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## **Gendered-Linked Differences in Speech Styles: Analysing Linguistic and Gender in the Malaysian Context**

### **DIFFÉRENCES DE SEXE DANS LE STYLE DE DISCOURS: ANALYSES LINGUISTIQUES ET ANALYSES SUR LE SEXE DANS LE CAS DE MALAISIE**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to look at the differences in speech styles of Malaysian men and women. The assertion that women and men typically employ different linguistic style is pursued in a wide range of studies. There is significant interest in the sociolinguistic variation associated with the speaker's gender. Over the last few years there has been an explosion of research in this field. Research conducted to date in anthropology and education clearly states that gender-specific patterns of behavior remain relevant factors and important social variables to be analyzed through the most common cultural codes of society, which is its language. Turning to linguistic differences between women and men, there do seem to be linguistic features that are stereotypically associated with men and women, and there is a large measure of agreement about the association of such features with one of the other gender. Gender is the term used to describe socially constructed categories based on sex. Most societies operate in terms of two genders, masculine and feminine, and it is tempting to treat the category of gender as a simple binary opposition. This paper limits itself to describe language use, in particular the different usage of women and men as speakers. Particular attention is given to the usage of five linguistic features; questions, hedges, adjectives, verbosity and politeness.

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Subsequent discussion of language of women and men will be presented in sociolinguistic terms.

**Key words:** speech styles, linguistic, gender, hedges, sociolinguistics

**Résumé:** Cette étude vise à examiner les différences dans les styles de discours des hommes et des femmes malaisiens. L'affirmation que les femmes et les hommes emploient généralement des styles linguistiques différents est poursuivie dans un large éventail d'études. Il y a un intérêt significatif dans la variation sociolinguistique associée au sexe du locuteur. Au cours des dernières années, il y a eu une explosion des recherches dans ce domaine. Les recherches menées à ce jour dans l'anthropologie et l'éducation montre clairement que des modèles spécifiques de comportement des sexes restent

des facteurs pertinents et des variables sociales importantes à être analysées à travers les codes culturels les plus courants de la société, c'est-à-dire la langue. Quant aux différences linguistiques entre les femmes et les hommes, il semble qu'il y a des éléments linguistiques stéréotypiquement associés aux hommes et aux femmes, et qu'il y a un vaste accord sur l'association de ces caractéristiques avec l'un de l'autre sexe. Le genre est le terme utilisé pour décrire les catégories socialement construites fondées sur le sexe. La plupart des sociétés marchent en fonction de deux genres, masculin et féminin, et il est tentant de traiter la catégorie des sexes comme une opposition binaire simple. Le présent article se limite à décrire l'usage des langues, notamment l'usage différent des femmes et des hommes en tant que locuteurs. Une attention particulière est accordée à l'utilisation de cinq caractéristiques linguistiques, c'est-à-dire les questions, les haies, les adjectifs, la verbosité et la politesse.

Les discussions subséquentes de la langue des femmes et des hommes sera présentées en termes sociolinguistiques.

**Mots-Clés:** style de discours, linguistique, sexe, refuge, sociolinguistique

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguists have accumulated considerable evidence that females and males tend to develop different patterns of interaction. Turning to linguistic differences between women and men, there do seem to be linguistic features that are stereotypically associated with men and women, and there is a large measure of agreement about the association of such features with one of the other gender, and that children learn to associate more and more of such features with the appropriate gender group over time (Edelsky, 1977).

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study is carried to find out if women's speech is considered as 'powerless language' as claimed by the American linguist, R. Lakoff (1973; 1975; 1977).

As women begin to enter the professions in greater numbers, there are calls for women to adapt to the linguistic norms of the public domain. As a result of social inequalities between the sexes, women have been thought to be deferential and unassertive through a variety of linguistic variables that reflect women's place in society. Furthermore, most claims about women's communication implicitly focus on white middle-class women without considering variation, for example, across race, ethnicity, class (Houston & Davis, 2002), or age or generation.

By investigating the linguistic features in the informal speech among men and women, more information can be gathered to prove that hesitancy is a characteristic of men and women.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to look at the differences in speech styles of Malaysian men and women. The focus of the study will be on the linguistic features or structures selected on the basis of Lakoff (1973, 1975). Particular attention will be given to the usage of five linguistic features; questions, hedges, adjectives, verbosity and politeness. This study investigates the differences in speech styles of male and female television and radio presenters on local entertainment programs. These features are chosen precisely because of the amount of attention they have received in language and gender.

## **1.3 Review of Literature**

Several researchers have established that negative terms associated with complaining--such as nagging, bitching, and whining--are stereotyped as female behavior (Conway & Vartanian, 2000; Sotirin, 2000). Even when complaining is discussed as a positive interaction (for instance, complaining to communicate solidarity or empathy with another's problems), women are still perceived as complaining more than men (Boxer, 1996). Bell and Blaeuer (2006) question communication research to attempt theorizing gender differently: "to depart from the sex/gender system as foundation for claims about communication, to return the body to research questions, methods, and findings as materially performed, and to account for power structures that produce the subject named in discourse." It is now widely accepted that women and men talk differently, that is, women and men make differential use of the linguistic resources available to them (Graddol and Swann 1989; Coates 1986; Thorne, Kramarae and Henley 1983; Thorne and Henley 1975). There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that male speakers are socialized into a competitive style of discourse, while women are socialized into a more cooperative style of speech (Coates 1986, 1991; Aries 1976; Kalchik 1975; Aries 1976;).

Jennifer Coates, in her book *Women, Men and Language* (New York: Longman Inc., 1986) studied men-only and women-only discussion groups and found that when women talk to each other they reveal a lot about their private lives. They also adhere to one topic for a long time, let all speakers finish their sentences and try to have everyone participate. Men, on the other hand, rarely talked about their personal relationships and feeling but "competed to prove themselves better informed about current affairs, travel, sport, etc" (Coates, 1986).

Also, Coates (1988) in a study of an all-female group of speakers notes particular tendencies which she feels are characteristic of women's style of speech with each other.

## **The Language of Men and Women**

Coates study suggests that the amount of talk contributed by women and men differ in public, formal contexts compared to private, intimate contexts. There are a number of ways of explaining this pattern. Men tend to value public, referentially orientated talk, while women value and enjoy intimate, affective orientated talk. Each gender may be contributing more in the situation in which they are most comfortable. Politeness, or sensitivity to the needs of others, may be another contributing factor. Men appear to regard public formal contexts as opportunities for display, while they are more reserved in private interaction. Women appear to take more account of their addressee's conversational needs.

More encouraging progress has been made in response to the comprehensive claims about sex differences in communicative style made by the American linguist, R. Lakoff (1973; 1975; 1977).

### **Differences in Communicative Style**

The literature on gendered communication suggests that while it is possible to identify typically feminine and masculine communication patterns, most individuals can call on a range of feminine and masculine-styles (Borisoff & Merrill, 1998; Crawford, 1995; Mulac, Bradac & Gibbons, 2001; Tannen, 1990, 1995). Lakoff (1977) categorizes these indices of ‘women’s style’ under three headings. Under the first, *lexical traits*, are discussed women’s specialized vocabularies (elaborated in the areas of fashion, cooking and decorating), the use of imprecise intensifiers (*so, such, divine, gorgeous*), the more frequent expression of emotions such as love and grief, avoidance of angry and hostile expressions, and the use of polite and insincere forms. Under the second category of indices, *phonological traits*, she includes women’s more traditional or correct pronunciation, the use of ‘charming’ foreign accents, and ‘certain supremacy features that are identified as “feminine” in American speech’. The third and final category includes indices at the level of the utterance of speech act, which she labels *syntactic-pragmatic characteristics*. Specifically, these include the use of questions with declarative functions (commonly called the *tag-question* form; e.g., Dinner will be ready at six o’clock, all right?), and *hedging* or deferring with the use of modal verbs (could, should, may), and other lexical items that indicate uncertainty (*kinda, sorta, more or less, like*).

