

## Male and Female Strategies of Communication in E-mail Discussion Groups



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The study of genderlects has certainly become a very popular field of investigation in recent decades. Having been sparked off by a largely intuitive analysis of the language of American women carried out by R. Lakoff (1975), it has been able, with the help of a number of experimental studies, to make both linguists and lay alike aware of certain more or less striking differences in the speaking styles of the two genders. It is for the field of interactional linguistics that the knowledge about the identified gender differences appears to be particularly useful as it helps to interpret the linguistic behaviour of men and women in the proper light.

The perception of particularly the female speaking style has undergone a certain re-interpretation over the recent decade. Initially described as a deficient language (Lakoff 1975) due to the avoidance of coarse expressions, the high frequency of hedges, empty adjectives, certain intonational patterns, emotionality and markers of politeness (cf. Coates 1993, Holmes 1995), it has gained in value mainly through the work of Coates (1988, 1993), Cameron (1995ab), Holmes (1993, 1995) and others. Thanks to their works it has been established that the female style of speaking should rather be described as cooperative, supportive and hearer-oriented; in other words, what used to be perceived as a sign of linguistic weakness has now attained a highly positive label. Experiments carried out in the field have demonstrated that, contrary to the female interactional style, the male linguistic behaviour when in interaction could be termed as competitive and achievement-oriented (cf. Zimmerman and West 1975, Coates 1993). This conclusion was motivated by the fact that male interlocutors tended, among others, to occupy more speaking time, interrupt their conversational partners, initiate topics, answer questions and solve problems rather than speak about their emotions or support their interlocutors with backchannel noises (cf. Zimmerman and West 1975, Fishman 1983, Stockwell 2002).

Alongside the re-valuation of the female speaking style (which has been a more frequent object of study than the male genderlect and always set against the male style as a model) another important corollary was made that undermined the initial claim of one universal female genderlect and, consequently, one male genderlect. Some linguists (cf. Bing and Bergvall 1996, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, Mills 2003) have suggested, through the study of the language of various specifically defined female

groups that not all of them shared the features of the mild and polite style of speech traditionally assigned to them. It is with these two principles in mind that I wish to proceed with my analysis of the gathered material: when discussing certain elements in the speech samples generated by women I will view them as markers of positive politeness rather than the signs of deficiency. Moreover, the conclusion derived from the study will be considered valid only for the group of the users of English who can be characterised by social variables specified further in the text, and not all the females and males in general. At this point I wish to indicate that I will use the terms *male* and *female genderlects* more as useful tags helpful in pointing out certain linguistic tendencies rather than fixed entities that do not allow for any flexibility in their make-up. The intention of this paper is not to reinforce divides between the genders, but rather to make the readers more aware of the possibility of certain discrepancies in the communicative styles that may occur and which at times incidentally overlap with the traditionally understood division of speakers into men and women.

What led me to take up this subject was my general and ongoing interest in gender issues (cf. Dąbrowska 1997, 1999, 2002ab, 2005, 2007a, forthcoming) and more specifically, I was intrigued by the form and content of some e-mail messages from a number of native English speakers written on subjects vital for the existence and functioning of a certain international organisation that they and myself are a part of. The messages were a part of a public e-mail network which any of the persons involved could join and express their ideas and concerns. I considered this an excellent opportunity to examine certain communicative strategies used by the members of this loop in a semi-formal setting which such a semi-public network creates. Due to the fact that a visible majority of these messages were written by male users (and quite by chance native speakers of English), I was naturally first drawn to examine the language of this group in this particular context and mode of communication, yet I concluded that such an analysis would not have been complete if there had been no other linguistic group to compare it with. Thus, I decided to also include in the analysis the messages generated by the female native English speakers who also contributed to the discussion, albeit to a more limited extent (naturally, there were also messages sent by non-native speakers of English, but these were necessarily excluded from my analysis – it has to be said, however, that on the whole about 80% of all the messages written in this network are in fact produced by the British, Americans, Australians and Canadians).

As a result of the above, I was able to collect 41 messages generated by 16 male correspondents (8 British, 5 Americans, 2 Australians and 1 Canadian) and only 22 e-mails from female correspondents, 11 in all, and comprising 8 British, 1 American, 1 Australian and 1 Canadian. Even though the correspondents represented different English-speaking countries, the review of the messages revealed no striking differences in terms of the strategies used within each of the gender groups except for the case of opening phrases in the female group indicated later in the text. The subject of the e-mails revolved around three major areas: the ideology and functioning of the organisation, the participation of the younger generation in it, and the preparation of a conference on a certain subject as well as issues related to it, e.g. the creation of a website. To make the

sociolinguistic picture of the study more complete, all of the persons involved were characterised by a minimum university college education and they comprised speakers between 20 to 65 years of age. Thus, the simple numerical characteristics presented above already conveys some meaningful linguistic message: almost a double number of the messages written by men as compared to those generated by women does confirm the greater willingness on the part of men to participate and share their opinions in public discussions. On the other hand, however, it is actually women who on the whole produced longer messages (261 words in an average e-mail from a woman vs. 192 words in an average e-mail from a man), which already proves that in some contexts women may diverge from the commonly attributed features of their speaking style, especially when the semi-formal, and thus a more relaxed context of communication encourages them to do so.

As for the medium of communication used, in my view the e-mail discussion appears to be a particularly useful mode for analysis. Quite an ample number of data can be collected in a relatively short period of time from a variety of speakers, which ensures a fairly reliable basis for conclusions as regards the social group selected for the analysis (in this case white, middle-class native users of English). Also the particular character of the medium combining the features of speech and writing (by some described as yet another channel of communication next to speech, writing and signed language – cf. Stockwell 2002) offers interesting possibilities for examining a variety of features. In this particular study it is especially valuable as it allows for research into how different users of e-mail loops approach the context – on the one hand it is public, which calls for a certain restraint of informality typically associated with e-mails (cf. Crystal 2001), and yet at the same time it happens among acquaintances, and sometimes even close friends, who share similar concerns about their work, vocation, etc. Such a choice of the study material, therefore, offers a good opportunity to examine more closely the linguistic means of expressing solidarity, and at the same time power and respect (cf. Brown and Gilman 1960, Hudson 1996) between the users as well as the proportions of the use of the two and the strategies employed to convey them.

Due to the limited size of the paper the analysis of the collected material will focus on a selection of features which will be broadly divided into the examination of the form and the content. In terms of the form (which I argue is more convention-based and therefore more subconscious) I intend to examine the strategies the correspondents used to initiate the e-mail exchanges, and more specifically, the opening phrases alongside the terms of address, as well as the possible introductory sentences which will allow us to judge how the senders approach the other users of the lists and whether they resort to conventional means of conveying politeness or not. A similar analysis will concern the formulae used to close the messages. As for the content (in my view monitored more consciously), some attention will be paid to a number of various speech acts which could be recorded in the collected messages, and in particular to the expressions of positive and negative opinions and emotions (and more specifically, criticism and praise) with regard to the issues being discussed, especially in terms of their number as well as the structure and linguistic elements used. Another speech act which will also undergo a more detailed

examination will be the act of making suggestions, that is, as it was explained above, the number of the suggestions recorded for the two groups of users as well as certain features of their structure will be discussed. In connection with this some attention will also be paid to the question of hedges, which are typically attributed to the female style of speaking. It is hoped that the analysis of these features will allow more insight into the typical elements of semi-formal and argumentative style of speech characteristic of a community of native English speakers, and provide certain observations concerning similarities and differences of the communicative styles of the two genders.

### Message openings

To begin with, I would like to address the issue of the presence or absence of the opening phrase. If e-mail communication is treated as one bearing features of a letter, the presence of the opening phrase should be self-evident (cf. Dąbrowska 2000, Crystal 2001). Yet this proved to be one of the significant differences with regard to messages written by men and women. Whereas all the 22 examined messages written by women contained an opening phrase, as many as 16 (39%) male correspondents omitted the salutation, passing directly to the content of their message. If any conclusion might be ventured in this case, it could be assumed that women's use of this conventional way of starting a message may be linked with the concept of positive politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987), i.e. the one whose aim is to show the addressee that he or she is admired, liked, cared for. Thus, the use of the salutation indicates that the female correspondent is writing to a concrete person or a group of people and the message acknowledges their existence, whereas the omission of the opening, on the one hand, points to a greater informality of the attitude of the sender but also a much greater impersonality of the message. What seems more important in this case is what is said and not who it is said to. The fact that such a high percentage of male correspondents chose to omit the conventional opening corroborates some earlier findings in the field which termed the female style of speech the rapport speaking and the male style – the report speaking (Tannen 1990, cf. Holmes 1995), i.e. giving information rather than being concerned with the other person's feelings.

