



Universitetet
i Stavanger

FAKULTET FOR UTDANNINGSVITENSKAP OG HUMANIORA

BACHELOROPPGAVE

Studieprogram: Engelsk språk og litteratur - bachelorstudium

Kandidatnummer: 2514

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Tittel på bacheloroppgaven:

The use of "tentative language" in female and male speech in an American television-series.

Antall ord: 5952

Antall vedlegg/annet: 0

Stavanger, 16.05.2022

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1. Introduction

Even though one of the most prevalent differences we can find regarding the use of linguistic traits are most likely to be seen amongst individuals, one can also argue that this can be seen between different groups of speakers. Although this is a complex case, Meyerhoff (2019) emphasizes that “to really understand the social meaning of any instance of language variation, we need to start from the particular while simultaneously keeping an eye on the broader context of that variation.” (Meyerhoff, 2019, p.226). One could interpret this in the way that every social variable can influence linguistic variation, and that shows the importance of exploring all aspects of linguistics before putting it into a larger social context.

1.1 Objectives

This bachelor thesis will investigate an element from gender linguistic studies with the help of a real time trend study with multiple members. The specific area the thesis has chosen to focus on is differences between female and male speech. The thesis will try to discover if the principle claim that female speakers use a more tentative language than male speakers, that is if they are expressing themselves in a tentative way, still have any relevancy in the modern American society. To accomplish this, the research will include a further look into the linguistic subgroups that can be characterized as tentative, and what sort of characteristics that classifies those. Further, a data collection from an American television show will be analyzed, to try to discover the frequency and use of these pragmatic particles. The research will also to some extent try to investigate the functions behind the use of them. Additionally, the thesis will attempt to find out if there has been a change in the use of these linguistic constructions over the last two decades, to further understand if these claimed differences are increasing or decreasing.

1.2 Hypothesis

The early hypothesis on this matter is that claims made in earlier research, for instance in Lakoff's study from 1973 and Holmes's study from 1990, is no longer as relevant and that the use of tentative linguistic features is close to equal between female and male speakers. It is also expected to find a slight difference from the two time periods, since one assumption is that the differences keep decreasing the closer we get to current time. The reason for this hypothesis is the belief that changes in the society regarding gender differences has influenced the distribution of the linguistic features.

2. Theory

When Robin T. Lakoff published her book *Language and Woman`s place* in 1973, the situation in America regarding gender equality was quite different than what it is today. When putting it in to an historical context, her book was published only a year after the Education Amendments was announced, with that law including that nobody in the United States should be discriminated from participating in any sorts of education (Women`s History Milestones, 2022, para. June 23, 1972). This makes some of the statements made by Lakoff (1973) more relevant for that time period. For instance, she argued that the language female speakers used at that time was closely related to the fact that they were discriminated against (Lakoff ,1973, p.46), she ended up calling this language “women`s language”. She also notes that this language includes all grammatical features of English, and that it varies from men`s speech in for instance the selection and regularity of lexical items and intonation (Lakoff,1973, p.49), to mention some.

In contrast, the New Zealand sociolinguist Janet Holmes did a more descriptive analysis on the manner about two decades later. In her paper *Hedges and boosters in women`s and men`s speech* (1990), Holmes contradicts Lakoff`s claims about women`s use of tentative language to some degree. She did so by emphasizing that although the use of the pragmatic particles is still unequal between female and male speakers, the functions as well as the motives behind the use of those are not due to uncertainty or that female speakers feel inferior. Her view on the matter was that the motivation behind the use of what Lakoff (1973) called “Women`s language” was to declare opinions with confidence and signal solidarity (Holmes, 1990, pp.201-202). This is an interesting contradiction to Lakoff`s view and illustrates that there can be other reasons than discrimination for the indicated differences in the use of tentative linguistic features.

2.1 Relevance

The theories mentioned above fit into the project chosen because they are some of the leading research done in the field of gender linguistics. Whilst the data from Lakoff was from the early 1970 American society, the more “recent” study from Holmes was from 1990. However, most of the participants in the data Holmes collected, was speakers from New Zealand (Holmes, 1990, p.197), and her findings still shows to some extent that Lakoff`s claims were

about correct. To mention one, she found that the distribution of tag questions amongst her participants were found to be 59 times used by female speakers whilst 47 times used amongst male speakers (Holmes, 1990, p. 197). That means that on some of the data, Holmes did not find contradictions against Lakoff's claims, they just disagreed about the motivation behind the use of the tentative linguistic features alongside with the linguistic features functions in general. What is also important to mention when putting these studies up against each other is that there can also be differences between those two geographical areas, both when it comes to gender equality in the society, but also in the distribution of certain linguistic features amongst the speakers. For instance, New Zealand gave women the right to vote already in 1893 (Parker & Donnelly, 2020, para.3), whilst in America, women did not get the right to vote before 1920 (Women's History Milestones, 2022, para. Aug. 18, 1920). Although those differences are preceding, it still indicates that there can be general differences when it comes to gender equality in the two areas.

