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## Gender Differences in Vocabulary Use in Essay Writing by University Students

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### Abstract

This study investigates gender differences in language use in argumentative essays written by male and female university students on designated topics under controlled conditions. Previous studies have usually focused on texts produced in uncontrolled conditions. Therefore, we cannot deny the possibility that other factors than gender may have affected the results. The results of the study presented here indicate that there are indeed gender differences in language use in essay writing, suggesting that male students tend to use more nouns related to social economic activities to convey information or facts about the given topics, whereas female students tend to use more pronouns, more intensifiers and modifiers, and words related to psychological cognitive processes so that they might convey their feelings and develop a good relationship with other people.

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### 1. Introduction

Since (Lakoff, 1975) called attention to linguistic differences between genders, numerous empirical studies have been conducted examining linguistic features related specifically to men and women. Some research has focused on phonological and lexical differences (Trudgill, 1972; Eckert, 1989) and some on discourse functions, such as compliments and apologies (Homes, 1995) or turn-taking (Tannen, 1991). Some corpus-based research has also examined the syntactic and lexical differences between sexes (Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2008; Argamon, Koppel, Fine, & Shimoni, 2003; Baker, 2014). Do men and women really use language differently? Do

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they really interpret things differently? Some of the findings of such research have suggested that men and women use language differently. However, some researchers claim that the sex of a speaker or writer affects language use very little, and that other factors such as the social status or age of the speaker and/or of the hearer may have a greater effect on language use (Brouwer, 1982; Berryman-Fink & Wilcox, 1983; Ishikawa, 2011). Clear answers have not been provided yet.

Previous studies have usually investigated conversational data from face-to-face interactions, and studies on the effects of gender on writing have been relatively limited to the data written on various topics in a range of contexts by people across age groups. For this reason, it may well be that observed linguistic differences between men and women were caused by factors other than gender in the society. There is a need for further investigation into gender differences in texts produced by men and women of similar ages, with the same status, on the same topic, and under the same writing or speaking conditions. Only then may we exclude other factors that may have affected the results. In this study, we focused on argumentative essays written by university students of both sexes. We set out to determine whether male and female students tended to use language differently when required to write an essay of a designated length about a given topic and, if so, how they differed.

Data for this study were drawn from the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE). The focus was on differences in vocabulary use between male and female university students from the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Each student was requested to write an essay on each of the two designated topics under strictly controlled conditions. It has been suggested that, in written contexts more formal than electronic communication, the writing style of men and women will not differ (Koppel et al., 2002). The findings of the present study investigate this issue further, and may help us to understand more about how gender influences language use.

## 2. Literature

(Koppel et al., 2002) analyzed 566 texts taken from the British National Corpus to identify linguistic features more commonly used by one or the other gender. The data include both non-fictional and fictional texts. All the non-fictional texts and 75% of the fictional texts are from 1975-1993, and the remaining 25% of the fictional texts are from 1960-1974. (Koppel et al., 2002) assert that the male indicators were largely noun specifiers (e.g., determiners, numbers, and modifiers) whereas the female indicators were mostly negation, pronouns, and certain prepositions. Men used *that* and *one*, and women used *for*, *with*, *not*, and, *in* more frequently in non-fiction texts.

(Argamon et al., 2003) also analyzed 604 texts from a wide range of genres in the BNC and revealed that women used more pronouns (e.g., *I*, *you*, *she*, *her*, *their*, *myself*, *yourself*, *herself*) and men used more noun specifiers, including determiners (e.g., *a*, *the*, *that*, *these*) and quantifiers (e.g., *one*, *two*, *more*, *some*). These authors argue that pronouns and specifiers are used in different conditions, although both are used to encode information about the things presented as nominals. Pronouns are used when the identity of the “thing” involved is known to the reader, whereas specifiers are used when the author assumes the reader does not know the “thing” (Argamon et al., 2003). They claim that the different use of these grammatical categories by men and women indicate that men and women tend to present things in a different way in their writing.

(Newman et al., 2008) compiled a large corpus and studied gender differences in language use. The data contained various kinds of texts including spoken texts (3%) and fiction written in the 17th century. These authors claim that women in their corpus used more words related to psychological and social processes and more verbs, whereas men discussed current concerns and used more words related to object properties and impersonal topics. The results of their study also showed that women used more pronouns (e.g., *I*, *my*, *me*, *she*, *their*, *them*), social words (e.g., *sister*, *friends*), psychological processes (e.g., *mad*, *uneasy*, *remember*, *nervous*), verbs, negations, and references to the home. Men, on the other hand tended to use more numbers, articles, and prepositions (e.g., *on*, *to*, *from*). As articles and prepositions are generally used with nouns, (Newman et al., 2008) concluded that men tend to focus more on conveying information, and women more on social connections.

Table 1 below offers a brief summary of the findings of previous studies. It is clear that some lexical items have been identified as linguistic features of female writing in one study but not in another.

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