As regards the form of the openings, there are also some interesting differences. What strikes one in the case of women is the use of the word *Dear* in as many as 17 salutations (accompanied by either the word *Friends*, predominantly, or *All*, and also twice used with some humorous undertones and once in a more extended version, i.e. *Hello dear friends*), the remaining ones being more informal and found in the messages from the Americans and Australians: *Hi all*, *Hello*, *Hello everyone*, *G'day all!* As I was able to observe in one of my earlier studies, the use of the very conventional form *Dear* is particularly characteristic of the letters written by British women (as compared e.g. to equivalent forms used by Polish women) even in very informal, personal messages (Dąbrowska, forthcoming). It could be interpreted, on the one hand, as a marker of conventional positive politeness and on the other, as an indication of the fact that British

women approach e-mails more as letters rather than oral messages.

Naturally, the messages written by men which did have an opening phrase also contained a fair number of the occurrences of *Dear* – 16 (39%), but here the percentage is certainly lower when compared to women as 77% of them used this form of salutation. Thus, alongside this traditional way of starting a letter, male correspondents used also quite a variety of informal and less conventional openings, as the first name or forms like *Friends*, *Hello X*, *Hi X*, *Hey X*, *Greetings X*, *To one and all*. The greater frequency of these shows that some men are more solidarity- and familiarity-oriented – in this way they seem to care more for the bond of friendship and a relaxed atmosphere than for the traditional expectations of linguistic etiquette.

On the point of etiquette, I was also interested to find out how the discussion list users approached the issue of more conventional polite formulae – whether they used such expressions at all, and if so, of what particular kind? The analysis of the collected letters demonstrates that conventional politeness expressions (as e.g. thanks, apologies, inquiries about somebody's well being, wishes, etc.) were not particularly visible in the accumulated material, but quite surprisingly, they appeared in greater numbers in the messages written by men (even if we consider the fact that they wrote more messages), i.e. men used them 27 times in all, whereas women only 10 times. The speech act which appeared most often, especially in the messages written by the males, was that of thanking. It proves quite natural, as in this way the correspondents tended to link to some previous messages and express their gratitude to a particular person. In the case of men there were 14 such cases recorded, e.g. *Thanks X (2)*; *Thanks (5)!*, *Thanks for this X*; *Thanks for these good thoughts*; *Thanks X for these thoughts*, *Thanks for alerting me to 'x' X*; *Thank you for all your messages*; *Thank you for including us on this*; *It's been very interesting to receive the different messages, thank you*; *Thank you X, Y, and Z in particular for your wise e-mails – I'm meditating on them still*; *I wanted to thank X for sharing his situation*. Thanks are a positive politeness strategy which, as stated above, aims at showing the others that they are respected, liked, admired, and this is certainly the message the male correspondents are passing on here. It can be seen from the form of the thanks recorded, though, that they are doing it in a fairly informal way (the notable frequency of the form *thanks* as compared to *thank you*), which once again stresses the solidarity feeling between them and the addressees. It also has to be added that four times the speech act of thanking was used as an initiation of the message in the cases where no traditional salutation was used at all, and thus it performed the function of a letter opening. It has to be noted that such an initiation of a letter shows more features of a spoken mode, of an ongoing conversation, rather than of a conventional written message, which is typically started by the traditional form of address, as was the case with the messages from women.

As for the females' messages, there thanks appeared only three times, i.e. *Thank you X for launching us all into the e-future*; *Thank you S for your messages which I found thought provoking*; *Thanks for the preliminary work*. The low number of thanks is surprising as it is women who are typically associated with positive politeness. This might have perhaps been effected by the semi-formality of the context which may have

restrained the use of such a more personal display of feelings. It is also possible that the women who did decide to take part in a public discussion possess more masculine traits (by virtue of accepting that neither masculinity nor femininity are internally homogeneous categories – cf. Bing and Bervall 1996, Mills 2003) and as such may consciously or subconsciously avoid too strong a display of emotions. The fact that men employed quite a few polite expressions and women did not may also be seen as an example of linguistic accommodation which has been observed in mixed-sex settings (cf. Stockwell 2002).

Another speech act which was used with a certain frequency as compared to others was the expression preceding the closing phrase of the message and as such will be discussed alongside the letter closings. The remaining ones were, with one exception, recorded once or twice each and therefore will be ignored here. Noteworthy, however, is a fair number of apologies on the part of men and again more limited (most likely due to a lower number of messages on the whole) on the part of women. There were 5 apologies in the messages from men, i.e. *I apologise to anyone who gets this twice or three times; I am sorry if some of us have run away with what X said...; Sorry to insist on such an uninspiring point...; it could be phrased better (apologies); this is totally late and probably irrelevant anymore, but I am thinking about your questions!!! So apologies*, whereas women apologised twice: *Sorry, I have banged on about it before; I also want to take this opportunity to apologise for being largely inactive in the follow-up team*. Apologies are markers of negative politeness whose aim is not to impose upon another person and not invade their space, but it is also a very highly face-threatening act for the speaker. The fact that some apologies did appear here on a public forum indicates that those were relatively minor offences that the speakers chose to apologise for. In this way, the more conventional polite reading of the messages was enhanced and social expectations fulfilled.

