## FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND BUSINESS STUDIES Department of Humanities

# Male and Female Usage of Minimal Responses 

A Comparison Between Same-sex and Mixed-sex, Formal and Informal, and Pair and Group Conversations

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#### Abstract

This essay investigates how the usage of minimal responses differs between men and women in different situations. There are three factors included in the analysis, gender of the interlocutor, formality, and the number of participants in the conversations. For each factor, the frequency and function of minimal responses are investigated. Eleven conversations are collected from the Santa Barbara Corpus to attain this aim. The method conducted to analyse the conversations is divided into two parts. The first part is to count the minimal responses used and calculate the frequency of usage for each speaker in all the conversations. The second part is a close analysis of the function of the minimal responses used by noticing whether they are disruptive or supportive. The results show that women use minimal responses at a higher frequency compared to men except in informal conversations. Also, there is no significant difference in the function of minimal responses between men and women. However, the minimal responses used in the informal conversations seem more disruptive. In pair and group conversations minimal responses can be used disruptively. However, if one considers the context, it seems that minimal responses in group conversations are collaborative, despite being disruptive.


Keywords: minimal responses, gender, formality, informality, pair conversations, group conversations
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## 1. Introduction

Language is the most powerful communication tool. It provides human beings with the means to cooperate and develop. Language is a system of signs and symbols, which constitutes a tool for acquiring knowledge, preserving beliefs, and restoring human companionship. The field of sociolinguistics is mainly interested in "how language is used by different groups in society" (Cambridge Dictionary Online, "Sociolinguistics") which is also the main topic for this essay. However, focusing on all language features is impossible due to the time limitation; therefore, the focus will be on one feature: minimal responses.

Minimal responses are often regarded as a feature used by a listener to show his or her engagement in the conversation (Fellegy, 1995, p.186). In this case, minimal responses function as "supportive and cooperative speech acts" (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 238). However, minimal responses can also be used in a disruptive manner showing a lack of interest, discouragement or attempts to dominate a conversation (Fellegy, 1995, pp. 196-197). In this essay, the topic will be investigated further in the hope of ending up with more findings on this front.

### 1.1 Aim and Research Questions

This essay aims to investigate the frequency and function of minimal responses in male and female speech when different factors are involved. Therefore, the following questions are posed:

1) Is there a difference in the frequency of usage of minimal responses between men and women?
2) Do minimal responses fulfil different functions when used by men and women? Do they use minimal responses as supportive interruptions or disruptive interruptions?
3) Is there a difference in frequency or function of usage of minimal responses in samesex and mixed-sex conversations?
4) Is there a difference in the frequency or function of usage of minimal responses in formal and informal conversations?
5) Is there a difference in frequency or function of usage of minimal responses between pair and group conversations?

After the introduction follows a section that discusses previous literature about the same topic investigated in this essay along with useful definitions that are necessary to understand the function of minimal responses and the method used in the analysis of the data. The section that follows will present the results from the analysis and discuss possible reasons why the results are what they are. Finally, the last section will present a short conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

Previous literature deals with many of the aspects investigated in this essay. It also sheds light on female and male usage of language features such as minimal responses which are the main interest of the essay. However, some aspects are introduced in this review due to their importance in understanding the usage of minimal responses better. The literature review will begin with a subsection for defining important concepts such as minimal responses, interruptions, and formality. Thereafter, general conversational patterns associated with female and male speakers are presented. After that, an introduction of previous findings related to the usage of minimal responses is offered.

### 2.1 Definitions

Minimal responses can be words, such as mhm, yeah or $u h-h u h$ etc, said by the listener to the speaker to express engagement in the conversation or encouragement for the speaker to continue talking (Fellegy, 1995, p.186). However, Fellegy clarifies that some utterances such as "brief restatements of the speaker's text, requests for clarification, sentence completions [Duncan 1974], and short answers to direct questions [Fishman 1978]" (Fellegy, 1995, p.186) are not considered minimal responses (1995, p.186). One of the functions of minimal responses is interruptions (Coates, 2004, p. 192; James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 238, referring to Willis \& Williams [1976], Shaw \& Sadler [1965], and Welkowitz, Bond, \& Feldstein [1984]). Interruptions are an attempt on the listener's part to take over the turn from the speaker and can be divided into successful and unsuccessful interruptions depending on whether the interruptor succeeds in taking the turn from the speaker or not (Hirschman, 1994,
p. 437). The reason for initiating interruptions seems to be related to wanting to restrain the speaker's opportunity to express himself or herself. Octigan \& Niederman say that "an interruption or overlap is taken as a violation and a sign of conversational dominance" (cited in James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 232). However, interruptions can also be supportive and cooperative (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 238).

Thus, one can say that minimal responses can, among other things, function as supportive and cooperative interruptions (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 238) or they can function as disruptive interruptions (Coates, 2004, p. 192). It is also possible in some cases to count simultaneous talk as a supportive or cooperative interruption when used in a non-disruptive way as in collaborative floors. In this case, i.e., on collaborative floors, people talk simultaneously to exchange ideas and opinions to develop the topic discussed, unlike on single floors where one person talks and interruptions seem less frequent (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 239). Although the simultaneous talk is regarded as a supportive interruption in some cases, it is not counted as a minimal response. Therefore, it is important to note that all supportive and cooperative interruptions are not minimal responses. However, minimal responses can function as supportive and cooperative interruptions, and sometimes as disruptive interruptions.

Another concept important for the methodology in this essay is the concept of formality. Formality is one of the factors taken into consideration in the essay because previous literature indicates a possible correlation between the usage of minimal responses and the level of formality in the conversation, which will be discussed in Section 2.3. Three aspects characterise a formal situation, two of them relevant to this essay: the linguistic and situational aspects (Irvine, 1979, p. 774). In formal situations, one is expected to talk seriously, politely, and respectfully and have structured and predictable speech that follows the social norm; the more formal a situation is the less acceptable deviation from the norm becomes (Irvine, 1979, p. 774). Irvine explains that, according to some researchers, formality is regarded as "the opposite of levity and intimacy" (Irvine, 1979, p. 775) and a situation can be regarded as formal when it forces the speaker to be careful with his or her word choice (1979, p. 775).

Different clothing styles also characterise formal and informal situations (Morand, 1995, p. 837). In formal situations, clothes are business-like, more expensive and indicate certain roles, e.g., uniforms, whereas, in informal situations, clothes are casual and colourful (Morand, 1995, p. 837). The degree of formality in a certain situation is also reflected by the
environmental characteristics of the surrounding area, e.g., the symmetrical layout of the furniture, desks, height of chairs and other official items display formality (Morand, 1995, p. 837). The opposite is true for informal settings which are characterised by "colors, soft, comfortable furniture, flowers, or food" (Morand, 1995, p. 838). It is also the case that formal settings are quieter and absent from background noises such as in companies (Morand, 1995, p. 838).

### 2.2 Typical Female vs Male Patterns of Conversational Interactions

It seems that men and women have different ways of conversational interactions, for example, men respond more often at the end of the speaker's turn whereas women spread their responses throughout the speaker's turn (Fellegy, 1995, p.194). Moreover, it seems to be the case that men and women respond differently to the speaker's attempt to find out the listener's level of engagement in the conversation through either question statements, which are questions in the form of declarative statements (Cambridge Dictionary Online, "Questions: statement questions") or pauses (Fellegy, 1995, pp.194-195). Moreover, the usage of such devices does not signal that the speaker is offering the listener the floor to talk but he or she is only making sure that the listener is on the same page as him or her. Examples (1) and (2) are introduced by Fellegy (1995, p. 195) and show how the speaker's usage of question statements or pauses generates usage of minimal responses from the listener:
(1) I like I had this? under the radical? an' like I took the 4 and the L1

Mmhmm yeah
square? put it there ' $n$ then like ...
yeah
(2) It was absolutely spooky [I] because her facial expressions ...
mmhmm

According to Fellegy's study, men seem to pose more question statements and use pauses more than women. However, when such devices are used by other speakers, men seem to answer them less frequently compared to women. Women, however, use pauses and question
statements less frequently but, when posed, women answer them more frequently compared to men (1995, p. 195).

It is also the case that men and women do not interpret minimal responses following the purpose of usage. For example, men interpret minimal responses as agreement or request for further explanation while women use them often to show that they are listening (Bailey, 2008, p. 11). Men's and women's usage of minimal responses also differs in the sense that men use it to fill a gap when they should have responded with a longer answer whereas women use minimal responses to show support and engagement (Fishman, 1978, p. 402). It is also apparent that women are more inclined to show engagement in female pair conversations compared to men in male pair conversations by using "brief, multiple, and repeated" (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 260) minimal responses. It is also the case that women laugh more and interact more with the speaker showing a "relatively high level of interruptions...associated with the expression of interest, enthusiasm, and rapport" (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 260). This is not typical male behaviour in male speech and no study has found the opposite in their results (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 260).

### 2.3 Previous Findings on the Usage of Minimal Responses

Some previous literature shows that minimal responses are used differently by men and women in a way which indicates that women are more supportive and active listeners while men use them when agreeing or when being inattentive (Fellegy, 1995, p.186). One study shows that men use delayed minimal responses (Fellegy, 1995, p. 186 referring to Zimmerman and West, 1975) which is explained as a strategy used by men to undermine the speech of women (Fellegy, 1995, p. 187 referring to Henley and Kramarae, 1991). However, Fellegy argues that both men and women use minimal responses appropriately and rarely use delayed minimal responses in same-sex conversations (1995, pp. 196-197). However, it is the case that men and women have different conversational strategies related to the placement of responses and the usage of question statements and pauses (Fellegy, 1995, pp. 196-197).

Therefore, these patterns might be the reason why men appear inattentive or that they are trying to undermine women because they use minimal responses less frequently which also shows that women are doing more work than men in mixed-sex conversations (Fellegy, 1995, pp. 196-197). Simultaneously, men use more question statements and pauses, to which women respond more frequently. However, when women use these devices, men answer
them less frequently. Hence, in mixed-sex conversations, men will appear less engaged, and women will appear to do more work to maintain the conversation. This applies even if women maintain the same conversational patterns they use in same-sex conversations and even if men maintain their level of engagement in mixed-sex conversations as in same-sex conversations (1995, pp. 196-197). Women not only seem to use minimal responses more frequently than men but seem to use more interruptive conversational patterns in female-only conversations (Hirschman, 1994, p. 427).

Conversations tend to be dominated by male speakers who are experts in a certain subject, therefore, they speak more and interrupt other speakers more frequently (Coates, 2004, p. 116). Speakers who are female and not as knowledgeable in the subject tend to speak less and use minimum responses at a higher frequency compared to men (Coates, 2004, p. 116). High-status male speakers dominate conversations because they interact in a way that is based on power, whereas high-status female speakers favour conversational interactions to be based on solidarity and support (Coates, 2004, p. 116). For instance, Coates presents an example which shows how a female boss talks to a male employee in a supportive and encouraging way despite his attempts to take the floor (Coates, 2004, p. 120).

Another explanation for why men tend to dominate women more than the reverse is the different socialisation of both which results in men wanting to manifest leader-like characteristics and women wanting to maintain their relationships (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 233).

Zimmerman and West claim that male speakers frequently delay their minimal responses in mixed-sex interactions (Coates, 2004, p. 123). In other words, they respond appropriately, but only after pausing. A delayed minimum response could appear as a misunderstanding or disinterest in what the speaker is saying (Coates, 2004, p. 123). A delayed minimal response indicates a lack of interest in and support for the speaker, just as an appropriately timed minimal response shows attentive listening (Coates, 2004, p. 123). When a man refuses to participate in conversation with the speaker, his silence serves as a reminder of his power to decide whether to engage in the conversation or not (Coates, 2004, p. 124). When a woman remains silent after being interrupted or after a delayed minimal response, it is an indication of her powerlessness (Coates, 2004, p. 124). Jenkins and Cheshire (1990, p. 269) claim that girls use minimal responses as a supporting mechanism while boys use them as "a subtle form of interruption . . . to gain a foothold in the conversation rather than as a
support for the current speaker" (cited in Coates, 2004, p. 192). Therefore, it is relevant here to present some previous findings on interruptions.

Six studies out of twenty-one have found that men interrupt women more (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 233). Although studies have not found a strong correlation between dominance and interruptions in casual conversations and between friends, the correlation seems to be stronger in formal-oriented and highly competitive situations such as collective decision-making and task-oriented meetings and problem-solving conversations between spouses (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 244).

James \& Clarke refer to seven studies on group conversations, six of them found that men interrupted the speaker at a higher frequency compared to women and interrupted female speakers more than male speakers (1993, p. 233). However, one study shows the opposite results; it shows that women interrupt the speaker more often than men do (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 233). It is worth noting though that the same study that shows that women interrupt the speaker more than men do show that men and women interrupt each other equally (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 233). Another study shows that a female physician is interrupted, especially by male patients, to a higher degree compared to a male physician (West, 1984). This means that although the female physician has a higher status, she is interrupted frequently by the male patient who has lower status.

It is established, though, that women show more agreement and support in conversations and "tend to perform more positive socioemotional behavior" (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 258) compared to men. This is manifested in same-sex and mixed-sex conversations (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 258). Many studies on the usage of minimal responses have found that women use minimal responses more than men as a supporting mechanism in female-only groups (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 259). James \& Clarke present three studies, Kalcik (1975), Coates (1989), and Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1988), that studied female interaction reporting that most of the interruptions made by women are in the form of minimal responses showing support or interest in the conversation (1993, p. 259). However, there are no studies on the same detailed level investigating male groups making the comparison between female-only and male-only groups possible (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 259).

As presented in the literature review various factors can affect the usage of minimal responses which makes it necessary to clarify the method used in this essay to make it easier
to analyse and understand the results. The next section, Section 3, is an attempt to explain the method.

## 3. Method

The purpose of this essay is to investigate potential differences in the usage of minimal responses between males and females. Therefore, the frequency and function of the minimal responses used will be investigated in same-sex and mixed-sex, formal and informal, and pair and group conversations.

### 3.1 Material

The primary source of this essay is the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC) which consists of recorded spontaneous speech from all over the US and it is also available as a transcript. The SBC covers a diverse range of individuals from various geographical origins, ages, professions, genders, and ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. A face-to-face conversation is the most common type of language usage included in the corpus, but it also contains information on a wide range of other uses of language in daily life such as "telephone conversations, card games, food preparation, on-the-job talk, classroom lectures, sermons, story-telling, town hall meetings, tour-guide spiels, and more" (Du Bois, 2000-2005).

This corpus offers an opportunity to analyse the data chosen through analysing the transcript, which gives a clear picture of the language features used. Also, it is possible to analyse the audio, if wished, to better understand the attitude and level of engagement the speakers have which can easily be detected from their tone of voice.

### 3.2 Data

As presented in the literature review, different situations can affect the usage of minimal responses between men and women. However, it is necessary to limit the extra-linguistic factors analysed in this essay because of the time limitation. In Figure 1, the different factors involved are presented. The choice of having two participants as the first group and three or more as the second group is motivated by the hypothesis of single and collaborative floors
presented by James \& Clarke (1993, p. 239). This hypothesis claims that when a group has a conversation the probability of interruption is higher, which also means that the usage of minimal responses might be higher as well since minimal responses can function as a supportive interruption.

The second factor is the degree of formality of the conversation which is also believed to affect the interpretation of a minimal response. As discussed in the literature review, in formal conversations, e.g., in decision-making meetings, attempts to interrupt are correlated with the tendency to dominate as well as in conflict-related informal conversations between, e.g., spouses. Since minimal responses can be used to interrupt, it becomes relevant to include the degree of formality among the factors investigated.

The third factor investigated is the gender of the other participants in the conversation to discover if men and women change their behaviour depending on if they are talking to men or women. This means that there are twelve categories investigated in the essay as presented in Figure 1.


Figure 1. The extra-linguistic factors which are taken into consideration for the choice of conversations.

It is worth noting that the distinction between formal and informal conversations can vary depending on whether the analyst takes into consideration if the situation is formal, the language is formal, or both. This essay follows the same description as explained in the study by Irvine (1979) and Morand (1995) and considers the setting of the conversation. When it comes to formal conversations, the setting might be a corporation, hospital, or institution. The
informal conversations can take place in a home or at dinner in a restaurant between family members, friends or neighbours which means that they will care less about the norms and conversational rules and talk more freely. Based on these criteria, the formal conversations chosen in this essay are set in hospitals, corporations, government buildings etc while the informal conversations are set mainly at home but even in gardens outside.

Hence, eleven conversations are included in the analysis and are also presented in Table 1. However, the original number of categories is twelve which means that there is one category that is not presented which is the category of female-only formal group conversation. The reason for this is the lack of such a conversation in the SBC which makes it impossible to include. It is also the case that the informal male-only group conversation includes two instances where the men are shortly joined by females. However, these parts are excluded from the conversation.

Table 1. A review of the conversations chosen for the analysis and a short description of each.

| Name of the conversation | Length | Description |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| SBC050 Just Wanna Hang | 16 minutes | Informal conversation between four female <br> roommates. |
| SBC032 Handshakes All- <br> Around | 27 minutes | Informal conversation between three male <br> neighbours. |
| SBC003 Conceptual <br> Pesticides | 26 minutes | Informal conversation between a heterosexual <br> married couple and their friend (two men and <br> a woman). |
| SBC014 Bank Products | 28 minutes | Formal conversation between four male loan <br> officers in a meeting. |
| SBC026 Hundred Million <br> Dollars | 26 minutes | Formal city meeting with multiple <br> participants, both men and women. |
| SBC006 Cuz | 27 minutes | Informal conversation between two female <br> cousins. |
| SBC017 Wonderful Abstract <br> Notions | 20 minutes | Informal conversation between two male <br> friends. |
| SBC005 A Book About <br> Death | 20 minutes | Informal conversation between a heterosexual <br> married couple. |
| SBC041 X Units of Insulin | 19 minutes | Formal medical interaction between a female <br> doctor and a female patient. |


| SBC046 Flumpity-Bump <br> Down the Hill | 15 minutes | Formal medical interaction between a male <br> doctor and a male patient. |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| SBC016 Tapedeck | 22 minutes | Formal conversation between a male <br> salesman who describes products to a female <br> customer. |

### 3.3 Method of Analysis

For a word to be counted as a minimal response it should follow the definition presented in section 2.1 which is based on the study by Fellegy (1995). Hence, all words such as $m h m$, oh, un-huh etc. will be counted as minimal responses, meaning that no limited list of minimal responses will be used. On the contrary, all minimal responses found will be included to make the analysis more comprehensive. It is also important to remember that some words that can be a minimal response can have a different meaning, for instance, the word right can signal an agreement, question or direction which is why it is important to do the count of the minimal responses manually to avoid such confusion. For example, in (3), lines 1 and 4 show how the word right is used in agreement but not as a minimal response. While in line 3 , the word right is used as a minimal response. As it is clear in the examples, when the word right is used as a minimal response, it is used alone as a single word and might also be used with other minimal responses such as $m h m, o h, u h-h u h$ etc. However, when the word right is used to agree, it is used within a phrase, such as 'you are right' or 'that is right'.
(3) DARRYL: ...You're [right].

PAMELA: [I] wouldn't [be] me.
DARRYL: [Right].
That's right.
It'd be a different [personality]. (SBC 005 A Book About Death)

The analysis of the minimal responses will also make it possible to distinguish the supportive minimal responses used from the disruptive ones. The supportive minimal responses are non-delayed minimal responses. Disruptive minimal responses are those which signal a lack of interest, discouragement and/or a tendency to dominate the conversation by being delayed without overlapping the utterance of the current speaker. Whether or not a minimal response is supportive or not is also discussed in the literature review and applies
also to this essay. Shortly, to count a minimal response as a disruptive one it should be delayed by at least 1-3 seconds (DeFrancisco, 1991, p. 415) and can be up to 10 seconds (Fellegy, 1995, p. 186 referring to Zimmerman and West, 1975) and not be an overlap. The supportive minimal responses should be non-delayed and used in a way that shows active listening and engagement in the conversation.

For example, Figure 2 shows an interaction between a couple where the man's responses are discouraging the woman. The minimal response used in line 15 is defined, by the researcher of that study, as a delayed minimal response functioning as a discouraging tool and thus is counted as a disruptive minimal response. The reason why the minimal response is counted as delayed is the lengthy remark the woman has uttered including a question in line 13 , which typically would generate a minimal response from the listener, that is not answered by the man. It is also worth noting that the Hmmm? response in line 1 and the $U m H m$ in line 2 are not counted as minimal responses because the first functions as a question and the second as an answer to a question.

| TRANSCRIPT |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| ${ }_{1} \mathrm{~F}$ : I didn't know that. (=) Um you know that (/garbage disposal on)) that organ |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| F: stuff about Frederick Taylor and Bishopsgate and all that stuff? $\Leftrightarrow$ 2 |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| M: |  |  |
| F: 1900's people were trying to fight favoritism to the schools (4) |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| M: That's what we needed. (18) I |  |  |
| F:$4$ |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| M: never did get my smoked oysters, I'm going to look for ((inaudible)) (14) Should we try the |  |  |
| 5 F: OK. That's a change. (72) Hmm. That's very interesting. Did |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| F: you know that teachers used to be men until about the 1840 's when it became a female occupa6 M: |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| F: tion? (2) <br> Because they needed more teachers because of the increased enroll- |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| M: $\quad$ Nhhmm ( (no) ) ( $=1$ |  |  |
| 8 F: ment. (5) Yeah relatively and the status (7) |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| M | M: $\quad$ And then the salaries started going down probably. $=$ ) |  |
| F: M : Um, it's weird. We're out of oil again. [There's two bottles I think $\begin{aligned} & \text { Now we have to buy that. } \\ & \text { ((whistling)) (8) Dressing }\end{aligned}$ |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| $10{ }^{\text {F: }}$ ( It does yeah. (76) That's really interesting. They didn't sta |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| M: looks good. See? (2) See babe? (1) |  |  |
| F : using the test to measure and find the you know categorize and track people in American |  |  |
| M: |  |  |
| F: schools until like the early 1900's after the army $y^{\prime}$ know introduced their array alpha things 12 |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| M |  |  |
| $F$ : to the draftees (?) And then it caught on with the schools and there was a lot of opposition right 13 |  |  |
| M : |  |  |
| F: at the beginning to that, which was as sophisticated as today's arguments. The same argu14 |  |  |
| M : |  |  |
|  | But it didn't work and they came (4) $]^{\text {heh }}$ |  |
| ${ }^{15} \mathrm{M}: \quad$ Yeah $(=) \quad$ Leslie White is probably right |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Figure 2. An excerpt from the transcript analysed by Fishman (1978, p. 403).

Example 4 shows what a supportive minimal response looks like. A minimal response is uttered often, but not always, simultaneously as the speaker talks in a way that encourages the speaker to continue and does not give the impression of lack of interest, discouragement, or tendency to take the turn from the current speaker, in other words, a tendency to dominate the conversation. In this extract, only the minimal response $m h m$ is used, however, it occurs two times. Therefore, when it comes to counting them, they are counted as two minimal responses despite being the same, because they occur in two different instances.
(4) PATT: the first Missis Wilcox Ruth.

LIND: [Mhm].
PATT: [Was so] other worldly [and everything] else.
LIND: 【mhm〕.
PATT: She didn't even have a clue: (.) as to what [was going] on. (SBC023 Howard's End)

Counting the minimal responses is done manually to avoid any miscalculations. Then the normalized frequency is calculated as follows: the total number of minimal responses divided by the total number of words which then is multiplied by 1,000 . The normalized frequency will thus describe how many minimal responses are uttered per a thousand words. The normalized frequency of the minimal responses is counted for each speaker which reveals any differences depending on who the speaker or interlocutor is. Also, when calculating the total number of words, it is important to pay attention to such lines as the one presented in (5) taken from the conversation SBC003 Conceptual Pesticides because it should not be included in the count of words since it only says that the person is laughing. Moreover, all the symbols such as $\&,=$ and () should be removed manually to get the right number of words uttered by a speaker. It is also the case that all conversations do not have the same length, however, this does not affect the calculation of the normalized frequency since it describes the probability a speaker would use minimal responses per thousand words, e.g., speaker x would use 10 minimal responses per 1,000 words.
(5) MARI: (.) \&=laugh $\&=$ laugh (.) \&=laugh $\&=$ laugh $\&=$ laugh $\&=$ laugh.
(SBC003 Conceptual Pesticides)

### 3.4 Validity and Reliability

Validity is a concept that describes whether the method used measures the wished aspects that eventually will lead to answers to the research questions or not; whereas reliability describes whether it is possible to replicate the study and end up with similar results or not (Litosseliti, 2010, pp. 55-56). Validity can also be divided into internal and external validity. The internal validity measures how legitimate the research design is and if it is possible to claim cause and effect relationships in the conclusions (Marion \& Jolaine, 2001). The external validity, however, measures the possibility of generalizing the conclusions to a new set of data (Marion \& Jolaine, 2001). On this basis, the method is internally valid when it comes to answering if women use minimal responses in higher frequency than men do. The reason is that the calculation of the normalized frequency is an accurate method, and it answers whether the frequency of usage of minimal responses differs when different factors are involved or not. However, it is not possible to claim that the factors investigated are the only ones that affect the results. Therefore, it is possible to claim that factor x causes a certain change in conversational behaviour, however, it is not possible to claim that it is the only factor involved. When it comes to external validity, it is not possible to generalise the conclusions on a large scale because the sample of the conversations is not large enough to neglect the individual characteristics of the speakers.

The method of deciding the function of the minimal responses is based on the definitions presented previously in the literature review and the parameters chosen in this essay. However, it is the case that different studies use different methods to determine the function of a minimal response and, therefore, base the results and conclusions on different criteria. Therefore, the literature presented in Section 2 is not based on studies with complete validity and reliability and fully clear operationalization. This means that generalisations must be drawn with caution. This is especially true when it comes to the literature on interruptions because it is not always clear how the researchers are defining them and distinguishing minimal responses from interruptions. For example, the work done by James \& Clarke (1993) regards minimal responses as supportive interruptions and therefore the discussion about interruptions includes minimal responses as well as other features that
function as interruptions but are not minimal responses. Despite that, this paper is included because it is a review of 21 studies which makes it a good source to acquire a good understanding of different researchers' studies, increasing the validity of this essay. After all, this paper makes it possible to compare this essay with results from a wide range of studies.

The parameter chosen in the essay for deciding the function of the minimal responses used is only whether the minimal response is delayed or not, which decreases the validity of the study since many other parameters are taken into consideration in other studies such as dismissive. However, by only choosing a delay as the parameter, the reliability of the study increases because it becomes replicable.

One factor that decreases the study's external validity is the sample size of the conversations chosen for the analysis. Ideally, a large sample of conversations should have been chosen. However, not even the target of this study, which is 12 conversations, was possible to attain due to the lack of conversations in the SBC. Consequently, individual variations in the conversations will affect the results and hence the conclusions drawn based on them. To solve this problem, the normalized frequency for each speaker will be calculated to develop a better foundation for the analysis. Still, it is important to take into consideration that individual characteristics play a role in the usage of minimal responses.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The aim of the essay is to investigate how the usage of minimal responses varies between male and female speech in different situations. Therefore, the frequency and function of the minimal responses used will be investigated in same-sex and mixed-sex, formal and informal, and pair and group conversations. Section 4 will present the results of the analysis to answer the research questions posed in Section 1.1. The data is presented in tables that follow the same order as presented in Table 1. In the end, the results will be discussed in a separate subsection.

### 4.1 Overview of the Results

In this section, the results will be summarised and divided according to the research questions posed in Section 1.1.

Table 2 presents the data according to the gender of the person using minimal responses.

Table 2. The normalized frequency of the minimal responses used by all female and male speakers in all conversations.

| Gender | Normalized frequency |
| :--- | :--- |
| Female | 38.315 |
| Male | 23.357 |
| Total | 29.677 |

According to the results in Table 2, females use minimal responses at a higher frequency compared to men.

Table 3 presents the data according to the function of the minimal responses used by males and females.

Table 3. The normalized frequency of the minimal responses used by all female speakers and male speakers in all conversations divided by function.

| Gender | Supportive | Disruptive |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Male | 19.829 | 3.528 |
| Female | 34.611 | 3.705 |
| Total | 26.075 | 3.602 |

According to Table 3, most of the minimal responses used by men and women are supportive. It is also clear that men use disruptive minimal responses at a slightly lower frequency compared to women. However, the difference is small and can be regarded as insignificant.

Table 4 will present data according to the gender of the other participants in the conversation.

Table 4. The normalized frequency of the minimal responses used by all males and all females in all same-sex and mixed-sex conversations.

| Gender | Mixed-sex | Female | Male |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Male | 26.226 | Empty | 21.814 |
| Female | 63.432 | 23.939 | Empty |
| Total | 42.312 | 23.939 | 21.814 |

According to Table 4, women use minimal responses at a higher frequency in mixed-sex conversations compared to men. In same-sex conversations, women use minimal responses at a slightly higher frequency compared to men. It is also the case that men and women use
minimal responses at a higher frequency in mixed-sex conversations compared to same-sex conversations.

Table 5 will present data according to formality and informality.
Table 5. The normalized frequency of the minimal responses used by all males and all females in all formal and informal conversations.

| Gender | Formal | Informal |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Male | 18.443 | 28.419 |
| Female | 88.771 | 16.024 |
| Total | 39.996 | 22.129 |

According to Table 5, females use minimal responses at a higher frequency in formal conversations compared to men whereas men use minimal responses at a higher frequency in informal conversations compared to women. In total, minimal responses are used less frequently in informal conversations than in formal conversations.

Table 6 will present data according to the number of participants in the conversations.

Table 6. The normalized frequency of the minimal responses used by all males and all females in all group and pair conversations.

| Gender | Group | Pair |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Male | 22.234 | 24.884 |
| Female | 23.942 | 46.946 |
| Total | 22.785 | 36.333 |

According to Table 6, men and women use minimal responses in group conversations at almost the same frequency. However, in pair conversations, women use minimal responses at a higher frequency.

### 4.2 Results for informal group conversations

Table 7 presents the data collected from the informal female-only group conversation. The conversation is started by two roommates, female speakers 1 and 2 , who are joined by their two other roommates, speakers 3 and 4 .

Table 7. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the informal female group conversation (SBC050 Just Wanna Hang).

|  | Female <br> speaker 1 | Female <br> speaker 2 | Female <br> speaker 3 | Female <br> speaker 4 | All <br> speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |


| Total number of <br> words used | 1,023 | 831 | 520 | 1,064 | 3,438 |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of <br> minimal responses <br> used | 42 | 46 | 20 | 21 | 129 |
| Normalized <br> frequency | 41.056 | 55.355 | 38.462 | 19.737 | 37.522 |

At the start of the conversation, speakers 1 and 2 talked together and used minimal responses in a supportive manner most of the time. However, disruptive minimal responses were used by all speakers. For instance, example 6 , line 2 , shows how female speaker 2 (KELLY) uses a delay minimal response when talking with female speaker 1 (DANA).
(6) DANA: [They left at like], ... quarter of eight.

KELLY: ... Mm. (SBC050 Just Wanna Hang)

Table 8 presents the data collected from the informal male-only group conversation. This conversation is between three elderly male neighbours. Male speaker 1 left the conversation after 21 minutes whereas the conversation lasted for approximately 27 minutes. A general pattern in the conversation is that the speaker who is telling a story receives more supportive minimal responses than a speaker having a dialogue with someone else.

Table 8 . The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the informal male group conversation (SBC032 Handshakes All Around).

|  | Male speaker 1 | Male speaker <br> $\mathbf{2}$ | Male speaker <br> $\mathbf{3}$ | All speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of <br> words used | 857 | 3,171 | 1,511 | 5,539 |
| Total number of <br> minimal responses <br> used | 34 | 46 | 20 | 100 |
| Normalized <br> frequency | 39.673 | 14.506 | 13.236 | 18.054 |

The conversation flows between the speakers most of the time. Still, in some instances, speaker 3 (Tom 3) uses disruptive minimal responses when talking with speaker 2 (Tom 2), as shown in (7). In this example, speaker 3 uses two minimal responses, okay and alright, in line 4 . Both minimal responses are delayed by 2 and 3 seconds respectively.
(7) TOM_3: .. You were second mate [then.

TOM_2:
[Yeah. I was second mate on the A]frican
Pilgrim.
TOM_3: .. Okay... Alright]. (SBC032 Handshakes
All Around)

However, when speaker 1 left the conversation, speakers 2 and 3 continued talking and nearly all minimal responses were used by speaker 2 who was listening to speaker 3 without any attempts to change or disrupt the conversation.

Table 9 presents the data collected from the informal mixed-sex group conversation. This conversation is between a heterosexual couple and their male friend who are making dinner in the couple's home. The male friend, speaker 2, has used minimal responses the most. It is also worth noting that most of the minimal responses used by him are used when he is told a story which happened twice; the first time by the other man and the second time by the woman.

Table 9. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the informal mixed-sex group conversation (SBC003 Conceptual Pesticides).

|  | Female <br> speaker | Male <br> speaker 1 | Male <br> speaker 2 | All speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of words <br> used | 2,421 | 1,514 | 1,068 | 5,003 |
| Total number of <br> minimal responses used | 45 | 19 | 125 | 189 |
| Normalized frequency | 18.587 | 12.549 | 117.041 | 37.777 |

All speakers have used minimal responses in a disruptive manner occasionally. As shown in (8), lines 2 and 4, male speaker 1 uses 2 seconds delayed minimal response, $O h$, and male speaker 2 uses 2 seconds delayed minimal response, okay.
(8) MARILYN: ... We can make um, ... garlic bread or something.

ROY: .. Oh, that [sounds] fun.
PETE: [Yeah].
MARILYN: ... Okay. (SBC003 Conceptual Pesticides)

A general pattern in all informal group conversations is that the speaker who is telling a story receives far more minimal responses than anyone else. It is also the case that at different parts of the conversations, only two speakers are involved. During these periods the pattern of the conversation changes often leaving one person talking and the other only commenting by using minimal responses or short remarks.

### 4.3 Results for formal group conversations

The data collected from the formal male-only conversation is presented in Table 10. This conversation is between two loan officers working in a bank, speakers 1 and 2 , and the president of the bank, speaker 3, together with a board member, speaker 4.

Table 10. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the formal male-only group conversation (SBC014 Bank Products).

|  | Male <br> speaker 1 | Male <br> speaker 2 | Male <br> speaker 3 | Male <br> speaker 4 | All <br> speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of <br> words used | 1,381 | 846 | 2,555 | 84 | 4,866 |
| Total number of <br> minimal <br> responses used | 44 | 33 | 17 | 4 | 98 |
| Normalized <br> frequency | 31.861 | 39.007 | 6.654 | 47.619 | 20.139 |

This conversation can be divided into presentations and discussions. At different points speakers 1, 2 and 3 present information about customers which is discussed by the other
participants. Speaker 4, who is the board member, rarely participates in the conversation. During the presentation parts, minimal responses are used in a supportive manner. The same applies to the minimal responses used during the discussion part except for very few instances such as presented in (9), lines 3 and when the minimal responses are delayed by 2 and 3 seconds respectively.
(9) FRED: But if we've [got uh] -

JOE: [for those unse]cured creditors.
FRED: .. Yeah... But if we've got the .. discharge,
JIM: ... Yeah. (SBC 014 Bank Products)

The data collected from the formal mixed-sex group conversation is presented in Table 11. The female speaker 1 and the male speaker 4 are city officials whereas the rest of the speakers are from the public.

Table 11. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the formal mixed-sex group conversation (SBC026 Hundred Million Dollars).

|  | Female <br> speaker <br> $\mathbf{1}$ | Male <br> speaker <br> $\mathbf{1}$ | Male <br> speaker <br> $\mathbf{2}$ | Male <br> speaker <br> $\mathbf{3}$ | Female <br> speaker <br> $\mathbf{2}$ | Female <br> speaker <br> $\mathbf{3}$ | Male <br> speaker <br> $\mathbf{4}$ | All <br> speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total <br> number <br> of words <br> used | 1,267 | 310 | 1,325 | 230 | 164 | 103 | 665 | 4,064 |
| Total <br> number <br> of minimal <br> responses <br> used | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 |
| Normalized <br> frequency | 1.579 | 3.226 | 0.755 | 4.348 | 6.098 | 0 | 0 | 1.476 |

As Table 11 shows minimal responses are nearly never used and through a closer analysis of the conversation it becomes clear that minimal responses are never used disruptively in this conversation.

### 4.4 Results for informal pair conversations

Table 12 presents the data collected from the informal female-only conversation.
Table 12. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the informal female pair conversation (SBC006 Cuz).

|  | Female speaker 1 | Female speaker 2 | Both speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of words <br> used | 5,339 | 635 | 5,974 |
| Total number of minimal <br> responses used | 9 | 25 | 34 |
| Normalized frequency | 1.686 | 39.37 | 5.691 |

The conversation is between two cousins. In this conversation, female speaker 1 is telling a long story and female speaker 2 is either responding with supportive minimal responses or asking for clarifications. Throughout the analysis of the conversation, no obvious disruptive minimal responses are used by either speaker.

Table 13 presents the data collected from the informal male-only pair conversation. The conversation is between two male friends who are discussing different topics related to science.

Table 13. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the informal male-only pair conversation (SBC017 Wonderful Abstract Notions).

|  | Male speaker 1 | Male speaker 2 | Both speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of words <br> used | 1,499 | 2,599 | 4,098 |
| Total number of minimal <br> responses used | 72 | 27 | 99 |
| Normalized frequency | 48.032 | 10.389 | 24.158 |

Speaker 1 uses more minimal responses although he talks less, and he usually uses them in a supportive manner. Disruptive minimal responses are rare and are not uttered more by one speaker than the other. For instance, example 10 shows how both speakers use minimal responses, $u h$ and hunh, which are delayed by 2 and 3 seconds respectively, see lines 1 and 2 .
(10) JIM: ..uh, .. This one's Fractal Fantasy, which is, for sale.

MICHAEL: ... Hunh. (SBC017 Wonderful Abstract Notions)

Table 14 presents the data collected from the informal mixed-sex pair conversation. This conversation is between a heterosexual couple talking about a book while lying in bed.

Table 14. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the informal mixed-sex pair conversation (SBC005 A Book About Death).

|  | Male Speaker | Female Speaker | Both speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of words <br> used | 1,047 | 1,834 | 2,881 |
| Total number of minimal <br> responses used | 34 | 11 | 45 |
| Normalized frequency | 32.474 | 5.998 | 15.619 |

At some point, the couple argues for and against different ideas resulting in higher usage of disruptive minimal responses mostly by the male speaker as shown in (11), line 3. However, most of them are still supportive.
(11) PAMELA: been put into something that's completely acid, to our true essence.

DARRYL: .. Yeah, but we [have no choice in that matter]. (SBC 005 A Book About Death)

### 4.5 Results for formal pair conversations

Table 15 presents the data collected from the formal female-only pair conversation. This interaction is between a patient, speaker 1 , and her physician, speaker 2.

Table 15. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the formal female-only pair conversation (SBC 041 X Units of Insulin).

|  | Female speaker 1 | Female speaker 2 | Both speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of words used | 757 | 2,363 | 3,120 |


| Total number of minimal <br> responses used | 107 | 30 | 137 |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Normalized frequency | 141.347 | 12.696 | 43.91 |

This conversation is guided mainly by the physician who is explaining a new diet plan to the patient. Most of the minimal responses used in this conversation are supportive. It is also clear that the patient used minimal responses at a far higher frequency compared to the physician.

The data collected from the formal male-only conversation is presented in Table 16. This interaction is between a male patient, speaker 1, and his male physician, speaker 2.

Table 16. The number and frequency of minimal responses used by the speakers of the formal male-only pair conversation (SBC046 Flumpity-Bump Down the Hill).

|  | Male speaker 1 | Male speaker 2 | Both speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of words used | 870 | 2,139 | 3,009 |
| Total number of minimal <br> responses used | 24 | 61 | 85 |
| Normalized frequency | 27.586 | 28.518 | 28.249 |

The two speakers use minimal responses in a supportive manner. The physician and the patient use minimal responses at almost the same frequency. However, it seems the case that the physician uses delayed minimal responses more often compared to the patient.

Table 17 presents the data collected from the formal mixed-sex conversation.

Table 17. The normalized frequency of the minimal responses used by the speakers of the formal mixed-sex pair conversation (SBC 016 Tapedeck).

|  | Female speaker | Male speaker | Both speakers |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Total number of words | 1,384 | 3,259 | 4,643 |
| Total minimal words used | 396 | 66 | 462 |
| Normalized frequency | 286.127 | 20.252 | 99.505 |

This conversation is between a male salesman and a female customer. The salesman is the one talking the most and, as Table 17 shows, the customer is the one using minimal responses
the most. The purpose of the conversation is to gain knowledge about tapes; therefore, the customer mainly asks questions, and the salesman explains the differences between different types of tapes in detail. The minimal responses used are mainly supportive and those which are disruptive, i.e., delayed, are uttered by both the man and the woman. However, the woman uttered more delayed minimal responses compared to the man.

### 4.6 Discussion

The first question posed in the essay is whether women use minimal responses more than men do or not. Based on the summary of the results presented in Section 4.1, the frequency of usage of minimal responses differs between men and women depending on the type of conversation they are having. In general, if only gender is taken into consideration, women use more minimal responses compared to men (see Table 2). However, if the factors investigated in this essay are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that the frequency varies. For instance, in same-sex conversations, men and women use minimal responses almost at the same frequency (see Table 4), whereas in mixed-sex conversations women seem to use minimal responses at a higher frequency compared to men, (see Table 4). In informal conversations, however, men use minimal responses more than women do (see Table 5), whereas women use minimal responses more than men do in formal conversations (see Table 5). In group conversations, men and women use minimal responses almost at the same frequency (see Table 6), whereas, in pair conversations, women seem to use minimal responses at a higher frequency compared to men (see Table 6).

Minimal responses fulfil different functions, but they are often used in a supportive manner. Based on the analysis, the gender of the speaker or interlocutor does not affect the function of the minimal responses used to any large extent (see Table 3); both men and women use minimal responses in a supportive and occasionally disruptive manner. Although women use minimal responses disruptively at a slightly higher frequency than men, the difference is insignificant (see Table 3).

A speaker changes his or her behaviour depending on if he or she is interacting with one or two other speakers which occurred in all three informal group conversations. In the female-only informal group conversation, the conversation starts with only two speakers who rarely use minimal responses in a disruptive manner. However, when they are joined later by the two other speakers, they used minimal responses in a disruptive manner more often
compared to when they were alone. The same applies to the informal group male-only and mixed-sex conversation; after one speaker leaves the conversation, the minimal responses used become more supportive.

It is also worth noting that in the informal mixed-sex group conversation, male speaker 2 is the one using minimal responses the most and they are also used in a supportive manner, and it does not seem that he interrupts the man or the woman more than the other. At the same time, the female speaker in the conversation uses minimal responses less frequently compared to the female speakers in the female-only conversation.

Taking the context of the conversations and the people involved in it into consideration, the women in the female-only conversation are well familiar with each other since they are roommates and therefore the probability that they will use minimal responses disruptively is relatively high compared to male speaker 2 in the mixed-sex conversation. This is not following the previous literature which is claiming that women use minimal responses supportively more often than men (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 260; Fellegy, 1995, p. 186 referring to Zimmerman and West, 1975).

In the formal male-only group conversation the frequency of the usage of minimal responses varies between the speakers. Male speaker 4 talks the least and uses minimal responses the most (see Table 10). According to the literature, minimal responses are used disruptively mostly in formal male-only conversations, especially by the person with the highest status (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 244). However, it is clear in the conversation that male speaker 4 , who is the board member and hence has the highest status, does not use minimal responses in a disruptive manner. Although he uses minimal responses at a higher frequency than all other participants, he uses them supportively.

The analysis of the formal mixed-sex group conversation shows that all the speakers use minimal responses far less than the speakers in the formal group male-only conversation. Two of the speakers do not use minimal responses at all. This conversation occurs in an organised city meeting in the form of questions posed by the public and answers provided by the city officials, mainly a female who is joined by a male toward the end of the meeting.

The formal same-sex pair conversations are similar when it comes to the setting; both are conversations between patients and their physicians. In both conversations, minimal responses are used supportively. However, in the female-only conversation, the female patient used minimal responses with far higher frequency than the male patient in the maleonly conversation. It is also worth noting that the female physician used minimal responses
less frequently compared to the male physician despite having nearly the same total word count as him which is not typical for the female conversational patterns that are characterised by larger usage of minimal responses, among other language features, that show support and encouragement (James \& Clarke, 1993, p. 260). This can be explained by the fact that the female physician had to explain a new plan to her patient; whereas the male physician had to discuss the accident with his patient to figure out the problem. This means that in the case of the female-only conversation, the physician talked far more than the patient and therefore did not require using minimal responses as frequently.

It is important to notice that the delayed minimal responses used in the formal conversations, both the meeting in the bank and the doctor-patient interactions, might have been uttered while the person is busy with the task at hand. For instance, if the male doctor used a delayed minimal response while talking to the patient, he might have done it because he is doing a physical examination of the patient and therefore must think through and analyse the issues presented by the patient. Similarly, a bank officer might use a delayed minimal response during a meeting when, for instance, reading through notes and doublechecking information. In other words, the delayed minimal response might not occur due to sociolinguistic factors but to task-related factors.

In the literature, West (1984) argues that female physicians are interrupted more than male physicians, especially by male patients. However, there is no indication of using minimal responses disruptively or any other language feature to do that. In the conversation sample in this essay, there is not a conversation between a female physician and a male patient and therefore no decisive conclusions can be drawn on this front. What is noted in the analyses, however, is that the male physician uses delayed minimal responses more often than the female physician.

The last conversation analysed is the formal mixed-sex pair conversation between the salesman and the customer. It is clear from the data in Table 17 that the female customer used a huge number of minimal responses compared to the salesman and all other speakers which might be contributed to individual characteristics. However, it is impossible to determine what these characteristics are merely by reading the conversation the lack of another conversation in that group makes it hard to draw any further conclusions. A close analysis of the conversation shows that most minimal responses used are supportive. However, the occasional disruptive minimal responses are mostly uttered by the woman. Also, the male speaker talks far more than the female speaker, which is only expected due to his role in the
conversation which requires him to talk more to answer the questions posed by the customer. This pattern follows the same theory discussed in Coates (2004, p. 116) which claims that well-informed males dominate the conversations. However, the analysis of the function of the minimal responses contradicts the claim that males use disruptive minimal responses at a higher frequency than women do since it is the female speaker who uses delayed minimal responses more often.

It is obvious from the analysis that the role of the speaker in each conversation plays a role in how much he or she talks and how many minimal responses he or she uses. Therefore, the variation in the usage of minimal responses is a result of different factors, more than the ones included in this essay. It is clear from the data presented in the Tables in Sections 4.1 to 4.5 that there is a difference in the frequency of usage of minimal responses between males and females.

Even the degree of formality and the gender of the other participants of the conversation seems to play a role in the conversational pattern the speakers have during the conversation. However, it is also clear that other factors also affect how frequently a speaker uses minimal responses. For instance, in the informal female-only pair conversation, one of the speakers talks the most during the conversation while the other uses more minimal responses, which is a pattern detected in other conversations as well. This indicates that a person leading a conversation often uses minimal responses less frequently. In the literature, the tendency to lead, or dominate, the conversation is argued to characterise male speech rather than female speech (James \& Clarke, 1993, pp. 232-233). However, the results show that this pattern occurs in both female-only and male-only conversations, whereas it is less frequent in mixed-sex conversations.

It is important to remember the importance of individual differences and their huge impact on the conversational pattern used by the speakers. It is clear in the data how huge the difference in usage of minimal responses is among different participants. For instance, Table 7 shows how two female speakers use around 40 minimal responses while the two other speakers use around 20, i.e., half as much. Even Table 9 shows how one male speaker use 19 minimal responses and the other male speaker use 125 minimal responses. In these situations, when two speakers of the same gender, in the same conversation, have such a huge difference in the number of minimal responses they use, it becomes clear that some individual differences play role in the conversational patterns used by a certain person.

Even the topic of the conversation seems to impact the way a speaker talks. An example is the informal mixed-sex pair conversation between a couple discussing a book the man does not like and at some points, he is irritated by. According to James \& Clarke (1993), tense conversations between spouses tend to elicit disruptive conversational strategies which are also observed in that conversation.

The results are also affected by the method chosen in this essay and the sample of conversations collected from the SBC. On one hand, the factors studied in this essay are the gender of the participants, the degree of formality and the number of participants. These factors are not the only factors that affect the frequency of usage of minimal responses; therefore, the results and analysis do not give a realistic picture of real-life conversational patterns. The sample of the conversations can also be argued to be relatively small and therefore not enough to generalise the results. It is also the case that the sample is not complete because the SBC does not have a formal female-only pair conversation which makes it impossible to draw any conclusions about that group.

## 5. Conclusion

The essay aims to investigate if the frequency and function of minimal responses are different when used by men or women depending on whom they are talking to, how many and the degree of formality. Therefore, a sample of conversations is collected from the SBC and analysed to answer the research questions posed in Section 1.1.

The results show that women, in general, use minimal responses at a higher frequency compared to men, however, both men and women use them similarly. Formality, the gender of the other participants and the number of them seem to affect the usage of minimal responses. It is also clear that other factors have an impact on the conversational patterns of individuals.

However, it is important to remember that no decisive conclusions can be drawn, especially on formal group conversations, because of the lack of formal female-only group conversations. This also impacts the numbers, to a certain extent, when the frequency of usage of minimal responses by the female speakers in female-only conversations is calculated because there are more male-only conversations compared to female-only conversations. In the results, the frequency of minimal responses in same-sex conversations is almost the same.

If a formal female-only group conversation was a part of the sample, the results might have been different. Therefore, further research on this front is required to attain decisive results.

Men and women do not have a huge difference in their usage of minimal responses. The factor that seems to affect the function of minimal responses the most is the degree of formality and the number of participants. The more informal a conversation is and the larger number participating in it, the more disruptive the minimal responses become.

Simultaneously, most of these minimal responses are used to develop the conversation. Whereas in pair conversations, when minimal responses are used disruptively, they often disrupt the conversation.

Based on the analysis performed, the conclusion is that men and women have differences and similarities. To understand their behaviour, understanding the complexity of language and human behaviour is essential. Therefore, more research must be conducted on both fronts to attain satisfying, reliable, and realistic results.

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