THE MYTH OF MARS AND VENUS

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Myths and Why They Matter

Do men and women speak the same language? Can they ever really communicate? These questions are not new, but since the early 1990s there has been a new surge of interest in them. Countless self-help and popular psychology books have been written portraying men and women as alien beings, and conversation between them as a catalogue of misunderstandings. The most successful exponents of this formula, writers like Deborah Tannen and John Gray, have topped the best-seller lists on both sides of the Atlantic.[1] Advice on how to bridge the communication gulf between the sexes has grown into a flourishing multimedia industry. John Gray's official website, for instance, promotes not only his various 'Mars and Venus' books, but also seminars, residential 'retreats', a telephone helpline, and a dating service.

Readers who prefer something a little harder-edged can turn to a genre of popular science books with titles like *Brain Sex*, *Sex on the Brain*, *The Essential Difference*, and *Why Men Don't*

Iron.[2] This literature explains that the gulf between men and women is a product of nature, not nurture. The sexes communicate differently (and women do it better) because of the way their brains are wired. The female brain excels in verbal tasks whereas the male brain is better adapted to visual-spatial and mathematical tasks. Women like to talk, but men prefer action to words.

Writers in this vein are fond of presenting themselves as latter-day Galileos, braving the wrath of the political correctness lobby by daring to challenge the feminist orthodoxy which denies that men and women are by nature profoundly different. Simon Baron-Cohen, the author of *The Essential Difference*, explains in his introduction that he put the book aside for several years because 'the topic was just too politically sensitive'.[3] In the chapter on male–female differences in his book about human nature, *The Blank Slate*, Steven Pinker congratulates himself on having the courage to say what has long been 'unsayable in polite company'.[4] Both writers stress that they have no political axe to grind: they are simply following the evidence where it leads, and trying to put scientific facts in place of politically correct dogma.

Yet before we applaud, we should perhaps pause to ask ourselves: since when has silence reigned about the differences between men and women? Certainly not since the early 1990s, when the previous steady trickle of books began to develop into a raging torrent. By now, a writer who announces that sex-differences are natural is not 'saying the unsayable', he or she is stating the obvious. The proposition that men and

women *communicate* differently is particularly uncontroversial, with clichés like 'men never listen' and 'women find it easier to talk about their feelings' referenced constantly in everything from women's magazines to humorous greeting cards. A few years ago, a British Telecom advertisement informed us that men like to conduct phone calls standing up, whereas women prefer to sit down. Even if this were a proven fact (which I doubt it is), the obvious response would be 'so what?' But today we seem willing to treat even the most implausible and trivial claims as worthy of serious attention.

The idea that men and women 'speak different languages' has itself become a dogma, treated not as a hypothesis to be investigated or as a claim to be adjudicated, but as an unquestioned article of faith. In this book I propose to question it, and to argue that our faith in it is misplaced. Like the scientists I have mentioned, I believe in following the evidence where it leads. But in this case, the evidence does not lead where most people think it does. If we examine the findings of more than thirty years of research on language, communication, and the sexes, we will discover that they tell a different, and more complicated, story. That is the story which this book will tell.

I have two reasons for wanting to tell it. One is simply that it is interesting, and deserves to be more widely known. The other, though, is more overtly political. I have called this book *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, and I use the word 'myth' in two senses. The idea that men and women differ fundamentally in the way they use language to communicate is a myth in the everyday sense: a widespread but false belief. But it is also a

myth in the sense of being a story people tell in order to explain who they are, where they have come from, and why they live as they do. Whether or not they are 'true' in any historical or scientific sense, such stories have consequences in the real world. They shape our beliefs, and so influence our actions. The myth of Mars and Venus is no exception to that rule.

For example, the belief that 'male–female miscommunication' is an endemic problem is increasingly influencing the way we deal with the crimes of rape and sexual assault. Defence lawyers can now argue that because the sexes communicate differently, a man may genuinely, and through no fault of his own, have understood a woman to be consenting to sex when by her own account she was doing no such thing. If this argument is accepted, the defendant may be acquitted or punished less severely on the grounds that he did not intentionally disregard the woman's wishes, he simply misinterpreted them.

The 'miscommunication' idea is also central to many programmes of sex education designed to reduce the risk of rape. Women are told that because men favour a more direct style of communication, the only kind of refusal that is certain to get through to them is a firm 'no'. As we will see in Chapter 5, linguistic research suggests that this belief is unfounded, and that following advice based on it may actually put women at greater risk of violence.

The workplace is another domain in which myths about language and the sexes can have detrimental effects. A few

years ago, the manager of a call centre in north-east England was asked by an interviewer why women made up such a high proportion of the agents he employed. Did men not apply for jobs in his centre? The manager replied that any vacancies he had available attracted numerous applicants of both sexes, since unemployment rates in the area were high. But as he went on to explain: 'We are looking for people who can chat to people, interact, build rapport. What we find is that women can do this more . . . women are naturally good at that sort of thing.' Moments later, he admitted: 'I suppose we do, if we're honest about it, select women sometimes because they are women rather than because of something they've particularly shown in the interview.'[5]

The growth of call centres is part of a larger trend in economically advanced societies. More jobs are now in the service than the manufacturing sector, and service jobs, particularly those that involve direct contact with customers, put a higher premium on language and communication skills. Many employers share the call centre manager's belief that women are by nature better qualified than men for jobs of this kind, and one result is a form of discrimination. Male job applicants have to prove that they possess the necessary skills, whereas women are just assumed to possess them. In today's increasingly service-based economy, this may not be good news for men.

But it is not only men who stand to lose because of the widespread conviction that women have superior verbal skills. Someone else who thinks men and women are naturally suited to different kinds of work is Simon Baron-Cohen: in *The*

Essential Difference he offers the following 'scientific' careers advice.

