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Hedges, Boosters and Tag Questions in  
*The Big Bang Theory: A Gender  
Perspective*

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**Appendix A**

**Appendix B**

**Title:** Hedges, Boosters, and Tag Questions in *The Big Bang Theory* – A Gender Perspective

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**Abstract:** The aim of the present study is to investigate the overall frequency of hedges, boosters and tag questions in a selected number of episodes of the TV show *The Big Bang Theory*, and whether or not there are any gender related differences. Some previous research into this field of sociolinguistics has shown that women tend to use these forms more frequently than men, albeit the majority of this research has been in other discourses than the present one, while some has shown no gender variation concerning frequency. This present study finds that the female characters used all these three features slightly more frequently in the researched material, albeit where tag questions are concerned, only a marginally higher frequency was detected and thus showed no statistical significance. This study also suggests that there seem to exist gender discrepancies in usage of the said linguistic devices to some extent in the analyzed data, most which correspond with previous research. Since the language used in media, such as TV, has significant linguistic influence, and furthermore, has the ability to reflect both cultural and social values and attitudes, further sociolinguistic research in this field is of importance.

**Key words:** Hedges, boosters, Tag questions, TV discourse, gender-related differences, gender, sociolinguistics, media, gender variations, television dialogue

# Hedges, Boosters and Tag Questions in *The Big Bang Theory*: A Gender Perspective

## 1. Introduction and Aim

### 1.1 Introduction

In our everyday lives, we are surrounded by linguistic input: in our homes, at work and in school. Furthermore, the language we encounter on this daily basis is supplied by different sources. Nowadays, in our modern technological society, a large part of this language is transmitted through different media discourses. According to statistics, performed by *Statistic Sweden* in 2010, adults spend more than two hours everyday in front of the TV, while one out of three teenagers spend more than three hours watching TV on an average day (*Statistic Sweden* 2011, online). Even if these statistics only pertain to Sweden, it is probably applicable to many other countries around the world. The usage of other media, such as the internet, is at the same time a rapidly growing phenomenon; resulting in the fact that we spend more and more of our time being subjected to the language used in media. Taking into account that the language we encounter not only expresses a basic meaning of the words; it also plays a vital role when it comes to the socialization of individuals into a culture, and as such, the language used in the media discourse, such as TV, most certainly calls for a closer scrutiny from a sociolinguistic point of view and is therefore a valid and important field for further linguistic research. Not at least considering its ability to carry significant linguistic influence: both Quaglio (2009) and Coupland (2007) found in their respective research that certain expressions used by characters in TV programs have become regular features of conversation among native speakers of English. Additionally, said linguistic transference does not only pertain to native speakers, Bednarek argues that “the dialogue featured in fictional television series can have significant influence on learners of English in non-English speaking countries” (2010: 10).

According to Winzenburg, “Sitcoms are the most popular type of programming on the

most influential medium in history” (2004: 11). Owing to this widespread popularity of TV-series, such as the sitcom *the Big Bang Theory*, the language portrayed in these shows is of interest to analyze from a linguistic point a view, and certainly from a gender perspective, especially since, according to Rey ”Popular media, including television, provide fertile ground for analyzing differences between women's and men's speech because the media often reflect social and cultural attitudes (2001: 38). Hence, the scripted speech used in TV shows might not be the same as the spoken and spontaneous language used in everyday conversations, as. Rossi argues “The written and time-constrained nature of film dialogues determines their conciseness and lack of elements of verbosity and vagueness typical of spontaneous face-to-face dialogues.[...] utterances often present a high degree of coherence, cohesion and conciseness, which bear traces of the (written) screenplay “(Piazza et al 2011: 26). But, an analysis of the language used in TV discourse can give us an indication of what linguistic differences scriptwriters, and people in general, perceive that men and women possess. As Piazza el al. argue “Telecinematic texts provide a recreation of the world and the time, place and discourse within it. This re-creation or representation is always in line with the specific social-cultural conventions of the society in which telecinematic texts are produced” (2011: 9). Therefore, a more in-depth analysis and investigation of linguistic features, such as the current study of hedges, boosters and tag questions, are of interest and of value for a sociolinguistic study. Even more so, since the language used in a TV discourse transmits both cultural and social values, and as such aids the construction of gender roles displayed in society today. Moreover, since popular culture transmitted through different media is a rapidly growing phenomenon in modern society, and therefore, the language used in media is now widely available through many different channels and targeting a huge audience worldwide. Thornborrow states that “ The media (usually understood to refer to the press, radio and television broadcasting) have become the most pervasive phenomena in our culture” (2004: 56), giving even more importance to the analysis of the linguistic features used in media discourses from a sociolinguistic point of view.

Additionally, television discourse has not received very much attention in linguistic

research in the past, but this has been a subject of change: a plethora of scholarly studies have been performed with different approaches during the recent decades. Still, some areas are not that well researched, as Quaglio argues “Television dialogue is a virtually unexplored research area” (2009: 13), adding even more importance to this field of research in sociolinguistics.

Finally, when discussing to what extent men and women differ in their use of language, it might be of importance to discuss the concept of gender versus sex. When we talk about the sex of a person, we refer to the biological differences between men and women, whilst when we talk about gender, we refer to the socially constructed categories. As Chambers states “The distinction between sex and gender essentially recognizes biological and sociocultural differences”(2009: 119). Furthermore, it is this cultural role of gender that is the focus of sociolinguistic studies, not the biological aspect of sex.

## **1.2 Aim and hypothesis**

The aim of the present study is to investigate the overall frequency of hedges, boosters and tag questions in a selected number of episodes of the TV series *the Big Bang Theory*, and whether or not there are any gender related differences. Previous research in sociolinguistics has indicated that men and women use these linguistic forms differently, and most has concluded that women have a tendency to use some of these forms more frequently than men.

My hypothesis is that the results of previous research will still apply, even though many of these studies were performed in a different discourse than the current one.

## **2 Theoretical Background**

In this section of the essay, some theoretical background is given. Section (2.1) describes hedges, section (2.2) boosters, and section (2.3) tag questions, followed by a summary of these three devices in section (2.4). Finally, section (2.5) examines previous research on these linguistic features.

### **2.1 Hedges**

A hedge is a linguistic device that generally reduces the force of an utterance, and softens the effect of the statement. Other labels for “hedges”, as mentioned in Holmes (1995: 73), are “downgraders” (House and Kasper 1981, “compromisers” (James 1983), “downtoners” (Quirk et al. 1985), “weakeners” (Brown and Levinson 1987) and “softeners” (Crystal and Davy 1975) “. Hedging can sometimes be interpreted as a tool for politeness, both positive and negative, since “Politeness involves taking in to account other people's feelings” (Holmes 1995: 74). The use of hedges as politeness devices has also been considered by other researchers, such as Brown and Levinson (1987) and Coates (1987). But to label these linguistic forms as solely politeness devices would not be sufficient or accurate; hedges can also be used to facilitate the addressee, or focus on the accuracy of the information provided in a statement. According to Talbot “We use hedges to avoid stating things categorically, to avoid sounding too dogmatic and sure of ourselves” (2010: 85). But hedges are multifunctional, and the context has to be taken into consideration. While analyzing hedges, such as *sort of* and *I think*, in a context, Holmes found that these linguistic devices had complex functions. According to Holmes “They are used differently in different functions. They mean different things according to their pronunciation, their position in an utterance, what kind of speech act they are modifying and who is using them to whom in what context “(2008: 303).

