it was only a compliment; he was trying to be nice and friendly; and no, of course he had no intention of dominance! But would he have said the same thing to a man? Would he have accepted a similar remark addressed to him by a woman as a compliment or a sign of friendliness? What gives him the right to do this act that cannot be reciprocated? It is the mere fact of his being male and the other being female that does; males and females are not, in this sense, equal.

The problem I find with the difference/cultural approach is that it does not consider this level where male dominance exists regardless of what the individual intends. It sees dominance as something that could be *misinterpreted* as existing in interaction, although not really there. The proponents of the difference/cultural approach state that although men's behavior in cross-sex conversation may seem to exercise dominance, the same behavior functions to show intimacy with male friends; therefore, the male dominance is not intended but a result of cultural difference and miscommunication.

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The proponents seem to consider that the lack of intention means that dominance does not really occur. They regard dominance as a matter of interpretation, dominance is seen as being in the same category as evaluative judgments such as "weakness," passivity," and "deficiency," the difference being only that the latter were how females' behaviors were interpreted according to male norms, whereas the former is how males are interpreted according to female norms. It seems that either the judgmental attribute "dominating" had been confounded with the act of dominance or the two had been equated. True, one's comments can be falsely interpreted as being dominating without the *intention* to dominate, but dominance occurs or does not occur, regardless of intention. The cross-cultural miscommunication approach *can* explain how and why men's behavior is seen as dominating by women, *can* deny that all men have the *intention* to dominate, and *can* say that the attribute "men are dominating" is not necessarily true, and these are important issues that had not been adequately raised by the dominance/power-based approach. But it *cannot* say that male dominance does not occur as a mechanism in interaction.

The failure to distinguish *dominance* as a social phenomenon from *dominating* as a judgmental attribute may have occurred because of the following reasons. First, Maltz and Borker themselves had not done any empirical research using the difference/cultural approach to analyze mixed-sex interactions. Their cross-cultural framework was developed relying mostly on works examining same-sex interactions. Second, Tannen, another major proponent of the difference/cultural approach, also primarily used studies of same-sex interactions to support her claims. A pattern of inequality and dominance between the sexes is hardly likely to appear in same-sex conversations. It is empirical research on female-male conversation that finds patterns of dominance (DeFrancisco 1990b, 1991; Edelsky 1981; Fishman 1983; Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz 1985; West & Zimmerman 1983).

Because of U.S. society's patriarchy, males are given the institutional power that in turn reinforces the social system, and this male dominance is guaranteed and maintained through the sexual division of labor. The difference/cultural approach *does* acknowledge the fact that in U.S. society it is men whose talk is valued more and that it is usually women who are labeled negatively (e.g., as "nags"), punished for their talk, and told to change (Tannen 1990c:15, 31, 75). The reason for this, however, is not pursued, and neither is the effect of this on daily interactions between women and men. If we deny the existence of a hierarchical organization of the sexes, what accounts for the asymmetrical treatment between the language use of women and men? And if we admit that there is a hierarchy, a power structure in the society, it is impossible to claim that it will not affect our everyday interaction. The difference/cultural approach deals with female-male communication as if it existed independently of this structure, as if the immediate context

of the conversation was sufficient to fully grasp the meaning of the interaction. To the contrary, it is the sociocultural structure that makes the interaction relevant, and this behavior in turn maintains this structure.<sup>16</sup> The issue here is not whether we cast blame on women or men for problems in communication, but it is whether we recognize that interactions between women and men are operating within a social hierarchy.

The observation of power structure can also be made when we look at the speech patterns acquired by girls and boys through same-sex interactions with peers. Girls' principles of cooperation, collaboration, equality, sharing and relating and showing empathy perfectly coincides with the "typical" female characteristics: nurturing, supportive, expressive, emotive, friendly, relationship-oriented, and other similar adjectives, which are also associated with "weakness" and "powerlessness." Boys' patterns, on the other hand, involve competing for and holding on to the floor, asserting, challenging, arguing, showing one's dominance and verbal aggressiveness, which are associated with "powerful" and "masculine" traits. Tannen's (1990a) own work investigating sex differences in ways conversational engagement was expressed showed results consistent with these stereotypical traits assigned to females and males. Maltz and Borker did not suggest the reason girls and boys learn these specific rules, for example, why in girls' interaction it is unacceptable to be "bossy" and why in boys' they must learn to assert dominance. Socialization per se cannot sufficiently explain why gender traits are not symmetrically assigned.

As Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary (1988:80) pointed out, it is not a coincidence that men can afford to be aggressive and hierarchically oriented conversationalists, whereas women are expected to provide conversational support. Nor does it seem to be a coincidence that men's roles are more likely to be those of the protector, the teacher, the expert, in relation to women (Tannen 1990c). The sexual division of labor shows a pattern that is too consistent with the pattern of dominance to assume that it occurred "naturally." The set of prescriptions females and males learn as children follows the culture's norms of how females and males should behave, which, in turn, is in line with the positions in which women and men are placed in the social hierarchy. The sexual division of labor in conversation is not a mere result of cultural differences. The difference, by virtue of its function of creating the expectation that women will naturally try harder to involve men in the talk, whereas men will look aloof and disengaged in the eyes of women, reinforces the pattern that women will (and must) do more work in the conversation than men. If we do not consider why it is the women who are supposed to do more work to show that they are engaged (and are called "bitches" if they refuse to, are called "nags" if the job is not done appropriately, but get no credit for doing it right), we are led to justifying this inequality and legitimizing the privilege given to men to toil less in conversation.

Another question arises when we focus our attention on the "miscommunication," which is said to be caused by the cultural differences between the sexes. The difference/cultural approach considers the miscommunication as the end result of the female-male interaction, as something problematic for both sexes and as something that can be solved. That is the reason, it is argued, why it is important to make a cross-cultural comparison and come up with a list of differences; for if we understood, or at least became aware of, each other's different ways and assumptions better, we would be able to see the cause of miscommunication and refrain from making negative attributions to individuals (Tannen 1986, 1990b, 1990c). Yet it seems that it is necessary to go a step further from the causal analysis of the phenomenon, to see the *consequences* of miscommunication. The unstated assumption is that, between social equals, miscommunication will produce equally negative results for both parties involved.

But how accurate is this really? Tannen's anecdotal examples of female-male miscommunication (1986, 1990c) give me the impression that women have more to lose from the miscommunication than their male partners. This is so partly because of the very nature of women's and men's "conversational styles" as Tannen puts it. Take, for example, a situation where a woman starts telling her husband about some troubles she had at work (from Tannen 1986). According to her rules of intimacy, she expects her husband to show understanding, reassure her that she is not alone in having trouble, and maybe share his own problems with her. Instead, he, according to his rules of expressing solidarity in conversation, cracks jokes, sidetracks her story, and offers solutions to her problem. She then feels trivialized and thinks he's claiming one-upmanship; he then feels frustrated, not understanding why she got upset. What is the consequence of this miscommunication? She may feel that he does not respect her, he is putting her down, he is insensitive, too logical and rational, and so on. He, on the other hand, may feel that she cannot deal with the problem by herself, does not understand humor, is unreliable or irrational because she says she has a problem but does not want any advice. These attributions made to each other are quite consistent with the negative stereotypes of men and women, but according to the cultural norms that value logic and rationality, her judgment of him does not imply that he is inferior to her, but his judgment of her does imply that she is to him. In addition, the person who actually gets his needs fulfilled, as Troemel-Ploetz (1991:495) pointed out, is the man – who "solved a problem and presented his solution," who "did what he needed to do," whereas the woman "did not get what she needed in her situation."

For women, in addition to these psychological damages, there are more materialistic concerns involved in the outcomes of the miscommunication. In U.S. society, it is usually the men who are in control of the resources – who make more money, have more physical power, are in a more authori-

tative or a higher social position – thus it is more likely to be men who can reward or punish women for their behavior.

If miscommunication is no one's "fault" and is something that can be analyzed as mutual misunderstanding of well-meant behavior, why is it that casualties are more often heavier on women than on men? Acquaintance rape and wife abuse could, with the miscommunication approach, be termed as extreme cases of such miscommunication (Henley & Kramarae 1991). Not only are women victims of physical violence, but they are also victims of blame and accusation for "asking for it." It would be absurd to say that these were caused by unfortunate misunderstandings between social equals who did not happen to share the same rules for interpreting certain behavior. An analysis of miscommunication must take into consideration who gets what they want, who is punished, who is forgiven, and in what ways – both on the individual level and on the societal level – after the miscommunication. And again, there is the issue of power involved. Whether manifested in the form of conversational rules, cultural values, possession of resources, or social norms, there is institutional power owned only by men that affects the result of miscommunication. Men's power allows them to "misunderstand" women's meanings without getting penalized for it, and also gives them the right to penalize women for misinterpreting men's behavior. As Henley and Kramarae (1991:19–20) noted:

Hierarchies determine whose version of the communication situation will prevail; whose speech style will be seen as normal; who will be required to learn the communication style, and interpret the meaning of the other; whose language style will be seen as deviant, irrational, and inferior; and who will be required to imitate the other's style in order to fit into the society. Yet the situation of sex difference is not totally parallel: sex status intercuts and sometimes contrasts with other statuses; and no other two social groups are so closely interwoven as men and women.

The approach that dismisses this aspect and only focuses on differences has the danger of being used to legitimize blatantly misogynist behavior on the ground that it is a case of innocent miscommunication caused by cultural differences.

#### CONCLUSION: TREATING GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

As we have seen, the major critique of the difference/cultural approach is that "cultural difference alone cannot adequately explain the full pattern of language difference and miscommunication" (Henley & Kramarae 1991:27) and that the approach downplays "the gender *hierarchy* and the links between the specifics of female–male interactions and the inequities women experience through . . . repressive practices" (Kramarae 1990:350; see also Coates

& Cameron 1988; DeFrancisco 1990a; Graddol & Swann 1989; Treichler & Kramarae 1983, for such critiques). Coates and Cameron (1988:10) contended that:

All discussions of how women operate in speech communities must, however, be aware of women's more general social and political position as a subordinate group. . . . [I]t is all too easy to lose sight of the fact of subordination and describe "sex roles" (in the manner of so many male sociolinguists) as "natural," "facts of life," difference not inequality.

Coates and Cameron added that both "the dominance approach, which stresses the hierarchical nature of gender relations, and the difference approach, which stresses subcultural differences between women and men" are needed for sociolinguistic research on sex difference (1988:72). However, my position is slightly different from theirs. Coates and Cameron were still considering that the three concepts of gender, power and (sub)culture could be separated and are independent of each other. I argue that these are intertwined. To talk about gender is to talk about women and men as composing sociocultural groups, and the main force that constructs these two groups as different is the difference in the position they are placed in within the social hierarchy. If *difference* and *dominance* are treated as different perspectives of looking at sex, we will only get two different pictures from two different angles. We would not be able to get a holistic, multidimensional view. Difference and dominance (and there may be other dimensions) should be seen as simultaneously composing the construct of gender.

The problem of how to conceptualize gender has so far been dealt with in most language research in a too simplistic way. This comes from a superficial view of sex – the categories of females and males are seen as prelinguistic variables (Kramarae 1986a) biologically assigned to individuals at birth – and a failure to recognize that gender is in fact a social construct (Kessler & McKenna 1978; Kramarae 1986a; Rakow 1987). We do not become socialized as females or males because we were born female or male. At birth we are assigned to one or the other gender according to our genital organs, but after our initial gender assignment is made, how we are treated and raised is not dependent upon whether we have a vagina or not (a fact that is not obvious under usual circumstances) (Kessler & McKenna 1978). We learn female rules because we are socially labeled "female" (from how we are dressed and addressed, etc.) – through the process of "sex categorization" (West & Zimmerman 1987) – and we become female through learning and obeying those rules. West and Zimmerman (1987:126–27) maintained that gender is "a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" and that it is "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category." We are *doing* gender (Rakow 1987; West & Zimmerman 1983, 1987) through gendered ac-

tivity. "(A) person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others" (West & Zimmerman 1987:140). Thus, regardless of our own intentions, the consequences of our behavior must always be seen in the context of the society that defines gender. In U.S. society's system (as well as in many others), part of being female consists of being the dominated, weaker sex. And the difference between women and men is constructed as a fact to reinforce the construction of gender, meaning that the appropriate doing of gender means the reproduction of "the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category" (West & Zimmerman 1987:146).

Gender is one major construct that organizes our world and our social life. It involves all human beings; every individual, after all, cannot escape being categorized as either female or male. But it must also be remembered that gender is so salient *because* it is a *social construct*, something that we *do* in interaction and not something that is based on nature or biology.<sup>17</sup> And it does not exist independently of other social factors such as region, ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation, and religion; these elements are constantly in interaction. The issue at hand is not whether we should take the dominance/power-based approach or the difference/cultural approach or both approaches to analyze sex differences in discourse. Rather, it is how we can come up with a framework that allows us to see gender as a holistic and dynamic concept regarding language use – a framework that allows us to see how we, in the social context, are *doing* gender through the use of language.

## NOTES

1. I thank, Braj Kachru for his encouragement, Cheris Kramarae and Dell Hymes for their invaluable suggestions for this article.
2. Throughout this article, I distinguish between the use of *sex* and *gender*. The convention today is that *sex* is biological and *gender* is sociocultural (Schlegel 1989). I have used *sex* to refer to the use of female–male dichotomy as a "prelinguistic variable," as a "set category from birth" (Kramarae 1986a). I have used *gender* to signify that the female–male dichotomy is "man-made" and socially constructed.
3. Hereafter, unless stated otherwise, all reference to women, men, and language will signify women, men, and English used by the majority of those living in the United States.
4. Maltz and Borker (1982) and Tannen's works use "cross-sex communication" to indicate the interaction between female and male, which they use parallel with "cross-cultural communication." However, the term *cross-cultural* must be distinguished from the term *intercultural*, as is discussed later.
5. From a linguistic viewpoint, the problem with her hypothesis was that form was separated from function, and women's speech was conceptualized only in terms of form.
6. O'Barr and Atkins's study on courtroom interaction found that witnesses with little authority and social power, regardless of their sex, used speech forms judged by Lakoff to be used more by women. The researchers therefore concluded that "women's language" as posited by Lakoff could be more adequately labeled as "powerless language."
7. These studies have found a general pattern of sex differences in pronunciation and grammaticality with women using more standard forms than did men. Trudgill has explained this in terms of female conservativeness and also in terms of the covert prestige with which the men

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held vernacular speech. Critics of his study have argued that women's social networks within the speech community must be taken into consideration (Nichols 1983). For a further discussion on this, see, for example, Coates and Cameron (1988) and Graddol and Swann (1989).

8. In this sense, one might say they are adopting a Firthian model of conversation (see Kachru 1980; also note 14).

9. Educational level is often incorporated into the analyses, albeit superficially. However, the effect of advanced education is assessed only in terms of quantity (i.e., the degree of influence on a certain behavior), not in terms of the quality (i.e., how the less explicit beliefs about gender are affected by advanced education).

10. A weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is taken by such feminists, especially those who advocate language change as a step to empowerment. See, for example, Spender (1980).

11. For a further discussion of the muted group theory, see Kramarae (1981); Showalter (1981); Spender (1980).

12. For a full review of Tannen's book, see Troemel-Ploetz (1991).

13. Therefore, Maltz and Borker's claims should not be extended to females and males who do not belong to the mainstream American culture. However, it is not clear to what extent the general framework of the difference/cultural approach has been regarded by others as universally applicable. It is very often the case that whenever a framework for analysis is presented using American samples, it is assumed to be universal until a proven otherwise.

14. In Tannen's analysis of conversation at a Thanksgiving dinner (1984, also cited in 1986), the difference in rules for expressing involvement and solidarity is shown to cause misinterpretation of each other's intention and to lead to the perceived conversational dominance of one group, Jewish New Yorkers, who had more expressive ways of showing involvement. She did not, however, report any sex differences. What then, is the relationship among the cultural factors that produce these differences such as regional difference, ethnicity, class, age, and sex? Tannen has drawn an analogy between ethnicity and sex, regarding them both as culture in that they produce different conversational styles. But she has failed to address the fact that ethnicity and sex are not mutually exclusive categories. An individual's conversational style is neither a product solely of her or his sex or ethnicity nor can it be adequately analyzed as such.

15. Aries admitted that the different/cultural approach cannot be used to analyze classroom interaction, although she evaluated it as the best approach to sex difference.

16. Here, I am applying the Firthian model of linguistic behavior to the unit of conversation. The sociocultural structure that organizes the hierarchy of the sexes is the *context of situation*, which is: "the situation which provides the *context of experience* and *context of culture* to the language used by the *speech-fellowship*, *speech community*, or a *language community*. This situation is *extra-linguistic*, and it is through *form* that a linguist is able to show its relevance (appropriateness) to linguistic behavior" (Kachru 1980:94).

17. But because one's sex category is the base of doing gender, the social order reinforced by the gendered activity is often thought to reflect "natural differences" between female and male, which then legitimizes the hierarchical arrangement as being "natural" (see West & Zimmerman 1987).

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