Lakoff’s claims have generated heated debate among researchers for a number of reasons. First, her arguments, both about the distribution of such variables and about the significance as indices of deference, are based entirely, as she freely admits, on intuition and casual observation.

### **Conversational Dominance**

Although the theoretical ideas about the relationship between gender identity and language are still being debated and developed, it is generally accepted that there is a relationship. For social psychologists taking an essentialist and realist approach to identity, the social significance of the expression of identity in speech and talk is at least twofold. On the one hand, it is assumed that people will have attitudes towards women’s and men’s speech that are consequential for evaluations of speakers. On the other hand, speech cues are thought to trigger attributions about the gender identity of the speaker (that is, how masculine or feminine they are). Zimmerman and West (1975) taped thirty-one conversations involving two participants ‘in coffee shops, drug stores and other public places’ on the campus of the University of California. They found profound differences between the conversations involving two speakers of the same sex and those involving one speaker of each sex. Control of topics is normally shared equally between participants in a conversation. In conversations between speakers of the same sex, this seems to be the pattern, but when one speaker is male and one female, male speaker tends to dominate.

Conversational dominance is also the focus of research by Leet-Pellegrinni (1980) which looks at the interaction of the independent variable sex of speaker and expertise.

As women start to enter the professions in greater numbers, there are calls for women to adapt to the linguistic norms of the public domain. Women who succeed on adopting a more competitive discourse style in public meet other problems. In other words, women are in a double-bind: they are urged to adopt more assertive, more masculine styles of discourse in the public sphere, but when they do so, they are perceived as aggressive and confrontational.

#### **1.4 Limitation of Study**

The study is limited to only four Malaysian (two males and two females) television and radio presenters. Only five linguistic features are taken into account specifically to explore the differences in the speech of both genders.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study presents the methodology that includes the source of samples, the subjects, the instrument, the transcription, the coding system and the analysis. This study is based on the qualitative survey method in collecting the data. The data is recorded in non-numerical form where the conversation recording will be transcribed (Nunan, 1996). Through qualitative research, qualitative data can be condensed and quantified to carry out statistical analyses.

The table below shows examples of the different types of linguistic features.

**Table 5: Features and Examples**

No	Types	Examples
1	Questions	a. tag questions e.g. <i>They didn't hit you, did they?</i> b. WH-questions e.g. <i>What's today's date?</i>
2	Fillers	<i>um, uh, ah, mm</i>
3	Hedges	a. phrase type e.g. <i>I think/assume/ guess, I mean</i> b. Adverbial e.g. <i>maybe, probably, relatively, generally</i> c. Adverbial used with the negative e.g. <i>(not)really, (not) necessarily, (not) very</i> d. generalized adjunct e.g. <i>or something, or whatever, sort of, kind of</i>
4	Intensifiers	sub-modification: <i>so, very, etc.</i>
5	Affirmatives	<i>Yeah, OK, Right, All right, Oh, Well</i> in utterance-initial position
6	Adjective Types	<i>wonderful, darling, lovely</i>

