VOICES

A Selection of Multicultural Readings

Kathleen S. Verderber
Northern Kentucky University

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**SELECTION THREE**

In American society, the games that boys have traditionally played and the games that girls have traditionally played have had different goals, rules, and roles. As a result, the interaction that is necessary to be successful in each of these distinct speech communities is different. According to Julia T. Wood, Professor of Communication at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, from childhood men and women are conditioned to have differing communication styles, to talk differently. In this selection from her book *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, the origins, behaviors, and motives for each style are discussed. Through understanding both masculine and feminine styles, we should be better equipped to interpret the verbal communication behaviors of both men and women.

**Gendered Interaction: Masculine and Feminine Styles of Verbal Communication**

Julia T. Wood

Language not only expresses cultural views of gender but also constitutes individuals' gender identities. The communication practices we use define us as masculine or feminine; in large measure, we create our own gender through talk. Because language constitutes masculinity and femininity, we should find generalizable differences in how women and men communicate. Research bears out this expectation by documenting rather systematic differences in the ways men and women typically use language. You probably don't need a textbook to tell you this, since your own interactions may have given you ample evidence of differences in how women and men talk.

What may not be clear from your own experiences, however, is exactly what those differences are and what they imply. If you are like most people, you've sometimes felt uncomfortable or misunderstood or mystified in communication with members of the other sex, but you've not been able to put your finger on what was causing the difficulty. In the pages that follow, we'll try to gain greater insight into masculine and feminine styles of speech and some of the confusion that results from differences between them. We want to understand how each style evolves, what it involves, and how to interpret verbal communication in ways that honor the motives of those using it.

**Gendered Speech Communities**

Writing in the 1940s, Suzanne Langer introduced the idea of "discourse communities." Like George Herbert Mead, she asserted that culture, or collective life, is possible only to the extent that a group of people share a symbol system and the meanings encapsulated in it. This theme recurred

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in Langer's philosophical writings over the course of her life (1953, 1979). Her germinal insights into discourse communities prefigured later interest in the ways in which language creates individual identity and sustains cultural life. Since the early 1970s, scholars have studied speech communities, or cultures. William Labov (1972, p. 121) extended Langer's ideas by defining a speech community as existing when a group of people share a set of norms regarding communicative practices. By this he meant that a communication culture exists when people share understandings about goals of communication, strategies for enacting those goals, and ways of interpreting communication.

It's obvious we have entered a different communication culture when we travel to non-English-speaking countries, because the language differs from our own. Distinct speech communities are less apparent when they use the same language that we do, but use it in different ways and to achieve different goals. The communication culture of African-Americans who have not adopted the dominant pattern of North American speech, for instance, relies on English yet departs in interesting and patterned ways from the communication of middle-class white North Americans. The fact that diverse groups of people develop distinctive communication patterns reminds us again of the constant interaction of communication and culture. As we have already seen, the standpoint we occupy in society influences what we know and how we act. We now see that this basic tenet of standpoint theory also implies that communication styles evolve out of different standpoints.

Studies of gender and communication (Campbell, 1973; Coates, 1986; Coates & Cameron, 1989; Hall & Langellier, 1988; Kramarae, 1981; Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990a, 1990b) have convincingly shown that in many ways women and men operate from dissimilar assumptions about the goals and strategies of communication. F. L. Johnson (1989), in fact, asserts that men and women live in two different worlds and that this is evident in the disparate forms of communication they use. Given this, it seems appropriate to consider masculine and feminine styles of communicating as embodying two distinct speech communities. To understand these different communities and the validity of each, we will first consider how we are socialized into feminine and masculine speech communities. After this, we will explore divergencies in how women and men typically communicate. Please note the importance of the word typically and others that indicate we are discussing generalizable differences, not absolute ones. Some women are not socialized into feminine speech, or they are and later reject it; likewise, some men do not learn or choose not to adopt a masculine style of communication. What follows describes gendered speech communities into which most women and men are socialized.

The Lessons of Childplay

We've seen that socialization is a gendered process in which boys and girls are encouraged to develop masculine and feminine identities. Extending that understanding, we now explore how socialization creates gendered speech communities. One way to gain insight into how boys and girls learn norms of communication is to observe young children at play. In interactions with peers, boys and girls learn how to talk and how to interpret what each other says; they discover how to signal their intentions with words and how to respond appropriately to others' communication; and they learn codes to demonstrate involvement and interest (Tannen, 1990a). In short, interacting with peers teaches children rules of communication.

