

## **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF HEDGES, TAG QUESTIONS, INTENSIFIERS, EMPTY ADJECTIVES, AND ADVERBS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN THE SPEECH OF MEN AND WOMEN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study was intended to examine whether men and women were different with respect to the use of intensifiers, hedges, tag questions, empty adjectives, and adverbs in English. To conduct the study, R. Lakoff's (1975) ideas concerning linguistic differences between males and females were examined. 120 students from Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch were selected randomly and divided into two groups of males (n=60) and females (n=60). To carry out the investigation, the researchers made use of the following English film scenarios: (1) Enough, (2) Taxi Driver, (3) American Beauty, (4) China Town, (5) My Beautiful Launderette and (6) Blood Simple. Each selected scenario had a social and family theme. Then, the total number of utterances in each scenario was counted, and the utterances were divided into two parts, those produced by females and those produced by males. Finally, participants were asked to produce these sentences in order to find whether they have any differences with regard to the use of hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, empty adjectives, and adverbs. The frequency of each grammatical item was calculated. Moreover, an independent *t-test* was used to determine mean differences between the groups. The results of the study revealed that there were significance differences between the groups in the use of hedges, tag question, intensifiers, and empty adjectives, but not in the use of adverbs ( $p < 0.001$ ). The results showed that adverbs are not gender specific. The findings of the study confirmed Lakoff's opinion regarding gender-bound language at least in the four areas.

**Keywords:** *Gender Differences, Hedge, Tag Question, Intensifier, Empty Adjectives, Adverbs, and Gender-bound Language*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of women interacting differently from men has been discussed for hundreds of years. As a matter of fact, language not only reflected a patriarchal system but also emphasized male supremacy over women. Most of the works analyzing language were to do mostly with male language production. Labov's works (1972a, 1972b), for instance, described mostly the speech of men. However, other linguists, such as the ones cited below, started to become interested in observable differences in language production depending on the sex of the speakers.

Observations of the differences between the way males and females speak were long restricted to grammatical features, such as the differences between masculine and feminine in morphology in many languages. However, in the 1970s women researchers started looking at how a linguistic code transmitted sexist values and bias. Lakoff's work (1975) is an example of this; she raised questions such as: Do women have a more restricted vocabulary than men? Do they use more adjectives? Are their sentences incomplete? Consequently, researchers started to investigate empirically both bias in the language and the differential usage of the code by men and women.

According to Cameron and Coates (1985), the amount we talk is influenced by who we are with and what we are doing. They also add that if we aggregate a large number of studies, it will be observed that there is little difference between the amount men and women talk. On the one hand, in a recent study, Brizendine (1994) states that women talk three times as much as men. On the other hand, Drass (1986), in an experiment on gender identity in conversation dyads found that men speak more than women.

Studies in the area of language and gender often make use of two models or paradigms - that of *dominance* and that of *difference*. Based on the "difference theory" men and women, even those within the

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same group, live in different or separate cultural worlds and, as a result, they promote different ways of speaking (Uchida, 1992). In simple terms, although men and women live in the same environment they establish different relations with society as if each belonged to a different environment and culture, the result of which is consequently reflected in the language of both genders as in other aspects of their lives. So in this theory, cross-gender communication is to be taken as cross-cultural or bi-cultural communication.

In “dominance theory”, men and women are believed to inhabit a cultural and linguistic world, where power and status are unequally distributed. Moreover, the focus is on male dominance and gender division.

The difference theory was also summarized in Tannen’s book *You just don’t understand* (1990) in an article in which she represents male and female language use in a series of six contrasts:

- **Status vs. support**

This claims that men grow up in a world in which conversation is competitive - they seek to achieve the upper hand or to prevent others from dominating them. For women, however, talking is often a way to gain confirmation and support for their ideas. Men see the world as a place where people try to gain status and keep it. Women see the world as “a network of connections seeking support and consensus”.

- **Independence vs. intimacy**

In general, women often think in terms of closeness and support, and struggle to preserve intimacy. Men, concerned with status, tend to focus more on independence. These traits can lead women and men to starkly different views of the same situation

- **Advice vs. understanding**

Deborah Tannen claims that, to many men a complaint is a challenge to find a solution:

“When my mother tells my father she doesn't feel well, he invariably offers to take her to the doctor. Invariably, she is disappointed with his reaction. Like many men, he is focused on what he can do, whereas she wants sympathy (Tannen, 1984)”.

- **Information vs. feelings**

Culturally and historically speaking, men's concerns were seen as more important than those of women, but today this situation may be reversed so that the giving of information and brevity of speech are considered of less value than sharing of emotions and elaboration.

- **Orders vs. proposals**

It is claimed that women often suggest that people do things in indirect ways - “let's”, “why don't we?” or “wouldn't it be good, if we...?” Men may use, and prefer to hear, a direct imperative.

- **Conflict vs. compromise**

This situation can be clearly observed in work-situations where a management decision seems unattractive - men will often resist it vocally, while women may appear to accede, but complain subsequently. In fact, this is a broad generalization - and for every one of Deborah Tannen's oppositions, we will know of men and women who are exceptions to the norm.

According to Lakoff (1975), women and men speak English in different ways. They have been taught to speak differently since young girls should speak in a passive voice and boys should speak what is termed ‘rough talk’ or active voice. In this regard, women frequently use women’s language such as empty adjectives, intensifiers and qualifiers, tag questions, hedges and polite forms. Sunderland (2006) cited Jespersen’s account of Rocherfort’s documentation in 1665 about the language of the West Indies: Rocherfort found that women and men had their own languages which they used and understood among themselves. Although in real life, both sides understood each other’s language, they refused to use it because if they used the language of the opposite sex, it would be viewed as inappropriate. For men especially, they would become the laughing stock of others.

Furthermore, Jespersen (1922) also supports the belief that “Women have smaller vocabularies, show extensive use of certain adjectives and adverbs, ‘more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say’ and produce less complex sentences.” In conversations involving both sexes, men could switch topics while women

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would take turns to speak, supporting others' opinions, complementing them, and trying to avoid interrupting others. When it is conversation among members of the same sex, women prefer to discuss personal topics while men prefer public issues and would avoid discussing private topics. The choices could be related to the nature of both sexes where women are more 'involved' and use emotional language pertaining to their feelings and thoughts. Men, on the other hand, are more into seeking 'information' and speak in a more straightforward manner and use authoritative language.

Lakoff's hypotheses have both pros and cons. Men's language as put by Lakoff is assertive, adult, and direct, while women's language is immature, hyper-formal or hyper-polite and non-assertive. But such statements have their own pros. Michaelson and Poll (2001), for example, emphasized on the dynamic nature of speech of men and women by stating that 'rule of politeness' governing face-to-face conversations seems to be less binding when there is no physical presence. They also state that it is this bodily presence of conversational dyads that lead to a weakening of gender roles. While analyzing the electronic mails of a number of men and women, Bunz and Campbell (2002) stated that social categories such as age, gender, etc. do not influence politeness accommodation in e-mail. Canary and Hause (1993) as cited in Mulae (1998) have argued that meaningful differences in the communication strategies of men and women have not been found with any degree of consistency.

Despite such and many other similar observations, Lakoff believes that the use of tag questions by women is the sign of uncertainty. Dubois and Crouch (1975) launched a critique on Lakoff's claims, especially on tag questions. They examined the use of tag questions within the context of a professional meeting and concluded that at least in that context males used tag questions more than females did. Their conclusion was that Lakoff's hypothesis might be biased in favor of highly stereotyping beliefs or folk linguistics.

Dubois and Crouch (1975) questioned Lakoff's findings as Lakoff had used introspective methods in her study. They argued that her conclusions were made on uncontrolled and unverifiable observation of others and were based on a highly skewed and non-random sample of people.

