

Summary Statement by Deborah Tannen
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: I am honored and grateful to have the privilege of addressing you this morning. I am university professor and professor of linguistics at Georgetown, and have published twenty-two books, half of them for scholarly audiences and half for general audiences. Among the latter, three have been New York Times best sellers. One of those three, You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, was on the New York Times best seller list for nearly four years, including eight months as #1, and has been translated into thirty-one languages. In addition to my academic writing, I frequently write for magazines and newspapers, and appear on television and radio news and information shows. I would like to speak this morning about how early support from the National Endowment for the Humanities has helped me help people in their everyday lives. I hope that my testimony will give you an idea of the enormous difference that can be made by relatively modest NEH grants.

I have been on the Georgetown University faculty since receiving my Phd in linguistics in 1979. That very first year I received an NEH summer grant. My annual salary as a beginning assistant professor was \$17,000, not enough for me to live on in Washington, DC. I would have had to spend the summer teaching in order to pay my rent, had I not been fortunate enough to receive an NEH Summer Stipend. It was not a very large amount of money: \$2000, if I remember correctly. But it made it possible for me to spend the summer doing research and, maybe most important, it was an invaluable vote of confidence in the research I was doing on the relationship between speaking and writing.

In 1985 I directed a Linguistic Institute at Georgetown, which was attended by six hundred scholars from around the country and the world. I also received a grant from NEH to direct a concurrent Institute that brought to the site of the larger institute twenty-five college and university faculty who taught linguistics-related courses in states from New Hampshire to Hawaii. The theme of the NEH-supported Institute was "Humanistic Approaches to Linguistic Analysis." This made it possible to broaden the impact of the larger institute, through college teachers, to innumerable college students across the country. Crucially, this gave support to a kind of linguistics that is concerned with the role of language in everyday lives--the subfield of linguistics that is most relevant to, and most popular among, undergraduates.

That same summer I received a small grant from the DC Humanities Council, which is funded by NEH's Division of State Programs, to mount a public presentation about communication between women and men. This is a paradigm case of the huge rewards gleaned from a very small amount of money made available by NEH. Thanks to free publicity provided when I and several colleagues from the Institute faculty appeared on a local radio show, a wide range of community members attended the public presentation and benefitted from the expertise of a panel of faculty already present at the Institute. We were able to pay small stipends to actors from a local theater group to dramatize scenarios representing typical conversations between women and men. The overwhelming response we received from the audience was, for me, the first external evidence of the wide appeal of a linguistic approach to understanding communication between men and women, which led to my writing the book that became the four-year best seller You Just Don't Understand. All this for the very modest grant of \$3500 from the DC Community Humanities Council.

The next year I received a Basic Research Grant from NEH to develop in more depth my research on the relationship between the language of conversation and the language of literature. This may seem like a technical topic, but it allowed me to deepen my understanding of the poetic power of everyday conversation, and its ability to involve speakers and listeners. I want to emphasize that the years I spent studying technical aspects of the language of conversation gave me the scholarly basis for understanding how conversation works, without which I would not have been able to translate my research into books, articles, and media appearances that everyone can understand and use to improve their lives.

I have tried to repay the NEH by serving on a review panel and by regularly reviewing grant proposals sent to me from numerous different divisions. I would like to emphasize this contribution to the work of the Endowment which may not be readily obvious: innumerable professors take time to review proposals without pay, and panel members receive hundreds of applications to read carefully and rate, thus making a donation of untold hours of their time, in addition to the days they devote to taking part in panel meetings. I mention this because it is one of many ways that the Endowment's work is enhanced way beyond the comparatively modest financial investment made by American taxpayers.

When people think of the humanities, they tend to think of the fields of history, literary criticism, classics, and so on. You may be surprised to be hearing support for NEH from a scholar from the field of linguistics. Indeed, there is a more formal type of linguistics which can be supported by the National Science Foundation, and there is a great deal of psychological research into human relationships that is supported by the National Institutes of Mental Health. But scholars who do research like mine -- approaching language as a humanistic enterprise, a matter of human beings talking to each other in their daily lives -- have few places to turn other than the National Endowment for the Humanities. The amounts of money we need for our research are very small compared to the requirements of scientific laboratories and large-scale psychological studies. Yet the impact in terms of enlightening human understanding is enormous.

Everyone is aware of the importance of the sciences in improving lives. But, as the great Princeton physicist Freeman Dyson writes in the current issue of the New York Review of Books, "Science is a creative interaction of observation with imagination." The United States has been the source of global innovation not because we are a nation of technicians; what informs our technology is our imagination and creativity, and these are the domain of the humanities.

In my testimony today, I hope to have showed, by recounting my own experience, how NEH support -- relatively small grants to a young scholar -- was crucial in providing time to further my research, in giving me early evidence of the broad popular interest in that research, and by constituting a vote of confidence that translates into more creative work. I have told of my personal experience to underscore that the NEH is a precious source of support for work that has power to touch the lives of every American, support that is not available from any other source. I am personally grateful for the continued funding by the United States Congress for the National Endowment for the Humanities. In fact, I will end by thanking you for the most precious gift that any individual can receive -- although it is a gift that cannot be guaranteed by any granting institution but of which I am certain I am not the only beneficiary: It was at the NEH-supported Institute for college faculty which I directed in 1985 that I met my husband. For that greatest of all gifts, even if it was given unintentionally, I would like to thank you.