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Virginia Woolf and the Art of Female Conversation: Through the Looking Glass of Deborah Tannen

Kristen J. Gough

Then one evening when they're driving home, a thought occurs to Elaine. She says: "Do you realize that we've been seeing each other for exactly six months?"

Silence fills the car. To Elaine, it seems like a very loud silence. She thinks to herself: Geez, I wonder if it bothers him that I said that. Maybe he feels confined by our relationship. Maybe he thinks I'm trying to push him into some kind of obligation.

And Roger is thinking: Gosh. Six months.

And Elaine is thinking: But hey, I'm not so sure I want this kind of relationship either. Are we heading toward marriage? Toward children? Toward a lifetime together? Am I ready for that level of commitment? Do I really even know this person?

And Roger is thinking: So that means it was . . . let's see . . . February when we started going out, which was right after I had the car at the dealer's, which means . . . lemme check the odometer . . . Whoa! I am way overdue for an oil change here. (Barry, 1996, p. 196)

And the conversation continues afterward. Roger can’t stop thinking about needing an oil change and Elaine can’t stop jumping from one idea to the next, trying to decide where the relationship is heading. Does this sound like two people from different worlds? Or just different sexes? This selection, condensed from popular humorist-writer Dave Barry’s Complete Guide to Guys pokes fun at the differences between the ways men and women think and communicate. While men’s and women’s differences have always been a hotly debated question, in recent years the debate has turned specifically to conversation. Just how do men and women speak differently, and does that contribute to the sexes misunderstanding each other? Deborah Tannen, a Brigham Young University linguistics professor, would answer with a resounding “Yes.” Her book about this topic, You Just Don’t Understand, was a number-one national bestseller; apparently, as Barry’s popularity and Tannen’s bestseller indicate, many people are asking these questions. Tannen’s books gives linguists and laymen alike the tools not only to analyze Roger’s and Elaine’s conversation above, but to analyze conversations in general. Men and women do communicate in very different ways, Tannen argues. Neither way is better, but we must consider and understand the differences in order to understand each other. And other critics of language are echoing Tannen’s concerns. Sally McConnell-Ginet et. al. maintain that asking questions of a language that works both “for and against women” is the key to furthering women’s authority. They ask, “What can a focus on women tell us about language in literature and society?” and “Does incorporating women’s perspectives and experiences challenge conventional models of language and language use, give us an appreciably different picture of the life of language?” (1980, p. xii).
Introduction
As I combed the academic research on gender and language, *genderlects*, as Tannen has coined them, my impression was that women have been unfairly treated when it comes to language. Not surprisingly, traditionally women's language is perceived as "powerless," while men's language remains powerful. Adrienne Rich states frankly, "This is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to talk to you" (Women, 1980, p. x). After looking at just a few titles in a collection of essays I found in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, I saw that critics perceive language as sexist; "By and large men have controlled the norms of use" (1980, p. 58). Perusing the essays reveals that the inherent traits found in women's ways of communicating, which differ from men's, have also caused women to be relegated to inferior status. Many of these authors seem to suggest that, because men don't understand the way that women communicate, they think women are just not as smart as them. Virginia Woolf, perhaps one of the earliest authors to look at these differences closely in her works, seems to suggest a slightly different scenario. Although Woolf popularized and revealed women's methods of communication in her works, she also seems to argue that if indeed women's language is perceived as powerless, women are as much to blame as men.

To illustrate this point, I will first offer a brief review of Tannen's genderlect theories. Applying her theories to Woolf and to two of her contemporaries with similar modernist concerns, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, I will show the differences in how they present men's and women's conversations. Ultimately, Joyce and Lawrence portray women as Tannen would anticipate them to: typically, males show women talking like men, not women. Woolf writes women more dynamically and, from Tannen's perspective, perhaps more realistically. However, I concede Sally McConnel-Ginet's warning that "In literature . . . there are not the feedback possibilities between producer and interpreter that sometimes help clarify the contextual specificities of speech interactions" (1980, p. xiii).