In the literature, Trudgill (1972) found a kind of sex differentiation for speakers of urban British English. His study demonstrated that "women informants"... use forms associated with the prestige standard more frequently than men". His study also discovered that male speakers place a high value on working class nonstandard speech. He offers several possible reasons for the finding that women are more likely to use forms considered correct: (1) The subordinate position of women in English and American societies makes it "more necessary for women to secure their social status linguistically"; and (2) while men can be rated socially on what they do, women may be rated primarily on how they appear – so their speech is more important. As for American literature, research has not shown a noticeable difference in terms of the usage of standard forms by men and women.

Wood (2011) explains that men and women grow in different gender speech communities and, thus, develop different communication styles. Wood stated, "a speech community exists when people share understandings about goals of communication, strategies for enacting those goals, and ways of interpreting communication" (p. 125). According to Wood's research (2005), gender roles are the source of differential communication between males and females.

Newman, Groom, Handelman, and Pennebaker (2008) also studied the differences male and females possess in communicating. Their text entitled "Gender Differences in Language Use" examines various studies to determine whether or not men and women use language differently and if so, how and why. Their research led them to identify that gender differences in language use reflect a complex combination of social goals, situational demands, and socialization. Their findings suggest that previous research found that men use language to give information instrumentally, while women use verbal interaction to simply socialize without any underlying purpose. They found that as women discussed their thoughts, emotions, senses, other individuals, negations, and utilized verbs in present and past tense, male conversations consisted primarily of occupation, money, sports, articles, prepositions, and long words.

Robin (1975) published an influential account of women's language in her book entitled *Language and Woman's Place*. In another article she published a set of basic assumptions about what marks the language of women. Among them she made some claims those women:

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- **Hedge:** using phrases like “sort of”, “kind of”, “it seems like”, and so on.
- **Use (super) polite forms:** “Would you mind...”, “I'd appreciate it if...”, “...if you don't mind”.
- **Use tag questions:** “You're going to dinner, aren't you?”
- **Speak in italics:** Intonational emphasis equal to underlining words - so, very, quite.
- **Use empty adjectives:** divine, lovely, adorable, and so on
- **Use hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation:** English prestige grammar and clear enunciation.
- **Use direct quotation:** men paraphrase more often.
- **Have a special lexicon:** women use more words for things like colors, men for sports.
- **Use question intonation in declarative statements:** women make declarative statements into questions by raising the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement, expressing uncertainty. For example, “What school do you attend? Eton College?”
- **Use “wh-” imperatives:** (such as, “Why don't you open the door?”)
- Speak less frequently
- **Overuse qualifiers:** (for example, “I think that...”)
- **Apologize more:** (for instance, “I'm sorry, but I think that...”)
- **Use modal constructions:** (such as can, would, should, ought - “Should we turn up the heat?”)
- **Avoid coarse language or expletives**
- **Use indirect commands and requests:** (for example, “My, isn't it cold in here?” - really a request to turn the heat on or close a window)
- **Use more intensifiers:** especially so and very (for instance, “I am so glad you came!”)
- **Lack a sense of humor:** women do not tell jokes well and often don't understand the punch line of jokes.

(Lakoff, 1975): To examine Lakoff's hypothesis, five grammatical categories were selected, namely tag questions, hedges, intensifiers, empty adjectives, and adverbs as the basis of analysis. The following research question was the basis for this study. *Do women use intensifiers, tag questions, hedges, empty adjectives, and adverbs more than men do in English and Persian?* This research question gave way to three null hypotheses as follows:

This research question gave way to five null hypotheses as follows:

- (1) There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of hedges.
- (2) There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of intensifiers.
- (3) There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of tag questions.
- (4) There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of adverbs.
- (5) There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of empty adjectives.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants

120 adult students were selected randomly, and divided into 2 groups, one male group (n=60) and one female group (n=60). They studied English as a foreign language at Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch, Iran. They all were translation students. The age range of the participants varies from 18 to 26. They were all non- native speakers of English, and their first language was Persian.

