

**“Stick your (adj.) (noun) in my (adj.) (noun)!”:
Teaching women to “talk dirty”**

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INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Deborah Tannen's *You just don't understand* (1990), numerous self-help books and articles related to the two-cultures model have sprung up in popular advice literature. As noted in Deborah Cameron's (1995) study of advice literature for women, this writing most often advises women on how to improve their speech and communication skills in male-female interactions. In this paper, we consider a specific sub-genre of advice literature for women, guidebooks for erotic talk. We examine five recent self-help books for sex, geared primarily towards women. Four of the five books were written by women, and two focus entirely on talk. All instruct the reader in some way on how to improve and enhance her relationship and sex life by “talking dirty.” Some even promise a great change in women's lives to be brought about by a change in their behavior and language.

All of the books suggest that women need training to express their needs and wants and to become more assertive linguistically. Following stereotyped assumptions about women's speech, the authors assume that women tend to speak indirectly and avoid using obscenities. These books imply that, ideally, communication in bed should incorporate taboo words. Barbara Keesling, the author of *Talk sexy to the one you love* (1996) advises, “We have to start saying ‘those words’ we can't say, asking for ‘those things’ we never ask for. We have to start letting our partners know what we need and how we are feeling” (6). Not only are women responsible for initiating sex talk, they must also communicate their needs through language that men will understand, enjoy and respond to — dirty words. We do not intend to criticize dirty talk and we would like people to realize that verbal play can occur between any couple and can be fun. We are focusing on these books, however, both because of their relationship to linguistic models of communicative “difference” and because of the problematic ways in which they represent cross-sex communication.

GUIDES TO "DIRTY TALK"

While the books we discuss address a variety of readers, the most likely consumers of advice literature are women. In this section, we will briefly review these five books, describe the goals and methods of each, and provide biographies of the authors. Not all of the books present "dirty talk" in the same way. Some authors consider "dirty talk" a form of foreplay or erotic verbal play, while others see it as a sexual favor or a means of arousal. Several authors feel that "dirty talk" is the recommended way to communicate in the bedroom because it reaps benefits such as a more intimate relationship, better communication, an improved sex life, higher states of arousal and even increased partner options.

The most exemplary of the books is *Talk sexy to the one you love* by Barbara Keesling. Keesling is a popular sex writer and sex therapist who has worked as a sex surrogate and has taught human sexuality and psychopathology. The intended reader of her book is a heterosexual woman and all of Keesling's examples involve heterosexual married couples. She promises that sexy talk will charge up a couple's sex life. It "connects you to your deepest desires," "heightens anticipation," "deepens human connection" and, she adds, "it's completely fat free." (1996:6-7). Keesling walks the reader through a series of exercises and scenarios which we will discuss in more detail later.

Susan Crain Bakos, the author of *Sexational secrets*, is a well-known writer on sex and a regular contributor to magazines such as *Penthouse*, *Redbook*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Bakos wrote *Sexational secrets* for the heterosexual woman who would like to broaden her horizons in various ways. She includes a chapter on "talking dirty" in which she introduces the reader to erotic verbal play through anecdotes about heterosexual couples. The author urges women to get over the guilt and uneasiness associated with dirty talk by learning and practicing taboo words, listening to the dialogue of erotic videos, calling phone sex services, and reading erotica out loud. The heterosexual couple may benefit from "talking dirty," which is a unique form of sex play that brings a higher state of arousal for both partners and may enhance sexual experience. A woman might also increase her partner options by becoming a more interesting, versatile and verbal lover. Bakos recounts, "A Manhattan trophy wife . . . told me she got her husband away from his first wife by 'talking dirty and swallowing.' You may disdain this trophy wife — or any woman who gets what she wants through the dispensing of sexual favors — but on some level, in some way, each of us makes accommodations in a relationship in order to get the other person to meet our needs" (1996:23). Therefore, according to Bakos, "dirty talk" pleases men while allowing the woman to express her exotic and daring side, but most importantly, "dirty talk" encourages a woman's male partner to meet her needs.

