Gender-determined language differences between men and women

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Abstract

The main goal of this thesis is to explore the relationship between gender and language and to identify possible gender-determined differences between men and women. The thesis is separated into two parts, the theoretical part and the practical part. The theoretical part lists existing theories and previous research made in the field of gender and language. Also, it provides definitions and explanations for the key terms used in the rest of the thesis. The second part consists of the conducted research for this thesis. Data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to a group of male and female university students. To examine several elements of communication styles, including comfort level with direct communication, use of hedges, tag questions, polite speech forms, frequency of swearing, and perceptions of how gender influences communication style, the questionnaire comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The results showed that there are several language differences between men and women and that gender roles impact the participants' communication styles. Consistent with traditional stereotypes of masculine communication, male participants were more likely to report using direct and assertive language, including humor and swearing. On the other hand, female participants frequently reported speaking more politely and shared worries about being perceived as negative when expressing opinions.

Keywords: gender, language, gender-determined, differences

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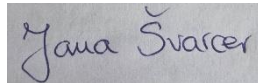Rijeka, rujan 2024.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. SEX AND GENDER

Although sex and gender are commonly thought to be interchangeable, it is important to highlight the main differences between them. According to the World Health Organization, gender describes the socially constructed characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys. This includes the norms, behaviors, and roles that come with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as their relationships. Gender is a social construct that varies by society and can change over time. Gender interacts with but differs from sex, which refers to the biological and physiological differences between males, females, and intersex individuals, such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive organs. Gender and sex are related, but they differ from gender identity. Gender identity is a person's deeply felt, internal, and unique experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's physiology or designated sex at birth (*Gender and Health*, n.d.).

1.2 LANGUAGE AND GENDER

The difference between men's and women's usage of language was always interesting to humans. People's interest and deep-rooted beliefs about women's and men's speech are reflected in proverbs, folktales, and literature. Jennifer Coates lists some of the proverbs:

"A woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail." (England)

"Foxes are all tail and women are all tongue." (England – Cheshire)

"Où femme y a, silence n'y a (where there's a woman, there's no silence)". (France)

"The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for a

word". (Jutland)[1]

Jane Sunderland lists a few more:

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[1] (Coates, 2013, p. 9)

"Three women make a market" (Sudan).

 "Three women together make a theatrical performance" (China).

 "Women are nine times more talkative than men" (Hebrew).[2]

Stereotypes about women's language can also be found in literature. Sunderland lists a few examples:

"Silence gives the proper grace to women" (Sophocles).

"She has brown hair, and speaks small like a woman" (Shakespeare)

"Her voice was ever soft,/Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman" (Shakespeare)

"'As men/Do walk a mile, women should talk an hour/After supper. 'Tis their

 exercise" (Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher)[3]

Language is an integral part of human life. Language enables us to express our feelings, thoughts, demands, wishes, and opinions. We use language every day, in every possible situation. Through language, we express our control over others, our affiliation with various social groups, the social roles we accept, and the values we uphold (Holmes, 1997). Although it is hard to define such an abstract and broad notion as language, there are numerous definitions. Crystal and Robins, Britannica writers, define language as "a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols using which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves." (Crystal & Robins, 2024). In addition, the Cambridge Dictionary defines language as "a system of communication consisting of sounds, words, and grammar." (LANGUAGE | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

It is noticeable that different people use language differently. People from different countries speak different languages that consist of completely different words, grammar, and sometimes even letters. People from different parts of the same country often speak different dialects, like in Croatia, where people from the northern part of the country speak "kajkavski", people from the coastal area use "čakavski", and the third dialect present in Croatia, "štokavski", serves as a basis for the standard Croatian language. That is not everything, these dialects are further divided into different types depending on the geographical location of the speakers. Also, when

[2] (Sunderland, 2006, p. 2)
[3] (Sunderland, 2006, p. 3)

it comes to social class, according to Ivić and Crystal, dialectal differences in a language are often associated with social class, education, or both in many communities. Higher-educated speakers and members of upper social classes tend to use more elements of the standard language, while lower and less educated speakers tend to retain more of the original regional dialect in their speech (Ivić & Crystal, 2024).

If extra linguistic elements like social class, education, and geographical location affect language use, the question arises; what else is affecting the way we speak and use language? This thesis will explore the impact of gender, one of the most fundamental features of a human being, on Croatian speakers' language use. The purpose of this study is to question whether there are gender-determined language differences between men and women. Moreover, the purpose of this study is to identify gender-determined language differences and their occurrence in everyday speech. By conducting empirical research with the students of the University of Rijeka, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how everyday language use of men and women is influenced by gender.

Historically, the connection between language and gender started to gain interest in the 1900s when linguists like Otto Jaspersen and Robin Lakoff examined language differences between men and women and identified several elements that marked woman's and man's language. In 1992, a bestseller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* written by John Gray was released. Gray used the book's title as a metaphor to illustrate the idea that due to psychological differences between the two sexes, men and women are from different planets, that is, men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Gray says that these psychological differences are the main cause of most relationship and communication issues between the sexes. Gray's work encouraged the common belief that men and women express themselves and understand each other in fundamentally different ways.

Later, many researchers from different areas of social sciences like psychologists and sociologists dealt with this topic and wrote about it. Three main theories that emerged from previous research on gender and language are *deficit theory*, *difference theory,* and *dominance theory*.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This chapter explores three main theories that emerged from previous research on gender and language: *deficit theory, difference theory, and dominance theory*.

2.1. DEFICIT THEORY: ROBIN LAKOFF, OTTO JESPERSEN

According to deficit theory, women's language is inferior to men's language. Hence, it is believed that women imitate most of the language used by men, but men are crucial to the creation of language. Consequently, women utilize language by mimicking the language of men and by expressing language that is not as flawless as that of men. These types of theories were backed by the research of Danish grammarian Jespersen and French scholar De Beauvoir.

Otto Jespersen published the first modern linguistics piece on "women's language" in 1922. In his book *Language: Its Nature and Development*, he devotes an entire chapter, "The Woman," to describing differences in women's and men's speech and voice pitch. He describes women's vocabulary as limited, keeping them in what he calls the central language field. He claims that the periphery of language and the creation of new words are exclusive to men's speech. According to Jespersen, these differences stem from the early division of labour between the sexes (Githens, 1991). Jespersen claims that women typically have a far smaller vocabulary than men do. While men frequently either invent new words or expressions or adopt outdated ones, women prefer to move in the center of the language, avoiding anything unusual or out of the way. Women typically travel the main path of language, but men are more likely to veer off onto a smaller path or even forge their route (Jespersen, n.d., p. 248). Jespersen claims that women in all cultures swear less than men do, speak more, more passionately by using intensifiers like "so" and "quite", and with more unfinished sentences.

