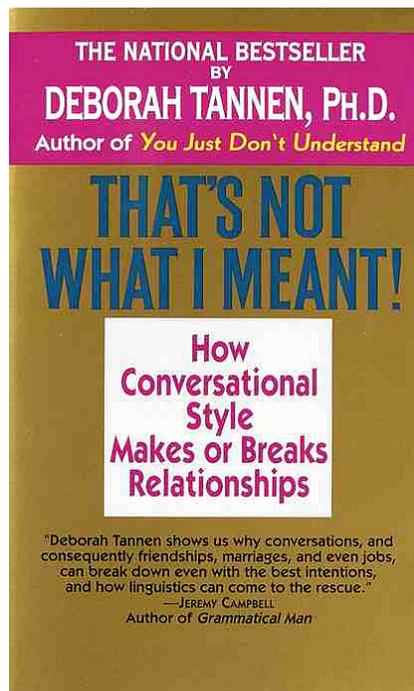


# That's Not What I Meant!

*How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*

By Deborah Tannen, Ph.D.



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## **Introduction**

In *That's Not What I Meant!* Dr. Deborah Tannen uses personal experience and observation to explain a variety of conversational styles and how they lead to misunderstandings. By using her own experiences and giving easy to follow examples, Dr. Tannen clearly explains why she believes there is so much confusion between people when it comes to communication. Throughout each chapter, Tannen discusses different characteristics of conversation and describes when the different characteristics come into play. Through her many explanations, Tannen is hoping to teach people that because each individual has a different conversational style, quarrels are bound to arise but can easily be remedied. Tannen uses a non-intimidating approach which results in her audience gaining a sense of understanding and relief that they are not alone in the world of miscommunication.

Tannen clearly wanted this book to be a helpful guide, so she uses language that is extremely easy to understand, and gives examples that are easy to relate to. She begins the book with her own personal story of going through a divorce, and how it was almost entirely due to her and her husband's inability to effectively communicate. By starting this book with a personal story, and showing that she too suffers from the difficulty of conversational styles, she immediately lets the reader know that they are not crazy for being able to relate to everything they are about to read. Tannen shows that communication is a challenge for everyone, and that instead of getting frustrated over it, it is better to understand that we *all* have a different style of speaking, listening, and understanding.

## **Chapter One: The Problem is Process**

Dr. Tannen begins this first chapter by giving examples of how conversations can go wrong. She describes a woman having a horrible job interview because she was unable to tell the interviewee that while her previous job was titled “administrative assistant,” she ran the whole company. Since she couldn’t get a word in edgewise, she did not get a job that she was more than well qualified for. Simple conversation hiccups like this happen all the time, and some have more of an impact than others. Tannen also gives a personal example of her and her husband’s marriage and how it failed because they could not properly communicate. “It would turn out that he had taken something I’d said as a hint about what I wanted, and I mistook his agreement with what he thought I wanted for being what he really wanted” (Pg 9, Tannen). Tannen and her husband had different ideas of how to communicate, and since they could not recognize their differences, they divorced.

After the frustration of not being able to figure out why Tannen had so many communication difficulties with her husband, she started to look into linguistics and found clarity. Tannen found that couples often want to maintain camaraderie, and they each have different ways of going about doing this, so when her husband was trying to agree and make her happy, she took it as him going against what she was saying and being difficult. These conversational mishaps go back and forth and it can be nearly impossible to actually understand that each person is just trying to maintain a comfortable environment. Everyone experiences miscommunication, and it can be very frustrating, but there is an explanation behind conversational styles which can help ease the tension in conversations.

“... *Our personal worlds are shaped by conversations- not only with family, friend and co-workers, but also in public*” (Pg. 12, Tannen). We are constantly communicating, and the way in which our conversations play out can have a large effect on our mood, and can be very frustrating. A majority of the world honestly has good intentions when speaking, but because of personal style and opinion, miscommunication can arise. People can perceive something as rude, when it is really just a difference in the way each individual communicates. Tannen says that clarifying a miscommunication can be difficult as well because we are often aware that there has been a miscommunication. It is important to remember that misunderstandings can arise, but we need to relax and remind ourselves “*that others may not mean what we heard them say.*” (Pg. 14, Tannen)

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As I began reading this first chapter, I realized immediately that I was going to be able to truly relate to this book. I never thought about the fact that my communication in past relationships could have been difficult because we had different styles of communicating. I always assumed that my previous boyfriends were just being difficult and not listening to me, when they very well could have just been communicating in their own way, which I couldn't understand. In just reading this first chapter, I actually felt better about the fact that past relationships had failed, because I realized that it wasn't because I was crazy, it was because we couldn't figure out how to read each others communication styles.