**Tannen's Genderlect Theories**
I think most people would agree that men and women simply have different way of communicating; yet when pressed as to specifics the answers become vague references to women's emotions or men's lack of them. Tannen pinpoints these differences, referring to men's communication as asymmetrical and women's as symmetrical. The different methods result from different goals in communicating. Tannen relates that men "engage the world" in terms of an "individual hierarchical social order in which he [is] either one-up or one-down." In communicating, men perceive themselves as involved in "negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand." The goal of the other person is to establish his superiority in the course of the conversation, or to reveal his inferiority. In the end, "Life, then, is a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure" (Tannen, 1990, pp.24-25). For these reasons, male conversations can be seen in terms of an asymmetrical situation. The conversation has a directed goal: essentially, to determine a winner. For example, typical traits in women's conversations such as asking questions, being polite and indirect, and trying not to offend are the traits men
perceive as putting that speaker in the one-down position. Perhaps an explanation of women’s language will clarify this point.

Women don’t see the world as a contest, but as a “network of connections.” And in conversation, women are striving “for closeness”; they “seek to give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus.” Women work within a group instead of individually. Tannen goes on to explain that “Life, then, is a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation. Though there are hierarchies in this world too, they are hierarchies more of friendship than of power and accomplishment” (1990, p. 25). Tannen makes the point that understanding these general differences will lead to better communication between men and women. Yet in the end, Tannen’s plea for understanding reverberates with sounds of women’s powerlessness.

Pretending that women and men are the same hurts women, because the ways they are treated are based on the norms for men. It also hurts men who, with good intentions, speak to women as they would men, and are nonplussed when their words don’t work as they expected, or even spark resentment and anger. (1990, p. 16)

It’s interesting to note that in her own communication Tannen reveals a tendency toward consensus and community, rather than making her efforts more dualistic. This is an admittedly brief explanation of Tannen’s theories; I will talk about specifics in more detail throughout the paper.

So what value can we derive from looking at Woolf and comparing her characters’ conversations to those of her contemporaries in terms of gender? As Claudia Harris, an English professor at Brigham Young University contends, “Virginia Woolf is the beginning of women’s studies. She revolutionized the way women were perceived in women’s studies” (1998). Moreover, I would argue that, along with changing the way women had been perceived, Harris put them under the microscope; in particular, she looked at women who shared her own middle-class status and portrayed their way of life and conversation. Perhaps she did this in order to advance the way women were perceived, similarly to Tannen, to show that differences don’t equal a choice between good and bad, powerful or powerless, but examining differences leads to greater appreciation and understanding. As Woolf argues in “A Room of One’s Own,” the novel does “[correspond] to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life.” Yet she goes on to explain that the values of men have been prized above those of women:

But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are “important”; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes “trivial.” And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction (Abrams, 1993, p. 1965). And for that reason, critics see books about war as “important” and novels that deal “with the feelings of women in a drawing room” as “insignificant” (1993, p. 1965). Arguably, Woolf sought to change that through her own works, which tended to center in the drawing room and brought the women’s conversations previously considered “insignificant” to a level of importance and
examination. Orlando echoes this sentiment after becoming a woman: “better to be quit of martial ambition, the love of power, and all the other manly desires if so one can more fully enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the human spirit.” And she continues to describe those raptures as “contemplation, solitude, love” (Orlando, 1965, p. 160). If it weren’t for Woolf, I believe, there would be no Tannen—and men and women would be much less apt to consider their differences as something to be appreciated instead of a demarcation line for superiority.