### Closing of the messages

The discussion of letter openings and some polite phrases following them demonstrated some significant discrepancies between the messages written by women, on the one hand, and some men on the other. When we look at the way the messages were terminated, there are also some differences but much less marked. As was the case with message openings, some e-mails were likewise left without the traditionally expected closing element and only the name of the correspondent was given. This time both men and women behaved similarly percentage-wise, i.e. men chose not to use any special farewell phrase 13 times (32%), and women 6 times (27%). The fact that some women also abandoned this traditional way of structuring an e-mail message shows that it is certainly the beginning of a message that needs to be more attended to, whereas more informality can be allowed when finishing a letter to acquaintances. The most striking difference between the two gender groups appears to be the use of the phrase *Love*. This, being a very frequent way of closing private letters (Dąbrowska, forthcoming), was used but once only in the group of the male correspondents. In the

case of women, even though the context of communication had a more public character, six correspondents decided to use this form to finish their message, i.e. it was found in 27% of the messages, and once even a much more familiar form *with much love* was used. In this case it might be guessed that they wanted to convey their warm feelings and demonstrate a more relaxed attitude towards the way of communicating, i.e. to convey their feeling of solidarity, but unlike in the case of the informal phrases used by men, visibly stressing the intimacy of contact. A number of other ways to close a message were oriented towards solidarity as well rather than formality: in the case of women these would be: *cheers* (2), *over and out* (1), *hope you are still having fun* (1), whereas men demonstrated their solidarity by means of *Cheers* (4), *big hug all* (1), *take care* (1), *thanks* (3), *more later (perhaps)* (2), *smiles* (1), but these do not seem to carry this affectionate undertone which can be sensed in *Love*, only the familiarity and informality of contact. However, as this context of a discussion list may have appeared a little more formal to some of its users, also a number of more neutral and polite closing phrases were recorded. And thus, women also opted for *with best wishes to you all* (3), *best wishes* (2), *wishing you all the best* (1), *hope this finds you well* (1) and *god bless* (1), whereas men chose also *warm(est) regards* (5), *best regards* (3), *best wishes* (2), *warm greetings* (1), *all the best* (1), and *blessings all* (1). Though not strikingly different at first sight, these more neutral closing phrases do, however, focus on different aspects – whereas women convey their wishes, thus making their messages more affectionate and personally-oriented, men often choose to send greetings or regards, which does not stress their personal involvement so strongly.

At this point of the analysis also the pre-closing phrases mentioned above should be included. Their presence does stress the polite reading of the whole message, especially if any more traditionally fixed formula is used. By this I mean the form *I look forward to...* (the choice of the Present Simple Tense makes the reading a little more official) as well as some others, which have in fact appeared both in some messages from women, i.e. *I look forward to hearing from you (all)* (2); *I look forward to rejoining you*, and *That's all for now*, and from men: *I look forward to any and all spirited responses*; *I look forward to getting feed-back from any of you and ideas*; *I look forward to seeing some of you*; *I look forward to getting feed-back from any of you*; *We very much look forward to hearing from you* and also *So, herewith my Sunday morning contribution*. Thus, it can be concluded that no striking difference can be found in the behaviour of men and women. If such pre-closing phrases as the above do appear, they hardly ever tend to focus on something else but the request for a reply, which in such a semi-formal context seems to be most appropriate.

### Expressing positive and negative emotions

When it comes to the content of the messages, it is rather difficult to analyse it in detail in the case of every e-mail, especially that some of them are remarkably long and wordy. Having read through the collected material I therefore decided to select the most frequently recurring and at the same time most strikingly different types of speech acts.

Thus, the elements which particularly draw the reader's attention are the expressions of positive and negative emotions manifested through praise and criticism, respectively, analysed in this section as well as the speech act of making suggestions, to which the next section will be devoted.

