Could you hand me my keys?
Can you give me my keys?

Differences between men and women in expressing politeness

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Abstract

This essay investigates the relationship between gender and politeness, specifically in the area of requests. The reason why this topic was chosen is that it is claimed that men and women communicate differently and express requests differently. The aim is to identify and clarify the different manners men and women express politeness with regard to the phrases Can you…? and Could you…?. A total of 200 occurrences of Can you…? and Could you…? were selected and analyzed from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

The working hypothesis was that, in accordance with their gender “regulations”, women use Could you much more than men and therefore act more polite. The findings, however, are contradictory and indicate that this was not the case. Men tend to use the more polite form Could you, and women tend to use the less polite form Can you. Moreover, requests are in some contexts expressed similarly by men and women. Therefore, the general claim about women being more polite in their language may not be correct.

Keywords

Communication, difference, gender, gender regulations, politeness, requests
# Table of contents

1 Introduction  
2 Aim and scope  
3 Theoretical background  
   3.1 Requests – What are they?  
      3.1.1 Indirectness and its associations  
      3.1.2 *Can* and *could*  
   3.2 Gender – A social construct?  
   3.3 Previous work – Connections between language and gender  
      3.3.1 Politeness and gender  
      3.3.2 Summary  
4 Method and material  
5 Findings and analysis  
   5.1 The distribution of the two phrases between the sexes  
   5.2 The qualitative study  
      5.2.1 The occurrences with *Can you…?*  
      5.2.2 The occurrences with *Could you…?*  
6 Conclusion  
References  

---

1  
2  
4  
4  
6  
7  
7  
8  
10  
11  
12  
15  
15  
17  
17  
21  
28  
30
1 Introduction

There is a common belief concerning communication which states that women are from Venus and men are from Mars. This belief originates from misunderstandings which may have occurred in interactions between men and women because of their different manner of speaking. One possible difference in regard to women’s and men’s interaction is politeness and the manner of how it is expressed. This essay will discuss politeness and its usage in the area of requests. As the area of requests is wide, the usage of the phrases Can you and Could you are the only phrases studied.

Much linguistic research has been done to this field due to the commonly held belief that women are more polite than men. This essay attempts to understand the difference and to explain why this difference exists. Previous studies on speech acts (Brown & Levinson 1987) and gender and language (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003; Holmes 1995) are relevant for this essay. So too is Brown and Levinson (1987) who have established their own politeness theory which informs us of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), indirectness and directness. These authors have conducted investigations in order to demonstrate this diversity and reasons for it. Holmes (1995) has also investigated this issue and she states the following:

> When we describe someone as polite […] or impolite, there are many possible aspects of their use of language that we might be referring to. […] giving peremptory orders, failing to thank someone […] – these are all examples of behaviour which may be considered rude in certain contexts.

Holmes 1995:115

When we describe someone being polite or impolite, it is essential that we understand why men are perceived as being less polite. It is important that this field is investigated because the belief that women are more polite may be nothing more than a myth. Consequently, men may then have been perceived as the impolite sex for years, but without justification.
2 Aim and scope

This essay investigates the relationship between gender and politeness. Given the limitations of this essay and the fact that politeness is a wide field, this paper investigates requests which include *Can you*…? and *Could you*…?. The research questions for this study are the following:

1. How do men and women differ in using *Can you*…? and *Could you*…??
2. What are the underlying causes for these differences?

The data used is a spoken corpus study from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). A total of 200 occurrences of *Can you*…? and *Could you*…? were selected and analyzed. Examples of factors which I looked at in the occurrences are what was said and by whom.

My findings indicate that the general claim about women being more polite than men can be questioned. Requests are in some contexts expressed similarly by men and women. In my research data, men seem to be more consistent and use the less polite form *Can you* in more occurrences than women. This does not imply that men do not use *Could you* but they simply tend to use it in more specific contexts than women.

Women’s usage of the two forms is less consistent. They do not use the less polite form *Can you* as often as men do and the reasons for the usage is not that clear. In regard to the use of the more polite form *Could you*, it seems that women use it in different types of instances. They tend to use it when they are happy but also when they are upset.

The most evident finding of this study is that, generally, women and men do not appear and act as they should according to literature. This means that they do not use the language and the two different forms as scholars claim. The underlying reason for this is not certain; however, it could be claimed that the language used by men and women is moving more closely together.

In chapter three, a theoretical background for previous studies in the field of requests is provided. There is an explanation to what requests signify. The notions *indirectness* and *directness* are introduced and defined as two different categories of speech acts. In addition, the phrases studied in this essay, *Can you*…? and *Could you*…?, are discussed with focus on which one of the categories they belong to. Furthermore, gender is explained and facts about how gender is perceived as a social construct are presented, especially how it influences the
manner of male and female speech. Firstly, in chapter three, an overview of politeness theory is provided.

Chapter four presents the method and the material chosen for this essay and in chapter five the findings are presented and discussed. Lastly, in chapter six, a conclusion is given with a suggestion of future research possibilities within this field.
3 Theoretical background

In this section, I present previous work in the field of politeness and in the field of language and gender. I explain the phenomenon of gender as a social construct.

3.1 Requests – What are they?

In *The Study of Language*, Yule (2006:118f) discusses different speech acts, namely direct and indirect speech acts. An example of a direct speech act is the phrase *Did you do your homework?*. This phrase has an interrogative structure which means that it has the structure of a question (ibid:118). Moreover, the phrase has the function of a question: we want to receive information and in this case we want to know whether the person has done the homework.

When the structure and the function of a phrase are coherent, it is called a direct speech act. An indirect speech act, on the contrary, does not have a structure which is coherent with the function. An example of an indirect speech act is *Can you close the window?*. This phrase has the “syntactic structure associated with the function of a question” (ibid:118), yet, it is not a question where we want to know whether the window can be closed or not. In fact, the function of this phrase is of a request: we want someone to do something (ibid:118f).

