

HimGLISH & Femalese

Why women don't get why men don't get them

Jean Hannah Edelstein

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Extract

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To all the men who said, 'Please don't put me in your book.'

Contents

Introduction	1
1. Communication: HimGLISH, Femalese and Other Ways We Get Our Wires Crossed	9
2. Dating: Let's Get Together. Whatever That Means	33
3. Sex: Everything You Thought You Knew About Sex is Wrong (Except the Bits Which Are Right)	61
4. Commitment: I Will Love You For Ever. I Guess	91
5. Domestic Bliss: Hey honey! I'm Home (Break Out the Crème Brûlée Torch)	115
6. Conflict: Sometimes, Men Are Jerks. Sometimes, Women Are Also Jerks	141
7. The Office: Men, Women, Professional Conduct . . . and the Stationery Cupboard	171
The End	195

Introduction

The first boy I ever loved was also three years old: Alex and I went to nursery school together, where we whiled away many a happy quarter of an hour – we had brief attention spans – hammering away at blocks of wood on the classroom woodworking table. In retrospect, this seems like it must have been very dangerous, but I guess in 1985 there were no health and safety rules that precluded three-year-olds from wielding chisels.

Anyway, in addition to sharing my precocious passion for sawing things, Alex had many other characteristics that made him, overall, a fine young man to love. While it is true that he was extremely short, I was too, at the time. But Alex had big blue eyes, hair the colour and texture of the strands of silk in an ear of corn, and dimples. And he had an extensive wardrobe of corduroy dungarees in a range of earth tones and a quite solid grasp of the niceties of toilet training. In the world of nursery school, I think that any of the small girls in our class would have agreed with me, Alex was pretty money.

But the thing that made me really love Alex, the thing that made our relationship extra-special, was that he had a

speech impediment. At least, I thought he had a speech impediment. When I consider the situation in retrospect, it seems possible that Alex just spoke like an average three-year-old and I interpreted this as a pathological problem – you may not be surprised to learn that I was a bit of a chatterbox. In fact, perhaps English wasn't Alex's mother tongue and he was actually speaking fluent German when I thought he was speaking fluent gibberish. But of course, at the time, none of these possible explanations for his vocal shortcomings occurred to me. I was gallant for my trio of years and I latched on to Alex because I saw an opportunity for me to play a special role in his life. Feeling very noble, I assumed, without any kind of explicit consent from Alex, the role of his translator. I was scrupulous about my responsibility to convey to the other kids and adults information that, now that I think about it, often probably had nothing to do with what Alex was actually trying to say.

Poor little Alex. We went our separate ways when we turned five and it was time for us to attend kindergarten, and I never saw him again. I seem to recall my mother telling me that his family had moved away, but now I wonder if in fact Alex's parents put their son in a new school so that he would at least have a chance to learn to speak for himself before my domineering influence stunted his personal development for good. What if, to this day, he is simply struck dumb around women, waiting for them to speak on his behalf? I feel a little bit guilty.

But only a very little bit. Because when I think about this further, it occurs to me that I might have indeed been doing Alex a great service. I must have prepared him well for one of the most basic and common and challenging experiences of male adult life: having women try to interpret what he says and often getting it wrong; feeling a bit powerless and unable to understand why it is, exactly, that

members of the opposite sex often cannot seem to understand the very simple and straightforward things that he says and does, the clear messages that he is sending.

Yes, in fact, I think that I can say with confidence that my relationship with little Alex was just another example of a long-held tradition of the human race that crosses generations and cultural boundaries. Men and women have both long been perplexed by the opposite sex and tried to mitigate that perplexity by attempting to employ their own interpretations and assumptions to explain or justify their confusing behaviour. Although it is not a tradition that is, or should be, particularly beloved, it is among our most enduring ones and cuts across both genders: women have been trying to figure men out, and vice versa, since time began. We can't seem to help ourselves, even though sometimes it can have a quite deleterious effect on our lives. It's not entirely a bad thing, of course: if men and women did understand each other perfectly, there would be far fewer artists in the world and a lot more accountants. But sometimes, when it's a matter of going about your daily life and not a matter of composing an opera, the sense that boys and girls are sometimes chalk and cheese can be more than a little bit frustrating.