Robin Lakoff had a slightly different approach because she maintained that women's marginalization in social interactions led to the gender inequality that emerged when they expressed themselves linguistically (Rahmi, 2015). Robin Lakoff is an American linguist, well-known for her groundbreaking work in sociolinguistics and the study of gender and language. She contributed to the understanding of how language reflects and upholds social norms, especially those about gender. *Language and Woman's Place*, written by Lakoff and published in 1973, is now well known for its claims regarding gender differences in language and how they relate to gender inequality. According to Lakoff, women have a unique speech pattern

known as "women's language," which consists of linguistic elements that highlight and perpetuate women's subordinate status in society. Lakoff argues that women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them (Svendsen, 2019). Both ways tend to reduce women to certain subservient roles, such as that of sex objects or servants. As a result, when certain lexical items are applied to men, they have one meaning, while when applied to women, they have a different meaning that can only be explained by the various roles that men and women play in society (Lakoff, 1973). By analyzing her own and her friends' speech, Lakoff identified specific linguistic traits that together make up a language style she refers to as "women's language," since it predominates in the speech of most women.

Some of these features are:

a) Hedges: hedges are used to soften what we say or write, and they are an important part of polite discourse. Hedging commonly takes the form of vague language (sort of and kind of), modal expressions (modal verbs and adverbs), tense and aspect, and certain verbs (*Hedges (Just) - Cambridge Grammar*, 2024).

b) Empty adjectives: adjectives that have meanings that convey the speaker's appreciation or approval of something are referred to as empty adjectives; this implies that their use is limited to emotional responses to specific information. Some examples are cute and divine. (Lakoff, 1973).

c) Intensifiers: adverbs or adverbial phrases that strengthen the meaning of other expressions. Terms like absolutely, completely, extremely, highly, rather, really, so, too, totally, utterly, very, and at all are frequently used as intensifiers (*Intensifiers (Very, at All) - Cambridge Grammar*, n.d.)

d) Tag questions: questions, such as "isn't it" in "It's fine, isn't it?", added to a statement or command to gain the assent of or challenge the person addressed (*Definition of TAG QUESTION*, n.d.).

e) Hypercorrection: stricter adherence to grammar rules than men

f) Special lexicon: women use more words for things like colors, men for sports, etc.

g) (Super)polite forms: "Would you mind...," "I'd appreciate it if...," "...if you don't mind."

They are all problematic because they limit a woman's ability to express herself strongly and so support the oppression of her identity (Lakoff, 1973). One characteristic of language used by women is the use of tag questions, which are employed by women at a higher rate than by men. Tag questions, according to Lakoff, are " midway between an outright statement and a

yes-no question: it is less assertive than the former, but more confident than the latter" (Lakoff, 1973). As a result, tags can be used "when the speaker is stating a claim but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim" (Lakoff, 1973). When the speaker is unsure of something that the addressee is probably more acquainted with, Lakoff recognizes tag-use as "legitimate" (Lakoff, 1973). Additionally, she recognizes that using tags in casual conversation is acceptable because it is acceptable to ask a question that you already know the answer to if it serves to maintain the conversation, such as "Sure is hot in here, isn't it?". But there are other situations in which the use of tags is not justified; these are the situations "where corroboration is sought for the speaker's opinions, rather than perceptions," as demonstrated by the statement "The way prices are rising is horrifying, isn't it?"(Lakoff, 1973). Lakoff states that using tag questions like this makes the speaker seem insecure in her statements and like she seeks approval for her statements. Therefore, Lakoff views tag questions as strategies to lessen the impact of an assertion, making the speaker appear insecure, when used in situations where they cannot be justified (Lakoff, 1973). Lakoff distinguished between two categories of women's language features: lexicon and syntax. Exact color terms, trivialized expletives, and empty adjectives are the lexical features and super politeness, and tag questions are the syntactic features.

2.2. DIFFERENCE THEORY: DEBORAH TANNEN

"Male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication." This statement is a fundamental idea of Deborah Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand*, which aims to explain why men and women frequently talk over one another. Deborah Tannen is a Georgetown University linguistics professor whose area of expertise is conversational style. She provides a microanalysis of six friends conversing over a two-and-a-half-hour Thanksgiving dinner in her first book on conversational style. Tannen uses a passage from *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster to introduce this sociolinguistic study: "A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry." The book by Forster shows how individuals from various cultures can seriously misinterpret one another's intentions. Tannen believes that similar misunderstandings between men and women happen frequently. These misunderstandings can be even more harmful because the people involved often don't realize they are experiencing a cross-cultural interaction. When we travel to a different country, we expect communication challenges but in conversations between men and women, failing to

recognize the differences in communication styles can lead to significant problems according to Tannen (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 384).

She states that adult men and women are speaking "different words from different worlds," and that even when they are using the same words they are "tuned to different frequencies." Tannen's cross-cultural perspective on gender differences diverges from most of the feminist literature, which holds that male dominance over women is reflected in conversations between men and women. She is using the notion of *genderlect* and claims that men and women speak different *genderlects*. *Genderlect* is a term that implies that it is best to think of masculine and feminine discourse styles as two separate cultural dialects (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 385.).

According to Tannen, men are primarily concerned with *status*, whereas women are more interested in establishing *connections* with other people. Men are striving to maintain their independence as much as women are concentrating on developing a sense of connectedness. Women's need for intimacy puts men's need for independence and freedom in jeopardy and diverts the male tendency to always be the better half in relationships (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 385.).

In 1979, a study that was published in the prestigious journal "Psychological Bulletin" provided empirical support for Tannen's claims. Adelaide Haas, who is now retired from the State University of New York at New Paltz's communication department, discovered that women are typically more supportive, courteous, and expressive, while men tend to use more directive speech. Additionally, she stated that women tend to talk more about home and family, while men talk about sports, money, and business. This empirical study is important for Tannen's work and future linguistic research about gender differences because it provides proof that men and women are different in at least two areas of language and communication: the way of talking and favored topics of conversation (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 385.).

> "Girls and women feel it is crucial that they be liked by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on symmetrical connection. Boys and men feel it is crucial that they be respected by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on asymmetrical status."[4]

Although Tannen acknowledges that many men and women would prefer to be independent and intimate in every circumstance, she doesn't believe this is achievable. Consequentially, men

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[4] (Tannen, 1990, p. 108.)

and women often have different perspectives on the same situation because of these disparities in priorities. Tannen's conclusions are derived from her observations of everyday communication made by men and women to determine the crucial characteristic traits of speech. She provides multiple instances of the different communication styles she sees in daily interactions, and she is confident that the connection-status division undermines all verbal interactions between men and women due to these linguistic differences. According to Julia Wood, an emeritus professor of communication at the University of North Carolina and co-author of the standpoint theory[5], Tannen's observations are valid, and connection-status division is visible even in childhood (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 386.)

In her book "Gendered Lives", Wood highlights the distinct rules that boys and girls acquire as they grow up based on her research with children. Comprehending these rules provides an understanding of some of the fundamental distinctions Tannen posits define the genderlect styles, which are the source of miscommunication between men and women.

Boys learn to:

1. Communicate to assert your ideas, opinions, and identity.
2. Use talk to solve problems or develop a strategy.
3. Speak in a way that attracts attention to yourself.

In contrast to these rules, girls learn to:

1. Use communication to create and maintain relationships.
2. Involve others in conversations and respond to their ideas.
3. Show sensitivity to others and relationships.

These speech forms show that women value rapport talk, while men value report talk. Report talk is defined as the typical monologic style of men, which seeks to command attention, convey information, and win arguments. Rapport talk is the typical conversational style of women, which seeks to establish a connection with others (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 386.).