### Procedures

To carry out the investigation, the following English film scenarios were used: (1) Enough, (2) Taxi Driver, (3) American Beauty, (4) China Town, (5) My Beautiful Laundrette and (6) Blood Simple. Each scenario selected had a social and family theme. Scenarios were used in print to get results, which could closely represent the linguistic performance of ordinary people in natural situations. In this study, it was believed that data extracted from scenarios were very close, if not exactly the same, to natural data.

Poems were not used, since they were considered to be quite different from the ordinary language especially with respect to structure and sequences of elements.

The above-mentioned scenarios were selected in the following way: First, all the English scenarios, with a family and social theme, were listed. Then, eight English scenarios were randomly selected. To controls

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the length of the documents, an unequal number of scenarios (eight versus six) were selected and used throughout the study. Moreover, in order to make the study as reliable as possible one test of reliability, namely inter-rater reliability was used.

To mark each example of hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, adverbs and empty adjectives the each utterance was recapitulated, and jointly it was decided if an example of hedge, tag question, intensifier, empty adjectives, and adverbs had been observed. To check inter-rater reliability, the whole data was given to a linguist who was well informed about the topic under study. He was asked to mark each occurrence of hedge, tag question, intensifier, empty adjectives, and adverbs in the whole scenarios. The result of the correlation coefficients between the lists he produced and the one produced by the researchers revealed once again a high correlation between the two lists (85%).

To collect the relevant data, first all the English scenarios were read with great care. Then, the total number of utterances in each scenario was counted. Later, the utterances were divided into two parts, those produced by females and those produced by males. Finally, participants were asked to produce these sentences.

**Data Analysis**

In this study frequency of each grammatical item was calculated. An independent *t-test* was used to examine the mean differences of the groups regarding the above mentioned categories.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Five categories of language features emerged from the data analysis: intensifiers, hedges, tag questions, empty adjectives, and adverbs. Evidence from each category will also be presented to give a better explanation. Table 1 shows the frequency of each grammatical item.

**Table 1: Frequency of Intensifiers, Hedges and Tags as produced in English Scenarios by Males and Females**

English scenario		
Grammatical Item	Male	Female
H	150	77
T	44	8
I	110	78
A	72	68
E	110	74

*H: hedges, T: Tag question, I: Intensifier, A: Adverb, E: Empty adjective*

**(a) Intensifiers**

According to Olsson (2000), intensifiers act as a boosting device in language. However, Lakoff (1975) categorized intensifiers as part of hedging where it weakens the feelings of the speaker in language.

**Table 2: Frequency of intensifiers used by the participants**

Grammatical Item	Male	Female
Intensifier	157	388

It is clear that from Table 2 that the frequency of occurrences of intensifiers is higher in females (n=388) than in males (n=157).

**(b) Hedging**

Table 3 presents a list of lexical hedges that are used in this study. Even though there are many lexical hedges listed by previous researchers such as Dubois (1987); Skelton (1988); Holmes (1990); Low (1996) and Hyland (1996), this study focuses only on these lexical hedges as shown in Table 3.

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**Table 3: Lexical hedges**

<b>Lexical Hedges</b>		
<b>Sort of</b>	Kind of	Well
<b>I think of</b>	I feel	I mean
<b>I should</b>	I suppose	I would
<b>I thought</b>	I'm sure	I might
<b>I reckon</b>	Perhaps	I'm thinking
<b>I am feeling</b>	Probably	May be
<b>A (little) bit</b>	I guess	You see
<b>You know</b>	Pretty much	Whatever
<b>It seems like</b>	If you like	Just like

According to Holmes (2001), hedging is a way to express uncertainty and also to soften the utterances of the speaker. However, Olsson (2000) found that other researchers such as House and Kasper (1981) and Blum-Kulka and Ohlstein (1984), stated that hedging is used to modify certain types of speech acts, requests and apologies.

**Table 4: Shows the frequency of hedges used in sentences produced by males and females**

<b>Grammatical Item</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Hedges</b>	141	340

It was shown that the females (n=340) used lexical hedges more frequently than did males.