Initial insight into the importance of children's play in shaping patterns of communication came from a classic study by D. N. Maltz and R. Borker (1982). As they watched young children engaged in recreation, the researchers were struck by two observations: Young children almost always play...
in sex-segregated groups, and girls and boys tend to play different kinds of games. Maltz and Borker found that boys' games (football, baseball) and girls' games (school, house, jump rope) cultivate distinct understandings of communication and the rules by which it operates.

**Boys' Games**

Boys' games usually involve fairly large groups—nine individuals for each baseball team, for instance. Most boys' games are competitive, have clear goals, and are organized by rules and roles that specify who does what and how to play. Because these games are structured by goals, rules, and roles, there is little need to discuss how to play, although there may be talk about strategies to reach goals. Maltz and Borker realized that in boys' games, an individual's status depends on standing out, being better, and often dominating other players. From these games, boys learn how to interact in their communities. Specifically, boys' games cultivate three communication rules:

1. Use communication to assert yourself and your ideas; use talk to achieve something.
2. Use communication to attract and maintain an audience.
3. Use communication to compete with others for the "talk stage," so that they don't gain more attention than you; learn to wrest the focus from others and onto yourself.

These communication rules are consistent with other aspects of masculine socialization that we have already discussed. For instance, notice the emphasis on individuality and competition. Also, we see that these rules accent achievement—doing something, accomplishing a goal. Boys learn they must do things to be valued members of the team. It's also the case that intensely close, personal relationships are unlikely to be formed in large groups. Finally, we see the undercurrent of masculinity's emphasis on being invulnerable and guarded: If others are the competition from whom you must seize center stage, then you cannot let them know too much about yourself and your weaknesses.

**Girls' Games**

Turning now to girls' games, we find that quite different patterns exist, and they lead to distinctive understandings of communication. Girls tend to play in pairs or in very small groups rather than large ones. Also, games like house and school do not have preset, clear-cut goals, rules, and roles. There is no analogy for the touchdown in playing house. Because girls' games are not structured externally, players have to talk among themselves to decide what they're doing and what roles they
have. Playing house, for instance, typically begins with a discussion about who is going to be the daddy and who the mommy. This is typical of the patterns girls use to generate rules and roles for their games. The lack of stipulated goals for the games is also important, since it tends to cultivate in girls an interest in the process of interaction more than its products. For their games to work, girls have to cooperate and work out problems by talking. No external rules exist to settle disputes. From these games, Maltz and Borker noted, girls learn normative communication patterns of their speech communities. Specifically, girls’ games teach three basic rules for communication:

1. Use collaborative, cooperative talk to create and maintain relationships. The process of communication, not its content, is the heart of relationships.
2. Avoid criticizing, outdoing, or putting others down; if criticism is necessary, make it gentle; never exclude others.
3. Pay attention to others and to relationships; interpret and respond to others’ feelings sensitively.

These basic understandings of communication echo and reinforce other aspects of feminine socialization. Girls’ games stress cooperation, collaboration, and sensitivity to others’ feelings. Also notice the focus on process encouraged in girls’ games. Rather than interacting to achieve some outcome, girls learn that communication itself is the goal. Whereas boys learn they have to do something to be valuable, the lesson for girls is to be. Their worth depends on being good people, which is defined by being cooperative, inclusive, and sensitive. The lessons of child’s play are carried forward. In fact, the basic rules of communication that adult women and men employ turn out to be only refined and elaborated versions of the very same ones evident in girls’ and boys’ childhood games.

Gendered Communication Practices

In her popular book, You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Communication, linguist Deborah Tannen (1990b, p. 42) declares that “communication between men and women can be like cross cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles.” Her study of men’s and women’s talk led her to identify distinctions between the speech communities typical of women and men. Not surprisingly, Tannen traces gendered communication patterns to differences in boys’ and girls’ communication with parents and peers. Like other scholars (Bate, 1988; Hall & Langellier, 1988; Kramarae, 1981; Treichler & Kramarae, 1983; Wood, 1993a), Tannen believes that women and men typically engage in distinctive styles of communication with different purposes, rules, and understandings of how to interpret talk. We will consider features of women’s and men’s speech identified by a number of researchers. As we do, we will discover some of the complications that arise when men and women operate by different rules in conversations with each other.

