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Brain Differences, Language, and Bad Directions

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I don't know what people did before Google Maps. Fight even more about directions, I guess. As it is, even with the power of GPS and satellite mapping, my husband and I still manage to fight over directions--with the primary problem being how one gives directions. An example:

Me: We need to turn right on Oak Street. It's about half a mile up at the light, and there's a gas station on one corner and that awful Mexican restaurant that didn't sell margaritas is on the other corner.

Him: Turn right on Oak Street.

The problem? Well, here's how each of us would respond:

Me: But where's Oak Street? How am I supposed to recognize it?

Him: What? Stop. That's way too much information. Just tell me where we're supposed to turn.

It turns out that there may be more to our differences in direction technique than the ability to annoy the other. It seems that researchers have found more solid evidence¹ regarding the different ways that girls and boys process language. Let me explain. No . . . there is too much. Let me sum up. In a series of tests involving separate visual and auditory presentations of words, girls showed more activity in the language areas of the brain--which in turn are associated with abstract thinking through language. The boys who performed best, however, showed greatest activity in either the visual centers of the brain (for the visual tasks) or the auditory areas of the brains (for the auditory tasks).

So what does it mean? Well, it does serve as more evidence that certain language-oriented learning might be best taught to boys and girls by different methods. Among other things, the researchers concluded that:

Given boys' sensory approach, boys might be more effectively evaluated on knowledge gained from lectures via oral tests and on knowledge gained by reading via written tests. For girls, whose language processing appears more abstract in approach, these different testing methods would appear unnecessary.

Researchers are still unsure as to whether this difference continues into adulthood, but if it does, it might be partly responsible for the different ways that men and women communicate. (As in my directions example.) Therefore, women may deal with some questions as an abstract language-oriented question that can benefit from context, whereas men are using a completely different approach and find the added content annoying.

Or it could be that my husband and I really need to work on being better navigators.

1. Science Daily, "Boys' And Girls' Brains Are Different: Gender Differences In Language Appear Biological." March 5, 2008.<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/03/080303120346.htm> (accessed March 6, 2008).

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