**(c) Tag Questions**

According to Lakoff (1975), a tag question is considered as a hedging device since it shows that the speaker is not confident in making a statement. Nevertheless, men usually use tag questions to show their perception on some topics while women are seen as indecisive people and have no view of their own. Mindell (2001) claims that tag questions can take three forms which are verbal (...isn't it?), vocal (I come here alone?) and gestural (head or shoulder shrug).

**Table 5: Shows the number of occurrences of tag questions used by the male and female participants**

<b>Grammatical Item</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Tag question</b>	20	50

Table showed that the frequency of the tag questions produced by females was higher than males.

**(d) Empty Adjectives**

Olsson (2000) explains that an empty adjective, like other adjectives, usually appear before a noun. However, it differs in terms of the way it is used. An empty adjective is when the speaker or writer expresses his/her emotional reaction.

**Table 6: Shows the frequency of empty adjectives used by the subjects.**

<b>Grammatical Item</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Empty adjective</b>	92	235

It is clear from the table that that both male and female students used empty while females had a higher number of occurrences (n=235) than males (n=92).

**(e) Adverbs**

An adverb can modify a verb, an adjective, another adverb, a phrase, or a clause. An adverb indicates manner, time, place, cause, or degree and answers questions such as "how," "when," "where," "how

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much". According to Crawford (1995, p. 23) there are more variables that might be gender-related and one of it was 'beginning a sentence with an adverb', and apparently, males usually use it in their sentences more than females do.

**Table 7: Shows the number of occurrences of adverbs used by the subjects of the study.**

Grammatical Item	Male	Female
Adverb	69	77

The results show that females used slightly more adverbs (n=77) than male bloggers (n=69). The difference in the number of adverbs used by female and male learners is not large. Thus, we can conclude that this language feature is not gender specific.

**Table 8: Mean and standard deviation of the variables in two groups**

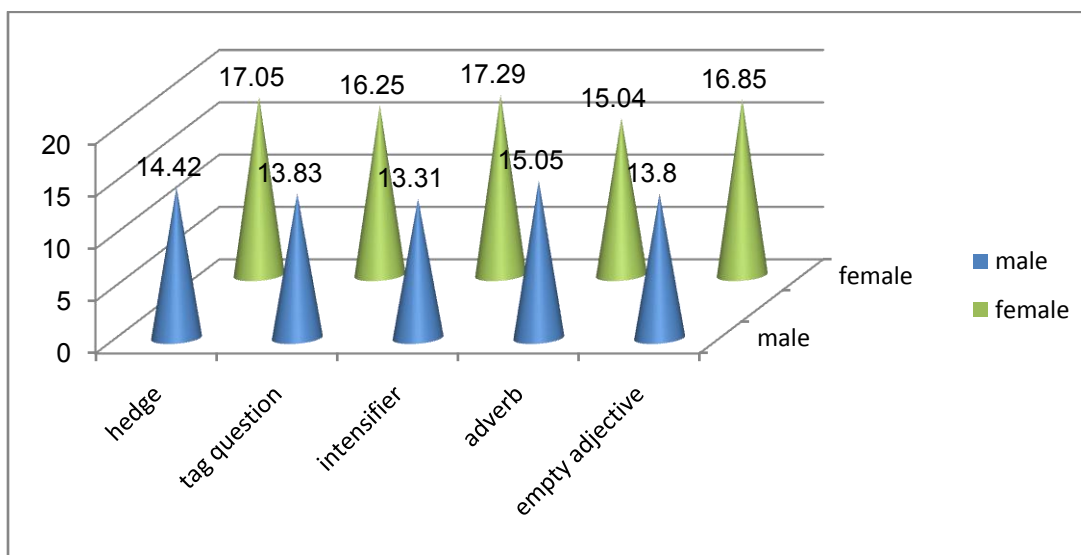
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hedge	Male	60	14.42	2.25
	Female	60	17.05	1.90
Tag. Question	Male	60	13.83	1.86
	Female	60	16.91	2.27
Intensifier	Male	60	13.30	2.59
	Female	60	17.29	2.28
Adverb	Male	60	15.05	2.91
	Female	60	15.04	2.89
Empty. Adjective	Male	60	13.80	2.81
	Female	60	16.85	2.39

Table 8 showed mean and standard deviation of the variables in males and females. It can be seen from the table that females scored more than male subjects in all studied variables except adverb in which two groups were equal.