Tannen observes that men tell more stories than women do, especially jokes, which is consistent with men's emphasis on status. Making jokes is a manly strategy for negotiating status and their

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[5] Standpoint theorists argue that our perception of the world is influenced by our social location. Our social location is influenced by our demographic characteristics, including sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and economic status (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 396.)

comedic tales have a captivating quality that makes the listener pay attention and puts the storyteller above the audience. When men aren't attempting to be humorous, they tell tales of themselves as heroes, frequently taking on major challenges by themselves. Women, on the other hand, often use stories about other people to convey their need for community. When a woman does appear as a character in her own story, it is usually in the context of doing something silly rather than acting cleverly to downplay herself on the same level as her listeners and so bolstering her network of support. Same as Lakoff, Tannen observes that women frequently follow up their statements with tag questions, such as, "That was a good movie, don't you think?" Tag questions lessen the hurt of possible disagreements that could cause people to drift apart. They also serve as invitations to take part in amiable, candid discussions. But they give the speaker a vague, ambiguous appearance to men (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 387.).

After observing notable disparities in the conversational patterns of boys and girls in the second grade, Tannen concluded that genderlect speech had its roots in early childhood. Many linguists and communication scholars think that girls and boys interact differently already at the age of seven and that these differences persist into adulthood. Moreover, they speak of *speech communities*, which are divided into groups that boys and girls belong to. According to Julia Wood a *speech community* is a community of people who share understandings about the goals of communication, strategies for enacting those goals, and ways of interpreting communication (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 390.). But the question remains, how do speech communities emerge and why?

According to Louise Cherry Wilkinson, a professor of education, psychology, and communication sciences at Syracuse University, separate speech communities begin with conversations between young boys and girls and their mothers. She came to this conclusion after observing interactions between mothers and children during free-play sessions. She invited mothers with a 2-year-old daughter or son to participate but did not determine specific topics for discussion. Wilkinson collaborated with Michael Lewis to transcribe interactions and train coders to analyse language. Wilkinson and Lewis found that mothers of girls were more likely to talk, ask questions, use longer sentences, and acknowledge their daughters' comments compared to mothers of boys. Mothers of boys were more likely to give directives than mothers of girls. Wilkinson and Lewis suggested that gender differences may shape early expectations of appropriate conversation styles (Cherry & Lewis, 1976).

Tannen's findings indicate that the differences in adult male and female speech stem from early childhood socialization.

2.3. DOMINANCE THEORY: ZIMMERMAN & WEST, HOLMES, O'BARR AND ATKINS

According to dominance theory, there was an imbalance of power between men and women, which led to differences in language expression between the sexes. Due to their greater influence in politics and social life, men dominated the language. Because of their power, men are eligible to control many things including language use (Rahmi, 2015).

Many gendered language theories were based on the idea that women's language reflected their inferior power position. These were eventually grouped under the umbrella term "Dominance Approach". This approach holds that, when compared to men, women's speech in conversations is more interspersed with back-channeling signals and less opposition to interruption, whereas men's speech behaviors show a tendency to hold the power center, with more interruptions and challenges (Mohammed, 2022).

According to Zimmerman and West's (1975) research, speech situations reflect power dynamics within society. The study is based on a small sample of conversations recorded by Don Zimmerman and Candace West at the University of California's Santa Barbara campus in 1975. The recording included white, middle-class individuals under the age of 35. Zimmerman and West provide evidence from 31 conversational segments. In 11 conversations between men and women, men interrupted 46 times while women interrupted only two. Zimmerman and West's small sample suggests that men's frequent interruptions indicate dominance or an attempt to dominate.

Sociolinguist Janet Holmes has significantly advanced the field of gender and language studies. Her research focuses on how language in diverse social contexts reflects, upholds, and subverts gender norms and identities. Holmes has done a great deal of research on the differences in politeness strategies used by men and women. She discovered that to preserve social harmony, women are more likely to employ positive politeness techniques (e.g., demonstrating concern for others, seeking agreement) and to lessen rules. Conversely, men are more likely to use language in ways that uphold social distance and assert power. Holmes concluded that "women are more polite than men." Even though this conclusion may be viewed as a broad

generalization, Holmes' statement was crucial because it generated a great deal of sociolinguist discussion. She contends that these variations have their roots in the power dynamics of gender relations (Vizcaino, 2002).

In an article titled "'Women's Language' or 'Powerless Language'?" William O'Barr and Bowman Atkins described the findings from their 1980 courtroom study. They investigated "language variation in a specific institutional context -- the American trial courtroom," and this article focused on "sex-related differences" (O'Barr & Atkins, n.d.). During the witness examination process, they studied how-to books written by successful trial lawyers and law professors, which included special sections on how to deal with female witnesses. O'Barr and Atkins spent 30 months studying courtroom cases and observing a wide range of witnesses. They questioned the witnesses about Robin Lakoff's ten basic speech differences between men and women.

O'Barr and Atkins discovered that the differences advocated by Lakoff and others are often the result of powerlessness rather than gender. They used three men and three women to demonstrate their point. The first man and woman spoke with a lot of "women's language" components. The woman was a 68-year-old housewife, while the man drove an ambulance. In comparison to woman and man #3, a doctor and a police officer, who both testified as expert witnesses, they demonstrate that the first pair of witnesses have less power in their jobs and lives (Githens, 1991).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. AIM OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to examine the impact of gender on language usage and communication styles of the students of the University of Rijeka. Moreover, the present study aims to identify specific gender determined language differences between 32 male and female students of the University of Rijeka.

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1 How does gender affect the language usage and communication style of male and female students of the University of Rijeka?

2 How do gender-specific language patterns manifest in the everyday communication of male and female students of the University of Rijeka?

3.2. HYPOTHESES

I predict that the case study will show that there are gender-determined language differences between men and women. Women use more hedges, tag questions, and polite speech forms while men use more directive speech forms and swear more. The research will show that male and female speakers differ in the way they speak and the topics about they most commonly talk about.

3.3. PARTICIPANTS

The target population of the research is made up of students of the University of Rijeka to collect as many as possible answers. The online questionnaire intended to capture as many participants as possible, which depended on their interest and response to the invitation to participate in the research. The research was conducted with 32 students at the University of Rijeka. 37,5% of the participants were male and 62,5% of the participants were female. 62,5% of the participants were aged from 22 to 25 and 37,5% were aged from 18 to 21 years. 69% of the participants are students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, while the other 31% of participants are students from different faculties of the University of Rijeka. 9% of the participants are students of computer science, 3% are students of biotechnology, 3% are students of medicine and 3% are students of teacher education.

Graph 1. Gender of the participants
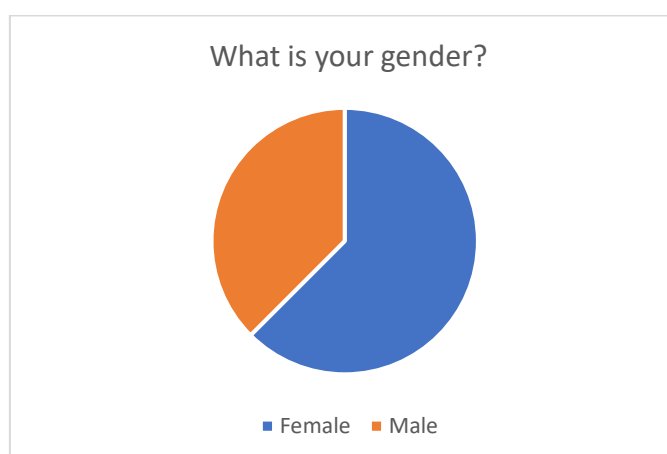
3.4. RESEARCH METHOD

I chose a questionnaire as a research method. Google Forms was the platform used to conduct the online questionnaire. This allowed participants to easily access the questionnaire through a link and complete it without having to worry about running out of time. The research was conducted using a questionnaire in the Croatian language, given that Croatian is the mother tongue of the target population, so I wanted to capture the most immediate and intuitive answers. The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions, and it was mainly composed of Lickert scale questions, five open-ended questions, and three closed-ended questions. The first five questions were asked to gather demographical data. 11 questions were formed on the Likert scale from 1 to 5. There were five open-ended questions aimed at eliciting insights into the differences in communication styles between men and women. The questionnaire examined the difference between male and female students' usage of hedges, tag questions, hypercorrection, swear words, direct speech acts, and polite speech forms. The difference between male and female students in using hedges, swear words, tag questions, and polite forms was questioned using a Lickert scale graded from 1-5. 1 stood for "Never", 2 for "Rarely", 3 for "Sometimes", 4 for "Often", and 5 for "Always". Also, hypercorrection was measured using the Likert scale from 1-5, but 1 stood for "Not at all important", 2 for "Slightly important", 3 for "Moderately important", 4 for "Very important", and 5 for "Extremely important". The usage of direct speech acts was questioned also using the Lickert scale from 1-5, but 1 stood for "Very uncomfortable", 2 for "Uncomfortable", 3 for "Neutral", 4 for "Comfortable" and 5 for "Very Comfortable". Almost all of the mentioned features are part of "women's language" according to Robin Lakoff so the questions were based on Lakoff's claims. In addition, Deborah Tannen's and Adelaide Haas' work serves as the basis for the question formation of this questionnaire. I questioned Haas' claim she made in the prestigious journal "Psychological Bulletin" stating that men use more directive speech acts while women use more indirect speech acts. Tannen claimed that men tell more jokes which is consistent with men's emphasis on status, so I also questioned the participants about the frequency of humor using in everyday speech. Finally, based on Tannen's work I questioned favorite topics of conversations of men and women. The research was conducted in July 2024. I distributed the questionnaire in the form of a link in a group chat and by sharing it via social networks. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Unfortunately, only 32 people filled out the questionnaire which can be because the period of the research overlapped with final exams so the students were possibly preoccupied with their obligations.

3.5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This subchapter presents the analysis of the data collected during this research. The primary goal is to examine the findings concerning the research questions mentioned in 3.1.:

1 How does gender affect the language usage and communication style of male and female students of the University of Rijeka?

2 How do gender-specific language patterns manifest in the everyday communication of male and female students of the University of Rijeka?

As explained in 3.4., data was gathered using a questionnaire. The results of this research study will be presented in pie charts and tables.

Graphs 2 and 3 below show the results for the sixth question: *How comfortable are you with direct communication; clearly stating your opinions or thoughts?* The question was formed on the Lickert scale (1-5) where 1 stood for "Very uncomfortable", 2 for "Uncomfortable", 3 for "Neutral", 4 for "Comfortable" and 5 for "Very comfortable". Graph 2 presents male responses and Graph 3 presents female responses. Graph 2 shows that the majority of male participants, 7 out of 12 (58%) feel "Very Comfortable" with direct communication, stating their opinions or thoughts directly while zero male participants feel "Very Uncomfortable" and "Uncomfortable" with direct communication. 3 (25%) participants feel comfortable and 2 (17%) feel neutral. Female responses presented by the chart in Graph 3 show that 7 (35%) of the female participants feel "Very Comfortable" with direct communication, 5 (25%) feel "Comfortable", 6 (30%) feel "Neutral" and 2 (10%) feel uncomfortable.

Graph 2. Comfort level with direct communication (male responses)
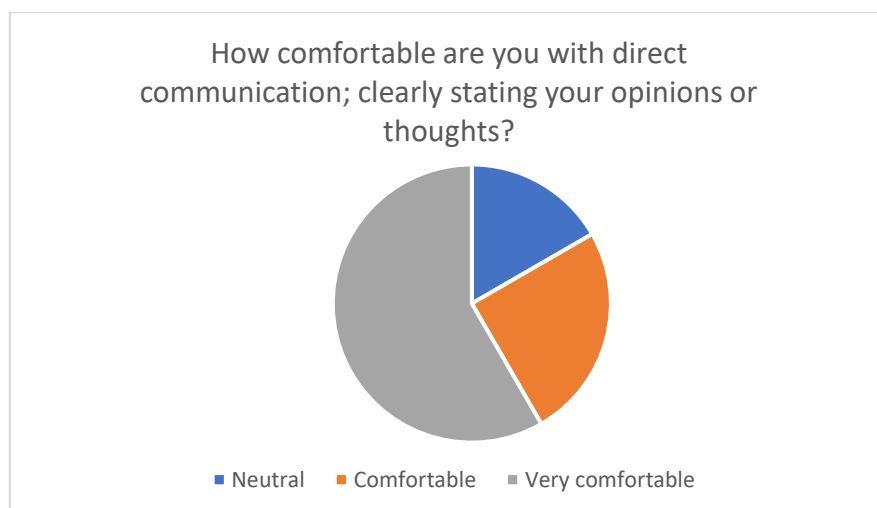
Graph 3. Comfort level with direct communication (female responses)

How comfortable are you with direct communication; clearly stating your opinions or thoughts?

■ Uncomfortable ■ Neutral ■ Comfortable ■ Very comfortable
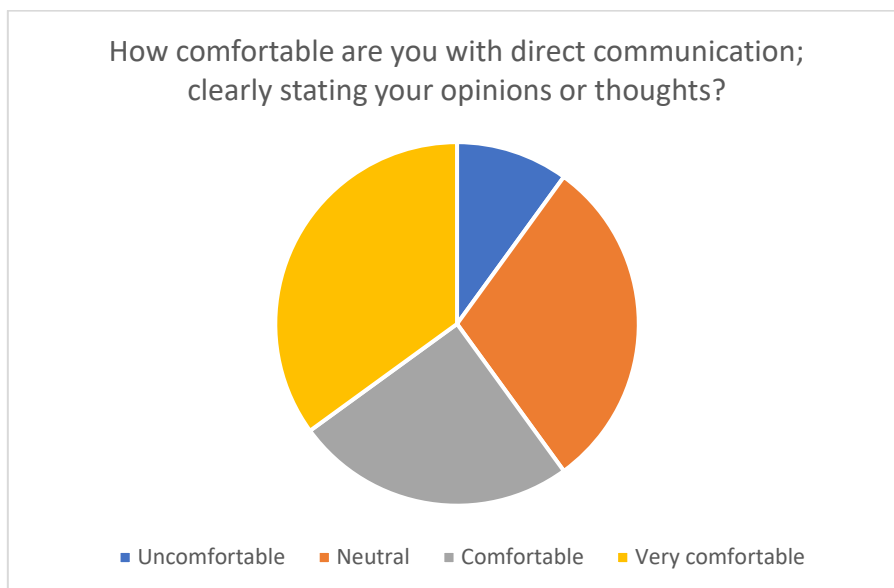
Based on the information contained in graphs 2 and 3 related to comfort levels in direct conversation, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference when it comes to male and female participants' attitudes towards direct communication. 58% of the male participants are "Very comfortable" whereas 35% of the female participants feel the same. It appears that male participants tend to have a greater tendency to state their opinions or thinking clearly and straightforwardly. However, the answers are distributed more widely among women. Nevertheless, though 35% say they feel "Very Comfortable" in this communication style, a considerable percentage of the respondents say that they feel "Neutral" (30%) or just "Comfortable" (25%). In addition, distributional patterns of this kind suggest that in this particular sample, while women are required to communicate directly, their confidence levels in doing so may differ widely. Even though in this sample both men and women appear comfortable with direct communication, men display a higher level of comfort in the exchange of direct communication than women who demonstrate a range of comfort levels with some feeling uncomfortable.

