

So today I want to consider and explore some the profound existential and perhaps even incendiary question do women speak dolphin Now that's ridiculous right And it might even be a bit off-putting to some of you But hopefully if you stay tuned I'll explain what that might just mean And I promise you that my explanation will hopefully make this dolphin thing seem more charming than offensive But we'll see

So I want to start by saying that I recently picked up and reread Deborah Tannen's great book called *You Just Don't Understand Men and Women in Conversation* In Tannen's book she lays out a theory of the gendered nature of communication styles And she argues that boys and girls they grow up in essentially different conversational cultures she calls it leading to different communication styles that persist obviously into adulthood Her intention wasn't just to contribute to the sort of academic sociolinguistic research at the time but also she wanted to explain the frequency of misunderstanding and frustration that she argues so often occurs in conversations between men and women which seems quite right and a noble pursuit on her part

So she argues that there is a distinction between rapport talk and rapport talk men who she says engage in report talk focus more on information they prefer public speaking over private conversation and that men are more comfortable with conflict and direct disagreement while women who engage in what she calls rapport talk focus more on building and maintaining relationships with an emphasis more on connection and communication as a way of negotiating closeness Women she says prefer private conversation over public speaking and tend to avoid direct confrontation

So she goes on and on talking about the differences along these lines She argues that women are more likely to communicate somewhat indirectly with higher sensitivity to emotional overtones and more often tend to use qualifying statements While men focus more on literal meanings they pay less attention to we pay less attention to emotional subtext and we're more likely to take statements at face value And I would add that the heteronormative man would tend to fear that commenting on another man's for instance on another man's body or appearance or clothing wasn't masculine

And this is not a fear that women have And in fact this is a hint as to the meaning of the dolphin metaphor that I'll explain in a few minutes And finally Tannen points out that there are differences in listening behavior between the sexes with women more likely maintaining eye contact offering supportive comments to others asking follow up while men tend to have a focus on outcomes or solutions are more likely to interrupt with solutions and don't make as intimate and direct eye contact as women

Now I think it's worth saying right here that when we try to deconstruct or understand something from a sociological or politically sensitive point of view many people will respond by saying well okay that seems right but I'm not like that or there's so many exceptions to the rule that the generalizations get lost and of course there are exceptions to this rule and there are lots of reasons why making a generalization like this is tricky For example for one thing it doesn't take

into account gay culture and is heteronormative and I think that's a real absence and lacuna in Tannen's model

Some people might say that Tannen or in this case I am caricaturing things but you see caricatures can often and do often reflect real social cultural and political phenomenon and differences So they're well worth thinking about in that way

And there's been a lot of discourse over the years about the misogynist nature of male communication certainly The greatest example of it being mansplaining And that's a real generalization but it's also an important and accurate insight into gender politics

But see Tannen's agenda is different She says and I agree that if we understand differences we can better negotiate them And we know that we sometimes speak different languages we can more peacefully and compassionately live in the same world

So that brings us back finally to the question do women speak dolphin. Now a couple years ago a friend of mine was at a party with some good friends and the women greeted each other in a tone and energy that was distinctive and different and reminiscent to him to his ears now as the kind of chirping and squeaking he had heard recorded in and from a dolphin pod He'd sometimes get frustrated with his wife didn't understand very clearly what she needed And he connected all this and complained to me and he said you know men and women are so different It's like women speak dolphin And I've thought about that on and off over the years And of course this guy was not trying primarily to dehumanize women by saying they were like sea creatures but instead he was trying to use an image to illustrate the difference the radical difference in communication style and also in the subtler ways that women and men communicate differently and connect with each other differently when they interact

So then I started to notice in recent months some things that my wife my own wife would do and say in ordinary social life that I think might be her version her dialect so to speak of speaking dolphin When I explained this to her and I'll give you some examples she got something of a kick out of it actually It wasn't offensive to her nor should it have been because my observations were based in a sense of great affection and appreciation and almost admiration for this whole dolphin world in which she so deftly participated and which was so foreign to me as a man

So what does it mean to speak dolphin. Well picture this situation Captures it My wife and I go into a department store And we're dealing interacting with a female cashier or saleswoman My wife says something like oh your earrings are fabulous I really like your earrings Or you know I really like your hair Or I really love that tattoo or that scarf you're wearing or those shoes you're wearing She sees a woman you know your hair is terrific Can you tell me who your stylist is Now these comments are not offered We're not offered with any special drama or excitement or seductiveness but we're just it seemed to me part of the normal everyday conversational universe in which my wife lives such that commenting on things that might at first glance seem

rather intimate about another woman's appearance or what she's wearing that these are average expectable gambits in social life for women Completely normal no big deal

And I'll say I'll admit that never in my memory at least have I noticed and then commented on another man's shoes I don't think the words have ever come out of my mouth Oh I really love those shoes John Or I really love your hair Bob except when Bob and I are joking about getting bald and that we're aging

And so this different universe seemed fascinating to me and I began to think of women in these particular moments only as forming a kind of dolphin pod in which communication is going on all the time below the awareness of most men that there's like a subsonic channel of intimate recognition appreciation and solidarity That's invisible and inaudible to men. And so to women listening to this I think that being a dolphin and being part of a broader pod can and should bring a certain sense of grace and charm to your gender And that might be a source of real pride