Someone who did find contradictions against Lakoff's claims, was Dubois & Crouch (1975), they did research on the use of tag questions in a professional meeting and found that men used all the tag questions that was collected (p.293). This shows that even in early research, and even around the time where Lakoff (1973) published her book, that there were conflicting results and quite divided views on the matter. This paper will thus also include research and articles from other scholars to provide different views and findings on the topic. During this study, it was also difficult to find new research on this exact manner with data collected from America and that is why I found it important to be focusing on the modern American society, with data from 2005 and 2021.

2.2 "Tentative" language

This paper has chosen to refer to the linguistic features included in the research as "tentative" or "tentative language"; this needs further explanation. To start with we must investigate what can be classified as "tentative language", according to Leaper & Robnett (2011) it can include several linguistic features, like for instance, tag questions, hedges and intensifiers (p.130). Additionally, it is important to add that the linguistic features mentioned above can serve many other meanings and functions other than what was just mentioned. Leaper & Robnett (2011) also states that the phrase that Lakoff (1973) used to refer to the use of those exact linguistic features, "women's language", accidentally extend the view that these features are

essentially female (pp. 129-130). They explain that to avoid continuing doing this, that they choose to refer to the linguistic features as “tentative language” (Leaper & Robnett, 2011, p.130). In other words, “tentative language” is what Lakoff (1973) referred to as “women’s language”, only described with a more gender-neutral term. During the study, I have also seen that this has become a widely used term amongst scholars investigating Lakoff’s study. On that note this paper will also refer to “tentative language” when discussing the linguistic features used in this research.

3. Methodology

The methods used in this research are observing already existing data and collecting the use of some of the relevant linguistic features available. Whilst both Lakoff (1973) and Holmes (1990) included hesitations, rising intonation, tag questions, hedges and intensifier in their studies, this research is forced to selected only a few of those due to the scope of the thesis to be represented in the findings.

For this research, the distribution of less factual hedges ‘sort of/kind of’, and ‘I think’, tag questions alongside with discourse markers ‘Like’ and ‘you know’ will be looked at. I have also added one feature that previously mentioned studies did not include, that will be the insertable hesitation, more specifically the filled pauses ‘uh’ and ‘uhm’. The reason I chose to include this feature is primarily that it is used quite frequently and can therefore perhaps help us see if features that shows indecisiveness are more visible amongst one or the other group of speakers. Also, because it can be viewed as an expression of uncertainty from the speaker (Brennan & Williams, 1995; Fox Tree, 2007¹ cited in Laserna, et al., 2014, p.329) and therefore can go under the category “tentative”. I expect that I will not find much use of some of the linguistic features chosen, but this will however still be represented in the findings alongside with trying to understand why these particles are not frequently used in the chosen data.

¹ Fox Tree, 2007 was unavailable, thus the use of secondary citation.

3.1 Description of linguistic features

According to Trask (1993) a tag question is a following question after a statement that helps us to request confirmation (p.275), these can have a lot of different functions and come in many different forms. Like for instance those tags that are grammatically independent are called “invariant tags” (Kimp, 2018, p.1). It can be useful to include invariant tag questions in this research, because they arguably are tags that function as a request for confirmation, and if that is the case they can be consider “tentative”. That is of course, depending on if they are used as a question after a statement. I will still include descriptive information of what type of tag questions is used by who in the findings.

Filled pauses on the other hand are when we are being irregular in our speech during a conversation and with ‘uhm’ and ‘um’ being the two filled pauses that are often used in the English language (Strassel, 2004² cited in Laserna, et al., 2014, p.329). Further, the term discourse markers are rather difficult to define, and it is noted that there is no clear definition on the term. However, one possible description can be that they “...are conventionalized, learned expressions that provide information about how the propositional content of messages should be interpreted.” (Fox Tree, 2010, p.278). This research will include ‘like’ and ‘you know’. At last, hedges are “An expression added to an utterance which permits the speaker to reduce her/his commitment to what she/he is saying:” (Trask, 1993, p.128). While these expressions can come in many different forms, some examples of this can be the use of ‘sort/kind of’ and ‘I think’, which will be included in the research.

The research does not include intensifiers as it involves different words that could have many diverse meanings and functions, so going through that would be a very time-consuming process and would force me to illuminate other important linguistic features. Same for intonation, as that would be a different type of study. However, the intonation used at the chosen linguistic features will be considered when trying to analyze the meaning and function behind the use of those.

² Strassel, 2004 was unavailable, thus the use of secondary citation.

3.2 Data

The data that was used in this research was a pre-published television show called Grey's Anatomy created by Shonda Rhimes. The show is divided into episodes of around 40 minutes each and 18 seasons airing from 2005 to 2021. Due to the scope of the thesis, only the first episode from season one called "A Hard Day's Night" from 2005 following the first episode from season 18 called "Here Comes the Sun" from 2021 have been analyzed and are used to represent the two different time periods. The manuscript from the first episode was written by Shonda Rhimes, whilst the manuscript from the second episode was written by Meg Marinis.

3.3 Explanation of choice of data

Although the data chosen is scripted and will therefore not reflect the speakers' natural linguistic behavior, it can perhaps still reflect the societies norms and expectations of language use in the two time periods. There has in previous years been published various studies on using scripted data from the media for analyzing language. One scholar that has done research on this manner, is Monika Bednarek (2012), she stressed the importance of analyzing language used in the media in her book *The language of Fictional Television*. For instance, she emphasizes that "...we may attribute particular significance to the words or actions of a character, because we know they have been selected for a particular reason by the author;" (Bednarek, 2012, p. 100). The fact that the chosen episodes have two different script writers can, according to this information from Bednarek (2012), be beneficial because we can see how two individuals perceive this manner in the two time periods, instead of just one. To add one element from my view, television shows are also easily accessible, and do not require any complicated preparation beforehand.

Furthermore, the choice of data was also done to be able to observe the acclaimed differences without any of the participants being aware of the linguistic study, that is, to avoid observer's paradox. It is also beneficial because the television-show chosen is presenting female and male speakers in both equal and unequal social positions, in informal and formal conversations as well as numerous states of mind. This has been considered beforehand, because then the distributions of the linguistic features can be observed in numerous different and unexpected situations and are not situational dependent.

3.4 Detailed outline

The research started with collecting the circa amount of speech produced by both female and male speakers in the two chosen episodes. The amount of speech produced by each of the groups were measured by a timer. The speech that was collected included small pauses between phrases when one person speaks continually, however it excluded facial expressions, nodding, laughter/crying or the times that the speakers had a chance to claim the conversational floor. This was done to see if there was an equal amount of speech produced by both female and male speakers and to avoid doing research on data where one group overrepresented the speech and therefore also presumably the use of linguistic features.

Due to the selection of two different episodes from two time periods, there was some variation amongst the speakers, however four of the speakers remained present in both episodes. I assume that the speakers were all adult native speakers of English. I could not find anything that suggested than any of the speakers had any other variety than American English, except from one speaker in episode 1 of season 18 who clearly had a British accent.

Table 3.1: Speakers and amount of speech produced in Episode 1, season 1 (2005).

	Female	Male	Total
Speakers	10	15	25
Amount of speech in minutes	14:53	14:14	29:07

Table 3.2: Speakers and amount of speech produced in Episode 1, season 18 (2021).

	Female	Male	Total
Speakers	16	17	33
Amount of speech in minutes	15:17	14:22	29:39

Table 3.1 and table 3.2 shows that in both episodes there were approximately an equal amount of speech produced by both female and male speakers. Although female speakers produced a

bit more speech than male speakers, in both episodes, the difference is not so great that we could expect that affecting the research. I did not find the fact that there were some more male speakers present in both data relevant, since the amount of speech produced was almost the same. For the main research, I examined and took notes on how many times each of the chosen linguistic features were used amongst both the female and male speakers. Each linguistic feature was also commented on regarding function and potential meaning as well as what gender was the speaker's addressee. Further, the data was analyzed by comparing and setting up the group of female speakers against the group of male speakers.

4. Findings

The findings that showed substantial differences will be displayed in a horizontal bar chart, whilst the findings that showed little to no use of in the data will be discussed separately. The findings section will be split into two, where the first part will show the findings from the data from 2005, whilst the second part will show findings from the data from 2021. The findings of each linguistic feature will be briefly commented on.

4.1 Findings from episode 1 season 1 (2005)

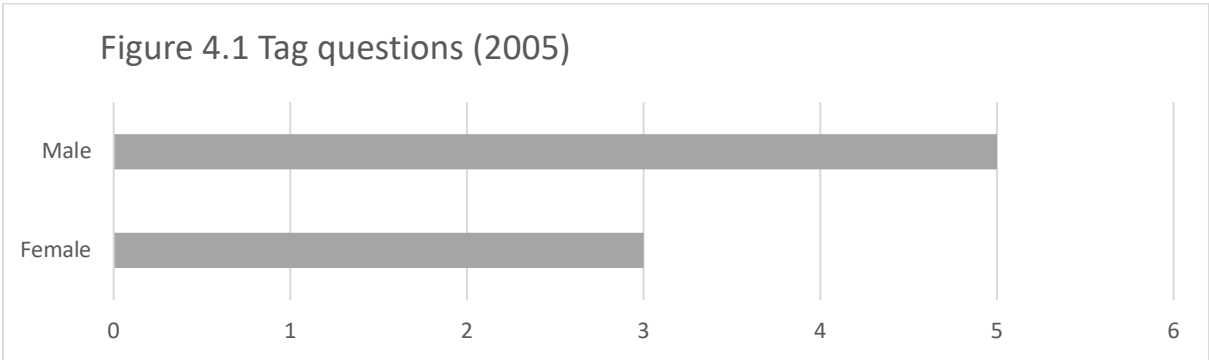


Figure 4.1: In this chart we can see that male speakers used tag questions a bit more than the female speakers. The male speakers used the invariant tag ‘, right?’ three times, whilst two of the tag questions were grammatically dependent ‘aren’t they?’ and ‘are you?’. All the three times they were used by female speakers they used the invariant tag ‘, right?’.

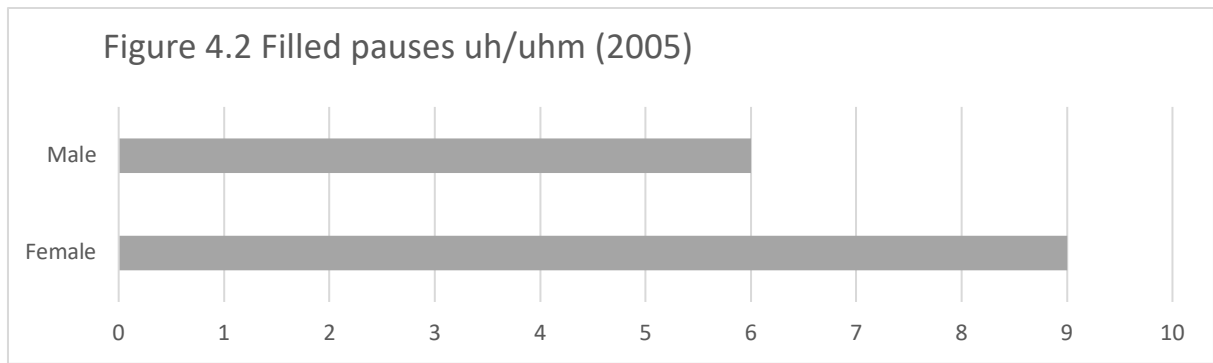


Figure 4.2: The filled pauses were counted each time it was used, even though it was used multiple times within one sentence or at the end of a sentence/ between sentences. Male speakers used the filled pause ‘uhm/um’ one time and ‘uh’ five times, six times in total. Female speakers used ‘um/uhm’ five times and ‘uh’ four times, that is, nine in total.

