# An Analysis of Gender Differences in Minimal Responses

# Based on the Cartoon Show *The Simpsons*

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# 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that men and women are different in biology and other aspects of human life. At birth, with the choice of an appropriate name, for example, Jack for a boy, and Rose for a girl, gender is a determining factor in the labeling of people. And this female-male distinction does not stop here. It continues throughout a person's life time. Besides names, assigned genders are constantly being reinforced through the type of toys, choice of clothes, hairstyles, acceptable manners, proper school subjects, expected choice of careers, and so on. It is obvious that as long as people live in this society, they are expected to act according to their perceived gender. Women are likely to wear skirts, put on makeup and grow hair long; while men like to wear neckties and keep their hair short. A man is often thought of as strong, courageous and capable of pursuing careers that make them breadwinners for themselves as well as their families. The categorized women do assume gentle and nurturing characteristics. The society in which people live and the language that is used are interactive. These gendered stereotypes have deeply permeated into language.

Traditionally, sociolinguists focused on linguistic variation coextensive with social class, ethnicity or age (Coates, 2004:4). But gender, which is the term used to describe socially constructed categories as an alternative expression of biological sex, was ignored for a long time. Since the middle of 1970s, language and gender as a new area has enjoyed fast growth. Linguists have been investigating language and gender from many perspectives. Based on the deficit approach, some researchers claim to establish what is called Women's Language, which is described as powerless. Another approach- the dominance approach- regards women as oppressed and the linguistic differences between women's and men's speeches reflect men's dominance and women's subordination. Evidence from these researches shows that men base their conversational style on competitiveness, while women base theirs on cooperativeness. That is to say that although women and men are equal, they characteristically use different strategies in conversational interaction on the following aspects of

conversational practice: minimal responses, hedges, tag questions, questions, commands and directives, swearing and taboo language, and compliments.

## 1.1 Aim

The aim of the present investigation is to find out whether or not there are differences in the communicative competence between male and female speakers, especially the selected characters from the primary material, in terms of their use of minimal responses. The focus will be on the frequency, type and function of male and female usage of minimal responses.

## 1.2 Material

The primary material used in the present investigation consists of a cartoon TV-show *The Simpsons* which has been aired consecutively from 1989. The TV-series is a reflection of the middle-class American lifestyle epitomized by a family, which consists of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. The show is set in the fictional town of Springfield, and reveals many aspects of the human condition including American culture, society, and television. It is well known for its vivid characters. It is interesting to see how a popular TV-series reflects the social norms in conversational strategy, especially the different uses of minimal responses by both male and female characters. Six episodes have been chosen randomly, with three from season 1 and three from season 2. Each episode lasts roughly 20 minutes. However, not all the characters in the selected episodes have the same amount of speech and it is not equally distributed between the genders. It may not be enough material to present statistically significant data, but the patterns and tendencies can be drawn hypothetically.

## 1.3 Method

Before the analysis of the result, both a careful listening to the dialogue of each episode and consultation of the subtitles have been done. Firstly the scripts of all the six episodes were identified. However, on some occasions some minimal responses

used by the speakers were missing from the English subtitles. All of the episodes were carefully listened to, and all the minimal responses in conversations were dictated to ensure to get all the minimal responses in each episode. In the study of the material, all the different forms of minimal responses were cited and the instances of each form were counted, too. Furthermore, the uses of minimal responses were categorized in light of the gender of the speaker so that they could be comparable and patterns and tendency were obtained. Then the functions were identified at an interactional level. Finally the results were compared and the differences between male and female uses of minimal responses were analyzed.

## 2. Theoretical background

Below previous work and theories related to the aim of the essay are introduced and summarized.

