

**WHAT MEN AND WOMEN DO WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT LOVE:
A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF “WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE
TALK ABOUT LOVE” BY RAYMOND CARVER**

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ABSTRACT. *Many people, like the protagonist of Dorothy Parker's short story "Too Bad," wonder "what did married people talk about, anyway, when they were alone together?" Raymond Carver's short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" is the literary rendition of the ways in which married couples talk. This essay analyses this short story taking into account sociolinguistic aspects related to men's and women's linguistic behaviour and the speech strategies each gender uses, so as to explore if these characters accurately reflect real life speech patterns or not.*

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Raymond Carver, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," sociolinguistics, cross-sex talk and married couples.

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DE QUÉ HABLAN LOS HOMBRES Y LAS MUJERES CUANDO HABLAN DE AMOR: UN ANÁLISIS SOCIOLINGÜÍSTICO DE “WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE” DE RAYMOND CARVER

RESUMEN. *Mucha gente, al igual que la protagonista del relato de Dorothy Parker “Too Bad” se preguntan “de todos modos, ¿de qué bablaban los matrimonios cuando estaban a solas?” El relato de Raymond Carver “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” es la reproducción literaria de las maneras en que las parejas casadas se comunican. Este ensayo analiza este relato teniendo en cuenta aspectos sociolingüísticos relacionados con el comportamiento lingüístico de los hombres y de las mujeres y las estrategias discursivas que cada género usa para explorar si estos personajes reflejan con exactitud hábitos discursivos de la vida real.*

Palabras clave: Análisis del discurso, Raymond Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” sociolingüística, charla entre sexos y matrimonios.

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What did married people talk about, anyway, when they were alone together? She had seen married couples... at the theatre or in trains, talking together as animatedly as if they were just acquaintances. She always watched them, marvelingly, wondering what on earth they found to say.

Dorothy Parker: “Too Bad”

1. INTRODUCTION

As Dorothy Parker’s quote above illustrates, literature has often made use of married couples’ conversations so as to illustrate the state of a marriage. Of Anna Karenina’s husband we know that, despite his joy for his wife’s return home, he cannot voice his happiness but makes a sarcastic remark instead. Similarly, a recurrent technique in movies to convey the impression that a marriage is on the rocks is presenting a couple not speaking to each other at all, like in *American Beauty* (1999). Writers have been pulled between two opposite forces to express their characters’ feelings – some have been too prolix, even on the verge of boredom; others, as Jane Austen did in *Pride and Prejudice*, have chosen to report what went on rather than let characters actually speak out their emotions. This essay analyses the short story by Raymond Carver “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” taking into account sociolinguistic aspects related to men’s and women’s linguistic behaviour and speech strategies in order to explore if Carver’s characters accurately reflect real-life speech patterns or not. Given the complexity

of this task and the scope of this essay, I will focus on the following aspects: the expression of feelings, agreement and disagreement, asking questions, and the use of hedges and profanity.

Raymond Carver re-created in a number of his short stories conversations between one or more married couples, such as “What’s in Alaska,” “Tell the Women We’re Going,” “Feathers,” “Neighbors,” “After the Denim,” or “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” just to name a few. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” deals with a cross-sex, seemingly casual conversation involving two married couples, Terri and Mel, and Nick (who is also the narrator) and Laura. The four of them are in their second marriage, have professional careers and have known each other for quite a long time. It is significant that the four participate (although the women characters hardly ever take the floor, as we will see) in the same conversation, thus standing in marked contrast to the Lynds’ study of Muncie, Indiana, in which they discovered that, when socializing, husbands and wives tended to divide themselves so as “to talk men’s talk and women’s talk” (Chafe 1991: 135). This could be explained because this is a very reduced group and therefore, all of them can sit together at the same table. The fact that Terri and Laura are professional women (actually, Nick met Laura “in a professional capacity” [Carver 1981: 173]) should be noted too. This is especially significant because many now seminal works on married couples’ verbal interaction such as Mirra Komarovsky’s or Lillian Breslow Rubin’s studies were based on working-class subjects while sociological studies have revealed that class is as important as gender in shaping friendship (Walker 1994: 258). Analysing the friendships of professional women, Helen Gouldner and Mary Symons Strong (in Walker 1994: 259) discovered that most middle-class professional women’s socializing was done with their husbands or with other couples, as it is the case in this story.

