



“I Can’t Believe She Said That: Creating Dynamic Characters Through Authentic Dialogue”

By Beth Morrow

We all know that men and women speak differently, but how do you capture that difference on the page?

Intent and desire sent Alex across the room in three short strides to where Kate sat alone. Silently he slipped behind her, pressing his lips to the bare skin of her shoulder. The familiarity of her powdery perfume, combined with the warmth of her skin and soft sigh at his touch sent heated blood racing throughout his body.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered, an undeniable hunger edging his husky tone. Dipping his mouth to trail hot kisses from her collarbone to the nape of her neck, he slid his calloused finger beneath the strap of her peach chemise to stroke her bare shoulder. “But first, you absolutely must tell me where you found this lovely chemise. The handmade lace is exquisite.”

Now, if the hero happens to be a lace trader in need of bounty for his business, this passage works. But if the hero’s dialogue interrupted the flow of the passage, you’re not alone. From vocabulary to mannerisms to meaning, men and women talk differently. As a reader, dialogue miscues can jolt you right out of a story. If you’ve read or written something that doesn’t read quite right, come along and discover how to make sure your own characters don’t meet the same fate.

Why Does Authentic Dialogue Matter?

Potentially more powerful than any passage of prose, well-written, authentic dialogue can accomplish a variety of story-related tasks that text cannot. If composed with detail down to the final word, dialogue can heighten tension, deepen character, reveal inner conflict and set the emotional tone of your scenes. In other words, dialogue breathes life into your story. “Dialogue is 90 percent of character,” states Harlequin Superromance author Kay Stockham (*Man with a Past*). “Only actions speak louder than words, but when writing a fast-paced book, nothing reads faster than dialogue. A character’s dialogue makes them stand out.”

So when our hero above questions the heroine in words we rarely, if ever, hear from men in real life, the balance of reality vs. fantasy tips dangerously toward fictional fantasy being ruined by the intrusion of reality. And once this wonderful world of fictional fantasy is compromised, the reader may never come back.

Choose Your Words Wisely

While well-written dialogue contributes on a myriad levels to making a good story great, the potential for turning off your reader can literally come down to the matter of one word. According to Kensington Dafina author Ann Christopher (*Risk*), once a contemporary character uses a word that would never come out of her mouth—or the mouth of anyone she knows—it takes Christopher right out of the story. “Things like, ‘I believe I’ll launder those clothes.’ Huh? Who, in this day and age, says launder? It reads well, but there’s a difference between what looks good on paper and what sounds like something a human would say.” Though fiction has its base in fantasy, dialogue used by our heroes and heroines has to mirror patterns of speech based in reality. Keep in mind, too, that no speech patterns, words, or phrases are “absolutely male” or “absolutely female” though research has proven some measurable distinctions. While most men wouldn’t pause to ask the significance of a scrap of lace, there may be that one character that needs to know for a reason. Know your characters and story well enough to know when certain speech is appropriate, even necessary.

What’d He Say?

Though we normally don’t stop to consider the exact words men and women use, male and female vocabularies differ in usage and intent.

In our example, the first alarm may have sounded at “lovely”—and for good reason. Think back to the last time you heard a man in your life use the word “lovely” as anything other than sarcasm. Difficult, isn’t it? That’s because it doesn’t happen often.

Historical author Allison Knight (*Simon’s Brides*) comments that having an aggressive, powerful hero call the heroine “my dear” or “my darling” is a big turnoff. “What tough, alpha male would call the love of his life ‘my darling?’ Honey, love, maybe even sweetheart—but ‘my darling?’”

Ever been frustrated by telling a man about your day and he offers solutions rather than being the sympathetic ear you’d hoped for? That’s his way of showing he’s listening. For men, conversation serves three main purposes: to exchange information with others, to present facts, and to solve problems. Male speech doesn’t have room for adjectives or words with overly-emotional connotations. Men are wired to find solutions, whereas women are wired to build emotional connections and community through conversation. So, in the male quest to meet the challenge to help the world become a better, safer place, there isn’t a lot of time to waste on embellishing a conversation or talking about feelings.

On the subject of vocabulary, men and expletives mix well. On average, men use 50 percent more strong expletives than women when in the company of other men, but will often soften their bad words or eliminate them completely when in mixed company. “We picture someone in our minds based on what they say and how they say it,” says Knight. “If they swear a lot, you picture one kind of individual. Someone using long sentences and big words, you picture another. Word choice is extremely important.”

As for jargon, that is, vocabulary specific to a particular line of work, hobby, or profession, men are more likely to use jargon terms than women. In women’s circles, overuse of jargon with other women is a sign of a woman’s thinking herself intellectually superior, a behavior most women interpret as snobbish and elitist. For a woman to flaunt her status with certain vocabulary in the company of other women is to make herself appear as if she isn’t interested in connecting, the main goal of female conversation. To men, jargon is a sign of mental superiority and intellectual prowess. Using jargon well, however, with either male or female characters, can go a long way in adding flavor to your story, says Brava Kensington author Dianne Castell (*I’ll Be Seeing U*). “If you ever listen to *Top Gun* during the opening flight scene where Maverick and Goose are chasing the Soviet plane, the flight talk so adds to the excitement even though we have no idea what it all means. The interaction between the characters is what brings them to life and makes the reader feel as if she were truly there.”

Why’d She Say It Like That?

While using specific words to add flavor to the theme and tone of our stories, it’s important to remember that an average of 60 percent of our conversations have nothing to do with the words we say but the way in which we say them, specifically body language and phrasing.

Most difficult in this realm of non-verbal communication, at least for writers, is body language. Translating the stance of the physical to a written form with the same impact is tricky and takes time to

master. “Sometimes in romantic relationships, the hero or heroine isn’t ready to reveal his/her true feelings, so there’s a disconnection between what he’s thinking and what he’s saying and doing,” points out Christopher. “For example, the heroine is strongly attracted to the hero and thinking how much she’d like to sleep with him, but she also thinks he’s a jerk. How does body language give her away? Are her eyes too bright? Is she breathing too fast?”

Extensive research has shown that eye contact differs dramatically between men and women in conversation. Women, seeking to connect with others on an emotional, intimate (but not necessarily sexually intimate) level frequently anchor their gaze directly on the face and eyes of the person they’re conversing with and occasionally look away. The focus of the conversation, usually revolving around relationships, families, and personal issues, is on the person with whom they’re speaking. This creates a feeling of rapport between women. In men’s conversations, which generally center on sports, business, and anything but women when speaking with other men, looking directly into the eyes of the other man is often interpreted as issuing a challenge. Men do discuss intimate relationships, but usually only in the company of other men with whom they have an established level of comfort, often close family members like fathers and brothers or college roommates they’ve known for years. Using these distinctions in eye contact between characters, then, can create tension and conflict or deepen connection.

Conversation through questioning is one area where debate exists in how women and men differ in asking for things, particularly tag questions. You know, those little questions that really aren’t questions at all but words tagged on a statement to make a point indirectly: “You saw him, didn’t you?” or “That lace is just beautiful, isn’t it?”

While the research is split on which gender uses tag questions more often, most important for the writer is the purpose of the question: how does it add to your story? If it doesn’t, it’s just empty talk.

Hedge statements, statements that begin with a passive introduction, i.e., “I think that...” “Maybe we should go...,” or “It seems like...,” are almost exclusively female. Rarely do men qualify a statement prior to making it because they like to say what’s on their mind and get it out. Hedge statements should be used sparingly in your fiction. Like tag questions, they can slow your story with unnecessary words. But as a tool in your creative process, hedge statements can also cast your heroine as reluctant, hesitant, and unsure of herself—which you can use to your advantage when she’s in risky, intense situations.

What Do You Mean By That?

Given that we’ve all been talking for as long as we can remember, it’s natural to make the assumption that everyone talks, well, because we can. While that’s valid, there’s more behind the reasons males and females talk. Much more. Beyond the words and vocabulary are different ways of interaction and different reasons for conversation.

The general objective of female conversation is one of building consensus and connection, both integral components in the creation of a relationship. Women value their interdependence as a whole and frequently downplay their individuality and personal accomplishments in the company of other females so as not to come across as being more important than others. Women focus on the empathy of the message, the “I know what you mean” to build friendships and make other women feel valued.

Independence and information are characteristics of male conversation. As men are programmed to find answers, they look for the hard and fast solution. It isn’t that men don’t care when you come home and want to discuss a problem. In fact, most men in the research said they consider their wives, spouses, or girlfriends their best friends, whereas most women chose another woman. What you see as venting, they see as asking for help. And they’re more than willing to try, even if it isn’t a true problem.

Since the intent of female conversation, then, is diametrically opposed to the purpose of male conversation, imagine the possibilities for incorporating this innate biological conflict into your fictional world. “I love hearing what a character has to say, what they avoid or find difficult to say, or what they regret saying,” explains Lexi Davis (*The After Wife*). “There are times when their speech surprises me and reveals something about themselves that they’ve been hiding. That’s a good thing.” For more fun, pretend the roles are reversed, based on your character’s history: the direct-speaking, problem-solving heroine and the conversational hero. Even the hero’s and heroine’s choice of mentors, if they’re the same or the opposite sex, can have different relationship dynamics and create numerous conversation possibilities.

What's It Mean To Me?