Men in Conversation with Men
The first step in considering genderlects is to examine how men speak to men, and in particular, how they speak about women. Tannen would predict that conversations would center on contest to establish position. Not surprisingly, women often become the prize in a contest between men. For example, in Joyce’s play Exiles the tension between Robert Hand and Richard Rowan is over Bertha, Richard’s common-law wife. However, the conflict seems to lie more in the question of who possesses her. When Richard asks, “Do you kiss everything that is beautiful for you?” Robert responds, “Everything—if it can be kissed.” He then compares a woman’s temple to a flat stone, “It is silent, it suffers for our passion; and it is beautiful . . . And so I kiss it because it is beautiful. And what is a woman? A work of nature, too, like a stone or a flower or a bird. A kiss is an act of homage” (Joyce, 1976, pp. 555-556). He sees women as beautiful objects; and as an object, a pawn that he and Richard can vie for. When Richard sees Robert’s attempts for Bertha’s love, he pushes Bertha toward a relationship with Robert so he won’t lose her; but in giving her away he has, in Tannen’s words, “one-upped” Robert. To Archie he says, “Do you know what it is to give a thing?” — the thing being Bertha. “While you have a thing it can be taken from you . . . But when you give it, you have given it . . . It is yours then for ever when you have given it. It will be yours always” (1976, p. 561). While most of us see giving as a selfless act, Richard reveal how he can use giving in order to possess and therefore to be in a superior position to Robert. The subtleties in the men’s discussion reveals this contest is not for Bertha’s love, but for her possession. To possess Bertha is to “one-up” the other man.

Women as objects in a contest also comes into play in Paul Morel’s hospital conversation with Baxter Dawes in D. H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers. Paul’s first meeting with Dawes since Dawes severely beat him, Paul is now in the position of power. Because of Dawes’ size, Paul couldn’t fight and win; but once the circumstances had changed (and Dawes is the more vulnerable man), Paul chooses to face him again. Further, Paul has decided he no longer wants to see Clara and that Dawes can, in essence, “have her back” as his wife. How does Paul establish his position in this contest? First, physically he’s healthy, while Dawes suffers from typhoid. Next, he explains to Dawes why he had come, “Because Dr. Ansell said you didn’t know anybody here” (Lawrence, 1962, p. 381). Paul is in the position of power. He has made the decision to see Dawes when no one else will. Dawes tries to one-up Paul by telling him that he’s a “fool” if he rents a motor car to take his mother home. Yet the jab at power fails; it’s just weak in comparison to Paul. And although “it was evident that [Dawes] dared not face the world again,” Paul challenges the man to go to the “seahills” (p. 382), to go outside knowing Dawes won’t. Paul leaves feeling a “strong emotion that Dawes aroused in him, repressed, made him shiver” (p. 382). The
emotion, power. Force. Dawes had beaten Paul (literally), and now Paul had a chance to return the favor. He would be Dawes’ only visitor and he would face Dawes and look into his eyes, letting Dawes realize he could face the world while Dawes dared not. Paul is in control. While the conversation doesn’t seem conflictive outright, the message is clear: Paul is establishing his dominance in the contest between the two.

Is this an isolated instance in Lawrence? Consider Bertie and Maurice in “The Blind Man”; they don’t get along with each other. Why? Perhaps because they haven’t established their hierarchical position: Maurice feels inferior to Bertie and for that reason doesn’t want to meet with him. But in Maurice asking to touch Bertie, the contest becomes more definitive. “I thought you were taller,” comments Maurice. Sensing he has nothing to fear from the other man, Maurice implores him to touch his face. Bertie, in the one-down position, must agree. Once Maurice realizes that he “knows” the other man and Bertie is “overcome” in “his own weakness,” Maurice feels ready to return to Isabel (Lawrence, p. 195). After all, Bertie is now the weaker of the two, knowing that Maurice is no longer intimidated by him. The men’s conversation and body movement center on establishing their position in relation to each other.

In general, we can consider that men communicate and see each other in terms of positions of power. Just as Woolf suggested that “war” was seen as an “important” topic for a novel, conflict and status make for “important” stories and themes, at least in part, for these male authors. They have experienced life as a contest between themselves and others and therefore their characters experience life the same way. And while it is harder to examine the conversations in literature (you can’t ask the characters to keep talking), we can at least see that Tannen’s theory is possible.