> People with the female brain make the most wonderful counsellors, primary school teachers, nurses, carers, therapists, social workers, mediators, group facilitators or personnel staff. . . . People with the male brain make the most wonderful scientists, engineers, mechanics, technicians, musicians, architects, electricians, plumbers, taxonomists, catalogists, bankers, toolmakers, programmers or even lawyers.[6]

The difference between the two lists reflects what Baron-Cohen takes to be the 'essential difference' between male and female brains. The female-brain jobs make use of a capacity for empathy and communication, whereas the male ones exploit the ability to analyse complex systems. Baron-Cohen is careful to talk about 'people with the female/male brain' rather 'men and women'. He stresses that there are men with female brains, women with male brains, and individuals of both sexes with 'balanced' brains. He refers to the major brain-types as 'male' and 'female', however, because the tendency is for males to have male brains and females to have female brains. And at many points it becomes clear that in spite of his caveats about not confusing gender with brain-sex, he himself is doing exactly that.

The passage reproduced above is a good example. Baron-Cohen classifies nursing as a female-brain, empathy-based job (though if a caring and empathetic nurse cannot measure dosages accurately and make systematic clinical observations

she or he risks doing serious harm) and law as a male-brain, system-analysing job (though a lawyer, however well versed in the law, will not get far without communication and people-reading skills). These categorizations are not based on a dispassionate analysis of the demands made by the two jobs. They are based on the everyday common-sense knowledge that most nurses are women and most lawyers are men.

If you read the two lists in their entirety, it is hard not to be struck by another 'essential difference': the male jobs are more varied, more creative, and better rewarded than their female counterparts. Baron-Cohen's job-lists take me back to my schooldays thirty-five years ago, when the aptitude tests we had to complete before being interviewed by a careers adviser were printed on pink or blue paper. In those days we called this sexism, not science.

Mars and Venus: a closer look

At its most basic, what I am calling 'the myth of Mars and Venus' is simply the proposition that men and women differ fundamentally in the way they use language to communicate. All versions of the myth share this basic premiss; most versions, in addition, make some or all of the following claims:

1. Language and communication matter more to women than to men; women talk more than men.
2. Women are more verbally skilled than men.
3. Men's goals in using language tend to be instrumental—about getting things done—whereas women's tend to be

interpersonal or relational—about making connections to other people. Men talk more about things and facts, whereas women talk more about people, relationships, and feelings.

4. Men's way of using language is competitive, reflecting their general interest in acquiring and maintaining status; women's use of language is cooperative, reflecting their preference for equality and harmony. Because of this, men's style of communicating also tends to be more direct and less polite than women's.
5. These differences routinely lead to 'miscommunication' between the sexes, with each sex misinterpreting the other's intentions. This causes problems in contexts where men and women regularly interact, and especially in heterosexual relationships.

Not all writers make every one of the claims just listed. Which ones are emphasized and which are downplayed is often a question of the genre a writer is working in. The idea that women are better communicators than men is strongly emphasized in popular science books, but more muted in self-help texts; conversely, self-help writers tend to foreground the theme of misunderstanding between men and women, whereas popular science writers are less interested in the minutiae of personal relationships.

The most obvious divergence between the two genres concerns the question of 'nature versus nurture'. Popular science books are typically dedicated to the proposition that sex-differences of all kinds have biological rather than social causes. Differences in men's and women's verbal behaviour are thus explained in biological terms. In self-help books, by

contrast, the emphasis is less on explaining the causes of difference and more on dealing with its supposed consequences. Some writers come down on the side of nurture, but many prefer to bypass the whole debate. John Gray, for instance, offers only the whimsical tale that gives his book its title—men and women are different because they originally came to earth from different planets.

Yet despite these variations in emphasis and tone, the self-help and scientific versions of the myth are in the end far more similar than different. Even where they disagree about why men and women differ, they take it as axiomatic that significant differences exist, and are largely in agreement on what the differences are. Most also express the same views on what our attitude to them should be: they advocate tolerance and mutual respect. We should not pretend that the differences do not exist, but nor should we make negative judgements on either sex. We should think of men and women as 'different but equal'.

Simon Baron-Cohen, for instance, concludes *The Essential Difference* with a plea for 'society [to] become more accepting of essential differences in the mind',[7] suggesting that a truly equal society would be one which acknowledged and valued diversity. Deborah Tannen, though she rejects the idea of 'essential differences in the mind' (in her view male–female differences are products of social arrangements), is also in favour of the 'different but equal' approach. She argues that sex differences are like ethnic or national differences, and deserve the same respect. Demanding that one sex assimilate

to the other's norm would be like treating one culture as the standard for all. The biological determinist and the cultural relativist may travel by different routes, but they end up at the same destination.

If their readers are happy to follow them there, it is presumably because their argument appeals to mainstream liberal values: who is not in favour of tolerance and respect? 'Different but equal', however, has a less than liberal history. Applied to racial groups, it was part of the official ideology of South African apartheid; applied to women, it was an argument popular in the nineteenth century with anti-suffragists who espoused the doctrine of 'separate spheres'. That doctrine held that each sex had its proper sphere of activity and influence: men should exercise authority in the public sphere of politics, government, trade, and the professions, while deferring to the authority of women in the private sphere of the home. Giving women the right to vote alongside men would disrupt this natural order, thrusting women into men's sphere and diminishing the contribution they made in their own.

One problem with this argument is that just calling two spheres equal does not make them so. The same goes for Simon Baron-Cohen's list of suitable occupations for people with male and female brains. What Baron-Cohen propounds in *The Essential Difference* looks very like a twenty-first-century version of the doctrine of separate spheres. He does not say that a woman's place is in the home, but he does suggest there is a natural division of labour whereby men make things,

design things, explain things, and decide things while women serve others and take care of their needs.