Because we know ourselves better than we know anyone else, it is only natural that members of both sexes tend to believe that our default behaviours make perfect sense and that it is the opposite sex with the problem. We feel safe to assume that they are the ones who are odd and inexplicable and foreign and sometimes just downright uncivilised. But this is a lazy kind of conclusion to draw, an easy way out: why try to understand the other half when you can be smug and confident in your supposition that they are irrational?

It is a strategy that many people have used for a long time, but with limited success, which is why, within the following pages, I am going to propose that we knock it

off. It is fine to accept that men and women may think and behave differently in various circumstances. But that is no excuse for writing off comprehension of the opposite sex as an impossible task: in the long run making the effort makes our own lives less stressful, saving us, ideally, from quite a lot of unnecessary weeping.

Before we crack on with this exciting undertaking, however, I do feel that it is important to note that while this kind of squinting and brow-furrowing when considering the opposite sex may be a fairly universal phenomenon, the differences between the sexes aren't always. This is not only because of general variances in cultural trends but also because of the sporadic evolution of mixed-gender relations over the course of history in different places and communities. It is a process that has always been dynamic but which has not necessarily always been progressive: assuming that we have it better than our ancestors can be an oversimplification. As we head at a rapid clip into the second decade of the third millennium, it is clear that in many respects inter-gender relationships have never been less tangled up in red tape – but, at the same time, that our relative freedom has created new conflicts and misunderstandings and, in some cases, challenges and limitations that have defied expectations by becoming rather endemic.

So what does our project here encompass? Well, in the chapters that follow, I've broken key issues down into a number of different categories, running the gamut of male–female relations and interactions from the very basics of communication to the most advanced complexities of love and life. I've done some research on your behalf, checking out what science has had to say about men and women recently and comparing these conclusions against what I have observed, and what people I've interviewed have experienced, in order to deduce what the contemporary universals of gender relations are.

In order to more precisely illustrate some of the phenomena that we will be discussing herein, I have drafted in some assistance in the form of two fictional characters. In the following pages, you will meet the plucky Alice Femalese and the spirited Jonathan HimGLISH. They are a young couple of indeterminate age (I believe they fall somewhere within the 18–34 demographic) who have been together for an indeterminate amount of time and have a varying – sometimes indeterminate, even! – degree of difficulty when it comes to understanding each other just like, well, the rest of us.

Isn't this exciting? Oh, my friends, it is. But before we get properly stuck in, you also need to be properly introduced to me, your guide for the spectacular adventure that we are about to embark on. You are probably thinking, right now, who exactly is this Jean Hannah Edelstein person, and how exactly is she qualified to explain to me these mysteries that she herself has just pointed out are as old as the hills?

Who I am, in fact, is a person not entirely unlike you: a woman who is navigating the trials and travails of living and working alongside members of the opposite sex in an epoch that is quite unlike any that has come along previously (which is, of course, pretty standard for epochs – we're not *that* special). I, too, spend far too much time trying to speculate about what messages men are trying to convey to me, only to often find that I am way off the mark because I have made the cardinal error of assuming that they are always communicating in the same way that I do.

Like you, I fall in and out of love with men from time to time and wonder why and what and how it happens; I, too, negotiate tricky domestic issues. I worry about sex and I struggle to negotiate the difficult problems that crop up when I try to get along being a woman in a man's world – and, sometimes, in dealing with men when the roles are reversed and they find themselves in mine. Sure, I am far from the

first person to write on this topic, but the rapid evolution of society – particularly over the last decade – means that there are a lot of fresh and new ways for men and women to clash over what is, in essence, an ancient conflict.