The setting is at one of the couples’ (Terri and Mel’s) and the main and only topic discussed by these couples is love, since all the other sub-topics discussed are closely related to love – domestic violence and its relation to love, different conceptions of love (Platonic, physical, in the Middle Ages, spiritual, real), the end of love (e.g., divorce), suicide and the willingness to die for love. The very participants in the conversation have some doubts about how they begun talking about love – “we somehow got on the subject of love,” the narrator says (Carver 1981: 170) and Laura wonders “how’d we get started on this subject, anyway?” (Carver 1981: 171) It seems the topic was brought up by Mel, who talks the most and because the next sentence after “we somehow got on the subject of love” is “Mel thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love” (Carver 1981: 171). Thus hinting that Mel might very possibly be the one who brought it up. Were this the case, this would confirm Fishman’s findings that “between cross-sex, intimate couples [...] a couple’s conversational topic is essentially the man’s choice” (in

West and Zimmerman 1983: 102) with the proviso that in this case the conversation is between two couples and not just one. Curiously enough, that the topic chosen by Mel is love contradicts folk beliefs that men are not only less likely than women to raise topics related to personal emotions or concerns but, what is more, they try to prevent the discussion of “sensitive topics of discussion” (Leto de Francisco 1998: 179-181).

That they are drinking gin while talking might be a factor contributing to the fact that their conversation is about love, since alcohol helps people to lose their inhibitions and speak more freely. Actually, in a given moment Terri asks her husband if he is getting drunk (Carver 1981: 177), and Nick, the narrator, later on acknowledges: “maybe we were a little drunk by then” (Carver 1981: 183). Carver, who had a first-hand experience of alcoholism (he was a recovering alcoholic and both his first wife and his father were alcoholics too), often included in his fiction the excessive use of alcohol to symbolize the problems that plague his characters. Thus, more often than not, in Carver’s fiction “alcohol is a kind of empty substitute ... that neither nourishes nor nurtures but distorts and confuses” (Moramarco n.d.).

2. THIS WORD LOVE

In Carver’s short stories, “love is a darkly unknowable and irreversible force, a form of sickness not only complicating but dominating the lives of characters. Characters are alternately bewildered, enraged, suffocated, diminished, isolated, and entrapped by love” (Nesset 1991: 293-294). From Carver’s first volume of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, “love and its maladies are for Carver already an ‘obsession’ (he hated the word ‘theme’)” (Nesset 1991: 293). Given the predominant space of love in Carver’s literary universe, it is not strange that the word “love” (either as a noun or as a form of the verb to love) is used a total number of fifty-eight times in this short story, of which twice are in reported speech (Terri repeating her ex-boyfriend Ed’s words in both instances) and once is said by all of them when they drink a toast to love. This extensive use of the word love is indicative of how much love “has been so beaten down in twentieth century discourse, particularly the rhetoric of advertising and popular culture, that it’s hard to know what anyone means by it anymore. ... [Love] occurs often in the titles of porno movies, religious sermons, new age self-help guides, romantic novels, and tv shows” (Moramarco n.d.).

Mel uses the word love a total of forty times, amounting to 69% of the cases, nothing surprising given that he is the most talkative participant in the conversation and the one who seems to have introduced the topic to begin with. In contrast, Terri says it thirteen times (22%), Laura three (5 %) and Nick, twice (3 %). This goes against the pervasive belief that men do not feel comfortable

when talking about feelings and that they try to avoid this type of conversations. That Mel is the participant that speaks the most has several other implications. To start with, it helps destroy the popular myth of women's talkativeness (Coates 1986: 31) that exists in most Western cultures. Being the one who talks the most involves a dominant behavior and increases the likelihood that one's topics succeed (Spender in Leto de Francisco 1998: 179). Confirming this, Mel not only controls all the conversation and is the most talkative speaker but also the whole conversation dwells with the topic of love or sub-topics related to it. Once he has introduced his topic, he does not let the other participants drop it. What is more, this constitutes a means by which controlling and silencing the other participants in the conversation (Leto de Francisco 1998: 180).