**Men Writing Women**

So what happens when these writers’ women converse? As Tannen predicts, the way that men communicate is typically how a man believes women communicate, as well: “Women and men are inclined to understand each other in terms of their own styles because we assume we all live in the same world” (Tannen, 1990, p. 179). Woolf noted, looking at book titles, that “women . . . [are] so much more interesting to men than men are to women” (Abrams, 1993, p. 1940). And that if she had to read “all that men have written about women,” then she would see “the aloe that flowers once in hundred years would flower twice before I could see pen to paper” (p. 1940). Men seem fascinated by the topic of womanhood, perhaps in part because, as Woolf claims, they question so much about women—Do they have a soul?, education? -- to name only two questions. Perhaps these men also think of the topic in terms of a contest where women are in the one-up position. Woolf’s quote from Pope seems to carry this connotation -- “Most women have no character at all” (p. 1941). This is not to suggest that men can’t write realistically about women and vice versa, but instead, as Woolf seems to indicate, we need to be perceptive about the differences.

A few brief examples from Joyce show his development as a writer writing women characters. To return to *Exiles*, an attempt of Joyce’s to mirror real conversation and people, according to Harris, we find Bertha acting more as a sacrificing woman, more a caricature, if you will, than a dynamic woman. As Woolf explains in *Orlando*, women are not “obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled by nature,” but it was “as a young
man, [that] she [as a man] had insisted that women must be “obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled” (1956, pp. 156-7). The idea here is that women must fit into a mold offered them by men. And Bertha seems to fit into this idea of the obedient, subservient woman. She agrees to Richard’s request that she lead Robert on, seemingly to Richard’s amusement. In the end, Richard calls this act betrayal -- “I have a deep, deep wound of doubt in my soul” (Joyce, 1976, p. 626); yet it was he who asked Bertha to see Richard. As the obedient wife she responds, as Orlando might predict, by bowing to her husband’s insistence. She acknowledges she has inflicted the wound and pleas, “Forget me, Dick. Forget me and love me again as you did the first time. I want my lover. To meet with him, to go to him, to give myself to him” (p. 626). And Bertha is relegated to the one-down position through her meek and lowly conversation. Her language seems “powerless” because it is subservient. Tannen explains that “Often, the labeling of ‘women’s language’ as ‘powerless language’ reflects the view of women’s behavior through the lens of men’s” (1990, p. 225).

Yet in Joyce’s later works, his women seem to come alive and are more dynamic. (Perhaps it is because, as Woolf might suggest, Joyce has become a more adept observer.) In Ulysses, the Penelope section seems to break the bounds of two-dimensional characterization. Molly Bloom is an ordinary woman with ordinary concerns, “I must clean the keys of the piano with milk what’ll I wear shall I wear a white rose....” (Joyce, 1976, p. 706). Compare Bertha’s willingness to submit to her husband to Molly’s strength, “first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes” (p. 708, emphasis added). Although Molly is also involved in a relationship with a man, her thoughts reveal her power within the relationship. Molly doesn’t just submit to a man’s desires; she is an active player in the relationship, not in the one-down position, but on equal footing. If Bertha were involved in the same situation her thoughts might go something like this, “Richard kissed me passionately on the lips. I could feel his desire to have me so I pressed up against him.” The man’s desires become hers, whereas for Molly, her desires are what she acts on.

We can argue the development of Joyce’s female characters through a comparison of these two women. As Tannen reflects, her studies show that “male-female conversations are more like men’s conversations than they are like women’s. So when women and men talk to each other, both make adjustments, but the women make more” (1990, p. 237). Although Molly is a far differently characterized woman than Bertha, the tendency still is to interpret her thinking through the lens of a man’s understanding. In the end, Molly is acting out something. Her inner dialogue up to this point has been random and free (notice that her thoughts are presented as one long sentence), yet her ideas are centered toward securing her man (men). Tannen might point to men’s emphasis on action. For example, she says her mother complains to her father that she feels ill. The father offers to take her to the doctor and the mother is disappointed (p. 291). Why? Because the mother wanted to talk to her husband about it; she wanted sympathy. But the father was focused on action. What can I do to resolve the situation?, he would be thinking. And so it is with Joyce that we see portrayals of more powerless women, or women that seem to act more like men.

