Female voices in horror:  
A linguistic study of female stereotyping in two slasher movies

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Abstract

This study sets out to investigate the extent to which slasher movies can be said to carry out linguistic female stereotyping in their portrayal of female characters. It has been proposed (cf. Coates 1993) that female speech is often associated with politeness, tentativeness, talkativeness and weaker expressions in comparison with men, descending from a female subculture (Graddol & Swann 1989: 90). Considering this, a stereotypical profile was created, consisting of linguistic features such as hedges, questions, expletives, empty adjectives and verbosity, through which the former characteristics may be manifested. The stereotypical profile was then applied to the corpus consisting of the transcripts of the two slasher movies *Halloween* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*. Evidence of all linguistic features mentioned above was found in the corpus, and the female characters’ use of these features did match, to a considerable extent, the stereotypical profile.

Keywords: linguistics, female stereotyping, gender, horror
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1 Introduction

They’re all the same. Some stupid killer stalking some big breasted girl who can’t act and who’s always running up the stairs when she should be going out the front door. It’s insulting. (Scream 1996)

This parodic excerpt from Craven’s 1996 movie hit Scream basically summarizes what many people think of as the essence of slasher movies. Since the dawning of the genre in the late 1970s with pictures such as Halloween, Friday the 13th and A Nightmare on Elm Street, these kinds of films have been accused of superficiality, predictability and sexism. One of the most common objections against slashers is their stereotypical depiction of women. Horror critic Pinedo seems to be so repelled by them that she actually refers to female viewers as “sex traitors” (Trencansky 2001: 1). Although one might disagree with Pinedo on that particular point, it has to be admitted that for an unobservant viewer the most frequent female portrait in slashers is a personification of the quotation above. The question this study wishes to address however, is whether there is any linguistic evidence supporting the general notion of female stereotyping in slasher movies.

Hence, this study sets out to investigate the extent to which the portrayal of female communicators can be said to be stereotypical. Special attention is paid to the main characters, often referred to as “final girls”, i.e. the female characters who escape the murderer’s attempts to kill them (Clover 1992) to see whether and in what way their use of language differs from other female characters’.

The keyword is “female stereotyping” as much of the linguistic behaviour assumed to characterize female speech, e.g. talkativeness, non-assertiveness etc. (Coates 1993) was proven inaccurate in empirical research, and one reason for the persistent myth of women behaving in a certain way may be the portrayal of females in media and popular culture (Graddol & Swann 1989: 10).

The linguistic features constituting the basis of this study are presented and discussed in Section 4, and the method used to accomplish the aim is presented in Section 5. The issue of gender in horror movies has previously been approached by Clover (1992); however, to the best of my knowledge there are no available studies focusing explicitly on language in horror or slasher movies. Previous studies on gender and language are discussed in Section 3.

The data chosen for this particular study consist of two slasher movies: Carpenter’s Halloween (1978) and Gillespie’s I Know What You Did Last Summer (1997) along with their transcribed versions. The screenplay of Halloween was written by John Carpenter and Debra Hill,
and the screenplay writer of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* was Kevin Williamson. The material is presented in greater detail in Section 2. The results of the study are presented and discussed in Section 6 and exemplified with excerpts from the corpus accordingly. The conclusion drawn from the analysis is to be found in Section 7.

It is important to keep in mind that while language use in movies might be a reflection of how language is used in the real world, it is also necessarily filtered through the mind of the scriptwriter. The degree of gender based language use thus depends on the writer’s perception of how language is used in reality. Furthermore, it depends on his/her wishes to either conform to or challenge society’s expectations on how language is used by men and women.

1.1 Aim, scope & research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which slasher movies carry out linguistic female stereotyping in their portrayal of female characters. It is acknowledged that men are subjected to as many stereotypes as women; however, an examination of the male characters’ linguistic behaviour in these data will not be carried out, as it is beyond the scope of this study. That is, the purpose of this essay is not to make a comparison between the male and female characters’ use of language, but rather to compare the female characters’ use of language with a stereotypical profile consisting of linguistic features proposed to characterize female speech. Research questions to be addressed are the following:

- What kind of linguistic behaviour is essentially associated with women?
- Is there any evidence of such behaviour in these data?

2. Material

The material used for this study consists of the slasher movies *Halloween* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (henceforth *I Know...*) along with their transcripts. The transcript of *Halloween* was made by Michaels and retrieved from the Internet, while the transcript of *I Know...* was created by a computer software called Subrip 0.96b, which converts subtitles into text files. The transcript was also manually modified to include lines missing in the subtitles. The movies were selected because they are familiar to the author and known to be representative for the genre, defined by Trencansky as “those horror movies that consist of a monster or maniac stalking and/or killing a succession of people, usually teenagers” (2001:1).

2.1 Plot summaries

The plot summaries below give a brief description of the two movies.
2.1.1 *Halloween*

On Halloween night 1963, six-year-old Michael Myers stabs his older baby-sitting sister to death. He is taken care of by the authorities and locked away in a mental institution under the supervision of Dr Loomis. The psychiatrist spends years and years trying to reach the young boy, but he is eventually forced to admit that Michael Myers passed the limit of what is human a long time ago. In October 1978, Myers manages to escape from the institution; he steals a car with the destination set on his home town, Haddonfield. Halloween is coming up and the seventeen-year-old baby-sitter Laurie Strode is in for the nightmare of her life. The bogey-man is back in town.

2.1.2 *I Know...*

After a 4th-of- July-party at the beach, four friends accidentally run over a man walking on the side of the dark, serpentine road. In the belief that the man is already dead, they dump the body in the ocean to save themselves from the consequences of the terrible accident.

Almost a year later, one of the girls receives an anonymous letter saying: “I know what you did last summer”, and it becomes evident that someone knows their secret. And as the 4th of July is getting closer, it becomes even more evident that the secret is fatal. Whoever is out there playing with them is determined not to let the four friends get away with murder.

2.2 The texts

The two movies are mainly regarded in this study as one corpus rather than two separate units as they belong to the same genre and therefore contain the same general characteristics. Comparisons between the two will only be carried out and commented on when it is necessary to be able to make valid points. Table 1 below presents the details of the data. The figures in brackets refer to the corresponding figures in percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Size and distribution of text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characters</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utterances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are 34 characters: 14 female and 20 male, contributing to the text in the corpus. It consists of...
a total of 8959 words: 5370 (60%) uttered by female characters and 3589 (40%) by males. All the words were counted, including interjections such as aah, oh, yuck. Contractions just as hyphenated words were regarded as one word.

It was decided to use the term “utterances” rather than “sentences” as these also include fragments of sentences, one or two-word utterances and non-finite clauses. Punctuation was used as unit markers; thus any line that ended with a full stop, a question mark or an exclamation mark was considered an utterance. The corpus contains 1062 utterances (62%) spoken by females and 657 utterances (38%) spoken by males, with a total of 1719 utterances. The term “turns” refers to utterances spoken at one occasion by one character. There is a total of 1144 turns in the corpus, of which 685 (60%) were used by the female characters, and 459 (40%) by the male characters.

The uneven distribution of words, utterances and turns is not regarded as problematic as the focus of this study is foremost on linguistic features of female speech. Comparisons between female and male speech will be considered and commented on only when valid points must be made. Table 2 below shows the gender distribution of the conversations in the corpus. The figures in brackets refer to the corresponding figures in percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Halloween</em></td>
<td>7 (26%)</td>
<td>8 (30%)</td>
<td>12 (44%)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I Know...</em></td>
<td>11 (37%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>18 (60%)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entire corpus</td>
<td>18 (32%)</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>30 (52%)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The corpus consists of 57 conversations of which 18 (32%) were between female characters and 9 (16%) between males. In 30 of the conversations (52%) the characters were both male and female. The fact that the two movies are separated in time by almost 20 years should be noted, since it may or may not reveal some interesting differences relevant for this study.

3. Overview of previous research

Much research has been devoted to the field of language and gender. Focus has mainly been on gender differences, and as with most research men have (implicitly or explicitly) been considered the norm and women the deviation from this norm. An early example of this is Jespersen (1922) who in his study of the nature and development of language, included a chapter called “The Woman” while ignoring to include one called “The Man” (Cameron 1992: 43). Later examples include Lakoff ([1975] 2004) who makes a distinction between “neutral language” and “women’s language” where neutral language contains features which may be used both by males and females,
while women’s language “is not being adopted by men, apart from those who reject the American masculine image [for example homosexuals]” (Lakoff 2004: 44).

Feminist linguist Cameron (1992) suggests two motives for focusing on the differences between male and female language use. The first motive, which she regards as positive, is an urge to find evidence of a true female language while the second motive, which is regarded as negative, involves the identification of “the sexual power dynamic in language use, the conventions and behaviours through which speech reflects and perpetuates gender inequality” (Cameron 1992: 37). Lakoff (2004) can be said to take aim at the positive motive, as she claims the existence of a female type of language to be distinguished from how men use language. However, she does not fail to acknowledge sexual power dynamic as a reason for – or at least an explanation of – the existence of female speech (2004: 82). She associates female language use with tentativeness and lack of assertion originating from socialization, i.e. women are taught already as little girls to use a soft, weak kind of language coloured by non-assertive forms and tentativeness signals such as lexicogrammatical hedges. This naturally leads to a disadvantage in interaction as women are unable to communicate on the same terms as men. Lakoff claims that a woman has two choices: either to ignore the tradition of female speech and lose the right to her femininity; or to follow tradition and gain respect as a woman, but not as a full person (2004: 41). Unfortunately, none of Lakoff’s ideas found ground in empirical research; they were rather based on introspection and her own intuition (2004: 40).

Coates (1993) is more neutral and objective in her approach as she describes “language use, in particular the differing usage of women and men as speakers” (1993: 3). Her book provides an overview of language in relation to gender and makes an attempt to show how women’s and men’s language differs, as well as why it differs. The answers are found within fields such as anthropology, dialectology and sociolinguistics. Her discussion dives into the issue of the consequences of gendered language, i.e. miscommunication and male dominance. She also brings about the notion of “powerful and powerless language” (1993: 132), which is not necessarily determined by gender.