The author of *The fine art of erotic talk* (1996), Bonnie Gabriel also leads workshops and erotic talk seminars. Gabriel makes a distinction between "dirty talk" and "erotic talk." For her, "talking dirty" is "simple graphic accounts of your

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lust," while "erotic talk" is "verbal expression" of a "variety of mood states that interplay with your sheer physical desire, emotions that sometimes yearn for verbal expression" (5). The intended readers are both women and men, partnered or not, and of all sexualities. In her examples and stories, she describes mostly heterosexual couples, though several lesbian and gay examples are included. According to Gabriel, through erotic talk partners may more readily create fantasies, express erotic feelings, get over inhibitions, and fine-tune erotic listening and speaking skills. She also offers scenarios, games, word lists and dialogues to practice, methods for voice training, and even advice on performing verbal dominance and submission.

Carol Queen is a sex educator who runs various sex-related workshops in San Francisco. Her first book, *Exhibitionism for the shy*, gives practical advice on exhibitionism, role-playing, and "talking hot." She wrote this book with "heterosexuals, bisexuals, lesbians, gay men, and everybody else in mind" (1995:2), but especially for people who are shy and want to be more erotically outgoing. Queen writes, "Overcoming the tendency to stay silent about one's own preferences and avenues to pleasure is the very best reason to conquer sexual shyness and learn to get comfortable with explicit language" (13). Queen devotes two chapters to "talking dirty" along with appendices of "dirty" words and phrases. She offers the reader word repetition exercises, tips, techniques, interviews, first hand stories, suggestions, and strategies. Through verbal practice, the reader gains sexual confidence which, in turn, cultivates better communication with partners and greater self-esteem and improved sexual self-image.

The final book we review, John Gray's *Mars and Venus in the bedroom* (1995) is one of many self-help books he has written for heterosexual couples in monogamous, committed relationships. While this book does not discuss "dirty talk" specifically, it does focus on communication between men and women in the bedroom. In this book, he explains how men and women can "understand, accept, and appreciate each others' differences in the bedroom" (back cover). He works with the premise that if a man and a woman are happy in bed, they will, by default, be happy in the relationship. Once the reader successfully acquires certain relationship and communication skills, she or he will discover better communication in the bedroom along with greater passion and intimacy in the relationship.

KEESLING AND GRAY

Not all of these books totally adhere to the two cultures model of cross-sex communication. For example, Queen and Gabriel discuss a variety of relationships (including lesbian and gay couples) and leave the identity of their intended audience open. Keesling and Gray, however, focus exclusively on traditional heterosexual monogamous relationships and write within the two cultures framework. The books by Keesling and Gray come from larger publishing houses and are distributed through chain bookstores nationwide. Also, Keesling and Gray claim to

speak from authority by using the title “Ph.D.” on their bookcovers. It is not surprising that the hooks with the largest distribution are the books that most readily adhere to the two cultures model.

Keesling’s *Talk sexy to the one you love* provides the most explicit steps for learning to “talk dirty.” First, the reader is introduced to an imaginary heterosexual couple, Sharon and Richard. Sharon is having trouble initiating sex with Richard because she only knows how to communicate through body language. Sometimes Richard gets the message, but most of the time he doesn’t. Keesling writes “But even when Richard did respond, Sharon knows there will be other messages he will never get, and that the sex won’t be anything like what she dreams about” (1996:2) because neither of the two can communicate in bed. She wishes Richard would be more verbal about sex, but finally takes it upon herself to initiate the sexy talk and “break the sounds of silence — forever” (1996:3).

Although Keesling’s methodology does place some of the communicative burden on the man, she nevertheless strongly urges the woman to read the advice literature and initiate the talk herself. The woman must first break the ice and tell the man how much she loves him, discuss the book, and talk about his needs. By discussing “dirty talk” with her partner before beginning to use it, she prevents him from wondering where she picked up such language. In the section entitled “Never let desire sound like demand,” Keesling warns, “[i]f there is one thing that stops a man from getting excited about talking sexy it is the fear that sexy language will translate into sexual demands” (20). “Whatever it is that you say, your partner needs to understand and believe that you are not demanding anything, nor are you expecting anything other than an opportunity to speak your mind, to play with possibility, to free your imagination, and to free your feelings. He doesn’t need to do anything but let you talk” (20-1). In other words, the woman is communicating her needs, but shouldn’t necessarily expect them to be fulfilled.

Once the reader is convinced she should learn to talk sexy, she is instructed to follow a set of solo and partner exercises, and to keep a daily record of her progress. In the first exercises, the woman copies sentences into her journal, and practices repeating them:

Yes, I want to talk sexy to my partner before, during and after we make love!
 Yes, I want to discover the deepest recesses of my erotic self!
 Yes, I want to break old taboos!
 Yes, I want to show my partner the deeply sensual side of me I have always kept hidden!
 Yes, I want to live a fuller, more gratifying, more electrifying, more complete life with the man I love!
 YES, YES, YES, YES, YES! (34)

According to Keesling, each woman must first become comfortable vocalizing taboo words so that she can ultimately use the words in a sentence for her partner. To begin, she makes lists of a variety of terms: sexy, slang, anatomical, literary or

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personal favorite references for “vagina” and “penis.” She practices repeating these taboo words:

Now, in the lowest of whispers, whisper the word penis. Whisper it again and again and again. Keep your eyes closed and keep thinking about your lover’s penis Whisper the word a little louder. Louder still. Once you have reached the level of a stage whisper, you can stop Repeat this process for all of the words and phrases on you ‘penis’ list (Keesling 1996:84).

The next step is to use the “dirty” noun, verbs, and adjectives in complete sentences. Keesling explains, “Sexy nouns can certainly spice up a sentence, but a nasty noun sitting dangerously close to a hot adjective or a sizzling verb can taste like five-alarm chili in your mouth” (99). In more advanced exercises, the reader completes and practices “bad libs” in the form of unmitigated imperatives, indirect requests and statements of desire for her partner:

- (1) Your (noun) makes me so (adj.). (106)
- (2) I want to (verb) your (noun). (106)
- (3) Thinking about you makes my (adj.) (noun). (107)
- (4) (Verb) my (noun)! (108)
- (5) I want you to play with my (adj.) (noun). (109)
- (6) I want to make your (adj.) (noun) (adj.)! (109)
- (7) Stick your (adj.) (noun) in my (adj.) (noun)! (109)
- (8) I love the way your (adj.) (noun) feels against my (adj.) (noun). (109)
- (9) I need to feel your (adj.) (adj.) (noun) inside my (adj.) (adj.) (noun). (109)
- (10) (Verb) me like a (adj.) (adj.) animal! (110)

At the end of the book, Keesling updates the reader on Sharon and Richard’s situation, “Life sure has changed since Sharon learned how to talk sexy to the one she loves” (161).

Perhaps the most blatant appropriation of the two-cultures model of cross-sex communication is Gray’s *Mars and Venus in the bedroom* (1995). Gray invokes Roman mythology in his description of male-female relationships. Just as Venus, the goddess of love, and Mars, the god of war, are polar opposites, such are men and women. In fact, men and women are so inherently different, they might as well come from different planets, hence Gray’s interplanetary parallel. According to Gray, since men and women are so unlike in the ways they enjoy sex and in their communication styles, both partners must work to overcome the communicative, emotional and physical differences that exist between the sexes.

Gray does try to place equal burden on each partner. A man must fulfill a woman’s emotional requirement so that she will more readily have sex with him. Likewise, a woman should use sex to get a man to “open up” emotionally. Gray notes that “Just as a woman needs love to open up to sex, a man needs sex to open up to love” (1995:16) and “when a woman begins to understand this difference, it changes her whole perspective on sex” (1995:17). These gender differences, however, seem reducible to the fact that the woman does not let the man have sex

with her enough, and that the man does not provide enough emotional support for the woman.