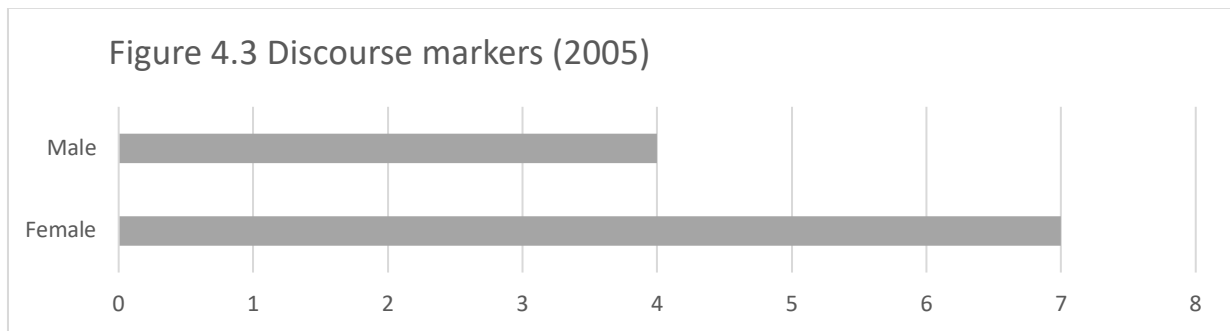


Figure 4.3: There was substantial less use of discourse markers by the male speakers in this data. By the selected discourse markers there was only seen use of ‘you know’ four times, meaning that the discourse markers ‘like’ were not used at all by male speakers in this data. ‘You know’ was used three times by female speakers whilst ‘like’ was used four times.

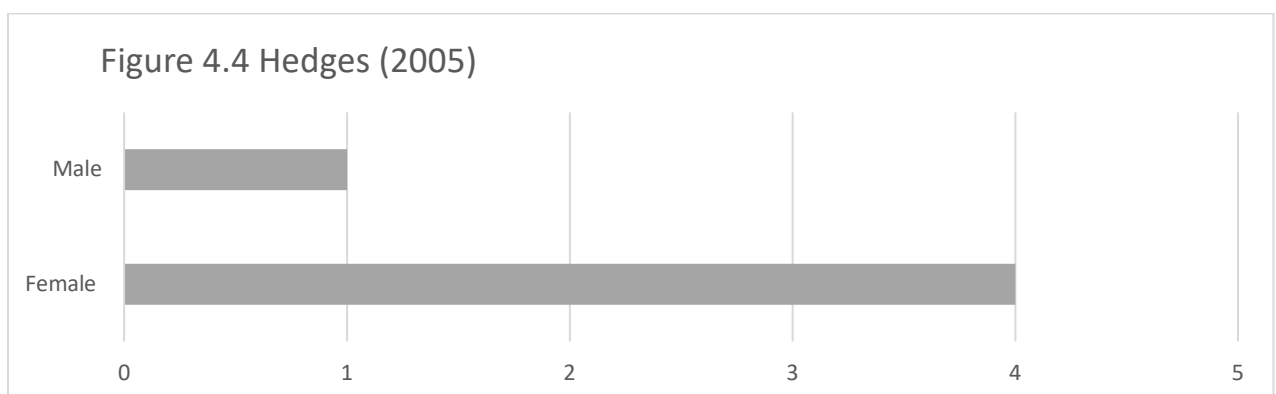


Figure 4.4: The male speaker used the informal way of the hedge by saying ‘kinda’. The only standard form of ‘kind of’ was used by a female, the same female speaker also used the

informal version 'kinda' later in the data. 'I think' was used two times by female speakers but was not seen used amongst male speakers in this data.

4.2 Findings from episode 1 season 18 (2021)

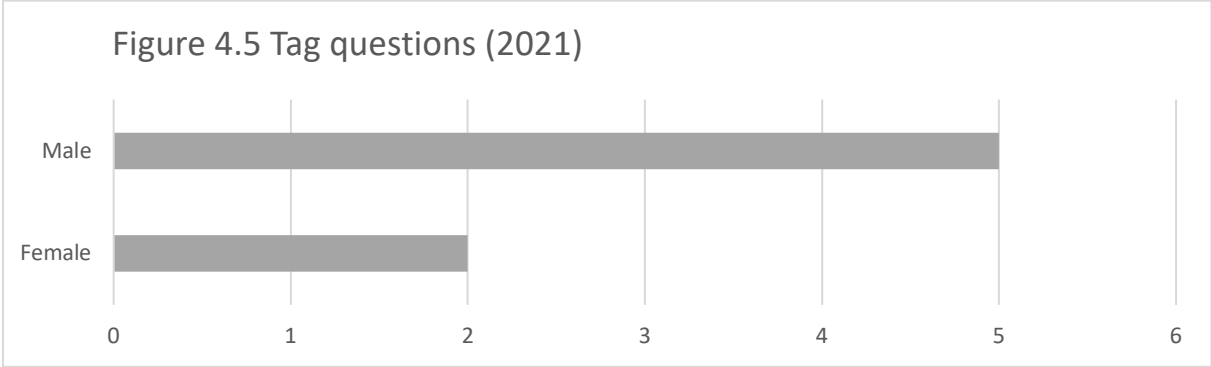


Figure 4.5: In this data there were also more use of tag questions amongst the male speakers, with three invariant tags ‘, right? / alright?’ and two grammatically dependent tags ‘doesn’t he?’ and ‘isn’t it?’. Amongst female speakers grammatically dependent tags ‘isn’t it?’ and ‘didn’t it?’ were collected.

