

The Myth of Mars and Venus

Deborah Cameron (Oxford University Press, 2007)

On the cover of this book is a picture of a man and woman sitting at a table. From the head of each there is a thought bubble: in his, a picture of a baby, in hers, a picture of a car. The subtitle of this book: 'do men and women really speak different languages?'

Even if you have not read John Gray's book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, you probably know the basic idea: men and women come from different 'places', and this accounts for their different language and behaviour. Understand those differences and you'll have better relationships. This simple idea has sold well. Apparently *Men are from Mars..* was the second best-selling book in the 1990s, coming second only to the Bible.

But there is one important question: Is this 'Mars and Venus' idea true? Or could it all be a myth – and as Cameron argues, a dangerous myth at that – as it has affected, for example, the way rape and sexual assault cases are conducted?

Cameron, a professor of language and communication at the University of Oxford, sets out to examine self-help and popular science books that are based on the assertion that there are fundamental differences in the way that men and women use language to communicate. She reminds us that many of the assumptions which have been made about differences are in fact culturally determined. Westerners have been led to believe that women are more co-operative and attentive to others' feelings than men – while in New Guinea and Madagascar, people are equally convinced that the reverse is true.

One of the most persistent generalisations is that women talk more than men – yet research finds the opposite – that men talk more than women. By citing numerous sources and studies, Cameron points out how there will always be ways in which differences between men and women will be marked in some way in their speech – but that it is false to suggest that there is one big difference between the sexes which is more significant than differences *within* each sex.

When it comes to leadership, Cameron argues that Mars and Venus generalisations are simplistic. Women have been excluded from public life (including preaching) partly because of the old doctrine of 'separate spheres'. She argues that the issue for women in leadership is not that they have different communication styles, but that they are liable to be judged by different standards. Women have to walk a 'tightrope of impression management', demonstrating professional competence *and* femininity – a conclusion remarkably similar to that drawn by the authors of *Through the Labyrinth*.

Why, then, have the Mars and Venus myths been so pervasive and had such influence? The author argues that this is partly because at a time when boundaries between men and women are becoming blurred, people are looking for safety in new 'myths'. Many people want to be told what is 'normal'. The other reason is that we pay most attention to observations which fit our expectations, while ignoring those which do not fit.

I've always felt uncomfortable with the Mars and Venus books, but have never been able to work out quite why. This may not be the last work on the subject, but I'm very grateful to Cameron for pointing out some of the flaws in the argument, and the thinking they have sometimes led to. Some great words from the final chapter: 'Given a choice between the biological determinism of *Why Men Don't Iron*, the cultural determinism of *You Just Don't Understand*, and the New Age psychobabble of *Men are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, our answer should be "none of the above". A book definitely worth reading.