This chapter also made me instantly think about my parent's relationship. Since I still live with my parents, and have been living with them my entire life, I can recall so many arguments they had, and I was wishing I knew then what I already learned in the

first chapter. I immediately told both my parents that they had to read this book, and I had only finished the first chapter. My parents definitely struggle with miscommunication, and I was glad to read that many marriages, including Deborah Tannen's, have issues with communication. Reading this first chapter eased my mind and I realized that by the end of this book, I would have a much better understanding of conversations and how to maintain sanity.

## **Chapter Two: The Workings of Conversational Style**

This chapter begins with defining metamesages, and the role they play in conversations. "*What is communicated about relationships- attitudes toward each other, the occasion, and what we are saying- is the metamessage*" (Pg. 16, Tannen). Tannen describes that we respond most strongly to the metamessage in a conversation. For example, if you see a friend wiping away tears and you ask them if they are ok and they say they are fine, you know they really are not by the metamessage they are sending. Along with metamesages is how fast we speak, how loud we speak, etc. All these aspects are not actually the words we say, but they have just as much as impact as what is coming out of our mouths.

The next point Tannen brings up is our need to have close relationships; we need to feel that there is more to the world than just us. However, while we don't want to be alone, we also need to feel a sense of independence so that we are not overwhelmed by the rest of the world. "We need other people to survive, but we want to survive as individuals" (Pg. 17, Tannen). Tannen goes on to say that balancing our needs is difficult, and that America has "*glorified individuality.*" Different cultures and people have

different ideas of how much independence they need, so relying on conversation has higher value to some people than others. For us, it is difficult to find a comfortable medium because we don't want to show too much involvement with others because it is a threat to our individuality. On the other hand, we don't want to stay at too far of a distance, because that is a threat to our involvement with the world. Tannen says that because of this struggle, communication can never be perfect and that we are left with no option but trying to balance independence with involvement.

The next topic Tannen address is politeness in conversation. It can be very hard to say what we think or feel without hurting someone's feelings. We are constantly trying to take into account the effect of what we say, and how we will make other people feel. Tannen lists three rules devised by Robin Lakoff: 1. Don't impose; keep your distance, 2. Give options; let the other person have a say, 3. Be friendly; maintain camaraderie. Naturally, each of these rules can have a negative side. If we take approach number one for example, and decline an offer for a drink, we may come off as rude and unappreciative when we are just trying to be polite. We balance all three of these rules and try to find a comfort level within ourselves. Furthermore, our attempts of politeness can often backfire and end up being offensive. Tannen gives an example of a friend canceling a trip to see another friend. When the one canceling made the call, the other friend supported her and although she was feeling upset, trying to be polite, she never showed it. The friend canceling sees this reaction as inconsiderate and insensitive. Clearly, being polite is often more difficult than most people think.

Finally, Tannen describes metamesages at home and across different cultures. We often treat other people the way we think we would like to be treated. For example, in

a situation involving a couple, if the woman wants attention, she will give the man attention, and if the man wants to be left alone, he will leave the woman alone. They are trying to be polite by giving each other what they think they want, but they are actually doing just the opposite. Each person has the others best interest in mind, but it doesn't always work out that everyone is happy. Cultural differences arise quite often because people from different cultures have different ideas of what is polite. An example Tannen gives is an American woman sitting in a booth in a cafeteria in England. A British couple show up and sit across from her in the booth without saying anything to the American woman. The American woman took this as very rude and inconsiderate, but the British couple felt speaking to the American woman would be an invasion of her privacy, and since sharing a booth is common for the British couple, they thought they were being quite considerate. Politeness can be extremely difficult across the world because each culture has a different idea of how to be polite.

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I definitely think we all need to feel independent, but we don't want to be left completely alone. I can easily think of times when I have said "*leave me alone,*" but have said just as much "*I really need someone to talk to.*" I think I feel more that I need independence because I really value the times I get to spend alone. By the same token, I often housesit and when I come back to my home, I can't stop talking to my family because I have not had anyone to talk to for the past week. I find it so interesting that we struggle with the need to be alone, but also the fear of having no one.

Politeness has a huge effect on me because I am a very sensitive person, so I often take things people say too harshly. My mom is constantly saying something to me, and

then after seeing my reaction, telling me to not be so sensitive. I have a nasty habit of taking what people say, and turning it into something negative. After reading this, it is nice to know that I should relax a little more because for the most part, people are just trying to be polite in the way they think is appropriate. I sometimes have an issue with being too nice, and sometimes I think I should express more of what I feel rather than worrying so much that I will make someone mad. I agree that being polite is important, and that we all need to watch what we say, but I think sometimes we can end up being passive instead of polite, and it is important to watch out for that.