### 2.1 QUESTIONS

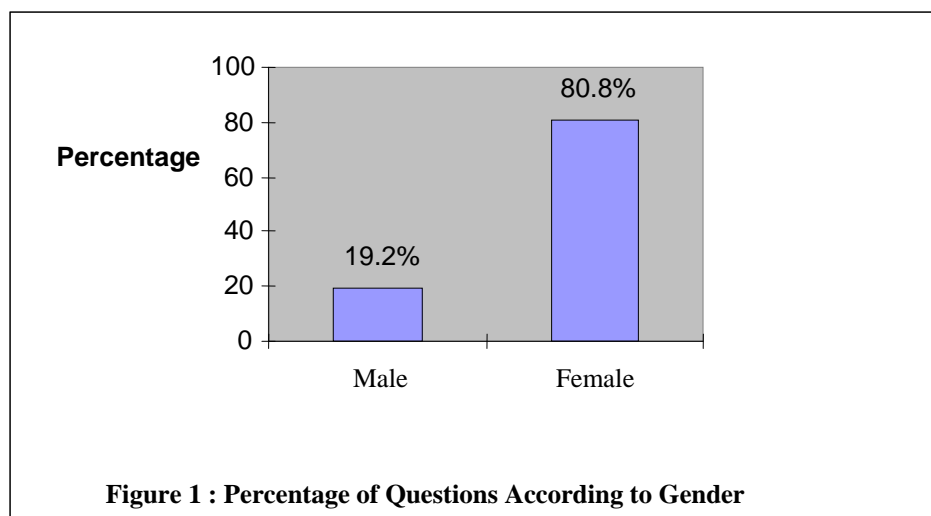
Lakoff 1975 was among the first to claim that women used more questions than men did. The 4 transcriptions consist of 24 questions uttered by four different speakers in the fifteen minutes talk described earlier. 3 types of questions were found in the transcription.

Detailed analyses of the transcriptions reveal the following:

- a. Every speaker in this sample asked 1 question or more during the programmes.
- b. Among the 4 speakers, one member (F1) used questions more often than the others.
- c. The frequency of occurrence of questions varied with the type of talk of the 4 different segments of the transcription studied.
- d. All speakers varied their usage of questions in comparable ways and in accordance with the different types of talk.

One of the goals in studying gender speech-style is to examine whether question asking is, as previously claimed, predominantly a characteristic of women's style. It is therefore worth noting the frequency of occurrence of questions individually and by gender.

The women used a total of 21 questions and the men uttered 5 questions. These figures indicate that question asking is generalized as being more characteristic of women's speech style than men's.



The findings (see Figure 1) show that female speakers used 80.8% of questions compared to 19.2% of the occurrences in the male speakers' speech. Questions are powerful linguistic forms as they give the speaker the power to elicit a response from listeners. Questions were used frequently by F2 to keep the conversation going (Fishman, 1980). This result supports Lakoff's claim that women used more questions than men but the fact that should be taken into account is that F1 and M2 used the same number of questions. Both these speakers used 4 questions each. Thus, it cannot be assumed that only women use more questions.

## 2.1 FILLERS

In connection with the confidence and fluency of the participant's speech, another variable is examined. A filler is defined as a phrase which could appear anywhere in a sentence and which could be deleted from the sentence with no change in content (Hirschman 1974).

The total number of fillers used by the men was 31 and the total number of fillers used by the women was 25. This finding indicates that the male presenters used fillers at a much higher frequency than the female presenters.

Examples of fillers:

**Hope you enjoyed my *ahh...* good selection this morning.**

(Abstract taken from F2)

**Well, *eh...* thank you very much.**

(Abstract taken from M2)

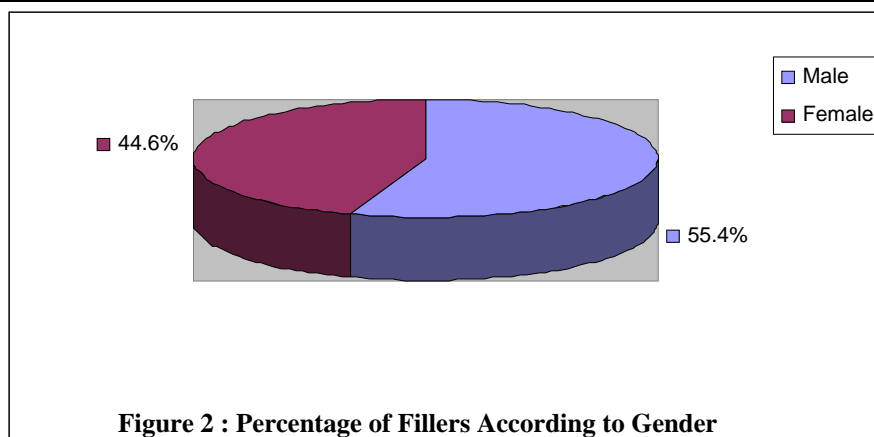


Figure 2 shows that male presenters used more fillers than female presenters. This indicates that the fillers are often used while the male speaker (M2) was groping for words and this affected his fluency and confidence in his conversation. Therefore, the result led the researcher to believe that the male speaker is not confident in his speech.

