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Exploring Response Tokens in Irish English – A Multidisciplinary Approach: Integrating Variational Pragmatics, Sociolinguistics and Corpus Linguistics[1]

Bróna Murphy

Abstract

Schneider and Barron (2008) discuss the effect of macro-social factors such as region, ethnic background, age, social status and gender on intra-lingual pragmatic conventions, and state that, to date, they have received comparatively little attention in the study of pragmatics. This paper chooses two macro-social factors, age and gender, and focuses on how they impact on the use of response tokens in Irish English. Not only does the paper shed light on the use of variational pragmatics as a framework for corpus-based studies but it also brings together research on sociolinguistics and corpus linguistics, which has, to-date, been scarce (Baker 2010). The paper reveals the importance of avoiding the exploration of sociolinguistic variables in isolation and concludes by highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary research and the merits of fine-grained sociolinguistic investigations using small corpora.
Keywords: *response tokens, age, gender*, *corpus, variational pragmatics, sociolinguistics*

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1   INTRODUCTION

In recent literature, Schneider and Barron (2008) discuss the effect of macro-social factors such as

region, ethnic background, age, social status and gender on intra-lingual pragmatic conventions,

and state that, to date, they have received comparatively little attention in the study of pragmatics.

To account for this lack of inter-disciplinary research, they suggest an attempt to marry the fields of

pragmatics and modern dialectology by promoting the systematic investigation of the effect of

different macros-social features on language in (inter)action. This branch of pragmatics, entitled

'Variational Pragmatics' (VP) (Schneider and Barron 2008), aims at complementing the study of

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[1] The author would like to thank the reviewers for their feedback on various drafts of this paper.

pragmatics with a focus on macro-social factors and from a dialectologist position, while at the same time complementing the study of variation with a pragmatic component (Schneider and Barron 2008). The top-down approach to the study of pragmatics is concerned with the investigation of possible correlations between macro-social factors and the use of language in action. They state that it does not impose any particular theoretical or methodological orientation; rather it puts pragmatics on the map of dialectology and variational linguistics. The establishment of VP, as a sub-field of pragmatics encourages further research into the effect of macro-social factors on language and in this paper, provides an appropriate and timely framework and rationale for such research being carried out on sociolinguistic variables, age and gender. Alongside such an approach, in this paper, is also the use of corpus linguistics. While corpus-based insights into pragmatics have increased in the past decade (Andersen, 2001; Stenström, Andersen and Hasund, 2002; Aijmer, 2002; Aijmer and Stenström, 2004; Stenström 2006; Romero Trillo 2008; Adolphs 2008; Farr and Murphy 2009; Rühlemann 2010; Murphy 2011), it would appear, from a survey of the literature that corpus linguistics has only made a relatively small impact on sociolinguistics (see Baker 2010). However Baker (2010) acknowledges that from the little work that has been done, it appears that some form of 'corpus sociolinguistics' is indeed possible. Corpus-based work on age, for instance, has focused on teenage talk (Stenström, Andersen, and Hasund 2002) and adult discourse (Murphy 2010) while accounts of gender have also emerged (Holmes 2001; Beeching 2002; Baker 2005; Murphy 2011).

In light of this background, this paper attempts to bring together three strands in the name of multidisciplinary research which is defined here as 'referring to research that integrates concepts from different disciplines which results in a more holistic view of the area under study' (adapted, Harvey 2004-2011). The disciplines which will be referred to are variational pragmatics, sociolinguistics and corpus linguistics and how they intertwine with each other to provide a more holistic view of response tokens. Response tokens, which will be defined in section 2, are a high frequency item in casual conversation and a core part of spoken grammar (Carter and McCarthy 2006). They will be explored, here, in relation to how they map out in terms of form and pragmatic functions across gender and age variables. The paper will also focus on the methodological issues which arise in such a study.

2   DEFINING RESPONSE TOKENS

Much research on spoken interaction has highlighted the importance of the role of responding in conversation (Fries 1952; Kendon 1967; Yngve 1970; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Tottie 1991; Drummond and Hopper 1993; Schegloff 1996; McCarthy 1992, 2003; Gardner 1997, 1998, 2002; Farr 2003; O'Keeffe and Adolphs 2008). Response tokens provide information on the course the talk is taking (Gardner 2002) and are defined as signals that are produced by the listener as an accompaniment to the speaker (Kendon 1967), for example *yeah, yes, no, mmh, really, wow*. Such signals can stand alone as short utterances and can also include non-verbal gestures such as head nods, as Kendon (1967) points out, and provide direction for the speaker. They guide the speaker and provide feedback (Gardner 2002: 3),

> response tokens provide information to [...] participants in the talk not only about how some prior message has been receipted, but also some information on how the response token utterer is projecting further activities in the talk, for example, whether they approve of, agree with, disagree with, will remain silent on, or will have something to say about the prior talk.

Given the dearth of research on response tokens, these signals are often referred to by a variety of different labels. Bublitz (1988) refers to such items as 'hearer signals' which indicate speech acts such as agreeing, supporting, approving, doubting, inquiring and so on while Yngve (1970) uses the term 'backchannel' to make reference to all utterances that are primarily displays of recipiency of listenership. O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008: 73) use 'listener response' as an umbrella term to refer to vocal, verbal and non-verbal responses when a listener responds to the floor-holding message in a conversation. However, they also use the term 'response tokens' to refer to this activity. From research on language and gender and in contrast to the other labels that signal listenership, Fishman (1978), Coates (1986), Coates and Cameron (1988), as well as Fellegy (1995) use the term 'minimal responses'. This research states that these forms are uttered by a listener during a speech event to signal a certain level of engagement with the speaker (Fellegy 1995: 186). To facilitate consistency throughout, this paper will refer to all items that signal listenership as 'response tokens' and will distinguish between two main forms, as discussed below in more detail, minimal and non-minimal response tokens.

2.1 Response Tokens: Minimal and Non-minimal Forms

Research highlights that response tokens can be divided into minimal response tokens and non-minimal response tokens (Zimmerman and West 1975; Fishman 1978; Tottie 1991; Fellegy 1995; Gardner 1997, 2002; Farr 2003; McCarthy 2003; O'Keeffe and Adolphs 2008). Minimal response tokens are defined as turn-initial short utterances such as *yeah*, *no* or non-word vocalisations such as *mmh* (O'Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter 2007) that function on their own and do not take over a turn as in lines 3, 6 and 8 in Extract (1), which has been taken from the Corpus of Age and Gender-Irish English (CAG-IE) (see Section 3 for a full description of the data) where Mick is providing his friend Will with directions to a location that had been advertised in the local newspaper.