Finally, I can definitely relate to cultural metamessages. Whenever I visit my sister in New York, I try to be very careful to watch my behavior because I could get myself into big trouble. New York City and Marin County are really different places so it's important for me to remember that I am not at home. On one of my trips to see my sister, I was in a clothing store and I went to the dressing room and gave the sales person a friendly smile, and he automatically said "*You're not from New York are you?*" I had not spoken one word, but my attitude showed him that I was no New Yorker.

### **Chapter Three: Conversational Signals and Devices**

This chapter begins with a discussion of conversational signals and how they affect communication. In the first case, pacing and pausing, Tannen explains that it can be difficult to know when is the appropriate time to jump in when having a conversation. Some people take longer pauses than others, so when a person is simply pausing and not actually done talking, another people may mistakably jump in because they don't want to

be stuck in an awkward silence. Both people come off as rude to each other, when in actuality, both are trying to be polite.

Loudness and pitch are also characteristics of conversational devices. Tannen describes how some people speak in a softer voice and others speak with a strong loud tone. This can make a conversation extremely uncomfortable because a loud speaker will increase their volume to make the quite speaker more comfortable. Of course, that backfires because the quite speaker just gets more uncomfortable and speaks in an even quieter voice. In the end you get a conversation where one person is shouting and the other person is whispering. Along with volume, Tannen says pitch can have an effect on conversation because it can put emphasis on certain words or ideas. Having a conversation in monotone would be painfully boring, so with the use of changing our pitch, we can show excitement, dismay, and a variety other feelings.

Tannen then goes on to describe conversational devices in action. The first idea she mentions is expressive reaction and how it can often be meant to show enthusiasm, but perceived as an insult. Tannen gives the example of four people having dinner. A more reserved man is telling a story, and another is trying to be an active listener by making comments like “*Oh my God!*” or “*Wow!*” The man telling the story is very confused by these reactions and instead of making him feel good about the story he is telling, he gets very uncomfortable and self-conscious. The man listening to this story is not trying to make this other man uncomfortable, actually quite the opposite, but because of their different styles of listening, they are getting frustrated with each others reactions.

Next, Tannen describes how asking questions can be a form of interest to some, and a form of interrogation to others. “...*Questions can seem nosy, overbearing, or*

*hinting at something else*” (Pg. 45, Tannen). There are many different forms of questioning, for example, the way a lawyer questions a witness is very different than the way a mother questions her daughter. Questions to some can often seem to be more of an imposition than an interest. An example would be a couple going to meet the man’s parents. The parents are trying to make the woman comfortable by asking questions but the woman becomes very uncomfortable and feels like she is under interrogation.

The last conversational devices mentioned are ritual complaining and setting a good example. An example of complaining are two girls talking about their mothers, one complains that her mother has been very critical of her, and she is expecting her friend to react by saying *“I completely understand my mother does the same thing.”* Unfortunately, that is not what happens; the friend says how lucky she is to have such a great mother who doesn’t criticize her. Now the friend who complained is even madder because she feels like her mother has been insulted, and she didn’t get the reaction she was looking for. Setting an example is similar to complaining because it can easily backfire. If a misunderstanding occurs, Tannen says that often people will admit that they should have listen more or taken something more literally, expecting the other person to agree and then say something that they should improve on. What happens, though, is that sometimes people will just agree and move on without stating their own flaws. This ends up making one person feel victorious, and the other person feeling a lot worse.

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I could not agree more with the points Tannen makes about conversational signals and devices. I have definitely had my experiences with feeling like I have been interrupted, and feeling like someone is shouting at me. The most amusing thing to me is

when someone who speaks very loudly is talking to me in a quite environment. For example, there have been several occasions when I am in class and one of my peers starts talking to be about something quite personal, but is speaking very loudly. I've noticed that I try to lower my voice to encourage them to lower theirs, but it completely backfires. Sometimes I just have to end the conversation because literally everyone in the room can hear us.

I can also relate to questioning, especially with me and my mother. My mom and I have a great relationship and I feel like I can tell her anything, but sometimes I mention one thing and she starts asking me question after question. This especially happens when I'm tired and don't really want to talk but she has a lot of energy. It is partly my fault because I will say something exciting and then not want to really talk about it anymore but she is dying to know every detail. When this happens, I feel like my mom is interrogating me and won't just let me be, when all she is really doing is showing interest in my life.

Lastly, ritual complaining is something I can definitely relate to. There have been times when I say something to my mom about how one of my co-workers is seriously pissing me off, and instead of agreeing and complaining with me, she tells me that I am overreacting and it makes me crazy! All I want to hear when I am complaining is someone agreeing with me, which I know is ridiculous, but I can't help it. Also, I know that if my I complained about my mom to a friend and they agreed that it was bad, I would become defensive about my mom, which is also ridiculous. It is interesting to me that these reactions are so common to me when I know they don't make any sense.

