

## Historical Change in the Language Use of Women and Men : Gender Differences in Dramatic Dialogue

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# Historical Change in the Language Use of Women and Men

## Gender Differences in Dramatic Dialogue

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Over the past twenty or more years, there have been numerous studies exploring differences in the language behavior of women and men.<sup>1</sup> Many of these studies have focused on aspects of conversational style, including topic choice, topic-shifting strategies, the use and function of tag questions, and the use and distribution of overlaps/interruptions and silence (see, e.g., the discussions in Cameron 1998; Coates 1996; Crawford 1995; Holmes 1995; Tannen 1993, 1994).

In addition, numerous studies have sought to identify contrasts in the typical linguistic characteristics of female/male language, usually discussing differences in functional terms. Four of the major generalizations that have emerged from these studies are the following:

- (A) In mixed-gender settings, women speak considerably less than men (Crawford 1995; see also the survey of relevant studies in James and Drakich 1993).
- (B) Women are generally more focused on the personal/interactional aspects of conversation; men tend to be more interested in conveying information (Holmes 1995; Lakoff 1990).
- (C) Women tend to be more tentative than men in their use of language, both in conversation (Coates 1993, 1996) and in some forms of writing (Rubin and Greene 1992), tending to use more hedges, possibility modals, and “ego-centric sequences” (Rubin and Greene 1992, 20) such as *I think* and *I guess*.



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- (D) Women's discourse is lower in the use of persuasive strategies, tending to emphasize narrative strategies more (Rubin and Greene 1992; Fleischman 1998).

Despite the many studies on this topic, there is still some question about the extent to which these characterizations represent valid generalizations about women's and men's language use. For example, Freed and Greenwood (1996) argue that linguistic differences relating to gender, task, and context are often difficult to tease apart in previous research. Furthermore, these studies have tended to use a single research paradigm, usually relying on ethnographic methods and qualitative analysis of a few texts with few participants. A number of studies have also restricted their research subjects to females only or males only, making comparisons between the groups difficult.

Corpus-based investigations can provide a useful complementary perspective on these issues. These investigations use computational methods for quantitative/linguistic analyses of large collections of texts, representing comparable samples of female/male language from many different speakers. Comparing the results of such studies to earlier qualitative investigations will allow for a kind of triangulation, giving us a more comprehensive picture of the language use of women and men.

To fully understand comparisons of present-day female/male discourse, we also need historical descriptions, tracking the ways in which female and male language use have evolved to become more or less different over time (see, e.g., the historical study of letters written by women and men in Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998, 215-22). In the present study, we take a long-term perspective, addressing research questions such as the following: How have the language use patterns of women and men changed over the past four centuries? Are these patterns converging or diverging? Or is it the case that new kinds of differences are emerging over time? By considering the historical context for present-day patterns of use, we hope to be able to better understand those patterns.

One major methodological problem to be overcome for such a study is the lack of historical archives of natural conversation; we have no recordings of conversations from earlier historical periods. However, we do have several sources that provide useful representations of historical spoken language. These fall into two major types: edited transcriptions (e.g., court transcripts and town meetings) and artificial dialogue (in fiction or drama).

In our study here, we focus on the language use represented in drama. As Tannen and Lakoff (1994, 139) point out,

Artificial dialog may represent an internalized model or schema for the production of conversation—a competence model that speakers have access

to . . . There is much to be gained by looking at artificial conversation . . . to see what these general, unconsciously-adhered-to assumptions are.

Drama represents extended conversational dialogue played out in live settings and thus allows for detailed analyses of the perceived language use patterns associated with men and women.

For a comprehensive analysis of this type, we need to consider three different parameters: (1) the sex of the author, (2) the sex of the speaker, and (3) the sex of the addressee. Previous research has shown that it is essential to consider the sex of the addressee in addition to the sex of the speaker; same-sex conversations differ in important ways from cross-sex conversations. However, to our knowledge, no previous study has taken into account the differing perspectives of female and male authors: that is, do female authors represent the language of men and women in the same ways that male authors do? And have these perceived patterns of use changed historically over time? This article begins to answer these questions through analysis of a subcorpus of dramatic texts, 1650-1990, taken from *ARCHER*.