Extract 1:   *Yeah* **- Floor-yielding minimal response token in CAG-IE**

Will:	Oh tis on The Post[2] there it's aam y'know when you go down when	**1**
	you drive down to the big store.	**2**
Mick:	**Yeah**.	**3**
Will:	And you go right down to the very end and you swing right to	**4**
	go over to the big bridges to go over to the naval base.	**5**
Mick:	**Yeah**	**6**
Will:	Or left sorry.	**7**
Mick:	**Yeah**.	**8**
Will:	It's just on the right hand side there.	**9**

Farr (2003), however, makes a further distinction between 'the floor yielding minimal response token', illustrated in (1) above and 'the floor holding minimal response token' which responds but goes on to an extended turn as illustrated in Extract (2) below where Mairead and Kate are discussing a colleague's behaviour at a work Christmas party.

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[2] The Post refers to the title of a local newspaper.

Extract 2: *Yeah* **- Floor-holding minimal response token in CAG-IE**

Mairead:	I never knew that he was like that.	**1**
Kate:	< laughing > I never knew.	**2**
Mairead:	Now I love the jokes and the fun.	**3**
Kate:	**Yeah** but he's a complete lunatic.	**4**

This paper will also distinguish between these two types of minimal response tokens: 'the floor yielding minimal response token' (as in Extract 1) and 'the floor holding minimal response token' (as in Extract 2).

In contrast, the second group of responses, the non-minimal response tokens, are forms that include mostly adverbs or adjectives which function as pragmatic markers (*good, really, great, absolutely*) or short phrases/minimal clauses (*you're not serious, is that so*? *by all means*) as highlighted by O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008: 74). Non-minimal response tokens occur as items which do not take over a turn and exist on their own in a floor-yielding capacity in Extract (3). Here, two young women in their twenties, Amy and Linda, are discussing an Elvis impersonator Linda has seen.

Extract 3: *Really* **- Floor-yielding non-minimal response token in CAG-IE**

Amy:	Is that the guy from Kerry[3]?	**1**
Linda:	It wasn't the guy from Kerry it was ...lads he was out of this world.	**2**
Amy:	**Really***?*	**3**

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[3] Kerry is a county in the province of Munster in the Republic of Ireland.

| Linda: | He was out of this world and Paddy who had gone all over the states to | **4** |
| | look at him had never seen anything like it as well. | **5** |

Non-minimal response tokens, however, also occur with a floor holding function in extended turns as in Extract (4) where Mairead and Kate are again discussing a work colleague. The 'non-minimal floor holding' response token *absolutely* marks the beginning of an extended turn.

Extract 4:   *Absolutely* **- Floor-holding non-minimal response token in CAG-IE**

| Mairead: | Robert is could be quite unstable you know | **1** |
| Kate: | **Absolutely** that's the impression I get from him I'm afraid so | **2** |

This paper will, therefore, differentiate between two types of non-minimal response token: the floor-yielding non-minimal response token (Extract 3) and the floor-holding non-minimal response token (Extract 4).

In addition to single word forms, as illustrated in Extract (5), the use of short phrases/minimal clauses which function as responses (O'Keeffe and Adolphs 2008) also occur. In Extract (5), Mairead and Kate are discussing Mairead's elderly mother who likes to wear nice clothes and get dressed up.

Extract 5:   **Short clauses/minimal clauses functioning as response tokens in CAG-IE**

Mairead:	She's very particular about herself you know she has lipstick and	**1**
	the whole works	**2**
Kate:	**Go 'way**	**3**
Mairead:	She's like a model every Sunday morning going to mass.	**4**

Observed, in line 2, is the use of non-minimal turn-yielding response token *go 'way* which is a reduced form of *go away* usually used in responses to indicate surprise and characteristic of Irish English.

Literature has highlighted that minimal and non-minimal response tokens often occur in pairs or clusters (McCarthy 2002) such as *yeah yeah*, as in Extract (6), where Mairead and Kate are discussing what their boss said, or *I know yeah* as in Extract (7) where Linda is gossiping about a friend who took part in a race.

Extract 6: *Yeah Yeah* **- 2-word response token cluster in CAG-IE**

Ruth:	Is that what he said?	**1**
Linda:	**Yeah yeah**	**2**

Extract 7: *I know yeah* **- 3-word response token cluster in CAG-IE**

Linda:	Shur that day you asked her did she win and I was full sure she	**1**
	hadn't because she ignored you for a while	**2**
Amy:	**I know yeah**	**3**

This paper will also examine minimal response tokens (floor yielding and floor holding) and non-minimal response tokens (floor yielding and floor holding) as forms which indicate participation in conversation. It will distinguish, for the most part, between these two sets of response tokens although it is necessary to note that clear-cut distinctions between the two groups are based on written transcriptions and full access to all non-verbal responses such as head nods and facial expressions are not always possible.

2.2 Response Tokens: Functional Diversity

Much research has been carried out on the functions of response tokens in everyday talk (Fellegy 1995; Maynard 1989; Gardner 1997, 2002) and a number of different uses have been identified. Broadly categorising, Mott and Petrie (1995) stress that response tokens signal support for, or attention to what the speaker is saying in a variety of different ways. Based on the work carried out by Schegloff (1982) and Maynard (1989), this paper highlights five main functions of response tokens which will be used as a functional framework in the analysis of response tokens occurring in this paper.

Firstly, Schegloff (1982) highlights the 'continuer' function of response tokens which allows the speakers to continue speaking in that it maintains the flow of conversation. Speakers often perceive response tokens functioning in this way as floor-yielding devices that mark the addressee's desire for the talk to continue. Tottie (1991: 225) refers to this desire by the listener to 'grease the wheels of conversation but constitute no claim to take over the turn'. The continuer function is usually realised using minimal forms such as *yeah, mmh, uh huh*, among others. Fishman (1978) highlights the supportive role of such items which show that the listener is carefully following the stream of talk. Drummond and Hopper (1993: 207) note that continuers such as *yeah*, for example, are rarely followed by further talk in the same turn while noncontinuer *yeahs* are. Gardner (1995, 1998) highlights that minimal response tokens can occur more than a thousand times in a single hour of talk and he adds, have a powerful effect on the way the talk develops (McGregor and White 1990: 1). In any particular context, McGregor and White (1990: 1) observe the multi-functionality of

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response tokens such as *yeah* which, they state, plays a powerful role in the shaping of the discourse.

Secondly, in addition to having a continuer function, the use of minimal response token *yeah* can also, often at the same time as highlighting a continuer function, indicate agreement and acknowledgement of the speaker's utterance, as in Extract 8, where Tom and Colin are discussing their friend's sister. Zimmerman and West (1975: 108) add that the insertion of minimal response tokens such as *yeah,* in the extract below, is not seen as interrupting the speaker but instead functions to display interest and co-participation in topic development.

Extract 8:   The use of *yeah* in co-participating in topic development in CAG-IE

Tom:	Oh Paul Hegarty's	**1**
Colin:	Is that his sister? \<laughing\>	**2**
Tom:	**Yeah**	**3**
Colin:	That fox was in the presentation school	**4**
Tom:	**Yeah** he's got a sister a teacher alright but aam what was I going to say.	**5**

Thirdly, Schegloff (1982) highlights the convergence function of response tokens. These are markers of agreement or convergence where there is a topic boundary or closure, or where there is any need to converge on an understanding of what is common ground or shared knowledge between participants. Adolphs and O'Keeffe (2002) provides an example, in Extract 9, which shows how these tokens are often found in closings as they facilitate a collaborative end. The data, presented here, is an interaction between a radio presenter and a caller.

Extract 9:   Convergence in radio phone-in data (from O'Keeffe and Adolphs 2008)

Presenter:	And aren't they grand?	**1**
Caller:	Yes they're very very handy	**2**
Presenter:	**Yeah**	**3**
Caller:	But they're not as secure as having them in your car	**4**
Presenter:	**This is true this is true**	**5**
Caller:	You know you could lose them easily	**6**
Presenter:	**That's true**. Ok Tess well thanks for talking to us thanks very much ...	**7**

O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008: 87) also point out the importance of the affective value of the convergence response tokens which they observe are of a higher relational value than the continuer tokens. They put forward that the convergence tokens do more than simply signal turn-yielding listenership and facilitate the flow of conversation, they signal agreement and convergence of mundane topics which, they state, is a form of interactional bonding between the speaker and the addressee. They state that this helps to maintain good relations between the speakers by reinforcing commonality between them.

Fourthly, Schegloff (1982) lists engagement tokens in his categorisation. Such forms indicate engagement where the addressee responds on an affective level and expresses a genuine emotional response such as *wow, really, no way*! Maynard (1989) also adds that response tokens indicate minor additions in the interaction and signal correction or a request for information. In Extract 10, Kate's response to Mairead's statement indicates genuine emotional engagement and illustrates Kate's utter disgust and shock at learning something that she had not known.

Extract 10: **The use of the engagement token *oh fuck off* as a response token in CAG-IE**

| Mairead: | She never had much to do with him all along because she | **1** |

	the mother didn't use to talk to her	**2**
Kate**:**	**Oh fuck off**	**3**
Mairead:	She wouldn't let her have anything to do with her	**4**

The final group of response tokens, information receipt tokens, such as *right* and *okay*, have, according to O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008: 27), a more organisational function than the other responses. They mark points in the discourse where adequate information has been received. However, it is thought that as this data consists of casual conversation, it is unlikely that there will be a high frequency of these forms.

2.3 Response Tokens and Gender-studies

In the area of language and gender, 'response tokens', as they are referred to in this paper or indeed 'minimal responses' (see Woods 1988; Reid 1995; Fellegy 1995) have been examined from a variationist perspective and differences in the ways males and females use them have been widely demonstrated. Fellegy (1995: 186) highlights that research on the functional diversity of 'minimal responses' ranges from the notion that they indicate active listening (Schegloff, 1972) to the belief that they are used when listeners are bored (Bublitz, 1988). However, the overriding theme that emerges from the literature is that the use of response tokens is largely associated with the way men and women engage in interactional practices. Literature portrays women as being communicative and socially aware of their interlocutors while men are less in tune. Fishman (1978), for example, states that men use 'minimal responses' to fill a turn which shows a lack of encouragement and interest on their part while women use them in 'support work' to show attention, participation and interest. Maltz and Borker's (1982) and Tannen's (1990) work also shows that women use the

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forms as signals of support or active listening while men use them as signs of agreement, although it is not clear why a sign of agreement could not also be interpreted as a signal of support. In addition, Aries (1976, 1982), Cameron (1985), and Coates (1987, 1988) all illustrate women's 'affiliative' and co-operative nature in interaction which is linked to their role as good listeners (Hirschman 1974). Women's interactive practices are also referred to as 'interactively facilitative and positive-politeness oriented' by Edeksky (1981) and Holmes (1984). However, others such as Zimmerman and West (1975) argue that certain uses of the responses by male speakers indicate a lack of attentiveness on their part. They also establish that in conversation with women, men delay 'minimal responses' often being silent for up to ten seconds before responding. The study also highlighted that in cross-sex conversations in a college community in the US, men denied equal status to women as conversational partners. However, without qualifying why this was or why this particular cohort produced such findings allows for a very stereotypical view of gender, as binary opposites, to emerge.

In light of the abundance of literature which exists , this paper will examine response tokens, from a gender perspective, while also taking age, into account in a contemporary spoken corpus, more than three decades after initial research began in this area in order to highlight the forms and functional patterning that exists. It will also investigate whether the distinction apparent in the literature, that is, women engage more in responding than men, still holds through.

3   DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This paper investigates response tokens in a 95, 993 word age and gender-differentiated corpus of Irish English which was collected between August 2003-April 2004 and which make it suitable for study within a variational pragmatics framework while also shedding light on the sociolinguistic variables. The Corpus of Age and Gender – Irish English (CAG-IE) consists of two sub corpora: a 47, 462 word male sub-corpus and a 48, 531 word female corpus. Both of these corpora are divided into three age groups of adults which represent three life-stages: young adulthood, mid-adulthood and older adulthood. Each of these sub-corpora consists of approximately 15, 000 words (see Table 1).

Table 1   Corpus of Age and Gender - Irish English (CAG-IE)

Gender	20s	40s	70s/80s	Total
Female	15, 602	14, 494	18, 435	48531
Male	17, 987	17, 693	11,782	47462

The corpus was collected in the Republic of Ireland (see Murphy 2010). The speakers consist of thirty-five volunteers, mainly family members, friends and acquaintances, who were willing to take part in the project. The speakers were asked to record any casual conversation they took part in with interlocutors in their own age bracket (20s, 40s, 70s-80s). They were not restricted in terms of the topics they were allowed to discuss (see Table 2). The conversations took place in the homes of the participants, in a University setting, in shops as well as while travelling in the car. Transcription of the data was carried out in line with the conventions used for the transcription of the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE)[4] with features such as speaker tags, repetitions, interruptions,

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[4] Limerick Corpus of Irish English http://www.ul.ie/~lcie/homepage.htm

background noise and non-standard contractions being identified. The transcripts were also anonymised. This included changing the names of the actual speakers, the people they mentioned as well as the places they referred to. It is important to note that some of the conversations consist of just two speakers (dyads). There is, however, no methodological reason for this. It was due simply to the nature of the data collection and the goodwill of the participants taking part (see Section 4 for further discussion).

Table 2   **Description of the Female Adult Corpus (FAC) and the Male Adult Corpus (MAC)**

	Topic	**Speakers**	**Relationship**
FAC 20s	Weekend	Linda, Amy, Ciara	Friends: 4 years
	Personal characteristics and behaviour	Linda, Ciara	Friends: 4 years
	Sleeping	Sarah, Ruth, Anne	Friends: 4 years
	Holiday plans	Mary, Ciara	Friends: 3 years
	Drinking games	Sarah, Ruth, Anne, Maura, Deirdre	Friends: 4 years
	Jobs	Louise, Dervla	Friends: 4 years
	Essay/project	Niamh, Grainne	Friends: 2 years
	Night out	Sarah, Ruth, Anne	Friends: 4 years
FAC 40s	Work/Family (divorce, separation)	Kate, Mairead	Friends: 5 years
	Schools	Mairead, Brenda	Acquaintances: one year
	Mother's Day card	Mairead, Grace	Friends: 20+ years
FAC 70s/80s	Family, Politics	Ellen, Marie	Close friendship:50+ years
	Politics, Neighbours	Ellen, Nora	Close friendship: 50+ years
	Local events, Religion, Politics, Shopping	Ellen, Nora	Close friendship: 50+ years
	Topic	**Speakers**	**Relationship**

MAC 20s	Football, going out and making dinner	Tom, David, Joe, Alan, John,	Friends: 4 years
	Sport and when they were younger	Tom, Colin	Friends: 10 years
MAC 40s	Boats, fishing and cars	Mick, Will	Friends/in-laws: 20+ years
	Boats and acquaintances	Mick, Will, Paddy	Friends: 20 + years
MAC 70s/80s	Sport and acquaintances	Gerard, Denis	Friends: 30+ years
	Work and acquaintances	Gerard, Denis	Friends: 30+ years
	Weather, work	Denis2, Sean, John	Friends: 5 years

The data were examined using Wordsmith Tools 5 (Scott 2008), a software programme for lexical and grammatical analysis. It should be noted that all figures and tables below will show frequencies per million words in order to allow comparisons to be made between groups where different numbers of words were spoken. Raw frequencies are also provided.

4 RESPONSE TOKENS IN CAG-IE

4.1 A Quantitative Approach

The first point of departure was to determine which response tokens featured in the corpus. A single word frequency list was carried out and all of the single forms with the potential to function as response tokens were isolated, for example, *yeah*, *okay, right, mmh* (Murphy 2006). Familiarity with Irish English and the context assisted this process. These forms were then cross-checked manually using the WordSmith Tools' concordancing function and only forms which operated as response tokens were selected. Table 3 presents the most common single word response tokens occurring in the corpus.

Table 3   Single word response tokens in CAG-IE

N	Response Token	Freq.wpm	Raw Freq.		Response Token	Freq.wpm	Raw Freq.
1	*yeah*	109, 217	1704	**12**	*really*	769	12
2	*no*	30, 893	482	**13**	*maybe*	641	10
3	*mmh*	11,217	175	**14**	*absolutely*	577	9
4	*right*	9486	148	**15**	*good*	577	9
5	*yes*	6602	103	**16**	*exactly*	449	7
6	*god*	3461	54	**17**	*cool*	384	6
7	*jesus*	3205	50	**18**	*lovely*	320	5
8	*christ*	2628	41	**19**	*beautiful*	256	4
9	*okay*	2371	37	**20**	*brilliant*	192	3
10	*what*	2243	35	**21**	*deadly*	64	1
11	*grand*	1025	16				

From this search, it is unsurprising to observe that the two most common single-word response tokens, by far, in the corpus are *yeah* and *no* with *yeah* occurring more than three times more often than *no*. It is interesting to notice the occurrence of religious response tokens such as *god*, *jesus* and *christ* which provide an insight into the cultural background of the language variety under exploration (see also O'Keeffe and Adolphs 2008). Also worthy of note is the occurrence of *right, lovely, grand,* and *beautiful* which have, in the past (see McCarthy 2002), been found to be characteristic of transactional settings such as shop encounters but which are also frequent in casual conversation as reflected here. From a total of 21 response tokens which appear in the corpus, five are minimal response tokens, *yeah*, *no*, *yes, okay* and *mmh* while 16 are non-minimal forms.

At this early stage, the list provides us with certain insights into how the response tokens might occur across the age groups. For instance, based on researcher intuition and familiarity with the

dialect, it may be surmised that the appearance of *cool* as well as *deadly* may be characteristic of the younger groups while *lovely*, *grand*, and *beautiful* may be regarded as items that are more associated with older age groups and with females, in particular. This initial search into response tokens in CAG-IE gives us an overview of the response tokens, in terms of their range and frequency, as well as allows us to make tentative observations about the forms in relation to gender and age, which will be explored in more detail below.