Accordingly, the structure of the phrase is not coherent with the function. Therefore, it is an indirect speech act. Bach ([www]) also discusses these speech acts and states that:

> We can perform a speech act (1) directly or indirectly, by way of performing another speech act, (2) literally or nonliterally, depending on how we are using our words, and (3) explicitly or inexplicitly, depending on whether we fully spell out what we mean

Bach (ibid) claims that an indirect speech act is not only one speech act but two. For instance, a request can be made by making a statement such as *It’s cold* or by making a question such as *Can you call me tomorrow?* These utterances are performed as indirect speech acts, yet by the “way of performing another speech act” (Bach [www]). Direct speech acts, on the other hand, are performed directly and literally. The phrase *Can you ride a bicycle?* is a question made by making a question. It is direct and literal, meaning that the person asking the question wants to know whether the person being asked can bicycle or not. Accordingly, in regard to requests, they are termed as being indirect speech acts.

A request can be defined as “‘an attempt to get hearer to do an act which speaker wants hearer to do’” (Jalilifar 2009:46). If we think of the question *Can you pass me the salt?*
and put that into relation with this definition, it is clear that the speaker wants the interlocutor to pass the salt. However, the definition continues with “and which it is not obvious that hearer will do in the normal course of events or of hearer’s own accord” (ibid:46). This means that what is requested is not necessarily performed by the interlocutor – the interlocutor might not pass the salt.

Requests have been investigated by Brown and Levinson in their study of politeness and in their presentation of a politeness theory. In this theory, they discuss the notion face (Brown & Levinson 1987:61). Face is a person’s self-image which can be maintained, lost or enhanced. In interaction, it is important that the faces of the interlocutors are attended; thus, a speaker who requests something must think of the hearer’s face. The speaker has a choice of either performing a Face Saving Act (FSA) or a Face Threatening Act (FTA). FTAs threaten the hearer’s face whereas FSAs “save”, or lessen, the threat to the hearer’s face.

In their theory, Brown and Levinson name requests as FTAs since they threaten the face of the hearer (a.k.a. addressee from Brown & Levinson). The authors express FTA’s by saying that these acts “by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee […]” (Brown & Levinson 1987:65). The speaker imposes his/her will on the hearer which means that by requesting something, the speaker might make a hearer do something that the hearer does not want to do/would not do otherwise. For instance, the hearer of the phrase Can you pick me up at 11 p.m? might not want to pick the speaker up but does it because of the speaker’s will. Yet, the speaker does not have to perform an FTA in the most direct way. This means that an FTA does not have to be threatening but that it can be less imposing (Brown & Levinson 1987:64ff).

When expressing the request, the speaker has a choice: either to do it directly or to mitigate it by doing it less directly. The choice is affected by different factors, such as social distance, power and imposition (Brown & Levinson 1987:15, 76f). Social distance signifies the distance between the speaker and hearer. Meanwhile, power signifies the power the hearer holds over the speaker and imposition accounts for the FTA’s degree of imposition on the hearer (Brown & Levinson 1987:15, 76f). Thus, these three factors may mitigate the request; it all depends on the degree of directness.

3.1.1 Indirectness and its associations
Indirect speech associated with politeness is expressed by Jalilifar (2009) as follows:
In line with Brown & Levinson (1987), Jalilifar (2009:50) claims that Western cultures share the same view of correlating indirect speech acts with politeness. He also concurs with the findings of Brown and Levinson (1987) connecting the relation of politeness and indirectness. The relation is that the higher degree of indirect speech acts, the more politeness is demonstrated. However, indirectness and indirect speech acts can be divided into subcategories where requests are considered to be *directives* (Jalilifar 2009:46). The question *Can you pass me the salt?* is, as mentioned before, not asking about the ability but requesting someone to do something; thus, it is a directive. Additionally, there are different degrees of directness in requests: direct requests (*Leave me alone!*), conventionally indirect requests (*Would you mind moving your car?*), and non-conventionally indirect requests (*We’ve been playing this game for over an hour now…*) (ibid:47). According to the different degrees, the requests in this essay (*Can you…?* and *Could you…?*) are conventionally indirect requests; therefore, the other degrees will not be discussed.

Conventionally indirect requests “express the illocution via fixed linguistic convention established in the speech community” (Jalilifar 2009:47). This means that the speaker knows that the hearer will understand the intention of the utterance because of the knowledge of how requests are performed in that speech community. Moreover, the phrases are what is called *query-preparatory*, meaning that they are phrases which consist of preparatory conditions such as willingness and ability (ibid:47).

Demonstrably, both *Can you…?* and *Could you…?* are indirect and according to Jalilifar (2009:50), “the most polite strategies in English are perceived to be conventionally indirect ones”. Thus, the two phrases are more polite than direct requests such as *Give me…*, *Hand me….* Furthermore, one of the phrases is perceived as more polite than the other. Grammars of English bring up this topic and it is investigated by authors such as Estling Vannestål (2007) and Quirk et al (1985).

### 3.1.2 Can and could

Coates (1983:121) states that “when making a request, it is conventional to substitute COULD [author’s emphasis] for CAN [author’s emphasis] as a mark of politeness”. She further names
could a covert imperative which signifies that it can be used when giving commands but is perceived as a question.

The term conditionality in connection with could/can, may/might and will/would, is discussed by Clark and Schunk (1980). They claim that when using might/would/could, there is a speculation about the condition if you please being implicit. Therefore, the conditional request, which is could, “should be the more polite of the two.” (ibid). Thus, here is a logic explanation why could is the more polite form.

This claim is reiterated in several grammar books. Quirk et al (1985) state that both forms are preferable to direct speech acts when making a request but they discuss further the forms by adding the significance of the tense of the forms. This means that a person can use either Can you…? or Could you…? when requesting something. Nevertheless, one of the tenses is considered to express more politeness. Can is present tense and could is past tense, and the form which is perceived as more polite is the past tense. The reason for this is that it is more tentative than the present one (ibid:220, 233). Estling-Vannestål (2007:163) also discusses the two forms and states could as more tentative.