## **Chapter Four: Why We Don't Say What We Mean**

Dr. Tannen begins this chapter with the topic of indirectness, which refers to “the way people mean what they don't exactly say” (Pg. 55, Tannen). The book presents the example of a couple, Cynthia and Greg. Greg fixed himself a snack and then offered it to Cynthia. Cynthia turned down the snack simply because Greg had not prepared it for her; he had prepared it for himself and then offered it to her. Greg could not believe that she was upset and felt that because he didn't make the snack for Cynthia, he did not care about her. People have a tendency to want you to know what they want without you having to tell them. It didn't matter if Cynthia was hungry, she felt Greg should have made her the snack simply because to show he cares.

A situation of indirectness which shows its positive side is Deborah Tannen's example of a father and a daughter. The daughter would ask her father if she could go to a party, and he would either answer “Yes, of course,” or he would say “If you want, you can go,” the latter was a sign that her father didn't really want her to go. This way actually works great, because if the father uses the latter and the daughter doesn't go, he is pleased, but if she does go, he has no reason to get upset because he said she could go. That aspect of indirectness has a positive affect, but issues arise when one person expresses intentions not on record, and the other expresses information outright. This is the fast lane to a nasty misunderstanding.

Dr. Tannen next moves on to directness and telling the truth. She describes how sometimes telling the complete truth can actually get you into trouble. If someone asks you a question and you give them a truthful answer with no explanation, he/she may think your answer is suspicious even though you are telling the truth. Tannen also states

that a *“reason we can’t solve the problems of indirectness by being direct is that there are always unstated assumptions”* (Pg 66, Tannen). People speaking to each other often get confused because they are saying something assuming that the other person knows exactly what they are talking about. For the most part, we can’t know everything that’s going on in someone else’s head so it’s nearly impossible to be completely clear at all times.

*“Honesty’ can result in or mask insensitivity to others’ feelings”* (Pg. 67, Tannen). Tannen closes out the chapter by speaking about honesty and how it is not always the best choice in conversation. If you want to go to dinner just you and a close friend, can you really tell your significant other you don’t want them there without hurting their feelings? Even if your partner has something better to do, they still want to feel welcome. It seems rather ridiculous that we can’t just say what we mean without hurting someone else, but of course, nothing in communication is that easy.

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With each chapter that I read in this book, I realize more and more how I am guilty of all the ideas Deborah Tannen mentions. In one of my previous relationships, my boyfriend would sometimes ask me if it would bother me if he did something, and I would say no when it really did. When I got angry later, my boyfriend would be so confused because I had said that it was fine with me. After reading this book and thinking back on that relationship, I can’t help but feel ridiculous for acting that way. It seems like it should be simple to say what you feel, but it seems like no one is really able to do that all the time.

When I was a senior in high school, I could not wait to graduate. I was frustrated with everything about school so I didn't go out very much. My friends started to notice that I didn't like to go out, so they would simply stop inviting me to go with them to parties. It wasn't a vengeful act; they just knew that I wouldn't want to go so they gave up on asking. They were absolutely right that I didn't want to go, but it still bothered me that they wouldn't ask me. I couldn't accept the fact that they were being honest, and I should have been honest too, instead of wanting them to invite me somewhere I wouldn't have gone.

### **Chapter Five: Framing and Reframing**

*“Framing is a way of showing how we mean what we say or do and figuring out how others mean what they say or do.”* (pg. 75, Tannen). Framing is the cause of a lot of misunderstandings. An example of this is a couple deciding where to have dinner. The woman asks where they should go, the man names a place, they eat there and the food is terrible. At the end of the meal, the woman says that she has eaten there before and knew the food would be horrible; the man is confused as to why she wouldn't have said that. The problem lies in the fact that when the woman asked the man where they should go, that was her way of starting a negotiation, and when the man says a place, that is his idea of starting a negotiation. Since neither of them knows when the negotiation is starting, they end up doing something that neither of them was too crazy about in the first place.

Framing affects the way we perceive what we see and hear. Most of misunderstandings occur in writing or over the phone, when people are not face to face. One example that Tannen gives is a student who turns in a paper that has exceeded the

word limit, but stays within the number of pages assigned because the student uses a small font. The professor writes on her paper, “*Using a word processor is kind of cheating*” (Pg. 79, Tannen). This poor student becomes very worried because she thinks the professor meant it literally. Since it was simply written and the student could not see the instructor’s face, she was unable to know that it was a joke. This type of thing happens often because unless we are face to face, it is very hard to know exactly what someone else means.