Although Gray's hook does not focus on "dirty talk," he provides bedroom-related dialogues for both women and men to practice. In the chapter called "The joy of quickies," he suggests that the couple add "quickies" to their sex life, (a "quickie" being a brief sexual encounter in which the woman most likely does not reach orgasm). Gray writes, "By making quickies guilt-free, a woman automatically supports a man in feeling free to initiate sex" (1995:82). He lists sample interchanges that can occur when the man wants sex and the woman doesn't:

- (1) He says, 'I'm feeling really turned on to you. Let's have sex.'
She says, 'I'm not in the mood for sex, but we could have a quickie.'
- (2) He says, 'Would you like to go upstairs and spend some intimate time together?'
She says, 'We could have a quickie. Maybe that will help me relax a little, and then we could talk.'
- (3) He says, 'I'm feeling so turned on. I would love to have sex.'
She says, 'I would love that too. We don't have much time, so why don't we have a quickie?'
- (4) He says, 'Let's have sex tonight.'
She says, 'I've really got a bad headache. Maybe we could have sex tomorrow. I could give you a hand job right now.'
- (5) He says nothing but gently reaches over in bed and begins making the moves.
She whispers, 'Um, this feels good. Don't worry about me tonight. Just go for it.'
(Gray 1996:82-3)

Each of Gray's examples results in the woman's bargaining with the man instead of saying "no." Thus, the "negotiation" over the woman's lack of desire for sexual activity always terminates in sex anyway.

Anderson criticizes Gray for using gender stereotypes to dismiss sexist, selfish, and inconsiderate behavior. She writes, "... women and men are from the same planet, planet Earth, where there are real social, political, and economic inequities. Instead of confronting the power imbalances between women and men in a patriarchal society, we're encouraged to believe that hardwiring accounts for any differences between us and that change is impossible, even undesirable" (1998:44). Gray's manuals teach women to accommodate men's behavior rather than to alter the power imbalance in a productive manner.

CONCLUSION

The advice books we have reviewed suggest that by speaking indirectly and avoiding taboo words women are not achieving their full potential in the bedroom. Thus, women are asked to give up certain aspects of what the difference model would classify as “feminine speech” without undermining their femininity. Women should use language to convey that they are wild, available, ready and willing, sexy, daring, excited and exciting, horny, exotic, assertive, sensual, naughty, imaginative, yet somehow they must still avoid being too demanding. The use of highly direct speech and “dirty talk” must be limited to the sphere of the bedroom to ensure that they maintain their feminine persona in the real world.

Several of the writers imply that dirty talk is a commodity; it is something men want, and something that women can learn to do. Although “dirty talk” is presented as if it will foster communication between heterosexual partners, it is more likely that “dirty talk” is a performance intended to entice the male partner. For example, it is clear that the “bad lib” “Stick your (adj.) (noun) in my (adj.) (noun)!” should not be completed as “Stick your dirty socks in my bulging laundry hamper!” The potential for this approach to open lines of communication that will actually meet the full range of women’s needs is quite limited. Placing an additional emphasis on the way a woman speaks during sex may actually make her self-conscious and cause insecurities in the bedroom. Despite the stated purpose of increased communication, the benefits of “talking dirty” for men and women are far from equal.

In *Verbal hygiene*, Deborah Cameron writes,

It could be argued that self-help now fulfills what were once prime functions of feminist politics: it takes women’s experience seriously, it gives voice to aspects of that experience that make many women unhappy, and it says that something can be done. What it does not provide, however, is a coherent political analysis of the present, a clear alternative vision for the future, or a self-consciously oppositional community in which proposals for change can be put into practice, and alternative values can become collective norm. (1995:210)

While these exercises attempt to provide women with a voice for their desires, they do little to question the power dynamics often found in male-female interactions. The appearance on the popular market of linguistically-oriented relationship advice books reflects the degree to which Tannen’s version of the difference model has permeated popular culture. We, as linguists, need to be aware of the implications of our work and the way in which the study of language and gender is presented to the public.

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