The next step in the quantitative analysis investigated how all 21 forms, presented in Table 3, mapped out in terms of age and gender variables across the corpora. This finding revealed that while all three of the female groups used response tokens almost equally, with the exception of the 40s' females, the male groups, on the other hand, tended to use the response tokens more frequently than their female counterparts, across each of the age groups, as highlighted in Figure 1.

Figure 1   Response token frequency in CAG-IE (frequencies per million)
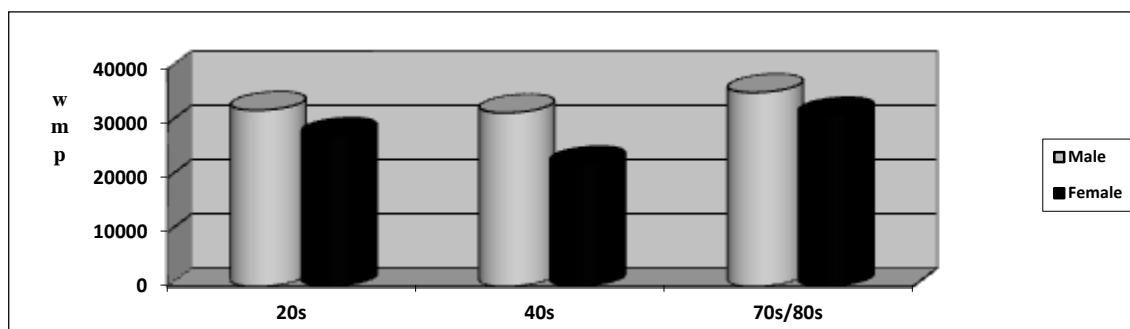
This finding, however, is at odds with the work carried out by sociolinguists in the 1970s/80s as reviewed earlier (see Fishman, 1978, for example) and is also at odds with the methodological make-up of the corpus, especially with regard to the MAC 20s' corpus, which features a total of 6 speakers in comparison to the FAC 20s, which includes 13. Given this mismatch in speaker numbers within the groups, the fact that the 20s' males are still the most common users suggests that perhaps a more fine-grained perspective of how the response tokens are used within the individual corpora is needed in order to shed light and understand further what is happening. In order to do this, the analysis then focused on the six individual corpora and explored the response tokens across individual groups as well as individual speakers, which gave rise to a more complex picture of the response tokens in relation to the sociolinguistic variables. Table 4 shows the top 5 most frequently occurring response tokens across the life-stages for both the male and female speakers. In the numbered line, the table below presents the response token form as well as the total occurrences of the token across each of the sub-corpora, while the second row presents the raw frequencies (RF). Underneath each cell in the shaded line, the Standard Deviation (SD) is provided as well as the SD expressed as a percentage of the total, which allows for inter and intra variationist comparisons across the corpora. SD is used here as a measure of diversity or variability and shows how much variation or 'dispersion' exists from the average across the individual speakers within each of the corpora. The higher the SD, the more the form deviates from the average.

Table 4 **Response tokens across gender and life-stage**

N	Form	FAC 20s		FAC 40s		FAC 70s/80s		MAC 20s		MAC40s		MAC 70S/80s	
1	**yeah**	16472		12005		15080		20737		20064		24528	
	RF	257		174		278		373		355		289	
	SD	*1540*	*9%*	*1968*	*16%*	*2316*	*15%*	*3660*	***18%***	*4200*	***21%***	*4129*	***18%***
2	**no**	4871		2277		6726		7561		4239		3225	
	RF	76		33		124		136		75		38	
	SD	*230*	*6%*	*435*	*17%*	*1068*	*15%*	*1232*	***17%***	*1114*	***20%***	*554*	***16%***
3	**mmh**	385		483		3851		667		3956		764	
	RF	6		7		71		12		70		9	
	SD	*60*	*15%*	*79*	*16%*	*657*	*17%*	*200*	***26%***	*940*	***24%***	*182*	***24%***
4	**right**	1154		2758		1248		722		1187		2801	
	RF	18		40		23		13		21		33	
	SD	*156*	*13%*	*452*	*19%*	*217*	*17%*	*108*	*7%*	*535*	***27%***	*369*	***17%***
5	**yes**	256		1173		3146		278		113		1443	
	RF	4		17		58		5		2		17	
	SD	*40*	*12%*	*184*	*16%*	*583*	*19%*	*81*	***29%***	*42*	***37%***	*232*	***16%***

Table 4 shows that the MAC corpus has a higher dispersion range when compared to the FAC corpus. Almost all of the dispersion scores in the MAC corpora, except one, are over 16% while the scores for the females are all below 19%. What this more fine-grained approach into dispersion suggests is that a particular speaker or indeed a number of speakers would seem to be responsible for the high occurrence of the forms in the male corpus, which would indeed explain why the MAC 20s' corpus shows a higher number of occurrences for *yeah*, for instance, even though the FAC 20s' corpus features double the number of speakers, as mentioned earlier.

Exploring dispersion further in the MAC corpus and focusing on the response tokens *yeah* and *no,* for instance, across all of the individual speakers confirms that these tokens are indeed favoured by

particular speakers, which leads to a higher average, as highlighted earlier (see Figure 1). In Figures 2 and 3 below, the graphs show that in the MAC 20s, Tom is, by far, the most frequent user of the two most common forms, *yeah* and *no*, and this is also true for the other response tokens, although they are not shown here. It would appear that Tom's use of the forms is almost primarily in the dyadic interactions with his interlocutor Colin and is the reason for the MAC 20s appearing to have a higher frequency than the FAC 20s. It is thought that the nature of the dyadic interactions also plays a role in the high occurrences of responding. *Yeah* was also explored across the individual speakers in the MAC 40s and Mick and Will were found to use *yeah* almost equally while in relation to *no*, Mick showed a slightly higher frequency. In the MAC 70s/80s, Denis uses *yeah* almost predominantly in his interaction with Gerard while with regard to *no*, there is a much lower frequency overall, in comparison to *yeah*, with Gerard appearing to use it slightly more often.

