

# LINGUISTIC POLITENESS AND SEX DIFFERENCES IN BBC RADIO 4 BROADCAST INTERVIEWS

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## Abstract

Since the mid-1970s, investigating the difference between male and female speech patterns has come to be a prominent feature of sociolinguistic research. Previous language and gender researchers have found that female interactants are more linguistically polite than their male counterparts, as they favour co-operative discourse strategies. In contrast, males favour competitive strategies. This paper tests the co-operation and competition framework by analysing the amount of attention male and female interviewers and interviewees pay to the norms and conventions of linguistic politeness in Radio 4 broadcast interviews. A pattern consistent with the co-operation and competitiveness framework is found, though there are exceptions, which cast doubt on the adequacy of previous theories that claim to explain why men and women speak differently.

## 1. Introduction

The decision to concentrate on the pragmatic phenomenon of linguistic politeness is motivated by the integral part it plays in spoken interaction.<sup>1</sup> Politeness norms and conventions serve to govern what is viewed as co-operative behaviour in conversation. As Thomas (1995: 158) points out, politeness strategies are employed by speakers to achieve goals 'such as promoting and maintaining harmonious relationships'. As politeness typifies co-operative behaviour, it provides an ideal way to test notions of co-operation and competition in male and female speech.

A major reason why media discourse was chosen as the contextual focus for this study is that linguistic politeness is relatively under-investigated in this setting, as the vast majority of previous research has focused on interaction in informal, domestic contexts. The decision to examine media discourse is also motivated by the importance of the mass media as a social institution. Fairclough (1995: 46) points out that the media 'constitute a powerful apparatus in society'. The language used by the media plays an extremely influential role in creating, promoting and maintaining cultural images and stereotypes.

Caldas-Coulthard (1995) argues that, in general, the discourse of the media serves as a tool of cultural reproduction which is highly implicated in society's power structure. She believes that the media work to 'encode bias and legitimate assumptions about linguistic behaviour and social asymmetries' (1995: 227). Fairclough believes that by analysing the discourse of social institutions rather than casual conversation, important issues surrounding the role that institutional discourse plays in producing and maintaining society's power structure can be examined.

Language and gender theorists including Cameron (1995, 1996) have advocated the need for the definition of a new theoretical perspective, which adequately accounts for the difference between male and female speech patterns. Previous approaches, such as the *power/dominance* framework prevalent in the 1980s, and the *culture/ difference*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised and shortened version of my MA research thesis *Linguistic Politeness and Sex Differences in Broadcast Interviews*. I would like to thank my supervisors Catriona McPherson and Anthea Fraser Gupta for their invaluable help and support with this project.

approach prevalent in the 1990s, are now thought to be too simplistic in their explanations. They have outlived their usefulness, and as Coates (1997: 460) points out, the popularity of investigating sex differences has led to researchers 'starting to ask more sophisticated questions about language and gender'. The empirical findings of this project are examined in relation to theoretical debates with the aim of contributing to a new, innovative direction for language and gender theory to take.

## **2. Background**

Brown and Levinson (1987) produced the most comprehensive theory of politeness to date, the basis of which is used for analytical purposes in this paper. They argue that polite linguistic behaviour shows up as a deviation against the rational and efficient nature of talk, but through a consideration of linguistic politeness, the hearer finds reasons for the speaker's apparent irrationality or inefficiency.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 62) base their theory on the concept of *face* (Goffman 1967). Face is defined as the public self image that all rational adult members have when engaged in spoken interaction, and it must be constantly adhered to. Face consists of two related aspects: *positive* face and *negative* face. Positive face is the wish all speakers have that their face 'wants' be desirable to fellow interactants. Negative face is the 'want' all speakers have that their actions will not be impeded by others.

In general, participants will co-operate with each other due to the mutual vulnerability of face. However, it is not possible for conversation to flow without a demand or intrusion being made on another person's autonomy. A simple act such as asking someone to sit down is a potential threat to their face. Brown and Levinson define the performance of such utterances as potential *face-threatening acts* (FTAs). When confronted with the need to perform a FTA, the speaker needs to decide how it should be uttered.

Brown and Levinson argue that the first choice to be made is whether the FTA should be performed *on record* or *off record*. If the on record strategy is chosen, a speaker can either perform the FTA *boldly* without *redressive* action or mitigate the FTA by uttering it with *redressive* action. Performing an act without redressive action involves uttering it in the most 'direct, clear, unambiguous way possible' (1987: 69). Conversely, performing an act with redressive action actually gives face to the addressee, making it clear that no face threat is intended. This can be achieved by adopting the strategies of either *positive politeness* or *negative politeness*.

Positive politeness is redressive action directed towards the addressee's positive face, demonstrating that the hearer's wants or needs are thought of as desirable. In contrast, negative politeness is redressive action directed to the addressee's negative face, demonstrating the speaker's desire not to impose upon the hearer by restricting their actions. The off record strategy enables the speaker to avoid the responsibility of performing a FTA. This can be achieved by inviting conversational implicatures (Grice 1975).

Holmes (1995) has produced the most detailed and methodologically sound work on linguistic politeness and sex differences to date, which examines speech in a wide range of contexts. She concludes that, in general, female speakers are more co-operative as they pay far more attention to politeness principles than their male counterparts, who instead favour competitive strategies. Researchers including Fishman (1980), Goodwin (1980), Maltz and Borker (1982) and Tannen (1990) also found the competitiveness and co-operativeness pattern, though much of this work focuses on interaction in an informal context.

Holmes's (1995) work has major methodological advantages over previous studies including Lakoff (1975) and O'Barr and Atkins (1980), as she takes into account both the form and function of each linguistic variable. This is essential to ensure an accurate analysis takes place, as there is nothing intrinsically polite about any linguistic form. Her work also has the advantage of examining a number of linguistic variables through the unified framework of politeness. This enables previous studies that examined the same variables to be re-evaluated within the perspective of politeness norms and conventions. Holmes' publication was an influential factor when deciding which linguistic variables to study (see section 3.4).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Sampling

In order to collect a detailed corpus of media language, sampling decisions are required in three major areas: media *genres*, media *outlets* and media *outputs* (Bell 1991). The decisions made in each of these areas are now detailed.

The decision to focus on the *genre* of broadcast interviews was motivated by the fact that the notions of female co-operativeness and male competitiveness could be firmly tested. The interviews collected were viewed either as competitive or co-operative encounters, defined by drawing a distinction between political (competitive) and non-political (co-operative) interviews.

Co-operative interviews were classified as those where political issues were not relevant to the topic of the encounter. These interviews are non-confrontational and they generally focus upon the interviewee's personal life or career. Any political affiliation the interviewees may have is not relevant to the topic of the interview and none of the interviewees are politicians or members of a political party to my knowledge.

On the other hand, interviews conducted with either an MP or a member of a political party on a political topic were classified as competitive encounters. The fact that political interviews are confrontational encounters is widely documented by researchers in this area (Greatbatch 1986, Harris 1991), and by media personalities themselves (Day 1975, 1991; Dimpleby 1975).

The speech of both male and female interviewers and interviewees was examined in dyadic interviews. This was based upon the fact that the relationship between the two participants is clearly defined, as the interviewer and interviewee have pre-established, 'a priori' roles (Winter 1993: 122). In order to examine discourse strategies in all possible settings, it was necessary to collect interview data from 8 dyadic settings, as illustrated in table 1.

Table 1. The eight dyadic settings chosen to test male and female interviewers' and interviewees' speech

Political interviews		Non-political interviews	
Interviewer	Interviewee	Interviewer	Interviewee
1. F	F	5. F	F
2. F	M	6. F	M
3. M	M	7. M	M
4. M	F	8. M	F

F=female M=male

The decision to use BBC Radio 4 as the media *outlet* for this project was motivated by the fact that interviews are prominent features of many programmes on this station, and I was confident that the required number of interviews would be found. Additionally, a large number of Radio 4 interviews are broadcast live. Winter (1993: 121) points out the importance of this in relation to political interviews, stating that live broadcasts do not allow repair or blatant planning from politicians. To my knowledge, all political interviews selected for this study were live at the time they were broadcast. It was not always possible, however, to obtain live non-political interviews, as many of these encounters are pre-recorded. Using pre-recorded non-political material was thus unavoidable on some occasions.

It was decided that the main media *outputs*, i.e. the specific programmes broadcast by the station would be *Today* and *The World at One*. Both programmes are well-established and well-respected news broadcasts which were transmitted five days a week at the time of recording. On both programmes, the presenters conduct interviews with politicians or members of a political party about the main political issues of the day.

A small number of non-political interviews have also been taken from these two news broadcasts, as both programmes try to establish a balance between 'hard' news, and 'softer' items, including interviews on 'light-hearted' topics. The other non-political interviews were recorded from *Desert Island Discs*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Woman's Hour* and *Personal Records*.<sup>2</sup>

Interviews were recorded from 6 different programmes in order to collect encounters with different interviewers. These programmes were also chosen as they were broadcast at different times of the day, thus enabling a variety of interviews from Radio 4 programmes to be collected.

Five interviews per cell, i.e. five interviews for each of the eight dyadic settings were collected. A sample of 40 interviews was thought to be large enough and representative enough to enable reliable and valid conclusions to be drawn. Interviews were recorded between October 1997 and February 1998. In total, programmes broadcast on 46 different days were recorded, totalling over 70 hours of material.

The encounters needed to be of a similar length in order for a credible analysis to take place. Interviews conducted on *Today*, *The World at One*, *Woman's Hour* and *Kaleidoscope* averaged between 3 and 5 minutes. As interviews from *Desert Island Discs* and *Personal Records* generally ran for forty-five minutes, it was decided to select randomly a sample from these interviews which matched the average length of the other interviews in the cell.

### **3.2 Problems with data collection**

After three months of recording, it became clear that there was a problem with collecting F-F political interviews. After over forty hours of recording on 29 different days, I still had not managed to record a single interview with a female interviewer and a female

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<sup>2</sup> *Desert Island Discs*: Well-known personalities talk about their lives and careers in relation to their favourite records; *Kaleidoscope*: Professionals from the arts are interviewed about their opinions on the latest publications and productions; *Woman's Hour*: Celebrities and professionals are interviewed about their lives and careers in relation to issues regarded as typically female, such as childcare, relationships and cooking; *Personal Records*: A famous celebrity is interviewed about the contents of their record collection.

MP or member of a political party. By the end of the five month period, three of these encounters had been recorded, but in order to keep the study on schedule, recording needed to be completed by the end of February.<sup>3</sup>

The problem in obtaining F-F political interviews is an interesting finding of this project. Political interviews with female participants occur less frequently as the political arena is still largely a male domain. There are considerably fewer female MPs, and far fewer women involved as active members of political parties.<sup>4</sup>

To ascertain whether the lack of F-F interviews was indicative of a more global pattern in the broadcast media, I listened to Radio 4 for one whole day. 15 hours of material was recorded between 6.00 a.m. and 9.00 p.m. During this time, 35 dyadic interviews were recorded, 28 had a political topic, and 7 had a non-political topic. Out of the political interviews, 18 were M-M encounters, and 10 were F-M encounters. No F-F or M-F interviews were found. In the non-political interviews, 2 of each of these encounters were F-F, M-M and M-F dyads, and 1 F-M interview was recorded. It is important to point out that the 2 F-F interviews were both recorded from *Woman's Hour*. These findings also suggest that political interviews with female interviewees are far less likely to occur than interviews with male interviewees.

The other difficulty encountered when collecting the data occurred with the F-M dyads in non-political interviews. With the exception of *Desert Island Discs* and *Woman's Hour*, the other programmes selected rarely had female interviewers. Therefore, in order to fill the cell, it was necessary to include four encounters conducted by Sue MacGregor on the *Today* programme. Any attempt to counteract this by including the same number of F-F interviews with Sue MacGregor proved impossible as only one had been recorded.

### 3.3 Measuring linguistic politeness

Measuring the level of linguistic politeness participants use in spoken interaction is a complex activity. The norms and conventions of linguistic politeness vary greatly from one culture to another, and different social groups express politeness differently. The degree of politeness expected is highly dependent on the contextual setting of the communicative event. The linguistic means used to express politeness are also dependent on the context, and on the relationship between the participants. Any study which examines politeness needs to pay close attention to the complex interplay of all of these factors to ensure an accurate analysis is given.

Holmes (1995) and Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that the levels of linguistic politeness expected between participants depends upon the degree of solidarity or distance between them. This is inextricably linked to the power relationship between the interactants, and the formality of the context.

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<sup>3</sup> It was decided to include an interview conducted by Anna Ford with Cambridge University Professor Susan Stobbs. This interview was political in content, as the topic under discussion was the effect of the Labour Government's education policy on the university's admission system. The fifth interview in this category was a non-dyadic encounter with both a male and female interviewee. However, the interviewer did address them individually. I thus analysed the section where the female interviewee was interviewed, and excluded the section where the male interviewee was addressed.

<sup>4</sup> The F-F non-political interviews were not as difficult to find as the F-F political encounters, though it must be taken into account that three out of the five selected in this category were taken from *Woman's Hour*, the programme specifically designed with a female audience in mind. If *Woman's Hour* had not been included, then F-F non political interviews would have been equally difficult to find.

In the specific context of the broadcast interview, the degree of solidarity-distance is constrained due to the highly formal nature of the interaction. Holmes (1995: 19) points out that in formal contexts speakers tend to focus on the ‘transactional’ roles of the discourse rather than on establishing personal relationships. Indeed, this is the case in broadcast interviews, where the main purpose of the encounter is to elicit information from interviewees. The degree of distance is also due to the fact that participants have unequal rights to the local power management of the discourse. Interactants have pre-established roles as either interviewers or interviewees, and it is the interviewers who have control of the discourse at a local level.

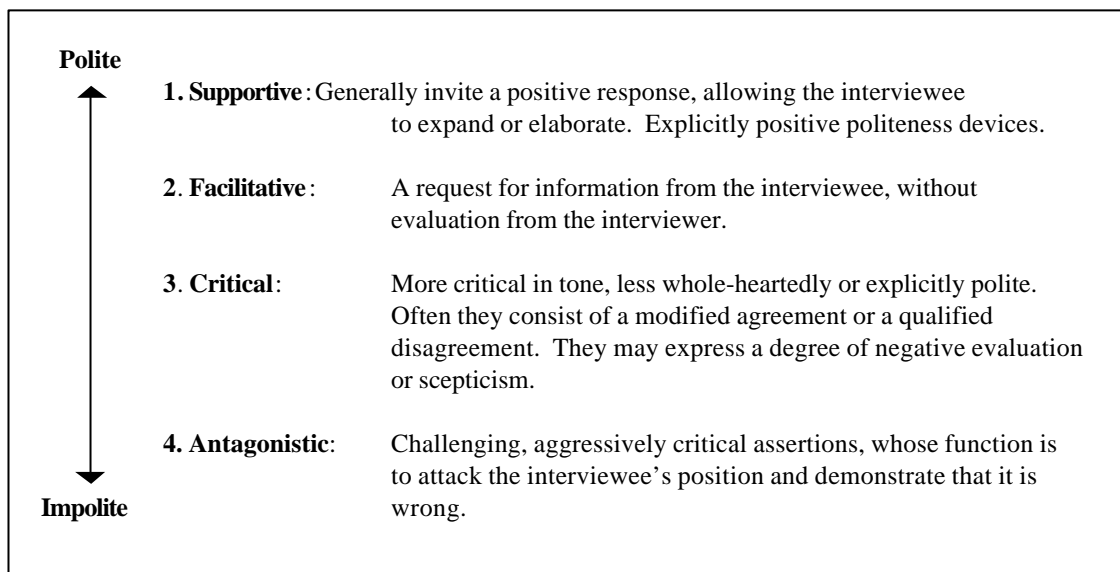
### 3.4 The linguistic variables

Question-answer sequences and participants’ adherence to the turn-taking system were analysed to measure politeness and sex differences. The analytical frameworks that identify the form and function of each of these variables in relation to linguistic politeness are now detailed. The frameworks I have developed specifically for the interviewing context are presented and defined in relation to Brown and Levinson’s definitions of politeness. Detailed examples of each linguistic variable are given in Mullany (1998: 32-41).

#### 3.4.1 Questioning strategies

In order to examine the pragmatic function of questions, I have adopted Holmes’s (1992) framework designed for analysing questions and politeness in the formal context of conference presentations. The category ‘facilitative’ has been added specifically for the interviewing context. This is because some questions posed by interviewers do not contain evaluation, whereas Holmes’s framework was designed specifically for questions which evaluate the preceding discourse at the end of formal presentations. The categories are illustrated in Figure 1, in conjunction with their place on a scale of politeness.

Figure 1. Analytical framework for the pragmatic function of questions based on Holmes (1992: 138-140)



### 3.4.2 Answers

In order to assess the degree of attention male and female interviewees pay to politeness principles when answering the interviewers' questions, I have designed a framework based upon Harris's (1991) classifications. Harris's study focused specifically on indirect answers given by politicians in broadcast interviews. She defined answers as either direct, indirect or challenging. I have adopted the general definitions of these categories, as detailed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Classifications for answers in broadcast interviews based on Harris (1991: 87)

<b>Direct:</b>	A response which explicitly expresses 'yes' 'no' 'of course' 'right' etc; or a response which provides a value for the missing variable in response to a wh- question.
<b>Indirect:</b>	A response which involves inference: either the selection of some intermediate position between 'yes' or 'no', or where a value for the missing variable in response to a wh- question can be inferred.
<b>Challenging:</b>	A response which challenges one or more of the presuppositions of a question, or a response which challenges the illocutionary force of a question.

Harris (1991: 80) points out that questions in political interviews are put forward by the interviewer in order to elicit agreement or disagreement from the interviewee, i.e. either 'yes that is the case' or 'no that is not the case'. On the basis of this, it was decided that the 'direct' category would be split into direct positive (+ive) responses and direct negative (-ive) responses. Direct +ive responses are positive politeness devices. They pay attention to the addressee's face needs by giving positive feedback, generally by providing agreement with the addressee. Conversely, direct -ive responses threaten the addressee's positive face needs by giving negative feedback, generally by providing disagreement.

It is hard to classify direct responses to wh- questions as either directly positive or negative, as the question form makes it difficult to locate these responses on a positive/negative continuum. For the purposes of this study, it was decided that direct responses to wh- questions would be classified as direct +ive responses. By providing a value for the missing variable, the speaker is attending to the addressee's positive face needs by providing a contingent answer to a request for information.

Indirect responses demonstrate that the interviewees are paying close attention to their own face needs. Obeng (1994, 1997) and Wilson (1990) point out that due to the cancellable nature of implicatures, politicians cannot be accused of any statement they make in a political interview if it is made indirectly. Obeng (1994: 42) defines verbal indirectness as a strategy used to communicate 'difficulty'. Any potential face- threatening act can be

seen to communicate difficulty. Indirectness is therefore a face-saving or face-maintenance strategy. It protects the interviewee's face needs from both the interviewer and the listening audience.

Challenging responses are bald on record strategies which directly threaten the addressee's face. By directly challenging either the illocutionary force or a presupposition of the question posed, the interviewee overtly attacks the interviewer's positive face in order to demonstrate that their position is wrong.

### **3.4.3 The turn-taking system**

In the specific context of interviews, the turn-taking system is constrained as the basic question and answer adjacency pair framework pre-allocates the turns. The interviewer has main responsibility for the turn-taking procedure and the interviewee is expected to answer accordingly.

A number of studies which examine turn-taking and sex differences have tended to focus on the disruptive elements. Malam (1995) points out that if a clear picture of sex differences in interaction is ever to be achieved, then a model of interaction which considers all aspects of turn-taking is needed, not just the disruptive elements. In light of this it was decided that supportive simultaneous talk and minimal responses as well as disruptive responses would be analysed. The detailed frameworks for examining these variables are now illustrated.

#### **3.4.3.1 Interruptions**

Previous studies have been heavily criticised for not providing a clear definition of exactly what constitutes an interruption. In this study, I follow Holmes in defining an interruption as a 'disruptive turn' (Holmes 1995: 52). Interruptions are utterances which break the symmetry of the turn-taking system, threatening the speaker's negative face need of not being imposed upon. They are competitive discourse strategies, signalling a battle for management of the conversational floor. The number of overall interruption attempts are calculated in order to establish which dyads are most competitive. Interruptions are also classified as either successful or unsuccessful. A successful interruption prevents the current speaker from finishing their turn as the interrupter gains the floor.

Malam (1995) claims that unsuccessful interruptions demonstrate that the interrupter is paying some degree of attention to the addressee's negative face needs by allowing the current speaker to continue. She argues that an unsuccessful interruption is less threatening 'since the potential interrupter recognises the possible threat, and withdraws' (1995: 230). However, there is another conceivable explanation for an unsuccessful interruption. It may be the case that the potential interrupter stops as he/she is not a powerful enough participant to succeed.

#### **3.4.3.2 Simultaneous talk**

Edelsky (1981) emphasises that simultaneous speech can also function as a form of co-operative linguistic behaviour. She distinguishes two conversational floors: the *single* floor and the *collaborative* floor. Whilst the single floor refers to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) idea of one speaker at a time, the collaborative floor is open to all participants to speak simultaneously in order to work together to produce shared meanings. In broadcast interviews, the single floor is expected, as if two participants speak at the same

time it is very difficult for the listening audience to comprehend the discourse being transmitted. However, short periods of co-operative simultaneous talk are evident in some of the non-political interviews.

Coates (1996: 129) provides comprehensive definitions to identify co-operative simultaneous talk which I have followed. She states that simultaneous speech is when speakers say the same thing but at slightly different times; when speakers complete an utterance simultaneously but differently; when speakers comment on what each other are saying, or when speakers pursue a theme simultaneously, saying different but related things at the same time.

Simultaneous talk is potentially a threat to the speaker's negative face. However, as it pays attention to the speaker's positive face needs by providing support and agreement, the face threat is mitigated (Makri-Tsilipakou 1994).

### 3.4.3.3 Overlaps

In order to distinguish clearly between an interruption and an overlap, I have followed Coates's (1993: 109) definition. She argues that overlaps represent 'instances of slight over-anticipation by the next speaker'. In this paper, overlaps are instances of simultaneous speech that are uttered at *transition-relevant places* (TRPs) in the discourse (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). TRPs are signalled by verbal and non-verbal clues which suggest the end of the current speaker's turn. These clues include pauses and a fall or rise in intonation. Overlaps have been identified and removed from the data to ensure that the only instances of simultaneous speech classified as either interruptions or simultaneous talk are not just instances of slight over-anticipation by the speaker.

### 3.4.3.4 Minimal responses

The term minimal response is generally used to refer to brief utterances such as 'mm' or 'yeah'. Minimal responses can play either a supportive or non-supportive function in the discourse, depending on factors such as intonation and timing (Holmes 1995: 56). Supportive minimal responses are positive politeness devices which indicate active listenership and support.

Supportive minimal responses have a function similar to supportive simultaneous talk, though the major distinction is that uttering a minimal response does not involve an attempt to hold the floor. Instead minimal responses signal active listenership and encourage the current speaker to continue. In the specific context of the broadcast interview, the interviewer can use supportive minimal responses to encourage the interviewee giving an answer, and the interviewee can use them to show attention to the interviewer's question before providing a response.

Previous researchers including Zimmerman and West (1975) and Fishman (1980) have found that minimal responses do not always have a supportive function. The form and function of each minimal response is thus carefully analysed to ensure an accurate classification is given, as is the case with every variable in this study.

## 4. Results

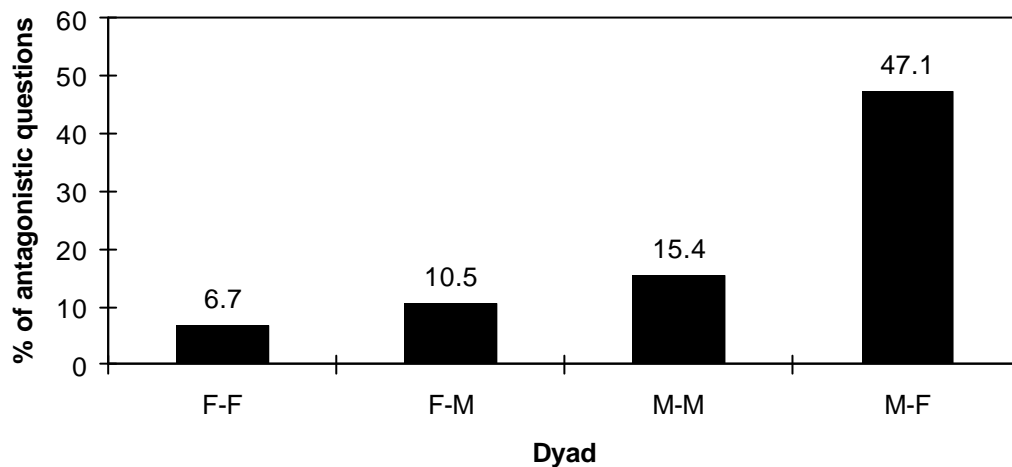
The figures presented throughout are the totals of the five individual interviews which make up the four dyads. The interviewer is always referred to first in the presentation of the results. The individual interviews have been given close examination to ensure that the

findings presented here are indicative of a pattern, and are not just found in one interview. This issue is discussed explicitly where it arises. The detailed figures for each of the variables are presented in the appendix.

#### **4.1 Question and answer sequences: political interviews**

As would be expected in this confrontational context, there are no instances of supportive questioning strategies in any of the dyadic encounters. Critical questions are the most common type in the F-F, F-M and M-M interviews. In the M-F encounters, whilst 35.3% of elicitations are critical, 47.1% are antagonistic. Although this difference is slight, it gains significance when it is compared to the instances of antagonistic questions in the other three dyads, as illustrated in Figure 3:

Figure 3. Percentage of questions classified as antagonistic in the political interviews



This evidence shows that female interviewers are least likely to utter antagonistic questions, especially in the F-F dyads, suggesting that the female interviewers are paying the greatest attention to their addressees' face needs by avoiding the most face-threatening questioning strategy. In contrast, male interviewers are six times more likely to use antagonistic elicitations to female interviewees than female interviewers. Furthermore, the male interviewers in the M-F dyads are almost three times more likely to use antagonistic questions to female interviewees than male interviewers in the M-M pairings. This appears to indicate that male interviewers pay far less attention to the face needs of their interviewees when the interviewees are female.

In the face of this evidence, it is important to analyse individually the five interviews which make up the total for each dyadic category. Antagonistic elicitations are discovered in only two out of the five interviews in the F-F and F-M dyads, three out of the five interviews in the M-M dyads, and four out of the five interviews in the M-F dyads. This adds weight to the argument that antagonistic questions are more likely to be used by male interviewers to female interviewees.

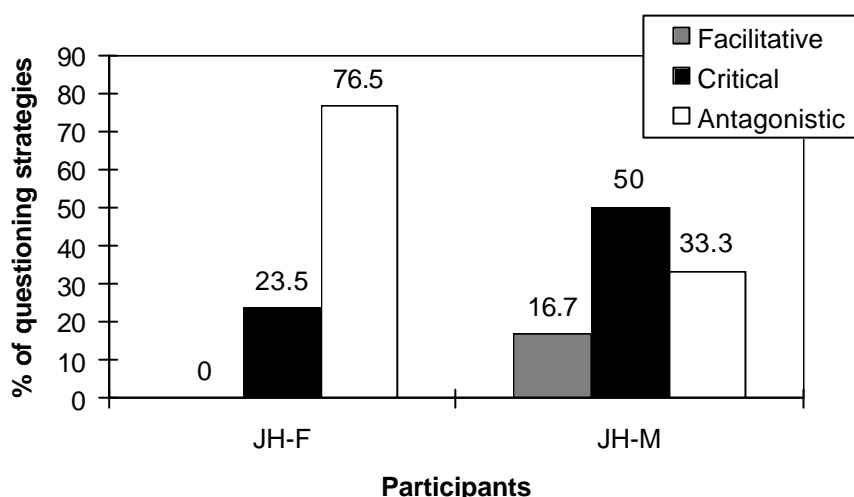
Analysis of the interviews which make up the M-F category reveals that a large number of the antagonistic questions are found in one interview: an encounter between John Humphrys and Hillary Armstrong MP, as illustrated in example 1.

##### **Example 1**

MER: How come they are high quality now when in the past you've attacked the Tories for the spending that's been so low with capping and all the rest of it, all of a sudden now you're in power, they are high quality, they didn't used to be did they?

This interview accounts for 63% of all antagonistic elicitations in the M-F category. John Humphrys is also an interviewer in the M-M dyad, in an encounter with Jack Cunningham MP. This interview is of a similar length to the encounter with Hillary Armstrong. If the figures for the interview with John Humphrys and Jack Cunningham are analysed, it emerges that 33.3% of the total of antagonistic questions in the M-M category are uttered in this encounter. This evidence indicates that John Humphrys is a confrontational interviewer. A direct comparison between the questioning strategies used by John Humphrys to address Hillary Armstrong and Jack Cunningham reveals some interesting findings, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Percentage of questioning strategies used by John Humphrys (JH) to female interviewee Hillary Armstrong (F) and male interviewee Jack Cunningham (M)



John Humphrys uses over twice as many antagonistic questions to Hillary Armstrong, and no facilitative forms are found in this interview. These findings suggest that John Humphrys pays less attention to his female interviewee's face needs by uttering far more face-threatening forms. The fact that antagonistic questions are found in four out of the five interviews in the M-F pairing adds credence to the argument that male interviewers are more likely to use the most overtly face-threatening questioning strategies when addressing female interviewees.

The highly critical and antagonistic nature of the questioning strategies used in the political interviews sets up the expectation that interviewees will frequently use indirectness as a face-saving strategy, as previous work on political interviews has shown (Obeng 1997). Indeed, examination of my data has found that indirect responses are the most common strategy used by interviewees of both sexes in all dyadic encounters, as in example 2.

#### Example 2

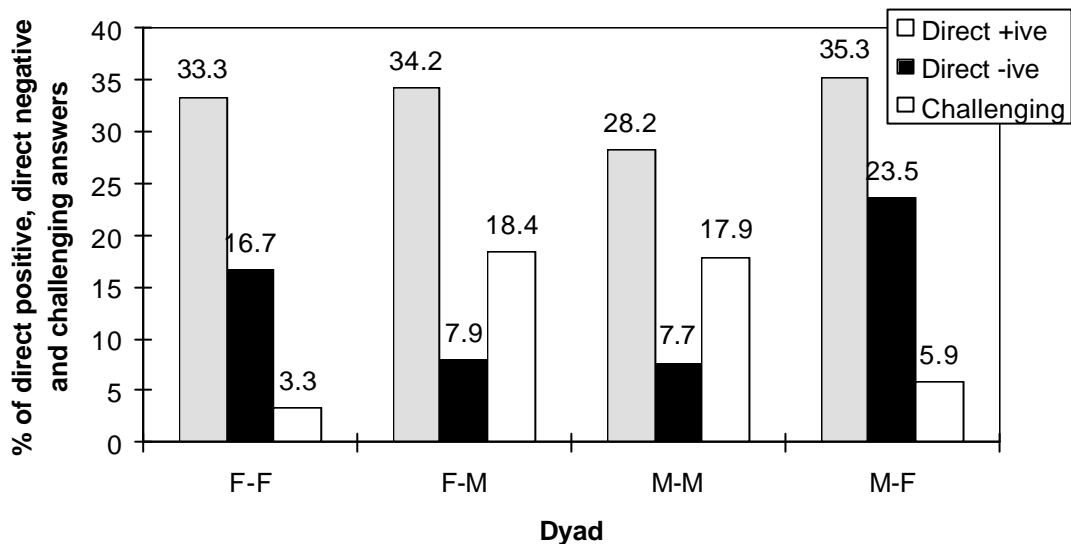
FER: Would you be doing better if Kenneth Clarke was the leader?

MEE: I think William's done a great job, I think he's done an excellent job, I think it's easy or perhaps it isn't easy to forget the scale of what happened to us on May the First, and whoever took over in those circumstances was going to have a very difficult job.

Indirect responses are found in all five interviews which make up the F-F and M-M categories, and four out of five interviews in the F-M and M-F dyads. There is relatively little difference between male and female interviewees' use of indirectness. It is used the most in the single sex encounters: F-F 46.7%, M-M 46.2%, whilst the figures in the mixed-sex dyads are slightly lower F-M 39.5%, M-F 35.3%.