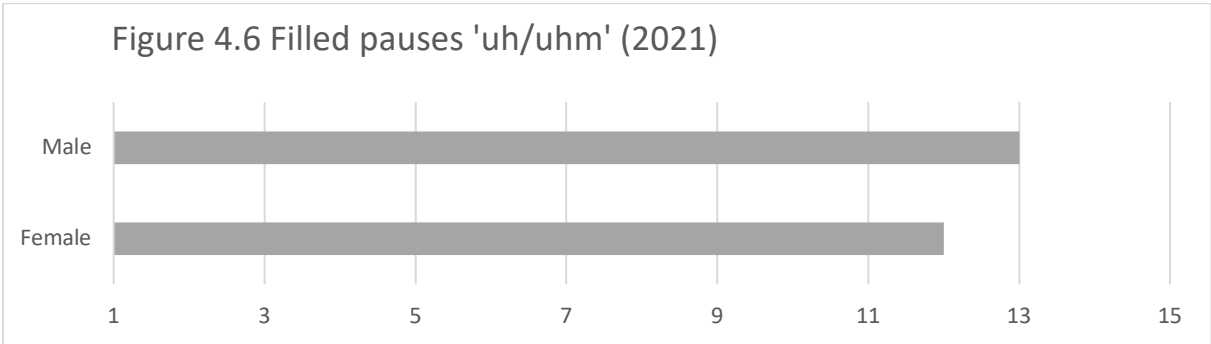


Figure 4.6: Male speakers used filled pauses thirteen times, with that including eight times the use of ‘uh’ and five times ‘um/uhm’. Female speakers used filled pauses twelve times, with that including nine times the use of ‘uh’ and three times ‘um/uhm’.

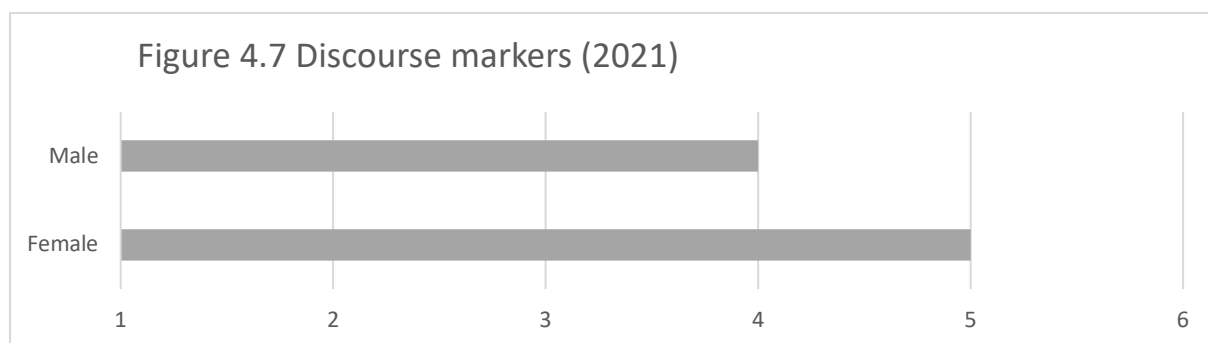


Figure 4.7: Male speakers used discourse markers four times. In this data there was found one use of the discourse marker ‘like’ alongside with three times the use of ‘you know’. Female speakers used discourse markers five times in this data, ‘like’ was alongside with male speakers used one time whilst ‘you know’ was used four times.

Note: there was no use of the hedges ‘kind of/sort of’ and ‘I think’ in this data.

5. Discussion

The findings collected from episode 1 season 1 (2005) shows that female speakers used the linguistic features representing “tentative language” 23 times whilst male speakers used them 16 times. This means that the information collected from this data did not contradict previous claims about women’s use of “tentative” language, at least not on the use of the chosen hedges, discourse markers and filled pauses ‘uh’ and ‘uhm’.

In contrast, from the findings collected from episode 1 season 18 (2021) female speakers used the linguistic features representing “tentative language” 19 times against male speakers that used them 22 times. Meaning that in total, the research found that male speakers used more of the “tentative” language on this data, specifically on the use of tag questions and filled pauses ‘uh’ and ‘uhm’. However, these numbers do not show the function behind the use of these linguistic features. By going through all the linguistic features in detail it would be easier to come closer to finding out if they were in fact used in a “tentative” way.