Graphs 4 and 5 below show the results for the 7th question of the questionnaire: *How often do you use hedges? (for example: kind of, maybe, sort of) when expressing your opinions?* The question was formed on the Lickert scale (1-5) where 1 stood for "Never", 2 for "Rarely", 3 for "Sometimes", 4 for "Often" and 5 for "Always". Male responses are presented by Graph 4 and female responses are presented by Graph 5. The chart in Figure 4 shows that 5 (42%) of male

participants use hedges "Rarely", 6 (50%) use hedges "Sometimes" and 1 (8%) use hedges "Always". Female responses represented by the chart in Graph 5 show that 2 (10%) of female participants use hedges "Rarely", 5 (25%) use hedges "Sometimes", 7 (35%) use hedges "Often" and 5 (25%) use hedges "Always".

Graph 4. The frequency of using hedges (male responses)
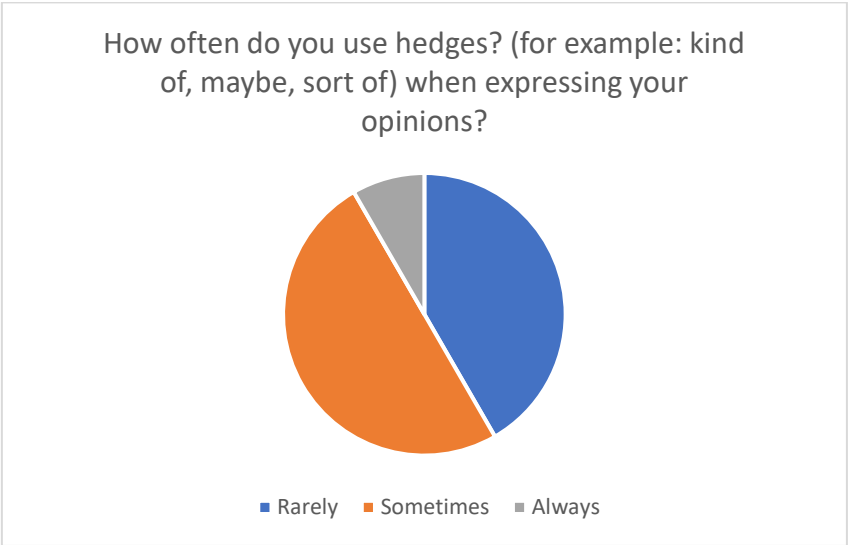
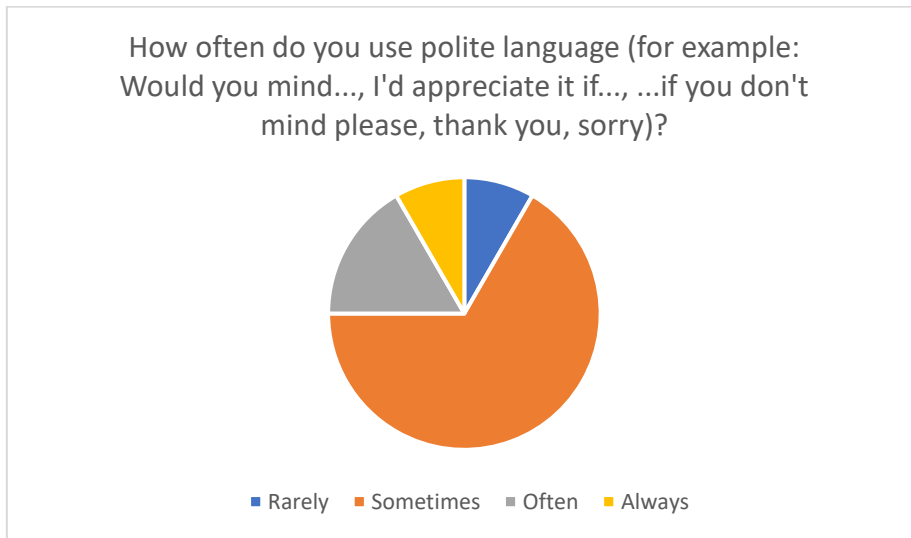**Graph 5.** The frequency of using hedges (female responses)
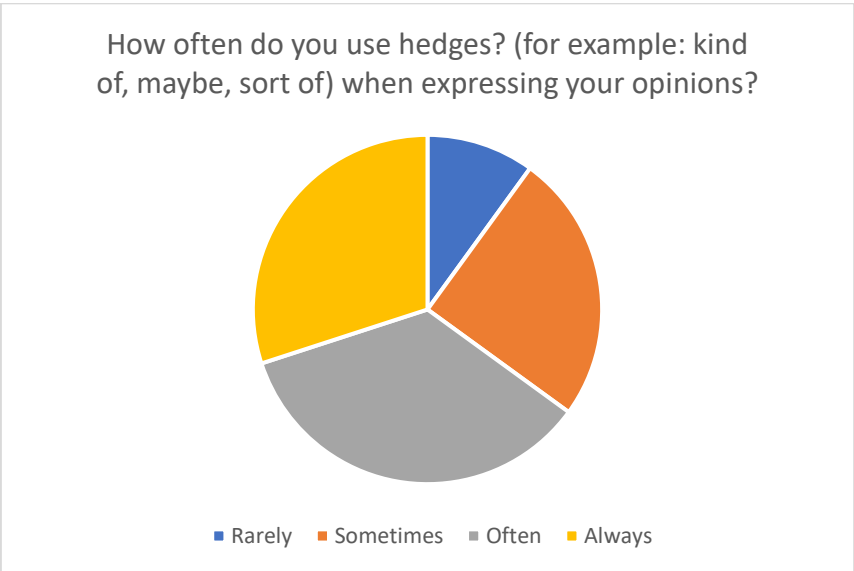
The data clearly shows that when compared to male participants, female participants show a higher tendency to use hedges. The data also indicates that a considerable percentage of women
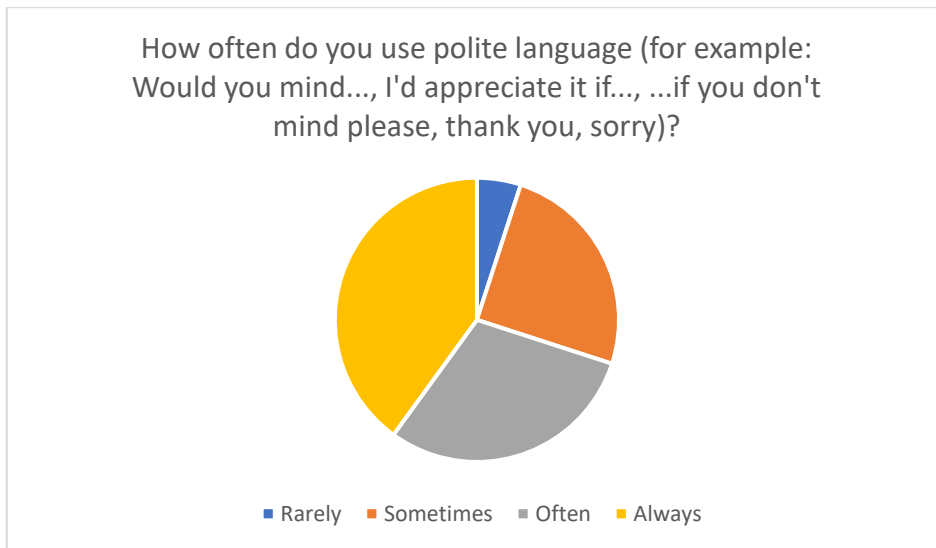
use hedges "Always" (25%) or "Often" (35%) in their everyday speech patterns, suggesting that hedges are a more common feature of female speech. Most of the male participants use hedges "Sometimes" (50%) or "Rarely" (42%). Also, only 8% of men said that they use hedges "Always", indicating that men use hedges less frequently in their speech. The results are in line with Robin Lakoff's theory and claims she made in "*Language and Woman's Place*," which lists hedges as a feature of "women's language". Lakoff's idea that women may employ these linguistic devices more frequently to soften their speech is supported by the higher frequency of hedge usage among female participants in this research study. Women's tendency to use hedges more was also supported by the research made by Newman et al. who tried to identify gender differences in language use by analyzing 14000 text samples (Newman et al., 2008).