Today, when older justifications will no longer wash, the notion that women have a natural vocation to care has become closely linked to the myth of Mars and Venus, which says that women have a particular gift for cooperative, rapport-seeking, empathetic communication. Men, by contrast, have no such gift: they are inarticulate, emotionally illiterate, insensitive, and aggressive.

The literature of Mars and Venus is remarkably patronizing towards men. Even when a writer's overt message is 'different but equal', this is often undercut by vignettes of male–female interaction in which the men come off as bullies, petulant toddlers, or Neanderthals sulking in their caves. One (male) contributor to this catalogue of stereotypes goes so far as to call his book *If Men Could Talk*.[8] A book called *If Women Could Think* would be instantly denounced: why do men put up with books that put them on a par with Lassie or Skippy the Bush Kangaroo ('hey, wait a minute—I think he's trying to tell us something!')?

Perhaps men have realized that a reputation for incompetence can sometimes work to your advantage. Like the idea that they are no good at housework, the idea that men are no good at talking serves to exempt them from doing something which many would rather leave to women anyway. (Though we will see later on that it is only some kinds of talking which men would rather leave to women: in many contexts men have no difficulty expressing themselves—indeed, they tend to dominate the conversation.)

This should remind us that the relationship between the sexes is not only about difference, but also about power. The long-standing expectation that women will serve and care for others is not unrelated to their position as the 'second sex'. But in the universe of Mars and Venus, the fact that we (still) live in a male-dominated society—a society in which the sexes are unequal as well as different—is like an elephant in the room that everyone pretends not to notice. Some writers concede that inequalities exist, but present these as the unfortunate result of our failure to 'value diversity'. If we could learn to understand our differences and show proper respect for one another, unfairness would disappear. But when we introduce power into the equation, an alternative possibility suggests itself. Rather than being treated unequally because they are different, men and women may become different because they are treated unequally.

In the mid-1970s, the linguist Robin Lakoff wrote an essay called *Language and Woman's Place* in which she argued that women's distinctive ways of talking both reflected and perpetuated their subordinate social status.[9] She suggested that many characteristics of 'feminine' verbal behaviour, such as hedging (using qualifiers like 'a bit' and 'sort of'), favouring 'empty' adjectives ('lovely') and elaborate colour terms ('lilac' rather than 'purple'), phrasing statements as questions, being 'super-polite' and avoiding taboo language, were really symbolic expressions of deference or powerlessness. They said: 'I'm not being aggressive about this . . .' or 'I know I have no authority to say this . . .'. Lakoff believed that women were caught in a

double bind. If they did not use 'women's language', they risked being judged unfeminine; but by using it they risked confirming the belief that women could not express themselves decisively or authoritatively, and were therefore unfit to occupy positions of responsibility. Women had a choice, but whatever choice they made, they paid a price.

Lakoff's essay was written more than thirty years ago, and some of her specific claims about the way women use language have now been abandoned (they were based more on intuition than evidence, and it turned out that research did not support them). But her more general argument, that there is a connection between language-use, gender, and power, still stands. Though few researchers today believe that power differences on their own explain everything (most do not believe that any single factor on its own can explain everything), power is still very much a part of the picture, because the evidence continues to point to it as one important influence on men's and women's use of language.

You would not know this, however, from reading the literature of Mars and Venus. Popular sources are selective in the use they make of research evidence. On one hand they ignore some very consistent research findings, while on the other, some of their claims are not supported by any evidence at all.

But if the picture presented in Mars and Venus books is selective and inaccurate, why do so many people find it convincing? For most readers, especially of self-help and popular psychology, the answer is probably that they judge what they read by how well it seems to fit with their own experience.

Readers of self-help books often praise them by saying that they found the examples of male and female behaviour 'immediately recognizable'. Yet that too is puzzling, for after all, readers have had years of experience observing real men and women having real conversations. Why would they claim to 'recognize' descriptions of behaviour which are based on myth rather than fact?

Actually, this is a common phenomenon: it happens because of the human tendency to rely on stereotypes when processing information about people. Though we often think of stereotyping as something only the ignorant and prejudiced do, the truth is that we all do it to some degree. Many psychologists would argue that stereotypes—generalized representations of what different groups of people are like—are widespread because they fulfil a vital function in human societies. They are short cuts which help us to deal with new people and situations, by reducing the complexity of human behaviour to manageable proportions. But of course, stereotyping has a downside: it can reinforce unjust prejudices, and make us prone to seeing only what we expect or want to see.

✯ The quest for differences (and how it distorts reality)

My father, like many men of his generation, held the belief that women were incompetent drivers. During my teenage years, family car journeys were invariably accompanied by an endless running commentary on how badly the women

around us were driving. Eventually I became so irritated by this, I took to scouring passing traffic for counter-examples: women who were driving perfectly well, and men who were driving like idiots.

My father usually conceded that the men were idiots, but not because they were men. Whereas female idiocy was axiomatically caused by femaleness, substandard male drivers were either 'yobbos'—people with no consideration for others on the road or anywhere else—or 'Sunday drivers'—older men whose driving skills were poor because they used their cars only at weekends. As for the women who drove unremarkably, my father seemed surprised when I pointed them out. It was as if he had literally not noticed them until that moment.

At the time I thought my father was exceptional in his ability to make reality fit his preconceptions, but now I know he was not. Psychologists have found in experimental studies that when interpreting situations people typically pay most attention to things that match their expectations, and often fail to register counter-examples. When they are asked to describe someone's behaviour after watching them for a period of time, people recall actions which were 'stereotype consistent' more quickly and easily than actions which were not; they also remember the stereotypical actions for longer. If their attention is drawn specifically to someone's non-stereotypical behaviour, they often explain it by suggesting that the individual concerned is an exceptional case (like my father's yobbos and Sunday drivers). Stereotypical behaviour, on the other hand, is not considered to need any explanation.[10]

It is not hard to see how these tendencies might lead readers of Mars and Venus books to 'recognize' generalizations about the way men and women use language, provided those generalizations fit with already familiar stereotypes. An anecdote illustrating the point that, say, men are competitive and women cooperative conversationalists will prompt readers to recall the many occasions on which they have observed men competing and women cooperating—while not recalling the occasions, perhaps equally numerous, on which they have observed the opposite. If counter-examples do come to mind ('what about Janet? She's the most competitive person I know'), it is open to readers to apply the classic strategy of putting them in a separate category of exceptions ('of course, she grew up with three brothers / is the only woman in her department / works in a particularly competitive business').

In relation to men and women, our most basic stereotypical expectation is simply that they will be different rather than the same. We actively look for differences, and seek out sources which discuss them. Faced with claims like BT's 'men stand up to make phone calls whereas women sit down', our first reaction is more likely to be 'how interesting' than 'what nonsense' or 'who cares?' We are much less attentive to, and less interested in hearing about, similarities between men and women. And this has consequences, not only for our everyday conversations, but also for what goes on in the supposedly more objective realm of science.

Most research studies investigating the behaviour of men and women are designed around the question: 'is there a

difference?'—and the presumption is usually that there will be. If a study finds a significant difference between male and female subjects (in other words, a result which statistical tests show could not have been produced by chance), that is considered to be a 'positive' finding, and has a good chance of being published in a scientific journal. A study which finds no significant differences is less likely to be published. This means that some negative findings are never even submitted for publication. It also means that if a study has examined a large number of variables and found positive results for only one or two of them, it will be the least typical, positive findings which the researchers emphasize.

The preference for positive findings is on one level understandable. A report which says, in essence, 'we looked for something and didn't find it' does not make for compelling reading. But if the research was competently designed and carried out, whatever it finds must surely count as knowledge. 'Men and women did not perform any differently on task X' is no less a fact than 'men and women performed significantly differently on task X'. If findings that confirm male–female differences get published more often than findings that disconfirm those differences, the resulting research literature will systematically distort the picture.

Soundbite science

Most people, of course, do not read academic journals: they get their information about scientific research findings from

the reports that appear in newspapers, or from TV science documentaries. These sources often feature research on male–female differences, since media producers know that there is interest in the subject. But the criteria producers use when deciding which studies to report and how to present them introduce another layer of distortion.

In 2005 a study published in the scientific journal *NeuroImage* was picked up by the media all over the world. The following report was typical:

> MEN DO HAVE TROUBLE HEARING WOMEN: RESEARCH
>
> Men who are accused of never listening by women now have an excuse—women's voices are more difficult for men to listen to than other men's.
>
> Reports say researchers at Sheffield University in northern England have discovered startling differences in the way the brain responds to male and female sounds.
>
> The research shows men decipher female voices using the auditory part of the brain that processes music, while male voices engage a simpler mechanism.[11]

This is a classic piece of 'soundbite science': a single piece of research making headlines because of the ease with which it can be boiled down to a simple, arresting, and yet familiar proposition. The Sheffield study appears to confirm the truth of a well-worn stereotype (that men don't listen when women talk); it then goes on to supply the kind of explanation that many people expect and want (it's to do with the way men's brains work). This enables the study to be framed as settling an age-old dispute in the ongoing 'battle of the sexes'. As the

report I have quoted puts it, men 'now have an excuse'.[12] Contrary to what women may think, men who appear not to be listening to them are not being inconsiderate, they have genuine difficulty hearing what women say. If the researchers had found that men's brains processed male and female speech in exactly the same way, that would also have contributed something to the sum of human knowledge. But we can be pretty sure the media would not have been interested in reporting it.

At least in this case the media were reporting a genuine research finding that had been published in a peer-reviewed journal. But there are cases where the headlines trumpet so-called facts which turn out on investigation to have no basis in evidence at all. In 2006, for instance, a popular science book called *The Female Brain* claimed that women on average utter 20,000 words a day, while men on average utter only 7,000.[13] Like 'men have trouble hearing women', this was perfect material for soundbite science: it confirmed the popular belief that women are the more talkative sex, while also suggesting that the magnitude of the difference was even greater than anyone had previously imagined. The 'fact' that women talk nearly three times as much as men was reported in newspapers around the world.

One person who found it impossible to believe was Mark Liberman, a professor of phonetics who has worked extensively with recorded speech. His scepticism prompted him to delve into the footnotes of *The Female Brain* to find out where the author had got her figures. What he found was not an

academic citation but a reference to a self-help book. Following the trail into the thickets of popular literature, Liberman came across several competing statistical claims. The figures varied wildly: different authors (and sometimes even the same author in different books) gave average female daily word-counts ranging from 4,000 to 25,000 words. As far as Liberman could tell, all these numbers were plucked from thin air: in no case did anyone cite any actual research to back them up. He concluded that no one had ever done a study counting the words produced by a sample of men and women in the course of a single day. The claims were so variable because they were pure guesswork.[14]

After Liberman pointed this out in a newspaper article,[15] the author of *The Female Brain* conceded that her claim was not supported by evidence and said it would be deleted from future editions. But the damage was already done: the much-publicized soundbite that women talk three times as much as men will linger in people's memories and get recycled in their conversations, whereas the little-publicized retraction will make no such impression. This is how myths acquire the status of facts.

My goal in this book is not to deny that there are any differences between men and women, nor to suggest that people should not be interested in those differences. Rather, my goal is to separate facts from myths, evidence from anecdote, and reasonable conclusions from speculative and sweeping generalizations. If we are serious about understanding the relationship between language and gender, we need more

sophisticated ways of thinking about men and women, their similarities and their differences. The myth of Mars and Venus is crude and reductive: it both exaggerates the extent of the differences and oversimplifies the reasons for them.