Additionally, there are many different ways of reducing the illocutionary force of an utterance, and hedging is performed by using a number of linguistic devices. Hedging devices include modal verbs (i.e *could, might, may, would, should*), lexical items (such as *perhaps*) and pragmatic particles (i.e *sort of, I think, kinda, like and kind of* ). Furthermore, prosodic features, as in rise-fall intonations, and paralinguistic signals, such as pauses and hesitations, can also be utilized in order to reduce the force of an utterance.

## **2.2 Boosters**

Boosters, on the contrary, intensify the illocutionary force in an utterance; they make a statement more powerful. Boosters have been labeled differently by other researchers: Quirk et al. (1985) refer to them as “intensifiers”, Brown and Levinson (1997) call them

“strengtheners”, while House and Kasper named them “up-graders” (Holmes 1995: 73). The common denominator is their ability to intensify and emphasize the force of a statement, both in a positive and negative manner. As Holmes argues that “Boosters may intensify or boost the effect of utterances with negative as well as positive intention or 'affect'” (1995: 76).

Linguistic devices used for boosting include some prosodic features (i.e. stress and high volume), modal verbs (such as *must*, *may*, *should* and *could*), and pragmatic particles (i.e. *like*, *so* and *just*). But a variety of other lexical items can also be used to boost a sentence; profanities and modal adverbs, e.g. *certainly*, *really*, *absolutely* and *quite*, can also have an intensifying effect. Not only linguistic devices are used for boosting; rhetorical and paralinguistic features can also be utilized. According to Holmes, “Rhetorical devices, such as repetition and paralinguistic signals such as well-placed pauses can also be used as boosting devices to emphasise a point” (1995: 77).

### **2.3 Tag questions**

Tag questions are somewhat more complex, since they both have the ability to strengthen (boost) or weaken (hedge) an utterance, depending on context, since there is no correlation between their form and their function. What is more, Holmes states that they are complex in syntax and phonology, and previous research indicates “that tags differ in polarity, in intonation, in syntactic derivation and in lexical form” (1995: 79), and as such, providing even further evidence of their complexity in form and function.

Canonical tags are tags that generally occur finally in an utterance and they are pronounced with either falling or rising intonation. They include tags such as *are you?*, *isn't she?* and *can't they?*.

Furthermore, tag questions can, according to Holmes (1995), be divided into four subgroups; softening tags, epistemic modal tags, challenging tags and facilitative tags. Epistemic modal tags (such as: *The exam is at twelve, isn't it?*) express the speaker's uncertainty towards a statement, and are referential rather than affective, since they focus on the accuracy of the statement made and not on the addressee's feelings. Challenging tags (such as: *You understand that, don't you?*) are, according to Holmes, “confrontational



strategies. They may pressure a reluctant addressee to reply or aggressively boost the force of a negative speech act” (1995: 80). Facilitative tags (such as: *You have a new car, haven't you?*) have a different function, they usually hedge a statement, and are used as positive politeness devices since they invite the addressee to participate in a conversation. Softening tags (such as: *that was really stupid, wasn't it ?*), on the other hand, are used for negative politeness, in order to soften the force of utterances, such as directives and criticism.

#### **2.4 Summary Hedges, Boosters and Tag Questions**

Both hedges and boosters are modal elements; as Talbot argues, since they are “elements that modify the force of a statement, either weakening it or intensifying it” (2010: 85). Furthermore, since these linguistic devices are multifunctional in form, they can be a sign of a social awareness.

A common denominator of boosters, hedges and tag questions is their propensity for expressing politeness: they can be used as politeness strategies in a conversation. As Holmes argues “ Being polite means expressing respect towards the person you are talking to and avoiding offending them. [...]” and, additionally, that politeness can “refer to behaviour which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behaviour (1995: 4-5). Furthermore, the use of these three linguistic devices is closely connected to “face work”, since they are directed towards someone's “Face”, which is the public self image that adults try to project outwards. As Holmes states: “Everybody has face needs or basic wants [...] politeness involves showing concern for two different kinds of face needs: first, negative face needs or the need to not be imposed on; and secondly, positive face needs, the need to be liked and admired” (1995: 5).

Boosters, hedges and tag questions can either express positive politeness; they can be utilized in order to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face by emphasizing agreement, reassurance and admiration towards the statements made by the hearer, and therefore refer to his or her self-esteem. The use of negative politeness, on the other hand, is directed towards the hearer's negative face; by emphasizing avoidance to impose on

him or her in order to minimize awkwardness or embarrassment. According to Holmes “Behaviour which avoids imposing on others (or avoids “threatening their face”) is described as evidence of *negative politeness*, while sociable behaviour expressing warmth towards an addressee is *positive politeness* behaviour” (1995: 5).

Another important denominator for all three devices is their need of a context in order to be properly analyzed: many linguistic features are to be considered as multifunctional, expressing different meanings based on the context of the situation and serving several different purposes. According to Holmes, “It is crucial to look at the function of every form in context. Obviously a comparison of women's and men's use of linguistic [...] devices will also take into account of the function of a specific forms in context” (1995: 72).

## **2.5 Previous Research**

Most sociolinguistic studies have found differences in the language used by men and the language used by women “In virtually all sociolinguistic studies that include a sample of males and females, there is evidence from this conclusion about their linguistic behavior: women use fewer stigmatized and non-standard variants than do men of the same social group in the same circumstances” (Chambers 2009: 115) . One early study into the differences in language use between men and women was performed by Robin Lakoff, and in her book *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), Lakoff put forth a hypothesis: that there was a distinct women's language which differed from men's in several aspects. Since her study was mostly based on impressions, it has been criticized for the lack of empirical evidence as support of her theories. Hence, her speculations have been valuable, not least since they instigated other researchers' interest in this particular field of sociolinguistics. Furthermore, her hypothesis has formed the basis for many gender studies in linguistics since then. One of Lakoff's arguments was that women used more hedges, tag questions and polite forms, which she interpreted as a sign of uncertainty, social insecurity and that they express a lack of confidence, as well as being a reflection of women's propensity to be polite. (Holmes. 1995: 73). Subsequent research has supported some of Lakoff's findings; while others have been refuted, as Talbot argues

“empirical studies have backed up some of her speculations. Women do seem to use a lot of tag questions, in some situations. What empirical research has not supported is her characterization of 'women's language' as tentative and uncertain” (2010: 41). Tag questions have also shown gender related differences other than in mere frequency. For instance, in Holmes's research, evidence of gender differences in the use of tag questions has been discovered; women tend to use facilitative tags more often, signaling encouragement towards an addressee to contribute to a discussion, or to soften a threat of a request or criticism. Men, on the other hand, seem to use more epistemic modal tag question in order to affirm the accuracy of a statement. (Talbot 2010: 39).

Furthermore, when discussing the issue of women's propensity to use hedges and boosters more frequently than men, the results differ to an extent among the researches, as Holmes states: “Some researchers reported that women used up to three times as many hedges as men, while others noted no gender differences. Most, but not all, claimed women used more boosters or intensifiers than men” (Holmes et al. 2008: 300).