Consider also Lawrence’s portrayals of Elizabeth in “Odor of Chrysanthemums” and Mabel in “The Horse Dealer’s
Daughter.” Elizabeth seems almost in a power play with her husband. Her conversations with her son seem reminiscent of those she probably had with her husband in that “she saw the father in her child’s indifference to all but himself” (Abrams, 1993, p. 2085). When she calls for her son to come in from the brook, he responds in a “sulky voice”: they are vying for the one-up position. Later, when she pursues her husband, it seems almost as though she is looking for a fight with him. Her reaction at the end reflects this:

There had been nothing between them, and yet they had come together, exchanging their nakedness repeatedly. Each time he had taken her, they had been two isolated beings, far apart as now. He was no more responsible than she. (p. 2095)

Her desire to assign blame puts her in the position of power. Her thoughts reveal her desire to know her status in relation to her husband. I’m not arguing here that Elizabeth is a masculine character, but perhaps more that she reacts to her situation in terms of hierarchy: where does she fit? Where does her husband fit? Is she in a one-down position?

Mabel’s passionate exchange with Dr. Fergasan echoes the same type of power play that Elizabeth expresses. Their conversation subtly shows Mabel’s desire to both overpower and be overpowered by Dr. Fergason while he suffers the idea of being placed in the one-down position in relation to her. “Why did you?” she asks, “Who undressed me?” His affirmative response puts her in a position of power, “Do you love me, then?” (p. 2105). And she presses more emphatically, “You love me. I know you love me, I know.” Dr. Fergason submits to her will, although “He revoluted from it, violently. And yet—and yet—he had not the power to break away.” Their power play ends in his marriage proposal, even though he “really, [had] no intention of loving her” (p. 2105). Perhaps this is a cynical view of a potentially touching scene, but is this interpretation possible? Are these characters responding to each other in terms of contest and hierarchical positioning? Dr. Fergason seems to love Mabel in the end, even though it cost him “painful effort” (p. 2106). But doesn’t the final plea sound more like one-upping, rather than an honest plea on Mabel’s part: “I feel awful. I feel awful. I feel I’m horrible to you.” Dr. Fergason’s response: “‘No I want you, I want you,’ was all he answered, blindly...” (p. 2108). And Mabel assumes power. It’s not that Mabel is more masculine than feminine, but that her desire to affirm her status seems like a man’s interpretation of a woman’s action, rather than a realistic portrayal. As Tannen might argue, men can write women and women can write men, but each sex seems to interpret the other through their own understanding.

Part of my argument lies in the idea that Woolf really triggers the concern for women’s studies, not as outsiders or objects, as women were thought of for the most part in her age, but as people worth understanding. She makes this argument in “Professions for Women.” She felt as though she had to kill the “Angel in the House”—the idea of the woman on the pedestal, revered, but kept at a distance and confined to her position—and she felt she should “[tell] the truth about [her] own
experience as a body” (Abrams, 1993, p. 1989). She saw woman as more than a simple characterization study for a book as in “A Room of One’s Own” but as a dynamic character, a “body” with diverse experiences. It would have been easy for her to write about women in experiences that seemed more “important” in war or conflict, (contest) rather than “the drawing room,” yet it would not have been “telling the truth” about her reality as a woman. She explains this idea further, as Nelly Furman asserts in “Textual Feminism” in Woolf’s article, “Aspects of the Novel”:

If the English critic were less domestic, less assiduous to protect the rights of what it pleases him to call life, the novelist might be bolder too. He might cut adrift from the eternal tea-table and the plausible and preposterous formulas which are supposed to represent the whole of our human adventure. But then the story might wobble, the plot might crumble; ruin might seize upon the characters. The novel, in short, might become a work of art. (qtd. in Furman, 1980, p. 45)