The number of direct positive, direct negative and challenging responses given by all interviewees is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Percentage of answers classified as direct positive, direct negative and challenging in the political interviews



There is hardly any difference between the proportion of direct positive responses in the F-F, F-M and M-F dyads. The lowest instances of positive responses are in the M-M encounters, which may suggest that in single-sex male pairings, the male interviewees are least likely to give positive feedback to their addressees.

Female interviewees in both F-F and M-F dyads use more direct negative responses than their male counterparts. The proportion of negative responses is highest in the M-F pairings. However, when the figures for the five interviews that make up this category are analysed, half of the total number of these responses come from the highly confrontational interview between Hillary Armstrong and John Humphrys.

The real surprise with direct negative responses is therefore in the F-F dyads. These responses are discovered in four out of the five interviews in this category. This finding casts doubt on the assertion that participants are paying the greatest attention to the face needs of their addressees in these encounters. However, a possible explanation for the high occurrence of direct negative responses from female interviewees can be found by examining the figures for challenging responses. The male interviewees are three times more likely to give challenging responses to interviewers of both sexes than female interviewees. Challenging answers are least likely to be used in the F-F dyads. There is only

one instance of a challenging response in all five interviews that make up the F-F category. This indicates that, although females use direct negative answers more frequently, the males appear to favour the most overtly face-threatening form instead. They are more inclined to challenge the interviewer's position with the aim of attempting to retain, or even enhance their status.

There is a small increase in challenging responses from female interviewees in the M-F dyads. Analysis of the interviews that make up this category reveals that all of these responses come from the encounter between Hillary Armstrong and John Humphrys, as illustrated in example 3.

### Example 3

MER: That's what Frank Dobson attacked the last government for doing precisely a year ago.

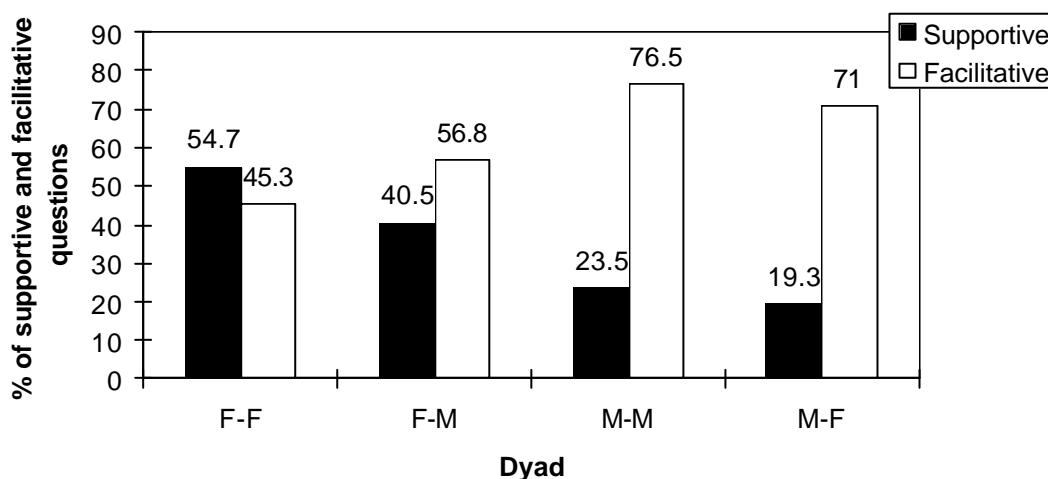
FEE: Well I was doing the rounds in the studio as well then John and we weren't saying precisely what you're saying.

Whereas challenging responses are found in only one of the five interviews in the M-F dyads, they are discovered in all five of the interviews in the M-M category, and four out of the five interviews in the F-M category.

## 4.2 Question and answer sequences: non-political interviews

In the non-political interviews, there are no antagonistic question forms, and very few critical forms, as would be expected in this context. Supportive and facilitative questions are therefore most frequent, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Percentage of questions classified as supportive and facilitative in the non-political interviews



The highest number of supportive questions is used by the female interviewers especially in the F-F pairings. The lowest instances of supportive elicitations are in the M-F interviews. The female interviewers use a far higher number of supportive elicitations to male interviewees in the F-M pairings than their male counterparts in the M-M dyads, as in example 4.

**Example 4**

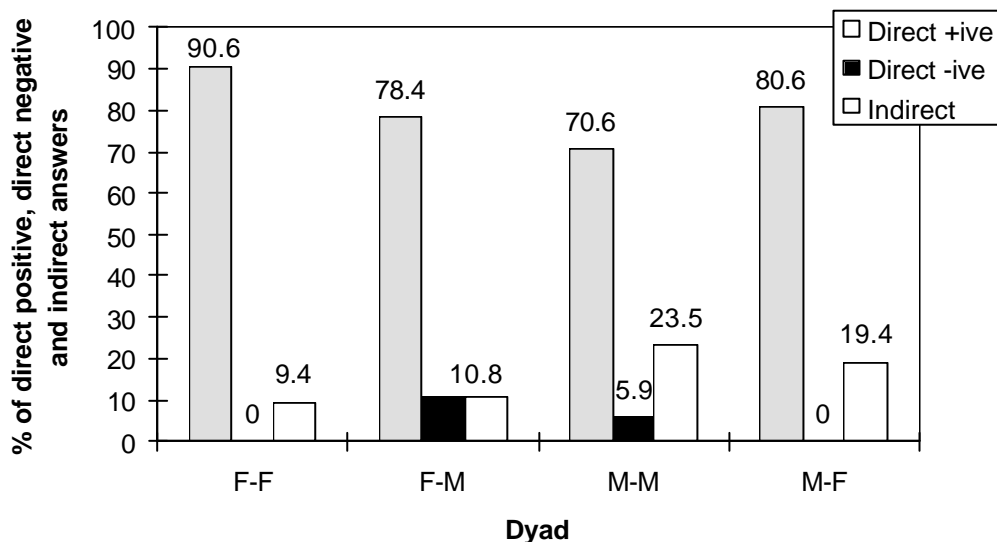
FER: Those flaps look like extraordinary gills or legs or something but there looks like about half a dozen of them on one side, but it's the hair that's startling isn't it for a sea creature?

The low instance of supportive questions in the M-F dyads once again indicates that the male interviewers are paying least attention to the face needs of their female addressees. The highest number of facilitative forms is found in the categories where the interviewers are male. They are most common in the M-M dyads. This suggests that the male interviewers' main priority is to elicit information from their interviewees, whereas the female interviewers also focus on being supportive in their questioning style. These findings are very similar to those of Holmes (1995). She argues that whilst females are more concerned with the affective nature of talk, males prefer to concentrate on its referential function.

In the F-F and M-M pairings, there are no instances of critical elicitations. The F-M dyads contain a small number (2.7%), but the highest number is in the M-F category (9.7%). Although this difference is relatively slight, it adds further weight to the argument that male interviewers in the M-F dyads are paying least attention to their female interviewees' face needs.

There are no instances of challenging responses in the non-political interviews, as would be expected in this context. Direct positive answers are discovered in each of the five individual interviews that make up the four dyadic categories. Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of direct positive, direct negative and indirect responses in the four pairings.

Figure 7. Percentage of answers classified as direct positive, direct negative and indirect in the non-political interviews



The female interviewees do not use any direct negative responses to either female or male interviewees. Female interviewees in the F-F dyads are more likely to utter direct positive responses than interviewees in any other of the three pairings, as in example 5.

**Example 5**

FER: Staff is your married name isn't it?

FEE: That's right Staff is my married name I changed it when I decided on going into television because you had sort of insurance cards in those days, and if it was a different name it was very awkward, so I changed it to Staff the surname to Staff which is my married name.

This suggests once again that these encounters are the most supportive, with interviewees paying very close attention to the positive face needs of their addressees. Although there are very few instances of direct negative responses overall, a small number are uttered by the male interviewees to interviewers of both sexes. They do so on slightly more occasions when the interviewers are female, suggesting that male interviewees in the F-M dyads are paying less attention to the female interviewers' face needs.

Interviewees of both sexes use fewer indirect responses to female interviewers than to males. The F-F and F-M dyads contain the highest number of supportive questions. Therefore, it appears that due to the highly supportive nature of these interviews, there is little need for interviewees to use face saving strategies, as the majority of questions are of a supportive nature.

It is interesting to note that although fewer supportive and more critical questioning strategies are used in the M-F encounters, the male interviewees in the M-M dyads use indirect responses slightly more than the female interviewees in the M-F pairings. This suggests that male interviewees may be more concerned with saving their own face than the female interviewees are.