In the work of Graddol & Swann (1989), the authors present three views of the relationship between language and gender. The first view proposes that existing gender divisions are reflected by language, while the second view proposes that gender divisions are created by language (1989: 9). The third view suggests a compromise between the former two, emphasizing moreover “that any full account of language and gender must explore the tension and interplay between the two” (ibid). These views, especially the latter one, constitute the ground for their exploration of traditional accounts of masculinity and femininity, gender differences in language use, and the possibility of
language itself being sexist. The authors take into account biological aspects, such as differences in voice pitch, psychological aspects according to which language is seen as a part of an individual’s identity, and social and cultural aspects which propose that language is to a great extent a learnt behaviour descending from cultural norms regarding gender roles. The latter aspect suggests that by conforming to these norms “individuals help recreate the social world in ordinary everyday encounters; that they do not just reaffirm it for themselves and reassure themselves that the world is ‘normal’ but that what they do ultimately help reproduce social structure and the gender inequalities which that implies” (1989: 172).

4 Linguistic aspects of female stereotyping

Her voice was ever soft, Gentle and low; an excellent thing in woman. (Shakespeare, The Tragedy of King Lear)

Throughout the ages Western society has ascribed women characteristics proposed to capture the very essence of what femininity is, or at least ought to be. Evidence of this is to be found in religion, e.g. the cult surrounding the Virgin Mary, in poetry such as Coventry Patmore’s The Angel in the House, in various proverbs and in literary quotations such as the one above. It is also reflected in how women use language – or rather – how women are assumed to use language.

Features commonly used to describe female speech are politeness and tentativeness (Coates 1993). Brown and Levinson (in Coates 1993: 29) regard linguistic politeness as minding other people’s face needs. Negative face needs involve a person’s free space, and one way to satisfy those needs is to apologize whenever intruding on that free space, e.g. I’m so sorry to bother, but would you mind telling me where the bathroom is?. Positive face needs regard “individuals’ desire to be thought well of by others” (Kuiper & Lodge 2004: 143). These needs are attended to, for example, by greeting a person and showing concern for his or her well-being (Coates 1993: 30), e.g. Well, hello Mrs Myers, you’re looking lovely. How are you today?.

In the context of female stereotyping, politeness and tentativeness seem closely connected in that women are assumed to use tentative language in order to signal politeness. However, politeness accounted as the classical concept of maintaining face may not be the only reason (Lakoff 2004). That is, women tend to soften their utterances not only when trying to avoid situations which may threaten someone else’s face, but also to prevent themselves from sounding too assertive and thereby indirectly or unintentionally imposing on other people’s free space. Linguistically this may be manifested by a frequent use of lexical or grammatical hedges (i.e. linguistic forms such as I think, perhaps, kind of and modal verbs etc.) and questions, especially tag
questions (Coates 1993). Compare the examples below, invented for the purpose of illustration:

(1)  a  I think slasher movies are rather entertaining.
     b  Slasher movies are entertaining.

(2)  a  Do you know when you will be back?
     b  When will you be back?

(3)  a  This was a bad idea, wasn’t it?
     b  This was a bad idea.

Some research on gender and language suggests that women and men come from different subcultures and therefore display different kinds of linguistic behaviour (Graddol & Swann 1989: 90). This is not an entirely new fact as Jespersen in his 1922 study claims to have noticed differences in women’s and men’s choices of words (1922: 245). For instance, women seemed to favour words such as pretty and nice, which were disregarded by men. Furthermore, he reports on women’s preference to use “feminine exclamations” such as good gracious and dear me, and euphemistic substitutions for expressions regarded as swearing, which on the other hand were frequently used by men (1922: 247). He traces these differences back to “the division of labour in primitive tribes and to a great extent also among more civilized peoples” (1922: 254). Jespersen’s findings are very similar to Lakoff’s notion of empty adjectives and women’s tendency to use, in her words, “weaker” expletives than men (2004: 44-45). She claims the existence of a neutral set of adjectives, e.g. cool, terrific and great, used by both sexes, and an additional set of adjectives such as divine, charming and adorable, restricted to female speech only. The latter type may, in addition to their literal meanings, also be used figuratively to express, for instance, admiration (2004: 45), e.g. What a fabulous idea. According to Lakoff, the choice of such words over words from the neutral group would “suggest that concepts to which they are applied are not relevant to the world of (male) influence and power” (2004: 46), hence the “emptiness”.

When it comes to expletives, Lakoff (2004: 44) uses the following example to illustrate the difference between the male and female use of these features.

(4)  (a)  Oh dear, you’ve put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.
     (b)  Shit, you’ve put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

Example (4 a) exemplifies the female choice and (4 b) the male choice. Thus, she associates female speech with the substitutions of curse words (weak expletives) and male speech with actual swearing (strong expletives).

Another common and firmly rooted stereotype is that women speak more than men. “Women ... are consistently portrayed as chatterboxes, endless gossips or strident nags patiently endured by strong and silent men” (Graddol & Swann 1989: 2). This may seem somewhat
contradictory in light of such low-key features as the ones mentioned above. However, the explanation is found in different expectations on women and men as speakers: “while men have the right to talk, women are expected to remain silent – talking at any length, then, will be perceived as talkativeness in women” (Coates: 1993: 115).

To summarize: female speech is stereotypically described as polite and tentative, which linguistically may be expressed in the frequent use of hedges and questions. Women belong to a different subculture than men which results in gender determined choices of words, such as empty adjectives and weak expletives substituting swearing. Women are expected to keep quiet and are therefore perceived as talkative whenever failing to fulfil this expectation.

5. Method

By consulting various sources on gender and language, e.g. Cameron (1992), Graddol & Swann (1989), Coates (1993) and Lakoff (2004), it was possible to create a stereotypical profile of female speech consisting of linguistic features such as hedges, questions (including statements and directives couched as questions), expletives, empty adjectives and verbosity. Other features such as turn-taking, floor-taking, interruption, minimal responses and disfluency were disregarded, as they are features assumed to be difficult to detect in movie conversations that are scripted and thus unnatural.

Lakoff (2004) suggests that precise discrimination of colour (e.g. mauve, crimson, indigo etc.) is a feature characteristic of female speech. This feature was disregarded as well, as it seems too context specific for a corpus of such limited size, i.e. none of the conversations contained discussions about colours.

The stereotypical profile was then applied to the corpus in order to see whether and in what way the stereotypes matched the language used by the female characters. A frequency count of hedges, questions, expletives and empty adjectives was carried out, and the features were also categorized according to their nature and contextual function or purpose. Ten mixed-sex conversations were analysed in order to see whether the myth of the talkative woman has any ground in these data.

As it was considered important to establish whether the females’ use of the above mentioned features did in fact exceed males’ use, a frequency count of these features in the male part of the corpus was carried out as well. However, as previously mentioned, further comparisons between males’ and females’ use of these features will be considered and commented on only when it is necessary to make valid points, such as regarding expletives where it is proposed that women
favour weaker expletives in comparison with men.

The findings were also regarded in relation to other empirical studies on female speech, to possible differences between the two movies and to possible linguistic differences between the main characters and other female characters.

6 Results

The aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which slasher movies accomplish linguistic female stereotyping in their portrayal of female characters. For this purpose a stereotypical profile was created, containing linguistic features proposed to characterize female speech, which was then applied to the corpus consisting of the transcripts of the two slasher movies *Halloween* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*. This section presents the results of the analysis viewed in tables and illustrated with examples from the corpus. The findings will be presented in the following order: *hedges, questions, expletives, empty adjectives* and *verbosity*.

6.1 Hedges

The term “hedge” refers to words or phrases such as *I think, maybe, you know, kind of* etc. which are used to convey the degree of the speaker’s certainty or uncertainty about what is being said (Coates 1993: 116). A frequency count of such expressions in the female part of the data resulted in a total of 111 instances, i.e. 10.5% of the 1062 utterances were hedged in some way (6.4% of the male part of the corpus). There was a slight difference in the amount of hedges in the two movies (48 in *I Know...* and 63 in *Halloween*) which is probably due to the fact that the latter movie has more female characters. However, as there were no representative differences in the form or function of the hedges, comparisons between the two movies will not be commented on.

The hedges were divided into two main categories, presented in Table 3 below. The figures in brackets refer to the number of occasions. The first category (26%) regards instances where the speaker is uncertain about the truth condition of the utterance, and the second category (74%) includes utterances which in some ways are softened, due to, for example, politeness.

Table 3. Main categories of hedges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty about truth</td>
<td>mental verbs (9), adverbs (17), modals (3)</td>
<td><em>I think, probably, must</em></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Softeners</td>
<td>mental verbs (28), politeness markers (7), finite clauses (8), adverbs (33), modals (6)</td>
<td><em>I guess, please, you know, well, could</em></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Lakoff, the first category would represent a “legitimate” use of hedges as they function as indicators that the speaker is not completely certain about the truth condition of the statement (2004: 79). See the examples below:

(5) I can access the local library and probably pull up all we need to know.

(6) Maybe he just wants a date.

(7) I think Willis killed David.

The adverbs probably and maybe and the mental verb think signal that what is being said may or may not be the case. That is, in example (5) Julie indicates the possibility of her being able to retrieve the information they need from the Internet. In example (6) Annie points out a possible reason for why Laurie is being stalked. In the last example Julie presents the possibility that the man whom the four friends thought they killed actually was killed by someone else. Thus if the utterances prove to be incorrect, the speakers cannot be held responsible. An even more efficient way of abjuring responsibility occurs in the utterance in (8):

(8) According to his sister that would make him class of 92.

Example (9) below illustrates an instance where the hedges may function as indicators of uncertainty about the truth condition of the utterance, but they could also be a result of the speaker’s own insecurity and lack of confidence.

(9) Costane wrote that fate was somehow related only to religion whereas Samuels felt that, well, fate was like a natural element.

There were a couple of utterances in I Know… where the hedge maybe seemed to have a somewhat ambiguous function. To illustrate, see example (10) below.

(10) Maybe he wanted to die. Maybe he blamed himself. Maybe he was sitting in the road waiting for us to hit him.

These utterances take place after the female characters Julie and Helen have learned that the man whom they accidentally ran over, and later dumped in the ocean, was involved two years earlier on the same road in a car accident which cost his girlfriend’s life. The hedges function partly as indicators of possibility, but also as a sort of “mitigators” as the possibility of the man wanting to die would mean that they are not responsible for his death, but perhaps even did him a favour. The hedges in the form of modals indicate degree of certainty, as in example (11):

(11) He must have broken the window with his hands.

The choice of the modal must makes the utterance more assertive than may or could would have, but still less assertive than the statement He broke the window with his hands. It indicates the speaker’s belief that there is actually a slight possibility that he did use a tool of some kind to smash
the window.

The “softeners”, which constitute the second category of hedges found in the corpus, do not regard uncertainty about the truth of the utterance, but rather linguistic features and choice of words which mitigate the utterance and prevent the speaker from sounding too assertive. The instances were further categorized according to their contextual purpose, displayed in Table 4 below.

**Table 4. Contextual purposes of softeners**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech acts</th>
<th>Politeness (19.5%)</th>
<th>Mitigation (36.5%)</th>
<th>Fillers (44%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Politeness (19.5%) is, according to Lakoff, another “justifiable” reason to use hedges (2004: 79) as they prevent the speaker from imposing on the other person’s free space, or threaten his or her negative face needs (Coates 1993: 129). A common way to avoid threatening someone’s face is to soften one’s requests as in examples (12) to (14) from the corpus:

(12) *We were just wondering if we maybe could use your phone?*

(13) *I was kind of hoping that you’d lend me that silk blouse that you got on your birthday.*

(14) *I was wondering, can you give me her phone number?*

These are also examples of what Lakoff refers to as “superpolite forms”, that is compound hedges, which she also claims are common features of female speech (2004: 80). Other instances of hedges used for the sake of politeness occurred in utterances classified as “suggestions” and “wishes” exemplified below:

(15) *I suggest you try Women’s Fragrances.*

(16) *I need you there by ten.*

(17) *I want you to go out of the house, go down the street to the Mackenzie’s house. I want you to knock on their door.*

(18) *I’d like you to call Ben Tramer and tell him that you were just fooling around.*

These utterances are actually couched commands as the speakers are trying to get someone else to do something. The hedges, which allow avoidance of the imperative form, make the utterances seem less imposing and thereby more polite. Not to say that example (17) is particularly polite;
however, the avoidance of the imperative form makes it less assertive than an outright command and it was therefore counted as a softener.

The last example is somewhat remarkable in its context. It is uttered by Laurie in *Halloween* who is hopping mad because her friend Annie has told a boy, Ben Tramer, that Laurie has a crush on him, and one might rightfully question the necessity of hedging in this situation. Another rather odd use of politeness markers occurs towards the end of the same movie when Laurie is chased by the murderous Michael Myers. He is right behind her when she reaches the neighbours’ front door, but despite the panic she still makes the effort of creating the superpolite form:

(19) *Will you please* help me?

The main character Julie in *I Know...* is facing a similar situation and she encounters the murderer (!) with the utterance:

(20) *Please,* it was an accident.

“Mitigation”, the second functional category of softeners (36.5%), regards expressions where there is no danger of threatening someone else’s face, but the hedges are used more to prevent the speaker herself from sounding too assertive, such as beginning a declarative with *I think* to signal that this is an opinion rather than a fact and the listener is free to disagree if (s)he wishes. Such examples are presented below.

(21) *I think* he’s cute.
(22) *I think* you’re whacko.
(23) *I think* we’ve had enough.

The utterances classified as “disagreements” were mitigated in the same spirit. These are exemplified below.

(24) Barry: It’s a bullshit story.
Ray: No, it’s not. It’s true.
Helen: *I don’t think so,* Ray.

(25) Julie: God, do you see what we’ve done? We killed a man and ruined the lives of everyone he knew.
Helen: *I don’t think we’re* that powerful.

The hedges in favour of a more blunt or outright way of disagreeing in (24) and (25) serve two functions. First, it prevents Helen from coming off as too assertive; and secondly, it might prevent Ray and Julie from getting offended by her disagreement. This use of hedges finds ground in Lakoff’s claim that women “are socialized to believe that asserting themselves strongly isn’t nice or ladylike, or even feminine” (2004: 79).

Some of the suggestions were regarded as mitigations as they provide a sense of inclusion
(i.e. the use of *let’s*) and furthermore give the listeners the opportunity to say “no thanks” if they should disapprove of the idea.

(26)   

*Let’s* make more popcorn.

(27)

*Let’s* beam down to Dawson’s beach.

Other examples from the same category include if-clauses which are less assertive than direct statements as they are presented as negotiable suggestions, as seen in (28):

(28)   

If *we bring* the yearbook to Missy, she could point him out.

The last category of softeners (44%) is somewhat problematic as it concerns, for example, instances of *well* and *you know* which normally are counted as discourse markers. In some research, e.g. Coates (1993), however, they are regarded as hedges, and as they occurred so frequently (see Table 4) it was decided to include them as such and categorize them as “fillers” to signal that they do not necessarily indicate insecurity.

This category, however, constitutes a usage which Lakoff explicitly associates with female speech and defines as “the speaker is perfectly certain of the truth of the assertion, and there’s no danger of offense, but the tag appears anyway as an apology for making an assertion at all” (2004: 79). That is, she explicitly associates the use of *well* and *you know* with tentativeness and the very presence of the features indicates lack of confidence. In this sense the following example, uttered by Julie in *I Know*... as a reference to an urban legend about a man with a hook, could be classified as an excuse for the audacity of making a statement.

(29)   

*You know*, the hook is really a phallic symbol.

A great part of the fillers (71%) however, appear explicitly as discourse markers to either draw attention to the following utterance as in (30), to frame a greeting as in (31), or to signal the end of the conversation as in (32) where Annie and Laurie are walking home from school and approach Annie’s house.

(30)   

Pageant official: In the spirit of Mother Teresa, what will be your contribution to your community and the world at large? 
Helen: *Well*, at summer’s end, I plan to become a serious actress in New York. By entertaining the world through art I shall serve my country.

(31)   

(Julie enters the store)
Elsa: *Well*, look what the cat drug in.

(32)   

Annie: *Well*, home sweet home.

Other discourse markers such as *listen* and *look* with a function similar to *well* were also categorized as fillers. Apart from their function to signal a following utterance, they also provide a sense of listener inclusion as they explicitly address the listener:
Other instances, such as the following example, may signal the speaker’s insecurity about what to do or how to act in that situation.

(34)  
(Lynda lies in bed. Door opens. Figure wearing a ghost costume and Bob’s glasses enters.) 
Lynda: Cute Bob, real cute. 
Lynda: *Well,* did you get my beer? *(Lynda sits up and drops sheet)* 
Lynda: See anything you like? 
Lynda: *Well,* can’t you answer me? *(Ghost breathes)* 
Lynda: *Well* I’m calling Laurie.

Since the ghost is wearing her boyfriend Bob’s glasses, Lynda falsely assumes that it is in fact he who is standing at the foot of her bed. The discourse marker *well* does by all means introduce the two interrogative forms and the declarative, however the reason for using them might be “Bob’s” silence which makes Lynda feel uncomfortable.

Similarly, the instance of *you know* in the following example may be a result of the speaker’s insecurity as it involves personal matters and moreover is addressed to two strangers. It is retrieved from *I Know...* and uttered by Missy, the sister of the man who was hit in a car accident and dumped in the ocean by Julie, Helen and their boyfriends. Missy knows nothing about the two girls’ involvement in David’s death, but believes he drowned himself out of guilt for accidentally killing his girlfriend in a car accident two years earlier.

(35)  
Julie: Do you live alone? 
Missy: My daddy died a long time ago and mama’s in a home. *You know,* she didn’t take too well to what happened to David.

## 6.1.1 Summary

The frequency count of hedges in the female part of the corpus resulted in 111 instances, or 10.5% of the utterances (6.4% of the utterances in the male part of the corpus). The hedges were divided into two main categories: “Uncertainty about truth” (26%) where the hedges were used to indicate that the speaker was not completely certain about the truth of the utterance, and “Softeners” (74%) where the hedges mitigated the utterances for various reasons. The softeners were further categorized according to their contextual purposes. 19.5% of the softeners concerned politeness where the hedges prevented the speaker from imposing on the addressee’s free space. 36.5% of the softeners were categorized as “mitigation” and were used to prevent the speaker from sounding too assertive. The remaining 44% were regarded as “fillers” which did not necessarily indicate tentativeness, but were still accounted for, as they are proposed to be frequent in female speech.
6.2 Questions

Female speech is commonly associated with a frequent use of questions proposed to reflect women’s insecurity as communicators (Coates 1993: 123). Some research also suggests that women in fact do ask more information seeking questions than men; a reason for this is thought to be that “women feel less inhibited about asking for information, since it does not conflict with the gender role prescribed by society” (Coates 1993: 122). Asking for information, however, is not the only function a question may have, as observed later. Questions may also convey, for example, couched statements and commands, suggestions and implied opinions; a frequent use of these secondary functions may result in a language “in which everything is hedged about and nothing asserted outright” (Cameron 1992: 44). The result of the frequency count of questions in the female part of the corpus is presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Frequency and distribution of the questions asked by female characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wh-questions</th>
<th>Yes/no-questions</th>
<th>Formal tag-questions</th>
<th>Informal tag-questions</th>
<th>Declaratives (intonation)</th>
<th>Imperatives (intonation)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Halloween</em></td>
<td>37 (47%)</td>
<td>26 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (2.5%)</td>
<td>3 (3.5%)</td>
<td>9 (11.5%)</td>
<td>2 (2.5%)</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I Know...</em></td>
<td>59 (54%)</td>
<td>36 (33%)</td>
<td>4 (3.75%)</td>
<td>6 (5.5%)</td>
<td>4 (3.75%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Both</em></td>
<td>96 (51%)</td>
<td>62 (33%)</td>
<td>6 (3%)</td>
<td>9 (5%)</td>
<td>13 (7%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frequency count of questions in the female part of the corpus resulted in a total of 188 questions, that is roughly 18% of the 1062 utterances consisted of questions (11% in the male part of the corpus). *Halloween* contained 79 questions and *I Know...* 109; the difference in their distribution is due to the different outlines of the two plots, i.e. *I Know...* contains an investigation part which *Halloween* lacks.

Wh-questions were the most common in both movies and regarded specific information as in *What are you gonna wear to the dance tomorrow night?*; information about time: *When did you get home?*; place: *Where did you go?*; person: *Who is he?*; reason: *Why did you hang up on me?*; and state: *How’s my hair?*. Yes/no-questions such as *Are you riding with me?* and *Is he dead?* were also fairly common.

The tag questions were divided into formal and informal tag questions, e.g. *You’re serious about it, aren’t you?* and *I don’t know, ok?*. These forms will be commented on more thoroughly later, as Lakoff (2004: 47) strongly associates them with female speech.