As said above, the question of expressing praise and criticism is one where quite visible differences between the two groups of correspondents can be seen best. As will be recalled, the number of messages from the female users of the forum was almost a half of the messages generated by men, yet, the detailed analysis demonstrated that it is women who generated more praises – in their case as many as 33 such speech acts were recorded (from 11 users) and in the case of men only 25 (from 16 users), which immediately shows a visible difference in proportion. Such a discrepancy does seem to confirm the traditional and also an experimentally proved (cf. Holmes 1995) view that women are particularly positive politeness-oriented and show a cooperative style of communication. When the praising formulae are analysed in greater detail, it proves that the most frequent, and therefore most favoured by the female correspondents here, were the structures *It is/was/looks...*, as in *It is so helpful to be able to read...; I think it's very good; it was fantastic to work with them; it was such a fantastic time; altogether it was a really rewarding experience; Generally, I think the whole thing is a VAST improvement; the web pages look really attractive* (and thus 6 of them), these closely followed by *I am/'ve been/was...*, as in: *I was stirred by...; I was inspired to learn about...; I am still super enthusiastic about...; very pleased to read all the discussions happening; glad the meeting went well*, (5) and also *I like...*, e.g. *I like this image; personally I like X's title; I like X's suggestions; I like the idea of sharing...*(4). Apart from these there can also be found such formulae as a) *I find/found...* as in *...which I found stimulating and worthy of more thought; I find it very pleasing design; I find gradations of four shades of blue quite sophisticated*; b) *I appreciate... – I appreciate X's point; I enjoy the work and I really appreciate being a part of the community*; c) *I respond... – X and I really respond to this suggestion*, and a number of individual phrases of various structures. What strikes one on examining these forms is a high frequency (18 in all) of emotive modifiers in the form of intensifiers, as *so, very, such, super, really*, etc. (highlighted in the text above), which, first remarked on by Lakoff (1975) without any experimental proof, do appear to characterise the language of English-speaking women (cf. Dąbrowska 2007, forthcoming).

The distribution of praises offered in their messages by men, smaller in number, relies on similar linguistic means. Again, the most popular way of praising in the case of men seems to be the structure *It is/was/has been/looks...*, as in *It's been very interesting to receive the different messages; firstly, new site looks great!; one of the things that I think is hugely important...; good to read such lovely thing; all that the web team is putting together is very inspiring. Amazing work!; it is certainly an important book; great that you are able to get together* (7). This one is closely followed by *I am/was/have been...*, as in *I am still enjoying it immensely; I am fascinated and excited about this conversation; was encouraged by this speech; I am genuinely optimistic; I am grateful for X's e-mail* (5). Another popular form of praising is *I like... – I like your first point*



on...; *I like the minimalism, the blue shading...; I like the thumbnail image style; I do like the campaign and its objectives* (4). Otherwise, one can find there some scattered phrases of various types, e.g. *there are **such** precious things we can learn...; I have appreciated the various ideas and suggestions; So well done to all involved!; I found it **really** inspiring*. What can be concluded here is that apart from the frequency there is in fact similarity in terms of how men and women display their positive emotions, and notably praise, in public, and with regard to the words of praise they utter (e.g. somebody's suggestion, thoughts, work, and more specifically here, the website). It also needs to be observed that even in a semi-formal context men do not always refrain from exposing their emotional attitude, though at times this may be done with the help of a more original type of adverbials (highlighted in the text).

It was said above that women exceeded men in terms of the number and proportion of positive expressions in the discussion forum. Quite unexpectedly, though, and contrary to the traditional assignment of mainly the rapport type of speaking to the female style of communication (Tannen 1990) women also expressed many more negative comments than men. Altogether, women voiced their negative attitude about some issues 15 times (in 22 messages), while men offered their criticism only 6 times (in 41 messages). As for the female criticism, the collected examples may be tentatively divided into three groups: a) the criticism expressed directly in the first person, a) a direct criticism in the third person, and c) mitigated criticism (with some hedging expression added). As for the first group, only 2 such forms were recorded: *I don't want to be a part of a discussion that isn't going to move...; I no longer like its subtitle*, which should not be surprising, as such comments are considered highly face-threatening. It may be observed, though, that the criticism is not directed at any particular person, in which case the threat to the face is certainly weaker. The fact that it is relatively safer to criticise an object or issue without directly saying who is expressing such feelings may be seen in a slightly larger group of critical remarks in the third person (4 records) – *there are other links that don't work; this is hard work for visually challenged; there are some strange typo's; there are times when [org X] makes me angry and frustrated*. The content of these makes it easy to understand why the correspondents decided to use direct criticism here – these are mainly objective issues and mostly easy to be rectified. It is, however, not surprising that such a highly face-threatening act often tends to be weakened, and therefore the largest group of critical comments found here is the one where criticism was alleviated by some mollifying word or expression which either made them very subjective (and thus easy to be challenged) or lessened the degree of the negative impact (8 examples in all): *Actually, I have a problem with X's title; the word 'multi-cultural' has been nearly done to death; I'm not sure if I get the meaning of this; longer **may be** better but **perhaps** not in all cases; I felt we lacked..., I find it quite slow to move; I feel there is **sometimes** a lack of deep real thought; I don't **really** agree*. It may thus be observed that even though women did not refrain from expressing their negative emotions, they mostly tried to convey them in the least offensive way.