**Dynamic Women in Woolf**

So what is the reality of woman? Although Orlando touts that “through all these changes [male to female], she reflected, she had remained fundamentally the same” (Woolf, 1956, p. 237), I would argue that Woolf is trying to make us look more closely at the differences between the sexes, rather than denying them all together. Tannen sees the essential difference in men’s emphasis on status versus women’s emphasis on connection and community. She explains that a woman’s “struggle is to keep the ties strong, keep everyone in the community, and accommodate to others’ needs while making what efforts they can at damage control with respect to their own needs and preferences” (1990, p. 152). For these reasons in general, women tend to play the role of peacemaker -- they emphasize similarities to establish connections; in terms of comparing their world view to status, women look to establish greater levels of friendship rather than power. Furthermore, they see control as a matter of a consensus. Tannen argues that women, instead of one-upping another person, seek agreement about something; and consensus leads to power for a woman.

I can think of no better example of a community of women than Woolf’s “A Society.” The story begins as “Six or seven of us were sitting one day after tea” (1985, p. 118). Already the topic differs from perhaps what was typical in Woolf’s day. The ladies are withdrawing to the drawing room, hardly the setting for a significant story. But a conflict in the story does arise when Poll describes her dilemma of having to read all the books in the London library before she can receive her inheritance. Poll reads what has been called a “book” to the horror of the other ladies. Indeed, the ladies concluded it couldn’t be a “book” because “the style in which it was written was execrable” (p. 119). Their ignorance gone, the women decide they must form a society to decide whether men have been “civilizing” the world, as they had thought. And they conclude that “Before we bring another child into the world we must swear that we will find out what the world is like” (p. 119). Consider the comments that Tannen might make even from the outset of this story. To solve the problem, the women form a society. They do not argue the point, but draw on the ideas and opinions of each other, form a consensus—that they don’t know the answer—and propose to study the answer a group, each gathering information
individually and then presenting it to the group for analysis: “So we made ourselves into a society for answering questions” (p. 119). Instead of solving the problem individually, or as a matter of contest, the women approach the problem in terms of community. A community issue, a community solution.

Similarly, when the women speak to one another it is to gather their information in order to reach a consensus. They don’t approach the issues as contests as matters of status. When conflict does arise in Castillia’s pregnancy, the women argue but strive for a community solution, a “vote.” And before they vote they ask questions of one another. “What is chastity then? I mean is it good, or is it bad, or is it nothing at all?” Another woman, Poll, answers “chastity is nothing but ignorance—a most discreditable state of mind. We should admit only the unchaste to our society. I vote that Castilia shall be our President” (Woolf, 1985, p. 124). In seeking connections, Poll suggests that Castilia is not so different from the rest of them, but that being unchaste is merely a state of mind. As Tannen explains, “the general tendency among women [is] to seek agreement” (p. 167) and to emphasize the commonalities between women to establish greater ties of friendship. Castilia has done something that jeopardizes the sameness of the women, and the community is threatened in the difference. Poll lessens this difference by reinterpreting it: we are all unchaste, she argues; it’s a matter of definition. Whereas a man might see Castilia’s confession as a chance to gain a higher position of status, to one-up her, Tannen points out that “appearing better than others [or different] is a violation of the girls’ egalitarian ethic: People are supposed to stress their connections and similarity” (1990, p. 217). And furthermore, “For many women, openly opposing the will of others—or what they perceive to be others’ will—is unthinkable” (p. 184). With these things in mind, Poll’s plea for sameness seems perfectly acceptable. And the other women agree. Helen “[moves] that no one be allowed to talk of chastity or unchastity save those who are in love” (Woolf, 1985, p. 124). She tries to lessen the conflict by altering the topic.