There is clearly danger in frames, Dr. Tannen says they allow people to say something and then later say, “*I didn’t mean it that way.*” There is no record of what occurred, so there is no proof of exactly what someone meant, which can cause quarrels. Tannen also says that we can break the frame, and gives a personal experience to prove it. She mentions that she was giving a lecture and two students kept asking extravagant questions trying to make Tannen sweat. When Tannen had finally had enough, instead of raising her voice and showing anger, she responded to one of the questions with an extremely intelligent answer. This was a very subtle way of shutting up these two annoying students, and Tannen was able to feel a sense of victory without being inappropriate or rude.

Finally, the idea of reframing is presented. Tannen describes how we sometimes feel put down by something someone says, but we don’t really know why. An example is given of a couple who tells their friend who has just recently divorced that she doesn’t have to spend Christmas alone because they are happy to have her with them. The woman who has just gone through a divorce was planning on going to London, and while this offer from her friends was very considerate, this woman feels terrible because she now

feels like people see her trip to London as an escape from her divorce. Whether that is the reason or not, this woman was looking forward to her trip, and now feels like she is just taking it to avoid being upset on Christmas. Reframing is tricky because you are trying to say something to show you care, but it can come out as pity, which practically no one appreciates.

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I must say I found this chapter especially difficult to understand. When reading it, it makes a lot of sense, but trying to describe it is tricky and frustrating. When I think about framing, the first thing that comes to mind is similar to the situation between the college professor and the student. It is very hard to tell exactly what someone means when it is put in writing. I text message quite a lot, and sometimes I will send a message and wonder if what I said will come out wrong. I remember a co-worker asked me via text message if I could cover one of her shifts, I sent her a message back saying *“I am already working on Thursday unless the schedule changed. If it did I will take your shift, but if not sorry!”* After I sent the message I wondered how the *“sorry”* would seem to someone reading it. I genuinely meant that I was sorry, but what if it came out as a phony sorry, like a *“too bad for you”* kind of sorry. Expressing yourself is hard enough as it is, but trying to express yourself through words without being able to show expression is extremely difficult.

I can also relate to the topic of reframing. Just the other day, my father said something to me that I think he meant in a nice way, but it ended up really hurting my feelings. Until recently, I was anxiously awaiting college acceptance letters, I was so stressed I was feeling sick a majority of the time. I told my dad that I wasn't feeling well,

and he suggested that I should go visit my brother because “you need more of a life.” He meant it in the sense that I needed to get away from work and school and have some fun, but I took it as I was loser who did nothing but sit around at home with my parents. I felt pity and that my father thought I was pathetic. Of course, my dad does not really think that I am a pathetic loser, but the way he framed his statement made me feel worse about myself in a time when I was feeling pretty confused and stressed.

## **Chapter Six: Power and Solidarity**

Power and solidarity go hand in hand, and we are constantly trying to find a balance between the two. We want to feel a sense of control and feel like we are getting what we want, but at the same time, we have the desire to please other people and keep our relationships running smoothly. There are many roles included in power and solidarity, age, status, and gender are a few. An example Tannen gives is that Jimmy address his boss as Mr. Warren, but when Mr. Warren address Jimmy by his first name, Jimmy feels that Mr. Warren is reminding him of their difference in status. Power plays a role in this situation, where Mr. Warren feels his is being proper, but Jimmy feels Mr. Warren is trying to enforce power. It is impossible to possess and equal amount of power and solidarity because they are such different things. If Mr. Warren tried to be friendly and casual by having his employees call him by his first name, they may very well question his validity. In that case, Mr. Warren is expressing solidarity, but has lost all power.

Dr. Tannen goes on to describe how solidarity can be used inappropriately, in a fake attempt to make a friend. Tannen says this is especially common in sales;

salespeople often try to give off the impression that they are there to be your friend, and want you to feel like you are just shopping instead of being sold to. In making this attempt, Tannen says that salespeople often cross the line by saying something like, “*I don’t like that color on you.*” While the salesperson is trying to be like a friend, they clearly are not, so they end up making the customer upset. On the other hand, acting like a friend can be a good technique to selling a product. Tannen uses the example of a cosmetic counter salesperson telling a woman that her face could be cleaner if she bought a certain product. This leads the customer to feel like she has a dirty face, and that she should be ashamed if she doesn’t buy a product that will help clean her face, so she buys the product. Clearly, solidarity can be used in a variety of ways, and is not always positive.

Lastly, Tannen describes power and solidarity in the home environment. Parents obviously feel a strong need to take care of their children, so they will often say things like “*eat all your vegetables,*” in an attempt to show solidarity, but their child sees it as controlling and an attempt to show their power. Another example would be two siblings; the older sibling wants to guide his or her younger sibling and give them advice, but the younger sibling misses the solidarity and just sees their sibling as controlling and will most likely shut them out. It is hard to find a balance at home with power and solidarity.