Some of the questions appeared in declaratives and imperatives, forms which are normally not connected with questions. They were recognized via question marks in the transcripts and the speaker’s rising intonation, see examples below.
You mean you actually never want him to get out?

Promise me you won't rip it?

Hence the utterances are presented as statements and commands; but they are hedged into questions perhaps due to politeness and a fear of sounding too assertive.

A question’s primary function is to ask for various kinds of information; however, as mentioned earlier, this may not be its only function. The two subsequent sections contain a discussion of such secondary functions. The reason for treating the movies separately in this section was to facilitate the discussion as the functions in the two movies differed somewhat.

### 6.2.1 I Know...

Table 6 below presents the forms and functions of the questions asked by females in *I Know...*. The figures in brackets indicate the number of occurrences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6. Forms and functions of questions in <em>I Know...</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wh-questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking information (25); seeking clarification (13); seeking opinion (5); expressing emotions (7); hypothesizing (4); rhetoric question (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes/no-questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking information (14); seeking opinion (2); seeking confirmation (2); expressing emotions (3); teasing (3); request (2); couched directive (2); discourse marker (4); indirect disagreement (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal tag-questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>couched statement (2); comment (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal tag-questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking confirmation (1); emphasizing (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Declaratives (intonation)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking confirmation (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total percentage of functions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking information: 36%; seeking confirmation: 6.5%; seeking clarification: 14%; expressing emotions: 9%; seeking opinion: 6.5%; couched directive: 2%; requests: 2%; hypothesizing: 3.5%; rhetorical questions: 3.5%; discourse marker: 3.5%; indirect disagreement: 3.5%; teasing: 3%; couched statement: 1.5%; comment: 1.5%; emphasizing: 4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions whose explicit function was to gather information were the most common kind (36%) and they were realized as wh-questions and yes/no-questions only. As mentioned earlier, the different plots of the movies determined to some extent the amount and functions of the questions. *I Know...* contains an investigation part where the characters make an attempt to gather information about the man they killed in the car accident and eventually dumped in the ocean. This was done in order to try to find out who was stalking them. Among other things, Julie and Helen pay a visit to the dead man’s sister Missy, with the pretext that their car stalled and they need to use the phone. See the excerpts below for illustration:
(38) Julie: Your name, Egan, sounds very familiar. Did you have a brother?
Missy: I did, but he was younger than me. David.
Julie: What class was he?
Missy: ’92. But he died last July.

(39) Julie: I think I remember David. He had a friend, right? What was his name?
Helen: Didn’t he hang out with this guy? What was his name?
Missy: There was one guy... He stopped by not long after David’s death to pay his respects.
Helen: Where is this old friend now?
Missy: Oh, I don’t know.
Helen: Do you remember his name?
Missy: Billy.
Helen: Did he have a last name?

The questions in example (38) are straightforward information-seeking questions. However, as one can see, some of the questions in example (39) are rather indirect, such as the informal tag question right? in the first line and the negative question in the second line. They were both labelled as seeking confirmation as the required answer is “yes”. They also introduce and to some extent mitigate the outright question What was his name?. The last two questions in (39) were tagged as seeking information and appear in the form of yes/no-questions. However, the required and satisfactory answer would be more specific than a simple “yes” or “no”. This use might be due to politeness as these forms may appear less up-front and less imposing. Compare with the habit of asking someone Do you know what time it is? rather than What time is it?.

A rather frequently occurring function of interrogatives in I Know... was seeking clarification (14%). This category regards questions asked as a reaction to a previous utterance, such as What? which might be an appeal for restoration or a pointer that the speaker does not quite follow and therefore demands more information. The latter situation is exemplified in the excerpt below where Julie has returned to Missy to find out more about her dead brother’s friend, Billy Blue.

(40) Julie: [Do you remember me from the other day?] [You know, the car trouble?] seeking confirmation
Missy: [What are you doing here?] seeking information/clarification
Julie: I need to find your brother’s friend, Billy. [Can you look through this yearbook?] request
Missy: [What’s this all about?] seeking clarification
Julie: It has to do with your brother and last July 4th.
Missy: [What about it?] seeking clarification

Julie’s goal is to gather as much information as possible while revealing as little as possible. This turns into a conflict as Missy is reluctant to provide information unless Julie clarifies what is really going on. Thus the situation turns into an issue of cooperation, or rather non-cooperation.

9% of the questions found in I Know... expressed emotions of various kinds. To illustrate, see example (41) and (42).
What’s wrong with you?
What are you doing?

The first example does not inquire about the person’s flaws, but is rather an expression of anger because the addressee has spilt beer all over the speaker. Similarly, Helen in example (42) does not express interest in her sister’s doings with the question *What are you doing?*. Rather she expresses frustration because her sister takes so long to unlock the door and let her in, especially since Helen is being stalked by a murderer. Other negative emotions involved are sadness and remorse, exemplified below.

*(43)*

*What happened between us?* We used to be best friends.

*(44)*

*God, do you see what we’ve done?* We killed a man and ruined the lives of everyone he knew.

In (43) Helen addresses Julie and expresses sadness because the two friends have hardly spent any time together since the night of the car accident almost a year ago. Example (44) is uttered by Julie after her and Helen’s visit to Missy, the dead man’s sister, when she realizes for the first time the consequences of what they did.

The category classified as *seeking opinion* (6.5%) contained examples such as (45) below.

*(45)*

*How’s my hair?*

However, other examples from the same category, such as these below, were of a slightly different character.

*(46)*

Barry: The guy’s already dead. If we go to the police, we’re dead too.
Helen: *What do we do?*

*(47)*

(Helen and Julie have, via the Internet, retrieved information about the dead man’s family and where they live)
Helen: *What do you think?*

*(48)*

Barry: Even if his body washes ashore he’ll be eaten by crabs and small fish. Maybe we’ll get lucky with a shark. Let’s do it.
Julie: Wait. *Should we find out who he is?*

The function of these questions in their context is not only to seek the other person’s opinion; the questions also express an invitation to someone else to take charge and make the decisions. This phenomenon is also connected with *couched directives* (2%), such as example (49) below.

*(49)*

Will you call Triple-A?

According to Lakoff, a function such as this springs from politeness, in that the speaker does not impose her will on someone else, but “the decision is up to the addressee” (2004: 50). The politeness function is present in questions marked as *requests* (2%) as well. See examples (50) and (51) below.
I was wondering, can you give me her phone number?

We were just wondering if we maybe could use your phone?

As the speaker wants the addressee to contribute with something (a favour), she phrases the request in a manner which allows the addressee to refuse cooperating (Coates 1993: 130). The examples above are moreover hedged, which was discussed in the previous section.

One of the functions of questions, i.e., *hypothesizing* (3.5%) is assumed to be present in order to contribute to the suspense character of the movie. The following example is taken from a conversation between Ray and Julie in which Julie has news based on her research.

Julie: It wasn't David Egan we killed. It was Susie’s father. Ben Willis.
Ray: But they found David’s body.
Julie: I think Willis killed David.
Ray: Then we killed Willis?
Julie: But what if he didn’t die?

Some of the questions were regarded as *rhetorical questions* (3.5%), i.e. they were not asked explicitly with the purpose of receiving an answer, but rather to make a point or reason with oneself. See example (53).

Julie: He took the body.
Barry: Why would he do that?
Julie: I don’t know, Barry. Why did he try to run you over? Why did he make coleslaw on Helen’s head? Don’t you see? He’s got us.

Julie has found a dead body in the back of her car. However, when she wants to show Barry the finding, it is missing. The person they refer to is their stalker and Julie’s purpose with the rhetorical questions is that they do not know how he is thinking since he is unpredictable and simply playing with them. Julie’s last question: Don’t you see is neither that asked for the purpose of gaining an answer. However, it was tagged as a *discourse marker* as it primarily functions as a link between the previous and the following utterance. Moreover, it emphasizes the following utterance and thereby draws the listeners’ attention to it. Discourse markers constituted 3.5% of the questions.

Another 3.5% of the questions in *I Know...* were marked with the function *indirect disagreement*. This regards either a previous statement as in example (54), or a previous utterance along with the idea it conveys as in example (55).

Helen: We were so careful.
Julie: Were we?

Julie: We’ll call the police and tell them the truth.
Ray: It’s manslaughter. We’re gonna fry no matter what.
Barry: Then we leave now.
Julie: Are you crazy?
Julie disagrees with the former speakers: in example (54) she does not share Helen’s opinion that the four friends were particularly careful the night of the accident. Neither does she appreciate the idea of being a part of a hit-and-run in (55). However, her disagreements become implicit as she uses questions rather than outright statements to convey the message.

The category classified as *teasing* constituted roughly 3% of the questions. It contained examples such as (56) below.

(56)

Elsa: Are you riding with me?
Helen: No. Tell Mom I’ll be home late.
Elsa: Is Miss Croaker gonna get sautéed?

Elsa, Helen’s sister, refers to the title Croaker Queen which Helen earned in a beauty pageant earlier the same evening.

The tag question is the form of questions which Lakoff claims to be characteristic of female speech (2004: 47). A study carried out by Siegler and Siegler (in Coates 1993: 119) in which students were provided with sentences of various forms and were asked to guess if the speaker was a man or a woman, also suggested that tag questions are commonly assumed to be part of female speech. Lakoff defines the tag question as a compromise between a statement and a question in which “the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim” (2004: 48). Although she admits that there are situations where tag questions are legitimate, such as in small talk and when the speaker is uncertain about the truth of the statement, she sees a danger in the very form, as “a speaker may also give the impression of not being fully sure of himself, of looking to the addressee for confirmation, even of having no views of his own” (2004: 49). However, tag questions may also be associated with politeness as the tag mitigates the statement and invites the addressee to agree or disagree (Lakoff 2004: 50). The use of polite softening is present in two of the formal tag questions marked as *couched statement*. See example (57) below.

(57)

Julie: You don’t really believe that crap, do you?

The tag question is addressed to Ray and refers to an urban legend he told earlier. As Julie’s statement is rather harsh she mitigates it with the tag and thus invites Ray to agree or contradict if he so wishes. The second functional category of the tag questions, *comment*, did not involve politeness or mitigation and neither did the speaker turn to the addressee for confirmation because she is uncertain of the truth of the utterance. The context of example (58) is the following: Julie and Helen have left Missy’s house and are sitting in their car. As they are driving away, Missy stops them because Helen forgot her cigarettes.