In the following two sections, we describe the portion of *ARCHER* used for our analyses here and briefly discuss our analytical procedure. Then we take up the major generalizations stated above (A-D), beginning with a simple question: How much do women and men talk in plays written by men and women? We also discuss the influence of the addressee's gender on the amount of talk. We then extend the analysis to a comparison of female/male language features, using the multidimensional (MD) analytical framework (Biber 1988). The MD approach is useful here in that it allows comparison of the communicative styles of women and men with respect to a large number of co-occurring linguistic features, rather than focusing on the isolated effect of individual features. In particular, three of the dimensions identified in previous research have functional/linguistic correlates that are directly relevant to the claims made about female and male language use: interactiveness, personal involvement, and tentativeness with respect to dimension 1, as well as reliance on narrative versus persuasive strategies with respect to dimensions 2 and 4 (see Table 2 below for a description of the linguistic features associated with these dimensions).

### **Description of *ARCHER***

*ARCHER*—*A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*—was designed for a specific research agenda: to analyze historical change in the range of written and speech-based registers of English from 1650 to the present. The general design goal for the corpus has thus been to represent as wide a range of register variation as possible, sampled systematically across texts from the past three and a half centuries. The overall structure of the corpus comprises ten major register cate-

gories, sampled in fifty-year periods from 1650 to the present. The entire corpus has been tagged for grammatical/functional categories. Biber, Finegan, and Atkinson (1994) and Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998, Methodology Box 2) provide more details about the design, sampling, and compilation of *ARCHER*.

### **Methodological Procedures for the Current Study**

Previous studies have used *ARCHER* to describe the evolution of speech-based as well as written registers in English from 1650 to 1990 (see, e.g., Atkinson 1992, 1999; Biber and Finegan 1989, 1997; Biber 1995; Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998, chap. 8). For the present study, we analyzed the ninety-five drama texts from *ARCHER*, including both American English and British English texts. We divided these texts into four major historical periods: 1650-1699, 1700-1799, 1800-1899, and 1900-1990.

Each text was coded for the sex of the author, while all conversational turns within a text were coded by hand for the sex of the speaker. We considered the addressee of a turn to be the speaker who spoke next in the discourse. We then wrote a computer program that used these codes to segment each text into four subtexts representing each of the four possible combinations of speaker and addressee:

female → female, female → male, male → female, male → male.

Table 1 gives the breakdown of drama texts according to these subtexts. In this table, we also distinguish between plays written by women and those written by men. As Table 1 shows, our subcorpus is markedly skewed to favor male authors over female authors. That is, we have only 38 subtexts for female authors, compared to 189 subtexts for male authors. The selection of texts in *ARCHER* was carried out using random sampling techniques from available bibliographic sources; this approach resulted in a marked underrepresentation of dramatic plays written by women (especially in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, with only a single play written by a female author in each period). As a result, our findings here should be regarded as preliminary and interpreted with caution.

Table 1 also shows differences in the extent to which men and women talk in dramatic plays. We discuss those differences in more detail in the following section.

### **Gender and Loquacity: Proportional Word Counts**

Figures 1 and 2 plot the proportion of the total words given to female versus male speakers within dramatic texts, also tracking change in the preferred speakers across historical periods. Figure 1 plots the patterns of use in dramatic texts written by women, while Figure 2 gives the patterns for plays written by men. The texts are

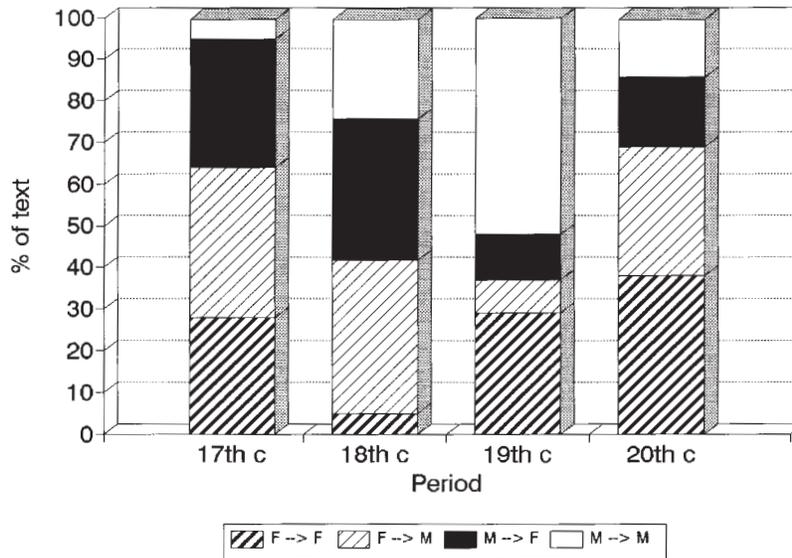
**TABLE 1**  
Breakdown of *ARCHER* Drama According to Gender Subtexts