5.1 Tag questions

As briefly mentioned before, tag questions can have a lot of different meanings. One scholar who tried to categorize them in a detailed way was Holmes (1990), she explains that they can have an ‘epistemic modal’, ‘facilitative’, ‘softening’ or ‘challenging’ meaning (p.196). In this

discussion I would say that it is the epistemic modal meaning that is the most related to this research. The epistemic modal meaning can show uncertainty as well as being a way for the speaker to seek confirmation from the addressee (Holmes, 1990, p. 196). In figure 4.5 we could see four use of grammatically dependent tag questions, equally divided between female and male speakers.

From my analysis some of these instances did express uncertainty to some extent, for instance a male speaker talked to his coworker in a conversation about bike-riding; “Nico, Levi rides, doesn't he?” (Marinis & Allen, 2021, 21:45), taking the intonation and situation into account, in this example the speaker is arguably uncertain about the answer to his question alongside with wanting confirmation from the addressee that his statement is correct. On the other hand, other examples, like for instance one female doctor discussing the back troubles of a patient that the patient did not seek help for before it got too far; “Which earned her more pain, didn't it?” (Marinis & Allen, 2021, 21:40), responding to a coworker stating that the patient postponed her doctor's visit. In this instance it can presumably be to express certainty rather than the contrary. Additionally, she did not get any answer to this, which can be because everyone in on the conversation new that it did in fact cause the patient more pain. Perhaps the use of a tag question here was to ease the statement and not making it so forceful.

To sum, the function of tag questions is arguably all up to the context in which they are used, and not so much on if the tag question itself shows uncertainty or is seeking confirmation. This research has collected tag questions, including invariant tags, both from female and male speakers, but found in both time periods that male speaker used them more than female speakers. Since this research included invariant tags, it would be natural to believe that that could influence on the result. But in total, including both time periods, the use of grammatically independent tag questions was four times by male speakers and only two time by female speakers, so the findings still shows that male speakers used them more.

5.2 Filled pauses

Table 4.2 from data 2005 showed that female speakers used filled pauses three times more than male speakers. As filled pauses can have a lot of different functions, it can be helpful to try and categorize them to rule out those who are just natural communicative behavior and to easier see which ones that can show uncertainty. Based on information found in Laserna, et al

(2014), I have tried to come up with a way to categorize these filled pauses. Firstly, it can be used as a way for a speaker to get some extra thinking time, from my analysis, this was the case two times for the female speakers and two times for male speakers. All of these were also from conversations where the speaker was forced to answer a simple question. Further, one category can be when the speaker is in “the processing of complex thoughts” (Laserna, et al., 2014, p. 329), this is when the speaker is processing thoughts or is forced to complete a task, with these tasks being a bit more complicated than the one mentioned before. This was found two times amongst the female speakers whilst one time amongst the male speakers. At last, we have what can be categorized as obvious uncertainty, that is situations where you use filled pauses because you are not sure what to answer or even to say next in the conversation. This was found three times among the female speakers and two times among male speakers. The remaining use (three times) of filled pauses from figure 4.2 did not fit into any of the categories above. To summarize, female speakers used a bit more of the filled pauses that showed obvious uncertainty than male speakers in this time period (2005).

However, when it comes to the data from figure 4.6 it was seen a slightly higher use of the filled pauses amongst male speakers than female speakers. But also, in total; figure 4.2 showed only 14 instances, whilst figure 4.6 showed that in total there was 24 uses of the filled pauses. Previous research on this matter found that those with higher education, older speakers and males used filled pauses more than those with lower education, younger speakers and females (Laserna, et al., 2014, p.329), this seems to fit with the findings from my research. If that is the case, that can be one explanation for the increased use of the filled pauses from the previous data collection from 2005 to the one in 2021. Meaning that when it comes to the characters in the tv-series who previously were playing the role of interns, are now playing the role of medical professionals. This means that most of the speakers are now portraying characters that are highly educated.

5.3 Discourse markers

Table 4.3 shows that female speakers used the discourse markers more than male speakers with seven times against four times. However, three of the collected discourse markers were distributed by the same female speaker within a short time period. This female speaker was a young teenage girl and did not stand for much of the collected speaking time. She still produced ‘like’ used as a discourse marker, which stood for almost half of the discourse

markers found used amongst female speakers. This is quite interesting, and the amount used can perhaps show that this was how the script writer wanted to portray this female speaker. This fits with Bednarek's (2012) concept of character identity very well, she stresses that linguistic research on language and identity is often a focus for scholars, but that these studies focus on "alive" persons and not so much about the scripted characters (p.97). I would argue that this research has provided a new look into this, and that the findings from table 4.3 and the use of 'like' by one female speaker can perhaps show that the scripted characters is given an identity which presumably is tried to be similar to an "alive" speaker at the same age of the scripted role. And if it is the case that 'like' as a discourse marker is used because of tentativeness, it is arguably clear that the scripter writer wanted to portray this scripted character with that feature.

