

FEATURES

Gender not as important as equal opportunity

RECENT article in the international journal *Science* reports on an "experiment" that found there was not much difference between the amount that women and men talk.

Given the widespread stereotype of women as overly verbose, you might think that, as a feminist linguist, I would be delighted about this report. But just as I warn people to beware of believing "research" which argues that women are from Venus and men are from Mars, I feel bound to recommend that the research reported in *Science* should also be considered carefully.

The article reports that researchers from the University of Arizona recorded a sample of the



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

word use of 386 participants over several days, and then counted every word recorded. On average, both men and women used approximately 16,000 words a day.

This looks pretty convincing at first sight. The researchers recorded a relatively large number of people, and they collected data

for a reasonable amount of time. But there are lots of other points to consider.

As soon as you reflect on when you talk and when you keep quiet, you become aware that when and how much you talk depends on a range of factors — such as how relaxed you are, who you are talking to, where you are talking, how much you know about the topic, and so on. Gender is nowhere near as important as these other factors.

Other researchers have shown, for instance, that men tend to talk more than women in business meetings, formal seminars and public meetings.

How often have you been to a meeting where a few men make a

lot of rather long contributions, and very few women contribute at all? Or where the men ask most of the questions at the end of a lecture? Women, on the other hand, tend to talk more in relaxed, informal contexts. So around the table at home, or at morning tea, or at a party, women are more likely to dominate the conversation.

I am sure you can all think of people who are exceptions to these patterns. And a range of contextual factors also change the patterns. The chair of a meeting tends to talk most, regardless of gender. Their social role means they have a responsibility which encourages them to contribute to the talk. Similarly, the host (female or male) at a dinner party often contributes more

talk, at least initially or when the conversation flags.

People also talk more if they are expected to. So if you are the expert on conservation, or taxation, or nutrition, and the topic is on the agenda, then you are likely (and perhaps even feel obliged) to contribute more talk than others. In studies where researchers did find that women or men dominated the talk in particular contexts, there has been a good deal of speculation about reasons for these gendered patterns of talk.

One suggestion is that men tend to talk more in contexts where it will contribute to their mana or status, while women are more interested in talking to establish connections or rapport with others.

Another is that men tend to regard talk as a means of getting things done — conveying and obtaining information, and getting things organised, while women use talk to develop and maintain relationships. But again such generalisations can be challenged.

The contexts in which we get things organised and establish rapport clearly overlap. Language is so complex and subtle that we are often doing all these things at once. In a formal meeting, for instance, people not only gather and convey information, they also signal their status — as meeting chair, for instance, or as "expert" on a topic. In a chat over coffee, which might look like a "gossip" session focused on maintaining friendship,

there is often a good deal of useful information being transmitted and discussed.

Treating the functions of talk as one-dimensional is clearly misleading. So, how should we treat the results of the *Science* report? Well, assuming that the women and men in the study were playing similar roles, and had equal opportunities to contribute to the talk they recorded, the results are reassuring. Gender is not as important as equal opportunity — in conversation as in society more widely.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz