

BOOK REVIEW



You Just Don't Understand by Deborah Tannen

Human nature is something that does not change in the course of time. Even today, when science is the main authority for human mind, people still believe in fairy tales and myths. One of those myths is equality. For some reason society has expectations to attain equal rights for everybody. The issues of social equality, equality before the law, equal opportunities, racial equality, and gender equality are constantly and widely discussed. The truth is equality is just an illusion for there are no identical conditions, no equal opportunities, and all people are different. There are no two identical human beings on Earth. Even twins are different. So maybe it is time for humankind to reject the notion of equality and accept the differences. It is especially true if it helps to improve our relationships with the opposite sex. This is one of the main ideas reflected in *You Just Don't Understand* by Deborah Tannen.

In fact, this book made Tannen popular with a wide audience. Before writing this bestseller, Deborah Tannen studied English literature and linguistics. She was known in academic circles for her scientific publications and professors' career. The idea to write the book came to her after she published another book entitled *That's Not What I Meant!* It was then when Deborah Tannen started receiving requests for interviews, articles, and lectures on male-female differences. To some extent, it was a revelation to her. Such a strong demand for knowledge about gender and conversational styles had to be met. That was the exact reason for a

specific book to appear, and so it happened.

In her book *You Just Don't Understand*, the author develops the idea of differences between men and women. Being an expert in linguistics, discourse analysis, and interpersonal communication, Deborah Tannen concentrates on the questions of linguistic specifics, conversational style, and mutual understanding between men and women. She believes men and women are separate cultures that live in separate worlds. Despite all their differences, they try to maintain the intercultural dialogue, and that is not always crowned with success. Readers just have to realize that two genders cannot follow one conversational style, thus people have to learn to understand each other. Understanding seems to be the goal for Tannen, and it appears that she has dedicated all her life to helping other people communicate. For that, the professor explains everything starting with the first chapter.

At the beginning of her book, Tannen introduces the key terminology and notions of her further research. The key notions are intimacy and independence, and they determine the worlds of women and men respectively. According to the book, men perceive the world as a hostile place where everybody competes with each other for a status. Women have different worldview. For them, it is a complex system, and all its members are concerned about each other and ready to help. This basic difference explains different behavior of men and women when making decisions, suggesting and accepting help. As men highly value independence, they prefer not to consult anyone when making decisions. They do not want to be dependent on anyone's opinion. Meanwhile, women love to discuss everything with their partners, be it a new haircut or the next weekend plans. For them, it is a sign of involvement and deeper connection between partners.

METAMESSAGES OF THE ACTUAL SPEECH

These are hidden messages that each of the partners puts into the words. And they are the cause of most of the troubles. They prevent people from being understood properly and make them “lost in translation”. Thus, the author raises one of the most important questions of this book. Where do women and men learn different ways of speaking and hearing? And here the most pleasant innovation of the book comes. Deborah Tannen tracks the roots of the problem into the childhood. Almost in every chapter she explores the reasons of men’s and women’s behavior. For that, she usually refers to credible sources. She tells the readers about different studies of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, and communication researchers. The findings of researches show that society puts different expectations toward boys and girls. While the former are encouraged to be openly competitive, the latter are inclined to be openly cooperative. Tannen gives the examples of children because they vivid demonstrate gender differences.

THE ISSUE OF DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS FORMS A GREAT PART OF THE BOOK

The typical situation where different expectations are involved is responding to complaints. This is probably something familiar to the majority of the readers. So, when a woman complains about something to a man, the results are as follows. The woman expects to be listened and understood. All she seeks is men’s understanding. The man in turn thinks that the woman expects him to solve her problems (when she does not). He starts giving her some pieces of advice as, from his point of view, it is the most appropriate reaction. Both women and men are often frustrated by each other’s way of responding to their expression of troubles. As a rule, this typical situation leads to the predictable outcome – they start arguing. Meanwhile, they could have avoided this if they had known about

the gender differences. To support her view, the author gives multiple examples from her own life and from the experience of her friends. Every person she meets is a possible source of information for this book. Their dialogues and the fiction excerpts serve as an additional basis for the author's arguments.

One of the benefits of the book is that the author is not afraid to challenge the public opinion. While people tend to think that women talk more than men, Tannen proves the opposite. According to her research (and recent studies), men talk more in public, but women speak more in private. It appears then that men are the source of the stereotype that women talk a lot. Men think so because women talk in situations in which men do not. Tannen notices that peculiarity just in time. The author strives to go against prejudices and stereotypes. She encourages women and men not to stick to social norms and to what is expected from each gender. Rules can be changed. Furthermore, Deborah Tannen challenges the view that only women must change. As far as men and women must search for the compromise, they share the responsibility to the equal extent. Thus, both sides are welcomed to change.

Another good side of the book is that it is well-organized and all parts are equally reasoned and developed. That makes the work readable and interesting for the wide audience. It can be useful for both younger and older generation. All people want to be heard and understood. Without that understanding they are doomed to blame others or themselves. Therefore, Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand!* encourages people to examine their choices and their effects. It is important to understand each other's conversational style. With that in mind, readers will realize the real reasons of their conflicts and will be able to find a common language. The increased understanding would become the guarantee of decrease of complaint "You just don't understand", as it had already happened to the millions of Tannen's readers around the world.

This book was also very useful for me. For as long as I can remember myself, I have always been interested in the psychological literature. After my first relationship failed, I became even more concerned about interpersonal communication and gender differences. I was fervently looking for all available literature. Thus, before reading this book I was already familiar with such books like *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray, *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps* by Allan Pease, and *Why Men Marry Bitches: The Nice Woman's Guide to Getting and Keeping a Man's Heart* by Sherry Argov. Nevertheless, I have learned a lot from Deborah Tannen's work. Other books never gave me the answer why men and women are different. Many books could well expound the main differences, but the only explanation was "men and women are different by their nature."

This explanation was never enough for me. Thus, in Tannen's book I finally found out the answers. I realized that everything depends on one's surrounding and upbringing. Everybody is talking in ways he or she learned as a child. It became obvious that neither men nor women can behave another way. The author of the book is able to track all connections and explain all reasons. It was important for me to learn what gossip means to women. I have never thought of this before. I just knew women are more talkative and they have a need to speak more. Now I understand the analogy between telling secrets in childhood and gossips in adult life. Earlier I also thought that gossip is a completely negative phenomenon and tried to avoid it. The comparison between women's gossip and men's news reading was quite interesting. It appeared that both men and women are interested in lives of other people. The difference is only in the fact that women admit it while men do not.

The distinction between rapport-talk and report-talk was a kind of personal revelation to me. I understood why my girl friends can talk about their problems endlessly – they just need interaction. I find useful another

word pair as well. It is one-up and one-down. Quite unexpectedly I realized it is so true-to-life... Men always compete and they cannot do anything about that. This competence and severe hierarchy determines the way they think, feel, and behave. They can only relax in the company of their beloved ones. That is why, as I know from my experience, men are so vulnerable beside their women. And it is so true that women want to be liked and men want to be respected. This idea I saw first in books of Shaunti Feldhahn, *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*. Many times in my life I got added evidence that it is true (and I realize the power of compliment). Additionally, it is important to learn to acquire one another's skills in listening and talking. I believe that despite everything habits can be broken.

You Just Don't Understand motivated me to think about further questions. Now I will be looking for the answer to the lecturing issue. I was intrigued to know that many male professors choose their profession due to the freedom they receive there. Besides, men are inclined to talk to get attention since their childhood while women do not. Society expects women to keep silent, but still they often choose academic career and speaking in public. How can it be possible? Now I wonder who are better teachers - men or women?