Figure 2   *Yeah* **as a response token across individual speakers in MAC**
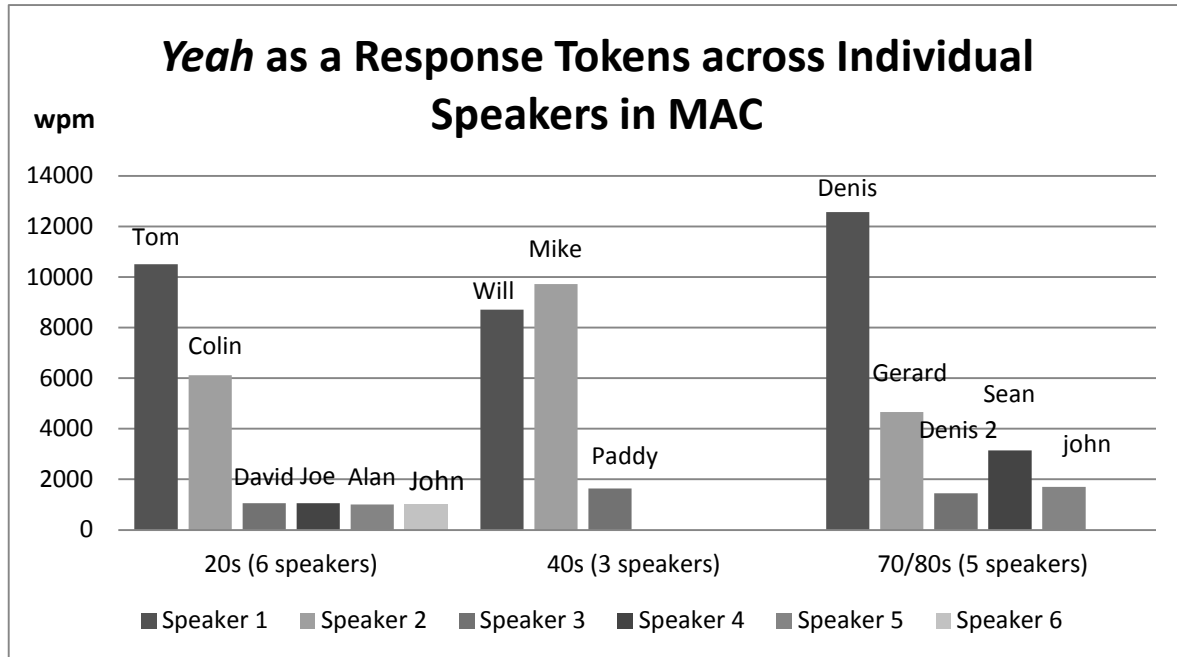
Figure 3   *No* as a Response token across individual speakers in MAC
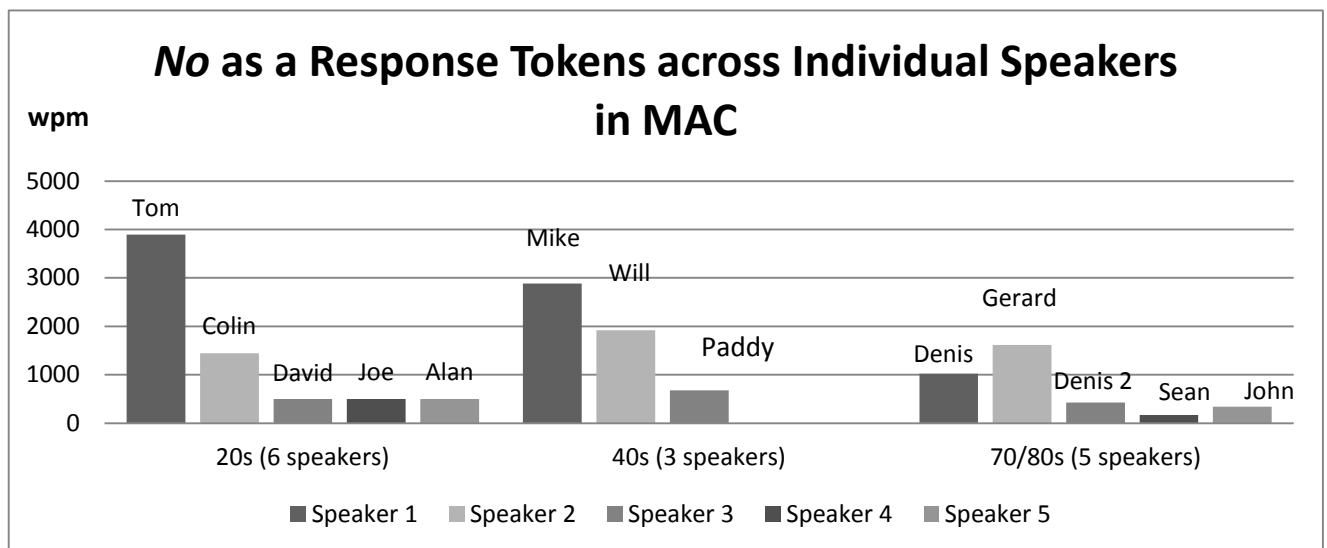
These findings show how insights into dispersion and variability are revealing in that they highlight how quantitative generalisations using small corpora can indeed be misleading and how more nuanced approaches which take individual speakers into account shows that there are often other variables also at play. Indeed, Harrington (2008: 86) also showed how quantitative corpus methodologies used to assess the amount of reported dialogue usage, in conversations between friends, can actually perpetuate stereotypes in the face of a contrary or at least more complex reality as reflected in Figure 1. Having established that there are a number of speakers who are using the form *yeah* more than others, the analysis will now focus more qualitatively on the individual speakers, across the male corpora, to find out why this may be.

4.2   A Qualitative Approach

4.2.1 *Yeah* in MAC 20s

The first step in the qualitative analysis of the MAC 20s' use of *yeah* involved investigating a set of concordance lines. As Tom was found to use the form most often in interactions with Colin, concordance lines for the response token were generated only from the interactions between these two men. Analysing the lines showed that 60 per cent of the total number of occurrences of *yeah* was produced by Tom who used it most often in turn-yielding utterances, as a continuer, as illustrated in Extract 11 where Colin and Tom are discussing a former team-mate. The use of the

turn-yielding response token *yeah* in lines 5, 7, 11 and 13 shows Tom engaging in listenership and indicating to Colin, his interlocutor, that he is attentive and is following the story.

