A Study of Gender-Related Differences in Introductory Letters

Linda Olsson
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LINDA OLSSON

Department of Languages and Literature
ENGLISH C
Supervisor: Gunnar Persson

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1. INTRODUCTION

The studies of differences in language used by men and women appear to mainly have been focused on differences in spoken language and written language in different works of literature and other published works. The language used in personal correspondence seems to be an area, which so far has not been thoroughly elucidated. In order to grasp the general beliefs about whether people think that there are any differences between the way men and women use the language in letters, eight persons regularly corresponding with people from all over the world were asked their opinions. Everybody asked thought that there was some difference. It could be assumed that after having read a lot of letters of personal style, most of us would develop "some sort of sense", as to which letters are written by men and which are written by women, before having looked at any hints, such as the name of the person behind the letter. This suggests that it might be possible to distinguish certain differences in language usage, irrespective of our "awareness" in that area. Still we should not take it for granted that there must be any differences, as intuition is an unreliable source, when wanting to match the correspondence between assumption and fact. Hence, the goal of this study is to examine whether there are any differences in the way women and men use the English language in introductory letters, rather than "what differences there are". However, any differences that may be established will be clarified.

A source material consisting of 50 introductory letters written by men and 50 by women, being mainly native speakers will be gathered and looked upon. So as to avoid other differences to be mistaken to be gender-related, the source material will also be looked upon with respect to age, native tongue and nationality. Factors such as social class, which could not be established, from the contents in the letters, will be disregarded.

The source material consists of at least 5 letters from each gender in each age group. In order to avoid generation-related differences being mistaken to be gender-related, the research material has also been divided into age groups. The largest

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1 Four men: "A" (Singapore), "B" (USA), "C" (India), "D" (USA) and four women: "E" (USA), "F" (Australia), "G" (Germany), "H" (England)
number of introductory letters gathered was of the age group 20-30. For practical reasons, this study only includes age groups within the range of 10-50.

Another factor that will be taken into great consideration is the nationality of the correspondents. There is an accumulation of letters written by Americans, but the study also includes native speakers from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Australia, India, Singapore and South Africa. The aim has been to try finding material representing both sexes of native speakers from each country to as great extent as possible.

Ten letters in each group are written by non-native speakers of English. These will only be used in percentage figures when the feature being analyzed does not differ from that of the native-speaking group. (For further information see chapter 3.6.) Note however that when non-native speakers have been examined, letters written in noticeably bad English have been excluded. The purpose being that the non-native speakers should have an ability to express themselves freely in English and hence have the ability to use the language in the same way as they would use their mother tongue. As the application of these features is not based on any diagnostic test of the participants, this part of the survey might be considered "less scientific" than the rest, and is therefore only included as a small part of the study.

The reason, as to why introductory letters have been distinguished from other letters, is to prevent the choice of subject to affect the language and vocabulary used. In an introductory letter, the topics are more or less limited to the range of features and activities describing the person behind the letter. (Indeed, other letters than introductory letters could also have formed an interesting base for a survey as the choice of topics would be more distinguished than in introductory letters.) This study will be focused on first letters, where the correspondents have achieved contact as a result of either a correspondence club, an advertisement for correspondence or through so called "friendship-booklets\(^2\)."

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\(^2\) Items circulated among people who correspond with each other, in order to look for more people to correspond with.
2. SEX AND GENDER

2.1 Biological Differences between Men and Women

When speaking of biological differences between men and women we tend to focus on bodily features. In reality, biological differences include all innate differences, bodily as well as mental differences and differences concerning traits of character. A huge amount of research has been dedicated to exploring whether there are sex-related differences in brain capacity. The claim that women would be born with better language skills, while men would have a better visual and spatial ability has been one of the most widespread claims regarding sex-related differences in language skills during the nineties. The question is whether it would be wise to be fully imbued in such assumptions without any well-documented reason as to why these differences would occur. Mary M. Talbot, who explored these conceivable biological differences in one of the chapters in her work *Language and Gender - An Introduction*, (1998) stated three 'fairly documented differences':

Girls statistically go through the stages of language development a little earlier than boys.

Girls are less likely to have language-related disturbances, such as stuttering and reading difficulties.

The right and left hemispheres of the brains of girls and women tend to be less specialized in function than in boys and men (less lateralized). This means that the speech centres are not so exclusively established in the left hemisphere; women process speech on the right side more than men do. The upshot of this is that if a woman's left hemisphere is injured (through a stroke, for example) she will probably show less impairment of speech than a man would. (1998: 10)

The accuracy of these statements can be discussed; for instance Talbot herself pointed to the fact that these differences did not apply to newborn babies and that "There is plenty of evidence indicating that girls and boys are spoken to differently." (1998:10) I will not, however, try to explore the correspondence between these claims and reality. Of importance for this survey is the consideration that there may
be biological differences affecting the way men and women use language, but irrespective of whether these possible sex-related differences exist or not, the possible gender-related differences may still do so. In order to trace these possible differences, it is necessary to first make the distinction between sex and gender.

2.2 The Difference between Sex and Gender

The essential difference between sex and gender is that sex is biologically founded, whereas gender is socially constructed. This distinction was developed by contemporary feminist researchers in the late seventies in order to "open ways to critique the social." (Crawford, 1995:9) Hence, as people are born to be of either female sex or male sex, they are taught by society how to fulfil their corresponding gender. It needs to be made clear that all men are not masculine and all women are not feminine, or as Vivian de Klerk stated in *The Role of Expletives in the Construction of Masculinity*: "Biology predisposes, but it does not predetermine." (Johnson & Meinhof, 1997:145)

2.2.1 Choosing a Term

The reason the decision was to use only the term gender-related differences in introductory letters in this study was because sex-differences are not judged to be specific in introductory letters. Any sex related-differences that may occur in spoken or written discourse are not judged to affect introductory letters as directly, as gender-related differences may do. Using the term sex-related differences indicates that possible differences are innate. If they are, it means that they would apply to men and women of different languages and cultures. This study merely analyses English. Writing letters is not an activity we are born with, such as learning to walk or talk. Therefore, I have judged that biology does not affect the way people write letters, but if it would, the extent would not be nearly as wide as the one brought on by society. According to Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, some linguists suggest that differences in speech result from a biological base. However, they also stress that "the clear weight of evidence is that few of the differences are rooted in biology." (1975:14)
3. FEATURES DISTINGUISHING THE SPEECH OF WOMEN ACCORDING TO LAKOFF

Robin Lakoff is one of the most cited authors in this area of Linguistics. Her *Language and Woman's Place* has influenced the research on language and gender since it was published in 1975. In this work Lakoff presented a group of lexical, syntactic and pragmatic features, which would distinguish the speech of women, viz. the use of Specialized vocabulary, Expletives, 'Empty' adjectives, Tag questions, Intonation, 'Superpolite' forms, Hedges, Hypercorrect grammar, Joke-telling and humor. When developing this further, this group of features indicates that women use more specialized vocabulary to describe colors and in areas regarding female activity, that women use milder forms of expletives than men, that there are 'empty' adjectives mostly women use, such as *divine* and *adorable*. Furthermore, these features suggest that women use the type of tag questions conveying their own opinions more often than men, that the intonation in women's speech varies more than in men's speech and that women often combine more than one sign of politeness in a request, e.g. *I wonder if it would be possible.* According to Lakoff's theory, hedges also frequently appear in an apologetic way in women's speech; women avoid vulgar or coarse terms and are more likely to use precise pronunciation. Women would neither tell jokes, nor understand them. In short terms, the 'female language' described here is a powerless style.

3.1 Lakoff's Theories on Female Speech, as Applied to Written Language

In the course of studying the language in the source of letters some of the points claimed by Lakoff might differ due to the different discourse. This does not mean that the hypothesis could naturally be applied to the language spoken by the writers of the letters. Frank Smith explored, among other things, the differences between spoken and written language and to quote one of his statements: "Speech and writing are alternative forms of language, and all of the uses to which language can be put apply to these alternative forms, to both writing and speech." (1982:15) A number of studies point in the direction that differences occur between the speech of men and women, as
for instance Tannen's study of "Gender Differences in Conversational Coherence", (1998:86-133) where four pairs of best friends from each gender were to speak about something intimate. Tannen noted differences in physical alignment as well as topical cohesion, indicating that the girls and women found their task easier. Apart from the recorded differences, men were also noted to have exchanged intimacy, although in another way than women, (1994: 85-129.)

Various studies should always be treated with great caution, as they may lead to stereotypical views and oversimplification. Hence, none of the material used from the research in this area will be seen as "some sort of recorded truth." As stated by Janet M. Bing and Victoria L. Bergvall: "One obvious oversimplification is that of using statistical differences between two groups as proof that all members of one group have certain characteristics shared by no members of the other group". (1996:15) However, when the same hypotheses have been applied, using different angles and research groups, indeed they present a good image of a "likely reality".

3.1.1 Specialized Vocabulary
According to Lakoff "women make far more precise discriminations than do men". (1975:8) She suggests that precise color terms such as lavender, mauve and aquamarine is a feature of female speech. No such color terms were recorded in any letter, neither in the female group nor the male group. Neither were there any signs indicating that women would "have richer vocabularies in areas that are traditionally female specialties" (Crawford, 1995:24) Specialized vocabulary was used regarding genres for literature and music by both sexes. Both sexes used specialized vocabulary, when discussing sports. One male writer (M28) specified dogs into breeds. Female writers tended to specify what kind of schools they studied at more often than male writers did. Four of the eight regular correspondents who were asked their beliefs in this area considered women to be using specialized color terms and other specialized vocabulary to a greater extent than men do.
3.1.2 Expletives
There were hardly any expletives recorded in the source material. Considering the purpose in usage of expletives this is not unexpected. Expletives are exclamations and exclamations are mainly the result of a direct reaction, responding to the situation. Speech is more direct than writing. It is possible for humans to speak at the same time as they think. In order to write something down, the process generally demands more time. Exclamations are often used as a result of a sudden change or arise out of emotion; they could be seen as culturally determined reflexes. A small number of expletives were, however, recorded in the letters being analyzed. Two female writers (F28, F47) used the expletives *wow* and *woah*, to express feelings such as amazement and frustration. There were no expletives recorded in the male letters, apart from a word, which is normally not an expletive, but which is used in a similar way as expletives, in this case namely *Idiots!* (M27) This referred back to the previous sentence, ("they don't even seem to want to understand"), and could be judged as an expression of frustration. Due to the low frequency of recorded expletives, Lakoff's claim that women use milder expletives can neither be proved nor disregarded in the course of analyzing possible differences in the language used in introductory letters. The result does, however, lend to support Lakoff's hypothesis rather than to disregard it, as the expletives found in the female group indeed are "milder" than the word used as an expletive in the male group.

3.1.3 Affective Adjectives
Affective or 'empty' adjectives is a group of adjectives which, apart from their literal meaning can appear in a way in which they only express an emotional reaction from the speaker, or in this case the writer. Lakoff listed a selection of empty adjectives, as divided into two groups, one neutral and one group used only by women:

<table>
<thead>
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<td>great</td>
<td>adorable</td>
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<tr>
<td>terrific</td>
<td>charming</td>
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<tr>
<td>cool</td>
<td>sweet</td>
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The only 'empty' adjectives used in the letters were great, lovely and cool. Indeed great and cool were recorded in both groups, while lovely was only used by two women. (F28, F50) This supports Lakoff's hypothesis, although we should consider the result with a certain caution, considering the few records of 'empty' adjectives, supposingly used only by women.

3.1.4 Tag Questions
Lakoff's idea is that tag questions are used when the speaker does not have enough confidence to make a statement, and does not lack as much knowledge as to make a question. Tag questions can be used either when the speaker seeks confirmation, when the addressee is believed to be of better knowledge or to be 'trying to elicit conversation from the addressee". (1975:16) As the results of different studies of tag questions have differed from indicating a higher usage in the female group, a higher usage in the male group and from showing no differences related to sex at all, Crawford (1995:28) pointed out that it "becomes obvious that Lakoff's claim was oversimplified." The tag questions Lakoff was referring to were merely those of referential function. The distinction between different types of tag questions, made by the linguist Janet Holmes and rendered by Talbot (1998:41) separates the referential tag, which "signals uncertainty about the information content of utterance", from the affective tag, which can be divided into facilitative tags, "expressing solidarity/closeness", and softening tags, "softening the threatening nature of a criticism or command."

Lakoff claims that women use the type of tag questions conveying their own opinions more often than men do. The number of tag questions found in the introductory letters is surprisingly small; namely no more than two ordinary tag questions in the male group and one ordinary tag question in the female group. Apart from these, both groups also contained informal constructions, used with the same purpose as other tag questions, such as "Very small...right"(M24) in the male group
and "If you want to exchange some, let me know, ok" (F30) in the female group. In the example from the male group I would claim that the informal right is used instead of isn't it because the user, who is referring back to given figures strengthening his point, wishes to further emphasize that it, (his country), is small. In the following sentence, he also confirms this: "Yes, well it is very small and is filled up with people from all over the world" Right provides even less expectation for the reader to disagree than isn't it used with an affective meaning. In the other example, the reason behind the informal choice of tag appears to be quite the opposite; this tag is referential and the writer might use ok instead of won't you, because the latter is closer to an order than the first, which is short for if that's okay. However, in both examples, it should be considered that informal alternatives might have been chosen, merely as a result of the discourse being informal.

The tag questions, formal as well as informal, found in the male group referred mainly to assumptions regarding either their own country or the country of the addressee. One of the tag questions found in the female group can also be applied to that, while the other tag questions used by female writers were exhortations softened into questions.

