I find it hard to think of an audience who would not enjoy or benefit from reading this book. Most of us are involved in conversations on a daily basis. We have all been in some that we have thoroughly enjoyed and others that were awkward or where the conversation kept breaking down. The reason for this, at least in part, can be understood from an analysis of conversational style. The way we say things, the linguistic devices and strategies we use, help signal to others how our words should be understood. We begin to acquire these strategies at a very young age in whatever cultural, subcultural, social context we are raised. When talking with people from a different social background, where the expected linguistic devices and strategies differ, misunderstandings arise and “misevaluations” are often the result. Why is he so pushy? She’s so cold and aloof. These people are kind of hostile. Tannen addresses these issues while laying out and demonstrating a model for analysing conversational discourse in this new edition of her 1984 foundational work, Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends. Tannen’s primary source of data for this work is a conversation that she and five other friends had over Thanksgiving dinner in 1978, which, with their help and permission, she later “microanalyzed.” The results and insights are yours to enjoy.

In the preface, Tannen describes the changes she has made to her original work for this edition:

In preparing this book for reissue, I have added a final chapter indicating how the ideas presented here have evolved and been expanded in subsequent work, no part of which has fundamentally changed or undermined them. This new final chapter replaces several appendixes listing further readings that accompanied the first edition. I have also renamed and reframed the first two chapters without substantially changing their contents. I have made no substantive changes within the analysis sections but I have updated references, slightly changed introductory or concluding passages, and revised wording to enhance clarity.

Linguists and students alike will appreciate chapters one and two, the introduction and theoretical background for understanding conversational style. Tannen explains the important concepts and contributions of other scholars to this area of discourse in a clear, readable way. She also introduces the two major stylistic strategies that underlie her findings in this study: involvement
and considerateness. (She and two of her friends, all from New York City, exhibited a “high-involvement” strategy, whereas the two friends from California and the one from England tended more towards a “high-considerateness” strategy.) Additionally, in these chapters as well as in the Appendix, Tannen gives practical information about how she conducted her study so that others can follow her methods to do their own research. (For those not so theoretically inclined, Tannen wrote another book explaining conversational style, That’s Not What I Meant! (1984), using brief quotes and anecdotes from a wide range of sources.)

Chapter three gives us details about the Thanksgiving event and provides background information on the friends who participated. Two hours and forty minutes of conversation were taped that evening, portions of which can be heard audibly today via Tannen’s website, www.deborahtannen.com.

In chapter four, Tannen presents and elucidates nine linguistic devices she found operating in their conversation: Personal versus impersonal style, the enthusiasm constraint, the machine-gun question, overlap and pace, mutual revelation, bonding through high-involvement devices, expressive phonology and intonation, persistence, and tolerance for noise versus silence. She illustrates each device generously with examples. It’s a fun and enlightening section.

Chapter five covers another major aspect of casual conversation, narrative strategies. Topics include: Story rounds, contrasting narrative strategies, expressive versus understated evaluation and response, getting to the point, meaning in intonation, cooperative versus impatient prompting, and what the point can be. Again, very enlightening and enjoyable to read.

Chapter six delves into one of the most distinctive aspects of a person’s conversation style, humor, in this chapter entitled, “Irony and Joking.” She explains her topic thus:

Through intonation, pace, voice quality, and nonverbal signals, a speaker can frame an utterance or string of utterances as ‘not meant literally.’ Such stylized usage can range from sarcasm (in which the intent is not humorous, and often hostile), to irony (which might elicit a smile or chuckle), to a joke, in which the main purpose is to entertain.

Chapter seven is a helpful summary. In it Tannen lists all the features of conversational style, reviews how they were used by the participants, and compares the participants to each other by placing them on scales for different features, such as, “subtle humor/gross humor.”

Chapter eight would have been her original conclusion to the book and is entitled, “The Study of Coherence in Discourse.” I personally found it a bit confusing. It appears to be a call to arms of sorts, guiding future researchers (including herself) to “focus on elucidating the relationships among various discourse genres and that a good starting place is an understanding of the relationship between ordinary conversation and literary discourse.” She proceeds to present features that she sees as being common to both:

- Rhythm
- Surface linguistic features
- Contextualization
Chapter nine was newly written for this edition. In it she talks about how her ideas and methods from twenty years ago have evolved and expanded in her work up to the present. It’s brief, but very useful. The three theoretical frameworks that drive this type of analysis for her are: (1) the ambiguity and polysemy of conversational strategies; (2) the interplay of power and solidarity; and (3) the linguistic framing of meaning in interaction. It is followed by a brief overview of books she has written since.

The back matter is all very user-friendly, and you will want to keep it around as a reference tool, especially if you are inspired to conduct similar research yourself. And I hope you are. And if you do, please publish it so I can read it. I’m definitely interested!

- Appendix 1 Key to Transcription Conventions
- Appendix 2 Steps in Analyzing Conversation
- Appendix 3 Participants in Thanksgiving Dinner
- Appendix 4 The Flow of Topics (chart of conversation tapes listing: digital counter number, topic, participants, and how topic came up)
- References (10 pages)
- Author and Subject Indexes

Quite honestly, this book and any similar research should be very useful to all of us who work with colleagues coming from different regions, cultures, or subcultures. (I would love for someone [or a group of someones] to conduct a study comparing the conversational style features for all the countries represented in our organization.) Reading and discussing this book in the context of a larger group would be very rewarding and informative. Each office library and/or personnel office would be wise to keep a copy for interested (or troubled!) people to refer to. The fieldworker could find it helpful for understanding how to better communicate with members of their host language. Extended periods of culture shock might even be mitigated. Of course, as it was designed, it could also be used as a model for researching the conversational discourse of any language.