The questionnaire also examined the differences in frequency in using polite speech forms with the 8th question: *How often do you use polite language (for example: Would you mind..., I'd appreciate it if..., ...if you don't mind please, thank you, sorry)?* The question was formed on the Lickert scale (1-5) where 1 stood for "Never", 2 for "Rarely", 3 for "Sometimes", 4 for "Often" and 5 for "Always". Graphs 6 and 7 below will show female and male responses presented in pie charts. Male responses are presented in Graph 6 and female responses are presented in Graph 7. The pie chart in Graph 6 shows that 1 (8%) male participant said that he uses the polite language "Rarely", 8 (67%) said that they use polite language "Sometimes", 2 (17%) marked "Sometimes" as their response and only 1 (8%) told that they use polite language "Always". In contrast, only 1 (5%) of female participants told that they use polite language "Rarely", 5 (25%) marked "Sometimes" for their response, 6 (30%) marked "Often" and 8 (40%) marked "Always" for their response.

Graph 6. The frequency of using polite speech forms (male responses)

How often do you use polite language (for example: Would you mind..., I'd appreciate it if..., ...if you don't mind please, thank you, sorry)?

■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ Always

Graph 7. The frequency of using polite speech forms (female responses)

How often do you use polite language (for example: Would you mind..., I'd appreciate it if..., ...if you don't mind please, thank you, sorry)?
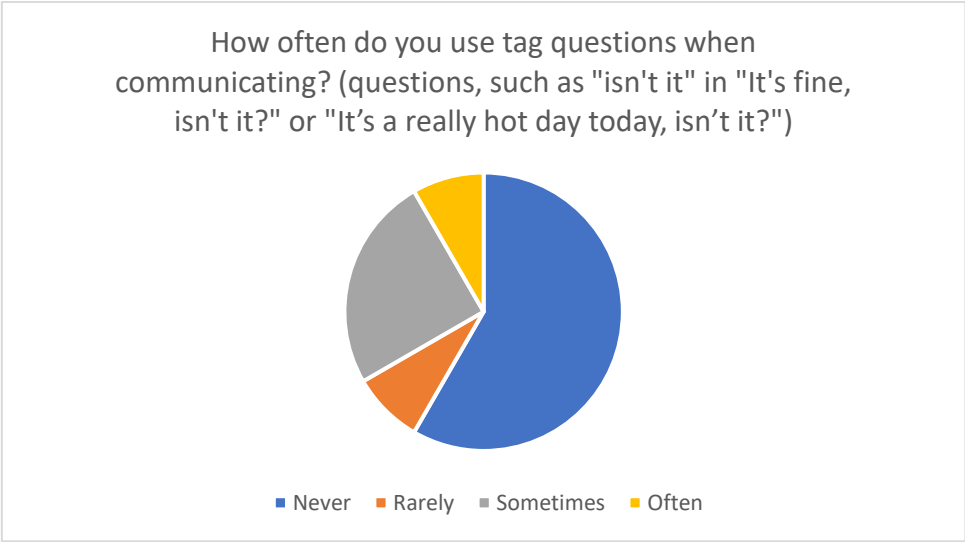
■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ Always

According to the data, women are more likely than men to use polite speech forms. Female participants report that they "Always" or "Often" use polite speech forms in higher percentages, indicating a general trend toward more polite communication. Male participants reported that they use polite speech "Sometimes," in higher percentages which in combination with a low percentage of male participants who marked that they "Always" use polite speech can indicate that men give less importance to choosing polite speech forms than women. The results are in line with previous claims made by Lakoff and Holmes. Lakoff claimed that
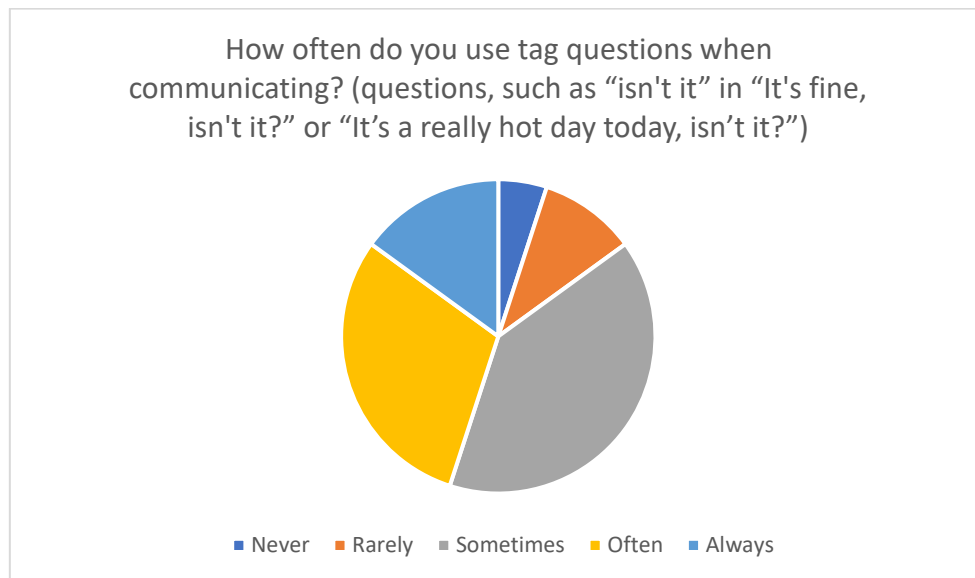
women tend to use more (super)polite speech forms while Holmes claimed that women are generally more polite when communicating than men.

