

Do women and men really live in different cultures? Evidence from the BNC

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In her bestseller *You just don't understand* Deborah Tannen claimed that “talk between women and men is cross-cultural communication” (1990: 18). Two years later, Geoffrey Leech and Roger Fallon (1992) published a paper with the title “Computer corpora – what do they tell us about culture?”. They showed how the frequencies of words in the Brown and the LOB corpora mirror the importance of certain concepts in American and British culture. In a note they expressed their hope that “by the year 2000, it will be possible to make use of these corpora [i.e. BNC and COBUILD] for cross-cultural studies on a much larger scale than is now possible on the limited basis of the Brown and LOB corpora” (1992: 47). To a large extent thanks to Geoffrey Leech’s own contribution to corpus linguistics, their hopes were not in vain.

If we combine Tannen’s claim with Leech and Fallon’s method, we arrive at an obvious question: Can the BNC tell us whether Tannen is right? The paper addresses this question by comparing the frequencies of words and collocations as used by women and men in the spoken part of the BNC. Words from the following domains have been investigated:

- personal references (personal pronouns, male and female proper names)
- family
- personal relationships
- home
- food and drink
- body and health
- clothing
- car and traffic
- computing
- sport
- public affairs
- abstract notions
- alleged “women’s” and “men’s” words
- swearwords
- hesitators, fillers, backchannel behaviour
- linguistic politeness markers
- linguistic markers of uncertainty and tentativeness
- linguistic markers of conversational cooperation and support

The data indicate that Tannen’s claim is indeed true, since most of the words and collocations investigated exhibit significant differences which seem to be gender-determined. On the whole, there is strong converging evidence that women’s speech style tends to be marked by proximity and involvement, and men’s by distance and detachment. This can indeed be interpreted as reflecting some kind of cultural difference. Nevertheless, not all the distribution patterns are in conformity with what is suggested in the gender-linguistic literature. The expletive *bloody*, for example, is much more often used by women than by men, particularly frequently in fact by women in the 45 to 59 years age band. (The factors age, social class and education are also taken into consideration but not focussed on.)

Depending on the time/space available, a selection of this data will be discussed in detail. The rest of the material will be summarised in tables in order to leave room for an adequate interpretation of the findings.