I am also going to argue that this matters, in ways that are not just 'academic'. I think we ought to be asking three questions about the myth of Mars and Venus. First, what is the evidence for its claims about men, women, and language? Second, what consequences does it have in the real world if large numbers of people believe those claims? And third, why are the claims being made? In an age not only of unprecedented sexual equality, but also of extraordinary advances in scientists' ability to manipulate 'nature'—the age of artificial reproduction and genetic engineering—why are we being so relentlessly exhorted to 'become more accepting' of natural sex-differences? In this book I will try to find answers to those questions.

2

A Time and a Place:

Putting Myths in Context

In 1950, the problem page of *Woman's Own* printed a letter from a woman who complained that her husband was more interested in his hobbies than he was in talking to his wife.[1] The magazine's agony aunt replied:

> I am sorry you are unhappy but I doubt if you will ever really cure your husband of his 'maleness', which is the real trouble. Nature shaped the human male to romp about with his hunting and his war games (in your husband's case watered down to scouting and football) while the female remained in the cave to look after the children.

Another letter published in the same year came from a woman who had started to suspect that her husband did not love her. He was, she said, a good provider and handy about the house, but he never said anything to suggest he was fond

of her. The agony aunt reassured her that she was worrying unnecessarily:

> The explanation is that your husband, like so many men, just cannot demonstrate his affection in those small ways that mean so much to most women. The average man feels that by working hard for his wife and children, by doing things about the house and by handing over the best part of his salary, he is expressing his love, as indeed he is in his own way. I suggest you try to accept everything he does for you as being his own particular expression of his love.

This advice from 1950 contains the same basic ingredients that Deborah Tannen and John Gray would later turn into a best-selling formula: unhappy women who crave intimate communication, inarticulate men who are unable to provide it, and experts who urge women to accept what cannot be changed. Evidently the myth of Mars and Venus did not just emerge out of nowhere in the early 1990s. Has it always existed, in some form or other?

The short answer is no: beliefs on this subject are not timeless and universal. They vary across cultures and change over time. But something more abstract does remain constant. In any given time and place, popular beliefs about the language of men and women will be derived from beliefs about men and women themselves—their natures, their relationship to one another, and the places they should occupy in society. As ideas about those things vary and change, so do ideas about the way men and women communicate.

Mars and Venus in history

The current myth of Mars and Venus depends heavily on the idea that whereas women like to talk and are skilled in the verbal arts, men are like the husbands in the problem page letters: they prefer doing to talking, and find it difficult to express themselves in words. In 'scientific' versions of the myth, the explanation given for this is that women's verbal abilities are innately superior to men's. Language skills are said to develop more rapidly in girls; women are described as more articulate and fluent than men, with more extensive vocabularies (from which they retrieve words more quickly) and a greater range of communication styles. They are also said to use language more 'correctly' and more 'politely' than men.

Accurate or not (I will consider the evidence later), these claims have become sufficiently familiar that if you asked a random sample of people 'which sex is more articulate/fluent/correct/polite?'—or just 'which sex is better with language and communication?'—a majority (of both sexes) would be likely to say 'women'. But that is a relatively recent development. In the not so far-off days when most people thought women were intellectually inferior to men, they also believed women were linguistically inferior.

A good place to begin this excursion into history is in eighteenth-century England. The eighteenth century was a period of intense concern about the proper use of language, and is therefore a rich source of evidence about the attitudes people held. Commentators emphasized the linguistic virtues

of eloquence, politeness, and correctness, while worrying about the 'corruption' of language by their opposites. And it was men (or more exactly, men of the elite class) who were regarded as more eloquent, more polite, and more correct. Men were the guardians of linguistic propriety, whereas women's shortcomings threatened constantly to corrupt it. Those shortcomings were a regular target for criticism and satire. Here, for instance, is Lord Chesterfield's sarcastic assessment, made in 1777:

> Language is indisputably the more immediate province of the fair sex: there they shine, there they excel. The torrents of their eloquence, especially in the vituperative way, stun all opposition, and bear away, in one promiscuous heap, nouns, verbs, moods and tenses. If words are wanting, which indeed happens but seldom, indignation instantly makes new ones; and I have often known four or five syllables that never met one another before, hastily and fortuitously jumbled into some word of mighty import.[2]

One of Chesterfield's stereotypes is still recognizable: that women talk too much. But in other respects his beliefs are remote from those which are commonplace today. Women are not cooperative, they are 'vituperative'. Their vocabularies are not more extensive than men's, but on the contrary, so impoverished that they must resort to making up words by jumbling syllables together. Grammatical correctness is not their strong point either: their combined loquacity and ignorance causes them to mix up 'nouns, verbs, moods and tenses'.

Because we have no direct evidence about the way men and women *spoke* in Chesterfield's time—we are dependent on written sources, the vast majority of them writing by men—it is difficult to know whether this description of women's speech (which is echoed by numerous other commentators of the period) reflects reality or simply prejudice. That there was prejudice is obvious to anyone who reads contemporary sources. But it is also possible that many women in eighteenth-century England really did have less extensive vocabularies and a less secure grasp of 'correct' usage than men (that is, men of the elite class). Women generally received less education than men, and were educated in English rather than studying Latin and Greek as men did. (Many rules of correct English usage in the eighteenth century were based on Latin rules, and many complex words were borrowed from Latin.)