The next feature of speech that will be looked at closely is tag questions. The 9th question of the questionnaire questioned the frequency of using tag questions: *How often do you use tag questions when communicating? (questions, such as "isn't it" in "It's fine, isn't it?" or "It's a really hot day today, isn't it?").* The question was formed on the Lickert scale (1-5) where 1 stood for "Never", 2 for "Rarely", 3 for "Sometimes", 4 for "Often" and 5 for "Always". Graphs 8 and 9 below will show female and male responses presented in pie charts. Male responses are presented in Graph 8 and female responses are presented in Graph 9. The chart in Figure 8 shows that 9 (58%) of male participants use tag questions "Never", 1 (8%) use tag questions "Rarely", 3 (25%) "Sometimes" and 1 (8%) uses tag questions "Often". On the other hand, regarding female responses, only 1 (6%) participant marked that she uses tag questions "Never", 2 (12%) use tag questions "Rarely", 8 (47%) "Sometimes", 6 (35%) "Often" and 3 (15%) use tag questions "Always".

**Graph 8**. The frequency of using tag questions (male responses)

Graph 9. The frequency of using tag questions (female responses)

How often do you use tag questions when communicating? (questions, such as "isn't it" in "It's fine, isn't it?" or "It's a really hot day today, isn't it?")

■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ Always

According to the data, male participants are more likely to use tag questions that female participants. Most female participants answered that they use tag questions "Sometimes" (47%) or "Often" (35%), and 15% reported that they use the tag questions "Always." This implies that tag questions are frequently used in women's communication. On the other hand, tag questions are rarely used by male participants. Only a small percentage of men said they use tag questions "Often" (8%) or "Sometimes" (25%), with the majority reporting that they "Never" (58%) use tag questions. This suggests that, at least in this sample, tag questions are not a typical feature of male speech. The results are in line with Robin Lakoff's claims about tag questions being one of the key features of "women's language".

The 12th question examined swearing differences between male and female participants: *How often do you use swear words?* The question was also formed on the Lickert scale (1-5) where 1 stood for "Never", 2 for "Rarely", 3 for "Sometimes", 4 for "Often" and 5 for "Always". The results are presented in Graph 10. Male responses are marked with blue colour and female responses are marked with orange colour. Graph 10 shows that 1 (0,05%) female participant uses swear words "Never", 6 (30%) use swear words "Sometimes", 5 (25%) use them "Rarely", 5 (25%) use them "Often" and 3 (15%) use swear words "Always". 1 (8%) of male participants "Never" use swear words, 4 (33%) use them "Often" and 7 (35%) "Always" use swear words.

Graph 10. Swearing differences between male and female participants
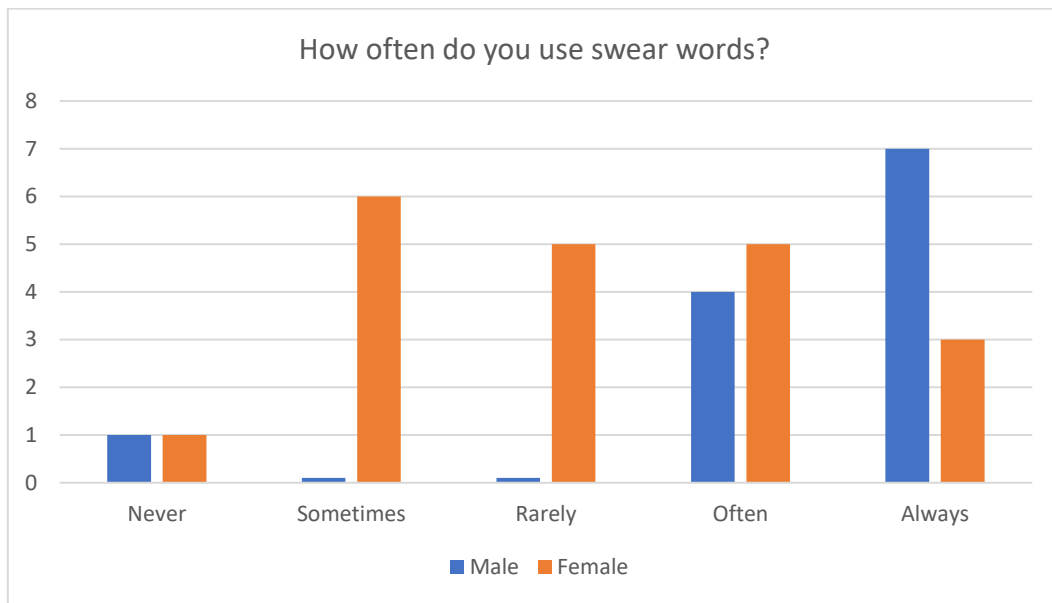
The data reveals that compared to female participants, male participants tend to use swear words more frequently. Male participants were significantly more likely to report using swear words "Always" (35%) or "Often" (33%). This shows that among the male participants in this sample, swearing is more typical in everyday speech. The distribution of swearing frequency among female participants is more varied. Although some females say they swear "Sometimes" (30%) or "Often" (25%), others say they swear "Rarely" (25%) or "Always" (15%). Only a tiny percentage of females (0.05%) say they "Never" use swear words. The results show that men are more likely than women to swear frequently, with a significant number using the swear words "Always" or "Often." In contrast, women demonstrate a wider range in the frequency of swearing; some use swearing frequently, while others do so infrequently or occasionally. These findings support the idea that swearing is more commonly present in the speech of men.

The 13th question of the questionnaire was an open-ended question whose goal was to determine whether there are differences in favorite conversation topics between men and women. 13th question: *What are your favorite conversation topics when you're hanging out with your girlfriends (for women) / friends (for men)?* Table 1 presents 10 female and male responses to the 13th question of the questionnaire that I considered the most interesting. If the two columns of the table are being compared it can be concluded that although there are noticeable differences in favored conversation topics, there are also topics that are favored by both men and women like jobs, college, and everyday life. These common topics imply that some aspects

of life, such as a career and education, are significant to everyone, regardless of gender. The most common topics among male participants are politics, sports, and college while among female participants most common topics are relationships, love, men, and college. According to the data, men and women typically choose different topics of conversation. Men typically choose more impersonal subjects like politics and sports, while women tend to focus more on personal subjects like relationships and interpersonal relations. The results are in line with previous research made by Adelaide Haas who claimed that women tend to talk more about home and family, while men talk about sports, money, and business.

