

# Gender-Linked Miscommunication in “Hills Like White Elephants”

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Like a Gregorian chant in which simple musical phrases elucidate intricate poetic lyrics, so does “Hills Like White Elephants”’s straightforward simplicity of plot frame its subtle and dramatic dialogue. The dialogue contains the essence of the story’s power; for to read Jig’s and the American’s conversation is to recognize the powerless frustration of parallel interchanges—in different words, in different places, and on different topics, but all somehow the same. It is to recognize both the circular noncommunication of strong gender-linked language differences and the consequent existential limitations and creative power of language.

The notion that men and women have difficulty communicating is not new. What is new is research, much of it from the 1970’s, which indicates that men and women miscommunicate because they speak different languages (Key 124). If Hemingway’s male and female characters are each clearly gender-marked—speaking as traditional American men and women would be expected to speak—then there are four distinct characters in the dyad of Jig and the American: Jig and the American as evaluated through the standard of traditional female gender-linked language patterns, Jig and the American as evaluated through the standard of traditional male gender-linked language patterns.

What is gender-marked language? Robin Lakoff has drawn a sketch of the typical male and female speaker. The male speaker’s

contribution is precise and to the point—utterly straightforward—and tells us as little as possible about the speaker’s state of mind and his attitude toward the addressee. We expect . . . a low pitch, flat intonation, declarative sentence structure, no hedging or imprecision, and lexical items chose for their pure cognitive content, not their emotional coloration. (“Stylistic” 66)

The female speaker’s language is

profoundly imprecise. There is a sense that the audience does not really know what she is talking about (nor does she), but that she is very concerned with whom she is talking to, concerned with whether he is interested in her and whether his needs are being met. . . . She uses interjections and hedges freely and her dialog is sprinkled with ‘I guess’ and ‘kinda.’ . . . (“Stylistic” 67)

When broken down into a more generalized paradigm, research indicates that there are three major areas of gender-linked differences in language: how, about what, and why men and women talk. This may seem all-encompassing, but as Tannen notes:

male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication. Culture, after all, is simply a network of habits and patterns based on past experience—and women and men have very different past experiences. (22)

Conversational patterns differ and miscommunication results because of

intolerance for the opposite gender-marked language. The tendency is for speakers to tenaciously hold on to the irrefutable logic of their own language and refuse to entertain the possibility that alternative translations exist.

trouble develops when there is really no difference of opinion, when everyone is sincerely trying to get along . . . this is the type of miscommunication that drives people crazy. It is usually caused by differences in conversational styles. (Tannen 21)

Lakoff has pointed out that many of the descriptive differences between male and female language become evaluative judgements since men are the dominant cultural group and women are "Other" (Miller 4-12), everything that man is not: emotional rather than logical, yin rather than yang, passive rather than active, body rather than intellect. The effect of this otherness is that many feminine characteristics—language included—are devalued in comparison to their male counterparts. Because women's language in general, and Jig's in particular, focuses on emotions rather than facts and objects, it is judged more ambiguous, less direct and more trivial than masculine speech. If Jig is flighty, trivial, and deferential, then it must be remembered that all of those terms are judgements which depend on a foreign standard, maleness.

The qualification should be made that these gender-linked patterns are polarities, paradigms which are becoming less and less accurate as women attain positions of power and people become more sensitive to language patterns. Still, if such gender-marked traits in the dialogue are isolated and evaluated, first

under the standards of the traditional male language patterns, then under the traditional female, four very different characters will emerge. Specific details from the story will make my hypothesis clearer.

The first conflict between Jig and the American is over the hills which she lightly compares to white elephants. Several characteristics of gender-marked speech are obvious from this interchange. The first is the content of language appropriate for each sex; the second is the implicit conversational objective of each.

The man insists on the "facts" and "proof" while Jig talks of fantasies, emotions, and impressions. Adelaide Haas writes:

[Men] frequently refer to time, space, quantity, destructive action, perceptual attributes, physical movement and objects. [Women] use more words implying feeling, evaluation, interpretation and psychological state. (616)

Feminine language tends to be relationship-oriented while masculine is goal-oriented.

Jig's conversational objective is to establish intimacy through shared emotions and joke-telling. Tannen notes that intimacy for women is shared words, intimacy for men shared actions (22). In this context, Jig's initial remark becomes an invitation to join in the intimacy of shared banter. The American's reply, "I've never seen one," effectively ends that conversational tactic.

Humor is often described as a means of decreasing social distance. Cohesion is also a result in situations in which a witty remark is ostensibly directed against a target, but actually is

intended to reaffirm the collectivity and the values held in common. (Neitz 215) Therefore, refusal to laugh at someone's joke is a strong form of distancing and power (Neitz 222).

