Review of Deborah Tannen, You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation

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tote mentions the valid syllogisms of his Analytics in his Rhetoric, but in the Topics he never explicitly refers to logically valid moods of inference. Vickers’ assumption that ‘die klassische Rhetorik ein volles Jahrtausend verschwand’ (134) seems to be less acceptable than Magab’s and Gerl’s description of a Christian interpretation and modification of classical rhetoric in medieval times. It’s true that important works of ancient rhetoric were lost throughout the Middle ages, but other standard treatments like the Ars rhetorica ad Herennium or Cicero’s De inventione were frequently used and many commentaries were written 3.

Ballweg’s sketch of an ‘analytic rhetoric’ is impressive, but I hesitate to consider rhetoric as a ‘super-discipline’; I embrace wholeheartedly all attempts to reestablish the dignity and importance of rhetoric, but to consider it (once more) as a ‘regina artium’ seems to be an over-extension of the concept of rhetoric. For me, Ballweg’s ‘analytic rhetoric’ rather is a comprehensive theory of semiotics.

I agree with the positions expounded by Oesterreich and Mainberger, especially as far as they claim that rhetoric (i.e., the use of rhetorical ways of argumentation, techniques of composition, stylistic devices) is indispensable also for philosophers who explicitly refuse rhetoric.

As a summary, I want to say that Schanze and Kopperschmidt have edited a book that can be considered as an interesting and valuable contribution towards a fruitful dialogue between rhetoric and philosophy; I hope that the old controversy will soon be replaced by mutual interest and respectful interaction.

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Notes


Readers of this journal with a general interest in gender and communication or with more particular interests in solving problems in cross-gender interaction in their own relationships will probably already have read You Just Don’t Understand, or at least heard it discussed in the popular media. Tannen’s sociolinguistic analysis of male-female miscommunication was written for popular consumption, and popular it has indeed been. Accessible as it is, YJDU reflects a great deal of thought about connections between language and society and refers to a great deal of scholarly research on the subject. At least one philosopher of rhetoric has found the book intriguing for reasons other than what it had to show him about the dynamics of his own marriage. Hence this notice.

Tannen’s premise is that communication between men and women is cross-cultural communication, because boys and girls grow up in different worlds. In the asymmetrical, hierarchical society of boys’ peer groups, independence and status are an individual’s primary goals, and being respected is more important than being liked. For men, the purpose of talk is to exchange information, and, accordingly, talk is most appropriate in public situations in which information is not already shared. In girls’ symmetrical, egalitarian world, on the other hand, establishing community is more important than winning verbal contests. Girls’ goals, as early as age three, are intimacy, connection, cooperation, affiliation; being liked is more important for women than being respected, and women accordingly focus on the “metamessages” in others’ talk that convey information about personal relationships. Because talk creates intimacy for women, it is more appropriate in private than in public.

As a result of these differences, misunderstandings occur. When men don’t talk at home and women do, women think men don’t care about their marriages and men think women talk too much. When women talk about their troubles, men respond maddeningly with advice when women want sympathetic talk about similar experiences; and when men talk about problems, women belittle their
troubles by recounting similar ones rather than giving them advice. Men who thrive on competitive conflict and dispute confuse women who find conflict threatening to community harmony. There is nothing wrong, says Tannen, with talking or with evaluating and interpreting others’ talk the way women do or the way men do, but men dominate in most societies, and hence men’s “conversational style” is perceived as normal and good and women’s as weak and abnormal.

To alleviate cross-gender misunderstanding, Tannen suggests that women and men become aware of one another’s conversational styles; the book is intended to help them do so. Further, she suggests that women and men learn to adopt one another’s styles, at least at times. Tannen’s approach stops short of advocating social change to correct the imbalances that could be argued to cause gender differences in the first place, and some idealists have criticized YIDU for not taking more forceful objection to the social oppression of women than it does. In response to such criticism, Tannen points out that some of the same arguments that could be used to show that men oppress women in conversation (arguments involving how often a person talks at the same time another is talking, for example) could also be used to show that Jews oppress gentiles in conversation. More to the point, Tannen’s aims are pragmatic. YIDU is meant to help people learn to cope better with the world as it is, not to set people to fuming about how the world should be.

Tannen’s approach to communication across cultural gaps is rooted in a flexible relativism. Cross-cultural communication is difficult, because different worlds give rise to fundamentally different ways of using and interpreting language. But speakers with the good will to make the effort to understand how they differ from others can learn to understand what others mean. Some discourse theorists, skeptical about the possibility of stable meaning or of understanding, might think Tannen’s approach naïve. They would be missing the point. Tannen’s manual for cross-gender talk is practical rhetoric, not philosophical rhetoric.

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