And thus, I'm here to offer you a thorough examination of the issues that dog our everyday lives from the front lines, so to speak. I didn't purchase a Ph.D. on the Internet in order to do this; rather, I have learned from my experiences, from the experiences of others, and from the immense glut of information on this rich topic that the media, in all its various forms, constantly bombards us with, claiming to freshly explain human behaviour to us on a daily basis, whether it's based on careful scientific research or hearsay or surveys conducted by companies that manufacture birth control pills. We have so much information that it is easy to feel overloaded, to feel resigned to the fact that there is no hope of even beginning to understand the half of the population with sex chromosomes different to our own. It is easiest of all to just accept defeat.

I do have sincere sympathy for those of you who feel defeated – I, too, have thrown up my hands once in a while and sworn that I was giving up ever trying to understand the opposite sex. But I have never been able to commit to such a policy for more than five minutes. Resigning yourself to considering men or women inexplicable is tantamount to accepting that you are incapable of being civilised. I don't think that is acceptable, and I don't think that you do either.

So in order for us all to avoid being unacceptable, I am taking the reins and making the project a little bit easier for you. I have boiled the big questions down into one handy volume that you can carry in your handbag, read on the train, discuss with your friends. If you feel especially confident – and I hope that you will, after you finish reading this – you can even leave this book in a tempting, suggestive

fashion on a coffee table or nightstand. Your boyfriend or husband might just be moved to pick it up when you've left the room to slip into something a little more comfortable, and he, too, might find that he appreciates the opportunity to become a little more enlightened.

My approach, you see, is an even-handed one: both women and men are sometimes at fault for being difficult and strange towards the opposite sex; neither women nor men can be consistently blamed for the awkwardness and misunderstanding. So no one is let off the hook. Like it or not, unless we join strict, gender-segregated religious orders, we do have to live with each other, and making half of the population out to be scapegoats or suggesting that one half must constantly manipulate the other is simply not the way forward. Unless the way forward involves you being rather bitter and maybe even a bit lonely.

Now, there are two more small points that I feel I must emphasise before we move onwards and upwards. First of all, I am going to make quite a lot of sweeping generalisations in these pages, as one must do when writing a book that engages in a broad discussion of one of the world's most complicated topics. Sometimes the generalisations will annoy you. 'This does not precisely reflect my personal experience,' you may find yourself thinking, frowning your brow. 'What is she talking about? This is poppycock!'

It is just not a good idea for you to get all agitated like that. Please realise, instead, that in this volume I am not seeking to offer a panacea for all of the troubles of contemporary gender relations and the associated issues of discrimination and anger and the like. That's a giant task that I'd like to think I might be able to play a small part in at some point in my career, but it is a task that no one woman can shoulder entirely. Nor should any of us be expected to. Here, instead, I am hoping to offer you a bit of elucidation

of some of those things that you've never quite been able to put your finger on, combined with some food for thought that will give you interesting things to talk about with your friends, your family, your colleagues – and, even if you have to do it via the stealthy techniques described above, I hope that this book will offer you something, once you are feeling quite brave, to share with your partners.

Ultimately, of course, all forms of relationships between men and women are unique and special (we will discuss this more thoroughly throughout the book) and I don't see my role here as one that is dictatorial so much as it is, I hope, suggestive, stimulating, and, once in a while, provocative – albeit never gratuitous. And I am well aware that although my thoughts on these issues are being published in old-school book form in the first instance, it is being published in an era of interactive media. So let's interact: if you do disagree with me, or you think that I've missed something, or you have questions, or you would generally like to engage in further conversation about some of the topics that I touch on here, then I hope that you will feel free to send me an email, to jean@hinglishandfemalese.com. I will write back.