Another way to consider women’s conversations in relation to men’s is a horizontal versus a vertical line. Tannen explains that women’s conversations, along with emphasizing similarities, are based on rapport; a man’s conversation, based on status, at times appears more directed for that reason. There is a definitive goal in the man’s conversation, one that is perhaps easier to understand, considering our still mainly patriarchal-centered society: striving towards status, one-up or one-down, the man’s conversation moves accordingly up or down a line. A woman’s conversation, on the other hand, moves along a horizontal line. Although friendship is the goal it is not seen in terms of up or down, but in a seemingly unending goal of networking. Woolf, at least in part, seems to recognize this difference. In Between the Acts, Isa and Mrs. Swithin appear to be speaking of nothing at all important

‘At least so my dentist told me,’ she concluded.
‘Which man d’you go to now?’ Mrs. Swithin asked her.
‘The same old couple; Batty and Bates in Sloane Street.’
‘And Mr Batty told you they had false teeth in the time of Pharaohs?’ Mrs. Swithin pondered.
Batty, she recalled, only talked about Royalty. Batty, she told Mrs. Swithin, had a patient a Princess. ‘So he kept me waiting well over an hour. And you know, when one’s a child, how long that seems.’ ‘Marriages with cousins,’ said Mrs Swithin, ‘can’t be good for the teeth’ (1974, p. 33).

Is this the type of conversation worthy of prose? Worthy of being written and recounted in detail? What does the conversation establish? Viewed through the lens of hierarchal status, nothing. Viewed, however, through the lens of establishing friendship, rapport, and connections, everything. Throughout the conversation, the women seek to find connections wherever they can grasp them in an effort to find similarities between themselves (even if they are weak ones). Isa goes to a dentist. Is it someone Mrs. Swithin knows? No, no connection there. But finally, Mrs. Swithin does find a connection between Isa’s dentist and herself. And this connection is important. It establishes the women as part of the same community.

This same style—seemingly insignificant details with deeper meanings—reverberates throughout Woolf’s works. “Kew Gardens,” “Blue,” “Green,” what is their purpose? In terms of establishing connections, Woolf gives her readers a connection to her by sharing her experiences. She takes the tone of an observer giving her audience a rich description of the scene. Perhaps on at least one level, Woolf is offering her own experience on paper so that it becomes part of our experience and secures a connection between her readers and herself. And this is also why some readers may feel like they are a part of the work, participants such as the characters in Miss La Trope’s play. We become part of the audience in Between the Acts. We are as shocked by the revelation of the mirror as the audience. When the end of the story explains that “the curtain rose. They spoke” (1974, p. 160), the ambiguity of “they” allows us to place ourselves within the play. We are the players. We are part of the experience. Woolf can speak to us on equal footing and establish connections with us, point out our similarities instead of our differences.

**Conclusion**

Can any author truly capture the genders in a real conversation? Is that even a fair question? I don’t believe the quest is necessarily to write realistically, as much as write so that the reader identifies with the character and finds something true in himself or herself that he recognizes within the character. The final exchange between Gretta and Gabriel in “The Dead” seems to capture the essence of the disparity of men’s and women’s attempts at communication. Gabriel wants to hold Gretta, passionately draw her to him to have her yield to his “impetuous desire” (Joyce, 1976, p. 236). But he doesn’t voice his ideas. He can see that Gretta is upset. Their conversation turns to Michael and a lost love that died, in Gretta’s mind, for her sake. Gabriel presses her for details, even thinking she wants to go to him. Gretta explains his tragic death. Gabriel holds her hand for a moment “and then, shy of intruding on her grief, let it fall gently and walked quietly to the window. She fell asleep” (p. 240). If we consider this exchange in terms of Tannen’s explanations we understand the lack of communication in terms of gender. Gabriel sees Gretta’s confession as a threat to his position as her lover. He immediately thinks she wants to run away with Michael. Then, when he finds out Michael’s dead he believes she is still in love with him. He doesn’t quite understand
why Gretta is telling him of the experience. Where is he in relation to Michael: one-up or one-down?