### 2.1 Turn-taking and transition relevance place

Human beings are talkative creatures. The basic structure of talk is "I speak-you speak- I speak- you speak" (Yule, 1996:71). It is common knowledge that, most of the time, it takes at least two persons to communicate in a conversation. It is also commonly believed that these two participants in the dialogue assume different roles in turn, and typically only one participant speaks at any time. That is, one of them is responsible for contributing to the conversation, and the other is listener or auditor. There tends to be avoidance of silence between speaking turns. According to Zimmerman and West (1975:106-107), Sacks et al (1974) outlines a model of turn-taking to analyze conversations. It provides a turn-taking mechanism as a systematic approach to speaker alternation in natural conversation. It suggests "that speech exchange systems in general are organized to ensure that (1) one party speaks at a time and (2) speaker change recurs" (1975:107). The smooth alternation of speaker and listener roles in a natural conversation results from the aim of the interlocutors to minimize both the duration of overlapping speech and the time lapses

between the turns, thus this process smoothes the communication and facilitates mutual understanding. There is a set of rules operating the turn-taking system, which is independent of different social contexts: (1) when the current speaker selects the next speaker, the next speaker has the right and, at the same time, is obliged to take the next turn; (2) if the current speaker does not select the next speaker, any one of the participants has the right to become the next speaker; (3) if neither the current speaker selects the next speaker nor any of the participants becomes the next speaker, the current speaker may resume his or her turn to speak. So, it is speakers who are responsible for the local management of turns at talk, and select who speaks next, or proceed to talk if no one grabs the turn.

Yule (1996:72) further explains turn-taking should conform to a local management system, which is a convention for grabbing turns, holding them, or giving them up. This system argues that speaking turns include TRP-transition relevance places, points where a sequence is grammatically complete, and at which it might be reasonable for a new turn to occur. However, there may be more than one possible transition relevance place in each turn. At each transition relevance place either the speaker can continue, extending the current turn, or someone else can speak, beginning a new turn. While a speaker is taking a turn, he or she is said to hold the 'floor'. Evidence for transition relevance places is found in the fact that conversation involves the smooth transition from one speaker to another with little or no time lapse intervening. When transition relevance places are misjudged or ignored, we find instances of simultaneous speech. Therefore, listeners should rely on additional implications, such as the speaker's eye gaze, change of intonation and gesture to predict the point at which the turn actually ends. Because conversation is a form of social action, the system is known to all the members in certain social groups.

## 2.2 Definition of minimal responses

Listeners respond to speakers in two ways. First, listeners make responses while the speakers are talking. Second, listeners can make responses after the speakers have

stopped talking. Theses responses play important roles in conversation. Yule (1996:75) says:

> Within an extended turn, however, speakers still expect their conversational partners to indicate that they are listening. There are many different ways of doing this, including head nods, smiles, and other facial expressions and gestures, but the most common vocal indications are called backchannel signals, or simply backchannels.

To illustrate these linguistic phenomena, Yule (1996:75) cites an example:

**(1)**     *Caller: if you use your long distance service a lot then you'll*

      *Mary:*                                            **uh-uh**

      *Caller: be interested in the discount I'm talking about because*

      *Mary:*                                          **yeah**

      *Caller: it can only save you money to switch to a cheap service*

      *Mary:*                                          **mm**

When the speaker (the caller) pauses to take a breath at the end of a tone unit, Mary appropriately puts in *uh-uh*, *yeah*, *mm*, which do not interrupt the speaker's floor in any way.

These types of signals, such as *uh-uh*, *yeah*, *mmm*, function as direct feedback to the current speakers indicating that their messages are being received. There are various terms to refer this discourse function, such as response token, minimal responses, continuer, response cues, and so on. Here the term minimal responses has been chosen so as not to restrict the objective of the essay only to verbal responses.

Minimal responses are verbal and non-verbal indicators of a person's co-participation in a conversation (Reid, 2005:8). Reppen (2002:52) points out that "Duncan and Niederehe (1974) reassert the basic notion that the backchannel encodes an understanding between speaker and listener that the turn has not been given up".

However, so far there has been no unanimous view of the delimitation of what is or isn't a minimal response. Zimmerman and West (1975:108) mention only *um hmm*, *uh huh*, and *yeah* as minimal responses. Kendon's (1975:204) examples are *yes*, *quite*, *surely*, *I see* and *That's true*. Reid (2005:8) argues in *Gender Differences in Minimal Responses* :

> Fishman (1978:402) believes minimal responses to be 'yeah', 'umm', 'huh', and 'only that'. Woods (1988:143) adds 'yes' and 'right' to this list. …Tao & Thompson (1991:210) define backchannels as 'short, non-lexical utterances produced by an interlocutor who is playing primarily a listener's role during the other interlocutor's speakership'. For Tao & Thompson back-channels are not disruptive nor do they claim the floor. 'Aha', 'uh huh', 'mhm' and 'yeah' are considered to be typical backchannel tokens.

However, the above listing approach is inadequate. Minimal responses need to be defined formally and/or functionally. With comparisons of the pervasive definitions, the following one is more comprehensible. Reppen (2002) cites:

> Duncan (1974) expands the typology of backchannel responses from non-lexical vocalizations and *yeah*, and includes items such as *right* and *I see*, sentence completions, clarification requests, brief restatements and head nodding and shakings.

It seems that most of the researchers agree that minimal responses do not count as turns in the conversation and neither hold the floor nor claim it. There is also a consensus that minimal responses are given to support the one who is holding the floor and give him a sign that he or she can continue talking.

(2)  *Pr. Skinner: Oh, when he's fully immersed in a foreign language, the average*
     *child can become fluent in weeks.*
   *Homer:* **Yeah***, but what about Bart?*

Although *yeah* is a frequently used minimal response, here the listener uses it to

introduce a new turn and claim the floor. So, it should be excluded from the forms of minimal responses.

Here the criteria for picking out minimal responses are as follows: firstly, they are not suitable for initiating a turn or trying to grab a floor; secondly, they do not answer questions from the first speaker; thirdly, they do not include three-part exchanges, or all the interactions are dyad; fourthly, they are very brief; finally, they are made as responses to another speaker.

All the following forms are counted as minimal responses:
1) vocalizations, such as *yeah*, *hmm*, *Uh-huh*, *Aha*, *mhm*, *wow*;
2) nonverbal nods and shakes of the head;

**(3)**  *Marge: Isn't Bart sweet? He sings like an angle.*
      *Homer:* **[Nods]**

When the speaker pauses at an intonation unit, the listener uses head nods instead of uttering any vocalization. But head nods indicate direct feedback and have the same function.

3) single words, such as *yes*, *no*, *yep*, *right*, *good*, *okay*, *sure*;
4) phrasal utterances, such as *oh*, *my god*, *oh, really*, *oh*, *gosh*;
5) short clauses, such as *that's right*, *that's true*, *I agree*;
6) longer utterances (e.g. clarification request);

**(4)**  *Barney: All right! Thirteen bigones! Springfield Downs, here I come!*
      *Homer:* **What**?
      *Barney: you heard me. I'm going to the dog track. I got a hot little puppy in the*
             *fourth race.*

When the speaker pauses, the listener does not understand or hear what the speaker has said. So, *what* is uttered to indicate clarification request.

7) restatement;

**(5)**   *Lisa: You know, in Albania, the unit of currency is called the lek.*
         *Homer: Heh heh heh.* **The lek***!*

The listener, Homer, using brief restatement, repeats in a few words *the lek* the thought expressed by the speaker.

8) smile and laughter.

Knap and Hall (1997:334) argue that "Brunner (1979) discovered that simile signal attentiveness and participation in a conversation just as "yeah", head nods do. These smiles facilitate and encourage current speaker's speech rather than indicate happiness." Besides, Feke (2003:1) in her study cites "For Maynard (1990:397) 'Back-channel expressions examined are limited to uh-huh's and the like, brief comments, punctuated head movements and laughter'." Laughter represents a spontaneous feature of communication and it is uttered at the same place as other forms and seems to replace the usual minimal responses. Therefore, it should not be excluded from minimal responses.

## 2.3 Functions of minimal responses

The basic function of minimal responses is interactional. They are shown to be important to assist the successful conversation. Very often, the use of minimal responses "increases immediacy, signals that the listener is comprehending the speaker's message, and reinforces the speaker's role in a conversation" (Andersen1999:201). Since minimal responses have different forms, their functions sometimes do not agree. Normally, minimal responses, such as *mm-hmm*, *uh-huh*, and

*yeah,* encourage the speaker and indicate attentiveness. However, if they are used in a rapid way, they can convey the message to ask the speaker to stop (Knapp and Hall, 1997:427).

On the other hand, minimal responses can indicate how much the listener can understand the speaker, whether the information conveyed by the speaker is new so that they can "affect the type and amount of information given by the speaker, the length of his or her turn, the clarity of the speaker's content, and the extent to which the speaker communicates in a qualified or specific manner (Knapp and Hall, 1997:461)."

Rod Gardner (2004) analyzes the functions of eight common minimal responses, namely *Mm hm*, *Uh huh*, *Mm*, *Yeah*, *Oh*, *Right*, based on his research. ***Yeah (Yes, yep,*** and so on)  typically means acknowledgement and alignment, with relatively high speakership incipiency. *Mm hm*, *Uh huh* are typically used as continuers, signalizing the prior speaker holding the turn, and with low speakership incipiency. *Mm* is weaker acknowledgement than *yeah*, with low speakership incipiency, letting pass the opportunity to say something on the topic of the prior turn. *Oh* acts as change-of –state token and newsmaker. That indicates the speaker's message is something new to the *Oh* speaker. It has high speakership incipiency. *Okay* can be used as change-of –activity token, meaning the interlocutor can move on to a new topic or activity. It has relatively high speakership incipiency. *Right* or *alright* has the function of confirmation and acknowledgement, with high speakship incipiency.

Furthermore, according to Marche and Peterson (1993), lack of minimal responses in conversations not only disturbs communication but affects the interpersonal relationship between the participants.

## 2.4 Current views of gender differences in use of minimal responses

Graddol and Swann (1989:69) cite Fishman (1983) who points out, "[t]here is an

unequal distribution of work in conversation…women do support work while men are talking and it is the women who generally do active maintenance and continuation work in conversations". The predominant belief for quite some time is that gender differences exist in use of minimal responses; that is, females are more supportive and responsive than males.

> Research on the use of minimal responses is unanimous in showing that women use them more than men, and at appropriate moments, that is, at points in conversation which indicate the listener's support for the current speaker (Coats 2004:87).

For example, Marche and Peterson (1993) cite in their research:

> Fishman (1978), in a study often cited as support for females' greater use of response cues, found that women were more likely to insert comments such as 'Yeah,' 'Mm,' and 'Oh' throughout their partners' talk than men were. …Females also tend to laugh more frequently than males (Duncan & Fiske, 1977; Haas, 1979) and to laugh harder (Coser, 1960).

It is Fishman's belief that women do all the interactional work in a conversation by inserting minimal responses throughout stream of talk rather than at the end. As Graddol and Swann (1989: 76) point out that "findings reported in Leet-Pellegrini's (1980) study were also compatible with Fishman's claim: women in this study used more 'assert terms' such as yeah, right, that's true, interpreted by Leet-Pellegrini as offering conversational support. These 'supporting' usages were also related to expertise". In other words, female experts were more likely to use these terms than male experts, and used them more in mixed-sex conversation than single sex one.

However, although men use the same minimal responses, they use them in a different way. Zimmerman and West find that men are more likely to slowly respond to comments made by their partners in "delayed minimal responses" (Coates, 2004:123). That means men use minimal responses to fill longer pauses when women stopped talking. Coates (2004:123) points out:

it seems that a delayed minimal response may function to signal a lack of understanding or a lack of interest in what the current speaker is saying. Just as a well placed minimal response demonstrates active attention on the part of the listener and support for the speaker's topic, so a delayed minimal response signals a lack of interest in and lack of support for the speaker's topic.

Maltz and Borker, in their *A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication*, hypothetically believe that to women minimal responses simply mean something like *I'm listening to you; please continue.* Men, however, attach much stronger meanings to positive minimal responses, such as *I agree with you* or at least *I follow your argument so far.*

The current conclusion is that women use more minimal responses for support work, showing interest in what men are saying and encouraging them to continue speaking, whereas these responses display lack of interest and support in males.

## 3  Analysis

This analysis is based on randomly selected conversations in six episodes from *The Simpsons*. All the conversations chosen by the author involve male pairs, female pairs and mixed pairs, not groups. It should be worthy of note that the amount of speech for all characters in terms of their genders is not taken into account.

### 3.1 Minimal responses and their forms

Initially, based on the data, the forms of minimal responses used in terms of gender will be examined. All the forms counted as minimal responses are counted from the six episodes. Table 1 shows different forms of minimal responses used in all the conversations and their occurrences.

Table1. Forms of Minimal Responses and Their Occurrences

| Form | Number | Percentage |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Mm/hm/mhm* | 22 | 28% |
| *Uh-huh* | 9 | 12% |
| *Oh* | 9 | 12% |
| *Okay* | 7 | 9% |
| *Alright* | 5 | 7% |
| *No* | 3 | 4% |
| *Yes* | 2 | 2% |
| *Yeah* | 1 | 1% |
| *Laughter* | 4 | 5% |
| *Others* | 16 | 20% |
| Total | 78 | 100% |

As is shown from Table 1, one can easily see that the forms of minimal responses are not evenly spread. Mm*/hm/mhm* is the most frequent minimal response, with a total number of 22, counting for 28% of all the minimal responses. *Uh-huh* and O*h*, two common minimal responses, have the same number of 9 and percentage of 12%. The uses of *Okay* and *Alright* are almost the same, too. But *yeah*, which is supposed to be a common response, occurs only once in the conversation. *Laughter*, with 5 occurrences, proves to be frequent a minimal response.

Other forms of minimal responses count for 20%, which include:

(1) clarification request *(what/ really)*;

(2) restatement (*the lek*);

(3) exclamation and emotional signals (*wow/aha*);

(4) head nods.

Table 2. Male and Female Occurrences of Minimal Responses

| Form | Female | Percentage | Male | Percentage | Total |
|------|--------|------------|------|------------|-------|
| *Mm/hm/mhm* | 15 | 19% | 7 | 9% | |
| *Uh-huh* | 2 | 3% | 7 | 9% | |
| *Oh* | 2 | 3% | 7 | 9% | |
| *Okay* | 5 | 6% | 2 | 3% | |
| *Alright* | 2 | 3% | 3 | 4% | |
| *No* | 0 | 0% | 3 | 4% | |
| *Yes* | 1 | 1% | 1 | 1% | |
| *Yeah* | 0 | 0% | 1 | 1% | |
| *Laughter* | 3 | 4% | 1 | 1% | |
| *Others* | 3 | 4% | 13 | 16% | |
| Total | 33 | 43% | 45 | 57% | 78 |

As is shown in Table 2, firstly, males offer more minimal responses than females: 45(57%) to 33(43%). The result is in fact a clear contradiction of Coates' research, which points out that women use more minimal responses than men. Here the findings are different, partly because in each episode that has been chosen as a sample, males have more screen time than females. In all the six episodes, there are six male characters and four females, who use minimal responses in conversation. Besides, it is the script writers who are responsible for the characters' use of language. This means that the findings here are far from the exact, however, they do reflect the social norms in conversational competency and show a tendency of what type of, and to what extent minimal responses occur.

Secondly, from Table 2, we can see that the uses of the minimal responses in terms of gender are not quite evenly spread, either. The term *alright*, however, is an exception, which males use almost as much as females, with three times and twice respectively. It is not consistent with Lee-Pellegrini's (1980) findings, which claim that females use

more assent terms such as *right* or *alright* as conversational support. On the contrary, it indicates that men also use certain minimal responses to do interactional work.

The most prominent difference is the use of *mm/hm/mhm*. Females use it more than twice as much as the males, with 20 to 9. The use of *laughter* is another case in point. As is mentioned in theoretical background, some researchers find that women laugh more frequently than men. In the findings, it is also the case. Females use four times the number of males. Besides, the uses of *no*, and *yeah*, are not found in female characters.

Males and females have different uses of other forms of minimal responses, which can be illustrated as follows:(1) clarification request, with *what* used five times by males, and *really* once by females; (2) restatement, used once by male; (3) exclamations or emotional signals, among which *wow* is used four times by males, *aha* twice, but *aha* is used only once by female; (4) head nods, used twice by males.

Previous researches have suggested that the use of language has something to do with speakers' power or status. Table 3 and Table 4 illustrate whether status is relevant in regard to men or women's uses of minimal responses.

Table 3. Male Characters Occurrences of Minimal Responses

| Form | Male 1 | Male 2 | Male 3 | Male 4 | Male 5 | Male 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Mm/hm/mhm* | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| *Uh-huh* | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Oh* | 6 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Okay* | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| *Alright* | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *No* | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Yes* | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Yeah* | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Laughter* | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Others* | 9 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 28 | 10 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Male 1= Homer; Male 2= Bart, Homer's son; Male 3= Doctor; Male 4= Manager; Male 5= Pr. Skinner, headmaster in Bart's school; Male 6= Milhouse, Bart's classmate.

It is clearly seen that Male 1 uses the most of minimal responses. He is an ordinary employee in a nuclear plant, with 3 children. As the main character, Homer occupies much of the screen time. That means he has much more opportunities to be involved in conversation. Undoubtedly he uses minimal responses most frequently, with a total number of 28. The reason mentioned above also contributes to Male 2, Bart's relative frequent use of minimal responses. Compared with other male adults, like Male 3, Male 4 and Male 5, Homer has a lower social status. It could indicate that men in subordinate position use more minimal responses than their more powerful counterparts.

Table 4. Female Characters Occurrences of Minimal Responses

| Form | Female 1 | Female 2 | Female 3 | Female 4 |
|------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| *Mm/hm/mhm* | 14 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| *Uh-huh* | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| *Oh* | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| *Okay* | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| *Alright* | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| *No* | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Yes* | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Yeah* | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Laughter* | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Others* | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 26 | 2 | 4 | 1 |

Female 1= Marge; Female 2= Lisa, Marge's daughter; Female 3=Maude, Marge's neighbor; Female 4= babysitter

As another main character of the whole episodes, Marge also appears most of the screen time. There are most occurrences of minimal responses in her interaction with others, accounting for 79% of all. Of all the forms of minimal responses, she uses *mn/hm/mhm* most frequently. Since all the 4 females are powerless in social status, it is a haste to conclude that women use more minimal responses in subordinate positions than they do in powerful positions. So, it appears that power is more relevant to men than women in regard to their uses of minimal responses.

## 3.2 Minimal responses and their positions

Minimal responses can occur both at transition relevance places and non-transition relevance places. The following are two examples to show their differences.

**(6)** *Homer: What do you mean? All the time? Even when they are nuts?*

> *Manager:* **Hmm.**
>
> *Homer: I certainly do.*

A question mark indicates a complete intonation unit and therefore a transition relevance place. The listener acknowledges the speaker's question with a brief feedback hmm, but does not hold the floor, and the speaker continues on with a new turn.

**(7)**      *Lady: That's right. $120 gross, less Social [Security],*

> *Homer:*                                    **[Yeah]**

> *Lady: less unemployment insurance…*

A comma indicates a continuing intonation unit, where the speaker does not relinquish her floor, merely but for taking a breath. The speaker does not stammer during this exchange, there is no pause, and the listener is in no way attempting to take over the floor.