(58)

Missy: I see you got your car started, didn’t you? Funny how that happens.
Missy simply uses the tag question to signal doubt and to point out the peculiarity in that the girls’ car seems to be working fine, although fifteen minutes earlier they needed to borrow her phone to call Triple-A because the same car had stalled.

The majority of the informal tag questions were placed in the category *emphasizing* in which the tag *ok* serves to reinforce or check agreement rather than to mitigate the statement. The following example is taken from a conversation where Julie tries to be the mediator in a fight between Barry and Ray, where Barry accuses Ray of being the stalker.

(59) Barry: You always wanted to be our friend, but you were too jealous to handle it.
    Ray: Fuck you!
    Julie: Listen, we have to stick together. Help each other, ok?

The addressing purpose of the tag seems to be *Do you understand me?* rather than *Do you agree with me?*. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, one of the informal tag questions was marked *seeking confirmation*, which also was the function of the declaratives used as questions.

(60) He is back?

The form in (60) is a statement, however the speaker’s rising intonation indicates a question, which means that she is not completely certain of the truth of the utterance and thus turns to the addressee for confirmation.

6.2.2 *Halloween*

Table 7 below presents the different functions of the questions uttered by the female characters in *Halloween*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7. Forms and functions of questions in <em>Halloween</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wh-questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking information (28); seeking clarification (2); expressing anger (2); suggestion (3); comment (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes/no-questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking information (9); seeking confirmation (8); seeking clarification (1); expressing anger (1); teasing (3); suggestion (4); pleading (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal tag-questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>couched statement (1); comment (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal tag-questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking confirmation (1); reassuring (1); teasing (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Declaratives (intonation)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking confirmation (3); seeking clarification (2); teasing (2); couched statement (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imperatives (intonation)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pleading (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total percentage of functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>seeking information: 47%; expressing anger: 3.5%; suggestion: 9%; couched statement: 2.5%; comment: 3.5%; seeking clarification: 6.5%; seeking confirmation: 15%; teasing: 7.5%; pleading: 5%; reassuring: 1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As in *I Know…*, questions asked for the purpose of obtaining information were the most common kind (47%). The nature of the information seeking questions in *Halloween* however, differs from
the ones in the former movie as they foremost involve information regarding the characters themselves. Common examples include questions about clothes and the upcoming school dance, topics which both may be counted as typical elements of a high school girl’s life. Examples (61) and (62) below illustrate this:

(61) Laurie: What are you gonna wear to the dance tomorrow night?

(62) Laurie: What’s the big, big news?
   Annie: What would you say if I told you that you were going to the homecoming dance tomorrow?

As one can see, the last question in example (62) is rather indirect as it contains a conditional clause. It is Annie’s implicit way of letting Laurie know that she has arranged a date for her. One reason for this stalling may be that Annie is uncertain about Laurie’s reaction. The answer to that comes in the form of two implicit questions categorized as expressing anger (3.5%).

(63) Annie: I just talked with Ben Tramer and he got real excited when I told him how attracted you were to him.
   Laurie: How could you do that? How could you just call someone up like that?

Laurie is mad at Annie for breaking her confidence and she is probably also embarrassed because the boy she has a crush on had to hear about it from her friend. Laurie is naturally not inquiring about the exact circumstances which enabled Annie to call Ben, but rather how she could have the audacity of doing so.

Some of the other information seeking questions regarded inquiries related to the characters’ own person, as in the examples below.

(64) Laurie: What’s wrong, Annie? You’re not smiling.

(65) Laurie: Hi Annie. What are you doing?

(66) Laurie: Doyle House.
   Lynda: What’s up?
   Laurie: Oh, just sitting down for the first time tonight.

These examples may be a result of politeness, an attempt to mind the addressees’ positive face needs by expressing concern about their doings (Coates 1993: 130). The use of politeness strategies is present in the following examples, from the categories suggestion (9%) and couched statement (2.5%) as well.

(67) Annie: How about the ski sweater you got for Christmas?

(68) Marion: What do I give him in front of the judge?
   Loomis: Thorazine.
   Marion: He’ll barely be able to sit up.
   Loomis: That’s the idea.
   Marion: You’re really serious about it, aren’t you?

In example (67), Annie wants to borrow clothes from Laurie. By suggesting the ski sweater rather
than demanding it (i.e. how about), she does not impose her own will on Laurie, but gives her a choice to deny. In example (68) nurse Marion and Dr Loomis are discussing the psychotic Michael Myers. Marion’s use of the tag question, which couches the statement, suggests that she does not want to sound too assertive, due to both politeness concerns in general and the fact that Dr Loomis is her superior and thus has a more prominent status. As mentioned earlier, tag questions are often associated with the tentativeness characterising female speech (Lakoff 2004: 47). *Halloween*, however, contained only two formal tag questions and the remaining one, example (69), was categorised as a comment (3.5%). In this example, Annie comments to Laurie on the dark van which has been following the girls around all day.

(69) Annie: Subtle, isn’t he?

Politeness is not an issue in this situation and neither is it likely that Annie is turning to Laurie for confirmation because she lacks confidence in herself or in the statement.

Questions categorized as seeking clarification (6.5%) were not as common in this movie as in *I Know...*. The instances of questions having this function regard exclusively demands for restoration or elaboration of a previous utterance. In example (70) Laurie believes she has spotted their stalker, i.e. Michael Myers.

(70) Laurie: Look.
Annie: Look where?
Laurie: There, behind the bushes.

Seeking confirmation, however, was a fairly common function (15%). Clear examples are questions initiated by an auxiliary and a negative which indicate that the speaker is more or less certain of the statement and only wants it to be confirmed:

(71) Lynda: Isn’t that Devon Graham?

Other instances, however, are slightly different. All of them occur in situations where the speaker either is being followed or watched, or receives a prank phone call, as in example (72).

(72) Laurie: Annie, is that you? Are you fooling around with me? Annie?

Laurie is seeking an affirmative answer, as a negative answer – or no answer at all – would suggest that the person at the other end has more vicious intentions than just “fooling around”.

7.5% of the questions were categorized as teasing. The following example is taken from a conversation between Annie and Lynda, where Lynda explains why she will be late for the babysitting that evening. Annie’s teasing remark suggests that she rather believes that Lynda will be spending time with her boyfriend:

(73) Annie: What time tonight?
Lynda: I don’t know yet. I have to take my brother trick-or-treating.
Annie: Treats for Bob?

Questions categorized as *pleading* (5%) were regarded as such due to politeness markers such as *please* as in example (74) and rising intonation, as in example (75).

(74) Laurie: Will you please help me?
(75) Laurie: Promise me you won’t rip it?

In both examples the speaker wants the addressee to do something. In the first example Laurie wants her neighbours to let her in because she is being stalked, and in the second one she wants Lynda to promise not to rip the blouse she borrowed from Laurie. However, the question form *will you* and furthermore the politeness marker *please* in the first example distinguishes it from the category *couched directive* found in *I Know...* in the previous section. The second example appears in the form of an imperative; however the speaker’s rising intonation turns it into a question. Important is also the use of the personal pronoun *me* in both examples, as it elicits sympathy and enhances the feeling that the speaker is pleading instead of asking and that the addressee would be doing her a favour rather than doing something for her.

One of the informal tag questions was marked as *reassuring* (1%). It occurs in a situation where Laurie is trying to comfort Tommy, the little boy whom she is baby-sitting.

(76) Laurie: What’d he look like?
  Tommy: The bogey-man.
  Laurie: We’re not getting anywhere. Alright. The bogey-man can only come out on Halloween, *right*?
  Tommy: Right.
  Laurie: Well, I’m here tonight. I’m not about to let anything happen to you.

The question tag *right* is not a tentativeness marker seeking confirmation due to lack of confidence. It rather enhances the assertion and makes sure that the speaker and the addressee are on the same page.

### 6.2.3 Summary

188 questions were found in the female part of the corpus, i.e. 18% of the utterances consisted of questions (11% of the utterances in the male part of the corpus). The primary function of an interrogative form is to elicit an answer, most often with the purpose of gaining information of some kind; this was also the most common function (40%) of the questions in the corpus. However, this also means that 60% of the questions had functions other than seeking information. The use of politeness and tentativeness signals such as mitigating an utterance were present in many of these secondary functions, such as in couched statements, couched directives, seeking confirmation,
requests and suggestions. Some of the information seeking questions were also softened into less direct ones.

6.3 Expletives

The term *expletive* is defined as “an often meaningless word used for swearing, to express violent feeling” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*). In order to determine if there is evidence in these data of women’s preference for “weaker” expletives than men, the corpus was searched for words or expressions regarded as swearing (e.g. *hell, damn* etc.) and surrogate words or expressions for swearing (e.g. *shoot, darn* etc.). The male contribution to the text was naturally analysed as well as the female, for the sake of comparison. The results are presented in Table 8 below. The figures in brackets refer to the number of occurrences.

**Table 8. Frequency and types of expletives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Halloween</strong></td>
<td><em>shoot, yuck, oops, meat heads, God (2), for heaven’s sake</em></td>
<td><em>asshole, damn, for God’s sakes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I Know...</strong></td>
<td><em>Oh, my God (5), shit (2), damn, asshole, Jesus Christ (2), prick, fuck</em></td>
<td><em>Jesus Christ (2), shit (6), damn, fuck (19), crap, mother fucker, hell, ass (3)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13 (28%)</td>
<td>34 (72%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Expletives may be categorized according to what topics they regard, e.g. religion, sex and anal related matters (Lindström 2002: 166). From a secularized point of view, blasphemy, i.e. expressions in which God or Jesus are called upon in vain, can be said to be rather uncharged, and they seem in this context to be neutral as both men and women in both of the movies used them. For the same reason *hell* and *damn* could be considered somewhat “weak”, although they are still regarded as swearing (Lindström 2002: 164). This is perhaps the case because calling for God is considered as calling for help, while calling upon darker forces indicates a darker motive.

As evident in Table 8, the female characters in *Halloween* made more use of expletives than the males, which probably is due to the fact that the male part of the corpus is smaller than the female one. Interesting is the fact that despite the lower frequency of expletives used by males, the male characters still provided “stronger” expressions than the females when expressing such negative emotions as anger, frustration, surprise and fear. Noteworthy is the interjection *You asshole!* uttered by Bob when he believes that his girlfriend is playing a prank on him. The female choice in a similar situation was the somewhat cleaner *You meat heads!*. An expression such as *meat head* may insult one’s intelligence; however, it does not compare the person with a body part.
whose sole function is to release faeces. This is in accordance with Lakoff’s theory that women do not revert to profanity or vulgarity simply because they are raised to be “little ladies”, while such a language used by men is excusable and moreover regarded as macho (2004: 44-45).

Even if Halloween displayed no instances of vulgar language, the expletives were “weaker” in the female column than in the male one. That is, damn is regarded as swearing involving religion, while shoot is considered a pseudo swearword. The women also used other expressions such as the onomatopoeic exclamations yuck and oops as expletives. This disparity and learnt behaviour, Lakoff (2004: 45) claims, may result in women’s attempts to express themselves being trivialized, as they lack the tools for expressing themselves as forcefully as men.

Here again, then, the behavior a woman learns as “correct” prevents her from being taken seriously as an individual, and further is considered “correct” and necessary for a woman precisely because society does not consider her seriously as an individual. (Lakoff 2004: 45)

I Know... displayed more instances of expletives than Halloween; in the former there were also examples of more vulgar kinds of expressions. This is probably due to time difference as the boundary of what is acceptable language in both media, popular culture and the real world constantly seems to be stretched. While the female characters in Halloween from 1978 preferred expletives regarded as substitutes for swearing, I Know... from 1997 displayed instances of females using shit, damn and asshole. The male characters from the 1978 movie, on the other hand, reverted to swearing with expletives such as asshole and damn. Thus what once was part of the male vocabulary, somewhat twenty years later is part of the female vocabulary as well, and men have increased the outer limits of profanity even further by using numerous variations of fuck.

In 1975, when Lakoff (2004) originally wrote her work, she noticed a development of “self-respecting women” who were able to adopt male expletives “publicly without flinching” (2004: 44). This is to some extent the case in I Know... where variations of the rather profane shit and damn were used by both sexes. Otherwise, the most common female expletive was the interjection Oh my God! with five occurrences.

If an expletive is to be regarded as “weak” or “strong” is of course a somewhat subjective issue. However, the “strongest” ones are generally those which regard subjects that are in some ways taboo, such as sex-related matters or defecations (Lindström 2002: 164, 176). The frequent use of fuck, shit and ass by males fits this definition. Worth noting is also the fact that the male part of the corpus is smaller than the female part; despite this the males used more expletives – especially “stronger” ones – than the females.

Many of the expletives were used as interjections, e.g. Fuck you! and emphasers to
amplify the forcefulness of the utterance as in What the hell is this?! However, I Know... also displayed instances of coarse language where the expressions had syntactic functions and meanings of their own. This is exemplified in the syntactic analysis below.

(77) Barry: If we call the police, we're [fucked]. subject attribute
(78) Barry: When they find [the fucker], the evidence will be washed away. direct object
(79) Barry: You two look like [shit]. subject attribute
(80) Helen: You're a [prick]. subject attribute
(81) Barry: Don't [fuck] with me! predicate
(82) Barry: How many [fucked-up] fishermen are there? pre-modifier
(83) Julie: He's [fucking] with us! predicate

As one can see, it is overwhelmingly men who use foul language here as well. The only instance where fucking is uttered by a female is merely a drop in the ocean compared to the total of nineteen instances where males made use of this multifunctional lexeme.

6.3.1 Summary

It was found that the female characters did show stronger tendencies towards a use of weaker expletives than the male characters, especially in Halloween, where the females exclusively used expletives regarded as substitutes for swearing. The female characters in I Know... did provide a few instances of stronger expletives or swearwords; however, the most common expletives were regarded as substitutions. The indication of a female preference for weaker expressions increases in comparison with the male characters who provided 72% of the uttered expletives in I Know... of which 94% were regarded as swearing. The differences in the amount and degree of profanity of the expletives between the two movies is believed to be due to time differences.

6.4 Empty adjectives

Another feature proposed to be characteristic for female speech is the use of a set of adjectives such as divine, charming and adorable, which apart from their literal meanings may also be used figuratively when the speaker wishes to express, for instance, approbation (Lakoff 2004: 45). Lakoff suggests that the choice of such an adjective – restricted to women’s language only – over a neutral one (e.g. cool, terrific, great), signals that “the speaker feels the idea referred to to be essentially frivolous, trivial, or unimportant to the world at large – only an amusement for the speaker herself” (2004: 46). However, it seems as if Lakoff interprets the use of these empty adjectives on a deeper level as well. Because of their connotations, the woman who uses them
indirectly suggests that not only the concept referred to, but also her opinion on the matter – and in
the long run even her own person – lacks meaning and importance to the real world (ibid.). It is
somewhat unclear whether these adjectives in this specific use are considered empty simply because
they are confined to female speech and therefore necessarily must signal frivolousness and
triviality, characteristics stereotypically associated with women; or if the matter is vice versa: they
are confined to female speech because they signal empty, trivial or frivolous meanings. Below
follow examples from *Halloween* which may be regarded as candidates for empty adjectives.
Neither *I Know...* nor the male part of the corpus displayed such instances.

(84)
Paul: My parents are gone.
Annie: Oh, that’s *fabulous*!

(85)
(Annie enters Laurie’s kitchen)
Laurie: Oh, *fancy*. (Observing Annie’s dressing which consists only of a shirt and a shawl around her
shoulders)

It is of course difficult, not to say impossible, to determine the true intention of the speakers (or
perhaps rather the scriptwriters) in these situations. Annie’s interjection in example (84) might
simply be a manifestation of her excitement that Paul will be able to sneak out to meet her; but the
choice *fabulous* over the neutral *great* might suggest that she has in mind the frivolousness the
couple will indulge in once he gets there.

Laurie’s comment *Oh, fancy* is also somewhat ambiguous. It may be interpreted as a
sarcastic remark, which a choice such as *Oh classy* more strongly would have suggested; but it may
also be used to point out the obvious frivolity in Annie’s appearance. One should also keep in mind
that *fancy woman* means ‘mistress’ or ‘prostitute’. Annie’s clothing is after all rather revealing and
she is sneaking out to see her boyfriend although she is supposed to be baby-sitting. Examples (86)
and (87) below further illustrate the use of empty adjectives:

(86)
(Lynda lies in bed. Door opens. Figure wearing a ghost costume and Bob’s glasses enters.)
Lynda: *Cute* Bob, real *cute*.

(87)
Annie: What’s the pumpkin for?
Laurie: I brought it for Tommy. I thought carving a jack o’ lantern would keep him occupied.
Annie: I always said you’d make a *fabulous* girl scout.

Example (86) might be interpreted in three ways. Either Lynda uses *cute* literally because she thinks
Bob is cute in his white sheet and glasses; or she uses it figuratively to express her approbation of
him making an effort to cheer her up. The last possibility involves sarcasm, as in *That’s mighty
clever of you, dressing up as a ghost on Halloween*. Considering Lynda’s somewhat blasé tone, the
last interpretation seems to be the most plausible.

Example (87), however, is somewhat more straightforward. Girl scouts are very much parts
of the female world to begin with; Annie’s choice of *fabulous* over the neutral *great* as a pre-modifier enhances thus even further the lack of importance of the concept in the world at large.

### 6.4.1 Summary

*Halloween* displayed four instances of adjectives such as *fabulous, fancy* and *cute* that could be interpreted and classified as empty adjectives. *I Know...* did not display any such instances, which might be due to the fact that the topics of the conversations differ between the two movies. *Halloween* contains more “everyday” conversations related to the characters themselves, which invite such responses, while the conversations in *I Know...* foremost regard the issue of identifying the stalker, which do not prompt the use of empty adjectives.

### 6.5 Verbosity

In order to determine if the stereotype that women are more talkative than men is exploited in these movies, words, utterances and turns were counted in ten mixed-sex conversations. As one can see in Table 2 in Section 2.2, *Halloween* contains fewer conversations with both male and female participants. It was therefore decided to consider all mixed-sex conversations that exceeded 50 words in this movie, i.e. five conversations, and then randomly select five conversations from *I Know...* based on the same criterion. The results are presented in Tables 9 and 10.

Since verbosity may be expressed in a variety of ways and not exclusively through the use of the highest number of words, the conversations which displayed a female dominance were also to some extent regarded in relation to Grice’s (1975: 45-46) maxims of conversation, summarized below as they appear in Lakoff (2004: 93).

1. Quality. Say only what is true.
2. Quantity. Say only as much, and just as much, as is necessary.

The consideration of Grice’s maxims in the analysis was prompted by Lakoff’s notion of “misogynistic stereotypes in our culture that women cannot follow the rules of conversation: that a woman’s discourse is necessarily indirect, repetitious, meandering, unclear, exaggerated” (2004: 94).

#### 6.5.1 *Halloween*

Table 9 below presents the results of the verbosity analysis, i.e. the count of words, utterances and turns in five mixed-sex conversations in *Halloween*. Conversation 2 is seemingly of little interest in
the context of female verbosity, as the distribution of words, utterances and turns is very even. There is an unbalanced power relationship between the speakers, as Laurie is Tommy’s baby-sitter and thereby the authority; however, this power relationship does not lead to dominance of any of the speakers. Neither is conversation 3 particularly interesting, as the male character actually makes use of more words than the female, even if the distribution of utterances and turns is even. This is in accordance with the power relationship, as the male speaker is the female’s father and uses his authority to dominate the conversation.