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In this chapter, I relate mostly to the issue of power and solidarity within families. I am the youngest of three and I am close with all my siblings. I often go to my sister for advice because I know she will lead me in the right direction, but sometimes it can be very hard to hear what she has to say. On several occasions, I will tell my sister

something that is going on with my life and she will suggest that I do something differently. I know that she is trying to help me do the right thing and has only my best interest in mind, but sometimes I feel like she is trying to control me and make me do things that I really don't want to.

I can also relate to the example Tannen gives about Jimmy and his boss Mr. Warren. I call my boss by her first name, but there are definitely things I can say to my fellow associates that I would never be able to say to my boss. This works for both me and my boss because I often notice that when my boss thinks we are being too friendly, she will tighten up her attitude because she doesn't want me to think of her as just a friend. Naturally, she wants us to be friendly and get along, but I can tell it is important for her that I know that she is my boss, and I don't blame her for that. It is interesting to see how much power and solidarity play a role in most every aspect of my life.

### **Chapter Seven: Why Things Get Worse**

In this chapter, Deborah Tannen really starts to get into why conversation is so difficult between people, no matter what their relationship may be. Dr. Tannen mentions that people seem to feel that communication should come easy with love, and that just because we are in a romantic relationship we should be able to understand one another perfectly. Unfortunately this is not the case. Just because two people are growing closer together, does not mean that their conversational styles are changing and suddenly becoming in-sync. In fact, communication gets even more frustrating over time because couples feel like if anyone should understand them, it should be their significant other, which is not always the case. Also, two people in a relationship are vulnerable to the idea

that their partner sees the real them, and if they can't understand or appreciate who they truly are, than they must not be a very great person. "*The closer you are to someone, and the longer you have been close, the more you have to lose when you open your mouth*" (Pg. 115, Tannen).

According to Deborah Tannen, there are two ways of getting to know someone, the myth and the reality. The myth suggests that when we sit down with someone, we are truthfully going to get to know that person; however, this will most likely not happen in the first meeting because people have difficulty saying what they really mean. The reality of getting to know someone is that there are bound to be misunderstandings, and in the beginning that is usually fine with two people. Tannen says that people don't mind these misunderstandings in the beginning because they are simply so happy to have found each other. As time passes in the relationship, frustrations between the two people start building up, and each person starts to pick out negative things about the other. The reality of getting to know someone is much more brutal than the myth, but is definitely more accurate.

As a relationship progresses, the more the couple knows about one another, the easier it is for a fight to arise. Since frustrations are building up between these two people, the smallest misunderstanding can spark a relatively large argument. Not surprisingly, these arguments are about much more than something insignificant, but are more about communication issues that have been building up over time. Tannen gives an example of two partners who have an argument over salad dressing. The salad dressing is simply a cover for the fact that Mike thinks Ken is demanding, and Ken thinks Mike is hypersensitive. It seems ridiculous to fight over something as small as salad dressing, but

when there is so much built up frustration, salad dressing is the only way for couples to let out some of their anger.

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I found this chapter to be extremely interesting and informative. I've always talked to my friends about my once a relationship reaches a certain point, it's lost some of its spark, and it begins to seem to routine. I was glad to read that this is normal and is simply a result of communication difference. I notice things like the salad dressing argument occur between my parents. They each have frustrations about each other that keep building up, so when my mom forgets to pick up my father's dry cleaning, he becomes extremely frustrated and angry, which makes my mother furious. When I ask them what's the matter, and my dad says that mom forgot to pick up his dry cleaning, I can't help but laugh because it seems so ridiculous that they are each this upset over clothes. After reading this chapter, it has become very clear to me that my parents are seldom ever really fighting about dry cleaning, and are really fighting over their differences in communication style.

I can also relate to the idea that communication becomes easier over time by looking at my parents relationship. They can't seem to find a balance between their different styles of communication. Reading this chapter actually made me feel better about my parent's relationship; it made me realize that difficulty communicating is extremely common and tough to remedy.

## **Chapter Eight: Talk In The Intimate Relationship: His and Hers**

Deborah Tannen begins this chapter by explaining that from the day men and women are born, they are treated differently and therefore act differently. “Boys and girls grow up in a different world, even if they grow up in the same house” (Pg. 125, Tannen). As time passes in a relationship, both partners know it will change, but the male has a different idea of change than the female. Women often feel that their partner should be able to know what the woman wants without her saying, and men feel that the man and woman should no longer dance around issues and should be able to say exactly what it is they want. Naturally, misunderstandings arise, but since men and women have such different outlooks on the world, solving issues is difficult because the man and the woman each have a different idea of how to go about talking things out.