3.1.5 Superpolite Forms
Women's language is often described as a powerless language and women are often believed to be less self-confident than men are. The use of over-exaggerated politeness could be seen as one sign indicating support for assumed lack of self-confidence and power in language. In the course of Lakoff's theories women use 'superpolite' forms, as in adding double expressions of politeness, such as in Would it be possible for you to perhaps help me, please? This theory was supported in the study of introductory letters. Compare the following sentences: "I saw your name in an fb & wondered if you might like to be pals" (F36)"I got your name off of an F.B., and I was wondering if you'd like to be my penpal"(F25) and "I would very much like to learn more about your interests" from the female group, with "I got your address and I think it would be cool to be your penpal", (M13)"I got your address from the FB and I would like to be your penfriend"(M29) and "Now it's your turn to tell me more about yourself"(M26) from the male group. The language used by the female group generally contained more
superpolite forms than the language recorded in the male group. Women are also considered to be more polite in their language than men are.

3.1.6 Hypercorrect Grammar
Hypercorrect grammar means that slang and words or expressions that are vulgar or coarse are avoided. Hypercorrection concerns mistakes made in the attempt to avoid mistakes. According to linguists, such as Lakoff, women use a more hypercorrect language than men do. In the letters written by men, approximately 5.4% of the sentences contained vulgar or coarse words or expressions, while the corresponding figure in the female group was 7.5%. In consideration of the amount of source material, the difference in percentage is not clear enough in order to establish the distinction that women would use more vulgar or coarse forms than men do. More striking is the difference between recorded errors. In the male group 8.8% of the sentences contained spelling mistakes. The corresponding figure in the female group was 31.6%.³ There was no significant difference in the occurrence of grammatical errors, although it was slightly over-represented in the female group. Hypercorrection only occurred in one sentence; "she has a little girl whom is also my goddaughter." (F31) Hence, there are no signs supporting Lakoff's hypothesis regarding hypercorrect grammar. On the contrary, the result seems to suggest the opposite. Before drawing such a conclusion, however, there are some factors that need to be considered. We must not forget that all letters used in this study are written to women. When women were asked whether they introduced themselves differently when they wrote to men or women they all answered that they did not, apart from those being married being more careful to state their martial status to men than to women. When men were asked the same question, they answered differently, one comment being: "If it were a female one would tend to be less harsh, women are more sensitive, so one would not want to hurt their feelings."⁴ This comment alone hints that the reason why there are more errors and slang recorded in the female group, is that men are more careful when writing to

³ In establishing these percentage figures, the number of the feature analyzed has been associated with the sentences recorded in the responding group. As some sentences contained more than one object, to be considered, the percentage used can be discussed and should therefore only be looked upon with a certain caution.
women, whereas women are more "relaxed" in this type of discourse. There is also a possibility that women subconsciously use more correct grammar and vocabulary when communicating with men. (It could, however, be suggested that the way to end letters with the word *cheers*, which was only used by men, is avoided in women's language because it can be associated with drinking.)

3. 1. 7. Joke-telling and Humor
Regarding joke telling and humor, Lakoff's thesis was that women neither understand jokes nor could tell them themselves. Very little humor was found in these letters, (maybe as a result of the present writer being female.) Humor was slightly over-represented in the male group, in sentences such as: "But things have changed a bit since then. (Not physical changes or change in name!! Ha ha!!)"(M47) This does not necessarily mean that women cannot understand or use humor. I would rather suggest that they might be more careful in using it than men do. It could be assumed that women find it more important to give a serious impression, when forming the base for a new acquaintance, than men do. In order to further develop these assumptions, it could be said that men wish to avoid a serious tone, because it would make them feel uncomfortable, and that women might avoid humor, as they would be afraid not to be taken seriously. Furthermore, this could be connected with the stereotypical male and female images of "tough men" and "emotional women." However, as these assumptions cannot be satisfactorily proved, we should be content with considering them as discussion-points, which might present a possible solution, but which also might have arisen without being based on necessary facts.

3.1.8 Hedges
Hedges are, in Lakoff's view, limited to expressions such as 'well', 'sort of', 'kinda' 'you know'. According to Raija Markkanen and Hartmut Schröder, (1997:4), there are other researchers, like House/Kasper and Blumkulka/Ohlstein, who "discussed hedges as a means of modifying certain types of speech-acts, notably requests and apologies." When hedging included a wider concept than the one used by Lakoff, some researchers begun to distinguish between two types of hedging, "approximators (e.g.
His feet were sort of blue), and shields, which do not affect the truth-value of the whole proposition (e.g. I think his feet were blue)” (on Prince/Frader/Bosk by Markkanen/Schröder 1997:5.)

Lakoff suggests that hedges are used as a way of apologizing for saying anything at all. The hedge well was used by 21 women, and by 19 men. It was recorded 28 times in the female group and 23 times in the male group. There were no records of well by women in the age group 30-40. As this group only consisted of five women, we must be careful before drawing the conclusion that women in this age-group do not use this hedge, or even that they use it less than women and men in other age-groups. In the other age groups, approximately 50% of the women used well as a hedge. In both gender-groups, the most recorded usage of the hedge well was when ending the letter. This could be applied to Lakoff's suggestion that hedges are used with an apologetic purpose. People use well when they round off letters, because they want to apologize for doing so. Five women and five men used well when they were about to tell the recipient about themselves. The possible apologetic purpose cannot as easily be distinguished in these cases. Well can be used as a filler when a speaker is thinking about what to say, and might as well be transferred to written language with this connotation. Well does not have the same softening effect as sort of, kind of, somehow and other similar hedges, except for the cases when the utterance conveys the opinion of the user.

Regarding other hedges, two women and two men used the hedge you know. Three men and one woman used the hedge kind of. There were also one man and one woman who used the contracted slang-form of kind of, namely kinda. There were no records of sort of or sorta. Somehow occurred once in the male group and was not recorded in the female group.

4. Further Approaches Towards Gender-Related Differences in Language

4.1 Intensifiers

"Lakoff puzzlingly calls [the intensifier so] a hedge too. It is supposed to weaken a speaker's strength of feeling. It has subsequently been viewed as a boosting device (like very)” (Talbot, 1998:39.) Indeed, there appears to be no reason to call so a hedge,
as it is used in a strengthening way and not in any way weakening. The intensifying usage of so was examined in the letters, showing no differences of significance, as it occurred 15 times in the female group, (used by nine women,) and eleven times in the male group, (used by eight men.) One thing that can be noted here though is that in the male group, so as an intensifier was only recorded among male native speakers aged between 20 and 40. This, however, could be a result of this age group being over-represented. If there had been realistic possibilities of gathering material upholding all age-groups to at least ten objects for research of each gender in each group, the result might had differed. Concerning the lack of non-native speakers using so, the fact that less non-native speakers were used in this study must be considered.

The intensifier really was used by 23 women in a total of 48 times and by 13 men in a total of 27 times. There was no indication of really being used more in any age group. There were also no signs that there was any correspondence between those who used the intensifier so and those who used really. In the female group, ten women used both intensifiers so and really and in the male group four men did. It might be suggested that some people would prefer to use one of these intensifiers, while others do not and use both. In order to do so, however, it would require the meanings of these two intensifiers to correspond very closely together. Really could only be replaced by so in one sentence, maintaining a meaning satisfactory close to the original; "when you wrote I was really happy" (F6) If replacing really by so in phrases such as "who seemed to be really well qualified" (F29) it would gain a negative attitude, which was not necessarily there from the beginning. So mostly appeared in more or less fixed expressions, such as thank you so much. Although so could not be replaced with really here, it is essential to remember that there are more than two intensifiers, such as very, which could easily replace so in the example above.

Very was used by twelve women, recorded 19 times and by 30 men, recorded 71 times. As the connotation of very is more neutral than that of really or so, very could in most cases have been replaced with either really, so or either of them. In a few cases so or really could also have been replaced with very. We could only speculate why it appears that men use very more often than women, and why women appear to use really, and possibly also so, more often than men. If following the tracks of the
assumption that women are less self-assured than men, it could be suggested that they use *really* to emphasize that they do know what they are talking about and that men prefer to use *very* because they do not need to stress the truth-value of their claim, as they do not expect anybody to doubt it. Another possible explanation could be that women prefer *so* and *really* as they convey a more emotional touch, which would support the general assumption that women tend to show their feelings to a greater extent than men do. It could also be claimed that the over-represented usage of *very* in contrast to *really* and *so* could be a result of men tending to use more formal vocabulary when communicating with women.

4.2 Adverbs
As Crawford pointed out, Mulac 1986 presented a list with 35 language variables that might be gender-related. Due to this work not being available in Sweden, these variables could unfortunately not be examined in this study. According to Crawford, one of these variables was "beginning a sentence with an adverb." (1995:30) When applying this to the collection of letters, it turned out that seven men and eight women had started sentences with adverbs. The total number of sentences beginning with adverbs found was twelve among the women, and seven among the men. The most occurring adverb, women used to begin sentences with, was *actually*, which occurred four times. In the male group *unfortunately* occurred most times, namely three, in the beginning of sentences. However, due to the low frequency of these words, it cannot be claimed that these adverbs are more likely to occur in the language of the respective gender. Neither were there any other recorded differences in the way men and women use adverbs in introductory letters.

4.3 Topic Control
As Tannen pointed out, (1994:40) raising topics might be a sign of dominance and controlling the conversation, but it is also possible that it is not. Before examining topic control in letters it is important to remember the different conditions of the persons communicating with each other. In spoken conversation, it is possible for one person to interrupt the other. In letters both persons are able to express themselves
without the risk of being interrupted. This could indicate that raising of topics in letters might be a sign of imagination rather than dominance. However, as the raising of topics often influences the addressee, a certain element of dominance must still be considered. This element would probably be of a higher significance if these letters had not been introductory letters. When dealing with different topics in introductory letters, most are still concerned with a description of the writer, without necessarily controlling the exchange of communication progressing in forthcoming letters.