### **4.3 The turn-taking system**

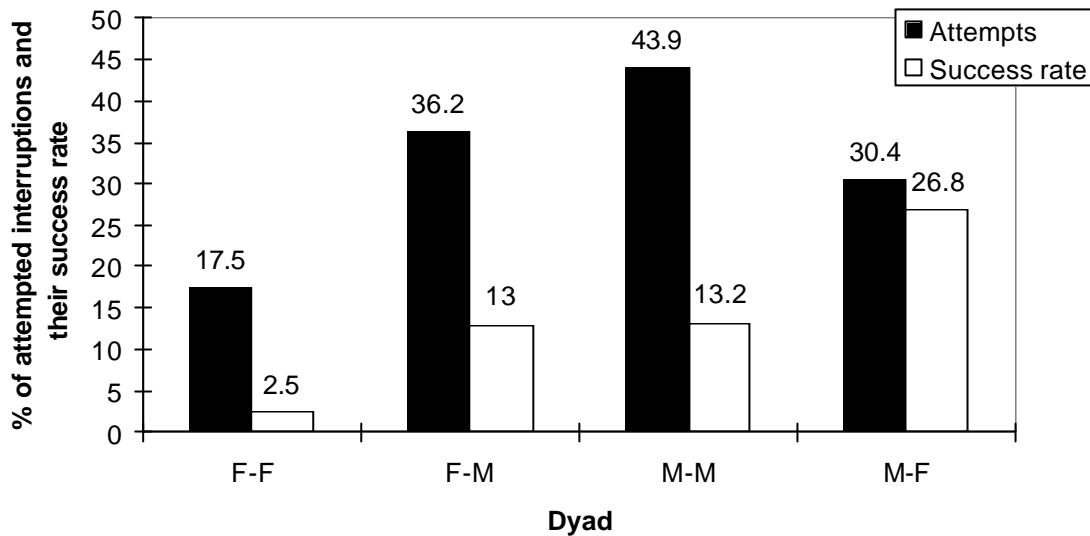
In order to gain an accurate picture of the turn-taking system, the participants' use of interruptions, minimal responses and simultaneous talk have been calculated as a percentage rate per number of overall turns taken. Again, the individual encounters have been scrutinised carefully to see if the results are indicative of an overall pattern, and not just the result of one encounter.

#### **4.3.1 Turn-taking: political interviews**

##### **4.3.1.1 Interruptions**

Figure 8 reveals the number of attempted interruptions by interviewers and the success rate of these attempts in all four dyads.

Figure 8. Percentage of turns classified as attempted interruptions by interviewers in the political interviews and their success rate



Interruptions are least likely to be attempted in the F-F dyads, and not surprisingly, the success rate is lowest in these encounters. There is a considerable increase in interruption attempts by female interviewers when the interviewees are male. Attempted interruptions are found in 4 out of the 5 interviews that make up this dyadic category. Interruption attempts are highest in the M-M dyads. They are found in all 5 interviews which make up this cell. There is little difference in the success rates between F-M and M-M interviews.

The most notable finding here appears to be the low instance of interruptions by male interviewers in the M-F dyads. The findings indicate that female interviewers actually attempt to interrupt male interviewees more than male interviewers in the M-F dyads. This goes against previous findings such as Zimmerman and West (1975) and Holmes (1995) which state that males are more likely to disruptively interrupt female participants. However, the male interviewers in the M-F pairings have a far higher success rate for interruption attempts than interviewers in any other dyad. 26.8% out of 30.4% of interruptions are successful, meaning that when male interviewers attempt to interrupt female interviewees they are successful 88.2% of the time, as in example 6.

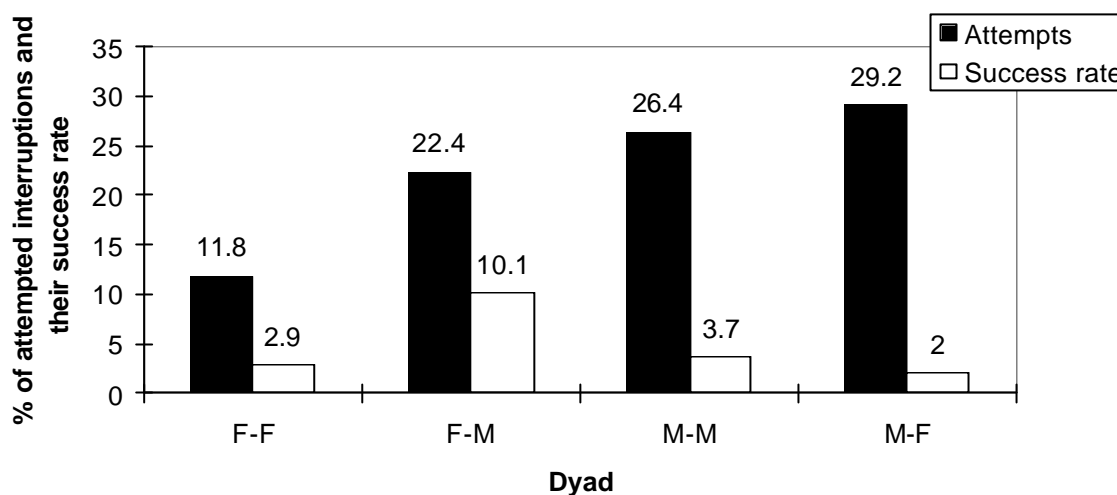
**Example 6**

FEE: No this means [because that makes up p- ]  
 MER: [presumably everybody wants] better services don't they  
 and that's no mystery.

The male interviewers are more than twice as likely to succeed as female interviewers in the F-M dyads.

Figure 9 illustrates the number of attempted interruptions by interviewees in all four dyadic encounters:

Figure 9. Percentage of turns classified as interruption attempts by interviewees in the political interviews and their success rate



The lowest number of interruption attempts are again in the F-F dyads. The surprising finding here is that the female interviewees in the M-F dyads attempt to interrupt their male interviewers more than in any other pairings. However, only 2% of these attempts are successful, the lowest success rate of all the dyads. When the interviews which make up this category are analysed, it emerges that Hillary Armstrong is responsible for 71% of the total number of interruption attempts in the encounter with John Humphrys.

Although male interviewees attempt more interruptions in the M-M dyads, the success rate for interruptions is higher in the F-M dyads. This suggests that male interviewees pay less attention to the face needs of their female interviewers.

#### 4.3.1.2 Minimal responses

The number of turns classified as minimal responses are low, as would be expected by the constraints of the interview as a speech event. There are no instances of minimal responses by interviewees in the political interviews. Initially, the results for minimal responses are surprising. There is relatively little difference between the number of supportive minimal responses given by interviewers in three of the dyadic settings. 7.5% of overall turns are minimal responses in the F-F dyads, 8.7% in the F-M dyads and 8.9% in the M-F dyads. The highest number of minimal responses are in the M-M dyads (13.2%). These findings go against previous research which suggest minimal responses are typically a trait of female speech. However, when the form of the minimal responses are analysed, it emerges that a large proportion of them take the form of 'right', as in example 7.

##### Example 7

MEE: I think people have understood that is my position, I've  
also said there are formidable obstacles throughout [in  
MER: [right  
MEE: joining monetary union

Such responses do not appear to function as supportive positive feedback. They could be seen as attempts by the interviewers to get the interviewees to shift the focus of the topic. They appear to be saying, 'I understand this, can we move on'. The use of the lexical item 'right' in these examples therefore appears to have more of a referential, information focused function than an affective, supportive function.

'Right' as a minimal response occurs as 2.5% of the overall number of turns in the F-F interviews, 4.4% in the F-M interviews, 8.8% in the M-M interviews, and 5.3% of the time in the M-F encounters. It is interesting that 'right' appears most frequently in the M-M dyads. This could add further evidence to the argument of males in single sex pairing focusing specifically on the referential nature of talk. This would be an interesting line of enquiry for future research. It would also be interesting to examine whether 'right' occurs with such frequency in other contextual settings.

### **4.3.2 Turn-taking: non political interviews**

#### **4.3.2.1 Interruptions**

The female interviewers in both the F-F and F-M dyads do not attempt any interruptions in the non-political interviews. Any instances of simultaneous speech are either overlaps, or co-operative simultaneous talk. This suggests that female interviewers in the non-political interviews are paying very close attention to the face needs of their addressees.