3. QUESTIONS

In this short story, when it comes to questions, men and women approximately ask the same amount of questions. Out of the total of forty-three instances of questions, men ask twenty-four of them (amounting to 56%) and women, nineteen (44%). This is especially significant because although the male characters (in particular, Mel) do most of the talking, the women ask almost as many questions as the men, which is more or less predictable since the hearers are the participants more likely to ask questions asking for information, clarification, etc.¹

The functions performed by these questions are the following ones:

- Disagreement – 1.1, 1.2
- Asking for information – A, E, F, G, I.1, I.2, J, K.1, K.2
- Keeping the conversation going – F, N
- Question tag – B, D, J
- Rhetorical questions – 3, 8, 9.1, 9.2, 10.1, 10.2, 13, 16, C
 - Asking for clarification – 4, 5, E, L
- Involving hearers in conversation, trying to prompt a response from hearers – 2, 6.1, 7, I.3, I.4
- Asking for others' opinion – 2.1, 2.2²

¹ Each letter corresponds to a turn of a female speaker, whereas numbers have been used to identify turns of male speakers. In appendix A, the corresponding quotations appear with the identity of the speaker specified and the page number in which that quotation appears in the short story. Turns including several questions have been subdivided.

² I have included the category "asking for others' opinion" under the broader label "involving hearers in conversation, trying to prompt a response from hearers" because although the speaker's purpose when asking questions of any of these categories is the same (dragging the hearers to a more active role in the conversation), in the case of "asking for others' opinion," hearers are explicitly asked to give their opinion, not just to contribute to the talk in other ways (e.g., providing further information, giving details, telling an anecdote or a story loosely or closely related to the topic of love...).

- Asking for confirmation – 11, 12, 14, 15.1, 15.2, 17, 18
- Request – M
- Extending previous question – 6.2

This classification shows that although some types of questions are as likely to be used by the male characters as by the female ones (asking for clarification, extending a previous question or involving hearers in conversation), most types are used by a gender much more often than by the other. Thus, whereas women are more prompt to ask for information in order to keep the conversation going (consistent with Fishman's conclusions of women doing the "shitwork") or use question tags, men in turn ask rhetorical questions and use more questions to show their disagreement with the previous speaker. Questioning the others' assertions is an indirect way of disagreement, which tends to be a linguistic strategy mostly used by women whereas men disagree in a more frequent, open and direct way (Pilkington 1998: 261-263).

4. WHAT MEN AND WOMEN DO WHEN THEY AGREE AND DISAGREE

Out of eleven instances of disagreement, seven correspond to men (i.e., 64%), whereas only four were uttered by women (36%). Disagreement is performed in several ways:³

- Criticizing the other speaker, even to the point of abusing and insulting or discrediting the other's opinion or statements – 1.1, 2, 4, 6
- Denying the previous speaker's statement – 1.2, 3.1
- Asserting something in conflict with the previous speaker's statement – A, B, C, D, 5
- Providing facts in contradiction to the previous speaker's turn⁴ – 3.2, 4, D
- Questioning the previous speaker's statement – 7

This shows that female characters not only disagree with men less often than the reverse, but that the male characters do it in a more direct way. Regardless of the gender of the other participant(s) in conversation, men "are more likely

³ Each turn has been considered as a single instance of disagreement. However, since in turns 1 and 3 disagreement is performed in two different ways within the same turn, these turns have been subdivided into turns 1.1 and 1.2 and 3.1 and 3.2, respectively. See appendix B.