### 2.3 INTENSIFIER

Intensifiers express both referential meaning (degrees of certainty) and affective meaning (politeness). Intensifiers have also been called ‘Boosters’ (Quirk et al., 1985) ‘strengtheners’ (Brown and Levinson 1987) and ‘up-graders’ (House and Kasper 1981). Researchers have considered this form as politeness device (Shinanoff, 1977; Brown and Levinson,1987). In the course of investigating the expression of politeness a number of intensifiers were used by the speakers.

Example: These guys are very good.

(Abstract taken from F1)

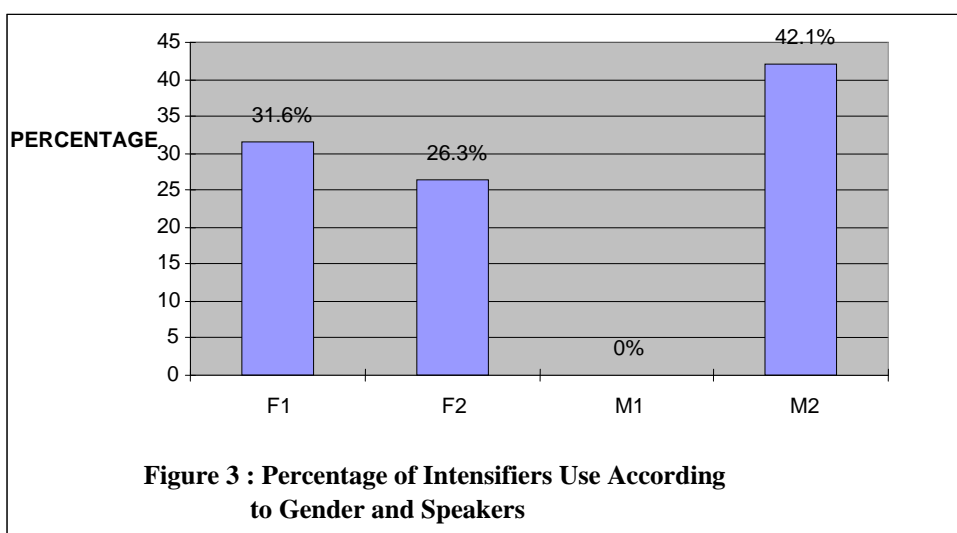


Figure 3 shows M2 used 42.1% of intensifiers. However, the results are not consistent because M1 did not use intensifier at all in his speech. Thus, the assumption cannot be made that male speakers used intensifiers at a higher rate.

## 2.4 ADJECTIVE TYPES

Adjectives are used to give compliments in conversations (Holmes, 1995 p. 127). According to Holmes women are said to use evaluative (attitudinal) adjectives more than men (e.g. wonderful, lovely, gorgeous). A small range of adjectives were used in the conversations by the speakers to convey positive semantic message and politeness.