Period	Author	Speaker	Addressee	Number of Subtexts	Word Count
1650-1699	F	F	F	1	278
	F	F	M	1	356
	F	M	F	1	315
	F	M	M	1	53
	M	F	F	4	1,880
	M	F	M	4	652
	M	M	F	4	854
1700-1799	M	M	M	6	3,130
	F	F	F	1	208
	F	F	M	5	1,693
	F	M	F	5	1,571
	F	M	M	3	1,097
	M	F	F	11	4,060
	M	F	M	9	2,565
	M	M	F	9	2,572
	M	M	M	10	4,486
	1800-1899	F	F	F	1
F		F	M	1	66
F		M	F	1	107
F		M	M	1	487
M		F	F	12	2,472
M		F	M	22	5,144
M		M	F	22	5,097
M		M	M	21	10,760
1900-1990	F	F	F	5	1,668
	F	F	M	4	1,390
	F	M	F	4	738
	F	M	M	3	645
	M	F	F	10	5,342
	M	F	M	13	2,041
	M	M	F	13	2,292
Total	M	M	M	19	12,379
				227	76,673

NOTE: *ARCHER* = A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers.

subdivided into four parts, according to the sex of the speaker and the sex of the addressee.

These figures show several general patterns. First, there is a general preference for authors to prefer speakers of the same sex. This trend is especially pronounced for male authors, who give male speakers more than 50 percent of the text in all periods; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, male authors give male speakers almost 70 percent of the text. Female authors show a similar preference for female speakers, especially in the twentieth century. (Since the findings for female-

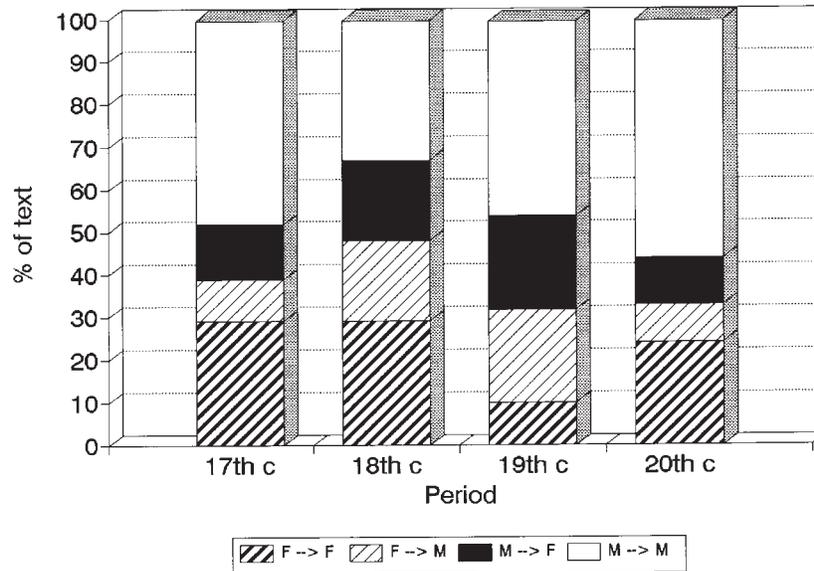


**Figure 1:** Percentage of Text That Female Authors Give to Female versus Male Speakers and Addressees.

authored drama in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries are based on a single play in each period, they should be treated with caution.)

Beyond that, there is an interesting difference in the language use patterns portrayed by male and female authors: male authors have a strong preference for male → male dialogue, which accounts for nearly 50 percent of all dialogue in seventeenth-century and nineteenth-century plays and increases to nearly 60 percent in twentieth-century plays. Male → female dialogue is dispreferred by male authors, especially in the twentieth century (where it represents only about 10 percent of all dialogue). In contrast, female authors portray women as talking much more equitably to both men and women. In earlier periods, female authors had women talking primarily to men, while in the past two centuries, women authors much more commonly portrayed women talking both to men and to other women.

These findings give support to the generalization of bias favoring male over female language: male authors have been especially biased toward constructing the discourse of males over the discourse of females. However, these findings do not support the generalization that men talk more than women in mixed-gender settings (see generalization [A] in the introduction). Instead, female → male and male → female discourse is equally represented in plays written by men, while female →



**Figure 2:** Percentage of Text That Male Authors Give to Female versus Male Speakers and Addressees.

male discourse is actually more prevalent than male → female discourse in plays written by women (especially in the twentieth century).

### Multidimensional Analysis of Gender-Related Language Use

#### Overview of the Multidimensional Approach to Register Variation

The descriptions of language use in the following sections are based on the multidimensional framework developed in Biber (1988). As described there, dimensions comprise a group of linguistic features that co-occur with a markedly high frequency in texts. These co-occurrence patterns are identified quantitatively by a statistical factor analysis. Dimensions are interpreted in terms of the situational and cognitive functions most widely shared by the co-occurring linguistic features and in terms of the relations among registers along each dimension.

The first five factors extracted in Biber (1988) have fairly straightforward interpretations and have been used for a number of previous historical analyses based on

other corpora (e.g., Biber and Finegan 1989, 1997). The major co-occurring features grouped on each of these factors are listed in Table 2.

Detailed functional interpretations of each dimension are given in Biber (1988, chaps. 6-7; 1995, chap. 6). For our purposes here, we provide only an interpretive label that summarizes the functional basis of each dimension:

- 1: Involved versus informational production
- 2: Narrative versus nonnarrative discourse
- 3: Situation-dependent versus elaborated reference
- 4: Overt expression of argumentation
- 5: Nonimpersonal versus impersonal Style

These dimensions can be used to analyze the linguistic characteristics of texts by computing “dimension scores” for each text: a summation of the frequencies for those features having salient loadings on a dimension. Registers and speaker styles can then be compared in terms of their mean dimension scores.

For example, Figure 3 plots the mean dimension 1 scores (involved versus informational production) of drama texts in each century, distinguishing between female authors and male authors. Dimension scores represent the combined frequencies of the co-occurring features defining each dimension. Styles with large positive dimension 1 scores, such as those of female authors in the twentieth century (see Figure 1), have high frequencies of private verbs, contractions, present-tense verbs, first- and second-person pronouns, and the other positive features defining dimension 1, together with markedly low frequencies of nouns, prepositional phrases, long words, and the other negative features defining dimension 1. Smaller positive scores on dimension 1, such as those for male authors in the seventeenth century, reflect lower frequencies of the “positive” features (e.g., private verbs, contractions, etc.) and higher frequencies of the “negative” features (e.g., nouns, prepositional phrases, etc.).

Three dimensions turn out to be important for describing historical shifts in the dramatic language of women and men: 1 (involved vs. informational production), 2 (narrative vs. nonnarrative discourse), and 4 (overt expression of argumentation). The following subsections describe the patterns of use along each of these dimensions.

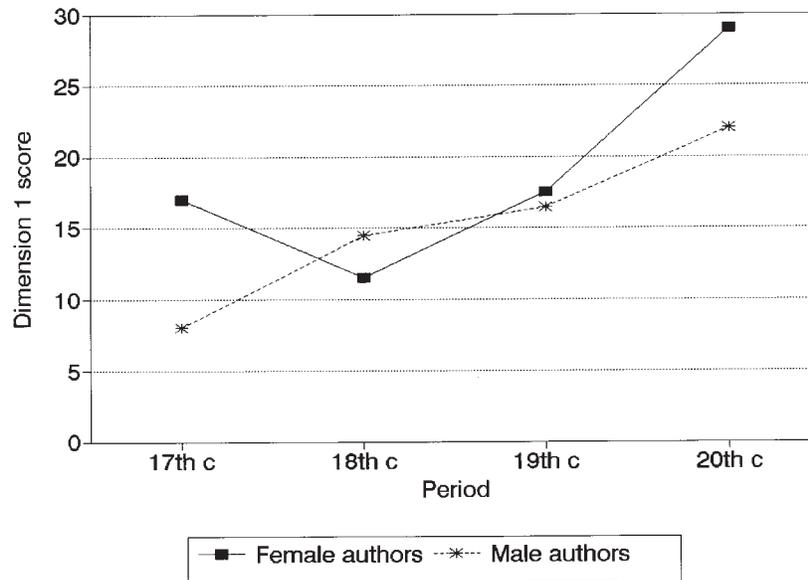
#### Gender, Personal Involvement, and Tentativeness: Dimension 1

Dimension 1 in the MD model—involved versus informational production—relates directly to generalizations B and C listed in the introduction: that women are more focused on the personal/interactional aspects of conversation while men are more focused on conveying information, and women are more tentative in their lan-

**TABLE 2**  
Summary of the Co-Occurrence Patterns Underlying the Five Major Dimensions of English

	Positive Features	Negative Features
Dimension 1: Involved versus informational production	Private verbs <i>That</i> deletion Contractions Present-tense verbs Second-person pronouns <i>Do</i> as pro-verb Analytic negation Demonstrative pronouns General emphatics First-person pronouns Pronoun <i>it</i> <i>Be</i> as main verb Causative subordination Discourse particles Indefinite pronouns General hedges Amplifiers Sentence relatives WH questions Possibility modals Nonphrasal coordination WH clauses Final prepositions	Nouns Word length Prepositional phrases Type/token ratio Attributive adjectives
Dimension 2: Narrative versus nonnarrative discourse	Past-tense verbs Third-person pronouns Perfect aspect verbs Speech act verbs Synthetic negation Present participial clauses	Present-tense verbs Attributive adjectives
Dimension 3: Situation-dependent versus elaborated reference	Time adverbials Place adverbials Adverbs	WH relative clauses on object positions Pied piping constructions WH relative clauses on subject positions
Dimension 4: Overt expression of argumentation	Infinitives Prediction modals Suasive verbs Conditional subordination Necessity modals Split auxiliaries	[No negative features]
Dimension 5: Nonimpersonal versus impersonal style	[No positive features]	Conjuncts Agentless passives Passive adverbial clauses BY-passives Passive postnominal clauses

SOURCE: Based on Biber (1988).

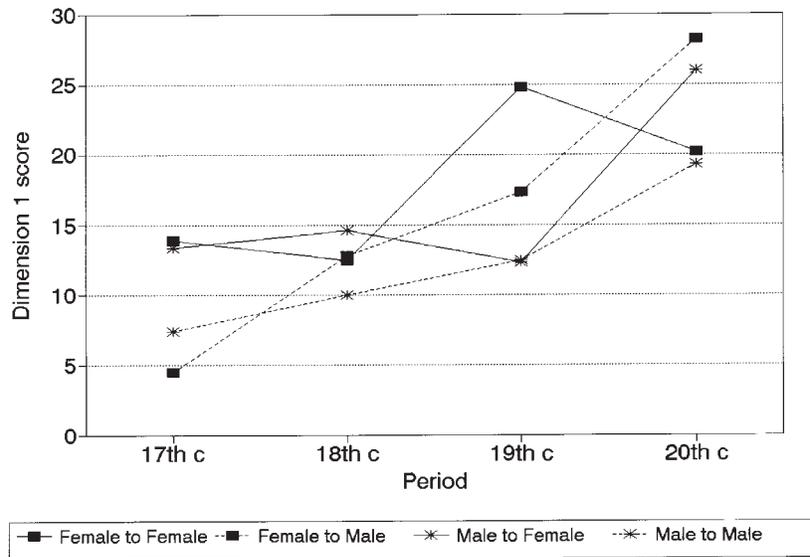


**Figure 3:** Dimension 1 Scores for Female and Male Authors, across Periods.

guage as well. Both personal involvement and tentativeness are reflected in high scores on dimension 1; information density and certainty are reflected in low dimension 1 scores.

Figure 3 (introduced in the last section) plots historical change in the dimension 1 characteristics of dramatic dialogue. This figure shows that there has been a steady trend toward more involved styles over the past four centuries, with a marked increase in the twentieth century. Interestingly, this recent increase is especially pronounced for female authors, who have developed extremely involved styles.

Figure 4 provides a more detailed perspective on these historical developments, tracking the characteristics of each speaker-addressee dyad across the periods. This graph shows the same historical trend toward ever more involved styles, with the language produced by women generally being more involved than that produced by men. However, a comparison of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries suggests an interesting reorganization of preferred styles. In the seventeenth century, it appears that the sex of the addressee was a more important factor than the sex of the speaker: discourse addressed to females was considerably more involved than discourse addressed to males. That is, discourse addressed to females was consistently involved and highly interactive, as in text sample 1. In contrast, discourse addressed to males was often more informational and monologic, as in text sample 2.



**Figure 4:** Dimension 1 Scores for Female/Male Speaker and Female/Male Addressee, across Periods.

**Text Sample 1: Seventeenth-Century Female → Female Interaction**

*Duffet, Thomas. 1675. The mock-tempest.*

<Act II, scene i.>

<Enter Miranda and Dorinda.>

{=f DORINDA.} Oh Sister Sister, what have I seen, pray?

{=f MIRANDA.} Some rare sight I warrant.

{=f DORINDA.} From yonder dust-cart-top, as I star'd upon the noise, I thought it had been fighting, but at last I saw a huge Creature, for ought I know.

{=f MIRANDA.} O, whereof you mean the Coach.

{=f DORINDA.} Coach! i'fads, I thought it had been a Fish, I'm sure it was alive, and it ran roaring along, and all the People ran away from it for fear it should eat 'em.

{=f MIRANDA.} O lo, O lo Sister, O lo!—ha ha he—

{=f DORINDA.} Why d'ee laugh at one, Sister? indeed it had eaten men, for just by our gate it stood still and open'd a great Mouth in the belly of it, and spit 'em out all whole.

{=f MIRANDA.} Oh but Sister, whereof I can tell you news pray, my Father told me in that Creature was that thing call'd Husband, and we should see it shortly and have it pray, in a Civil way.

**Text Sample 2: Seventeenth-Century Female → Male Discourse**

*Caryll, John. 1671. Sir Salomon; or The Cautious Coxcomb.*

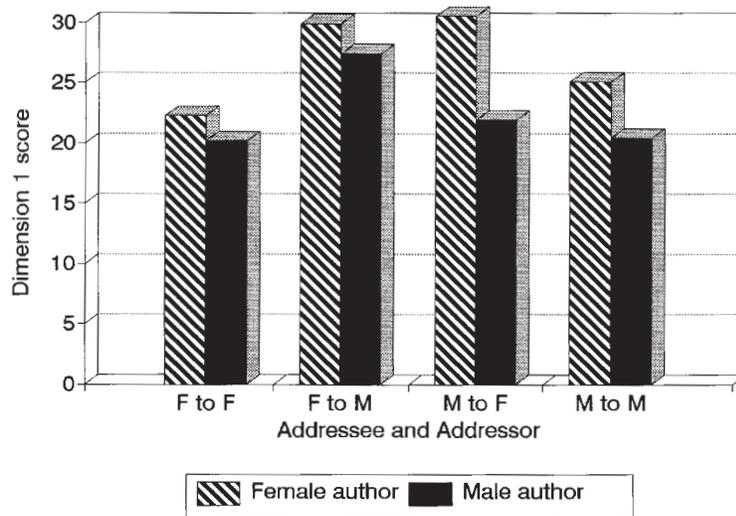
{=f JULIA.} Sir, I confess, all is in your power; And, as I need not be brib'd by the hopes of a plentiful fortune to do my duty; so 'tis in vain by frights and terrors to exact that from me, which lies not in my power to performe; the example in Sir Salomons Family is so odious a President of tyranny in the eyes of the whole world, that I am sure you can never make it your Pattern. And, Sir, give me leave, for your satisfaction and mine, to make you this solemn protestation, that I never will marry him, whom you like not, or him, whom I love not.

In the twentieth century, on the other hand, the central determining factor has become whether dialogues are cross-sex or same-sex. That is, cross-sex dialogues (female → male or male → female) have shifted to become considerably more involved than same-sex dialogues (female → female or male → male), for authors and speakers of both genders.