One slightly earlier commentator, the anonymous female author of *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*, had denied that women were linguistically disadvantaged by their lack of classical education. On the contrary, she suggested, *not* having to spend years mastering Latin gave girls a head start on English: their 'command of words and sense' was developed by reading books in their own language from an early age. Boys, she said, lagged many years behind, and 'at Seventeen or Eighteen are . . . but where the Girles were at Nine or Ten'.[3]

This writer's view was, however, an unusual one for her time. It was only later that women became by common consent the linguistically superior sex. Particularly in areas of verbal behaviour that were thought to reflect more general

intellectual abilities, men were still being described as superior to women well into the twentieth century.

In 1922, the Danish scholar Otto Jespersen published a general survey of the nature and origins of language, which included a chapter called 'The Woman'. Drawing on sources as diverse (and in some cases as unreliable) as seventeenth-century travellers' tales, the dialogue given to women characters by male novelists and dramatists, his own observations, and experiments conducted by psychologists, Jespersen attempted to summarize what was known at the time about male–female differences in language-use.

'The Woman' is one of the earliest sources to take a systematic and scientific approach to this topic: Jespersen was clearly striving for a 'balanced' assessment. But to a modern reader it is clear that he was biased: he considered women less logical and creative thinkers than men, and took it for granted that their use of language must reflect that.

Jespersen does praise women for the civilizing influence they exert on the development of languages through what he calls 'their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined . . . veiled and indirect expressions'.[4] He follows this, however, by noting that 'there is a danger of the language becoming languid and insipid if we are always to content ourselves with women's expressions'.[5] Chesterfield, writing in an age that considered innovations in language to be 'corruptions', had attributed the habit of making up new words to women; Jespersen, writing in an age that valued originality and inventiveness, says that

men are responsible for 'renovating' language by coining new words.

One belief Jespersen shares with eighteenth-century commentators, but not with the experts of today, is that women have smaller vocabularies than men. He describes one research study in which the experimenter asked twenty-five male and twenty-five female students to write down as quickly as possible the first 100 words that came into their heads. The men produced about 250 more words than the women, and more of the men's words were abstract terms. Jespersen comments that women's vocabulary is both less extensive and more 'everyday' than men's. His explanation is connected to a theory that had been advanced by educationalists in the nineteenth century: women's minds are quick but shallow, whereas men think more slowly but also more deeply:

> Woman is linguistically quicker than man: quicker to hear, quicker to learn and quicker to answer. A man is slower: he hesitates, he chews the cud to make sure of the taste of words . . . thus preparing himself for the appropriate use of the fittest noun or adjective.[6]

The shallowness of women's minds is also apparent in the way they construct their sentences. According to Jespersen, men use subordinate clauses to express logical relationships between ideas, whereas women simply string the ideas together with the all-purpose conjunction *and*—'the gradation between the respective ideas being marked not grammatically, but emotionally, by stress and intonation, and in writing

by underlining'.[7] Incomplete and exclamatory sentences (like 'well I never!') are also described as characteristic of women. Explaining this, Jespersen quotes the novelist Thomas Hardy, who once described a female character as 'that novelty among women—one who finished a thought before beginning the sentence that was to convey it'.

To a contemporary reader, the comments I have quoted from Jespersen are likely to seem at best condescending to women, and at worst downright offensive. But in his time, Jespersen would not have stood out as especially prejudiced. His prejudices were uncontroversial, accepted by most people as obvious common sense. The problem we have with them now reflects the fact that common sense has changed.

The biggest change is that we no longer believe women are less intelligent, rational, or logical than men. We are therefore reluctant to swallow linguistic stereotypes derived from that proposition, such as the idea that women cannot form grammatically complex sentences. Other, less unflattering stereotypes—like the idea that women are more refined and less 'coarse' in their language than men—have fared better. And a few of the old criticisms, for instance that women talk excessively and are overemotional, have not only survived, they have been recast in positive terms. Today, 'articulacy' or 'fluency' and 'emotional literacy' are among the qualities that are considered to make women better communicators than men.

This reflects another big change in our thinking, not only about men and women but also about language and

communication. There has been a shift in what kinds of speech we consider most valuable or most skilful. The historian Theodore Zeldin observes that Victorian advice on how to talk to others is strong on matters of etiquette, but leaves out something modern readers regard as far more important: 'the idea of personal contact, of the intimate meeting of minds and sympathies'.[8] Since Victorian times (and especially since the rise of 'therapy culture' in the 1960s and 1970s), enabling this 'intimate meeting of minds' has come to be understood as the essence of good communication. Consequently, the modern understanding of verbal 'skill' puts less emphasis on qualities like eloquence and correctness, and far more on qualities like honesty, sincerity, and empathy.

This shift in our priorities has contributed to the shift in our assessment of men's and women's verbal skills. Eloquence was from Mars, but empathy is from Venus. Or at least, this is how we see things in modern western societies. What, though, about the rest of planet Earth?

Mars and Venus across cultures

In the first half of the twentieth century, a number of anthropologists published descriptions of non-European cultures in which, allegedly, there were distinct men's and women's languages. The scholars did not mean that the sexes used completely different linguistic systems, but that there were differences in the word-forms they used or in their pronunciations of certain sounds. For instance, Alexander Chamberlain,

in a brief note on 'Women's Languages' published in 1912, says that among the Caraya Indians, the name of a drink called *jacuba* is pronounced *šdúbd* by men and *šdkúbd* by women.[9]

This interest in 'women's languages' was part of a more general preoccupation with the 'exotic' and the 'primitive'. Variant linguistic forms for men and women were regarded as survivals from an earlier stage of human cultural development, which had long since disappeared from the most advanced civilizations. In 1944, Paul Furfey referred to sexual differentiation in language as 'a phenomenon which is barely discernable in the familiar languages of Europe, but which is not at all uncommon among primitive peoples'.[10] He also suggested that it was 'a tool of [male] sex-dominance'.