Women often feel as time passes in their relationship, their partner listens to them less. Tannen says that sometimes these women are correct in thinking that their men are not listening to them, but on the other hand, the men are sometimes falsely accused. People judge if someone is listening by their personal opinion of how to listening, so it is possible that a woman could be speaking to her partner, and while she believes he is ignoring her, he is hearing everything she is saying. Women often feel that since men are more quiet when their partner is speaking, it means that they are not listening, and men feel that since women make listening noises, women are impatient and not genuinely interested in what they are saying. “*So men and women are being stylistically consistent in their interactive inconsistency*” (Pg. 138, Tannen).

Dr. Tannen closes out this chapter by saying that most people place an enormous amount of importance on primary intimate relationships, and that we feel if we are

successful in these relationships, we are a stable and good person. She goes on to say, however, that we expect way too much from these relationships; we want these relationships alone to make us feel complete. Since we invest so much into these relationships, Tannen says that people often feel that if something goes wrong, we are bad people for choosing that partner. But, if we know the differences in conversational style, we can accept these differences and get through our relationships. Tannen says that we may not always correctly interpret our partner's behavior, but we can at least learn that if we feel negativity, we may be perceiving our partner's behavior incorrectly. Most importantly, couples have to remember that misunderstandings are bound to arise, but if we keep an open mind about how our partners communicate, those misunderstandings don't have to end a relationship.

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I absolutely agree with Tannen that men and women are very different, which can have a huge effect on the way they communicate. When I have a conversation with my mom about something that happened in my life, she is always asking for exact details; she wants to know who said what and how they said it. I am thrilled to give my mom all the information and I love the fact that she wants to know. On the other hand, when I speak to my brother and he is telling me a story, I am always asking him for the exact details of who said what, and he never seems to want to tell me. He just brushes it off and says he does not remember, as if it is of no importance. It is interesting to look at the differences of male and female conversation, and I can easily see how conflict can arise.

Furthermore, when I speak to my brother or my dad, I almost always think they are not listening to me because they don't maintain eye contact and don't vocally show

me they hear what I said. When I call them on their behavior and accuse them of not listening to me, they immediately respond that they heard everything I said and can actually repeat what I just told them; I am always extremely frustrated when this happens. On the other hand, sometimes when I am talking to my mom and my dad about something like celebrity gossip, I can see my mom is dying to hear what I have to say while my dad is completely tuning me out. I never get offended when this happens because sometimes my dad and brother will be speaking and I will turn off my dad and go off into my own world.

### **Chapter Nine: The Intimate Critic**

Tannen begins this chapter with discussing the idea that in many social situations, our partner, who we think is our ally, can often have a negative affect on our interaction with new people. The reason for this is that the people closest to us can tell when we say something that is recognizably our own. When people meet for the first time, there are little slip ups and people can usually use that to break the ice and make the area comfortable, but when you are with someone who knows you personally, they can turn a slip up into an opportunity to criticize you. They may say it with humor, but it often has the result of hurting you, and making the situation uncomfortable for whoever you have just met.

One aspect of criticism is sarcasm, which can often offend someone rather than humor them. Tannen gives the example of a man who meets his ex-wife at a food festival for their child's school. The woman asks her ex-husband if he has tried any interesting foods, and when he says "*a croissant,*" she responds with "*adventurous, huh?*" While the

woman most likely means this to be a joke, she ends up offending her ex-husband because she forces him to relive the fact that his ex-wife use to tell him he was too conservative and too cautious. This type of sarcasm can make someone who felt relatively confident about their behavior, feel like a complete idiot.

Along with criticism, many couples seem to feel the constant need to correct one another. Couples correct each others grammar and for not using appropriate words when speaking. With these criticisms comes something called sidetracking, which is often used at a means of taking away from your partner's story. Here is one of the examples Tannen uses of a man and woman having a conversation and the man sidetracks the story:

*"Mr. Frobel told me about an assignment that he'd given the class"* Fran said.

*"The have to draw up a map of Russia."*

*"You mean the Soviet Union. Nobody calls it Russia anymore."*

*"Is that important? May I finish?"* (Pg. 152, Tannen)

In this case, the man sidetracks Fran's story, and criticize her for using Russia instead of the Soviet Union. This criticism often makes people feel unheard and possibly unloved.

Advising those who have be criticized, Tannen reassures readers that the criticism is a way of showing intimacy. Tannen says that we should not get defensive about being criticized for what we said, but we should say how that criticism makes us feel. That way, we are more likely to receive an apology, and definitely will not cause the criticism to increase. Furthermore, when being criticized, it is important to try and not overreact. *"There are times when a partner needs to air legitimate complaints"* (Pg. 165, Tannen). It is not healthy for one to feel like they cannot give criticism ever. Finally, Tannen states

that while we cannot rid of the want to criticize, we can and should, refrain from constant and unwarranted criticism.