The American gives several very important gender-linked conversational clues. Shutting down Jig's attempt at intimacy with terse phrases and insistence on facts reveals the American's attempts to control the conversation and, by extension, the relationship. Since the topic itself is too innocuous for such negativity, the American must be rejecting Jig for some reason other than her quip about the hills like white elephants. At the end of round one, Jig looks at the beaded curtain and changes the subject. Her response to his rejection is, to use Lakoff's phrase, "classic female deference" ("Stylistic" 67).

All of the conclusions above evaluate the American through traditional female gender-linked language, however. If evaluated within a traditional male standard, speeches about hills like white elephants become irrelevant fluff and Jig's lightness and humor inappropriate in the context of a train ride to the Barcelona abortion clinic. The American, feeling victimized by Jig's pregnancy and mocked by her levity, insists on facts which protect him against her and reassert his control of his unstable world.

The differences in these translations of the American and Jig are important. Jig's superficiality and manipulativeness, for example, are judgemental labels linked to her language and contingent on an evaluation of her according to the foreign standard of a traditional male language. The American's sincerity in

his love of Jig or his emotional manipulation of her depends on whether his rejection of Jig's attempts at intimacy is without justification or because of gender-linked presumptions. If the latter, then he makes a language, not a character, judgement which focuses and modifies his otherwise disproportionate cruelty.

Jig attempts reconciliation with her next question about the advertisement on the beaded curtain. Because the American can speak and read Spanish and Jig cannot, translation of her world is one of many things for which she is dependent upon him—permission to try new drinks, an audience to laugh at her jokes, entertainment, support, love are others. Such dependence can have several possible effects. One is that the man is flattered; ever since she could pick up *Seventeen*, a woman has been told to interest and soothe the ego of a man by asking lots of questions and allowing him to parade his knowledge. Jig's pattern of dependency on the the American suggests that this tactic has proven successful before in their relationship. But this time, when Jig asks about the taste of Anis del Toro, the American answers politely but distantly, avoids even the most trivial personal disclosure—whether Anis del Toro tastes good with water—and follows Lakoff's paradigm of masculine language, to tell "as little as possible about the speaker's state of mind."

Another possible effect of dependence is that the man will sense entrapment and withdraw. At this awkward point in their relationship, Jig's dependency is probably not one of her most endearing qualities. Her questions remind him of

his responsibility for her—a point he would rather forget.

Within the evaluative standard of traditional female speech patterns, the American's lack of disclosure is emotional withholding; he is not playing according to the rules. Within the evaluative standards of traditional male speech patterns, it is not the American's reaction, but Jig's action, which is at fault. Jig's dependence is smothering; because she is unable to make even the smallest decision on her own, the American's terseness becomes a kindness, giving her vital information to enable her to make her own decisions.

The conflict becomes more explicit in the next exchange, in which Jig voices her disappointment with the licorice taste of Anis del Toro and compares it to absinthe. Her reply, "like absinthe," must be an allusion to some disappointment in their shared past, which, since absinthe is an aphrodisiac, Johnston suggests is sexual. "Now he wished to be rid of the unwanted by-product of that passion. He is not amused by such ironic references" (237). Whatever the allusion, her remark hits a nerve and she presses her advantage:

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time."

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains look like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

"That was bright."

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

"I guess so."

Jig's series of questions are strongly gender-marked. She uses a proportionately large number of tag-end questions:

"wasn't it?," "isn't it?" (Dietrich). She also uses circular and vaguely generalized evaluations of their activities rather than direct statements—"that's all we do"—the goal of her conversation being consensus.

Tag-end questions are words tacked on to the end of a statement which turn it into a question. Women's language uses more tag-end question than does men's. The advantages of tag-end questions are that a speaker can invite contributions, avoid commitment, and effect consensus. The disadvantage is that the speaker seems to lack self-confidence and authority (Dietrich). Robin Lakoff writes

but the tag appears anyway as an apology for making an assertion at all . . . women do it more [than men] . . . hedges, like question intonation, give the impression that the speaker lacks authority or doesn't know what he's talking about. (Language 54)

Her use of vague generalizations and circular patterns is the opposite of the traditional male pattern of direct and objective statements. According to Lakoff, "a woman's discourse is necessarily indirect, repetitious, meandering, unclear, exaggerated . . . while of course a man's speech is clear, direct, precise and to the point" (Language 23), because, as Scott states, these qualities "are effective ones for affiliative interactions in which warmth, co-operation, and self-expression are valued" (206). His achieves goals; hers facilitates consensus and builds relationships.

