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Autor: Laversuch, Iman Makeba
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Five Popular Myths about Gender, Sex, Sexuality, and Language

von Iman Makeba Laversuch

Eine einsprachige ROSA zum Thema «Sprache» – undenkbar! Darum wird der Artikel der Amerikanerin Iman Makeba Laversuch zu den (vermeintlichen) Verständigungsproblemen zwischen den Geschlechtern hier in der Originalsprache abgedruckt. Eine deutsche Übersetzung kann bei Bedarf unter rosa.gender@gmail.com angefordert werden.

In recent years, the market has shown a sudden unexpected increase in the number of experts who claim to have discovered the psycholinguistic Holy Grail: the key to how and why men and women speak the way they do. Even more surprisingly, the theories advanced by these self-proclaimed gurus of speech have been greedily gobbled up by throngs of otherwise critical readers in various stages of filial frustration, all hoping to finally put an end to one of the oldest and most contentious conflicts of human history: the war between the sexes. How much more maddening then to discover that the answer we had all been apparently waiting for was there all along, written in the stars.

Indeed, according to this latest wave of conjugal messiahs, the apparent reason *Why Men Don't*

Listen (or iron for that matter) and *Women Can't Read Maps* is not that we all suffer from collectively compromised levels of *Emotional Intelligence* which precariously hover somewhere dangerously below the *Bell Curve*, but rather that at least two of the world's recognized genders ultimately hail from two different worlds or planets. Thus, although there are over 100 different kinds of butterflies and equally as many snails, the hundreds of millions of people on this planet can be conveniently divided into two groups: men who can parallel park and women who nurse them.

For all those of us who do not fit into one of these interplanetary models, there is also a third category located somewhere beyond the gravitational pull of Mars and Venus, in the darkened margins of the

social stratosphere where lovers Audre Lorde and Francis Louise Clayton still French kiss to the sweet smoky sounds of Bessie Smith. In short, in 2006, we all find ourselves in almost exactly the very same position we were in several generations ago, when men were men and women were...well...not.

Despite the revolutionary progress we have wrought from *Brigitte* to *Emma*, it seems that far too many of us are still languishing in relationships which do not fulfill us, with partners who do not respect us. However, as countless rows of books stacked suspiciously between the sections marked *Women*, *Mental Health and Dieting* in our local bookstores scream, we can change. Unfortunately, the perennial premise skulking behind far too many of these self-help books which promise to give you the key to a *Better Relationship* (along with the real reason why he's coming and you're not) goes something like this: men and women speak differently and as a result they often miscommunicate, which in turn causes general strife between couples.

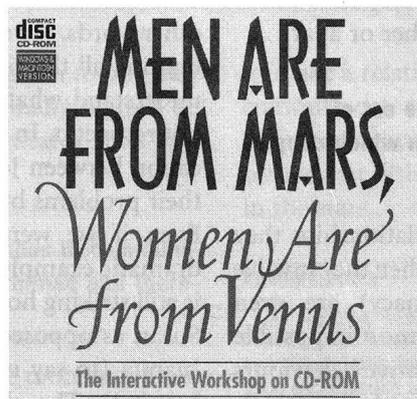
However, all is not lost! By buying into (and most importantly BUYING) the revolutionary insights

contained in the endless number of books, tapes, CDs, DVDs available today, even the most hopelessly star-crossed lovers can prevail. But is this really true? In a word, «No». Without even resorting to a complicated volley of modern empirical data or critical theory (both of which would within a nano second be able to show just how bogus this thesis is), we can simply work our way through the assumptions underlying this thesis and

identify many serious and significant contradictions between what prophets on the motivational circuit say they have newly discovered and what modern science and good old-fashioned common-sense long since have taught us about the relationship between gender, sex, sexuality, and language. So let's examine each one of the assumptions underneath the above presumption.