Extract 11: **Use of *yeah* as a continuer in 20s' Males**

Colin:	We had great fun with him (Steve) one night.	**1**
Tom:	He's a pure idiot altogether	**2**
Colin:	We were standing waiting for we= were in this queue for a	**3**
	fun- to go into a funeral	**4**
Tom:	**Yeah**	**5**
Colin:	This fucking huge queue now	**6**
Tom:	**Yeah yeah**	**7**
Colin:	But he was standing behind us and ah he started talking to us	**8**
	he thinks he's a fucking g=an expert it was the year we went	**9**
	to Kildoran for the last game of the season and beat ye 2-1	**10**
Tom:	**Yeah yeah**	**11**
Colin:	And won the league	**12**
Tom:	**Yeah yeah**	**13**
Colin:	And we were telling him that shur Baledehinch[5] are gone now but	**14**
	I suppose we're fucked we said	

In this extract, Tom is engaging in 'active listening' (Schegloff 1972). He does not attempt to change the direction of the discourse or take over the turn. Also on display here is the occurrence of the cluster *yeah yeah* in lines 7, 11 and 13 which is also a common pattern throughout their interaction and is also responsible for the high frequency of the form in the males 20s' discourse. As highlighted by McCarthy (2003: 11), repeated tokens in close sequence, such as *yeah yeah*, may also be plausibly interpreted as signalling an enthusiastic or encouraging response, as in Extract 11. Tom's use of *yeah yeah* could suggest that he is eager and excited to hear what happened on the particular occasion that Colin is referring to and thus could be interpreted as signalling the listener's

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[5] Baledehinch refers to a local football team.

level of engagement in the interaction. The men's use of *yeah* commonly occurs in two (*yeah yeah*), three (*yeah, yeah, yeah*) and four (*yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah*) word clusters which also influences their frequencies. An investigation of the clusters showed that in simply one conversation between Colin and Tom, they used the three-word cluster *yeah yeah yeah* 22 times or 1,223 times per million words for that conversation, which is relatively high given that the total frequency of all of the three-word forms in the 20s' females, which takes all of the women's conversations into account, totals at 44 occurrences or 2756 times per million words.

Examining the use of *yeah* as primarily a floor yielding minimal response token in the 20s' males, it appears that the men, in fact, often take on an interactional role. Tom is a very active listener and supports Colin in the interaction. His use of *yeah* is mainly to acknowledge his interlocutor and to allow the flow of conversation. He provides space for Colin's stories and uses the response token *yeah* to do this which would refute earlier claims which promoted a stereotypical view of males as being non-interactional (Fishman 1978) and non-active listeners (Maltz and Borker 1982).

Throughout the hour long conversation between the two men, the pattern illustrated in the interaction above is repeated. Colin features, for the most part, as the story-teller and Tom, as the listener. It would, therefore, appear that, perhaps, Tom's frequent use of the response token *yeah* is linked to the roles that both men have assumed in the interaction. Knowing the background to the speakers and understanding the context also sheds some light on why the men have assumed such roles (see Harrington 2008) and to a certain extent, allow me to access the private worlds of the

speakers in order to gain an insider's understanding (see Rommetveit 1985: 185-6; Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 36). Colin, for instance, is in charge of the recorder and perhaps sees it as his responsibility to generate conversation. Therefore, it may be that he unconsciously dominates the interaction while forcing Tom into the role of listener. On the other hand, it appears that Tom, who has volunteered to take part, is not as comfortable with the recording process as Colin, which may offer another explanation as to why he acts as a listener. This comes to light early in the interaction between the men as illustrated in Extract 12. In line 1 of the extract, Colin introduces the topic of recording to Tom to which he replies *oh good God*. This utterance is surrounded by laughter but indicates, nonetheless, that the recording process is not Tom's most preferred choice of activity. Colin, who has picked up on Tom's reaction, even possibly before they have begun, teases further in line 4 directly suggesting that Tom is tired of recording to which Tom responds in line 5 by disagreeing and stating that, in fact, he loves doing it which is, again, surrounded by more laugher and clearly suggests the opposite.

Extract 12　　Colin and Tom discussing the recording

Colin:	We may as well do some more recording for the \<pause\>	**1**
	nuisance \<laughing\>	**2**
Tom:	\< laughing\> Oh good God.	**3**
Colin:	**You're sick of the old recording Tomas are ya boy?**	**4**
Tom:	**No no no \< laughing \> love doing it**.	**5**
Colin:	**\<laughing\> Says he with a smile**.	**6**
Tom:	\< laughing \>	**7**
Colin:	What else did ya do anyway?	**8**

This interaction between the men intimates that perhaps Tom is not as verbose as Colin because he feels intimated by the recording process. Indeed, their roles may also be influenced by the fact that Colin is more familiar with the researcher as he has known her for a longer period of time and does not seem to be put off by the fact that she will hear the recording and deliberately refers to her as a *nuisance* in line 1 in a light-hearted way. However, Tom does not reveal his full feelings on the process preferring to pretend that he enjoys taking part in the recordings for the sake of the researcher as he knows she will hear it. Even though it appears, from his intonation, his reaction in line 3 and the laughter, that the researcher might infer what he really thinks, Tom continues to play politeness.

These insights suggest that there are a number of influential factors at play which provide plausible explanations for Tom's high frequency usage of the response token *yeah* and that gender does not, in this case, seem to be one of them (see Coates 2003). Instead, issues such as the background context surrounding the speakers' relationship with each other and the researcher, the actual recording process itself and the presence of the recorder, the nature of the dyadic interaction, as well as the roles the men assume all come to bear on the analysis and provide an explanation for the high dispersion scores in the MAC 20s. As *yeah* occurred consistently as a high frequency marker across all of the male age groups, we will now focus on the next group of older men, the MAC 40s, in order to find out how it maps out in terms of how Mick and Will use it.

4.2.2 *Yeah* in MAC 40s

As highlighted in Figure 4.2, it was established that both Mick (55 per cent) and Will (45 per cent) use the response token *yeah* almost equally. In a more detailed exploration of their interaction, however, unlike the 20s' males who assumed and maintained certain fixed roles during their conversations, the 40s' male speakers do not maintain separate fixed roles throughout but switch roles which features each of them acting as listeners as well as story-tellers or information providers throughout their interactions, and would appear to account for the almost equal use of the response token *yeah*. These roles support Coates' (2003) research which highlights that men tend to engage in narrative-telling when in interaction with other men. Extract 13 shows the use of the response tokens *yeah* and *mmh* by Mick to mark listenership and acknowledge Will, who is operating as an information provider on the topic of a local incinerator project.

