“That’s What She Said”:
A Linguistic Analysis of Language and Gender Differences in the TV Show The Office

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**Abstract**

Concepts such as “women’s language” and “men’s language” suggest differences between how men and women speak, often concerning stereotypes. However, some research within the field of linguistics presents evidence showing little or no difference. This study aims to investigate linguistic differences between male and female characters, respectively, in *The Office* and analyze whether these findings correspond with, or challenge stereotypes associated with “men’s” and “women’s language”. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the lines assigned to the male and the female characters, respectively. The data was retrieved by closely watching eight episodes from two seasons and transcribing the lines spoken by male and female characters. The research methods employed are qualitative conversational analysis (CA) and quantitative content analysis. The results reveal several differences between how the male and the female characters speak in *The Office*. The female characters’ lines exhibit linguistic features associated with “women’s language” and lines borne out by the male characters are characterized by linguistic features typical of “men’s language”. Furthermore, these differences seem to correspond with stereotypes of gendered language features. In conclusion, the study suggests that the TV show adheres to stereotypes, potentially reinforcing stereotypical characterizations of how men and women speak. Additionally, this study suggests further research in the field of gender and language within TV shows to explore differences and the effects of these.

**Keywords:** The Office, Gender, Language, Linguistic features, Stereotypes
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1. Introduction

The study of language and gender has been a topic of considerable interest in linguistics for decades. The relationship between language and gender is complex and multidimensional, with various theories and perspectives. Several studies show significant differences between how men and women speak, while others claim these differences are just assumptions and not facts. Different theories aim to explain the reasons for observed differences between women and men. The deficit theory suggests that women’s language is powerless and tentative, and the dominance theory highlights the influence of patriarchy and social hierarchy. The difference theory emphasizes the influence of early childhood, leading to different linguistic cultures. The social constructionist theory, in turn, suggests that linguistic differences are context-dependent.

Despite extensive research in the field, there is still a debate about whether gender-related linguistic differences emerge from stereotypes or inherent speech patterns. These stereotypes refer to women using more hedges, tag questions, being supportive, cooperative, and being more polite. Men, on the other hand, are claimed to use more powerful, dominant, aggressive, and hostile language, including jokes, insults, and verbal aggression. These stereotypes, or alleged differences in linguistic behavior, play a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions and expectations of how men and women should communicate.

The media often perpetuate these stereotypes and influence our perceptions of how men and women speak or should speak. This essay aims to examine the linguistic behavior of male and female characters in The Office, and whether observed differences correspond with, or challenge stereotypes associated with “men’s” and “women’s language”. This will be done by employing a qualitative conversation analysis and a quantitative content analysis. The analysis of selected episodes from seasons two and five of The Office will hopefully contribute toward a deeper understanding of how language both reflects and shapes our perceptions of gender in the world of television.
2. Aim and Research Questions

This essay aims to investigate gender and language in *The Office* by analyzing the linguistic behavior of the male and the female characters, respectively. Further, this essay aims to analyze linguistic behavior in relation to conventional stereotypes associated with gendered language. In the pursuit of the aim, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. To what extent and how do the male and the female characters, respectively, in *The Office*, display differences in their linguistic behavior?
2. How do these linguistic differences correspond with or challenge the stereotypes associated with “men’s” and “women’s language”?

3. Background

The concept of “gender” in this essay refers to the linguistic performance one engages in. Specifically, “gender” will consider the social and cultural differences and particular qualities and ways of behaving associated with being male and female, rather than focusing on biological differences (Eckert & McConnel-Ginet, 2013, p. 1; Ehrlich & Meyerhoff, 2014, p. 4).

3.1 Gender and Language

Many linguists have tackled the study of language in relation to gender over the last century. Despite extensive research in the field, debates persist regarding whether the perceived language differences between genders stem from stereotypes rather than speech patterns (Aries, 1996, p. 138). While some point to a lack of evidence for consistent differences in speech across genders, others conclude that substantial research indicates reliable gender differences in speech such as women’s greater use of tag questions, positive politeness, and backchannel responses (pp. 138-139). However, these results can be viewed from a different perspective, thus presenting a different result. Methodological challenges such as contextual variability in language use and the influence of power dynamics, status, and participant roles suggest that gender-related linguistic variations are infrequent (Aries, 1996, pp. 138-139). Additionally, these variations are often context-dependent and tend to lack statistical significance (Aries, 1996, pp. 138-139).

The respective theories of deficit, dominance, and difference suggest that differences between how men and women speak are inherent and perpetually reinforce and emphasize traditional stereotypes (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 106). In contrast to these theories, the social
constructionist theory proposes that language usage is a social construction that is performed, not inherent (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 106), thus relying more on stereotypes.

3.1.1 The Deficit Theory
In the 1970s, women’s place was often considered subordinate to men’s, and consequently, the language used by women – referred to as “women’s language” – was viewed similarly (Beers Fägersteen & Sven, 2016, p. 92; Lakoff, 2014). The view that women’s language is powerless often links to women’s tendency to be indirect (Tannen, 1994, p. 32). Adding to the characteristics of a deficit or powerless use of language, Cameron (2014) explains that, over the centuries, “women’s language” has been described as lacking in qualities such as logic, honesty, seriousness, directness, and authority (p. 286). In contrast, men’s speech is often claimed to be more direct, controlling, and straightforward (Maltz & Borker, 2011, p. 488).

The deficit theory suggests that women’s subordinate status is reflected in and constructed through a less powerful version of men’s language (Lakoff, 2004, p. 72). Lakoff (2004) identified several linguistic features that characterize “women’s language”, such as “empty” adjectives, tag questions, rising intonation in statement context, and the usage of hedges (pp. 79-80). Another feature discussed by Lakoff (2004) and Tannen (1990) is that women do not tell or understand jokes, whereas men can tell dirty jokes and are more likely to do so, especially when they have an audience (pp. 80-81, 90; pp. 89-90). Men also tend to tell more aggressive types of jokes, such as obscene jokes and ethnic-racial jokes openly (Timothy, 1999, p. 167).

3.1.2 The Dominance Theory
The influence of patriarchy, with an emphasis on male dominance and superiority, can be seen as contributing factors explaining differences in linguistic behavior (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 97). Holmes (2013) further writes that linguistic differences between men and women often reflect broader societal disparities related to social status or power. In hierarchical societies where men are more powerful than women within each level, linguistic differences may reflect the social hierarchy as a whole (Holmes, 2013, p. 162). A similar suggestion is made by O’Barr and Atkins (2011), proposing that women’s tendency to use powerless language more frequently, and men less so, can be partly because of women’s occupation of a more powerless social position (p. 458).

Observations suggest that men interrupt women more frequently than the reverse, signifying male dominance. Holmes (2013) describes that women are taught to expect interruptions and yield the floor without any protest (p. 312). Zimmerman and West (1975) observe that men
predominantly interrupt during mixed-gender conversations, interpreting this behavior as an attempt to dominate the conversation (pp. 115-116, p. 125). However, James and Clark (1993) state that “most research has found no significant difference between genders in the number of interruptions initiated, in either cross-sex or same-sex interaction” (p. 231). Aries (1996) suggests that the inconsistent definitions of an interruption across studies confuse whether men interrupt more frequently than women (p. 84). For an interruption to be “successful”, and thereby indicate dominance, a speaker must yield the floor (Aries, 1996, p. 84). James and Clarke (1993) add that women often use cooperative and supportive interruptions more frequently, thus emphasizing the need to consider a larger context and motive behind interruptions (p. 268).

3.1.3 The Difference Theory
The difference theory revolves around the different cultures men and women adapt to at a young age, which is reflected in their speech (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 103). Tannen (1990) describes how boys and girls “grow up in different worlds of words” (p. 43), since allegedly, they are spoken to differently. Consequently, women and men are seen as originating from two different cultures with their respective languages, where women “speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, [and] … men speak and hear a language of status and independence” (Tannen, 1990, p. 42). James and Drakich (1993) describe that men learn that it is important to be the leader in interactions (p. 285). Consequently, they may dominate conversations and talk more because they need to establish or maintain their status in a group. This contradicts the commonly held belief that women talk more than men (James & Drakich, 1993, p. 281).

Furthermore, men’s language is, overall, characterized by giving orders, engaging in confrontation, maintaining independence, communicating information, jokes, insults, verbal aggression, and put-downs (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 103; Maltz & Borker, 2011, pp. 490-497). In comparison to women, men have a greater freedom to express aggressive and hostile speech habits (Timothy, 1999, p. 165). In contrast, women’s speech is characterized by showing support, being polite, building relationships, seeking understanding, achieving intimacy, and avoiding or solving disagreements (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 103).

3.1.4 The Social Constructionist Theory
The social constructionist theory suggests that language use is a social construction that reflects outside influences (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 106). The theory proposes that one behaves as a man or woman and that this is something that is learned, not inherent (Beers
Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 106). Similarly, Plug et al. (2021) suggest that male and female languages, respectively, display more similarities than differences and that gender is constructed interactively rather than constituting a fixed attribute (p. 46). Furthermore, performance, or behavior, comes with linguistic features, and certain linguistic features become culturally engrained and are thereby associated with men’s or women’s language (Plug et al, 2021, p. 106; Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 107).

This perspective aligns with Tannen's (1993) suggestion that conversation is collaboratively produced, emphasizing the dynamics of solidarity and power as a “major source for the ambiguity and polysemy of linguistic strategies” (p. 166). Beers Fägersten and Sveen (2016) write that gender should not be seen as a category of identity where one must belong to either one or the other, but rather as a scalar construction where an individual’s language use can vary depending on social context and roles (p. 107). Thus, an individual’s language use may align with stereotypical masculine or feminine language at times without being exclusively tied to one or the other (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 107).

3.2 Gender and Language in the Media

Even though analyses by linguists such as Hyde (2014) have shown insignificant or very small differences between the linguistic behavior exhibited by, respectively, men and women, this is not always the representation to be found in media. Men and women are, rather, portrayed in a stereotypical way in mainstream media, especially as regards women (Ward & Grower, 2020, p. 179). These stereotypical depictions include physical attributes as well as personality attributes, and in mainstream media, male characters are, for example, less likely to be depicted as polite (p. 180). There is also an underrepresentation of girls and women in mainstream media, and thereby a lack of recognition for girls and women, which might signal that women are conventionally regarded as inferior in society (Ward & Grower, 2020, p. 179). TV shows can perpetuate stereotypical linguistic manifestations of gender, which in turn can influence our conception of gender and, thereby, how men and women should speak (Beers Fägersten & Sveen, 2016, p. 107).

Li (2014) investigated the amount of talk by the male and the female characters in the TV show Desperate Housewives and whether there are any differences in the number of turns and their distribution (p. 52). The finding revealed that the male characters spoke more, both regarding the number of sentences, and total amount of words spoken (p. 54). Regarding turn-taking and
their distribution, the findings showed a small gap between men and women (Li, 2014). Differences between the extent to which female and male characters use adjectives, hedges, and interrogative sentences in the TV show *How I Met Your Mother* were studied by Ding and Li (2023, p. 270). Based on their data, they concluded that the female characters use adjectives and interrogative sentences more frequently and tend to use hedges to express their opinion (Ding & Li, 2023, p. 272). Additionally, in another study, Żmigrodzki (2021) analyzed the usage of adjectives in the TV show *Homeland*. Differences related to how adjectives are used are highlighted, revealing that the female characters used adjectives more frequently than their male counterparts (Żmigrodzki, 2021, p. 15).

4. Method and Material

4.1 Material

*The Office* (Daniels, et al, 2005-2013) is an American mockumentary sitcom television series based on a British version from 2001. The narrative unfolds through the perspective of a documentary film crew’s camera, as well as one-on-one interviews with the characters. These interviews offer a comprehensive view of the characters’ experiences, thoughts, and insights. The plot primarily focuses on the interactions among the staff at Dunder Mifflin Scranton in Pennsylvania, and we get to follow the day-to-day of typical office workers with dynamic personalities. The staff includes the socially awkward regional manager, Michael Scott, and his employees Pam, Jim, and Dwight, among others. The tiresome workday is characterized by cultural and ego clashes and inappropriate behavior, especially by Michael. Michael’s management style is marked by a constant need for approval and attention, leading to many awkward and humorous situations (Daniel, et al, 2005-2013).

The primary material to be analyzed in this essay is eight randomly selected episodes from seasons two and five.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season/Episode</th>
<th>Title of Episode</th>
<th>Writer and Director</th>
<th>Aired</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S02E02</td>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>Daniels (Writer), Novak (Writer), Gervais (Writer), Kwapis (Director).</td>
<td>2005, Sep 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S02E08</td>
<td>Performance Review</td>
<td>Daniels (Writer), Wilmore (Writer), Gervais (Writer), Feig (Director).</td>
<td>2005, Nov 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S02E10</td>
<td>Christmas Party</td>
<td>Daniels (Writer), Schur (Writer), Gervais (Writer), McDougall (Director).</td>
<td>2005, Dec 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The reason for choosing the second season is because of the character development from season one. Season two also displays a far more diverse cast of male and female characters in comparison with the first season. For a broader perspective, season five was also selected, because this season is characterized by further development of characters, the story, and the number of characters. Episodes from the chosen seasons were randomly selected. The selected episodes from seasons two and five were deemed to provide a manageable scope for this study. This allows the researcher to investigate the language used by male and female characters, specifically, the lines assigned to the male and the female characters, respectively.

4.2 Method

This essay employs a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative method used is conversational analysis (CA). Clark et al. (2021) explain that CA examines the organization of talk within an interactional context in everyday and professional life, emphasizing the production of social order through natural social interactions, or “naturally occurring talk” (pp. 477-478). Although the material analyzed is scripted, not “naturally occurring”, and the dialogues and interactions are based on the writers’ perspective and intended humor, the analysis assumes that the dialogues are constructed with the goal of being as authentic and natural as possible. This idea is retrieved from Beers Fägersten and Sveen (2016) according to whom “scripted dialogue is assumed to be realistic or to aim for realism as a function of these same constraints” (p. 4). When closely watching the selected episodes and, in relevant parts, transcribing conversation, CA was applied to analyze and examine to which extent and how differences exist regarding the usage of linguistic features between the male and the female, respectively, in The Office.
The quantitative method used is content analysis. This approach involves a process of counting the frequency of specific categories, events, or words within the content being studied, as well as examining data to understand the information conveyed and its effects (Clark et al., 2021, pp. 271-272). In this essay, the frequency of linguistic features has been counted, such as the usage of hedging expressions. While analyzing the episode, the findings were coded and further divided into relevant categories. The findings are further addressed in the discussion in relation to stereotypes discussed in the background section of this essay.

5. Results and Analysis

This section will present and analyze the findings of the study and present the identified linguistic differences between the male and the female characters divided into three categories.

5.1 Amount of talk

The difference between the number of lines spoken by the male and the female characters is important to point out. *Lines* are defined as the scripted sentences spoken by the male and the female characters in *The Office*. The characters whose lines are included are those who are a part of the entire show, or a whole season but do not necessarily appear in every episode. Those who are excluded are those characters who are only part of one episode or one scene.

![Chart 1. Number of lines divided between the male and the female characters.](image)

The conversations in the episodes are scripted, which means that the conversation is not naturally occurring. However, the writers of the episodes chose to assign 1,643 lines to the male characters in the selected episodes, in comparison to 544 lines to the female characters. One question that arises from this, is the reason for the lack of balance in the distribution of the lines. The writers of the episodes could have divided the lines equally between the male and the female characters but chose not to. The script could, therefore, be seen as a reflection of reality.
Another question that arises is if this could be seen as a reflection of the author's view of how men and women speak and if it perpetuates stereotypical linguistic features associated with men and women.

There is also a difference between the length of the lines and the number of words divided between the male and the female characters. In total, the male characters use 16,989 words throughout the eight episodes. In comparison, the female characters use 4,931 words throughout the eight episodes. The length of lines differs as the male characters more often had lines with 30 words or more, and the female characters usually had lines with just a few words. The longest line by a male character contains 134 words, compared to the longest line by a female character, which contains 68 words.

5.2 Hedging

Hedging involves the usage of words or phrases to convey ambiguity, probability, caution, uncertainty/tentativeness or seek understanding and weaken the illocutionary force, meaning the speaker’s intention, to make it more polite. These characteristics were also the criteria for a word to be counted as a hedge in this analysis. Fifteen words and phrases characterized by hedging were identified to be used more frequently and thereby chosen to be analyzed. These words and phrases were kind of, you know, I guess, might, like, actually, I think, well, probably, may, seem, I mean, just, and I don’t know. Words or phrases that were identified as hedges, but only used once by a male or a female character were excluded due to the scope of this essay. The identified words and phrases were subsequently divided based on their usage by the male and the female characters.

[Chart 2. The usage of hedges divided between the male and the female characters.]
5.2.1 Male Characters
Hedging expressions were used 127 times by the male characters. In this section, examples will be presented and analyzed.

Jim is making an impression of Stanley to Pam and Oscar when Stanley comes out of the bathroom.

(1) Jim: Oh, hey Stanley. Uh, I was just doing an impression (S02E20).

Toby is asked about whether one can have office relationships or not.

(2) Toby: Yeah. So let's just try to avoid them. But, um, if you already have one, you should disclose it to HR (S02E02).

In the first example, just appears to be used to acknowledge Jim’s behavior as he was making an impression on Stanley, to make it less intrusive. He is being indirect as he provides an explanation and apology for potential misunderstanding or offense that his impression might have caused. Toby is suggesting rather than directly stating that one should not engage in office relationships by using the word just.

Jim is being asked to go and talk to Michael about Dunder Mifflin giving an offer to buy out Michael’s new company.

(3) Jim: Oh, I don't know. You know, they've taken a good deal of clients, so… (S05E25).

The Chief Executive Officer, David Wallace, comes to the office to discuss the suffering Michael’s new company has caused Dunder Mifflin.

(4) Charles: Oh, you know it hasn't been that bad. Hasn't been that bad. These people are the salt of the earth down here. You couldn't ask for a better way to learn a company (S05E25).

The hedges you know, and I don't know used in example 3 indicate uncertainty and suggest that Jim is either unsure or cautious about how he presents his information, in other words, the hedges are used as an act of indirectness. Jim does not directly state that Michael might not accept an offer and creates an ambiguity relating to how well, or not, it is going for Michael’s
company. In example 4, Charles appears to be seeking agreement or shared understanding by using *you know* as a hedge. By using *you know*, he is also being indirect, as he is not directly stating how it actually has been, thus making the statement more polite and creating ambiguity.

> Michael and Meredith are sitting in Michael’s car. Michael is trying to trick Meredith into going to rehab by saying that they are going to a new pub.

(5) **Michael:** Oh, shoot. Oh *well*, we’ll have to go someplace else then *I guess* (S05E10).

Michael is using the hedge *well*, or in this line, *oh well*, to be indirect about where they are going. He is hiding his true intention by misleading Meredith to avoid confrontation. This makes the statement more polite and ambiguous since he does not clearly say where they are going and why. By ending the sentence with *I guess*, he diminishes the significance of the change in destination.

### 5.2.2 Female Characters

The female characters used hedging expressions 101 times across the eight episodes. In this section, examples will be presented and analyzed.

> Michael quit Dunder Mifflin after conflicts and frustration with his new boss, Charles, and started a new company. Dunder Mifflin has lost major clients to Michael’s company and the company is suffering.

(1) **Phyllis:** *Maybe*, and *I don’t know*, if you had *just* returned Michael’s call none of us would’ve lost clients (S05E23).

The word *maybe* indicates a sense of uncertainty or possibility rather than certainty, followed by *I don’t know*, which further underscores the uncertainty. Phyllis indicates that she is not asserting the fact but rather offering a tentative, and more polite way of stating her opinion and frustration. Phyllis uses the hedging expressions to soften the statement, making it less confrontational, and does not directly blame Charles for not returning Michael’s call.

> Pam’s mom is asking if Pam is ready to go out for dinner.

(2) **Pam:** *Well, you know, actually I kind of* need to stall a bit (S02E02).
Kelly must choose a gift during a Christmas game at the office.

(3) Kelly: Okay, well, I guess I will take that book of short stories (S02E10).

In example 2, Pam uses hedges to indicate hesitation or uncertainty. The statement is indirect and well, you know, actually and kind of is used to soften the statement and imply ambiguity. She tentatively expresses herself, rather than stating directly that she cannot go right now. The line in example 3 indicates uncertainty and hesitation. The use of hedges makes the statement softer and more polite as it is indirect, instead of directly saying “I will take the book”.

Pam is showing her mom her desk where she works as the receptionist in the office.

(4) Pam: Yeah, yeah, but I uh... I switched stuff around because I actually needed like more room for organization. So... (S02E02).

In this example, actually and like serve as hedges and make the line indirect and more tentative. Pam explains her action cautiously and indicates hesitation as to why she switches stuff around and chooses not to elaborate why, leaving the explanation open and incomplete. The tentative way of explaining herself, and the uses of actually and like also make the statement more polite.

Pam traded back the gift originally meant for her from Jim after a game of “Yankee Swap” where she lost the gift to Dwight.

(5) Pam: I traded with Dwight. Just, I figured, you know, you went to a lot of trouble and it means a lot (S02E10).

Instead of directly stating her feelings about Jim’s gift, Pam explains her actions indirectly and ambiguously in example 5. She implies the significance of Jim’s gift without explicitly stating it, by using hedges, in this line, just and you know. Pam’s reasoning is tentative, and the hedges are softening the directness of her explanation.

5.3 Verbal Aggression

Verbal aggression includes linguistic behavior such as insulting, shouting, name-calling, telling dirty jokes, and vulgarity. This section is further divided into three subcategories for detailed analysis.
5.3.1 Insults and Name-calling
In the eight episodes, the male characters frequently use various forms of insults and name-calling. In total, this occurred 18 times across the eight episodes, in comparison to the female characters who used insults four times, but never name-calling. To clarify, it was the total number of times insults or name-calling occurred, not the number of words used as an insult or the number of name-callings.

(1) **Todd Packer:** What’s up Halpert, still **queer**? (S02E02).
(2) **Todd Packer:** We’re talking **blonde incompetent** (S02E02).
(3) **Todd Packer:** And then, suddenly, for no reason, this **bimbo** blows the whistle on the whole thing just to be a **bitch** (S02E02).
(4) **Dwight:** Thanks, **girl** (S02E20).
(5) **Todd Packer:** [grabbing Michael around the neck] Merry Christmas, **asswipe**! (S02E10).
(6) **Michael:** …she is incredibly... **fat and enormous** right now - **extremely unattractive** (S05E03).
(7) **Michael:** I'm fine, **weirdo**. Such an HR **weirdo**. Try not to suck all the air out of there when you walk in (S05E03).
(8) **Michael:** I have now memorized all of your names. **Shirty, Mole, Lazy Eye, Mexico, Baldy** (S05E15).
(9) **Dwight:** Nice job on the cake, **Bozo**! (S05E15).
(10) **Charles:** You two are **morons** (S05E23).

The ten examples presented above show how the male characters use insults and name-calling in different contexts, directed at both male and female characters. As seen in the first three examples, Packer consistently uses vulgar and obscene language in interaction with the office workers. He insults other characters both directly to their face as well as behind their back. Example 1 shows how he uses the word **queer** as an insult to Jim when he is greeting him. Packer is mocking Jim’s sexual orientation by implying that he is **queer**, hinting that being queer is something bad. In examples 2 and 3, Packer is talking about a female colleague who is not present, referring to her as having **blonde incompetence** and being a **bimbo** and a **bitch**. The terms used are sexist and offensive, and he perpetuates the stereotype that blondes are unintelligent or incapable.
Examples 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10 illustrate frequently occurring terms used as an insult in the selected episodes. These terms are used to diminish a person’s status, to suggest that a person is abnormal, or, in some way mock or offend someone. In example 6, Michael is talking about Jan, who is pregnant, using vulgar language when describing her. Example 8 illustrates Michael engaging in name-calling, instead of the names of the workers at another office. The names used are derogatory, as he implies that someone is irritable, targets a medical condition, uses nationality or ethnicity offensively, and mocks one’s appearance.

(1) **Jan:** It's your personality. I mean, you're obnoxious, and rude, and, and, and stupid, and you do have coffee breath ... [and] you are very, very inconsiderate (S02E08).

(2) **Phyllis:** I do enjoy being the head of the Party Planning Committee. I'm no longer under Angela's heel, and her little grape head is under mine (S05E03).

(3) **Angela:** Pervert (S05E03).

(4) **Meredith:** I gotta see that little bitch (S05E15).

In the first example, Jan is explaining to Michael why she does not want to be in a relationship with him. She is insulting him by including a series of personal attacks, which are not only offensive but also hurtful. Commenting on physical traits, saying that he is obnoxious and has coffee breath, can be embarrassing or humiliating. Example 2 illustrates how Phyllis is insulting Angela by saying that she has a little grape head. Angela calls her boyfriend a pervert in example 3, insulting him as she accuses him of inappropriate and abnormal sexual behavior. In example 4, Meredith is referring to Angela’s new cat, saying that she must see that little bitch. In this example, Meredith is insulting Angela’s cat, implying that the cat is aggressive, unpleasant, or spiteful by using the term bitch.

### 5.3.2 Dirty Jokes

For a joke to be considered dirty, it must contain offensive comments or sexually suggestive content. The following section will present the telling of dirty jokes by the male characters in the eight episodes. The female characters were not observed to tell such jokes.

(1) **Darryl:** Well, [points at Michael] those are some awful tight pants you have on. Where'd you get em? Like Queers R Us?

**Roy:** Boys R Us!

**Warehouse Guy:** Oh!
Darryl: Man, we can see all your business coming around the corner, okay? You need to, you know, hide the... good thing you don't have a lot of business to start with.

Roy: So you don't have the biggest package. Don't feel bad.

Darryl: I think he feels bad.

Roy: Little package!

All: Little package, he gets it from his mama, [kissing noises, shouting, making noise, sheep baaing sounds] (S02E02).

The first example illustrates a dirty joke that is homophobic, offensive, and inappropriate. Darryl, Roy, and the Warehouse Guy are telling a joke at Michael’s expense. First, they mock the tightness of Michael’s pants, implying homosexual tendencies, and further suggest that he purchased the pants from a boy’s store, due to his small package. They continue offending Michael, shouting about this supposed small genital size while neglecting and making fun of his feelings. Michael leaves and the others continue to shout at him in various derogatory manners.

(2) Michael: That’s what she said! (S02E02, S02E10).

(3) Todd Packer: What has two thumbs and likes to bone your mom? [points at himself] This guy! (S02E02).

(4) Michael: [comes into the conference room in a Santa hat and beard] Merry Christmas! ho, [points at Pam] ho, [points at Angela] ho, [points at Phyllis], [points to Ryan] pimp (S02E10).

The three examples above demonstrate frequently occurring types of dirty jokes in the eight episodes. Example 1 shows Michael using the phrase That’s what she said in response to statements that, while not intended to be sexual, can be interpreted as such. For example, when Pam says “Um… my mother is coming” (S02E02), Michael interprets coming as a sexual remark, referring to having an orgasm. This type of joke creates an uncomfortable situation, as it turns an innocent comment into something sexual. In example 2, Todd Packer’s joke is
offensive due to its sexually explicit and disrespectful reference to Michael’s mother. The third example illustrates how Michael implies that Pam, Angela, and Phyllis are prostitutes, with Ryan as their pimp. The joke is inappropriate as well as disrespectful and offensive.

(5) Todd Packer: There's this guy. He's at a Nymphomaniac Convention. And he is psyched 'cause all these women are smokin' hot perfect 10's, except for this one chick who looks a lot like, uh... [points at Phyllis] (S02E02).

Example 5 illustrates a dirty joke by Todd Packer which is offensive as it objectifies women and engages in body shaming. He singles out Phyllis, implying that she does not meet certain physical standards compared to others. The joke is not only hurtful to Phyllis, who is hearing it, but its content is offensive and inappropriate.

5.3.3 Shouting and Vulgarity
Shouting and vulgarity occurred almost exclusively by the male characters. Female characters shouted four times across the eight episodes. Vulgarity in this context refers to language that is inappropriate, disrespectful, and aggressive and was not found to be used by female characters.

Todd Packer comes into the office and muffles Michael by pulling Mihael’s jacket over his head.

(1) Michael: Kay! Oh you are so bad! Yeah!
   Todd Packer: [makes gun noises and shoots at Michael with his fingers]
   Michael: Oh, Boom! Bam! Oh, this guy is out of control! He is a madman! Better get the bleep button ready for him.
   Todd Packer: Bleep, bleep (S02E02).

The first example illustrates where two male characters are raising their voices, shouting, and disturbing their coworkers. They are standing in the middle of the office so everyone can both see and hear them. Their language can be considered disrespectful since the others are trying to do their job, which is hard when two men are making loud noises and, in a sense, playing with each other. It can also be seen as inappropriate, as they are shouting, and Todd is shooting with “finger guns” at a workplace while making loud noises.
(2) **Michael:** Was I, Creed?! Ok, well, you know what? I am implying that when we’re on an elevator together, I should maybe take the stairs, because talk about stank (S02E08).

The second example shows how Michael is shouting at his coworkers when they are having a meeting where the workers have put suggestions for improvements in a suggestion box. He is not happy with what his employees wrote, and he starts to shout when Creed corrects him, saying that Michael was *inferring*, not *implying*. It is disrespectful because he is aggressively dismissing Creed by shouting and then indirectly saying that he smells bad, which is offensive.

*After having a conversation about sexual harassment and inappropriate jokes at the office, Michael comes out and tells everyone that he will no longer say or do something funny. Jim deliberately says something that can be interpreted as sexual, and Michael shouts:*

(3) **Michael:** THAT’S WHAT SHE SAID!

**Jan:** Michael. MICHAEL!

**Michael:** [Laughing] Come on!

**Jan:** Michael, please (S02E02).

The shouting by Jan in this example could be argued to be of a different character compared to when the male characters shout. The reason Jan is shouting is because Michael is not listening. Jan is the Vice President of Northern Sales and Michael’s boss, and by not listening to Jan, Michael disrespects her. It could be argued that she must raise her voice to get his attention and for him to listen to her, and thereby had a reason for shouting, compared to the male characters. Jan is not using vulgar language when shouting, which also differs from the male characters. Jan is, however, shouting at Michael. Michael on the other hand, is shouting, and telling a dirty joke.

(4) **Dwight:** [shouts from another room] What did you do?!

**Kelly:** Stop yelling at me!

**Dwight:** What did you do?!

**Kelly:** I didn’t do anything!
Dwight: What did you learn in there? I bet you learned things, huh? Like how to fashion a shiv, hmm? (S02E15)

In this example, Dwight is being aggressive and hostile towards Kelly, which creates tension and an unpleasant work environment. He is shouting at her, questioning her about her time as a juvenile when she was a teenager, which is none of his business. The way Dwight confronts and questions Kelly by shouting and using an aggressive tone can be argued to be insulting, as well as unprofessional, inappropriate, and disrespectful.

Michael is trying to trick and force Meredith into going to rehab after an incident where Meredith got drunk and accidentally set her hair on fire at the office Christmas party.

(5) Meredith: Sunrise Rehab? No! No! No! I told you no! There is no way!
  Michael: It’s okay. It’s all right.
  …
  Meredith: No! No way! I told you. We talked about this. There is absolutely no way. No! No! There is no way! No! No! I am not going in there! I am not going in there! (S05E10)

This example shows how Meredith is shouting because Michael is trying to force her into rehab. He is physically trying to drag her into the rehab center, and Meredith is screaming no way multiple times. This example, like the previous example of when Jan shouted, can also be argued to be of a different character than when the male characters shout. Meredith is being forced into doing something she does not want to do, and Michael is completely ignoring her, thus violating her personal boundaries, which is a fair reason for shouting and screaming. However, the screaming and shouting are aggressive towards Michael, but trying to force Meredith into rehab against her will is highly inappropriate for a boss to do.

(6) Dwight: Michael! My water’s breaking!
  …
  Dwight: Aaaaaa! What do you do? What do you do?!
  Michael: Oh, OK! OK!
  …
  Michael: Do it! Do it! Scream! Scream it out, scream it out, scream it out.
  Dwight: Aaaaaa!
Michael: Aaaaaa!

…

Dwight: I’m screaming, I’m screaming, I’m screaming! Aaaaaa! (S05E03)

The final example illustrates Michael and Dwight role-playing and practicing what to do when Jan is going into labor using a watermelon. Dwight is simulating contractions, water breaking, and finally “gives birth” to the watermelon. The act is taking place in the middle of the office, and later in Michael’s office, with the door open. The two men do not consider the others and interrupt their work by shouting, screaming, and acting out the birth. It is inappropriate and unprofessional since the noise is distracting and disturbing.

5.4 Powerful and Powerless Language

In this section, linguistic behavior stereotypical of “men’s language”, or powerful language, by the male characters, and “women’s language”, or powerless language, by female characters, will be presented.

5.4.1 Powerful Language

The use of powerful language by the male characters includes interruptions, taking the room, and showing dominance.

It is a Christmas party at the office, and Ryan comes up to Angela, who is the head of the Party Planning Committee, and Michael, and says that they are running low on cups.

(1) Ryan: We’re running low on cups. Do you want me to just run out and get some?
    Angela: There should be some [interrupted]
    Michael: No, no, no, no. We’ll find some, don’t leave the party (S02E10).

This example shows how Michael is interrupting Angela and ignoring her comment. She is trying to let Michael and Ryan know that there are more cups somewhere but is interrupted before she can finish the sentence. This is an example of an interruption that is not supportive and cooperative, but rather a “successful” interruption where Michael takes the floor. Since Michael is interrupting Angela, he is also showing dominance and authority, by not including or listening to what she has to say.
Michael says that he has gossip for Todd, that a CFO resigned but does not know why.

Todd answers:

(2) **Todd Packer:** Are you kidding? Everyone knows why! You don’t know? Okey, check this out. All right. So here’s the story [takes a seat at Jim’s desk]. So Randall is nailing his secretary, right? And she is totally incompetent (S02E02).

Todd Packer’s behavior in this example shows that he is “taking the room” by intentionally gathering everyone to listen to him and expecting everyone to stop working and listen to him. He is openly and bluntly discussing Randall’s personal life, regardless of who might be listening, and is thereby asserting dominance and authority by not caring. His engagement in this type of gossip, without concern for the potential consequences of sharing such inappropriate information, can also be seen as using a language of status.

*Phyllis is the new head of the Party Planning Committee and is talking about the Christmas party to the camera in another room.*

(3) **Phyllis:** I do enjoy being the head of the Party Planning Committee. I'm no longer under Angela’s heel, and her little grape head is under mine.

**Michael:** [banging on the glass] Hey, hey. What are you doing? Don't talk to them.

**Phyllis:** Sorry.

**Michael:** Make the party. Don't - make the party, please, Phyllis. [Phyllis starts inflating a balloon with a pump] Pump it! (S05E03)

In this example, Michael is giving Phyllis clear and direct instructions, thereby showing dominance. He is commanding her to stop talking to the camera crew and to *make the party* and *pump it*, which reflects his authority. Phyllis stops talking to the camera and does what she is told which further shows Michael’s authority and dominance. Michael is also interrupting Phyllis as she is speaking by banging on the glass. Since Phyllis stops talking, this could be seen as a “successful” interruption, even though it is done from another room.

*Toby is having a presentation about sexual harassment, and Michael is not pleased with having to give up email forwards with sexual jokes and sexual jokes in general.*
Michael: Do you realize what we are losing, seriously?

Angela: Email forwards.

Michael: Exactly! Mmwwah [blows a kiss to Angela]! Can we afford to lose email forwards? Do we want that?

Angela: I hate them. You send me these filthy emails and you say forward them to ten people or you'll have bad luck.

Michael: Give me a break (S02E02).

Angela expresses her dislike for email forwards, especially filthy ones. Michael’s response, *give me a break*, can be seen as dismissive, indicating that he is not willing to take Angela’s opinion seriously. It can be interpreted as an attempt to assert dominance since it indicates a lack of interest in her opinion. Michael’s use of the phrase *Can we afford email forwards? Do we want that?* could also be seen as a way of showing dominance. Michael uses rhetorical questions to emphasize the potential consequence of losing email forwards, making it seem more important than it might be. This could be seen as a way of showing power by using different linguistic features, trying to make everyone agree with him.

**5.4.2 Powerless Language**

The use of *powerless* language by the female characters includes showing support, building relationships, and avoiding disagreement.

*Everyone has gathered around the Christmas tree at the office to see it light up.*

(1) **All:** Three, two, one. [very dim lights come on the tree]

   **Michael:** Not great.

   **Phyllis:** I’m sorry, everybody.

   **Pam:** I think the tree looks nice (S02E10).

Pam shows support by saying *I think the tree looks nice*, while others show disappointment, regardless of what she might think of the lights herself. She is strengthening their relationship as well since she is acknowledging Phyllis’s efforts. This example also shows Pam’s consideration for the feelings of others, in this case, Phyllis, and how she tries to find something nice to say to make Phyllis feel better.

*Michael just found out that Holly has a new boyfriend and is very sad about it.*
(2) **Pam:** I’m so sorry, Michael.

**Michael:** How could she do this to me, Pam?

**Pam:** She’s not doing it to hurt you.

…

**Pam:** Listen, when Jim was dating Karen, I didn’t want to come to work. It was awful. I hated it. I wanted to quit, but [interrupted] (S05E15).

In this example, Pam is showing support to Michael since he is feeling sad because Holly has a new boyfriend. She is being personal and trying to relate to Michael’s feelings and comfort him. She does not have to show support to him, comfort him, or try to make him feel better, but does so regardless. Thereby, she is also building and strengthening their relationship.

*Michael changed Secret Santa to another game he calls Yankee Swap. Angela, who planned the party, is talking to a camera in another room.*

(3) **Angela:** Michael should have asked the party planning committee first. He’s not supposed to just spring things on us out of nowhere. [Starts to cry] (S02E10).

Angela is not happy with the fact that Michael changed the plans without letting her know. She does not, however, say anything to Michael, but expresses her emotion to the cameras in a different room. This could be seen as a way of avoiding disagreement since she does not express herself to the person who hurt her feelings. She could have said something to him but chose not to, and it could also be argued that she might not have done so because Michael is her boss. Michael’s authority could make Angela hesitant to directly address him, as she may feel neglected and not want to affect their professional relationship.

*Michael is talking to Holly, telling her that Jan is coming in today and that he will be cold to Holly to pay respect to Jan and her “bloated feelings”. Holly answers:*

(4) **Holly:** Of course. Yeah (S05E03).

In this example, Holly agrees to let her boss treat her in a way that can be argued to be inappropriate and mean. Holly might agree to be treated this way to avoid disagreement and not challenge their relationship. Michael is not asking Holly if it is okay that he is going to act cold towards her, but stating the fact that he will. This could further be a reason why Holly
agrees to let him act cold towards her since it might be hard to argue against her boss who is showing his authority by being direct.

6. Discussion

This section will discuss the results of this study in relation to the background section of this essay.

6.1 Men’s Language

The male characters in *The Office* frequently employ verbal aggression, such as insults, name-calling, shouting, vulgarity, and dirty jokes, aligning with stereotypes identified by Maltz and Borker (2011) as characteristic of men’s speech. Timothy (1999) explains that men tend to tell more aggressive types of jokes such as obscene ones openly (p.167). This stereotype was also borne out in *The Office* since the male characters told several dirty jokes throughout the eight episodes. The writers seem to reinforce stereotypes as they assign certain linguistic features associated with men’s language, which Beers Fägersten and Sveen (2016) argue are culturally ingrained.

The language used by the male characters, especially Michael, can be seen as disrespectful and inappropriate in an office. Michael frequently shouts at his employees, without facing opposition or intervention. The reason for providing Michael with such language could be because the writers, unintentionally or intentionally, wanted his linguistic behavior to mirror a hierarchical society, as discussed by Holmes (2013). Beers Fägersten and Sveen (2016) argue that language use can vary depending on social context and roles (2016, p. 107), providing an additional reason for why Michael has the authority to shout and use vulgar language differently compared to the other characters.

6.2 Women’s Language

The female characters use a language that includes showing support, building relationships, and avoiding disagreement, in line with Beers Fägersten and Sveen’s (2016), Lakoff’s (2004), and Tannen’s (1990; 1994; 1993) characterization of women’s language. The possibility of women adopting powerless language due to their social position is suggested by O’Barr and Atkins (2011). It can be argued that the female characters in *The Office* hold a lower status than the male characters, resulting in the use of powerless language. The writers have, unintentionally or intentionally, assigned the female characters lines that express consideration,
support, and indirectness, and fewer lines compared to the male characters. These linguistic features appear to correspond with Cameron’s (2014) explanation of women’s language as well.

Lakoff (2004) and Tannen (1990) discussed the idea that women do not tell or understand jokes. In the selected episodes, the female characters were not observed to tell jokes in the sense that others listened and laughed with them. The stereotype of women’s inability to tell jokes seems to be accurate for the female characters in The Office. The stereotype of women’s language lacking quality such as authority, explained by Cameron (2014), seem to be accurate as well. The female characters did not shout, raise their voice for no reason, or use vulgar language, nor did they speak up when the male characters did. Perhaps, it is because they lack authority since they were not given one by the writers.

6.3 Gender and Power Dynamics

The importance of being a leader in interactions, explained by James and Drakich (1993), can be seen in The Office. Male characters often speak loudly in the office, disregarding others which can be argued to display dominance and leading interactions. It can also be argued that this is a way of showing status and thereby corresponds with Tannen’s (1990) characterization of men’s language. Male dominance and superiority in society, mentioned by Beers Fagersten and Sveen (2016), could be the reason why the male characters are assigned a stereotypical way of speaking. Regardless, the use of powerful language borne out by the male characters in The Office appears to correspond with stereotypes of men’s language.

Regarding interruptions, both the male and the female characters predominantly engaged in cooperative and supportive interruptions. Occasional successful interruptions were borne out by male characters and indicated dominance, corresponding with Aries’s (1996) description of successful interruptions. The absence of significant gender differences in interruptions, noted by James and Clark (1993), appears to be accurate. The stereotype of men interrupting women more is thereby challenged by the characters in The Office. However, due to the generally short dialogue length, successful interruptions can be limited in integration, possibly influenced by the nature and brevity of cross-sex interaction.

6.4 Spoken Content

The results show that hedging expression is used more by the male characters than the female characters. However, considering the number of lines and words, arguably, the female characters use hedging expressions more frequently. Of the 1,643 lines and the 16,989 words
spoken by the male characters, hedging expressions are used 127 times, meaning the lines consist of 0.75% hedging expressions. In contrast, of the 544 lines and 4,931 words by female characters, the lines consist of 2.03% hedging expressions. Interestingly, this indicated that the female characters use more hedging expressions when they speak, in relation to the number of lines and words, thereby corresponding with Lakoff’s (2004) characterization of women’s language. The results from The Office resemble the results presented by Ding and Li (2023) on another scripted show, which is interesting since both are scripted shows and could present a more equal, and perhaps accurate, representation of how men and women speak.

A general idea is that women speak more than men. However, the results indicate that the male characters speak more. The reason could be that men tend to speak more because they believe it is important to be the leader in interactions and establishing or maintaining their status in a group, which corresponds to what James and Drakich (1993) argue. The male characters in The Office had more lines, and thereby spoke more, and often dominated the conversation. The unequal distribution of lines between male and female characters might be an intentional, or unintentional, reflection of societal expectations regarding gendered speech by the writers. Interestingly, similar findings were observed by Li (2014) in Desperate Housewives, where male characters also spoke more. The findings of this study as well as the one by Li (2014) seem to challenge the stereotype of women speaking more, thereby revealing interesting insights.
7. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate to what extent the male and the female characters, respectively, in *The Office*, display differences in their linguistic behavior. Further, it was analyzed whether these findings correspond to or challenge the stereotypes associated with “men’s” and “women’s language”.

The results reveal differences in linguistic behavior between the male and the female characters in *The Office*. The male characters tend to use verbal aggression such as dirty jokes and vulgarity, along with a more dominant and powerful language. This is reflected in the distribution of lines and the content of them. The language used by the female characters included indirectness, hedging expressions, and linguistic features used show support politeness, build relationships, and avoid disagreement.

Further on, despite linguistic studies suggesting very small or insignificant differences between how men and women speak, there is a general assumption that the difference is larger. The observed differences between the male and the female characters’ language use appear to correspond with stereotypes associated with men’s and women’s language, indicating that the difference is great. However, the finding challenges the stereotype of men interrupting women more, as interruptions in the episodes are mostly cooperative and supportive.

The portrayal of men and women in *The Office* seems to be stereotypical and can thereby reinforce stereotypes as well. Whether alleged differences are inherent or socially constructed, the writers assigned characters with stereotypical language, influencing our conception of how men and women should speak. The prevalence of such stereotypes in mainstream media with scripted dialogues aimed at humor subtly sends a message of our conception of gender and how men and women speak – that there are considerable differences.

In conclusion, the question that arises is: why are stereotypes of how men and women speak so embedded in society and reinforced in mainstream media when evidence shows little or no difference? An interesting topic for further studies would be to further investigate alleged differences between how men and women speak in other TV shows and the effects of these differences. It would also be interesting to investigate whether these TV shows reinforce or challenge stereotypes regarding “men’s” and “women’s” language.
List of References