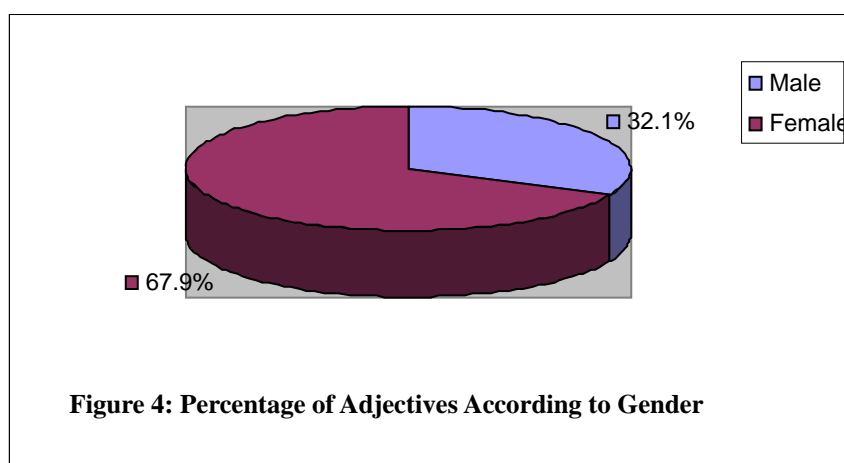
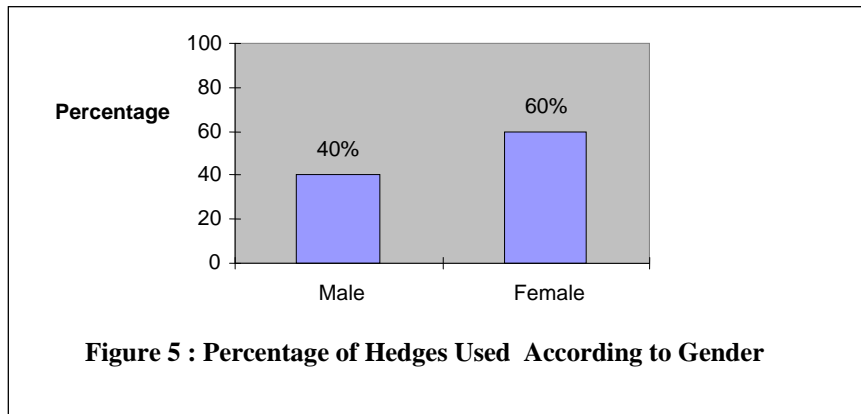


Figure 4 clearly shows that female speakers used significantly more adjectives than males. However, throughout the fifteen minutes conversation there are great differences in the overall distribution of adjectives. Although F1 used more adjectives than the other speakers did, F2 used only 1 adjective. M1 used 8 adjectives while M2 used only 1 adjective. The findings provide evidence that F2 and M2 used only 1 adjective. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that only female speakers are capable of using more evaluative adjectives.

## 2.5 HEDGES

Women's speech is often described as 'tentative', and this assertion is linked to the claim that women use more hedges. Hedges are linguistic forms which express the speaker's certainty or uncertainty about the topic under discussion.

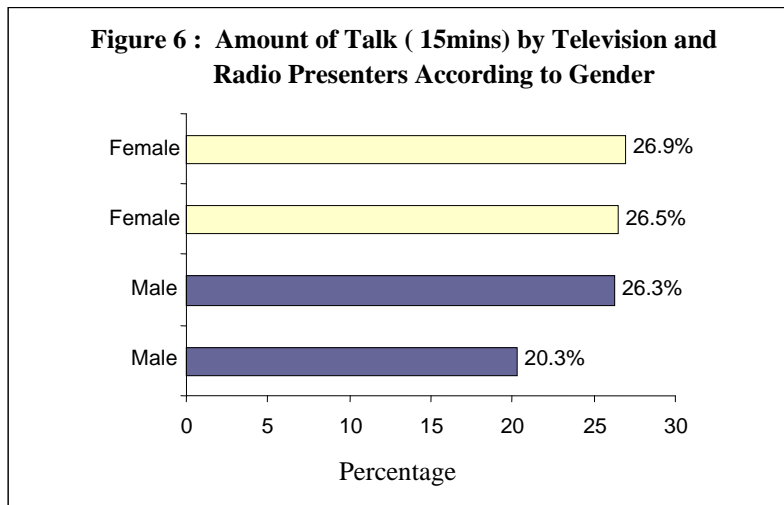




The result shows that a total of 24 hedges were used by female presenters compared to 16 hedges by male speakers. Figure 5 provides evidence that female speakers used more hedges (60%) compared to male speakers (40%) and this finding supports Lakoff's claim that women tend to use more 'hedges' compared to men (1975, p.54)

## 2.6 VERBOSITY

To characterize how much each speaker talked, the amount of time each person spoke was measured for 15 minutes. Then the number of words each person produced was counted.