**Table 9: Results of Independent Samples Test on studied variable**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			Mean Difference
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Hedge	2.49	0.117	6.92	118	0.000	2.63
Tag. Question	1.19	0.278	8.11	118	0.000	3.07
Intensifier	3.02	0.085	8.92	118	0.000	3.98
Adverb	0.003	0.959	0.013	118	0.990	0.006
Empty. Adjective	7.64	0.007	6.39	118	0.000	3.05

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**Figure 1: Shows the mean of the mentioned grammatical categories used by the females and males**

In reference to the significant difference between male and female subjects in surveyed variables the independent t-test was used. As shown in table 2 there was a significant difference between males and females in Hedge  $t_{118}=6.92, p<0.001$ ; Tag question  $t_{118}=8.11, p<0.001$ ; intensifier  $t_{118}=8.92, p<0.001$ ; and empty. Adjective  $t_{118}=6.39, p<0.001$ . On the other hand, there was no significant difference between males and females in Adverb  $t_{118}=0.013, p>0.05$  indicating similar pattern of responding to the questions in males and females.

**Discussion**

According to Lakoff (1975), gender differences in language use reflect different and unequal roles and status. Because of the lower status of women in society they are pressured to talk like a lady. Therefore, it results in women using more hedges and intensifiers compared to men. Women and men use the language according to the society’s beliefs of how both sexes should communicate. The results obtained from the study revealed that men and women differ in their number of use of hedges, intensifiers and tag questions. So, Lakoff’s idea should be hold, and the hypotheses of the study concerning these grammatical items were rejected.

In Lakoff’s opinion, the functions of tag questions are two-fold: they soften the impact of assertions and they express uncertainty. This study was not in line with the study conducted by Holmes (1993). He found out that certain types of tag question are used more by men than by women, i.e. *modal tags*, and certain other types are used more by women, i.e. *facilitative tags*.

Holmes (ibid.) states that facilitative tags are addressee-oriented, expressing the speaker’s solidarity or positive attitude to the addressee. On the contrary, modal tags are speaker-oriented and signal speaker’s desire for confirmation. Furthermore, in a research carried out by Cameron *et al.*, (1998), it was found that men used more facilitative and modal tags than women did. The results of this study showed that women used tag questions more frequently than men did. Furthermore, the result of the independents *t-test* showed that there was significance difference between male and female with regard to tag questions.

Lakoff (1975) also believes that women use more hedges than men do. She identifies three types of hedges as follows: those showing that the speaker is unsure; those used for the sake of politeness and finally those characterizing women’s language - the language of those who are out of power in society. The results revealed that women used more hedges than men did. Moreover, the result of the independents *t-test* showed that there was significance difference between male and female with regard to hedges.

This finding is not in line with what Holmes (1986) found concerning the use of 'you know' in the speech of men and women. Holmes did not find any significant difference between the two genders.



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What was found concerning intensifiers, in the research, confirmed Lakoff's ideas. Significant difference was found between the groups under study with regard to the use of intensifiers. The frequency of occurrence of intensifiers in the speech of women is higher than in that of men.

An empty adjective is hard to define because it is abstract and closely associated to emotions and feelings. The findings show that this feature relates to gender since females used it more frequently (n=235) than males (n=92). It shows that females tend to express emotion when they want to express something that is intimately linked to them. Sometimes it shows that females exaggerate in explaining or describing something which in turn makes the whole thing look better. This huge difference might occur because of the way women usually incorporate feelings and emotions into their expressions. According to Lakoff (1975), empty adjectives are usually used by women as they are generally considered more expressive and emotional compared to men.

The data discussed earlier shows that both females and males used adverbs, and there was no significance difference between male and female participants with regard to the adverbs.

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