1. Women and men speak differently because... they are well...different

This statement is so deceptively pleasing because of its neatness, its simplicity, its circularity.¹ It is true of course that there do seem to be key differences in the ways men and women speak. These



...und alle andern sind vom Pluto?

differences may explain why listeners respond differently to a woman who says «You are such a fucking CUNT!» as opposed to a man who makes the same declaration. In the first instance, the statement may be perceived as startlingly humorous, scandalously progressive, even shamelessly seductive. Said by a man, the same utterance may be considered startlingly offensive, scandalously primitive, and even shamelessly reductive (to say nothing of misogynistic and violent). The difference in reception does not reside alone in the speaker but in the listener. What then very often makes the difference significant between what and how women and men say is not so much the body but the world they find themselves living in. Moreover, even if we were to accept that the speech of men women differs, the only way to prove it would be to expand our search to include larger and more diverse groups of speakers. After all, if there is truly a linguistic feature common to every single woman and never found among men, we should be able to find it from Southern California to Western Nigeria, in the voices of women who love men as well as in the voices of women who love men but only (or only occasionally) make love to women.² Until we do, however, we can say very little about how men and women speak, together or apart.

2. There is a universal and definitive set of patterns which describe the ways in which couples speak with one another

People are complicated and the relationships they have with one another (especially when they involve physical and/or emotional intimacy) are even more complicated. It is therefore almost impossible to identify a definitive set of normative behaviours which are relevant for or descriptive of all speakers. Just as the definition and expectation of a good and healthy relationship varies wildly from one culture to another, the same is true for gendered linguistic norms within a relationship. Consequently, what works for one couple won't necessarily work for another. Having said this, it is interesting that many of the pseudo casestudies presented in self-help guides are taken from couples whose relationship is clearly NOT working. Aside from the voyeuristic

Die ganze Wahrheit über Männer und Frauen

thrill and potentially misleading relief which may come from saying that «At least we're not THAT bad!», the use of such extreme examples is highly problematic. It is notoriously difficult to determine



Anscheinend haben gleichgeschlechtliche Paare keine Kommunikationsprobleme...

whether or not the conflicts a couple has are the cause or the effect of their linguistic impasse. In other words, the real reason why John and Mary are fighting all the time may not be that they did not understand what the other said but that they did not respect it. In which case, the lack of communication between John and Mary is not the cause of their problems but the result.

Even if we were to limit ourselves to the less dramatic examples of relationships gone haywire, it is still striking how many of them involve Alan and Susan as opposed to Alan and Rick or Susan and Juanita (to say nothing of Alan, Rick, Susan, and Juanita!). The almost complete absence of non-heterocentric scientific and popular literature not only means that we cannot say anything definitive or reliable about how men and women communicate in relationships. It also means that the needs, concerns, and experiences of a significant portion of the world's population are simply being ignored: considering the shocking number of gays, lesbians, and bis who either kill themselves or descend into paralysing depression because they fear that they will never be understood or loved, this ignorance is no less than criminal.

3. Miscommunication endangers a relationship

The assumption operating here is that arguing is detrimental to a relationship. In fact, many therapists find it far more disturbing when a couple

shows up in complete and utter silence, having long since given up on trying to understand one another as opposed to the couple which shows up yelling, screaming, crying but nonetheless still TALKING in their attempt to communicate with one another. Of course any extreme in a relationship can quickly become destructive, if left unchecked. But, generally speaking, it is both healthy and natural to disagree and to argue. Thus, the measure of healthiness in a relationship may not so much be WHETHER you argue but HOW you argue (i.e. whether or not partners understand and respect the emotional and physical boundaries). Whether or not self-help books can actually help couples (re)discover

these boundaries remains to be seen. To date there has been no empirical research which confirms that couples who read self-help guides on how to communicate better

actually do, especially when it is given to one partner as a way of saying «I have finally figured out why you are such a bad communicator! You can't help it. You're a man/woman!»