A closer examination of the negative comments made by men demonstrates that in terms of how they voiced their views, the men employed similar strategies to those found

in the female messages, the number of critical comments recorded here was, however, very low. The group that stands out is the one which expresses criticism less directly, with hedges (5 cases): *the sub-head is a bit long and clumsy; but my own view is that where [the Org] fails, it fails as an organisation; I find it difficult and painful and I don't readily embrace it; [the org] now does a relatively poor job of mustering its volunteer base; so paradoxically the thing about ...seems to me paradoxically shortsighted*, and only one comment criticises a certain issue directly: *it's not clear from the home page that such context exists on the site*, but similarly as in the women's comments, this is a very minor point. Due to such a small number of negative comments offered by men it is rather difficult to assess their content more fully. What may be ventured, however, on the basis of particularly three examples from this group is the observation that men may be more prone to criticise more abstract, philosophical or large-scale issues, while women may be more detail-oriented (cf. Spender 1980). Also some differences in the choice of hedging devices are not to be overlooked, as the highlighted phrases indicate.

### Making suggestions

The last point to be discussed with regard to the content is the strategy of making suggestions, a rather obvious one in an e-mail discussion forum devoted to the future of the organisation or some of its programmes. It is one more time that, considering both the absolute majority of suggestions made and the proportion of these with regard to the overall number of messages written by men and women, it is women who made more suggestions. Altogether, 23 suggestions were recorded in the e-mails written by women as opposed to 14 put forward by men. The overall group of suggestions offered by women could further be subdivided into three categories: a) the *we*-suggestions, b) the *I*-suggestions, and c) the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, i.e. indirect suggestions, (there might also be some formulae which combine the above). In view of the fact that making suggestions in public is a highly face-threatening act a marked percentage of the *we*-suggestions is to be expected, which is confirmed by the 6 occurrences of those: *but maybe we need to make; we need to agree; we need to rethink; perhaps we should think more about...; the first discussion we need to make is...; can we elect to pay in a different currency?.* However, quite surprisingly, the *I*-suggestions, which put the face of the speaker most at stake were recorded as many as 12, these including also 4 forms introduced by the hedging device in the 1<sup>st</sup> p. sg.: *I would rather have something that is understated than in your face; I'm not suggesting we should 'rap' our way through the forum...; I suggest that we ask for seven nights...; I am proposing that we have the meeting over the weekend; suggest we have supper together; suggest that this time we are more selective; I would like to make a proposal; I think before we discuss we have to...; I think maybe some of the titles could stand out a little more; I do think that the title needs to convey...; therefore I think our title needs...and possibly My suggestion for....* Finally, as for the indirect suggestions, the following examples may be quoted: *some more exposure in depth to certain work would be helpful; one suggestion is to renew my (each person's) personal relationship to the world that I perceive; perhaps the discussion needs to be*

*first about who we are and what we want; it would help if the visuals hinted at possibilities; so what about...?* (5). Following this, it is important to observe that quite a number of women appear to take full responsibility for their thoughts and the work of the organisation, which the use of the 1<sup>st</sup> person would imply (contrary to Lakoff's initial claim about the deficient or powerless language of women), and in some cases the sense of self-confidence is additionally strengthened by the use of informal language (e.g. the omission of the subject pronoun in *suggest we...*). These suggestions are firm and direct, which shows that the style of some of the women does not corroborate the traditional view of the women's powerless language, and thereby it supports the need expressed by some linguists (cf. Cameron and Coates 1988, Bing and Bergvall 1996) for a more "punctual" type of analysis focusing on more specific groups of speakers. On the other hand, the style of those women who chose to make a suggestion with the help of the *we* pronoun, does show some lack of confidence and a possible fear of rejection – hence the use of a safer and more inclusive *we*. At the same time, it has to be stressed here that the use of the 1<sup>st</sup> p. plural pronoun does corroborate the claim about the female cooperative style as it shows the collective, all-inclusive approach on the part of women.