There is a consistent pattern among the four speakers. F2 spoke 26.9 percent and F1 spoke 26.5%. However, M1 talked slightly less than F2, that is 26.3%. The difference in the amount of talk between F2 and M1 is only 0.2%. This discrepancy suggests that verbosity cannot be generalized as women's feature.

## 2.7 AFFIRMATIVE

There were a small number of frequently used words which indicated a response and speakers moving to a new topic. Affirmative words (Yeah, Ok, All right) serve as supportive in conversations (Hirschman, 1974).

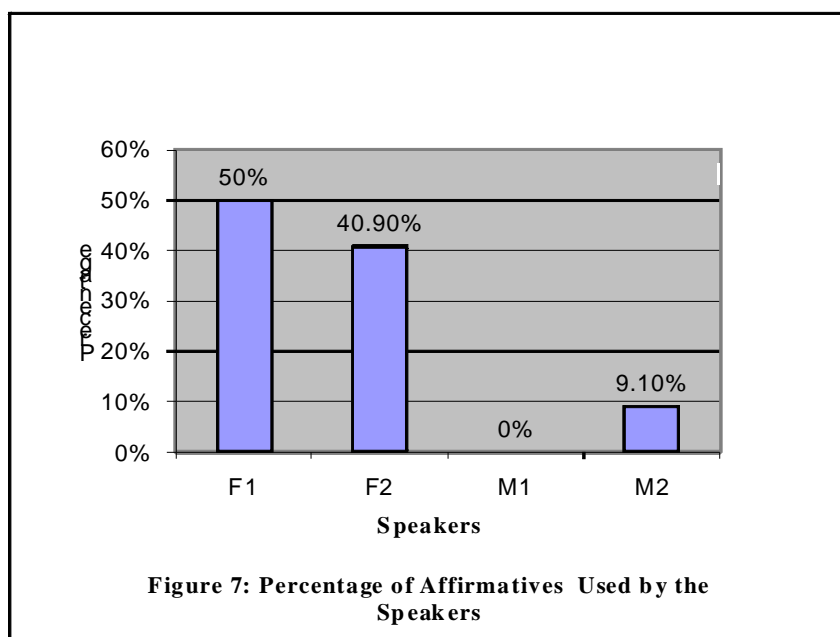


Figure 7 shows that there is a great difference in the overall use of affirmative words in the conversation of male and female presenters, The speaker who used the highest percentage of affirmative words was a female (F1).

The male speaker (M1) did not utilize any affirmative words. The total percentage of affirmative words used by the women was 90.9% which is comparatively higher than the men's which is only 9.1% This finding indicates that women used positive response to their statements and thus assert their conversations.

## 3. CONCLUSION

Analysis from this study shows that in the fifteen minutes talk the striking overall female difference was in the use of questions, where females outnumbered males. There was also a difference in the use of fillers. One male presenter (M2) used more fillers than the female presenters contrary to expectation and this showed lack of certainty compared to female speakers. This finding also suggests that the female presenters were more at ease with their conversation.

Assertiveness was measured by the pattern of holding the floor (verbosity), relative absence of qualifiers (sort of, I think); fluency of speech (related to frequency of fillers). Supportiveness was measured by frequency of affirmative words (yeah, right). Minute differences were found in proportion

of qualifiers, though there were individual differences in types of qualifiers used. Female presenters showed that they were more assertive and confidence in their conversation. There seemed to be a tendency among female presenters to use a higher frequency of affirmative words. These words were used to progress on to another topic of conversation and they did not show uncertainty. The findings provide evidence that one male speaker made many false starts and repeated words as a hesitation device.