

University

Author examines traditional roles

Women used mostly for support

By Tim Neff
Emerald Contributor

Women spend most of their time supporting the emotional states of others, particularly when engaging in conversations with men, said Dale Spender, an Australian author who lectured on campus Tuesday.

Spender, doing research for an upcoming book, has compiled hundreds of tape recorded conversations between men and women. She has found that men dominate conversations, limiting the input of women to gestures of approval.

"Men talk dramatically more than women," Spender said. "I don't have any tapes of women pursuing topics of their own choice in conversations with men."

This became evident as Spender began to review her tapes of conversations.

"By the fourth or fifth tape I realized women do so little talking with men," she said. "I thought I'd have to do a Ph.D. on women saying 'Hmmm...'"

Spender said when women attempt to assert themselves in conversations they are seen as aggressive or rude.

"I set myself to talking for three minutes," Spender said. "I totally failed. They (men) run away saying, 'She never listens.'"

"It usually takes men 20 to 30 seconds for their first interruption and then women talk louder. Then 40 or 50 seconds later the second interruption comes. By the time you get to two minutes, he runs away. You've broken every rule of politeness and still only talked for 40 percent of the time."

Instead, women spend most of their time in conversations filling a managerial role, lending support to the views of others, Spender said. Spender referred to this as "talking comfort."

"Women use language to make others feel good, to provide support," she said.

"Women are constantly involved in managing, helping, assisting and supporting others."

Talking comfort is a linguistic skill that can be extremely useful in day to day relationships, Spender said.

"What fascinates me is the extent to which talking comfort is a strength. It's magic. I see women putting children at ease, calming them down, getting them to feel important. But I also wonder how much it opens women to being exploited."

Spender said men fail to see the supporting role talking comfort plays in their relationships.

"The only way to explain it is to not do it. But then they find you rude and obnoxious," she said.

The dominating of conversations by men reaches across all cultures and into all areas of life, Spender said. Her research found the domination is evident in the classroom setting.

"In the classroom the boys talk," Spender said. "Teachers negotiate with the boys. What gets talked about is what interests boys."

"What's ironic is that the more authoritarian a teacher is, the more the sexes are probably going to be treated the same. If you say 'No one can talk,' you're probably treating the sexes more equally."

But there may be an upside to the reticence of females in



Dale Spender

the classroom. Women may learn to better cooperate with each other in a suppressive classroom setting, Spender said.

Spender also stressed the importance of talking comfort in relationships.

"Talking comfort is the substance of human relationships. Women do the relating. It goes on in every relationship that works."

"We look for it in our family, and if it isn't there, it's not a family context," she said. "I don't think many of us are free from it, especially if we are being polite."

"To talk comfort you must be self-sacrificing. If you take time to support others, you have little time for yourself."

Spender's lecture was sponsored by the Department of English and the Center for the Study of Women in Society.

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