To further investigate this recent development, Figure 5 plots the twentieth-century dimension 1 characteristics of each speaker-addressee dyad as it is represented by female and male authors. Here we see a mismatch between the patterns of female and male authors. First, female authors consistently portray all speakers as being more involved than male authors do. This difference is especially notable for the portrayal of male speakers: female authors portray male speakers as much more involved than male authors do. However, beyond this, there are more specific differences. Male authors portray female → male discourse as being extremely involved but represent the other three pairings as only moderately involved. In contrast, female authors portray both kinds of cross-sex dialogue (female → male and male → female) as being extremely involved (reflected by more frequent use of first- and second-person pronouns, contractions, direct questions, etc., combined with a less frequent use of nouns and associated nominal modifiers). Cross-sex dialogue is also more tentative, especially in women's utterances, with expressions such as *I can't say*, *I think*, and *I'm not sure*, along with the self-correction *I mean*.

As a result, the biggest mismatch here is for male → female dialogue: female authors represent this as being extremely involved, while male authors portray it as only moderately involved. Interestingly, both male and female authors agree on their portrayal of female → female discourse as only moderately involved.

In sum, we see generalizations B and C partially supported in terms of both the language produced by female and male speakers and in terms of the stylistic preferences of female and male authors. However, the findings here suggest that this generalization must be revised to take into account the influence of same-sex versus cross-sex interactions.



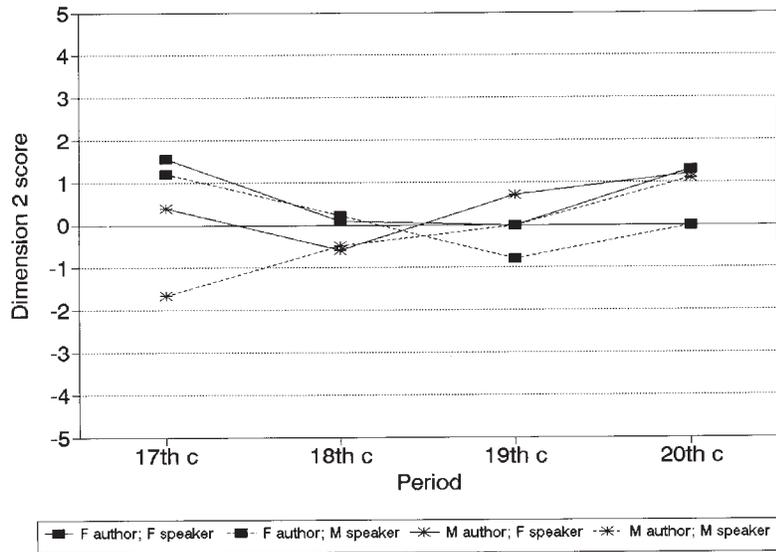
**Figure 5:** Twentieth-Century Dimension 1 Scores, for Female/Male Speaker and Female/Male Addressee, by Female versus Male Author.

#### Gender and Narrative versus Persuasive Strategies: Dimensions 2 and 4

Generalization D can be investigated through comparison of dramatic dialogues along dimension 2 (narrative discourse) and dimension 4 (overt expression of persuasion/argumentation).

Figures 6 and 7 plot the historical trends along these two dimensions for female and male speakers as they are portrayed by female and male authors. Neither figure shows clear-cut differences between female and male speakers. With respect to dimension 2, there is considerable fluctuation across the periods, although all dialogues show a trend toward more narrative styles in the most recent period. Interestingly, male author portrayals of both male and female speakers are narrative, as are female author portrayals of female speakers—only male speakers portrayed by female authors are unmarked for a narrative focus.

Figure 7 is consistent with earlier studies of dimension 4, which have shown it to be more important as a marker of a speaker's or a writer's individual style than as a marker of varieties. (This is especially evident with the nineteenth-century scores for female authors, which are based on only a single dramatic text.) However, this figure shows no general difference in the persuasiveness of female and male speakers.