According to Tannen's study, girls and women of all ages talk about a small number of topics. Boys in grade two and six tended to talk about many topics, although only a little about each topic. The boys from grade ten and the 25-year-old men, used in her survey, dealt with a few subjects, which they discussed "on a more abstract level." In the introductory letters used in this study, there was no evidence that a certain age group dealt with more topics than another age group. Men on average dealt with 6.30 topics, the lowest recorded use being two topics and the highest twelve. As women on average dealt with 6.19 topics, within the range of one topic up to 17 topics, we cannot distinguish any differences in the number of topics used between the two genders.

Raising topics may or may not be a sign of dominance, but as well as using different topics, this appears to be dependent on the individual rather than the age and gender of the writer. Women on average raised 5.4 topics and men 5.2 topics. If we disregard those letters which are not replies to a previous letter and therefore only raise new topics, the average in the female group merely sinks down to 4.8, with the responding figure of 4.9 topics in the male group. The reason why most topics discussed in introductory letters are new ought to be a result of these letters consisting of introductions, hence introductory letters.

In the course of studying the use of different topics and the dominance this might indicate, the number of questions used was also examined, showing that men on average used 1.42 questions per letter and women 0.90 questions per letter. Both these numbers could be equalized to 1 question per letter.
4.4 Focusing on Private Issues
It is often assumed that women find it easier to talk about private issues, and that men prefer to discuss work and society. The letters used in this survey are openings to personal correspondence, hence if the assumption that women do speak more in private would be a reflection of reality, one might ask whether this could also be applied to their writing or not. In order to try the value of this assumption we could ask whether women write more letters than men, whether women write longer letters than men, and most importantly, whether women introduce themselves dealing with more private issues than men or not.

The task in examining whether women or men write more letters may be seen as almost impossible to fulfil. After examining 100 friendship-booklets, only a handful of the addresses that appeared belonged to men. This, however, does not necessarily correspond to the actual number of men writing letters, but rather with the number of men signing friendship-booklets. Four homepages, (Andy’s Penpals, The Friendship Page, International Penfriends and Interpals,) with correspondence services and ten issues of the magazine Floh were examined in order to try to establish whether there are more men or women who look for pen friends. The representation of each gender was rather similar in the different databases and showed that approximately 65-73% were women and 26-34% men. In the magazine 95% were women. These figures might be a result of more women seeking pen friends more actively than men, or women preferring to look for pen friends through pen-friends' services such as these examined. However, as women are over-represented in all examined sources for seeking pen-friends, and as this also corresponds to the general assumption that there are more women than men who write letters, it is more likely that there are more women who write letters, than that it is not. It could also be added that in the gathering of material for this study, letters from female writers were much easier to access than a sufficient number of letters from male writers.

The number of words used in the male group was 11 859, giving an average of 237.18 words per male writer. In the female group 12 596 words were recorded, giving an average of 251.92 words per female writer. The total number of sentences was 857 among men and 905 among women. This results in an average of 17.14 sentences per
letter in the male group and 18.10 sentences per letter in the female group, giving an average of 13.4 words per sentence in the male letters and 13.0 words per sentence in the female letters.

The numbers indicate that women might write longer letters than men, but the differences are not distinctive enough to claim that they do, as the replacement of a few letters possibly could have given a result pointing in another direction. A difference of 737 words might be seen as well sufficient to base a theory on, but if calculating the number of words recorded into percentage, we find that among all recorded words, approximately 51.5% were written by women and hence 48.5% by men. Examining a greater number of letters, this could have indicated clear differences in how much men and women write, but here a certain coincidental element needs to be considered. Furthermore, the number of words per sentence does not support any suggestion that women, or men, use a more descriptive language than those of the other gender do.

Closeness and "degree of privacy" certainly cannot be classified into strict categories. Therefore one person's perception of closeness might differ considerably from that of another person. In this study the main approach when trying to determine whether women write more private letters or not, has been to examine the expression of feelings, as well as the main focus of the letters, such as for example family, work or geographical location.

Feelings were expressed or discussed in both groups, consider "I do it sometimes especially when I'm depressed or something like that"(M27) and "it hurts to be lied to"(M30) from the male group and "I just felt so dumb"(F47), "I'm sad because of that"(F16) and "i (sic) really really hate being at all these crossroads..."(F32) from the female group. There were 17 women who expressed their feelings in introductory letters and all but one did so in a direct way, whereas only five men expressed their feelings, with none of them being direct. Women tended generally to focus more on topics regarding their immediate environment, drawing the reader closer to the moment they were performing the act of writing. Men tended to focus more on topics concerning their work, their country and the country of the recipient. This would support the thesis that "Men are more talkative in public, women in private."
The hypothesis that women talk more about private matters than men do could also be applied to written language in personal correspondence. This means that the major difference in choice of focus was that women tended to draw the reader closer to their daily life, whereas men tended to focus on their life as a whole. It appears that the suggestion that women speak more in private can also be applied in introductory letters.