Extract 13   Mick and Will discussing an incinerator project

Mick:	So what are they on about so like?	**1**
Will:	Tis in actual fact they reckon Don now would be more up on this	**2**
	now but they reckon aam what's coming out the top of that right.	**3**
Mick:	**Mmh**.	**4**
Will:	There's more toxins in the air around it than there would be	**5**
	coming out of that.	**6**
Mick:	**Yeah**.	**7**
Will:	But like the the the problem is is is it's failure y'see like y'know that's	**8**
	that's that's the thing like y'know.	**9**
Mick:	**Yeah**.	**10**
Will:	But y'see they have em as I said to you they have em all over	**11**
	Europe like y'know and I mean.	**12**
Mick:	They haven't a problem with it.	**13**
Will:	It's it's it's a clean way it's a clean way of of getting rid of your	**14**
	waste as well like y'know.	**15**

Mick:	**Yeah**.	**16**

However, almost equally, there are also instances whereby Mick holds the turn and acts as the story-teller or information provider while Will plays the role of the listener, as illustrated in Extract 14 where they are discussing boat chains.

Extract 14   Mick and Will are discussing boat chains

Mick:	Y'see the biggest problem with the chain is tis although	1
	there's no thing on it the chain is doing that all the time.	**2**
Will:	**Yeah**.	**3**
Mick:	With the swell coming in here, y'see that don't happen in Kinsale	**4**
	and places.	**5**
Will:	**Yeah.**	**6**
Mick:	Where there's no swell the buoy is just hanging there off the.	**7**
Will:	Or it's just pulling to one side.	**8**
Mick:	Yeah but here tis jingling all the time like y'know and that	**9**
	wears the chain big time like.	**10**
Will:	**Mmh mmh.**	**11**

Interestingly, in this interaction, the roles the interlocutors assume seem again to be influential and play a part in the distribution of the response tokens. This supports Coates' (2003) work which established that men tend to engage in more narrative work when in interactions with other males and therefore their speech tends to be more organised around patterns of domination, with extended bids for floor-holding. This finding shows that there is variation in terms of how the 40s' men's roles differ from the roles played by the 20s' men. This may be related to the fact that both men were very at ease with other as they have known each other for a longer period of time and, as highlighted in personal correspondence, were not influenced by the presence of a recorder. Both

men mentioned how they forgot about the recorder almost immediately and felt that they behaved as they normally do in interactions with each other. The fact that the interlocutor roles differ between the two groups of men somewhat serves to confirm that the use of response tokens goes beyond gender and may be influenced by individuals, relationships and their relational roles. Although there is a difference between the 20s' and the 40s' males in terms of how they use *yeah*, it would seem that it is not related to age but to the individuals, as established earlier. The final section looks at the use of *yeah* in the eldest age group of males, the MAC 70s/80s' group and focuses, in particular, on the most frequent users of the form, Gerard and Denis.

4.2.3 *Yeah* in MAC 70s/80s

Finally, in an exploration of *yeah* through concordance lines in the 70s/80s' males, it appears that Gerard and Denis have assumed very fixed roles, as was highlighted earlier in the instance of Colin and Tom. The concordance lines show that Denis is very much the listener who uses the response token yeah 73 per cent to Gerard's 27 per cent. He tends to use *yeah* most often as a continuer, (60 per cent), like Tom, primarily to acknowledge listenership. Interestingly, similar to the 20s' males, Gerard is responsible for the recorder and perhaps, like Colin, sees his role as being linked to generating conversation while Denis acts a role which acknowledges listenership and behaves within the boundaries set out for him. It may also be the case that as the conversation takes place in Gerard's house and Denis is a visitor, there is a hierarchy at play but from an understanding of the speakers and the context, this is unlikely. Again what appears to emerge here is that one's role in

the interaction or indeed their perception of it seems to play a part in terms of listenership and the use of response tokens. Whether this is connected to the fact that Gerard dominates because he knows he must generate conversation or whether it is related to the men's personalities is not clear but what emerges is the fact that the men do not switch roles throughout the interaction and that the roles seem to play a very influential part in the men's use of the response token *yeah*, which would refute the point that there is a gender influence at play.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored response tokens across sociolinguistic variables, age and gender, from a variational pragmatics' perspective, using corpus-based tools and methodologies. It highlights the importance of more fine-grained explorations of corpora, where indeed, the corpus is small and lends itself to such analyses. Here, more nuanced investigations revealed a much more complex account of the distribution and use of response tokens which indeed challenges notions that gender differences or stereotypical accounts of gender in terms of binary opposites, as was common in the 1970s and 1980s, are absolute. A more refined investigation of the quantitative data showed that taking the individual speaker or speakers into account showed a high level of dispersion across the male groups which highlighted how one or more speakers' use of the forms was influencing the overall frequency. Such an approach sheds light on earlier quantitative findings and shows how quantitative corpus methodologies, especially when dealing with small corpora, can actually

provide a less accurate and complex account of reality, as was the case here (see Harrington 2008). The fine-grained analyses showed the importance of considering the individual speakers, both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to understand the situation further. Qualitatively, specific explorations of concordance lines from individual interactions allowed the response tokens, used by particular speakers, to be investigated which shed light on the interrelationship between the importance of the interlocutors' relationship, background context, and the roles they assume.

This paper concludes by highlighting the dangers of making generalisations, as was illustrated earlier, about linguistic gender differences. Instead, it shows how corpus analyses can help challenge notions that gender differences are absolute by offering more nuanced and complex accounts, even when exploring small samples. The paper also emphasises the importance of considering gender, alongside other variables, such as age and shows how differences within male groups exist, especially when taking dispersion into account across different life-stages. Finally, revisiting the topic of response tokens and gender some forty years after initial research using different tools and methodologies shows, indeed, a different and more complex picture of response tokens which highlights that response tokens are influenced not so much by gender or indeed age, it seems, but by other factors, such as the roles the speakers assume, background context as well as speaker relationship, which are only possible to access through fine-grained analyses.

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