⁴ I have drawn this distinction between asserting something in conflict with the previous speaker's turn and providing facts in contradiction to the previous speaker's turn because in the former case, the speaker's assertions are not grounded on reasons, whereas in the latter, facts are provided to support these assertions. I have considered these facts as such and not as opinions because Ed's being dangerous has already been asserted since his threats to Mel's life have already been mentioned; his willingness to die for love is, in the same way, confirmed by his suicide – at least in Terri's eyes.

to challenge or dispute their partners' utterances" (Hirschman cited in Maltz and Borker 1998: 419). Terri is the only female speaker who disagrees (just as Mel is the only male speaker disagreeing) and the strategy she employs is making a statement whose validity and truthfulness can only exist given that Mel's previous statement is false as they present two opposite visions of the same fact. In contrast, Mel explicitly denies the validity of Terri's assertions and even reaches the point of criticizing her (regardless of the presence of their friends), attacking her for being silly and romantic (the latter being an ambiguous characteristic, for it can be a both a desirable quality at times, especially in a woman, and scorned in other situations – e.g., in a managerial context) and, in short, simply for having a conception of love that happens to be different and somewhat broader (since Terri allows for the existence of domestic violence under the label of love) than his own. That Mel fails to understand Terri's concept of love is consistent with studies researching married couples' speaking patterns which have consistently reported men's assertions about their difficulties (if not outright inability) in understanding their wives, when not women in general (Kramarae 1981: 10), arguing that men and women are different, a common complaint of both men and women (Walker 1994: 252).

The strength of Mel's disagreement with Terri and his verbal abuse can be accounted for the fact that they are a married couple and with people we are intimate with or have a great deal of confidence in (e.g., our closest friends, our spouse, our parents – especially our mothers) we are more likely to abandon all our politeness and good manners (while reserving them for people we have just met; West and Zimmerman 1983: 106) and be more direct and even rude. The bond of one man and one woman constitutes a peculiar social group since men and women usually live in heterosexual pairs (Coates 1986: 7) and "the pervasiveness of the family makes it seem a natural relationship" (Kramarae 1981: 126). Therefore, since Terri is his wife, Mel is bolder and dares to disagree with her using techniques (verbal abuse, insults, direct attack) he very possibly might not use so readily if disagreeing with Nick or Laura. However, it is strikingly remarkable that when trying to convince Terri of the absurdity of accepting being physically abused by a lover, Mel verbally abuses her, thus assuming that abuse is acceptable as long as it is performed with words and not in the form of beating. This is recurrent in Carver's literary production, which often includes "scenes of emotional menace at the heart of domestic and working-class America. Verbal violence and psychological abuse are the most common forms of animosity in Carver Country. [...] women are depicted within a domestic world where family tensions end in violence" (Kleppe 2006: 107). In this story, Terri suffers physical abuse from Ed and verbal abuse from Mel, portraying how violence against women was a daily occurrence in contemporary America at the time this short

story was published (1981). Actually, “in 1985, the U.S. Surgeon General identified domestic violence as a major health problem; in 1988, the year of Carver’s death, the Surgeon General declared domestic abuse as the leading health hazard to women” (Kleppe 2006: 124).

In contrast, women are the ones attempting conciliation in this story. That way, in order to reconcile Mel’s and Terri’s antagonistic positions, Laura calls for appeasement: “I don’t know anything about Ed, or anything about the situation. But who can judge anyone else’s situation?” (Carver 1981: 172). Not only women are forced to attempt conciliation, they are also more pitiful. Mel cannot hide his dislike for Ed, the man who threatened to kill him and would have done it (or so Mel claims) had he not killed himself first. However, Terri, who was the victim of Ed’s physical abuse, still can believe that he did love her, and, moreover, can express pity for him and for his death, which was, more than anything else, a relief for both her and Mel, given Ed’s threats and relentless pursuit. And whereas Mel takes no pain in openly criticizing Terri, she, in contrast, not only does avoid criticizing him but dissipates any suggestion of it: “Sweet, I’m not criticizing” (Carver 1981: 177).

In this short story, disagreement occurs far more often than not. Whereas there are eleven examples of disagreement, there are just two instances of agreement, which are the following:

- Terri: “But Mel’s right” (Carver 1981: 175).
- Mel: “Terri’s right” (Carver 1981: 179).

In both cases, the speaker explicitly sides with the previous speaker’s assertion, legitimating it and dissipating any doubt that the other participants in the conversation might have had about the truthfulness of the previous statement. Curiously enough, in the first case it is Terri the one who agrees with her husband and in the second it is Mel who does the same for his wife, thus making it a case of loyalty to one’s spouse. This, however, is far from meaning that this is always the case, given the previous instances of disagreement, most of which are due to Terri’s and Mel’s different conceptions of what love is.

5. PROFANITY AND HEDGES

It is significant that 100% of the profanity contained in the short story is uttered by the male speakers. More specifically, Mel is the one who does all the profanity, which is hardly unexpected since he is the one who does most of the talking as well. The only exception is the profanity Terri uses when reporting Ed’s words. But even if we accepted the profanity used in reported speech, there are also instances of Mel’s using profanity in reported speech (once again, re-telling Ed’s

words). This helps reinforce the folk linguistics assumption that women's language is less coarse and, in turn, more polite due to the social pressure for women not to use vulgar language ever since the Middle Ages, the ideal for women being not to use cuss words (Coates 1986: 19-22). The result is that "even more than slang, this [swearing] has been regarded as men's territory" (Poynton 1985: 73).

Hedges can be used with multiple functions but they are generally classified as a feature of women's speech as a result of "the stereotype of tentativeness associated with [women's] speech" (Poynton 1985: 71). Coates explains women's use of them because of their discussing sensitive topics,⁵ their disclosing personal information, for the sake of keeping the collaborative floor, to mitigate the force of their statements, to avoid imposing their opinions on the others, and to allow for room for the addressee(s)'s feelings (Coates 1996: 156, 162-171; Coates 1986: 102). In this short story, out of seventeen instances of hedges, men perform thirteen (i.e., 76%), whereas the remaining four, performed by women, constitute just the 24%.

The mitigating devices used to lessen their statements are:⁶

- Like – A
- May – B, C
- Maybe – D, 3, 4.1⁷, 5
- Just – 1, 6, 7, 9.2
- Some – 2
- Such a – 4.1
- I mean / it means – 7.1, 9.1

In the existing literature to the contrary, the men in this short story hedge their utterances more often than women. This can be due to the fact that the men here talk more, and, subsequently, they also have to protect their negative face more often. When analyzing women's talk, Coates (1996: 165) claims that the use of hedges when talking about sensitive topics is vital because, otherwise, given the mutual self-disclosure of participants, talk would be impossible since, due to the characteristics of this kind of topics, statements cannot be said bluntly. Despite the fact that the dominant speaker here, Mel, is a man, I still consider that Coates' hypothesis is at work, for, in this case, the sensitive nature of the topic at hand prevails over the speaker's gender.

⁵ Coates' definition (1996: 162) of sensitive topics is the following: "By 'sensitive' I mean that they are topics which are controversial in some way and which arouse strong feelings in people. These topics are usually about people and feelings". Love, being the feeling *par excellence*, clearly falls into this category.

⁶ Full quotations appear in appendix C.

⁷ In turns 4, 7, and 9 there are two instances of mitigating devices within the same turn.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Whether there can be sincere cross-gender communication has been a matter that has for long occupied many pages in American literature. Already in the eighteenth century, Charles Brockden Brown in his novel *Alcuin* (1798) wrote that “all intercourse between [the sexes] is fettered and embarrassed. On one side, all is reserve and artifice; on the other, adulation and affected humility. [...] The man must affect a disproportionate ardour; while the woman must counterfeit indifference or aversion” (quoted in Waterman 2010: 30). “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” by Raymond Carver deals with cross-gender conversation and the inherent difficulties in it. With the proviso that this is a conversation taken from a short story and not a real-life conversation, there are several conclusions that can be drawn in regards to cross-gender communication in late-twentieth-century America. According to the existing literature, when husbands and wives take part in the same conversation, men are the ones who speak the most and rather than joining in a multi-party conversation, women talk to their husbands and men talk to their wives. Also, instead of engaging in conversation with other women, “in the mixed-gender groups women in general spoke less and interacted less with each other than with men” (study by Elizabeth Aries, reported in Kramarae 1981: 147). Consistent with most studies, the male characters in this short story are the ones who choose the topic of the conversation and control its subsequent flow in such a way that not only does this topic succeed but it is also the only subject matter talked about during the rest of the conversation. Only once the topic has been thoroughly discussed to the limits of its possibilities, will it be possible for the participants to move on and engage in a different topic or activity – in this case, going out to dinner. This confirms Leto de Francisco’s (1998: 182) conclusion that “the men seemed to have more control in defining the day-to-day reality of these couples’ communication styles, and the women did more of the adapting”. That way, social order, in which men have more privileges, is imitated (Coates 1986: 121), Mel being the most talkative speaker because “men, the speakers of the dominant style, have more rights and privileges. They exhibit their privileges and produce them in every conversational situation” (Troemel-Ploetz 1998: 447). As a result of this, women are not equal in conversation (West and Zimmerman 1998: 107), their status in spoken interaction being similar to that of children talking to adults on the grounds of their limited (or non-existent) power to control the course of the conversation (West and Zimmerman 1998: 165-175).