4.5 Being People-Oriented
There are stereotypes saying that women are more people-oriented than men are. According to Crawford there has been a "methodologically sophisticated study that compared male and female speakers", which showed this stereotype wrong, as the women in that study did not use as many references to people as the male speakers did. (1995:30) Here this stereotype is supported, as there were 104 references to people in the female group and only 48 references in the male group. Men on average referred to 0.36 persons, while women referred to 2.08 persons. Women did not settle for writing about their closest family. Some people that appeared in these letters were a guidance officer, a therapist and a sister's boyfriend. Apart from the people in their surroundings, women also referred to famous people far more often than men did. There were only two references to famous people in the male group and 13 in the female group. The men who wrote their introductory letters replying to another letter written to them, did, however, tend to refer back more to what the person in that letter wrote than the female writers did.

5. Jespersen's Theories on Women's and Men's Language

Jespersen's work has often been commented on in the research of language and gender. According to Thorne and Henley Jespersen's Language: It's Nature, Development and Origin (1922) "cited women's supposed preference for refined, euphemistic, and hyperbolic expression, and men's alleged greater use of slang and innovations - those examples both reflecting and reinforcing traditional sex stereotypes." (Thorne & Henley, 1975:6)
5.1 Euphemism
Euphemism, which means that people replace words and phrases, which are not "appropriate" with other words or phrases, was not found in any of the letters in this study. This could be a result of the discourse being written, as it allows people to avoid areas that are taboo to a greater extent than in spoken conversations. An example often used when explaining the meaning of euphemism is stating the different noa words generally used to replace toilet. In daily life, such areas cannot be entirely left out from language, and the way they are expressed should be seen as a result of society in the English-speaking countries. In letters there is usually no need for the writer to deal with topics that need to be disguised by euphemism.

5.2 Hyperbolic Expressions
Hyperbolic expressions are overstatements and exaggerations. There were no obvious hyperbolic expressions found, although sentences such as "Usually I write longer letters, but the first one is always sooo (sic) difficult" (F30) might be hyperbolic, depending on whether the writer does mean that first letters are always difficult to write or that they usually are. As gender-related differences cannot be based upon guesswork, the usage of hyperbolic expressions cannot be analyzed further. This is also applicable to litoteses, understatements.

5.3 Slang
In casual speech people sometimes use words and phrases which are only used within a certain group, such as a specific social group or age group. Slang was not recorded in any letter, maybe as a result of the limitations of slang usage. All letters were written to a person living in another country than the writer. Other features "categorizing" people into different groups were not always possible to distinguish. Hence, people appeared to be avoiding slang, as they could not be sure whether the meaning they expressed would be construed correctly.

5.4 Innovations
According to Jespersen's theories, the language of men would also be more innovative than the language of women. The creativity of language is a feature that could be
looked upon from many different angles. Using the perspective that the person would use many different words, especially adjectives to describe things, the differences recorded in the different groups were dependent on the individual behind the letter. There was no evidence which would support the idea that more people of one gender, or people in general of one gender, would use more innovations than those of the other gender do.

6. SELF-CONFIDENCE AND POWER IN CONTRAST TO POWERLESSNESS AND LACK OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

It has often been claimed that women use a more powerless language than men do, (Lakoff et al.) The reason which is usually given for this is that the powerless position women often have in society affects their language. It is important to remember that all women do not have powerless positions, just as all men do not have powerful positions.

There are many aspects that must be concerned when trying to elicit powerful or less powerful language, one being the usage of tag questions, (see chapter 3.2.4,) and another the usage of hedges (see chapter 3.2.8.) The tag questions and hedges, found in this study, did not provide sufficient evidence to distinguish the language of one gender to be more powerless than that of the other gender.

Another feature which is believed to characterize powerless language is the usage of superpolite forms, (see chapter 3.2.5.) As women did use more superpolite constructions than men did, this feature supports the belief of women's language being more powerless than the language of men is.

In spoken conversation the one who raises the most topics may be seen as controlling the conversation, and therefore having more power than the addressee(s), (see chapter 3.3.3.) As earlier stated, this feature might give a less accurate result in introductory letters, as these types of letters all consist of introductions of the writers. The average number of topics raised in the letters was approximately five per letter in both gender-groups.

