

Talking New York: It's Not What You Say, It's the Way That You Say It

By Deborah Tannen

ONE OF THE NICE THINGS about the United States is that, wherever you go, people speak the same language. So native New Yorkers can move to San Francisco, Houston, or Milwaukee and still understand and be understood by everyone they meet. Right? Well, not exactly. Or, as a native New Yorker might put it, "Wrong!" Even though people all over the country speak English, the ways they let others know how they mean what they say—whether they're being friendly, ironic, or rude—can be very different.

Now, I'm not referring to the two aspects of language that everyone notices and a lot of people talk about: accent and vocabulary. Plenty has been said about the New York accent—pronunciation of vowels (*cowfee*), consonants (*tree for three*), leaving out some *r*'s (*toidy-toid street*) and putting others in (*Linder Ronstadt*). And much has been said about vocabulary—if you say "*dungarees*" instead of "*jeans*"; if you stand "*in*" line or, as only a New Yorker can do, stand "*on*" line.

But there are other aspects of language that people tend not to notice because they seem so natural—when you start and stop talking; how fast you talk; how you use pitch, loudness, tone of voice, rhythm; what your "*point*" is likely to be and how you get to it; what you talk about, when, and to whom. If people do notice these aspects of speech, they don't attribute them to language habits but to the speaker's personality—thinking of New Yorkers, for instance, as loud and pushy.

As a sociolinguist, I want to know how cultural differences affect the ways

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people talk and listen. My research method, inspired by the work of Robin Lakoff and John Gumperz of the University of California at Berkeley is sociolinguistic microanalysis. I tape-record and transcribe naturally occurring conversations. Then I identify "*rough spots*" (segments in which there is evidence that communication broke down) and compare these with segments of the same or different conversations in which communication worked. I focus on such usually overlooked features as what (of all possible) information is said or left unsaid, how it is strung together, and how it is said—pitch, tone of voice, and so on. To check my interpretations, I play back taped conversations with the participants. Finally, I play the tape for others, to see if

there are cultural patterns in the way they interpret what they hear.

I'm from New York City and of East European Jewish background, and I used to live in Berkeley, California, so a lot of the conversations I have taped and analyzed involve native New Yorkers talking to Californians. I found out that New York Jews have ways of talking that often have one effect (a good one) when used with one another and another effect (not so good) when used with others. Of course, some New Yorkers who are not of East European Jewish background talk this way, and so do people who are neither from New York nor Jewish. But there are many who do—enough to account for the negative stereotype, and enough for many people, when I talk about these

“...The ways New Yorkers show they're friendly — their volume, pitch, speech rhythms — make others think them loud and pushy...”

phenomena, to react with a very loud “Aha!” and a sigh of relief, saying this explains something that's been giving them trouble for a long time.

NEW YORKERS SEEM TO THINK the best thing two people can do is talk. Silence is okay when you're watching a movie (though it might be better punctuated by clever asides), or when you're asleep (collecting dreams to tell when you awake), but when two or more people find themselves together, it's better to talk. That's how

California differences for a few minutes, the visiting New Yorker suggested that we exchange our guidebook for the one he recommended, so we all went back to the store where my friend had bought her book a few hours before. In the bookstore, our new friend called over his shoulder, “Have you read *Garp*?” I answered, “No, should I?” “Yes,” he said, animatedly. “It's great!” Then I heard a voice behind us saying, “Oh, is it? I've been thinking of reading that.” I looked around and saw a woman no longer paying attention to us. I asked her where she was from: another New Yorker.

Most non-New Yorkers, finding themselves within hearing range of strangers' conversation, think it's nice to pretend they didn't hear. But many New Yorkers think it's nice to toss in a relevant comment. Californians are shocked to have strangers butt into their conversations, but if they accept the intrusion, they are shocked again if the stranger bows out as suddenly as he butted in.

There was something else about our conversation that made it tempting for a New Yorker to chime in: the fact that my friend was complaining. A Californian who visited New York once told me he'd found New Yorkers unfriendly when he'd tried to make casual conversation. I asked what he made conversation about.

Well, for example, how nice the weather was. Of course! No New Yorker would start talking to a stranger about the weather—unless it was really bad. We find it most appropriate to make comments to strangers when there's something to complain about—“Why don't they do something about this garbage!” “Ever since they changed the schedules, you can't get a bus!” Complaining gives us a sense of togetherness in adversity. The angry edge is aimed at the impersonal “they” who are always doing things wrong. The person is thus welcomed into a warm little group. Since Californians don't pick up this distinction between “us” and “them,” they are put off by the hostility, which they feel could be turned on them at any moment.

NEW YORKERS HAVE LOTS OF ways of being friendly that put non-New Yorkers off, such as the way we ask questions. When we meet someone, we think it's nice to show interest by asking questions. Often we ask “machine-gun questions”: fast, with an unusually high or low pitch, in a clipped form, and often thrown in right at the end of someone else's sentence, or even in the middle of it.

One conversation I taped, between a woman from New York (Diane) and a man from Los Angeles (Chad) who had just met, will show what I mean:

Diane: You live in L.A.?

Chad: Yeah.

Diane: Y'visiting here?

Chad: Yeah.

Diane: Whaddya do there?

Chad: I work for Disney Pres—Walt Disney.

Diane: You an artist?

Chad: No, no.

Diane: Writer?

Chad: Yeah.

Now, anyone can see that something is wrong. Diane is doing all the asking, and Chad is giving minimal, even monosyllabic answers. He's uncomfortable enough to stumble over the name of his own company. When I played the tape for Chad, he said that he felt under interrogation. But Diane didn't want to ask all the questions. She was trying to show interest and get Chad talking. She couldn't understand why he was so unfriendly. But, being a nice person, she kept trying—by doing more of what was putting him off.

The intonation, high pitch, and clipped form of Diane's questions would have tipped off fellow New Yorkers: “This is a casual question. Answer if you feel like it; otherwise, say something else.” But Chad wasn't used to questions like that. When someone asks him a question, he feels he has to answer. So all that attention on him seemed pushy and nosy. He was also put off by the speed with which Diane's questions came at him. People who are not from New York often complain that New Yorkers interrupt them, don't listen, and don't give them a chance to talk. Typically, the New Yorker starts talking before the Californian is finished, so the Californian, piqued, stops talking. So who's interrupting? The New Yorker? Not necessarily. Who said only one person can talk at a time?



we show we're being friendly. And that's why we like to talk to strangers—especially if we won't be with them long, such as in an elevator or on a bank line. This often makes non-New Yorkers think we're trying to start something more than a conversation.

Once, when I was visiting San Francisco, my friend and I stopped in the street to look something up in her guidebook, and she complained that the book wasn't very clear. A man who was walking by turned to us and said, “Oh, that book's no good. The one you should get is this,” pulling a guidebook out of his bag to show us. I couldn't resist checking out my hypothesis, so I asked him where he was from. He had just flown in from New York.

After we talked about New York-

"...When New Yorkers show appreciation, it sounds to Californians like disbelief..."

In a really good New York conversation, more than one person is talking a lot of the time. Throughout the conversations I have taped and analyzed, New York listeners punctuate a speaker's talk with comments, reactions, questions (often asking for the very information that is obviously about to come). None of this makes the New York speaker stop. On the contrary, he talks even more—louder, faster—and has even more fun, because he doesn't feel he's in the conversation alone. When a non-New Yorker stops talking at the first sign of participation from the New Yorker, he's the one who's creating the interruption, making a conversational bully out of a perfectly well-intentioned cooperative over-lapper.

On the tape of two and a half hours of conversation from which the Diane/Chad example comes, I had hoped to analyze the styles of all six people present, but there was no time when non-New Yorkers talked to one another without the New Yorkers saying anything. This happened mainly because the non-New Yorkers expected a certain amount of pause before they started talking, but before that much pause came about, a New Yorker started to think there was an uncomfortable silence, and kindly set about filling it up with talk.

A short segment from that conversation—a discussion of the neighborhood around the Coliseum—will show this principle in action.

Kurt: Remember where WINS used to be?

Diane: No.

Kurt: Then they built a big huge skyscraper there?

Diane: No. Where was that?

Kurt: Right where Central Park met Broadway. That building...

Diane: By Columbus Circuit?...

Kurt:... shaped like that [makes a pyramid of his hands]...

Diane:... that—Columbus Circle?

Kurt:... right on Columbus Circle. Here's Columbus Circle.

Diane: Now it's the...

Kurt:... here's Central Park West

Diane:... Huntington Hartford museum.

Peter: That's the Huntington Hartford, right?

Kurt: Nuhnuhno.

For much of the above conversation, two or three people are often talking at the same time. But how do I know

that they thought it was a good idea? When Diane suggests, "Now it's the Huntington Hartford museum," Peter says almost the same thing. But Kurt tells Peter and Diane they are both wrong. How could they have made the same mistake? Listening to the tape later, Peter admitted he really had no idea what Kurt was talking about; he hadn't lived in New York since high school, and he felt very much out of his element in this conversation. So, figuring that Diane ought to know, he just said the same thing she said, beginning a split second later so he could hear what she was saying and echo it. The wonderful thing is that it worked: Everyone had the impression that Peter knew the area. So knowing what you're talking about is not necessary in order to take part in this kind of conversation; knowing what kind of comment to make, when, and how fast is not only necessary but sufficient.

A NEW YORK LISTENER DOES a lot of talking. And if you like a story, or if you think someone has made a good point, you don't appreciate it in silence. You show your reaction fast and loud. This creates trouble when New Yorkers talk to non-New Yorkers. In conversations I taped, again and again the Californians and Midwesterners stopped dead in their vocal tracks when a New Yorker tried to encourage them by exclaiming, "What!," "Wow!," or "Oh, God!" What was intended as a show of interest and appreciation sounded to the speaker like rude disbelief, or scared him into speechlessness. My sister, who grew up in New York City but hasn't lived here in seventeen years, has this problem with her children. When they tell her something and she gives them an enthusiastic response, they jump and jerk around to see what scared her.

New Yorkers also think it's nice to let others in on their thoughts and tell about their personal experiences; the expectation is that others will do the same. Often, however, the others do not understand this unspoken arrangement. A friend of mine from the Midwest had a date with a Jewish man who regaled her with stories of his personal life. In exasperation, she asked, "Why are you telling me all this?" and was utterly bewildered when he explained, "I want to get to know you."

Few forms of entertainment are as well loved by New Yorkers as telling

stories. New Yorkers will often use dramatic gestures and facial expressions, change the pitch of their voices, or imitate the people they are quoting. A Midwesterner who worked for a few years in New York had a native friend who liked to tell him stories while they were walking down the street. When the New Yorker got to the climax of the story, he'd stop walking, nudge his friend to stop too, and deliver the punch line face to face. The Midwesterner found this a public embarrassment. But a New Yorker can't walk and tell a good story at the same time. He needs to gesture and to watch his audience watching him.

After observing many hours of conversation and analyzing tape recordings of many more, I am convinced that the style of New York conversation grows out of the desire to show involvement with other people, and they seem to New Yorkers like self-evident ways of being a good person. But conversational habits are not universal. People from different ethnic and social backgrounds have different conversational habits that seem self-evident to *them*. Some people wait longer than others before they feel it's appropriate to start talking. Some think it's polite to talk more softly, keep their intonation flatter, keep their faces and gestures in check, and talk about different topics.

What makes misunderstandings resulting from conversational-style differences so hard to clear up is that we don't have a way of talking about them. We don't think of saying, "When my voice has that quality, it means I'm being friendly," or "I'll leave a half-second pause when I'm finished." Such linguistic cues are sent and perceived automatically. All we can say is "I didn't mean it that way," which no one is ever going to believe if he knows that *he* would have meant it that way if he had said it that way. And we don't walk away from conversations thinking, "Gee, you use pitch and intonation differently from me." We think, "He's in a rotten mood," or "She's weird."

So what's a New Yorker to do? You can try to change your conversational style, as some New Yorkers have tried to change their accents—and probably with a similarly patched-up effect. You can teach yourself to count to three after you *think* someone else has finished talking. This may work sometimes, although it may give you a belabored look when you're counting. But can you change your sense of irony, of the way to tell a story—even if you sit on your hands?

I don't know. But in any case, don't feel guilty when you're accused of interrupting. In fact, you can complain, "Don't just sit there—interrupt me!"