In line with these works, I adopt the notion of Could you being the more polite form, compared to Can you.

3.2 Gender – A social construct?

gender: a term used in three ways: (1) a biological distinction between male and female, also called natural gender [author’s emphasis]; (2) a distinction between classes of nouns as masculine, feminine (or neuter), also called grammatical gender [author’s emphasis]; (3) a distinction between the social roles of men and women, also called social gender [author’s emphasis]

Yule 2006:242

Although gender can refer to different things, this essay deals with natural gender and social gender. When studying gender, many scholars make a clear distinction between sex and gender. Yule (2006) has done this too but not by referring to the notion sex but to the notion natural gender. He states that “natural gender and social gender have a connection related to biology by the biological distinction (male and female) underlying the social distinctions (father and mother)” (Yule 2006:222f). In addition, he admits that “there is a great deal about the social roles of individuals as men or women that is unrelated to biology” (ibid:223).
According to Yule (2006:223), people inherit a gendered culture by learning what it means to be a boy or a girl. It is society that makes these “gender regulations” and bases these “regulations” on cultural beliefs. Thus, he claims that people learn how to become a girl or a boy in a so called process of learning norms. Yule (ibid:224) argues that this process initiates from birth and later it is called a process of socialization where a whole culture is learned; for example, from childhood, boys tend to socialize in large groups where there are competitions (I’m the king and you’re my servant) and they learn the relation of hierarchy. Girls, however, tend to socialize in smaller groups involving co-operation (First I’m the queen and then you can be the queen) and they learn the relation of reciprocity (ibid:224). What is important to point out about the ways girls and boys socialize is that these are all tendencies; as such, all girls or boys may not act in accordance to Yule (2006).

3.3 Previous work – Connections between language and gender

According to Yule (2006:223), there is a connection between social gender and language; he refers to this as gendered language. Variations in language are noticeable in every social class and within these classes the variations are connected to gender. A supposition is that whenever the variation is given higher versus lower prestige, women tend to use the higher prestige forms. The underlying reason for this is claimed to be an explanation of the socialization of women. In general, women are aware of social status; they tend to be more careful and more sensitive to others’ judgements (ibid:224). Therefore, and normally, their use is more high prestige. A possible explanation to why men use the lower prestige form is something called covert prestige. Covert prestige is the conscious use of less prestigious forms (talkin’ instead of talking and watchin’ instead of watching) and these forms are used in order to show group identity. Because of men’s volition to show their masculinity, they use less prestigious forms such as the ones above.

Characteristics of women and men’s speech have been established by Yule (2006). More frequent use of tag questions (It’s cold here, isn’t?) and hedges (It’s kind of cold) are claimed to be examples of “female” speech whereas strong language and more assertive forms (It’s cold here!) are claimed to be examples of “male” speech (ibid:224). With regard to requests and indirect speech acts, these seem to occur more frequently compared to direct speech acts in conversations among women. Yule (ibid:224) further mentions “same-gender talk”. By this, he means that each sex, in general, has one way of speaking when they are speaking to the same sex and another way when speaking to the other sex. An example of this
is men not interrupting other men but when speaking to women they interrupt them. Cross-cultural communication is the term used to describe interaction between women and men.

In their research about language and gender, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) state that language is a system of signs. In these signs and their use in “communicative practice”, gender is embedded (ibid:60). In other words, as we speak and use language, we tend to use signs where our gender is embedded and in that way we portray our gender. Furthermore, we tend to use language to “color ourselves” when we speak owing to the fact that we want to present ourselves as a person of a particular kind. Again, gender can be portrayed by the choice of vocabulary or grammatical patterns. A consistent claim of the authors is that language constructs and reflects social order. Like Yule (2006), Eckert and McConnell-Ginet have enumerated characteristics of women and men’s speech (2003:86, 158f). These characteristics display a concordance with the ones mentioned above. This concordance is seen by “manifestation of power and entitlement in men’s speech, and of submissiveness and deference in women’s” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:86).

Lastly, the conception of doing gender is discussed by Edlund et al (2007:38ff). This conception is about people not being a gender but gender being something which we acquire by doing gender; for example, using a particular kind of speech. They argue that gender is an activity in which people devote themselves “to demonstrate the expected behaviour according to the ascribed gender category” [my translation]. Therefore, because women tend to use more hedges, they fortify the social and cultural frames. Moreover, the authors discuss the different hypotheses presented by Deborah Cameron (1992:63f): the deficit hypothesis, the dominance hypothesis and the difference hypothesis. The first hypothesis is about women’s speech and how it is perceived as deficient by some people. This deficiency implies that women’s language is poorer than men’s language. The way in which women’s language is poorer is that it does not hold the same power and efficiency as men’s language does. The second hypothesis is about men’s power and dominance over women and how this is reflected in the language. Finally, the third hypothesis claims that men and women’s language differ owing to the fact that men and women belong to different cultures.

3.3.1 Politeness and gender

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Holmes (1995:2) states that women and men perceive conversations differently. In general, women see talking as something important; they think of language as a means of establishing and maintaining relationships. Men, on the other hand, tend to use conversations to receive and convey information; thus, they see language as a tool for this. In other words, the focus in men’s conversation is on the content and it seems that they do not think of the feelings of others whereas women’s focus is on the feelings of their conversation partner. The different kinds of focus demonstrate two different functions of speech: referential function where speech is used to convey information; and affective function where speech is used to convey feelings and reflect social relationships (ibid:3).

Holmes (1995:6) suggests that women think of/focus on other people’s feelings. Consequently, her conclusion is that women are more polite than men because they tend to express politeness or friendliness in their way of using language. Other authors, such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:143), concur with Holmes, claiming that men are more competitive and competition does not involve politeness. In contrast, women show tendencies to be more cooperative which leads them to care about other people’s feelings.

However, there are authors who question this view of gender influencing language. Brown (1998:83) suggests that it is not only gender which has a role in expressing politeness. She mentions the social network which is a group of people where the members have established ways of talking. Examples of social networks are colleagues at work; classmates and family members. The social network is as important as other factors. Thus, if a person uses Can you... in a group of friends, it does not necessarily mean that the person is being impolite. It may rather be that the less polite form is the one used in that group. Moreover, there are communicative strategies and social motivations which influence our speech (Brown 1998:83). Brown claims that we need to have these factors in mind when we discuss gender and language because people are rational actors and we tend to adapt to different contexts and networks (ibid:83). For example, if we are having a meeting with our boss, we would use the more polite form whereas if we have a family meeting around the kitchen table, we would probably use the less polite form. Brown (ibid:84) further discusses factors which “seem to be involved” in our decision of appearing polite. One example is the factor of being superior/inferior in the interaction. If we consider the example above with the meeting with a boss, the employee would probably appear polite because the boss is superior.
3.3.2 Summary

In section five, my findings are presented. When I analyzed the findings, some elements from sections 3.3 and 3.3.1 were taken into consideration. These sections are referred to and discussed in the analysis. Examples of elements taken into consideration are Yule’s (2006:222ff) theories about gender, women’s awareness of social status and caring about others’ feelings (also mentioned by Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:1, 86, 158f and Holmes 1995:6) were considered in the analysis. Moreover, the characteristics of men’s and women’s language, which are also mentioned by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:86, 158f), were taken into consideration.

The theory of superiority and inferiority, which is mentioned by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:158f) and Edlund et al (2007:50), was considered, as were factors which might have an influence when deciding to be polite or not (Brown, 1998:84; Brown & Levinson, 1987:15). Brown (1998:83) further mentions social network, communicative strategies and social motivations which were all included in the analysis.

Holmes (1995:3) discusses the different functions of speech (affective and referential) and these were borne in mind when the findings were analyzed. These functions are connected with women’s wish to establish and maintain relationship and men’s wish to only receive information. Men’s competition was also an important feature to have in mind.

Lastly, Cameron’s (1992:63f) hypotheses of language were included and discussed in the analysis.
4 Method and material

As this study is about politeness, oral speech is studied rather than written text. For this reason, I used the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). COCA is a corpus constructed by Mark Davies from Brigham Young University. The corpus contains 385 million words. These words are from 1990 to the present, and they are both from spoken and written contexts. The written portion is divided into different genres: fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic texts. The corpus is updated every six to nine months and, therefore, shows a record of linguistic changes in American English. Searches for exact words can be conducted, and the frequency and distribution of words can be shown. Of importance to note is that the occurrences from spoken contexts are from television and radio programs; consequently, the utterances may not be completely authentic but uttered from a script.

The phrases chosen for this study are *Could you...?* and *Can you...?*. The two phrases were separately written in the search field and the alternative “chart” was marked. The different genres and the usage of *Can you*, and *Could you* respectively, were displayed.

Figure 1. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)
The genre “spoken” was chosen and all occurrences with the phrases were shown. By only making a search of the two phrases, a great number of occurrences were found. In order to narrow the occurrences down, a sample of 100 occurrences of each phrase were chosen. This was done by choosing the alternative “sample 100 entries”. Among the 100 occurrences that were displayed, sentences such as *How could you do that?* and *Can you believe this guy?* could also be found. As the phrases *could you* and *can you* in these examples portray other meanings than requests, these sentences were not included in the analysis. For the reason of having a total of 100 occurrences, “real” requests were then included. To be able to see and understand the context and situation from where the occurrences were taken, I clicked on the title of the occurrence which was the name of the television/radio programme. Thus, the “expanded context” was shown and in my analysis I have taken the “expanded context” to display the situation.

In order to get an insight into the usage of the two phrases, two studies were conducted. To begin with, a quantitative study was performed to see the distribution of the two phrases between the sexes. This was made by simply analyzing how many men and how many women used the two phrases in the samples of 100 occurrences. Secondly, a qualitative study was conducted in order to see the differences in the usage between the sexes. Again, the 100 occurrences of each phrase were used. Yet, because of the desire of having equal representation of the sexes, utterances made by men were excluded in order to include more occurrences with women.

When studying the chosen occurrences, there were different factors which were taken into consideration. Firstly, the person who uttered the phrase, and secondly, to whom the phrase was uttered. The method used to identify the sex of the speaker was to look at the conversations from where the occurrences were taken. In some examples, the sexes of the speaker and interlocutor were stated by a first name or the honorific Mr/Mrs/Ms before the question or the response. In these instances, there was no difficulty. In other cases, however, there were no first names or titles indicating the sexes. Sometimes a last name was provided; this name was searched for on the Internet together with the name of the television/radio programme. In the cases where information about a person was found together with a television/radio programme, the sex could be stated. Non-identified occurrences were not included in the study.

As stated above, the representation of the sexes was not equal in the occurrences. Because of the desire of having equal representation of the sexes in the 200 occurrences, some occurrences with men were excluded. So far, I do not want to draw any bold conclusions.
because further investigation must be conducted. That said, a possible reason for the low share of occurrences with women may be due to the higher share of men working on and hosting television programs.
5 Findings and analysis

A total of two hundred occurrences were analyzed: one hundred of *Can you...?* and one hundred of *Could you...?* Firstly, in the quantitative study, the distribution of the two phrases between the sexes was analyzed. Secondly, in the qualitative study, the differences in the usage between the sexes were analyzed. In this section, the findings of both the quantitative study and the qualitative study are presented and analyzed. Moreover, the findings are discussed.

5.1 The distribution of the two phrases between the sexes

In this study, one hundred occurrences of *Can you...?* and one hundred occurrences of *Could you...?* were analyzed. The diagrams below display the distribution of the two phrases between the sexes.

Diagram 1. Distribution of *Can you...?*
Within the total of 200 occurrences, men were more frequent. Yet, in the distribution of Could you…?, men represented the minority which means that they uttered this phrase less frequently than women. The phrase Can you…?, however, was used more by men.

To some extent, these findings are in accordance with what the literature claims. For instance, Yule (2006:223) claims that women use the higher prestige form, and Holmes (1995:6) claims that women tend to be more polite than men. As Could you…? is the more polite form/higher prestige form, one could assume that it would be used more by women in the study. Evidently, this claim is supported by the findings. However, by reading the literature, even if it points to tendencies, one could form the opinion that the difference in the distribution of Could you…? between men and women would be greater. This opinion is not tenable. Moreover, one could not assume that women would use the less polite form as much as in 37% of the occurrences of Can you…?. Yet, they did.

Another claim is that men tend to be straightforward and that they use language as a tool for receiving information (Holmes 1995:2). This claim is supported by the findings as men used Can you…? (the form which is seen to be straightforward) more than women. However, this claim cannot in full be supported because men also tend to use the more polite form, even though they do not represent the sex who, supposedly, uses it more often.

Regarding factors which can be important in the choice of form, it may not only be the
factor of gender which influences women, for instance, to use the more polite form. Therefore, it is important to point out that the factor of formality in a particular context, for instance, may also have a great importance.

As stated before, men were more frequent in the 200 occurrences. The reason for this is not clear. However, a supposition is that men dominate the public sector and therefore occur more often in occurrences like these.

5.2 The qualitative study
In this part of the study, the representation of the sexes was equal within the 100 occurrences of each phrase. This means that 50 occurrences were with women and 50 were with men. Examples of occurrences with *Could you…?* and occurrences with *Can you…?* are displayed and discussed. The examples that are presented are the ones most interesting, either because they somewhat contradict the literature or because they are in accordance with the literature. Most examples contradict the hypothesis.

5.2.1 The occurrences with *Can you…?*

*Conversation 1: NPR (National Public Radio)*

**CALLER FEMALE** My calls for Jen, and I almost apologize for asking this question just because I hope it’s not a painful question. But I would imagine in your situation, when you saw some of the reasons for the war question and all those kinds of things, different thoughts might have been going through your head. *Can you* just - *can you* explain maybe a little bit what you were thinking, or how it impacted you to have the war questioned, given that your husband gave his life in the struggle?

**Ms. BRYANT:** Well, of course, it makes you question quite a few things because one of the arguments people bring up was that were over there for no reason

The topic of this conversation is not very amusing: Ms. Bryant has lost her husband and the caller asks her a delicate question. The caller’s apology for her question shows that she is aware of this delicate situation and question. One could, therefore, assume that she would make the request less directly; yet, this does not seem to be the case.

As Brown and Levinson (1987:15, 76f) claim, the factor of *imposition* in the speech act might influence the speaker when deciding whether to make a request directly or less directly. Thus, in general, people think of the imposition of a request and do not use the less polite form *Can you* which is more direct. Therefore, and generally, a less imposing request and a usage of the more polite form would be expected in this situation. Nevertheless, the
caller repeats her question and that might be a sign of her trying to ask carefully. Moreover, it seems that she is not thinking about her usage of the less polite form.

Another occurrence of *Can you* is the following between a powerful person and a little girl. It is taken from NBC (National Broadcasting Company).

**Conversation 2: NBC**

**DICK CHENEY, U.S. VICE PRESIDENT** Heather, *can you* open your eyes? Yeah, good. Hi, Heather, how are you?

**JOE RICHMAN, Reporter** Without a working liver, Heather is now at risk of irreversible brain damage or worse.

**DICK CHENEY, U.S. VICE PRESIDENT** OK, Heather, you have a good night, all right? We’re just going to still take care of you, all right?

This is an authentic situation where Mr. Cheney does not appear to have a script or a prepared speech. Given Mr. Cheney’s situation as a powerful leader and a person who meets people of high station, one could assume that he would use the higher prestige forms of the language. However, this conversation takes place in a situation where it does not seem that he is expected to speak as he tends to do to people of high station. It seems that it is appreciated if he speaks as he does to a normal person. He might wish to undermine what Brown and Levinson (1987:15) call the *social distance* and *power* between them. Therefore, it could be claimed that he tends to use the less polite form for the reason of appearing more humble. According to Holmes (1995:3, 6), Mr. Cheney appears to act as a woman in this conversation: he appears to think about the other person’s feelings and uses the *affective function* of the language. Thus, it does not seem that he is acting as the literature says.

The next conversation is from ABC (American Broadcasting Company) and it is between two women.

**Conversation 3: ABC**

**FEMALE** We can’t grow apart. We’ve got to grow together as a nation, going into the next century.

**JOAN** Aside from defense, of course, what would you count as a wasteful program? *Can you* give us examples?

**FEMALE** Besides...

**JOAN** Besides defense.
The reason for the choice of the less polite form is not clear. The woman asking the question does not seem to act as a woman according to viewpoints of Cameron (1992) and Holmes (1995). They claim that women tend to use *Could you* because they generally wish to have good relationships with their interlocutor/s. Could it be that this woman is an exception, and that she tries to stop “doing gender” (Edlund et al 2007:38ff)? Does she ignore the factors *power* and *imposition* mentioned by Brown and Levinson (1987:76f)?

According to Brown and Levinson (1987:15), these factors influence the speaker when deciding whether to use the less polite form or not. The factors can mitigate a request but in this conversation, the woman who asks the question may not want to mitigate the question. As Jalilifar states (2009:49), “direct requests appear to be inherently impolite and face-threatening because they intrude in the addressee’s territory”. The woman might want to have a clear and sincere answer from the other woman; therefore, it is a direct question. Furthermore, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:328) have come to the conclusion that young women are moving away from the “feminine linguistic ideal”. The usage of forms that are connected to women and their gender is diminishing. The woman in this conversation might simply be young and more aware of the so-called submissiveness in women’s language and wishes to change their situation.

The next occurrence is between two women.