In case you missed it the first time, much of the popularity of fiction (in general) and romance fiction (specifically) rests in the element of fantasy. Readers love romance fiction because of its happy-ending promise despite seemingly insurmountable odds. Part of that fantasy is having hero/heroine conversations mirror the way we idealize our own conversations with our husbands and significant others. Forsaking the impact of the fantasy we are entrusted to create in our fiction for the sake of absolute reality robs our work of an elemental connection to the reader. "Dialogue in the real world is different from dialogue in novels. It has to be, or it wouldn't keep our interest. Finding the balance between realism and interest is the challenge," shares Patricia Sargeant, Kensington Dafina author of *You Belong to Me*.

Dialogue economically and dynamically brings the internal alive, makes the passive active and connects the abstract essence of our characters to something solid and tangible. Just as endless pages of narrative can turn off readers, lengthy conversations tune out the reader. "When I'm polishing my work," adds Toni Blake (*Swept Away*), "I find places where the hero has gone on and on about something then generally cut or spread it out to make it more consistent with his personality."

Combining the character's history with the nuances and subtleties of male and female speech patterns can lead to complex, lively characters. "Every person I know," states Lori Foster, multipublished author of *Murphy's Law*, "has a unique way of speaking, of putting words together. They each have a different focus toward the things they see, hear or experience. Keep in mind the background of the characters and his/her situation in life, so their reactions and responses enhance their personality."

Does your heroine occasionally slip into male-type speech when in the heat of battle or when dealing with a stubborn hero? Don't let this occur randomly—there needs to be a compelling reason in her history leading her toward more direct, less consensus-focused speech. Was she the only girl in an all-boy family? The daughter of a single father? More comfortable at school hanging out with the guys? Drawn to a traditionally male line of work? Know why her past leads her to behave the way she does in the present. If you find your hero shares details of his personal life more willingly than other heroes, take the time to discover his motivations. Maybe his best friend growing up was a girl who knew all his secrets. Or older women in his life (mom, aunt, sister, secretary) encouraged him to be honest about his thoughts. Did he witness his father/uncle/older brother struggle with words in the company of women they loved? Use the events that have shaped his life to round out his character. Blake shares a prime example of this. "My book, *Swept Away*, contains scenes from the hero's youth, and you can see how his speech became a bit more sophisticated in his adulthood as compared to when he was young and not very educated. It only made sense to vary his speech this way since adulthood had changed him into a very different guy than when he was twenty." Also, over the course of your story, your hero should become more emotionally and conversationally open with your heroine as his comfort level and their mutual intimacy increase. By intensifying the depth of their relationship through speech, the walls of traditional communication will be broken down bit by bit and reestablished in terms of their own, unique personal relationship, the signature of every great romance.

Remember, too, that character speech from other regions of the U.S., different time periods, and different countries will vary in terms of the vocabulary usage and sentence structure and often have different connotations where body language is concerned. "In historicals, [for example], word choice and manner of speaking are important as they help set the period," according to two-time Golden Heart finalist Donna MacMeans. "A little bit of dialect or accent can help in defining the location or the period."

Finally, to write more authentic dialogue, do some personal research. Observe male-male, female-female, and mixed company conversations. Listen for words and phrases your characters would both use and never use. "The male," says Jacki Bentley (*Angel and the Flying Warhorses*), "must sound different from the female. I try to make each of my heroes sound and feel different. It's hard to do, but each character must have something that's theirs alone."

Pay attention to your own speech patterns and how they change when speaking to males or females. Many writers who are credited to have witty, engaging, exciting dialogue in their stories are not even explicitly aware of how they create conversation on the page. It's something that comes naturally through years of listening.

Now that you know how to use authentic dialogue to build stories readers will love, use your knowledge to create characters they'll never forget, summed up well in a thought by Toni Blake: "Dialogue is all important. In life, we are what we say. The same is true in writing, too. The words [the

characters] speak have to reflect who they are, where they've been, where they're going and who they want to be.”

10 Tips to Keep in Mind When Crafting Authentic Dialogue

1. More than words (vocabulary, body language, structure, and phrasing) are conveyed through dialogue.
2. Males prefer direct speech focusing on logic, facts, and information.
3. Females prefer indirect speech focusing on feelings, emotion, and connection.
4. Males seek to build status through speech.
5. Females seek to build community and consensus through speech.
6. Men speak concretely with little use of adjectives and emotionally-charged phrases.
7. Females use hedges and downplay their accomplishments.
8. Males ask questions for answers.
9. Females ask questions for conversation.
10. Nothing in dialogue is absolute—know your characters.

Sources:

Tannen, Deborah (1990). *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women In Conversation*. New York: Ballentine Books.

Tannen, Deborah (1986). *That's Not What I Meant: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. New York: Ballentine Books



When Beth Morrow isn't eavesdropping (for research, of course), she can be found writing contemporary romances, working toward her M. Ed or scheduling meeting speakers for her local RWA, the Central Ohio Fiction Writers. Visit her on the Web at: www.bethmorrow.com.

(This article was originally printed in the October 2006 *Romance Writers Report*.)