Men, in order to control the course of the conversation and to prevent their topic from being dropped, hold the floor most of the time, a matter of “prime importance” for men (Poynton 1985: 28), making the longest turns (by far) and trying to silence disagreeing voices in an active and open way by using

verbal abuse and strong criticism. The longest turns belong to men, and, more importantly, to the host. Additionally, confirming this, Terri speaks far more than Laura and so does Mel in comparison to Nick, which could be influenced by the fact that they are at Terri and Mel's house. At a given moment, Mel's monologue sounds like a lecture on love (Carver 1981: 176-177); it is not only his longest turn, but the longest turn in the story. Despite conceptions of men's sparingness and women's talkativeness, "while the evidence is not conclusive, the literature suggests that men talk as much or more than women when the sexes converse" (West and Zimmerman 1998: 108) and this short story seems to confirm it. This stands in marked contrast with the typical stereotype of women as tireless talkers despite "a number of recent studies [that] demonstrate that [...] in conversation interaction between men and women, far from men never being able to get a word in edgeways, they usually have the upper hand" (Poynton 1985: 26), a stereotype whose foundation must lie in the fact that "the yardstick against which women's talk is, in fact, measured, is that of **silence**" (bold hers; Spender quoted in Poynton 1985: 67).

As Kramarae puts it, the pervasive image we generally have of manhood has it that "a **real** man is strong and silent and does not talk about his troubles, feelings, and pain" (1981: 11; bold hers). Yet, the topic chosen by Mel is, curiously enough, love and despite the general assumption that men do not feel comfortable when discussing this kind of topics, it soon turns out to be a favorite topic of his, almost his hobbyhorse. Obviously, Mel has thought about love at length (as he acknowledges towards the middle of the conversation: "Sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too" [Carver 1981: 176]), as most men most probably do, but the remarkable thing here is that he has no problem in openly discussing it with his wife and a couple of close friends. Contrary to folk beliefs and stereotypical images that men engage in physical or sports-related activities while not discussing personal issues whereas women friends talk about intimate matters, it seems that "when specific friendships are examined, it becomes clear that men share feelings more than the literature indicates, whereas women share feelings less than the literature indicates" (Walker 1994: 246-247, 254).⁸

At times, Mel's long turns (almost monologues in some cases) even have an *ex cathedra* quality ("I'll tell you what real love is" [Carver 1981: 176]), showing a teacher-like behavior, as if he were lecturing an ignorant audience who knew

⁸ "75% of the men reported engaging in nongendered behavior with friends – all of whom reported that they spoke intimately about spouses, other family members, and their feelings. Furthermore, one third of those men reported that they engaged in other nongendered behavior as well as intimate talk" (Walker 1994: 253). Yet, "about 40% of the respondents reported that men were not as open as women" (Walker 1994: 251).