Evaluating Jig from the standard of women's language, it is clear that she is trying to do just those things: to lead the American into an admission that he is

committed to her and desires a fuller life than they now lead. Evaluating Jig from the standard of male language, she is indirect and coercive and therefore superficial and manipulative.

The American's perfunctory replies are evasive. Since "to many women the relationship is working as long as they can talk things out," the traditional female standard would evaluate the American's weak replies as a warning sign of his insincerity (Tannen 23). While the traditional male standard might see the evasion as discomfort with emotional disclosure, since "Men, on the other hand, expect to do things together and don't feel anything is missing if they don't have heart-to-heart talks all the time" (Tannen 23).

There is no conversational intimacy in the American's echoes of her statements. Instead of effecting consensus, Jig's questions increase the distance between them.

If shared activities equal intimacy for a man, then Jig's reduction of their lifestyle to "trying new drinks" is a rejection of the American. That he resists retaliation is, therefore, at worst a gesture of apathy, but at best a gesture of affection. His reticence, instead of the withholding evaluated from the standard of feminine language, might be the kindest way of being gentle with Jig without compromising his own integrity.

His transition into the next conversational topic—that of the temperature of the beer—seems to support this softer view of the American. The American initiates small talk in which both he and Jig describe the beer, each remaining consistent in his or her use of gender-linked language. The American uses

what Dietrich calls "neutral adjectives"—"nice and cool"; Jig uses an "empty adjective"—"lovely." Empty adjectives, characteristic of feminine speech, are words like "pretty," "adorable," "precious." Dietrich suggests women use these words to add impact linguistically they do not possess socially. Lakoff feels that their use dulls strong feeling and commitment (Language 11).

Their agreement on the beer is a momentary lull, a lead-in to direct conflict: the abortion.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's really not an operation at all.

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

With goal-oriented, objective, and precise language, the American distances the abortion by reducing it to an operation which lets the air in. If shared activity equals intimacy, then his offer to stay with Jig during the abortion is a gesture of love.

Unfortunately this does not translate well into feminine language. Since the American's facts do not fully describe Jig's experience, the abortion being "not anything," for example, she projects that neither could they fully describe his. Whether the distance between his language and his experience is due to self-deception, dishonesty or cowardice hardly seems important. Both his reduction of the abortion to an operation

and his offer to stay with Jig ignore the issue at the core of the conflict: emotional commitment and self-actualizing growth.

Ignoring the issue of the simplicity of the operation, Jig follows his appeal with a series of questions which keep bringing him back to the core issues: their relationship and their attitudes toward life. She asks him directly for the emotional commitment for which she previously only hinted. Jig's direct attack is uncharacteristic of feminine speech, and therefore very threatening (Lakoff, *Language* 41).

As the argument continues, Jig asks him whether he "wants" her to have the abortion; he translates his reply into what he "thinks," thereby denying his emotions. Directly contradicting his desire for the abortion, he twice repeats that he does not want Jig to do anything she doesn't want to do. Making several obviously impossible promises—to always be happy, to always love her, to never worry—he demonstrates flagrant bad faith. From the standard of male language these contradictions are the inevitable results of her unreasonable questions: abstract emotional responses to abstract emotional questions. From the standard of female language, they are inauthentic answers and betray trust. The differences stem from the gender-like premises that language does/does not deal with emotion and is/is not the basis of intimacy.

Jig's series of questions exposes both the American's and Jig's conversational double-binds. The double-bind, as described by Bateson, is a conversation with two objectives. To be true to one conversational objective, a speaker

must be untrue to another (208).

Jig's direct insistence on the American's emotional commitment forces him into a double-bind. The American has two conversational objectives. The first, as Tanner phrases it, is to "maintain camaraderie, avoid imposing and give (or at least appear to give) the other person some choice in the matter" (22). For this reason he repeats six times within the forty-minute conversation: "I don't want you to [do anything you don't want to to]." The American's other objective is the abortion. Unfortunately it is impossible to maintain easy camaraderie while insisting on the abortion. Instead of choosing one or the other, he chooses both and ignores the contradiction. While a traditional masculine standard of language might recognize the sincerity of the American's concern for Jig, the traditional feminine standard translates his contradiction as hypocrisy.

Jig is also caught in a double-bind. She wants both the American and the baby. Her series of questions establishes that she can accomplish at least one of her objectives, so she releases the other with her self-sacrificing statement "I don't care about me." While Jig may be totally sincere, not caring about herself and having only the American's interests at heart, such total devotion is highly unlikely; it is more likely that she is well-taught in the skills of social deference. But in this situation, where the American's interests equal lack of growth, eternal adolescence, and sterility, her deference is self-destructive.