Table 9. Conversations in *Halloween*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversations</th>
<th># Words Females</th>
<th># Words Males</th>
<th># Utterances Females</th>
<th># Utterances Males</th>
<th># Turns Females</th>
<th># Turns Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Psychiatrist &amp; nurse</td>
<td>112 (54%)</td>
<td>94 (46%)</td>
<td>15 (42%)</td>
<td>21 (58%)</td>
<td>13 (45%)</td>
<td>16 (55%)</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Baby-sitter &amp; child</td>
<td>39 (50%)</td>
<td>39 (50%)</td>
<td>11 (50%)</td>
<td>11 (50%)</td>
<td>16 (52%)</td>
<td>15 (48%)</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24 (32%)</td>
<td>50 (68%)</td>
<td>8 (50%)</td>
<td>8 (50%)</td>
<td>7 (50%)</td>
<td>7 (50%)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Father &amp; daughter</td>
<td>72 (71%)</td>
<td>29 (29%)</td>
<td>12 (67%)</td>
<td>6 (33%)</td>
<td>8 (57%)</td>
<td>6 (43%)</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45 (61%)</td>
<td>29 (39%)</td>
<td>11 (58%)</td>
<td>8 (42%)</td>
<td>9 (56%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Couple Lynda, Bob</td>
<td>45 (61%)</td>
<td>29 (39%)</td>
<td>11 (58%)</td>
<td>8 (42%)</td>
<td>9 (56%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conversation 1, on the other hand, which takes place between nurse Marion and the psychiatrist Dr Loomis when they are about to transport Myers from the mental institution to a hearing, is a possible example of the stereotype being carried out, in that Marion uses more words than Dr Loomis. He, however, dominates both the utterances and the turns. There are no clear examples of Marion violating the conversational maxims. Her dominance in the number of spoken words is more a result of Dr Loomis keeping his utterances brief than she being chatty. She is also in a subordinate position and her use of politeness strategies (e.g. hedges and questions) when turning to the authoritative doctor results in longer utterances. This is exemplified below.

(88) Marion: *Don't you think we could refer to it as him?*
Loomis: *If you say so.*
Marion: *Your compassion is overwhelming, doctor. What do I give him in front of the judge?*
Loomis: *Thorazine.*
Marion: *He'll barely be able to sit up.*
Loomis: *That's the idea.*
Marion: *You're really serious about it, aren't you?*
However, in comparison, Marion still comes off as the more talkative party simply due to Dr Loomis’ brevity and rather snappy responses.

Conversation 4 is a phone conversation between the teenage couple Annie and Paul, in which Annie, according to the figures, clearly is the dominating part. Paul, who is grounded, is calling Annie to let her know that he will be able to sneak out since his parents have left the house. Annie has embarrassingly enough managed to get stuck in a window, something that Lindsey, who answered the phone, did not neglect to inform Paul about. Like Dr Loomis, Paul prefers to keep his utterances informative but brief. Example (89) below illustrates the female dominance in the distribution of words and utterances.

(89)    Annie: Oh, hi, Paul. Look, it could happen to anyone.
      Paul: Sure, stuck in a window.
      Annie: Yeah, but I’ve seen you stuck in plenty of other positions -
      Paul: My parents are gone.
      Annie: Oh, that’s fabulous! When did they leave?
      Paul: A half hour ago.
      Annie: Oh, utterly fantastic! Why don’t you just walk over?
      Paul: Come pick me up.
      Annie: I can’t come now, my clothes are in the wash. Oh, shut up jerk. God, I’ve got a shirt on. That’s all you ever think about!

Annie’s use of interjections (i.e. Oh, that’s fabulous! Oh, utterly fantastic!) may not be a violation of any conversational maxim; however, they result in unnecessary exaggeration, especially compared with Paul’s aloofness. Annie’s three last utterances, on the other hand, are definitely on the verge of violating the maxims of quantity and relevance, especially since Paul did not even get a chance to comment on her possible nudity.

Conversation 5, between the teenage girl Lynda and her boyfriend Bob, is also interesting. The difference in the distribution of words, utterances and turns may not seem particularly substantial, and indeed only one maxim is being violated; but together with the following excerpts from the conversation it certainly paints a picture of the chatty woman and the man of few words.

(90)    Lynda: Bob, this is totally silly, put me down!
      Lynda: Hey, it’s totally dark.
      Bob: Yeah.

(91)    Lynda: Want a beer?
      Bob: Yeah.
      Lynda: Is that all you can say?
      Bob: Yeah.

In (90) the violated maxim is the maxim of quantity. That is, the utterance: Hey, it’s totally dark when Lynda enters a house with no lights on is considered as somewhat redundant information.

A close reading of other conversations in which Lynda participates shows that she tends to
be the dominating speaker there as well, making use of far more words than necessity demands. See examples (92) and (93) below.

(92) Lynda: Oh, look at all the books you have. You need a shopping cart to get home. Yeah, not funny. You know it’s totally insane. We have 3 new cheers to learn in the morning, the game is in the afternoon, I have to get my hair done at 5, and the dance is at 8. I’ll be totally wiped out!

(93) Laurie: I forgot my chemistry book.
Lynda: So who cares? I always forget my chemistry book, my English book, and let’s see, my French book, and... Well, who needs books anyway? I don’t need books. I always forget all of my books. I mean, it doesn’t really matter if you have your books or not.

In the light of Grice’s conversational maxims, the examples above are clearly violations of the maxims of quantity, relevance and manner, as there is too much information which in addition is irrelevant and somewhat unclear. Notable is the repetitiveness in example (93) and the use of the emphaser *totally* in example (92) (as well as in (90)), which enhances the impression of talkativeness. In Lynda’s 75 utterances, *totally* occurred eleven times. This is to be compared with the only other instance of this emphazer, uttered by the main character Laurie as a teasing remark, that is, when she is imitating Lynda. This, on the other hand, could be regarded as a violation of the maxim of manner. See example (94).

(94) Laurie: Promise me you won’t rip it?
Lynda: *totally* promise.
Laurie: I *totally* don’t believe you.

6.5.2 I Know...

Table 10 below presents the distribution of words, utterances and turns counted in the conversations in *I Know*....

Table 10 Conversations in *I Know*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversations</th>
<th># Words Females</th>
<th># Words Males</th>
<th># Utterances Females</th>
<th># Utterances Males</th>
<th># Turns Females</th>
<th># Turns Males</th>
<th>Total w</th>
<th>u</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 2 couples</td>
<td>53 (26%)</td>
<td>149 (74%)</td>
<td>6 (23%)</td>
<td>20 (77%)</td>
<td>6 (33%)</td>
<td>12 (67%)</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ray &amp; Julie</td>
<td>61 (61%)</td>
<td>39 (39%)</td>
<td>12 (63%)</td>
<td>7 (37%)</td>
<td>9 (56%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Barry &amp; Helen</td>
<td>57 (97%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>6 (86%)</td>
<td>1 (14%)</td>
<td>2 (67%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 2 couples</td>
<td>97 (34.5%)</td>
<td>184 (65.5%)</td>
<td>19 (34%)</td>
<td>37 (66%)</td>
<td>15 (39%)</td>
<td>23 (61%)</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 2 couples</td>
<td>115 (51%)</td>
<td>112 (49%)</td>
<td>24 (51%)</td>
<td>23 (49%)</td>
<td>12 (44%)</td>
<td>15 (56%)</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The reason for the male dominance in the conversations 1 and 4 is that the male characters tend to address each other and thereby exclude the female characters. Conversation 5 displays neither male nor female dominance. The conversations of interest are therefore foremost conversations 2 and 3 which take place between the teenage couples Ray and Julie, and Barry and Helen respectively.

Conversation 2 showed no striking differences in utterance length, and as the difference in the amount of spoken words is rather slight, making use of one or two more words in a few utterances could make the whole difference. However, one reason for the female verbal dominance is the beginning of the conversation where Julie refers to the urban legend about a lunatic with a hook told earlier. Ray mostly uses non-linguistic responses such as eye-contact and nodding.

(95)  
Julie: You don’t really believe that crap, do you?  
Ray: It’s true.  
Julie: The hook is really a phallic symbol. Ultimately castrated.  
Julie: I'm gonna miss you.

A possible violation of the maxim of quantity is manifested in Julie’s predilection for pre-modifiers realized as compound adjectives, illustrated by example (96) below.

(96)  
Julie: I hate this. You’re gonna fall for a black-haired head-shaven body-piercing philosophy student.

Conversation 3 is probably the most illustrative example of the chatty woman in the corpus. As exemplified below, it shows instances which may be regarded as violations of the maxims of quantity, relevance and manner – at least judged by the male participant, Barry, who seems more interested in the kisses Helen is delivering while speaking, than the words coming out of her mouth.

(97)  
Helen: By that time I’ll be finishing my two-year deal on “Guiding light”, coinciding with your first year as quarterback for the Steelers –  
Barry: The Cowboys.  
Helen: Whoever. Then we can elope to Europe or the Caymans, where I’ll let you impregnate me with the first of three children before you head off to rehab. Then we can live happily ... blah... blah... blah...

6.5.3 Summary

Ten of the mixed-sex conversations were chosen for analysis, of which five carried evidence of female dominance. This dominance was foremost due to differences in conversational style where the male’s brevity resulted in a notion of talkativeness on the female’s behalf. Two of the conversations were clear examples of female verbosity, and further analysis of one of these female characters’ linguistic behaviour resulted in further evidence of talkativeness, such as repetitiveness, unnecessary information and irrelevant comments.

6.6 Discussion

Given the results in the previous sections, the analysis of the female characters’ linguistic behaviour
did show evidence of the features constituting the stereotypical profile, i.e. *hedges, questions, expletives, empty adjectives and verbosity*. A percentage calculation of the male part of the corpus as well also showed that the female characters used hedges and questions as signals of politeness and tentativeness to a greater extent than the male characters did. The question is: do women speak in such a manner? Is their linguistic behaviour characterized by politeness, non-assertiveness, talkativeness and weaker expressions in comparison with men?

Preisler’s (1986) study on 24 women and 24 men in both single-sex and mixed groups does in fact suggest that women do use tentativeness signals such as tag questions, modal verbs and hedges to a greater extent than men. He also found that this linguistic behaviour occurred within single-sex groups as well as within mixed groups, which he claims indicates that “men and women have developed sex-specific speech patterns” (1986: 288) and women’s tendency for tentativeness is thus not a result of them being “cowed by male chauvinists who force them into a defensive position” (ibid). This finding correlates to some extent with the present study as the tentativeness signals used by the female characters occurred in conversations with women as well as with men.

When it comes to questions in general, most research indicates that women ask more questions than men, which is proposed to be a strategy to maintain the conversation, as a question normally elicits an answer (Coates 1993: 123). This is very much the case in the investigation part in *I Know...*, mentioned in Section 6.2.1. When visiting the dead man’s sister Missy (see examples (38) and (39)), Julie and Helen need to keep the conversation going in order to gain information about whether Missy or someone else close to her brother is the person who is stalking them. Interesting is the fact that the male characters do not take part in this, thus the scriptwriters deliberately put the female characters only in a situation which demands a lot of questions. What is also interesting is that one of the male characters, Barry, in fact carries out an investigation on his own. The example below presents his encounter with Max, another possible suspect.