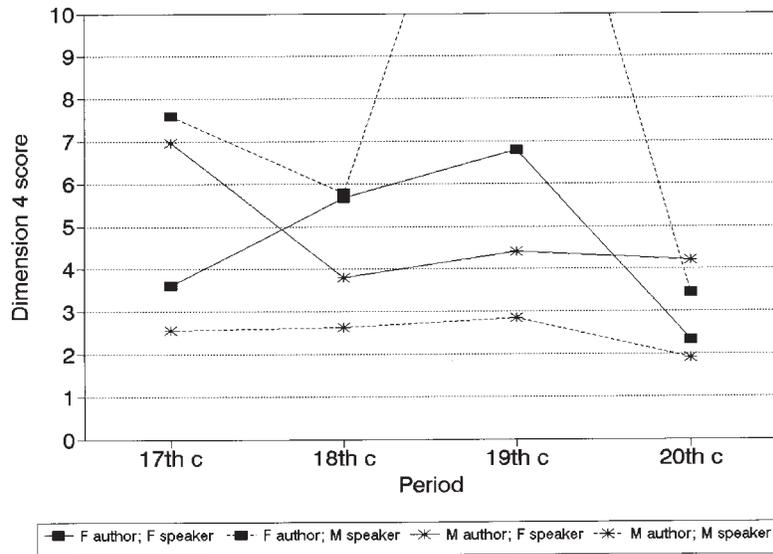
**Figure 6:** Dimension 2 Scores, for Female/Male Author and Female/Male Speaker, across Periods.

In sum, neither of these dimensions identifies clear-cut differences in the language produced by men and women. The characterizations with respect to dimensions 2 and 4 raise serious doubts concerning sex-related generalizations about preferences for narrative or persuasive strategies. These findings indicate the need for additional corpus-based research on current-day conversations, examining a broader range of linguistic features relating to narrative and persuasive strategies.

### Conclusion

In this article, we have illustrated the application of corpus-based analysis to investigations of sex-related linguistic performance. We have focused here on the dramatic portrayal of female/male discourse by female/male authors and have tracked the historical trends in preferred styles over the past four centuries.

We found that connections between gender and loquacity are complex ones, with authors representing characters of their own gender as speaking more than those of the opposite gender. Furthermore, neither female nor male authors represented male characters as producing more talk than female characters did in cross-gender conversation. With respect to women's involvement, tentativeness, and reli-



**Figure 7:** Dimension 4 Scores, for Female/Male Author and Female/Male Speaker, across Periods.

ance on narrative rather than on persuasive strategies, the results of this study are again complex. We found that female authors portrayed both female and male characters as being more involved and tentative than male authors. In addition, we found that for female and—to a lesser extent—for male authors as well, the gender of the addressee was a major factor in the extent of involvement and tentativeness. The results of this study do not, however, support a preference for narrative strategies over persuasive strategies on the part of either female characters or female authors.

The historical changes that emerged from this study include a marked increase in the preference of authors for dialogue spoken by characters of their own gender. Another shift was a trend toward more involved production, especially in the twentieth century. While this shift occurred in the work of both male and female authors, it was most marked for female authors. A third shift occurred in the impact of the addressee's gender over time: the level of involvement became less dependent on whether the addressee was male or female and more dependent on whether the dyad itself was same gender or mixed gender, with mixed-gender dyads becoming more involved than same-gender dyads.

In future studies, these same techniques could be usefully applied to the analysis of natural conversation among and between women and men. This would allow

comparisons to previous research based on qualitative methods and to the historical findings presented here, yielding a more comprehensive view of the complex ways in which gender and language may influence each other.

### Note

1. We use the terms *gender* and *sex* more or less interchangeably because there is no real consensus on any clear differences in their meanings. Some researchers draw a sharp distinction between them, believing, like Coates (1993), that “‘sex’ refers to a biological distinction, while ‘gender’ is the term used to describe socially constructed categories based on sex” (3-4). However, this is by no means a universal categorization of the terms; other researchers use them somewhat differently. For example, while Nordenstam (1992) seems to favor the use of *gender*, she also identifies interlocutors as being “of the same sex” (77) and refers to “single-sex” (85) or “same-sex” (91) groups, as well as to “single-gender dyads” (96) and “two-gender dyads” (76). But Rubin and Greene (1992), noting that even “biological sex [is] culturally constructed” (16), prefer to use the terms “biological gender” (7) and “psychological gender role” (cf. 16).

In our study, the choice of terminology is further complicated by the fact that we are analyzing two different kinds of distinctions: the biological differences between female and male authors versus the projected differences between female and male characters in dramatic texts (reflecting authors’ perceptions).

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