Women’s Speech

For most women, communication is a primary way to establish and maintain relationships with others. They engage in conversation to share themselves and to learn about others. This is an important point: For women, talk is the essence of relationships. Consistent with this primary goal, women’s speech tends to display identifiable features that foster connections, support, closeness, and understanding.

Equality between people is generally important in women’s communication (Aries, 1987). To achieve symmetry, women often match experiences to indicate “You’re not alone in how you
feel." Typical ways to communicate equality would be saying, “I've done the same thing many times,” “I've felt the same way,” or “Something like that happened to me too and I felt like you do.” Growing out of the quest for equality is a participatory mode of interaction in which communicators respond to and build on each other’s ideas in the process of conversing (Hall & Langellier, 1988). Rather than a rigid you-tell-your-ideas-then-I'll-tell-mine sequence, women’s speech more characteristically follows an interactive pattern in which different voices weave together to create conversations.

Also important in women’s speech is showing support for others. To demonstrate support, women often express understanding and sympathy with a friend’s situation or feelings. “Oh, you must feel terrible,” “I really hear what you are saying,” or “I think you did the right thing” are communicative clues that we understand and support how another feels. Related to these first two features is women’s typical attention to the relationship level of communication (Wood, 1993a, 1993b; Wood & Inman, 1993). You will recall that the relationship level of talk focuses on feelings and the relationship between communicators rather than on the content of messages. In conversations between women, it is common to hear a number of questions that probe for greater understanding of feelings and perceptions surrounding the subject of talk (Beck, 1988, p. 104; Tannen, 1990b). “Tell me more about what happened,” “How did you feel when it occurred?” “Do you think it was deliberate?” “How does this fit into the overall relationship?” are probes that help a listener understand a speaker’s perspective. The content of talk is dealt with, but usually not without serious attention to the feelings involved.

A fourth feature of women’s speech style is conversational “maintenance work” (Beck, 1988; Fishman, 1978). This involves efforts to sustain conversation by inviting others to speak and by prompting them to elaborate their experiences. Women, for instance, ask a number of questions that initiate topics for others: “How was your day?” “Tell me about your meeting,” “Did anything interesting happen on your trip?” “What do you think of the candidates this year?” Communication of this sort opens the conversational door to others and maintains interaction.

Inclusivity also surfaces in a fifth quality of women’s talk, which is responsiveness (Beck, 1988; Tannen, 1990a, 1990b; Wood, 1993a). Women usually respond in some fashion to what others say. A woman might say “Tell me more” or “That’s interesting”; perhaps she will nod and use eye contact to signal she is engaged; perhaps she will ask a question such as “Can you explain what you mean?” Responsiveness reflects learned tendencies to care about others and to make them feel valued and included (Kemper, 1984; Lakoff, 1975). It affirms another person and encourages elaboration by showing interest in what was said.

A sixth quality of women’s talk is personal, concrete style (Campbell, 1973; Hall & Langellier, 1988; Tannen, 1990b). Typical of women’s conversation are details, personal disclosures, anecdotes, and concrete reasoning. These features cultivate a personal tone in women’s communication, and they facilitate feelings of closeness by connecting communicators’ lives. The detailed, concrete emphasis prevalent in women’s talk also clarifies issues and feelings so that communicators are able to understand and identify with each other. Thus, the personal character of much of women’s interaction sustains interpersonal closeness.

A final feature of women’s speech is tentativeness. This may be expressed in a number of forms. Sometimes women use verbal hedges such as “I kind of feel you may be overreacting.” In other situations they qualify statements by saying “I’m probably not the best judge of this, but . . .” Another way to keep talk provisional is to tag a question onto a statement in a way that invites another to respond: “That was a pretty good movie, wasn’t it?” “We should get out this weekend, don’t you
Tentative communication leaves open the door for others to respond and express their opinions.