nothing of his latest and revolutionary discovery. This patronizing attitude of Mel towards his wife and friends is what several women “termed ‘patronizing,’ ‘put down’ and ‘teachy’ behaviors by their husbands. Paternalistic statements are said to limit another’s behavior through what are presented as well-meant intentions” (Davis cited in Leto de Francisco 1998: 181). That Mel is a cardiologist, somehow seems to give him a special status or expertise over the others. Women, in contrast, avoid “playing the expert,” as Coates (1996: 160-161) calls it. When speaking about love, Mel chooses to ignore that what he is doing is just giving his own opinion (which is a personal one and can be disagreed with, as Terri actually happens to do). What is more, he is not talking to people with no knowledge of what love is and what it implies (as it could be the case if he were talking to very young children, for instance) but to grown-up people who, just like he has, have also undergone the experience of a failed marriage, a divorce and have re-married and, consequently, also have a “qualified” opinion on it. Moreover, he even acknowledges the fact that he might be no expert on the matter, even questioning his own and the others’ knowledge about love: “‘What do any of us really know about love?’ Mel said. ‘It seems to me we’re just beginners at love’” (Carver 1981: 176). Nevertheless, this does not prevent him from lecturing his “audience”. Instead of letting the other participants in the conversation – who for most of it are forced to play the role of hearers – take an active part in it and share their own experiences and views, he lectures them.

This is so much the case that when Terri tries to explain her (different) conception of love, Mel attacks her and tries to convince her of her foolishness for having such ideas while imposing his own ideas on love, which he tries to force her to accept as the only valid ones. In Mel’s attempts to convince Terri of what love is like and his reluctance to accept her reasons we find Mel exerting his power since “power is the ability to impose one’s definition of what is possible, what is right, what is rational, what is real” (Fishman quoted in Poynton 1985: foreword). Terri’s attempts to explain how and why she considers it possible to reconcile wife-beating and real love in the same relationship fail because Mel rejects over and over again that possibility, despite Terri’s pleading for him to be more open-minded and trying to understand: “‘He did love me though, Mel. Grant me that,’ Terri said. ‘That’s all I’m asking. He didn’t love me the way you love me. I’m not saying that. But he loved me. You can grant me that, can’t you?’” (Carver 1981: 172). While Mel can see only one way of loving, Terri is able to perceive that there might be more than just one way. Mel’s refusal to accept somebody else’s reasoning creates a misunderstanding grounded on the fact that “male-female conversation is always cross-cultural communication,” which provokes that “it’s difficult to straighten out such misunderstandings because each one feels convinced of the

logic of his or her position and the illogic – or irresponsibility – of the other's” (Tannen 1998: 435, 437).

Terri's attempts to express her point of view fail, not only on the grounds of Mel's stubbornness to accept a vision of love alternative to his own, but also because language, as a social construct, is male-made and it is not appropriate at times to express women's experiences since language has been made and shaped by men. In contrast, women have been forced to use it even though it does not serve women as well as it serves men because “the male system of perception, which is represented in the language used by both men and women, does not provide a good ‘fit’ for the women's expression of their experiences” (Kramarae 1981: 1-2). This is due to the fact that

men, in determining the ‘acceptable’ values and assumptions (which include the inferior status of women), subject women to experiences that men are not subjected to; but men's language structure does not include the ready means for women to express the thoughts and behavior that result from their subjugation. While women have had to learn the language structure of the dominant group, men have seldom had to discern or have wanted to discern the women's model of the world. (Kramarae 1981: 9)

As a result, Safilios-Rothschild proposes that there might be “two ‘realities,’ the husband's subjective reality and the wife's subjective reality – two perspectives which do not always coincide. Each spouse perceives ‘facts’ and situations according to his [or her] own needs, values, attitudes, and beliefs” (quoted in Kramarae 1981: 129).

To conclude, just like in most instances of everyday life, in this short story, when engaging in cross-sex conversation, men assume the control, preventing others (i.e., women) from doing so in such a strong way that other voices (especially those voices which disagree⁹) are silenced in an attempt to keep the current state of affairs in which women occupy a position subordinate to men's and have to struggle to have their voices not only heard but taken into account in a world made by men for men and in which women's role has to be constantly negotiated (if not fought for) using a range of strategies going from conciliation to open disagreement. Carver, a neorealist who ever since his first short story collection was interested in the limitations of language, offers in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” a vivid and realistic portrayal of married couples' verbal interaction in contemporary American society.

⁹ Not necessarily just women, but also members from minorities, religious dissenters...