My second caveat is this: at heart, this book is a work of non-fiction. I am happy to admit, however, that I have changed names and details in many of the stories within, sometimes in order to make an illustration work better and sometimes simply in order to make my anecdotes sufficiently ambiguous so that the people who have inspired some of my best tales from the front lines of relating (thanks, folks) get to maintain their dignity. And also because I would prefer that no one sues me. Actually, it is mostly because I would prefer that no one sues me.

Are you ready to get started? And by 'get started', I mean: are you ready to change the way that you relate to the opposite sex for ever, and for the better? You know you want to.

1

Communication: Hinglish, Femalese, and Other Ways We Get Our Wires Crossed

Debates have raged for time immemorial about the crucial differences in the ways that men and women communicate. A wide variety of reasons for these differences are cited, without, of course, any kind of definitive conclusion being reached. Resolution is rather difficult, I am sure, in light of the fact that representatives of both sexes are engaged in this particular debate. We can't agree about how men and women communicate differently because we can't communicate with each other. Isn't it just the very catchiest of Catch-22s?

Quite simply there are a multitude of opinions on the matter. A selection, a variety, a myriad, a plethora.

Or, as I might say if I was a man writing this book, a shedload.

One school of thought holds that women utter far more words than men because, much like our magnificent bosoms, the language centres in our brains are better developed than those which our male counterparts possess. If it is indeed the case, one might well surmise that is in part because, back in the days of yore in which we ('we' being humankind, that is) were hunters and

gatherers, women did lots of chatting when they were out collecting plant-based food (wouldn't you need to gossip to pass the time during the tedious process of collecting seeds? I know I would) while the strong, silent menfolk trampled their manly way through the forests, stalking woolly mammoths or tigers or dinosaurs for a nice Sunday roast – the pursuit of which, of course, would only have been derailed by idle chit-chat which might have scared the prey off.

Of course, other very intelligent people who have studied human development from other perspectives have said that this is nonsense. Subscribers to another key school of thought maintain that the differences in the way that gender defines our use of language come down to social conditioning. We simply expect women to say more because of generations (and generations, and generations) of social and cultural gender stereotyping that all of the feminism in the world has not, it seems, been able to shift. In any case, regardless of the actual grounds of our assumptions, we tend to be consistent in our expectations: when we at our laziest when it comes to generalising about gender and communication, we anticipate that our daughters will be chatty to a fault, while we expect that our sons, like their fathers, will be quiet and taciturn and most comfortable communicating through a simple system of monosyllables and the occasional grunt.

For these reasons, women take their responsibility for communication so seriously that sometimes – OK, whenever possible – they even speak on behalf of their male friends and relatives. I, personally, have found that this is in particular a very useful technique when a consensus needs to be reached – something which I am sure that all of my ex-boyfriends will be happy to confirm. But it is not always quite so effective when a particular circumstance

actually requires that a range of opinions needs to be surveyed. Indeed, my own experience has shown that although I may know in my heart of hearts that I am always right, sometimes the men in my life are happier for me to at least pretend that I am not totally inflexible.

Now, just to clarify, it can be argued that this assumption that girls talk more than boys is not just something that is based on rumour and innuendo. For example, I seem to recall from my Introduction to Psychology course at university (I knew it would come in handy eventually) that younger brothers of older sisters are likely to begin speaking at a slightly older-than-average age than the, er, average child, simply because there's no reason for the wee chaps to give it a shot on their own when they can depend on the women in their lives – their big sisters, their mothers, their talkative girlfriends at nursery school – to serve as their official spokeswomen. No offense to my gentleman readers, but I think that we can all agree that this is rather lazy of the wee chaps. Although, on second thought, maybe we should regard it as marvelously efficient. After all, it permits you boys to devote the time that your big sisters spend negotiating television privileges and fish finger dinners with your parents to the development of your obsession with supporting the sports teams that will give you reason to get up in the morning for the rest of your lives.