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I dealt with a lot of criticism from my friends in high school, part of it was due to the fact that I was so sensitive, but there were many times where I felt my friends would put me down to make other people laugh. As scary as it was for me to go into things alone, it was a relief to not be with my friends and deal with them constantly having something to say about the comments I made. I understand now where they were coming from, and that they probably did not do it to intentionally hurt me, but nonetheless I still experienced the pain of criticism.

I have also had experiences with my family and sidetracking. I am the youngest so a lot of the time, I feel like I don't know as much as the rest of my family, I get reminded of this sometimes when telling a story; mostly by my father. If I use an incorrect word when telling a story, my dad will interrupt me and correct me for the word I misused. Not only does it take the attention off of my story and on to him, but it makes me feel stupid and not as confident as I was when I began the story. When sidetracking like this happens, I often feel as if I don't want to continue with what I was saying because my morale has been brought down.

### **Chapter Ten: Talking About Ways of Talking**

Dr. Tannen uses chapter ten as an opportunity to summarize everything she has discussed in the previous chapters. She begins by saying that the first step towards being a better communicator is to know your own style. She suggests taping conversations and

listening to see if you sound like you are interrupting, or not speaking enough. Sometimes we are not aware of the way we communicate, so hearing ourselves in a conversation can present us with a clear image of our personal style. We have to know who we are as communicators before we can try to improve our conversations.

Along with knowing our personal communication style, it is important that we make an effort to adapt to other's style's as well. When we learn to tolerate other people's style, we are more likely to be able to tolerate the person, and actually enjoy their company. Furthermore, Tannen goes on to show how framing and reframing can also be used as tools to improve communication. "*The most powerful way to change interaction is to change the frame without making it explicit: reframing by talking or acting in a different way*" (Pg. 176, Tannen). Along with the reframing is the ability to switch styles depending on the situation. For example in some cases it is appropriate to begin a negotiation, and in others it is completely inappropriate.

After summarizing several of her previous points, Tannen ends this book by "*widening the lens,*" and capitalizing on communication as a national issue. She discusses that just as couples blame each other, cultures blame other cultures. An American man might find a comment a European man makes to be offensive when the European man meant no harm. Tannen shows that while communication between couples is an issue, we are also dealing with an even larger issue of miscommunication between cultures. She says that international affairs are often handled by a group of people speaking in a room, and since individuals are constantly having misunderstandings, countries end up with the same misunderstandings making quite a big mess. Tannen hopes that over time communication can improve and therefore improve national issues. "*It is the hope of this*

*book that insight into conversational style will enhance if not ensure mutual understanding” (Pg. 193, Tannen).*

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I think it is amazing that Deborah Tannen can take what she has learned about conversational style and apply it towards something more than relationships. I completely agree with Tannen that the reason this world is so divided is because we are unable to effectively communicate with one another. If all the nations in the world were able to come together and genuinely listen and understand each other, this world would be a better place. What worries me is that this seems to be an extremely difficult task. Different cultures vary drastically in their ideas of how to properly communicate; a gesture that may be polite to one culture is extremely offensive to the other. I don't know how our nations will ever be able to really communicate because we have gotten to a point where we are all so different. It is not to say that I don't appreciate the difference in the world because that is what keeps things unique and interesting. If we could simply figure out a way to understand that we are all different, and listen to one another I think our world we be a safer and better place.

## Conclusion

I genuinely enjoyed *That's Not What I Meant!* because it was the first book that I felt I could completely relate to. Dr. Deborah Tannen's style allowed me to come to peace with the fact that I am always going to have miscommunications, but that there are steps I can take to becoming a better communicator. The way that Tannen breaks down each of the reasons we have difficulty communicating allowed me to apply each reason to a different part of my life. One section would remind me of my own personal relationships, while another would help me understand why my parents interact the way they do. I have been frustrated numerous times in the past because I felt like I couldn't express myself, or I would be getting hurt my things and I couldn't understand why. After reading each of the chapters in this book, and relating them to my life, I feel like I have worked out a lot of issues I couldn't seem to get past. It was so nice to read that everyone has a different conversational style and that there was nothing wrong with that. Tannen never gave off the feeling that one conversational style was better than the other, she simply explained the differences between each one, so I never felt like the way I was acting was wrong. I am not much of a reader, so when I knew I had to be reading this book I was nervous, but after the first page I completely changed my mind. This book was interesting, informative, and amusing. I was never bored while reading the book and I honestly can say that I will take everything I have learned from this book about communicating and apply it to my life everyday.