Based on the data, the uses of minimal responses both at transition relevance places and non-transition relevance places are studied to see whether there is a significant difference in the position of minimal responses related to gender. In some researchers' opinions, like Fishman, women insert minimal responses "throughout stream of talk rather than at the end". This equates to the non-transition relevance place minimal responses, which are assumed to be of support variety.

Here is a table showing the number of minimal responses made in terms of gender and TRP type. In this table, the mixed sex pair is divided into two columns to distinguish between two sexes.

Table 5. Number of Minimal Responses Made in Terms of Gender and TRP Type.

| Type | Female/Female | Male/Male | Female/Male | Male/Female | Total |
|------|---------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| TRP | 3 | 9 | 3 | 7 | 22 |
| -TRP | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 3 | 11 | 4 | 8 | 26 |

TRP= Transition Relevance Place; -TRP= Non- Transition Relevance Place

Table 5 illustrates clearly that the majority of minimal responses are at transition relevance places. So, there is no significant association between the gender of the pair and the use of transition relevance places. Hence gender is not the decisive factor as far as the position of minimal responses is concerned.

From Table 5, we can also find that males use more minimal responses at non-transition relevance places than females. It is noteworthy that there is no use of minimal responses at non-transition relevance place in female/female pair. This indicates that the males in the findings indeed did more support work, according to Fishman's research, than their female partners, who mainly used their minimal responses at transition relevance places. As mentioned above, this contradicts Fishman's findings.

**3.3 Minimal responses in terms of gender and type dyad**

Next, the minimal responses used by people in the same sex dyads and those in different sex dyads are compared, regardless of position, to see if there is association between them.

Table 6. Minimal Responses by Gender of Speakers and Type of Dyad

| Dyad type | Number of minimal responses |
|---|---|
| Female/Female | 3 |
| Male/Male | 20 |
| Female/Male | 25 |
| Male/Female | 30 |
| Total | 78 |

As is shown from Table 6, there is a significant association between the sex of interlocutors and the number of minimal responses used. The highest use of minimal responses occurs when females are speaking to males while the lowest occurrence is with females conversing with females.

It indicates that men tend to increase the amount of interactional work done when they are speaking to women. People may adjust their use of minimal responses in line with the gender of their conversational partner. The fact that males in the findings used more minimal responses in mixed sex dyad than the same sex one shows that men are in fact aware of the women's need for cooperativeness in conversation.

Although males in this study used more minimal responses than females in the same sex pair, yet females in mixed sex pair did more interactional work. This supports Coates's statement that women use minimal responses more than men in mixed sex interaction (Coates, 2004:87).

## 3.4 Minimal responses and their functions

According to Maltz and Borker and Fishman, minimal responses used by male and female can be classified into two groups in terms of function. One has the function of showing listener's agreement, and the other comprises facilitative minimal responses, which indicate listener's attentiveness and encouraging current speaker to go on. The

functions of minimal responses can be illustrated through the following examples.

**(8)** *Doctor: However, it is expensive we must insist on a cash payment up front.*

  *Marge: Cash.*

 *Doctor:* **Mm-Hmm**.

With using minimal response, the doctor speaks with certainty that Marge acknowledges there are no other methods to pay. Therefore, here it has the function of showing the speaker's agreement.

**(9)** *Homer: Marge…Oh…Let me be honest with you.*

  *Marge:* **Yes.**

 *Homer: Well…I…I want to do the Christmas shopping this year!*

It is clear that Marge does not use *yes* to express her agreement, because this is not answering the prior speaker's question. Instead, the use of minimal response indicates that Marge is listening and encouraging the speaker to continue speaking. So, it can be classified as facilitative minimal responses. Table 7 shows the number of minimal responses in terms of their function.