**Conversation 4: Unknown**

**FEMALE** Got it. Can make it a couple days in advance...
**JENNIFER** Exactly.
**FEMALE** ...or if you don't use it all, you can keep it for a few days?
**JENNIFER** Exactly. And then we'll do that.
**FEMALE** Mix it all up.
**JENNIFER** Mix it all up. Here, you… *can you* help me mix?
**FEMALE** Sure.
**JENNIFER** I'm going to squeeze a lemon, which is always important. A little delicious flavor.
**FEMALE** Boy, that ice cream is screaming, Get over here quick!

The women in this conversation seem to enjoy what they are doing. They are preparing some kind of food/cake and they are working together. The television host helps the guest and they seem to get on very well. Moreover, neither of the women seems to perceive herself as more superior than the other. As Brown (1998:84) claims, people generally use the more polite form to people they see as superior. Yet, as they perceive one another as peers, there is no
need for the more polite form. All this may explain the usage of the less polite form: they enjoy each other’s company and they perceive themselves as peers.

The following occurrence is taken from a conversation between a man and a woman. It is taken from CNN (Cable News Network).

**Conversation 5: CNN**

**UNIDENTIFIED MAN** We’re sending local law enforcement wherever they are, yes.

**VERNIA FELDER** Chief, does this have anything at all to do with the bomb threats over the past few weeks at all? *Can you* clarify that?

**UNIDENTIFIED MAN** That’s another possibility we’re still exploring. I can’t rule that in or out.

**VERNIA FELDER** No bomb threats today, though, right?

**UNIDENTIFIED MAN** Not yet.

**VERNIA FELDER** *Can you* give us any specifics on bomb – or what the bomb threats were or, when they came in, who they were made to?

**UNIDENTIFIED MAN** Both of those were notes that were left in common areas.

The woman in this conversation does not employ the more polite form *Could you*, but the form which is less polite, *Can you*. The reason why she employs *Can you* is not clear. As this seems to be a live broadcast, the woman probably does not have a script written for her.

This conversation could be analyzed from the point of view given by Brown (1998). According to Brown (ibid:84), there are factors which influence people to act more politely. One example is the relationship between the speaker and interlocutor. Brown (ibid:84) claims that people tend to act more politely if they do not know the person they are talking to. It could be that the woman and the man in this conversation know each other; hence, the use of *Can you*. This, however, is unlikely because most television/radio hosts are not personally acquainted with their interviewees; as such, the polite form *Could you*...? tends to be more expected.

The last occurrence to be brought up is the following:

**Conversation 6: FOX**

**ALAN** Hey, Steve, it’s Alan Colmes. Thanks for being with us under those very dire conditions. I just wonder what those people are going to find when they come back, how severe is the devastation? *Can you* describe for our audience what you’ve seen and what they’re going to face when they’re able to return?

**STEVE** Really, at the point even before the storm started four or five hours ago it already looked like a hurricane or a storm had hit. I think the rising level of the water caught a lot of people by surprise.
Many homes already flooded before the Gulf really started to rise.

This occurrence seems to be a live broadcast just as conversation 5 above. Therefore, one could once again assume that there is no written script that the broadcaster uses.

As mentioned above, it is unlikely that television hosts are acquainted with the people they interview or talk to. Therefore, one could expect the more polite form in this occurrence because the two men in this conversation may not know one another (Brown:84). Yet, there seems to be an ease in the conversation and that might be because they perceive one another as peers. They are both in the television business and seem to have the same job, or at least similar jobs, and this may have an importance in the explanation to why the less polite form is used. They perceive themselves as being on the same “level” and do not see any necessity to address one another with the more polite form. However, there could also be another, more simple, explanation to the usage of the less polite form in this occurrence. This explanation is that men generally use the less polite form because they may not think about their social status as women do (Yule 2006:224) and may not see themselves as having to use the more prestigious form.

These occurrences show that men and women do not seem to differ greatly in using the less polite form Can you. They tend to use this form to express politeness. It may seem that they do not always think of their usage and that there is a more polite form that they can use, which is Could you.

The reasons for men and women using the less polite form are not as clear as one could wish. One significant finding, however, is that they do not seem to behave as the literature suggests. Generally, women do not use the less polite form because their language is submissive and deficient (Cameron 1992:63f) and they tend to compensate it by using more prestigious forms such as Could you. Men, on the other hand, generally use the less polite form. Yet, the question is whether they do it because they tend to see themselves as not having to use the more prestigious form, owing to the fact that they do not have to think about their social status as women usually do.

5.2.2 The occurrences with Could you…?

The men in the study show a tendency of using the form Could you to both women and other men. This finding disputes Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s (2003:35) theory about men and their competition.
According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:35), men tend to be competitive by nature and competition does not involve politeness. Therefore, there seem to be no reasons for men to use *Could you*. Yet, they claim that there are “social moves” in all conversations and that people tend to make different moves owing to different plans with the conversation (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:129f). Thus, if a man wishes to have a fruitful talk, he would generally act politely.

The following example demonstrates a man addressing a woman with the more polite form. This conversation is from NBC.

**Conversation 7: NBC**

**FRED HICKMAN** Hey D.J., would you come up here for a minute?

**WOMAN** What?

**FRED HICKMAN** Could you come up here for a minute? How you doing?

**WOMAN** All right.

**FRED HICKMAN** Good. I just want to talk to you for a minute.

The last line in this conversation is important when analyzing the choice and the reason of the more polite form *Could you*. The man states that he wants to talk to the woman for a while and this “want” is what Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:129f) discuss in goals and moves. A person who takes part in a conversation tends to have goals with that particular conversation. It might be that the person wants/has as a goal to receive information. This goal leads to moves (ibid: 129f). In this conversation, the man’s goal is to have the woman’s attention and to talk to her; as a result he tends to use the more polite form. If he had used *Can you*, her response might have been different and this response might have affected the outcome of the conversation.

What is more important in this occurrence is that the man has actually asked the woman more politely already in the beginning. He used *Would you* and that is even more polite than *Could you*. This might be a sign of a respectful man or a man who is eloquent. As a result, it seems that a script would not have an important part in this discussion because the man would probably use either *Would you* or *Could you* without it. However, he does not seem to behave in accordance with his gender. According to Holmes (1995:2f, 7), men tend to use speech as a tool to receive and convey information and not to establish relationships.

The next occurrence is taken from NPR and the people are discussing an Olympic scandal. It seems to be a heated discussion.
Conversation 8: NPR

1ST SPECTATOR you – I never wanted to be an IOC member. Could we stay on the subject please? I think you’re quite right to point out, as everyone does, that the Sarmaranch regime has led the commercialization of international sport. There’s no argument about that whatsoever. And indeed the culture of international business, international communication...

THALIA ASSURAS No, John, you’re not answering the question.

DOUG MOCHRIE But – but...

THALIA ASSURAS They covered up positive dope tests. Could you give an answer? Do you approve of it? It’s a fact. The people who worked in the lab confirm nine positive tests were hidden because it was embarrassing to the IOC. Now, do you not have an opinion on that?

1ST SPECTATOR Excuse me. What makes you think that anyone doubts these facts?

Firstly, there are three people in this occurrence: a woman and two men. How do we know that the “spectator” is a man? He is called “John” by the woman. Secondly, there are interruptions, ignorance of a third part in the conversation and many questions without answers – a heated discussion. Then, why does the woman use the more polite form? She seems to disagree with the spectator and to be dissatisfied with his answers. The atmosphere of this conversation is stifling and irritated; therefore, one could assume that the less polite form would be used. This does not appear to be the case, however.

In this instance, the woman does not use Could you to attain a more suitable atmosphere. Thus, it appears as if she does not think about social motivations and communicative strategies mentioned by Brown (1998:83). Moreover, the woman does not seem to think about establishing and maintaining a relationship, factors which Holmes (1995:2f, 7, 67) argues inhabit women’s speech. Yet, might it be that she acts in accordance with the deficit hypothesis and dominance hypothesis constructed by Cameron (1992)? The deficit hypothesis is about the woman’s language being deficit and poorer than the man’s language, and the dominance hypothesis is about men dominating the world and the consequences for the language (ibid:63f). The woman might dislike the man she is speaking to or dislike his answers. However, if she acts in accordance with the two hypotheses, the usage of Could you…? can be explained as a way of compensating the language.

Another example similar to the one above is the following occurrence. Yet, it is not a conversation between a man and a woman but between two women.

Conversation 9: Unknown

CYNTHIA You know what? If you don’t want to talk about the policy stuff, we can keep going back and forth.
CAROL PINEAU CNN CORRESPONDENT I don’t. I am curious on where this investigation stands with regard to Martha Stewart. Could you please answer one of those questions?

CYNTHIA OK. And I can’t provide you any information with specifics about Martha Stewart.

Similarly to the previously-mentioned conversation, there seems to be a stifling and irritated atmosphere. The two women do not appear to be enjoying the conversation and especially the interviewer, the CNN correspondent, does not seem satisfied with the answers to her questions. Ostensibly, the other woman does not like the questions, and therefore she tends not to give the answers the interviewer is searching for. It seems that both women understand that the conversation is not going well. Then, again, why does the interviewer use the more polite form?

It could be argued that the interviewer is urging for some answers because, it seems, she has asked questions but has not yet received a satisfactory answer (“Could you please answer one [my emphasis] of those questions?”). Her motivation/goal appears to be to receive at least one answer from the woman; therefore, Could you might be an attempt to receive some information from the interlocutor. Thus, it seems that she uses the more polite form as an attempt to achieve her goal and accordingly, the more polite form functions as a communicative strategy (Brown 1998:83).

The following occurrence is between a male reporter, a powerful person and a mother who has lost her son.

Conversation 10: Unknown

REPORTER Could you tell us what it was?

CONGRESSMAN HENRY WAXMAN Not in detail, I can’t, no…

CONGRESSMAN HENRY WAXMAN –but I- he did have a relationship in which he provided information to us.

JEANNE WHITE, Mother Can you not tell us- Was he- one more, George. Was he not at the same time acting as a double agent and telling whatever he learned?

CONGRESSMAN HENRY WAXMAN I don’t know that.

This conversation demonstrates both a usage of the more polite form Could you and a usage of the less polite form Can you. What is the difference in the two usages? How come the reporter uses Could you and the mother uses Can you? It could be argued that the reporter has a script which he follows and therefore tends to use the higher prestige form. Moreover, as he is a reporter and is being seen on television, one could assume that he is aware of his language
and may want to appear as positively as possible. He is talking to an important and powerful man and therefore he tends to use *Could you*. Again, the factor of superiority seems to play a role and as mentioned before, people tend to be polite to others who are superior to them (Brown 1998:84).

The woman, on the other hand, does not seem to care about what form is perceived as being more prestigious in this situation and may not think about her usage. Therefore, she tends to use the less polite form. In addition, it does not appear that she is thinking about or caring about who she is talking to as the reporter does. The fact that she is talking to a congressman does not seem to affect her speech. Thus, both the reporter and the woman do not tend to act according to the tendencies suggested in the literature. Generally, the usages are reversed because women tend to use the more polite form and men tend to use the less polite form. Authors such as Yule (2006:224f) and Holmes (1995:7) argue that women are the ones who care about the other person and wish to establish and maintain good relationships; therefore, they generally use the higher prestige form. This conversation refutes those facts. Furthermore, the authors argue that men are the ones who are competitive and tend to be careless of the interlocutors’ feelings (Yule 2006:224; Holmes 1995:7) – also this is contradicted by this utterance.

The following occurrence is between two women, taken from NPR:

**Conversation 11: NPR**

**JANET RENO** **Could you** just very quickly rattle off a half dozen of the different internet providers that people could sign up with if they want?

**ROSEMARY DEMPSEY** OK. Let’s see, Seattle is Northwest Nexus. Another group here called Connected. In LA a new group has just started up called Earthling.

In contrast to conversations 8 and 9, this conversation proceeds well. The atmosphere does not appear to be stifling and the women seem to be on common ground. The fact that they are, seemingly, getting on well might influence the way they address each other. It seems to be about respect and as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:134ff) argue, showing respect is a mutual issue. People tend to desire respect and to show respect in order to possess it. Thus, both women might share the same *social motivations*. Moreover, and again, women tend to see relationships as something important (Holmes 1995:2f, 6) and that might also be a reason for them to treat one another well.
The last occurrence is the following, taken from NPR. There are two men talking.

**Conversation 12: NPR**

**Mr. WOODS** I’m told she had quite a finish for the act.

**Mr. VINCENT DYMON** Yes.

**Mr. WOODS** Oh, come on now. Let’s play ball. *Could you* please tell us what the finish of the act was.

**Mr. VINCENT DYMON** The finish of the act included lassoing an object and the object was a stuffed pig.

The factor of superiority/inferiority is difficult to establish in this context and therefore it seems hard to predict the effect of that factor. As several authors claim, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003); Brown (1998) and Edlund et al (2007), the person who uses the more polite form tends to be inferior. Suggested reasons for the “inferior” person to be polite to the “superior” person are showing respect or being afraid of not addressing the person in the right way (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:161ff). Thus, from this utterance, it could be claimed that Mr. Woods feels inferior to Mr. Vincent Dymon. Yet, how do we know that? We do not know the different status of the men. Moreover, there are other reasons for people to act politely. Another possible reason for Mr. Woods to use the more polite form could be that he wishes to have a good talk and therefore uses *Could you*. A usage of the less polite form might have led to an end to the conversation and that would not be good owing to the fact that it was an interview on a radio program. However, it could simply be that Mr. Woods has a script in front of him and tends to say what the script says. Thus, there might be no reason of showing respect or wishing to have a good conversation.

The usage of the more polite form *Could you* does not seem to differ between men and women as much as the literature claims. Women tend to use it to ask politely and so do men. Yet, in some occurrences, it seems somewhat strange that this form is used. For instance, when women are upset it seems that they still tend to use the more polite form. The reasons for this are not clear or certain. However, it could be claimed that women act according to the *deficit hypothesis* and therefore tend to use, whatever circumstance and mood, the more prestigious form. Another explanation could be that they are aware that they are in a public forum and act accordingly.

To demonstrate a contrast to the occurrences where the reasons for the usage are unclear, conversation 7 is brought up. The man uses the more polite form to a woman and it could be because he has a *social motivation* which is not only to receive information about the
woman but also to establish a relationship. Nevertheless, it should again be pointed out that the findings are not in accordance with the literature.
6 Conclusion

The aim of this essay was firstly to investigate differences in the way men and women express politeness by using the phrases *Could you* and *Can you*. Secondly, these differences were to be identified and clarified.

By my study and my analysis of the 200 occurrences from the COCA, the conclusion that I draw is that the hypothesis that women generally request nicely is questionable. Women tend to use both the less polite form and the more polite form; yet, the usage of *Can you...?* is less frequent than the usage of *Could you...?*. Scholars in gender and politeness studies claim that women are more aware of their language because of factors such as their perceived inferiority to men; their consideration of others’ feelings; and their desire to maintain good relationships (Yule, 2006; Holmes, 1995). In general, this awareness makes them use higher prestige forms of the language such as the more polite form *Could you* instead of *Can you*. Yet, many conversations in this study have contradicted this hypothesis by showing numerous examples of women not using the more polite form. Furthermore, some men use *Could you* when requesting. Again, this contradicts the literature. According to Holmes (1995:2, 7), men have a tendency to be straightforward and not to think about establishing and maintaining relationships with others. However, not all men show this tendency to think about relationships but generally use the less polite form. Accordingly, both men and women tend to use the more polite form in some contexts and the other form in other contexts. Thus, requests made by men and women tend to be expressed similarly. This statement is directly related to my research questions which were:

1. How do men and women differ in using *Can you...?* and *Could you...??*
2. What are the underlying causes for these differences?

The answer to the first question is, as mentioned above: men and women tend to express requests similarly. In some occurrences, they use the less polite form, and in other occurrences they use the more polite form. Regarding the second question, it could be expected that, in spite of similarities, there are different causes underlying the choice of form. However, there did not seem to be any underlying causes. The reason that differences could be expected is that the literature argues that men do not show consideration owing to the fact that they are competitive in contrast to women (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:35). Therefore, an explanation for a man using *Could you* might be that he is trying to wriggle...
himself into the interlocutor’s favor. However, this study cannot entirely support and confirm that proposition because of the fact that in some occurrences, it seems that the reasons are alike: a man tends to use the more polite form to show consideration and so does a woman. Moreover, a woman might as well, as much as a man, desire a clear and concise answer but does not care about having a good relationship with the interlocutor. Therefore, she tends to use the less polite form.

Two occurrences in my analysis (conversations 8 and 9) raised some questions. In these occurrences, the more polite form *Could you* is used by women. The reasons for the usage are, however, difficult to determine owing to the fact that the women seem to be in heated or irritated conversations. It would be more conceivable to use the less polite form but the women still act politely. Could it be that the women tend to be more polite, despite their mood? Or do women simply tend to be more polite whatever the circumstance?

With regard to limitations of my findings and my study, there were some factors that could have worked better and been better. For instance, in the first sample of occurrences with *Can you…?*, and *Could you…?* respectively, the occurrences were mostly with men. For the reason of having an equal share, I therefore had to include more occurrences with women and exclude occurrences with men. Moreover, the occurrences could have presented more information about the people speaking in order to decide the power between the speaker and interlocutor. Thus, if the power was more evident an analysis of the reasons would have been more rewarding.

As mentioned above, the occurrences were mostly with men and it was no problem in finding these occurrences. Occurrences with women, on the other hand, were not that easy to find. This raises the question whether men are seen more on television and heard more on radio than women. Therefore, an example of future research would be to investigate the relationship between gender and media. Do men represent the majority in the media? If so, is it a way of continuously dominating society? Does this, in turn, allow men to dominate and decide the language? The world and women await an answer.
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