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONS

- 1.- Mel: [1.1] "Make up what? [1.2] What is there to make up?" 171
- 2.- Mel: [2.1] "What about you, guys? [2.2] Does that sound like love to you?" 171
- 3.- Mel: "What do you do with love like that?" 170
- 4.- Nick: "What do you mean, he bungled it?" 173
- 5.- Nick: "How'd he bungle it when he killed himself?" 173
- 6.- Mel: [6.1] "Can you believe it? [6.2] A guy like me?" 173
- 7.- Mel: "To go to the hospital, you know?" 173
- 8.- Mel: "What do any of us really know about love?" 175
- 9.- Mel: [9.1] "How do you explain that? [9.2] What happened to that love?" 177
- 10.- Mel: [10.1] "Am I wrong? [10.2] Am I way off base?" 177
- 11.- Mel: "All right?" 177
- 12.- Mel: "Right?" 177
- 13.- Mel: "You know something?" 178
- 14.- Mel: "Then we're going to dinner, right?" 180
- 15.- Mel: [15.1] "You know? [15.2] Right, Terri?" 180
- 16.- Mel: "You know what?" 180
- 17.- Mel: "You know, that hat that's like a helmet with the plate that comes down, and the padded coat?" 185
- 18.- Mel: "How does that sound?" 185
- A.- Terri: "How'd we get started on this subject, anyway?" 171
- B.- Terri: "Mel always has love on his mind. Don't you, honey?" 171
- C.- Laura: "But who can judge anyone else's situation?" 172
- D.- Terri: "You can grant me that, can't you?" 172

- E.- Laura: "But what exactly happened after he shot himself?" 173
- F.- Laura: "What happened?" 174
- G.- Laura: "Who won the fight?" 174
- H.- Terri: "Isn't that a laugh?" 175
- I.- Terri: [I.1] "How long have you been together now? [I.2] How long has it been?"
[I.3] A year? [I.4] Longer than a year?" 175
- J.- Terri: "Mel was, weren't you, honey?" 175
- K.- Terri: [K.1] "Are you getting drunk? Honey? [K.2] Are you drunk?" 177
- L.- Laura: "What does that mean, honey?" 185
- M.- Laura: "Is there something to nibble on?" 185
- N.- Terri: "Now what?" 185

APPENDIX B: INSTANCES OF DISAGREEMENT

- 1.- Mel: [1.1] "My God, don't be silly. [1.2] That's not love, and you know it". 171
- 2.- Mel: "Terri's a romantic. Terri's of the kick-me-so-I'll-know-you-love-me school.
Terri, hon, don't look that way". 171
- 3.- Mel: [3.1] "Poor Ed nothing. [3.2] He was dangerous". 172
- 4.- Mel: "He was dangerous. If you call that love, you can have it". 174
- 5.- Mel: "I sure as hell wouldn't call it love". 174
- 6.- Mel: "If that's love, you can have it". 174
- 7.- Mel: "Make up what? What is there to make up?" 171
- A.- Terri: "Say what you want to, but I know it was". 171
- B.- Terri: "It may sound crazy to you, but it's true just the same". 171
- C.- Terri: "He did love me though, Mel". 172
- D.- Terri: "It was love. Sure, it's abnormal in most people's eyes. But he was
willing to die for it. He did die for it". 174

APPENDIX C: HEDGES

- A- Laura: "It sounds like a nightmare". 173
- B- Terri: "It may sound crazy to you, but it's true just the same". 171
- C- Terri: "Sure, sometimes he may have acted crazy". 171
- D- Terri: "In his own way maybe, but he loved me". 171

- 1.- Mel: "I just wouldn't call Ed's behavior love". 171
- 2.- Mel: "They were in some shape". 179
- 3.- Mel: "Maybe I won't call the kids, after all". 185
- 4.- Mel: "Maybe it isn't such a hot idea". 185 (2 hedges)
- 5.- Mel: "Maybe we'll just go eat". 185 (2 hedges)
- 6.- Nick: "It just means what I said". 185
- 7.- Nick: "It means I could just keep going". 185 (2 hedges)
- 8.- Mel: "Honey, I'm just talking". 177
- 9.- Mel: "I mean, we're all just talking, right?" 177 (2 hedges)