Commentators like Furfey equated the levelling out of linguistic sex-differences, which they claimed had taken place in European cultures, with civilization and social progress: extensive marking of sex-differences in speech was for them a sign of backwardness. This casts an interesting sidelight on the current popularity of the myth of Mars and Venus. However, we now know these early scholars were wrong to see sexual differentiation in language-use as something confined to traditional non-western cultures: similar patterns are found in western speech communities too. Their perception of sex-differences as alien and exotic led them to exaggerate the distinctiveness of the male and female speech-forms they reported, and perhaps to misconstrue the meaning of the differences.

Like the concept of 'primitive peoples' to which it was connected, the idea of 'men's and women's languages' is no longer current among linguistic anthropologists. But research on how gender influences ways of speaking in different cultures has continued: its findings underline the point that Mars and Venus generalizations about men's and women's language do not have universal applicability.

In Gapun, a remote village on the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, Jespersen's observation that women 'instinctive[ly] shrink from coarse and gross expressions' would be greeted with incomprehension if not derision. In this community, coarse and gross expressions are something of a female speciality. When Gapun women get annoyed with their husbands (or indeed with anyone else, though their husbands are in practice the commonest targets) they do not ventilate their grievances to the local equivalent of an agony aunt. They do it by way of a speech genre that is known in the village as a *kros*.

A *kros*—the word means 'angry' in Tok Pisin[11]—is a monologue in which one person complains about another's behaviour, generally in highly abusive terms, and often at considerable length (forty-five minutes is not unusual). It is delivered from inside the speaker's own house, but is intended to be heard by the entire village. The rule is that the target may not answer back, and nor may anyone else on their behalf. If the *kros* turns from a monologue into an argument, there is a good chance it will soon degenerate into a physical fight. Gapuners prefer to let the speaker go on until she feels she has said all she needs to say. Her grievance, now a matter of public

record, can if necessary be addressed later through more diplomatic channels.

I have used the pronouns *she* and *her* in this description because the *kros*, almost without exception, is a women's genre. (Widowers may occasionally have a *kros*; other men who feel the need generally get their wives to do it for them.) In one *kros* recorded by the anthropologist Don Kulick, the speaker, Sake, turns on her husband, Allan, after an altercation which begins when Sake falls through a hole in the rotten floor of her house (a house which Allan built, and is in theory responsible for maintaining). In the ensuing conflict Allan hits Sake with a piece of sugar cane, while she threatens to slice him up with a machete and then burn the house to the ground. When Allan leaves the house, Sake begins a tirade of abuse. The following (translated) extract gives the flavour of it:[12]

> You're a fucking rubbish man. You hear? Your fucking prick is full of maggots. You're a big fucking semen prick. Stone balls! . . . Fucking black prick! Fucking grandfather prick! You've built me a good house that I just fall down in, you get up and hit me on the arm with a piece of sugar cane! You fucking mother's cunt!

It is true, of course, that an anthropologist would probably be able to record women using similarly obscene language in any British town centre after closing time on a Friday night. But when western women behave in this way, they are usually considered to be adopting 'masculine' traits. In Gapun, by contrast, women whose language is direct, aggressive, abusive,

and obscene are not thought to be acting like men. They are thought to be doing what comes naturally to women.

Villagers hold the general belief that human beings are endowed with two opposing qualities, known as *hed* (roughly, being wilful or headstrong) and *save* (literally, 'knowledge', but what is meant by it here is more like 'judgement' or 'good sense'). *Hed* is something people are born with; *save* takes time to develop. But while every adult has both, men are more able than women to subordinate *hed* to *save*, and that difference is manifested in their verbal behaviour. Men pride themselves on their ability to express themselves indirectly, controlling their emotions and concealing their real opinions to avoid provoking conflict. Women on the other hand are uncooperative and belligerent. As Kruni, one of the older men in the village, told Don Kulick: 'They don't suppress their *hed* a little bit. No way. Talk *kros*, bad talk, that's the way of the women, their habit. They don't have any *save*.'[13]

In John Gray's terms, Gapun would seem to be a place where men are from Venus and women are from Mars. And Gapun is not the only such place. The precise form women's Martian behaviour takes in Gapun is specific to Gapun, but the distinction made in the village between women's direct and adversarial style of speaking and men's more indirect, consensus-seeking style has parallels elsewhere.

Elinor Ochs Keenan encountered a similar distinction while doing ethnographic work among the Malagasy people of Madagascar. In this society, the norm of maintaining harmonious social relations is particularly strong. Open

confrontation is severely frowned on, and even such ordinary actions as asking someone a direct question are considered impolite, because they are seen as putting the addressee too much on the spot. There is an extremely formal and indirect traditional style of speaking called *kabary*, which is used on ritual occasions. *Kabary* is highly valued—and only men are considered capable of using it. As Keenan explains,

> Men tend not to express their sentiments openly. They admire others who use language subtly. They behave in public in such a way as to promote interpersonal ease. In short, they avoid creating unpleasant face-to-face encounters. Women, on the other hand, tend to speak in a more straightforward manner. They express feelings of anger or criticism directly to the relevant party. Both men and women agree that women have *lavalela*, a long tongue. . . . They consider the use of speech by men to be more skilful than that by women.[14]

Keenan goes on to observe that Malagasy men (rather like the men in Gapun who get their wives to have a *kros* on their behalf) exploit women's linguistic 'deficiencies' when it suits their purposes to do so. They leave it to women to communicate unwelcome information, issue reprimands, request favours, and ask direct questions like 'where have you been?' or 'what did that cost?' They also give women primary responsibility for buying and selling in the local markets. An extremely indirect way of communicating is not an advantage when you are competing to sell your wares and haggling over prices. Malagasy women thus dominate one economically important sphere of activity: but it does not have the same

cultural value, or the same political influence, as the male sphere of formal and ritual oratory.

According to the ethnographer Joel Sherzer, the two cases just discussed exemplify a common pattern ('not universal, but certainly widespread') in traditional non-western societies. Many of these societies, he says, recognize two distinct styles of speech:

> indirect, allusive and metaphorical speech, which is highly valued by the society in a socio-aesthetic sense and is also associated with men, politics and the public domain, and direct, non-allusive speech, which is not valued by the society in a socio-aesthetic sense and is associated with women.[15]

Traditional oratory is often both indirect and highly ritualized, making use of stories, proverbs, incantations, and other special ways of speaking that have been passed down through the generations. These features distinguish formal and ceremonial speech from everyday speech, and being able to deploy them appropriately is the mark of a 'skilled' speaker. Often, this kind of verbal skill is a prerequisite for political influence and leadership within the community. But it is almost always men who are believed to possess the relevant skills, and who monopolize positions of leadership.

Mars and Venus in the modern West

Different though they are in substance, the beliefs I have cited from different times and different cultures do have one thing

in common. Whatever is said to be typical of women's speech is also said to make women less well suited than men to occupy positions of power and authority. In traditional societies which value indirect, consensus-seeking speech-styles, those styles are associated with men: women are considered too direct to make good leaders. In the West, where public and leadership roles have been seen to demand direct and assertive ways of speaking, it has also been men who were thought to possess the necessary verbal skills, while women were considered insufficiently direct.

It used to be a common argument, for instance, that women did not reach the top ranks of business and the professions because they lacked verbal authority and confidence. Many commentators on the under-representation of women in British parliamentary politics have suggested that this is partly explained by women's inability to deal with the extremely adversarial style of debate for which the House of Commons is famous. But I am choosing my verb tenses carefully here, for it does seem that recently things have been changing.

In 1997, when the landslide general election victory of Tony Blair's New Labour party sent a record number of women MPs to Westminster, some commentators did ask: 'how on earth are they going to cope?' But a different reaction was more common: the view that women's presence should be welcomed, not in spite of their less sharply honed debating skills, but because of them. Women would improve the quality of political debate by making the House of Commons, in one journalist's words, 'less of a bear garden'.[16]

The journalist did not mean merely that women would exercise a restraining influence on men's 'coarseness'. The idea was rather that women would introduce a whole new style of political discourse. As newly elected Labour MP Julia Drown remarked, 'women are more cooperative . . . They're not so into scoring points, and more interested in hearing different points of view.' Her colleague Gisela Stuart concurred, adding that 'democracy is about consensus rather than imposing will'.

Skilled exponents of adversarial politics, like Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher ('the lady's not for turning'), presumably did not think that arguing with or 'scoring points' against political opponents was inimical to democracy. Nor did the ancient Greeks who gave us the word. But this is the age of Venus: we are constantly told that the modern way to get things done is through cooperation, negotiation, motivation, and teamwork. These are buzzwords in business as well as in politics. 'The best new managers', proclaimed management guru Tom Peters in 1990, 'will listen, motivate, support.' He went on to pose the obvious rhetorical question: 'isn't that just like a woman?'[17]

Ours may be the first time and place in history to hold such unequivocally positive beliefs about women's ways of speaking. Whereas eighteenth-century writers openly disparaged women, and early twentieth-century commentators like Jespersen damned them with faint praise (their speech was quick but shallow, and polite but 'insipid'), we in the twenty-first century congratulate women unreservedly on their

verbal skills. We are also far more ready than our predecessors to find fault with men's.

Is this a sign of progress? In some ways, perhaps: but we should be cautious about drawing the conclusion that where 'they' were prejudiced, 'we' are enlightened. It is always much easier to notice the prejudices of other times and other cultures than it is to examine our own beliefs with a critical eye. But the very fact that beliefs on this subject have been so variable might suggest that a degree of scepticism is in order. If male–female linguistic differences are rooted in biology, as so many contemporary scientists assert, why do different societies claim to observe diametrically opposed patterns of difference? Why are westerners convinced that women are more cooperative and more attentive to others' feelings than men, while in New Guinea and Madagascar people are equally convinced that the reverse is true? And if female verbal superiority is a scientific fact, why have so many cultures, for most of recorded history, considered men's verbal skills (however these were described) to be more advanced than women's?

These are questions I will return to later on. Meanwhile, they should remind us that beliefs about male–female differences are never neutral. When we read Chesterfield or Jespersen now, it is obvious that they were participating, and taking sides, in an ongoing cultural conversation about the roles of men and women in society. Even if it is less obvious, the same is true of today's commentators.

Approaching our own beliefs in a critical spirit means inquiring into the reasons for the current popularity of certain

ideas (and the unpopularity of others). It also means investigating the practical consequences of their popularity. (We will see later, for instance, that notwithstanding the predictions of Tom Peters et al., women in business and politics do not seem to be benefiting from their much-vaunted verbal skills.) Most of all, though, it means asking the question: are we justified in believing what we do? Are our beliefs based on evidence, and is that evidence convincing? In the next chapter I will begin to explain why many researchers today do not think so.

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3

Partial Truths:

Why Difference is not the Whole Story

In 2005, an article appeared in the journal *American Psychologist* with the title 'The Gender Similarities Hypothesis'.[1] This title stood out as unusual, because the aim of most research studies is to find differences rather than similarities between men and women. Yet as the article's author Janet S. Hyde pointed out, on closer inspection the results of these studies very often show more similarity than difference.

Hyde is a psychologist who specializes in 'meta-analysis', a statistical technique which allows the analyst to collate many different research findings and draw overall conclusions from them. Unlike the media, whose science stories typically revolve around a single eye-catching finding, scientists believe that one study on its own does not show anything: results are only considered reliable if a number of different studies have replicated them. In any field of inquiry, the published literature will contain numerous studies of the same question, and