A tremendous amount of research has been dedicated to gender related differences in language use in the field of linguistics. Furthermore, research focusing on gender related discrepancies in the use of hedges, boosters and tag questions has been investigated in various discourses: some researchers have focused on written discourse, such as Fahy's (2002 ) research on computer conference material, where he found that men used boosters (referred to as amplifiers and intensifiers) more frequently than women. Other researchers have investigated spoken discourse, such as Stenström's (1999) research on the use of boosters (referred to as intensifiers) among teenagers in London, where she examined data provided from a corpus of spoken language, and she concluded that teenage girls use these devices more frequently than teenage boys. In addition, other researchers have also focused on spoken discourse, albeit with material provided from recorded, live conversations between men and women. In her research into the use of question and hedges in conversations, performed in 1980, Pamela Fishman listened to 52 hours of recorded conversations between three American couples of the ages 25 to 35. She found that women used tag questions four times as frequently as men, and the hedge

“*you know*” five times as frequently. Furthermore, Fishman stated that women use questions in order to gain conversational power, not from lack of certainty or tentativeness; these devices were used to facilitate the conversation in order to keep it going. Another study on spoken discourse, performed by Bent Preisler in Lancaster, Britain in 1986, corroborated one of Fishman's findings: that women tended to use more hedges than men. He recorded conversations on controversial subjects between men and women, ranging from 20-50 years of age, from three occupational groups and found that women used significantly more hedges than men.

So what might be the reason for these differences in language use between the genders ? Two theories have been put forth by researchers, the “dominance” theory and the “difference” theory. The “dominance” theory offers one explanation of said differences. This theory gives the difference in power between men and women as the main cause of gender variation in language use, since “it is statistically the case that men tend to have more power than women, physically, financially and in workplace hierarchies” (Waering et al. 2009: 90). Fishman's (1980) and DelFransisco's (1991) research supports this theory. Another possible explanation is the “difference” theory, which emerged as a response to several problems with the dominance theory, mainly that women were deemed as powerless. Additionally, this theory also portray men as undermining and demeaning of women. The difference theory, as Waering et al argue “ suggests that women and men develop different styles of talking because, in fact, they are segregated at important stages of their life. Deborah Tannen's work (1990, 1991) is often taken as an illustration of difference theory”(2009: 90). According to this theory, it is during these important stages in life that these variations of language use emerge.

### **3 Material and Method**

In this section, the material (3.1) and method (3.2) are outlined.

#### **3.1 Material**

The material for this research consisted of episodes 1-10 of season five of the TV show

*The Big Bang Theory*, which was available on DVD, along with closed captioned transcripts, and thus these ten selected episodes provide the primary source material for this study. Given the scope of this study, it was decided that ten episodes would be sufficient in order to obtain enough data to give an indication of gender displayed tendencies in the three chosen linguistic features in the chosen discourse.

Having decided on TV discourse as the field of linguistics for my research, the sitcom *the Big Bang Theory* was chosen to provide the primary source material for this linguistic study. As previously discussed, sitcoms are the most popular programming on TV in today's society; *The Big Bang Theory* was the 8th most watched TV program in USA during its 5<sup>th</sup> season in 2011/12, and was also deemed as one of the fastest-growing broadcast TV shows in the country (Washington Post 2012, online). Moreover, the show has not only been broadcast in USA; it has been exported to more than 45 countries, available to an even broader audience, and as such, providing greater potential as a source of imitation.

For anyone not familiar with the show, *The Big Bang Theory* is broadcast by CBS; it has recently concluded its 6th season, having aired 137 episodes up to this date, and it has been renewed for a 7<sup>th</sup> season. *The Big Bang Theory* is centered around seven major characters: roommates and scientists Leonard Hofstadter and Sheldon Cooper, Penny, a waitress and aspiring actress who lives across the hall, Leonard and Sheldon's friends and co-workers, aerospace engineer Howard Wolowitz and astrophysicist Raj Koothrappali. The cast also includes Howard's fiancée Bernadette Rostenkowski, a microbiologist, and Sheldon's girlfriend Amy Farrah Fowler, whose field of work is neurobiology. (*the Big Bang Theory*, Wikipedia, online).

From a linguistic point of view, the language used in the show is somewhat unusual for a sitcom; most of the characters portrayed are scientists, and the language used in the show is full of academic and scientific references, and contains many standard American language traits. Out of the three women in the recurring cast, Penny is the only one who exhibits many of Lakoff's (1975) debated 'female' language traits, such as a high degree of boosters and hedges, probably since her character works as a waitress and lacks higher education. Both Bernadette and Amy are both highly educated scientists and tend to use a

more gender neutral language, not using boosters and hedges more than the male characters do.

### 3.2 Method

When the material for the research was established, a DVD copy of season 5 was obtained and the closed-caption transcripts, which were available online, were retrieved. Firstly, the selected episodes were watched, and any inaccuracies between the actual TV show and the written transcripts were noted and any discrepancies were adjusted in the transcripts. These corrected transcripts then served as the primary source material used for the analysis of the chosen linguistic features. Secondly, the corrected transcripts were imported into individual Microsoft Word documents and any material other than the actual conversations was removed in order to facilitate a word count. Thirdly, a manual count of the number of words spoken by men and the number spoken by women was performed in order to establish correct results for the study, since there was an uneven distribution between the number of words uttered by men and the number of words uttered by women. Finally, an analysis of the actual conversations was performed, and the context was carefully considered before labeling any considered item as a hedge, booster or a tag question. This was crucial in order to ensure the accuracy of the research, especially since, as aforementioned, hedges, boosters and tag questions are linguistic forms that neither adhere to a specific form nor word class: they are multifunctional and the context needs to be analyzed in order to determine their specific function in a text. As Holmes states “One form may serve many functions, and particular functions are expressed by a variety of forms” (1995: 72). Some linguistic forms can be utilized as a booster in some contexts, but not in others, which is exemplified in these following two sentences:

- (1) She is *pretty* in that dress
- (2) That was *pretty* nice of you.

The adjective *pretty* in (1) functions as a subject complement in the sentence, but neither

does the use of said subject complement provide any tentativeness towards the statement, as hedges do, nor does it amplify the illocutionary force, as a booster would, and since *pretty* in this context does not meet any of these criteria, it would be discarded in this research; it is neither a hedge or a booster, and therefore not valid for this study.

However, the use of *pretty* in (2) is somewhat different. It is an adverb, modifying the adjective (*nice*), and it amplifies the illocutionary force of the utterance; It boosts the statement and makes it “stronger”, Therefore, it serves as a booster in this context, and would be valid for this particular research, and be included in the material for this study.

Additionally, some forms can be either a hedge or a booster, depending on the context, as illustrated in the following sentences:

(3) *So*, are you going to the movies tonight?

(4) I am *so* over him.

Both these sentences contain the pragmatic particle *so*, a very common booster in English in some contexts. But a closer look at the first sentence tells us that, in this particular context in (3), *so* does not portray the usual traits of a booster, since it lack the ability to amplify the illocutinary force of the sentence. On the contrary, *so* in that context seems to reduce the force of the utterance, and a closer analysis of the context tells us that this *so* is, in fact, a hedge. In example (4) though, the use of *so* does, on the other hand, amplify the illocutionary force, and as such, serves as a booster.

Therefore, the surrounding context had to be analyzed in my study of the occurrence of hedges, boosters and tag questions in *The Big Bang Theory* for an accurate interpretation of their function.

Finally, only the linguistic realizations of hedges and boosters were examined in this present study, not the ones based on intonation and prosody, since these devices would not be evident from an analysis of the written transcripts.

## **4 Results and Discussion**

In this section, the results from the research are presented and discussed. In this first

section (4), the total number of words in the data and the issue of the unevenly distributed material between the genders are addressed, followed by subsections presenting the frequency of the hedges (4.1), boosters (4.2), and finally the tag questions (4.3) found in the researched material. Finally, the results are summarized and discussed (4.4).

As it turned out, the material was unevenly distributed between the genders; the men provided a larger number of words than the women in the researched material: of the approximately 24350 words uttered; men provided 16415, while women were accountable for 7935 words, as presented in Figure 1 .

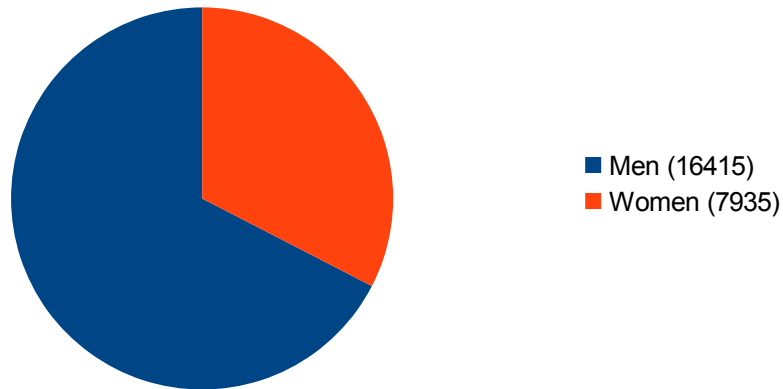


Figure 1. The total number of words, 24350, divided per gender

In order to determine to what extent males and females contributed to the total number of words used in the material, a percentage was calculated for a more exact figure, as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of words provided by each gender

	Men	Women
No of words (24350)	16415	7935
Words in % of total	68	32



As both Figure 1 and Table 1 show; the male characters are accountable for a significantly larger number of the words uttered in the ten analyzed TV episodes: 68 percent of the words are spoken by the men, while the rest, 32 percent, are uttered by the women in the show.

This uneven distribution of the total number of words between the genders is of interest to discuss in this context. The original cast consisted of four men and one women, but even now, having added an additional two women to the cast, men still get to utter 68 percent of the words, more than two thirds, while women account for the remaining 32 percent. These percentages only pertain to the researched ten episodes, not to the TV show as a whole, but nevertheless, this uneven distribution of words between the genders is interesting from a sociolinguistic point of view, especially taking into account the values and attitudes transmitted through language in media. This would be an interesting study in itself, but this is not the area of the present investigation.

In order to account for this uneven distribution of uttered words between the genders, the number of instances per 1,000 words were calculated and used for the purpose of comparison in order to determine accurate results concerning the frequency of tag questions, hedges and boosters in the researched material. This method is used throughout the results section.

#### **4.1 Hedges**

Altogether 532 hedges were found in the material: 331 were provided by the men in the show and 201 by the women, as displayed in Figure 2, along with the total number of words, divided per gender. However, a calculation of the number of instances per 1,000 words had to be made in order to provide accurate results for this study, as previously discussed, which is displayed in Figure 3.

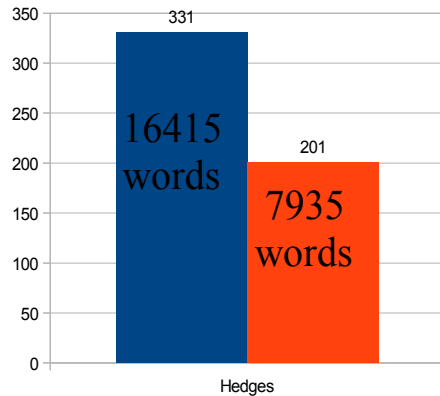


Figure 4. Total number of hedges and uttered words, divided by gender.

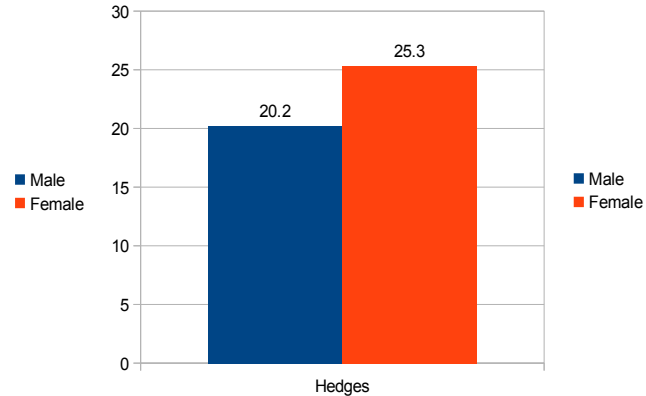


Figure 5. Number of hedges per 1,000 words, divided per gender.

When the estimated occurrences were calculated per 1,000 words, the result indicate that women use hedges slightly more frequently in the researched material: the number of instances per 1,000 words is 25.3 for women, and 20.2 for men. Consequently, the women in the researched material tend to use approximately 5 more hedges per 1,000 uttered words than the men, or to use percentages, hedges were used 0.005 percent more frequently by the female characters than the male.

Since hedging is accomplished by using a variety of words and expressions, a complete summary of the hedges found in this study is provided in appendix A, and only the five most frequently used hedges, divided per gender, is presented and discussed in this section.

Table 2. Men :Top Five Hedges

Hedge:	No of instances	% of total number (331)
<i>well</i>	42	12.7
<i>would</i>	37	11.1
<i>like</i>	33	10.9
<i>you know</i>	23	6.9
<i>kind of/maybe</i>	21	6.3

Table 3. Women: Top Five Hedges

Hedge:	No of instances	% of total number (201)
<i>well</i>	22	10.9
<i>would</i>	18	8.9
<i>like</i>	15	7.4
<i>some/you know</i>	14	6.9
<i>should/kind of</i>	12	5.9

As Table 2 and Table 3 show, the most commonly used hedge is *well*; for both genders. The men in this study tend to use *well* somewhat more than the women: 12.9 percent of their hedging is done using this feature, compared to the women's number of 10.9 percent. The second most utilized hedge is *would*; for both men and women. The men use that particular hedge in 11.1 percent of their hedges, while women use it in 8.9 percent of theirs. The third most common hedge is *like*: used in 10.9 percent of the instances by men, and 7.4 percent by women . The numbers for the fourth most common hedging device, *you know*, are equally distributed between the genders: both the men and the women use *you know* to perform 6.9 percent of the hedges found. *Kind of*, the fifth most common hedge, is used by men in 6.3 percent of their hedges, while women use that particular hedge in 5.9 percent of theirs.

Furthermore, these tables indicate that men and women tend to use the same hedging devices, since the most commonly utilized hedges are *well*, *would* and *like* for both genders; but with some exceptions. For example, the hedge *some*, which shares fourth place with *you know* in women's usage: is utilized in 6.9 percent of the hedges ( the corresponding number for men is 4.5%, as can be deducted from the appendix). An other example is *should*, which shares number five of the most frequently hedges used by the women. It is utilized to perform 5.9 percent of their hedges, the corresponding number for men is 3.9 percent, as calculated from the results in Appendix A. Finally the hedge *maybe*, found in 6.3 percent of the hedges uttered by men and sharing fifth place, is found in 4.4 percent of hedges used by women .(As can be deducted form the appendix A).

Example of hedging in an all female dialogue:

- ( 5) -Letting Sheldon use you to manipulate me? I thought you were my friend. (F 1)  
-No, I am your friend. Please, don't be mad at me! (F 2)  
- I can't believe this. You know, maybe you should just go. (F 1)

Examples of hedges in a mixed dialogue:

- (6) - Leonard, I didn't know if I should tell you, but I kind of cheated on you, too (F)  
- Uh, kind of? (M)  
- A couple of weeks ago, I slept with my ex-boyfriend. So I guess we both messed up a little. (F)  
- No, no. I messed up a little, you messed up a lot. (M)

Examples of hedges in an all male dialogue:

- (7) - You interested in Amy? (M 1)  
- Well, I mean, she didn't look through me [...]. Could you run it by Sheldon if I could ask her out ? (M 2)  
- Sure. I guess. (M 1)

This study suggests that the women in the show tend to use hedges somewhat more frequently than the men, albeit only slightly, at least in the analyzed episodes: the female characters use approximately 25 hedges per 1,000 words; 5 additional hedges than the men, since the corresponding number for the male characters is roughly 20 hedges for the same number of words. This is statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

The use of hedges has shown varied results in gender related issues in previous studies: some research has shown that women use up to three times as many hedges than men, Preisler (1986), Fishman (1980) and Lakoff (1975), while others, such as Holmes (1987), suggest no real difference in the number of instances between the genders. What Holmes (1987) did find was indications that men and women used hedges differently, which demonstrates their multifunctional nature. Thus, as far as the frequency of hedges is concerned, the results are consistent with some previous research, since hedges were

more frequent in the women's dialogues, albeit not as prevalent as some previous studies have indicated.

This research also suggests, when summarizing the number of occurrences of each hedge, that men and women tend to use the same types of hedges: the most frequently used hedges are *well*, *would* and *like*; for both genders. The male characters tend to use these more frequently; these three hedges are responsible for 34.7 percent of the total number of utilized hedges. Similarly, the corresponding number for the female characters is 27,2 percent. Consequently, since women use hedges more frequently, albeit only slightly, these findings suggest that the female characters utilize a wider range of hedges than the male in this study: 6 different hedges are used to form 54.2 percent of the total number of hedges used by the male characters, while 7 different hedges are responsible for 50.8 percent of the hedges uttered by the female characters.

#### 4.2 Boosters

In the researched material, 444 occurrences of boosters were discovered: 277 of these were provided by the men in the TV show, while the rest, 167, were uttered by the women, as displayed in Figure 4 along with the total number of uttered words. For a more accurate result, given the uneven distribution between the genders, Figure 5 presents the raw frequency of boosters per 1,000 words, divided per gender.

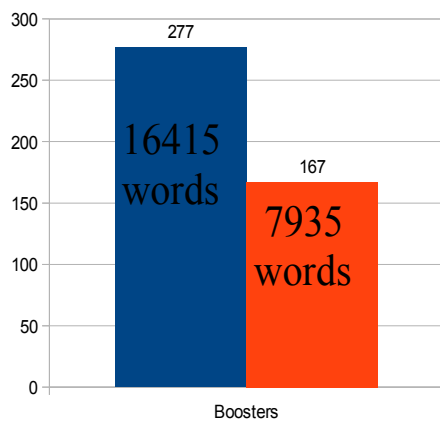


Figure 4. Total number of boosters and uttered words, divided by gender.

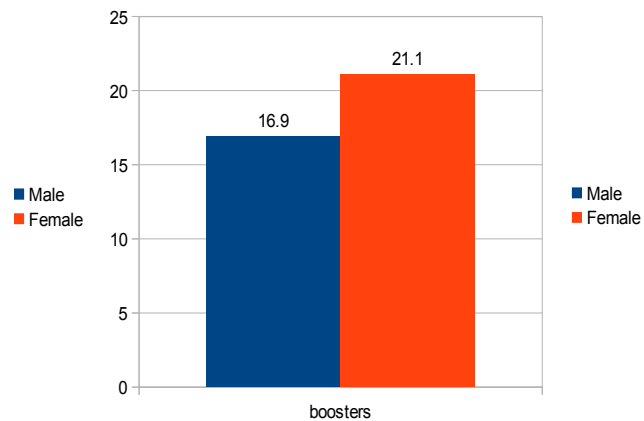


Figure 5. Number of boosters per 1,000 words, divided per gender.

Figure 5 reveal that men use approximately 17 boosters per estimated 1,000 words, and the accompanying number for the same number of words for women is roughly 21. Consequently, women use roughly 4 more boosters than men per 1,000 words, or in percentages, 0.004 percent more boosters.

Since boosting is done by using several linguistic features, only the five most frequently used boosters are presented in this results section, the rest are provided in Appendix A. Table 4 and Table 5 display the most frequently used boosters, the number of instances, and the percentages of the total number of boosters; for men and women respectively:

Table 4. Men: Top Five Boosters

Booster:	No of instances	% of total number (277)
<i>just</i>	62	22.4
<i>so</i>	27	10
<i>really</i>	22	8
<i>very</i>	15	5.4
<i>too</i>	13	4.7

Table 5. Women: Top Five Boosters

Booster:	No of instances	% of total number (167)
<i>so</i>	40	24
<i>just</i>	25	15
<i>really</i>	19	11.4
<i>my God</i>	7	4.1
<i>actually/of course/damn/great</i>	4	2.4

As can be observed from Table 4 and 5, the most frequently used booster for men is *just*: 22.4 percent of their total number of boosters are formed by using that word. The most frequently used booster in the data provided by women is *so*, responsible for 24

percent of their total number of boosters. On the other hand, the roles are reversed concerning the secondly most utilized booster, men tend to use *so* in 10 percent of their boosters, while women use *just* in 15 percent of theirs. The third most common booster is *really*, for both genders; men use *really* to form 8 percent of their boosters, while the accompanying number for women is 11.4 percent. The fourth most common booster is *very* for men, responsible for 5.4 percent of the total number of boosters, while *my God* form 4.1 percent of the boosters used by women. Finally, concerning the fifth most common booster, *too* is used to form 4.7 percent of the boosters provided by the male characters, while the women use *actually*, *of course*, *damn* and *great* to an equal extent when forming 2.4 percent of their boosters, respectively.

Additionally, these two tables display that the three most frequently used boosters, for both genders, are *so*, *just* and *really*. Hence, where men tend to use *very* and *too* to a higher extent, women use other forms to produce the most frequently found boosters in their material, such as *my God*, *actually*, *of course*, *damn* and *great*. As for *very*, the corresponding number for women is 1.8 percent, while *too* is responsible for 0.6 percent. Furthermore, the estimated corresponding number for the occurrences in male speech regarding *God* is 1.4, *always* 1.1, *great* 2.2 and *of course* 3.2 percent, respectively.

Examples of boosters in an all female conversation:

- (8) - No, its completely fine. I get it, Sheldon sent you he put you to this.(F 1)
- Yes he did. He absolutely did. (F 2)
- My god, Amy, that's really crappy of you. (F 1)

Examples of boosters in a mixed conversation

- (9)- Oh my Gosh! Really? Oh, I'm so excited, thank you, thank you so much! (F)
- What about Nebraska? (M)
- Oh, hell with Nebraska. I'm gonna be a star! (F)

Examples of boosters in a all male conversion:

- (10) -[...] the simple fact is, because I'm much smarter than you [...] it is highly unlikely that you two rubes could ever surprise me. (M 1)
- We can't beat him. He is just too smart. (M 2)

Where boosters are concerned, this study suggests that the women tend to use this linguistic device somewhat more frequently than the men since 4 additional boosters per estimated 1,000 words were found in the data provided by the female characters. This result seems to correspond with Holmes's (2008) claim, that most previous research suggests that women use more boosters than men and Lakoff's (1975) assertion, that boosters were a distinct feature of women's language. Other studies have found no gender related difference in numbers, but a variation in use among discourses, such as Tao et al, who in their research into data provided by the corpora BNC found that "When all amplifiers are taken as a whole, the difference between male and female speakers is not statistically significant [...], whereas in writing women use amplifiers significantly more frequently than men" (2007: 248).

Moreover, the male and the female characters seem to use the same type of boosters, especially regarding the three most frequently occurring ones (*just*, *so* and *really*), but there is a gender related discrepancy concerning the number of instances; where men tend to use *very* and *too* to a high extent, women seem to prefer to use *my God*, *actually*, *of course*, *damn* and *great* in their boosters. Consequently, this study suggests that there seems to be gender related differences, not only concerning the number of instances when a booster occurs, but in the choice of word as well. Furthermore, that the expletive *damn* shares fifth place among the most frequently used hedges in female speech in the researched material is somewhat contradictory, since most research supports the idea that men use more non-standard features, such as expletives, than women. Regarding expletives and strong language, Lakoff (1975) stated that men use stronger expletives, such as *damn*, than women, which this result contradicts. But on the other hand, the fourth most utilized booster for the women, *my God*, can be interpreted as a weaker expletive, as Lakoff (1975) claimed women favored.

To sum up this discussion on boosters, the results from this study suggest that the



female characters use slightly more boosters than their male counterparts. This is statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . Furthermore, there is a gender related difference concerning the number of instances regarding the three most frequent boosters, *so*, *just* and *really*: the women use these three words to form 50.4 percent of their boosters, while they are only accountable for 40.4 percent of the male boosters. This corroborates the results of Bradac et al (1995) research, where they found that women preferred to use certain boosters, such as *so* and *really*, more frequently than men, who seemed to prefer less frequent items. Furthermore, that the boosters *so* and *really* are frequently used by both genders in this TV show might not be a coincidence. Quaglio found in his research, where he compared the dialogues in the sitcom *Friends* to natural conversation, that these two boosters were much more utilized in the sitcom than in real life conversations (209: 91).

### 4.3 Tag questions

Tag questions are not a very frequently used linguistic device in this study: 23 tag questions were found in the researched material; 15 were provided by the men, while the remaining 8 were uttered by women. In Table 6, the number of instances are presented and divided per gender, as well as the calculated instances per 1,000 words.

Table 6: Frequency of tag questions and instances per 1,000 words, divided per gender.

Raw frequency		Instances per 1,000 words	
Men	Women	Men	Women
15	8	0.91	0.99

Table 6 indicates that, when the unevenly distributed material between the genders was accounted for, women use marginally more tag questions, approximately 0.99 instances per 1,000 words while men use this linguistic device 0.91 times for the same number of words.

Following Holmes's (1995) model: tag questions, or canonical tags to be more precise, can be divided into four different categories, as discussed previously in the

research section, depending on their function in a context. The different categories (softening-, epistemic modal-, challenging- and facilitative tag questions) are displayed in Figure 6, as well as their distribution between the genders.

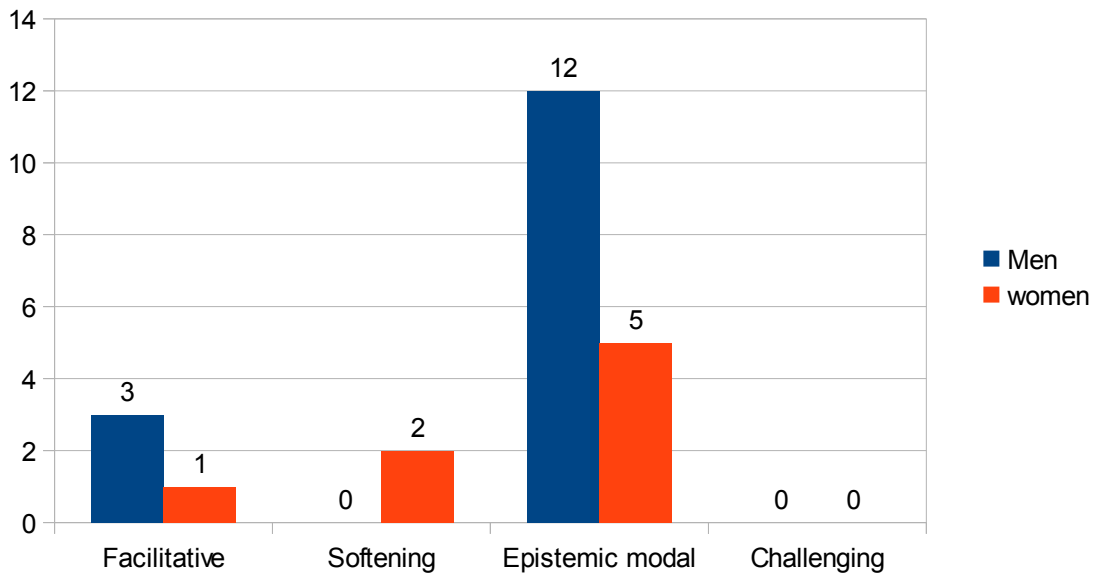


Figure 6. Frequency of the four different categories of tag questions.

Figure 6 shows that the most commonly used tag question, for both genders, is of the epistemic modal variety. Furthermore, these epistemic modal tags account for 17 out of the 23 tag questions found in the researched material: 12 are provided by men and 5 by women. Facilitative tag questions are the second most common feature: of the 4 provided, men are accountable for 3, and women for 1. No examples of softening tag questions are present in the data provided by men: women provide the 2 that were found. There are no instances of challenging tag questions found in the material.

Examples of the different categories of tag questions from the researched material :

- (11) - "I'm not going to get my pecan pie, *am I*?" Male  
 "You want some Oreos ? (Reply, Male)

(12) “ Let's put on our thinking cap, *shall we?*” Male  
(mimics doing so, looks at male co-star who looks away and doesn't respond)

(13) “Boy, you were not liked in high school, *were you ?* Female  
“No, not really. Is that my yearbook ? (reply, Male)

In (11), the tag question is interpreted as epistemic modal, since it focus on the accuracy of the statement, which the subsequent reply provides an answer to, since the co-star offers him cookies, and therefore provides an indirect no to the question at hand. In (12), the tag questions can be categorized as facilitative, since it invites the co-star to participate in the conversation, even though, in this particular incident, the co-star does not respond to this invitation. Finally, in (13) the tag question can be understood as softening, since the attached tag question might be an attempt to soften the force of the utterance, when addressing a possible sensitive subject.

Lakoff (1975) considered tag questions to be an archetypal feature of women's language (Coates, 1989), but as far as the instances of tag questions are concerned, this material provide no conclusive indications to whereas the women use this linguistic device to a higher extent than the men, as some previous research, e.g. Fishman (1980), has shown. However, the results indicate a slightly larger number of tag questions in the material provided by the women, roughly 0.99 tag questions per 1,000 words, whilst the corresponding number for men are 0.91 for that same number of words. Hence, the difference in instances was approximately 0.08 per 1,000 words, and as such, as far as frequency is concerned, the provided material show no distinct gender related difference. Furthermore, this difference in number is not statistically significant.

When addressing the issue of the four different types of tag question, which have displayed gender related differences in previous research, the results suggest that when the men in this study do use tag questions, they mostly use the epistemic modal variety: 12 out of the 15 tag questions provided by men found in this study adhere to that particular type. This seems to support the results of Holmes's research: that men tend to

use tag questions mainly to express epistemic meaning and that “[...] men's usage tends to focus more often on the referential function” (1995: 113). On the other hand, Holmes also states that in her research “Women tend to use more facilitative devices and expressions of positive politeness “(1995: 113). In the data examined for this study, only 1 of the 8 tag questions provided by women are of the facilitative variety, and 2 of them are of the softening kind, which express negative politeness. Both these findings seem to contradict the results in Holmes's research to some extent.

To sum up the discussion on the different types of tag questions, the instances found in the researched material seem to support some of the previous findings: that when men use tag questions, they tend to use the epistemic modal variety, but contradict some, since the women's use of tag questions in this material tend to be more of the softening and referential variety than of the facilitative kind, which Holmes (1995), Cameron (1989) and Coates (1989) have found that women tend to prefer in their respective research.

#### **4.4 Results and Discussion: Summary**

The women in the analyzed material are responsible for a higher frequency of hedges, boosters and tag questions than the men in the show. Yet, the difference in number of instances is not very pronounced: these linguistic devices are only slightly more frequent in the female dialogues than in the male, and where tag questions are concerned, only marginally more frequent.

Additionally, hedges are the most frequently used linguistic feature of the three; approximately 532 instances of hedges were found in the material. Boosters are used in an estimated 444 instances, while tag questions are not very commonly utilized; only 23 instances were found in this research. The overall frequency of instances of the researched linguistic devices are presented in Figure 7, estimated per 1,000 words and divided per gender.

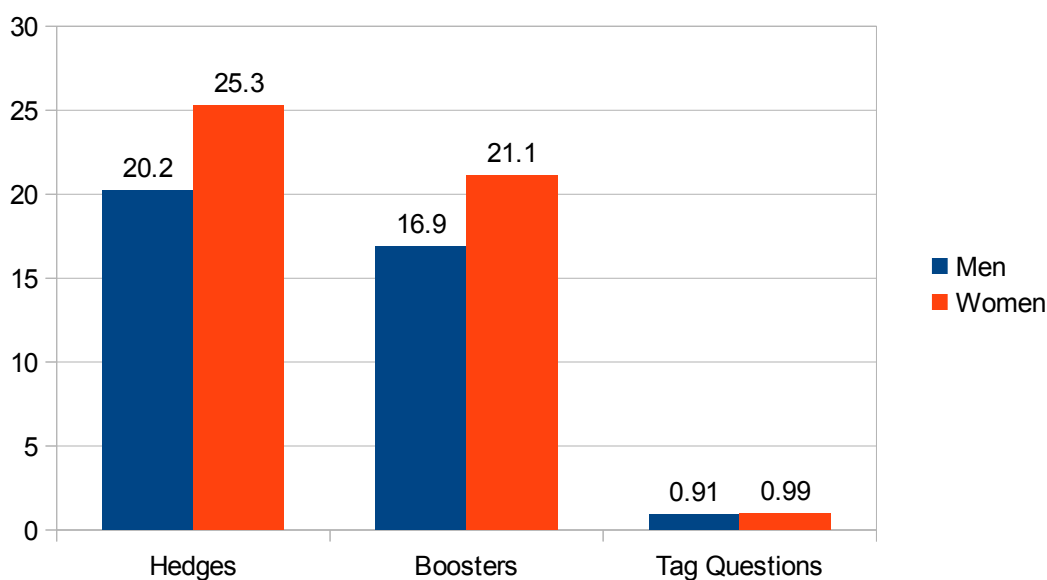


Figure 7. Frequency of hedges, boosters and tag questions per 1,000 words, divided per gender.

As can be observed from the Figure 7 above, the women tend to use approximately 25 hedges, 21 boosters and 1 tag question per estimated 1,000 words, while the corresponding numbers for the men are approximately 20 hedges, 17 boosters and 1 tag question in the data provided from the analyzed episodes.

Before discussing the overall results of this study, an important aspect has to be addressed: the aspect of limitation. This research is restricted to ten episodes of a TV series, which has aired 137 episodes up to this date, and as such, can only give us an indication of the gender differences in the chosen linguistic features in the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* as a whole. Hence, the only conclusive results presented in this study pertain to the selected 10 episodes of the TV show, or more precisely, the first ten episodes of season 5. It can be further discussed, of course, if the results of ten episodes of 137, which is roughly 7.3 percent, should be able to give indications on the show as a whole at all. But, given the scope of this study, these chosen episodes of the show will at least give us a rough idea about the gender differences and similarities, both concerning frequency and usage, of the selected linguistic features in the show.

One additional point has to be added as well when discussing the results of this study. Most previous research concerning the number of hedges, boosters and tag questions in male versus female speech and writing has been in other discourses than the one to which this study pertains: the majority of them are results concluded from spoken discourse, such as conversation analysis from actual, live conversations, or various kinds of written discourse. None of the previously mentioned studies, with the exception of Quaglio (2009), has been performed on data provided by dialogues from TV discourse. Furthermore, not all of these studies have been done in the same English speaking country as the present one.

Moreover, it is important to note that the language used in the dialogues in this TV show is fictitious. Even though it is the scriptwriter's aim to produce scripts that resemble real, everyday conversations: these can only be interpretations of natural conversation. Quaglio (2009) found in his research, where he compared the conversations in another sitcom, *Friends*, to natural conversation that “*Friends* share the core linguistic features that characterize natural conversation (139), but also that “conversation presents much more variation than *Friends*”(140). Furthermore, TV dialogues occur in different circumstances than natural conversations, which take place in real time and in a shared context, avoid elaboration of meaning and are interactive. Hence, since TV dialogues have a different set of rules and are also based on written material, not recordings of actual speech, they can only give us an indication of the perception scriptwriters have of the differences between genders in natural conversation. In his manual for writing television sitcoms, Smith argues that “dialogues should be written in a conversational style” (1999: 148). But, at least if we rely on most previous research, this style seems to differ between the genders, and since only 3 out of the 16 script writers in *The Big Bang Theory* are women, we can assume that most of the dialogues are written by men (bigbangtheory.wikia.com, online). Consequently, this could have an implication when it comes to the language used in the dialogues. On the one hand, the gender of the writers could have influenced the dialogues, especially since the majority of them are male; they might have transferred their own language traits and conversational style into the dialogues of the female characters. This could explain the marginally elevated number of

the instances of hedges, boosters and tag questions in the material provided by the women. On the other hand, it can also be the case, that the writers do not perceive that there are any gender related differences in the frequency of these three devices, and if that is the case, this also explains the only marginally higher frequencies of these three linguistic features in the dialogues of the female characters. It could also be a coincidence, since the data for this study only pertains to a selected number of episodes; if the TV series as a whole were to be analyzed, the results might be different. Whatever might be the reason, this study is not able to provide any definite answers.

Furthermore, when discussing gender related differences in any given linguistic field, it is important to mention that no linguistic device is to be regarded as superior to the others; they are all equally valid in status and should be treated as such. What is more, hedges, boosters and tag questions are not to be regarded as evidence of tentativeness or insecurity; they are often devices of politeness used in conversation to address the listener's "face". Additionally, they are to be regarded as a part of a conversational style. Coates argues that "the evidence at present suggests that women and men do pursue different interactive styles" (2004:110), and this might be the reason why women tend to use more hedges, boosters and tag questions: they might merely be evidence of a female conversational style.

Nevertheless, the TV discourse is most interesting to use as material for any sociolinguistic study: not at least for its ability to convey both social and cultural values in its choice of language. This has become even more urgent today, when popular TV programs have become highly available through several media, on any given time of day and to a large number of people across the world.

## **5. Conclusion**

The results of this quantitative study support the hypothesis: the results of previous research still seem to apply even given the medium of TV discourse, since the women in the analyzed material are responsible for a higher frequency of hedges, boosters and tag questions than the men in the show. However, the differences between the genders are not very striking: only a slighter higher frequency in numbers of incidents were found in the

women's dialogues versus the men's. Where tag questions are concerned, the results indicate that there are no significant differences in instances between the genders, since no statistical significance is evident. Most previous research has shown that women tend to use these three linguistic devices more frequently than men in some areas of research, while others have shown no gender related difference in occurrences. Furthermore, the results obtained from the data found in this study indicate a correspondence with some previous results, such as women's propensity to use certain types of boosters, and contradict some, for instance what types of tag questions women tend to use.

Even though the language examined in this study is fictitious, and based on scriptwriter's perception of natural conversation and gender related language issues, the results of a sociolinguistic study in the field of TV discourse should not be dismissed, especially as regards to its widespread popularity and its ability to convey social and cultural attitudes. Moreover, due to TV and other media's rapidly growing popularity, and the fact that they claim more and more of our leisure time, the language used in these discourses are well worthy of further investigation, not at least for its influence, both linguistically and culturally, on its viewers.

This present study has only examined three linguistic features which have shown gender differences in many previous linguistic studies; namely hedges, boosters and tag questions. It would also be interesting to investigate the use of other features, considered to be typical male traits in linguistics, such as non-standard use of verbs and expletives in popular TV shows. Furthermore, this study has only examined these features in a TV discourse, aimed at an adult audience. A further investigation into other discourses, such as movies and online programming, would be most interesting, as well as investigating these media discourses aimed at a younger audience, such as young children or teenagers.



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# Appendix A

## Part 1 Hedges

### 1.1 Hedges summary: Men (words uttered approx 16414)

Hedge:	number of entries:
Well	42
would	37
Like	23
you know	23
maybe	21
kind of	21
some	15
might	13
should	13
could	11
i think	11
i guess	10
a little	10
may	9
i thought	9
looks like	8
probably	5
you think	5
I mean	5
suppose/supposed	4
must	3
apparently	2
possibly	2

i know	2
perhaps	2
believe	2
kinda-sorta	1
a couple of	1
any	1
sometimes	1
will	1
appear	1
suggest	1
i hope	1
somehow	1
i feel	1
mildly	1
quite	1
most	1
<b>Total number of hedges</b>	<b>331</b>

**1.2. Summary hedges : female** (words uttered approx 7933)

Hedge:	Number of entries
well	22
would	18
like	15
some	14
you know	14
should	12
kind of	12
a little	11

i thought	10
maybe	9
could	9
i guess	7
probably	6
i mean	5
look/look	5
might	4
seem/seems	3
supposed	3
you think	2
must	2
normally	1
more of	1
perhaps	1
kinda-sorta	1
may	1
assume	1
a bit of	1
sort of	1
sometimes	1
kinda	1
a couple of	1
feel	1
<b>total number of hedges</b>	<b>201</b>

## **Part 2: Boosters**

### **2.1 Summary boosters men (words uttered approx 16414)**

<b>Booster :</b>	<b>Number of entries:</b>
just	62
so	27
really	22
very	15
too	13
actually	11
of course	9
a lot of	9
pretty	8
great	6
hell /the hell	6
more	5
always	5
damn	5
God	4
seriously/serious	3
vastly	3
giant	3
ever	3
real	3
way	3
most/ the most	3
all	3
obviously	2
already	2
incredibly	2
totally	2
much/too much	2
finally	2
Highly	2

big	2
screw	1
holy smoke	1
dear	1
completely	1
beautifully	1
best/the best	1
true blue	1
apparently	1
exactly	1
certainly	1
surprisingly	1
clearly	1
gently	1
technically	1
enormous	1
terrific	1
crazy	1
lovely	1
a load of	1
a whole lot	1
a bunch of 1	1
a lot more	1
total	1
tons of	1
basically	1
absolutely	1
a number of	1
much	1
terrifying	1
perfectly	1

<b>Total number of boosters :</b>	<b>277</b>
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**2.2 Summary Boosters : female (words uttered approx 7933)**

<b>Booster:</b>	<b>Number of instances</b>
just	40
so	25
really	19
my God	7
damn	4
actually	4
of course	4
great	4
real	3
hell	3
very	3
always	3
totally	2
completely	2
pretty	2
frankly	2
finally	2
my gosh	2
totally	2
enough	2
all	2
ever	2
super	1



huge	1
particularly	1
serious	1
a lot of	1
absolutely	1
a bunch of	1
accidentally	1
lovely	1
righteous	1
wild	1
vastly	1
considerably	1
amazing	1
exactly	1
high	1
worst	1
mighty	1
tall, tall	1
seriously	1
plenty of	1
the less	1
yet	1
big	1
basically	1
I'm sure	1
many	1
a lot more	1
too	1
lots of	1
<b>Total number of boosters</b>	<b>167</b>

## Appendix B Tag Questions

### Tag questions uttered by male characters:

1. let's put on our thinking cap, *shall we?*
2. subtlety isn't her strong suit, *is it?*
3. just his head, *right?*
4. you're friends with penny, *right?*
5. it never is, *is it ?*
6. you never stop, *do you?*
7. you'd love that, *wouldn't you?*
8. I'm not going to get my pecan pie, *am I ?*
9. it is nice, *isn't is?*
10. it is, *isn't it*
11. we used to go out, *right?*
12. you're cool with you and me just being friends, *right?*
13. I want to go to Korea town and sing karaoke with your friends, *who wouldn't ?*
14. you're just my little Lovey-Dovey, *aren't you ?*
15. sex is off the table, *right?*

### Tag questions uttered by female characters:

16. I know, *right?*
17. try to keep it in your pants, *OK?*
18. boy, you were not liked in high school, *were you ?*
19. you're the whole package, *aren't you?*
20. oh, you did, *didn't you ?*
21. they have wine here, *don't they?*
22. oh, that's a funny turn, *isn't it ?*
23. it's great, *isn't it ?*

**Number of instances** = 23

**Distribution** = male 15 / female 8