Table 7. Numbers of Minimal Responses in Terms of Functions

| Function | Number |
|----------|--------|
| Agreement | 34 |
| Facilitative | 26 |
| Others | 18 |

The results from Table 7 conclude that more minimal responses have the function of showing the listener's agreement. The main reason, probably, is that most conversations are short and without many interlocutors exchange of information. In

most of such cases, the listener use minimal responses to show agreement as well as conclude the conversation. On the other hand, facilitative minimal responses act as continuers, signalizing the current speaker holding the floor.

However, some uses of minimal responses can fall into neither of the two groups. For instance, some minimal responses can express disapproval, disappointment, excitement and so on. Therefore, each utterance should be taken in context and its contents examined to identify its function.

Table 8. Number of minimal Responses in Terms of Gender and Function

| Function | Number | | | |
|----------|--------|------------|--------|------------|
| | Male | Percentage | Female | Percentage |
| agreement | 17 | 38% | 17 | 52% |
| facilitative | 16 | 36% | 10 | 30% |
| others | 12 | 26% | 6 | 18% |
| Total | 45 | 100% | 33 | 100% |

It can be concluded from Table 8 that the occurrences of minimal responses used by males to show agreement are almost the same as those facilitative ones, with 17 (38%) to 16(36%). However, females use more minimal responses to show their agreement in interaction, with 17, compared with 10 facilitative minimal responses. Besides, males use more facilitative minimal responses than females.

This distinction indicates a tendency that women decrease the amount of interactional work while men increase the amount of interactional work in conversation. Men are not as dominant as expected; rather, they make great effort to keep the interaction flowing smoothly.

Table 9. Number of Minimal Responses in Terms of Gender of Speaker and Function

| Speak/ addressee | Agreement | Facilitative | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Female/female | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Male/male | 12 | 10 | 22 |
| Female/male | 5 | 6 | 11 |
| Male/female | 17 | 7 | 24 |

The results from Table 9 demonstrate that minimal responses are used in different ways in terms of gender and function. On the one hand, females, as addressees, use more facilitative minimal response when conversing with female partners. This supports Coates' statement that women use minimal responses to signal their active listenership and support for each other. However, when responding male partner, females use more minimal responses to show agreement, though the uses of facilitative minimal responses are increased from 3 to 7.

On the other hand, whether in same sex or mixed talk, the occurrences of minimal responses used by males to show agreement are almost the same as facilitative ones. But it should be noticed that males, as addressees, use more facilitative minimal responses interacting with male co-conversationalist than with female one.

Based on Table 6 and Table 7, it appears that people are likely to modify their uses of minimal responses according to the gender of their co-conversationalist. It could be that women perceive that men require less interaction input in conversation than women. Meanwhile, men realize that women need more cooperative gestures in interaction.

4. **Conclusion**

Men and women are linguistically different from each other. This study indicates that there is indeed a difference between men and women in the communicative competency where minimal responses are concerned.

Previous work done by Jennifer Coates and other researchers shows that women use more minimal responses than men, and do more interactional work in conversations. But the present study, the results of which could be affected by the primary material and design of the method, indicates the contrary. It is men who use more minimal responses and take a more active role both in same sex and mixed talk. Women, on the other hand, use more of the agreement type of minimal responses than facilitative or cooperative type in mixed talk. Another interesting finding is that men never use delayed minimal responses, which are assumed to indicate men's dominance in conversation. Conversely, both men and women may well adjust their use of minimal responses according to the gender of their interlocutor. So, people can not over simply say women are automatically cooperative and men are dominant in conversation.

It is a difficult task to generalize the differences between male and female speech, for it depends on the situation and individual. Maltz and Borker (1982) argue that males and females learn different conversational patterns in childhood, with their predominately same-gender friends, that they carry with them into adult relationships. Because men and women are reared in different sociolinguistic subcultures, they have learned different cultural rules for carrying on friendly conversation.

Due to many factors, the result of this present investigation is quite limited, but it might at least give a hint of how men and women behave differently in the use of minimal responses. In order to make a definite conclusion based on this present study, one should do more research involving more primary and secondary materials.

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