A similar classification of the suggestion formulae as the one above could also be applied to the examples found in the e-mails from men, though the numerical share in the categories would be different. As for the *we*-suggestions, these were represented by ... *or put other ways we need to focus on what we are individually called to be become; we need to focus on...; we need to ask questions about how great or how effective [the org] is at doing this*, which shows that the number of the all-inclusive suggestions is relatively small (3). The more individualistic presentation of suggestions with the help of the 1<sup>st</sup> p. singular, which would confirm the findings of some experiments that men tend to express their thoughts with a frequent reference to the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular (cf. Stockwell 2002), was, however, also fairly insignificant. Only one prototypical example of this type was recorded: *I would like to use the word **x** somehow either in the title or subtitle*. In this group we could possibly also, as was the case with women, put suggestions introduced by the hedging device in the 1<sup>st</sup> p. sg., as ***I believe** it could be best operationalised by integrating it into...; **I think** it would be good to have some evaluation; on that note **I think** it would be good to have a message to the Council from this group* (3), though these could equally well be classified as indirect 3<sup>rd</sup> p. suggestions with a hedging device (the actual reading would really depend on the intonation used). The indirect, non-committal form seems to be the most favoured device for making suggestions in the examined group of men, as it comprises 5 examples in all (mainly in the interrogative form): *so how about...?; perhaps 'events' instead of 'initiatives'; could the 'gallery' heading in the right column link to the gallery of images; might subtitles appear directly beneath?; this could come from a registration page*. Two more suggestions stand out due to their form, as they are made very directly with the use of the imperative mood, i.e. *make a good report; review how things are going*, as a result of which it is difficult to distinguish between a suggestion and a directive when the context is not provided. Such forms did not feature in the messages from women, while their presence, albeit very limited, does seem to indicate certain traits of the

communicative style of some men. These two last forms sound very forceful. However, the examination of the remaining ones does indicate that the English-speaking men can also be quite tentative in how they try to make proposals. This is visible in the number of hedges found similarly often in both the messages from women and men, or in the tentative forms of the interrogatively phrased suggestions (i.e. the use of *could* or *might* instead of e.g. *should*). It may be assumed that the more powerful devices would be reserved for a more intimate context, whereas the public e-mail forum appears to discourage the use of expressions of this type both in the case of men and women alike.

## Conclusion

The above were the most conspicuous elements of the messages generated by the two groups of users. Even though the material collected was not highly extensive and the number of users also limited, as a result of which this study should be treated more as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the linguistic gender issues rather than an independent study, it was possible to observe certain visible tendencies in the communicative strategies employed by some representatives of the two groups. On the one hand, they confirm some earlier observations made with regard to genderlects via linguistic experiments, on the other, there are some features of the material which appear to undermine certain traditionally established beliefs concerning the linguistic differences between the two genders. To sum up the above discussion, let us focus on the following points:

- the collected material exhibited differences in the approach of the majority of women and men involved in the study towards their interlocutors which have been demonstrated by many other studies to date. More specifically, women tended to stress the bond of friendship with the other forum users through such devices as the use of forms of address in the letter openings (the opening phrase was never omitted), and the majority of the female contributors opted for a more formal and at the same time neutral way of addressing the interlocutors by means of the *Dear X* phrase. Many men, on the other hand, appeared to stress the solidarity with the addressees of their messages rather than follow conventional politeness (and thereby enlarge the distance between the users), this preference being indicated by a frequent omission of the salutation phrase. The omission could also be linked with the treatment of e-mail communication more in terms of a spoken medium rather than the traditional letter writing.

- The cooperative, friendly, and affective style of communication preferred by women was also to some extent hinted at by the formulae used to close the message. A fourth of the women in the forum indicated that by means of wishing their interlocutors all the best, and a similar number stressed the familiar and warm attitude towards their interlocutors by means of the intimate and personally-oriented phrase *Love*. By contrast, a fair number of the male contributors selected a less affective, and at the same time a more neutral closing form with the words *greetings/regards*, which was not recorded in the messages from women.

- as for the markers of conventional politeness, there was not any significant

number of such devices recorded in either of the two groups. Contrary to expectations, men employed more thanking formulae than women, they used, however, the informal phrase *thanks* in the majority of cases, which again stresses the bond of solidarity and camaraderie between the interlocutors. The fact that there were more thanking phrases in the messages from men might be at least partly explained by the fact that they used them sometimes as a phrase to initiate (i.e. instead of the traditional form of address) or close the message, it may also be a result of linguistic accommodation prompted by the participation in a mixed-sex semi-formal discussion.