Of course the unnaturalness of Jig's self-sacrifice and the artifice of her insincerity leave her vulnerable to the stere-

otype of "women as fickle, distrustworthy, and illogical" (Lakoff, "Stylistic" 71). Judged by traditional male language patterns, Jig is capricious and manipulative. Judged by traditional female language patterns, particularly within the context of the double-bind, the progression of Jig's conversation is logical and inevitable.

The American's reaction to Jig's acquiescence is immediate emotional withdrawal and disavowal of responsibility for her decision or for her problem. His distance contradicts all of the protestations of love he made minutes before. It also contains a thinly-veiled threat of permanent withdrawal. His knee-jerk response shows that his desire for non-involvement and non-responsibility is much stronger than his desire to maintain a relationship with Jig. Of course, objectively, the abortion is Jig's problem: it is her body and the American has no right to interfere. However the objective facts do not take into account the emotional dimension of their shared reality: the body is hers; the relationship and baby is theirs.

Even though Jig agrees to the abortion, it is obvious that she is not emotionally reconciled to it. She moves away from the table and him, and, while staring at the fertile valley, continues the argument. Unwilling to give up her dream, she finds it impossible to believe he has deliberately chosen stagnation, sterility, and death. The American goes into shell-shock in this segment of the conflict. While she reveals her most intimate desires, he seems to be scarcely listening.

"And we could have all this," she said. [gesturing to the landscape] "And we

could have everything and every day we make it more impossible." In traditional feminine language patterns, the goal of social facilitation leads to emphasis on politeness which, in turn, tends toward metaphors and indirect sentence patterns. Consistent with her gender-linked language, Jig speaks of the baby metaphorically, in terms of the land. This, Jig's most powerful argument, links the American's fertility to the obviously symbolic landscape. As Mary Dell Fletcher writes:

The life-giving landscape ("everything") is now associated in Jig's mind with . . . a fruitful life where natural relations culminate in new life and spiritual fulfillment, not barrenness and sterility, as represented by the dry hills. (17)

The possibility of change and self-actualization, the fertility of the land, and the continuation of life affirmed through Jig's pregnancy are evidence that sterility and stagnation are the American's choice, not his fate. As she stands next to the tracks, the crossroad of their choice, Jig turns her back on the sterile, burnt hills and the American and looks out onto the fertile fields. He calls her back into the shadows with him where there is both the anesthesia and sterility of his choice: "Come on back in the shade," he said. "You mustn't feel that way."

The American distances himself further by paying so little attention to Jig's words that he must ask her to repeat herself. Assuming the truth of Tanner's argument that for a woman intimacy is shared emotion and conversation, the American's "what did you say?" sets him apart from and above her (22). Because

she bases her argument on a series of factors which he does not recognize as being important or true, the more she reveals her deepest desires, the more he denies her reality and retreats from her. Feminist theorists argue that since women derive their language from a standard which is men's, women's language is inadequate to express her experiential world. Jig's stuttering and vague description of the world she sees slipping away from her seems to illustrate this inadequacy; her slippery language describing "forces" must frustrate his literal mind-set which does not deal in such intangibles and insists on facts. The more she tries to establish intimacy, the less the concord between them. As Tannen observes, the more problems she exposes, the more incompetent and neurotic she knows she must appear in his eyes: the more they both see her as problem-ridden (22). They end this section of the conflict with this exchange:

"Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along."

"Of course it does. But I don't want anyone but you. I don't want anyone else. And I know it's perfectly simple."

Note how the American responds to the plural pronoun "we," with the singular pronouns "I" and "you." Tannen notes that the use of the singular pronoun is the standard in male speech, the use of the plural pronoun in female. Women often feel hurt when their partners use "I" or "me" in a situation in which they would use "we" or "us." (23) In traditional female speech patterns, plural pronoun use indicates that the speaker feels he/she is half of a couple, singular

pronouns an independent person. Jig, who is feeling vulnerable and looking for reassurance, would recognize the American's singular pronoun as a direct signal that no relationship existed. The American, for whom the singular pronoun is traditionally standard, would not find this switch meaningful. As Dietrich has noted, because women are relationship-oriented, they have higher social I.Q.'s than men and are more sensitive to subtleties of words. This sensitivity can backfire, as this example of miscommunication pointedly illustrates.

