

MANSPLAINING: THE SYSTEMATIC SOCIOCULTURAL SILENCER

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Abstract

This presentation will examine the phenomenon of mansplaining and how it affects men and women both linguistically and culturally. Mansplaining is a systematic and institutionalized form of oppression that silences women, implicitly disclosing the lesser value of the female voice. This presentation demonstrates that mansplaining is not only as the way in which men make needless explanations to women, usually in a condescending manner, but also as the chronic interruption of women. Topics include the differences in the life-long socialization of men and women; political, religious, and cultural examples of mansplaining; and the violence exercised on women in relation to mansplaining. Evidence for this presentation was drawn from academic studies spanning the last thirty years to substantiate claims of discrimination between men and women and how they are allowed to express themselves.

The idea that women talk more than men is a false stereotype deeply entrenched in society. Today, research suggests that men play the dominant, lead role in conversations. Not only do men talk more than women, they interrupt more (Handcock and Rubin 2014). Mansplaining is a relatively new term, coined to describe such disruptive discourse. The injurious effects of mansplaining are present on a microcosmic level: in the workplace and the classroom; but also in a macrocosmic level: in politics, religion, and leadership roles world-wide. Through a cyclical, institutionalized socialization, society has taught men to grant their own voices more value than their female equals. Mansplaining is an underestimated linguistic undercurrent that is detrimental to women's dignity, free speech, and parity in culture. As long as men continue to dominate the public sphere, women will continue to be interrupted, valued as less than men, and violently silenced.

In 2012, sociopolitical journalist Rebecca Solnit wrote an essay critiquing male conversational arrogance. Inspired by her lifelong experiences of being cut off and spoken over by men, she pioneered the field of the gender roles in everyday conversations. Shortly after publication, Solnit's essay gained the massive amounts of public attention, and subsequently, the term "mansplaining" was coined. Mansplaining is simply defined by Google as "(of a man) explaining (something) to someone, typically a woman, in a manner regarded as condescending or patronizing." For the purposes of this paper, I will broaden the definition of mansplaining to a more comprehensive description of these interactions, as well as to include the general effects of the phenomena. In her essay, Solnit (2012) writes about the "slippery slope of silencing;" mansplaining, she says, "crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world." Mansplaining is more than just a conversational inconvenience: it trains women in "self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's

unsupported overconfidence” (Solnit, 2012). Such uncertainty in conversation is at the core of the disparity between the ways in which men and women speak.

The study *Um . . . Who Like Says You Know: Filler Word Use as a Function of Age, Gender, and Personality* by Charlyn M. Laserna, Yi-Tai Seih, and James W. Pennebaker analyzed filler words, and found that “filler word use can be considered a potential social and personality marker.” The study separates filler words into two distinct categories: filled pauses (*uh, um*) and discourse markers (*I mean, you know, like*). Using two hundred and sixty-three transcripts of natural language recorded by a device called the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR), Laserna, Seih, & Pennebaker (2014) found that filled pauses were used at almost the same rate between men and women, but discourse markers “were more common among women, younger participants, and more conscientious people.” The researchers, unsurprised by their results, asserted that people who use discourse markers more often do so to imply to listeners that they are attentive, or to rephrase opinions in order to have a more inclusive conversation. A study examining conversational differences between men and women by Hancock and Rubin (2014) asserts that in spoken conversations, women are more likely to be interrupted, even by other women, than men. The study revealed that “when speaking with a female, participants interrupted more and used more dependent clauses than when speaking with a male.” The increased use of dependent clauses, researchers say, is a male tactic to draw out the sentence and keep the listener’s attention, but a female tactic to indicate that they are paying attention to the speaker. Both studies revolutionized the linguistic and cultural implications of filled pauses and discourse markers by creating a holistic image of who is using them, and why they do so.

The study by Laserna, Seih, & Pennebaker (2014) found that men and women use filled pauses at an equal rate. An earlier study by Shriberg (1996) also corroborates their results,

finding that women produce more discourse markers than men, but the sexes were equal with respect to other types of disfluency rates such as filled pauses. This does not, however, necessarily mean that these words have the same linguistic implications when utilized.

Georgetown University linguist Deborah Tannen (2014) has spent years studying the gender differences in styles of communication, and argues that though the usage is equal, the meanings are not. Tannen (2014) asserts that “men are saying ‘uh’ as a placeholder to keep the floor whereas women say ‘um’ as a ‘backchannel’ [Tannen’s personal term for filled pauses] fits in with [the idea] that women are using it to indicate, ‘I’m listening.’” Theories such as Tannen’s work to outline the power dynamic between men and women in conversations, and relate directly back to the interruption of women and ultimately mansplaining. Men are accustomed to continuously demanding the attention of the listener and use filled pauses to maintain the dominant status; women use filler pauses to conform to their traditional role as the listener and supporter.

Discourse markers, too, are used differently by men and women. Historically, discourse markers such as *like*, *you know*, and *I mean* have been considered feminine, and continue to be perceived in the same way today. As previously stated, Laserna, Seih, & Pennebaker (2014) concluded that women and conscientious people use discourse markers to express a sense of appreciation for the speaker. Men use discourse markers less because they do not have the same normative standards to conform to; they are used to holding the lead position in a conversation. Even when expressing a concrete thought, idea, or opinion, women are more likely to add a discourse marker. These added words are a kind of protection for women who are used to being mansplained. After years of constantly being negated or invalidated in conversations by men, women have adapted discourse markers as a lexical safeguard. Women have been socialized to

expect interruptions during conversation, and use markedly more filled pauses and discourse markers in response.

Mansplaining is a behavior present in every aspect of culture, historically and today. Perhaps the most famous instance of mansplaining occurred during Taylor Swift's 2009 VMA acceptance speech when Kanye West interrupted. West leapt uninvited onto the stage, took the microphone from Swift's hand, and proceeded to explain that Beyoncé should have won the award. Swift was left speechless. However, Hollywood has a record of mansplaining that is often unaddressed. The Huffington Post (2013) expanded upon a study by the NY Film Academy, analyzing the leading roles in 2013's fifty highest-grossing films and tallying how many featured a female lead, how many featured a male lead, and how many included a co-ed ensemble cast. Not only are women — as the New York Film Academy found — less prominent in the film industry, the movies that garner the most attention rarely focus on female narratives. Only six of fifty starred a female lead, more than thirty-two of the movies among the top fifty starred only male leads, and twenty percent of the total films did not even include women as secondary characters. This lack of representation in artistic endeavors is not, however, limited to large-budget films. In 2013, of the three hundred and sixty-seven works of art in the Museum of Modern Art, only twenty-nine were by women (Saltz, 2013). The overwhelming lack of representation demonstrates the low value society puts on the voices and narratives of women. This type of silencing synonymous to mansplaining.

Women suffer from this kind of mansplaining globally in religion and politics as well. Statistics in 2016 from the Center for American Women and Politics show that despite being over half of the population of the United States, women hold less than twenty percent of congressional seats, nineteen percent of the U.S. House of Representatives, twenty-four percent

of statewide offices, twenty-four percent of state legislative seats, and only eighteen percent of mayorships. A study analyzing the nine major religious organizations in the U.S. that ordain women and allow them to hold top leadership slots revealed that only two had women in elected power positions (Pew Research Center, 2016). The undeniable lack of women in leadership roles is a quantifiable display of the disrespect for women's authoritative voice.

Furthermore, mansplaining is present in everyday situations, such as education and the workplace. An article in National Geographic comments on the suppression of women in the field of science: "over the centuries, female researchers have had to work as "volunteer" faculty members, seen credit for significant discoveries they've made assigned to male colleagues, and been written out of textbooks" (Lee, 2013). Scientist Ben Barres wrote publicly about his experiences in the field, first as a woman then as a man. As a female student at MIT, Barbara Barres was told by a professor after solving a particularly difficult math problem, "your boyfriend must have solved it for you." Years later Ben Barres gave a scientific speech at a conference and overhead a member of the audience say, "his work is much better than his sister's" (Vedantam, 2006). Mansplaining happens even in the doctor's office; a study of primary care visits found that female patients were interrupted more often than male, by both male and female doctors (Rhoades, McFarland, Finch, and Johnson, 2001). Perhaps the most common instance of mansplaining is in the office. A study by Brigham Young University and Princeton researchers in 2012 showed that women contributed only twenty-five percent of the dialogue in professional meetings.

The implications of these cultural findings raised questions about why women do not speak up or insist that their voice be heard. In most instances, however, when women do express their thoughts, ideas, or opinions, they suffer either mansplaining or violence. Global estimates

published by the World Health Organization in 2016 indicate that about one in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. A study of female parliamentarians by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2016 found that more than forty percent of female members of parliament said they had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction while serving their terms, including threats to kidnap or kill their children. Over a fifth said they had been subjected to one or more acts of sexual violence and almost a third said they'd witnessed an attack on a colleague in parliament, and eighty percent said they had been subjected to psychological violence in the workplace. The violence against women who assert themselves exposes the often-ignored effects of mansplaining on a macroscopic level. The fear of being interrupted and ultimately of violence keeps women in a place of filled pauses and submission.

Mansplaining and masculinized speech norms dominate the public sphere. This is a global, intersectional issue, but it begins first in families and early childhood education, where gender is a primary defining characteristic. A study of the interactions between parents and children aged two to five found that parents were more likely to talk over their daughters than sons (Law, 2014). This behavior tells girls from an early age that their voice is worth less than that of boys. According to research by Myra and David Sadker from 1994, in classroom discussion, boys called out answers eight times as often as girls did and were more likely to be listened to than admonished, while girls who shouted out answers were instructed to raise their hands. The normalization of mansplaining begins with the conflicting sociocultural ideas of the “young lady” and “boys will be boys.” Mansplaining in early childhood teaches girls to value subservient behaviors and boys to exercise dominant ones. These personality patterns will then follow both males and females into adulthood, and continue to affect them linguistically and culturally.

In 1874, Thomas Hardy wrote, “it is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in a language chiefly made by men to express theirs.” Almost a hundred and fifty years later, Hardy’s expression remains relevant. Because language is dominated by men, women struggle to assert themselves into conversation. The theory of linguistic determinism within the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that “the language we speak determines how we perceive and think about the world” (Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, 2014, p. 22). Mansplaining is a form of cultural determinism, expanding beyond minor aspects of conversation and affecting the linguistic macrocosm of society. The interruption and silencing of women is detrimental and cyclical: the oppression begins in childhood and progresses throughout a lifetime. As long as men dominate the conversation, language will continue to evolve to accommodate them.

Despite irrefutable evidence, mansplaining is denied by many. Opposing parties argue that the term is in itself sexist because it targets men. Solnit combats this argument by writing, “mansplaining is not a universal flaw of the gender, just the intersection between overconfidence and cluelessness where some portion of that gender gets stuck” (2012). Though all men do not mansplain, every woman can recall a time when she has been mansplained, or been forced to deal with the consequences of mansplaining. Because of the way children are socialized, men may not be making a conscious effort to mansplain rather they are acting upon internalized feelings. Mansplaining is a cultural issue that must be addressed, like every social injustice, despite the discomfort such confrontations bring. Mansplaining is an institutionalized and systematic cultural value embedded into every aspect of society. It is necessary for women to demand space within the linguistic system of our society in order for this power dynamic to incorporate them in a more egalitarian way. A forcible seizure of rhetorical autonomy and

sovereignty will shape the reality to which our language speaks, as well as promote equity in both our words and actions.

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