From information collected from both figure 4.3 and figure 4.7, we can see that by comparing them that the differences in the use of discourse markers are decreasing, with the differentiation in the findings going from three in 2005 to one in 2021. There was also an equal amount of use of the discourse marker 'you know' between female and male speakers. Holmes (1990) suggests that this phrase too can be categorized; that one function of it can be to express confidence, whilst the other could be the rather opposite, that is, uncertainty (p.189). One example can be "She may not have pneumonia, you know." (Rhimes & Horton, 2005, 19:01) that one female speaker contradicts to a male addressee's suggestion. In this example it can seem like the female speaker did so to express confidence to her statement, since she did come with a critique against the addressee's suggestion. One could argue that if this statement were expressed with uncertainty that it would be said in a different way to ease the statement. Another example can be when one female speaker got asked out for dinner; "Well, I'll have uh, you know, to talk to Ben. And the boys are, you know, their schedules are so unpredictable-- but" (Marinis & Allen, 2021, 04:46), in this instance one could argue that the use of 'you know' here was due to uncertainty, however that is if you take the whole sentence into account. The use of 'you know' two times alongside with the filled pause 'uh' arguably gives an overall impression that this speaker was uncertain about how she was going to respond to the question.

5.4 Hedges

As seen in table 4.4, there were more uses of lexical hedges amongst female speakers in the data collected from 2005. Previous research has found that women tend to use hedges more often when speaking to other women less than men do in male-to-male conversation (Crosby & Nyquist, 1997, p.320). In my research I found that only one of the cases where women used hedges were in a women-women conversation, the three other occasions were in mixed groups conversations. However, the only use found of the chosen hedges amongst male speakers were in a conversation consisting of only male speakers. This arguably contradicts the previous research to some extent.

Furthermore, there was no use of the chosen hedges at all in the data collected from 2021, this is quite interesting and can have several explanations. To start with, it can simply be a coincidence that one of the scriptwriters chose to exclude this feature amongst the scripted roles while the other did not. However, one explanation can also be the fact that in the data from 2005, as briefly mentioned earlier, a large number of the speakers are playing the role of interns, whilst in the data from 2021 they are now playing the role of finished and well-trained surgeons. Meaning that they have changed their role in the community. Due to that, one could assume that the script writer wants to portray them as more committed to what they are saying than what the script writer in the episode from 2005 wanted.

6. Conclusion

From this research we can see that from the data collected in 2005 and 2021 that in total female speakers used the linguistic features representing “tentative language” 42 times whilst the male speakers used them 38 times. This means that in total there are only a minor difference between the two groups. Nevertheless, there was differences in the use of some of the linguistic features; in both time periods female speakers used more of the discourse markers whilst male speaker used more tag questions. However, as seen in the discussion, there was vast variations in how certain one could be about whether the examples provided proofs of tentative use between either one of the groups. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude that all the linguistic features collected was due to tentativeness or uncertainty.

When it comes to whether the differences between female and male speakers in the use of “tentative language” is increasing or decreasing, one could argue that it is decreasing. For instance, the use of discourse markers increased amongst male speakers in the data from

2021, which made the dissimilarity between them and female speakers almost not present. The same happened with the use of filled pauses `uh` and `uhm`, were the male speaker used them more than the female speakers. The findings from the two time periods indicates that the differences between female and male speech when it comes to the use of tentative language arguably is decreasing, at least in the use of the linguistic features portrayed in this research.

6.1 Limitations

The approach has not investigated natural linguistic behavior due to geographical restraints, nor has it included all tentative linguistic features that may be found in the chosen data due to the scope of the thesis. The research has only been done with a limited dataset with few speakers. The manuscript is also written by two different script writers, which means that the differences found between the two time periods can partly be because of different perceptions or views of how speakers should be portrayed between the writers. The differences can also be due to the reason that most of the scripted characters which provided the speech analyzed, had different roles in the community in the two different datasets. However, it can be due to changes in the society that influence the distribution of the different linguistic features. This particular manner has not been included in this thesis but could be an interesting study for further research.

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