In the next stage of the conflict there is simply more of the same. The repetition of key words and phrases and the circularity of issues has a tired predictability. As frustration from their miscommunication becomes more intense, each exhibits "more and more extreme forms of the behaviors which trigger in the other increasing manifestations of an incongruent behavior in an ever-worsening spiral." George Bateson calls this "conversational disorder" "complementary schismogenesis" (Stone 88).

The final conflict in the story leaves the issue of the abortion unresolved; the American states his intention of moving their bags to the other side of the track and Jig smiles. Politeness is a distinctive characteristic of women's speech, a facet of their role of making others feel at ease by decreasing distance and showing a lack of hostility. Unfortunately, Jig smiles at the American at a point when common sense indicates that she should have the most hostility toward him, leaving her again vulnerable to the charge of inauthenticity and manipulation.

In Jig's defense, it should be noted



that she has used a variety of language skills in her confrontation with the American: she has been metaphorical, amusing, self-sacrificing, sarcastic, direct—and none has worked. No matter which tack she chooses, the American comes back at her with the same two sentences: “I think you should do it” and “I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do.” According to Dietrich, even though traditional female language is generally more skillful and creative than traditional male language, because his is more authoritative, and powerful, the male’s best effects submission. Since our society values authority and power, the inevitable result of the American’s repetition is Jig’s silent smile.

The final exchange between Jig and the American shows how far they are from understanding one another. When the American drinks a solitary anise at the bar he exposes the strain that this argument has had on his facade of reason and detachment. Johnston evaluates this gesture as the prelude to many other activities the American will do without Jig, since he is tired of her emotions and dependence (237).

The American’s final question is the most powerful gender-linked language in the story. “Do you feel better?” assumes that Jig’s pregnancy, her emotions, her desire to grow and change all are aberrations from which she must recover. As Lakoff writes, “women do not make the assumption that their ways are healthy and good ones, or the only ones . . . women do not, on the basis of their misunderstanding, construct stereotypes of men as irrational, untrustworthy or silly” (“Stylistics” 71). As

the more powerful, the American is able to define what is healthy, even when that definition condemns him, Jig, and the land to stagnation and sterility.

In spite of the sparse details of plot, the subtle and dramatic dialogue in “Hills Like White Elephants” reveals a clear, sensitive portrait of two strong personalities caught in a pattern of miscommunication due to gender-linked language patterns. Jig’s language covers a wide range of moods; but whether she is light, sarcastic, emotional, or deferential, her language is traditionally feminine. The American uses few words, speaks in direct sentences, effectively translates the world and achieves his goals, and is therefore traditionally masculine.

In short, Hemingway’s accurate ear for speech patterns duplicates the gender-linked miscommunications which exist between man and women in the real world. As a result of these differences, there are two Jigs: the nurturing, creative, and affectionate Jig of female language, and the manipulative, shallow and hysterical Jig of male language. There are also two Americans: in the female language he is a cold, hypocritical and powerful oppressor; in the male language he is a stoic, sensitive and intelligent victim.

Recognizing the existence of four characters in the dyad of Jig and the American in “Hills Like White Elephants” shifts emphasis from affixing blame for conflicts of noncommunication to understanding the causes—a foregrounding of the function of language in the Modernist world. For example, nowhere is gender-linked language’s inadequacy to express the

range of experience more poignantly revealed than in the American's solitary drink of anise; through the chinks in his language of power and stoicism, the American's underlying emotion and sensitivity are betrayed. It is not that the American perversely or stupidly chooses sterility and death, it is that he cannot imagine any escape. Jig's pregnancy, Family, Fatherhood, Love—all traditional solutions to his existential angst—are inadequate. What he does not recognize is that Jig does not represent tradition; she is "all this." Does this make him a victim of reality or a victim of his own definition of reality? The logical result of his definition of the world is his own victimization.

Even though the American's language is the language of power, it is also the language of limitation. The American is proof of Miller and Swift's thesis that masculine language's "inflexible demands . . . allow for neither variation nor for human frailty" (Lakoff, "Stylistics" 68). In contrast, one of the strengths of women's language, Irigaray argues, is that it is outside of traditional dualism and may creatively discover alternatives. Language does more than describe an objective reality; the relationship between the signifier and the signified is highly subjective—language does not describe as much as create reality.

Recognizing the subjective and creative potential of traditional gender-linked patterns at the comfortable distance afforded by "Hills Like White Elephants" verifies language's profound imaginative power to define and shape what has always been defined as objective reality, but what is, in fact, closer to the protean fluidity of Jig's "all this." It

is only through an understanding of such linguistic functions that there is a possibility of harmonizing its frustrating circularity and actualizing its creative potential of breaking through the confining limitations of a language in which "all [is] so simple" is so sterile and so hopeless.

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