4. Sex- and Gender-based differences in communication styles are genetically determined and therefore largely unalterable

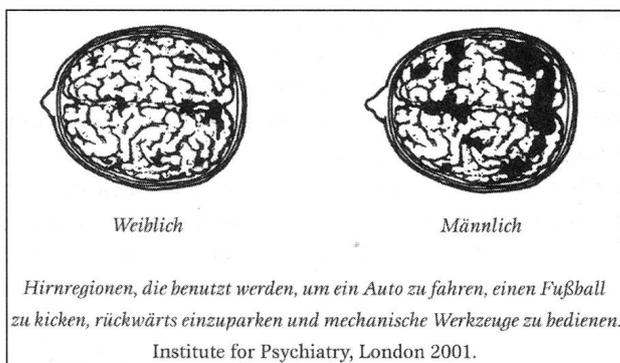
Though often presented in other more acceptable terms, this notion is one of the most pervasive and pernicious assumptions underlying many of today's neo-pop linguistics best-sellers because it has helped to give back legitimacy to one of the most dangerous myths of human culture (i.e. we are not in control of and therefore responsible for our behavior). Therefore, before women graciously accept the apparent accolade of being able to multitask (e.g. to iron, make lunch, do the laundry, and speak to their girlfriend on the phone all at the same time), they had better look very carefully at what they may be giving in return. In many ways, by allowing linguistic-perpetrators to become the victim of their own biology, we may also be giving them (and us) carte blanche to excuse and ultimately dismiss the ways in which speech can excuse, encourage, and cause harm.

5. Sex- and Gender-based differences in communication lead to miscommunication

Following this logic, if we really want to end the battle of the sexes, the easiest solution would seem to be to eradicate all cross-gendered relationships as biologically inferior. Men should only be with men and women with women. But, if sharing the same sex or gender meant never having a disagreement or a misunderstanding, it would be difficult to explain why men and women in same-sex relationships do not have an automatic, infallible understanding of their partner's needs and desires, fears and pet peeves. The fact that Condoleezza

Rice and I both have vaginas does not mean by any stretch of ANYONE'S imagination that she and I would make a great couple! Obviously, it takes more than genitalia to share a world perspective with someone else. And contrary to the happy, smiling faces which appear on back of book jackets proclaiming: «We made it! You can too!», it takes more than buying a book, a CD, or a DVD

to make a relationship work. What it takes is time, commitment, re-commitment, commonalities and differences, investment and re-investment, and of course that little something special which is written in the stars...



«Genetische Tatsachen»: Selbsthilfe-Bücher verbreiten meist unbewiesene Verallgemeinerungen.

ANMERKUNGEN

¹ Like any other unexamined belief, the slavish adherence to this humbug often leads people to reject all evidence to the contrary as irrelevant and deviant in both senses of the word. For example, upon encountering a man who is a sensitive listener and speaker «He is so feminine...He must be gay!» As sensitivity and masculinity were mutually exclusive; and certain forms of speech were unerringly predictive of sexual preference and/or orientation.

² Although there has been a recent upsurge in the research conducted on the speech of gays, lesbians, and bis, it is still relatively in its infancy and has tended to focus either on the language which heterosexuals use to label homosexuals and bisexuals or on the lexicology and phonology of gays. By comparison, the amount of linguistic research done specifically and exclusively on aspects of lesbian or bisexual women is smaller. The speech of transgender and transsexuals remains virgin territory.

AUTORIN

Die Soziolinguistin Iman Makeba Laversuch war von 2001 – 2004 als Lektorin am Englischen Seminar der Universität Zürich tätig und unterrichtet nun an der Universität Köln. Sie befindet sich in der Endphase ihrer Habilitation über bikulturelle Zweisprachigkeit. Gleichzeitig arbeitet sie an einem Buch über Kommunikationsweisen multikultureller lesbischer Paare. Falls Sie an dieser Studie teilnehmen möchten, wenden Sie sich bitte unter folgender E-Mail-Adresse an sie: mavi.yaz@web.de.