- the most striking and at the same time a rather unexpected distinction in the communicative styles of the men and women analysed here was attested in the content of the messages and concerned the number and to some extent the quality of three speech acts discussed in more detailed in the study, i.e. of expressions of praise, criticism, and suggestions. In all the three cases it was women who chose to contribute more of these to the discussion, which was particularly noteworthy considering the fact that the number of e-mail messages written by women was by half-smaller than that produced by men. It has to be stressed here that when expressing praises both women and men used a fair amount of emotive modifiers, though in the case of women they were more pronounced and of a more common character, whereas men used more uncommon adverbial expressions. As concerns criticism, despite the fact that women offered more critical comments, they on the whole made efforts to phrase them in the least offensive way, which was achieved through the use of a variety of hedging expressions. Also men tried to mollify their negative comments. The limited number of these, however, makes it more difficult to describe in terms of the devices preferred by men. As for the suggestions made, the type of structures found in the analysed messages was on the whole the same for both groups (except for the two examples of imperative structures found only in the messages written by men). Particularly marked in the messages from women was the use of the *we*-suggestions, which on the whole pointed to the cooperative quality of female communication. What was most striking, though, was an even higher employment of the 1<sup>st</sup> p. sg., i.e. the *I*-suggestions on the part of women. It is an indication that the language used by some women does not have to be deficient and lacking in confidence, especially when generated in an environment providing the sense of safety and encouraging openness, which an e-mail discussion forum certainly does. The greater number of praises, criticisms and suggestions recorded in the e-mails from women may additionally be treated as a manifestation of the more detail-oriented approach of women to the problems discussed (i.e. not making broad comments on abstract issues as men mostly did, but focusing on specific problems) and of showing greater care and a cooperative attitude. The reversed proportions of the use of the above linguistic devices might also be interpreted in terms of the aforementioned linguistic accommodation attested in mixed-sex groups, whereby both genders show more awareness of each other's speaking styles and are more willing to imitate the communicative style of the other sex for the sake of a smooth and more fulfilling discussion.

What emerges from this brief analysis, then, is a confirmation of both the traditional

and the more modern approaches to the question of genderlects. The findings made here especially with regard to the conventional form of the messages (as a rule more subconsciously selected) do corroborate the traditional view that men and women on the whole have different preferences as for communicating their attitude towards their addressees – men achieving this through a more relaxed, solidarity-oriented style, and women via more conventional, polite and affective approach towards their interlocutors and their overall supportive attitude. On the other hand, as the analysis of the content, the more consciously monitored feature of written communication, demonstrated, it is rather obvious that within these two groups of correspondents various shadings of communicative styles can be discerned (as e.g. in the case of the *I*-suggestions prevailing in the case of women). One therefore must be cautious not to make sweeping statements about the two gender groups and take into consideration both the context and the means of communication as well as the existence of multiple masculinities and femininities.

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### **Տղամարդու և կնոջ կողմից կիրառվող ռազմավարության առանձնահատկությունները էլեկտրոնային փոստով հաղորդակցվելիս**

Հոդվածում քննության են առնվում տղամարդու և կնոջ կողմից դրսևորված հաղորդակցական ռազմավարության միտումները, որոնց տարբերությունները ուսումնասիրվում են հաղորդագրությունը սկսելու, ավարտելու, ինչպես նաև դրական և բացասական զգացմունքներ արտահայտելու յուրօրինակ ձևերի վերլուծության հիման վրա: Կարևոր տարբերակում է գովեստի,

քննադատության և առաջարկության խոսքային ակտերի օգտագործումը տղամարդկանց և կանանց կողմից: Ուսումնասիրված նյութը ցույց է տալիս, որ էլեկտրոնային փոստով հաղորդակցվելիս կանայք ավելի հաճախ են գովում, քննադատում և առաջարկություն անում իրենց գրուցակցին, քան տղամարդիկ: Միննույն ժամանակ, կանայք և տղամարդիկ ունեն տարբեր նախապատվություններ հասցեատիրոջ նկատմամբ իրենց վերաբերմունքը արտահայտելու համար: Այսպես, տղամարդիկ ավելի չեզոք ոճով են հաղորդակցվում, նախընտրելով գրուցակիցների նկատմամբ արտահայտել սոսկ համերաշխության վերաբերմունք, մինչդեռ կանայք դիմում են ավելի քաղաքավարի և զգացմունքային ձևերի: