

Possible Factors Affecting Women's Conversational Style

-An Investigation of Hedges Used by Women in the American TV-series

Desperate Housewives

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1. Introduction

Women and men's talk in same-sex groups is an important and still developing area of language and gender. It has often been assumed in past research that women and men each form one homogeneous group, sharing one common social agenda and that their speech behavior can be explained by means of two simple generalizations: men's competitive speech style and women's cooperative speech style. Their different speech styles are achieved by characteristically drawing on different conversational strategies such as minimal responses, hedges, turn-taking patterns, interruptions and so on in conversational interactions.

According to Bergvall et al., Thakerar's (1982) speech accommodation theory describes "how speakers may vary their discourse behavior in accordance with their desire to signal allegiance to or divergence from other members of the group". (Bergvall et al., 1996: 80) Through a large sample of conversations collection and then a systematic study of specific linguistic features, Bergvall et al. also reveals that women and men in their study display remarkably similar language behavior (Bergvall et al., 1996:60).

Women's speech is often described as tentative and women's speech style is always described as cooperative. This assertion is linked to the claim that women use more hedges. "Hedges are linguistic forms such as *I think, I'm sure, you know, I mean, sort of* and *perhaps* which express speaker's certainty and uncertainty about the proposition under discussion." (Coates, 2004: 88) Hedges are used to mitigate the force of speakers' utterances and to save other speakers' face needs. According to Coates, Robin Lakoff (1975) explicitly links women's use of hedges with unassertness and argues that this is because women believe that asserting themselves strongly is not nice and less ladylike (Coates, 2004: 88). This is a claim based on no empirical evidence. Although some later relative studies made by linguists have proved that women use more hedges than men, contradictory findings have also shown that women and men similarly use some conversational strategies. as the research done by Bergvall et al. shows that, the occurrence of *you know* and the use of *questions* in men's conversation is nearly the same as those in women's conversations (Bergvall et al., 1996: 60).

The important thing lies on the multifunctionality of linguistic features and the multifunctionality relies on linguistic features' surrounding contexts. A particular example of

one linguistic feature can often be judged only from the context in which it occurs (Macaulay, 2005: 9). By investigating women's use of hedges in the particular context, the article attempts to explore possible factors affecting their conversational style.

1.1 Aim and Scope

The aim of the present investigation is to study the linguistic feature hedges in terms of their forms and functions in the spoken language in private, all-female contexts in the American TV-series *Desperate Housewives*. The hedges are used in further analyzing the conversational style of the female main characters to explore possible factors affecting their conversational style.

1.2 Material

The study is conducted on the speech of female, main characters in all-female private contexts in some episodes of the first season of the American TV-series *Desperate Housewives*.

There are twenty-three episodes in the first season and the total playing time for each episode is forty-two-minute. Table 1 is the list of the playing time of the female main characters' conversations in private, all-female contexts in some episodes:

Table 1. The relevant playing time for each episode

Episode	Playing time	Episode	Playing time
1	6 minutes 6 seconds	11	2 minutes 14 seconds
2	5 minutes 18 seconds	12	4 minutes 55seconds
3	2 minutes 12 seconds	13	43 seconds
4	12 minutes 23 seconds	14	4 minutes 19 seconds
5	7minutes 18 seconds	15	2 minutes 53 seconds
6	5 minutes 2 seconds	16	12 minutes 9 seconds
7	2 minutes 22 seconds	18	4 minutes 16 seconds
8	2 minutes 37 seconds	19	5 minutes 2 seconds
9	4 minutes 30 seconds	21	1 minutes 51 seconds
10	6 minutes 2 seconds	22	3 minutes 30 seconds

Total playing time	1 hour 35 minutes 41 seconds	
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There is no proper sample in episode 17, 20 and 23 because there is no conversation in these episodes engaged with all female participants or the conversational context is not a private one. Therefore, the total playing time of the entire samples in this study, namely the total playing time of spoken language of female main characters in private, all-female contexts in Season one of *Desperate Housewives* is 1 hour 35 minutes 41 seconds. Through calculating the relevant playing time, the researcher is informed that the length of the playing time is acceptable and feasible to carry on the study. After knowing the total playing time and with the help of the available manuscripts of the speech, the number of the words spoken in the entire samples can be calculated as well as the frequency of each hedges used in the entire samples.

The American TV-series *Desperate Housewives* is chosen for the present study as a result of the aim is to investigate women’s use of hedges and possible factors affecting their conversational style. There are many female characters in this TV-series which is advantageous to the study. The season and the episodes are randomly chosen to be conversational samples.

1.3 Method

This investigation analyzes hedges used by female, main characters in all-female private contexts in some episodes of the first season of the American TV-series *Desperate Housewives*. The study is carried on through a close analysis of the spoken language and the available manuscripts of the speech. Hedges are identified through discussing their definitions and different functions; and then the frequency of occurrence of each hedge is counted per 1,000 words in the entire samples and the distribution of each hedge by its function will be analyzed. Different function of each hedge is explained and exemplified with examples from the samples. Lastly, the relationship between women’s usage of hedges and their conversational style are analyzed and possible factors affecting their conversational style are explored.

2. Theoretical Background

In this section, three aspects of related information about the theoretical background will be presented. Firstly, general beliefs of women and men's conversational styles (see 2.1) will be given followed by possible factors affecting conversational style (see 2.2). Lastly, theories of hedges (see 2.3) will be discussed.

2.1 General beliefs of women's and men's conversational styles

Since the beginning of 20th century, linguists and social scientists have tried to reveal the causes of differences in the speech of women and men, and in the process, far too many inaccurate generalizations about female and male speech have been made (Bergvall et al., 1996: 54). Bergvall et al. points out that there are many writings about women, men and their language differences but for which there is little empirical foundation. For example, from Jespersen's work in 1922, to Lakoff's pioneering 1973 article, to Tannen's popularized 1990 depiction of women's speech, people commonly hold stereotyped images that women are more conservative in their speech than men, that women are more polite than men, that women seek more verbal intimacy than men, and that women are less secure and more status-conscious in their speech than men (Bergvall et al., 1996: 55). In contrast, subsequent studies which explicate the specific social or discourse conditions which motivate the language choices of particular groups of women and men more or less subvert those folklinguistic beliefs (Bergvall et al., 1996: 56).

The development of same-sex talk unavoidably follows this pattern. Coates points out that after Deborah Jones' paper *Gossip: notes on women's oral cultures* (1980) which firstly addresses the same-sex talk, a great deal of research has been carried out on same-sex talk and unavoidably, research in this area has also been largely affected by those anecdotal and stereotyped acknowledgements of women and men (Coates, 2004: 125). For example, a sociolinguistic observation reveals that men pursue a style of interaction based on power while women pursue a style based on solidarity and support in same-sex talk (Coates, 2004: 126). It is concluded that other things being equal, women are more likely to have a collaborative speech style, supporting other speakers and using language in a way that

emphasizes their solidarity while men prefer a competitive style by using some conversational strategies. Coates also points out that women are careful to respect other speakers' turns and apologize for talking too much. In all-female conversations, women can have a discussion for a long time about only one topic. They share personal feelings with each other and tend to support and encourage each other by skilfully using linguistic features such as minimal responses and hedges. Men, however, either have a monologue or often interrupt others with turn-takings or jump for topic to topic, but they rarely talk about sensitive and impersonal problems (Coates, 2004: 90).

However, the analysis of informal conversations between pairs of female friends and male friends made by Bergvall et al. reveal that women and men have nearly the same use of *you know* and *questions* which have been regarded as relevant linguistic features used by female speakers to achieve cooperative speech style. According to Bergvall et al., Thakerar's (1982) speech accommodation theory, from the perspective of the social psychology of language, also suggested that speakers might vary their discourse behavior in accordance with their desire to signal allegiance to or divergence for other members of the group (Bergvall et al., 1996: 93). It means that if speakers want to pursue solidarity in the group, they will adopt a style similar to other members of the group they feel more allied with and when they want to be independent and separate from the group, they will differentiate their speech style from other members of the group. Therefore, the use of some conversational strategies can be seen as controlled by social, psychological and political factors (Gudykunst, 2004: 127).

There must be some factors resulting in these seemingly contradictory findings of women and men's speech style. The previous findings seem to be less comprehensive as an argument cited by Bergvall et al., who discusses Butler and Bem's (1990) claim that the "error lies in viewing sex and gender as simple bipolar distinctions and in believing in the existence of natural and inherent differences between women and men" (Bergvall et al., 1996: 55).

2.2 Possible factors affecting conversational style

As the introduction indicates, it is vital to take into account the specific social conditions of the community in which speakers live, that is to say, it is important to think practically and look locally in attempting to account for differences in women's and men's speech. Social

conditions such as local economic situations, employment rate, educational level, social network, which group of women is under investigation, in what circumstances they are speaking, in the role of what, in relation to whom, with what background and even the extent to which women and men can participate in public activities are all factors which are influential on the choices that women and men make in the speech style that they use.

Coupland draws on Goffman's dramaturgical metaphors of frontstage and backstage to explore the way women deal with aspects of the self which do not conform with conventional norms of femininity (Coupland, 2000: 245). Frontstage performance is much more carefully planned and controlled. Informal personal conversations are widely acknowledged to be backstage activity. It seems to be plausible to parallel these two concepts respectively to the public and the private context. Coupland suggests that, at home, talking to a close friend, women sometimes perform a very different self who is not so nice. This backstage of behaving badly is accepted and even welcomed between female friends, precisely because backstage helps them for dropping their front, and because this mutual beneficial admissions of 'not-niceness' reinforce solidarity (Coupland, 2000: 246).

Macaulay has paid more attention on the multifunctionality of linguistic features such as *you know*, *well*, *questions* and he has put an emphasis on social class differences, age differences and gender differences in the use of *you know* and *I mean*. The most important thing he found, about which can also be associated with this paper is that "in the case of *you know*, the middle-class females are more likely to use it for purposes of emphasis or elaboration, and they are more likely to use *I mean* for explanations and that their daughters are more likely to follow their examples" (Macaulay, 2005: 86). This claim helps to explain the reason why at first, both boys and girls learn women's language at home and school since their caretakers are usually mothers and female teachers but later boys choose to have a different speech style. Similar studies emphasizing on boys and girls in same-sex peer groups made by Romaine have also revealed quite different patterns of their interactions. Girls use forms such as *let's*, *we're gonna* to create and maintain cohesiveness. All girls in the group participate in decision-making on an equal basis and their activities are generally cooperative and non-competitive. Boys, on the other hand, tend to organize more hierarchically groups with more use of commands and directives to try to assert dominance or control. In the adults' world, women and men are in more social pressures than those of boys' and girls' (Romaine, 1994: 117). Tannen talks about different words and different worlds with an example of a married

couple. The husband engages the world where conversations are negotiations men make to try to achieve and maintain upper status and preserve independence while the wife is approaching the world where conversations are negotiations for closeness in which women seek confirmation and support to try to protect themselves from others' attempts to push them away. Women pursue solidarity in the guise of connection and men pursue independence in the guise of opposition. But there is a point made by the wife that sometimes when she also dislikes people's expressing sympathy about her commuting marriage which raises a question that in some conditions, women disvalue others' sympathy or support and want to drop off her own guised frontstage (Tannen, 1992: 25).

2.3 Hedges

In this section, three aspects of related information about hedges are discussed. The first part is about the definition of hedges (see 2.3.1); the second part is about the relationship between hedges and women's conversational style (see 2.3.2) and the third part is about forms, functions and different use of hedges (see 2.3.3).

2.3.1 Definition of hedges

As Yule argues that, the number of expressions people use to indicate that what they are saying may not be totally accurate is the best measurement of how a cooperative interaction is in English (Yule, 1996: 38). Expressions like these are hedges. Hedges are linguistic features which express the speaker's certainty (uncertainty) and protect both speaker's and hearer's face. People use hedges like *I'm not sure, as far as I know* to mitigate the force of their utterances. Even the following sentence *I don't know if this is important, but some of the files are missing*, where there is no obvious use of the hedges, people can easily make a sense of the uncertainty of the speaker.

The hedge is a linguistic feature that is regularly associated with female speech. Hedges are used to respect the face needs of all participants when they negotiate sensitive topics. In most cases, women use more hedges because the topics they choose are highly sensitive and impersonal (Coates, 2004: 90). Common hedges are *I think, I'm sure, I mean, you know, probably, well, sort of, perhaps*. A recent new comer to the class of the hedges is the word

like, which is found to be used by younger speakers all over the English-speaking world to mitigate the force of utterances (Coates, 2004: 88).

2.3.2 The relationship between hedges and women's conversational style

It has often been assumed in past research that men tend to pursue a competitive conversational style, women, on the other hand, use a number of conversational strategies that can be described as a cooperative style, supporting other speakers and emphasizing solidarity with other speakers. Hedges, are one of the most common strategies that used by female speakers to mitigate the force of their utterances to achieve the solidarity (Coates, 2004: 138).

According to Coates, Robin Lakoff (1975) has a claim that there are more hedges in women's speech and explicitly connected women's speech style with hedges of uncertainty because women are socialized to believe that asserting themselves strongly is not nice or ladylike (Coates, 2004: 88). Another research cited by Coates focusing on the expression of hedges is carried out by Bent Preisler (1986). The informants in this study are women and men from two different age groups (20-25 and 40-45) and from three occupational groups. Through making a record of their conversations discussing subjects such as violence on TV or corporal punishment for children, it is found that the women in his sample use remarkably more hedges than the men (Coates, 2004: 88).

2.3.3 Forms, functions and different use of hedges

The word *like* which is a new comer to the class of the hedges has been drawn on intensive attention by researchers. Many of these studies show that *like* is much more common used in the middle-class adolescent conversations by both male and female but is not common used in the middle-class adult conversations (Macaulay, 2005: 82). Two possible reasons for this are media influence from the United States such as Hollywood films and the traditional use of *like* in final position by working-class people.

Macaulay makes a detailed analysis of the use of *well* by its six functions: elaboration, response, repair, quoted dialogue, topic switch, and agreement (Macaulay, 2005: 60). The figures show that *well* is most used for elaboration by the speakers and the most frequent

users of *well* are working-class men and middle-class girls; adolescents use significantly less *well* than adults and men use more *well* for self-repairs and elaboration than as responses.

According to Coates, Holmes (1984) makes a distinction between the different functions of *you know* (Coates, 2004: 88). The common hedge *you know* is categorized into two groups in her data: one where *you know* is used to express speaker's certainty and the other where *you know* is used to express speaker's uncertainty. The distribution of *you know* by function and speakers' gender shows that women use more *you know* than men when it expresses uncertainty and use less *you know* when it expresses certainty. Macaulay also makes detailed summary of social class, gender, and age differences in the use of *you know*. He argues that it is common to analyze *you know* as a linguistic feature to emphasize shared knowledge (Macaulay, 2005: 63). However, Macaulay argues that it is also common to find suggestions that *you know* is "a complex and sophisticated pragmatic particle" and that it may act "as a turn-yielding device, as a linguistic imprecision signal, as an appeal to the listener for reassuring feedback, or as a signal that the speaker attributes understanding to the listener" (Macaulay, 2005: 70).

It is clear from a great deal of research that *you know* is associated with lower-class speech. Macaulay makes a conclusion about them: there are two unpublished Australian studies about Poole's (1973) and Brotherton's (1976) claim that there is a higher frequency of *you know* in lower-working-class speech but no more findings are given; In New Zealand, Stubbe and Holmes (1995) have also found that the significantly occurrence of *you know* in working-class speech; in addition, Huspek (1989) finds that *you know* is frequently used in the speech of the workers he interviewed, but there is also a lack of access to know the specific percentage of *you know* since he does not make a comparison with those in middle-class (Macaulay, 2005: 66). Therefore, linguists make a conclusion that it is too early to assume that *you know* is used more in working-class speech until more extensive research has been made in to social class differences in the use of *you know*. Gender differences in the use of *you know* is clearer than that of social class differences. Macaulay makes a conclusion about them: London-Lund Corpus (Svartvik & Quirk, 1980) shows that the frequency of *you know* in women's speech is remarkably higher than that in men's speech and *you know* is more likely to occur in same-sex conversations. In the middle-class conversations, *you know* is also found to be frequently used with *sort of* and *kind of*. Age differences in the use of *you know* only shows that adolescent are less frequent users than adults (Macaulay, 2005: 68).

I mean is multifunctional and can be used to make elaboration, explanation, express adversative meaning and supply new information. As linguistic features, *you know* and *I mean* have many similarities in their use to the item *well*, and both of their semantic content is minimal which means that *you know* is not used to show addresser's assumptions of addressee's knowing about what he or she has just said and *I mean* is not used to indicate that the speaker is trying to explain what he or she has just said. There is the research showing that *I mean* is much more frequent in the lower-class than in the middle-class speakers while there is also research showing that *I mean* is more frequently used by middle-class speakers, both adults and adolescents (Macaulay, 2005: 74). The gender differences show that it is the middle-class women and girls who use *I mean* most frequently and adults use *I mean* almost twice as frequently as the adolescents. The important thing is that the most frequent use of *I mean* among the middle-class women is for explanation. Therefore, it may indicate an important aspect of middle-class women's speech: the most frequent users of *I mean* for explanation (Macaulay, 2005: 77).

As above research shows that, adolescents have significantly less use of *you know* and *I mean* than adults. However, the word *like* which have a similar function as *you know* and *I mean* are used more by adolescents. As a linguistic feature, the item *like* is more difficult to identify than *you know* and *I mean* because it can be used in many ways, as a verb, as an adjective and as a preposition.

3. Analysis

This section is divided into two main parts. The first part is a brief description of the story background (see 3.1) which indicates age, class and gender factors possibly affecting women's conversational style in the sample. The second part will present the investigation results of hedges in terms of their multifunction and the frequency of occurrence of each function used by women in the entire samples and explore possible factors affecting women's conversational style by analyzing the relationship between the use of hedges and women's conversational style.

3.1 Story background

The setting of the story is the street of Wisteria Lane in the fictional American town of Fairview. The female, main characters are all middle aged. The information found from the website as well as the researcher's cognition about the story indicate that they belong to the middle class or slightly upper middle class with relatively a good economic condition. The first season introduces the four central characters of the story: Susan Mayer, Lynette Scavo, Bree Van de Kamp and Gabrielle Solis, as well as their families and neighbors. Susan Mayer, a divorced mother with a sense of humor for drama and in search of love; Lynette Scavo, a former businesswoman turned stressed out stay-at-home mother of four; Bree Van de Kamp, the seemingly perfect mother struggling to save her marriage; and Gabrielle Solis, an ex-model whose unhappy marriage has had her beginning an affair with her 17-year-old gardener. They work through domestic struggles and family life, while facing the secrets, crimes and mysteries hidden behind the doors of their-at the surface-beautiful and seemingly perfect suburban neighborhood.

The primary material TV series *Desperate Housewives* limits the scope of social contexts into a private context and clarify their roles in a specific community because central characters are all housewives living in the same community. As for the criteria of the private, only conversations happened in their houses can be regarded as the private context.

3.2 Investigation results

Common hedges can be found in the samples. They are items like *just, well, maybe, might, may, probably* and phrases like *sort of, kind of, you know, I mean, I guess, I'm (not) sure, I'm certain, I (don't) think, as far as I'm concerned*.

The analysis focuses on explaining four main hedges including two simple items *well, sort of (kind of)* and two more complicated items *you know* and *I mean*. Firstly, they will be defined according to previous relevant study or the available dictionary. Of each hedge, the distribution of it by its function will be analyzed. Each of its function will be explained and exemplified with examples from samples. After that, possible reasons for the distribution will be analyzed. Then, try to find out the relationship between this usage of hedges by the women

in the sample and their conversational style. With the help of theoretical background, possible factors affecting their conversational style will be explored.

The statistical investigation shows that there are 16,358 words spoken by the female, main characters in all-female, private contexts in the chosen episodes. Table 2 is the list of the total number of all occurrences of hedges and the frequency of them per 1,000 words. From top to bottom, these hedges are listed in the sequence of high frequency to low frequency.

Table 2. The number of these hedges and their frequency per 1,000 words in the sample

Hedges	Number.	Frequency of per 1,000 words
<i>Just</i>	98	5.99
<i>Well</i>	76	4.65
<i>Maybe, might, may</i>	22	1.34
<i>Sort of, kind of</i>	18	1.10
<i>You know</i>	18	1.10
<i>I mean</i>	16	0.98
<i>I think</i>	12	0.73
<i>Probably</i>	7	0.43
<i>I guess</i>	4	0.25
<i>I don't think</i>	3	0.18
<i>I'm sure/ I'm certain</i>	3	0.18
<i>I'm not sure</i>	2	0.12
<i>As far as I'm concerned</i>	1	0.06

A glancing observation of the results shows that the simple items *just* and *well* are most frequently used in the sample followed by phrases of *you know* and *I mean* and then the other hedges. The noticeable findings of a great deal of use of *well* for response and the simple use of multifunctional linguistic features *you know* and *I mean*, reveal that the women's conversational style in the sample is not always cooperative as indicated by most previous relative research. Previous study shows that women's speech is often described as tentative and women's speech style is always described as cooperative for their frequent use of hedges. They use hedges as mitigating device to soften their utterances and save other people's face (Coates, 2004: 88). In the entire samples, women use relatively simple hedges *just*, *well* and

have the simple use of relatively complicated hedges *you know* and *I mean*. This particular finding indicate that women do not use hedges for all the time as a mitigating device. In many cases, hedges are more used as a habitual way of speaking. Therefore, their conversational style can be cooperative as well as competitive. Possible factors affecting their conversational style are contextualized functions of the hedges and extralinguistic factors about their interrelationship and social conditions. The following are the detailed analysis of four main hedges, *well*, *sort of (kind of)*, *you know* and *I mean* by their contextualized functions.

3.2.1 *Well*

The linguistic feature *well* can be used in a number of functions. The total number of the occurrences of *well* in the entire samples is 76. Table 3 shows the distribution of *well* by its functions. It displays the occurrence number and the percentage of each functional use of *well*.

Table 3. The distribution of *well* by its functions.

	Number.	Percentage
Response	66	87%
Elaboration	5	6%
Topic switch	2	3%
Repair	2	3%
Agreement	1	1%

1. Topic switch

In some situations, *well* is used when the speaker is changing the topic. For example:

Example 1: *Edie: "I'm not bringing anything."*

*Susan: "Oh, you don't have to. **Well**, this is good. Thank you. I guess I should go take a shower and wash Mrs. Huber off of me."*

Susan answers Edie's question that she (Edie) does not have to bring anything, and then she uses *well* to change this topic and begin a new topic.

2. Agreement

Well can be used to signify agreement. For example:

Example 2: *Danielle: "Daddy ended up cheating on you."
Bree: "Yes. **Well** -"*

After saying yes to Danielle's question that Bree uses *well* to add the agreement.

3. Repair

Well can be used in self-repairs. Some of the elaboration use of *well* could also be considered as repairs. For example:

Example 3: *Lynette: "Okay. She's going through something, and I'm sure she'd prefer it to be private."
Edie: "She's upset with Mike, isn't she? **Well**, come on. I'm gonna find out sooner or later."*

Here, after hearing what is said by Lynette, Edie thinks that Lynette intentionally hides something from her and then Edie ventures a guess that the *she* in the conversation is upset with Mike. However, after venturing the guess, she becomes aware of what she has said might be wrong or improper, so she uses *well* to repair what she has said. Macaulay restricts this category to those examples where there is a break in the intonation pattern (Macaulay, 2005: 61). As a matter of fact, the repairing function of *well* is mostly used to make elaborations .

4. Elaboration

Well is often used to amplify or elaborate an earlier statement. For example:

Example 4: *Bree: "That's the reason why I joined the NRA." "**Well**, when Rex started going to those medical conferences, I wanted it in the back of his mind that he had a loving wife at home with a loaded Smith & Wesson."*

5. Responses

Well is very often used by speakers when they are going to answer questions, especially WH-questions. For example:

Example 5: Julie: "Mom, why would someone kill themselves?"

Susan: "Well, sometimes people are so unhappy, they think that's the only way they can solve their problems."

In contradiction to what has been presented that *well* is most used for elaboration by the speakers (Macaulay, 2005: 62), there is a significantly large number of *well* used for responses by the women in the sample as listed in Table 3. It is an easily accepted fact that the function of *well* as responses is relatively a simple usage of *well*, compared with its other functions. It can be easily handled just as a way to answer questions, especially WH-questions. It is more a habitual way of speaking than a mitigating device. Combined with the figures shown in Table 2 that an overwhelming majority of hedges used by the women in the sample are the item *just* and *well*, it indicates that women use them more as idiomatic expressions or a habitual way of speaking rather than as hedges.

If it is true, the most interesting point comes that women in the conversation sample may not place a strong emphasis on the face saving or face needing between each other, not mention achieving a cooperative conversational style. Their longstanding relationship between each other strengthens this possibility since the speakers' interrelationship will affect their use of linguistic features. If their relationship is solid or at least stable, they do not need to use many minimal responses, hedges or other mitigating devices to establish or (re)define their relationship. One more possible factor that can explain women's use of hedges is that women's boredom of conforming with conventional norms of femininity (nice or ladylike). As Coupland indicates that at home, talking to a close friend, women sometimes perform a very different self who is not so nice (Coupland, 2000: 246). This backstage of behaving badly is accepted and even welcomed between female friends, precisely because backstage helps them for dropping their front, and because this mutual beneficial admissions of 'not-niceness' reinforce solidarity. This factor can also be concluded that women sometimes devalue others' sympathy or support and want to drop off her own guised frontstage (Tannen, 1992: 25).

3.2.2 Sort of (Kind of)

In the middle-class conversations with all female participants, *sort of* and *kind of* are often used with other hedges. For example:

Example 6: *Lynette: "Maybe it's just some sort of sick joke."*

Bree: "Well, if it was a joke, it was in very poor taste."

Example 7: *Julie: "Why do you hate Zach?"*

Susan: "I don't hate Zach. I just think he's sort of crazy."

Julie: "Mom, I've heard people call you sort of crazy."

The above two examples show a typical way of using *sort of*. *Sort of* is used with other hedges *maybe*, *well*, *just* and *I think*. These expressions help soften the force of utterances since they make the utterance not so strong and make the speaker less assertive. All together, they are used when women want to soften the force of their utterances. At that time, their conversational style is more likely to be cooperative and supportive.

3.2.3 You know

As explained earlier, it is not applicative to all cases that *you know* is the signal of shared knowledge among speakers and addressees since sometimes *you know* does not retain its basic semantic value (Macaulay, 2005: 70). The following are definitions of *you know* given in the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*:

1. "you know or understand very well; you are a person I do not need to tell, explain, things to"
2. "I am informing, or reminding, you"
3. "I am giving you my opinion, or advice"
4. "I am correcting, or contradicting, you"

The multiplicity of the definitions determines the multifunctionality of the item *you know*. The first definition can be summarised as you know and understand well because you are a person I do not need to explain; the second definition can be concluded into inform or remind

you; the third definition can be summarized as giving you the opinion and the last definition can be concluded into correct or contradict you. The following are examples of *you know* used in conversational samples:

Example 8: *Julie: "Stopping so nervous. You are just asking him out to dinner. It's no big deal."*

*Susan: "You are right. So, is that your project for school? **You know**, when I was in fifth grade, I made the White House out of sugar cubes."*

The use of *you know* in example 8 may be not a signal of shared knowledge between Julie and her mother Susan since it is possible that Julie does not know about her mother's making of White House with sugar cubes until Susan just tells her.

You know can also be used by speakers to check whether the addressee wants to cooperate or accept his (her) utterance or to show a presumption about some shared ground between the private world." For example:

Example 9: *Lynette: "**You know what?** It is not gonna change until you resolve your issues with that man."*

*Susan: "What, you mean forgive him? **You know**, I've lived with this bitterness so long I think I'd be lonely without it."*

Here, *you know what* can be seen as a checking or a prompt to Susan made by Lynette that she (Lynette) is going to say something that may be not accepted by Susan. The second *you know* used by Susan is the signal of shared knowledge between her and Lynette since they are so familiar with each other's stuff as neighbors with a longstanding relationship.

The total number of occurrences of *you know* in the entire samples is 18. They are analyzed with the help of Oxford *Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*. Table 4 shows four functions of *you know* according to its four definitions in *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*. It is noticeable that sometimes *you know* can be used as both a signal of informing or reminding and a signal of giving opinion.

Table 4. The distribution of *you know* according to its four definitions.

Four definitions	Number.	Percentage
You know or understand	1	4.6%
Inform or remind you	12	54.6%
Give you the opinion	7	31.8%
Correct or contradict you	2	9.0%

As shown in Table 4, an overwhelming majority of *you know* is used with its second and third definition. *You know* is frequently used by the women when they want to inform or remind the addressee or when they are trying to give some advice to the addressee. *You know* is only employed once to signify that there is no need to tell the things to the addressee because women believe that the addressee must know it very well. These findings, on the one hand, can be regarded as another explanation of the women's solid relationship which needs no more schmooze to (re)define their relationship; on the other hand, these figures show that on the basis of this longstanding relationship, they feel free to judge each other by giving opinions or telling or informing others, or correcting and contradicting others. Therefore, like the item *just* and *well*, *you know* is also not used as a real mitigating device by them, but a way of expressing their own feelings. It is noticeable that a particular example of one linguistic feature can often be judged only from the context in which it occurs (Macaulay, 2005: 9). So It would be more plausible to judge speakers' conversational speech style only after knowing what kind of forms and functions of the hedges they use. This particular use of *you know* must to some extent affect the women's conversational style. Their conversational style can either be a cooperative one or a competitive one. They have flexible conversational styles which can be controlled by their own choice as what the speech act theory indicates that the use of some conversational strategies can be seen as controlled by social or psychological factors and then convergence or divergence of speaking styles can be achieved (Bergvall et al., 1996: 80).

3.2.4 *I mean*

As mentioned earlier, *I mean* is not just used to indicate that the speaker is trying to explain what he or she has just said to the addressee. It can also be used for elaboration, explanation, adversative, and new information (Macaulay, 2005: 85). The total number of the occurrences

of *I mean* in the entire samples is 16. Table 5 is the list of numbers and percentage of *I mean* by each of its functions.

Table 5. The distribution of *I mean* by its functions.

	Number.	Percentage
New information	3	18.8%
Elaboration	5	31.2%
Explanation	8	50.0%

1. New information

Sometimes *I mean* is used to introduce new information or even to begin a new topic. In these cases there is no sense that *I mean* is referring back to something that has just been uttered.

Example 10: *Lynette: "So, did Mike say anything?"*

Susan: "No, but God, you should have seen the look on his face!"

*Lynette: "I'm sure it is not that bad. **I mean**, he is coming to the party, right?"*

After commenting on Susan's saying about Mike, Lynette begin to talk about a new topic that whether Mike will come to the party or not.

2. Elaboration

Sometimes a speaker will expand on something he or she has said. For example:

Example 11: *Susan: "And then I opened the cabinet and there was all this money in it. **I mean**, there was a wad of it."*

Susan uses *I mean* to add details to her previous utterance. She makes an elaboration that *all this money* is a large sum of money.

3. Explanation

Sometimes there is no direct verbal connection of the elaboration to the previous utterance but constitutes an explanation for something said earlier. For example:

Example 12: Bree: "*Well, it must been some sort of accident. **I mean** little boys don't just kill their baby sisters.*"

Bree is explaining why she considers that is some sort of accident. *I mean* here is not applied literally to what she has just said.

As pointed out by Macaulay, who discusses Glasgow data, the most frequent use of *I mean* among the middle-class women is for explanation (Macaulay, 2005: 77). And it has to be remembered that the middle-class women are the most frequent users of *I mean*, so this may indicate an important aspect of middle-class women's speech. In the case of the present study, although *I mean* is not so frequently used by the women in the sample, most frequent use of *I mean* is for explanation. Therefore, as *you know*, *I mean* is also not skilfully used as a mitigating device.

3.2.5 The other hedges

Probably

Example 13: Susan: "*Hey, are you okay?*"

Gabrielle: "*Yes. I, uh, went jogging today, and **I think I just** pushed myself too hard.*"

Susan: "*Well, you're **probably** not wearing the right shoes.*"

Herein, it is shown that like *sort of* and *kind of*, *probably* can also be used with other hedges in the middle-class conversations with female participants to express the uncertainty of the speakers.

I guess

Example 14: Bree: "Oh, I take it you're met Maisy Gibbons."

Lynette: "She's a total nightmare. **I guess** I shouldn't have challenged her."

I think

Example 15: Bree: "**Well**, I tried, but he was so nervous. He actually started shaking, and then he **just** left."

Gabrielle: "Okay, this is getting really weird. **I think** we should go to the police."

As far as I'm concerned

Example 17: Susan: "What's that?"

Mrs. Huber: "**I think** you recognize it. I found it in the ruins of Edie's home."

Susan: "**Well**, that's not ---"

Mrs. Huber: "Shh, shh, shh, shh, shh. My point is this. I wasn't there for you when Carl left, but I'm here for you now. **As far as I'm concerned**, this is our secret. And no one ever need know. Oh, Susan. You don't know how good it feels to finally be able to help you. You look so pale. Now. I insist you try some of my pie."

I guess, I think and *as far as I'm concerned* are all expressions used by female speakers when they want to express their uncertainty about proposition under the discussion. When they express their own ideas, they use these mitigating devices to soften the force of their utterances to respect the face needs of all participants.

I'm sure

Example 16: Lynette: "So, did Mike say anything?"

Susan: "No, but God, you should have seen the look on his face!"

Lynette: "**I'm sure** it is not that bad. **I mean**, he is coming to the party, right?"

I'm sure are used when the female speakers want to express certainty about the proposition under discussion.

In a general view, these are relatively simple hedges since all of them are single-functional. It is evident that they are commonly used to mitigate the force of utterances. Women simply use them to soften the force of their utterances when they think it is necessary to save others' face need. At that time, the conversational style is more likely to be cooperative and supportive.

4. Conclusion

The aim of the present investigation is to study the usage of the linguistic feature hedges in the spoken language in private, all-female contexts in the American TV-series *Desperate Housewives*. The hedges are used in further analyzing the conversational style of the female main characters so as to explore possible factors affecting their conversational style. The total playing time of spoken language of the female main characters in private, all-female contexts in Season one of *Desperate Housewives*, namely 1 hour 35 minutes 41 seconds' conversation samples are used as primary material for this study.

It is found, through making statistical investigation, that hedges used in the entire samples which contains 16358 words are items such as *just, well, maybe, might, may, probably* and phrases like *sort of, kind of, you know, I mean, I guess, I'm (not) sure, I'm certain, I (don't) think, as far as I'm concerned*. Among them, the simple items *just* and *well* are the most frequently used ones, followed by the phrases of *you know* and *I mean* and than the other hedges.

In order to explore possible factors affecting their conversational style, detailed analysis of contextualized functions of these hedges are also made since many linguistic features are multifunctional. A particular example of one feature can only be judged from its surrounding context. Investigation results show that some hedges are used more as a habitual way of speaking rather than as the mitigating devices. *Well* is originally multifunctional, however, in the sample a large amount of *well* are used only for response. The complex phrase *you know* and *I mean* are used neither frequently nor skilfully. An overwhelming majority of *you know* is used by the women when they want to comment others, for example when they want to inform others or give advices to others. Only a very small proportion of *you know* are used as the result of hesitation. Most of *I mean* is used just as elaboration and explanation. Therefore,

the peculiar usage of linguistic features leads the conversational style to be either cooperative or competitive.

There are also some extralinguistic factors leading their conversational style to be flexible. As the story background indicates that, the female, main characters enjoy seemingly perfect suburban life, but at the same time, they also face domestic struggles- the secrets, crimes and mysteries hidden behind the door. They make choices according to their temporal psychological condition. Moreover, their longstanding relationship and degree of intimacy also allow them to feel free to comment on each other without using too many mitigating devices. At home, talking to a close friend, they may perform a very different self who is not so nice and then they do not need to consider too much about saving others' face.

The investigation only focuses on women's conversational style in all female, private contexts without comparing with that of men's. Conversational context is also limited into a particular social context. So the conclusion about women's flexible conversational style is not so convincing. Further study of the same area could be carried on to explore more possible factors affecting women or men's conversational style since they do not seem to pursue unique gendered speech style all the time.

List of References

Primary Material

The speech of female, main characters in all-female private contexts in some episodes of the first season of the American TV-series *Desperate Housewives* is used as the primary material for the present study.

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