You could study this for a lifetime (er, lots of people do, of course. They are called social scientists), but for our purposes here – a bit of enlightenment, some food for thought – we're going to consider what I believe are the four most important ways in which men and women differ in their use of language.

Dearest gentlemen readers, here is a bulleted list of them for your reference, because (as I will explain shortly in

greater detail, which your gender may make you inclined to skim), that is exactly how you like it:

1. Direct versus indirect speech
2. Questions
3. Tonality
4. Disclosing and eliciting personal information

Darling lady readers, I will now go on and carefully expand these four points, in keeping with our tendency to prefer things to be detailed and long-winded and explained in a thorough manner.

It is important to note that actual scientists have spent hours working in research labs substantiating these key differences. I admire their dedication, and indeed their admirable applications of the scientific method. I, on the other hand, found that it was possible to test and confirm these four assumptions not through science but simply through dedicated hours of eavesdropping on random couples attempting to have private conversations in restaurants, on buses, at the supermarket, in queues – despite my intrusive, lurking presence. And I also pretended to go to the ladies' a lot when I was out on dates with perfectly nice men so that I could take copious notes. Sorry, random couples. Heartfelt apologies, perfectly nice men (who think I have an abnormally small bladder). But I'm not too sorry: after all, my nosiness and note-taking was for the service of the greater good, even if I did destroy the atmosphere in circumstances that could have otherwise led to some very romantic interludes.

Direct versus indirect speech

Various studies conducted by people in lab coats have found on a number of occasions that the average man utters as

much as a staggering sixty-five per cent fewer words than the average woman on the average day. (Statistics on how often men make meaningful grunty noises in lieu of uttering actual words are, alas, not available. I will gladly welcome applications from female readers who would like to volunteer to collect mumble-data from their male partners for the second edition of this book.) With this kind of strict limitation, I think it makes sense that men employ more direct forms of speech than their female counterparts – much like living with limited funds requires one not to indulge in excessive spending, you don't want to mess around with superfluous adjectives and fancy metaphors if you are dealing with such a tiny supply of words.

Women, on the other hand, seem to have utterances to spare, and thus we often slosh our word-wealth about with the kind of careless insouciance that is usually associated with the manner in which celebrity heiresses dole out pink champagne. This approach will often extend to written communication as well – when left to our own devices, women tend to have far higher rates of waffling when it comes to writing. In fact, had a man written this book, I rather suspect, it wouldn't be a book: it would cover two sides of an A4 sheet of paper. Or, if written by an especially pithy gent, a Post-it note.

Because of this intrinsic conflict between being short- and long-winded, we often find ourselves in circumstances where men and women who are supposedly speaking the same language can express the same thoughts in completely different ways. One could say that in any given language, there are two distinct dialects: men speak 'Himglish,' women speak 'Femalese'. To understand better how this works – or doesn't work at all – I find it handy to eavesdrop on a few conversations between Jonathan and Alice.

(Jonathan's mother is coming to visit; both Jonathan and Alice are aware that the living room needs a bit of a spit and polish.)

Jonathan: We need to clean the lounge. My mother is coming to visit.

(Femalese interpretation: My mother hates you and thinks that you are a slovenly housekeeper.)

Alice: Jonathan! The living room is in a shocking condition! I cannot bear to look at it anymore, it fills my heart with woe. Why do you leave your trainers by the sofa like this? Do you think that the room is a rubbish tip? Do you not understand how mortifying it will be for both of us if your mother sees our home in this disastrous state?

(Hinglish translation: We need to clean the house. Especially you.)