Sentences such as "Waiting for letters? Wanting to correspond with someone? No problem, here I'm (sic)" (M15) do imply a greater self-confidence among men.
There were also a few examples of men who seemed to use a superior tone such as in:
"Regarding your English you write pretty good English and hope in future you shall be able to improve it better." (M36) However, it is important to stress that individuals are the ones who form sentences. Sentences conveying self-confidence were not over-represented in any group, although women tended to use sentences possibly conveying lack of self-confidence to a slightly greater extent than men did.

7. NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS IN CONTRAST TO NATIVE SPEAKERS

Comparing the language between native and non-native speakers allows further possibilities in trying to establish gender-related differences. It might guide us whether non-native speakers of each respective gender are influenced by the corresponding gender in the native-speaking group. As earlier mentioned, the research material consists of 40 letters from native speakers of each gender, with an additional ten letters each of non-native speakers.

Applying Lakoff’s hypotheses to non-native speakers, we find that there are no differences in the usage of specialized vocabulary. The word used as an expletive in the male group was written by a non-native speaker. Considering the low frequency of recorded expletives it is important to remember the coincidental element. Furthermore, four of eight women who used the affective adjective great were non-native speakers whereas all men who used great had English as their mother tongue. The other recorded affective adjectives were too few to support either differences or similarities in regard to the mother tongue. This can also be applied to tag questions. Superpolite forms, hedges, intensifiers and humor were used by more native speakers than non-native speakers, maybe as a result of there being more native speakers in the research material. There were also more native speakers beginning sentences with adverbs. If we compare these features with the numbers of persons in each group, it shows no differences between native and non-native speakers. Non-native speaking men and women, as well as native-speaking people of both genders dealt with approximately 6 topics per letter. Hypercorrect grammar and recorded errors were not studied among the non-native speakers, as the result of doing so might be misleading due to the
different difficulties these persons probably have. Twenty letters is not a sufficient base to support men or women in being "better" in English and hence, the result of establishing this feature would rather prove differences between the individuals. Furthermore, non-native speakers did not deal with less private issues than native speakers and nor were they less people-oriented.

8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The difference between written and spoken language is evident when trying to record differences in language usage between the gender gap, as most research in this area concerns spoken language. Therefore, this study has come not only to analyze
differences between the two genders, but has also crossed the area concerning spoken and written discourse.

There are differences in the way men and women write introductory letters, one of the most striking ones being the over-represented use of superpolite forms in women's language. It could also be established that women were more likely to discuss private issues and feelings than men were. Women in general also had references to far more people than the men had. Furthermore, women tended to use the intensifier really, where men preferred very. There were not enough expletives recorded in order to support Lakoff's hypothesis that women use milder expletives than men do. The few expletives recorded were, however, milder in the female group. The affective adjectives used by men and women were those stated as neutral by Lakoff, and the affective adjective lovely, which was only used by women, was also on Lakoff's list for affective adjectives used only by women. Humor was slightly over-represented among men. Women seemed to use tag questions mainly to soften exhortations, while men used tag questions mostly when making assumptions. When it comes to hypercorrect grammar Lakoff's hypothesis that women use it more than men could only be supported by one example of hypercorrection. There were generally more spelling mistakes in letters written by women than in letters written by men. Women did not use more specialized vocabulary than men, which they would do according to Lakoff. Neither were hedges greatly over-represented in the female group as they would have been if Lakoff's hypotheses could be blindly adopted to all comparison between language and gender. Other features concerning topic control, euphemism, slang, innovations and beginning sentences with adverbs showed no gender-related difference in this research material. The features that differed or corresponded between the genders among native speakers also did so among non-native speakers. Finally, powerless language appears to be dependent on the individual rather than the gender of the individual.

As the research material could not be matched in equal groups, regarding all aspects, the result of this study needs to be taken with a certain amount of caution. It is, however, important to note that a study consisting of ten times the research material still may not cover all possible divisions people can be categorized into equally. The
result of this study presents an image of the people whose letters have been analyzed. Possibly we could apply these as general distinctions used in introductory letters, but before doing so it is important to remember that this may lead to incorrect simplifications. There were no features which occurred in all, or almost all, letters of one gender. The established differences only showed tendencies for different features occurring more often in the language used by one gender. Even if there are differences between the language used by the respective gender, these differences differ due to different types of discourse and other factors separating the persons communicating with each other. Language and gender will probably always remain an area open for discussion, as we are all humans and humans will always be similar in some aspects and unique in others.

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100 letters:

F1: 12 South Africa
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F3: 14 Zimbabwe
F4: 14 South Africa
F5: 14 USA
F6: 15 Scotland/UK
F7: 15 Germany non-native speaker
F8: 15 Japan non-native speaker
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F48: 47 USA
F49: 48 Norway non-native speaker
F50: 49 Australia

M1: 8 USA
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M8: 16 Indonesia non-native speaker

\(^5\) F refers to female writers
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6 M refers to male writers
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