There has been controversy about tentativeness in women’s speech. R. Lakoff (1975), who first noted that women use more hedges, qualifiers, and tag questions than men, claimed these represent lack of confidence and uncertainty. Calling women’s speech powerless, Lakoff argued that it reflects women’s socialization into subordinate roles and low self-esteem. Since Lakoff’s work, however, other scholars (Bate, 1988; Wood & Lenze, 1991b) have suggested different explanations of women’s tentative style of speaking. Dale Spender (1984a), in particular, points out that Lakoff’s judgments of the inferiority of women’s speech were based on using male speech as the standard, which does not recognize the distinctive validity of different speech communities. Rather than reflecting powerlessness, the use of hedges, qualifiers, and tag questions may express women’s desires to keep conversation open and to include others. It is much easier to jump into a conversation that has not been sealed with absolute, firm statements. A tentative style of speaking supports women’s general desire to create equality and include others. It is important to realize, however, that people outside of women’s speech community may misinterpret women’s intentions in using tentative communication.

**Men’s Speech**

Masculine speech communities define the goals of talk as exerting control, preserving independence, and enhancing status. Conversation is an arena for proving oneself and negotiating prestige. This leads to two general tendencies in men’s communication. First, men often use talk to establish and defend their personal status and their ideas, by asserting themselves and/or by challenging others. Second, when they wish to comfort or support another, they typically do so by respecting the other’s independence and avoiding communication they regard as condescending (Tannen, 1990b). These tendencies will be more clear as we review specific features of masculine talk.

To establish their own status and value, men often speak to exhibit knowledge, skill, or ability. Equally typical is the tendency to avoid disclosing personal information that might make a man appear weak or vulnerable (Derlega & Chaiken, 1976; Lewis & McCarthy, 1988; Saurer & Eisler, 1990). For instance, if someone expresses concern about a relationship with a boyfriend, a man might say “The way you should handle that is . . . ,” “Don’t let him get to you,” or “You ought to just tell him . . .” This illustrates the tendency to give advice that Tannen reports is common in men’s speech. On the relationship level of communication, giving advice does two things. First, it focuses on instrumental activity—what another should do or be—and does not acknowledge feelings. Second, it expresses superiority and maintains control. It says “I know what you should do” or “I would know how to handle that.” The message may be perceived as implying the speaker is superior to the other person. Between men, advice giving seems understood as a give-and-take, but it may be interpreted as unfeeling and condescending by women whose rules for communicating differ.

A second prominent feature of men’s talk is instrumentality—the use of speech to accomplish instrumental objectives. As we have seen, men are socialized to do things, achieve goals (Bellinger & Gleason, 1982). In conversation, this is often expressed through problem-solving efforts that focus on getting information, discovering facts, and suggesting solutions. Again, between men this is usually a comfortable orientation, since both speakers have typically been socialized to value instrumentality. However, conversations between women and men are often derailed by the lack of agreement on what this informational, instrumental focus means. To many women it feels as if men
don't care about their feelings. When a man focuses on the content level of meaning after a woman has disclosed a problem, she may feel he is disregarding her emotions and concerns. He, on the other hand, may well be trying to support her in the way that he has learned to show support—suggesting ways to solve the problem.

A third feature of men's communication is conversational dominance. Despite jokes about women's talkativeness, research indicates that in most contexts, men not only hold their own but dominate the conversation. This tendency, although not present in infancy, is evident in preschoolers (Austin, Salehi, & Leffler, 1987). Compared with girls and women, boys and men talk more frequently (Eakins & Eakins, 1976; Thorne & Henley, 1975) and for longer periods of time (Aries, 1987; Eakins & Eakins, 1976; Kramarae, 1981; Thorne & Henley, 1975). Further, men engage in other verbal behaviors that sustain conversational dominance. They may reroute conversations by using what another said as a jump-off point for their own topic, or they may interrupt. While both sexes engage in interruptions, most research suggests that men do it more frequently (Beck, 1988; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1983). Not only do men seem to interrupt more than women, but they do so for different reasons. L. P. Stewart and her colleagues (1990, p. 51) suggest that men use interruptions to control conversation by challenging other speakers or wresting the talk stage from them, while women interrupt to indicate interest and to respond. This interpretation is shared by a number of scholars who note that women use interruptions to show support, encourage elaboration, and affirm others (Aleguere, 1978; Aries, 1987; Mulac et al., 1988).