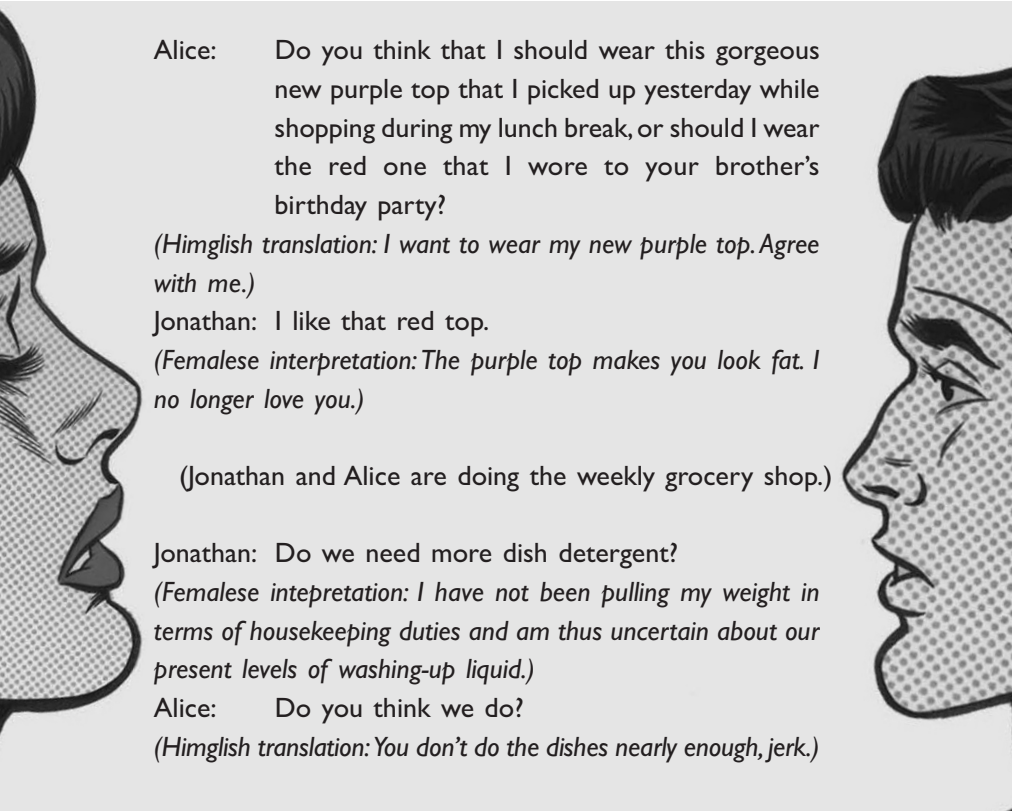
(Jonathan and Alice are selecting outfits to wear to a dinner party.)

Alice: You wear that shirt a lot, don't you? You never wear the pink shirt that I got you for your birthday.

(Hinglish translation: Change your shirt, dude.)

Jonathan: I like this shirt.

(Femalese interpretation: I dislike the shirt that you got me for my birthday and my refusal to wear it this evening is evidence not only of my poor taste in clothing but also of a general disregard for your feelings and our relationship; I am attempting to tell you that I want to break up with you.)



Alice: Do you think that I should wear this gorgeous new purple top that I picked up yesterday while shopping during my lunch break, or should I wear the red one that I wore to your brother's birthday party?

(Himglish translation: I want to wear my new purple top. Agree with me.)

Jonathan: I like that red top.

(Femalese interpretation: The purple top makes you look fat. I no longer love you.)

(Jonathan and Alice are doing the weekly grocery shop.)

Jonathan: Do we need more dish detergent?

(Femalese interpretation: I have not been pulling my weight in terms of housekeeping duties and am thus uncertain about our present levels of washing-up liquid.)

Alice: Do you think we do?

(Himglish translation: You don't do the dishes nearly enough, jerk.)

Of course, conversations in Himglish and Femalese don't just happen between couples like Jonathan and Alice; the languages are employed in non-relationship contexts as well. I give you the following cases in point:

Working

Himglish: You're fired.

Femalese: I feel that our goals are no longer in accordance and I regret to have to say that you will want to start seeking alternative employment, perhaps in another field in which your particular skill set might be more suitable.