(98) Barry: Hey, Max. Can we talk a second, in private?  
Max: What’s up?  
Barry: We got your letter. Don’t fuck with me. You saw us.  
Max: What the fuck are you on?  
Barry: I’ll say this once. I’ll kill you. I have no problem with that.  
Max: Get off of me!  
Barry: Understand? (Leaves)

Barry’s approach is very different from Helen’s and Julie’s. He asserts, curses, threatens and he does not ask one single information seeking question.

A study carried out by O’Barr and Atkins (in Graddol & Swann 1989: 85) uncovered a phenomenon which they termed *powerful* and *powerless language*. Their findings suggest that features associated with female speech resulting in a tentative linguistic behaviour are not
determined by gender only, but also by the speaker’s status. The reason for women’s frequent use of powerless language in general may then be women’s relatively lower status in society compared to men (ibid). *Halloween* contains an example where a male character uses powerless language due to his lack of status or authority. See example (99) below where Laurie meets Tommy on his way to school.

(99) Laurie: Hi Tommy.
Tommy: Coming over tonight?
Laurie: Same time, same place.
Tommy: Can we make jack-o’-lanterns?
Laurie: Sure.
Tommy: Can we watch some monster movies?
Laurie: Sure.
Tommy: Will you read to me, can we make popcorn?
Laurie: Sure, sure, sure. But you better hurry up now.

Laurie is Tommy’s baby-sitter and thus the authority. Tommy’s asking about the things he wants to do rather than demanding them shows that he is aware of this power relationship with Laurie in charge of making the decisions. Laurie’s awareness of the same is shown in her short, outright answers together with the directive *But you better hurry up now* in the last line.

When it comes to verbosity and the myth of the talkative woman, research on such diverse test subjects as panel discussion participants, married couples, work colleagues and CMC (computer-mediated communication) participants suggest that women speak less than men in mixed conversations (Coates 1993: 115). This was also the case with some of the mixed conversations in the corpus. As Coates rightly points out, verbosity and triviality are closely connected and “the idea that women discuss topics which are essentially trivial has probably contributed to the myth of women’s verbosity, since talk on trivial topics can more easily be labelled ‘too much’” (1993: 115). This is carried out to a great extent in *Halloween*. The male single-sex conversations foremost regard how to catch the escaped psychotic killer Michael Myers. The topics of the female single-sex conversations on the other hand, are foremost clothes and boys. This is not to say that these are trivial matters; however, they are easily considered less important than protecting the town’s inhabitants from a lunatic murderer with a flair for sharp knives.

**6.6.1 The final girls**

The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or the Final Girl. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified. ... She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him.
Laurie is the final girl of *Halloween* and her character is quite different from the characters of her friends Annie and Lynda, especially the latter. Laurie is responsible, she studies hard, baby-sits every weekend and she does not have a boyfriend. Neither does she carry a hope of ever finding one, as, in her own words: *Guys think I’m too smart.* Her friends on the other hand, are only moderately interested in school and the only reason for them baby-sitting is, according to Lynda, to have a place to have sex in. (Premarital sex is an important issue especially in early slashers, and a stock joke in movies contingent on the genre is that the only way to survive a horror movie is to stay a virgin.) Linguistically, the difference between the final girl and the other characters lies in the portrayal of the other characters, rather than in the portrayal of Laurie’s own characteristics. Lynda, for instance, is portrayed as “the chatty one” (see examples in Section 6.5). Her linguistic behaviour is in many ways coloured by repetitiveness, irrelevant comments, an excessive use of hedges categorized as “fillers” (e.g. *well, you know*) and an undying predilection for the intensifier *totally.*

The foremost difference between the final girl Julie and her friend Helen in *I Know...* is that Julie is a straight-A-student with a collage scholarship, while Helen is an awarded beauty queen who wants to pursue a career as an actress. However, they both have boyfriends and they are both sexually active. Their usage of the linguistic features constituting the stereotypical profile showed no marked differences. However, interestingly enough, it is possible to discern a change in Julie’s linguistic behaviour towards a more assertive use of language the moment it becomes clear that she is the final girl, i.e. when she finds the first dead body. After this occasion, she makes use of the expletive *fucking* which otherwise is a feature from the male column of expletives, and she openly challenges the stalker with the outright question *What are you waiting for?*. Furthermore, in a conversation where the four friends discuss what to do about the situation, Julie takes charge and makes the decisions. See example (100) for illustration.

(100)  
Helen: If we bring the yearbook to Missy, she could point him out.  
Ray: I’m not going anywhere.  
Julie: I’ll go. Helen, you’ve got that parade.  
Helen: Forget it.  
Julie: You have to. In case he shows up there.  
Helen: I don’t want him to!  
Julie: This is our chance. We could catch him. I’ll go to Missy’s. Barry, you go with Helen.  
Ray: You sound like vigilantes.  
Julie: It’s July 4th. Ray. Whatever he has planned is gonna happen today, unless we stop him. We have to face this.

Julie has clearly realized the gravity of the situation and despite the others’ objections she stands her ground. She takes initiatives on her own without seeking confirmation and her statements appear in the form of outright, assertive declaratives and even an imperative. If one takes into account the
contingency between the concepts of “masculinity” and “femininity”, where a lack of femininity automatically determines +masculinity, one might say that by using a less stereotypically feminine language, Julie has adopted a more masculine linguistic behaviour.

Laurie’s linguistic behaviour in *Halloween* does not quite undergo this radical change. After finding her friends’ dead bodies and having escaped Michael Myers’ first attempt to kill her, she turns to the children she is baby-sitting, illustrated in (101).

(101) Laurie: *I want you to listen to me. I want you to go out of the house, go down the street to the Mackenzie’s house. I want you to knock on their door. I want you to tell’em to call the police and tell them to send them over here.* Now, do as I say.

As one can see, Laurie is to some extent still making use of hedges in that she foremost uses declaratives and thus couched directives rather than imperative forms – which the urgency of the situation speaks in favour of – when she tells the children what to do. Only in the last utterance does she make an outright command with the use of an imperative. However, this might also be a strategy to make herself explicit in front of the children. That is, she tells them what she – the authority – wants them to do.

Laurie’s somewhat tentative linguistic behaviour is present in her very last utterance as well. *Halloween* is a movie with an A-ending (see quotation above), that is, Laurie gets rescued by Dr Loomis who shoots Myers right before he is about to stab Laurie. After being rescued, Laurie turns to Dr Loomis, the authority, with the confirmation seeking question *Was it the bogey-man?*. One might think that after struggling with him – this man in blue overalls and a white mask, who dodges for neither knitting needles nor hangers right in the eye – she should have the confidence to assert rather than ask about who he is.

### 7 Conclusion

As mentioned in Section 1, there is a general notion of slasher movies treating women stereotypically. With this in mind, the aim of this study was to investigate to what extent these movies carry out linguistic female stereotyping in their portrayal of female characters. Relevant research questions were thus: What linguistic behaviour is essentially associated with women? Is there any evidence of such behaviour in these data?

It has been proposed that female speech is often connected with politeness, tentativeness, talkativeness, and weaker expressions in comparison with men, descending from a female subculture. Bearing this in mind, a stereotypical profile was created, consisting of linguistic features such as hedges, questions, expletives, empty adjectives and verbosity, through which the former characteristics may be manifested. The stereotypical profile was then applied to the corpus
consisting of the two slasher movies *Halloween* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, together with their transcribed versions. Evidence of all linguistic features constituting the stereotypical profile was found in the corpus.

Hedges and questions were used to a great extent to signal politeness and tentativeness, i.e. both in order to satisfy the addressee’s face needs as well as to prevent the speaker herself from sounding too assertive. Furthermore, expressed in percentages, hedges and questions were used more frequently by the female characters than by the male characters, and it was also found that the female characters were deliberately placed in situations which demanded a frequent use of such features. However, Lakoff’s notion that tag questions and hedges such as *well* and *you know* exclusively signal tentativeness and lack of confidence (2004: 49, 79) did not find firm ground in these data as a few instances of these forms in addition indicated other functions.

It was found that the females did use weaker expressions in comparison with men as the most common expletives uttered by female characters were regarded as substitutes for swearing, while the male characters showed a preference for expletives regarded as actual swearing. A few occurrences where the use of specific adjectives could be interpreted as empty adjectives were also found. The myth of the talkative, chatty woman was clearly confirmed in the portrayal of one of the female characters in *Halloween*. The linguistic behaviour of this character also distinguished her from the final girl, i.e. the portrayal of the final girl – the heroine – was found less stereotypical than the portrayal of other female characters who were not fortunate enough to survive. *I Know...* displayed no such linguistic distinction in general between the final girl and other female characters. However, it was possible to discern a change in the final girl’s linguistic behaviour towards a more confident and assertive use of language, once she had accepted her responsibilities as a final girl. Differences observed between the two movies, such as in the amount and functions of certain features, and in the degree of profanity, are believed to be determined by different outlines of the plots and time difference.

It must be pointed out that this is a surface study and to be considered a starting-point. It is a theory-driven study in which a stereotypical profile was applied to the corpus; a data-driven study where the linguistic features are allowed to speak more freely for themselves might result in a different outcome. Furthermore, a comparison with the male characters might provide yet another aspect of the results. It might also be interesting to see whether an analysis of the male characters’ linguistic behaviour would reveal a stereotypical portrayal similar to the results of this study. Other suggestions for further research might be to conduct comparisons with other genres to determine whether stereotypical portrayal of male or female characters is widespread within popular culture, or if it is genre specific.
However, given the results mentioned above and displayed in Section 6, slasher movies can be said to carry out linguistic female stereotyping to a considerable extent in their portrayal of female characters. The reason for this might simply be a mere assumption that this is how women speak (which, to some extent and in some situations, might be true). The gender of the scriptwriters may also be a factor. However, one of the co-writers of *Halloween* is female, which did not result in less female stereotyping than in *I Know...* where the scriptwriter is male. Finally, the strategy of exploiting female stereotyping in the portrayal of female characters could also be an easy way out. Stereotypes are generally well known and exploiting them in popular culture might facilitate the audience’s recognition and thereby their identification with the characters. This is also where the danger lies. Stereotypes which propose a certain behaviour easily become fulfilled prophecies as they suggest a notion of how things ‘ought to be’ (Cameron 1992: 42). Gender or gender expectations must never determine the linguistic behaviour of the individual. Language use is – and must be – a personal choice, irrespective whether one is male or female.
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