Table 1: *Favourite conversation topics in same-sex company*

Male responses	Female responses
"Politics and sports"	"Relationships and everyday life"
"College and sports"	"Love, college, travel"
"Politics and world news"	"Make-up, clothes, jobs"
"Job, sports, politics"	"Relationships, love, mental health, life events"
"Sports, world news, music"	"Love life, college, interpersonal relations"
"College and world news"	"College, boys, life issues"
"Cars, girls, computer science"	"College, fashion, love troubles"
"Sports, college and job"	"Private life, books, movies"
"Sports, college, politics"	"Men, everyday life, job, family"
"Private life, hobbies, events in the world"	"College, other people, everyday life"

The 16th question examined the validity of Tannen's claims about men using more humor (jokes) in communication due to men's emphasis on status. She claims that making jokes is a manly strategy for negotiating status and making the listener pay attention. The question was formed on the Lickert scale (1-5) where 1 stood for "Never", 2 for "Rarely", 3 for "Sometimes", 4 for "Often" and 5 for "Always". Graphs 11 and 12 below will show male and female responses presented in pie charts. Male responses are presented in Graph 11 and female responses are presented in Graph 12. The data shows that 1 (8%) male participant uses humor "Rarely", 2 (17%) use humor "Often" and 9 (75%) use humor "Always". Regarding female participants, 5 (25%) use humor "Sometimes", 14 (70%) use humor "Often" and 1 (5%) uses humor "Always".

Graph 11. The frequency of using humor in conversations (male responses)

How often do you use humor in conversations?

■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ Always

Graph 12. The frequency of using humor in conversations (female responses)

How often do you use humor in conversations?

■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ Always

Notably, no participants, whether male or female, marked "Never" or "Rarely" as their response, suggesting that humor is a common feature in the communication styles of both men and women. Tannen's claims that men use humor to negotiate status are somewhat supported by the data. The majority of male participants said that they "Always" use humor which can be explained by Tannen's theory that humor is a male strategy for attracting attention and maintaining status. However, the data also contradicts this by showing that while 51% of female participants use humor "Often", only one respondent used humor "Rarely" and nearly another

quarter (22%) used it "Sometimes". This data proves that humor is also the quality of female communication.

The 19th question of the questionnaire was an open-ended question whose goal was to gather information about participant's perceptions of how their gender affects their communication styles. 19th question: *How do you think your gender influences your communication style?* Table 2 presents 5 female and male responses to the 19th question of the questionnaire that I considered the most interesting. When comparing male and female responses it can be noticed that men feel more encouraged to be direct, loud, and use swear words while women frequently feel pressured to be more polite, keep quiet, and less assertive. The responses show that both sexes are aware of gender-determined differences in communication styles. These impressions reflect societal expectations and conventional gender roles, which still have an impact on communication.

Table 2: *Participants' perceptions about the influence of their gender on communication styles*

Male responses	Female responses
"I think that I express my opinion more openly."	"I feel that people look down on me as if my opinion is not important in some way or as if I do not have enough knowledge in certain areas. People often silence me and it takes a long time for my opinion to be valid in a conversation.
"I don't think my gender influences my communication style."	"I think I soften my views or opinions more than men in direct communication so that I don't offend anyone or come off as rude. I have the impression that such a thing is expected of women because those who really express their opinions always have a negative image associated with them."
"A "rougher" way of talking (expressing opinions without consequences, swearing) and I use humor more than women"	"I do not express my opinions publicly. I communicate much more quietly and weakly with people of the opposite sex (men)."

"I think that I use harsher language than women and swear more."	"I think women know how to use communication techniques better than men."
"I think that I use swear words more than women and that I get into debates and conflicts more often when I disagree with someone about a certain topic."	"I think that I communicate more politely in relation to the opposite sex."

4. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to examine the impact of gender on language usage and communication style of the students of the University of Rijeka. Moreover, the present study aimed to identify gender-determined language differences among students at the University of Rijeka. The research focused on features of speech such as directive speech acts, the use of hedges, tag questions, polite speech forms, swear words, humor, favored topics of conversation, and perceptions of how gender influences communication. The results showed language differences that are mostly in line with previous research about gender and language and the hypothesis. The data showed that men generally use more direct language, including humor and swearing while women were more likely to use polite language, tag questions, and hedges. In addition, the responses to open-ended questions offered a more in-depth understanding of how participants perceived the influence of gender on communication. While women reported that they felt pressured to use polite speech forms and felt as not being able to express their opinions clearly and freely, men mostly felt empowered to speak freely and assertively.

However, the results of the research are not suitable for drawing any broad conclusions and generalizations on the population level due to the low response of the participants. Nevertheless, the results provide an insight into the students' communication styles and self-evaluations about gender differences in their everyday lives. The primary limitation of this study is the limited response rate of the intended audience on the completion survey, which left too few responses to allow for a more thorough examination. Because of this, it was impossible to generalize from the participants to the whole population. Performing the same analysis on a notably larger sample would yield results with higher reliability. Thus, future research must generate a more representative sample.

Furthermore, the questionnaire was primarily answered by women, which limits insight into the perspectives and opinions of men. This research questioned only students at the University of Rijeka, therefore future research could include a wider population, i.e. students from other important universities in Croatia like Zagreb, Split, Osijek, Zadar, Pula, and generally students that are enrolled in graduate study programs, not only undergraduate students. It would also be interesting to question students from different European universities and then compare the data collected in different countries. Research studies interested in gender differences between men and women should question as many people as possible, perhaps in one country or one

determined area, and include people to make it possible for researchers to draw conclusions and generalizations about this interesting topic.

LIST OF FIGURES

APPENDIX

Questionnaire:

1 What is your gender?

-Male

-Female

2 What is your age?

-18-21

-22-25

-26-30

3 What do you study?

4 What was your motivation to enrol in your study program?

5 What year are you currently enrolled in?

-First year

-Second year

-Third year

-Fourth year

-Fifth year

6 How comfortable are you with direct communication; clearly stating your opinions or thoughts

1 Very uncomfortable

2 Uncomfortable

3 Neutral

4 Comfortable

5 Very comfortable

7 How often do you use hedges? (for example: kind of, maybe, sort of) when expressing your opinions?

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Often

5   Always

8 How often do you use polite language (for example: Would you mind..., I'd appreciate it if..., ...if you don't mind please, thank you, sorry)?

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Often

5   Always

9 How often do you use tag questions when communicating? (questions, such as isn't it in it's fine, isn't it? or it's a really hot day today, isn't it?)

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Often

5   Always

10 How important to you is using standard language forms when communicating (everyday communication)?

1 Not at all important

2 Slightly important

3 Moderately important

4 Very important

5   Extremely important

11 How often do you use informal language (e.g., slang, colloquialisms) in conversations with peers?

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Often

5   Always

12 How often do you use swear words?

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Often

5 Always

13 What are your favorite conversation topics when you're hanging out with your girlfriends (for women) / friends (for men)

14 What are your favorite conversation topics when you're in mixed company (men and women)?

15 How often do you feel your ideas are taken seriously by your colleagues?

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Often

5 Always

16 How often do you use humor in conversations?

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Often

5 Always

17 How comfortable are you with using assertive language in social interactions?

1 Very uncomfortable

2 Uncomfortable

3 Neutral

4 Comfortable

5 Very comfortable

18 How important is it for you to avoid conflict in conversations?

1 Not at all important

2 Slightly important

3 Moderately important

4 Very important

5 Extremely important

19 How do you think your gender influences your communication style?

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