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Why do men and women talk differently?

A new book argues that guys argue and girls overshare for a reason: Evolution. The author explains

BY THOMAS ROGERS



(Credit: iStockphoto)

Over the past few decades, linguists have shown that, when it comes to speech, many gender stereotypes hold remarkably true: Men tend to speak loudly, while women whisper; men talk over each other, while women conspire behind each other's backs; men hold back their feelings, while women lay them out to strangers they meet on the subway. According to some critics, these differences are merely a reflection of our cultural presuppositions about gender. But, according to a new book, there's a far simpler reason for these linguistic differences: biology.

In "Duels and Duets," John L. Locke, a professor of linguistics at Lehman College and the author of "Eavesdropping: An Intimate History,"

argues that men and women have radically different ways of speaking not because of their upbringing, but because they have radically different evolutionary needs. Men, he argues, use antagonistic speech, or "duels," to show off their strength and prove themselves to women. Women, meanwhile, use quieter speech patterns to bond with each other — and help protect themselves against aggressive men. And, according to Locke, this is a pattern that has been going on for thousands and thousands of years.

Salon spoke with Locke over the phone about sexual stereotypes, the "Real Housewives" franchise and the future of speech in the digital age.

So what are the differences between male and female speech?

Women are likely to look for common ground when they are talking with other women and tend to produce overlapping remarks in conversations. Those were initially misdiagnosed as interruptions, but it turns out that women tend to like to help each other tell stories — some people have called it coauthoring. They tend to have a rather animated and lively way of talking, with very pronounced variations in vocal pitch and much more exchange of emotion in speech. The connective tissue in women's groups is the divulging of personal and sometimes intimate information about the life and the relationships of the speaker and other people. That's a trademark of the way women talk with female friends.

The word "gossip" has a pejorative sound to it, but with it, women are, in a sense, servicing the moral code of the community. One study of gossip showed that gossipers were concerned about women who are bad housekeepers, and

women who are bad mothers, and women who are promiscuous. Those things are all threats to each woman in a community; therefore they have every good reason to want to talk about those things. But men speak very differently from women.

Yes, you argue that men are constantly sniping at each other in tiny ways. You call this “dueling.”

There are a number of criteria: It’s symbolic, playful, stylized. In its purest form, it looks quite a lot like a performance. But the disposition to duel sort of seeps into everyday speech too — like if two guys, for example, come up to each other, and one of them says, “Hey, you old son of a bitch. How the hell are ya?” and maybe insults him a little bit about his bulging midriff, or his thinning hair, or some weird shirt that he is wearing. Women would simply never, never, never do that. They might later privately tell someone, “Hasn’t she aged terribly?” They would never say to her face, “Well, look at the wrinkles on your face” or, “My God! I’ve never seen bulging breasts like those before,” and so forth.

At one point you use the term “verbal plumage,” to describe this dueling dynamic, because it’s partly meant to seduce women.

Both men and women need to know if men are dominant or subordinate. Men need to know because they are very hierarchical in their organization. Women also need to know that, too, because dominant men, or high-status men, have unusually good access to everything women want. It’s recently been discovered that a very rich repository of information is carried by the speaking voice of individual men, and women are particularly good at picking this up. Women love to hear men who have low speaking voices, because it’s correlated with testosterone levels, and those men tend to be more assertive. I don’t think women want men that are aggressive, but they want men that’ll stick up for themselves and bring home the bacon. They especially love a low voice when they’re at the portion of their menstrual cycle when their estrogen is highest.

I’ve actually read somewhere that men who speak in a monotone are also more attractive to women than men who don’t.

By using unusual words or rare words or words in a creative way, men can give everyone, including women, the impression they’re intelligent. If you ask women what they want in a long-term mate they list intelligence at the top of the list, and one of the best ways for them to see if that man is smart is to listen to him talk. It’s almost like a folk IQ test. Words used in a clever way are almost like the colorful feathers of a peacock — a display of what biologists would call fitness information that relates to their ability to reproduce.

So what’s the biological explanation for the low-key, cooperative form of speaking to ascribe to women — or “dueting,” as you call it?

If you are smaller, and less powerful, and weakened or compromised by pregnancy or infant-care responsibilities, then you do not want to portray yourself as a strong autonomous individual that is going to individually fight off anybody who proposes problems. Even in the other primates, where there is a female-male size disparity, females don’t confront males individually, but a group of females will chase males away. Primates also use reciprocal grooming as a favor and a form of respect. I don’t say that intimate disclosures by women are equivalent to manual grooming in the primates, but in a sense they’re similar.

When women are dueting and trading in intimate disclosures about themselves and their friends, they’re fortifying a relationship. If you disclose secrets, they could harm you if they’re distributed, especially to foes or rivals. So dueting tends to be reciprocal. If one woman tells a friend about her worries or fears or intimate life, then the woman knows she needs to reply in kind.

Isn’t this projecting modern, stereotypical gender roles onto people?

This is about sex. It's not about gender. We've seen that girls who have a larger than normal amount of testosterone are more likely to be aggressive. Well, that's not because they're treated in such a way as to make them aggressive, and it's not because their parents are more aggressive than other parents. It's because they have something within them that is making them aggressive. We all know about boys that grow up in fatherless homes. That's a large percentage of young people nowadays. We don't identify them by the fact that they talk like girls. In fact, they tend to be more strongly masculine than the little boys that have a father.

It's been about 6 million years since humans broke off from the other primates, and males are still far more aggressive than the females. Six million years is a long time for something to stay in a species if it's not being sustained by anything. In other words, these differences are not purely arbitrary.

I feel like I'm always seeing women getting into arguments. Two days ago, I saw two older women screaming and swinging canes at each other on the subway. The entire "Real Housewives" franchise seems predicated on this kind of fighting. Isn't that dueling?

I don't watch that program, but when you said "screaming," that's a real clue. When women do that, they are almost invariably angry. And there is a reason. If a woman has done something to cause another woman anger or hurt, she'll scream or yell at them stridently. It's a targeted form of opposition that's designed to cause that individual to back off or to change their behavior in some ways. Anthropologists call it conflict talk. But dueling is done between friends, using insults in a joking or ritualistic way — in the same way that two dogs will bite the other as a form of playing. This is a critical difference, because men are trying to accomplish what their ancestors would have done by direct fighting — only without bloodshed. Humor is critical to this. You could argue that one of the reasons humor evolved is to keep men from becoming violent.

You say we should embrace the differences in the ways we talk. Why?

We are the way we are. It's not to say we can't change, or can't be more respectful of others, or that we can't harmonize our interests in others. But I don't see the point in telling everyone their natural dispositions make them a bad person. I think that men and women need to learn to get along, I think the best way to do that is to start by recognizing the ways we naturally differ.

As you point out in the book, one of the places these speech differences come to a head is in romantic relationships. But what about gay relationships? I think that I'm actually both a dueter and dueler — depending on the context.

That's certainly an area to be looked at. I don't think testosterone is the only variable necessarily, and I also noticed that in my own life, I have very duelly moments and more duetish moments, and I'm not one thing all the time. I think sometimes elements of dueling and elements of dueting are present in the same person.

Over the last decade, texting seems to have overtaken speech as a form of conversation. The new iPhone even allows you to automatically turn your voice messages into texts. How do you think this will change this dynamic between the sexes?

I wrote a book in 1998 about this sort of thing, called "The Devoicing of Society," but frankly, I don't know. When email first started, a technical report was published called "Flaming and Shaming" about the use and misuse of electronic communication. They did a survey looking at the percentage of respondents who had said that email had indirectly led them to terminate a relationship. They pointed out that sometimes somebody sends an email to another person without knowing them very well. With email you're left without background information, tone of voice, a face, so the words stand out nakedly on the screen. And email is almost a duelly medium because emails are not usually conversational — they're more like bullet points. Also, I think there's a much stronger impact of speech upon print than print upon speech.



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