Gretta, on the other hand, wants to establish a connection with her husband, a connection that has been failing for quite some time. She tells the story hoping for understanding, hoping for a renewed connection. Instead, she finds a hostile reaction in Gabriel. Not wishing a further confrontation, which would only provoke a further severing of what little connection is left, she falls asleep. Joyce has perhaps realistically portrayed Gabriel’s feelings and frustrations, but has he Gretta’s? It’s told from his perspective. In Tannen’s mind we can conjecture she would point to the lack of understanding as a fundamental difference in the way, and goal, each communicates:

Because [women] are not struggling to be one-up, women often find themselves framed as one-down. Any situation is ripe for misinterpretation, because status and connections are displayed by the same moves. This ambiguity accounts for much misinterpretation, by experts as well as nonexperts, by which women’s ways of talking, uttered in the spirit of rapport, are branded powerless (Tannen, 1990, p. 225).

Gabriel and Gretta don’t understand each other. Just as Tannen demonstrated the strained ties between her father and mother in the example of her mother’s illness, so too, the same applies here. Isa feels sick at heart. Gabriel senses it. What can he do to fix it? is his essential reaction. Isa strives for sympathy and is upset when Gabriel seeks action instead of closeness. If men and women considered each other’s differences more closely wouldn’t it lead to greater understanding and truer communication? I believe that Tannen provided the linguistic door that other linguists are still trying to unlock. Tannen is the first to admit that there are exceptions to her theories that “asymmetries [exist] among women . . . and symmetries among the men” (p. 229), but if these theories provide better understanding, then the generalities seem acceptable.

Woolf seems to agree. Orlando claims that “up to this moment [when he became she] [he]she had scarcely given her sex a thought” (1956, p. 153). But once Orlando realizes women’s treatment and their essence he, as she, cries

At last, . . . she knew Sasha as she was, and in the ardour of this discovery, and in the pursuit of all those treasures which were now revealed, she was so rapt and enchanted that it was as if a cannon ball had exploded at her ear . . . (p. 161).

He understood her and she understood him, and the revelation had the power of a cannon ball. Deeper understanding leads to deeper fulfillment. So while I don’t claim all male authors misrepresent women and all women authors misrepresent men, considering their differences potentially leads to greater understanding, especially when it comes to women who have been misrepresented for so long. Woolf must have experienced the women she read in much of the fiction of her age similarly to how Tannen describes a man’s interpretation of a situation with a woman: “This man was surely telling the truth as he experienced it, because when women and men get together they interact according to men’s, not women’s norms” (1990, p. 235). And so it was with Woolf that she recognized women in fiction acting according to men’s norms, whether it be as
some sort of Angel in the House or speaking more like men. She began a closer examination of her sex, and not necessarily a kind one: "What fools they make of us—what fools we are!" (Abrams, 1993, p. 158). She began popularizing the drawing room, making the snail on the wall an object for greater contemplation. And she saw the ideal day when men and women would speak with each other without misunderstanding:

‘Are you positive you aren’t a man?’ he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, ‘Can it be possible you’re not a woman?’ and then they must put it to the proof without more ado. For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other’s sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, they had to put the matter to the proof at once. And so they would go on talking or rather, understanding . . . (Woolf, 1956, p. 258).

Each understood the other because each understood the differences. While Tannen’s theories remain imperfect, they continue in the tradition which Woolf started by looking more closely at women’s studies and in particular at women’s conversations, not in terms of better or worse, but in looking for understanding. Is her goal too lofty? Have we really gotten anywhere since Woolf? Tannen might argue ‘yes,’ that women today are being understood to a much greater degree than the women of Woolf’s day. Yet when I read Dave Barry’s recent commentary, I am struck by the quandary that still exists between men and women. And while Orlando may have been a combination of the seemingly best of each sex, a man’s “strength” and “a woman’s grace” (p. 138), I don’t think Orlando’s metamorphosis (both physically and emotionally) a viable solution. Rather, I believe I will do my best to recognize the differences and improve the disparity in my own relationships with the opposite sex; yet I believe I will still find Tannen’s more cynical side the more accurate: “We try to talk to each other honestly, but it seems at times that we are speaking different languages . . .” (1990, p. 279).

Works Cited