Fourth, men tend to express themselves in fairly absolute, assertive ways. Compared with women, their language is typically more forceful, direct, and authoritative (Beck, 1988; Eakins & Eakins, 1978; Stewart et al., 1990; Tannen, 1990a, 1990b). Tentative speech such as hedges and disclaimers is used less frequently by men than by women. This is consistent with gender socialization in which men learn to use talk to assert themselves and to take and hold positions. However, when another person does not share that understanding of communication, speech that is absolute and directive may seem to close off conversation and leave no room for others to speak.

Fifth, compared with women, men communicate more abstractly. They frequently speak in general terms that are removed from concrete experiences and distanced from personal feelings (Schaeff, 1981; Treichler & Kramarae, 1983). The abstract style typical of men's speech reflects the public and impersonal contexts in which they often operate and the less personal emphasis in their speech communities. Within public environments, norms for speaking call for theoretical, conceptual, and general thought and communication. Yet, within more personal relationships, abstract talk sometimes creates barriers to knowing another intimately.

Finally, men's speech tends not to be highly responsive, especially not on the relationship level of communication (Beck, 1988; Wood, 1993a). Men, more than women, give what are called "minimal response cues" (Parlee, 1979), which are verbalizations such as "yeah" or "umhmm." In interaction with women, who have learned to demonstrate interest more vigorously, minimal response cues generally inhibit conversation because they are perceived as indicating lack of involvement (Fishman, 1978; Stewart et al., 1990). Another way in which men's conversation is generally less relationally responsive than women's is lack of expressed sympathy and understanding and lack of self-disclosures (Sauer & Eisler, 1990). Within the rules of men's speech communities, sympathy is a sign of condescension, and revealing personal problems is seen as making one vulnerable. Yet women's speech rules count sympathy and disclosure as demonstrations of equality and support. This creates potential for misunderstanding between women and men.
Misinterpretations Between Women and Men

In this final section, we explore what happens when men and women talk, each operating out of a distinctive speech community. In describing features typical of each gender’s talk, we already have noted differences that provide fertile ground for misunderstandings. We now consider several examples of recurrent misreadings between women and men.

Showing Support

The scene is a private conversation between Martha and George. She tells him she is worried about her friend. George gives a minimum response cue, saying only “Oh.” To Martha this suggests he isn’t interested, since women make and expect more of what D. Tannen (1986) calls “listening noises” to signal interest. Yet, as Tannen (1986, 1990b) and A. Beck (1988) note, George is probably thinking if she wants to tell him something she will, since his rules of speech emphasize using talk to assert oneself (Bellinger & Gleason, 1982). Even without much encouragement, Martha continues by describing the tension in her friend’s marriage and her own concern about how she can help. She says, “I feel so bad for Barbara, and I want to help her, but I don’t know what to do.” George then says, “It’s their problem, not yours. Just butt out and let them settle their own relationship.” At this, Martha explodes: “Who asked for your advice?” George is now completely frustrated and confused. He thought Martha wanted advice, so he gave it. She is hurt that George didn’t tune into her feelings and comfort her about her worries. Each is annoyed and unhappy.

The problem here is not so much what George and Martha say and don’t say. Rather, it’s how they interpret each other’s communication—actually, how they misinterpret it, because each relies on rules that are not familiar to the other. They fail to understand that each is operating by different rules of talk. George is respecting Martha’s independence by not pushing her to talk. When he thinks she directly requests advice, he offers it in an effort to help. Martha, on the other hand, wants comfort and a connection with George—that is her purpose in talking with him. She finds his advice unwelcome and dismissive of her feelings. He doesn’t offer sympathy, because his rules for communication define this as condescending. Yet within Martha’s speech community, not to show sympathy is to be unfeeling and unresponsive.

Troubles Talk

Tannen (1990b) identifies talk about troubles, or personal problems, as a kind of interaction in which hurt feelings may result from the contrast between most men’s and women’s rules of communication. A woman might tell her partner that she is feeling down because she did not get a job she wanted. In an effort to be supportive, he
might respond by saying, "You shouldn't feel bad. Lots of people don't get jobs they want." To her this seems to dismiss her feelings—to belittle them by saying lots of people experience her situation. Yet within masculine speech communities, this is a way of showing respect for another by not assuming that she or he needs sympathy.