In the M-M dyads 2.5% of overall turns are classified as interruption attempts, and in the M-F dyads 13% of overall turns are attempted interruptions. The male interviewers are thus over five times more likely to attempt an interruption when the interviewees are female, suggesting that the males are paying far less attention to the female interviewees' face needs. 4.3% out of the 13% of attempts are successful in the M-F dyads, meaning that when a male interviewer attempts an interruption in my data, they succeed 33% of the time. None of the attempts in the M-M dyads are successful.

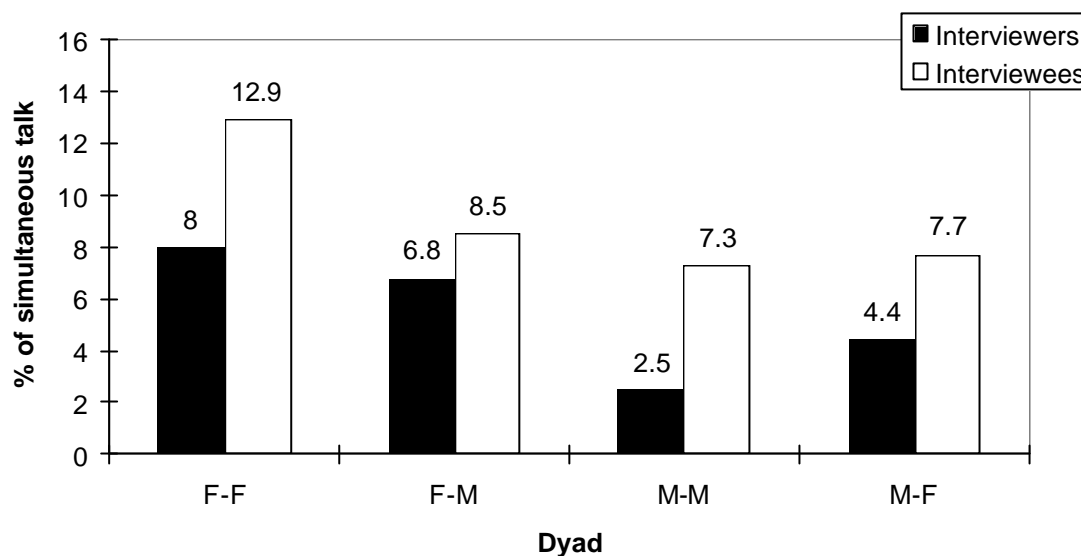
There are no interruption attempts by female interviewees in the F-F dyads. Once again this demonstrates female participants paying greatest attention to their addressees' face needs in the F-F pairings. The highest number of attempted interruptions are in the F-M dyads (10.7%). The male interviewees in these pairings are more than twice as likely to attempt an interruption than the interviewees in the M-M dyads (4.9%). Female interviewees only attempt a small number of interruptions to male interviewers (2.5%). However, the only successful interruptions are in the M-M interviews, where 50% of attempts are successful.

While the number of attempted interruptions are far higher in the F-M dyads, none of these attempts are successful. This may indicate that males are paying some attention to the face needs of their female addressees. However, the fact that no attempts are made in the F-F dyads, and that the very small number of interruption attempts by female interviewees in the M-F dyads are all unsuccessful, indicates that female interviewees are paying more attention to their addressees' face needs, especially in the single-sex pairings.

#### **4.3.2.2 Simultaneous talk**

Figure 10 illustrates the percentage rate of simultaneous talk given per total number of turns by all participants.

Figure 10. Percentage of turns classified as simultaneous talk by interviewers and interviewees in the non-political interviews



These results demonstrate that simultaneous talk is used most frequently by female interviewers and interviewees, especially in the F-F dyads, as in example 8:

**Example 8**

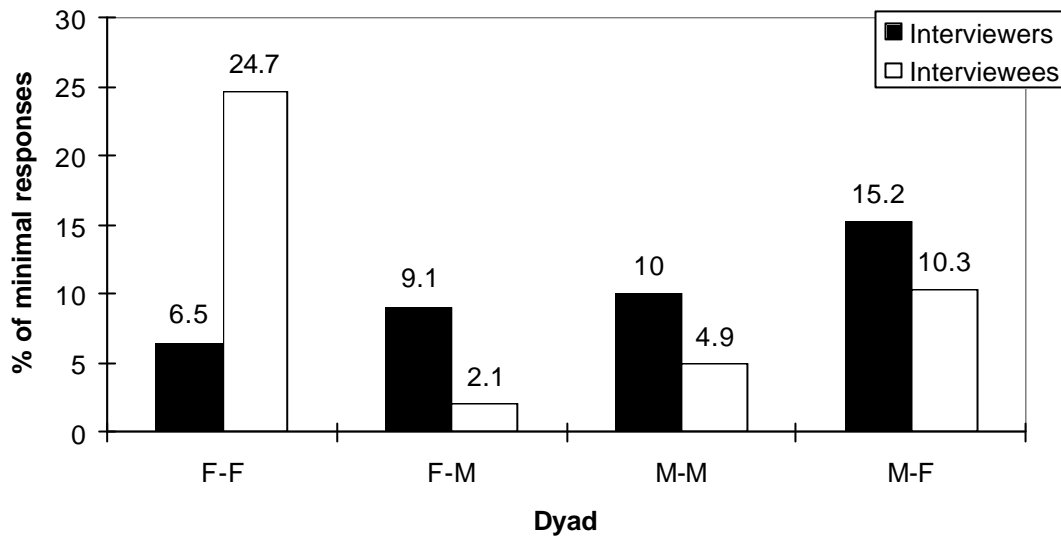
FEE: I wanted to be a ballet dancer but my parents [couldn't afford to have ]  
 FER: [didn't work out that way]  
 FEE: me trained.

It is interesting to observe that male interviewers are more likely to use simultaneous talk to female interviewees than to male interviewees. It is possible that this result could be an example of speech accommodation (Thackerar, Giles and Cheshire 1982), though more detailed research would need to be conducted to test such an assertion. It is also notable that the male interviewees are responsible for more instances of simultaneous talk when the interviewers are female, than female interviewees in the M-F dyads. Again, this could be interpreted as an example of speech accommodation. Female interviewers make the encounters less face-threatening, so highly supportive and co-operative strategies may be more likely to be used, even when the interviewees are male.

**4.3.2.3 Minimal responses**

All minimal responses in this context are of a supportive nature, and no instances of 'right' are discovered in these encounters. Figure 11 illustrates the rate of minimal responses per number of turns given by all participants.

Figure 11. Percentage of turns classified as minimal responses by interviewers and interviewees in the non-political interviews



The results for the interviewers are surprising. The male interviewers in the M-F dyads are most likely to use minimal responses, whereas female interviewers in the F-F dyads are least likely to use them. This suggests that male interviewers do use minimal responses as supportive strategies, especially to female interviewees, which is in opposition to previous findings. However, as with the political interviews, the occurrence of minimal responses as overall number of turns is low due to the constraints of the interviewing context. The difference between the figures is thus relatively slight.

Unlike the interviewers' figures, the pattern for interviewees' use of minimal responses is in accordance with the findings of previous research. Female interviewees are more likely to use minimal responses than their male counterparts, especially in the F-F pairings, and male interviewees in the F-M pairings are least likely to use them.

## 5. Interpretation

The results of this study broadly support earlier work such as Goodwin (1980) Maltz and Borker (1982) and Tannen (1990) which found that female participants are far more co-operative interactants than their male counterparts, as they appear to pay the greatest attention to their addressees' face needs in both the political (competitive) and the non-political (co-operative) settings. Conversely, male participants are more likely to use on record strategies which do not mitigate the threat to the addressee's face, thus demonstrating the competitive nature of their discourse strategies in both interview settings.

However, despite this evidence, it is unjustifiable to state that female participants will always use co-operative discourse strategies more whereas men will always use competitive strategies more, as the data analysis has revealed some exceptions to this. There are instances where the male participants do use co-operative strategies more than their female counterparts, and vice versa.

The most surprising results are found in the non-political interviews, when examining supportive positive politeness strategies. Male interviewers in both the M-M and M-F dyads utter slightly more supportive minimal responses than the female interviewers in either the F-F or the F-M dyads. In fact, the female interviewers in the F-F pairings are least likely to use minimal responses, whereas the male interviewers in the M-F dyads are most likely to use them.