Now let's turn the tables and see what happens when a man feels troubled. When he meets Nancy, Craig is unusually quiet because he feels down about not getting a job offer. Sensing that something is wrong, Nancy tries to show interest by asking, "Are you okay? What's bothering you?" Craig feels she is imposing and trying to get him to show a vulnerability he prefers to keep to himself. Nancy probes further to show she cares. As a result, he feels intruded on and withdraws further. Then Nancy feels shut out.

But perhaps Craig does decide to tell Nancy why he feels down. After hearing about his rejection letter, Nancy says, "I know how you feel. I felt so low when I didn't get that position at Datanet." She is matching experiences to show Craig that she understands his feelings and that he's not alone. Within his communication rules, however, this is demeaning his situation by focusing on her, not him. When Nancy mentions her own experience, Craig thinks she is trying to steal the center stage for herself. Within his speech community, that is one way men vie for dominance and attention. Yet Nancy has learned to share similar experiences as a way to build connections with others.

**The Point of the Story**

Another instance in which feminine and masculine communication rules often clash and cause problems is in relating experiences. Typically, men have learned to speak in a linear manner in which they move sequentially through major points in a story to get to the climax. Their talk tends to be straightforward without a great many details. The rules of feminine speech, however, call for more detailed and less linear storytelling. Whereas a man is likely to provide rather bare information about what happened, a woman is more likely to embed the information within a larger context of the people involved and other things going on. Women include details not because all of the specifics are important in themselves but because recounting them shows involvement and allows a conversational partner to be more fully part of the situation being described.

Because feminine and masculine rules about details differ, men often find women's way of telling stories wandering and unfocused. Conversely, men's style of storytelling may strike women as leaving out all of the interesting details. Many a discussion between women and men has ended either with his exasperated demand, "Can't you get to the point?" or with her frustrated question, "Why don't you tell me how you were feeling and what else was going on?" She wants more details than his rules call for; he is interested in fewer details than she has learned to supply.

**Relationship Talk**

"Can we talk about us?" is the opening of innumerable conversations that end in misunderstanding and hurt. As Tannen (1986) noted in an earlier book, *That's Not What I Meant*, men and women tend to have very different ideas about what it means to talk about relationships. In general, men are inclined to think a relationship is going fine as long as there is no need to talk about it. They are interested in discussing the relationship only if there are particular problems to be addressed. In contrast, women generally think a relationship is working well as long as they can talk about it with partners. The difference here grows out of the fact that men tend to use communication to do things and solve problems, while women generally regard the process of communicating as a primary way to create and sustain relationships with others. For many women, conversation is a
way to be with another person—to affirm and enhance closeness. Men’s different rules stipulate that communication is to achieve some goal or fix some problem. No wonder men often duck when their partners want to “discuss the relationship,” and women often feel a relationship is in trouble when their partners are unwilling to talk about it.

These are only four of many situations in which feminine and masculine rules of communication may collide and cause problems. Women learn to use talk to build and sustain connections with others. Men learn that talk is to convey information and establish status. Given these distinct starting points, it’s not surprising that women and men often find themselves locked into misunderstandings.

Interestingly, research (Sollie & Fischer, 1985) suggests that women and men who are androgynous are more flexible communicators, who are able to engage comfortably in both masculine and feminine styles of speech. The breadth of their communicative competence enhances the range of situations in which they can be effective in achieving various goals. On learning about different speech rules, many couples find they can improve their communication. Each partner has become bilingual, and so communication between them is smoother and more satisfying. When partners understand how to interpret each other’s rules, they are less likely to misread motives. In addition, they learn how to speak the other’s language, which means women and men become more gratifying conversational partners for each other, and they can enhance the quality of their relationships.

References


Questions for Reflection

1. Observe and reflect on your own speech patterns. To what extent is your speech style reflective of that which is typical for your gender?
2. Do the primary games you played in your childhood match those suggested by the authors for persons of your sex?
3. To what extent do your childhood socialization experiences explain your current speech style?
4. If your current speech style is not explained by your childhood experiences, to what do you attribute your style?