Analysis of simultaneous talk produced the expected results with interviewers, though exceptions are found with the speech of the interviewees. Whilst the female interviewers in both the F-F and F-M dyads produce more simultaneous talk than their male counterparts, the male interviewees in the F-M dyads utter slightly more instances of simultaneous talk than the female interviewees in the M-F dyads.

Therefore, the evidence for both minimal responses and simultaneous talk in the non-political interviews questions the findings of previous researchers who claim that these discourse strategies are favoured by female speakers. In the co-operative interview setting, male participants use these strategies more than their female counterparts on some occasions.

There also appear to be exceptions to the expected pattern with female speech. In the F-M political interviews, the female interviewers are responsible for the second highest rate of interruption attempts, and they succeed in interrupting just as often as their male counterparts in the M-M dyads. This evidence questions the findings of previous studies including Zimmerman and West (1975) and West and Zimmerman (1983) which state that males will disruptively interrupt female participants more. These exceptions prove the need for a new perspective for language and gender theory.

Cameron (1995, 1997) believes that the way forward is to view gender as a performative social construct. This reconceptualisation of gender should enable the definitions of where men and women come from to be given fresh examination. Cameron hopes that by conceiving gender in this way, researchers will not just document the styles that are typical of male and female speech. The idea of problematising gender in this way has its origins in recent feminist social theory (Butler 1990, Bem 1993). Butler (1990) emphasises that one is never finished becoming a woman or man, as individuals make varying accommodations to femininity and masculinity in producing and reproducing themselves as gendered beings. She argues that gender is performative: femininity and masculinity are not traits that we have, rather they are effects we perform by the things that we do.

Cameron (1997) points out that the notion of performativity sheds some light on the phenomenon of gendered speech. She argues that men and women do not simply learn, and then mechanically reproduce ways of speaking appropriate to their own sex. Instead, men and women 'are members of cultures in which a large amount of discourse about gender is constantly circulating' (1997: 280). Boys and girls do not only learn the gendered meanings associated with their own sex during the socialisation process. Rather, they learn a much broader set of gendered meanings that are complexly attached to different ways of speaking. The speech they produce is dependent upon these gendered meanings. Both male and female participants are capable of using discourse strategies associated with traits of either masculinity or femininity.

However, Cameron's (1997) findings and indeed the findings of this study emphasise that in the majority of cases, speakers do produce the speech patterns most commonly associated with the norm for their sex. Therefore, although male and female speakers are aware of the others' cultural norms and are fully capable of using them, it must be realised that if they deviate from the speech patterns associated with their sex, their speech will be viewed as marked (Ochs 1992). Freed (1996) states that this is a consequence of the fact that the way men and women perceive one another in society is deeply entrenched in gender stereotypes. She points out that when the language of male or female speakers does not

meet the expectations commonly associated with their sex, then a set of judgements is made about them. Their language is seen as 'marked', and they themselves are viewed as 'deviant' (1996: 70).

The view of gender as a performative social construct represents a clear step forward from previous linguistic theories. It accounts for the flexibility of speakers, and represents a rejection of the rather simplistic explanation of sex differences in language use advocated by previous theorists.

Greenwood (1996) also expresses the need for gender to be viewed as dynamic. In a study of adolescent speakers, she disputes the claim that boys interrupt girls more, and suggests that in some contexts, gender is not the most salient factor in distinguishing linguistic behaviour. Instead, she points to the use of speech accommodation theory (Thakerar, Giles and Cheshire 1982) to explain the strategies interlocutors use. Speech accommodation theory advocates that when speakers want to signal solidarity, they will adopt a style similar to the members of a group they feel most allied with. If speakers want to signal distance, their speech style will shift away from that of the members with whom they wish to contrast themselves. Indeed, analysis of the data in this study has also indicated that there may be evidence of speech accommodation, especially in the non-political interviews (see section 4.3.2).

The findings of this study, and new ideas including those of Cameron and Greenwood outlined above, prove the need for a new perspective on language and gender theory to be found. It is no longer possible to apply the definitions of cooperation and competitiveness to account for sex differences, as this argument has proved to be too simplistic in its explanations.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study has produced new empirical evidence on sex differences and linguistic politeness in the previously under-investigated context of media discourse. It is hoped that the wealth of data that is presented illustrates the value of using linguistic politeness to analyse the difference between male and female speech patterns. A large number of linguistic variables were incorporated into a politeness framework designed specifically for analysing differences in the context of broadcast interviews. By examining the form and function of each linguistic variable, it is hoped that this study avoids the methodological criticisms that have been levelled at previous work.

By applying the empirical findings of the study to current debates in language and gender research, it is also hoped that the need for a new theoretical perspective which accounts for sex differences in language use has been clearly emphasised.

### **Transcription conventions**

**FER**= female interviewer

**MER**= male interviewer

**FER**= female interviewer

**FEE**= female interviewee

[ an open bracket indicates overlap

[ ] closed brackets indicate simultaneous speech

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## Appendix 1

### Figures

#### 1. Political interviews

Table 1. The form of questions given by interviewers in the political interviews

Questions	F-F		F-M		M-M		M-F	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Supportive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Facilitative	9	30	6	15.8	7	18	6	17.6
Critical	19	63.3	28	73.7	26	66.6	12	35.3
Antagonistic	2	6.7	4	10.5	6	15.4	16	47.1
Total	30	100	38	100	39	100	34	100

Table 2. The form of answers given by interviewees in the political interviews

Answers	F-F		F-M		M-M		M-F	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Direct positive	10	33.3	13	34.2	11	28.2	12	35.3
Direct negative	5	16.7	3	7.9	3	7.7	8	23.5
Indirect	14	46.7	15	39.5	18	46.2	12	35.3
Challenging	1	3.3	7	18.4	7	17.9	2	5.9
Total	30	100	38	100	39	100	34	100

Table 3. Form of turns taken by interviewers in the political interviews

Turn form	F-F		F-M		M-M		M-F	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Questions	30	75	38	55.1	39	42.9	34	60.7
Interruptions	7	17.5	25	36.2	40	43.9	17	30.4
Minimal responses	3	7.5	6	8.7	12	13.2	5	8.9
Total	40	100	69	100	91	100	56	100

Table 4. Form of turns taken by interviewees in the political interviews

Turn form	F-F		F-M		M-M		M-F	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Answers	30	88.2	38	77.6	39	73.6	34	70.8
Interruptions	4	11.8	11	22.4	14	26.4	14	29.2
Minimal responses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	34	100	49	100	54	100	48	100

## 2. Non-political interviews

Table 5. The form of questions given by interviewers in the non-political interviews

Questions	F-F		F-M		M-M		M-F	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Supportive	29	54.7	15	40.5	8	23.5	6	19.3
Facilitative	24	45.3	21	56.8	26	76.5	22	71
Critical	0	0	1	2.7	0	0	3	9.7
Antagonistic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	53	100	37	100	34	100	31	100

Table 6. The form of answers given by interviewees in the non-political interviews

Answers	F-F		F-M		M-M		M-F	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Direct positive	48	90.6	29	78.4	24	70.6	25	80.6
Direct negative	0	0	4	10.8	2	5.9	0	0
Indirect	5	9.4	4	10.8	8	23.5	6	19.4
Challenging	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	53	100	37	100	34	100	31	100

Table 7. The form of turns taken by interviewers in the non-political interviews

Turn form	F-F		F-M		M-M		M-F	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Questions	53	85.5	37	84.1	34	85	31	67.4
Interruptions	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	6	13
Simultaneous talk	5	8	3	6.8	1	2.5	2	4.4
Minimal responses	4	6.5	4	9.1	4	10	7	15.2
Total	62	100	44	100	40	100	46	100

Table 8. The form of turns taken by interviewees in the non-political interviews

Turn form	F-F		F-M		M-M		M-F	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Answers	53	62.4	37	78.7	34	82.9	31	79.5
Interruptions	0	0	5	10.7	2	4.9	1	2.5
Simultaneous talk	11	12.9	4	8.5	3	7.3	3	7.7
Minimal responses	21	24.7	1	2.1	2	4.9	4	10.3
Total	85	100	47	100	41	100	39	100